



# EDWARD DE VERE NEWSLETTER NO. 5

Published by De Vere Press  
1340 Flemish Street  
Kelowna, B.C. V1Y 3R7 Canada

## Did Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, write the Langham Letter? [Part 1 of 3]

The diverting piece of Elizabethan prose known as the Langham Letter is well known for its contemporary description of the lavish entertainment offered to Queen Elizabeth by Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, at Kenilworth castle in the summer of 1575.

The Letter purports to be a personal letter, written to one Humfrey Martin in London by his friend R. Langham (or Lanham), who describes himself as a

Mercer, Merchauntaventurer, and Clark of the Councill chamber doore, and allso kepar of the same (Kuin 80).

Recent critical opinion has, however, reached a consensus that the Letter was written by someone other than Langham (Kuin 12). The reasons for doubting Langham's authorship include the following:

1. The Letter's length.
2. The circumstances of its publication.
3. The "excuses" offered by the author for such things as his too evident learning.
4. The brilliant authorial personality revealed in the Letter.
5. The letter from William Patten to Lord Burghley dated September 10th, 1575.

### 1. The Letter's length.

R.J.P. Kuin's recent reprint of the Letter runs to some forty-three pages (approximately 17,000 words). The Letter's length is thus so extraordinary as to in-

vite conjecture that it is something other than what it purports to be.

### 2. The circumstances of the Letter's publication.

The seventeen extant copies of the Letter contain no information as to the date of its publication or the identity of the printer (Kuin 17). These highly unusual circumstances lead almost inevitably to the conclusion that the Letter was not printed for sale to the general public.

This hypothesis is supported by the fact that it would have been virtually impossible for the stationers at Paul's to have sold copies of the Letter without Queen Elizabeth's knowledge and permission. Censorship was a fact of life in the Tudor era, and the Queen controlled her public image carefully. Even her portrait could not be reproduced without express licence. The diarist Henry Machyn records a proclamation of Queen Mary's time stating "that no man shuld not talke of no thynges of the qwen" (Nichols, Machyn, 62), and although Elizabeth was more popular than Mary, the situation during her reign was not that different. The Puritan John Stubbs, for example, lost his right hand for taking the liberty, in his *Discovery of a Gaping Gulph*, of discussing the Queen's proposed marriage to the Duke of Alencon (Neale 373).

These considerations make it evident that the Letter was privately printed for circulation among a select group of individuals. Who, then, would have received copies? Clearly, the persons who had the liveliest interest in a printed record of the Kenilworth

entertainment were Queen Elizabeth and her courtiers, and the *Letter* was, no doubt, printed for their benefit. The letter of September 10th, 1575 from William Patten to Lord Burghley corroborates this theory, providing evidence that copies of the *Letter* were distributed to Lord Burghley, Nicholas Bacon and the Master of Requests (Scott 301). That a minor functionary like Langham was the *Letter's* author, bore the printing costs, and distributed the *Letter* to members of the court circle is highly unlikely.

### 3. The “excuses” offered by the author for such things as his too evident learning.

Another curious feature of the *Letter* is the way in which the author anticipates certain logical objections which might be raised by his friend Humfrey Martin. Humfrey Martin might wonder, for example, how a minor official like Langham arranged to be present at all the “shows and spectacles” put on for the Queen, and why he was allowed to wander freely through the castle garden. He might wonder why Langham has nothing to say about the final seven days of the Kenilworth visit. He might also wonder how Langham acquired his almost too evident learning.

The author tries to meet all these objections in advance. He excuses his presence at the various entertainments by pointing out that he has:

poour, a dayz (while the Councell sits not) to go and too see things sight worthy, and too be prezent at any sheaw or spectacl, ony whear this Progress reprezented untoo her highnes (Kuin 36).

The castle garden is seemingly off-limits, perhaps being exclusively reserved for the delight and refreshment of the lords and ladies, but Langham is able to give an amazingly detailed description of it. His excuse is that a fellow servant has let him in while the royal party was out hunting:

One day (Maister Martin) az the Gardin door waz open, and her highnes a hunting, by licens of my good freend Adrian, I cam in at a bek, but woold skant oout with a thrust: for sure I waz looth so soon too depart (Kuin 71).

Then there is the strange fact that he has nothing to say about the final seven days of the Kenilworth visit. He gets over this obstacle by claiming he has no notes to work from:

For which seaven daiz, perceyving my notez so slenderly aunswering: I took it no less blame, too ceas and thearof too write yoo nothing at al, then in such matterz too write nothing likely (Kuin 64).

Near the end of the *Letter*, Langham even feels compelled to explain away his too evident learning:

Heerwith ment I fully to byd ye farewell, had not this doout cum to my minde, that heer remainz a doout in yoo, which I ought (me thought) in any wyze to clear. Which iz, ye marvell perchauns to see me so bookish (Kuin 79).

The impression created by these passages is that the real author, writing as though he were Langham, nonetheless has privileges and knowledge which go beyond Langham's. He must somehow explain these things away in order to lend verisimilitude to the fiction that Langham is the *Letter's* author.

### 4. The brilliant authorial personality revealed in the *Letter*.

The personality of the author is one of the most arresting features of the *Letter*. The author is obviously a young man full of high spirits and enthusiasm and possessed of a lively sense of humour. He has a striking capacity for appreciation of beauty in all its forms, whether it be an outdoors musical presentation for the Queen on a calm summer evening or the delights of the gorgeous garden, with its fountains, fruit trees, and exotic birds, laid out by the Earl of Leicester within the walls of Kenilworth Castle. He is interested in everything: there seems no province of knowledge which is without its attractions for his agile intelligence. He possesses a capacity for making and keeping friends, and is much sought after to enliven social occasions.

Although the author of the *Letter* does not in any sense parade his learning, his extraordinary educational attainments are obvious. He is completely at home with the classics and early British history, is

widely read in a number of other fields, and has access to an excellent collection of old English books, plays, and ballads. He appears to be fluent in French, Spanish, Dutch and Latin. His prose style is superb: he moves effortlessly from one topic to another, has brilliant powers of description, and is unfailingly interesting and entertaining.

### 5. The letter from William Patten to Lord Burghley dated September 10th, 1575.

That the dazzling personality which emerges from the *Letter* is someone other than Langham is clearly indicated by a letter written by William Patten to Lord Burghley on September 10, 1575. The text of the letter is as follows:

May it lyke yoor honorabl Lordship. This day receyved I aunswer fro my good freend the master of Requests hoow the book waz too be suppress for that Langham had complayned upon it, and ootherwise for that the honorabl entertainment be not turned intoo a jest. May it pleaz yoor honor, excepting the vi untoo master Wylson, too yoor Lordship and untoo my Lord Kepar, I have not let three more pass me, but have & suppress them all. I indeed prayd master Wylson too gyve Langham one, for that of woont he woold have taken more upon him. sory I am that he takez it so noow. And for the rest, I humbly submit myself too yoor honor, mooch less to stond at ony poynt of defens, but rather beseching the continuans of yoor favoor, whearof my poor estate hath so mooch need of, God healp me. Thus endyng untoo yoor good Lordship, encreas of mooch honor and continuans of good health most humbly & hartely wish I. From London this xth of September 1575. yoor honorabl Lorships allweyz humbly at comaundment W Patten (Scott 301).

Two points emerge from consideration of this letter. The first is that Langham complained about the publication of the *Letter*. Although this does not completely rule him out as the author, it raises serious difficulties. If Langham wrote the *Letter*, why was it published without his knowledge and then distributed to such highly placed court officials as Lord Burghley and Sir Nicholas Bacon? A far more logical explanation is that Langham did not write the *Letter*, and that he complained about it because someone, the real author, had written under his (Langham's) name. Langham felt himself the aggrieved victim of an elaborate practical joke.

A second point which emerges from Patten's letter to Lord Burghley is that the Langham *Letter* had been written, published, and suppressed by September 10th, 1575. All these events thus took place during an amazingly brief time span. The Kenilworth entertainment itself lasted until July 27th (Scott 301). The Queen's progress then moved on to Lichfield (where she stayed until August 3rd), Chartley, Stafford Castle, Chillington, Hartlebury Castle, and Worcester, arriving at the latter city on the 13th of August. While the court was thus traversing the countryside, Langham was allegedly somehow finding time to write the *Letter*, for it is dated from the court at Worcester the 20th of August, the day on which the Queen left that city (Nichols, *Progresses*, 529-36, 552). The court (and, presumably, Langham) then went on to Gloucester, and eventually to Woodstock in Oxfordshire, while the *Letter* itself made its way to Humfrey Martin in London, was printed, distributed, and suppressed. All this allegedly took place within the short space of three weeks -- a not-impossible, but decidedly unlikely, sequence of events.

As the foregoing discussion has indicated, the Langham *Letter* is something other than what it purports to be, and its author is most assuredly not the man named Langham who complained of its publication.

The remaining two parts of this article will deal with the individuals mentioned in the *Letter*, and with evidence which indicates that the real author was Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford.

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