

Review of N. B. Cockburn, *The Bacon Shakespeare Question: The Baconian Theory Made Sane* (1998): A Classic Worth Reprinting

By Christina G. Waldman

May 3, 2023

1998 does not seem so long ago to me. That was when N. B. Cockburn, late British barrister, devoted 740 pages to setting forth his evidence in favor of Francis Bacon's authorship of the works traditionally attributed to "William Shakespeare," based largely on that name/pseudonym's being printed on the title page of the 1623 First Folio. Barry R. Clarke (*Francis Bacon's Contribution to Shakespeare* (New York: Routledge, 2019)), Brian McClinton (*The Shakespeare Conspiracies*, (Aubane: Aubane Historical Society, 2006 and Belfast: Shanway Press, 2008)), and other authors, including myself, have acknowledged their debt to Cockburn. Mather Walker has previously [reviewed](#) the book for SirBacon.org which prints in full its [table of contents](#).

Cockburn initially addresses "Bacon as a poet," "Bacon's interest in the theatre," and "Bacon's reasons for anonymity" (chs 1 - 3). As to the two reasons usually offered to "rule out" Bacon as the author of the Shakespeare works, Cockburn provides chapter 5, "Bacon's Spare Time," and chapter 32, "The Literary Styles of Bacon and Shakespeare." Short answers: true, Bacon was a busy public servant—more so in his later years—but he had periods in his life in which he was not so busy. Moreover, he ran a scrivenery of "good pens" whom he hired to help him in his writing projects, as Peter Dawkins, founder/principal of the Francis Bacon Research Trust (FBRT.org) has pointed out (see his essay, ["The Shakespeare Circle"](#)). Also, it goes without saying, Bacon would have varied his writing style depending on what he was writing, whether prose or poetry.

Cockburn devotes chapter 14 to "The Hall and Marston satires and a Freeman Epigram" which provide contemporaneous evidence that these writers not only knew that "Shakespeare" was a pseudonym; they knew who the real author was. In one of his longer chapters, Cockburn delves into the numerous "parallelisms" found in the works of both Bacon and "Shakespeare" (ch 33, pp. 425 - 564). A large part of this chapter focuses on parallels between entries in Bacon's *Promus*, his literary "commonplace" book in which he "jotted down" quotations and expressions he thought might be useful in his writing, and the Shakespeare plays. Cockburn devotes one short chapter (10) to one *Promus* entry, the intriguing reference to "Merry Tales at Twickenham."

In certain chapters he focuses on individual plays: *The Comedy of Errors* and the Gray's Inn Revels of Christmas 1594 – 95, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *The*

*Tempest*. He devotes a chapter to the "Northumberland Manuscript" (a manuscript folder, discovered in 1867, linking the names of Bacon and Shakespeare) and one to "The Tobie Matthew postscript," where Bacon's close friend Matthew writes, at the end of his letter to Bacon, "The most prodigious wit that ever I knew of my nation and of this side of the sea, is of your Lordship's name, though he be known by another." (p. 256). Cockburn exposes the logical fallacies in "Stratfordian" claims that Matthew was talking about someone other than Francis Bacon.

Speaking of postscripts, Cockburn makes his own interesting postscript when he wrote about the Elizabethan quartos, some by Shakespeare, which were found in the new house built on the Gorhambury estate property. One logical explanation is that these quartos had been in Bacon's possession and were transferred from his former house to the new house on the property. Perhaps he is being overly-cautious in stating this only as a "possibility." (see pp. 37-38). See also Lawrence Gerald, "[The Discovery of Eight Shakespeare Quartos in Bacon's Library](#)," n.d., [Sirbacon.org](#).

In chapter 30, Cockburn addresses the question whether Shakespeare was a lawyer (338-366), looking at "legalisms" in *King John*, *Hamlet*, and other plays, as well as in the Shakespeare, and other, sonnets. He responds to the conclusions of American writers Paul S. Clarkson and Clyde T. Warren, *The Law of Property in Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Drama* (1942, 1968) ("C & W")—which, at the time of his writing, he called "the best book on this subject"—that the "internal evidence from Shakespeare's plays" was "wholly insufficient" to prove that Shakespeare was a lawyer or had had legal education, based on their studies (p. 339, citing C & W, 285–286). Cockburn challenges the "accuracy of their calculations," pointing out that quality can be more important than quantity (p. 339).

For example, he notes that Shakespeare *corrects his own source* as to the law of bastardy in *King John*. He asserts that C & W did not adequately address the question of "slipping"; that is, when an author unintentionally falls into a usage familiar to him, in this case legal (p. 347). As to the bastardy trial in *King John*, "The Clarkson and Warren account of the matter is incomplete (see their pp. 189 and 213–5) because they reserve the evidential questions it raises to one of their later projected volumes which have never materialized." (p. 347). Indeed, one must wonder why they did not produce further volumes using their research. Although there are currently scholars who study the law in Shakespeare without tying it to authorship, the law in Shakespeare continues to be one of the strongest elements of the Baconian case. For, there is no evidence, only conjecture, that Shaxpere ever had any exposure to the law, other than as a litigant.

In all, Cockburn devotes thirty-five chapters to the case for Bacon (part 1), twenty pages to "Rival Claimants" (part 2), and five chapters to the "Stratfordian case," part 3 which includes chapter 39, "A Play Called *Sir Thomas More*," followed by his conclusion and five appendices. As to "Hand D" in the *Play of Sir Thomas More*, Cockburn opines that it is probably that of a copyist. To him, "Hand D" did not sound sufficiently "Shakespearean." Of special note are appendix 2, in which he provides the full annotated text of "The Masque of Proteus," including two songs; and appendix 4 in which he discusses the strong evidence of the *Manes Verulamiani*, epitaphs on Bacon. For, Bacon was known as a contriver of masques; see, e.g., his essay, "Of Masques and Triumphs."

Cockburn takes great pains to be fair, objective, and comprehensive in his treatment of the evidence and arguments overall. It cannot be denied that few biographical facts exist about the William Shaxpere (various spellings) of Stratford who left his wife and children behind to make a new life for himself in London and became an actor, shareholder in a theatre, grain merchant, and moneylender. Nor can it be denied that what facts there are seem incongruous with claims he was qualified, in terms of learning and life experiences, to play the role of one of the world's greatest literary dramatists and poets (see p. 2). Yes, genius can explain some things, but not everything.

Evincing his objectivity, Cockburn does not stint in stating his disagreement with those Baconians who believe there is evidence of Bacon's codes and ciphers within the Shakespeare plays and other works. In his opinion, the reputation of the "Baconian case" was harmed by the well-publicized assertion that code and cipher theories were unfounded, especially after the publication of U. S. cryptologists William and Elizebeth Friedmans' book, *The Shakespeare Ciphers Examined* in 1957 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Admittedly, the Friedmans are acknowledged "experts" on cryptology, but were they impartial? Proponents of code and cipher theories which the Friedmans discussed included authors Ignatius Donnelly (a Congressman), Dr. Orville Owen (a physician), Elizabeth Wells Gallup (a Sorbonne-educated high school principal before she joined Riverside Labs, the first United States cryptology school, as an instructor even of the Friedmans), and William Stone Booth (author of books on acrostics in Shakespeare).

Cockburn emphatically states his disbelief that Baconian codes or ciphers are present within the Shakespeare works; hence, his subtitle, "The Baconian Theory Made Sane." However, not everyone would agree with him, as can be seen by the engrossing, ongoing discussions in the SirBacon.org forums. Personally, I think such evidence cannot be entirely ruled out. After all, we are dealing with Francis Bacon, the man who

invented the biliteral cipher upon which modern computer technology is based. At any rate, Cockburn demonstrates that an ample case for Bacon's authorship can be made without relying upon codes-and-ciphers evidence.

One puzzling omission, however, is any mention of the 1992 report of the late Maureen Ward-Gandy, a highly-respected UK forensic expert, in which she concluded, based on handwriting analysis, that it was "highly probable" that a handwritten manuscript, consisting of a play fragment analogous to the "tapster scene" in Shakespeare's play, *The First Part of Henry the Fourth*, was written in Francis Bacon's own handwriting (["Elizabethan Era Comparison for Writing Identification of 'Common Authorship,' July 24, 1992](#), reviewed for Lawrence Gerald, July 2, 1994"). The manuscript fragment was discovered in 1988, serving as extra padding ("binder's waste") inside the cover of a 1586 Greek-Latin edition of Homer's *Odyssey* (Geneva, 1586). At the time, this discovery generated a lot of media publicity.

To my knowledge, no forensic handwriting expert of Ms. Ward-Gandy's professional standing, or even with lesser credentials, has refuted Ms. Ward-Gandy's expert opinion that this Shakespeare play fragment was written in Bacon's own handwriting. In legal terms, this is, arguably, highly probative evidence.

Cockburn's book is difficult to find. WorldCat.org shows that it is available in only twenty-five libraries world-wide, most of which are overseas. Although research is ongoing (including articles by ["A Phoenix"](#) published at academia.edu), this book remains a classic, a "bible" to Baconians. Although not everyone will agree with all of his editorial choices or opinions, his book is valuable—well-researched and well-reasoned. If a new edition is made, perhaps a more extensive index could be provided, taking advantage in improvements in computer-indexing software since 1998.

There are those who assert that there is no case for Francis Bacon's authorship/editorship of the Shakespeare works. I submit, they have not seriously considered the *totality of the evidence* which continues to be unearthed, aided by computers. Collaboration among playwrights on the Shakespeare plays has been acknowledged. Why exclude Francis Bacon, one of the most brilliant literary "stars" of the era, from consideration as having played *any role at all*? Does that make sense?

As this book shows, there is good evidence demonstrating why Bacon's role in Shakespeare authorship remains a topic worthy of serious consideration. Cockburn's book, as well as books and articles written since Cockburn, continue to put researchers on notice that ethical due diligence demands further inquiry. Bacon-Shakespeare studies should be reinstated as a legitimate topic for scholarly (academic) inquiry.