

A Countenance More in Sorrow than in Anger

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In late 1990 I visited a book shop in Northumberland, near to my then home. Charlton Ogburn's *Mystery of William Shakespeare* was on prominent display. I picked up a copy. Clearly it was something about the Shakespeare authorship question. I had heard of those theories about Marlowe and Bacon, and found them rather tedious. Did it really matter who wrote those works? And what of this idea, advanced by Ogburn, that Shakespeare was the Earl of Oxford? I hadn't hear of that one before. It sounded like yet another crackpot theory. I bought a couple of novels instead.

A few weeks later, in January 1991, I was making preparations for a six-month stay as a research fellow in a Swedish research institute. I visited my local book shop for some enjoyable reading for my 24 hour ferry crossing. Ogburn's book was still there. It would be a long read for a long journey. Although I am an economist rather than a literature specialist or an historian, I have loved Shakespeare's works since boyhood and I have a special interest in the late Tudor period. I bought a copy. If I got bored with it I could read some economics books instead.

The ferry ploughed through the high North Sea waves in a westerly gale and I opened *The Mystery of William Shakespeare*. I was captivated. There really was a problem about Shakespeare authorship, and severe doubts about the Stratford man. By page 80 I was convinced that it was very unlikely that William Shaksper of Stratford wrote the poems or plays. Ogburn's lively, polemical style propelled me through the pages.

I arrived in Sweden with my head buzzing with excitement about Ogburn's revelations. In fact, my research work in economics was seriously delayed for several days. I couldn't put the book down until it was finished. My view of Shakespeare was completely changed. I read the sonnets again and they attained extra dimensions of meaning when interpreted in Oxfordian terms. The idea that 'it didn't matter who wrote those plays' became empty and absurd.

By another strange coincidence, a few weeks later I was to have my first taste of anti-Oxfordian prejudice. To my surprise I was contacted in Sweden by my first wife (we divorced in 1979) who was in Stockholm on business. When we met I mentioned that I had become interested in the Shakespeare authorship question. 'Who did write the plays then?' she asked. 'The Earl of Oxford' was my answer.

She saw this proposition as an attempt to deprive an honest rural proletarian of the credit, and as a suggestion that only the aristocracy are capable of high art. My response was to submit that Shaksper of Stratford was hardly a member of the working classes. Even a good socialist should see no superior merit in the rich capitalist merchant and land-dealer from Stratford, even compared with a member of the nobility.

Ogburn had addressed the accusation of snobbery in his book. Is it snobbery to prefer the aristocrat de Vere over the more lowly Shaksper as the author of the works? Snobbery is typically associated with assertions of the 'right to rule' based on birth rather than talent. Nature rather than nurture is seen as the foundation of human capabilities. However, much of the Oxfordian case - both for de Vere and against Shaksper - is based on the idea that genius is a product of environment and upbringing, not of lineage. It is not de Vere's aristocratic

blood or Shaksper's lack of it that promotes the Earl of Oxford as the likely author of the plays. It is their quite different education and experiences.

For the next two years my Oxfordian ideas were unmolested. In June 1992 I was appointed as a Lecturer in Economics at the University of Cambridge. It was some time before my family were able to move south. In August 1993 we found an attractive, 300 year old thatched cottage, in West Wickham, 12 miles south-east of Cambridge. We did not like the name that the previous owners had given to the house and I paid a visit to the Cambridgeshire County Records Office to see if there was evidence of a still earlier name.

To my amazement, I discovered in the *Victoria County History* that the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford had owned land in West Wickham. Indeed, the Earls of Oxford had held land in the village since the time of the Conquest. In 1536, West Wickham priory was granted on the suppression of the monasteries to John de Vere, 15th Earl of Oxford (*Victoria County History*, p. 118).

The de Vere Family held numerous estates all over the south-east of England, notably in Castle Hedingham, Lavenham and Castle Camps, and also in West Wickham. In general, the main residence was Castle Hedingham, but Castle Camps was preferred by the 14th Earl.

Edward de Vere, was born in Castle Hedingham - about 14 miles south east of West Wickham - on 12 April 1550. He studied at St John's and at Queens' colleges at Cambridge University, obtaining a degree whilst still a boy in 1564.

Although he inherited enormous estates he was frequently in monetary difficulties. He thus sold a number of his family estates: one in 1573, one on 1575, five in 1576, three in 1577, two in 1578, five in 1579, thirteen in 1580, one in 1581, four in 1582, five in 1583, seven in 1584, two in 1587, one in 1588, one in 1591, and three in 1592 (B. M. Ward, *The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford*, p. 353). In 1591, echoing King Lear, he made over his estate in Hedingham to Burghley in trust for his daughters. Amongst these last sales, in 1592, about the time of his second marriage, he sold West Wickham priory to Edmund Stubbing, a local yeoman (*Victoria County History*, p. 118).

Accordingly, Edward de Vere held property in West Wickham from when he inherited title to it in 1562 to when he sold out in 1592. Notably, his estates in West Wickham were among the last of those that he sold.

From this time on Edward de Vere retired from public life, first spending his time in his house in Shoreditch. Ogburn and Looney argue that his remaining years were devoted to revising his plays and completing the sonnets. It is nice to think that this work was partly financed by the proceeds from the sale of his estates in West Wickham. In 1596 de Vere settled in Hackney. There, on 24 June 1604, he died.

Unwittingly, my new residence was right in the middle of 'Shakespeare Country'. I must admit that gave me a feeling of pride: and some recompense from my departure from the beautiful Northumbrian hills.

West Wickham has a lively local history society. With some trepidation I suggested to the secretary that I could give a talk on 'William Shakespeare in West Wickham'. She agreed, and I set about reading more material on the Oxford question. In the last few months I have read J. T. Looney's *'Shakespeare' Identified as Edward de Vere*, B. Ward's *Seventeenth Earl of Oxford*, and much more. My talk was given on 26 April 1995. (By coincidence this was the 531st anniversary of William Shaksper's christening.) In the subsequent parish newsletter it was described as 'very convincing'.

In reading these subsequent Oxfordian works, my mood and opinion have changed. First I was struck by how little in Ogburn's book was original. This is meant as no criticism of Ogburn. If it wasn't for his efforts the Oxfordian case might have been lost to another generation. His destruction of the Stratfordian defences is a major achievement.

I no longer think that the case for Oxford as author of the poems and plays is merely a strong one. Instead, it is overwhelming. There is so much positive evidence on the Oxfordian side, and so little negative evidence to explain away, that one is led to ask: 'What more evidence can be required? Surely there is enough there already?'

Commenting on one of the many pieces of evidence linking de Vere with the authorship of the works of 'Shakespeare', Looney (*'Shakespeare' Identified*, p. 230) comments: 'so conclusive does it appear that we are almost inclined to question the utility of accumulating further evidence.' What he said in 1920 is even more true today. What more evidence can reasonably be demanded to prove the Oxfordian case?

My mood is thus tinged with a sense of outrage. Why is the Oxfordian case so little publicised? Why did it take Ogburn and my chance encounter with his book to bring the claims for Oxford to the attention of myself and others? Surely the issues involved are worthy of wide and serious debate?

To outrage I have added sadness. It is now clear to me that most of the original work in support of the Oxfordian case was published between the First and the Second World Wars. Ogburn aside, the battle lines have advanced only a little in Oxford's favour since 1940. The Oxfordians remain a tiny group. Yet I would challenge anyone to read both Ogburn and Looney and not be overwhelmed by the power of the Oxfordian case.

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