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They were fiercely repressed by the authorities.

AL Morton recounts the ideas, activities and fate of these intriguing 17th Century mystical anarchists.

• *past tense* •

a glorious Liberty



the ideas of the Ranters

A. L. Morton

THE RANTERS

The Ranters formed the extreme left wing of the sects which came into prominence during the English Revolution, both theologically and politically. Theologically these sects lay between the poles of orthodox Calvinism, with its emphasis on the power and justice of God as illustrated in the grand scheme of election and reprobation, with its insistence upon the reality of Hell in all its most literal horrors and upon the most verbal and dogmatic acceptance of the Scriptures, and of antinomianism with its emphasis upon God's mercy and universality, its rejection of the moral law, and with it, of Hell in any but the most figurative sense, and its replacement of the authority of the Scriptures by that of the inner light. The Ranters pushed all these beliefs to, and sometimes even a little beyond, their furthest logical conclusions, which, when acted upon, soon brought them into conflict with law and authority. The conviction that God existed in, and only in, material objects and men led them at once to a pantheistic mysticism and a crudely plebeian materialism, often incongruously combined in the same person. Their rejection of scripture literalism led sometimes to an entirely symbolic interpretation of the Bible and at others to a blunt and contemptuous rejection. Their belief that the moral law no longer had authority for the people of a new age enjoying the liberty of the sons of God led to a conviction that for them no act was sinful, a conviction that some hastened to put into practice.

The political views of the Ranters were the outcome of this theology. God existed in all things:

I see that God is in all Creatures, Man and Beast, Fish and Fowle, and every green thing, from the highest Cedar to the Ivey on the wall; and that God is the life and being of them all, and that God doth really dwell, and if you will personally; if he may admit so low an expression in them all, and hath his Being no where else out of the Creatures. [1]

But man alone could be conscious of his Godhead and this gave to all a new and equal dignity. The poorest beggars, even "rogues, thieves, whores, and cut purses" are "every whit as good" as the

1: *The Light and Dark sides of God*, Jacob Bauthumley, quoted from N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, P. 336.

great ones of the earth. [1] The Ranters, and they alone at this date, spoke for and to the most wretched and submerged elements of the population, slum dwellers of London and other cities, though to what extent their message reached these depths it is now hardly possible to say. In Coppe and Clarkson, in Foster and Coppin there is, in different degrees and forms, a deep concern for the poor, a denunciation of the rich and a primitive biblical communism that is more menacing and urban than that of Winstanley and the Diggers. Like the Diggers, and unlike Lilburne and his followers, they were ready to accept the name of Leveller in its most radical implications, but with the difference that for them God himself was the great Leveller, who was to come shortly "to Levell with a witnesse, to Levell the Hills with the Valleys, to lay the Mountaines low". [2] It is hardly accidental that the Ranters began to come into prominence soon after the Leveller defeat at Burford and would seem to have attracted a number of embittered and disappointed former Levellers. Where Levelling by sword and by spade had both failed what seemed called for was a Levelling by miracle, in which God himself would confound the mighty by means of the poorest, lowest and most despised of the earth.

Such, briefly, was the nature and setting of the Ranter Movement, which came into sudden prominence towards the end of 1649, reached its peak in the following year and thereafter seems to have survived only in fragments. The purpose of this essay is to give some account of Ranter ideology and then of the rise, fortunes and decline of the Movement.

1: A. Coppe, *The Fiery Flying Roll*, p. 2.

2: *Roll*, I, P. 4

The ideas of the Ranters were, of course, not new. They may be traced across Europe and across the centuries from the time, to go back no further, of Joachim of Fiore in the twelfth century, with his doctrine of the three ages, in the last of which, shortly to be expected, the sons of God would enjoy perfect spiritual liberty. To trace the course of these ideas in any detail would take me far beyond my present scope - a few salient points only may be noted. [1] A generation or so after Joachim, the Amurians in France added to his doctrine of the three ages a neo-platonic pantheism which declared that "all things are one because whatever is, is God". Later, in Germany, the loosely connected groups which are known under the general name of the Brethren of the Free Spirit turned this idea into a way of living. While Joachim had expected the age of the spirit in the near future, the Brethren claimed that it was already here and exercised themselves the promised liberty of the sons of God. Sharing the perfection of God all that they did must of necessity be good: sin for them ceased to have a meaning. In the sixteenth century these beliefs received a new social dimension from Thomas Munzer, the leader of the great peasant insurrection of 1525, and among the Anabaptists of Munster. Through various channels they began to reach England, especially the artisans of London and East Anglia. As early as 1646 Thomas Edwards was denouncing those who declared,

That by Christs death, all the sins of all men in the world, Turks, Pagans, as well as Christians committed against the moral Law and the first covenant, are actually pardoned and forgiven, and this is the everlasting gospel.

and that

there is a salvation that shall be revealed in the last time which was not known to the Apostles themselves. [2]

But it was among the Ranters above all that such beliefs and others

1: See Norman. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 1957, especially Chapters. VII and VIII. Whatever may be argued against Prof. Cohn's conclusions, his book is a most valuable compilation of material on popular heresies of the Middle Ages. See also A. L. Morton, *The Everlasting Gospel*, 1958.

2: *Gangraena*, I, pages 23, 28.

related to them are found in the fullest and most uncompromising forms. What made them different in kind from their medieval predecessors was the fact that they were the heirs of a successful revolution which they still hoped to see carried to a victorious end. This is why Clarkson wrote on the title-page of *A Single Eye* that it was printed "in the Year that the Powers of Heaven and Earth Was, Is and Shall be, Shaken, yea Damned, till they be no more for Ever" and Coppe that his *Fiery Flying Roll* was a "word from the Lord to, all the Great Ones of the Earth" printed "in the beginning of that notable day when the secrets of all hearts are laid open". Many Ranters and their hearers had been in the forefront of the revolution and their sense of participation gave their message a force and universal applicability previously absent.

The central Ranter doctrine, from which all else logically flows, concerns the nature of God and man and their relationship. John Holland, whose book, *The Smoke of the Bottomlesse Pit*, though hostile, contains perhaps the clearest and most objective account of Ranter doctrine, writes:

They maintain that God is essentially in every creature, and that there is as much of God in one creature, as in another, though he doth not manifest himself so much in one as in another: I saw this expression in a Book of theirs, that the essence of God was as much in the Ivie leaf as in the most glorious Angel. . . . They say there is no other God but what is in them, and also in the whole Creation, and that men ought to pray and seek to no other God but what was in them.

The titles they give God are these: They call him The Being, the Fulnesse, the Great Motion, Reason, the Immensity. [1]

The passage already quoted from Bauthumley's *The Light and Dark side of God*, on which Holland obviously drew to a considerable extent confirms this. Holland also says that the Ranters believe, concerning man,

That man cannot either know God, or beleve in God, or pray to God, but it is God in man that knoweth himself, believes in himself and prayeth to himself. . . . hence they alledge that man differeth in nothing from the bruit beast, but onely that God doth manifest himself more in man than he doth in the beast. [2]

1: Op cit., P. 2. 2: Op. Cit. P. 5.

Richard Coppin who, while denying that he was a Ranter, was very close to their ideas, influenced at least Coppe considerably, and gave Ranter theology a sophistication it often lacks, emphasised the unity and indivisibility of God under the diversity of his appearances:

Thus this spiritual man, which thus knows all things, and judgeth all things, can be no less than God, who is all things; it can be no part or peece, as broken from God, for God cannot be divided or broken asunder . . . and where he is he is perfect; and in whom he is, he is perfect. . . .

But some will say, Is God all in one and none in another? or is he all in every one?

I answer, that God is all in one and so in everyone; the same all which is in me, is in thee; the same God which dwels in one, dwels in another, even in all; and in the same fulnes as he is in one, he is in everyone: But there is this difference, everyone hath not a like manifestation of him; the first man hath the same fulness and the same God, but not the same manifestation of that fulness; the same God but not the same knowledge of God. [1]

Clarkson, looking back on his Ranter period after a gap of ten years, wrote:

For this I conceived, as I knew not what I was, before I came in my being, so for ever after I should know nothing after this my being was dissolved; but even as a stream from the Ocean was distinct in itself while it was a stream, but when returned to the Ocean was therein swallowed and become one with the Ocean; so the spirit of man while in the body was distinct from God, but when Death came it returned to God, and so became one with God, yea God itself. [2]

This image of river and ocean was common to the Ranters and to their medieval ancestors. It can easily be seen how completely it excluded all orthodox beliefs in personal immortality and especially those in a material Heaven and Hell. For their theologians Hell was no more than a state of mind in which they existed before, as Bauthumley put it, "God . . . brought me into the glorious liberty of the Sons of God, whereas I was before in bondage to sin, law, an accusing Conscience which is Hell."

1: *Divine Teachings*, pp. 8-9.

2: *The Lost Sheep Found*, p. 28.

The identification of God with man and with the natural universe had two apparently opposite consequences. It might lead to a mysticism which found God in everyone: equally it might lead to a virtual materialism which in practice dispensed with him altogether. If God existed everywhere in general he could be said to exist nowhere in particular.

In fact, both these tendencies are found in the Ranters, sometimes oddly combined in the same person. This did not disturb them, since they loved to present truth as reconciliation of opposites. This comes out in the characteristic titles of a number of Ranter works - in Clarkson's *A Single Eye, All Light, No Darkness; or Light and Darkness One*, in Bauthumley's *The Light and Dark sides of God*, or in Salmon's *Heights in Depths and Depths in Heights*. Coppe stresses the diversity and unity of God in his Preface to *Coppin's Divine Teachings*:

Thus saith the Lord, I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, the first and the last; and now the last is reaching the first, and the end the beginning.

All things are returning to their Original, where all parables, dark sayings, all languages, and all hidden things, are known, unfolded and interpreted.

God is at once,

A jealous God, and the Father of Mercies; in him (I say) the Lyon and the Lamb, Servant and Lord, Peace and War, joy and jealousy, Wrath and Love, etc. are reconciled and all complicated in Unity.... And all those seemingly cross Denominations do sincerely and secretly declare him to be all in all, and one in all, according to the Scriptures.

If there was a Light and Dark side of God, so there may be said to have been a Light and a Dark side of Ranterism. It brought together two very different traditions - that of pantheistic mysticism which we have traced briefly, and, almost equally ancient if not quite so venerable, that of rude scepticism and anticlericalism that was certainly no less marked in England than in other lands. [1] Anticlericalism arises inevitably out of the role of the Church as exploiter. Long before the Reformation the luxury and corruption

1: This tradition is discussed by C. Hill in "Plebeian Irreligion in 17th Century England in *Studien Über die Revolution* (Berlin, 1969).

of the higher clergy and the monastic orders were arousing hostility, and, if many parish priests were poor, their very poverty made it all the more a necessity for them to curse for their tithes, which involved them in a perpetual war with their parishioners. There were few demands more strenuously pressed by the radicals in the English Revolution than the abolition of tithe. Alongside this anticlericalism went a crude, and, to the orthodox, hideously blasphemous rejection of Christianity and of religion itself. Christopher Marlowe is alleged to have said, among many other things, that "*the first beginning of Religion was only to bring men in awe, that Christ was a bastard and deserved to die more than Barrabas and that of all the Apostles only Paul had wit and he was a timorous fellow for bidding men to be subject to magistrates.*" Whether Marlowe actually said any of these things is unimportant. The fact that he was accused of saying them shows that such views were current at the time. It is possible to find many of the same accusations, sometimes in almost the same words, made against the Ranters.

Thus John Holland, whose accounts are relatively restrained, reports:

I have heard some say, that if Christ was on earth now he would be ashamed of what he did before; I heard one of them say, it is a question whether Christ was born of a virgin, nay, saith another, he was a bastard sure enough....

I heard one of them say, the day of judgement was begun already, and that the world had been made many thousand millions of years before we read of its creation, and that it shall continue many millions longer than we expect. [1]

Some of the more sensational accounts of Ranter utterances are considerably more startling, though they should not be entirely rejected on that account. One tells how, as some Ranters were at dinner,

eating a piece of beef one of them took it in his hand, tearing it asunder said to the other, This is the flesh of Christ, take and eat. The other took a cup of Ale and threw it into the chimney corner, saying, There is the bloud of Christ. And having some discourse of God it was proved that one of them said, That he could go into the house

1: Op. Cit., pp 3, 6.

of Office, and make a God every morning, by easing his body.[1]

Perhaps even more revealing is the tale of a journeyman shoemaker in St. Martins who;

when he heard any mention of God, he used to laugh, and in a disdainful manner say that he believed money, good clothes, good, meat and drink, tobacco and merry company to be Gods: but he was little beholding to any of these: for his God allowed him but eight pence or ten pence a day, and that he made him work for; and he knew not of any thing that could be gotten from him by fair means, therefore he would have a saying to him, and force what he pleased.... But at another time in his Ranting mood ... the Shoemaker replied to this effect (yet in broader language) that the Divil was nothing but the backside of God, and that it was but a scarecrow.[2]

This Ranter who spoke of the Devil as the backside of God was only expressing in a homely way a common Ranter doctrine. To God, Clarkson wrote in *A Single Eye*, "Light and Darkness are both alike" so that to the truly enlightened, "Devil is God, Hell is Heaven, Sin Holiness, Damnation Salvation". Putting the same idea in a different way the Ranters were fond of arguing that God made the Devil, an argument that according to Fox the Quakers found it difficult to dispose of. He records that two Quakers in Cornwall were converted to Ranterism because they could not meet this point.[3] And in fact there was really very little room in Ranter theology for the Devil in any form that the seventeenth century could recognise. He became merely an aspect of the all-pervasive God. A Ranter told John Holland

that the Divil could do no evill at all, if God did not give him a power to do it, and therefore the Divil is not so much in the fault as men think he is ... one of them said he hoped to see the poor Divil cleared of a great many slanders that had been cast upon him.[4]

And with the Devil went sin, as a logical consequence of Ranter views on the character of God and the relation of God and man. Since God is man and man God, they argued, and since God is

1: *Strange News from Newgate*. PP. 2-3.

2: *Arraignment and Tryall of the Ranters*.

3: *Journal*. 1952 edn., P. 443. George Fox was one of the founders of Quakerism.

4: *Op. cit.*, p. 6.

altogether good, all that we do is done by him and is good also. As Clarkson put it:

Sin hath its conception only in the imagination; therefore, so long as the act was in God, or nakedly produced by God, it was as holy as God: but after there was an appearance in thee, or apprehension to thee, that this act is good, and that act is evil, thou hast with Adam eat of the fruit of the forbidden Tree, of the Tree of knowledge of good and evil, then thou hast tasted of that fruit which is not in God, for saith the Text, Out of the mouth of the most High proceedeth not evil, and good: good but not evil; for God is good and good is God: therefore it was he made all things good: yea that which by you is imagined evil, he made good.[1]

For the Ranters, as for all antinomians, this created problems of conduct which could be faced in different ways. For some, like John Saltmarsh,[2] it necessitated an even more scrupulous code of behaviour. And Tobias Crisp's solution was similar:

The grass and pasture is so sweet that he [God] hath put a beleever into, that though there be no bounds in such a soule, yet it will never goe out of this fat pasture to feed on a barren common.[3]

Some Ranters, like Bauthumley, were evidently not quite happy about the implications of this doctrine and attempted to find a compromise position:

And whereas some may say, then men may live as they list, because God is the same, and all tends to his glory, if we sin or if we do well: I answer them in the words of the Apostle: Men should not sin because grace abounds; but yet if they do sin, that shall turn to the prayse of God, as well as when they do wel. And so the wrath of man praises God as well as his love and meekness, and God is glorified in the one as well as the other. And however this may seem to countenance that God is the Authour of sin, and wills sin; yet to me it is plain, that there is nothing that hath a being but God, and sin being a nullity, God cannot be the Authour of it, and so falls not within the decree of God.... These things I write, not to countenance any unseemly act or evill in any man. [4]

1: *A Single Eye*, p. 8.

2: A New Model Army preacher, believer in Free Grace, influential in the late 1640s.

3: *Christ Alone Exalted, Sermon II*, p.39

4: *Cohn, Op. Cit.*, PP. 338-9.

Others, like Clarkson, were prepared to face the logic of their position, though even he found himself forced to draw the line at murder:

yet the very motion of my heart was to all manner of theft, cheat, wrong or injury that privately could be acted, though in tongue I professed the contrary, not considering I brake the law in all points (murder excepted:) and the ground of this my judgement was, God made all things good, so nothing evil but as man judged it; for I apprehended there was no such thing as theft, cheat or a lie, but as man made it so. [1]

Yet antinomianism was not merely a claim upon personal liberty - it was also a positive weapon against the hypocritically righteous, the Calvinist elect who were trying to force a "reprobate" majority into conformity to the pattern of living which they thought proper.

The great flowering of antinomianism at the end of the Civil War was in part due to a widespread feeling that a new age had brought a release from old bondages. It was also a reaction against the new bondage of Presbyterian discipline. The Church had always claimed to regulate conduct over a wide field, but the pre-revolution Church Courts, irritating as they often were, were still limited in their operations. The rich were too dangerous to be interfered with under ordinary circumstances, and the fact that the Courts were mainly interested in revenue from fines rather than with morality, meant that those who were too poor to be worth fining also tended to escape. The Presbyterians, who were genuinely concerned with enforcing moral standards, extended the inquisition further down the social scale. Overton wrote scathingly of their activities:

Friends and Country-men, where are you now? ... sure you must have the banes of Matrimony re-asked at the Conventicle of Gallants at White-hall, or at least you must thence have a Congregational Licence, (without offence be it spoken to true Churches) to lye with your wives, else how shall your wives be chaste or the children Legitimate? they have now taken Cognizance over your wives and beds, whether will they next? Judgement is now come into the hands of the armed-fury Saints. My Masters have a care what you do, or how you look upon your wives, for the new Saints Millitant are paramount [to] all Laws, King, Parliament, husbands, wives, beds, &c. [2]

1: *The Lost Sheep*, P. 27.

2: *The Picture of the Council of State*, p31.

It was to the urban lower orders that the Ranters undoubtedly made their greatest appeal and there were elements in their theology which attracted many who did not fully understand it but who disliked being dragooned by the "armed-fury Saints". It was in the writings of Abiezer Coppe that the Ranter attitude to good and evil was most powerfully developed. His gospel, he wrote, is,

To the Scribe folly; to the Pharisee blasphemy, who hath [ad unguem] at's fingers ends, he blasphemeth, is a friend of Publicans and Harlots, he is a glutton, and wine-bibber; and say we not well, that he hath a divil?

Which Pharisee, in man, is the mother of harlots, and being the worst whore, cries whore first: and the grand blasphemer, cries out blasphemy, blasphemy, which she is brimful of . . .

But the hour is coming, yea now is, That all his carnal Outward, formal religion, (yea of Scriptural cognizance, so far as its fleshly and formal) and all his fleshly holiness, zeal and devotion shall be, and is, set upon the same account as outward drunkenness, theft, murder and adultery....

Yea the time is coming, that zealous, holy, devout, righteous, religious men shall (one way) dye, for their Holiness and Religion, as well as Thieves and Murtherers for their Theft and Murther....

But once more, the time is coming, that Thieves and Murtherers shall scape, as well as the most zealous and formal professors; and men shall be put to death (or be murdered by men) no more for the one than for the other. [1]

In *A Fiery Flying Roll* he urges the pious to give up their formal religion and so-called Gospel Ordinances, under which lies nothing but "snarling, biting, besides covetousnesse, evil surmising". He explains his unconventional conduct:

Kisses are numbered among transgressors - base things - well! by base hellish swearing, and cursing... and by base impudent kisses... my plaguely holiness hath been confounded, and thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone.

And then again, by wanton kisses, kissing hath been confounded, and external kisses have been made the fiery chariots, to mount me swiftly into the bosom of him whom my soul loves, [his excellent Majesty, the King of Glory]. [2]

1: R. Coppin, *Divine Teachings*, Preface.

2: *a Roll*, Pt. II, Chapter 5.

Coppe regarded swearing as having a positive value, saying that he would rather

heare a mighty Angell (in man) swearing a full-mouthed oath... cursing and making others fall a swearing, than heare a zealous Presbyterian, Independent or spiritual Notionist pray, preach, or exercise.

Well! One hint more; there's swearing ignorantly, i'th darke, vainely, and there's swearing i'th light, gloriously. [1]

It is not surprising that he was accused of every kind of misconduct. One anonymous pamphlet wrote,

he is one that not long since assumed the pulpit in a noted Church in London, and in a most wicked manner blasphemed and cursed for an hour together, saying, a pox of God take all your prayers preaching, reading, fasting &c." [2]

And another:

their Ring-leader, Copp (when he was fitter to have gone to bed and slept, than to have spoken in a public place) bestowed an hours time in belching forth imprecations, curses, and other such like stuffe, as is not fit to be once named among Christians: and when he perceived that he should be called to answer... he took two of his she-Disciples, and went to the Citie of Coventri; where it was soon dispersed abroad, that he commonly lay in bed with two women at a time. [3]

The truth of such stories, which come from pamphlets of the lowest, muck-raking type, must be doubtful, but it would hardly be surprising if many of the more ignorant Ranters, for whom the subtleties of their doctrines may have had little meaning, interpreted them literally as dispensations from all customary standards of conduct. Much of the evidence is, of course, hearsay and grossly prejudiced. We may well doubt the report that at a meeting in Shoemakers Alley their time was spent "in drunkenness, uncleanness, blasphemous words, filthy songs, and mixt dances of men and women stark naked" [4] though passages in Clarkson's

3: Ibid., Pt. 1, Chapter 2.

2: *The Ranters Ranting*, p. 5.

3: *Routing of the Ranters*. P. 3.

4: Ibid., p. 2.

The Lost Sheep do suggest that such accounts may not be entirely without foundation and that at times a ritual nudism may have been practised as a symbol of their liberation from the bondage of the moral law. Another story, of which differing versions exist, has suggestions of a ritual undertone:

They taught, That they could neither see Evill, know Evill, nor Act Evill, and that whatsoever they did was Good and not Evill, there being no such thing as sin in the world: Whereupon Missis E. B. striking fire at a Tinder-box lights up a candle, seeks under the Bed, Tables, and stooles, and at last comming to one of the men, she offers to unbutton his Cod-piece; who demanding of her what she sought for? She answereth, For sin: whereupon he blows out her candle, leads her to Bed, where in the sight of all the rest, they commit Fornication. [1]

And it is certainly possible to find some justification in Ranter writers for the statement that,

they affirms that God is so far from being offended at the crying sins of drunkenes, swearing, blaspheming, adultery etc that he is well pleased therewith, and that (O strange and horrid impiety) it is the only way of serving him aright. [2]

A similar situation may be seen in Ranter views about the Scriptures. Naturally, believing themselves directly instructed by the word of God within themselves, they tended to minimise the importance of the written, external word. As sons of the new age of spiritual liberty and knowledge they felt themselves in possession of a fuller truth never before enjoyed. So Coppin wrote:

So you see, that the holy Apostles and Prophets which were before us, knew nothing of the Mystery of Salvation, but what was revealed to them by the Spirit, and what they knew was but in part, and not in full possession, for they had but the Spirit of Prophecy given them.... Here we see that these things which the Prophets, and Apostles, and the Angels themselves have desired to look into, yet could not find the depth of them, but God hath revealed them more fully to us in this later age by his Spirit. [3]

1: *The Ranters Last Sermon*, P. 3.

2: *The Ranters Religion*, p. 4.

3: *Divine Teachings*, pp. 23-4.

In so far as the Scriptures were a guide, they could only be so when symbolically interpreted by the inner light. Their attitude was much like that of Blake, who, according to Crabb Robinson,

Warmly declared that all he knew was in the Bible, but then he understands by the Bible the spiritual sense. For as to the natural sense, that Voltaire was commanded by God to expose. [1]

Both Salmon and Coppe speak of the History and the Mystery as conflicting forms of truth:

He is not a Christian indeed, that doth by the power of Nature, believe what is Naturally and Historically reported of Christ in the Scripture, but he that by the power of the Spirit beleevs all this History to be verified in him in the Mystery; for there is a History and a Mystery of Christ; the History is Christ for us, the Mystery is Christ in us. [2]

From this it is no long step to total rejection. Holland shows us the process at work:

The best they say of the Scripture is; That it is a tale, a History, a Letter, and a dead Letter, and more, the fleshly History; They call it a bundle of contradictions. I heard one swear it was the archest piece of Witchcraft that ever was invented. Another said it was the greatest curse that ever came into the world, for, said he, the Scripture hath been the cause of all our misery ... and there would never be any peace in the world, till all the Bibles in the world were burned. [3]

A poem quoted in *The Ranters Religion* declares,

*such lies
Cannot be found in any Histories,
Save in that booke of fallacies, they name
The Bible, which from some fooles fancy came.* [4]

And *The Ranters Last Sermon* includes among their beliefs

1: Quoted from Symonds, *William Blake*, 1907, p. 267.

2: *Anti-Christ in Man*, p. 27.

3: *Op. Cit.*, P.3.

4: P. 8.

That the sacred BIBLE was but a meer Romance, and contradictory to itself; only invented by the Witts of Former Ages, to keep People in subjection, and (as they term it) in Egyptian slavery; likewise, That there was as much truth in the History of Tom Thumb, or The Knight of the SUN, as there was in that Book. [1]

This rejection of scriptural literalism and the sometimes very forcible language in which it was expressed was one of the main reasons for the horror the Ranters aroused and the ferocity with which they were persecuted. It is also very much at variance with most modern conceptions of Puritanism, yet it is indeed only an exaggeration of a constant trend within Puritanism such as can be seen in Saltmarsh and Walwyn, and in Quakerism a little later. It is closely connected with the rejection of orthodox views of Heaven and Hell as actual Places and any belief in a personal immortality. Again, as with Walwyn, if in a cruder way, we can see how mysticism does not, at this stage, conflict with the use of reason and common sense as criteria for commonly accepted beliefs.

The social ideas of the Ranters, like their theology, cannot be separated from Joachite beliefs in the new (usually the third) age of spiritual liberty. This they related directly to the progress of the Revolution in England: for them the fall of monarchy was only the first stage in vast changes by which the whole social order would be turned upside down. Richard Coppin, in whom so many Ranter ideas found their first expression, wrote:

God now comes forth from the great and learned of the world, and exalts himself in the poor and ignorant; as James saith, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world? Not only poor, as touching the world; but poor and ignorant in the things of God. [2]

The conception of a series of progressive and higher revelations found its most detailed political expression in J. Salmon. In *A Rout, A Rout: or some part of the Armies Quarters Beaten Up, By the Day of the Lord Stealing upon them*, which appeared on February 10th, 1649, he first outlines in much the usual way the three successive manifestations of God. First in the Jewish Ceremonies, then in "the flesh of the Son, as being a more true pattern", but

1: P. 4.

2: *Divine Teachings*, P. 3.

now,

God (having hitherto walked under this form) is now (and hath been these last dayes) come to rend this vail in pieces, to shake this form, to lay it waste, and cloath himself with another.

He then ingeniously applies a similar pattern to contemporary events:

The power and life of the King, and in him the very soul of Monarchy sunk into the Parliament, and here it lost its name barely, but not its nature, its form but not its power, they making themselves as absolute and tyrannicall as ever the King in his reign, dignity and supremacy; yet the Lord ascended a little nearer himself, by taking of this form (the Parliament) and hereby made way for his after-design.

We see in a short time, he layes aside that glorious shew and Idol (the Parliament) and cloaths himself with the Army: and thus both King, Monarchy and Parliament, fell into the hands and upon the swords of the Army....

Thus far we see God hath moved from party to party, and sits down at present in the Army: and here also God makes darkness his secret place, living under a poor, low, carnal form, and few can behold his beautifull presence under the power of the Sword. [1]

God's will is now, he proceeds to explain, that the Army too should lay aside its power and cast itself upon him. He will give victory out of suffering and humility and only then will the new age really commence:

You are afraid to lay down your swords, lest you should lose your Liberties; but the Lord will recompense this seven-fold into your bosme, he is coming to make you suffer a blessed Freedom, a glorious Liberty, a sufficient recompense for the loss of all outward glories.... When you are become children of the new birth, you shall be able to play upon the hole of the Aspe, and to dwell with the Cockatrice in his den, oppression and tyranny shall be destroyed before you. [2]

This note of extremely radical, and, if the phrase may be allowed,

1: *A Rout*, pp. 1-10.

2: *Ibid.*, p. 11.

active pacifism is characteristic of Ranter political writing. It came partly from the nature of their theology, with its emphasis on the inevitable coming of the new age of liberty and brotherhood. God, they felt, was abroad in the land and they needed only to proclaim his purpose. But it came also from the precise political situation in which Ranterism developed. In February 1649 when *A Rout, A Rout* was written, Charles had just been beheaded and the Council of State was in effective control. In the two parts of *Englands New Chains Discover'd* we can sense the feeling of the Levellers that they had been outwitted and betrayed. In a few weeks their leaders would be in prison: in a couple of months their last hope would be destroyed at Burford.

Already a sense of defeat, that something had gone wrong with the expectation of a new England, was in the air. It was in this situation, with the left in retreat and the turning point of the Revolution already passed, that the Ranters became prominent. With ordinary political calculation failing. Many people began to look for a miraculous deliverance.

For Abiezer Coppe and George Foster, God the Great Leveller was about to manifest his power:

the mighty God of Jacob is at hand, and will come of a sudden when thou art not aware of, even that mighty Leveller, for to Levell and lay mountaines and hills low, even you that are greater and richer than your fellow-creatures, even as low as may be, and so will make all equal with the plaines.

So Foster wrote in *The Sounding of the Last Trumpet*, "declaring the universall overturning and rooting up of all Earthly Powers in England".

The combination of pacifism with Leveller principles is especially marked in Coppe, who, as he insisted,

never drew sword, or shed one drop of any mans blood ... all things are reconciled to me, the etemall God (IN HIM) yet sword levelling, or digging levelling, are neither of them his principles. And now thus saith the Lord:

Though you can as little endure the word LEVELLING as could the late slaine or dead Charles (your forerunner who is gone before you) and had as live heare the Devil named as heare of the Levellers

(Men-Levellers) which is, and who (indeed) are but the shadowes of the most terrible, yet great and glorious good things to come. Behold, behold, behold, I the eternall God the Lord of Hosts, who am that mighty Leveller am coming (yea even at the doores) to Levell in good earnest, to Levell to some purpose, to Levell with a witnesse, to Levell the Hills with the Valleyes, and to lay the Mountaines low....

For' lo I come (saith the Lord) with a vengeance, to levell also your Honour, Riches etc. to staine the pride of all your Glory, and to bring into contempt all the Honourable (both persons and things) upon the earth, Isa. 23. 9.

For this Honour, Nobility, Gentility, Propriety, Superfluity etc hath (without contradiction) been the Father of hellish horrid pride, arrogance, haughtinesse, loftinesse, murder, malice, of all manner of wickedness and impiety, yea, the cause of all the blood that ever hath been shed, from the blood of the righteous Abell, to the blood of the last Levellers that were shot to death. And now as I live (saith the Lord) I am come to make inquisition for blood...

And maugre the subtilty, and sedulity, the craft and cruelty of hell and earth: this Levelling shall up;

Not by sword; we (holily) scorne to fight for anything; we had as live be dead drunk every day of the weeke, and lye with whores i'th market place; and account these as, good actions as taking the poor abused, enslaved ploughmans money from him... we had rather starve, I say, than take away his money from him, for killing of men. [1]

Levelling as Coppe and Foster understood it involved a far greater social upheaval than the political changes advocated by Lilburne and his associates, or Winstanley's quite limited proposals for joint cultivation on the commons and waste land. It was linked with a passionate denunciation of the rich and with a primitive type of Communism which looked back both to the early Apostolic Church and to the teachings of John Ball.

The rich, Foster declared, grudge the poor even a piece of bread, but "all things are the Lords" and he is coming shortly to bring down their pride, who "because of your riches have thought yourselves better than others; and must have your fellow-creatures in

1: Roll, Pt. 1, pp. 1-5.

bondage to you, and they must serve you, as work for you, and moyle and toyle for you, and stand cap in hand to you, and must not displease you, no by no meanes". [1] Coppe, who like Foster drew much of his imagery from the Epistle of St. James, addressed himself to the poorest and most depressed strata of society, at a time when the slum population of London was suffering terrible hardships as a result of the wartime dislocation of trade and industry. In an extraordinary passage, whose meaning is clear if its grammar is sometimes confused, he declares that God, in whose name he writes, will come upon the rich like a highwayman, saying:

Thou hast many baggs of money, and behold I [the Lord] come as a thief in the night, with my sword drawn in my hand, and like a thief as I am - I say deliver your purse, deliver sirrah! deliver or I'll cut thy throat!

I say (once more) deliver, deliver my money which thou hast to him, and to poor creeples, lazars, yea to rogues, thieves, whores, and cut purses, who are flesh of thy flesh, and every whit as good as thy self in mine eye, who are ready to starve in plaguy Gaols, and nasty dungeons....

The plague of God is in your purses, barns, houses, horses, murrain will take your hogs (O ye fat swine of the earth) who shall shortly go to the knife, and be hung up i'th roof, except - blasting, mill-dew, locusts, caterpillars, yea, fire your houses and goods, take your corn and fruit, the moth your garments, and the rot your sheep, did you not see my hand, this last year, stretched out?

You did not see.

My hand is stretched out still.

Your gold and silver, though you can't see it, is cankered, the rust of them is a witnesse against you, and suddainly, suddainly, suddainly, because of the Eternal God, myself, its the dreadful day of Judgement, saith the Lord, shall eat your flesh as it were fire James 5.1-7.

The rust of your silver, I say, shall cat your flesh as it were fire. [2]

Coppe felt himself one with God, to the extent that in his writing it is sometimes impossible to say whether his 'I' is God or Abiezer Coppe. But no less he felt that he was one with all men, and especially with the poor and miserable. This comes out most dramatically in the story of the beggar which occupies Chapter III of

1: Last Trumpet, p. 2.

2: Roll, Pt II PP. 2-3.

the second part of the Roll. On September 30th, he writes, he met "a most strange deformed man". Coppe was filled with love and pity for him:

Whereupon the strange woman who flattereth with her lips, and is subtile of heart, said within me, Its a poor wretch, give him two-pence.

The woman, whom elsewhere he calls the "wel-favoured harlot" and the "holy Scripturan Whore" is the formal righteousness which exalts prayer, gospel ordinances and conventional morality at the expense of mercy and justice. He rejects her temptations, but she returns to the attack, saying, "Its a poor wretch give him 6d. and that's enough for a Squire or Knight to give to one poor body." He almost falls, but in the end,

the plague of God fell upon my pocket, and the rust of my silver rose up in judgement against me, and consumed my flesh as with fire ... and the 5 of James thundered such an alarm in mine ears, that I was faine to cast all I had into the hands of him, whose visage was more marr'd than any mans that I ever saw.

*This is a true story, most true in history.
Its true also in the mystery.*

He put off his hat to the beggar, bowed seven times, and finally "rode back once more to the poor wretch, saying, because I am a King, I have done this, but you need not tell any one".

Coppe's conduct can be paralleled by that recorded by Professor N. Cohn of a certain Loy Pruystinck a century earlier in Antwerp. Pruystinck demanded that his richer disciples should publicly embrace the thieves, prostitutes and beggars who formed the bulk of his following. He is said also to have symbolised this uniting of opposites by himself dressing in rags which were sewn with jewels.

Professor Cohn speaks of Pruystinck and similar religious leaders as regarding themselves as "an elite of amoral supermen", who accepted no obligations to ordinary mortals and whose "communism" was no more than an arrogation of their own right to dominate and exploit the unenlightened. Whatever may have been the truth in these other cases it must be said that in the writings of Coppe and other Ranters the main emphasis is not on such privilege but on giving and sharing, on the human dignity of the poor and

despised, and on the imminence of a day of liberty, brotherhood and social justice.

Coppe was, no doubt, unbalanced, and by the extravagance both of his conduct and language deprived himself of the chance of a hearing, yet there is a genuine nobility in much of his writing, not least in the passages where he states his belief in the need for common ownership:

I know there's no Communion to the Communion of Saints, to the inward Communion, to communion with the spirits of just men made perfect, with God the judge of all.

No other Communion of Saints do I know.

And this is Blood-life-spirit-communion.

But another Communion also do I know, which is water, and but water, which I will not be without; my spirit dwells with God, the judge of all, dwells in him, sups with him, in him, feeds on him, with him, in him. My humanity shall dwell with, sup with, eat with humanity; and why not [for a need] with Publicans and Harlots? why should I rum away mine eyes from mine own flesh? Why should I not break my bread to the hungry, whoever they be? ...

Howl, howl, ye nobles, howl honourable, howl ye rich men for the miseries that are coming upon you.

For our parts we that hear the Apostle preach will also have all things in common; neither will we call anything that we have our own.... Wee'l eat your bread together in singleness of heart, wee'l break bread from house to house. [1]

This aspect of Ranter doctrine is strongest in Coppe, though it can be seen also in Foster, and, in a perhaps more intellectualised way, in Clarkson. But there is evidence that it was widespread. *The Ranters Last Sermon*, for example, states

They taught, That it was quite contrary to the end of Creation, to appropriate anything to any Man or Woman; but that there ought to be a Community of all things. [2]

There is plenty of evidence, too, for the social and, indeed, convivial nature of their gatherings. They ate together and drank wine, smoked tobacco (still regarded by most as an act of doubtful morality), danced and sang. Hostile pamphlets print three alleged

1: *Roll*, Pt. II pp. 18-19.

2: P. 4.

Ranter hymns - one a drinking song, one advocating sexual liberty and a third ridiculing orthodox religion. It is tempting in this connection to recall the importance of singing among the American IWW, who were also fond of irreverent parodies of hymns. Under the Commonwealth the old laws of settlement had broken down and one of the very real if temporary freedoms the Revolution had brought was the freedom to move about in search of work. It may well be that among these migratory workers, unattached and prepared to break with tradition, the Ranters found many of their supporters. This would at least help to explain the rapidity with which they seem to have spread to all parts of the country.

Charges of sexual promiscuity as a matter of principle were frequently made against them. Thus, Holland says:

They say that for one man to be tied to one woman, or one woman to be tied to one man, is a fruit of the curse; but they say, we are freed from the curse; therefore it is our liberty to make use of whom we please. [1]

No doubt there was much malice and exaggeration in such charges, but they are not really at variance with declared Ranter principles. Edward Hyde Jun., a hostile but not on the whole unfair critic, explains that they believe *"that all the women in the world are but one mans wife in unity and all the men in the world are but one womans husband in unity; so that one man may lie with all the women in the world in unity, and one woman may lie with all men in the world, for they are all her husband in unity"*. [2]

They seem to have used the expression *"fellow creature"* as the usual mode of address among themselves, thus emphasising not only their social equality but their position in a chain that stretched from God to the lowest form of life. They were fond, also, of coarse jests that emphasised the animal nature of man. Samuel Shepherd calls them *"The Joviall Crew"*, while Ephraim Pagitt, having declared that *"the Ranter is an unclean beast, much of the same make with our Quakers ... only the Ranter is less sowre, professes what he is, and as he has neither Religion nor honesty, so he pretends to none"*, nevertheless adds with what looks like a measure of unwilling admiration:

They are the merriest of all devils, for extempore lascivious Songs, not extempore Prayer, but as absurd and nonsensical, for healths, musick, downright boudry and dancing, the two last of which commonly proceed and follow the conjunction of the fellow creatures, which is not done in corners. [1]

Such comparisons between Ranters and Quakers were not uncommon at this time, in spite of the strong hostility between the two sects. Baxter wrote:

But the horrid Villainies of this Sect did not only speedily Extinguish it, but also did as much as ever anything did, to disgrace all Sectaries, and to restore the Credit of the Ministry and the sober unanimous Christians: So that the Devil and the Jesuits quickly found this way served not their turn, and therefore they suddenly took another.

And that was the fourth Sect, the Quakers; who were but the Ranters turned from horrid Prophaness and Blasphemy, to a Life of extreme Austerity on the other side. Their Doctrines were mostly the same with the Ranters: they make the Light which every man hath within him to be his sufficient Rule, and consequently the Scriptures and Ministry are set light by. [2]

It seems reasonable to conclude that these festive Ranter meetings were not merely an expression of fellowship and rough good spirits, though these were present and important. They had also a ritual character. The joint meal was a sharing of bread, perhaps even a kind of sacrament, and the stories in which the Ranters on such occasions are said to have parodied the Christian sacraments in what seemed to their contemporaries a blasphemous manner are in fact evidence for this. The rank and file Ranter was not a poet or mystic like Coppe or Salmon, and what began as poetry could in their hands become clowning, just as the metaphysical subtleties of Ranter doctrine could coarsen into nonsense and paradox. If there was such a thing as the typical or average Ranter he was probably something very like Robert Wilkinson of Leicester as he is presented to us by the Quaker Richard Farnworth:

He said he was both God and Devil, and he said there was no God but him and no Devil but him, and he said whom he blest was blest,

1: Op. Cit. P. 4

2: A Wonder, p. 42

1: Heresiography, 6th edn., pp. 259-61.

2: Reliquiae Baxterianae, P. 77.

and whom he curst was curst, and he said he was a serpent, and so he is, and he said the Apostles were lyers and deceivers, and I gave him a Bible to prove that, and he said the Bible was a pack of lyes, and there was neither heaven nor hell but here, and yet he was both in heaven and hell, and he had as lieve be in hell as in heaven, and he said he was a serpent and a whoremaster, and before he said he was born of God, and could not comit sin. [1]

II

It would probably be incorrect to speak of the Ranters as a church, or even as a sect. There is no evidence for any formal organisation or generally received body of doctrine. Gilbert Rouleston, who claimed to be a converted Ranter, speaks of seven different sorts of Ranters, to whom he gives such fancy names as Shelomethites, Clements, Athians (whose beliefs as he describes them appear to be those of the Mortalists) and Nicholantenes. For such elaborate sub-divisions there is no evidence elsewhere, but they may perhaps represent some differing trends within a loose grouping of people with broadly similar views. The term Ranter seems to have been used in a rough and ready way to describe not only people like Coppe and Salmon but a rather different type of group like that around John Robins in London or William Franklin and Mary Gadbury in Winchester.

While the Ranters properly so-called identified themselves with God only in the sense that all men and even all living things shared in the divine nature, Robins and Franklin claimed to be Gods, or to be inspired by God, in a special and personal sense. Each formed a small, self-contained group around its own prophet or messiah, with a chosen woman disciple who filled the role of Mary - in the case of the Robins group at least she claimed that a child she was about to bear would be a new Christ. These groups, in their nature exclusive, do not seem to have had any connection either with one another or with the Ranters as a whole, and though some of their teachings were similar, it is not necessary to discuss them here in any detail.

If, however, we cannot speak of a Ranter sect, it is possible to speak of a Ranter Movement, and this Movement has a history which can be traced, at least in broad outline. Many uncertainties

1: *Ranters Principles*, p. 19.

must remain because of the nature of the evidence - the writings of the Ranters themselves are, as has been shown, primarily concerned with doctrine and any historical details they may contain are incidental. On the other hand the literature about the Ranters, though quite extensive, is uniformly hostile and frequently nothing but the lowest type of gutter journalism. Its statements have always to be weighed against one's estimate of what is credible as well as against what the Ranters say about themselves. And this again must be considered in relation to the fact that they were constantly persecuted and were forced to express themselves with great caution.

Yet, when allowance has been made for all this, it is possible to follow the careers of the leading figures as well as the rise and decline of the Movement as a whole. The fate of Coppe, who is perhaps the most central as well as the most spectacular figure, can best be followed in connection with the general history of Ranterism. The others whose writings have survived at least in part, can conveniently be discussed separately and more briefly.

Most of what we know about Joseph Salmon we learn from his recantation *Heights in Depths*, which is, like many such books of its kind and time, a form of spiritual autobiography. He was, apparently, when he wrote *Anti-Christ in Man* (December 1647) and *A Rout, A Rout* (February 1649), an officer in the Army. Something has already been said about these - the first is antinomian, but not perhaps specifically Ranter; the second, which as we have seen, applied Joachite principles to the contemporary political situation, may perhaps be regarded as his farewell to the Army. It must have been soon after this that he wrote *Divinity Anatomized*, a book which has disappeared but which is mentioned in *Heights in Depths* as the main place in which his Ranter views had been "vented". As a result of this, and probably of his preaching, he was arrested and imprisoned at Coventry, where Fox found him, together with other Ranters, towards the end of the year. Fox has described his argument with these Ranters, "who said they were God."

I asked them, if they knew whether it would rain tomorrow. They said they could not tell. I told them God could tell. Again, I asked them if they thought they would be always in that condition, or should change, and they answered they could not tell. Then said I unto them, "God can tell and God doth not change. You say you are God and yet you cannot tell whether you shall change or no." So they were confounded and quite brought down for that time. Then

... I perceived they were Ranters, and I had met with none before. [1]

Fox says that "not long after this" Salmon put forth a paper or book of recantation, upon which he was set at liberty. However, it seems clear from *Heights in Depths* that Salmon was released shortly before its publication in August 1651, and upon promise of writing it. He says that while he was in prison he had time to reflect, had been helped by conversations with a Major Black and that finally Colonel Purefoy arrived in Coventry with an order from the Council for his release. He then proceeds to account for his ideas and their development. He had found the world a chaos, in which he had sought for some assurance:

Behold the Lord maketh the earth empty and voyd; he layeth it waste: it reels to and fro like a drunkard: all its Foundations are out of course. [2]

He forsook his home and kindred to become successively Presbyterian, Independent and Baptist, and this, "in the hottest time of persecution: I was made one eminent both in holding forth this way to the world and also in an open suffering for the same". [3] He is thought to have preached in and round Rochester and later he served in the Army.

But all this gave him no comfort and he heard "a voice from the throne of the heavenly Almightyness: arise and depart for this is not your rest". This was the beginning of a deep inner crisis that seems to have been a characteristic stage in the development of most of the Ranter prophets. First came a period of exaltation:

I saw heaven opened unto me and the new Jerusalem (in its divine brightness and corruscant beauty) greeting my Soule by its humble and gentle discensions.... I appeared to my selfe as one confounded into the abyss of eternitie, nonentitized into the being of beings; my Soule split, and emptied into the fountaine and ocean of divine fulness: expired into the aspires of pure life. [4]

This, however, was only temporary, and soon he "turned from a

1: *Journal*, P. 47.

2: *Heights in Depths*, PP. 3-4.

3 *Ibid.*, p11.

4: *Ibid.*, p. 15.

King to become a Beast".

I was now sent into a strange land, and made to eat unclean things in Assyria; walked in unknown paths, and became a mad man, a fool among men....

Being then clouded from the presence of the Lord, I was violently posted through most dark paths, where I ever and anon stumbled and fell into the snare of open error and profaneness, led and hurried (by what power let the wise judge) in a principle of mad zeal; to tear and rend the very appearances of God, which I had formerly cherished in my brest. [1]

This is a characteristic account, but it must be remembered that it was written after a long and severe imprisonment, and, assuming that his recantation was sincere, as it has every appearance of being, after he had come to believe that the views he had once held were erroneous. As he wrote he felt a new peace in a quietism that had perhaps been partly foreshadowed by the pacifism of *A Rout, A Rout*:

I am now at rest in the silent deeps of eternity, sunk into the abyse of silence, and (having shot this perilous gulf) I am safely arrived into the bosome of love; the land of rest....

I see there is nought that can satisfie under the Sun....

My great desire (and that wherein I most delight) is to see and say nothing. [2]

The last pages of his recantation are devoted to:

A Sincere Abdication of certain Tenets, either formerly vented by, or now charged upon the Author.

I am daily accused as one that holds these horrid opinions.

Viz That there is no God; no Devil; no Heaven; no Hell; as one that denies the Scripture, and the blessed Trinity of the God-head; that saith there is no Sin; or otherwise that God is the author of Sin; these (among others of less consequence) are chiefly alledged against me.

Salmon denied having held these views, or, in some cases, admitted that he had been in error. Even so, his explanation of his doctrines

1: *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 23.

2: *Ibid.*, P. 28.

was still far from orthodox: he wrote, for example:

That God is that pure and perfect being in whom we all are, move and live; that secret blood, breath and life, that silently courseth through the hidden veins and close arteries of the whole creation.
[1]

Salmon is obviously trying here to express his beliefs in a way that would not give offence, but what is said is really not at all inconsistent with the usual Ranter idea of God.

"Silence" Salmon wrote, "hath taken hold of my spirit", and in fact he seems to have taken no further part in public affairs.

The story of Jacob Bauthumley or Bottomley was similar. He was a militantly Puritan cobbler in Leicester, where, we learn, "At one Bury's house 2 ministers Mr. Higginson and Mr. Burdin stood by while Bottomley the shoemaker of Leicester prayed." He was also in trouble for causing a disturbance in All Saints Church. [2] Like Salmon he served in the Army and there wrote *The Light and Dark Sides of God*, for which he was punished by being burned through the tongue. The town authorities of Leicester were sufficiently alarmed by this book to send it to London for advice, since it seemed to them to be "of a very dangerous consequence and lets open a very wide dore to Atheisme and profanes". [3] He too hints at a spiritual struggle, though in much less detail than Salmon or Coppe:

I was continually suffering the torment of Hell, and tossed up and down, being condemned of my selfe ... And this is that I found til God appeared spiritually, and shewed me that he was all glory and happiness himself and that flesh was nothing ... God ... brought me into the glorious liberty of the Sons of God, whereas I was before in bondage to sin, law, an accusing Conscience which is Hell. [4]

He continued as an active Ranter in Leicester, to which he returned after his Army service, and Fox met him at nearby Swannington in 1655:

1: *Heights in Depths* PP. 37-8.

2: Joan Simon, *The Two John Angels*. Trs. Leics. Archs. and Hist. Soc., XXXI P. 39.

3: Simon, Op. cit., P. 48.

4: Cohn, Op. cit., P. 339.

And the next day Jacob Bottomley came from Leicester, a great Ranter, but the Lord's power stopped him and came over them all....

And we sent to the Ranters to come forth and try their God, and there came abundance who were rude, as aforesaid, and sung and whistled and danced, but the Lord's power so confounded them that many of them came to be convinced. [1]

By about 1660, however, he appears to have become sufficiently respectable to be appointed library keeper and sergeant-at-mace in Leicester. [2]

Morton discussed Laurence Clarkson separately; we include a brief note on him here. Sometimes called Claxton, he was born at Preston in 1615, and drifted from Anglicanism to Presbyterianism, Independency and Antinomianism, serving like many other later Ranters in the army, as a chaplain until 1644, when he became an itinerant preacher in East Anglia. In 1645, he was arrested & charged in Suffolk for Baptist activities. The following year he was unofficial preacher to the troop of Cornet Nicholas Lockyer, later a Leveller agitator. In Clarkson's account of his religious career, published 1660, *The Lost Sheep Found*, he describes being paid £14 for penning a 1647 Leveller tract, *A Generall Charge or Impeachment of High Treason*, in the name of Justice Equity, against the Communalism of England, arguing that Parliament derived its power from the people.

Clarkson then joined the Ranters in London, publishing *A Single Eye All Light, no Darkness* in 1650, (sponsored by the Leveller military man, William Rainborowe, brother of the murdered Leveller Colonel Thomas).

Therein Clarkson opposed the idea of sin, as invented by the ruling class to keep the poor in order. He stated that only the intention of an act, nothing of its content, mattered to God - no specific morality could be prescribed on religious bases. Sin was all in the mind: "till acted that so called Sin, thou art not delivered from the power of sin, but ready upon all Alarums to tremble and fear the reproach of thy body." The only relevant commandment was "Thou shalt not kill"; most of the others he confessed to have broken; he justified adultery by means of a phrase from Isaiah, 'I will make darkness light before them'. (He was in fact known for - and freely

1: *Journal*, PP. 182-3.

2: Information from Mr. G. A. Chinnery.

admitted - his sexual promiscuity). Clarkson considered himself to be the truest of the radical religious thinkers of the period to the ideal of separating religion from money. He seems to have known Digger Gerrard Winstanley, and accused him of being a self-seeking tithe-gatherer. It's not known whether Clarkson was one of the Ranters the Diggers ejected from their commune, whom Winstanley wrote had sacrificed inner Reason to outward lustings. Clarkson was arrested in during raids on Ranters in London in 1650 (see later in the text).

Some time before 1660 Clarkson left the Ranters and joined the Muggletonians (apparently to the consternation of some of its members). Clarkson claimed to be the chief follower and disciple of John Reeve, (another ex-Ranter) of whom Lodowicke Muggleton was himself an acolyte, and claims in *The Lost Sheep Found* to be "the true and only bishop now living." A protracted struggle for control followed between Clarkson and Muggleton, which Clarkson lost.

One other name should be mentioned here, that of Richard Coppin. Coppin denied being a Ranter, indeed, he claimed that the Ranters, like other sects, had "persecuted" him in some unspecified way, but his *Divine Teachings*, published in September 1649, was a quarry in which all Ranters seem to have mined and few of their books are without ideas and phrases taken from it. Its publication coincided roughly with the opening of the main period of Ranter activity and prominence.

Coppin, unlike most of the Ranters, was a man of considerable theological training and sophistication. Originally an Episcopalian, he reached his final positions in the customary way, being in turn Presbyterian, Independent and Anabaptist. In the later 1640s he was preaching around Rochester, evidently with some effect, since Wood says that after 1644 William Sandbrooke "was appointed by the Presbyterian Party one of the three Lecturers in the Cathedral there; purposely to preach down the Blasphemies and Heresies of Rich Coppin and his besotted and begotted followers". [1] About 1648 he had a crisis of faith of which *Divine Teachings* was the outcome. From that date he became an itinerant preacher and was constantly in trouble for his views, being placed on trial twice at Worcester, twice at Oxford and once at Gloucester. The indictment at Worcester, as he gives it shows how nearly his views coincided

1: *Athenae Oxonienses* II, P. 149.

with those of the Ranters:

First, that I should say, That they were evil Angels (meaning the Ministers who preach the Gospel of Christ) that told people of damnation, and that such ought not to be heard or believed.

Secondly, That all men whatsoever should be saved.

Thirdly, That those that heard me were all in heaven, and in glory.

Fourthly, That God was as much in me as in Christ....

Sixthly, That there was no general Day of Judgement.

Seventhly, That there was no heaven but in man.

Eighthly, That he that thought there was a hell, to him there was a hell, but he thought there was no hell, to him there was no hell. [1]

On the whole he escaped lightly, though in December 1655 he was imprisoned for six months at Maidstone. The impression given in *Truths Testimony* is that, while juries were hostile, judges were sympathetic and inclined to stretch the law as far as possible in his favour. He does not deny holding the beliefs with which he was charged.

There can be no doubt that the autumn of 1649, when *Divine Teachings* appeared, marked a coming together in Ranterism of a number of former Levellers and others of the politically defeated left wing of the commonwealth forces. Giles Calvert, who published it, had issued the final version of *An Agreement of the People*, and it is worth noting that immediately it appeared *Divine Teachings* was commended in the Leveller journal *The Moderate*, as "an excellent book". William Larner, the usual Leveller printer, issued both Bauthumley's *The Light and Dark Sides of God* and works by Clarkson. It is clear that from the way Clarkson describes his introduction to the Ranters by Calvert that the latter, if not actually a Ranter (and he seems always to have been cautious of identifying himself too completely with anyone) at least enjoyed their full confidence. Clarkson found among the Ranters no less a Leveller than Major William Rainborough, brother of the recently

1: *Truths Testimony*, P. 31.

murdered Thomas. [1] A final pointer in the same direction is the fact that Clarkson, Rainborough and others gathered at the house of a Mr. Walis or Waddis of Ilford, where John Saltmarsh had lived during the last month of his life. Saltmarsh and the Ranters differed in many ways, but they were all branches upon the great tree of Free Grace, and Saltmarsh would certainly have sympathised with the Ranter conception of God as the Great Leveller.

Divine Teachings came out with a long Preface by Abiezer Coppe, his first public appearance of which we have actual knowledge, though Anthony Wood speaks of a book called *John the Divines Divinity* by J.F., to which he also wrote a Preface and which appeared on January 13th, 1648. This does seem to have survived. Coppe was born in Warwickshire and in 1636 went to Oxford, first to All Souls and then to Merton. Here, according to Wood,

all lectures or examples could not reform, or make, him live like a Christian: And it was then notoriously known that he would several times entertain for one night or more a wanton huswife in his Chamber... in the little or old quadrangle, to whom carrying several times meat, at the hour of refection, he would make answer, when being asked by the way, what he would do with it, that it was a bit for his cat.

Wood is hardly an unbiased witness, but since Merton was his own college, and he matriculated only eleven years after Coppe, this anecdote may well be based on first-hand information. This is more than be said of his further statement that after Coppe had turned Ranter

'twas usual with him to preach stark-naked many blasphemies and unheard of villanies in the day-time, and in the night to be drunk and lye with a wench that had been also his hearer stark naked. [2]

Such accusations are typical of many that were made against him and which he repudiated with what seems genuine indignation. Pamphlets written against the Ranters, he writes,

1: It may not be without significance that Major Rainborough had been frustrated in all his efforts to obtain justice upon his brother's murderers. *Second Part of Englands New Chaines*, p. 11

2: Op. Cit., P. 367.

are scandalous and bespattered with Lyes and Forgeries, in setting me in front of such actions which I never did, which my soul abhors; such things which mine eyes never beheld, such words which my tongue never spake, and mine ears never heard.

All like that false aspersion - Viz, that I was accompanied to Coventry with two she-disciples, and that I lay there with two women at once. Which two she-disciples were Captain Blak, and other Souldiers, who have hurried me from Gaol to Gaol; where I sing Hallelujahs to the Righteous judge, and lie in his bosome, who is everlasting loving kindness. [1]

His development followed a pattern with which we are by now familiar. After leaving Oxford he turned Presbyterian, then Anabaptist, preaching widely in Warwickshire. He was in prison in Coventry in 1646. Finally after a prolonged spiritual convulsion he became a Ranter. This crisis he has described more vividly and in greater detail than any other Ranter writer:

First, all my strength, my forces were utterly routed, my house I dwelt in fired; my father and mother forsook me, the wife of my bosome loathed me, mine old name was rotted, perished; and I was utterly plagued, consumed, damned, ramm'd and sunk into nothing, into the bowels of the still Eternity (my mothers wombe) out of which I came naked, and whereto I returned again naked. And lying a while there, rapt up in silence, at length (the bodys outward forme being awake an this while) I heard with my outward eare (to my apprehension) a most terrible thunder-clap. and after that a second. And upon the second thunder-clap, which was exceeding terrible, I saw a great body of light, like the light of the Sun, and red as fire, in the forme of a drum (as it were), whereupon with exceeding trembling and amazement on the flesh, and with joy unspeakable in the Spirit, I clapt my hands, and cryed out, Amen, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Amen. And so lay trembling, sweating and smoking (for the space of half an houre) at length with a loud voice (I inwardly) cryed Out, Lord what wilt thou do with me; my most excellent majesty and eternall glory (in me) answered and sayd, Fear not. I will take thee up into my everlasting Kingdom. But thou shalt (first) drink a bitter cup, a bitter cup, a bitter cup; whereupon (being filled with exceeding amazement) I was throwne into the belly of hell (and take what you can of it in these expressions, though the matter is beyond expression) I was among all the Devils in hell, even

1: A Remonstrance of Abiezer Coppe, p. 6.

in their most hideous crew.

And under all this terrour and amazement, there was a little spark of transcendent, unspeakable glory, which survived, and sustained itself, triumphing, exulting and exalting itself above all the Fiends. [1]

This conversion seems to have taken place in Warwickshire about the middle of 1649 and to have included a command, "Go up to London, to London, that great City". There Coppe, who emphasised the social aspect of his teaching more, perhaps, than any other Ranter, began in the autumn of that year an appeal to the London poor, in a series of sermons in the streets in which the rich were denounced. The substance of these outbursts was probably incorporated in *A Fiery Flying Roll*, where he speaks of himself as, *charging so many Coaches, so many hundreds of men and women of the greater rank, in the open streets, with my hand stretched out, My hat cock't up, staring on them as if I would look thorough them, gnashing with my teeth at some of them, and day and night with a huge loud voice proclaiming the day of the Lord throughout London and Southwark. [2]*

No doubt this is the episode referred to by Clarkson in *The Lost Sheep*, which states that shortly before his own conversion Coppe "had lately appeared in a most dreadful manner". Coppe's campaign in the streets, soon to be followed by the publication of *A Fiery Flying Roll* (January 1st, 1650) marked the beginning of the period of maximum Ranter activity and was followed almost at once by a campaign of persecution and abuse directed against them.

A Fiery Flying Roll, from which a number of extracts have already been given, described itself as "A Word from the Lord to the Great ones of the Earth". With it was bound *A Second Fiery Flying Roll*, addressed "To all the Inhabitants of the Earth.". The violent and provocative tone of the *Roll*, together with Coppe's unconventional behaviour, attracted a great deal of attention and led to an immediate reaction. The Ranters, hitherto almost ignored, began to be written and talked about. A glance at the bibliographical note appended to this essay will show that almost half the items listed date from the year 1650 and more than half the remainder from 1651.

1: *Roll*, I, Preface

2: *Roll*, H, Ch. 5.

Coppe, who had either left London after the publication of *A Roll* or been taken from it under arrest, was soon in prison in Coventry. On February 1st Parliament issued an Order declaring that passages from *A Roll* had been read before it and contained "many horrid Blasphemies, and damnable and detestable opinions, to be abhorred by all good and godly people". It was ordered that copies be publicly burnt "by the hand of the Hangman, at New-Pallace-Yard at Westminster, the Exchange, in Cheapside and at the Market-place in Southwark". Search was to be made and all copies that could be found were to be destroyed.

One of the first attacks on the Ranters came from the Anabaptists. Heart-Bleedings of Professors Abominations appeared on February 28th and this was signed by sixteen of their Ministers. These included a number - Kiffin, Spilsbury, Patience and Drapes - who less than a year ago had signed *The Humble Petition and Representation of Severil Churches of God in London* directed against the Levellers. On both occasions they were eager to disavow any connection with what they regarded as an unpopular group. Here, though the Ranters are not mentioned by name, their familiar tenets are all outlined and repudiated. The pamphlet deals at length with the argument "that those who have faln into such desperate abominations, were sometimes members of our Congregations, and from thence are apt to condemn our profession, and question whether our way be of God or no, saying, you see what your judgement leads to". They reply that, "Many if not most of them were never members with us", and that in any case no flock can be condemned for having had a few black sheep. [1]

That these fears were not without foundation was shown by the publication a fortnight later of *A Blow at the Root, Or some Observations towards A Discovery of the Subtilties and Devices of Satan*, a production of the Presbyterian establishment in which the excesses of the Ranters serve as an excuse for an attack on all the Sects. Its anonymous author contends that one thing leads inevitably to another:

An over-curious questioning of some things appertaining to Religion (against which yet I conceive, no cleare evidence can be given) disposeth to Separation: Separation is an ordinary step to Anabaptisme; Anabaptisme perfects itself in Seeking, being above

1: *Op. Cit.*, P. 12.

Ordinances, and Questioning everything revealed in the Scriptures, and in high Raptures and Revelations. This determinates in Levelling, and (through that) runnes compasse (with some) to that strange and fearfull. straine declared and taught in the late Fiery flying 'Roll; which state's the perfection of all Religion expressly [in perfect Libertinisme]. So that Profaneness ye may perceive, is the Devils Alpha and Omega. [1]

The main Ranter doctrines are then attacked in some detail.

Meanwhile the Ranters appear to have been growing in strength and Clarkson's *A Lost Sheep* describes the increasing boldness of their activities. In April George Foster published *The Sounding of the Last Trumpet*, with social and political ideas very similar to those of Coppe and Clarkson. [2]

In June Parliament set up a Committee to enquire into the Ranters and other heretical groups. On June 21st it reported "on the several abominable Practices of a Sect called Ranters", and a Bill was prepared which was debated on several days during June and July. On August 9th Parliament passed its Act for the Punishment of Atheistical, Blasphemous and Execrable Opinions. This Act declared a number of heresies to be punishable by six months' imprisonment, with banishment for a second offence. These included maintaining that God "dwells in the creature and nowhere else", that "the acts of uncleannes, Prophane Swearing, Drunkenness, and the like Filthiness and Brutishness, are not unholy and forbidden in the Word of God", that such actions and "the like open wickedness, are in their nature as Holy and Righteous as the Duties of Prayer, Preaching or giving of Thanks to God", "that such men and women are most perfect, or like to God or Eternity, which do commit the greatest Sins with least remorse or sense", and that "there is no such thing really and truly as Unrighteousness, Unholiness or Sin, but as a man or woman judgeth thereof; or that there is neither Heaven nor Hell, neither Salvation nor Damnation, or that those are one and the same thing".

This Act was the signal for paper polemics to be followed up by

1: Op. cit. pp. 151-2.

2: In November this was reprinted with a similar work, *The Pouring Fourth of the seventh and last Viall upon all Flesh*.

organised police action. Some Ranters, like Coppe and Salmon, had already been imprisoned. Now began systematic police raids, often made on evidence provided by informers. The Ranters, however, were by no means silenced or quickly defeated. A *Single Eye* by Clarkson appeared in September 1670 [1], and Bauthumley's *The Light and Dark sides of God* in November. Opposition to the Act was also shown by William Larner's publication in 1651 of *The Petition of Divers gathered Churches, and others wel affected, in and about London, for declaring the Ordinance of the Lords and Commons for punishing Blasphemies and Heresies, null and void*. This Petition was reprinted in 1655.

Soon after the passing of the Act Coppe was brought from Coventry to London and examined by a Parliamentary Committee, as was Clarkson and William Rainborough soon after. Both Clarkson and Coppe proved difficult subjects. Clarkson, like Lilburne and Overton before him, stood on his rights as a free citizen, refusing to answer any questions that might incriminate him. Coppe adopted different tactics. *The Weekly Intelligencer* for October 1st-8th mentioned "the arrogant and wild deportment of Mr Copp the great Ranter, who made the Fiery Roll, who being brought before the Committee of Examinations, refused to be uncovered, and disguised himself into a madness, flinging Apples and Pears about the roome, whereupon the Committee returned him to Newgate whence he came". A similar account of the incident is given in *The Routing of the Ranters*.

In December and January 1650-1 appeared a whole swarm of anti-Ranter pamphlets, many anonymous, crudely printed, mostly apparently from the same press, and for the most part of the most scurrilous and witch-hunting character. Not only are they full of allegations of obscene orgies and suggestions that the Ranters were Royalist agents or concealed Jesuits, but such even greater absurdities as that the Devil in person attended their meetings,

and taking them by the hands very familiarly, he leaves the print of his fowl Paws behinde him, which the Ranter can never get out, it remaining black and Blue; they being fearfully tormented thereat. [2]

1: Thomason, whose datings I have usually followed, gives the date as October 4th, but the Parliamentary Order for it to be burnt was dated September 20th.

2: *Ranters Last Sermon*, p. 7.

Another pamphlet tells how a Ranter preacher, when his audience turned against him, "called for ... a pissepot, and in an instant, upon a great flash of fire, vanished, and was never seen more". [1] In a third, one Kendall of Drury Lane, having made an assignation with a she-Ranter, "was suddenly strook dead in the place to the great amazement and astonishing of many beholders". [2]

These pamphlets do, however, give some interesting details, especially of the suppression and persecutions of the Ranters. In the *Arraignment and Tryall... of the Ranters* we read of an Army Ranter being hanged by the thumbs, in *The Ranters Recantation* of one W. Smith, hanged at York "for denying the Deity, Arian-like", and of a number of police raids and imprisonments.

Clarkson's coolness in avoiding arrest during such a raid is described in *The Routing of the Ranters*. A meeting in Whitechapel was surprised "by the officers of the place":

Amongst this company was that Claxton (before mentioned) who with undaunted boldness and audacious carriage, spake to the Officers, that came with authoritie to apprehend them, to this effect.

Gentlemen, I perceive you are come to seize on us, your fellow creatures, for what cause I know not; I pray use not any violence, or terrifie and affright those of our fellow creatures here, that are of a weak and tender constitution if we have offended the Law, we shall readily and willingly submit to be tried by it. And taking up his cloak, he said Gentlemen, I will not leave you as I am ready to go along with you. And forth he went with the first; and as the others were coming forth (about thirty in numbers) he framed an excuse to return back into the house, pretending he had left something of great use behind him, and so escaped away at a back door; but is re-taken, and at this day in prison.

The same pamphlet, describing a raid on the house of one Middleton, at the sign of *David and the Harp* in Moor Lane, (Moorfields) supplies an illuminating detail:

one of the men took a candle, and went up and down the room, as if he had been seeking a needle; and after a while, one asked him what he sought after? to whom he answered, That he lookt for his

1: *The Ranters Recantation*, p. 5.

2: *Strange News from Newgate*, p. 6.

sins but they were not there, he could not find them.

Mrs. Middleton, who at about this time was Clarkson's mistress, escaped, but most of those present were arrested. This is probably the same episode as that referred to in *The Ranters Ranting*, when also Mrs. Middleton is said to have escaped arrest, but the names of some of the others are given as John Collins, I. Shakespeare and Thomas Wilberton. These, and five others were brought before Sir John Wolaston and sent to the Compter (the City prison).

Strange Newes from Newgate and the Old-Baily describes the "Proofs, Examinations and Confessions of J. Collins and T. Reeve, two of the Ranters taken in Moor-Lane, at the General Sessions of Gaol-Delivery, holden in the Old-Baily the twentieth day of this instant January". Each was sentenced to six months' imprisonment under the Act of August 9th. Elsewhere there are accounts of the dispersal and arrest of groups at York, Uxbridge, King's Lynn and other places. Other pamphlets speak of large numbers of Ranters who have repented, and, as *The Ranters Declaration* puts it, "now live civilly in their respective places and habitations".

In all this proliferation of slander and abuse two pamphlets written in these months stand out as at least attempting serious argument. One is *The Smoke of the Bottomlesse Pit* by John Holland, already referred to, whose attempt to give a fair account of Ranter doctrine belies its catch-penny title and justifies its author's claim that it was written, "not with any intent... to make their persons odious unto any, much lesse to stir up any to persecute them barely for their judgements; for when I consider what the Scripture saith, I find it not Gods method to deal with spiritual enemies with carnal weapons". The other was *A Wonder and Yet no Wonder* by Edward Hide junior, published in December, and, most surprisingly, by Giles Calvert.

While a publisher is not, of course, necessarily identified with all the views of the authors he publishes, this must reflect a deliberate intention by Calvert to retreat from his recent Ranter connections. This may have been mere natural caution in the face of persecution and possible damage to his business interests. On the other hand he continued to publish radical and dangerous books (including the last speeches of many of the Regicides) right up to his death in 1663, and his widow Elizabeth continued the same policy afterwards. But about this time Calvert was to begin his long

association with the Quakers, scores of whose books he was to publish in the next dozen years, and it seems more probable that this is mainly an indication that he was moving from the Ranter to the Quaker standpoint and perhaps wished to emphasise the fact.

Hide (more usually Hyde) was a Royalist, related to the future Chancellor, who had been sequestered from his living of Brightwell in Berkshire, but he is described by Wood as "an enthusiastical person". His book certainly contains much cloudy stuff about Great Red Dragons and the like, but his criticism of the Ranter position, though hostile, is not entirely unsympathetic. People like the Ranters, he argues, err,

by ushering in Error with these six glorious truths following; that is to say:

God Doth all things.

Is all things.

All things are in God.

All things are of God.

All things are through God.

All things are to God.

From these excellent premises they draw such rotten and unsound Principles as that they are very God and infinite and Almighty as the very God is.... That Heaven. and all happiness consist in the acting of those things which are sin and wickedness; That those are most perfect, and like to God and. Eternity, which do commit the greatest sins without least remorse or sense ... and that there is neither Heaven nor Hell ... and that there is not any distinction between them, or between light and darkness; that Reason is God. [1]

It will be noted that Hide, like other writers, tends to use the actual words of the Act of August 9th, and these will also be found to colour the language of subsequent Ranter retractions.

The combination of legal prohibition, police repression and adverse propaganda in the last months of 1650 and the first of 1651 did not destroy the Ranter movement, but it certainly checked its growth, drove it underground and forced it to shun rather than court public notice. From this time Ranterism ceases to be news and

1: Op. Cit., PP. 36-42.

references to its activities decrease sharply. Meantime the most prominent Ranter spokesmen, Coppe and Clarkson, like many of their followers, were in prison. Clarkson was released after about a month and the sentence of banishment passed on him was never enforced. However, he left London for East Anglia and soon abandoned his Ranter activities if not his beliefs. His colleague Rainborough was only "discharged and disabled of and from bearing or executing the Office of a justice of Peace in the County of Middlesex, or any other County within England and Wales". [1]

Coppe remained in prison, and in January 1651 issued a partial recantation - *A Remonstrance of the sincere and zealous Protestations of Abiezer Coppe Against the Blasphemous and Execrable Opinions recited in the Act of Aug to 1650*. Apart from complaints that he had been slandered, this consisted mainly of denials that he had ever held the views attributed to him. This evidently did not satisfy the authorities and he was kept in prison for another five months till he wrote a second and fuller recantation, *Copps Return to the wayes of Truth: . . . Or Truth asserted against, and triumphing over Error; And the Wings of the Fiery flying Roll clipt*. It is dated:

May 30 { The day Of } 1619
 { my nativity }
 { And the day of my } 1651 [2]
 { new birth }

In the Preface Coppe addresses Parliament, asking pardon for his sins and errors, but saying that many errors not his own have been maliciously attributed to him. He has been in prison a year and a half during which his wife's health has suffered and "my poor innocent children scattered here and there in several places to our great care, Grief and charge". His fall, like that of Nebuchadnezzar, had been due to spiritual pride:

In a mystical sense I built a great Babel. And (in the pride of my heart) I walked in the Palace of the Kingdome of Babylon, i.e. recreating and priding myself, in the pleasures of... Babel, i.e. Confusion.

1: Parliamentary Resolution Of 27/9/50.

2: Thomason gives the date 11/7/51: perhaps there was a gap between its writing and publication.

On pages 1 to 13 he proceeds to disown the following errors and assert their opposites:

1. That there is no sinne.
2. That there is no God.
3. That Man, or the meer Creature, is very God.
4. That God is in Man, or in the creature onely, and no where else.
5. That Cursing and Swearing, is no sin.
6. That Adultery, Fornication and uncleannesse is no sin.
7. That community of Wives is lawful.

In view of the provisions of the Act, and the penalties it contained, he could hardly have done otherwise, and apparently the authorities were sufficiently convinced since they released him. He did not convince everyone. In September he preached a recantation sermon at Burford which was attacked by John Tickell in an appendix to *The Bottomles Pit Smoking in Familisme*. Tickell accused Coppe of deceit and equivocation. The Ranters "use to speak one thing and mean another.... Before the late Act they spake boldly, now they dare not." When they speak of Christ and his crucifixion they regard Christ as a type, not as an historical figure - a charge justified to a certain extent by Ranter insistence on the primacy of the mystery over the history in the Scriptures.

How far Coppe's enforced recantation was sincere it is difficult to say. But he seems, as far as possible, to have held to the essence of his beliefs. Thus, while denying that there was no sin, he expressed the view that all men are equally sinful in the eyes of God:

Thieves, little thieves, and great thieves, drunkards, adulterers, and adultrresses. Murtherers, little murtherers, and great murtherers. All are sinners. Sinners All. What then? Are we better than they? No, in no wise. [1]

Most significant of all, far from denying any of the social views advanced in *A Fiery Flying Roll* he reaffirmed them almost defiantly:

As for community, I own none but that Apostolical, saint-like Community, spoken of in the Scriptures. So far as I either do, or should own community, that if flesh of my

flesh, be ready to perish; I either will, or should call nothing that I have, mine own.

If I have bread it shall, or should be his, else all my religion is in vain. I am for dealing bread to the hungry, for cloathing the naked, for the breaking of every yoak, for the letting of the oppressed go free....

Yet,

Know all men by these presents, that I am utterly against the community which is sinful, or destructive to soul or body, or the well being of a Common-wealth....

I own none other, long for none other, but that glorious (Rom. 8) liberty of the sons of God.

Which God will hasten in its time. [1]

The sting of his recantation was certainly in its tail.

After his release Coppe remained in London, but it is uncertain how far he resumed his Ranting activities, since little is heard of him after this. Wood says that he "was kindly entertained among those of his own opinion". Fox reports a meeting with him in 1655 which suggests that there had been no great change, provided that his date is correct:

During the time I was prisoner at Charing Cross abundance of professors, priests, and officers, and all sorts of people came to see me ... and there came one Cobbe, and a great company of Ranters came in that time also, and they began to call for drink and tobacco; and I desired them to forbear it in my room; if they had a mind to it they could go into another room. And one of them cried, "All is ours", and another said, "All is well": but I replied, "How is all well when thou art so peevish and envious and crabbed?" [2]

Of Coppe's later years Wood writes that "the name of Coppe odious, he did at the Kings restauration change it to Higham, and practising Physick at Barnelms in Surrey, and sometimes preaching, went for divers years under the name of Dr Higham". He died in August 1672 and was buried "on the south side of the church there, under the seats".

Under all these blows Ranterism ceased to exist as a coherent

1: Ibid., p. 14.

2: Journal, P. 195

social and religious movement, but its decline was slow and prolonged. All over the country small, more or less isolated groups, and, no doubt, many individuals, remained. Apart from its specific theology, there was something about its intransigence, its blunt nonconforming irreverence, its rough materialism and perhaps its appeal to an ancient, deep-rooted peasant communism that made a strong appeal to many Englishmen of the lower orders. The best evidence for its persistence in all parts of the country in this period, and for its character, comes from Fox's Journal. Fox reports Ranters as late as 1668, and in New England, 1672. From his first sight of them in 1649 he emphasises their rough, unmannerly conduct. They "took tobacco and drank ale" at their meetings. They "fell a-swearing", they "made a disturbance and were very rude", they "sung and whistled and danced". Yet this was essentially, a negative type of appeal, not of the kind on which a wide national movement could be built.

What, actually, was the size and strength of the Ranters? It is not easy to answer such a question with any assurance. Fox quoted, with some complacency, a statement by Justice Hotham that the Quakers had saved England from being engulfed by them:

Justice Hotham was glad that the Lord's power and truth was spread and so many had received it.... And moreover he said, if God had not raised up this principle of light and life, the nation had been overspread with Ranterism and all the justices in the nation could not stop it with all their laws, because they would have done and said as they commanded them and yet kept their principle still. But this principle of Truth overthrows the root and ground of their principle ... which they could not have done with all their laws. [1]

This judgement should be treated about as seriously as the even more famous one that Methodism saved England from revolution in the nineteenth century. Equally untrustworthy are some contemporary estimates of vast numbers of Ranters being converted - 3000 at one time according to the Ranters Declaration, 700 at another according to *The Ranters Bible*. All reliable evidence suggests that Ranter meetings were quite small, perhaps ten or a dozen or a score of people meeting privately or semi-privately in a member's house. On the other hand they were probably both more numerous and more influential than has

sometimes been supposed.

No doubt their main strength lay in the poorer quarters of London, among the impoverished artisans and labourers, suffering the effects of the war, and they appealed also to a number of former Levellers inside and outside the Army. But they were certainly not confined to London or even to its neighbourhood. Ranter activities of various kinds are reported from Abingdon, Leicester, Coventry, York, Berkshire, Kent, King's Lynn, Uxbridge, Ilford and Winchester. Fox supplies many more localities: Cleveland, Ulverston, Holderness, the Peak area, Nottingham, Horsham, Bristol, Weymouth, Norwich, Cornwall, Southampton, among others. Such a list, drawn from only a few haphazard sources, must mean that there was no part of England where their influence was not felt. It suggests also, if less conclusively, what might in any case be expected, that this was a mainly urban movement, drawing support from the wage earners and small producers in the towns rather than from the peasantry.

It is not surprising that it caused alarm in orthodox and. Propertied circles and was savagely attacked the moment it appeared. Yet it is also clear that it can never have been a real threat to the established order. If it seemed so, it was perhaps because the rich had an uneasy conscience. It arose, as we have seen, at a time of the political defeat of the radical, plebeian element in the revolution, and, indeed, as a consequence of that defeat. It had therefore to face a ruling group that had fully, consolidated its position and had a firm grip on the Army and the State machinery. What the Levellers had failed to do with considerable mass support, organising ability, and an attractive programme based on a well considered political theory in a time of exceptional political fluidity was far beyond the powers of groups of confused mystical anarchists, at a time of political retreat, whose programme really amounted to little more than awaiting the day when "God the Great Leveller" would come upon the rich and mighty "as a thief in the night, with my sword drawn in my hand, and like a thief as I am - I say deliver your purse, deliver sirrah! deliver or I'll cut thy throat!" [1]

The Levellers, again, had behind them a solid class basis to which their programme made a definite appeal. The Ranters could appeal only to the defeated and declassed, the lower strata of the urban

1: Journal, P. 90.

1: Roll, M Ch- 2.

poor, and upon these no substantial movement could possibly be built. [1] While individual ex-Levellers might turn to them this could only be out of despair and such recruits were likely to be only temporary. The more substantial and balanced of those who had supported the Levellers were more likely to be repelled by the wild language and wilder conduct of the Ranters. These, in their turn, were largely a reflection of their own despair and demoralisation. A logical contradiction developed here between the ideologues and the mass of their followers. The former might well believe that the day of the Lord was at hand and they were indeed in the very year that the Powers of Heaven and Earth should be shaken and damned, and that therefore their actual actions were a matter of little importance.

Their followers might believe this too with the surface of their minds. But such conviction is really only possible for a few and for most the practical outcome seems to have been a feeling that they might as well eat, drink and be as merry as their conditions allowed, since they had little more to expect either here or hereafter. For a few critical weeks or months in 1650 expectations may have been pitched rather higher, but when the test came, and it was obvious that the Powers were so far from being shaken that they had the situation well in hand, a rapid disillusion set in. In a sense the fall of the Ranter movement was as swift as its rise - but it was incomplete. Without leadership except at the local level, Ranter groups persisted for a number of years, carrying on familiar procedures as a matter of habit, perhaps, like Margaret Hollis in 1654, who "singing antiquely, and in rude postures, said That was Religion". [2]

A tough non-conformism remained, but the millennial expectation was over. So was the passion, the poetry, the vision, the attempt at a comprehensive world outlook, however confused, which gave the Ranters a firm and peculiar place in the English Revolution and in the list of English heresies, and which established them as a main link in the chain that runs from Joachim of Fiore to William Blake.

1: Unreformed Stalinist that he was, Morton couldn't resist getting this totally unhistorical Leninist nonsense in. Elsewhere in *The World of the Ranters* he waxes over-optimistic about the class basis of the Levellers and the extent of the franchise their leaders were working towards.

2: *A List of Some of the Grand Blasphemers*.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

The works listed below fall into three main groups: books or pamphlets by Ranters, books or pamphlets attacking them, and books of a more general character in which they are referred to. They are arranged chronologically, and where precise dates are given these are usually as supplied by Civil War era London bookseller George Thomason's collection of 22,000 pamphlets (now housed in the British Library). Though some of these dates are no doubt inaccurate they are still sufficiently correct to make such a list a useful guide to the development of the Ranter movement.

Very little of this material has ever been reprinted. Professor N. Cohn gives useful extracts from a number of these works in an appendix to *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, and extracts from *Heights in Depths* and *The Light and Dark sides of God* are in an appendix to Barclay's *The Inner Life of the Religious Societies of the Commonwealth*.

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A Rout, A Rout. J. Salmon. 10/2/49.

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Divine Teachings. Richard Coppin. Preface by A. Coppe. 18/9/49.

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Parliamentary Resolution on A Fiery Flying Roll 1/2/50.

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A Single Eye all Light, no Darkness. Laurence Clarkson. 4/10/50.

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