

2016

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Recommended Citation

Anderson, Paul N., "John Punshon (1954) Obituary" (2016). *Faculty Publications - College of Christian Studies*. 282.
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John Punshon (1954)

*by Paul N. Anderson, Professor of Biblical and
Quaker Studies, George Fox University*

When William Penn, whose portrait still adorns the walls of Christ Church College, was expelled from Oxford in 1661 for his nonconformist views and alternative worship venues, who would have thought that one of Oxford's alumni three centuries later would become one of the leading Quaker interpreters and ministers of the late 20th and early 21st centuries? Having experienced a number of faith traditions in his earlier years, John Punshon actually joined the Friends movement while at Oxford. A lover of Newman and the aesthetic spirituality of the Oxford Movement, and

having experienced the biblical vitality of his grandfather's rural Baptist church during the Second World War, John came to appreciate the simplicity of Quaker worship during his Oxford years, and his life has been given to interpreting that faith in practice ever since.

Born in 1935 to Arthur and Dorothy Punshon in Hackney, east London, John received a strong classical education, accompanied by an intellectual curiosity, which served him well at Oxford and beyond. Despite being stricken with polio at the age of fourteen, he lived a full and productive life. With a quick wit and a twinkle in his eye, he inspired thousands with his teaching and public ministries in Britain, Africa, the Americas, and worldwide. John passed away on 10th March after a second battle with myeloma. He is survived by his wife Veronica, their children, Tom Punshon and Sophie Miller, and their grandchildren, Victoria and James Punshon and Tabitha and Esther Miller.

Memorial services were held at Milton Keynes Friends Meeting on 7th April and at Wanstead Friends Meeting in London on 12th August, where his ashes were interred. John and Veronica were married there in 1962. At both memorial services the sharing of memories was full and extensive, and loving appreciation continues to be expressed to the family from those who have known John and have been touched by his many ministries over the years. Incidentally, upon visiting Wanstead's burial ground, one may also run across the gravestone of Elizabeth Fry, which John had helped to rescue several years earlier. In that sense, he rests in good company!

As an adolescent, John Punshon applied himself to his studies, and was ever the full participant in extracurriculars while at school and college. Recorded in *The Brazen Nose*, J.A. Punshon is listed in the second rowing position in the Second Torpid during Hillary Term, 1955, although glory-garnering outcomes have gone unreported. Enough of sport, though; the Brasenose Players of 1956, in their performance of *Saint Joan*, lists J.A. Punshon as playing the role of Peter Chaucon, Bishop of Bauvaix. Despite the rain sustained in the garden performances, the play was rumored to be worth seeing, and according to *The Brazen Nose*, "rumor did not lie."

In commenting on Punshon's performance in particular, *The Brazen Nose* reports: "The Archbishop was a splendid prelate – of somewhat D'Oyly Carte precision and stiffness." And, according to The Buchan Society's report of 1956–57, John served as the chairman of the organizing

committee. After a charter was drawn up, the college debating society was inaugurated in January of 1957 with Punshon continuing to serve as an officer. Debates on politics, economics, and governance in British society were thus debated energetically. *The Brazen Nose* concludes its coverage of the debating society thusly: "The Society has now reached the age of discretion, at least. Let us hope that its growth will be as healthy in the future as it has in the past."

Following his time at Oxford, Punshon continued to be active in politics. As a researcher, legal clerk, and barrister in London (1957–76), John stood for Parliament in 1964 and 1966 (Labor, Ilford North), though unsuccessfully. He served as a City Councilman (London, Burrough of Leyton, following in the trajectory of Lord Sorenson, a lifelong friend of John's parents and family) from 1958–64. He also taught at Stratford Grammar School (1961–67) and Corpus Christi High School (1976–79).

Following his political and teaching service in London, John was appointed the Quaker Tutor at Woodbrooke in Selly Oak, England (1979–1990), later serving as a Visiting Professor of Quaker Studies at George Fox College in Newberg, Oregon (1990) and as the first Geraldine Leatherock Professor of Quaker Studies at the Earlham School of Religion in Richmond, Indiana (1991–2001). A member of Whitewater Friends Meeting, he became a recorded Friends minister in Indiana Yearly Meeting (1993). Following his service at ESR, John and Veronica returned to England, where they lived in Milton Keynes, and where John participated in civic and ecumenical leadership.

John was a frequent speaker at yearly meetings, churches/meetings, and colleges/universities around the world. He ministered in Kenya and Honduras and delivered the Johnson Lecture at FUM (1987, *Patterns of Change*), the Swarthmore Lecture in London Yearly Meeting (1990, *Testimony and Tradition*) and the Western Yearly Meeting Quaker Lecture (1993, *Enriching the Worship*). He also wrote several articles on Quaker theology and history for encyclopaedias, dictionaries, and Festschriften.

His books include a concise treatment of Quaker history (*Portrait in Grey*, 1984), an invitation to Quaker unprogrammed worship (*Encounter with Silence*, 1988), and a thoughtful analysis of the evangelical tradition among Friends (*Reasons for Hope: The Faith and Future of the Friends Church*, 2001). John also contributed many essays to *The Friend*, *Friends Journal*, *Quaker Life*, *Evangelical Friend*, and *Quaker Religious Thought*, and

his Pendle Hill Pamphlets include *Alternative Christianity* (#245) and *Letter to a Universalist* (#285).

In sharing about his faith in practice at Milton Keynes Friends Meeting, John concludes his overview of his adventuresome life and its fulfilment as follows. "It is really very simple. I love God, I read my Bible, I say my prayers and I try to be good. That is my faith in practice."