

JOHN DARRELL — EXORCIST

By R. A. MARCHANT

WE live in days of high-powered propaganda and of great advertising campaigns, and are apt to think of such things as being devices of the modern world. Propaganda has, however, existed at least since the earliest days of printing, and in England there have perhaps been no more successful exponents of its techniques than the preachers and politicians who formed the religious and parliamentary opposition to Elizabeth I and the first two Stuart kings. The tremendous amount of literature manufactured by this opposition produced its effect both in its own day and also later, for it has been too often taken at its face value and not recognised for what it is, blatant propaganda, neither more true nor more reliable than any other examples of its kind.

This may seem a strange introduction to an account of an unfortunate Puritan minister, but in fact John Darrell became caught up in one of the few successful efforts of the authorities at counter-propaganda. Their first had been in 1591 when Hacket, Arthington and Copinger had been executed for heresy. Hacket had announced that he was a heavenly being, sent to prepare the way for the Messiah by inaugurating a new Church—the organization of which bore a resemblance to that advocated by the Presbyterians. Although the men were obviously fanatics, that did not prevent the leading church lawyer of the time, Richard Cosin, from writing a book *Conspiracie for Pretended Reformation viz. Presbyteriall Dicipline* (1592) associating them and their policies with the orthodox Puritans. The second success of the authorities' counter-propaganda was more legitimate, for they were able this time to associate genuinely the Puritan spiritual exercises of prayer and fasting with fraudulent exorcising of the devil.

The Puritans often accepted the literal meaning of their Bible, so when they read that demon-possession could be cured by nothing save prayer and fasting (Mark ix, 29), some of them began to look around for a devil or two to exorcise by

these holy means. John Darrell was by no means the only, albeit the most famous, of these Puritan exorcists. He was evidently of yeoman stock and came from the locality of Mansfield, being born about 1562. He was educated at Queens' College, Cambridge, and the Inns of Court. Perhaps he had to break off his legal education because of the death of his father, for he returned to Mansfield, where he farmed some leasehold land. There, in 1586, when he was no more than twenty-four years old, he held an exercise of prayer and fasting to remove a devil from Catherine Wright, a girl who had been brought to him by the Puritan, Thomas Beckingham, Rector of Bilsthorpe. For Beckingham to have known about him, shows that he must have already acquired some reputation, and his efforts proved successful. The distasteful aspect of the affair was that during the process of exorcism the girl accused one Margaret Roper of having sent a legion of fiends into her. The poor woman was arrested, but the magistrate who examined the case, Godfrey Foljambe, found her innocent and threatened Darrell with prison for his part in the matter. It was afterwards remarked that he never exorcised again until after Foljambe's death in 1595.

Sometime after the exorcism of Wright, Darrell was ordained. He spent some time at Bulwell, but in 1592 sold his leaseholds and bought a small farm at Ashby-de-la-Zouche. Here he was an associate of the Vicar of the town, Arthur Hildersham, one of the most famous Puritans of his day. Darrell was evidently a zealous attender at the monthly exercises of preaching which the Puritans held in various places, as he is recorded as attending those at Ashby, Burton-on-Trent, Appleby and Packington. He began his climb to fame in 1596 when he exorcised Thomas Darling of Burton-on-Trent. Here again the unsavoury accusation of witchcraft was present, Alice Goodrich being convicted of bewitching Darling. She was not executed but died whilst in prison. Darrell's reputation was further enhanced by his success in exorcising a family in Lancashire during the next year.

It was at this juncture that an apprentice in Nottingham, William Somers, began to have fits, and soon it was rumoured that these fits were no less than possession by the devil.

The readiness with which the populace accepted this explanation, and afterwards flocked to hear Darrell preach on the subject, is an adequate commentary on the way in which the average mind was still living in the world inhabited by spirits and demons, typical of the Middle Ages. Not unnaturally, having a successful exorcist close at hand, and with the additional connection that Darrell's sister-in-law urged his powers, letters were sent to him to enlist his aid. From the letters, and the report of the messenger who brought them, he readily diagnosed devil-possession and prescribed prayer and fasting, but he did not himself come to Nottingham until formally requested by the Mayor, Peter Clarke.

The fits were still continuing, rendering Somers unconscious, turning him a blueish colour and causing incoherent noises to proceed from the region of his stomach. These, and similar symptoms reported in other cases, show that usually, if not always, the 'devil-possessed' were epileptics. The news of the possession rapidly spread throughout the city, and crowds tended to gather outside the house where the boy lived. The more privileged were allowed into the house to wait to see him in one of his fits. Darrell arrived on the scene on the 5th November 1597. He had acquired sufficient confidence in his abilities to be able to wait until he had received an official summons, and in his prophetic insight to announce after his first meeting with the boy, that the devil had been allowed to possess Somers because of the sins of the city and of his parents. We can see now that this was the climax of Darrell's career; had he been successful in exorcising Somers, he would have had an assured reputation which would have secured an important appointment for him and seen him through any subsequent failures. As it was he over-reached himself.

Nevertheless for the moment Darrell carried all before him. The Vicar of St. Mary's, Robert Alridge, in a sermon announced that God had sent the devil into Somers and had used Darrell to interpret the fact rightly in order to reprove Nottingham for its sins. Meanwhile the exorcist had appointed a day of prayer and fasting to speed the devil on his way, and at the appointed time about one hundred and fifty persons gathered together under Darrell's leadership, much affected by his message, frequently shouting "Lord have mercy on us".

The result came as predicted, Somers had a temporary relief from fits, and in the enthusiasm Darrell was elected public preacher at St. Mary's.

The failure of Darrell to turn his triumph to good effect demonstrated that his abilities were mediocre. He had only one talent—exorcism, and only one message—that devil-possession was caused by sin. These limitations were in the end fatal to his career. Unfortunately also, there were no other devils in the vicinity, so he had to make do with that of Somers, a dependence which placed him to some extent at the mercy of the lad. As one of the principal charges later made against Darrell was that he was in collusion with Somers, the latter producing his fits to order, it is necessary to state here that the only evidence adduced in support was Somers' own testimony. The evidence clearly shows that Darrell talked too much while the lad was present—describing the future course of the possession, the symptoms which would appear, and the like. It was all too easy for the boy, eagerly listening to what was to befall him, to simulate these symptoms. He had every incentive to do so, it was in his interest to remain in idleness in a sick room, the chief attraction of the town, with collections being made for him, rather than to be sent back to his work.

So it came about that when Darrell predicted that the lad would be re-possessed, the fits obligingly began again. At this stage one becomes uncertain whether they were genuine or imitation, certainly newcomers applied the old tests, such as sticking pins in the unconscious form, without raising any suspicion. On other occasions, however, it was noted that the fit suddenly ended when Somers felt the need to obey the calls of nature. Shortly after the fits recommenced, Darrell, in Somers' presence, told visitors how that Darling and one of those he had exorcised in Lancashire had claimed to discover witches (the evidence suggests that the latter at least had done this *before* Darrell appeared on the scene). The inevitable happened. Before long Somers had fits during which he would call for a woman, screech when she was approaching, lie as still as death while she was present, and then cry out again as she was leaving.

It says much for the prestige enjoyed both by Darrell and by Somers' devil, that the Mayor and aldermen felt obliged to have the women arrested and interrogated, thirteen in all, even though one of them, Alice Freeman, was the niece of an alderman. Nothing could be found against them and all but two were released. Belief in witches was gradually dying among the educated classes, and it was these incidents of witch-hunting—in which Darrell played no direct part—which began the opposition to him. It must be admitted that he was placed in an awkward situation. He could not deny the validity of the witch-hunt, yet by supporting it he was losing the most influential of his following. He returned to describing in his sermons, with almost scientific precision, the workings of the devil, and how that Somers' possession was the result of the town's sins. (The Vicar alleged later that by this time he had grown weary of the frequent denunciations of Nottingham's wickedness—it was no worse than anywhere else).

Somers' fits recommenced in January 1598. The following month the opposition to Darrell secured the temporary removal of the boy from the care of his friends to the work-house, during which time he made a confession that his fits were fraudulent, an admission that was well publicised. The strife between the pro-Darrell and anti-Darrell parties rose to a new level, rival preachers thundered from their respective pulpits. It was realised that the only solution was an official investigation. Darrell's supporters applied to the Archbishop of York, Matthew Hutton, well known for his Puritan sympathies; the opposition (led by John Walton, Archdeacon of Derby) sought the aid of the Archbishop of Canterbury and of the High Commission Court at London.

Hutton's commission of inquiry was first on the scene. It contained men of repute, John Thorold, High Sheriff, Sir John Byron, Walton himself, the Archdeacon's Official, the Mayor, together with aldermen and clergymen. It formally met in Nottingham on 20th March and examined seventeen witnesses. Most important of all was the evidence of Somers himself. Now back under the influence of his friends, he had returned to having fits, and before the commissioners he had another one. Pins were stuck into him but he remained senseless, and

it may well have been a genuine fit, brought about by nervousness at the occasion. Needless to say, the commissioners reported that the possession was genuine, but the report may not have been wholly favourable for a month later Darrell was called to York and had his preacher's licence revoked.

In the meantime, Darrell planned a final act of exorcism which would effectively end Somers' activities and hence his ability to do and say inconvenient things. He announced another day of prayer and fasting to exorcise the devil which possessed the boy, beyond possibility of re-possession. Great importance was attached to the enterprise, for it was intended to establish beyond doubt both the competence and probity of the exorist. The anxiety of the pro-Darrell party was so great that Mrs. Alridge visited Somers, urged him to stick to the truth, and promised him that if he did so he would be given a position in the service of Mr. Bolton, Sir John Byron's chaplain, and afterwards in the employment of the knight's grandchildren. Mr. Alridge, using the stick rather than the carrot, told him to keep to his evidence before the commissioners or else he deserved to be severely punished.

Unfortunately for Darrell, the opposition party forestalled his last bid for victory by securing the co-operation of Sir Edmund Anderson, Lord Justice of the Common Pleas, who happened to be in Nottingham at that time for the Assizes. The Lord Justice personally examined Somers (31st March) whereupon the unfortunate apprentice once more admitted that he was a fraud. He was now permanently removed from the influence of his friends and eventually sent to London as the chief witness for the prosecution. The powerful influence of the Lord Justice was now added to that of the Archdeacon of Derby; the High Commission Court at London, under the dominance of the Puritans' arch-enemy, Bishop Bancroft, summoned Darrell before them and imprisoned him. He was eventually sentenced to degradation from his orders, and evidently, after a term of imprisonment, released.

The prosecution of Darrell at London was a formidable piece of official activity. The Court named a new commission to take evidence, comprising Peter Clarke and other aldermen, William Gregory, the Town Clerk and Samuel Harsnet,

Bancroft's chaplain. The original witnesses of the Archbishop of York's commission were re-examined. Evidently perplexed by the turn events had taken, they were rather more critical of Darrell than before, but all through their evidence it is impossible to discover any statement reflecting on the probity of Darrell, though they had mostly become disillusioned of Somers. The names of the witnesses show how thoroughly the Puritan party had become implicated in Darrell's activities. There were John Brinsley, Hildersham's understudy at Ashby-de-la-Zouche, Richard Bernard, Vicar of Worksop, Nicholas Hallam, Rector of Trowell, Robert Evington, Rector of Normanton-on-Soar and William Alred, Rector of Colwick, among others. All these had crowded around Somers' bed and assisted Darrell's exercises.

In addition to the commission's activities, the Court brought to London not only Somers, but also Darling and others from Burton-on-Trent. Darling's evidence was not conclusive and it is clear that the case rested principally upon the fraudulence or otherwise of Somers' exorcism. Somers admitted to having had previous arrangements with Darrell to have fits to his instructions, but of course this part of his testimony was quite uncollaborated. Darling admitted only that he had spent a short time alone with Darrell. Somers by his own showing admitted that he had acted and testified according to the wishes of those who were protecting him at any one time, and must be dismissed as a thoroughly unreliable witness.

The case was "written up" for the general public by Samuel Harsnet. He used the evidence of Somers and Darling to prove Darrell a fraud, and also used the evidence of the seventeen witnesses to the same purpose. He had to be clever, because in order to use this evidence he could not afford to blacken the character of the witnesses. In fact, he never directly attacked the Puritans at all. It was sufficient for his purpose to damn Darrell and to let the world draw its own inference about the soundness of the beliefs of his associates. Actually, there were Puritans who themselves attacked him—after he had landed himself in prison—doubtless scenting the discredit which his activities would bring on the whole movement for further reformation in the Church of England. The way in which the prosecution of Darrell

had repercussions among the Puritans can be judged by the fact that William Bradshaw, then a Fellow of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, later styled the "Father of the Independents", smuggled into that town a parcel of the two books which the exorcist had written in prison in his defence. These were duly circulated, but being traced to Bradshaw he was summoned before the High Commission and censured. Some members of the Puritan party never surrendered a belief in devil-possession or its exorcism by prayer and fasting. Stanley Gower, in his life of Richard Rothwell, described how Rothwell exorcised himself and how he and various 'godly ministers', particularly the Puritans Richard Bernard and Henry Langley, Rector of Treswell, helped to exorcise John Fox who lived near Nottingham (c. 1612).

What little else is known of John Darrell may be told briefly. He was evidently released from prison after his degradation, probably about 1601. He returned to his haunts near Mansfield and doubtless resumed farming. He continued to mix in Puritan circles and knew personally some of those who later separated from the Church of England, such as John Smyth and John Robinson and their congregation around Scrooby. He even seems to have contemplated becoming a Separatist himself (he and his family had not received Communion in 1607), but changed his mind and began to preach instead. The latter activity was short-lived, for the arch-deacon's court was at that time stamping out unlicensed preaching. Darrell's swan song was *A Treatise of the Church, Written against them of the Separation commonly called Brownists* (London, 1617). Whether this attempt to commend himself to orthodoxy produced any result, we do not know, neither have we any further information about him.

Samuel Harsnet and his superiors found the exposure of Darrell such a good stick with which to beat the Puritans that a few years later they attempted to do the same with the Roman Catholics. *A Declaration of egregious Popish Impostures under the pretence of casting out of devils. Practised by Edmunds alias Weston a Jesuit, and Divers Romish Priests Whereunto are annexed the Copies of the Confessions and Examinations of the parties themselves which were pretended to be possessed, and dispossessed: taken upon oath, before the high Commissioners, for causes*

Ecclesiasticall (London 1604) was written by Harsnet after his previous pattern. Darrell's escapade was enshrined in Canon LXXVII of 1603 which prohibited exorcism without the licence of the bishop of the diocese. It may be doubted, however, whether the anti-Darrell party in Nottingham was primarily motivated by the anti-Puritanism of the High Commission. Private exercises to remove devils were one thing, but witch-hunting was quite another and responsible men could not allow it. Further, with very inadequate means for keeping order, the civic authorities were perpetually on their guard against anything that might create mobs inflamed by excitement, liable to get out of hand. Religious men themselves must have been upset by the way party strife was invading the pulpit. All in all, the episode of Darrell is an interesting side-light on the popular and religious beliefs of the time, but also as showing that the more rational approach of the modern world was gradually superseding the old beliefs in devils and witches.

AUTHORITIES

Detailed references have not been given in the text, but all the statements contained therein are based on the following works :

- A Discovery of the Fraudulent practises of John Darrell, B.A.* by S.H. (1599).
- An Apologie or Defence of the Possession of Wm. Sommers* (n.d.) [By Darrell].
- A Briefe Narration of the possession, dispossession and repossession of Wm. Sommers, and of some proceedings against Mr. John Dorrell, preacher* (1598). [By Darrell].
- A Briefe Apologie proving the possession of Wm. Sommers* (1599). [By Darrell].
- A Detection of that . . . discourse of Samuel Harsnett* (1600). [By Darrell].
- A Treatise of the Church* (1617). [By Darrell].
- Diallogical Discourses of Spirits and Devils and A Summarie Answer to al the Material points in any of Master Darel his bookes* (both 1601), by John Deacon and John Walker.
- A Martyrologie* (1652), by Samuel Clarke, contains Thomas Gataker's *Life of William Bradshaw*.
- A General Martyrologie* (1651) by Samuel Clarke, contains Stanley Gower's *Life of Richard Rothwell*.

Secondary authorities :

- Cooper's *Athenae Cantabrigienses*.
- Dictionary of National Biography*.
- The Puritans and the Church Courts* (1960), by R. A. Marchant.