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## A TRIBUTE: REMEMBERING JOHN PUNSHON (1935-2017)

PAUL ANDERSON

John Punshon has been one of the premier Quaker historians and spokespersons over the last four decades. With a quick wit and a twinkle in his eye, John inspired thousands with his teaching and ministries in Britain, America, and worldwide. John passed away on March 10th 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 April 7th and at Wanstead Friends Meeting in London on August 12th, where his ashes were interred. John and Veronica were married there in 1962, and their children were raised in that Meeting. At both memorial services, the sharing of memories was full appreciative, expressed by those who have known John and have been touched by his many ministries over the years. Incidentally, upon visiting Wanstead's burial grounds, one may also run across the gravestone of Elizabeth Fry (featured on the British 5-pound note), which John had helped to rescue several years earlier from a neighboring Friends property undergoing relocation. In that sense, he rests in good company!

Recorded for public ministry in Indiana Yearly Meeting, John Punshon served as the Quaker Tutor at Woodbrooke in Selley Oak, England from 1979-1990 and as the first Geraldine Leatherock Professor of Quaker Studies at the Earlham School of Religion from 1991-2001. John also served as Visiting Professor of Quaker Studies at George Fox University the fall of 1990, and he was a frequent speaker at yearly meetings, churches/meetings, and colleges/universities in the United Kingdom and in North America. John ministered in Kenya and Honduras, and he 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*).

His books include a concise treatment of Quaker history (*Portrait in Grey*, an excellent treatment of the political and religious situation out of which the Friends movement emerged), an invitation to Quaker unprogrammed worship (*Encounter with Silence*, a wonderful aid to those engaging the foibles and glories of worship after the manner of Friends), and a thoughtful analysis of the evangelical tradition among Friends (*Reasons for Hope: The Faith and Future of the Friends Church*, an appreciative appraisal of the historic and theological bases of the faith and practice of four fifths of today's Quakers). The front cover of his third book featuring a photo of the altar rail at Newberg Friends Church bespeaks John's appreciation for the revivalist tradition among Friends, of which he became an advocate.

In my view, this book may be John Punshon's most important among his many publications, long term, as it highlights the centrality of Christ, the power of personal transformation, and the importance of Scripture for Friends historically. In so doing, despite more structured approaches to ministry and service, John notes the many ways that evangelical Friends are closer to the faith and practice of the first generations of Friends, who embraced the Covenant of Light in their witness to the world, than some others who seem to have abandoned the Judeo-Christian heritage and a lively sense of divine reality.

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). Within these and other writings, John's personal and spiritual development can be seen, and as the power of the written word continues beyond the boundaries of time and space, through them, his life and insights continue to speak.

While his formative spirituality can be seen in his reflections and writings, in another venue,<sup>1</sup> John Punshon describes his intellectual development as having "outlived communism and fascism and never succumbed to the charms of phenomenology, existentialism, or deconstruction." He "received a literary and classical education at his English grammar school and Oxford University, and is, therefore, immune to postmodernism." He "spent most of the 1970s acquiring the rudiments of theology and biblical criticism," and in the 1980s, Punshon "encountered non-theist modernism which," he concluded, "was an unwarranted inference from the central Quaker tradition." In trying to assess its significance, he "came to see universalism, pluralism, non-theism, and experiential-expressive religion as the inevitable

consequences of postmodern ways of thinking.” In the 1990s, he “learned to face postmodernism in two ways: first, to acknowledge the limitations of modernity, and second, to see revelation as the only reliable source of knowledge of God.” He thereby “came to reclaim the evangelicalism of his childhood that has always been implicit in his writing, and what subconsciously he has always believed.”

In some ways, it is highly ironic that the leading Quaker historian and interpreter of Quakerism over the last four decades should have been schooled at Oxford, 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. And yet, having experienced a number of faith traditions in his earlier years, John Punshon actually joined the Friends movement while at Oxford upon experiencing the power of worship after the manner of Friends. Despite being disabled with polio since he was fourteen, John was involved in rowing, drama, and debate at Brasenose College, and his love for sports (especially baseball), nature, music, and beauty continued throughout his life.

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’s warm and encouraging presence will be missed—especially his jovial laugh, followed by “Oh, dear!”—and yet, his memory and many contributions continue for generations to come.

## ENDNOTES

1. Described in a cheeky and politically incorrect description of his intellectual sojourn, provided by Veronica Punshon. See also his presentation to Friends at Milton Keynes Friends Meeting (2003), included in this issue of QRT.

## CONTRIBUTORS

PAUL ANDERSON serves as Professor of Biblical and Quaker Studies at George Fox University and as Extraordinary Professor of Religion at North-West University of Potchefstroom, South Africa. His book, *Following Jesus*, presents a dynamic understanding of discipleship from a Quaker perspective, and his new introduction to the New Testament, *From Crisis to Christ*, offers a contextual approach to the issue. His current projects include several books on the writings of John and the historical Jesus, with implications for an inclusive quest for Jesus and authentic spirituality.

MICHAEL BIRKEL is Professor of Christian Spirituality at the Earlham School of Religion in Richmond, Indiana. He is a member of Clear Creek Friends Meeting. Michael's research and writing focus chiefly on Quaker spirituality and on interfaith understanding.

JENNIFER M. BUCK is an Assistant Professor of Practical Theology at Azusa Pacific University. She is a licensed minister in the Evangelical Friends church and served for eight years on pastoral staff. She is the author of *Reframing the House: Constructive Feminist Global Ecclesiology for the Western Evangelical Church* (Pickwick, 2016). Alongside her filmmaker husband Adam, they keep a menagerie of cats and dogs and drink far too much kombucha.

JEFFREY DUDIACK is Professor of Philosophy at The King's University in Edmonton, Canada, and adjunct Professor of Philosophy at the University of Alberta. He has recently been the Cadbury Scholar at Pendle Hill (2014-15), and served as clerk of the Friends Association for Higher Education (2014-16). His book on the relationship between Quakerism and Christianity, *Radicalizing Spirit: The Challenge of Contemporary Quakerism*, was published by Friends United Press in 2015.

T. VAIL PALMER, JR. is a recorded minister of Freedom Friends Church (unaffiliated, convergent) in Salem, OR. He and his wife, Izzy Covalt, are retired and live in Albany, OR. (Izzy is a member of Freedom Friends Church and of Faith Lutheran Church in Albany.) He is author of *Face to Face: Early Quaker Encounters with the Bible*, published by Barclay Press in 2016, and of *A Long Road: How Quakers Made Sense of God and the Bible*, [to be] published by Barclay Press in 2017. In October 2016 he attended the 200th-anniversary celebration of Drumore (PA) Friends Meeting House, where his parents were

married in 1926. On August 21, 2017, he and Izzy celebrated the 116th anniversary of the birth of his mother, Esther Lamborn Palmer, by observing the total solar eclipse in Albany.

JOHN PUNSHON. Please see the tribute to John in this issue.

DAN CHRISTY RANDAZZO is the Chester Reagan Chair of Quaker and Religious Studies at Moorestown Friends School in Moorestown, NJ. Dan Christy attends Haddonfield Meeting as a new resident of New Jersey, but is a member of Stony Run Meeting (Baltimore Yearly Meeting). Dan Christy serves as co-chair of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group. Dan recently completed his PhD at the University of Birmingham. His dissertation is titled *The Interdependent 'Light': Quaker Models of God in Reconciliation Theology*, which explores Liberal Quaker reconciliation theology.

LONNIE VALENTINE is Professor of Peace and Justice Studies at the Earlham School of Religion. He received his MA in Religion from ESR and his PhD in Constructive Theology from Emory University. His teaching connects social justice and peacemaking to the theological disciplines in courses such as *Liberation Theologies*, *Bible and Violence and Nonviolence*, *Spirituality of Peacemaking*, and *History of the Friends Peace Witness*. He hopes that young Friends will consider exploring peace and social justice at the School of Religion! Last year Lonnie did the bicycle "Ride Across Indiana" (160 miles, One Way, One Day) with his daughter, Cady. She probably will not be able to talk him into that again.

