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## A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO ELIAS HICKS

PAUL BUCKLEY

Elias Hicks is certainly the best known of the characters associated with the separations among Friends in the United States in the 1820s. Unfortunately, much of what is “known” is untrue. This is the result of two sets of activities. First, his opponents selectively reported what he said and, to a degree, distorted it to demonstrate his unsoundness. Second, his supporters scrubbed what he wrote of anything that might embarrass his memory before publishing his journal and a book of his letters. My goal in putting out new editions of his journal and letters was to allow the man to speak for himself. Some of this work will please those who today call themselves Hicksites and some will not. Elias Hicks does not fit easily into our twenty-first-century categories—nor did he fit neatly into those of the early nineteenth-century. But, if we are to understand how the Religious Society of Friends came to its present shape, he is a man we need to engage and understand.

Although his life’s work was to travel widely in the ministry—preaching both among Friends and to “the world”—the three most significant things about Elias Hicks took place on Long Island. First, he was born in 1748, just as the 18th-century reformation of American Quakerism was gathering steam. This set a model in his mind for the way the Society of Friends was supposed to be. For Hicks, true Christianity and Quakerism were the same. God called Friends uniquely to be a light unto the Gentiles and other so-called Christians are just that, Gentiles. To fulfill that calling, Quakers had to meticulously maintain a hedge between themselves and the world. Things like using plain speech or wearing plain clothes were peculiarities—not in the sense of that they were somewhat strange, but as things peculiarly required of Friends by God. This set Quakers apart and made them the object of ridicule. As a measure of how much Hicks embraced separation and confrontation with those without the society, he noted with regret that in his day, being a Quaker was no longer a name of reproach among men! (*Journal*, p. 93)

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The second critical turning point came in his late teens. Up to then, his life had been ungrounded. He received some formal education before his mother died, but little, if any, afterwards. He spent a wild youth, racing horses, playing cards, and, in his mind worst of all, singing. He was apprenticed to a non-observant Quaker and may well have ended up an equally non-observant, itinerant carpenter, but on a dance floor, “the pure witness rose so powerfully in his mind, and so clearly set before him the evil tendency of the course he was pursuing, that he reasoned not with flesh and blood, but gave up to the heavenly vision, and in deep contrition and prostration of soul, entered into covenant with the God of his life” (*Journal*, p. 9). In short, he was born again.

Third is the single most important outward event in the life of Elias Hicks—his marriage to Jemima Seaman in 1771. He reported that his marriage “established my membership” (*Letters*, p. 180). It also gained him a farm sufficient not only to support a growing family, but also to provide the wherewithal for him to travel widely in the ministry. Even more important, it matched him with “the fullness of comfort and joy that the best of wives could be to a husband” (*Journal*, p. 437) and a woman fully capable of running the farm during his frequent absences. Without Jemima, I don’t think we would ever hear about Elias. These three events set the stage for a career as a traveling minister.

In his writings, you will find Elias Hicks to be neither the kindly saint his original editors wished him to be nor the dastardly meddler of his opponents’ imaginings. He’s not even a Hicksite! Just a man dedicated to following the will of God as best he can discern God’s will, no matter the consequences.

Paul Buckley, ed. *The Journal of Elias Hicks*. San Francisco, CA: Inner Light Books, 2009.

Paul Buckley, ed. *Dear Friend: Letters and Essays of Elias Hicks*. San Francisco, CA: Inner Light Books, 2011.