Confessions of an American Ranter

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A pair of letters written between 1706 and 1708 concerning the efforts of John Pearce to gain readmission to the Woodbridge, New Jersey, Meeting of Friends suggest that orthodox Quakers of the Mid-Atlantic used the term "Ranter" to marginalize theological deviants. Paradoxically, these letters also suggest how those ostracized developed a coherent group identity by embracing this heretical label. And these letters provide additional evidence in the emotional debate which has raged in Anglo-American historiography over the existence or non-existence of the Ranters.¹

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The term Ranter has its own history and historiography. The Ranters are one among a number of small sects (including the Quakers) believed to have emerged in England between 1640 and 1660. Their beliefs have been described as pantheistic antinomianism, the belief that God dwelt not only in all people but in all things.² However, the very existence or non-existence of the sect has become the subject of a heated historical controversy. Marxist historians, most notably Christopher Hill, maintain that the sectarians' appearance marked a countercultural revolt against an unintended but nonetheless potent bourgeois revolution instigated by the Puritan rulers of England in the Interregnum and embodied in the Protestant ethic.³ Numerous challenges have been mounted to Hill's interpretation in the last twenty years, but none so serious as that posed by J.C. Davis in Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and the Historians.⁴ Davis maintains that the Ranters in particular never existed as a coherent group and argues his case by assaulting Hill's reconstruction of Ranter belief and membership. The sect, in Davis's view, was twice invented: once in the seventeenth century, by a combination of writers hostile to sectarians and by sectarian writers themselves who were in need of a bogeyman to control the beliefs of enthusiastic members; and again in the twentieth century by the Communist Party's Historians Group, particularly by A.L. Morton and Christopher Hill.⁵ Davis believes that the Group, determined to link the counterculture of the 1960s to a past history of dissent, overlooked the fact that the primary sources which discussed the Ranters have been almost all generated by those decidedly hostile to radical religion.⁶ Nothing less than our understanding of popular movements in the early modern period is at stake in that debate, since our knowledge of these movements comes primarily from hostile sources.

Pantheistic antinomians play almost as important role in discussions of early American history as they do in discussions of the English Civil War. Most historians of early New England now accept that Winthrop's marginalization of the Antinomian faction in Massachusetts Bay helped create non-separating Congregationalist orthodoxy from the varied beliefs of English Puritanism. David
Lovejoy has suggested, with a good deal of merit, that the marginalization of the “Ranters” in the Mid-Atlantic similarly helped orthodox Quakers achieve stability. But the beliefs of these groups in New England and the middle colonies are also known primarily through hostile sources.

While the existence or non-existence of the Ranters in England is debatable, by the 1660s the term “Ranter” had supplanted “familist” and “anabaptist” in the Anglo-American lexicon used to describe theological deviance. Perhaps this shift occurred because the Ranters had emerged as a historical group; perhaps it occurred because the claims of an indwelling spirit made by the so-called familists seemed tame in the theologically dislocated 1650s. For whatever reason, after 1650 it became common to declare that religious troublemakers in England exhibited a “Ranting Tendency” or a “Ranting Spirit,” a spirit of theological licentiousness which encouraged disorder. The Quakers, with their loose institutional structure and their emphasis on the inner light, found themselves particularly vulnerable to the charge, one that they not only vehemently denied but eventually turned against the radical fringe of their own sect, first in England, and then in America as Friends’ settlements spread to what became the middle colonies. The vigor with which these charges were applied created a fairly large body of seventeenth-century documents which mentions the Ranters, but hostile observers generated almost all of this literature concerning the English Ranters, the Antinomians of Massachusetts Bay, and the Ranters of the middle colonies. For this reason, the life of John Pearce, and the few pieces of evidence that record his existence, are historically significant. Pearce confessed to being a Ranter, and it is worth examining how he came to espouse that identity.

Sometime before 1687, John Pearce settled in New Jersey. He probably arrived thinking himself a Quaker, but his beliefs seemed different from those around him and he never quite fit into any one theological group. The hardening of Quaker orthodoxy, a subsequent theological schism among the middle colonies’ Friends in the 1690s, and broader theological disorder at the opening of the eighteenth century in New Jersey intersected in Pearce’s lifetime and made what was probably an unpleasant life all the more difficult.

Pearce seems to have spent his adult life on the social fringe of the congregationalist communities of Elizabeth Town and Woodbridge in East New Jersey. The grinding poverty which led him in 1687 to send “a paper to the people of the world (desireing to be suplyd with a cow he being poor)” seems to have defined his life. Although we know he lived in East Jersey, he is mentioned in no town records, there is no evidence of him owning land anywhere, participating in politics, or engaging in any trade. There is no mention of when he entered New Jersey, and there is no record of his death, neither in the Quaker records nor in the civil records of the colony. What we do know is that for some time before 1706 he belonged to and identified with what the Woodbridge Quaker Meeting called the “separate party called Ranters.” The “Ranters” seem to have given him the only true social acceptance he ever knew, and he seems to have ended his days with them.
Pearce’s time in New Jersey chronologically corresponded with the transformation of the American Quakers from a sect to a church. This change took decades and led the orthodox meetings to eventually denounce as Ranters those like Pearce who could not accept the standardization of belief. Quakers arrived in the middle colonies as early as the 1650s, and were among the first settlers in eastern New Jersey in the 1660s. These groups initially retained the loose, sect-like character that marked the initial Friends’ meetings in England, but by the end of the 1660s this had begun to change. The arrival of representatives from among the English Friends and the migration of many more Friends to the Delaware Valley after 1676 encouraged a tighter organizational structure. As the newcomers struggled to build a workable society, they created a more stable religious life. Practices disruptive to good order in the meetings came to be defined more and more as part of a “Ranting tendency” or “Ranting spirit,” and the beliefs that informed these acts came to be defined as heretical. At some point in this process, more or less recognizable groups known as Ranters emerged in a number of places in the middle colonies.

The identities of most of those Ranters is unknown. We know of these people almost entirely from literary sources; these sort of antinomians left no membership lists. The colonial governments did not persecute them, so they created no court records. It is unclear whether a connection existed between these groups and earlier English radical dissenters beyond the evident connection to the Quakers. While this sort of evidence base limits what we can say about the Mid-Atlantic Ranters, a pattern does seem to be present in contemporaries denunciation of the sect.

The rhetorical attacks on of the middle colonies’ Ranters seems to have begun in the 1670s, died away in the mid-1680s, and then picked up again in the 1690s. One visitor to Long Island in 1672 recorded the activities of a group of Ranters who “would come, both men and women, into Friend’s meetings, singing and dancing in a rude manner.” Typical of the early accounts of Ranters in East Jersey was that of Quaker William Edmundson, who complained in 1682 that one Edward Tarff, and several others possessed of a “ranting Spirit,” disrupted a Friends Monthly Meeting in Monmouth, New Jersey. Face blackened, Tarff sang, danced, and called Edmundson “old rotten Priest.” The account of Tarff’s singing and dancing in Monmouth is one of the last attacks against the Ranters from this early period.

A resurgence of outrages against the Ranters seemed to have occurred in the 1690s. A Quaker traveller on Long Island in 1698 recalled his meeting with “some of the people called Ranters who disturbed our meeting. I may say as the apostle Paul did, that I fought with beasts there.” A 1703 report from New Jersey’s future Governor Lewis Morris to ecclesiastical authorities in England denounced the Ranters in East New Jersey. A report from Long Island in the same period denounced a Ranter who “hooted like an owl and made a ridiculous noise” in order to disrupt the Quaker meeting. These reports exemplify the resurgence in denunciations in that later period. The Woodbridge Friends condemned John Pearce during this second wave of recrimination.
The general reemergence of concern about theological deviants after 1690 probably grew out of a broader disorder in religious society. By 1690 the Quakers who settled in New Jersey and then Pennsylvania had reestablished the meeting structure they knew in England, but that structure soon came under internal criticism, most notably from George Keith, a prominent public Friend.25 In the 1690s, Keith publicly declared that many Quakers were drifting away from knowledge of Christ. The resulting Keithan schism revealed the discord within a heterogenous Quaker population drawn from all over the British Isles. Soon the Friends' Meetings in America fell into disputes about theological questions, membership, and organizational structure.26 Some Quakers responded by becoming radical antinomians, while others drifted into more stable Protestant churches. Pearce's letter suggests that East Jersey's Ranters were aggressively denouncing “the old Quakers” and “Foxes Orders,” in an apparent effort to convert orthodox Quakers to their Ranter beliefs.27 At the other extreme, by 1701 Keith was aggressively proselytizing for the Church of England among the Friends of New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania.28

Not just the Friends' Meetings, but the entire theological world around John Pearce fluctuated violently in this period. The Dutch Reformed Church, strong in East Jersey, violently split in the wake of the failure of Leisler's Rebellion of 1688-90. The Dutch population divided between those who would convert to Anglicanism, those who accepted a conservative Dutch Reformed church influenced by English authorities, and evangelically-minded Dutchmen living on the frontier in New Jersey and in parts of New York.29 At the opening of the eighteenth century, evangelical and mechanic preaching became commonplace in Pearce's home county of Essex.30 The English-speaking Congregational churches of East Jersey underwent a still-unexplained change from independency to a presbyterian system of church governance while the Church of England established new Anglican congregations at Pearce's hometown of Elizabeth Town as early as 1705.31

Set within this framework of broad theological dislocations in the middle colonies, the scrutiny that Pearce's 1706 efforts to rejoin the Quakers received makes more sense. The Friends' orthodoxy established in the 1670s and 1680s had become unhinged, releasing conflicting impulses in the Quaker meetings. On the one hand, their proselytizing impulse encouraged the Woodbridge Friends to embrace Pearce in 1706 “in order to gain him to a sincere reformation” after his apostasy.32 On the other hand, Pearce's theological ambiguity represented a threat to the order that had emerged among Friends as they struggled to define who and what they were. Anxious to portray themselves as having “the most concise, regular, and reasonable Constitution of Discipline that ever was established in the World,” the Mid-Atlantic Quakers feared anyone who seemed to be of either too radical or too conservative theological tendencies.33 At a time when the basic understanding of what a Quaker was had broken down to a considerable degree, a person who fit comfortably in neither orthodox Quaker meetings nor among the Ranters was a serious problem. Wanting to be inclusive, Quakers tried to accept Pearce; fearful that Pearce repre-
sented antinomian subversion, they never seem to have trusted him.

While numerous theologically radical people suffered the same fate, the letters through which we know Pearce are unique in that they demonstrate that he had, at some time before 1706, internalized the Ranter identity thrust upon him. The true importance of the Pearce letters lays in this internalization. I have no doubt that the term “Ranter” was part of a durable rhetorical construct used to define and describe threatening religious enthusiasm in the Anglo-American world in the latter half of the seventeenth century and the first decades of the eighteenth century, nor do I doubt that aspects of the identity were merely rhetorical in our common usage of the term. Concerned with order, Quaker leaders and gentlemen like Lewis Morris used the cry of “Ranter” to define those whose behavior seemed threatening.

This does not mean, however, that there were no Ranters in New Jersey in 1706. If we are to continue to accept that people in the past at least occasionally said what they meant and that that meaning is recoverable, then it is apparent that John Pearce believed himself to have been, at least for some time, one of the “separate party called Ranters.” Those around him believed the same thing, declaring that he belonged to the “separate party.” Whatever his inclinations were when he penned his confession in 1706, by 1708 he had again joined the Ranters and “lately sent us [the Woodbridge Friend’s Meeting] another paper of his own writing wherein he condemns us whom he stield his dear friends, & beloved of ye Lord Jesus & justifying ye s:d separate party.” While those in power in his world attempted to control him by labelling him Ranter, he found comfort in that identity. The process of defining some people as lying out of the orthodox meeting in a sense created, or recreated, two group identities. In defining themselves the Quakers of the Delaware Valley helped created a Ranter movement which took on a life of its own. Rhetorical denunciations marginalized New Jersey’s Ranters, but at the same time provided them with an identity through which they could define what they believed and defy those who ostracized them.

Unlike most everything else we known of those holding antinomian beliefs in England and in America, the Pearce letters express the beliefs of someone intimately and immediately involved with a group he understood to be Ranters. The letters reveal that he was capable of articulating Ranter beliefs. Pearce’s general understanding of Ranter spirituality falls within the pantheistic antinomian theological framework that historians have established as a defining aspect of Ranter beliefs in England. “This thing,” wrote Pearce, “is true, for I have been mislead too much by their fair words & fine appearances like Angels of light.” “Angels of light”—this suggests intense piety, while the goal, “to break down all good Order of Truth in ye Church of Christ, under pretence of liberty of Conscience, if not all Meetings of friends, yea & would hew down all ye Books & Records”—is, in my mind, a plebeian’s description of antinomian beliefs.

In his efforts to show that the English Ranters did not exist, J.C. Davis invokes the theories of sociologist Kai Erikson to show how “moral panics” about deviants are
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deliberately manipulated to create standards of normalcy. Indeed, Erikson himself has demonstrated how a moral panic separated the orthodox from the deviant in Massachusetts Bay in the 1630s. True enough, perhaps, but Erikson and others have demonstrated that the Antinomian faction there was indeed a very real faction with its own political and theological agenda. No doubt there was more to the creation of this faction than their definition as deviants; an internal dynamic of organization, centered on Anne Hutchinson, gave these dissidents an identity. The Ranters seem to have been similarly created in New Jersey, the obscured twin of the more familiar Quakers.

In time, "enthusiast," "new light," and "evangelical" would replace "Ranter" as the labels of choice for those whose theological behavior seemed to defy religious and social convention. This new vocabulary arose as the numbers of those embracing an emotional, inner religion grew geometrically. To be sure, the specific beliefs of those labelled as enthusiasts differed from the pantheistic antinomianism of a John Pearce. But in their behavior and in their defiance of authority they appear remarkably like the earlier Ranters.

Language, behavior, and institutional structure all play a part in establishing individual and collective identity. John Pearce, a plebeian man in the middle colonies, internalized the identity of Ranter thrust upon him, and apparently so did a number of other people. He believed (at least some of the time) in the validity of that identity and so did those around him. We cannot invalidate his view of himself without risking a kind of nihilism in which we negate the existence and thought of common people in the past. That his identity as a Ranter helped to maintain discipline and orthodoxy among Quakers is also probably true, but it does not negate his self-identification.

Language and written records are often the instruments of the powerful. In consequence, popular, non-elite voices are difficult to hear clearly, and still more difficult to interpret accurately. The Pearce letters provide us with such a voice. They in no way settle the debate over the Ranters, nor do they completely illuminate how the Quakers of the Mid-Atlantic established theological and institutional boundaries by marginalizing deviants. But they do provide us with another vantage point from which we can try to understand the theological differences of the period. It is through the examination of pieces of evidence such as the Pearce letters that the importance of the Ranters in the colonial Mid-Atlantic will become apparent.
The letters are provided courtesy of the Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College.

At the Monthly Meeting Held in Amboy the 13th day, 2nd Month 1687

John Pearce being present the meeting told him, that he had done wrong in sending a paper to the people of the world (desiring to be supplied with a cow he being poor) and not coming to the Monthly Meeting of friends to lay his necessities before them. And this left him to consider whither he would redress his fault if he feels it in himself.

This letter taken from, Record, Monthly Meeting of Friends, Woodbridge, New Jersey, Microfilm Copy, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College.

At Nathaniel Fitz Randolph's in Woodbridge the 19th day of the 10th month 1706

A Paper from John Pearce was read which is as followeth. For ye monthly & Quarterly Meetings of ffriends. Written ye 10th: mo.th, 1706.

Dear Friends & beloved of ye Lord Jesus. Whereas I do hear that some dear friends do hear yt I am like to be led away after a separate party called Ranters, This thing is true, for I have been misled too much by their fair words & fine appearances like Angels of light, but through ye mercies of ye Lord who hath showed me yt ye bottom of their work is to break down all good Order of Truth in ye Church of Christ, under pretence of liberty of Conscience, if not all Meetings of ffriends, yea & would hew down all ye Books & Records of so many dear ffriends yt have suffered so faithfully for Truth's sake, who are gone before us, And I have searched more into their ways, words & actions now of late than ever I did heretofore, & through the mercy of ye Lord am fully satisfied they are misled by a wrong Spirit & I would every one were aware of their Spirit & ways, least they smart for it as I have don & still do, for I fear they be the worst enemies Truth hath on earth. You may know them by their Speach, for they generally say to all sorts of people beware of the old Quakers, beware of Foxes Orders. And they do labour to whisper in the ears of all people all manner of Rif Raf & Lies against ye most worthy & faithful friends, not only ye living but ye dead. Oh dear friends ye thoughts of these things worketh zeal in me again & again to adore such a Spirit of darkness whither in myself or others. And I do willingly & volenterily bear my testimony against all spirits yt do in ye least strike against ye Orders of Truth yt is among friends. And I do desire friends prayers to God for me yt I may be preserved on my watch better for time to come & live to ye praise of God & in unity wth his people & an instrument of his praise. So with
my dear love to you I rest yours in life or death farwel. John Pearce.

I do desire true Copys of this may be Sent to all ye monthly & quarterly meet-
ings of friends, as my testimony agt; those yt walke disorderly & smites ag.t ye Order
of Truth & friends, whose Spirit leads into darkness & lies & slanders agt ye inno-
cent people of God.

John Pearce.

After ye reading of ye said Paper, a Question was put viz; Whether ye desire in
ye latter part thereof (which may be term'd the Postscript) should be answer'd or not.
Upon debate thereof It was concluded not to answer it.

This letter taken from Minutes, page 33-34, 19th day 10 mo. 1706, Monthly
Meeting of Friends, Woodbridge, New Jersey, Microfilm Copy, Friends Historical
Library of Swarthmore College.

At a Monthly Meeting at Nathaniel ffitz-Randolph's in Woodbridge the 16th day
of the 7th. month 1708.

According to the appointment of the last monthly Meeting Benj. Griffith drew
up a Testimony against John Pearce & Presented to this Meeting who ordered it to
be read which was accordingly so don, the meeting approv'd thereof & ordered that
it should be given forth publickly. The Testimony is as followeth.

From our monthly Meeting at Woodbridge the Twenty first day of ye 8:th
mo:th 1708.

Whereas John Pearce of Elizabeth towne in the County of Essex in the Eastern
division of the Province of Nova-Cesaria or New Jersey hath for several years gone
under the profession & denomination of a Quaker but his conversation hath in a
great measure been contrary thereto, whereof he hath been friendly adverized &
admonished in love & good will to him to condemn ye Same & for time to come to
walke more circumspective upon which he hath written several papers of condemn-
ation & sent them to our Meetings (to which himself seldom came) & in the year
1706 he wrot a paper, directed For ye monthly & Quarterly meeting of ffriends (as
he then term'd us) wherein he declares yt he had been too much misled by a seperate
party called Ranters, but now, through ye mercy of ye Lord he is fully satisfied they
are misled by a wrong Spirit wch worketh zeal in him again & again to abhore such
a Spirit of darkness whether in himself or others, saymg he doth willingly & volun-
tarily bear his Testimony agt: all Spirits yt do in ye least strike ag:t ye order of Truth
yt is among us, & desires our prayer to God for him yt he may be preserved agt: ye:
Spirit for time to come & live to ye praise of God & in unity w:th his people (w:ch
he then esteem'd Us to be) & then concluded, So wth any dear love to you I rest yours
in life or death farwel John Pearce.

Notwithstanding what above we have related he declares (and much more) in
his above said paper & bore his testimony ag:st ye wayes, words, actions & Spirit of
ye Seperate party call'd Ranters, He lately sent us another paper of his own writing
wherein he condemns us whom he stield his dear friends, & beloved of ye Lord Jesus
& justifying ye s:d seperate party, & hath since then wholly deserted coming to our
meetings, reproaches & condemns us by which he evidently manifest himself to us,
to be what we have for a long time judg'd him to be viz: a man possest, in a large
degree with an unstable & wavering Spirit, nevertheless we have dealt tenderly & lov-
ingly with him, in order to gain him to a sincere reformation, but we find that we
cannot prevail upon him so to do, Therefore a holy constraint lieth on us, for clear-
ing that blessed Truth we make profession of and bear testimony to, as also for clear-
ing Ourselves of him to bear and publish this Our Testimony against him for his
instability, disorderly walking and contention and disown him (which hereby We do)
to be a member, or one in unity and fellowship with us, or any of the religious Society
of the faithful people of God, who are in division call'd Quakers,

Therefore we do hereby desire his neighbours and all others, to whose knowl-
edge this may come, That, they would not hereafter deem him to be one of us.

This letter taken from Minutes, page 45, 19th day 5th mo. 1708, Monthly
Meeting of Friends, Woodbridge, New Jersey, Microfilm Copy, Friends Historical
Library, Swarthmore College.
Notes
1. I would like to thank David Underdown, Christopher Hill, Simon Newman, Tim Harris, Brenda Myers, and Natasha Jones for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this note.
3. Ibid., 13-15, passim.  
*Past and Present*, No. 140 (August 1993), 194-210. This last cited volume of *Past and Present* also contains a number of other articles concerning the controversy. Those who have rushed to defend Hill have reformulated the nature of the Ranters and at the same time continue to insist on their existence.
10. H. Larry Ingle, *First Among Friends: George Fox and the Creation of Quakerism* (Oxford, 1994), 115, gives an example where a group of Baptists accused a group of Quakers of desiring "to lay waste scriptures, churches, Christ, faith, hope..."
11. Ibid., 115,171-172.
12. It is at least possible that Pearce was part of the Scottish migration stream which arrived in New Jersey in the 1680s, and if that is so, he might have been a Cameroonian. This Presbyterian offshoot was demonized in much the same way as the Ranters were. If Pearce was indeed a Cameroonian, his later appearance as a Ranter suggests new ways of understanding the transatlantic movement of ideas. I would like to thank Professor Tim Harris, Brown University, for bringing this possibility to my attention. It is also possible that Pearce had been labelled a Ranter in England, but it is impossible to determine this with certainty.
13. At a Monthly Meeting Held in Amboy the 13th day, 2nd Month 1687, Record, Monthly Meeting of Friends, Woodbridge, New Jersey, Microfilm Copy, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College.
14. 19th day of the 10th month, 1706, Minutes of the Woodbridge Monthly Meeting, 1686-1751, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, 33.
18. As in Jones, 231.
20. Ibid.
21. Lovejoy, 141, suggests that by the early 1680s the Ranters of the MidAtlantic had reshaped themselves into "New Quakers". While I believe Lovejoy accurately marks the decline of Ranters accusations in the earlier period, he fails to note
what I think is a later resurgence.

22. As in Jones, 231n.


27. 19th day of the 10th month, 1706, Minutes of the Woodbridge Monthly Meeting, 1686-1751, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, 33.


32. Testimony of Benj. Griffith.....At a Monthly Meeting at Nathaniel fitz-Randolph's in Woodbridge, 1708, Minutes of the Woodbridge Monthly Meeting, 1686-1751, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, 33.

33. Lovejoy, 143.

34. 19th day of the 10th month, 1706, Minutes of the Woodbridge Monthly Meeting, 1686-1751, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, 33.

35. Testimony of Benj. Griffith.....At a Monthly Meeting at Nathaniel fitz-Randolph's in Woodbridge, the 16th day of the 7th Month, 1708, Minutes of the Woodbridge Monthly Meeting, 1686-1751, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, 33.


37. For the best brief discussion of the hardening of Quaker orthodoxy in America, see Butler, 28.

38. 19th day of the 10th month, 1706, Minutes of the Woodbridge Monthly Meeting, 1686-1751, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, 33.

39. Davis, 97-98.

40. Erikson, 33-64.