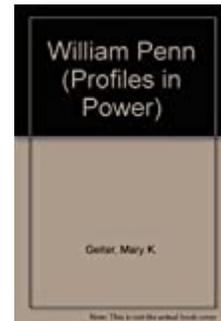


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Mary Geiter. *William Penn.* London: Longman, 2000. xii + 186 pp. \$89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-29901-6.



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Published on H-Albion (April, 2001)

A biographer of William Penn faces a daunting task. He or she needs to master fifty years of English political and religious history, understand the evolution of Quakerism, know thirty years of events in early Delaware, West New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, and then must sort through a multitude of myths. And although Penn wrote voluminously on many subjects, there are major gaps in the documentary record, and several of the thirty-five (at least) previous biographers have complained that we know too much about his theological disputes and too little about important events, including Charles II's granting of Pennsylvania or Penn's actions as a friend of James II after 1688.

Mary Geiter claims to offer a demythologized British perspective which will make Penn neither an "enigma," nor "icon," but a member of a "ruling elite" (p. vii). She insists that the focus of the series of "Profiles in Power" required her to concentrate on political power, although the book's cover advertising the "religious and political significance" of Penn's "life" seems not to know of this limitation. I assumed all would agree that in the seventeenth century there was an intermingling between religious and political power. Geiter presents a view of Penn exercising power which plays down or ignores his religious writings, his roles within Quaker meetings, and his intellectual development. These lacunae are a bit like

a golfer learning to play the game one-handed: it can be done, it gives new insights on the sport, and certain pleasures, but the overall result is almost doomed to be unsatisfying.

Geiter does provide new perspectives on Penn, although in order to evaluate them scholars will need to read her articles or dissertation where there are more complete footnotes.[1] She is revisionist, debunking Penn as "supercilious," "aggressive," ambitious, willing to jettison Algernon Sidney for a price, and to sell supplies for the army and navy and to advocate military measures (the proposals for inter-colonial union and a European parliament) to curry favor with William III. Geiter's Penn saw Pennsylvania primarily as a place to make money, and he "viewed his colony from an imperial perspective always with a view of England's greatness" (p. 6). Almost from its founding, Penn was willing to sell the government of Pennsylvania to the Crown. He was a Jacobite who may have plotted the return of James II after 1688[2] and "had to claw his way back to political influence" (p. 21). He was, in summary, "a political weather vane" (p. 160) primarily interested in power as a way to augment his fortune.

Attempts to cut away the mythology around Penn are nothing new. This is proclaimed as one of the goals in the first volume of the *Papers of William Penn*, and C. E. Vul-

liamy's 1933 biography examining Penn's post-1688 maneuverings termed him a political "trimmer," suggesting that this trait may have been learned from his father. The issue is not whether Penn deserves his appellation "hero," but whether Geiter's portrait is balanced and proven. My conclusion is that a good corrective is needed and Geiter provides new insights about politics, but scholars can have more confidence in the introductory sections written by the editors of the *Papers of William Penn*.

Geiter's volume has too many instances of inadequate evidence on the parts of Penn's career I have researched to accept her revisionist stance on his overall career. For example, her proof that Penn intended to sell the colony from its beginning is based upon a 1725 letter of James Logan. Logan became the Proprietor's secretary in 1699. (She never mentions Penn's attempt to preserve the religious and political rights of the colonists in the post 1702 negotiations with the Crown over selling the colony.) Geiter retells the old canard about Charles II removing his hat to Penn because only one man can be uncovered in the presence of the King, even though the earliest sources for the story do not mention Penn. She discusses a portrait in armor as showing Penn's character when there is no conclusive evidence it was young William Penn. She recounts the story of Penn going below deck when he and Logan encounter what could have been a hostile ship on their journey to America without indicating that our only source is Benjamin Franklin and that both Logan and Franklin advocated defense measures against the Quakers' pacifism.

Religion is not a major theme in this book, but it was important to Penn, and Geiter makes many mistakes. I doubt that she has ever even read all of Penn's religious writings; at least, when discussing what she calls "Quaker philosophy" (p. 3) she gets it wrong. She sees Moise Amyraut as a crucial influence on Penn's ideas of religious toleration, but never even lists other possible sources (Quaker and non-Quaker). There is no citation to Hugh Barbour's footnotes listing books Penn cited.^[3] Geiger is wrong to see Robert Barclay as the first Quaker theologian and mistaken to see Penn's *No Cross, No Crown* (1669) as the first "coherent guide to Quaker behavior" (p. 20). I don't know of 111 ministers "engaged" by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting before 1680-1754 and doubt that there were 92 Pennsylvania Quaker autobiographers in this period (p. 112). Penn is alleged to engage in no religious activity in his later life; it is true he wrote nothing, yet he continued to attend meetings and preach, and his contemporaries wrote glowing testimonials to him printed in Besse's 1726 *Collected Works*. It is

doubtful that in 1690 Germantown had "Lutheran, Moravian, and Mennonite" churches (p. 116), because Quakers and Mennonites still worshipped together at that date and the Moravians did not appear in Pennsylvania until the 1730s. Her claim that Catholics were not included in religious toleration in Pennsylvania until James II became king is simply wrong.

Penn's attitude towards war would be more understandable if Geiter had noted that Robert Barclay and Isaac Penington allowed a magistrate defensive war, and the Quaker peace testimony before 1700 was ill-defined. Her claim that Pennsylvania colonists created a "secular" culture would be more convincing if she had told us how she can know this, particularly since there is no evidence that she has read Quaker minutes from this side of the Atlantic.

Rather than as a biography, the value of this book comes from Geiter's perspective of restoring politics and economics to center stage. She argues that Pennsylvania was not simply the product of one man's collecting on a debt to create a religious utopia, but resulted from Charles II's fear of civil war at the time of the exclusion crisis. She makes a plausible case on circumstantial evidence that the Crown granted the colony in an attempt to divide the London merchant from the Whigs. Her stress upon the influence of merchants in the drafts of Frames of Government and later history of the colony is needed. Geiter documents the influence of the Levant Company on Pennsylvania and the crucial role of the investors in the Free Society of Traders in the early history of Pennsylvania. I agree with her conclusion that after 1700 Penn was caught between the colonists seeking autonomy, the Crown engaged in war, London merchants wanting to control trade, and Pennsylvania traders seeking freer markets. There is good information in her discussion of the pressure by the Crown on the Duke of York to surrender Delaware in 1681, of this area's importance to the merchants who invested in Pennsylvania, and of James's later attempts to reverse this grant.

Trying to encompass Penn in 170 pages is a daunting task. The decision to treat Penn's English career first and then put the American sections in the last 55 pages means that an undergraduate (the intended audience) will study the Glorious Revolution and negotiations of Penn with the Board of Trade over smuggling in the colony before learning about the settling of Pennsylvania. Geiger compressed Pennsylvania history from 1701-1710 into one page. American graduate students should have the background to handle the amount of information about En-

glish history and politics packed into the first chapters, but undergraduates are likely to get bewildered. In what I suspect is an unintentionally funny transition sentence, Geiter announces “People are not born knowing the context of late Stuart politics” (p. 6). Very true, but this is not the first book to read in learning about Stuart politics, William Penn, and early Pennsylvania.

Notes:

[1]. “The Incorporation of Pennsylvania and Late Stuart Politics,” Ph.D. Dis., Cambridge, 1993; “The Restoration Crisis and the Launching of Pennsylvania, 1679-1681,” *English Historical Review* (1997): 300-18; “London Merchants and the Launching of Pennsylvania,” *Pennsyl-*

vania Magazine of History and Biography (1997): 101-22.

[2]. I cannot evaluate this claim since the evidence will appear in a forthcoming article. However, I am very skeptical of her claim that an American journal rejected it because of an alleged bias for Penn. All the Penn scholars I know would love to have conclusive evidence about this episode.

[3]. Hugh Barbour, ed., *William Penn on Religion and Ethics* (Lewistown, NY, 1991).

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Citation: Jerry Frost. Review of Geiter, Mary, *William Penn*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. April, 2001.

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