Augustine Baker and the History of the English Benedictine Congregation

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I want to begin by thanking those of you who have come to my paper rather than Michael Woodward's, as I would have liked to hear his paper as well. You may wonder exactly what this paper is about, as its title is somewhat vague. Most importantly, I want to say something about Augustine Baker as an historian, since, as I guessed rightly, all of the speakers at this symposium are talking about the history of Baker's life, his writings, or his teachings on the spiritual life. And this is more generally true about all previous writing concerning Baker. One exception, though it is hardly worth mentioning, is Ellis' *Welsh Benedictines of the Terror* (1936), which includes a chapter entitled 'Dom Baker and his Historical Work.' I say it is hardly worth mentioning, because it is rather short and superficial, but I suppose it's main weakness is the lack of references, though it is not difficult to discover where he got his information. Ellis' account is still substantially accurate and I want only to look more closely at the primary sources and supplement them with some more recent scholarship on the subject. More particularly, I want to say something about Augustine Baker's role in the composition of the *Apostolatus Benedictinorum in Anglia* (Douai, 1626). What I do not aim to speak about is Baker's place in the history of the EBC, although something must inevitably be said about this, since Baker was one of the most important figures in its early history.

To begin with, it is worth asking where Baker's interest in history came from. Bakler himself gives no indication of having done any historical reading in his *Autobiography*, no doubt because it is unfinished. I don't think it is too much to presume that Baker read little, if any, history before becoming a monk. My guess is that his interest in history, and specifically the history of the English Benedictines, was ignited by meeting Fr Sigebert Buckley and the events surrounding his aggregation of the monks Edward Mayhew and Vincent Sadler to himself on 21 November 1607. Undoubtedly Baker was largely responsible for the legal aspects of the affair, due to his education in law at the Inns of Court; but I must disagree with the judgment of Ellis that 'it was to [Baker], to
his legal and historic instinct, that the importance of preserving the continuity of the Congregation occurred.¹ Moreover, Ellis argues that while Frs Anselm Beech and Thomas Preston were looking after the aged Baker upon his release from prison, 'they probably never considered, or even knew of, the pre-Reformation Congregation; its very existence had been almost forgotten, and Dom. Buckley himself, when he was questioned, was more than hazy on the subject.'² Ellis is almost certainly basing himself upon the account of Leander Prichard, who writes of Buckley in his *Life of Augustine Baker*:

This old man did the Italian monks [i.e. Beech and Preston] respect and honour as a venerable piece of antiquity, and as a relique of our Order in former days in England. But Mr Baker shewed them many speciall and particular points, in which this old man might be useful to them. And namely how far the modern laws, and much more how far the ancient laws, both of the Kingdom and Church of England, did approve or favour the surviving and continuation of rights in few or one only person of a body politick or religious.³

But this account differs from that of Baker himself, who related that Anselm Beech knew of Buckley's importance as early as 1600,.⁴ In describing Beech's petition to the pope in favour of sending English monks on the mission, Baker notes that one of the principal reasons for this was that the said monks might be united and aggregated to Sigebert Buckley, and thereby the old English Benedictine congregation would be kept ever alive and continued.. whereas otherwise it would cleane perish by the death of the said remaininge monke who was now extremely aged, and so could not live longe but would die before these fathers could come in as missioners, if they came not in with the more speed.⁵

But how did Anselm Beech know of Buckley's existence in 1600, that is, while Buckley was still in prison and before Beech and Preston had even gone to England and met him? David Lunn says that it was through a certain Henry Constable, a layman, courtier, and member of the French party

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¹ Ellis, *Welsh Benedictines of the Terror* (Newtown, 1936), 110.
² *Ibid*.
among the English Catholics, someone Beech met while acting as apostolic penitentiary to English pilgrims in Rome.⁶ I see no obvious reason to doubt this. Therefore, I argue that Beech and Preston did not need Baker to tell them about the special importance of Buckley in continuing the English Benedictine Congregation, since they already knew this, but that Baker probably did aid them in showing exactly how this could be done from a legal standpoint.

Around this time, that is, at the time when Baker, Buckley, Beech, and Preston were arranging the all-important aggregation, Baker relates another chance occurrence that would influence events at least as much as had the meeting of Beech and Constable in Rome. This is the discovery of

an abstract or summary of all the decrees held by a certeine generall chapter of the order in England, held in the time of Henry the sixt kinge of England...and there was expressed there the title of the session, place, day, and yeare, and the names of the two Presidents, specifieinge that it was for the whole order in England, that was not subject to transmarin howses.⁷

This 'abstract or summary', Baker writes, was written in the back of 'an old printed Turrecremata upon our Rule, which one whom I know [which is probably Baker himself] happened to buy amonge the booke-sellers of Duck-lane.'⁸ This glimpse into the medieval history of the English Benedictines, at a time when Baker was trying to find out as much as he could from Buckley, would certainly have ignited his interest into the history of the English Benedictine Congregation, the existence of which Baker was only beginning to be conscious. Yet, it seems that he had little opportunity to engage in serious historical study until the 1620s.

I must make a short digression now to put Baker's historical researches at this time into context. Shortly before this, namely in 1619, Edward Mayhew, one of the first two monks aggregated to Buckley in 1607, began to publish his Congregationis Anglicanae Ordinis Sancti

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⁶ Lunn, English Benedictines, 25.
⁸ Ibid., 180.
This book appeared in three instalments: the first in 1619 concerning the history of the English Benedictines, the second in 1620 concerning its saints, and the third in 1625 concerning its writers. The year 1619 is, of course, the year when the union of the Spanish and English monks was effected to form the present English Benedictine Congregation. Not every monk of the Spanish Congregation, however, wished to join or was required to join the English Congregation. Two such monks were John Barnes and Francis Walgrave; they had become chaplains attached to the nuns at Chelles. For their maintenance, the abbess of that house managed to acquire for them French benefices, the which meant that they had to become French citizens and, furthermore, because the benefices belonged to a Cluniac priory, they had to transfer themselves to the Order of Cluny. Having left the Spanish Congregation without permission, Barnes and Walgrave found themselves in some trouble with their former superiors. They began to promote the Cluniac order at the expense of the English Congregation, Barnes publishing in 1622 a book with the polemical title of *Examen Trophaeorum congregationis pretensae Anglicanae*, in the which he argued that there never had been an English Benedictine Congregation, but that all of the medieval English Benedictine houses had been subject to Cluny.


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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).
This tome together with five other tomes manuscripte do conteyn certein collections which I made out of some olde MS. books that I founde in divers mens hands in Englane, concerning some principall houses of our order. My purpose was to have collected farre more and better things, but was hindred by ye persecution arising in Englane, which thereupon I lefte and came over to this side the seas. And this that I have donne I did in the peaceable tyrne that was in Englane, which was in the tyne of ye treatie of ye match betweene ye Prince of Englane and ye Infanta of Spaine; what I meant further to have donne was chieflie out of ye MS. librarie of sir Robert Cotton, whence though I have taken many things, yet is there yet there to be hand an infinit store of matter more than I have taken out, yea better matter, for indeed I spent my tyme most, in other mens libraries heere and there, esteming myself sure of sir Roberts librarie, as I had ben, if ye tyme had helde for it.\textsuperscript{11}

Prichard's \textit{Life of Augustine Baker} further supplies the details that Baker himself omits, namely that he employed a scribe who travelled with him and actually copied out the contents of the Jesus College MSS; and that this laborious work was accomplished at Baker's own expense to the sum of nearly two hundred pounds.\textsuperscript{12} It is evident from this note, however, that Baker had to leave his researches unfinished and flee to the Continent, where he stopped at Douai briefly before being sent to the nuns at Cambrai in 1624.

I now want to dwell on these manuscripts for a moment before turning to the \textit{Apostolatus Benedictinorum in Anglia}, which was written using these manuscripts shortly afterwards and published in 1626, four years after the publication of Barnes' book. The first and longest of these manuscript volumes (616 fos.) contains material relating to both Benedictine houses in Canterbury, Reading Abbey, Bury St Edmunds, and Westminster; the second (262 fos.) concerns Ely, the third (322 fos.) St Albans, and the fourth (215 fos.) Ramsey, Lindisfarne, and Durham. Naturally, one might wish to speculate about the contents of the missing fifth and sixth volumes. In this connection, let me draw your attention to a very intriguing review by David Knowles published in the \textit{English Historical Review} in 1954. The book review in question is of the third volume of

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{11 Coxe, Catalogus Codicum MSS, 27-28.}
\footnote{12 Prichard, 'Second Treatise,' 110.}
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Barnaby James Hughes
Walther Holtzmann's *Papsturkunden in England*, a collection of papal documents relating to medieval England. Knowles notes that the most interesting documents in Holtzmann's collection, hitherto unpublished, is a series of more than eighty privileges and bulls from the abbey of St Albans. 'These,' he writes, 'together with other monastic records, seem to have formed part of the transcripts made by Dom Augustine Baker and his associates for Reyner's *Apostolatus* and other works; they found their way into the library of the Bollandists and thence into the Bibliotheque Royale (Brussels), but have never been printed or used by modern monastic historians.'13 Knowles then goes on to describe some of these particular privileges of St Albans and their significance for historians. What I would like to know is whether it is Knowles' or Holtzmann's opinion that these transcripts were part of the original Baker collection, and if so, whether or not anyone has followed up such a suggestion? It might certainly end speculation as to the contents of one, if not both, of the missing volumes. Yet, it is possible that the original volumes have been subsequently divided, seeing as the first Jesus College MS contains more than twice as many pages as the other three. I don't know if Baker's working methods were entirely consistent, but on the evidence of the Jesus College MSS, he grouped his material together by monastery, not interspersing material relating to different houses. Therefore, for there to be another MS volume in existence containing material relating to St Albans, in addition to Jesus College MS 77 devoted exclusively to St Albans, is surprising, unless that manuscript had been subsequently divided. But these are just speculations. Perhaps a more reliable method of discovering the contents of the missing volumes would be by a careful analysis of the *Apostolatus* to see how its authors have made use of the extant material in the Jesus College MSS, and then to work out which similar parts of the *Apostolatus* do not rely on that material. Thus, by a process of elimination, it might be possible to work out the contents of the missing volumes.

Having now discussed Baker's preparatory researches, it is now time to turn to the

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Apostolatus itself, which is composed of three separate, but related, treatises. The first treatise, divided into three parts, argues that the conversion of England was effected by Benedictine monks; and it is in this connection that the transcriptions in the Jesus College MSS were chiefly used. The second treatise in six parts, certainly the most important of the three, as it refutes Barnes’ book, argues that the English monasteries were a congregation, distinct from all other congregations, and subject to no foreign congregation. The third and final treatise deals with the re-establishment of the English Congregation, culminating in the union of 1619 and illustrated by many official documents. According to his first biographer, Leander Prichard, Baker was responsible for the first two of the Apostolatus' treatises; who was responsible for the third, however, is not mentioned. Prichard does say that Leander Jones, 'who penned it in Latin' and 'had the trimming and pollishing of it', deserves to have the second place in the composition of the Apostolatus after Baker. The only other person mentioned in connection with the composition of the Apostolatus is Clement Reyner, whose name appears on the title page; he is said to have been the 'Secretary and subscribed the dedicatory epistle'. I presume that the third treatise was also written by Leander Jones, but that the sources used in its composition were supplied by more than one person. Regarding the material relating to Abbot Feckenham, I think it very probably that this was provided by Henry Holland, a kinsman of Feckenham who became a priest and was resident at the English College in Douai at the time. This probability is further based upon the fact that Holland was a Latin poet, and a largely unpublished collection of his Latin verse on religious and historical subjects survives as Harley MS 3258 in the British Library, from which his biographical poem 'In Laudem Ioannis Fecknami' was taken and published by Edmund Bishop in the very first volume of the Downside Review in 1882. Another historical source available in the same English College was the legatine register of Cardinal Pole. For perhaps most of the treatise, however, the author could draw on his own experience and that of his contemporaries.

14 Prichard, ‘Second Treatise,’ 111.
15 Ibid., 112.
16 Douai, Bibliotheque Municipale, MS
The *Apostolatus Benedictinorum in Anglia* was and still is a monumental work of scholarship. While I think it would be perhaps unfair to criticise it, say, for describing St Augustine of Canterbury as a Benedictine, which we now know to be false, we can certainly commend Augustine Baker's generous use of manuscript sources, something David Knowles never accomplished. Moreover, as David Farmer noted in a previous symposium paper, the *Apostolatus* printed for the first time the *Regularis Concordia* and Lanfranc's *Monastic Constitutions*.\(^\text{17}\) I believe much more work remains to be done on the *Apostolatus*, some of which I have already hinted at. Additionally, if we are to better appreciate Baker's role as an historian, we also need a new edition of his *Treatise of the English Benedictine Mission*, one that reproduces the entire text and not just the portion edited by Hugh Connolly and published by the Catholic Records Society. In conclusion, it's worth noting that Augustine Baker stands out from among his antiquarian contemporaries Cotton, Camden, and Selden in writing history that was not concerned with the past for its own sake, but for the sake of the present, and it is for this reason that he is still read. Thank you.