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ALLEN JAY: A HOLINESS QUAKER EXTRAORDINAIRE

CAROLE DALE SPENCER

Review of *The Autobiography of Allen Jay*, ed. Joshua Brown

If it was inevitable that someone, someday would edit and reissue the *The Autobiography of Allen Jay*, then Joshua Brown was destined to do it. For many years Brown has served as pastor of West Richmond Friends Church, where Allen Jay was a founding member, and to whom its 1916 building was dedicated. Brown is a graduate of Earlham School of Religion, the seminary of Earlham College, a school that probably owes its existence as a modern liberal arts college to the fundraising abilities of Allen Jay. Although the seminary of Earlham College did not come into existence until some fifty years after Jay's death, he would have heartily endorsed its creation and undoubtedly would have found ways to endow it. Jay had a vision for Quaker theological education and pastoral training far in advance of his time, and had a remarkable gift for fundraising, and institutional organizing and development that directors of Advancement today would stand in awe of.

As a leader and superintendent of Indiana Yearly Meeting Jay was instrumental in establishing many of its local meetings. One of the ongoing themes throughout his autobiography is his passion for unity and his aversion to separation. Jay lived through the most divisive century in Quaker history yet he could rejoice near the end of his life by writing: "It is a cause for thankfulness that today in nearly every portion of Indiana Yearly Meeting love and harmony are prevailing..."¹ The irony of this statement at this moment in history will not be lost on Joshua Brown, pastor of West Richmond Friends Church, which is currently embattled in controversy with Indiana Yearly Meeting, a yearly meeting on the verge of dissolving and realigning. Jay would be grieving deeply over this turn of events because of his strong belief that separation is always destructive to the church. If this gifted mediator who could see "some truth on both sides,"² were leading Indiana Yearly Meeting at this time in history, might he have found resolution to the current conflict short of laying down the Yearly Meeting?

Joshua Brown claims that to understand seventeenth century Quakerism we must read George Fox's *Journal*, to understand the eighteenth century, John Woolman's *Journal*, and to understand the challenges and complexities of the nineteenth century, we must read Allen Jay's *Autobiography*.³ Brown's statement elevates Jay's autobiography to a level of significance reserved for Quaker's greatest saints, and while warrant for such an extravagant claim may be debated, I would fully agree that this new edited version of a major primary text covering the transformation of Orthodox Quakerism makes a vital contribution to our understanding of the development of Quaker Orthodoxy and the growth of its institutions.

I would like to suggest that Hannah Whitall Smith's 1903 autobiography, *How I Discovered the Unselfishness of God*,⁴ be read alongside Jay's 1910 *Autobiography* for a more inclusive picture of nineteenth century Quaker evolution. Reading the two in tandem would provide a male/female, rural/urban and a Mid-western/Eastern perspective.

For years I have been fascinated by Smith's narrative and her interpretation of the evolution of Quakerism, and now to have it complemented by the autobiography of Allen Jay, an exact contemporary, is a great gift to me personally, as well as to all lovers of Quaker history. (Jay's dates are 1831-1910, Smith's 1832-1911. They both lived to the identical age of 79, and both were active and sharp-witted into old age.)

Both Smith and Jay were remarkable spiritual leaders of their time, and both were also paradoxical figures that forged their own unique and individual paths through the complexity of the Quaker Holiness Revival. Jay's *Autobiography* adds fresh insight and analysis of that revolutionary period within Orthodox Quakerism. Like Smith he both embraced and critiqued the revival, and like Smith, it provided the spiritual dynamic of his life. Both describe distinct conversion experiences of a mystical nature and both felt a clear call to bring others to conversion and into a deeper faith experience. Both had ecumenical interests, but Smith's influence was greatest beyond the gates of Quakerdom, and Jay's transformative within it.

There are many fascinating parallels in their lives, more than can be described in this short review, but here are a few: both were outstanding preachers and evangelists, and bible teachers, though neither had any theological training, nor college degrees. And both had to overcome significant obstacles to fulfill their calling: for Jay,

a uniquely individual one--a serious speech defect, and for Smith, along with all women of her generation, sexism in a male-dominant culture (including the more egalitarian Quaker culture.) Regarding women's roles in Quakerism in this period, a striking example from the autobiography is worth noting. When Jay describes the first conference of the Peace Association of Friends in 1866 in which he was a delegate, he lists the names of all of the delegates who were present. Brown adds in a footnote that the conference was a "Who's Who" of influential American Quaker leaders of the mid-nineteenth century.⁵ Forty-three names are listed and every one is male. Apparently women, though often ministers and leaders in some arenas, were not important enough to be included among the "Who's Who" or simply were not invited.

One revealing contrast between the two would be Smith's fierce feminism and strong support of women's rights, and Jay's glaring omission (noted by Brown)⁶ of any reference to the Women's Suffrage Movement, despite the important role Quaker women played in it, and his own largely egalitarian views.

Both were able to synthesize the new evangelicalism with the essential principles and teachings of traditional Quakerism. While both had deep Quaker roots and pedigrees and were evangelical in orientation, they were reared in different Quaker cultures. Smith was raised in a well-to-do Philadelphia Orthodox family and lived all her life in Philadelphia, New Jersey and later in England. Jay was a western Gurneyite Quaker, raised on an Ohio farm. Yet they knew many of the same Quaker leaders and occasionally travelled in similar circles. James M. Whitall, Hannah's father, was one of Jay's "dear friends"⁷ as was Dr. James Carey Thomas of Baltimore, Smith's brother-in-law. Despite Jay's modest rural beginnings he had many "dear Friends" of much wealth and influence. He had the rare ability to relate comfortably and intimately with both the rich and the humble.

I was delighted to discover that Allen Jay and Hannah Whitall Smith did in fact share a platform on at least one occasion when Jay was travelling in England in 1875 at the same time that Hannah and her husband Robert Pearsall were having a "great holiness conference" in the "Corn Exchange" in Brighton, England.⁸ The Smiths arranged for Jay to be on the platform with them at this conference, perhaps one of the largest holiness gatherings ever, which became known as the Keswick Movement in England. Jay writes that there were over

600 ministers in attendance and notes these meetings were greatly blessed and “our dear friends very popular.”⁹

In my study of the theology of holiness in the Quaker tradition, I analyzed a variety of historical figures who embodied the characteristics of Quaker holiness.¹⁰ Though I was aware of Allen Jay as a prominent evangelist in the revival movement, he was not a figure I included in my research. But after reading his autobiography, if I were to revise my work I would surely include Jay as a prime example of a true holiness Quaker. If Jay’s spirituality were measured by the essential elements of Holiness Quakerism, elements found in all the writings of early Friends as outlined in my study, all of the elements could be illustrated by examples from his autobiography. Many are obvious: reverence for scripture, conversion experience, passion for evangelism, charisma (meaning led by the Spirit, and “anointed from above”).¹¹ Others are inferred: mystical (he had “the spiritual insight of a mystic”¹² and “he saw visions and felt ecstasies”¹³), willingness to suffer (self-sacrificing, “he knew the meaning of ... ‘the joy of the cross’”¹⁴), and perfection (a Barclayan understanding of perpetual growth in righteousness).¹⁵

I have been thrilled to learn that the life and work and religious experience of this Quaker minister whom Thomas Hamm calls “perhaps one of the most remarkable Friends who ever lived,”¹⁶ and Rufus Jones, “the most deeply loved Friend of our generation,”¹⁷ fully supports my thesis that holiness is the common denominator of normative Quakerism. Jay was clearly a holiness friend, but not a radical or a doctrinaire fundamentalist. He, like Smith, desired to incorporate fresh expressions of spirituality into Quaker worship in order to renew a moribund traditionalism. He also wanted to bring the power of Quaker spiritual experience to a broader audience of religious seekers.

Jay represents what I call “classical Quaker holiness” at time when many radicals were taking holiness theology into new and often non-Quaker sectarian directions, including friends and colleagues of Jay’s, such as David Updegraff and Dougan Clark. Jay warned of excesses and saw the danger of what he called “wild and extreme hobbies and fanatical doctrines.”¹⁸ Yet he was aware of the potential of revival preaching for spiritual awakening and renewal, and used many revival elements such as “an altar of prayer” and hymn singing in his meetings. While Jay often gave altar calls at his evangelistic meetings, he did not put primary focus on instantaneous sanctifications or “second blessings.” He had no interest in doctrinal hairsplitting that

was rampant in his day. And while he often described meetings where participants were moved to tears, he was cautious about making emotional appeals, and thought the mind must be trained along with the emotions—“head and heart educated in unison,” he liked to say.¹⁹

Jay was as effective as the more radical revivalists in reaping conversions, but he was always cautious and careful in his approach. He continually worked for reconciliation between traditionalists and innovators, and became a rare mediating presence among the Gurneyite evangelicals of his time. He was willing to compromise and see the truth on both sides. He had mastered the art of the rare centrist who did not alienate those on both the right and the left.

I would argue that Jay was the most discerning voice of holiness in the revival movement, true to the spirit of holiness within normative Quakerism. As the revival movement became more polemical and doctrinally rigid, Jay seems to have distanced himself from those interpreting holiness in a narrow paradigm, yet he never denigrated them. Both Jay and Smith remained essentially evangelical in orientation, and puritanical in lifestyle (both eschewed drinking, card playing and dancing) yet as their spiritual lives deepened and evolved they also opened to progressive ideas and defended “young liberals.”²⁰

Allen Jay was the epitome of the Quaker traveling minister and his extensive travels reveal how public ministry evolved during the changes of the nineteenth century.

Like the most prominent Quaker ministers of his century, he eventually felt a call to transatlantic travel, a traditional pattern that began with George Fox and early Quakers. One of the more unique aspects of Quakerism is the strong networking web Friends have historically created through their practice of the traveling ministry (even after their divisions). Jay uses this network to great advantage, as he becomes a Quaker fundraiser extraordinaire.

As an evangelist, Jay had an incredible gift of intuition and persuasion. When those gifts were turned to the task of raising money for Quaker schools and colleges they enabled him to become one of the most successful fundraisers in Quaker history.

Another surprising aspect of Jay’s autobiography, in addition to the parallels to Hannah Whitall Smith, was the connections this mid-western Quaker minister had to my own home yearly meeting, Northwest Yearly Meeting, known in Jay’s day as Oregon Yearly Meeting. In 1906 Jay crossed the Rocky Mountains four times in one

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year (he was 75 years old that year, and also crossed the Alleghenies six times). I was amazed to learn that Jay raised large sums of money for Pacific College (now George Fox) as well as Whittier, Penn and Guilford. And he also raised money for a new Quarterly meeting in Washington State, Puget Sound Quarterly Meeting, and was instrumental in the establishment of Friends Memorial in Seattle, now North Seattle Friends Church, which was part of Indiana Yearly Meeting until 1946.²¹

I am more than pleased to see this autobiography edited, reprinted and promoted among Friends. Allen Jay represents the best of evangelical Quakerism, and modeled true Quaker holiness amidst the divisive and aggressive methods of the more radical evangelists. Jay's autobiography also conveys (with deep humility) the astonishing fruits of holiness that had immense practical applications in renewing, rebuilding and expanding the mission of Friends.

It seems fitting to conclude this paper with an affirmation from the memorial booklet printed after Jay's death that "his very presence was a benediction."²² That presence is captured in his written words and the amazing legacy he left for the Society of Friends, and I am deeply grateful to Joshua Brown for this new and accessible version of his autobiography.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Joshua Brown, ed., *The Autobiography of Allen Jay: 1831-1910* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2010), 293.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 92.
- 3 *Ibid.*, xvii.
- 4 Hannah Whitall Smith, *The Unselfishness of God and How I Discovered It: A Spiritual Autobiography* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1903).
- 5 Brown, *The Autobiography of Allen Jay*, 113.
- 6 *Ibid.*, xv.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 192, 195.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 235.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Carole Dale Spencer, *Holiness: The Soul of Quakerism: An Historical Analysis of the Theology of Holiness in the Quaker Tradition* (London: Paternoster, 2007).
- 11 Brown, *The Autobiography of Allen Jay*, 363.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 361.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 362.

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14 *Ibid.*, 363.

15 *Ibid.*, 356.

16 *Ibid.*, v

17 *Ibid.*, ix

18 *Ibid.*, 293.

19 *Ibid.*, 172.

20 *Ibid.*, viii.

21 Some of the connections between the humble saintly Jay and certain celebrity figures of the time are idiosyncratic. One of the wealthy Northwest Quakers that Jay tapped for building a new meetinghouse in Seattle (as well as for relieving a debt at Guilford College, was Samuel Hill originally from North Carolina). Northwesterners are most familiar with Hill as the rich, eccentric dreamer who built an opulent mansion on a cliff overlooking the Columbia River in a dry desert region of Eastern Washington, a remote and inaccessible location in the early twentieth century. (He also had a replica of Stonehenge built nearby.) Hill had hoped to create a Quaker farming community there, but because of the region's isolation and lack of rainfall, his dream never materialized.

22 Brown, *The Autobiography of Allen Jay*, 354.