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Mingins' "The Beacon Controversy and Challenges to British Quaker Tradition in the Early Nineteenth Century: Some Responses to the Evangelical Revival by Friends in Manchester and Kendal" - Book Review

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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, convincement and the vitality of Quaker worship. Her explanation of the divisions among Quakers in terms of ‘plain’ and ‘guy’ 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 convincement 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’.
engulfed London Yearly Meeting in its most bitterly fought controversy of the nineteenth century. The Manchester businessman and recorded minister Crewdson was one of many British Quakers in the 1820s and '30s to be strongly influenced by the Evangelical movement. In the *Beacon* he made a strong plea for the supremacy of Scripture, and launched an attack on contemporary understandings of the Inward Light, which in his view too closely approximated to the 'heresies' of Elias Hicks in the United States. In this well-researched and well-written book, Rosemary Mingins begins with a summary of the controversy, emphasising the division of British Friends into three major factions. Crewdson represented a new current of 'extreme Evangelicals', whose overriding stress not only on scriptural authority but on the Atonement led them to reject large parts of their Quaker heritage. At the opposite pole stood traditionalists, like Thomas Hancock from Liverpool, who hit back at Crewdson with *A Defence of the doctrines of Immediate Revelation and universal and saving light* (1835). And mediating between tradition and modernity were the most influential group, the 'moderate Evangelicals', such as Joseph Gurney. The most original aspect of the book is Mingins's in-depth account of the impact of these rival polemics on Quakers in Manchester and Kendal, two towns where support for 'Beaconism' was unusually large. In both places about ten per cent of the membership resigned in the later 1830s or early '40s. Manchester, the most dynamic of British cities in the early nineteenth century, also contained one of the country's largest Quaker communities. There, Crewdson and his followers broke away to form a congregation of Evangelical Friends, worshipping in a large and expensively built meeting house, but not long surviving their leader's death in 1844. In Kendal, a small market town where Quakers made up a large and influential section of the population, many of the Beaconites left to join other denominations. The principal theme of the book is the social background to these secessions. Mingins shows that in both places the seceders were drawn from the elite - both in an economic, and in a more strictly Quaker sense: they included bankers and industrialists, often living in large and elegant houses, even in one case in a castle. Many of them were recorded ministers or elders. The younger generation of the more affluent Quaker families also joined the secession in considerable numbers. For these families, Mingins argues, Evangelicalism was a way of joining the mainstream of contemporary upper middle-class life. More controversially, she highlights the theme of social control: a biblically-based religion was better suited to providing strict rules for the regulation of a turbulent industrialising society than one based on the less predictable leadings of the Inward Light.

While stressing social motivation, Mingins also provides a vivid portrait of the thought-world of early nineteenth-century Quakerism. One theme is the importance of trans-Atlantic religious traffic. Elias Hicks, the Long Island farmer, was the supreme bugbear of the Evangelicals in England as much as in America. On the other hand, an English tour by the American Evangelical Elisha Bates in the early 1830s provided inspiration for many of the later Beaconites. Intense spiritual searching, combined with rigid dogmatism, were common to those on each side of the debates. She quotes an interesting retrospect by one of the participants in the conflict, writing from the vantage-point of the more tolerant 1870s, who thought that both sides had been too uncompromising, and too little ready to allow room for difference. In the end, the controversy engulfed the Quakers in England just as it had the Quakers in America.