

places about London.³ The following day, the Council of State ordered Coppe to be brought to the capital. Various delays ensued, but on 19 March the transfer took place. Clearly, however, some urgency had gone out of the situation. On 19 July, the Rump ordered a committee to deal with those responsible for *A Fiery Flying Roll*. Two months later, it was still urging similar action on another committee.⁴ Not until 2 or 3 October was Coppe finally hauled before a Parliamentary committee. We have no record of its proceedings, and the press accounts, hostile and sensational, have to be treated with caution. Clearly, however, the committee hearing was abortive in the sense of producing no resolution or finding. Coppe apparently questioned the committee's authority to act judicially, and its members seemed to experience difficulty in finding a charge to bring against him.⁵

Three months later, in January 1651, he published, from prison, *A Remonstrance* dissociating himself from sensational reports of his beliefs and conduct. Also in this work, he tried to demonstrate the compatibility of his beliefs with the so-called Blasphemy Act of August 1650. The ambiguity of this ordinance has hardly yet been recognised by historians. It was primarily directed against atheists, only secondly against blasphemers, and ironically—in terms of Coppe's views—it also laid down penalties for religious formalism. In July 1651, Coppe published a further clarification of his views, and sometime between then and September he was released from prison after a possible incarceration of 21 months, with no formal charges ever brought against him. In 1657, he published a work called *Divine Fireworks*, thematically close to *A Fiery Flying Roll*. After the Restoration, he practised as a physician under the sardonically assumed name of Dr Higham. He was buried at Barnes in Surrey in 1672. One last twist: in 1680, Coppe's verse, *Character of a True Christian*, was published as a broadsheet, with the printer's advice that it might be sung to the tune of 'The Fair Nymphs'.⁶

What have historians made of him? The nonconformists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—Barclay, Masson, Whiting, Rufus Jones, Tindall and Nuttall—were universally condemnatory. The Ranters epitomised the excesses of enthusiasm; Coppe, their leader, a kind of spiritual dementia which was devastating for other nonconformists because it pushed the authorities into the repression of the Blasphemy Act. From the 1950s, however, other historians began to take an interest from a very different direction. Two books in 1957, Norman Cohn's *Pursuit of the Millennium* and A. L. Morton's *The Everlasting Gospel* (a study of the historical antecedents of William Blake's thought), presented the Ranters as something substantially more than a provocation on the margins of nonconformity. In 1970, Cohn published an article