

James Nayler's "Last Words"

THE revision of the Book of Discipline of London Yearly Meeting, at present in progress, raises once more the long-discussed question of the authenticity and accuracy of the last Testimony of James Nayler (or Naylor, or Nailer, or Nailor—all spellings being equally correct). As printed in *Christian Life, Faith and Thought* (p. 16, reprint of 1942 or later) the passage has a composite source. The first paragraph is taken from Nayler's *Works*, 1716 (p. 696) with the omission of the initials J.N. which there complete it. The second paragraph: "Thou wast with me when I fled from the face of mine enemies. . . . Let this be written for those that come after. Praise the Lord. J.N." comes from a tract issued by Robert Rich, the merchant who supported Nayler through the ordeal of his branding and other punishments, the dog that licked the sores of Lazarus, "that poor Ass . . . reproving and withstanding this wrathful, bitter, persecuting Spirit" as he called himself. Rich's version also contains the first paragraph exactly as in the *Works*. So far as we know, it was first published in *Hidden Things brought to Light, or the Discord of the Grand Quakers among themselves discovered &c.* in 1678. Rich was then in Barbados; he had been there since 1659. Consequently he was out of England in October, 1660 when Nayler died; and perhaps that is why he headed the Testimony: "A Letter from James Nayler by which the then present state of his soul is represented." He was disowned, although he did not accept the disownment, and continued to attend Meeting and moved among Friends in the West Indies and in London, when he returned in 1679 and died in the same year. He would have been pleased with his eventual rehabilitation by London Yearly Meeting, by the acceptance of his text in the 1922 edition of our *Discipline*.

But suspicion has rested on more than Rich's accuracy; it was long questioned whether James Nayler spoke *any* of these words; whether they were not rather "a traditional speech handed down for use on pious deathbeds" (Mabel Brailsford). The late date of publication of Nayler's *Works*, fifty-six years after his death, due to the scandals associated

with his name, helped doubt to grow. When Robert Bridges, for instance, spread the fame of the passage by quoting it in his anthology *The Spirit of Man* (1916), he added a note saying "It seems to rely on oral tradition." Mabel Brailsford, in defending the authenticity of the passage in an appendix to her book *A Quaker from Cromwell's Army* (1927, p. 196) could point to a garbled variation by John Pennyman in 1703 and relied on the authority of George Whitehead (who edited the *Works*) and William Sewel. But in 1660 Whitehead was only 21, and Sewel 6 years old, and in Holland.

The discussion has been continued in the pages of this *Journal*, notably by L. Hugh Doncaster (1949, pp. 3-4, with additional notes from Geoffrey Nuttall, 1950, p. 91, and 1953, p. 46). The discussion has, however, been hampered by the absence (which William Charles Braithwaite long ago lamented) of any complete census or accurate text of Nayler's tracts. Geoffrey Nuttall's last note carried the printing of the passage almost within hailing distance of Nayler's deathbed by pointing to a version printed in 1664. But in Friends House Library there are at least 17 copies (and probably more) of the shorter version of the "Last Words," printed in 1660, within months and perhaps weeks of Nayler's death. It is now time to set out systematically what we know; more may yet be added. All the copies found, with the two exceptions noted below (items 4 and 9), contain the shorter, single paragraph version; and throughout there are no significant variations in its text, except for the accidental dropping of a phrase noted by Hugh Doncaster in 1949. But there are several new points of interest.

1. 1660 Printed on the last page of an 8-page tract:

To all the Dearly Beloved People of God, Mercy and Peace.

COLLATION: The title-paper, beginning "There is nothing dear and precious to me in this World, but God's truth" occupies pp. 1-3: p. 4 "A Testimony to Christ Jesus"; pp. 5-7 "J.N.s Answer to the Fanatick History In Relation to himself"; and p. 8 (text substantially as in *Works*, 1716) followed by the imprint: *London, Printed in the Year 1660.*

SURVEY OF COPIES AT FRIENDS HOUSE: Of this paper (Smith II, 227) one loose copy is in the Thompson Tracts (Box 50) and 15 others lie in a single volume (Tracts XVIII) which is made up entirely of substantial

numbers of 5 Nayler tracts (as many as 24 in one instance) interleaved with copies of a "ghost" title page: *Several Papers of Confessions, Prayer and Praise: by James Naylor: Concerning his Fall and Restoration. London, Printed in the Year 1659.* It seems that Friends had the intention (apparently not carried out, as no perfect copy of such a collection is known) of publishing a volume of Nayler's papers; the project was delayed until the *Works* of 1716. I surmise that the remaining stock of these tracts lay in the Clerk's office until at last they were bound together; a stern note on the fly-leaf: "This volume to be broken up" has fortunately gone unheeded.

In 10 of these 16 copies, the *Last Words* are headed simply: "Another Paper added" the word *added* suggests that the tract was already in preparation; indeed I believe that copies may exist in which p. 8 is *blank*. It may be that having set up and begun the run, it occurred to those concerned that a more explanatory heading would add extra weight; and they stopped the press to insert (in 6 of these existing copies) the familiar rubric: "The following words were deliver'd by James Naylor, about Two Hours before his departure out of this Life; several Friends being present." It is possible, though I think much less likely, that their rubric was questioned and the innocuous heading substituted. It is certain, at least, that all the copies are of the same printing, for example in the sentence "In God alone it can rejoice" the G of God is broken in the same way throughout. In whatever order, or for whatever reason, these changes were made, they imply haste.

2. 1660 Printed on the last page of a 4-page tract: *J.N.s Answer to the Fanatick History &c.* which is (in fact) the second half of the tract above, issued with separate pagination, 1-4; the *Last Words* identical, with the same broken G. The only copy of this I have seen has the heading "Another paper added".
3. 1664 (Noted by Nuttall) printed at the end of *What the Possession of the Living Faith is &c.* This tract was originally issued in 1659 (of course without the "Last Words"). In 1664 they appear on the last, unnumbered, page (following 84) without heading of any kind, "There is a spirit that I feel . . ." the page being completed by an errata list referring to the pamphlet. (Smith II 231. Copies in Thompson Tracts Box 50; Tract Vol. 44.) Again the unnumbered page, absence of heading, and errata suggest an afterthought or "fill-up".
4. 1678 (First appearance of the longer version, discussed above) in Robert Rich, *Hidden Things brought to Light.*

5. Broadside, undated; a quarto page, verso blank.
The shorter version nicely printed in large type, without heading, comment, or imprint; authorship only to be identified by the initials J.N. (Copies in Thompson Tracts Box 50; Tract Vol. 44.)
6. 1703 Garbled version (Nayler not referred to by name) in John Pennyman's *Short Account of his Life* (2nd edn., p. 68), cited by Brailsford and Doncaster, neither of whom notes that Pennyman is *intentionally* parodying, and not merely misquoting (he was a disgruntled and dis-owned Friend). Unless the passage were already famous, the parody would be pointless.
7. 1716 *A Collection of Sundry Books, Epistles, and Papers, &c.* (The authorized collected *Works*) p. 696. Headed: "His Last Testimony, said to be delivered by him about two Hours before his Departure out of this Life; several Friends being present" adapted from 1, and not (as Brailsford supposed) inserted editorially by George Whitehead.
8. 1717 In Dutch, in the first edition of Sewel's *History*. This edition contains an appendix on Nayler, and the passage (pp. 12-13; how beautiful it looks in Dutch!) is described as his last pronouncement made "an hour or two" before his death: "en een uur of twee zynen dood sprak hy in't byzyn van verscheydene getuygen deeze woorden. . . . Dit was Naylors laaste reede." Sewel's treatment of Nayler was considered too lenient, and Friends would not sanction an English translation until it was modified; hence in the English we get: "This was J. Nayler's last testimony, or dying words; and thus he gave proof, that though he had erred, yet with great confidence he hoped for a happy resurrection."
9. 1719 (Second known appearance of the longer version, as in Rich, in) *Memoirs of the Life, Ministry, Trial and Sufferings of that very eminent person James Nailor &c.* (Smith II, 232). The anonymous author describes himself as not a Quaker, but he is strongly "Naylerite" and his heading follows that of Rich: "A Letter from James Nailor, by which the blessed State of his Soul, is represented.'
10. 1728 Shorter version, in *How sin is Strengthened, and how it may be overcome.* (Smith II, 231.)

To this list it is perhaps worth adding the seventeenth-century manuscript copy at Friends House (Dimsdale 1) which is of the single paragraph, and agrees with the text in the *Works*.

Points worth noting are these:

(a) Whereas the 1716 edition cautiously heads "His Last Testimony, *said to be* delivered . . ." the 1660 text says specifically "The following words *were deliver'd* . . ." and surely we may take this as authentic.

(b) Rich's copy ends "let this be written for those that come after. Praise the Lord." If authentic, the instruction was presumably taken literally and the testimony written down; possibly in time to be read over to the dying man, or even initialled by him.

(c) Reasons for omitting the second paragraph might be accidental—e.g. the two statements might have been made at different times during his last hours, and recorded by different Friends at his bedside. But they might also be theological. Orthodox Friends might smell a whiff of Nayler's old pride, particularly in the sentence: "God hid me and took care of me until he brought me forth a rock which cannot be moved" especially if the word *rock* had for them a sinister smack of the papal claims for Peter.

(d) Robert Rich must have been dependent on a written account of Nayler's end. But there are two reasons to trust him: the first, his persistent loyalty; the second, the *shape* of the statement as he gives it. The doubters who spoke of a "traditional deathbed speech" were not entirely wrong. Such a speech was expected to turn at the end from the *creature* to the *creator* (compare William Dewsbury's end: ". . . so concluded in Prayers to the Lord. . . .") Rich's version does this; the shorter version, though more unified, does not. I hope Friends may conclude to give Rich his due, and keep the whole.

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