Henry Fell, Early Publisher of Truth

NE of the more intriguing figures in early Quaker history is Henry Fell, who was probably the first Friend to travel on four different continents. His various missionary activities carried him through England, across Europe, several times to the West Indies, and to such widely separated places as New York, Surinam on the coast of South America, and Alexandria in Egypt (while on his way to visit the legendary figure Prester John). With the exception of the unknown Friend who laboured in the East Indies for three years prior to 1661, Henry Fell was perhaps the most widely travelled of all the early Quakers.

Fell's origins, like his end, are shrouded in obscurity. He appears to have been born in 1630 and to have died sometime in the mid-1670s. The latest known letter from Henry Fell was written in 1674. He was already dead by the time that Richard Richardson's "list of Friends in the Ministry deceased" was produced in 1680.2 Henry Fell belonged to one of the many Lancashire families of that name. Although he was closely attached to the family of Judge Thomas Fell (and once served as his clerk), it is not clear that he was actually related to Judge Fell.3

It seems probable that Henry Fell was one of George Fox's many converts in the Swarthmoor area at the time of Fox's first visit there in 1652—when Margaret Fell and most of her family at Swarthmoor and Leonard Fell and others at Baycliff were convinced. 4 Henry's close relationship with Margaret

- William C. Braithwaite, The Second Period of Quakerism, second edition with notes by Henry J. Cadbury (Cambridge, 1961), pp. 217, 668-669.
- ² Friends House Library, London, Manuscripts, Portfolio 5.60. Henry Fell is recorded as number 96 on this list. The two Friends listed just before him died in 1678, while the three immediately after him died in 1675, 1678, and 1672—so that there is no apparent chronological pattern to the listing of these deceased Friends.
- 3 Friends House Library, Swarthmore MSS I, 42 (Tr. II, 97). Henry Fell in 1656 speaks of "my Brother Thomas Fell" in a list of other people (including Leonard Fell) not so designated. This Thomas appears to be someone other than Judge Fell, although the name *Thomas* may indicate a closer relationship than has been hitherto thought likely.
- 4 George Fox, Journal, ed. by John L. Nickalls (Cambridge, 1952), pp. 113-117. All references to Fox's Journal are to this edition unless otherwise stated.

Fell (and her children) and William Caton (who was employed in a secretarial capacity at Swarthmoor) is reflected in his many extant letters to these two. Although Henry Fell probably was convinced in 1652, there is available no evidence of his travelling in the ministry before 1655, when he suddenly appears quite active as a "Publisher of Truth."

Early in 1655 Henry Fell was at Gravesend, where he was able to report that meetings had been held and that several people had been convinced. In May 1656 he seems to have been back at Swarthmoor Hall once more, writing to William Caton twice that month. In August 1656 Henry Fell wrote from Bristol that he had been going toward Launceston to visit George Fox who was imprisoned there but had heard that no Friends were allowed to pass. He had also been in Gloucester visiting some Friend who was in prison there. 3

A few days later, on August 14, Henry Fell reported to Margaret Fell from Bristol, the main gateway to the West Indies, that he would shortly be travelling to Barbados. He also noted that six Bristol Quaker women, whose husbands were already in Barbados, would probably travel out on the same ship with him—as well as a young Friend who was going there on "outward business." 4 Fell arrived in Barbados on October 7 and soon was hard at work in his proclamation of the Quaker message. For two weeks he joined with Mary Fisher, Peter Head, and John Rous in holding meetings throughout the island, prior to their departure for the Leeward Islands. He reported to Margaret Fell that he had experienced some difficulty with Joseph Salman, an English Ranter, who had "bewitched" many who had leaned towards Friends, and that he had also spent half an hour with the governor, who was a "very moderate" man. The governor, he added, "took no offence att my hatt or thouinge of him but he is high in his wisdom & many words, and conceited of himself".6

```
<sup>1</sup> Swarthmore MSS IV, 167 (Tr. II, 85).
```

² Ibid., IV, 260 (Tr. II, 91); IV, 265 (Tr. II, 93).

³ Ibid., I, 42 (Tr. II, 97).

⁴ Ibid., I, 65 (Tr. II, 99). Cf. ibid., I, 292 (Tr. III, 639) for a reference in the Swarthmore accounts to money being provided for his voyage to Barbados.

⁵ Christopher Hill, The World Turned Upside Down (London, 1972), passim, especially pp. 162-163, 174-177, 226-227.

⁶ Swarthmore MSS I, 66 (Tr. II, 101).

By December 19, persecution and suffering had become Henry Fell's lot, so that he reported having been abused and beaten while on his way to visit Colonel Morris, who had requested a visit. The guilty ones, however, had already been "bound over to their sessions". Whenever Fell tried to speak at any of the various "meeting houses" or to any of the priests (usually waiting until they had completed their own talks), he was "hayled forth". He reports that,

I went to speake to one of the Cheife preists in the Land on that day they call Christmasse day who was preachinge & I spoke to him but was carryed away to the marshall's house where I was kept but till he had done; & then two or 3, called Justices came, & I was before them brought, one of them tould me I must find security for the good behaviour, & for my app[ea]rance at the generall Sessions, & he would give me three dayes tyme to give security else I should goe to prison. I tould him I had not behaved myself ill & therefore I should not give him Security, & the lord was my Security & taught me to behave myself honestly, and I looked not to men for Security, for I had broken noe law that was accordinge to that of God in the Conscience. If I had done evill to any man, I deny not to suffer thou mayst use thy power &c. and I gave him a paper which I had written ag[ains]t the observation of that tyme (There was another, with me, who was but newly convinced) soe a little before the sessions came they Issued out their warrants under 3 Justices hands for us both to be apprehended & sent them up & down the Country from Constable to Constable but none layd hould of us to bringe us to the Sessions, & though we were presented by the grand Jury (soe called) yet nothinge was done against us.2

On January 11, 1657, the "word of the Lord" came to Henry Fell that he should go to New England where Friends had been undergoing an increasing persecution. He was able to report to Margaret Fell on February 19 that Mary Dyer (who was one of the four Quakers later to be hanged at Boston) and Ann Burden, who were both returning from England to New England, were now in Barbados and that it was his hope to go to New England with them. On March 14, Fell wrote that he had not yet been able to go to New England but still intended to do so and reported that John Rous hoped to go with him. In the meantime Fell and Rous had been

¹ Ibid., I, 67 (Tr. II, 107). ² Ibid., I, 68 (Tr. II, 111).

³ Ibid., I, 68 (Tr. II, 111). Mary Fisher and Peter Head were now on their way back to England via Holland.

holding four or five meetings a week in Barbados—where the work had been made more difficult by reports coming from England about James Nayler's "fall," for this had produced opposition to and attacks on Quakerism by many of the enemies in the island.¹

Henry Fell's plans to go to New England were still very much in his mind when he and John Rous wrote to Margaret Fell on April 24, but there is no record of such a religious visit. Just when his return journey to England got under way is uncertain; probably it was shortly after July 22, when John Rous wrote to Margaret Fell that Henry Fell "hath freedom to go for England" and that at his departure Rous would be the only ministering Friend in Barbados. When Fell's ship was approaching England, it was captured by the Spaniards and he was taken to Spain as a prisoner. Escaping from Spain, Fell then made his way through France to La Rochelle and got passage to England—arriving in London on October 29, 1657.3

After some months in England, Henry Fell decided to return to Barbados once more. Sailing from Plymouth, where he had waited eight or nine days, he arrived in Barbados in September 1658. This time he was accompanied by Ann Clayton, Robert Malins, Peter Cowsnocke, Edward Eades [Teddes], Philip Rose, Marmaduke Stevenson, and Peter Pearson, some of whom intended to continue on to New England, Virginia, Jamaica, and elsewhere. Shortly after this return to Barbados Henry Fell wrote to Margaret Fell that John Bowron—who had just completed his visit to Surinam—was in Barbados and reported that Bowron "hath done little good here, but rather hurt".5 In his next letter to her, written early in October, Henry shows that the "spell" of Surinam was now upon him (perhaps as a result of his conversations with John Bowron), so that he expects that he may soon visit that temporarily English colony on the north-eastern coast of South America.6

Almost seven months passed before Henry Fell's next extant letter was written on May 8, 1659. He reported that

```
Ibid., I, 69 (Tr. II, 117).
Ibid., I, 80 (Tr. III, 261).
Ibid., I, 71 (Tr. II, 127).
Ibid., VI, 20 (Tr. VII, 505); IV, 238 (Tr. IV, 249); IV, 218 (Tr. IV, 289).
Ibid., I, 70 (Tr. II, 125).
Ibid., I, 72 (Tr. II, 129).
```

during this period he had journeyed to Surinam, having been accompanied by four Barbados Quakers. They had performed some service among the settlers there, and some convincements had been made in Surinam. It was his belief, however, that the inhabitants in that colony exceeded in wickedness any that he had thus far met among the English—"Insoemuch that the Indians thereaways by the evill example of the English are much worse and hardened in their ways, & little of God appearing in many of them wee were Among." Fell also described his labours among these Indians and told of the Quaker sufferings at the hands of the officials (books were burned, and Fell and his companions placed in stocks and then temporarily banished into a great wilderness). Finally Fell, who was suffering from a great illness at the time, and his companions were shipped back to Barbados."

Probably Henry Fell returned to England shortly after this, for he was in England by mid-autumn. On November 14, 1659, he was back at Swarthmoor Hall and was corresponding with George Fox, seeking advice about going on some religious travel with "J. S.".2 In all probability, he was already entertaining the idea of going with John Stubbs to Alexandria and beyond, in their projected visit to Prester John. More than a year would pass, however, before they began that journey. Henry Fell appears to have spent much of late 1659 and early 1660 in the Swarthmoor vicinity. On May 21, 1660, after having been active in the Norfolk area, he was arrested at a meeting and was placed in Thetford Prison.3 While imprisoned here, Fell wrote to Charles II (who had been upon the throne only a short time) warning him to walk in uprightness—otherwise God "will overturn till Truth and Righteousness comes to raign in Kingdoms, Nations and Governments, which he alone loves and takes delight in." 4 He

Friends House Library, London, Caton MSS, III, 229–232. Cf. Kenneth L. Carroll, "Early Quakers in Surinam (1658–1659)", Quaker History, scheduled for publication in 1973. The section of Fell's letter dealing with Surinam is reproduced in full in this article.

[•] Swarthmore MSS IV, 181 (T1. II, 133).

³ Ibid., I, 73 (Tr. II, 135). At Thetford, Fell had been pulled out of a meeting, whipped, then turned out of the town and sent as a vagabond from parish to parish until he might return to Lancashire.

⁴ George Fox (et al.), The Copies of Several Letters, which were delivered to the King (London, 1660), pp. 17-22, contains Fell's letter. The quotation comes from the foot of p. 20. On pp. 23-24 is found a sort of postscript dealing with Henry Fell's own case. Cf. Swarthmore MSS I, 74 (Tr. II, 139).

also wrote, at Thetford in July, An Alarum of Truth Sounded forth to the Nations, a fifty-page work which is a sound presentation of the Quaker faith, calling others to seek the Light and Truth. In this work, which frequently alludes to scripture, Fell appears conscious of living on the threshold of judgment.¹

At the beginning of August, Henry Fell was released from his imprisonment and arrived in London on the ninth—joining such Friends as Margaret Fell and William Caton.² Caton wrote to George Fox several days later that he believed Henry Fell would stay in London for "a season".³ It was while Fell was in London, at the time of the Fifth Monarchy uprising, that he nearly lost his life—for, while he was going to a general meeting at Major Beard's, soldiers knocked him down and he would have been killed if the Duke of York (later James II) had not come along and rescued him.⁴

At the beginning of December, Fell was at work in Suffolk and reported that he had been labouring also in Essex, and a part of Norfolk. His plans called for him to return to Thetford and then to London once more. He also noted that John Stubbs had written to him about some likelihood of passage to the East Indies (and the projected trip to visit Prester John—sometimes thought of as dwelling in Central Asia and other times identified with the ruler of Ethiopia). Fell, however, was still seeking George Fox's advice on this projected visit to Prester John.5

It was early in 1661, on January 21, that George Fox and eleven other influential Friends issued their famous "Declaration," setting forth the Quaker peace testimony.6 Among these eleven others is found the name of Henry Fell, thus testifying to the important place which he had won for himself during the first decade of the Quaker movement.

- ¹ Henry Fell, An Alarum of Truth Sounded forth to the Nations (London, 1660).
- ² Swarthmore MSS I, 77 (Tr. II, 141). This letter to Bridget Fell mentions that her mother Margaret is present in London. It also reflects the great love Henry Fell has for the Swarthmoor Hall family.
 - 3 Ibid., IV, 271 (T1. I, 418).
 - 4 George Fox, Journal (Cambridge, 1911), i, 386.
 - 5 Swarthmore MSS I, 78 (Tr. II, 143).
- 6 A Declaration from the Harmles & Innocent People of God, called Quakers. Against all Plotters and Fighters in the World (London, 1660 [1661]). Cf. Fox, Journal, pp. 398-404.

In mid-spring of 1661, Henry Fell and John Stubbs were finally able to embark on their voyage to Egypt, which was meant to be only a stepping stone on their way to meet Prester John. Even before their departure, these two had produced a special message addressed to this legendary figure (with the first three pages being in Latin and the last three in English). They noted that

Our message is sent unto Thee, and to thy Kingdomes by us the servants of the Lord, and [who] hath sent us his servants to give Thee, and Thy Dominions, and Nations a visit and hearing that thou hast a Love to the faith of Christ, the Light of the World, which enlightnesh every man that cometh into the world, by which men apprehend the Faith from him.

They also noted their awareness that they are only a small part of the great missionary surge that marked Quakerism in 1660/1661:

We from the Lord having a moving out of great Brittain, England, from among the family of the Prophets of the most high God, among whom his name and power and glory is revealed, who are two of the rest which are sent out into the Nations, into the World, into the utmost parts of the Earth, to visite Gods Vineyard, and the Kings of the Earth whom God hath in his hand, and rules them as the waters.²

Even before these two travelling Friends could get under way, they met with many difficulties (as recorded by Fox in his *Journal*):

John Stubbs, and Henry Fell, and Richard Scosthrop were moved to go to China and Prester John's country, but no masters of ships would carry them. At last they got a warrant from the King; but the East India Company would not obey it, nor the masters of their ships. Then they went into Holland, and would have got passage, but no passage there could they get. And there John Stubbs and Henry Fell took shipping to go to Alexandria in Egypt, and so to go by the caravans from thence.³

Fell and Stubbs met much the same type of treatment in Alexandria that John Perrot and his companions had experienced several years earlier in Smyrna (where the

¹ H[enry] F[ell] & J[ohn] S[tubbs], For Presbyter John, and All his subordinate Kings and Princes (London, 1660).

² Ibid., pp. 4-5.

³ Fox, Journal, 420. Fell, Stubbs, Scosthrop, and Daniel Baker travelled together to Leghorn, then separated—with Baker and Scosthrop going on to Smyrna and Fell and Stubbs to Alexandria.

English consul there discovered their purpose and strongly encouraged them to return home). Fox reports that the English consul banished Fell and Stubbs from Alexandria, but only after they had been able to distribute a number of books and papers to the Turks and Grecians. These two Quaker missionaries then returned by ship to Italy from Egypt. Then they went by land from Leghorn, travelling thirty-two days without resting before they joined William Caton at Heidelberg in Germany. Here they also met with the Prince Palatine, at his request, having a two-hour discussion with him. From here Fell and Stubbs travelled on to Holland, where they spent a brief period working with William Ames before setting out for England. By the beginning of February 1662 they were back in London once more.

Very little is known about Henry Fell in the dozen or more years of his life following his arrival back in England from Egypt. It would appear that he soon returned to Barbados, and there is no known reference to any work in England by him after that time. The several remaining bits of information all relate to Barbados—suggesting that Fell settled down on that island, which had a large Quaker population and on which he had laboured so much a few years earlier. It seems probable, though, that his travels in the ministry came to a stop before very long and that he then became involved in a period of deep inward and outward turmoil and suffering.

Henry Fell is said to have been imprisoned in Barbados in December 1662.4 Our next news of him is found in a 1666 letter which he wrote to Margaret Fell.5 This document shows that he had written a number of earlier letters which apparently had been lost as a result of the war which had caused many ships to "miscarry". (Margaret Fell's own letter of December 9, 1665, had taken almost six months to reach him.) He reports that meetings in Barbados are peaceful, but that "things are not well"—for the enemy had sown tares

² Fox, Journal, 420. Cf. Besse, Sufferings, 1753, ii. 420.

¹ Kenneth L. Carroll, John Perrot, early Quaker schismatic (London, 1971), published as J.F.H.S., Supp. No. 33, p. 18.

³ Swarthmore MSS, IV, 171 (Tr. II, 149). Cf. William I. Hull, The Rise of Quakerism in Amsterdam, 1655–1665 (Swarthmore, Pa., 1938), p. 183.

⁴ Backhouse, Biographical Memoirs (MS.), III, 256, found in Friends House Library, London.

⁵ Friends House Library, London, Thirnbeck MS. 4.

(probably a reference to the schismatic influence of John Perrot). He records the earlier death of Perrot in Jamaica, but notes that R. Stacke—who seems to have fallen into the Perrotonian error—has recently arrived from Virginia and is very much like Perrot in his work.²

Fell also reports that, with the departure of Ann Clayton, Joseph Nicholson and his wife, and Ann Coleman, all to Rhode Island, there were now no ministering Friends in Barbados. Fell, himself, was about to depart for New York "in New England", travelling in a vessel in which he had bought part interest. It was his plan to visit Friends in that area, while investigating the possibilities of settling there the following year. In the meantime, however, Fell's wife³ and her family would remain in Barbados while he was away for four or five months.

The next glimpse we get of Fell comes some six and a half years later in a letter to Margaret [Fell] Fox from Henry Fell, who was still in Barbados. After reporting the great work which George Fox had done in Barbados, Jamaica, and New England (before returning to Maryland to "winter"), Fell notes that his own wife and another Barbados Friend were in Bermuda, having gone there on religious service some seven weeks previously. Although his wife's religious situation was "solid", Fell himself had by now floundered spiritually, morally, and financially. Probably it was his participation in various commercial enterprises (such as the shipping adventure noted in his 1666 letter) which caused him to go deeply in debt. He greatly longed to return to England but knew that it would be impossible for him to remove from Barbados until debts there were satisfied. He therefore noted,

but [I] must bear it, for it is the fruit of my own doings. Had I kept to the Truth and in the fear of the Lord, I had been preserved out of the things into which I did plunge and pierced myself through with many sorrows. So that it is very just from the Lord upon me;

² Carroll, John Perrot, p. 82.

² This is probably Robert Stack [Stake, Stage] of Maryland (which at this time was often thought of as a part of "Virginia"—that whole area opening off the Chesapeake Bay). Cf. Henry J. Cadbury, Friendly Heritage, letters from the Quaker past (Norwalk, Conn., 1972), pp. 194–195.

³ The name of his wife and the place and date of their marriage are unknown. New York had only recently been taken from the Dutch.

⁴ Maria Webb, The Fells of Swarthmoor Hall and Their Friends (Philadelphia, 1896), pp. 305-308. This letter was written December 14, 1672. Cf. Friends House Library, London, Manuscripts, Portfolio 31.62.

and I find most peace in keeping under it, till he shows me a way of deliverance out of it, which I believe he will do in due time.

Henry Fell's final letter known to us was written from Barbados to Margaret Fox on March 8, 1674. One cannot help but be touched by the pathetic situation in which Fell found himself. Margaret's letter of March 8, 1673, had proved to be both a challenge and a comfort to him in his unhappy state. To it was due some of the credit for the reawakening of his spiritual life—as well as to Fox's visit to Barbados a short time before. Fell writes,

And blessed be the name of the Lord, who againe hath opened an eye in me; of his infinite mercy & goodnesse & hath let me see my fall, & losse in a great measure: and not only soe, but also the way out of it to returne unto himselfe, and hath brought me into that way in measure, and into the Spirituall warfare against that which separated me from God; & hath brought me to waite upon him, in the way of his Judgments; & my hope is that he will give me patience alsoe to abide & waite there untill Jud[g]ment be brought forth into victory; & the Captivity be returned; and that which brought forth captivity be for ever ledd captive; by the power of that blessed seed (which was promissed of old to bruise the Serpents head) Christ Jesus whose right it is to raigne over all for evermore. O I cannot but remember the great & mervilous love of god to mine, & many poore Soules here in this Island in sending his blessed Apostles and servants to vissit us here, vizt. dear GF: and the rest with him. O it was a blessed vissitation of love to us, even to the raysinge of my soule out of death, which was even dead in sins and trespases; but now againe quickened by the power of the word of life, through the preachinge of the everlasting Gospell wherby the blinde came to see, the deafe to heare; and the dead to be raysed; even as Lazarus out of the grave soe that my soule (above many) hath great cause for ever to prayse and magnify the name of the Lord on their behalfe; whose Labour of love the lord hath & will reward for ever.

And indeed as thou mentioned in thy last letter, the pure in me thereby hath again received a Second resurection. And though it meet with great opposition, & many enemyes; yea greater & stronger then before; and tryalls & temptations many, yet as I am kept low in the feare of the Lord, I am dayly preserved and faithful to the measure of his grace in me I finde it is sufficient for me: ffor he is come who is stronger then he that is in the world: so that as Sin hath abounded, his grace doth much more abound (glory to his name for ever), and (I hope) at length will bringe Salvation and deliver my Soule out of the hands of all it enemyes, that it may for ever blesse and prayse the Lord in the land of the livinge.²

¹ Fox, Camb. Jnl., ii. 256–258.

² Ibid., ii, 256–257.

Fell's wife and child were scheduled to sail for Bristol in the fleet about to depart. Henry, himself, would like to have been able to accompany them, but his "debts & outwards engagements" had made him "as it were a prisoner in this Island". John Stubbs, Fell's old friend and former yoke-fellow on the journey to Alexandria (who was also to be the bearer of this letter to Margaret Fox), had almost made it possible for Fell to satisfy his creditors and return to England; however, John Cartwright, who was then travelling in Barbados, had set Friends against the project so that it had failed for the time being. Fell's letter then ends with a cry from the heart:

I should be very gladd once more to see my native Country; if the Lord soe please that it may be soe. In the meane tyme I desire thy prayers for me, that I may be preserved faithffull to persevere unto the end ffor I meet with many tryalls both inward & outward, & many Snares & temptations from the enemy, whereby he seekes by all meanes possible to entangle me againe. But I hope the Lord will preserve me out of them (by his power), & in due tyme give me dominion over him: for which my Soule breathes & cryes dayly unto the Lord that it may be accomplished.²

How did Fell's struggles end? This we do not know, for nothing subsequent to the 1674 letter has been found. Probably he never succeeded in freeing himself from his debts, for one very early bit of information records that he died in America3 rather than returning home. It seems, however, that he was much more successful in the spiritual struggle—for he was listed in Richard Richardson's 1680 'list of Friends in the Ministry deceased' as well as having a brief testimony of his work preserved.

KENNETH L. CARROLL

¹ *Ibid.*, ii, 257.

² Ibid., ii, 258.

³ Friends House Library, London, Manuscripts, Portfolio 17.3.

⁴ Ibid., Portfolio 5.60.

s Ibid., 17.3. It reads as follows: "Henry Fell, who was Judge Fell's clerk, being convinced of Gods truth, after a while he travelled with John Stubbs, & having got an order from the King to the master of the shipps to carry him towards East Indys. But the master of the shipps in Holland & England would not obey it & carry them. Therefore they took Shipping to go through Egypt by the Caravans. But when they came into Egypt the Consule there banished them out of Egypt. And after when they had some service they came into England & [he] travaild into America and there dyed."