

William Penn: A Radical, Conservative Quaker**J. William Frost****University Park: Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2024.****237 pp.****ISBN 978-0-271-09777-0****DOI: [10.14713/njs.v12i1.420](https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v12i1.420)**

Preeminent emeritus scholar of Quaker beliefs and practices, J. William Frost, examines William Penn's "religious faith and his roles within the Society of Friends" (xv). Definitively not a biography, *William Penn: A Radical, Conservative Quaker* is more of a spiritual discernment—an examination of what William Penn believed it meant to be Quaker. Frost organized the book into eight major essays, each of which is meant to stand alone—easily adapted into course readings—and each, such as "Convinced," "The Dissident Quakers," and "Preacher," focuses on a different aspect of Penn's Quaker identity in the context of Quaker ideology and Penn's position in society. Far from arguing with Andrew Murphy's recent biography *William Penn: A Life*, Frost intends to offer a more religiously oriented basis to understand Penn as a Quaker. Frost argues that Penn "was a rebel who supported authority, an aristocratic plain Quaker" and therefore was historically enigmatic (xii). This book seeks to pull aside that veil on his identity just a little bit.

Spiritual biographies, such as are popular among Puritans, often start with the early sinful life as justification for conversion. However, Quakers (William Penn included) rarely focused on conversion. Penn "neither discussed nor described" his conversion in his published writings, even though he spoke on many other religious issues, and most information of his conversion comes from later scholars (35). He did, however, mention his first hearing of a Quaker speaker, Thomas Loe, who his father apparently invited to speak (as a joke?) in his home when Penn was a teenager. Many years later in Ireland, Penn learned that Loe was speaking and attended his talk

and started attending Quaker services. Did he convert as an adult or as a teenager, or did these talks simply confirm his religious convictions that had always existed? Frost argues that Penn did not discuss his conversion because “Penn believed that his later knowledge of God confirmed and allowed him to understand his childhood experiences” (37). In short, he had always been Quaker; he simply needed to work out how the external manifestation could match his internal understanding, which made him more convinced.

In 1670, Penn was put on trial for public preaching that caused a riot. In the ensuing account of the trial, the author (influenced by Penn) made the judges appear incompetent. And when the jury acquitted Penn and his fellow Quaker, William Mead, the judges tried to imprison the jury! The account made Penn famous as a sort of “radical hippy of his day” (14). Penn became a prominent Quaker known for “defend(ing) Friends’ right(s) to practice their faith publicly” in his use of “tracts, the courts, and appeals to the king and Parliament to ease Quakers’ suffering” (69). Strangely, William Penn is virtually unknown in England, but famous in Pennsylvania (and the United States more broadly) as a founder of religious liberty in America. As Frost makes clear, Penn was a lobbyist for Quaker rights in England—one of the only Quakers to navigate the political sphere in such a way. His writings had specific audiences, and he wrote as a gentleman and a Quaker, not a political philosopher. He was a “rationalist and humanist using nature, reason, balance, moderation and love as a guide to ethics” (121).

Penn’s role in Pennsylvania is his most popular legacy, and no book would be complete without its consideration. Frost makes it clear that Penn quickly gave up any hope of implementing his ideas in Pennsylvania. He had to return to England soon after arriving in Pennsylvania and only heard from afar about the behavior of Pennsylvanians, but he “lament(ed) the reports of bad behavior” (103). His “Holy Experiment” after all was not, as many historians

believe, an experiment to test the ideas of religious toleration; Frost argues that Penn used experiment to mean “to have experience of,” meaning that Pennsylvania was a place that was meant to be populated by moral people who would then have a holy experience (162). As such, Penn’s legacy has been completely misunderstood and is partly why Penn himself spent so little time and overall energy in the colonies.

For J. William Frost, William Penn is a Quaker first, a strange and powerful one. His examination of Penn’s writings is a welcome addition to the literature on William Penn, for it adds a historical religious context of Quakerism that other scholars avoid. The book’s structure is also useful for teachers who can safely use a chapter in courses—one of my favorites was the chapter on “William Penn in Myth and History,” perfect for courses in methodology, public history, local history, and historical memory. Frost seems to understand both Penn and the need for undergraduates to have a simple way to access the man separate from the legend.

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