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# Gurney's "Brave Community: The Digger Movement in the English Revolution" and Smith's "Martha Simmon[d]s 1624-1665: Her Life and Quaker Writings and 'The Fall' of James Nayler" - Book Reviews

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## BOOK REVIEWS

GURNEY, J., *Brave Community: The Digger Movement in the English Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. xiii + 236. ISBN 978-0-7190-6102-8, Hardback, £55.

SMITH, Bernadette, *Martha Simmon[d]s 1624–1665: Her Life and Quaker Writings and 'The Fall' of James Nayler* (York: Sessions Book Trust, 2009), pp. vi + 82. ISBN 978-1-85072-389-9, Paperback, £7.50.

Each of these books revisits and illuminates a familiar episode from the tempestuous years of the Interregnum. John Gurney scrutinizes the Diggers' challenge to land ownership (1649–50) through his close study of the local history of Surrey and of the parish of Cobham in particular. Bernadette Smith touches on James Nayler's 'blasphemous' entry into Bristol in 1656, but radically shifts the usual focus by seeing it from the perspective of one of the women usually treated as a bit-part player in Nayler's drama. We now know, of course, that the emergence of Diggers and Quakers, occurring in the uncertain years between the execution of Charles I in January 1649 and the death of Cromwell in September 1658, would prove very different in terms of their longevity and legacy. To many of their contemporaries, however, the two movements seemed equally threatening in challenging a social order already shaken by the Civil Wars.

Gurney's book is a thoroughly scholarly and meticulously researched piece of social microhistory. Using close archival work at parish level, it roots the discussion of the Diggers in their immediate local environment. In this account, Winstanley and his associates are not simply outsiders whose brief experiment was ended by angry locals. Rather, Gurney stresses the evidence for the Diggers' success in attracting local sympathy and local members to the community on St George's Hill. He carefully demonstrates the contrast between the parish of Cobham's more active support and the hostility shown by inhabitants of Walton-on-Thames by investigating the individuals involved: both those who joined Winstanley and those who bitterly opposed him. The first two chapters look at pre-existing social conditions in Cobham, such as the incidence of pre-Digger protests over forest law and tenancy in the 1640s, and at the ideological and material impact of the Civil War on the area. Chapters on Winstanley and his early writings follow, leading up to the final chapters on the Diggers on St George's Hill, on their activities in Surrey and elsewhere, and

on their relationships with the local community. A brief 'Aftermath' covers Winstanley's movements and writings after the break-up of his short-lived community.

Given the volume's close focus on Cobham, Walton and local families and landowners it is surprising that no maps are included to help the reader visualize what is being described. Few readers will be able to match the author's knowledge of Surrey, and his densely detailed description of events, settlements and households would be rendered more immediately intelligible and appealing by a few visual aids. At the very least, the reader might reasonably expect to be able to refer to maps of the county of Surrey, of Cobham itself, and of the region north of London visited by Winstanley after the break-up of the community; a few illustrations of this kind would have enhanced an otherwise handsomely produced volume.

Historians have long noted the connections between Diggers and Quakers and it is no surprise, therefore, that Gurney gives examples of similarities between the two: in, for example, their uses of language and their anti-tithe attitudes. He also notes several Diggers who later became Quakers, such as those from Wellingborough (previously documented by Richard Vann), as well as individuals from Cobham. Winstanley's burial in 1676 by the Quakers has proved baffling to some historians, who have tended to explain it as a matter influenced by his second wife. Gurney, however, asserts Winstanley's more active role among Quakers in later life and points to 'clear evidence that Winstanley attended the Savoy meeting in the months before his death'. He also alerts us to Winstanley's familiarity with radical booksellers, writers and thinkers. One intriguing example relates to the aftermath of St George's Hill, when in 1650 the Diggers offered to help other people with the harvest. Winstanley and some of his companions went to Pirton in Hertfordshire to work for Lady Eleanor Douglas/Davies, the well-known prophet of Charles I's downfall. Gurney recounts an argument over the threshing accounts between Winstanley and Lady Eleanor, the latter 'in the guise of Melchizedek King of Salem'; surely an encounter to be relished!

Mention of Lady Eleanor is a useful reminder that the emergence of female activists such as the Quaker Martha Simmons, the subject of the second book reviewed here, was not an entirely new phenomenon in the 1650s. For in the 1630s and 1640s Lady Eleanor had written, published and distributed her prophecies as well as enacted public demonstrations attacking the Laudian church, such as her quasi-ceremonial interventions in Lichfield cathedral in 1635, where on various occasions and with her female companions she occupied the bishop's throne and poured tar over the altar. Though her religious position was idiosyncratic and she was never part of a wider group, some elements of her story foreshadow the treatment of those Quaker women, like Martha Simmons, who prophesied, published their writing and enacted the 'street theatre' of signs. Lady Eleanor attracted such heavy punishment (fines and repeated imprisonment both in the Tower and in Bedlam) that it is clear that the authorities took her seriously as a threat to public order. Yet it is only recently that historians have tried to read and understand her writings, previously dismissed as incoherent—thanks largely to Esther S. Cope's research and her 1995 edition of a selection of Lady Eleanor's texts. Martha Simmons, Bernadette Smith's

subject, was much less prolific as an author but no less vilified for her public actions, and in particular for her involvement in staging the 'Nayler incident' of 1656.

As the supervisor of the Master's thesis from which Bernadette Smith's book grows, I should declare my interest in both topic and author. At fewer than one hundred pages, this book will seem physically slight in comparison with Gurney's extensive work on the Diggers, but it is in my view particularly important for two reasons. First, it allows the modern reader actually to read *what Simmons herself wrote*, both before and after her involvement in Nayler's 'blasphemous' entry into Bristol. Her three pamphlets, written between 1655 and 1657/58 and hitherto ignored by historians, are densely written but short enough to be presented here in full as Appendices. Moreover, Smith's introductory chapters enable us to approach them as informed readers, placing them within the contexts both of Simmons's biography and of her development as a Seeker and Quaker. Secondly, the book takes as its central focus the attempt to understand Simmons's own thinking by using as its primary evidence her writing—her language, imagery, use of Biblical allusion—and her enactment of 'signs'. Her spoken words as recorded at her appearance before Bristol magistrates are also transcribed here. This emphasis on Simmons's own words makes a refreshing change from simply seeing her as a malign influence in the better-known narrative of James Nayler's downfall and trial.

Martha Simmons was the sister of Giles Calvert, the most prominent radical publisher of the age (and, incidentally, the publisher of much of Winstanley's work as well as that of most early Quakers) and the wife of Thomas Simmons, who later took over from Calvert as principal publisher of Quaker books and pamphlets. Martha therefore had daily access to the latest in radical religious writing and was an insider in the two bookshops at the Black Spread Eagle (run by the Calverts) and the Bull and Mouth (the Simmonses) which acted as the most important clearing houses, *postes restantes* and meeting places for the wider radical community including itinerant Quakers. Seeing this woman through the prism of her own words is indeed illuminating, enabling Bernadette Smith to identify the principal motifs of Martha Simmons's writings—even *before* accompanying Nayler into Bristol—as 'the Entry into Jerusalem and the Crucifixion with their associated narratives and the Coming of the Bridegroom'. Here, then, the usual viewpoint is reversed, and we see Simmons as an earnest Seeker, then a Quaker, embarking on her own journey both actual and spiritual: travelling out of London to interrupt ministers and enact 'signs' in Colchester, and simultaneously developing her own apocalyptic vision. This is the narrative, already well under way, into which Nayler steps, fulfilling Simmons's dramatic vision.

The central thesis of the book, its careful reading of Simmons's texts and the presentation of the texts themselves all make this book of particular significance to anyone interested in the beginnings of Quakerism, in women's writing, in James Nayler or in the broader history of the Interregnum. A disappointment is that the author's point seems to have been completely, and even wilfully, undercut by the publisher. First, the cover offers a rather unsympathetic modern image of Nayler entering Bristol (from an etching by Robert Spence) in which Nayler appears calmly

aloof while the capering woman in front of his horse is (hysterically?) transported by emotion. Even worse is the title. Smith's original thesis title, *'By Word, by Writing and by Signs': The Testimony of Martha Simmons, Quaker*, is here replaced by a title in which the clumsy formulation of her surname (using '[d]' to signal inconsistency in its spelling) is unnecessarily distracting, and the addition of...and *'The Fall' of James Nayler* undercuts her focus on the woman herself.

That the publisher is not entirely in sympathy with the politics of the work is perhaps signalled by the addition of an Epilogue (presumably supplied by Sessions rather than Smith) which seems almost an apologia for Smith's work. The Epilogue's writer attempts to restore the usual viewpoint of a 'foolish' Nayler, with his 'adulatory' followers, and asserts the necessity for Fox and Fell to take a grip. Another inexplicable addition is Appendix 5, 'The First Two Publishers of Quaker Books: Giles Calvert and Thomas Simmons'. This reproduces extracts from and references to a few works now so very old as to be almost entirely superseded (not least by the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*): an article by Mortimer from 1948 (with two footnotes both numbered '1'); Altha Terry's thesis of 1937; and Plomer's *Dictionary... 1641 to 1667* (published in 1907), from which an extract on Livewell Chapman is also added with no explanation. To present these antique snippets (and indeed the Epilogue) unsigned, and thus as if they are by Smith herself, is unfair to her own scholarly competence and unhelpful to the understandably puzzled reader. Taken together, Appendix 5 and the Epilogue look like an attempt to close off the unsettling possibilities opened up by Smith's work, not least by reasserting the old paradigm of foolish man led astray by irrational woman. A few errors in copyediting and proofing seem minor by comparison: it is unfortunate, for example, that the Editorial Notes do not describe accurately the conventions adopted here (the promised line numbers having apparently been removed and the left-hand justification changed). And Edward Thomas's excellent recent work on Giles Calvert, referred to in the notes, is strangely absent from the Bibliography. We should be grateful to Sessions of York, however, for making Martha Simmons's words available after three and a half centuries of obscurity in so accessible and affordable a form, and to Bernadette Smith for her careful reconstruction of Martha's dramatic spiritual journey.

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