

# Abiezer Coppe and the well-favoured Harlot: The Ranters and the English Revolution

J. C. DAVIS

Historians in search of the English Revolution of the seventeenth century have come, in recent times, to seek it not amongst those well-known heroes of old, but amongst the obscure and lowly. John Hampden, Oliver Cromwell and John Milton are swept aside as conservative and ultimately repressive. The authentic voice of revolution comes from other less famous mouths: Jacob Bau-thumley, George Foster, Laurence Clarkson and, perhaps, Richard Coppin. There is an ironic nicety about this setting at nought of the things that are by those that are not, which would have appealed to Abiezer Coppe and his alleged Ranter colleagues.

For Coppe, as for other seventeenth century radicals, we have to stitch together the appearance of biographical understanding from scattered scraps of information. Coppe's appearance is unknown to us; his life obscure, except for a flurry of notoriety in 1650-51.<sup>1</sup> He was born in Warwick on 30 May, 1619. At the age of seventeen, he went up to All Souls, Oxford, but soon transferred to Merton College. Apparently, in Oxford, he showed Presbyterian leanings, but he left the university without a degree on the outbreak of civil war in 1642. In the mid-1640s he reappears as a Baptist and preacher to the garrison at Compton House in Warwickshire. Richard Baxter, then lecturer to the Coventry garrison, thought him the most competent and effective Baptist preacher in the region of Warwickshire, Oxfordshire and Worcestershire. However, despite their patronage by some sections of the army, Baptists were vulnerable to persecution and Coppe is reported, at this time, as imprisoned for fourteen weeks.

In 1649 he broke with the Baptists, being ejected from their London meetings. His repudiation of the formalism of the gathered churches springs from this time. On 4 January 1650, his *A Fiery Flying Roll* appeared in the booksellers. Four days later, the Council of State issued a warrant for his arrest on the curiously phrased charge of writing 'some blasphemous truths'.<sup>2</sup> He was arrested and imprisoned in Warwick. On 1 February, a Friday, the usual day on which the House devoted itself to religious issues, the Rump condemned *A Fiery Flying Roll*. All copies were to be seized and destroyed. Specimens were to be burned by the hangman in several