

'Babels of profaneness and community': The Ranter Sensation in Hampshire and Wiltshire, 1649-51

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Hampshire and Wiltshire were caught up in the angry confrontations between opposing armies in mid seventeenth-century England's dislodging, harrowing, and traumatising Civil War. There were battles at Cheriton and Roundway Down. Basing House, Wardour Castle, Devizes and Winchester endured sieges. Winchester and Warminster changed hands several times. But these two counties also featured no less in the surrounding 'English Revolution' which reverberated widely in economy, society, religion, culture and in politics at all levels. Old anchorings were cut loose, old controls broke down as monarchy and state Church were dismantled. All of this had an impact at local level. Land changed hands. Patriarchy in all its forms was challenged or overthrown. New freedoms were grasped. Democracy reared its head; Hampshire and Wiltshire had their Clubmen and Levellers, if not Diggers. Women raised their voices and exercised new roles. Protestantism, even Puritanism, fractured in ways which allowed new radical religious groupings and mechanic preachers to come into the open. All too many, lamented Humphry Ellis (a Winchester Presbyterian preacher who will figure prominently in this article) in 1647 'are carried away by the change of wind, now this way, now that ... unsettled in their opinions, not knowing what to fix themselves upon'. Looking back from a safer vantage point thirty years later, Thomas Comber could be even more forthright. 'In the late unhappy

times all hell broke loose'.¹ Thomas Edwards, a hostile but mesmerised Presbyterian critic, documented and attempted to classify the ensuing religious babel in a huge, deeply prejudiced, sprawling text, aptly entitled *Gangraena* (1646). Ephraim Pagitt did something similar a few years later in his *Heresiography* (1654).² The uncertainties and fluidity of the times facilitated religious mobility and experimentation while the confused breakdown of censorship in the Civil War raised the unwanted spectre of religious toleration. Baptists, Seekers, Fifth Monarchists, Muggletonians, Ranters and then Quakers suddenly attracted notice. Millenarianism forcibly entered the scene.³ These were teeming, bewildering and unnerving times. Many contemporaries, exhilarated or alarmed as the case might be, spoke of the world being turned upside down.

Ranters – much discussed and debated by historians in the last generation, as we shall see – were probably the strangest, wildest, and least easily classifiable of all the radical religious presences of this period and they will form the chief focus of this article – the first extended local investigation of the subject to appear in print.⁴ Ranters were so

1 Humphry Ellis, *Two Sermons ... preached in the sometime cathedral church of Winchester* (London, 1647), pp. 27, 65; Thomas Comber, *Christianity no Enthusiasm* (London, 1677), p. 88.

2 See Ann Hughes, *Gangraena and the Struggle for the English Revolution* (Oxford, 2004) and J. Coffey, '“A ticklish business”: Defining Heresy and Orthodoxy in the Puritan Revolution' in D. Loewenstein and J. Marshall (eds), *Heresy, Literature and Politics in Early Modern English Culture* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 108–36.

3 Censorship and its breakdown in this period is covered in Cyndia Susan Clegg, *Press Censorship in Caroline England* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 208–34 and David Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic* (Cambridge, 1999). The toleration issue is discussed in J. Coffey, 'The Toleration Controversy during the English Revolution' in C. Durston and Judith Maltby (eds), *Religion and Revolutionary England* (Manchester, 2006), pp. 42–68 and in Blair Worden, 'Toleration and the Protectorate', reprinted in Worden, *God's Instruments. Political Conduct in the England of Oliver Cromwell* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 63–90. On the changing religious spectrum of mid-seventeenth century England generally see, for example, C. Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down. Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London, 1972), Durston and Maltby (eds), *Religion and Revolutionary England*, and A. Bradstock, *Radical Religion in Cromwell's England* (London, 2011).

4 N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London, 1957); A.L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters. Religious Radicalism in the English Revolution* (London, 1970); Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, *passim*. Hill's work on the Ranters was continued in his essays on 'Sin and Society' and 'Antinomianism in seventeenth-century England' in *The Collected Essays of Christopher Hill. II: Religion and Politics in Seventeenth-Century England* (Brighton, 1986), pp. 117–40, 162–84, and 'Plebeian Irreligion in seventeenth-century England' in Hill, *England's Turning Point. Essays on Seventeenth-*

designated initially as a term of abuse by their detractors and opponents. As a very loosely assorted group they were conspicuously mobile, partly to assist them in evangelising and partly to escape opposition and punishment. For that reason it is not surprising that we find itinerant craftsmen in their ranks, as well as ex-soldiers, pedlars, vagrants, and the unemployed.⁵ Rather noticeably Ranters for the most part had a plebeian following; shoemakers, ropemakers, feltmakers, hatmakers, weavers and husbandmen figure in the records as occupations of those identified as Ranters. Women were much involved. The Ranters' assertively democratic theology had a particular appeal to those in the lower ranks of society. It promised them opportunities, a degree of equality, and liberation from controls of all kinds, not least from the oppressive discipline of puritan theology and micro-management.

Ranter religious ideas were anything but neatly coherent and are not easily pinned down. Ranters were diverse in their beliefs, claims and practice. There was no stereotypical Ranter, except perhaps in the eyes of hostile opponents. But they had at least some common features which set them apart. Ranters, undoubtedly, set out deliberately to shock, to outrage, to challenge and reject accepted norms. Rudeness and Ranterism went together. They were antinomians – believers in an in-dwelling God. A few of them, indeed, actually claimed to be God or the Son of God. For them there was no Heaven or Hell in a spatial sense. They thought the Bible was a dead letter since God was still revealing his truth. They said exactly what came into their heads. They believed that the pure in heart were licensed to act in whatever way they wished without inhibition; they *could not* sin or practise evil. Amongst other things, therefore, Ranters preached free love. For them monogamous marriage had no special significance. Everyone was simply a 'fellow creature' to others, there to be shared and enjoyed. Social levelling was also an important part of their platform; rank and riches were unjustifiable aberrations. In the religious sphere churches were merely buildings like any others, and had no special, sanctified significance. Ranters freely congregated, therefore, in alehouses and inns and in the open air. A boisterous, *al fresco* meal was often their way

Century English History (London, 1998), pp. 75–94; J.F. McGregor and B. Reay (eds), *Radical Religion in the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 121–40, and N. Tranter (ed.), *Ranter Writings from the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1983). D. Como, *Blown by the Spirit. Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil-War England* (Stanford, CA, 2004) examines the earlier background.

5 Hill's *World Turned Upside Down* briefly discussed the social composition of the Ranters.

of celebrating communion. Singing, whistling, dancing, nakedness, drunken orgies, loud swearing, cursing, and smoking were all part of the intense frenzy that was reported to constitute their kind of 'worship'. Abiezer Coppe, one of the most prominent of the Ranters, rejoiced in the liberating effects of 'swearing in the light gloriously'. They were, in a sense, the hippies of their time, though obviously it would be grossly anachronistic to press the comparison too far.⁶

Ranters were not widely or evenly distributed across England; there was something almost haphazard about their geography. They appear to have been chiefly a feature of the looser structures of urban society and the industrialising countryside, and were most conspicuous in London. Samuel Sheppard's play *The Joviall Crew or the Devil turn'd Ranter*, set in London and depicting the sect's 'monstrous meetings ... rude revellings ... [and] impious and incorrigible deportments', would certainly have struck a chord in 1651 when it was issued in the capital. Because of the continuing ban on the playhouses, however, it was presumably not publicly performed straight away.⁷ East Anglia, the Midlands and the Home Counties all had Ranters. So did Kent, Surrey, Berkshire, Hampshire, Wiltshire, and Gloucestershire. The North West of England also, with its sprawling and unmanageable units of government, appears to have served as a Ranter recruiting ground, as it later did for Quakers. The same was true of Yorkshire.

In terms of their organisation and group size Ranters were neither tight-knit nor numerous, though for obvious reasons precise statistics are unavailable. In any case it was not their head count that attracted attention, as we shall see. They were far too chaotic to become a coherent and well-disciplined sect or a well-integrated movement. They are best seen as effervescent individualists with no shared, rigid agenda. They had no universally acknowledged leaders or spokesmen, though certain figures stand out. Abiezer Coppe, Jacob Bauthumley, Lawrence Clarkson, Joseph Salmon, and Richard Coppin all came

6 Quoted in C. Hawes, *Mania and the Literary Style. The Rhetoric of Enthusiasm from the Ranters to Christopher Smart* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 34. G.F. Ellens, 'The Ranters Ranting: Reflections on a Ranting Counter Culture', *Church History* 40 (1971), 91–107, took the comparison much too far.

7 Sheppard himself was not one to toe the official line. See Andrew King, 'Samuel Sheppard (c. 1624–1655?)' in H.C.G. Matthew, B. Harrison *et al* (eds), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, 2004–) [hereafter ODNB] L, pp. 268–69 and Susan Wiseman, *Drama and Politics in the English Civil War* (Cambridge, 1998). The *Oxford English Dictionary* confuses Sheppard's play with one of a similar title by Richard Brome.

under the spotlight and got into print.⁸ That said, Ranter vocabulary and rhetoric were as uncontrollably free-flowing as Ranter activities; once aroused, the inner voice and its blasphemous wordplay were unstoppable. 'One stood by me and pronounced all these words to me with his mouth', Coppe disarmingly asserted, 'and I wrote them with ink in this paper'.⁹

If, inevitably, there remains uncertainty about their numbers, internal inter-actions and organisation there can be no doubt whatever about Ranter determination to seek publicity. Ranters were irreverent, noisy, shocking and blasphemous. But they were a short-lived phenomenon. They were hardly heard of before the last months of 1649 when they emerged in the disillusionment which surrounded the suppression and collapse of the Levellers and the failure of the Revolution to begin moving towards the creation of a democratic society. By the early 1650s the brief age of the Ranters, in England at least, was effectively over. In the American colonies, on the other hand, to which some Ranters may have fled, they were still in evidence in the 1680s and beyond. Aphra Behn's satirical play *The Widow Ranter* (1688–90) set its scene in Virginia.¹⁰ While they flourished only briefly in England, however, their existence produced extreme alarm in many quarters. Not only orthodox Anglicans and moderates but even radicals of other persuasions, such as Gerrard Winstanley the Digger, were careful to distance themselves from Ranters to avoid being tarred with the same brush. This was even more true in the case of George Fox whose itinerant Quaker ministry frequently brought him into contact and collision with Ranters and Ranterism. His journal, up to 1656 at any rate, abounds with such instances though it may well be that this says as much about the growing pains of Quakerism itself and its concerns to bring its own followers into line as about Ranters. Moderates like the Presbyterian Richard Baxter were condemnatory. Ranters, he said, set out 'to dishonour and cry down the Church, the Scripture, the present ministry [and] conjoined a cursed doctrine of libertinism which brought them to all abominable filthiness of life ... They spoke

8 Tranter (ed.), *Ranter Writings*, includes selections from all of them save Coppin.

9 Abiezer Coppe, *A Second Fiery Flying Roule* in Tranter (ed.), *Ranter Writings*, p. 99.

10 See R.C. Rath, *How Early America Sounded* (Ithaca, NY, 2005), chapter 4 'On the Rant'; B. McConville, 'Confessions of an American Ranter', *Pennsylvania History* 62.2 (1995), 238–48; C. Hill, 'From Lollards to Levellers' in M. Cornforth (ed.), *Rebels and their Causes. Essays in Honour of A.L. Morton* (London, 1978), pp. 63, 64. Antinomianism was still very recognisably a feature of the American religious scene even in the early nineteenth century.

most hideous words of blasphemy and many of them committed whoredom commonly ...'¹¹ They were viewed as vile, contaminating and dangerous, as much for their social deviancy as for their religious heresies.

Attempts to check blasphemy had started in 1648 with an Ordinance for that purpose, followed by a further declaration the following year. But the punishment prescribed by the 1648 Ordinance – the death penalty for heresy – was in practice viewed by its inexperienced civilian administrators as too draconian to be invoked. A new Blasphemy Act was hastily pushed through Parliament in August 1650, and this time with imprisonment as the penalty for the first offence and banishment for persistent offenders. Self-styled messiahs, declared atheists, blasphemers, and those practising and rejoicing in gross immorality yet denying sin were to be swept up under its provisions. The Act's shrill recital of rampant expressions of ungodliness appears to have been framed with Ranters specifically in mind, though they were not the only targets. But leading Ranters like Coppe and Bauthumley felt its force. Both were imprisoned, forced to recant, and their blasphemous publications were burnt. For good measure Bauthumley also had his tongue bored through. Because of their immoral lifestyle, however, Ranters could as easily – or perhaps more easily – fall foul of the Adultery Act placed on the statute book earlier in the same year. This Act, like the 1648 Blasphemy Ordinance, classified adultery as a felony meriting the death penalty. Few convictions, however, have been found by historians. The Act lapsed in 1660 and was not renewed.¹²

II

Turning now to the evidence for Ranterism in Hampshire and Wiltshire it needs to be said at the outset that these two counties in the early seventeenth century were not renowned as hotbeds of religious

11 J.F. McGregor, 'Ranterism and the Development of Early Quakerism', *Journal of Religious History* 9 (1977), 349–63; J.M. Lloyd Thomas (ed.), *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter* (London, 1931), p. 73.

12 The full text of the Adultery and Blasphemy Acts is reprinted in C.H. Firth and R.S. Rait (eds), *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum* 3 vols (London, 1911), II, pp. 387–89, 409–12. See K.V. Thomas, 'The Puritans and Adultery: the Act of 1650 Reconsidered' in D. Pennington and K. Thomas (eds), *Puritans and Revolutionaries. Essays in Seventeenth-Century History presented to Christopher Hill* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 257–82. Thomas comments on the scarcity of recorded convictions (p.258) as does Bernard Capp in his *England's Culture Wars. Puritan Reformation and Its Enemies in the Interregnum, 1649–1660* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 134–39.

radicalism, even of Puritanism. Puritanism, however, had made some headway at least in this region, particularly in market and clothing towns and ports, as it did elsewhere, and it coloured, if it only partly caused, the divisions which figured in the Civil Wars. Dr Tobias Crisp (1600–43), long-serving vicar of Brinkworth, Wiltshire for fifteen years after 1627, entertained outspoken antinomian views and his preaching is likely to have influenced Laurence Clarkson, a leading Ranter, and may well have helped to prepare the way for the events (discussed below) which unfolded in nearby Langley Burrell.¹³ Even Winchester, despite its Civil War reputation as a Royalist stronghold, was not unanimously conservative. No place could be solidly united in the volatile, explosive 1640s. But because religious conservatism, moderation and loyalty were so much in evidence in Hampshire and Wiltshire when radical outbursts took place they perhaps attracted a disproportionate amount of attention, horrified the law-abiding and many of those in authority, and provoked active, swift, and determined resistance and calls for justice.

Two particularly eye-catching and contrasting cases of Ranterism occurred in Hampshire and Wiltshire and came to a head in the years 1649 to 1651. In the absence of other detailed local and regional studies of Ranters, it is instructive to place these rather different cases under the historical microscope to see what they add to our understanding of religious extremism. Ranterism's confused pluralism, its social underpinnings, its chaotic, unsettling theology and these two counties' divided responses to all of this are brought into sharp focus. The individuals who were at the centre of these Hampshire and Wiltshire events had local careers which are extremely well documented since their activities led to preliminary examinations by JPs, to appearances at Quarter Sessions, and to formal hearings at the Assizes in their respective counties. Both sets of events also engendered exceedingly graphic contemporary published tracts offering detailed accounts of the circumstances and individuals in question. Both cases, too, have subsequently attracted brief discussion by historians. What follows here, however, is the first attempt to make a systematic comparison of the two Ranter prophets in question, the local circumstances surrounding them, and the ways in which their activities and impact were reported, interpreted, channelled, acted upon, and dealt with.

13 C. Hill, 'Dr Tobias Crisp, 1600–43' in Hill, *Collected Essays. II: Religion and Politics in Seventeenth-Century England*, pp. 141–61.

The tract detailing the activities of the Ranter leader and his followers in Hampshire was penned by Humphry Ellis, a moderate puritan clergyman serving at the time in war-damaged Winchester at the (former) cathedral from January 1646. He is known to have been a clergyman at Millbrook, Southampton in 1645 and by 1653 was at St Thomas's, Winchester. In 1647 Ellis had published two of his cathedral sermons on the dangerous lurking presence of antichrists in the deeply troubled last times which he and his contemporaries inhabited.¹⁴ His later sixty-two page tract *Pseudochristus* was launched as a specific exposure of the deceits and blasphemies perpetrated by the central figures in the case in 1649–50, and was intended to serve as a dire warning to those gullible enough to be led astray. It quoted extensively from the judicial record, from the testimony of witnesses, the full and detailed confessions of the leading figures involved, and from his own shorthand notes taken at the trial. It was also based on the author's firsthand, eye-witness knowledge and his prison visits to those who had been brought to justice. 'Thousands in these parts', Ellis declared defensively in his preface, 'can witness these things for the generality and substance of them to be true that therefore I hope that none will see any cause to question the truth and credit of the things here related, how strange soever they might otherwise seem to be unto them'. His revelations of the disturbing case may well have made a direct contribution to the passage only a few months later in August 1650 of the Blasphemy Act. (The Act denounced those who exalted themselves 'to be very God or to be Infinite or Almighty ... [or claimed that] the true God or the Eternal Majesty dwells in the creature and nowhere else'). The lurid details of the further scandalous *cause celebre* in Wiltshire discussed below would undoubtedly have been taken later as ample justification for the Act's inclusion on the statute book, though not, it seems, for implementing its provisions as a matter of course. (The Blasphemy Act had gone on to condemn those asserting that 'unrighteousness in persons, or the acts of uncleanness, prophane swearing, drunkenness, and the like filthy and lascivious speaking, and brutishness are not unholy and forbidden in the Word of God').¹⁵

Some of the elements in the Hampshire story reiterated familiar features of the Ranter experience. This was no less true, as we shall see, of the Wiltshire case. The chief protagonist in the events in

14 This subject formed the first of Ellis's *Two Sermons preached in the sometime cathedral church of Winchester* ... (London, 1647).

15 Firth and Rait (eds), *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum*, II, p. 410.

Hampshire was originally a local man but became a Ranter convert in London, the Ranter epicentre and chief moral battleground of the English Revolution.¹⁶ From there he returned to his native county. He exemplified Ranter mobility. He belonged, as did many of those who became his Hampshire acolytes, to the lower ranks of the craftsmen/tradesmen sector. A Hampshire inn rather than a church for a time became his local headquarters – a decision perfectly in line with Ranter convictions that there was no need for special, separate buildings dedicated to religious worship, to which in any case they would not have had open invitations. His Ranter preaching, too, was in many respects similar to that offered by others of his kind. He stressed the supreme importance of the in-dwelling Spirit which superseded all of God's work in the past just as it effectively superseded the historical Jesus and the Biblical record of it. He also proclaimed the redundancy of conventional religion and church organisation, and the irrelevance of moral codes and monogamous marriage. For him, as for other Ranters, there simply could be no such thing as sin. But this Ranter went much further by openly proclaiming himself the Messiah, the risen Christ, who had come again to save the world. No wonder that this individual and his acolytes who noisily pushed themselves forward came to be examined very intensely and were in due course prosecuted and their errors publicly denounced so that all could see the folly and dangers of religious toleration.

The Hampshire Ranter prophet in question was William Franklin and at the time of his trial in 1650 he was said to be about 40 years of age. He had been born in Overton but moved to London to serve an apprenticeship to a ropemaker. He settled in Stepney, an East-end parish with a radical reputation, married, had three children, and established himself as a respected member of and, in due course, officeholder in a puritan congregation there. Then things began to go wrong. He was beset by illness, became distracted, and was treated by a surgeon (named in Ellis's account) in 1646. Franklin then claimed to have divine revelations that he was Christ incarnate, the Messiah, and he began to speak in tongues and to prophesy. As a new being emancipated from his own past and from his own family and responsibilities, he left his wife and children and consorted with other women of loose morals, spreading the new gospel of unfettered freedom. One woman

16 London's special place in the religious developments of this time is covered in T. Liu, *Puritan London. A Study of Religion and Society in the City Parishes* (Newark, Del., 1986) and in K. Lindley, *Popular Politics and Religion in Civil War London* (Aldershot, 1997).

in particular, Mary Gadbury, a married, religiously-inclined woman deserted by her husband, became very closely linked with him. She had a small business in and around Watling St. selling laces, ribbons, pins and other trifles, but now attached herself to Franklin, sold all she had, and – though still married – lived with him openly. She, too, now claimed to have had revelations which confirmed Franklin's status as the reincarnated Messiah and, for good measure, asserted that she was Christ's Bride. Ejected from his church congregation in Stepney for his blasphemies and threatened with the law, Franklin and Gadbury took to the road and returned by carrier's waggon to the ropemaker's native county. Hampshire, he and Gadbury were told in a vision, was 'the land of Ham' – a destination foretold in the Bible.

Settling in Andover, a market town on a major road, the couple established themselves at the Star Inn. There Franklin began his preaching ministry and started to win over converts among clothworkers and others of the same class. One of these converts, John Noyce, soon claimed that he was the reincarnated John the Baptist. Others – Edward Spradbury and Henry Dixon of Stockbridge – let it be known that they were healing and destroying angels. Franklin now had a quasi ministerial 'team', though one that was distinctly ill assorted and intrinsically undisciplined. All of this Ranter group rejoiced in being a focus of attraction and in their distinctive, new, elevated and special position and the liberating power and authority it conveyed. When someone in the crowd on one occasion addressed Franklin as 'fellow', an outraged Gadbury spoke out aggressively on his behalf. 'Thou dog! How darest thou call thy saviour "fellow"; thou art not worthy of a crumb!' ¹⁷ Gadbury herself – conscious of her own new exalted status as the Bride of Christ – also turned evangelist while Franklin briefly returned to London and she won over some previously hostile critics, both male and female. One of these, Goody Waterman, because of her local standing and outspokenness, proved an asset to the Ranter group. Gadbury also inveigled some fine linen from a gullible female convert, having had another vision commanding that she should be clothed in white raiment to celebrate her return from Jerusalem. Though illiterate, Gadbury was clearly forceful and influential. One historian has gone so far as to describe her as 'the brains of the [Ranter] operation' in Hampshire.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ellis, *Pseudochristus*, p. 8

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 29; J. Friedman, *Blasphemy, Immorality and Anarchy. The Ranters and the English Revolution* (Athens, OH, 1987), p. 162. The Franklin case figures very

Franklin's evangelism took a more serious turn, however, when he succeeded in converting William Woodward, rector of the nearby sparsely populated parish of Crux Easton, and his wife. (Woodward had been rector there since 1643). Margaret, his wife, fulsomely declared Franklin to be 'her Lord and King and that she is saved by his death and passion'. Thus emboldened by his evangelical successes Franklin along with Gadbury in December 1649 installed themselves as house guests in the Crux Easton rectory. Franklin preached there, proclaiming himself 'Christ crucified' and 'the Lion of the tribe of Judah' and declaring that he had the authority to forgive sins and that he held the keys to the 'bottomless pit' (which presumably enabled him to release condemned souls). More disciples were added to the Ranter fold, perhaps in part due to the laxity of local government and to lingering parochial resentment expressed the year before in response to the imposition of the hated army tax. An ex-soldier from Wallingford garrison testified (highly improbably) that five to six hundred converts had been made and that many believed that Franklin could be in more than one place at the same time, that loud heavenly trumpets sounded whenever he preached, and that great ships appeared in the sky. Disciples started to date their age from the moment of their conversion. All of the Ranter community, Ellis declared, were gripped by 'a spirit of frenzy and contradiction'. Godly ministers and others in the area who challenged or repudiated the Ranter group were brushed aside or cursed. Gadbury was said to have given monstrous birth to a dragon which was promptly slain by Franklin.¹⁹

All this proved too much for hostile, 'well-affected', neighbours and the authorities. In January 1650, following intervention from parish officers, the chief culprits were examined by local JPs. Franklin and Gadbury though they recanted – he first, to the consternation of the others – were then bound over to the next Quarter Sessions. Richard Cromwell, Oliver's son, newly installed near Winchester after his marriage to the daughter of the lord of the manor of Hursley in 1649, was among the JPs in attendance. Significantly this Quarter Sessions hearing identified a further issue – one concerning town government in Andover – which might well have been conducive earlier to the activities of the Ranter group there. Evidently under the terms of Andover's charter its constables had been claiming exemption from

briefly in A.M. Coleby, *Central Government and the Localities: Hampshire 1649–1689* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 57–58.

19 J.S. Cockburn (ed.), *Western Circuit Assize Orders, 1629–1648. A Calendar*, Camden Society, 4th series, 17 (1976), p. 284. Ellis, *Pseudochristus*, pp. 46–47

attendance at the Quarter Sessions held in Winchester with the result, it was claimed, that 'the town is made a sanctuary for offenders'. Alehouses and drunkenness there – Ranter accompaniments – now came under a renewed onslaught and justice finally caught up with Franklin and Gadbury. They were duly imprisoned to await trial at the next Winchester Assizes. Gadbury was whipped. They stayed in gaol for five weeks and were much visited by both well-wishers and the merely curious. Ellis was one of them and he found Franklin's 'speech and language was wholly according to the Familists. I suppose he had sucked in all these wicked principles upon which he acted'. Their case at the Assizes was heard by Lord Chief Justice Henry Rolle and the outcome – as with almost all trials of this period – was reached expeditiously. It had to be. There were six counties to be briskly covered on the Western Circuit and Somerset and Devon were always allocated more time on account of their heavier business than Hampshire, Wiltshire, Dorset and Cornwall. Since Hampshire was almost invariably taken first on the Circuit the judges were in no position to linger there; a one-day only session in Winchester was standard practice. Record keeping at the Assizes was kept to a minimum. Rolle's verdict was that the blasphemies he had heard 'were so gross that it could not be believed that anyone in his wits could follow them'.²⁰ Franklin was recommitted to prison and ordered to remain there until someone could be found who would stand surety for his good behaviour. No one in fact came forward – and he was still languishing in Winchester's loathsome, badly-managed gaol when he faded out of the record. Gadbury was also imprisoned and again whipped. 'The punishment was too light for such a lewd woman', declared the Judge, 'and her offence was the greater because she committed it under the cloak of religion'. But it seems she was later released and was able to return to London by carrier's waggon at the end of April 1650. The self-proclaimed healing and destroying angels were also put in prison until sureties were found for them. The deluded Parson Woodward was stripped of his church living and committed to gaol; the Judge expressed incredulity how an educated man could fall victim to the wiles of a charlatan like Franklin. Woodward's wife was indicted as a common bawd for allowing Franklin and Gadbury to cohabit in the rectory and was packed off to the House of Correction, a punishment deemed no less suitable for 'spiritual vagrants' than for

20 Hampshire Record Office, Quarter Sessions Records Q1/3 (1649), pp. 14, 25; J.S. Cockburn, *A History of English Assizes, 1558–1714* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 46–48; Cockburn *Western Circuit Assize Orders*, *passim*; Ellis, *Pseudochristus*, p. 50.

those normally committed there. By the standards of the time the punishments were not excessively severe. (The parson's wife was not branded as the 1650 Act allowed). Perhaps securing recantations from the principal offenders and publicly discrediting them were the main purposes of the legal proceedings? A few years later, in 1656, after the Quaker James Nayler had made his symbolic, Christ-like entry into Bristol, the third largest town in the country, he became the focus not simply of local attention but of an extended debate in the House of Commons about whether he deserved the death sentence. Richard Cromwell, who had earlier attended the hearing of the Franklin case at the Winchester Quarter Sessions, was one of those in favour of it. By this time Quakers were judged a much more serious threat to religion and the state than the Ranters had ever been; they were certainly far more numerous and better organised. In the event though Nayler was not executed the harshness of the physical punishment imposed on him greatly exceeded that provided for in the 1650 Blasphemy Act.²¹

The Franklin affair lasted only a short time – from late 1649 to April 1650 – and the chief perpetrators were speedily dealt with to prevent contamination spreading further among the 'giddy people'. Ellis's graphic account of the case predictably ended with much moralising about the unhinged Franklin's delusions and errors, about the unstable, fallen times in which the author and his contemporaries were living, and about the horrors which were likely to ensue when the so-called inner light was elevated above the Scriptures. What would follow when this happened, Ellis insisted, would inevitably be the Devil's work. Recalling the Franklin/Gadbury case a few years later the clergyman author Claudius Gilbert thought that their humiliation and punishment was a salutary lesson designed to 'teach others wisdom and prevent that horrid confusion which otherwise is like to overflow all our banks. If these bears cannot be tamed they had need to be chained except we love to see them do mischief'.²²

21 The miserable conditions in, and mismanagement of, both Winchester's gaol and house of correction are examined in J.S. Furlley, *Quarter Sessions Government in Hampshire in the Seventeenth Century* (Winchester, 1937), pp. 36–42. Ellis, *Pseudochristus*, p. 52. Much later, in 1666, Woodward was again deprived, this time of his living of Trottescliffe, Kent. Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, pp. 200–1 offers a succinct account of the Nayler case. Richard Cromwell's views on it are cited in J.T. Rutt (ed.), *The Diary of Thomas Burton Esq*, 4 vols (London, 1828), I, p. 126.

22 Claudius Gilbert, *The Libertine School'd, or a Vindication of the Magistrate's Power in Religious Matters* (London, 1657), p. 26.

The Wiltshire case to which we now turn overlapped chronologically with Franklin's, though it started earlier and reached its climax a year later. There is no evidence, however, of direct connections between the two central individuals and the sets of events in which they featured. Younger than Franklin, Thomas Webbe was the leading figure in the second case, already notorious for his blasphemous antinomian preaching in London around 1644 when he was little more than twenty years old. This phase and his later tumultuous itinerant ministry in Suffolk, Essex, Kent and Sussex were doggedly pursued by the ever-vigilant Thomas Edwards as one of the many heretical targets denounced in his *Gangraena* (1646).

Not long since [said Edwards], I had some conference with Mr Webbe, a man that pretends a new light, who said unto me ... that he blessed God he never trusted in a crucified Christ nor did he believe him to be the son of God, nor the scriptures divine but human invention and not fit for the rule of life ... There was no more resurrection of a man than of a beast nor had he any more soul than the body yet he granted a spirit in both wicked and godly which he says goes again to him that gave it ... He denies any local hell or Devil more than men are devils in themselves.

Webbe was on record as preaching that scripture was but 'a golden calf' and that 'it were better for a man to sit and be drunk in an alehouse than to be compelled to go to church against his conscience'.²³ Not easily overawed or browbeaten, the pugnacious Webbe crossed swords with Edwards in a published pamphlet in the same year.²⁴

The high point in Webbe's 'ministry', however, was its period in Wiltshire – his native county – which lasted almost five years and was finally terminated in 1651. Here in Wiltshire in 1646, arriving as an 'Angel of Light', Webbe initially made a failed attempt to secure for himself the vicarage in war-scarred Warminster. He succeeded, however, in 1647 in intruding himself into the rectory of Langley Burrell, one and a half miles north-east of Chippenham, a living which had been vacant since the year before when the previous incumbent had been ejected as unsatisfactory. Webbe's opening proclamation to abolish tithes – a burning issue during the English Revolution – no doubt ensured an initial welcome among his parishioners. The living was well

23 Thomas Edwards, *Gangraena* (London, 1646, reprinted Exeter, 1977) p. 54. Quoted in Hughes, *Gangraena*, p. 260.

24 Thomas Webbe, *Mr Edwards Pen no Slander: or, The Gangraena once more searched* (London, 1646).

endowed in any case and Webbe, it seems, demolished outbuildings of the rectory and a large barn and cut down trees on the glebe land to get additional income. Within two years Webbe appears to have set up a Ranter commune in Langley Burrell (though some of its recruits came from outside the parish or from nearby army garrisons). In it he spread blasphemous doctrine and revelled in his simultaneous enjoyment of both a third wife and a mistress (married to Henry White, the patron of the church living) who in due course gave birth to a bastard. He also openly indulged in a homosexual relationship with John Organ, a young married yeoman clothier from Castle Combe, a parish to the east of Langley Burrell. Organ soon ran off with a young woman from Webbe's parish and in due course began a short-lived career as a Ranter evangelist on his own account. Following Webbe's striking example and active encouragement, free love became one of the hallmarks of the Langley Burrell commune. 'There's no Heaven but women', Webbe was alleged to have preached, 'nor no Hell save marriage'.²⁵ Though Edward Stokes, a local magistrate and landowner in nearby Tytherton Lucas was no arch conservative – George Fox, the Quaker, later had cause to be grateful to him for shielding him at Marlborough in 1656 – such abominations were too much to stomach.²⁶ Relatively young for a JP – 36 at the time the Webbe case climaxed – Stokes added his own weight to the complaints made by others against Webbe and his Ranter crew. He began accumulating the damning evidence against this 'mock parson ... a mere masterpiece of hypocrisy and deceit ... this profane stage player ... so that others be not deceived by him as many hundreds in Wiltshire have been'. At least Stokes could later take some comfort in the fact that the Langley Burrell Ranter commune collapsed in due course partly on account of its own internal animosities, fracturing and its members' rival law suits.²⁷

Stokes gathered his material together in a hard-hitting and lengthy tract *The Wiltshire Rant* – eighty three pages long, twenty more than Ellis's *Pseudochristus* – issued, when the dust had largely settled in Wiltshire, in 1652. It combined his own firsthand observations as neighbour and JP of Webbe's activities with full depositions from other witnesses, some of them quite humble, and with much correspondence relating to the case. It seems from this account that Webbe had not held back from controversial engagement in politics. Charles Aland,

25 Edward Stokes, *The Wiltshire Rant* (1652), p. 4

26 N. Penney (ed.), *The Journal of George Fox*, 2 vols (Cambridge, 1911), I, pp. 259, 444.

27 Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant*, p. 2

yeoman, of Langley Burrell told how Webbe had tried to dissuade him from service in the militia and had denounced Parliament as unjust and corrupt. But Webbe's religious perversities were his most conspicuous defining feature and were abundantly documented. William Lewis, yeoman, and his wife from Langley Burrell testified that they had heard the Ranter parson say of his congregation 'Poor fools! They be come to sit and gape upon me whilst I tell them lies ... Preaching and lying are to me both one case'. Hugh Wastfield, another yeoman witness, declared that Webbe had publicly announced in a sermon that 'it was now in working that there can be no such thing as a parsonage or ministry in England'. Others, Mistress White's maidservant among them, testified that Webbe had preached that 'Moses was a conjurer', that 'the works of Jesus Christ and his apostles were dead works and carnal and ended when they died and served but for their time only', and that 'God had put an end to all ministers and ministrations ... and requires no obedience of any scripture commands'.²⁸ Elizabeth Lewis, another deponent, had been scandalised to hear Webbe assert that 'he did live above ordinances of religion and that it was lawful for him to lie with any woman' just as a cock pigeon did with hen pigeons.²⁹ Webbe, it seems, also developed a taste for raucous music and dancing and dabbled in astrology.

Webbe's growing notoriety and the swelling number of complaints and formal charges against him led to appearances before local magistrates, Edward Stokes included, then to an indictment to appear before Quarter Sessions in the autumn of 1650, and finally to his committal to the Assizes in Salisbury in March 1651, the year after Franklin and Gadbury were tried in Winchester. Chief Justice Rolle, no stranger to Ranters by this point, was again presiding.³⁰ This time, however, the Assizes dealt out no conviction. But the Parliamentary Committee for Plundered Ministers finally ejected Webbe from the Langley Burrell rectory in September of that year. The indomitable Ranter, true to form, challenged the legality of the proceedings against him at every turn and defiantly attempted to undermine the credibility of his detractors. He accused Mary White, his mistress, of having insatiable lusts. Far from seducing her, as alleged, Webbe himself

28 Ibid., pp.12, 55

29 Ibid., p. 53

30 J.S. Cockburn (ed.), *Somerset Assize Orders 1640-1659*, Somerset Record Society, 71 (1971), pp. xiv, 37; Rolle (1589/90 - 1656) was briefly captured by the rebels in Salisbury at the time of the Assizes in that city during Penruddock's Rising. A.H. Woolrych, *Penruddock's Rising, 1655* (London, 1955), p. 18.

claimed that he had been the victim of her frequent unwanted amorous attentions. She forced him, he asserted, 'to commit the detestable sin of uncleanness so often in one day that he was glad he could take the air'. But Edward Stokes felt the full thrust of the Ranter's wrath and was accused in a published tract *A Masse of Malice against Thomas Webbe* of blasphemy, theft and of spitefully preventing bail from being granted to Webbe and Mistress White. (The theft charge, backed up by John Aland, Webbe's churchwarden, constable or tithingman ally in Langley Burrell, related to the alleged misappropriation of parish funds). Stokes wearily summarised this lengthy 'bundle of notorious untruths, ... malicious filth', painstakingly refuting all the allegations against him. Aland, earmarked by other JPs as 'a person of evil name, fame, and behaviour', was bound over to appear before Quarter Sessions.³¹ The long drawn out and tempestuous legal process involving the Langley Burrell minister, however, was uneven. Sometimes it had been punctuated by displays of sham repentance and recantation. Webbe finally quitted Wiltshire in the autumn of 1651 to return to London, his old stomping ground.

His departure certainly led before long to the re-emergence of normality in Langley Burrell. Although parish records for this period no longer survive it is known from the Quarter Sessions Rolls that unlicensed alehouses there, 'nurseries to vice and lewdness', were closed down in April 1651. Edwards Stokes's activities as a JP gradually subsided into routine business connected with the taking of recognizances, the maintenance of highways, bridges and ditches, and with petty larcenies, bastardy cases, slander, and disputes between neighbours.³² But John Organ, Webbe's former lover, who had lately been posturing as 'a reformed man ... [with] such religious discourse', was in trouble again in the summer of 1651 when he was indicted to appear before Quarter Sessions to answer charges that he had tried to seduce a young widow from Castle Combe and entice her to go away with him to Holland.³³ Webbe himself, back on the London stage, was not silenced. This unrepentant Ranter firebrand was on trial at the Old Bailey in a further case of adultery in 1654, though again acquitted due to insufficient evidence. He rushed into print in that year (under the pseudonym Abraham Lawmind) spiritedly defending himself against,

31 Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant*, p. 15; Wiltshire and Swindon Archives, Chippenham [hereafter W&SA] Quarter Sessions Rolls. A/110 Michaelmas 1651 (187, 179).

32 W&SA, Quarter Sessions Entry Book 1648–53 (A1/150/10) and Quarter Sessions Rolls, A1/110 Hilary 1651 (99)

33 W&SA, Quarter Sessions Rolls A1/110 Trinity 1651 (150).

what he considered, the iniquitous proceedings against him. Under another pseudonym – on this occasion ‘Mad Tom’ – he was in print again for a final time in 1660, parading as ‘a king of faction’, brushing off the charges of madness and Ranterism made against him and lashing out at Quakers and Fifth Monarchists.³⁴

As we have seen, the principal opponents of Franklin and Webbe both published detailed records of the exploits of their Ranter adversaries, and it is chiefly these which have made possible the extended comparison offered in this article. The two authors came from different backgrounds, engaged with their respective subjects from different stances, and couched their accounts in noticeably different language and prose styles. Humphry Ellis wrote in the way one would expect from a mainstream puritan clergyman of the time. The discourse in his narrative was perfectly in line with his earlier published sermons on antichrists; religious contamination never for a moment failed to occupy centre stage in his account and his concerns were, ultimately, for a fallen world and not simply for a particular part of an English county. Framed and underpinned with Biblical quotations his linear, clearly structured, presentation of the Franklin case was itself a kind of moralising sermon and it ended with a prayer. The title page of Stokes’s tract also carried a Biblical text (Isaiah 59, 4–6) with its pointed pun on the word ‘web’. That said, Edward Stokes, a layman and puritan magistrate, produced a text that, with its consistently specific focus and long-winded rehearsal and verbatim submission of evidence and witness depositions, chiefly displayed all the hallmarks of the kind of local legal proceedings with which he would have been familiar on a daily basis. As his only venture into print and naturally not one that could draw directly on the same personal experience of pulpit oratory, *The Wiltshire Rant* clearly lacked Ellis’s rhetorical skills and polish. Both texts, however, shared common ground in combining factual reportage with hostility. Neither author could convincingly lay claim to objectivity despite their professions to the contrary. (That Stokes in the course of his dealings with Webbe was at one point fending off libellous allegations against himself no doubt fuelled his exposure of the Ranter). Both writers were openly judgemental and they depicted individuals, groups and phenomena deemed to be uncontestably outrageous, disruptive, and destabilising from both a religious and social point of view. Ellis, the clergyman author, predictably had more

34 Thomas Webbe, *A Lasting Almanack for the Reign of the Fifth Monarchy* (London, 1660).

on the religious dimensions of the case – not surprisingly in view of Franklin's messianism. Revealingly, however, Ellis did not use the word 'Ranter' as a label to describe the Crux Easton/Andover dissidents and their leader. Indeed his preface makes clear that he was quite at a loss when faced with trying to give a precise title to the 'high impieties ... [the] like thereunto hath not yet been heard of to have been acted amongst us in this nation'. Franklin, he suggested, had probably picked up his errors from the Familists. Anabaptists and Seekers were also thrown into his narrative at times as reference points. Stokes had no such terminological problem. He was absolutely certain what description to apply to Webbe and his crew. 'Ranting' figures in the very title of his tract and was used repeatedly throughout his text as a term which he was obviously confident would be readily understood by his readers and enlist their support. In the short two-year interval separating the appearance of *Pseudochristus* and *The Wiltshire Rant* the Ranter sensation had burst on the scene and the catch-all, hostile, word 'Ranter' had been coined and entered common usage. It was not the first label to gain almost instant acceptance in the 1640s. 'Leveller' was another, slightly earlier, in 1647. Vocabulary expanded rapidly as required to keep up with the fast-moving explosive, revolutionary times.³⁵

In terms of background and subject matter similarities between the two cases abound. Though it seems that the two men never actually met each other for both Franklin and Webbe London was the common denominator in their Ranter progress; both had served apprenticeships and practised their trades – rope-maker and hat-maker respectively – in the capital before moving back to home ground in Hampshire and Wiltshire. Once returned, both took advantage of the religious instabilities and vacuum which they found there. Franklin enjoyed the temporary support of a local rector and his deluded wife in Crux Easton, Hampshire. Webbe illegitimately acted the part of the incumbent of a vacant church living in Wiltshire. Both exuberantly practised Ranter antinomianism and challenged social and moral as well as religious norms. Both of them evangelised successfully and made a startling impact on their local scenes. Franklin's self-aggrandisement, of course, could not possibly have been greater since he presented himself to his followers as the risen Christ. Webbe, though not one to undervalue himself, at least held back from duplicating such claims. But as a Ranter preacher and controversialist he was in other respects more vocal and

35 G.E. Aylmer, 'Did the Ranters Exist?', *Past & Present*, 117 (1987), 217.

assertive than his Hampshire counterpart, much less easily intimidated by those in authority and by the law, and far more resolute in refusing to concede defeat. Ultimately though both were charged under the Adultery Act of 1650 neither was convicted nor made to receive the death penalty which it prescribed. (It was unclear anyway whether Gadbury's husband who had disappeared was still alive). Webbe and White were acquitted at the Salisbury Assizes, perhaps chiefly because Mary White's husband (springing to the defence of his own tarnished reputation) repudiated the adultery charge. Nor did the Assizes trial in Webbe's case invoke the Blasphemy Act, by then on the statute book. Stokes in *The Wiltshire Rant* curiously did not openly express shock at the unwanted outcome, but merely took pains to underline that the acquitted Webbe failed to turn over a new leaf and unrepentantly continued in his debauched, mentally twisted, Ranter fashion. Webbe simply refused to give up. His case rumbled on even after the deprivation of his church living by the Committee for Plundered Ministers. By contrast, the Franklin *cause celebre* in Hampshire – shorter in duration anyway – was brought to an abrupt closure by the Winchester Assizes in the spring of 1650. That there were relatively few later prosecutions against others under the Blasphemy Act, passed in the summer of that year, would appear to indicate a reluctance on the part of the civil authorities to move into new, previously uncharted territory (for them) and directly confront Ranters and other extremists as heretics rather than as social dissidents. And the death penalty promised in the terms of the Adultery Act was in practice viewed as too harsh to be implemented.

Other isolated instances of Ranter activity in Hampshire and Wiltshire cropped up in the next two years, as in Petersfield where Richard Faulkner was proceeded against by the local magistrates for drinking the health of the Devil and asserting that Christ was a bastard. There was probably a small Ranter group in Salisbury at this time with which Webbe associated. William Eyre, a Salisbury preacher, published a defence of antinomianism – *Justification without Conditions* – in 1654. In 1656 two Ranter weavers from Lacock, Wiltshire, William Bond and Thomas Hibbord, were indicted before the Quarter Sessions. Bond, it seems, had openly declared

There was no God or power ruling above the planets, no Christ but the sun that shines upon us, that the twelve patriarchs were the twelve houses, [and] that if the scriptures were a making again Tom Lampire of Melksham would make as good scripture as the Bible, that there was neither heaven nor hell but in a man's conscience.

For if he had a good fortune and did well in the world that was heaven, and if he lived poor and miserable that was hell and death itself, for then he would die like a cow or horse.

Less expansive but still forthright in his own way Hibbord, it was alleged, had sworn that he would trade all religions for a jug of beer. In the same year the Wiltshire Grand Jury expressed anxieties about those in parts of the county who 'do wander about spreading many evil and dangerous opinions to the dishonour of God and the blaspheming his name'.³⁶

But in general Ranterism in these two counties and also elsewhere faded away as quickly as it had appeared. Leading light Abiezer Coppe calmed down and later practised as a surgeon in Surrey under an assumed name (Higham) and died in 1672. Bauthumley was sufficiently subdued to become a librarian in Leicester. Some Ranters turned to Quakerism and partly for that reason the early Quakers were often confused with Ranters. They shared some common cultural ground, it is true. Quakers, like Ranters, stressed the inner light, were socially levelling, were no less opposed to conventional religion and to the status of church buildings within it, and at first were often uncontrollably expressive, noisy and attention-seeking, though not libertines. Only later after 1660 – in order to survive – did Quakerism subside into respectability and pacificism, its later defining features. Quakers, Richard Baxter opined, became 'but the Ranters turned from prophaneness and blasphemy to a life of extreme austerity'.³⁷ By contrast, the first ebullient, defiant Quakers, like Ranters, were persecuted and imprisoned. Unlike Ranters, however, Quakers tended to refuse to recant and their graphic accounts of their sufferings became a major part of the foundation of their later success. Clearly, the fortunes of Quakers and Ranters were closely bound up with each

36 Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant*, p. 15. Thomas Hotchkiss, *An Exercitation concerning the Nature and Forgiveness of Sin* (1655), cited in Hill, 'Dr Tobias Crisp', p. 153. Quoted in McGregor and Reay, *Radical Religion and the English Revolution*, p. 134. B.H. Cunington (ed.), *Records of the County of Wiltshire* (Devizes, 1932), p.231, quoted in A. Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500–1700* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 345–56.

37 Quoted in McGregor, 'Ranterism and the development of early Quakerism', 350. Reay in his *Quakers in the English Revolution* (London, 1985) argued that fears of the apparently runaway growth of early Quakerism – the numbers involved were far greater than those of the Ranters and their organisation was impressive – made a decisive contribution to the closing of propertied ranks which ensured the Restoration of 1660.

other. In the end Ranters were not persecuted out of existence; the law was too hesitantly and feebly enforced to bring that about. Quakerism came to fill the space which Ranters had temporarily occupied, initially as a not all too easily distinguishable alternative, and then – in its mollified new form – as a distinctively different replacement.

It may be very tempting to dismiss Franklin, Webbe and their coteries out of hand as simply part of either an ephemeral seventeenth-century lunatic fringe or 'timeless Bedlam' – but we should not. These two rather different Ranter figures help provide an entrée into hitherto unexamined social and cultural aspects of local worlds. Self evidently also the Franklin and Webbe cases and the Ranter phenomenon in general – though short lived – have much to tell us about the insecurities and uncertainties of the overheated English Revolution when a country had cut itself adrift from its time-honoured anchorings in the monarchical state and the Anglican Church and was moving who knew where. It seemed to many in the 1640s that a brave, inverted, new world was dawning. Some wanted this to happen, and recognised that new freedoms actually gave them new status and opportunities. Those who were hostile allowed their anxieties and phobias to take over, they greatly exaggerated the Ranter threat, and over-reacted when confronted by it. The Ranters' reputation undoubtedly exceeded their reality and since Ranterism itself lacked internal coherence the term 'Ranter' was often applied imprecisely and used as a stick with which to beat assorted dissidents and oddballs. Edward Stokes, for one, certainly recognised the potency of the label he was using. For these reasons alone both Ranters themselves and their defeat have much to tell us about the confused, competing cross currents of the times. Studying Ranters also self-evidently connects with the attempted puritan moral stabilisation and godly reformation of the interregnum, with the Adultery and Blasphemy Acts of 1650, and associated assault on worldly pleasures. Bernard Capp did not fail to find a place for Ranters in his *England's Culture Wars. Puritan Reformation and its Enemies in the Interregnum, 1649–1660* (Oxford, 2012) which examined the patchwork of outcomes stemming from the concerted efforts made in the interregnum to curb irreligion, profanity, sexual promiscuity, drunkenness, gambling and riotous recreation. Earlier (from different angles) Ranters had featured in David Underdown's revealing study of the complex contrasts in religion, political allegiance and popular culture between the West Country chalk and cheese country in his *Revel, Riot and Rebellion. Popular Politics and Culture in England 1603–1660* (Oxford, 1985). Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, 1971) drew Ranters into his exploration of the pantheistic cultural underworld

of early modern England. Ranters occupy a secure place in the *Dictionary of British Radicals in the Seventeenth Century* edited by Richard Greaves and Robert Zaller (3 vols, Brighton, 1982–84). History, after all, should not simply confine itself to the winners, as historians like Christopher Hill were always at pains to remind us. Much can always be learned from studying the varied experiences of defeat.

III

The legacies of Ranterism, both religious and historiographical, resonated for long after the mid-seventeenth century. At the very end of the eighteenth century William Blake for one harked back in his beliefs to Ranters and Muggletonians. Nor did the actual term 'Ranter' go out of use in the seventeenth century. The early nineteenth-century Primitive Methodists particularly were often called Ranters, especially by outsiders, commentators and critics. Their revivalist, extemporaneous worship, loud singing and preference for outdoor camp meetings – so different from the, by then, staid respectability of Wesleyan Methodism – evidently allowed long-since eclipsed folk memories of an earlier past to re-surface. Like their seventeenth-century originals these later so-called 'Ranters' were predominantly plebeian and were characteristically drawn from the open villages of the countryside and from the industrial towns of the Midlands and North; Primitive Methodism began in Staffordshire but spread extensively. Significantly, perhaps, Primitive Methodists were to be found in nineteenth-century Andover and Chippenham, two of the places which had earlier featured in the Ranter ministries of Franklin and Webbe discussed above.³⁸ But whereas the seventeenth-century Ranters had a reputation for boisterous, defiantly drunken, immoral behaviour and blasphemy, their later incarnations often became highly respectable teetotallers who turned their back on working-class excesses. Ranterism in other words has a long, complex, and sometimes contradictory history – another reason for taking the trouble to study it.

I can personally attest this. As a boy I was raised in a Methodist chapel in Lancashire (Morton St., Middleton, near Manchester). It

38 Julia S. Werner, *The Primitive Methodist Connexion. Its Background and Early History* (Madison, WI, 1984); R.W. Ambler, *Ranters, Revivalists and Reformers. Primitive Methodism and Rural Society. South Lincolnshire, 1817–1875* (Hull, 1989). J.M. Wilson, *The Imperial Gazetteer of England and Wales*, 6 vols, (London, 1870) includes outline information, based on the 1851 Religious Census, about the Primitive Methodist presence in these parishes.

had originally been part of the Primitive Methodist connection, and its distinctive origins were still clearly visible in the severely plain and functional architecture of the building, in the style of worship, and in its predominantly working-class membership. Two elderly ladies in the congregation regularly caught my eye. Good old-fashioned, rousing hymns with choruses were sung at this chapel, and these two old ladies would warble them with immense gusto, close their eyes, sway slightly, and frequently stretch out their arms in ecstasy. They loudly boomed out their Amens across the chapel. In answer to my enquiries about them, my mother explained that they were Ranters. I did not question the label at the time but it did seem rather odd to me that such well-dressed, eminently respectable people – pillars of the congregation, one the wife of a JP and the other a JP in her own right – should choose to worship in such an uncharacteristically demonstrative way. It was a youthful image of Ranters which hardly prepared me for first encountering – many years later – their seventeenth-century originals.

The historiographical legacy of the Ranterism has been no less striking. Unquestionably Ranters have been the subject of intense controversy among historians. In the late 1980s a bitter debate raged, launched by the publication of J.C. Davis's book *Fear, Myth and History. The Ranters and the Historians* (Cambridge, 1986). In this short text, less than 140 pages long without its substantial appendix of Ranter texts, Davis argued vigorously that Ranters were a double fabrication. In the first place they were all but invented during the 'moral panic' which followed the Civil Wars and the events of 1649 and were the creation of those with axes to grind about the horrors of deviancy and religious toleration, of other radicals conscious that their own reputation was at risk, and of a small group of sensationalist London printers with an eye on the market and with an existing armoury of stock images of libertines and atheists contained in contemporary character writings which could be hastily deployed.³⁹ In reality, Davis insisted, there was no Ranter movement, no Ranter sect, campaign, or theology, not even a hard core of Ranter leaders with a common cause. After subjecting their published texts to detailed examination only Clarkson, according to Davis, seemed to embody most of the usually accepted Ranter attributes. Coppe and Bauthumley did not. Franklin

39 One example was John Earle's *Microcosmography*, first published in 1628. This contains an essay on 'A prophane man'. See H. Morley (ed.) *Character Writings of the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1891), p. 232. The genre of character writing continued later in the century with Samuel Butler, for one, offering his sketch of 'A Ranter'. See *ibid.*, pp. 403–4.

and Webbe figured fleetingly in Davis's account but ultimately were not classified as Ranters, not least since in the end Davis had no such category in which to place them. The 'Ranter sensation', Davis concluded, was exceedingly short-lived and largely groundless. How strange, unwarranted, and unforgiveable, therefore, that some modern historians – A.L. Morton and Christopher Hill chief amongst them – should have committed the second fabrication by converting the Ranters into an identifiable plebeian movement, defiantly making its own history in resistance to those in authority and to the repressive puritan code of the time. These historians' dedication to the cause of 'History from below', Davis argued caustically, simply got out of control. In Morton's *The World of the Ranters* and Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down* Ranters were grossly over emphasised and falsified simply because they were necessary to affirm the marxist historians' preconceived theory of revolution. Untrustworthy contemporary sources expressing mid seventeenth-century fears and phobias and not documenting realities were allowed to underpin a fundamentally flawed edifice of interpretation.

In urging historians to look again at the Ranters and the evidence relating to them with fresh eyes, to locate them firmly in their fractured, anxiety-ridden times, and perhaps to re-think typologies of sectarianism, Davis may have performed a useful service. In that sense at least his book takes its place as a provocative and revealing case study alongside K.T. Erikson's account of New England's *Wayward Puritans. A Study of the Sociology of Deviance* (New York, 1966) and Georges Lefebvre's (very different) *The Great Fear of 1789. Rural Panic in Revolutionary France* (London, 1973). The intemperate charges against Hill embodied in Davis's book, however, did not stick except among died-in-the-wool reactionaries like J.P. Kenyon and were in any case grounded on mistaken assumptions. (Kenyon gloatingly reviewed Davis's book for *The Observer* and expressed the hope that now that the Ranters had been despatched to oblivion the Diggers would surely be the next casualty of modern historical revisionism). Other reviewers of Davis's book such as Barry Coward and Keith Lindley were unconvinced by the author's premises and methodology. Gerald Aylmer concluded that Davis had greatly overstrained his case.⁴⁰ But Hill had never in fact claimed that Ranters were a coherent sect or movement – his

40 Barry Coward in *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 February 1987; Keith Lindley in *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 23 January 1987; Aylmer, 'Did the Ranters Exist?', 208–19, especially 219.

stated preference was for the term 'Ranter milieu' – and the following year he reiterated this point forcefully in a published response to Davis's volume. Davis's criteria for establishing the existence of the Ranters were dismissed by Hill as anachronistically impossible. Self evidently no sect or religious grouping in mid seventeenth-century England was capable of organising itself along the same lines as later denominations.⁴¹ Revealingly, Andrew Bradstock in his recent study of *Radical Religion in Cromwell's England* (2011) passed over Davis's book exceedingly quickly and, rather pointedly, did not even mention its author by name.

Jerome Friedman's *Blasphemy, Immorality and Anarchy. The Ranters and the English Revolution* (Athens, OH 1987) was in course of production at the time Davis's book appeared so no mention was, or could be, made of it. In almost every respect, however, this volume was the antithesis of *Fear, Myth and History*. Here, after a sketchy contextualisation which sought to establish the theological family tree of the Ranters and its affinities with Gnostic heresies, the examination of individual Ranter figures proceeded by grouping them (somewhat artificially) under such headings as philosophical Ranters, sexual libertines, and Divine Ranters. Anti-Ranters, more convincingly, were also placed in different sub-categories. As in Davis's book it was Ranter published texts which formed the chief object of attention here but whereas in Davis's case such an exercise was used to make the Ranters evaporate Friedman employed it to demonstrate that they needed to be seen as the 'chief sectarian expression of radical frustration with the outcome of the Civil Wars'. For Friedman these class-conscious anarchists had a presence 'in virtually every corner of England'. Their importance, he insisted, was undeniable.

Such strident claims were undermined, however, by Friedman's slipshod methodology which too readily accepted biased reporting as objective fact, his imperfect grasp of the circumstances of mid seventeenth-century England, and by his unscholarly style. His approach to his subject took for granted that, despite some individual differences, there was a Ranter consensus. Moreover, he claimed that Ranters came closest to expressing the sentiments of the majority of the population. Franklin and Gadbury and Webbe were given short chapters of their own but in these the transatlantic Friedman's

41 C. Hill, 'The Lost Ranters? A critique of J.C.Davis', *History Workshop Journal* 24 (1987), 134–40. In the end Hill could not understand why Davis devoted 'so much time and effort to such a dubious project ... Why is it so important for him to prove that [Ranters] did not exist? What is he frightened of?' (140).

unfamiliarity with local geography and other local detail let him down badly. But there was worse to come since ultimately *Blasphemy, Immorality and Anarchy* offered not simply an account but a committed defence of the Ranter phenomenon.⁴² It is all too easy to imagine what Davis would have made of all this if Friedman's rather eccentric book had been in print when he launched into his attack on Morton and Hill (paragons of historiographical virtue in comparison).

There was certainly much Ranter smoke in the mid seventeenth century – all writing about them have been in agreement at least on that score – and this article has attempted to break new ground by attempting to show through local evidence drawn from Hampshire and Wiltshire how and why the smoke rose up and spread. But it seems certain that below the smoke there were real, if not widespread, fires causing it and that these occurred in highly combustible local surroundings. The Ranter preachers, and others like them, featured in this article briefly saw to that. Heresiographers like Edwards were surely not tilting at windmills, as Ann Hughes' systematic unpacking of the repetitious text of *Gangraena* and the evidence underpinning its moral stories conclusively demonstrated. She conceded that Edwards' book might not be a factual catalogue but, notwithstanding the author's fixations, it can still be reckoned 'an exercise in truth-telling'. Similarly most present historians in the field – such as James Holstun in his *Ehud's Dagger. Class Struggle in the English Revolution* (London, 2000) – are now inclined to view Davis's 1986 book as little more than a polemical outburst. The ironic final postscript to these Hampshire and Wiltshire Ranter stories is unexpectedly contained within the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, a much more balanced and inclusive publication than its original late nineteenth-century, starched-collar, predecessor which chiefly celebrated the famous. Humphry Ellis and Edward Stokes, unsurprisingly, are not included.⁴³ The two local Ranter leaders discussed in this article, William Franklin and Thomas Webbe, however, both find a place and receive scholarly attention. Ranter fires, it seems, are still smoking.

42 Friedman, *Blasphemy, Immorality and Anarchy*, pp. 15, xi, 9, 10, 11, 311, 314, 233, 166, 161, 235, 165, 312, 313. Friedman later re-cycled some of his Ranter material – semi verbatim at times – in his later book *Miracles and the Pulp Press during the English Revolution* (London, 1993).

43 A.G. Matthews, *Calamy Revised* (Oxford, 1934), however, offers a brief biography of Ellis who died in April 1687 at Mottistone on the Isle of Wight where he had been rector since December 1664. Before moving to the Isle of Wight he had briefly served as rector of Langton Maltravers in Dorset after 1660 before being ejected.