

William Penn After 300 Years: His Life and Legacy

by Andrew R. Murphy

The title of this conference highlights two events in William Penn's long public career: his founding of Pennsylvania in the 1680s, and his 1693 plan for a European Parliament. The subtitle directs our attention to two concepts, or principles, that were central to Penn's career: pacifism and federalism. In Penn's mind, all of these things were connected. First, he began planning for an American colony only after he became convinced that there was simply no way for Quakers to live in peace in England, and he hoped that Pennsylvania might provide a way out of the widespread religious violence that had engulfed Europe during his lifetime. Second, his aspiration for a European Parliament grew out of his experience of nearly constant war and conflict during the 17th century. In other words, it was his commitment to peace – both within nations and between nations – that led Penn to both his proposal for Pennsylvania and his proposal for a European Parliament. Third, in both his plans for Pennsylvania and his plans for a European Parliament, he believed that well-designed political institutions that protected fundamental rights – especially liberty of conscience, which he always considered the most fundamental right of all – could offer a way to channel human energies in constructive, not destructive, directions, and facilitate what he called “civil interest”: the shared commitment that all members of a community had, regardless of their religious views, to the smooth functioning and prosperity of their community. We can not all agree on the proper route to God, Penn acknowledged, but we can agree that a peaceful and well-ordered community offers the best prospect for each of us to pursue the good as we best understand it.

One more point about Penn's pacifism. Peace was a fundamental commitment of Penn's not only because of the Quaker peace testimony, which

rejected “all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end or under any pretence whatsoever,”¹ but also because he considered it a universal human aspiration. To see this dual emphasis, note Penn’s inclusion of two different quotations on the cover of his 1693 *Essay Towards the Present and Future Peace of Europe by the Establishment of an European Dyet, Parliament or Estates* – one from the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew («Beati pacifici» – blessed are the peacemakers) and one from the classical tradition («Cedant Arma Togae» – let arms yield to the toga – from Book I of Cicero’s *De Officiis*).² And in the very first sentence of the very first chapter of his *Essay*, Penn appeals not to Scripture, but to basic humanity:

He must not be a man, but a statue of brass or stone, whose bowels do not melt when he beholds the bloody tragedies of this war.³

These two aspects of Penn’s *Essay* illustrate an important dimension of William Penn’s career: his campaigning for liberty of conscience and for peace grew out of his Quaker commitment, to be sure, but always sought to build bridges beyond the Quaker community by appealing to broader, shared values held by his audience.

In what follows, I shall reflect on some of the significant episodes in William Penn’s life that prepared him to engage in those two tasks highlighted in the conference title: to found Pennsylvania and to envision a European Parliament. First, I explore the ways in which violence shaped the world into which Penn was born. Second, I consider Penn’s Quaker conviction and the way that it led him into a career denouncing persecution and campaigning for liberty of conscience and, eventually, to the founding of Pennsylvania. Third, I lay out some of the details of Penn’s life that led up to his 1693 proposal for a European Parliament. I close with some general comments about the paradoxes that make William Penn such a remarkable and complicated figure, one well worth revisiting in this 300th anniversary year of his death. (The biographical details in this essay are taken from my *William Penn: A Life*.⁴)

¹ For the Quaker peace testimony, see *A Declaration from the harmless and innocent people of God* (London, 1660).

² Penn had used “Beati pacifici” on the cover page of one of his works before, the 1685 work *Good advice to the Church of England*, but there it stood alone, with no corresponding, non-Scriptural passage.

³ William Penn, *Essay Towards the Present and Future Peace of Europe by the Establishment of an European Dyet, Parliament or Estates*, in Andrew R. Murphy, ed., *The Political Writings of William Penn* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002), p. 402.

⁴ Murphy, *William Penn: A Life* (New York: Oxford, 2019).

War, Violence, and William Penn's Parents

When examining William Penn's life and career and particularly when looking at his embrace of pacifism, it is important to remember that his commitment to peace emerged out of an intimate familiarity with the reality of violence and war, particularly religious violence and war, which were widespread in early modern Europe. Penn was born into a warring world – in the year of his birth, 1644, the English Civil War had already been raging for two years, and it would continue for the rest of that decade. And nearly seventy years later, when Penn was struck down by the stroke that disabled him physically and mentally in 1712, the War of the Spanish Succession had already been underway for more than ten years. During the years in between, William Penn witnessed an extraordinary range of religious and political violence: the English conquest of Ireland during the 1650s, a brutal, hundred-year-long colonial project driven on by fierce anti-Catholicism; the Anglo-Dutch Wars of the 1650s and 1660s; the persecution of Quakers and other religious dissenters during the Restoration; the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685; the 1688 Revolution in England, which led England into the War of the Grand Alliance against France; and the War of Spanish Succession. Each of these experiences contributed to his aspirations for peace, whether it be an American society with liberty of conscience at its core or a European Parliament where nations could seek resolution of their disputes against each other.

In fact, war and violence shaped William Penn's parents' world as well, before he was even born. And so I begin neither with Penn's birth in 1644 nor with the English Civil War, but with another, even earlier, violent episode: the 1641 Ulster uprising.

We know very little about William Penn's mother, but we do know that she encountered firsthand the potent mix of religion, politics, and violence at the heart of early modern European history. Born Margaret Jasper, she hailed originally from Holland, but by the 1630s had settled with her parents in County Clare, Ireland. While there, she married Nicholas van der Schuren, a Dutch émigré about whom we also know very little. Nicholas apparently traveled to Ireland to escape one set of violent religious and political conflicts, the Thirty Years' War, only to meet his end in another set of violent religious and political conflicts: the Ulster Rebellion of 1641, in which an uprising against English rule in Ireland soon evolved into a far bloodier conflict. Graphic reports of atrocities committed by Irish Catholics – many of them, of course, completely untrue – began to reach London almost immediately, and fanned the flames of English anti-Catholicism, especially after the publication of James Cranford's

The teares of Ireland in 1642.⁵ Many Irish Protestants fled to the protection in the cities (Cork, Dublin, Derry), but others, like the widowed Margaret Jasper van der Schuren and her family, left Ireland for the safety of London instead. Shortly after arriving there, Margaret met a young naval officer, Captain William Penn (the father of our William Penn). The two were married in 1643, and Margaret would give birth to a son, William, a year later. So even before his birth, war, displacement, religious conflict, and violence had shaped William Penn's world in highly personal ways.

When we move from the 1641 Irish uprising to the English Civil War, and move from Penn's mother to his father, we see a second way in which violence and conflict shaped William Penn's earliest days. With the outbreak of armed conflict between King and Parliament in 1642, William Penn (senior) began his steady rise through the ranks of the navy. He set sail shortly after the baptism of his first son, our William Penn, in October 1644, and was away for much of the next decade, commanding at a number of important naval operations, primarily in the Irish Sea and Ireland's west coast, including Youghal, Bunratty, Galway, Limerick, and Waterford. In 1650 he commanded a parliamentary fleet that sailed to the Mediterranean in pursuit of ships commanded by Prince Rupert, the king's nephew. In August 1653 Admiral Penn received a gold chain and medal from Oliver Cromwell, as well as several thousand acres of confiscated Irish lands in County Cork, for his service in the First Anglo-Dutch War. In late 1654 Cromwell placed Admiral Penn in command of the naval portion of a massive force that sailed for the Caribbean, aiming to conquer Spain's territories in the West Indies (known as "the Western Design"). So war provided concrete benefits to Sir William Penn and his family, even while it took his father away from him for much of his boyhood.

While his father was off with the navy, William Penn was attending school in Chigwell, outside of London. All that changed in 1655, when he was 11, and Cromwell imprisoned his father in the Tower of London, as a result of the failure of the Caribbean expedition. The force, which departed in late December 1654, was a spectacular failure: it fell apart almost completely in a matter of months, as a result of illness, exposure to the tropical sun, and lack of water. Although it did win a small victory at Jamaica, not long after, Admiral Penn left the troops and sailed back to England, claiming that he needed to update English leaders on developments. His departure demoralized the troops and enraged Cromwell, who threw Admiral Penn in the Tower of London for a month. Upon his release, the Admiral resigned from the navy and, by the next year, decided that it would be wise for him to take his family to Ireland to be far

⁵ Cranford, *The teares of Ireland* (London, 1642).

from Cromwell's wrath. And thus young William Penn's education at Chigwell School came to an abrupt end, and he left his home in England for the remote Irish town of Macroom, where he would spend his next five years.

Once the Penn family went to Macroom, we know little about Penn's life until 1660, when he left Macroom for two very unhappy years at Oxford. 1660 was also the year, of course, when the English monarchy was restored, and the Restoration provided the context within which the adult William Penn would become a Quaker and embark on a decades-long career as an advocate of civil and religious liberty.

Restoration, Quakerism, and Persecution

Despite Sir William Penn's service to parliament during the civil war and his ties to Oliver Cromwell, he was also a skilled politician and a capable naval commander, so when the English monarchy was restored in 1660 he managed to maintain a close relationship with the new King, Charles II, and with his brother James, Duke of York. (Sir William and James worked closely together in the Navy.) His father's close relationship with Charles and James would be important to William Penn's future career, since Charles would grant him Pennsylvania two decades later, and James would take him on as an advisor after he became King in 1685.

One other result of the turbulent political atmosphere of 1660 also, of course, was the Quaker peace testimony, in which Friends declared that:

All bloody principles and practices we do utterly deny, with all outward wars, and strife, and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretence whatsoever... the spirit of Christ, which leads us into all Truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons.⁶

It's worth pointing out that the Quaker peace testimony did not come naturally to William Penn, at least not early in his life as a Quaker. Just a year earlier, he had helped put down a mutiny of soldiers at Carrickfergus, north of Belfast, and those who witnessed his actions wanted to grant him a military command. (His father said no.) And when, shortly after his Quaker convincement, a "soldier came into the meeting making a great disturbance," William Penn did what came naturally to him. He went to the soldier, Penn later wrote, "[took] him by the collar, and would have thrown him down [the] stairs" had he not been stopped by a Friend who asked Penn to let the man go,

⁶ A Declaration from the harmless and innocent people of God (London, 1660).

“for they was a peaceable people and would not have him make a disturbance there.”⁷

After his Quaker conviction, the sorts of violence that most concerned William Penn had to do with the ongoing persecution of Quakers and other religious minorities (in England, Ireland, Europe, or America), and he devoted the rest of his life to the campaign for toleration and liberty of conscience, and to envisioning ways in which individuals and groups with differing religious views could find ways to coexist and work together for the common good. He quickly became one of the most famous Dissenters in the land, and played an important role as a bridge between Quakers and the broader public: other religious groups (including Presbyterians, Baptists, Anglicans, and so on), the English government, and (later) those engaged in the English colonial and imperial project throughout the British Atlantic.

The foundational commitment toward which William Penn worked during the 1670s was toleration, an end to persecution for all those who suffered for the sake of conscience. In Penn’s words, persecution was “the Devil’s offspring,” and he attributed it not only to honest differences about religion, but to base motives like hatred, revenge, lust for power, and self-interest.⁸ The case against persecution was by definition, the case for toleration, and the case for toleration was the case for peace. In other words, persecution, in Penn’s view, divided societies (both the people from their government, and the people from each other) and in doing so undermined peace and prosperity, which were the true aims of government. His writings during the 1670s frequently took aim at the many ways in which the English political and legal system attacked peaceful religious Dissenters, including physical assaults, fines, destruction of property, imprisonment, seizure of goods, and exclusion from access to government service and the universities. Perhaps his most comprehensive account of the arguments against persecution came early in his career, in *The great case of liberty of conscience*.⁹ The basics of this account of liberty of conscience would remain foundational to Penn’s public career during the 1670s and motivate his aspirations for Pennsylvania, so they are worth spending a little time on this morning.

First, he provided a concise definition of his key term: liberty of conscience did not only mean simply freedom of belief, but also of practice:

⁷ “The Convincement of William Penn,” *Journal of the Friends Historical Society* 32 (1935), 23.

⁸ Penn, Narrative of the Sufferings of Quakers in the Isle of Ely, November 1671, in Dunn and Dunn, eds., *Papers of William Penn* (hereafter PWP) I: 225.

⁹ William Penn, *The great case of liberty of conscience* (London, 1670); also reprinted in Murphy, ed., *The Political Writings of William Penn* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002), pp.79-119.

By liberty of conscience, we understand not only a meer liberty of the mind, in believing or disbelieving this or that principle or doctrine, but the exercise of ourselves in a visible way of worship, upon our believing it to be indispensibly required at our hands.

And, of course, he made clear that he was not advocating lawlessness:

Yet... not to contrive [anything] destructive of the government and laws of the land, tending to matters of an external nature... but so far only, as it may refer to religious matters, and a life to come, and consequently wholly independent of... secular affairs.

Persecution, in Penn's view, was not limited to fines, jails, and physical punishment, but included "any coercive let or hindrance to us, from meeting together to perform those religious exercises which are according to our faith and persuasion." In other words, liberty of conscience includes protection not only of the rights to belief, but also to worship, speech, and assembly: a cluster of related rights that emphasized the importance of individuals living lives of conscientious integrity, and gathering with others to live out their deepest commitments, all the while sharing their community with others who might hold very different views about, as he put it, "religious matters, and a life to come."¹⁰

The great case collected all the standard arguments against persecution that had been employed by tolerationists since early in the seventeenth century. Penn offered a range of scriptural examples, from Jesus' parables (weeds and wheat, Good Samaritan) and the Golden Rule to Paul's exhortations to bear meekly with others. Not only was persecution antiscritural: it was also anti-Protestant (an especially powerful argument in a Protestant nation like England). Calling those who view their religious obligations differently than oneself "heretics" is a "story...as old as the Reformation,"¹¹ Penn argued, and Protestants' persecution of other Protestants made their own denunciations of Catholics far less convincing. Because it misunderstood the workings of the human mind, persecution was not only bound to fail – the heart of religion is belief, and you simply can not force someone to believe something – but inappropriate, inflicting physical punishments for mental or spiritual offenses.

Of course toleration was ultimately a political question, and thus Penn offered a definition of government, which he called "an external order of justice, or the right and prudent disciplining of any society, by just laws."¹² In making this argument Penn advanced a distinction between "fundamental" and

¹⁰ Quotations from *Great Case*, in Murphy, ed., *The Political Writings of William Penn*, pp. 85-86.

¹¹ Penn, *Great Case*, in Murphy, ed., *Political Writings of William Penn*, 101.

¹² Penn, *Great Case*, in Murphy, ed., *Political Writings of William Penn*, 95.

“superficial” law. Fundamental law (in the English case, Magna Carta) protected subjects’ basic rights from the exercise of arbitrary power, and were important to maintain unchanged (jury trial, voting rights, representation). Superficial laws, on the other hand, which legislatures enacted to address specific issues, had to change with time and circumstances. But in the case of any conflicts between the two, Penn insisted, fundamental law always took precedence over superficial law. Just because a Parliament passed a law, did not guarantee that the law was legitimate: after all, Parliaments had been passing persecutory legislation for decades, and it was precisely those laws that Penn spent his career denouncing as illegitimate.

Finally, Penn noted that persecution harms peace and prosperity. Persecution undermines the common good and the smooth operation of the nation’s economy. Like other tolerationists of his day, Penn cited the Netherlands as a neighboring example of economic prosperity and religious liberty going hand in hand. Persecuting laws “are so far from benefiting the country, that the execution of them will be the assured ruin of it...For where there is a decay of families, there will be of trade; so of wealth, and in the end of strength and power.”¹³ He then offered a long list of tolerating rulers from Cato and Hannibal down to English Kings James I and Charles I. Although *The great case* was originally published when Penn was a young activist, in his mid-20s, it was this understanding of liberty of conscience that he devoted the rest of his public career to pursuing, and he saw it as crucial to achieving a peaceful society – if not in England, then perhaps in Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvania

Penn’s aspirations for an American colony were heavily influenced by his experiences of persecution, and his advocacy on behalf of Friends, during the 1670s in England. The bitter religious and political divisions on display during those years drove home to him the deep and persistent divisions in English society and suggested to Penn that those divisions, and the persecution that accompanied them, were unlikely to end anytime soon. And so there was a clear sense in which Pennsylvania was a Quaker undertaking, and of course he famously referred to his colony as a “holy experiment” and, as many scholars have pointed out over the years, saw it as a place where Quakers could live their lives in accord with their consciences (no swearing of oaths required, no established church, and so on). And yet, in much of his promotional literature, Penn often downplayed the specifically Quaker dimensions of the settlement

¹³ Penn, Great Case, in Murphy, ed., Political Writings of William Penn, 98.

and appealed to all who were seeking a better life for themselves to make their homes in Pennsylvania. Less than a month after he received his colonial charter, in 1681, he published *Some Account of the Province of Pennsylvania*, which offered political and economic arguments for colonization but said virtually nothing about religion. Penn called colonies “seeds of nations begun and nourished by the care of wise and populous countries, as conceiving them best for the increase of human stock, and beneficial for commerce.”¹⁴ As a piece of promotional literature intended to recruit industrious settlers, *Some Account* presented an economic argument in favor of colonization in general and Pennsylvania in particular, grounding political legitimacy in the rule of law, and issued an enthusiastic invitation for settlers to seek prosperity in the new colony. As for his colony’s “constitutions,” Penn emphasized the foundation of Pennsylvania’s political legitimacy in consent (“the people and governor have a legislative power, so that no law can be made, nor money...but by the people’s consent”), and promised that “the rights and freedoms of England” would be honored there.¹⁵ He concluded by emphasizing his view of the ideal demographics in a new colony: industrious workers encountering difficulty making a living in their native lands, artisans looking for advancement, and others with an interest in promoting the public good. Penn mentioned nothing specifically about those suffering for conscience’s sake, although of course, even without explicit references to religious liberty, the process of recruiting settlers was facilitated by Penn’s extensive networks among European Dissenters and his reputation as defender of persecuted religious minorities.

Penn had hoped, when he first journeyed to America in 1682, that he might convince his family to join him and spend the rest of his days there. He even told one correspondent that “I am like to be an adopted American.”¹⁶ But it was not to be. Border disputes quickly broke out with his southern neighbor, Lord Baltimore and the Maryland colony, and Penn returned to London to defend his colony after just two years. It was a fateful decision – he would not return for more than fifteen years. But his exit from Pennsylvania paved the way for his re-entry into English politics, at the highest level of influence: as one of the chief advisors to King James II.

¹⁴ *Some Account of the province of Pennsilvania [sic] in America* (London, 1681), in Jean Soderlund, ed., *William Penn and the Founding of Pennsylvania: A Documentary History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 59.

¹⁵ *Some Account*, in Soderlund, ed., *William Penn and the Founding of Pennsylvania*, 62.

¹⁶ Penn to Lord Culpeper, February 5, 1683, *PWP II*: 350.

The 1688 Revolution: Prelude to the Essay

Although he was victorious in his case against Baltimore, and wanted to return to Pennsylvania, Penn remained in England, and quickly became one of the closest advisors to the new King, James II. Penn has been described as the “intellectual architect” of James’s campaign for liberty of conscience for all England’s Dissenters.¹⁷ This period, the years between 1685 and 1688, represents the peak of Penn’s political influence. But the longer Penn stayed in England, the more alienated he became from his Pennsylvanians and their government. He was deeply frustrated at their unwillingness to pay him the rents and taxes that he considered due to him, at their political divisions (which his rivals spread around England to discredit him), and at the government’s refusal to provide money or men for colonial defense (which was grounded in the Quaker peace testimony). He heard very little news from Pennsylvania at all, and what he did hear troubled him. His correspondence with Pennsylvania became increasingly hostile, though he was basically powerless to do anything about it from so far away.

Meanwhile, despite Penn’s enthusiastic support, King James II had several problems. He was Catholic, and thus faced all the longstanding English anti-Catholicism mentioned earlier with regard to the 1641 Ulster uprising (which had arguably only worsened in the intervening time). He was also hampered by developments across the English Channel, when in 1685 the Catholic King Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes, which guaranteed protections for French Protestants, just as James was attempting to convince English audiences that he was sincere about seeking liberty of conscience. The Dutch invasion of England in late 1688 put an end to James’s efforts to implement liberty of conscience (and with it, Penn’s placement at the highest levels of political influence).

The 1688 Revolution was a disaster for William Penn. Fortunately for James, he could flee to France; unfortunately for William Penn, he had nowhere to go, and had been a loyal ally of the overthrown King. Penn was under constant suspicion by the new regime. In December 1688 he was questioned and briefly detained; in February and again in June 1689, warrants were issued for his arrest, and he was imprisoned from September through November 1689. He professed his innocence, but two more proclamations for Penn’s apprehension were issued over the next eighteen months. Finally, in 1691, he

¹⁷ Scott Sowerby, “Of Different Complexions: Religious Diversity and National Identity in James II’s Toleration Campaigns,” *English Historical Review* 124 (2009): 41.

decided to go into hiding. His colony was taken from him in 1692, to be governed by the Governor of New York.

Penn remained in hiding until late 1693, when he was cleared of all charges. It was during this period that he wrote his *Essay toward the peace of Europe*, with its plan for a European Parliament. But it was not until the following year that he regained control of Pennsylvania, and even this victory required painful compromises (ones that bear on our interest in his pacifism): in order to regain his colony, Penn was forced to agree that the Quaker government of Pennsylvania would either provide soldiers to defend the colony, something that did not sit well with Quakers. (He tried to justify his compromises by telling the government that the world was filled with difficult and painful choices, “We must creep where we can not go...”¹⁸ but the Pennsylvania government would resist his constant requests to do so for years.)

So by 1693, when Penn published his *Essay*, he had spent several years in very difficult circumstances. The European war – War of the Grand Alliance, which England joined in 1689 – had been raging for four years. It would continue for another four, bringing with it the customary fruits of war: human carnage; high taxes; interrupted commerce; and increasing domestic disputes over foreign policy. He pointed to the “bloody tragedies . . . in Hungary, Germany, Flanders, Ireland, and at sea,” and bluntly contrasted peace and war:

Peace preserves our possessions; we are in no danger of invasions: Our trade is free and safe, we rise and lie down without anxiety. . . . It excites industry, which brings wealth, as that gives the means of hospitality...But war . . . seizes all these comforts at once, and stops the civil channel of society. The rich draw in their stock, the poor turn soldiers, or thieves, or starve; No industry, no building, no manufactory, little hospitality or charity; but what the peace gave, the war devours.¹⁹

Although it does not mention Friends’ principles specifically, Penn’s *Essay* is a quintessentially Quaker tract; it provides a concrete example of what the Quaker peace testimony might look like if taken seriously on an international level. The publication of the *Essay* was also part of a larger process by which Penn, during these difficult years, was turning his thoughts to political units larger than the colonial and the national levels. No longer content to confine his attention to only one colony (Pennsylvania) or even one nation (England), Penn fixed his moral vision on Europe more generally, and sought to take his fundamental commitments to an even broader level.

¹⁸ Penn to the Provincial Council, November 24, 1694, *PWP* III: 405.

¹⁹ *Essay Towards the Present and Future Peace of Europe*, in Murphy, ed., *The Political Writings of William Penn*, 402-403.

William Penn's Paradoxes

As a way of concluding my remarks this morning, let me offer four paradoxes that help make sense of Penn's complex life and legacy, and which figure into his aspirations for peace.²⁰

1. *Egalitarian Quaker theology and hierarchical expectations.* William Penn lived with a sharp tension between egalitarian ideas on the one hand, and hierarchical and deferential expectations on the other. As an influential member of the Society of Friends, Penn embraced a radically egalitarian theology that proclaimed human equality in the sight of God and the transformative power of the Light within. As an outgrowth of this radical theology, Quakers upended social hierarchies, disdained conventional markers of social distinction, and of course found themselves on the receiving end of bitter condemnation and brutal punishment. Over his long years of service as a Quaker controversialist and Public Friend, Penn never wavered from these theologically explosive tenets of Quakerism. Yet as a prominent Englishman – with a war hero, Member of Parliament, and recipient of expropriated Irish lands for a father – Penn grew up expecting deference from others, consistently lived beyond his means, was never without servants, and even owned several slaves who worked on Pennsbury, his American estate. Much of Penn's correspondence with Pennsylvanians during his extended absences from the colony read like the fulminations of a disappointed parent at his wayward children, who refused to subordinate their wills and express appropriate gratitude for all his sacrifices on their behalf.

2. *Champion of popular institutions and mouthpiece for an autocratic king.* During much of the 1670s, William Penn vocally defended popular institutions, including Parliament and juries, as guarantors of the people's liberties. (His famous 1670 trial with William Mead, popularized in *The people's ancient and just liberties asserted*, is merely the most noteworthy example.²¹) Yet during the late 1680s Penn was widely reviled (not without reason) as King James II's mouthpiece, the paid lackey of an absolutist monarch bent on destroying the rule of law by decreeing religious liberty in the face of Parliamentary opposition. Penn reconciled these three commitments – to representative institutions, to liberty of conscience, and to the King's program for pursuing

²⁰ These paradoxes are taken from my *Liberty, Conscience, and Toleration: The Political Thought of William Penn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 9-11.

²¹ [Penn], *The people's ancient and just liberties asserted*, in Murphy, ed., *Political Writings of William Penn*, 9-21.

toleration – by insisting that the King’s Declaration would be followed by Parliamentary confirmation, as part of what he called a new “Magna Charta for liberty of conscience.”²² It was a theoretically coherent and plausible position, although in the heated political atmosphere of 1688 we ought not to be surprised if its nuances escaped those who saw Penn’s royal employer as an existential threat to English liberties.

3. *American colonizer and absentee English landlord.* A few months after his arrival in Pennsylvania, Penn wrote to a correspondent that “I am mightily taken with this part of the world...I like it so well, that...my family being once fixt with me; and if no other thing occur, I am like to be an adopted American.”²³ He threw himself energetically into the business of founding, attempting to harmonize the political theorizing he had articulated in England with conditions on the ground in America. But some “other thing” did occur: legal disputes with his southern neighbor Lord Baltimore, which drew him back to England just two years after his arrival; and, later, repercussions from Penn’s involvement in English politics during the late 1680s. In all, he spent just about four of his remaining thirty-six years in America, a stranger to his own settlers, and was laid to rest far from Philadelphia, in the burial ground of Jordans Meetinghouse in Buckinghamshire, just outside London. And there he remains, with his wives, a number of children, to this day (despite an ill-fated and unsuccessful attempt to repatriate Penn’s remains to Philadelphia for the 1882 bicentennial of his arrival in America).

4. *Thriving colony and indebted proprietor.* Pennsylvania soon became a thriving center of American political, intellectual, economic, and religious life, a popular destination for emigrants from across Europe, and a crucial hub in the emerging British imperial economy. Yet Penn was never able to reap these benefits. His eight-month imprisonment for debt in 1708 provides evidence of his chronic difficulties managing money, and stemmed directly from his inability to take advantage of the economic potential of American colonization (not to mention his inability or unwillingness to curtail the costs of his standard of living). In fact, he bankrupted himself in the process of colonization, and was in the process of selling Pennsylvania back to the Crown when a stroke incapacitated him in 1712.

²² Penn, *The great and popular objection against the repeal of the penal laws and tests, briefly stated and considered* (London, 1688), 8.

²³ Penn to Lord Culpeper, February 5, 1683, *PWP* II: 350.

In 1680, when Penn first applied to King Charles I for an American colony, he was just thirty-five years old, an energetic young Quaker activist, filled with revulsion at the continued persecution and violence directed at Quakers in England. By 1693, Penn was nearing fifty, had weathered a number of personal and political crises (including the death of his wife and George Fox, the founder of Quakerism and his dear friend; and loss of control of his colony); he was in hiding, and at a particularly low point in his career. Even at this low point, however, he held fast to a vision of a world in which fundamental rights would be respected, political institutions manage conflict and help promote the common good, and disputes resolved without recourse to violence. Although he had quickly become disappointed with Pennsylvania, his plan for the European Parliament showed that he had not lost his ability to dream of a better world. I am less interested in the fact that Penn died deeply disappointed in Pennsylvania, and that his plan for the European Parliament went unfulfilled during his lifetime, than in thinking about the important foundations he laid – philosophically, politically, institutionally – for the world that we live in today.