Nonconformity in Country Parishes

By ALAN EVERITT

THE great age of Dissent in England lasted from the Restoration till the First World War. Since then Nonconformity has largely ceased to be the aggressive force in English life that it once was. The historian should be wary of saying that it can never become so again, for society rarely develops along regular lines, but proceeds by unpredictable fits and starts. It is not often possible to be absolutely certain that a human movement has reached the ultimate end of its allotted span of life. The power in recent years of the more extreme sects to attract numerous adherents to themselves, almost alone among Christian bodies outside the Catholic church, is one of the stranger vagaries of the times. Nevertheless, the more traditional dissenting denominations may be said to have come to the end of a certain cycle or phase in their history by the early years of the twentieth century.

Many people might be inclined to date the decline of Nonconformity rather earlier, for example from the days of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. But in fact the major dissenting bodies, despite important ups and downs in their fortunes, generally continued to expand till long after Charles Darwin. In rural areas it is very common indeed to find chapels founded, rebuilt, or extended up to the last decades of Queen Victoria's reign. A lonely Primitive Methodist chapel on the windswept Pennines above Middleton-in-Teesdale, for example, originally built in 1842, was extended and refronted in 1888. The Wesleyan chapel at Naseby in Northamptonshire, first erected in 1825, was enlarged and 'restored' in 1871, while a new Sunday School, nearly as large as the chapel itself, was added as late as 1903.[1] These two examples may be taken as typical of hundreds of others in country districts all over England.

The history of Dissent is one that should therefore be of some interest to the student of local agrarian society. The predilection of large and growing sections of the English population for a locally autonomous form of religion, unfettered by archbishops, popes, or presbyteries, is indeed one of the more striking peculiarities—one might almost say perversities—of English provincial society from the days of Charles I to those of Edward VII. It is one of the many signs that local attachments, far from declining with the growth of national consciousness, were in many ways becoming stronger: a fact which will cause no surprise to an observant reader of novelists like George Eliot and Mrs Oliphant. True, by no means all the traditional English sects placed equal emphasis on the autonomy of the local chapel. Compared with the Congregationalists the

[1] This information is from datestones on the buildings.

Wesleyans, for instance, have always been a highly organized body. Nevertheless the life of every Dissenting sect was centred in the local chapel. Its enthusiasm was the enthusiasm of a nexus of local dynasties, often closely inbred through generations of intermarriage. And without too greatly stretching the evidence, it may be said that the waning of Dissent began with the growth of centralization—in government, in provincial society, and in the organization of Nonconformity itself—during the last sixty or seventy years.

The importance of Dissent in provincial life has, of course, long been recognized, and has given rise to a very considerable literature of a kind. It must be confessed, however, that, faced with the sagging shelves of chapel histories and Dissenting hagiographies, even the most intrepid historian is apt to wilt. Is it really possible to make useful generalizations out of this edifying literature, or to harness its not inconsiderable scholarship to the interests of a more secular age? The work of scholars like Dr G. F. Nuttall has shown that it certainly is. Recently a whole crop of university theses and many local studies have been devoted to various aspects of Nonconformity, both local and national.[1] And in *Devonshire Studies* Professor H. P. R. Finberg himself contributed a witty and masterly study of the development of Nonconformity in the south-west.[2] The present paper makes no attempt to synthesize recent work or to explore the deeper spiritual problems of Dissenting history. It sets out with the limited aim of answering a single elementary question: in what types of rural community did Dissent tend to find a foothold and flourish? Was there any relationship between the differing species of local society and the proliferation of Dissent in certain well-defined areas, or its relative absence in others?

(i) *Nonconformity in 1851*

The remarkable regional diversity in the pattern of Nonconformity in England was first clearly shown to the world by the Census of 1851.[3] This census was the first to record religious allegiance, and because of the wrangles and disputes the results gave rise to, the exercise was never repeated. Although the present paper deals chiefly with the period before 1851, a preliminary glance at the census figures is instructive. These recorded both the numbers of

[1] Mr H. G. Tibbutt, for example, has published a valuable series of studies in Bedfordshire Nonconformity, each devoted to the history of a local Congregational or Baptist church.

[2] W. G. Hoskins and H. P. R. Finberg, *Devonshire Studies*, 1952, 'A Chapter of Religious History'. This study relates chiefly to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

[3] For a discussion of the significance, reliability, and limitations of the 1851 census record see Professor K. S. Inglis's important article, 'Patterns of Religious Worship in 1851', *Jnl Eccles. Hist.*, XI, 1960, pp. 74–86. The value of information on religious allegiance was much disputed at the time, but Professor Inglis advances a cogent and balanced case that on the whole it was conscientiously compiled and within its limits substantially reliable. For this paper I have relied on the summaries and abstracts of the census given under each county and parish entry in J. M. Wilson, *The Imperial Gazetteer of England and Wales*, 6 vols., 1870 (hereafter cited as *Imp. Gaz.*).

attendants at services on census Sunday, and the number of 'sittings' available in churches and chapels. For a variety of reasons, such as illness and bad weather, attendance at church on census Sunday was unusually low, so that attendance figures cannot be regarded as very reliable for a comparative guide to the strength of different denominations. The figures recording the number of 'sittings' in church and chapel are also open to obvious statistical objections; but they provide at least some kind of rough indication of denominational strength. What do they tell us?

Judged by the number of 'sittings' recorded in 1851, 44 per cent of the English population as a whole at this time were Dissenters, and 56 per cent Anglicans.[1] The census figures are probably in some areas misleading, particularly in the eastern counties where there were many large parish churches serving small and dwindling populations. In Norfolk and Suffolk particularly the number of 'sittings' probably overestimates the strength of Anglicanism by a considerable margin. It is quite possible that Dissenters may have formed half, or nearly half, the population in these two counties. Nevertheless, when all allowance is made, the census figures are of great interest and significance.

By far their most remarkable feature is the astonishing increase they indicate in Nonconformist numbers since the later seventeenth century. Though at the time of the Compton Census (1676) some towns had Dissenting congregations with several hundreds of adherents, the number of these was probably exaggerated by contemporary observers, of Nonconformist leanings, like Defoe and Celia Fiennes. The typical congregation rarely numbered more than fifty at this time, and it is doubtful if in any county Nonconformists comprised much more than 10 per cent of the population. Probably in many counties and most country districts they were far fewer than this, as we shall see below in considering their distribution in Kent. The great period of expansion came, of course, with the Evangelical Movement of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The next feature about the 1851 Census figures is the striking regional differences they indicate in the pattern of Dissent. At a first glance, the analysis of regional allegiance in TABLE I seems to suggest two principal and not unfamiliar tendencies in this pattern. In the first place Nonconformity appears to have been more powerful in the north than the south. In the whole of the north-east, from Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire up to the Scottish border, Dissenters apparently comprised more than half the church-going population, and in Durham and Northumberland as much as 60 per cent of it. In the counties south of the Thames, by contrast, they generally formed little more than one-third of the population. Secondly, Dissenters often appear to have been more strongly represented in 'industrial' than in 'agricultural' counties. The ten

[1] See TABLE I, 'General Religious Allegiance in 1851'.

TABLE I

GENERAL RELIGIOUS ALLEGIANCE IN 1851

	Total Church and Chapel Sittings	*Anglicans*		*Dissenters*		
		Sittings	%	*Sittings*	%	
1. Herefordshire	68,675	49,312	72	19,363	28	41
2. Rutland	17,299	12,131	70	5,168	30	40
3. Oxfordshire	109,301	74,369	68	34,932	32	39
4. Sussex	160,011	108,076	67	51,935	33	38
5. Surrey	219,094	143,783	66	75,311	34	37
6. Westmorland*	37,239	24,411	66	12,828	34	36
7. Dorset	120,082	77,886	65	42,196	35	35
8. Kent	299,296	194,443	65	104,853	35	34
9. Hampshire	212,161	135,720	64	76,441	36	33
10. Shropshire	143,663	92,435	64	51,228	36	32
11. Suffolk†	224,229	141,417	63	82,812	37	31
12. Middlesex	552,231	344,487	62	207,744	38	30
13. Berkshire	92,737	56,679	61	36,058	39	29
14. Essex	216,113	132,041	61	84,072	39	28
15. Somerset	287,353	174,723	61	112,630	39	27
16. Warwickshire	201,831	123,624	61	78,207	39	26
17. Worcestershire	138,668	85,155	61	53,513	39	25
18. Norfolk†	283,420	168,722	60	114,698	40	24
19. Hertfordshire	93,230	55,193	59	38,037	41	23
20. Devon	332,934	191,710	58	141,224	42	22
21. Staffordshire	279,516	161,217	58	118,299	42	21
22. Buckinghamshire	113,209	64,231	57	48,978	43	20
23. Cumberland	99,783	56,803	57	42,980	43	19
24. Gloucestershire	276,606	156,651	57	119,955	43	18
25. Northamptonshire	150,472	84,816	56	65,656	44	17
26. Wiltshire	158,694	87,843	55	70,851	45	16
27. Lancashire	708,217	383,466	54	324,751	46	15
28. Cheshire	229,711	121,882	53	107,829	47	14
29. Leicestershire	156,678	82,964	53	73,714	47	13
30. Huntingdonshire	45,014	23,568	52	21,446	48	12
31. Cambridgeshire	104,196	52,917	51	51,279	49	11
32. Lincolnshire	279,247	142,844	51	136,403	49	10
33. North Riding	161,062	79,740	50	81,322	50	9
34. Bedfordshire	87,814	42,557	48	45,257	52	8
35. Derbyshire	182,581	87,829	48	94,752	52	7
36. Nottinghamshire	150,024	70,928	47	79,096	53	6
37. East Riding	140,793	64,135	46	76,658	54	5
38. West Riding	665,428	276,910	42	388,518	58	4
39. Co. Durham	167,285	66,319	40	100,966	60	3
40. Northumberland	131,646	52,405	40	79,241	60	2
41. Cornwall	261,684	95,155	36	166,529	64	1
Total	8,359,227	4,641,497	56	3,717,730	44	

* The number of sittings in the four Baptist chapels in the county was not reported. These have been estimated at 1,000.

† The figures for Anglican sittings in these counties are probably affected by the exceptional size and number of ancient parish churches.

counties with the highest percentage of Anglicans—about two-thirds or more of the population—were all predominantly agrarian, including Herefordshire, Rutland, Oxfordshire, Shropshire, Westmorland, Dorset, Sussex, and Kent. In counties with a good deal of industry, by contrast, such as Yorkshire, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, and Durham, they formed less than half the population.

These overall tendencies certainly cannot be ignored. They were not entirely an optical illusion. But the more closely they are examined, the more unreliable they appear as generalizations. To some extent the disparities between different counties are merely due to the fact that Anglican churches tended, for reasons of history and settlement, to be more numerous in the south than the far north. West of the Pennines, moreover, in contrast with the east, Dissenters nowhere formed as much as half the population, and in Westmorland the proportion was exceptionally small (34 per cent). In Staffordshire and Lancashire, two of the most industrialized counties in England, the Nonconformist population was markedly lower (42 per cent and 46 per cent) than in agrarian counties like Huntingdonshire, Cambridgeshire, and Bedfordshire (48 to 52 per cent.[1] In the predominantly agricultural North and East Ridings the proportion of Dissenters, though lower than in the West Riding, was still remarkably high by national standards—much higher than in industrial Staffordshire—amounting to more than half the local population. Finally, we must not forget that absolute numbers may be as significant as percentages in assessing the strength of Dissent. And these show that of the thirteen counties with more than 100,000 chapel-sittings in 1851, eight were in the south and only five in the north, whilst four were predominantly industrial and seven or eight at that date predominantly agrarian: Kent, Somerset, Norfolk, Devon, Gloucestershire, Lincolnshire, Cheshire, and Cornwall.

The truth is that there was no simple equation between agricultural society and Anglicanism, or industrial parishes and Dissent. Nor was there any inherent tendency to Nonconformity in the north-country character as opposed to that of the southerner. There were areas of counties like Sussex and Suffolk where Dissent was nearly as strong as in a Nottinghamshire mining village or a West Riding clothing town. Ultimately, what is essential, if we are to explain the pattern of rural Nonconformity in England, is not large-scale generali-

[1] It might be thought that the figures for Lancashire would be affected by the size of the Roman Catholic population. In fact, though far more numerous in Lancashire than elsewhere, Catholics were still a relatively small minority. Judged by the number of church-sittings there were 383,466 Anglicans in the county, 324,751 Nonconformists, and only 55,610 Roman Catholics. The latter were outnumbered by both Congregationalists (80,072 sittings) and Wesleyan Methodists (107,983 sittings). Throughout this paper I have excluded Catholics from figures of 'Dissenters'; their case is obviously a special one. In most counties they apparently comprised only 1 or 2 per cent of the population in 1851, though 'sittings' are probably an unreliable indicator of Catholic numbers.

zation but a microscopic examination of the society of these places: of each county's economy as a whole, of the various rural economies within it, of the social structure of each local community in the county, and of the Dissenting sects and chapels within that community.

The 1851 Census also indicates many other regional differences between the various religious persuasions of England. A comparative study of religious allegiance in the four counties of Lincolnshire, Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, and Kent, for example, raises a number of intriguing speculations.[1] Why was it, to begin with, that (judged by the number of sittings) almost 40 per cent of the whole church-going population of Lincolnshire were Methodists, in comparison with only 21 per cent in Leicestershire, and no more than 14 or 15 per cent in Kent and Northamptonshire? Why was it that the old Dissenting bodies of Baptists and Independents formed a much larger proportion of the population of Northamptonshire than in any of the other three counties, three times as large, in fact, as in Lincolnshire? (There were few counties indeed where the Old Dissent was so deeply entrenched as in Northamptonshire.) Why was it that a West Country sect like the Bible Christians, intensely emotional and proletarian in character, found no adherents at all in three of these four counties, but more than 3,000 in far-away Kent? Why was it indeed that the more colourful or unusual sects—Latter Day Saints, Huntingtonians, Catholic and Apostolic Church, Lady Huntingdon's Connexion, and a whole crop of nameless 'isolated congregations'—generally found far more followers in Kent than in the other three counties?[2] And why were there more than 20,000 Particular Baptists in both Kent and Northamptonshire, whereas there were only 7,000 in Leicestershire and less than 5,000 in Lincolnshire?

Such seemingly anomalous facts, however trivial they may appear to a secular age like our own, are certainly in some way related to significant differences of local society as well as to more purely personal and spiritual causes. They are not wholly to be explained by different forms of local society. So far as Lincolnshire is concerned, no doubt, the strength of Methodism was due in part to the personal influence of John Wesley; for this was his native county. Yet if the divine fire was essentially personal and unique in its impetus, the way in which it spread was largely dictated by peculiarities of local economy, forms of family connection, and lines of social class. One does not need any profound knowledge of history, or any extensive acquaintance with chapel architecture, to recognize the marked social distinctions between, say, the Primitive Methodists, the Wesleyan Methodists, and the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion, whatever religious principles may have originated their

[1] See TABLE II, 'Religious Allegiance in Four Counties in 1851', on p. 184.

[2] Dissenters outside the three traditional groups (Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists) were three times as numerous in Kent as in the other counties.

TABLE II

RELIGIOUS ALLEGIANCE IN FOUR COUNTIES IN 1851

	Acreage	*Population in 1861*	*Parishes*	*Anglicans*	*Independents*	*Baptists*	*Wesleyan Methodists*	*Primitive Methodists*	*Other Methodists*	*Other Dissenters**	*All Dissenters*
Kent	1,013,838	733,887	425	C 479	86	107	184	26	45	52	500
				S 194,443	27,091	25,668	33,759	2,877	7,285	8,173	104,853
				65%	9%	8%	11%			3%	35%
							255(C); 43,921(S)				
							15%				
Leicestershire	514,164	237,412	214	C 289	41	85	129	53	20	26	354
				S 82,964	11,988	24,001	21,739	7,930	3,523	4,533	73,714
				53%	8%	15%	14%			3%	47%
							202(C); 33,192(S)				
							21%				
Lincolnshire	1,775,457	412,246	621	C 657	38	62	462	221	21	27	831
				S 142,844	11,508	13,620	78,862	25,164	4,517	2,732	136,403
				51%	4%	5%	28%			1%	49%
							704(C); 108,543(S)				
							39%				
Northamptonshire	630,358	231,079	303	C 292	56	87	97	16	9	29	294
				S 84,816	17,444	23,200	18,620	1,759	992	3,641	65,656
				56%	12%	16%	12%			2%	44%
							122(C); 21,371(S)				
							14%				

C=churches or chapels S=number of sittings * Excluding Roman Catholics and Jews

divisions. More intensive study of differences like these would undoubtedly point up many social peculiarities in each region and sect. In the limited space of this article only a few of these differences can be singled out for study, though I hope to discuss others in more detail in a subsequent paper.[1]

(ii) *Nonconformity in the Countryside*

Nonconformity of the older stratum is often supposed to be a predominantly urban phenomenon, but this supposition is not borne out by the facts. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries a great deal of it, almost certainly the bulk of it, was in fact based in the countryside.[2] In many towns, it is true, such as Canterbury and Northampton, Dissent was a powerful force, often much more forceful and vociferous than the mere numbers of its adherents might lead us to expect. It was also, of course, very powerful in London. But if one analyses sources like the subscribers' lists of celebrated Dissenting works in the early eighteenth century, one is likely to find that the truly urban subscribers were considerably outnumbered by those from purely agricultural areas and small market-centres. Of the 1,100 subscribers to the first volume of Philip Doddridge's *magnum opus*, *The Family Expositor* (1739), only 2 per cent came from London (where it was published) and 35 per cent from the larger provincial towns like Coventry, Liverpool, Hull, Oxford, Shrewsbury, and Bristol. By contrast 34 per cent came from very small rural market centres like Olney, Oundle, and Cullompton, and nearly 30 per cent from wholly agrarian parishes. Many of the 'urban' subscriptions, moreover, probably represented country people, since they came from booksellers in market towns, whose customers doubtless included villagers as well as townsmen. Probably at least two-thirds of the subscribers, therefore, were really of rural or semi-rural origin.

The country basis of much of the Old Dissent may be further illustrated from the numbers of Nonconformists recorded under each parish in the Compton Census of 1676. These figures cannot be regarded as exact; in some parishes it is clear that they were largely based upon guesswork. But they are the earliest figures of any kind that we have, and broadly speaking they are confirmed by other types of evidence. For Kent the figures have been edited by

[1] This paper will be based chiefly on a more detailed examination of the 1851 Census, related to forms of local society.

[2] An obvious factor in this distribution is the impact of the Clarendon Code. This is a complex subject which cannot be discussed in detail here. Two points may be made, however. First, the strictness of the ban on Nonconformity in incorporated towns varied a good deal with the type of Dissent, the current political situation, and the attitude of the local justices. That many groups, most of the time, in most boroughs continued to exist is undoubted. When licences were taken out under the Declaration of Indulgence, the largest numbers were granted to Dissenting groups in incorporated boroughs. Secondly, it is unlikely that the influence of the Clarendon Code still had any marked effect on local Nonconformity in these respects by George I's reign.

Mr C. W. Chalklin, and the following calculations are based upon his text.[1]

Of the total of 7,037 Dissenters recorded in the county of Kent in 1676, 51 per cent came from wholly rural parishes and 49 per cent from the towns. These gross figures need some care, however, in interpretation. Included among the urban 'nonconformists' in Kent were also the members of foreign congregations (principally French-speaking) in Canterbury, Sandwich, Maidstone, and Dover. The numbers of these groups are not given separately in the census; but in the 1640's they probably exceeded 1,500.[2] Probably, therefore, we must exclude a good third of the 3,464 urban 'nonconformists' in Kent if we are to arrive at a true figure for the native, indigenous Dissenters. This leaves a total of 5,882 local Nonconformists in the county as a whole, and of these 61 per cent lived in wholly agrarian parishes.[3]

We shall probably not be far wrong, then, in thinking that, outside London, at least one-half and probably two-thirds of all English Dissenters before 1740 were countrymen, and not townsmen. It would be foolish to belittle the importance of the urban element in English Nonconformity, but there was certainly nothing essentially urban about Dissent. No one with two eyes in his head and any knowledge of counties like Northamptonshire, Norfolk, Lincolnshire, Suffolk, and Devon could suppose that there was. There are still hundreds of chapels in the rural parishes of counties like these bearing witness to the former extent of Nonconformity in the countryside, though many are now fast going to decay.

The second point to notice about the Old Dissent was that, despite the claims of both its enemies and its champions, it seems to have comprised only a small

[1] See TABLE III, compiled from the parish figures in C. W. Chalklin, 'The Compton Census of 1676: the Dioceses of Canterbury and Rochester', *Kent Records: a Seventeenth Century Miscellany*, Kent Arch. Soc., Records Publication Committee, XVII, 1960, pp. 153–74. For the following calculations I have excluded three or four suburban parishes adjoining London, since properly these appertain to the metropolitan rather than the Kentish economy. It has usually been assumed in the past that the Compton figures refer only to communicants. It is now realized that they vary in their basis, but generally include adults only. The problems of the reliability of this 'census' and the extent to which it underestimates the number of Nonconformists cannot be discussed here. Mr Chalklin gives a balanced assessment (*loc. cit.*), to which the reader is referred. The membership of early Nonconformist churches in counties like Kent, Cambridgeshire, and Northamptonshire was certainly as a rule very small at this time, rarely as high as fifty. The real problem concerns the unknown number of 'occasional' conformists, and whether these should be reckoned as Dissenters or Anglicans.

[2] There were 900 in Canterbury, 500 in Sandwich, and 50 in Maidstone, according to a contemporary account.—British Museum, Thomason Tracts, E.285.6, p. 22. The figure for Dover is not given.

[3] This figure probably underestimates the total, since many 'urban' parishes in Kent (e.g. Maidstone and Cranbrook) included thousands of acres of countryside, with subsidiary villages and hamlets. We do not know how many Nonconformists in these places were in fact countrymen, and I have therefore reckoned all as 'urban' perforce. In emphasizing the strength of urban Dissent in Kent, Mr Chalklin (*op. cit.*, pp. 173–4) seems to have overlooked this fact. He has also included the foreign congregations, which I have excluded as explained above.

minority of the population. Even in Kent, where, to judge from the Compton figures, its adherents were unusually numerous in the 1670's, they represented no more than 8 per cent of the total population, or if we include the foreign congregations, 10 per cent.

TABLE III

DISTRIBUTION OF DISSENT IN KENT IN 1676

	Parishes	*Conformists*		*Nonconformists*		*Papists*	*Total*
		Number	%	*Number*	%		
A. RURAL PARISHES							
I. East Kent							
North-East Marshlands	18	1,347	98	20	2	—	1,367
Foothills	41	4,639	93	338	7	7	4,984
Downland	42	5,222	97	179	3	2	5,403
Forest of Blean	8	1,165	94	68	6	8	1,241
Romney Marsh	22	1,016	92	82*	8	—	1,098
Total	131	13,389	95	687	5	17	14,093
II. Mid-Kent							
Foothills	20	2,418	99	8	0·3	26	2,452
Downland	18	1,927	98	24	1	6	1,957
Chartland	33	5,107	95	255	5	9	5,371
Weald	33	9,667	83	1,986	17	29	11,682
Total	104	19,119	89	2,273	11	70	21,462
III. West Kent							
Thames-side parishes and Hoo	11	1,066	99	16	1	—	1,082
Foothills	12	2,087	98	34	2	3	2,124
Downland	16	1,529	99	19	1	1	1,549
Chartland	17	2,052	97	52†	3	11	2,115
Weald	16	5,483	96	177	4	27	5,687
Total	72	12,217	97	298	3	42	12,557
IV. Unclassifiable Rural Parishes	9	1,402	82	315	8	1	1,718
V. All Rural Parishes	316	46,127	93	3,573	7	130	49,830
B. URBAN PARISHES	34	17,535	83	3,464	17	63	21,062
C. ALL PARISHES‡	350	63,662		7,037	10	193	70,892

* Of these, 50 were in Lydd parish.

† Of these, 40 were in Snodland.

‡ The Compton Census, on which the figures are based, does not cover the whole of Kent. There are no surviving returns for 53 parishes, of which the chief group is the 31 parishes of the deanery of Shoreham in West Kent. The 350 parishes covered by the surviving returns therefore represent about seven-eighths of the county.

The Compton figures, it is true, are open to serious question; but when the records of individual congregations are examined, it is clear that, before the Evangelical Awakening, the membership of the typical chapel was surprisingly small. None of the five or six groups of Dissenters in Northampton, at the time when Philip Doddridge accepted the call to Castle Hill Chapel in 1729, numbered more than forty or fifty communicants; and this was not at all untypical. Mrs Spufford has found much the same conditions in late-seventeenth century Cambridgeshire. In Northampton Doddridge built his own congregation up to a membership of three hundred at its maximum; but this was a remarkable feat of skill and industry on his part, prophetic rather of the future Awakening, with its hordes of converts, than of the limited, Puritan past. Although large numbers of people often attended chapels of which they never became formal members, it is clear that, in speaking of the Old Dissent, we are in general dealing with numbers of quite a different order of magnitude from those of Victorian Nonconformity.

(iii) *Nonconformity in the Forests*

How were these groups of rural Dissenters distributed between the different types of agrarian economy alluded to above? The figures for Kent in the Compton Census of 1676 have been analysed in detail and are given in TABLE III. Kent is a county which, owing to geological, climatic, and historical causes, is sharply divided into distinct agrarian regions. Between the Surrey border and Thanet it may be said to fall into three parts: West Kent, Mid-Kent, and East Kent. North and south, it is naturally divided into riverside marshes (separated by the Forest of Blean between Faversham and Canterbury), fertile (often loamy) foothills, flinty chalk downlands, sandy and stony chartlands, the old Wealden forest, and a second extensive area of marshland around New Romney. Altogether there were (and still are) thirteen or fourteen distinct rural economies within the county, and the distribution of Nonconformity varied strikingly between them.

In the rural parishes of East Kent Dissenters numbered 5 per cent of the population; in Mid-Kent 11 per cent; and in West Kent, despite the relative proximity of London, no more than 3 per cent. As between the different types of economy in each division, differences were equally marked. In all the scores of downland parishes in the county, whether in East, West, or Mid-Kent, there were no more than 230 Dissenters altogether, or less than 2 per cent of the communicant population. Dissenters were everywhere most numerous in the forest parishes, and in the Wealden area of Mid-Kent they comprised as much as 17 per cent of the population. In some Wealden parishes the proportions were much higher than this: in Staplehurst 35 per cent, in Frittenden and Sandhurst 39 per cent, and in Smarden no less than 48 per cent. In fact more

than 60 per cent of all the rural Nonconformists in Kent were to be found in the Weald, though this area probably comprised only one-quarter of the rural population as a whole.

What is the explanation of this remarkable prevalence of Dissent in the forest parishes and its equally curious absence from the chalk downlands? It is significant that in chalk and limestone regions in other counties at this time, such as the Lincolnshire and Leicestershire Wolds, the Old Dissent often seems to have been conspicuous by its absence. It is equally remarkable how prevalent it was in woodland regions in other shires, such as Rockingham Forest in Northamptonshire and Macclesfield Forest in Cheshire.[1] In the past the predominance of Dissent in rural areas like the Weald has usually been attributed to the cloth industry. Quite why there should be this apparent association between sectarian Christianity and cloth has always seemed, to one student of history at least, something of a mystery. When one looks more closely into the distribution of rural Dissent, however, it becomes clear that it also flourished in many districts where there was no cloth manufacture to speak of. The truth rather seems to be that the link was only an indirect one, and that cloth-making and Nonconformity were probably fostered independently by certain local characteristics peculiar to the society and settlement pattern of these areas. What were these characteristics so far as Dissent was concerned?

In answering this question, the Weald is further examined as a case-study. In other areas of strong Dissent, like the West Riding dales, east Devon, south-east Lancashire, east Cheshire, north Warwickshire, west Leicestershire, and Rockingham Forest, many of the same settlement characteristics appear. But forms of local society are rather echoed than repeated precisely in different regions, and it must be left to other students to examine these different districts in greater detail. In all these areas it seems to the present writer that the proliferation of Dissent was due to a conjunction of favourable circumstances rather than to any single universal cause. Not all the operative circumstances in the Weald were apparent elsewhere, but as a rule two or three elements in the syndrome seem to have been present.

The first characteristic fostering Dissent in the Weald was no doubt the exceptional size of the parishes, especially in the Mid-Kent Weald, where Dissent was strongest. On the downlands of East Kent the average parish extended to less than 1,600 acres, and many parishes were of under 1,000 acres. In the Weald, by contrast, the average parish covered nearly 5,000 acres, and several were twice this size. Goudhurst, for example, covered 9,800 acres, and Cranbrook 10,400 acres; the original area of Wrotham amounted to nearly

[1] For information about Macclesfield Forest I am indebted to Dr R. C. Richardson. For Northamptonshire I have relied on contemporary tracts, local chapel histories, and licences under the Declaration of Indulgence.

11,000 acres, of Westerham to 11,100 acres, and of Tonbridge to more than 15,000 acres.[1] In these vast parishes many families lived far away from their parish church, often as much as several miles. No doubt they occasionally worshipped there; but it is impossible to imagine a family with young children, who lived in an outlying hamlet or 'forstal' in one of these parishes, *regularly* attending their local church, especially during winter months when Wealden roads were notoriously difficult to negotiate. In the large parishes of the north of England, subsidiary Anglican chapels were often to be found in dependent settlements like these. But for some reason outlying chapels were very rare in Wealden parishes in the seventeenth century. There is evidence that they had existed before the Reformation; but by the period we are concerned with none at all seem to have remained in use in the great parishes of Goudhurst, Cranbrook, and Tonbridge. Such areas were ripe, therefore, for the development of Dissenting chapels of their own, independent of the established church.

The scattered nature of Wealden settlement was a further factor favouring Dissent. Even today it is not at all unusual to find forty or fifty separate settlements in a Wealden parish. In Smarden, for instance (not a particularly extensive parish, of 5,385 acres), there are still sixty-two distinct hamlets and isolated farms, nearly all of them medieval in origin. In the nineteenth century many new Anglican churches were built to serve outlying hamlets in parishes of this kind, for instance at Kilndown, Ide Hill, Corks Pond, Mark Beech, Bough Beech, and Four Elms. But in the seventeenth century there was only a single instance of any attempt to solve the problem by dividing an ancient parish. This occurred when the 11,000-acre parish of Wrotham, stretching seven miles from its northernmost tip on the downs to its southern edge in the Weald, was divided into three portions during the Commonwealth period. The division was later quashed by the Restoration church, but it had resulted in the remarkable little Interregnum church of Plaxtol, built by the local Puritan squire in 1648, and still almost as Gothic in its inspiration as any medieval church in the county, or the well-known Laudian building at Staunton Harold in Leicestershire, erected about the same time.[2] Nowhere else in Kent, however, was any attempt made to build a new church till Tunbridge Wells became a fashionable spa in the late seventeenth century, and a new chapel was built near the springs and dedicated to King Charles the Martyr. Elsewhere, such additional places

[1] Wrotham and Westerham parishes were not wholly within the Weald, and the original settlement in each case was strictly speaking outside its borders; but most of the area of the two parishes was woodland in character. Originally Westerham included the whole of what is now Edenbridge parish. Though Edenbridge had its own medieval church, and by Hasted's time had been formed into a separate parish, it still remained a dependent chapelry of Westerham.—E. Hasted, *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent*, 2nd edn, III, 1797, p. 188. In many counties forest parishes tended to be larger than fielden. In Warwickshire, for instance, Tanworth-in-Arden covered 9,400 acres, Wootton Wawen 8,700, and Hampton-in-Arden 11,052.

[2] Hasted, *op. cit.*, V, pp. 22–5, 27.

of worship as were built in rural areas before the nineteenth century were, without exception, Nonconformist in origin.

The spread of Dissent in the Weald was further facilitated by the comparative weakness of the local manorial structure. Manorial organization in Kent is generally supposed to have been weaker than in the Midlands; but in the half of the shire to the north and east of the Weald, this weakness had in many ways been offset, particularly under the Tudors and Stuarts, by the growing power of the gentry, both in economic standing and in matters of local government. If the homes of the major county families of Kent in the seventeenth century—knights, baronets, and peers—are plotted on the map, few will be found in the Weald. Their parks and mansions were with few exceptions sited on the chartlands or the downs. Twysdens, Oxindens, Hardreses, Haleses, Scotts, Wottons, Harfleetes, Boyses, Finches, Sackvilles, Tuftons, Filmers, Honywoods, St Legers, Sondeses, Walsinghams, Diggeses: these and a score of other leading county families in the shire all lived outside the Wealden area, though a number of them possessed scattered or outlying property within it. There were gentry in the Weald, but most of them belonged to comparatively minor families, with a modest patrimony, and little power to overawe the numerous clothiers and independent yeomen of the parish.[1]

There can also be no doubt that the changing structure of population in the Weald in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was a major factor in its propensity to Dissent. As has been argued elsewhere, one of the striking differences between forest and fielden areas of England generally in this period was that, while the population of the latter often remained numerically stationary or in some cases declined, the inhabitants of forest and heathland districts generally tended to increase in numbers. There is a good deal of evidence that a new and final wave of settlement was taking place in the woodlands of England at this time. Much of the rapid growth in the English population between Henry VIII's reign and the Civil War was probably absorbed by these latter areas: partly because there was still waste land to colonize, partly because the land was poorer and less in demand, and partly because newcomers could more easily squat down without molestation in an area where manorial control was weak.[2]

By 1640 districts like the Weald had become some of the most densely settled in the countryside. Contemporaries like John Norden and William

[1] Cf. A. M. Everitt, *The Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion: 1640–60*, 1966, ch. II. Many of the greater parks of Kent, such as Knole and Squerryes, were situated on the stony, infertile greensands in the chartland belt, or 'Quarry Hills' as the area was called. The Kentish word 'chart' means 'rough common, overrun with gorse, broom, bracken', and is identical with the Norwegian word *kart*, 'rough, rocky, sterile soil'. Much of the land was of little use but for woods and parks.

[2] For this and the following paragraphs see my chapter on 'Farm Labourers', pp. 396–465, in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, IV, *1500–1640*, ed. Joan Thirsk, 1966.

11,000 acres, of Westerham to 11,100 acres, and of Tonbridge to more than 15,000 acres.[1] In these vast parishes many families lived far away from their parish church, often as much as several miles. No doubt they occasionally worshipped there; but it is impossible to imagine a family with young children, who lived in an outlying hamlet or 'forstal' in one of these parishes, *regularly* attending their local church, especially during winter months when Wealden roads were notoriously difficult to negotiate. In the large parishes of the north of England, subsidiary Anglican chapels were often to be found in dependent settlements like these. But for some reason outlying chapels were very rare in Wealden parishes in the seventeenth century. There is evidence that they had existed before the Reformation; but by the period we are concerned with none at all seem to have remained in use in the great parishes of Goudhurst, Cranbrook, and Tonbridge. Such areas were ripe, therefore, for the development of Dissenting chapels of their own, independent of the established church.

The scattered nature of Wealden settlement was a further factor favouring Dissent. Even today it is not at all unusual to find forty or fifty separate settlements in a Wealden parish. In Smarden, for instance (not a particularly extensive parish, of 5,385 acres), there are still sixty-two distinct hamlets and isolated farms, nearly all of them medieval in origin. In the nineteenth century many new Anglican churches were built to serve outlying hamlets in parishes of this kind, for instance at Kilndown, Ide Hill, Corks Pond, Mark Beech, Bough Beech, and Four Elms. But in the seventeenth century there was only a single instance of any attempt to solve the problem by dividing an ancient parish. This occurred when the 11,000-acre parish of Wrotham, stretching seven miles from its northernmost tip on the downs to its southern edge in the Weald, was divided into three portions during the Commonwealth period. The division was later quashed by the Restoration church, but it had resulted in the remarkable little Interregnum church of Plaxtol, built by the local Puritan squire in 1648, and still almost as Gothic in its inspiration as any medieval church in the county, or the well-known Laudian building at Staunton Harold in Leicestershire, erected about the same time.[2] Nowhere else in Kent, however, was any attempt made to build a new church till Tunbridge Wells became a fashionable spa in the late seventeenth century, and a new chapel was built near the springs and dedicated to King Charles the Martyr. Elsewhere, such additional places

[1] Wrotham and Westerham parishes were not wholly within the Weald, and the original settlement in each case was strictly speaking outside its borders; but most of the area of the two parishes was woodland in character. Originally Westerham included the whole of what is now Edenbridge parish. Though Edenbridge had its own medieval church, and by Hasted's time had been formed into a separate parish, it still remained a dependent chapelry of Westerham.—E. Hasted, *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent*, 2nd edn, III, 1797, p. 188. In many counties forest parishes tended to be larger than fielden. In Warwickshire, for instance, Tanworth-in-Arden covered 9,400 acres, Wootton Wawen 8,700, and Hampton-in-Arden 11,052.

[2] Hasted, *op. cit.*, V, pp. 22–5, 27.

of worship as were built in rural areas before the nineteenth century were, without exception, Nonconformist in origin.

The spread of Dissent in the Weald was further facilitated by the comparative weakness of the local manorial structure. Manorial organization in Kent is generally supposed to have been weaker than in the Midlands; but in the half of the shire to the north and east of the Weald, this weakness had in many ways been offset, particularly under the Tudors and Stuarts, by the growing power of the gentry, both in economic standing and in matters of local government. If the homes of the major county families of Kent in the seventeenth century—knights, baronets, and peers—are plotted on the map, few will be found in the Weald. Their parks and mansions were with few exceptions sited on the chartlands or the downs. Twysdens, Oxindens, Hardreses, Haleses, Scotts, Wottons, Harfleetes, Boyses, Finches, Sackvilles, Tuftons, Filmers, Honywoods, St Legers, Sondeses, Walsinghams, Diggeses: these and a score of other leading county families in the shire all lived outside the Wealden area, though a number of them possessed scattered or outlying property within it. There were gentry in the Weald, but most of them belonged to comparatively minor families, with a modest patrimony, and little power to overawe the numerous clothiers and independent yeomen of the parish.[1]

There can also be no doubt that the changing structure of population in the Weald in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was a major factor in its propensity to Dissent. As has been argued elsewhere, one of the striking differences between forest and fielden areas of England generally in this period was that, while the population of the latter often remained numerically stationary or in some cases declined, the inhabitants of forest and heathland districts generally tended to increase in numbers. There is a good deal of evidence that a new and final wave of settlement was taking place in the woodlands of England at this time. Much of the rapid growth in the English population between Henry VIII's reign and the Civil War was probably absorbed by these latter areas: partly because there was still waste land to colonize, partly because the land was poorer and less in demand, and partly because newcomers could more easily squat down without molestation in an area where manorial control was weak.[2]

By 1640 districts like the Weald had become some of the most densely settled in the countryside. Contemporaries like John Norden and William

[1] Cf. A. M. Everitt, *The Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion: 1640–60*, 1966, ch. II. Many of the greater parks of Kent, such as Knole and Squerryes, were situated on the stony, infertile greensands in the chartland belt, or 'Quarry Hills' as the area was called. The Kentish word 'chart' means 'rough common, overrun with gorse, broom, bracken', and is identical with the Norwegian word *kart*, 'rough, rocky, sterile soil'. Much of the land was of little use but for woods and parks.

[2] For this and the following paragraphs see my chapter on 'Farm Labourers', pp. 396–465, in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, IV, *1500–1640*, ed. Joan Thirsk, 1966.

Harrison, and many disputes in the Exchequer and Court of Requests, bear witness to the rapid growth of the cottage populations in areas like the Forest of Dean, the Forest of Kingswood, Feckenham Forest, the heaths and woodlands bordering Warwickshire and Staffordshire, and the forests bordering Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire. Analysis of the Compton Census of 1676 confirms that in Kent the Wealden parishes were by that date the most thickly settled rural areas in the county. There were then less than 8 acres of land to every rural inhabitant in the Weald, compared with 11 acres on the downland, 18 in the low-lying parishes along the north coast of Kent, and 44 in Romney Marsh.

What was the consequence of this rapid growth of forest populations? Many contemporaries believed it led to lawless and semi-heathen communities of squatters and social outcasts.[1] The hostile views they expressed, however, probably tell us only part of the truth. The fact seems to be that by the mid-seventeenth century there were two kinds of community in woodland districts like the Weald of Kent. On the one hand there were the older centres of population, like Goudhurst and Cranbrook, with a powerful core of more rooted, stable, and prosperous families of freeholders and clothiers, who had long been natives of the area. On the other hand there were the newer squatters' communities, settled on sandy tracts and heaths like Ide Hill, Goathurst Common, Kennington Lees, and Seal Chart, largely composed of very poor cottagers, with a substantial leaven of recent migrants. In all probability the strictures of writers like Aubrey and Norden upon forest dwellers were really more applicable to these latter settlements. With the relaxation of local control by the justices of the peace during the Commonwealth period, the lawless inclinations of heathland communities became a frequent subject of complaint. When the earl of Dorset returned to Kent after the Civil War, his steward reported to him that the "poor and of a better sort" on Seal Chart "are yeomen so thievish and unconscionable that all the care [that] can be taken will not, without arresting some of them, and send[ing] them to prison, reform them. I have made many journeys to one poor old justice (and he dwells six miles from me) but to little purpose, the poor of Senoke [Sevenoaks, the adjoining parish] are grown so insolent."[2]

These two types of forest settlement may well have fostered distinct brands of Nonconformity: the older and more stable communities encouraging the more traditional forms of Dissent, already prevalent in centres like Cranbrook and Goudhurst by the time of the Civil War: and the newer, heathland communities

[1] Cf. A. M. Everitt, *Change in the Provinces: the Seventeenth Century*, Leicester University, Dept. of English Local History, Occasional Papers, 2nd ser., 1, 1969, pp. 22–3.

[2] Quoted from a document in the Kent County Archives Office, in Everitt, *Community of Kent*, pp. 171–2.

of squatters encouraging the more extravagant and millenarian kinds of sect. It is difficult to prove this thesis conclusively for the seventeenth century; but in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries it is certain that Methodism and eccentric messianic sects tended to flourish in 'outcast' settlements of this type, particularly in areas like Kingswood, Wychwood, and the Forest of Blean.[1] It is possible that a comment made by Canon J. J. Raven in 1895 in this connection, no doubt with a certain humorous intent behind it, may contain more than a grain of truth. Discussing the different brands of Dissent in Suffolk he remarked: "High predestinarian doctrine [i.e. of the Old Dissent], chiefly of the Particular Baptist type, seems to flourish more on the heavy soils, while the sudden conversions of various forms of Methodism have been more frequent on the sands and gravels."[2] For it was on the poorer sands and gravels that squatters' settlements tended to flourish.

(iv) *Nonconformity in Boundary Settlements*

We must not make the correlation between Dissent and forest societies too simple, however. Even in the seventeenth century Nonconformity was also found elsewhere in the countryside. Another form of rural community in which it tended to proliferate was the frontier settlement, situated on the boundary between two parishes. Places of this kind tended to be more frequent in forest districts, where waste land was more abundant; but they were not confined to woodlands. In Kent, where they were exceptionally numerous, they were to be found in most parts of the county. In Cowden, for example, a Wealden parish on the Sussex border, there are still nine outlying settlements situated on the parish boundary. In Lenham, a mid-Kent parish straddling the downs and the chartlands, the parish border passes through the middle of eleven distinct hamlets and farmhouses. In Elham, a large downland parish of East Kent, the boundary bisects no fewer than thirteen subsidiary communities. The origins of these settlements are outside the scope of this paper; but most of them certainly go back to the fourteenth century, and probably a good deal earlier; a few, indeed, are recorded in Anglo-Saxon charters. At least seventeen of the thirty-three in these three parishes are mentioned in documents dating from before 1385, and many of the rest, on topographical or toponymic grounds, must probably be assigned to an equally early period.[3]

Dissent was not found in more than a few of these boundary settlements, of course. Most of them have remained solitary farmsteads ever since their foun-

[1] For the Forest of Blean see P. G. Rogers, *Battle in Bossenden Wood*, 1961, relating to the followers of John Nichols Tom in this area; for Kingswood, *Imp. Gaz.*, *sub* Kingswood; for Wychwood, R. M. Marshall, *Oxfordshire Byways*, [1949], pp. 146–7.

[2] J. J. Raven, *The History of Suffolk*, 1895, p. 254. I owe this reference to Mr Norman Scarfe.

[3] J. K. Wallenberg, *Kentish Place-Names*, 1931, *passim*; and *The Place-Names of Kent*, 1934, pp. 81–3, 223–7, 431–5.

dation. A number, however, at some period of their history, gradually developed into populous communities in their own right. In Kent these kinds of boundary settlement are often distinguished by characteristic suffixes, such as *common* (e.g. Goathurst Common, on the border of Sundridge and Chevening); or *minnis*, a Kentish word meaning 'land held in common' (e.g., Stelling Minnis and Rhodes Minnis); or *lees*, a word in Kentish usage often referring to 'rough commonland or pasture' (e.g. Challock Lees and Kennington Lees); or simply the word *green* (e.g. Grafty Green, on the border of Lenham and Boughton Monchelsea). Places like these were the kind of boundary settlements that often proved conducive to Dissent. Many, it will be noticed from their names, were situated on common land, shared between two or three parishes, where jurisdictions were difficult to define and tended to come into dispute. Such conditions often fostered independent or (according to one's viewpoint) lawless behaviour; for in such a community it was always easy, on the approach of the parish constable, to claim that the inhabitants in question were not under *his* jurisdiction but that of the next parish.

In Leicestershire, a classic example of such a settlement is the village of Walton, a few miles east of Lutterworth. Nowadays the boundary has been adjusted to include the whole of Walton in Kimcote parish; but originally it passed through the middle of Walton village so that half the settlement lay in Kimcote and half in Knaptoft. Walton is certainly a very ancient settlement, for it is mentioned in Domesday, and is quite possibly older than either Knaptoft or Kimcote. It may have originated as a settlement of British serfs or slaves, for the name may mean 'the *tun* of the Welshmen'. Or alternatively it may mean 'the *tun* in a wood'. Either meaning would explain its subsidiary relationship to Kimcote and Knaptoft, of which it has remained an outlying appendage, with no parish church of its own—though in medieval times there was a chapel—until today. Yet it was large enough to develop a strong community life, with several times the population of Kimcote and many times that of the now vanished village of Knaptoft. In George III's reign there were a number of shopkeepers and craftsmen among its inhabitants, and probably many more framework-knitters than farm workers. How far back the Nonconformist traditions of this boundary settlement go we do not know; but during Queen Victoria's reign there were at least two Dissenting chapels within it, whereas there were none in either Knaptoft or Kimcote.[1]

Another, though much later, example of a Leicestershire boundary settlement with a strong Dissenting tradition is Coalville. It originated in the 1820's,

[1] The above paragraph is based on the accounts for Kimcote and Walton in nineteenth-century directories, John Nichols's *Leicestershire*, *Imp. Gaz.*, *The National Gazetteer of Great Britain and Ireland*, [1868] (hereafter cited as *Nat. Gaz.*). I am also indebted for information to the Rev. R. A. Cowling. The Methodist and Baptist chapels were both in Walton village. The former has disappeared; the latter is still in use.

under the name of Long Lane, at the junction of three distinct parishes, Ibstock, Whitwick, and Packington, and the separate chapelry of Snibston. By 1838 its first Nonconformist chapel had been erected, by the Baptists, and by 1870 (with a population of about 1,700) there were no fewer than four dissenting churches, with but a single place of worship for Anglicans.[1] No doubt other factors than its situation at the junction of three parishes affected Coalville's propensity to Dissent; yet it is interesting as an unusually late example of the persistent association between Nonconformity and boundary societies.

Closely similar in character to these boundary settlements were those which sprang up on extra-parochial tracts and wastes. Typical of these were places like Dunkirk in Kent and Lye Waste in Worcestershire. Lye Waste, like Coalville, was a late settlement. According to Lewis's *Topographical Dictionary* (1833), *The National Gazetteer* (1868), and *The Imperial Gazetteer* (1870), it had originated on the uncultivated waste of Lye village, and was "settled by a numerous body of men, who acquired a right of separate freehold on the passing of an enclosure act. . ." It consisted chiefly of nailmakers, and of cottagers employed in the local iron and coal works. Part of the settlement, Carless Green, was "noted for insurance clubs called Stewpony societies, and for an institution designed to improve the condition of the labouring classes, called the Stewpony Allotment Society."[2] By 1870 there were at least four Dissenting chapels on Lye Waste. The story of this community, with its numerous small freeholders and many Dissenters, would well repay further exploration. The association between an outlying settlement, independent cottagers, rural industry, and Nonconformist propensities is characteristic of many Midland manufacturing villages like this in the early days of industrialization. It was an association that had a very long tradition behind it.

The origins of Dunkirk, in Kent, are more obscure. It has been claimed as an Anglo-Norman settlement; but there appears to be no documentary evidence for its existence in the medieval period. According to the *Imperial Gazetteer* (1870) "the name Dunkirk was first given to it, about the middle of last century, by a body of squatters, who took free or forcible possession of the land, and who became notable for smuggling practices." This account, however, seems to date the origin of the settlement rather too late. More probably, like many other squatters' communities, it originated during the seventeenth century, when the Dunkirkers preyed on English vessels round the coast and the term was synonymous with pirates and outlaws. At all events, by the early eighteenth century the Kentish place was sufficiently important to be regarded as a dis-

[1] *Imp. Gaz., sub* Coalville; Sarah E. Wise, *Coalville: the Origins and Growth of a Nineteenth Century Mining Town*, Leicester M.A. dissertation, 1968, pp. 1, 3, 7, 15, 21n., 63.

[2] The name Stewpony was no doubt associated with the local inn called the Stew Pony. Probably the meetings of these societies were originally held there.

tinct 'ville' or township, and was certainly 'extra-parochial'. Situated within the old Forest of Blean, outside any parish jurisdiction, and within a few miles of the north coast of Kent, it became a notorious centre for smugglers and highwaymen. According to Hasted, writing at the end of the eighteenth century but referring to an earlier period, it was "inhabited by low persons of suspicious characters, who sheltered themselves there, this being a place exempt from the jurisdiction of either hundred or parish, as in a free port, which receives all who enter it without distinction," so that "the whole district from hence gained the name of Dunkirk."[1]

The inhabitants of Dunkirk were probably amongst those whom Wesley inveighed against as 'savages' when he preached in this area after returning from America.[2] In the early nineteenth century the 'ville' became the chief centre of a notorious sect in East Kent, led by John Nichols Tom, the self-styled Sir William Courtenay, who ultimately claimed to be the Messiah. The story of this sect has been more than once described by local historians. It came to a tragic end in 1838, when, after a series of riots and impostures, Courtenay and seven of his followers were killed by the Kentish Militia in the Battle of Bossenden Wood. The desperate poverty and brutality of the area revealed by these events profoundly shocked the local gentry and clergy, and indeed Parliament itself. In an effort to civilize the inhabitants an Anglican church and school were built about 1840, and in the following year Dunkirk was formed into a separate parish. "The process of reclaiming the bad characters of Dunkirk began," says a recent historian, "almost as if a mission had been started in some far-off equatorial jungle, instead of in Kent."[3] In 1888, the Reverend W. J. Springett, who had by then been vicar of Dunkirk for thirty-five years, remarked that "the clergy had had a very uphill work in reclaiming the neighbourhood from the ignorance and immorality which were the results of a long period of neglect." By the time he wrote, however, their efforts had been "crowned with sufficient success to make Dunkirk no longer distinguishable from any other Christian and civilized neighbourhood."[4] The history of Dissenting vagaries in the area, with their strange mixture of idealism and delusion, had come to an end. There was no longer much that was shocking, or

[1] Hasted, *op. cit.*, IX, pp. 3–4; *Imp. Gaz.*, *sub* Dunkirk; *Nat. Gaz.*, *sub* Dunkirk.

[2] Quoted in Richard Green, *John Wesley: Evangelist*, 1905, p. 176. Wesley is said to have been preaching at or near Faversham, on the edge of Blean Forest. It is possible he was referring to the townsmen, but more probably to the forest inhabitants, who were notoriously lawless.

[3] Rogers, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

[4] Quoted *ibid.* Possibly, however, the Rev. Springett was too optimistic. About the same time an anonymous local author wrote of this area: "even in this year of 1890, we can positively affirm that it would hardly be safe in the outlying districts surrounding that fatal gathering-place [Bossenden Wood] to mention with a sneer or a rude jest the name of William Courtenay. The descendants of those who followed him—a few of whom are still living there—believe in him to this day."—*Annals of a Fishing Village: drawn from the Notes of "A Son of the Marshes,"* ed. J. A. Owen, 1892, p. 67.

perhaps much that was interesting, about it. Even now, however, the events of those times have not entirely passed out of local memory.

The association between Dissent and boundary settlements or extra-parochial tracts is obviously a subject that needs more extensive study than can be given to it here. It would also be profitable to explore a similar connection between Nonconformity and disputed boundaries in a number of provincial towns as well as rural areas. In late seventeenth-century Leicester, for example, the local justices and the corporation had a good deal of trouble with illegal conventicles in the extra-mural suburb known as the Bishop's Fee. The jurisdiction over this area had long been a matter of dispute between the town and the bishop of Lincoln (and later the county), and it was not finally resolved till the nineteenth century. In all probability there was also a connection in this case between these conventicles and the illicit trading and innkeeping for which the area became notorious. Part of it, still known in the early nineteenth century as No Man's Land, developed as the chief centre of Leicester's great autumnal fair.[1] An association of this kind between a disputed jurisdiction, illicit conventicles, and dubious trading activities seems to have been characteristic of a number of market towns in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In many cases, probably, there was a connection with the fraternity of travelling merchants and factors, by whose means radical religious ideas were readily propagated. Certainly Stourbridge Fair, near Cambridge, was noted not only as a mart of national importance but also as a centre of Puritan disturbance as early as Queen Elizabeth's reign.[2]

(v) *Envoi*

Between the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries Nonconformist chapels were erected in thousands all over England and Wales. Exactly how many there were we shall never know, but at their most numerous, towards the end of the nineteenth century, there may well have been more than 30,000 of them. Certainly at the time of the 1851 census there were about 20,000 in England alone.[3] In Northamptonshire, for example, there were 294, in Leicestershire 354, in Kent 500, and in Lincolnshire 831. In all these counties there were, by Queen Victoria's reign, more Nonconformist chapels than Anglican churches.

Yet of the vast majority of these local chapel communities we know extremely little. Even the whereabouts of many of them are now unrecognized, and of

[1] Helen Stocks, ed., *Records of the Borough of Leicester . . . 1603–1688*, 1923, p. 259 *et passim*; C. J. Billson, *Medieval Leicester*, 1920, pp. 114–15; V.C.H. *Leicestershire*, IV, pp. 48, 54, 57–8, 350.

[2] Everitt, *Change in the Provinces*, p. 42.

[3] Again, the exact number is not known to me. This estimate is based on the fact that there were 3,717,730 'sittings' in all Nonconformist chapels, and the average size of chapel was approximately 200. (In Lincolnshire the average size was 164 sittings, in Leicestershire 208, in Kent 210, and in Northamptonshire 223.)

their inner life we know virtually nothing. For many of them there are no surviving letters, no diaries, no personal memoranda: not a shadow survives to tell us what their members thought or felt or did, their joys and hopes and sorrows, or even who they were. How much 'the Chapel' meant to its members we do know from the bare economic fact that congregations of less than two hundred members on the average, rarely composed of wealthy people, without state support, and usually without any kind of endowment, were prepared to build, finance, and run their chapel and to pay their own minister. Something of what their religious life meant to them we can also sense from the vast corpus of hymns they have left behind them—the unexplored, unrecognized folk-poetry of England.

But all this can tell us nothing about the individual genius of any particular religious community. And the variety amongst Nonconformist chapels, it must never be forgotten, was at least as great as were the similarities. One would like to know the history of a remote rural chapel near Hartlip in East Kent, for instance, built in 1820, and inscribed in its pediment with the single eloquent word 'Cardiphonia'—the utterance of the heart. The allusion is to a once-famous volume of John Newton's letters, published under the title *Cardiphonia* in the year 1781. Yet why should the members of this little wayside Bethel have so revered the Anglican parson's book, with its intense and tender sentiment, as to name their chapel after it? This is one of those minor yet intriguing mysteries of provincial life whose answer, could we discover it, might open quite an unsuspected bypath of rural life. There must have been depths of thought and feeling amongst the folk at Cardiphonia Chapel which the evidence merely hints at, and then tells us no more. Perhaps, if there had been a George Eliot to overhear their conversation, we should have found a Dinah Morris among them, a Mrs Poyser, or an Adam Bede.

Of another chapel, only a few miles from Cardiphonia, in a lonely marshland spot near Milton Regis, we know more. It originated about the same time, but its character must have been utterly different. Like many of the smaller religious communities in the countryside, it was founded by a farmer on his own land and became a kind of proprietary chapel. This is how it was described by a Victorian writer who had known it as a boy.[1] "Some distance from Philip Magnier's homestead, on the edge of the marshes, close to the highroad, there used to be a small but very substantially built farmhouse, on rising ground, surrounded by barns and other outbuildings. Sheltered from the winds, a little lower down, was a small orchard well stocked with fruit-trees, which were old like the buildings, and like them covered with moss and lichens. Ponds of fresh

[1] The following account is based on Owen, *op. cit.*, pp. 105–7. The precise whereabouts of the chapel and farm are not given, but internal evidence shows that the 'Marshton' of this book was Milton Regis.

water stood round about. Apart from the other buildings was one capable of holding about fifty people. It was Old Grab's chapel, or as the folks called it, his preaching shop." Old Grab, the farmer, said it was a long way for the people to get to the parish church, and he had a notion it was not right for them to live and die like heathens. So he built the chapel at his own cost, and then he preached to them himself.

The farmer-pastor evidently preached to his captive congregation a decidedly grim gospel, and they all became greatly afraid of him. In particular he preyed upon their dread of witchcraft, which was still widely practised in the marsh. They also said that he drank enough smuggled brandy to scald a hog (smuggling was still widespread in the area), and yet he preached to them about rendering Caesar his dues, and the sinfulness of getting drunk, "in a way to make them cry." Then suddenly one day the old farmer went mad. He gave all his workfolk notice, including a carter who had been with him for eleven years, and informed them that he was going to join his son in foreign parts. It was all a pitiful hoax. His own terrors must have caught up with him: he committed suicide instead.

Twenty years later the same Victorian author revisited the spot and found all the farm buildings derelict. "Apparently they had been deserted for some time. The casements had been blown to pieces, only the iron frames were left hanging. Before the door tufts of rushes had sprung up between the flags of the roughly paved path, and small pools were here and there. Most of the old trees in the orchard were prone on the ground, not dead, for their roots were not exposed, but sloped down by the wind. The reed-thatching was blown off or rotten; from a pool that used to supply the house with drinking-water some wild ducks flew up, and one could see, by the tracks on the surface of the reed-covered cattle-pond, that wild-fowl made it one of their feeding-spots."

It was a strange and melodramatic end to a small dissenting community in a Kentish parish in the early days of Queen Victoria. It might almost have been invented by Edgar Allan Poe. And of course it cannot be taken as genuinely characteristic of country conventicles in the provinces. Yet the fierce and introverted life behind the story of this marshland chapel was probably not at all untypical of Nonconformist communities in rural parishes. The history of these Dissenting groups, scattered in their thousands up and down the countryside, provides yet another tract of largely uncharted territory for the student of agrarian society to explore.