

Reminder 26/xi

19 September 1985

Dear Sir,

Shakespeare in the Public Records, Crown copyright 1985, £2.95, PRO/HMSO

Is it now a matter of Government policy that some or all of the six Shakespeare signatures are unauthentic?

This is proclaimed on your p.33 as a well-attested and indeed self-evident fact ascertainable by anyone ~~at~~ the merest glance.

Yet no palaeographer over the centuries has ever taken any such view, and ⁿnor has any serious commentator. The actual book covering the subject named in your selective bibliography (Schoenbaum, 1981) denies point-blank, on its p.98, that any such position can be rationally maintained, let alone asserted as a fact by the signatures' custodians.

Should it not at least be made clear to your world-wide readership that this assertion of spuriousness is just an opinion, based on the purely personal and idiosyncratic (not to say demonstrably false) assumption that signatures are invariant in their letter-forms?

Yours faithfully

Eric Sams
Dr. Eric Sams



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Your reference

Our reference

Date

TRP/S/7

6 February 1989

Dear Mr Sams

Thank you for your letter of 28 January to Dr Crook, who has moved to another department in this Office.

As I understand the text of Jane Cox's comments on Shakespeare's signatures in Shakespeare in the Public Records, she does not say that the signatures on the will are certainly not his, merely that they might not be. Since in her view these signatures and those on other documents were not by the same hand, it is a matter of judgement which were actually by Shakespeare and which by clerks of the various courts involved. You are welcome, however, to take your case on the subject to the Keeper of Public Records, Mr Michael Roper, at the above address. No doubt you could also seek to publish an article, with your own views on the matter, in one of the archival periodicals such as Archives (published by the British Records Association, 18 Padbury Court, London E2 7EH) or the Journal of the Society of Archivists (edited by Dr J B Post, at this Office).

Yours sincerely

TRPadfield

T R Padfield
Assistant Keeper
Search Department

TRP/EG

~~Simon Cott. 1981~~

8 February 1989

Dear Dr. Padfield,

Thank you for your letter of 6 February. It was a pleasure, and is a relief, to have a reply on this subject from the P.R.O., after five years of trying.

Jane Cox's views are, I fear, not in doubt. She expressed them in a letter to the Times of 11/x/84 as follows: '... the marked discrepancies between the signatures lend credence to the views of the most extreme anti-Stratfordians. Could the man write his own name, let alone anything else?'. (Signed: Principal Assistant Keeper of Public Records.

I certainly intend, in due course, to publish an article on such matter - in the TLS or Encounter, I hope, in the first instance, but I'll certainly bear in mind the other possibilities you are good enough to mention. Meanwhile I'll also gladly follow up your other suggestion, and write to Mr. Roper.

With renewed thanks,

Yours sincerely

Eric Sams

Dr. Eric Sams

NB
11 February 1989

Dear Mr. Roper,

I'm writing following recent correspondence with Mr. Padfield, copies of which (and of the Times exchange) are enclosed for your information. I've written to the Keeper on three or four previous occasions, and have never had either a reply or an acknowledgement; I'm pleased to feel that I may fare better this time.

My question relates, as before, to what is said in the PRO handbook Shakespeare in the Public Records 1985, a Government publication available world-wide from HMSO. I'm impressed, of course, by what David Thomas says; and I note that his work is cited with approval (if not always with due acknowledgement) by Levi, Rowse, Schoenbaum and others.

I'm still just as depressed as ever, though, by what Jane Cox says, apparently with full official and indeed HMG approval, namely that it is 'obvious at a glance' that most of the six Shakespeare signatures treasured in our national archives 'are not the signatures of the same man', because 'almost every letter is formed in a different way in each' and 'it is unthinkable' that he did not develop a 'personalised signature' as ^{we} do today.

So far as I can trace, no serious scholar has ever offered any such unqualified opinions.

And they are surely unqualified in every sense? No amount of specialist knowledge or expertise, so far as I can see, could entitle Mrs. Cox to suppose, let alone pronounce *urbi et orbi*, as an infallible fact, that what she personally finds unthinkable cannot conceivably be the case. It seems to me, just as it has seemed quite wrong since 1984, that such eccentric and unevdenced claims and statements should be offered as facts, by one custodian of the signatures (in defiance of the others) and of all other scholars in the field) with the authority of the PRO in a Government document.

I'm writing to ask, therefore, whether you might now feel that the time has come for revision. In that interest, I'm venturing to enclose a note of detailed comments which might perhaps be thought worth taking into account.

Yours sincerely

Eric Sams

Dr. Eric Sams

12 February 1989

Dear Mr. Roper,

Further to my letter of 11 February, I now see that my further notes (including details of the transcription of the will text, with which I thought I need not trouble you just yet) contain an additional point of some substance, which I should have mentioned.

It concerns p.24, line 8ff, about 'Joseph Green, the Stratford antiquarian who was the first to look among the records of the probate court for the will'.

Greene (sic) was is an 'antiquary' in the Schoenbaum source cited; but his proper style is surely vicar of Stratford and headmaster of its grammar school. There seems to be ~~no known suggestion from any source~~ no warranty for the suggestion that Greene was the discoverer of the original will (which seems to have been kept in Doctors' Commons); what he knew and described and transcribed was ^{the} Stratford copy 'now kept by the Birthplace Trust' (p.34/22). ^{It} has been published, in ^{Shas} ~~Shakespeare~~ Survey 4; and ^{it} ~~this~~ evidence of what a real copy actually looked like surely disposes of the alleged 'possibility' (p.34/13) that the document treasured as Shakespeare's will in the Public Record Office, (aka 'the so-called original will'; 34/14) was a 'facsimile copy made either by the court or by Collins' (s) clerk'.

I see incidentally that Peter Levi, in his recent book says of your will PRO ~~document~~ 'the hand is unidentified, but I suppose it could be his own'. This is generally denied, e.g. by I.A. Shapiro, on the ground that the expert eye can see, no doubt at a glance, the clear difference between the subscription 'by me, William Shakespeare' and the text of the will. But if, as your handbook informs us, that signature might well be a fake, like the rest, then this objection falls, and leaves the plain possibility that Shakespeare, with his own legal knowledge, wrote his own will. Charles Hamilton is also contra Shapiro, on quite different grounds of factual observation, namely a denial simpliciter that the signature is different; in his recent book he shows how in fact each of the six signatures can be reconstructed with letter-forms taken from the body of the will (In Search of Shakespeare, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985, p.78).

Hamilton also says (p.6) 'I have checked every ~~document~~ example of handwriting I could locate in which 'by me' was used, and in all cases the document was entirely in the hand of the signer'. I have done the same, among Essex and other wills, with the same result. The same is true of 'per me (scriptorem)'. Yet no expert I ask (including Mary Clapinson at the Bodleian, as well as county archivists) seems able to feel that 'by me' is anything but meaningless. The argument goes: we know for a fact that Shakespeare's will was written by Collins, or a clerk, or anyone but Shakespeare himself,

so 'by me' can't mean 'manu propria' in that case, and hence need not in any other case. I wonder whether you might have a view on these matters? The 'so-called original will'

with the other more valuable ad with the same result.



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27 February 1989

Dear Dr Sams

Thank you for your letters of 11 and 12 February. I cannot trace any letters written by you to my predecessor, but I take it that they deal with the same issues.

In reply, I would first draw a distinction between the Public Record Office as a government department and as a scholarly institution. It is in the latter role that the Office and its staff publish the results of their researches in the records and in this respect their interpretations of available historical data should not be taken to be Government or official views or to presume to be any more 'correct' than those of any other scholar working in the field.

So far as the particular points of historical interpretation with which you disagree are concerned, I am not personally qualified to judge just where the balance of the evidence points (my own special periods of research are entirely different ones), and I would agree with Mr Padfield that it is open to you to express your disagreements in print and thus contribute to the general process of historical enquiry. In the longer term the points which you make will be taken into consideration if we embark upon a new edition of Shakespeare in the Public Records. When, if at all, that will be is to some extent out of our hands, since it will be a matter for the commercial judgement of HM Stationery Office in the light of the state of sales of the present edition.

Yours sincerely

Michael Roper

MICHAEL ROPER

1 March 1989

Dear Dr. Roper,

Thank you for your letter of 27 February. It was good of you to reply. I'm at any rate rather encouraged to have heard anything at all, after five fruitless years. I'm not surprised to hear that you cannot trace my previous letters; I expect they were just thrown away.

Perhaps I may just say, yet again, that I'm not in the first instance disagreeing with any 'historical interpretation'. I'm disagreeing with what is a personal opinion, no more, ^{1,2} that the failure of Shakespeare to develop a ^{in the six or so that survive} personalised signature is 'unthinkable'. 'Could the man write his own name, let anyth alone anything else?'

There is no question here of 'the balance of evidence'. No evidence has been adduced; none is ~~available~~-available. Only Mrs. Cox herself could tell us what the evidence is for the proposition that what she finds unthinkable cannot possibly be the case; and no doubt she will maintain her five-year silence on the matter.

I fear too that the general reader may fail to appreciate, or indeed to draw, the distinction you mention between a Government department and its unofficial views. But of course I've noted, and am grateful/ for, that/ guidance, and your kind assurance that my points will be taken into consideration as and when a new edition is undertaken. I'll try to get round to publishing a piece of my own in due course.

I'm rather sorry to learn that your own specialist fields of research are entirely different. But I'm rather sure that they, and the skills they confer, and the discipline they entail, are also relevant to the question of Shakespeare's handwriting and the status of his will. In the cyclical way that history has, these topics are resurfacing. I suppose the PRO wouldn't consider convening a conference, or at least a committee, of accredited specialists, to consider them and report?

I could perhaps venture, while I'm writing, to suggest an appropriate consultant, if one were ever needed. ~~When~~ I hear from a Sotheby's specialist that the words 'by me' occur on manuscripts ~~written-ex-~~copied by the signer; other experts in the field say the same. I'm sure that the PRO ~~could-~~ itself has the services of ^{scholars} ~~experts~~ authoritative in these matters. Wouldn't it be nice if someone could say what one of the most famous phrases in our language actually means? And wouldn't it be fun if it meant 'in my own hand'?

With renewed thanks

yours sincerely



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15 March 1989

Dear Dr Sams

Thank you for your letter of 1 March.

If a conference or committee were to be established to try to resolve the disputed Shakespearean signatures I am sure that those of my colleagues who have special knowledge of the early seventeenth-century records of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury would wish to contribute, and that its conclusions would be reflected in any further edition of Shakespeare in the Public Records. However, I do not see it as the role of the Public Record Office to set up such a conference or committee. To do so might be seen as giving too much 'official' credence to conclusions which may never be resolved to everyone's absolute satisfaction. ~~Our role cannot be more than making the will and other records of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury available for study by the experts in our reading rooms.~~

*Yours sincerely
Michael Roper*

MICHAEL ROPER

16 March 1989

Dear Dr. Roper,

Thank you for your further letter. It was good of you to reply. The committee or conference was only a suggestion, for whatever it might be worth. I can quite see that it might not have overmuch appeal.

However, perhaps you won't mind my mentioning that your reply puzzles me mightily. I must have put my points very obscurely or maladroitly. I seem to be no nearer the official ear than I have been for the last five years.

I can entirely understand your reticence about 'giving too much official credence to conclusion which may never be resolved to everyone's absolute satisfaction', as you put it. But please forgive if I therefore ask yet again - why in that case is official credence lent, by publication as fact in a Government handbook to the personal conclusion, unique to Mrs. Jane Cox, that Shakespeare must have had an invariant signature? So far from being to everyone's absolute satisfaction, I cannot find (despite protracted and assiduous search) that this flat statement has ever been made by any other person, professional or lay, in ^{any} other source on the subject, at any time in any of the last four centuries.

Mrs. Cox says: 'It is obvious at a glance that these... are not the signatures of the same man...' because 'it is unthinkable' that Shakespeare did not have what she calls a 'personalised signature'. This has stood, stated as a ~~manifest~~ manifest fact, in a Public Record Office Handbook, for the last four years, despite my continuous and ignored protests; and there it will stand into the twenty-first century, unless something is actually done about it. From the ordinary layman's standpoint it is being given not only credence but guarantee.

Indeed, it seems to have persuaded you; for your letter refers to 'the disputed Shakespeare signatures'. But what accredited authority in history, apart from Mrs. Jane Cox, then their actual custodian, has ever disputed them? Again, you twice stress the relevance of records maintained in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury. But ~~these~~ ^{these} ~~have~~ ^{do} have nothing whatever to do with the case save on the assumption that Mrs. Cox's thoughts and glances are infallible. ~~If they were not,~~ ^{otherwise} no ~~such~~ problem arises, save the problem of how to rectify the recognition accorded them for four years in an official document.

That is the question to which I have long sought to draw your attention.

With best regards,



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21 March 1988

Dear Dr Sams

Thank you for your letter of 16 March.

I hoped I had made it quite clear that I have no wish to get involved officially in a dispute on a matter of scholarship between yourself and Mrs Cox. I can do no more than to offer to review what is said about Shakespeare's signatures in any further edition of Shakespeare in the Public Records in the light of what you say and the then current state of expert opinion.

Until that time, I regard our correspondence on the subject as closed.

Yours sincerely

Michael Roper

MICHAEL ROPER

23 March 1989

Dear Mr. Rope,

Thank you for your final letter.

I fear there's no point in my saying, yet again, that the question to which I'm trying to direct your attention has nothing whatever to do with any aspect of 'scholarship'; it's about whether the personal opinion of Mrs. Cox, unique to her in the world, should be paraded as fact in a Government document with Government sponsorship at public expense under your aegis.

But you have indeed made it quite clear that you have no wish to get involved officially; and I've had good reason to know that the correspondence was closed, five years before it even opened.

Yours sincerely

Eric Sams