

# EDWARD DE VERE NEWSLETTER NO. 7

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

The evidence in favour of Edward de Vere's authorship of the *Letter* can be conveniently summarized under the following headings:

1. Oxford's knowledge of Kenilworth, and his part in the 1572 Kenilworth entertainment.
2. The consonance between Oxford's interests, educational attainments, and accomplishments, and those of the author of the *Letter*.
3. The familiar fashion in which the *Letter* deals with the nobility.
4. Certain other clues in the *Letter* which point directly to Oxford's authorship.

### 1. Oxford's knowledge of Kenilworth, and his part in the 1572 Kenilworth entertainment.

The 1575 entertainment was not the Queen's first visit to Kenilworth. She had been there in 1565 (*CSP*, 276), and again in 1572, when Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, accompanied that summer's progress. At Warwick Castle, the Earl led a force of some two hundred men in a mock battle which much delighted the Queen (Ogburn 505). The progress then moved on to nearby Kenilworth (Jenkins 192), where Oxford would have had an opportunity to see the improvements effected by Leicester which are so vividly described in the Langham *Letter*.

### 2. The consonance between Oxford's interests, educational attainments, and accomplishments, and those of the author of the *Letter*.

The Earl of Oxford's known interests and accomplishments exactly parallel those of the author of the Langham *Letter*.

The author of the *Letter* is obviously very well educated, and from an early age Oxford was also known to his contemporaries for his learning. He received a Master of Arts degree from Cambridge University in 1564, at the age of fourteen, and another from Oxford University in 1566. In 1569, when Oxford was only nineteen, Thomas Underdowne dedicated to him his translation of *An Aethiopian History* by Heliodorus, speaking of:

your honour, so haughty courage, joined with great skill, such sufficiency of learning (Ogburn 473).

Oxford's interest in history (so evident also in the author of the *Letter*) was well known to his contemporaries: Arthur Golding mentions it in a volume dedicated to Oxford in 1572, and Thomas Twyne does the same in a dedication of 1573, referring to:

such regard as you are accustomed to [bestow] on books of geography, histories, and other good learning, wherein I am privy your honour taketh a singular delight (Ogburn 473-4).

Oxford's musical talent (again, something very evident in the author of the *Letter*) was also remarked upon. The Elizabethan composer John Farmer dedicated two books of madrigals to him, saying in the dedication to the second of these volumes:

For without flattery be it spoke, those that know your Lordship know this, that using this science as a recreation, your Lordship have over gone most of them

that make it a profession (Ogburn 750).

The author of the *Letter* also displays a fascination for dramatic presentation, with particular emphasis on comic effects. Oxford is known to have maintained a troupe of players (Ogburn 679), and was acknowledged in 1598 by Francis Meres in his *Palladis Tamia* as one of “the best for comedy among us” (Ogburn 195).

Examples could be multiplied. The author of the *Letter* devotes a full page to a comic description of country lads jousting and running at the quintain: Oxford was a three-time champion at the tilts during Elizabeth’s reign (Ogburn 479, 640, 681). The author of the *Letter* includes a ballad which seems to be of his own composition: Oxford wrote poetry and was known for his musical ability. The author of the *Letter* cleverly describes a bear-baiting in terms of a civil suit: Oxford had legal training. It is thus abundantly clear that the author of the Langham *Letter* and the Earl of Oxford shared an unusual combination of interests, educational attainments, and accomplishments, giving credence to the hypothesis that the Earl was, indeed, the *Letter’s* author.

### 3. The familiar fashion in which the *Letter* deals with the nobility.

The reader of the *Letter* cannot help noting the amused and almost flippant tone of references to some of Queen Elizabeth’s most highly placed officers and favourites. Pertinent examples are two references in the *Letter* to the Dudley brothers, Robert and Ambrose, Earls of Leicester and Warwick. The Earl of Leicester was, of course, responsible for the Kenilworth entertainment, and the author of the *Letter* puns breezily on the Dudley family name, saying that the Parcae (the three Fates who spin the web of life) were so “duddl’d” with entertainment that they could not attend to their business for the duration of the Queen’s visit:

The *Parcae* (az earst I shoold have sayd) the first night of her Majestiez cumming: they heering and seeing so precious adoo heer, at a place unlook’t for, in an uplondish Cuntree, so far within the Ream: preassing intoo every steed whear her highnes went, whearby so duddl’d with such varietee of delyghts, diyd set asyde

their huswifry, coold not for their harts tend their work a whyt (Kuin 68).

The author also puns on Ambrose Dudley’s first name, terming one of the lavish banquets put on for the Queen “Ambrosial”:

After the play oout of hand, folloed a most delicioouz and (if I may so terme it) an Ambrosiall Backet (Kuin 55).

The author takes a further liberty with the motto of the great Lord Burghley. In a long digression on “oneness” and “dualities”, he makes a glancing reference to Burghley’s motto, *One heart, one way*:

And cauz I speak of one: let me tell yoo a littl of the dignitee of onehod, whearin alwaysz, all hy Deitee, all Sooveraintee, Preeminens, Principalitee and Concord without possibilittee of disagreement iz conteyned. Az one God, one Savioour, one Feith, one Prins, one Sun, one Phenix, and az one of great wizzardom says: One hart, one wey (Kuin 73).

The reference is a bit double-edged. The author, having stated that “one of great wisdom” (Burghley) favours “oneness”, then goes on to say that he himself prefers dualities, an interesting sidelight on the fundamental personality differences which led to friction between Burghley and his son-in-law, Oxford.

The author of the *Letter* also makes rather free with the reputation of Sir Thomas Smith, Queen Elizabeth’s Customer of London. At the close of the *Letter*, the author prays to be remembered to Master Smith in terms that make Smith out to be a bit of a reveller:

and in any wise [commend me] too my good olld freend Master smith, Custumer, by that same token: Set my hors up to the rak, and then lets have a cup of Sak. He knoez the token wel inough, and wyll laugh, I holdd ye a grote (Kuin 80).

A further example of the author’s *lèse majesté* is the manner in which he parodies heraldry in his description of the imaginary arms of the borough of Islington, where London’s dairy products were produced. The author was obviously quite familiar with heraldry. As Kuin points out:

The description is of course ludicrous; yet the elements are almost all heraldically possible (Kuin 103).

It is interesting, and perhaps significant, that one of the heraldic colours made much of in the parody is the tawny colour of Oxford's own servants' livery (Ogburn 432). It is also perhaps noteworthy that the addressee of the *Letter*, Humfrey Martin, and his father Sir Roger Martin had a connection with Islington:

[Licence] for Thomas Persse to alienate the Rectory of Islington, Co. Middlesex, to Roger Martyn, 'mercier', Alderman of London, and Humphrey Martin, his son and heir apparent (*CPR*, 300).

There may thus be, in this parody of the arms of Islington, a jest involving Humfrey Martin which is lost on the modern reader.

#### 4. Certain clues in the *Letter* which point directly to Oxford's authorship.

In addition to the foregoing evidence, there are also a number of other clues in the text which point directly to Oxford's authorship of the Langham *Letter*.

The first of these is the fact that Lanham and Bompsted were the names of two of Oxford's estates in Suffolk and Essex. In a deed of 1583, for example, Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, conveyed to Richard Pecoock and Roland Martyn various properties in "Lavenham *alias* Lanham" (*Ancient deeds*, 411). The names of the purported author of the letter (Langham or Lanham) and his 'master Bomsted' thus appear to have been deliberately chosen with two of Oxford's estates in mind.

Oxford also identifies himself as the author by alluding to himself, in the first paragraph of the *Letter* as "The Black Prince" (whose first name, like Oxford's first name, was Edward), and by signing the letter in Spanish as *el prencipe negro* ("the Black Prince"). This use of Spanish in the closing words of the *Letter* is so curious as to warrant the inference that it has some special significance:

Yoor countreeman, companion, and freend assuredly:

Mercer, Merchauntaventurer, and Clark of the Councell chamber doore, and allso kepar of the same: *El prencipe negro. Par me. R.L. Gent. Mercer* (Kuin 36, 80).

The words *el prencipe negro* are immediately followed by the Spanish words *par me*. In Spanish, *par* can mean "peer", perhaps alluding to Oxford's status as one of the foremost peers of the realm. The next part of the signature — "me.R.L." — is, if spoken quickly, a rough equivalent of "me Earl". Oxford may thus be identifying himself as the *Letter*'s real author — someone named Edward who is a peer and an Earl.

The reference to the gift of "a buk or too" is also worth noting since only a member of the nobility, possessed of landed estates, would have been in a position to make a gift of venison. The passage may even bear an additional significance. In the final paragraph of the *Letter*, the author indicates that both he and Humfrey Martin are members of the Mercers' Company. In the Acts of Court of the Mercers' Company, we are told that:

Rich noblemen assumed a sort of honorary membership by such payments as 'two bucks at the warden's supper' (xii).

Oxford may well be referring to this custom when he says:

I feith, if with wishing it coold have beene, ye had had a buk or too this soomer: but we shall come neerer shortly, and then shall we merely meet and grace a God (Kuin 21).

Once the possibility of Oxford's authorship of the *Letter* is accepted, it is clear that the entire *Letter* is sprinkled with abundant clues to its authorship which would have been obvious to Oxford's contemporaries. No-one in the inner court circle could have read the *Letter* without realizing that the young man who was sought after by the Maids of Honour, had a fine library, loved plays and acting, was possessed of a sparkling sense of humour, enjoyed a cup of sack, and numbered many friends among the wealthy London merchants was none other than the brilliant young courtier, Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford.

This leads to the consideration of a final problem. Why did Oxford write the description of the Kenilworth entertainment in the form of a letter?

At first glance, the personal letter form seems appropriate in that Langham was at Kenilworth and Humfrey Martin in London. However, the great length of the Langham *Letter* leads inescapably to the conclusion that it was not written to Humfrey Martin by someone who was present at the Kenilworth festivities. No-one would write a 17,000 word letter to a friend less than one hundred miles away whom he would see again in a few weeks. Had Humfrey Martin received such a letter from Robert Langham, the Keeper of the Council Chamber, one suspects he would have been surprised indeed. However, the picture alters when one imagines the *Letter's* having been written by someone who was on an extended continental tour, and who was perhaps missing being in the centre of things at Court. It would still take a quite extraordinary individual to write such a letter, but the situation itself is a far more probable one.

In the summer of 1575, Oxford was hundreds of miles away from England. The scanty record of his travels which survives indicates that he was either crossing the Alps or somewhere in northern Italy, as evidenced by a letter of October 6th, 1575 from Benedict Spinola to Lord Burghley, congratulating him on Oxford's safe arrival at Venice from Milan (*CSP*, 504).

In these circumstances, how did Oxford obtain the information necessary to the writing of the *Letter*? One thing is certain. If Oxford was the author of the *Letter*, it could not have been based on an account of the Kenilworth entertainment sent to him after the event. The time frame is far too short, given that copies had already been distributed by September 10, 1575. What is much more likely is that Oxford wrote the *Letter* in the spring of 1575, basing the account on his first-hand observations of earlier progresses, supplemented by his knowledge of what was planned for the summer's festivities. The Kenilworth entertainment was on a scale which required months of advance preparation, and much of

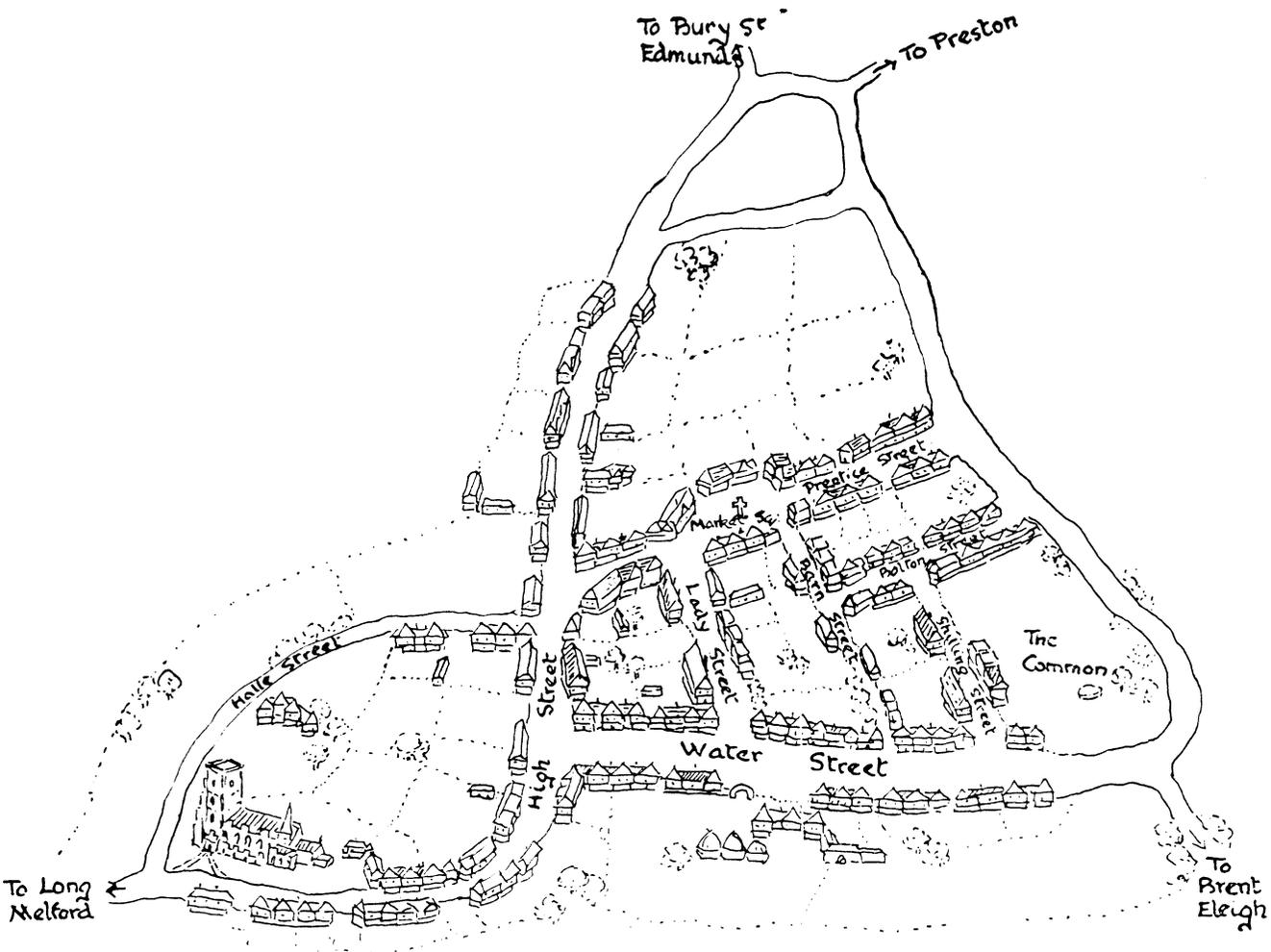
this information would have been available to Oxford, as a court insider, long before he left England in February, 1575, only five months before the Kenilworth festivities. While on his travels, Oxford may also have received additional information from correspondents at court such as his sister Mary de Vere, who was one of the Queen's Maids of Honour at the time (Nichols 544). It is even possible that Oxford himself may have had something to do with the planning of the pageantry of the Kenilworth entertainment. Certainly, the individuals — George Gascoigne, William Hunnis, William Patten — who composed the songs, speeches and other "devices" were well known to him.

In conclusion, then, it can be stated with a considerable degree of certainty that the 17th Earl of Oxford wrote the Langham *Letter* sometime in the spring of 1575. Friends in England then arranged for its publication and distribution. The degree of interest and amusement that the *Letter* provoked at court is indicated to some degree by Patten's comment that it was suppressed, in part, "for that the honorabl entertainment be not turned into a jest" (Scott 301).

The *Letter* thus provides a picture of Edward de Vere that has heretofore been unavailable. The captivating personality which emerges from the *Letter* makes it abundantly clear that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, was one of the most brilliant figures of the Elizabethan Age.

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LAVENHAM IN 1525.

[Imagined from the Clothier Wills and Lavenham at the present day.]