

Looking Backward by Henry Watters  
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# LOOKING BACKWARD

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thus: There arrived on the scene of current events and affairs what was called a Shakspeare Day. It appears that a person by the name of William Shakspeare was born on April 23, 1564, at Stratford-on-Avon and died there April 23, 1616—very little else being known of record about him; and on the warrant that this person's name appears upon the title page of certain popular dramas the highbrows of the stage, led by Percy MacKaye, not to be outdone by the movie people, got up a Shakspeare Day and a Shakspeare play; and the boys of the City Editor's Room, not to be outdone by the highbrows of the stage, took up the wondrous tale with a hoop-la. Before such a juggle-call what was an old cavalry horse, a little cranky in wind and legs, but still in the ring, as it were, to do but fall into line? Sure!

Still, disdainful the universal, the obvious, the commonplace—seeking, so to say, the elusive scoop—I took a line of my own. When I was growing up at Washington and passing much time in the Library of Congress, earning my living as an amusement writer—they called us "dramatic critics" in those days—I made a rather close study of the Elizabethan period, with the purpose to compose a volume to be entitled *A Biography of the British Dramas*. I had actually made a contract with a book-publishing house for this, and it was duly advertised. But here "the little man from Egypt," who has pursued my literary ambitions, again interposed. The War of Sections was hard upon us. Clearly I was to be a great soldier, not a literary celebrity.

Time passed. It kept on passing. I had almost forgotten the circumstances when Shakspeare Day loomed in the distance. "Aha," said I to myself, "ha, ha! Let those laugh most who laugh last."

I knew that William Shakspeare, of Stratford-on-Avon, no more wrote those plays than the man in the moon. But who did? I could not hope to make a get-away with the Baconian theory. That was worn to a frazzle. The Walter Raleigh theory looked promising. So did the Wrothesley theory!

Yet stay—the Marlowe theory? It was the oldest if not the least known of all the theories. Why not? Pursuing the Baconian scheme of research—minus the cryptograms—without quite discarding even Shakspeare or forgetting the musical glasses—taking up the mystic tablets of memory and turning down the hourglass of time to watch each grain of sand as it fell—why not Marlowe? He was by no means killed in the tavern brawl. It was the other son of a gun. Marlowe escaped to the Continent. He had been at Cambridge when Bacon was there. Why may they not have been classmates? Easy. The inference could not be resisted: Marlowe wrote the plays; he sent them to Bacon; My Lord of Verulam supplied the court etiquette and revised the philosophy and learning where these required revision; then he turned them over to their joint friend, Shakspeare, the showman, who produced them, using his own name to shield Marlowe, whose life were forfeit if his existence and whereabouts should be known. As simple as falling off a log. It settled the whole business. It gave Bacon a show. It did justice to Marlowe. It explained Shakspeare.

They would not have it from me—and though I shot the bolt, with proper accessories, it refused to explode and fell noiseless among the bushes that choke and conceal real genius.

THAT bread cast upon the waters—"dough" put out at unance," as Joseph Jefferson used to phrase it—shall return after many days has I dare say been verified by most persons who have perpetrated acts of kindness, conscious or unconscious. There was a poor, broken-down English actor with a passion for Chaucer whom I used to encounter in the Library of Congress. His voice was quite gone. Now and again I had him join me in a square meal. Once in a while I paid his room rent. I was loath to leave him when the break came in 1861, though he declared he had "expectations," and made sure he would not starve. Years after I was passing through Re-

failed him; he had come into a considerable property and was living in affluence upon an ancestral estate.

He knew London as only a Bohemian, native and to the manner born, could know it. His memory and sense of obligation knew no bounds. Between him and John Mahoney and Artemus Ward I was soon made at home in what might be called the mysteries and eccentricities of differing phases of life in the British metropolis not commonly accessible to the foreign casual. In many after visits this familiar knowledge served me well. But Newton did not live to know of some good fortune that came to me and to feel my gratitude to him, as dear old John Mahoney did. When I was next in London he was gone.

It was not, however, the actor, Newton, whom I had in mind in pointing the bread-upon-the-water moral, but a certain John Hatcher, the memory of whom illustrates it much better. He was a wit and a statesman. He had been State Librarian of Tennessee. Nothing could keep him out of the service, though he was a sad cripple and wholly unequal to its requirements. He fell ill, of course. I had the opportunity to care for him. When the war was over his old friend, George D. Prentice, called him to Louisville to take an editorial place on the *Journal*.

About the same time Mr. Walter Haldeman returned from the South and resumed the suspended publication of the *Louisville Courier*. He was in the prime of life, a man of surpassing energy, enterprise and industry, and had with him the popular sympathy. Mr. Prentice was nearly three score and ten. The stream had passed him by. The *Journal* was not only beginning to feel the strain but was fast losing ground. In this emergency Hatcher came to the rescue. I was just home from London and was doing some noticeable work on the Nashville *Banner* amid my foreign experiences.

"Here is your man," said Hatcher to Mr. Prentice and Mr. Henderson, the owners of the *Journal*; and I was asked to come to Louisville.

After I had looked over the field and inspected the *Journal's* books I was satisfied that a union with the *Courier* was the wisest solution of the newspaper situation; and I told them so. Meanwhile Mr. Haldeman, whom I had known very well in the Confederacy, sent for me. He offered me the same terms for part ownership and sole editorship of the *Courier* which the *Journal* people had offered me. This I could not accept, but proposed as an alternative the consolidation of the two on an equal basis. He was willing enough for the consolidation, but not on equal terms. There was nothing for it but a fight. I took the *Journal* and began to hammer the *Courier*.

A dead summer was before us, but Mr. Henderson had plenty of money and was willing to spend it. During the contest that followed not an unkind word was printed or uttered on either side. After stripping the *Journal* to its heels it had very little to go on or to show for what had once been a prosperous business. But circulation flowed in. From eighteen hundred daily it quickly mounted to ten thousand; from fifteen hundred weekly to fifty thousand. The middle of October it looked as if we had a straight road before us.

But I knew better. The truth was the field, no matter how worked, was not big enough to support two rival dailies. There was toward the last of October on the edge of the city a great real-estate sale which Mr. Haldeman and I, on invitation, attended. I thought I saw a chance. I must have bid up to a hundred thousand dollars and did actually buy nearly ten thousand dollars of the property put up at auction, relying upon some money presently coming to my wife.

I could see that it made an impression on Mr. Haldeman. Returning in the carriage which had brought us out I said: "Mr. Haldeman, I am going to ruin you. But I am going to run up a money debt to John Henderson I shall never be able to discharge. You need an editor. I need a publisher. Let us put these two newspapers together, buy the *Democrat*, and, instead of cutting one another's throats, go after Cincinnati and St. Louis. You will see."



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