Biddulph’s Anxiety of Authorship

William Biddulph was an English clergyman who arrived in the Levant at the same time as Dallam, but stayed on for eight more years. During this time he served as Protestant chaplain in Aleppo, travelled overland to Jerusalem and meddled in the diplomatic life of Istanbul. Published in 1609, Biddulph’s *Travels* was reissued in 1612, but his name appears on neither title-page. Selections were reprinted by Samuel Purchas, so, unlike Dallam, Biddulph was by no means entirely shy of publishing. None the less Biddulph proves an illusive fellow. The elaborate preface to *The Travels* obscures matters. Of Biddulph’s life before and after his appearance in the East I have found little evidence. He cannot have been a member of the ‘ancient family’ of Biddulphs ‘originally of Staffordshire [and] denominated from Biddulph, a village in the north parts of the county’ since there are no Williams in the family of suitable age. He may have been the ‘William Biddle’ listed as a member of Brasenose College, Oxford, who received his MA in July 1590, but there is no proof.

Throughout, I have quoted from the first edition: ‘The Travels of *certaine Englishmen into* Africa, Asia, Troy, Bythnia, Thracia, *and to the Blacke Sea.* And into Syria, Cilicia, Pisidia, Mesopotamia, Damascus, Canaan, Galile, Samaria, Judea, Palestina, Jerusalem, Jericho and to the Red Sea, and to sundry other places. Begunne in the yeere of Jubile 1600 and by some of them finished this yeere 1608. The others not yet returned. Very profitable for the helpe of Travellers, and no lesse delightfull to all persons who take pleasure to heare of the Manners, Government, Religion, and Customes of Forraine and Heathen Countries. London. Printed by Th. Haveland, for W. Sepley, and are to been sold at his shop in Paules Church yard, at the signe of the Parrot. 1609.’ Biddulph’s companions were Edward Abbott, John Elkin, Jasper Tyon and Jeffrey Kirbie.

Biddulph was the first English chaplain to publish an account of life in the Ottoman Empire. He showed considerable interest in meeting the Christian communities there, visiting biblical sites and judging peoples and places by...
their biblical past. Insisting that he was not himself a pilgrim, Biddulph remained highly conscious that, by representing the Church of England, his duty was to remain steadfast, unchanged by his experience. He often notes how his clerical appearance earned him particular respect. ‘At Jerusalem,’ he comments, ‘many strangers of sundry Nations understanding I was an English Preacher, came and kissed my hand, and called me the English Patriarch.’ Later he noted, ‘if a man have a faire long beard, they reverence him’ (pp. 62, 99). Of his own beard, more later.

Biddulph clearly intended to publish, yet took considerable pains to disclaim any personal responsibility for the book, and for good reason. In part, he confronted the challenge facing all clergymen; since travel writers were presumed guilty of exaggeration, mendacity and immorality, such work ranked among the lowest and least respectable kinds of writing. More to the point, however, *The Travels* contains thinly veiled accusations aimed at living Englishmen, material that would cause offence and must have been included from personal motives. To avoid accusations of frivolous impiety on the one hand, and of scandalmongering on the other, Biddulph claimed that he had objected to publication while also outlining a rationale for going public that was intellectually respectable, seemingly pious and a means of pursuing personal grudges.

‘Theophilus Lavender’ defends travel writing

Biddulph’s solution was to adopt a stratagem that Pope, Swift and the Scriblerians would have applauded. By assuming an editorial persona named ‘Theophilus Lavender’, he explained how the book was published against his wishes. Consisting of four letters, as if the familiar epistolary form confirmed that publication was never intended, *The Travels* recounts Biddulph’s journeys and describes many of the sites he visited on trips into biblical lands. Facing the title-page, in large bold print and framed within an ornate border, the very first words of the book command ‘Good Reader read the Preface, or else reade nothing’. Dutiful readers here learn that Lavender compiled these composite epistles by editing several letters sent from abroad by both William Biddulph and his brother, Peter. Since any contribution Peter might have made is entirely erased by the editing – all four are signed by William himself – this pretence of dual authorship can be nothing more than a further strategy for obscuring authorial responsibility.

Lavender reports that William objected to the publication of the letters because he was ‘not ignorant of the incredulitie of others in such cases’ and did not wish to be considered a mendacious travel writer (sig. A). Although previous scholars have accepted this claim at face value, there is ample reason for considering it no more than a fiction signalled by the fanciful name, ‘Friend of God’ Lavender.