



# EDWARD DE VERE NEWSLETTER NO. 10

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## **Did Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, write the Elizabethan history play *The Reign of King Edward the Third*?**

The indications of Oxford's authorship of this play can be conveniently grouped under the following headings:

1. The natural interest which the reign of Edward III would have held for Edward de Vere.
2. Edward de Vere's use among his friends of the sobriquet "the Black Prince".
3. The author's use of Froissart's *Chronicles*.
4. The eyewitness account of the Armada found in Act III of the play.

### **1. The natural interest which the reign of Edward III would have held for Edward de Vere.**

Oxford's interest in the reign of Edward III would have been sparked by his ancestors' participation in the stirring events of the times. John, Earl of Oxford fought at Crecy and Poitiers, and took part in the Black Prince's raid on the Languedoc (Ramsay 329, 394). It was, in fact, the Earl of Oxford's tactical skill at Poitiers that helped ensure the English victory, a stunning upset in which the Black Prince's force of less than 8,000 defeated King John's French army, variously estimated at up to 50,000 men (Longman 382-5). As Barbara Tuchman notes in *A distant mirror*:

Shooting from sheltered positions protected by dismounted knights and foot soldiers, the archers, at the express order of the Earl of Oxford, aimed for the horses' unarmoured rumps. Stumbling and falling, the

horses went down under their riders or reared back among those who followed 'making great slaughter among their own masters'. It was the frenzy of Crecy over again. In the melee that followed, amid call of trumpets, shouted battle cries, and screams of wounded men and horses, both Clermont and the Constable were killed, Audrehem was captured, and the greater part of the picked knights killed or taken prisoner (149).

The reign of Edward III was doubtless also of interest to Oxford in that during that reign the house of de Vere was allied with the royal house of Plantagenet. This alliance resulted from the marriage, in 1365, of King Edward's daughter Isabella to Enguerrand de Coucy, a French nobleman and patron of the chronicler Froissart (Tuchman xx, 452-4) known to us today chiefly as the subject of Barbara Tuchman's *A distant mirror*. After his marriage to Isabella, de Coucy was given lands in England and created Earl of Bedford. De Coucy's second daughter, Philippa, married Robert de Vere, 9th Earl of Oxford (Tuchman 219-20), who rose to great influence in the reign of Richard II as one of the young King's favourites. Earl Robert's marriage to Philippa, however, proved unhappy, and Robert divorced her. Shortly thereafter, he was forced to flee the country when Philippa's royal uncles, the Dukes of Gloucester, Lancaster and York, banded against him and accused him of treason. He was killed in Brabant in a boar hunt at the age of thirty (Tuchman 445-6).

From the foregoing discussion, it will be seen that the reign of Edward III would have held a natural fascination for Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, involving as it did the careers of some of his more famous ancestors, and the union of his house

with the blood royal.

## 2. Edward de Vere's use among his friends of the sobriquet "the Black Prince".

It is clear from the Langham *Letter* that, in 1575, Edward de Vere was known to his friends by the sobriquet "the Black Prince". Oxford closes the first paragraph of the *Letter* to his friend Humfrey Martin with the words:

Well wot ye that the blak Prins waz never stained with disloyaltee of ingratitude toward ony, I dare be his warrant, hee wyll not begyn with yoo, that hath at hiz hand so deeply dezerved (Kuin 36).

Similarly, Oxford ends the *Letter* by signing himself *el prencipe negro*, Spanish for "the Black Prince" (Kuin 80).

Since he saw himself as "the Black Prince", it is to be expected that something of Oxford's youthful self is to be found in the Black Prince in *Edward III*. There are, in fact, interesting resemblances. In Act I Scene ii, for example, King Edward tells the Black Prince:

. . .and, Ned, thou must begin  
Now to forget thy study and thy bookes  
And ure thy shoulders to an Armour's weight  
(Tucker Brooke 71).

This speech hardly seems to apply to the Black Prince. History nowhere records that the Black Prince abandoned scholarly pursuits to fight his father's wars in France. Oxford, however, in 1569, like "Ned", left a scholar's life behind when, at the age of nineteen, he accompanied the Earl of Sussex to Scotland during the Northern Rebellion. By that time, Oxford had already been awarded Master's degrees from both Cambridge and Oxford, and his learning was remarked upon by his contemporaries. John Brooke, for example, in dedicating a work to Oxford wrote that:

. . . your honour hath continually, even from your tender years, bestowed your time and travail towards the attaining of [learning], as also the University of Cambridge hath acknowledged in granting and giving unto you commendation and praise thereof, as verily by right was due unto your excellent virtue and rare learn-

ing (Ogburn 442).

The reference to "Ned", who must forget his study and books, thus appears to be autobiographical, leading to the inference that the first draft of *Edward III* was written about the time of the Northern Rebellion (which in itself accords with the fact that the first two acts of the play take place in Scotland).

## 3. The author's use of Froissart.

Tucker Brooke states that:

The Villiers-Salisbury episode [in *Edward III*] is not found either in Holinshed or Froissart and is of uncertain derivation (xx).

This is clearly wrong in the case of Froissart, where the story is told virtually as it appears in the play, apart from the substitutions of Salisbury for Sir Walter de Maunay and Villiers for Salisbury's unnamed French prisoner. As summarized by Longman, Froissart's account is as follows:

Shortly after the retreat of the French from Aiguillon, Sir Walter de Maunay, having heard of the victory at Crecy, was anxious to join his Royal Master at Calais; and, by means of the release of a prisoner whom he had taken at Aiguillon, obtained a safe-conduct through France from the Duke of Normandy for himself and twenty companions. He was, however, taken prisoner at St. Jean d'Angeley, but escaped. At Orleans he was taken again and carried off to Paris. On his arrival, the King of France, knowing that Sir Walter was a skilful commander, threatened to put him to death, alleging, as an excuse for such treachery, that he was his greatest enemy. When the Duke of Normandy heard of this, he was very wroth, and declared he would never bear arms against the King of England if his father disgraced himself by executing Sir Walter. At length Philip yielded, and not only released Sir Walter but made him dine with him and gave him jewels and other presents of great value. Sir Walter accepted them, subject to King Edward's approval; and when he reached Calais, finding that the King disapproved of his receiving presents from his enemy, returned them to Philip (274-5).

As this incident is unique, and found in Froissart but not in Holinshed, the inference that Froissart was a source for *Edward III* is inescapable. And as the whole of Edward III's wars in France are recounted in entirety in Froissart, it can reasonably be concluded that it would have been superfluous for the

author of *Edward III* to have consulted Holinshed (which, in any event, was not in print in 1569). This use of Froissart suggests that the author of *Edward III* was someone who had a decided interest in history and a knowledge of historical sources beyond Holinshed's *Chronicle*. These indications point strongly toward Edward de Vere as the author of *Edward III*. Alone among Elizabethan dramatists, he had a marked interest in history which is attested to by documents still extant. In addition, he had the unique distinction of having an ancestor who was the son-in-law of Froissart's patron, Enguerrand de Coucy.

#### 4. The eyewitness account of the Armada found in Act III of the play.

If the first version of *Edward III* was written, as suggested, in 1569, the play was clearly revised and polished at a later date. The probable date of the revision can be ascertained by reference to the description of the sea battle in Act III Scene i. There is first the description of the approach of Edward's Armada:

*Mariner:* Neere to the cost I have discried, my Lord,  
As I was busie in my watchful charge,  
The proud Armado of king Edwards ships:  
Which, at the first, far off when I did ken,  
Seemd as it were a grove of withered pines;  
But drawing neere, their glorious bright aspect,  
Their streaming Ensignes, wrought of couloured  
silke,  
Like to a meddow full of sundry flowers,  
Adornes the naked bosome of the earth:  
Majesticall the order of their course,  
Figuring the horned Circle of the Moone:  
And on the top gallant of the Admirall  
And likewise all the handmaides of his trayne  
The Armes of England and of Fraunce unite  
Are quartred equally by Heralds art:  
Thus, titely carried with a merrie gale,  
They plough the Ocean hitherward amayne  
(Tucker Brooke 83).

This description of Edward's sea power is followed, a little later in the scene, by a description of the carnage wrought during the sea battle:

*Mariner:* These Iron harted Navies,  
When last I was reporter to your grace,  
Both full of angry spleene, of hope and feare,  
Hasting to meet each other in the face,

At last conjoyned; and by their Admirall  
Our Admirall encountred manie shot:  
By this, the other, that beheld these twaine  
Give earnest peny of a further wracke,  
Like fiery Dragons tooke their haughty flight;  
And, likewise meeting, from their smoky wombes  
Sent many grym Embassadors of death.  
Then gan the day to turn to gloomy night,  
And darkenes did as wel inclose the quicke  
As those that were but newly reft of life.  
No leisure servd for friends to bid farewell;  
And, if it had, the hideous noise was such,  
As ech to other seemed deafe and dombe.  
Purple the Sea, whose channel fild as fast  
With streaming gore, that from the maymed fell,  
As did her gushing moysture breake into  
The crannied cleftures of the through shot planks.  
Heere flew a head, dissevered from the tronke,  
There mangled armes and legs were tost aloft,  
As when the wherle winde takes the Summer dust  
And scatters it in middle of the aire.  
Then might ye see the reeling vessels split,  
And tottering sink into the ruthlesse flood,  
Untill their lofty tops were seene no more.  
All shifts were tried, both for defence and hurt:  
And now the effect of vallor and of force,  
Of resolution and of cowardize,  
Were lively pictured; how the one for fame,  
The other by compulsion laid about:  
Much did the *Nonpareille*, that brave ship;  
So did the blacke snake of Bullen, then which  
A bonnier vessel never yet spred sayle.  
But all in vaine; both Sunne, the Wind and tyde,  
Revolted all unto our foe mens side,  
That we perforce were fayne to give them way,  
And they are landed. - Thus my tale is donne:  
We have untimely lost, and they have wonne  
(Tucker Brooke 84).

Certain key details ("Figuring the horned Circle of the Moone") given in these passages seem clearly to be those of the Battle of the Armada of 1588, a battle in which Oxford participated in some fashion. The records of his service are scanty, although Camden mentions that Oxford fitted out a ship at his own expense, and a letter from Leicester to Walsingham attests to Oxford's eagerness to fight:

I trust he be free to go to the enemy, for he seems most willing to hazard his life in this quarrel (Ward 289-90).

An additional record which appears to describe Oxford's actual participation in the sea battle is a poem of 1589 by I.L., the pertinent verse of which reads as follows:

DeVere, whose fame and loyalty hath pearst

The Tuscan clime, and through the Belgike lands  
By winged Fame for valour is rehearst,  
Like warlike Mars upon the hatches stands.  
His tusked Boar 'gan foam for inward ire,  
While Pallas filled his breast with warlike fire (Ward  
291).

If Oxford is the author of *Edward III*, it seems likely that he revised the play sometime soon after 1588, while the battle of the Armada was fresh in his memory. It is also likely the play was performed at about that time, as its principal motif is England's defeat of a mighty enemy.

The points raised in the foregoing discussion support the hypothesis that the author of *The Reign of King Edward the Third* was Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford. There appears to be no other Elizabethan dramatist for whom as strong a case can be made.

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