

England's Secret Theater

The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe
by Charles Nicholl. Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993

Reviewed by Gary Goldstein.

On May 30, 1593, in the seaside town of Deptford, the most popular dramatist in England was killed at the age of 29. Very few people have accepted the verdict of the inquest which concluded that Christopher Marlowe was killed in an act of self-defense by one Ingram Frizer, as attested by the two other witnesses present, Nicholas Skeres and Robert Poley.

The latest word on this infamous act is given in Charles Nicholl's *The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe*. Its investigation into and explanation of Marlowe's death offers a plausible answer to a centuries old question of murder and a comprehensive picture of the secret world of Elizabethan England. These two strands are skillfully interwoven by Nicholl so that the slow unveiling of a murder investigation dovetails with the unveiling of the covert side of Elizabethan society.

It is Nicholl's argument that the secret theater of the era is to be found in the Elizabethan Secret Service and its operations. In the death of Marlowe, both aspects meet violently, for the simple fact that the great poet and dramatist was also a government spy for Sir Francis Walsingham and then for Sir Robert Cecil. When informed that the three men listed in the inquest as witnesses to Marlowe's death were also intelligence agents working for the Earl of Essex or Sir Robert Cecil, our perspective of Marlowe's last day takes on a different coloring. It metamorphoses from an outing of four friends eating, drinking, and perhaps being bawdy into a meeting of four spies ensconced in a safe house discussing their work and disagreeing. What the disagreement may have been is unknown, and Nicholl's investigation concerns itself with this "why" of the killing of the poet, playwright, and spy.

As Nicholl rightly reminds us, there was plague, political divisions, and savage executions in Elizabeth's England throughout the 1580s and 90s, as well as rampant unemployment and inflation. Politically, writes Nicholl, "The situation was volatile: the Spaniards were threatening to engulf Europe, the Queen was aging, the question of the succession was unresolved.... England had reverted to Catholicism a generation ago, under 'Bloody Mary,' with attendant burnings, imprisonments and sequestrations. There was a real possibility of this happening again. The spy kept a foot in both camps and was ready to jump either way. His commitment to Mr. Secretary, to Protestantism, to Queen and Country would be cast off in a moment."

Accordingly, Elizabethan England in Marlowe's time was a hotbed of spies, informers, provocateurs, and double agents who "played both ends against the middle, and fed information to both sides. In a sense, they did not even know which side they were really working for.... The keynote of this kind of work is precisely non-commitment—to belong to both sides and to neither. It is a world of alterable meanings."

Into this environment enters Christopher Marlowe, an impoverished student on scholarship at Cambridge University in the mid-1580s. For a penniless student, entering the wilderness of mirrors that is the espionage world conveyed money and access to influential circles. An additional incentive might have been Marlowe's own emotional disposition toward intrigue, suggests the author.

Nicholl limns the man and the age with detail worthy of a novelist, yet there are curious lapses, and he makes several mistakes in representation. For instance, the Earl of Oxford is mentioned but appears in the index mistakenly identified as Francis de Vere, his first cousin. Moreover, to treat Anthony Munday at length without reference to his claim to be a servant of Oxford, or Munday's dedications to Oxford or his later dedication to Oxford's son, Henry de Vere, is something of a travesty. Moreover, Nicholl points out that Mathew Royden and George Buc contributed commendatory verses to a collection by Thomas Watson but does not mention that Oxford had verses there as well. The mere fact that Oxford was related to Lord Burghley by marriage should put him in the picture of the reckoning. Does Nicholl give Oxford such a wide berth because he wishes to avoid bungling into the authorship question?

Where Nicholl's contribution is strongest is in trying to provide us with a rounded portrait of Marlowe. Nicholl finds our romantic view of the poet-playwright to be marred by our refusal to acknowledge that he was also a professional spy, working for most of his adult life as a government courier, agent provocateur, and counterfeiter (this last occupation being tried in Flushing a year before his early death). While giving us a fuller portrait of the very public poet, playwright, and now spy, Nicholl's portrait falls short of revealing the private man. Perhaps a closer look at Marlowe's relationships with Thomas Watson and Thomas Kyd would finally provide us with this truly hidden aspect of Marlowe's character.

Another facet of the case that Nicholl focuses on is distinguishing among the various political factions at Elizabeth's Court. Before 1590, one looked to the Earl of Leicester, Lord Burghley, or Sir Francis Walsingham for access and influence in Her Majesty's government. Afterwards, during the showdown with Spain and the internal battle over the royal succession, new power barons emerged, such as the Earl of Essex, Sir Walter Raleigh, and Sir Robert Cecil, with

each competing against the other for position and spoils.

Nicholl argues that the political machinations of these men was the direct cause of Marlowe's death.

Several weeks before his death, Marlowe was called before the Privy Council to answer accusations of atheism, blasphemy, and lesser offenses, based on the confessions of an imprisoned Thomas Kyd, informers' accusations, and a sheet of paper "discovered" in Kyd's apartment (which he recently had shared with Marlowe) in an anonymous hand that detailed religious heresies.

Unlike his former roommate and fellow dramatist, Marlowe was not arrested, imprisoned, and tortured, but required only to report daily to the Privy Council. In short, Marlowe had escaped any serious consequences arising out of the charges of blasphemy and atheism. It was during this period that he travels to Mrs. Bull's home for a day-long conference with three men connected to Essex and Cecil as intelligence agents.

What, then, is Nicholl's final explanation for this event which echoes through the centuries?

"Marlowe did not die by mischance, and he was not killed in self-defense. He had become an impediment to the political ambitions of the Earl of Essex, as these were perceived and furthered by secret operators like Cholmeley and Baines.... They had tried to frame him; to get him imprisoned and tortured; to use him as their 'instrument' against Raleigh. They had tried all this and failed. He had proved elusive, a danger, a potential projector against them. His mouth—if it could not be made to say what they wanted it to say—must be 'stopped.' To the plausible Skeres is entrusted this delicate task: to try once more to persuade Marlowe to turn evidence against Raleigh, and failing that, to silence him for good. I do not think the purpose of the meeting was murder. This is not because I underestimate the ruthlessness of the Essex faction, but because if murder had been intended all along, it could have been better accomplished more anonymously. Rather, Marlowe's death was a *decision*. It was a point the day reached, by a process of dwindling options. Nor do I think that the Earl of Essex actually ordered Marlowe's murder. He is profoundly implicated in this matter, but he probably knew little about it. The killing happens in the hermetic confines of the secret world: a dirty trick, a rogue event, a tragic blunder."

In this argument, simultaneously blaming and absolving the Earl of Essex of Marlowe's murder, Nicholl rates Essex's political and intelligence powers more highly than was actually the case. To start, he maintains there was a pause in the contest for power in 1590 following the death of Walsingham, with several of his agents "going over" to Essex's service. First, Nicholl's belief that Walsingham was a free agent and not a political subordinate of William Cecil's, who brought

him into Court, is very likely erroneous. As is the belief that Walsingham's intelligence network didn't simply get handed to Sir Robert Cecil upon the former man's death. This is especially true concerning those who supposedly pledged service to Essex, for Nicholl offers no evidence that these individuals actually changed their allegiance to Essex. My belief that they were agents in place for Cecil is borne out by the ease of the Cecilian destruction of Essex a decade later.

For all his glamour, Essex was essentially a free lancer compared to Sir Robert, who reigned as the de facto secretary of state in his father's dotage during the 1590s. Along with that status came the perquisites of a government secret service that was decades in the making. Rather than Essex, I think the evidence points to Sir Robert Cecil as being the instrument of Marlowe's death. He needed to "shut" Marlowe's mouth for reasons of self-preservation. Had the spy talked about his secret activities to save himself from jail and the noose, Marlowe could have implicated *only* the Cecils, for whom he toiled as a secret agent for nearly a decade. To silence the uncontrollable poet-dramatist—who had a pen as well as a mouth at his disposal—would be of paramount importance to this powerful politician.

In closing, Nicholl acknowledges that "we will never know for certain exactly what happened in that room in Deptford in 1593." Nevertheless, he has given us a sophisticated and knowledgeable argument to ponder regarding a brilliant and ambitious Elizabethan playwright, who ultimately became a player in a tragedy of someone else's composition.