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## The Enigmatic Mr. William Penn: A Biographer's Dilemma

J. William Frost

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My contacts with the Friends Historical Library go back til Christmas vacation 1965 when as a graduate student who had finished prelims I came to Swarthmore to check out whether there was enough material to do a dissertation on the Quaker family in early America. Fred Tolles was director, Dorothy Harris assistant director, and the library was housed in the Biddle wing of the main library (the part that thanks to fire proofing survived the student fire and became a sort of pub, only to be destroyed for a new dorm). I continued to use the library at intervals for the next eight years, staying frequently at Pendle Hill while writing a dissertation, turning it into a book, and teaching history at Vassar. In the fall of 1973 it became my privilege to become Director of this collection of books, manuscripts, and records—whose strengths I came to appreciate ever more over the years—which by then was housed in the new wing of McCabe Library. I soon learned that the library functioned best when I allowed the staff to do their work in consultation with each other. They were knowledgeable, efficient, and friendly—both to researchers and each other. So I want to begin by paying tribute to those who for the last forty years maintained and improved the excellence of the FHL—first those who served as Curator: Jane Rittenhouse, Bert Fowler, Mary Ellen Chijioke, and Chris and, what seems now to be an amazingly long-serving staff—there were only eleven changes in all those years (five by retirement and three are still there): Nancy Speers, Eleanor Mayer, Ray Turburg, Kaz Oye, Jane Thorson, Claire Shetter. Pat Neeley, Pat O'Donnell, Susanna Morikawa, and Charlotte Blandford. The Honorary Curators helped too, by persuading those with rare books and manuscripts to donate them and keeping the college administration cognizant of the importance of both the library and the college's Quaker traditions. Then special tribute also should go to the Jenkins family and the Grundy Foundation for grants that paid only one half of my salary and books when I came and now—thanks to the stock market—make the library financially self-sufficient. So Happy 135th Birthday, FHL.

Associating William Penn with historical research is quite natural, for the initial draft of the 1676 request from London Meeting for Sufferings for Friends meetings to collect records of persecution, notable occurrences, controversies, and deaths of ministers was written by Penn and what he later wrote as an introduction to the *Journal of George Fox* (which Friends refused to include) was published separately as *The Rise and Progress of the People called Quakers* (PP, I, 363–365). It was a first attempt to portray the history of the new movement and to link it to earlier reform efforts of Christianity.

A more direct link between Penn and FHL came because three directors of this library became fascinated, have attempted to understand him, and wrote about him.

*William I. Hull's William Penn: A Topical Biography* (1937) summarized what was known about the man and presented in devastating detail the comments of earlier historians who made up stories or allowed their biases to override sound judgment. Hull's careful research and sifting of evidence make his book one I often consult. Hull also published books on the Dutch Quaker Migration to Pennsylvania and on early foreign language biographers of Penn. (Since Hull was married to a Clothier heiress, he did not have to rely on a commercial press and published several of his books under a Swarthmore College imprint.) Fred Tolles, who before he became ill, helped set in motion the project that became the five volumes William Penn Papers project, wrote essays comparing Penn's maxims with Franklin's Poor Richard's sayings and a book about James Logan who served as Penn secretary and agent in Pennsylvania. I wrote essays about Penn and religious liberty, his ideals for Pennsylvania, and legends about Penn. So now the mantle for the Director's grappling with Penn will pass to Chris Densmore and Ellen Ross—I wish them luck.

## I.

There is no shortage of biographies of Penn, but in our age where publishers and reviewers claim that John Adams, Hamilton, Jefferson, and Washington are neglected figures, there is always room for one more biography. I wrote some years ago that Catherine Peare's 1950 biography was best but all the biographies are unsatisfactory (for example, in Peare there are several intriguing bits of information that there are no footnotes for) and that the safest solution was to rely upon the introductions to the 4 volumes of *The Papers of William Penn*. Still, with the completion of the Penn letters, the additional volume of bibliography of Penn's published works that lists 134 titles, Hugh Barbour's two volumes of introductions and extracts from the most significant publications, and the first volume of Craig Horle's biographical dictionary of lawmakers and legislators in Pennsylvania that provides a sketch of everyone who served in the Council and Assembly and a detailed analysis of the politics of early Pennsylvania, there should be an opportunity for someone to write a new, more satisfactory biography. We also know more about Restoration England, the Revolution of 1688, and the early history of Friends—though we still lack a thorough study of London Yearly Meeting during the years Penn was active. Perhaps I should have been sufficiently warned by the examples of Professors Richard and Mary Dunn and the editorial assistants of the Penn Papers—all of whom, even with an enormous memory bank of materials, decided not to write a new biography. The new information does not make understanding this most complicated man any easier.

This is a most unusual paper for me to present and I ask your indulgence, maybe even sympathy, at the outset for my waffling over drawing firm conclusions. For I will be discussing fundamental problems of interpretation in a project I may or may not get finished—a new biography of William Penn. (I cringe at calling him Billy, because I doubt even his children could do this.) So I will be listing four characteristics of Penn and explaining why I have difficulty understanding them—his conversion (which I will be spending most time on), his role in dealing with schismatics, his rationalism, and his

internationalism. My justification will be that my task is helping all of us to appreciate a man whose history has too often be simplified by those seeking to present a model Quaker and colonizer.

A story will illustrate the difficulties that any future biographer of Penn will face.

I recently attended a roundtable sponsored by the Pew Foundation where about a dozen scholars who allegedly were knowledgeable about Penn gathered to provide perspectives that could be used to create an interactive video about Penn, much like that for Benjamin Franklin at the Franklin Court in downtown Philadelphia. Prof. Gary Nash declared that we needed to be able to provide insights into Penn as an introspective, searching man.

Richard Dunn countered that Penn was too busy, too restless, always on the go, to have engaged in deep introspection, and that he and Mary could find no evidence for Penn's critical self-examination. So the issue, to pose it starkly, is whether Penn, brighter and more ethical of course, was very much like Ronald Reagan whose biographer concluded that at the center was a void—there was no there, there. Both led unexamined lives.

Richard Dunn later asked me my judgment and at the time I agreed with him that after Penn became a Quaker, I could find no evidence of critical self-evaluation, a “dark night of the soul,” or of doubt or waverings caused by critiques that other Quakers made of his activities in politics or at court or in Pennsylvania. He blamed the Fords, not himself, for the financial carelessness that led to his imprisonment for debt. Instead, there was a sense that the test of true devotion was suffering, a suffering that for the young convert could be a triumphant suffering for truth as proclaimed in the New Testament and *No Cross, No Crown* or a wallowing in self-pity as in so many of proprietor Penn's letters after 1700.

Since last fall, I have often pondered whether I was too glib. Was it possible for Penn to sit in silent meetings for two hours each Sunday, plus Quarterly and Yearly and business meetings, to have undergone the isolation required by two long imprisonments, an enforced two year withdrawal from society after the Dutch conquest of 1688 that deposed James II and brought Mary and William to the throne, a stay in debtor's prison, and to have been rebuked by a law court and still not have critically examined his life? When George Whitehead and other prominent Friends opposed his second marriage as inappropriate (he was nearly twice her age with a twenty-year old son, but she was wealthy and a devout Quaker), how could Penn so confidently have assured Hannah Callowhill that his listening to the light showed how blessed their marriage would be? After all, Penn should have remembered how strongly he had written requiring the Pennymans and Wilkinson-Story adherents and other so-called schismatics to accept the authority of leading London Friends. Now he was now ignoring their counsel. How many hundreds of sermons must Penn have listened to requiring him to hearken to that “still small voice” within and not have wondered if

withdrawal from his frantic pace of life might not be preferable? After all, this was the quiet life of country living he recommended in his *Fruits of Solitude: Reflections and Maxims*.

Perhaps the problem was the idiom that Penn wrote in—that is, like Fox, Penn knew the Bible intimately and used biblical metaphors extensively. So an historian has to be constantly checking the bible verses to see what Penn meant. Or, more likely, religious experience was so constantly seen as biblical that issues that were not raised in the Old and New Testament would not appear in Penn's writings. While there are some verses that demand introspection, this is not a prominent theme of the Bible as contrasted with trust in God or ethical behavior. For example, there are few references to "self" in the King James Bible. The Bible never says "Know thyself" or "An unexamined life is not worth living." Knowledge and wisdom in the scriptures come from an encounter with God that leads to ethical activity. If one looks in Penn's tracts for citations from Quaker writings as a theological authority (except when he is defending specific passages from what he saw as misinterpretations), they are absent. This raises the issue as to whether in the 17th century, the Bible led Quakers to introspection in a particular way difficult to discern today. I raise this issue, but have not figured out the answer. Clearly, for Friends the Bible was the only source for metaphors because, even though religious experience was individual, the only authority for it was God.

Even more unsettling to me was whether I was committing a fundamental historical error: that of judging the past from a later perspective. Was I judging Penn by the norms laid down in the next century of quietist Quakerism as exemplified by John Woolman's constant self-examination and the fear of outrunning his gift or leading within and outside the meeting? Could I think of any 17th century Friend who engaged in self-examination after his or her conversion? Fox shows no sense of sin or deep introspection after he was convinced, even though he underwent a period of depression in 1659; nor do others of the *First Publishers of Truth*. Nor do the women portrayed in the documentary collection, *Hidden in Plain Sight* (1996). Only Naylor of the first generation seems a divided person and he fell from grace as evidenced by his so-called messianic entrance into Bristol in 1654. Of the next generation, Isaac Penington comes closest, but there is no self-critical scrutiny in the surviving writings by Robert Barclay, George Whitehead, or George Keith before he became schismatic.

The lacunae may come not only from the kind of writings that were preserved, but from the nature of Quaker belief itself. Since the primary source of authority for Friends was a religious experience that they shared with other Friends (in fact, it was identical) and they believed that this experience was normative for all Christians, then to have confessed doubt would have been to agree with the Puritans and Anglicans that the Light of Christ Within (remember, early Friends never used the term inner light) was natural or, even worse, a sign of the Devil's power. Instead, certainty of the experience had to be proclaimed forcefully. For Quakers there could after convincement be no acknowledgment of a "dark night of the soul," no mystical searching for a hidden God.

There should be a seventeenth-century Quaker like Cotton Mather, constantly checking himself to make sure he was of the elect and looking at events to see the providence of God. Perhaps a key is in the doctrine of assurance. Quakers believed that even one who had the experience of the Light could fall. Calvinists insisted that those who really had grace could not fall away—the perseverance of the saints. So if theology alone were the key, then the Puritans should have been less introspective after conversion than the Quakers, but the opposite is true. It may be that the Puritans remained uncertain of the original experience of saving grace, while Quakers and Penn proclaimed their absolute confidence. Certainly, Penn never in any writings after his conviction in 1667 evinced the least doubt that he had experienced God within. This is certain knowledge, says Penn as well as Barclay, learned from spiritual senses. In his advocacy of religious toleration, Penn says that conscience cannot be coerced, but does not make the skeptical argument that one cannot know truth.

An additional factor may be from the Quaker belief as to what should happen in a silent meeting. Our age is preoccupied with the self, a discovery of the self, an authentic self. We center down to contact our innermost being. Penn does not worry about his self, authentic or otherwise. Similar to the means but not the goal of Buddhist meditation, Penn's desire in meeting is to escape the self, to suppress it, and all self-will, so that the self does not contaminate the experience of God that leads to knowledge and prompts action. For early Friends, when a person plunged deep into him or herself, at the core was not an id, ego, or superego, or a Jungian archetype, but the Seed of God. I am almost persuaded that Penn's grounding in religious experience that he constantly renews in Quaker meetings is the key to understanding both his triumphs and failures and how he could deal with both. It may also be why he never recognized the evolution in his theological perspective from apocalyptic prophet to rationalist Christian. Since even in his earliest writings, Penn can be theologically orthodox, apocalyptic, or rationalist, he may have internally continued to have affirmed all three perspectives while changing his external emphases because of the audience he sought and the nature of the times.

So my conclusion is that Penn was not introspective in our sense, but he was in the early Quaker and biblical framework of constantly seeking for and finding an experience of God that would bring true wisdom and the power to be a disciple of Christ.

## **II.**

Penn became famous because of his birth (i.e., he was the son of a military hero and so was a gentleman, a person of quality as a judge noted), his own abilities (he was a very bright man), and a conversion. So the first issue for a biographer is to explain why the gentleman became a Quaker. A difficulty is the lack of sources for the early life. Unlike many Quakers, Penn left no journal. In his earlier journeys to Ireland and the Low Countries, he kept an itinerary of the kind that other Friends used as a basis for journals. He published his German journals almost twenty years later, perhaps after the

decease of some of the people mentioned or as a recruiting device for inhabitants of the Low Countries. Also there were sufficient numbers of letters and writings preserved in his letter books that he could have relied on, as Fox did, in writing a journal. Joseph Besse in the *Introduction to the Collected Works* (1726) refers to Penn's Memoirs and there are two brief fragments of "Accounts of my life" that were published in the 1830s concerning meetings with King Charles and the Duke of York in 1684 and his earlier imprisonment ("Fragments of An Apology for Himself," *Memoirs of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania* vol. 3, part 2, 236–242). If the two fragments were typical, the memoirs were secular in tone and, had the whole work survived, we could have learned an enormous amount about Penn's view of himself and his neighbors. Still, I doubt that the memoirs contained information about the conversion or Besse's account of it would not be so cursory, mentioning only the role of Thomas Loe and the text of the sermon ("There is a Faith that overcomes the World, and there is a Faith overcome by the World"). Thomas Clarkson's 1813 biography, based upon access to Penn's writings does not go beyond Besse. It may be that the memoirs were destroyed in the 19th century, along with other very personal Penn papers, by a mentally ill and illegitimate son of Granville Penn. This may be the reason for many gaps in the record; for example, there are no letters from Penn to his first wife Gulielma Penn during his first trip to America. Of course, Penn may have destroyed some letters and papers after the Revolution of 1688 when he feared being charged with treason; Hannah or his children by her may have been jealous of Gulielma or there could have been a careless secretary. It may be that Penn just never found the time to write as he aged and had less energy, but he had enough stamina to sire four children between 55 and 61. He clearly was not expecting a debilitating stroke in 1712 at age 68 from which he never really recovered until his death five years later. At any rate there remains today a gap in the record because the conversion is neither discussed nor described in Penn's published writings.

At some periods in his life, Penn was not reluctant to talk about himself. When Penn, Robert Barclay, and George Keith traveled in the ministry to Holland and Germany in 1677, they visited the Princess Elizabeth—a granddaughter of Charles I. She had asked Penn to provide an account of his life, religious exercises, and sufferings. He says he began recounting after a period of silence at 3 p.m. He talked until supper, to which the Princess invited the Friends, and then began again until 10:00. If we allow two hours for supper, a less formal meal, that is still five hours. Penn says he could have said more but he left out events because of shortage of time and lapses of memory. These comments make me more sympathetic to Bishop Burnet's negative opinion of Penn as "a talking vain man... He had such an opinion of his own faculty of persuading, that he thought none could stand before it, tho' he was singular in that opinion. For he had a tedious luscious way, that was not apt to overcome a man's reason, tho' it might tire his patience" (Quoted in Peare, p. 297). Of course, Burnet was a bishop who did not like Quakers and met Penn when the Quaker was serving as James II's emissary to persuade William to support toleration for Catholics. Burnet opposed this too. In fact, considering the eminence of the Friends on this trip, including

Fox, it is remarkable, but not unusual in Quaker travel documents, for the author—in this case Penn—to concentrate largely upon himself. I once heard Howard Brinton or Henry Cadbury describe Quaker traveling ministers' journals: when the meeting was barren, neither of the two traveling Friends spoke; if the meeting was fruitful, the companion spoke; but if the meeting was truly blessed, the journalist spoke.

As an example of Penn's energy level, here is one day's itinerary on his German trip. After a full day meeting people, some favorable, others hostile, the party of Quakers left at 8 at night, walking six English miles to reach Duysbergh, but when they arrived sometime between 9 and 10 the gates were shut. So they lay down in a field "receiving both natural and spiritual refreshment." The next morning they arose at 3, and walked for two hours to the city and entered when the gates were opened at 5. They went to an inn where Penn wrote a letter, four pages long in the Penn Papers, of "comfort and exhortation" to a "persecuted Countess" and then met with some interested individuals; the group left at 4 and walked an additional eight miles to the next town where they stayed the night (PP, I, 459).

Our only account of Penn's conversion is in third hand—told by Penn to Thomas Harvey in 1697 and later told to "me" who wrote it down in 1729. The "me" is careful to say recounted "in a brief manner as well as his memory would serve after such a distance of time." As I have argued elsewhere, in spite of a couple of mistakes, the document does have the ring of truth to it. A logical explanation of the reason for writing it down is the superficial account of Penn's conviction in Besse's Introduction to the Collected Works. Although the Harvey Ms. gives an account of the external events, it does not tell us what Penn thought or why Loe was so persuasive. So the Ms. needs to be supplemented by statements Penn made after his conversion. The difficulty with relying on Penn's post-conviction statements is that they reflect his commitment to Quakerism.

One of these documents was written to Mary Pennyman who seems to have charged Penn with being boastful of his book learning or theological acuity. Penn countered that "I never addicted my self to Shool-Learning to understand Religion by; but allwaies even to their Faces rejected and disputed agst it. I never had any other Religion than what I felt, excepting a little Profession that came with education" (PP, I, 264–5). So Penn claimed he did not study religious books in school to define his religion and was little influenced by them. This is clearly false and ignores what seems to have been his deep attachment to Reformed or Calvinist religion, an attachment that shows in several themes of his writings after his conversion. In fact, a year later Penn claims to have "had a conversation with books" and cites Origen, Tertullian, DuPlessy, Grotius, and Amiraldu (WPW, II, Guide Mistaken, 3). After he was expelled, Penn uses the term "banished" from Oxford, Admiral Penn sent his too religiously-minded son to France. After being presented at court, Penn withdrew to study at the academy run by a moderate French Calvinist, Moise Amyraut. Amyraut was old and sick by the time Penn arrived, but he had written extensively on a wide variety of topics, including religious



toleration, and it seems likely that Penn not only immersed himself in the works of church fathers but works of religious history. (There is a tradition Penn arrived at the beginning of a term, stayed for two years, and boarded with Amyraut.) (The only documentary evidence is in John Oldmixon, *British Empire*, I, 296 cited in Endy, 97.) Penn also cites in his early tracts works by Hugo Grotius, not only a father of international law but a moderate Calvinist and praises David Blondell, who taught at Saumur, for proving spurious some of the accounts in which the Gentiles prophesied about Christ (*Christian Quaker*, *Select Works*, I, 288–289).

One could make a strong case that Penn almost became a Puritan. Christ College where Penn had enrolled was under the leadership of Dr. Fell, a disciplinarian determined to weed out Puritan and republican influences. Penn may have participated in a student riot against the wearing of surplices. We know that Penn had been frequenting probably for study as well as devotional exercises, the house of Dr. John Owen, a Puritan who had previously been vice-chancellor of the university and was now residing close by. Owen had also written a great deal and, like other Puritan divines, was almost a physician of the soul interested in cultivating a life of prayer, Bible reading, and morality. We are taught now to look for the silences, as well as the emphases in peoples' writings. Penn does not cite Amyraut nor Owen in those works, like his *Treatise on Oaths* or 2nd edition of *No Cross, No Crown*, where he compiles citation after citation on topics, and rarely elsewhere. I suspect it was because to do so would admit of other influences than the direct experience of God on his religious life.

Like the young George Fox and many Puritans, Penn wants to make a sharp contrast between his life before and after conversion. Yet at the same time, he presents himself as outwardly very moral—no one could say he had “ever... seen me drunk, heard me swear, utter a Curse, or speak one obscene word... I speak this to God's glory that has ever preserv'd me from the power of those pollutions, & that from a Child begot an hatred in me towards them” (PP, I, 199). Like the Puritan, for Penn such behavior, while moral, clearly had little to do with the salvation that came from the experience of grace.

In fact, in a letter to Princess Elizabeth, Penn says that his religious yearning were solitary and that no one else in his family was spiritually inclined—not his father, mother, sister, or young brother. The portraits of the Penn family contained in Samuel Pepys' diary seem to confirm this and indicate no great religiosity by the Admiral, his wife, or the young William Penn. In fact, the Admiral and Lady Penn seem rather typical Restoration figures; for example, Pepys describes romping on the bed with Lady Penn. The Admiral, termed by Pepys a “rogue” and “atheist” (this is certainly incorrect) was a trimmer in politics and the British navy was no place for the squeamish. He wanted Penn to be a courtier or ambassador and vigorously opposed the young convert, perhaps even beating him, though Penn later stressed that they reconciled before his father's death, and his father did make William his principal heir. Lady Penn provided financial support when the Admiral exiled Penn from home and wrote a letter asking for the release of Fox from prison, but neither parent nor his sister Margaret became

Quaker. The one influence that his father had was indirect and unintentional. According to the Harvey Ms. the Admiral—in exile from Cromwell either because of the failure to take Hispaniola or for royalist plotting—had with his family removed to estates in Ireland earlier given by Cromwell. The father invited a visiting Quaker minister named Thomas Loe to speak to his family and guests in order that they could judge Quakers for themselves. This procedure was rather unusual. I asked Kenneth Carroll if he knew of any other prominent Englishman who had followed a similar course and neither of us could remember any. Normally, Friends approached the influential person and asked for a meeting.

In no other records does Loe appear a particularly distinguished preacher. But at the Admiral's, Loe's "doctrine" so affected the father's Negro slave that he began to cry as did the Admiral and the very young William thought "wt if we all became Quakers {blank space, unreadable}" (*Journal of Friends Historical Society*, vol. 32, 1935, p. 22). There is no record of any other contact between the young William Penn and the Quakers until ten years later—after Oxford, and France, and the Inns of Court—when the Admiral sent William to Ireland to bring order in his newly granted estates. William learned that Thomas Loe was going to preach, attended the meeting, was emotionally affected, and immediately after began frequenting meetings. Note that Penn never discusses in the Harvey Ms. what it was in Loe's preachings that appealed to him. In fact, when he discusses his early spiritual awakenings, the dates he assigns sometimes predate and at other times coincide with his first trip to Ireland. In 1673 Penn stated that, "the knowledge of God from the Living Witness from 13 years of Age hath been dear to me, from 16 I have a great Sufferer for it at the University" (PP, I, 264–65). At age 13 Penn was in Ireland with his Father. On another occasion, however, he dated his glimpse of God from age 10 or 11, which was before going to Ireland.

In order to infer what Penn believed happened to him during Loe's preaching, the only solution I have figured out is to look at his very early writings in defense of Quakerism, particularly since some of these were directed at Presbyterians. These help to explain why Penn became a Quaker in spite of his education. Some but not all of these date from before the time Quakers began supervising all publications and we know that Penn wrote quickly, sometimes dictating just as the type was set. "I write & speak as I feel it, & not in demure Images" (PP, I, 263).

He makes clear that conviction is not sudden; rather it comes in stages:

"godly sorrow, true mourning, and that repentance." Elsewhere he says that what is needed is "holy awe in your hearts," "a divine sense of his presence in your souls," "godly sorrow, that worketh unfeigned repentance, the only way to eternal life." These descriptions show that conviction came gradually; equally striking, these stages would be the same for a Puritan like John Owen.

The immediacy of the experience was so strong that a language of the senses provided analogies: "Do you see with this divine light? Have you searched your hearts with it?....

Is (Jesus) your eye, your head, your wisdom? Do you live, move, and have your life and being in him, in praying, preaching, and singing, yea in your whole conversation . . . and have you heard his voice, and seen his shape” (Select Works, 1825, II, 341, 345, 393).

Penn insists that the experience requires suffering and yet is pleasant: “hide his living word in your hearts; though it be as an hammer, a fire, a sword, yet it reconcileth, and bringeth you to God, and will be sweeter to you, that love it, than is the honey, and the honey-comb. Fear not, but bear the cross (Tender Counsel and Advice, Select Works, II, 368).

Grace is not an intellectual experience; Penn cautions against images of the mind that are from the self. “My friends, disquiet not yourselves to comprehend divine things; for they that do so, are of the flesh: but wait in stillness,... and then shall you have? a true feeling of him, and of that which feeds the soul, and giving the saving knowledge, viz. That knowledge which is everlasting... likewise peace, and everlasting assurance goes along with it” (To those Professors of Christianity, Select Works, II, 379).

His longest and most subjective description is in 1668 “The Guide Mistaken and Temporizing Rebuked” (1726 Works, II, 20–21):

“I am necessitated to declare, (and be it known to all that ever knew me) that when the unspeakable Riches of Gods eternal Love visited me by the Call of his Glorious Light, from the dark Practices, wandring Notions, and vain Conversation of this polluted World, and that my Heart was influenced thereby, and consequently dispos’d for the more intimate and sincere Reception of it; those very Habits, which once I judg’d impossible, whilst here, to have relinquished, (as well as I was unwilling) and did allow my self Liberty therein, because not openly gross or scandalous, I thought my self excusable) became not only burdensome, and by that Light manifested to be of another Nature than that which I was called to the Participation of; but in my faithful Adherence to it’s Holy Counsel and Instructions, I was immediately endued with that Power and Authority as gave Dominion over them, and being in Measure redeemed from that to which the Curse is pronounc’d, I sensibly enjoy’d the Blessings that attend a Reconciliation.... And as I have the Seal of God’s eternal Spirit of Love upon my Soul, as an infallible Assurance....

What is a modern scholar to make of such passages:

1. clear debt to Puritanism that is not acknowledged
2. close relationship between the Light and purging of sin
3. the experience is self-authenticating—a call, a feeling, harsh but sweet, in the heart, or soul—yet is duplicated by all Quakers
4. the light gives “power and authority” to give up not only sinful practices but what previously were thought of as innocent pastimes
5. an embrace of sufferings as essential element
6. most important, the Light is absolutely pure and provides a direct contact between God and the person.

These criteria do not tell us how Penn became a Quaker, but they do show similarity to convincements of other 17th century Friends. So we are left with a conclusion that Penn should by education have become a Puritan, and perhaps this would have occurred had Penn come of age ten years earlier. During the Restoration, the Puritans were demoralized with little sense of triumphant discovery of truth or willingness to boldly suffer that appears in Quakers and in Penn's first writings. In conclusion, we are left with Penn's assertion that he found in the Quaker claim of the availability of direct encounter with God a description that answered the immediacy of divine presence and power in his life.

### III.

After leaving the enigma of Penn's conviction, we then are confronted with four other conundrums, which I will briefly mention. First, is selective rebellion. His conviction confirmed Penn in a certain style of rebellion—a readiness to defy his father, the religious authority of Puritans, Anglicans, and the Crown. As he proclaimed in the Tower, “that my prison will be my grave before I will budge a jot.” Yet paradoxically, the man willing to die for his spiritual freedom and to defend religious toleration even for Roman Catholics showed no sense of understanding or sympathy for those Quakers defying the leadership of George Fox and what might be called the emergent Quaker establishment. Whether confronting the followers of John Perrot or the Wilkinson/Story critics, Penn demanded submission. The historian should not assume that the main body of Quakers was correct and that Penn was following either the Holy Spirit or intelligence. The only explanation I can give for his submission to the totality of Quaker principles and practices comes from his description of Friends:

“They are sound in Principles, zealous for God, devout in Worship, earnest in Prayer, constant in Profession, harmless and exemplary in their Lives, patient in Sufferings, orderly in their Affairs, few in Words, punctual in Dealings, merciful to Enemies, Self-denying as to this World's Delights and enjoyments; and to sum up all, Standards for the God of heaven...” (Collected Works, II, 21). Here all of Quakerism seemed fused with the divine light of revelation; it was almost like a cult: that is, since the religious experience was true, all that Quakers claimed to deduce from the light was true. I don't know when Penn learned what Friends were really like, but at the latest his encounter with Pennsylvania Quakers changed his evaluation. Did he at the same time begin to wonder whether all the testimonies had the authority of God?

### IV.

The second mystery is Penn's bringing a rationality to Quakerism when it was much more compatible with Puritanism. When Penn became a Quaker, he retained his academic learning that surfaced in his emphasis upon “Reason.” For example, in *The Sandy Foundation Shaken* (1668), Penn attacked the traditional doctrine of the Trinity and imputed righteousness through the Atonement: “From the Authority of Scriptural Testimony and Right Reason.” These doctrines he argues are against reason and the consequences in believing them are “Irreligious and Irrational” (P, Works, 1726, 263).

The formulas Christians have used to define the trinity, according to Penn, have no biblical support and also negate common reason. He didn't deny the existence of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost but listed a series of queries designed to show the absurdity of substances, accidents, and co-existent persons. Here is the discussion of Trinity of "Distinct and Separate Persons, in the unity of Essence."

"...either the Divine Person are finite or infinite; if the first, then something finite is inseparable to the infinite Substance, whereby some finite is in God; if the last, then Three distinct Infinites, Three Omnipotents, Three Eternals, and so three GODS. If each Person be God, and that God subsists in three Persons, then in each Person are three Persons or Gods, and from three, they will increase to Nine, and so ad infinitum" (Sandy Foundation, Penn, Works, (1726), I, 253).

Pepys, who thought Penn's apocalyptic writings absurd, praised the Sandy Foundation as a tract of good sense, but wondered whether Penn had the intelligence to write it. The bishops thought otherwise and put Penn in the Tower of London and sent Dr. Edward Stillingfleet, the King's chaplain and also a bishop, to reason with him. Penn's clarification, *Innocency with an Open Face* quoted liberally from Stillingfleet and thereby, proved his soundness on the divinity of Christ and so he was released. Stillingfleet was one of the Cambridge Platonists and there were many similarities between the Christ Light of Friends and the Christ Logos of the Platonists. In fact, one could argue that Penn's Light was Platonic at its base.

In his 1671 *Apology*, Penn claims to refute his opponent "briefly and rationally." Scholars have long noted that Penn's defenses of religious toleration are based upon scripture, reason, and expediency, with the later two coming to predominate. Hugh Barbour has chronicled Penn's transition from apocalyptic prophet to an enlightenment man of reason as seen in the 1690s *Fruits of Solitude* and *Essay on the Peace of Europe*. There is general agreement that Penn becomes both more sympathetic to what can be termed Orthodox Protestantism and at the same time advocates a toleration based upon reason and utility and an ethics based on rational moderation—very different from the mortification glorified in *No Cross, No Crown*. The prophetic apocalypticism so prominent in the 1660s disappears before 1700. However, there is no passage in which Penn recognized this change in his thoughts. He does seem to see less utility in controversial books and does rewrite some of his earliest writings in the 1690s.

While we do not know what the older, more conservative Penn thought of his youthful denunciations and debates, we do know he stops writing them.

Rationalism was not a salient feature in the writings of other Friends before Penn, but was a major theme in the writings of Puritans. The only major Quaker who used it earlier was George Bishop, an ex-Cromwellian soldier turned Quaker and a friend of the Admiral, who wrote the father defending the young man's conversion after his return from Ireland on the way home. Bishop is also the first Quaker I know who uses natural law to support toleration. Although we do not commonly associate reason with Robert

Barclay, his *Apology* is organized in scholastic academic fashion with proofs based on scripture and reason. George Keith distinguished in his writings between matters of faith and speculations on such issues of the transmigration of souls that were postulates of reason. Penn, Keith, and Barclay engaged in dialogue with Cambridge Platonists at the house of Anne, Countess of Conway. And in the eighteenth-century there is an emphasis upon reason in such prominent Quakers as Richard Claridge and Alexander Arscott. So it may be that Penn is evolving in the context of a changing Quaker perspective.

## V.

A third enigma: Penn writes incessantly from the date of his conversion until 1700. Nothing seems to stop his creativity: not the deaths of his parents, his twins, his wife, his son Springett. His pen was never still no matter how busy he was in gaining and planning for Pennsylvania, serving as a courtier (the Admiral would have been pleased) in the court of James II, or enduring his loss of Pennsylvania and going into hiding. Many of his most important works come in the 1690s. But after 1700 there is a dearth of new materials. He publishes *More Fruits of Solitude* in 1702, testimonials to four deceased Friends in their collected works, three broadside addresses to Parliament (on blasphemy, occasional conformity, and for proprietary government), and an introduction to Bulstrode Whitelocke's *The History of England*. In spite of the fact that Charles Leslie, Francis Bugg, and George Keith are excoriating Quakers, Penn does not answer them. Nor does he defend the Toleration Act. Several of the earlier devotional writings were still in print, and it is possible that Penn felt he had nothing new to say, but anyone who reads the earlier writings knows that repetition had never stopped him before. One possible explanation is that many the leaders in London Yearly Meeting did not favor Penn, but still he was selected to present the address of Friends to newly crowned Queen Anne and to write pamphlets representing Friends to Parliament.

My guess, and it is no more than that, is that Penn had become a disillusioned man. He was in debt, betrayed by what he thought was a dishonest steward. His oldest son left Quakerism and became an alcoholic, living in France apart from his family. Whatever dreams he had for Quakers in Pennsylvania had been dashed by what Penn saw as the obstreperous nature of the settlers there. Caught between defending Pennsylvania from royal officials and determined resistance to him by Quaker politicians in the colony, Penn gave up on his Holy Experiment and prepared to sell the right of government back to the Crown. Only a stroke stopped him. We can only hope that he found some solace in his new wife who bore him a daughter and three sons. Yet the quantity of letters Penn wrote in this decade did not diminish; his wife despaired of having him live in Bristol when he was always in London and so moved with him near the city so Penn could wait upon royal officials and members of Parliament. His activities as well as his successes as a lobbyist for his colony did not diminish. What I don't know as yet and what none of his other biographers discuss is whether he stopped attending Second Day Morning Meeting and Meeting for Sufferings and Yearly Meeting on a regular basis. Did he stop

completely traveling in the ministry? If he continued to participate in meeting affairs, then the three constants in Penn's life after his conviction would be

1. his commitment to religious toleration
2. his sense of the presence of God
3. the belief that Quakerism was primitive Christianity and that all other denominations had departed from the Truth.

The third of these seems most problematic. It is likely that Penn had become so invested in Quakerism that it would have destroyed him psychologically had he questioned its premises.

## VI.

The fourth enigma I may have a solution to: why did Penn become an internationalist, seeking a European parliament as a way to end war? Striking in Penn's earlier writings is the non-political nature of peace. Quakers are a peaceable people who do not participate in rebellion or war. Robert Barclay's *Apology* endorsed a sectarian definition of peace for Quakers that allowed non-Quaker magistrates to wage just wars. Penn's treatment of the peace testimony in *Rise and Progress of the People Called Quakers* is very brief and in content cursory. Most of his early comments in the tracts exalt peace and condemn war, but show little understanding of international system. He also defended his father's reputation to Judge Samuel Starling and carried out his father's will by erecting in St. Mary Redcliffe parish church in Bristol a memorial monument. (Actually, the tablet says erected by his wife. I wonder if the Admiral did not trust his son to do it.) He was working after 1692 to regain his colony and had to promise that Pennsylvania would create a militia and provide money for the ongoing war with France. So Penn, who was loyal to the memory of his father, who knew that the only reason the Crown had given the colony was because of his father's war service and debts incurred for war supplies, needed a way to preserve his commitment to the meeting's anti-war stance, his father's naval victories, and the Crown which wanted a militia. His solution: reform the international system by creating a parliament of Europe to adjudicate disputes. By using the humanist critique of war most clearly enunciated by Erasmus, Penn could argue that war was against reason, a folly. Since war served no constructive purpose, then reasonable leaders could find a mechanism to abolish it. If, following Meredith Weddle's book on Quakers in Rhode Island during King Philip's war and seeing the peace testimony as ill-defined and evolving from an individual to a group held norm, then Penn provided a solution compatible with advocating peace and holding power. His solution, with difficulties caused by external events, worked for Pennsylvania for 75 years—the only time in history that a government dominated by pacifists held power.

In conclusion, what should we say about this man? He is the most complex figure connected with colonization. Compared to him, John Winthrop, Roger Williams, Anne Bradstreet, John Smith, Pocahontas, and Governor Berkeley of Virginia are dull with minor gifts. Penn's accomplishments as devotional writer, defender of toleration,

colonizer, city planner, and ethicist are impressive. Still, his contradictions make me wonder how he lived with himself. Perhaps, as Jean Soderlund, one of the editors of *The Papers of William Penn*, mused, we approach the 17th century with a vision of what early Quakers should be and when Penn doesn't conform, we wonder why. We know so much more about Penn than other Quakers; this may be the reason he appears so flawed. In *The New York Times Book Review* section of March 26, p. 16 Will Blythe noted "The art of biography is often the record of authorial disillusionment. To know all is to know too much." My problem with Penn is that I know too little and what I know I cannot integrate into a picture that gives a rounded portrait of the man. That may be why we have in the past needed multiple biographies and the future will bring many more.