

Reflections on John Punshon as Teacher, Scholar and Colleague

John Punshon and Teaching Quaker Studies: The Woodbrooke years

*Chris Lawson*¹

John was a wonderful colleague. I was fortunate to work alongside him the whole time he was on the staff of Woodbrooke. I was then organising the programme of short courses and conferences and taking some part in the general teaching programme. John was always encouraging, perceptive and focussed on what he wanted to do. The international community which came together in Woodbrooke for 11-week terms enabled world links to be made and intercultural and interfaith perspectives to be rooted in friendships. It was a good setting for John to come to. He flourished from the freedom and resources with which to grow as a Quaker educator, as did others of us on the staff. He led courses, gave lectures, tutored students, wrote books and articles. His background in law and politics may not have been usual for a Quaker Studies tutor, but his ability to gain necessary information and share it was impressive. As we know, he became in due course a widely known and respected scholar and communicator.

Shortly after John was appointed Quaker Studies Tutor at Woodbrooke in 1979 I asked him (in my role as editor of the annual review of the past year and aims for the following one) to write his views on the aims of Quaker Studies. He started off by making clear that there was learning to do before your own opinions could be properly formed:

¹ Chris Lawson was on the Woodbrooke staff from 1969 to 1996 in various roles, concluding as Senior Tutor. He has read through some of the articles in which John outlined his thinking on Quaker Studies while he was at Woodbrooke.

A Quaker Studies curriculum for Woodbrooke is not easy to construct. It is relatively easy to sit down and write out what you think should be taught but you have to utilise some principles that will permit you to justify each item of your selection on independent grounds. The art is to construct a course that will meet student needs but at the same time present an inherited tradition that must be encountered regardless of personal whim or intellectual fashion.

John was not shy then, nor later, in pointing to trends in the Society that needed challenging. Like all good teachers, he wanted his students to emerge with wider perspectives and a surer foundation to their faith. For him there would be no point in Quaker Studies if in the end any viewpoint is taken as equal to any other.

Next, John laid out the elements that he was sure were needed within a Quaker Studies programme:

First, ... we include a basic element of Quaker history. We exist, and we need to know how we have been given our identity and reputation. Accordingly, emphasis has to be placed on events, controversies, testimonies, personalities, movements of opinion and ideas and influences at work within the Society ... This is the study of the Quakers as a peculiar people in the best sense.

But then we need to look carefully at the area of interaction between ourselves and the Church of which we are a sometimes uneasy part. We simply ought to understand the main themes of Biblical theology and how they relate to the Quaker understanding of the Christian Faith. So we shall need to study the language, nature and significance of the 17th Century Quaker proclamation, the reasons why most British Friends reject evangelicalism and most American Friends do not, the liberal period and contemporary theological concerns, notably the current debates about the nature of God, alternative constructions of Christian doctrine and the Christological problem.

As an example of this approach, 'Bringing Worship to Life', a three-week course in Summer Term 1981 organised by John, focussed on worship and witness:

We shall look at Quaker history to see if Friends can best be viewed as collective mystics or whether there is a prophetic component too. This matters vitally, for questions of discovery or revelation are involved, and the adequacy of our ideas or experience of God.

In an article in *Friends Quarterly* in 1983, John noted how placing Quaker Studies centrally in Woodbrooke's sense of purpose was now expressed more openly than in 1903, when it started as a study centre:

... there is no mention of 'Quakerism' in the early period and what Quaker studies there were came as a by-product of more general lines of enquiry. Now these things are reversed and Quaker studies has pride of place.

John was firm, nonetheless, in seeing Quakerism as within the Christian tradition, and he himself was firmly rooted in a Christian faith. But his, like Fox's,

was a Christianity that has its own key emphases. So he called his 1982 Pendle Hill pamphlet 'Alternative Christianity'. I remember discussing the title with him and feeling that it made his convictions clear.

By now we know that showing the wider scene into which liberal and evangelical forms of Quakerism can be set became a gift and ministry that John gave us. He would not have known at that moment all the bridge building that he became able to do. Over the following years, as we watched him heading off to the States during the summer vacations, we could see the larger Quaker world which was calling him. After spending time in the USA in 1984, John reflected in the Annual Review:

On a visit like mine you ... have to come to terms with many different aspects of Quaker life in what is now the most populous Quaker nation. ... My visits were mainly within the unprogrammed tradition, and I made two discoveries that have altered my perspective in interesting ways. The first is that in the United States there is no established church exercising a social and theological gravitational pull in religious life. This has advantages and disadvantages but it showed up for me the degree to which English Quakerism has been formed by its status as a part of 'Dissent' or, less accurately, 'Non-conformity'. Equally, it also suggested to me that the Quaker 'tradition' therefore has to play a more important part in establishing the Society's identity there than here.

The development of Quakerism in Britain and America became a major interest for John and later in 1984 he was able to co-lead with Daniel Smith of Oregon Yearly Meeting two weekends at Woodbrooke 'looking at aspects of Quaker faith and practice, past, present and future and in a world context'. A succession of other leading American Friends came to Woodbrooke in subsequent years to take part in the Quaker Studies programme.

In relation to Quaker Studies for members in general he saw during his American trip the value of an ordered approach:

In many places I visited there was great seriousness of purpose in the provision of opportunities for adult religious education. For example, suddenly aware of the extent of its slow decline, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting has set itself a target for growth. This is intended to build on the highly successful Quaker studies programme which has been in operation for three or four years now, introducing Friends to the Quaker tradition, its Biblical basis, place in church history and importance as a spiritual resource for the Society's contemporary witness. ... I am certain that similar needs and demand exist within London Yearly Meeting.

Two years later the first 'Gifts and Discoveries' pack was published and used by many Friends. John wrote about it in the 1986–87 Annual Review:

'Gifts and Discoveries' is a new initiative in Quaker adult education undertaken by the Resources for Learning Group which operates jointly between Woodbrooke and Quaker Home Service. It takes the form of a scheme of study, discussion and spiritual development intended to nourish the roots of the Society of Friends. It

seeks to serve those who would value an opportunity to stand back for a while and ask themselves those fundamental, challenging and life-giving questions about faith which we are usually too busy to look at.

The name symbolises the aim. The scheme is designed to help those taking part to discern gifts in themselves they may not have realised they had and to encourage others to do the same by carrying out a disciplined reflection on, and perhaps thereby a re-discovery of, the roots of Quakerism.

In 1987 John followed his widely read historical survey of Quakers, *Portrait in Grey*, with *Encounter with Silence*, a more personal reflection. It was the first joint publication between Quaker Home Service and Friends United Press, Richmond, Indiana. Woodbrooke's Annual Review said that it was 'therefore written for Friends in pastoral and programmed traditions as well as "silent" ones. Both will benefit from his ability to draw from each and see those essentials in which they unite.'

For John, as for the rest of us on the staff of Woodbrooke, learning was not for its own sake but to help build up, or grow, the learners as people of faith and the life of the Society as a whole. As John put it:

Woodbrooke, however, is a growing institution, not just a learning one, and we need a spiritual input that is far from the theological workroom. For this we have 'Basic Quakerism', a structured discussion series for the sharing of experience which leads naturally into a series of topics called broadly, 'Worship and Life'. This covers attitudes towards worship, prayer, meditation, contemplation, mystical awareness. It includes work on the 'Advices and Queries' and broadens into the life of the meeting—eldership and oversight, outreach, membership, clerkship. This is backed up by seminar sessions on great Quaker classics like Fox's 'Journal' and the writings of Thomas Kelly.

The Christian spiritual tradition became part of John's teaching. In 1988, for example, he led (with Christopher Holdsworth) a weekend course on 'Living Silence: An exploration for Friends and others of how silence can be used to enrich our lives, focussing on the Quaker experience but seeing it in a wider context'. John's involvement in politics before he came to Woodbrooke was perhaps why at a very different weekend the following year he was course tutor for 'John Bright: politician, capitalist and Quaker'.

Another strand in which John became involved was interfaith dialogue. Linking with the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations in the Selly Oak Colleges, he helped bring a Muslim-Christian Consultation on Peace to fruition in 1982 and gave a background presentation on 'Christian approaches to religious sources for peace'. The consultation was not just sharing faith perspectives, for it sent a letter to the then prime minister regretting the government's decision to go ahead with the Trident nuclear missile programme. John brought Islamic thinking into a 'Faith and Quakers' course the following year.

At this time at the national level there was not only strong central Quaker work but a blossoming of groups based around special interests or topics. The Quaker Universalist Group, alert to the spiritual insights of other faiths, the New Foundation Fellowship, re-emphasising Fox's original message, and the Open Letter Movement, looking for how Quakerism could integrate with contemporary ways of thought, were among them. Conferences at Woodbrooke brought members of such groups together for weekends of exploration and fellowship. I had the privilege of helping run many of them as the Woodbrooke staff link. Other groups were bringing feminist perspectives and issues of sexual identity to the fore. I will not let on which was the group about which a member of our kitchen staff commented afterwards 'My, but they were serious!' John was clear that the vitality these showed needed to be taken into the Quaker Studies programme if it was to be relevant in looking at the future of Quakerism. So he ended his Aims article with:

Above all, a Quaker study centre cannot ignore what Quakers are doing now, so we have a module called, 'London Yearly Meeting'. This will include preparation and follow-up sessions for YM every year supplemented during the term by sessions on the structure and finance of Quaker work and the multifarious activities of central committees.

This is balanced by a 'New Thinking' module in which we hope to have speakers from the 'centres of vitality' (of which we see ourselves as one, incidentally) and to use their sessions and an analysis of current Quaker periodicals to see what indications we can discern of the development of Quakerism in the future and what part we, as Woodbrooke students, have to play in that development.

Wider questions were around, as the 1989 Annual Review notes:

John Punshon's regular course on Quaker theology, practice and worship continued, though he is finding an increasing number of students for whom the questions of 'Why religion?' and 'Why God?' come before wanting to examine Quakerism in detail.

One of the regular exercises that John gave students was the challenge to 'Draw God'. Such sessions were ones that were also followed by lively discussion and sharing of reflections on the responses.

By the time John left Woodbrooke, the experience of leading Quaker Studies there and gaining knowledge of it at American Quaker institutions had sharpened his expression of the purpose of the subject. In 1992 he contributed a splendid article to the first issue of the *Journal of Woodbrooke College* delightfully called 'Mad Hatters and Red Queens: Some Reflections on Quaker Studies'. Dormouse Quakerism, Mad Hatter Quakerism and Cheshire Cat Quakerism are varieties that we can all recognise. Quaker Studies needs to be more than the listing of such. As in an earlier article, John wants us to see ourselves more clearly: 'What guidelines could we use to make sure our own predilections are not indulged, and there is integrity to what we do? Can Quaker Studies be

more than the justification of denominational, sectional or personal prejudices? I think it can.' He challenges common ways of writing about Quakerism and insists that there is information to absorb before theories are constructed:

I believe that the key lies in the problem of data. In this field of study it is notoriously easy to begin by defining what Quakerism is, or must be, and then build up one's corpus of knowledge on this basis. I think the great reformers of Quakerism, like Rufus Jones and Joseph John Gurney did this, and we are still unconsciously affected by that approach

But data mark the beginning, the foundation of the discipline, and have to be worked upon. There then comes the stage of analysis and evaluation, and we have to utilise assumptions and techniques that find their proper place in other disciplines—philosophy, sociology, semantics, politics, theology, history, to name just some . . . I think it fair to say that many of the fundamental contributions to the study of Quakerism in recent years have been made by academics who are not formally connected with the Society.

For example, if you are unfamiliar with concepts like post-modernism or deconstruction, you might just not know why the intellectual tradition of Quakerism is losing influence in London Yearly Meeting. This has little to do with Quakerism, but much to do with an array of challenges to tradition within the general culture. If you do not know about revisionist historians' critiques of the positions taken by the Christopher Hill school, you might just have a picture of early Quakerism that is curling at the edges. And so on.

I make no apology for this. I am a Quaker by conviction, and I happen to value Quakerism very highly. It deserves better than superficial treatment, and the practitioner of Quaker studies therefore has a high calling, and needs a fair degree of intellectual shrewdness.

He then turns to the curriculum for Quaker Studies and stresses that there is a context to much of Quakerism to be understood:

Plainly knowledge is absolutely essential, and if I were designing a curriculum that would be a strong emphasis. . . . it is out of the facts that certain central concepts, like 'Light' and 'Testimony' inevitably emerge. For example, if one takes Barclay's *Apology* or Penn's *The Sandy Foundation Shaken*, one encounters a frontal assault on the Reformed Tradition in theology. Not to notice that, or to decline the process of assessing its significance and importance is not to do Quaker Studies.

One of the sessions in which John brought home the radical thinking of Fox was that on 'perfection'. The buzz in the dining room showed how much debate was continuing among those who had been made to re-consider their views.

Taking issue with lazy thinking among some Friends, John continued:

Indeed, the well-known objection to theology is no help in this matter. The question of authority and the continued viability of the Quaker business method—a contemporary matter of crucial importance and significance—is intimately bound up with Penn and Barclay's theological assault. Have you ever

wondered by what 'right' the Book of Discipline is being revised? The nature of the Society of Friends, its Yearly Meetings, its Disciplines, its worship and its spirituality would be very different without that theology. Quaker history has taken a certain course because of the possibilities for development either closed off or opened up by these things. We cannot understand ourselves now without understanding what we were then.

Quaker Studies is, however, seen as more than learning history, for it is a means of shaping those who are today's Friends:

... we are socialised into the Society by its story, and inevitably Quaker Studies serves as a means whereby Friends are inducted into the values and perspectives of Quakerism. This process is, frequently one of give and take, as a critique of the Quaker culture often accompanies a broad acceptance of it. That is how growth happens, and the advantage of an historical perspective is that we can see this dimension of our experience.

But we then find ourselves back where we started. What Society are we being socialised into? There is often a prior judgment about which branch, and my remarks about data were intended to prevent that happening, either through the Mad Hatter move or the Red Queen move. I have no objections to Mad Hatters and Red Queens, provided they know what they are about, and I regard it as one of the moral challenges of Quaker Studies to force people to delay their choices till they know what the options are.

I do not know in detail how John's thinking developed during his time in the USA after Woodbrooke. But I do read into his closing comments in this 1992 article his major concern that the world-wide Society holds together at a deep level and that Quaker Studies can help that process:

Thus, I suppose I would say that the substance of Quaker Studies has to be the personalities, practices, doctrines, beliefs, dynamics of, and influences working on the varieties of Quakerism in the world. This is clearly ecumenical in Quaker terms, and, I will gladly admit to my bias in this respect. But to do any less seems to me to balkanise the subject and the Society. I choose that unpleasant word deliberately. There is a danger that world Quakerism may lose its sense of common origin and identity and separate into Quaker tribes, distant cousins, but no more. I don't want that to happen. The subject of Quaker Studies should not be the other tribes, but 'our' family.

John's ability to be a bridge-builder through being a teacher of Quakerism was amply shown in the subsequent years of his service among us. His clear view of what he was about can still set the approaches that are needed and challenge anyone who is involved in Quaker Studies.

John Punshon, Beloved Tutor

April Claggett, New Hampshire, USA

John Punshon was my tutor when I came to Woodbrooke in 1988. I was a 23-year-old peripatetic American Friend abroad, and Woodbrooke offered me rest from restlessness by letting me join their housekeeping staff. Coming from a counter-cultural young adulthood, falling in easily with atheist and anarchist types, I felt it was my role to be suspicious of establishmentarianism and orthodoxy, to be highly critical of any substance and affect that whiffed of old rule clinging to power for power's sake, and so on. So I attended John's courses primed with a healthy dose of disdain for (things he really couldn't help): his age, his frumpy clothes, his aristocratic voice and diction, the self-congratulatory twinkle in his eye, the authoritarianism with which he dispensed his interpretation of Quaker history and thought, and the theological certainty through which he interpreted his life, which came across (to me, lacking such certainty) as smug and unexamined. Remember, I'm 23. So, you know where this brief story is going Over the course of the six months that we overlapped, John managed to endear himself, without trying.

Simply put, he modelled integrity. He was consistent: consistently honest, consistently patient, consistently insightful, consistently twinkly, consistently frumpy. I learned to hear humility and sweetness in his voice. I learned that that twinkle in the eye was actually a tender apology for having just punctured my pride with some wisdom. Most of all, he unfuzzied the liberal-Liberal Quakerism into which I was born with a structural historical approach. His dry logic slaked my thirst, while the mystery of faith remained charged with potentiality. I will venture to say that through his examination of history, faith and practice, not as foregone conclusions but as evolving responses, he was instrumental in setting the stage for the next generation of deconstructionist Quaker thinkers, such as Ben Pink Dandelion, who was also at Woodbrooke with me.

Once, I sniffed out in a lecture that John was hedging around the notion of living evil. I detected uncharacteristically unsure footing. It was probably the first time I had heard a thoughtful person speak of evil as a presence, instead of an absence or ignorance of God. When I went to his office privately to inquire further his thoughts on the matter, I remember him leaning in to say, 'Seek ye Satan and ye shall certainly find him, roving to and fro over all the earth!' with an extra-theatrical 'to and fro' bit. Which I took as an admonishment to set my sights on more challenging quarry, like this miracle-of-grace business he would much rather I wrapped my head and heart around.

In my experience, John Punshon's gift was interpretive rather than prophetic or pastoral. Because, in the late 1980s, my generation was spiritually shattered

by the AIDS epidemic and its social consequences, and I don't remember John saying a word about it. The meaning and expression of Love (human and spiritual) was very high on the list of concerns at that age and, again, John had little to say that I can recall. A traditionalist, he would not be present at our radical explorations of such topics. He would always, however, Zen-masterly, be able to recount a biblical or Quaker story to act obliquely as a parable for our concerns.

I understand that when later John moved to the US, he became a fan of baseball—a storied, quirky and nerdy game of humans acting as individuals and communities within prescribed beautiful geometries. This makes perfect sense to me. John knew which team he played for, the history of the franchise, the drama of the struggle and how to impart his love and appreciation for the grace that is set up to occur. I will always envy his clarity.

John Punshon in the USA

John Punshon: My Friend and our Friend

Alan Kolp, Baldwin Wallace University, Berea, Ohio, USA

John Punshon was small in stature with a big heart, and both made a lasting impression and left an enviable legacy. I came to know John in the early 1980s, soon after he had gone to Woodbrooke, the Quaker Study Centre right outside Birmingham, England. My close friendship continued for two decades through his time at Earlham School of Religion (ESR). When he retired from ESR in 2001, returning to his native England, our friendship was more spasmodic, but no less valued.

With my family (two pre-school girls), I headed to Woodbrooke in the summer of 1981 as a Fellow, as it was then called. I was on sabbatical for the Fall Semester at ESR and was delighted to spend six months with British Quakers. One of the earliest and warmest people to greet us was John Punshon. At the time Woodbrooke had the feel of a mixture of college and retreat centre. John was the Quaker Studies Tutor and was already deeply respected as a teacher. But there were other things—equally as important to me—that I did not know about John, but came to know.

I learned that John was an avid sports fan. As a former athlete and sports fan, this appealed to me. Very early in my time at Woodbrooke, John posed a question. 'Do you want to go with me to a football match?' Of course! And so it was that

I saw my first English Premier League soccer match. It was at Aston Villa, one of the three Birmingham ‘major league’ teams, as we would call them.

I have two more memories of that first game. Soon after entering the stadium, John again asked a question. ‘Are you a Quaker who does or does not?’ At first I was not sure what he was asking, but then realised he wanted to know if I wanted a beer! My second memory of that football match happened as we were leaving the stadium. We emerged into the middle of a huge football hooligan brawl. There must have been five hundred younger fans from both sides engaged in a pitched battle. Bottles, bricks and the like were flying like missiles. We crouched next to a brick wall just beyond the melee. I was scared, but John reassured me that we would survive. He had survived World War II; I had some learning to do.

And so the real person, John, came to be a friend. He was a bright, insightful Quaker scholar. He was an Oxford-educated intellectual. But he was a sports guy with interests as pedestrian as mine—a guy who grew up on an Indiana farm. John was fun and funny. He could be serious and, yet, he always had a twinkle in his eye and was ready for a laugh. People loved him. I found him to be both extraordinary and ordinary.

I would like to use his own story to flesh out that last point. I was delighted to write a short blurb that appeared on the back of his little book *Encounter with Silence*, which appeared in 1987. Fairly early in the book John tells the touching story of his father and his father’s death. In John’s inimitable way, he describes it. ‘The night he died, I had to take a long look at myself. I had to ask what I believed.’¹ John talks about his own life and, particularly, what the privilege of being an Oxford person can do to one. Effectively, John realised he was experiencing transformation. He put it this way:

The consequence of all this is that I parted company with my pedestal. I saw through the system that had selected me and schooled me and given me its values and standards. I prized my education highly, but came to reject what it had been for. I discovered the joy of being ordinary ... These changes were set in train the night I got back from the hospital ... That night I came to know that as Christ was resurrected, so should my father live. For the very first time, I had life in me.²

John summarised his experience by saying, ‘I date my conversion from the act of repentance I made that night.’³

After I returned to ESR, I continued a long-distance friendship with John throughout the 1980s. Like everyone at ESR, I was delighted when John decided to join the ESR faculty in 1991. He agreed to become the Geraldine Leatherrock

1 John Punshon, *Encounter With Silence: reflections from the Quaker tradition* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1987), p. 14.

2 Punshon, *Encounter With Silence*, pp. 15–16.

3 Punshon, *Encounter With Silence*, p. 16.

Professor of Quaker Studies. Soon John and Veronica were living in a house about three blocks south of both ESR and my own house on College Ave. Quickly, he became a favourite among the students and a valuable colleague among the faculty and staff.

There are three meetings for worship in Richmond. John and Veronica visited all three and would have been a blessing in whichever one they finally were to choose. Ultimately, they decided to become active members at First Friends in Richmond. That is where another chapter in my friendship with John would be written. In 1992 I felt called to leave ESR and become the Pastoral Leader at First Friends. I had earlier served the Meeting during a sabbatical in 1987 and had come to appreciate the folks there.

When John began his pilgrimage at First Friends and I joined them as a leader, First Friends still called home their mammoth meeting house on East Main St. Through a fascinating process, the Meeting was led to leave that building and site to relocate on the front campus of Friends Fellowship. A hiatus—or period of exodus—between leaving the old building and moving into a new, classical Quaker meeting house was nearly two years worshipping in a Jewish temple.

And so it was that frequently John and Veronica were in meeting for worship with me. I had never envisioned being his pastor! It was wonderful to have the gift of their presence and participation over the decade, until 2001, that they were in Richmond. John often spoke out of the silence of worship. He often brought the message when I was not in attendance (once a month someone else brought the message in those days at First Friends).

First Friends were blessed by having the Punshons with us and as one of us. I always enjoyed hearing him introduced as a member of the ESR faculty and member at First Friends Richmond. By virtue of membership with First Friends, John was also a member of Indiana Yearly Meeting—as it was in those days, as well as Friends United Meeting (FUM). John helped all of us in the Midwest understand something about Britain Yearly Meeting. We knew he was just as eager to learn from us about American Quakerism.

John was already known by some American Quakers and would be embraced by all American Quakers—of all theological stripes. We gain a sense about John when we read his 1996 piece ‘Some Reflections on Quakers and the Evangelical Spirit’. John begins that reflection by allowing that Arthur Roberts was the first Evangelical Quaker he ever met.⁴ John wrote, ‘On what was probably the third day of my very first visit to the United States, I flew out to Oregon to meet him and visit George Fox College.’⁵ In his vintage way, John wryly noted, ‘I wish I had known more about evangelical Quakerism, and earlier than I did. I wish that

4 John Punshon, ‘Some Reflections on Quakers and the Evangelical Spirit’, *Truth’s Bright Embrace: essays and poems in honor of Arthur O. Roberts*, Paper 6, http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1015&context=truths_bright/6.

5 Punshon, ‘Some Reflections on Quakers and the Evangelical Spirit’.

evangelical Friends had taken more trouble to find me.’⁶ John wanted to learn from us. And we certainly learned from him.

Remembering John and appreciating a friendship is not simply a historical trip through the past. Because he wrote a great deal, his thoughts and influence continue to be a factor in my life. For example, we are currently in a period when Christians are recognising the 500th anniversary of the Reformation (1517 CE). That tumultuous pre-Quaker time set the stage for what would happen in seventeenth-century England—the century that birthed Quakerism. Both the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were periods of reformation and renewal. Contemporarily, perhaps, we are facing our own period of renewal. A couple of lines from Punshon guide my own current thinking. He claims: ‘In one sense, all movements of renewal are returns to an earlier vitality. Institutions can never be revived, but people can, and are.’⁷

I am confident that this theme of renewal is part of what fascinated John about Quakers. In their beginning, Quakers were certainly change-agents. In what will be John’s most enduring written piece, *Portrait in Grey*, his short history of Quakers, we find his own take on Quaker origins: ‘we shall see Quakerism as a logical outcome of the Puritan impulse, Quakerism as the legatee of Continental spiritual religion, and finally Quakerism in its connexions with political radicalism in the aftermath of the English Civil War’.⁸

While that historical account can be abstract and historical (remember, John was a scholar), John was always able to take that kind of material and put it in human terms that could speak to the mostly ordinary people in their churches and meeting houses. For Quakers George Fox was the earliest figure to experience, embody and express the ardent spiritual desires of ordinary people. Punshon notes that Fox had the conviction that ‘Christ had come to teach his people himself.’ And, with this conviction, Fox was able to bring people ‘into the Quaker fold with a teaching that gave reality to their hopes and substance to their dreams’.⁹

Good Quakers know that George Fox was not the only person who was able to speak to the desires of ordinary people. John Punshon knew it and, furthermore, he knew how he could do it. I watched him in countless situations take what he knew—both as a scholar and experientially—and speak to the condition of ordinary people. I watched him do it in the seminary classroom, within a yearly meeting session and at various other venues. But the place that most touched me was watching him do it in my parents’ living room.

I do not recall the details about the first visit I made with John to my parents’ home in Winchester, IN, a mere 25 miles from Richmond. What I do know is

6 Punshon, ‘Some Reflections on Quakers and the Evangelical Spirit’.

7 Punshon, ‘Some Reflections on Quakers and the Evangelical Spirit’.

8 Punshon, *Portrait in Grey: a short history of the Quakers* (London: Quaker Home Services, 1984), pp. 9–10.

9 Punshon, *Portrait in Grey*, p. 25.

the immediate and lasting impression John made on both of them. My parents were native Hoosiers, a farm family with only a high school education. They were church-goers, but whether there was anything more than the socially acceptable requirement of church affiliation of their generation would have been hard to tell. They were about as ordinary as it gets.

And yet, John made them feel special. They were honoured to have him visit with them. In fact, one visit led to more visits and to a genuine friendship with both of my parents. John made them feel like his mentors. They taught him about being Midwesterners. He made them proud to be Quakers. My dad loved sports. He was an avid Cincinnati Reds baseball fan. And he helped John join that Reds' fraternity. John went with my dad to games in Cincinnati. He had his own Reds' baseball cap which he proudly wore. He became one of us, but with an accent!

And now both my parents and John are gone from this world. But they are not gone from memory and not gone for good. I always appreciated how John finished his book, *Portrait in Grey*. He ends it with reference to Edward Hicks (1780–1849), the Quaker painter who repeatedly painted the scene of the Peaceable Kingdom. With that theme in mind, John Punshon wrote the last two sentences of that book. 'The Peaceable Kingdom is both past and future, because it has a permanent place in the human heart. The Quaker faith is that this dream can become reality.'¹⁰

I am confident the dream had become reality in John's life. And I am even more confident that the dream has become fully and finally his reality. While this could be the conclusion, I prefer to share one more story because it best represents the John Punshon I knew. It's not a personal story so much as it is a generic John Punshon story. It comes in his 1990 Swarthmore Lecture, which is now the little book *Testimony & Tradition*. I have my own signed copy from John with this note: 'To Alan, Letitia and family. With love from John. 5 June 1990.'

He opens the chapter 'Discipleship and Vocation' with this account: 'My grandfather was enormous.'¹¹ John tells us that his grandfather taught him many lessons in life. I like how John nuances his grandfather's pedagogy. John says his grandfather taught him 'not through what he said so much as by what he was.'¹² The next line is vintage Punshon. I can see John's face when he quipped, 'One of these lessons is that it does not really make sense to watch a sporting event without gambling on the result.'¹³ John had an uncanny ability to be serious and funny at the same time. As we read the rest of that paragraph, we see exactly how John Punshon worked. John gives his reason for gambling on sporting events:

The reason is that much sport is ritual, and not sport. In rituals, unseen changes of a very serious nature are taking place, and are of great importance to the

10 Punshon, *Portrait in Grey*, p. 264.

11 John Punshon, *Testimony & Tradition: some aspects of Quaker spirituality* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1990), p. 75.

12 Punshon, *Testimony & Tradition*.

13 Punshon, *Testimony & Tradition*.

participants. To observe rituals for enjoyment is a species of sacrilege. You cannot watch boxing for fun. You have to have something riding on the result. You have got to stand to lose.¹⁴

In clever fashion John has gone from boxing to ritual. Very quickly he is talking about sacrilege, which implicates the sacred. Almost magically, through boxing John has shown us that life has something riding on it. You can lose! Life is risky.

It is at this point John allows that he does not watch boxing or gamble. But he has set us up to make what will be the final point. He says, 'The principle I am trying to illustrate is that there is all the difference in the world between playing a game yourself and watching other people play.'¹⁵ That is why he says you need to gamble, if you watch sports. You need to be involved. You need something at stake. And so he concludes:

The same principle holds good in religion. Many people think they are practicing religion when they are in fact only thinking about it. They do not realize that knowledge of religious truth comes only through practice and is inaccessible to thought alone. This is because religion is an activity and has to be done to be understood.¹⁶

That's my friend and our Friend.

Remembering John Punshon

Jay Marshall, Earlham School of Religion, Richmond, Indiana, USA

Like many Midwestern Quakers who lived within the orbit of Earlham School of Religion, I learned of a British Friend named John Punshon after he had been persuaded to accept the initial appointment as the Geraldine Leatherock Professor of Quaker Studies in 1991. However, my first live encounter with John was not in a classroom or Quaker gathering; it was at Riverfront Stadium at a Cincinnati Reds baseball game. I was serving as a pastoral minister in a Friends Meeting that year. In those days one of my first cousins pitched in the major leagues and would provide complimentary tickets when his team visited the Reds. Though I have now forgotten many of the details, Jim Newby knew about this and asked if I would share two of those tickets with John and himself. We met outside the

14 Punshon, *Testimony & Tradition*.

15 Punshon, *Testimony & Tradition*.

16 Punshon, *Testimony & Tradition*.

stadium as the game began and quickly settled into our seats where, between stolen bases and foul balls, we launched the beginning of a friendship.

Our paths next crossed in the course of gatherings and committee meetings within Indiana Yearly Meeting. If the Reds game provided an opportunity to see the childlike joy displayed in moments of leisure, these yearly meeting engagements allowed one to see the depth and seriousness with which John approached faithfulness and its accompanying demands. I served on the Committee for the Training and Recording of Ministers when John was recommended for recording as a minister by his monthly meeting. In the early 1990s, when this occurred, Indiana Yearly Meeting contained a broader diversity of constituents than it does now, though with a decided lean toward evangelical Christianity. One consequence of that evangelical leaning was that the recording process was primarily a route for the credentialing of pastors. It required that a series of interviews occur and that certain educational requirements be met. The interviews provided an opportunity for discernment of call as well as orthodoxy, while the educational components provided exposure to Quaker thought with the hope that adequate formation for ministry among Friends resulted.

The putting forth of John's name for recording was a bit like the square peg/round hole dilemma and caused some on the committee, myself included, to pause and wonder why the Yearly Meeting should entertain this recommendation. As an unprogrammed Friend and professor of Quaker Studies, John did not intend to be a pastor. He lacked a seminary education or its equivalent. At the same time, I could not fathom asking John to undertake further educational work to demonstrate his competency in ministry as a Friend, nor could I imagine what exactly would be gained by such an investment of time and expense. After thinking through the initial surprise and arising questions, I recall uniting without too much difficulty with the recommendation of recording John as a minister of the Gospel. The wisdom of that decision was proved countless times over the next several years, as John's gifts for ministry were clearly in evidence. In some ways, this anecdote is illustrative of John's effect among North American Friends. His presence and manner often gently challenged his audience to reconsider their certainties, frequently breaking open new insights and possibilities.

In the coming years John and I would serve together on that same Committee for the Training and Recording of Ministers. We, along with a few others, worked to expand the yearly meeting's vision of recording to encompass public Gospel ministry rather than primarily pastoral ministry or chaplaincy. Sadly, the committee's progress in that area was largely undone in later years. As is often the case, changes to committee composition are accompanied by changing attitudes and agendas so that work is often done, undone and redone over a period of years. However, John's service in this capacity demonstrated to Friends his willingness, indeed his intention, to bridge the gap that often exists between theological education and the traditions they seek to serve.

Our paths intersected once again when I joined Earlham School of Religion as Dean in 1998. By then John was firmly entrenched as a fixture on the school's faculty. His hiring had been a strategic move by Earlham in its effort to raise its profile among Friends as a centre of Quaker scholarship. True to expectation, John's expertise and vision enriched the curriculum immediately. Before his arrival, courses with a Quaker focus were sprinkled throughout the various disciplines. For instance, *Quakers in Conflict* was offered in the peace studies curriculum, and *Quaker Belief* found its home in the theological studies curriculum. John introduced new foci with courses such as *Evangelical Quakerism* and *Liberal Quakerism*. When the school adopted a set of ministry emphases that function in a manner similar to a major or concentration, John developed a cluster of courses that provided an emphasis in Quaker ministry for the Master of Divinity degree and a concentration in Quaker studies for the more research-oriented Master of Arts in Religion degree. The unexpected bonus was that John proved to be an incredible roving ambassador for the school. Among its constituents, a school is better known from encounters and experiences with personnel and alumni/ae than by printed materials and advertisements. John demonstrated a genuine interest in the concerns, well-being and future of Friends and these Friends noticed! He had much to teach, but realised that he also had much to learn from the variations of Quakerism practised in North America. He inserted himself in gatherings across the spectrum of Friends, always arriving as one eager to experience and to learn rather than as an expert to whom all others should kowtow. Without doubt, that humility contributed to his ability to move among the branches of Friends and be embraced by all. Plus, to American ears, John's British accent lent a sense of heightened credibility to anything he said!

On campus, for a few years, John served simultaneously as presiding clerk and recording clerk of the ESR faculty meeting! He explained to me soon after my arrival that there were several committees for which he simply was not well-suited, but these were tasks that fitted his skill set and he was happy to serve as long as the faculty wished. Some will probably contend that serving both clerking roles simultaneously is an unwise practice, and they could be correct; many have expressed certainty they would not be capable of tending to both responsibilities if called upon to do so. John managed the task with grace and efficiency. He would listen attentively as discussion meandered through the issues. When it was clear all beneficial discussion had run its course he would offer a bold interjection: 'All right, Friends ...'—or, when slightly frustrated, perhaps something like 'Now look ...'. One day John floored us all when after a rather lengthy discussion he asked, 'Would you like to hear the proposed minute I wrote before this discussion began?' One might rightly wonder, 'Who writes a minute in advance of the deliberation?' The minute accurately captured the sense of the discussion! In no way would I propose that as a model for clerks to follow, but the episode embodies how in synch John could be with the issues at hand, the personality of the group and the working of the Spirit in the midst of the

process. That was an incredible gift from which the Earlham School of Religion repeatedly benefited through the years.

One of the greatest surprises during John's tenure at ESR was how smitten he was with pastoral Friends. My sense is that this attraction was less about sermons and singing and more about the opportunity to express his Christological convictions among kindred spirits. He was deeply committed to the God he knew and fervent about contributing to a vibrant manifestation of Friends. He understood that a Christian expression of Quakerism was distinctive in certain ways from other variations of Christianity. A clarification I found useful was his insistence on a distinction between Quaker evangelicalism and evangelical Quakerism. The former yielded a largely generic, evangelical Christianity, whereas the latter had deep roots in the Quaker experience of the Christ. It was a distinction that allowed Quakerism to remain as a covenant people with a connection to Jesus and the Gospels without its distinctiveness being bleached by holiness theology. A passion for that perspective was a driving motivation behind his book *Reasons for Hope*. Dedicated 'To the Indiana Yearly Meeting, who gave me a home', the book identifies the challenges that individualism introduces to a faith designed to be practised in covenant with a community. As he contemplated the future of Friends, John encouraged a continued commitment to Quaker testimonies, the use of silence within programmed worship and holding to the spiritual reality of the sacraments, all within an evangelical understanding of the Gospel. The work is a fine representation of John's analysis of Friends roots, a source of vitality and a route to a vital future as he worshipped and served among North American Midwestern Friends.

As John prepared to retire in 2001, I joked with him that our retirement gift to him would be to allow him to lead the ESR faculty on a tour of historic Quaker England. John embraced the idea immediately. During his time at ESR he had already led alumni/ae groups on this 'Fox trot', as he called it, so this would be easy in terms of preparation. My hope was to accomplish three things: first, to celebrate our friendship with John on his home turf after his devotion of a decade to the school's mission; secondly, to deepen the faculty and staff's understanding of Quakerism's historical roots beyond what is possible from merely reading about it; and, thirdly, to use the opportunity of extended days off campus and out of context to develop group members' relationships with one another. For this to succeed, the guide would need to excel at his task. John proved to be as entertaining in the role of tour guide as he was knowledgeable of Quaker history. Each morning our bus departed with John sitting in the guide's seat sharing news from the daily paper as though he were our personal commentator. Most days included updates on American baseball scores. Some days it wandered into politics and the headlines of the day. It was always interspersed with John's wry wit and commentary that we had come to love. At each stop on the itinerary, John's passion and knowledge helped history to come alive. Whether sitting in Jordan Meeting House, climbing Pendle Hill or finally stepping on the grounds of

hallowed Swarthmoor Hall, moments of lecture, worship and exploration ushered us into a deeper appreciation of places about which we had only read. Such visits as those to the Dissenters Burial Ground and Lancaster Castle reminded us of the suffering and sacrifice that helped the way to open so that Quakerism could survive. The itinerary strengthened our capacity to represent this tradition that preceded us and yet envelopes us, a task whose importance was elevated due to John's departure from the faculty.

After a full day on the Quaker trail, John would hold forth on life in general or any other topic introduced over a pint of his favourite ale. These long and leisurely conversations were the perfect ending to each fabulous day.

It is the type of perfect ending I have often wished I could experience with John one more time. It is said of some people that they light up a room when they enter it. I think I noticed the room dim a bit when he retired. One of the things I appreciated most about John was his ability to provide correction and clarity in the course of normal conversation. He was often able to cut to the heart, without arrogance or offence. An example of this is this excerpt from *Encounter with Silence*, which counters Friends' occasional idolatry with silence itself: 'Silence is simply a preparation for being still We are able to discern the Spirit because of the stillness of our hearts, not because our bodies are motionless' (p. 11). I have been in far more silent meetings than I have still ones, and the difference is palpable.

Some of the feedback John offered arose from his observation of the activity around him. One day, after a particularly challenging committee meeting at the yearly meeting level, John affirmed my clerking skills and said, 'I have watched you. Whenever you are preparing to articulate the sense of the meeting, you push back from the table as you prepare to speak. You are unafraid to discern the sense of the meeting even in difficult discussions. That is what good clerks must do.' I had never noticed that practice, but it was true—as though physically I was ending the discussion and creating a bit of space in order to offer a minute reflecting the sense of the meeting.

Perhaps one of the kindest things anyone has ever said to me was his statement during his exit interview at ESR. He said, 'I want to thank you for your leadership here. You have a way of inspiring us all to undertake and achieve things we had never imagined we were capable of doing.' I have hoped that was true ever since that day. Comments such as these, whether in print or via conversation, provide a glimpse of the candid and kind manner in which John shared insight and offered ministry.

John and I had plans to bring him back to ESR on occasion to teach during our two-week intensives. We succeeded in doing that only once. When I raised the question of compensation, his response was that if I could secure him tickets to a couple of Reds games while he was in town, that would be payment enough. John Punshon—Friend, scholar, and Reds fan to the end!

Badinage

Paul Buckley, Cincinnati, Ohio, USA

John Punshon loved high blue Indiana summer skies and, even though mine are Ohio, I can't help but think of him when I see one. It was one of the things about the United States that captivated him. He said he could feel the difference between the States and Britain as soon as he stepped off the plane and if he hadn't had family drawing him back, he would have stayed on after he retired.

He loved the Cincinnati Reds—win or lose, good or bad (and they frequently lost badly). Even after he returned to England, he kept up with them over the internet.

On the first day of class each semester, he had the students introduce themselves and tell the group why they had chosen to be there. I think his all-time favourite answer was 'For the badinage.'

When there was a visitor to one of his classes, he would ask everyone to state their name and, in a few words, quickly answer one question. The questions were seemingly random, but sometimes quite revealing. Once he asked for our favourite toothpaste and took delight in 'Whatever is on sale.'

He had us well trained. On another occasion we were to name one thing we would want to have if stranded on a desert island. A latecomer was confronted with the query as he walked through the door. Without missing a step, he replied, 'Daiquiri mix' and slid into a chair. Even if we were running late, John closed class with 'A quick pray.' Often, he would ask us to 'Remember the God of our fathers in the days of our youth.'

His Quaker faith was central to his life and Indiana Yearly Meeting felt like home. He missed the silent meetings he had known in England, but found that a choir and a prepared message could enhance his period of worship. Occasionally he would ruefully note things could become too 'Happy-clappy' for his taste, and was heard to wish that meeting for worship could conclude without 'Curses and Blessings' (Joys and Concerns to the uninitiated).

I was introduced to John even before my first class at the Earlham School of Religion. He was working on *Reasons for Hope* and needed someone to talk it through with him. That was my first assignment as a Cooper Scholar. I had done quite a bit of academic and professional writing in my previous employment and was a published children's book author, so I thought I knew something about writing. What I quickly discovered was how very little I knew about Quakerism. It became obvious to me as I struggled through my first reading assignment from the manuscript and was assuredly apparent to him when we met to discuss it. It would have been entirely reasonable for John to ask for a more suitable reader, but he kept me. I may have learned more in my one-on-one sessions that Fall than in

my other two and a half years at ESR. More than anything else, I learned what it meant to be intellectually engaged, challenged and respected.

It's easy in a seminary to become academic—to know facts and theories, hypotheses and data. John knew all these, but he taught from his direct experience. He was one of God's well-grounded creatures, living in a love of God and joy for the rest of creation. His was a steady flame. Those of us who knew him have truly been blessed.

John Punshon as Transatlantic Friend

Remembering John Punshon

Douglas Gwyn, Pendle Hill, Wallingford, Pennsylvania, USA

John Punshon was Quaker Studies Tutor at Woodbrooke when I met him in 1981, during a conference there of New Foundation Fellowship and Open Letter Movement Friends. I was living in New York at that time, writing my dissertation on George Fox's apocalyptic theology. Lewis and Sarah Benson had helped me to travel to England and speak at the conference. John spoke about early Friends in contrast to Ranters, with insights I found useful. He encouraged me in my work and we became friends from that time onward. When my doctoral work on Fox came out in my first book, *Apocalypse of the Word* (1986), John kindly wrote a blurb for the back cover. I am sure his endorsement helped warm Friends on both sides of the Atlantic to a strange new interpretation of early Quaker witness.

Perhaps owing to his previous work in law and politics, John was a captivating lecturer. I always appreciated listening to his mind work. And, given his love for evangelical Quakerism, his popularity among pastoral Friends in America was something like that of the British Friend Joseph John Gurney, visiting America in the 1830s. John's years of teaching at Earlham School of Religion were the crowning work of his Quaker vocation and a blessing to many. He was also a popular speaker and teacher at Pendle Hill in the 1980s. It seemed that liberal Friends—at least in America—lapped up John's criticisms of their foibles.

John visited me in California during the mid-1980s, while I was pastoring with the Berkeley Friends Church. He was the featured speaker for one of our Quaker Heritage Days, attended by Friends of all varieties around the Bay Area. (I can't recall whether I managed to get John to an Oakland Athletics game. He loved baseball.) John visited me there again in the early 1990s, when I was finishing my work on *The Covenant Crucified* (1995). He had generously read the completed

manuscript and we discussed it over dinner at an Indian restaurant. John liked the book overall, but suggested that I drop the chapter on the Nayler crisis of 1656. He felt I was too generous toward Nayler. I was shocked and responded that the chapter was the centrepiece of the book. At one point, John stopped, looked me in the eye, and said, 'Doug, James Nayler was a loony!'

John was one of the speakers at the Western Gathering of Friends in Portland, Oregon, in 1992, where I also participated. Notwithstanding vigorous outreach by the organisers, liberal unprogrammed Friends outnumbered pastoral Friends at the conference by a margin of three to one. In the final session, John helpfully observed how the framing of the conference did not attract evangelical Friends. He suggested an outward focus on mission and service, rather than our inward-looking one on mutual understanding among Friends.

I became one of John's successors as Quaker Studies Tutor at Woodbrooke (2000–2003) and twice recruited him to teach weekend courses. When he sent me his course description, he sternly ordered me not to let Woodbrooke tweak the language into something more palatable.

John and Veronica became members of the First Friends Meeting in Richmond while he was teaching at ESR. When he retired and they returned to England they kept their membership with First Friends. They loved the Meeting. While I was pastoring at First Friends Meeting (2003–2010) John and Veronica visited. It was a warm-hearted reunion and, of course, we all cherished the opportunity to hear John bring the message in worship.

John Punshon was a lovely man, an insightful scholar, an engaging teacher and a humble learner in the school of Christ. He was a blessing in my life and in the lives of many others on both sides of the Atlantic. He sustained a faithful and energetic witness in spite of physical difficulties he rarely acknowledged. His ability to speak plainly about trends he found unhealthy in the Society was always balanced by a warm, unconditional regard for all persons. 'Well done, good and faithful servant ... enter into the joy of thy Lord' (Matthew 25:23).