

Martha Simmonds, a Quaker Enigma

ONE of the more mysterious figures among early Friends is Martha Simmonds, who was active in English Quakerism from 1654 to 1665. Although she is a very intriguing sort of person, no one ever seems to have made a study of Martha herself. Interest in her has centred on her connection with James Nayler's entrance into Bristol. After crossing her trail several times while examining the Nayler episode and also in connection with a study of prophetic "signs", I came to feel that some effort to picture her more fully should be made—so that she might begin to emerge more fully as a person in her own right.

Martha was born in 1623/1624¹ in the Parish of Meare in Somerset, the only daughter and last child of George and Elisi [Elisabeth] Calvert. She had several older brothers, Giles (1612–1663), George (1617–1618), and a second George (born 1619). Giles Calvert eventually became one of the chief printers for early Quakerism and even published several of Martha's works.² Martha Calvert married Thomas Simmonds, who, interestingly, also became a prolific printer of Quaker books³. There were some children of this union, but their names are not now known.

Martha Simmonds appears to have spent most of her adult life in religious search. In *A Lamentation for the Lost Sheep of the House of Israel* (1655, 1656), published for her by her brother Giles Calvert within two years of the time she embraced Quakerism, she leaves a brief account of her fourteen year struggle or pilgrimage:

¹ These dates are taken from the registers of the parish of Meare, Glastonbury, Somerset (where they are actually the dates of baptism, which usually came several days after the birth of the child). Martha's baptism was performed on January 28, 1623 [O.S.].

² Altha E. Terry, "Giles Calvert, mid-seventeenth century English bookseller and publisher: an account of his publishing career, with a checklist of his imprints" (MS thesis in Library Science, Columbia University, 1937). See *J.F.H.S.*, xxxv (1938), 45–49 for a summary of this thesis, under the title "Giles Calvert's Publishing Career".

³ R. S. Mortimer, "First century of Quaker printers", *J.F.H.S.*, xl (1948), 37–49, especially pp. 43–44.

Having had a Habitation in this City of London sometime, for seven yeers together I wandered up and down the Streets, inquiring of those that had the Image of Honesty in their countenance, where I might finde an honest Minister; for I saw my soul in death, and I was in the first nature; and wandering from one idols Temple to another, and from one private Meeting to another, I heard a sound of words amongst them, but no substance I could finde; and the more I sought after them, the more trouble came on me; and finding none sensible of my condition, I kept it in, and kept all close within me; and about the end of seven yeers, hunting, and finding no rest, the Lord opened a little glimmerings of Light to me, and quieted my spirit; and then for about seven yeers more he kept me still from running after men, and all this time I durst not meddle with any thing of God, nor scarce take his Name in my mouth, because I knew him not, it living wilde and wanton, not knowing a cross to my will, I spent this time; it something I found breathing in me, groaning for deliverance, crying out, *Oh! when shall I see the day of thy appearance?* About the end of the last seven yeers, the Lord opened my eyes to see a Measure of himself in me, which when I saw, I waited diligently in it, and being faithfull to it, I found this Light more and more increase, which brought me into a day of trouble, and through it; and through a warefare, and to the end of it, and now hath given me a resting place with him; and this is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem. And now all that have a desire to come this way, must lay down your Crowns at the feet of Jesus, for now a profession of words will no longer cover, for the Lord is come to look for Fruit, all types and shadows is flying away, and he that will come in may inherit Substance, and he that will not shall be left naked.¹

Martha Simmonds lived in an age of great religious excitement and expectations. A large number of powerful preachers had appeared among the Puritans of seventeenth century England. Many people believed that they were living in the "last days" when the "pouring out of the Spirit" would occur once more, just as it had in the apostolic age long before. Radical Puritans, caught up in the apocalyptic expectations which marked much of the religious life and outlook of the time, believed they were about to enter the "New Age". Geoffrey Nuttall has written that

Accompanying this dynamic principle of pressing on, through and beyond all outward and imprisoning forms, to attain to the full

¹ Martha Simmonds, *A lamentation for the lost sheep of the House of Israel* (London, 1656), pp. 4-5; an earlier edition was printed in 1655, in which see pp. 5-6.

liberty of the Holy Spirit, was a powerful eschatological consciousness. Religious enthusiasm, working over the prophecies in Daniel and Revelation, and conscious of contemporary religious revival, has issued in eschatological convictions at other periods also. Puritan eschatology combined such convictions with the further belief, based on the tone of references to the Holy Spirit such as they found in Joel, Acts and Paul's Epistles, that the last age had come, or was at hand, for the reason that it was "the age of the Spirit". Precisely when the age was to be was a subject admitting difference of opinion, but it would not be long delayed.¹

It is quite clear that, at their beginning, Friends shared the apocalyptic expectations and beliefs of the radical Puritans. If anything, these were heightened among the Quakers of the 1650s as a result of the great burst of religious energy and the groundswell of revelation which came with the religious pilgrimage, discoveries, and proclamations of George Fox.

Going hand in hand with the apocalyptic concepts and expectations of the early Quakers was their belief that prophecy had reappeared in their day. George Fox was very much a prophet or "spokesman for God", having become aware—out of his own religious experience—of God's purpose for and message to all men. Fox and other early Quakers caught up in the itinerant preaching mission must have sensed how much they had in common with the Old Testament prophets (and also the apostles in the early Church).² Truly prophecy had resumed once more.

Only with some knowledge of these developments does the strange career of Martha Simmonds make any sense. Also, her shortcomings and failures become more understandable, even though they remain indefensible for the most part. Her own intense religious search and pilgrimage, the apocalyptic expectations of seventeenth century Puritan England, and the nature of the new Quaker movement to which she was drawn, all combined to make her what she was—and what, in an unstable moment in her life, she became.

Martha Simmonds must have been one of the many early converts to Quakerism that London produced in 1654.³ By

¹ G. F. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan faith and experience* (Oxford, 1946), pp. 108–109. Cf. pp. 28ff.

² Recently I have completed a monograph "Early Quakers and the Spirit of Prophecy" which deals at length with these points.

³ William C. Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, second edition with notes by Henry J. Cadbury (Cambridge, 1955), pp. 157ff.

1655 she had been called to the ministry and begun her travels in religious service. James Parnell, the early Quaker martyr, wrote to William Dewsbury on December 16 of that year, saying:

Our tender sister Martha Simmondes is heare in Bondes in the Towne prison; she was put in the last evening for speakeing to a priest; she hath beene in twice before this within a weeke but they had not power to keepe her in & I believe now they will be Tormented. The Lord hath shown his power much by her since she came here, she is A faythful heart in her measure.¹

This passage by Parnell shows his appreciation of Martha Simmonds' work and her person, both referring to her as "our tender sister" and mentioning that "the Lord hath shown his power much by her" since she had arrived at Colchester. Parnell then continued with the very interesting information that Martha "was moved to walke in sack cloth barefoote with her hayre sprred & ashes upon her head, in the Towne, in the frosty weather, to the astonishment of many".²

Martha Simmonds was not the first Quaker to appear in sackcloth and ashes, nor was she to be the last. As early as May 1655 Sarah Goldsmith had appeared in this manner "as a sign" to the people of Bristol.³ Richard Sale (1655), Thomas Morford (1656), William Simpson and Dewance Morey (both "in Oliver's days") all engaged in this practice—as did Elizabeth Harris (in 1658), the "mother of American Quakerism".⁴ Appearing in sackcloth was most frequent in the 1650s and 1660s, but isolated cases among Quakers continued for some time—with John Pemberton, well-known American Quaker, making such an appearance in Londonderry in Ireland as late as 1784.⁵

Undoubtedly the practice of wearing sackcloth arose

¹ H. J. Cadbury (ed.), *Letters to William Dewsbury and Others* (London, 1948), p. 41. This monograph was published as *Jnl. F.H.S.* Supplement 22.

² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³ Richard Blome, *The Fanatick History, or An exact relation and account of the old Anabaptists and new Quakers* (London, 1660), p. 221 (wrongly dated 1654); Besse, *Sufferings*, i.41; Geo. Bishop and others, *Cry of Blood*, 1656, pp. 98-100.

⁴ K. L. Carroll, "Elizabeth Harris, the founder of American Quakerism", *Quaker History*, lvii (1968), 96-111. These other cases are dealt with in Chapter V of my monograph "Early Quakers and the Spirit of Prophecy".

⁵ "Occurrences for the Progress of Truth", *J.F.H.S.*, ii (1905), 135.

among early Quakers in part as a result of their study of the Old Testament prophets—especially the messages of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Jonah.¹ The major impulse for this action, however, must have come from the Revelation of John, which so greatly influenced both radical Puritanism and Quakerism. Revelation 11:3 promises “And I have two witnesses, whom I shall appoint to prophesy, dressed in sackcloth”. Early Quaker belief that prophecy had resumed, coupled with their apocalyptic hopes, made this passage a “natural” for them.

It was Martha’s call to a prophetic ministry that led to her early travels in the service of Truth. Exactly where she travelled, other than Colchester, is unknown. She must have been in that city a number of times. Besse speaks of a four months’ imprisonment which she experienced in 1656 or 1657 in Essex² and Penney notes an incarceration in the “Moot Hall” at Colchester in 1657.³ Yet Martha Simmonds’ travels were much more widespread than these two reports suggest, for in a 1656 publication she says

O England! thou hast not wanted for Warnings; my soul stands witness in the presence of the Lord against thee, that in thy Cities, Townes, and Market-Streets, I have past with bitter cryes and streams of tears for almost two yeers time, warning you of this day that is coming upon you as a Snare, with this Lamentation, O people of England repent! O that thou wouldest consider the time of thy visitation! O that thou wouldest prise thy time before the dore of Mercy is shut! . . .

This mournful cry began at London, so to Colchester, and through the Nation.⁴

Martha’s call to repentance was directed, first of all, to the nation as a whole.⁵ She called upon the entire people to

see him who is the Rock of Ages to be thy Rock and strong defence; and then shouldst thou see a war begin contrary to thy

¹ Cf. Isaiah 3:24; 15:3; 20:3; 22:12; 37:1–2; 50:3; Jeremiah 4:8; 6:26; 48:37; 49:3; Ezekiel 7:18; 27:31; Jonah 3:5–6, 8.

² Joseph Besse, *Sufferings* (London, 1753), i, 192. The date seems a bit uncertain.

³ Norman Penney (ed.), *The First Publishers of Truth* (London, 1907), p. 97.

⁴ Martha Simmonds (*et al.*), *O England; thy time is come* (London, 1656), pp. 1–2. Thus she had already been in Colchester at least once in 1655–1656.

⁵ Simmonds, *A lamentation for the lost sheep of the House of Israel*, 1656, p. 1.

will, and him that brings into the war, and carries through; and then there would be nothing to do on thy part, but to stand still; and keep thy minds in, girt up to him that works; and then thou wilt come to see what it is to follow the Lamb through Tribulation.¹

She also directed some of her message to the "High Priests of this Nation, and Teachers of all sorts of opinions", telling them that they should

be content with that you have, and let the people alone to the measure of God in them, that it may guide them into the way that they may finde bread for their souls; and seeing that you will not enter yourselves, do not shut the kingdom against them, in laying stumbling blocks before them, and raising up false accusations against the Light, and those that walk in it.²

Her final appeal is to the sober and religious in all of England, challenging them to accept the Quaker message—for the Kingdom of God was at hand:

And now all people that hath sobriety, and love to your souls, come out from amongst these doll dumb Shepherds, that feed themselves, and not you, and if you put not into their mouths, they will soon shew violence to you: Come out from among them, and be no longer partaker of their uncleanness, for they are broken Cisterns, that can no longer hold water; and come into the Fountain that runs forth freely, the streams whereof would refresh your hungry fainting souls; In my Fathers' house there is bread enough: Oh! why will you perish for hunger? minde the Light, the measure of Christ in you, that with it you may see where you are, that you may see his eternal love, how he calls and invites you into the kingdome, that he may take off your filthy garments, that he may clothe you with the garment of Righteousness, and marry you unto himself; And now the day of his mighty power is appeared, and the Fountain of Life set open, to wash and clense you from your sins, and baptize you into his death and sufferings: Oh be not stubborn and stiffnecked against him! for we that do follow him do finde his pathes pleasant, pure and sweet; and the further we follow him in the straight Gate, and narrow Way, we see that his love is past finding out. And now in the tenderness of my heart, longing for your souls good, am I made open to you.³

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 4. Cf. Martha Simmonds, *When the Lord Jesus came to Jerusalem*, printed as a separate broadside (n.d.) and as pp. 5-6, at the end of *A lamentation for the lost sheep of the House of Israel*.

Early Quakers, much like the radical Puritans, believed very strongly in the indwelling of the Spirit. The Quaker adaptation and interpretation of the Puritan concept of the indwelling of the Spirit was accompanied by a great danger—so that even Fox himself was charged with “professing himself to be equal with God, to be the eternal judge of the world and to be the Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life”. Braithwaite, while discussing this situation, writes

Fox replies to the more serious charges, as he had done at the quarter sessions, by denying that he had ever made such statements in the sense that George Fox was equal with God or that George Fox was Christ, but he insists that the new life, the spiritual man, is the Lord from heaven and that Christ is one in all His saints. Fox’s words, even in this answer, are open to misconstruction . . . Fox, and others of the early Friends, had a vivid sense of personal union with their living Lord, but they coupled this experience of the indwelling Christ with a doctrine of perfection that betrayed them, during the first exhilaration of the experience, into extremes of identification with the Divine. They believed that inspiration gave infallibility, a belief that men have often held with respect to the writers of scripture, and they had to learn, with the help of some painful lessons, what we are learning to-day about the writers of scripture, that the inspired servant of God remains a man, liable to much of human error and weakness.¹

Martha Simmonds strongly embraced this view of the indwelling of the Spirit. Undoubtedly this was one of the several factors which led to the Nayler episode at Bristol. Perhaps the clearest expression of her attitude on this subject is seen in the following passage from one of her early writings:

Why should it seem a strange thing to you to see Christ reigne in his Saints and fit and prepare the Vessels, make our bodies fit for himself to dwell in, seeing our hearts are ready to bow to his Will? And is it not more for his glory, though it be a greater cross to your wills, to purifie these bodies, and pour out the dregs thereof, then to bring down that body which was crucified at Jerusalem, seeing all are in his power and one Spirit rules in both, by much tribulation, anguish of Spirit, and sufferings of the flesh, hath he now fitted a bodie for himself, who hath conquered death and hell, so perfect is he that he can lay down his life for his enemies, not opening his mouth to defend himself, this Vessel is as precious to me as that which was tortured at Jerusalem, seeing

¹ Braithwaite, *Beginnings of Quakerism*, p. 109.

the Father hath prepared them both, and the same Graces springs from both according to its time of working, which now is finisht in sufferings.¹

One or two other factors should be mentioned, in order to set the stage for the Bristol "caper". It should be noted that by 1656 Martha Simmonds had developed a deep feeling for James Nayler, although her conviction must have come at the hands of Edward Burrough, Francis Howgill, or some of the other 1654 leaders who were at work in London.² Nayler himself did not arrive in London until 1655. Soon, however, he achieved great success, moving in high circles and becoming the chief Quaker minister or Publisher of Truth in London—in part as a result of the departure of Howgill and Burrough for Ireland and also as a result of his tremendous gifts. Overworked and increasingly "ensnared by trifles, vanities, and persons," however, he began to be drawn away from the Light and into darkness.³

Martha Simmonds herself appears to have been strongly caught up in apocalyptic expectations in the summer of 1656, at a time when Baptists and Fifth Monarchy Men were proclaiming that "this very year Christ should come and reign upon earth a thousand years".⁴ This undoubtedly combined with her own strength of personality and Nayler's growing weakness to give her an increasing influence with and power over him. In addition to these factors there was also that strange development whereby Martha increasingly became the leader of a small but vocal group of women who so troubled London Quakerism in 1656 and 1657. Their primary interest appears to have been in insisting that Nayler was the chief leader of Quakerism—in the South (if not in all of England).

With the return of Howgill and Burrough to London in the spring of 1656 growing signs of trouble began to appear. Martha Simmonds, having become more caught up in enthusiasm, undertook some religious work outside London (after having been "denied" for some of her earlier appearances in the ministry in London). Her excesses and refusal

¹ Simmonds, *O England; thy time is come*, p. 5.

² Cf. Braithwaite, *Beginnings of Quakerism*, pp. 155-164, for this development.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 243-244.

⁴ George Fox, *Journal*, ed. Nickalls (Cambridge, 1952), p. 261.

to heed the advice of Friends to refrain from such work brought her under condemnation by Howgill, Burrough and others. Martha then appealed to James Nayler for "justice" but was, for the moment, rebuffed. Her violent response to Nayler's "judgment" appears to have sent him into a state of shock—and also to have exhilarated Martha Simmonds:

then I was moved of the Lord to go to James Nailer, and tell him I wanted Justice, and he being harsh to me, at length these words came to me to speak to him, which I did, and struck him down; *How are the mighty men fallen, I came to Jerusalem and behold a cry, and behold an oppression, which pierced and struck him down* with tears from that day; and he lay from that day in exceeding sorrow for about three daies, and all that while *the power arose in me*, which I did not expect; seeing I knew he was in that condition: But after three daies he came to me, and confessed *I had been clear in service to the Lord*, and that he had wronged me, and should have done Justice, but did not do it. And then he lay at my house three daies.¹

Richard Hubberthorne, one of the better known early Quaker leaders, was in London at this time. Not having been involved in the controversies up to this point, he felt free to go to see Martha Simmonds. On July 26, 1656, he sent the following report to Margaret Fell:

I went to Martha Simonds, which was ye woman that F[rancis] H[owgill] mentioned in his letter, And I asked her the ground of those things which had made the differences, . . . and she being constrained as to tell mee, haveing nothing in her mind against mee as Against others she told me some thing plainly how shee came under judgment; she being at one time in A meeting, she spoke and was judged by F. H. to speak in her will and she being troubled in her mind went to James [Nayler] & told him that she was moved to speake and then was judged & he alsoe judged her, And told her that she sought to have the dominion & charged her to goe home & follow her calling, & that with the other things wrought in her mind: And the other woman, Hanah Stringer she alsoe went to James, and said that he had judged the Innocent, and not judged righteously, and something to that effect did she & Martha speake to him, which word he received to be the word of the Lord, and coming under the power of their words, Judgement came upon him, and ——— [?] trembling night and day, while he was in London, for some nights lyeing upon A table, And then ther reignes & deceipts got up especially in Martha to glory and boast over all, And now an exceeding filthy spirit is

¹ Ralph Farmer, *Sathan Inthron'd in his Chair of Pestilence*. (London, 1657), pp. 10-11.

got up in her, more filthy than any that yet departed out of the truth, And with it Labours to break and destroy the meetings if it were possible. When I spoke to her and told her how the deceit entered she could not beare it.¹

Hubberthorne then reported that he had been at a "great meeting of Friends" to which Martha Simmonds had come. Her behaviour there shows how unbalanced she had become—earning a place with the worst of the Ranters, such as Mildred and Judy:

And when we had waited in silence A while, she stood up & spoke, judging all Friends that they were not come to the crosse, nor that there was not one to take her part, And would have drawne them from the meeting & to have withdrawn [?] with her, and have kept their own habitations, & then shee fell on singing, with an unclean spirit. And the substance of that which she said in her singing was, Inocency, innocency, many times over, for the space of one hour or more, but in the power of the Lord I was moved to speake soon after she begun, And with many teares was I in the eternal power made to reap [?] the witsse of god to bring that under the fear & dread of god, which she would have raised into righteousness, and she Continued singing but when the witness of god was raised And the many hearts was broken into tears with the eternal power, then the word of life in others rose against her, and when she saw the power of god arissing against her, and reigne over her in those that were ready to be stumbled by her before then, she was tormented against mee, and Cryed of deep subtilty, for A long time together turning it into A song, And that wee were all the beast, and I [was] the head of the beast, but the day was a day to the Lord, that the life of god in many was raised from under a thick cloud which was come over and it was A day of washing of the garments of many that were spotted and stained through offence but the Lord God is Ariseing to his eternaly glory, and is bringing his Image and brightnesse from under a cloud, and chaining the dragon.²

Not only was Martha Simmonds opposed publicly (as by Burrough and Hubberthorne in the cases already mentioned) but she was also condemned by letters which were delivered to her. Edward Burrough, in late May or at the very beginning of June it would seem, wrote to her as follows:

This is the truth from the Lord God concerning thee Martha Simons: thou and [those] whoe followes thy spirit; you are out of the truth, out of the way, out of the power, out of the wisdom.

¹ Friends House Library, London, Caton MSS, III, 364–365.

² *Ibid.*, III, 366–367.

& out of the Life of God; For you are Turned from the Light of Christ Jesus . . . & doth disobey it, & Lend your eare to another, & followe a Lying spirit . . . It is not the spirit of god, But the voice of the stranger which you follow; And are become Goats, rough & hairey . . . though some of you have prophesied in the name of Christ yet now are you workers of iniquity.¹

William Dewsbury, apparently about the same time, joined in the attacks on Martha Simmonds, writing

Martha Simons, thou hast departed from the Counsell of God, & in the evil imaginations of thy heart, thou is run forth to utter wordes without knowledge (whoe saith) thou dost not trouble Israell; the righteous seed is burthened with thee, who hath in thy deceitful practice opened the mouth of the Enemies of god to blaspheme his name, & through thy sorcery, hath abused the simplicity, which to thy charge will be laid, in the day when the Lord will be glorified.²

Having made such a strong criticism of her activities, Dewsbury then proceeded by calling upon Martha Simmonds to return to the counsel of God.

As has already been noted, James Nayler was "pierced" by Martha's sharp attack on him, for

it smote him down into so much Sorrow and Sadness, that he was much dejected in Spirit or disconsolate. Fears and Doubting then entered him, that he came to be clouded in his Understanding, bewildred, and at a Loss in his Judgment.³

Somehow Nayler allowed himself to be persuaded to go to the Simmonds' house, where he spent three days—during which time his condition went from bad to worse. His own account of this development, produced some time later, tells us that

Thus having in a great Measure lost my own Guide, and Darknes being come upon me, I sought a Place where I might have been alone, to weep and cry before the Lord, that his Face I might

¹ Friends House Library, Markey MSS, pp. 120–122. This letter caused Martha to be quiet for a brief period. For some unknown reason she read the letter publicly in a meeting. Cf. Cadbury, *Letters to William Dewsbury*, p. 24, for a June 4, 1656, letter.

² *Ibid.*, p. 123.

³ Introduction to Nayler's *Works*, p. ix, quoted by Mabel Richmond Brailsford, *A Quaker from Cromwell's Army: James Nayler* (London, 1927), p. 98.

find, and my Condition recover: . . . I could not be hid . . . And so letting go that little of the true Light which I had yet remaining in myself, I gave up myself wholly to be led by others, whose work was then wholly to divide me from the Children of Light.¹

This picture really contradicts Martha's claim that Nayler had sought her out and confessed that he had been wrong in his judgment of her, saying that she had been correct in her disruption of meetings for worship and in her other actions.²

Some of Nayler's friends were worried by the great change which came about both in his appearance and outlook—so much so that they came and "plucked" him away from Martha's house and captivity.³ Many of them felt that she had bewitched Nayler, for they could account for the changes in him in no other way. In order to rescue him from Martha's power, his friends then sent him on to Bristol, so that he might participate in some religious service there at the time of St. James's Fair (July 25).

Not even in Bristol was the ailing Nayler safe from Martha Simmonds, for she followed him there in order to bring him under her control once more and also to keep the opposing group from influencing him against her. Upon her arrival Martha rushed up to Nayler and knelt at his feet. Nayler himself remained "silent and apathetic, but the sweat began to trickle down his forehead."⁴ Nayler's friends quickly led him—without any resistance—into a neighbouring house. When Martha attempted to follow she was forcibly restrained. In her attempt to break loose and follow Nayler she fell or was flung down the steps.⁵ Seeing that Nayler would receive no privacy in Bristol, his friends sent him on toward Launceston (where George Fox was imprisoned). Martha, temporarily giving up the contest, returned to London for the moment.

Within three miles of Launceston, Nayler and his companions were arrested and then taken to Exeter as prisoners. In the course of this imprisonment Nayler fasted a great deal.

¹ Nayler's *Works*, p. xlii, quoted in Brailsford, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

² Cf. R. Farmer, *Sathan Inthron'd*, pp. 10-11.

³ Farmer, *op. cit.*, p. 11. Note how Dewsbury's letter quoted above spoke of her "sorcery".

⁴ E. Fogelklou, *James Nayler*, (London, 1931), p. 155.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 155. Cf. Farmer, *op. cit.*, p. 11 (where Martha claims to have been thrown down the stairs) and George Bishop, *The Throne of Truth exalted* (London, 1657), p. 29, where Bishop denies that charge.

Fogelklou describes him as "ravaged by mental distress, bad air, fastings, probably also by fever".¹ During this time Martha Simmonds had been nursing the wife of Major-General Desborough (who was also the sister of Oliver Cromwell). Her only request, in return for the day-and-night nursing which she performed, was that an order be granted for the release of James Nayler. Such an order, signed by Cromwell himself, was eventually forthcoming.²

Martha Simmonds, accompanied by her crony Hannah Stranger, made her way rapidly to Launceston where she suddenly appeared before George Fox in his lonely dungeon abode—calling upon him to submit to James Nayler and telling him that his heart was rotten and his leadership was false. Fox, believing that Martha had come from Nayler, wrote to James Nayler as follows:

Martha Symonds which is called your Mother, she bid me bow downe, & said I was Lord & king, & that my Heart was rotten, & shee said, shee denyed that which was Head in me, & one of them said, she had stopped Francis Howgills Mouth, & silenced him, & turned my word into a lye & into a Temptation, & she came singing in my Face, inventing words, & Hannah boasted, & said, if they was Devills make them to tremble, & she boasted what she would do & cry against. Many did not expect that thou wouldst have been an Incourager of such as doe cry against the power & Life of Truth, but would have been a nourisher of Truth, & not have trained up a company against it.³

From her confrontation with George Fox at Launceston, Martha Simmonds hurried immediately to Exeter where Nayler was in prison. Nayler himself had seemed to become more tender towards Friends until Martha Simmonds appeared there. Richard Hubberthorne, September 16, wrote to Margaret Fell:

but there came Martha Simmonds when I was there & when at any time wee are together shee would have caled him away & he was so much subject to her; she remains in her filthiness still; she had then been at GF & begun to singe before him at Launceston & he judged her uncleane spirit but shee exalted herselfe & Judged him as shee had Judged me & worsse, & said he must come downe out of his wissdome & subtilty & much of that nature

¹ Fogelklou, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

² *Ibid.*, p. 159.

³ Swarthmore MSS, III, 193 (Transcripts II, 233).

& did appeare so Impodent that had not the wissdome of god prevented it would have set the rude multitude against them but at last she was brought downe to confess & to owne her condemnation in words & from there she came to Exeter wheare I was as I said before.¹

Martha Simmonds, according to Fogelklou, had “come into Nayler’s life like a whirlwind, and like a whirlwind she was to cause havoc.”² She did all she could to widen the gulf between the two—even persuading Nayler, it seems, that Fox wanted “to bury his name in order to exalt his own”.³ Fox, stung to the quick by Martha’s actions at Launceston and by the reports coming to him from Exeter, made his way there to see Nayler as soon as Fox was released from his own imprisonment. His meeting with Nayler was tragic, only serving to make a bad situation so much worse that it has been described as a “terrible nightmare”.⁴ The once close relationship between the two had so ruptured that Fox condemned both Nayler and his followers:

James! Thou hadest Judged & writtine thy secrete & falce Letters against him thou shouldest not, thou shouldest not deale soe presumptuously against the innocent . . . Justice is sett A top of you all and this thou must read & owne . . . And James it will be harder for thee to gett downe thy Rude Company than it was for thee to set them up (if ever thou Come to know & owne Christ) whose Impudence doth spoart & blasphemme the truth . . . Martha Simonds & stringer [Stranger] and his wiffe is denyed for there lyes & slanders & so Judged out with the truth.⁵

For some time following Fox’s visit with Nayler, the latter remained in prison at Exeter—probably not receiving his freedom until about October 20, 1656.⁶ Martha Simmonds and the Strangers had remained in Exeter after Martha’s husband Thomas had returned to London (following the delivery of the order of release).⁷ Nayler, Martha, the Strangers, and several other disciples set out for London via Bristol, which they reached on October 24. Here, filled with some sort of apocalyptic expectation, the group—under the

¹ *Ibid.*, III, 153 (Transcripts II, 597).

² Fogelklou, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 170. Cf. Braithwaite, *Beginnings of Quakerism*, pp. 247–248.

⁵ Swarthmore MSS, III, 195 (Transcripts II, 231).

⁶ Braithwaite, *Beginnings of Quakerism*, p. 248.

⁷ Farmer, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

guidance and control of Martha Simmonds¹ it would seem—enacted a “sign”,² with James Nayler as the central figure making his “messianic” entrance into Bristol.

The story of Nayler’s “entrance” and/or “fall” has been told many times,³ so that there is no need to retell it here. Only Martha Simmonds’ part in this episode needs examination. Martha and her friend Hannah Stranger walked beside Nayler’s horse, holding its reins and leading it. Martha (accompanied by her companions) sang “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Israel,” spread her clothes before him, and knelt down before him.⁴ Nayler, who had been absorbed in thought or perhaps in a vague stupor, snapped out of that state long enough to ask them not to do anything which the Lord had not prompted them to do.

That Martha was the engineer of the whole episode appears very likely. Her almost hypnotic influence on Nayler and the apocalyptic expectations with which she and her small circle were filled during that summer and autumn of 1656 made it possible for her to use Nayler as a “sign” of Christ’s coming. While Nayler himself always insisted that he had never claimed to be Christ but was only acting out a “sign”,⁵ Martha and her small band of fanatical women (especially Hannah Stranger and Dorcas Erbury) and men were convinced that he was “Jesus himself come again in the flesh”. They had begun with their belief that God was present in every man, believing that “a double portion of that Spirit” was in Nayler. During the time of his Exeter imprisonment one of Nayler’s fellow Quaker captives (Dorcas Erbury) fell into such a lasting coma that she was believed to be dead. When Nayler was called to see the “dead” girl he put his hands upon her, at which point she revived and began to talk. This “miracle” convinced some of Nayler’s followers that he was truly Christ.⁶

¹ Martha appears to have been the ringleader and Nayler the somewhat confused “dupe”. Martha, it will be remembered, believed in “signs”, appearing in sackcloth, and speaking in favour of going naked.

² Cf. my monograph “Early Quakers and the Spirit of Prophecy”, especially chs. IV–VII, concerning early Quaker use of “signs”.

³ Braithwaite, *Beginnings of Quakerism*, pp. 244–273; Brailsford, *op. cit.*, pp. 93–123; Fogelklou, *op. cit.*, pp. 143–188, all have good discussions of this development.

⁴ Farmer, *op. cit.*, pp. 15–16.

⁵ Cf. Carroll, “Early Quakers and the Spirit of Prophecy”, ch. VIII.

⁶ Brailsford, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

Martha Simmonds herself called Nayler "the everlasting sone of Righteousness", the "Lord of Righteousnesse and prince of peace," and "King of Israel"—saying that he had been so anointed by a prophet (whom she refused to identify). She said that "there is a seed borne in him which I shall honour above all men".¹ Such views as these, when coupled with what is known of her leadership of the strange group which surrounded Nayler, suggest that she was largely responsible for what took place at Bristol. This conjecture is strengthened by her husband's letter from London, condemning her for outrunning her true guide:

Had you stood in the wisdom and counsell of the Lord, and there waited single to have been guided by him alone, then the Lord had brought you safe to this City [London], where he would have manifested his mighty power amongst us. Now this it was, and I know it so with you, you being all joynd in love, when you wait on the Lord, there is a great power amongst you, and then when any thing arises in any particular as to speak or Act which many times arises from the earthly dark principle, to this you all joyn although you see it not, neither the life of God which is in you, answers to it. And hence comes all your Cumber and Trumpery without; which my soul was grieved to see it, abundance more hath been acted amongst you since I came away, which the Lord delivered me from; whose presence I now feel, and he was with me in my journey & brought me in peace to this place, and warned me in the night at Exeter, not to return by Bristol, but to go the streight way to London, & M. S. as I was upon the way, I saw thee in the light, going before on the left hand, which was towards Bristoll, and my love was to thee, none else did I see, which made me think thou was coming along towards London; *surely thou was the chief leader in that action*. If there was such a glory amongst you; why were you not silent, and have let the people cry Hosanna. Oh how is dark night come upon the Prophets, and those who once were honourable and glorious, are now falen, because they were in prosperity and the Lord honoured them, they forgot the Lord; therefore hath he darkened their understanding, and given them up to believe lies, . . . Dear heart my love is to thee, . . . but this I could not but write, to warn you that you stand single to the Lord, and not believe every spirit. Your work is soon come to an end; part of the Army that fell at Burford was your figure.²

¹ Farmer, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21. This letter, from London, was dated November 1, 1656. Italics added. It would be both interesting and helpful if more could be learned about the "prophetic immaginations" that Martha and her friends were caught up in. Did Martha Simmonds belong to a "band" of prophets?

For her part in this episode Martha—along with Nayler and the other participants—was imprisoned at Bristol on that very day of their “sign”. After some examination by the Bristol magistrates (who were at a loss to know just what to do) Martha Simmonds, Nayler, the Strangers, and Dorcas Erbury were all sent on to London where a committee of fifty-five members of Parliament was appointed to consider the Bristol “misdemeanors and blasphemies”.¹ As they were brought toward London the whole company sang in most of the towns through which they passed.²

The same spirit which had led Martha and her compatriots into the Bristol extravagancies was still at work in London, so that Hubberthorne reported to Margaret Fell on November 25 that he had visited Nayler in London and discovered that

the women are exceeding filthy in Acting in Imitations & singing, And that power of darkenesse in them rules over him as I wrote to thee at the first that it was come over him; many people come dayly to them, both of the world and also such as are Convinced, And wonders at the Imitation which is Acted Among them as often they will kneel before him &c. James speakes pretty much to Friends as in Justifieing all their Actings to be in Innocency.³

As a result of this type of behaviour poor Nayler was called upon to answer a “new charge touching some unseemly communications between him and Martha [Simmonds], his fellow prisoner. She stroked his head, and sat breast to breast, and desired him to go with her”. Nayler, however, answered that he was not free to go.⁴

Nayler’s punishment began on a cold December 18, when he was placed in the pillory for two hours. Then he was whipped on his naked back 310 times with a whip of seven cords full of knots. On December 27 Nayler was placed in the raised pillory beside the Old Exchange and a hole was bored in his tongue and he was branded with a hot iron on his forehead.⁵ Present at this terrible spectacle were Martha Simmonds, Hannah Stranger, Dorcas Erbury and the “mad

¹ Braithwaite, *Beginnings of Quakerism*, p. 255.

² Swarthmore MSS, I, 294 (Transcripts III, 645).

³ Caton MSS, III, 370.

⁴ Thomas Burton, *Diary*, (London, 1828), p. 10.

⁵ Braithwaite, *Beginnings of Quakerism*, p. 266.

merchant" Robert Rich.¹ One report says that Martha sat just behind him on the right side and the others before him—one on the right side and one on the left "in imitation of Mary Magdalen and Mary the Mother of Jesus, and Mary the Mother of Cleophas".² Robert Rich, caught up in the mad imaginations of this small circle, put a sign saying "This is the King of the Jews" over Nayler's head.³

After a brief return to Bristol for further punishment there (by whipping and riding backwards through the city), Nayler was brought back to London once more and imprisoned in Bridewell. Martha and her circle still continued to seek him out for honour and attention. On February 10, 1657, Hubberthorne reported to Margaret Fell that Nayler was in Bridewell and that few were allowed to see him. He then added that

then the women, when they will not let them in to him, they fall down & knealls before the wall, And they sometime Appointes meetings in the most publick places of the Citie as in the Exchange and at the places where J: N: suffered, And from the Exchange they sent some of them to prison at Bridwell, And they are A great offence to the way of Truth here for the present.⁴

Not only did Martha Simmonds and her crew persist in their mad adoration of Nayler, but they also continued to invade and disrupt the meetings of Friends. Hubberthorne, in this same letter, reported several experiences which London Quakers had met with at the hands of Martha and her companions. He reported that he had attended a meeting at the Bull and Mouth where hundreds of people were present. Martha Simmonds, accompanied by six or seven women, came, and

there was also men of that Company, which in all may be above ten; And they began to sing and to make A noise to stop the Truth from the people & they grew very both Impudent & filthy. And Mar[tha] took A bible and read A psalme, And they sang it after her, as they doe in the steeplehouses, but I keeping clear in Innocency, & ministering in the power of Truth as I was moved to the people their singing was Confounded, And after that shee

¹ John Deacon, *An exact history of the life of James Nayler*, (London, 1657), p. 35.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36. Cf. John 19:25.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 36. Cf. Luke 23:38.

⁴ Caton MSS, III, 375.

took a chapter in Ezek: which speake to the Rebellious children, And she said that the Lord had sent that chapter to be read unto us, and commanded me to be silent and hear it read, but when she saw the Truth prevaile over all their deceipt & gainesayinges, then she cryed out to the people, that we denied the scriptures; And after that she said, who would have thought that the Quakers would tell people that there Teacher is within them And thou hast taught this three houres and much more noyse & clamour they made to hinder the Truth, or to make it odious to the people.¹

Not only did Martha Simmonds and her party attack Friends, attempt to destroy their meetings for worship, and also introduce the singing of psalms into Quaker gatherings, but on one occasion at least they made a great show of holding some type of eucharistic or communion meal one Sunday at the Bull and Mouth some time after Friends had ended their own meeting at that place:

The people aforementioned met again at the bull & mouth in the afterpart of the day upon the first day after wee were gone And they broke bread & drunk drinke, & gave to the rude multitude, that would take any & soe fullfilled an Imagination of their harts: And they said that was to manifest that they had Love to the wicked.²

At the same time that Martha and her inner circle (still in custody, but with some real freedom of movement it appears) were disturbing Quaker meetings, they were also to be found attending services at Westminster Abbey with quiet and dignity. It was recorded that, on February 22, 1657

This day, being the Lord's Day, the persons called Quakers, which were brought from Bristol with James Nayler,—vis. John Stranger, and Hannah his wife, Martha Simmonds and Dorcas Erbury—,remaining yet undischarged under the custody of the serjeant-at-arms, but now somewhat altered in their carriage, went to the Abbey, morning and afternoon, where they gave ear civilly and attentively to the sermons of Mr. John Rowe, an eminent preacher, whose spiritual doctrine so far wrought upon them, that they intend to hear him again, which gives hope that they may be rectified in their judgment.³

It was undoubtedly the example of Martha Simmonds which loosed a whole band of "Ranters and loose persons"

¹ *Ibid.*, III, 373-374.

² *Ibid.*, III, 376.

³ Burton, *op. cit.*, p. 377n, quoting from *Mercurius Politicus*, No. 350.

upon the London meetings. The two most troublesome ones, known simply as Mildred and Judy,¹ remained a problem for a year or two. Not only was London Quakerism plagued in this way, but the movement soon spread into other parts of England. In August 1657 John Braithwaite reported to Margaret Fell that Quakers around Salisbury "have received some hurt by some of Martha Simmonds company which came there about to dwell; but the Lord gave us dominion over them".²

Martha Simmonds was still active in her destructive work in April 1657, when George Fox, Edward Burrough and a number of other Quaker leaders had assembled in London. John Perrot,³ Humphrey Norton, and William Shaw (all of whom had recently been active in proclaiming Quakerism in Ireland) wrote to Ireland from London on April 10 that

The Agents of J[ames] N[ayler] have come creeping on their Bellies to be owned yea: Martha their Miserable Mother, this day hath been [at?] us, & all her witchery & filthy Enchantments is set at Naught, they are left for Miserable Examples, unto all that feare god, Pride & Vaine glory, & fleshly liberty was their Overthrow.⁴

Not only were Martha Simmonds and her followers opposed openly in such Quaker meetings as have been mentioned, but there were also some published attacks directed against them and their activities. George Bishop's 1657 publication *The Throne of Truth Exalted over the Powers of Darkness*, written against Ralph Farmer's *Sathan Inthron'd*, refers to Martha and her followers as "that Woman and her company, with all their filthiness in their deceit". He reported "that spirit which darkened him [Nayler], was then denyed by them [Friends], and also the Woman from whom it had entred him, and the other two with her, and all their Filth". He also referred to Martha as "that Woman through whom this hour came".⁵

William Dewsbury, according to Braithwaite "the chief

¹ Braithwaite, *Beginnings of Quakerism*, pp. 269-270.

² Swarthmore MSS, II, 129 (Transcripts I, 247).

³ Cf. K. L. Carroll, *John Perrot, early Quaker schismatic* (London, 1971), published as *J.F.H.S.*, Supp. no. 33.

⁴ Swarthmore MSS, V, 27 (Transcripts VII, 125). This letter was to William and Margaret Blanch of Waterford.

⁵ Bishop, *op. cit.*, pp. 4, 5, 9.

agent in reconciling Nayler to Friends",¹ not only laboured with those who had "run out", but also called upon Nayler to judge the "deceitful spirit" which had brought suffering upon Truth. In a letter to Nayler, Dewsbury wrote, "My Bowells [y]earnes towards thee, with whom I have suffered in the day and howre of temptation wherein thou hast suffered much wrong in hearkening to the words of Martha Symmonds and Hannah Stringer and in not reproveing what they with others have done out of the Light and wisdom of God".² Although Nayler did not openly condemn his own proceedings at Bristol, he did produce a paper which condemned the spirit of disorder which had seized control of so many. This paper was published before the end of July 1657, along with letters showing Nayler to be in a "tender frame of mind".³

The transformation taking place in Nayler and his denunciations of the various rents, divisions, and disorders, must have had an almost immediate effect on Martha Simmonds. In an undated letter (which belongs to the autumn of 1657)⁴ Hubberthorne wrote to Margaret Fell that "Martha Simmonds & that Company is quiet". He then continued his report with the rather surprising statement that "there is something of God stirring in her". This is almost the last reference to Martha that I have come upon, in spite of a rather thorough search of the manuscript and printed sources for the period 1657-1665. It is true that there is a brief mention of her in a 1659 anti-Quaker document which attacks her as a Quaker who advocates going naked as a sign.⁵ Whether or not Quakers had accepted her back into their fellowship, Blome certainly looked upon her as a Friend.

The final mention of Martha Simmonds is found in connection with her death in 1665. The burial records of London and Middlesex Quarterly Meeting state that she died September 27, 1665, and was buried that same day in

¹ Braithwaite, *Beginnings of Quakerism*, p. 271.

² Swarthmore MSS, V, 50 (Transcripts VII, 231).

³ Braithwaite, *Beginnings of Quakerism*, p. 272.

⁴ Caton MSS, III, 391. This letter mentions the return of Henry Fell from Barbados (which took place on October 29, 1657), the death of George Bayly in France (in the autumn of 1657), the return of Gerrard Roberts from Paris, and the continued imprisonment of John Harwood in France.

⁵ Richard Blome, *Questions Propounded to George Whithead and George Fox, who disputed by turnes against one University-Man in Cambr., August 29, 1659* (London, 1659(?)), p. 6.

Southwark.¹ Another source lists her death as taking place on April 7, 1665, while on her way to Maryland.² However one handles this discrepancy in the recorded dates of her death,³ it would appear that she was in the good graces of the Society of Friends at that time. Martha, like Nayler (who in 1657 condemned his outgoing) and Hannah Stranger (who in 1669 condemned her conduct "with all its stratagems, wiles, and practices")⁴ must have made her peace with the Society of Friends and then remained quiet during the closing years of her life. There is no evidence that she, like so many of Nayler's former followers, became a follower of John Perrot during the great controversy and the schism of 1661-1665. The "M. S." who had some connections with Perrot turns out, upon close examination, to have been Mary Stancliffe.⁵ It must be that Martha Simmonds, following the urgings of Nayler, her husband Thomas, and other Friends, finally learned to "stand single to the Lord, and not believe every spirit".

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¹ London and Middlesex Quarterly Meeting Burial Digest (Friends House Library, London). She is listed as being of "Magdalens Bermon[d]sey Parish".

² Swarthmore MSS, I, 45, as quoted in Braithwaite, *Beginnings of Quakerism*, 269.

³ Can the Martha Simmonds who died in Southwark have been the daughter of Martha and Thomas Simmonds (one of their unknown children)?

⁴ Braithwaite, *Beginnings of Quakerism*, p. 269. Hannah Stranger later became Hannah Salter and proved to be a valuable Friend. Bristol Record Society, XXVI (1971), p. 25n.

⁵ Friends House Library, Crosse MSS.