

Book Review: Mayflower Bastard: A Stranger Among the Pilgrims, by David Lindsay

By R. G. Kainer

A biography of one's ancestor is a special case of historical writing. Descendancy can spur one on to a painstaking pursuit of archival data. Although subjectivity in the writing of history and biography is certainly not exclusive to descendants, it may also be that one's subjective beliefs are colored by the compelling identifications of ancestry. It depends on the identification the author makes with the subject, both consciously and out of awareness. One of the achievements of David Lindsay's *Mayflower Bastard*

is the author's ability to make his discovery of his ancestor also a pilgrimage of his own self-discovery.

The book's title is Lindsay's compass – his lodestar for navigating the tale of his *Mayflower* ancestor Richard More. The story that was already known was that Richard, along with his brother and two sisters, was shipped off with the *Mayflower* Separatists by Lord Samuel More, who had repudiated and disinherited the four young children born during his stormy marriage to his cousin Lady Katherine More. However, Lindsay's title signifies his certainty that Richard was the child of Katharine More by the estate's yeoman, Jacob Blakeway (from whom Lindsay came to think he was descended) and not by her lawful husband, Lord Samuel More.

While Lindsay's conclusion is a possibility – given the highly charged and ambiguous relationship of Katherine to both Samuel and Jacob – Richard's actual paternity remains unproven, and at best uncertain. My own interpretation of the existing data and the English law of the time does not really support Lindsay's conclusion that Richard should be considered illegitimate, let alone labeled a bastard [1]. However, as befitting the descendant of the *Mayflower* voyager who later became "Old Captain More," the salty vigor of "bastard" helped Lindsay weave the sailor's yarns he favors, spinning them out of considerable research and spicing them with his predilection for inventiveness. [2] In a previous book [3], Lindsay characterized Alexander Graham Bell as balancing "sense and sensationalism" – which fits here. Neither was a bad hand at discovery.

Although Lindsay launched Richard in rough waters, he was steadier in relating Richard's passage into adulthood and old age. He grants Richard the man the dignity he deserves, even with his documented misdeeds of business and weaknesses of flesh. Lindsay takes pains to show that Richard often did the best he could with what life handed to him. We learn that he was not without decency and kindness, and he displayed a sense of responsibility to his family and friends. Richard More was an individualist but not a Separatist, and despite a young childhood spent in Elder William Brewster's household, he was not one of the Saints. Richard's survival-driven business practices in a hardscrabble life were often dubious, and evidence also suggests that he committed bigamy as a young man and adultery as an aging one. Lindsay here reminds us how serious and scary sexual misconduct was in those times. It certainly went on, but the punishing hand of the law could be very severe. In an odd turn, it seems easier for Lindsay to think of Richard as a bastard than it was for him to believe him actually guilty of adultery, which is more than likely. The court's charges (which Lindsay conjectures may have been fabricated) were also made by his church, which excommunicated him (they reinstated him two years later). However, if biography "aims not merely at informing but also at moving the reader through the spectacle of another soul's journey through existence," [4] then David Lindsay has done well by Richard.

He also does very well in his reading of the feisty Lady Katherine and the self-serving Lord Samuel More. He captures the character of each and his psychological takes seem right on the mark. With all due respect to Lord Samuel's descendants, Lindsay's sober account of the harm done by the power-abusing Lord Samuel to his first wife and the children (and in his later role as a deserter of his soldiers) makes it understandable why Lindsay came to prefer to think of himself as descended from a pleasure-seeking, working-class man like Jacob Blakeway.

The biography describes Richard being witness to the Witch Trials of his hometown of Salem, where he kept an "ordinary" after his sea days were over. Lindsay relates many historical events that occurred in the places that Richard

lived, as well as the areas he traveled to as a mariner. Sometimes the data seem like oddments, but they often bring a fuller understanding of the background that affected Richard's life.

It would be tempting for a lover of great literature to fault Lindsay on his narrative style or his ability to evoke an always perfectly true picture of Richard in his sketches. Ironically, only figures that come out of a writer's deep and pure imagination can evoke an indelible truth for the reader. We all know who the lovesick Juliet is. We hardly know who the probably heartsick Dorothy (May) Bradford was. In this book of Lindsay's seafaring ancestor, the author is not Melville but Captain More is also not Captain Ahab. Ahab, as pure fiction, could be single-mindedly portrayed as driven by the evil of revenge. Richard More's portrait is complicated by the necessity of uncovering facts and analyzing them with judicious restraint. Despite the imperfections of style, and possibly of interpretation, Lindsay did create something of value. I'm glad that Lindsay thought there was a hot story to be told because, like Columbus, he may not have been exactly where he thought he was, but he discovered America anyway! Without Lindsay's identification with his subject an important journey might not have been made, and a good tale might not have been told.

Notes

1. "Hostages of Fortune/The More Children of the *Mayflower*". R.G. Kainer, *New England Ancestors*. Winter, 2003.
2. *The Patent Files/Dispatches From the Frontiers of Invention*. David Lindsay, New York: Lyons Press, 1999.
3. *Madness in the Making: The Triumphant Rise and Untimely Fall of America's Show Inventors*. David Lindsay. New York: Kodansha, 1997.
4. "Biography and Pseudobiography". Kenneth Silverman, *Common-Place*, vol. 3. No. 2, January 2003.
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