William Rakestraw: Pacifist Pamphleteer and Party Servant

At some date between 1713 and 1715 a pseudonymous Pennsylvanian, "Philalethes," first published the Quaker objection to the payment of taxes laid to support war. In his pamphlet, *Tribute to Caesar*, "Philalethes" objected to Friends paying the tax levied by the Pennsylvania Assembly in order to contribute £2,000 "to the Queen's use"—money requested by Queen Anne for an expedition against Canada.¹ His denial of the New Testament rubric to "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's," and the Quakers who espoused it, was the first airing of a caveat that divided Quakers throughout the colonial period and the American Revolution.

In 1947 Emily E. Moore discovered the identity of the author and ended speculation that he was Thomas Maule, a Salem, Massachusetts, Quaker.² At Friends Library, London, Moore discovered a manuscript in Thomas Story's hand entitled, "Tribute against Caesar, &c. Being a refutation of a wretched and defamatory pamphlet (writ by one William Rakestraw, a satyre in Pennsylvania) per T.S." Most of Rakestraw's pamphlet rebutted Story's sermons espousing the payment of the tax and cavilled at Story in a very un-Friendly manner.

Among the papers of the Quaker historian Robert Proud, deposited at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, is a manuscript which doubly certifies the authorship of Rakestraw and adds some leading details about his circumstances. The paper, dated October 24, 1712, signed by "W. R.," and entitled "My Answer to our mo.

Meeting," is an angry, rambling monologue against some ill-defined accusation by the Philadelphia Monthly Meeting. In the records of the Meeting one finds that the Meeting was dealing with Rakestraw for publicly abusing Thomas Story and that in 1713 it disowned Rakestraw. In Rakestraw’s reply to the Meeting, and in his later pamphlet, he specified either the names or the initials of some of his adversaries in the contest: Thomas Story, of course, Richard Hill, Joseph Kirkbride, Thomas Griffith, and (deduced from one or more initials) Caleb Pusey, Griffith Owen, and James Logan. Most of these were conspicuous members of an alliance which in 1710 ousted all the incumbent members from the Assembly and, thereupon, satisfied Queen Anne’s request to assist the Canadian expedition, among other things. They directed the government which restrained the property of a few Friends who like Rakestraw refused to pay the tax, and they disowned him in Philadelphia Monthly Meeting because he sought a hearing in public. It appears, in sum, that a conscientious, albeit intemperate, Quaker defied a callous Quaker clique in power to become, in light of subsequent Quaker pacifism, and in the eyes of men from Anthony Benezet to Peter Brock, “a forerunner of the radical peace men . . . in the second half of the century.”

Thomas Story saw no such character in William Rakestraw. Story attached this “hack” Rakestraw to a group of malcontents and demagogues who had resisted all government and taxes since the very founding of the Province. Without specifying Thomas and David Lloyd and their company, Story undoubtedly had them in mind. Yet Story, who kept his temper loosely tethered, might have been replying to Rakestraw’s ad hominem remarks with some of his own, and chose to obscure Rakestraw’s sincere pacifism by fastening upon him the selfish motives that the political parties in 1711 and

3 Robert Proud Papers, Box 2, Folio 100, Library Company of Philadelphia, on deposit at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
4 Philadelphia Monthly Meeting minutes, May 29, 1713, and Sept. 25, 1713, Friends Records Department, 302 Arch Street, Philadelphia.
5 Anthony Benezet to Moses Brown, July 1, 1780, Quaker Collection, Haverford College; Peter Brock, Pioneers of the Peaceable Kingdom (Princeton, 1968), 93.
6 Story, “Tribute against Caesar.”
earlier attributed to each other. Accounts of Rakestraw have discounted Story's disparagement of Rakestraw or ignored it.

Story's opinion was sound. For almost a decade before the tax of 1711, Rakestraw had been troubling Penn and Logan over alleged slights which had nothing to do with war or taxes for war. His complaints conformed to the scores of private and public jealousies that had disordered Pennsylvania society and politics since 1682. With that past in view, Story could easily have imagined that Rakestraw displayed a chronic distemper, as Rakestraw might similarly have found that Story displayed chronic arrogance.

Rakestraw began in 1702, asking Penn for title to a parcel of land in Philadelphia which he, Rakestraw, had been occupying. Penn had no intention of admitting Rakestraw's right to land which he thought Rakestraw had presumptuously taken up. Next, in 1706 or early 1707, Rakestraw petitioned Logan, who managed the Land Office of the province, for a city lot, and Logan refused him because Francis Plumstead had already applied for the same lot. In March, 1707, the Assembly, controlled by David Lloyd and his party after their absence from it in 1705, appointed Rakestraw its clerk. Two months later Rakestraw figured in the impeachment of Logan which the House initiated that spring. Among the articles of impeachment, the House accused Logan of misusing the offices of Proprietary Secretary and Surveyor General and abusing honest citizens who applied to the Land Office. As evidence of the same were "Several petitions [to the House] against the Secretary complaining of the great abuses, intolerable oppressions, insolent behavior, and opprobrious language of the said Secretary to the several petitioners,

7 For example, see Story to Israel Pemberton, Feb. 13, 1742, Quaker Scrap Book, I, 191, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.


when they had occasion to apply to him, about their patents and other affairs pertaining to his office..." The first of these petitions was Rakestraw's, relating to the city lot which he had claimed.10

Logan sought out all these petitioners but one, and they "confessed" to him that the House had persuaded them to bring the petitions to it in order, said Logan, to raise "a cry against the Proprietor's chief agent here..." Logan did not speak to Rakestraw because Rakestraw had been publicly and scurrilously berating him and Penn; Logan did not need to ask this partisan how he came to petition the House.11

Eight months after that action, Rakestraw complained to Philadelphia Monthly Meeting about Logan's treatment of him, a customary procedure when one Friend felt aggrieved by another. Under the Meeting's auspices, Logan and Rakestraw chose arbitrators who heard the difference between them and found Rakestraw's complaint "to be altogether without ground or just cause..." Even as the arbitrators were hearing the parties, Rakestraw was writing and circulating "Wicked Rimes" against Penn and Logan. When the Meeting announced the adverse decision to Rakestraw it also demanded he "give satisfaction by a paper of condemnation against his evil practices & endeavour to take ye reproach he hath raised or evily designed against our Govt [sic] Wm Penn & Truth through him..." Rakestraw also had to destroy all the papers he had written and retract the false charges in his " clamorous speeches." He appealed the decision, got no reversal, and refused to comply fully with Friends' demands.12

Logan had little enough to be happy about when he wrote to Penn about Rakestraw's disappointment: "Tis vain to propose to friends here to deal with D.[avid] L.[loyd] his party is so strong that it would occasion the greatest convulsions among them... tho' many would most gladly see it done, yet they dare not adventure on [it]. it would splitt them, they say, to pieces." And a little

11 Penn-Logan Correspondence, II, 388.
12 Philadelphia Monthly Meeting minutes, Jan. 30, 1707/08 to Apr. 29, 1708, Nov. 26, 1708, to Jan. 28, 1708/9, Friends Records Department.
later, Logan told Penn that “Rakestraw has at last mett with his deserts . . .,” and that he would send the monthly meeting minutes to that point. “I have had some trouble wth him,” Logan concluded, “but I wish I had as fair a hearing with all our Enemies, for they are much alike.”

Rakestraw might have been a sincere pacifist; but he was certainly a poor apostle for the cause of peace. There is no way that his possible pacifism can be disentangled, retrospectively, from his jealousy. His contemporaries, friends and enemies, never separated the two. He might have used a pseudonym in order to prevent his readers from knowing that a man who had previously acted in a partisan and jealous way had authored the argument, which they thereupon might discount.

Neither was Rakestraw a model for John Woolman and other quietist, Quaker radicals who repeated his arguments in later wars. They understood that unless they mixed charity with pacifism few men would believe them. Rakestraw passionately advocated pacifism, and although his argument may be timeless, his passions included those of most early Pennsylvania politicians; charity was not one of them.

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13 Logan to Penn, July 19, 1708, Howland Collection, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.