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LAURENCE CLARKSON

*A Lost Sheep astray in the County of Suffolk,
Painfully Seeking and, at the last, Happily Finding
Rest and Salvation in the Fold of the
Everlasting Gospel*

By A. L. MORTON

No novelist, setting out to create a typical figure to illustrate the development and variety of religious life in the seventeenth century would have dared to invent anything so fantastically made-to-measure as Laurence Clarkson.¹ In the course of about twenty years he passed through the whole range of the religious experiences possible in his age, progressing from the Anglicanism in which he was brought up, through Presbyterianism, to become in succession Independent, Antinomian, Baptist or Dipper, Seeker and Ranter, till he found his final home among the Muggletonians.

He recorded his adventures, physical and spiritual, in an autobiography: *The Lost Sheep found: or the Prodigal Returned to his Fathers House, after many a sad and weary Journey through many Religious Countreys. . . . Written by Laur. Claxton, the onely true converted Messenger of Christ Jesus, Creator of Heaven and Earth.* (1660), a book almost unknown but in my judgement of greater intrinsic interest than Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*. In the first place, it covers the period (1640-60) when the sects were at the height of their prosperity and influence. Secondly, it introduces us not merely to one sect but to the whole range of the advanced religious life of that period, and, third, it is written with an extraordinary frankness and with a fulness of vivid detail which throws much light on the inner life of the sects. Clarkson never hesitates to show himself in an unfavourable light and the assurance with which he embraces each new creed is only equalled by the decision with which he rejects all his previous convictions. Yet, with all his constant changes, there seems to be a single thread which he follows, a fixed goal upon which he is bent. What that goal was I will try to show in the course of this paper.

Finally, Clarkson has a special interest for us in that he married a Suffolk girl and passed much of his life in Suffolk, which was the scene of some of his most remarkable experiences. In describing his career it will be possible to throw a good deal of new light on early nonconformist activity in our county.

¹ His earlier pamphlets are signed Clarkson, the later ones Claxton. I have adopted the earlier form throughout.

Clarkson was born at Preston, Lancashire, in 1615, of an Anglican family which appears to have been of an average and orthodox piety. This did not satisfy him and at an early age he began to go secretly to hear 'godly' ministers in neighbouring towns:

however, I being under my fathers tuition, he cast a strict eye over me, and would force me to read over the prayers in the book of *Common Prayer* and *Practice of Piety*, which I have done till they have fallen asleep and myself, this was our devotion in those days . . . and the next thing I scrupled, was asking my parents blessing, that oftentimes in the winter mornings, after I have been out of my bed, I have stood freezing above, and durst not come down till my father was abroad, and the reason I was satisfied, the blessing or prayer of a wicked man God would not hear, and so should offend God to ask him a blessing.²

Later he became a Presbyterian, and, on the outbreak of the Civil War, came to London, 'where I found them more precise than in our Popish Countrey of *Lancashire*'. In London he went to hear the most approved ministers—Calamy, Case and Brooks—but soon grew tired of the Presbyterian intolerance and became an Independent. Their doctrine he found 'clearer and of a more moderate spirit', but 'still enquiring after the highest pitch of Light then held forth in London' he was converted to Antinomianism by Simpson and Randel. Presently he made the acquaintance of one Paul Hobson, a preacher who

had a Captain's place under Colonel *Fleetwood* for *Yarmouth*, so that thither I went, and there tarried a soldier with them, at which time I had a small gift of preaching, and so by degrees increased into a method that I attempted the Pulpit at Mr. *Wardels* Parish ^{2a} in *Suffolk*.

Leaving the Army he became an itinerant preacher, gaining such a reputation locally that he was soon

invited to preach at *Pulom*, which was a great Parish; so upon liking I went, and was well approved by all the Godly, so there for a time I was settled for twenty shillings a week, and very gallantly was provided for, so that I thought I was in Heaven upon earth, judging the Priests had a brave time

² *Lost Sheep*, 5. All quotations for which no other reference is given are from this pamphlet.

^{2a} William Wardell was rector of Burgh Castle 1617-1660, and of Belton 1624-1660, when he was succeeded in both parishes by Samuel Fleete. (Suckling, *Hist. of Suffolk*, I, 301, 340).

in this world, to have a house built for them, to tell the people stories of other mens work. Now after I had continued half a year more or less, the Ministers began to envy me for my Doctrine, it being Free Grace, so contrary to theirs, and that the more, their people came from their own Parish to hear me, so that they called me *Sheep-stealer* for robbing them of their flocks, and to that end came to catch and trap me at several Lectures when I was called, that at last they prevailed with the Heads of the Parish to turn me out.

It is this doctrine of universal salvation which divided the more advanced sects from the Presbyterians and very many of the Independents, who held the orthodox Calvinist views of predestination and the rigid division of mankind into the reprobate and the elect. The non-calvinist sects tended to hold that since Christ died for all men and not only for the elect, salvation was open to all. The further implications of this are obvious and it is no accident that it was among the sects that we find the first signs of modern ideas of democracy and of civil and religious liberty. The Levellers, for example, who came very largely from these sects, drew the conclusion that if all men are capable of salvation all should be capable of voting and taking part in political life. As a result of all this the Presbyterians began to find themselves outbidden both politically and theologically. Hence the fury of Clarkson's rivals and the bitterness with which the Presbyterian Thomas Edwards recorded that:

An Independent Antinomian Libertine Preacher here in London said *That a poore whoremonger, or a poore drunkard cannot look into your Churches* (speaking of the Presbyterian Preachers) *but hell must be flashed and thrown into their faces.*³

Expelled from Pulham, Clarkson resumed his vocation of itinerant preacher along the Norfolk-Suffolk border. He became friendly with Robert Marchant of Weybread and began to court one of his daughters. Presently he met John Taylor of Colchester, a Baptist, who 'brought me to believe that the baptism of the Apostles was as much in force now, as in their day.' He then went to London, where he was 'baptised in the water that runneth about the Tower' on 6 November 1644,⁴

Then for *Suffolk* again I travelled through the Church of the Baptists, and was of *Robert Marchant's* family received with joy, for I had the love of all the family, and though he had four daughters marriageable, yet there was one I loved

³ *Gangræna*, ii, 144.

⁴ *Gangræna*, i, 72.

above any in that Countrey, though I was beloved of other friends daughters far above her in estate, yet for her knowledge and moderation in spirit, I loved her.

We do not know Mrs. Clarkson's Christian name, but it is clear from all that follows that she was a woman of great courage and spirit, as well as remarkably tolerant of her husband's unusual ideas about marriage.

Clarkson now became one of a whole group of Baptist preachers who were extremely active in Suffolk for several months. Perhaps the best known was Hanserd Knollys, of whose activities Edwards gives us a picture. After preaching in the Earl of Manchester's army and in London, where he was imprisoned,

he getting free went down into *Suffolk*, and there played his Rakes, not only for preaching strange Doctrine, but in such a tumultuous, seditious, factious way. . . Preaching in the Churchyard when he could not get in the Church, and getting up the Pulpits when the Sermon or Lecture had been ended, against the will of the Minister and Parish, so that there were several Riots and Tumults by his means, so that he was sent for by some in Authority in the County, with Articles and Complaints against him to a Committee of Parliament.⁵

Knollys, in a volume of three sermons which mentions Debenham and Stradbroke as scenes of his activity, declares that the disorders were created by his opponents, and that

for this Doctrine [he] had the Meeting-house doores shut against him, and was stoned out of the Pulpit (as he was preaching) by a rude multitude; who were gathered together, and set on by a Malignant High-Constable. Which hath been proved by divers witnesses of Good reputation, before the Honorable Committee of Examination at London.⁶

Much later, in a posthumously published autobiography, he gave a short account of the whole affair:

Not long after I was brought before the Committee of Examinations, being accused by them that I occasioned great disturbance to Ministers and People in *Suffolk*; which I gave so good and satisfactory an account to them, that upon their report thereof to the House of Commons, they Ordered

⁵ *Gangræna*, i, 97-8.

⁶ Hanserd Knollys, *Christ Exalted*. . . . *Being the summe of divers Sermons Preached in SUFFOLK*, 1646 (Title page).

that I might preach in any part of *Suffolk* where the Minister of that place did not preach: which was all I got for £60 which that trouble cost me to clear my Innocence and the Honour of the Gospel.⁷

That Knollys' preaching had considerable popularity and some lasting effect may be deduced from a Commission given him by Parliament in 1649 to preach in Suffolk as the result of a petition from the inhabitants of Ipswich.

Another Baptist preacher was:

Andrew Wyke of the County of *Suffolk*, a Mechanick, but turned a great preacher and Dipper, who for his preaching and Dipping being brought before the Committee of that County, carried himself like *Lilburne*, *Overton* and other fellow Sectaries . . . reproving the Committee, as *You may think to speak what you please now*, with other such language. This *Wyke*, or some other Sectary, hath printed a pamphlet call'd *The Innocent in Prison Complaining; or, a True Relation of the Proceedings of the Committee at Ipswich, the Committee at Bury St. Edmunds in the County of Suffolk, against one Andrew Wyke, a Minister of Jesus, in the same County; who was Committed to Prison June 3, 1646*. In which Pamphlet . . . the Committee is exclaimed upon fearfully.⁸

The religious situation in East Anglia in the middle 1640's was clearly peculiar. Since the area had been a Parliamentary stronghold from the outbreak of the war, Anglicanism had been eliminated as a social and religious force and the Presbyterians were in control of the governmental apparatus in the County Committees, and, generally, in the Parishes. At the same time, the sects were winning wide support, especially in the Army. The threat of Royalism, which in other areas still forced all Puritan groups to preserve some sort of unity, hardly existed here and the struggle between the Presbyterians and the sects was already in full swing. Early in 1645 the authorities took steps to check the activities of the Baptists in Suffolk, and Clarkson was one of the first to suffer:

There was no small stir among the priests what to do with me, which afterwards they got a Warrant from the Parliament to apprehend Mr. *Knowles* and myself, for then *Knowles* was about *Ipswich* preaching that doctrine, and baptising certain

⁷ *THE LIFE and DEATH of . . . Mr HANSERD KNOLLYS. . . Written with his own Hand to the Year 1672*, 1691, 21-2.

⁸ *Gangrena*, iii, 10. I have been unable to find a copy of Wyke's pamphlet and would be grateful for any information.

people into that Faith; now they apprehended Mr. *Knowles* in *Ipswich* Gaol, and from thence with Warrants came to secure me, so in the week day being privately assembled in a friends house, within three miles of *Ay*, there came an Officer from the Parliament with certain soldiers and two Constables, with some of the Parish, having clubs and staves surrounded the house, I being earnest in my doctrine, and at that time was very much pressing the people, that without submitting to Baptism all their profession was nothing. . . in which time some of the Officers hearing me, interrupted my doctrine, and told me I must leave off, and go along with them, shewing me the authority they had from the Parliament; however, some of our friends would have opposed them, but I saw it was in vain, and so desired our friends to be quiet, and said, we must not only profess Christ but also suffer for him; so it being in the winter time, and almost night, they hasted me of *Ay*, though I, with my friends, desired but so much liberty as to go to my wifes fathers house for linnen and other necessities, and they would engage for my appearance before the Committee at *Bury*; but all in vain, then my wife told them they should provide a horse for her, for whither ever I went, she would go: at which they were very much incensed, but all to no purpose, so at last a Trooper would have her ride behind him, but she with scorn refused, then they got her furniture to ride behind me, so taking leave of our friends, to *Ay* that night we were carried;⁹

Now one of them went before to provide Lodging, so the Town having intelligence that they had taken a great Anabaptist, there was no small waiting for my coming, that when I entered the Town, the inhabitants had beset both sides of the streets to see my person, supposing an Anabaptist had bin a strange creature, but when they beheld me, with my wife, they said to one another, He is like one of us, yea they are a pretty couple, it is a pity I should suffer: so to the *Inne* I came, where a great company was in the yard to behold me; so being unhorsed, they guarded me to our Lodging, and a great provision was made for supper, and many a pot was spent that night to see my face; so to bed we went, and in the next room by Soldiers guarded, so in the morning we were hasted for *St Edmunds Bury*, which morning Captain *Harvey* gave out many sad and greivous words, what the Committee would do with me, but the

⁹ For convenience I have broken this long quotation into paragraphs; Clarkson rarely opens a new paragraph for anything less than a change of creed.

devil was deceived; however I said little, so they came out to me with a Bill what I had to pay for Beer, Wine and Meat; unto which I said, I had none, but if I had, I would pay none, it was sufficient I was wrongfully deprived of my freedom, and not to pay for their rioting; however they told me, I must before I go; then keep me here still: surely, I said, your Masters that set you on work, are able to pay your wages: Well, they said before I came out of prison, if I were not hanged, I should pay it; then said I, rest yourselves contented till that day:

So towards *Bury* we took our Journey, and one was gone before to inform the Committee I was taken; against my appearance they were assembled in a full Committee, of which I take it Captain *Bloyes* of *Woodbridge*¹⁰ was their Chair-man. So to the Hall¹¹ I was guarded, the room being full, I was conveyed up to the Chair-man, who asked my name? To which I replied, this was strange that you had a Warrant to take me, and know not my name: Well, that was no matter, do you tell us your name; so I told them: What Countrey man are you? I said *Lancashire*. What made you travel so far to these parts? The like motions that moved others, moved me. How long have you professed this way of dipping? Not so long as I ought to have done, had my understanding been enlightened. What then, you approve of what you do? Otherways I should not do it. How many have you dipped in these parts? I being a free born subject of this Nation ought not to accuse myself; but you are to prove your charge, by sufficient witness against me; but however I being brought before you for my obedience to the Commands of Christ, I am neither afraid nor ashamed to tell you what I have done: but to give you an account of how many I have dipped, that I cannot tell. Then you have dipped some? Yea, that I have. After what manner do you dip them? After a decent order. We are informed that you dip both men and women naked? As to that, you are not rightly informed. Where is your *Jordan* you dip them in? Though it is not *Jordan*, yet there are several places convenient. Do you not dip them in the night? Yea. And why do you not dip them in the day, it being an ordinance of Christ as you say? Because such as you are not able to bear the truth. Then said Sir *William Spring* but Mr

¹⁰ William Bloyse: J.P. during the Long Parliament, Col. of a Rgt. of Foot during the siege of Colchester and M.P. for Suffolk in the Parliaments of 1654 and 1656. See 'The Ancient Families of Suffolk', *Proc. Suff. Inst. Arch.*, viii, 135.

¹¹ No doubt the Guildhall.

Claxton, have you not force some in the water against their wills? That is contrary to Scripture. Did you not one time, being on horseback, with a switch force some into the water? Let them that so informed you, affirm it before you to my face. But Mr *Claxton*, who were those you dipped about *Framlingham*? At this time I cannot remember, but several I have dipped thereaways. Did you not dip six sisters thereabouts at one time? I never dipped six at one time. Then said Sir *John Rouse*, we are informed that you dipped six sisters one night naked. That is nothing to me what you are informed, for I never did such a thing: Nay further, it is reported that which of them you liked best, you lay with her in the water? Surely your experience teaches you the contrary, that nature hath small desire of copulation in water, at which they laughed. But, said I, you have more cause to weep for the unclean thought of your heart.

Mr *Claxton* have you not a wife? One that brought me, said she is in the town. Where is she? Fetch her hither: she being without the door came in quickly and took me by the hand. Well, said the Chair-man, you are a loving woman, is this your husband? Yes, he is my husband. How long have you been married? About two moneths. Where were you married? At *Waybread* in my fathers house. Who married you? My husband, with the consent of my parents, and the Church. At that there was a great laughter, and one said, your husband marry you himself, that is against the law; I being vexed at their folly, answered, Marriage is no other, but a free consent in love to each other before God, and who was sufficient to publish the Contract as myself? Nay but Mr. *Claxton*, you are not rightly informed as touching a true Marriage. I say I was married according to truth: then if your Marriage be lawful, we are not lawfully married. I question not yours, look ye to that; but this I know, and can prove, I am married according to the word of God; neither can your law repeal the contract of that couple, that hath their parents consent, and the Church confirming the same. Well, well, we shall give you the hearing but how many were present when you took your wife? About twelve. What did you say to her and the Church? First I sought the Lord by prayer for a blessing upon that Ordinance, and then I declared unto her parents and the Church what had passed between she and I, and that before them all I took her by the hand, and asked her if she was not willing to take me for her husband during life? To which she assented, and her parents also approved of it, and gave her to me with the confirmation of the Church.

Then said the Chairman, What think you Gentlemen, of this Marriage? They said it was a strange Marriage. What then Mrs *Claxton*, you look upon this man as your lawful husband? Yea, I deny all other men in the world. Then you have lain with him? I ought to ly with no other. But Mrs *Claxton*, did your husband dip you before or after he became your husband? Before I was contracted in public. How or after what manner did your husband dip you? in your clothes or naked? Sir, we defie any undecent carriage, if you were dipped in your clothes you would spoil them, and besides it you might endanger your life with cold: we have clothes for both men and women provided for the purpose. What were you plunged in over head and ears? So saith the Scripture. What Mr *Claxton*, did you go with her into the water? No I stood on the bank side. Mrs *Claxton*, were you not amazed or almost drowned? No Sir, the obedience to the Command of God did shut out all fear and cold. What did you not go to bed after dipped? I had a warm bed with dry linnen provided. Did not your husband lodge with you that night? There is no such wickedness among us. Why what matter, you were married before God. Till we were publicly before witness we had no such matter, and let me tell you, if it be the practice of your Church, it is not so in ours. Nay woman, be not angry. I do not say you did so, for truly I am as much against sin as you are. But Mrs *Claxton*, we have an Order to secure your husband, and there to endure the pleasure of the Parliament, what will you do? we have no order to stay you. If you stay my husband, you must stay me also. What, are you willing to go to gaol with your husband? For the cause of Christ I am willing to suffer imprisonment. Then you are resolved yours is the way of Truth. Then said I, for the present I know no truth but this. Well Mr *Claxton*, after a while you will be better informed. Never to turn back again. We are to commit you to custody, that you may seduce no more people.

Sir, I must obey your pleasure, but I shall not deny to be obedient to the Command of Christ. Well, we shall talk with you another time: so they ordered to make my *Mittimus*, and in my presence gave it to Captain *Poe* my Keeper, and said, Mr *Claxton*, you may take notice that the Parliament is favourable to you and will not send you to the common Gaol, but to a house where none but men of quality are kept in Custody. Then said *Poe*, who was my Gaoler, what shall his wife do? Then said my wife, wherever my husband is, there will I be, then the Committee ordered her with me:

so coming thither, there was none but two Papists Knights and a Sea Captain, so after we had supped we were directed to a large Chamber, and pretty good Furniture.

Now under a week I told Captain *Poe* that I was not able to board at half a crown a Meal. Then, said he, you must go to the Common Gaol: thither would I go, for I am not ashamed to sit in the stocks in the Market-place, for the Name of Christ. So he informed the Committee, but they would not remove me, and said, he must agree for the Chamber, and I find myself in Diet: At that *Poe* was vexed, and sent up his handmaid Mistress *Tuck*, to agree with me for the Chamber at four shillings a week, which for the space of half a year I gave her, in which time our people increased, there being *William Muly* and some others of this way in *Bury*, I had oftentimes money from the Army, and the Churches at *London* and *Colchester*, so that I wanted for nothing; and some came to my Chamber, and there I preached unto them, in so much that the Keeper informed the Committee, who that Sunday at night assembled, to consider what to do with me: in conclusion they shut me close prisoner, and kept my wife from me, which was more misery than the rest. Well, against the next Lords-day I appointed our friends to stand before my window on the Angel-hill, that being the way for all the great Ones of the Town to go to their worship, so at the very instant time putting my head forth out of the window, I did boldly exhort the people to beware of the priests, and while it is the time of your health, submit your souls and bodies to the true Baptism, and be no longer deluded to think your infants are commanded to obey, or capable of an Ordinance imposed upon them. Oh for shame, if not for fear, stand still and hear the truth related by this true and lawful Minister, otherwise turn back again: at which a great sort of people gave attention, which did enrage the Priest and Magistrate, yet they knew not what to do with me, but charged me to do so no more. Then said I, take heed how you keep my wife from me: is this to do as you would be done unto? So they forthwith took off the Pad-lock, and let my friends come to me.

After this I had the liberty of the whole house, nay, to sit at the street-door; for he had no prisoners save such as gave in great security for their safe imprisonment; and as for me, and *Westrop* my fellow-prisoner, they feared not our going away, onely they were afraid I should dip some. So a little after, Spring coming on, I got liberty, not being well, to go abroad with a Keeper, and Captain *Gray*, who was

called Captain *Drinkwater* was to go with me: now above all the rest, I desired Captain *Gray* to go with me to a Wood a mile distant from me; it having rained over night, the Brook was up, so a man coming with a Pole, I desired him to lay it over, which he did, so I went over first, and the Captain followed me, and shaking the Pole, he fell into the middle of the water, and in a trembling condition he was, lest the Committee should hear of it: so to the Wood we went, and there he dried his Hose and Stockings, so after we came to the prison again, the Committee hearing of it, questioned Captain *Gray*, but he told them the truth, at which they laughed.

The support which Clarkson received there confirms the impression which we get from other sources that Bury was an important centre of sectarian activities, certainly important enough to attract leading preachers from other areas. In 1646 Katharine Chidley, one of the women preachers who so shocked the Presbyterians, and her son Samuel, soon to be an outstanding figure in the Leveller movement, were established here. Edwards, as usual, gives a somewhat disparaging account of their proceedings:

One Katharine Chidley, an old Brownist, and her sonne, a young Brownist, a pragmatistical fellow . . . have been this summer at *Bury* in *Suffolk*, to set up and gather a Church there . . . who being one night very late together about their Church affairs, a mad woman breaking from her Keeper and running out of the house she was kept in happened to light upon the house where the company was, and stood up in the entry of the house; they being upon dissolving their meeting, and going to their several houses, as they were going out there stood this woman in her smock in the entry speaking never a word, which when they saw, they ran out over one another for fear of this white devil, some one way some another, almost frightened out of the little wit they had.¹²

The Chidleys, seem, nevertheless, to have set up a permanent Church in Bury, and when they returned to London left it in charge of one Lanseter or Lancaster, of whom the Presbyterian Minister of Clare had written to Edwards earlier as,

Lancaster of *Bury*, a Pedler and of his opening the whole book of *Ezra* at a private meeting, instead of opening his pack.¹³

¹² *Gangræna*, iii, 170. For a short account of Samuel Chidley see W. Schenk; *The Concern for Social Justice in the Puritan Revolution*, 74-7.

¹³ *Gangræna*, ii, 20.

Lanseter had replied to Edwards' attack with a pamphlet called *Lanseter's Lance* ¹⁴ in which, Edwards says:

Katharine Chidley and her sons Books (for mother and son made them together, one inditing and the other writing) are highly magnified, and the brazen-faced old woman resembled unto *Jael*; but as for *Lanseters Lance* for my *Gangræna*, I shall show it to be made not of iron or steel, in no sort useful to lance or enter the *Gangræna*.¹⁵

Chidley not only left a gathered Church in Bury, but maintained a direct contact with it long after he had returned to London and become involved in the Leveller struggles. This is shown by the dedication of a pamphlet written by him in 1652, which is addressed

*To the Church of GOD (in Edmondsbury) even to the living Temples of the Holy Ghost, Samuel Chidley, the Servant of Jesus Christ sendeth greetings.*¹⁶

But perhaps the most revealing glimpse of sectarian ideas which Edwards gives, and one which provides the key to the whole future development of Clarkson, is in the following passage:

Some of the Sectaries in London do hold, that in Suffolk there is a prophet raised up to come and preach the Everlasting Gospel to them, and he staves but for a vocal call from Heaven to send him, which is expected daily.¹⁷

The idea of the Everlasting Gospel is so essential to any understanding of the advanced sects, as well as Clarkson himself, that it will be necessary to spend a little time in elucidating it, more especially as its significance for this time seems so far to have been almost entirely overlooked. Edwards himself, I think, did not understand what he was writing, but the origins of the doctrine go back to the twelfth century Italian mystic, Joachim of Flora. He taught that the history of the world fell into three Ages, those of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Ghost. The first was the Age of fear and servitude, and ended with the birth of Christ, the second was the Age of faith and filial obedience, and the third, which he expected shortly, was the Age of love and spiritual liberty for the children of God. The scripture of the first Age was the Old Testament, of the second, the New Testament. In the coming third Age the full truth of the Everlasting Gospel

¹⁴ Another lost Suffolk pamphlet; can anyone help me to find it?

¹⁵ *Gangræna*, iii, 170-1.

¹⁶ *THUNDER From THE THRONE OF GOD AGAINST the Temples of Idols*. The title page is a little masterpiece of eccentric typography.

¹⁷ *Gangræna*, i, 35.

will be revealed, not in a new sacred book, but in a completely new understanding of the meaning of the Bible which will illuminate the hearts of men.¹⁸

It will be seen that there are two main strands in Joachite thought: the conception of the three Ages or Commissions, and the the conception that God has not yet fully revealed himself in the scriptures but will shortly do so. Both strands are to be found, sometimes separate but more often together, in the English sects of the seventeenth century, especially among the Antinomians, Seekers and Ranters, and, as we shall see later, the Muggletonians, by whom Joachite ideas were carried their logical conclusions. There is plenty of evidence that by about 1645 the Everlasting Gospel was being widely preached, though I have found only one example of the actual use of the phrase, in an early pamphlet of Winstanley the Digger, who writes that the authority of the Apostles and Prophets

are to cease, when the Lord himself, who is the everlasting Gospel, doth manifest himself to rule in the flesh of sonnes and daughters.¹⁹

It is not easy to fill the gap between the Italian Joachim of the twelfth century and the English sects of the seventeenth, but it is probable that his ideas reached England by way of Germany and Holland. It was in these years that the works of Hans Drench, Sebastian Franck and, above all, of Jacob Boehme were appearing in English translations, many of them the work of Seekers and the closely related sect of Familists.²⁰ Boehme was clearly much influenced by Joachite ideas: his Epistles

predicted that 'the Age of the Lily' was near at hand and that its bloom would soon burst forth, especially in the cold lands of the North, where lilies are not expected. . . The Nettle was the symbol of the stern dispensation of the Law, the Rose was the blood-red flower that characterised the dispensation of the Son. . . the coming of the Lily meant in symbolic fashion the birth of the Life and Love and Joy of God in the lives of men.²¹

Under such influences the Seekers rejected all forms of a visible Church and contented themselves with waiting for the coming of the higher light promised in the new age:

¹⁸ The life and ideas of Joachim are discussed in Coulton, *Studies in Medieval Thought*, 151-162.

¹⁹ *Truth Lifting up its Head above Scandals*, 1648, *Works*, ed. G. H. Sabine, 114.

²⁰ Many of Boehme's writings were published by Giles Calvert, the publisher of many Digger, Leveller and Quaker works. And it was Calvert who brought Clarkson to the Ranters and published at least one of his pamphlets.

²¹ Rufus M. Jones, *Mysticism and Democracy in the English Commonwealth*, 105.

We must be content to *wait* until God shall raise up some such, whose authority in this behalf he shall attest with visible signs of his presence by Gifts of the Holy Ghost.²²

John Saltmarsh, a leading preacher among the Seekers, says that they believe,

That there is a time and fulness for the Spirit and for the later pure spiritual dispensations, as there was formerly for the first dispensations. And [they query] whether this shall be while the Angels are but pouring out their vials or not, or when Babylon is fallen; and whether there is not as much need for new tongues to reveal the pure original to us, it being conveyed with corruptions and additions in translations, by which truth may be more purely discovered and the waters of life that now run muddily may flow more clear and crystal-like from the throne of God.²³

Here, as often, Joachite ideas can be seen in relation to the conception of Babylon and Jerusalem as social symbols; and the belief in the imminent fall of Babylon and the advent of a new Jerusalem is indeed often a special form of the third Age. The connection appears in a sermon preached in 1641 by Hanserd Knollys:

Babylon's falling is Sion's rising. Babylon's destruction is Jerusalem's salvation. . . . This is the work, that is in hand. As soon as ever this is done, that Antichrist is down, Babylon fallen, then comes in Jesus Christ reigning gloriously; then comes in this Hallelujah the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth²⁴

In the writings of Knollys, Saltmarsh or Thomas Collier,²⁵ as well as in those of the Digger Winstanley, the relation of these ideas to the events of the Civil War, with the overthrow of the royal power, can be clearly seen. The victory in the War was regarded as a clear sign of the imminent coming of the new Age of Liberty. The Levellers carried this a stage further, giving the doctrine of the Everlasting Gospel a secular twist in their theory that the fundamental contract binding society together had been

²² William Allen, *A Doubt Resolved, or Satisfaction for the Seekers*, 14.

²³ John Saltmarsh, *Smoke in the Temple*. Quoted from A. S. P. Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty*, 181-2. Saltmarsh was a leading Seeker preacher who actively supported the Levellers. See his *A Letter for the Army* (1647), and *Wonderful Predictions Declared in a Message* (1648).

²⁴ *A Glimpse of Sion's Glory*, Woodhouse, *op. cit.*, 233.

²⁵ Thomas Collier, *Discovery of the New Creation in a Sermon Preached at the Head Quarters [of the Army] at Putney, Sept. 29, 1647*. In this sermon Collier introduces almost the whole Leveller programme.

entirely dissolved in the wars and that a completely new society had to be constructed on a democratic basis. *The Agreement of the People* was, in a sense, the Everlasting Gospel translated into the language of practical politics. So it is possible to see the Joachite doctrine developing in two totally different directions, one stressing its mystical side, as among the Fifth Monarchy Men, and, later, the Quakers and Muggletonians, the other its practical and secular side, as in the rationalism of Winstanley, insisting that reason is the voice of God in man, or in the Leveller Walwyn's infuriating question, 'How can you *prove* that the Scriptures are the Word of God?'²⁶ In Clarkson both tendencies can be found to an unusual extent, though, in the end, it was the mystical strain that came uppermost.

Perhaps the most complete expression of the doctrine of the Everlasting Gospel is to be found in the Welsh Seeker William Erbury, who was preaching in Bury in 1644 and again in 1645. He also came under the eye of Thomas Edwards:

This man was a chaplain in the Earl of Essex's Army a great while, and did broach there many Antinomian Doctrines, and other dangerous Errors. . . In July last [1644] he was at *Berry*, where he exercised in private, some forty persons being present, he declared himself for general Redemption, that no man was punished for Adam's sin, that Christ died for all. . . He said also that within a while God would raise up Apostolicall men, and after that should be the fall of *Rome*: he spoke against gathering churches, the Anabaptists Re-baptising, and said that men must wait for the coming of the Spirit, as the Apostles did. . . And then, after the fall of *Rome*, there shall be the new *Jerusalem*, and then the Church shall be one, one street in that city and no more.²⁷

Most of the essentials of the doctrine of the Everlasting Gospel can be detected here, but Edwards did not understand it sufficiently to present them in their true form. For this, however, we can turn to Erbury's own writings:

The Saints in Wales will not onely walk in the same light they formerly did, but in higher discovery of God and of Christ; yea in more holy and righteous ways with men. This is the new *Jerusalem*, and new *Earth* wherein dwells righteousness. . .

²⁶ Edwards calls Walwyn a Seeker, and though later he does not seem to have been definitely connected with any sect, his ideas are close to theirs and he probably was one when *Gangræna* was written. Compare *Walwyns Wiles* and *Walwyns Just Defence*, (1649).

²⁷ *Gangræna*, i, 77-8.

This was not fulfilled in the Gospel-dispensation, (though in part performed there) yet that the full accomplishment thereof is referred to a third dispensation in these last days appears by the parallel of Isai. 60, 19, 20, 21, with Rev. 21. 22, 23, 24, 25, this new Jerusalem being the third dispensation differing from Law and Gospel-Churches, yet comprehending both, and above both, as the glory of the Gospel was above that of the Law, and darkened the light thereof, even as the rising Sun doth the Moon.²⁸

Sometime in the early summer of 1645, Erbury returned from a preaching mission in Northampton and from his quarters at Ely, to Bury, where Clarkson had been in prison since January 24th. The two men had long discussions, as a result of which Clarkson himself became a Seeker, thus taking his first decisive step in the quest of the Everlasting Gospel which was to occupy the remainder of his life.

Mr *Sedgwick*²⁹ and Mr *Erbery* came to visit with me with whom I had a great discourse, and after they were gone I had a great contest in my mind, as touching the succession of Baptism, which I could not see but in the death of the Apostles, there was never since no true Administrator; for I could not read that there was ever any that had power by imposition of hands, to give the Holy Ghost, and work miracles after they did; so that in the death of these I concluded Baptism to either young or old was ceased. Now observe, I could discern this, but could not by the same tale see that preaching and prayer was to cease: for this I now know, as in the death of the Apostles, and those commissioned by them, the Commission ceased, as unto all their Forms and Worship: So finding I was but still in *Egypt* burning Brick, I was minded to travel into the Wilderness; so seeing the vanity of the Baptists I renounced them and had my freedom.

Edwards, as might be expected, gave a less favourable, but not essentially contradictory explanation:

Now lying in Prison for some months, and seeing he could not get out by all the friends he could make there . . . but must lie in Prison, he then Petitioned the Committee of *Berry* and made a Recantation . . . being thus discharged of his imprisonment, he turned from Anabaptist and Dipper to be

²⁸ William Erbury, *A Call to the Churches; OR a Packet of Letters To the PASTORS of WALES*, 1652, 35-7.

²⁹ William ('Doomsday') Sedgwick of Ely. Not to be confused with the Presbyterians Obadiah and John Sedgwick, brothers who were both Ministers at Coggeshall.

a Seeker, and to deny the Scriptures to be the rule of a Christian, or that in Doctrine or Practice half of God's glory was revealed as yet.³⁰

Once free, Clarkson went to Ely,³¹

to look for *Sedgwick* and *Erbury*, but found them not, onely their people were all assembled with whom I had discourse but found little satisfaction, so after that for *London* I went to find Seekers there.

In London Clarkson published (1646) his first book, *The Pilgrimage of Saints, By Church Cast Out, In Christ Found, Seeking Truth*.

After this I returned to my wife in *Suffolk*, and wholly bent my mind to travel up and down that country, preaching for monies, which I then intended for *London*, so coming to *Colchester*, where I had *John Aplewhit*, *Purkis*, and some other friends, I preached in public; so going for *London*, a mile from *Colchester* I set my Cane upright upon the ground, and which way it fell, that way I would go; so falling towards *Kent*, I was at a stand what I should do there, having no acquaintance, and but little money, yet whatever hardship I met withal, I was resolved for *Gravesend*, so with much ado I got that night to a town called *Bilrekey*, it being in the height of the summer, and in that town having no friends, and I think but six pence, I lodged in the Church porch all night, so when day appeared I took my journey for *Gravesend*.

After preaching for some time in *Kent* he returned to *Suffolk* on a short visit to his wife and then made a second journey to *Kent*. Here occured an episode which he describes with remarkable frankness:

Coming to *Canterbury* there was some six of this way, amongst whom was a maid of pretty knowledge, who with my Doctrine was affected, and I affected to lye with her, so that night prevailed, and satisfied my lust, afterwards the mayd was highly in love with me, and as gladly would I have been shut of her, lest some danger had ensued, so not knowing I had a wife she was in hopes to marry me, and so

³⁰ *Gangræna*, i, 72-3.

³¹ Ely 'that Island of Errors and Sectaries' as Edwards calls it, was at this time a Seeker stronghold. Wood says that it was *Erbury's* 'ordinary residence' from 1645. (*Athene Oxonienses*, ii, 104). In October 1646 *Cromwell* wrote his well-known letter to his daughter *Bridget Ireton* about the conversion of his younger daughter *Elizabeth Claypole* to the Seeker doctrines; as *Elizabeth* was then living in *Ely*, it is reasonable to conclude that she was a convert to the preaching of *Erbury* and *Sedgwick*. *Carlyle, Cromwell*, ed. Lomas, i, 246-7.

would have me lodge with her again, which fain I would, but durst not, then she was afraid I would deceive her, and would travel with me, but by subtilty of reason I perswaded her to have patience, while I went to Suffolk, and settled my occasions, then I would come and marry her, so for the present we parted, and full glad was I that I was from her delivered, so to *Maidstone* I came, and having got some six pounds, returned to my wife, which after a while I went for Kent again, but found none of the people so zealous as formerly, so that my journey was but a small advantage to me, and there I heard the maid had been in those parts to seek me, but not hearing of me, returned home again, and not long after was married to one of that sect, and so there was an end of any further progress in Kent.

He then preached in London and Hertford. Meanwhile, the Leveller agitation was rising to its first climax at the time of the Putney Debates and it was in 1647 that Clarkson wrote his one directly political pamphlet: *A Generall CHARGE OR Impeachment of High Treason, in the name of JUSTICE EQUITY, against the Communality of England. . . . by L. C. a friend of the enslaved Communality.* This pamphlet shows Clarkson's political and social views at this time to have been almost identical with those of the Levellers.³² He then went to Lincoln as an Army Chaplain, but, meeting with financial troubles, 'I concluded that all was a cheat, yea, preaching itself.' For Clarkson such a state of mind was a sure sign that he was ready to embrace a new faith, and on his return to London with his regiment he began to take steps in this direction:

a former friend of mine asked me if I heard not of a people called *My one flesh*? I said no, what was their opinion and how should I speak with them? Then he directed me to Giles Calvert.

Calvert gave him an introduction to one Brush 'who told me that if I had come a little sooner I might have seen Mr *Copp*, who then had lately appeared in a most dreadful manner.'³³

³² For a discussion of this pamphlet see Perez Zagorin, *A History of Political Thought in the English Revolution*, 31-2.

³³ The reference to Abiezer Coppe, one of the most celebrated Ranter preachers, helps to place Clarkson's conversion as probably in the second half of 1649. Earlier in the year Coppe had preached a series of sensational sermons against the rich in the streets of London and this is probably the 'appearance' referred to. He then went to Coventry, where he was arrested in January 1650 and brought to London. His book, *A Fiery Flying Roll: A Word from the Lord to the Great Ones of the Earth* was published in February and immediately condemned by Parliament.

The 'people called *My one flesh*' were the Ranters and Clarkson soon became one of their leading preachers; in one hostile pamphlet they are actually described as

a sort of people . . . newly sprung up among us, called Ranters *alias* Coppinites, or Claxtonians.³⁴

They were Antinomians of the most uncompromising order, whose views Clarkson explains in a sermon of which he gives a summary:

I affirmed that there was no sin, but as man esteemed it sin, and therefore none can be free from sin till in purity it be acted as no sin, for I judged that pure to me, which to a dark understanding was impure, for to the pure all things, yea all acts were pure.³⁵

On the face of it, this was a further step towards the doctrine of the Everlasting Gospel. The Ranters did not, indeed, claim any more than the Seekers that the Third Age was already come, but they did claim for themselves in practice the complete liberty proper to the children of God in that Age. Yet in fact this was a premature and therefore a false step, which brought Clarkson, as we shall see, no satisfaction but rather a growing disillusion and despair. That lay ahead. In the meantime, he was 'Captain of the Rant', preaching in London, returning now and then to his long-suffering wife in Suffolk, who in due time bore him five children, or living at Ilford with Major Rainborough and other members of the Sect:³⁶

where was no small pleasure and delight in praising of a God who was an infinite nothing, what great and glorious things the Lord had done, in bringing us out of bondage to the perfect liberty of the sons of God, and yet the very motion of my heart was to all manner of theft, cheat, wrong or iniquity that privately could be acted, though in tongue I professed the contrary.

The presence of so prominent a Leveller as Rainborough among the Ranters is of special interest when taken in conjunction

³⁴ *The Routing of the Ranters*, Nov. 19, 1650, 1.

³⁵ See also, Clarkson, *A Single Eye all Light and No Darkness, or Light and Darkness One*, 1650.

³⁶ Major William Rainborough, brother of Col. Thomas Rainborough, and himself a leading Leveller who had taken an active part in the Putney debates. The Ranters seem to have become suddenly prominent after the Leveller defeat at Burford in the summer of 1649, and undoubtedly attracted many former Levellers whose hopes had been disappointed. *A Fiery Flying Roll*, which must have been written in the second half of 1649, contains many Levelling ideas, but cast into a mystical form, and it appeals to a more depressed stratum of society than the Levellers had ever touched.

with the way in which Clarkson combined the Ranters' doctrine with social views that were close to those of Winstanley, and the very similar views expressed by Coppe in *The Fiery Flying Roll*:

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: for if the creature had brought this world into no propriety, as *Mine* and *Thine*, there was no such thing as theft, cheat, or a lie; for the prevention thereof *Everard* and *Gerrard Winstanley* did dig up the Commons, that so all might live of them selves, then there had been no need of defrauding, but unite with one another, not then knowing this was the devil's kingdom, and Reason lord thereof, and that Reason was naturally inclined to love itself above any other, and to gather to itself what riches and honour it could, so that it might bear sway over its fellow creature; for I made it appear to *Gerrard Winstanley* there was self-love and vain-glory nursed in his heart, that if possible, by digging to have gained people to him, by which his name might become great among the poor Commonalty of the Nation, as afterwards in him appeared a most shameful retreat from *Georges-hill* with a spirit of pretended universality, to become a real Tithe-gatherer of propriety;³⁷ so that by these things in others, and the experience of my own heart, I saw that all men spake or acted, was a lye, and therefore my thought was, I had as good cheat for something among them, and not come under the lash of the Law.

The Ranters were, indeed, a curiously mixed body, in which mysticism rubbed shoulders with a rather primitive rationalism.³⁸ It was this latter, which, in the long run, Clarkson found unpalatable:

for this then, and ever after till I came to hear of a Commission, was the thought of my heart, that in the grave there was no remembrance of either joy or sorrow after. For this I conceived, as I knew not what I was before I came in being, so for ever after I should know nothing after this my being was dissolved; but even as a stream from the Ocean was

³⁷ There is no other evidence either for or against this charge; in its absence I think we must regard it as possible rather than probable. Winstanley had attacked the Ranters in his pamphlet: *A Vindication of those whose endeavour is only to make the Earth a Common Treasury, called Diggers, Or some reasons given against the immoderate use of creatures, or the excessive community of woman, called Ranting, or rather Renting*. March 20, 1649.

³⁸ *The Ranters Religion*, Dec. 11, 1650, 7-8 and *The Ranters Bible*, Dec. 9, 1650.

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; yet notwithstanding this, I had sometimes a relenting light in my soul, fearing this should not be so, as indeed it was contrary; but however, then a cup of Wine would wash away this doubt.

But now to return to my Progress, I came for *London* again to visit my old Society; which then *Mary Middleton* of *Chelsford* and *Mrs Star* was deeply in love with me, so having parted with *Mrs Middleton*, *Mrs Star* and I went up and down the countries as man and wife, spending our time in feasting and drinking, so that Tavernes I called the house of God; and the Drawers, Messengers; and Sack, Divinity; reading in *Solomons* writings it must be so, in that it made glad the heart of God.

Presently the activities of the Ranters attracted so much attention that warrants were issued against Clarkson, Rainborough and others and they were taken to Whitehall and examined before a Parliamentary Committee. Clarkson denied all charges, standing on his right to refuse to answer any questions that might incriminate him. However, Rainborough was banned for life from serving as a Justice of the Peace and Clarkson was sentenced to banishment. This sentence was never carried out and a month later he was released and once more returned to his wife and to Suffolk. This ended Clarkson's active connection with the Ranters. It seems clear that this was largely due to his growing disillusion with the negative character of their beliefs, but he always combined with his religious absolutism a remarkable vein of hard common-sense, and it is not unfair to suppose that the unpleasant results that could follow the attempt to put the ranting principles into practice had some weight with him. This had been demonstrated both by his own imprisonment and the much worse sufferings of his fellow-ranter Coppe.³⁹ He did not as yet adopt a new faith, but contented himself for a time with the combined practice of medicine and somewhat bogus magic in south-west Suffolk and Cambridgeshire.

I came forth of prison, and then took my journey with my wife to my house in *Stainsfield* and from there my progress into *Cambridgeshire* to the towns of *Foxen* and *Orwel* where I still continued my Ranting principle with a high hand.

Now in the interim I attempted the art of Astrology and

³⁹ See Abiezer Coppe, *Coppe's Return to the Wayes of Truth*, 1651.

Physick, which in a short time I gained and therewith travelled up and down *Cambridgeshire* and *Essex*, as *Lintin* and *Saffron-walden* and other countrey towns, improving my skill to the utmost, that I had clients many, yet could not be therewith contented, but aspired to the art of Magick, so finding some of Doctor *Wards* and *Wollerds* Manuscripts, I improved my genius to fetch Goods back that were stolen, yea to raise spirits, and fetch treasure out of the earth, with many such diabolical actions, as a woman in *Sudbury* assisting me, pretending she could do by her witch-craft whatever she pleased; now something was done, but nothing to what I pretended, however monies I gained, and was up and down looked upon as a dangerous man, that the ignorant and religious people was afraid to come near me, yet this I may say, and speak the truth, that I have cured many desperate Diseases, and one time brought from *Glenford* to a village town wide of *Lanham* to Doctor *Clark*, two women and one man that had bewitched his daughter, who came in a frosty cold night, tormented in what then *Clark* was doing, and so after that his daughter was in perfect health, with many such like things, that it puffed up my spirit, and made many fools believe in me, for at that time I looked upon all was good, and God the author of all, and therefore have several times attempted to raise the devil, that so I might see what he was, but all in vain, so that I judged all was a lie, and there was no devil at all, nor indeed no God, but onely nature, for when I have perused the Scripture I have found so much contradiction as then I conceived, that I had no faith in it at all, no more than a history, though I would talk of it, and speak from it for my own advantage, but if I had really then related my thoughts I had neither believed that Adam was the first Creature, but that there was a Creation before him, which world I thought was eternal.

To a man of Clarkson's character and antecedents such an absence of positive faith could not but be intolerable, yet it would be wrong to see in his state of mind a purely individual distress. By this time the splendid hopes of the revolutionary years were fading, as the Protectorate followed the Commonwealth, and it was among the Levellers and the advanced sects, in whom these hopes had been highest, that despair made the greatest inroads. The Army, which ten years before had marched on London from Putney singing:

The Lord begins to honour us,
 The Saints are marching on;
 The sword is sharp, the arrows swift
 To destroy Babylon,⁴⁰

was carrying on with unbroken discipline but with steadily diminishing enthusiasm the task of policing a largely hostile or indifferent civilian population. The Levellers had ceased to be a popular movement and had become a conspiracy. The sects were disintegrating, the dividing lines were becoming blurred, and many, as the Quakers were beginning to do, were turning away from the world which had so grievously disappointed them. This situation is already revealed in a report from Major General Haynes, Fleetwood's deputy in East Anglia, made to Thurloe in 1656:

Our fiftie monarchy men have many of them turned Anabaptist . . . others have renounced that and all other ordinances and are turned Seekers, and feared by sober people will soon profess to be Quakers.⁴¹

Clarkson's state was therefore an extreme expression of feelings that were almost universal. By the beginning of 1658 he was ready for his next and final change. The instrument of this change was the Muggletonian prophet John Reeve, whom he first met in London in February of that year:

so having some conference with *Reeve* the prophet, and reading his Writings, I was in a trembling condition . . . considering how sadly I had these many years spent my time . . . which after I was fully persuaded that there was to be three Commissions upon this earth, to bear record to the three Titles above, and that this was the last of those three: upon the belief of this I came to the knowledge of the two Seeds, by which I knew the nature and form of the true God, and the right devil, which in all my travels through the seven Churches I could never find, in that now I see it was onely from the revelation of this Commission to make it known.

Now being at my Journeys end, as in point of notional worship, I came to see the vast difference of Faith from Reason, which before I conclude you shall hear and how that from Faith's royal prerogative all its seed in *Adam* was saved, and all Reason in the fallen Angel was damned, from whence I came to know my election and pardon of all my former transgressions; after which my revelation growing,

⁴⁰ See A. L. Morton, *The English Utopia*, 68.

⁴¹ Thurloe, v, 187.

moved me to publish to the world, what my Father was, where he liveth, and the glory of his house, as is confirmed by my writings now in publick.

In these two central Muggletonian doctrines of the Three Commissions and the Two Seeds Clarkson found a precise and authoritative formulation of ideas which as Anabaptist, Seeker and Ranter he had long held or groped after.

Reeve and Muggleton, strongly and directly influenced by the translated writings of Boehme,⁴² carried the Joachite gospel to its logical conclusion; for them the Third Age had actually begun with the Commission given to Reeve in 1652. Muggleton explained the doctrine in his posthumously published history of the Sect. He tells that, being under examination at Derby, he expounded:

who those Men were and are that have acted the Records of Water, Blood and Spirit upon Earth. . . Now the Water Record was to Witness to God the Father, the Blood Record witnessed to Christ the Son, and you see they [i.e. Moses and the Apostles] were Men like yourselves. . . So likewise must the Record of Spirit upon Earth be acted by Men also.

Now, said I, God chose John Reeve and myself, by Voice of Word, to the hearing of the Ear, to be his Two last Prophets and Witnesses of the Spirit, and he gave us Understanding of his Mind and Scripture above all Men in the World at this Day.

Also we being the third Record of the Spirit upon Earth, we use no outward visible Form of Worship, but do Worship God in Spirit and Truth as Christ said.⁴³

Here indeed was Clarkson's 'Journeys end', the doctrine of the Everlasting Gospel not as something in the utopian future but as a present reality. In the doctrine of the Two Seeds he found another thought common to many of the sects given a new and, to him, completely satisfactory form. It was currently held by these sects that the rich, powerful and wicked were descended from Cain and the poor, oppressed and godly were descended from Abel. Bunyan, among many others, held this view:

⁴² Augustus Jessop, *The Coming of the Friars*, 323-4. Dr Jessop's essay on Muggleton is valuable in many ways, but quite misses the point of the doctrines of the Three Commissions and the Two Seeds. Lytton Strachey's better-known essay in *Portraits in Miniature* is entirely superficial.

⁴³ Ludovick Muggleton, *The Acts of the Witnesses of the Spirit.*, 1699, part iii, ch. 11 and 12. Compare John Reeve, *A General Treatise of the Three Records or Dispensations*, 1652, and *Lost Sheep*, 42-3.

The Holy Ghost, as Bunyan and every reputable Baptist, Fifth Monarchy Man and Quaker knew, had intended Cain and Nimrod as the types of all kings and tyrants. . . 'It is the lot of Cain's brood to be lords and rulers first, while Abel and his generation have their necks under oppression.'⁴⁴

The Muggletonians linked this idea with their doctrine of the Fall, in which Cain was not the son of Adam but of Eve and the devil, and, consequently, the inhabitants of the earth are divided into the Seed of Adam (through Abel) who are to be saved, and the Seed of Cain who are not only automatically damned but are in fact devils, for the 'right devil' had indeed no existence except in the Seed of Cain. Thus, the power to damn, which Reeve and Muggleton claimed and exercised freely, was really no more than the power to recognise at sight the seed of Cain and to pronounce upon them the sentence of a damnation already existing. It was to the exposition of the doctrine of the Two Seeds that Clarkson devoted the first book which he wrote after his conversion.⁴⁵

The effect of Reeve, 'the greatest prophet that ever shall be', upon Clarkson was clearly overwhelming, but in 1658 Reeve was a dying man and only survived his meeting with Clarkson by a few months. He was the mystic and prophet of the sect: Clarkson's reaction to Muggleton was very different. Muggleton was the practical leader and organiser, a man of great courage and unbreakable determination, a true hero, though perhaps not a very attractive one. And Clarkson's character was such that he aspired to be the leader of any sect of which he became a member. There was always an element of bombast and self-glorification in him, even when he was most sincere, and this is well illustrated by an episode which happened about 1659. The Muggletonians' chief rivals were the Quakers, and one of Clarkson's contributions to the paper war between them was a pamphlet called *The Quakers Downfall*. This was answered by the Quaker John Harwood in *The Lying Prophet Discovered and Reproved*, in the course of which Harwood described a dispute he had with Clarkson and Muggleton, during which Clarkson boasted that,

⁴⁴ William York Tindell, *John Bunyan, Mechanick Preacher*, 141. The quotation is from Bunyan's *Exposition of Genesis*. Compare Coppe, *Fiery Flying Roll*, part 1, 4: 'This Honour Nobility, Gentility, Propriety, Superfluity etc. hath . . . been the Father of hellish horrid pride, arrogance, haughtiness, loftinesse, murder, malice, of all manner of wickednesse 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.'

⁴⁵ *Look About You, for the Devil that you fear is in You*, 1659. This book was published by William Larner, another link with the Levellers, since Larner was an active Leveller and publisher of some of Lilburne's and Walwyn's most important works.

he had damned the Lord Mayor seven or eight years ago and 1000 more within these eight years, and that he had justified forty or fifty.

This cannot be true, since Clarkson had only been a Muggletonian about a year at this date. The facts were that the Lord Mayor *had* been damned in 1653 by Reeve and Muggleton, and, after Reeve's death, Muggleton strongly objected to the exercise of the power of damnation by any of his followers. He was the last man to tolerate any such attempt to steal his spiritual thunder.⁴⁶

A conflict was inevitable, and it came with the publication of *The Lost Sheep*, in which Clarkson seemed to place himself on a level with Reeve and did not mention Muggleton at all. Muggleton acted at once to crush this threat to his supremacy:

For as John Reeve was like unto Elijah so am I as Elisha, and his place was but as Gehazi, and could stand no longer than my will and pleasure was.⁴⁷

He pronounced Clarkson excommunicated. At any previous stage in his life this would have been enough to set him off on his spiritual travels again, but now he had found a faith which fully satisfied his deepest needs and he could not bear to leave it. He made a half-hearted attempt to oust Muggleton from the leadership of the sect, but, when it failed, he submitted. In 1661:

Laurence Claxton humbled himself to me and acknowledged his Fault, and I forgave him, and took him into my Favour, but ty'd him not to write any more.⁴⁸

It was a cruel sentence for Clarkson, to whom pen and ink were almost as dear as the pulpit, but it was accepted. Clarkson wrote no more, but for the last few years of his life contented himself with preaching the Everlasting Gospel in humble subordination to Muggleton. It is to Muggleton that we owe our knowledge of the circumstances of his death in 1667. And once again, as so often in his career, it is hardly possible to be sure whether his end was the result of philanthropy or opportunism, or in what proportions they were intermixed:

It came to pass, when the Fire destroyed the City of London, he, to get a livelihood, did engage to help Persons of Quality to borrow Money, to build their Houses again.

⁴⁶ It is, of course, possible that Harwood was lying or mistaken, but the explanation I have given squares exactly with everything that Clarkson tell us about himself.

⁴⁷ Jessop, *op. cit.*, 334.

⁴⁸ *Acts of the Witnesses*, part iii, ch. 6.

But the Persons, that had the Money did run away, and left Claxton in the Lurch; the Debt was one Hundred Pounds.

So he onely was arrested, and put in Ludgate Goal for this Money: he lay there a whole year and dyed there.

But he gave a very good Testimony of his Faith in the true God, and in this Commission of the Spirit, and of that full assurance of eternal Happiness he should enjoy, to eternity after his Death.

Insomuch that all the Prisoners marvelled, and were sorry they had opposed him so when he was alive.⁴⁹

The circumstances of his end must have been tragic and sordid, but I do not think we should regard him as an object of pity: he died in the assurance of having found what he had sought so persistently through all the apparent contradictions and inconsistencies of his eventful life, the full and glorious light of the Everlasting Gospel.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*