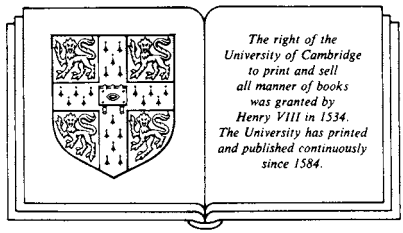
FEAR, MYTH AND HISTORY

The Ranters and the historians

J.C. DAVIS
Professor of History, Massey University



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1

The historians and the Ranters

i. THE REVIVAL: BIRTH OF A MOVEMENT

In 1970 two historians announced the rediscovery of a more or less forgotten group of religious extremists who had fitfully flourished in the brief period of the English republic.[1] The Ranters were emerging from obscurity. Ironically both historians had previously written of the Ranters, but in each case as subjects subordinate to what was then their main theme.[2] The Ranters were coming into their own, as subjects worthy of study in their own right.

For Norman Cohn, the Ranters, 'almost wholly forgotten', deserved 'a modest niche in history' because they were 'a link in a long series of mystical or quasi-mystical anarchists extending from the thirteenth century to the present day'. In one context they linked the Brethren of the Free Spirit with Charles Manson and the hippy amoralists of California in 1969. In another, they fleshed out and gave substance to the roots of modern totalitarianism in the High Middle Ages.[3] In *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957) Cohn had argued that documents on the Ranters from the 1650s could be used, in a retrospective manner, as evidence of the behaviour and belief systems of the Brethren of the Free Spirit (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) or of the Spiritual Libertines encountered by sixteenth-century reformers like Calvin and Bucer in France and Germany. The Ranters, like the Brethren of the Free Spirit, preached a revolutionary social doctrine, self-deification,

[1] Norman Cohn, 'The Ranters', *Encounter*, 34:4 (1970), 15–25; A.L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters: Religious Radicalism in the English Revolution* (London, 1970). A paperback edition of Morton's book appeared in 1979. Reference will be made to this edition as *W.O.T.R.*

[2] Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Messianism in Medieval and Reformation Europe and its Bearing on Modern Totalitarian Movements* (London, 1962), Appendix, pp.321–78. This work was first published in 1957. A.L. Morton, *The Everlasting Gospel: A Study in the Sources of William Blake* (London, 1958), especially Chapter 4.

[3] Cohn, 'The Ranters', 24: for the Manson references see 15, 25; *Pursuit of the Millennium, passim.*

total emancipation, antinomianism and an anarchic eroticism. There were 'many thousands' of them in London and other groups scattered throughout the country.[4] The evidence for this was culled from hostile accounts of heresiographers, Anglicans, Baptists, Quakers and some sensationally lurid yellowpress accounts of Ranter behaviour, as well as from the writings of Jacob Bauthumley, Joseph Salmon, Laurence Clarkson and Abiezer Coppe, all alleged Ranters. Cohn's article in *Encounter* (1970), written when a second edition of *The Pursuit* was in the press, was obviously intended to allow the general argument to reach a wider audience and to underline the affinities which were now seen to exist between the Ranters and the counter-cultural groups of the late 1960s.

A.L. Morton, our second historian, had been, along with a prestigious group of British historians (Christopher Hill, Edward Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Donna Torr), a member of the Communist Party Historians' Group which flourished between 1946 and 1956. Members of this group were to have a decisive influence on British historiography. They saw it as part of their rôle to bridge the gap between academic and popular history. Morton was prominent and successful in this area. He had published works on Blake, Owen, the Labour movement, English utopianism and a popular general history of England. *The World of the Ranters* (1970) was a collection of essays exploring facets of radical religious and political movements in the 1640s and 1650s. Central to it were two essays; one on the Ranters, the other on Laurence Clarkson. For Morton, the Ranters were one expression of a radical movement demoralised by the abortive revolution of 1649. While other groups, like the Fifth Monarchists and Quakers, had attracted more attention, Morton suggested that the Ranters were possibly more significant than any of them. They were more menacing, because more urban, than Winstanley and the Diggers.[5] They represented 'the extreme left wing of the sects' but were not themselves to be seen as a sect. There was too much incoherence, too many contradictions, in the central tenets of Ranterism for that, but, as a movement, they were widespread and commanded great attention so that one could speak of 'Ranter theology', 'Ranter doctrine', 'The World of the Ranters'.[6] The defining centre of the Ranters was necessarily hazy, but it was clear that

[4] Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, pp. 321, 323.

[5] *W.O.T.R.*, pp. 17, 71.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 73. For Christopher Hill there was to be a 'Ranter intellectual milieu' out of which Muggletonianism, in part at least, sprang: Hill, 'John Reeve and the Origins of Muggletonianism', in Christopher Hill, Barry Reay and William Lamont (eds.) *The World of the Muggletonians* (London, 1983), p. 71.

there was a widespread and significant movement: 'no evidence for any formal organisation or generally received body of doctrine' existed. Nevertheless, there was a movement with a reasonably clear history. It had 'a strong appeal to many Englishmen of the lower orders'; it was 'mainly an urban movement, drawing support from the wage earners and small producers in the towns', but its followers were 'probably both more numerous and more influential than has sometimes been supposed'.[7] It arose out of the 'defeat of the radical plebeian element in the revolution' and represented a shift of aspirations from 'Levelling by sword and spade' to 'Levelling by miracle'.[8] Incoherent though Ranter doctrine might be, its central features were a materialist pantheism, an extreme antinomianism and a 'naive communism'. The movement came 'suddenly into prominence' in 1649 shortly after the crushing of the Levellers. Thereafter the Ranters enjoyed 'a mass following' amongst the poor and marginal classes, especially in London but throughout the country. Though their appeal was to 'the defeated and declassed' there was 'no part of England where their influence was not felt'.[9] The movement peaked in 1650 when, after the passing of the so-called Blasphemy Ordinance on 9 August 1650, it was faced with 'savage repression' and an 'organised police action'. 'Under all these blows Ranterism ceased to exist as a coherent social and religious movement, but its decline was slow and prolonged.'[10] Repression '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'. It remained 'a main link in the chain that runs from Joachim of Fiore to William Blake'.[11]

There can be no doubt of Morton's success in stimulating fresh interest in the Ranters. He and Cohn had taken them out of the hands of those whose religious disapproval was to the fore and had made the issue of their significance a matter of very long-term trends in English history. But there were disturbing features in Morton's account. Recognising the suspect nature of many of the hostile and extravagantly sensational contemporary accounts of the Ranters,[12] Morton is yet heavily dependent on such material for evidence of the dramatic rise and fall, nature and extent of support, prominence, behaviour and savage repression of the movement.[13] Nowhere is this more apparent

[7] *W.O.T.R.*, pp. 92, 110, 111. [8] *Ibid.*, pp. 71, 85. [9] *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 112, 111.
[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 103, 110. [11] *Ibid.*, pp. 107, 112.
[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 76, 81. Cf. his comments on the use of the heresiographer Thomas Edwards in his essay on John Lanseter, *ibid.*, p. 24.
[13] For examples see *ibid.*, pp. 76, 81, 82, 83, 89, 90, 92, 96, 99, 107, 108–9, 110, 111.

than in his depiction of the practical antinomianism of the Ranters, their alleged flouting of all moral conventions. Morton takes his picture of a typical Ranter from a hostile Quaker, Richard Farnworth,[14] and accepts the orgiastic nature of Ranter meetings from what he himself describes as pamphlets of 'the lowest, muck-raking type'.[15] To put it kindly, even while recognising their flawed nature, Morton built his claims for the numbers, members, beliefs, and behaviour of the Ranters upon the incautious use of his sources. Like Cohn, he had, in part at least, been prepared to take hostile and sensational contemporary commentary at face value. The rediscovery of the Ranters was unconsciously beset with methodological and evidential problems and, to a great extent, it has never faced or escaped from them. They are problems which we must consider in greater detail later.

ii. BEFORE THE REVIVAL

A sense of breakthrough or rediscovery of the Ranters was understandable in 1970, given that the great historians of the English Revolution and student textbooks had previously barely mentioned them. For Guizot, Ranke, Inderwick and Gardiner the Ranters were a phenomenon which could be passed over in silence. Similarly Firth, Trevelyan and Godfrey Davies made little or no mention of them. Even in Christopher Hill's textbook, *The Century of Revolution* (1961), the Ranters were in passing associated with the 'lunatic fringe' as illustrations that some limit had to be set to religious toleration – and no more.[16]

Still, 1970 was not the breakthrough or year of discovery that the language of enthusiasm sometimes seemed to imply. The Ranters had been discussed in Barclay's *Inner Life of the Religious Societies of the Commonwealth* and in Masson's monumental *Life of John Milton*. To the former they represented a kind of sectarian madness against which Quakerism, in its sobriety and discipline, provided a barrier.[17] The latter saw them as 'ANTINOMIANS run mad, with touches from FAMILISM and SEEKERISM greatly vulgarized', one of a competing range of 'phrenzies'. Yet Masson knew the Thomason Tracts so thoroughly as to

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 92.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 81. For examples see pp. 80–1, 90, 91. The cover of the paperback edition is in fact adorned with a woodcut from just such a pamphlet.

[16] Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution 1603–1714* (Edinburgh, 1961), p. 167.

[17] Robert Barclay, *The Inner Life of the Religious Societies of the Commonwealth* (2nd edn, London, 1877), Chapter 17.

be aware that they were one of the pamphlet and newsbook phenomena of the early 1650s. There may have been varieties of Ranterism but a shared pantheism, rejection of moral values and scriptural authority, associated significantly with atheism, mortalism or materialism, gave them a common identity.[18]

The tone of religious antipathy permeating Barclay's and Masson's accounts of the Ranters was to remain a marked feature of their treatment until their reassessment by Morton and Cohn. The one serious attempt to break free of the religious perspective was made by an anthropologist, James Mooney, in 1896 but he, sadly, confused Ranterism with John Robins's self-proclaimed reincarnation of the Messiah. As well as perpetuating this muddle, Mooney was ironically dependent for his information on Barclay and so the chances of establishing a value-free perspective were limited.[19]

From the 1930s a number of accounts of the Ranters appeared which continued the tradition of seeing them as a case study in the morbid pathology of a religious disease. They were 'the wildest of the sects', 'a lunatic fringe', reflecting a serious mental as well as moral disorder.[20] Attitudes like this persisted well into the early 1970s.[21] At the same time, however, a more balanced approach was emerging, in passing, in works like Geoffrey Nuttall's *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (Oxford, 1947) and, more substantially, in the work of William York Tindall. Tindall's familiarity with the pamphlet literature of the period was so comprehensive as to enable him to place the Ranter phenomenon in a wider context and to see that many of the charges against them were permeated with ulterior sectarian motives. For him the Ranters and the Quakers were the principal non-Calvinist sects of

[18] David Masson, *The Life of John Milton, vol. V 1654–1660* (London, 1877), pp. 17–19.

[19] James Mooney, *The Ghost-Dance Religion and Wounded Knee* (Toronto, 1973), pp. 936–8. This is an unabridged republication of 'The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890', *Fourteenth Annual Report (Part 2) of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Smithsonian Institution 1892–3* (Washington, 1896). An abridged version of this was published by Phoenix Books (Chicago, 1965) which, amongst other things, omits Mooney's account of the Ranters. Compare Mooney with Barclay, *Inner Life*, pp. 419–20. Both are dependent on G.H., *The Declaration of John Robins, the false Prophet otherwise called the Shaker God* (1651), E.629 (13).

[20] C.E. Whiting, *Studies in English Puritanism from the Restoration to the Revolution 1660–1688* (London, 1931), pp. 243, 272–7, especially p. 272; Rufus M. Jones, *Mysticism and Democracy in the English Commonwealth* (New York, 1932; reprinted, 1965), p. 132; Rufus M. Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion* (London, 1936), p. 467.

[21] G.F. Ellens, 'Case Studies in Seventeenth Century Enthusiasm: Especially the Ranters', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Columbia University, 1968; G.F. Ellens, 'The Ranters Ranting: Reflections on a Ranter Counter Culture', *Church History*, 40 (1971), 91–107.

the 1650s, but this quasi-quantitative assessment still rested on taking much of the sensational literature seriously.[22] Tindall's account was an important one and a major step in the serious treatment of the phenomenon. Two American doctoral theses, submitted in 1949 and 1956, should have consolidated this, but both have been strangely neglected by scholars in the field.[23] Nevertheless, a more neutral approach was provided, even in passing, in the work of Gertrude Huehns and Serge Hutin. Huehns's study of antinomianism (1951) provided a context for understanding the moral and theological implications of the Ranters' antinomian views, and, while she was too ready to accept as valid the views of heresiographers like Edwards and Pagitt, she raised a number of considerations which have been unfortunately since forgotten.[24] The same, sadly, must be said of Hutin's work on Behmenism in seventeenth-century England (1960). Not only did Hutin confirm Nuttall's distancing of Richard Coppin from the Ranters, but he placed Ranterism against a background of popular pantheism, concern with a third dispensation or everlasting gospel – typified by the Seekers – and the first stirrings of the influence of Jacob Boehme in England.[25]

The Ranters, it is clear, had never been entirely neglected. Their rediscovery in 1970 was not quite as dramatic an unveiling as it appeared to some. Nevertheless 1970 has to be seen, if only in retrospect, as a watershed. From this point on the reputation and significance of the Ranters began to grow. It was no longer possible to write a textbook with only glancing reference to them.

iii. THE RISE OF THE RANTERS: THE WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

Cohn and Morton had left problems. Cohn's use of a seventeenth-century group as evidence of the practices and beliefs of medieval

[22] W.Y. Tindall, *John Bunyan Mechanick Preacher* (1934; reprinted New York, 1964): see p. 45 for Bunyan's use of attacks on the Ranters as a weapon against the Quakers.

[23] R.G. Scofield, 'The Ranters in Seventeenth Century England: Their Principles and Practices', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University, 1949; A.D. Mott, 'The Phenomenon of Ranterism in the Puritan Revolution: A Historical Study in the Religion of the Spirit', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of California, 1956. In his important Oxford B.Litt. thesis of 1968 Frank McGregor mentions neither of them.

[24] Gertrude Huehns, *Antinomianism in English History: With Special Reference to the period 1640–1660* (London, 1951).

[25] Serge Hutin, *Les Disciples anglais de Jacob Boehme aux XVII^e and XVIII^e siècles* (Paris, 1960). Morton had, of course, stressed the everlasting gospel in his work of that name two years previously.

heretics was problematic. Was it permissable at all? Both historians had been incautious in their use of sources and, for Morton at least, the central doctrines of the movement remained contradictory and vague, something which made it difficult to distinguish Ranter from non-Ranter amidst the plethora of mid-century religious enthusiasms. Yet the image of a chronologically sharply defined movement with a large, widespread following had been emphatically evoked. Rising in 1649, peaking in 1650, the movement was apparently overwhelmed by fierce and systematic repression but continued to be seen in fitful encounters throughout the century. It was typified by a robust rejection of the forms and ordinances of all churches and sects, and a positive liberation from the sense of guilt and moral repression commonly depicted as the essence of puritanism. It was counter-cultural, and part of its fascination lay in the sense that, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Western society was witnessing a profound counter-cultural rejection of institutional, social and moral norms and conventions in the name of individual liberation and authenticity. The Protestant ethic and its apparatus, so it briefly appeared, were about to collapse before the trumpets of youth and in the turmoil of their own contradictions. Cohn compared Ranters and hippies and the comparison was extended the following year by Gordon Ellens without apparent incongruity.[26]

It was in this ambience that Christopher Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down* could be read on its first appearance in 1972. It was an ambience of counter-cultural expectation, of the reading of Herbert Marcuse's *Essay on Liberation*, when it was worth while noting that Marcuse, the guru of pop culture and the politics of permissiveness, might have approved of Gerrard Winstanley.[27] For the first time a great historian had written a major work in which the Ranters played a central rôle, their significance reaching far beyond their own century. The breathtaking quality of *The World Turned Upside Down* rested not only on the habitual mastery of Hill's scholarship, the quality of his insights, the verve and moving compassion of his writing but, above all, on the architectonic brilliance of the overall design of the work. What had hitherto appeared as a more or less promiscuously seething mass of heterodoxies took on pattern and social meaning in the groundplan of the book.

In some ways *The World Turned Upside Down* parallels Edward

[26] Cohn, 'The Ranters', 15, 25; Ellens, 'The Ranters Ranting', 105–7.

[27] Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (London, 1972; paperback edition, Harmondsworth, 1975). References will henceforth be made to the latter as *W.T.U.D.* See Chapter 16, section III, 'A counter-Culture?'; for references to Marcuse, *ibid.*, pp. 138, 414.

Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, and is informed by the same underlying convictions. Central to these is the notion that the people make their own history and are not merely a passive screen against which the 'great' act out the events of 'history', or an inert, deferential mass given shape and function by their betters. The overriding concern of Hill's book is with 'the attempts of various groups of the common people to impose their own solutions to the problem of their own time'.[28] These attempts must be taken seriously because they, and in particular those of the Ranters, have something to say to our generation.[29]

The framework for these aspirations of the common people is the continual struggle between them and the dominant classes. The latter wish to establish their hegemony not only by coercive means but in a variety of cultural and even theological forms, through which the subordinate classes will come to think, feel and see themselves as their betters would wish. They will internalise the values of subordination. Against this is set the desire of the people to be free, to make their own history and express their own identity. One may first see these aspirations expressed, according to Hill, in class tensions and, in this particular context, in 'a tradition of plebeian anti-clericalism and irreligion'.[30] In the seventeenth century these expressions of class hostility had been most evident in the phenomenon and fear of masterless men (*W.T.U.D.*, Chapter 3), in the New Model Army (Chapter 4), and in those areas of the country where, for geographical and environmental reasons, the control of the ruling classes had long been weak (Chapter 5). Lower-class self-expression surfaced much more widely in the 1640s and 1650s because of a breakdown of institutional controls in the wake of the revolutionary struggle and because of the incitement given to the lower orders to join in an attack on authority.[31]

Part of the apparatus designed to control these aspirations was Puritanism, which in other respects was a rebellious force itself. Hence the tension within the revolutionary movement and its ultimately conservative outcome. The risks of allowing the people free rein were too great for those who had participated in inciting them to action. In a society with very limited coercive resources, internalised controls, self-control on the part of the masses, were seen to be vital.[32] Puritanism, by internalising the sense of sin, was, in part at least, a sustained attempt to develop such control. The most powerful agency of self-repression, of

[28] *W.T.U.D.*, p. 13. [29] *Ibid.*, p. 16. [30] *Ibid.*, p. 25. [31] *Ibid.*, p. 24.

[32] *Ibid.*, pp. 47–8. Hill is here developing arguments from Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1965).

internalising subordination, was sin, powerful enough to undermine the call for a more democratic, less deferential politics by groups in the army and amongst civilian Levellers from 1647 to 1649.[33] After 1649 the Diggers, the Fifth Monarchists, the Seekers and the Ranters could be seen to be seeking ways of liberating the oppressed from the burden of their own sense of sin and sinfulness. The struggle between the Protestant, Calvinist or Presbyterian sense of sin, imposed from above and controlling those below, and an 'antinomian rejection of the bondage of the moral law' was thus not only a theological conflict but a desperate struggle against social, cultural, political and personal repression, the outcome of which has determined at least three hundred years of history and human experience. It was the Ranters who most vigorously, if crudely, led the attack against sin, and gave fullest expression to the longing for self-determination and liberation.[34] There was, Hill claimed, a 'Ranter milieu' expressive of these things, but also a Ranter movement with various wings: those who talked about the end of sin and those who acted out the end of sin, the mystical, quietist wing of the Ranters, and the cursing, swearing wing of the Ranters.[35] While they lacked coherence, leadership, organisation and, consequently, unity, the Ranters did exist as a movement. They functioned and were recognised as a group whose course ran most spectacularly between 1649 and 1651.[36] Theirs was 'a heroic effort to proclaim Dionysus in a world from which he was being driven, to reassert the freedom of the human body and of sexual relations against the mind-forged manacles which were being imposed'.[37]

The framework, or paradigm, within which Hill's Ranters operated was sophisticated and serious; their rôle, though not unique, was central and important. They had secured a place in history. The documentary underpinnings of that place were assembled by a master historian with unrivalled knowledge of seventeenth-century English sources. But two features of the work, relative to the Ranters, were troubling. First, although Hill warned against taking the sensational literature of 1650–1 seriously, he, like Morton, repeatedly used it to illustrate Ranter behaviour, practice and belief.[38] Secondly, and again like Morton, Hill saw little coherence or definition at the centre of the Ranter movement and consequently there is some uncertainty about exactly who should be seen as the central figures of the movement. This is not resolved by the manner in which the figures are presented in *The World Turned*

[33] *W.T.U.D.*, Chapter 8, pp. 71–2.
[34] *Ibid.*, pp. 161, 167, 331, 333, 339. [35] *Ibid.*, pp. 197–8, 202–3, 210.
[36] *Ibid.*, pp. 203, 204, 377. [37] *Ibid.*, p. 339. [38] *Ibid.*, p. 317.

Upside Down. After a general section on the movement (pp. 203–10) there follow sections on Abiezer Coppe, Laurence Clarkson, Joseph Salmon, Jacob Bauthumley, Richard Coppin (uncertainly 'a Ranter (or near-Ranter)', p. 208) who denied being a Ranter, George Foster, who 'does not fit neatly into the category of either Leveller or Ranter' (p. 223), and, even less certainly, John Pordage, Thomas Tany and Thomas Webbe.[39] The personnel and the coherence of the core of the movement remained questionable.

Not only did the people endeavour to make their own history, but there were giants of the received tradition of high culture who recognised that effort and were influenced by it. So as Hill's writing continued in the 1970s and early 1980s it became clear that the Ranters were for him part of the milieu which influenced not only John Reeve and Lodowick Muggleton but also John Milton.[40] In 1982 he was arguing that Ranter writings had contributed to a radical reformation in literary modes and style which represented a watershed in the history of English prose, an issue soon to be taken up more elaborately in relation to the Ranters by Nigel Smith.[41] In early 1984, Hill published an essay, 'God and the English Revolution', which restated his vision of the English Revolution.[42] There were three Gods at work in that upheaval; the God who sanctified the established order, the deity of authority and tradition; secondly, the God who stressed justice rather than tradition, a God of scriptural legitimations, heard in the claims of mainstream Puritanism and the more moderate sects; and, thirdly, the God to be found *in* every believer, the God of the spirit and its liberating authenticity. This third was God's revolutionary voice and it was heard through his antinomian saints, pre-eminently Abiezer Coppe, George Foster and Laurence Clarkson. 'In the early fifties the Ranters had abolished sin. But history abolished the Ranters and sin came back in strength after 1660.' God the Great Leveller left England and seems not to have returned.[43] In yet another essay Hill stressed that the fight against religion, conducted as it might, necessarily, have been in

[39] *Ibid.*, pp. 203–27. Figures like Tany and even John Robins have continued to be categorised by Hill as Ranters. For Robins see Christopher Hill, *The Experience of Defeat* (London, 1984), p. 45, n.6.

[40] Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution*, (London, 1977; paperback edition, 1979), *passim*; 'John Reeve and the Origins of Muggletonianism', in Hill, Reay, Lamont (eds.), *World of the Muggletonians*, pp. 64–110.

[41] Hill, 'Radical Prose in Seventeenth Century England: From Marprelate to the Levellers', *Essays in Criticism*, 32:2 (1982), 95–118; Nigel Smith (ed.), *A Collection of Ranter Writings from the 17th Century* (London, 1983), Introduction. Reference will now be made to this book as *R.W.* [42] In *History Workshop*, 17 (1984), 19–31. [43] *Ibid.*, 24–5, 27, 30.

religious terms, was also a fight against repression. It was the Ranters who made the loudest anti-religious noises.[44]

iv. THE CONSOLIDATION OF THE RANTERS

The influence and prestige of Christopher Hill were almost sufficient to ensure that others would begin to take up the theme of the Ranters in scholarly articles, monographs and textbooks. By 1980, the sense of Ranter style had become so definite that Anne Laurence could identify three letters and two poems in the Clarke manuscripts as Ranter material.[45] In 1983 Barry Reay published a study of Laurence Clarkson's own account of his activities as a spiritual wanderer and Ranter, illustrating the religious culture of the subordinate classes in seventeenth-century England.[46] Nigel Smith's edition of what purported to be the principal Ranter texts appeared in the same year. Although they had 'no organisation or programme as such' and the term 'Ranter' was loosely used as one of abuse, the selection of texts was premised on the assumption 'that there was an identifiable body of individuals between 1649 and 1651 which was subject to a thorough persecution by the government'.[47] Such contradicitions are paralleled by the difficulties inherent in the attempt to discuss Ranter style and make general claims for it while stressing the 'highly individualised nature of each Ranter's style'.[48]

Still, the Ranters had arrived, and nowhere is this more apparent than in their treatment in one of the best of the new generation of textbooks,

[44] Hill, 'Irreligion in the "Puritan" Revolution', in J.F. McGregor and B. Reay (eds.), *Radical Religion in the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 191–211. An earlier version of this was given as the Barnett Shine Foundation Lecture for 1974. Hill's account in *The Experience of Defeat* (pp. 42–8) adds little to earlier versions.

[45] Anne Laurence, 'Two Ranter Poems', *The Review of English Studies*, 31 (1980), 56–9. There are enormous difficulties in such ascriptions. Assumptions are made about Ranter coherence, identity and style which just may not be warranted. As Nigel Smith has acknowledged, most of the language of the alleged Ranters is biblical in inspiration, something which does not help to distinguish them from their contemporaries (*R.W.*, p. 23). The effusiveness of their writing could be matched in that of many contemporaries. As Laurence recognises herself, the sentiments expressed in the documents she ascribes to Ranters were commonplace amongst religious radicals in the late 1640s and early 1650s: Laurence, 'Two Ranter Poems', 57.

[46] Barry Reay, 'Laurence Clarkson: An Artisan and the English Revolution', in Hill, Reay, Lamont (eds.), *World of the Muggletonians*, pp. 162–86. A version of this paper had first been given at the Christopher Hill Summer School in Canberra, February 1981.

[47] *R.W.*, pp. 7–8. [48] *Ibid.*, pp. 23, 31, 35.

Barry Coward's *The Stuart Age* (London, 1980). While understandably concerned about the nature of some of the sources upon which the Ranter edifice had been built, Coward clearly felt that their significance required the concession of space. They were a sect 'whose activities were often violent and anti-social' but who shared with the Quakers the distinction of forming an extreme radical wing of the sects which frightened conservative opinion into reaction. They formed 'the hippy-like counter-culture of the 1650s which flew in the face of law and morality and which was considered with horror by respectable society'.[49] With some alacrity the Rump 'revealed its obsessive fear and hatred of the excesses of the Ranters by enforcing observance of the Sabbath', suppressing swearing and cursing, and imposing the death penalty for adultery, fornication and incest.[50] The Ranters illustrate not only the revolutionary potential of mid-seventeenth-century sectarianism but also its capacity to produce a most ferocious backlash. Like Hill, Coward saw the early history of Ranters and Quakers as running close together, but was also concerned to point out that the early history of both groups was bedevilled by the hostile nature of so many of the sources.[51]

As the Ranter image gained currency, not everyone showed the same caution over identity and sources. David Underdown found Ranters in Somerset associated with John Robins.[52] Philip Gura took for granted the corporate identity of the Ranters in an attempt to relate the thought of a New England antinomian to them and the Seekers.[53] Ranter practice was so well established that it could be cited in reference to far distant events and circumstances.[54] The orthodoxy on the Ranters had become that of a 'most extraordinary sect', 'the extreme development of antinomianism and millenarianism in the English Revolution', some of whose writings justified 'sexual licence' and the overthrow of all moral restraint.[55]

[49] Barry Coward, *The Stuart Age* (London, 1980), pp. 208, 229, 421, 209.

[50] *Ibid.*, pp. 209, 214, also 217, 222. [51] *Ibid.*, pp. 418, 209.

[52] David Underdown, *Somerset in the Civil War and Interregnum* (Newton Abbot, 1973), p. 156.

[53] Philip F. Gura, 'The Radical Ideology of Samuel Gorton: New Light on the Relation of English to American Puritanism', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 36 (1979), 78–100.

[54] E.g., Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, 'The Golden Age and Sin in Augustan Ideology', *P. & P.*, 95 (1982), 19.

[55] Keith Lindley, review entitled 'Advancing New Ideas', *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, no. 566, 9 September 1983, 17.

v. A VOICE OF CAUTION

In the midst of all of this, one voice was quietly urging caution. Since the submission of his B.Litt. thesis (supervised by Hill) in 1968,[56] Frank McGregor has been doing some of the best and most scrupulous work on the phenomenon of the Ranters and the radical sects. This work began gradually to appear in print in the later 1970s and early 1980s. It has been typified by sensitivity to the character of seventeenth-century religious sentiment, the context of religious languages and images, caution with regard to the use of sources, and awareness not only of the polemical use of images of deviance, but also of their institutional and corporate values. As McGregor pointed out in 1968, 'The study of English enthusiasm during the Revolution has suffered from the lack of a consistent and comprehensive definition of Ranterism.'[57] From the start, he was reluctant to accept contemporary ascriptions of Ranterism because the term was, on the one hand, such a powerful abusive weapon and, on the other hand, had its uses as a device for procuring discipline and unity within vulnerable sects like the Quakers and Baptists. There was 'a climate of opinion', and briefly in 1650 'a loosely co-ordinated campaign', but there was no Ranter sect.[58] Most of the evidence of their following was unreliable; popular stories of Ranter orgies, their practical antinomianism, impossible to substantiate.[59] Quaker sources provided the most extensive evidence for the survival of Ranterism, but, McGregor argued, they could not be taken at face value because Quaker use of the term 'Ranter' was indiscriminate and deployed principally as a disciplinary device within the Quaker movement itself. 'Ranterism came to represent any anti-social manifestation of the light within', and this in turn could amount to little more than opposition to George Fox and his allies within the Society.[60] Ranterism could be seen as a largely artificial product of the Puritan heresiographers' methodology or of the anxious obsessions of sectarian leaders with unity. It could be given shape by the sectarianising tendencies of seventeenth-century observers when itself far from choate in character.[61]

In McGregor's picture the notion of a Ranter movement, a follow-

[56] J.F. McGregor, 'The Ranters 1649–1660', unpublished B. Litt thesis, Oxford University, 1968. [57] *Ibid.*, p. vi; see also p. 137. [58] *Ibid.*, p. 60. [59] *Ibid.*, pp. 85, 90.

[60] McGregor, 'Ranterism and the Development of Early Quakerism', *Journal of Religious History*, 9 (1977), 351, 354, 359, 360–1, 363.

[61] McGregor, 'Seekers and Ranters', in McGregor and Reay (eds.), *Radical Religion*, pp. 121, 122, 137.