The Medievalism of the English Benedictine Congregation

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Introduction

I feel I must begin this paper with an explanation of what I mean by 'medievalism', since it is a word that is used in many different ways. The earliest use of this word with which I am familiar is in the book Medievalism by the English Jesuit George Tyrrell, written at the height of the Modernist controversy in 1907. Tyrrell used 'medievalism' as a derisive term for everything that he disliked most about the Catholic Church: ultramontanism, papal infallibility, neoscholasticism, and dogma. Now I realise that this is an example with which most of you will probably not be familiar, but it illustrates a negative judgment about what characterises the Middle Ages. The medievalism of the English Benedictine Congregation, by way of contrast, represents an entirely positive judgment about the medieval past. (I must add that the English monks I'm speaking of did not themselves use the term 'medievalism'.)

The English Benedictine Congregation, although tracing its roots back to a decree of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, was reconstituted, after the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, i.e. after a gap of about seventy-five years. This paper, then, seeks to trace some of the various ways by which English monks of the early seventeenth century tried to reclaim some of the medieval heritage of English Benedictine monasticism. Three of the ways that they did this was (1) by asserting direct continuity between themselves and their medieval predecessors through the aggregation of Sigebert Buckley, (2) by laying claim to the medieval monasteries of England should the Catholic Church be re-established, and (3) by a new Benedictine mission modelled on that of St Augustine of Canterbury.
The Motives for Medievalism

Before looking at these three claims in more detail, it is worth considering why they were made in the first place. I'd like to suggest that it reflects the rather different status and context of the English Benedictines in the seventeenth century compared with their medieval counterparts. Medieval English Benedictines possessed some of the largest and wealthiest monasteries in the land, with real ecclesiastical and political influence. They numbered in the thousands and their houses numbered in the hundreds. By the seventeenth century, there were less than a hundred English monks scattered across the European Continent, exiled from their homeland and practicing their religion in the safety of Catholic countries. Beginning in the late sixteenth century, some Englishmen had entered Italian and Spanish monasteries. But with the establishment of the English Benedictine mission in 1602, they began to form their own monasteries in closer proximity to England. Thus, they established monasteries at Douai (1605) in Flanders, Dieulouard (1608) in Lorraine, St Malo (1611), Paris (1615), and Lamspringe (1643) in Germany.

The English Benedictine mission was modelled on the lines of the English Jesuits who first arrived in England in 1580. Since the Jesuits controlled most of the English seminaries abroad, and many of the first Benedictines were seminary drop-outs, there naturally grew up strong antagonisms between the Jesuits and Benedictines that lasted from the 1580s right through to the nineteenth century. Part of the appeal of the Benedictines to these seminary drop-outs was the fact that they represented an alternative kind of religious life, one that had been entirely naturalised in medieval England. The Jesuits, founded in 1534, in contrast, represented a recent and much less English religious tradition. It is important not to underestimate the importance of national feeling in this period. Part of the animosity of the English to the Catholic Church, ever since Henry VIII's break with Rome, was to something perceived as foreign. All English Catholics were suspected as traitors, and the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605 confirmed the nation's worst fears.

What I am suggesting, therefore, is that the appropriation of the medieval Benedictine past
represented an assertion of English loyalty in the face of Protestant fears about both foreign allegiances and Jesuit conspiracy, as well as of English identity in the face of foreign exile. Moreover, in view of the relatively vulnerable and marginalised situation of English monks on the Continent in the seventeenth century, it represented a desire to be connected to something older, grander, and more politically significant. Furthermore, the English monks were re-establishing themselves as a Benedictine congregation at the same time as French monks were establishing their own Congregations of St Vanne and St Maur. By laying claim to the medieval past, the English monks could assert the superiority of their own congregation, even though much smaller, less numerous, and materially dependent on the French.

The Claim to Continuity

In order to understand the seventeenth century claim to continuity with the medieval past on the part of the English Benedictines it is necessary to backtrack to 1556. In that year a monastic community was re-established at Westminster Abbey for the first time since 1540. It was the first Benedictine monastery to be founded since the Dissolution and the only one to be founded during the reign of Catholic Queen Mary. Many, if not most, of the monks who made up this community had previously been monks before the Dissolution, and so there was a significant measure of continuity within this community. But this community also attracted young novices, one of whom was Sigebert Buckley. Shortly after Queen Elizabeth dissolved this monastic foundation in July 1559, a number of the monks were put in prison for refusing to take the Oath of Supremacy, acknowledging the Queen's authority in ecclesiastical affairs. Sigebert Buckley was one of these, and he spent the entirety of Elizabeth's reign in prison. By the time King James succeeded Elizabeth in 1603, Buckley was the sole surviving monk of Marian Westminster, and, therefore, the only monk of the time professed in England.

In 1605, Sigebert Buckley was discovered in London by the English monks Edward
Mayhew and Vincent Sadler, who had made their monastic profession in Italy. Only gradually did the significance of Buckley's survival become apparent. Two years later, in 1607, another English monk professed in Italy, Augustine Baker, supervised the momentous act whereby Sigebert Buckley aggregated, i.e. joined, Edward Mayhew and Vincent Sadler to himself in order to perpetuate all the rights and privileges of the medieval English Benedictines that Buckley possessed as the sole surviving monk of Westminster Abbey. Baker, who had studied law at the Inns of Court before becoming a monk, managed to secure papal recognition of Buckley's act of aggregation. Baker himself was later aggregated and this nascent community were referred to as monks of Westminster, though with the exception of Buckley, none had ever lived at Westminster Abbey; nor was this community ever established there. This label was also used to distinguish them from the Spanish monks and the Italian monks, that is, those English monks who had been professed in Spain and Italy and were later gathered together in northern France to be sent to England as missionaries. It was not until 1617 that these three groups of English monks—the Westminster, the Spanish, and the Italian—were joined together to form the re-constituted English Congregation.

It was at that time that the first histories of the English Congregation and, therefore, the first statements of when it began, were written. The first of these appeared as the first part of Edward Mayhew's *Congregationis Anglicanae Ordinis Sancti Benedicti Trophaea* (1619), or *Trophies of the English Congregation of the Order of Saint Benedict*.¹ In this work Mayhew put forward what was to become the official line, namely that the English Congregation had been founded in 1215 as a result of the Fourth Lateran Council, that it had been preserved after the Dissolution in the short-lived community of Westminster Abbey under Queen Mary, and handed on to the present generation of monks in exile by Sigebert Buckley. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Mayhew's *Trophaea* did

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¹ This book appeared in three instalments: Tabula I (1619) is concerned with history, Tabula II (1620) with saints, and Tabula III, which was printed with the two previous instalments as one four-volume work (1625), is concerned with writers. For full details of known copies of this book, see R. H. Connolly, 'A Rare Benedictine Book: Father Edward Maihew's *Trophaea*, Downside Review 50 (1932), 108–25. For an extract, see ibid., 'Father Maihew on the Restoration of the English Congregation,' Downside Review 50 (1932), 490–497. Bibliographical details and library holdings of this and the following rare books can be found in the first volume of A. F. Allison and D. M. Rogers, *The Contemporary Printed Literature of the English Counter-Reformation Between 1558 and 1640*, 2 vols. (Aldershot, 1994).
not go unchallenged, but was attacked by the English monk John Barnes, one of the Spanish group, who opposed the union and refused to submit to the President of the English Congregation. In protest, Barnes became a Cluniac, and in his *Examen Trophaeorum congregationis pretensae Anglicanae* (1622), or *Examination of the Trophies of the Pretentious English Congregation*, argued that there never had been an English Congregation in the Middle Ages, but that the English monasteries had been subject to Cluny. While Mayhew may have been guilty of retrojecting the much later concept of a reformed monastic congregation onto the High Middle Ages, Barnes was engaging in the much more culpable error of wishful thinking, for there is not the slightest shred of evidence to suggest that the medieval monasteries of England were ever subject to Cluny, apart from specifically Cluniac houses like Lewes, Thetford and Bermondsey.

In order to refute Barnes' attack, Augustine Baker was officially entrusted with the task of refuting Barnes' book. After much research among the medieval monastic manuscripts in the libraries of such contemporary antiquarians as Sir Robert Cotton and William Camden, and with the collaboration of his fellow monk Leander Jones, the English Congregation published its official response, the *Apostolatus Benedictinorum in Anglia* (1626), or *The Apostolate of the Benedictines in England*, under the name of its President, Clement Reyner. Its second and third tractates are devoted to the refutation of Barnes' *Examen*, by showing that the Benedictine monasteries of England were never subject to Cluny, but held their own general chapters as mandated by the Fourth Lateran Council. By the time that the *Apostolatus* was published, Barnes was unable to answer his opponents, having been imprisoned in 1626 for writing a book titled *Contra Aequivocationem* (1624), or *Against Equivocation*, which was essentially an attack on the Jesuits, who were the champions of that doctrine. Since no rebuttal of the *Apostolatus* was forthcoming, this early official account has largely stood unchallenged.

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3. Four volumes of Baker's transcriptions from medieval manuscripts survive as Jesus College MSS 75-78 in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.
The Claim to the Medieval Abbeys

A further dimension of this desire to preserve the heritage of medieval monasticism on the part of the English Benedictine Congregation can be seen in the privileges granted to it by the papal bull *Plantata* (1633). These privileges reflect the rather naïve hope that the Catholic Church would be re-established in England by King Charles, who had Catholic sympathies. In the event of such an occurrence, the English Congregation was granted the right to appoint individual monks as prior of each of the former Benedictine cathedral priories, to be known as titular cathedral priors. Interestingly, they were allowed to appoint titular cathedral priors not only to the nine medieval cathedral priories of Bath, Canterbury, Coventry, Durham, Ely, Norwich, Rochester, Winchester, and Worcester, but to the medieval abbeys of Chester, Gloucester, and Peterborough, which had become cathedrals under Henry VIII, and therefore, in the event of monastic restoration, would have become cathedral priories.

The idea behind the appointment of titular cathedral priors was that in the event of Catholic restoration the titular cathedral priors could immediately return to England and become actual cathedral priors. The experience of Catholic restoration under Queen Mary, however, should have proved how impossible such a wholesale restoration of English monasticism would be. Not only had the monastic population decreased so significantly that they could have hardly hoped to staff even three of the cathedral priories, but many of the former monastic buildings had been demolished or converted to other uses and their endowments considerably diminished. To put it simply, times had changed. This is not to say that the monks of the time were living in the past. In order to put this into context, it must be mentioned that each of the new English monasteries founded on the Continent in the first half of the seventeenth century similarly claimed to be the continuation of one of the great medieval monasteries. St Laurence's, Dieulouard, which continued Westminster Abbey, of course, had the best claim, since it was founded by the monks who had been
aggregated to Sigebert Buckley, the last surviving monk of Westminster. The other claims were more dubious. St Edmund's, Paris claimed Bury St Edmund's, St Gregory's, Douai claimed St Albans, and St Benedict's, St Malo claimed Glastonbury. Apart from the claim to Westminster, from which I believe the others were derived, each claim did not represent a claim to direct continuity, but a claim on the medieval monastic past, which was perceived as far more glorious than the marginal position of English monks in exile on the Continent.

The Revival of the Benedictine Mission

I have already mentioned the 1602 inauguration of the English Benedictine Mission in direct competition with the Jesuits and hopes for the re-establishment of the Catholic Church in England. It was only natural in such an atmosphere that seventeenth century English monks should turn to the example of St Augustine of Canterbury, who had been sent to England by Pope Gregory the Great one thousand years previously. Devotion to St Augustine is evident in that many of the English monks, such as Augustine Baker, took his name upon entry to the monastic life. Indeed, the custom of taking a new name had only just begun at the time, having probably been initiated at Glastonbury at the very end of the fifteenth century with Thomas Dunstan. Hitherto monks had often been given names of origin. The custom of Glastonbury was continued at Westminster Abbey in the 1550s by novices like Sigebert Buckley. The taking of historic names, therefore, was a further means of connecting oneself with the past. Churches, of course, had long been dedicated to a particular saint, and so, though none of the English Congregation's churches was dedicated to St Augustine, one of them was dedicated to St Gregory the Great, who was lauded as the Apostle of England.

While there was nothing particularly unusual in sending monks as missionaries to a foreign land in the sixth century, by the seventeenth century there certainly was. The English Benedictines had probably not acted as missionaries since the conversion of the Danes. Since the failure of St Bernard of Clairvaux's mission to the Cathars in the south of France and the success of St Dominic's
new order of friars, evangelisation of pagan territories and the conversion of heretics was usually entrusted to the more active religious orders. Indeed, there was opposition initially to the English Benedictine Mission, on the part of the Italian superiors of the English monks who objected on monastic principles, and on the part of the Jesuits who did not want any competition. The Jesuits had already secured a monopoly on missions to the Far East. No doubt, appeal to the example of St Augustine of Canterbury made the involvement of monks in the English mission somewhat more palatable. Both missions, moreover, proceeded with the full support of the papacy. While the *Apostolatus Benedictinorum in Anglia* was mentioned above in connection with John Barnes, it was much more a defence of the English Benedictine Mission, as its title implies, and so its very first tractate began with Augustine's mission to England.

**Conclusion**

While the medievalism of the English Benedictine monks of the nineteenth century was more purely aesthetic, taking its cue from the Gothic revival in church architecture, furnishings, and vestments, the medievalism of their seventeenth century predecessors took the form of re-appropriating the past in order to connect with something bigger. The English monks in exile wished to re-connect with their homeland. On the Continent they were a small minority, dwarfed both by the wealth and numbers of their French Benedictine counterparts, and by the all-powerful Jesuits. So they made the best of a difficult situation by founding the English Benedictine Mission, by reconstituting the English Congregation, and by perpetuating a line of titular cathedral priors in the unlikely event of Catholic restoration.

All three strands of this medievalism survive in the English Benedictine Congregation today. St Edmund's, now in Berkshire, recently acquired stones from the medieval abbey of Bury St Edmund's, which were formed into a cross, and adorn the entrance to Reception. Some of the present crop of titular cathedral priors have used their position to form ecumenical links with the
cathedral chapters concerned. And the parish churches run by the English Benedictines are still called missions. A much more curious survival is the custom of taking monthly days of recreation in place of the periodic convalescence following bloodletting. The re-appropriation of the medieval past, and of any period of history, therefore, is an important part of coming to terms with the present. For we do not study the past for its own sake, which is antiquarianism and not history, but in order to relate it to the present.