

ESSAY REVIEW

THE PAPERS OF WILLIAM PENN

The Papers of William Penn, Volume I, 1644-1679. Edited by MARY MAPLES DUNN and RICHARD S. DUNN. Associate Editors: RICHARD A. RYERSON and SCOTT M. WILDS. Assistant Editor: JEAN R. SODERLUND. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981. xv, 703 p. Illustrations, maps, appendix, index. \$28.50.)

"Mr. William Pen, who is lately come over from Ireland, is a Quaker again, or some very melancholy thing," noted Samuel Pepys on December 29, 1667, about the transforming event in his young neighbor's life. Bred to a career at court by his father the admiral, Penn had thrown away his advantages to join one of the most despised and feared sects in Western Europe. Even in Germany a decade later, the first mention of Quaker beliefs about hat honor so alarmed a nobleman that he instantly sent for his soldiers and refused to continue the conversation (p. 458). Penn challenged the world after 1667. Unlike most people who have undertaken that role, he wrought changes that are still visible today.

Few careers exhibit more vivid ironies. At the broadest level, Penn's fame rests primarily upon his role in the founding of a colony that resembled what the United States would later become more closely than did any other province. Penn spoke often of toleration, pluralism, liberty, and prosperity, all of which were, he believed, profoundly interdependent qualities. Yet as a spokesman for America's sense of identity and mission, he has never been able to match John Winthrop's more apocalyptic vision of "a city upon a hill" which now inspires even Ronald Reagan to frequent misquotations. Nor has Pennsylvania's considerable success equalled New England's ideological failure as a catalyst for the public imagination. In this sense, historical and literary scholars seem transfixed by what the nation might have been but is not, and rather bored with what it actually has become and why. Winthrop is staple reading in undergraduate courses. Penn remains unanthologized, unassigned, and unread.

To a degree, Penn has been a victim of his ideological descendants. Such Quaker historians, as Frederick B. Tolles and Edwin B. Bronner have hinted a

bit sadly that Penn was not quite worthy of the movement he led. That pre-eminent Whig, Thomas Babington Macaulay, pronounced Penn corrupt for supporting James II, much as many contemporaries suspected him, quite unjustly, of crypto-Catholicism. Penn's complexities admit of no easy solution, but that fact hardly absolves us from the effort. Ambivalence and ambiguity have become rewarding categories for explaining (and admiring) New England Puritans, but when similar qualities emerge among Penn and the Quakers, moderns seem unable to resist a tendency to resolve them into moral simplicities. To say that Penn (or anyone else) deserves the benefit of the doubt would be trite and unhelpful, but surely his doubts and inner tensions do merit the benefit of our understanding and careful analysis.

Thanks to this superb edition of *The Papers of William Penn*, no excuse remains for evading this assignment. The Dunns and their able staff intend to publish about a quarter of the extant Penn manuscripts. (For the first volume, the ratio is nearly one-half. The completed set of four volumes of his papers will complement rather than supplant existing editions of Penn's works, which go back to eighteenth-century compilations by Joseph Besse or John Fothergill and contain mostly what he published in his own lifetime. The Dunns have printed only those contemporary tracts for which they have a manuscript text, as with *An Account of My Journey into Holland and Germany*, but not *The Sandy Foundation Shaken* (1668), *No Cross, No Crown* (1669), *A Seasonable Caveat Against Popery* (1670), the famous account of the Penn-Mead trial, Penn's polemical contributions to the Exclusion Crisis, or other public statements through which he became known to readers of his day. Rather, this volume depicts the inner Penn with a detail not readily accessible until now. To be sure, approximately half of the items in this volume have been printed somewhere before. Many appeared in scattered nineteenth-century collections, some with serious inaccuracies that the Dunns have now corrected. Texts have not been modernized, editorial introductions are brief but always helpful, and annotation has been confined, with few exceptions, to names, places, biblical passages, and contemporary tracts mentioned in the documents. The result is a scholarly rather than a popular volume, although it may and should attract a wide audience. Using the *Papers*, the Besse and Fothergill editions of Penn's works, and Caroline Robbins' recent microfilm compilation, published in fourteen reels by the Historical Society in 1975, for the remaining unpublished writings, a modern researcher will be able to pursue Penn's life, Quaker history, or the early development of Pennsylvania (in subsequent volumes) with greater convenience and accuracy than ever before.

Whoever accepts this challenge will find no lack of ambivalence in these sources but may be surprised by Penn's apparent lack of awareness of most of it. He seems never to have doubted his own integrity. In his frequent clashes

with outsiders and dissident Quakers, he struggled only to bring his opponents to a truth that he already possessed. The one correspondent who might have compelled him to a deeper self-examination was the Cambridge Platonist, Henry More, who combined sympathy for Quaker spiritual values with a fascinating critique of the Friends' ritual practices (pp. 304-326). The two men evidently became friendly, but if Penn ever replied to More's letter, no record of his answer has survived.

A psychosexual historian might detect inner uncertainty in Penn's use of the feminine pronoun to describe his own soul (p. 33) or in his image of a woman in labor to characterize the whole Quaker movement (p. 498). Conventional scholars might retort, on the other hand, that to a Latinate generation the soul really was a feminine noun (*anima*), and the church had long been conceptualized as the bride of Christ. Perhaps. Nevertheless, Penn's sexual attitudes remain intriguing. He seldom provides revealing glimpses of his wife or mother, but he reaches the highest plane of religious ecstasy in prolonged conferences with other married women. He could boast (pp. 199, 303) of his lifelong purity, but as a young man he wrote a poem called "Ah Tyrant Lust" (pp. 32-33) at about the time that Pepys suspected him of designs on his wife. This incident occurred before Penn's conversion. We could, of course, look for substance in Pepys' suspicions. Rather more plausibly, we can see here for the first time Penn's fondness for intense conversations with married women, not because the situation titillated him, but for the opposite reason. It probably seemed safe and unthreatening. He could be gregarious, and later pietistic, without being overtly sexual.

Penn shared the Quaker detestation of war, but like others in the movement, he enjoyed using martial metaphors for spiritual events: the Lamb's War, the "sword" of the spirit (p. 296), the departed Friend who "fought like a valiant Souldier the good fight" (p. 71). He went beyond other Quakers in retaining "superstition enough (as some are pleas'd to call it) to vulture every the smallest Relique" of his father's naval career (p. 183) and in using his influence to secure a military appointment for a friend (pp. 300-301). To judge from the documents in this volume, he never once questioned the legitimacy of the English conquest of Ireland from which he profited greatly. His rare comments about the native Irish betray revulsion, not compassion. Later he would acquire a reputation for kindness to Indians, those other victims of English arms. In this volume he raises the subject only for West New Jersey, where he urged his confederates to buy land quickly before the natives had time to raise the price (p. 417).

Penn's attitude towards Catholics has been well studied by Mary Dunn and Melvin B. Endy, Jr., obviating the need for extensive discussion here. A few points deserve brief emphasis. Quakers probably needed Rome as their

standard of darkness, engulfing all Protestants who failed to heed the Inner Light. All ordained "hireling ministers" were "priests" and to that extent popish. Richard Baxter returned the compliment, of course. By attacking an educated and godly ministry, he claimed, Penn threatened to return England to popish domination. Thus Rome loomed on all sides as *the* alternative to true piety more than a century after the Reformation. The extent of these fears helps explain Penn's willingness to believe in the Popish Plot, even when his own lawyer and longtime acquaintance, Richard Langhorne, became one of the first victims of Titus Oates' fabrications. Yet despite his dread of Rome, Penn bravely defended before Parliament the right of Catholics to worship freely. He also redrafted the Test Act in a way that, if adopted, would have excluded Catholics but not Quakers from office. Toleration had limits, even for Penn.

As a young convert, Penn notified his father that the "holy Spirit" had made him "daily desirous of dying to all the Sin, Pomp, and vain Fashions of this World that I might be found in a Continual beholding of the Lord's Glory." (p. 67). Yet as his business records indicate (they are printed without annotation as an appendix), he lived unusually well on his country estates, enjoyed delicacies at his table, and increasingly spent beyond his means. Penn scholars have accused his steward, Philip Ford, of embezzling his resources. The editors have found no evidence to support this charge. Penn sold capital to sustain his level of spending, and as this volume ends, he was falling behind on his debts to Ford. The combination of Pennsylvania and compound interest adequately explains his financial difficulties in later years.

This contradiction seemed obvious to one contemporary. Baxter accused Penn of hypocrisy because, "while hee swims himselfe in wealth," he falsely proclaimed that "he will give all that hee hath to the Needy if they want it more than hee." (p. 342). Perhaps Penn's vulnerability on this subject intensified his rejection of such worldly *symbols* of pride as hat honor which seemed to trouble him more than war. He equated one man's deviation from this principle with the "spirit of witchcraft and of the Devil" (p. 267, n. 5). Even so, he wore a small wig to cover his premature baldness, induced by childhood smallpox and intensified by months in jail. He and Fox justified the wig because it was simple and not pretentious. Neither explained why disguising baldness is not vanity.

To leave the matter there would be like describing someone's warts without the face. Penn suffered severely for his convictions and seldom yielded to self-pity. Despite long confinements to prison, his Quaker loyalties never weakened. Even in much smaller ways, his intense discipline shows through. For example, he probably had a real flare for wit, but he repressed it except when it seemed an appropriate weapon for discrediting the godless—various "priests" (pp. 303, 357), Baxter (pp. 344-345), or the magistrates in the Penn-Mead trial. His religious ecstasies strike this reviewer as utterly genuine. Although

he wrote about them too hastily, his passionate commitment appears in every sentence.

By conventional Christian standards, he could also be quite daring. The doctrine of the Inner Light horrified orthodox contemporaries because it seemed to collapse the Trinity, disparage the centrality of the Redemption, and challenge the Bible as the sole word of God. The writings of Fox, Penn, and other Friends display a reliance upon Scripture that few Puritans could have exceeded, but their critics did have a point. In one of his most audacious projects, Penn urged Quakers to compile systematic and accurate accounts of their "sufferings" or persecutions. This idea may seem unexceptionable to a generation raised on John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, but Penn had a grander model in mind. He hoped to *improve* upon *The Acts of the Apostles* (pp. 363ff, 378). Although no one in this volume said so explicitly, the Quakers may have been trying to add their own book to the Bible. In another context and a different tract, Penn had no difficulty assuming the role of God (No. 55)—which, incidentally, also permitted him to become the Lord, a "man of war" (p. 190).

No reviewer can validate his credentials without finding something amiss, but the editorial work in this volume has been so scrupulous that slips are embarrassingly difficult to find. Two footnote numbers are missing from the text of separate documents, and a preposition is lacking in one sentence of a footnote. Just possibly, the mention of "Helen" in a letter about Constantine, Tertullian, and toleration (p. 92) refers to St. Helena, the emperor's mother, and not Helen of Troy, as the editors assume. To redeem themselves, they have even caught Penn in a Greek misspelling (p. 274, n. 10), a tiny but revealing indication of the care they have bestowed upon their work.

This volume is elegantly printed and handsomely bound. Considering its bulk, the price is modest. The Inner Light may have dimmed since 1680, but William Penn and his correspondents shine on in these *Papers*.

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