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Sox's "Quakers and the Arts: 'Plain and Fancy': An Anglo-American Perspective" - Book Review

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Exemption answers fairly conclusively, though the evidence in the act is indirect, the question whether Rhode Island's Quaker rulers, for all their support of war measures and military preparations, regarded themselves 'personally' as pacifists—or, better put, supporters of their Society's peace principles. "When they acted as civil officers, as magistrates...they not only were able to prepare for war and to defend [the colony] with weapons but were positively obliged to so" (p. 177). For had not Paul shown Christ's followers that God had instituted the magistracy to be 'a terror to crime'? And were not Indians now rebels against constituted authority? (Weddle shows that most Quakers then shared this belief.) Indeed during his visit to Rhode Island in the summer of 1672 George Fox himself had approved enthusiastically of Quakers in office; by his silence on the subject he had indeed given his assent to their war measures, including the provision of 'powder, shot and ammunition'. (The third Anglo-Dutch war had broken out in March of that year.)

Weddle not only discusses the wartime stance of Rhode Island's Quaker magistrates; she also surveys the wartime behaviour of ordinary Quakers in that colony as well as in the other New England colonies: Massachusetts, Plymouth and Connecticut. And once again she comes up with some novel conclusions. When in chapter 13 she surveys Quaker non-combatants during King Philip's War, she finds them a mixed bag, ranging from the staunchly pacifist authors (or just possibly only approvers) of a Testimony directed against Friends supporting 'use of carnal weapons...and wars...either offensive or defensive' (printed on pp. 242-44) to unarmed folk ready to spend their nights in fortified garrison houses hopefully safe there from 'these bloody Indians' (the Quaker missionary, Alice Curwen's phrase). The number of Quakers refusing to train seems to have varied from place to place. For instance, Quaker COs were fairly numerous in Sandwich (Plymouth colony), whereas at Hampton (in present-day New Hampshire) and at Kittery (in present-day Maine) most Friends seemed to favour attendance at militia musters. The situation in each case may have depended on the views of leading Quakers in the area. 'Different meetings did show distinctly different levels of interest in peace issues, some clearly demanding more scrupulous behavior than others' (p. 305 n. 13).

Weddle has even uncovered an instance of a non-Quaker CO. We know of a few Baptist pacifists in Rhode Island in this period. But this Wright, a Providence man, was 'of no particular profession sect'. 'He was a man of...great knowledge in the Scriptures' and, at the same time, her sources tells us, 'one that derided watches, fortifications, and all public endeavours...for the common safety...He refused...to shelter himself in any garrison but presumed he should be safe in his house' (p. 203). However, one night the Indians killed him. Weddle indeed takes issue with a number of (mainly) Quaker COs with the seventeenth century to the present, who have stated that in wartime the Indians spared Quakers if they remained unarmed and did not attempt to leave their dwellings for a fortified place. 'The Quakers', Weddle concludes, 'were not immune from the violence around them', and she furnishes evidence in support of her thesis. 'Those Quakers', she comments, 'who were more strict with themselves and stayed clear of garrisons were more courageous or fatally foolish, depending on who was making the judgment' (p. 218). At this point she provides us with the intriguing possibility of a disagreement between Quaker Governor William Coddington and his wife, also of course a Quaker, who seems to have overborne her husband's hesitations to fortify their dwelling and insisted on having 'a pallisaded fortification' set around their house.


The dispossession of Quakers toward the visual and performing arts are complex and changing. In a normative gesture, Solomon Eccles, a contemporary of Fox and a member of a distinguished musical family, renounced music and smashed his viols because it diverted him from divinity.1 Time was when the only illustrations to be found in a Quaker home were a picture of William Penn's treaty with the Indians, an instructive diagram of a slave ship drawn by Thomas Clarkson and the plan of Ackworth school. The functions of the ethic of plainness, of the aversion to 'cumber', of the proper stewardship of time and of the vanity of sitting for portraits have occupied the authors of various secondary accounts of which one of the more scholarly is Elizabeth Isuch's Fristnon Quakers.2 Similarly, Frederick Nicholson3 traces the constraint of a Quaker ethic upon the practice of those inclined to artistic expression and while

Jack Wallis enquires into the place of inspiration in the work of sixteen contemporary artists of whom nine are Quakers.

The book by David Sox is more biographical than these. Its focus is upon the backgrounds of those many practitioners who have reconciled Quaker dispositions and the development of their own gifts. It is structured as a series of vignettes. The subjects of these include Benjamin West, second president of the Royal Academy, a favourite of King George III and the painter of the original picture of Penn's treaty. There is a chapter on John Greenleaf Whittier, best known for his hymn Dear Lord and Father of Mankind in which he imbues an unQuakerly genre with a characteristically Quakerly theme, ‘O still small voice of calm’. There is an extensive account of the art critic Roger Fry, a son of the chocolate family and a father of the Bloomsbury group. The story of Henry Scott Tuke treats as much of his lineage as his art. The performing arts are represented by Joan Baez, James Michener, Sheila Hancock, Judi Dench, James Deane, Paul Eddington and Ben Kingsley.

It is made explicit that not all of these persons are practising Quakers; others are Quaker by background or connection rather than by an affiliation in adult life. The idea that they all belong in the same book rests on the assumption that all somehow bear in their art the dispositions formed in a Quaker upbringing. These dispositions might include a distaste for gratuitous display, a disregard of establishments, a respect for the evidence of experience, a capacity for hard work and a developed sense of social responsibility. These are asserted, for example, in the account of Roger Fry on p. 82. But it would be difficult to demonstrate that intellectuals, artists and poets who had Quaker backgrounds derived from their families sentiments that were common among their peers and contemporaries in general.

More seriously, there is an issue here that is not fully addressed. The tendency of defection among several of those featured in this book and others whose names are omitted raises questions about the compatibility of Quaker belief and a profession in the arts. Joseph Southall of Birmingham who died in 1944 was celebrated among artists for his revival of tempera painting, but it was virtually ignored by Quakers who valued him rather for his peace testimony. Others have gone their own way. The architect Thomas Rickman found patronage in the established Church. Sox makes no claim to Howard Hodgkin, a painter of great distinction and the product of a famous Quaker dynasty. The Biographical Catalogue in Friends House carries a telling entry for Samuel Lucas of Hitchin (1805-1870) who in the end gave up art and returned to the family business of brewing upon which there was no taboo:

Drawing and colouring were to him the natural mode of expressing the feelings nature awoke in his mind and his life's bread-winning taken this direction he would probably have risen to distinction in artistic circles... No career as an artist was in the days of Samuel Lucas' youth thought desirable for their sons by consistent members of the Society of Friends... 5

And where is the Methodist who joined the Society of Friends and buried his cello? 6

In the end one has to ask whether the book is about art anyway. The biographical detail invariably starts a generation or two back and is exclusive of much engagement of the kinds of issue that its title might be thought to promise. The personal tensions of recognizing talents within an environment of explicit taboos are barely traced. There is little sense of the potential of art as ministry. The theme of 'plain and fancy' appears in the subtitle but does not survive long in the text.

Lastly, one wishes at times for the hand of a more meticulous editor. There are sentences that break into parenthetical details with commas or dashes but do not recover. There are spellings pardonable only by Americans, such as the verb form 'prance'. Was it in 1894 or 1895 that Roger Fry portrayed Edward Carpenter? The date varies from one place to another. These are irritations to the reader rather than profound obstacles, but the book would be better without them.

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