

MARY MAPLES DUNN

William Penn

Politics and Conscience



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BY

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E.M.M. & F.A.M.

Preface

WILLIAM PENN as a politician was uncomfortably poised between the real and the ideal, between new worlds and old. He was a man of both England and America, a man of theory who actively involved himself in politics. Because he played so many roles, he has been variously portrayed: as a leader of Friends, as the liberal founder of Pennsylvania, as the beleaguered proprietor, as the plain courtier. But because the interactions among these roles have not been sufficiently studied, and because too little attention has been paid to him as a creative political thinker or even as an active politician, much of the man remains hidden beneath the broad-brimmed hat. This work is an attempt to uncover more of that man.

The crucial years, the creative years, were those between 1660 and 1689. It was then that he was prolific of ideas, of published works, of vigorous action, of accomplishments and compromises. The twists and turns and tensions of Penn's political career, the complexities and scope of the trans-Atlantic political arena in which he moved, are revealed in the development in theory in his political tracts, the relationship between theory and political action in England and America, the effect of his American interests on his behavior in England, his English interests on his behavior in America.

The key to the young Penn's politics was liberty of conscience. Religious convictions, and particularly belief in the ultimate persuasiveness of the truth where the conscience is free, were the basis for the persecuted Quaker's attachment to the concept of religious liberty.

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Fundamentally Penn's vision was far from "modern." He looked forward to a world in which Christian unity and peace, once allowed to develop freely, would be complete. The goal was not as dissimilar from that long held by devout churchmen as were Penn's definition of faith and the means to the end. Because of the measures used to enforce the orthodoxy of Restoration England, freedom of conscience became Penn's most important and fixed political principle, and the basis of a political philosophy of natural law and fundamental right which put him while a young man, relatively unencumbered, in the political avant-garde. Enthusiastically and belligerently he attacked the laws of persecution and supported Parliament men in the 1670's. Defeat in 1680 and the "Stuart Revenge" for the attempts to invade the royal prerogative might have vitiated Penn's vigorous sense of mission, but it was saved by the opportunity to put ideas to the test in Pennsylvania.

Initially, the semif feudal position of proprietor seemed as much an anomaly for the Whiggish William Penn as were the objectives of a "holy experiment" in an increasingly secular colonial empire. The tensions between the quest for freedom and prosperous peace in a Christian community of brotherly love, and the desire for profit and power, would perhaps have been enough to undermine the noble effort. Unhappily for the splendid dream, colonial investment also carried with it new restraints on political action in both England and America. The old enthusiasm and belligerence had perforce to give way to a new conservatism. The constant threat of loss of the colony meant that Penn could no longer afford to provoke the crown, nor could he allow his colonists to do so. Not a good businessman, in the course of his venture he accumulated enormous debts which made him press the colony for profit. In

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both cases he was driven to uncomfortable compromises and expedients.

At home in England during the reign of James II political restraints appeared, temporarily, to have little effect on ideals. King as much as Quaker seemed anxious to establish toleration. Penn, in common with the historians who have followed, was not altogether sure what James's intentions were; his political tracts indicate at least some uneasiness. But whatever the king's designs, Penn was sure the crown could go no further than liberty of conscience. He was, mistakenly, equally positive that James could win that much with the help of Dissenter allies. This faulty analysis of power, combined with fears for the colony, accounted for his alliance with the crown. But he had chosen the losing side, and the first positive steps toward the long-awaited goal were taken in 1689 while he, among the most militant of freedom's champions, was regarded as a friend to tyranny and an enemy to England. Those brief years when through James he was most intimately connected with power and active in politics resulted, then, in personal failure. Nor could he look to the colony for proof that his mission was a success. Guaranteed rights and religious freedom in Pennsylvania had done no more than enforced orthodoxy to prevent religious faction and disruption of government.

Silence descended. Once ever ready to use his pen and voice in the public good, quick to publish indictments of the present, theories and plans for the future, he now devoted his remaining energies to retaining his hold on the colony in the face of increasing royal interest in colonial affairs, avoiding bankruptcy, and maintaining the power necessary to secure his own property rights in Pennsylvania. In those efforts, he enjoyed a quite astonishing degree of success, but he was not the

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kind of man who could take comfort in it. He probably judged himself a failure, not altogether aware that tension, confusion, and pain were often the lot of the men who, however reluctantly, helped to make the transition to a modern, secular state and an empire of colonies and trade.

I am most thankful to the many kind people who helped me along the way. Financial assistance was very generously given by the American Association of University Women and by the Eugenia Chase Guild Fellowship of Bryn Mawr College. Research was made easy and pleasant by many helpful librarians and archivists. I am particularly indebted to the staffs of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the Friends Library in London.

Caroline Robbins, first the most generous of teachers and now the best of friends, has given me encouragement and help beyond the call of duty for either teacher or friend. I am also grateful to my friends and colleagues Arthur P. Dudden, Felix Gilbert, and Frederick B. Tolles, who gave me a great deal of improving and helpful advice. Devoted but severe criticism is one of the great benefits of academic marriages, and my husband, Richard S. Dunn, has patiently listened, read, and argued, to my great profit. He also drew the illustrative portrait, with apologies to Benjamin West. I dedicate this book to my parents to acknowledge a debt that can never be paid.

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WILLIAM PENN
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CHAPTER I

Projects for the Good of England

WILLIAM PENN was one of those gentlemen of seventeenth century England who attempted to solve the problem of what constitutes a just and lasting government. Deeply religious and goaded by intolerance, he championed the cause of liberty of conscience and made that cause the foundation of his political philosophy. The first half of his career was crowned with an almost unique opportunity. He was able to establish a government of his own. No utopia, this. He hoped in a new world to find for his theories a practical and enduring form. He was not unprepared for the responsibility and brought to it the fruits of long speculation and the valuable experience of a life of action.

During a period of puritan triumph over royal authority, his father, later Vice-Admiral Sir William Penn, set the first example of service in the national interest and loyalty to the crown. He held command in the Irish fleet in the first Dutch War and in the expedition sent by Cromwell into the West Indies. When he returned from that not very successful venture in the Indies, Cromwell capped his career with a few weeks in the Tower. From 1654 to 1660 the admiral was in mysterious correspondence with the Royalists. Presumably for services to country and monarch, Charles II

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rewarded him in 1660 with knighthood and appointment as a commissioner of the navy. But the admiral dreamed of greater glories and nobler titles to bring position and prestige to him and his posterity, and his ambitions depended in part on his son William.

Son William was born in London in 1644, the time of civil war. His earliest formal education was at the Free Grammar School in Chigwell, where he learned his Latin, Greek, and mathematics. Alas for the ambitious admiral, William also early imbibed the non-conformist ideas which were to foil his father's plans. He later claimed to have had his first mystical experience at the age of twelve, and the fruits of dissent were clear to both father and son by 1661. William entered Oxford in 1660, and soon was at odds with the more cavalier of the students whose manners and morals he could not tolerate, and with the university whose compulsory chapel service, surplice, and prayer book he would not tolerate. Later, and not without bitterness, he called the universities "signal places for idleness, looseness, prophaneness, prodigality, and gross ignorance."¹ In 1661 he was sent down for nonconformity.

The admiral, alarmed and irritated, tried his best to woo his son from this dangerous course and sent him off to the continent for the Grand Tour, which might win William to the safer and more sophisticated pleasures of the world. Presentation at the brilliant court of Louis XIV, new friends such as Robert Spencer, later Lord Sunderland, fine French tailoring, and the excitement of life in Paris seemed to win the day. The young man even became proficient in dueling, as he later confessed apologetically.² However, conscience did assert itself, and he went for a short time to Saumur to con-

¹ William Penn, *Truth Exalted* (London, 1668), p. 9.

² Penn, *No Cross, No Crown* (London, 1682), pp. 148-149.

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tinue his studies, perhaps under Moses Amyraut, the Protestant divine.

The approaching renewal of war with the Dutch led Admiral Penn to call his son home in 1664, and the older man must have been, on the whole, well pleased with the effect of the tour abroad. William returned to London well-dressed, not averse to gay evenings in company with his father's associates.³ So hopeful was the admiral that he once used his son as courier to the king, who received young William kindly and talked to him at some length.⁴ For other occupation he was set to the worldly business of the law, which he studied in Lincoln's Inn. This was far from unusual for young men of the day who were intended for some kind of public responsibility. While the father served on the *Royal Charles* as second in command to the Duke of York, the younger William was gaining an invaluable legal training which would serve him well during imprisonments and trials, in pleading the case for liberty of conscience, and in the design of a constitution for the colony of Pennsylvania.

A sensitive young man, he was seriously disturbed by the great plague, and in 1666 Admiral Penn again sent William from England, this time to attend to Penn estates in Ireland. At first, he proved all that was dutiful in an admiral's son and future landholder. He was sharp in his transactions concerning the estates, but graceful in local society.⁵ A mutiny at Carrickfergus gave him a taste of combat, and, far from being repulsed, the excitement and the favorable attention he

³ See *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, Richard, Lord Braybrooke, ed. (London, 1906), pp. 284-285.

⁴ Granville Penn, *Memorials of the Professional Life and Times of Sir William Penn, Knt.* (London, 1833), II, 318.

⁵ For youthful business acumen in Ireland, see Penn, *My Irish Journal 1669-1670*, ed. Isabel Grubb (London, 1952).

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received for his own part in putting down the rebels led him to think of a military career. The Duke of Ormonde was so pleased with reports of William's conduct that he wrote to the admiral suggesting that the father relinquish command of the garrison at Kinsale in favor of the son. The admiral, who expected to return fairly soon to Ireland, was not enthusiastic about seeing his first-born receive preferment in that way. He politely declined Ormonde's generous proposal, and wrote to William, "I wish your youthful desires mayn't out-run your discretion."⁶

This in 1666 was William Penn.⁷ He was educated, traveled, and perhaps excitable. He was reported handsome and personable, and was winning friendly attention from his father's aristocratic and influential friends who would have encouraged him had he settled on a soldier's life. He was also much concerned with matters of the spirit, and in the following year he made the most momentous decision of his life, one which was to shape his ideas and determine his actions. He was still in Ireland when he heard the preaching of Thomas Low (or Loe), a Quaker of Oxford who was active in bringing the Friends' word to Ireland. The young man was fairly soon convinced, which was not really surprising in one who had such strong religious sensibilities.

Penn came to the Quakers at a moment when they had need of a champion. Although never popular with those in power or with those of more conservative creed, George Fox and his humble followers had flour-

⁶ Granville Penn, *Memorials . . . of Sir William Penn, Knt.* (London, 1833), II, 432.

⁷ There are many biographies of Penn, but none is completely satisfactory. William I. Hull, *William Penn: A Topical Biography* (New York, 1937), is useful. One of the best accounts of his public life is still Samuel L. Janney, *The Life of William Penn* (Philadelphia, 1852), but Catherine O. Peare, *William Penn* (Philadelphia, 1957), displays greater understanding of his personality and private life.

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ished in the perfervid religious atmosphere of the Commonwealth. Enthusiastically, ecstatically, even flamboyantly, they embraced the vision of a new, universal society of Truth's Friends which would transform the world. Oppression there was, but if Cromwell did not cherish them, the "sincere convinced" could at least communicate to him the nature and depth of a faith for which he had respect.⁸

The Restoration brought bewildering changes. Pleasure was earnestly pursued where once godliness had been the goal. Religious enthusiasm was suspect, particularly that which in any way threatened the rehabilitated establishment. The period from 1660 to 1681 was an uncertain time for all nonconformists. When Charles II was restored it seemed that he, at least, was not interested in revenge, but hoped by tolerance to prevent religion from ever again being the occasion of civil strife. However, nonconformists were caught up by Charles in constitutional issues. His declarations of indulgence were a vehicle for testing the royal dispensing powers, but Charles was so wary of using pressure and aggression that his policy was only intermittently helpful, and even harmful when Parliament's quarrel with the king centered on issues involving religion. Reverses of war, the need for money, and uncertainty in the face of opposition often forced the crown to capitulate to Parliament when it protested that the king had exceeded his powers, for example in the Declaration of Indulgence. After parliamentary authority over the penal laws was established, nonconformists could seek aid from the king only in a few individual cases. By 1681 even private redress was difficult to secure, be-

⁸ For example, in the most noted of George Fox's meetings with Oliver Cromwell, *The Journal of George Fox*, Norman Penney, ed. (London, 1924), pp. 104-106.

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cause the king was sorely offended by the nonconformists' support of the Test Act and Exclusion measures.

Only Parliament could suspend the penal laws, but unfortunately Parliament was almost always far more interested in passing them. Vengeful for the past, fearful for the future, righteous in the service of the Lord, and jealous of its prerogatives, Parliament responded to every rising and rumor with more legislation designed to suppress dissent. The new laws of the Clarendon Code,⁹ combined with old statutes, created a massive array of charges on which nonconformists could be indicted when the temper of the country was a persecuting one. But at no time was persecution consistent and continuous. In time of war it might be laid aside; during the Plague and Great Fire the courageous behavior of the dissenters won them respect. But a Venner's rebellion or a Popish Plot could raise the hue and cry against all or some, and at all times the wretched informers might be at work.¹⁰

Often it was the Quakers who bore the brunt of the persecuting spirit. The Quakers' refusal to conform aroused the church against them. A hierarchy whose members did not like to be addressed as "thou" by men who stubbornly retained their hats in defiance of all respect and custom viewed them with a distaste tinged with fear. Most disastrous for the Quakers was their refusal to take oaths.¹¹ Refuse to swear your allegiance

⁹ Corporation Act, 1661, 13 Car. II, stat. ii, cap. i. Act of Uniformity, 1662, 14 Car. II, cap. iv. Conventicle Act, 1664, 16 Car. II, cap. iv. Five Mile Act, 1665, 17 Car. II, cap. ii.

¹⁰ G. R. Cragg, *Puritanism in the Period of the Great Persecution 1660-1688* (Cambridge, 1957), pp. 31-65.

¹¹ In addition to the cautions against swearing which they found in the Bible, the Friends believed oath-taking implied a lack of confidence in man's word. They also argued that a dishonest man would not hesitate to take or break an oath if it served to his advantage, and that a society which required oaths was an unstable one in which the element of trust was gone. For a complete discussion of his attitude, see [Penn],

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to king and country? Very suspicious in violent times when men rely on words to prove loyalty. Unfortunately, the refusal to take oaths resulted in more than suspicion. It made the Quakers subject to almost every law with religious intent, even those Elizabethan ones, long on the books and specifically designed to trap the Catholics; the favorite snare was an oath which any other Protestant but no sincere Catholic could swear. Refusal to swear also barred Quakers from holding office because of acts passed to exclude recusants; it sometimes became an obstacle at the polls; and it often prevented them from seeking redress in the courts. There were oaths for almost every occasion if those in charge wished to use them.¹²

Quakers found themselves, then, among the least understood and most despised of dissenters. As a result, they became increasingly conscious of themselves as a persecuted minority of Englishmen, and to the old all-embracing ideals was added a new necessity for simple self-preservation. But the Children of Light had been used to describe their visions and ideals with the plain speech of the son of a weaver, and although they tried to love their enemies they did not fully understand them. To protect themselves during waves of persecution, to make known their modest desire to live in peace, to penetrate the walls of suspicion with which they were surrounded and behind which some of them retreated, they needed a new voice.

William Penn, and a few other new converts like him, rose to meet the emergency and prepare the defense. Penn's education made him a cogent "witness to

A Treatise of Oaths: Containing Several Weighty Reasons Why the People Called Quakers Refuse to Swear (1675).

¹² For example, The Oaths Act, 1610, 7 & 8 Jac. 1, cap. vi, could be used to meet nearly every emergency.

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the truth," but one whose words were directed not only to potential citizens of the new universal community but also to a hostile society. His background, associates, and social position gave him entree to places from which help might come, but where most old Friends could never make themselves heard. His training and temperament had prepared him for public responsibility and political action; he became an advocate on behalf of his coreligionists. More important, that advocacy and religion led him to a broader goal, liberty of conscience for all.

William Penn and other younger Friends were not content to suffer passively, and as they became more influential among Quakers, so too were they influential in the newly developed and developing central agencies of that group. Despite the objections of many older members who prized the freedom of the individual conscience and self-discipline, in the years immediately following Penn's conviction stronger communal discipline and centralized organization were gradually imposed. While there were many reasons for establishing central committees, the primary ones were to publish the truth, answer detractors, and prove the Friends intellectually respectable and socially reliable. A second, but by no means secondary, purpose was to provide relief from persecution.¹⁸ It is appropriate to consider Penn's activities before 1681 in connection with two committees which became increasingly important. These were the Morning Meeting and the Meeting for Sufferings. Penn's attentions were centered on liberty of conscience; his actions were often determined by the

¹⁸ A good, but brief, study of the development of central organization is Arnold Lloyd, *Quaker Social History, 1669-1738* (London, 1950), chs. 6, 7, 11. See also William C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism* (Cambridge, 1961), ch. 10.