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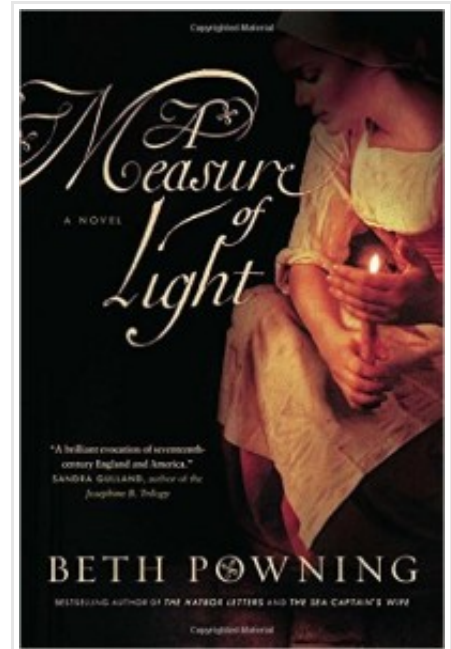
## A Measure of Light: A Novel

Reviewed by Beth Taylor November 1, 2015

***By Beth Powning. Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2015. 324 pages. \$29.95/hardcover; \$16.95/paperback (available March 2016); \$14.99/eBook.***

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Most readers know Mary Dyer as a martyr for religious freedom, specifically Quaker faith. But few of us know her story. Novelist Beth Powning spent years researching Mary Dyer's life, following in her footsteps, unearthing any documents or mentions in colonial records. In *A Measure of Light* Powning has eloquently imagined a haunting story of a woman torn by domestic and cultural upheavals.



Some things we know in fact: after losing a first child soon after birth, Mary fled England with her husband, William, to find a truer practice of Puritan belief in Boston, Mass. She and William followed Anne Hutchinson in supporting Reverend Cotton in the 1630s as he encouraged individualized faith, or antinomianism, among Puritans. Mary had other children, but around this time lost another child, a stillborn, which, because it was deformed, spurred superstitious

rumors of Mary's moral corruption. The antinomians were cast out of Boston, and led by Ann Hutchinson, they followed Roger Williams to Rhode Island. In Newport, Mary and William established a farm, businesses, and a Quaker meeting.

We know Mary left for England for five years, leaving her children behind, and while there she discovered the ministry of George Fox and Quakerism. When she returned to Rhode Island, she headed to Boston to aid Quakers who were imprisoned under the new law banishing them from the Commonwealth. She was sent away, but she would not leave, so she was imprisoned. She was sent back to Rhode Island, but returned again, and was again imprisoned. She was sentenced to death but reprieved at the gallows. She was sent home again, and then, after a final return, she was hanged on Boston Neck.

Most of us know the outline, but few of us know the woman, in part because the only documents left to us are letters to jailors and documents of her brother's death. We must imagine the psychology of the woman who would leave her husband and children, who would consciously disobey the law to follow the leading of her private understanding of God's voice, ending in her death. How did it feel to be her? What stages of understanding led to her changes in faith and to the gallows? How did she think of her children, of her husband, and of her own life?

Powning wondered these same questions, and she imagines a rich and haunting inner life for Mary Dyer; it grows from grief and shame and fury into a mission. Mary's story becomes a perfect storm of psychology and a particular moment in time for women and for Quakers. Powning renders each scene from deep inside the mind and heart of Mary, watching, listening, unbelieving, deciding, taking action.

We sail with Mary, give birth with her, fear for herself and William as Puritans judge them, are agonized by the stillbirth, a monster they say. Inside Mary's mind, we are isolated by disorienting rumors; we move to a rough hut in the wilderness by the coast and slide into depression, watching children cared for so well by Sinnie, the household helper and nanny, until the depression grows too dark. When news comes from England that family members are dead or ill, we flee with Mary and return to her childhood home, finding comfort and new friendships. Still she is withdrawn, cannot go home to her children, even though William writes and asks her to return, forbears, wants the best for her. She is still numb.

Until she meets George Fox, and she is changed. In his words—"The manifestation of the Spirit

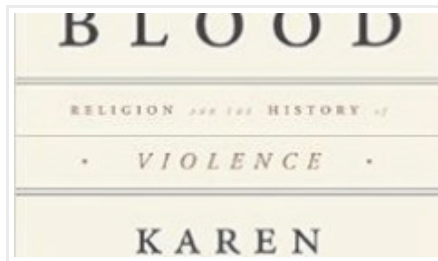
of God is given to every one of us to profit withal”—she finds affirmation of who she is and why and what she must do. And that is what propels her home, to aid imprisoned Quakers in Boston. She does return to her children, but she hardly knows them and they have grown independent, as they must. William can see she is no longer his, and he watches with resignation as she returns to Boston under threat of death. He asks their son to write to the jailors on her behalf—a child’s plea more significant than a spouse’s, saving her from the gallows the first time. She comes home one more time to rest, but she lives inside herself now, detached from family, connected only to God, his Word, and her fellow Quakers. She must test the jailors. They do not want to be tested, but they must follow the law. And they do.

Mary Dyer is hanged on June 1, 1660, one of the four Quakers martyred in 1660–1661. Soon, Charles II will receive reports of these Quaker deaths and decree religious tolerance. By 1677 Quakers will be free to hold meetings in Massachusetts. Thus, Mary Dyer comes into our history, our lore, and our spirit-leading. This lovely novel offers her elegant voice.

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Beth Taylor is a member of Westerly (R.I.) Meeting and author of *The Plain Language of Love and Loss: A Quaker Memoir*. She is co-director of Brown University’s Nonfiction Writing Program.

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