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REVIEW OF *GENTLE INVADERS*, #1

SHANNON CRAIGO-SNELL

In *Gentle Invaders*, Linda Selleck tells the remarkable stories of some of the many Quaker women who taught African Americans during and after the Civil War. Despite serious dangers, social ostracism, and physical and emotional hardship, hundreds of women traveled into the war-torn South to help prepare black Americans for freedom and begin to repay some of the incalculable debt owed to these former slaves. Quaker women from every yearly meeting in the country joined the ranks of these gentle invaders who were considered by many Southerners to be “Yankee intruders – the afterguard of the brutal Union soldiers whose weapons of war had indiscriminately reduced the South to ashes.”¹

Selleck argues that Quaker women were particularly well equipped for this service by the Religious Society of Friends. Analyzing the successful components of Quaker community, Selleck writes,

In *Becoming Human*, feminist theologian Letty Russell describes three conditions required for women and men to participate fully as human beings in any given community: they must be treated as subjects, not as objects of the community; they must have direct participation in shaping their own future; and they must be part of a community of support which allows for individual as well as corporate participation. The theological grounding for the Quaker movement, which originated out of religious dissent in war-torn England during the 1650s, defined the Society from its very beginnings as a radical egalitarian Christian community. (7-8)

The Quaker belief in “that of God in everyone” had long supported egalitarian ideals and enabled women to take up powerful non-traditional roles. These courageous educators had a history to sustain them, for their unusual lives could be modeled after the “scores of women released for public ministry by the Society of Friends.”(19) Quaker concern for education and the standard of women’s leadership in women’s meetings for business concretely prepared female Friends for the tasks of organizing schools for black people. Selleck

writes, “The spiritual formation and intellectual freedom to become independent thinkers and agents of change, encouraged by the Quaker religious community, were crucial aspects of the lives of these educational pioneers.”(7) And, “Most importantly,” Selleck asserts, “these teachers benefited from the priceless Quaker inheritance of stories of bold, courageous women struggling against all odds to promote Truth.”(90)

Through the rest of the book, Selleck makes more of this inheritance available to us today by recounting the stories of these bold and courageous women. In the course of telling these stories, Selleck explains that these women, by doing what Quakerism prepared them to do and by exemplifying some of the best of our egalitarian tradition, exposed the ways in which the Society of Friends did not conform to its own profession. Selleck notes that these women “found their Quaker-based spiritual and educational formation had prepared them to challenge not only the rampant racism of the postbellum South, but, ironically, the racism quietly fermenting within Quakerism itself.”(14)

One such woman was Sarah Smiley, a New England Friend born in 1830. During a meeting for worship in Baltimore in 1865, Smiley felt led to travel to North Carolina to aid the Friends suffering there.(144) She traveled to Goldsboro with Richard Janney, distributing thousands of dollars worth of clothing, food and supplies to Quaker families devastated by the war and others in need. Smiley’s energetic ministry included: raising funds for and organizing schools for African Americans in Virginia; visiting every “meeting that had survived the war in both Virginia and North Carolina...to ensure Quaker intellectual and spiritual progress”(136); “organizing work rooms, supply stores, employment offices and clothing shops in one section of a hospital for blacks”(140); stocking and establishing libraries in every monthly meeting in North Carolina(157); preaching on at least two continents, and, in all her free time, publishing a book in 1868 entitled, *Who Is He? An Appeal to Those Who Regard with Any Doubt the Name of Jesus.*(162)

Although in many ways enabled and supported in her ministry by Friends, Smiley also encountered racism within the Quaker community that troubled her. She described the people of one meeting she visited in Virginia as “peculiar” and reported that they were quite prejudiced against blacks.(152) She tried to help these Friends overcome their racism and began to “speak out regarding the spiritual

nourishment Quakers were capable of but reticent in sharing with the African Americans they generously aided.”(159) At the 1867 New York Yearly Meeting in a discussion prompted by a letter from Smiley, “It was suggested that whilst Friends were foremost in ministering to the physical and intellectual needs of the freed-people, and in awakening in them desires after holiness, they left the spiritual care of them to other bodies, practically saying that we do not wish them in our Church organization.”(159)

Another powerful woman whose story Selleck tells is Alida Clark. She and her husband Calvin were released by Indiana Yearly Meeting in 1864 to work in an orphanage for black children in Helena, Arkansas. Alida and Calvin Clark, in partnership with a regiment of African American soldiers, helped turn this orphanage into the first African American college west of the Mississippi.(192) The 56th Colored Infantry Regiment was stationed at Helena and commanded by Colonel Charles Bentzoni. When forced to return the lands that housed the orphanage to the original owners, the soldiers contributed out of their own very limited funds to “purchase building materials and thirty acres of land where the school” could be rebuilt.(194) In the dedication ceremony, Colonel Bentzoni presented Alida Clark with the deed to the property and she accepted it on behalf of Indiana Yearly Meeting. She and her husband served as matron and superintendent of Southland College for 22 years, drawing almost no salary for their work.(195) Alida Clark found homes for dozens of children and raised considerable funds through relentless letter-writing appeals to Friends.

Over the years, as she continually requested money for Southland, she became aware that many people were comfortable funding the education of black children from a distance, but quite hesitant to imagine black adults joining the Quaker community.(197) After worshiping with integrated congregations of other denominations, Clark challenged the Quaker sensibilities that led to financial assistance and relief work but fell short of welcoming black membership in meetings. In Clark’s own words,

Think, Friends, of the millions of money expended by Friends towards these people, and the scores of conversions wrought through the teaching and influences of Friends’ laborers, and yet they must go and unite with some other religious denomination, thus virtually declaring to them that our profession is

not adapted to them, or else: “Sit thou there, we are better than you.”²

In 1866, when Indiana Yearly Meeting issued a letter declaring that it “looked forward to the organization of permanent religious meetings amongst the blacks, Calvin and Alida Clark took them at their word.”(203) The following year the Clarks began petitioning the yearly meeting to enroll 70 African Americans. In 1868, seven of these people were accepted into the membership of Whitewater Monthly Meeting. Eight more were accepted the following year. The Clarks pushed the matter further by proposing to record a black man named Daniel Drew as a Friends minister. Drew, an ex-slave and army veteran, had exceptional gifts in the ministry. The Missionary Board responded to the Clarks’ repeated requests by establishing a preparatory meeting at Southland in 1870 and recording Drew as the first minister of Southland Friends Meeting(206), which eventually became the largest African American Quaker meeting ever founded.(192) A year later, Alida Clark became the second recorded minister of Southland Friends. In 1885, she reported that thousands of African Americans had been taught at Southland and nearly 300 teachers had been trained there.

In recounting the ministry of female Quakers in educating African Americans, Selleck repeatedly notes, as did the Quaker women, the initiative black students took in their own education. Slaves and former slaves valued learning highly, withstanding risk and hardship to make the most of what education was available to them. In many parts of the South, the idea of public education was met with stubborn resistance among whites. “Former slaves and free blacks were the first among native southerners to campaign for universal, state-supported public education.”(125) Their initiative inspired, and also probably scared, many whites. One official “noted to a congressional committee: “The “poor whites” are excited by hearing Negroes read while they are ignorant; and it is my belief that they will now receive schools, if furnished them, as never before.””(126) The initiatives of the former slaves and the ministry of Quaker women together helped build schools that later substantially formed the public school system in North Carolina. In 1916, North Carolina Yearly Meeting stated they were doing little for black education because blacks were doing the work themselves. Quakers noted, “Their loyalty and liberality in the support of their churches

and their educational and industrial efforts would be worthy of imitation by our own people.”(63)

Selleck reports that Quakers funded, hired, and trained many black educators, telling the stories of several of these remarkable women. One such teacher was Charlotte Forten, the great-granddaughter of James Forten, who had been a student of Anthony Benezet. Benezet was one of the very first Quakers to address the issue of African American education. Under his leadership, the Philadelphia Quakers opened a school for blacks in 1774.(21) James Forten had been one of his students, and Forten’s great-granddaughter, a well-educated woman from a free black family in Philadelphia, began working at the Penn School for blacks on the Sea Islands in South Carolina a century later. Her arrival initially met with great reservations by the former slaves, but Charlotte won them over with her musical talent, for they loved to hear her play the piano.(81)

Selleck’s book overflows with stories of courageous, outrageous women. While her title, *Gentle Invaders*, lures us in with its apparent contradiction, it soon becomes clear that the word “gentle” alone, in reference to these women, would be severely misapplied. Yes, these invaders were schoolmarms and not soldiers, but they were also incredibly powerful, forceful women who endured physical danger and hardship to live their faith with integrity. When the Ku Klux Klan threatened, Margaret Newbold Thorpe continued to teach in Virginia even though her adult students had to arm themselves before coming to class.(95) Tacy Hadley and others had to outwit the many white men who came to the refugee camps and schools to rape black girls.(97) Even without overt threats from whites, handling huge classes of children who had never been to school before was not for the faint of heart. Lucy Chase reported that all of her students screamed, forcing her to “outscreeam the screamiest.”(72)

Selleck tells the story of Martha Schofield patrolling the grounds of her school in South Carolina one night. She intercepted arsonists there to burn the building and, Selleck writes, “She was able to disperse them with simple, direct speech. Such conversation was not without force and conviction, as Friends had always testified to the power of the Holy Spirit in convicting sinful souls to Truth.”(94) Remembering from the previous chapter that this same woman was quite accustomed to teaching students who hit, bit and kicked her, and that once she had gone so far as to bind a student’s hands and

feet, I imagine that her simple, direct speech was mighty powerful indeed. These gentle invaders refused to be domesticated in life and we should be careful not to domesticate them in retrospect. Indeed, as Selleck's work makes clear, their stories defy such domestication. These women exemplified Quaker beliefs, and that living testimony was, and is, strong stuff!

Their commitment to Quaker egalitarian views exposed, by contrast, the limits of the Society of Friends as a whole, which was eager to offer humanitarian aid to blacks but reluctant to fully accept them as equals within meeting. When Quakers arrived in an area, they "first focused on distributing medical supplies and basic materials necessary for survival to as many blacks as possible. After the most pressing human needs were met, attention was then turned to the stabilizing work of black education."(48) This focus on basic needs and education, instead of on proselytizing, grew out of fundamental Quaker beliefs and was important in helping them to be such remarkable relief workers and educators. They were praised by many, including historian Ronald Butchart, for placing the most immediate needs of the blacks above their own denominational interests.(185) The importance of education and the hesitancy to proselytize are values dear to many Friends. Yet, Quaker belief in the power of education was perhaps a bit naive in the face of American racism. Selleck refers to this "reliance on education as being the only needed ingredient to full citizenship" as the "blind spot of many Quakers."(87) Also, these female educators questioned the motives behind Friends' reluctance to proselytize.

There is an old saying that in the South, whites don't care how close blacks get, but they don't want them too high, while in the North, whites don't care how high blacks get, but they don't want them too close. Selleck portrays nineteenth century Quakerism as having a rather Northern disposition, doing a great deal for the advancement of blacks, from a distance. One example of Quaker reticence and evidence of its mixed motives is the fact that Friends funded the educational and evangelical work of Charles S. Schaeffer, a Baptist minister who organized 123 black Baptist congregations in Virginia with over 11,000 members. Selleck comments, "Although uncomfortable with the idea of promoting Quakerism, ironically Philadelphia Quakers were content to finance church growth for black Baptists."(177) Quaker historian Hiram Hilty writes, "Afro-Americans did not join Friends meetings in any significant numbers,

nor would they have been welcome in most of them.”(189) It is interesting to note that one of the more concrete concerns of Quakers was that African Americans would interrupt silent worship with some of the hymns and spirituals that had nourished and sustained them under slavery. White Friends were reluctant to welcome blacks into meeting, in part, out of fear that they could not keep from singing.(180)

The most pointed criticism of nineteenth-century Friends in Selleck’s book is posed by historian, Jean Soderlund. Soderlund writes:

Friends meetings extended financial help when needed, but exacted a price for that aid in supervising the binding out of children and the drawing up of contracts between blacks and their employers...the Friends also expected the blacks to conform to white Christian (perhaps Quaker) standards of morality, attend special Friends meetings held for blacks (but conducted by whites), and send their children to special schools set up for blacks (but again controlled by white Quakers). Blacks benefited from the Friends’ system of mutual aid and endured, with varying degrees of patience, their paternalistic concern.(169)

Selleck responds by saying, “Soderlund’s argument seems forceful enough, but it is unfair to judge the race relationships Quakers voluntarily made with blacks 200 years ago from modern racial sensitivities.”(169) She argues that Soderlund does not adequately take into account the sacrifice made by Friends in refusing membership to slave owners, the risks of giving administrative power to blacks in situations of such intense race hatred, and the lengthy process that any applicant for membership in Quaker meeting had to endure. Concerning the fear that black members might start singing in the middle of silent worship, while Selleck recognizes that “Quakers showed particular insensitivity to the spiritual and emotional needs musically expressed by people raised in an oral tradition,”(180) she also states that “it seems unreasonable to charge 18th century Friends with cultural insensitivity to black norms of expression when the political and social realities were so very different.”(171) Selleck defends the Society of Friends from Soderlund’s criticism, going so far as to make the questionable statement that “the resistance in considering black monthly meetings and acknowledging the spiritual

gifts of black Quakers did not affect the excellent advantages blacks had through Quaker education.”(179)

Even though she refutes Soderlund’s judgment, Selleck herself does not ultimately let Quakers off the hook.³ Resisting the temptation to allow the history of these remarkable women to serve a merely self-congratulatory role for contemporary Quakers, Selleck records and echoes the probing questions of these educators. She writes, “Perhaps Quakers were so willing to finance in tremendous proportions aid and relief to needy African Americans, because they knew, in their heart of hearts, that they should be working just as diligently to encourage blacks into the fold, and yet could not bring themselves to make the necessary shifts in racial attitudes in order to create integrated Quaker meetings.”(188) Commenting on the contemporary situation, Selleck notes, “Some African Americans can be found as members of Friends meetings scattered around the country, but much could be done to increase the sense of welcome and corporate mission that white and black Quakers can share alike.”(221)

Gentle Invaders raises many pertinent questions for contemporary Friends. In a community where questions of integration are still apparent every First-day morning, Selleck’s study provides an excellent starting point for conversations about our non-proselytizing manner, our sometimes dogmatic adherence to particular styles of worship, our openness or resistance to change within our own much-cherished tradition. These issues are raised and yet, in a text that is primarily historical, not thoroughly analyzed. Perhaps stronger organizational structure would have allowed and enabled more in-depth analysis. There may be some discrepancy in Selleck’s offering accounts of Quaker pioneers that make clear Friends were ahead of their time in race relations, and yet when faced with criticism, being unwilling to judge the past by present standards. If this issue had been resolved, Selleck might have felt greater freedom to offer and expand her own valuable insights.

Selleck begins her account of these female Quaker educators with a quote from Letty Russell, implying that Quaker community had provided for these women the three necessary conditions for a person to participate as fully human within a community: they were treated as subjects and not objects, they had direct participation in shaping their own future, and they were part of a community of support that allowed for individual as well as corporate participation.(7) The many stories that follow illustrate how and to what extent the

Society of Friends provided the same liberating conditions for blacks as it did for women. In *Gentle Invaders*, Selleck not only adds to our knowledge of valiant Friends of the past; she also enables their lives to challenge us in the present.

NOTES

1. Selleck, Linda B. *Gentle Invaders: Quaker Women Educators and Racial Issues During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1995), 6. Other references to Selleck's book will be included in the text.
2. Selleck 202. This last line apparently refers to the fact that some meetinghouses had a bench in the back reserved for black worshipers.(175)
3. Throughout the book, Selleck notes instances where Quakers and some of these Quaker educators displayed racist and/or paternalistic attitudes. For examples, see pages 178, 175, and 83.