

TRIBUTE TO TOM BETHELL

Author, investigative journalist – and Oxfordian

By Amanda Hinds

Tom Bethell, author, investigative journalist, editor, devout Roman Catholic and committed Oxfordian, sadly died on 12 February 2021 aged 84, of complications of Parkinsonism, cared for by his wife Donna at their home in Washington DC. An obituary in Washington and a panegyric after a Requiem Mass describe the breadth of his life and convictions. To quote Donna, ‘He was curious about so many things,’ and ‘He had this breadth of curiosity that drove him.’ Curiosity led him to the USA and journalism, after Downside School and Dartmouth, briefly the Royal Navy, and Trinity College Oxford, and to New Orleans (to study and write about jazz) and then to Washington, where he was a columnist and editor of *Harper’s Magazine* among several other journals. While working as a researcher for Jim Garrison, the Louisiana District Attorney, he provided evidence for the successful defence of a man who his boss (Garrison) had charged with conspiracy to assassinate J. F. Kennedy. Tom wrote articles and books on widely differing subjects – from conspiracy theories, climate change, what Darwin got wrong – to his firm belief that Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford wrote the plays and poems wrongly attributed to William Shaksper.

Tom Bethell was a friend and colleague of Joseph Sobran, who cites Bethell (in *Alias Shakespeare*) as the first to publish evidence that no historical events were reflected in the works of Shakespeare after 1603. Bethell’s article in a cover story, ‘Searching for Shakespeare’ in the October 1991 issue of *The Atlantic*, is a model for concise, convincing presentation of ‘The Case for Oxford.’ ‘The Case for Shakespeare’ by Irvin Matus, also an Englishman, is about the best article I have read on that side of the argument – and their refutations of each other’s cases are well written. *The Atlantic* is to be congratulated for a fair presentation of the Shakespeare Authorship Question – which is sadly not reflected in the tone of James Shapiro’s invited response (June 2019) in the same journal to an article by Elizabeth Winkler almost thirty years later.

Tom Bethell’s ‘Case for Oxford’ leads with *Hamlet* ‘... derived from a story in Francois de Belleforest’s *Histoires Tragiques* (1576), not yet translated ...’ and

cites seven parallels with Oxford's life, ranging from Lord Burghley's 'Precepts' to Oxford's capture by pirates – frequently quoting orthodox authors. After moving from the controversy over Francis Bacon as the real author to J. Thomas Looney's 'far more interesting and plausible' candidate, Bethell exposes the weakness of the conventional dating of the plays as 'more a matter of giving a breathing space to Stratford chronology than of letting the facts speak for themselves'. Bethell allows the facts to speak for themselves – including an account of the shipwreck of the *Edward Bonaventure* in Bermuda in 1593 – well before *The Tempest* was written. In his section 'The Inadequacy of the Stratford man', Bethell quotes Emerson's comment, 'Other admirable men have led lives in some sort of keeping with their thought, but this man in wide contrast' as 'the anti-Stratfordian case in a nutshell.'

Bethell's section 'The Virtuosity of Oxford' includes Oxford's close links with the stage (refuting Matus' main argument about Shakspeare's links with the stage) and his poetry and plays written before his use of the pseudonym. Bethell's quotation from the *Dictionary of National Biography*, written by Sir Sidney Lee, at much the same time as his *Life of Shakespeare* (leading to my firm conviction that Sir Sidney Lee *knew* ... , which I never had the opportunity to discuss with Tom).

Oxford, despite his violent and perverse temper, his eccentric taste in dress, and his reckless waste of his substance, evinced a genuine interest in music, wrote verses of much lyric beauty. Puttenham and Meres reckon him among the 'best for comedy' in his day; but, although he was a patron of players, no specimens of his dramatic productions survive.

Tom summed up the evidence for Shakspeare: 'As far as I know, at no point in Shakspeare's lifetime was the claim made that he had written anything, nor do we have any evidence that he was ever paid for writing. Shakspeare himself makes no authorial claim in the anecdotes that have come down to us.'

Tom Bethell was a lifelong friend of my husband, Fergus, who was with him at Dartmouth and (briefly) in the Royal Navy – and was the first 'Oxfordian' either of us met. We will miss his annual visits to England but look forward to remembering him with his wife Donna. 'Searching for Shakespeare' from *The Atlantic* will shortly be available on the DVS website: <https://deveresociety.co.uk/library/books-journals/>