



Christopher Marlowe: Poet & Spy

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Christopher Marlowe's life was the most spectacular of any English dramatist. One of the great playwrights of his age, second only to Shakespeare, he was also a secret agent as well as the central figure in a murder mystery. Now, Park Honan offers the most thoroughly researched and detailed biography of Marlowe to appear in over fifty years.

Honan, the acclaimed biographer of Shakespeare, takes us from Marlowe's childhood in Canterbury to his mysterious death in Deptford, shedding much light on this shadowy individual. The book features new information on Marlowe's six-and-a-half years at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, his shocking blasphemy and his street fights, his methods of preparing himself for writing, and his alleged atheism. The book includes new facts about Marlowe's adventures on the continent, where he was caught with a counterfeit coin, a hanging offense, but talked his way out of the noose and was returned to England in irons. Honan describes his attraction to scientists such as Thomas Harriot and other hard-headed realists bent on innovation and free thought. In addition, there are new details on spies and business agents that Marlowe knew, a more exact account of the circumstances that led to his murder, and a fresh description of his evolving relationship with Shakespeare.

The author of *Tamberlaine the Great* and *Doctor Faustus*, Christopher Marlowe changed the nature of the English stage. Researched in archives in England, Europe, and the United States, this superb biography paints an unforgettable portrait of one of the most remarkable figures in English literature.

Christopher Marlowe: Poet & Spy Details

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From Reader Review Christopher Marlowe: Poet & Spy for online ebook

John says

I've read about half of Honan's biography of Marlowe. Because I don't know the state of documentary sources that relate to Marlowe, I can't really judge the book too harshly. It may well be that Honan has wrung all the information and informed, reasonable conjecture that can possibly extract from the bits and snippets that survive. I do wish that he had spent fewer words on context and more on developing his sense of the human being, however. Apparently with subjects such as Marlowe, it appears one has a choice: to commit to paper's onse sense of the person (together with one's reasons and as much evidence that exists) or to forego writing a biography altogether.

Having written a biography of an entirely obscure individual, I certainly understand the difficulties of such an undertaking, but in the end one chooses to write what one can or not to write at all.

Having finished the book...

I really wish Honan had spent more words on his sense of the person acting in the situations he presents. I found the piling up of detail regarding context and secondary persons a bit tedious. I had the impression that Honan was filling pages with as much information, no matter how remotely related or tangential, as he could collect.

Perhaps the surviving material doesn't justify a book. Certainly Honan doesn't make the case.

Vicki Mullen says

This book was all over the place and hard to read. I learned more about the people around Marlow than I did about him.

David Serxner says

Very well written so far. It always amazes me the amount of work that go into a biography like this.

Brian Willis says

Honan's biography of Shakespeare was good, solid, no-nonsense stuff so I was looking forward to this book on a life for which we have more primary sources, although not nearly enough to know everything. And while this is an excellent overview of the life and times, including interesting new information on the portrait believed to be of Marlowe (featured on the cover), his time at Cambridge, and forensic evidence on the fatal wound, there is still paradoxically less to be known about Marlowe than Shakespeare. Why? Because Marlowe's short career leaves us less theatrical evidence to surmise his business dealings, his collaborations, and his reputation than Shakespeare's does. So we can actually make more solid speculation based on evidence for Shakespeare than Marlowe, because Marlowe's career lasted half a decade, and Shakespeare's

reputation never waned.

Ultimately, I enjoyed reading this book primarily for the information on his Canterbury youth as well as strong readings of his plays and their unusual voice. But I still walk away from the book not feeling like I know the subject as a human being, which is usually the feeling I get from the very best biographies. Part of this is because of the subject himself and the dearth of evidence, but also part of this is the book as well. While I admire Marlowe for his courageous lifestyle and his innovations in drama, I still feel after this book that I am looking at a distant subject rather than having spent a few minutes chatting. The account of his murder is a bit muddled in my opinion (nothing will top Charles Nicholl's superb book *The Reckoning*), and I'm not fully sure we'll ever know the real reason he was bumped off, though Honan certainly gives it a good go. It is very clear however that Marlowe had a temper that got him into trouble, that he made many enemies, and that his outspoken nature also made him a target for the establishment. All in all, the plays are the best record of the man, but this book is a good, and pleasant, read that looks over his life story.

Brackman1066 says

This book was a little frustrating--Honan did quite a bit of psychological analysis on little (or sometimes no) evidence. That's OK in moderation, but to my taste, he overindulged and it felt a little like padding. Others may disagree, though, and if you're new to the whole debate over Marlowe's life, death, and career as a spy, this is probably a good general introduction.

Melisende d'Outremer says

A serious look at the life and career of one of England's greatest writers (sorry Will). Marlowe was an enigmatic and mysterious man whose work often goes without due credit. I am slightly biased as I personally love Marlowe.

Evalyn says

One of the great poets and playwrights during the Renaissance, Christopher Marlowe might have been more of a challenge to Shakespeare's legacy if he had lived longer. This book explores his writing and his assistance to the Queen as a spy. Of all the playwrights in their time (and since), Shakespeare excelled, and was definitely the best, but Marlowe certainly deserves runner-up status.

Sean Gibson says

Kit Marlowe should be a compelling biographical subject. Epic plays? Bar fights? Rivalry with Bill Shakespeare? Alleged spying?! How can this NOT be amazing??

Sadly, there's not a whole lot of actual, you know, evidence about Marlowe's life, and so this is mostly conjecture on what he MIGHT have done or said or thought, and none of it is particularly engaging. It's by no means the author's fault that the historical record is lacking, but if speculation is the name of the game, I prefer mine wild and unfounded.

I'd take a pass unless you're truly desperate to know the few nuggets of Marlowian fact that are out there.

Maria says

A good book to evoke the times and life of the poet, but there seem to be a lot of educated guesses and leaps-of-faith here. Perhaps there is more documentary proof of some of the relationships therein, but perhaps, in trying to make it more like a biography (and less a research thesis), some things got lost along the way.

Rose says

Workmanly biography of Christopher Marlowe, well explained but never catches fire. Nicely chosen illustrations.

Bruce says

Park Honan of the University of Leeds published this biography of the playwright and poet in 2005, and the book may represent the most thorough of Marlowe biographies in light of recent research and evidence. As might be expected with regard to an historical figure whose life and career have been enigmatic, all uncertainties are not cleared up with this volume. Indeed, the first chapter, which relates to Marlowe's childhood in Canterbury in the late 16th century, is filled with phrases such as, "it might be supposed," "he very probably," "it is likely." Once Marlowe matriculated at Cambridge, however, there is considerably more documentation about his life and writings. Always a precocious youngster and verbally fluent individual, he was also sociable and forward, quick to assert himself and unafraid of taking opinions out of favor with his time and society. He was also usually financially in need and was thus susceptible to the temptations of selling his time and efforts to the intelligence services of Queen Elizabeth's government. His involvement in a number of espionage activities made him vulnerable on a number of levels, and his atheistic views at a time when such were dangerous combined with his almost certain homosexuality to make him appear an increasing liability among other spies who feared that his reputation might in turn disgrace their mutual spy masters, such a disgrace inevitably having the potential to bring about their own downfall and financial remunerations. Thus, Marlowe's death in what was initially described as a barroom brawl and subsequently understood as an assassination was no surprise.

Honan presents this story in a clear, straightforward (to the extent possible), and readable manner. But he does far more than that. He also traces the events of Marlowe's life, weaving those events into the themes and issues with which Marlowe dwelt in his plays and poetry. The exploration of those parallels and the discussion of the plays themselves were perhaps the most interesting part of the book. Marlowe's poetical works are compared and contrasted with those of his literary contemporaries, including Shakespeare, and a picture emerges of how these writers responded to and developed from each other. One is drawn to a rereading of Marlowe's works with new appreciation for their subtleties and dramatic strengths.

This is a fascinating book, and it provides a window into a playwright whose influence on those contemporaneous with him and those who followed has been incalculable. It also gives the reader new insights into Marlowe's writing as a product of his life and times as well as a fresh appreciation for his unique genius.

minervasowl says

Somehow it was the film *Shakespeare in Love* which sparked my interest in Marlow.

Keith says

As you would expect, this book is mostly sheer speculation. While a good bit is known about Christopher Marlowe (and Shakespeare) despite him not being a history-moving lord or baron, there isn't enough fact to fill a biography. And thus we end up with a kind of sociological biography of the subject's time and place.

Honan keeps it moderately interesting, but there are long stretches of minutia and people that are hard to follow and the desire to skip forward is irresistible. And frankly, amid all the speculation, I think I missed some of the key facts of Marlowe's life. These should be called out somehow. Hidden in these mounds of speculation is a grain of truth, but that truth is easily overlooked or lost in the immense granary.

If you are an avid Marlowe reader, this is interesting and I'd recommend it. Honan provides a close reading of Marlowe's wonderful plays (but you have to wonder about some of his biographical readings).

If you don't have much interest in Tudor England, this is probably a book you can skip.

Pete daPixie says

Any regular reader of historical non-fiction will be well aware of an author's ability to extract telling detail from seeming innocuous scraps of information long hidden in dusty archives. Park Honan's 'Christopher Marlowe-Poet & Spy' (2005) appears to stitch together a biography of the enigmatic Elizabethan from the barest of threads. The author is Emeritus Professor at the School of English, University of Leeds. Having previously published a biography of Shakespeare, he walks on familiar ground here.

However, I found it hard to put real flesh on the bones of this poet and spy. Marlowe (Marley) remains something of a historical iceberg, where only a small part of this person is revealed above the surface. Much of this book benefits from the expert analysis of the man through his written works, namely 'Dido', 'Tamburlaine', 'Dr. Faustus', 'The Jew of Malta', 'Edward II' and 'Hero and Leander'. I'm not sure how much analysis of the poet's canon lifts the fog of time, or gets us any closer to unveil the mysteries of Marlowe. Was he recruited as a government agent at Cambridge? Was he employed as a tutor to Arbella Stuart as proposed by Sarah Gristwood in her biography of 'Arbella', published 2003? Whatever circumstances were behind the murder at Deptford in 1593 remains unknown and perhaps unknowable.
