

Suppressing Sexual Irregularities in the 17th Century

An article written by C H Bray
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On the 23rd May 1621, Ninnion Compton and Henry Boles, the churchwardens of Winterbourne Dauntsey, made the following presentment at the church visitation.

"Item. We present Richard Maynard and Elinor Pragnell als Maynard, the now wife, for suspicion of incontinence before their inter-marriage".

Here is an instance where we have to re-adjust our attitude to matters of sex if we wish to understand the social atmosphere in which men moved during the 17th century.

What business was it of the churchwardens whether a child had been born within a month or so of marriage? The answer is, that they were the watch dogs of the Church which was intent on suppressing all sexual irregularities. In their eyes, sexual intercourse was almost a crime and must be confined within the limits defined by tradition and canon law.

We now go back to Easter time, to a meeting in the village street at Winterbourne Earls between Richard Maynard and Andrew Washbeard. They had quarrelled, with the result that they were summoned to appear before the Bishop's court. There is no need for us to guess the cause of the quarrel. The witnesses will tell us in their own words.

Edward Bigges of Winterbourne Earls deposed. That upon a day happening about Easter last past he, this deponent, rememberth for the tyme more certayne this deponent now remembers not, and in the evening at the same day and in the street at Winterbourne aforesaid, that Andrew Washbeard falling out with Richard Maynard then and there uttered and spake to and of him the said Richard Maynard these words following or the very like in effect viz: "Thou art a whoremonger knave and hath a bastard". This, added Bigges, was said in the presence of Robert Dovyne and Mary Monday.

On being further questioned, Bigges said "that for ought knew to the contrary, the said Richard Maynard was and is an honest man and it cannot chose but be a hurt to the said Maynard by reason of the said Washboard speaking of the said words that the saying is that if one have an ill name he is half hanged."

The evidence was supported by Robert Dovyne, a thirty year old farmer and by Mary Monday, the wife of another farmer.

Richard Maynard was then called and he deposed "that about 4 or 6 years since, there was a bastard layed to him for which he answered the same."

In answer to a question by the Judge, Maynard said that he did pay for the keeping of the said bastard child so long as it was alive by the Justice's orders; the wench's name was Mary Erwood.

Twelve months before, in January 1620, Maynard and Mary Erwood had appeared before the Bishop's Judge. The minutes of the court were written in highly contracted Latin and were so badly written that I gave up in despair. My copy of the proceedings is therefore incomplete. In one place, it looked as though someone had pushed the registrars arm while he was writing down his notes. Hasty and illegible writing is one of the difficulties with which the research worker has to contend.

It appears however, that Mary Erwood admitted her association with Maynard. He had brought five compurgators to vindicate his character before the court. Their names were Mathew Parsons, Pruet, Abraham Willett, John Hede and John Atkins. That is about as much as it is possible to get from the copy, except that Thomas Spratt, the curate of Winterbourne Earls, was apparently asked to submit written evidence.

The reason for mentioning this trial is because it was probably the cause of Washboard's angry attack on Maynard, as the event would still be fresh in his memory.

Meanwhile, Maynard had to get Elinor Pragnell into trouble, but this time he played the game and married her. When the churchwardens presented him he was living at Winterbourne Dauntsey.



The presentment was accepted, Maynard and his wife were ordered to appear before the court which sat in the parish church, presided over by Edward Hyde.

John Pouchardon, the Registrar, was there to write down the minutes of the proceedings; it is from those minutes that this account has been taken. I have spent many hours trying to read his scrawl. As the court was open to the public, it is quite likely that a number of villagers were there.

After taking the oath, Elinor Pragnell was examined and confessed "that about a month past she was delivered of a child begotten before wedlock by Richard Maynard, her now husband, they having been married about half a year past."

Richard Maynard then appeared and willingly and readily offered to answer the presentment against him and consented to take an oath upon the gospels.

He admitted the charge and submitted himself to the court. The Judge accepted his confession and admonished and enjoined him and his wife, that for their offence, they must purge themselves in the parish church of Winterbourne Dauntsey on Friday of the next week.

After the court, the following process of instruction was addressed to Thomas Spratt, who was curate of both Dauntsey and Earls:

"fforasmuch as Richard Maynard and Elinor his now wife being presented for incontinence before marriage, have appeared and confessed their fault and shewes forth apparent tokens and contricion in that behalf, it is therefore ordered by Mr Edward Hyde, Master of Arts, official of the peculiar jurisdiction of Winterbourne aforesaid, that the said Richard Maynard together with his wife Elinor, shall upon Friday, the first day of June next, in the parish church there, immediately after morning praior is ended, in their usual wearing apparel, before the congregacon, then and there assembled, repeat this confession" viz:

"We Richard and Elinor doe here before God and you his church and congregacon confess that we have offended his divine Majesty and you his people in giving our bodies to other carnallies (reading doubtful) before our intermarriage for which we are right hartily sorrie and unfeignedly repent us thereof and desire you present not only to forgive us but also to pray to God for us that he will in mercy look upon us and forgive us. And for our parte we promise never to offend in the like by Gods grace."

"What is done herein you are to certifie under your hand and to return these presents betwixt this and Midsomer next given under the seal of office this xxiii th of May anno Dni 1621."

After Maynard and his wife had purged themselves by standing before the congregation in the parish church and repeating the above confession after the curate, notification that this had been done was ordered to be sent to the Registrar.

"These are to certifie that Richard Mainard and Elinor his wife did penitently confesse their faults in the manner and forme within menconed the first of June 1621 in the parish church of Winterborne Dantestone." By me Thomas Spratt, Curate

From the Winterbourne Earls Parish Register, we take the following entry:

"Richard Mainard and Elinor Pragnell were married the xxvii th of November 1620."

And from the Dauntsey Register we take the entry about the little girl whose coming was the cause of so much trouble:

"Jane Mainard daughter of Richard Mainard and Elinor Prangnell baptised the xxviii of April 1621."

Mary, or according to one document, Margaret Erwood, who was Maynard's first love, was married to William Nore in October 1628.

The Parish Registers are a source of interest both to the genealogist and the historian, but they are far more so when it is possible to get behind the scenes, and to learn something about those whose names are recorded there, such as we have done with Richard Maynard and his wife.