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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

New Light on George Fox (1624-1691); A Collection of Essays, edited by Michael Mullett. York: William Sessions Limited, 1993. 162 pp.

REVIEWED BY PAUL ANDERSON

IN AN EDITED SELECTION of essays presented at the George Fox Tercentenary Commemorative Conference held at Lancaster University, March 1991, Michael Mullett extends his personal contribution beyond the significant conference he organized to the publishing of a valuable collection of essays sure to inform the reader helpfully and provocatively. The essays represent less than a fifth of the conference presentations, but they include some of the most weighty as well as most of the major plenary addresses. The book reveals interesting debates among historians and interpreters of the early Quaker movement. The contributors and their essays are as follows:

Michael Mullett, "George Fox and the Society of Friends" (introduction); Thomas Hamm, "George Fox and the Politics of Late Nineteenth-Century Quaker Historiography"; Christopher Hill, "Quakers and the English Revolution"; Larry Ingle, "Unravelling George Fox: the Real Person"; Michael Graves, "Mapping the Metaphors in George Fox's Sermons"; Kenneth Carroll, "George Fox and America"; Jerry Frost, "George Fox's Ambiguous Anti-Slavery Legacy"; Meredith Weddle, "The Basis of the Early Quaker Peace Testimony and its Implications for Behaviour"; Maryann Feola, "Fox's Relationship with Nayler"; Richard Bailey, "The Making and Unmaking of a God: New Light on George Fox and Early Quakerism"; Hugh Barbour, "The 'Openings' of Fox and Bunyan"; David Boulton, "Public Policy and Politics in Fox's Thought: The Un-militant Tendency in Early Quakerism"; and Michael Thompson, "The Post-Restoration Peace Testimony: Quakers and the Kaber Rigg Plot."

While one misses the essays of Tatiana Pavlova (on Fox and perestrojka in 17th C. England) and Dorothy Nimmo (a riveting poem on Nayler—however, see her *A Testimony to the Grace of God*, York: Sessions 1993), Mullett's thoughtful introduction and ordering of the essays treat the reader to an enticing platter of fresh treatments of Fox and related themes. Without treating the content of each essay in

this brief review, of particular interest is the fact that even between the essayists several suggestive dialogues emerge. These lead the historian and the interpreter to issues demanding further investigation:

First, what are the implications of Quaker historiography—especially treating the first generation of the movement—as it relates to it later interpretations and their impact upon those who consider themselves part of the Quaker movement, let alone those who do not? For the last century or more, historical investigations into nascent Quakerism have provided platform agendas for restorationists and iconoclasts alike. This requires historiography to be done well by innovators as well as defenders of more widely-held views.

Second, what was the historical development of the Quaker Peace Testimony really like? Was its 1661 formulation a reflection of continuity with the previous decade, or was it an innovation, marginalizing some even within the fold? Certainly popular movements are always more heterogeneous than more simplistic presentations suggest, but the investigation of the historical development of this central Quaker Testimony is rife with implications.

Third, and similarly, what did Fox and early Quakers do with such societal institutions as family structures and slavery practices? Did Fox speak clearly to these matters in liberating ways, or was his treatment more ambiguous than one might have desired? Whatever the case, the historian must be wary of anachronistic impulses tending to fit the “hero” into the “right answer” responses of later reformers, although the seeds of later reforms may certainly be inferred in Fox’s work.

Fourth, what of the relation between Fox and Nayler? Do we simply have in our memory of Fox as the founder of the movement the privileging of the more enduring of the two, or would Friends (and others) in the 1650s also have given the nod to Fox over Nayler in terms of spiritual weight? Certainly, Nayler’s embarrassing the movement and Fox’s subsequent shunning of Nayler set the course of collective memory. Then again, charisma alone cannot long endure without (at least the perception of) the integrity to match it, and on this one Fox clearly did win over Nayler.

Fifth, was the advance of the early Quaker movement primarily a sociopolitical phenomenon or was it an eschatological and spiritual visitation? Perhaps it was both, and each furthered the other. Nonetheless, as much information as possible should be gathered in understanding the factors leading to the rise of the movement if one would also com-

prehend its contagion. An impressive aspect of this collection is that it contains a broad, interdisciplinary, set of approaches for investigating the life and impact of Fox, and this multidimensional set of approaches deserves to be carried even further.

Finally, a cautionary query: How can approaches to the “historical George” remain chaste and consideration-worthy in casting new light upon familiar topics? The innovator here has the same constraints as the defender of familiar views and must always shoulder the burden of proof. As always, the historian must state degrees of certainty regarding specific points, acknowledge conjecture when it is being made, identify the setting (and inclination) of the sources cited, and be willing to state the present writer’s views and agendas underlying the historiographic work one is conducting. Here we face the same sorts of issues and challenges before those conducting “historical Jesus” research, and acknowledging of interests and presuppositions at the outset, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of one’s views, at least contextualizes one’s historicizing appeals to “objective” investigations and prepares the ground for constructive engagements of one’s views.

This collection will be a good addition to any library and should be engaged by serious students of Fox and the early Quaker era. Mullett has done a service to the Quaker movement and interested persons. Several articles represent central parts of larger published works but also stand on their own as essays worthy of being considered and further engaged. I recommend the book highly.

Douglas Gwyn, *The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and the Rise of Capitalism*. Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1995. Preface + 398 pp. + 5 pp. of index, ISBN 0-87574-924-0. \$16.95

REVIEWED BY T. VAIL PALMER, JR.

IN CONJUNCTION WITH DOUG GWYN'S two previously published books, this new work amply demonstrates his amazing versatility as a scholar-writer. First, in *Apocalypse of the Word*, he presented an interpretation of George Fox as a systematic biblical theologian—a task that Lewis Benson might have accomplished had he had a disciplined theological education. Next, *Unmasking the Idols* was a tract for the times, in the spirit of the Old Testament prophets. Now, in *The Covenant Crucified*, he returns to the thought of Fox and the early Friends. But this time he examines their thought not as a systemic whole but as it changed and developed through the latter half of the seventeenth century, from the double perspective of biblical covenant theology and of a Marxist reading of history!

I need to make it clear that I approach this book with a couple of deep-seated biases. First, I have long had a strong interest and some involvement in Christian-Marxist dialogue. In particular, I have put some effort into investigating how a Marxist perspective can shed light on our understanding of Quaker history and of the thought of various Quaker writers. Second, I have had an even longer interest in the covenant as a major theme in biblical theology and on the ways in which this theme informed the thought of early Friends such as Fox and Edward Burrough.

Without these biases, I might be inclined to characterize Doug Gwyn's effort as at best a major tour de force, with some curiosity as to how well he might succeed in pulling it off. But from where I am, I came to this book with some excitement. I saw the effort as one that sorely needed doing. Already knowing Doug's acumen as a scholar and felicity as a writer, I had some hope that he would do the job very well.

I was not disappointed. It is rare for a work of scholarship, dealing with abstract themes and bristling with footnotes, to emerge as a page-turner. But that is just what happened. I read this book with a

sustained level of high excitement, put it down between chapters with some reluctance, and completed it with delight at what Doug had accomplished.

Doug Gwyn succeeds in melding his contrasting covenant/ Marxist perspectives into a convincing dialectical whole. The proof of the effectiveness of this approach is in its ability to throw fresh new light on puzzling, controverted issues in the period under consideration—the first fifty years of Quakerism. And this book succeeds in doing just that. In particular, we gain new insights into the James Nayler affair and into the genesis of the peace testimony.

We have argued over whether the second-generation decline from the original vitality of the movement was due to the limitations of apologists like Barclay and Penn, was the result of inherent defects in the original vision, was an exemplification of the fact that any religious-renewal movement is inevitably a one-generation phenomenon, or was not truly a decline. Gwyn develops a persuasive case that this decline was a necessary response to forces outside of the movement, which prevented it from attaining its envisioned goals.

On another historical issue, Doug Gwyn parts company with interpreters with whom he is generally sympathetic: Lewis Benson and Rob Tucker. On the issue of “gospel order,” Benson believed that when Fox entered into his task of setting up men’s and women’s business meetings, at the local and regional levels, he was completing the inherent logic of his own original vision. In “Revolutionary Faithfulness” Tucker argued that the Quaker business-meeting structure was “a revolutionary apparatus through which to do the work of overturning the old and instituting the new.” [QRT 9, 2, p. 8] In contrast, in *The Covenant Crucified*, Gwyn argues that “Fox’s burst of apostolic organizing decisively ended the revolutionary period of Quaker witness” (p. 281) and came about largely as an innovative response to the defeat of the original Quaker covenant-society vision by the forces of the established church, the restored royalty, and the emerging capitalist social-economic order.

On one point I believe Gwyn falls short in his synthesis of the Marxist and covenant perspectives. In an initial chapter he examines the development of the biblical covenant theme in the light of a Marxist understanding of the history of ancient Israel and early Christianity. In this connection he refers to Marxist “Louis Althusser’s interpretation of mode of production as an all-encompassing social reality...Althusser, as a Marxist eschewing theistic options, works this out as a system of total

immanence; that is, there is no force acting from beyond the totality of the system itself.” (pp. 61-62) In contrast, Gwyn argues, the biblical covenant implies a reality that transcends the existing social-economic system as well as a deeper immanence within the system. I think Gwyn could have enriched this tension if he had made use of the seminal work by Czech Marxist Milan Machovec, *A Marxist Looks at Jesus*.

Machovec argues that “early socialism had the concept of a totally different, incomparably ‘other’ future. It was thus ‘radically eschatological’ and much closer in mentality to some of the prophetic figures of the biblical tradition than anyone in the nineteenth century, Marxist or Christian, was prepared to admit.”¹ He goes on to insist: “The very essence of eschatological thinking...is the total penetration of the present by the future in the understanding of consistently eschatological people, of whom Jesus was indisputably one. It is...not just paradoxical that because of this—and the essence of Jesus’ message is unintelligible otherwise—many modern Marxists can in some respects evince more understanding of the present than many Christians.”² It appears to me that Machovec here implies an element of transcendence in Marxist thought: an “eschatological” transcendence of the future breaking into the reality of the present. An appreciation of this dimension of transcendence in Marxist thought would not only enrich Gwyn’s synthesis of covenant theology and Marxist history in understanding the biblical background. I have argued elsewhere that it would also enhance a Marxist analysis of early Quakerism, through a deeper appreciation of the radical social implications of the eschatologically-oriented theology of Fox and Burrough.³

In summary, Douglas Gwyn’s book is a lucidly written, monumental work of scholarship. It should provoke thoughtful reactions and further inquiry into Marxist thought, covenant theology, and early Quakerism. I recommend it without reservation.

NOTES

1. Milan Machovec, *A Marxist Looks at Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), p. 26.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

3. T. Vail Palmer, Jr., "A Revisionist Revised: A New Look at Bernstein's Cromwell and Communism," in D. Neil Snarr and Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, eds., *Practiced in the Presence: Essays in Honor of T. Canby Jones* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1994), pp. 48, 56-57.