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Neelon's "James Nayler: Revolutionary to Prophet" - Book Review

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NEELON, D., *James Nayler: Revolutionary to Prophet* (Becket, MA: Leadings Press, 2009), pp. xxxviii + 218. ISBN: 0-981-7363-2-7, Hardback, \$39.95.

James Nayler (1618?–60) remains little known among Friends other than his ‘fall’ in the wake of his Bristol enactment of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem (1656). For this ‘horrid blasphemy’ he was tried by Parliament, tortured and incarcerated. Forsaken by Fox at this tragic moment, he was released by the Rump three years later only to die after being set upon by persons unknown while returning to his Yorkshire home.

Neelon’s *James Nayler* comprises an Introduction and sixteen chapters, the first five of which provide the background to his subject’s public ministry. We learn how Nayler grew up in the confused and volatile political and religious environment of Caroline England in the parish of Woodkirk in West Ardsley near Wakefield. Neelon, scotching Bittle’s (1986) supposition that the substantial East Ardsley House was Nayler’s home (pp. 3–6), makes much of the local history of Woodkirk since he is keen to paint a comprehensive picture of Nayler’s social and working environment, ‘a sense of place’. His success in this respect is impressive given the paucity of materials at his command.

In addressing ‘Anthony Nutter and the Puritans’, Chapter 2 describes the growth of Puritanism through the career of the most famous of Woodkirk clerics. Then, in Chapter 3, we are eased into an examination of ‘religious dissent’ and the struggle for ‘freedom of conscience’. Charles I, the ‘abuse’ of his personal rule (1629–40) and the

prelude to revolution are the subjects of Chapter 4 after which Chapters 5 and 6 are devoted to the civil wars (1642–51) and Nayler's part in them; included is his role as quartermaster under General Lambert at Dunbar (1650) before illness forced demobilisation. Neelon shows courage in providing a succinct account of the complex politico-religious controversies engulfing the British nations. This is no easy task as the still-turbulent debates among historians over the nature of Puritanism, the protracted disputes within the Church of England, the causes of the wars, the role of the army and the progress (or otherwise) of the Commonwealth and Protectorate clearly show.

So ends in effect part one of the book before we embark on Nayler proper and his part as an itinerant minister in the unfolding drama of 1650s Quakerism. Neelon guides us through Nayler's initial stay at Swarthmoor Hall (1652), the disputes with the Puritan 'priests of Westmorland' and his trial, along with Francis Howgill, at Appleby (1653) for blasphemy, a trumped-up charge by the same priests. The trial proceedings are found in *Saul's Errand to Damascus* (1653), an early collaboration with Fox and important for the nascent Quaker movement's theology (pp. 68–72). All this is well told.

Three chapters are reserved for Bristol. Neelon's treatment of the event is not new but well written, particularly the account of Nayler's exhaustion. The subsequent trial by the Commons is confidently explained. Finally, Neelon makes use of Nayler's recantation and such essential works as *The Lamb's War* (1658) to present not so much a systematic exegesis of a theology that matured while Nayler languished in prison, but an outline of the works' principle themes.

Neelon's approach is less theological than that of Fogelklou (1931), avoids Damrosch's (1996) linguistic territory and is more scholarly than Bittle. He sculpts well the image of the local farmer, the ordinary soldier, the chaste prisoner, the emotional and sensitive, albeit sometimes confused, man who nevertheless possessed considerable religious and writing gifts.

I would have opted for less Anthony Nutter and a de-emphasis of Nayler's letter to Bradford (pp. 107–12) for more of Nayler's theology—for instance, a deeper examination of his subject's eschatology, that is to say, his prophetic and revolutionary *Quaker* orthopraxis in a premillennial environment. And a quibble: *Swarthmoor*, not Swarthmore, for the Hall.

James Nayler has a pleasing, accessible style and contains some special touches: for example, we learn that at his Appleby trial Nayler was possibly confused with a John Naylier, Leveller (p. 64). The discovery of tracts which mention Nayler's military exploits in Yorkshire is exemplary scholarship (p. 47).

Neelon has written a fine addition to the small number of works surrounding this charismatic yet enigmatic giant of early Quakerism. The work will prove a reliable guide for Quaker continuing theology (i.e. history) and will be especially attractive to students of discernment and Leadings, besides being an excellent resource for discussion groups.

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