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Allen's "Quaker Communities in Early Modern Wales: From Resistance to Respectability" - Book Review

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BOOK REVIEWS

ALLEN, R.C., *Quaker Communities in Early Modern Wales: From Resistance to Respectability* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), pp. xiv + 314. ISBN 978-0-7083-2077-8, Hardback, £45.

At last! This well-documented and cogently written study of the history of Quakers in Wales is to be welcomed. There is a dearth of monographs on Quakerism in that country, one of the 'dark corners of the land' in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, perhaps because of the relative scarcity of sources for many parts of it and the small numbers of Quakers concerned. Richard Allen addresses the cultural and social impact of Quakerism there, engaging with the evidence about its origins, development, and decline. The seven chapters cover beginnings (1653), numbers and social composition in the movement, organisation, persecution and toleration, the Friends' discipline, the role of women Friends, and finally the decline of the Welsh Quaker communities. This work brings together and extends much of the scholarship about the subject.

Quaker communities would have been broadly similar, the author assumes. He has had to extrapolate, given that sometimes—and for many decades at a time—there may be a scarcity of evidence about them in one part of Wales or another. While analysing minutely the more abundant evidence from certain counties he has used what exists from elsewhere 'to test typicality' (p. 3), at times including analogous information from bordering English counties. South East Wales provided a fuller store of primary source material and Richard Allen has used Monmouthshire Friends as a case study of the distribution and social composition of Quakers (pp. 34-59) and also as illustrative of the organisation of the group. The scope is as widely encompassing as possible, however, utilising records of surviving Quarterly, Monthly, Yearly, and Half-Yearly Meetings (the former instituted in Wales in 1682 and ceasing in 1797), Women's Meeting minutes and a variety of correspondence and official records from Cardiganshire to Monmouthshire, Glamorgan to the North of the country.

It proves to be a difficult task to build a picture of numbers and the social composition of Quakers among dissenting communities in Wales. The author offers pertinent comparisons with the demography of Quakerism elsewhere and acknowledges both difficulties in non-Quaker records (which make it hard to identify numbers of

Quaker dissenters with certainty) and the inadequacies of Quakers' own record keeping. He constructs an overview of the Monmouthshire situation, bolstered by tables of statistics for the Friends' births, marriages, and deaths in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, comparative data for the Roman Catholics in the region, and evidence for occupational status as compared with Gloucestershire/Wiltshire Quakers. The impression that 'yoeman and craftsman' (and a few of the gentry) dominated Welsh Quakerism is borne out by this chapter. Yet 'The numerical strength of the Quaker community was, in comparison to the fear they aroused, rather small', he observes (p. 47).

Wales was not a monoglot country. Allen does not dissent from those who have seen Quakerism as something 'never fully Welsh', imperfectly integrated with the national life and character. It was led (from England) by those who did not grasp that Wales was different. Very little Quaker literature was produced in Welsh (though some English writings were translated into it) and in this study twelve (primary and secondary source) items appear in Welsh in the extensive (37pp.) bibliography. I did not find reference to the sometimes negative role of the London-based Second Day Morning Meeting where writings by Welsh Friends in English were concerned. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries it did not, for example, further the publication of work by Barbara Bevan Jr (of Pennsylvania, thereafter returned to Tref y Rhyg) or of Prudence Davies (disinherited daughter of the Quaker-hating vicar Rondl Davies?), albeit at least the important *Journal* (if not other writings) of Richard Davies survived its processes to aid the historian of Welsh Quakerism.

In the chapter on discipline, schooling, the employment of the young, dress and demeanour, disorder, disagreements, disownment, and more figure. The Welsh tardiness in establishing Women's Meetings was considered in the preceding chapter, along with many disciplinary matters concerning women Friends in particular. A good deal of ground is covered in these two chapters. Finally the decline of Quakerism in Wales is addressed.

Only twenty-four Quaker congregations were registered there by 1715 and the last chapter takes the reader into statistics for the nineteenth century also. Evidence from ecclesiastical returns points to the demise of many Quaker communities in the eighteenth century and the author considers possible causes for this decline. Emigration to Pennsylvania as part of William Penn's experiment was indeed a pivotal factor in parts of Wales. In the emigration of some two thousand Quakers in fewer than two decades many of the most active and gifted of Welsh Friends were lost. This alone did not account for its demise in many places, however. Quite apart from Quaker rigour not sitting well with Welsh popular culture, the Welsh preference for spirited preaching and song (available in other non-conforming traditions) was perhaps another cause. The conclusion emerges that Quakerism had failed to 'breach the communication divide' between itself and the people of Wales (p. 191).

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