Penn Short Guide

Penn by Elizabeth Gray Vining

BOOKRAGS

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Overview

As a prominent Quaker leader and the founder of Pennsylvania, William Perm is an important figure in religious and political history. He worked to bring religious freedom and tolerance to his native Britain, and when Pennsylvania was established as the last of the restoration colonies, he sought to graft these principles to the American experience. The colony's constitution, which Perm helped to compose, served as a model for the U.S. Constitution.

Pennsylvania's democratic heritage was strengthened further when Perm made a peace treaty with the Native Americans who lived in the colony. Voltaire, a French philosopher, noted that the document was the only treaty with Native Americans that was "never sworn to and never broken." Neither the Quakers nor the Native Americans saw any need to swear to their word. Perm's vision extended to the international realm.

More than two hundred years ahead of his time, he advocated a league of nations to maintain world peace.

Perm's life makes an exciting story.

Born into the British establishment, Perm alienated his father, a famous admiral, by joining the Quaker movement, whose members were persecuted in seventeenth-century England. Penn was imprisoned several times for his religious beliefs. He was also incarcerated for failing to pay off a debt that was incurred to finance his colony.

Despite his notoriety as a spokesman for a persecuted minority, Penn remained on cordial terms with King Charles II, who granted him the charter to found Pennsylvania; with the Duke of York, later King James II; and with the diarist Samuel Pepys, who was openly critical of Quakerism. Penn headed several estates, married twice, and raised a family.

Although he was expelled from college as a young man, he developed an intellectual nature. He wrote numerous books and pamphlets, and devised the city plan for Philadelphia.

Penn offers a history not merely of an individual, but of a movement. Historically, Quakers have exercised an influence far greater, proportionally, than their small numbers would suggest.

They have worked for social reform, founding good schools, spreading humanitarian ideals, and teaching peace and tolerance by example. The Quaker belief that "there is that of God in everyone" implies that human life is sacred and that all people should be treated equally.

About the Author

The daughter of John Gordon Gray and Anne Iszard Gray, Elizabeth Janet Gray was bom on October 6, 1902, in the old Germantown section of Philadelphia. She demonstrated an aptitude for literature early in life and began writing for school publications while in grade school in Germantown.

She later attended Germantown Friends School and Bryn Mawr College; both institutions were associated with the Society of Friends religion, more commonly called Quakerism.

After receiving her bachelor of arts degree from Bryn Mawr in 1923, Gray started writing full-time but could not get her stories published. After a year of teaching, she enrolled in the library science program at Drexel Institute, now Drexel University. She earned her bachelor of science degree in 1926 and accepted a position at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she published her first books and met Morgan Fisher Vining, a university administrator whom she married in 1929.

After sustaining serious injuries in a 1933 automobile accident that killed her husband, Gray moved to Washington, D.C. To help cope with the loss of her husband, she began attending Quaker meetings and began research for her book Young Walter Scott. In 1934 she returned to Philadelphia to live with her mother and older sister. She maintained her attachment to Quakerism, and her life and writings thereafter were profoundly influenced by her religion.

As a pacifist Quaker, Gray was horrified by World War II, but she contributed to the healing process after the conflict when, in 1946, she accepted an appointment as tutor to Crown Prince Akihito of Japan. She spent four years in Japan and described her experience in the best-selling autobiographical work Windows for the Crown Prince (1952), published under her married name, Elizabeth Gray Vining. Her other adult books, also published under her married name, include the nonfiction works Contributions of the Quakers (1939), Friend of Life: The Biography of Rufus M. Jones (1958), and Flora: A Biography (1966); the novels The Virginia Exiles (1955), Take Heed of Loving Me (1964), and I, Roberta(l967); and the autobiographical studies Return to Japan (1960), Quiet Pilgrimage (1970), and Being Seventy: The Measure of a Year (1978).

Gray also continued to write fiction and biographies for young adults. Gray has received numerous honorary degrees and other awards, including the 1943 Newbery Medal for Adam of the Road. From 1952 to 1971 she served on the Board of Trustees of Bryn Mawr College. In 1972 she retired to Kendalat-Longwood, a Quaker retirement community near Kennett Square, Pennsylvania.

Setting

Beginning with Perm's birth in 1644 and ending with his death in 1718, Gray's book covers the periods in British history known as the Commonwealth, the Restoration, and the Glorious Revolution. The years of Penn's life are marked by religious conflict among Catholics, Anglicans, and Nonconformists. The Nonconformists are composed of many diverse sects such as the Quakers. To escape religious persecution, the Quakers move to Pennsylvania, where they hope to find peace and tolerance.

Social Sensitivity

Although Penn portrays a considerable amount of conflict, the book does not contain much violence. Admiral Penn's wars occur at a distance, the sounds of cannon fire marking great victories, and Gray only summarizes young Penn's exploits in the Irish campaign. An offended Frenchman draws his sword on Penn in Paris's dark streets, but Penn merely disarms him in an almost Quakerly manner. Otherwise, the worst to occur is that violent hands are laid on Penn to arrest him or to enclose him in a courtroom cage. If anything, Gray can be faulted for making situations seem too rosy, since persecution of Quakers and other religious minorities often included brutal treatment. Gray does not hesitate, however, to show death and disease, including the horrendous London plague.

Gray's discussion of religion never becomes doctrinaire in Penn. The strongest principle asserted is religious freedom and tolerance. Despite various descriptions of religious contention and persecution, Gray depicts few people of any religion unfavorably. Negative portraits necessarily include the Anglican authorities who persecute Quakers and a Presbyterian minister who challenges Penn to a debate, but Gray attempts to inject humor into these portrayals rather than to vilify Penn's adversaries.

Literary Qualities

Although Gray covers the important events throughout Penn's life, she devotes half the book to his childhood and young adulthood. This proportion reflects the author's focus on matters with which young readers can easily identify, such as Penn's relationship with his father. Gray's straightforward style suits young readers.

Also in an effort to make Penn's story accessible to young readers, Gray emphasizes outer rather than inner conflict, showing Penn clashing with authorities in the streets and in the courts. The resulting high drama clearly delineates the issues and themes, but neglects an examination of Penn's motives and inner struggles. Admiral Penn's inner conflicts, interestingly enough, receive more attention than do his son's. Gray's reluctance to speculate about the characters' motivations perhaps reflects her desire to keep her book firmly grounded in historical fact.

Historical background contributes to the settings, which play important parts in the story both literally and symbolically. England is portrayed as almost a prison, whereas Pennsylvania is a wild but free place, wooded and green.

England is stormy with religious conflict, but Pennsylvania is inhabited by friendly Native Americans who trade with and babysit for the colonists. Even the air, bright and clear, has a different quality in Pennsylvania.

Themes and Characters

Part 1 of the biography focuses on Penn's struggle with his father, Admiral Sir William Perm, and with government and church officials. Admiral Perm loves his first-born son and hopes for him to become a diplomat or other high government official. Young Penn is educated for such high office, but his turn to Quakerism ruins his father's plans.

Ironically, it is the religiously tolerant admiral who introduces his son to the Quakers by allowing the Quaker Thomas Loe to preach to the household.

The event makes a strong impression on young Penn, and Thomas Loe is later influential in Penn's conversion.

Penn's struggle with his father develops the theme of freedom of conscience or religion, but it also develops a more personal family theme: children must and will go their own way. Penn, who dearly loves his father and is hurt by his father's rejection, is obedient in all particulars except those of religion.

Ultimately Admiral Penn comes to respect his son's strength of character, and on his deathbed, he asks the king and the Duke of York to give young Penn their protection.

Early in the book, Gray portrays a bright, sophisticated, handsome, and athletic Penn. Before he becomes a Quaker, Penn fights and distinguishes himself in the Irish campaigns. He even harbors notions of becoming a soldier and following in his father's footsteps.

Thus, although Gray chooses not to analyze this, Penn's conversion to Quakerism involves considerable readjustment of his thinking.

Other characters who play significant roles in part 1 include Penn's good friend, the diarist Samuel Pepys, noted for his pursuit of pleasure and amusement. Pepys serves as clerk of the Royal Navy, later secretary of the admiralty, and lives in the Navy Gardens next to Admiral Penn's family. The genial nature of Pepys and his wife, who are shown entertaining and socializing with the Penn family, helps introduce the themes of friendship and tolerance that the book develops.

In addition, Charles II and his brother the Duke of York, whose names are synonymous with the Restoration and its libertine life, also prove to be exemplars of friendship and tolerance.

They rescue Penn more than once, and Charles II signs the charter deeding a colony to Penn, naming it Pennsylvania over Penn's objections. But Charles and his brother also have political reasons for practicing friendship and tolerance: both are Catholics in a strongly Protestant country.

Unfortunately the religious and judicial authorities in the book exemplify neither friendship nor tolerance. Offended by Perm's pamphlet "The Sandy Foundation

Shaken," the Bishop of London imprisons him in the Tower of London without a trial. Penn stays in the tower for almost nine months, enduring cold and heat and other privations, until the king orders him released. Later arrested for a trumped-up charge of disturbing the peace, Penn receives a trial, but the ten justices involved include some of the most determined persecutors of Quakers in Britain. When the jury declares Penn not guilty, the judges imprison the jury.

Part 2 of the biography, titled "Onas" for a Native American translation of "Penn," focuses on Penn's mature achievements. These carry the theme of religious freedom and tolerance to a successful conclusion with the establishment of Pennsylvania, the "holy experiment," and Philadelphia, the "City of Brotherly Love." But colonization and development involve Penn in boundary disputes, political contentions, and other mundane matters of government.

The trusting Penn proves a bad judge of character in the governors and schoolmasters he appoints, in his personal accountant, and even in his own son.

Topics for Discussion

1. Young Penn bitterly disappoints his father. In turn, Admiral Penn takes stem measures against his son, at one point disowning him and at another letting him cool off all winter in the Tower of London. Is young Penn a good son? Is Admiral Penn a good father?

2. Admiral Penn has ambitions for young Penn to become an important statesman. Is he wrong to try to determine his son's future? How much say should parents have about their children's ambitions?

3. Ironically, by becoming a Quaker and disappointing his father, Penn eventually fulfills his father's hopes. That is, he founds Pennsylvania, helps bring religious freedom to Britain, and influences the U.S. Constitution. Do you think his father would have been satisfied?

4. Would Penn have been a better father himself if he had spent less time fighting for religious freedom and founding Pennsylvania? What do you think of the way his son Billy turns out? Is Penn to blame? How is this question related to the treatment he received from his own father? Who is ultimately responsible for Billy's behavior?

5. Penn is expelled from Oxford and serves time in prison. Is he such a good person after all? What is the difference between being good and being respectable?

6. The Quakers refuse to take oaths, refuse to take off their hats to superiors, and address people with the familiar "thee" instead of the formal "you." Do they get pleasure out of being contrary and impolite, or do they have important points to make? If so, what are those points?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Trace and analyze the stages of Perm's relationship with his father. What are the reasons for the changes in the relationship at each particular stage?

2. Try to imagine Perm's thoughts as he decides to become a Quaker instead of a soldier. What are some of the choices he has to make? Why do you think he finally makes them?

3. Discuss and analyze Penn's character. What are some of the traits that help make him great? What are some of his failings? How are the former and the latter sometimes related?

4. Define and discuss Penn's concept of democracy. What are its origins?

How is it reflected, and how well does it work in the "holy experiment" of Pennsylvania? How does it influence the U.S. Constitution? How is it still controversial?

5. Define and discuss Penn's ideas on peace. What are their origins? How are they reflected in his relations with Pennsylvania's Native Americans? In his proposal for a league of nations? How are his ideas relevant today? Are they workable?

6. Discuss the Quaker beliefs and practices. What do Quakers think of priests?

Of religious dogma? Of preaching and silent worship? Of church government?

7. Define and discuss the Quaker concept of humankind and its implications.

What do you think of the idea that "there is that of God in everyone"? Is this idea sacrilegious?

For Further Reference

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Dunn, Mary Maples. William Penn: Politics and Conscience. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967. Concentrates on Perm as a political thinker and practical politician.

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Tolles, Frederick B., and E. Gordon Alderfer, eds. The Witness of William Penn. New York: Macmillan, 1957.

This careful selection of Perm's writings includes excellent introductions by the editors.

Vining, Elizabeth Gray. Quiet Pilgrimage. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970. This full autobiography includes background on Gray's association with Quakerism and on the writing of Penn.

Wildes, Harry Emerson. William Penn.

New York: Macmillan, 1974. This scholarly, clearly written biography concentrates on Penn's later years.

Related Titles

Readers interested in the Quakers might want to read some of the author's books for adults published under the name Elizabeth Gray Vining: The Contributions of the Quakers; Friend of Life: A Biography of Rufus M. Jones, about a prominent Quaker who lived from 1863 to 1948; and The Virginia Exiles, a novel about Quakers exiled to the Virginia mountains for refusing to fight in the Revolutionary War. Gray's forte is books with a historical background. Other biographies for young adults are Young Walter Scott, about the Scottish author, and Mr. Whittier, about the American Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier.

Her novels for young adults include the award -winning Adam of the Road, which surveys Chaucerian England through the eyes of a young boy, and I Will Adventure, which does the same for Shakespearian England. Shakespeare himself is a main character in the latter.

Two historical romances with female points of view are Meggy Macintosh, about a Highland girl who comes to America, and Jane Hope, about a Civil War heroine.

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