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Kennedy's "British Quakerism 1860-1920: The Transformation of a Religious Community" - Book Review

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Thomas C. Kennedy, *British Quakerism 1860–1920: The Transformation of a Religious Community* (Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. xv + 477. £60. ISBN 0-19-827035-6.

Flush with the excitement of a Young Friends Conference held at Woodbrooke in the autumn of 1910, John Hoyland declared in the pages of the *Friends Quarterly Examiner* that he could discern ‘a crying need for the restatement of Christianity in terms of reality and simplicity...a restatement our own Society *should* be pre-eminently able to provide...a Neo-Quakerism...a fresh understanding both by individual and society of the meaning of our great positive principle—life lived according to the ideal of Christ in close and vital communication with God’ (p. 292).

Hoyland was a child of the ‘Quaker Renaissance’—that extraordinary era of intellectual and spiritual renewal during which the Society of Friends gradually shed its nineteenth century Evangelical skin and began to fashion a twentieth-century identity out of liberal theological enquiry, a new historical self-awareness and a more profound engagement with political, social and economic issues of the day. As Thomas Kennedy’s magisterial history of the period makes plain, this was one of the great hinge moments in British Quaker history—a time when arguments were advanced, choices made, and challenges undertaken which were to prove decisive for the trajectory of the Society of Friends during the next one hundred years. *British Quakerism 1860–1920* provides an essential guide to one of the crucial chapters of modern Quaker history—the consequences of which remain very much alive in contemporary theological and sociological debates both inside and outside the Society of Friends.

No historian of British Quakerism has done more to advance our understanding of this rather neglected period of the Society’s past than Thomas Kennedy. *British Quakerism 1860–1920* represents the fruit of several decades of careful research and deep thinking about how proponents of the so-called Liberal Theology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were eventually able to wrest control of Britain Yearly Meeting from the powerful grip of the architects and captains of Evangelical Quaker culture. In his subtly argued account of this sometimes traumatic transition, Kennedy’s mastery of the literature of the era and his insight into its leading personalities is everywhere evident. With a strong sense of narrative that never overlooks important contradictions or exceptions, Kennedy’s *magnum*

opus is not only a major contribution to Quaker historiography but a compelling story of conflict and discovery, of questioning and conviction.

In one of two great set-piece dramas which make up the core of Kennedy's study, the frequently bitter struggle among British Friends to establish 'the ultimate seat of religious authority' (p. 23) during the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s is recounted with particular skill. The ongoing battle to determine whether that authority resided finally 'in the letter of Scripture or the inspiration of the Light' (p. 23) marked the moment when a well-educated, spiritually hungry generation of younger Quakers set out their theological stall and also displayed their considerable leadership potential. Kennedy explores the contours of this embattled landscape most effectively through his detailed assessment of the upheavals among Manchester Friends during those decades—when long-dominant Evangelicals were forced onto the defensive by a collection of nascent Liberals who had all the advantages of youth and energy on their side.

Kennedy gives the reader a vivid sense of the restlessness, discontent and occasional brashness which animated these Quaker Young Turks as they challenged what they experienced as the stifling atmosphere of mid-to-late Victorian Quakerism—a culture of stasis which they believed had prevented the Society's necessary encounter with a rapidly changing world-view. The generation which launched the 'Quaker Renaissance' project had taken their cue from John Stephenson Rowntree, whose influential *Quakerism, Past and Present* of 1859 had famously made the case that 'to ever again become the sort of dynamic spiritual force their ancestors had been... Quakers needed more knowledge of the wider world' (p. 40).

It was precisely this intellectual curiosity and a growing confidence in the rightness of their case which was to spark the Manchester controversies which Kennedy charts so well—culminating in the disownment of the charismatic, if not exactly modest, liberal rebel, David Duncan in 1871. In Kennedy's gripping retelling, Duncan's tale has all the hallmarks of a Victorian Quaker tragedy with conscience, hubris, and even a dash of Friendly villainy all part of the mix. The response of that weightiest of Quaker Evangelicals, J.B. Braithwaite, to Duncan's untimely death shortly after his expulsion from the Society ('How wonderful are the ways of Providence!' p. 79) underlines the vehemence with which Friends were wont to cling to their respective positions in the conflict.

In tracking the liberal generation through the years of *A Reasonable Faith* (1884), the Richmond Declaration (1887), the crucial Yearly Meeting of 1893, and the Manchester Conference of 1895, Kennedy is alert to the risks of over-simplification of the historical processes at work in the 'Quaker Renaissance'. While rightly celebrating the rejuvenating energies and limitless relish for authentic spiritual adventure of the 'Renaissance' generation, at the same time Kennedy recognizes the need to interrogate the occasional 'bit of Quaker mythology, partly self-constructed' (p. 115). In relation to key moments like the rejection of the Richmond Declaration at the Yearly Meeting of 1888, for example, Kennedy ventures that Quakers and others have at times perhaps allocated 'these younger members more celebrity and acclaim for the decisiveness of their contributions than they deserve' (p. 115).

The 'Renaissance' project of self-definition and proclamation may have been piloted by explicitly liberal Friends, but Kennedy is also careful to note that the contributions of more moderate or open-minded Evangelicals to the revival of the Society during this period were often a vital factor in the ultimate success of the enterprise. Ironies such as the staunchly Evangelical George Cadbury providing the fuel for some of the most powerful engines for the intellectual and spiritual regeneration of the Society of Friends—generously funding the

Summer School Movement and Woodbrooke College—are certainly not lost on Kennedy.

In Kennedy's hands, the significance of the 'classic' climactic moments of late Victorian Quaker history—the rejection of Richmond, the gathering at Manchester—are always given their due. But in writing what will long serve Quaker and other religious historians as the definitive history of the period, Kennedy helpfully reminds us that 'the process by which this transformation took place was more gradual and less traumatic than has sometimes previously been depicted. It was natural rather than revolutionary, a product, not of startling theological innovations, but of changing social and educational standards' (p. 118).

However, none of this welcome caution against triumphalist interpretations of the march of liberalism detracts from Kennedy's infectious enthusiasm for the spirit of the chief prophets and explorers of the 'Renaissance'—summed up nicely by what Edward Grubb described to George Cadbury in 1901 as a distinctively Edwardian blend of 'fervent zeal with enlightened spirituality' (p. 178). One cannot help but share Kennedy's genuine appreciation and even affection for the likes of John Wilhelm Rowntree whose vision and determination have justly placed him centre stage in Kennedy's history. One comes away from reading this book with an enhanced sense of Rowntree's status as a catalyst for change and development in twentieth-century Quakerism—worthy, in Kennedy's eyes, of 'singular attention' (p. 140).

What makes Kennedy's take on Rowntree so refreshing is that this enhancement of reputation is achieved without recourse to the sort of hagiography which he rightly argues has actually impeded our understanding of Rowntree's enduring impact on the Society of Friends. Dismissing 'the Quaker mythology of St John Wilhelm, the wise and good', Kennedy maintains that 'such a view transforms an attractive young man into a plaster saint, robbing him of most of the very human qualities that made him so appealing to so many of his contemporaries' (p. 140). Rowntree's words and actions, eloquently summarized by Kennedy, are allowed to speak for themselves on this occasion.

One of the abiding passions of John Wilhelm Rowntree's short life was the nurture of the young Edwardian Friends who were to be the inheritors of the 'Renaissance' project which his own generation had inaugurated. In *Present Day Papers*, Rowntree had warned at the century's turning that 'our small society will neither maintain nor justify its existence unless its view of life is clearly emphasized, and its young life fired by a worthy ideal. It is here we fail and here that it is our duty to succeed...' (p. 287). Kennedy's treatment of the emergence of a distinctive and vibrant Young Friends Movement in the years before the First World War is one of the highlights of the book. He demonstrates convincingly that the Young Friends Movement needs to be understood as more than just another Renaissance vehicle for the personal development of its participants.

Given its central role in the recovery and re-articulation of the historic Peace Testimony in the half-decade before August 1914, Kennedy argues that it was the spiritual crucible of the Young Friends Movement which provided the next generation with the opportunity to prepare itself for the ultimate challenge of the coming conflict. According to one Young Friend who would later endure imprisonment as an absolutist objector in the dark years after 1916, the movement's seminal 1911 conference at Swanwick had been 'the outward and visible sign of a great and growing movement...beginning to make itself felt in the life of our society...To many of us the challenge came...to live out our message and our faith in a way which must cost us dear' (p. 307).

The exact nature of that cost and the Society's willingness to bear it without compromise

becomes the subject of the second of the set-piece dramas which bracket Kennedy's broader canvas. Kennedy's chapters on British Friends and the First World War are superbly crafted. It is unquestionably the finest account to date of that watershed in Quaker history when 'the war and the imposition of compulsory military service permitted a minority alliance of young radicals and middle-aged zealots to grasp the moment and lead their Society, kicking and screaming as may be, to support a radical interpretation of their historic, but previously amorphous, peace testimony' (p. 322).

This is to a large extent the story of the Friends Service Committee (FSC)—that bastion of Quaker absolutism which was to help keep the Society's official position on the war anchored firmly to the Peace Testimony and which would consequently achieve 'a moral influence that far outweighed the paucity of their numbers' (p. 351). The FSC's unstinting refusal to countenance special treatment or exemption for Friends facing conscription after 1916 or to allow the Society to be seduced into some sort of cozy accommodation with the Government which would protect its 'own' while allowing militarism to flourish unchallenged is presented here in all of its ferocity. Kennedy gives us an absorbing group portrait of a formidable band of Friends—many of them women—'intent on making their line of war resistance *the* Quaker line, despite the fact that only a very few Friends took so extreme a position as that of the 145 Quaker absolutists who chose prison rather than compromise with the wartime State' (p. 333). As Kennedy points out, it was to be this relatively small group of witnesses—those who endured the harshest punishments as a consequence of their opposition to the war—who would go on to acquire the lion's share of authority in the Society of Friends in the inter-war period.

The conflicts between the FSC militants and the many Friends who were ready to justify participation in the war effort on patriotic and even religious grounds—as well as with those to whom the idea of some alternative form of national service such as the Friends Ambulance Unit was entirely acceptable—are investigated with rigour and a fine sense of balance. While keeping his eye fixed on the astonishing fact that this tenacious minority was to ensure that the Society of Friends would come to be regarded by many at the end of the war as 'a prophet society for transforming the world into the Kingdom of Christ' (p. 333), Kennedy does full justice to the complexity of Quaker viewpoints at play throughout the period. Alongside the deeply moving testimonies of incarcerated absolutist objectors like Wilfrid Littleboy, Kennedy also reminds us of 'Renaissance' giant W.C. Braithwaite's support for work in munitions factories as an acceptable form of alternative service; Seeborn Rowntree's role as a key wartime advisor to Lloyd George; and of the military service of the sons of George Cadbury, John Wilhelm Rowntree, and numerous other eminent Quaker families of the period.

Likewise, the disownment of prominent Darlington Friend, W.T. Thomson, on the grounds of his involvement in recruitment activities is contrasted with the renegade group of weighty Friends such as Sir George Newman and Lord Gainford who sought to blur the distinction between their personal enthusiasm for a League of Nations endowed with a collective security capacity and the Society's steadfast refusal to endorse such an approach to post-war international relations. Kennedy's navigation of these tensions among wartime Friends—fractures which nevertheless consistently failed to undermine the Yearly Meeting's 'unwavering adherence' (p. 425) to a radical Christian pacifist position on the conflict and its aftermath—is exceptionally surefooted.

Indeed, Kennedy's repeated insistence on always seeing his cast of 'Renaissance' and wartime movers and shakers in the round—as in his discussion of John William Graham's tendency toward 'self-confident moral superiority' (p. 305) or in his discussion of Thomas Hodgkin's and Caroline Stephen's support for the South African War—is one of the most appealing features of the book. While Kennedy has done Quakers an enormous service in bringing an inspiring phase of the Society's evolution to life with such colour and clarity, he also honours Friends with his candid assessment of those less than progressive dimensions of Quaker life and public discourse during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His excellent chapter on women in the Society of Friends between 1860 and 1914 will make sobering reading for those Quakers disposed to think that their community has always been on the cutting edge of the struggle for equality between the sexes. Similarly, Kennedy's very fine discussion of Quaker engagement with social and economic concerns throughout the period—particularly in his valuable accounts of the Friends Social Union, the War and Social Order Committee and the minority but highly influential Socialist Quaker Society—reveals a stubborn conservative streak in many early twentieth-century Friends that was as much a feature of the era as the utopian vision of their challengers.

It is to be hoped that the publication of *British Quakerism 1860–1920* will encourage a new generation of Quaker historians to devote their energies to some of the fascinating developments and questions which are included in this outstanding survey of the period. A number of especially desirable projects spring to mind. As noted above, Kennedy has now given us a much clearer picture of the formative influences at work on those Friends of the 1914–18 generation who were to experience state persecution of a severity unknown since the Society's Restoration 'sufferings'. A further investigation of the social and spiritual formation of the 'nearly one thousand or one-third of all male Friends of military age' (p. 313) who by contrast felt called to do military service in the First World War would be welcome. Kennedy's book also leaves one wishing for new intellectual biographies of critical 'Renaissance' figures like Rufus Jones and Edward Grubb, providing fresh, in-depth assessments of their extensive writings and placing their work in a wider historical and theological context.

With regard to contemporary British Quakers themselves, Kennedy concludes that 'to the critically admiring outsider there would seem to be much to be gained if more Friends acquired a deeper understanding of and appreciation for both high and low points in the history of their most remarkable and esteemed Society' (p. 429). Kennedy's astute comment raises the question of how Britain Yearly Meeting might develop additional vehicles to allow for the transmission of history and experience to its membership in the new century, not as an antiquarian pursuit, but as a means of orientation and a source of spiritual richness. Perhaps British Quakerism today is faced with a dilemma not unlike that which confronted the pilots of the 'Renaissance', with Friends needing to accept 'responsibility for developing a coherent set of ideas and a comprehensive plan of action' (p. 169) with something of the same sense of urgency that animated the Quaker prophets of the Edwardian age?

For this reviewer, one of the great virtues of Kennedy's work is that it underlines how misunderstood the 'Quaker Renaissance' has been among many late twentieth-century Friends who are much given to mistaking the embrace of Liberal Theology as the green light for what John Punshon and others have described as a kind of 'supermarket Quakerism' and confusing an alertness to new light with the levelling of all religious authority. As becomes abundantly clear in this book, the 'Renaissance' was as much about a call to commitment to a

living discipline as it was a throwing open of the Society's doors in search of new freedoms. Central to John Wilhelm Rowntree's vision was the need for the Society to create opportunities 'for producing a ministry that was informed and inspired as well as free' (p. 168)—an invocation to a greater intellectual and theological rigour that has more than a little resonance for British Quakerism as it enters its 350th year.

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