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New Perspectives on Eighteenth-Century British Quaker Women

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Abstract

In the last three decades, research on eighteenth-century British Quaker women reflects a range of different methodological perspectives. Recent studies focus on female spiritual development and sense of identity in the formative seventeenth century. New influences and changing contexts in the eighteenth century, especially Quietism, engendered new themes: a continuing concern with self and collective identity; theology and practices; and participation in the public and private spheres. The experiences and perceptions of British Quaker women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries reflect the influence of Deism and Evangelicalism. Despite these valuable studies, further research and systematic analysis is needed, especially concerning the gaps highlighted in the work to date. The majority of this research focuses on English Quaker women, for example. New studies such as those undertaken by Josephine Teakle point to differing experiences of women living in other contexts in the British Isles.

Keywords

Quakers, women's writings, eighteenth century, Quaker Quietism, Deism, Evangelicalism

Introduction

Over the last thirty years, a range of scholars, including those interested in literary theory and feminism, have examined the changing contexts and experiences of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Quakers. These studies yield important new insights highlighted here but also raise unanswered questions about how these changes affected the lives and writings of women Friends. The formative experiences of the mid- and late seventeenth century raised ongoing questions faced by many eighteenth-century British Quaker women concerning their self and collective

identities. The changing contexts of the eighteenth century raise still more questions regarding Quaker women: how were they affected by Quietism? What were their theological beliefs and practices? How did they participate in the public and private spheres?

Recognising the value of multiple perspectives, we offer differing points of views on some of these questions, especially the nature and extent of Quietism, and its impact on women. We also look at the impact of Deism and Evangelicalism on the lives of individual Quaker women, which raises further questions about how these influences contributed to the schisms which fractured transatlantic Quakerism in the nineteenth century. The new findings over the last three decades contribute much to an overall understanding of British Quakerism but also show that there is still much to learn about eighteenth-century Quakerism and the roles of British women within it.

BEGINNINGS: QUAKER WOMEN AND WRITING IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

Inspired by the radical apocalyptic theology of the mid-seventeenth century, the first Quakers saw themselves as being in the vanguard of the global transformation that would follow from the realisation that Christ was returned. Based on the spiritual equality of all, early Quakerism, as Michelle Tarter succinctly summarises, 'invited women not only to worship, but also to quake, prophesy, travel, preach and write in the beginning of the Quaker movement'.[1] Although fully present in this founding phase, women are not always fully represented in the scholarship concerning the formation of Quakerism. Christine Trevett, for example, began her work in 1986 because it was clear to her women were so little represented in Quaker histories.[2]

Beginning in the 1980s, a broader and often more analytical body of scholarship based on seventeenth-century women's writings began to develop. In some of this work, Quakers are central to the revolutionary context, and selections of Quaker women's writings form part of a wider-ranging compilation.[3] Phyllis Mack, for example, stresses the importance of Quaker women pamphleteers, while including those of other beliefs in her groundbreaking work, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth Century England*, published in 1994.[4] More recently, however, Marcus Nevitt argues that focusing on these radical pamphleteers masks other forms of contemporary Quaker women's expressions.[5]

In the research conducted over the last thirty years, self and collective identity emerge as important themes in seventeenth-century Quaker women's writing. As Rosemary Moore shows in her study of more than 1500 publications appearing between 1646 and 1666, early Friends expressed their beliefs in letters, pamphlets, epistles, testimonies, and even verse, despite Quaker doubts about writing that required planning or revision.[6] In the seventeenth century, spiritual autobiography flourished as part of a general trend within Puritanism where inner beliefs were tested through self-examination, and then expressed in testimony. Because Quaker belief is rooted in experience, the narrative accounts of that experience, by both males and females, played an important role in the early development of Quaker faith.

In *Women in the Seventeenth-Century Quaker Community: A Literary Study of Political Identities, 1650–1700*, Catie Gill sees an element of collective witness as inherent in early Quaker women's writings. She points out that the earliest Quaker publications were essentially collective documents, a view reinforced by the often multiple authorship. Gill and other scholars identify the sense of a collective endeavour as the overriding characteristic of Quaker writing from the beginning and believe that Quakers effectively thought of themselves as a 'single organism'.[7]

Other recent researchers, especially feminist scholars concerned with female agency, highlight the more individualised and gendered aspects of writings by early Quaker women. In her introduction to *Women and Quakerism*, for example, Trevett discusses how perspectives from feminist theology influence her.[8] Likewise, Gill notes that the marked involvement of women in public life in the seventeenth century inevitably combines with 'present (feminist) concerns to rewrite history to include women'.[9] Much of the more recent scholarship focusing on women, both in literary studies and in gender and women's studies, has been influenced by post-structuralism, stressing the multiple possible readings of texts. Gill, for example, while not denying a 'pre textual reality', argues that scholars inevitably bring something of themselves to the process of writing and research, and that 'future "selves" might read it differently'.[10] Thus, there can be a sort of inbuilt provisionality in these interpretations. Yet, as Gill notes, much scholarship on Quaker women either precedes or ignores these theoretical developments.[11]

Contemporary Quaker scholar Michelle Tarter does, however, examine the role of gender in the practices and language of early female Friends. Tarter looks at how early Quakers manifested a form of embodied spirituality, reflecting the Christ within. Friends literally quaked as they believed themselves to be experiencing the pouring out of spirit on flesh. As Ben Pink Dandelion notes in his *Introduction to Quakerism*, 'Tarter has suggested that the physical quaking was emblematic of a feminine and embodied form of worship'.[12] Grace Jantzen, another contemporary Quaker scholar, argues in 'Choose Life! Early Quaker Women and Violence in Modernity' that Margaret Fell and other early Quaker women used a noticeably more life-affirming imagery than their male counterparts. Yet the model Jantzen proposes does not seem to translate easily to other contexts.[13]

Leading scholars of early Quakerism see significant changes in the late seventeenth century. Based on her extensive study of primary sources, Moore argues that before and after the Restoration in 1660, British Quakers underwent a 'metamorphosis', as their focus changed from religious and political radicalism to survival.[14] Dandelion sees important changes during the period 1666–89. 'Early Quakerism', he maintains, 'was built on an understanding/experience of an unfolding second coming (experienced inwardly)', heralding the end of the world or 'endtime'. By the late seventeenth-century, 'a sense of endtime is replaced by one of meantime', as Quakers, like some other Christians, focused 'on the best ways in which to wait' for the return of Christ.[15] Robert Barclay, for example, systemised Quaker theology in his *Apology*, published in English in 1678. Unlike the radical Quaker eschatology of the founding days, Barclay focused on how to live in the world as it was.[16]

CONTINUITES AND CHANGES IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY WOMEN'S WRITING

In contrast to the radical theology and practices of the seventeenth century, the eighteenth century is seen as the period of Quaker Quietism. The basic textbooks for eighteenth-century Quakerism continue to be the so-called Rowntree Histories. At the turn of the twentieth century, John Wilhelm Rowntree envisioned a new, liberal movement with 'a comprehensive and complete history of Quakerism as a means to revival'. After Rowntree's early death, William C. Braithwaite and Rufus M. Jones 'took on Rowntree's vision'.[17] Although meticulously researched, Braithwaite's *The Beginnings of Quakerism* and *The Second Period of Quakerism* and Jones's *The Later Periods of Quakerism* inevitably reflect the prevailing culture in which their writers were working. Braithwaite and Jones both present an unsympathetic view of eighteenth-century Quietism, which does not fully reflect the lived experiences of Friends then. Moreover, it is questionable whether the Quietism they identified was as all encompassing as presented in these chronicles. Wilmer Cooper argues, for example, that the identification of Quakerism and mysticism 'is the result of Jones's influence and historical interpretation'.[18]

The influence on Quakers during the eighteenth century of other religious ideas, (especially Deism and Evangelicalism as discussed later), needs to be recognised, but clearly Quietism found expression in the daily lives of many Friends and retreat from the outward and worldly was enforced by Quaker discipline. Outward plainness came to be an indicator by which many outside the Society came to judge Quakers in the eighteenth century. Yearly Meetings sought to ensure an increasingly distinctive appearance and lifestyle, but clearly the trend was not wholly accepted. In 1718, for example, the London Yearly Meeting found the need to censure Quaker males who in their pride had taken to wearing the 'long extravagant and gay wigs which they that are not in profession with us see as a mark of declension from our primitive plainness'.[19] The annual epistles from the Yearly Meetings held in London frequently dispensed advice and instruction on plain speech, dress, and behaviour. All of the advices were collated and distributed to Meetings in manuscript form in the 1738 'Book of Extracts'. The first published book dealing with discipline appeared in 1783.

Trevett points to the failure of the Rowntree Histories adequately to discuss the roles of women in the Quaker narrative of the long eighteenth century.[20] As Friends shifted their focus from endtime to meantime, the roles of women changed, too. Perhaps because of the influence of Quietism and/or the greater stress on uniformity in discipline, no woman leader of equal stature to Margaret Fell appeared in the eighteenth century. Fell remained an exemplar to the generations that followed her, but no woman achieved thereafter her kind of influence and public face. George Fox set up separate women's Meetings for the purpose of ensuring women a continuing voice within the Society. In practice, however, women's Meetings became confined to roles that were largely considered appropriate for their gender, such as reviewing requests for marriages. Repeated calls throughout the century for the establishment

of a Women's Yearly Meeting in Britain, such as existed in Pennsylvania, went unanswered until 1784.[21]

In 'The Experience of Regeneration and Erosion of Certainty in the Theology of Second-Generation Quakers: No Place for Doubt?' Nikki Coffey Tousley samples 21 accounts of convincement of first-generation writers and finds that one-third were written by women. By contrast, she finds only one woman in her sample of second-generation writers.[22] Trevett also sees a shift in the emphasis of autobiographical writings between first- and second-generation Quakers, a trajectory continuing into the eighteenth century. She finds that the 'vibrant, confident style of writing' that marked a belief that the writers were in the midst of the endtimes, gave way to something rather more cautious and introspective. 'In terms of published work', Trevett concludes, 'there would appear to have been a decline in Quaker women's writings'.[23]

When looking at published work, it is widely recognised but nonetheless important to note that women's voices were constrained by the conventions of the predominantly male publishing industry. This perhaps applies even more to Quaker publications, where a rigorous system of censorship prevailed. For example, the Second Day's Morning Meeting established in 1673 to oversee Quaker publications was composed entirely of male ministers and elders. Under their scrutiny, manuscripts were often adapted to suit the institutional expectations of Friends. The circumstances under which women's accounts were published, therefore, may well obscure any sense of a specifically gendered identity, as well as hints of radicalism.

The internal regulation of contemporary publications and the dearth of scholarly studies concerning the experiences and practices of British Quietism in the long eighteenth century supports Dandelion's observation that:

> This period...remains under-researched and misunderstood. People see the rules and the disownments and a view of the self difficult to understand in this psychologised world and fail to see the rich and deep spirituality of the journals, of the life underpinning the testimony.[24]

If eighteenth-century British Quakerism in under-researched and misunderstood, the role of women and their writings is even more so. Although largely absent from organisational leadership, women on both sides of the Atlantic fully participated in Quaker ministry throughout the eighteenth century. The practice of recording the names of those recognised to have a gift for ministry began in 1722. Those who travelled in the ministry as itinerant preachers, female as well as male, were known as 'Public Friends' and played important roles as spiritual leaders.

In contrast to the plenitude of scholarly studies about seventeenth-century Quaker women preachers and prophets, studies of eighteenth-century Quaker women ministers in Britain have only begun to appear in the last twenty years. Rachel Labouchere presents the edited letters and journal of Abiah Darby (1716–93) and the journal of her daughter-in-law Deborah Darby (1754–1810).[25] Gil Skidmore provides useful profiles and selected writings of eight Quaker women.[26] Tarter contemplates the life and writings of Elizabeth Ashbridge (1713–55).[27] Mack discusses later eighteenth-century ministers active in Britain, including Catherine Payton, Sophia Hume, and

Hannah Barnard, among others, in her essay 'In a Female Voice: Preaching and Politics in Eighteenth-Century British Quakerism'.[28] Rebecca Larson contributes the only large-scale study to date in *Daughters of Light: Quaker Women Preaching and Prophesying in the Colonies and Abroad 1700–1775*, highlighting the transatlantic connections of Anglo-American women ministers, although she focuses mainly on American women.[29] Much of this work has of necessity been largely biographical, concentrating on the editing and annotation of selections from the writings of eighteenth-century women to engender greater awareness of their roles and highlight the archival riches available.

SELF AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN WRITINGS BY AND ABOUT EARLY EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH QUAKER WOMEN

To understand fully the nature of the research into eighteenth-century Quaker women's writings, it is important to understand the sources available, the form they took, and the very particular religious culture in which they were written. Significant recent studies by Tarter, Tousley, and Katherine Damiano offer new insights into the religious culture of early eighteenth-century Quaker women. Tousley identifies different sorts of autobiographical writings in her study of second-generation Quakers. These distinctions are needed, argues Tousley, because by 'prioritising experience over received doctrine,...autobiographical narrative is an important source of early Quaker theology'.[30]

Tousley distinguishes, for example, between the narrative tract and the journal. The narrative tract which predominated in the early years of the movement, contained significant autobiographical detail, usually appeared within a few years of the events described, and served the purpose of developing a wider theological argument. These tracts were generally written for the purpose of seeking new converts to Quakerism. The publication of journals developed somewhat later. 'Journal' is a loosely defined word meaning an 'autobiographical writing that gives a broad, retrospective account of the life of the author'. Journals were not necessarily diaries recording daily events then, although some published journals were based on edited diaries and other writings collected over a lifetime (such as records of the travels undertaken by recorded ministers), while others were more in the way of memoirs recalling life events with the benefit of hindsight.[31]

Tarter, in her study of Elizabeth Ashbridge, argues that Quaker writing and reading was 'much more than an intellectual pursuit; it was, in fact, a spiritual...encounter where writer and reader met in divine intimacy through the power of the Word'.[32] Tarter embarked on her PhD research striving, in her words, to 'integrate my personal spiritual experience with my intellectual rigor and study'.[33] Comparing the writings of first- and second-generation Quaker women, she observes that the 'sense of physicality and apocalyptic urgency became diluted'. Accordingly, Tarter notes, the sense of living in the 'in between time' and of the Society being the place of spiritual formation, might be expected to make the sense of collective purpose and responsibility in the writing more prominent, since these women were clearly aware

of writing not just for themselves, and not even for their peers. Instead, they were 'prophesying, reading, and writing autobiographically for future generations'.[34]

Tarter also highlights the importance of a vibrant manuscript culture among early eighteenth-century British Quaker women that contributed to the preservation of beliefs and practices that might not necessarily have accorded with the male dominated, institutional shifts within Quakerism.[35] She detects something subversive in eighteenth-century women's manuscript writings, a conscious effort to sustain the spiritual radicalism of the early movement from an increasing formalism. She cites, for example, Ashbridge's detailed account of her physical reactions in her own convincement.[36] She notes that women's convincement accounts form another area which could usefully be explored further.

Trained within the theoretical perspectives of feminist theory, post-structuralism and cultural studies, Tarter concludes that Quakers have constructed their own literary theory. She believes that Quakers' mystical relationship to their written works is unique and has resulted in a coherent approach to literary theory, which effectively spans the last 350 years. In her consideration of *Some Account of the Fore Part of the Life of Elizabeth Ashbridge*, she points out that current scholarship has 'focused primarily on Elizabeth's journey to find a voice and an identity'. Tarter observes that, 'While such considerations contribute a great deal to the understanding of Ashbridge's writing, I find that it is equally imperative to read her narrative as she and her fellow Friends would have done so: through their spiritual lens'.[37]

While the idea of surrender to God challenges some feminists' focus on female agency, Damiano, in her work on 'Eighteenth-Century Quakerism as Realised Eschatology', like Tarter, seeks to enter imaginatively into the spiritual experience of the period. In so doing, Damiano discerns in this surrender, instead of what might appear to be repression to modern eyes, a source of comfort to those living through it. She argues that key to understanding eighteenth-century Quakers is the realisation that they 'knew that the guidance to live a just and peaceable life was accessible in the present by hearing and obeying the Christ within'.[38] While Damiano may be criticised for idealising the Quaker community,[39] her work indicates that, to some extent, the community was able to nurture those living through their struggles with fear and doubt.

Quietist Quakerism can be as bewildering to modern ears as the apocalyptic language of the seventeenth century. In his *Introduction to Quakerism*, Dandelion writes that within eighteenth-century Quietism 'There is a supernatural plane and a natural one'. Within this dualistic perception, the faithful in their aspiration to the former need to retreat from the latter, resulting in a suspicion of both the world and the self.[40] 'Self' and 'identity' are, of course, complex concepts; there may be some usefulness in Dror Wahrman's definitions of 'self' as 'the unique individuality of a person', as opposed to what could also be regarded as the contradictory 'identity', namely a common denominator that 'places one individual within a group'.[41] The sense of the individualised and autonomous self in eighteenth-century British Quaker women's writings was likely to be suppressed, at least to some extent.

CHANGING CONTEXTS IN THE LIVES AND WRITINGS OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY QUAKER WOMEN

It is important to consider the lives and experiences of Quaker women within the changing political, economic and cultural contexts of the long eighteenth century in Britain. The extensive research of Jack Marietta on Quakers in Pennsylvania reveals how colonial warfare and political participation, combined with a desire for spiritual renewal, resulted in disownments and withdrawal in Colonial America.[42] While Quakers in Britain and the American Colonies shared core beliefs and practices, English Friends experienced the almost constant warfare of the eighteenth century differently because they were barred from holding political office and, in England, (although not in Scotland and Ireland), physically removed from the sites of battles. Moreover, by the last quarter of the eighteenth century, as Rebecca Larson points out, 'The American Revolutionary War would forever alter the once thriving transoceanic Quaker culture'.[43]

Outside the political arena, Jennings points to the participation of British Quakers as leaders in the revolutionary developments in commerce and industry of the late eighteenth century, as recently documented by Edward Milligan.[44] Prominent Quaker ministers such as Abiah and Deborah Darby directly participated in these economic changes through their family connections. The successes of leading British Quakers in banking are well known, and these successes shaped the lives of families for generations, including the Barclays, Gurneys, and Lloyds. Quaker women of the middling sorts experienced many of the changing roles of English middle-class women traced by Lenore Davidoff and Catherine Hall in their important study.[45] Prosperous provincial Quaker women participated in the changes Amanda Vickery found among gentlemen's daughters.[46] Quaker women, like Quaker men and people of other religions, were also deeply influenced by the rise of Evangelicalism and the development of Deism in the mid- and late eighteenth century.

Wilmer Cooper rightly points out that 'no sociologist or historian of religion should ever expect to fully account for the Quaker movement by analyzing the social and cultural forces of the time', leaving 'no room for new and fresh innovations of the Spirit'.[47] In theological terms, the long eighteenth century witnessed increasing internal tensions within Quakerism. As Dandelion observes:

> It is easy to see how the world rejecting Quietism could lead to alternative theologies separated from or antagonistic to Scripture such as deism or rationalistic perspectives on Scripture, or to a reaction based on a more world affirming spirituality such as Evangelical Christianity.[48]

THEOLOGY AND PRACTICES OF BRITISH QUAKER WOMEN IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

It is important to pinpoint time and place as well as gender in discussing the theology and practices of British Quaker women in the long eighteenth century. Newman sees Quietism evident in the life and writing of Abiah Maude Darby, an active

minister who lived most of her life in Shropshire.[49] The daughter of Samuel and Rachel Maude, Abiah first married a young Quaker minister but was widowed early. In 1746, she married Abraham Darby II (1711–1763) and they settled in Coalbrookdale, where his father had located an iron foundry. In 1748, when she was not yet 32, Abiah appeared as a minister. While her husband and son became pioneers in the iron industry, Abiah Darby became a religious leader. Throughout most of her life, she expressed her religious thoughts and beliefs in letters to her family and in her journal edited by her descendant Rachel Labouchere.

In 1779, Abiah Darby wrote a letter to her niece, Rachel Maude, daughter of her brother William and Hannah Freeman Maude. The opening suggests the range, complexity, and depth of the mutual support among the women of her family. Darby begins by revealing her own vulnerability, 'I have had much anxiety and have been brought very low in spirit, so that I stand in great need of comforters rather than to administer to others, for those who have walked in the deep valleys of trouble can best console with fellow travellers'.

Later in the letter, Darby comforts her niece concerning the recent death of her mother, Hannah Freeman Maude:

> Oh the happy change! No cause for mourning dont let a single murmer come up or arise my Dear Child—she hath been spar'd long to you, and her Life hath added lustre, as a shining light in the Dark World. Comfort thyself in the ordering of prudence thou hast been an obedient kind help to her, worthy of thanks from us all on her account.

Darby's description of widowhood and family service also provides some indications of what she considered a faithful life for Quaker women:

> I know of no one in the Society that hath fulfilled the description of the apostle gives of an honourable widdow more than she hath done, therefore her well spent life is of good favour... Oh her joy is now complete and what is above it will forever last!... I am thankful thou art made an instrument of so much good in your family in general, as well as the Society... I hope...that nothing may disturb the quiet of thy mind.[50]

In its structure and language, this letter suggests an expression of both raw emotion and long experience. Further research is needed, however, to clarify how typical and deeply rooted such a response to life and death is in the writings of other eighteenth-century British Quaker women.

The suspicion of self which is seen to be inherent in eighteenth century Quaker Quietism should be considered when reading women's writing of that time. Even those who were new to the Society appeared to learn quickly the expectations. An example is a letter written in 1781 by Jane Harry, a recent convert and the subject of a highly charged disagreement between Dr. Johnson and Mary Morris Knowles. After staying at Coalbrookdale, Harry wrote a letter to Susannah Appleby, the companion of Abiah Darby's youngest daughter, Sarah. On one level, the chatty, gossipy tone of the letter is in sharp contrast with Abiah Darby's writing. Harry appeared to be aware of her position as something of a novice and wary of appearing to focus too much on herself. She did not wish her letter to be circulated, as was often done, because she ended by saying, 'see how full of egotism this letter is so do not copy it'.[51]

Paul Lacey, in an essay on Mary Morris Knowles, identifies evidence of a far more energetic faith in the eighteenth century than had hitherto been acknowledged.[52] Jennings further examines Knowles's role in her biography[53] and in her essay, which follows. A point made by Josephine Teakle in her thesis on Mary Birkett Card could perhaps equally be made of Knowles. Like Card, Knowles was negotiating between 'a desire for self-promotion and the requirement to sublimate the self'.[54] Tousley observes that, given the shift in theology from one which placed 'the author in the midst of the completion of salvation history' to something more focussed on 'individual spiritual change',[55] this kind of negotiation became less clear-cut.

Teakle's work, moreover, suggests that self-restraint could come to assume such importance to individual Quaker women that family tragedy was attributed to divine punishment for temporary lapses, as Card believed at least during some harrowing periods in her life.[56] This is not to say that individual women did not struggle with the implications of their individual callings or fall prey to doubts in the face of wider social expectations. The examples of both Mary Morris Knowles and Mary Birkett Card challenge any easy stereotypes and show the need to acknowledge greater complexity than the better-known published writings of the time might suggest.

There is certainly still work to be done researching the way in which the theological and ideological strands played out against more obvious outward division between plain and gay in eighteenth-century British Quakerism. This includes the need to recognise that the approved and published Quaker sources, at least, will tend to obscure the conflicting elements. Based on her work on the mid-nineteenth century, Newman points out that the rejection of creedal statements means that there is a real reluctance for Quaker writers to appear to be engaging in doctrinal debate, and the different strands of thought are by no means easy to discern.[57]

Attitudes to the writing of poetry might be seen as an indicator of developments within the eighteenth century, and systematic research could usefully be undertaken to complement the study by Moore on Quakers' published verses in the seventeenth century.[58] For example, Catherine Payton Phillips (1727–1794), who had written poetry in her youth, later recalled that:

> soon after I appeared in the ministry, I dropped my pen in regard to verses. I do not say it was a sacrifice required; but the continuing of the practice might have proved a snare in some way: it might have engaged my attention too much, or tended to make me popular, which I have ever guarded against.[59]

Yet there is ambiguity in the phrase 'I do not say it was a sacrifice required', which indicates that Phillips applied a different standard to her writing before and after she appeared as a minister. Furthermore, in another statement about her poetry, she observed it 'has been handed about in manuscript, and suffered much by copying'.[60] This indicates she continued to care about preserving the quality of her writing.

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH QUAKER WOMEN IN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPHERES

The publication in English of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*,[61] the influential theory of Jurgen Habermas on the origins of the bourgeois public sphere

in the eighteenth century, continues to influence studies on public and private roles relating to gender. Quaker women in the eighteenth century were certainly influenced by religious and social expectations surrounding private roles relating to domesticity and motherhood. As George Fox wrote, 'a Mother in Israel brings forth to God, and nurses upp [*sic*] the children of God, as a mother among Christians'.[62] Biblical archetypes legitimised the infusion of an active moral authority into women's customary domestic and nurturing function.

Yet even a devoted mother and Quietist Quaker like Abiah Darby frequently blurred the lines between private and public on many levels. For example, given Darby's place in the family and the Society, it seems reasonable to assume that her letter to Rachel Maude, cited above, was far from 'private', and that she would have expected it to have been circulated to a wider 'audience' by her niece.

At another level of complexity, Abiah Darby was scarcely separated from the Coalbrookdale works located near her family home. Her writings demonstrate her awareness of the pioneering industrial processes, and some of her papers directly deal with business. She and her family also lived in close proximity to the foundry's workingmen, and she was directly concerned in the workers' family welfare. Darby provided hospitality to a stream of visitors who came to Coalbrookdale on business, and, on more than one occasion, she and her daughters provided food and clothing to the workers.[63] Darby was not alone among Quaker women in fulfilling this kind of social role. In their study of middle-class women, Davidoff and Hall cite contemporary criticism of Quaker females for undertaking philanthropic work at what might be seen as the expense of their families.[64]

An even more complex example of blurring private and public roles is how, for Darby, the promptings of the spirit took precedence over everything, including her husband's ill health. For example, she undertook her last travels in the ministry during the serious illness of her husband Abraham, returning only months before his death in 1763. She believed that to refuse the inner promptings to minister was to 'give way to carnal reasoning and slavish fear'.[65] Her experience and that of her daughter-in-law Deborah Darby, a minister who also travelled during family difficulties, suggests the importance of their shared understanding, and shows how, within the extended family networks, other women Friends would fill the breach and take on a supporting role when their relations followed their calls to travel in the ministry.[66]

The promptings of the spirit may have taken precedence overall, but they could nevertheless be seen as leading to a range of different, if often interlinked callings. Led by the Spirit, Abiah Darby often preached in public settings, aiming her remarks at all citizens in a particular locality. As evident in her journal, Darby clearly expected local Friends to advertise her visits to the other people of the area. She warned Friends that withdrawal from the world seemed generally to have signalled a retreat into what she saw as a dead formality. She had no hesitation in engaging in public, extemporaneous preaching when she felt called. She also ministered at the meal table of her home when visited by non-Quakers on trade and business or when eating in a public place during her travels. For example, when visiting Shrewsbury in 1756, she prayed at an inn in the presence of a group of naval officers.[67] She found the call to

minister in such public circumstances 'a great cross to the natural will', since the private practice of her own family was 'sitting in awful silence at every meal'.[68]

By the late eighteenth century, the Evangelical Revival meant that Quaker women were not alone in their public ministry. Abiah Darby had comparatively close personal contact with early Methodism through John Fletcher, who served from 1760 through 1768, as vicar in the nearby town of Madeley. Yet Darby's ministry predated the Evangelical Revival and differed theologically, as her debates with Fletcher demonstrate.[69] So while later notable women ministers such as Hannah Kilham and Mary Dudley came to Quakerism via Anglicanism and Methodism, the tradition of public ministry predated them and stemmed from a distinct theology. The ministry of women within the climate of Quietist Quakerism is an area of research that still awaits systematic analysis.

Eighteenth-century Quakerism certainly continued to produce women who, whether as recorded ministers or not, challenged accepted roles for women at the time. Mary Birkett Card used the phrase 'Mother of Israel' to refer specifically to Quaker women, and the idea gained a wider cultural currency with the Evangelical Revival.[70] All of this evidence suggests that theories of entirely separate spheres fails adequately to take into account individual Quaker women's specific circumstances in everyday life. Jennings points out that it is important to distinguish between attitudes, practices, standards, and spiritual expressions associated with women ministers, since these practices and expressions might have been different for devout women Friends, like Mary Morris Knowles, who were not called to minister. Jennings posits an intermediary, or social sphere, connecting and overlapping the private and public roles played by wealthy and visible Quaker women like Knowles.

CHANGING CONTEXTS AND PERCEPTIONS OF BRITISH QUAKER WOMEN IN THE LATE EIGHTEENTH AND EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURIES

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, important shifts began taking place in British Quakerism, fuelled by forces as diverse as the French Revolution and the growth of Evangelical Quakerism. The highly charged and protracted controversy surrounding the travelling American minister Hannah Barnard and her appearances before the London Yearly Meetings of 1800 and 1801 may be both a cause and symptom of these changes. James Jenkins, her contemporary, devotes over 40 pages to her actions in 1800 and 1801 in his recollections.[71] With the exception of Rob Alexander's recent study of *Democratic Quakers in the Age of Revolutions*,[72] there has been little work done since Jenkins on the impact of the Hannah Barnard controversy. The issues surrounding the controversy remain comparatively under-researched, so more research needs to be undertaken to understand it fully.

In 1807, Thomas Clarkson, the abolitionist, published *A Portrait of Quakerism* to acknowledge Quakers' importance in the campaign against the slave trade and to encourage their continued efforts in the fight against slavery. In this portrait, he bestowed on Quaker women a highly romanticised reputation, which both obscures a lived reality and sets up an ideal against which Quaker women of the period have tended to be compared. Quaker women were, Clarkson wrote, 'above everything

that is little and trifling', while their pursuits were 'rational, useful and dignified'.[73] Moreover, he asserts that they had that 'which no other body of women have', a 'public character' completely independent of their private lives.[74]

If Abiah Darby might be seen as an example of that superior, spiritually minded Quaker woman whose virtues Clarkson extolled, it was not a state she had been able to achieve, as he would have claimed, because she had 'but little to do with the Mammon of the world'.[75] Recent work on late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Quaker women indicates that engagement with the public sphere may not have been perceived as quite so separate from their private life as Clarkson portrayed. In *Quaker Women: Personal Life, Memory and Radicalism in the lives of Women Friends, 1780–1930*, for example, Sandra Stanley Holton concludes, that within each individual's history, the public and private were 'two mutually defining worlds', and that it is unhelpful to distinguish between those who remained in the domestic sphere and 'public' women as if they were 'two different kinds'.[76]

Examining the important bridging period between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Holton's pioneering study utilises the extensive manuscript collection of the Priestman–Bright–Clark circle. Her work illustrates the importance to these family networks of preserving their papers. She identifies an essentially female role among Quaker family networks, that of 'family correspondent'. In the early nineteenth century, Margaret Wood, 'Quaker spinster and shopkeeper' from Rochdale effectively inherited this role from her mother, becoming the family member responsible for sustaining

> the exchange of news, information and advice between the English branches of her family and those in the United States. This task she found irksome, believing herself to be ill suited to it. She undertook it, nonetheless, out of a wish that family bonds not be broken, and a deep sense that family memory, involving knowledge of genealogy, individual histories and particular places was important to leading a meaningful life. In recording and passing on such memory her letters also served to express her own clear sense of self as among the 'peculiar people' of the Society of Friends.[77]

This passage from Holton's family study highlights a number of important points. A sense of 'self' was subsumed within the wider religious culture. Because of the Quaker practice of endogamy, which continued until 1850, families were both tight-knit and geographically extensive; the flow of news readily crossed the Irish Sea and the Atlantic. The Quakers she studied taught all their children, boys and girls, to read and write, and the task of providing a written record was, on occasion, a duty for many women, for the reluctant writers like Margaret Wood as much as those like Mary Birkett Card and Mary Morris Knowles, for whom writing was much more of a creative pleasure as well as a religious experience.

There is still a great deal of scope to explore the extent to which eighteenth-century women's writings displayed a specifically gendered identity. There remain considerable problems in establishing how the different influences on the 'authorial voice' within the writings could be unravelled.[78] Within the parameters of a Quaker culture there was a range of literary styles to be found among women's writings. Moreover, Holton's work highlights the enormous potential of adopting the methodological perspective of micro-history in order to explore the family and social

networks which gave rise to these writings. Quakers certainly fall into that category of an atypical group with their own sub-culture, which, by its very peculiarity, offers insights both into individual Quakers and the wider culture, if only by emphasising the diversity of lived experience. The recounting of dreams may well also fall into this. Dreams were often very fully recorded in Quaker journals and have been explored as a means of understanding the psychology of Quakers.[79]

Quaker women of the nineteenth century, like those of the seventeenth, have been studied much more than the women of the eighteenth century. The activist leaders of the nineteenth century have especially attracted the attention of contemporary feminist scholars. Writing about American women Friends of the nineteenth century, sociologist Carol Stoneburner stresses that:

> contemporary feminist theological study of women's spirituality...remind(s) us that examination of the spiritual process of women should be separated out and silhouetted against the religious experience of males. Otherwise the male experience will be seen as normative and the particular insights of women may be lost.[80]

There was certainly a strong suggestion in these Quaker women's writings that they were writing not as individuals but as part of a 'peculiar people', and moreover a people who, regardless of gender, had 'God-given potential to respond to the divine otherness within their very being'.[81] In the process of self-searching, Stoneburner argues, 'ideas and feelings about the self are themselves transformed' so that 'where once there was isolation of self, there now became a relationship of self and other'.[82] There is, however, the paradox that the inner struggle to submit oneself to the divine presence within exposed the individual to 'a considerable amount of distressing self-knowledge', some of which inevitably was transmitted onto the page.[83] For example, as Stoneburner observes, the tone of some of the writing sometimes seems to belie a 'sectarian righteousness' intended to 'shame the larger culture'.[84]

A danger in the feminist perspective is to exaggerate both the common goals and the autonomy of Quaker women and to ignore the specific context. Teakle rightly warns readers to be cautious about the 'concept of a female tradition' that 'presupposed a shared perspective' across periods and cultures.[85] Nevitt, too, warns, as noted earlier, that focusing on feminist agency may unintentionally privilege radical activities by women and mask other female writings and experiences.

On the other hand, it is important to note that throughout the late eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, writings of British Quaker women were still subject to censorship and/or severe editing by the Second Day's Morning Meeting. The seven manuscript volumes of journals of London Quaker, Margaret Hoare Woods (1748–1824), for example, were condensed into a single published volume of *Extracts*. According to the introduction, the publication was 'restricted to devotional material...intended for the edification of other Quakers' when first published in 1829.[86]

For early nineteenth-century women, Quaker faith was not simply an accident of birth or a habit. Well-known reformer Elizabeth Gurney Fry (1780–1845) wrote in her journal when she resolved to become a plain Quaker, 'I know now what the mountain is I have to climb. *I am to be a quaker*'.[87] Women who clearly adhered to

the discipline of the Society and separated themselves from the prevailing culture behind their 'hedge', had not thereby washed their hands of wider society. Their involvement in campaigns against the slave trade and slavery, and other reform movements, illustrates how, as Stoneburner suggests, an 'outward struggle to transform society' remained the obverse of an 'inner struggle to be responsive to the light within'.[88]

The lives and writings of eighteenth-century British Quaker women provide insights into the schisms that shattered Quaker unity in the nineteenth century. The work of Teakle and Jennings, published here, highlights the influence of Deism on Quakers in Ireland and England in the late eighteenth century. Gil Skidmore, on the other hand, traces the growing influence of Evangelicalism in British Quakers in the early nineteenth century, notably in her edition of Elizabeth Fry's writings.[89] Both influences were to cause friction and fracture among Quakers. It could be argued that in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it was fear of Deism that was the more notable source of division, at first in Ireland, and eventually in the United States leading to the Great Separation in 1827. But the growing Evangelical emphasis on Scriptural authority was integral to the divisions too. The ways in which the issues impacted on women's ministry would be a fruitful line of further research.

CONCLUSION

As this brief survey shows, focusing on recent scholarship concerning eighteenth-century Quaker women not only fills important gaps in historical understanding but also raises new questions about eighteenth-century Quakerism. These glimpses suggest that eighteenth-century British Quakerism is more vibrant and complex than the earliest histories suggest, and in spite of some of the more recent useful work, there is still more to do. Most notably, there is an inadequate understanding of the predominant, but not exclusive, Quaker Quietism of the period.

The lives and writings of Mary Birkett Card and Mary Morris Knowles, explored in the two following articles in this issue, serve to illustrate the range of rich evidence available. These case studies reinforce the need for further research into other women's writings, both published and manuscript, in order to facilitate a clearer understanding of the issues. The life and writings of Abiah Darby suggests a particularly rich line of research concerning the ways in which Quaker women supported each other and sustained their faith through their family and the wider religious networks. Understanding the lived experiences and theological practices of women like these also contributes to understanding the different theological and ideological strands that developed and coexisted within eighteenth-century British Quakerism and the diverse ways of living as a faithful Quaker woman.

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