

A new letter by J. T. Looney brought to light

Christopher Paul

Originally published in the Summer 2007 issue of the *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter*, vol. 43, no. 3, pp. 8-9.

In the Foreword and Appendix 5 of her edition of John Thomas Looney's *Shakespeare Identified*, the late great Ruth Loyd Miller included lengthy excerpts from three letters Looney had written to Charles Wisner Barrell (June 6, 1937), Dr. Will D. Howe (June 2, 1938), and Eva Turner Clark (June 10, 1939). Clark also printed the first letter that Looney had written to her dated June 26, 1926, in her book *Axiophilus* published that same year. I am pleased to add to this small corpus a letter hitherto unknown to Oxfordians that Looney wrote to the British economist Joan Violet Robinson on September 3, 1933.¹

While there is not enough space here to enumerate the many achievements of Robinson (1903-1983), we may rest assured that Looney was not dealing with any intellectual lightweight; she was educated at St. Paul's Girls' School in London and from 1922 at Girton College, Cambridge, where she excelled as Gilchrist scholar. Appointed to an assistant lectureship in economics and politics at Cambridge in 1934, she became a university lecturer in 1937, reader in 1949, professor of economics in 1965, and was a fellow of the British Academy from 1958 to 1971. It is thought that Robinson was passed over for the Nobel Prize owing either to her gender or her personal politics. The product of upper middle-class English dissenters, Robinson's great-grandfather was a well known Christian socialist and her father a central figure in the debates concerning British military manpower of 1918. With regard to her forebears, the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* notes that she "continued the family tradition with distinction, always a rebel with a cause." Further, "Robinson's incisive mind made her a powerful critic; her insight and intuition, whereby she provided logical arguments of great penetration (without the help of modern mathematical techniques), allowed her to make significant contributions across the whole spectrum of economic theory."

The ODNB describes Robinson as a writer of expository, often original articles and books who "played a major role in the three main critical movements in economic theory in the twentieth century." Her contributions, however, "usually arose from criticisms, sometimes hostile, sometimes sympathetic, of the work of others," including her mentor, A.C. Pigou, whose insights and methods she "thoroughly absorbed," but angrily resisted his "ideology and foxiness, fudges, and smokescreens," as she would say. Also described as "skeptical" and "perceptive," Robinson was an innovative theorist whose collected works "have inspired the young as much as they have irritated their orthodox elders." More than any other economist of the twentieth century, Robinson "became a model for progressive radicals, fearlessly following arguments to conclusions no matter how incompatible they proved to be." It is little wonder then that Robinson and Looney would have been impressed with each other—there is the old adage that great minds think alike. With traits such as these, it comes as no surprise that the Oxfordian theory would have appealed to Robinson.²

Publishing a new letter by Looney and revealing Robinson's Oxfordian sympathies are satisfying in and of themselves, but there is another particular element of interest to be gleaned from the matter. As may be gathered from Looney's letter, Robinson had written to him the week

before expressing her interest in the Oxfordian theory along with her appreciation of Looney's efforts in bringing the case to light. She had apparently also mentioned a certain premise then being advanced by Percy Allen, possibly enquiring as to Looney's opinion of it.³ However she may have framed it, Looney referred back to the same in a post script. And it is here where we learn what the founding father of the Oxfordian movement thought about an adjunct movement that was just then getting underway—familiar to most of us now as “Prince Tudor,” or the “PT theory.”



15 Laburnum Gardens,
Low Fell.
Gateshead-on-Tyne.

3rd Sept. 1933

Dear Mrs. Robinson,

It was most gratifying on my return from holidays last week to receive your letter of Aug. 28th.

Such expressions of interest in the Earl of Oxford's claims, & of appreciation of my own efforts in bringing them to light are, I can assure you, no small reward for my labours. Will you please accept my warmest thanks for writing as you have done.

After all, it is the quality rather than the volume of the support that one wins that matters most in a case like this; and from this point of view, I have had little cause for complaint. Although you and your immediate associates may not be identified specially with literary interests, I do not doubt that, working as a group, you would eventually make yourselves felt. It would certainly be a distinct gain if a nucleus for propaganda could be formed in Cambridge having the avowed object of forcing our case upon the attention of the literary authorities there. At any rate something might be done towards exciting the interest of the undergraduates – which is perhaps the best way of forcing the attention of the professors. The future is certainly with us, and, sooner or later, the authorities will have to succumb.

It is this confidence that has prevented my feeling any bitterness at the course things have taken, though I certainly did think things would have moved more quickly.

It is something, however, that Oxford's advent has practically stopped the flow of competitors for Shakespeare honours, and that the case, as it now stands before the public, lies only as between the Stratford man & Oxford. All the strength of the Stratfordian case consists in its long acceptance; and it is safe to say that, if the plays had come down to us anonymously, no reasonable person would now hesitate to attribute them to the Earl of Oxford.

If, of course, Oxford was the author of the Shakespeare plays the situation reflects no credit upon the intellectual competence of Shakespearean specialists. Naturally they are sensible of this and wish their exposure to be posthumous. This is why we must look most to the rising generation of students. It would be galling to a man whose position in literature rests wholly upon his reputation as a Shakespeare specialist, to have to admit that he had been befooled, that he had missed the significance of the biggest issue that could possibly have arisen in his peculiar domain, and that the most romantic discovery connected therewith had fallen to an entire outsider. These

considerations affect in degree all the literature-specialists, who, without being Shakespeare-specialists, should have risen to the occasion. All alike have failed ignominiously upon a vital problem affecting their special province and can only find refuge now in a conspiracy of silence.

I sincerely hope then that you and your friends by persistent action may eventually break down this passive resistance in Cambridge and win for the Earl of Oxford's claims the consideration to which they are entitled.

Again my warmest thanks,

Yours sincerely,

J. T. Looney

P.S. re. Mr. Percy Allen. His personal loyalty to myself has been so staunch that I do not like to criticise him. I, of course, fully recognise the very great value of G. Rendall's support: by far the most valuable that has, as yet, been given to the cause.

Mr. Allen, on the other hand, with the support of Captain Ward, is now advancing certain views respecting Oxford and Queen Eliz. which appear to me extravagant & improbable, in no way strengthen Oxford's Shakespeare claims, and are likely to bring the whole cause into ridicule.

J.T.L.



WORKS CITED

Clark, Eva Turner. *Axiophilus, or, Oxford alias Shakespeare*. (New York: Knickerbocker, 1926), 1-3.

Miller, Ruth Loyd, ed. and Looney, J. Thomas. "*Shakespeare*" *Identified in Edward de Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford*. 2 vols., 3rd ed. (Port Washington, NY/London: Kennikat, 1975), 1:xxx, 649-54.

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 60 vols. (Oxford, New York, 2004), 47:353-54.

¹ Cambridge University, King's College Archive Centre: The Papers of Professor Joan Violet Robinson: GBR/0272/JVR/7/263. I am grateful for the assistance of King's College Assistant Archivist Elizabeth Ennion.

² In addition to the ODNB entry on Robinson, from which I have culled the foregoing quotations, I draw the reader's attention to informative online biographies of Robinson at <http://cepa.newschool.edu/het/profiles/robinson.htm> and <http://www.econlib.org/LIBRARY/Enc/bios/Robinson.html>.

³ Percy Allen advanced the Prince Tudor theory in 1933 in *Lord Oxford & "Shakespeare": A reply to John Drinkwater* (BL Shelfmark 011761.de.60). Additionally, Allen published a 15-page pamphlet on the theory in 1936, co-authored by Captain B.M. Ward, titled *An Enquiry into the Relations between Lord Oxford as "Shakespeare," Queen Elizabeth and the Fair Youth of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (BL Shelfmark: 11767.c.2). Allen published another article promoting the theory in 1943 titled: "Who Were the Dark Lady and Fair Youth of Shakespeare's Sonnets?"