

Public infidelity and private belief? The discourse of spirits in Enlightenment Bristol

Jonathan Barry

Recent work on the history of witchcraft and magic has identified three themes or approaches as of particular importance in our understanding of a subject which, although it has been centre stage since the publication of *Religion and the Decline of Magic* in 1971, has continued to trouble historians. The first problem, acknowledged as ‘the most baffling aspect of this difficult subject’ by Thomas himself, is that of ‘decline’: by rendering early modern witchcraft beliefs intelligible, historians have highlighted the issue of why and how far they ceased to have meaning (or function), and many have regarded this as the least satisfactory feature of Thomas’s account.¹ The great interest now being displayed in the culture of the long eighteenth century, including its occult aspects, has rendered this theme of pressing concern.²

The second issue concerns the need for case studies. It is broadly agreed that witchcraft must be studied as a conjunctural phenomenon, operating at a whole series of levels and affected by the interplay of a variety of institutions, interests and languages. While these can all be analysed separately, it is equally crucial to study their interrelationship and this, for the moment at least, is best done in specific settings where the evidence survives to allow a full reconstruction of the development and resolution of a witchcraft episode.³ Third, historians have become particularly interested in witchcraft as a linguistic phenomenon and one imbedded in narrative. This involves a concern to reconstruct the role played by conflicts over the use of contested terms (such as ‘witch’), and the provision of alternative stories of what was happening in a specific case. But it also involves an interest in the intertextuality of witchcraft cases, that is their shaping by reference to previous stories, authorities or cultural models of how, for example, a possession might develop and be resolved.⁴

The case to be discussed here fulfils all three of these criteria. It dates from 1761–62, some twenty-five years after the Witchcraft Act of 1736, and some ten years after the last English witchcraft episode that has been studied in any scholarly depth.⁵ Unlike that case, when a man was executed for

ducking a witch and thus causing her death, the Bristol case never generated any legal proceedings. However, three main sources have survived to enable us to report this affair, usually known as the Lamb Inn case after the inn near Lawford's Gate at the Gloucestershire exit from the city where the episodes began and, for the most part, occurred. They tell the story of the possession of the daughters of the innkeeper, Richard Giles. The girls suffered tormenting fits, saw visions, had crooked pins stuck into them, and became the mouthpieces of a diabolic spirit. Giles also fell ill and died. The family suspected witchcraft, and resorted to a cunning-woman for an eventual cure, but for one section of the Bristol intelligentsia with Methodist leanings the case was one of direct satanic possession and was to be dealt with through prayer.

The three main sources are the diaries of a Bristol accountant named William Dyer, a series of newspaper letters during early 1762 and a narrative account of the episode prepared by Dyer's friend Henry Durbin, a Bristol chemist of some standing, uncle to a later alderman, Sir John Durbin, and a leading figure among the Wesleyans in Bristol who opposed the separation of the movement into a denomination outside the Church of England. Taken together these enable us to reconstruct much of what occurred, and to follow the process whereby various rival understandings of what was going on were constructed and presented to the public. Furthermore, we have a great deal of contextual evidence to explain the position of those who believed in the reality of supernatural forces in this case, and sought to defend this view publicly. Even though the identities and motives of the sceptics are less clear, and no detailed work has been done on the social circumstances of the family at the centre of the case, enough can be deduced to draw tentative conclusions about what the episode may have meant to them as well.

Sources: private and public debate

In an earlier essay I used the diaries of William Dyer, covering the second half of the eighteenth century, to question some of the assumptions of Keith Thomas and others regarding the 'decline of magic' and 'secularisation' of healing in the eighteenth century.⁶ Outwardly a typical enlightened humanitarian in a modern profession, Dyer's own beliefs and medical activities, and those of the circle he moved in, with their extensive interests in electrical and chemical medicine, were shown to arise from their Pietist and anti-materialist philosophies, which attracted them to spiritual accounts of nature and its powers, as embodied in such movements as Hutchinsonianism, Behmenism and, later, Swedenborgianism and mesmerism. In religious terms they sought an ecumenical alliance of groups emphasising Biblical and Trinitarian ideas against Deist and Unitarian tendencies within both dissent and Anglicanism, though their response to evangelical Methodism was mixed.

Dyer and several of his closest friends, including Durbin, were drawn to Wesleyan Methodism, but remained attached to the Church of England, many of whose clergy in Bristol shared similar Pietist inclinations, but in religion, as medicine, they were eclectic, seeking out effective spiritual remedies just as they collected and purveyed what they saw as effective medical treatments. Indeed, this 'experimental' emphasis on spiritual vitality might be seen as their overriding concern.

In the case of Dyer's diary, we have two versions of events in 1762, for around 1800 Dyer produced a condensed version of his original diaries for the last fifty years.⁷ Having done this, he then destroyed all the originals save, fortunately, that for 1762, probably because of his interest in the Lamb Inn case.⁸ Thus we only have his retrospective account for late 1761, when the affair began, but then both contemporary and retrospective accounts for 1762. Dyer's diary reveals that a number of his fellow Pietists, such as Stephen Penny and George Eaton, also began narratives of the affair, as did Dyer himself, but none of these have survived. They were also involved, as we shall see, in the newspaper controversy that developed in February and March 1762 over the episode, with a sequence of eleven letters putting forward rival explanations of the incidents and how they should be approached in philosophical and religious terms. We know from Dyer that other letters on the subject appeared in other Bristol newspapers, now lost, and that Penny also wrote at least one letter to the London papers, where the matter was reported. Some of the attention it attracted arose from its coincidence with the so-called Cock Lane ghost affair in London, which was widely reported and discussed.⁹ Durbin also began to prepare his account in 1762 and in subsequent years the account, and his testimony, formed the basis of comment on the incident in the manuscript annals of several Bristolians, but his narrative was not published until after his death, which occurred in 1799. The next year was published *A Narrative of Some Extraordinary Things that Happened to Mr. Richard Giles's Children at the Lamb, without Lawford's Gate, Bristol; supposed to be the effect of witchcraft. By the late Mr. Henry Durbin, chymist, who was an eye witness of the principal facts herein related. (Never before published.) To which is added, a letter from the Rev. Mr Bedford, late Vicar of Temple, to the Bishop of Gloucester, relative to one Thomas Perks of Mangotsfield, who had dealings with familiar spirits.* The editor of this sixty-page pamphlet is not identified, but it is quite possible that it was William Dyer himself, as he prepared for publication other manuscripts by his Pietist friends. The relevance of the appended letter by Bedford will become clear later.¹⁰

I have gone into some detail regarding the sources for this case because my aim is not so much to consider the Lamb Inn events themselves, but rather to explore the responses of those involved and the way in which the episode was portrayed, both at the time and subsequently. As my title suggests, my concern is with the possible divergence of public and private

responses in 'the discourse of spirits' and, in a broader sense, the implications of this for our understanding of the decline in the 'public discourse' of witchcraft, magic and the supernatural during the eighteenth century. The standard interpretation of this has been to see public discourse following changes in private belief and understanding, as new views of religion, natural philosophy and the like cut back the realm of the supernatural in educated thought. The evidence presented here suggests instead both that public discourse may be only an approximate guide to private belief, dependent on the rules of public debate, but also that those very rules of public debate may themselves have moulded private belief, at least in the longer term.¹¹ If so, the outcome was not necessarily just secular enlightenment but also the range of beliefs that fed into nineteenth-century occult and spiritualist traditions.

In my earlier article I established that many of Bristol's mid-eighteenth-century intellectuals shared some or all of the beliefs in revelation, providence, spirits and anti-Newtonian philosophy which ran counter to the supposed 'enlightenment' tone of intellectual life at that period.¹² Whether Bristol was untypical in that respect may be debatable, but there is no doubt that, despite their position in Bristol life, most of these people felt themselves to be living in a world of 'public infidelity' – subject to the mockery or neglect of a sceptical public. Such a belief did much to shape their reaction to the Lamb Inn affair. Dyer and his friends kept notes and began narratives of the affair in order to put on record their side of the story in what they concluded was a 'clear case' of 'supernatural Agency'.¹³ Yet their motive in doing so was certainly as much to convince and edify themselves and their friends as to convince the broader public.

It was the sceptics who first brought the affair into the public domain through a letter that appeared on 6 February 1762 in *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*. A week earlier the same newspaper had published a sceptical account of the Cock Lane affair in London. The letter began, 'As the two principal cities in this kingdom are supposed at present to be very much plagued with witches and spirits (to the terror of some, amusement of others and concern of most people)' an extract from Scot's *Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584) would be 'not unentertaining nor uninformative' to readers. At the end of this piece, which carried over into the next week's issue, the lesson was drawn that, as the 'far more amazing' case reported by Scot had turned out to be one of 'ventriloquy and plain cousinage', so would the modern cases. Thus the JPs should interfere to see 'if the arts of present witches can escape their cognizance and acuteness', bearing in mind what was being achieved in the way of ventriloquy by 'Mr Bilinguis', who was putting on public shows in Bristol at the time.

In Durbin's narrative it is the day after the second part of this letter appeared, on 14 February, that he notes the need for 'a certain Fact' to convince the world that the case was not one of imposture,¹⁴ and on 18

February Dyer reported that Durbin was taking down details of the affair in writing. The next day one of the clergymen involved told Dyer that the affair was also being ridiculed in a London paper. On 20 February *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* carried two more pieces, the first continuing the attack, though from a different angle, while the second letter, 'Some Seasonable Queries relating to the Affair without Lawford's Gate' offered the first public defence of those involved in the case. The title and tone of this piece is significant, implying a cautious response to the intemperate certainties of the previous letters, and this is indeed the theme of the letter, which focuses on the 'self-conceit' of those who say something cannot be because they cannot assign reasons why it should be permitted. It then appeals to God's inscrutability and Biblical examples. Just because of 'many cheats' and a 'thousand silly stories', 'well-attested' cases should not be disbelieved, for 'total denial of witchcraft' should be left to 'the shallow coffee-house critics and weak sadducees of Robbin-hood'. It became neither 'a gentleman' nor a 'Christian' after the 'testimony of so many credible persons in Bristol to print such a paragraph as was in the last papers, reflecting on Mr G——s' family and insinuating that the justices of the country ought to punish them for that which is really an affliction permitted of God'.

A number of themes are being developed here, including the fear, widespread at this time, that the press could be abused to harm private reputations,¹⁵ together with the associated denigration of coffee-house debating and Walpolean Whiggery (both implied by 'Robbin-hood') as centres of a shallow public opinion based on destructive scepticism.¹⁶ The believers had begun to develop their public case. We do not know who wrote this letter, but on 6 March Dyer noted his pleasure at reading it and other letters publicly supportive of his personal views on the matter. However, from Dyer's diary we learn that his friend Penny viewed the public debate with less satisfaction. On 30 March Dyer remarked that he was writing down all he could about the affair to give to Penny, who thought to publish a narrative with remarks on it, but that Penny then changed his mind because it might 'hurt the minds of the people by filling them with jealousies and fears'. This remark is susceptible of two interpretations, both perhaps valid.

The first is that Penny was concerned lest accusations of witchcraft and the diabolical fuelled popular 'jealousies and fears'. Critics of the affair suggested that its effect would be to fan ignorant superstition and bring innocent old women into suspicion, and there is no doubt that the Lamb Inn case did lead to the revival of old fears and the public surfacing, if not creation, of new ones. Durbin's narrative for 4 and 8 February shows that reported afflictions in Bristol had spread beyond the family first involved,¹⁷ and by 10 February Dyer was noting that 'people now began to be staggered concerning this affair'. On 21 February he noted further that people were remembering similar affairs in the past. As we shall see, the Durbin circle were profoundly

ambivalent about the development of the Lamb Inn affair into a witchcraft case or its movement into the public sphere. In this sense alone the publication of their side of the story was bound to be, in some senses, an own goal.

Second, as their comments on public debate of such matters have already suggested, this group was distrustful about the benefits of airing spiritual matters in the press. One of the repeated themes of their publications (ironically enough), as well as their private writings, is that vital religion was being damaged precisely by the growing torrent of words and opinions, distracting people from the simple truths of the Bible and quiet contemplation of their souls. This was one of the points of divergence between this group and the wholehearted evangelism of John Wesley and Whitefield, who were willing to use the media to stir up public attention whatever animosity and divisions it caused. Pietists like Penny and Dyer disliked and distrusted controversy.¹⁸

Such concerns, of course, explain why Durbin never published his narrative in his lifetime. The preface makes this quite clear. It opens by noting, 'In an age naturally inclined to Infidelity, it requires some courage in a man to stand up against the current of public opinion, to express his conviction that there is a *spiritual world*.'¹⁹ Later it notes Durbin's personal response to those who urged him to publish:

The present is an age of Infidelity – men scoff at spiritual things – if they believe not Moses and the Prophets, Christ and the Apostles, they will not, of course, believe my feeble testimony concerning a World which it may be their interest to discredit. When I first engaged in the Examination of this business, I was abused in the public Papers for what was termed my *credulity*. Should I publish the Narrative, the same abuse would be revived, and I wish to live and die in peace with all men. It will doubtless be published after my death, and the matter will then speak for itself.²⁰

The quietism of this latter statement offers an ironic perspective on the notion of 'courage' in the opening quotation: it seems that it was courageous enough to stand up against public opinion in one's own mind, without being required to enter the fruitless struggle to reverse that public infidelity. And yet the preservation and planned publication of the narrative clearly imply a belief that it might, after all, have its uses in converting a sceptical public, as well as its more private purposes for sharing with 'friends' on an individual basis. Significantly, moreover, we learn that some circumstances told to friends are not mentioned in the narrative.²¹ We are thus alerted to the likelihood that the narrative is shaped to win over a sceptical public, not to divulge its meaning for the already sympathetic. This can be substantiated both by close examination of Durbin's narrative itself – its language and its silences, its structure and its baffling lack of structure – and by comparing its account with that provided by the newspaper pieces and, in particular, by Dyer's observations,

which, while not spontaneous, do show a complexity of response and circumstance largely, though not totally, excised from the published narrative.

From its title page onwards, the tone of the narrative is one of cautious empiricism. Although the modern facsimile of the text is boldly entitled *Witchcraft at the Lamb Inn Bristol by Henry Durbin*,²² the original title only promises us a 'narrative' of 'some extraordinary things' 'supposed to be the effect of witchcraft', as related by 'an Eye and Ear witness of the principal Facts herein related', one who is named and whose position in Bristol life is very specifically emphasised, together with his occupation of 'chymist'. The main discursive strategies of the text are in fact encapsulated in these points. We are offered a 'narrative', written entirely in the first person as an account of what Durbin himself was involved in, from the first entry:

December 18, 1761, hearing that Mr Giles's children, Miss Molly and Dobby, were afflicted in an extraordinary manner, for a fortnight past, I went there this day, and saw Molly sewing, and found she had marks on her arms given on a sudden, like the marks of a thumb-nail; which I am satisfied she could not do herself, As I watched her, I saw the flesh pressed down whitish, and rise again.

Each subsequent entry follows the same format, with no attempt in the text itself to impose a pattern or explain the chain of events to the reader. The purpose throughout is to establish that Durbin was an actual witness of a series of very precisely described physical events, along with many other unimpeachable witnesses and that what they saw happening could not be the result of imposture but had occurred in a fashion beyond 'natural' explanation.

Sceptics and believers

To understand this narrative strategy it is necessary to look at the terms of the debate over the affair conducted in the newspapers. What these show is how public consideration of the incident was confined within a tight and highly polarised model of alternative possibilities. The sceptics rested their case primarily on two premises. The first, Reginald Scot-like one, was that all such incidents always turned out to have a natural and usually fraudulent explanation and were within the powers of conjurors. The second was that, in a modern and enlightened age, witchcraft was no longer accepted by the law, but fraudulent pretences at spiritual powers, such as fortune-telling, were now the essence of the crime of witchcraft, as defined by the 1736 Act. The sceptical position was thus the consequence of a long-lasting sceptical stance, epitomised by Scot, together with a modern legalistic position. Strikingly absent from any of the sceptical accounts is any effort to appeal to modern natural philosophy or medicine to explain the events described as true but natural.²³

In one sense we may be struck by the extremism and stridency of this approach: it certainly represents a 'strong' form of denial of the reality of 'preternatural' events in daily experience. Yet its very intemperance left open many inviting targets for the believers. If it sufficed to show that the events in question were really happening and were not the outcome of imposture, then a simple narrative that established the credibility, not the credulity, of the witnesses, was sufficient. As the editor of Durbin's narrative puts it:

he is willing that every man should abound in his own opinion; being convinced, that they have the same *right* to disbelieve relations of Witchcraft, &c. in general, as he has to credit those which he believes to be sufficiently authenticated. He thinks the following is a *clear case*, and that from it, every impartial reader will be drawing the following conclusion: Either this is a *real* case of Supernatural Agency: or, Mr Durbin has knowingly imposed on the World and gone into Eternity professing to believe what he knew to be false. – But in this case, Mr D's character swears for him; and will for ever preclude, with all who knew him, the possibility of such an imputation.²⁴

Hence the preface devotes itself in large part to establishing Durbin's social respectability, as an alderman's uncle and a charitable man of 'ample annual income', of probity and piety. Further, it presents Durbin as approaching the affair:

through a principle of critical curiosity to detect and expose what he deemed to be an imposture ... and shew such prudential caution, and rigid, critical examination, proceeded in with the most patient perseverance for a great length of time, as no *trick* or *imposture* could have possibly shielded itself from.²⁵

And this is indeed the burden of most of the text, with its details of what Durbin himself or other credible witnesses saw or heard or experienced directly, and the repeated efforts they made to ensure that there was no fraud, by checking for wires or hairs, holding the children or masking things from their view and the like. Those engaged with this task alongside Durbin are not named (though Dyer's diary allows us to put names to many of them), but their social and intellectual credentials as witnesses are established by references to their status. Many of them are presented, like Durbin, as initially sceptical, but all are convinced by their sense testimony. As the preface sums up: 'Several Clergymen of learning and piety, and Gentlemen of considerable abilities, some of whom were professed Deists' attended, and all were 'fully convinced that there could be no imposture in the case'. This is reinforced in the preface by reference to the preservation of bent pins and a warped glass for display to sceptical friends.²⁶ At several points in the narrative Durbin emphasised that at no point were the children ever discovered performing any fraudulent tricks.²⁷

The critics of the affair faced, therefore, a considerable problem in

discrediting all this evidence without violating the code of respectability by openly claiming, in the press, that the witnesses were either complicit or stupid. Their tactic was to avoid such direct accusations whilst casting doubt on the value of the witnesses indirectly. One way this was done was to suggest, perhaps correctly, that not everybody was welcome to witness the manifestations and that not all of the episodes were as clear-cut as presented in Durbin's account. They also, as we have seen, sought to present the witnesses as credulous rather than credible, thus avoiding outright accusations of falsity while implying that they were predisposed to credit what they were being asked to believe. Without knowing all the parties involved this is hard to judge. Dyer, perhaps inevitably, largely refers to the presence of his friends, so that the laymen and clergy that he mentions attending the affair are people who, like Durbin, were far from sceptical about the existence of spirits. Most of them at some stage tell Dyer of apparitions, dreams or other 'spiritual' experiences, quite apart from their common interest in metaphysical schemes with a heavy role for an active spirit world.²⁸

Not all of the clergy who attended, however, can be associated with Dyer's outlook, one such exception being the Grammar School headmaster, later Rector of St Michael's, Samuel Seyer, who 'asked many questions in Greek and Latin' on 10 February.²⁹ His son and namesake, when he was collecting notes about the affair around 1800, refers to conversations with Durbin but was apparently quite unaware of his own father's involvement. Seyer junior noted that 'Durbin was said to be a credulous man' but that he was known to be honest and could hardly be mistaken about what he had touched. The presence of hundreds of witnesses, gentlemen and ladies, convinced Seyer that the events recorded happened, but he left open the question of whether 'they were performed by supernatural agency or imposture', though noting that if the latter it was never discovered.³⁰ Another Bristol antiquarian, George Catcott, also hedged his bets in his annals of Bristol history. At first he described it firmly as 'pretended witchcraft', but later amended this opinion, not least because it was never detected, concluding that there was at least 'something supernatural in it'. Finally, reflecting his anti-intellectual leanings, he concluded that if it was a trick it was 'so artfully managed that all those learned gentlemen with all their scholastic knowledge' were unable to detect the fraud.³¹ An anonymous annal, compiled in 1790, gave a long account of the affair, concluding that 'some were filled with awe and astonishment' leading to a 'belief in the doctrine of witchcraft', while 'other persons of understanding staggered in their opinions concerning the causes of such unaccountable noises and sights'. But 'the people without doors in general treated the affair with derision'.³² This offers an interesting inversion of the normal assumption of popular credulity and elite scepticism.

Thus it might appear that, both at the time and in later years, the 'believers' had made good the relatively simple task of offering credible

enough evidence to undermine the 'imposture' interpretation.³³ In fact, Dyer's contemporary account shows matters in a rather different light.³⁴ If Durbin's claim to initial scepticism is questionable – he was already a convinced Wesleyan following a vision of light,³⁵ and in later years he stands out among Dyer's friends for his interest and belief in possession – then Dyer's own reactions as the affair unfolded, and those he reports among others closely involved, suggest a continuing tendency to doubt the whole affair. In Durbin's account people, including the Giles family themselves, move from initial scepticism to conviction of the reality of the affair. In Dyer's diary, their belief ebbs and flows with the twisting turns of an affair which lasted over a year in all and had several distinct periods. In particular, the period from early March until May, which is passed over rapidly in Durbin's account, and when the newspaper controversy died down, emerges from Dyer's diary as one when many of the supporters of the Giles family, notably the gentry Haynes family of nearby Wick, where the children were often taken to stay, concluded that it was 'a cheat'.³⁶ On 13 March Dyer reported that people were very clamorous about Mr Giles as their suspicions were now confirmed that the witchcraft was 'merely a contrived thing' to lessen the value of the inn, in which Giles had subsequently bought a share.³⁷ When the children then made a (short-lived) recovery, Dyer himself noted on 18 March, 'Lord pardon my weakness and what I have done amiss.' Dyer later recovered his belief in the supernatural character of the affair, as we shall see, but he continued to record the belief that it had all been to lessen the price of the house (10 April), and on 15 May he again noted that one of the Haynes family was 'very angry' over the affair and added, 'May the Lord prepare me for calumny.' Dyer's own employers, the leading Presbyterian merchants Ames and Bright, were very distrustful of Giles and 'interrogated' him concerning the matter both on 5 February and on 22 June.

It seems likely that this explanation, which remained the standard sceptical explanation into the twentieth century,³⁸ was formulated very early on, since Durbin's narrative notes on 10 January that the children had been sent to other houses to see if the manifestations continued, as if they did this would provide 'clearer evidence that it was no imposture'.³⁹ 'Some Seasonable Queries' on 20 February had questioned whether the Giles family could have any interest in manufacturing so 'long and troublesome' an affair and noted that Giles was suffering in business because some looked upon the affair as a judgement of God on him. More mundanely, the Durbin narrative notes in passing that the family were losers because customers were moving to other inns.⁴⁰ In the letter published over his name on 5 May Giles himself explicitly denied that it was a plot to reduce the inn's value, claiming that he was unaware of the decision to sell until three months after the affair began, and again drawing attention to his sending of the children away from the inn.

Without definitive proof of fraud, however, the case for imposture

remained purely circumstantial and it was thus possible for the supporters to argue that, in their rejection of the evidence presented, it was the sceptics, rather than they, who were being dogmatic. As their letters to the newspapers emphasised, sense testimony had to be accepted even if it could not be explained by what currently passed for 'reason'. As 'Philalethes' put it on 15 May, reason was a 'necessary handmaid' to the senses, but 'a poor weaksighted girl without their assistance'. The first asserters of the existence of the Antipodes had been regarded as 'heretics' by the 'reasoners' of 'those dark times'. Reason needed to be 'enlightened' by experience and it was the testimony of 'eyes and ears' that brought certainty. In their insistence on the need to rely on sense testimony, experiment and credible witnesses, the believers were thus presenting themselves, not their opponents, as the champions of Enlightenment values. 'Some Seasonable Queries' neatly reversed the usual charge by arguing that it was 'more credulous' to see as fancy the bites, cuts and flying objects appearing before the eyes of many than to accept the reality of sorcery or demonic contracts. Here empiricism could be turned to the advantage of supposedly occult beliefs, just as it could be used by non-professional healers to justify their cures, even if these ran contrary to accepted medical theory. The analogy is important, since, as I documented in my earlier essay, many of Dyer's circle adopted just such a medical empiricism. In a relatively free society where public opinion and its correlate, market demand, were held to be superior to professional or state control, the discourse of empiricism and enlightenment was open for appropriation by all sides.⁴¹

Yet it would be misleading to imply that the believers in the Lamb Inn case could win the argument easily by reliance on the evidence of the senses alone. There is considerable evidence both that they could not and that they themselves were dissatisfied with a purely sensory investigation of the affair. The consequence was that investigation of the case took on a further dimension with the questioning of the 'spirit' involved. This, while intended to strengthen the case for a supernatural force at work, offered the sceptics a much more congenial ground on which to criticise the believers. It was on 8 February that, according to the narrative, Durbin proposed asking the spirit questions in Latin 'which I thought would remove all suspicion of a fraud, if it answered right, but I find all the evidence insufficient to convince some'.⁴² This process gradually grew more elaborate as questions were later put, not only in Greek, but also with their back to the children, then in whispers and finally silently. The answers were made by scratching a number of times either to signify yes or no or to the correct number to answer the question asked. This procedure, and the use of learned languages to prevent comprehension by the children or uneducated, was of course a well-known technique in possession cases. However, its shortcomings were equally well established and these were quickly pounced upon by its critics. Even in

Durbin's narrative a number of inconsistencies can be detected: sometimes the spirit scratched and 'took no notice of the question', while its answer to a query concerning the number of satellites of the planet Saturn was wrong (though the editor notes that, since more had since been discovered by Herschel in nearby Bath, perhaps the spirit's higher estimate would be proved correct!).⁴³ The narrative also observes, 'I cannot think why it will not scratch or answer questions to a stranger the first time, unless it intends thereby to throw a reflection on the family, as if they did it by artifice.'⁴⁴ Dyer's diary reveals that one answer, incriminating an autodidact collier of involvement in the affair, was rejected as unacceptable or, as Dyer put it, 'no doubt a lying spirit'. All this gives credence to the criticisms made by 'Anti-Pythonissa' on 27 February. He pointed out that the answers were not in Latin and Greek but just by scratches and these were often wrong, while all the questions asked in Hebrew had been answered mistakenly although Hebrew was, surely, the Devil's first language!

Dyer, well aware that the answers might be of 'a lying spirit', noted on 18 February that he was 'fatigued' about the affair and hoped he was 'behaving with prudence' as became 'a Christian' and the next day recorded that 'some may say' that they were being too free with Satan in their constant visits, but reassured himself that he, at least, was doing so 'not to converse with that evil spirit', but to profit both himself and the children by 'dropping any little word of use'. Hence, presumably, Durbin's failure to record his interview with the spirit, as reported in the preface. 'His often repeated request to the Spirit, as it was termed, to favour him with an interview ... on any terms consistent with his character as a Christian' led eventually to a meeting where Durbin:

adjured it in the most solemn manner, to shew itself in any form, or way it thought proper. After a short time spent in waiting, a loud knocking took place on the opposite side of the wainscot (it was at night, and the place in deep darkness.) Lifting his eyes towards the place where the noise seemed to be, he discovered a coloured luminous appearance, of a circular form, about the size of a common plate: the colours resembled those of a rainbow: the brighter ones were extremely vivid, and deeply shaded with the *red*, *blue*, and *indigo*. The Writer believes that Mr. *D* said, he then asked some questions, but what they were, he cannot now recollect.⁴⁵

The sense of unease is palpable.

Why, given the mixed advantages of turning to this procedure, had recourse been had to asking questions? The simple answer to this is that the initiative in this respect was not taken by Durbin and his circle but by the women of the household, and that, as Durbin's account suggests, their intervention was to some extent a matter of stepping in to establish the credibility and experimental rigour, that is the learned male control, of a process already unstoppable. But, in doing so, Durbin and the others also

took the opportunity to extract from the process the kind of religious message which, arguably, had underlain their interest from the start. Both Dyer and Durbin agree that questioning began on 23 January, and the narrative makes it clear that the initiative was taken by the girls' grandmother, Mrs Elmes, who 'spoke to the invisible tormenter, when it was knocking and scratching, and said "Art thou a witch? if so, give scratches;" which it did'.⁴⁶ By the next day, Durbin himself was also asking questions by this method, although he cautioned against reliance on the answers given, 'as it [the spirit] might put it [the accusation of witchcraft] on an innocent person'. The following day he was actively leading the questioning, repeating the queries put first by the women.⁴⁷

As far as we can tell, all the early questioning related to the afflictions themselves, but once the questioning shifted into the learned languages, a new dimension appeared. The last recorded question on 8 February was 'Si Maximus est Deus' (if God be supreme) to which the scratching replied, of course, in the affirmative.⁴⁸ By 10 February, with a whole crowd of clergymen present, Durbin notes 'we were willing to see if it would acknowledge the great truths of Religion'. These were 'Si Jesus Christus, est deus eternus' (if Christ be the eternal God), 'Si hos liberos protegit Dei angelus' (if an Angel of God protects the Children), and (asked in Greek) 'If Christ be God and Man', to which an affirmative reply came 'very loud'.⁴⁹ On 16 March it also 'scratched as if in a passion' when asked, in thought, 'if Jesus Christ would come to judge the World?'.⁵⁰ Thus the spirit affirmed both the existence of a world of angels to oppose that of evil spirits and Trinitarian orthodoxy. The latter emphasis fits very nicely with other evidence that hostility to Unitarianism was one of the unifying forces among the 'anti-materialist' groups in Bristol. Furthermore a new and aggressive proponent of Unitarianism, the Rev. Edward Harwood, was just entering the Bristol scene as pastor of the Tucker Street Presbyterian meeting, precipitating a doctrinal dispute that engulfed the Bristol newspapers through the mid-1760s and led to many pamphlet publications. During this dispute, significantly, Harwood accused his main Trinitarian opponent, the Baptist minister Caleb Evans, of 'credulity and blind zeal' of the sort that led to the 'patronizing of extravagant delusions' such as 'a Cock Lane Ghost' or 'a Lawford's Gate witchcraft'.⁵¹

The linking of this affair to debate over the meaning and authority of the Scriptures may have had an ambivalent effect. Many concerned at liberal theological developments may have been alienated from the sceptics and pushed towards belief, just as Dyer and his friends were. On the other hand, the smearing of such belief as the product either of past Puritanism or modern Methodist extremism may also have had an effect. In a larger sense, the debate over the meaning of the Bible was fundamental in encouraging all sides to demonstrate, both from natural philosophy and from contemporary spiritual experience, that their understanding of the Bible was validated by

external evidence. This was the strategy underlying such movements as Hutchinsonianism, Behmenism and Swedenborgianism and it also, of course, had a major part to play in Methodism. It was hard to be sure how such evidence could be weighed against rival interpretations of the Bible itself. A critic writing on 27 February tellingly observed that many who believed in the Scriptures and all its 'important truths', doubted the reality of 'diabolical converse in the vulgar sense' and they felt 'no need of the testimony of evil spirits to strengthen their Faith in the Doctrines of the Gospel'.

Indeed, it was possible to extend the critique of the Christianity of those who chose to explore the affair. A letter of 20 February, which criticised the questioning of the Devil by scratches, also made a number of other charges. It was, 'astonishing that serious believers should find pleasure in seeing these performances repeated for weeks and months together. They enter the room and there wait with eager expectation to see the children pricked, pinched, cut, hit or scratched.' What were 'men of sense and learning' doing sitting 'dumb for an Hour while something is cooling over the fire that is to bring the witch to the door?' Finally, if, as hinted, a witch was being identified as to blame: 'Certainly every man of Religion or Humanity must tremble at the thought! As some poor person deformed by age or worn out by mere decay might fall a victim to the furious spirit of the credulous. In my opinion this affair has a manifest tendency to revive superstition and ignorance amongst us!' These queries require us to consider the process whereby what could be presented, as the Durbin narrative begins by doing, as the scientific investigation of what we might now call a 'poltergeist' phenomena, became a case both of possession and witchcraft. It also raised the question of the appropriate Christian response in the face of such phenomena. Was empirical enquiry compatible with the duty of comfort and healing? And what forms of remedy were appropriate and legitimate? In answering these questions, a considerable gap seems to emerge between the attitudes of the family, especially the women and children, and those of Durbin, Dyer and friends. In the most simple terms, this complies with the classic distinction between a concern for *maleficia* and identifying and neutralising the witch coming up 'from below', and the learned's concern for the religious issues involved, focusing on the reaffirmation of spiritual control. To a considerable extent that can also be seen as a gendered distinction, between the girls and their female relatives and servants on the one hand, and the men involved on the other.⁵²

But this simple dichotomy should not be overstated. For one thing our evidence is all drawn from the Durbin-Dyer perspective – the meaning of the episode to the children and women involved can only be inferred from their reported behaviour and words as filtered by these men. Secondly, Durbin and Dyer were far from immune to the fears and concerns of the family, as they became drawn into the unfolding drama. Furthermore, this is

one of the areas where Durbin and Dyer's presentations, the public and the private, diverge considerably. Whether deliberately or not, Durbin's narrative, while forced to reveal the growing element of anti-witchcraft behaviour in the affair, never commits itself on this matter and, without actually criticising their behaviour overtly, maintains a clear distance between the narrator and the women and children. Dyer, struggling to understand what was going on and to help the family, was drawn into much closer empathy with their position, while retaining severe doubts, at times, about their behaviour and interpretation of events.

Witchcraft?

It may be no coincidence that it was on 7 January that Dyer first referred to prayers being said over the children for their relief, by the Methodist-trained Anglican curate James Rouquet. Durbin's narrative is silent about this procedure although two days later it mentions that 'a clergyman went to prayers, and [the affliction] ceased directly, and was quiet all night'.⁵³ Dyer was explicit that Rouquet was praying for their relief, as enjoined in the Scriptures but (in official eyes) forbidden by the Canons of 1604, which outlawed Anglican exorcism; the narrative's indirect reference fudges this important question.⁵⁴ By 10 January 'the maid, nurse and two children' had seen 'a hand and arm' but there were few new developments until 21 January, when pins first make their appearance. However, on 15 January Dyer referred to 'the witch's pranks' and on 21 January to a dream of his about 'witchcraft' and 'the witch'. The spirit was also finding a voice, speaking to the children on 12 January and to the nurse on 21 January.⁵⁵

The stage was thus set for the role of the witch to be made explicit on 23 January when the grandmother first asked questions, starting with 'Art thou a witch?'⁵⁶ Durbin's narrative then rather distracts the reader (intentionally?) by describing other incidents before returning at the end of that day's narrative to note: 'By asking questions this morning, it answered that Mr. **** had employed it. Mrs. Elmes and the children heard it cry out, "Jee woah", as waggoners used to say in driving horses.'⁵⁷ Dyer's diary supplies the crucial details, naming the man concerned as Mr James, a wagoner, and saying that the scratches placed the blame on him and 'the old woman at the door'. Dyer also added the crucial information, omitted by Durbin, that the family had also 'tried the experiment of boiling the children's urine'. This, as we shall see, was a well-recognised counter-measure against witches, expected either to force them to reveal themselves or to harm the witch. A remedy against witchcraft printed in *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* on 25 November 1752 had noted that a mixture of urine and other exotic ingredients, if boiled, would cause the witch agony and, if it boiled quite away, she would die. On 21 January the narrative admits that a 'person proposed relieving [the

children] by casting their urine into the fire'. When this was done: 'as soon as it burned clear, *that* child was as well as if nothing had happened. They did the same with the other's water, and she recovered in the same manner. But it returned in three hours as bad as before.'⁵⁸ There is of course no suggestion here that the action was a counter-measure to flush out or harm the witch. The final episode of this whole affair, both in Durbin's narrative and Dyer's diary, came when Mrs Giles, after consulting a cunning-woman, boiled the urine once again. She had been told to 'take the two children's first water in the morning, and put it in a pipkin on the fire; and if, when it boiled, all colours of the rainbow came out of it visibly, she [the cunning-woman] could cure it; and she would do the rest at home'. The procedure worked and the children were relieved. Durbin notes, 'how far the cunning woman may have contributed to this, I will not pretend to say'.⁵⁹

So, the 'reply' to the questions introduced not just the witch but Mr James, who ran a wagon business to London from the Old Market in Bristol. As the affair developed it became clear that, in the family's account, the whole episode revolved around the commercial rivalry between James and Giles in running wagons to London. On 20 February the narrative, after describing one of several incidents where Giles's wagons were stopped at Kelson Hill near Bath, their chains broken and the horses frightened off, observes 'The first week Mr Giles set up the flying Waggons for London these troubles began'.⁶⁰ On 9 February the porters testified before the Commissioners for Turnpikes, who were meeting at the inn, about a similar incident 'at the beginning of the affair with the children' and another occurred on 24 February.⁶¹ On 25 January questioning of the spirit established that Mr James had hired the witch for ten guineas and that it was her work that had stopped Giles' wagons on Hanham Hill 'when he was obliged to put on ten horses before he could move it', for which he 'paid 5l penalty for halling with so many horses'.⁶² On 17 June Dyer referred to the threats facing Mrs Giles from 'her adversary Mr. James, may Jesus oppose any diabolical charm which may be levelling at her'. On 15 September questioning of the spirit elicited the claim that the witch had been hired for a further year's tormenting for another ten guineas, although voices heard by the children and the maid on 15 November seem to reflect an uncertainty about whether there would be further tormenting and if so for how long.⁶³ Finally the cunning-woman confirmed that 'a man in Bristol had given many pieces of gold to a woman in Gloucestershire to do it'.⁶⁴ For the family, then, anxious about a new and risky commercial venture, a malevolent rival in trade had become the ultimate explanation of their misfortune.

The final twist of this misfortune came in May 1762 when Mr Giles fell ill and died. Durbin's narrative of this makes it clear that, to Giles at least and perhaps by implication to Durbin and the reader, this was tied up with the wagoning affair. The report of the death of this 'industrious, honest man'

in *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* on 22 May just noted 'mortification in his bowels'. In his retrospective diary for 1762 Dyer recalled that the symptoms did not fit the prevailing influenza and that Giles had been sensible till he expired.⁶⁵ In his contemporary account Dyer recorded on 18 May his suspicion that:

the same infernal diabolical tormenter which persecuted his poor children may have had some hand in Giles's death. Though to outward appearances his decease seems natural, yet these spiritual wickednesses are capable ... of executing their horrible deeds in such manner as to deprive a man of life though as not to be perceptible by any man present nor the person so assaulted. May Jesus preserve and protect us against this accursed spirit.

Dyer also recorded 'another odd circumstance, that the very evening Mr Giles died an old woman with a straw hat looked in at the kitchen door' and asked a servant if her master was not dead yet. The maid went to get Dobby to see if the old woman was the witch but she had gone before she returned. This was reported to Dyer by George Eaton, a Quaker schoolmaster who was one of the most active visitors and questioners during the affair, who had been with Giles as he died. The death was followed by six weeks of quiescence, partly reflecting the absence of Molly, who had been sent for the summer to Swansea, but in mid-July a few incidents again affected Dobby and in reply to questions the spirit claimed that 'if Mr. Giles had spoken to the woman that day ... his life would have been saved'.⁶⁶ Despite all this, Mr James, as far as we can tell, was never accused directly by the family or the believers. Dyer referred on 16 May to a suspicion that 'Mr Giles' adversaries' might 'enter a persecution against his friends', but no further explanations are given and there is no reference to this aspect of the affair in the press. If it became public at all, it certainly did not destroy James's business, as he was still running his wagoning business to London from Old Market in 1775.⁶⁷

There was clearly a tendency for the children to become ever more directly and dramatically involved with the spirit, but equally clearly there was an adult suspicion that the children were too directly controlling what happened. One explanation of the growing scepticism evident by early March is that this factor, and the lack of any further new dramatic developments, led all concerned to feel dissatisfied. But at the same time, the process the children had begun was taking on a momentum of its own, and moving beyond the confines of the Giles household to make contact with wider Bristolian beliefs about possession and witchcraft. When Durbin had questioned the spirit on 25 January, he had 'named several parishes, to find out where the woman lived' before suggesting Mangotsfield and getting the expected response 'very distinctly'.⁶⁸ Dyer reported that on 9 February questions were asked about imps and familiars and whether there were good

spirits to restrain them, whether witches lived in Mangotsfield and how long it was since the witch had made a compact with the Devil. From this they learned that the witch's name was Elizabeth Hemmings. Although Dyer's diary makes it clear that Durbin was one of the questioners, there is no account of this in the narrative.⁶⁹ Instead the resonance of Mangotsfield is clarified only in the narrative of 10 February, which reports the questioning of the spirit as to 'its true name'. One of the party then asked 'Si nomen tuum Malchi est' [if thy name be Malchi], which it affirmed. The significance of this is then made clear as the account continues:

About sixty years ago, one Perks of Mangotsfield had a familiar spirit that was named Malchi, agreeable to the account written by the Rev. Mr. Bedford, a late Minister of Temple parish in this city. And as it had said the woman lived at Mangotsfield that did this mischief, it made us suppose it might be the same.⁷⁰

Hence the reproduction of Bedford's letter at the end of the Durbin pamphlet. However, no further reference is made by the children to Malchi, as reported by Durbin, and the Faustian case of Perks, who had conjured up the spirit to satisfy his curiosities in astronomy, mathematics and the like, and had seen spirits dancing at midnight, was completely alien to the vulgar violence of the Giles children's spirit. Malchi only returns to the story when Mrs Giles visits the cunning-woman at Bedminster in November when she learns:

it was a very powerful spirit that was employed; it was a chief of the familiar spirits; it was Malchi (which was the name it told me [Durbin] it was called by) and therefore she was in doubt whether she could stop it. And this spirit knew all languages, and all thoughts; for there were some learned spirits and some ignorant.⁷¹

In these terms, Durbin's Malchi was 'learned' but Molly and Dobby's spirit was 'ignorant'.

As noted before, news of the Lamb Inn case had begun to bring other supernatural incidents to light. On 4 February the spirit, when questioned, spoke of tormenting six people at that time. It was then asked 'If it had any power to torment Mr – 's daughter' and more questions were asked about this case the next day, when the spirit said she would be cured in four weeks 'and accordingly in a month she was cured, but left very weak'. Dyer, who dated these questions to 8 February, named the girl as Nancy Tudway. Durbin's narrative continues:

The doctor thought her incurable, and would take no fees. She used to bark four or five times and then crow somewhat like a young cock; turning her head from the right shoulder to the left, backwards and forwards twenty times, and yet her neck not swell. I have seen her tongue pulled, as it were, out of her mouth very long, then doubled down her throat; then after having rolled on the ground in great agony, she would go about the house, as usual,

or sit and sew, barking and crowing all the time. She has continued very well ever since it stopped.⁷²

The mention of such symptoms in Durbin's narrative takes on a rather tragic irony in view of incidents later in Durbin's life, of which Dyer informs us. On 10 April 1769 he reported that he electrified Durbin's daughter Hester, aged 14, who had 'an unaccountable complaint', 'a convulsive motion in her tongue' so that she:

sometimes made a singing noise, at other times like the crowing of a cock, yet in perfect health in all other respects. Dr. Drummond [who had also attended Giles before his death] had prescribed nervous medicines but without effect. It was suspected to be preternatural, as Mr. Durbin had been an assiduous attendant on Giles's children and fully convinced of a preternatural agency in regard to them and a zealous advocate in their defence against the unbelieving. He himself was led to think that his daughter's complaint proceeded from one and the same cause.

On 22 January 1775 Dyer again noted that she was ill, adding 'he [Durbin] calls it a possession'. Finally on 29 November 1788 Dyer refers to Durbin visiting his daughter at the asylum run by Richard Henderson, a fellow Methodist known for his religious piety and sympathy for patients.⁷³ Dyer comments: 'conceiving her disorder proceeded from diabolical possession he mentally without uttering a word abjured the spirit [Malchi?] which he believed possessed his poor child. She instantly felt it and said "Father what have you done?" She appeared better afterwards but unhappily relapsed.' This tragic replaying of the earlier episode within his own family may help to explain both Durbin's obsession with the earlier episode and his unwillingness to make it public.

Whatever their original doubts about viewing the Lamb Inn affair as a matter of witchcraft and possession, Dyer and Durbin had become drawn in to seeing the affair in that light. Yet in one respect, at least, they kept very firmly at arms' length from the family, and that was in the matter of counter-remedies. But here too they failed to keep control over the affair, a failure reflected in the ending of the narrative. Whereas the perfect ending would have been a deliverance through 'prayer and fasting', or at least waiting on God, in fact it was traditional counter-magic that finally broke the spell. As Durbin notes:

Mrs. Giles asked my opinion, whether they should not go to those called *White Witches*, to have these troubles stopped. I told them, if *they* could stop it, it must be done by the power of the devil; therefore I thought it not lawful to go to them; but to trust the providence of God for deliverance.⁷⁴

But eventually 'they were determined to go to the woman at Bedminster' and 'Mrs. Giles and two neighbours' went 'resolved not to tell what they came about, to see if the woman knew their thoughts'. She did, and 'told Mrs. Giles

that she should have come to her before, for that there had been horrible Witchcraft at her house', and 'so for an hour and a half told them every thing that had happened; and some secret things, which Mrs. Giles said, she thought she could not possibly have known by hearsay'. Durbin distanced himself by adding 'as all these things had been long and publicly talked of, she might easily have heard the whole, and yet no WISER than her neighbours'. Durbin's final sentence in the narrative, 'How far the *cunning* woman may have contributed to this, I will not pretend to say', might be read as a final rhetorical flourish of cautious empiricism, but perhaps was more of an expression of defeat.⁷⁵

Dyer's reporting is rather fuller and more revealing. On 20 November he noted that Mrs Giles told him about going to a woman at Bedminster 'who rents a room at the Queen's Head', about something which she 'had lost or mislaid but is since found agreeable to her prediction', from which Dyer concluded 'it appears pretty evident that the poor wretch has a familiar to attend her'. It was nine days later that Mrs Giles went to the cunning-woman at Bedminster (surely the same woman?) to ask advice about her affliction: 'may the Lord pardon her folly'. Then on 7 December 'Mrs. Giles told me the old woman of Bedminster had lately been there and given instructions how to manage the children in order to counteract the charm, likewise gave expectation that she would bring to light the persons concerned in that affair.' To which Dyer again appended 'Oh may Jesus be the refuge of that family and may they not flee to the Devil for assistance'. In his retrospective diary he was even more forthright: 'Mrs. Giles's serious friends blamed her for having recourse to a woman of equally bad repute with the miserable wretch who was the author, in conjunction with the spirit of darkness, of all the troubles experienced by poor Giles, his children and family.'⁷⁶

In Dyer's reproach, we may detect the censure of one who put religious purity before the urgent search for remedy that those actually afflicted might feel. Yet more was involved than a simple choice between Job-like patience and pragmatic counter-magic. Dyer himself was active throughout the Lamb Inn affair in supplying medical advice and medicines to the children and the family. In particular, during the autumn months he had been giving regular doses of his 'hemlock pills' as well as Dr James's powder and noting their effects. On 6 November he recorded that one child had received 'amazing benefit' from the hemlock. In this respect, the mother's decision to turn to the cunning-woman might have hurt Dyer, not just for its religious 'folly', but also as a rejection of his (free) remedies in favour of another 'alternative' medicine. The previous month, on 16 October, Dyer had reported with disgust that another of his clients 'Poor Miss Roe, has now applied to an old woman in Bedminster (and therefore laid aside the Hemlock) who promises her help.' In yet another sense, the women involved in the case were pursuing a path independent of their male advisers, challenging not

only their understanding of what was happening in spiritual terms but also their preferred human solutions.

For Dyer, at least, there was in fact no sharp dichotomy between providing material remedies and offering spiritual solutions to afflictions. To some extent this was natural, given his metaphysical preference for vitalistic world-views in which the spiritual and material were interwoven, rather than sharply divided. At the same time, it reflected what he would no doubt have considered his Christian duty to bring healing in whatever form proved effective. In that sense his medical empiricism and his religious convictions were indivisible. The same was no doubt true of Durbin, who had been apprenticed to a leading apothecary and spent his life as a 'chymist', although it is not clear how far he pursued an active medical practice. Since Dyer too had begun training as an apothecary, but had given it up in favour of accountancy, preferring to give his medical services free of charge and of orthodox responsibility, it is tempting to see in both men an 'alternative' medical approach.

Yet, as I have argued elsewhere, this is misleading, if it implies the radical opposition to establishment medicine with which nineteenth-century models of alternative medicine have made us familiar. Dyer and his circle were not sharply cut off from orthodox medical men and often shared ideas and practices with them. Eighteenth-century medical men were themselves deeply influenced by empirical eclecticism and slow to adopt a model of professional and scientific monopoly to protect themselves from the likes of Dyer.⁷⁷ One reason for this may be that, while some doctors had a reputation as deists or materialists, many were active members of various denominations, from whom they often drew their patients. They thus found it necessary to empathise, at the least, with their patients' understanding of the meaning of their afflictions, and in many cases they may have shared those understandings. A number of them participated actively in the intellectual circles that I described earlier. This may help to explain why the responses to the Lamb Inn case did not contain, as might have been expected, confident claims to understand the episode in terms of natural philosophy or medical knowledge. Instead the clear lines of division lay in traditional religious and ideological areas – polarised around the concepts of fraud and enthusiasm on the one hand, and of Scriptural example and Sadduceeism on the other.

Ultimately then, although the notion of 'public infidelity' and 'private belief' captures part of what was going on, and something of the mood of men like Durbin and Dyer, it creates too neat a polarity. The public world still offered many cultural resources to justify the opinions of Dyer and his circle, if properly deployed. At the same time they were privately well aware of the contradictions and failings of their position. It is clear that, as events unfolded, they were viewed from many different perspectives by the different parties

involved, and that a simple dichotomy between 'believers' and 'sceptics' fails to do justice to the range of both convictions and doubts about what was happening and how best to react to it which could be felt by those involved.

This conclusion would undoubtedly be strengthened if we had more direct access to the mentalities of the women and children at the centre of the episode. I have suggested repeatedly that the men could not control the activities of the women and children as they wanted. It would be wrong to assume, however, that the women and children were not themselves struggling to control a sequence of events that none of them had fully anticipated or desired. It is not my intention here to attempt a reading of what was happening within the Giles household, but there were surely tensions between the female adults and children, both overtly over the children's possible manipulation of their afflictions and, if one chooses to read the material psychologically, in the rather sinister pattern of physical abuse by older women played out in the children's accounts of their sufferings. On the other hand, the two girls, aged eight and thirteen, were part of a family of eight children, with at least one younger sister.⁷⁸ None of these other children were afflicted, while a number of the physical episodes directly involved the nurse, the maid and several of the other adults.⁷⁹ As has been suggested for other possession cases, the children's behaviour reflected not only their own models of the supernatural, but also involved a constant negotiation with the (often conflicting) expectations of others: this process led to a series of crises, some followed by new manifestations of evil, others by apparent quiescence. For the women and children, at least, the opportunity to put a definitive end to the episode through the agency of the cunning-woman may, consciously or unconsciously, have been a blessed relief.

It was still possible, as I hope I have shown, to justify beliefs in witchcraft, even on enlightened principles. Yet the price to be paid for doing so, in terms of the spiritual priorities of those who might have sought to defend the reality of witchcraft, was increasingly one that did not seem worth paying. In this respect it is particularly telling to consider the testimony of John Wesley. Historians have often cited Wesley as the last of the believers in witchcraft, both in his practices of conversion (which often, especially in the early years, involved the apparent dispossession of the convert's body from demons), and in his intellectual determination to maintain what he saw as the Biblical and experiential fundamentals of God and Devil (which included some reality for witchcraft).⁸⁰ Some have rightly insisted that this was not, for Wesley at least, incompatible with being an Enlightenment empiricist and publicist *par excellence*.⁸¹ Wesley could be pragmatic about whether the 'discourse of spirits' would or would not forward his evangelistic mission in particular cases and with particular audiences. His comment on the Lamb Inn case, which leaves the verdict open and yet, in another sense, shuts the matter off, as something incapable of useful resolution to practical effect, deserves to end

this discussion: 'The facts are too glaring to be denied, but how are they to be accounted for? By natural or supernatural agency? Contend who list about this.'⁸²

Notes

- 1 Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, 1971), p. 570. For a historiographical perspective on Thomas's work see my introduction to Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester and Gareth Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 1–45 and Alan Macfarlane, 'Civility and the Decline of Magic', in Peter Burke, Brian Harrison and Paul Slack (eds), *Civil Histories* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 145–61; James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in England 1550–1750* (London, 1996), pp. 33, 211–302.
- 2 See, for example, Peter Hulme and Ludmilla Jordanova (eds), *Enlightenment and its Shadows* (London, 1990); George Rousseau (ed.), *The Languages of Psyche* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford, 1990); Margaret Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 1991); Roy Porter (ed.), *Medicine in the Enlightenment* (Amsterdam, 1995); W. E. Burns, *Age of Wonders: Politics, Prodigies and Providence in England 1657–1727* (Manchester, 2002). Three crucial contributions to this development in relation to witchcraft are Michael MacDonald, 'Religion, Social Change and Psychological Healing in England 1600–1800', in William Sheils (ed.), *The Church and Healing* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 101–25; David Harley, 'Mental Illness, Magical Medicine and the Devil in Northern England, 1650–1700', in Roger French and Andrew Wear (eds), *The Medical Revolution of the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 114–44; M. Hunter, 'Witchcraft Controversy and Free-Thought in Restoration England', in his *Science and the Shape of Orthodoxy* (Woodbridge, 1995), pp. 286–307.
- 3 For a European dimension see Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours* (London, 1996). For England see Sharpe, *Instruments*, and for case studies, Ronald Sawyer, "'Strangely Handled in All Her Lymes": Witchcraft and Healing in Jacobean England', *Journal of Social History* 22 (1988–89) 461–85; Annabel Gregory, 'Witchcraft, Politics and "Good Neighbourhood" in Early Seventeenth-Century Rye', *Past and Present* 133 (1991) 31–66; Michael MacDonald (ed.), *Witchcraft and Hysteria in Elizabethan London* (London, 1991); J. Swain, 'The Lancashire Witch Trials of 1612 and 1634 and the Economics of Witchcraft', *Northern History* 30 (1994) 64–85; Malcolm Gaskill, 'Witchcraft and Power in Early Modern England: The Case of Margaret Moore', in Jenny Kermod and Garthine Walker (eds), *Women, Crime and the Courts in Early Modern England* (London, 1994), pp. 125–45; Anne de Windt, 'Witchcraft and Conflicting Visions of the Ideal Village Community', *Journal of British Studies* 34 (1995) 427–63; James Sharpe, 'Disruption in the Well-Ordered Household: Age, Authority and Possessed Young People', in Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox and Stephen Hindle (eds), *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England* (London, 1996), pp. 187–212; Malcolm Gaskill, 'Witchcraft in Early Modern Kent', in Barry *et al.* *Witchcraft* pp. 257–87; G. Gilbert and I. Bunn, *A Trial of Witches* (London, 1997); R. Rapley, *A Case of Witchcraft: The Trial of Urbain Grandier* (Manchester, 1998); J. Sharpe, *The Bewitching of Anne Gunther* (London, 1999).
- 4 This approach has been well developed for England by a number of feminist historians and literary scholars. See Frances Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars* (Ithaca and London, 1994), pp. 171–236; Deborah Willis, *Malevolent Nurture: Witch-Hunting and Maternal Power in Early Modern England* (Ithaca and London, 1995); Diana Purkiss, *The Witch in History* (London, 1996) and 'Women's Stories of Witchcraft in Early Modern

- England' *Gender and History* 7 (1995), 408–32; M. H. Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft: Stories of Early English Witches* (London, 1999); Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts (eds), *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland* (Exeter, 2000). Historians are now following suit, for example: Peter Elmer, '“Saints or Sorcerers”: Quakerism, Demonology and the Decline of Witchcraft in Seventeenth-Century England', in Barry *et al.* *Witchcraft*, pp. 145–79; Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 1997); Malcolm Gaskill, *Crime and Mentalities in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2000) and Stuart Clark (ed.), *Languages of Witchcraft* (Basingstoke, 2001).
- 5 W. B. Carnochan, 'Witch-Hunting and Belief in 1751: The Case of Thomas Colley and Ruth Osborne', *Journal of Social History* 4 (1970–71) 389–403; Paul Muskett, 'A Late Instance of English Witchcraft: Some Questions Concerning Evidence', *Hertfordshire's Past* 48 (2001) 12–24. See also, P. J. Guskin, 'The Context of Witchcraft', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 15 (1981) 48–71; B. C. Luxton, 'William Jenkin, the Wizard of Cadoxton-juxta-Barry', *Morgannwg* 24 (1980) 31–59, and most significantly, Ian Bostridge, 'Witchcraft Repealed', in Barry *et al.* *Witchcraft*, pp. 309–34; Bostridge, *Witchcraft and its Transformations c. 1650–1750* (Oxford, 1997), and Owen Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture 1736–1951* (Manchester, 1999).
 - 6 Jonathan Barry, 'Piety and the Patient: Medicine and Religion in Eighteenth-Century Bristol', in Roy Porter (ed.), *Patients and Practitioners* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 145–75. In what follows I have not referenced background evidence cited in the earlier article. My arguments there have been developed further in David Shuttleton, 'Methodism and Dr George Cheyne's "More Enlightening Principles"', in Porter, *Medicine in the Enlightenment*, pp. 316–35.
 - 7 Bristol Reference Library, Bristol Collection (hereafter BCL), 20095.
 - 8 BCL, 20096. References in the text hereafter to Dyer's diary entries for 1762 refer to this volume, not the retrospective one, unless indicated.
 - 9 On this episode see Douglas Grant, *The Cock Lane Ghost* (London, 1965) and, for contemporary responses, *Gentleman's Magazine* 32 (1762) 43–4, 81–4, 339–40; *Annual Register* (1762) 142–7, and the discussions in A. Friedman (ed.), *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, 5 vols (Oxford, 1966), vol. 4, pp. 419–41 and D. Grant (ed.), *Poetical Works of Charles Churchill* (Oxford, 1956) on Churchill's poem 'The Ghost'. On 18 February Dyer notes that Durbin was asking whether the London case was witchcraft or a ghost. For newspapers as sources see O. Davies, 'Newspapers and Popular Belief in Witchcraft and Magic', *Journal of British Studies* 37 (1998) 139–65.
 - 10 *A Copy of a Letter sent to the Bishop of Gloucester from a Clergyman of the Church of England Living in Bristol* (two editions, Bristol and London, 1704); John Beaumont, *An Historical, Physiological and Theological Treatise of Spirits, Apparitions, Witchcraft and Other Magical Practices* (London, 1705), pp. 296–300; Geoffrey Nuttall (ed.), *Calendar of the Correspondence of Phillip Doddridge DD, 1702–51* (Historical Manuscript Commission, 1979), p. 258, no. 1273 (a letter to Doddridge dated 10 September 1747 with a copy certified as correct by Bedford in January 1740); BCL, 396 (mistakenly dated 1763); BCL, 10364; *Arminian Magazine* 5 (1782) 425–9; Ebenezer Sibly, *A Complete Illustration* (London, 1788), p. 1121. What is probably Bedford's own copy of his original letter, with minor differences from the printed version, is in Bristol Record Office, Temple Lc 7. For Bedford see Jonathan Barry, 'Hell upon Earth or the Language of the Playhouse', in Clark *Languages of Witchcraft*, pp. 139–58.
 - 11 The line of argument pursued here owes much to a distinguished line of analysis within the history of science. See Steven Shaplin, *A Social History of Truth* (Chicago, 1994), although Shaplin's privileging of 'gentility' as the accepted condition for credibility is unfortunate, not least for the analysis of urban culture. There is no

- intention to imply that 'public' and 'private' are unproblematic categories of analysis: for an excellent account of the issues involved see John Brewer, 'This, That and the Other: Public, Social and Private in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', in Dario Castiglione and Lesley Sharpe (eds), *Shifting the Boundaries* (Exeter, 1995), pp. 1–21.
- 12 Barry, 'Piety and the Patient'.
- 13 Dyer's diary for 24 February (for Eaton), 30 and 31 March and 10 April (for Dyer and Brown); Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 7.
- 14 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 32.
- 15 See Jonathan Barry, 'The Press and the Politics of Culture in Bristol 1660–1775', in Jeremy Black and Jeremy Gregory (eds), *Culture, Politics and Society in Britain 1660–1800* (Manchester, 1991), pp. 68–9.
- 16 There is probably an intended reference to the periodical *The Free Enquirer* (which ran from 17 October to 12 December 1761) by Peter Annet of the Robin Hood Society, which was condemned in 1762 as a blasphemous libel. The playwright Samuel Foote cashed in on both issues in his play *The Orators, in which is Introduced the Tryal of the Cock Lane Ghost* (Dublin, 1762), which contains a 'View of the Robin-Hood Society'.
- 17 Durbin, *Narrative*, pp. 24, 26.
- 18 Barry, 'Piety and the Patient', pp. 155, 169; Jonathan Barry, *Methodism and the Press in Bristol 1737–1775* (Wesley Historical Society, Bristol Branch, 1992).
- 19 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 3; here, as in all subsequent quotations, the italics are in the original.
- 20 Durbin, *Narrative*, pp. 5–6.
- 21 Durbin, *Narrative*, pp. 6–7.
- 22 With an introduction by Robert A. Gilbert (Leicester, 1981).
- 23 See Sharpe, *Instruments*, pp. 233, 273–5. Note also the comments of the Bristol Quaker James Gough in the preface to his *Select Lives of Foreigners Eminent in Piety* (Bristol, 1773), p. 13: 'Some things relating to sorcery and witchcraft, however well-attested at that time, will not easily obtain credit in the present age. I attribute them to the devices of those consummate impostors the Jesuits.' This is the more striking because of Gough's closeness to the Pietist position of Dyer and Durbin, for which see Barry, 'Piety and the Patient', p. 164, n. 43.
- 24 Durbin, *Narrative*, pp. 7–8. Italic in original.
- 25 Durbin, *Narrative*, pp. 4–5.
- 26 Durbin, *Narrative*, pp. 5–6. Despite the gendered emphasis on male witnesses here, the *Narrative* mentions a considerable number of female witnesses, including Durbin's sister (pp. 11, 50–2) and 'two ladies of the company' (p. 25).
- 27 For example, Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 22.
- 28 Barry, 'Piety and the Patient', pp. 161–2.
- 29 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 29. Dyer's diary identifies him as attending on 28 January and 6 February and as the clergyman involved on 10 February.
- 30 BCL, 4533 under 1762.
- 31 BCL, 22477 under 1761. Ironically, Catcott is best known for his championship of the authenticity of the Rowley forgeries of Thomas Chatterton.
- 32 BCL, 12196 under 1761. Another account, based on Durbin's narrative, can be found in BCL, 7956, fo. 272.
- 33 In 1788, the surgeon Samuel Norman, seeking to discredit the later 'possession' of George Lukins of Yatton near Bristol, refers to the Cock Lane ghost being discovered to be mercenary, but makes no mention of the Lamb Inn case, despite the fact that several of the participants had been connected with this case: S. Norman, *Authentic*

- Anecdotes of George Lukins* (Bristol, 1788), p. 15. On Lukins see Davies, *Witchcraft*, pp. 20–2.
- 34 Dyer's retrospective verdict was that the affair was 'at first unaccountable, at length imputed to diabolical magic or witchcraft' (BCL, 20095, 10 December 1761).
- 35 *Arminian Magazine* 20 (1797) 200–2, reprinting letter of 'H. D.' to John Wesley on 5 August 1743. Durbin, assuming it was him, described himself as then 'a student of philosophy for two years'; this would be about three years after his apothecary apprenticeship had ended. He had heard George Whitefield at the Baldwin Street religious society and then been given a copy of the Homilies by Wesley, after which he began to yearn for Christ. In his vision he had seen a very bright light arising from the side of a hill, which seemed to enlighten his whole soul; the enlightenment had lasted all the next day.
- 36 For the intellectual interests of the (Tory) Haynes family see Jonathan Barry, 'The History and Antiquities of the City of Bristol', *Angelaki* 1, 2 (1993–94) 57–8.
- 37 Eleanor Keate, *The Unfortunate Wife* (1779), described how she and her husband had been unable to sell a house outside Lawford's Gate, Bristol, for three years due to the 'mistaken notion' that it was haunted by the ghost of a man who had died there after living there thirty-six years. In 1754 they had to move in themselves to scotch the 'scandalous report' (p. 5).
- 38 See, for example, J. F. Nicholls and J. Taylor, *Bristol Past and Present*, 3 vols (Bristol, 1880–82), vol. 3, p. 196; John Latimer, *Annals of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* (Bristol, 1893), pp. 348–50. It was Giles's wife and her mother, Mrs Elmes, who were held responsible for the fraud in these later accounts, but this was perhaps a redirection of suspicion following Giles's death.
- 39 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 17.
- 40 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 49.
- 41 Barry, 'Piety and the Patient'. See also Jonathan Barry, 'Publicity and the Public Good: Presenting Medicine in Eighteenth-Century Bristol', in William Bynum and Roy Porter (eds), *Medical Fringe and Medical Orthodoxy 1750–1850* (London, 1987), pp. 29–39.
- 42 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 26
- 43 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 29.
- 44 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 28.
- 45 Durbin, *Narrative*, pp. 6–7.
- 46 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 18.
- 47 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 20.
- 48 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 27 (the translations here and below are those given in the footnotes to the *Narrative*).
- 49 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 29.
- 50 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 32.
- 51 *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 3 August 1765; Barry, 'Piety and the Patient', pp. 165–7.
- 52 For excellent guidance on the issues involved, see Clive Holmes, 'Popular Culture? Witches, Magistrates and Divines', in Steven Kaplan (ed.), *Understanding Popular Culture* (Berlin, New York and Amsterdam, 1984), pp. 85–111. On possible conflicts between male and female attitudes to the trials see also Clive Holmes, 'Women, Witnesses and Witches', *Past and Present* 140 (1993) 45–78 and James Sharpe, 'Women, Witchcraft and the Legal Process', in Kermode and Walker (eds), *Women, Crime and the Courts*, pp. 106–24.
- 53 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 17.
- 54 In Barry, 'Piety and the Patient', pp. 161–2, I contrasted Rouquet's willingness to act in this way with the refusal of the other Anglican clergy involved. I have since

discovered a suggestion (in Nicholls and Taylor, *Bristol Past and Present*, vol. 3, p. 196) that the Behmenist minister of St Werburgh's (where Rouquet was curate), Richard Symes, said prayers in the church for 'two children grievously tormented'. This was not, of course, the same as praying directly over the children, but even this act apparently caused great offence, with many people quitting the church in disgust. I have not been able to discover the original source for this statement.

- 55 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 17.
- 56 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 18.
- 57 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 19.
- 58 Durbin, *Narrative*, pp. 39–40. For counter-magic see Owen Davies, 'Healing Charms in Use in England and Wales 1700–1950', *Folklore* 107 (1996) 19–32.
- 59 Durbin, *Narrative*, pp. 54–5. See also Dyer's diary for 30 November and 7 December, discussed later.
- 60 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 39.
- 61 Durbin, *Narrative*, pp. 27, 41–2.
- 62 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 21.
- 63 Durbin, *Narrative*, pp. 51, 53.
- 64 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 54.
- 65 BCL, 20095 15 and 16 May 1762.
- 66 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 48.
- 67 *Sketchley's Bristol Directory* (Bristol, 1775), p. 51.
- 68 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 21.
- 69 Durbin refers to asking 'two Latin questions', but does not give them nor discuss the replies (Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 28).
- 70 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 29.
- 71 Durbin, *Narrative*, pp. 54–5.
- 72 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 24.
- 73 Barry, 'Piety and the Patient', pp. 174–5.
- 74 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 54. Italic in original.
- 75 Durbin, *Narrative*, p. 55. For cunning-folk see Owen Davies, *Cunning-Folk: Popular Magic in English History* (London, 2003).
- 76 BCL, 20095 7 December 1962.
- 77 Barry, 'Piety and the Patient', pp. 170–5; Barry, 'Publicity and Public Good'.
- 78 Durbin, *Narrative*, pp. 26–7, 48.
- 79 Durbin, *Narrative*, pp. 14, 17, 23, 40, 45, 53.
- 80 See, for example, Sharpe, *Instruments*, pp. 253–5.
- 81 See Henry Rack, 'Doctors, Demons and Early Methodist Healing', in Sheils, *Church and Healing*, pp. 135–52; MacDonald, 'Religion, Social Change and Psychological Healing'; Henry Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London, 1989), pp. 387–8, 431–6. See also Owen Davies, 'Methodism, the Clergy, and the Popular Belief in Witchcraft and Magic', *History* 82 (1997) 252–65.
- 82 W. R. Ward and R. P. Heitzenrater (eds), *The Works of John Wesley: vol. 21: Journals and Diaries IV (1755–65)* (Nashville, 1992), p. 352 (27 March 1762). I am most grateful to David Harley, Michael MacDonald and above all the late Roy Porter for the inspiration they have offered in developing this subject and to the responses to this paper offered by those attending the conference on 'Healing, Magic and Belief in Europe, Fifteenth-Twentieth Centuries' at Zeist, the Netherlands, in September 1994 and by students on the MA course in the History and Literature of Witchcraft at the University of Exeter.