

A SEVENTEENTH CENTURY FRIEND ON THE BENCH

The testimony of Elizabeth Walmsley

Summary

Evidence of this early Friend has emerged, via a few letters and her own "Testimony", amongst the unpublished correspondence of Isaac Penington. This correspondence is currently the subject of a study to be published by 'Quaker Life'.

The Testimony provides an account of the conviction of a first generation "Friend on the Bench". It is an insight into Penington's relationship with members of his local meeting and the character of his outreach and oversight.

Most importantly, however, it is a rare memorial to the usually anonymous local Friends whose faithfulness in keeping their meetings held the firm centre from which our early leaders were able to do great things.

Background

A current study centred on the unpublished letters of Isaac Penington¹ is revealing tantalising glimpses of individuals in the "crowd of witnesses" who sat on the benches with the more public and therefore better known founders of Quakerism. The characters and experiences of our early leaders are well documented and leap out at us vividly from their often voluminous writings² but the contribution to our history of those who appear only as footnotes was as fundamental.

These "footnotes" are the local Friends who kept the meetings going while their leaders were removed to jail or were travelling on Quaker business. They cared for each other, supported each other's families, discoursed with each other on their spiritual insights, discussed the theological expositions of their more weighty members and read out the "notices" or letters from each other³ - much as we do in our Meetings today. Unlike today, however, they risked being fined for attending meeting and having their goods distrained for non-payment. Periodically they openly disagreed with each other. Other tensions, such as strains on family relationships, can only be guessed at by reading between the lines. Usually an indication of their existence as individuals survives only if they happened to be

mentioned in the correspondence of a well known personality, or if they were formally recorded as having "suffered" materially and/or physically for their witness.

The name Bridget Atley for example is one such Friend on the Bench. We know her as a recipient of a few of Penington's letters valued for their content, not at all for their addressee.⁴ Yet a brief paragraph in the records of the sufferings of Friends in Buckinghamshire hints at the personality behind the name and brings to life the stresses under which such ordinary Friends met and worshipped together. Goods to the value of £14, mainly her beds, bedding and kitchen equipment, were taken from this "widow woman" to satisfy a fine of £8.5s "for being at a meeting".⁵ The name of the justice who issued the warrant is carefully recorded as "an eager Persecutor". This single paragraph recording the simple witness of a local Friend has no less impact than Penington's own well-documented persecution. We treasure such records, however fugitive, not only because they honour the individuals concerned, but also because they give context to the lives of our more prominent founders.

A closer family friend of the Peningtons to whom we are similarly introduced as an addressee of Isaac's letters was Elizabeth Walmsley. Elizabeth seems to have been a significant member of Chalfont Meeting, by which she was probably held in high regard as Penington entrusted her specifically with his often weighty letters to what was until mid-1666 his local Meeting. Several letters from Isaac to Elizabeth are preserved, but three he wrote to her from jail in the first half of 1666 show us her personality and her role in Isaac's ministry to his Meeting. The first two are short personal letters of encouragement and support in her faith. The third ends with a reference to an enclosure⁶ which he wants Elizabeth to read out - obviously to the Meeting as a whole, not just to their immediate circle with whom Elizabeth would have been much more comfortable. She is an anxious woman, a "worrier", clearly not a public speaker but firmly convinced of the Truth. Penington is well aware how unsure she feels about her ability to do his words justice, but he has no doubts. He acknowledges her feelings of inadequacy, urging her to stay focussed and concentrate on the words: "Look not out for if the Lord make thy heart willing and be with thee in it, it will be an acceptable service from thee to him, although it should be outwardly hard", although in true Quakerly fashion he does not insist: "yet I lay not upon thee, but leave it to thy freedom and disposal otherwise, if thou find a more convenient way of having it read".⁷ Elizabeth replies "thine to Friends was read the next first day" - but whether by

herself or by another she does not say - "surely I felt a freewillingness in my heart to read them both, but this in plainness there was something of fearfulness also, lest anything of that vertue and life in which they were writ should be obscured, through my weakness. Very weak I am when I look out, or my heart is not fixed on the everlasting strength."⁸

Penington trusted Elizabeth not only as a respected member of the Meeting, but also because she was a close family friend. "This outward distance, this long outward imprisonment and separation from us hath lain much on my heart.....and now the removal of thy family also, thus separating our friends from us..." she wrote when the Peningtons had to move away from Chalfont later in 1666, most of which year Isaac himself spent in prison.⁹ This separation did not sever the relationship; in spring 1670 Isaac wrote to thank Elizabeth for having daughter Mary junior to stay: "I am sensible of thy great love to us, expressed in thy care and tenderness of our child.....I hope she is no burden to thee".¹⁰ In 1679, by then a widow, she was the recipient of one of the last letters Isaac wrote before he died, intended also for the Meeting which was involved in another internal difficulty.¹¹ She wrote supportively and more self-confidently to Isaac's wife Mary. There is a "thinking of you" letter: "Soon after I was set down in the Meeting thou camest fresh into my mind and thy great exercises and trialls were present before me, and thy bed of weakness which deprived us of thy bodily presence, and I said in my heart, Lord, why is it thus?....".¹² She is mentioned twice in Mary's will with regard to the disposal of personal items of clothing.¹³

Elizabeth regarded the Peningtons very much as her spiritual mentors, her "overseers", and also seems to have been somewhat dependent on them for emotional support. Certainly she identified strongly with their family life as a whole while there is little indication of her own family. She had a sister, through whom she came to Quakerism, whom Isaac knew and who was therefore probably a member of the Chalfont Meeting.¹⁴ She was married to a Thomas Walmsley and seems to have lived in relatively comfortable circumstances, but as she escaped the attentions of "the eager Persecutor" we have no indication of what she had to lose. It may not be unreasonable to detect a restraining husbandly influence here: there is no evidence to suggest that Thomas was also involved with the Meeting. Elizabeth does not mention him at all in her Testimony as she does her sister, so it is unlikely that he shared her views. Neither did Penington send him any personal greetings via his letters as he did to others: on the contrary, the few times he addressed

Thomas specifically are attempts to turn him from the error of his way of thinking. In one letter Isaac says he came on purpose to see Thomas but he was out.¹⁵ The impression is of one of those marriages not unfamiliar to Friends of a committed, active individual whose busyness about the affairs of the Meeting is tolerated by a more worldly partner, happy to let her get on with it as long as he can be "out" when Friends come to call.

From the evidence, Elizabeth emerges as an active local Friend, firmly centred in the affairs of the Meeting and the practical needs of its members while happy to leave to others the seventeenth century equivalent of: "Central Work". Given this role, the respect in which she was held and her relationship with the Peningtons emphasise just how much the achievements of our more "public" members have always depended on the pastoral care and worshipful upholding they receive from members of their local Meeting. Most of these Friends on the Bench, the engineroom of Quakerism, have no memorial. Being good Quakers they would approve of that, but it is frustrating for the Quaker historian. A few are remembered in Minute books, the odd letter, the chance reference. Elizabeth Walmsley would have remained one such name if she had not written an account of her conviction - her "Testimony" - which, presumably because it contained a glowing testimony to Penington himself, his son John copied out along with all his father's unpublished letters and papers after his death. Thus the Testimony of this unknown seventeenth century Friend on the Bench has come to rest in the fourth volume of the John Penington Manuscripts, rightfully alongside letters from such revered figures as George Fox himself.

Diana Morrison Smith

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This was her Presidential Address to the Friends Historical Society.]

TESTIMONY

All ye that know the truth and love it above all, for this I testify, its price is above all things in this world, for though my education was in sobriety and my conversation as to the outward things blameless, yet this I feel, had not the Lord reached forth the arm of his power in love to turn my mind inward and given me a sense of his everlasting truth and way of life Christ Jesus, and staid my mind therein, I had been to this present day most miserable. But the love of the Lord

hath been to me unexpressible. In my young years he tendered me and there was a fear lest I should do evil; but after many years the Lord brought me into a close exercise of spirit, as to my inward condition, and many things I felt condemnation for, and it was close on my mind, if thy heart condemn thee, God is greater, he sees all things, and I said, I shall be overcome, and one day fall, and in this distress a secret answer sprang in my heart. My grace is sufficient for thee, my strength is made perfect in thy weakness, and I do not remember that ever the temptation took hold of me again. And the Lord gave me a further sense of my condition, and I followed hard to know the truth, and that faith, which gives victory over the spirit of this world, that so I might walk in the pure way of life which the Lord would have me walk in, and it often sprang in me, what am I doing? Wither am I going? What will be the end of these troubles? I am as one alone in the wilderness & know not what way to come forth: but in the needfull time the Lord appeared, & showed me I was to wait, till the hand, which led me into the wilderness, brought me forth, & there was a cry raised in me, O my soul wait thou on the Lord, & ...Answer, he will return & appear for his own name sake & thy comfort; but I knew not that it was the voice of my beloved, yet this I felt that the most abiding peace I ever felt, was from an inward sense or touch, though then I knew not what it was, & those that I then walked with desired me to beware of such Enthusiasms but take heed of the written word. But I not knowing the voice of my beloved was sore distressed, & knew not what to do, but said in my heart, is God departed? Will he not return? O my soul wait thou for him, he will return for his names sake & thy comfort, & the Lord, in great love & tender mercy, left me not in the day of exercise & travell, but called once again, Glory to his name. And about this time truth was declared, & there came one into the steeple house & reprov'd our worship, & my heart was reached by what he spake, & it was great trouble to me to see him abused & I spake to them to let him alone, & said there was more in their declaration than we felt. And after some time dear Isaac Penington came hither, & though I had a love to him, yet fear did so surprise me (lest I should be deceived by the people, there being strange reports of some of them) that I was unwilling to go into the room where he was, but my sister M.E. came out & asked me to come in. Then I went in trembling, & sat down at the door, & took heed to what they spake, & I felt the answer in my heart to the truth of it, & there was a love in my heart to them (I think J. Crook was with him) & after some time I.P. send me word, that such a day they intended a Meeting at his house, if I were willing to come etc; & the Lord opened my heart & a way for me to go (I being

then weakly & not well able to travell so far on foot) & they kindly received me. There were severall friends whom the Lord, in great mercy, had reached by his eternal power & word of life in their own particulars, who declared that this word was nigh in the heart which reproves for evill etc, & the witness of God though I then knew not what to call it, then testified that I felt that near me which was my reprover. But how I should come to be delivered from all my evill thoughts & vain words, how my faith failed, for I had travelled hard & still felt condemnation for many things, & if my heart condemn me, God is greater & knows all things. Surely (said I) I am as one alone, I see not my way, though I read and hear much, I know not what I am to do: & then a cry arose in me. Lord, show me the way wherin thou wouldst have me walk, & the thing I should do, O my soul, wait thou on the Lord, but I knew not that in which I was to wait. Thus was I distressed on every side, & the enemy prevailed, & I knew not how to bear the cross, & went to the steeple-house again, but judgement followed me, & my dissatisfaction increased. This was the goodness of the Lord to my poor bewildered soul, who did not leave me in the grave of death & land of darkness. And in this time dear M. Penington wrot me a letter, & laid my concern close before me, & it entred me much, especially one sentence which was, That the Lord had a dart to strike through the liver of his Adversarys, & it lived in me, & my cry was, Lord, show me thy way, & help me to walk in it, for I have no helper but thee. And then, O then the Lord appeared, glory to his name for ever, who lighted his candle in me, & fired my habitation in that way & worship I was so hampered in, & I said, If God be God, let me follow him, but if Baal be God, then follow them: surely I shall never hear them more. And the Lord strengthened me so that I then turned from those watchmen of the night, & he manifested to me, that that life & satisfaction which I had felt amongst them was departed, darkness had entered, & the people were not profited. For now the voice of the Lord is, Come out of Egypt, travell through the wilderness, & though we meet with many besetments, look not back, look not out, beware of the entanglements of the worlds spirit & nature: for this I testify, there is an enemy lyes near which watcheth to drave out the mind from the inward teaching of the pure spirit of truth & life in the heart, therefore keep the watch in the eternall light Christ Jesus, which shows us our way, give us to make strait steps before him, who followed me with great long-suffering & forgiveness, & appeared to help me in the needfull time. O how great is his goodness! For though the people whom I walked with pursued, yet the Lord helped me, that that spirit prevailed no more, though there was a seeming tenderness in

them to me, & many discourses they had with me to draw me back again, but the Lord in love to his seed left me not in the day of triall. O the goodness of the Lord, let it never be forgotten by me, who called me in the day of the powerfull breaking forth of his glorious Light, the eternall word nigh in the heart Christ Jesus, the everlasting gospell, which hath lain hid from many generations, but now is made manifest to turn the mind inward, where that is found which we sought abroad, that so the gathering may be to the Lord & that pure faith come to be witnessed which gives the victory over the spirit of the world. This was the mistery hid & all the Teachers I followed after could not declare it to me: for they knew it not. They declared of severall sorts of faith, & some of them told me, a desire of faith was faith: but this was as dark to me as the rest, so my desires were great, that scripture lived in me, without faith it is impossible to please God, & faith is the gift of God, but I knew not that I had the gift (& how to have it they could not teach me) for indeed I knew not the power which saves, nor the birth to which it is given to believe. And some other scriptures opened in me, as that, For this cause many are sick & weak not discerning the Lords body, & here I left off breaking of bread with them, they telling me it was the body which died at Jerusalem. And again what the Oyl was, which the foolish virgins wanting were shut out, when the Bridegroom came. Thus the Lord in great mercy tendered me, even for his seeds sake, which he preserved in Egypts darkness, & nourished in the wilderness, & executes his righteous judgement on the rebellious nature, that the seed may come forth & that birth be born, which alone can serve the Lord. And this is that my soul waits for, that the Lord may be honoured his truth exalted in the hearts of those that profess to know the Lord, & our lights shine & Lamps burn, that many may come to confess & say, Surely God is in this people of a truth, we will go with you. Then shalt the gathering be to the Lord, & his power be felt & witnessed, whose right it is to rule over all forever & for evermore. Glory to the Lord who is great love visits the children of men by the arm of his power, & would not that any should perish but turn from the evil of their ways, & hath raised up many living witnesses to declare the way of salvation by Christ Jesus, the eternall light, who is come to enlighten the dark mind of man & woman, & the voice is sounded Believe in the light that you may become children of the Light. This is the invitation of the servants of the living God, who have received the power & vertue of faith in their own particulars to crucify the world & lusts therof, & therefore they testify of it to others, & the love of God constrains them so to do, & they cannot eat their morsell alone, but as they have freely received

they freely give forth, and are freely given up to spend & be spent in the service of the Lord, that truth & righteousness may spring forth in & over all.

And in this weighty work & service of the Lord his truth & people, dear Isaac Penington was called forth by the Lord, who gave him a double portion of his spirit, the Light of God shined through his earthen vessell & reached the seed of life, which lay deep in many. And through the goodness & rich mercy of the Lord I stand a living witness of it, glory to the Lord. He faithfully declared the everlasting gospell, & what he had tested, felt & handled of the eternall word of life he freely communicated to others.

And the Lord in great mercy gave him a deep sense of my state & made him as a tender father to me, in directing me to the principle of life within, I having long wandered abroad to seek the living among the dead. I cannot express what the Lord hath been to me, in great mercy, tender kindness & forgiveness; glory to the Lord, who gave him a deep sight of the way & work of the Lord in the hearts of the children of men, & also of the secret & subtle working of the enemy; for he having travelled through the great deeps & close excercises, the power of the Lord upholding him, he was enabled to speak a word in season to the weary traveller, that hungered & thirsted after the living God & a secret hope hath been raised he that hath delivered can yet deliver; so that deep answered deep, the depth of mercy reached the depth of misery, glory to the Lord. He was tender in spirit to all, not willing to hurt any tender spirit yet could not dawb with untempered mortar; for a close heart-searching ministry he had, & the prosperity of life of truth was greatly his concern, & his exhortations were to keep close to the Light, that life might have scope & all keep within the limits of life; for in this the work of the Lord would prosper, & the subtle enemy be made manifest, & that birth born which alone can serve the Lord, but cannot serve another. True & right judgement was near his habitation in the light, He was a diligent traveller in his day & time, in the work & service of the Lord that the stones might be squared & fitted for the spirituall building, & the top-stone raised, & Alleliyahs, living praises, glory & honour be given to the Lord, who is worthy of all for ever & for evermore.

And now dear Isaac Penington hath finished his travell, the work & service of his day, & having kept the faith, he is gone to rest in everlasting peace with the Lord, & a crown of glory rests on him. The memoriall of the just shall be had, in everlasting remembrance. Though he is taken hence, his life yet speaks, yea the life of truth

speaks through many, glory to the Lord. The truth of our God abides for ever.

And now my dear friends, bear with me in love, this being on my mind, to leave as a testimony for the great Goodness and unspeakable mercy of the Lord to me, who am one of the least in that Church and Family of the Living God.

Eliz. Walmsley

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 *Knowing the Mystery of Life Within: Selected Writings of Isaac Penington in their historical and theological context* edited by R. Melvin Keiser and Rosemary Moore. Manuscript transcriptions by Diana Morrison Smith (leaflet with this issue). To be published by Quaker Life. After IP's death his eldest son, John, copied out all his unpublished letters and papers into 4 volumes, known as the John Penington Mss (JP) now in Friends House Library.
- 2 IP published prolifically during his lifetime and was notoriously wordy. After his death George Whitehead, a weighty Friend, when asked to write a testimony wrote, "I hope I shall not need to write an apology for this man's many writings...not is it altogether proper for me to apologise in such a case, not having read all these his books"
- 3 See below discussion of IP's letters to his Meeting. The JP mss are full of letters of theological exposition, both to meetings and to individuals.
- 4 She became involved with a dissident offshoot of IP's Meeting.
- 5 "...had taken from her for the 8li 5sh two great feather beds (al she had) two feather bolsters, one coverlett, one bedstead, with curtains and vallans and curtain-rods, one trundle bedstead, one folding or drawing table, one cupboard. A brass-pott, a pewter-pot, a platter and a candlestick, a great spit and a great iron dripping-pan. In al to the value of fourteen pounds...." Account of the Sufferings of Friends in the County of Bucks - 1670.
- 6 1st in JP Vol 2, p 202; 2nd in JP Vol 1, p 89, letter 1; 3rd in JP Vol 1, p 89, letter 2. The enclosure is presumably the "Epistle to Friends in the Two Chalfonts" dated, as is the letter to EW, 20 June 1666: No. 20 in John Barclay's "Letters of Isaac Penington" pub 1828 (also included in the recently published new edition of IP's Works, vol 4).
- 7 JP Vol 1, p 89..
- 8 JP Vol 4, p 8, letter 1.
(Note: (7) and (8) are of additional interest as the only identifiable piece of cross-correspondence in the JP mss).
- 9 JP Vol 4, p 8, letter 2.
- 10 JP Vol 3, p 43.
- 11 24 July 1679. JP Vol 2, p 185.
- 12 JP Vol 4, p 180.

- ¹³ To my daughter...the mantle that I left with Elizabeth Walmsley for her" and "I would have my daughter Penn dispose of my hoods scarves gloves...and such things to the women of our meeting, viz Elizabeth Walmsley..." (followed by names of 8 other women). ("My daughter Penn" was Gulielma, who married William Penn in 1672).
- ¹⁴ Referred to in the Testimony as "M.E." In 1669 Thomas Ellwood, who was a lifelong friend of the Penington family, a member of their household and tutor to their children, married a Mary Ellis who was considerably older than himself. Could this be the same "M.E."?
- ¹⁵ "...I have often felt thy state and thy souls great danger, even in the sight of God, and in the sense and demonstration which is from him, though I have not found clearness before him often either to write or speak to thee....." O friend, Lean not to thy own understanding, but pray to God to deliver thee from thy own understanding and to give thee the understanding which is of him....." JP Vol 1, p 21.