From one of our most distinguished Shakespeare scholars, here is a fascinating, lively, anecdotal work of forensic biography that firmly places Shakespeare within the hectic, exhilarating world in which he lived and wrote.

Theater in Shakespeare’s day was a burgeoning “growth industry. Everyone knew everyone else, and they all sought to learn, borrow or steal from one another. As Stanley Wells suggests: To see Shakespeare as one among a great company is only to enhance our sense of what made him unique.”

Wells explores Elizabethan and Jacobean theater, both behind the scenes and in front of the curtain. He examines how the great actors of the time influenced Shakespeare’s work. He writes about the lives and works of the other major writers of Shakespeare’s day and discusses Shakespeare’s relationships—sometimes collaborative—with each of them. And throughout, Wells shares his vast knowledge of the period, re-creating and celebrating the sheer richness and variety of Shakespeare’s social and cultural milieus.
Shakespeare and Co. gives us a new understanding of how the Bard achieved unparalleled singularity as the greatest writer in the language.

My Personal Review:
Stanley Wells is one of the great Shakespeare scholars of this, or any other, generation. His work on the Oxford edition of the Complete Works, the Textual Companion, the Dictionary of Shakespeare and, if I can mention a personal favorite, Shakespeare for All Time, assure his enduring reputation. It was with keen anticipation I picked up this book, then, and I was not disappointed. The book is not groundbreaking, by any means, but is pleasant, erudite, and consistently interesting. It is the best introduction I know to placing Shakespeare in the theatrical currents of his time and tracing his interactions, such as they can be known, with his less famous, though greatly gifted, contemporaries Marlowe, Jonson, Dekker, Middleton, Fletcher, Webster and the rest.

In an age such as ours where otherwise serious people can become preoccupied with crank, dilettantish ideas like the Oxford wrote Shakespeare nonsense so much in circulation, how likely is it those same serious people have taken the time to read Shakespeare’s less well known fellows? They have, perhaps, read Dr. Faustus in an English lit survey class, and know about Marlowe because, after all, HE might, just maybe, be the one who really wrote at least some of Shakespeare’s plays, but certainly they have not read either part of Tamburlaine, or A Trick To Catch The Old One, or The Shoemakers Holiday. Need enough, then, that a thoroughgoing, popular introduction to the lives and masterpieces of some of Shakespeare’s contemporaries deserves a home on our bulging Shakespeare bookshelves.

The first sentence of the Preface says "This book attempts to place Shakespeare in relation to the actors and other writers, mainly playwrights, of his time in an accessible and where possible entertaining manner" (ix). And so it does, with, speaking for myself, at least, emphasis on "entertaining." I found the book enormously likable. If you are familiar with the period and the authors being treated, you will find nothing new, but a non-specialists book surveying a rather broad field does not attempt to present novel interpretations, but rather can be relied on to deliver the state-of-the-art scholarly understanding of these authors and their works in a pleasant style. Wells’s scholarly status guarantees the most dependable understanding of the times and writers, and his gifts as a writer makes reading a joy.

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