

## *A Rhymed Defense of William Penn, 1690*

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.<sup>1</sup>

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 Stradbroke<sup>2</sup> in Suffolk, that he was "one that hath met with sorrow," and that he was an execrable

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

*The Character of Will[ia]m Pen[n] Esq.  
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  
 ffor 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 hoping 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 profitient Learning  
 And next An Admireable Understanding—  
 3dly 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 Emminent  
 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 particuler 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 Generaçon  
 Was to recover Sinners from their fall  
 They Gained by Adam in which wee Sinned All  
 That is the most glorious dispensaçon  
 to have the Gospell preached in our Naçon  
 Also he Speaks ag[ain]st 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 itt is a dreadfull Tribulaçon  
 To perish under a Gospell Despensaçon  
 Then he Came to the most Materiell part  
 That is to Say the purgeing of the Heart—  
 The Heart's a Tribute due to our Creator  
 Therefore wee may not give itt 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 Salvaçon 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  
 Loe 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.<sup>3</sup> 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*

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<sup>3</sup> 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