

EVANS CHARLES

A CONCISE
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH
OF WILLIAM PENN

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Содержание

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF WILLIAM PENN	5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	11

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF WILLIAM PENN

The following is a brief sketch of the life of one who, though perhaps more widely known as the Proprietor and Founder of Pennsylvania, was also eminent as a minister of the gospel in the Society of Friends, and distinguished for his superior intellectual abilities, his varied culture, and, above all, for his devoted Christian character, exemplified both in adversity and prosperity. It is taken principally from a work entitled "Friends in the Seventeenth Century."

He was the son of William Penn, who, trained to nautical life, had by his genius and courage risen rapidly in the navy, until at the age of twenty-nine he became "Vice-Admiral of the Straits." From the account of his life and public career, given by Granville Penn, a descendant, he appears to have been a man who made self-interest a leading principle of conduct, but who, while eagerly coveting wealth and honor, was never accused of being corrupt as a public servant. His son William was born in London, in 1644, and resided with his mother at Wanstead, in Essex, while his father was absent with the fleet over which he had command.

Owing to information received by Cromwell, through some of the spies kept by him in attendance upon the exiled Charles and his court, that, notwithstanding he had sanctioned the promotion of Admiral Penn, and largely rewarded him by an estate in Ireland, for some losses he had sustained there, he was secretly making overtures to bring the squadron he commanded into the service of the Royalists, he lost favor with the Protector. On his return from an unsuccessful expedition against the Spanish West India Islands, he was deprived of his command and thrown into prison, whence Cromwell generously liberated him at his own humble petition. He then took his family over to Ireland, where he continued to reside for some years, on the estate which Cromwell had had bestowed upon him, and which was near Cork.

In a manuscript written by Thomas Harvey, reciting an account given to him by William Penn, of some of the circumstances of his early life, and which was first published in "The Penns and Peningtons," by M. Webb, it is stated, "That while he was but a child living at Cork with his father, Thomas Loe came thither. When it was rumored a Quaker was come from England, his father proposed to some others to be like the noble Bereans, and hear him before they judged him. He accordingly sent to Thomas Loe to come to his house; where he had a meeting in the family. Though William was very young, he observed what effect T. Loe's preaching had on the hearers. A black servant of his father could not restrain himself from weeping aloud; and little William looking on his father, saw the tears running down his cheeks also. He then thought within himself, 'What if they would all be Quakers!'" This opportunity he never quite forgot; the remembrance of it still recurring at times. William Penn was then about eleven years of age, and was being educated by a private tutor.

On the retirement of Richard Cromwell from the position for which he had been appointed by his father, Admiral Penn declared for Charles Stuart, and lost no time in going over to the Continent to pay court to him whom he had no doubt would soon be recalled to the throne. Charles employed him in secret service, and rewarded him by the honors of knighthood, and by becoming his debtor for one hundred pounds.

When a little over fifteen years of age, William Penn entered as a "gentleman commoner," at Oxford, where he remained three years, distinguishing himself as a hard and successful student. After the Restoration, the Court set to work to remodel the University, by displacing those who held Puritanical opinions, or who had found favor during the Commonwealth, and installing others, friendly to the re-established church and the lax moral principles then prevailing. Dr. Owen,

conspicuous as a scholar and a strict religionist, was ejected to make room for a royalist partisan, and the students became divided into parties, applauding or denouncing the changes made.

There is reason to believe, from observations made by William Penn himself, that throughout his youth he was repeatedly visited by the Day-Spring from on high, convicting him of that which was evil in his ways, and bringing him into serious thoughtfulness. While at college, his associates appear to have been those of a religious cast of character like himself, and who, with him, were greatly influenced by the teaching and advice of Dr. Owen. It so happened that, while much controversy was going on among the scholars relative to religious opinions and practices, Thomas Loe came to Oxford, and held several meetings. To these meetings William Penn and his associates went, and a deep impression was made upon their minds by the powerful preaching of this devoted servant of Christ. They declined being present at what were now the regular "services" of the college, and did not refrain from speaking depreciatingly of what they designated as the "Popish doctrines and usages" re-introduced among them. For this they were lectured and fined. With the ardor and indiscretion of youth, this supposed indignity was highly resented by them. They not only held private meetings for worship and religious exhortation and prayer, but some of them refused to wear the student's gown and cap, and in some instances tore them off of those they met. How far William Penn was implicated in the latter wrong-doing is not known; but his positive refusal to wear the usual garb, his bold denunciation of the doctrine and practices he believed to be wrong, and his courageous defence of the gospel truths he had heard from Thomas Loe, brought upon him the enmity of the Masters in power, and he was expelled the University.

Admiral Penn, who had set his heart upon preparing his son for realizing to the full the ambitious hopes and aims entertained by himself for his family, appears to have been little qualified to understand his son's character, or to rightly estimate the principles that actuated him. His pride was mortified, and, as he thought, his promising schemes were blasted. He received William with anger, and for a time would hardly deign to speak to him. Accustomed to command, and to be obeyed without question, he ordered him to give up his newly-formed views of religious duty, and to hold no further intercourse with those who had shared in his rebellious opinions and course. Enraged on finding that his authority, though seconded by the filial affection of his child, was powerless for removing his religious convictions, he resorted to the use of his cane, followed by solitary confinement in his room, and then banishment from the family.

It was not long, however, before his good sense convinced him that the object he had in view was not to be obtained by severity. He resolved to change his mode of attack, and try if what could not be gained by force might not be brought about by the seductions of a life of gayety and pleasure. Learning that a number of young men, sons of persons considered to be of high families, were about to go on to the Continent and spend some time in study and travelling, he decided to send William with them. Accordingly, furnished with letters that would introduce him into what the world considered the best society, he went to Paris; and, fascinated by the courtly and gay scenes of the company into which he found himself welcomed as an admired guest, he soon caught the worldly spirit that presided over their festivities, and his serious, Quaker-like impressions appeared to pass away, like the morning dew before the burning rays of the sun. He did not, however, allow pleasure to wean him from study. He went to Saumur, and placing himself under the tuition of the learned Moses Amyrault, applied himself to the study of the language and literature of the country, embracing the philosophic basis of divinity. Travelling into Italy, he made himself acquainted with its language, and gratified his taste for the works of the masters in art.

On the breaking out of the war with the Dutch, the Admiral called his son William home, where he arrived after an absence of two years. All trace of the religious seriousness and conscientious restraint that had marked his conduct and manner when he left was gone, and his father was delighted to find his son wearing the carriage and displaying the accomplishments of a self-possessed man of

the world. He was at once introduced at Court, and had the opportunity to become acquainted with many who stood high in the brilliant but profligate society that filled the saloons of Whitehall.

William Penn now entered Lincoln's Inn as a student of law, and in 1665, when twenty-one years of age, there seemed every probability of his making an accomplished courtier, and a successful competitor for the honors of this world. Few could enter life with more flattering and apparently better-grounded prospects of attaining to all that would gratify a mind with strong intellectual powers, and naturally ambitious of preferment. His manly form, blooming with health, betokened physical strength and endurance. His disposition, though lively and active, was marked by docility and sweetness. He possessed ready wit, and his good mental abilities had been well developed and trained by careful culture, and strengthened by extensive and profound literary attainments. Men high in power and place smiled upon him. His father enjoyed close intimacy with the Duke of York, heir presumptive to the crown, and eagerly sought to secure for his son the glory and riches of the world, which courted his acceptance.

The Admiral having been appointed by the Duke of York to accompany him in command of the fleet, took William as one of his staff; but after a short absence the latter was sent home with a dispatch to the King. The plague was now spreading in London, and soon the whole aspect of the city was sadly changed. The awful scenes of death that were daily occurring and struck the stoutest hearts with dismay, brought to the sensitive mind of the gay young man conviction of the uncertainty of life, and warning of the necessity to prepare for its sudden termination. The Holy Spirit again broke up his false rest, showed him the emptiness of all worldly grandeur, and wooed him to follow Christ Jesus in the regeneration.

After a cruise of about two months, his father returned, flushed with success in the sanguinary contest in which he had been engaged. He found William again serious, and indisposed to continue the course upon which, but a short time before, he had exultantly entered. The increased honors and emoluments heaped on the victorious sailor by the royal brothers, made him still more fearful lest the foolish whimsies, as he thought them, of his son, would yet disappoint his hopes of the hereditary honors that might be settled upon him. Large accession to his Irish estate, derived from royal bounty as a reward for the service rendered, made it necessary that some one should look after his interest there; and having experienced the good effect, as he considered it, of placing his son within the dazzling circle of gay and fashionable life, he hurried him across the Channel, with letters of introduction to the Duke of Ormond, then Lord Deputy of Ireland.

William found the vice-regal Court comparatively free from the dissipation and loose morals of that which surrounded Charles II., and he soon seemed to enter heartily into the enjoyment it afforded. He joined an expedition sent, under the command of Lord Airan, to quell an insurrection that broke out among the garrison at Carrickfergus, and for a while was so excited by the spirit and enterprise attending active military life, that he became anxious to adopt it as a profession. But his father, when consulted on the subject, decidedly objected, and it was given up.

But He who watches over the workmanship of his hand, and seeks to save that which is lost, was not leaving William Penn to wander in the paths of folly, without the reproofs of instruction, and in mercy, by his witness in the heart, inclining him to accept those reproofs as the way to life; and it was not long before he was brought to a stand, and made to feel that he must then make his election between the life of a votary of this world and that of a self-denying disciple of a crucified Saviour.

Shangarry Castle, the newly-acquired estate of the Admiral, was near to Cork, and when not employed in bringing the place and the affairs connected with it into order, William was often in the town, where he had been well acquainted when a boy. Having one day, while there, gone into the shop of a woman Friend whom he had formerly known, to make a purchase, and finding she did not recognize him, he introduced himself, and entered into conversation with her; recalling to her recollection the meeting held by Thomas Loe at his father's house. Upon her expressing surprise at his memory of the events, he replied, he thought he would never forget them, and that, if he knew

where that Friend was, he would go to hear him again, though it was a hundred miles off. She told him he need not go so far, for that Friend was now in Cork, and was to have a meeting the next day. Curious again to hear one who had arrested his attention when a boy, and seriously impressed him by his ministry, when at Oxford, he went to the meeting; and after a time Thomas Loe stood up with the expression, "There is a faith that overcomes the world, and there is a faith that is overcome by the world." It struck deep into the heart of William Penn, who was then made to feel keenly that he had been long striving against or slighting his known duty to his Maker, and allowing the world to overcome the drawing of his heavenly Father's love, to bring him out from the thralldom of sin; and as the preacher with fervid eloquence dwelt on the fruits of such faith, he was thoroughly broken down, and wept much. After the meeting he went with Thomas Loe to a Friend's house, where they had a free conversation, and from that time he became a regular attender of the meetings of Friends. As the Light of Christ shone with more and more clearness upon his soul, he saw how grievously he had departed from the right way of the Lord, and was brought under deep repentance therefor. Convinced of the truth of the doctrines held by Friends, he heartily embraced them, and firmly resolved to live and die by them, whatever sacrifices it might cost him.

Being at a meeting in Cork in 1667, he, with others, was arrested by officers who came to break the meeting up, and was sent to prison: though the Magistrate, who recognized him as the son of the lord of Shangarry Castle, offered to set him at liberty if he would give his word "to keep the peace," which he refused. From the prison he addressed a letter to the Earl of Ossory, giving an account of the arrest and imprisonment of himself and friends, showing their innocence, and pleading the liberty of conscience demanded by the precepts of the gospel. An order was immediately dispatched by the Earl for his release; and as it was soon noised abroad that Admiral Penn's son had turned Quaker, the Earl wrote to his father, communicating the information. Startled and annoyed by the intelligence, the Admiral ordered William to come home immediately, which he did. Josiah Cole, a minister in the Society of Friends, met him at Bristol; accompanied him to London, and being deeply interested for his stability and preservation, went with him to his father's house. Fully as William had adopted the principles of Friends, and many as were the baptisms he had already passed through, he had not yet adopted the plain dress that distinguished them from others; and his father observing this, and that his rapier still hung by his side, hoped that his friend the Earl had been wrongly informed; and he treated him and his friend during the evening with ordinary courtesy, without alluding to the report that had reached him.

Observing, on the next day, that William did not uncover his head when he came into his presence, – in those days men generally wore their hats in the house, – and that he used thee and thou when addressing him, he demanded an explanation. William frankly told him that, having been convinced of the truth of the religion of the Quakers, he was conscientiously scrupulous against taking off his hat as a token of respect, using the plural language, or compliments. An angry altercation on the part of the father, and deeply distressing on the part of the son, succeeded, and was more than once repeated. Finally, the former, finding that neither argument nor threats could shake the latter's firm conviction that to comply with his father's wishes would be to violate his duty to his Lord and Master, told him he might thee and thou whom he pleased, and keep on his hat, except in the presence of the King, the Duke of York, and himself; but to or before these he should not thee or thou, or stand covered; and the son, moved by his father's distress and his own filial affection, asked time for consideration before giving a decisive reply. This was reluctantly granted, though he was forbidden to see any Friend, and William retired, to pour out his soul in prayer for right direction and strength to follow it. At their next interview William told his father that he could not comply with his wishes without violating his duty to his God, and must therefore decline. Irritated at what he considered his son's obstinacy, and foolish determination to sacrifice the worldly honors soliciting his acceptance, for a mere whim, the Admiral upbraided him in no measured terms, and when convinced that he would not be changed, turned him out of doors, with the threat that he would disinherit him. Before leaving

his home and family, William assured his father how deeply he was grieved; not so much because of his being driven from his paternal roof and brought to poverty, as because he incurred his displeasure, and was thought by him to be an undutiful child. He then left the house, resigned to make the sacrifice required, and "choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he had respect unto the recompense of reward." Friends who knew the circumstances under which William Penn was placed, received him gladly; and his mother, who yearned over the son of her love, and greatly mourned the course pursued towards him, took means to have him supplied with money sufficient to obtain food and raiment, and so managed as to have an occasional interview with him. It was not long after, that, laying aside his rapier and all ornamentation of dress, he appeared in the plain garb of a Quaker.

Some years after, when writing respecting the trials that befell him about this time, he speaks of "the bitter mockings and scornings that fell upon me, the displeasure of my parents, the cruelty and invective of the priests, the strangeness of all my companions, and what a sign and wonder they made of me; but above all, that great cross of resisting and watching against my own vain affections and thoughts."

As he was given up to endure the baptisms necessary for his purification and refinement, his Divine Master brought him up out of the horrible pit, set his feet upon Himself, the Rock of Ages, and made him a partaker of the powers of the world to come; and having thus prepared him for the work, bestowed on him a gift in the ministry of the gospel of life and salvation. He first came forth in this service in 1668, about two years after his conviction under the ministry of Thomas Loe, and in the twenty-fourth year of his age. His uniformly consistent conduct, and careful maintenance of affectionate filial respect toward his exasperated parent, finally won upon him so far that he permitted him to take up his abode in his house; though it was long after he had been so living, before he would have much intercourse with him. But when, sharing in the persecution which Friends were then suffering, his son was cast into prison, it was said he secretly used his influence to obtain his liberty.

In 1668 Thomas Loe was called away from the church militant to enter upon his reward in the church triumphant. When on his death-bed, he said to William Penn, who, with other Friends, was waiting on him, "Bear thy cross and stand faithful to God; then He will give thee an everlasting crown of glory, that shall not be taken from thee. There is no other way which shall prosper than that which the holy men of old walked in. God hath brought immortality to light, and life immortal is felt. Glory! glory! to Him, for He is worthy of it. His love overcomes my heart; nay, my cup runs over; glory be to His Name forever." To George Whitehead he remarked, "The Lord is good to me; this day He hath covered me with glory," and as life was leaving his body, he sang, "Glory, glory to Thee forever!" and so sank to sleep in Jesus.

In 1668 William Penn was imprisoned on account of one of his publications, "The Sandy Foundation Shaken." It resulted from himself and George Whitehead having been unfairly prevented from orally replying to a Calvinistic preacher who had assailed the doctrines of Friends. In this tract he was not so guarded in the language he used, but that he was misunderstood by many, and supposed to be unsound on the fundamental doctrines of the proper divinity and meritorious death and atonement of Christ. The publication attracted general attention, and gave deep offence to some of the Prelates, who either thought it beneath their dignity to enter into argument with a polemic so young, and as they might think, so unskilled in divinity, or, being more in accordance with their practice and the spirit of the times, and more likely to silence their opponent, they applied to the Secretary of State, and induced him to issue a warrant for his arrest; which William Penn hearing of, went and voluntarily gave himself up, and was committed to the Tower. It was evident that William Penn had some bitter enemies, for a letter was picked up near where he had been standing when he surrendered himself, which contained matter of so treasonable a character, that Lord Arlington, the Secretary of State, on receiving and reading it, went immediately to the Tower and had an interview with him,

in which he soon satisfied himself that William Penn knew nothing of the note, and was innocent of any conspiracy.

There had been no indictment, no trial, conviction, nor sentence passed upon the prisoner, and yet he was kept in solitary confinement for about eight months; during which time most of his family and friends were forbidden access to him, and the "Bishop of London" sent him word he should either make a public recantation or die in prison. But though thus closely immured as to his body, his spirit was free, and the word of the Lord was not bound. He prepared himself to weary out the malice of his enemies by patience and meekness, and to be resigned to lay down his life within the walls of the Tower, if the sacrifice was called for, rather than violate his conscience.

To occupy his time profitably, and, as far as he had ability, promote the cause of truth and righteousness, he employed his pen; and his thoughts, probably taking their direction and coloring from the afflictive circumstances under which he and many other members of the Society to which he was joined were then placed, he wrote the work, since become so celebrated, "No Cross, No Crown." This treatise is admitted to be of extraordinary merit; not only in a literary point of view, considering the short time and the circumstances under which it was produced, but in the clear and cogent manner in which it presents the sinful indulgences of the great body of the professors of Christianity, and enforces the self-denying requisitions of the religion of Christ.

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