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'John Duncalf the Man that Did Rott Both Hands & Leggs': Chronicle of a Staffordshire Death Retold in the Long Eighteenth Century

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ABSTRACT

In 1677 John Duncalf, a Staffordshire labourer, fell ill after falsely swearing that he had not stolen a bible. He was visited by droves as he lay helpless, the flesh of his legs and arms mysteriously rotting away until they dropped off and he died. His suffering and death were publicized and debated, and his case was recirculated throughout the eighteenth century. This article analyses the different constructions placed upon his death, showing how there was an anti-atheist Duncalf; a Duncalf for church comprehension; a medicalized Duncalf; a Duncalf the curiosity; a Staffordshire Duncalf; an anti-papist Duncalf; and a Duncalf who was more palatable to Catholics; a Duncalf for the elites; and a Duncalf for the poor; and a Methodist Duncalf. The persistence across the long eighteenth century of a story often told as a Providential warning against swearing allows for some reconsideration of arguments about secularization and disenchantment.

KEYWORDS

Ars moriendi; contested memories; religious conformity; religious nonconformity; methodism; Staffordshire; Providence

In the spring and early summer of 1677, a Staffordshire labourer, John Duncalf, became a wonder to excite the curious, visited by hundreds if not thousands as he lay helpless and dying in the south Staffordshire parish of Kingswinford, the flesh of his legs and hands mysteriously rotting away until his limbs dropped off before his death on 21 June. Like the people of Restoration England who came to gaze at the unfortunate Duncalf, historians have shown a particular fascination with curiosities and wonders, the strange, the troubling, and the downright disgusting, often using them to open a window on a pre-industrial world that seems alien to modern eyes. Typically, such studies are more interested in the immediate moment of the bizarre occurrence – tales of women giving birth to cats or rabbits, apprentices torturing animals, and notorious imposture – than in the after-history of later memory,¹ fuelling the claim that

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¹For example, D. Cressy, *Agnes Bowker's Cat: Travesties and Transgressions in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); K. Harvey, *The Impostress Rabbit Breeder: Mary Toft and Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); R. Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (London: Allen Lane, 1984); N. Z. Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1983). A rare example that considers memory is J. Shaw, 'Mary Toft, Religion and National Memory in Eighteenth-Century England', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 34, 3 (2009), 321–38.

microhistories often fail to address questions of historical change.² If such studies do look beyond the immediate historical context, it is typically to yoke them, sometimes teleologically, to grand narratives of modernization, secularization and rationalization, and the separation of elite and popular cultures.³ Against the microscopic, small-scale studies, the historiography of death offers the grand, sweeping scale of the foundational texts of Philippe Ariès, and in particular his claim that a ‘tame death’, where the dying man was master of his own end, was (though not unchallenged or unchanging) the structuring paradigm for a millennium in pre-industrial western Europe. Furthermore, Ariès argued that, from the later middle ages, ideals of a tamed death were overlain, if not superseded, by an ever greater focus on the dying individual and the family, which he called ‘One’s Own Death’ and ‘Thy Death’.⁴ His much criticized but still highly influential models, in prioritizing individual and family control, are socially determined, for they depend on the little-examined assumption that the dying had the social and cultural capital to exercise some control over their own end. That may have been the case for many of the elites and even middling sorts of the early modern world, but this did not extend to the vast bulk of the poor and powerless, like John Duncalf. His death, moreover, suggests an aspect of dying that little concerned Ariès, whose focus was, as reflected in the English title of his *magnum opus*, the very moment of an earthly end, ‘the hour of our death’; that the dead might have an afterlife not in the eternal realms of heaven and hell but in memory, and not just in the commemoration of the dead, lay outside his concerns. The aim of this article, then, is to explore who controlled the memory of death, and consider what the many retellings of the death of one humble Staffordshire labourer for more than a century after his passing might offer to the much larger questions of changes across the long eighteenth century from the 1670s to the early 1800s, particularly debates about secularization, disenchantment, and a decline or persistence in beliefs about Providence and miracles.

John Duncalf’s death was set and foretold by the details of his short and humble life. A few facts can be established, mostly from the particulars published as he lay dying and shortly thereafter in a range of tracts whose writers, as we shall see, sought to claim his end for their own moral and didactic purposes. John was born into a poor family in Codsall, a small agricultural community in south-west Staffordshire, about the year 1655. His parents, Joan and Richard, died in 1664 and 1669 respectively, leaving behind them ‘many Children, and but slender provision for them’, though the Codsall parish

²B. Gregory, ‘Is Small Beautiful? Microhistory and the History of Everyday Life’, *History & Theory*, 38, 1 (1999), 100–110; J. de Vries, ‘Playing with Scales: The Global and the Micro, the Macro and the Nano’, *Past & Present*, 242, issue supplement 14 (2019), 23–36.

³K. Park and L. Daston, ‘Unnatural Conceptions: The Study of Monsters in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France and England’, *Past & Present*, 92, 1 (1981), 20–54; K. Park and L. Daston, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998); L. Lunger Knoppers and J. B. Landes, eds., *Monstrous Bodies/Political Monstrosities* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); K. Jillings, ‘Monstrosity as Spectacle: The Two Inseparable Brothers’ European Tour of the 1630s and 1640s’, *Popular Entertainment Studies*, 2, 1 (2011), 54–68.

⁴P. Ariès, *Western Attitudes Towards Death from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); P. Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death* (New York: Vintage, 1981).

register, which has a long gap between 1642 and 1657, records only John's younger brother Samuel, born in 1658, and Thomas, born in 1664 and buried the following year.⁵ John Duncalf must have had some elementary schooling, for he could read and write, but nothing more is known of him until early in 1673 when he was bound apprentice to Thomas Gibbons, a wheelwright in Kingswinford, 10 miles to the south on the border with Worcestershire.⁶ Kingswinford was a proto-industrial community of around 1,200 souls including glass-workers and coal-miners, and especially poor metalworkers, particularly nailers, but with some more skilled and wealthier trades such as scythe- and lock-making.⁷ Duncalf did not prosper, and in October 1675 he and a fellow apprentice were sent to the house of correction for stealing nails and bar ends from Gibbons. After only a week, however, both of them falling (or as was later suggested, feigning) sick, they were released. Neither Duncalf nor Gibbons were eager to continue his apprenticeship, so he was released on payment of £2. He left Kingswinford but remained in south Staffordshire, supporting himself by petty theft, especially, he later confessed, stealing bibles, since they found ready buyers.⁸ On 6 January 1677, perhaps hoping for greater charity on the feast of Twelfth Night, he begged food and drink from Humphrey and Margaret Babb of Grange Mill near Wolverhampton, where he was known to the household. While the drink was being fetched, he stole a bible which he soon sold for three shillings to John Downings's maid at neighbouring Heath Forge. Margaret Babb shortly learned of the whereabouts of her stolen bible and bought it back. Those acquainted with Duncalf, such as Henry Evans of Himley, quickly suspected the ne'er-do-well former apprentice, but Duncalf vigorously protested his innocence and continued his itinerant life, finding employment in Dudley with a joiner, Thomas Osborn, in the middle of February. After only two weeks, however, he became too ill to work, and quitting the town on Shrove Tuesday, 27 February, he headed north, in the direction of Codsall. He later said that he was going 'towards my acquaintance', but his childhood home may have had another attraction, a sulphur spring renowned for the treatment of leprosy and other skin complaints, for by then, in addition to an ague or fever, the skin at his wrists had begun to turn black.⁹ He got no further than Perton (in Tettenhall parish), 10 miles from Dudley but 3 miles short of Codsall, where he collapsed in a barn. Found after two days he was kept at the charge of Tettenhall parish for about four weeks until, at the next monthly meeting of the justices of the peace, his legal settlement was determined to be Kingswinford. He was carried there on 28 March and placed in the care of John

⁵[H.R. Thomas, ed.], *Codsall Parish Register 1587–1843* (Willenhall: Staffordshire Parish Register Society, 1963), pp. 60–1, 68, 72, 77; J. Illingworth, *A Just Narrative, or, Account of the Man whose Hands and Legs Rotted off* (London, 1678), pp. 1, 11 (the latter noting that Duncalf was 'about twenty two years of age' when he died in June 1677); all page references to the work are to this octavo edition. Richard Duncalf was too poor to pay the hearth tax in Codsall in 1665: E. Grogan, ed., 'Hearth Tax: Seisdon Hundred', *Collections for a History of Staffordshire* (William Salt Archaeological Society, 2nd series, 1923), p. 76.

⁶Illingworth, *Just Narrative*, pp. 1–2.

⁷J. Beach, ed., *Registers of the Church of St. Mary, Kingswinford ... 1603–1704* (Kingswinford: Birmingham and Midland Society for Genealogy and Heraldry, 1984), pp. 105–23; P. Chandler, 'Kingswinford in the Later Seventeenth Century' (transcript in Dudley Archives (DA), LD 942.4 KIN); D. Dudley, *Metallum Martis* (London, 1665), p. 5.

⁸Illingworth, *Just Narrative*, pp. 1–3.

⁹Illingworth, *Just Narrative*, p. 4; R. Plot, *The Natural History of Stafford-shire* (Oxford: printed at the theatre, 1686), pp. 101–2.

Bennet at Wall Heath, a small hamlet on the north side of Kingswinford that lay along the main north-south road through the parish.¹⁰

So far there is nothing remarkable in the sad story of John Duncalf. His experience is doubtless typical of many other nameless youths from a poor background: the early death of his parents; a failed apprenticeship leading to a masterless and itinerant life; making do in the economy of makeshifts where the absence of kin networks and lack of access to formal charity tipped him into petty criminality; encounters with justices of the peace and overseers of the poor.¹¹ His story is similar to those of the youths, vagrants, and masterless known through the work of others.¹² Although Duncalf had left his home parish, he had not gone far, typical of the pattern of short-distance mobility found in later periods in the research of Colin Pooley and Joan Turnbull (and unlike the longer-distance migration of ‘rogues’ and ‘vagabonds’ who stalked the early modern imagination).¹³ His life was defined by the proto-industrial, coal- and iron-working area of south Staffordshire and north Worcestershire between Wolverhampton, Dudley, and Stourbridge, what would later be known as the Black Country.¹⁴ Life in the area probably bore many resemblances to that in another (and better studied) industrializing area in a similar period, Whickham in the Durham coalfield.¹⁵ Parts of Duncalf’s life typify the experiences available in this corner of the midlands: a rapidly expanding population drawn in by the opportunities of employment in an area of heath and forest, squatting on common lands, particularly Pensnett Chase on the eastern side of Kingswinford parish, where the agent of Lord Ward, the lord of the manor, permitted renting a hovel at an annual lease.¹⁶ Despite the shifting population, Duncalf’s experience suggests the poor were not faceless. He was known and readily recognized; perhaps a labourer in constant search of short-term work and needing the informal charity of neighbours had to rely on networks of acquaintances for survival. Duncalf’s predilection for stealing bibles, recognizing that ‘they would soonest be bought by others’,¹⁷ also suggests a thriving black market among both the middling sort and the poor. It is noteworthy that not only did Duncalf sell the Babbs’ bible to a local maid, but also that the price, three shillings, was a significant sum, at least half a week’s wages for a male labourer like Duncalf and considerably more for a female servant.¹⁸ This suggests a local demand for bibles (and possibly books in general) greater than that revealed in probate inventories, the most commonly used source for book ownership: only two of the many inventories from the neighbouring

¹⁰Illingworth, *Just Narrative*, pp. 4–5.

¹¹S. King and A. Tomkins, eds., *The Poor in England, 1700–1850: An Economy of Makeshifts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

¹²P. Griffiths, *Youth and Authority: Formative Experiences in England, 1560–1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), esp. ch. 7; D. Hitchcock, *Vagrancy in English Culture and Society, 1650–1750* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); A. L. Beier, *Masterless Men: The Vagrancy Problem in England 1560–1640* (London: Methuen, 1987).

¹³C. Pooley and J. Turnbull, ‘Migration and Mobility in Britain from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Centuries’, *Local Population Studies*, 57 (1996), 50–71; C. Pooley and J. Turnbull, ‘Leaving Home: The Experience of Migration from the Parental Home in Britain Since c. 1770’, *Journal of Family History*, 22, 4 (1997), 390–424.

¹⁴M. Rowlands, *Masters and Men in the West Midland Metalware Trades Before the Industrial Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975).

¹⁵D. Levine and K. Wrightson, *The Making of an Industrial Society: Whickham 1560–1765* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

¹⁶DA, DE/3/5/1/25; John Ogilby, *Intinerarium Angliae* (London, 1675), London to Shrewsbury.

¹⁷Illingworth, *Just Narrative*, p. 3.

¹⁸D. Woodward, ‘The Determination of Wage Rates in the Early Modern North of England’, *Economic History Review*, new series, 47, 1 (1994), 22–43.

manor of Sedgley between 1673 and 1691 record books.¹⁹ It does, however, bear out Richard Baxter's claim about the religiosity of the poor nailers and other labourers around Dudley who would 'not only crowd the Church as full as ever I saw any in London, but also hand upon the Windows, and the Leads without' in order to hear him preach, and it lends support to Eamon Duffy's argument that we should be wary of dismissing the poor as indifferent to orthodox Protestantism.²⁰

Duncalf's protestations of innocence, laced round with an oath 'That his Hands might rot off if he stole it',²¹ were entirely conventional. Similar curses occur with sufficient frequency in print and on stage to suggest that 'may my hands rot off' (as Shakespeare rendered it) was a common oath in early-modern England.²² It was given power by the many stories of the wicked having their bodies rot that filled the literature of divine vengeance: Thomas Beard's famous collection of instructive ends included at least eight, from King Herod to Bishop Stephen Gardiner.²³ As John Spurr has argued, oaths were both solemn and negotiable; part of the crux of Duncalf's story was that he intended his oath only to deceive, but those who publicized his agonizing death wanted to ensure that oaths were regarded as inviolable and buttressed with divine oversight.²⁴

It is not his typicality that made John Duncalf notorious in late seventeenth-century England, but what happened after his oath denying the theft. The flesh of his hands and his legs below his knees began to rot. At first the skin at his wrists and knees rose in great and agonizing welts; then to break and run with foul-smelling white pus. Towards the end of April maggots emerged from his decaying flesh as if from a corpse; to protect his wounds they were wrapped in dock- or mullein-leaves. Lice and other vermin filled his clothes; his head was shaved to prevent further infestation. By the second week of May both his lower legs below the knee had fallen off and his right hand, attached to his forearm only by a ligament, was amputated; his left hand continued to decay and wither, and was cut off shortly thereafter. The stumps of his limbs carried on weeping putrid matter.²⁵

The curious flocked in their droves to see Duncalf. James Illingworth, one of several clergymen who visited him, reported 'not only many hundreds' of visitors but,

¹⁹DA, DE/3/7/1/39, pp. 92–3; DE/3/7/1/40, pp. 177–8. For studies of book ownership based on probate inventories see P. Clark, 'The Ownership of Books in England, 1560–1640: The Example of Some Kentish Townsfolk', in *Schooling and Society*, ed. by Lawrence Stone (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 95–111; L. Taylor, 'Literacy and Book Ownership in Seventeenth-Century Faversham', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, 134 (2014), 205–19; J. A. Johnston, 'Books in Wills', *The Local Historian*, 15 (1983), 478–82. For caution about the value of inventories in capturing book ownership, see M. Spufford, *Contrasting Communities: English Villagers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Stroud: Sutton, 2000), pp. 210–12.

²⁰R. Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, ed. by Matthew Sylvester (3 parts, London, 1696), i, p. 85; E. Duffy, 'The Godly and the Multitude in Stuart England', *The Seventeenth Century*, 1, 1 (1986), 31–55.

²¹Illingworth, *Just Narrative*, sig. ²Bv.

²²J. Woodall, *The Surgeons Mate* (London: printed by John Legate for Nicolas John Woodall 1655), pp. 398–9; S. Hammond, *Gods Judgements upon Drunkards, Swearers, and Sabbath-Breakers* (London, 1659), p. 77; J. White, *First Century of Scandalous Malignant Priests* (London, 1642), p. 17; C. Manuche, *The Loyal Lovers a Tragi-Comedy* (London, 1652), p. 45; L. Carlell, *The Fool would be a Favourit* (London, 1657), p. 29; Philo-Basileus Philo-Clerus, *Jura cleri, or an Apology for the Rights of the Long-Despised Clergy* (Oxford, 1661), sig. [A4v]; M. Nedham, *A Second Pacquet of Advices and Animdiversions* (London, 1677), p. 71; A. Marvel, *An Account of the Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government* (Amsterdam, 1677), p. 113; W. Shakespeare, *The Tragedie of King Richard the Second* (London, 1597), sig. [G4v].

²³T. Beard, *The Theatre of Gods Judgements* (4th edn, London, 1642), pp. 19–20, 27–8, 41–2, 59, 170.

²⁴J. Spurr, 'A Profane History of Early Modern Oaths', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4th series, 11 (2001), 37–63.

²⁵Illingworth, *Just Narrative*, pp. 5–6.

according to his keeper and others there were ‘many thousands’, from near and far, including from London, ‘not to satisfy their curiosity so much, as to behold a monument of Divine severity’.²⁶ Another clergy visitor who spoke with Duncalf on 26 April reported that, on that one day, ‘there were a great many both Men Women and Children beholding of him’,²⁷ and that was a Thursday; many more apparently came to see him on a Sunday, typically armed with a nosegay against the smell and feared contagion from his rotting flesh.²⁸ Duncalf continued to weaken, dying by degrees, ‘his flesh began to wast, and his spirits to fail’, and in the afternoon of 21 June 1677 he died.²⁹ He was buried the following day. The Kingswinford parish register highlighted his new-found identity, describing him as ‘John Duncalf the man that did rott both hands & leggs’, the only entry in the register to include any details beyond the deceased’s status or occupation.³⁰ It was not a notoriety that Duncalf had enjoyed. Not surprisingly, he had grown surly in his suffering, and the ‘crowding, impertinent curiosity, and foolish questions’ of his many visitors had provoked him to lash out that, as they were offended by the smell of his own putrefaction, ‘their Noses might rot off’ like his own limbs, or he called on his keeper to ‘dash out their teeth’.³¹

The explanation for and meaning of Duncalf’s decay and death were dissected and debated orally and in print across the midlands and further afield. Where modern medical science has tried to diagnose gangrene, complications arising from ergotism, or necrotizing fasciitis,³² most contemporaries saw signs of divine judgement. But precisely what Duncalf was being damned for, and how far he remained resolute in his sin, or showed signs of repentance – in other words, whether his was judged a bad or a good death – were not clear, and were deliberated in a series of retellings. The first was issued a month before his death, William Vincent’s *Strange and True Nevvs from Staffordshire*, licensed on 11 May 1677. Vincent, litigious vicar of Acton Trussell and Bednall in Staffordshire, twenty miles to the north, visited Duncalf on 26 April and rushed out his eight-page account of the interview as quickly as possible, proclaiming on the title page that Duncalf was ‘The sadest Spectacle that ever Eyes beheld’.³³ Since Duncalf was still very much alive – Vincent emphasized that he was ‘not at all sick, but could eat and drink and speak heartily’ – his theme was ‘Gods just Wrath’ on a sinner who denied his crime and for ‘imprecating sad Judgments against himself’. Vincent held out the hope to all readers of salvation through accepting ‘God’s Free Grace and Mercy’. The story was both a deterrence to all from notorious sins and a warning of the importance of preparing oneself for a good death by contemplating that continuance in sin would cause flesh and bones to be consumed and ‘crumble into dust and rottenness’ like the

²⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 5, 7.

²⁷William Vincent, *Strange and True Nevvs from Staffordshire* (London: printed for E.R., 1677), p. 4.

²⁸Illingworth, *Just Narrative*, p. 5.

²⁹Illingworth, *Just Narrative*, pp. 5–6, 8–9, 11; *Digitus dei. A Faithful Relation and Collection of Seven Wonderful and Remarkable Judgements* (London, 1677), p. 5.

³⁰DA, PR24/15/2/3.

³¹Illingworth, *Just Narrative*, pp. 5–6.

³²T. Hitchcock, *English Sexualities, 1700–1800* (London: Macmillan, 1997), p. 42; C. De Costa, ‘St Anthony’s Fire and Living Ligatures: A Short History of Ergometrine’, *The Lancet*, 359, 9310 (2002), 1768–70; K. Goodman, ‘The Man Whose Hands and Legs Rotted Off: A Seventeenth Century Case of Necrotizing Fasciitis’ <<http://bowsbladesandbattles.tripod.com/id40.html>> [accessed 19 February 2020].

³³Vincent, *Strange and True Nevvs*; The National Archives (TNA), E134/20Chas2/East21; E134/20Chas2/Trin1; E134/27Chas2/East4.

‘dreadful and deformed Spectacle’ of corpses in a charnel house. Vincent turned the tale into a traditional *ars moriendi* fable of the importance of a good death and the need for all ‘to consider their latter ends’.³⁴

Vincent’s work was small enough (and hence potentially cheap enough) to appeal to lowly audiences. It was turned into a ballad, *Strange News from Stafford-shire; Or, A Dreadful Example of Divine Justice*, the dependence on Vincent proclaimed by the statement that ‘This relation was given and attested by Mr. Vincent, Minister of Bednal, who discoursed with this miserable young-man’.³⁵ Undated, it must have been issued before its syndicate of publishers – Francis Coles, Thomas Vere, John Wright, and John Clark(e) – broke up in 1679 or 1680, and, since it makes no mention of Duncalf’s death, it may have been composed very shortly after Vincent’s tract was published.³⁶ The ballad itself was a straightforward warning against theft and false swearing:

Let his example warn us all,
Least we into such sins may fall,
Forbear such wishes too which may
Bring soul and body to decay.

Duncalf was portrayed as penitent, desiring the prayers of ‘Good peoples . . . To mitigate Gods wrath and ire’, but his repentance came too late to save his body from decay. The emphasis, nevertheless, was more on the temptations of the Devil than the judgements of God. Not only did the text warn how the Devil might possess the unwary and lead them on from sin to destruction, the lyrics were accompanied by three illustrations. The first showed the Devil creeping up behind an unsuspecting pair of men. Another, with an explicit anti-Catholic message, showed a pair of scales with the Bible ‘conteyning the word of God’ outweighing a pan containing images of the Roman church such as a saint’s statue, papal crown, rosary, and cardinal’s hat, labelled as ‘The Decrees and Decretals conteyning Mans traditions’. The third depicted three figures visiting a couple in bed which was crudely transformed into a death-bed scene by scratching out the face of one of the figures in bed. Strangely, it was the man who was obliterated. If, as Megan Palmer and Christopher Marsh have recently argued, early modern ballad viewers could pay as much attention to the illustrations as to the words of a ballad to create their own associations and meanings from words and pictures, then the ballad might be viewed as an example of a good Protestant death following a sinful life.³⁷

Duncalf was the subject of a second ballad, J. C., *A Warning for Swearers*, which likewise made no mention of his death.³⁸ It probably derived from an unpublished eyewitness account, for it mentioned details not in Vincent’s account, such as the stink

³⁴Vincent, *Strange and True Nevvs*, pp. 3–5, 7–8.

³⁵*Strange News from Stafford-shire* (London, n.d.). Only one copy is known, Bodleian Library, Wood E25.fol.(125). It is reprinted in H. E. Rollins, ed., *The Pack of Autolykus* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), pp. 200–5.

³⁶C. Blagden, ‘Notes on the Ballad Market in the Second Half of the Seventeenth Century’, *Studies in Bibliography*, 6 (1954), 170–1.

³⁷M. Palmer, ‘Picturing Song across Species: Broadside Ballads in Image and Word’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 79, 2 (2016), 221–44; C. Marsh, ‘A Woodcut and Its Wanderings in Seventeenth-Century England’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 79, 2 (2016), 245–62.

³⁸J. C., *A Warning for Swearers, by the Example of God’s Judgements Shewed upon a Man Born near the Town of Wolver-Hampton, in Stafford-Shire, who had Stolen a Bible* (London, n.d.), English Broadside Ballad Archive 30,391. Again, only one copy is known, British Library (BL), Roxburghe 3.38–39.

of Duncalf's rotting flesh that 'none can endure for to stand him nigh' and Duncalf's origins, 'Born near the Town of Wolver-hampton', while its claim that Duncalf's forswearing of his theft was made before a justice of the peace is not found in any other known published account. The ballad is undated, but being printed for William Thackeray, Thomas Passinger, and William Whitwood (also prolific ballad publishers), must date before Passinger's death in 1688.³⁹ That it may have been composed in the mid-1680s rather than the late 1670s is suggested by the second tale it turned into verse, that of a Worcestershire woman who, falsely denying that she had sold her hair and swearing that she should never speak were the accusation true, was struck dumb and then died. That looks as if it was derived from *An Allarum from Heaven* of 1683, which told the story of Mary Barrett of Gloucester who sold her hair but denied so doing with a rash wish that her tongue would swell in her mouth, with predictable results.⁴⁰

In the ballad, Duncalf is proclaimed a penitent sinner ('He doth declare, and also doth confess,/its Gods just judgment for his wickedness'). The title and the tale of the hair-selling Worcestershire woman warn of the dangers of false swearing, and the section about Duncalf ends with a verse aimed at habitual swearers:

You men that hear these lines, I pray forbear,
take heed how wilfully you Curse and Swear,
Too many use it now in every place:
more is the pittie, tis for want of grace.

Nonetheless, the tale of Duncalf could also be read as a moral about bible theft. The lyrics suggest that Duncalf's punishment is 'For stealing of this holy Bible book', while the two woodcut illustrations accompanying the verses showed a prone figure with a leg that had rotted off, and an open Bible, with a lit candle on one side and a bleeding heart the other, beneath the all-seeing eye of Providence. These pictures rather undercut the message of the text, emphasizing Duncalf's theft of a bible rather than swearing (and saying little of the Worcestershire woman).

Not only do these two ballads show that there was no single reading of Duncalf's suffering, they are also powerful reminders of the various ways by which details of his case, and warnings about sin more generally, circulated in early modern England. A further example, similarly of Duncalf's life rather than his death, adds to the picture. On Sunday 16 December 1677 the godly Essex minister Ralph Josselin instructed his household of the Providential punishment of sinners. His diary recorded that he read to them of:

the judgment of god on John Duncalf of old Swinford in Staffordshire [sic], who running from his trade. to idleness and intemperance came to want a morsel of bread, to theft and of a bible and being charged with it denied it with this imprecacion would his hands

³⁸J. C., *A Warning for Swearers, by the Example of God's Judgements Shewed upon a Man Born near the Town of Wolver-Hampton, in Stafford-Shire, who had Stolen a Bible* (London, n.d.), English Broadside Ballad Archive 30,391. Again, only one copy is known, British Library (BL), Roxburghe 3.38–39.

³⁹Blagden, 'Notes on the Ballad Market', p. 179.

⁴⁰*An Alarum from Heaven: Or, A Warning to Rash Wishers. Being An Account of a young Maiden in Glocester, named Mary Barrett, that Sold her Hair off her Head* (London, 1683). The only copy known is Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge, shelf-mark 365(46).

might rott of if he stole it. within a fortnight a simptome of rotting appeared and so both did and his legs.

The moral of the tale for Josselin was that ‘god sett this home to mee and mine to make us more careful of our wayes’.⁴¹ It is significant that, nearly six months after his demise, Josselin did not apparently know the final fate of Duncalf, and that his summary of the story emphasized not just the bible theft and its denial, but Duncalf’s previous idleness and intemperance that led to his final fall, making this a warning of wider application than Vincent’s emphasis of false swearing. Josselin’s source is not certain. If he had read a published account, Vincent is the one that, like Josselin’s version, did not mention Duncalf’s death, but Vincent does not mention Duncalf’s descent from trade to idleness to theft, and never locates the action except to say it was in Staffordshire, 14 or 15 miles from his own home at Bednall. It is also intriguing that Josselin put Duncalf in Old Swinford (the neighbouring Worcestershire parish) rather than correctly (as other known accounts did) in Kingswinford in Staffordshire. It is likely, therefore, that Josselin had an oral or manuscript report, or an otherwise unknown printed account, probably deriving from the circle of Simon Ford, rector of Old Swinford who preached several sermons in the spring or summer of 1677 about Duncalf and had them ready for the press by the autumn, though they were not published until the following year.⁴²

Further accounts of the circulation of Duncalf’s sufferings are evidence of the importance of oral transmission. In the 1740s the elderly natural philosopher and theologian William Whiston (1667–1752) recalled that as a ten-year-old boy several visitors came to his father’s rectory at Norton-juxta-Twycross in Leicestershire, 30-mile north-east of Kingswinford, with details of Duncalf. They were, he recalled, either ‘eye and ear-witnesses, or those who had spoken with eye and ear-witnesses’. Reading Illingworth’s account nearly 70 years later he affirmed ‘all things therein related as I remember I heard’ as a boy.⁴³ In the late 1690s a clergyman, William Turner, included Duncalf’s case in a large compendium of divine judgements. The details were summarized from Vincent (no mention was therefore made of Duncalf’s death), but Turner added that since he had at the time been ‘living in the next adjacent County’ he had also had the tale ‘from the Information of several Friends’.⁴⁴ Turner, a native of Cheshire, was a curate in Shrewsbury (30 miles north-west of Kingswinford) in 1677–8 and was also a close friend of Philip Henry, who as we shall see, was well placed to pick up local stories of Duncalf.⁴⁵

Only rarely are we afforded glimpses of how stories like that of John Duncalf, or other lurid tales of judgement and crime, circulated orally or were read and discussed. Typically, we have printed accounts, but little else from which to understand how such tales were spread or read. From diaries and newsletters Lena Liapi has shown how one

⁴¹ Alan Macfarlane, ed., *The Diary of Ralph Josselin 1616–1683* (London: British Academy, Records of Social and Economic History, new series, 3, 1976), p. 605.

⁴² S. Ford, *A Discourse Concerning God’s Judgements* (London, 1678), sigs A2–A3, ‘The Epistle Dedicatory’ dated at Old Swinford, 20 September 1677. All references to Ford’s work are to the octavo edition.

⁴³ W. Whiston, *Memoirs* (London, 1749), pp. 4–5.

⁴⁴ W. Turner, *A Compleat History of the Most Remarkable Providences Both of Judgement and Mercy* (London, 1697), chap. civ, p. 16.

⁴⁵ Clergy of the Church of England Database <theclergydatabase.org.uk> [accessed 16 March 2018], person id 60,218 and 60,219; H. Berry, ‘William Turner (1652/3–1701)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/27875>> [accessed 4 August 2022]; M. Henry, *An Account of the Life and Death of Mr Philip Henry* (Edinburgh, 1791), pp. 115–16, 187–8.

true crime story circulated in Restoration London, that of James Turner, executed for burglary in 1664.⁴⁶ Liapi argues that contemporaries did not distinguish between stories of crime and news defined as ‘political’ by modern scholars, suggesting an extension of the notion of ‘public opinion’ beyond politics to encompass stories of crime. Evidence about the circulation of the news of Duncalf’s death supports, extends, and refines Liapi’s conclusions. These examples of the consumption of news about Duncalf reinforce claims that oral, manuscript, and print transmission complemented one another. They suggest, moreover, that public opinion might be widened beyond the narrowly ‘political’ to include not just crime but wonder stories of dramatic judgement such as filled many small godly chapbooks for, as Duncalf’s fate showed, they could generate considerable public interest and discussion, constituting what Ford called ‘common talk’ and ‘fresh news’ that ‘filled . . . the whole Nation’, and could be consumed through word of mouth as well as manuscript and print.⁴⁷ Finally, public consumption of the details of Duncalf’s case suggest that Liapi’s division between Londoners who ‘for the most part relied on word of mouth’ and ‘those in the provinces’ who ‘responded to manuscript or published accounts of news’ is too stark.⁴⁸

All were agreed that Duncalf was the subject of divine judgment. There was much less agreement on the causes and nature of that judgement, and hence the meaning of his rotting limbs and what his fate meant for others. The various accounts that circulated put forward different explanations and understandings of the case and, moreover, often reveal signs of contradictions and contested explanations.

Where Vincent (and, as we shall see, other printed accounts) saw Duncalf as being punished for theft and especially false swearing, there are hints from Illingworth’s narrative that it was ‘common . . . in the Country hereabouts’ to believe that Duncalf was being punished for sexual sins, ‘that he had committed a Rape upon a young person, and afterward murdered her’ and that ‘he was guilty of Buggery, or lying with Beasts’.⁴⁹ Although Illingworth dismissed such ideas as an ‘unjust rumour’, they were not mere salacious scandal. Rotting bones and flesh were widely recognized symptoms of venereal disease.⁵⁰ Biblical verses were frequently translated or glossed to emphasize a connection between rotting flesh and sexual sins, that ‘rottenesse and wormes’ might be the fate of he that companieth adulterers’, or that God could cause an adulterous wife’s ‘thigh to rot’.⁵¹ Second, Duncalf did confess to what Illingworth called ‘licentious courses’ including ‘Uncleanness with Women’, though that was, explained Illingworth, not actual fornication or adultery, ‘but in the thoughts of his heart, and by lascivious words, and gestures, whereby he had endeavoured to tempt them to lewdness in divers

⁴⁶L. Liapi, “‘The Talke of the Towne’: News, Crime and the Public Sphere in Seventeenth-Century London”, *Cultural and Social History*, 14, 5 (2017), 549–64.

⁴⁷Ford, *Discourse*, sig. A2v, pp. 1, 64.

⁴⁸Liapi, ‘News, Crime and the Public Sphere’, 558.

⁴⁹Illingworth, *Just Narrative*, p. 2.

⁵⁰G. Harvey, *Little Venus Unmask’d, or, a Perfect Discovery of the French Pox* (London, 1670), pp. 3, 19, 45, 56–7, 62, 111.

⁵¹*The Bible, that is, the Holy Scriptures* (London, 1600), STC 2181, Ecclesiasticus 19:3; Numbers 5:21, as glossed in John Mayer, *A Commentary Upon the Whole Old Testament* (London, 1653), Numbers, p. 22.

places'.⁵² For others, however, the withering of hands and feet was particularly associated with cursing and swearing, as one widely circulated story of a Swiss drunkard related, whose feet and hands dried up after a rash oath.⁵³

Once Duncalf had died, not just the meaning of his suffering but the interpretation of his end could be considered, the latter set within the traditional *ars moriendi* motif of a good or bad death. The first dateable example is a short anonymous tract, *Digitus dei*. The author knew that Duncalf had died, but not the date: the title placed his death in July 1677, while the text itself proclaimed that 'about the later end of June he gave up the Ghost'.⁵⁴ Promising seven cases of divine judgement on the title page, but delivering only six in the actual text, it has all the hallmarks of a hastily assembled compendium and was probably published shortly after the latest story it mentioned, that of a woman in Newgate, London, struck blind, deaf and dumb on 14 July 1677. Its account of Duncalf was partly taken from Vincent, but was supplemented with a few details not found in any other source, including the claim that following amputation one hand and both legs were buried on 13 May, and that his other hand was removed on 18 May.⁵⁵ While that may simply be a plausible invention, it is more likely to have been information that the anonymous author picked up through oral transmission as the case was recounted from person to person. Other discrepancies (the victim of the bible-theft named as 'Goodwife Bays', rather than Babb as given by Illingworth, for example) look like the product of a chain of Chinese whispers from Staffordshire to the printing house in London.

In the tract, Duncalf is clearly held up as an example of a bad death. After initially asking people to pray for him, he became 'surlly and morose' and refused to converse with any clergy or godly visitors, and died 'not shewing that Repentance as all good men hoped so terrible a Visitation might have wrought in him'.⁵⁶ The immediacy of divine judgement was emphasized by the claim that 'as soon as he had sold this Bible, . . . immediately his Hands began to Rot', a claim that necessitated delaying his theft of the bible until March, rather than Twelfth Night as Illingworth claimed. Duncalf's bad death was reinforced by the other examples in the tract. Of a similar length was the tale of an Oxfordshire alewife burnt from head to foot after falsely denying that she had cheated a customer and then swearing 'God damn me, and the Devil burn me, if it be not so'. The remaining cases included a card-player who denied cheating with a false oath and was immediately struck down dead, and an oppressor of the poor in Suffolk who denied his oppressions with a wish that he might rot if it were so and then died in 'a strange manner, perfect Chalk-stones dropping out of the calves of his leggs'. These bad deaths were contrasted at the end of the tract with the good death of Sir Gervase Elwes, executed in 1615 for his part in the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury, for on the scaffold he repented, confessing his earlier frequent swearing in what

⁵²Illingworth, *Just Narrative*, p. 2.

⁵³The story as repeated in T. Beard, *The Theatre of Gods Judgements* (London, 1597), p. 185. It was frequently related: W. Powell, *A Summons for Svvearers, and a Law for the Lips* (London, 1654), pp. 309–10; S. Clarke, *A Mirrour or Looking-Glasse Both for Saints and Sinners* (London, 1654), p. 111.

⁵⁴*Digitus dei*, p. 6.

⁵⁵The generally well-informed James Illingworth, by contrast, reported that his two legs fell off at the knees on 8 May; that his right hand was removed at the same time; and that the left hand 'hanged on a long time afterwards' until it was also amputated: Illingworth, *Just Narrative*, p. 8.

⁵⁶*Digitus dei*, pp. 5–6.

the tract styled as ‘an excellent and penitent Speech made immediately before his Death upon the Ladder’.⁵⁷

Duncalf’s bad death was challenged by a series of publications that promoted the idea of his good death, or at least held out the possibility of it. The most important of these, and possibly the originator of the idea, was James Illingworth’s *Just Narrative, or, Account of the Man whose Hands and Legs Rotted Off*. Illingworth was chaplain to Philip Foley of Prestwood House in Kingswinford parish, and his account was based on local knowledge as well as several interviews with Duncalf. His work was issued with Dr Simon Ford’s *A Discourse Concerning God’s Judgements* in octavo and duodecimo editions.⁵⁸ Where Illingworth related the story of Duncalf’s life and death, Ford’s work, the substance of several sermons that Ford preached on the occasion of Duncalf’s suffering and death in the neighbouring Worcestershire parish of Old Swinford, set out the ways in which God intervened in the world as a warning to people to repent and abstain from sin and to show that God’s judgement against Duncalf was not unique but part of the divine plan whereby sinners were punished ‘either here or hereafter’. The date of publication of both is given as 1678, though Ford dated his dedicatory epistle (which referred to Illingworth’s narrative) 20 September 1677, and the imprimatur was dated ‘Sep. 25’.⁵⁹

Illingworth presented a nuanced position on the state of Duncalf’s spiritual (rather than bodily) health. Duncalf’s false swearing was crucial to Illingworth’s explanation of the story, and hence he stressed the evidence for Duncalf’s imprecation, attested not only by Thomas Evans of Himley who heard Duncalf so swear, but also by Duncalf’s own confession both to various visitors, as overheard by his keeper, and to Illingworth himself.⁶⁰ It was the cause of God’s wrath and punishment, as it was a sign of Duncalf’s lack of repentance, for it showed both Duncalf’s initial wicked heart and the power of the Devil over him. It was also proof that Providence could act swiftly in the world, for Duncalf reported how immediately after his execration ‘he had an inward horror or trembling upon him, a dread and fear of the Divine Majesty’ as well as ‘within a few days’ noticing that his flesh began to blacken.⁶¹ Beyond this, the extent and nature of Duncalf’s repentance, hoped for by Vincent, became a central contention for Illingworth.

The nature of Duncalf’s repentance mattered to Illingworth because it concerned the role of ministers like him. Illingworth reversed the spiritual chronology of *Digitus dei* (which had him initially showing signs of repentance by desiring people to pray with him, but then falling into stubborn hard heartedness) by stressing the role that he and a number of other ministers had in offering spiritual counsel and prayers, thereby procuring some level of repentance:

He began to beg instruction, and help to repent and that some Ministers and others, who came to visit him, would pray for and with him, which many did, both publick Preachers and others, at several times; and some who lived near him (as I did) often.

⁵⁷For Elwes see A. Bellany, *The Politics of Court Scandal in Early Modern England: News Culture and the Overbury Affair, 1603–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 222–6.

⁵⁸BL, shelfmark G.19162 is an example of the octavo edition, while RE.23.a.28686 is the duodecimo. Illingworth’s work has a separate title page, and separate pagination and signatures in the octavo edition; in the duodecimo the signatures, however, are continuous.

⁵⁹Ford, *Discourse*, especially sigs [Av], A3v, p. 64.

⁶⁰Illingworth, *Just Narrative*, pp. 3–4.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, p. 4.

Under Illingworth's instruction, Duncalf begged Margaret Babb and Downings's maid visit him, and asked for their forgiveness. In his last days, 'fearing his approaching death', Duncalf asked Illingworth to pray for him, while on 19 June 'in great anguish and trouble of mind' he cried out 'What shall I do to save my poor soul?', all stereotypical signs of impending repentance. Duncalf's keeper, however, was deaf to the entreaties to fetch a minister to hear his confession, and when Illingworth finally returned on 21 June, Duncalf was by then 'unsensible, and past any further advice'; he died later that day.⁶² The centrality of both this spiritual crisis and his keeper's refusal to the interpretation of Duncalf's death was recognized by an eighteenth-century reader of a later edition of the narrative who bracketed off the passage and drew a manicule in the margin to highlight it.⁶³ Appended to Illingworth's narrative, reinforcing the point, is an account of a visit to Duncalf on 1 May made by Jonathan Newey, minister of Kinver, six miles to the south, in which Newey identified some 'tokens of penitence' in Duncalf, and in which Duncalf confessed his sins – bible-stealing, Sabbath-breaking, 'loss of Time, neglect of Duty, and the service of God'.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Illingworth had to explain why God's judgement was not lifted from the penitent Duncalf. Illingworth's answer was two-fold. First, Duncalf was being punished not for one act in January, but for a life of sin, 'for all his great transgressions'. Second, a question-mark remained over Duncalf's confession: he only agreed to speak with clergy when his keeper stopped cleaning him of the vermin and lice that filled his shirt and doublet, and even Illingworth admitted that he never had 'as clear an evidence of a comfortable change wrought in him' as he had hoped.⁶⁵ Ultimately, Illingworth's evidence undercut his claims for the importance of his own ministrations.

Illingworth's nuanced yet equivocal narrative of Duncalf's death was adapted for a small, 16-page godly chapbook, *A Warning to Wicked Livers; Or, A faithful and true Account of the Life and Death of John Duncalf, whose Hands and Legs Rotted Off in Staffordshire*.⁶⁶ It is undated, and though it is tentatively assigned to c. 1680 by Wing there are few clues to allow a publication date to be assigned, and Wing's guess might be too precise. Joshua Conyers was using versions of its imprint, 'for J. Conyers at the Black Raven', from 1675 to at least 1691.⁶⁷ Only one copy is known, collected by Samuel Pepys who had his copy bound with 45 other chapbooks in a volume he called 'Penny Godlinesses': those that are dated range from 1677 to 1687 offering no further certainty of publication date.⁶⁸ All that can be said, therefore, is that *A Warning for Wicked Livers* can be no earlier than 1678 but may be as late as 1688. The first eight pages of *A Warning for Wicked Livers* recounted the life and death of Duncalf taken from Illingworth, cutting down his 3,600 words to only 1,700, but following his structure and mostly copying his words. Newey's interview was omitted altogether and the

⁶²Illingworth, *Just Narrative*, pp. 6–7. 9.

⁶³DA, PR 24/14/1, p. 14. The reader may be the 'Mrs H – ks in New-Inn-Passage in Stanhope Street near clare market' who wrote her name and the date, 9 February 1754, on the final page of this copy.

⁶⁴Illingworth, *Just Narrative*, sigs ²Br-[²B3v].

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 6, 8–9, 11.

⁶⁶*A Warning to Wicked Livers* (London, n.d.), Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge, shelf-mark 365(6). I am grateful to Catherine Sutherland, Deputy Librarian of Magdalene College, for her assistance with Pepys's collection of chapbooks.

⁶⁷For example, Wing B257, M276, and S3154A.

⁶⁸Pepys Library, 365; M. Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and its Readership in Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Methuen, 1981), pp. 131–2.

testimony of six ministers and gentry that Illingworth presented was reduced merely to the claim that the truth of the tale was attested by those six. The rendering of their names suggests oral transmission from Illingworth's text, for Mountfort became 'Mountford', Wilsby was printed as 'Wilstby', and most tellingly, Ambrose Sparry was turned into 'Amb. Parey'. The remainder of the book summarized Ford's *Discourse*, reducing its 21,000 words to less than 1,400 by the simple expedient of copying or slightly amending certain chunks of text and completely ignoring the rest. *A Warning to Wicked Livers* simplified Illingworth's text. For example, Illingworth had hedged his account of the extent of Duncalf's conversion with doubts:

he had been a strong young man, naturally of a stubborn temper, much hardened by evil courses; yet he seemed sometimes to be affected with his condition, the discourses made to him, and prayers with him; and I wish I might have had from him as clear an evidence of a comfortable change wrought in him, as I would gladly have told the world. I must in charity leave his final condition to God[.]

That was turned into a simpler and less ambiguous statement about his conversion by the omission of Illingworth's 'sometimes' and his doubts about the extent of his repentance:

he had been a strong youngman, naturally of a stubborn Temper, much hardned in by evil Courses, yet seem'd much to be afflicted with his miserable condition he lay under; I must in charity leave his final Condition to God.⁶⁹

This latter version presents a more straightforward yet subtly different version of and meaning to Duncalf's life and death. In both, the final phrase, that his final condition was left to God, was an orthodox attempt to marry the hope-filled idea that a good death might lead to heaven, with a Protestant soteriology that God, not man, was the arbiter of everlasting life and hence avoid any scent of a Roman Catholic doctrine of salvation by the good work of death-bed repentance.

A Warning to Wicked Livers represents an attempt to circulate the warning from Duncalf's life along with the possibility that, his sins notwithstanding, it was possible for him, and hence anyone, to repent and meet a good end among a less literate and more popular audience who would not read Illingworth's 24-page narrative or Ford's 96-page discourse. Duncalf's death was also added to the catalogues and compendia of divine warnings and punishments that were frequently printed in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In 1681, Nathaniel Crouch (under the pseudonym of Richard Burton), seizing on Duncalf's former status as an apprentice, included a short version of his life and death in his long handbook for apprentices, a work that contained a great variety of information deemed useful for apprentices, from basic mathematics to handwriting examples, prayers and devotions, and exemplary warnings about the vices of apprentices. Duncalf was one of the cautions against 'prophane cursing, swearing and perjury'; his was also presented as a good death, for he was said to have 'acknowledged the just and righteous judgment of God upon him for his Perjury'.⁷⁰ The following year Crouch incorporated a longer version of the same story (adapted from Illingworth) into

⁶⁹Illingworth, *Just Narrative*, p. 11; *Warning to Wicked Livers*, [sig. A5r].

⁷⁰R. Burton (i.e. Nathaniel Crouch), *The Apprentices Companion* (London, 1681); the case of Duncalf is pp. 123–4. For a brief discussion of Crouch as a 'prodigy-monger', see W. Burns, *An Age of Wonders: Prodigies, Politics and Providence in England 1657–1727* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 129–32.

his many examples of divine judgement and mercy as the 35th instance of God's 'Dreadful judgments upon atheists, perjured wretches, blasphemers, swearers, cursers and scoffers'. Once again, Duncalf admitted his sinful courses and hoped 'That God would give him Repentance, and pardon his sins of Idleness, Stealing, Lying, Cursing, Swearing, Drunkenness, Unclean Thoughts, and constant Prophaneness; and that he would save him for Christs sake, and give him patience in the mean time'.⁷¹ Crouch's work proved popular, going through further editions in 1685,⁷² 1693,⁷³ 1699 (proclaimed as the fifth edition),⁷⁴ 1707,⁷⁵ 1717,⁷⁶ 1729,⁷⁷ and 1762, by which time Duncalf was the 54th example of its kind.⁷⁸

In crafting an image of a penitent Duncalf, Illingworth had had a further purpose beyond setting a moral exemplar for others to follow, for there was a competitive confessional aspect both to the striving for Duncalf's soul in the spring of 1677 and the later shaping of the details in print, just as there was among clergy seeking conversion in gaols or by the scaffold.⁷⁹ According to their own accounts, both Vincent and Illingworth had visited Duncalf on 26 April, and yet neither mentioned the other.⁸⁰ Many clergy wished to be the one to comfort and convert Duncalf and claim success for their version of Christianity and vision of the church. That was most apparent in the visit to Duncalf of an unnamed Roman Catholic priest who, according to Illingworth and Newey, promised to heal Duncalf's sores and 'pawn' Duncalf's soul for his if Duncalf converted. In Newey's account Duncalf offered to consider of the priest's offer, but Illingworth held that Duncalf rejected the Romanist with a clear statement of Protestant orthodoxy: 'How can he pawn his soul for mine? none can save me but Christ'. Illingworth (or Henry Brome his publisher) drew attention to this anti-Catholic element in Duncalf's story by adding a printed manicule to the margin against Illingworth's mention of the false promise of the Roman priest.⁸¹

Cases of crime and divine judgement, along with those of possession, were routinely used to assert the truth of Protestantism or Catholicism, or varieties of either.⁸² Illingworth's purpose was more nuanced than simple anti-Catholicism, for his narrative was no singular effort but part of a wider campaign waged by a group of local clergy and gentlemen. As we have seen, Illingworth's account was issued with a narrative from Jonathan Newey, minister of neighbouring Kinver; it also came with a supporting testimonial from five ministers and one gentleman who had visited Duncalf and

⁷¹R.B. [Nathaniel Crouch], *Wonderful Prodigies of Judgement and Mercy: Discovered in Above Three Hundred Memorable Histories* (London, 1682), p. 28.

⁷²Wing C7361A, ESTC citation no. R35614. Duncalf is pp. 29–30.

⁷³Wing C7361B, ESTC citation no. R228947.

⁷⁴Wing C7362, ESTC citation no. R32393. Duncalf is pp. 22–3.

⁷⁵ESTC citation no. T71496.

⁷⁶ESTC citation no. N66219.

⁷⁷ESTC citation number T213329. Duncalf is pp. 26–8.

⁷⁸Edinburgh, ESTC citation no. T106493. Duncalf is pp. 36–8.

⁷⁹R. Martin, 'Henry Goodcole, Visitor of Newgate: Crime, Conversion, and Patronage', *The Seventeenth Century*, 20, 2 (2005), 153–84.

⁸⁰*Strange and True Nevvs*, t.p.; Illingworth, *Just Narrative*, p. 2.

⁸¹Illingworth, *Just Narrative*, p. 7, sig. [2]B3]. South-west Staffordshire was a noted recusant heartland, and though only 8 recusants were recorded in Kingswinford in 1678–80, there were then 57 in Sedgley and 140 in Wolverhampton: D. Fowkes and M. Greenslade, eds., 'A List of Staffordshire Recusants 1678–80', *Staffordshire Catholic History*, 24 (1990), 11–14, 21.

⁸²For example, Peter Lake, 'Puritanism, Arminianism and a Shropshire Axe-Murder', *Midland History*, 15 (1990), 37–64; R. Baddeley, *The Boy of Bilson* (London, 1622); R. Howson, *The Second Part of the Boy of Bilson* (London, 1698).

conversed with him or who had ‘received frequent Informations of the Passages herein mentioned from a multitude of credible Witnesses’.⁸³ All were local men, but beyond that, three salient points stand out. First, the vicar of Kingswinford, Francis Ashenhurst, is never mentioned, either by Illingworth or, indeed, by any other account of Duncalf’s demise, even though he was resident in the community and assiduously asserted his vicarial rights to the tithes of the parish.⁸⁴ Second, those ministers and gentlemen publicly associated with Illingworth in Duncalf’s case were a mixture of moderate conformists and nonconformists. Simon Ford, rector of Old Swinford; Jonathan Newey, curate of Kinver; Edward Paget, preacher and schoolmaster at Enville; and Samuel Mountfort, born in Kidderminster, one of the leading inhabitants of Old Swinford, and later rector of Upton Warren, Worcestershire, were all conformists.⁸⁵ The remainder were ministers ejected at the Restoration: John Reynolds from Wolverhampton in 1660, Ambrose Sparry from Martley in Worcestershire in 1662, Thomas Willesby from Wombourne, Staffordshire, the same year, and Illingworth himself, removed from both his fellowship at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and Eccleston, Lancashire, in 1660.⁸⁶ Though divided by the Restoration settlement of the Church of England, a number can be linked together with Richard Baxter, the leading nonconformist in Restoration England who had, moreover, ministered in Worcestershire in the 1640s and ’50s, in hopes for a new, comprehensive church settlement that would unite moderates within and beyond the established church.

Reynolds, Sparry, and Willesby had all been members of Baxter’s Worcestershire Association in the 1650s and continued to correspond with Baxter into the 1670s. Baxter and other nonconformists praised Ford, Reynolds, Sparry, and Willesby as peaceable and moderate advocates of comprehension of moderate Episcopacy.⁸⁷ Illingworth was a correspondent of Baxter, and in the early 1660s had sent Baxter an account of a Cambridgeshire boy who saw spirits.⁸⁸ The conformist Mountfort, though a less prominent figure, was also connected to Baxter: his father William was one of the leading parishioners in Kidderminster who had sought Baxter’s guidance at the Restoration.⁸⁹ On Ford’s move to Old Swinford in 1676 this group became a model of local comprehension and understanding crossing the conformist/nonconformist divide imposed by the established church. John Reynolds’s eldest son, John (1668–1727) was schooled in Stourbridge (the principal town in Old Swinford parish) and later recalled that three ministers there were important to his spiritual formation:

⁸³Illingworth, *Just Narrative*, sig. [2B4].

⁸⁴Staffordshire Record Office (SRO), B/C/5/1671/40. Some of Ashenhurst’s children were baptized or buried in the parish in September 1676, December 1677, January 1678, and July 1680: Beach, ed., *Registers of ... Kingswinford*, pp. 115, 117–18, 124.

⁸⁵Worcester Record Office (WRO), b850 Old Swinford BA 9150/16(i).

⁸⁶A. G. Matthews, *Calamy Revised* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 287–8, 409, 455, 531.

⁸⁷G. Nuttall, ‘The Worcestershire Association: Its Membership’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 1, 2 (1950), 202; E. Calamy, *A Continuation of the Account* (2 vols, London, 1737), ii, p. 769; N. H. Keeble and G. F. Nuttall, eds., *Calendar of the Correspondence of Richard Baxter* (2 vols, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), ii, nos 676–7, 810, 812, 832, 930, 933, 956, 992; Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, i, p. 382, iii, pp. 91, 131.

⁸⁸R. Baxter, *The Certainty of the Worlds od Spirits* (London, 1691), p. 63.

⁸⁹Keeble and Nuttall, eds, *Correspondence of Richard Baxter*, ii, nos 651–2, 691. For William as Samuel’s father, see J. Foster, *Alumni Oxonienses 1500–1714* (4 vols, Oxford: Parker, 1891), iii, p. 1043.

Sparry, whose ‘Ministry was sweet to my Soul’s Taste’, Willesby, who ‘touched me, mov’d me at his Pleasure’, and Ford, whose sermons ‘were profitable to my Heart’.⁹⁰

At the centre of this knot was the Foley family, a dynasty of ironmasters busily converting its wealth into political influence.⁹¹ After his ejection, Illingworth was household chaplain to Philip Foley of Prestwood in Kingswinford.⁹² Ford dedicated his *Discourse* to Philip Foley and his brother Thomas Foley the younger, who had presented him to Old Swinford in 1676.⁹³ Both Ford and Sparry were trustees of Old Swinford Hospital, erected by Thomas Foley the elder (father to Thomas and Philip);⁹⁴ Sparry and Paget were witnesses to the will of Richard Foley of Stourbridge (uncle to Thomas and Philip) made in April 1675.⁹⁵ Philip Henry, an ejected minister from Flintshire, visited most parts of this network in June 1682, staying with Philip Foley at Prestwood (‘A good & great Family wel order’d’), calling at Kinver (Newey’s parish) and Enville (where Paget was schoolmaster), and hearing Ford preach at Old Swinford.⁹⁶ The Foleys protected sober nonconformists, allowing Sparry to teach school at Stourbridge and Reynolds and Willesby to preach in their own houses in Stourbridge and elsewhere, while ensuring that only what Baxter called ‘the best Conformable Ministers ... that could be got’ were appointed to the livings of Kidderminster and Old Swinford.⁹⁷ Contemporaries and historians alike have been keen to label the Foleys as nonconformists or varieties of Presbyterian,⁹⁸ but it is more appropriate to describe them as favourers of a comprehensive church settlement that would encompass both Anglicans and Presbyterians along Baxterian lines, the family having had a long association with Richard Baxter from the late 1630s when he lodged with Richard Foley in Stourbridge: Baxter reciprocated in praising Thomas and his sons (including Philip) as ‘Religious worthy Men’ and great benefactors to the Kidderminster and Stourbridge area.⁹⁹ On this reading, the Foleys represented what historians have recently begun to describe (albeit recognizing the limitations of the term) as puritanism, whether qualified as ‘Restoration puritans’ or ‘moderate puritans’ (Michael Winship) or ‘puritan Whigs’ (Mark Goldie).¹⁰⁰ That model of a church was exactly the local situation in those parts of Staffordshire and Worcestershire where the Foleys had influence and in which Duncalf slowly rotted away in 1677.

⁹⁰TNA, PROB11/373, ff. 213v-15 r; W. A. Shaw, revised by Alan P. F. Sell, ‘Reynolds, John (1668–1727)’, *ODNB* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/refodnb/23424>> [accessed 4 August 2022]; J. Reynolds, *Memoirs of the Life of the Late Pious and Learned Mr. John Reynolds* (3rd edn, London, 1735), p. 20. For the many Foleys, see Treadway Nash, *Collections for the History of Worcestershire* (2 vols, London, 1799), ii, p. 465.

⁹²Matthews, *Calamy Revised*, p. 287.

⁹³Ford, *Discourse*, sig. A2 (their names were erroneously printed as Toley in the octavo, but correctly as Foley in the duodecimo).

⁹⁴DA, DE/1/3/150; TNA, PROB11/375, f. 57 r.

⁹⁵TNA, PROB11/352, f. 226A.

⁹⁶M. H. Lee, ed., *The Diaries and Letters of Philip Henry* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, 1882), p. 314.

⁹⁷Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, iii, pp. 91, 93; Calamy, *Continuation*, ii, pp. 769, 773.

⁹⁸R. Warner, ed., *Epistolary Curiosities; Series the First* (Bath: Cruttwell, 1818), p. 100; R. Baxter, *An Apology for the Nonconformists Ministry* (London, 1681), p. 146; B. D. Henning, ed., *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1660–1690* (3 vols, London: Secker & Warburg, 1983), i, pp. 461, 463, ii, pp. 338, 340.

⁹⁹Baxter, *Reliquiae*, i, pp. 13–14, 106, ii, pp. 71, 73, ii, p. 93; N. H. Keeble, ‘Richard Baxter (1615–91)’, *ODNB* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/refodnb/1734>> [accessed 4 August 2022]; Keeble and Nuttall, *Correspondence of Richard Baxter*, ii, nos 657, 685.

¹⁰⁰M. Winship, ‘Defining Puritanism in Restoration England: Richard Baxter and Others Respond to *A Friendly Debate*’, *Historical Journal*, 54, 3 (2011), 689–715; M. Goldie, *Roger Morrice and the Puritan Whigs: The Entering Book 1677–1691* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2016).

The publication of an account of Duncalf's death by Philip Foley's household chaplain, with a testimonial by a group of ministers and gentlemen in their circle, and a wider treatise of divine judgements by the rector of the Foley parish of Old Swinford, was not accidental but a deliberate, two-fold strategy. First, it was part of an attempt to consolidate the Foleys' position in the local area as they turned their wealth from the iron trade into both status as gentlemen and political influence.¹⁰¹ Second, and on a national rather than a local stage, Ford's and Illingworth's tracts were a public example of the value of a broad church settlement, the co-operation of the sober godly regardless of the divisions imposed in 1662, at a time when, despite the temporary experiment of indulgence of 1672–3, Baxter and others still hoped for a new, comprehensive church settlement.¹⁰² Ford and Illingworth attempted to show that moderates on either side of the 1662 divide could work together to tackle some of the spiritual problems of ordinary layfolk and, moreover, do so better than the current church settlement, represented by the complete absence of the prelatical rector of Kingswinford from their narratives.

That vision was almost immediately overtaken by events, as within months of the publication of Ford's and Illingworth's works the stories of an imminent popish plot, then the crisis of exclusion, came to dominate public debate and shift discussions about 'moderate' behaviour, and then the Act of Toleration of 1689 ended most hopes for a comprehensive or latitudinarian church settlement. Moreover, understanding of Duncalf's demise could not be fixed, and Duncalf was the subject of many more retellings.

Duncalf was one example among many pressed into service in the later seventeenth century against what some feared was a growing tide of atheism or 'Hobbism' and 'Saduceeism', a worry that transcended traditional concerns about religious indifference, stretching to the fear that educated and uneducated alike were abandoning a belief that God intervened in the world to direct affairs or punish the wicked. Two diagnoses of this worrying trend were made. The first was that the religious fanaticism of wilder sects, such as Quakers, and the religious pluralism of which they were such a feature from the 1650s, had led the common people into doubt, indifference, and atheism.¹⁰³ The remedy was therefore the type of latitudinarian co-operation of moderate conformists and moderate nonconformists that Ford, Illingworth, and others in the Foley-Baxter circle exemplified. The second diagnosis was that people needed to be shown the reality of Providence and the world of the spirits. The divine striking down of Duncalf for his sins of theft and swearing was one such example, and it held power whether he was portrayed as penitent or obstinate, dying well or dying badly.

¹⁰¹M. B. Rowlands, 'Foley family (1620–1716)', *ODNB* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/47491>> [accessed 4 August 2022]; R. G. Schafer, 'Genesis and Structure of the Foley "Ironworks in Partnership" of 1692', *Business History*, 13, 1 (1971), 19–38; R. North, *The Lives of the Right Hon. Francis North ... Dudley North ... and ... John North* (3 vols, London: Henry Colburn, 1826), ii, p. 228; P. Styles, 'The Corporation of Bewdley under the Later Stuarts', *University of Birmingham Historical Journal*, 1, 1 (1947), 92–133.

¹⁰²R. Thomas, 'Comprehension and Indulgence', in *From Uniformity to Unity 1662–1962*, ed. by G. Nuttall and O. Chadwick (London: SPCK, 1962), pp. 189–253 (especially pp. 209–222); J. Spurr, 'The Church of England, Comprehension, and the Toleration Act of 1689', *English Historical Review*, 104, 413 (1989), 935–6.

¹⁰³For example, Charles Jackson, ed., *The Diary of Abraham de la Pryme* (Durham: Surtees Society, 54, 1869), pp. 85–6.

In 1697, William Turner included Duncalf in his exhaustive collection of Providential judgements which he hoped would be useful to ministers as sermon illustrations, furnishing ‘topicks of reproof and exhortation’. Duncalf, repentant at the end in begging the prayers of divines (only Vincent was named) and acknowledging’s God’s just punishment of his sins, was one of nine examples of divine judgements upon cursing which also included the well-known story of the Swiss man whose hands and feet dried up after a curse.¹⁰⁴ Turner designed his book as an answer to what he saw as the ‘abounding Atheism of this Age’, just as his former work, an account of different religions, was intended to counter ‘Scepticism and Atheism and Impiety’.¹⁰⁵

Alongside attempts to combat the rising tide of atheism, a further campaign was that against various forms of vice, swearing and cursing included alongside sexual immorality, of the societies for the reformation of manners. George Meriton intended his 1698 collection of ‘several signal judgments of God against offenders’ to further the ‘Advancement of Reformation of Manners, so happily begun and carried on by several Societies’. He lifted an account of Duncalf straight from Crouch as a warning against ‘profane and presumptuous Swearers and Coursers’.¹⁰⁶ Duncalf was not, however, pressed by others into battle in that war: sermons and tracts against profane swearing at the very end of the seventeenth century preferred to cite biblical injunctions and examples, or to argue rationally against those sins, rather than produce recent examples of divine judgements.¹⁰⁷ There was a growing scepticism among educated elites about the veracity of tales of recent wonders such as that of Duncalf, or doubts that they should be seen as evidence of direct divine intervention. When the Anglican cleric John Brandon included Duncalf in his 1682 pastoral handbook for families, he was at pains to assert that the case was published by Ford ‘with such concurrent Testimony as no sober man can cavil against’. Moreover, he continued ‘if any man shall impute this great thing to Fortune or Chance’ or anything other than ‘Divine power’, Brandon feared that ‘he is one of those who the Devil and Sin hath blinded to Destruction’. Brandon’s abbreviated account of Duncalf presented him as a bible thief and false swearer who was quickly punished, ‘a Spectacle of God’s just Displeasure’; there was no mention of any repentance. Not only was Duncalf’s fate therefore a case of the destructive power of sin, but not believing such an interpretation of the story was evidence of the same.¹⁰⁸ A similar attempt to combat perceived doubts about the meaning of Duncalf’s death can be seen in the comment of one a reader of Meriton who, in the margin against the mention of Duncalf, wrote, ‘This is attested by D^r Symon Ford’.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴Turner, *Compleat History*, chap. civ, pp. 14–16.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, sig. bv; W. Turner, *The History of all Religions in the World* (London, 1695), sig. A4r.

¹⁰⁶A. Craig, ‘The Movement for the Reformation of Manners, 1688–1715’ (PhD diss., Edinburgh University, 1980); G. Meriton, *Immorality, Debauchery, and Profaneness, Exposed to the Reproof of Scripture* (London, 1698), t.p. and pp. 68–9.

¹⁰⁷For example, R. Boyle, *A Free Discourse Against Customary Swearing* (London, 1695); J. Rost, *The Swearer’s Doom* (London, 1695); *A Discourse Concerning Profane Swearing and Cursing* (Dublin, 1697); D. Jones, *A Sermon Against Swearing & Cursing* (London, 1699); W. Clagett, *The Religion of an Oath. A Discourse Proving the Danger and Immorality of Rash and Profane Swearing* (London, 1700).

¹⁰⁸J. Brandon, *A Form of Sound Words, or a Brief Family Catechism* (London, 1682), pp. 53–4.

¹⁰⁹Meriton, *Immorality*, p. 68, BL, shelfmark 698.e.6.(2).

By the end of the century, the grounds of the argument about alleged atheism were shifting away from Providence and death to an attempt to assert the reality of ghosts, fairies, and demonic possession as proof of the supernatural.¹¹⁰ Hence, Richard Baxter's most significant intervention into the debate, his treatise designed to convert 'Atheists, Sadduces and Infidels', focussed on examples of ghosts, possession, and witchcraft to demonstrate the immortality of the soul and the existence of heaven and hell; the example of Duncalf was not used.¹¹¹ Although, as historians have come to recognize, 'Enlightenment' science and early modern religion were not polar opposites, and stories of the miraculous and Providential could happily co-exist with mechanical philosophy,¹¹² for the educated, wondrous deaths such as Duncalf's were too easily amenable to explanations that left out (though they did not deny) the direct workings of the divine hand.

The alternative educated explanation for Duncalf's demise can be seen in the work of the Oxford antiquary Robert Plot, who included details of Duncalf in his 1686 natural history of Staffordshire. Plot drew his information from Illingworth's narrative, recounting details of Duncalf's crimes, execration, and demise. Plot styled Duncalf an example of human vice 'most wonderfully punish't', with the hope that his fate might be a warning 'beneficial in deterring others from committing the like wickedness'. Illingworth's concern for Duncalf's repentance, however, was missing from Plot's account and, as befitting Plot's roles as secretary to the Royal Society and keeper of Oxford's Ashmolean Museum, he was most interested in Duncalf's symptoms of decaying flesh, providing a long account of the progress of his illness, his hands and legs first turning black, then hardening, then falling off, at which point the stumps began to weep – first a stinking pus, then the rotting flesh turned sweet, finally a 'thin stinking humor'. The flesh drew back exposing the bones, and ultimately his flesh wasting and his spirits failing, he died.¹¹³ Those he also took from Illingworth, from a section of that narrative described as 'some short Observations, communicated to me by an ingenious Gentleman, our Neighbour, who several times visited him in his afflictions', though Plot expanded on those observations.¹¹⁴ Such a medical approach was not antithetical to a divine interpretation of Duncalf's sufferings: in his earlier work on Oxfordshire, recounting story of Anne Green who was revived after a hanging, Plot had commented that 'God Himself make use many times of natural means in the production of the most wonderful, most amazing effects'.¹¹⁵ Moreover, the anonymous 'ingenious Gentleman'

¹¹⁰S. Handley, *Visions of an Unseen World: Ghost Beliefs and Ghost Stories in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2007), pp. 26–30; P. Marshall, 'Ann Jeffries and the Fairies: Folk Belief and the War on Scepticism in Late Stuart England', in *The Extraordinary and the Everyday in Early Modern England: Essays in Celebration of the Work of Bernard Capp*, ed. by A. McShane and G. Walker (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 127–41.

¹¹¹Baxter, *Worlds of Spirits*, sig. A4r.

¹¹²S. Schaffer, 'Godly Men and Mechanical Philosophers: Souls and Spirits in Restoration Natural Philosophy', *Science in Context*, 1, 1 (1987), 55–85.

¹¹³Plot, *Natural History of Stafford-shire*, pp. 304–5; A. J. Turner, 'Plot, Robert (1640–96)', *ODNB* <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/22385>> [accessed 4 August 2022].

¹¹⁴Illingworth, *Just Narrative*, pp. 10–11.

¹¹⁵R. Plot, *The Natural History of Oxford-shire* (Oxford, 1677), p. 197.

may have been John Reynolds, who was not only an ejected minister but also a medical doctor who had, a decade earlier, penned a tract on a Derbyshire woman who fasted for a year, explaining her survival in natural rather than miraculous terms.¹¹⁶ Nonetheless, Plot's account made no mention of divine intervention and he even suggested that but for the lack of 'Art & good Medicines', Duncalf might have been saved.

Plot's removal of any explicit mention of God was suggestive of educated doubts about the intervention of Providence in human affairs and recast the tale as a medical affair amenable to rational description and explanation. The wider context of Plot's work, however, implied a further reading of the death as a curiosity with no deeper meaning than human interest and wonder. The tale of Duncalf was immediately followed in Plot's work by that of a soldier in the civil wars who was saved when a bullet aimed at him struck the discarded horseshoe he had just picked up and stuffed in his belt, a story that had no more meaning than to illustrate the proverb that 'a little Armour well placed is as good as a whole suit'. Duncalf's death, moreover, stood alongside other wonders including a man who could lift two hundred pounds with his teeth, another who ate his bed-sheets in his sleep, a petrifying spring, and a host of monstrous births.¹¹⁷ That was how William Oldys reviewed Plot's 'elaborate and curious History' in 1737 in a chapter-by-chapter listing of the many examples throughout the book (including Duncalf), frequently described as 'strange', 'uncommon', 'unusual', 'unaccountable', and 'extraordinary'. The whole was thereby presented as a compendium of 'remarkable ... ingenious ... curious and instructive Matter'.¹¹⁸

The turning of the tale into an appealingly gruesome curiosity was already formulated before Plot. The publishers of Ford's *Discourse Concerning God's Judgements*, Henry Brome (d. 1681) and then his son Charles, advertised that work heavily in their catalogues until 1687, but altered its title in those lists to 'Dr. Ford's Sermons on the Man whose Legs and Arms rotted off' to make it more eye-catching.¹¹⁹ As a curiosity, Duncalf might pique the imagination, but the tale need not be true. John Entick's defence of freemasonry against Robert Plot's aspersions sought to impugn Plot's reliability by suggesting that his inclusion of Duncalf and similar stories showed that 'A Man of less judgment, and more Credulity never lived than Dr. Plot'.¹²⁰ Not only was the tale of Duncalf of doubtful credibility, it was increasingly seen as purely local, thanks to the development of antiquarian studies and local history from the late seventeenth century.¹²¹ Duncalf was

¹¹⁶Matthews, *Calamy Revised*, p. 409; J. Reynolds, *A Discourse upon Prodigious Abstinence* (London, 1669); J. Shaw, *Miracles in Enlightenment England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 108–11. Reynolds graduated in medicine from Leyden University the year before his death, 1682: W. N. Du Rieu, *Album studiosorum academiae Lugduno Batavae MDLXXV-MDCCCLXXV* (The Hague: Martin Nijhoff, 1875), col. 654.

¹¹⁷Plot, *Natural History of Stafford-shire*, pp. 105, 262, 266, 268–72, 293, 301, 305–6.

¹¹⁸W. Oldys, *The British Librarian* (1st issued in parts, 1737, London, 1738), pp. 175–87.

¹¹⁹B. Turner, *A Sermon Preached ... at the Guild-Hall Chappel, Octob. the 28th 1677* (London, 1678), p. 36; D. Vairasse d'Allais, *The History of the Sevarites or Sevarambi*, trans. A. Roberts (2 parts, London, 1675–9), ii, rear; T.A., *Religio clerici* (London, 1681), rear; B. Camfield, *A Sermon Preach'd ... at Leicester, February the 10th, 1684/5* (London, 1685), rear; B. Camfield, *A Sermon Preach'd upon the first Sunday after the Proclamation of the High and Mighty Prince, James the II* (London, 1687), p. 36.

¹²⁰J. Entick, *The Pocket Companion and History of Free-Masons* (London, 1754), pp. 234–6.

¹²¹For these developments, see R. Sweet, *Antiquaries: The Discovery of the Past in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004); J. Broadway, *'No historie so meete': Gentry Culture and the Development of Local History in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

pigeonholed as a local, Staffordshire curiosity. In the sale of nearly 3,000 books by Samuel Paterson in 1771, for example, 1678 editions of Ford's *Discourse* and Illingworth's *Narrative* were included in the topographical sale, listed under Staffordshire, representing that county along with Plot's *Natural History*, accounts of demonic possession in Bilston, exemplary godliness in Burton-upon-Trent, and the life and letters of Elias Ashmole, antiquary of Lichfield.¹²² Vincent's, Ford's, and Illingworth's books were similarly placed among the principal works illustrative of Staffordshire's histories in lists published in the early nineteenth century.¹²³ That view has persisted in local histories from Stebbing Shaw's 1801 history of Staffordshire which repeated details from Plot and Illingworth without further comment, to David Guttery's mid-twentieth-century retelling of the tale for a Black Country audience and other, more recent, local histories of the Black Country.¹²⁴

While accounts of Duncalf took a medical and curiosity-driven turn in the late seventeenth century, later developing into antiquarianism and local history, there was one further re-imagining of Duncalf's death in the eighteenth century, his reinvention by Methodists. From the 1740s, early Methodists began highlighting the tale of the 'Second Spira'. an English gentleman who converted from orthodox Christianity to deism and then despaired, ultimately dying unconsolated. The 'Second Spira' was first published in 1693 and was an immediate publishing sensation.¹²⁵ Although then framed as an antidote to atheism, from the 1740s Methodists discovered Spira and wove him into their own stories of conversion from the agonies of despair and abandonment to the joys of God's free grace, reinterpreting the story from a warning about God's judgement meted out to the obstinate to one of God's mercy freely offered to the repentant.¹²⁶ In that new emphasis on mercy freely offered, two stories were grafted onto that of Spira: the death-bed repentance of the notorious Restoration libertine, John Wilmot, earl of Rochester (d. 1680), and John Duncalf, the ultimately penitent bible thief and swearer who at the last accepted God's free pardon, a version of the story that could be read into Illingworth's account even if it was not his original intent. Illingworth's *Just Narrative* was republished in 1745 and 1746, in the latter instance as part of *Divine Judgement and Mercy Exemplified In a Variety of Surprising Instances*, alongside the Second Spira and the earl of Rochester. The text was accompanied by two woodcuts, one of Duncalf making off with a stolen bible behind the back

¹²²S. Paterson, *Bibliotheca Anglica curiosa* (3 vols, London, 1771), p. 129.

¹²³J. Britton et al., *The Beauties of England and Wales* (18 vols, London: Vernor, Hood, 1801–15), xiii, pp. 1229–32; G. Cooke, *Topographical and Statistical Description of the County of Stafford* (London: Cooke, [1830]), pp. 139–42.

¹²⁴S. Shaw, *The History and Antiquities of Staffordshire* (2 vols, London, 1798–1801), ii, pp. 230–1; D. R. Guttery, *The Prentice and the Parson: A Chapter from the History of Kingswinford* (Brierley Hill: Libraries & Arts Committee, 1950); E. Chitham, *The Black Country* (Stroud: Amberley, 2009); M. Pearson, *The Little Book of the Black Country* (Stroud: History Press, 2013), p. 59.

¹²⁵R. Sault, *The Second Spira* (London, 1693); M. MacDonald, 'The Fearefull Estate of Francis Spira: Narrative, Identity, and Emotion in Early Modern England', *Journal of British Studies*, 31 (1992), 32–61. The first Spira was an Italian Protestant, Francesco Spiera, who, in the sixteenth century, renounced his faith in the face of persecution by the Inquisition and then so despaired that he was damned as an apostate that he committed suicide. In a variety of English retellings over the next 150 years he became an archetype of the dangers of abandoning true Christianity and the pitfalls of religious despair.

¹²⁶MacDonald, 'Fearefull Estate of Francis Spira', pp. 51–3; Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Lives of Early Methodist Preachers* (4th edn, 6 vols, London: Wesleyan Conference, 1875), i, p. 299. MacDonald misses this 1740s phase of the use of Spira.

of Humphrey Babb as Margaret fetched a pot of ale, the second of Duncalf lying on straw in a barn, his left hand about to drop off, as he is visited by a crowd including a bewigged clergyman.¹²⁷

It was, perhaps, this republication that prompted the philosopher William Whiston to recall in his 1749 memoirs hearing the story of Duncalf as a ten-year-old boy and to suggest that Illingworth's narrative and Ford's sermon 'ought, in this sceptical Age to be reprinted' for the benefit of all who doubted or denied that Providence intervened in human affairs to punish the wicked.¹²⁸ That recommendation lay behind the republication in 1751 of Illingworth in an edition with Ford's *Discourse*, with Whiston's commendation on the title page. The increased scepticism about the case which we have seen led to a switch of Illingworth's title, from a *Just Narrative* to a *Genuine Account*.¹²⁹ A further edition of Illingworth's book, this time without Ford's sermon, was published in Worcester in 1757. It was prefaced with a short letter to the publisher Samuel Gamidge, possibly invented by Gamidge, from a 'worthy Clergyman', suggesting that the book be printed as a remedy against the 'growing Evil' of 'degeneracy from Virtue', and promising to buy 50 copies to distribute in his own parish. Priced at only two pence (compared to the one shilling for the 1751 edition), it was probably aimed at the industrial poor of the west midlands. Indeed, all traces of the original's anti-popery were removed – the stories of Illingworth and Newey that a Roman priest tried to convert Duncalf in return for curing him were the only excisions from the 1678 text – to make the tract more palatable to the rising number of Catholic poor of the mid-eighteenth-century Black Country.¹³⁰ Illingworth's account was further recycled in *Divine Judgements Exemplified* in 1778 as 'An Authentic Narrative', alongside the story of the Second Spira. Although the account of Rochester was dropped and the word 'mercy' omitted from the 1746 edition on which the whole was based, the theme of God's grace offered and accepted remained, particularly as the work closed with Newey's account of his visits to Duncalf.¹³¹ Methodists continued to promote the tale of Duncalf. An abbreviated version of Illingworth's account, along with Ford's discourse, was serialized in John Wesley's *Arminian Magazine* in 1784, while two decades later a short account of Duncalf, taken from Illingworth, was published in the *Methodist Magazine* as a 'useful' anecdote 'illustrative of Divine Providence and Grace'.¹³²

The repeated recycling of the story of a gruesome death in Restoration England, particularly as portrayed by an ejected cleric and an Anglican minister as a Providential warning against sin, might be taken as evidence of the continuation of seventeenth-century religious concerns across the eighteenth century, and hence play its part in the big historiographical battles of the period, including debates

¹²⁷No copy of the 1745 edition has been found, and it is not noticed by the English Short Title Catalogue, but a version with a separate title page from 1745 was included as a part of *Divine Judgement and Mercy Exemplified* (London, 1746).

¹²⁸Whiston, *Memoirs*, p. 5.

¹²⁹J. Illingworth, *A Genuine Account of the Man, whose Hands and Legs Rotted Off* (London, 1751). The date of publication is shown by various advertisements of the book that year: *General Advertiser*, nos 5108–9, 6 and 7 March 1750/1.

¹³⁰J. Illingworth, *A Just Narrative of John Duncalf* (Worcester, 1757); the only known extant copy is in the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, Los Angeles, call number BZ129j1757*. For the growing Catholic population of the Black Country, see M. Greenslade, *Catholic Staffordshire 1500–1850* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2006), pp. 181–3.

¹³¹*Divine Judgements Exemplified* (London, 1778). Newey's name was incorrectly printed as Newton.

¹³²*Arminian Magazine*, 7 (1784), pp. 213–18, 268–73, 324–6, 376–9, 433–6, 494–6, 545–8, 603–6, 652–3; *Methodist Magazine*, 29 (1806), pp. 365–7.

about secularization and the decline of religious belief and the supernatural, and the existence of a 'long Reformation' well into the Hanoverian age as recently re-emphasized by Robert Ingram. All are varieties of an argument about the coming of the modern world and the location of what Ingram has called an 'historiographical continental divide': on the one side the seas of early modernity, on the other the waters flowing 'swiftly and ineluctably into the large Ocean of Modernity. In each body of water swam wholly different species'.¹³³ It is the argument of this article that the history of death can speak to some of these arguments. Ariès' work on death's long history, indeed, was a meditation on the late coming of a 'brutal revolution in traditional ideas and feelings' in the later nineteenth century.¹³⁴ Examining the many ways in which the death of one hapless Staffordshire labourer was presented and re-presented across the long eighteenth century permits some ways of evaluating these questions. Rather than linear change, a decline of a Providential view to a curious one, there were cycles of interpretation, as both sociologists and historians of religion have recently come to argue. Readings of Duncalf's death are similar to what Jane Shaw has suggested were attitudes to miracles in the 'Enlightenment' period: a range of opinions that 'ebbed and flowed' rather than the triumph of one, sceptical or 'rational' model over an earlier divine one.¹³⁵ Nevertheless, Duncalf's death was 'disenchanted', and a Providential reading of his demise was replaced or overlaid by a variety of other lenses through which his end was viewed – medical, curious, local. Yet there was not one single moment, no 'continental divide' when a modern interpretation triumphed over an earlier one. Instead, there were a series of shifts at contrasting times for different groups or constituencies. The many afterlives of John Duncalf also allow a refinement of some recent arguments about prodigies and memory. First, the chronicle of his death retold questions the emphasis laid on predominantly and distinctively Anglican attitudes towards the supernatural in the work of William Burns on prodigies and Jane Shaw on miracles.¹³⁶ A more fine-grained approach to religious division and party is needed, for retellings of Duncalf's story expose the significance of links between groups within the established church and those beyond and their shared ideas about Providence, sin, and the role of the church, whether that be the common interests of sober nonconformists and low-church or Whig Anglicans in the later seventeenth century, or the idea of Methodism both within and later outside the Church of England in the eighteenth. Second, Shaw's suggestion of a single 'national memory of wonders' is too monolithic.¹³⁷ While it is important to consider the afterlives and later memories of a wonder, whether that be Mary Toft's claims to having birthed rabbits (as in Shaw's argument) or Duncalf's dying (as here), the wondrous could live long in cultural memories in a variety of ways and meanings. Duncalf endured a bad death and many varieties of a good death. There was a bible-stealing Duncalf and a false-swearing Duncalf, an anti-atheist

¹³³R. Ingram, *Reformation Without End: Religion, Politics and the Past in Post-Revolutionary England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), p. xi.

¹³⁴Ariès, *Western Attitudes*, especially p. 85.

¹³⁵Shaw, *Miracles*, pp. 17–18, 180–1. See also A. Walsham, 'The Reformation and the "Disenchantment of the World" Reassessed', *Historical Journal*, 51, 2 (2008), 527.

¹³⁶Burns, *Age of Wonders*, especially p. 186; Shaw, *Miracles*, especially pp. 3, 179.

¹³⁷Shaw, 'Mary Toft'.

Duncalf, a Duncalf for church comprehension, a medicalized Duncalf, a Duncalf the curiosity, a Staffordshire Duncalf, an anti-papist Duncalf and a Duncalf who was more palatable to Catholics, a Duncalf for the elites and a Duncalf for the poor, and a Methodist Duncalf. In none of these did Duncalf himself have any say; he was master neither of his death nor his many afterlives. Death may be universal, but it can reveal many different paths of history and meaning.

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