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Hamm's "The Quakers in America" - Book Review

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Heloise Brown argues that, in consequence, many women turned to the more secular pacifist organisations, for example, the International Arbitration and Peace Association (IAPA). This body did not require its supporters to commit to absolute pacifism, and was more sympathetic to the women’s movement, allowing women, for example, to sit on its Executive Committee. It was short­ly joined by a breakaway feminist section of the women’s auxiliary of the Peace Society, while an evangelical Friend, Priscilla Peckover, formed women’s associations within localities, and affiliated to the Peace Society, that rapidly became a mass movement. Another woman Friend, Ellen Robinson, whom Heloise Brown identifies as pursuing the perspective of moderate internationalism, sub­sequently took over the re-established women’s auxiliary of the Peace Society. Under the influence of these two women Friends levels of cooperation between the Peace Society and the women’s movement grew, and it became more inter­national in outlook.

The societies led by Priscilla Peckover were particularly attractive to many women whose pacifism reflected their religious values. Her work, Heloise Brown argues, was also significant in establishing an autonomous women’s peace move­ment, and in articulating a position that made peace a women’s issue. Despite her personal absolutism on the question, Priscilla Peckover also showed a strong commitment to international cooperation with bodies that took a more moder­ate position. She also became a prominent voice in anti-imperialism. Meanwhile, Ellen Robinson worked in parallel with Priscilla Peckover, though in association with socialist and working-class organisations, and from a position that com­bined, it is argued, feminism, Quakerism and Liberalism. The two women shared, however, a conventional conception of ‘women’s mission’, deriving from their religious values, and leading them to articulate a form of patriotism that empha­sised the moral force that women might bring to bear on international relations. Both were drawn to the IAPA, which, by maintaining two separate women’s auxiliaries, proved capable of accommodating many different perspectives, from evangelical religion to secularism and to neo-Malthusianism. Moreover, the incorporation of a significant number of feminists meant that pacifism, in turn, came to have a considerable influence within the women’s movement.

This study brings a fresh perspective to the history of both the peace move­ment and the women’s movement and fills a surprising gap in the existing literature. So it is likely to provide an important reference point for future researchers in this area. There are points where the line of argument is not altogether clearly expressed, for example, in the classification of various forms of feminism put forward in chapter two, and similarly in the discussion of the different currents among Friends in chapter three. Nevertheless, this study will be welcomed for the detailed scholarship it brings to a neglected area in this period of women’s involvement in pacifist organisations. Its account of pacifist feminism serves as a useful balance to recent emphases on imperial feminism, important though these are, most especially in its recognition of the enormous varieties of perspective within the women’s movement. Heloise Brown has convincingly demonstrated how pacifist feminism served to advance both the debate on the


Hamm makes an admirable transition with this volume from the nineteenth century to contemporary research. This study was solicited by Columbia University Press for its Contemporary American Religion Series, so its approach is no doubt dictated partly by the series editors. Although the book is mainly contemporary in focus, it includes distilled and balanced historical back­ground chapters that provide perspective on the exotic divergences of today’s Friends. A brief description of the book’s chapters follows.

Chapter One, ‘Meeting for Worship and Meeting for Business’, provides a good way into the subject matter by describing the sessions of four different Yearly Meetings – all in Ohio – embodying the wide diversity of American Quakerism. Careful, sympathetic characterisations of the four emphasise the commonalities of business procedures and testimonies, despite vast differences in theology, social outlook, and worship style.

Chapter Two, ‘The Origins of American Quakerism, 1640-1800’, is a good, brief portrayal of early Quakerism and its subsequent developments. As early Quakerism is my own area of specialisation, I, of course, found some points for disagreement. For example, from my own research I have not found that that early Friends expected an imminent physical return of Christ (see pp. 16-17). The experiential, present-unfolding sense of Christ returned to teach his peo­ple himself by the Light within them is one key to the social radicalism of early Friends. Similarly, I do not believe that Fox claimed to be ‘Christ returned to earth’ (p. 19), despite some of his exalted self-descriptions. Finally, Hamm fol­lows Larry Ingle in portraying Fox as making a ‘sharp right turn’ and abandon­ing eschatology in 1660 (pp. 25-26). This is a misinterpretation of early Quaker theology, which certainly had to make some adjustments with the Restoration, but not as immediately or as conservatively as Ingle suggests. Nevertheless, Hamm’s subsequent characterisations of Penn’s Holy Experiment, Quietism, the tightening of Quaker discipline, and the American Revolution move the book’s
focus to the American scene gracefully and with clarity. Chapter Three, 'Their Separate Ways: American Friends Since 1800', makes the most of Hamm's specialism in nineteenth century Quakerism. The portrayal of the separations and the diverging trajectories of Friends is masterful. The chapter helpfully traces the evangelical impetus of Gurney and subsequent revivalism, leading to the formation of the Five Years Meeting and Rufus Jones' early efforts to liberalise Orthodox Quakerism. It continues these trajectories through the post-war twentieth century, adding helpful summary paragraphs with statistical overviews of the various branches.

Chapter Four, 'Quaker Faiths and Practices', begins with the apt comment, 'Generalisation about American Quakers today is almost impossible.' This excellent chapter sketches the wide range of beliefs and practices among American Friends, all generating around five commonly shared convictions: worship based on the leading of the Spirit; the ministry of all believers; decision making through the traditional Quaker business process; simplicity as a basic philosophy of life; and a commitment to education as a manifestation of Quaker faith' (p. 64). Hamm introduces a vast array of specimen statements and pithy comments from the wide spectrum of contemporary Friends, amply illustrating the diversity of American Quakerism. However, while the breadth of research and the masterful organisation of data are impressive, I wished for more interpretation of these divergences, according to wider cultural influences upon Friends. What influences from the wider evangelical movement or liberal humanist currents are pulling on Friends today?

Chapter Five, 'Contemporary Quaker Debates', summarises some of the nagging disagreements and unclarities among Friends today. The main issues treated are the Christian nature of Quakerism, leadership, authority, sexuality, Quaker identity, unity/diversity, growth/decline. While no major split have come from these differences, they continue to widen. Some of these issues are unique to Friends, others are causing concern in religious groups across the spectrum.

Chapter Six, 'Quakers and the World', examines the very different ways Evangelical and Liberal Friends carry on the traditional Quaker concern for the world. This treatment is carried on under the categories of peace, race relations, the American Friends Service Committee, and the Friends Committee for National Legislation. There is excellent detail and balance in this chapter, an original contribution. Chapter Seven, 'Quaker Women, Marriage, and the Family', concludes the study well, except that it does not treat the very rapidly evolving issues of gay/lesbian marriages and families – an area where Liberal Friends have been leading experimenters.

The book includes an afterword, biographical sketches of 15 of the best known American Friends (ranging from John Woolman to Bonnie Raitt and Scott Simon), a brief chronology, a glossary, 40 pages of detailed endnotes, resources for further study, and a good index. As both an American Friend and a mature historian, Hamm has drawn upon a wide variety of sources to produce the best available portrait of Friends in North America. His study can also help Friends in other parts of the world better understand the mind-bending varia-

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