

THE DIVINE DURANT: A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY
INDEPENDENT

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JOHN DURANT's career spans the revolutionary period of English history. Born in 1620, his chance to make a name for himself came as a result of the upheaval of the early 1640s: he died at the beginning of 1689. As a young man, he was himself an ardent supporter of radical political action, using his powerful sermons to inflame feeling and his influence over his flock to secure support for political moves. With maturity came moderation, a greater understanding of the need for reconciliation with old opponents, and in the world, material prosperity. When, however, after 1660 that 'day of blackness' which he had for some time foreseen came upon him and his fellow-believers, he was able to demonstrate in adversity the extent of his spiritual strength. While remaining highly individual, Durant is yet in many ways typical of the 'new men' of the 1640s and 1650s, who found opportunity in revolution and used their talents, whether as soldiers or as preachers, to make their mark on their times.

Durant's field of activity was Kent, and more particularly Canterbury, where he led an Independent congregation for over forty years. He was not, however, a Kentishman; he was indeed rootless as well as revolutionary when he first came to the county. Son of a respectable Cornish family with London connections, he had served an apprenticeship in the City as a soap-boiler: to the end of his life he remained to his enemies a 'washing-ball maker'. His family was evidently a talented one and his younger brother William, who was a scholar at Oxford in the early 1640s, later won a considerable reputation as a lecturer in Newcastle. John himself seems to have spent some time at Pembroke College, Oxford, but took no degree and probably did not even matriculate, as the University did not record his presence. Once arrived in London, he came under the influence of John Goodwin, the pastor of Coleman Street, who was later to vouch for his 'Learning and Manners', and by 1641 he had begun to preach himself. His sermons drew upon him the unfavourable attention of the House of Commons, at this time anxious to stamp out such unauthorized activities, and he was summoned, with four other lay preachers, to attend the House. He did not apparently appear there in person, but the three of the group who did

attend were sternly reprimanded and warned in the strongest terms to desist.¹

In 1642, a more hopeful opportunity presented itself in the form of service with the fleet. Durant spent some time at sea, and learnt to 'love and pray for seamen'. It was his first official ministry, and in a set of meditations later published as *The Christian's Compass: or, The Mariner's Companion* . . . he drew upon the incidents of a seaman's life to illustrate the temptations of the times and the need for spiritual regeneration. He was himself learning his craft: when he revised these early essays more than ten years later, he 'expunged and blotted out some more *pedantick phrases* which some of the heads were expressed in (according to my then juvenile fancie:)' . It was perhaps during a sermon of the more pedantic kind that there took place one of the incidents on which he meditated: a young man, asleep in the shrowds, fell into the sea and was almost drowned. Durant could benefit from experience: 'Well, let the young man learn to be less drowzy; and be thou more awaking & stirring in preaching.'

It was probably during these months at sea that Durant secured the interest of the Earl of Warwick, who later made him his chaplain-extraordinary and perhaps used his influence in the Cinque Ports to recommend him to the lectureship of St. Peter's, Sandwich, which was bestowed on him by Parliament in July, 1643. His experience with the fleet would undoubtedly have increased his influence with those 'rude seamen' who formed a substantial part of the inhabitants of the port, and during his three years as lecturer he built up a large following. He also made enemies: the author of *Gangraena*,² in a bitter attack on the Independents, took pains to abuse him for his violent preaching, his uncompromising refusal to abandon large household meetings even when he was offered the use of the church, and his personal ambition, 'viz. of a Washing-ball-maker to become such a rare man . . .'.³ By 1646 he had already become notorious for his extreme hostility to the king; he openly prayed that Charles should be brought up in chains to Parliament. Not merely the Presbyterian clergy but certain of the town rulers in Sandwich regarded such sentiments with strong misgivings: even Durant's friend and fellow-Independent, Simons, the 'more politick' minister of St. Clements, attempted to explain away the offending words, suggesting that the reference had been to 'chains of gold'. The young prophet himself was unmoved: he replied 'that was

¹ For short biographies of John and William Durant, see A. G. Matthews, *Calamy Revised* (Oxford, 1934), p. 173; see also Kent County Archives, Maidstone, Sa/C4(11) for John's references, 1643; *Journals of the House of Commons*, 1640-1642, p. 168.

² Thomas Edwards.

³ *Gangraena* (London, 1646), Part II, p. 150.

none of his meaning; but he meant, hee might be brought in chains of iron'.⁴

Durant's reputation as a powerful and fearless preacher spread through East Kent. In Canterbury, the largest town in the county and the focal point of its eastern section, a newly formed congregation of Independents was in 1646 looking for a pastor. Durant was invited to undertake the work. It was a considerable opportunity, for Canterbury was, by right of its Cathedral, a traditional centre of influence in the county, and within the city lived six or seven thousand people, more than double the number of Sandwich's inhabitants. The old 'cathedral party' had many sympathizers, both amongst the citizens, who had resented the devastation of their great church by Puritan fanatics, and amongst the influential gentry living in or near the town. Canterbury was, in fact, very much in the front line of controversy and a powerful preacher might hope to redeem many souls from error during a ministry there. Moreover, it was close to Sandwich, and Durant could and did maintain his links with his old followers. He even continued for some years officially to hold his Wednesday lectureship in the port.

Durant moved to Canterbury in the early summer of 1646, and established himself in a house in the Cathedral precincts. He prospered in every way. At first simply pastor of a separatist congregation, supported by the voluntary contributions of his flock, he acquired a paid lectureship in 1649, when his fellow Independents held political power both locally and nationally. In 1654 he inherited land left by his uncle Ralph, a London haberdasher, and from 1656 he was drawing an augmentation of a hundred pounds a year, in addition to the hundred pounds he already received from his lecturer's stipend. Unlike some of his Sandwich flock, he had no scruples concerning public maintenance of ministers: evidently believing that he was worthy of his hire, he did not hesitate to petition for his augmentation.⁵

There was in any case a growing family to support. Durant had married, and three daughters, Mary, Grace and Elizabeth, were born between 1648 and 1656. There was also a son, another John, and a fourth daughter, Renovata, who was christened in November, 1659. This last child was a 'renewal' of her sister Mary whose death earlier that year had come as a great blow to her father. In his family life, John Durant seems to have consistently rejoiced. Of his wife, Mary, we know only what her will can tell us: in old age at least she appears calm and practical, wanting her body 'decently interred with as little charge as may be . . .', fond of her daughters and grand-daughters and anxious that the £300 or so that she has to leave shall go to the younger children

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁵ *Calendar of State Papers Domestic, 1655-1656*, pp. 391, 392.

of the family rather than to any land-inheriting elder brothers.⁶ Her husband's sermons, however, abound in domestic similes: the images (used more than once) of the affectionate wife who longs for her husband's return, the sorrowing woman who can be 'prevailed withall not to be too sad, because it grieves the husband . . .',⁷ suggest a happy marriage. With the children, their father like his contemporaries was doubtless at times severe—he regarded necessary chastisement as a commonplace—but he was intimately involved with their care and their welfare. He knew, and used in his sermons, the details of family life: how 'a child swimmes when held up by the chinne',⁸ how when the father was away, the children pestered their mother to tell them when he would return, how the bigger child in a family walked while the younger one was carried in its father's arms. For his eldest daughter, Mary, he felt a particular affection. Of his 'nose-gay of flowers'⁹ she was the best: only the strongest sense of duty, as he admitted, enabled him to preach on the Sunday following her death a sermon which itself revealed a deepened understanding of grief, and of its spiritual temptations.

During these years of prosperity, Durant developed both as a leader and as a preacher. He ruled his own congregation with determination. There had been at least one opponent of his original appointment as pastor,¹⁰ and unanimity of opinion amongst the members of the new church proved increasingly hard to achieve. The qualities of independence and curiosity which had driven men and women into separation from the national church in the first instance made it difficult for them to resist the appeal of new doctrines and other teachers as these appeared. Theological argument was a constant delight as well as a duty, and acceptance of a body of common doctrine, as well as of a common discipline, was delayed while every point was earnestly debated. Durant, like many other Puritan pastors who had themselves challenged the old authority of priests and bishops, now found himself on the defensive. His strong personality asserted itself. He prayed and preached against division, against undisciplined wandering, ' . . . going from one high notion to another': the church in the winter of 1649 held a day of humiliation on account of its members, 'some degree of apostacy from our first love to christ and one to another'. Earlier in that same year, Durant had threatened to resign if certain demands of his with regard to the actions of members with

⁶ Somerset House, Dyer 136; Mary Durant died in 1701.

⁷ *Comfort & Counsell for Dejected Soules* (London, 1651), pp. 187, 152-53.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁹ *Altum Silentium* (London, 1659).

¹⁰ For this and other details concerning the organization of Durant's Canterbury church, see the Church Book deposited in the Dean and Chapter Library, Canterbury Cathedral (U37).

'scruples' were not met. The threat had been effective, and the pastor's terms were accepted, but still certain members failed to bring their children for baptism and the struggle against the lure of novel opinions continued throughout the 1650s.

It was necessary for defenders of discipline to combine. Together with the deacons and other influential members of his church, Durant supported in the spring of 1653 a move for a general council of congregational churches, and in Canterbury pressed for a joint week-day meeting with the other Independent congregation. This last suggestion was rejected by the sister-church, but Durant grew to exercise a *de facto* supervision of congregations in East Kent. Not only his old flock at Sandwich, who continually sought advice on their choice of pastor and on such intricate problems as the maintenance of the ministry, but also the Independent churches at Staplehurst and Dover asked for and received assistance in resolving local problems. Advice was often tendered in person, with Durant travelling to neighbouring towns in company of one or more of the prominent members of his own church. Both in theory and in practice he supported a measure of organization and a general agreement on basic issues amongst Independent congregations, and his position as a leading minister in East Kent was recognized by his inclusion amongst the ten clerical members named for the Committee for Scandalous Ministers for the county in August, 1654.

At home in Canterbury Durant was much occupied. He subscribed to a system of church organization which believed in the active participation of members in all the church's affairs: decision came after discussion, and while the pastor could influence and lead, he could not of his own authority command. Orders recorded in the Church Book were orders of the whole church, and discipline was enforced by the church's delegates and in the church's name: much time must necessarily have been spent in debate. When a decision had been reached, it often fell to the pastor, assisted by certain of his brethren, to implement it. Individual failings were considered with great care and on the whole with patience and charity, with the church's power to excommunicate reserved as the ultimate threat but rarely exercised. Durant was called upon to deal with some awkward cases: with what success, one wonders, did he reason with Susan Godferyes, whom he was instructed to admonish in 1652 for her 'going unto witches to enquire about a husband, and . . . going up & down to London in a distempered manner about it . . .', and for her 'unseemly & ungodly speech' when her faults had been pointed out to her on a previous occasion?

Despite the demands of administration and pastoral work, Durant had to find time to prepare lengthy sermons for delivery before an audience used to taking a critical interest in the preacher's art. He was

one of the Six Preachers of Canterbury Cathedral, and as such had a reputation to uphold. Moreover, there were amongst his colleagues in Canterbury some very able men, and he was the exception amongst them in his lack of a University degree. Doubtless he wished, as his enemies had suggested, to excel. His published sermons reflect both his labour and his success. They are in the best modern style of the mid-seventeenth century, vividly written, well related to everyday life and to local experience, intelligent and carefully planned. They do not lack stern admonition or even invective: against 'vain, jeering, negligent, lazy Gentry, who are *so set upon sport* and so set *against the persuasions of some godly Ministers . . .* so inveterately set against powerfull preaching, that nothing moves them; and they perswade others to goe no further then themselves': against 'scorners' who sneer at the Saints, saying '*Those precise persons lisp at an oath . . . perplex themselves . . . with duties, sermons, prayers, Church-fellowships, Christian meetings etc. . .*', and who think (erroneously) '*these people doe more then they need, and . . . you shall be saved at the last as sure and as soon as they . . . sooner and surer then they*': against (for Durant was nothing if not a realist) those careless optimists whose comfortable reaction to a sermon was only 'Tush, we hope all is not so bad as Preachers make it'.¹¹

It is not admonition alone with which these sermons are concerned, however. Some at least were delivered in order to aid those already converted and now grappling with the common and serious problem of spiritual despair, and these, published under the title *Comfort & Counsell for Dejected Soules*, gave practical advice on the avoidance of extremes of feeling, and encouragement to those who felt themselves cut off by their sins from all hope of salvation. Dejection, in Durant's vivid simile, is to be compared with Autumn and Winter, when 'Flowers fade, leaves fall, cold nips, trees wither, sap runnes downe, night growes long and dark too, wayes grow dirty, aire chilly, all things looke unlovely'.¹² However, winter passes and so will dejection: it is a temporary condition, not a prelude to eternal damnation. Elsewhere, Durant takes a less poetical and more sternly practical approach to the problem of comforting the believer. In a lengthy conceit, he likens Christ to that useful if not always admired seventeenth-century figure, the attorney, and points out how no Saint need fear when he has such a champion in the Court of Heaven. Speaking to a congregation of citizens, he can elaborate his conceit with familiar and homely examples: 'If wee should see a poore country-man at the doore to the Court: If, I say, wee should see him stand sad and confused in his thoughts (as not knowing what to do in such a case) how easily should we think to relieve him by putting him upon, or procuring for him an

¹¹ *The Salvation of the Saints . . .* (London, 1653), pp. 27, 28, 260.

¹² *Comfort & Counsell for Dejected Soules* (London, 1651), p. 14.

Advocate.' All his listeners, too, would appreciate the risks involved in offending such a protector: 'Do wee not see by experience, how reason makes a Client affraid to displease his Attorney, especially if his Attorney plead (as Christ doth) for nought?'¹³

From his pulpit in the Cathedral, Durant could hope to stir the minds and consciences of a larger, if less dedicated, congregation than that to which he ministered in his own church. The actual membership of this church was never large: by 1647 it had reached perhaps seventy, with another twenty joining in the period of Independent triumph following the Second Civil War. After 1650, the annual number of new recruits was never more than half a dozen and sometimes only two or three. The saints were, and knew themselves to be, an *élite*, a small, exclusive group surrounded by a hostile majority. 'The most are the worst, and the best are alwayes the fewest,' Durant himself declared.¹⁴ Both pastor and flock, however, were active in the world in the advancement of their cause, and ready to acclaim with their thanksgivings or to advance with their supplications the political triumphs of their friends. In a city which had for the most part supported the Kentish Insurrection against the Parliament (or more especially against its local Committee for Kent) in 1648, Durant's church held a day of thanksgiving for 'the Lords wonderfull suppression' of the revolt. In 1651, prayers were ordered for the armies 'now against the Scotts at Worcester', followed by a thanksgiving for the victory, and in 1654 Durant prefaced an edition of his seafaring meditations with a plea to the Saints to fill the sails of the outgoing fleet 'with a gale of prayers'.¹⁵ Political deviation was as much to be deplored as moral weakness: indeed, it was itself moral weakness, as in the case of the erring brother complained against in 1650 as one who was 'neglectful' and who 'did drinke the king's health'.

In the critical winter following the Second Civil War, Durant's own influence had been used to sway men against the king. He was spoken of after the Restoration as one who had been 'a principal agent in getting hands to the petition for bringing his late Majesty to his trial and death', and certainly some prominent members of his congregation, although not he himself, signed the Kentish petition for the king's trial.¹⁶ He was known to have friends amongst those in authority in Canterbury during the early 1650s, when men of extreme Parliamentary and religious views had taken their places as members of the city's ancient Burghmote and more recently established Committee:

¹³ *The Salvation of the Saints* (London, 1653), pp. 108, 125 *et passim*.

¹⁴ *The Spiritual Sea-man: or, a Manual for Mariners* (London, 1654), p. 43.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Dedication; Church Book (U37).

¹⁶ *Calendar of the State Papers Domestic*, 1680-1681, p. 505; for the signatories of the petition see the Bodleian Library MS., Tanner 57(2): at least 10 of Durant's congregation signed.

two of his own congregation became Aldermen. In 1651 he was asked to exert his influence on behalf of the imprisoned Royalist, Sir Thomas Peyton.¹⁷ Moreover, his reputation had now spread beyond East Kent. When it seemed necessary to the central government to employ a reliable man to raise a troop of horse in the county at the end of 1650, a blank commission was sent to Durant. He was on good terms with Robert Gibbons, a Colonel in Cromwell's army, he dedicated his *Spiritual Sea-man* to his 'very much esteemed friend, General Pen' and was spoken of with respect by Commissioner Peter Pett of Chatham as 'a knowne good man'. With reputation and valuable connections came the opportunity for patronage. Durant's contact with Pett arose from his support for his old friend Simons' son, now in 1655 seeking a post in the Navy. In a concise and businesslike letter, the minister signified his readiness to stand surety for the young man and thanked the Commissioner for his kindness to one whose father 'was a godly man & good preacher': he added the practical comment that it must surely be acceptable to the Lord to help the seed of his departed servants.¹⁸

The Canterbury church itself rose in its local world, being given in 1650 both the right to use the Cathedral chapter-house for its services, and a considerable amount of sequestered plate, 'viz. 2 flaggons, 3 cupps, 2 largdishes, & 2 lesser guilded'.¹⁹ Its members had originally consisted very largely of small craftsmen and their wives,²⁰ although a few more substantial citizens had from the beginning played a prominent part in its proceedings. By the mid-1650s, two or possibly three of its members sat on the Aldermen's Bench and another, Francis Butcher, had represented Canterbury in the Parliament of 1654. Such visible success brought its own dangers: Durant was aware of the tendency of the faint-hearted or cynical to join the religious group most favoured by the party in power, and bewailed early in 1653 the fact that 'profession begins to be (as wee say) in fashion; and . . . many take it up upon no better termes, and if times alter they would doe by their Religion (as by their garments) lay them aside, as out of fashion'.²¹

As Commonwealth developed into Protectorate, and as Durant himself settled down as a leading member of the new Establishment, he found himself increasingly defending a moderate rather than a revolutionary position. Whereas in the 1640s he had refused Presbyterian olive-branches, flaunted his own viewpoint and preached fiery political sermons, he was even as early as 1653 deploring controversy, wishing 'the names of Prelaticall, Presbyterian, Independant, Anabaptist etc.:

¹⁷ See Peyton's letter to Durant, 13th May, 1651 (B.M. Add. MS. 44846f2).

¹⁸ Public Record Office, State Papers Domestic, 18/117/113, 114.

¹⁹ Church Book (U37).

²⁰ Nine out of the 14 original male members were tailors, carpenters or leather-workers.

²¹ *The Salvation of the Saints* (London, 1653), p. 259.

. . . were all blotted out, and not only not mentioned, but not remembered among you', and himself refraining from putting forward his own views on the subject of a Second Coming because they might 'end in disputations'.²² During the 1650s, Independents as well as Presbyterians were increasingly horrified by the teachings—and by the success—of the Quakers, and Durant's emphasis on moderation and restraint was in part a reaction against the new radical danger. He hastened to Dover in 1656 to sustain the Independent congregation there in the face of a powerful Quaker movement in the town, and to remind them of the essential tenet of their belief, that Christ did not die for all 'but only for those elect ones which hee calls by the name of his sheep'.²³ Durant felt that divisions amongst the Elect were encouraging their followers to drift away, to assume 'loose and vain opinions': when he visited his brother in Newcastle—probably in the winter of 1659—he praised the unity he found amongst the ministers there, the absence of 'the noise of Axes and Hammers' in their pulpits.²⁴ Yet he could refer with gentleness even to the Quakers themselves, who did not hesitate to interrupt his own preaching in the Cathedral, speaking of them as 'a company of poor Creatures amongst us . . .'.²⁵ A real sense of opportunity lost seems to have been with him as he saw the Protectorate disintegrate and the clouds gather. It was time, he urged, 'for Beleivers to lay aside their bitterness which hath been their sin, and shame, many years . . . Let us in this imitate Christ, to carry it well at last, for a long time we have carried it harsh and ill'.²⁶

By 1660 Durant had withdrawn himself from politics: indeed, in words which came strangely from a man with his political past, he praised the clergy of Newcastle for their obedience to magistrates and their disinclination to 'intermeddle with the politick affairs'. Such protestations of neutrality, however, failed to convince the Royalist gentry and clergy now back in the seats of power. In Canterbury, the 'Cathedral party' rejoiced in the return of an Archbishop to the city and in the ejection of Durant and many of his fellow Dissenters from the pulpits of the Cathedral and the parish churches. Loss of livelihood was followed by active persecution: as early as the August of 1661 instructions came from the Privy Council 'to secure such as have been active under the late usurp't and tirrorannical power and that there is cause to suspect retaine their principles', and it was reported that Durant had been 'silenced' by the Canterbury Deputy Lieutenants, along with his associate Thomas Ventris and the blind preacher, Francis Taylor. At the beginning of 1662 a news-sheet again recorded

²² *The Salvation of the Saints* (London, 1653), Dedication, and p. 196.

²³ Church Book (U37)

²⁴ *A Cluster of Grapes* . . . (London, 1660), Dedication.

²⁵ *Altum Silentium* (London, 1659), pp. 10, 11.

²⁶ *A Cluster of Grapes* . . . (London, 1660), p. 181.

his arrest.²⁷ These enforced 'silences' proved short-lived. By 1663 Durant and Ventris were holding a regular conventicle in Canterbury,²⁸ proving like other dissenting ministers all over the country that while they remained in close proximity to their old congregations they would continue to lead them in despite of the claims of the beneficed clergy and of the provisions of the law. The Conventicle Act of 1664 and the Five Mile Act of 1665 reflected the anxiety of the Anglican majority in Parliament in the face of such widespread defiance. The penalties these acts imposed on those attending conventicles and on ejected ministers continuing to live in the vicinity of their old livings or in those centres of disaffection, the corporate towns, were severe enough. Even so, conventicles continued. In Canterbury, the very heart of the restored Anglican church, where as one saddened informer reported about 1668, there were in the parish of St. Paul's where Durant's meetings took place, four hundred or so communicants 'if they would come',²⁹ conventicles flourished. They were aided by sympathizers amongst the town rulers, such as the mayor of 1668-1669 who delayed as long as he dared publishing a new Proclamation against them.³⁰ In 1669 Durant was reported as preaching at one which met alternately in the mornings and afternoons of Sundays in the parishes of St. Peter's and St. Paul's.³¹ His fellow Independent, Ventris, had suffered six months' imprisonment during the previous year, but along with three other sufferers had continued throughout his confinement in the West Gate gaol to preach to his flock every Sunday and Wednesday, thanks to the connivance of the keeper.³²

In 1672 came a brief respite. The King's Declaration of Indulgence allowed Nonconformists to apply for licences to preach, and Durant obtained permission to hold meetings just outside the city walls, at Almery Hall in Longport, which adjoined St. Paul's parish: after a long break in his church's record of new members, thirteen names were added in 1673. In that very year, however, an angry House of Commons forced the withdrawal of the Indulgence, and intermittent persecution was resumed. About six years later Durant at last abandoned his work in Canterbury and withdrew to Holland, together with some members of the congregation.³³ His influence remained a source of anxiety to his old opponents, however. The Canterbury Dissenters were successfully re-establishing themselves in local government, and the mayor for

²⁷ Oxinden Letters, ed. D. Gardiner (London, 1937), ii, pp. 255, 256; *Calamy Revised*, p. 561.

²⁸ *Original Records of Early Nonconformity* . . . ed. G. Lyon Turner (London, 1911), iii, p. 466.

²⁹ *Congregational Historical Society Transactions*, v, pp. 126, 127.

³⁰ William Wynne, *Life of Sir Leoline Jenkins* (London, 1724), ii, pp. 659, 660.

³¹ Lyon Turner, iii, p. 465.

³² *Calamy, Continuation*, p. 551.

³³ Church Book (U37).

the year 1681-82 was Jacob Wraight, who had married Grace Durant in 1674, and who had himself been a member of Durant's congregation. Wraight's local enemies recalled with bitterness his father-in-law's past as 'the most seditious conventicle preacher in this county', one who had been instrumental in getting signatures to the petition for the trial of Charles I, 'the Belweather of the Independent faction' and 'a leading Rebel from his cradle'.³⁴

The date of Durant's return to Canterbury is unknown. It is possible that he came back after the issue by James II of his first Indulgence in 1687, although the Canterbury Congregation elected a new pastor, Comfort Starr, in the August of that year. If Durant had returned, he was perhaps an ailing man: he died in the winter of 1688-89, and was buried in the church of St. George's, Canterbury, on 27th February, 1689, having lived just long enough to see William of Orange accepted as king.

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³⁴ Public Record Office, S.P. 29/419/97.