

## New Evidence of Francis Mercury Van Helmont's Relations with the Quakers

TWO events of more than passing importance to the Cambridge Platonists in the last quarter of the seventeenth century are commonly attributed to the influence of one man. One of these events was the apostasy of an important leader of the English Quakers; the other was the unprecedented going over of a lady of illustrious family who had been intimately associated with the Platonists from the accepted religious practices of her social group to those of the despised, persecuted "quiet people."

The intellectual stimulus which drove George Keith away from the Quakers after his intimate association with such leaders as George Fox and William Penn came largely from Keith's conversations with Francis Mercury Van Helmont.<sup>1</sup> The influence which led Lady Anne, Viscountess Conway, from the Church of England to the serene attitudes and practices of the Friends certainly came from her conversations with Van Helmont and from the books which she read at his suggestion.<sup>2</sup>

Van Helmont's continental reputation as a physician of almost supernatural power had preceded him when he arrived at the Court of Charles II on a diplomatic mission from the court of Bohemia to stay "not above a month."<sup>3</sup> Lord Conway persuaded Van Helmont to go with him to his seat in Warwickshire where Lady Conway, relapsed into invalidism after the failure of Valentine Greatrakes to cure her malady, lived in the retirement imposed by her condition. It was hoped that the great Belgian physician would succeed in dispelling Lady Conway's most distressing symptom, a headache of many years' duration and shocking intensity.

Although Van Helmont was not able to effect a cure, the Countess found with him a stimulating and satisfying

<sup>1</sup> Keith, George. *Mr. George Keith's Reasons for Renouncing Quakerism and Entering into Communion with the Church of England*, London, 1700.

<sup>2</sup> *Conway Letters: The Correspondence of Anne, Viscountess Conway, Henry More, and Their Friends, 1642-1684*, ed. Marjorie Hope Nicolson, New Haven, 1930, p. 413.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 323.

relationship so agreeable that the few days he had allowed for his visit to Ragley Hall extended themselves to the nine remaining years of Lady Conway's life. Except for a few brief journeys to Germany he remained at her side, helping her through her last hours, and finally planning and making that curious lead and glass coffin which would permit her husband to look upon her face when he should return from Ireland.

The record of the steps by which physician and patient approached the Quaker experience are well documented in the letters which passed between the Countess, her husband, and her friend Henry More of Cambridge.<sup>1</sup> Lady Conway, writing to More from Ragley Hall on 29th November, 1675, suggested the initial prejudice which must have been overcome by members of England's upper classes as they regarded the despised sect.

I am glad that you had an opportunity so free and full a converse with several of the Quakers, when you were in London, by which means you will be able to give a better judgment of their principles and practices, than you do upon the reports of others, who either through prejudice or ignorance had doubtlessly misrepresented them to you. The reading of their books lately had in a great measure freed me from former prejudicate opinions, but their conversation doth much more to reconcile me to them.<sup>2</sup>

A postscript to this letter reports Van Helmont's situation.

Monsieur Van Helmont is growne a very religious churchman; he goes every Sunday to the Quaker's meetings.<sup>3</sup>

In his answer to Lady Anne's letter Henry More, expressing his concern over the drift away from orthodoxy, could not forego the role of adviser.

And though Monsieur Van Helmont go to their meetings, yett I would advize him by all means to abstain from using their garb in Hall or speech.<sup>4</sup>

To this reasonable counsel Lady Conway replied,

Neither is it true you heard reported that Monsieur Van Helmont has Quaker meetings here though he continues a frequenter of their meetings but has not altered either his garb or his language.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Conway Letters*, ed. Marjorie Hope Nicolson.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 407.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 409.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 415.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 420.

From these cautious beginnings in 1675 the Countess and her physician moved to what we may regard as full acceptance of Quaker doctrine and practice. The extent of their devotion to the new religion is indicated by Lord Conway's somewhat bitter letter of 28th December, 1677, to his brother-in-law, Sir George Rawdon, who had asked the Conways to accept into their home his motherless daughter. Lord Conway regretted that he could not welcome his niece to Ragley.

In my family all the women about my wife and most of the rest [of the servants] are Quakers and Monsieur Van Helmont is governor of that flock, an unpleasing sort of people, silent, sullen, and of a removed conversation.<sup>1</sup>

The currently accepted belief that Lady Conway and Van Helmont became Quakers has been based upon items in the Conway letters, upon the references by George Fox in his journal to his visits at Ragley Hall,<sup>2</sup> and upon the record of Lady Conway's contribution toward the building of the Quaker Meeting House at Alcester.<sup>3</sup>

The period being earlier than the establishment of any formally recorded membership among Friends we are dependent upon other evidence of active association.

New evidence of Van Helmont's relations with the Quakers is contained in the account book of the Women's Box Meeting, 1669-1749,<sup>4</sup> a Quaker charity managed by women for the relief of distressed Friends in London.<sup>5</sup>

The accounts of the Box Meeting record small transactions for the early years after its foundation in 1659. As the fund grew its work became known in the Quaker community, and so well endowed did the fund gradually become that it took on the function of a bank, making loans, accepting notes and bonds. In 1674 William Penn borrowed £300 under his bond, repaying the amount four years later.

<sup>1</sup> *Conway Letters*, p. 439. Lord Conway's opinion of the Quakers did not change. Writing a year later from Ireland, he declared, "I find them to be a senseless, wilful, ridiculous generation of people, rather to be pitied than envied." *Ibid.*, p. 274.

<sup>2</sup> *The Journal of George Fox*, ed. John L. Nickalls (Cambridge, 1952), p. 729.

<sup>3</sup> *Warwick County Records Proceedings in Quarter Sessions*, Vol. VIII, cxvi.

<sup>4</sup> The MS. is listed in the Library of the Society of Friends, London, as *Account Book of Women's Box Meeting*, 1669-1749, No. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Edwards, Irene, "The Women Friends of London," *Journal of Friends' Historical Society*, 1955, Vol. 47, No. 1.

The Box Meeting Fund was by the year of Lady Conway's death, 1679, so well known among the Quakers that Van Helmont was moved to contribute to it part of his legacy from the countess. The MS. entry under date of 3rd April, 1679, lists.

Received of Thomas Rudger of Lady Conaways legacy paid by Van Helmont £10<sup>1</sup>

This entry establishes two interesting new facts about Van Helmont. The first is the revelation of his attitude toward the legacy left him by the woman whose long friendship had given him the most settled and serene years of his life. The will of Lady Conway<sup>1</sup> does not list any legacy to the Quakers. All the legacies listed are left to specified persons except one bequeathed to the poor of Alcester. Van Helmont was to receive £300, and it is doubtless from this bequest that he made the contribution to the Box Meeting Fund, rather in memory of Lady Anne than as a payment requested by her. The payment and the wording of the entry which records it indicate Van Helmont's feeling that the Quaker experience had been deeply felt by Lady Anne.

A second point of interest in this entry is the fact that Van Helmont made the payment by the hand of Thomas Rudger or Rudyard, of Lombard Street, lawyer, author, influential Quaker, who in 1680 was to be one of the nine purchasers from the trustees of Sir George Carteret of the lands called "East New Jersey in North America."<sup>2</sup> Rudyard's name appears frequently in the records of the Court of King's Bench; he was especially active as legal counsellor and defender of Quakers from August, 1674, until his departure for America in 1682.<sup>3</sup> In the year when he appears to have acted as Van Helmont's agent in making the payment to the Box Meeting Fund, he was actively engaged in a "pamphlet war" with the Baptists.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Prerogative Court of Canterbury*, 53 King, Somerset House.

<sup>2</sup> "East New Jersey, 1682," *Journal of the Friends' Historical Society*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1916. Also, "Letter of George Fox to William Penn," 13th November, 1678, *Journal of the Friends' Historical Society*, Vol. 11, No. 1, January, 1914. Rudyard is listed as author of ten books in Joseph Smith, *A Catalogue of Friends' Books*, Vol. II, p. 516.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred W. Braithwaite, "Thomas Rudyard, Early Friends' Oracle of Law," Supplement No. 27, *Journal of the Friends' Historical Society*, 1956, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> C. E. Whiting, *Studies in English Puritanism, 1660-1688*, 1931, pp. 167-9.

A second item in the Box Meeting account book relating to Van Helmont indicates not only his connection with the Quakers but also the extraordinary financial success and security achieved by the Box Meeting Fund. The item is entered as of 1st September, 1679.

Reced of Francis Van Helmont £110 for the consideration thereof to pay him £11 per year during his life if he demands.<sup>1</sup>

This entry, made six months after Lady Conway's death, indicates that Van Helmont had received the full amount of the £300 which had been bequeathed to him and that he had probably taken residence in London. This payment is obviously to be regarded as an investment of the annuity type. Van Helmont's selection of the Box Meeting Fund as depository indicates the reputation for solidity and security which the fund enjoyed in the twentieth year of its existence.

Three years later Van Helmont withdrew his money; there is no indication of his purpose. We can only surmise that, feeling himself rootless in England after Lady Anne's death, he had returned to the continent in the autumn of 1679 and thought that his money might be better invested in a continental fund. Under date of 9th September, 1682, the Box Meeting treasurer listed the transaction.

Paid Van Helmett his £110 againe recd in 1659 110.00.00<sup>2</sup>

The treasurer who set down this item was in error in regard to the date of Van Helmont's earlier deposit. In the MS. the figure 1659 is very legibly written, an apparent slip-of-the-pen for 1679. Obviously "his £110 againe" can refer only to the item described above which records the amount paid to the fund by Van Helmont in 1679.

The importance of the item, in spite of the obvious error in date of reference for the original payment of Van Helmont's £110.00, lies in the precision with which it enables us to identify him upon a new evidence with the practice as well as to the philosophy of the Quakers.

These transactions may be regarded as supporting evidence for the statement, hitherto based only upon the Conway papers, Fox's Journal and Warwick County Records, that Van Helmont and Lady Anne, Viscountess Conway, regarded themselves as true Quakers. The ageing physician

<sup>1</sup> Box Meeting MS. p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Box Meeting MS. p. 15.

was evidently so deeply integrated with the Quaker ways of thought that use of the Box Meeting Fund was a natural and logical step when he wished to memorialize Lady Anne and when he planned for the financial security of his remaining years.

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*The Quakers and Politics, 1652-1660.* By W. Alan Cole. A Cambridge University Ph.D. thesis, presented in June, 1955. Pp. 349. Unpublished typescript.

Until recently there has been little detailed study of the political standpoint of the early Friends, and even less of their political activities; and many historians still regard the Quaker movement as essentially non-political.

In this essay, however (which is available in typescript in the library at Friends House) the author shows that throughout the Commonwealth period Friends took a keen interest in the course of political events. He dismisses the charge that Friends were ever seriously implicated in political intrigues and plots as without foundation. But his central thesis is that their comparative aloofness from political activities was due neither to indifference nor even to pacifism, but to political circumstances, to the growing conflict between the interests of property and radical demands for further reform in Church and State which characterized the years after the civil wars.

During the Protectorate, Friends were driven into isolation by religious persecution, by their expulsion from civil and military offices and the proposal to make Cromwell king; and they warned the Protector that by relying on conservative interests at the expense of his former friends he was undermining the basis of his power and paving the way for a Restoration. After Cromwell's death, on the other hand, the situation temporarily improved, and the author tells in detail the little known story of Quaker activities during the year of anarchy, 1659. In these critical months, leading Friends frequently indicated their willingness to co-operate with other groups in promoting the reforms by which alone they believed the Commonwealth might yet be established in peace. But when instead the rulers of the Commonwealth preferred to recall the King, their disillusion with other parties was complete. Hence, the author concludes, it was at this time that the main body of Friends came to a pacifist and politically neutral position, strengthened by their conviction that the moral structure of history must ultimately ensure their toleration by a hostile world.

Although the writer consulted the main manuscript collections at Friends House, most of the less familiar evidence on which his account is based was taken from the innumerable Quaker tracts published in the Commonwealth period. The work includes a bibliography and index, and there is also an appendix dealing with the social origins of the early Friends, based on the occupational data in the Quaker registers of birth, marriages and deaths.