

The Authorship Question; or, Will the Real William Shakespeare Please Stand Up?

by Jenijoy La Belle

*Why has
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many doubters?*

Over the last 200 years many theories have surfaced that the plays and poems generally attributed to William Shakespeare from Stratford-on-Avon were actually written by someone else. Most of these theories propose that there was some sort of conspiracy or hoax and that the true author of *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and all those other masterpieces found it necessary to hide his or her identity by producing and publishing the plays under the name of a minor theatrical manager and actor of no significant talent. Many of these theorists, and perhaps even some of their readers, assume that we know next to nothing about the man from Stratford and that what we do know gives no indication that he was capable of writing great dramas. But, as a matter of fact, as the scholar Alfred Harbage has put it, “we have more reliably documented information about Shakespeare than about Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Plautus, Terence, all medieval English playwrights combined, and all but a few of those of the Renaissance. . . . No playwright’s life was then written up, and the most remarkable thing about Shakespeare’s is that our record of it is as full as it is. . . . The identity of theatre writers [in the 16th century], like that of . . . television writers now, was a matter of public indifference.”

One piece of information about Shakespeare sometimes taken as negative evidence is his education or lack thereof. He did not go to a university—and probably attended only grammar school. This raises an important point that affects many anti-Stratfordian arguments—a lack of historical perspective. We’re all familiar with

grammar schools today and what they teach, but an Elizabethan grammar school would have provided an education roughly equivalent to a modern bachelor’s degree in classical literature. Latin was the principal subject taught. Thus, the implication that Shakespeare was an uneducated country boy is very probably wrong. And calling him an “illiterate butcher,” as one anti-Stratfordian does, is patently absurd.

Another assumption one frequently encounters is that the Shakespearean plays show such insight into various aspects of human experience that their author must have been a sailor, a soldier, a statesman, a lawyer, an astronomer, a medical doctor—each theorist of course picks his own particular profession. But I think the one opinion about the great plays that even the anti-Stratfordians would assent to is that they are great *plays*, and they were written by someone who understood the living theater, stage performance, and the creation of dramatic plot and character. What sort of person would be most likely to know how to create such works? I suggest that it would be someone intimately familiar with the procedures of the theater of his day, someone who knew about acting, and someone who was a professional playwright. This is exactly what we know William Shakespeare from Stratford did for a living. He was an important member of an important theatrical troupe—roughly equivalent to a repertory company today. He was respected within the industry, he made a good deal of money at this profession, and no one in his own time or for nearly 200 years seriously questioned the authorship of his plays. Conse-

Ignatius Donnelly sought to prove Sir Francis Bacon’s authorship through cryptographic analysis—uncovering the elaborate code behind which Bacon supposedly hid his identity. Reproduced here from Donnelly’s *The Great Cryptogram* (1888) is a page from the Shakespeare first Folio (1623) that Donnelly used as a work sheet.

“If Bacon wrote Shakespeare, then Shakespeare (or someone else) wrote the works of Bacon.”

quently, the notions that the name Shakespeare is a meaningless veil or that the man from Stratford was an ignorant rustic incapable of writing plays are contrary to the facts.

Let me now turn to a brief history of the authorship controversy. One of the earlier theorists was Colonel Joseph C. Hart, an American, who in 1848 set forth his opinions in a book entitled *The Romance of Yachting*. In the course of relating his adventures crossing the Atlantic, Hart digresses on the subject of Shakespeare. He doesn't know *who* wrote the plays, but he indignantly claims that Shakespeare was “a vulgar and unlettered man” who purchased other people's works and added naughty bits to spice them up. He said he could “easily discover” the parts of the plays Shakespeare wrote by their “filth.”

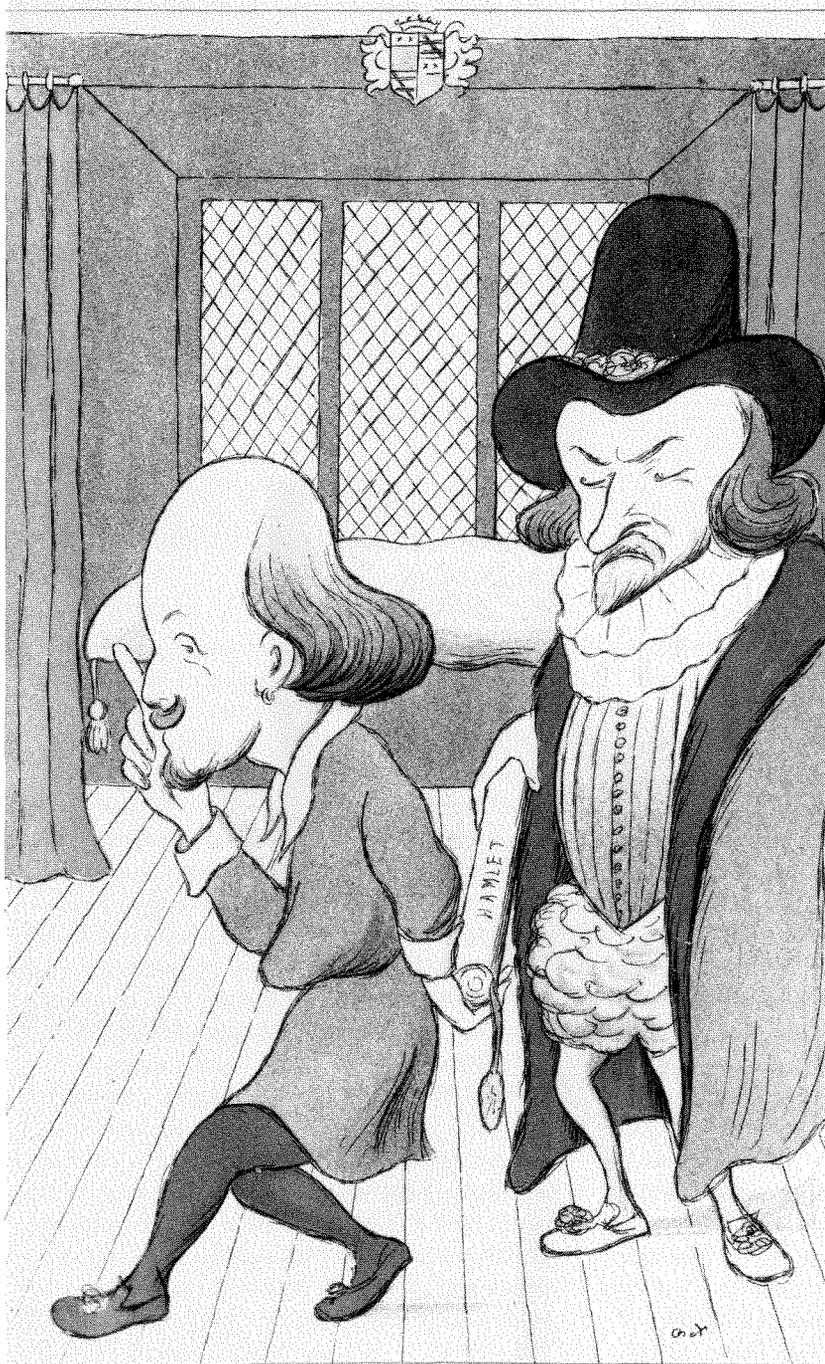
Actually Hart makes a valid point without realizing it. Shakespeare did indeed borrow almost all of his plots from other authors, ranging from classical writers like Plutarch to contemporaries such as Thomas Lodge. The “spicing up,” however, includes not just ribald jokes and bawdy puns, but the transformation of prose tales into theatrical events and the virtual invention of complex psychological characterizations for both real and imagined figures whose lives are recounted in outline in his sources.

The most popular authorship theory in the 19th century was that the Shakespeare canon was written by the sly and mighty Elizabethan politician and philosopher Sir Francis Bacon. One of the earliest proponents, William Henry Smith, stakes his claims on the supposed fact that Bacon “had the requisite learning and experience” to

write the dramas—even though Bacon is not known to have had any connection with the theater or any experience in play writing. Bacon was indeed a writer and a man of enormous erudition, but his philosophical, legal, and political tracts (often in Latin) bear no similarities to Shakespeare's plays. As the literary scholar George Lyman Kittredge pointed out years ago, “If Bacon wrote Shakespeare, then Shakespeare (or someone else) wrote the works of Bacon.” Smith, however, points out that both Shakespeare and Bacon use some of the same vocabulary—such as the word *inkling*. This is a type of argument frequently used to prove authorship, and if two writers can be shown to have used an extensive list of the same words that no one else in the period used, then we might have the beginnings of a good argument that the same person wrote under both names. But simply to show that two authors used the same word commonly used by a great many people of the time is hardly the basis for an attribution—even if the word strikes the modern ear as unusual.

In 1888 the American lawyer Ignatius Donnelly brought to the Baconian hypothesis the full machinery of cryptology—finding in Shakespeare's plays “the most ingenious and elaborate cipher ever presumed to have been constructed by the mind of man.” Through this cipher (or secret code) Bacon was indicating his authorship of the plays. Further, Donnelly claimed he had found evidence that Bacon wrote practically all the dramas of the Elizabethan era (almost 800 plays), plus the essays of Montaigne—in French. How Sir Francis also had enough time to compose works under his own name and help govern England remains something of a mystery.

The cryptographic approach proved popular. One believer, a physician from Detroit, extended the theory to the notion that Bacon not only begot the Shakespearean plays, but was himself the son of Queen Elizabeth. Indeed, the Baconian theory has in this century continued to stake out new ground, including the “discovery” that Bacon wrote *Don Quixote*, parts of the King James Version of the Bible, and Edgar Allan Poe's “The Raven.” The absurdity of these vast claims is a by-product of the fact that if one looks hard enough and invents an elaborate enough system, one can create ciphers out of any extensive body of writing. Professional cryptographers have discredited the Baconians by showing that their basic procedures can be used to validate obvious impossibilities—for example, that Theodore Roosevelt wrote the Gettysburg Address and that Francis Bacon wrote parts of the Yale University Catalogue for 1909. Perhaps Sir James Barrie



WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, HIS METHOD OF WORK.

In his book *The Poets' Corner* (1904), Max Beerbohm caricatured Francis Bacon furtively handing the manuscript of *Hamlet* to William Shakespeare. Reproduced by permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

has the final word on the Baconian hypothesis. Barrie said, "I know not, sir, whether Bacon wrote the words of Shakespeare, but if he did not it seems to me he missed the opportunity of his life."

Another popular theory is that Shakespeare's works were written by a group of collaborators. In spite of her name, Delia Bacon did not strictly follow the Baconian pattern, but in her interminable book of 1857 proposed a collaborative effort led by Sir Walter Raleigh. The unfortunate lady died two years later—"violently insane." Yet, her idea of what the scholar Samuel Schoenbaum calls "a secret society of master wits" did not die. Indeed, the group or syndicate theory had a resurgence in the 1930s, with a cast of characters that included not only a great many Elizabethan courtiers and playwrights but also an anonymous cabal of Jesuits. Actually these proposals do have a certain appeal, for they would seem to account for Shakespeare's infinite variety and do accord with legitimate scholarly suppositions about how Shakespeare may have developed his plays through working together with other members of his theatrical company. However, the Groupists consistently exclude the supposedly illiterate Shakespeare from their proposals—or assign him a very minor role.

In recent years, the favored candidate for the anti-Stratfordian forces has been Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford—a man of influence and many talents, although nothing in his extant works indicates that play writing was among those talents. The first to set forth the Oxfordian attribution in detail was the admirably named J. Thomas Looney. In his 1920 volume, "*Shakespeare*" Identified, Looney claims that the author of the Shakespeare canon had nine "special characteristics," including "an enthusiasm for Italy" and "a love of music," and, of course, Oxford's life revealed these very characteristics. Looney confesses to one impediment to his attribution. The earl died in 1604—vexingly early in light of the standard chronology of the plays. *The Tempest*, for example, is generally dated to 1611. But Looney triumphantly leaps this hurdle by the simple expedient of asserting that *The Tempest* is a poor effort and could not possibly have been written by the author of the earlier plays. To back up his claims, Looney also published a volume of Edward de Vere's poetry—although in fact some of those verses were not his at all but are works known to be by skilled poets such as John Lyly and Walter Raleigh.

Among the many adherents of the Looney theory was Percy Allen who, during séances conducted by a spiritual medium of "unimpeach-

Sometime around 1800 William Blake painted this intriguing tempera portrait of Shakespeare, based on the famous Droeshout engraving published in the Shakespeare Folio of 1623. Reproduced by permission of the City Art Gallery, Manchester, England.



able integrity,” was able to converse with Bacon, Oxford, and Shakespeare. These worthy ghosts revealed de Vere, the Earl of Oxford, as the man who shook the spear. This seemingly incontrovertible proof has been questioned, however, because this same medium had earlier found for the Baconian Alfred Dodd that his favorite was the true author.

The tendency for anti-Stratfordians to be long-winded reached new extremes in a 1952 volume (running to nearly 1,300 pages) by the American lawyer Charlton Ogburn and his wife, Dorothy. As usual, these Oxfordian claimants begin by branding Shakespeare as an “uneducated, unlettered, undistinguished, . . . virtually unknown” lout. The Ogburns find a host of what they call “identity-clues” in the plays—all pointing to de Vere. For example, Rosalind’s statement in *As You Like It* that “men are April when they woo, December when they wed” “recalls the fact that Oxford, born in April, wooed when very young and was quite cool by the time of his December wedding.” Need I point out that the ability of imaginative literature to “recall” to our minds incidents in our own lives or in the lives of others does not provide solid evidence for authorship. Yet, the Oxfordians soar on apace with such tomes as the 1984 volume, *The Mysterious William Shakespeare: The Myth and the Reality*—almost 900 pages of detailed information knit together with magisterial illogic by Charlton Ogburn’s son, Charlton Jr. I have recently learned that there is a Charlton Ogburn III—perhaps waiting in the wings to continue the family tradition?

Locally, the supposed “mystery” of authorship has been kept alive in the pages of the *Los Angeles Times* by its arts editor, Charles Champlin. As far as I know, Champlin has not come down firmly in print for de Vere, but his articles on the “Debate Over the Bard” make it seem as though this is a legitimate scholarly issue and that academics are ignoring it for no good reason. The actual reason that the Baconian and Oxfordian attributions have never received attention in the academy is that these theories have no merit. Nor do the proposals for dozens of other rival claimants. The Derbyites advocate William Stanley, sixth Earl of Derby, who at least has the requisite initials (W. S.). Stanley’s promoters emphasize the knowledge of court etiquette in the dramas, knowledge which they maintain only a courtier of distinguished ancestry could have acquired. Since Derby didn’t die until 1642 (26 years after Shakespeare’s death), it’s surprising he did not crank out a few more plays. Yet another candidate is Roger Manners, fifth Earl of Rutland. The Mannerists assert that the plays merely echo episodes in Rutland’s life. Others champion Christopher Marlowe—even though there is good evidence he was slain in 1593, years before many of the plays were written. But such a minor detail as death is no hindrance to a theory-spinner. The Marlovians simply insist that their pretender did not die, but went into hiding in Northern Italy where he wrote the works now credited to Shakespeare. (I am reminded of some lines from *Macbeth*: “The time has been / That when the brains were out, the man would die, / And there an end. But now they rise again, / . . . And push

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us from our stools.”) The one positive thing that can be said for the supporters of Marlowe is that, in the game of “Choose Your Own Shakespeare,” they have at least fixed upon a considerable dramatist and poet instead of enlisting yet another earl.

As a feminist, I suppose I should mention a few of the theories involving women. Queen Elizabeth has been proposed as the author of the plays—as has the Countess of Pembroke, the Countess of Rutland, Mary Queen of Scots, a nun named Anne Whateley (who probably didn’t even exist), and Shakespeare’s own wife, Anne Hathaway. The arguments supporting these candidates are tissue-thin and often require elaborate scenarios and speculations about Shakespeare’s love life, political intrigue in England’s court, and other matters for which there is no historical evidence. Often these arguments are preceded by the implicit phrase, “Isn’t it possible that . . .?” The only reply is, “Yes, it is possible . . .,” but there is an almost infinite list of possibilities that never happened. The “isn’t it possible” argument is simply a rhetorical ploy intended to shift the burden of proof to those unconvinced by an attribution. But the burden must always rest on those who make such ascriptions.

However weak and fallacious the anti-Stratfordian arguments have seemed to literary scholars, the Shakespeare authorship issue is a historical phenomenon worthy of study and explanation. Everyone loves a good mystery, and conspiracy theories often capture the popular mind. But why has *Shakespeare*, more than any other author, attracted so many doubters? Nobody produces volume after volume on who “really” wrote the plays of Thomas Middleton, Cyril Tourneur, or a host of other Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights about whose lives we know less than we do about Shakespeare’s. Claims that someone else wrote his plays began in the early 19th century. This was the same period in which bardolatry—the worship of Shakespeare as a transcendent, almost superhuman genius—also began. As Thomas Carlyle wrote in 1840, “there is actually a kind of sacredness in the fact of such a man being sent into this Earth.” And the German poet Heinrich Heine once stated, “God himself naturally has a right to the first place, but the second certainly belongs to Shakespeare.” I think that the two phenomena, bardolatry and reattribution, are intimately connected. If whoever authored the plays was one of the greatest minds who ever lived, then how could he have been a mere commoner? The exaggerations of bardolatry—

for example, the claim that Shakespeare was a world-class expert in a dozen or so fields—have tempted some people to imagine that the author must have been a nobleman of wide experience and high education.

Another quality in the plays themselves can also stimulate speculations on authorship. As the Romantic poet John Keats pointed out, Shakespeare was as capable of creating an evil character as a good character, taking “as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen.” This mobility and multiplicity of personality can lead to a sense that there is no single describable mind operating behind all the plays. Thus, theories of collaborative authorship, however unsupported by the facts, accord with Shakespeare’s acknowledged variety. The wealth of theories supporting well over 60 different claimants springs not from solid historical evidence, but from 19th- and 20th-century perceptions about Shakespeare’s artistry.

If we stand back a little from the details of the anti-Stratfordian arguments—all those thousands of pages of pointlessness—a few features emerge common to the vast majority. Almost all share a snobbish class-consciousness. Rather than proposing that the Shakespeare canon was written by some other professional playwright, the Looneys, Ogburns, and their many minions always select candidates of aristocratic birth (the bluer the blood the better) or political position. Here again, the worship of Shakespeare’s talent leads some to translate artistic ability into literal nobility. But, as Harbage has pointed out, Shakespeare had precisely the social background one would expect of a popular playwright. Indeed, many of the other giants of English literature had similar middle-class origins: “Chaucer was the son of a vintner, Spenser the son of a linen draper, Donne the son of an iron-monger, Milton the son of a scrivener, and so it goes. . . . To be the son of a Stratford glovemaking was not poetically disabling.”

Another assumption common to the authorship doubters is that there is no such thing as imaginative and fictive literature written for the purpose of entertainment. Let me explain. Theorist after theorist reads the plays as though they were puzzles—both concealing and revealing secrets about authorship. Such readers believe that the plays are neither fictions nor dramatic recastings of clearly indicated historical events, but are veiled observations about contemporary happenings and people. For example, the younger Ogburn takes it as a firm principle that “the dramatist’s first intention . . . seems to have been to write a parable of the times.” This

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notion, of course, drains the plays of their aesthetic qualities, their power to make us laugh or cry. The logical extreme of such an approach is reached in the works of the anagram, acrostic, and cipher schools. The cryptologists do not investigate the literary features of Shakespeare's works and compare them with the literary characteristics evinced by the writings of the proposed candidates. Instead, all literature is reduced to an allegory of authorship. As Schoenbaum has written, "Surely it is madness . . . to believe that the hilarity of Falstaff, the agony of Othello, and the rage of Lear serve merely the puerile requirements of a game of words or numbers: telling an impossible tale of courtly intrigue, conveying signatures or broken fragments of thought. For this the lyricism of *Romeo and Juliet*, the ripeness of *Antony and Cleopatra*? For this the poet's vision, the playwright's craft?"

That the theorists have a very limited respect for the powers of the imagination is further shown by their constant harping on the fact that the plays are filled with all sorts of places, people, and events that the man from Stratford could not have personally experienced. One example of this sort of anti-imaginative—indeed anti-intellectual—argument will suffice. In his boldly titled book *Bacon Is Shakespeare* (1910), Edwin Durning-Lawrence's logic runs as follows:

1. There are French soldiers in *Henry V*.
2. Shakespeare could never have seen a French soldier.
3. Bacon, while in Paris, had considerable experience of French soldiers.
4. Ergo, Bacon wrote *Henry V*.

Of course, if the anti-Stratfordians applied this kind of logic consistently, they would have to conclude that no Elizabethan could have written *Julius Caesar* and that modern science-fiction stories about life on Mars must have been written by people who actually visited the red planet.

What Shakespeare has to say about Italy often figures large in heretical arguments. The theorists begin by exaggerating the knowledge of that country evinced in the plays, and then conclude that Shakespeare, who never visited Italy, could not have written so insightfully about it. But, not surprisingly, the Earl of Oxford had spent time in Italy and knew it well. In fact, what the Shakespeare plays tell us about Italy is mostly a series of commonplaces that one could derive from any of several books of the period. Further, Shakespeare's dramas contain some basic geographical errors that would be odd mistakes for the well-traveled earl to have made. If de Vere wrote the plays, it seems more than a little strange that he would place a sailmaker in inland



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Bergamo, describe a nonexistent waterway between Milan and the sea, and have characters board a ship in landlocked Verona. And why does Bohemia have a seacoast if the author of the plays was an educated aristocrat who traveled on the Continent? In short, the geographical knowledge shown in Shakespeare's plays provides no evidence of authorship. And the same could be said for a host of other realms of learning—such as sailing, warfare, law, and medicine. When stripped of their rhetoric and dramatic artistry, Shakespeare's thoughts on these subjects may be wise, but they are not original contributions to the Renaissance body of knowledge in these disparate fields. The author of Shakespeare's works was a great writer—but he was not a great navigator, lawyer, or physician.

Besides bashing Shakespeare the man, the anti-Stratfordian forces enjoy denigrating academic scholars. The Baconians, Oxfordians, and their devotees take the fact that no respected academic *literary* scholar has ever believed in their fantastical theories as an indication not of the weakness of those theories, but of the dull wits of academics. Some go a step further and add to their conspiratorial proposals about authorship a modern conspiracy among academics to deny all claims against the man from Stratford. The nonbelievers believe that the community of professional scholars has some sort of profound investment in Shakespeare's authorship. I suspect that shopkeepers in Stratford-on-Avon have such an investment, but I have never understood how academics do. Indeed, if I could come up with valid and significant evidence that someone other

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than Shakespeare wrote his plays, I could achieve instant fame and fortune in my profession. Plus, I could appear on the "Phil Donahue Show." But, alas, none of us has ever found a shred of such evidence upon which to build an argument.

I realize that to come to this conclusion and to argue against the multitude of authorship proposals will have no effect on those who deeply believe that Bacon or de Vere or someone else wrote Shakespeare. The theorists are sincere, they are dedicated, they are irrepensible, and they will take whatever I say as proof of my own pigheadedness, not of theirs. But their views are, as William Shakespeare of Stratford wrote, "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing." □

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Calculating Shakespeare

Even Caltech was involved, at least once, in the Shakespeare-authorship question. Sidney Weinbaum, who worked during the 1930s in Linus Pauling's lab doing quantum mechanical calculations of molecular bonds, tells the following story in his oral history (another more notorious chapter follows on page 30):

"At that time, they decided they will have to use electric calculators instead of hand calculators. And so every firm wanted to sell their electric calculators, and two of them gave them to us free to try out.

"There was a man in Los Angeles who was sure that Shakespeare was not written by Shakespeare but by whoever it was—I don't remember now. And a Caltech professor of mathematics, Clyde Wolfe, was doing calculations for him; one of his specialities was theory of probability. So he was looking at repetition of words and things like that, to show that it was not the same as the known writings of Shakespeare. I understand that this man had about six or eight calculating machines, and he had a little swivel chair in the center there, so Wolfe could swivel his chair and go from machine to machine. However, when we got the electric calculators, they were much more modern than what he had. So he somehow found out about it, and he came to take a look and to see how they worked. Well, a few weeks passed by. One day I came back to work, and the machine was stuck; it wouldn't work. So I called the company; "That's impossible; it was in perfect order." The company representative came back and he tried it out; it didn't work. He said, 'What did you do with it? Did you try to take it apart or something like that?' Well, they gave us a different machine. Months passed by, and I met Wolfe on the campus. And he says, 'I came one day to try out your machines. Nobody was there, so I just worked for a while. And then I wanted to know how it is put together, so I took it apart, and then I put it back together.' So the company was right."