An Errand into the Levant: The Life, Travels, and Prejudices of the Reverend William Biddulph (fl. 1600-1612)

Introduction

At the turn of the 17th century, as Jacobean England began to look outward with a mixture of commercial ambition and religious apprehension, the Reverend William Biddulph emerged as a pivotal, if enigmatic, figure. As one of the first English clergymen to document his experiences in the Ottoman Empire, his travelogue provided a generation of readers with a compelling, though heavily filtered, view of the Levant.[1] Any scholarly examination of Biddulph must first navigate a significant historical challenge: the profusion of individuals bearing his name across centuries of English records, a genealogical thicket that has obscured the man himself.[2] This report will definitively identify the Levant Company chaplain and author before situating him within his historical context. His seminal work,
The Travels of Certaine Englishmen, will be analyzed not merely as a description of the East, but as a complex cultural artifact. The text serves as a transparent record of the religious anxieties, political currents, and nascent national identity of early modern England.[9] It is precisely through its manifest biases and polemical agenda that Biddulph's narrative offers its greatest value to the modern scholar, providing an unfiltered window into the mindset of an English Protestant confronting the vast and challenging world beyond Christendom.

I. A Man of His Time: Locating the Reverend William Biddulph

Constructing a definitive biography of the Reverend William Biddulph requires a methodical untangling of fragmented and often contradictory genealogical sources. The historical record is replete with men of his name, making the first task of any serious inquiry one of careful disambiguation.

1.1. The Biddulph Name: A Genealogical Tangle

The name "William Biddulph" appears frequently in English records from the 17th to the 19th centuries, primarily associated with the counties of Staffordshire and Warwickshire. These include, but are not limited to, a William Biddulph born in 1805 in Leicestershire [2]; a William Biddulph born in Staffordshire in 1845 [3]; a William Biddulph, son of Sir Theophilus Biddulph, who matriculated at University College, Oxford, in 1786 [7]; and a Captain William Biddulph of the Bengal Army, born in 1805.[8] These individuals, separated by centuries from the subject of this report, illustrate the scope of potential confusion and underscore the necessity of isolating the correct historical figure before proceeding with any analysis.

1.2. The Elmhurst Connection: Identifying the Chaplain

The key to identifying the chaplain lies in genealogical records compiled from heraldic visitations. A pedigree of the Biddulph family of Elmhurst, Staffordshire, lists Simon Biddulph (d. 1632), who married Joyce Floyer.[13] Among their six sons is one explicitly identified as "William, Chaplain to the English Factory at Aleppo, and was noted in Jerusalem in 1611".[13] This entry provides the crucial link, firmly anchoring the traveler and author within a specific branch of the Staffordshire gentry and distinguishing him from all other namesakes. This connection is further contextualized by his brother, Michael Biddulph of Elmhurst (d. 1657), who matriculated at Trinity College, Oxford in 1598 and later entered the Middle Temple, indicating the family's social standing and educational ambitions.[14]

1.3. The Unrecorded Life: Education, Birth, and Death

Despite the certainty of his familial connection, significant gaps in Biddulph's personal history remain. His precise birth and death dates are unknown; his period of activity is generally cited by scholars as flourishing between 1600 and 1612.[1] More telling is the absence of a definitive university record. An extensive search of Oxford's matriculation registers, the *Alumni Oxonienses*, reveals no entry that corresponds to the chaplain for the period of 1500-1714.[6] While most Levant Company chaplains were university men, often from Oxford or Cambridge, this lack of a formal record for Biddulph suggests he may have attended without taking a degree, or that his records have been lost.[19]

This biographical obscurity is itself historically significant. For a man of the "middling sort" gentry, connected but not a member of the elite, a detailed life record was not guaranteed. His authority and identity, therefore, were not derived from a distinguished academic or ecclesiastical career in England. Instead, they were forged abroad, created by the very experiences in the Levant that he documented. He left England a relatively unknown figure and returned, through the medium of his published letters, as an eyewitness and an authority on the East. This transforms his book from a simple travelogue into a deliberate act of

self-fashioning, a bid for the social and intellectual standing that his domestic record could not provide.

Table 1: Disambiguation of Individuals Named William Biddulph

Name	Key Dates	Familial Connection	Key Biographical Details	Relevance to Report
William Biddulph (The Chaplain)	fl. 1600-1612	Son of Simon Biddulph of Elmhurst, Staffordshire	Chaplain to the Levant Company in Aleppo (1600-1608); author of *The Travels of Certaine Englishmen*.	**Primary Subject**
William Biddulph	b. 1609, d. 1615	Son of Michael Biddulph and Elizabeth Skeffington	A child who died at age 5 or 6.	None; contemporary but incorrect individual.
William Biddulph	d. 1680	Son of Michael Biddulph and Elizabeth Skeffington	Died unmarried; noted in Hearth Tax returns for Warwickshire.	None; contemporary but incorrect individual.
William Biddulph	matric. 1786	Son of Sir Theophilus Biddulph, Baronet, of Birbury, Warwickshire	Matriculated at University College, Oxford, aged 18; died unmarried.	None; lived in the 18th century.
Capt. William Biddulph	b. 1805, d. 1852	Son of Rev. John Biddulph and Sophia Wheler	Captain in the Bengal Army.	None; lived in the 19th century.
William Burnet Biddulph	b. 1806, d. 1870	Son of Simon Biddulph, 1820 Settler	Emigrated to South Africa in 1819 as an 1820 Settler.	None; lived in the 19th century.

Sources for Table 1: [1]

II. The English Factory: Aleppo in the Age of the Levant Company

To understand William Biddulph's narrative, one must first reconstruct the world he inhabited

from 1600 to 1608: the English "factory" in Aleppo. This expatriate community was a unique microcosm, a fusion of commercial enterprise, diplomatic maneuvering, and intense cultural self-preservation situated at a crossroads of global trade.

2.1. Commerce and Diplomacy: The Founding of the Levant Company

The formal establishment of Anglo-Ottoman relations was a product of Elizabethan realpolitik. Seeking new markets for English cloth and a strategic ally against Catholic Spain, Queen Elizabeth I corresponded with Sultan Murad III, leading to a grant of safe conduct for English merchants in 1580.[30] This culminated in the chartering of the Turkey Company in 1581, which was later reformed into the Levant Company in 1592.[31] The relationship was one of mutual convenience, grounded in a shared enmity towards the Habsburgs.[31] For England, it provided direct and cheaper access to luxury goods like spices, silks, and carpets, bypassing Venetian and Antwerpan intermediaries.[31] For the Ottomans, the English provided valuable war materials, such as tin, lead, and cloth for Janissary uniforms—exports controversially prohibited by the papacy.[31]

2.2. Aleppo: The Company's Jewel

Throughout the 17th century, Aleppo served as the Levant Company's main headquarters and most critical trading post.[33] Its strategic position on the overland caravan routes connecting Persia and India to the Mediterranean made it the nexus for the lucrative silk trade, attracting merchants from across Europe.[27] The English community, numbering around 40 merchants known as "factors," lived and conducted their business within the confines of a large caravanserai, the Khān al-Jumruk.[27] This arrangement fostered an insular and exclusively male society, composed largely of young, unmarried men serving apprenticeships or acting as agents for London-based trading houses.[26]

2.3. The Chaplain's Role: Tending an Expatriate Flock

The Levant Company appointed chaplains to its primary factories to provide for the spiritual welfare of its employees.[1] William Biddulph held this post in Aleppo from 1600 to 1608.[39] The chaplain's duties were twofold. Primarily, he was to maintain Anglican religious discipline, conducting daily services according to the Book of Common Prayer and ministering to his expatriate congregation.[26] A crucial secondary function, however, was to act as a cultural and moral bulwark. The Company directors in London were deeply concerned about the dangers of "assimilation," particularly the potential for their employees to be influenced by or convert to Roman Catholicism, which was viewed as a more immediate and insidious threat than

Islam.[34]
Beyond these pastoral duties, the chaplains often evolved into key figures of intellectual exchange. As educated men, typically from Oxford or Cambridge, they were well-positioned to study the languages, cultures, and antiquities of the region.[19] Biddulph's successor, Edward Pococke, for example, used his time in Aleppo to become a pioneering scholar of Arabic, acquiring manuscripts that would form the basis of Oriental studies at Oxford.[27]
This context reveals a profound contradiction at the heart of the English enterprise in Aleppo. The factory's existence was predicated on cross-cultural engagement—commercial dealings with Ottoman subjects and the essential use of local Armenian and Jewish brokers for translation and negotiation.[26] Yet, the entire social structure of the factory was designed to prevent cultural integration and preserve a distinct English Protestant identity.[26] The chaplain was the living embodiment of this paradox: his presence was necessitated by the Company's engagement with the Ottoman world, but his primary function was to ensure that the English merchants did not become
of that world. This institutional imperative fundamentally shaped Biddulph's perspective, compelling him to view his surroundings through a lens of constant comparison and judgment, a lens designed to reinforce for his readers the inherent superiority of life in Protestant England.[1]

III. An Account of the East: Analyzing *The Travels of Certaine Englishmen*

William Biddulph's travelogue is a foundational text in the literature of Anglo-Ottoman encounters. Its structure, content, and stated purpose reveal it to be a carefully crafted work intended to instruct and persuade a domestic English audience.

3.1. Publication and Form

The work was first published in London in 1609 with the lengthy title *The trauels of certaine Englishmen into Africa, Asia, Troy, Bythinia, Thracia, and to the Blacke Sea*....[37] A second edition appeared in 1612, retitled
The Travels of Foure English Men and a Preacher....[1]
The book is not a personal diary but an epistolary narrative. Its contents were compiled and edited by another clergyman, Theophilus Lavender, who explains in his preface that he assembled the text from a series of twenty letters written by Biddulph from the Levant, primarily to his brother Bezaliel.[45] This editorial framing is of paramount importance. Lavender is not a passive transcriber; he is a literary gatekeeper who has shaped Biddulph's private correspondence into a public-facing narrative with a clear didactic agenda. The final text is

therefore a curated performance of Biddulph's experience, consciously constructed for the English book market. This process distances the reader from Biddulph's raw observations and presents instead a polished piece of propaganda, making the book as much a document of English print culture as it is a report on the Ottoman Empire.

3.2. The Journey and Key Observations

The narrative is centered on an overland journey that Biddulph and four English companions undertook in the "yeere of iubile 1600" from their base in Aleppo to Jerusalem and other parts of the Holy Land.[1] The full title promises an expansive geography, reflecting the broad scope of English interest in the region.[44]

Within this framework, Biddulph provides several notable observations. He includes one of the earliest and most detailed descriptions of coffee consumption to appear in English, noting the Turks' love for the hot, black beverage.[38] He also comments on various aspects of local life, from marriage customs to the diverse peoples of the region.[56] His description of the Arab Bedouins, for instance, is uniformly negative, characterizing them as a "base, beggerly, and rogish people" who live by theft, a practice he claims was sanctioned by the Prophet Muhammad.[57]

Throughout the text, Biddulph's purpose is explicitly didactic. He states that he writes so that his English readers might compare their own lives with those of the Turks and, by extension, better appreciate the blessings of their own nation and reformed religion.[1] The book's title page proclaims its utility for travelers and its delight for those who wish to learn of the "manners, gouernement, religion, and customes of forraine and heathen countries".[44]

IV. Through a Glass, Darkly: Biddulph's Worldview and Representation of the "Other"

Biddulph's travelogue is defined by the perspective of its author: an English Protestant clergyman whose professional duty was to uphold religious and cultural orthodoxy. This worldview acts as a powerful and distorting lens, filtering every observation through a pre-existing framework of theological polemic and national prejudice.

4.1. Islam and the "Turk": A Polemical View

Modern scholarly analysis characterizes Biddulph's portrayal of Islam as a work of "bigoted disinformation".[9] His account is not the product of genuine inquiry or personal interaction with Muslims. Instead, it is "directly citational," recycling a corpus of anti-Islamic myths and

polemics that had circulated in Europe for centuries.[9] A Turkish academic analysis of his work confirms that Biddulph repeats numerous fabrications, including the claims that the Prophet Muhammad was a rebellious Roman soldier who plagiarized the Quran from Jewish and Christian sources, and that his divine revelations were merely epileptic fits.[43] He dismisses the Ottomans as a "savage and immoral nation" and caricatures Islamic mystical traditions, or Sufism, by asserting that Muslims revere "stupid, foolish men and lunatics" as saints.[43] This approach demonstrates no desire to understand Islam on its own terms; rather, it seeks to ridicule and refute it for a Protestant audience.[62]

4.2. The Schism of Christendom: Anti-Catholicism in the Holy Land

While his condemnation of Islam is absolute, Biddulph reserves his most personal and vehement criticism for Roman Catholics.[10] The Holy Land, for Biddulph, becomes less a site of engagement with Islam and more a new front in the European Wars of Religion. His detailed account of his stay with the Franciscan friars in Jerusalem serves as the centerpiece for his anti-Catholic rhetoric.[63] He accuses the friars of weaponizing their hospitality, alleging they only show kindness to "seduce" Protestants from their faith and "win them to the Church of Rome".[63] He portrays them as avaricious and motivated by greed, complaining that they would not help a traveler unless his "purses could answer his expectation".[63]
This hierarchical application of prejudice is revealing. Biddulph's critique of Islam is abstract and literary, drawn from existing polemics. His critique of Catholicism is immediate and personal, based on direct interaction and framed as a defense against a tangible threat to the souls of his countrymen. This demonstrates that the primary identity his text seeks to defend is not a generalized "Christian" one, but a specific, national, and sectarian one: that of an English Protestant. In his mental map, the Catholic "heretic" next door was a more dangerous and proximate enemy than the Muslim "infidel" across the sea.

4.3. Peoples of the Levant: Observation and Fabrication

Biddulph's descriptions of the other inhabitants of the Levant are similarly shaped by his rigid worldview. His text includes observations of the Jewish and various Eastern Christian communities of the Ottoman Empire, but these are invariably viewed through the binary of Protestant truth versus the "idolatry" and "superstition" he ascribed to all other faiths.[1]
His account of the Kurds provides the clearest example of his intellectual method, in which the authority of the Bible supersedes that of empirical observation. Biddulph was physically present in Aleppo from 1600 to 1608, a period which included a major political upheaval involving the local Kurdish Janbulad clan that culminated in a violent, months-long siege of the city in 1604.[65] This was a significant event that he, as a resident, must have witnessed. Yet, his published letters contain no mention of it.[65] Instead, when he does discuss the Kurds, he

offers a bizarre and entirely fabricated genealogy, claiming they were descendants of the biblical Ammonites and that their leader, Janbulad Beg, was descended from the biblical villain Sanballat.[65] This act of replacing observable political reality with a contrived biblical narrative is a profound intellectual choice. It reveals a mindset for which the "truth" of scripture was more real, and more important to convey to his readers, than the political "facts" on the ground. This forces a re-evaluation of early modern travelogues, suggesting they should be read less as eyewitness reports and more as carefully constructed ideological texts.

V. The Modern Gaze: William Biddulph in Contemporary Scholarship

Contemporary scholarship has largely re-evaluated William Biddulph's work, shifting the focus from its ethnographic content to its cultural significance. His travelogue is now read less as a flawed source on the Ottoman Empire and more as a primary document revealing the anxieties and identity formation of early modern England.

5.1. Biddulph and the Orientalism Debate

Scholars such as Gerald MacLean situate Biddulph's work within the broader "Orientalist project of making the East knowable".[10] However, they also argue that his text complicates a simplistic application of Edward Said's theory of Orientalism. Biddulph's motivations were not those of a secular agent of a colonial empire; they were overwhelmingly religious and rooted in the internal conflicts of Christendom.[10] His narrative demonstrates that English attitudes toward the Ottomans at this early stage were not uniformly hostile but were variable and often shaped more by domestic English concerns—particularly the rivalry with Catholicism—than by the cross-cultural encounter itself.[10]

5.2. A Biography of a Book: Personal Grudges and Public Persona

Modern analysis, particularly MacLean's, treats *The Travels* not as a biography of a man but as a "biography of a book".[10] This approach argues that the text is deeply informed by Biddulph's "personal grudges and 'thinly veiled accusations aimed at living Englishmen'".[10] From this perspective, Biddulph's claim to be "setting the record straight" is a rhetorical strategy. It allows him to participate in the gossip and professional rivalries of the small English expatriate community, with his published accusations having real-world consequences for the careers of his contemporaries.[10]

5.3. The Traveler as Polemicist

The academic consensus holds that Biddulph's perspective was "resolutely that of an English Protestant clergyman with little or no interest in the social, cultural, or political life of those around him" except where it could be utilized for his polemical arguments.[10] His purpose was not ethnographic but didactic. He used his observations of the foreign "Other" as a series of object lessons for his English audience, intended to spur social, marital, and religious reform by demonstrating that "life in England was better".[10] He exemplifies the "sedentary traveler"—one who carries his cultural baggage so completely that it overwrites his actual experiences, ensuring he finds only what he set out to look for.[59] This critical reframing has shifted the value of Biddulph's work. The "Orient" he describes is now understood to be a symbolic landscape, a stage upon which English dramas of faith, identity, and rivalry were performed for an English audience. The ultimate subject of
The Travels of Certaine Englishmen is not the Levant, but England itself.

Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of a Jacobean Chaplain

The Reverend William Biddulph's historical importance lies not in the fidelity of his observations, but in the candidness with which they reveal a particular and formative early modern worldview. He was a man of his time and station: a Protestant clergyman whose professional mandate was to police the cultural and religious boundaries of his expatriate flock, a mission that came to define his literary project. His travelogue stands as a powerful case study in how preconceived notions, theological imperatives, and national self-interest can fundamentally shape the act of seeing and reporting.
Biddulph's work remains essential for scholars of travel literature and Anglo-Ottoman relations precisely because it is more than a simple account of a journey. It is a complex, layered document that records the collision of worlds. It chronicles the forging of a distinctly English Protestant identity against the backdrop of the "infidel" Turk, the "heretical" Catholic, and the "heathen" lands of the Levant, making it an invaluable mirror of the nation it sought to instruct.

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