

Here is a real hero for the young — that guy on the top of City Hall

By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

Teaching about exemplary lives has been a fundamental goal of American education for centuries. Schools offer their students heroes and role models in order to combat the ambiguities and temptations of adult life as well as to cultivate a sense of pride in our nation's past.

But increasingly, teachers have been forced to compromise these heroes for a popular culture more interested in the irony, amusement and titillation that may or may not have characterized their private lives.

Imagine how shocked I was when a group of my middle school students recently attacked a personal favorite, William Penn. "What a loser!" exclaimed one insightful young critic. "He flunked out of college, was disowned by his father for joining a cult and then gets tossed into jail for breaking the law. Sounds like a product of the '60s."

What could I say? Penn was expelled from Oxford University for refusing to participate in its required religious services; he was disinherited for a brief period, by a highly ambitious father who had trouble accepting his son's decision to join a despised, Quaker sect; he was imprisoned for publicly defending his nonconformist beliefs; and he was, indeed, a product of the '60s... the 1660s that is!

To be sure, irreverence among the young is inevitable and, in some ways, even desirable. That was just as true for Penn 300 years ago as it is for my discerning middle schoolers today. So please forgive me for not engaging in the futile exercise of defending Penn's infallibility as a champion of civil and religious liberty. The fact is that I admire him largely because he was human and yet he still managed to achieve, in large measure, his remarkable vision of a utopian society. That is why I celebrate Penn during the 350th anniversary of his birth on Oct. 14, 1694.

Penn has alternatively been glorified and criticized for a daring experiment he fashioned out of the ideals of his Quaker faith. The history texts of my school days emphasized the virtuous nature of this enterprise.

Outraged by the violence, religious intolerance and arbitrary authority of his era, Penn emerged as a romantic visionary who established a colony dedicated to participatory government, religious toleration and

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the oppressed of all nations where every man was guaranteed the fundamental right to his own life, liberty and estate. Government would make no effort to dictate matters of individual conscience, rather it would be driven by the force men gave it. "Let men be good," wrote Penn, "and the government cannot be bad; and if it be ill, then good men will cure it."

As a high school student, I learned that Penn's optimistic view of human nature paved the way for participatory government in Pennsylvania and eventually in the American political tradition itself. I also learned that Penn's great faith in mankind inspired him to nurture a spirit of peace and brotherly love among the multiplicity of religious and ethnic peoples who settled in his colony.

The greatest expression of this spirit could be found in Penn's treatment of the Native American Indian. At a time when other European colonists warred with the Indians for possession of the land and material resources, Penn learned their language and followed their customs in his dealings with them.

As a young member of the Society of Friends, I admired Penn's example because he demonstrated the power of nonviolence as an effective engine of social change and mutual respect among peoples. "Let us see what love can do," he reasoned, "for if men once did see we love them we would soon find they would not harm us. Force may subdue, but love gains, and he that forgives first wins the laurel."

Over the last few decades however, Penn, like many of our nation's heroes, has become a victim of a new approach to history which stresses that violence, exploitation and personal greed were endemic to our past. The media's preoccupation with the private lives of our contemporary leaders and

authority.

Today's student generation takes its cues from a revisionist culture that mocks and disdains those figures — past and present — who serve in positions of authority.

They believe that Penn was more of a feudal landlord than a champion of democracy. That he wanted to keep government completely in his own hands as Proprietor and only grudgingly granted a Charter of Liberties to his settlers. That his idea of religious freedom meant Jews and Catholics were tolerated, but not really accepted. Only Protestants could vote or hold public office. And Penn's own sons would break the virtuous treaties he made with the Indians.

But these so-called "realities," like the more idealist textbook accounts of my students days, give us little more than half-truths about the life and legacy of Penn. The Holy Experiment certainly was not without failure — Penn made many mistakes, particularly in the choice of aides.

In the formative years of this endeavor, Penn was often absent and beset by political and financial problems of his own. Despite his idealism and administrative abilities, the government he produced was marred by factional conflict and limited freedoms.

But these failures did not detract from the spirit of the enterprise. After all, to *experiment* is to be willing to try, possibly fail, and try again. It involves willingness to listen carefully to the ideas of others. And it requires an openness to admit mistakes as well as to accept responsibility for them.

Penn was, in many respects, an honest man. We too, should be honest in appraising his character and achievements. Perhaps the best way to do this is to praise him for his genuine virtue in *attempting* an experiment to improve the future of mankind, while also conceding the prejudices he held in common with his own generation.

If in the end, Penn seems so human, so much like ourselves, it's only because he really was. And that is something worth celebrating.

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