

## IN MEMORY OF A PATHFINDER: CHARLTON OGBURN, JR.

By James Norwood

The combination of the publication of Charlton Ogburn's *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* in 1984 and the subsequent *Frontline* program *The Shakespeare Mystery* in 1989 were arguably turning points in a revival of interest in the Shakespeare authorship question in the late twentieth century.

Taken together, the book and the television documentary were responsible for introducing authorship to a new generation. In the following retrospective of Ogburn's life, his notion of Shakespeare authorship studies as a 'laboratory' for understanding other controversial historical and contemporary events may serve as a model for us all. He once described the author 'Shakespeare' as 'a myriad-minded man', and the same could be said of Ogburn himself.

It is vital to remember the dedication and courage of a humble man who wrote not only persuasively, but with passion. His book may be out of print, but the memory of Charlton Ogburn lives on.



Charlton Ogburn, Jr – 'the portrait of a gentleman and a scholar'  
(p.31 below)



Charlton Ogburn (1911–98) never wrote a sentence that was not beautifully constructed and did not contain a well-reasoned main point. Ogburn's *The Mysterious William Shakespeare: The Myth and the Reality* (1984) is one of the landmarks in the history of Shakespearean biography. It was the culmination of a half-century of intensive study and writing by Charlton and his parents. The journey began when the family read 'a very inconspicuous article' by Charles Wisner Barrell in the May 1, 1937 edition of the *Saturday Review*. The article pointed the Ogburns to J. Thomas Looney's "*Shakespeare*" Identified in *Edward de Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford*. Twelve years later, Charlton Ogburn, Sr.'s book, *The Renaissance Man of England*, was published in 1949. The much more detailed volume *This Star of England*, written jointly by Dorothy and Charlton, Sr., followed in 1952, and was issued by a major publishing house, Coward–McCann. Charlton, Jr. wrote an eight-page foreword to his parents' book. He also collaborated with his mother on *Shake-speare: The Real Man Behind the Name*, which was published by William Morrow in 1962. Among the family's briefer works, two articles were published in the *American Bar Association Journal* (one by Dorothy and another jointly by Dorothy and Charlton, Sr.). An influential essay was published by Charlton, Jr. in the 1974 edition of the *Harvard Magazine*. As a corpus, this is a significant body of scholarly work from the three Ogburns, spanning over a half century of intensive study and writing. While leading their personal and professional lives, the Ogburns not only kept the authorship subject alive, but advanced our understanding of the true author of Shakespeare's works through original and creative contributions.

In his writing career, Ogburn selected topics for which he truly had a passion. His books also demonstrate his thesis about Shakespearean authorship, namely, that a dedicated writer always returns to his or her personal experience for the core content. One of Ogburn's contentions about Shakespeare was that the author has a vast knowledge of ornithology. Not surprisingly, Charlton wrote two books on birds, *The Winter Beach* (1966) and *The Adventures of Birds* (1976), which derived from a lifetime of bird-watching experience. His book *The Marauders* (1959), which was later turned into a successful film with Lawrence Harvey, was based on Charlton's personal experiences in Burma where he served in World War II. His retrospective book *Railroads: The Great American Adventure* (1975), which was published by The

National Geographic Society, focuses on the primary mode of transportation that infused the lives of all Americans until the age of airplane travel. Again, the author was writing out of his personal, direct experience of trains. He published two novels, *The Gold of the River Sea* (1965) and *Winespring Mountain* (1973), plus several children's books, including *The White Falcon* (1953), *The Bridge* (1957), and *Big Caesar* (1968) – works which also drew on his life experience. All authors allow their personal lives consciously or subconsciously to creep into the writing. Any written discourse has a built-in subjectivity, especially literary works. When composing the *Iliad*, Homer was clearly invested in both the nobility and the horrors of war. When shaping the biblical stories, the authors of the Hebrew Bible were writing from the immediacy of the exile in Babylon. And Dante makes no pretence of disguising his own identity in his epic poem, assigning himself the role of protagonist in the spiritual journey of *The Divine Comedy*. Shakespeare alone, according to the experts, wrote in a complete personal vacuum, creating masterworks 'objectively' and solely out of his 'genius' and his 'imagination'. The Stratfordians' insistence on this single author's refusal to allow subjectivity to enter his literary creations is one of the main issues of contention in the authorship debate.

Ogburn always stressed the importance of approaching the Shakespeare authorship question with an open mind. He believed that Henry Clay Folger, the founder of the bastion of orthodoxy in Washington, D.C., would have welcomed the challenge to the Stratfordian position and would have been enthusiastic about the implications of Edward de Vere's Geneva Bible in the holdings of his own library. Of course, Ogburn knew precisely why Folger would have been excited: he was not an academic! Another revelation came after the 1985 *Firing Line* television program in which Ogburn and Rutgers' English professor Maurice Charney discussed the authorship question with William F. Buckley, Jr. as moderator. Ogburn recalls a short personal exchange after the program in which Charney confessed that his wife had read Ogburn's book and become a convert! An inherent difference between Dr and Mrs Charney is that the former is a member of the professoriate and the latter is an open-minded lay person. Another characteristic trait of Charlton Ogburn is his humor. In his concern that the 1987 moot trial debate at American University was going to be a disaster, Ogburn confided to a friend that they were 'on our way to the guillotine in the

tumbrel'. It is unfortunate that the legal brief for the Oxfordians was not a series of extractions from Ogburn's monumental *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*.

Ogburn's intensive study at the Folger Library and the Library of Congress led him to compile massive documentation of the spectacular leaps of faith taken by the Stratfordian scholars. In *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*, he allows the academicians to speak for themselves. The inescapable conclusion is that 'the author as he emerges from the plays is very nearly the opposite of the Stratford man as we know him from the record and as we've seen him in his characteristics'. Ogburn grounded his own analysis in the world of Tudor England to come to terms with the singular conditions of a poet-dramatist in the general timeframe of the late sixteenth century. His discoveries were startling.

For Ogburn, the Stratfordian theory was built upon the ambiguous testimony of Ben Jonson as an antidote to the puzzling absence of evidence linking the plays and poems to the Stratford man. Ogburn recognized a more profound dynamic of how future scholars would place their faith in Jonson's cryptic words and the Tudor and Stuart authorities, as opposed to examining the evidence impartially. Based on Ogburn's analysis, the phrase 'Shakespeare Birthplace Trust' takes on a new meaning. The only way to accept the myth of the Stratford man is to place one's total *trust* in the authorities, namely, those who have controlled and manipulated the information about the author of Shakespeare's works from the moment of publication of the First Folio in 1623 to the present day.

Part of the wisdom of Ogburn was apparent in his use of the Shakespearean authorship case as a model, or laboratory, for any subject in which a minority voice confronts a power elite that is wedded to a false narrative. Psychologists refer to this phenomenon as cognitive dissonance. In the 1950s and long before a single American military 'advisor' had been placed in Vietnam, Charlton Ogburn was an intelligence officer, writing memos to the State Department and warning of the dangers of military involvement in Southeast Asia. His voice was completely ignored by the overconfident authorities in Washington. Ogburn compares the formulation of policy in Vietnam by officials in Washington to the treatment of evidence in the Shakespeare authorship case by the elite members of academe. He suggests that the reach of the authorities is 'totalitarian' in nature, a

reality that was grasped by Plato, who may have been the first to identify the amorphous power of the ‘State’ in the example of ancient Athens. A phenomenon beyond the control of the individual citizens, state-controlled policy extends from the death of Socrates to George Orwell’s depiction of the Ministry of Truth in *1984*: a memory hole capable of deleting an entire historical record and replacing it with state-approved information. For Ogburn, Vietnam was another example of his ‘laboratory’ of understanding dogma as presented by authority figures. The passage of time would prove Ogburn to be correct about his assessment of Vietnam. Writing in 1989, Andrew Jon Rotter in *The Path to Vietnam: Origins of the American Commitment to Southeast Asia*, refers to Ogburn’s dispatches to State Department officials as ‘startling and prophetic’ in his early critique of the assumptions guiding U.S. policy. Ogburn concluded one of his memos to Dean Rusk with a statement that spoke for the rights of third world nations caught up in the Cold War. Referring to the people of Southeast Asia, Ogburn wrote, ‘Darn it, they are the ones who are threatened with a fate worse than death – not we.’ Over a decade later, Dean Rusk served as Secretary of State to Lyndon Johnson and oversaw America’s disastrous escalation of the war in Vietnam.

Like the ‘laboratory’ of Vietnam, resistance to change on the part of the authorities prevented any revision of the traditional view of Shakespearean authorship. Ogburn recalls how at one time, the dissenters from Shakespearean orthodoxy were all Stratfordians, but later relied on their own minds to penetrate the layers in pursuit of the truth. The clear-thinking ‘heretics’ challenged the ‘dogma’ of the authorities who had disseminated information in classrooms, textbooks, and the mainstream media. In a democracy, the voices of the minority could not be silenced. But they could effectively be suppressed through marginalization and ridicule. Ogburn’s Vietnam analogy may be the most important concept as a starting point for finally reversing the dogma implicit in Shakespearean authorship. Two decades after Ogburn’s death, the Oxfordian movement has grown with active participants from every walk of life.

The critics of Charlton Ogburn frequently assert defensively that he and others who challenge orthodoxy are mere ‘amateurs’. The academicians use that word as a catch-all to categorize those who do not belong to their institutional

clique. But when we look at the root word of amateur, there is a resonance of the word *amour*, or love. An amateur in the purest sense of the word pursues a vocation for the sheer love of it. In this regard, the dedication apparent in the collective publications of Charlton Ogburn and his parents was a model of amateurism in the truest sense of the word. The original amateurs were the men and women of the Enlightenment – Voltaire, Emilie du Châtelet, Rousseau, Diderot – who transformed the world with breathtaking ideas. The creativity of their thinking came precisely because they were not part of an institution. The founding fathers of America, especially Jefferson, Adams, Franklin, and Hamilton, were maverick amateurs who conceived the infrastructure of our experiment in democracy. Thus, Charlton Ogburn is among distinguished company in a long line of amateurs. To recall his life in his myriad contributions, it becomes clear that this is amateurism at its finest and a phenomenon that is, unfortunately, becoming all too rare today: the portrait of a gentleman and a scholar.



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