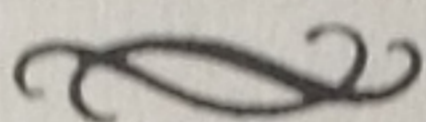


The Lincolnshire Forger



DURING the early 1700s the small town of Bourne, in south Lincolnshire, was in the pastoral care of Reverend William Dodd. In 1729 Dodd's wife gave birth to a son, who was duly named after his father. Young William proved to be quite an intelligent child and in 1746 went off to Cambridge, becoming a Bachelor of Arts in 1749.

No doubt the elder William Dodd envisaged a quiet but successful career in the Church for his son, but it was not to be. While at university, young William began to develop some rather licentious habits, giving rather more attention to his social life than to his studies. He is said to have made a rather hasty exit from Cambridge.

Despite this slight upset, Dodd was an ambitious young man who naturally gravitated to the excitement and opportunity offered by London — rather a contrast to the sleepy little market town of his birth. Dodd hoped to embark on a literary career, being rather pleased with his prowess with a pen, but his first major step was in fact to get married. His bride was Mary Perkins, the daughter of a

verger. Mary did not have the social status to which William Dodd aspired but she was, apparently, 'largely endowed with personal attractions.' The marriage seems to have been rather sudden. Although he now had to take part in domestic duties, Dodd found time to embark on his literary career and began with a major success. His book, *The Beauties of Shakespeare*, was published in 1752 and became a best-seller. Almost overnight he achieved some of the fame that he lusted after.

Dodd's next move was to prepare for a career in the Church. No doubt he believed that appointment to the right church living would offer a secure income to back his literary efforts, together with the possibility of going up in the world. So in 1753 he was ordained by the Bishop of Ely and was appointed a curate at West Ham.

West Ham was then a village several miles away from London — not really the place in which to attract attention and the patronage of high society. In 1763 things improved for Dodd when he was appointed chaplain to the Magdalen Hospital on a comfortable salary of 100 guineas a year. The chapel there offered a suitable base from which to launch a career as an impressive preacher, and soon the flamboyant Dodd began to attract large crowds. The chapel was packed each Sunday with people anxious to witness his sensational sermons.

Dodd's preaching brought him the wider attention he craved. He was appointed a King's Chaplain and so impressed the Earl of Chesterfield that he was made a tutor to one of the royal princes. Despite all these duties, Dodd found the time to write *Reflections on Death* and in 1766 he became Doctor Dodd.

Dodd was now confident about his success and began to adapt his lifestyle to suit his view of himself. He lived in the West End but also bought a country house at Ealing. Perhaps this was a little beyond his actual means, but Mary

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Dodd won £1,000 in a lottery and William seized upon this as a new opportunity.

He used the money to build a chapel of his own, the Charlotte Chapel, in Pimlico. The name was carefully chosen to please the Royal Family, whose patronage Dodd hoped to attract. However, though the chapel became popular with many members of the aristocracy, the Royal Family did not attend it. Dodd's star had risen rapidly, but it seemed it would rise no further.

He still had some useful acquaintances and so was able to secure some extra livings for himself in the Church of England. In 1772 Dodd became rector of Hockliffe in Bedfordshire, and then of Chalgrove as well; he could draw the stipend from these places, and pay a curate to take the services, leaving a handsome profit for himself.

Yet Dodd was still not satisfied. He wanted, above all, to become the incumbent at one of the top London churches. In 1774 there was a vacancy for the vicar of St George's, Hanover Square. The living was in the patronage of Lady Apsley and Dodd sent her an anonymous letter, offering £3,000 if she would appoint a certain gentleman — whose name was to be revealed in a later letter — to the position. Dodd's intention was plainly to bribe Lady Apsley into appointing him, but the anonymous letter was identified as having been written by Dodd and he temporarily left the country under a cloud of ridicule.

Dodd's rapid rise turned into an equally rapid fall. His popularity fell away, he was sacked as Royal Chaplain, and he was even lampooned as 'Doctor Simony' in a well-attended play.

When Dodd returned from abroad he found that he had a number of financial problems. In 1777 he tried to solve these difficulties by forging the signature of the Earl of Chesterfield on a bond for £4,200. He later claimed that he had hoped to escape punishment by repaying the money

before any problems arose, but his prompt arrest put any such hopes out of the question.

Dodd was put on trial in February 1777 and duly found guilty. In the late 1700s there was a great deal of crime, but little in the way of preventive or detective forces; crime was discouraged by severe penalties for the few who actually got caught and so Dodd was sentenced to death.

Being something of a celebrity, with a few influential friends, he secured a private room for himself in the infamous old Newgate Gaol. Dodd was allowed a plentiful supply of books and writing equipment, which he used to produce his last book, *Prison Thoughts*. Yet all his literary connections were unable to help him over the most important matter of all - even Doctor Johnson's appeals for mercy went unheeded. A petition in the errant clergyman's favour contained 23,000 signatures and was 37 yards long.

Nonetheless, in June 1777 the day of his execution arrived. He was taken out of Newgate for the two mile journey to the gallows at Tyburn; the crowds were so immense that Dodd's last journey took three hours. In front of the baying throng, Dodd was strung up in the company of an 18 year old youth who had stolen 30 shillings. In his last moments, he appeared 'stupid with despair'.

Dodd's friends were hopeful to the last. The gallows were often used so inefficiently that it was possible to cut a man down and revive him in a hot bath. They rented a room in a nearby building and prepared a bath, but the crowds were so densely packed that they were unable to get Dodd from the gallows to the hot water quickly enough. Thus ended the notorious life of one of Lincolnshire's most infamous clergymen and authors.