

# The English Petrarch

Reviewed by Warren Hope

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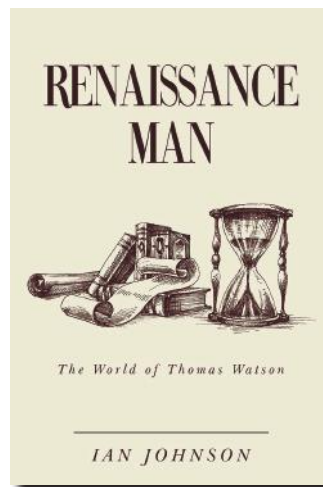
*Renaissance Man: The World of Thomas Watson. By Ian Johnson.  
New Generation Publishing, 2020, 350 pages (paperback \$16.99).*

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Ian Johnson has produced what is likely to be the most complete and accurate life of Thomas Watson, the Elizabethan poet, that we will ever have. The book seems to be the result of fortuitous circumstances—the right author coming to the right subject at the right time. What makes the author the right one is Johnson’s method—his combination of open-mindedness and skepticism, his willingness to scour all sources for facts on Watson’s life and writings and, when appropriate, engage in thoughtful and reasonable speculation.

The subject is the right one because Watson is central to the literary life of the Elizabethan period while remaining something of an anomaly. Although he was a secretary to the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford, a collaborator with William Byrd on the production of madrigals, and a friend of Christopher Marlowe, he remains relatively obscure. The time is right because Johnson gratefully benefits from and makes the most of some relatively recent scholarship that has thrown new light on Watson. The result is a work that should interest all students of the Elizabethan period.

Johnson opens the book in a fascinating way. Instead of beginning with a chronological narrative of Watson’s life, he sets the stage by examining in



some detail the two dominant groups of literary courtiers of the Elizabethan period—those writers who gathered around Sir Philip Sidney and his sister the Countess of Pembroke, and those writers who gathered around Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford. Johnson takes this approach because he is very aware of the importance of associations in the age of Elizabeth—family connections, cultural interests, religious leanings, and political stances often combined to all but define a person’s “place” in society. He realizes that the wealthy and powerful to a large extent used such things as literature, plays, music, and dancing in ways that increased their influence or even openly served propagandistic purposes. The examination of the Sidney and Oxford circles is important because although they are often thought to have been antagonistic, they also at times overlapped and Watson, in fact, had connections with both groups.

The first two books Watson published served to establish his reputation among his contemporaries. His *Antigone*, a translation into Latin of the Greek tragedy by Sophocles, appeared in 1581, displaying his love of drama and testifying to his learning and skill as a Latinist. In the next year, 1582, he published his *The Hekatompathia or Passionate Century of Love*, a book of 100 love sonnets in both English and Latin. While this was among the first sonnet sequences of the Elizabethan period, Watson’s sonnets were 18 lines long (rather than the traditional 14 lines) and were accompanied by annotations that drew attention to the poet’s sources and learning. Some of these poems were translations or adaptations of Petrarch’s sonnets, hence the justification for his reputation as “the English Petrarch.”

The dedications of the two books help to define Watson’s “place” in London society of the 1580s. The first was dedicated to Philip Howard, 1st Earl of Arundel, who has been made a saint by the Roman Catholic Church, but took part in jousts and at least one rather scandalous love affair. The second book was dedicated to the Earl of Oxford, thanking him for “perusing” the work in manuscript and giving it his blessing. It was prefaced with poems by other writers who gathered around Oxford—John Lyly, for instance, and Sir George Buc. While there is no indication that Arundel responded to the dedication with patronage or affection, Oxford seems to have played a role in much of Watson’s life. Watson worked with other writers in Oxford’s service at the mansion known as Fisher’s Folly as a kind of secretary, work that

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might well have included writing plays for the public theaters. As Ian Johnson points out, Francis Meres praised Watson as one of “our best for tragedie” and William Cornwallis wrote Watson “could devise twenty fictions and knaveries in a play which was his daily practyse and his living.” The lack of any plays in English bearing Watson’s name is one of the puzzles he presents students of the period.

What those dedications seem to indicate is that Thomas Watson was probably a Catholic or at least had a Catholic background. Born in 1555 to what is now recognized as a wealthy and prominent family—Watson was with justice referred to as a “gentleman” in contemporary documents—he was orphaned at the age of four and raised by an uncle. Johnson presents some evidence that this uncle, Thomas Lee, was close to some Catholics and suggests that this sympathy displayed itself in Watson’s education. He was sent to Winchester College at about the age of 12, a school known for the high quality of its education but also described as “Catholic haunted.” Watson also entered New College, Oxford, another institution known at the time for its Catholic sympathies and leanings. He did not take a degree from New College, but rather went to the Continent, completing his education in Italy, Flanders, and France. Johnson makes the attractive suggestion that Watson attended the University of Padua, and Watson certainly attended the English University of Douai in Flanders, where he studied civil and canon law. Watson, who seems to have been born with a scholarly soul, at times laments that his education had been disrupted by war. In short, Watson acquired as good an education as his age could provide—one made especially rich by his linguistic abilities and his love of both the Classics and the poetry of the continent.

Johnson makes it clear that Watson had other associates, especially when he was in Paris in the early 1580s. Perhaps the most important of these associates was Thomas Walsingham, the cousin of Sir Francis Walsingham, known as the chief of the Elizabethan intelligence network under William Cecil, Lord Burghley. Because of this connection, Johnson concludes “the evidence is sufficient for us to be certain that Watson was in Paris in the early 1580s, at the same time as Thomas Walsingham, and in the pay of Sir Francis Walsingham.” It seems clear that Watson worked as a courier for Walsingham, and was probably, as Johnson points out, the Watson who delivered a message to the court from Paris in August 1581. These associations link Watson with Sir Philip Sidney, who was related to Mr. Secretary Walsingham by marriage and thus connect him with both dominant literary circles at the court of Elizabeth.

Johnson is very good at providing the illuminating context for Watson’s life and writings. His earliest book publications and work as a courier coincide with a period of trauma and turmoil for English Catholics. Pope Pius V’s excommunication of Elizabeth in 1570 as a heretic, and the pronouncement by Pope Gregory XIII in 1580, outraged at the deaths of Catholic missionaries, that

encouraged Elizabeth's murder resulted in the demand that those studying abroad return home—and led to a period of plots, spying, and the work of agents provocateurs. Watson was probably caught up in these changed circumstances and agreed to serve the Crown, perhaps making him what some then considered a “counterfeit Catholic.” It should be remembered that this was also the period (late 1580) when Oxford exposed his former friends—Lord Henry Howard, Charles Arundel, and Francis Southwell—as secret Catholics. In addition, Oxford incurred the wrath of the Queen and was placed in the Tower of London in March 1581 for three months because he fathered a boy by Anne Vavasour, the boy who would become Sir Edward Vere, a soldier and a scholar. Upon his release, Oxford was exiled from court until June 1583. As Johnson makes clear, “Watson's dedication of his book to the Earl of Oxford was a loyal and courageous act at a time when de Vere was disgraced at court.”

Watson married in September 1585 to Ann Swift, who originally came from Norfolk, at St. Antholin's Church. Johnson speculates, based on Watson's poems, that he likely suffered from an earlier lost love that had healed sufficiently by the time of his marriage. Watson and his wife lived first in St. Helen's, Bishopsgate, and later moved to Norton Folgate. Hugh Swift, Watson's new brother-in-law, played a prominent role throughout the rest of Watson's life.

In 1588, William Cornwallis bought Fisher's Folly, the mansion and gardens Oxford had used to house writers and musicians and established his household there. Watson, who had worked there as a secretary or servant of Oxford's, continued to be employed there by the Cornwallis family as a tutor. In this capacity he seems to have inspired a daughter of the family to keep a manuscript collection of poems known as “Anne Cornwaleys her Booke,” now owned by the Folger Shakespeare Library. It was possibly at this time too that Watson began to work with William Byrd, often considered the best English composer of the age. The result of Byrd's collaboration was a set of madrigals with English lyrics by Watson, not translations from the Italian so much as new lyrics, in the main. Here again, while Watson tends to remain obscure, he is associated with one of the most brilliant lights of the English Renaissance. In the same vein, Byrd's collaboration with Oxford included the composition “The Earl of Oxford's March,” as well as music for two poems attributed to Oxford—“If Women Could Be Fair” and “My Mind to Me a Kingdom Is.”

*The First Set of Italian Madrigals Englished* did not come from the press of Thomas East until 1590, after Watson's release from Newgate Prison. Probably the best-known event in Watson's life is his killing of William Bradley in a fencing match in Hog Lane. The trouble between them initially arose

through Watson's brother-in-law, Hugh Swift, serving as a solicitor to John Allen, no doubt the older brother of the actor Edward Allen, and a manager of the Admiral's Men headquartered at The Curtain. Allen lent 14 pounds to William Bradley and Hugh Swift attempted to collect repayment of the loan. Bradley appears to have been, as Johnson states, "a thug," notorious for quarreling and brawling, and took against Watson and his friend Christopher Marlowe, apparently because Watson went with Swift and Allen to try to collect on the loan. On the afternoon of September 18, 1589, Watson came upon Bradley and Marlowe dueling with swords in Hog Lane, near where all of them then lived. Watson intervened, Marlowe withdrew, and Bradley reportedly said to Watson, "Art thou now come? Then I will have a bout with thee." Bradley attacked Watson and wounded him with a sword and a dagger. Watson reportedly tried to escape but was pursued and again attacked until he managed to thrust his own sword into the right side of Bradley's chest, killing him immediately. Wounded and imprisoned, Watson spent about five months waiting to be granted the Queen's pardon. Although Marlowe was originally imprisoned too, he was soon released on bail, no doubt because, as Johnson demonstrates, Marlowe knew people "in high places."

Soon after Watson's release from prison, Sir Francis Walsingham died. Watson wrote a Latin eulogy for him entitled *Meliboëus sive Ecloga*, published in 1590 and dedicated to Thomas Walsingham. He published an English version of the poem in the same year and dedicated it to Lady Frances Sidney.

Watson's own life by then was tending toward its end. One work he seems likely to have been associated with, and potentially involved the Earl of Oxford, was the entertainment for the Queen at Elvetham in Hampshire, an entertainment technically presented by the Earl of Hertford.

While it is impossible to be certain about the roles played by Watson and Oxford in the preparation of this entertainment, Johnson is willing to speculate and draw inferences in a sober, reasonable way. In doing so, he is careful to follow the findings of other scholars. Albert Chatterley, for instance, convinces Johnson "that the opening Latin speech and blank-verse sections should be attributed to Watson." On the other hand, it has been argued that Watson and Nicholas Breton wrote parts of the entertainment under the guidance of George Buc.

Johnson points out that all three of these writers were part of Oxford's circle and that makes it at least possible that Oxford himself was the guiding spirit behind the entertainment. It is hard not to share Ian Johnson's pleasure in "the attractive suggestion that when the Queen entered the park on her first day at Elvetham and found herself confronted with a poet dressed in green and wearing a laurel-wreath, a poet who fell to his knees and declaimed to her in Latin, that poet was none other than Thomas Watson."

Both Thomas Watson and his brother-in-law Hugh Swift were probably carried off by one of London's periodic plagues in September and October 1592, respectively. Watson was then 37 years old. Some of his work was issued by the press soon after his death. His *Amintae Gaudia* appeared in November with a dedication to Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, in Latin and signed C.M., no doubt Christopher Marlowe. A year later a book entitled *Tears of Fancy or Love Disdained* appeared. It consisted of sixty 14-line sonnets and signed at the end with "Finis T.W." The last sonnet in the book is a slightly different version from one produced by the Earl of Oxford in the 1570s. Scholars continue to debate whether this collection is in fact Watson's work, with the consensus tending to agree it represents early work the poet himself chose not to publish. It seems unlikely at this date that any more conclusive decision will ever be reached on Watson's connection with the book's contents.

As mentioned earlier, the lack of any plays in English known to have been by Watson is something of a puzzle because he seems to have been widely known as a playwright. Ian Johnson gives a hearing to one attempt by an Oxfordian scholar, Dr. Bronson Feldman, to contribute a solution to this puzzle by proposing that Thomas Watson wrote *The Spanish Tragedy*, a play traditionally attributed to Thomas Kyd. Johnson reprints Feldman's argument from *The Bard*, a former publication of the Shakespeare Authorship Society in England and edited by the historian Francis Edwards, S.J., as an Appendix to his book. This is perhaps the clearest example of Johnson's combination of open-mindedness and skepticism. Unlike most academic students of the Elizabethan period, Johnson realizes that there is no closed circle of specialists who have a monopoly on the knowledge of the period. He is open to and frequently uses findings presented by Oxfordians, Marlovians, and others in addition to traditional academic scholars. His skepticism causes him to make clear that Feldman's theory remains unproved, remains a theory, but he nonetheless finds it valuable enough to reprint and he even contributes findings—parallel passages between *The Spanish Tragedy* and Watson's recognized work that Feldman missed, forgot, or ignored—thus strengthening Feldman's case. Johnson's sentences on Feldman's theory demonstrate the generosity of spirit that makes him the ideal biographer for Thomas Watson: "Tempting as the theory at first seems, lack of proof renders it no more than that—a theory. Nevertheless, for daring to make such a radical suggestion and for taking on the academic establishment of the 1950s, Bronson Feldman deserves our admiration."