

2009

## Holton's "Quaker Women: Personal Life, Memory and Radicalism in the Lives of Women Friends, 1780-1930" - Book Review

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### Recommended Citation

Newman, Edwina (2009) "Holton's "Quaker Women: Personal Life, Memory and Radicalism in the Lives of Women Friends, 1780-1930" - Book Review," *Quaker Studies*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 5.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/quakerstudies/vol13/iss1/5>

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## BOOK REVIEWS

HOLTON, S.S., *Quaker Women: Personal Life, Memory and Radicalism in the Lives of Women Friends, 1780-1930* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. xiii + 288. ISBN 978-0-415-28144-7, Paper, £24.99.

This is a book about the domestic culture of the Priestman, Bright and Clark families, and the way in which their kinship networks were deployed in religious, business and political activity from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries. It is a beautifully structured account that traces this middle-class Quaker circle through the lives of the women of three generations. The lynchpin here is Helen Clark, daughter of the radical statesman, John Bright, and his first wife, Elizabeth Priestman, an account of whose death serves as the introduction to the themes of the book, leading as it did to the extended family care of her infant daughter. It was primarily Helen's patient work of collection and collation of family papers that created the Clark Archive, the principal source material for this work. Many of the papers, of course, were also produced by Helen herself, but she was by no means the only family member who clearly felt that, no matter how irksome it might seem at times, the work of being a 'family correspondent', maintaining the bonds across geographical and generational distance, was 'important to leading a meaningful life' (p. 24). It reinforced, moreover, these women's own sense of who they were and what they stood for.

In the course of her book, Sandra Stanley Holton presents a number of specific findings which make an important contribution to the wider historiography of gender issues among the middle class of this period, notably on 'women's money', the role of single women in households and the preservation of a radical inheritance. The findings cover a whole range of women's activities beyond the purely domestic, from philanthropy, humanitarian and moral reform movements to radical politics, culminating in the women's suffrage movement. But to pick out individual topic areas tends to detract from the much deeper overall insight that is achieved.

Comparing this study of radical Quaker women with Judith Jennings' 2006 study of a somewhat earlier period (*Gender, Religion and Radicalism in the Long Eighteenth Century* [Aldershot: Ashgate]) the reader would be struck by the remarkable difference in the tenor of the 'radicalism'. While Mary Knowles (the subject of Jennings' study) could apparently square her radical beliefs with accepting a gift of £800 from Queen Charlotte in return for a needlework portrait of the king (George III),

Margaret Wood, keeper of a confectioner's shop in Rochdale (and the first subject of Holton's 'collective biography'), would take no interest in the local celebrations for the coronation of George IV, remarking that he was 'na but a pauper, and I have to help keep him' (p. 9). This very contrast, and the difficulties of definition it implies, seems powerfully to justify Holton's adoption of the method of 'microhistory', whereby she explores her subjects 'in terms of their particularity, not for their typicality, or as exemplars' (p. 6).

Holton offers no more explanation of her method than the endnote definition of 'microhistory' as 'a research approach that examines the experience, mentalities and subcultures of subordinate and/or atypical groups or individuals' (p. 235). The comparative brevity of the reference perhaps assumes too much in the way of widespread understanding of a methodology which was pioneered in the 1970s by scholars who wanted to challenge the relativist view then gaining ground that, rather than being an exercise in explaining a complex reality, history could be no more than a linguistic exercise in interpreting texts. 'Microhistory' requires the writer to explain the research process as an integral part of the search for meaning. The findings are often presented in a narrative form which allows the researcher to acknowledge the subjectivity of the sources while also revealing something about the wider social context in which they exist. The results, as here, can be illuminating and authoritative without pretending to be definitive, since what is offered is an insight into the complexity of lived experience and the plurality of individual views.

More specifically, in this study, the approach of 'microhistory' encourages further questioning of the commonly used categories of separate 'public' and 'private' spheres to explain gender roles and relationships in the period. Holton voices disquiet about the use of 'prescriptive material' to interpret actual practice, finding that, in the lives of individuals, the 'public' and 'private' became 'mutually defining worlds' (p. 226). 'Family relations between men and women were actual and part of everyday life, as forcibly shaped by physical and emotional needs as by the language of separate spheres... The two worlds were inextricably mixed in life' (p. 85). What we are presented with is recognisable family life, rarely without disagreement of some sort, (if not over politics then over rice pudding), but where the individual family members, whose religion after all taught them to attend to their leadings, generally found a way to ride out the storms. So John Bright's disapproval of Helen's active involvement in the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts led him to write to her in 1872 that 'our sympathy and the harmony of our thoughts must be considered at an end' (p. 171). But it made no difference either to Helen's campaigning or to her continuing care for him when he was sick and eventually dying, when she found him 'very quiet and cheerful and nice' (p. 183).

The relationship between religion and everyday life (again inextricably linked almost by definition among Quakers), is, on the whole, deftly handled. The study employs the generally accepted trajectory of Quaker theology but without imposing this artificially on the evidence for individuals' experience. Above all the dislike of dogmatism and a reluctance to be involved in schism is evident. It is, of course, implicit in this study that accepted explanatory devices should not dictate the

ordering of the evidence. Nevertheless, there are occasions where terms are not used with sufficient clarity and create ambiguities. Is it not misleading, for example, to talk of the 'liberal Quakerism' of John Bright and his aunt Margaret Wood (p. 66) given that the term has come to mean something quite specific in the context of the later nineteenth century? And I would have liked to see further explanation of the (unreferenced) point that Helen 'identified herself with the "the liberal party" within the Society' (p. 125). The use of the term 'Inner Light' (instead of 'Inward Light'), is also glaringly anachronistic, especially when applied to Quakers' understanding from the later seventeenth century of 'something quite separate from human nature' (p. 11). If indeed Margaret Bragg (1761–1840) was sustained at her death by 'her Quaker belief in the "Inner Light"' (p. 72, and it is placed in quotation marks here whereas an earlier reference, on p. 11, on the 'doctrine of the Inner Light', is not), then it could predate the known period of general use of this term by decades. However, neither the source nor date of the evidence is entirely clear.

Sometimes, then, a paucity of references makes it difficult to follow up individual points. Certainly, to overload a narrative with references can be intrusive, and the 'light touch' in this respect does help the flow of the writing. But one of the glories of this book is its potential to inspire further study, so although it may seem churlish to point out problems, it is also testimony to what I would regard as its enormous importance to students of Quaker history. Overall, this is a book which should serve as a benchmark for other studies of 'networked families' in this period. To produce such a sustained, coherent and carefully nuanced account from a potentially overwhelming body of source material is a remarkable achievement.

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HAMM, T.D., *The Quakers in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. viii + 293. ISBN 0-231-12363-9, Paper, \$40.00.

DOBBS, Jack P., *Authority and the Early Quakers* (Gloucestershire: Martin Hartog, 2006), pp. 269, Paper, £10.00.

These two books are based on scholarly research: one is an attempt to explain the nature of modern Quakerism, which involves a journey into first principles; the second is a detailed study of the development of the early Quaker movement that originally saw the light of day as an Oxford University DPhil. Thomas Hamm clearly wishes to explain how the modern Quaker life is derived from the early history of the movement, but he is essentially a scholar of the more modern world. Dobbs' premise is less modern-world focussed, but nevertheless contributes to understanding how the Quakers moved subtly from being wholly inner-light focussed to accepting external authorities, in a complex balance which allowed them to continue to exist.

Hamm is concerned with diversity. He argues that amongst the 100,000 Quakers in the United States there are several distinct strands of belief within the Quaker