Besse's "Collection of the Sufferings of the People called Quakers. Selections: etc." - Book Review

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There could also have been more consultation in regard to the footnotes, or at least more circumspect and critical proof-reading. Buckley’s notes seem to stand in contradiction to the praiseworthy character of Buckley’s core work, the main body of the text. I found both the theological and historical notes too often either erroneous or badly formulated. To give a few examples of the former ones: the term ‘Homousios’ can hardly be equated with simply ‘Trinitarian’ despite the course that the history of the early Church took; not all Protestants deny that the consecrated bread and wine is the actual body and blood of Christ (the Lutherans for example maintain this view). The Familists were hardly a people ‘that held that religion consisted chiefly in the exercise of love (an idea probably derived from the more ‘official’ appellation of the group, the Family of Love; luckily this mistake is corrected in another footnote). The historical remarks follow very much in the same vein as the theological ones, despite the one or two to be found in relation to The Rise and Progress which avoid the tendentious, ‘Quakerly’ and quite ahistorical representation evident in many places in Buckley’s Introduction.

Some other shortcomings and deficiencies also attend the footnoting. It is the Muggletonians, not the Familists, that would have required an explanatory footnote in relation to The Christian Quaker, being of more importance with respect to that work. This would have been more important and, I believe, of more interest, too, to the reader. In many places an everyday reader would have surely benefited from footnoted information about the contemporary historical situation Penn refers to, or against which his reflections are to be understood. Indeed, overall, historical introductions to the context of each of the works (including some explanation over the question of Penn’s and Whitehead’s ‘co-work’ in The Christian Quaker, which is seemingly clear but has some ambiguity to it) would have done no harm. These critical remarks, though not major issues in their own right, are numerous in quantity, and this reader is left with a feeling that the work went to press in haste. Some inconsistencies in some minor and quite rare, yet striking, respects do with the layout also contribute to this sense.

But in giving to the reader in their entirety the Bible references that Penn alludes to in his text mostly without making them explicit, Buckley has again done superb work. Whilst this requires very frequent reiterating of the same passages it greatly benefits a reader not familiar with the Bible, and at the same times shows Penn’s manner of using the Scriptures in his writing. He quotes them even more freely than Fox or Barclay (also mingling different passages together as the other two do): the two first pieces, The Sandy Foundation Shaken and The Innocency with Her Open Face, are almost as full of the quotations from the Bible and biblical language as is the case with Fox.

In the light of the huge task Buckley has taken upon himself and completed, the rather unavoidable deficiencies and shortcomings are quite natural and understandable. Occasionally but very rarely he misses references to Scriptural passages Penn has clearly had in mind, also occasionally referring to only one of the two passages Penn is evidently alluding to. Some odd Bible references Penn...
mation concerning the early decades of the Society and the fortitude of its Members from the Interregnum to the post-Toleration Act (1689) period. These were years when Friends challenged the authority of the State and the ecclesiastical authorities, defined their own value systems, and established a more coherent organisation. As a separate people, an alternative community, they regarded themselves as 'the Children of the Light', and practised their beliefs in opposition to the pre- and post-Restoration governments and the State Church. Not surprisingly they were vilified as dangerous subversives. Friends were regularly imprisoned, fined, whipped, placed in the stocks, and heavily dis­trained of their goods for holding their own meetings for worship or for recu­sancy, for refusing to pay tithes, for holding pacifist sentiments, and for sending ‘Messengers to declare against Deceit and Deceivers’ (p. 462).

The fifth volume offers graphic descriptions of the various punishments meted out to Friends from the mid 1650s onwards, including the arrest of five Irish Friends in 1660 when they were seized after a Meeting in County Cavan. They were ‘much abused on the Road’, beaten and later imprisoned amongst felons. While being taken to Cavan prison one unfortunate Friend had his feet tied under a horse’s belly (p. 465). In 1662 several Shrewsbury Friends suffered ‘grievous bruising of their bodies’ (p. 749), and in 1668 William Thomas of Llandewi in Pembrokeshire was ‘struck on the Head and Shoulders with a great Staff’ by a paid informer of the Crown (p. 752). Later in 1671 Aberdeen Friends saw their burial ground desecrated and the body of a child disinterred (p. 501). There is some fascinating incidental information about individual Friends, their missionary journeys, and dramatic events. For example, Besse recorded a violent storm at sea in 1655 in which the Irish Quaker Mary Blagdon almost lost her life when the crew attempted to throw her overboard. It appears that they ‘imputed the cause [of the storm] to her, as being a Quaker’ (p. 458).

These documents are admirably indexed, while Michael Gandy offers a helpful introduction to the volume and indicates some of the problems associated with providing a modern facsimile of an eighteenth century text (pp. iv-viii). He presents a brief overview of the history of the publication of the Collection and its value for later generations. In this Gandy draws upon the views of Besse himself, and modern assessments of this seminal work. Yet he could have strengthened the volume by referencing, or simply appending a bibliogra­phy listing other historical analyses of the persecution of Friends in Ireland, Scotland and Wales (including Monmouthshire), notably the work of Kenneth Carroll, Maurice Wigham, and Richard S. Harrison (for Ireland); W.H. Marwick, William F. Miller, George B. Burnet, and Gordon DeBrisay (for Scotland); Thomas Mardy Rees, R.C. Allen and Christine Trevett (for Wales), and more generally to Craig Horle and Rosemary Moore. Despite this, the new facsimile volume is an extremely helpful addition to our understanding of Quakerism in its formative period in these Celtic counties.

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