The Museum of Melancholy: The Divine Case of Mrs Drake 1615-25

A True Account of the Suffering and Redemption of Mrs Joan Drake (née Tothill) of Esher Place, the Parsonage of Walton-on-Thames and Shardeloes near Amersham.

Author: C. L. Dawson; chris.dawson@casacolori.co.uk

Part 1: Mrs Drake's Divine Case

Sickbed c. 1620

Four hundred years ago, at Easter in 1625, Mrs Joan Drake (née Tothill) died. Her tragic story was recorded for posterity by one of the onlookers, Dr John Hart, who published it as *"Trodden Down Strength, or Mrs Drake Revived"* some twenty years later. For today's reader, his archaic language and lengthy scriptural references put up an almost insurmountable barrier, but if you tease out the secular sentences, a more accessible work emerges that provides a dramatic account of her last years. Upon further investigation, reading between his lines and identifying what he omits to mention, an unforeseen layer of intrigue becomes apparent.

Being introduced to Mrs Joan Drake a decade earlier, you would have encountered a small woman in her early thirties, with a brown complexion and darting eyes like a sparrowhawk, who had a quick wit. You would learn that she was over-indulged as a child, and that she did not agree (for reasons not stated but which become clear) with the match arranged by her father William Tothill of Shardeloes, with the son of Richard Drake of Esher Place, a Groom of the Privy Chamber to Elizabeth 1. Despite her objections, the wedding to Francis Drake, godson of the great explorer, went ahead and that contrast — from spoilt child to marriage against her will — was when she first began to feel the *'storms and tempests'* in her mind.

It was the birth of her third child, also named Joan, around 1615, that triggered more sinister symptoms. During the delivery she was *'much wronged by the midwife, and she was ever after troubled with fumes and scurvy vapours'* which gave her a continual migraine, and a fire burning in her stomach. She also began to feel a great spiritual anxiety, that she had committed the Unpardonable Sin and was *'damned, and a cast away, and so of necessity must needs go to Hell'*, which led to violent mood swings.

The Drakes had Puritan sympathies, and it was proposed by John Hart, a Doctor of Divinity, that his acquaintance John Dod, a Puritan divine who possessed a *'mild, meek and merciful spirit'*, would be ideally placed to attempt a spiritual cure. The initial meeting at Esher Place did not

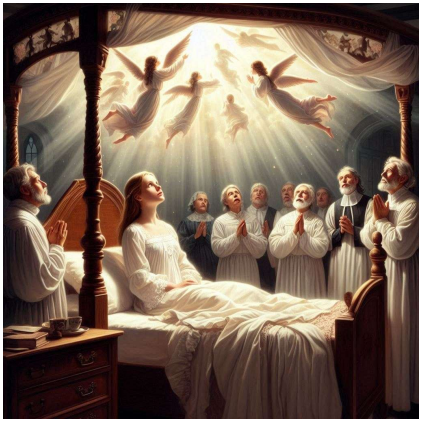
start well, since as they were ushered in, they could see Mrs Drake being chased up the stairs by her husband brandishing *'the great iron fork'* from the fireplace. Unaware of visitors, she had run to her bedroom from where Francis attempted forcibly to retrieve her.

The chase with the 'great iron fork' from the fireplace.

This antipathy set the pattern for the next three years. From Mrs Drake's perspective, she had rejected God and it was therefore in vain for anyone to try to help her. She would laugh at Mr Dod's speeches, and gained great enjoyment from disturbing him at private prayer with dramatic gestures, such as threatening to fling herself down the stairs if he did not stop. It did not help, that in her mind she compared him to the character of Ananias, the hypocritical Puritan, with his 'holier-than-thou' visage and biblical rantings, much satirised by Ben Jonson in 'The Alchemist', which she had seen performed at the Blackfriars theatre. For his part, Mr Dod was convinced that he was conversing with the Devil himself. Throughout her antics, or *'the Devil changing his posture and weapons'*, he would look pitifully upon her but never raised his voice, even when he could hear *'the Devil's rhetoric being used nimbly and strongly against him'* by a *'sophisticated logician'*.

The Museum of Melancholy.

In early 1619, Mrs Drake relocated to the Parsonage at Walton-on-Thames, insisting that not only was Esher Place miserably cold and damp, but that it held sad memories. Mr Dod having moved on, she was visited on several occasions by Dr James Ussher, *'a magazine of all knowledge and learning…with his infinite reading'*, who in later life was celebrated for his Biblical Chronology. Mrs Drake's 'case' was now receiving widespread attention from home and abroad, and there was a constant stream of visitors and correspondents; it must have seemed to Francis Drake that his wife had become an exhibit of international repute in a museum of melancholy. In search of a more permanent spiritual advisor, he appointed Thomas Hooker as rector of his local parish. Hooker gave counsel in such a stirring fashion that it was clear to all who met him that he was *'born to be considerable'*, and indeed he left after a year for the New World. However, his experience became the foundation for his theological thinking, and he later produced his celebrated work "The Poor Doubting Christian Drawn to Christ" in which he made general spiritual guidelines from the specifics of Mrs Drake's case, but without publicly revealing her identity. He is best known as the founder of Connecticut, and "The Father of American Democracy".



The rapturous vision.

By 1625, Mrs Drake was convinced that she was dying and insisted that her final days be spent at Shardeloes. Soon, Dr Hart heard reports that Mrs Drake was *'talking perpetually night and day without intermission, not having any jot of sleep'*, and he took it upon himself to fetch Mr Dod. On Tuesday 12th April, otherworldly shrieks emanated from Mrs Drake's bedroom, where she sat bolt upright in bed, staring upwards, her chest heaving, rapidly repeating the same phrases: *'What's this! I can't endure it any longer! Look, the Angels have come for me!'* Dr Hart thought she would fly away, leaving a hole in the roof. Returned to her senses, she said that God had revealed Christ to her, in a burst of ecstasy.

On Easter weekend, Mrs Drake finally fell asleep, and when she awoke on Easter Monday, she found herself surrounded by family, and the divines, and rejoiced. Before midday, she beckoned to Mr Dod, lifted up her hands in prayer, then collapsed and was gone. From the perspective of the Puritan preachers, it might have taken a decade of sustained sermonising and unrelenting scrutiny of an unwell woman, but their cure had worked.

In part 2, we discover more about Dr John Hart, the 'relater', and his relationship with Mrs Drake.

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Part 2: The Relationship with the 'Relater'

The 'facts' about Mrs Drake's final years of struggle come from Dr John Hart's book, published in 1647, but evidence for who he was is thin. He referred to himself throughout as 'the Relater', and placed himself front and centre of proceedings, as confidant and organiser: *'…another worthy Minister, whom the Relater brought to see her and judge her case'*.

He does, however, provide insights into his relationship with Mrs Drake. In the period of relative calm at Walton-on-Thames, they had clearly been discussing whether she should leave the household, to concentrate fully on her recovery elsewhere, on her own terms. They agreed that John Hart should go, secretly, to Essex to enquire whether a preacher — known as 'Roaring John Rogers' on account of the 'many wild notes' of his lecturing — would accommodate her. With an affirmative answer, Mrs Drake raised the issue with her husband and parents, who flatly denied her request, even if chaperoned. That the original intention might have been for Dr Hart to accompany her, since it was he making the furtive arrangements, hung in the air between them. The refusal *'much unhooked her spirit… so much did it afflict her'*.

Another day, as they walked together, Mrs Drake suddenly stopped and fixed her gaze on the ground, with a wild look in her eyes, until he gently shook her and she uttered a question: *'If God, who with a word made Heaven and Earth, can soften my heart, then why does he not do it?'*

The argument in the garden

Taking this as blasphemy, *'for such speeches were not to countenanced, but to be cast off, with detestation and abomination'*, Dr Hart left by the garden gate immediately without saying a word. After recovering his composure, she asked him to join her for a horse ride, which he refused for fear that the ground might open and swallow them up; and he told her he was going to report her blasphemy to the Archbishop, and buy bundles of sticks for her burning. He wrote: *'we both parted in seeming discontent*'. Anyone observing from a distance — the garden stroll, the pausing and his hands on her shoulders, the storming off, the arguing and gesturing — might have imagined that this was a lovers' quarrel. Remarkably, these episodes occurred when Mrs Drake would have been pregnant with, and then gave birth to, her youngest son, John, born in 1619 but who died aged three, of which no mention is made.

A declaration of love, of sorts.

The final reckoning came at Shardeloes. She summoned Dr Hart to her deathbed, took his hands and said: *'You must forgive me that you for so many years together having shown me so much love, and been a means of my everlasting comfort and happiness, that yet I have been so unkind unto you, for I have not loved you by the hundred part, in that measure I ought to have done, according to that love you have shown to me.'*

Was this a declaration of love, of sorts, or a long-overdue explanation of her uncharitable treatment of him? Whatever it was she was trying to say, or how he understood it, the matter was resolved.

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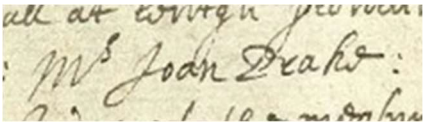
Dr John Hart's later life remained a partial mystery. Three letters from Dr Hart were found amongst Dr Ussher's papers when he died, in which Hart spoke about Mrs Drake, and wrote her name.



Dr Hart writing Mrs Drake's name

There are a number of other publications of his, mainly in the mid-1600s, either as author or editor, and a woodblock portrait of him as an old man appeared on the frontispiece of some of them. One publisher even offered a second volume of his collected works, as a 'famous author'. He was, perhaps, more of a wordsmith than a celebrated evangelist.

One question lingers unresolved: why did he wait twenty-two years to publish his book, which he wrote *'to remain as a perpetual monument whilst time lasts, of God's great goodness and infinite mercies even to the most hard-hearted and miserable that may be'*? His stated aim was to help others suffering from spiritual anxiety, but he chose to include so many poignant details about Mrs Drake, which she had recounted to him on their walks or horse rides together or which he had observed as an eyewitness: her childhood memories; her character and appearance; feelings about her marriage; episodes of domestic violence; her physical ailments; her suicidal thoughts; expressions of affection; the fine detail of the final days. Whether he realised it or not as he was writing, we can sense his emotions, such as his jealousy of the more charismatic and learned divines, or his excitement at the secret mission, or his passion during the argument in the garden, and his utter anguish at her death. Was he, in the thrall of his pious outpourings, oblivious to the intimacy of his revelations?

When all was said and done, was he a reliable narrator? Did he hesitate so long to publish his account because he waited until all of those closest to Mrs Drake, who might have questioned his version of events, had died: Francis Drake in 1634; Mr Dod in 1645; and Thomas Hooker in 1647, the very same year that John Hart's book first appeared in Mr Pilkington's bookshop next to the Red Lion Inn on Fleet Street?

In Part 3, we uncover a missed opportunity to have helped Mrs Drake, and happen upon an epitaph of her tragic life.

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Part 3: 'Poor Thing'

Recorded by Dr John Hart in his book — in later editions subtitled 'The Firebrand taken out of the Fire' — Mrs Drake's symptoms had first appeared after her marriage, and following the birth of her daughter built gradually, then alarmingly, towards a conclusion: the constant all-consuming headaches and heartburn; the loss of appetite; the irritability; the feelings of despondency, despair and emptiness; the episodes of 'frozen' staring at the ground; the feverish nightmares; the uncontrollable weeping and manic laughter; the suicidal thoughts; the excessive guilt; the rapid and confused speaking; and finally the sleep deprivation and the hallucinations.

Whether it was the prime cause of her melancholy, or a contributory factor, Mrs Drake's spiritual angst created a lamentable predicament for those attempting a cure. The Puritans took the doctrine of Predestination from Calvin which stated that God had already decided who were the small group of people who were saved and would have eternal life (the 'elect') and that therefore everyone else was barred from access to salvation and sentenced to eternal hellfire (the 'reprobates'). Understandably, such a situation was going to cause anxiety for many adherents, but especially those of a melancholic disposition who were most likely to be thrown into a deep, even suicidal, despair that would provoke physical symptoms which were unresponsive to the rudimentary medicine.

With no other recourse, Mrs Joan Drake had to rely on her own ingenuity to face her challenges, which she achieved via persistent subversions that were within her control. She defied Mr Dod with dramatic distractions, found rebuttals to his pronouncements, and sent out her maid to seek alternative arguments she could use. She refused to take the sacrament or sing uplifting psalms. She formulated a determined, if impracticable, plan to escape. In desperation, she cut herself and swallowed pins. Against convention, she nursed her precious youngest son. In her final act, she symbolically left her husband, and specified how she wanted to be buried. Most poignantly for posterity, she confided in her closest spiritual adviser, Dr John Hart, who faithfully noted everything down.

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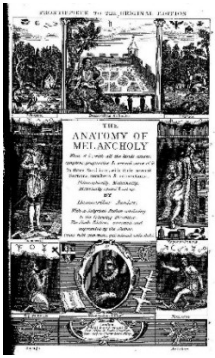

The Anatomy of Melancholy by Robert Burton 1621

There had, though, been one opportunity to provide a second opinion. William Drake, Mrs Drake's eldest son, had arrived at Christ Church, Oxford to begin his studies at the beginning of the Michaelmas term in autumn 1623, at the age of seventeen. He would have come to know the college librarian, Robert Burton, a scholarly, solitary and celibate figure in his late forties, absorbed almost entirely in his books and his writing. In 1621 Burton had published his major work, 'The Anatomy of Melancholy', an epic self-help guide, in which despite not possessing a medical background, he had elaborated with great authority a fulsome history of melancholy: its types, causes and cures. He focused on the symbiosis between the body and the mind, in which mental anguish gave rise to physical symptoms and, vice versa, where chronic sickness could give rise to depression.

His list of cures, uniquely for his time, were practical and holistic, treating the person not simply the disease: he recognised how sufferers were soothed by the natural world, and recommended fresh air, slow walks in the countryside and swimming in the cold water of rivers and lakes; he proposed appealing to the senses though natural light, warm baths, perfumes, and herbal remedies, and insisted that diet was a core part of recovery by avoiding foods that were difficult to digest, and drinking cordials instead of wine; he recommended rest and relaxation such as listening to soft music or singing in the company of friends, and the importance of undisturbed sleep. He preached moderation, even in religion, whereby the patient should avoid excessive zeal, or neglect of religious duties, but find comfort in prayer and rituals.

In his diary, William Drake mentioned Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy, but it is not clear when he read it, or what he thought of it, or whether he associated the subject matter with his mother.

Portrait of a Lady, English School c.1620

No portrait of Mrs Joan Drake has survived, and although her physical presence has been described by Dr John Hart, it is still a challenge to picture what she might have looked like, and therefore there is a distance in our empathy for her. A near approximation is the next best thing, much like we accept that an actor plays the part of a real-life character, and there exists a portrait of an unknown lady with a similar social standing, painted around 1620 by an anonymous artist of the English school. The establishment of provenance and dating was made by an art historian: firstly, by her hair which is held in place by a wire headdress, known as a 'tire'; and secondly by the 'falling ruff', fashionable throughout the 1620s. But the reason this portrait creates a reaction, having learned of Mrs Drake's experiences, is not the finery of the clothes, but her demeanour — the pale features, the tired eyes, the air of having suffered and not being quite well, the melancholic charisma.

A succinct epitaph of Mrs Drake's tragic life was provided by Lady Elizabeth Eliott-Drake. In 1911 she published her research into the family history of her husband, who had inherited Sir Francis Drake's estate at Buckland Abbey and who suffered periods of mental ill health for which he had been admitted to Ticehurst Asylum in Sussex, an institution catering for aristocratic patients. In stark contrast to Mrs Drake, he was permitted to maintain his own transport — a horse and carriage, with

coachman — and to travel to the seaside when he was able.

Recounting an acrimonious trial in 1605 involving the heirs of Sir Francis Drake with Francis Drake of Esher, she added a footnote relating to his wife Mrs Drake, that provided a brief glimpse of her compassion drawn from experience: “After about twenty years of a miserable [married] life, sometimes better and sometimes worse, but never really sane, she left her husband, saying she would die in her father’s house, and so she did within a few days of her arrival, believing, happily for herself, poor thing, that she was surrounded by triumphant choirs of angels. This comforting change of ideas when on her deathbed enabled those who had ruined her life to regard her as a ‘firebrand plucked from the burning’.”

A full version of Mrs Drake’s story — based on detailed analysis of (and quotes from) Dr John Hart’s book, plus extensive research with footnotes of relevant associated facts, a list of sources, and an index — is available as a ‘Flipbook’ or pdf download in the ‘Drakes of Esher’ tab at: https://casacolori.co.uk/