

The History of England from the Accession of James the Second - Volume IV
By Thomas Babington Macaulay
CHAPTER XVII

<http://www.nalanda.nitc.ac.in/resources/english/etext-project/history/England4/>

(An excerpt on the religious practices of Quaker George Fox)

An event had taken place which a historian, whose object is to record the real life of a nation, ought not to pass unnoticed. While London was agitated by the news that a plot had been discovered, George Fox, the founder of the sect of Quakers, died.

More than forty years had elapsed since Fox had begun to see visions and to cast out devils. {22} He was then a youth of pure morals and grave deportment, with a perverse temper, with the education of a labouring man, and with an intellect in the most unhappy of all states, that is to say, too much disordered for liberty, and not sufficiently disordered for Bedlam. The circumstances in which he was placed were such as could scarcely fail to bring out in the strongest form the constitutional diseases of his mind. At the time when his faculties were ripening, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Independents, Baptists, were striving for mastery, and were, in every corner of the realm, refuting and reviling each other. He wandered from congregation to congregation; he heard priests harangue against Puritans; he heard Puritans harangue against priests; and he in vain applied for spiritual direction and consolation to doctors of both parties. One jolly old clergyman of the Anglican communion told him to smoke tobacco and sing psalms; another advised him to go and lose some blood. {23} The young inquirer turned in disgust from these advisers to the Dissenters, and found them also blind guides. {24} After some time he came to the conclusion that no human being was competent to instruct him in divine things, and that the truth had been communicated to him by direct inspiration from heaven. He argued that, as the division of languages began at Babel, and as the persecutors of Christ put on the cross an inscription in Latin, Greek and Hebrew, the knowledge of languages, and more especially of Latin, Greek and Hebrew, must be useless to a Christian minister. {25} Indeed, he was so far from knowing many languages, that he knew none; nor can the most corrupt passage in Hebrew be more unintelligible to the unlearned than his English often is to the most acute and attentive reader. {26} One of the precious truths which were divinely revealed to this new apostle was, that it was falsehood and adulation to use the second person plural instead of the second person singular. Another was, that to talk of the month of March was to worship the bloodthirsty god Mars, and that to talk of Monday was to pay idolatrous homage to the moon. To say Good morning or Good evening was highly reprehensible, for those phrases evidently imported that God had made bad days and bad nights. {27} A Christian was bound to face death itself rather than touch his hat to the greatest of mankind. When Fox was challenged to produce any Scriptural authority for this dogma, he cited the passage in which it is written that Shadrach, Meshech and Abednego were thrown into the fiery furnace with their hats on; and, if his own narrative may be trusted, the Chief Justice of England was altogether unable to answer this argument except by crying out, "Take him away, gaoler." {28} Fox insisted much on the not less weighty argument that the Turks never show their bare heads to their superiors; and he asked, with great animation, whether those who bore the noble name of Christians ought not to surpass

Turks in virtue. {29} Bowing he strictly prohibited, and, indeed, seemed to consider it as the effect of Satanical influence; for, as he observed, the woman in the Gospel, while she had a spirit of infirmity, was bowed together, and ceased to bow as soon as Divine power had liberated her from the tyranny of the Evil One. {30} His expositions of the sacred writings were of a very peculiar kind. Passages, which had been, in the apprehension of all the readers of the Gospels during sixteen centuries, figurative, he construed literally. Passages, which no human being before him had ever understood in any other than a literal sense, he construed figuratively. Thus, from those rhetorical expressions in which the duty of patience under injuries is enjoined he deduced the doctrine that selfdefence against pirates and assassins is unlawful. On the other hand, the plain commands to baptize with water, and to partake of bread and wine in commemoration of the redemption of mankind, he pronounced to be allegorical. He long wandered from place to place, teaching this strange theology, shaking like an aspen leaf in his paroxysms of fanatical excitement, forcing his way into churches, which he nicknamed steeple houses interrupting prayers and sermons with clamour and scurrility, {31} and pestering rectors and justices with epistles much resembling burlesques of those sublime odes in which the Hebrew prophets foretold the calamities of Babylon and Tyre. {32} He soon acquired great notoriety by these feats. His strange face, his strange chant, his immovable hat and his leather breeches were known all over the country; and he boasts that, as soon as the rumour was heard, "The Man in Leather Breeches is coming," terror seized hypocritical professors, and hireling priests made haste to get out of his way. {33} He was repeatedly imprisoned and set in the stocks, sometimes justly, for disturbing the public worship of congregations, and sometimes unjustly, for merely talking nonsense. He soon gathered round him a body of disciples, some of whom went beyond himself in absurdity. He has told us that one of his friends walked naked through Skipton declaring the truth. {34} and that another was divinely moved to go naked during several years to marketplaces, and to the houses of gentlemen and clergymen. {35} Fox complains bitterly that these pious acts, prompted by the Holy Spirit, were requited by an untoward generation with hooting, pelting, coachwhipping and horsewhipping. But, though he applauded the zeal of the sufferers, he did not go quite to their lengths. He sometimes, indeed, was impelled to strip himself partially. Thus he pulled off his shoes and walked barefoot through Lichfield, crying, "Woe to the bloody city." {36} But it does not appear that he ever thought it his duty to appear before the public without that decent garment from which his popular appellation was derived.

If we form our judgment of George Fox simply by looking at his own actions and writings, we shall see no reason for placing him, morally or intellectually, above Ludowick Muggleton or Joanna Southcote. But it would be most unjust to rank the sect which regards him as its founder with the Muggletonians or the Southcotians. It chanced that among the thousands whom his enthusiasm infected were a few persons whose abilities and attainments were of a very different order from his own. Robert Barclay was a man of considerable parts and learning. William Penn, though inferior to Barclay in both natural and acquired abilities, was a gentleman and a scholar. That such men should have become the followers of George Fox ought not to astonish any person who remembers what quick, vigorous and highly cultivated intellects were in our own times duped by the unknown tongues. The truth is that no powers of mind constitute a security against errors of this description. Touching God and His ways with man, the highest human faculties can discover little more than the meanest. In theology the interval is small indeed between Aristotle and a child, between Archimedes and a naked savage. It is not strange,

therefore, that wise men, weary of investigation, tormented by uncertainty, longing to believe something, and yet seeing objections to every thing, should submit themselves absolutely to teachers who, with firm and undoubting faith, lay claim to a supernatural commission. Thus we frequently see inquisitive and restless spirits take refuge from their own scepticism in the bosom of a church which pretends to infallibility, and, after questioning the existence of a Deity, bring themselves to worship a wafer. And thus it was that Fox made some converts to whom he was immeasurably inferior in every thing except the energy of his convictions. By these converts his rude doctrines were polished into a form somewhat less shocking to good sense and good taste. No proposition which he had laid down was retracted. No indecent or ridiculous act which he had done or approved was condemned; but what was most grossly absurd in his theories and practices was softened down, or at least not obtruded on the public; whatever could be made to appear specious was set in the fairest light; his gibberish was translated into English; meanings which he would have been quite unable to comprehend were put on his phrases; and his system, so much improved that he would not have known it again, was defended by numerous citations from Pagan philosophers and Christian fathers whose names he had never heard. {37} Still, however, those who had remodelled his theology continued to profess, and doubtless to feel, profound reverence for him; and his crazy epistles were to the last received and read with respect in Quaker meetings all over the country. His death produced a sensation which was not confined to his own disciples. On the morning of the funeral a great multitude assembled round the meeting house in Gracechurch Street. Thence the corpse was borne to the burial ground of the sect near Bunhill Fields. Several orators addressed the crowd which filled the cemetery.