The Quaker founder of Pennsylvania was in difficulties in 1690. The known, the confessed, the unrepentant friend of the hated James II, he found himself disgraced, suspected of treason, harried and kept under strict surveillance by the new king, William III. Wherever he went, he was reviled and slandered, accused of being that worst of public enemies, a Jesuit in disguise. During most of this dark period, he lived a retired life at Worminghurst, his country seat in Sussex. Occasionally, he went up to London or preached in the surrounding counties.

To at least one man outside of Penn's own Quaker circle, the charges against him were incredible, the suspicions totally unwarranted. This man had no special, intimate knowledge of Penn's character and history. Apparently, he had seen the Quaker only once, when Penn had preached in Suffolk the year before. But he had been deeply impressed by what he had seen and heard on that occasion. He felt certain—or almost certain, for no one could be quite sure in that day of distrust—that this was no Jesuit, no traitor. Under this strong conviction he composed a set of labored couplets—even the title rhymes—to vindicate Penn from his unjust accusers.¹

The writer's name was George Sparrow, a name otherwise unknown to history or literature. From the poem itself we learn three things about him: that he lived near Stradbroke² in Suffolk, that he was “one that hath met with sorrow,” and that he was an execrable

¹ The manuscript of this poem, which is in the Huntington Library, was purchased from Maggs Brothers in England in 1922. Its previous history is unknown.

² So, at least, I interpret his “Stratbrough,” the place at which he “stated” his verses. Sparrow is, or was, a common Suffolk name. There were several George Sparrows in the county in 1674. See Suffolk in 1674: Being the Hearth Tax Returns, Suffolk Green Book, No. IX, Vol. 13 (Woodbridge, 1905). The place at which he heard Penn preach remains a mystery. No “Heringham” appears in any gazetteer that I have consulted, although several Suffolk place names have a similar sound: Heningham, Heveningham, Helmingham.
That Matchless Man Whom Ages Will Admire

Assuredly There are but few Such Men
In all this World As is that Will[ia]m Pen
for if his Tongue and heart goe both together
Wee know not where to find out Such Another
And Certainly if itt were otherwise,
Seeing hee hath Soe many Enemy's
They would have found ere this Time without doubt
Some Way or other to make the matter out,
Soe hopeing that hee is noe Hippocrite
Or What is worse A popish Jesuite—
I will proceed as breifly As I can
To that Discription of the Transcendant Man
Which will be done but Slenderly by mee
but hee deserves the Superlative degree—
In the first place he hath profitian Learning
And next An Admireable Understanding—
3ly A Wonderfull good Memory
4ly An Admireable Delivery—
5ly he hath an Artificiall Gesture
6ly he hath a Magnanimous posture
7ly That which doth All the rest Exceed
Hee can by Heart most of the Bible read
That is Those proofs which are most Eminent
both in the Old And the New Testament
Hee Speaketh them All readily wee See—
As if they were but A B C and D.
Which Crowneth all the high Accomplishm[en]ts
of his great part's those are the Small Contents
Now for his Doctrine Itt doth plainly Shew
That hee is neither papist Turk nor Jew
but an Undaunted Protestant that can
Tell how to Speak to Each particular man
A Word in Season As the Case requires
In Scripture Language and Needs Goe no higher
first he declares that every dispensation
Towards Mankind in every Generation
Was to recover Sinners from their fall
They Gained by Adam in which wee Sinned All
That is the most glorious dispensation
to have the Gospell preached in our Nation
Also he Speaks against All Sorts of Sinn
And Shows the danger that poor Souls are in
Who Trust unto outward Christianity
Which will deceive when they Come to dye,
And that it is a dreadful Tribulation
To perish under a Gospell Dispensation
Then he Came to the most Material part
That is to say the purging of the Heart—
The Heart's a Tribute due to our Creator
Therefore wee may not give it to the Creature
The Way to keep Truth in ye Inward part's
Is by Keeping Sinn out of the heart's
Then Add to this What is worth All the rest
There is noe Salvation but In Jesus Christ
To be Baptized of him wee Should desire
That doth Baptize with Holy Ghost and fire
Because a Christian of Christ own makeing
Wee may be Sure never to be forsaken
With Those Such like Truths he did proceed
And made an Excellent discourse Indeed—
But that which hee did most Insist upon
Itt was against Outside Religion
There's much In Europe And in England too
Outside Christianity if that would doe—
Hee Said itt And hath Seen itt for his part
To which he added ye Text My Son Give me thy heart
Looe by those few words which are here Exprest
May be Supposed what were the rest—
Or rather what unto they did all bend
Which was Wee hope unto A godly End
For with A Godly prayer he did Conclude—
And with a blessing on the Multitude—
poet. As a word portrait, or “character,” his piece is disappointing; it gives us little real insight into the appearance, the manner, or the personality of William Penn at this critical point in his life. It is conventional, wooden, a crude performance.

But its very conventionality is revealing and, in its way, touching. Clearly, George Sparrow’s intent was to dispose of two widespread canards: on the one hand, that Penn was a mere “mechanick preacher,” an uncouth, illiterate tub-thumper; on the other (the inconsistency seldom bothered anyone), that he was a disguised Jesuit, an artful, subtle agent of Rome.

To disprove the first allegation—a common charge against Quakers in the seventeenth century—Sparrow took pains to describe Penn’s manner of preaching. The picture is one of a polished orator, who understands and follows the accepted canons of Ciceronian eloquence with respect to memory, delivery, gesture, and the rest. Penn, after all, was an educated gentleman, and Sparrow leaves no doubt that he spoke like one. To refute the charge of Popery was hardly more difficult. All Sparrow needed to do was to outline Penn’s sermon. Obviously, with its “Scripture language,” its emphasis on original sin, its attack on mere “outside religion,” it was a Protestant homily. In the face of this palpable evidence that Penn was both an educated gentleman and a sound Protestant, the charges of treason, so Sparrow seems to imply, fell to the ground of their own weight.

Whether Penn ever heard of his unknown admirer in Suffolk we do not know. Nor do we know how widely Sparrow’s verses may have circulated, or whether they had any effect in counteracting the malicious gossip. All we really know is that Penn preached in Suffolk on March 21, 1689, and that he made a powerful, a favorable, and a lasting impression on at least one of his hearers.

Huntington Library

Frederick B. Tolles

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3 Penn’s sermon, as Sparrow outlines it, is strikingly similar to one that he preached five years later at Gracechurch Street Meeting in London, even to the text: “My son, give me thy heart” (Prov. 23: 26). See The Harmony of Divine and Heavenly Doctrines, 2nd American ed. from 3rd London ed. (St. Clairsville, Ohio, 1836), 3–30.
This Is the Sume of what I heard, I Say—
And thought my Time well bestowed that day—
Soe much I have to Say for Mr. Penn
And doe Account him One of ye best of men
And yet how basely hath he been abus'd
Which is noe News for good ones to be soe Us'd
Proud Tertullus A pestilent fellow did Call
That great Apostle And pretious preacher paul
And ye high preist with the Chiefe of the Jews,
Our Lord And Saviour Christ did Soe abuse—
And never left Till they had Murthered him
Who out of Love Came to Redeem them

If Any Ask who or what I be
That doth presume to Write As here you See
Answer Itt is One That hath mett w[i]th Sorrow
Which is known And Call'd by Name George Sparrow.

March 21 1689 Heard Att Heringham Suffolk—
     Stated Stratbrough 1690