

# The Meditation of John ap John

The first Welsh Quaker

Edited by Martin Williams

## The Meditation of John ap John, the first Welsh Quaker

It is generally reckoned that the first Welshman to become a Quaker was John ap John, of Rhuabon, near Wrexham. In his forties, he wrote, briefly but movingly, of "how the Lord hath been dealing with me", in a rare early piece of Welsh Quaker writing that deserves a wider audience. Known as "the meditation of John ap John", this short piece is reproduced here, in its original charming if idiosyncratic spelling, and rendered into modern English spelling, together with some biographical notes.

Little more than notes survive, in fact. His date of birth is uncertain, his death testimony is lost, and the account of his life's work, planned by contemporary Quakers at his death either never materialised or is lost. No portrait exists, and very little writing (though his signature is extant). His charismatic influence, however, was enormous. Biographical data has been painstakingly collated by Quaker scholars, notably William Norris, from a variety of sources, principally the Journals of George Fox, Quakerism's founder.

He was probably born between 1625 and 1630 in Rhuabon near Wrexham in north Wales. He was certainly a native Welsh speaker, a fact that Fox used to his advantage in his travels in Wales. His childhood saw strong Puritan influences and he had been a minister, possibly with the New Model Army, in Anglesey. He was also influenced by the Independent preacher Morgan Llwyd, whose radical views made Llwyd interested in and sympathetic to Quakerism. So much so, that in 1653, he dispatched John ap John and another to investigate. As Fox puts it:

*"But when those Triers came down amongst us, the power of the Lord overcame them, and they were both convinced of the Truth. So they stayed some time with us and then returned to Wales, where afterwards one... whose name was John ap John, abode in the truth and received a part in the ministry, in which he continued faithful." (Fox, Journal)*

Certainly, ap John was with Fox in his first venture into Mid Wales in 1657, ministering in Welsh to those significant numbers who did not speak English at the large and lengthy meeting in Radnorshire. Time and again, Fox's Journal records the difficulties they experienced, and John ap John was constantly in trouble with the authorities. Indeed, he has the dubious honour of being the first Welshman to be recorded in Besse's Book of Sufferings, which records the persecution of the early Quakers. In Swansea in 1655, his "crime" had been to challenge a preacher in Church, after his sermon, as to "whether he was a minister of Christ". This earned him 20 weeks in prison but not the whipping "that the Devil might come out of him" that the priest demanded. He was imprisoned on numerous other occasions.

He was not alone in his sufferings, of course. Many Welsh Quakers were persecuted and this led, from 1681 onwards, to large scale emigrations to the Welsh Tract, William Penn's "Holy Experiment", in what was to become Pennsylvania. Curiously, John ap John (and other notable early Welsh Quakers such as Richard Davies) bought

substantial amounts of land under this scheme, but never emigrated or even visited. The reasons for this remain obscure.

And so it went on: a constant round of travelling, ministering and persecution. In John's own words:

*"J denied ye paement of tithys, & becos of ye same Denial, i cam to siffer ye loss of corn, hay, lams, peegs, yievs, kids & much thretrnings with pikyls and other waes." ("I denied the payment of tithes, and because of the same denial, I came to suffer the loss of corn, hay, lambs, pigs, yewes, kids and much threatening with pitchforks and other ways.")*

No wonder, then, that there is so much power in his reflections, twenty years later, when he was in his forties.

In 1694 his wife Catherine died, and John himself died three years later, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of the Ninth Month, 1697. Curiously, there is no obituary notice in the Meetings records, held in the Staffordshire Register. Norris considers that this can only be the result of a specific request against it. In 1712 London Yearly Meeting, somewhat belatedly, requested local Friends "to collect together such Memorials, Books, and manuscripts as they can find, relating to ye service of our Antient and Faithful Friend, John ap John". Local minutes acknowledge this request but no trace of such a collection, if it was ever established, remains.

Martin Williams  
30/5/00

## **Bibliography**

The most thorough single source for John ap John is undoubtedly Norris. Additional sources are given for reference.

Norris, William	"John ap John and early records of Friends in Wales". Friends Historical Society, Supplement 6. London 1907.
Besse Davies, Richard Fox, George: Griffith, E Rees, Mardy	The Sufferings of the People called Quakers. Autobiography of Richard Davies. 1794 Journal. John Nickalls edition, London, 1975 The Friends in Wales. 1895 The Quakers in Wales. Carmarthen 1925

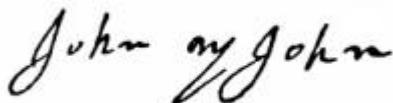
## The Meditation of John ap John of Rhuabon

The 21 day of the 5 month, 1673. This tim 20 years Agooe was ye tim that J John Ap John was At Swart Moore with Gorge ffoox, in Lankashire.

Yt was ye ffvrst tim yt J soa Go ffox. Now in this 20 years i have Reseved mvche & don bvt lityl; & it was thee, O Lord, yt was my hvphwldar all this 20 years. J never Lost ye ffeeling of thy power since then in swartmore J reseved it & ffelt it; & i blive i nevr shall lose it if i waet for it & fear thee, & if thy ffeare be bebiffor my Ei. This ffeare will keepe me ffrom ofending agenst thee, ye god of my liff.

Ye 9 of ye 6 Month, 1673, were thes things seriosly Considered and pondred vpon, how ye lord hath byn Deling with me & many more this 20 years, & upwards.

my Evning  
meditiations  
affor Soonn seting



The 21<sup>st</sup> day of the 5 month, 1673. This time 20 years ago was the time that I, John Ap John, was at Swarthmore with George Fox, in Lancashire.

It was the first time that I saw George Fox. Now in this 20 years I have received much and done but little; and it was thee, O Lord, that was my upholder all these 20 years. I never lost the feeling of thy power since then in Swarthmore when I received it and felt it; and I believe I never shall lose it if I wait for it and fear thee, and if thy fear be before my eye. This fear will keep me from offending against thee, the God of my life.

The 9<sup>th</sup> of the 6<sup>th</sup> Month, 1673, were these things seriously considered and pondered upon, how the Lord hath been dealing with me and many more these 20 years, & upwards.

my evening meditations,  
before the setting sun

John ap John