

DAVID WILLSON'S "IMPRESSIONS OF THE MIND" AND "LETTERS TO THE JEWS"

Thomas M. F. Gerry

Love hath no beginning nor ever will have an end. Love is the revealed will of God, and the saviour of nations. Love is the conquering sword of God, the peace-maker of the world, the blessed of God. She bears his own image, and is forever. She ariseth in the east as the light of day. She is the bride of man, and the bridegroom of the soul. She binds together, and none can part those whom she hath joined together. She hath connected limb to limb, and joint to joint, since ever her name was known to the human mind. She is ever in the presence of God. She conceals her mind from those that disbelieve her name, till sorrow shall enable them to embrace her hand with a smile. She is the queen of the Deity; as male and female, she is one with God.¹

READING THESE WORDS of David Willson's, written and published in Upper Canada in 1835, one may be surprised, and perhaps mystified, but certainly one must acknowledge the presence of an intriguingly unique voice from a Canadian pioneer settlement. Willson was a prolific writer of religious prose, poems, and hymns, whose works create a new dimension in our understanding of the early life and literature of Canada. Overshadowed in history by his friends William Lyon Mackenzie and Robert Baldwin, and actively ignored, even scorned, by church and state officers since John Strachan, Egerton Ryerson, and Stephen Grellet, Willson's endeavours, including the lovely Temple of Peace at Sharon, Ontario, and his musical achievements, are beginning to receive their rightful recognition. To focus on two of Willson's books from 1835, the middle of his long career, is a good way to discover several of the important features of his writing and of his contribution to Canadian letters.

David Willson was born on 7 June 1778 in Dutchess County of New York State, near Poughkeepsie, of "poor but pious Presbyterian parents," as Willson describes them.² He worked as a sailor, a farmer, and a carpenter, having received little formal education. In the 1790s he married Phebe Titus, a member of the Society of Friends (Quakers) until 1794, when she was disowned by the local

meeting at Nine Partners, New York, for associating with a non-Quaker. The Willsons, with their two children, emigrated to Upper Canada in 1801, buying land near Newmarket, in the vicinity of the Quaker settlement begun a year earlier by Timothy Rogers. In 1805 David Willson joined the Society of Friends. He was very active on committees and as an office-holder, and most important, he learned from his study of the founders of Quakerism the fundamentals of his thinking about religion. By 1812, however, theological differences between the Quakers and Willson caused an upheaval during which about twenty members of the Yonge Street Meeting were disowned by the Society of Friends. These cast-offs agreed with Willson's views strongly enough to break with their religious affiliation, and became the original Children of Peace. In spite of Willson's attempts throughout his life to reconcile with the Quakers, the split never healed, and the Children of Peace grew into a thriving independent community numbering about four hundred by the 1830's. The buildings of the Children of Peace, their band, choirs and music school, their festivals, and their egalitarian social arrangements that included schools for boys and girls and co-operative marketing and banking, all inspired by David Willson's visions and nurtured by his hymns, sermons and books, were sources of fascination to the people of the time, as one may appreciate by reading contemporary newspapers and travellers' accounts. After Willson's death on 19 January 1866, the Children of Peace gradually declined, both because of the loss of Willson's guiding energies and because of the shifting economic circumstances of the late nineteenth century that stymied villages like Sharon while fostering larger centres like Newmarket and Toronto. Since 1917 the York Pioneer and Historical Society has maintained the surviving buildings of the Children of Peace as a museum that houses the most extensive collection of Willson's manuscripts and publications. Since 1981, the one-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the Temple's opening, the York Pioneers have sponsored highly successful concerts each summer, featuring David Willson's works and other music of nineteenth-century Canada.

The Impressions of the Mind: To Which Are Added Some Remarks on Church and State Discipline, and The Acting Principles of Life (1835) is Willson's outstanding work because it brings together many of the themes, concepts and images that he had developed and would continue to explore. The Children of Peace sold the book to visitors to the Temple, and it was widely circulated, copies even now being held by many libraries in Canada and the United States.

Impressions was published in Toronto by J. H. Lawrence and, as its complete title indicates, it is in three parts. The entries in all three parts are individually dated: *The Impressions of the Mind* begins 9 October 1832, and ends on 29 January 1835; *A Friend to Britain* begins 1 December 1834, and ends 28 January 1835; and *The Acting Principles of Life* begins 20 February 1835, and ends

16 March 1835. Willson's dating of his writings is likely an indication that some pieces may have been used as sermons and hymns; also, the dates demonstrate the principle Willson always maintained: "I never repeat one communication twice over, nor sing one old hymn in worship: bread from heaven is our lot — descending mercies." His gratitude for God's blessings on the Children of Peace in their wilderness home is the source of Willson's association of the ancient Israelites fed on manna by God during their wanderings in the desert after the Egyptian captivity (Exod. 16. 35), with the group in Upper Canada. For order and form in his book Willson relies on the day-to-day revelations themselves, rather than imposing an external systematization. Nevertheless, a pattern does emerge as one reads *Impressions*. In his prophetic way, Willson indicates the form of the book in a description of the mind:

The mind hath as many parts in it as there are in the creation, and the centre of it we wish to find. My small history will end there; there will my pen and thoughts be stayed; . . . there I shall find the Lord if he is ever known of me, there I shall see the saints at rest; there I shall hear the last song that ever shall be sung, and the solemn harp of everlasting praise.

The predominant shape Willson signifies is the circle, of which he intends to find the centre. His method operates to include the multiplicity of creation. Willson's symbolism is entirely in keeping with traditional usage, as the entry on the "Centre" in J. E. Cirlot's *A Dictionary of Symbols* makes clear:

To leave the circumference for the centre is equivalent to moving from the exterior to the interior, from form to contemplation, from multiplicity to unity, from space to spacelessness, from time to timelessness. In all symbols expressive of the mystic Centre, the intention is to reveal to Man the meaning of the primordial 'paradisaal state' and to teach him to identify himself with the supreme principle of the universe.⁸

Not only in *Impressions* did Willson enact the symbolism of the centre, but also in the architecture of the Children of Peace's remarkable Temple: it is surmounted by a golden sphere on which is engraved the word "Peace." Willson's reference to the staying of his pen and thoughts when he reaches the centre means that communication will be direct, unmediated even by words, a state identical to the one reached at the end of the Book of Revelation.

On the same page of *Impressions* from which the foregoing excerpt on the centre is taken, Willson goes on to say: "I would reach the centre of my soul and see every propensity of the mind at rest with God, and this is *with me a world to come*." The implication of this sentence is the key to understanding *Impressions*. Willson invites the reader to identify imaginatively with the central point of view towards which the "impressions of the mind" Willson records centripetally tend. The name for the central point of view is "Peace," in Willson's terms, the name he applied to the utopian community he inspired.

THE IMAGES WILLSON employs to express his sense of the quest he pursues usually suggest a centripetal structure. On 4 December 1834, for example, he writes:

The sanctuary of the Lord is in the midst of all things. The nearer my heart is to God my Saviour, the more I can see of his wondrous works; the more passive is my mind, the more sensible of impression. The nearer I am to the centre of all things, the more subject to command. The more I am simple and ignorant by nature, the more ready I am to obey. The centre of a compass is the stand to see every point of the globe.

From this passage one may discern just how clearly Willson understands the mystical quest for the symbolical centre, and how precisely he chooses his images. Similarly to many mystics, Willson quite consciously adopts the stance of an unlettered original. In addition to their posture of obedience, the details of Willson's works make it clear that he participates integrally in the tradition of Christian mysticism.

Willson learned his ways of thinking about religion, the chief topic of his writing, as well as his characteristic style as a mystic, from the Quakers. In the 1790's and early 1800's, when Willson was learning about Quakerism, the founder of the Society of Friends, George Fox (1624-91) had been dead for little more than a century, and his reputation and writings were still a major inspiration and guide to the Quaker way of life. Fox's *Journal* was widely circulated among Friends at the turn of the nineteenth century, as were the books of Friends contemporary with Fox, such as William Penn's *No Cross No Crown*, a formulation of a political system based on Quaker principles and applied in Pennsylvania, and Robert Barclay's *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity as the Same is Held Forth, and Preached by the People Called in Scorn, Quakers*. Both Penn and Barclay were close friends of Fox and followed his precepts in their works. David Willson was familiar with these primary sources of Quakerism, as his work and Quaker records indicate.

Permeating the writings of George Fox is the zest of the German mystic, Jacob Boehme (1575-1624), whose theosophy is the bridge that connects the Puritan spirit that survived in Europe, the conviction of God's accessibility to the individual, with the genesis of George Fox's attempts in seventeenth-century England to reform the established Protestant, Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches. Much has been written concerning the relation between Boehme and Fox, but since Boehme's formative influence on Quakerism is precisely the strain of Quakerism that would affect David Willson so crucially, a brief summary of the key concepts shared by Boehme and Fox will help to establish Willson's writings in their correct theological context.⁴

Both Boehme and Fox objected to the dogmatic and legalistic elements in the established churches of their times. In harmony with his predecessors, Willson criticized the rigid doctrinal and judgmental aspects of contemporary Quakerism, eventually, in 1812, turning to his own inner light for divine revelation concerning the true Christian life. And, as Fox had turned to Boehme, so Willson turned to Fox for his model. The inner light, according to all three writers, is God's Holy Spirit. From this certainty arises their distinctive apprehension of the world as at once physical and spiritual, a view that animates the three writers' imagery and morality.

In contemplating the living God within himself, Boehme had to take into account the evil in his world, in the forms of war and a corrupt Church. He concluded that in the primary root of existence — in the Deity itself — evil is the deepest element. Boehme named the dark principle the “Unground” (*Ungrund*). Like a great will, the Unground, the necessary chaos, dialectically generates light and love. The Unground is the original nothingness that calls forth something. It is the antithesis of all life, the darkness in which fire appears. Redemption from evil, then, is one part of the creative process on the divine and material planes simultaneously. Regeneration, in Boehme's understanding, is accomplished through three stages: repentance, prayer, and faith, becoming one with the will of God, or, as George Fox terms this final stage, “walking in the Light.” The Holy Spirit is experientially known and salvation, available to living human beings, is a state like Adam's before the Fall, except that the redeemed state is eternal because of Christ. David Willson learned these and other concepts from his association with Quakerism. Throughout his career the influence of Fox, and from him, Boehme, appears, not only as ideas and mode of expression, but as fundamental tenets informing all of Willson's activities.

“Wisdom's Ways,” the entry for 28 May 1833 in Willson's *Impressions*, presents a cluster of images based on the circle and intended to fuse spiritual and physical realities:

Wisdom's ways are as many paths leading to a fountain of living water, where the weary drink and are at rest. They are as gates to a hidden treasure which when the soul findeth she seeks no more. They are as pillars that never move in a storm. The fountain never dries, neither is the treasure exhausted; she has no end. Few find the gates of wisdom; haste leads us by the port, and except we return we miss the appointed way forever. The things of God or the workmanship of his hands delight the mind at the first appearance, and like as many children gathering flowers, we run after them.

In his *Journal* for 1648, George Fox describes a visionary elevation he experienced, using terms that could plausibly be the seed for Willson's more palpable impression of “Wisdom's Ways”:

And the Lord showed me that such as were faithful to him in the power and light of Christ should come up into that state in which Adam was before he fell in which the admirable works of the creation, and the virtues thereof, may be known, through the openings of that divine Word of wisdom and power by which they were made. Great things did the Lord lead me into, and wonderful depths were opened unto me, beyond what can by words be declared; but as people come into subjection to the spirit of God, and grow up in the image and power of the Almighty, they may receive the Word of wisdom, that opens all things, and come to know the hidden unity in the Eternal Being.⁵

By comparing this famous passage from Fox with Willson's writing, one may also perceive the stylistic influence of the earlier writer. Willson's syntax and grammatical archaisms are deliberate attempts to maintain the Quaker ethos of simplicity and plainness, as well as to partake of the traditional mystics' independence of human knowledge. Willson opens *Impressions* with his revealing "Observations to the Reader:"

The want of literary qualifications will be seen by every observing reader in the following pages. I have not set out to please the learned, nor supplicate the great. My object in the publication of these few broken hints to the world, hath been to improve the small measure given, that, in the end, I may lay down my head in peace with God. I have drawn the following lines from the mind; . . . It will be observed that I am in favour of ancient simplicity and plainness of speech. The want of education and literary skill has made my sentences but few on various subjects, and left the cause naked that I have taken in hand. Perhaps the learned may clothe the same sentiments with a more pleasing language, and the Truth may live.

Willson's disclaimer may be applicable at times to his grammar, but in other aspects of his writings the "want of education" is actually his conscious participation in the conventions of mystical writing.

ALTHOUGH UNTIL RECENTLY the Natural Sciences Library at the University of Western Ontario held a copy of *Impressions*, cerebral anatomy is a topic remote from Willson's concerns in his book. The title, *The Impressions of the Mind*, is a formulation of an expression often employed by Quakers and others contemporary with Willson. In his *Journal*, Timothy Rogers, for instance, uses the phrase, "a hevy impression of mind." Quaker minute books often note that "the minds of Friends were deeply impressed" by some subject. In Willson's sermons and the writings of other Children of Peace the usage is also common. In *Impressions* Willson devotes a good deal of attention to the meaning of "mind." Adopting a technique many thinkers and writers exploit, Willson meditates on the contents of a cliché — "impressions of the mind." Generally, Willson formulates

his insights into impressions of the mind as metaphors, the literary realization of the relation between physical and spiritual dimensions.

Willson explores the relation between God and the human being in the entry for 2 February 1833, "The Life of a Redeemer in the Mind": "God possesses the hearts of those that love him; if he hath redeemed us from vain and transitory enjoyments he possesses the whole mind, and this is altogether the pillars of the man, and the principles of action." The image of pillars relates to a simile later in the same section: "Thou assumest the mind to thyself O God, as thine house or tabernacle here below; . . . thou hast made it for thine own dwelling, this is where thou showest thyself to man, it is all thine." Not content with translating his sense of God's relation to man into literary terms, Willson also built a Temple whose central section is supported by sixteen pillars that are named after the apostles and Faith, Hope, Charity, and Love.

Continuing with Willson's images devoted to spatial aspects of the mind, one finds an unusual conception of the mind's location in "What Is Life?" (19 February 1833). He writes:

The person is but a waymark to the mind, and the mind as a distant city or far country to those who do not seek to find the prize, or travel industriously to come to a sense of the man . . . A man's mind is as a wilderness; he knoweth not what it will produce until it is cultivated and improved . . .

It is the mind that holds a communication with spirits, and commits to the man intelligence from God . . . The mind or spirit of the man never *was* created, but is spirit, and was and is with God always, either in the far distant and measured regions of his judgments, or compassed about by the bounds of his favours in which there is no wrong.

Both in the thorough interpenetration of the physical and the spiritual dimensions and in the powerful sense of the ineffable they convey, Willson's writings are remarkably similar to Jacob Boehme's and George Fox's works.

Another spatial image Willson often uses emphasizes the centripetal tendency, noted earlier as the characteristic mode of *Impressions*:

The mind is a part of God's spirit, given to this human frame, and as the streamlets and rivers never rest short of the bosom of the sea — where the whole family of springs and rivers unite; so the travelling mind cannot rest short of the bosom of God. A man's mind is ever from home till he returns to the father or fountain of spirits, and this is the place of his appointed rest.

Once the person chooses to live in the mind, a transformation occurs. Willson explains the change by using an analogy that is reminiscent of his own immigration to Upper Canada:

If a country affords an encouraging history, we will some times haste to remove there to better our condition of life, why not speak of the fertility of the mind, and induce some wandering souls that are seeking for a residence of rest, to leave

this world and its common course, and inherit the mind, improve it as a new country, and enter into rest, enjoy the fruit of our labour and be at peace; for this is where God hath ordained praise, and where he will satisfy the soul in itself, for a man is a kingdom of his own and he needeth not be as an alien in a far country, and a servant of men.

Willson's poetic imagination teems in this passage with layers of meaning. The "wandering souls" are not only the Children of Peace, but the individual mind. The community at Sharon, Upper Canada, is not only a new country, but the world of the mind where the Children of Peace have entered into rest, and are at peace. As with the Sabbath, the day of rest on which to offer praise to God, so Willson intends the entire life of his community to be a creative offering to the Deity. In their music, building, farming and literary activities, the Children of Peace performed what Willson envisions as the true human role in creation: the praise of their God.

On the level where "a man is a kingdom of his own," Willson offers another description that conjoins divine and human elements. In Chapter Two (7 June 1833, Willson's fifty-fifth birthday), he writes:

Eyes and ears are but the organs of the mind, of themselves they can do nothing. It is the mind that employs them to hear and speak, they are as servants sent abroad to bring some intelligence to the mind. The mind is not small, otherwise as a vessel it would become full. But not a little seeing and hearing fills the mind, and now we have an evidence of its almost unbounded extent, it will contain a history of all nations, kingdoms and countries, language and science. It will not contain a deity only by parts, but there is nothing created so extensive as the mind and as it is unknown, uncomprehended, and to us unbounded, we are almost or quite forced to believe it is a *limb of the deity*, and came out from God, and is our intelligencer from heaven above and hell below.

The phrase, "*limb of the deity*," reinforces an association that often intrudes when one is reading Willson: the writings of William Blake, the mystical poet and illustrator contemporary with Willson. One of the many instances where Blake expresses an insight identical to Willson's appears in the notes to his engravings of *The Laocoon*:

The Eternal Body of Man is The
Imagination, that is,

God himself

The Divine Body

} Jesus: we are his Members.

It manifests itself in his Works of Art (In Eternity All is Vision).⁶

Willson's mention of the eyes and ears is also very close to Blake's understanding of the senses expressed in *A Vision of the Last Judgment*:

I assert for My Self that I do not behold the outward Creation & that to me it is hindrance & not Action; it is as the Dirt upon my feet, No part of Me. 'What,' it will be Question'd, 'When the Sun rises, do you not see a round disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea?' O no, no, I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.' I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning a Sight. I look thro' it & not with it.

Perhaps it is the effect of their contacts with Jacob Boehme, in Willson's case through the writings of George Fox, that accounts for the deep affinities between Blake and Willson.

TURNING AWAY FROM the life of the senses to the eternal life of the mind has consequences, in Willson's view, that ultimately vindicate this orientation and enrich the spirit, although public indifference and isolation from society may be the price, as it was for both Blake and Willson. Willson asserts in *Impressions*:

As I serve not the princes and nobles of my age, they frown upon my appearance, — as I pay no tribute to the priest, he stands a distance from my necessities, — as I find fault with governments and counsellors, I share none of the public gold, — and as I cannot walk in consort with my brethren, I am chastised by them for error: and hasten my steps to meet the grave. Every time I fall, I am the stronger. Every turn adds experience to the mind. Every frown increases my faith; for by these heart-known lessons I am taught more and more to distrust the world.

The drop of water tasteth sweet,
 We in the thirsty desert find,
 And every fall directs our feet,
 And every crumb assists the mind.

To Willson, the sensory world's whole purpose, in fact, is to cause suffering in order to effect a radical change of mind. On 1 November 1834, he writes:

All things that are are right, and not any thing hath been removed from its place since the worlds began. Providence is every where and overseeth all things . . . We generate evil, because our minds are so to do; and if we did not, we would not know ourselves to be the weaker or lesser part of experience; but sin bringeth in or introduces the superiority of a judge to abase a sinning mind. The Lord loveth sinners as the husband the field, from which he receiveth wealth, honour and glory from the workmanship of his hand; so doth the Deity from the heart of a sinner. The forgiving of sins by the Deity, extolls and promotes the noblest praise of God.

In "The Dispensations of God to the World" (17 December 1834), Willson elaborates on this statement of the significance of evil, relating evil to baptism:

through past experience I am confident — and that without doubting, that if I suffer tribulation without sin, the hand of God doeth it, and it is only to reveal

to my soul the greater measures of his will — enlarge the mind by baptism, and bring that to light tomorrow, which is today unrevealed — as wisdom under deep waters, he only changes our diet to delight our taste, increase our love, and multiply our praise. How can the miser increase his joy? No way but by doing one thing over; but the children of God ever hath new bread from heaven.

Willson's conception of the mind as a "*limb of the deity*" inspires his views on important matters besides the proper spheres of concentration in life and the role of evil. Creation itself, signifying both the world and the activity — meanings which Willson conflates — is another fascinating example. Through interpreting the Biblical account of God's work, he reveals his own insights about creation. In "The World's Evidence for a Deity" (2 November 1834), he writes:

The creation proves his spiritual existence. It was by the creation and sublime evidences that Moses came to the knowledge of God; he was no man's servant in his handwriting, but his history in many passages is evidently the productions of the mind. That Moses ever saw the worlds created by the light of the sun I believe not, but that he saw the world and the things thereof come to light in himself, and he wrote of them as they arose . . . Where did Moses contain his skill of revelation before his handwriting? In the mind without doubting. Then all he knew was contained in the mind.

Willson's sense of the metaphorical nature of scripture, and of sensory life itself, includes an element of the necessity of the particular spiritual/physical relationship he describes. He makes the necessity explicit in a compelling image:

All the springs and streams worship the sea, because they are the greater fountain of living waters. So all our mind and abilities worship the mind of a Deity, the element of our creation. Who can keep the living stream from the sea? neither king nor councils. Who can keep my soul from God? None.

The key word that unifies Willson's image is "worship," used both in connection with the streams and the mind. Praise is the human being's way to find God, the most vital activity of human life. Praise is the direction for all human creativity, appropriate to the sabbath or day of rest. Willson's insistence on the necessity for worship, then, is premised on his belief in the present perfectibility of human beings. As with Boehme and the early Quakers, his emphasis on human perfectibility led him to believe less in the dogma derived from scripture than in the truth of ongoing revelation. Willson says:

The Lord continues to reveal . . . He that seeth the creation rising in his mind according to its religious and temporal usefulness, saw as Moses saw, he owns the operations of God's Spirit on his mind, and one thing after another is brought to light in him.

Willson's frequent references to the Old Testament give rise to the question of his view of Christ. He states in "The Son of God is Sent to the Lost Sheep of the House of Israel" (6 December 1834):

It is requisite to know Moses before Christ. Christ hath said, if ye had known Moses ye would have known me: but the wise and prudent of his day did not know either of them . . .

The shadow pursued to its origin, leadeth us to the substance; so the person of the Son invites us to come to God, the original of all good, and the father of that which by Moses came into the world. Those that know not Moses, know not God, for Moses was of God, a true servant sent into the world to redeem Israel from bonds . . . A living mind cannot be reconciled to a dead and speculative system . . . The Lord loveth the man that cannot help himself; his heart is an open door for the reception of the Lord; he will take the stranger in — he will give him drink when he is thirsty, food when he is hungry — he will clothe the naked and feed the fatherless — he will visit the sick, and those in prison, for the soul of Christ is there suffering for our sins, that is not to say he is not reconciled with God in heaven; for the father was well pleased with him when he was groaning for our sins. Till we relieve the afflicted, the Son of God will not be at rest with us.

In summary, Willson holds that because the world generally still fails to live according to Christ's commandments, the Christian age has not yet fully dawned.

This fact, much lamented by Willson in his writings, forces him to adopt as a corollary that the Children of Peace in Upper Canada were experiencing what the Children of Israel experienced according to the Bible. In this identification is the source of his profound interest in and sympathy for the Jews. In *A Friend to Britain*, bound with *Impressions*, he addresses the British people in the context of his eternal vision. Knowing the basis of his understanding, the reader may sympathize; most British recipients of Willson's admonitions would probably have taken them differently. He opens his remarks with an analysis of British Christianity's history:

The children of Israel have almost fulfilled a dear atonement for the blood of the prophets, and the Messiah; but you are living in pomp and splendour, while the blood of martyrs is crying at your gates. I am a kind of an original character, and look back to the Ancient of days for light. Why should I prefer you before the Jews? The hands of the Christians are stained with blood; not only war but the murder of their brethren, who gave up their lives for conscience sake. If Israel had to answer dearly for this crime, (the Deity is not changeable in his mind,) you must answer for yours. Your spiritual courts issued these mandates: first killed your brethren and then went and preached the gospel to the poor, and took their bread and garments for revealing the will of God unto them.

In spite of the apparent finality of this condemnation, in his next address Willson modulates to a friendlier tone:

Britain is my hope, for there I shall see the salvation of God. I love the king as my father, for he will receive grace, and be at peace with his people. Britain is the star of nations; the sun will rise and shine upon her as morning rays on the western hills. Britain will become as a saviour to the world; as the mother of nations, she

will receive of God, and crown her offspring with peace. She has conquered her deepest foes, the clergy.

The catalyst on earth for the fulfilment of Willson's millennial hopes for Britain is Israel. He writes:

Hear a word from a friend, ye inhabitants of the isles. What God hath ordained and appointed will come to pass. He hath appointed Israel, the Jews, to be his people, and it will be so. God is their Saviour; to this end were they made, and their means is salvation to all the world. The globe hath but one centre, nor Israel, but one Saviour. The personal Son of God hath appeared, but the solemn effect is yet to come; for though we say we have believed, (that are Christians,) we have not practised; such a faith is dead, and renders our situation but little better than the Jews.

Probably it is because of the Reform Bill of 1832 that Willson is so optimistic about Britain's role in establishing true Christian practice on earth. He goes on to say:

Reform has begun in Britain as in Abraham, and will spread through the whole earth . . . Britain is restoring the poor to their right, and pleading for a free circulation of just principles, and the preaching of the Gospel on the principles it began in Israel and in Judah.

Although his prophecies may sound disconnected from reality, Willson clearly intended his words in a practical sense.

IN 1835, THE SAME year that *Impressions* was published, Willson also published *Letters to the Jews*. The twelve epistles in this brief volume of seventy-one pages are dated from 28 June 1835 to 11 July 1835. In communicating directly with the Jews, he was attempting to hasten the restoration of this people, an event that, as indicated in *A Friend to Britain*, in turn would bring about the redemption of Britain and the entire world. In the first letter Willson states his position — not an uncommon one at the time — very clearly:

Joshua was of the dispensation of Moses, and Christ of the Prophets, for he prophesied of that which should be hereafter. He, Jesus, was a true prophet, and the New Testament ought to be received by you, as a book of prophets or prophecies of things that will come to pass, for the words of this prophecy, the New Testament relates unto us, that another dispensation shall come upon the world, and this dispensation is, the salvation of the Jews, the chosen of the Lord.⁷

As he connects Biblical times with the historical present and future, so Willson is careful to show two distinct meanings of Israel. He observes that "The Lord is not a respecter of bloods, but of souls that are within us, and goes on in the third letter to specify precisely his concept of Jewishness:

Now, I believe, *in spirit* I must become the Jew; as to blood, that is impossible . . .

The sooner I am a Jew in spirit it is the better for my soul, because I then become heir with them in the things that God hath given, and speak with them as a brother about the things of God . . . Israel of old will soon be had in remembrance, and the name of Abram come to light, and David be seen in Israel, Jacob's sure defence. Therefore as David could not be overcome, his sword shall never depart from the house of the Lord.

This is one of the many instances in his writings where the coincidence of the Bible's King David and David Willson's names bears a large amount of significance for Willson's self-conception. The similarity of Children of Peace and Children of Israel, noted above in connection with their shared wilderness trials, is another aspect of this same phenomenon. In essence, Willson is attempting to liberate himself from time and perceive the world in an eternal perspective. His technique is congruent with the circle imagery's purposes in *Impressions*. In the eighth letter he presents the following description of himself:

My spirit is from a far and distant hill. *It is older than Israel*, and was before Moses was born into the world; because the Lord God of Jacob and of Israel, giveth me that which hath not been revealed. I neither ask alms nor break bread with the churches that are; I am not depending on the hills nor cities, but a daily supplicant to my God, that hath upheld my spirit in the wilderness. Almost the desert of the world is my abode, and I confer not with flesh and blood about the things of God.

Willson evidently intends these unflattering remarks about Upper Canada to augment the image of himself as a prophet on the order of Moses or King David.

Willson's double vision of the Jews as a favoured race and as a spiritual state — an identification he most fully explores in *Letters to the Jews* — is also an important feature of *Impressions*. His role as "David," the shepherd, giant-killer, king, and psalmist, is part of the larger conflation of the Children of Israel and the Children of Peace and to express the redemptive experiences of the Children of Peace in the Upper Canadian wilderness, he normally uses terms that were originally applied to the Children of Israel in the Bible. The first consequence of this method is to reinforce the sense of circularity and of overlapping in time. In a passage that recounts the historical events during the split from the Society of Friends by the Children of Peace, the interweaving of Old Testament myth is striking:

I am myself one of the wandering kind from society, for the Judges found me unworthy of communion, and like my father out of Paradise — I was put away — the gates were closed against me, fast and strong . . . I soon found a spring of living water, and fresh pastures to my soul. I now enjoy a little field in the wilderness with a few brethren of the lost number like myself: here we have been since the year 1811, building houses to the Lord — introducing ancient praise into the assemblies of his people. Our little field enlarges (as David hath said of the

abounding mercies of his God) — our springs fall not, neither do our pastures pass away, and from my lonesome tent I set out this morning to reveal the Son of God to the world.

In describing most vividly the apocalyptic mission of Christ, Willson again overlaps present and past times to create an eternal perspective, giving rise to an image of struggle:

Christ was and is the means, God the Saviour of us all. The means could not do farther than the Father was with him; he overcame the world in spirit, but the world overcame him in person, and he fled from the house of Jacob and the tents of Israel. He did not only ascend in person, but in spirit also, and revealed himself to but few afterwards . . . Here Satan first began his reign and here it will end. God will tabernacle with man, and there will be God and man again, no serpent or mediator between, it is near at an end, when Satan is where he began . . . Between God and man is Satan's place, and Christ came from heaven to abolish his name from between man and his Maker, that every soul should have knowledge of his builder and maker, who is God, and his word or Christ the means and maker of us all.

This conception of the struggle between opposing forces is very similar to Boehme's theory of the generation of nature as a dialectical product of struggle. In Willson's imagery, Satan, the serpent that brought about the centrifugal flight into time and space, gives way to Christ, the redeemer who draws all into the centre in an eternal, rhythmic process. To Willson, this salvation is not an abstract notion, but a reality that is available to human beings here and now in the eternal present, as both Boehme and George Fox also believed. Willson says: "Till the day cometh that *the universal love of nations and societies* is preached from the pulpit *the love of neighbours as ourselves*, and practised, there will be *peace in no nation under the sun.*" Willson addresses the final section of *Impressions*, "The United Colonies of North America" (29 January 1835), to the Americans. Completing the circle, at the end of his work he returns to contemplate his birthplace. To the Quakers, his spiritual origin, he also returns in the last section of *Impressions*, noting the fulfilment of the prophecy he had made in 1816 in his *Testimony to the Quakers*, that the Society of Friends would "one day *rend apart in a visible manner.*"⁸ He also restates his view that their fundamental error is in assuming the judgement seat over their brethren. Answering a final question about the various political and religious divisions in the world, Willson provides a centripetal image that summarizes the form and meaning of *Impressions* as a whole:

Can one good Lord Jesus Christ be the author of this abounding contention there is on earth about heaven and hell, God and the devil? I think not. He communicates one understanding to all men because he is the Prince of Peace, but a diversity of gifts from one body or spirit; but these accord and at last centre into one, the bosom of Christ Jesus the Saviour and Redeemer of the world.

The third section of *Impressions* is *The Acting Principles of Life*, the entries of which are dated, following the dates of *A Friend to Britain*. *The Acting Principles*, Willson trusts, will “encourage virtue and suppress vice.” Uniquely among his works, *The Acting Principles* contains no poems interspersed among the prose passages, but the prose itself is poetic — cadenced like the Psalms, and, also similarly to the Psalms, Willson’s prose employs parallelism. *The Acting Principles* is a poetic restatement of the concepts underlying *Impressions* and *A Friend to Britain*. Willson arranges his subjects in contrasting pairs. This organization is consistent with his vision of life as a whole: he imagines the world micro- and macro-cosmically, as a rhythmic dilating and centring process. The subject that follows “Love,” the opening chapter of *The Acting Principles* (from which the excerpt at the beginning of this essay is taken), for instance, is “Sorrow.” In his apostrophe to “Life” (6 March 1835), Willson lucidly depicts his impression of the rhythmic process at the heart of existence:

Life, thou art the ways of man, and the child of God. God hath clothed thee with his own dwelling. He hath placed a crown on thy head and thrown it down to earth. In thy name he hath built great cities, and consumed them with fire. He hath caused thee to flee to the mountain and hide in the by places of the rocks, to shun his name. He hath pursued thee with the sword, and caused thee to fall in the battle. He clothed thee with a garment by the morning light, and before the setting sun cast thy covering into the grave. He has made thee mourn with the mother, and rejoice with the princes in one day.

Perhaps the most beautiful of the apostrophes that make up *The Acting Principles* is the one addressed to “Light” (25 March 1835). Writing on this subject, one of the central images of the Quaker religion, Willson attains visionary heights of poetic inspiration. For him, light is the coalescence of the diverse themes he treats throughout *Impressions*. In “Light” he reaches the eternal perspective he seeks:

Light, thou art the covering of the world, the presence of the highest. By thee man was made, and a sun placed within his breast to give light to the inner man. Thou art without and within the soul; by thee the earth is discovered, and heaven, to the mind. By thee the plant arose from the bosom of the earth, and is clothed with many colours. Thou art the name of the Deity with us; the bitter and the sweet grow up before thee, and unnumbered virtues are extracted from the ground . . . Thou art connected with life as the husband with the bride, and life and light are one in all things.

Wisdom is the light of life, and with her she walketh always. Who hath seen wisdom without thee, or life without direction? Hope is implanted in thy breast, and faith is the proceeds of light, and bringeth life into action, and the whole work of God appeareth visible to the eye in thee. Thou art in the eye, and in the sun and skies; and when life departeth from the body light is absent also, and the eye is closed in the dark.

The Boehmist sense of opposition generating existence and emphasis on the role of wisdom (Boehme's "Sophia") are strong in Willson's apostrophe.

The final pair of antithetical themes he treats in *The Acting Principles* are "Mercy and Charity" and "Judgment" (16 March 1835). This opposition synthesizes into the subject that is supremely important to Willson: his relationship with his God. The closing paragraph of "Judgment," in fact of the entire book, epitomizes the relationship in images suggestive of the centripetal tendencies so often felt in his work:

Judgment and mercy are as twins of the Almighty: by the one he doth trouble for our sins, and by the other abate the consuming flame. These are united by his convincing and converting power, by which he will redeem all the inhabitants of the earth into the presence of one God; and the children of this world shall be as the children of one father: and heaven and God, and saints and angels, dwell here on earth with them forever. All shall be convinced and converted in the flesh: the mind is the habitation of spirits, heaven and hell is in it, and here guilt consumes the sinful soul; it is where the dead shall live, and the sinner be converted and redeemed from all woes, and his soul as the living stream seeking the bosom of the sea, flow to his creator God, and live with him forever and enjoy those promised worlds that are to come, which is a conversion of the soul.

Willson's understanding of the Apocalypse carries tremendous strength of conviction and shines throughout his many books, hymns, sermons, and tracts. During his life he inspired a large number of people, the Children of Peace, to live "as the children of one father." Though it led him sometimes to eccentric positions, his faith guided him to communicate a vision of renewal in Upper Canada which in many respects is still valid. After his death in 1866, however, the energy of the Children of Peace rapidly diminished and generally people have ignored Willson's writings. The reason is not simply that his style is archaic and his ideas esoteric, because one may trace ways of understanding his works. I think that the most difficult aspect of his writings is the challenge they present to the reader to wade into "the living stream seeking the bosom of the sea" which Willson himself so wholeheartedly entered.

NOTES

- ¹ David Willson, *The Impressions of the Mind . . .* (Toronto: J. H. Lawrence, 1835), p. 317. Subsequent references to this work from this edition.
- ² David Willson, *A Collection of Items of the Life of David Willson, from the Year 1801-1852 . . .* (Newmarket: G. S. Porter, 1852), p. 14.
- ³ J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. Jack Sage (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962), p. 39.
- ⁴ Among the writers who detect Boehmist influences in Fox are: Rufus M. Jones, *Spiritual Reformers in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (London: Macmillan, 1928), p. 220; Stephen Hobbhouse, *William Law and Eighteenth-Century Quakerism*

(New York: Macmillan, 1928), p. 246; Caroline Spurgeon, "William Law and the Mystics," in *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, eds. A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1912), IX, 307; and William C. Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1912), pp. 38-42.

⁵ George Fox, *The Journal of George Fox* (1694), ed. J. L. Nickalls (London: Religious Society of Friends, 1975), pp. 27-28.

⁶ William Blake, *Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), p. 776.

⁷ David Willson, *Letters to the Jews* (Toronto: W. J. Coates, 1835), p. 7. Subsequent references to this work from this edition.

⁸ David Willson, *Testimony to the People Called Quakers* (N.p.: privately printed for the Children of Peace, 1816), p. 5. The only known copy of this work is in the Quaker Collection of Haverford College where I recently found it uncatalogued on a shelf beside Willson's other books.

FIVE PIECES FROM "SMOKING MIRROR"

Brian Henderson

The Gathering Release

These are the *nemontemi*, the blank days, during which nothing accomplishes itself. No fires burn, all pots are broken. No one speaks. Even politics and war cease. Nothing may ever begin again.

Out of this blankness, I am sailing over a city of corpses, a hand moves, I hear a scream. They are killing everyone. In the square of the Holy City huge animals glinting men ride trample everywhere. People are dismembered, children are dismembered. I see myself barely standing, awash in blood, wings crashing over my head. All time is being unmeasured.

Back on my roof just as everyone is coming up to theirs, the hawk folds its wings, and I suddenly welcome how calm nothing can be. The city is dark and we all are looking in the dawn-direction. The Pleiades begin to shoot over the lake. Piercing wrists, wincing, I fling blood into the night, black, silver, red. On the mountain the flame leaps and everyone in the city is cheering. It is a river coursing down the mountain, heading toward each of our hearths. Almost unpredictably the world, for another moment, has begun again.