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Mike Heller  
*Roanoke College*

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REVIEW OF GARY NASH'S *WARNER MIFFLIN: UNFLINCHING QUAKER ABOLITIONIST* (PHILADELPHIA: UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS, 2017)

MIKE HELLER

Gary Nash's biography of Warner Mifflin is an important contribution to Quaker history. It's exceptionally well written and researched. Mifflin is largely a forgotten figure who needs to be recognized along with John Woolman and Anthony Benezet. Mifflin was possibly the most important American antislavery activist of the late-eighteenth century.

Born in 1745, Mifflin grew up on Virginia's Eastern Shore where he watched his father acquire tracts of land to be worked by their many slaves. As a young man Mifflin became an important landowner and owned slaves himself. At over six foot six, he stood out among his peers, not only for his height but as a wealthy landowner who spoke well. Nash describes Mifflin, in his twenties, as "a man on the make" (37). When he married Elizabeth Johns, she brought to the marriage numerous slaves and large tracts of land in Delaware's Kent County, where they decided to move. There he became a justice of the peace and was active in monthly and quarterly meetings and soon in the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting.

Since he was fourteen, Mifflin had struggled with the idea of being a slaveowner. But it was not until 1774, that Mifflin felt he had to take action. That year slaveholding weighed heavily upon him as news reached him of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's recent decisions to end slave owning among Friends. He and Elizabeth had settled upon a tract of Delaware land that was excellent for farming, but also plagued with mosquitos and serious disease against which they had no defense. That same autumn, illness brought Mifflin close to death and shook him to his core. He realized that slaveholding would lead to "eternal separation from heavenly enjoyment ... that I should indeed be excluded from happiness if I continued in this breach of Divine law, written upon my heart, as by the finger of Heaven" (43).

Having been shaken by illness into a religious awakening, he believed those supporting slavery would have to face God's judgement. Mifflin believed in Divine intervention. He also believed that change required human action. As he recovered his health, he began to work on freeing his and Elizabeth's slaves. He then began persuading their extended-family and neighbors to do the same. A commitment to ending slavery became his life's work. It took precedent over management of their land. Because he was often away from home, despite his and Elizabeth's efforts to live more simply, their personal wealth began to decline.

By 1778, Mifflin was serving on a committee of men and women from his monthly meeting that would go further than had the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. It was not enough to free one's slaves. For the members of this committee, as Nash writes, "the work of true Christians only began with the liberation of their human property. After that they were morally obligated to provide for the education of the black children, to care for aged and disabled men and women coming out of thralldom, and to help freed people with legal assistance when white predators tried to drag them back into slavery" (99). But the committee went even further: Mifflin proposed that freed slaves deserved compensation for their years of labor. He was not the first to raise this idea, but as the Revolutionary War expanded and then as the new government began to take form, Mifflin led the way in arguing for compensation for freed slaves. Nash writes that such were Mifflin's efforts "in spreading the gospel of restitution for liberated slaves, so singular that he may fairly be called the father of American reparationism" (93). Mifflin did not stop with advocating for reparations, or as it was called by Friends then, restitution.

He was part of a Philadelphia Yearly Meeting peace delegation in 1779 which traveled to the Germantown battlefield to meet with both opposing generals, Howe and Washington. (In the 1790s, Mifflin wrote to and met again several times with Washington after he became President of the new nation.) Mifflin went on to fight for legislation to ease severe restrictions on manumission passed by Southern legislatures. He and his Quaker colleagues had some success in Virginia and promising possibilities in Delaware, Maryland and North Carolina, but all were, of course, to be disappointing. Then Mifflin moved into advocating for the new national government to address the slave trade. He was part of a delegation in 1783 to take a petition, with signatures of 535 Quakers from five states, to the

Continental Congress. Members of Congress dined with the Quakers but finally did nothing.

Mifflin's fame had reached Europe, in 1784, when St. John de Crèvecoeur published an expanded edition of his *Letters from an American Farmer*, which included twelve pages about the peace mission and focused on Mifflin as the "good Quaker." He wanted to travel to Europe but was denied Quaker meeting support to travel because he was thought to be overly zealous. In this way he repeatedly would face timid responses of some Quaker leaders as well as out-right opposition from some non-Friends. Various Europeans came to visit Mifflin as his fame spread.

In 1786, Mifflin lost Elizabeth, probably to cancer, when she was not quite 40. They had had twelve children, six of whom died before age 4, and one daughter, Mary, who died at age 15. At Elizabeth's death, five children were surviving. Mifflin continued his antislavery efforts, but traveling became all the more difficult, as he had to leave the children in the care of others. At the same time, he dealt with chronic health problems.

In 1788, he married Ann Emlen Mifflin, who also bravely took up Mifflin's abolitionist causes. Both Elizabeth Johns and Ann Emlen endured much suffering as they went through childbirth, cared for the children, and looked after the various properties during Mifflin's extended absences from home. In disease-infested Kent County, they all suffered severe fevers which yearly threatened to take away beloved children. Before their marriage, Ann Emlen took remarkable stands based on her Quaker faith and testimonies. As a young woman, she wrote a thirty-five-page, indignant "Address to Methodist John Wesley on his derogatory *History of the Quakers*." In her early twenties during the Revolution, she refused to use Congress's "polluted currency" and protested Pennsylvania's revolutionary government for its non-pacifist involvement. She had no interest in marriage. She wrote that "It is not marriage or celibacy [that] gives merit or demerit to a person, but a life ordered in the fear of The Lord" (153); by later giving in to marriage to Mifflin she sacrificed much of her own ambition. In addition to raising the five children from his previous marriage, she and Mifflin had three of their own, a daughter who died at 5 months, and two sons who lived to early adulthood but were plagued with physical and mental disorders.

In 1790, despite the fact that Ann was eight months pregnant, Mifflin felt called to leave home to accompany ten other Quaker leaders to New York to lobby the first Federal Congress. Their goal was gradual abolishment of slavery. Their faith in Divine judgement combined with belief in the Golden Rule, and they believed that the Declaration of Independence, with its statement of inalienable rights and the equality of all men, was “the great principle” and foundation of the new nation. As Nash observes, “Mifflin and his fellow Quakers were experienced lobbyists and men fiercely intent on trying to save the nation from the seeds of self-destruction” (161). Southern Congressmen, however, were outraged and protested that the Quakers had no right to petition Congress. Their action could have limited citizen involvement from that point on, but thankfully they did not succeed in limiting “the right in a democracy to petition elected representatives” (165). Nash writes that the Quaker delegation was “the first sustained lobbying effort in American history” (163). The Speaker of the House, James Madison, referred the petition to a committee, which Mifflin appeared before a few days later, becoming “the first recorded oral testimony before a Congressional committee” (167).

In arguing for gradual emancipation, Mifflin became vilified as “one of the most dangerous men in America” (11). Congressmen from the Lower South singled out Mifflin for verbal abuse and character defamation. Their fearmongering was based not only on the financial cost of ending slavery, but on concerns about bloody slave revolts like the recent one in St. Domingue. They also greatly feared interracial marriage, which would produce a “mongrel” nation in which “the white race would be extinct and the American people would be all of mulatto breed” (171). (The Quakers themselves would not welcome formerly enslaved people into their meetings because of some of the same racist fears.) Mifflin’s emphasis on the Divine judgement of slaveowners as well as the nation itself also drew counterattacks from his opponents who were largely deists. Southern congressmen balked at having their own Christianity questioned.

In a sixteen-page pamphlet published by the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, *A Serious Expostulation with the Member of the House of Representatives of the United States*, Mifflin responded to personal attacks against him. Nash writes, “How could he not speak out, as ‘the Prophet did when he was ordered to cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgressions, and the

house of Jacob their sins?” (187). Nash goes on to say that “Mifflin had little reason to believe his pamphlet would move Congress or the president. . . . Rather, his quarry was the public at large. In this strategy to reach a national audience, . . . he knew he was in this endeavor for the long run” (187).

In addition to lobbying, Mifflin could not deny requests by enslaved men and women to represent them in court for various lawsuits, in which he had some successes. His and Ann’s home became a refuge for runaway slaves. At the same time their financial situation became dire and they sold off more and more properties to make ends meet. With his own failing health, he and Ann became overwhelmed by the numbers of desperate people seeking help. In 1798, three weeks before Mifflin died, he “composed the last letter he would ever write. To John Adams, the nation’s second President, he poured out all his accumulated grief at the plight of black America and the sinfulness of white America” (212). When he died at age 52, Ann carried on his efforts and became a traveling minister in her own right, outliving him by 17 years. The letter to Adams had not been sent, but two years later, as part of her devotion to her husband’s legacy, she asked his friends to send the letter to Adams, whose reply was, in essence, “a mockery of her husband’s lifelong work” (224).

The story of Mifflin’s life is remarkable. He experienced a transformation from a wealthy land and slaveowner to becoming a major figure in the abolitionist movement. He had small successes at the state level, in the courts on behalf of individual former slaves, and in his and Ann’s home where they cared for desperate runaways. But the Congress and George Washington missed the opportunity to gradually end the national sin of slavery and the betrayal of founding principles. As a leader of the first recorded lobby to the U.S. Congress, Mifflin’s perseverance and dedication are an inspiration to us today. Despite the attacks on his character, Mifflin responded with equanimity. In Nash’s words, “Even in his most fervent lobbying efforts with combative Southerners, he insisted that he loved them as fellow humans, whatever their faults. Through all of it, never flinching, Mifflin insisted that he was a lover of his country, a well-wisher to all his fellow Americans, a brother at heart even with those who excoriated him, a servant of the Christian God, and a friend of all humankind” (8).