

Peaceable Kingdom Lost: The Paxton Boys and the Destruction of William Penn's Holy Experiment

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Author:

Kevin Kenny

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Eoin Magennis

The massacres of Indians in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, by the Paxton Boys in December 1763, have long been a notorious event in that part of the globe. A glance at Kevin Kenny's bibliography provides a sense of the continuous interest in the killings since the 19th century. Part of this, captured in this book, is the involvement, in the aftermath at least, of the state's most famous citizen, Benjamin Franklin. Indeed his fame contrasts sharply with the impossibility of establishing much about even the leaders of the Paxton Boys.

Another reason for the fascination is surely the cold-blooded nature of the killings. This is not a tale of instant retaliation for killings and scalplings by Indians, as part of the war that bedevilled this part of Pennsylvania in the 1750s and 1760s. Instead, the slaughter was relatively well-planned and carried out in two parts. First, was the attack on Conestoga Indiantown in mid-December where up to 60 men killed six Indians in their homes. The other 14 members of this settlement were not at home during the killings and took refuge in Lancaster workhouse, ten or so miles away. A fortnight later, two days after Christmas, around the same size of group rode into town, broke into the workhouse and killed everyone inside. The horror of the event was captured in the account of the deaths of eight children among the fourteen Indians.

There followed a few weeks of terror in Philadelphia as the Paxton Boys were said to be coming to the state capital to kill Moravian Indians sheltered there by the city authorities. Kenny describes these weeks superbly in the almost comical chapter fifteen as the rumours spread, the city militia proved difficult to array and the Paxton Boys reached Germantown in early February 1764. The city's Quakers do not emerge well from this account, captured in the reproduced print (p. 152), 'The Paxton Expedition' (which would have benefitted

from a large reproduction to show the details).

Although the panic passed the story was not over. The Paxton Boys claimed the 500 acres granted to the Conestoga Indians by 'right of conquest' but were driven off by provincial magistrates and their settlement burned. At the same time the legal authorities never managed to bring the Paxton Boys to justice although the identity of their leaders was well-known or, at least, not hidden. The limits of law enforcement were thus demonstrated.

A decade of recurring violence followed, some of it aimed at Indians, and is detailed here. The pattern of this, from the open clashes between 'Black Boys', soldiers and Indian traders in Cumberland County in 1765 to the breaking out of jail of the Indian killer, Frederick Stump, in 1768, was one of open defiance to the authorities. Often the local elites, clergymen and military leaders, colluded with their fellow back-country dwellers. Uniting them was an animus towards the Quaker majority in the Pennsylvania Assembly and, to a lesser degree, the Penn family.

Kenny locates the primary cause of the violence of the 1760s as the collapse of William Penn's 'holy experiment' or 'Peaceable Kingdom'. He is certainly alive to other interpretations such as the 'frontier school' of Frederick Jackson Turner and revisionists of this, such as Patrick Griffin.⁽¹⁾ The role of the frontier and land hunger are described here in detail. So too are the militarisation processes which preceded, drove and survived the French and Indian War, beginning in the 1750s. As Fred Anderson has shown, this war was critical both to the imperial relationship and the question of violence which came to live at the centre of any Indian policy.⁽²⁾ Kenny uses this historiography well, particularly for an historian whose first area of interest was a century later. However, his interpretation of the Paxton Boys differs from others in the direct link made to the Penn utopia and the impact upon this of the new settlers from Germany and Ireland, specifically Ulster.

The Penn experiment was certainly a unique mixture of imperial policy (of a royalist or hierarchical bent) and genuine principles of compassion and tolerance arising from his Quaker beliefs. The latter are taken seriously by Kenny, as they were by the Delaware Indians (whom Penn met in 1682) and their descendants. Given his pacifism Penn was opposed to an armed militia for the new colony and thus his Indian policy was one of pragmatic accommodation. The Delawares had good reason for accepting this, given their being subjects of the Iroquois nation, a control they chafed at. Thus Penn and the Delawares agreed the purchase of lands which formed eastern Pennsylvania, allowing the establishment of clear titles to land. This was not the 'right of conquest' but something close to English property rights.

However, these beginnings, which were themselves caught up in colonial practices – albeit peaceful ones – were soon betrayed. Part of the reason was, as Kenny describes, Penn's need to 'turn a profit' (p. 18). He failed to do so and died in debt, and his widow, heirs and agents were keen not to repeat this outcome. Through the 1720s and 1730s Thomas Penn and the key agent, James Logan, shifted policy. The taking of lands from the Delawares became openly fraudulent in the 'Walking Purchase' of 1737 where the Indians were expelled from their lands. Worse still, this policy was achieved by the Penns drafting in the Iroquois to assert their authority over the Delawares. The scene, described here (pp. 48–9), where the Iroquois leader dragged his Delaware subordinate, Nutimus, from the room by the hair marks a brutal contrast to the scene depicted on the book's cover of William Penn meeting the Delawares in 1682. Not surprisingly, the 'burning grievance' created (p. 49) was probably a key to the war of the 1750s.

There is no doubt that the story of Indian policy is a difficult one for the non-specialist to follow. But it is critical to the story and Kenny does a very good job of depicting the personalities (from Sir William Johnson to Teedyuscung) as well as the negotiations. The differing needs of the various Indian nations, the imperial and the localised ambitions of the Penns and settlers from Connecticut or Maryland are all clearly delineated. It's hard to see any common good in this story – it appears more like a tale of every man (or group of men) for himself.

Into this combustible mix Kenny drops three other factors: the Anglo-French conflict in North America; the

clash between the Quaker party and the Penn interest in the colony; and the arrival of new settlers and their ambitions. All three provide some context for what was to happen in December 1763 in Lancaster County. Braddock's defeat in 1755 meant that the French and their Indian allies were on the edge of Pennsylvania and raiding parties followed. The Quakers and proprietary interests were divided over raising a militia not because of pacifism but over the question of who would pay for the force and to whom it would be responsible. Meanwhile the pacifists among the Quakers, led by Isaac Pemberton, sought to negotiate a peace and came to get a reputation for being 'Indian lovers' or busy-bodies interfering in Indian policy.

In the meantime the Western settlers raged against the Quakers and formed their own Independent militias to protect their own homes and fight alongside the British. These settlers, more realistically, squatters had formed their own settlements with names redolent of west Ulster, such as Donegal, Derry (interestingly the London prefix did not survive the Atlantic) and Swatara (probably a version of Swatragh in County Derry). By the time peace came in 1763 the 'peaceable kingdom' was anything but. It was divided into increasingly armed camps, poisoned by suspicion. In a sense the Conestoga Indians were the victims of this situation with the Paxton Boys being the weapon.

The bitterness exploded into print after the Paxton Boys' killings. Kenny covers the ground well-known to those who have used John Dunbar's edition of the pamphlet war but not to many others.⁽³⁾ The anti-Paxton pamphlets pick up on the contemporary anger at the predominantly Presbyterian Ulster settlers who were involved. Their tendency to adopt Indian practices, in clothing and pasturage, were contrasted with the behaviour of the frugal Germans (p. 32). Even more likely to insult was the comparison drawn between the Paxton Boys and the Irish Catholic rebels of 1641. Franklin's *Narrative* described them as 'Christian White Savages' and others depicted them as intolerant from Scotland to Ireland and on to New England (see chapter 18). One author linked the events in Pennsylvania to the Hearts of Oak protests back in Ulster in the summer of 1763 which he said had attacked the monarchy. (In fact much of the language of the Oakboys echoes the Paxton Boys' *Remonstrance* in the denunciation of 'bad advisers' around the Penns.) They had their supporters, such as the local clergymen Presbyterian John Elder and Anglican Thomas Barton. The first sought to pour the accusations of savagery back on to the Indians; the latter to use the events as a stick to beat the Quaker Assembly with. (This was in line with Barton's ally, William Smith, who was jailed for contempt in the 1750s for accusing the Assembly of betraying the settlers.)

The pamphlet war was probably a 'score draw' but the Paxton Boys legacy came back to haunt the Pennsylvanian authorities. The Connecticut Susquehanna Company offered them land in the Wyoming Valley in 1769. Some became mercenaries fighting the Pennsylvania forces. By the time of the Revolution the Paxton Boys found themselves on the 'Patriot' side fighting the 'Tories' in the Penn interest. And, all the time, Indians in the Wyoming Valley were killed in the skirmishes and, as Kenny puts it, the brutality seen in Lancaster had become commonplace by 1776.

This book is essential reading not only for Americanists but also for those interested in the Irish diaspora. It follows Kenny's earlier book, *Making Sense of the Molly Maguires* ⁽⁴⁾, in taking an archetypal American story and seeing what looking at the ethnic angle can tell us. By doing so, not only was the history of Irish America further explained but so, too, was an important and violent event on the coal-fields of the United States. The same is true of this book on the Paxton Boys a century earlier in Pennsylvania.

Some readers will cavil at Kenny's steadfast refusal to theorise about these events. They are not gendered, ethnicised or linked to ideas about frontiers between civility and barbarity. For that reason, this is a somewhat old-fashioned narrative style of history akin to the best of the recent work by Fred Anderson. This is both a strength and a weakness. The book presents a compelling inevitability about what happened not only in December 1763 but also in the revolutionary period in the western counties of Pennsylvania. At the same time people do change with time. And so it proved with the Paxton Boys. For this reason it would be interesting to know more of why some members of the Boys fought former allies in the Wyoming Valley in the 1770s. Money or the promise of land might be the obvious answer but the episode might also offer a hint of possible roads not taken. Still, this is a minor point and should not take away from what is a superb addition to both Colonial American and Irish-American historiography.

Notes

1. For further detail on this historiography see James Merrell, *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* (New York, 1999) and Patrick Griffin, *American Leviathan: Empire, Nation and Revolutionary Frontier* (New York, 2007). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years War and the fate of empire in British North America* (New York, 2000). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. John Dunbar, *The Paxton Papers* (The Hague, 1957). An excellent article, published since Kenny's book was published, also covers this ground; see Benjamin Bankhurst, 'A looking-glass for Presbyterians: Recasting a prejudice in late colonial Pennsylvania', *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 133 (2009), 317–48. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Kevin Kenny, *Making Sense of the Molly Maguires* (New York and Oxford, 1998). [Back to \(4\)](#)

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