GEORGE GASCOIGNE DID NOT ACCOMPANY THE EARL OF OXFORD ON THE WAY TO LONDON IN 1562

By Robert R. Prechter

This is the third article in a series challenging aspects of B.M. Ward's augmentation of Edward de Vere's biography. Previous articles appeared in *Brief Chronicles* (2010) and *The Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter* (Fall 2023). This article is excerpted from the George Gascoigne chapter of *Oxford's Voices* (oxfordvoices.com).

B.M. Ward proposed that George Gascoigne accompanied the twelve-year-old Earl of Oxford on his trip from Hedingham Castle to London in 1562. Several biographers have woven Ward's travel scenario into their accounts of Oxford's life. Half a dozen observations – relating to Gascoigne's own words and Ward's derivative constructions – combine to refute the claim.

Ward's scenario – proposed in one book and detailed in another[1] – derives from dual descriptions of one of Gascoigne's personal experiences. In the dedication to *The Complaynt of Philomene* dated April 16, 1575, Gascoigne explains how he came to delay completing the poem:

> I called to minde that twelve or thirtene yeares past, I had begonne an *Elegye* or sorrowefull song, called the Complainte of *Phylomene,* the which I began too devise riding by the high way betwene Chelmisford and London, and being overtaken with a sodaine dash of Raine, I changed my copy, and stroke over into the *Deprofundis* which is placed amongst my other *Poesies,* leving the complaint of *Phylomene* unfinished: and so it hath continued ever Since until this present moneth of April. 1575. when I begonne my *Steele Glasse*….

His trip occurred 'twelve or thirtene yeares past,' indicating (taking him literally) sometime between April 1562 and April 1563.

In *A Hundreth sundrie Flowres*, published two years earlier, the poem headed Gascoignes *De profundis* appears within a series of verses labeled as Gascoigne's work. Above it, the unnamed editor of *Flowres* describes the author's recollection as follows:

> The occasion of the wrighting hereof (as I have herde Master Gascoigne say) was this: riding alone between Chelmsforde and London, his minde mused upon dayes past … when a great shoure of rayne did overtake him, and he … compiled firste this sonnet, and afterwardes, the translated Psalme of *Deprofundis* as here followeth.

Ward stated, 'Anybody will surely agree that two such similar and graphic accounts … of so trivial an incident as a ride in the rain, could only have been written by …' whom, do you think? I would say – in accordance with both reports – that it would be (1) the person who experienced it and (2) the person who reported hearing him tell of it. But no. Ward asserted that it must be a pair of 'actual eyewitnesses [who] rode into London *together*.'[2]

Both passages quoted above, however, contradict Ward's idea that two men traveled together. As you can see by the underlined text, the editor states that Gascoigne reported he was 'riding *alone*' when rain overtook '*him*', and Gascoigne himself confirms the solitary nature of his experience by continually using *I*, not *we*. He never once mentions a companion, much less 141 companions, fitting the size of Oxford's procession.

The route and the timing involved reveal three more problems with Ward's proposal. First, Gascoigne's trip southward from Chelmsford to London would not have brought him anywhere near Castle Hedingham because the castle is twenty miles north of Chelmsford. To open the possibility of a meeting, Ward conjectured, '*If* Gascoigne was riding from Bury St. Edmonds or Lavenham, he must have passed Castle Headingham on the way.'[3] That is a big *if*. Bury St. Edmonds and Lavenham are indeed north of Chelmsford, but Gascoigne does not say he began his trip north of Chelmsford; Ward just made it up. Second, after citing the historical fact that Oxford traveled to London on September 3, 1562, Ward proposed that of all the available days (unlike, say, in Nevada, it can rain in England at any time of year) between April 1562 and April 1563, Gascoigne's trip must have occurred precisely on the same day as Oxford's. But such a coincidence would have only a 1/365 probability of happening by chance and a 364/365 chance of *not* happening. Third, Ward assumed that the intraday timing of the two trips was so fortunate that Gascoigne managed to meet up with Oxford on the road even though the two men were traveling *in the same direction*. That would

constitute another highly unlikely coincidence, a requirement that significantly increases the improbability of the proposed meetup.

There's more. We are expected to believe that Gascoigne had no qualms about clip-clopping right up to the pre-teen *Lord Great Chamberlain of England* as he led a train of pomp comprising 140 decked-out horsemen. We are expected to believe that the incident left such a weak impression on Gascoigne's mind that he could not even recall the *year* it happened, much less the date. We are expected to believe that a decade later, Oxford took up his pen to reminisce anonymously about the incident in *Flowres* (for which, by the way, Gascoigne took full credit two years later) on Gascoigne's behalf, without mentioning his own participation in the event, proving that it meant nothing to him even as Ward proposed that the event was highly memorable, while attempting to hide (unsuccessfully, according to Ward) his role in the publication, all as a sidebar to a mean-spirited publishing conspiracy designed to embarrass the Queen's favorite courtier, Christopher Hatton, and finally that Gascoigne recalled the same event in print two years later without bothering to mention his famous companion! Simply cataloguing Ward's leaps of conjecture is exhausting.[4]

The Ogburns described the passage in *Flowres* as "[the] Editor's – *i.e. Oxford's* – Introduction to *De Profundis*[5] and expanded upon Ward's scenario:

> There is a story recorded that … George Gascoigne … was bearing him company on his journey to the court…. The horses pranced. Gascoigne had fallen back a little. The young Earl sat erect, his heart high. [M]idway through the young Earl's journey a hard shower had overtaken his procession, giving him and his friend Gascoigne a drenching. He had resented this abrupt dampening…."[6]

In truth, no such story is recorded anywhere. It was not only invented but also invented contrary to Gascoigne's own descriptions.

Speaking about the text from 1573 that Ward claimed Oxford wrote, the Ogburns noted, 'He even uses the word 'o'ertake' [sic; actually 'overtake(n)'], as Gascoigne did.'[7] Yet their idea that two people *independently* used a version of the same word when recalling the incident makes less sense than the scenario depicted in the texts, which is that the editor heard Gascoigne speak of the incident *exactly as Gascoigne himself recalled it*. Because the editor is almost certainly Gascoigne's

stepson, Nicholas Breton,[8] it is easy to understand why he would have been privy to Gascoigne's personal reminiscence. Notably, neither account says that *one traveler overtook another*; both accounts only say that *rain overtook Gascoigne*.

Ward surmised that Oxford and Gascoigne had traveled together as comrades. He also hypothesized that Oxford shamefully abused Gascoigne a decade later. The two claims make little sense together.

There is in fact overt evidence of Gascoigne's respect for Oxford. His *The Grief of Joye* (1576), published three years after Oxford (according to Ward) shamefully misused his friend, includes a poem 'flatteringly addressed to the Queen and the beauties at court….'[9] Within it is a gracious tribute to Oxford and Philip Sidney:

> And so saith Vere, that bloom of noble bloode,
> Sidney saith staie, and let me bend my bowe,
> …And sure they be, both gallant and all goode,
> The fragrant flowres, of princely grace & porte…

Could anything be clearer? Yet because Gascoigne's accolade does not fit into a scenario in which Oxford supposedly mistreated him, the Ogburns tried to bludgeon it out of recognition. Gascoigne, they wrote, was not *praising* but rather '*casting a broadside* at de Vere.' Why did they surmise that Gascoigne was covertly being caustic? Because, they categorically stated, 'fragrant flowers' 'alludes of course to the anthology that Oxford had published…'[10] But the phrase cannot refer to the anthology (never mind that Oxford didn't publish it) because Sidney is one of the two *flowres* to which Gascoigne refers, and by no one's theory does Philip Sidney have anything to do with *A Hundreth sundrie Flowres*.

Ward called the event of being caught in the rain '*trivial*,' but obviously the event was not trivial to George Gascoigne. In the dedication to *Phylomene*, he makes it plain why he found the downpour memorable. As quoted above, Gascoigne states that while on his journey he began composing *Phylomene*, but a rain shower interrupted his thoughts, inspiring him to compose 'De profundis', thereby delaying the completion of *Phylomene*. His works were important to him, and he wanted to tell his readers their history.

Had Gascoigne joined Oxford's famously ostentatious procession on the same day, that event – which anyone would judge to be far more memorable than a bit of rain – would surely have been part of Gascoigne's narrative. His failure to regale his readers with any such report, either in 1575 or anytime else, coupled with both his and his editor's affirmations that he traveled alone, augmented with all the improbabilities cataloged above, establish that Ward's proposed encounter never took place.

Some biographers have elevated Ward's fabrication about Oxford's trip to the status of fact, stating flatly, 'He was accompanied by the soldier-poet and future laureate George Gascoigne',[11] and even, 'a member of William Cecil's establishment, a George Gascoigne, came to fetch him'[12] from Castle Hedingham. Future biographies of Oxford should steer clear of such statements.

End Notes

1 Ward, B.M. *The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford 1550–1604*, John Murray, London, 1928 edition, p.15, 15fn; and Ward, B.M., Ed., *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres from the Original Edition*, Frederick Etchells and Hugh Macdonald, London, 1926

2 Ward, B.M., Ed., *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres from the Original Edition*, Frederick Etchells and Hugh Macdonald, London, 1926, xxxii

3 ibid

4 For a challenge to Ward's theories about Hatton, Gascoigne and *Flowres*, see Prechter, Robert, '*A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres* Revisited: Was Oxford Really Involved? ' *Brief Chronicles*, Vol. 2, Issue II, 2010, pp.45–77

5 Ogburn, Dorothy and Charlton, *This Star of England*, Coward-McCann, Inc., New York, 1952, p.1266

6 ibid, Ch.1

7 ibid, Ch.2

8 Prechter, Robert, '*A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres* Revisited: Was Oxford Really Involved?' *Brief Chronicles*, Vol. 2, Issue II, 2010, pp.45–77

9 Ogburn, Dorothy and Charlton, *This Star of England*, Coward-McCann, Inc., New York, 1952, Ch.29

10 ibid, Ch.22

11 Beauclerk, Charles, *Shakespeare's Lost Kingdom*, Grove Press, New York, 2010, p.73

12 Gray, Marilyn Savage, *The Real Shakespeare*, iUniverse, Bloomington IN, 2001, p.27

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