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REFLECTIONS ON WILLIAM PENN'S PREFACE TO GEORGE FOX'S *JOURNAL*

In some quarters at present it is the fashion to show antipathy to George Fox as self-important, and to play down his *Journal* as selective and doctored history. This is unfair, as well as ill-considered. Fox's *Journal* makes no claim to be a history of early Quakerism. It is a genuine journal, with a journal's self-centredness. The history was left to William Penn, who in his preface first carefully sets it in a long perspective and then, from 'intimate knowledge' of both Fox and the 'ensuing annals', gives prominence to each, but still with critical balance.

The *Journal* does not stand alone, either in genre or in content. For comparability in genre there are the journals written by other Friends, together with numerous autobiographical *Sufferings and Passages*. For reliability what is in the *Journal* can be checked against hundreds of contemporary letters, in the main not from or to Fox but between other Friends, and also against scores of contemporary printed tracts written by these other Friends as well as by Fox himself.¹ Furthermore Fox was a compulsive autobiographer, and from the *Short Journal* edited by Norman Penney to the *Narrative Papers* edited by Henry J. Cadbury numerous pieces are extant with which the *Journal* may be compared.

William Charles Braithwaite's acquaintance with these documents was unrivalled, but what lies behind *The Beginnings of Quakerism* is their coherence: without this, his comprehensive and convincing narrative would not have been possible.

Study of Fox's *Journal* raises many unanswered questions. Did he depend on a memory both capacious and retentive? Did he keep some sort of diary, to which he could later refer? We do not know. Were the innumerable intercalations in the manuscript of the *Journal* inserted at Fox's direction, perhaps when what he had dictated was read over to him, or are they independent additions by the scribe? Probably they are of both kinds. When, and why, or how, did the missing opening pages of the manuscript become detached? The extent and purposes of the alterations, omissions and additions made by the editor throughout the manuscript is a fascinating subject in itself; a systematic study of it would almost certainly be illuminating. It is natural to wonder if the opening pages, for which we have to depend on the first printed edition, owe more than a little to the editor, Thomas Ellwood; but any attempt to identify and detach Ellwoodian phraseology in these pages runs into the sand. All this is tantalising, but it is not the kind of thing which historians are unaccustomed to working with; it does not lead then to abandon the text as unreliable.

Of course Fox was a visionary, with the seer's psychic and intuitive powers, a 'sensitive', with the enthusiast's tendency to extravagance in speech and sometimes in action, a charismatic, who attracted both devotion and antagonism. None of this is edited out of the *Journal* either by himself or by Ellwood, though Ellwood often softens its extremest expressions and manifestations. Nor is it concealed by Penn, who, while observing (in what for Penn is strong language) that Fox's 'very presence expressed a religious majesty' and noting both his power of discernment and his 'authority... over evil', readily acknowledges the opposition he met with, and also his 'uncouth' lack of elegance and the at times broken and abrupt manner in which he spoke: at first this was unwelcome to Penn's 'nice ears', but 'I have many times been overcome in myself' by it, Penn confesses, till at last it 'engaged my soul'. And of course Fox was a natural leader, and knew it. So did Penn, who does not hesitate to call Fox 'God's blessed instrument', 'clothed... with a divine preference', 'the first and chief elder in this age'. Even then, Penn takes care not to exaggerate. Fox was never the only leader. Before concentrating on Fox Penn lists by name as many as nineteen other Friends of 'the first and great convincement'; and he ends his preface to the *Journal* with a plea to the reader to 'behold the blessed man *and men* [my italics] that were sent of God in this excellent work and service'.

Penn was not of this first generation, for he was not convinced till 1667; but he writes as if he were. At first affecting detachment, he writes of 'the people of God called Quakers', who 'were changed men before they went about to change others', in the third person plural. But he cannot keep it up and 'they' becomes 'we': 'we drew near to the Lord'; 'we were in travail'; 'we did not think our selves at our own disposal'; 'I cannot forget the humility and chaste zeal of that day'. This is the familiar language of enthusiasm. Its date - the early 1690s, after Fox's death but before the publication of his *Journal* - is the point to note. In a remarkable way, so quietly as almost to escape notice, Penn's preface establishes a continuity between the sixteen-fifties, the 'sixties and the 'nineties. Nor in this respect does the passage stand alone. Consider the following:-

In the same year 1652 in the Government of Oliver Cromwell, the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Go thy ways to Swarthmore, where my lambs and babes and children of light will be gathered together to wait upon my name; I will feed them with the finest of the wheat, and with honey out of the rock; and with the dew of heaven I will refresh them, that they may grow as plants of my right hand planting, that above all the families of the earth I may rejoice to do them good.

The writer, Miles Halhead, was 'a plain sensible man' from the North, without a trace of Penn's culture or cultivation. What besides its tone his *Sufferings and Passages*, from which the passage comes, has in common with Penn's preface is its date. It was published in 1690.

Enthusiasm is attended by its own perils: 'oh, how easy is mercy to be abused': 'mercies should not be temptations; yet we often make them so' (Cromwell); 'the greatest and best gifts... from God are accompanied with the chiefest and worst temptations' (Nayler). Especially is this the case when the stopper of persecutions has been removed and excitement wells up without restraint. The earliest Quakerism could hardly avoid some overflow of what has been called the ranter swell. As one watches Nayler on his messianic ride into Bristol or listens to Muggleton claiming to be one of the two witnesses to whom power would be given (Revelation xi), one senses the pressure on a Fox or a Cromwell, each with his sense of vocation to leadership, to become *exalté*. Fox was human and at times succumbed, but never for long, and his resolution steadied others. Justice Hotham's saying, as Fox records it, that 'if God had not raised uppe this principle of light & life of ours ye nation had been overspread with rantisme' rings true.

It was also an age when meaning was constantly sought and found in

names and anagrams and puns. When 'all things were new' (Fox) in what Dewsbury in 1688 could still call 'a new world', the appeal of the 'new name which no man knoweth' that was to be given (Revelation ii) was irresistible. 'Give forth by me', runs a statement in 1659 from one of the Boston martyrs, 'who am known to men by the name of Marmaduke Stevenson but have a new name given me, which the world knows not of, written in the book of life'. Why did Nayler sometimes reverse his initials and write them N.J.? Was it in order to evade a hostile writer's reference to 'the other J.N., Jesus of Nazareth, that came in his Father's name'? But on occasion Fox also reverses his initials. Was it in part a sign that Friends were, as Penn calls them, 'turners of the world upside down'? But when Fox signs a letter F.G., he adds, like Marmaduke Stevenson, 'who is of the world called George Fox who A new name hath which the world knowes not'. The reference to Revelation ii is unmistakable. It will not have been lost on Cromwell, to whom the letter was addressed. Cromwell also was changing his signature at this time, to match the reality of something new: 'I called not myself to this place', he insists; he accepted it as from God; but would the world understand?

What Fox passes over as Nayler's Bristol 'disturbans' finds no place in Penn's preface. Why should it? It was not to his purpose in commending the *Journal*. He knew about it, of course. Nayler he puts at the head of his list of those of 'the first and great convincement', naming before him only Farnworth. The Ranters he also mentions, describing them as those who became 'exalted above measure' and 'ran out in their own imaginations' (phrases traceable to Nayler and Fox respectively). But Penn's interest was not, as is the modern historian's, in the Nayler who was tried for blasphemy but in the Nayler who came through, with his spirit purified and his faith strengthened; just as it was not in the Fox whom the modern historian finds hard and unrelenting but in the Fox whom he knew, 'as ready to forgive, as unapt to take or give an offence', and who came through, to reconciliation.

It is in fact revealing to note the contexts where Penn's language repeats Nayler's emphases and phraseology. When for instance Penn exhorts his brethren in the ministry, 'let us be careful neither to out-go our Guide, nor yet loiter behind him', and continues with a reminder that 'it is possible for one that hath received the word of the Lord, to miss in the division and application of it', both the warning and the admission are pure Nayler; and when, further on, Penn writes 'We shall watch always for good, and not for evil', he is virtually taking the words out of Nayler's mouth. To find Nayler's message in the preface to a book by Fox may seem surprising. One thing it indicates is that Penn

perceived no significant discrepancy between what Fox and what Nayler stood for. Sometimes this is clearly the case. When Penn claims of Friends that on principle 'they did not only refuse to be revenged for injuries done them... but they did freely forgive' and later adds that in practice Friends 'did not only show any disposition to revenge, when it was at any time in their power, but forgave their cruel enemies' - the alembic of the peace testimony, commonly overlooked by secular historians - he could have supported the assertion from both Fox and Nayler indifferently. Silently but tellingly the coherence and unity of early Quakerism are again confirmed.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹ For a minuscule pilot study in this direction, see my 'The Dating of George Fox's Journey from Launceston to London in the Autumn of 1656', in *Friends' Quarterly Examiner*, no.318 (1946), pp.117-21.