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# Keiser and Moore's "Knowing the Mystery of Life Within: Selected Writings of Isaac Penington in their Historical and Theological Context" - Book Review

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KEISER, R. Melvin, and MOORE, Rosemary (selected and introd.), *Knowing the Mystery of Life Within: Selected Writings of Isaac Penington in their Historical and Theological Context* (London: Quaker Books, 2005), pp. xiv + 322. ISBN 0-85245-378-7, Paper, £18.00.

This two-part introduction to the life and writings of Isaac Penington is a model of its kind. Part I, by Rosemary Moore and incorporating manuscript transcriptions by Diana Morrison-Smith, offers a 'Life' founded on Penington's correspondence and writings; Part II, by Melvin Keiser, offers an account of 'The Spirituality and Thought of Isaac Penington'. Taken together with the book's two appendices, its bibliography and two indexes (of biblical and general references), the two parts of *Knowing the Mystery of Life Within* actually serve to dismantle the rather disjunctive 'life and (on the other hand) works' approach that its structure might initially suggest. The Penington presented by Keiser and Moore is not a concise or necessarily an easy writer. Their 'General Introduction' quotes George Whitehead's embarrassment at Penington's amplitude, with its awkward attempt at making a necessity seem virtuous: 'I hope I shall not need to write an apology for this man's many writings...nor is it altogether proper for me to apologise in such a case, not having read all these his books' (p. ix). Nonetheless, the selections from Penington's works presented in *Knowing the Mystery* do form, as his editors suggest, a 'comprehensive representation' of their subject, linking the life and the writing in supportive, complementary ways.

Late in the second part of the book, Keiser makes a distinction that, if we are to compare large things with small, this serves very well as a way into the strengths of the approach adopted in *Knowing the Mystery of Life Within*. 'Religious language', Keiser writes, was 'for Penington...doing something very different from defining a conceivable thing. It is not trying to identify God as an Object nor to define that Object's nature. Rather it is trying to bring us to experience God's mysterious reality' (p. 217). Thanks to the fresh work of Diana Morrison-Smith with Penington's manuscripts, and the biographical researches of Rosemary Moore, there are fewer of the (rather more mundane) mysteries attendant on Penington's life than once was the case, but the account they jointly produce does not pretend to render Penington as a readily definable 'Object'. Instead, their work offers us a Penington socially alive and engaged, a man caught up in the events both large and small of his age, moving between matters of state and matters of the family: this is a man changing and changeable, and all the more true to life for that. Historically and theologically learned, Part I of the book presents a vivid and engaging biography. Yet, at the same time, the more numinous aims that Keiser identifies for Penington's conception of religious language are respected also. Each of the chapters constituting

Part II introduces a varied selection of extracts from Penington's writings with a compact account of the issues, debates and beliefs with which they engage. What is more, these short extracts can readily be returned to their fuller original context thanks to Appendix A, which offers notes on the contents and contexts of the source-texts. I can readily see this unostentatious, useful work being of immense service both to scholarly and to devotional readers; it has served me well as a primer to unfamiliar material, and, with grace and authority, would allow an interested reader to move beyond it into deeper study.

The book is handsomely produced, with its clear typography complemented by four high-quality images taken from contemporary printed editions (this total swells to five if the colour reproduction of Penington's letter 'To Friends in Amersham' used on the front cover is included). 'Our life is love & peace & tenderness & bearing one w<sup>th</sup> another', he writes there, famously, at the opening of the letter; his own life, disrupted by the political and religious upheavals of the civil war, and his long spells in Aylesbury and Reading gaols, must have seemed far otherwise at times. This new edition allows us, in new and valuable ways, to see how his life and writing themselves bear one with another. What's more, they do so in a way that allows his new and returning readers to be spared some of what even his editors concede as his 'usual fault of over-wordiness' (p. 59). For this there is much to be grateful.

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