

Some Early Quaker Autobiographies

By OWEN WATKINS

THE first Quaker evangelists began writing tracts and pamphlets in 1652, and from the very beginning their publications included narratives in which the writer related the history of his own spiritual experience. It is the purpose of this article to offer a brief survey of some of the pioneer writings of this kind—writings which in many ways set the pattern for similar narratives included in the journals of 30 or 40 years later. Clumsy and extravagant in expression though they often are, they give us unique insight into the inner life of the early Friends and bring us very close to the authentic fire of the Spirit which burned within them.

Similar testimonies were already very popular among the Baptists and Independents, and it was the recognized practice of the gathered churches at this time to require of those who wished to enter into communion with them some kind of evidence that they were soundly converted and in sympathy with the main body of believers. Thus John Rogers, an Independent minister in Dublin, tells us when introducing a collection of testimonies published in 1653: "Every one to be *admitted*, gives out some *experimental* Evidences of the work of *grace* upon his *soul* (for the *Church* to judge of) whereby he (or she) is *convinced* that he is *regenerate*, and *received* of God".¹ The aims in publishing such confessions were to encourage those in distress by showing how God had brought others through similar ordeals, to shame slothful Christians into action, and to challenge the unconverted.

In the case of the Friends, however, the purpose was more decidedly evangelistic, for all who wrote an account of their experience did so for a single reason: a desire to convert their readers to Quakerism by offering their own lives as experimental proof of the doctrine of the Inner Light. By this means they could bring their readers to the heart of their message by giving them a first-hand report of the workings

¹ *Ohel or Bethshemesh. A Tabernacle for the Sun*, 1653, p. 354.

of God in a narrative free from complicated arguments and "windy doctrine". They spoke of nothing but what they knew, and could direct others into the way of peace because they had found it themselves. Thus Isaac Pennington says of his own brief memoir: "what I have seen and known I testify for the relief of others",¹ and George Whitehead claims to write "for the simple ones sake, who are groping in the dark, whether in forms, or out of forms".² These works, then, were born out of the common desire of their authors to testify to an experience which all had shared, and which they wanted others to share because it was too important to ignore.

Perhaps the most noticeable feature of their stories is the resemblance of incident, which extends even to the outward lives of the writers. They are all concerned in the search for peace of heart, and one and all testify that neither a pious upbringing, nor fervent prayer, nor powerful preaching heard with reverence and attention did anything but make them more restless and frustrated. They lost faith in "formal" religion, for in spite of believing all the articles of faith required of them they could not really understand how outward baptism, outward observances, and a Christ who died at Jerusalem 1,600 years earlier could free them from the bondage of an inward corruption. No one could tell them where God was to be found; all whom they asked either confessed their ignorance or else repeated the empty words of the priests, who were "physicians of no value", "blind guides", and "daubers with untempered mortar". Consequently they either abandoned themselves to the pursuit of pleasure or vainly tried to find the way to God by associating in turn with the Presbyterians, Independents, Anabaptists and other less reputable sects. But at last, when they heard the Quaker message, the perplexed seekers understood that by thinking of God as being "at a distance" they had been following a false trail. They then submitted themselves to the seed of God within and waited for this to manifest itself in its own time. And as this seed grew it revealed the indwelling principle of evil more and more clearly until all that was of the flesh stood utterly condemned by it. We then learn how by surrendering his whole life to the

¹ *Babylon the Great Discovered*, 1659. Sig. A4v.

² *Jacob Found in a Desert Land*, 1656, p. 10.

dreadful judgment of God the seeker was cleansed from sin and the root of evil in him was utterly destroyed.

This seed of God later came to be known as the Inner Light, because if waited on and obeyed it would lead a man into all truth. In the early days the Friends referred to "the witness of God in me" or "the righteous principle" or simply to "something within me", but whatever it was called it was identified with "the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world" and the Quaker missionary activity everywhere was based on an appeal to this universal seed of God in man: the seed of the woman that bruises the serpent's head. And the burden of their preaching was that if this Light were accepted as the means of communication between God and man it also revealed itself as the power of God against evil. As soon as a man submitted himself to it for guidance all that was evil in him would be destroyed and a life entirely free from sin became possible. Anything short of this was a "miserable salvation", a "feeding on husks", with nothing but "brain frothy knowledge" of the things of God.

But although the First Publishers of Truth were united in their witness and had practically the same story to tell, each man had to speak honestly of his own experience; and since no two lives are exactly alike in all respects, every memoir shows an awareness of individual problems which is not entirely obscured by the similarity of outward scheme. In almost every case the progress of the spiritual life is related to some particular issue, and this may provide a kind of inner framework for the narrative. Such a centre of interest may for instance be revealed by the nature of the first religious crisis recorded. Thus Edward Burrough, one of the first to publish his testimony, says that when he was seventeen he often heard a voice in his prayers saying, "Thou art ignorant of God, thou knowest not where he is, nor what he is; to what purpose is thy Prayer".¹ And this conviction of his ignorance of true faith forms an undercurrent to his short memoir, for the thing he wishes most to emphasize is the contrast between the knowledge of the head, which is of little value, and the knowledge of the heart. He therefore relates how for many years he thought the first was sufficient

¹ *A Warning from the Lord to the Inhabitants of Underbarrow*, 1654, p. 32.

for salvation: "I lived pleasantlie, for I had the true God, and the true Truth in my comprehension, which by my wisdom in the light I had comprehended, and I had the world in my heart, Pride, Covetousness, and the earthly spirit ruled."¹ He was brought to the living faith when George Fox taught him the second and higher sort of knowledge, which leads to separation from the world. In a similar way Richard Hubberthorn tells us that he was a minister of the letter and his "form of godliness" was "all without" until his conscience was awakened by the light of God.²

An experience that William Dewsbury had at the age of eight has an important effect on the way he tells his story: "the word of the Lord came unto me; I created thee for my glory an account thou must give to me for all thy words and actions done in the body".³ He saw his subsequent search for peace as a direct outcome of the conviction of separation from God that these words inspired. Similar narratives are those of George Whitehead and George Rofe, whose testimonies appeared in 1656. They represent their lives as a search for dominion over the beast within while living in terror of punishment for sin.⁴

A different approach is found in *The Heart Opened by Christ*, by Richard Farnsworth, which was written in May, 1654. Towards the end he says of the Puritan "priests": "So I have cleared my conscience, in declaring part of my experience of them, and not by report nor opinion of others".⁵ And this is a summary of what he has been trying to do in the preceding pages, for he shows how his religious faculties were developed as a reaction against what he considered to be the deceits of the clergy, with a gradual separation from the church in which he was brought up. He describes his interview by the local minister before his first communion and his failure to find assurance of salvation at that time; he recounts the stages by which he came to reject infant baptism and formal worship, and speaks of the attempts made by his friends and neighbours to restore him to their community and make him go to church with them on Sundays.

¹ *A Warning from the Lord to the Inhabitants of Underbarrow*, 1654, p. 33.

² *The Immediate Call to the Ministry of the Gospel*, 1654, pp. 1-2.

³ *The Discovery of the Great Enmity of the Serpent*, 1655, pp. 12-13.

⁴ Whitehead: *Jacob Found in a Desert Land*.

Rofe: *The Righteousness of God to Man*.

⁵ *The Heart opened by Christ*, p. 13.

Eventually he was led to deny all outward ordinances and wait upon God alone, so that before long he found "the righteous law of the spirit of life set up within".¹ Thus his whole story is centred on the changing relationship between himself and the representatives of the orthodox faith, and he saw in this the fulfilment of a biblical prophecy:

. . . the pure was stirred up in me, and wounded the Serpent time after time, yet not meeting with any true shepherd that could direct to walk by the footsteps of the flock, to come where the fold was, I wandred to and fro, from mountain to mountain, in cloudes and thick darkness, and the hireling shepherds instead of seeking a poor lost sheep that wandred, and wanted life and refreshment, they drove me off, and set their dogs on me, and chaced me away from them, and so fulfilled the Prophecie of *Ezekiel*, the 34 Chapter.²

As might be expected, biblical imagery is used extensively to explain and clarify the writers' experiences. The conception of salvation as a calling out of the bondage to sin in Egypt and a journey to the Promised Land has been popular throughout Christendom since Apostolic times and was widely used by preachers of all denominations in the seventeenth century. Francis Howgill tells us how at a critical moment he stood with the Red Sea in front of him and Pharaoh behind, but the Lord opened a way through the deep waters and drowned the adversary. And Thomas Forster, in the preface to *A Guide to the Blind Pointed To*, refers to his spiritual development almost entirely in these terms. He says:

the Lord God . . . mercifully brought me out of *Egypt*, and delivered me from those cruel *Taskmasters & Builders* of Confusion, and set me at liberty to travel towards the *Holy Land*: for in all the Land of *Egipt* I found no outward Guide to lead me out of my *Egiptian* darkness, . . .

. . . being delivered out of *Egypt*, and journeying towards *Canaan*, I met with divers sorts of *Travellers*, with whom I had converse & acquaintance:

(here he discusses the Independents, the Baptists, and "those called Notionists")

. . . and being now come to the red Sea, I had a lingering and secret longing to the *Garlick and Onions of Egypt* again, yet the Lord kept me from going back into *Egypt* (where was no *light* at all) but I walked in the *Wilderness* to and again for many yeers together, filling my head with Notions, and comprehending of Mysteries, which were very pleasant and delightful unto me.

. . . and though the Spirit of innocency often cryed in me Return,

¹ *The Heart opened by Christ*, p. 12.

² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

return, and come into the narrow-way which leads to life; yet I flattered my self that I had been there already, and that now I was come to the Borders of Canaan.¹

But the way leading to Canaan was the way of "a foolish people in the Worlds esteem", and it was only when he found them that his restless wanderings came to an end.

Some Quaker testimonies were addressed to a particular kind of reader, and of these the most interesting is Humphry Smith's tract, *To All Parents of Children upon the Face of the Whole Earth*. In this he gives an account of his childhood in order to warn parents against misleading their children with "devised fables, and evil examples".² He tells among other things how he himself was despised by his parents because of his abnormally tender conscience and frequent tears. The Light within led him to see the abominations of the priests' practices long before he heard anyone speak against such things, "and [I] did speak against their way of sprinkling Infants, and said I should never stand as a Godfather for any (nor never did) whereat a man swore at me, and said, it was a pitty any one did it for me".³ But the light became darkened when others taught him prayers out of books and urged him to be guided by the priests and their sermons; this, he says, begot in him "abundance of the Serpents subtilty".⁴ With these and other examples from his early life he urges parents not to stifle the "meek and harmless principle" in their children, and to let God alone be their teacher. Smith writes of his later conviction in *Man Driven out of the Earth and Darkness, by the Light, Life, and Mighty Hand of God*, a narrative that appears to have been intended in the first place as a reply to criticism that he left his outward employment after becoming a Quaker. He shows that a long period of inner turmoil was due to his persistent refusal to face the ridicule and suffering that membership of the Society of Friends would entail. Perhaps what he has already said of his childhood throws some light on this.

Every seventeenth-century Christian thought of his life as a constant war against the devil, and all the writers with whom we are concerned refer to their progress

¹ *A Guide to the Blind Pointed To*, 1659. Preface, sigs. A5-A6.

² *To All Parents of Children*, 1667. p. 3. (First edition, 1660.)

³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

towards the light as an inward battle between the forces of good and evil. Thomas Symonds, for instance, in *The Voice of the Just Uttered*, relates how he was distracted by conflicting motives in his soul and attempted to find relief by enlisting as a soldier in the Civil War: "I entred into the war without me, thinking thereby to be beloved of God for my forwardness in that work, and the war within me did somewhat cease but not wholly".¹

It is however William Ames, the missionary to Holland, who uses this imagery to the greatest effect in his testimony. He begins by saying that he had from his youth been aware of something within which enabled him to distinguish right from wrong and which condemned him when he did wrong. "But as I grew in years, I grew in *wickedness*, and the *wicked one* grew *stronger and stronger* in me, and the *just* grew *weaker and weaker*. So that I came to delight more & more in sin, and that, which before reproved me, I found to be *dead*".² The strategy of the enemy was always to direct his attention outside himself to rules, Scriptural promises, or the fact that Christ had already died for his sins at Jerusalem:

. . . and always, when the *witnes of God* convinced me of Sin in my Conscience, the *deceit* drew out my mind from it, to looke upon a *Christ without me*: and to mind the *Scripture* to be my rule.

. . . there was not any promise in the Scripture, which was to *beleevers*, but I could apply them unto my selfe, because I did belev that *Christ died at Jerusalem and was buried, and the third day rose again* etc.³

Thus his religion was only an outward profession, and his soul was occupied by an enemy who blinded his eyes to the truth by turning his attention outwards:

Then, as I grew *higher* in my *wisdom*, I began the *more to conform to the Letter of the Scripture*. For the Scripture declared against *anger*, then I began to abstain from it *outwardly*, and from uncleanness, filthyness, and deceit *outwardly*, and from pride *outwardly*, and so many of the *branches* of Sin were cropt off. But the *Root* and *ground* from whence it proceeded, was not removed.⁴

Ames found his enemy defeated when he identified the light in his conscience which convicted him of sin with the power of the living Christ; his attention was thereby directed

¹ *The Voice of the Just Uttered*, 1656, p. 2.

² *A Declaration of the Witnes of God, Manifested in the Inward Parts*, 1681, p.4. (First edition, 1656.)

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 5 and 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

inwards to where the enemy also was, and the arm of God was then able to destroy the corruption at the root of the soul.

. . . one, who was sent by the Lord, . . . declared *that that, which Convinced man of Sin, was the light of Christ, with which he had enlightened every man, that Commeth into the world.* And this Doctrin pierced through me. Yea it peirced through the *earth*, and never ceased untill it reached the *witness*, which lay in the *grave*, under *death*, and was covered with earth. This heard the voice, and knew the voice, & owned the voice, and did arise out of the *grave*, then that, which had kept it in bondage . . . would have fled from the presence of the *Light*.

But I turning my mind *to within to the Light*, saw my selfe poluted, *a den of Theevs, a Cage of unclean Birds, a habitation for Dragons, and the Sinagog of Satan.* Then did the Just arise in fury, and indignation. Then was the Sword drawn, and made ready for the slaughter, and the everlasting arm was stretched out against the heathen, to cut down and to destroy, and to make desolate that great City Babilon, which had laid Gods heritage waste; then did he arise in his power, and did slay on the right hand, and destroy on the left. Then did her young Men fall in the Streets, and her Men of War were Cut off, and her strong ones did faint, and her mighty ones were dismayed before the presence of the Lamb.¹

Very few of the first Quaker apologists fail to interpret the final crisis of conversion as the fall of Spiritual Babylon in the heart: the scenes of cosmic destruction, the raising of the witnesses, the judgement of the harlot and the plague of the beast were all used by them to describe the period of turmoil that followed the acceptance of Quaker preaching and eventually led to lasting inner peace, the peace of the New Creation. The fact that this was the language used by Ranters and Muggletonians could have done little to reassure the many people who already saw little to choose between the Friends and these other enthusiasts, and this kind of extravagance was in fact soon repudiated and discouraged by the Society. Nevertheless the very violence of such prophetic utterance reinforced the assertions of the early Friends that it was possible for a man to attain freedom from sin in this life, and that the power of God was a power that changed man's nature and utterly destroyed the inner root of evil. And we must remember that the Friends were proclaiming a revolutionary doctrine by means of the familiar language of the Bible. So that whereas the Baptist or Independent preacher relied on the reader bringing his own associations to biblical passages referred to, the Quaker had to break

¹ *A Declaration of the Witnes of God, Manifested in the Inward Parts*, 1681, p. 12.

through the barrier of familiarity and force his doctrine home by more violent expressions and an individual use of scriptural imagery. What he was saying in effect was that in his case the orthodox Puritan's lifelong struggle to achieve perfect holiness had been compressed into the brief time when he submitted the rebellious will to judgment; consequently the cleansing of the corrupt nature was correspondingly more violent. Moreover, the identification of the Babylon of the Apocalypse with a man's inner self and the taking place within him of the Day of Judgment were but two examples of the whole Quaker practice of finding the true importance of all things by their spiritual interpretation through the inward man. They exaggerated the orthodox distinction between intellectual knowledge of the faith and heartfelt personal knowledge of Christ as redeemer. All the historical events of the Bible—the fall of man, the rule of sin and death until Moses, the giving of the Law, the hope of a redeemer given by the prophets, the preparation by John the Baptist who washed with water, the death and resurrection of our Lord, the spread of the knowledge of the gospel and the final cleansing of all things—all these events found their truest significance as they happened in turn to the individual believer. In a most interesting passage William Dewsbury actually gives the dates on which these events were manifested within him;¹ unfortunately this is much too long for quotation, but the following paragraph by John Whitehouse employs many resources of biblical imagery in his attempt to make the reader understand the power and wonder of the work which God has done for his soul.

Yea, the Lord hath made the *parched*, to be as a *pool*, and the *dry-land*, *springs of water*; and hath visited poor *Lazarus* with mercy and love, but the rich *Glutton* hath he fed with Judgement; and *Esau* the wild hunter, the first birth, hath he brought down, to serve *Jacob* the younger, who hath obtained the Blessing; and hard-hearted *Pharaoh* hath he plagued, but *Israel* the Seed hath he blessed, whom he hath led by the pillar of fire, which was a light unto him, by which he walked out of the darkness of *Egypt*, from under the bondage of *Pharaoh*, whom he hath destroyed in the bottom of the Sea; Therefore doth the Seed rejoyce and sing, with high praises to its King, who by the power of his strong hand hath broken the snare and band, . . . ²

¹ See *The Discovery of the Great Enmity of the Serpent*, 1655, pp. 17-19.

² *The Doctrine of Perfection Vindicated*, 1663, p. 38.

Other writers claim that events in their lives were fulfilments of prophecies by Ezekiel, Obadiah or Haggai, while Edward Burrough recalls the death of Abel when he says, "the blood of that which I had slain cried continually". Instances of the direct application of biblical events to the facts of an individual's life can be found on almost every page of a Quaker testimony, and they are apparent also in their titles: *Jacob Found in a Desert Land*, *The Discovery of the Great Enmity of the Serpent against the Seed of the Woman*, and *The Captives Returne*, to name only a few. But the crowded scenes and exuberant imagery of the Apocalypse naturally made it the most popular source of language with which to interpret the spiritual life.

The social and political upheavals of the Commonwealth were symptomatic of the vast spiritual restlessness that the Renaissance left in its wake, and it is perhaps significant that the extreme subjectivism of the Quaker teaching met with such a powerful response at a time when the human consciousness was no longer finding within the old instinctive awareness of a spiritual world. The Friends, as we have seen, could find no essential connection between the objective Christ of history and their own inner life; so they rejected all outward and historical testimony and abandoned the attempt still being made to bridge the chasm by the intellectual system of Puritanism: they confined their attention, as it were, to the hither side of the gulf and rearranged their lives around the manifestation of God within. By rejecting the Bible as the final authority in matters of belief and practice they were driven in on themselves to find that authority in personal experience. Hence the spiritual testimony became an important weapon of evangelism, and was to Quaker life what the weekly prophecyings were to the early Puritans, pointing of course not now to the Bible, but to the new authority of the Inner Light, which was identified with the very Spirit that inspired the Scriptures. And in this withdrawal inwards the Bible itself touched reality only in so far as it was an expression of a condition of soul. Thus while not denying the historical truth of the Scriptures the Friends were able to interpret their own lives as an actual re-living of the Bible, and so found in its pages the language for their written confessions.