



OffG Recommends...Last Will & Testament

Description

WORLD : Today is St George's Day, and it's also Shakespeare's Birthday ...not really.

The truth is it's a guess. William Shaksper, "the man from Stratford", is known to have been baptised on April 26th and since babies of that time were generally baptized quite quickly, it stands to reason he was born sometime in the preceding few days.

The consensus is April 23rd because it allows England's most famous literary son to have been born on his nation's Patron Saints Day – and that was apparently a contrivance too poetic to pass up.

...But all of that is immaterial, because whether or not he was born on April 23rd, "the man from Stratford" didn't write the plays. At least that's the contention of a vocal minority – including Mark Twain, Charles Dickens and Charlie Chaplin – over hundreds of years.

It's also the position taken up by Last Will & Testament, a 2012 documentary directed by Laura and Lisa Wilson, and the latest subject of the OffG Recommends series.

The documentary is a great introduction to the topic for anyone who has never come across it before, making the case against the traditional attribution by interspersing expert opinion, historical documentation and – for want of a better word – "celebrity" guests.

Grand old thespians Mark Rylance, Derek Jacobi and Vanessa Redgrave make appearances, and their rational and articulate positions are some of the high points of the film.

There are some excellent arguments against "the man from Stratford": His apparent illiteracy and the illiteracy of his children, the fact his will doesn't document ownership of any books at a time when they would be valuable assets, and the documentary lays all of these out clearly and coherently.

It's fun and very interesting...but it's not perfect. Far from it. There are some strong criticisms to be made.

It is very much a documentary of two halves. The first half, making the case against the Stratford man

is by far the strongest part, asking questions and pointing out inconsistencies.

...but then they feel the need to answer those questions, and in doing so they make themselves ridiculous.

The explanation they offer is that the plays were written by Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford. This is not, in and of itself, wholly absurd. He's been one of the main candidates for decades and his known literary aspirations and his close association with the Cecil family (William Cecil, Lord Burleigh has been widely assumed to be the model for the character of Polonius in Hamlet) are reasonable enough arguments in his favour.

But then they go further, giving air time to the theory that de Vere was Elizabeth I's illegitimate son, and – further – that he then had an affair with Elizabeth and produced another illegitimate son, Henry Wriothesley Earl of Southampton.

That's just historically illiterate.

To be clear, the question of succession was the foremost thought on the minds of Elizabeth's ministers for decades. She refused to marry, and as such they all knew that when she died England was faced with the possibility of Catholic Mary Queen of Scots taking the throne, and a return to dark bloody days of Mary Tudor.

They would have done anything to make sure that couldn't happen. The idea that Elizabeth could have produced two children – both protestants and both male – and her ministers decided to keep it a secret is insane.

They would have been giddy at the prospect. – Throne protected, succession guaranteed, and no Catholic bonfires to worry about it.

The moment it was apparent Elizabeth was pregnant they would have rushed a marriage, or legitimised the bastard – it happened before and afterwards, and anything is better than a succession crisis.

No, that theory is daft. And here we come to my second problem with the film. One of the men strongly putting the case for the Earl of Oxford (and the incest baby theory) is credited as Charles Beauclerk.

His true full name is Charles Francis Topham de Vere Beauclerk, Lord Burford and Heir Apparent to the Duke of St Albans.

Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, is his ancestor, he is pitching his own familial ties to both the crown and the plays. This is never mentioned in the documentary, and that seems somewhat intellectually dishonest to me.

...but we don't have to agree or approve of every aspect of a film to recommend it.

It's an interesting and well made insight into a fascinating topic. I recommend you enjoy mulling its questions – but be very skeptical of its answers.

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2. History-Archaeology-Past Mysteries
3. Main
4. Media-Soc. media-Internet

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