

*Commentary***“Monstrous Animosity”***How Nelson’s Oxford bio distorts both Oxford and Oxfordians*

By Roger Stritmatter

It is difficult to know where to begin to place Dr. Alan Nelson’s *Monstrous Adversary* in historical perspective. One recent reviewer describes the book as “a plethora of archival transcriptions” which “misconstrues the personality of a genius” (see page one of this issue). To argue, however, that Professor Nelson merely “misconstrues” the character of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, is a kindness, in my opinion, which reflects more on the noble oblige of the reviewer than on the content of the book being reviewed; the word implies that there is something casual and innocent about Nelson’s methodology, that the book should be criticized for errors of judgment instead of errors of intent. Admittedly, the difference may in practice be difficult to discern. But even the casual reader of *Monstrous Adversary* will be impressed by Professor Nelson’s thorough hostility towards the subject of his own biography and wonder why a man would devote ten years of his life to writing a book about a man whom he so obviously despises.

Ironically, Professor Nelson makes no attempt in his book to actually counter the arguments contained in the numerous works which constitute the desideratum of his project; true, a few names are considered in his introduction and a handful of works advocating the case for Oxford’s authorship are named in his bibliography. Yet, whenever the arguments of those works would have a bearing on the matters in question, Nelson somehow fails to offer any reference to their contents. This is not, it must be emphasized, because Nelson is unaware of the relevance of these arguments; it is clear from the shape of his own “refutation” that he is often formulating his own narrative with these very arguments in mind.

But somehow Nelson cannot trust his readers enough to acknowledge that another point of view exists. They must be protected from what Nelson’s ideological ancestor, Giles Dawson, reviewing *This Star of England* in 1952, referred to as the

“specious plausibility” of the Oxfordian case.

The result is a work of laborious schol-

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arship which has about it an air of unreality. It is as if the reader is being let in on the argument of the millennium, but is only being given access to one side in the debate. He is expected to assume that the other side is beneath consideration. To be sure, Nelson does make an effort to justify the book’s one-sidedness. In his introduction, Nelson states that he will “dismiss from serious consideration” two major works which make the case for Oxford’s authorship because “neither...contains anything substantial in the way of original documentary research” (5).

One of them is Charlton Ogburn’s 1984 work, *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*. Nelson’s condescending phraseology is a clue to the importance of this rhetorical gambit. As anyone who has studied the recent history of the Shakespearean question is aware, Ogburn’s book is the most important work on the authorship question since J. T. Looney first made the

case for Oxford’s authorship in 1920.

Indeed, the alarming circumstance documented on the dust jacket of Nelson’s book (see “Who’s an Amateur?” on page 23 in this issue) is a direct consequence of the publication of Ogburn’s 1984 book. The chief reason that, by the turn of the millennium, the Oxford myth had been “uncritically embraced” by large segments of popular media and was making significant inroads within academia was Ogburn’s book. It was in response to it that *Frontline* prepared a 1989 documentary, on which Ogburn was a featured guest; it was in response to this book that a thousand persons attended the 1987 moot court trial on the authorship question at American University in Washington, D.C.; the moot court in turn led directly to a 1988 Shakespeare authorship story in *The New Yorker* and stimulated Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens to enter the authorship fray with his article, “The Shakespeare Canon of Statutory Construction,” published in the *Pennsylvania Law Review* in 1992; it was in response to Ogburn’s book that *Atlantic* magazine in October 1991 ran an extensive cover story on the authorship question. And yet, Nelson refuses to engage the content of Ogburn’s book on the basis that it fails to contain anything substantial “in the way of original documentary research.”

Ogburn never intended, of course, to present a new body of “original documentary research” based on archival transcription of the kind which Professor Nelson approves. Instead, his book assembled under one cover an impressive body of circumstantial evidence, much of it appearing previously in print only in obscure articles published in journals with tiny circulations during the 64 years intervening between Looney’s book and his own. Ogburn’s purpose was to transmit the research and scholarship contained in these obscure sources to a general readership; by all accounts, he was enormously successful in achieving this purpose. As Pulitzer Prize winning historian David

McCullough wrote in the introduction to the 1984 first edition,

this is a scholarly detective work at its most absorbing. More, it is close analysis by a writer with a rare sense of humanity. The strange, difficult, contradictory man who emerges as the real Shakespeare...is not just plausible but fascinating and wholly believable. It is hard to imagine anyone who reads the book with an open mind ever seeing Shakespeare or his works in the same way again (x).

A second purpose of Ogburn's book, however, was to force a long-delayed confrontation between advocates of the Oxford case and their academic opponents. As long ago as 1950 Hamilton Basso, writing in *The New Yorker*, quoted Columbia University Professor Fredrick Tabor Cooper's opinion of "*Shakespeare*" *Identified*, said:

Here at last is a sane, dignified, arresting contribution to the much abused and sadly discredited Shakespearean controversy. Every right-minded scholar who cares for the welfare of letters in the bigger sense should face the problem that this book presents and argue it to a finish.

Ogburn, born in 1911, had been a keen observer and participant in the authorship debate since the 1940s when both he and his parents were inspired by Looney's book to take up the cause Cooper advocated. Ogburn had watched in dismay as two generations of academic scholars ignored, belittled, and misrepresented the case for Oxford's authorship. He was determined to change this circumstance; accordingly, his book opens with a stunning indictment of the animadversions of the Shakespearean establishment. He wrote in the introduction to *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*:

One of their weapons was to attack the character and motives, even sanity, of dissenters. I meant to try not to reply in kind. One of my points would be that *argumentum ad hominem*, while often effective and difficult to combat, does not do much to advance anyone's understanding of the issues and is the resort, usually, of those unable to defend their case on its merits. What I could do and would do was to put the orthodox academicians on record at every turn and contrast their claims with the facts. I knew the academicians well enough to have little doubt that if their

animadversions were matched against those facts they would never again be cited as authorities by anyone with respect for evidence and reason... (xvii).

Ogburn may have been overly optimistic about the immediate consequences of exposing the fallacies of orthodox reasoning. But it must be acknowledged that one of the primary reasons for the success and popularity of his book was that, in an age when inherited respect for authority had

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been undermined by the colossal follies of the U.S. war in Indochina, Watergate, and the Iran-Contra scandal, his argument that the Emperor of Shakespearean orthodoxy had no clothes found a ready audience. One early, sympathetic review of the book is remarkable because of its source and author: in 1985 Richmond Crinkley was the Director of Educational Programs at the Folger Shakespeare Library, an institution which then, as now, was a bastion of orthodox dogma on the questions raised by Ogburn's book. Crinkley, however, achieved the miraculous by publishing a thoughtful review of Ogburn's book in the *Folger's Shakespeare Quarterly*. In a stunning rebuke to the Folger's own traditions, Crinkley commented that "if the intellectual standards of Shakespeare scholarship quoted in such embarrassing abundance by Ogburn are representative, then it is not just authorship about which we need to be

worried .... Ogburn has skillfully directed so much attention on the shabby behavior of his opponents that his argument for Oxford looks all the better because of who is against it."

Ironically, then, Professor Nelson's *Monstrous Adversary* constitutes a delayed response to Ogburn's purpose of engaging the authorship debate. Without Ogburn's book, Nelson would have found no occasion to write his monstrous biography, and without Ogburn's book Nelson's own work would probably not have found a publisher and certainly would never have found a readership. The market Nelson is now playing to exists only because of Ogburn's charismatic eloquence; unfortunately, Nelson's own work is profoundly deficient in the very qualities—balance, tolerance, and critical acumen, to name only a few—which made *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* such an influential work. Nelson has of course read Ogburn's work, but it failed to impress him in the manner it impressed David McCullough. Not only is his view of Shakespeare unchanged by Ogburn's book; he wants to make sure that no one else's view of Shakespeare will be changed by it, either.

To Nelson, this is a professional mandate. What might seem a strange paradox, namely that Nelson has excised Ogburn's book from his bibliography, and for all practical purposes from his book, is in fact the conventional orthodox methodology in dealing with the authorship question. Ogburn's real crime was not that his book lacked "original documentary research," but that it exposed to public awareness a shocking duplicity within the literary establishment and lack of candor in its methods of dealing with public dissent. Therefore, at any cost, the book must be condemned as inadequate in its scholarship and beneath "serious consideration" by "real scholars."

Ogburn's point about the limitations of the *ad hominem* argument, however, applies with special ironic force to Nelson's own book. For all its window-dressing of scholarship, the book is neither plausible nor believable. In place of a judicious scholarly critique of the Oxfordian case it substitutes a sustained *ad hominem* attack on Oxford's character which bends or breaks every canon of fairness which might impede its single-minded pursuit of ideological conformity to orthodox belief.