Spielhofer's "Stemming the Dark Tide" and Mendlesohn's "Quaker Relief Work in the Spanish Civil War" - 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, Wilmers's wife, which now hangs at Earlham School of Religion. It is unfortunate that the Mellen Press price for this attractive, crem, but not heavily scholarly work, following in custom of passing on neither charges nor royalties to its author, is $110.

Hugh Barbour
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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. Rigthly, 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.

In this case, I have not found any glaring gaps and much material was new to me and interesting. My impression is that the contributors have generally steered an admirable course between repeating the accepted facts for those who may be new to a topic while retaining enough critical edge to put in question a number of standard interpretations. At times, compression does mean that some of the articles could strike an uninitiated reader as somewhat cryptic when larger issues are touched upon but not explored, but here the various appendices and other aids to the use of the dictionary should prove helpful.

I was pleased to see a good and comprehensive index, which, together with a thorough system of cross-referencing, means that a great number of topics can be followed through without unnecessary repetition of information. A particularly useful feature is the extensive and well-researched bibliography which is arranged under a number of heads such as geographical regions, particular testimonies and the biographies of individual Friends. This forms an excellent starting point for further inquiry and, incidentally, a good check-list for individuals and meetings who wish to build up a comprehensive Quaker library.

All in all, this is an excellent first port of call for those who wish to understand the breadth of the contemporary Religious Society of Friends and the historical underpinnings of that diversity and a handy reference point for those who may know more, but wish to check up on specific facts. The editors are to be congratulated on bringing together such a range of contributors and for the high standard of the entries and the appendices. I hope that the volume gets the exposure that it deserves.

Hugh S. Pyper
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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. Cautionous 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 in 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 hold 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 Kenner — 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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