

## Early Quakerism at Newcastle upon Tyne

WILLIAM COATESWORTH

OF early Quakerism at Newcastle not much is known from the usual sources. There is no local report in the *First Publishers of Truth*, 1907 or its supplements in *J.F.H.S.* Fox tells briefly in his *Journal* of visiting the place with Anthony Pearson in 1657, having, he says, visited it once before. Their request of Thomas Ledgerd, an alderman, and others for permission for a meeting—whether a meeting of Friends or a conference with town and church authorities—was not granted. Friends did however get a foothold in Gateshead across the river. All this is recorded in J. W. Steel's *Historical Sketch of the Society of Friends in Newcastle and Gateshead*, 1899.

A fuller record of the efforts to found a meeting is given in George Whitehead's *Christian Progress*, 126-130, referring to a time near that of Fox's visit, and is summarized as follows in W. C. Braithwaite, *Beginnings of Quakerism*, p. 373:

A similar policy [of excluding Friends from the town] was pursued at Newcastle-on-Tyne, where, at the end of 1657, a large room was taken by William Coatsworth, of South Shields, and others; but the mayor and his officers broke up the first meeting, and escorted the Quakers to the "blew stone" on Tyne Bridge, which marked the limits of his jurisdiction, and charged them in the name of the Protector to hold no more meetings at their peril. On a first-day soon after, a meeting was attempted out of doors by the river-side, and the Friends were again dragged off to Tyne Bridge. Then the Guildhall was hired, which was outside the liberty of the town; but Samuel Hammond, one of the authors of *The perfect Pharise under Monkish Holines*, induced the hall-keeper to break his bargain, and the meeting had to be held on the hill-side, also outside the liberty. George Whitehead was there, and spoke for two or three hours, in so loud a voice that he could be heard from the Castle Green, where he was standing, over the Tyne into Gateshead. Coatsworth was so chagrined over the business that "he let in too much grief and trouble of mind, insomuch that it did somewhat discompose him, so that in a hurry"—that is, in agitation of mind—"he took horse to ride to London in all haste to speak to Oliver Cromwell." He was taken ill on the road, and died at Durham, but before his end was "made sensible he had not stood in the cross, nor been so watchful as he ought to have been."

As early as 1653 Newcastle ministers were involved in vigorous anti-Quaker pamphleteering, and also one Thomas Ledgerd (if that is what T. L. in some lost anti-Quaker pamphlets means). Thomas Ledgerd and one of the ministers, Samuel Hammond, are mentioned above. James Nayler and others replied promptly to them, and finally George Fox did so in *The Great Mystery of the Great Whore Unfolded*, 1659, pp. 74, 182, 227, 254, 257.

Whitehead puts Coatesworth's death at Durham, where his parents-in-law lived, on 8th of 11 Month, 1657 [January, 1658]. He was thus one of the most short-lived of the early zealous converts.<sup>1</sup> The allusions to him in the Swarthmore MSS (i. 276, 284; iv. 25, 27) are all in 1656, and suggest that he was a man of means, though subject to financial loss by pirates, and that he generously offered financial help to the First Publishers of Truth.

How much earlier we may trace Coatesworth's connection with Friends depends on the date of Swarthmore MSS ii. 17 of which he was one of the sixteen signers. It was a call for "some of every several meeting to meet monthly." It was endorsed by George Fox "The setting up of the men's meeting in Bishoprick, 1653." The date is probably wrong and the area probably too narrow. Another signer can be identified as coming from Gateshead (Richard Ubank), and this implies it occurred in 1654 or even later.<sup>2</sup> Six of the other signers occur among the names of the signers of a similar document of 1659 from "several meetings in and adjoining the county of Durham." It suggests that Friends do "not tie up ourselves to the world's limits of counties and places." Both documents are given in full in *Epistles of the Yearly Meeting of Friends, held in London*, 1858, i, pp. vi-vii and xxxi-xxxiv. The earlier one is also in Bowden, *History of the Society of Friends in America*, 1850, i, pp. 209-10; the later one, but without signatures, in A. R. Barclay, *Letters, &c., of Early Friends*, 1841, pp. 288-92.<sup>3</sup>

Further reference to him at a stage of the above proceedings comes from an unexpected source—a contemporary London newspaper published in French. It has the additional interest of being one of the longest lived of the newspapers

<sup>1</sup> James Parnell died 10th April, 1656.

<sup>2</sup> Braithwaite, *Beginnings*, p. 143, note 3.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Braithwaite, *Beginnings*, pp. 328-31.

of the period, running from 1650 to 1658,<sup>1</sup> and of having been started by William DuGard (*anglice* Dugard), an acquaintance of Milton, and probably with Milton's help. It was the *Nouvelles Ordinaires de Londres*. In political views it presented the official government viewpoint. It was doubtless started under the Commonwealth in an attempt to offset in France the prevailing ideas of royalist exiles. The Quaker items, as in other papers, are not so much political news as what we should call "human interest stories."<sup>2</sup> In the issue No. 400 for 24/14 to 31/21 January 1658/7 [1658]<sup>3</sup> one reads the following on page 1606:

The letters from Newcastle of 17th January report that a few weeks before that date the great Quaker or "Trembler" called Fox had been going about in that area, visiting the members of his fraternity, and had left one George Whitehead and various other disciples at the above-mentioned Newcastle to pursue vigorously all possible efforts to seduce and pervert not only families but whole villages; that for this purpose a certain William Coatesworth had recently rented a very large house in the same Newcastle, in the corn market in the centre of town for a term of three years, where these Tremblers began to hold their meetings on the 8th of this month, that being a market day; that the Mayor of Newcastle, having been informed of it, and considering quite rightly that such meetings could have dangerous consequences for the corporation, both for the public peace as well as for the truth which might be disturbed by these meetings, went himself to the house with the Aldermen of the city after the meeting had begun, and had expelled those who were assembled there, forbidding them to meet there any more; that if he had not come just then, apparently there would have been a considerable number of people gathered there in less than two hours; that since that time the man Coatesworth had often been to see the Mayor, had often walked beside him, without, however, saying a word, although they say he was urged to speak if he had something to say; that the preceding Sunday, the 13th of this month, this Coatesworth and another Trembler had gone on horseback, riding at full speed through the city of Durham just at the time when people were coming out of church; that some people having stopped them, asking them why they were riding this way on a Sunday, the man Coatesworth had replied that they had killed

<sup>1</sup> The British Union Catalogue of Periodicals records an issue as late as 1663.

<sup>2</sup> See Joseph Frank, *The Beginnings of the English Newspaper 1620-1660*, 1961, pp. 210f. and elsewhere, especially p. 360, note 31.

<sup>3</sup> For a photostat of this issue I am indebted to the Library of the University of Rochester. Dr. Edith Philips, of Swarthmore College, has, with her experienced knowledge of French treatment of Quakers, very kindly made for me the English translation that follows.

or poisoned the Mayor of Newcastle and that they were hastening to London to try to obtain their pardon. Whereupon the Mayor of Durham had them all arrested and was still keeping them prisoners. That it was to be noted that on the disbanding of their assembly one of them had been heard to say that if others would act as he did the Mayor of Newcastle would not be mayor very long, and that by such ways of acting and such words it could easily be concluded that the principles of these people are desperately evil and dangerous, and that if they had the power they would be as bloodthirsty as their fathers the Jesuits are and have been. The same letters add that the man Coatesworth, having recently buried his wife in a field near Shields, three days later had returned to the same place, saying that she was to be resurrected that day. He had scratched the earth to uncover her, but after staying there some length of time he had finally gone away; that afterward he had asserted that he wished to walk on the river, into which he had advanced until the water was up to his chest, and would have drowned himself but for the help of a boatman who jumped into the water to save him, and that at present he was quite out of his senses in the prison of Durham, where he often repeated the words, "Oh brave James Nayler, oh brave George Fox, oh brave William Coatesworth, you have done such things as men on earth have never done."

The passage needs little comment. There is fundamental agreement with the Quaker account about Coatesworth's zeal, about his intended journey to London, and his being halted at Durham. Indeed the friendly Whitehead agrees with the newspaper that he was "in some discomposure." There are, of course, contradictions, though the exact days of the month may not be among them, in view of the use in the newspaper of the continental dates, i.e., arrival in Durham on 13th January, that is the 3rd, death, according to Whitehead on the 8th a few days after his arrival.<sup>1</sup> The story of his discomfiture in expecting his wife's resurrection could have been influenced by the episode of Susanna Pearson at the grave near Worcester of William Pool in February 1657 which had been promptly published in the English news-books and became notorious.<sup>2</sup>

This newspaper account may seem too trivial to deserve notice. There is no reason to prefer it to Quaker sources. It may, however, be made a text for a plea for a more thorough culling of the seventeenth century British newspapers for references to the Quakers. One of the most useful publications

<sup>1</sup> The local Friends' registers do not include such early data.

<sup>2</sup> See George Fox's *Book of Miracles*, pp. 13-15; cf. *Short Journal*, pp. 375f.

of an earlier generation was *Extracts from State Papers relating to Friends, 1654-1672* (London, Friends' Historical Society, 1911-13), transcribed by Charlotte Fell Smith and edited by Norman Penney. These extracts from the "Domestic" Series give us not only important additional information but also insight into how Friends appeared to their contemporaries. Our early Quaker historical sources are happily very abundant, so abundant that in using them alone we often lack this other perspective. I have frequently wished that the *Extracts* would be continued by publishing references to Friends in later years and in other series of State Papers than the Domestic. Considerable matter of interest has been or can be found there, for example on William Penn in 1670.<sup>1</sup>

The British newspapers are much more intractable material. The State Papers are mainly at one place, the Public Record Office, and have been calendared, except 1686-1688, and the calendars indexed, so that Quaker references are easily found. On the other hand the British newspapers are extremely difficult to locate and examine. The Thomason Collection in the British Museum has a good run of most of them up to 1660 (not however the *Nouvelles Ordinaires* from which I have quoted), but otherwise files are broken and scattered. To compile a reasonably complete list of what newspapers were published, and for what periods, is in itself a complicated task.<sup>2</sup> To that is added the problem of locating copies for all the issues. After that one must either visit the libraries that contain them or get microfilms and read them. This is a laborious task, as I discovered when I once attempted it for only about a year (1682).<sup>3</sup>

British newspapers constitute a source that has been largely untapped in Quaker history. A few sporadic references occur.<sup>4</sup> Even if the collection were carried out for a limited

<sup>1</sup> Published in *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 70 (1946), 349-372; 73 (1949), 9-15.

<sup>2</sup> See the Index of Seventeenth Century Newspapers in Frank, *op. cit.*, or R. S. Crane and F. B. Kaye, *A Census of British Newspapers and Periodicals 1620-1800*, 1927, and the checklists for British newspapers at the Bodleian, Guildhall, Harvard, Huntington, University of Texas and Yale Libraries.

<sup>3</sup> *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 75 (1951), pp. 147-158.

<sup>4</sup> For example, in A. R. Barclay, *Letters, &c., of Early Friends*, 1841, notes on pp. 23f., 66.

period, or for one substantial and continuous periodical, the results would be of interest. They might not add much to our knowledge of events but, like the State Papers, they would help place the study of Quaker history in the perspective of contemporary public opinion.

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