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QUAKERS, SLAVERY, AND RACIAL JUSTICE—TWO REVIEWS

C. WESS DANIELS

Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship: Quakers, African-Americans, and the Myth of Racial Justice, by Donna McDaniel and Vanessa Julye (Philadelphia: Quaker Press 2009)

In many ways, *Fit for Freedom* is a landmark in Quaker studies. As a historical resource, it is not only massive, but it is as comprehensive as anything Quakers have when it comes to the narrative of its tradition's interactions, engagement, and struggle to bring about racial justice in the Western world. McDaniel and Julye have offered a gift with all of the stories and landmark events they survey in Quakerdom. Quakers have too often been self-congratulatory when it comes to their history around modern slavery and its abolition, and *Fit for Freedom* works to "muddy the waters" of that narrative and show that the actual history is far more complex. While the authors happily recognize the many positive features of Quakers' working to end slavery, that same history is also fraught with contradictions, failed attempts, and disagreements over how best to bring about its abolition.

For instance, I was interested to read about the debates over gradualist and immediatist positions of 19th century Quakers such as, Angelina and Sarah Grimke, and Charles Osborn who aided the work of William Lloyd Garrison, himself an immediatist and editor of the newspaper, *The Liberator*. Debates around such issues as: whether the political system, which many took to be utterly corrupt, should be utilized to abolish slavery; the role of clergy and whether they should allow the political dissenters to meet within their church buildings and meetinghouses; the role of women in abolitionist work (79-81); and whether Quakers should join with other non-Quaker groups to assist in abolition (when in all likelihood those non-Quaker groups might utilize non-Quaker means to bring about the end of slavery (cf. 85), created real crises among Friends. Unsurprisingly, Friends went both ways on these issues and subsequently disagreed on how to be

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involved in the Civil War. Nonetheless, *Fit for Freedom* tells the story of how many Friends did find ways, appropriate to their consciences, to participate.

The story is marred by the fact that Friends, while working for political abolition, were ironically not as quick to befriend the very same people they helped gain freedom. Here, the second part of the book's title stings with prophetic pointedness. *Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship*, is also a narrative about the still-rising need for the abolition of racism and classism among Friends in later generations. Clearly, this less-than-congratulatory thread makes this part of the history harder to read. Nevertheless, it remains a necessary part of the tale and offers Quakers a challenging task for today. Just as Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* amplifies the voices of those who are often unheard or ignored in our country's history, *Fit for Freedom* amplifies those same voices within Quakerism's own ranks (and they are there!).

The facts that Friends have not always done well at reaching out to our African-American brothers and sisters, and for a long time practiced segregation within our own meetings (cf. 182-83; 198), are a part of our muddled history. This tenuous relationship is evident, among many places, in the histories of Quaker educational institutions. While a number of Quaker schools were set up as Black-only schools, and other 'integrated' schools had very few, if any, African-American students starting out, there were others like Walter Malone's Cleveland Bible Institute that were far better at reaching out; "Between 1884 and 1894 the Malone's brought as many as three hundred people of African descent into Quakerism." (202) While it is not at all surprising that Quakers have not always been a part of the solution to racism in America, it is an invitation to continue searching out those places in Quakerism today where the language of inclusion is more pronounced than is the actual conduct. Reading *Fit for Freedom* is an invitation, as Cornel West says, "not just to be informed but to be transformed." (xviii)

I found *Fit for Freedom* to be well documented, clear, and an engaging read. Some reviewers have remarked that the tone of the book is negative, and thus undermines the project, but I think this is largely because we are used to reading historical accounts written from a majority perspective, as though neutrality or objectivity were possible. McDaniel and Julye's work is simply more upfront about its approach and the subjectivity that attends their research. And, while I

found the opening and closing chapters to be challenging, and found some of the language around labeling ethnicities overly mechanical, these are minor detractions in the larger scope of the book, and as a whole I believe it reads as well as any standard and well-written historical account. There is much for Friends to be proud of with this history, but it is not a perfect past, and people have been hurt in the process. I think the authors go a long way to make their point without it becoming propagandist. Friends have done a lot of work in this area, but the work is not yet done; we are thus invited to move out of our enclaves and befriend those we believe to be our equals.

***Black Fire: African American Quakers on Spirituality and Human Rights*, edited by Harold D. Weaver, Jr., Paul Kriese, Stephen W. Angell (Philadelphia: Quaker Press 2011)**

Black Fire: African American Quakers on Spirituality and Human Rights is the perfect companion to *Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship*. I read *Black Fire* before reading *Fit for Freedom* and found that it gave me a deeper connection to some of the stories and events that McDaniel and Julye write about. *Black Fire* is a compendium of writings from African American Quakers, beginning with Benjamin Banneker (1731-1806), a farmer and author of an *Almanac*, who had connections to but never joined the Society, all the way up to Bill Sutherland (1918-2010), a Friend who worked in Africa for almost thirty years, where he advocated for non-violence and worked with AFSC, among other organizations.

The eighteen African-American Friends they survey covers many topics including writings about Quaker worship, prayers, songs and poems, letters to draft boards, interviews about relationships between European American and African American Quakers, and essays about Civil Rights.

There is a richness and depth in this book that took me by surprise. For instance, “Sojourner Truth’s Song” is absolutely heartbreaking:

I pity the slave mother, careworn and weary,
 Who sighs as she presses her babe to her breast;
 I lament her sad fate, all so hopeless and dreary,
 I lament for her woes, and her wrongs unredressed.
 O who can imagine her heart’s deep emotion,

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As she thinks of her children about to be sold;
You may picture the bounds of the rock-girdled ocean,
But the grief of that mother can never be told. (24-25)

Or Helen Morgan Brooks's prayer, 'Revelation':

I too bear record and testify to the things that I saw. Praying
all Saints and our Father in Heaven to have mercy on all little
people, all hopeless ones, all hired hands, all share croppers,
all tired washer women, all scrub women, the carriers of the
hod, the laborers with pick and shovel, all menials, all who are
rejected, all derelicts, all the abandoned... (140)

These are the voices of our brothers and sisters who speak of
experiences unknown to most of us. Their words offer Friends the gift
of listening to the stories and experiences of so many unheard voices.

Black Fire will also challenge. A number of authors call European-
American Quakers to consider its blind spots and the resulting feeling
of isolation that many African-American Quakers experience in our
meetings (Mahala Ashley Dickerson, 191-192). Barrington Dunbar
was clearly a prophet sent to Friends and called them to account. One
challenging insight from Dunbar is when he suggests that a quick
reliance upon nonviolence comes from being isolated from the plight
of the poor. For Dunbar, Quakers have created "beautiful islands
which help individuals to develop but often aren't enough concerned
with the ugly world outside." (125) That's a euphemistic way of
saying that Friends are not practicing what they preach.

Finally, I could not help but read about Bayard Rustin without
thinking also about the backdrop of the Occupy movement, now
taking place around the world. There are many things "occupiers"
could learn from Friend Rustin (as Martin Luther King, Jr. did). And
how much further along would we be if Quakers had more Friends
like Rustin leading our work around injustice today? His writings
collected in *Black Fire* offer powerful guidance for a new generation of
Friends looking to bring about change within society while remaining
rooted within Jesus' teachings and the Quaker tradition:

We cannot convert nation-worship back to Christianity again
unless we care enough, unless we can believe that man is in
apprehension like a god, unless we are able so to revolutionize
and to discipline ourselves that those who behold us exclaim of
us, 'In action how like an angel!' unless like Jesus and Gandhi
we attain that spirit which makes it possible for us to stand with

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arms outstretched, even unto death, saying, “You can strike me, you may destroy my home, you may destroy me, but I will not submit to what I consider wrong, neither will I strike back.” (160)

In an address Rustin gave to the “Young Friends Movement,” he nicely sums up a deep truth both *Black Fire* and *Fit for Freedom* wish to leave Quakers with: “We cannot remain honest unless we are opposed to injustice wherever it occurs, first of all in ourselves.” (158)