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## 'Puritan' Profiles

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## Chapter 8: ‘Puritan’ Profiles

Bryan W. Ball

The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* was published in 2004 and in an online edition in 2008. The *Dictionary* contains entries on every significant person who has influenced British history from as far back as records have been kept. The print edition consists of 55 volumes, written by over 10,000 contributors, all specialists in their fields. It replaced the older *Dictionary of National Biography* whose 50 volumes had, for more than a century, provided similar information on individuals who had lived before the end of the nineteenth century. The *ODNB* was the biggest publishing endeavour ever undertaken by Oxford University Press, and it is difficult to imagine that there will ever be another like it. Following are three entries of the six contributed to the *ODNB* by the present author. They all deal with individuals who lived and worked in the Puritan era. While none of these men was actually Puritan in a strictly defined sense, they belonged unquestionably to the seventeenth century – two Anglicans, Mede and Bold, with Puritan sympathies, and Writer well to the left of Puritanism and best described as a typical radical. Each of them is related in some way to other chapters in this book, Mede to ch.10 and Bold and Writer to ch.14, through its derivation from *The Soul Sleepers*. The articles are reproduced here *verbatim* by permission of Oxford University Press.

### Joseph Mede

**Mede [Mead], Joseph (1586-1638)**, Hebraist and biblical scholar, was born in October 1586 at Berden, Essex, of unknown parents ‘of honest rank’, according to the ‘Life’ contained in his collected works, and was related through his father to Sir John Mede (or Mead) of Wenden Lofts, near Bishop’s Stortford. When Mede was ten his father died of smallpox and his mother married a Gower of Naseing, Essex, by whom he was sent to school, first at Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire, and later at Wethersfield, Essex. While at Wethersfield, and on a trip to London, he purchased a copy of Bellarmine’s *Institutiones linguae Hebraicae* and by the time he left school had, without any instruction, obtained a considerable working knowledge of Hebrew. In 1603 he matriculated as sizar at Christ’s College, Cambridge, where he studied first under Daniel Rogers and then under William Addison, before

graduating BA in 1607 and proceeding MA in 1610. In 1613 he was elected to succeed Hugh Broughton to the King Edward VI fellowship through the influence of Lancelot Andrewes, then bishop of Ely, after having been passed over several times on suspicion of having ‘too much . . . tenderness to the Puritan faction’ (Mede, 850). Valentine Cary, master of Christ’s, may eventually have been disposed to view him more favourably on account of his friendship with Sir Martin Stuteville of Dalham, who was also a friend of Mede. In 1618 Mede was appointed Mildmay Greek lecturer, holding both fellowship and lectureship for the rest of his life. He did not marry, and lived modestly in a chamber at ground level beneath the college library.

Mede was a man of wide interests and considerable attainment. In addition to his skills in Hebrew, Greek and Latin and his knowledge of the biblical text in English and the original languages, he was proficient in several other disciplines. His early biographer describes him as ‘an acute logician, an accurate philosopher, a skilful mathematician, a great philologist, and an excellent anatomist’ (Worthington, ii). By invitation he frequently attended dissections at Gonville and Caius College. He was also proficient in botany, physics, and history, and was interested in astrology. He is said to have been as deeply versed in ecclesiastical antiquities and knowledge of the Greek and Latin fathers ‘as any man living’ (Brook, 429). His pursuit of knowledge and his scholarly achievements, including his biblical studies, were marked by a love of truth for its own sake. ‘I cannot believe’, he is reported as saying, ‘that truth can be prejudiced by the discovery of truth’ (ibid., 431). A period of scepticism early in his reading of philosophy, which led towards Pyrrhonism, gave way to devout belief. As has been observed, ‘escaping the jaws of atheism, he fled towards faith’ (Firth, 214).

Despite his profound erudition, Mede was a man of great modesty and humility. John Worthington, who is generally credited with the ‘Life’ of Mede prefixed to later editions of his *Works*, says he was ‘studiously regardless’ of formal academic attainment, ecclesiastical preferment, and worldly advantage (Worthington xv). He eschewed higher degrees beyond the BD, which he took in 1618, and in 1627 and again in 1630 declined the provostship of Trinity College, Dublin, an opening made possible on the recommendation of Archbishop James Ussher, who is said to have sought Mede’s assistance in the determination of his own great work on sacred chronology. Among Mede’s pupils, whom he treated with great consideration, were several who achieved distinction, including John Milton and Henry More. Although his income was meagre Mede regularly gave one-tenth to charitable causes. He maintained good personal relationships and was known for his openness and generosity towards those who opposed him. He suffered throughout life from a speech impediment which, particularly in the early years, led him to

decline many invitations to speak in public. He persevered with the defect, however, and was able to preach without noticeable hesitation.

Mede's theological and ecclesiological allegiance was finally settled in favour of moderation and episcopacy, although he was included in Benjamin Brook's *The Lives of the Puritans* (1813) and had some puritan sympathies. Worthington notes his 'reverential regard to the established government and discipline of the Church' (Worthington, xxx), and Ussher's support and, more strikingly, Andrewes's invitation to him to become his chaplain cannot be ignored. Brook refers to Mede's correspondence with several eminent nonconformists and his fear that Roman rites would prevail again in the Church of England. Mede's view of Rome as the Antichrist and his conviction of the necessity of a godly life were both puritan emphases. They were balanced, however, by his concern that some puritan arguments opened the door to Socinianism and by his condemnation of a book by John Eastwick in a letter to Samuel Hartlib. He also opposed presbyterian discipline and practice. It would be incorrect to denominate him a party man in any strict sense, since a spirit of fraternal ecumenicity marked his outlook. He sought charity and mutual forbearance, 'the owning of each other as brethren and members of the same body whereof Christ is the head' (ibid., xvii). Remaining loyal to the Thirty-Nine Articles and prayer book liturgy, he expected that more would be achieved from mutual respect and toleration than by any attempt to legislate or impose uniformity.

Mede is notable for his works on biblical eschatology, and especially for *Clavis Apocalyptica* (1627), translated into English posthumously by Richard More and published as *The Key of the Revelation* (1643). It enjoyed the almost universal praise of contemporaries in England and on the continent and deeply influenced the development of eschatological thought in seventeenth-century England. Despite being intended originally only for private circulation among a select academic audience, it was published three times in Latin and in English between 1627 and 1650. The second Latin (1632) and subsequent English editions included Mede's *In sancti Joannis Apocalypsin commentarius*, a commentary on the Apocalypse, and the *Key* and the commentary, together with his other eschatological works, sufficiently emphasized the coming millennium to justify Mede being regarded as the father of English millenarianism. Given the radical nature of much of the ensuing millenarian activity, it was a reputation that Mede would have sought to avoid almost at any cost. He claimed to have reached his own moderate millenarian convictions with reluctance, having honestly endeavoured to locate the millennium in the past as had other interpreters, including Thomas Brightman and Hugo Grotius. His study of the biblical text, however, would not permit that conclusion. In anticipating a future millennium Mede did

not consider that he was proposing extreme or heretical doctrine, but rather a return to the belief of the early church. The view that Mede derived his millenarianism from continental sources, particularly Alsted and Pareus, is outweighed by his own testimony and that of contemporaries. His biographer comments, 'He proceeded upon grounds never traced by any, and infinitely more probable than any laid down by those who before him undertook that task' (Worthington, vii). Fuller remarked that the Fifth Monarchists had driven the nail 'which Master Mede did first enter further than he ever intended it' (Fuller, 335). It remains fair comment on Mede's own millenarian position, and is supported by the later view that it was due to the efforts of others after his death that Mede was 'transformed from scholar to prophet' (Firth, 228). Most of his works were first published posthumously.

The distinctive element of the *Clavis Apocalyptica*, and Mede's unique contribution to contemporary and subsequent prophetic studies, was the noted synchronisms, which he argued were essential to a correct understanding of the book of Revelation. Within the context of the prevailing historicist interpretation of apocalyptic prophecy, the thesis underlying the synchronisms was that the major prophetic outlines in the books of Daniel and the Revelation were inter-related, contingent on each other, and that at many points they overlapped in scope, depicting the same era or events with different emphases. This was Mede's 'Law of Synchronistical necessity' (Mede, 583). It proposed to unlock the mysteries of apocalyptic prophecy making them accessible and relevant to the present age. Mede's standing as a careful scholar ensured that it was to have a profound effect on the religious life and outlook of the time and on the immediate course of English history over the next three decades. In addition to placing the millennium firmly in the future, thus opening the way for speculative interpretations and extreme millenarianism, Mede's exegetical scheme had at least two further consequences: it confirmed historicism as the fundamental principle of prophetic interpretation in English eschatological thought for several succeeding generations, and it unhesitatingly identified Rome as the Antichrist and the predicted latter-day apostasy. In an age which vividly remembered the Gunpowder Plot and its associated fears, Mede's considered and clearly articulated view of Rome as the 'the unfaithful and treacherous spouse, the Christian Jezebel' (J. Mede, *The Apostasy of the Latter Times*, 1641) was staple diet for English minds which cherished Protestantism and valued their religious freedom. Mede's work underpinned such intrinsic aspects of the religious outlook which prevailed in English post-Reformation thought for another 300 years or so.

Chronology and eschatology formed the basis for much of Mede's extensive correspondence, published in the later definitive editions of his works,

edited by John Worthington (3<sup>rd</sup> edn. 1672; reprinted, 1677). Between 1626 and 1638 Mede's correspondents included Samuel Hartlib and John Durie, and his friends William Ames, professor of theology at Franeker in the Netherlands, and Sir William Boswell, ambassador to The Hague, each of whom was instrumental in bringing Mede and the *Clavis Apocalyptica* to the attention of potential readers abroad, and conveyed to Mede the comments and criticisms of some of his overseas readers. He also corresponded with James Ussher, William Twisse – later prolocutor of the Westminster assembly, who provided the preface for *The Apostasy of the Latter Times* – and Samuel Ward, master of Sydney Sussex College, Cambridge. Between 1620 and 1631 Mede also wrote regularly and at length to his friend Sir Martin Stuteville. This extensive series of letters, filling two folio volumes in the British Library (Harleian MSS 389 and 390), deals largely with current university issues and matters of local and public interest in England and abroad, throwing additional light on Mede as a man of his time, willing and able to comment on contemporary issues. The correspondence was brought to an end by Sir Martin's death in 1631.

Mede himself died prematurely, and in some discomfort, on 1 October 1638 at Christ's College, his death precipitated by the application of inappropriate medication which caused an internal blockage. His will, drawn up the day before his death, reveals that he was a man of only modest means, worth in all no more than 500 British pounds. He left 100 pounds to 'the master and fellows' of Christ's College, 100 pounds to the poor of Cambridge, and, after various smaller bequests to his sister and her children, to the children of a deceased sister, and to a pupil, the residue of his estate to Christ's College, 'towards the adorning of the College Chapel', where he was buried on 2 October. A delayed memorial service was held at Great St Mary's in February 1639 at which the preacher was John Alsop, also a fellow of Christ's and Mede's executor. A monumental inscription to Mede in Christ's College chapel, preserved in Latin (Mede, 35) and English, recalls his interest in philosophy, mathematics, chronology, history, and Near Eastern antiquities, and contains the words,

He studied all languages, cultivated all the arts, . . . and above all things, theology, the queen of all sciences. . . . He was a bigot to no party, but loving truth and peace, he was just to all; candid to his friends, benignant to others: holy, chaste, and humble in his language, wishes, and habits. (Brook, 433)

It remains a fitting tribute to one of the more notable English scholars of the seventeenth century.

Bryan W. Ball

Sources: J. Peile, *Biographical register of Christ's College, 1505-1905*, and of

*the earlier foundation, God's House, 1448-1505*, ed. [J. A. Venn], 1 (1910); J. Mede, *The works of the pious and profoundly-learned Joseph Mede* (1677); J. Worthington, 'The life of the reverend and most learned Joseph Mede', in *The works of . . . Joseph Mede*, ed. J. Worthington, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (1677); B. Brook, *The lives of the puritans*, 2 (1813); Venn, *Alum. Cant.*, I/3; E. Middleton, ed., *Biographia evangelica*, 4 vols. (privately printed, London 1779-86), vol. ; D. Neal, *The history of the puritans or protestant nonconformists*, ed. J. Toulmin, new edn, 2 (1822); K. R. Firth, *The apocalyptic tradition in Reformation Britain, 1530-1645* (1979); B. W. Ball, *A great expectation: eschatological thought in English Protestantism to 1660* (1975); Fuller, *Worthies* (1662); J. van den Bergh, 'Continuity within a changing context: Henry More's millenarianism, seen against the background of the millenarian concepts of Joseph Mede', *Pietismus und Neuzit*, 14 (1988), 185-202; J. van den Bergh, 'Joseph Mede and the Dutch millenarian Daniel van Laren', *Prophecy and eschatology*, ed. M. Wilks (1994), 111-22; J. Hunt, *Religious thought in England from the Reformation to the end of the last century*, 1 (1870); D. A. Cockburn, 'A critical edition of the letters of the Reverend Joseph Mead (1626) 27, contained in British Library Harleian MS 390', PhD diss., U. Cam., 1994; *DNB*; will, TNA: PRO, PROB11/179, fol. 142r; J. Heywood and T. Wright, eds., *Cambridge University transactions during the puritan controversies of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries*, 2 (1854); A. J. Gilsdorf, 'The puritan apocalypse: New England eschatology in the seventeenth century', PhD diss., Yale U., 1965; F. S. Plotkin, 'Sighs from Sion: a study of radical puritan eschatology in England, 1640-1660', PhD diss., Columbia University, 1966.

Archives: BL, Harley MSS 389, 390; BL, Harley MSS, letters to Sir Martin Stuteville; BL, Add. MSS 4276, 4254, 4179.

Wealth at death approx. 500 British pounds: will, TNA PRO, PROB 11/1/179, fol. 142r

## Samuel Bold

**Bold, Samuel** (1648x52-1737), Church of England clergyman, is of obscure origins. He was brought up and educated in Chester by William Cook (1611/12-1684), curate of St Michael's parish there. Cook was ejected in 1662 and served as nonconformist minister in the city thereafter. Bold later paid tribute to Cook's widow, Mary, for her 'great love' and 'motherly affection' from his infancy through childhood and youth (Bold, *Man's Great Duty*, sig. A2r). A Samuel Bold, according to the university register, matriculated from Jesus College, Oxford, on 3 November 1671, aged nineteen; if this is our subject, he was the son of Edward Bold (1603/4-1654/5), rector of Hawarden, Flintshire, and was born in 1651 or 1652 rather than 1648 or 1649, the dates derived from his reported age at death. However, Bold's name does not appear in the college's admission records, and there is no evidence of his graduation in either the college or university archives. Bold is notable principally on three counts: as an advocate of religious toleration, for his defence of John Locke, and for his later views on human nature and immortality.

In 1674 Bold was instituted vicar of Shapwick in Dorset, from which pulpit in March 1682, following the required reading of a brief on behalf of persecuted Protestants in France, he preached against intolerance and persecution in general. He decried both the repulsive nature of persecution and its perpetrators with equal clarity and zeal. The sermon was shortly published as *A Sermon Against Persecution*, specifically for ‘the consideration of violent and headstrong men’ (Bold, *Sermon*, title-page). It aroused much local indignation, particularly in view of Bold’s defence of dissenters personally known to him as men ‘of great learning, exemplary piety, strict devotion, and extraordinary loyalty’ and his denunciation of those responsible for persecution as the ‘devil’s agents’ (ibid., sig. A2v, 4) inflicting on the church ‘unspeakable injury’ (ibid., 23, 28) and who, having ‘a great affection for Popery, are hastening towards Rome as fast as they can’ (ibid., 6). Given the political climate – of the failure to exclude the Catholic James, duke of York, from the succession and the intensified persecution of dissenters during the tory reaction – it was, to say the least, injudicious.

Bold sought to justify his position and avert retribution with *A Plea for Moderation towards Dissenters* (1682) but the damage had already been done. He only succeeded in further alienating popular and ecclesiastical opinion. *A Plea for Moderation*, although couched initially in more conciliatory language, deploring ‘mutual animosities and contentions’ and pleading for ‘mutual forbearance’, did so in view of the perceived papal threat and the fear ‘that Hannibal [Rome] is at our ages’ (Bold, *Plea*, 5, 6). Bold concluded by protesting again at the ‘immoderate heat and peevishness of those fatuous and headstrong bigots’ who attacked dissenters (ibid., 36). At a time when English gaols, particularly in the West Country were filled with dissenters on account of the efforts of local informers and magistrates it was more than the authorities, civil and ecclesiastical, could take. Bold was presented to the assizes in Sherborne in August 1682 and shortly afterwards to the court of William Gulston, bishop of Bristol, accused of ‘scandalous libel’ and sedition. The civil court imposed fines, and Bold was imprisoned for seven weeks until the fines were fully paid. The ecclesiastical prosecution was terminated following Gulston’s sudden death.

Bold resigned from Shapwick later that year, possibly on account of the furore raised by his defence of dissenters, but probably also because he had already accepted the more comfortable living at Steeple in the Isle of Purbeck. To the chagrin of his successor at Shapwick, Obadiah Beane, Bold remained popular with the former parishioners and was frequently requested to officiate at marriages and baptisms. Beane recorded such events in the parish registers as married or baptized ‘by an unlawful priest’ (Sparkes, 19). Bold’s views on sovereignty and allegiance and his advocacy of toleration

may all have derived from his early association with William Cook, a 'zealous royalist' who before coming to Chester about 1651 had been deprived of the living of Ashby-de-la-Zouch for refusing to take the engagement, thereby withholding his allegiance from the Commonwealth, and had been charged with treason in 1659 for his support of Sir George Booth's royalist rising, only at the Restoration to become a victim of persecution under the so-called Clarendon code (*Nonconformist's Memorial*, 1.327). 'Besides [,] many of those you prosecute', Bold reminded his audience:

have given greater demonstrations of their loyalty, having suffered more in the late times of usurpation, for the king, than many, if not all of you have, and contributed much more to the bringing of him back to his crown and his just right. (Bold, *Sermon*, 27)

In 1688 Bold published anonymously *A brief account of the first rise of the name protestant . . . by a professed enemy to persecution*, a tract urging protestant unity in the face of the popish threat perceived in the policies of James II. In 1690 Bold took issue with Thomas Comber in *An Examination of Dr. Comber's Scholasticall History* which he perceived, probably mistakenly, had been written to justify persecution of dissenters.

Bold was installed as rector at Steeple, also in Dorset (from 1721, Steeple-cum-Tynham) in April 1682, through the influence of William Churchill. It was from there, in 1697, that he commenced the work for which he is chiefly remembered, his defence of John Locke. Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity* had appeared in 1695 and was immediately attacked as Socinian by the Calvinist John Edwards in *Socinianism Unmasked* (1696). Locke's own *Vindication* (1695) and *Second Vindication* (1697) of the *Reasonableness of Christianity* against Edwards were supported by Bold who, in 1697, entered the field with *A Short Discourse of the True Knowledge of Christ Jesus* in which he contended with Locke that Christ and the apostles considered it sufficient for a Christian to believe that Jesus was the Christ. Bold published two further works in that year, contra Edwards, in defence of Locke and his own *Short Discourse*, and in 1698 added *Observations on the animadversions . . . on a late book entituled, the Reasonableness of Christianity*, again in defence of Locke.

In 1699 Bold turned his attention to the vindication of Locke's other great work, the *Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* (1690) which by then was already in a second edition but which had attracted unfavourable comment. Bold's *Some considerations on the principal objections and arguments . . . against Mr. Locke's essay of humane understanding* (1699), together with his earlier work in support of *The Reasonableness of Christianity* drew the comment that Bold was 'one of the ablest advocates of Mr. Locke' (Hutchins, 1.612), as well as Locke's own unstinted gratitude. Bold was frequently mentioned in Locke's correspondence with great regard and

Locke wrote to him in 1699 ‘everything must be welcome to me that comes from your pen’ (*N&Q*, 137), although in 1703 when Bold visited Locke at Otes (or Oates) he was dissuaded by Locke from further publication.

In 1706, however, after Locke’s death, Bold’s earlier publications in defence of Locke were republished, together with some of his more recent works, in *A collection of tracts publish’d in vindication of Mr. Locke’s Reasonableness of Christianity*. One of these later works, *A Discourse Concerning the Resurrection of the Same Body* (1705), seems to have been generated by Bold’s assimilation of Locke’s views on human existence, resulting in a major shift in Bold’s own thinking regarding the nature and destiny of man. In 1696 Bold had published *Meditations Concerning Death* in which he had upheld the traditional view of the soul’s immortality and immediate felicity in heaven after death. “We have immortal souls”, he had declared. Death is “the departure or separation of the immortal soul from the body” to receive either eternal ‘happiness or misery’ (Bold, *Meditations Concerning Death*, 4, 6).

But there are already hints of a move away from this traditional eschatology in the *Observations* of 1698 and *Some Considerations* of 1699, where in defending Lock’s mortalist views Bold asserts that ‘the truth of the case’ is that immortality, lost by all through Adam’s transgression, is restored by Christ ‘in that he will raise them all from death’ (Bold, *Observations on the Animadversions*, 86), and that ‘after the Resurrection man will be immortal’ (Bold, *Some Considerations*, 25). In the 1705 *Discourse Concerning the Resurrection*, contra Daniel Whitby and Samuel Parker, who had opposed Locke’s view of human nature, contending that death means only the death of the body, Bold predicated a more defined mortalist view, arguing that death ‘happeneth to the [whole] man’ rather than to the body alone, and confessing that the belief that after death ‘man is not dead’ was beyond his comprehension. Bold otherwise appears to have been doctrinally orthodox, despite later inclusion in Wallace’s *Antitrinitarian Biography* where the author concedes that there was ‘no ground for suspecting his orthodoxy’ concerning the Trinity (Wallace, 315).

Most of Bold’s more than twenty published works appeared during his years at Steeple and in addition to his appeals for tolerance, his defence of Locke, and his own modified theology of the soul and immortality, included a number of sermons and devotional pieces, notably *Man’s Great Duty* (1693), *The Duty of Christians* (1717), and *Help to Devotion* (1736), the latter containing a short prayer on every chapter in the New Testament. Bold died at Steeple in August 1737 after a ministry there of more than fifty-five years, aged eighty-eight, and greatly respected.

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**Sources:** ‘Neglected biography, no. 1: some account of the writings, correspondence and persecution of Rev. Samuel Bold, rector of Steeple, in the county of Dorset’, *The Christian Reformer* (Aug 1860), 466-78; G. D. Squibb, *Dorset incumbents, 1542-1731* (c.1946); J. Hutchins, *The history and antiquities of the county of Dorset*, 4 vols. (1861-70), vol. 1; *N&Q*, 11 (1855), 137-9; *DNB*; R. Wallace, *Antitrinitarian biography, or, Sketches of the lives and writings of distinguished antitrinitarians*, 3 vols. (1850), vol. 3; Foster, *Alum. Oxon.*; *The nonconformist’s memorial ... originally written by ... Edmund Calamy*, ed. S. Palmer [3<sup>rd</sup> edn], 1 (1802); S. Sparkes, *St. Bartholomew’s Church, Shapwick* (1996); J. Gorton, *A general biographical dictionary* (1841); J. Watkins, *The universal biographical dictionary* (1821); Watt, *Bibl. Brit.*; [C. B. Heberden], ed., *Brasenose College register, 1509-1909*, 2 vols., OHS, 55 (1909); S. Bold, *Man’s great duty* (1693); S. Bold, *A sermon against persecution* (1682); S. Bold, *A plea for moderation towards dissenters* (1682)

### Clement Writer

**Writer, Clement** (d. 1659x62), religious controversialist, was one of three known surviving children of unidentified parents. Given his prolonged association with Worcestershire it is possible that he descended from the county. He claimed to have received little formal education, and never married. He first appears in 1627 in conjunction with Captain Edward Spring and an unspecified debt of eight pounds. The state papers indicate that pecuniary difficulties and related litigation dogged him for much of his remaining life. In 1631 an adversary, John Racster, requested Sir Dudley Carleton, secretary of state, to use his influence on his behalf with Sir Nathaniel Brent, judge of the prerogative court, against Writer. In protracted litigation against his uncle, George Worfield, Writer petitioned unsuccessfully for compensation for seven years’ remuneration and expenses incurred in conducting Worfield’s lawsuits, later claiming that Lord Keeper Sir Thomas Coventry had unjustly decreed against him to the extent of 1500 pounds. In 1640 he sought redress against Coventry from what he called ‘the grand committee of the courts of justice’ (Writer, *Case*, 1), but the committee was dissolved before his case could be considered. In 1646 his complaint was heard by the Commons committee for petitions, and a subcommittee was appointed to deal with the matter, but the committee itself was suspended before it could receive a report. Frustrated by this succession of disappointments, Writer published *The Sad Case of Clement Writer* (1646) in his defence, arguing that the failure to hear his case in 1640 was a miscarriage of justice that had denied him the opportunity to present his evidence; copies were distributed to MPs. In 1652 Thomas Fowle, solicitor for the Commonwealth, referred his case against Coventry to the Worcester committee for sequestration, but the dissolution of parliament once again prevented the matter from being

resolved. Writer ultimately petitioned Cromwell, and the council of state delegated the case to yet another committee in October 1656. It is not known if he ever obtained redress.

Legal problems notwithstanding, Writer was actively involved in the affairs of the day. He was in business as a clothier in Worcester, where he owned property, during the 1630s, and by the early 1640s was trading in London and living in Blackwell Hall. Although he had rejected Presbyterianism for Independency about 1638 after reading the works of John Robinson, he became a prominent member of Thomas Lambe's London General Baptist congregation. In 1641 he accompanied Lambe on an evangelistic mission in Gloucestershire, and his name appears in association with other known General Baptists. On the outbreak of civil war he enlisted horse for the support of the parliamentary army; he himself took up arms, but by 1645 had seemingly returned to civilian life when he attended meetings concerning the issue of religious toleration between the sects, the Independents, and the Presbyterians.

Repeated attempts to determine precisely Writer's religious sympathies have proved difficult, and he remains elusive. Contemporaries were provoked by his departure from theological orthodoxy and reacted accordingly. Thomas Edwards, with some spleen, called him an 'Anti-scripturalist', 'arch-heretique', 'fearfull apostate', even an 'atheist' (Edwards, 1.27), a depiction which has persisted in some modern historiography. Richard Baxter also thought he was both 'apostate' and 'infidel' (*Reliquiae Baxterianae*, 1.116), and in 1655 published *The Unreasonableness of Infidelity* with Writer in mind. However, these assessments by more moderate figures were obviously polemically motivated, and neither Edwards' early view of 1646 or Baxter's later judgement should be taken as the last word. More recently Writer has been portrayed as a General Baptists, a Seeker, even a Leveler, the latter on account of his acquaintance with William Walwyn, who has also been designated a Seeker. The truth probably lies somewhere here, with the term 'Seeker'. Baxter believed that this was Writer's own estimation of his position, although after two meetings and correspondence, Baxter himself remained uncertain. Writer's defection from Presbyterianism, his antipathy to ceremony and dissatisfaction with all organized churches, including ultimately those of the General Baptists, and his enquiring mind and emphasis on the Spirit's immediacy were all marks of a Seeker outlook. He could probably be accommodated in the last of Baxter's six categories of Seeker, those who had 'over-grown the Scripture, Ministry and Ordinances' (McGregor and Reay, 126).

Writer's publications reveal his matured thought. He is said to have contributed to Richard Overton's *Man's Mortalitie* (1644), a provocative work

which denied the immortality of the soul, a position which his own works subsequently substantiated. Mortalism is thus added to the long list of heresies of which Writer was suspected, the most serious being his liberal view of scripture and the nature of revelation. He was concerned over textual variations of the Bible, questioned Moses' authorship of the Pentateuch, recognized the Bible's openness to conflicting interpretation, and contended that the history of the canon raised difficult questions about inspiration. In the eyes of many this amounted to an attack on biblical infallibility. Such views would not have been approved by most General Baptists and this suggests that by the later 1640s he had moved away from the sect's theological position. Writer's doubts were raised in *The jus divinum of presbyterie* (1<sup>st</sup> edn, 1646) and *Fides divina: the ground of true faith asserted* (1655), and some of them were discussed at meetings with Baxter in 1653 and 1657. Writer maintained that Baxter had misrepresented him in *The Unreasonableness of Infidelity*, and eventually replied to his charges in 1658 in his *An Apologetical Narration, or, A Just and Necessary Vindication of Clement Writer*.

Writer's questions, however, substantial though they were, do not provide grounds for dismissing him as an 'anti-scripturist'. Despite his reservations, he did not reject outright the authority of scripture. Rather he believed that doctrine was necessary and should be based on 'Scripture and weight of sound reason' (Writer, *Jus divinum*, 1646, 18). The *Jus divinum* itself attempts to demonstrate 'by Scripture' the nature of true ministry, and both it and *Fides divina* repeatedly call on scripture for support. The *Apologetical Narration* displays a thorough knowledge of the biblical text and relies heavily upon it, identifying its author with radical contemporary eschatology. Writer's apparent ambivalence may be explained in part by his insistence on the Spirit's enlightenment. He commended Samuel How's *The Sufficiency of the Spirit's Teaching without Human Learning* (1<sup>st</sup> edn, 1639), and insisted that scripture must be interpreted in light of the Spirit's primacy in the believer's personal experience. Thus he suspected learning, the religious establishment, particularly Presbyterianism, and a formally trained ministry in which the individual call is not evidently endorsed by the Spirit: 'For the Ministry of the Gospel is a divine office. So it must necessarily be derived from a divine power, and bring with it suitable evidence' (Writer, *Jus divinum*, 1646, 53). This opposition to ecclesiastical structures and those who maintained them, in addition to his bold criticisms of the Bible, explains the antagonism he received from those who regarded themselves as defenders of orthodoxy. He was, in fact, far more typical of the radical sectarian and Seeker mentality than Edwards or Baxter, and others, have been prepared to allow.

By his will dated 2 August 1659 (proved in 1662), it appears that at the

time of Writer's death he was comfortably placed with assets valued at several hundred pounds, including several houses, two mills, and adjoining lands in the city and county of Worcester. Most of his assets were distributed in small bequests to relatives and friends, notably to the children of his brother, Thomas Writer, and to various cousins, with a bequest of 20 pounds to his friend William Walwyn. The will also made provision for sundry debtors, mostly tenants, to be excused their obligations and for the poor of Worcester and other adjoining localities to receive some relief, evidence perhaps that one Seeker, at least, had discovered the essence of true religion, a generous spirit.

Bryan W. Ball

**Sources:** *CSP dom.*, 1627-9, 1631-3, 1635-6, 1656-7; T. Edwards, *Gangraena, or, A catalogue and discovery of many of the errors, heresies, blasphemies and pernicious practices of the sectaries of this time*, 3 vols., in 1 (1646); *Reliquiae Baxterianae, or Mr. Richard Baxter's narrative of the most memorable passages of his life and times*, ed. M. Sylvester, 1 vol. in 3 pts (1696); C. Hill, *The world turned upside down: radical ideas during the English revolution* (1972); repr. (1975); *DNB*; *Calendar of the correspondence of Richard Baxter*, ed. N. H. Keeble and G. F. Nuttall, 1 (1991), 1638-60; C. Writer, *The sad case of Clement Writer* (1646); [C. Writer], *An apologetical narration, or, A just and necessary vindication of Clement Writer, against a four-fold charge laid on him by Richard Baxter* (1658); 'Writer, Clement', Greaves & Zaller, *BDBR*, 3.344-5; D. Masson, *The life of Milton*, 3 (1873); K. Lindley, *Popular politics and religion in civil war London* (1997); will, TNA: PRO, PROB 11/307, sig. 30; J. F. McGregor, 'Seekers and Ranters', *Radical religion in the English revolution*, ed. J. F. McGregor and B. Raey (1984), 121-40

**Wealth at death** assets valued at several hundred pounds, incl. several houses, two mills, and adjoining lands in and around Worcester: will, TNA: PRO, PROB, 11/307, sig. 30

