

Some comments on the opinion that Gainsborough Old Hall is not connected with the Separatist movement and the congregation led by John Smyth

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Nick Bunker's recent book, *Making Haste from Babylon, The Mayflower Pilgrims and their World, A New History* (London: The Bodley Head, 2010), contains numerous well-written vignettes concerning topics that have been omitted from previous histories of the Pilgrims, such as fur-trading in Moscow (in which the Pilgrims were not involved), the welcome in Rome that greeted Irish Catholic refugees who arrived there after years of rebellious actions against the English monarchs (not involving any of the Pilgrims), and the spice trade with the East Indies (in which the Pilgrims did not participate). Bunker marvels at the failure of previous historians of his subject – the Pilgrims – to include this quite interesting material which serves to remind the reader that the lives of the Pilgrims ran their course in a period that also included many other interesting activities and events in which these particular people were in no way directly involved. Diligent archival research produced the details of this extraneous material – collected in the same sources that previous historians of the subject had also read through in their search for archival documentation directly related to the Pilgrims. But Bunker would like his readers to believe his repeated claims that no one before him ever made a serious effort to do research on the subject. As far as I can tell, disregarding the large number of interesting details about contemporary events and people who were not directly involved in the Pilgrim story, he found three documents about the Pilgrims that have not previously been published in studies of the topic (although two of them were known from summaries published in the nineteenth century). These three documents are indeed worthwhile additions to the material comprehended in the story, but Bunker misinterprets them in believing that they contradict previous information, when, in point of fact, they both confirm and clarify what was already indicated in William Bradford's famous memoir *Of Plymouth Plantation*.

It is, however, not my purpose here to write a full review of Bunker's highly interesting volume. Robert Charles Anderson, in his review in the January, 2010, issue of *The American Genealogist*, comments that "Although Bunker does bring a few previously unknown documents into the light of day, he overshadows them with lengthy, unnecessary digressions, leaving the reader uncertain as to what is new and what is not." David Wallace-Wells observed (in *The New Republic*) that, while Bunker "devotes many florid pages to the natural landscapes of sixteenth-century England and seventeenth-century America, those passages serve ultimately as reminders that the Romantic mode in narrative history is perhaps less a product of Victorian style than of missing archival material." But I have been asked more specifically to comment on Bunker's assertion that there is no reason to suppose that William Hickman of Gainsborough Hall was sympathetic

to the Separatists, and, by extension, no reason to associate Gainsborough Hall with the Separatists led by John Smyth, Richard Clyfton, and John Robinson who are now known as the Pilgrims.

Bunker mentions that Sir William Hickman, who acquired Gainsborough Old Hall in the 1590s, had an ongoing series of social and legal conflicts with someone named John Noble, a local draper. Bunker refers to two law cases in 1610 in which Hickman opposed one or more of these neighbors; he says, further, that “Many cases related to Gainsborough survive.” (One is left to assume that the other cases among these “many” clarify the Hickman disputes.) Bunker states that Noble and two friends (Aston and Williamson) belonged to what Bunker calls “the local Puritan network.” This is stated as part of an argument suggesting that Hickman was not part of such a Puritan group. It does not speak well for Bunker’s scholarship that he does not mention that, if any family supported the Puritans, it must certainly be said that the Hickmans did – starting with William’s mother Rose and going over a period of several decades. “Puritan network” indeed!

Bunker does state that it “was Hickman who reported John Noble for nonconformity” (in 1607, for failing to take communion for a year and for refusing “to remove his hat during Sunday services, a gesture often made by Puritans”). Bunker comments (in a footnote on p. 180), that “Without documentary evidence, historians have often said that Smyth and the Separatists worshipped at Gainsborough Old Hall. A magnificent fifteenth-century brick manor house, it still stands close to the parish church. It belonged to Sir William Hickman, which means that the story is unlikely to be true if it refers to events in 1607, in view of Hickman’s attitude to John Noble. However, Smyth commanded widespread respect in the town, and so he would certainly have been a guest there in earlier years. In any event, the Old Hall retains its exceptional importance as one of the finest late-medieval buildings in England.”

Bunker does not provide the documentary evidence to support his analysis of the dispute between Hickman and the townspeople. He does not even provide a reference for his statement (which might be true) that Hickman was responsible for reporting his commercial and social enemy Noble for nonconformity. He misrepresents Hickman as not belonging to what he calls a Puritan network. And he omits to mention that William Hickman was among six Gainsborough citizens who wrote in support of John Smyth, who had failed to appear before the Archdeaconry Court to answer complaints of non-conformity in March, 1606. This is reported by Stephen Wright in his excellent *Early English Baptists 1603-1649* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006), p. 17. Of course in his disdain for the work of all previous scholars of the subject, Bunker tends to be oblivious to their work. But he was not unaware of this document, because on p. 176 he refers to the 1606 incident: “Local gentlemen rallied to his [John Smyth’s] defense, including Williamson and Sir Gervase Helwys, who signed letters praising him.” We must excuse Bunker for his forgetting to mention the name of Sir William Hickman that evidently appears in the same document supporting Smyth.

Bunker does not dispute Bradford's account of the formation of two Separatist congregations – one at Scrooby and the other at Gainsborough. He does not provide an answer as to where a congregation could meet. Given the information that William Brewster opened Scrooby Manor to the congregation at Scrooby, and given the Hickman family's interest in Puritanism and William Hickman's support for John Smyth, it is a reasonable assumption that Gainsborough Old Hall was the place of safety for meetings of Gainsborough's Separatists.

Bunker, in his evident attempt to overturn as many old assumptions as possible, denies that William Brewster succeeded his father as Bailiff of Scrooby Manor. In a footnote on p. 131 he writes: "Historians have often said that as well as becoming postmaster, William Brewster the Pilgrim succeeded his father as bailiff at Scrooby Manor. Actually, no documentary evidence for this has been found. In view of his father's quarrel with the archbishop's widow it seems unlikely." That's as good an example of Bunker's scholarly methods as any – conjecture based on bias, overlooking what is known. It is documented that William Brewster, Jr., succeeded his father as postmaster; it is known that the job of postmaster meant maintaining a stable of horses for exchange on the post road from London to Edinburgh, and that the place where this could be done was Scrooby Manor. It is also documented that both the Brewsters and the family of Richard Jackson lived in the manor house until ca. 1607 (deed in the collections of Pilgrim Hall Museum). William Brewster and his family could not have continued to live in Scrooby Manor unless he had the position of bailiff of the manor, since the resident of the manor had to be the bailiff to administer the interests of the archbishop.

Bunker's biased desire to reject previous opinion is perhaps clearest in his absurd statement on p. 102, that Scrooby "was not the center of the movement" [evidently meaning, the Separatist movement in the region. He wants to make Thomas Helwys the leader instead of William Brewster or the clergymen, apparently because Bunker has discovered a couple of interesting documents about Helwys. But those do not in any way justify rejecting William Bradford's history of the movement. To explain that, however, would require going beyond the topic of these comments.