Ute Dreher

Watching Pigeons Making Love: From the Life of a Country Parson in these Distracted Times—Thomas Webbe at Langley Burrell, c. 1647–1651[1]

IT WAS A DAY AROUND Whitsuntide, 1650, in a Wiltshire village. A group of friends met for one of their regular gatherings in the gatehouse of the local manor house, intending to discuss matters of religion. This group included the rector of the parish and the lady of the manor. The rector's attention was caught by some

[1] I would like to thank the following archives and libraries for their kind help: the Wiltshire and Swindon Record Office, Trowbridge/Wiltshire; the National Archives (formerly Public Record Office), London; the Corporation of London Record Office, London; the London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), London; the British Library, London; Friends House Library, London; the Library of the Society of Antiquaries, London; the Bodleian Library, Oxford; Durham University Library, Durham/UK; Trowbridge Reference Library, Trowbridge/Wiltshire; and the Library of the Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, Devizes/Wiltshire. I am extremely grateful to Patricia Allderidge, Manfred Brod, Clive Holmes, Christopher Kent, Jessica Newton, Dennis Powney, Alison Shell and Michael Woodman for kindly sharing their knowledge with me, for generously allowing me access to private collections and for providing vital support and advice. My thanks for their generous hospitality in London, Oxford and Wiltshire go to Christine, Ian and John Newton, George Southcombe, Sonia Parry and Simon Draper. Thanks to Sarah Cook, Mr. and Mrs. John Curtis, Veronica Kilmister, Christine and Walter Pettifor, Doris Roddham, Simon and Ann Tyndale and Rosemary Walker for making me feel so welcome in Wiltshire. Thanks, too, to Nada Elzeer, Philip Martin, Philippa Martindale, Tonje Raddum and Yuka Tajiri for their endless patience, enthusiasm, and useful comments—and to Claire George and Julie Sutherland. This article is dedicated to the congregation of St. Peter's Church, Langley Burrell—past, present and future.

tame pigeons in the courtyard, particularly by "a great Cock Pidgeon" that was in the process of bestowing rather intimate attentions upon "divers of the Hen Pidgeons there." The rector took this instance of avian lovemaking to acquaint the company with his thoughts "that it was lawfull for every man and woman, and that they ought to take that liberty and freedom one with the other, as those Pidgeons did, although they were not married the one to the other."[2]

The village was Langley Burrell. The rector was twenty-four-year-old Thomas Webbe.

Prologue

This unusual glimpse of the thoughts and pastimes of an English country parson comes from a tract called *The Wiltshire Rant*, which appeared in July 1652.[3] It chronicles the tumultuous incumbency of the Ranter Thomas Webbe, who ministered at Langley Burrell from c.1647 until his infamous ejection in September 1651.[4] Unlike most mid-seventeenth-century tracts describing the activities of religious radicals, this one did not flow from the pen of an embittered clergyman. Instead, it was written by Edward Stokes, Esq., of Tytherton Lucas, a local justice of the peace and one of Webbe's parishioners. He came from a rather colourful family himself. Son of a "halfe mad" father and himself father of Abjohn Stokes, who would pass into local legend as an unprincipled bully utterly devoid of any sense of honour,[5] Edward Stokes had the professional

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[2] Edward Stokes, *The Wiltshire Rant; Or a Narrative wherein the Most Unparallel'd Prophane Actings, Counterfeit Repentings, and Evil Speakings of Thomas Webbe, Late Pretended Minister of Langley Buriall, are Discovered; the Particulars whereof are Set Down in the Following Page* (1652) 53; hereafter cited as Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant*. Parenthetical citations in the text refer to this document.

[3] Thomason acquired his copy on 2 July.

[4] For the dating of his incumbency see below, note 26.

[5] See Sir John Long of Draycote to Viscount Weymouth, 16 September 1683, in June Badeni, *Wiltshire Forefathers* (1959; reprint Malmesbury: Norton Manor, Malmesbury/Wilts., 1982) 152. Edward Stokes was the youngest son of Thomas Stokes, who died in 1654 at the age of 67. Edward married Mary Abjohn in London in 1640. She died in 1644, leaving her husband with two sons, Abjohn (1641–1725), who stayed at Tytherton Lucas, and Christopher, who moved to Whitchurch in Hampshire. Edward's second wife, Elizabeth Jacob of Wotton Bassett, by whom he had a daughter, Eliza, born in 1653, outlived him. In 1689, she was described as of Corsham. See *The Pedigree of John Stokes of Seend, Co. Wilts.*, ed. Arthur Schomberg (London: Mitchell and Hughes, 1886) 4, 5; and Wiltshire Record

misfortune of having to deal with Thomas Webbe and his adherents when their eccentric activities caused a stir in the Wiltshire countryside. As a consequence, Stokes and his fellow judges became the target of vitriolic verbal and printed attacks by Webbe, who accused them of partiality, prejudice, and, most theatrically, of being after his life.[6] *The Wiltshire Rant* constitutes Stokes's reply to these charges.

What is remarkable about Stokes's authorship is that, although he strives to create for himself the image of the Christian magistrate,[7] he candidly admits that he had once been a close friend of Webbe.[8] Both men shared a pronounced aversion against legalism, believing instead that true religion must come from within: "M. Stokes confesseth that he hath been addicted to laughing and jeering at false and formall worshippers, both Papists and common Protestants, who make ignorance the mother of devotion, and worship an unknown God."[9] But it seems that Webbe's Ranterism became too extravagant for Stokes. According to his own confession, he could not "run with" Webbe "into the same excesse of Riot" (4). As a result, their ambiguous relationship deteriorated. Webbe from time to time chose to evoke it when doing so seemed to serve his ends. "Sweet Sir," he felt entitled to write to Stokes in August 1650, "I professe to you unfainedly from my heart, that exceedingly I love you and tender you.... Oh how glad would my heart be to see you! While you were at London, I longed for your coming home because to you I would unbosome my self, but I was cast off by you to my great grief and sorrow" (80). Stokes himself admits that "if Mr. Stokes had not been a lover of good works, and the parson an enemy there to, both partners had continued lovers and friends to this day" (84). As it was, he reveals himself a reluctant chronicler of his erstwhile friend's downfall: "I

Office (hereafter sited as WRO) 1178/227 (Colley Papers), deed of 17 November 1689, also in WRO 529/37.

[6] Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 62, 65. Most bizarrely, Webbe claimed that Stokes had often said "that he would give £200 to have me taken out of the way" (66).

[7] See Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 24.

[8] Webbe tried to remind him of this old friendship in January, 1650: "and so humbly intreating you to ... act for me who once was your near friend, and still is, Honoured Sir, your faithfull friend and servant, Tho. Webbe" (Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 41).

[9] Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 68.

was for'ct to the work which I never sought after, nor do not delight in: yet what I have done, I have done it publiquely and truly, that truth may be manifest, and falshood discovered, that the righteous waies and people of God may be justified, and the wicked waies and works of ungodly men may be destroyed" (83).

What an understatement. *The Wiltshire Rant* is a highly amusing, sometimes even comic, vitriolically sarcastic narrative corroborated by personal letters and depositions before the justices, painstakingly rich in detail. It shows what happens when the post of parish rector is filled by a pleasure-loving individual who does not believe in the paraphernalia of organized religion, but who instead hopes "to live so long ... that there should be no such thing as a Parsonage or Minister in England" (56). A Ranter parish parson is a contradiction in terms, and Thomas Webbe embodied this contradiction. Much of the narrative—and comic—tension in *The Wiltshire Rant* stems from a careful juxtaposition of the two identities. It is this preposterous combination, Webbe's existence as a "Ranting Parson" (20, 58), which constitutes his villainy. It sets him apart from a mere libertine, and turns him into the "non-such Parson" (9, 57) Edward Stokes saw in him.

It is believed that Webbe originally came from Bromham, near Devizes, where Thomas, son of William Webb of Netherstreet and his wife Edith, was born on 16 October 1625.[10] In a village

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[10] See C.W. Wood's entry for Thomas Webbe in *A Biographical Dictionary of British Radicals in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Richard L. Greaves and Robert Zaller (Brighton/Sussex: Harvester Press, 1984) 3:297, hereafter cited as *BDBR*, and WRO 518/3, Bromham parish registers. Webbe, Webb and Web all appear as different spellings of Thomas Webbe's name. "Webbe" has become the received version thanks to Stokes, but even he uses variant spellings. Due to the scant nature of the information preserved in the parish registers and the sheer size of the extended Webbe family at Bromham, it is almost impossible to make any clear statements about Webbe's immediate background. Thus, at least four different William Webbes appear as fathers of baptized infants in the 1620s and 1630s. There may even have been two couples called William and Edith. It should be noted, however, that the *BDBR* entry is the only source to mention the Bromham connection. Wood heavily relies on Marjorie Reeves's "Protestant Nonconformity" in *The Victoria County History of Wiltshire* 3, ed. R.B. Pugh and Elizabeth Crittall (London: Oxford UP, 1956) 99–149, and fails to notice that Reeves in fact writes about two Thomas Webbes. Hence, he confuses Thomas Webbe of Langley Burrell with a much younger nonconformist and diarist of the same name, who was born at Rowde in the parish of Bromham in 1672. For the Webbe family of Rowde, see "Nonconformity in Devizes, Part V": *Devizes Advertiser* (Thursday,

dominated by the cloth industry, William may have farmed Netherstreet Farm, the only substantial farm in the area at the time.[11] The Webbe family was certainly well-established in the village. A Thomas Webbe served as churchwarden in 1620 and 1621—possibly Thomas's uncle of Netherstreet, who died in 1624, and after whom young Thomas seems to have been named.[12] In 1650 and 1651, when Webbe courted disaster at Langley Burrell, a William Webb of Netherstreet was a juror at Bromham, alongside two other Webbs.[13] Thomas's cousin Nathaniel would read theology at Oxford, and, after a stint as rector of the Wiltshire parish of Yatesbury, would open a school at his native Netherstreet, to die a much-loved figure there in 1678.[14]

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31 May 1877). For extracts from this younger Thomas Webbe's manuscript diary, see also Charles Stanford, *Joseph Alleine: His Companions and Times; A Memorial of "Black Bartholomew," 1662* (London: Jackson, Walford, and Hodder, [1861]) 28, 349. As noted below, Thomas Webbe of Langley Burrell was first heard of in London, and his father lived in London in the early 1650s (see note 15). He did, however, have family in the West Country. Thus, while the Bromham connection cannot be proved and seems to spring from a misunderstanding, it is not altogether implausible.

[11] I am indebted to Dennis Powney of Bromham for information on Netherstreet Farm.

[12] WRO 518/3 (Bromham parish registers). For Thomas Webb's will, dated 11 May 1624, proved December 1624, see WRO, ArchWilts wills.

[13] See WRO A1/110, Great Rolls of the Wiltshire Quarter Sessions, Easter 1651 (herafter cited as WRO A1/110 E1651, etc.) fol. 172 (Return of the Liberties of Bromham and Rowde).

[14] Webbe's father lived in London at the time (see Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 17). Nathaniel Webbe married Elizabeth, the eldest daughter of Bromham's rector Hugh Webb. After his ejection from Yatesbury, he continued to preach at Calne and other places in the Chippenham area. He and Thomas Rutty, the ejected minister of Milston, established a Presbyterian conventicle in Calne, which in 1669 allegedly attracted a congregation of 200–400 people. See William A. Webb, *Bromham: A History of a Wiltshire Parish* (privately printed, 1913) 132–33; and D.A. Crowley and Jane Freeman, "Calne," in *The Victoria County History of Wiltshire* 17: Calne Hundred, ed. A.J. Fletcher and D.A. Crowley (Woodbridge/Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer for the Institute of Historical Research, 2002) 109. Nathaniel Webbe's house was registered as a Presbyterian meeting house in June 1672. See *Wiltshire Dissenters' Meeting House Certificates and Registrations, 1689–1852*, ed. J.H. Chandler (Devizes: Wiltshire Record Society, 1985) 173 (A32). He was buried at Bromham on 18 September 1678; see *Calamy Revised, Being a Revision of Edmund Calamy's Account of the Ministers and Others Ejected and Silenced, 1660–1662*, ed. A.G. Matthews (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934) 516.

Such respectability, however, was not for young Thomas. By 1644 we find him in London. In a private house in Covent Garden, he preached that "God loved the Creatures that crept upon the ground as well as the best Saint, and he knew no difference between his Flesh and the Flesh of a Toad.... That the Soul died with the body, and all Things should have an End," and, most blasphemously of all, "That we did look for great Matters from One crucified at Jerusalem Sixteen Hundred Years ago, but that would do us no Good. It must be a Christ formed in us, in the Deity united to our Humanity." Thanks to this sermon, Webbe quickly attracted the attention of the Assembly of Divines and the House of Lords. He was put in gaol on 23 November, but released after a full recantation on 2 December.[15] Notwithstanding the latter, he continued to preach—or, as a baffled Thomas Edwards put it in the first part of *Gangraena*—to vent "many of his strange opinions" in London, Essex, Suffolk and Kent.[16]

The early accounts of Webbe's career make clear that he was a "wandering starre"[17] of the amorphous Antinomian movement. Stokes's hostile description of Webbe as "the most notorious Champion" of "the Ranting crew" (7, 13, 3) may seem odd in the absence of any theological writings on Webbe's part. There is no doubt, however, that Webbe was associated with the more well-known Ranters like Abiezer Coppe, and especially Joseph Salmon. A letter from Salmon to Webbe, dated April 1650, reveals close ties between the two men's families. Salmon addressed Webbe in overtly erotic terms as "My own heart bloud, from whom I daily receive life and being" and "The Webb of my own spinning.... My dear thou art to me as a garment of Needlework, I wear thee as my choicest Robes of Royalty."[18]

This, then, was the man who, at barely twenty-two, arrived at Langley Burrell. Originally a schoolteacher,[19] he had, in his own

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[15] *The Journals of the House of Lords, 1578–1714* (London, 1780–1781) 7:71.

[16] Thomas Edwards, *Gangraena* (1646; facsimile reprint of the first edition originally published in three volumes, Exeter: The Rota, 1977) 1:74, 75 (hereafter cited as Edwards, *Gangraena*). Webbe replied to Edwards in *Mr Edwards Pen no Slander* (Thomason 21 May 1646).

[17] Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* Epistle to the Reader.

[18] Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 13.

[19] Edwards, *Gangraena* 75. In the summer of 1645, Webbe caused a stir in Milton in Kent. He "came thither to teach School," but soon ended up preaching for the

words, "no Order from any Authority to possesse himself of the Rectory or Parsonage of Langley ... but ... did officiate there by the consent and approbation of some of the Parishioners."[20] Indeed, it was the patronage of the lord and lady of the manor, Henry and Mary White, which gained Webbe his country parsonage after the incumbent of ten years' standing, Henry Norborne, had been sequestered for delinquency in 1647.[21]

The Whites came from a most interesting background. Their slow and contested rise to gentry rank and their connection with Langley Burrell only dated back to the late sixteenth century, when Henry's grandfather, also called Henry, had bought the manor from the Read family.[22] Prior to his becoming lord of the manor of Langley

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minister, Henry Symonds, who seems to have been a controversial figure himself, and who was to resign his incumbency later in that year. Webbe's own account of the Milton episode is in his *Mr Edwards Pen no Slander* (1646) 10ff. For Symonds, see British Library Additional Manuscripts (hereafter cited as BL Add. MS) 15669, fol. 236, BL Add. MS 36792, fol. 35, Bodleian Library (hereafter cited as Bod) MSS Bodley 324, fols. 191, 376 and Matthews, *Calamy Revised* 442.

[20] Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 50, 64.

[21] BL, Add. MS 15671, fols. 58, 79 (orders dated 12 June 1647); see also *Walker Revised: Being a Revision of John Walker's Sufferings of the Clergy During the Grand Rebellion, 1642-1660*, ed. A.G. Matthews (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) 378 (entry for Henry Norborne). Norborne, who hailed from Calne, had been Henry White's brother-in-law through his marriage to Henry's younger sister Rebecca on 7 July 1638. She died on 16 June 1641 and was buried in St. Peter's church on 21 June, where a curiously defaced monumental inscription still commemorates her life. See WRO 1487/1 (Langley Burrell Parish Register, 1607–1702). For a pedigree of the Norborne family, see Bryant G. Bayliffe, *Family of Bayliffe in Gloucestershire and Wiltshire* (published by the author, 1993, 2nd rev. ed., 1999) 316–17. Norborne was a pluralist who also held the benefice at Yatesbury—which he would eventually lose to Nathaniel Webbe of Bromham.

[22] See WRO 118/125a, 35 Elizabeth. The first Henry White bought the manor from Edward Reade of Chisbury, gent., for £2300. In 1601 he also purchased the manor of Grittleton, which remained in the possession of descendants of the family until 1828. See J.E. Jackson, *The History of the Parish of Grittleton in the County of Wiltshire* (London: J.B. Nichols & Son, 1843). In 1623 Henry's four sons, Henry of Langley Burrell, Francis of Gray's Inn and Langley, Samuel of Poulshot, and Walter of Grittleton were all ignobly included in a list "of all such as have usurp't the names and titles of Gentlemen without Authoritie and were Disclaimed at Salisburie in the County of Wiltsheire in Sept. 1623," though Francis's name was subsequently crossed out in the original manuscript. See *The Visitation of Wiltshire, 1623*, ed. G.W. Marshall (London: George Bell & Sons, 1822) 103 (Walter White), and F.A. Carrington, "The Heralds' Visitations of Wiltshire, and Pedigrees of Wilts Families," *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society Magazine* (*WAM*)

Burrell, the first Henry had been a clothier at Slaughterford in the By Brook valley. Slaughterford, today an outstandingly beautiful, secluded hamlet of approximately thirty-five souls, has made it into the annals of English separatism thanks to its early-seventeenth-century curate, Thomas White.

Intriguingly, Thomas White's father was "reputed to have skill in the black art.... 'I misse my ayme if ever this my sonn T.W. do proue a good man'," old Mr. White allegedly said of Thomas,[25] who in around 1603, at the age of twenty-five, left the "antichristian" Anglican church to preach only in private houses. He founded a conventicle of his own, converted his successor in the ministry, Thomas Powell, and attracted followers from the surrounding villages such as Eaton and Castle Combe. When one of the Johnson brothers came over to England from Amsterdam, he preached at Slaughterford at the house of Thomas Cullimore. While there is no evidence that Henry and Thomas White were related, Thomas Cullimore was Henry White's son-in-law through his marriage to Henry's daughter Ann, who also attended the conventicle. Thomas White and Thomas Powell faced considerable opposition from the surrounding clergy. Slaughterford became the scene of several theological disputations. It was perhaps the threat of persecution at the hands of their erstwhile colleagues which persuaded the two men to leave for Amsterdam, where White stayed at Francis Johnson's house for some time. Eventually, however, White and Powell founded their own small congregation in Amsterdam, ostensibly to distance themselves from the allegedly scandalous ancient church. In 1605, White published his only known work, *A Discovery of Brownisme*, which was directed against Johnson's congregation. It teemed with stories of adultery, fornication, incest and homosexual practice. Johnson unsuccessfully sued White for slander. By the time his much-quoted *An Inquirie and Answer of T. White His Discoverie of Brownisme* appeared in 1606, Thomas White, who had once been a candidate for the post of pastor of the fledgling English Reformed Church in Amsterdam, had returned to the Church

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2.6 (1855): 105 (Henry, Francis and Samuel White). For the Cullimores see Henry White's will, PRO, Prob 11/302, fol. 331.

[25] Francis Johnson, *An Inquirie and Answer of Thomas White His Discoverie of Brownisme* (Amsterdam, 1606) 51.

of England, and accepted a benefice in London. He seems to have died before 1612.[24]

"I desire God to keep all people from such a Congregation, where Adulteries, Cousenages, and Theft are in such abundance.... I speak not of whores, and other filthiness, too too bad," Thomas White had railed against the English congregation at Amsterdam.[25] One wonders, then, what he would have made of Henry White. At Langley Burrell almost fifty years later, the latter cemented his family's radical connections by exercising his power in favour of the seemingly angelic Thomas Webbe. The Committee for Plundered Ministers and the county committee of Wiltshire had appointed the Oxford graduate John Martyn to fill the vacancy created by Norborne's ejection. Martyn, however, had the misfortune of being denied entry

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[24] See Marjorie Reeves, "Protestant Nonconformity," *The History of Wiltshire*, ed. R.B. Pugh and Elizabeth Crittall (London, Oxford UP, 1956) 3:100; WRO A1/110, Easter 1604, fol. 148r (Examination of John Harfore of Eaton, weaver), WRO A1/110, Easter 1604, fol. 148v (Examination of William Hore of Slaughterford, fuller, 7 March 1603/04), both summarized in *Historical Manuscripts Commission, Report on Manuscripts in Various Collections* (London: Printed for His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1901) 1:76; B.R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971) 106–7; Alice Clare Carter, *The English Reformed Church in Amsterdam in the Seventeenth Century* (Amsterdam: Scheltema & Holkema NV, 1964) 22; Francis Johnson, *An Inquirie and Answer of Thomas White His Discoverie of Brownisme* (Amsterdam, 1606); Ephraim Pagitt, *Heresiography, Or a Description of the Hereticks and Sectaries Sprang Up in These Latter Times*, 6th ed. (London, 1661) 75–76. In his will, dated 20 September 1602,and proved 1605, Henry White made bequests to his immediate family—including his five Cullimore grandchildren—as well as to several nieces and a nephew, but does not mention a relative called Thomas. See WRO, Prob 11/105, fols. 110v–111v (will of Henry White of Langley Burrell, clothier). Apart from Ann, Henry's daughter Katherine also married into the Cullimore family; see fol. 111r. For Ann, see also WRO A1/110, Easter 1604, fol. 148v.

[25] Quoted by Pagitt, *Heresiography* 75. Johnson claimed that it was White's and Powell's thirst for power which led them to found their own church. The personal history of White's wife Rose, a young widow whom he had married in Amsterdam in April 1604, did not help his credibility. Rose was an excommunicated ex-member of Johnson's congregation. She had discredited herself by spreading a rumour that another member of the congregation, Daniel Studley, had an incestuous relationship with his wife's daughter. Johnson himself had painstakingly traced the gossip back to Rose, who had had to admit to her lie publicly before the magistrates. See Johnson, *An Inquirie and Answer* 29, 50. Furthermore, Johnson hinted that Rose had been suspected of abusing a fatherless child who had been placed in her care and run away (74).

to what should have been his church by the Whites, some other parishioners, and Thomas Webbe. Having evidently arrived before Martyn, Webbe had won the hearts of the villagers by a promise not to take tithes.[26] "This young stripling," a disenchanted Stokes mused five years later, "having formerly made himself a Preacher, forsaking his lawfull calling, becomes a Parish Priest or Parson," one of those men who "take upon them the work of publique

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[26] Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 51–52, 64. Martyn's orders, which enjoined him to take up his post immediately, were dated 12 June 1647 (see BL Add. MS 15671, fols. 58, 79). It is clear from Stokes's narrative that Webbe was already at Langley Burrell by the time Martyn arrived there. All this strongly indicates that, despite his outrageous behaviour, Webbe enjoyed his benefice for four years and did not arrive in 1649 or 1650 as most modern commentators on *The Wiltshire Rant* seem to assume. There is more internal evidence to support this theory. Webbe and Stokes both refer to a collection made at St. Peter's church in 1647. Stokes bitterly accuses Webbe of not having donated any money—a charge which would have made little sense if Webbe had not been the resident incumbent at the time (Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 64, 76). Moreover, Stokes "affirms that he hath had no familiarity with Webb for four years last past ended in July 1652" (67). Webbe, it seems, had alienated his erstwhile companion by the summer of 1648, but we must not forget that they had been friends for at least some time before then. As regards Martyn, Robert Richards, the aged and frail parson of Thomas Webbe's native Bromham, was assisted by a young "Mr. Martyn ... a godly man and diligent preacher" in 1655/56 (Public Record Office, hereafter cited as PRO, C 94/3, fol. 39, Chancery Surveys of Church Livings, c.1650–1658). John Martyn of Langley Burrell (and possibly Bromham) should not be confused with the mid-seventeenth-century vicar of Compton Chamberlayne and friend of the Penruddock family. For John Martin of Compton Chamberlayne, see PRO E 336/28, and W.W. Ravenhill, "Records of the Rising in the West, John Penruddock, Hugh Grove et Socii," *WAM* 15.43 (1875): 13–15. While the Martyn-Webbe story had spectacular consequences, it was by no means an isolated case. Sequestrations did not always go smoothly, and the surviving papers of the Committee for Plundered Ministers reflect a general confusion in such cases, especially in localities where local patrons traditionally had the gift of the living. Thus, Abberton in Essex witnessed an acrimonious dispute between the county committee's man and the protégé of a local baronet in 1647 (Bod MSS Bodley 324, fols. 413, 445). At East Greenwich in 1645, Thomas Larkham competed with the town's new minister Thomas Spratt, preaching and interrupting the latter's sermons. The Committee for Plundered Ministers eventually ordered both men "to forbeare all manner of passion and personale invectives against each other in the exercise of the ministry" (BL Add. MS 15669, fols. 82, 94, 101). In 1647 John Wright, the newly appointed rector of Cowfold in Sussex, upon his arrival found "that the Church dores are lockt up against the said Mr Wright & that he is thereby kept out of the same" (Bod MSS Bodley 324, fol. 479).

Ministers and Preachers, when never sent of the Lord, nor allowed or approved of men, nor in any way gifted or qualified for so glorious a work."[27]

The peculiar circumstances of Webbe's admittance to the benefice reflected the confusion the English church found itself in in the 1640s and 50s. Four years later and with the benefit of hindsight, they provided Stokes with a welcome opportunity to distance himself from Webbe and to discredit his ministry as a rather drawn-out stage play. This, indeed, is the solution he seems to offer to his readers regarding the central mystery of how someone could be both a Ranter and a parish parson. Webbe, he claimed, was not a true minister, but only "pretended" to be one—a revelation boldly publicized on the title page of *The Wiltshire Rant*, where Webbe is called the "Late pretended Minister of Langley Buriall." Throughout *The Wiltshire Rant*, Stokes sees the Wiltshire Ranters as actors. The text is interspersed with references to the stage and steeped in the language of pretence—a nice device at a time when theatres were officially frowned upon and eventually closed down. Webbe himself, Stokes claims, "could act any part on the devils stage."[28] Initially, however, he "came as an Angel of Light into those parts, with a great form of godlinesse, in sheeps cloathing, whereby he gained with ease the affections of many.... As new things, so new or strange persons affect much: So new brooms sweep clean." And how clean, for by the time Stokes's *Wiltshire Rant* was published in 1652, Webbe had turned into "the greatest monument of scandall and reproach as ever appeared in North Wiltshire" (3).

What had happened? Suspend your disbelief. Welcome to Thomas Webbe's Langley Burrell.

Thomas Webbe at Langley Burrell

Webbe arrived at Langley Burrell a happily married man, but his wife—his second—died shortly after the couple had settled down. It seems to have been with her death that things began to take a

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[27] Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant*, Epistle to the Reader.

[28] Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 20. Stokes may have been inspired by anti-Ranter tracts such as *The Ranters Ranting* (1650), which emphasized the Ranters' love of acting, music and mixed dancing. *The Ranters Ranting* in particular reproduced an alleged Ranter song "to the first Scene, when they began to act upon the Devils stage" (3)—an expression Stokes seems to have copied almost word for word.

turn for the more unconventional. Webbe and his patroness Mary, a London girl whom the widowed Henry White had married in 1644,[29] fell passionately in love with each other. They embarked upon an initially clandestine affair. Henry may have been lord of the manor since his father's death in 1642,[30] lord over "thirty messuages, two dovehouses, thirty gardens, thirty orchards" several fishponds, "one thousand acres of land, two hundred acres of meadow, one thousand acres of pasture, fifty acres of wood, two hundred acres of furze & heath" at Langley Burrell and in the adjoining parishes of Kington St. Michael, Hardenhuish and Chippenham,[31] but in the White household it was clearly Mary who was wearing the breeches. Webbe at one time said of her "that she had sent her own husband Mr Henry White to fetch him four mornings in a week out of his bed, of purpose to ly with him."[32] By late September 1650, Henry had initiated twenty lawsuits against his wife's lover,[33] but this happened during a period of prolonged and bitter estrangement between Webbe and Mary, and the cases seem to have been dropped upon the couple's reconciliation. On only one recorded occasion did Henry make an ultimately abortive attempt to cross his wife's will: when a warrant of the peace was served against Webbe in November 1650, Henry at first refused Mary's request to stand surety for Webbe, but eventually gave in. "What will not love do?" commented Stokes on this rather bizarre episode (26).

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[29] Henry White was born in March 1608 (cf. WRO, 1487/1, Langley Burrell parish register, 1607–1701). He married Margaret Drewe of Southbroome in the parish of Bishops Cannings in 1635, and Mary Haynes of London nine years later; see WRO 118/125a (Ashe Papers), indentures 26 March 1635 and 20 May 1644. A daughter Elizabeth was baptized on 2 February 1642/43 and buried in 1643 (WRO 1487/1). For a pedigree of the White family, see *Wiltshire Visitation Pedigrees 1623. With Additional Pedigrees and Arms Collected by Thomas Lyte of Lyte's Cary, Co. Somerset*, ed. G.D. Squibb (London: Harleian Society Publications, 1954) 214–15, and below, note 51.

[30] Henry White the elder was buried on 28 June 1642 (WRO 1487/1).

[31] See the agreement between Henry White and John Wildman, 19 June 1654, in WRO 118/125b; for the fishponds see an indenture of 3 September 1652, in WRO 118/95.

[32] Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 31.

[33] Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 31.

In spite of his relationship with Mary, Webbe got married for a third time, to "a modest sober young woman" from the village.[34] In March 1650 the Webbes moved from the rectory to the nearby manor house. Langley House formed the nucleus of the Ranter community in Wiltshire. In 1650 it was home to a veritable commune which included the Whites, the Webbes, the yeoman William Lewis and his wife Edith, Mary's maid Elizabeth Briscoe and quite possibly Webbe's friend Francis Bayliffe.[35] According to the half-amused, half-gleeful Edward Stokes,

> Twas wonderfull to see the love of the fellow-creatures ... what a union there was among these persons, and others of the same kidney ... united in family, living under one roof: united in principle, united in practice, united in all things becoming fellow-creatures and lovers of community. (28)

Webbe's precipitated third marriage proved an ill-judged and ill-starred one, though. Whilst most of the villagers were as yet oblivious of what was going on at Langley House, young Mrs Webbe, doomed to act the part of the Puritan killjoy in this pleasure-loving Ranter household, grew suspicious and "manifests much trouble; fearing least her husband Thomas Webbe (notwithstanding his seeming sanctity) would prove an unclean Parson" (5). Webbe, Mary

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[34] Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 4.

[35] Bayliffe and Lewis had been the first Ranters Stokes had encountered in the county; see Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 23. There was an extended Bayliffe family in Chippenham in the seventeenth century. They intermarried with the Norborne and Stokes families. However, the in-depth genealogical and historical study by one of its descendants, Bayliffe's *Family of Bayliffe* is silent on a mid-seventeenth-century Francis. A Henry Bayliffe, an impoverished day labourer, lived at Tytherton Lucas. In 1648 he and one Isaac Ball petitioned the justices of the peace, claiming that they had been unjustly persecuted by "one Thomas Stokes of Marlborrowe, Gent"—probably Edward's "halfe-mad" and, it seems, quarrelsome father. See WRO, A1/110, T1648, fol. 208 (Great Rolls of the Quarter Sessions, Trinity 1648, hereafter cited in the abbreviated form mentioned above). For the Stokes family, see Schomberg, *Pedigree of John Stokes* 4, 5. For Thomas Stokes, see also *Monumental Inscriptions of Wiltshire: an Edition, in Facsimile, of Monumental Inscriptions in the County of Wilton, by Sir Thomas Phillipps, 1822*, ed. Peter Sherlock (Trowbridge: Wiltshire Record Society, 2000) 12 (plaque for Thomas Stokes of Tytherton Lucas, gent.).

and their friends resorted to highly unusual methods to silence her. On a Sunday morning, when Webbe was preaching in the church, the company invited another Ranter, "a lusty young man" Mrs Webbe had foolishly and artlessly confessed to be fond of, to the manor house and persuaded him to seduce her. They then fetched a seemingly surprised Webbe directly from the pulpit, in mid-sermon, so to speak, in order to allow him to catch his shocked wife in flagranti. Webbe's reaction was one of cruel jollity: laughing, he complimented his wife on her new-found liberty: "Well ... is this your liberty? Well done, wife, well done, pray God bless you together." Webbe, a bewildered Edward Stokes later observed, had acted as "a kinde of Pander to his own wife" (6, 7).

More was yet to come. Living, as he himself admitted, above ordinances, denying the sacrament of marriage, which he saw as a merely "formall union" (42), and firmly holding "That there's no Heaven but women, nor no hell save marriage" (4), Webbe took a "man wife" (7). This was the lovely John Organ of nearby Castle Combe.[36] Even Edward Stokes introduces him in almost suspiciously flattering terms as "a comely young man ... of an honest Stock and parentage" and "of a seeming sober behaviour, even as Webbe himself, of whom a stranger cannot but say, or at least think, that butter would not melt in his mouth." Castle Combe had a long-standing dissenting tradition, but its mid-seventeenth-century incumbent, Roger Flower, read other men's works in the pulpit,[37] so it is perhaps not so surprising that the young John Organ sought spiritual fulfilment elsewhere. At Langley Burrell, he found much more, for he "was all woed and Married to this holy unholy Parish-Parson, Tho. Webb." Webbe, far from merely having a sexual relationship with Organ, also "honoured" him "with the title of Webbs

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[36] Stokes refers to Webbe's man-wife by his initials, J.O., only, leaving in it to Webbe himself to mention "young Organ of Castlecombe" in another context (see *Wiltshire Rant* 31). Stokes hints at his identity in he following observation: "Webb is become a great lover of Musick ... but whether ever he plaied any hellish tune with his Organ or Church musick ... is not yet discovered: But this is discovered, that both the man and the man-wife were in other things brethren in iniquity" (8). Organ's identity becomes clear from a 1651 quarter sessions case in WRO A1/110, T1651, fol. 150. See also below, page 351.

[37] According to the parliamentary commissioners of 1649–50. See E.J. Bodington, "The Church Survey in Wiltshire, 1649–50," *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine* 41 (1920–1922): 3; and BL MS Lansdowne 459, fols. 159ff.

wife, for so he cals him, My wife O[rgan], and O owns Webb for a husband, and now where ever they come, 'tis my wife O, and my husband Webb" (7, 8). To make matters worse, John Organ was married with children. Webbe seems to have felt so safe at Langley Burrell that he publicly owned the relationship. Publicity, however, brought on scandal, and John Organ soon left Wiltshire to become an itinerant minister in Kent as his lover had been, having been taught the art of preaching by Webbe himself. The latter was, as Stokes observed, "most eminent this way, to teach men how to use the tongue" (8). Bizarrely, John Organ left in the company of his neighbour's flighty daughter, thus confirming Stokes in his view that Ranterism consisted chiefly in a surprising readiness to forsake one's lawful family and have sex with almost everyone else.

Webbe, meanwhile, was "for a time without check and control swimming down the streams of lust" (9), until a suicide attempt by his wife alienated his more sober parishioners. Webbe took her on a journey, and upon his return found that he had fallen from grace. Against his expectations, Webbe was no longer "accounted a white boy," nor was he "received as in times of Yore" (10). His new-found tenderness for his wife infuriated Mary White, "the little Gentlewoman" (16), as Stokes most cynically termed her. Mary and Thomas's relationship seems to have been extraordinarily stormy. Mary displayed an emotional possessiveness which was strangely at odds with the Ranters' advocacy of free love. Thus, Stokes hints at domestic violence, self-inflicted wounds and Mary's threats to commit suicide. The quarrel grew to such a height that Webbe saw no other solution than to move back to the rectory—against the will of his mistress. By this time, "he well knew he was the common table talk of the country" (10).

Worse still, a furious Mary persuaded Henry to drag Webbe before the magistrates, under the eyes of a gossipy public only too eager "to see these rare persons." The estranged lovers did not disappoint their audience's thirst for sensationalism. Both of them manifested a suicidal proneness for washing their dirty linen in public. Webbe, not quite the country parson, "preached a Billingsgate Sermon, as if he had met with all the Oister [sic] wives at once, but was answered in his own kinde." Francis Bayliffe, who acted as a go-between between Webbe and Edward Stokes, tried to persuade the latter that Mary was "an insatiable woman" and a "monster" (11). Mary and her maidservant Elizabeth Briscoe, on the other

hand, unconvincingly accused Webbe of attempted rape. More spectacularly, they told the judges how he had, "in a boasting way," claimed "that he could lye with any woman except his own mother," dutifully followed by a list of seven women he had had carnal knowledge of. The latter included "his Aunt D. of Batheston" and "one S.C. of Slaughterford," who "had given him the French pox" (12), confirming the suspicions of Edward Stokes that "one Woman was not enough to satisfie his brutish lusts" (4).

All these sensational accusations, interwoven with details of the parson's highly unorthodox beliefs and subversive attitude towards his ministry,[38] might easily have led to Webbe's downfall, had he not rather spectacularly confessed to his mistakes. He admitted (what a public humiliation for Henry White!) that he was the father of Mary's unborn child and "that he had committed the detestable sin of uncleanness so often in one day that he was glad when he could take the air." At the same time, however, he was careful to portray himself in a passive role as the hapless victim of Mary's stubborn attempts to seduce him (15). Webbe had a pronounced flair for theatricality and exaggerated public gestures. Edward Stokes's account of his miraculous and "unparallel'd" repentance is one to relish:

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[38] Having taught his friends to live above ordinances—they did, as becomes clear from the seduction plot, not attend his services—he had little sympathy for the churchgoers amongst his parishioners: "Ah poor fools, they be come to sit and gape upon me, whilst I tell them lies.... Now Preaching and lying are to me both one case" (*Wiltshire Rant* 12). In one of his Sunday sermons, he preached "That he was no Minister of God, and wisht them not to look upon him as Minister, for that ... God had put and end to all Ministers and Ministrations" (51). He taught "That Moses was a Conjurer, and that Christ was a Deceiver of the People" (12, 13), "That God requires no obedience to any Scripture-commands" (51), "that the doctrine and practice of Jesus Christ and the Apostles, were dead works, and ended when they died: and that Preaching and Praying cease, for the Lord had no ears to hear" (55) and "that the Baptisme of water was only John's Ministry, and was a legall washing.... Gods teaching his people is not by any outward Ordinance or Ministry, or means, but by the inward unction and anointing" (55, 56). As a logical consequence of his beliefs—but dangerously, according to his parishioner Charles Aland—he "perswaded the people not to conform themselves to any visible ministrations, either for Church or state" (51).

> Twas wonderfull to behold the Head of this Bulrush to hang so low; his countenance is changed; the extraordinary poudring of his head and frizling of his hair, and other incitements to lust and wantonnesse (his former every daies garb) is now wholly laid by and in all things he now appears as at the first, Poor Tho. Webb, and not like the proud and insolent Parson of Langley, and it's remarkable, how at the first meeting of the Justices, he smote himself upon the breast, and threw himself upon the ground before many witnesses, seeming exceedingly to lament his unclean life. (15)

To Stokes himself, he appealed in a series of letters. "God," he wrote, "hath suffered the strange and adulterous woman to lead my poor simple spirit captive, though she stand like a bold and impudent woman in the justification of her self ... I know the way of an unsatiable woman is to ruine and have the life of one whom they cannot mold to their Lusts" (16). But such private ponderings were not enough for someone as flamboyantly extrovert as Thomas Webbe. Hence, the inhabitants of Langley Burrell witnessed their "libidinous Parson" (71) trying to save his flock from the very charms he had fallen prey to: "His zeal carrieth him farther even into the pulpit, where in the face of the whole Congregation at Langley he Preached upon ... Proverbs 6.62, *For by means of a whorish woman a man is brought to a morcell of bread, and the adulteress seeketh for the precious life* ... he brought in his own experience, and by that also urged his Parishioners not to follow the way of uncleannesse with such, as he had done" (20–21). It worked. His congregation forgave him.

Stokes himself remained unconvinced. His suspicions proved well-founded when Webbe and Mary publicly resumed their relationship after the birth of their child in late September or early October 1650. The repentant, admonishing sinner was a figure of the past:

> The humble Parson acts afresh the part of a most proud and insolent phantastick, and appears more like unto a prophane stage-player, then Parish parson or sober Christian. His long, shaggy hair, which

> lately hung like a forgotten excrement, is now taken into consideration, and furbisht up with so much frizell and pouder, as if nature or lust had altered its course on the sudden. We have read of men, that through sudden fear have been turned grey in one night; why may not a lascivious joy upon its resurrection operate as much upon this vain man? (21)

During his repenting days, Stokes recalled, Webbe had confided in the sober-minded and respectable among his parishioners—and it is a testimony to his enduring popularity that the latter had welcomed him with open arms. Now, however, he turned his back on them and returned to his Ranter friends, who "were most notoriously ignorant and scandalous" (22). Webbe combined adultery, an unbeseeming personal vanity and exotic looks with a new interest in the suspicious science of astronomy and, worse even, music, seen by Stokes as an "inlet to lust."[39] He invited "the youth of the Parish and others" to "Music and mixt dancing" at the rectory (22). There is no suggestion in Stokes's account that the youth of the parish was not delighted to accept the offer.

This new-found happiness was seriously disturbed by William Lewis, who was clearly jealous of Mary and Webbe and began to spy on them, betraying an appalling voyeurism.[40] Mary reacted to this tension by fetching a soldier friend, John Morris, from Gloucester. Morris, a member of Webbe's inner circle, appears as a dark, menacing figure, combining sexual licence with a threatening presence. So threatening, we are meant to believe, that William and Edith Lewis ran away to Tytherton Lucas in the middle of the night

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[39] *Wiltshire Rant* 8. Stokes explicitly mentions astronomy, but his likening Webbe to "other Egyptian fortune-tellers" (22) suggests that it might have been astrology, rather than astronomy, that he had in mind. Webbe was not the only Ranter to show an interest in the stars. Lawrence Clarkson dabbled in astrology during his Ranting days; see Lawrence Clarkson, *The Lost Sheep Found* (London, 1660) 32. The connection between radical religion, astronomy and astrology is examined in Nathanael Homes, *Daemonologie and Theologie* (London, 1650) 106–90.

[40] See Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 31. In court, Lewis tried to hide his jealousy and voyeurism under a cloak of Christian concern for the straying sinners Webbe and Mary: "fearing that they would grow as familiar again ... [he] did the more strictly observe their doings."

to wake up an understandably irritated Edward Stokes and plead for help. William Lewis tried to convince Stokes that the "most wicked and prophane" John Morris had come to Langley Burrell "on purpose to do his wife or himself a mischief, and had given out threatning speeches so soon as he was alighted from his horse" (24). According to Edith, an infuriated Webbe and Mary "have threatned and sworn to be revenged upon me and my husband, so that I dare not return home any more without danger of life."

What followed was a farce. Henry White sought the assistance of another justice of the peace, swearing "that he standeth in fear" lest the Lewises "will take away his life, hurt and main [sic] his body, or burn his houses" (25–26). Stokes was reluctant to lend credence to either side, putting their apparent paranoia down to a mutual desire for revenge. In the end, Henry White had William Lewis imprisoned for theft of household goods, while Mary and Webbe both ended up on trial for adultery in November 1650.

Stokes dwells at length and with unconcealed glee on the fact that it was internal disintegration that brought about the fall of the Ranters' "Babel of Prophanenesse" in Wiltshire (2). He repeatedly hints at a strange air of menace and vengefulness which enveloped the Langley Burrell Ranters—best illustrated by the Lewises hysterical fear of revenge. Stokes's initial reluctance to take part in the Ranters' persecution seems to have partially sprung from a desire to mask his own involvement with the group and with Webbe in particular. And with good reason, for "the Parish Parson" became "as lawlesse as the Parish Bull"—what an apt double entendre—in his rage against Stokes (78). Other people seem to have been genuinely frightened of Webbe and his Ranting friends. "You snarl at creatures, and like a madman strike at those that are next you," Stokes once told Webbe, whose behaviour when angry he described as "frenzied" (45). The adultery trial had all the ingredients of a sensationalist stage play. "You may perceive," the good justice invites his audience, "what a spirit of giddinesse possessed the primest actors upon the Ranting stage," who, "drunk with folly and frenzy" and "having committed folly, act the part of madnesse and enraged fury, and resolve never to quit the stage till they have devoured each other, and then the longest liver take all.... Very remarkable it is that their own ... tongues brought their horrid wickednesse to light, loudly proclaiming that publiquely, which before was but privately suspected and whispered" (28).

Rumours about Mary's, Webbe's and Elizabeth Briscoe's sex lives had been "bruted up and down the country" before—so much so that at one point "some honest and religious people" of the nearby village of Calne had sent one of their own, Edith Lewis's brother Thomas Riley, to Langley Burrell to investigate the matter (31). Now Edith emerged as the key witness in the trial and gave a particularly graphic account of how she had caught Mary and Webbe making love at the manor house in early October—shortly after their child's birth.[41] She also hinted at veritable orgies involving Webbe, Mary, Mary's maid Elizabeth Briscoe, John Morris and John Organ. Under the Adultery Act of 10 August 1650, such flagrant and rampant adultery would have been punishable by death for both partners. Hence, it is understandable that Mary and Webbe utterly denied the charges. They escaped the death sentence, but were sent to Fisherton Gaol on the outskirts of Salisbury "for suspicion of Adultery."[42] Not content with such a narrow escape, Webbe, incongruously invoking his suffering wife and child born in wedlock, petitioned the justices, claiming innocence and ascribing all allegations levied against him to the "malice & revenge" of Edith Lewis.[43] To Stokes, he sent a list of objections against the justices' proceedings against him, mingled with threats. In an odd bid to reconcile his rampant promiscuity to his status within the community, Webbe took umbrage at the justices' practice of making "no difference between common whoremongers and Masters of Art" (44). Furthermore, he had the cheek to inquire "Whether they ought not to have received more favour being they were publique persons, and had laid out themselves for the publique, and upon the publique service, though they were guilty?" (35).

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[41] Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 29–30. The midwife who had delivered Webbe's and Mary's child was the wife of Robert Jeffryes of Langley Burrell (52). Interestingly, a Goodwife Geffreys appears as a member of John Pordage's circle at Bradfield near Reading. Pordage's enemy Christopher Fowler singled her out for a particularly vitriolic attack as one "who even stinke[s] above ground"; see Christopher Fowler, *Daemonium Meridianum or Satan at Noon* (London, 1655) 61. While there is as yet no proof that Stokes and Fowler were talking about the same woman, the thought that there may have been a direct connection between the Wiltshire and Berkshire Ranters is an extremely intriguing one. I am grateful to Manfred Brod for drawing my attention to Goodwife Geffreys.

[42] See the petition of Henry White, WRO A1/110 H1651, fol. 208.

[43] WRO A1/110 H1651, fol. 199. At the same time, Henry White appealed to the justices on behalf of his wife; cf.WRO A1/110 H1651, fol. 208.

Webbe the public servant? Not surprisingly, Stokes remained unmoved. "Surely," he demands of his audience, "there's no Reader that views this Parson, but must needs admire him for his deep judgment and singular knowledge in the act of adultery, and the Parliaments Act against the same, of which he is the only expositor after the Ranters understanding" (36). Webbe also tried to influence the Salisbury judge Francis Swanton against Stokes, whereupon Stokes seems to have been genuinely worried. "Sir," he wrote to Swanton in despair, "I can make it appear (notwithstanding his fair glosse to strangers) that he is a meer piece of hypocrisie and deceipt" (37). This time, Webbe's plan backfired. Outrageously overestimating the power of his charms and ruthlessly opportunistic, Webbe suddenly turned to none other but the much-maligned Edward Stokes for help, claiming "that which at first moved me to write to you, and to expresse my self in so bold and rude language, truly was my love to you, for I could have chused to have writ to others, but indeed I ever loved you" (40). Not surprisingly, his entreaties fell on deaf ears.

After their release from prison in early 1651, Webbe and Mary returned to Langley Burrell, where they openly lived their relationship and Webbe became "more proud, imperious and impudent than ever" (43). It is difficult to say what happened next. According to Stokes's version, Webbe, in what must have been a fit of sheer madness, went to London in the spring of 1651 to ask the Committee for Plundered Ministers for a re-examination of his case. Webbe himself was later to claim that he fell victim to a malicious campaign ushered in by Stokes and Charles Aland of Langley Burrell.[44] Whoever initiated the proceedings, their outcome was,

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[44] Stokes became embroiled in a dispute with John Aland, Langley Burrell's overseer of the poor, at the same time. One of the wealthiest men in the parish, he refused to pay poor rates to Aland, but instead gave money directly to "one Angell," whom Aland suspected of fraud (WRO, A1/110, M1651, fol. 186). Stokes's behaviour in this case seems decidedly odd. Implicitly, it sprang from a personal dislike of Aland whom he called a "Rogue" and "a mischievinge man" (WRO, A1/110, M1651, fol. 187), while Aland charged Stokes with "many ... untruths" and made the mistake of "offeringe many other vilifyinge speeches in disgrace of him the said Edward" (WRO. A1/110, M1651, fol. 179). Given the timing of this dispute—September 1651—it would be interesting to know if Aland was a follower of Webbe. At least he was "a person of evill name fame and behaviour" (WRO, A1/110, M1651, fol. 179), and may have chosen to disclose some uncomfortable details of Stokes's association with Webbe. The dispute itself and the pressure

predictably, Webbe's ejection from Langley Burrell in September 1651.

As could be expected, Webbe did not go quietly. At his examination, two of the Wiltshire justices of the peace found themselves exposed to "much uncivil carriage ... and many frivolous and unfitting discourses" (56) attacking not only their authority, but also that of the Committee for Plundered Ministers. After his departure from Langley Burrell, Webbe published the sadly no longer extant *A Masse of Malice against Tho. Webb.* He painted a rather intriguing picture of his erstwhile companion, recalling "such horrid acts of blasphemy of the highest nature, as ever I heard related to be done by any."[45] Webbe's recollections of Stokes's mock prayers at Westminster Abbey, mock communions in shared bedrooms at inns and, perhaps most surprisingly, of Stokes teaching him "to make a spiritual face" (64, 65–69) are thoroughly fascinating, if overtly malicious. To Stokes, who had discarded Ranter irreverence and insouciance for respectability and sobriety, they must have come as a shock. The *Masse* was prefixed with a list of approximately one hundred signatures on Webbe's behalf—including Henry White's. It constituted Webbe's sensationalist and ultimately abortive attempt at self-justification, by which he hoped "to gain another parsonage" (59). This time, however, the magic no longer worked. Webbe, who had been so comically, tragically, out of place in a country parsonage, never obtained another benefice.

Curtain Call

Webbe visited John Organ and his Wiltshire friends in the spring of 1652. He paid his compliments to his estranged wife, whom he had left behind at Langley Burrell, but did not see his child born in wedlock. Instead, he took his child by Mary White with him to London, playing, as Edward Stokes cynically put it, "the part ... of a loving father" (83), and apparently intent on putting deception and clerical life behind him. In London, father and child were reunited with Henry and Mary White. Stokes's account of Webbe's life ends on a sarcastically halcyon note. Historical evidence, however, suggests otherwise.

Stokes put on Aland show that there may have been a more manipulative side to Stokes, as he managed to have Aland suspended from his office.

[45] Webbe about Stokes, reprinted in Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 67.

In mid-December 1654, Thomas Webbe and Mary White faced their second adultery trial, this time at the Old Bailey. Charged with having committed the felony in the parish of St. Botolph's without Bishopsgate on 1 July 1654, they were acquitted at the end of a spectacular trial during which Webbe's opponents and judges unfavourably dug up his Wiltshire past. The curious circumstances of this trial triggered a bizarre printed defence from John Wildman. Writing under the thinly-disguised pseudonym of Abraham Lawmind, Wildman, who had obviously fallen under Webbe's spell, had the nerve to portray Webbe as the much-respected, innocent, gentlemanly victim of an orchestrated hate campaign who bore the abuse levelled at him in court "with abundance of patience" and saved his life by "undauntedly" withstanding the malice of his accusers. One wonders what provoked Wildman to champion such an obviously lost cause.[46]

Webbe and Wildman had known each other since at least May 1652, when Henry White had leased the manor of Langley Burrell to Wildman.[47] Two years later, on 19 June 1654, Wildman acquired the manor, the manor house and the advowson for £5000.

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[46] Corporation of London Record Office (hereafter cited as CLRO), City of London Sessions Files 126 (December 1654) [no folio number]. Henry's role in the case is as ambivalent as it had been at Langley Burrell. His signature appeared on the presentment, but was subsequently erased, suggesting that he had changed his mind about the affair. One of the witnesses against Webbe and Mary was Magdalen Overman. Intriguingly, Henry sued a Samuel/Stephen Overman of St. Saviour's, Southwark, soapboiler (possibly Magdalen's husband or another relative) for an undisclosed felony—quite probably in a belated attempt to protect his wife's reputation; see CLRO, City of London Sessions Files 126 (December 1654) [fol. 2]—both Christian names, Stephen and Samuel, appear in the original. I am grateful to the archivists at the CLRO, especially Jessica Newton, for their help in identifying Henry White's signature. Wildman's tract is Abraham Lawmind, *The Juries Right Asserted and Vindicated by the Ancient and Good Law of England* (London, 1654/55) especially 7, 9. He reveals that Webbe had initially been imprisoned for coining and did not expect an adultery trial. Wildman was fond of anagrams. He called himself "John Lawmind" in his *Putney Projects* (London, 1647) and "J. Howdlin" in *The Lawes Subversion* (London, 1647/48). Webbe had Leveller sympathies. He spoke out in defence of John Lilburne and William Walwyn (Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 12, 13, 66), and one of the justices called him "one of Lilborns faction" (61). Many thanks to Clive Holmes for an inspiring and seminal chat about Wildman.

[47] WRO 118/125b. Both Webbe's and Wildman's signatures appear on the document.

In 1657 Wildman sold on the property to Samuel Ashe.[48] The old manor house disappeared in the late eighteenth century, when the present mansion was built for the Rev. Robert Ashe. The Ashe—later Scott-Ashe—family lived at Langley House until very recently.[49]

By the time Mary's and Webbe's second adultery trial came up at the Old Bailey, Henry, possibly in a direct response to this new scandal, had retreated to Slaughterford, the picturesque hamlet his clothier grandfather—and one of Webbe's sexual conquests—had come from. The Whites still had family connections there.[50] We do not yet know what became of Mary. She is not mentioned in Henry's will, dated 16 December 1658. Instead, Henry left most of his worldly goods to his daughter, also called Mary, who was still a minor at the time—possibly Webbe's much-contested lovechild.[51]

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[48] See Wildman's receipts for £2500 (6 November 1657) and £1000 (11 December 1657) in WRO 118/92. The former is signed by Ayliffe White, a relative of Henry's, the latter by one John Morris—probably Webbe's and Henry's soldier friend. Wildman probably acted as a trustee on behalf of royalists. This suggestion was first put forth in 1852 by the then lord of the manor. See The Library of the Society of Antiquaries, London, 817/6, Canon J. E. Jackson's Wiltshire Collections: Langley Burrell (hereafter cited as Jackson, Wiltshire Collections) fol. 71: Jackson's note dated 5 January 1852. Wildman's connection with Langley Burrell is largely forgotten today.

[49] The old house stood "on the Knoll beyond the Fishpond and below the terrace wall"; see Francis Kilvert, quoted in an anonymous review of *Selections from the Diary of the Rev. Francis Kilvert, 23 August, 1871–13 May, 1874*, ed. William Plomer (London: Jonathan Cape, 1939) in *WAM* 49 (1940–1942): 135. According to village legend, an eighteenth-century lord of the manor also moved the entire village away from the church and house to its present site to the south-east of both. Nothing except perhaps an old garden wall remains of the old rectory, which stood next to the church in what is now a coppice. I am grateful to Sarah Cook, Christopher Kent, Veronica Kilmister and Doris Roddham for information on the curious topographical history of Langley Burrell.

[50] See CLRO, City of London sessions files 126 (December 1654), fol.2 (Henry White of Slaughterford, gent., v. Stephen/Samuel Overman, of St. Saviour's, Southwark, soapboiler, 15 November 1654). One wonders if the "C" in "S.C.," the initials of Webbe's lover of Slaughterford (see above, page 340), stood for Cullimore, the family name of Henry White's Slaughterford cousins. See PRO, Prob 11/302. fol. 331 (will of Henry White of Slaughterford, gent.).

[51] PRO, Prob 11/302. fol. 331 (will of Henry White of Slaughterford, gent.). The parish register of St. Mary's, Lambeth, records the burials of "Mary the daughter of Henry White" on 31 July 1660, and of "Mrs Mary Webb, from the Marsh," on 19 September 1656, but there is no evidence that these entries concern Henry's family (LMA, X038/001, Parish Registers of St. Mary's, Lambeth). The pedigree of

Slaughterford itself developed into a Quaker stronghold in the seventeenth century. George Fox visited the hamlet several times.[52] Today, the ruins of the Friends' meeting-house in the ramsons-covered woods due south of the hamlet still bear testimony to Slaughterford's place in Quaker history.

But what happened to Langley Burrell's "lust-loving Parson" after he had left "the publique Stage of Wilts[hire]"?[53]

Webbe himself fades into obscurity after 1654, when Ephraim Pagitt unintentionally immortalized his unconventional beliefs and attitudes by making them the basis of his new chapter on the Ranters in the fifth edition of *Heresiography*—perhaps a quiet and now puzzling token to Webbe's importance within the group.[54] He has been identified as "Mad Tom," the author of a scurrilous anti-Quaker tract, *Twenty Quaking Queries*, which appeared in 1659, and as the "Thomas Webb of Lambeth" who published a speciously Fifth Monarchist broadsheet, *A Lasting Almanack for the Raigne of the Fifth Monarchy*, in 1660.[55] A number of internal references render Webbe's authorship of the Almanack questionable, and many ways, the narrator's elaborate gestures are more reminiscent of another Ranter, Thomas Tany, and his well-documented flair for inspired street theatre, than of the "pretty prophane Preacher"[56] of Langley Burrell, but who knows?

A Lasting Almanack is essentially a warning against religious factionalism, flowing from the pen of an ex-sectary who obviously shared Webbe's exotic sartorial styles and his predilection for theatrical gestures and extempore songs, which had rendered him

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the White and Houlton families of Grittleton lists Henry as a relative who died without issue. It does not even acknowledge Mary's existence. See "Pedigree of White and Houlton, of Grittleton, Co. Wilts," in J.E. Jackson, *The History of the Parish of Grittleton in the County of Wiltshire* (London: J.B. Nichols & Son, 1843).

[52] See *George Fox—The Journal*, ed. Nigel Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998) 206, 423 (hereafter cited as Smith, *Fox's Journal*).

[53] Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* sig. A3.

[54] Pagitt does not mention Webbe by name, but most of his account of the Ranters, including an extract from Salmon's letter, is directly taken from *The Wiltshire Rant*, rather than from the better-known writings of Coppe or Clarkson. See Ephraim Pagitt, *Heresiography, Or a Description of the Hereticks and Sectaries Sprang Up in These Latter Times ... The Fift [sic] Edition, whereunto is Added the Quakers or Shakers, and the Ranters, with an Alphabeticall Table* (London, 1654) 143–44.

[55] See the entry for Thomas Webbe in *BDBR* 3:297.

[56] Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 7.

such a bird of paradise at Langley Burrell. In the narrative passages of the *Almanack*, we see its ostensibly "mad" author dress as a beggar and undauntedly divulge a "vision" in several London churches, much to the annoyance of the congregations and its well-to-do members. Then he takes his readers to Kingston-on-Thames where, in the immediate aftermath of a Quaker meeting, he dons a series of flamboyant and outrageous outfits, pretending to be a Quaker one day, and a Fifth Monarchist the next, always speaking in verse. What is remarkable about these passages is that, quite apart from the religious agenda, the narrator reveals himself as an individual who obviously enjoyed performing and who did not shy away from re-inventing himself:

> I went up and down the Town in a gallant rich Garment, with my hat off, and where I thought fit, I made a stand, and cryed, O yes, O yes, O yes, and all manner of persons, of City, Town and Country, lend your attention.... And when I had thus done, as oft[] as I did please, I returned to my Inn and afterwards I took horse, and disguised my self with an ugly hideous grizly vizard, and a Mountear, with a red Cap upon it, having a Lambs skin Fur fowed about it, and two horns sticking up at my Ears; and there I charged the Devil, in his Disciples, the Quakers. On yet another occasion, I rid in state ... with a grim and austere countenance.

Towards the end of this strange but fascinating tract, the narrator discloses "that I am not mad ... because I can act madness at pleasure." And why the Quakers and the Fifth Monarchists? "Because," he gleefully reveals, "of all sects they are the maddest, as I could shew."[57] "Tis no matter into what shape you lick your self into, so long as you like your self," an irritated Edward Stokes had told the manipulative, seemingly ever-performing Webbe in 1651 (45). Fascinatingly, *A Lasting Almanack* turns into a celebration of an individual's ability to adopt different personalities. This sort of acting transcends the boundaries of a merely physical performance. The narrator's claims eerily echo Stokes's words of nearly a decade earlier: "I can transpose and metamorphose my mind into

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[57] *Lasting Alamanck* [no pagination].

more then thirty shapes or habits." Was he, then, really an actor who "could act any part on the devil's stage," who actually made the worlds of Wiltshire, London and Kingston his rather boundless stage, forcing his increasingly outré and deliberately shocking performances on an unsuspecting public? Who knows, for with this ultimate act of elusiveness, Thomas Webbe bids us farewell.

The parish registers of St. Mary's, Lambeth, record the burial of a Thomas Webb on 4 October 1665—at the height of the plague.[58]

John Organ quarrelled with his mistress and returned home to his father, wife, and children at Castle Combe, his reputation in ruins.[59] In the spring of 1651, he managed to enchant Elinor Huggins, a young widow his father had taken in as a lodger during his absence. They engaged in "relligious discourses," and Elinor, much to the dislike of his wary father, delighted in John's courteous company until he declared his love to her and pressed her to elope to Holland with him. When she declined, he threatened suicide. Displaying a misplaced flair for melodramatic gestures, he at one time not only voiced the thought of killing his father, but also wielded a knife in front of the horrified woman, "holding it to his breast" and claiming "yt hee could as willingly thrust it in, & lett out his heart-bloud, as receive a flatt denial from her." Not surprisingly, a thoroughly alienated and frightened Elinor Huggins turned to the justices of the peace for help.[60]

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[58] London Metropolitan Archives, X038/001, Parish Registers of St. Mary's, Lambeth. This Thomas Webbe was owed £7 by the King at the time of his death (WRO, Prob 4/7135, Thomas Webbe of Lambeth, 26 October 1665).

[59] Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 8, 9.

[60] WRO A1/110 T1651 (Great Rolls of the Wiltshire Quarter Sessions, Trinity 1651) fols. 26, 150, 151; information of Elinor Huggins before George Ivye and William Shute, 10 June 1651. Organ is described as a clothier. The parish registers of Castle Combe are silent on John Organ. An interesting entry records the burial of Sarah Organ, wife of John, on 14 August 1679. "Jno. Organ, Slaughterford," was buried on 23 August 1717 (WRO 2234/1, Castle Combe Parish Register, 1653–1692). The Slaughterford connection is intriguing due to Henry White's residence there. Could it be that Henry White gathered a group of Webbe's old adherents around him in this secluded hamlet? I have not yet found any evidence that Henry White or John Organ joined the Quakers, though one of Henry's relatives certainly became a Friend. The Organs of Castle Combe were a nonconformist family. On 22 July 1672, "the house of James Organes" was registered as a Presbyterian meeting-house. On 31 July 1689, James Organ, clothier, applied for a license for his barn; see Chandler, *Wiltshire Meeting House Certificates* 173 (A41), and 1 (9). For the 1651 case, see also WRO, A1/110, T1651 fol. 26.

Edward Stokes joined the Quakers. He entertained Francis Howgill, Edward Burroughs, John Camm, John Audland and George Fox at his house in the mid-1650s and Alexander Parker in 1660. He rushed to Fox's defence at the Quarter Sessions at Marlborough on 7 October 1656, where the latter had gone after a visit to Henry White's Slaughterford.[61] According to Howgill and Burroughs, Stokes "had bene A great notionist & a Teacher, and had outrun all." After his conversion to Quakerism, they found him "broken as A child, And his wife"—Elizabeth—"would have laid all att our feett [sic], And hee sent his man & horses 15 miles alone [sic] our Jorney."[62] John Audland called Stokes "a sober wise man", impeccably honest—a far cry from the erstwhile companion-in-mockery of Thomas Webbe. Of Stokes's hospitable home, Audland wrote "I know not such another place in all the Counterey."[63] Stokes died, aged about 56, on 31 October 1667, and lies buried in St. Nicholas Chapel, Tytherton Lucas, where a plaque still commemorates his life.[64]

And the village? In 1650, the benefice at Langley Burrell had been worth £100 per annum, which would have made it the richest

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[61] Friends House Library, London, Swarthmore MS 1, fol. 181 (Walter Clement to Margaret Fell, 4 October 1656) and 3, fol. 143 (Alexander Parker to George Fox, June 1660), Caton MS 3, fols. 185–88 (Francis Howgill and Edward Burroughs to Margaret Fell, 1654/1655). Stokes has an entry in the "Dictionary of Quaker Biography" (typescript, Friends House Library). See also Smith, *Fox's Journal* 206–7.

[62] Caton MS 3, fols. 186, 188.

[63] John Audland, undated letter to George Fox, in: Charles Leslie, *The Snake in the Grass, or, Satan Transform'd into an Angel of Light*, 3rd ed. (London, 1698) 369–70. The Stokes family lived next to St. Nicholas's Chapel in a house that was called Stokes Farm until the late twentieth century, when it was renamed Westfield House. Curiously, an adjacent modern house bears the name of "Stokes." I am grateful to Dr. Christopher Kent for information on the history of Tytherton Lucas.

[64] The small monument is on the north wall of the north aisle, framed by similar plaques in memory of Stokes's father Thomas and his son Abjohn. Its text is reproduced in *Monumental Inscriptions of Wiltshire: An Edition, in Facsimile, of Monumental Inscriptions in the County of Wilton, by Sir Thomas Philipps, 1822*, ed. Peter Sherlock (Trowbridge: Wiltshire Record Society, 2000) 12. The age given suggests that Stokes was born in 1611, whereas Stokes claimed to be thirty-six in September 1651 (Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 51). Stokes's will is in PRO, Prob 11/326, fols. 65–67. Nothing in his will suggests that he died a Quaker, but he did leave instructions to be buried "in a silent and decent manner … without pagan pompe or popish Ceremony." Curiously, one of the overseers of his will and trustee of his daughter's inheritance was Henry White's cousin and "Welbeloved Freind"[sic] Thomas Neate of Chippenham, a Quaker and solicitor to whom Henry himself had left £5 "for his Love latelie Exprest to mee" (PRO, Prob 11/302, fol. 331).

benefice in the Chippenham area,[65] probably because it was also the one most abundant in woodland.[66] By the early 1700s its value had fallen to a mere £50, perhaps partly because Webbe not only caused spiritual and sexual havoc in the parish, but also seriously depleted its timber supplies.[67] The new rector to be entrusted with this almost treeless glebe was Henry Massey, whom Webbe had denounced as a protégé of Stokes.[68] If so, then the latter's choice proved no wiser than Henry White's had been.

Massey's incumbency may have been less notorious than Webbe's, but it was, it seems, no less tumultuous and divisive. Massey's name appears in the records of the Wiltshire Quarter Sessions virtually from his arrival onwards.[69] In the summer of 1654, twenty-two of his parishioners signed a certificate claiming that Massey had been "grossly abused in his good name, by some people which have no honest reports, but scandalous in life, tale bearers"—quite possibly Webbe's old adherents. Massey was, his supporters claimed, "a man of a godly conversation, and not given to drunkenness or other notorious vices," but "an abl[e] preacher, apt to teach ye gospell, & ready to good workes, & one faythfull to this Commonwealth."[70] Historical evidence, however, suggests otherwise. In 1655 Massey's wife, his younger brother, his maid and a guest "fell upon" and beat up the tithingman's deputy who had called at the rectory to execute a warrant against the quarrelsome parson.[71] They then sued him for theft.[72] Curiously, the astonished victim of this affray was Massey's former mentor Charles Aland,

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[65] BL MS Lansdowne 459, fols. 159ff.; see also E.J. Bodington, "The Church Survey in Wiltshire, 1649–50" (IV), *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine* 41 (1920–1922): 1–39: 3 (Langley Burrell). By comparison, Chippenham itself was rated at only £6 13s 4d, with its filial benefice of Tytherton Lucas rated at £40 per annum. Castle Combe was rated at £60 (BL MS Lansdowne 459, fols. 159ff.).

[66] See Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 47.

[67] WRO, D1/27/1/1, Seth Ward's *Notitiae Parochialis* (1701) 94; Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 54, 55.

[68] Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 63.

[69] See WRO, A1/110, H1652, fol.69, M1653, fol. 25, H1654, fol. 136, E1655, fols. 12, 61, 62, 63, 218, 248, T1655, fol. 118.

[70] WRO A1/110, Hilary 1654, fol. 136, also printed in Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Report on Manuscripts in Various Collections* (London: Printed for His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1901) 1:128.

[71] WRO A1/110, E1655, fol. 63, T1655, fol. 118.

[72] WRO A1/110, E1655, fols. 218, 248.

whom Webbe had once accused of complicity with Stokes, and who, twelve years later, would stand accused of planning an anti-royalist rising in Wiltshire.[73]

Massey's career did not survive the fracas. In the summer of 1655 Thomas Masters, MA, was admitted to the benefice.[74] The period of intrusions was over. Normalcy returned to Langley Burrell. Masters stayed until the Restoration.

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[73] Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant* 63. In 1667, Aland, a "great fanatic," found himself in prison at Marlborough for debt. An intercepted letter to his eldest son James revealed details of an armed conspiracy which would also have involved Aland's "six dear friends." Colonel J. Long thought of the Alands as being at the heart of republican activity in Wiltshire: "The Alands could discover this nest of Vipers: if some were punished, it w. re-establish the ignity of the Crown: these were the great actors in the horrid iniquity of the late King's murder" (Col. J. Long to Secretary Williamson, Draycote, 2 February 1667, reproduced in manuscript in Jackson, Wiltshire Collections, fol. 70).

[74] Massey was sequestered before 26 July 1655; see WRO, A1/110 T1655, fol. 118.