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Skidmore's "Elizabeth Fry: A Quaker Life. Selected Letters and Writings" - Book Review

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brief look at Europe, but the result is that a polarised model emerges. A consideration of changing attitudes to reciprocity over the period might have provided a context. This is a complex project combining economic and cultural investigation. The case for the north-west is grounded in the area and archives that the author knows well. The detailed analysis in the area of the four towns appears convincing with regard to the redistribution of wealth. I have not researched the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in depth, so refrain from commenting on the assumptions of probability that have to be made, or on typicality. One can draw much from its presentation and in-depth examples, whether or not one accepts the argument fully. Charles Foster’s business experience gives him valuable insight into how small businesses became creatively involved in innovation and adaptation. When he uses his knowledge to suggest possible financial situations and outcomes he is careful to include appropriate caveats. In other matters, for example literacy, he sometimes slips into a generalisation that leaps too far.

The suggestion is made that, as families who worked for a living in the north-west grew wealthier, they became more independent, an attitude shown in their openness to Puritan religion and to the Quaker challenge to authority and rank. In saying this Foster is pointing to a state of mind within which Anglican, Dissenting or Catholic attitudes to work could interplay (although Catholics do not feature in this study). How one might identify and interpret this independence in relation to the development of business is as open to debate as the Weber thesis.

Quakers have a prominent place among the in-depth studies of the business society that was forming over 1650-1770. The eighteenth-century Hough family and their connections in the Warrington area, principally the Fothergills and Chorleys, are the subject of one chapter; two Quaker families feature in the account of sailcloth manufacturing around Northwich from 1556-1773, and there are some additional references. Foster is interested in these people for their shared standard of conduct and their networking. The chapter on the Houghs is particularly interesting, not only for the details of their finances, but also for the indication of activities and friendships outside the Quaker circle. Thomas Hough was a commissioner of the Weaver navigation. From the perspective of Quaker studies, Warrington stands out as an eighteenth-century focal point that could contribute to the understanding of many different aspects of Quaker history. Ian Seller’s recent history of Warrington accords the Quakers a lesser place. Readers may like to add to Foster’s modern references work by Ann Prior and Maurice Kirby.

There is another potential language puzzle in this chapter. It relates to the discussion of equality. For example, how is one to interpret that Quakers (who worked like everyone else primarily to provide for their family) ‘banded together to succeed in business so as to gain a way to a better world’?

There are some small points for future editions: the history journal is Journal of the Friends Historical Society; the phrase ‘Inward Light’ would be used at this period rather than ‘Inner Light’, and it would be very useful to have a list of manuscript sources at the head of the bibliography. Numerous maps and illustrations enhance both books.

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I have always thought of Elizabeth Fry’s writings as an important source for many aspects of nineteenth-century history, notably the treatment of offenders within the criminal justice system, the role of women in philanthropy and middle-class family life. What surprised me initially about this edition was its publication in co-operation with the International Sacred Literature Trust. It would not have occurred to me before to think of Fry’s writings as the kind of sacred text that fulfils the Trust’s hopes to open up understanding between faiths and to transform the contemporary world.
Readers are not expected to try to understand these writings without some sense of context, and accordingly there is an introduction by Gil Skidmore, who has also selected and edited the passages reproduced. That introduction, of necessity, has to take us through Quaker history at breakneck speed, often conflating developments. Skidmore offers a wonderfully clear, succinct and moving exposition of insights concerning the Inward Light, conviction and the vitality of Quaker worship. Her explanation of the divisions among Quakers in terms of ‘plain’ and ‘gay’ resonates perfectly with Fry’s own categorisation. Nevertheless, I found it frustrating that this introduction did not give more attention to the context of the rapidly growing Evangelical Movement that was gaining a new respectability in early nineteenth-century Britain, and all that stemmed from that both for the Society of Friends and for perceptions of the ‘dangerous classes’ who were to become Fry’s vocation.

In the ‘note on the text’, Skidmore explains that her selections come primarily from the two volume printed version of Fry’s writings, compiled by her two daughters after her death in 1845. It is worth remembering that the Society at that time still exercised considerable control over the publication of Quaker works. Evangelical Friends like William Savery who was so dear to Fry, and who figured prominently in the early journal entries, were very much in favour in Britain Yearly Meeting in the 1840s, while those like Hannah Barnard, who came in for Fry’s criticism (pp. 53-54), most decidedly were not. It would not have been appropriate to the publishing remit here to probe too far into old theological differences, and thereby complicate a basic ‘message’. However, if this edition were to be used as a primary source for nineteenth-century history, it would need particularly careful evaluation.

The book is structured in sections dealing chronologically with different periods in Fry’s life: her youth, marriage, ministry, beginnings of prison work, family life, her husband’s bankruptcy and the difficulties following this, a growing disenchantment with the Society in the late 1830s, and last years and death. The account is based primarily on the journal, but there are also some letters, and Chapter 6 comprises an extract from her ‘Observations on the Visiting, Superintendence and Government of Female Prisoners’ where she deals with the then controversial issue of women working in the public sphere.

The extracts are chosen and put together in such a way that the narrative moves along at a good pace while not obscuring the often halting nature of the ‘spiritual journey’. Given the size of the Gurney and Fry families, the ‘family chronology’ following the introduction is invaluable, and there were times when I would have appreciated additional notes in the text explaining who was who.

This edition conveys strongly the sense of a dynamic life; it is fascinating to trace the developments in Fry’s perceptions. The public persona of the calm, determined ‘angel of Newgate’ belies the reality shown here of an often doubting and nervous soul. Her Quaker conviction clearly gave her the strength to ‘strike out’ in the beginning, and challenge some accepted attitudes. The struggle to act according to conscience while not upsetting those dear to her, marks her journal throughout. It is interesting to observe how her dislike of what she saw as Quaker sectarianism grew as she came into contact with the wider world and ecumenical ventures. She became increasingly critical of Quakers’ tendency to set themselves apart as a ‘peculiar people’.