

## Letters of William Penn and Richard Baxter

**A**N encounter between the great Quaker, William Penn, and the equally prominent Puritan, Richard Baxter, is of sufficient importance to make it worth while to clear up some of the mystery surrounding it.

It appears that in 1675 Baxter visited Rickmansworth for a few weeks, and his spirit was provoked within him, as he beheld the countryside full of Quakers, foremost amongst them being Penn. So he challenged Penn to a debate which took place on 5th October. Then followed a number of letters, on the strength of which Thomas Clarkson in his *Memoirs of . . . Penn*, 1849, alludes to one conference only, F. J. Powicke, in his book on *Baxter under the Cross*, 1927, reports two, of which that on 5th October was the first.

In the *Collection of the Works of William Penn*, 1726, five letters are printed, all of them from Penn to Baxter. In the *Monthly Repository* for 1823 (xviii, pp. 137 ff. and pp. 193 ff.) five letters are printed from the Baxter letters in Dr. Williams's Library, one of them being a letter from Baxter to Penn.

A recent effort at re-cataloguing the Baxter MSS. in Dr. Williams's Library has brought to light another letter from Baxter to Penn, which has not been previously printed or used. There is in the collection also yet another letter (from Baxter to Penn) not hitherto printed, without name or date, which was identified by W. H. Black (who prepared the nineteenth-century catalogue of MSS. in the Library).

Reviewing all this material it is possible to establish the true sequence of the letters, as follows:

	Writer	Dr. Williams's Library MS. Letters	<i>Monthly Repository</i> Vol. xviii	<i>Penn's Works</i> Vol. I
(1) October 6th	Penn ..	ii. 299	Letter I (p. 138)	Third letter (p. 171-2)
(2) October 6th	Baxter..	ii. 113	Suppt. Letter (p. 193-5)	—
(3) [October 8th]	Penn ..	ii. 111	Suppt. Letter (p. 195-8)	Fifth letter (p. 173-6)

(4) October 11th	Penn ..	—	—	First letter (p. 170-1)
(5) [October 10th] <sup>1</sup>	Baxter	vi. 185	—	—
(6) October 11th	Penn ..	ii. 303	Letter II (p. 139-40)	Second letter (p. 171)
(7) [        ]	Baxter..	"Treatises" Nos. 215 & 192		—

Letter (1) challenges Baxter to a further debate on 7th October. In Letter (2) Baxter does not refuse a conference but says "not at your appointed time nor at your rates." He then runs off into a long and querulous argumentation. In Letter (3) Penn calls letter (2) "an evasion of meeting" and "a repetition of thy old refuted clamours, and both wrapped up in terms fit for the devil." He has a great many other stinging rejoinders to make. In Letter (4) Penn says "I have waited for an answer, but find none" and runs on to add "what I omitted in my last." Letter (5), which is, of course, only Baxter's copy of what he sent, is without date as we have it, but Penn speaks of it in Letter (6) as dated 10th October, though he did not receive it until late on 11th October. In it Baxter tells Penn that "some change in my affairs" enables him to offer a conference on Tuesday. Letter (6) from Penn Begins "I have received a letter from thee of the 10th inst. just now, being the 11th, and about six at night" and says that the late delivery "looks like a design". He cannot accept Tuesday but offers "the next 6th day at soonest, vulgarly Friday." If there was a design on Baxter's part and he sent off Letter (5) belatedly on 11th October (with the wrong date 10th October) the reason may have been that since receiving Letter (3), for an answer to which Penn was so impatient, Baxter had been engaged in writing the enormous epistle (7), which runs to some 13 foolscap sheets closely written on both side. Was it ever sent? Only its re-discovery amongst letters received by Penn could prove that it was. Or was Baxter content to let the letter, dated "10th", a very cross and ungracious letter, be his last contribution to the correspondence? We do not know.

There is yet one more letter, from Penn to Baxter, preserved in the Baxter letters in Dr. Williams's Library as ii. 301 (printed in *Monthly Repository* as Letter III (p. 139-40) and in the *Works* as the fourth Letter (p. 172-3). It is this letter that has caused most confusion. It has been taken for the last of

<sup>1</sup> The sequence is that of delivery.

the series, and, on the strength of it, the transcriber in the *Monthly Repository* and Powicke have assumed that a second conference (projected in the other letters) took place soon after 11th October, for in it Penn, after speaking of a paper put into his hands at parting, says "the civility and kindness I received from thee at our conference have prevailed with me to overlook the asperity of it [the paper]. This inspired Powicke to rejoice in a happy ending. While the first conference had, he says "been marked by much violent speech on both sides, the second was marked by restraint, and ended in peace. From what Penn wrote, this happy change was due to Baxter who, instead of scorn and bitterness exhibited 'civility and kindness.' " He adds somewhat obscurely "There were reasons for the change in Baxter, which did him honour." What these reasons were he does not say and he does not say because he did not know; all he knew was that they must have been honourable to his hero. But he could not have known of any such reasons because unfortunately there was no such "happy ending"; and, so far as the evidence goes, no second conference. The letter on which so much was built was not written sometime after 11th October but at some date before the previous March.

The approximate date of the letter can be fixed by an allusion at the latter end of it in which Penn writes: "if the civility and kindness of our late meeting had not been with some more than ordinary satisfaction remembered by me, I had made more use of thy name . . . in my late Answer to the Epistle." The allusion here is to Penn's *A just rebuke to one and twenty learned . . . divines . . . being an answer to an abusive epistle*, 1674. From the *Term Catalogue* we may conclude that this pamphlet appeared in January, 1675, at latest. The conference alluded to must have been at a still earlier date.

Penn also alludes to a paper "it pleased thee to put into my hands at parting." If this letter had really been the last of the series of October, 1675, it would have been natural to suppose that the lengthy epistle (Letter (7), above) was the "paper" alluded to. But the subjects in the letter and the "paper" (or epistle) do not correspond. But there is another paper amongst the Baxter "Treatises" in Dr. Williams's Library (No. 85) which so closely corresponds to the answers in Penn's letter that we may fairly assume that it was the

paper which Baxter handed to Penn. Incidentally it permits us to identify an anonymous "Socinian", mentioned in Penn's letter, as Henry Hedworth.

Little more needs to be said except that Penn was involved in two conferences in 1674 mentioned in pamphlets of that year of which particulars will be found in Joseph Smith's Quaker and Anti-Quaker bibliographies under William Penn and John Faldo. The letter just considered may be evidence of yet a third conference in that series in which Baxter played some part. But the development of that piece of history must be left to others. It may also be worth adding that amongst the Baxter "Treatises" (No. 41) in Dr. Williams's Library is a report of a debate between Baxter and Penn, but this debate is presumably that held on 5th October, 1675.

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