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## Introduction

### The Political Thought of William Penn (1644–1718)

This volume aims to introduce William Penn and his political thought to audiences who may be familiar with his contemporaries (Hobbes, Locke, Harrington, Sidney) but less so with Penn himself. As I have written elsewhere, more than 300 years after his death Penn remains “a man apart, a figure whom many know a little, but few know well.”<sup>1</sup> But a close examination of William Penn’s remarkable political career – of the ideas that he developed as a Dissenter in England, and his attempts to implement them as a colonial proprietor in America – provides a window into the broader emergence of civil and religious liberty in early modern England and America. Born two years after the outbreak of civil war, Penn came of age during the Restoration and lived on, though in declining health, into the reign of George I. At the height of his involvement in politics, between 1685 and 1688, he was one of the best-known and most influential Dissenters in the land. At its depths, he found himself imprisoned on several occasions in the aftermath of the 1688 Revolution, suspected of Jacobite sympathies, and accused of treason. Later still, he spent much of 1708 in debtors’ prison. But between the late 1660s and the early eighteenth century, William Penn played a central role in the political life of the nation, the development of Quakerism, the

<sup>1</sup> Murphy, *Liberty, Conscience, and Toleration*, p. ix. For more extensive treatment of these topics, see chapters 1 and 8 of *Liberty, Conscience, and Toleration*, from which much of the material in this Introduction is drawn.

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articulation of religious liberty as a necessary component of legitimate government, and the launching of a major American colony.

Penn has never been without champions. Voltaire sang his praises in some stirring passages in the fourth of his *Letters on the English* (though it must also be admitted that Voltaire's paeans to Penn misstate a number of key dates and details). Thomas Jefferson pronounced Penn "the greatest lawgiver the world has produced, the first in either ancient or modern times who has laid the foundation of government in the pure and unadulterated principles of peace, of reason and right" in pursuit of "the only legitimate objects of government, the happiness of man."<sup>2</sup>

Yet for years, with the exception of Mary Maples Dunn's *William Penn: Politics and Conscience*, systematic scholarly attention to Penn's political thought lagged behind that lavished on his more famous contemporaries.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, Penn often appears in studies of his more famous contemporaries, such as John Locke, Algernon Sidney, or James II. Other scholars have explored the key role he played in the Society of Friends, as well as the founding of Pennsylvania and the religious, political, and economic developments that made its early years so noteworthy in the history of English colonizing efforts in North America.<sup>4</sup> In what follows, I lay out some of the reasons for this oversight, as well as the payoffs of reintroducing Penn into the history of political thought.

<sup>2</sup> Voltaire, *Lettres, Ecrites de Londres sur les Anglois et Autres Sujets* (London, 1734), Letter 4; "Jefferson to Peter Stephen Duponceau," November 16, 1825; <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/default.xqy?keys=FOEA-print-04-02-02-5663>

<sup>3</sup> Mary Maples Dunn, *William Penn: Politics and Conscience* (Princeton University Press, 1967).

<sup>4</sup> On Penn's famous contemporaries, see Richard Ashcraft, *Revolutionary Politics and Locke's Two Treatises of Government* (Princeton University Press, 1986); Jonathan Scott, *Algernon Sidney and the Restoration Crisis, 1677–1683* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Steve Pincus, *1688: The First Modern Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Scott Sowerby, *Making Toleration: The Repealers and the Glorious Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

On his role in the Society of Friends, see Melvin B. Endy, Jr., *William Penn and Early Quakerism* (Princeton University Press, 1973); William C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism* (London: Macmillan, 1919); Richard C. Allen and Rosemary Moore (with specialist contributors), *The Quakers, 1656–1723: The Evolution of an Alternative Community* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2018); Jane E. Calvert, *Quaker Constitutionalism and the Political Thought of John Dickinson* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

On early Pennsylvania, see Edwin B. Bronner, *William Penn's Holy Experiment: The Founding of Pennsylvania, 1681–1701* (New York: Temple/Columbia, 1962); J. William Frost, *A Perfect Freedom: Religious Liberty in Pennsylvania* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1993); Sally Schwartz, *A Mixed Multitude: The Struggle for Toleration in Colonial Pennsylvania* (New York: NYU Press, 1988).

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*Liberty, Conscience, and Toleration: The Political Thought of William Penn*, by the present writer, more recently joined Dunn's as the only book-length treatment of Penn's political thought, and sought to enrich scholarship by drawing on the recent insights of Cambridge School and contextualist approaches to the history of political thought since the late 1960s.<sup>5</sup> And in the wake of the 300th anniversary of Penn's death, which was marked in 2018, a new scholarly biography, along with a new collection of essays, *The Worlds of William Penn*, approached its subject's complex legacy – both the worlds that shaped him and the worlds he helped shape – from a multidisciplinary set of perspectives.<sup>6</sup>

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At first glance, William Penn's political thinking can appear puzzling. Although deeply engaged in both political theorizing and active political involvement, Penn did not produce a political-philosophical *magnum opus*. Most of Penn's public writings were *pièces d'occasion*, and his public career embodied a number of paradoxes that have challenged scholars seeking to understand his complex legacy. First, William Penn lived with a sharp tension between egalitarian ideas and hierarchical and deferential expectations. As a zealous convert to, and an influential leading member of, the Society of Friends, Penn espoused a radically egalitarian theology that proclaimed human equality in the sight of God and the transformative power of the Light within.<sup>7</sup> Yet, as a member of the English gentry, raised in a prominent family with a war hero for a father, Penn expected deference and subordination from others, consistently lived beyond his means, was never without servants, and even owned slaves who worked at Pennsbury, his American estate. Much of Penn's correspondence with Pennsylvania's government during his extended absences from the colony read like the fulminations of a parent disappointed in his wayward children.

<sup>5</sup> Murphy, *Liberty, Conscience, and Toleration*. I refer of course to the pioneering work of Quentin Skinner, J. G. A. Pocock, and the "Cambridge School." See the essays collected in Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Volume I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge University Press, 2002); Pocock, *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (University of Chicago Press, 1971); and John Dunn, *Political Obligation in Historical Context: Essays in Political Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> Murphy, *William Penn: A Life*; and Murphy and Smolenski (eds.), *The Worlds of William Penn*, the title of which pays homage to, and moves beyond, another outstanding collection: Richard S. Dunn and Mary Maples Dunn (eds.), *The World of William Penn* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> See Rosemary Moore, *The Light in Their Consciences: Early Quakers in Britain, 1646–1666* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2000).

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Second, Penn's own political loyalties shifted dramatically over the course of his long public career. In its early days, he became a national figure by defending the rights of Dissenters, and he championed representative popular institutions, such as juries and parliament, as guarantors of the people's liberties. Yet during the late 1680s Penn was widely reviled as James II's mouthpiece, the paid lackey of an absolutist monarch bent on destroying the rule of law. Penn himself reconciled his varied commitments – to representative institutions, to liberty of conscience, and to the king's program for granting liberty of conscience – by insisting that the king's Declaration of Indulgence be followed in short order by parliamentary confirmation. Nonetheless, in such a heated political atmosphere, we ought not to be surprised if the nuances of his position escaped those who saw his employer as an existential threat to English liberties.

Third, despite his high hopes for Pennsylvania, Penn's physical absence from his American province virtually ensured that such aspirations would go unfulfilled. A few months after his arrival in Pennsylvania, Penn wrote that "I am mightily taken with this part of the world...I like it so well, that...my family being once fixt with me; and if no other thing occur, I am like to be an adopted American."<sup>8</sup> Yet he would spend just about four years of his remaining thirty-six in America. The man whose name would eventually grace American banks, insurance companies, hotels, universities, and schools became a cipher to those he had so assiduously recruited to America. He spent his final seventeen years far from Pennsylvania and was finally laid to rest in Old Jordans Cemetery outside of London.

The divergent fortunes of Penn and his colony represent a fourth paradox worth considering here. From modest beginnings in the early 1680s, Philadelphia grew into the "richest, fastest-growing, and most cultivated of American cities" by the middle of the next century.<sup>9</sup> Yet Penn was never able to reap the benefits of the colony's multifaceted promise. His imprisonment for debt in 1708 provides evidence of his chronic difficulties managing money, and his excessive borrowing is inseparable from his

<sup>8</sup> Penn to Lord Culpeper, February 5, 1683, *Papers of William Penn*, ed. Richard S. and Mary Maples Dunn, 5 vols. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981–1986), vol. II: p. 350. Hereafter, references to the *Papers* will appear as *PWP* volume: page number – so here, *PWP* II: 350.

<sup>9</sup> Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 80, 197.

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inability to realize the economic possibilities of American colonization. In fact, he was attempting to sell Pennsylvania back to the crown when he was incapacitated by the first of several strokes in 1712. It seems likely that the dynamic growth of Pennsylvania might well have taken place precisely *because of*, rather than in spite of, the proprietor's extended absences.

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If William Penn produced no masterwork, no synthetic or architectonic work that guaranteed him entry into the canon of political philosophy, he nonetheless played a crucial role in the emergence of religious toleration and liberty of conscience as a fundamental element of early modern political thought. His importance derives, first and foremost, from his central role in the increasingly vocal, organized, and philosophically sophisticated tolerationist movement that gained strength over the second half of the seventeenth century. Shaped by the experience of religious and political dissent on both sides of the Atlantic, theorists of toleration generated substantive principles of civil and religious liberty, insisting that individuals and groups be free to follow the dictates of their conscience not only in the narrow essentials of religious worship, but in the many ways in which issues of conscience arise in public life. Penn's placement at the heart of this movement grants his political thought a signal importance in the emergence of toleration as both a philosophical principle and a political reality.

Not only did Penn attempt to articulate principles of religious liberty as a Quaker in England, he actually experienced firsthand the complex relationship between theory and practice. Unlike most theorists of toleration (certainly, unlike his contemporary, Locke), Penn wielded political power as the chief officer of a constituted government. Given the divergent localities in which Penn produced most of his political theorizing (England) and in which he occupied public office (America), a study of Penn sheds a great deal of light on the transatlantic context of early modern political thought, and especially on the complex phenomenon known as the "British Atlantic." On the one hand, despite living into the eighteenth century and founding an American colony, Penn's world was that of the seventeenth century, and his center of gravity – intellectually, religiously, socially – was English. Viewing Penn primarily as an American "founder," then, runs the risk of underplaying the degree to which he was shaped by his English background. On the other hand, Penn was no ordinary English Dissenter: He was the proprietor and governor of a

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large American colony, a recipient of crown largesse, and deeply invested in the project of imperial expansion and American settlement. An Atlantic perspective helps make sense of Penn's multifaceted political thought and its interplay with the exercise of political power.<sup>10</sup>

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Twenty-first century audiences, for good reason, often consider “toleration” rather minimal and uninspiring compared with the more robust defenses of difference articulated by contemporary theorists of identity. Nor is it only twenty-first-century audiences who express such sentiments: In his 1790 letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, George Washington noted that “It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights.”<sup>11</sup> That said, the concrete victories won by tolerationists over the course of the seventeenth century represented a basic level of legal protection and co-existence for people who had long faced fines, corporal punishment, and jail time for attempting to live with conscientious integrity, and paved the way for the eighteenth-century developments lauded by Washington.

Toleration (often also referred to as “indulgence”) generally refers to the political protection of dissenting individuals and groups. In Penn's time, it contained a number of different dimensions: nonpunishment for those whose religious commitments placed them outside the Church of England, and an end to jailing, fines, or other sanctions for refusing to conform to the Church of England; a reduction in the social power of the established church and the acceptance that Dissent was a permanent feature of English life; and some minimal freedom of assembly and speech (for proselytizing and gathering for worship).<sup>12</sup> Toleration is also closely connected to “liberty of conscience,” a term often understood to ground political protections for Dissent on the less ambiguous theoretical footing of natural-rights arguments. Yet the seventeenth-century sense of these terms was hardly a model of consistency: Penn himself used the two terms interchangeably in his *Great Case of Liberty of Conscience*, whose

<sup>10</sup> On Atlantic history, see Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *The Atlantic in World History* (Oxford University Press, 2012); Jack P. Greene and Philip D. Morgan (eds.), *Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> George Washington, Letter to the Hebrew Congregation at Newport, August 18, 1790: <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/letter-to-the-hebrew-congregation-at-newport/>

<sup>12</sup> See Teresa M. Bejan, “Evangelical Toleration,” *Journal of Politics* 77 (2015): 1103–1114.

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extended title proclaimed the work to be “a general reply to such late discourses as have opposed a toleration.”<sup>13</sup>

William Penn came of age during the Restoration, but religious and political discord had plagued English society for years, firing the English Civil War, the execution of King Charles I, and dominating the Commonwealth and Protectorate periods. Prior to his restoration, in the Declaration of Breda (April 1660), Charles II had indicated his desire for a moderate religious settlement; the Restoration’s ultimate outcome, however, effected by a series of parliamentary statutes known as the Clarendon Code, imposed a narrow and rigid Anglicanism. Thus Restoration debate over the rights of Dissenters always took place against the backdrop of struggles for preeminence between king and parliament.

Tolerationist arguments during these years drew upon a range of sources, and Penn employed all of them. *Christian and Protestant arguments* emphasized the sanctity of individual conscience, and such Scriptural offerings as Jesus’s claim that his kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36), the parable of the tares and wheat (Matthew 13), and Paul’s exhortation that whatever is not of faith is sin (Romans 14). *Epistemological arguments* insisted that the heart of religion resided in inner conviction, and that belief represented a faculty of the understanding and not the will, and was thus impervious to physical coercion. Civil governments, on this view, might control their subjects’ bodies for the common good, but could not compel belief. *Historical arguments* invoked the ancient English constitution and Magna Carta, maintaining that Englishmen held their civil liberties irrespective of religious differences, and offering catalogues of English and European statesmen who endorsed principles of religious liberty, thus providing an historical pedigree for tolerationist claims. And finally, *prudential or pragmatic arguments* emphasized the prosperity and civil peace that toleration would yield after years of religious strife.

But tolerationists always faced an uphill battle. After all, they were calling for a departure from longstanding practices of political and religious uniformity, and they struggled against often-vivid memories of numerous instances where political and religious unrest clearly *had* gone hand in hand. It is impossible to understand discourses of toleration without careful consideration of the criticisms they faced. *Historical or political arguments* drew on memories of the 1640s and 1650s, when

<sup>13</sup> See Penn, *The Great Case of Liberty of Conscience* (1670) (Selection 5 in this volume).

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Dissenters played a central role in a civil war and regicide. *Religious or ecclesiastical* arguments reflected the widespread view that civil rulers were charged with overseeing matters of worship within their borders. Anglican thinkers developed a doctrine of passive obedience that was only reluctantly discarded in 1688, and then only in the face of a frontal assault by a Catholic monarch.<sup>14</sup> And *theological or epistemological arguments* undergirded penal legislation and the suppression of Dissent, with English Protestants going so far as to draw on Augustine's writings justifying coercion against the Donatists.

When Penn entered into these debates over toleration in Restoration England, he did so on behalf of the Society of Friends, a sect that had burst across the British Isles during the 1650s and was soon sending missionaries to Europe and North America. Their "peace testimony" notwithstanding, Quakers continued to attract condemnation from authorities in church and state: They refused to observe conventional practices of decorum and deference, exuberantly celebrated what George Fox, one of the group's key founders, called "the inward Light" or "that of God in every man," and dissented from central elements of Christian orthodoxy such as the Trinity. The Restoration years saw the growth of the Society of Friends from a movement that emphasized the experience of inner Light and the spirit of Christ within to a far more ordered system of Monthly, Quarterly, and Yearly Meetings, complete with disciplinary ecclesiastical structures and collective oversight of members' writings. Penn's support for Fox's organizational efforts sought to provide a balance between the power of individual religious experience and the need for established structures to facilitate the Lord's work.<sup>15</sup>

Complicating all these disputes, England was never a closed system: It was situated within a European world and, increasingly, an ever more intricate incipient global empire overseen by royal officials determined to centralize colonial affairs in the service of a "grand imperial vision."<sup>16</sup> The English had been settling the North American coast, with varying degrees of success, for nearly a century: from Jamestown in 1607 through

<sup>14</sup> Mark Goldie, "The Political Thought of the Anglican Revolution," in *The Revolutions of 1688: The Andrew Browning Lectures*, ed. Robert Beddard (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 102–136.

<sup>15</sup> Endy, *William Penn*, p. 154, and chs. 4, 5 more generally. Also Moore, *The Light in Their Consciences*; Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism*; and Allen and Moore, *The Quakers*.

<sup>16</sup> Owen Stanwood, *The Empire Reformed: English America in the Age of the Glorious Revolution* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), p. 25.



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Massachusetts and Maryland during the 1630s; from Carolina in the 1660s through New Netherland, which the English finally took from the Dutch in the 1670s. Although he never visited America until his voyage to Pennsylvania in 1682, Penn had been involved in mediating disputes between Quakers involved in the New Jersey colony during the 1670s, and was a signatory of the *West Jersey Concessions* of 1677.

Domestic religious considerations intersected with policy toward the Catholic European powers as well as the Protestant Dutch. Stuart kings and Restoration parliaments often had rather different agendas: The secret clauses of the 1670 Treaty of Dover (in which Charles II promised to convert to Catholicism in return for a French subsidy) show the lengths to which English kings would go to be freed from dependence on parliament. In 1685, Louis XIV's revocation of the Edict of Nantes reignited debates about "popery" and persecution just as James II, a Catholic king, began his reign in England.

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The selections included in this volume span three decades in William Penn's public career. Born in 1644 to then Captain (later Admiral, later Admiral Sir) William Penn and his wife, Margaret, a widowed Dutchwoman who had fled to London from the Irish violence of the early 1640s, William Penn grew up in and around London. His father rose through the ranks of the navy, siding with parliament during the Civil Wars and gaining additional renown under Cromwell. In the mid 1650s, Admiral Penn (having invoked Cromwell's displeasure due to his failure to capture Hispaniola in the ill-fated "Western Design")<sup>17</sup> took his family to their lands in County Cork, Ireland, which Cromwell had bestowed in happier times. The boy spent four years there, leaving to attend Christ Church College, Oxford, in the fall of 1660. It was a miserable experience, and Penn was ejected after just two years for some unspecified religious nonconformity. Thus began an unsettled period between 1664 and 1666: travel in Europe, including study at the Protestant Academy in Saumur, France; a stint as messenger between his father and royal officials, including King Charles II himself, in the run-up to the Second Anglo-Dutch War; and an attempt to study law at Lincoln's Inn, which ended almost before it began when plague hit London. Finally, in early

<sup>17</sup> See Carla Gardina Pestana, *The English Conquest of Jamaica: Oliver Cromwell's Bid for Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

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1666, Sir William sent his son to Ireland to negotiate lease agreements with his tenants. The following year, at a Quaker Meeting in Cork, Penn underwent a profound spiritual transformation and joined the Society of Friends. It was a religious conversion with equally profound social and political implications – Quakers were one of the most despised sects in Britain – and represented an apparently unambiguous repudiation of his father’s plans for him to enter the English elite.

But when one door closes, another door opens. His Quaker conviction set Penn’s life on a radically new path, and his prominent family name provided Friends with a high-profile convert. Over the next several decades, William Penn would build bridges between the Society of Friends and a variety of other audiences.<sup>18</sup> One particular aspect of that early career stands out: Penn’s 1670 trial with his fellow Quaker William Mead, in which the defendants effectively hijacked a trial for disturbing the peace and transformed it into an impassioned defense of religious assembly and the rights of Englishmen.<sup>19</sup> The publication of a “transcript” of this trial, *The Peoples Ancient and Just Liberties Asserted* (Selection 1), made Penn a widely known figure in the movement for toleration during these years.

Before the decade was out, another political crisis engulfed the realm. The Popish Plot and the Exclusion Crisis not only framed Penn’s political thinking between 1678 and 1681, but also provided the immediate backdrop for his petition for an American colony. Rumors of Catholic plots to assassinate Charles II and install his (Catholic) brother James on the throne gave new life to Whig efforts to exclude James from the succession, and led to passage of the Test Act of 1678, which extended to parliament the terms of earlier legislation that had required public officeholders to swear oaths of allegiance to the monarch, as well as renunciations of Catholic doctrine, and to receive Communion in an Anglican church, as a condition of holding public office.<sup>20</sup> Penn was deeply engaged in politics during these years, preparing petitions defending Quakers, endorsing toleration, and working (unsuccessfully) in support of Algernon Sidney’s efforts to get elected to the House of Commons. Like many of his contemporaries, Penn denounced “popery” – one of the

<sup>18</sup> See my “William Penn after 300 Years: Paradoxes and Legacies of a Boundary-Spanner,” *Quaker Studies* 24: 1 (2019): 5–23.

<sup>19</sup> *The Peoples Ancient and Just Liberties Asserted* (1670) (Selection 1).

<sup>20</sup> Test Act of 1678 (30 Car. II. st. 2); Test Act of 1673 (25 Car. II c. 2).