

# Militant Seedbeds Of Early Quakerism

Two Essays By David Boulton



Quaker Universalist Fellowship

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Richard Barnes, Treasurer  
Quaker Universalist Fellowship  
Route 1, Box 28-3  
Millboro, VA 24460  
email: [QUF@sylvania.net](mailto:QUF@sylvania.net)  
website: [www.universalistfriends.org](http://www.universalistfriends.org)

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## Editor's Introduction

The Quaker Universalist Fellowship has previously published in pamphlet form two documents that testify to the presence of both revolutionary politics and universalist beliefs among 17th-century Quakers. They are *The Light Upon the Candlestick* (1992) and *Fifty nine Particulars* (2002), which George Fox addressed to Parliament only months before the restoration of the British monarchy in 1660. It seems fitting to follow them up with the two historical essays presented here.

These pieces are reprinted with permission of the author from *Real Like the Daisies or Real Like I Love You? Essays in Radical Quakerism*, a booklet published in the United Kingdom in 2002 by Dales Historical Monographs in association with the Quaker Universalist Group. My review of "Daisies" appeared in *Universalist Friends* (number 39). The collection is now on sale from the bookstore of Friends General Conference in Philadelphia but is not generally available elsewhere in the United States.

David Boulton is a member of Kendal Monthly Meeting in Britain and the Quaker Universalist Group. A broadcaster and author, he has written widely on Quaker history and radical theology. An American edition of his latest book, *The Trouble with God: Building the Republic of Heaven*, will be published in October by John Hunt Publishing. He has lectured and led workshops in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and the United States. In May, 2005, he joined Kitty and David Rush in leading a weekend workshop at Pendle Hill on *The Experience and Understanding of Nontheism in Contemporary Quakerism*.

Rhoda R. Gilman

## Militant Seeds of Early Quakerism

### Winstanley And Friends

*This essay combines an article written for Friends Quarterly, April 2000, and a paper delivered to the Conference of Quaker Historians at Earlham College, Richmond, Indiana, USA, in June 2000. It also draws on an article in Political Theology, May 2001.*

Was Gerrard Winstanley a Quaker? Did he have any direct connection with Quakers? Did George Fox read his books and pamphlets, and was he influenced by them? These questions—the first two, at least—were asked in the seventeenth century, and have been asked again by historians and scholars in the twentieth. Those of us who have been inspired by Winstanley's radicalism have hoped that the piecemeal scraps of documented information will indeed prove him “one of us”: those who distrust his politics, and particularly his communism, will breathe a sigh of relief if it can be shown that True Levelling and Quakers never did more than flirt with each other, and certainly never consummated their coy relationship. This article is an attempt to set out the known facts, and to summarise the conclusions I have reached while researching my book, *Gerrard Winstanley and the Republic of Heaven*.

Winstanley was born in Wigan, Lancashire, in 1609. He was probably educated at Wigan grammar school, as his writing is fluent if not particularly scholarly, and he made use of the occasional Latin tag. In or around 1630 he travelled south to London to be apprenticed to a merchant tailor, Sarah Gates, who was probably a kinswoman. She was the widow of a former puritan minister turned cloth merchant and possessed a well-

stocked theological library in her home, where Winstanley probably lodged. In 1637 he became a freeman of the Merchant Tailors Company and in 1640 married Susan King, daughter of a small landowner in Cobham, Surrey. In 1643, with the country plunged into civil war, his cloth business failed. "I was beaten out both of estate and trade," he wrote, "and forced... to live a country life". He seems to have been employed by his father-in-law as a grazier and cowherd in Cobham.

The great swirl of political and religious dissent soon pulled him into its vortex. From having been brought up "a strict goer to church... and hearer of sermons", he turned to "the ordinance of dipping" (baptism), at a time when the more radical Baptist congregations were denouncing all forms of church establishment and providing a stream of recruits to the Leveller movement and the New Model Army. (The same stream would later be diverted into Quakerism). But Winstanley preferred the pen to the sword. Early in 1648 he delivered to a notoriously radical-sectarian printer, Giles Calvert, who had a printing shop in the crowded alleys behind the old pre-fire St. Paul's cathedral, the manuscript of the first of three pamphlets he would publish that year. Another seventeen would follow within four years, mostly published by Calvert, who was printer to the Levellers and, a few years later, to the Quakers.

*The Mysterie of God* was an extraordinary literary debut. It is probably the first theological work in the English language to argue what became known as the "universalist" doctrine that everyone, however sinful, would be saved. The prevailing Calvinist orthodoxy preached that the fate of all was divinely preordained, the few to salvation, the many to damnation. Even those like the General Baptists who denied predestination accepted that eternal damnation was the lot of the unrepentant sinner. Winstanley's sweeping universalism had radical political as well as heretical theological implications: puritanism tended to identify the "better sort", the successful and wealthy, with

the elect, and the “baser sort”, the poor, with the damned. The great and the good were one, as were the small and the bad. Universalism clearly tended to blur if not altogether erase the distinction between the great unwashed and those who had been washed in the blood of the Lamb. It was a truly levelling doctrine.

But Winstanley was not content to argue that the poor would be saved. In *The Mysterie of God* and the two pamphlets which followed, he teaches that it is the poor who are to be God’s agents in bringing about the kingdom of heaven on earth. When he dares to connect the poor with the radical sectaries, the subversive and revolutionary potential of his doctrine is clear, to priest and magistrate alike.

In his next two pamphlets Winstanley presses the point with a daringly metaphorical interpretation of Biblical scripture. The devil is not a person but the embodiment of selfishness and self-seeking. God is Reason, or selflessness, or community. Christ is not “a man [who] lived and died long ago at Jerusalem” but “the power of the spirit within you”. God is not to be looked for “in a place of glory beyond the sun, but within yourself... He that looks for a God outside himself... worships he knows not what, but is... deceived by the imagination of his own heart”. Winstanley shared the millenarian expectations of his contemporaries, but the Christ who would come again would be a spirit “rising in despised sons and daughters”, an “indwelling power of reason”, a “sea of truth” which would wash away corruption and ensure that the lowly and meek inherited the earth.

Moreover, the coming “saints’ paradise” was to be built not on clerical book-learning and authority but on direct experience, “experimental knowledge of Christ”, “a teacher within”. Years before George Fox would say much the same, in almost identical words, Winstanley writes: “What I hear another man speak is nothing to me until I find the same experience in myself. The testimony of others is known to be true by the testimony of the same experience within myself”. And again, like Fox, he applied this to the books of the Bible no less than to those of his contemporaries.

But Winstanley was no armchair theoretician, content to sit back and wait for Christ to rise in sons and daughters. Early in 1649 he had a vision, much as Fox was to have at Pendle three years later. In his vision, or “trance”, Winstanley was instructed: “Work together. Eat bread together. Declare this all abroad... I the Lord have spoke it”. Winstanley interpreted this as a call to action, and on April 1, with a small band of fellow-Diggers, he took possession of some common land at St. George’s Hill, near Walton-on-Thames, and established a community to till the ground in common, sharing labour and produce. One of his companions, William Everard, reportedly predicted that they would be thousands-strong within ten days. In fact, some fifty men with their families joined them, and over the next twelve months perhaps thirty similar communes came into being, albeit tentatively and briefly, throughout south-east England.

The St. George’s Hill community was immediately attacked by mobs led by those who claimed exclusive proprietary rights to the commons. Leadership of the mob was quickly assumed by the local parson, John Platt, a puritan minister and landlord who objected in both capacities to the actions of those who were now calling themselves “True Levellers”. Crops were dug up, shelters pulled down and burnt, and women and children physically assaulted. The winter of 1649, following a disastrous harvest and seven years of crippling warfare, was one of hunger and hardship nation-wide. For Winstanley and his comrades it was a grim struggle to survive, made no easier when a group of Ranters attempted to join, preaching community of women as well as land, and urging violent resistance to the mobs.

A stream of pamphlets from Winstanley’s pen denounced parson Platt and his corrupt church, the landlords and their corrupting wealth, and the Ranters and their corrupting influence. He insisted that violence could not be met with violence: God (or Reason) would not rely on “carnal weapons”.

The Digger's war was a "Lamb's War" against the dragon of property, the principle of selfishness which was the devil incarnate. Winstanley's arguments for making the earth a "common treasury", for turning republican England (Charles I had just been executed) into a republic of heaven, are formulated in a total of twenty pamphlets and books, which output is surely among the most lucid and inspirational in England's rich tradition of polemical literature. As Michael Foot writes, "If there were such a thing as a sacred canon of radical English literature, Winstanley's works would be there, not far behind those of Milton, Byron, Shelley, Hazlitt and William Morris". And none of these wrote under such conditions of persecution and destitution as Winstanley endured in the first year of the English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish republic.

But Christ did not rise in sons and daughters, even with the assistance of the Diggers' spades and Winstanley's eloquent pen. Twelve months after the experiment began it was ended with the brutal sacking of the community and the forced dispersal of the dwindling band of comrades. The satellite communes quickly collapsed in turn. Winstanley, who had taught the evils of wage labour, had to turn to wage labour himself to keep himself and his longsuffering wife alive. He wrote one more major work, *The Law of Freedom*, published early in 1652. It is a detailed blueprint for a communist society, and it is addressed to Oliver Cromwell. "Now I have set the candle at your door", he writes, "for you have power in your hand... to act for common freedom if you will; I have no power". Winstanley has not entirely given up hope that "the Lord", understood as a benevolent cosmos, will signal the start of the long-awaited millennial reign; but he now looks to state power to assist Christ's rising, where a year or two earlier he had seen state and church together as the twin-headed dragon that would be overcome by the lamb.

*The Law of Freedom* is an astonishing work, on the basis of which Winstanley would subsequently be labelled a proto-Marxist (though it has been suggested that Marx might more aptly be called a neo-Winstanleyite). Some have seen in the short four years separating *The Myserie of God* in 1648 from *The Law of Freedom* in 1652 an abandonment of mystical theology for secular politics, but it is plain to me that the politics are already embedded in the first pamphlet and the radical theology remains the core of the last. Politics and religion, the secular and the sacred, were one to Winstanley, as they were to Fox and early Friends, whose new Quaker movement began to achieve lift-off just as True Levelling crash-landed.

Twenty-four years after *The Law of Freedom*, and two years after Winstanley's death, the Dean of Durham, Thomas Comber, published a book, *Christianity no Enthusiasm*, claiming that the Quakers "derived their ideas from the communist writer Gerrard Winstanley", which in his view made "repression of Quakerism... not only a service to God, but a preservation of every man and his property". Although the alleged connection seems not to have been closely pursued at the time (perhaps because by the 1670s the widely-recognised attachment of respectable Friends to private enterprise was enough to give the lie to Comber's crude smear), it was taken up again when Winstanley was rediscovered by nineteenth-century Marxists. Eduard Bernstein in 1895, G. P. Gooch in 1896 and Lewis Berens in 1906 all claimed that either Winstanley became a Quaker or that the Quakers derived much of their theology from Winstanley. The respectable Quaker historians Rufus M. Jones and William C. Braithwaite thought the connection doubtful, suggesting that Winstanley and Fox seem, in Braithwaite's words, to be "independent products of the peculiar social and spiritual climate of the age". David Petegorsky's *Left-Wing Democracy in the English Civil War: a Study of the Social Philosophy of Gerrard Winstanley and the Digger Movement*, 1940, was more emphatic, saying "there is no evidence whatever" for

any contact between Winstanley and Friends, and this was the view of George Sabine, who published his monumental *Works of Gerrard Winstanley* the following year—though Sabine recognised the “close similarity of religious experience” in Winstanley and Fox. Richard T. Vann charted what he saw as Winstanley’s journey “from radicalism to Quakerism” in *Journal of Friends Historical Society*, Vol 49 (1959-61), but was almost alone among Quaker scholars in searching out the documentation.

There matters stood till the late 1970s when historian Barry Reay unearthed in the Friends House archive a letter sent in August 1654 by Edward Burrough in London to Margaret Fell at Swarthmoor. Burrough and Francis Howgill had been dispatched to the capital by Fox as Quaker missionaries, and Burrough reported that “Wilstandley says he believes we are sent to perfect that work which fell in their hands. He hath been with us”. There can be no doubt that the sorely mutilated “Wilstandley” is our man; that he had “been with” Friends, which probably means he had attended their first London meetings; that he saw the new religion from the north as a continuation of his own work; and that Burrough (the most politically radical of early Friends) was not unsympathetic.

It would be very interesting indeed to have sight of whatever reply Margaret Fell may have made. Quakerism had established its headquarters in a gentry house, under the patronage and matronage of a family which had greatly benefited in wealth and influence from their Cromwellian politics and entrepreneurial adventures. The Fells can hardly have been unaware that “the work” associated with Winstanley was a levelling work, a communist work, dedicated to the overthrow of private property and its replacement by common ownership, under the power of an indwelling God who was more sweet reason than lord of lord protectors. It seems not unlikely to me that Margaret Fell and George Fox discouraged further contacts with so notorious an agitator. Certainly we hear no more of

“Wilstandley” from Burrough, Howgill, and the growing band of London Friends.

Not, at least, for many years. But 22 years later we find (or Richard T. Vann found, and recorded in the article I have cited) Winstanley’s burial record. It is not in any parish register but in that of Westminster Monthly Meeting, which records the burial at Long Acre of Gerrard Winstanley, corn chandler, of St. Giles in the Field. It has been suggested that Winstanley’s widow, Elizabeth (he had remarried after Susan’s death) persuaded Friends to give him a Quaker funeral in honour of his radical past, but this is surely far-fetched. A communist past was not something a widow was likely to want to honour in the reactionary 1670s, and Friends were most unlikely to bury any but their own. It seems clear that some time before he died Gerrard Winstanley became a Quaker. It may be that Elizabeth herself had Quaker connections, for when she remarried in 1681 it was to a Quaker, and the deaths of the three children of Gerrard and Elizabeth are all recorded in the Quaker registers.

But if we can now confidently claim Winstanley as a Friend at the last, we can do so only by opening up another mystery. Other researchers, led by the Canadian scholar James Alsop, have discovered that shortly after his doomed courtship of Friends in 1654, Winstanley took possession of his father-in-law’s Surrey estate and began to live the life of a country gentleman. By 1659 “Mr Winstanley” was a waywarden in the parish of Cobham, by 1660, as England reverted to monarchy, he was an overseer, by 1668 a churchwarden, and by 1671 a chief constable—in which capacity he presumably had responsibility for prosecuting Quakers and other dissenters under the Clarendon Code! So it seems that the young radical, forsaken by Reason in his attempt to create a communist republic of heaven, cold-shouldered by Quakers, and then tempted by comfort, security and respectability, had followed the familiar road from radicalism to reaction, before a death-bed repentance brought him back to his radical roots. Christ could yet rise in

sons and daughters, even if the republic of heaven was to be a republic not of this world.

In my book I have argued that Winstanley's political and theological trajectory is less baffling once we begin to understand the huge changes in the context within which this all happened. Winstanley changed, certainly, but so did the political and religious world he inhabited. And so too did Quakerism. In 1649 it was distinctly possible to believe that the revolution then in full swing might lead to the extinction of "kingly power", including the rule of wealth and property. The Quaker movement of the 1650s was in part a response to the failure of that revolution to materialise, with a consequent tendency to internalise and spiritualise the republic of heaven as "within" and mystical rather than "without" and this-worldly. The counter-revolution and restoration of monarchy in 1660 put an end to any remaining hopes that the new Jerusalem might be built in England's green and pleasant land. And by the 1670s, their militant republicanism and identification with the "Good Old Cause" conveniently forgotten, Friends were well down the road of respectability, with a reputation for shrewd but honest business dealings, drab clothing and fearsome consciences: "the harmless people of God called Quakers". In truth, the final journey Winstanley made from gentleman to Quaker is not as long as it seems. Friends met him half way.

But if we now know beyond reasonable doubt that Winstanley *did* have contact with Friends in the 1650s and *did* join Westminster Friends in the 1670s, we still lack direct evidence to help us resolve the remaining conundrum: did Winstanley's pre-communist pamphlets influence Fox and early Friends, as the hostile priest Comber alleged? Were the similarities in their works coincidental, attributable to "the spirit of the age", or did Fox read Winstanley and derive some of his inspiration from the older man?

George Fox was some fourteen years younger than Winstanley, born of parents with spectacularly pious pedigrees.

He left his Midlands home in 1643, the second year of the civil war, the year Winstanley's cloth business was ruined, and sampled London (where he too had a kinsman). By 1646, his Journal tells us, he understood that the university-educated ministry of "hireling priests" was a hindrance to true religion, so he "looked more after the dissenting people", only to find that the separatist preachers could not speak to his condition. What he knew, he knew "experimentally". In 1647 he met up with radical Baptists—"shattered Baptists" he calls them—where he apparently recruited his first followers. As the Journal tells it, Fox seems to have been curiously oblivious of the civil discord all around him till, jailed for blasphemy, he was visited in 1651 by a recruiting party for the New Model Army. The recruiting party seems to have regarded his radical dissent as eminent qualification for a commission—which, as he tells us in the Journal, he refused. Released later that year, he began his journeyings through the north which would culminate in his meeting the Westmorland Seekers in 1652 and the emergence of an organised Quaker movement.

Thus Winstanley's and Fox's radical religio-political ideologies were formed and framed by the revolutionary convulsions of the 1640s, which saw the established church lose its historic power, the Lords their hereditary seats, and the king his head. There is a critical difference between Winstanley's and Fox's account of these tumultuous times: Winstanley's was written as *the revolution progressed*, every one of his works reflecting a new twist and turn in the power struggle on earth and its cosmic projection in heaven; while Fox's account was dictated and edited-together many years later, when it was no longer politic to foreground the political dimension, which in Fox's mind had by then become almost wholly subsumed in the religious and spiritual. But these very different lenses on the events of the forties cannot disguise the similarities of experience—that which each man "knew experimentally". Both had stopped being a "goer to church", had explored dissent,

had been with the radical Baptists, had mixed with Seekers, had tangled with Ranters and with the law, and had found their liberation in an experience of what they believed to be unmediated communion with a God who for the one was sweet Reason “rising in sons and daughters” and for the other was the light of conscience in every man and woman.

I want to suggest a number of ways in which the similar experience of these two spiritual and subversive giants led to congruent positions on a number of critical issues. But these suggested congruities are not simply between Winstanley’s thought and Fox’s, but between True Levelling and first-generation Quakerism *en masse*. I will break these down into ten points, some more complex than can adequately be pursued here, others simple and obvious and requiring little elaboration.

*One:* Winstanley and Quakers shared an overwhelming conviction that the overturning times through which they were living had a cosmic dimension. God was working his purpose out through the religious, political and social tumults of the times. Three and a half centuries before Fukuyama, Winstanley and Fox believed they were witnessing the beginning of the end of history. The conviction was shared by all the sects and seekers, and notably by Cromwell. True Levellers and Quakers each subscribed to a realised eschatology which rested on a metaphorical interpretation of the Second Coming. “The rising up of Christ in sons and daughters,” Winstanley writes, “is his second coming”. For Fox and Friends, the second coming was Christ’s indwelling power as manifested in “the people of God called by the world Quakers”.

*Two:* For both Winstanley and Fox, the source of worldly corruption was a fallen church, led by university-educated priests who traded in the gospel as a merchant trades in corn. Anti-clericalism was rife in the forties, but nowhere more virulent and sustained than in Winstanley’s writings and the Quakers’ subsequent contemptuous denunciation of “hireling priests”. True Levellers and Quakers opposed tithes precisely because

they financed the clergy: no tithes, no clerics. For Winstanley the church was part of the “kingly power” to be overthrown, for Fox even separatist preachers like Francis Howgill and Thomas Taylor (among his earliest lieutenants) were beyond the pale till they gave up the stipends they had been paid by their Seeker congregations. Priests, whether “Common Prayer men” or Puritan “professors”, were the devil’s disciples. From this came Winstanley’s and Fox’s opposition to all church ordinances, and their advocacy of toleration, by which they meant a rooted objection to any interference by magistrates with religious belief or practice—a position learnt from the forties Baptists. Also taken straight from the Baptists was first Winstanley’s, then Fox’s, championing of unordained and untaught “mecanickal preachers”. “The Scriptures of the Bible”, Winstanley writes in *Fire in the Bush* (probably 1650), “were written by the experimentall hand of Shepherds, Husbandmen, Fishermen, and such inferiour men of the world; And the Universitie learned ones have got these mens writings; and flourishes their plaine language over with their darke interpretation, and glosses, as if it were too hard for ordinary men now to understand them; and thereby they deceive the simple, and make a prey of the poore, and cosens them of the Earth, and of the tenth of their labors”. Winstanley and Fox certainly differed when it came to church organisation: Winstanley was a congregationalist, insisting on the independence of each local church, where Fox became an ever more convinced centralist. But in their hostility to clericalism and legally enforceable prescription they were at one.

*Three:* Closely allied to their renunciation and denunciation of ecclesiastical authority was the conviction that, in the new dispensation, no “outward teacher” was necessary. No book (including the Bible), no sermon, no ministry had any authority except in so far as it confirmed what the reader or hearer knew and understood “experimentally”. At a stroke, this undercut all academic, expert and learned authority, as well as all

processes of systematic reasoning, analysis and logic, despised as producing mere “notions”. Baptists and other sectaries in the mid-forties were fond of quoting Jeremiah 31: 33-4, which had prophesied a time to come when the law would be “written in men’s hearts... And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour... saying Know the Lord”. This has proven a great misfortune for historians, since it discouraged the sectaries from ever admitting that they had learned anything from a book or a human teacher, which greatly complicates attempts to plot influences and connections. Winstanley mentions only one man, William Everard, with whom he was associated, and Fox notoriously cites hundreds whom he “convinced”, but none who ever convinced him of anything. In *The Mysterie of God* in 1648 Winstanley is at pains to make it clear that what he has to say he knows “first, by my own experience”, and this is contrasted with the mere book-learning of the educated clergy: “He that preaches from the book and not from the annointing is no true minister but a hireling that preaches only to get a temporary living”. What he knows he knows experientially or “experimentally”. Compare Fox over and over again: “And this I knew experimentally”.

It is worth recalling that the language of experience and experiment was a very contemporary phenomenon. What was to become the Royal Society (“for Improving Natural Knowledge”) started meeting in 1645, just three years before Winstanley first broke into print, its aim being to explore “experimental philosophy” and promote “experimental learning”. This was the language of emergent science: a thing was true if it worked, and whether it worked was tested by experiment. First Winstanley and then Fox were using the newly-fashionable language of the day to revolutionise attitudes to religious authority, just as Newton and his “natural philosophers” were using it to displace superstition by science.

*Four:* For Winstanley as for the Quakers, the inward teacher was God or Christ, often symbolised as an inner “light”.

Winstanley, before Fox and Friends, urges the importance of “walking in the light”: The enlightened “come to see the spirituall Light that is in every creature, and in that power and light do walk righteously towards other creatures, as well beasts as man-kinde” (*New Law of Righteousness*, 1649).

Although neither Winstanley nor Fox acknowledge their influence, the works of the continental mystics Henry Niclaes and Jacob Boehme made repeated use of light symbolism (elaborated, of course, from John’s Gospel). Significantly, the works of both Niclaes and Boehme began to appear in English translations in 1646 and, perhaps more significantly, those of Niclaes were printed by Winstanley’s and Fox’s printer, Giles Calvert. God is spoken of as an “inner light” by mid-forties radical Baptists, though the revolutionary implications of seeing God as within rather than without soon frightened off the Baptist hierarchy, which by 1650 was vehemently condemning the spiritual anarchy of “a God within, and a Christ within, and a word within”. Winstanley was branded an atheist for insisting that there was no outward God, and Fox’s imprisonment for blasphemy in 1650 followed his claim that God was in him, as in Christ. George Sabine in his *Introduction to The Works of Gerrard Winstanley* (1965) (from which all my Winstanley citations are taken) comments that the resemblance between Winstanley’s and Quaker perceptions of the immanent God “is astonishingly close”, and “closest of all perhaps in the case of George Fox himself, whose sense of ‘Christ within’, of worship as communion with God, and of such communion as an inward source of serenity and energy seems almost identical to Winstanley’s conception”. If there is a difference, it is that Winstanley sees God as an indwelling power in both humankind and nature—a pantheist (or panentheist) vision—whereas Fox focuses on “that of God in every man”. Winstanley’s eco-centrism prefigured modern Creation Spirituality: Fox’s merging of the human and the divine prefigured modern religious humanism.

It is worth noting that the “inward light” motif, which quickly became the most distinctive mark of Quakerism, was appropriated as much from emergent science and contemporary art as from Nicolaus’ *Family of Love* and Boehme’s works of misty mysticism. Descartes philosophically and Newton experimentally were much preoccupied with the newly-discovered properties of light. Rembrandt, exploring the contrasts between painted oceans of light and oceans of darkness to penetrate mystery and heighten emotional response, and Vermeer, who was already experimenting with a *camera obscura* to organise his light on canvass, had both made light a fashionable subject. Again, we find Winstanley and Fox right up there with the latest trends and preoccupations.

Five: Almost as important as the “light” in Fox’s theology is the “seed”, which reoccurs again and again in the *Journal*. But here too we find Winstanley anticipating him. In *Fire in the Bush* (1649 or 1650) he writes of “the Seed or blessing” which will “rise up... to work deliverance”; and again, “they that are at liberty within, in whom the Seed is risen to rule, doe conquer all enemies by Love and patience...The Seed or Christ then is to be seen within, to save you from the curse within, to free you from bondage within; he is no Saviour that stands at a distance”. For both Winstanley and Fox, the seed is a multiple metaphor: it is the Biblical promise to Abraham, but it is also a saving power within, and yet again it is the people themselves in whom Christ has risen: for Winstanley, all True Levelling communists, for Fox, “the elect seed of God called Quakers” (*Journal*, Nickalls 1975 ed., p. 281).

Six: Winstanley and Fox had similarly radical deconstructionist attitudes to the scriptures. Each man knew his Bible intimately, and the writings of both are saturated in biblical imagery, but both valued “experimental knowledge” far above Bible teaching. For Winstanley, scripture had value as a record of the experiences of spiritually-minded men and women in far-off times and places, and (like Fox) he wasn’t

above a bit of Bible-bashing himself when specifically addressing the churches. In his early works he elaborately allegorised Biblical passages, much as Niclaes and Boehme had done, though later his interest in using texts as scriptural batteringrams waned.

When Cromwell quoted scripture at him, Fox retorted that “all Christendom (so-called) had the Scriptures, but they wanted the power and the Spirit that those had who gave forth the Scriptures”. Fox’s university-educated friend and Friend Samuel Fisher put it more boldly: it was silly to call the Bible the Word of God, since it had no more authority than the Koran. It was “a bulk of heterogeneous writings, compiled together by men taking what they could find of the several sorts of writings that are therein, and... crowding them into a canon, or standard for the trial of spirits, doctrines, truths” (*The Rustics Alarm*, 1660). Fisher’s book, comments Christopher Hill, is “a remarkable work of popular Biblical criticism, based on real scholarship. Its effect is to demote the Bible from its central position in the protestant scheme of things, to make it a book like any other book”—which is exactly what it was to Winstanley. The Bible, he said, usefully illustrated truths of which one was already convinced by experiment. Fox said much the same: “What the Lord opened to me, I afterwards found was agreeable” to scripture.

Sabine is worth quoting again, since what he says of Winstanley could equally well be inferred from Fox’s teaching: “Winstanley’s belief in the sufficiency of an experimental religion, consistently carried out, made a clean sweep of the mythology of the Christian tradition, and more particularly of Protestant bibliolatry. By placing the whole religious drama within the setting of the human mind, the mystics quite destroyed the external or, so to speak, the physical existence of those entities upon which all doctrinal forms of Christianity depended. Christ and the devil, Winstanley says over and over again, are not forces outside human nature; they are the

impulsions and inclinations, respectively, of good and evil—the flesh and the spirit—which every man experiences as the controlling motives of his own action. The Devil is not ‘a middle power between God and me, but it is the power of my proud flesh’. And ‘the power of the perfect law taking hold thereupon threw me under sorrow and sealed up my misery, and this is utter darkness’. Heaven and Hell are therefore located within the soul; they are not places far off. Similarly, Christ is the generating power of goodness within every man, not the historical character who lived long ago in Palestine.” Sabine quotes from Winstanley’s *The Saints Paradice*, (1648): “And therefore if you expect or look for the resurrection of Jesus Christ, you must know that the spirit within the flesh is Jesus Christ, and you must see, feel, and know from himself his own resurrection within you, if you expect life and peace by him. So that you do not look for a God now, as formerly you did, to be [in] a place of glory beyond the sun, moon, and stars, nor imagine a divine being you know not where, but you see him ruling within you, and not only in you, but you see him to be the spirit and power that dwells in every man and woman; yea, in every creature, according to his orb, within the globe of the creation.”

It was this insistence on dispensing with literal interpretations of the Bible, this creative impulse not only to allegorise scripture but to mine it for new myths and stories appropriate to a new dispensation, which severed both Winstanley and the Quakers from mainstream puritanism and the established Christian tradition. Neither Winstanley nor Fox invented scriptural allegorisation: it had a long history in the underground movements of the “Everlasting Gospel”. But they both dragged it from under ground, brought it into the light, and used it as a double-edged sword to lay into biblical literalism and bibliolatry.

*Seven:* There are striking similarities in Winstanley’s and Fox’s theologies of resistance in relation to the use of force. This is a complex matter. Neither man, at least before the 1660s,

was what we would now call a pacifist: both believed that the New Model Army was a necessary instrument of revolution. But both were unequivocal in their advocacy of non-violence, or turning the other cheek, when they and their followers were under attack, and both saw non-violence as the mark of those within whom Christ had risen.

Since the discovery by Profesor G. E. Aylmer in 1968 of Winstanley's early-1650 pamphlet *Englands Spirit Unfoulded*, it has been clear that Winstanley supported Cromwell's Engagement, which rested on the victories of the army and its de facto rule. When Winstanley attacked the army, as he frequently did, it was not for its reliance on the sword but for its failure to enforce a revolutionary settlement. Winstanley saw the army as the vanguard of the poor, and it was his faith and hope that Christ would rise in and through the revolutionary regime, not in spite of it. The Council of State was the agency which would deliver freedom, not the obstacle to freedom. Fox's position, at least before 1660, was similar. Although he had declined the offer of a commission in 1651, by 1652 he was deliberately targeting the military for Quaker recruits. (See my article "The Quaker Military Alliance" in *Friends Quarterly*, October 1997, reprinted hereafter.) As late as 1658 he is lambasting Cromwell for not carrying his republican crusade into Holland, Germany, Spain, Turkey and the Vatican itself, urging "Let thy soldiers go forth... that thou may rock nations as a cradle". For Margaret Fell too, the army was "the Battle-axe in the hand of the Lord".

But while True Levellers in the forties and Quakers in the fifties saw military power as the indispensable guarantee of republican freedom, which in turn was the foundation of the "New Heaven and New Earth" which they believed they had been called to build, both movements renounced the use of violence to further their own ends, even in self-defence. Before starting his communist experiment, Winstanley had written in *The New Law of Righteousness*: "The Lord himself will do this

great work, without either sword or weapon; weapons and swords shall destroy, and cut the powers of the earth asunder, but they shall never build up". When the Cobham community was repeatedly attacked, its members beaten, its houses burnt, its crops uprooted, Winstanley insisted that retaliation of any kind was not an option for those in whom Christ had risen. "For my part, and for the rest [of the Diggers]", he writes in *A New-yeers Gift* (1650), "we abhor fighting for Freedom, it is acting of the Curse and lifting him up higher; and do thou uphold it by the Sword, we will not; we will conquer by Love and Patience, or else we count it no Freedom: Freedom gotten by the Sword is an established bondage to some part or other of the Creation; and this we have declared publicly enough... Victory that is gotten by the Sword, is a Victory that slaves gets one over another;... but Victory obtained by Love, is a Victory for a King.. This great Leveller, Christ our King of righteousness in us, shall cause men to beat their swords into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks..." In *The True Levellers Standard Advanced* (1649), written after the first mob attacks on his commune, Winstanley declares that they are willing to shed their own blood, but not that of their enemies: "We shall not do this by force of Armes, we abhorre it". And when his community was finally routed and dispersed, he writes: "We have declared our Testimony, and now let freedom and bondage strive who shall rule in Mankind: the weapons of the Sonnes of bondage being carnall, as fire, club and sword; the weapons of the Sonnes of freedom being spiritual, as love, patience and righteousness".

In his last book, *The Law of Freedom*, where he attempts a constitution for a state which has adopted common ownership of the land, Winstanley does allow for armed defence, and for capital punishment for serious offences. Early Friends also tacitly accepted that a state dedicated to the building of heaven on earth had the right and duty to defend itself against God's enemies, and it was many years before they began to challenge

capital punishment. In only one important and somewhat bizarre respect did Winstanley's teaching differ sharply from Fox's: *The Law of Freedom* advocated capital punishment for preachers who accepted payment for their trade. Such "shall be put to death for a witch and a cheater".

This apart, the active non-resistance of the True Levellers closely prefigures that of Friends. "Like George Fox", writes Sabine, "...Winstanley distrusted the efficacy of force to accomplish any permanent moral results, and this was altogether in accord with the belief that morality begins with a change of heart. Hence the root of moral regeneration is a kind of passivity, submissiveness of the better impulse that will rise if it be given the chance, a silence and a waiting until the wiser thought and action ripens". Here is the essence of what became Quaker pacifism, and it is at the heart of everything Winstanley wrote and enacted.

*Eight:* Not only does Winstanley's theology of nonviolence prefigure Fox's, but so too does some of the graphic imagery with which it is advanced. Quakers made much of the imagery of "the Lamb's war" to describe their own militant engagement with the "beast", the "dragon". But Winstanley was there before them. In his *Letter to the Lord Fairfax* (1649) he writes: "In this work of Community in the earth, and in the fruits of the earth, is seen plainly a pitched battaile between the Lamb and the Dragon, between the Spirit of love, humility and righteousnesse, which is the Lamb appearing in flesh; and the power of envy, pride, and unrighteousnesse, which is the Dragon appearing in flesh". And again, in *The Bloudie and Unchristian Acting* (1649), in one of his most powerful passages: "But now O England know this, that thy striving now is not only Dragon against Dragon, Beast against Beast, Covetousnesse and Pride against Covetousnesse and Pride, but thou now begin'st to fight against the Lamb, the Dove, the meek Spirit, the power of love... The battell between the Dragon and the Lamb is begun in the midst of thee, and a few years now will let all the world see who is

strongest, love or hatred, freedom or bondage". Thereafter the language of the Lamb's war is never absent from Winstanley's writings, and it is soon to find a central place in Quaker polemics.

*Nine:* Winstanley and Fox shared a radical social vision which was all the more threatening to the powerful in its explicit appeal to the powerless. Both men attacked the social hierarchies of church and state, both rammed home the awkward message that God's promises were to the poor and the meek. Both preached a kingdom of God on earth: salvation or freedom was for now and for this life, not for later, in some other world. Winstanley went much further than Fox in demanding full economic equality and common ownership of the land, but Fox, ten years after the True Levellers' commune, came close to matching him when he called in 1659 for the confiscation of all former monastic lands, glebes, and the great gentry estates. Fox's diatribes against the great ones who "cumbred the ground", who were "harlotted from the truth, and such gets the earth under their hands, commons, wastes and forrest, and fells and mores and mountains, and lets it lie waste, and calls themselves Lords of it, and keeps it from the people, when so many are ready to starve and beg"—all this reads like pure Winstanley. Indeed, in arguing that church buildings and Whitehall itself should be turned over to the poor, that the people should respond to tithe demands with civil disobedience, that lords of the manor should have their fines confiscated and that the gentry should be disarmed, Fox arguably went even further than Winstanley—though his revolutionary demands (with the notable exception of civil disobedience against tithes) were quietly forgotten after the Restoration, and dropped as an embarrassment from Fox's incomplete *Complete Works*.

*Ten:* Finally, Winstanley and Fox both had a genius for propaganda. It was Winstanley who pioneered the publication of "sufferings" to attract sympathy for his communes, and the Quakers famously made good use of the tactic. Moreover, when

Gervase Benson and Anthony Pearson first published Friends' sufferings, their printer was Winstanley's: Giles Calvert.

So I now approach the critical question: are these congruities simply coincidental, the result of contemporaries drawing from the same well of dissent, or did Winstanley's writings have a direct if wholly unacknowledged influence on Fox and early Quakerism? As noted earlier, as early as 1678, two years after Winstanley's death, Thomas Comber claimed in his anti-Quaker pamphlet *Christianity no Enthusiasm* that Quakerism was but a rehash of Winstanley's teachings, which in his view made repression of Friends "not only a service to God, but a preservation of every man and his property"—perhaps the first recorded instance of an anti-communist smear campaign! As we have seen, the nineteenth-century Marxists who rediscovered Winstanley and claimed him as one of their own all suggested Quakers derived much of their distinctive theology from the True Leveller. But Quaker historians were doubtful, cautiously content, perhaps, to leave Winstanley with the Marxists. Even Richard T. Vann, in his important essay charting Winstanley's journey "from radicalism to Quakerism" (*Journal of Friends Historical Society*, No. 49, 1959-61) placed more emphasis on Winstanley's movement towards Quakerism than on his possible role in shaping it.

But there is something oddly unsatisfactory about this notion that radical ideas somehow floated in the ether of mid-seventeenth-century England, to be caught and absorbed independently by Winstanley in London and Fox in the north. Ideas are not like pollen grains, wafting about in the spring air. Ideas are born by being spoken or written, and they are spread by being heard or read. In seventeenth-century England the mass media of communication were the pulpit (professional and lay) and the printing press (official and unofficial). We are therefore entitled to a little healthy scepticism about claims to learn only from an "inward teacher": or, if we don't wish to be sceptics, we are entitled to conclude that the inward teacher made efficient use of outward agents—the preachers and

pamphleteers who spread the word and made it their business to turn the world upside down.

Winstanley and Fox both tell us how, as seekers, they sampled the sects, where they will have heard preachers galore. They tell us virtually nothing, however, of what they read. But are we to suppose that the unprecedented flood of pamphlets, of political and religious debate in the newly-emergent free press, simply passed them by? That they read only their Bibles? That Winstanley clung so faithfully to his inward teacher that he never strayed into the books in Sarah Gates' theological library, and that Fox's fidelity to his "openings" preserved him from reading anything written by his fellow-seekers? I don't believe it.

Consider: When the young, seeking George Fox was having his first "pure openings of the Light without the help of any man" (*Journal*, p. 33) in 1648, Winstanley's first three pamphlets were streaming off Calvert's press. When Fox teamed up with Elizabeth Hooton in 1649, the news-sheets were full of Winstanley's dig, which was the talk of the country. By the time Fox was touring Yorkshire in 1651 and putting together the first building-blocks of what was to become the Quaker movement, Winstanley was working on his twentieth publication. The demand for these works was such that Calvert had to reprint several of them: *The Myserie of God* and *The Breaking of the Day of God*, both first published in 1648, were reissued the following year, and again in 1650 when they were included in a Winstanley collection, *Several Pieces Gathered into one Volume*. Two editions of *The Saints Paradise* appeared in 1648 and another in 1649. *Truth Lifting up its Head* of 1649 was reprinted in 1650. *The New Law of Righteousness* of 1649 was reprinted the same year. It is clear that Winstanley's works had an eager readership, and those readers must surely have been the very radicals, seekers and separatists in whose excited, enthusiastic meetings early Quakerism was at that very moment taking root. It is hard to believe that Fox himself was not among those readers.

To what extent the congruities and similarities of Winstanley's and Fox's writings were the result of serendipity or direct influence remains hard to pin down. It is clear that both men derived much of their distinctive teaching from common sources such as the teachings of Nicolaes and Boehme (not to mention John's Gospel and the Book of Revelation), the theological radicalism of "shattered Baptists" and seekers and the social radicalism of the Lilburne Levellers (a group quite distinct from the True Levellers). But the startling similarity of language and imagery strongly suggests that Fox knew Winstanley's works. The fact that these works were being published at the precise time when Fox was beginning to give shape to his own ideas, and issued from the same press which was soon to publicise Quakerism, make a degree of direct influence highly probable. Thus both the internal and the external evidence combine to suggest that the inward teacher benefited from a helping hand. Fox knew what he knew experimentally: but his experience surely included reading and absorbing the inspirational words of his immediate predecessor, who lived and died in the hope that Christ, the spirit of love and community, might yet rise in sons and daughters.

It is clear to me that Winstanley the True Leveller was a formative influence on early Quakerism, a maker of the tradition we have inherited. We should pay him more attention than we have done hitherto. And we could begin by identifying his burial place and agitating for the erection of a plaque to honour this extraordinary pioneer of social justice, non-violence, and religious humanism.

## The Quaker Military Alliance

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An alliance between peace-loving Friends and the armed forces? Some mistake, surely?

I want to draw attention to an aspect of Quaker history which until recently has been largely overlooked by both non-Quaker and Quaker historians: by non-Quakers (with some notable exceptions like Christopher Hill and Barry Reay) because they have tended to underestimate the part played by Friends in the English revolution, and by Quaker historians, either because they have a distaste for the militant republican Quakerism of the 1650s or because they judge a Quakerism concerned with building a New Earth as less mature and less valuable than a Quakerism not of this world.

Imagine that we are looking at the history of Quakerism, not from our present-day perspective but from that of March 1660. England has been a republic for just over ten years. Quakers have been an organised body within the republic for eight of those ten years. We do not yet know that before the leaves return to the trees the revolution will collapse, the republic will be finished, and the old order of king, lords and bishops which we thought had been done away with for ever will be back with a vengeance. Still less can we have any notion that within a year those militant Quakers who tried so hard to turn the world upside down, and who backed Cromwell's military dictatorship because they were convinced that his sword was wielded on God's behalf, will do a U-turn and "utterly deny... all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons for any end or under any pretence whatsoever".

In this article I am concerned solely with the 1650s. We need to remind ourselves that in this, their pioneering decade, Quakers, including George Fox, were not yet pacifists; that

they supported Cromwell's armed rule for much of the decade; that they served the republic as soldiers and naval officers; that they were widely perceived by their contemporaries, friends and enemies alike, as representing the radical or left wing of the armed revolution, in alliance with the army; and that this perception, far from being a calumny invented by the Quakers' enemies, was a fair reading of their position.

It is not my intention to argue that there is some kind of pure, true Quakerism which embraces armed conflict and to which we should seek to return! There are many aspects of early Quakerism—its intolerance of both external and internal dissent, its extravagances such as walking naked through the streets crying “Woe to Yorkshire” (or wherever), its hostility to the arts, its repressed and repressive attitude to sexual expression—which no Friend today would wish to resurrect. My aim here is a view of early Quaker history which is consistent with the documentary evidence, whether or not we find it agreeable to our modern sensibilities.

While George Fox was a growing lad in Leicestershire in the 1630s a long-simmering conflict was coming to a head. Who had authority to rule, in the state and in the church? The king and his court and bishops, or the people, represented in parliament? In 1642 the quarrel became a civil war, with the king and the established church in one corner and parliament and the puritan reformers in the other. The first round saw parliament and puritans in the ascendant, depriving the king of effective power and abolishing the episcopal Church of England. But then the parliamentary-puritan side started quarrelling among themselves. What we might now call “moderate” or “right-wing” puritans wanted to replace the established Anglican church with an established presbyterian system under a reformed monarchy. The “left” wanted a decentralised church, an “Independent” system in which dissent (within limits) was tolerated, and the crown was either subordinated to parliament or done away with altogether.

The conflict within the parliamentary-puritan party came to a head when Cromwell and his Independent colleagues won control of military operations and created the New Model Army in 1645. What was new about the New Model was that its leadership—its officers, cavalry and chaplains—were deliberately and systematically recruited from the ranks of the “godly”: Independents, Baptists and separatists with revolutionary views on politics and religion. They were soldiers from conviction rather than conscription and compulsion, men who in Cromwell’s words “had the fear of God before them and made some conscience of what they did”. They prayed, studied the Bible and worshipped together without sanction of priest or church. They agitated for democracy, for the abolition of tithes to drive priests out of business, and for the overthrow of the aristocracy. There was never an army like it before, and as Noel Brailsford has commented in *The Levellers and the English Revolution*, “nor was there anything like it thereafter till the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils met in 1917 in Russia”—though, so far as we know, the Russian workers and soldiers didn’t hold prayer meetings.

By 1648 the presbyterian gentry were so alarmed by the army’s religious and revolutionary zeal that the bulk of them defected to the king as protector of traditional property and power structures. So the last phases of the civil war saw Independents pitted against the combined forces of the old royalist party, the presbyterian defectors and the Scots. The king now had numbers on his side, but Cromwell had the New Model Army. The king was captured, tried and beheaded, and by 1651, after the battle of Worcester, the kingdom of England was dead too, reborn as a New Model Republic which entrusted its peace to the godly soldiers of the New Model Army.

Many early Quakers, including members of the movement’s core founding group, took up the sword in the service of the revolution. James Nayler was nine years a soldier, serving as Major-General Lambert’s quartermaster. Preaching to his

troops after the battle of Dunbar in September 1650, Nayler so impressed one of Cromwell's officers that he was "afraid to stay, for I was made a Quaker"! Note that Nayler was "making Quakers" before he ever met or heard of George Fox. The very first Quakers, it seems, were made in the New Model Army. William Dewsbury joined the army "in obedience to God", and after sampling the Independents and the Baptists found his mind turned within to the light of his conscience. This was as early as 1645. He called himself a Quaker by 1651. Richard Farnsworth claimed of himself that there was "no more ardent Roundhead" in his district, when the term Roundhead was a term of abuse for parliamentary soldiers. William C. Braithwaite speculates that it was this group—Nayler, Dewsbury and Farnsworth—who invited George Fox to the North in 1651.

According to Barry Reay's important study *The Quakers and the English Revolution*—largely neglected by Friends with a distaste for historical revisionism—scores more prominent early Friends were soldiers. Richard Hubberthorne, Edward Billing, John Crook, Gervase Benson, Edward Cook, Amos Stoddart, William Morris, Thomas Curtis, George Bishop (whose 1659 tract *To the General Council of the Army* called on the generals to reinstate Friends purged from the forces), Edward Pyott, Francis Gawler, Joseph Fuce: all these were officers. The other George Fox known as "the younger", Benjamin Nicholson, William Edmundson, John Whitehead, John and Thomas Stubbs and William Ames served in the ranks. American historian Richard Vann refers to 95 Quakers who served in the army, but there were hundreds more.

Fox, of course, never joined up, and he tells us in his Journal that he specifically refused a pressing invitation to take a commission offered in 1651—something I shall return to later. But let us first look carefully at the company he was keeping, and at the men he chose to target as he began to weld into one movement the disparate groups variously called Seekers, "shattered Baptists", Ranters and Quakers in the autumn of 1651 and spring of 1652.

Released from Derby jail in October 1651 after serving nearly a year for contravening the Blasphemy Act, Fox made his way to Yorkshire, either by their invitation or providentially meeting up with the Nayler-Dewsbury-Farnsworth group of ex-soldiers, newly demobilised after the “crowning mercy” of the battle of Worcester. This historic meeting, which brought together the six young men (the other two were Thomas Aldam and Thomas Goodaire) who organised the first great Quaker missionary journeys in the north, was held at the home of one *Lieutenant* Roper. As Fox moves on, he targets and makes converts of army *Captain* Richard Pursloe of Cranswick, near Selby, and his friend Justice Durant Hotham, who was to act as his protector. After criss-crossing Yorkshire and “convincing many” Fox has a “great meeting” at the house of *Colonel* Robert Overton. After climbing Pendle Hill, Fox makes his way northwards to Dent, where among the few who are convinced is *Captain* Alexander Hebblethwaite. Next stop Garsdale, where he searches out *Major* Miles Bousfield. On to Sedbergh and Brigflatts, where he makes for the home of army veteran Richard Robinson, who takes him to a meeting at Borret, the home of *Captain* Gervase Benson, the regional military commissioner. Among the Westmorland Seekers, Fox convinces *Captain* Henry Ward of Grayrigg, and other Seekers Fox meets for the first time are outspoken republican zealots: Richard Hubberthorne, Edward Burrough, Thomas Taylor. On his way to Swarthmoor Hall he searches out *Captain* Adam Sandys of Bouth, chief constable of Ulverston (but finds him “a very chaffy light man... for his god was his belly”). At Swarthmoor he has clearly targeted Justice Thomas Fell, Cromwell’s leading man in the far north-west, Vice-Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and friend and circuit-colleague of Judge John Bradshaw who, as President of the court which condemned Charles Stuart to death, was the midwife of the republic itself. Fell had turned over part of his Swarthmoor home as a billet for New Model Army troops.

Let's convert this into statistics. There are 46 men Fox names (or whose names have been added as footnotes by his editors) in his Pendle-to-Swarthmoor narrative—the mythic origin of the Quaker movement. Thirteen of these are “priests” or JPs who may or may not have had direct military connections. Of the remaining 33, no fewer than 20—well over half—carry a military rank, or are known from other sources to have been in the army or connected with it. Of course, some of the remaining 13 may also have served in the army although there is no specific mention of it. However we compute it, army men are strongly and disproportionately represented in this account. What, then, might we infer from this?

It seems clear that Fox was recommended from one group and one individual to another. From the Pendle inn where he stayed after his climb, he tells us he had the innkeeper and his wife send out papers advertising his presence in the area. We may reasonably guess that the unnamed kinsman of John Blaykling whom he met near Wensleydale told him of the Dent Independents (who were organising a tithe strike at the time) and their leader Captain Hebblethwaite, who told him of Major Bousfield in Garsdale, who told him of Richard Robinson and Captain Benson in Sedbergh, who certainly introduced him to the Westmorland Seekers, who perhaps told him of Captain Sandys of Bouth and Justice Fell of Swarthmoor. Fox wasn't blundering around aimlessly, guided by some kind of blind divine intuition. He networked his way across the northwest, following the recommendations of sympathisers and targeting influential men with the radical sympathies which might make them receptive to the Quaker message. Most of these men were clearly the military leaders of their local communities, guardians of the new English republic.

It may be objected that some of the men named were former soldiers, no longer in active service, and even those who were still known by their army rank may no longer have been serving officers by 1652. Why should we assume that Fox's

targeting of these men implies some kind of Quaker-military alliance? May it not be the case that Fox opened their eyes to the futility and wickedness of a military life, turning them from Cromwellian soldiers into Quaker pacifists?

There are two answers to that. One is that Quakers continued to serve in the army, and also the navy, all through the 1650s. But there is another point to be made with respect to Fox himself. It is striking that, of the many recorded occasions when he meets these captains and majors, not once does he rebuke them for their calling, for their use of “carnal weapons”. He objects to Captain Sandys’ sense of humour and his appetite for the good life, both of which he thinks inappropriate for a puritan, but he does not criticise the captain’s military profession. Is it not surprising that the man who is to become best known to the world as the pacifist leader of a pacifist sect breathes not one recorded word of criticism of the soldiers’ trade?

But what about the occasion in 1651 when Fox specifically refused a commission? In April of that year, with the decisive battle of Worcester looming, he was visited in Derby jail by the army commissioners urging him to accept appointment as a captain. “They proffered me that preferment because of my virtue”, he says in the Journal, “with many other compliments, and asked me if I would not take up arms for the Commonwealth against the King”. And he famously replied: “I told them I lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars, and I knew from whence all wars did rise, from the lust according to James’s doctrine [a reference to James iv, 1]. I told them I was come into the covenant of peace which was before wars and strikes were.”

The first point I want to make here is one which is often missed. While Fox emphasised that he refused the commission, I want to make the point that *it was offered*. What is striking, surely, is that the New Model recruitment panel clearly recognised a fellow-zealot for the republican cause. They praised his “virtue”—which John Nickalls, the modern editor

of the *Journal*, translates as “valour”. They heaped compliments on him. They were clearly familiar with what he had done, said, believed, preached. He might be an extremist, but he was their kind of extremist: “one of us”. He opposed tithes: so did they. He championed the poor: so did they. He proposed to eliminate every lord and aristocrat from England: so did they. He did all he could to undermine the power of the national church: so did they. His radical politics and his radical religion were interfused, inseparable—as were the politics and religion of the Levellers, the army Agitators and the junior officers of the New Model. He was for the English revolution, God’s own cause, and that was enough.

But let us focus on his answer: “I lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars”. This sounds like pacifism. It seems to anticipate by a full decade the peace testimony of Restoration Quakerism. It has generally been interpreted as indicating that, even if other Quakers were slower to abandon the sword, Fox himself was clear on the necessity of renouncing force right from the start, and had to wait ten years for the rest of the movement to catch up with him. But this interpretation will not do. It squares with the *Journal*, dictated many years later, but not with what Fox was writing and publishing in the 1650s.

Christopher Hill ventured the suggestion, when he addressed the George Fox Tercentenary Conference in Lancaster in 1991, that Fox unconsciously projected his 1670s pacifism back into the 1650s. Another explanation, I suggest, is that Fox refused the commission not because he objected in principle to the use of military force in a godly cause but because he believed God had chosen him personally for something different. He supported the army, but did not himself feel called to be a soldier.

Those who insist that we must take the absolute pacifism of Fox’s 1651 statement (as recalled and written down in 1675) at face value, must address several problems. The first is the

one I have already dealt with at some length: that Fox appears to have targeted the military as the very people most likely to be sympathetic to his message, without ever suggesting they should renounce their military calling. But if that is deemed inconclusive, consider this message to Cromwell, signed “George Fox” and dated January 1658, where the Protector is lambasted for not carrying his military conquests into Europe and on to Rome itself—even to the Turkish empire:

“Oliver, hadst thou been faithful and thundered down the deceit, the Hollander had been thy subject and tributary, Germany had given up to have done thy will, and the Spaniard had quivered like a dry leaf wanting the virtue of God, the King of France should have bowed his neck under thee, the Pope should have withered as in winter, the Turk in all his fatness should have smoked, thou shouldst not have stood trifling about small things, but minded the work of the Lord as He began with thee at first ... Let thy soldiers go forth... that thou may rock nations as a cradle.”

It is very hard to read this as a pacifist tract! Interestingly, it was not included when Fox’s collected works were published after his death. The original parchment is at Friends House, London (Bound Parchment Portfolio 9, p. 79) Edward Burrough quoted it approvingly in his pamphlet *Good Counsel and Advice Rejected* in 1659.

In another pamphlet, *To the Council of Officers of the Armie*, probably published in 1659, Fox urges the troops to “see that you know a soldier’s place... and that ye be soldiers qualified”. One Quaker soldier, he asserted, was worth seven non-Quakers. If the army grandees could not be trusted to see the work through, “the inferior officers and soldiers” should take on the task themselves. Addressing them over the heads of their generals, he urged them “never set up your standard till you come to Rome”. Indulging a surprising military fantasy, he railed against the army for failing to invade Spain and root out the Inquisition, and for holding back from a conquest of the Turkish

empire which would have released the innocent from “thralldom, bondage and captivity”. Clearly for the young George Fox the sword had its place in fulfilling God’s purpose on earth, even if he personally felt called—as he clearly did—to a different way of life.

Christopher Hill in his Lancaster address reminded us of other contemporary statements of Quaker support for republican military rule. Friends “stood by [Cromwell] in time of greatest dangers in all the late wars”, wrote Francis Howgill, adding that “many precious men ventured their lives and lost their blood” to win liberty “as men and Christians”. James Nayler agreed. When there were moves to silence Quakers after Cromwell’s death in 1658, Nayler protested that Friends “generally did venture their lives and estates with those that are in the present government, purchasing their freedom as men with great loss”. No doubt he spoke with feeling: he had spent nine years fighting under Lambert. George Bishop, who as an army captain and Agitator had dared accuse the high command of not being wholeheartedly republican, defended the king’s execution “for the preservation of the public interest”. He told Cromwell in 1656 that the republican cause was “the highest on which men were ever engaged in the field”. Edward Burrough believed it was God, working through the army, who “overthrew that oppressing power of king, lords... and bishops, and brought some tyrants and oppressors to just execution”. In 1659 he declared himself “given to believe that there is some great work to do by them, in their nations, with their outward sword, and that time is not long till a good thing may be accomplished by our English army”. Even Quakerism’s nursing-mother-superior Margaret Fell described the army as “the Battle-axe in the hand of the Lord”, telling the military leadership in her 1659 pamphlet *To the General Council and Officers of the Army* that “though we [Quakers] be but little and small in your eyes... yet it will be good for you, if ye have our prayers”.

Few Quaker soldiers resigned from the army when they were convinced. William Dewsbury did so, apparently on genuine pacifist grounds, but that was before he became a Quaker; and Edward Billing resigned his position as a cornet in General Monck's army to become a Quaker brewer, though he made it clear he still "owned the sword in its place". But they were the exceptions. Barry Reay finds evidence of Quaker recruitment in the army garrisons in York, Bristol, Holy Island and Berwick-upon-Tweed, Lancaster, Carlisle, Chester, Kent, Northamptonshire, Norfolk, Shrewsbury and London.

Friends were particularly successful in making Quakers of the soldiers in Cromwell's army of conquest in Ireland in 1655 and 1656, with one officer, Colonel Nicholas Kempson, promising to build a meetinghouse in Cavan, another provincial governor, Richard Hodden of Kinsale, appointing a Quaker minister to preach to his troops, and another, Governor Robert Phayre of Cork, reporting that "more is done by the Quakers than all the priests in the country have done in a hundred years". Many Quakers were also recruited in the army in Scotland. True, both Henry Cromwell in Ireland and General Monck in Scotland moved against Quakers and tried to purge them from their armies, but not because they were pacifist; on the contrary, because they were considered dangerously militant and potentially mutinous. Also, their insistence on treating everyone equally, and therefore refusing the usual compliments due to officers, was considered prejudicial to good order and discipline. In 1657 a non-Quaker colonel complained that his captain was "much confirmed in his principle of quaking, making all the soldiers his equal (according to the Levellers' strain)". This captain even forbade his men to salute him, which the colonel thought "the root of disobedience" and "anarchy", since "where all are equals I expect little obedience". Quakers bitterly opposed the purges and struggled hard to stay within the army's ranks. When Monck purged forty Quakers from his forces in 1657, none had been in the army less than seven years and the

majority had service records of fourteen years, which means they had joined up at the beginning of the civil war and had remained soldiers during Cromwell's military dictatorship.

In the crisis year of 1659, when it became clear that the half-way revolution was no longer an option, when England must either settle the republic on a permanent basis or fall back into royalist reaction, Quakers were in the forefront of those who adopted a militant revolutionary position. When the army restored the Rump of the Long Parliament to power, George Fox exulted: "the Lord Jesus is come to reign... Now shall the Lamb and the saints have victory". Edward Burrough, in an address to the army omitted from his collected works as later published by Friends, declared "We look for a New Earth as well as for a New Heaven", adding that Quakers expected the army and Parliament together to secure the "just freedom of the people". Quaker naval captain Anthony Mellidge drew on Leveller language to remind his masters that this freedom had been won by bloody warfare: "We are not only free-born of England, but we have also purchased our freedom in the nation, and the continuation thereof, with many years hard service, the loss of the lives of many hundreds, the spoiling of much goods, and the shedding of much blood in the late war, by which at last the Lord overturned them".

It was at this critical stage that Fox produced the most revolutionary political programme ever published by a Quaker leader, calling not only for the standard Leveller package of toleration, abolition of tithes and law reform, but also for a huge programme of public ownership by way of the wholesale expropriation of church and crown lands, royalists' property, and estates once held by the monasteries and now enjoyed by the gentry. This, coupled with the confiscation of manorial profits, would finance a radical new system of poor relief and the maintenance of a standing army, which Fox saw as the guarantee of the revolutionary Commonwealth. But the restored Rump failed to respond or produce the liberties

demanded. (And Friends did not include this pamphlet, *To the Parliament of the Commonwealth of England: Fifty-nine Particulars*, in his collected works).

There were rumours of royalist uprisings, and Parliament moved to set up new local militias in which Quakers were active. General Lambert recruited northern Friends to help crush “Booth’s Rebellion” in Cheshire, though Fox, in a sudden volte face, now chastised the “foolish, rash spirits” among Friends who still clung to hopes of military salvation. But his was something of a lone voice among the radicals. The only hope now for the party which sought a New Heaven, declared Henry Stubbe, was that it was “possessed with the militia of the nation, and under good commanders”. When the Rump fell and control reverted to the army and its Committee of Safety, the rush into the militias increased. Quaker Anthony Pearson set about recruiting an armed force from among Kendal and Lancaster Friends. Five Friends were named commissioners for the Westminster militia, two for Berkshire, and one each for Cheshire, Cornwall, Devon, Gloucestershire, Glamorgan, Worcestershire and Wiltshire. Five Quaker leaders in Bristol served as commissioners there, and six in North-West Wales. Barry Reay argues that it was the spectre of the Quakers seizing power, reintroducing the demands of the Levellers (as augmented by Fox’s newly published programme), and reopening the wounds of the civil wars that panicked the gentry into the camp which would restore monarchy the following year.

Quaker leaders like Francis Howgill, Edward Burrough and George Bishop actively supported direct resistance to the counter-revolution. But later in that same fateful year of 1659, when the political struggle was nearing its climax, Fox seems to have withdrawn from the struggle in growing disillusionment. When Bristol Friends asked his opinion on whether Friends could serve as soldiers he answered half-heartedly that “there is something in the thing... and you cannot well leave them seeing you have gone among them”. A little later when Welsh

Friends asked the same question, his answer is not recorded in any contemporary document, but he tells us later he “forbade” it.

In the very last days of the republic, Fox records in the *Journal* that while riding out on his horse in Nottinghamshire he was met by a troop of soldiers on their way to join General Lambert in a last-ditch stand against Monck’s troops who were marching south to put Charles II on the throne. Lambert’s republicans wanted to buy Fox’s horse, but he refused to sell, telling them that “God would confound and scatter them”—as indeed he did in the next few days. For Fox, the Quaker-military alliance was over—even if Lambert’s army still had many Quaker soldiers in it.

Of course Friends had never been entirely at one with the various republican governments of the 1650s. The wider struggle for a godly Commonwealth was for them only part of their own “Lamb’s War”. They formed the left wing of a revolution to which the leaders of those governments paid lip-service, while constantly trying to hold it in check. Nearly two thousand Quakers were imprisoned during Cromwell’s regime, mostly by local authorities where revolutionary loyalties were thin. But the middle ranks of the army no less than the Quakers remained a radical stronghold, at least until 1657, and whenever the revolution looked set to go into reverse Quakers and the military made common cause. In 1659 Friends seem to have tried briefly to take over the army, as the Levellers had tried in 1648 and the Fifth Monarchists in 1653, and with the same lack of success.

The alliance was shattered when the revolution collapsed and the monarchy was restored. From being the critical left wing of the ruling party and allies of the ruling army, Quakers were singled out as the most intransigent enemies of the crown. Their response was to declare themselves harmless, meeting accusations of plotting with the peace declarations of 1660 and 1661. Quaker politics increasingly took a new form, that of passive resistance and mass civil disobedience, undertaken

against the new king in the name of a King of kings who was not of this world. There was no place for the sword in this kind of politics, and the old alliance with the army was not only abandoned but rapidly written out of Quaker history.

It is no part of my argument that the peace testimony is somehow less valid because it resulted from a Quaker U-turn. Indeed, the fact that it grew out of long and bitter experience of the failure of armed struggle to create a New Earth surely gives it more rather than less potency. In any case, while rejection of “carnal weapons” clearly represented a political U-turn, it may also be seen as a natural development of Friends’ consistent refusal to return violence for violence on the personal level, a testimony to which they were conscientiously attached even when allied with the army. Counter-revolution in 1660 proved that hopes of an earthly reign of the saints, a New Model theocracy, were false, and Friends found themselves forging a new politics of survival in an unregenerate world where paradise was postponed indefinitely.

But the fact of the Quaker-military alliance during the English Republic should alert us to the inadequacy of the received version of our history, which has been so filtered, censored, distorted, re-invented, that it now misleads more than it leads. If we are going to make a serious effort to understand Quaker religious experience in the seventeenth century, which we have to do if we are seriously interested in articulating Quaker religious experience in our own time, we must reopen the archives and study them without preconceptions and with as much objectivity as we can muster. It will not do to rely on our Quaker historians alone: even the very best, fairest and most scholarly, like William C. Braithwaite, but particularly the many who have simply recycled the old, old story. Intuition alone, that good old standby and very present help to the intellectually lazy, will avail us nothing here. Creative flair and imagination will be essential, but hard work by disciplined minds even more so. Of course every history is an interpretation, and

historical truth is always relative. But we need a new narrative, and to make it we need to draw on non-Quaker and anti-Quaker as well as Quaker sources, and certainly on non-Quaker as well as Quaker historians.

I also believe we can learn something positive from the republican Quaker church-militant. Early Friends were surely right to link the making of a New Earth with a New Heaven, to recognise that if mercy, pity, peace and love are to flourish, the world—this world—must be mended and society radically refashioned. In a pre-democratic state where it seemed that the power to refashion society could only be won by force of arms, early Friends—with few exception could not and did not dissociate themselves from the sword. After 1660, when Friends abandoned the sword because it had failed them, they necessarily abandoned the pursuit of political power to change the world. But in twentieth-century England the sword is no longer the sole arbiter of power. There has been a democratic revolution, incomplete and imperfect, but one which allows the pursuit of power by peaceful means. We no longer have to choose between political-action-with-violence and non-violence-with-political-withdrawal.

That means that, if we choose, we can look again at the New Earth which 1650s Friends strove to build in alliance with the New Model Army, and ask if we cannot pick up where they left off, building this time in alliance with the democratic process. Dare we resume the campaign for a society of equals, in which the power of peers and monarch are abolished and the mighty put down from their seats, a society which is not frightened to expropriate the rich to relieve the poor, a society which at last disestablishes the Church of England and deprives it of its indefensible privileges?

Now there's a Quaker programme for the twenty-first century!