

THE SHAKESPEARE FELLOWSHIP NEWS-LETTER

No. 5

September 1937

THE EARL OF OXFORD AND THE SUCCESSION QUESTION

by B. M. Ward

There is a curious sidelight on Lord Oxford's attitude towards the Succession Question in a book called "Godes Peace & the Queenes" by N. J. O'Connor (1934).

The Elizabethans were sufficiently near to the Wars of the Roses to feel very apprehensive as to what might happen when Queen Elizabeth died and the direct Tudor line became extinct. As soon as it became clear that Queen Elizabeth would have no children, candidates for the Succession began to appear. At first Lord Beauchamp (nephew of Lady Jane Grey) seemed to be the "favourite." Later on, however, his chances receded, and Arabella Stuart (niece of Mary Queen of Scots) took up the running. But with the turn of the century James VI of Scotland came more and more to the front, with Arabella a poor second, and Lord Beauchamp a bad third. There were, moreover, two "outsiders," who represented the two extremist religious parties: the Infanta of Spain (descended from Henry II) who was the hope of the Catholics, and Lord Hastings (descended from George, Duke of Clarence) who was the hope of the Puritans.

The evidence as to Lord Oxford's attitude towards the Succession Question is contained in a letter written by Sir John Peyton, Lieutenant of the Tower, to the Privy Council, entitled "A true relation of such speech as passed between my Lord of Lincoln and me some four days before Her Majesty's decease." The gist of this letter, as recorded by Mr O'Connor in "Godes Peace & the Queenes" (pp. 105 - 107), is as follows (spelling modernized):

. . . Sir John said that the Earl of Lincoln had come to him about six days before the Queen's death. Knowing the Earl well disposed towards King James, Sir John had sounded the nobleman regarding the Succession, and had urged him that, as deeds are better than words, he

should, after the Queen's passing, give active support to King James. "Hereupon," the Earl "determined to send his money, plate, and jewels unto me into the Tower, and to come thither himself, with his servants and attendants, which afterwards he performed."

Two days before the Queen died the Earl returned to Sir John, and passed the night at the Tower, when Lord Lincoln said "he had discovered an opposition against His Majesty's title (to the crown of England), and that there was a great nobleman who had opened himself upon that point, and had dealt with him to join as a party in the action." Somewhat alarmed, Sir John had desired more information; whereupon the Earl replied that "he had been invited by a great nobleman to Hackney, where he was extraordinarily feasted, at the which he much marvelled, for that there was no great correspondence between them, this nobleman having precedence of him in rank (whereby, he told me, I might know him, there being but only one of that quality dwelling there). This nobleman and he, being after dinner retired apart from all company, began to discourse with him," declaring that, as peers, they were bound to concern themselves with the succession to the crown, and that "the Earl of Lincoln ought to have more regard than others, because he had a nephew of the Blood Royal, naming my Lord Hastings, whom he persuaded the Earl of Lincoln to send for: and that there should be means used to convey him over to France, where he should find friends that would make him a party, of the which there was a precedent in former times (x). He also inveighed much against the nation of Scots!" The Earl of Lincoln "brake off his discourse, absolutely disavowing all that the great nobleman had moved."

Sir John pointed out to Lord Lincoln his folly in silencing the Earl of Oxford before getting all possible information. Peyton declared that he was at first much

(x) Henry Tudor, afterwards King Henry VII, landed in England from France when he won the English crown by defeating King Richard III at Bosworth in 1485. The thirteenth Earl of Oxford was his chief supporter, and was largely responsible for his success.

disturbed, but, when the Earl made him understand what peer was meant (i.e. Lord Oxford), Sir John was relieved, for "I knew him to be so weak in body, in friends, in ability, and all other means to raise any combustion in the State, as I never feared any danger to proceed from so feeble a foundation." This is a delightful comment of the man of action concerning a poet and musician.

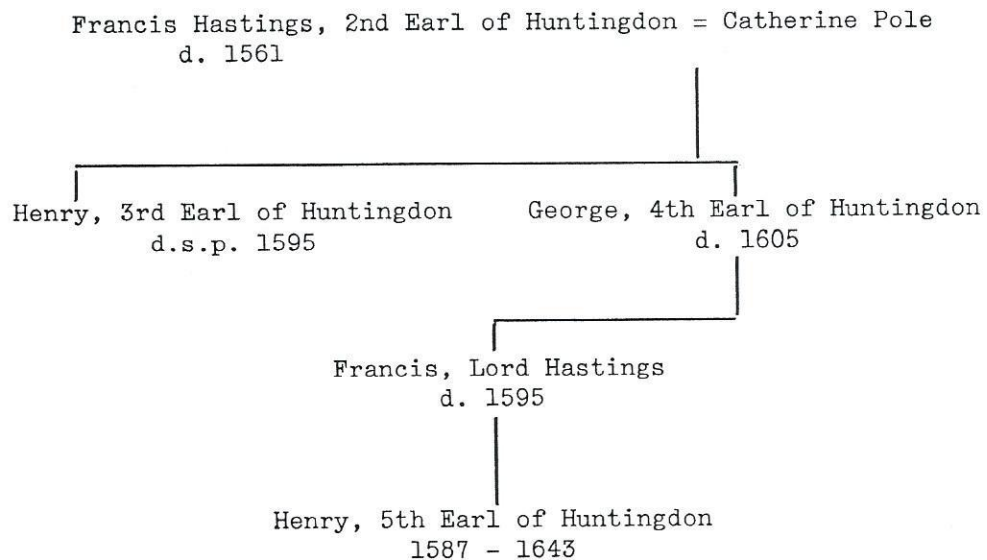
Soon after this dinner at Hackney the King was proclaimed, and the great nobleman's name "was attested in the said proclamation," which caused the Earl of Lincoln "to wonder." The entire story was told to Lord Kinross (who began the correspondence with Cecil which brought about the accession of King James), but he evidently did not take the affair seriously, and it blew over.

The "Lord Hastings" referred to in the above letter was Henry Hastings, afterwards fifth Earl of Huntingdon (see pedigree on next page). He was, as I have already said, the Puritan candidate for the succession.

It is certainly very surprising to find Lord Oxford secretly plotting on behalf of Lord Hastings. But I do not think the evidence of the Earl of Lincoln should necessarily be accepted. Indeed, Sir John Peyton elsewhere declared: "Touching the Earl of Lincoln his imputations laid upon me, his fashion is to condemn the world if thereby he might excuse himself." It seems likely that Lincoln himself had become mixed up with the party favouring the Hastings Succession, and his denunciation of Lord Oxford was merely a ruse to clear himself in the event of trouble arising. Moreover, it seems that Lincoln was a thorough bad hat - quarrelsome, vindictive, and a confirmed intriguer; so too much weight should not be attached to his statement.

On the other hand it is just possible that Lord Oxford may have toyed with the idea of circumventing the accession of King James. He (Oxford) was at this time on excellent terms with his brother-in-law, Sir Robert Cecil. Now, the Cecilian party had always been opposed to the Scottish Succession - openly, at least. Nobody knew that for two years before Queen Elizabeth's death Sir Robert had been conducting a secret correspondence with King James; and, to the world at large, it must have seemed that, if James were to succeed, the Cecilians would be thrown out of office, and their places taken by the Essexians and the Howards. Indeed, just a month after Queen Elizabeth's death,

THE HASTINGS FAMILY AND THE "SUCCESSION QUESTION"



Note: Catherine Pole was sister and sole heiress of Edward Plantagenet, Earl of Warwick, the last heir male of the royal house of Plantagenet. They were grandchildren of George, Duke of Clarence, brother of Edward IV. Edward, Earl of Warwick, was executed in 1499 by Henry VII.

Lord Hastings was the courtesy title borne by the eldest sons of the Earls of Huntingdon.

by which time James had been proclaimed but had not yet reached London, Oxford was still very apprehensive, because in a letter to Cecil he wrote: "In this common shipwreck mine is above all the rest, who, least regarded though often comforted of all her followers, she hath left to try my fortune among the alterations of time and chance, either without sail whereby to take the advantage of any prosperous gale, or with anchor to ride till the storm be overpast."

As it turned out, however, Lord Oxford's very natural fears were quite unfounded. Sir Robert Cecil remained more firmly than ever in the saddle. And King James not only continued Lord Oxford's unprecedentedly large pension of £1000 a year, but made him a member of the Privy Council, and granted him in addition the Bailiwick of the Forest of Essex and the Keepership of Havering House.

Whatever may be the real truth as to Lord Oxford's attitude to the Succession Question in 1603, it is interesting to get a glimpse, however distorted, of the intrigues and counter-intrigues that were going on at the time of Queen Elizabeth's death.

"WHEN SHAKESPEARE DIED"

by Ernest Allen

(Obtainable from the author, 8 Cumberland Rd.,
Kew Gardens, Surrey; price 1s. post free)

A pamphlet dealing with the question of the date of "Shakespeare's" death is long overdue; and Mr Ernest Allen is to be congratulated upon having successfully accomplished the task.

It is curious to look back on the history of this all-important matter, and to see how all Oxfordian writers have emphasized that Lord Oxford's death in 1604 exactly fits in with the argument that he wrote the Shakespeare plays. At the very outset Mr J. Thomas Looney, in "Shakespeare Identified," pointed out that the first great outburst of "Shakespeare" publications - thirteen different plays appeared in quarto between 1597 and 1604 - came to a sudden end in the latter year. Shortly afterwards Colonel B. R. Ward, in "The Mystery of Mr W.H.," showed that the slight revival of Shakespearean publications in 1608-9 - three plays and the Sonnets - occurred just when Lord Oxford's widow sold her house in Hackney to Lord Brooke, the obvious inference being that the manuscripts were discovered when she

was clearing up her effects prior to leaving the house. In the dedication to the Sonnets (1609), the author is described as "our ever-living poet," which is only applicable to a man who is dead: and in 1609 Lord Oxford was dead, but all the other claimants to be "Shakespeare" - e.g. Bacon, Derby, and Shaksper of Stratford - were still alive. More recently our President, in "Lord Oxford was Shakespeare," has gone carefully into the matter of the ten or eleven plays that are popularly supposed to have been written after 1604, and has shown convincingly that the evidence we possess is overwhelmingly in favour of all these plays - with the exception of "The Tempest" - having been written before 1604. And it is significant that practically every commentator on the Sonnets believes that they had all been written by 1603 or 1604 at the latest.

In spite, however, of these unanswerable arguments, nearly all orthodox or anti-Oxfordian writers have obstinately persisted in declaring that Oxford's death in 1604 is an insuperable bar to his being "Shakespeare." A typical example is Sir Edmund Chambers, who remarked laconically that "many of the plays were written after Oxford's death" - and leaves it at that, although he must by now know that such a statement is absurd.

Having dealt with the significance of 1604 as the date of "Shakespeare's" death, Mr Allen proceeds to examine "Troilus and Cressida," which was published in another significant year, 1609. He shows that the prose preface - a unique feature in Shakespeare quartos - contains not only typical "Vere" puns, but definite evidence in favour of its having been written by Lord Oxford. The preface tells us that it has never been "staled with the stage, never clapper-clawed with the palms of the vulgar" - a remarkable state of affairs if it had been written by Will Shaksper, who is supposed to have earned his living by writing stage plays, at least ten years before! And there is a cryptic reference to the "Grand Possessors," which certainly suggests that the author was dead, and that the manuscript of the play had been in the possession of aristocratic owners. Mr Allen adds that we should remember that -

Lord Oxford had three daughters, two of whom were closely connected with the sons of Mary Sidney, the Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery, to whom the First Folio edition of "Shakespeare's" plays was afterwards dedicated. One daughter had been engaged to one of the Earls, and

another daughter had married the other Earl. If Oxford were the real "Shakespeare," what more likely than that his manuscripts had passed into the hands of certain members of this aristocratic group?

Mr Allen passes on to the year 1616, when Will of Stratford died, and he writes:-

Once more events would seem to contradict the orthodox view of authorship, for the happenings in and around the year 1616 were absolutely nil. Will of Stratford was buried quietly enough in a prominent position in the local parish church, where he still lies. It seems to me curious that the verses inscribed on the tombstone of so great a poet should be little better than doggerel, and it seems even more curious that the bust on the wall over the tomb, erected at some later date, should indicate that there was uncertainty concerning the real occupant of the tomb!

And there is no doubt that the lines at the base of the bust "apply much more accurately to Francis Bacon than to the Stratford man, and the phrase 'Read if thou canst whom envious death hath placed within this monument' seems to me very extraordinary if, as the orthodox tell us, there was no doubt at all about the identity of 'Shakespeare.' I can see no sense in these words unless they were intended to put the unwary on their guard."

In a recent number of the "News-Letter" there was an article suggesting that Lord Oxford had been buried in Westminster Abbey. Mr Allen quotes Basse's poem, which appears in the prefatory matter to the First Folio, and finds it "more than illuminating." He holds that Sir Sidney Lee completely misunderstood the real meaning of all these verses, including Ben Jonson's, in the Folio. "He (Ben Jonson) definitely requests the reader to look 'not on his picture but his book.' Briefly, he says to Basse, 'Don't talk about tombs,' and to the reader, 'Don't trouble about looking at pictures,' and to both, 'Please look at the book; there you will find the truth.'"

Mr Allen concludes by saying, "Did the death of Francis Bacon have any effect on 'Shakespeare,' or produce anything of interest in connection with the subject? - Certainly not." And in the closing paragraph he writes:-

To me these events indicate very strongly that Will of Stratford was a spurious "Shakespeare," and that Edward de Vere, probably with assistance from Francis Bacon and others, was the real author of the plays. I care nothing for tradition or for the decrees of famous men of letters - I appeal to the evidence and to that alone. It is time that England awoke to realities in this matter. Fiction and fancy lead nowhere: in the end truth will prevail.

There is one slip. Bacon died in 1626, not 1637.

OCCASIONAL NOTES

Members will be interested to hear that the editor of the "East Anglian Magazine" has generously offered a page in his monthly magazine to be devoted to new developments in the Oxford theory. The September issue contains an article on the Sonnets by Mr Ernest Allen. This Oxfordian page is being edited by one of our members, Mr F. L. Ranson, of 39 Market Place, Lavenham, Suffolk. The "East Anglian Magazine" is obtainable from any branch of Messrs. W. H. Smith & Son throughout the world, price 1s.

"SHAME OF THE PROFESSORS"

by George Frisbee

In the July number of "Reading and Collecting," a monthly review published in Chicago, there is a characteristic article by Mr George Frisbee under the above title, and best appreciated in the author's own trenchant language.

The circus has its clowns; the drama its comedians; while for their humorous fellows the Universities have the Professors of English, who teach innocent youngsters that the plays and poems by William Shakespeare were written by a man born in Stratford.

These perverters of youth

. . . may be roughly divided into three classes: the tricksters, the cowards, and the gulls. The tricksters are the big shots, the Tittlebat Toploftys that garble data to bolster the Stratford myth, who juggle dates and conjure a chronological scheme of plays to suit their nefarious ends. The cowards are timid souls who know better, but fear the disapproval of the elder pedants.

The gulls are the common or garden variety, who swallow everything peddled by the big shots. . . . The truth is simple, as it always is. There were two men, one born in Stratford in 1564 - Shaksper. . . . No Professor, living or dead, has ever offered a scrap of proof to show that he was either dramatist or poet. All they produce is guesswork, plentifully padded with "probably," "doubtless," etc.

Has not Sir George Greenwood in his great works "The Shakespeare Problem Restated," and "Is there a Shakespeare Problem?" simply mopped up these Professors, so that none has dared reply? They even shun his works as if it were the plague! Does not also Mr Alden Brooks, in his book "Will Shakspeare, Factotum and Agent," show there is little that is authentic about Shakspeare of Stratford - most of it is faked up to play up to the tourist (alas, we fear, American!) trade - while the commercial British, and those who have investments in Stratford, are averse from having their best-paying shrine debunked. Good for the town's people; but self-respecting men ought to be above fostering a fairy tale in order to boost the tourist trade in Stratford. Do the professors get a cut? Hollywood yes-men are on the payroll, why not the academic ditto-men?

Since it is certain that Shaksper did not write the plays, who did? Mr Frisbee writes:

In his magnificent work "Shakespeare Identified," Mr J. Thomas Looney shows clearly that the author could only have been Edward de Vere. He is supported by Dr Gilbert Slater in "Seven Shakespeares," and Lieut-Colonel M. W. Douglas in "Lord Oxford was Shakespeare" (a book highly praised by the conservative "Christian Science Monitor"), and others interested in the truth.

De Vere was a scholar, musician, dramatist, and poet of high order; fluent in French and Italian, and acquainted with northern Italy. He stands before us equipped with all the qualifications we would expect of "Shakespeare." A perusal of the above works will satisfy an open-minded reader that "the professors have been deceiving their followers with nonsense about Shaksper of Stratford. As Hamlet said, "For 'tis the sport to have the engineer hoist with his own petard."