

A Mystery Solved

Skeptical Schoolteacher Solves Shakespeare Mystery
at Lit & Phil: The Centennial of a Revolutionary Book

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by Kathryn Sharpe and Bryan H. Wildenthal

In the years before World War I, a virtual “Sherlock Holmes” toiled in the archives of the Literary & Philosophical Society.

John Thomas Looney (1870–1944), a native of the Newcastle area, was a brilliant and independent-minded scholar. By day a mild-mannered schoolteacher in Gateshead, his hope was to solve the greatest literary mystery of all time.

Was the author “William Shakespeare” really an actor from Stratford who never traveled abroad, whose personal records contain no hint of a literary career? Or did a discreet writer use that pseudonym to publish plays and poems infused with learning, art, and exposure to cultures outside England, notably Italy?

Approaching the mystery as Holmes might have done, Looney derived from the works a profile of the author’s likely characteristics. He assembled a vast array of circumstantial evidence pointing to a highly educated courtier, praised as a poet and dramatist, who traveled to Italy as a young man.

Looney’s resulting book remains the most revolutionary ever published on Shakespeare. On March 4, 1920, rejecting advice to use a pen name himself, he bravely presented it to the world: *“Shakespeare” Identified in Edward de Vere the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford*. One of his “greatest debts,” Looney wrote, was to the Lit & Phil where he researched and wrote it, with “an ease and rapidity of work that would probably have been impossible in any other institution in the country.”

Looney’s critics have mostly ignored his evidence-based analysis, resorting instead to ad hominem smears and mockery of his Manx family name. Yet researchers over the past century have continued to find new evidence corroborating his thesis.

for more information:

<https://deveresociety.co.uk>

<https://ShakespeareOxfordFellowship.org>