

A LETTER BY JAMES NAYLER APPROPRIATED TO GEORGE FOX

In a number of manuscripts¹ in the Library at Friends House, London, are copies, all in seventeenth-century hands, of an undated letter beginning 'All Friends everywhere, who with the light that never changeth are convinced and turned from darkness'. In each copy the signature to the letter is given as that of James Nayler. But in the volume of George Fox's *Epistles* published in 1698, undated but with the year 1653 at the head of the page and with the address in the margin as 'To Friends in Cumberland, Bishoprick, and Northumberland', the letter is printed as by Fox, with his initials given by way of signature (Ep. 47, pp. 45–46). The identity of the two documents is noted on the relevant card for the Library's holding of Nayler MSS., but appears not to have been made the subject of any critical observation.

The manuscript versions do not significantly vary from one another and in what follows will be regarded as if a single entity; but collation between them and the version as printed reveals a number of variations. In terms of the letter as a whole these are statistically few; but in general they confirm the assumption that the manuscript version is the earlier, and that alterations were made when the letter was printed. In a few cases the wording in the manuscript may also be thought to be characteristic of Nayler rather than Fox, and the printed form to be more in line with the religious views of Fox (or his editor).

Where in the manuscript Friends are exhorted to dwell in the light 'that you may come to learn Christ', and the Spirit 'works to freedom', in print this reads 'that ye may learn of Christ', and the word 'to' is omitted; and as Hugh Barbour remarks², 'Fox stred degrees or growth in Light less than did Nayler'. Where in the manuscript Friends are exhorted not to 'walk by imitation of others' in print the word 'only' is inserted, suggesting a change from the call by the Publishers of Truth to be spiritually independent of themselves to an acceptance that a measure of admiring dependence on the leaders was in right ordering. Where in the manuscript Friends are urged to 'mind their standing', the words 'upon Christ their rock' are added, very much in Fox's manner. In the manuscript the phrase 'the manifestation of him who is approved' is followed by the words '& this Man Cannot be revealed, but in the falling away'; these words are omitted, presumably because earlier

millenarian convictions were now abandoned. In the phrase 'that which will not come to the everlasting foundation is made to be tossed to and fro' the change in the printed version from 'made' to 'apt' may similarly be seen as the dropping of a Calvinist locution (which Nayler may have taken over from the Independent church of which he had been a member) as no longer appropriate. Other differences may be regarded as largely stylistic: these also, as where in the printed version the phrase 'but the end will be lost labour' becomes 'but in the end thy labour will be lost', suggest that the terser wording in the manuscript is the earlier.

Extracts from the document under consideration were reprinted as by Fox in L.V. Holdsworth's *Daybook of Counsel and Comfort* (1937), and again more recently in C.W. Sharman's *No More But My Love* (1980). If the attribution to Nayler be accepted, it raises a number of questions. Not much seems known about the editing of Fox's *Epistles*, apart from the fact that there was an enormous mass of material on which to draw. In editing *The Annual Catalogue of George Fox's Papers* (1939) Henry J. Cadbury excluded all papers known to be printed, so that his volume throws no light on the document under consideration; but the fact that the entry 92A (p.37) carries the bracketed heading 'J.N.' suggests that documents by writers other than Fox, and specifically that documents written by Nayler, *could* come to rest among Fox's papers. Perhaps this is what happened in this case. If so, one is bound to ask, was the editor of Fox's *Epistles* not aware of this? There is no need to question his good faith or general reliability; but it is in an interesting coincidence, if no more, that in the same year as that in which Fox's *Epistles* were printed the question of publishing a collection of Nayler's writings was raised by Yorkshire Friends³. Again, if one letter among Fox's *Epistles* was in fact written not by Fox but by Nayler, may the collection, one wonders, not include other letters written by Nayler, or by other Friends?

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ Caton, MSS., i. 39 and ii. 1; Portfolio 36. 110; Box A: G, F, Ss; MS. vol. 298.

² Hugh Barbour, *The Quakers in Puritan England* (New Haven and London, 1964), 150, n. 77.

³ W.C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism* (2nd edn., Cambridge, 1961), 419.