

2013

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### Recommended Citation

Miller, Jay (2013) "Review of Geoffrey Plank, John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 121, Article 6.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol121/iss1/6>

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## REVIEW OF GEOFFREY PLANK, *JOHN WOOLMAN'S PATH TO THE PEACEABLE KINGDOM*

JAY MILLER

Dorothy Day, twentieth century writer, social activist, and a founder of the Catholic Worker movement, is alleged to have said, “Don’t call me a saint. I don’t want to be dismissed that easily.”<sup>1</sup> John Woolman, eighteenth century writer and Quaker reformer, while probably using more of his characteristic tact, would likely agree with Day. At least that is the conclusion one could draw from reading historian Geoffrey Plank’s excellent 2012 book, *John Woolman’s Path to the Peaceable Kingdom: A Quaker in the British Empire*.

Plank believes “[t]he effusive praise Woolman has received, both as a saint and as a pioneering opponent of slavery, has unfortunately impeded our ability to comprehend his engagement with other Quakers,” and with “the secular currents of eighteenth-century life.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, Plank seeks to understand Woolman as thoroughly embedded in the contexts of eighteenth-century American Quakerism and the British Empire. According to Plank, “[t]he debates that preoccupied Woolman affected everyone living in the British colonies in North America,” and read in this way Woolman shifts from being solely a prophet against slavery to a sort of public intellectual posing a systematic critique of British Imperialism.<sup>3</sup>

Woolman saw the imperial economy as a machine, and... the various parts of the British Empire served specialized functions that supported one another. He argued that purchasing the products of slave labor promoted slave-raiding and warfare in Africa and that concentrating wealth in the hands of the landed elite on the American East Coast had the effect of pushing landless whites onto Indian lands in the west. He therefore saw from his home in Mount Holly nearly all the evils of the far-flung empire around him.<sup>4</sup>

Plank notes that “religious vision inspired Woolman’s detailed and sweeping critique of the material culture and economy of the British Empire.”<sup>5</sup> Throughout the book, which is a loosely chronological

series of overlapping thematic chapters, fine examples drawn from impressive archival work are used to explore the convictions, critiques, and conundrums that marked John Woolman's religious vision and his life. In the process, Plank recovers many aspects of the Quaker saint's life that are often neglected.

In the opening chapters of his book, Plank describes the social and historical contexts of Woolman's life, and examines his childhood and adolescence. Living on a farm, in a predominately agricultural region dotted by distinctive Quaker brick homes and meetinghouses, impressed upon Woolman the values of country life, and the legacy that had been left by early Quaker settlers. However, during Woolman's growing up years the Delaware valley was undergoing a transformation, as new businesses, particularly iron works, created wealth, diversified the economy, and drew non-Quakers immigrants to the region.<sup>6</sup> Plank links this transformation to Woolman's "apprehension of there being less steadiness and firmness amongst people in this age than in the past."<sup>7</sup> He then suggests, insightfully and somewhat provocatively, that though Woolman's "ideas may have carried radical implications . . . but at heart . . . he was a conservative," someone driven by a desire to live life in continuity with and within some of the limitations of the past.<sup>8</sup>

Plank describes Woolman as conscientious and solitary young man. But while he endeavored to stay away from frivolous company, Woolman sought out the affirmation and approval of trusted Friends and formal Quaker oversight. Plank goes on to catalogue the many ways that Woolman served the Society of Friends in his lifetime: oversight for meetinghouse maintenance, book and pamphlet delivery to local meetings, mediation between debtors and creditors, conversation with young men intending to marry, service on committees that spoke with individuals interested in Quakerism, and more. The scope of Woolman's ministry undermines the image of him as singularly focused on eradicating slavekeeping among Quakers. Rather, he possessed a broad concern for the internal affairs of the church, including the business of quarterly and yearly meetings across the colonies.

The travel required by Woolman's ministry meant significant time away from his family. Plank suggests that this tension peaked with the death of John and Sarah Woolman's three-month-old son William, whose death shortly followed one of John's journeys. Historical evidence describing this episode is scant, but Plank notes that

following William's death, John "reallocated his time and energies in an effort to reconcile his responsibility to his family with his heartfelt sense of obligation toward God."<sup>9</sup>

Here Plank delves into the details of Woolman's business preserved in ledgers. For example, Woolman for a time carried out an extensive and complex business selling pork to the Caribbean via a Philadelphia merchant. However, Woolman's ledgers show that this trade abruptly stopped, perhaps because of its association with the Caribbean and slavery, perhaps because of the demands it placed on his time and attention. Gradually his business shifted to local endeavors, growing grain on his own land, and tailoring for members of his community.<sup>10</sup> Plank points out that distancing himself from potentially unjust retail operations was not exceptional among Quakers in his day; what was unique was his writings making a larger social critique of the luxury some experienced at the expense of others' labor.

Plank goes on to discuss Woolman's objections to slavery, the French and Indian war, and colonial relationships with Native Americans. Here Plank does a fine job of demonstrating that Woolman did not come to his convictions in isolation, but through interactions with others. Readers are introduced to Maria and Jem, slaves Woolman knew, told the story of his brother Abner's resistance to Imperial soldiers, and learn about the Munsee prophet Papunhank, who is an important historical figure in his own right.

Plank makes his point clear that Woolman's prophetic ministry did not take place in a vacuum, and did not set him apart from the complex details of daily life in contact with other people. However, his commitment to understanding Woolman through his context and communities does not obscure Woolman as an individual. The Quaker saint's passions, severities, and idiosyncrasies remain, and are only sharpened by the historical detail Plank offers.

Dorothy Day is on her way to be canonized, and not without reason, just as Quakers and scholars are justified in noting the exemplary aspects of John Woolman's life. Perhaps the value of Day's reticence to being called a saint and Geoffrey Plank's insistence on a full picture of John Woolman's life and thought is that it reframes our understanding of sainthood, not as the endeavor of a few who transcend, but the hard won vocation of all who walk this earth.

## ENDNOTES

1. James Martin, SJ, "Don't Call Me a Saint?" *America: The National Catholic Review Online*, accessed 17 May 2013.
2. Geoffrey Plank, *John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom: A Quaker in the British Empire*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012, 4.
3. *Ibid.*, 7.
4. *Ibid.*, 3.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 16.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, 32.
9. *Ibid.*, 72.
10. *Ibid.* 87-88.