New England patriots: 'The Rainborowes: One Family's Quest to Build a New England'

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By Glenn Altschuler

In 1648, at the height of the English Civil War, Thomas Rainborowe, a senior officer in the army and member of Parliament, was kidnapped and murdered by supporters of King Charles I.

Royalists celebrated his assassination: “Of Rainsborough, this we record; hated he liv’d, and dy’d abhor’d.” English radicals, however, blasted the “horse leeches that drew his blood” and quoted from the epitaph placed on his gravestone: “He that made Kings Lords Commons Judges shake, Cities and Committees quake;...Rainsbrough, the Just, the Valiant, the True, Here bids the Noble Levellers Adieu.”

Colonel Rainborowe (the spelling of the family name varied) came from a distinguished – and much traveled – family. Thomas’ father, William Rainborowe Senior, rescued hundreds of Christians from captivity, negotiated a treaty with the sultan of Morocco, which expanded commercial opportunities for England in North Africa, and declined the offer of a knighthood.

Thomas' sisters, Martha and Joan, emigrated to New England; Martha was the fourth wife of John Winthrop, the long-time governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. And Thomas’ brother, William Rainborowe, a merchant, mariner, and military man, made a mark in the Old and New worlds.

In “The Rainborowes: One Family’s Quest to Build a New England,” (Basic Books $28.99) Adrian Tinniswood, a Visiting Fellow in Heritage at Bath Spa University, uses the experiences of this remarkable, long-forgotten family to illuminate the tumultuous, transatlantic English world in the first half of the seventeenth century.

His beautifully crafted, vivid account demonstrates that the Rainborowes “mattered, not only because every life matters,” but because, through their passion, demands for justice, and lust for adventure, they “forged chains that linked continents.”

An informative and engaging blend of military, religious, and political history, “The Rainborowes” is at its best recreating the everyday lives of residents of England and New England. The “city on a hill” in
Massachusetts Bay “had some dark alleys,” Mr. Tinniswood reveals.

After reviewing evidence of drunkenness, sexual abuse, theft and violence, however, he is struck less by the low moral standards of the colonists or the harshness of punishment, but by the reluctance of courts to impose the death penalty.

Maternal mortality rates in Massachusetts, he points out, were between a third and a fifth lower than in England, even though pregnant women were advised to grease the vagina with goose fat or shove snuff up the nose to induce sneezes that would dislodge babies who showed some reluctance to leave the womb.

Although he is unable to supply an explanation, Mr. Tinniswood also tells us that John Winthrop asked a Rainborowe in-law to present a live otter to Charles I. After three weeks in the hold, he indicates, the animal squeezed through a scuttle hole in the ship’s counter, ran into the sea and drowned.

In a bit of a blow to American national pride, Mr. Tinniswood notes that although some colonists had returned to England each year, the trickle became a flood in the 1640s, as Puritan ministers, caught up in the Civil War, reminded their congregates “that there is no land that claims our name, but England.”

As a result, he adds, land values in Massachusetts plummeted. Migration and commercial traffic to New England resumed at the end of the decade, but many people, including some Rainborowes, he writes, saw no contradiction between their Puritan convictions and their worldly ambitions, and decided to stay put because old England “was a land of opportunity.”

Mr. Tinniswood writes with authority and candor. The opponents of Charles I in England, he claims, were arrayed along a spectrum, a holy alliance, ranging from Parliamentarians to Ranters, “a radiant cluster of dissidence and dissent and conflict.” Their desire for a more tolerant and democratic England could be achieved only by “ignoring the law and imposing their will by force.”

Throughout the book, Mr. Tinniswood betrays a modesty that actually enhances his credibility. Despite his extensive (and impressive) research, he concludes that he doesn’t know the Rainborowes, their “hearts stay just out of reach,” and he’s not even sure he likes them.

The past, he adds, has a way of offering confusion to those who look for certainty. Just so. It’s worth noting, however, that as this fine book demonstrates, if the past is a foreign country, it is one well worth visiting.

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