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Trevett's "Quaker Women Prophets in England and Wales 1650-1700" - Book Review

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Christine Trevett, *Quaker Women Prophets in England and Wales 1650–1700* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000), pp. xv + 246. Hardback. ISBN 0-7734-7518-4. £49.95.

This new work provides a useful addition to our understanding of Quakerism in its formative period in England and Wales, and the key role women played in the development of Quaker communities. Supplementing the themes from her previous work, *Women and Quakerism in the Seventeenth Century* (York: Sessions, 1990), Christine Trevett offers a historiographical appreciation and eight chapters on the lives and responsibilities of Quaker women in the seventeenth century. The composition of the book suggests that this study will form the basis of research for future generations of scholars, and they will use the ‘finely-balanced collection of essays’ as a means of exploring both early modern Quakerism and gender-related issues.

The reader is immediately made aware of the reasons for the study, its parameters, and the recent research conducted into Quaker studies. For the Welsh reader there is, as Professor Geraint H. Jenkins observed, a need for an in-depth study of Quakerism which examines the role of the Society of Friends in Wales.¹ It is, therefore, to be applauded that, apart from

1. G.H. Jenkins, *Protestant Dissenters in Wales, 1639–1689* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992).

unpublished theses on Welsh Quakerism,² Dr Trevett has offered the first major study of the subject for nearly eighty years.³ Throughout, the evidence has been presented in a thoughtful way and useful questions have been posed. This is particularly true of the lack of literary outpourings by Welsh Quaker women and the possible reasons why they were reluctant to publicize their own religious experiences. Indeed, as the author acutely remarks: 'Living in Wales was the kiss of death to women Friends' publishing'.

Trevett also offers a clear insight into the need to write and preach by 'the more sober Protestant matrons', and the controversy this caused in mid-seventeenth century society and later in the Quaker movement itself. This is admirably referenced with contemporary views (Quaker and non-Quaker) as well as modern published and unpublished material. She also provokes the reader to examine the ecstatic behaviour of these female prophets and social observers, and makes interesting comparisons with the early Christian movement. Dr Trevett comments further on their ability to turn 'the language of gender and of the 'woman-ish' on its head', but states that these women were neither 'humanists nor feminists'. Yet significantly, she notes, that they 'served to offend other women and to widen women's horizons'.

Dr Trevett in later chapters provides a discussion of the role of 'remarkable' women in the Society, notably as preacher-prophets and as administrators. Thus, the examination of Dorcas Erbery, Margaret Fell and Anne Camm, helps to sharpen the overall study by illustrating the radicalism of the period. These chapters also offer contrasts between proselytising, suffering, and the more mundane but no less important, organizational qualities of these early Quaker women. As Trevett judiciously remarks, these women were either courageous or foolhardy in their 'willingness to suffer great personal hardship, impoverishment and a great deal of abuse'. These concerns are effectively reflected upon throughout the volume, and the author succeeds in capturing the ferocity and turbulence of the period under review. She graphically illustrates the antipathy of the authorities and members of 'respectable' society towards the Quakers by quoting contemporary epithets that they were 'demented, distracted, bodily possessed of the devil', 'smug', and 'small, bald, stinking fledglings'.

Although the book's principal objective is to provide a closely focussed study of seventeenth-century Quaker activity and a critique of women's roles in the Society, the author extends her investigation to include the early eighteenth century and the important organizational changes which took place. Trevett acknowledges that in the post-Toleration period, and particularly with the development of the Women's Meetings from the 1670s, women were subject to internal restrictions which 'served to discourage and block the kinds of colourful displays of Quaker individualism'. These issues needed to be scrutinised more rigorously, not least by taking due account of the recent works of Nicholas Morgan, David Scott, and Rebecca Larson⁴ which have investigated the reasons for such changes in attitude.

2. H.G. Jones, 'John Kelsall: A study in religious and economic history' (unpublished University of Wales, 1938); M.F. Williams, 'The Society of Friends in Glamorgan 1654-1900', (unpublished MA thesis, University of Wales, 1950). R.C. Allen, 'The Society of Friends in Wales: The case of Monmouthshire, c. 1654-1836' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Wales, 1999).

3. The last being that of Thomas Mardy Rees, *A History of the Quakers in Wales and Their Emigration to North America* (Carmarthen: T. Spurrell and Sons, 1925).

4. Nicholas J. Morgan, *Lancashire Quakers and the Establishment 1660-1730* (Halifax: Ryburn Academic Publishing, 1993); David Scott, *Quakerism in York 1650-1720* (York: University of York,

The suggestion that in the eighteenth century there was 'no fire in the belly' required greater justification, while the fundamental shift in emphasis from a radical sect to a respectable denominational status in the late-seventeenth century might have been explored with greater vigour. This is particularly true of women Friends' acceptance of bourgeois values and their predilection for 'mystical, highly feminine imagery'.

On a positive and final note, *Quaker Women Prophets in England and Wales* is an extremely readable, admirably researched, and provocative study. It is certain that Dr Trevett's work will, as Professor Jenkins' studies have previously done, 'stimulate young researchers to illuminate some of the dark corners of Dissent'.⁵

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Robert S. Burgess, *To Try the Bloody Law: The Story of Mary Dyer* (Burnsville, NC: Celov Valley Books, 2000), pp. x + 133. Hardback. ISBN 0-923687-56-4. \$19.95.

As with the histories of the sufferings of many of the first Quakers, contemporary Friends know yet do not know the story of the life and death of Mary Dyer, one of four Friends who were hanged in Massachusetts in 1659-1661, and the only woman to be so executed. The stories of early Quaker witness and persecution remain, as they were for earlier generations, a source of pride, challenge, and collective identity among Friends, yet the specific details of these events remain complex to reconstruct. Recognizing their narrative power, however, popular writers even more than scholars have been drawn to retelling passages of the Quaker martyrology. Robert S. Burgess, a U.S. Friend and retired social worker, continues this tradition in his biography of Dyer, *To Try the Bloody Law*.

Dyer is an alluring yet ambiguous subject for individual treatment. Primary resources on her life are limited, and there is little on record that distinguishes her ideas or spirit from that of the many other valiant women who preached and suffered during the 1650s and 1660s, in New England as well as elsewhere. Only two letters written by her survive. However, the fact that she was hanged for her faith—indeed, reprieved (against her will) on the scaffold in 1659 after being sentenced to death along with William Robinson and Marmaduke Stephenson in for their repeated entry into the forbidden territory of Massachusetts, she returned to Boston a final time in 1660, at which point there were no more reprieves—confronts us with a narrative climax that is hard to resist. Memorialized in a statue placed at several sites in the US, she has gained unparalleled iconic status among Friends there as a witness for religious freedom. But for students of American religious and women's history she has additional significance as well. Her story is inextricable from that of the much-studied Anne Hutchinson, the figurehead of the so-called Antinomian Controversy, with whom she was first banished from Massachusetts in 1637, and who served as her midwife

1991); Rebecca Larson, *Daughters of Light: Quaker Women Preaching and Prophesying in the Colonies and Abroad, 1700-1775* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Incorporated, 1999).

5. Jenkins, *Protestant Dissenters in Wales*.