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# Fager's "Friends in Civilian Public Service: Quaker Conscientious Objectors in World War II Look Back and Look Ahead" and Fager's "Friends and the Vietnam War; Papers and Presentations From a Gathering for Recollection, Reappraisal and Looking Ahead" - Book Review

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## BOOK REVIEWS

Chuck Fager (ed.), *Friends in Civilian Public Service: Quaker Conscientious Objectors in World War II Look Back and Look Ahead* (Conference Proceedings From November 1996) (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Press, 1998), pp. 347. \$19.95. ISBN 0-87574-930-5.

Chuck Fager (ed.), *Friends and the Vietnam War; Papers and Presentations From a Gathering for Recollection, Reappraisal and Looking Ahead* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Press, 1998), pp. 365. \$19.95. ISBN 0-87574-931-3.

The history of the Quaker Peace Testimony in the modern world has frequently been distorted by an artificial divide between 'peace work' and 'relief work'. This distortion has emerged from the general divide maintained by Quaker committees which for practical and sometimes theological reasons have found it best to divide the different kinds of work and their *modus operandis*, but it is unacceptable that to a greater or lesser degree most historians of Quakerism have simply accepted the divide created by the necessities of filing, so that in works on Quaker peace efforts, reconstruction work can find itself in the books and chapters on peace, but child feedings is 'relegated' to humanitarian relief.

Personal accounts are far less vulnerable to this kind of artificial understanding: ask a Quaker relief worker whether his/her work is 'a peace testimony' and one is likely to encounter the blank look of incomprehension of a fish who cannot recognize water. Yet differences do exist and a peace testimony is not necessarily a testimony to pacifism. Where relief work and peace work are often rigidly divided in the formal records, the difference between the two stances on peace can be clouded by the formal records. Personal narratives, on the other hand, provide the historian with the opportunity to discern between the evangelical conviction that Jesus does not permit killing, and the slow awareness of the pacifist that he or she cannot kill that which connects them to God. However, oral and written testimonies are not neutral evidence; they are shaped by the means which generate them, the agenda of the testifier and of the interviewer, and by the format in which they are presented. The two collections produced by Pendle Hill point to both the joys of this kind of work and to the pitfalls.

The first of the collections, *Friends in Civilian Public Service*, emerged from a gathering of Civilian Public Service alumni and it is manifestly clear that the organizers did not embark on the project with the intention of publication. From the point of view of the modern historian the book *ought* to be of vital importance. It consists of a collection of talks and panel discussions from members of the CPS involved in care for the insane, volunteering for medical experiments, or generally involved in land work, about a vitally important period in

the development of active peace work, which helped to shape Quaker responses to the draft in the post-war period. The material provided is, as far as I am aware, entirely unpublished elsewhere. However, the book as it stands is a deeply uncomfortable read: presentations have been simply transcribed from the recordings which were made, without any attempt to formalize the language or to restructure the narratives. As many of the talks were clearly from notes, the lack of structure can obscure meaning and in one or two cases reduce the testimony to a genial ramble. The use of punctuation has not assisted with the difficulty. Instead of employing ellipses and inserts to clarify passages, the editors have attempted to use punctuation to carry the rhythm of speech rather than meaning, and at times the punctuation is a positive hindrance to comprehensibility.

More serious, perhaps, is that this book lacks context: the very informality and selectivity of the original venue has led the contributors and the editors to forget that the audience for the book may well be ignorant of the history of the CPS, of the military terminology or even of the structure of the debates and the result is indulgent. Reading the recordings feels at times much like listening in to a private party. In addition, the lack of any kind of contextualization for some of these testimonies reduce them to meaningless anecdotes. Good oral history, when it is successful, is a negotiation between interviewer and interviewee in which both strive to place meaning and interpretation on events. It is evaluative and critical. This book, by espousing a cosy neutrality, produces not oral history but memory and storytelling in which what emerges as the end product is a narrative smoothed by repetition. This is brought most sharply into relief, ironically, by the excellent chapter 'Adventures in Oral History: Telling Your Story' by Bobbi Kelly. A professional story-teller, Bobbi Kelly used her session to encourage a more conscious construction of story, one which, because it forced a deeper probing, and encouraged the narrator to have opinions, to *interpret* his story, is much more interesting and much more useful to the researcher.

By the time the second conference, *Friends and the Vietnam War*, was held it was obviously clear to the organizers that proceedings would be forthcoming and the result is a much better book in which testimonies have clearly been polished in their written form. In addition, one suspects that the fact that a greater number of the respondents were college-educated made for a more self-conscious consideration of their experiences than the previous generation. To complete the criticisms I have made of the first, however, it was no surprise that the one chapter in this book which doesn't work is the transcribed panel interview. Jocular and audience engagement do *not* translate as exciting reading.

Where the majority of the respondents in the first book were conscientious objectors discussing their contribution to a civil service, often very movingly (I particularly recommend Asa Watkins's discussion of CPS work in mental health institutions and his superb drawings from the period), in *Friends and the Vietnam War* the emphasis is on the measures taken to avoid the draft, the fine dividing lines between different motivations, and the campaigning work that many undertook or saw as intrinsic to their status as COs. In many ways this is a much more bitter book. In the Second World War the US government had an established protocol to follow, a clear sense of righteousness and a much smaller CO population than it had actually expected. During the Vietnam War the politicization of many COs, even those from religious families, clearly racked up the tension. The ongoing Cold War and the deepening civil unrest sparked by the Civil Rights movement further alarmed the authorities and the treatment of those seeking CO status (as opposed to those awarded it

relatively easily) resulted in harsh measures. Many of the people who contributed to the conference either had their own, or saw other people's, lives at best redirected and at worst destroyed. Not all found the Quakers supportive and it's perhaps notable that non-Quakers may have received more support from the Friends than did birthright Quakers, who often found their families more concerned with community standing than one might expect.

While the first book casts light on a little-known project and generally reveals good feelings all around, this second book finds itself illuminating the underbelly of America: an America that was not democratic, was not free and could be capricious and cruel when alarmed. I've read a great deal about the Vietnam peace movement and very few of the standard texts detail the level of abuse which COs had to deal with in the way that this book does. Unlike the *Friends in Civilian Public Service*, *Friends and the Vietnam War* concludes by attempting to pull together the meaning of the conference and the war as spiritual experiences. Altogether it is a much more reflective and analytical work.

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Meredith Baldwin Weddle, *Walking in the Way of Peace: Quaker Pacifism in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. xvi + 348. £45. ISBN 0-19-513138-X.

The reader who is looking for a comprehensive and systematic account of Quaker pacifism in the (second half of the) seventeenth century may be disappointed since, despite the subtitle, s/he will not find that here. What this stimulating book does provide is a case study of Quaker pacifism located in Rhode Island and its environs during King Philip's War of 1675-76. The topic is discussed on an extensive background; in these preliminary chapters Meredith Weddle deals with various aspects of the emergent Quaker peace testimony from the early 1650s on and, in particular, its working out in New England before the outbreak of King Philip's War. The final pages of the book sum up the results of the author's research with some historiographical comments in an appendix. At the end Weddle also prints the full texts of three basic documents in her story: the English Quakers' declaration of 1660-1661 'against all plotters and fighters in this world', which became 'the normative expression of the peace testimony' (p. 7), and two Rhode Island documents of 1673 and 1675 respectively.

The book originated in a Yale University PhD dissertation (1993). Its structure, with most of the original chapter headings, remains the same but the text has been revised in many places. The work is based on a formidable documentation; her research equipment is indeed impressive. The listing of unpublished primary sources from a variety of locations on both sides of the Atlantic covers nine pages of the book's bibliography while published primary sources occupy over eleven more pages. As one would expect, Weddle in addition has consulted virtually all the relevant secondary materials, including some recondite local history monographs and articles. She has also included a number of interesting illustrations—seventeenth-century manuscripts, woodcuts and maps—which help to enliven the text.

The main impression left by Weddle's research is the complexity of early Friends' attitude to war; and she chides some previous writers for failing to realize this. Throughout the seventeenth century from Quakerism's emergence in the early 1650s and on into the next