Introduction

Joanna Southcott – the name may be vaguely familiar to most people, if only in connection with an advertisement placed regularly in the national press urging the bishops to open her Box of Sealed Prophecies. But few know anything about the woman herself – who she was, what she did, why nearly two hundred years after her death her life still excites controversy. In Britain, the USA, Australia and New Zealand, groups of her followers continue to wait expectantly for the return of Shiloh, the divine child to whom they claim Joanna Southcott gave birth in 1814. Scholars still study her contribution to millenarian thought. Believers pore over her prophecies.

Joanna Southcott was forty-two years old and earning her living as a domestic servant in Exeter when she claimed that God had chosen her to announce the Second Coming. In normal times perhaps few would have taken her seriously. But this was 1792 and times were far from normal. The American War and the Revolution in France had shattered everyday certainties for many who, turning to their Bible for consolation and guidance, read in the prophetic book of Revelation that they must expect just such upheavals in the Last Days. That they were living through a time that would encompass the final overthrow of Satan and usher in the Second Coming was a possibility being explored even by advanced thinkers such as Joseph Priestley, Presbyterian minister and chemist.

In his sermon published in 1794, *The Present State of Europe Compared with Ancient Prophecies*, Priestley warned that if anything could be learned from the language of prophecy it was that greater calamities than the world had yet known would precede that happy state of affairs in which ‘the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.’ Priestley not only saw the disturbances in Europe as the beginning of these calamitous times but believed that the French Revolution was the fulfilment of Revelation 11:13: ‘And the same hour was there a great earthquake, and the tenth part of the city fell, and in the earthquake were slain of men seven thousand: and the remnant were affrighted, and gave glory to the God of heaven’.

Against this background of war on the Continent, the fall of the French monarchy, bad harvests, food shortages and freakish weather people’s thoughts turned easily to apocalypse and predisposed them to listen to Joanna. Socially and geographically her appeal was broad-based.
Numbered among her followers were scores of country folk like herself, reared on a diet of traditional piety spiced with superstition, people who looked naturally to their Bible for an explanation of whatever troubled them. She also attracted support from Anglican clergymen such as Thomas Foley, Thomas Webster, Stanhope Bruce, Samuel Eyre and Hoadley Ashe. Other adherents included William Sharp, famous engraver; Owen Pughe, lexicographer and close friend of Blake; Elias Carpenter, wealthy paper manufacturer; George Turner, a Leeds merchant; and Colonel William Tooke Harwood. At the peak of her career, her following numbered many thousands and her influence stretched from the West Country to the Midlands, the industrial cities of the North, and was particularly strong in London.

Nevertheless, Joanna’s early hope of securing support from the Methodists in Exeter was disappointed. She had assumed that Dissenters would be her natural allies because they shared some of her millennial beliefs and, like her, regarded the Bible as the record of a golden age when perfect communion had existed between God and His people. If this golden age was ever to return, it seemed to her, then it must be through the restoration of both the form and substance of apostolic Christianity – which was exactly what she thought Methodists were trying to achieve. Their eventual rejection of her message was all the more bitter for the hopes they had aroused. ‘I was deeply wounded with the conduct of the Methodists, who said that my writings were not from the Lord,’ she wrote, castigating both kinds of Methodism found in Exeter at that time, Wesley’s Arminianism and Whitefield’s Calvinism.

Despite this experimentation Joanna always regarded herself as a devout daughter of the Church of England and even while going to Methodist meetings never neglected her regular attendance at Anglican services. Frequently she declared, ‘Back to the Church all must come,’ meaning that all sects were to seek in her their way back to the Anglican fold. That the clergy of the Established Church failed to appreciate this was a source of great disappointment to Joanna, for she believed that they had a crucial role to play in the accomplishment of her mission. Without their endorsement she feared that she might not be taken seriously. For this reason she made innumerable overtures to the Church hierarchy expecting them to examine her writings and arrange a formal hearing of her claims. Their disdainful reaction alienated Joanna from the clergy, if not from the Church. In one of her early pamphlets, The Answer of the Lord to the Powers of Darkness, Joanna’s Spirit said, ‘It is no Love to Me that man aspireth to be a bishop, a chancellor, an archdeacon, or a shepherd of the flock, it is their love to themselves, for they all preach for hire.’
The Anglican establishment’s hostility towards Joanna had important consequences. It meant that the Southcottians inevitably turned to other forms of worship and, like the Methodists, founded their own chapels. Yet Joanna never gave up her attempts to find accommodation within the Church. To do this she had to establish her credibility beyond doubt. Knowing that if she were ever caught out in a deception all her claims would be open to question, she staged three formal ‘trials’ at which her writings and character were examined. Personal invitations were sent to the bishops and prominent clergy, but since none of these would attend, Joanna was each time denied the possibility of official sanction – or reproof.

There is no shortage of material when it comes to studying the life of Joanna Southcott, for she herself published sixty-five books detailing her exploits, visions and prophecies. Most of these books follow a basic pattern. First there is a description of some incident, dream, or prophecy. Then the ‘Voice’ of her Spirit takes over and in both prose and verse interprets the initial passage, seeing every event as a biblical ‘type’ that symbolises the present or predicts the future. For the biographer Joanna Southcott’s books are a mixed blessing. They are not journals, but simply reflect whatever was in her head at the time, and her ideas tumble out in such confusion that they have to be pieced together, fragment by fragment, to form a shape. On the other hand, whilst they are not great literature, her jumbled reflections contain a wealth of intimate, and at times exuberant, detail that makes the woman, her family and her circle of friends come alive.

Contemporary observers dismissed Joanna as a fanatic, or worse, a cunning manipulator who exploited her followers for pecuniary gain. In 1812 Hewson Clarke, editor of The Scourge, admitted that he had no foundation for the scurrilous articles he had published about Joanna, but that ‘being a prophetess, she was fair game for anyone to shoot at.’ Caricaturists clearly thought so too and she became the butt of artists like Rowlandson and Cruikshank. In 1820 a defamatory account of her appeared in R.S.Kirby’s Wonderful and Eccentric Museum; Or Magazine of Remarkable Characters. Fifty years later she received similar treatment in The Book of Wonderful Characters: Memoirs and Anecdotes of Remarkable and Eccentric Persons in All Ages and Countries. More recent studies have sought to place Joanna Southcott in a more meaningful context and give credit to the thousands of followers who gave her career its significance. In 1956 G. R. Balleine provided an accessible account of her life in Past Finding Out: The Tragic Story of Joanna Southcott and Her Successors, but his book suffers from an uncritical reliance on Joanna’s own writings and a failure to quote
sources. Since then J. F. C. Harrison’s *The Second Coming* has included a judicious treatment of Joanna Southcott in his wide-ranging study of millenarianism, whilst at the same time stressing that she ‘still awaits a modern published biography’. Similarly, J. K. Hopkins, in *A Woman to Deliver Her People*, has provided a stimulating study of Joanna Southcott and her followers by placing them in the social, intellectual and political setting of their time.

Earlier in the twentieth century Alice Seymour had revived public interest in Joanna by founding the Southcottian Society and publishing *The Express*, a two-volume biography drawn almost entirely from Joanna Southcott’s own writings. Seymour confessed that many had been baffled in trying to write a satisfactory account of Joanna:

> [T]he incidents of her life are so scattered throughout so many books, and the trifling events that are mentioned, are nearly all set as types and prophetic to the nation at large, that one cannot but acknowledge that her life was indeed ‘hid in God’. She could not understand why she was ordered to chronicle such ordinary everyday occurrences.

For the present writer the challenge has been to extricate these ‘ordinary everyday occurrences’ and test them against other sources without becoming embroiled in the need to prove or deny Joanna’s own ‘spin’ on events. To this end, Joanna’s own propaganda has been checked against the evidence – contemporary letters, diaries, parish records and newspapers – with the result that many new and revealing facts have emerged about her family, early relationships and the events which led to her remarkable career as a visionary prophetess.

By any reckoning Joanna was a fascinating woman who exerted a powerful influence over her contemporaries. In her lifetime she had tens of thousands of followers and even today passions run high on the vexed question of her character. She was certainly charismatic, but was she a genuine spiritual leader? Was she naïve, or manipulative? Prophet, or impostor? Cunning cheat, or long-suffering saint? Because the jury is still out on these questions, this book aims to convey Joanna Southcott’s story – without fear or favour – just as it happened, leaving readers to form their own judgement on the controversial character who dared to identify herself as the *Woman Clothed with the Sun*. 