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Spielhofer's "Stemming the Dark Tide" and Mendlesohn's "Quaker Relief Work in the Spanish Civil War" - Book Review

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Spielhofer, S. *Stemming the Dark Tide* York: Sessions, 2001. pp. v + 171. ISBN 1 85072 267 6, Paper, £9

Mendlesohn, F. *Quaker Relief Work in the Spanish Civil War* (Series in Quaker Studies Vol. 1), Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002, pp. ix + 243. ISBN 0-7734-7276-2, Cloth; £69.95, \$109.95

In the age of NGO giants such as OXFAM and Christian Aid, the humanitarian enterprise is firmly fixed in the British public imagination. The politics, economics and ethics of various interventions by aid agencies are frequently discussed and written about by scholars, activists, journalists and others. There are even university courses aimed at preparing young humanitarian practitioners for more effective, responsible careers in the field (I teach on one such academic programme myself). But the two books under review here serve as a useful reminder that many of the conflicts, dilemmas and crises that provide grist to the contemporary humanitarian studies mill are anything but new. British and American Quakers engaged in humanitarian relief work between the two World Wars undertook their endeavours for good in a far less crowded field compared to today's bustling NGO marketplace. And yet the challenges they faced in riding out the political and economic storms of post-Habsburg Austria

and in the conflict-torn Spain of the late 1930s are strikingly similar to those encountered by their larger and better-resourced counterparts at the start of the twenty-first century.

With these two studies, Sheila Spielhofer and Farah Mendlesohn have made an enormously valuable contribution to the history of humanitarian work in the first half of the last century. Spielhofer is a confident, extremely capable storyteller – whose account of the creation of the Quaker International Centre in Vienna in the years following the First World War and the parallel development of a small community of Austrian Friends benefits greatly from her evident narrative skill. The imaginative ways in which a procession of Friends and others sought to tackle the intense economic deprivation and alleviate the effects of the acute social and political upheavals of the day are briskly and compellingly explored.

In what is arguably the most interesting strand of the book, Spielhofer examines the tensions that arose between international Friends and their local allies who piloted the Quaker Centre's relief initiatives and other social programmes and the emerging band of Austrian Quakers. Cautious about not appearing to be a proselytising new church in a conservative Catholic society, those who spearheaded the Quaker Centre programmes tended to concentrate on practical efforts to meet the needs of the hungry, the unemployed and the politically outcast while remaining relatively circumspect about the faith basis of their activities. At the same time, the fragile nucleus of an Austrian Quaker movement was seeking to establish and foster a more explicitly spiritual presence in their embattled society. Not surprisingly, there was much scope for misunderstanding and even conflict between these twin dimensions of Quaker life in the unstable, struggling inter-war republic. Quakers working in equally precarious or violent contexts today will recognise the terrain at once. How does one achieve a balance between witnessing as a member of a religious body and simply getting a difficult job done in adverse circumstances? How does one ensure that our work transmits some sort of genuine Quaker content while maintaining a non-threatening emphasis on what Quaker doctor Hilda Clark (writing in 1922 of her work in Vienna) called 'disinterested service and practical brotherhood'?

The author deftly underlines the numerous obstacles to the sustained growth of an indigenous Austrian Quaker movement, and her work finally raises fascinating questions about the viability of transplanting Quakerism outside its Anglo-Saxon cradle. Small, committed communities of Friends continue to meet in continental European countries today – and their place in the Quaker family is no less valid or valued for their size. But *Stemming the Dark Tide* does prompt reflection on whether the cherished Quaker notion of the immediate, obvious universality of the Quaker project is in certain respects something of a fiction. Spielhofer's rather abrupt ending to the book leaves the reader wishing for some sort of concluding analytical chapter which might have examined some of these broader implications of the story – but this superbly-told tale will hopefully stimulate these necessary conversations among Quaker activists and other humanitarians of our own time.

The landscape of Farah Mendlesohn's study of Quaker relief interventions in 1930s Spain will likewise strike contemporary NGO workers as more than a little familiar. The inter-agency disagreement between the Quakers and Save the Children over the most effective approach to working in a context of civil war and to confronting the attendant mass suffering is particularly resonant here. In the figure of Friends Service Committee representative Alfred Jacobs, who worked tirelessly in Barcelona during the period, one discovers a remarkable degree of correspondence with the ethos of Quaker work in present-day conflict or post-conflict situations. The Quaker insistence on what in current jargon would be described as 'empowerment' – working *with* rather than *for* local people; the engagement of local actors directly in programme work; grounding Quaker presence in personal relationships rather than the establishment of bureaucratic structures – is contrasted with what was then seen as Save the Children's more formal, self-consciously 'professional' style of field operation. The near-comic squabbling between the Quakers and the Mennonites over the branding of a vehicle used in relief work – the Mennonites keen to preserve their separate identity for the sake of their supporters back home even as they cooperated with Quakers in the field – will also have today's humanitarian practitioners howling with the laughter of recognition.

Mendlesohn's history also highlights the overwhelming significance of personality in humanitarian work – demonstrating powerfully how a single individual (as in the case of Alfred Jacobs) can frequently have a defining impact on the tone and the content of any given intervention. The book is especially illuminating with regard to what amounts to the sheer randomness of this aspect of the humanitarian enterprise – how very often the success or failure of such work depends on whoever happens to be available and at least partly qualified (Spanish-speaking Quakers or Quaker supporters in this instance) for the assignment at hand. In this vein, one of the real peaks of Mendlesohn's book is her account of the tensions around the leadership of the American Friends Service Committee's Howard Kershner – whose attempts to appear 'impartial' in his role strayed into a rather bizarre sympathy with the Franco regime.

Mendlesohn's narrative control of her material is perhaps a little less sure-footed than Sheila Spielhofer's, and the book contains abundant detail on matters such as flour distribution which is unlikely to hold the attention of the general reader. But these minor imperfections most likely arise from the work's origins as a doctoral thesis. Both books would have benefited hugely from the inclusion of an appendix containing capsule biographies of the many individuals introduced to the reader – particularly those who suddenly appear in the text itself with only sketchy background information attached. But in uncovering these two key episodes in Friends' tradition of international relief work, Mendlesohn and Spielhofer have added richly not just to the store of twentieth-century Quaker history – but to the wider history of civilian protection in wartime and post-conflict reconstruction as well.

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