

## From Radicalism to Quakerism: Gerrard Winstanley and Friends

EARLY Friends were suspected of being many things—Franciscan friars, Jesuits, Fifth-Monarchy men, Levellers, and sometimes an unlikely combination of these. Several of their earliest pamphleteering adversaries exposed Friends' supposed connection with the radical political views of the Levellers. In 1678, Thomas Comber, Dean of Durham, published an even more startling discovery. The Quakers, he thought, had derived their ideas from the communist writer Gerrard Winstanley. Consequently, repression of Quakerism was not only a service to God, but a preservative of every man in his property.<sup>1</sup>

Modern writers, too, have discussed the influence of the Levellers and Diggers on the Quaker movement.<sup>2</sup> The striking similarities between Gerrard Winstanley's ideas and those of Friends have long been remarked. In his early writings Winstanley charged the ecclesiastical power with: setting up the teaching of men against the teaching of the spirit; teaching according to books and authorities rather than the teaching of the indwelling God; upholding forms and customs against the communion of saints; commending observance of days against the indwelling of Christ in the soul; and practising corrupt forms of baptism, communion, and the maintenance of ministers against Christ's clear teaching about these matters.<sup>3</sup> You are not to be saved, he argued, by believing that a man lived and died long ago at Jerusalem, but by the power of the spirit within you treading down all unrighteousness of the flesh. Neither are you to look for God in a place of glory beyond the sun, but within yourself and in every man.<sup>4</sup>

His doctrine of scriptural authority, often the surest touchstone for judging religious affiliation, is the same as

<sup>1</sup> *Christianity No Enthusiasm* (1678).

<sup>2</sup> For example, Emilia Fogelklou, *James Nayler: The Rebel Saint* (1931), pp. 22-23.

<sup>3</sup> *The Breaking of the Day of God* (1648), as paraphrased in *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley, with an Appendix of Documents Relating to the Digger Movement*, edited by George H. Sabine (1941), p. 89.

<sup>4</sup> *The Saints Paradise* (1648?), as paraphrased in Sabine, p. 96.

that professed by Friends. In answer to the question, Are not the Scriptures the truths of God? he replied:

I shall demand of you how you know that these Scriptures are the word of God, in the sense you call them, but [by] the testimony of the spirit within your selves; I say, there is no way to know but by the spirit himself; seeing there are so many expositions upon them, which without doubt hath varied the copies.<sup>1</sup>

W. C. Braithwaite, however, concluded that the two men [Winstanley and Fox] seem to be independent products of the peculiar social and spiritual climate of the age; and it is doubtful if Winstanley ever influenced Fox or associated with Friends.<sup>2</sup>

The question of influence will always be arguable; but that of personal association can more easily be settled. It has always been known that John Lilburne, the Leveller, became a Quaker, for of course he wrote a book about it: *The Resurrection of John Lilburne, Now a Prisoner in Dover Castle, Declared* (1656). Now there has been discovered in Friends' death registers an entry reporting the death and burial of a Gerrard Winstanley.

The register kept by the Westminster Monthly Meeting records on 10th September, 1676 the death of Gerrard Winstanley, corn-chandler, living in the parish of (St.) Giles in the Field, Bloomsbury. Winstanley was buried in Long Acre burying ground; his age is given as about 62. The burials of two sons of his are also recorded—Gerrard Winstanley, who died 20th August, 1683, aged about 18, and Clement Winstanley, who died 2nd October, 1684, aged about 14. The two boys are mentioned as sons-in-law (presumably stepsons) to one Giles Hilbury (or possibly Tichbury).<sup>3</sup>

Was this *the* Gerrard Winstanley? So little is known of his later life that positive identification is beyond our reach. Furthermore, there is no corroborative evidence from Quaker sources. Winstanley is not mentioned in the earliest minute book of Westminster Monthly Meeting, which begins in 1674 (and goes to 1689). I have not been able to find any reference to him in the records of sufferings. A search of the London probate registries failed to discover a will or letters of

<sup>1</sup> *Truth Lifting up its head Above Scandals* (1649) in Sabine, pp. 127-28.

<sup>2</sup> *The Second Period of Quakerism*, p. 557.

<sup>3</sup> Friends' registers record the marriage of Elizabeth Winstanley, widow of Jarret Winstanley and daughter of Gabriel Stanley, of the parish of Giles in the Fields, to Giles Tutchbury (Tutchberry), cooper, of the parish of Newington Butts (son of Giles Tutchbery, of Oxfordshire), at Bull & Mouth, London, 15.1.1680 (15 March 1681).

administration.<sup>1</sup> But what little else we know about Winstanley's life is not inconsistent with his being the Quaker corn-chandler who died in 1676.

He was certainly born in Lancashire, as we know from his first published book, *The Myserie of God* (1648). An entry in the Wigan parish register for 10th July, 1609, showing the baptism of "Gerrard, son of Edward Winstanlie" may relate to him. He came to London and became a tradesman and freeman of the city, but suffered bankruptcy during the early years of the civil war and had to retire to the country. There is a record in the London marriage licenses in the Bishop of London's Register of the marriage 28th September, 1640, of a Jerrard Winstanley to one Susan King.<sup>2</sup>

Winstanley published his first pamphlet, a theological treatise, in 1648. His thought soon turned to economics, and at once he showed an unsettling willingness to live as he preached. He and his followers commenced the cultivation of St. George's Hill, in the parishes of Walton-upon-Thames and Cobham, Surrey, on 1st April, 1649. The local magnates resorted to both legal and illegal violence to disperse the Diggers and trample down their crops. Winstanley, refusing to fee a lawyer in his defence, resorted instead to the public press, without effect. In 1652, just after the settlement of the legal matters pending against him, he published his last pamphlet.

The next time the name of Winstanley has been discovered is October, 1660, this time appended to a petition in Chancery. There seems little doubt that this action was brought by the former Digger, for the details of his London career are consonant with the incidental remarks in his writings, and he describes himself as a gentleman living in Cobham, Surrey (the site of the Diggings). The petition arose out of Winstanley's financial difficulties; for "about the beginning of Aprill, 1641, your Orator then being a Cittizen of London" he had had "some trading w<sup>th</sup> Richard Alsworth, late citizen . . . of London, for fustians, dimities

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to the assistance of Mr. A. H. Hall, librarian of the Guildhall, and Miss E. D. Mercer, Middlesex County archivist, in searching for the will. I should also like to thank Professor W. K. Jordan of Harvard, for his advice on the preparation of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> These details are taken from Sabine's introduction to his edition of Winstanley's works. The introduction contains the most complete account of Winstanley's life that has appeared.

and lynnin cloth, and such like comodities, w<sup>ch</sup> trading continued for the space of twoe or three yeres.”<sup>1</sup> In 1643, because of the badness of the times, he left off trading altogether, and settled with all his creditors. Although (he claimed) he had paid £434 to Richard Alsworth, and had specifically paid him £42 and a piece of blue cloth worth £9 to redeem a bond of £50, he was being harassed by the executors of Richard Alsworth. Winstanley asked that the executors be subpoenaed to bring into court the account books of Richard Alsworth, to demonstrate that he had in fact paid all his obligations.

From the sums mentioned it is obvious that Winstanley was more than a petty tradesman; his total obligations must have run into thousands of pounds. Since the plain speech is not used in the petition, and since Friends did not ordinarily approve of actions in Chancery, it seems likely that Winstanley was not a Quaker in 1660.<sup>2</sup>

No corroborating evidence ties together the entries of birth, marriage, and death in the way that this petition agrees with the autobiographical bits in Winstanley's writings. But the age at death given in the death register fits the outline of Winstanley's life.<sup>3</sup> And the fact that Mr. C. W. Winstanley, in the course of his (presumably genealogical) researches, could unearth only two references to Gerrard Winstanley in London makes it appear unlikely that there was more than one person of that name. This is perhaps a place for Occam's razor; Winstanleys ought not to be unduly multiplied.

Although the similarities between Winstanley's thought and Quaker teachings would make it appear possible that he joined Friends, Quakerism gave a conservative twist to

<sup>1</sup> The petition is C. 9/412/269 in Reynardson's Division, Chancery Proceedings, Public Record Office. I am grateful to Mr. C. W. Berry for having a photostatic copy made for me. This reference was discovered by a Mr. C. W. Winstanley, who also found the marriage license (Sabine, p. 6).

<sup>2</sup> Winstanley in his Digger writings was no great friend to the law, for that matter: “. . . for truly Attourneys are such neat workmen, that they can turn a Cause which way those that have the biggest purse will have them . . . *England* is a Prison; the variety of subtilties in the Laws preserved by the Sword, are bolts, bars, and doors of the prison; the Lawyers are the Jaylors, and poor men are the prisoners . . . Woe to you Lawyers, for your trade is the bane and miserie of the world; your power is the only power that hinders Christ from rising . . .” *A New-Yeers Gift for the Parliament and Armie* (1650) in Sabine, pp. 360-62. See also *A Watch-Word to the City of London and the Armie* (1649) in Sabine, p. 320.

<sup>3</sup> Although, if he died aged 62 in 1676, it would mean he was born about 1614, not 1609 as in the Wigan parish register.

his career. This is indicated in his final choice of a trade, that of corn-chandler. Winstanley the prophet had cried out:

every one shall put to their hands to till the earth, and bring up cattle, and the blessing of the earth shall be common to all; when a man hath need of any corn for cattle, take from the next store-house he meets with. *Act.* 4. 32. There shall be no buying nor selling, no fairs nor markets.<sup>1</sup>

“All buying and selling of Land, and the fruits of the earth”, he wrote, “is the art of cheating one another, is but the actings of Mankind in darknesse, under the power of the fall . . .”<sup>2</sup>

Friends’ critique of economic life was far less radical. The only trades they objected to were lace-making and preaching. Anyone else, even a distiller, could serve the Lord acceptably in his calling so long as he was honest and “at a word” in his dealings, and avoided extending his trade beyond his means. If Winstanley as corn-chandler is more astonishing than Winstanley as Quaker, it is only because his new occupation dramatizes the social conservatism entailed in his conversion.

It would seem that both Lilburne and Winstanley gave up their agitating before or when they became Friends. Perhaps it would be more appropriate for historians to study the influence of Quakerism on the Diggers and Levellers, rather than the reverse. Friends’ records are so complete that Levellers and Diggers could probably be identified if they later became Friends. If many followed the path of Lilburne and Winstanley, the role of Quakerism as a conservative political influence may have been considerable. It would be ironical if the Quaker movement, so much persecuted as subversive, in fact contributed to the political stability, such as it was, of Oliver’s Protectorate. But if Lilburne and Winstanley stopped their agitation for social reform when they joined Friends, may not many who would have heard their message have done the same? Was it pure coincidence that the rise of Quakerism so closely succeeded the collapse of the Leveller impulse?

Elie Halevy’s famous thesis contended that the Methodist revival deflected the English working classes from the support of a social revolution like that in France. The impact of Quakerism on English society, at least during the decade of

<sup>1</sup> *The New Law of Righteousnes* (1649), in Sabine, p. 184.

<sup>2</sup> *An Humble Request to the Ministers of both Universities and to all Lawyers in every Inns-a-Court* (1650), in Sabine, p. 425.

the Commonwealth, was perhaps as great as that of Wesley and Whitefield. The spiritual pilgrimage of Lilburne and Winstanley may explain why the English propertied classes won so easy a victory over the spectre of radicalism.

RICHARD T. VANN

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*Somerset in manuscript*, a selection from the records preserved in the Somerset Record Office, published by the Records Committee, Somerset County Council, June 1959, includes notes on the main archive groups preserved in the Somerset Record Office, with a description of documents selected for exhibition.

Among the Quarter sessions records showing the justices at work is Exhibit 2—The preliminary hearing.

*Quarter Sessions Roll, 1657*. The seventeenth century rolls consist largely of examinations before local Justices. Displayed is an examination of Thomas Salthouse, an early leader of the Quaker movement, who travelled and preached widely in the West Country.

Among business records (from the Dickinson collection) are two Exhibits:

112. The trade of a Bristol merchant, 1734.

*Instructions issued by Graffin Prankard, a Quaker merchant, to his ship's master, 1734*. His activities, as the name of his vessel, "Baltic Merchant", implies, were principally directed to the Baltic ports. However, his trade was sometimes with North America where he had agents in Charleston, South Carolina, from which his principal imports were rice and logwood.

113. Hazards of the sea.

*Letter from a prisoner in Spain, 1740*. On a later trip from South Carolina the "Baltic Merchant" had to face additional risks in that England had declared war on Spain. Within sight of the Scilly Islands she was attacked by a Spanish privateer, and the surviving crew, with passengers, were taken to San Sebastian; from here the Captain was able to get letters through to his kinsman, Prankard, in Bristol.

Other Prankard manuscripts are in Bristol Public Library.

Exhibit 115 is a letter from Edmund Rack and John Collinson (c.1785) soliciting support for the history of Somerset on which they collaborated, and which was issued under Collinson's name after the death of Rack.