

Diggers and Quakers—A Further Note

THE discovery that Gerrard Winstanley probably died a Quaker¹ naturally prompts the question whether other supporters of the short-lived Digger movement may not also have become Friends. Unfortunately the question cannot be answered with complete assurance. The only approach to it is to compile a list of the Diggers, taken largely from the signatories of their manifestoes, and then to compare it with the names of contemporary Quakers in Besse and in the birth, marriage, and death registers of the counties where the Diggers were active.²

The chief difficulty in discovering Diggers who later became Friends is that there is little to identify the Diggers beyond the bare names under their manifestoes. And most of these champions of the commons of England bore names that were exceedingly common.³ Such useful identifications as occupations or places of residence can usually be got from legal references, but for our purposes the law was insufficiently thorough in uprooting the Diggers. Only a few of them were brought before the bench, and even for the 15 who were presented before the Assizes the evidence is disappointing. The indictment, with slightly piquant literalism, describes Gerrard Winstanley and all his colleagues as "labourers" resident in Walton-upon-Thames.⁴ Yet we know that Winstanley had been in the cloth trade in London, on at least a moderate scale, and there is much reason to assume that

¹ *Journal, F.H.S.*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (1959), 41-46.

² These counties are Buckinghamshire, Northamptonshire, London, Middlesex, and Surrey. The manifestoes with their signers can be found in *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley, with an Appendix of Documents relating to the Digger Movement*, edited by George H. Sabine (1941). Most of an unusually tedious search was done by Patricia F. Vann, whose help has been invaluable in preparing this note.

³ This is probably not accidental. Writes Christopher Hill: "The names of Shakespeare's lower-class characters—Snug the joiner, Bottom the weaver, Snout the tinker, Starveling the tailor—are pure Saxon. So are those of the signatories of the Diggers' manifestoes." ("The Norman Yoke," in *Democracy and the Labour Movement: Essays in Honour of Dona Torr* (1954), 24.)

⁴ The indictment is in Home Circuit File 35, Bundle 90 in the Public Record Office. Possibly Winstanley and the other Diggers were also presented before the Quarter Sessions, but the contemporary Quarter Sessions records for Surrey have not survived.

the others had come from other occupations and other parts of the country.

Since we are reduced to searching for a correspondency of names, the only safe statement is a negative one: Diggers did not move *en bloc* into the ranks of Friends. Of 80 names appended to Digger pamphlets or involved in legal proceedings, only 22 can be found also among Friends. These are: Thomas Adams, John Bachilor, John Beechee (or Beachly?), Giles Childe, William Childe, John Dickins, James Hall, Henry Hancocke (or Handcocke), John Harrison, Thomas James, Richard Maidley (or Medley), John Palmer, Edward Parret, William Smith, John Taylor, Richard Taylor, William Taylor, John Webb, John Wilkinson, Gerrard Winstanley, Urian Worthington, and Nathaniel Yates.

Of this group the most probable identifications of Digger and subsequent Quaker would seem to be Winstanley, Giles Child, Medley, Parret, William Taylor, and Worthington. William Taylor is not a distinctive name, but the Quaker William Taylor lived in Walton-upon-Thames, the site of the main Digger effort. Richard Medley is a good deal more distinctive, and it is noteworthy that the Friend Richard Medley, like Winstanley, lived in St. Giles in the Field parish, Bloomsbury. Urian Worthington may with some confidence be identified with the Uriah Worlington who Besse tells us was released from prison in Surrey in 1672, having been arrested at a Friends' meeting.¹

The Quakers Child and Parret—the name also occurs as Perrot and Parrat, with or without the final letter doubled—lived in Amersham, Buckinghamshire, an area where we know there was sympathy for the Diggers. A pamphlet called *A Declaration from the Wel-Affected of the County of Buckingham-shire* (May, 1649) praises the digging up of common lands, and two other Leveller pamphlets, *Light shining in Buckingham-shire* (December, 1648) and *More Light shining in Buckingham-shire* (March 30th, 1649) foreshadow some Digger themes and images.²

It may also be of significance that Parret had aroused the wrath of at least one Buckinghamshire magnate, for

¹ Besse, Joseph, *A Collection of the Sufferings of the People Called Quakers* (1753), I, 699.

² These are re-printed in the appendix to Sabine's edition of Winstanley's works.

his funeral in 1665 was subjected to a quite exceptional indignity. As Besse tells the story (I, 77) Ambrose Bennett, a justice of the peace,

. . . ordered the Persons attending the Funeral to be stopt, struck one of the Bearers with his drawn Sword, and violently threw the Coffin from their Shoulders. The Corps, thus inhumanly treated, was left lying in the Highway.

The result of the incident was that several Friends, including Thomas Ellwood and Isaac Penington, were committed to Aylesbury prison, while the body of Edward Parret was taken

by Force from his Widow, to whom its disposition legally belonged, and buried . . . in the Backside, or as they term it, the unconsecrated Part of the Ground called the *Church-Yard*.

This was the only Quaker funeral ever abused in this fashion in Buckinghamshire, and it appears that Justice Bennett was as much concerned to pay old scores as to make a recon-dite theological point. We can only guess whether these grudges included Parret's activities as an agitator in the days of the Commonwealth.

By rare good fortune we have two pieces of literary evidence about one man who was sympathetic both to the Diggers and to the Quakers. This was Thomas Nottingham of Wellingborough in Northamptonshire. A group there, probably inspired by the example set in Surrey, began to "dig up, manure and sow corn upon the common, and waste ground, called the Bareshanke." Nine of them, publishing a vindication of this undertaking, reported that "some of those rich men amongst us, that have had the greatest profit upon the Common, have freely given us their share in it, as one Mr. John Freeman, Thomas Nottingham and John Clendon, and divers others . . ."¹

Thomas Nottingham showed at least an equal tenderness towards Friends in Wellingborough. In 1655 he was included in a list drawn up by Northamptonshire Friends of men thought suitable to be justices of the peace. He is therein described as "a Man of about 80 pound per annum, and a

¹ *Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, 649-51. This was printed for Giles Calvert, who published many Quaker books.

modderate man hath seven Children and his wife reall freindes.”¹ At some later time he apparently joined Friends, for his burial is recorded among them at Wellingborough on 2nd January, 1670/1.

Such glimpses of long-forgotten Englishmen in obscure dialogue with their consciences are all that the poverty of evidence affords us. Most of our inferences about the relations between Diggers and Friends must still be drawn from the community of ideas in their writings. But the non-literary evidence does warrant our surmising that at least a few Diggers passed also through that profession and into “the people of God called Quakers.”

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¹ Details of this early effort to have “loving” men put in commission of the peace may be found in *Extracts from State Papers Relating to Friends, 1654 to 1672*, edited by Norman Penney (1913), 6-13.