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Vann & Eversley's "Friends in Life and Death: The British and Irish Quakers in the demographic transition, 1650-1900" - Book Review

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Quaker and the eponymous hero of some two dozen detective stories in the late nineteenth century. Broadbrim's affiliation to the Friends was recognizable not only by his hat but by the peculiarities of his speech; the association of these with sobriety, wisdom and the pursuit of justice conveyed a positive image. And in 1919 there was published in New York a dance tune that confirmed the notion of Friends as the bearers of grey habits, 'All the Quakers are Shoulder Shakers'. Neither these examples nor Moby Dick nor Uncle Tom's Cabin nor Kellogg's cereal packets are deeply explored in this volume, though it prompts such work to be undertaken.

Roger Homan
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This book by two distinguished historians in their particular fields, was first published in 1992 and its appearance in paperback is long overdue and will be welcomed by all of those who are involved in researching the Religious Society of Friends in Great Britain, Ireland and on the other side of the Atlantic. The authors have analyzed the life experiences of over 8,000 Quaker families to provide a painstaking reconstruction of Quaker populations in Britain. These they have compared with a variety of English and other populations to produce a work of great value to historians studying Friends either in a local or wider historical context, as well as to those engaged in family history. The work will also be of interest to those studying social history and demographic change in this period.

The period under consideration was one of unprecedented demographic change and Vann and Eversley consider the demography of a group of people whose distinctive life-style and religious beliefs set them apart from the general population. The study shows that these differences affected changes to the demography of Friends as a group. It shows that Quaker women in the nineteenth century were choosing not to marry in increasingly large numbers which has interesting implications for the history of Quaker women and for the history of women in general. This suggests that the distinctive values and beliefs of Friends not only altered women's perceptions of the importance of marriage but also may have affected their opportunities for marriage. It concludes that fertility rates for Quakers in the first one hundred years were fairly low and that the group barely reproduced itself. However, in the period 1750-1850, fertility rates rose significantly but this rise was mitigated by a rise in age at first marriage which was offset by a shorter interval between births despite the later age of women at marriage. The authors have considered geographic and environmental influences and show that this rise in fertility displays variations; fertility being higher in the cities but lower in the North-East of England. Professors Vann and Eversley demonstrate that the Irish Quakers were exceptionally fertile even when compared with other populations. At the same time as fertility was increasing, life-expectancy amongst