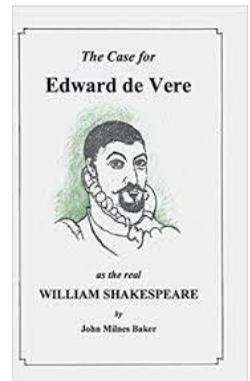

REVIEWS

***The Case for Edward de Vere as the real William Shakespeare* by John Milnes Baker**

Review by Alice Crampin

DVS member John Milnes Baker is a distinguished American architect who has produced *The Case for Edward de Vere as the real William Shakespeare: a Challenge to Conventional Wisdom*. This is an illustrated booklet which he was moved to write as a riposte to a Puffin book *Who was William Shakespeare?* by Celeste Davidson Mannis.

Mannis' book is aimed at young people and, from an Oxfordian point of view, it is a frustrating read. It comes with assumptions stated as facts, and gaps in Shaksper's meagre biography plugged with many of the myths that have crept in



over the years. Although not primarily directed at the same readership, Baker responds with a large font size and a straightforward narrative about Edward de Vere. This is a very useful approach, and in the fine tradition of the Shakespeare Authorship Coalition's response in 2013 – *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt? Exposing an Industry in Denial* – to the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust's *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt*.

The problem for us is that ours is not a completely straightforward tale. There are a lot of hows and whys to be figured out and a few loose ends lying around too. Baker comes up with a clever and helpful device. Each page of text has an annotated illustration on the facing page, and here he can go into more detail and give the evidence for some of the points he is making. It is a delicate balancing act and hard to carry out successfully, but the stakes are high, as we are also liable to attack if we make assertions without providing the backing.

I was concerned, for instance, about the two-part assertion that a version of the old Hamlet tale was rewritten by Oxford 'when he was a young man' and revisited by him 'in 1587 in anticipation of the invasion' by Philip of Spain. This needs a rather more justification than the brief note about the *Ur-Hamlet* provides. Accuracy is critical too. Elizabeth Trentham was one of the Queen's maids of honour, not a wealthy widow; we have heard that this had already been pointed out to Baker and has now been corrected for future printings.

I would have preferred it if some of the reasons why Shakespeare is deemed an unlikely candidate for being the great playwright had been hammered home even sooner in the text (as Charlton Ogburn does in the layout of his seminal work *The Mystery of William Shakespeare*). It is necessary to get the novice reader thoroughly involved in the question before introducing Oxford. Otherwise, the reader may stick at 'Why can't Shakespeare BE Shakespeare?' Or, most wearisomely: 'You are just snobs'.

The main text of the booklet is supplemented by a timeline, a bibliography and an Addendum. These are all good and the Addendum helpfully deals with possible solutions to some of the problems in the Oxfordian case. We need more of these texts that are designed to rebut a particular mainstream work, and this booklet offers an intriguing model of how to do it, not only in works for young people. We need to build on this!

