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Abbott, Chijoke, Dandelion, & Oliver's "Historical Dictionmy of the Friends (Quakers)" - Book Review

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Heavilin’s own contribution, a 43-page Introduction, starting from the book’s subtitle quoting William Penn, summarises all the articles. The Heavilins are both graduates of Indiana Wesleyan University from which Barbara went on to teach at Taylor University, both solidly Evangelical, but via a Master’s degree at Ball State. Charles had gone on to Asbury Seminary, but then to Union Theological Seminary in Virginia and clinical pastoral training.

The cover and frontispiece reproduce a quilt of Lion and Lamb lying together in a cosmic field by Emily Cooper, Wilmer’s wife, which now hangs at Earlham School of Religion. It is unfortunate that the Mellen Press price for this attractive, Irene, but not heavily scholarly work, following its custom of passing on neither charges nor royalties to its authors, is $110.

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This is a very welcome and useful compendium of information on Friends worldwide. The introduction stresses the fact that the size of a movement is not necessarily an index of its influence, something that the volume seeks to bring out. For this format, however, the small size of the Society is quite a boon. It means that the coverage can be comprehensive in a way that would be hard for a larger group, although that itself brings out the surprising internal variety of the Society.

It is, quite deliberately I suspect, a dictionary of Friends, rather than of ‘Quakerism’, reflecting the inappropriateness of trying to define some common core of belief. The welcome appendices give a fascinating overview both of the evolution and the numbers of Friends and make the point that representing the diversity while reflecting the balance of numbers of particular groups is a well-nigh impossible task. Rightly, the emphasis has been more on the former than the latter for such a historical dictionary. The entries themselves, and the contributors, do represent a fair cross-section of the diversity of the Society.

One might argue that that very diversity means that ideally every single Friend since the 1650s should have his or her individual entry. That is of course impossible, although the projected Dictionary of Quaker Biography will go some way towards redressing the balance, but it serves to point up how easy a game it is for the reviewer of such a reference work to point out omissions and imbalances. In addition to the overall balance of entries, within short articles it is inevitable that similar questions can be raised, particularly where the articles touch on contentious issues or deal with well-known figures. Moreover, such a dictionary has to serve a very varied audience. It must give a clear and succinct introduction to each subject for those who know little about Friends and are using it as a first point of reference while still satisfying those who are very familiar with the Society, or at least one branch of it, and are seeking further information or a reminder of crucial facts.