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Review

Robert W. Tucker

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Review

THE PEACEABLE KINGDOM, An American Saga, Volume One, by Jan de Hartog. Atheneum, New York, 1972. 677 pp., \$10. A series of four novels linked in that different generations of the same families are portrayed. Volume One includes "The Children of the Light," Lancashire, England, 1652-1653, and "The Holy Experiment," Pennsylvania, 1754-1755. Volume Two, now in preparation, will include "The Peculiar People," Indiana, 1833, and "The Lamb's War," New Mexico, 1945.

Already Meetings are starting to get visitors who were attracted by reading *The Peaceable Kingdom*, and their numbers can be expected to increase. The lack of first-rate, accurate historical fiction about Quakerism, the sort that will command a mass readership and remain on public library shelves everywhere for years, has long been a concern of many of us; such books exist around many other religious traditions and have proved to be a major way in which the faithful learn something about their tradition and new members are discovered. In this enormous literary project, Jan de Hartog is trying to meet a real need, and to put his considerable literary talents to the service of his faith. He cannot be faulted in his intentions.

Unfortunately, the project is over-ambitious for his unaided talents, and he has not sought the help from other Friends that he needed. I have been told that Volume Two is being vetted chapter by chapter by scholars of the places and periods discussed; I hope this is so, and I hope Friend de Hartog will consider doing a revised edition of Volume One. It is a great pity to see worthy intentions and an enormous expenditure of energy and talent faulted by unnecessary inaccuracies and mal-focusings. Unfortunately, some of the faults of Volume One are so central to the main story line as to raise questions as to whether the book is salvageable by any amount of rewriting. In any event, there is an immediate and on-going need to explain this book, and often, to explain it away, to present-day members of the Society of Friends as well as to inquirers.

Jan de Hartog is an admirable human being, a worthy Friend, and a first-rate story-teller — this last is what makes *The Peaceable Kingdom* so important. One of his earlier books, *The Hospital*, is about a Friends Meeting, another, *The Captain*, is a novel about conversion to pacifism; both are drawn from de Hartog's own life and his deepest spiritual experiences. They are profoundly Quaker books, of high literary caliber. But in *The Peaceable Kingdom* he tries something new for him, the role of the historical novelist. I am not sure he fully understands the special expectations that a historical novelist must meet; a standard apologia explains that he has not felt bound by minor details of historical exactitude, but this is not good enough. A historical novelist needs to be steeped in the period he writes about; he needs to know not only barebone facts, but to have a feeling for what made people tick in the mind-set of another time and place; it is this that permits him to take liberties with historical detail for the sake of the story line. For the project he has undertaken, Jan de Hartog needed to be a perceptive scholar of both history and theology for four different times and places, or else to seek help from people who are. Being a confident first-rate writer, with a special interest in a historical period and a willingness to do research, is simply not enough.

For consider, briefly, just why people read historical novels. Partly for the same reason we all sometimes read undemanding books: relaxation. But with a historical novel, the reader also expects to learn some history the easy way. No, more than that — the reader expects to have history made live for him in the way a dry dissertation never can; he expects to be helped to see and feel another time and place the way the people of that time and place felt it. The reader assumes that the author will meet this expectation. Even a fifth-rate historical novel, if it is properly done, is by far the most vivid, interesting, and memorable way to learn history and understand former times and different cultures; this genre fills an important niche in mass education. Religious historical novels also recruit people to the religious tradition they discuss, and open up that tradition to those who already adhere to it. Historical novels must be assessed not primarily by their literary value, but by how well they meet the special expectations readers bring to them.

In these terms, *The Peaceable Kingdom* does have some major strengths. It avoids the sentimental version of pacifism endemic among Friends; no one can read this book without understanding that Christian peaceableness can and often does get you killed, and that getting killed is not pleasant or

romantic. The book looks clear-eyed at prison horrors and vividly portrays just what it was that the first Friends knowingly submitted themselves to. De Hartog should especially be commended for making so clear that early Quakerism was catholic and gathered all kinds and conditions of people. In this connection, he also has, and presents, an understanding of mixed motives, the fact that God often uses our weaknesses to reach us, the fact that most noble endeavors have both noble and ignoble motivations behind them if one looks deeply enough. De Hartog, unlike so many Friends today, understands that people really are sinners, and that the miracle of religion is precisely that God puts authority into the hands of sinners and bears them up and helps them. Sentimentality in general is just not one of Jan de Hartog's vices as a writer, and this makes *The Peaceable Kingdom* almost unique, and goes far toward redeeming its many grave faults.

The most striking fault, though not the most serious, is historical error. The errors need to be carefully catalogued, but this is a task for *Quaker History*; *Quaker Religious Thought* needs to concern itself with theological misrepresentation. Yet this latter is also a task in historiography; Quaker belief in 1653 was not the same as it was in 1755 and both are different from today, and the three social and cultural environments are drastically different.

Therefore, without pretending to special scholarship in the period, let me try to impart something of the flavor of Friend de Hartog's historical research by offering a short list of minutiae that I (along, surely, with hundreds of other Philadelphia Friends) happened to notice and remember in the second novel, "The Holy Experiment":

(1) Formal lectures were not given at Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in 1754, nor for a century and a half afterward. (2) First-day Schools were not invented until a century later. (3) The town of Media did not exist until a century later. (4) The Northwest Territories did not exist by that name until after the American Revolution; in 1755 they were passing from French to British hands, but they remained part of Quebec — this, in fact, was an important cause of the American Revolution. (5) For this reason, Friends who migrated in this period did not go to the Ohio Valley. Like the Boones of Exeter Meeting, they went to the Piedmont region of North Carolina, and later to Tennessee. (6) There were no women doctors in the early 1700's, and everything in the plot that hinges on the assumption that there were is just unbelievable. (7) So, likewise, is the assumption that American woodsmen had pene-

trated, in 1755, into regions that were to remain unknown until the Lewis and Clark expedition in the next century. (8) An interracial egalitarian frontier settlement of Friends never existed, nor could it have. Friends held advanced views, but not that advanced. (9) There was no significant number of German-speaking Friends in 1754, certainly not whole Meetings of them. I suspect de Hartog has seen references to "German Quakers" and does not know that this was the popular name for the Schwenkfelders, who in this period used Quaker worship and discipline and plain dress, but who resisted annexation attempts by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, and who certainly did not attend Yearly Meeting sessions. (10) In 1754, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting was still convening in late summer; it switched to early spring in 1798, because of the yellow fever epidemics. (11) There was no "Committee on Indian Affairs" in 1754, and even the non-reporting association that was ancestor to the present committee did not then exist. More basically, this was before the committeeization of Quakerdom; the notion of a standing committee of this type was alien to the Quaker mentality of 1754. (12) The "coalition" with German voters was not a coalition of Friends in the Assembly with Pennsylvania Dutch in the Assembly; it consisted in the fact that, during the period of Quaker ascendancy, Germans tended to vote for Quaker candidates to office.

Two less trivial historical defects should be mentioned; they are related. The central plot device of an island in the Delaware with a tropical climate created by hot springs, on which a West Indies type of indigo plantation was maintained, not only strains credulity, but does so unnecessarily. If de Hartog needed to have a Philadelphia Quaker family directly involved in big-time slavery, he could have had them own an actual Indies plantation — there was in fact much absentee ownership, also a constant flow of shipping. Even more basic to his plot: Slavery was not a central issue with Philadelphia Friends in 1754-1755, and certainly had nothing to do with their withdrawal from politics. The Quaker abdication had to do with the French and Indian wars, combined with a general religious revival that included a strong "quiet-in-the-land" emphasis, and these were central issues that preoccupied Friends in 1754-1755, to the exclusion of most other things. These are among the best-known years in Quaker history precisely because they were key years in Quaker thinking about the relationship of Christians and the secular state, a topic still very unresolved. Of all possible years to choose, de Hartog picked these two, and then wrote about slavery, an issue that loomed large in

years before and years after but not in those years. It is jarring to read a book about a period so well known and find it ignores what that period is known for, and focuses on something else; it is kinder to think de Hartog's historical ignorance is colossal than to suppose he did this knowingly.

This recitation of historical error demonstrates, I believe, that de Hartog did not do his basic job of steeping himself in the history and culture of the period and people he was writing about. It adds up to a *prima facie* case for approaching everything else in his book with caution. It suggests that when we talk to people who have read *The Peaceable Kingdom* and been favorably impressed by it, the first thing we should say is that it is not safe to approach this book with the expectations we normally bring to historical novels.

The second thing we should say is something indignant about the incredibly offensive portrayal of Margaret Fell as being attracted to Quakerism because she was attracted sexually by George Fox. This is a historical point that turns quickly into a theological one.

Margaret Fell, as de Hartog makes clear, was virtually co-founder of the Society of Friends. Lewis Benson, the only friend I know who has read virtually everything written by both George Fox and Margaret Fell, comments that nobody understood the mind of Fox better than Margaret Fell. The *mind* — not the gonads. Many years later, after she had been widowed for some years and when both were middle-aged, the two married, and promptly went off to separate jails. In view of the totality of intellectual and spiritual understanding between them, plus the special problems of a rich widow who was a Friend, this marriage was almost inevitable.

De Hartog is perhaps a typical victim of our times in that he seems to assume that there is no valid marriage without a primary ingredient of mutual sexual attraction. Yet even in these days there are valid and spiritually significant marriages for other reasons. In the Seventeenth Century sex was not on the cultural front burner as it is today. Indeed, one of the striking things to the modern mind is the innocent use of sexual figures of speech, taken loosely from Canticles, in the letters persecuted Friends addressed to Margaret Fell at Swarthmoor.

To suggest that Margaret Fell entertained conscious adulterous thoughts, or even subconscious adulterous thoughts, when she first met Fox twenty years before she was to marry him, is to suggest in the first case religious hypocrisy, in the second case inadequate gifts of introspection. Neither supposition is

compatible with all we know of Margaret Fell, and we know a great deal. To suggest that her attraction to Quakerism was really the attraction of a woman of passionate nature to a very virile male is a nauseating piece of male chauvinism, as well as a denigration of the caliber of the faith of one of the founders of our faith, and therefore of our faith itself.

The male chauvinism becomes worse, and more conspicuously unhistorical, and doctrinally subversive, when de Hartog gives us to understand that Margaret Fell went behind George Fox's back to set up Quaker organization, thus feminizing and weakening the virile male prophetic thrust of Fox, but also making possible a permanent Society of Friends, which, it is suggested, Fox himself could not have done as a matter of character.

The best that can be said about all this is that it is the reverse side of one of de Hartog's strengths, his understanding of the multiplicity of motivation that lies behind most noble and lofty behavior. Let us admire his perception here even while we note that this particular application of it must be vehemently rejected.

Aside from the fact that prophetic thrust among early Friends was conspicuously found in women as well as in men — and in normal women and men, contented in their vocations and their family lives — de Hartog's view simply ignores the fact that Fox devoted his life and labors, above all other things, to setting up the organizational system called Gospel Order. It is true that in 1653 organization was still unsettled, yet even at this date it was intrinsic to what Fox was doing.

For Fox, like almost everyone in Seventeenth Century England, was centrally and overwhelmingly preoccupied with the question of "What Is the Church?" From the beginning he was engaged in gathering a people around a renewed understanding of the corporate nature of Christianity, around the realization that to be the church and inherit apostolic authority you need neither succession nor book nor creed nor rite nor a learned clergy. Any group of ordinary people could be the church by entering corporately into a hearing-and-obeying relation with Christ after the example of the original disciples. Quaker organization and Quaker thought about the church are implicit in Fox's original opening that "There is one, even Christ Jesus, who can speak to thy condition." The reason this made Fox's heart leap with joy is that it was an opening into the ways Christians of his time were apostate, an opening of the Good News of early Quakerism that ordinary and unlearned people could stop fretting the issues of the day and enter into

the power promised a community of discipleship in Matthew 18. If much of the early organizing work was done by Margaret Fell, this was because she was in a position to do it as Fox then was not (as de Hartog correctly makes clear), but also because she totally understood the implications of Fox's doctrine. It can perhaps be argued that she understood them better than Fox in a way, in that hers was the more orderly mind, but it is rank heresy to suggest that they disagreed, or that her work was something that would not have occurred to Fox.

Today, Protestant individualism, plus a generation of Quaker reunionism and consequent lowest-common-denominator Quakerism, have profoundly subverted Friends' understanding of our own corporateness. A dozen years of Quaker historical and theological scholarship have focused almost exclusively on a rediscovery of the early Quaker understanding of the church, with the result that scholars of Quakerism and those few whom they have influenced are moving in one direction in their thinking, while Quakerism more generally is still moving in the opposite direction. It is no surprise that Jan de Hartog should miss the whole point of early Quaker thinking; most contemporary Friends do. But it is inexcusable in a historical novel in terms of what historical novelists need to do.

De Hartog has absorbed several key peripheral insights of contemporary Quaker scholarship. In *The Peaceable Kingdom* there is no attempt to invoke the mysticism theory of Quaker origins. The Protestant enthusiasm theory of Geoffrey Nuttall and of Roland Knox, which has also been debunked, can be read into his book, but is not conspicuous. What is conspicuous is an aspect of the new scholarship wrenched from its context and thereby distorted.

That aspect is power. Jan de Hartog understands very clearly that early Friends knew how to lay hold of power. The laying hold of and application of spiritual power is his most central theme.

Unfortunately, the power in question is not explained as the power of the apostles, granted by Jesus, to which a community of faithfulness has access. Rather, it is understood diffusely as spiritual power in general, to be laid hold of by a centering-down technique that is spelled out in detail, almost mechanistically. By doing *this*, Friends got the power to do *that*.

But the power that Friends have sometimes known is explicitly the power of Christ, and it is laid hold of not by any gimmick, but by daily faithfulness. Faithfulness, by definition, means eagerness to do the Lord's will, not one's own, toward ends that may be totally open or, if dimly perceived,

are perceived as temporary working models that may have to be discarded at any time. Jan de Hartog does seem aware that the spirit of the Lord is trickier than a roller-coaster full of nitroglycerine — it may explode at any time in any direction and work all sorts of havoc with the lives of those who mess with it. But he is inconsistent. If some of his characters use a centering technique by which power lays hold of them and seizes them like leaves in a wind and carries them to places they never thought to reach, others use the same technique to achieve ends they wanted in advance to achieve; for example, his young man who faces an Indian chief.

There is no one technique by which one lays hold of apostolic power. De Hartog would have us think it happens in silent worship. Yet in both historic and present-day fact, silent worship usually does no more than open us to a power that comes to us in the midst of everyday tasks, or in connection with decision-making out in the world. Accounts of several early Friends record that they were at their ploughs when they heard a voice saying, "Thou art ordained a prophet unto the nations." Though it doesn't seem to happen that way to de Hartog's early Quakers, by the evidence of *The Hospital* it does in fact happen that way to de Hartog.

Laying hold of mystic ancient power to accomplish one's own ends is not a new idea; it is regularly advertised by the Rosicrucians. Some of us will feel it important to tell inquirers that Quakerism is not similar to Rosicrucianism, whatever *The Peaceable Kingdom* may seem to suggest.

R. W. Tucker