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*Book Review*

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**Who Killed Kit Marlowe?**

by M.J. Trow and Talieson Trow

London: Sutton, 2001

THOSE who have found themselves questioning the mystery that surrounds the death of the brilliant poet and dramatist, Christopher Marlowe, will find this book of interest, as they will any book that takes the question seriously. Unfortunately, despite the promise of the jacket blurb of a “wholly new and surprising conclusion,” in reality what is new is trivial, hardly worth the required plunge through a mishmash of facts, mixed with myths and guesswork presented as facts, much of it poorly sorted at best and, most annoyingly, backed by few real citations. Descriptions are trite and repetitive: every mention of Elizabeth is followed by the same pejoratives: “black teeth,” “thin hair” and “scrawny chest,” as though that were all there was to be said about the great Queen. Every mention of Elizabeth’s Principal Secretary Francis Walsingham (1572-90) is followed by “the Spymaster,” as though that were the whole of his occupation. Then there’s Nicholas Faunt, similarly tagged “the homosexual,” as though it were some sort of title, one furthermore with no relevance to his role in the story. Really cheap stuff.

There are the same old quotations, repeated, not for any relevance to the thesis, but purely for their allure, or perhaps to flesh

out the book to a respectable size: the Queen’s Armada speech at Tilbury; Anthony Babington’s letter to Robert Poley on the eve of his destruction with its hint of homosexual love (shudder! shudder!); the anecdote about the maid of honor, who, while being seduced by Raleigh, cried out, “Sweet Sir Walter, Swisserwasser”! (pant! pant!)

There are some really sorry mistakes. We are informed that the Latin motto on the portrait thought by many to be of Marlowe, “Quod me nutruit me destruit” (“That which nourishes me destroys me”), refers to spying. The author neither knows nor bothers to find out that this popular motto invariably referenced some private passion. Or do they suggest that Marlowe had a private passion for spying?

The first statement in government agent Baines’s report on Marlowe’s atheism, that Marlowe held that “the Indians and many authors of antiquity have assuredly written above 16 thousand years ago, whereas Adam is proved to have lived within 6 thousand years. . . .” is interpreted by Trow to refer to *Native Americans*, sending him off on a pointless tangent about the possibility that Raleigh and Harriott saw native rituals on their trip to Virginia. Had he been less focused on “Marlowe the Spy,” it might have occurred to him that, in his Faustian thirst for knowledge, Marlowe had read, or heard tell, that the wisdom of the ancient Greeks came to Greece by way of India, something



that, however it may have surprised Baines (and Trow), would hardly surprise antiquarians, then or now.

Still, we are glad to see that they have addressed to some extent the major problem with Charles Nicholl's 1992 *The Reckoning*, by far the most important book on the Marlowe mystery since Leslie Hotson came up with the actual coroner's report in 1925. For some reason, Nicholl was unable to grasp the obvious implications of his own research, offering what is perhaps the weakest of all solutions: that it was Essex who had Marlowe murdered. Another and even less likely solution, that Raleigh had Marlowe murdered to prevent him from "telling all" about the School of Night, is also dismissed by the Trows, with good reason.

Unfortunately they also dismiss out of hand the most interesting scenario yet, that proposed originally by Calvin Hoffman in 1955 in *The Murder of the Man Who Was Shakespeare*, which holds that Marlowe's death was faked. Though it can offer no real evidence, Hoffman's version does account for more of the peculiar elements in the story than most theories. (It may be that his scenario is disregarded less on its own account than because its primary purpose is to support his theory that Marlowe lived on to create the Shakespeare canon while in exile.)

All of these writers see the official

scenario, that Marlowe was killed in a brawl over the bill for the day at Eleanor Bull's inn, as a cover-up. All agree that some powerful higher-up "set up" Marlowe, though they differ on who and why.

Since the Trows haven't given the matter enough study to do more than raise the question, their book does little more for Marlowe than point the finger where Nicholl fell short, at Robert Cecil, a solution, however, that had already occurred to Curtis Bright (see his *Surveillance, Militarism and Drama of the Elizabethan Era*, from 1996). It was Robert Cecil who, upon taking over the office of Principle Secretary from the recently deceased "Spy-master" Walsingham, had the motivation, both personal and official, to get rid of Marlowe. Marlowe's plays, with their bold, underclass heroes, were attracting far too much enthusiastic attention from the young and the restless of London, a situation that would have concerned the Cecils and other establishment figures whose priorities leaned more towards security and stability than fostering the arts.

Unfortunately the Trows diminish their identification of Cecil by including in their accusations both the Lord Admiral, Charles Howard, and the Lord Chamberlain, Henry Hunsdon. (This must be the "wholly new and surprising conclusion" since nothing else is either new or surprising.)

They are also off-base with the reasons



they give for Marlowe's elimination. Trow (senior, I suppose) waxes eloquent—or as close to it as his native limitations allow—over the dangers of free-thought in Elizabethan England and the consequences of being charged with atheism. True enough. That some members of the highly educated nobility were themselves guilty of free-thinking, also true no doubt. But that Marlowe “knew too much” about the atheistical free-thinking of Howard and Hunsdon, things they feared he might reveal under examination by the rest of the Council, won't hold water on the face of it, and even if it did, Trow, with his slipshod approach, isn't up to making the case. Whether or not we come away persuaded of their complicity in Marlowe's murder, some background on these two important officials, both members of the Privy Council, both relatives of the Queen, both patrons of important acting companies, would be a darn sight more interesting than another recitation of the Queen's Tilbury speech. If anything, it would seem that Howard, patron of the brilliant actor Edward Alleyn, who brought Marlowe's heroes to life on the stage, would have been more concerned to protect his author than to destroy him. If this question ever occurred to Trow he shows no sign of it.

Although Trow never gets quite as Gothic as does Charles Nicholl whenever the subject of undercover operations arises (there should be some limit set on the use of the word “seamy” in books like this), there's still way too much negative mystique here.

When (oh, when) will someone give us

the book that dispells the myth of “Marlowe the Spy,” an image so ingrained in the psyche of the reading public by now that nobody even bothers to offer proof? In point of fact, “Marlowe the Spy” is an imaginary being based on an arbitrary interpretation of three incidents, none of them offering any real evidence that Marlowe was ever actually hired or paid by the government to spy on his countrymen, either at home or abroad.

The incident that launched this omnipresent spy version of Marlowe's biography has been misinterpreted from the very start. There can be no argument over the fact that, in the mid-1580s, when he was in his early twenties, Marlowe was engaged in some activity that occasioned several long absences from his studies at Cambridge University; or that when the dons, hearing rumors that he had gone to Rheims to turn Catholic (or to pretend he had) refused to give him his degree, that they were ordered to do so by the Privy Council. The problem lies with the interpretation of the Privy Council's order:

Whereas it was reported that Christopher Morley was determined to have gone beyond the seas to Rheims and there to remain, their lordships thought good to verify that he had no such intent, but that in all his actions he had behaved himself orderly and discreetly whereby he had done her Majesty good service & deserved to be rewarded for his faithful dealing. Their lordships' request was that the rumor

thereof should be allayed by all possible means, and that he should be furthered in the degree he was to take this next Commencement; because it was not her Majesty's pleasure that anyone employed as he had been in matters touching the benefit of his country should be defamed by those that are ignorant in th'offices he went about.

Trow finds great significance in the phrase "and there to remain." Says he, "the earlier part of the sentence 'was determined' either shows Marlowe's keenness to be of service or is merely Elizabethan speak for 'was ordered,'" concluding: "There is little doubt that he went to Rheims and perhaps elsewhere on Walsingham's business. . . ."

On the contrary, there is every reason to doubt it. Without some evidence that Marlowe actually went to Rheims, why refuse to accept "their lordships'" explanation? Certainly it would seem that Marlowe's unique abilities, his passion for knowledge, his training in music and his gift for self-expression, would make him an unlikely choice for a spy. Contrary to Nicholl's peculiar insistence that writers are inclined towards spying—a view that he repeats over and over like some sort of mantra, in hopes perhaps of convincing the reader (or himself)—the history of literature suggests that great writers do *not* make good spies; far from it. When it comes to relations with repressive authorities, great writers are far more likely to be found jailed or exiled for speaking out too freely than snitching on their fellows.

Even less likely is the accompanying charge that he was a closet Catholic. If Marlowe was a Catholic activist, then somebody else penned *Dr. Faustus* and *The Massacre at Paris*.

Spook hunters ignore the importance of the final sentence of the Privy Council message: "it was not her Majesty's pleasure that anyone employed as [Marlowe] had been in matters touching the benefit of his country should be defamed by those that are ignorant in th'offices he went about." However some members of the Council may have felt about him later, at this point it should be clear that at the time they signed this letter, most of them regarded the rumors of Marlowe's spying as shameful and uncalled for and his actual service, whatever it was, of a much more honorable nature. What reason have we ever been given to disbelieve them? Since we are still just as ignorant of "th'offices he went about" as were the Cambridge dons in 1587, why continue to "defame" the great poet? Is spying the only thing that a brilliant young writer and scholar could be doing to "benefit" his country, the only thing that the Privy Council was unwilling to reveal to the university? What about writing anti-Catholic propaganda? What about writing plays for the newly formed Crown company, the Queen's Men?

The second incident that is supposed to prove Marlowe's spying involves the poet and two certified government operatives, Richard Baines and Gilbert Gifford (Yes, I know he called himself "Gifford Gilbert"—a ruse so patently transparent that one is dumbfound-

ed that it has been successful for so long) who, for some reason, met and shared a room in Flushing, where shortly Baines and Marlowe accused each other to Robert Sidney, the governor of Flushing, of seeking instruction (from Gifford) in the counterfeiting of coins, and of threatening to “go over to the enemy” (the Catholics), both capital crimes. Steering clear of an obvious mess, Sidney shipped all three off to Burghley.

Here Nicholl sees Marlowe and Baines as two government undercover agents attempting to blame a conspiracy to counterfeit coins and/or go over to the Catholics on each other. But this could only be the case if the authorities—in this case, the governor of Flushing or his men—had discovered the plot through some separate agency, forcing the conspirators to turn on each other to save their own skins. That this was not the case is revealed by Sidney’s letter to Burghley, wherein he explains that he first learned of the “plot” from Baines, who came to him to accuse Marlowe. Marlowe, when asked to respond to Baines’s charges, claimed that it was in fact Baines who had urged the scheme and Baines who claimed that he intended to defect to the Catholics.

Who are we to believe here, the government operatives, up to their ears in double-dealing and false testimony, or the great playwright, particularly in light of who was involved in his murder the following year?

Whatever Sidney may have known or suspected about Baines and Gifford, clearly he knew enough, or suspected enough, to turn the matter over to Burghley—or perhaps

we should say, “return” it to him. Today, thanks in particular to Nicholl, we have more than enough evidence that both Baines and Gifford were government agents who worked for both Burghley and Cecil. Gifford was one of the main movers behind the sting that entrapped Anthony Babington, while Baines was the author of several bits of disinformation used by the government, among them the “note” written a few days before (or after) Marlowe’s assassination, damning him as an atheist and a sodomite and ending with: “I think all men in Christianity ought to endeavor that the mouth of so dangerous a member may be stopped.”

The Flushing incident took place in January of 1592, during the period following Walsingham’s death that Robert Cecil was assisting his father in carrying out Walsingham’s duties. (The Queen finally gave Cecil the job permanently in 1596.) We believe that this incident was a sting intended to put Marlowe behind bars (much as Jonson was jailed in 1597, and for the same purpose), and that it was the first, or one of the first, of a series of moves that can and should be seen as the Cecils, now working as a team, moving to suppress those writers who satirized, or attacked, them and their policies in print, or who, as with Marlowe, wrote plays that they feared would incite the hoi polloi to riot. These moves include: the Dutch Church libel; the imprisonment and torture of Thomas Kyd; the arrest, “trial,” and executions of Greenwood, Barrow, and Penry; the arrest and murder of Marlowe; the Cerne Abbas inquiry into atheism in the Raleigh

circle; the arrest and imprisonment of Ben Jonson for his part in *The Isle of Dogs*; the closure of the London theaters for the same; the book burning carried out by the bishops in 1599; and the increased tightening of controls on the stage and publishing throughout the 1590s.

The third and final incident that leads the spook hunters to conclude that Marlowe was a spy is the one that killed him. As in Flushing the year before, we see Marlowe in Deptford, surrounded by thugs, three this time, foremost among them Robert Poley, the most notorious of all government agents. The only possible reason why this scenario would suggest the official version, i.e. that Marlowe was killed as a sort of falling out among thieves, is that for some reason, although they have done yeoman service in recovering the facts, only Curtis Bright has had the stomach to see, or at least to publish, the truth. The men who killed Marlowe were *not* his colleagues. Marlowe's colleagues were scholars, actors, writers, poets, and their patrons. The men who killed Marlowe were hit men, pure and simple, paid by the government to eliminate a troublesome writer, just as they were paid to eliminate troublesome Catholics (Norfolk, Campion, Babington, Mary Stuart) and troublesome Puritans (Barrow, Greenwood, and Penry).

Simplest is almost always best. After centuries of searching by scholars, nothing has been uncovered that proves, or even suggests, that Marlowe was a spy. While payments to hundreds of intelligencers and informers at home and abroad are listed in



### Recent Books of Interest to Oxfordians

**The Marginalia of Edward De Vere's Geneva Bible** by Roger Stritmatter, PhD. 8 1/2 x 11, perfect bound, 515 pp, 112 images: most photographic facsimiles from the de Vere Bible. Publisher Oxford Press, Northampton, MA (July 2001, \$69). To obtain a copy or for information, post: [stritmatter24@hotmail.com](mailto:stritmatter24@hotmail.com). This ten-year study of de Vere's personal, annotated Bible was nominated for the 2001 Bernheimer Prize for the best PhD dissertation in Comparative Literature.

**Shakespeare's Tutors: The Education of Edward de Vere** by Stephanie Hopkins Hughes. Publisher Paradigm Press (Mar. 2003, \$35). To obtain a copy or for info, post: [hopkinshughes@attbi.com](mailto:hopkinshughes@attbi.com). Hughes examines the education of de Vere from his placement with Sir Thomas Smith at the age of four, through his years with William Cecil, a period covering his late teens and early twenties. Includes important new information on his formative years and the brilliant men who shaped his thinking and his goals.

**Shakespeare & the Tudor Rose** by Elisabeth Sears. Publisher Meadow Geese Press. An update of the controversial book that has spurred the Oxfordian version of the "Prince Tudor Theory." Presents the case that Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, was the son of Oxford and the Queen. Features full-color portraits of Elizabeth, Oxford, and Southampton. Available autumn 2002.

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\* \* \* \*

Those who would like to register early or who are interested in presenting a paper please send name and address by email to:

Brian Hicks, Chairman  
The De Vere Society

*brian.hicks@ntlworld.com.*

the Warrants, Marlowe's name has not been found. We know for certain only that he was beset upon twice by men who are known to be government agents, men who spied and performed "dirty tricks" for the government, men who, for a price, had entrapped, created disinformation and killed for the government on other occasions, and one man who, if not directly for the government, worked in the same capacity for men who were closely connected with government officials (i.e. Thomas Walsingham).

Yet as long as those who are more excited by "seamy" spy stories than by the struggles of artists against the forces of social repression continue to dominate the inquiry, no progress will be gained in discovering or uncovering the real reasons for Marlowe's death. These, if revealed, will, of course, be connected with who he really was: no double-talking, double-dealing sneak whose gift was the ability to snooker fools into a deadly trap, but a reckless malcontent, a hothead with a golden voice, the total opposite of a spy. Forget Graham Greene and Ian Fleming with their modest talents; think Ovid, Dante, Voltaire, Solzhenitsyn, Vaslav Hamel; think Charlie Chaplin and Dalton Trumbo.

Does it matter that the spook hunters keep getting it wrong? Of course it matters, truth always matters, but it should matter to authorship scholars in particular because Marlowe is--has to be--an important part of the reason why so many gifted writers felt they had to hide their identities at this crucial moment in English literary history. When we get Marlowe's story wrong we get

the story of the English Renaissance wrong. Once again, as with the name "Shakespeare," we find ourselves on a tangent that leads away from, not towards, the truth.

Personally, I like Hoffman's notion that Marlowe was not actually murdered. For one thing it leaves the Cecils with a little less blood on their hands; surely their purpose (to shut him up) was as easily fulfilled by an exile as by a murder. It explains why the sting took place in Deptford, where ships rode at anchor, waiting for the tide to take them across the Channel, down the coast of Portugal and Spain, through the Gates of Hercules into the Mediterranean and thence to the Near East, the setting for Marlowe's most popular plays. It explains the eight hours spent in "conversation" at Eleanor Bull's, as time is never spent by people unless they're waiting for something to happen, such as the tide to turn, or for something to arrive, such as John Penry's corpse.

If John Penry's corpse was used as a substitute for Marlowe's it would explain the stab wound in the eye; such a wound tends to bleed less (outwardly) than a stab in the chest or back of the body, a consideration if the body to be stabbed had been dead for some time. Nicholl notes the unusual place chosen for the execution, suggesting that, unlike his cohorts, Barrow and Greenwood, who were hanged in London, "they" chose to hang Penry at an inn on the road halfway from London to Deptford because they were afraid that a mob might rise to defend him. It's more likely that the location was chosen because it was close to Deptford. Trow ques-

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Saturdays 10:30 am - 12:30 pm  
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### September 21

"Romeo & Juliet and Shakespeare's Calendar"  
Speaker: Dr. Steven Sohmer

### November 16

"Chaos and Appetite in *Troilus and Cressida*"  
Speaker: Frank Dwyer

### January 25

"Shakespeare in Italy"  
Speaker: Richard Paul Roe

### March 22

"Music at the Court of Henry VIII  
& Queen Elizabeth"  
Speaker: Sally Mosher

### June 7

"The Spanish Theater during  
Shakespeare's Time"  
Speaker: Professor Susana Fernandez

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tions whether the coroner's jury would accept without question the rope burn on the neck that accompanies hanging; but, if Penry's execution was one factor in a plot to eliminate Marlowe, he could just as easily have been smothered in a bedroom of the inn, his execution later reported as a hanging. Who that was involved would dare, or even wish, to claim otherwise?

I prefer to think that Marlowe, after a severe warning that death would be his lot should he ever return, was given some money and a passport to the East, the direction towards which his soul had always leaned, the source of the ancient wisdom he sought (also perhaps where it was not considered "filthy" to love one's own sex). He seems to me an early version of European artist-adventurers like T.E. Lawrence, Richard Burton, Robert Louis Stevenson and Arthur Rimbaud, whose hunger for freedom—intellectual, emotional and sexual—drew them to the East. John Donne, who must have met Marlowe in his youth, once wrote, "When I am gone, dream me some happiness. . . ." Because we can never know the full truth of Marlowe's disappearance, we are free to reject this "seamy" murder by the dregs of London lowlife and in its place, "dream some happiness," or a longer life at least, for England's first great lyric poet. SHH

