

“William the Quaker” or the Friend in Fiction

IN the Introduction by Edward Garnett to *The Life, Adventures and Piracies of the Famous Captain Singleton*, by Daniel Defoe (Everyman's Library edition), we are told:

The character of William the Quaker pirate is a masterpiece of shrewd humour. He is the first Quaker brought into English fiction¹, and we know of no other Friend in latter-day fiction to equal him. Defoe in his inimitable manner has defined surely and deftly the peculiar characteristics of the sect in this portrait.

Though we may hesitate to accept Defoe's "William" as "surely" representative of the Quaker at the close of the seventeenth century, we may, at least, obtain some insight into the general estimation in which the Quaker of the period was held by the outside world—an estimation based upon knowledge—if at times exaggerated.

Captain Singleton was published in 1720—the events depicted ranged round the year 1706. The introduction of "Friend William" was on this wise:

We had one very merry fellow here, a Quaker, whose name was William Walters, whom we took out of a sloop bound from Pennsylvania to Barbados. He was a comic fellow indeed, a man of very good solid sense and an excellent surgeon; but, what was worth all, very good-humoured and pleasant in his conversation, and a bold, stout, brave fellow too, as any we have among us.

A "Quaker pirate" seems a contradiction in terms, but though unlikely to make a good pirate, William was not unwilling to accompany his captors and on many occasions his advice saved the situation.

"I shall make myself as useful to thee," he told Captain Singleton, "as I can, but thou knowest it is not my business to meddle when thou art to fight." "No, no," says the captain, "but you may meddle a little when we share the money." "Those things are useful to furnish a surgeon's chest," says William, and smiled, "but I shall be moderate."

¹ The reference to James Nayler ("Jamnail") in *Bentivolio and Urania*, a religious romance, by Nathaniel Ingelo (1621?-1683), 1660, p. 169, is an earlier instance.

The strong objection of the Quaker to taking life is constantly introduced—"I was once resolved to have made a descent at the island of Dumas, but friend William, who was always for doing our business without fighting, dissuaded me from it, and gave such reasons for it that we could not resist"—but at times he was not averse to a show of carnal weapons.

"Friend," says he, "what does yon ship follow us for?" "Why," says I, "to fight us, you may be sure." "Well," says he; "and will he come up with us, dost thou think?" "Yes," said I, "you see she will." "Why, then, friend," says the dry wretch, "why does thou run from her still, when thou seest she will overtake thee? Will it be better for us to be overtaken farther off than here?" "Much as one for that," says I; "why, what would you have us do?" "Do!" says he; "let us not give the poor man more trouble than needs must; let us stay for him and hear what he has to say to us." "He will talk to us in powder and ball," said I. "Very well, then," says he, "if that be his country language, we must talk to him in the same, must we not? or else how shall he understand us?"

William "was for the best of everything," as many a Quaker since has been.

That the Friend of that early period wore a distinctive dress is manifest from Defoe's allusion to "two men whom William dressed up like two Quakers, and made them talk like such," though we regret the action as deceit unworthy of our Quaker. The sloop in which these actors sailed was "all plain, no curled work upon her (indeed she had not much before), and no guns to be seen."

The business ability and habits of the Friend are frequently indicated. William was "good, frugal and merchant like." His business enterprises were generally remarkably successful. He had his wits about him, and on more than one occasion "not a man on board the ship had presence of mind to apply to the proper duty of a sailor, except friend William."

Captain Singleton often expressed his obligations to his Quaker companion—"I have always found your advice good and your designs have not only been well laid, but your counsel has been very lucky to us"—"William was a wise and wary man, and indeed all the prudentials of my conduct had for a long time been owing to his advice."

Towards the close of the book the religious element comes into greater prominence and the need for repentance and if possible restitution is more deeply felt. "Says William very seriously, 'They that never think of dying, often die without thinking of it.'" But both agreed they "must never talk of repenting while continuing pirates." How the ill-gotten gains were disposed of, and how they settled down to a peaceful and kindly life, bring the story to a close.

Elizabeth Fry to Alderman Wood,
M.P.

Plashet House.

7th Month 23, 1825.

Dear Friend,

It would have given me much pleasure to aid the view of any friend of thine but I fear in the present case it is out of my power as I believe our society are not likely at present to send agents out to South America to establish schools. A little time since some of us had such an idea, but it did not appear as if such an arrangement could be accomplished at present.

It is not impossible that the British and Foreign School Society may have something of the kind in view, but I have not heard of it.

I think that the Gentlemen recommended by thee would be peculiarly desirable were such an arrangement thought of, and it would be well worth while to make enquiry respecting it; if I hear of anything I will make a point of informing thee at once respecting it.

Excuse my troubling thee by representing the following cases that I think need peculiar attention in Newgate, as I think it very bad for the prisoners generally, and unfair to the city to keep convicts there under these circumstances, more particularly as reason has so often been given them to believe they were to be discharged as to render them very unsettled.