

1999

Review Article - Recent Publications in Quaker Studies

Farah Mendlesohn
Middlesex University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/quakerstudies>



Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), and the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mendlesohn, Farah (1999) "Review Article - Recent Publications in Quaker Studies," *Quaker Studies*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 4.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/quakerstudies/vol4/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quaker Studies by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

Review Article - Recent Publications in Quaker Studies

Farah Mendlesohn
Reviews Editor
Middlesex University

Quaker Studies 4 (1999):68-81

Quaker studies is a disparate and varied field. Like many a new area of research it suffers from a lack of contact between researchers and the inability of all but a select few to make a career in the field. As a consequence, excellent work may go unnoticed and unreported because the individual author is not part of any national association or academic network or because the absence of scholarly interest in the field means that many texts are published by small presses and come to light only in the rarefied atmosphere of Friends House book shop. The mission of Quaker Studies to provide a forum for new scholarship, and to keep our readers in touch with the work done in other disciplines. As part of this mission we hope in the future to publish an annual critical essay which will offer a round up of the years work in Quaker studies. However, it will not be the policy of this section to review substantially unrevised new editions, so although, for example, Larry Ingle's Quakers in Conflict (Ingle 1998) is a welcome reprint, it will not be considered as part of the recent output in Quaker studies. This year we have chosen to begin with a retrospective of some of the more interesting work available while at the same time considering some of the issues which face the discipline.

In the past few years history, of one sort or another, has dominated the field and although we hope that the journal will encourage research in other areas, this is reflected in the material submitted. The quality of this material, however, has been hugely variable. One of the problems which plagues Quaker studies is hagiography. Usually produced by small presses, this type of work is distinguished not merely by its uncritical attitude but also its tendency to drown the reader in uncontextualised names, convinced that they will share the authors enthusiasm. We received two such books this year.

Joy Thacker's self published, *Whiteway Colony: The Social History of a Tolstoyan Community* is of rather more interest to Quaker scholars than one might at first glance imagine, as it provides a great deal of contextual evidence for the changes taking place in British Quakerism at the turn of the century. Despite its devotion to lists of names and a series of often uncontextualised events, what remains fascinating is the inadvertent portrayal of the embourgeoisement of a colony set up by people devoted to cooperative living and a socialistic ideal. Inadvertant because Thacker sees her book as a celebration of community living.

Thacker's book is far more revealing in the information that it presents rather than in its conscious analysis, for example, from the main narrative we learn that the colony worked hard to survive, but only from a child's diary do we learn that this was borderline starvation: the colony was subsisting on raw wheat rather than bread. Equally, although we learn that Whiteway was split from Purleigh, an earlier colony, over the issue of open access to the colony, and was set up with the principle that those most in need would receive preference for the places, a number of people left because they could not afford the 'rent' for their place in the colony. Chapter five in particular gives a rather unattractive picture of the colony. The colony in the twenties (when money had been reinstated), seems to have

been riven with social snobbery (an apparently gypsy woman was accepted when her voice betrayed her as 'cultured', possibly racial prejudice (a Muslim man seems to have been the focus of much stress) and certainly the strains of an internal capitalist economy in which small deeds even for children could result in large bills. The overall picture is one of priggish unkindness and infighting. It is also clear that with colonists adhering to different standards of property ownership, a great deal of pilfering took place. Only occasionally did colonists take the logical stand in an anarchy and interfere to protect their 'property' such as when one colonist killed another's chickens to prevent them destroying the tithe crop. As far as I can tell from the text, every co-operative venture rapidly descended into individual enterprise, whether smallholding, artisanship, or the role of a small independent trader. While the community may have succeeded in living the 'simple' life, they were rarely more co-operative than the average suburban community, and considering the contractual nature of many of their transactions, perhaps less so. By the end of the 1970s they had succeeded in re-inventing the leasehold (although the author does not realise this) and were suffering the divisive effects of the motor car. By the end, this is a community recognisable to anyone who has seen the gated compounds of suburban America: no more, no less.

While Thacker's text suffers from a lack of critical analysis, it remains extremely useful to anybody interested in communitarianism. Mary Jones Langford's *The Fairest Isle: A History of Jamaica Friends* (1997) contains less to redeem it. The *Fairest Isle* is sadly the sort of book I have come to expect in the mass of Quaker history: interest starts to wane rapidly when you realise this is simply a strictly chronological account of which missionaries arrived where, with whom and to take up which practical projects. Even this is limited in its use by the absence of an index: it would be almost impossible for a serious researcher to make use of this text -

perhaps to trace the work of a single missionary - without being forced to read it in its entirety.

Of serious concern is the author's failure to realise when she may have found something of interest and worth sharing. We are told, for example, that the self-produced journal *Friends Jamaica Mission* - produced from 1898 - demonstrated 'novelty and excitement', (Langford 1997:39) but we are given no access to it and if it has been used as a source to explore the community life of the mission stations there is no evidence of this. Also lacking from this text is any exploration of what Friends actually thought or did in Jamaica: there is no consideration of the theology they imparted (although we know it was evangelical), no discussion of how they fitted into the wider context of missiology of the period and where they stood in the debate over whether or not to nurture a home grown church. Nor is there any discussion of the extent to which they sought to live within the Jamaican communities they chose - all major issues to missionaries of other denominations. Changes of policy are mentioned but what analysis is offered is rarely more than one line, and one is always tempted to ask, 'what evidence do you have for these assertions?'. Although racism is mentioned briefly, Langford sustains no close consideration or analysis which might help us know what this meant and how Friends dealt with it. Her suggestion (1997:143) that paternalism rather than racism might have been behind the failure of missionaries to yield control to a younger, largely indigenous generation, suggests that she herself may not be too clear on what this meant. A serious absence is the presence of the missionized themselves. Perhaps there are no useful records that would provide such insight, but then this ought to be recorded. As it is, the Jamaicans are almost entirely absent from the earlier half of the text even where their achievements might have illuminated and celebrated the efficacy of the missionaries. Chapter Six, however (which one suspects may have once stood alone as an article) offers some serious analysis of context and implementation of the policies of the

Friends, their interaction with their 'target audience' and some of the consequences inherent in their failure to disassociate themselves with the colonial power and the cultural standards of America. As the text moves on into the late twentieth century and begins to explore Quaker interactions with the government, more of Quaker social thought becomes evident through the shifts in policy and approach to education, and the choices in matters of employment. However, despite this, the books does provide Quaker scholars with a general outline of Jamaican history, and does it rather well.

One concluding note is necessary. The front cover of this book credits its authorship to Mary Jones Langford. The frontispiece, however, credits Bill Wagoner as one of the authors although his contribution appears to be in the form of an epilogue which suggests that the book was, in fact, begun by Glen Vincent and left incomplete by his death. Although Glen Vincent's 'help' is credited in the acknowledgments, if he did indeed begin the research and (possibly) contribute to the manuscript, some greater acknowledgement of authorship is required. In contrast, while Rasmussen's book (see below) was completed after her death by her husband, he generously takes no credit on the cover. If this seems a minor quibble, I have never recovered from, as an undergraduate, realising that an author's thanks to his wife for acting as interpreter and translator while he gathered material for his book (on Japan) meant that she should, at the very least, have been credited as its co-author. Give credit where it is due and let us have some truthful accreditations.

A sharp contrast to Langford's text is offered by Ane Marie Bak Rasmussen's *Modern African Spirituality* (1996). Rasmussen's book is published by British Academic Press. *Modern African Spirituality* is a sequel to an earlier work *The Quaker Movement in Africa* (1995). The book ably explores the consequences of the emergence of an indigenous church and the subsequent schism which took place as local African needs took over. Unlike

This Fairest Isle this is clearly an account of local agency and adaptation. Apart from the general interest it presents to Friends in terms of the development of a still recognisably Quaker Church, its real fascination lies in Rasmussen's account and analysis of the original schism and what it reveals of the American Friends Church in the early twentieth century. The first schism was caused by the successful endeavours of a mid-Western Friend to trigger a revival. Although he left for home after two short years his impressive preaching rippled outwards, creating a Holy Spirit movement among the poorest and least important of the members of the African Friends Mission Church. The movement itself is of interest, but what particularly fascinates is the account of the persecution meted out to the schismatics. Not content with expulsion of these renegades, the members of the mission church began following them to their churches and to their homes, attacking and beating them in the hope of securing a recantation. While one cannot not always assume that Quakers will be on the side of right, one is accustomed to assuming that they will be on the side of peace. As Rasmussen demonstrates, apparently not.

The interesting effect of reading so many seemingly unrelated texts together is the unexpected connections one makes. It seems unlikely that Leo Damrosch's *The Sorrows of the Quaker Jesus* (1996)(a consideration of the meaning of James Nayler's actions at Bristol and their impact on the Society of Friends) would offer much insight into modern African Holy Spirit Churches, but the connections spring out: Rasmussen's African schismatics may have more in common with Damrosch's early Friends than do their twentieth century British and American descendants.

An unabashed literary scholar, Damrosch states from the beginning that his object is not a biography, but a careful consideration of Nayler's own writings and those of his contemporaries. In particular, he offers a welcome analysis of the documents of Nayler's trial itself. However, his self-identity

within his discipline notwithstanding, this is a superb piece of historical reconstruction.

Damrosch's book is a revisionist account of the entry of James Nayler into Bristol, in which he decisively rejects the accusations of messianic delusion and the assertions of exceptionalism. Instead, he offers an account in which an increasingly conservative regime, while recognising the symbolism of Nayler's actions, used it to comprehensively reject the threatening anti-nomianism for which it stood. Damrosch's study goes beyond a simple recontextualisation of Nayler, however. In studying Nayler's followers he points out some aspects of early Quakerism which overturn the conventional understandings. In considering Martha Simmons, one of Nayler's followers for example, he points out that while Quakers encouraged women to prophecy, this was acceptable only when it was directed outside the group. If a woman was presumptuous enough to criticise the male leaders of the movement, she automatically opened herself to accusations of self promotion and of a disputatiousness that proved she had 'lost the power.' (1996:133). Further, Damrosch argues that in the rush to distance themselves from Nayler, Friends rejected the Pentecostalism which acquired them the name Quaker. becoming instead 'a peaceable people' in word as well as deed. To achieve this, however, the Friends were forced to rewrite their own history and began a trend which survived for the next two hundred years, of simply expunging from the record those who no longer walked with them and ideas they found embarrassing. Perhaps Damrosch's most interesting assertion, however, is that much of what happened at Bristol was the result of the common language of Protestants used in differing ways: (1997:151) combined with the then (and even now) unfamiliarly erotic nature of early Quaker writings, the symbolic gesturing of Nayler was an alarm signal to an already seriously concerned magistracy. Most tellingly, Damrosch argues that Nayler's trial provided not only an opportunity for Parliament to pounce on the more radical sects but that it also proved a useful site for

Parliament to contend with the Protectorate for constitutional, legal and moral authority: to turn themselves, from radical revolutionaries into the truths defenders. As with Cristine Levenduski's *Peculiar Power: A Quaker Woman Preacher in Eighteenth Century America* (1996), this book seeks to offer a way into contemporary concerns: to make the religious as immediate as the political with which it was intertwined.

Cristine Levenduski proceeds from much the same assumptions as Damrosch. She, too, is attempting to contextualise the life of an individual Quaker, but in Levenduski's case she has far less material to work with. In the absence of a resource equivalent to Nayler's writings and the transcripts of the court cases, she is forced to rely on a solitary piece of biographical writing which covers only a short period of her chosen subjects life, and the inadequacy of this is all too evident. Although theoretically the book is supposed to be about the life of Elisabeth Ashbridge, an eighteenth century American Friend, Levenduski is forced to spend far much time examining the place of Quakers in contemporary American society in order to obscure the paucity of material. Her final chapter, in fact, is a simple consideration of the portrayal of Quaker women in literature of the following century. the relevance of which is not clear. Further, Levenduski attempts to wring more truth from the scanty autobiography through a comparison with the contents of other spiritual writings and other narratives. Failing to find meaningful similarities she concludes that Ashbridge's writings were unique, but as she fails to examine other contemporaneous female genres - captivity narratives are remarkably similar in content and tone - the conclusion is unconvincing.

This is not to say that Levenduski's analysis is untenable but the success of her work is dependent on ones attitude to the concept of liminality. Levenduski is clear on the difficulties of using autobiography: in fact it is these difficulties which offer her the most promising lines of enquiry as she negotiates Ashbridge's negotiations between public and private life, with

similarly mixed success. This is essentially psycho- history: a search for conversion motives in fatherlessness, itinerancy and betrayal. It is as valid as any other textual interpretative technique, but it ultimately distracts from both the hard evidence and the subjects sense of self. Thus, while the reconstruction of history is good, this is a work of literary analysis and should be approached as such, despite its packaging. Its most interesting focus is on the influence which gender conventions had on the subject's conversion and accommodation to Quakerism: the comparisons with Woolman are both interesting and instructive, particularly when considering the respective roles which matters of dress and luxury played in their lives.

Traditionally, the Quaker autobiography records the subjects growth into grace, a self reflective process which both Levenduski and Damrosch explore. *A Pilgrimage of Grace: The Diaries of Ruth Dodds* edited by Maureen Callcott (1995), offers just such an autobiography and, incidentally, demonstrates what small presses do very well: making available to researchers and the general reader interesting and insightful primary material.

Although the early sections of the biography are of only marginal interest to the Quaker scholar, Grace Dodds' adulthood offers much. Dodds was a socialist as well as a Quaker, active in the Independent Labour Party and as a voluntary social worker. She was passionately attached to the cause of women and children but always had time to spare for her particular concern, the life of the pitman, sometimes to the detriment of her own well being: a dispute with her brother over the righteousness of the General Strike of 1926 led to her leaving the family business. What makes the biography stand out, however, is her refreshing honesty about the difficulty of being a Friend, with all the small lapses, luxuries and selfishnesses which attend to the process of growth. On a wider level, this is one of the few Quaker texts of which I am aware which questions the value of the peace

offered by Chamberlain and which expresses true ambivalence when the Second World War breaks out. In the end, this is a very lovely read about a woman who was very interesting in a very ordinary way. Watching her change and develop, growing into grace, is a real pleasure; we can clearly see Dodds the Quaker begin to emerge. This contrasts interestingly with George McClelland's *Embers of War* (1997), a book which provide insight into the perplexed question as to whether it is possible to do Quaker work without the motivation of Quaker conviction.

A very well edited collection of letters from a FAU worker (1945-47), *Embers of War* is of interest, principally, as a comparative text to the letters of Quakers working directly for FSC at other times. This collection, although clearly reflecting the authors interest in peace and reconciliation, lacks the Quakerly passion for other people and for the life of the spirit which has jumped out at me from relief letters of all periods: for example, he clearly does not hesitate in using prison and the threat of prison to secure co-operation from those PoWs he is trying to assist, a complete rejection of the 'mutuality' which Friends' relief workers are usually so anxious to emphasise. Occasionally I am asked to explain why FAU work is not, strictly speaking, Quaker work. Beyond a simple organisational explanation, McClelland's letters go some way to illuminating the spiritual differences.

In addition to publishing collections of letters and diaries, the other invaluable service which small presses often perform is the publication of local histories. Brian Hawkins' *Taming the Phoenix: Cirencester and the Quakers, 1642 - 1686* (1998) is one such very welcome contribution to the field. There is no index, the most common problem with non-academic presses and this reduces the academic utility of this book, but despite this it is an extremely well researched, well written account of Cirencester in the mid-seventeenth century. Taking as its focus a particular family, the Haywards, and a document left by one scion of that family, Hawkins

succeeds in using them as a window into his chosen world, without ever succumbing to romanticism or unwarranted speculation. He is particularly successful in demonstrating how political turmoil in the wider world had its impact on the provincial lives of Cirencester and its inhabitants (a little bit as if someone wrote the history of the poll tax from the point of view of Somerset Womens Institute - a task I hope someone will take up) and exploring why the inhabitants of Cirencester might have been willing to enlist with Parliament in the Civil War only to become disillusioned later. It is here that the Quakers enter the picture as Hawkins begins to describe how splits within the army, the treatment of the Burford mutineers and a general cynicism and loss of belief in the possibility of a new social order sent many, including our protagonist, John Hayward, seeking for Truth elsewhere. Hawkins very ably links his Hayward family into the Quaker 'underground', and demonstrates how this involved the Hayward family directly in the political disputes of the day. Much of the hardship John Hayward endured is familiar to students of Quaker history, but this very individual account succeeds in divesting the foundation stories of the air of legend which inevitably accompanies oft repeated generalisations. This is a story of alliances to be made and choices to be taken as the Hayward family divested themselves of involvement with the world and created new social networks and supports. As Hawkins asserts: 'To understand this incipient movement as a religious sect in any modern sense would be quite anachronistic.' (1998:112) What Hawkins is describing of his Cirencester family is common to any newly emerging revolutionary movement, guaranteeing neither success or failure.

Although lacking the sophistication of Damrosch, Hawkins demonstrates nicely the means by which early Friends came to terms with the end of the Commonwealth and the emergence of a new political regime - to the extent that by 1679 they sat in Meeting to pray for guidance before casting their votes in the election of that year. Usefully for the Quaker historian, it

demonstrates the extent to which the treatment of the early Friends was bound up with the interests of local elites rather than central politics, as a threatened and fearful squirearchy looked to reaffirm its authority. If there is a flaw in this book, it is in the implicit assumption that memoirs are an utterly reliable source of evidence. While Hawkins has corroborated most of the major events, reported conversations are laid down unquestioningly. Even given the early Friends' insistence on absolute truth-speaking, a memoir written late in life is likely to be coloured by fond memory.

Although a number of the works reviewed above have been very enjoyable, Hans A. Schmitt's *Quakers and Nazis* (1997) is the pick of recent works in Quaker studies. To begin with it is written by a professional historian who knows how to construct his evidence into that most elusive of styles, the critical, analytical narrative. Further, Schmitt has the ability to encompass significant numbers of characters without either losing his audience in confusion, boring them with irrelevancies, or distracting from the story and analysis to be told. Admittedly, Schmitt has a compelling story to tell, the history of Quaker activities, in Germany, Holland and Austria in the inter-war years, during the rise of Hitler and throughout the war years, but it could very easily have turned into a fairly standard Quaker hagiography which related only the tales of heroism. Instead Schmitt, who was himself a beneficiary of Quaker heroism, portrays a warts and all picture, from the Dutch Friends whose commitment to truth may have sent nine young Jewish students to die (one of these Friends died reciting their names to the last), to the Viennese Quakers who refused to associate themselves with the Vienna Quaker Centre and staunchly insisted on the separateness of Quaker religion from the worldly turmoil around them. Yet it is Schmitt's commitment to a Quakerly truth which makes this such a powerful book. Superbly researched and movingly written it is a testimony to a people under trial who refuse to accept that neutrality and passivism mean nonintervention and who accept that each can only make decisions for themselves. It never pulls punches,

dealing with Quaker involvement with appeasement as rigorously as it illuminates the work German Friends undertook to secure the release of individuals from concentration camps. Particularly valuable is Schmitt's attempt to explain why the Quakers were left almost untouched during the war years.

References

- Callcott, M., ed., *A Pilgrimage of Grace: the diaries of Ruth Dodds, 1905 - 1974*. Bewick Press, 1995.
- Damrosch, L. *The Sorrows of the Quaker Jesus: James Nayler and the Puritan Crackdown on the Free Spirit*. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Hawkins, B. *The Taming of the Phoenix: Cirencester and the Quakers, 1642 - 1686*. York: Sessions, 1998.
- Ingle, L. *Quakers in Conflict: The Hicksite Reformation*. Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1998.
- Langford, M.J. *The Fairest Isle: History of Jamaica Friends*. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1997.
- Levenduski, C. *Peculiar Power: A Quaker Woman Preacher in Eighteenth Century America*. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996.
- McClelland, G. *Embers of War: Letters from a Quaker Relief Worker in War-torn Germany*. London: British Academic Press, 1997.
- Rasmussen, A. M. *Modern African Spirituality: the independent Holy Spirit Churches in East Africa, 1902-1976*. London: British Academic Press, 1996.
- , *A History of the Quaker Movement in Africa*. London: British Academic Press, 1995.
- Schmitt, H. A. *Quakers and Nazis: Inner Light in Outer Darkness*:

Columbia, MI: University of Missouri Press, 1997.
Thacker, J. *Whiteway Colony: The Social History of a Tolstoyan Community*. Self- published, 1997.

Mailing Address:

Farah Mendlesohn, 22 Addington Road, Reading RG1 5PT, England,
e-mail: farah@fjm3.demon.co.uk)