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A REVIEW OF *THE TENDERING PRESENCE*,¹ #1

MAX L. CARTER

A virtue of Michael Birkel's book is its simplicity in making Woolman an intimate resource for integrating the inward life of the Spirit and outward activism. A virtue of *The Tendering Presence* is its complexity in examining the many ways Woolman may serve as that companion. In her last years, Dorothy Day was asked about the possibility of her being made a saint after her death. Her alleged response was, "I certainly hope not; I don't want to be made that irrelevant." The Quaker canonization of Woolman has almost made him irrelevant to those who feel they could never be *that* pure; *that* dedicated; *that* meek and lowly. Mike Heller's skillfully edited book helps us reclaim Woolman as a very human and relevant resource.

Twenty-one scholars from such fields as American literature, communication studies, anthropology, peace studies, biblical studies, theology, Quaker history, economics, and sociology contribute essays. The variety assures that there are many points of access to the importance of Woolman for contemporary religious and social issues. That these are scholarly (but actually understandable!) articles assures that they are very different from some of the hagiography that has characterized earlier writing about Woolman.

Some even dare hint at Woolman's own complexity and "blind spots." Anne Myles takes Woolman to task for his "rhetoric of identification between dissenters and the oppressed." She asks whether Woolman was not limited by his own Christian identification and Western cultural norms and thus had to, at some level, always remain a stranger to "the other." She is willing to critique Woolman in this way because she believes his "politics of empathy" are so needed, yet we must be aware of our own limitations. Jean Soderlund asks why Woolman went to see the Indians in 1763 but then seems not to go much further with his concern. Was his motion of love to visit the Indians exhausted by that one trip? Why did he devote so much energy to antislavery and not more to Indian concerns? Is this an example of following Thomas Kelly's advice that "we cannot die on every cross" or an example of a flawed person? In either case, it offers us

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someone we can relate to Mary Rose O'Reilley points out that there is no "conversion narrative" in the *Journal*, but rather a presentation of a process of "deconstruction" of the false self and re-construction around a principle of tenderness and sympathy with God. Might this offer us alternatives to views of what suffices for the transformed life in Christ? J. William Frost asks "...the historian's question of whether John Woolman knew the sources of his own thoughts" and describes the cultural soup in which he was stewing. Might we learn from this that there is very little in our experience (the mystics among us, perhaps, notwithstanding!) that is unmediated, that even our "pure habitations" may have been inhabited by prior cultural residents?

I found especially helpful Michael Birkel's chapter on Woolman's use of scripture and Vernie Davis's chapter on Woolman as an agent for social change. Oddly, for me, Birkel's essay was more moving than the chapter on scripture in his own book! It presents Woolman as a model for reading the Bible as an act of self-discovery. Davis gives clear guidance on how we can take Woolman's approach to conflict resolution and apply it to our own lives.

Editor Mike Heller notes that many have found much meaning in the opening essay by Philip Boroughs, in which he describes Woolman as less a lone prophetic figure and more as a respected and committed member of a spiritual community. JW actually did his committee work! Heller also notes that it is no accident that the book, having begun with a location of Woolman in his own spiritual community, ends with Sterling Olmsted's comparison of Woolman with Gandhi, placing the former in a broader community—Kelly's "Beloved Community."

In both Heller and Birkel, John Woolman is presented as a very real person, one who, in spite of the accident of a difference of 250 years or so, can be part of our "blessed community." He can be a companion to us as we read scripture, confront the powers and principalities, or dig deep to the springs of the living Spirit within. These books are excellent companions, too—guides to reclaiming Woolman as a vital resource for a wider community.

NOTES:

1. Mike Heller, ed. *The Tendering Presence: Essays on John Woolman*. Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 2003. 340 pages. \$21.00