A NEW VIEW OF WILLIAM PENN

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An antiquarian attitude is both legitimate and delightful, but it is not an historical one. It is too partial and too local for historical purposes. The attitude toward William Penn has been entirely too much so, and his greatness has not been grasped even by his biographers. One will emphasize him as a Quaker denominationalist; another as an international curiosity; another as a colonizer of a local sort; and still another from a local Logan viewpoint. None, however, have painted him with any grasp of his greatness as a man and genius in the midst of the great upheaval in the British Empire, molding his powers to his great purposes of trying out a "holy experiment" in life and government, with magnificent self-sacrifice and successful results.

His life was contemporary with that British revolutionary movement which was a struggle for parliamentary supremacy over absolutism—a movement that was full of paradoxes from the extremes of a Cromwellian republic to a charter-destroying Stuart and from the decapitation of one king to the decamping of another to foreign parts, with the importation of crowned heads that would accept the new order of supremacy. Born into such a convulsion, with the fleeing king as a foster-father, a father who was that king's lieutenant admiral, and a mother from the imported king's country, he was familiar with royalty in England, France, Holland and Germany. He had a French education, as well as a training in Christ Church College, Oxford, and in law at Lincoln's Inn. At Oxford, he was so radical, having visions of real simplicity and great truths in that formal age, that he was expelled. Friend and supporter of the republican Sidney and the philosopher Locke, unlike the former he kept his head to produce a commonwealth in America, and, like the latter, he tried to write constitutions and laws, which, like Locke's, would not work. With a Washingtonian wisdom, he appointed lieutenants like David Lloyd and James Logan—his Jefferson and Hamilton—to carry out his ideas, while
he handled the conflicting powers in London that tried to cripple the great work of this foster-son of the decamped king in his efforts to build up Delaware River colonies.

He did this, too, with such character and genius that he won the friendship of both Parliament, with the power of the purse, and the imported king, without it. He acted with such wisdom and skill, too, in the midst of these powers, that no one knows to this day just what kind of a government he would have had if not obstructed by them. Yet he had the vision and courage to advocate publicly a union of the North American colonies long before Franklin, and even worked out in detail an international government beyond that of Henry of Navarre and Sully, while he lived long enough to see his lieutenants, under Lloyd’s leadership, construct a colony as free as Canada is today, with a metropolis, the first on the North American continent.

But what was he, while doing all of this? The “Pope” of the most radical Christian denomination of his day! He was even more powerful than Fox himself, the founder of the Friends, who were dubbed “Quakers.” He was jailed for street preaching. He refused to take off his hat to kings or to mere men. Like Bunyan, he turned imprisonment into victory by the composition of that acknowledged classic on “Solitude.” Even as the greatest leader of the persecuted Friends, he secured for them an asylum on the Delaware River. He published an anonymous pamphlet in Philadelphia on *The Excellent Privileges of Liberty and Property*, warning his people to stand for these when his colonies were threatened by the king and by Parliament too.

Under David Lloyd, his people did stand and win. They even won from Penn the Charter-Constitution of 1701, which he feared London would not allow, for he had to keep the Quakers near enough to English institutions not to arouse suspicion. Desiring a proper title to Delaware, he refused it when it was offered with the power of the purse independent of the assembly, and thereby never did get sound title to it, although he won James over, but too late. So great was he, that he, the Quaker “Pope” and greatest Quaker missionary, could win from a Catholic absolutionist a home for his people in three colonies! What is more he made it a home for all other persecuted of any beliefs even after Lord Baltimore had abandoned religious freedom in his own
colony. Still more, his lieutenants, under David Lloyd's leadership, made so attractive constitution, laws and prosperity that his colonies drew citizens from all the others, including men like an Andrew Hamilton from Maryland and a Franklin from Massachusetts, who, with Penn's lieutenant, Logan, made his metropolis the greatest center of science and learning on the American continent. The prestige of the Quakers was so great that all denominations supported them in government for three-quarters of a century, when they withdrew from dominance of their own accord.

And with what sacrifice did he do all this! For forty-four years he molded tremendous British powers in tragic changes and urged or held back his people as circumstances required. He threw into the struggle all he owned and mortgaged his colonies even as a last resort. When about to lose them, he offered to sell them to the Crown—the final blow that broke his mental powers. But he saved his colonies to his people and family, for whom this great sacrifice was made.

William Penn was great in many ways. He had the wisdom of a Washington; the vision in government of a Sully, a Kant or a James Wilson; the political skill of a Richelieu, a Cavour or a Disraeli; a spiritual vision that was almost Johnanine; a sacrifice for his people that was Christ-like; a pen that was classical; a patience like that of Job that ended in victory for his purposes. Only death prevented his establishing a home on the Delaware where his grave ought to be. And isn't it time that Pennsylvania, Delaware and New Jersey erect a monumental lighthouse at the point where the Delaware-Pennsylvania line meets the river, and having it face toward New Jersey, his first colonial child?