THE SEARCH FOR SHAKESPEARE

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In my Diary for the year 2001 there is a brief entry for April 5th, “Lunch with Michael Wood at the Raynes Park Tavern.” At that time I was staying with my brothers in Wimbledon, and a few days before I had received an unexpected phone call from a BBC producer of historical documentaries named Michael Wood, asking me if he could come down from London for an interview with me. He had been commissioned by the BBC to do a documentary on Shakespeare, and as he had come across a recent book of mine on The Catholicism of Shakespeare’s Plays and been informed by the publisher, Robert Asch of The Saint Austin Press, that I was then in Wimbledon, he especially desired to speak with me. For it was already his conviction that behind the plays of Shakespeare and the enigmatic personality of the dramatist lay an allegiance to “the old faith.” So, we discussed this common conviction of ours over lunch at the tavern across the road from Raynes Park station. The subject of our discussion wasn’t just this conviction but also practical ways of following it up for the documentary, and I had several suggestions to offer, proceeding by way of Stratford to Lancashire, as well as to the Jesuit archives at Farm Street Church, London. In particular, he seemed to be interested in the person of William Allen, founder of the seminary at Douai, and the possibility of his having been employed for a brief period as usher at the Stratford Grammar School about the year of Shakespeare’s birth, when he would have been known not (of course) to the new born baby but to his father John, then a prominent member of the town council. And so one thing might well lead to another.
We thus parted, with high hopes on either side. I also had his address
and phone number for further contact. But no further contact came, at
least from his side. I wasn’t in the country for long, and I soon had to
return to Japan; but from time to time, particularly at Christmas, an
appropriate time for the renewal of old contacts, I wrote to him to ask
how things were coming along, but I got no reply. All I could do was to
entertain dark suspicions that he had been dissuaded from his project by
“the powers that be” in the Shakespeare establishment at Stratford, who
were not so favorably disposed to my pet thesis of “the Catholicism of
Shakespeare’s plays.” Thus it was that two years passed in total silence,
when I heard this summer from one of my brothers that Michael Wood’s
documentary was coming up for presentation in a series of four install-
ments and that it was accompanied by the publication of a book with
the same title, *In Search of Shakespeare*. In late July I was actually back in
England but, though I missed seeing any of the documentaries, the last
of which had been shown on BBC 2 on July 19th, I found a copy of the
book at home and I read it through in a matter of two days. It was
indeed a fascinating read! Subsequently, a friend whom I had met in
London sent me both his copy of the book and a video of the first three
installments, so that I could read it through at greater leisure and see the
documentary with my own eyes, while comparing the one with the other.

Then what was my impression? And to what extent were my hopes of
two years back realized? Well, my first impression, particularly of the
documentary, was one of admiration, on seeing how strongly the
Catholic background of Shakespeare from the time of his childhood
at Stratford was emphasized – to an extent that must have astonished
most of the viewers, for whom the simple addition of “Shakespeare +
Catholic” didn’t make sense. How could the great dramatist, it is com-
monly assumed, living as he did in Protestant England under the great
Queen Elizabeth, have been a Catholic, or at least have been brought
up as a Catholic in the presumably Protestant town of Stratford-upon-
Avon? At least, the possibility that he had some Catholic connections in
his early life and formation, while recognized by scholars, isn’t regarded
as having any great importance for an appreciation of his plays. At most,
it seems to be of merely biographical interest, and even so, the various
bits and pieces that go to make up what is known of the dramatist’s bio-
graphy have been rigorously examined by the authoritative biographer
Samuel Schoenbaum in his *Documentary Life* and been found, if not want-
ing, at least not fully convincing. Yet from that low level of skeptical
rejection on the side of the Shakespeare establishment there has arisen a
tide of increasing affirmation, spear-headed in one significant direction
by the distinguished scholar E. A. J. Honigmann with his study of

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