

All is Not True

The Truth Will Out: Unmasking the Real Shakespeare

by Brenda James and William D. Rubenstein
(Longman Books, 2005)

In October 2005, a series of articles in the British national press announced the imminent publication of a new book that proposed a new and hitherto unsuspected candidate as the real author of the Shakespearean canon. The high profile publicity continued with a launch later that month at The Globe Theatre in London, an event hosted by our President Mark Rylance (author of the book's Foreword), and attended incidentally by a number of Marlowe Society members.

Brenda James had stumbled across **Sir Henry Neville** in a "Eureka moment", after applying a "sixteenth century code-breaking technique" to the mysterious Dedication prefacing Shakespeare's Sonnets. Seven years of research followed, during which she "uncovered piece after piece of compelling evidence," convincing her that Neville was in fact the quill-wielding shadow behind front-man Shakespeare. A draft of the book was sufficiently compelling to persuade William D. Rubenstein (Professor of Modern History at the University of Wales) to act as editor and co-author, "refocusing [James'] work and cutting it down to size".

Meshing

Much of the book is given over to a biography of Neville, in which James and Rubenstein [BJ&WR] endeavour to show "how his life meshes literally at every point with the accepted chronology of Shakespeare's works". The most basic correspondence is provided by the fact that Neville (c1562-1615) lived almost exactly contemporaneously with William Shakespeare (1564-1616), which gives their candidate no problems as far as the 'orthodox chronology' is concerned. His university education, four year tour of Europe (including stops in Padua and Venice), and life-long career as an MP with court connections also provide Neville with much of the general experience often demanded of the Bard by anti-Stratfordians.

Biographical events are also linked to certain plays. The most notable of these is Neville's position as a Councillor in the London Virginia Company, which might have given him access to the 'Strachey Letter', the private document reporting the shipwreck off Bermuda en route to Virginia that is widely believed to have been a source for *The Tempest*. The coincidence in 1609 of the award of that Company's second charter and the registration of the Sonnets just three days earlier, is also proffered as an interesting explanation of the curious reference in the Dedication to the "Adventurer...setting forth".

Neville's biggest claim to infamy was his involvement in the Essex rebellion of February 1601. The exact degree of his commitment to this doomed cause remains uncertain, but he was nevertheless imprisoned in the Tower of London along with Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, and only

released after James I acceded to the throne in 1603. BJ&WR speculate that Neville's stretch in the Tower accounts both for the disgrace felt by the author of the Sonnets, and the perceived Shakespearean mood shift in the new century that triggered the 'problem plays'.

A long-standing acquaintance with Southampton provides a clear Nevillian link with the man to whom Shakespeare's two narrative poems were dedicated, and to whom it is speculated that at least some of the Sonnets are addressed. Quite why a man in Neville's position would dedicate two poems to the Earl is less clear, and BJ&WR feel obliged to explain this away as some kind of in-joke (p100).

The Awkward Bits

Unfortunately, these circumstantial links are as good as it gets for Neville's latent literary career, and Rubenstein's claim in the Times article that there are no "awkward bits" seems open to some debate.

Perhaps most awkward of all is Neville's spell as French Ambassador (May 1599 to August 1600), which clashes with a particularly productive period of Shakespearean output. Between his appointment and departure for Paris, he apparently found time to reel off *Henry IV Part 2*, half of *Henry V*, and *Julius Caesar*. Once in France, he polished off *Henry V* (his new environs inspiring him to write a scene in French), before penning at least two further plays (*As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*), and perhaps also *Much Ado About Nothing* (unless that was also written prior to sailing).

It is perhaps no surprise then that Neville's brief diplomatic career was a failure if he spent these twenty or so months churning out no less than six plays. Such demanding extracurricular activity is feasible according to BJ&WR, with the Ambassador meeting King Henri IV only half a dozen times. Furthermore, they muse, Neville could have used the ambassadorial scribes and secretaries (presumably sworn to secrecy) at his disposal to produce the manuscripts, as well as taking advantage of the fast diplomatic courier services to send the finished plays back to London, where they were acted in his absence (p128).

The overall case is also undermined by attempts to twist every known Nevillian fact into some kind of authorship link, with results ranging from the far-fetched, through the bizarre, to the plain erroneous. Mention of "the losse of my son lately born" in a diplomatic communication to Cecil is circumstantially linked to the Countess of Southampton's oft-quoted gossip¹ a few months earlier that "Sir John Falstaffe is...made father of a godly miller's

¹ "Sir John Falstaffe is by his Mrs Dame Pintpot made father of a godly miller's thumb, a boye that is all head and a little body" – letter from Countess of Southampton to her husband (June or July 1599); Neville's communication to Robert Cecil – Sept 1599. No mention is made of a similar reference in a letter from Essex to Cecil, dated 25-28 Feb 1598: "I pray you commend me also to Alex Radcliff, and tell him for newes his sister is marryed to Sr. Io. Falstaff" – quoted in *The Annotator* (p62).

thumb.” From this union is born the exaggerated claim appearing widely in the advance publicity and reviews that Neville was known to all his friends as Falstaff². A ludicrously contorted parallel between Falstaff’s reported death in *Henry V* “babbling in green fields” and the fact that Neville’s father left a falcon in his will to Charles Howard of Effingham (p116) is not untypical, whilst elsewhere both his father (p113) and his grandson (p203) are incorrectly credited with the first translation of Machiavelli into English.

The Tower Notebook

This biographical “meshing” would be more convincing if there was any documentary evidence to support Neville’s authorship. Three “primary sources from the Elizabethan period” are submitted for the jury’s consideration. The only new document, discovered by Brenda James at the Lincolnshire Record Office, is a 196 page manuscript containing extracts copied from historical records at the Tower of London in 1602, at a time when Neville was imprisoned there.

BJ&WR concentrate on a single page of this ‘Tower Notebook’ containing notes on some eminent personages and their roles at Anne Boleyn’s coronation, which, they claim, “represents a new, unknown source for the coronation material in [*Henry VIII*]”. Despite transcribing both the page of notes and extracts from the play, the sole commonality that can be seen is mention of the Cinque Ports Barons carrying the Queen’s canopy. This is just one of ten Processional stage directions prefacing Act IV Scene I, all but one of which can be traced directly to a passage in Holinshed³.

Attempts to cast Neville-as-Shakespeare researching the scene are also flawed. BJ&WR mistakenly claim that Neville was a Baron of the Cinque Ports, and try to emphasise the Shakespearean significance by imagining that a line from Sonnet 125 (“Were’t ought to me I bore the canopy”) documents his disappointment at not fulfilling that role at the coronation of James I. They fail also to address the attribution of the Coronation scene to John Fletcher in most studies of this play’s joint-authorship⁴.

There is further confusion regarding members of the Neville clan. A distant Neville relative “Jon Lo[r]d Latimer”⁵ is mentioned in the Notebook but not in *Henry VIII*, much to BJ&WR’s surprise (p224). In stark contrast, the

² BJ&WR claim that the original name of Falstaff in the play, Sir John Oldcastle, is “an obvious pun on Neville’s name” (‘old castle’ - ‘new town’ i.e. ‘new ville’), seemingly oblivious to the fact that Oldcastle was a real person who was indeed a close friend and supposed bad influence on the young Prince Hal.

³ “A canopy, borne by foure of the Cinque-Ports; under it, the Queene...” – *Henry VIII*, Act IV Sc I 36.16-17; “Then proceeded foorth the queene ... and ouer hir was borne the canopie by foure of the five ports” – Holinshed, 933; “Barons 5 ports claym to cary the canopie on 4 Lances gilt sylver” – Tower Notebook as transcribed by BJ&WR.

⁴ Of the five major studies cited in Arden (*Henry VIII (All Is True)*, Third Edition edited by Gordon McMullan, 2002, pp180-199 and Appendix 3), those by James Spedding (1850), Fleay (1886), Farnham (1916), and Jonathan Hope (1994) attribute the scene to Fletcher whilst Cyrus Hoy (1962) attributes the scene to Shakespeare but “touched up” by Fletcher.

⁵ John Neville, 3rd Baron Latimer (1493-1543) who married the future queen Katherine Parr in 1533.

appearance and arrest of a far closer relative in Act I Scene I is practically ignored. Instead, the only reference to the character Abergavenny (who in real life was Neville's great-uncle⁶) erroneously identifies him as Sir Henry's grandfather in a list of Nevilles who appeared in Shakespeare plays (p223).

Even if Neville was responsible for the notes, it seems clear that they are in no way a source for the scene in *Henry VIII* that appeared some 11 years later.

Supporting Documents

Attempts to hijack two contemporary documents already in the Authorship arena are equally unconvincing. The protestant Neville is an even more unlikely candidate for the '*The Annotator*' than William Shakespeare, who was originally proposed by Alan Keen in his 1954 book⁷ as the seemingly catholic-leaning author of marginal notes in a copy of *Halle's Chronicles*. There is little more to BJ&WR's citation of the *Northumberland Manuscript* (a key exhibit in the Baconian case since its discovery in 1867) than that the surname "Nevill" appears twice amongst some jottings along with that family's motto.

The weakness of both arguments is underlined by some tampering with peripheral evidence in an attempt to beef up their case. Keen describes a "library ticket" or "label, pasted inside the upper cover of the *Chronicle* when it was rebound, probably at the end of the seventeenth or early eighteenth century," with the "library ticket bearing the printed pressmark "EEd"⁸. BJ&WR find a reference to a "Neville, distinguished for book learning" in a Latin travelogue poem *Iter Boreale*⁹ (1583) by one Richard Eedes (1555-1604), that may well place their man in Durham as a member of Francis Walsingham's diplomatic party. Misrepresenting Keen's pressmark as "Eed" (and thus a variant spelling of Richard's surname), and ignoring the fact that Eedes died nearly a century before Keen's dating of the library ticket, BJ&WR proceed unabashed to imagine the Oxford scholar lending Neville his copy of *Halle's Chronicles* (p236) and exclaiming that "mere coincidence does not usually stretch this far"!

Meanwhile, the physically separate scribblings "Nevill", "Nevill" and motto "Ne vile velis" are falsely conjoined with a Latin quatrain on the *Northumberland Manuscript*. The resulting five-line "family-motto poem" is then linked to a

⁶ George Neville, 3rd Baron Abergavenny (1469?–1535), was brother to Sir Henry's grandfather, Sir Edward Neville (1471-1538). Abergavenny was able to resurrect his position at court after a year's imprisonment in the Tower (1521-22). He went on to fulfil the intriguingly titled role of Chief Larderer at Anne Boleyn's coronation, just as he had at Henry VIII's. He was also appointed Warden of the Cinque Ports in 1513, but soon resigned the position. Due to the misidentification of Abergavenny, these coincidences fail to earn a mention.

⁷ Alan Keen and Roger Lubbock, *The Annotator – The Pursuit of an Elizabethan Reader of Halle's Chronicle Involving Some Surmises About the Early Life of William Shakespeare* (MacMillan New York, 1954).

⁸ *Ibid* p2-3 and p91.

⁹ See Richard Eedes, *Iter Boreale* (1583) – A Hypertext Critical Edition by Dana F. Sutton which can be found online at The Philological Museum (<http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/eedes>). BJ&WR have copied (p235-6) Sutton's summary of Eedes' life word for word (less a few sentences) without acknowledgement – see paragraph 2 of Sutton's Introduction.

misleading partial quotation from a letter¹⁰ by one Rodolphe Bradley to Anthony Bacon. From this second flaw, BJ&WR make a fanciful leap and conclude that Bradley “knew or suspected Neville’s secret hand” (p244).

The provenance of all three documents to Neville is, by this stage, of little interest. BJ&WR seem quite happy to confess that the hand-writing in each case is not Neville’s, but cite the use of scribes and a barely plausible love of disguised handwriting in an incongruous attempt to somehow paint this as positive evidence for Neville’s authorship.

But perhaps the most bizarre claim in the whole book is for Neville’s involvement in the authorship of the seditious tract, *Leicester’s Commonwealth*. BJ&WR imagine Neville in Scotland, collaborating with the Catholic agitator Charles Paget¹¹ in 1583. This highly implausible fiction again seems to have grown out of a single¹² Nevillian fact: that Leicester’s brother Ambrose Dudley was delegated by the Queen to visit Neville’s Sussex ironworks that same year and take issue with the export of ordnance abroad. As a result of this confrontation, we are asked to believe that the protestant Neville, hell-bent on revenge, embarked on the production of a potentially treasonable pamphlet¹³ in league with an exiled Catholic subversive, whilst travelling with Francis Walsingham.

Shaky Ground

Even a brief cross-examination thus finds BJ&WR’s documentary evidence inadmissible, and their case is further marred by a myriad of errors, non sequiturs and contrived links of which this review has mentioned but a few. The bold assertion that the book has “at a stroke, solved comprehensively and categorically all the mysteries and puzzles surrounding the world’s greatest literary genius” rings distinctly hollow by the end, and the hastily constructed edifice that is Neville’s candidature quickly collapses due to the extremely shaky foundations on which it is built.

Brenda James continues her campaign via a web-site¹⁴ where there is hopeful talk of launching a Neville Society. Curiously, the original begetter of this

¹⁰ 1 Tenison MSS., Lambeth Palace Library, vol. 15, folio 110. The letter contains the line “Your gracious speeches **concerninge the gettinge of a prebendshippe for me** ... be the words of a faithfull friende and not of a courtiour, who hath Mel in ore et verba lactis, sed fel in corde et fraus in factis”. BJ&WR omit the **bolded text** which makes clear the subject of the speeches, and removes any possibility that Bradley was referring to Neville.

¹¹ There is absolutely no evidence for Paget’s presence in Scotland, nor that he was an author of *Leicester’s Commonwealth*. Neville’s diplomatic presence in Scotland is inferred from the reference in *Iter Boreale*. See the transcription of Leicester’s Commonwealth edited by D.C. Peck, together with his Introduction to the document, which can be found at <http://homepage.iprolink.ch/dpeck/write/leic-comm1.htm>. This was also published in the US (Athens and London: Ohio University Press, 1985).

¹² BJ&WR also allude to Neville mixing with Paget sixteen years later whilst Ambassador in Paris, claiming he even employed the Catholic on spying missions (p90). “This story will be told in full later in the book,” we are promised, but it is not - possibly as a result of Rubenstein “cutting the work down to size”?

¹³ Leicester’s Commonwealth also includes a potentially dangerous reference to Neville’s father. A speaker alleges that one of Leicester’s inner circle, Sir Thomas Leighton, discussed with Sir Henry Senior the Earl’s plans to become king, and suggested that Sir Henry may be in line for one of the top jobs when this comes to pass.

¹⁴ <http://www.henryneville.com/>

ensuing book – her Eureka decoding of the Sonnets Dedication - is relegated to a mere footnote, although we are promised that this will be the subject of a future publication. I, for one, am unlikely to be rushing out to buy a copy.

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