

DELLA HILTON

WHO
WAS KIT
MARLOWE?

The story of the poet
and playwright

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To Myra Roper, for bringing
literary distinction to
Melbourne University

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Introduction

Who was Christopher Marlowe? For me, when I first heard his 'divine Zenocrate' speech as a seventeen-year-old schoolgirl, he was the greatest poet in the English language. The following year, when I studied *Tamburlaine* at university, he was the most exciting of the early playwrights.

I was fortunate because I met the real Marlowe before I heard the myth. *Tamburlaine*, which was published in his lifetime, is true Marlowe, as is his mature and less bombastic *Edward II*. The partially corrupt texts of *The Jew of Malta*, *The Massacre at Paris* and *Doctor Faustus* still tell us more of their author than the rumour and speculation which has grown up round him.

Much is actually known about Marlowe – more than about his contemporary Shakespeare – because he can be traced through the records of his school and university, at Canterbury, and in London where he was involved with two definable circles, that of his patron Thomas Walsingham and, to a lesser degree, Raleigh's School of Night.

These facts must be viewed in the light of his writings if we are to have a true picture of the man; too often Marlowe's plays are read or produced with alleged hindsight, which attributes false meanings to otherwise straightforward passages. For example, Marlowe is described as 'violent' when his record, set beside that of contemporaries, is relatively mild and his plays are no more bloodthirsty than the fashion of the time. The label 'atheist' came very early, from a jealous playwright; and though this playwright misquoted, saying that *Tamburlaine* 'dared God from Heaven' when he actually dared Mohammed, the mistake has still contributed to the myth. Marlowe was outspoken and a challenging

thinker, as were all Raleigh's School of Night, most of whom were also accused of atheism, but present-day biographers of Raleigh, for example, have put this in perspective, while Marlowe is still cloaked in unnecessary speculation. Hearsay criticisms of Raleigh receive closer scrutiny than those of Marlowe.

Another subject of speculation is Marlowe's alleged homosexuality. This is based on two passages from his works, which have fewer homosexual characters and descriptions than those of some contemporaries, and two flippant hearsay comments quoted by a detractor. The detractor claimed that Marlowe said 'that St John the Evangelist was bedfellow to C(hrist) and leaned alwaies in his bosome, that he used him as the sinners of Sodoma' and that 'all they that love not Tobacco and Boies were fooles'. In the first Christ is condemned for supposed homosexuality like the 'sinners of Sodoma', and the second seems to link homosexuality with the new diversion of pipe smoking taken up by Raleigh's circle, hinting that a number of people did both. Those accusing Marlowe of homosexuality often omit the first allegation and merely quote the second; the translations of Ovid's love poetry and the erotic parts of *Hero and Leander* are overlooked.

Perhaps some people wish Marlowe, like Shakespeare, to stay a mystery, but too much is known about him for a true picture of the man not to be given.

Much harm has been done to Marlowe by those who suggest he wrote Shakespeare's plays, because this makes him seem an interloper, when he was a great playwright on his own account.

In recognizing that Marlowe was not the writer of Shakespeare's plays some people mistakenly dismiss him altogether, thus diminishing our literary canon, and denying Marlowe his historical importance in the development of drama. Marlowe, in fact, was the pioneer and Shakespeare followed his example.

Others, since the revelation that Marlowe had done some spying, concentrate on the Man of Action, and give little attention to his writings.

INTRODUCTION

My book aims to give the life of Marlowe as it was, from the facts, documents, and in the light of his writings.

What emerges is the life of a brilliant, attractive and sometimes disturbing man; and also a picture of the period, one of the most exciting in our history, when the Spanish Armada was defeated and English literature flourished.

There are some people who have not heard of Christopher Marlowe, and wonder why there is interest in this man who lived four hundred years ago.

This book is also for them. Marlowe's colourful life and transcendent poetry is part of the heritage of all English-speaking people.

For their assistance I wish to thank: Dr William Urry, ex-Canterbury archivist and now Ceremonial Dean of the Modern History Faculty at Oxford, to whom the Marlowe family is as real as if they were his next-door neighbours; A. J. P. Taylor, for sympathetic and valuable guidance in preparing this biography; Peter Pollak of Marlowe House, King's School, Canterbury; Christopher Falkus and John Curtis for encouragement; George MacBeth for poetry help; Dr Christopher Andrew of Corpus Christi, Cambridge; the Rev. Canon C. Norwood of Sutton Valence, Kent, and Southchurch; archivist Katharine Wheeler; Dr Christopher Wrigley; the reference librarian of the Paddington branch of the Westminster Library; and my family and a number of friends for sympathetic listening. All Marlowe quotations have been taken from the Penguin editions.