

Print Edition

SHAKESPEARE'S DESCENDANT

Ottawa portrait owner is the Bard's kin

JAMES ADAMS

April 11, 2009

Here's something to possibly twist your codpieces and flip your crispines, gentlemen and ladies. ...

A 76-year-old retired Bell Communications engineer from Ottawa has discovered that he is related to William Shakespeare. Yes, the Shakespeare of *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet* fame, the bestower of "obscene," "fancy-free," "arch-villain," "play fast and loose" and "all's well that ends well," among many thousands of other words and expressions that enliven the English language.

The discovery is significant because Lloyd Sullivan already is famous, in a sorta/kinda way, as the inheritor and custodian of a portrait that The Globe and Mail, in a front-page story in May, 2001, unveiled as very possibly the only authentic portrait of the Bard painted during his 52 years on the planet. Gasps were heard around the world: *A colonial from Upper Canada with a portrait of the world's greatest playwright wrapped in cardboard and brown paper and stored in a cupboard in his home?!?*

The revelation of Sullivan's familial relation to the Bard (and, it turns out, to some of the playwright's friends and intimates) can only heighten interest in - and possibly reinforce - Sullivan's claims about the so-called Sanders portrait. In fact, it's occurring at a particularly charged moment in the long-running and controversial saga over what Shakespeare looked like, and who, if anyone, has the painting - or drawing or engraving or bust - with the strongest claim to his truest representation.

It's a fight, as one scholar has noted, about "who or what institution has the power to make a particular interpretation stick." And Sullivan is betting his will prove the most adhesive, while sticking it to those who previously have pooh-poohed his claims.

Just last month the mighty Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, scored international headlines when it unveiled what it claims is the only authentic portrait of Shakespeare completed during his lifetime (1564-1616). Known as the Cobbe portrait, it has been dated to around 1610 - the same date attributed to the Chandos portrait that Tarnya Cooper, curator of 16th-century portraiture at the National Portrait Gallery in London, declared three years ago to be the only "probable" authentic lifetime image of Shakespeare.

Also last month, Canadian documentarian Anne Henderson launched, at Montreal's Festival international du film sur l'art, *Battle of Wills*, a sympathetic portrayal of Sullivan's now-\$1-million, near-20-year quest to affirm the authenticity of the portrait of which he has been custodian since 1972.

What fascinates Henderson, she said in an interview, is "how much political spin underlies the stories of these portraits. People have ... not really analyzed the agendas behind institutions like the National Portrait Gallery and the Birthplace Trust. At the same time, those very institutions hold Sullivan to a higher standard. He's sort of required to have the 100-per-cent-bullet-proof document, whereas they don't."

Her \$400,000 film, completed late last year, was also screened recently in Guelph, Ont., sponsored partly by the University of Guelph's Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project. The project's head, Daniel Fischlin, has been a major researcher and advocate on behalf of Sullivan's initiative. Indeed, he and Sullivan have been busily collaborating on a book, "waiting for the last pieces in the genealogical puzzle to fall into place."

Those pieces appear to be doing just that. Thanks to a still-growing body of genealogical evidence accumulated in the last six years, it's now clear that Sullivan is indeed kin to the world's greatest playwright. True, it's a "relative of relatives/ the thigh bone is connected to the backbone via the hip bone" phenomenon, but real nevertheless: a link by what genealogists call "affinity" - in this case, a string of marriages stretching back centuries among families with such sturdy English surnames as Sanders, Throckmorton, Catesby and Arden. Before, during and after Shakespeare's time, these families lived in closely connected communities in the English Midlands, in such towns as Coughton, Huddington, Droitwich, Temple Grafton, Worcester and Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare's birth (and death) place.

When Sullivan declared eight years ago he had the only authentic lifetime portrait of Shakespeare, it was his understanding then that its alleged painter, one John Sanders, an ancestor 11 or 12 generations back, was "only" an associate, possibly a friend, of the Bard. No more. The dogged detective work of British genealogist Pam Hinks has put Sullivan "right in the middle of Shakespeare's relatives and friends," as Sullivan himself put it recently.

Hinks, who lives near Worcester, the ancestral home of Sullivan's relations on his mother's side, was brought in in 2003 to bolster Sullivan's claims for the Sanders portrait. To date, Sullivan has paid for 13 scientific tests on the painting, all of which it has passed with flying colours. One of the most important occurred in 2000, when radiocarbon analysis confirmed that a tattered rag label glued to the portrait's back had, in fact, been made in the early-to-mid-17th century. Another test, in 2007, dispelled accusations by some that the inscription written on this label - it reads, in almost-invisible, old-time script: Shakspere/Born April 23 = 1564/Died April 23-1616/Aged 52/This Likeness taken 1603/Age at that time 39 ys" - had been added decades, perhaps centuries, after the early 1600s.

Still, "science can never make authenticity; it can only break it," to paraphrase an expert in Henderson's documentary. While today virtually no one disputes that the Sanders portrait dates back at least 400 years, the biggest knock on its claim to authenticity - at least until now - has been its lack of provenance, more particularly the gaps in the historical record of who owned or held the painting between its purported creation in 1603 and now.

Sullivan could pretty much trace his family roots, and the trajectory of the portrait through them, back to the first decades of the 18th century - but the century or so preceding that was decidedly misty. It's this veil that Hinks, who fondly calls the face in the painting "Old Smiler," has been steadily, stubbornly parting.

For instance, she has found that in 1594 Dorothy Saunders, a relative of Sullivan, married one John Throckmorton - one instance of a number of marriages involving these families over the decades. Throckmortons also married Ardens, and it was one of those aristocratic Ardens, Mary, who in 1557 became the wife of a John Shakespeare, and seven years later gave birth to a boy christened William. In 1592 another Sullivan relative, Phillip Sanders, married one Anna Heminges. She was the cousin of none other than John Heminges, born just two years after Shakespeare in Droitwich, near Stratford-upon-Avon. John Heminges later became an actor in Shakespeare's company, and in 1623 co-edited and published the famous First Folio of the Bard's plays.

Hinks has limned many other linkages. One of the most intriguing concerns another Sullivan relative, Mathew Sanders, the third child of a Stephen Saunders - back then, spelling was anything but standardized - born in Coughton in 1624. At his death, in 1745 at age 68, Mathew Sanders was found to have a will in which he deeded to a John Sanders (relationship unspecified) "eight pictures."

Could one of these pictures, Sullivan wonders, have been of a man named Shakspeare? Could it be the very painting that has been Sullivan's obsession for decades? Hinks hopes she can find out as she strives to push back even further into the early 17th and late 16th centuries.

What is yet to be determined - and it becomes "a bigger and bigger challenge every generation you go back," observes Henderson - is if there is a Sanders whose age, talents and proximity (to both the Bard and the Catholic communities of England's Midlands) make him a more-than-probable match to the John Sanders who's been touted as the painter of the 1603 portrait by generation upon generation of Sullivan's relations.

"Thanks to Pam Hinks, we are getting very close to making that connection," says the U of G's Fischlin. "And we may find that the person's name may well have been James or Matthew or something else. Or that indeed it was John. Time will tell and there is feverish work going on to figure out this last branch of the genealogy."

Sullivan contends that much of the fog surrounding the Sanders portrait is due to the (highly disputed) fact that Shakespeare was Catholic. Admittedly, Sullivan, a lifelong devout Catholic, is not alone in making that claim about the Bard; many scholars agree. It's also a fact that the communities around Shakespeare's hometown were hotbeds of papist resistance in newly Protestant England. Two of the major conspirators of the infamous Gunpowder Plot of 1605, brothers Thomas and Robert Wintour, for instance, hailed from Huddington, just 20 kilometres from Worcester and Stratford, and were the grandsons of Katherine Throckmorton, aunt of Mary Arden (a.k.a. Shakespeare's mother). After the failure of the plot, the lads were hanged, drawn and quartered.

Shakespeare kept his Catholicism covert precisely because he wished to avoid the fate of the Wintours and their ilk, Sullivan argues. Similarly, "the Sanders portrait was kept secret and protected [and unsigned] for all these years because, had it been discovered,

it would have been confiscated and destroyed by the authorities," including the virulently anti-Catholic Puritans who ruled England in the mid-17th century.

Sullivan acknowledges that proof of the Bard's religion could prove elusive. Fortunately, he says, there is other evidence closer to hand regarding the portrait's authenticity: the information written on the rag label. It was only in the late 18th century, once Shakespeare's baptismal record was discovered, that the playwright's correct birth date (on or around April 23, 1564) was determined and generally accepted by scholars. This same information had been affixed to the Sanders label more than a century and a half earlier.

Similarly, the spelling of the Bard's surname on the label is the same as that on his baptismal record, on his marriage banns, on a mortgage document, and in the registry for his burial in Stratford's Holy Trinity Church ("1616, Apr. 25. B. Will. Shakspeare, gent."). Yes, spelling was not particularly standardized back then, yet Sullivan is convinced the portrait's spelling indicates that its painter and his family were intimates of the Bard and, like him, Stratfordians.

Audacious? Perhaps. But as Daniel Fischlin observes: "Not one claim about the Sanders portrait has been reasonably rebutted by experts. The only thing I've heard in direct rebuttal is [Tarnya] Cooper's ... naive and impressionistic claim [made in 2002 and again in 2006] that the Sanders isn't Shakespeare because the sitter does not appear to be 39. ... No other Shakespeare image has had this level of scrutiny and evidence that has been tested very publicly in all sorts of ways with still no argument worthy of mention to knock it down."

Are we having fun yet?

The Shakespeare-Sanders-Sullivan link

When The Globe and Mail's Stephanie Nolen broke the story of the so-called Sanders portrait in May, 2001, Lloyd Sullivan, under cover of anonymity at that time, claimed that the oil had been painted by a John Sanders in 1603 when Shakespeare was 39. According to family lore - there's no signature on the portrait, just as there is no signature on either the Chandos or the Cobbe - this Sanders was a distant relative of Sullivan's mother, Kathleen (née Hales-Sanders), as well as a bit player in Shakespeare's acting company in London and an occasional set and portrait painter.

The portrait came to Canada in 1919 from England through the initiative of Sullivan's grandmother, Agnes. Her husband, Aloysius Hales-Sanders, had been willed the painting earlier by his father. But he never actually possessed it, having emigrated in the mid-1890s to Montreal where he died at 54 in March, 1919. Although Hales-Sanders's father, Thomas, had died four years earlier, the British government put a hold on the portrait's transfer to Canada, thinking it might be, in Sullivan's words, "a true-life image of Shakespeare painted by a native son."

However, efforts to prove that failed, and in the fall of 1919, Agnes Hales-Sanders went to England to bring the painting to Canada - where it has remained ever since, eventually coming into the hands of Agnes's grandson, Lloyd Sullivan, in 1972. Sullivan

took possession of the painting upon his mother's death, on the understanding that he would suss out the back story once and for all. *J.A.*

CTVglobemedia © Copyright 2009 CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.
globeandmail.com and The Globe and Mail are divisions of CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc., 444 Front St.
W., Toronto, ON Canada M5V 2S9
Phillip Crawley, Publisher

Source :

[http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/LAC.20090411.ASHAKESPEARE11ART12242/TPStory//
?pageRequested=all](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/LAC.20090411.ASHAKESPEARE11ART12242/TPStory//?pageRequested=all)