

The Person behind the Legend

"A Citizen of the World" by Vera Massey, Quaker Home Service, London 1993, 32 pages, illustrated, £2.20, ISBN 0-85245-245-4

With her small booklet that is now available in reprint, Vera Massey does not attempt yet another biography of William Penn, this most colourful of all early Friends; rather than reiterating often-told history, she gives us a glimpse at Penn's personality – from the rich diversity of his talents and experiences to his constant struggle to live with seemingly irreconcilable contradictions. Son of an Admiral, he was a member of the aristocracy, turned Quaker, to eventually become the founder of the American province of Pennsylvania. His insistence on remaining both Quaker and aristocrat made him many enemies on either side, yet he juggled those aspects of his personal identity more or less successfully for most of his lifetime.

The size of the booklet would lend itself perfectly to an introduction about William Penn for those unfamiliar with Quaker history. Unfortunately, Vera Massey takes it for granted that readers are well-acquainted with the beginnings of our Religious Society of Friends as well as with 17th century English history in general. Anyone new to the subject will no doubt get lost in some of the numerous references to various Kings, individual Friends and historic events. Apart from this, "A Citizen of the World" is a skillfully balanced profile of William Penn and an easy and enjoyable read, spiced up with some quotations from Penn that reflect his wry wit and refreshing sense of humour and defy the perception of Quakers as sober, earnest saints.

Klaus Huber