

## SOME INCIDENTS IN EARLY WORCESTER QUAKERISM

**T**he earliest visits by Quakers to the city of Worcester were those of the Yorkshiremen Thomas Goodaire and Richard Farnsworth in 1655. Edward Bourne, the Worcester doctor who later (in 1685) described the growth of Quakerism in the city, wrote, 'The first we know of who published [truth] in Worcester... were Thomas Goodaire and Richard Farnsworth. Richard Farnsworth had the first meeting in Worcester... Thomas Goodaire was then a prisoner in Worcester Castle prison for speaking to Richard Baxter at his place of worship in Kidderminster. Richard came to see him and appointed a meeting [at Widow Drew's house], which was the first meeting we know of...' <sup>1</sup> This seems to have been in April or May 1655.

Though the house is no longer in existence, we know where 'widow Drew's house' was. Sarah Drew lived in a house abutting on Dark Alley (which once ran from the cloisters of the Cathedral down to the River Severn). It was in the parish of St. Michael in Bedwardine and had belonged to a former Rector of St. Michael's, Nathaniel Marston. <sup>2</sup> In her will of 5 March 1665/6 Sarah left 'the residue of my goods and chattels, edifice and edifices... unto my dear and loving friend Nicholas Blackmore.' (Blackmore [d.1670] was also a Quaker). Her inventory, taken on 29 January 1666/7, totals £85.4.2. <sup>3</sup> From Edward Bourne we learn that others present at the meeting at her house included Robert Smith, baker, Elizabeth Careless and Bourne himself.

Soon after this, but also in 1655, George Fox, perhaps the greatest figure in the early history of Quakerism, himself visited Worcester. In Edward Bourne's words, 'He... had a good meeting the evening after he came to the town. Some contentious professors of religion, when the meeting was over, endeavoured to occasion a dispute and to raise contention in the street... the next day he had a dispute with one Clement Writer, who would have G.F. and Friends confirm their doctrine by miracles. [This dispute] was at Sarah Drew's house, who was a widow woman and one who received Friends in the beginning.' George Fox makes no mention of the dispute with Writer in his Journal <sup>4</sup> but among the Swarthmore MSS. is a copy of a letter he sent to Writer referring to their dispute. <sup>5</sup>

Who was Clement Writer? <sup>6</sup> Baptised at All Saints, Worcester on 13 December 1586, he was the son of John Writer, baker, and his wife

Ursula (née Worfield). Clement Writer was a clothier. Very little is known about his life. In 1629 he sent a petition to the corporation about 'the Shambles next to the [Pump] in Baxter St.'<sup>7</sup> His will shows that he owned property in Baxter St. and in the suburb of St. John's. In the 1630s Clement Writer was involved in a lawsuit with his uncle George Worfield and petitioned the Long Parliament about this in 1640 and again in 1646, when he sent in 'The Sad Case of Clement Writer, who hath waited for relief... since the 4th of December 1640.' He was petitioning the Lord Protector about the case in 1656. Writer died in 1662.

For his religious views we have to rely on the testimony of men who disliked him. The Presbyterian Thomas Edwards wrote in his *Gangraena* of 1647 that about 1638 Writer 'fell off from the communion of our churches to Independency and Brownism; from that he fell to Anabaptism and Arminianism and to Mortalism, holding the soul mortal. After that he fell to be a Seeker and is now an antiscipturalist, questionist, sceptic and, I fear, an atheist.'<sup>8</sup> He was by 1646 'an arch-heretic and fearful apostate, an old wolf and a subtle man, who goes about corrupting and ventilating his errors.' In c.1664 Richard Baxter<sup>9</sup> wrote 'About the same time [?1653] I fell into troublesome acquaintance with one Clement Writer of Worcester, an ancient man that had long seemed a forward professor in religiousness and of good conversation, but was now perverted into I know not what. A Seeker he professed to be but I easily perceived he was either a juggling Papist or an infidel, but I more suspected the latter.' Clement Writer wrote in his published works for what he called 'the middle sort and plain-hearted people' and said that 'if any divine right remains now in England, it is in the people of England.'<sup>10</sup>

Baxter tells us that in conversation with him Writer argued that 'no man is bound to believe in Christ who doth not see confirming miracles himself with his own eyes,' and it is clear that Writer took the same line with him as he did with George Fox. He describes Writer's *The Ius Divinum of Presbytery* (1646; second edition 1655) as 'a scornful book against the ministry' and he admits that his own book *The Unreasonableness of Infidelity* (1655) was written 'by the provocation of this apostate.' Although Clement Writer is not named in the work, one section discusses 'whether the miraculous works of Christ and his disciples 'do oblige those to believe who never saw them?' Baxter attacks 'those apostates in England that go under the name of Sceptics and Seekers,' and says that it was 'a... private conference with some

miserable men who maintained the negative' that led him to introduce the above subject to the ministers of the Worcestershire Association for debate.

In 1657 Writer produced *Fides Divina* in which he sought to prove the unreliability of the scriptures because of the possibility of errors of transcription or translation. Baxter replied with *A Second Sheet for the Ministry* (1657) and this was followed by Writer's *An Apologetical Narration* (1658), written in vindication of himself against the criticisms of Richard Baxter. The tone of this work is pessimistic. Writer says that it is not possible to 'call back the light of the glorious gospel of Christ when it is withdrawn by God, as now apparently it is, the times and seasons for these things being solely in his own power and dispose' and that, as 'This Babylonish darkness is like to continue,' the religious must tolerate one another, pray and wait.<sup>11</sup> These gloomy sentiments may owe something to the writings of the famous Seeker William Erbery (d.1654). Despite what Baxter says, there can be little doubt that Writer too saw himself as a Seeker, since, in Baxter's words, 'These taught that our Scripture was uncertain; that present miracles are necessary to faith... and that the true church... was lost for which they are now seeking...'<sup>12</sup>

Clement Writer's call for 'confirming miracles' in his dispute with Fox can not only be seen as typical of the approach taken by the Seekers, but as a challenge which at least some Quakers (in Worcester and elsewhere) thought they could, and should, meet. Though their approach probably always represented a minority viewpoint, the division of Quaker opinion over this highlights what has been called a 'struggle in infant Quakerism.'<sup>13</sup>

It is now widely accepted that Quakerism before 1660 was very different from what it later became and indeed now is.<sup>14</sup> As Christopher Hill has written, 'the whole early Quaker movement was far closer to the Ranters in spirit than its leaders later liked to recall'<sup>15</sup> (the Ranters were the most outrageous and amoral of the radical groups of the 1650s). Furthermore, though in retrospect George Fox came to be seen as the Founding Father of Quakerism, in the 1650s it was James Nayler<sup>16</sup> who was most often seen as the leader of the sect, and it is arguable that it is in Nayler that the Ranter element in Quakerism was at its strongest.

In Exeter gaol in 1656, a year expected by many to usher in the Millennium, James Nayler, as many people believed, raised from the dead Dorcas Erbery, the daughter of the Seeker William Erbery.<sup>17</sup> In so doing he was, as he saw it, playing the role of St. Peter in Acts 9.40, who raised Dorcas, also called Tabitha. Later that year Nayler made a

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triumphal entry into Bristol on a donkey (with his enthusiastic followers strewing palm branches before him) in the manner of Christ's entry into Jerusalem. The punishment imposed by Parliament for this blasphemy undoubtedly shortened Nayler's life (he died in 1660). These acts of Nayler have been ascribed with some plausibility to the Ranter spirit in early Quakerism. However, Dr. G.F. Nuttall<sup>18</sup> has persuasively argued that they may more accurately be seen as reflecting the beliefs of Familism (which was often said to have given birth to Ranterism), and it is likely that Nayler's behaviour owed something to the Familist belief that it was possible to be totally inhabited by Christ or other figures of the apostolic or pre-apostolic age.

However this may be, the 'raising' of Dorcas Erbery was not an isolated case. In this same year of 1656 some Quakers travelled to Colchester in the confident expectation of the resurrection of their fellow Quaker James Parnell who had died in the prison there.<sup>19</sup> And we shall shortly consider the case which occurred near Worcester in 1657. It would be wrong to consider these anticipated or attempted resurrections as reflecting beliefs held solely by a "lunatic fringe" of Quakerism. The actual situation was much more complicated. The attitude of the early Quakers to miracles was inconsistent and ambivalent. There was a widespread expectation, on the part of Quakers and non-Quakers, that the new movement should establish its claims by miracles. So Quakers frequently claimed miraculous cures, though they generally refused to attempt miracles which were demanded of them. One hundred and fifty miraculous cures were attributed to George Fox alone,<sup>20</sup> and Fox was certainly influenced by Familist beliefs - he several times refers to himself in the years 1650-54 as 'the son of God.'<sup>22</sup> Yet he was always more cautious and more of a realist than Nayler, and the fate of Nayler had a sobering effect on him. He told Writer in 1655 that the demand for confirming miracles was an unreasonable one. In 1659 he wrote, 'Many prayed by the spirit and spake by the spirit that did not show miracles at the tempter's command, though among believers there are miracles in the spirit which are signs and wonders to the world...'<sup>22</sup> His hardening attitude to attempted resurrections is shown by his reaction to the Worcester case of 1657, to which we shall now turn.

This strange incident, which involved at least some members of the Quaker group in Worcester, is reported most fully in (an admittedly hostile account) the 'Mercurius Politicus' (of 26 February - 5 March 1657 : the account is dated February 28): '... one Susanna Pearson, having formerly been a pretended lover of, and a zealous contender for Christ, scriptures, ordinances, ministers, members etc... She hath since proved an apostate from, and been (as I may say) half mad against, each

of the former; and at length she embarked among that idle sect called the Quakers. Her wonted practice for these late months... was this, to wag from one assembly to another, requiring the ministers then and there preaching to prove their call by miracles, as the apostles did, and to show what grounds they had to preach... and did witness against them and would often bid them to come down... There was in this city one William Pool, an apprentice to George Knight... both Quakers; the young man was aged about 23 years and Friday the 20 of February he went forth of his master's house about evening into the garden and (as 'tis reported), being asked where he had been, he said he had been with Christ; Christ had him by the hand and he had appointed and must be gone again to him.

'But, being gone, he came not again nor was he heard of till Sunday following, February 22, and then it was found he had stripped himself, laid his clothes by the waterside and drowned himself... [he] was buried in the parish of Claines by four of the clock on Monday morning... about six or seven hours after he was buried the said Mrs. Pearson and other Quakers went to the grave, digged up the young man, opened the shroud and laid the corpse upon the ground, rubbed his face and breast with her hand (and some say laid her face on his face and her hands upon his hands) and commanded him to rise. But he not moving, she kneeled down and prayed over him and so commanded him, in the name of the living God, to arise and walk. This being done and he not obeying, she caused him to be put in the grave again and hence departed, having only this excuse left her, that he had not yet been dead four days...' <sup>23</sup> Thomas Willan of Kendal sent Margaret Fell (later Mrs. George Fox) an account of the case, based on the newspaper account. George Fox endorsed the letter 'mad whimsy,' but it is not clear when he did so. <sup>24</sup>

'And some say laid her face on his face and her hands upon his hands.' This sentence shows that Susan(na) may have seen herself as playing the part of Elisha when he restored to life the son of the Shunamite woman (2 Kings, 4:34-5). However, perhaps the most significant words are that William Pool had not 'yet been dead four days.' This is clearly a reference to John 11:17ff. - Christ's raising of Lazarus - and suggests that Susan(na) Pearson, like Nayler on his entry into Bristol, aspired to a Christlike role on this occasion (as does the command to William Pool to 'arise and walk') but felt that she should have waited four days, the period for which Lazarus had been dead before Christ raised him.

It is interesting that Richard Baxter mentions both Susan(na) Pearson and James Nayler, in that order, in a passage of his autobiography, which is anyway very revealing about his attitude to the early Quakers: <sup>25</sup> '... The Quakers, who were but the Ranters turned from

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horrid profaneness and blasphemy to a life of extreme austerity on the other side. Their doctrines were mostly the same with the Ranters... divers of them went naked through the chief towns and cities of the land as a prophetic act. Some of them have famished and drowned themselves in melancholy, and others undertaken by the power of the Spirit to raise them (as Susan Pearson did at Claines near Worcester, where they took a man out of his grave that had made away himself, and commanded him to arise and live, but to their shame). Their chief leader James Nayler acted the part of Christ at Bristol...’.

Nothing else is known about the unfortunate William Pool. However, there are a number of references to Susan Pearson in Quaker records.<sup>26</sup> She was several times fined and imprisoned (for short periods) in both Worcester and Evesham (with Worcester the most important Quaker centre in the county)<sup>27</sup> in the late 1650s and early 1660s. Perhaps the most interesting reference to her is in a list of 20 Quakers named in an order made by the Assize judges at Worcester and dated 16 July 1662.<sup>28</sup> The 20 Quakers were convicted of assembling for a religious meeting at the house of Robert Smith, baker, in Worcester and were each fined £5. In the list are Thomas Pearson, gentleman, and his wife Susan. It is virtually certain that Susan Pearson, wife of Thomas, is the lady involved in the William Pool case. At the trial of the Quakers she said, when asked to plead, ‘Whose ox or whose ass have I taken, or who have I defrauded? If I have taken aught from any man, I will restore him fourfold.’<sup>29</sup>

In the parish register of St. Helen’s church, Worcester is an entry for 15 March 1640/1 : ‘[baptised] Susanna filia Thomas Peirson.’ Susan(na) Pearson, junior, was also a Quaker. She is reported in 1663-4 as a Quaker in Bristol and in 1664-5 as a ‘dispenser of Quaker books in Worcester.’<sup>30</sup> In 1669 both mother and daughter signed the marriage certificate when George Fox married Margaret Fell.<sup>31</sup>

The William Pool case is important in the history of Quakerism, both nationally and locally. It illustrates the euphoric spirit and confidence that are such a marked feature of what may be called the “apostolic” age of Quakerism. In local terms it illustrates the dilemma of a group within the Worcester Quaker community who were led by the logic of their own challenge to the orthodox ministers of the area (and were also perhaps goaded by the criticisms of Clement Writer) into rashly attempting the resurrection of a young Quaker suicide.

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### NOTES AND REFERENCES

#### Abbreviations

C.S.P.D.	=	<i>Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series.</i>
D.N.B.	=	<i>Dictionary of National Biography.</i>
H.W.R.O.	=	Hereford and Worcester Record Office (at Worcester).
W.H.S.	=	Worcestershire Historical Society.

- <sup>1</sup> *The First Publishers of Truth* (ed. N. Penney, *JFHS*, supp. no. 4 (1907), 27ff. It was not Richard Baxter whom Goodaire interrupted at Kidderminster, but his assistant Richard Sergeant.
- <sup>2</sup> See Howard E. Collier, 'The Worcester Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends 1655-1949' (1949), 20-21 (there is a typescript copy of this unpublished work at H.W.R.O. [B.A. 2208]).
- <sup>3</sup> Sarah Drew's will and inventory are at H.W.R.O. (B.A. 3585; Ref.0.008). On Nathaniel Marston see Philip Styles, *Studies in 17th Century West Midlands History* (1968), 217-18.
- <sup>4</sup> *The Journal of George Fox* (ed. J. Nickalls, 1975), 225.
- <sup>5</sup> LSF, Swarthmore MSS VII, 16.
- <sup>6</sup> On Clement Writer see *D.N.B.* His will is P.C.C.30 Laud (1662).
- <sup>7</sup> 'Chamber Order Book of the City of Worcester 1602-1650' (ed. S. Bond for W.H.S.), 234 (under 27 October 1629).
- <sup>8</sup> Thomas Edwards, *Gangraena* (1647), 81-82.
- <sup>9</sup> *Reliquiae Baxterianae* (ed. M. Sylvester, 1696), I, 116 (henceforth *Rel. Baxt.*). That the year they met was 1653 is shown by a passage in Writer's *Apologetical Narration* (1658), 42, where he refers to 'a small conference [Baxter] had with me five years since.'
- <sup>10</sup> For these quotations see Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (1975 ed.), 265 and Writer's *Apologetical Narration*, 79.
- <sup>11</sup> Hill, 265-66; Writer, *Apologetical Narration*, 8.
- <sup>12</sup> *Rel. Baxt.* I, 76.
- <sup>13</sup> G.F. Nuttall, James Nayler: a fresh approach *Jnl. Friends' Hist. Soc.*, supp. no.26 (1954), 20ff. The quotation is from p.20.
- <sup>14</sup> See e.g. Barry Reay, *The Quakers and the English Revolution* (1985).
- <sup>15</sup> Hill, 232. For the Ranters see Hill, chs. 9 and 10.
- <sup>16</sup> On James Nayler see *D.N.B.* and Nuttall, *op. cit.*
- <sup>17</sup> For the argument that Dorcas was William Erbery's daughter, not his widow, see W.C. Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism* (2nd ed. 1955), 247n.2. The irony of the daughter of a leading Seeker and sceptic being raised from the dead will not have been lost on Nayler.
- <sup>18</sup> Nuttall, *op. cit.*
- <sup>19</sup> H.J. Cadbury, *George Fox's Book of Miracles* (1948), 20; Barry Reay, *op. cit.*, 37.
- <sup>20</sup> Cadbury, *op. cit.*, ix and 36ff. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971), 149-50.
- <sup>21</sup> *Jnl. Friends' Hist. Soc.* vol. 55, no. 8 (1989), 265ff.
- <sup>22</sup> Cadbury, *op. cit.*, 26-7.
- <sup>23</sup> Cadbury, 13-25; for other (less detailed) accounts see T. Underhill, *Hell Broke Loose* (1660), 34-35; Richard Baxter, *Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1667), 426; Baxter, *Certainty of the World of Spirits* (1691), 175; *A Sad Caveat to All Quakers...* (1657). Baxter repeatedly states that William Pool had gone without food for some time

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before his suicide, and this seems a reflection of the widespread belief that many Quakers had killed themselves after fasting. For examples of 'Christlike' fasting by Quakers and others see Nuttall, *op. cit.*, 9-10. George Knight, Pool's employer, was a clothier who lived in Forest St. near the Northgate or Foregate.

<sup>24</sup> LSF., Swarthmore MSS. I,217.

<sup>25</sup> *Rel. Baxt.* I,77. The reference to the practice of walking naked through towns is principally to the activities of the Quaker William Simpson.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Besse, *The Sufferings of the Quakers* (1753), I,53; II, 61,66.

<sup>27</sup> A.W. Brown, *Evesham Friends in the Olden Time* (1885).

<sup>28</sup> P.R.O. : ASS. 2/1, f.80.

<sup>29</sup> See 'Miscellany II' (W.H.S.), 104, and the pamphlet 'A Cry against Opposition and Cruelty' (H.W.R.O., B.A. 8720/2 [ii]).

<sup>30</sup> *C.S.P.D.* 1664-65, 42; Besse II, 637; *Extracts from State Papers* (ed. N. Penney) *Jnl. Friends' Hist. Soc.*, supplement no. 9 (1913).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*