Reflections on

A Measure of Light

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I grew up as a Quaker. My mother had the good sense not to allow me to go to Meeting until I was eight years old; she and my older brother went, while my father and I stayed home and made Sunday dinner. The first Meeting I attended was in Storrs, Connecticut, at the home of E .O. Smith, a quiet gentleman whose eighteenth century house was filled with clocks. The silence was filled with their somnolent ticking and the hour ended with a tumble of tinkles, cuckoos and bongs. There were other odd meeting places, as befitting George Fox's "the fell side is holy as any other ground…" In Indiana, where my father was studying at Purdue University, meeting was held in a bare, dusty room on the second floor of a dismal office building. Back in Connecticut, after E.O. Smith died, meeting moved to a cinder-block house next to a strip mall, with a rotting foundation and pink walls.

Finally, in the 1960s, Storrs Friends Meeting was able to construct its own solid, sunny Meeting House. By then, I was in high school and the Vietnam War was heating up, as was resistance to it. I took the train to New York City with my mother to participate in one of the first Vietnam War protest marches. The following summer, my brother and I attended a Quaker workcamp in Massachusetts ("The Rock") where we were thrown into a wild mix of left-wing cultural activities – lectures, plays, musical events, poetry readings. In 1968, I spent the summer with a Mexican/American Friends Service Committee program that placed young people from around the world to work with Mexicans who had requested assistance. Villareal was a village high in the mountains accessible only by foot and mule. We helped the villagers build a road, gave reading lessons, visited sick people, attended the funerals of three infants; our presence made it difficult for the medical authorities to refuse Villareal's urgent petitions for help.

To my family's relief, my brother, as a birthright Quaker, received conscientious objector (C.O.) status and was not obliged to go to Vietnam.

In 1969, my husband and I (both aged nineteen!) were married in a Quaker ceremony. It was held in my parent's barn, as swallows swooped in the dusky sky and farmers passing on tractors waved and called out greetings.

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It was not entirely the Vietnam War that brought us to Canada in 1970, although the climate of the United States in the late sixties and early seventies was hostile to long-haired students. My husband and I were touched by the warm, welcoming people of New Brunswick, ancestral home of my mother's family. We found the 1870s

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farm where we still live today.

There was no Quaker Meeting close by, and so we were no longer members of a meeting, nor are to this day. However, my parents began to hold meeting at their home and after my father died, my mother continued. Now ninety-one, her house is still a refuge for many who come seeking its peace. *I am a Quaker: in case of emergency, be quiet,* says a little message in her kitchen.

I think of myself as a Quaker. I recognize in myself the impulse to find the inner light in others; to seek consensus; to serve. Meeting other Quakers, I feel kinship.

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My new novel, *A Measure of Light*, began in a Toronto hotel room, reading an article in *The Globe and Mail* about the York Retreat, a farm for mental patients conceived and run by Quakers in eighteenth-century England. Intrigued, I tore out the article and, once back in New Brunswick, sought more information about it. I began to see the shadowy shape of an historical novel taking place in the Yorkshire asylum—until, in the course of my research, I stumbled across the story of a woman who had come from England in the great Puritan migration, and had later become a Quaker. Her name was Mary Dyer.

I sent away for the single published biography about her (*Mary Dyer*[2] by Ruth Talbot Plimpton.) And with that the eerie coincidences began. The book arrived just as we were leaving for a family trip to the United Kingdom. The day after I read about how Mary Dyer became a follower of Anne Hutchinson—who defied the Puritan magistrates and ministers in her famous 1638 trial—I walked into a church in Boston, Lincolnshire, the "Boston Stump." A long plaque along one wall proclaimed this to be the very church that Hutchinson attended, along with other Puritans who left England, seeking religious freedom, in the 1630s. Several days later, we travelled to Wales; and when we arrived in the village where we had booked a holiday home, there, in the town square, was a museum dedicated to the sufferings of the early Quakers.

As I continued studying Mary's life, I discovered (scalp prickling!) that Sylvester Manor in New York state, where Mary sought refuge in 1659–60, is the ancestral home of my best friend. When my husband and I randomly picked Barbados for a vacation, I learned that Mary had spent time there too, her ship blown astray on her return from England.

And I realized that there were similarities between Mary's life, 355 years ago, and mine. Mary and her husband left London seeking freedom in the wilds of the New World; so, too, my husband and I left Connecticut for the safety of Canada. Mary suffered a devastating stillbirth, as did I. I knew Mary's New England countryside—as a child, I had leaned against the bronze legs of the pastor Roger Williams, had played in fields cleared by English settlers. I grew up imbued with Puritan sensibilities: the New England work ethic, a sense of inherent guilt and shame, straight-laced austerity in the very lines of our plaster-walled, creaky 1790s house, the Puritanically unadorned Congregational Church where I sat with my cousins and grandparents. Yet, too, I was brought up as a Quaker.

It seemed I was destined to write about Mary Dyer.

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[2] Ruth Talbot Plimpton, *Mary Dyer: Biography of a Rebel Quaker* (Boston, MA: Brandon Publishing, 1994).

I began by studying Mary's story, which exists in many places — Ruth Talbot Plimpton's biography, as well as many on-line sites. As I read, endless questions came to mind and I realized that I would have to understand seventeenth-century England (with its Civil War) as well as colonial New England; that I would need to understand the genesis of Puritans and Quakers; and that, in order to draw convincing scenes in Yorkshire, London, Massachusetts and Rhode Island, I would have to know not only how people thought, but must render the details of their lives — clothing, food, bedsteads.

I dived into the period and thrashed ahead, starting with a wide overview. While visiting in Connecticut, I ransacked my mother's bookshelves, which are amply supplied with classic Quaker literature — Howard Brinton's *The Religious Philosophy of Quakerism;*[3] *The Quaker Reader* by Jessamyn West;[4] Leonard S. Kenworthy's *Quakerism*;[5] and, of course, *The Journal of George Fox*.[6] At hand, too, were essayists of early New England in *American Literature Survey, Colonial and Federal to 1800*.[7]

Back home in New Brunswick, I turned to ABE and Amazon used books. I ordered *American Jezebel, The Uncommon Life of Anne Hutchinson* by Eve La Plante.[8] Her bibliography led me to further readings on New England, the Puritans, and the great "grace vs. works" controversy, including the invaluable *Journal of John Winthrop 1630-1649* and Edmund Morgan's *The Puritan Dilemma* and *The Puritan Family.*[9]

In the first summer of my work on Mary Dyer, I stumbled upon www.dyerfarm.com, a website about Mary Dyer by Johan Winsser, who has been studying Mary Dyer for many years and is working on a yet-to-be published biography. He sent me a copy of his manuscript—and for the next four years, emails flew back and forth between us as we shared gleanings, source materials, and insights about Mary. This unforeseen collaboration was enormously helpful. His manuscript provided me with a precise and detailed chronology of Mary's life. With great generosity, he sent me ideas for further reading, such as Thomas Dekker's *The Seven Deadly Sins of London* or Dow's *Everyday Life in the Massachusetts Bay Colony;*[10] told me of the early London Puritan teacher, John Everhard, who may have influenced Mary. He also gave me ideas for on-line sources where I could find maps of Boston and London.

I spent many months researching, but finally the time came when I needed to begin writing. The research, then, became specific. Once I made up the character of Sinnie, for example, I needed to know

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[3] Howard H. Brinton, *The Religious Philosophy of Quakerism* (Pendle Hill, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1973).
[4] Jessamyn West, ed. *The Quaker Reader* (New York: The Viking Press, 1962).
[5] Leonard S. Kenworthy, *Quakerism, A Study Guide on the Religious Society of Friends* (Dublin, IN: Prinit Press, 1981).
[6] Rufus Jones, ed., *The Journal of George Fox* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1976).
[7] Milton R. Stern and Seymour L. Gross, eds. *American Literature Survey, Colonial and Federal to 1800* (New York: Viking Press, 1962).
[8] Eve LaPlante, *American Jezebel, the Uncommon Life of Anne Hutchinson* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 2004).
[9] Richard S. Dunn et. al., eds., *The Journal of John Winthrop 1630-1649* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 1958). Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).
[10] Thomas Dekker, *The Seven Deadly Sinnes of London* (1606, rpt. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1922). George Francis Dow, *Everyday Life in the Massachusetts Bay Colony* (Boston: The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, Boston, 1935).

about the Shetland Isles. I contacted the Shetland Museum and a curator steered me to *Shetland Life Under Earle Patrick,* which I obtained through inter-library loan.[11] I invented Mary's childhood "Kettlesing" by researching a particular village in Yorkshire and then giving it an imaginary past. When Dafeny entered the novel, I studied seventeenth-century hill farms. Dafeny and Mary's return to London necessitated research into the fate of the Royalist families. In Katie Whitaker's *A Royal Passion, The Turbulent Marriage of Charles I of England and Henrietta Maria of France,* I discovered that members of the deposed court hid in a stable; this small detail blossomed into many scenes.[12]

At the beginning of the project, I purchased *The Beginnings of Quakerism* by William Braithwaite, as well as the chilling POD (print-on-demand) books *A Call from Death to Light,* by Marmaduke Stephenson (1659); Besse's *Narrative of the Martyrdom, at Boston;* and George Bishop's *New England Judged.*[13] These were my main sources for the Quaker thread, along with George Fox's *Journal*, an on-line collection of Fox's sermons, and Braithwaite's fine book. I used Fox and Braithwaite in tandem, reading a chapter of Braithwaite and then comparing it to Fox's account of the same incident.

Both Mary Dyer and her husband William left remarkable documents. The end-papers of *A Measure of Light* are facsimiles of Mary's actual letter to the court, whose steady handwriting (written in a jail cell on the night before her death) evidence her character. No writings of the better-known Anne Hutchinson exist, only the transcript of her trial; but Mary's actual letter exists in the Massachusetts Archives. There, too, are William's letters to the magistrates, the second of which moved me to tears — "Oh, do not you deprive me of her…." Scratched with goose quills, etched into paper, these words touched my heart and changed William and Mary from historical characters into dignified, furious, grieving people.

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It is the historical novelist's job to render the past as a place where the reader may walk, think, and suffer as if caught within its present.

Sensory experience, then, was a final component of my research.

My husband, Peter, and I travelled to Newport and Aquidneck Island. At the northernmost tip of the island, I stood on the banks of a sedgy marsh, imagining small boats nosing through the dark water, carrying those who had been exiled from Boston. I stood on a Newport street and imagined Mary setting forth alone to seek Long Island. Out at the point, I watched combers rolling in, green and sun-glittered, dashing against the rocks; and stored the memory for the apex of Mary's agony. At Plimoth Plantation, a living history

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[11] Gordon Donaldson, *Shetland Life under Earl Patrick* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1958).

[12] Katie Whitaker, *A Royal Passion, The Turbulent Marriage of King Charles I of England and Henrietta Maria of France* (New York: W. W Norton and Co., 2010).

[13] William C. Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1923). Marmaduke Stephenson, *A call from death to life : being an account of the sufferings of Marmaduke Stephenson, William Robinson and Mary Dyer, in New England, in the year 1659* (Providence: np, 1865, (Nabu Public Domain Reprint). *"Narrative of the Martyrdom, at Boston: of William Robinson, Marmaduke Stevenson (sic), Mary Dyer, and William Leddra, in the Year 1659,"* Taken from Besse's account, 1841, reprint Kessinger Publishing. George Bishop, *New England Judged, by the Spirit of the Lord* (London: T. Sowle, 1703).

museum, I listened to enactors speaking in the period's dialect; stood in dark, low-ceilinged dirt-floored houses; examined clothing and gardens and cooking pots. I gathered, hoarded — the smell of cows; the sound of red-winged blackbirds; the blackened stones of a fireplace.

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Experts, books, websites, libraries, living history museums, my own knowledge and memories; all of these are precursors and adjuncts to the work of creating an historical novel. I collate facts and impressions, toss them into the back of my mind, and wait for the novel to enact itself. Mary steps into a London street. There's the sound of a crowd. What lies beneath her feet? What do her eyes see? I wait — face in hands, and fingers poised over keys. There's a lot more hard work to come, only to be found in my own imagination.