CHAPTER 2

The Demonic Possession of Richard Dugdale

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In July 1688, Richard Dugdale, a nineteen-year-old gardener in the village of Surey, near Whalley in Lancashire, began acting in an abnormal manner. According to his own account and that of his father, his unusual behaviour began shortly after he returned from an ecclesiastical festival in his parish church, where he drank to excess and became involved in a fight with one of the revellers. In this state he reportedly “offered himself to the Devil, on the condition that the Devil would make him a good dancer.” The next morning Richard claimed that he had a “burning pain” in his side, and in the nights following he reported the appearance of various supernatural entities in his bedroom. He experienced “strange fits which violently seized him”, and he felt an uncontrollable urge to dance.1

When a local physician was unable to stop the fits, which increased in frequency and intensity, Dugdale and his father became convinced that he was possessed by the Devil. The following April Dugdale, still plagued by these fits, presented himself to Thomas Jolly, a Congregationalist minister, asking him to expel the evil spirit that was allegedly the cause of his affliction. Dugdale was a member of the Church of England, but there was little likelihood that an Anglican clergyman would be able to accept such an assignment. The Canons of the Church of England of 1604 stipulated that an exorcism could be performed only with the approval of the bishop, and no such episcopal warrant had ever been granted. But Dissenters—a diverse group of nonconformists that included Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Quakers—were not subject to ecclesiastical control by the Church of England and therefore were free to perform such exorcisms. In doing so, however, they were expected to use only the biblically prescribed techniques of prayer and fasting, rather than the Roman Catholic ritual, which Protestants considered superstitious and magical.

1 [Thomas Jolly], The Surey Demoniack: or, An Account of Satan’s Strange and Dreadful Actings in and about the Body of Richard Dugdale of Surey, near Whalley in Lancashire (London: Jonathan Robinson, 1697); Thomas Jolly, A Vindication of the Surey Demoniack as No Impostor (London: Nevill Simmons, 1698).
On 8 May 1689 Jolly, together with John Carrington, a minister in Lancaster, and thirteen other Dissenting ministers, began the dispossession. Most of these clergymen, including Carrington, were Presbyterians, who had only recently joined forces with the Congregationalists in a ‘happy union’ to present a more united front against the Church of England. Since Protestant Dissenters had been granted the freedom to practice their religion by the Toleration Act of that year, the ministers could perform the exorcism publicly, and since Lancashire had the largest concentration of non-conformists in England, the ministers could expect large numbers to witness it. The crowds that attended the dispossession were so great that during one of the prayer meetings a hayloft in a barn where the exorcism took place collapsed under the weight of the onlookers. During these exorcisms, Dugdale’s fits continued, interspersed with periods of paralysis, but he also began to display additional symptoms that other demoniacs had been known to exhibit. He reportedly became temporarily deaf, blind, and mute, conversed in languages of which he had no previous knowledge, vomited stones, emitted “hideous” sounds that resembled those of beasts, foretold future events, predicted changes in the weather, and uttered blasphemies. At one point he threatened to tear one of the ministers to pieces.

The prayer meetings that were intended to expel Satan from Dugdale’s body continued without success for the better part of a year, during which time the crowds that attended them steadily decreased in size. Failure to successfully dispossess a demoniac was a persistent problem for Protestants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Catholics, who used a much wider array of rituals in their exorcisms, had achieved a considerably higher success rate in casting out demons, giving them a competitive advantage in the propaganda wars of the Age of the Reformation. On 24 March 1690 the ministers, voicing their disappointment and for all practical purposes admitting their failure, performed their last exorcism. The following day Dudgale, after taking medicine from the local apothecary, declared that the demon had left his body and that his symptoms had disappeared. Those symptoms did not reappear, and Dugdale faded into historical obscurity, spending the rest of his life as a gardener, untroubled by demonic assault.

3 [Jolly], The Surey Demoniack, 4; Jolly, A Vindication, 45–6.