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Rosemary Moore's *The Light in Their Consciences: The Early Quakers in Britain, 1646-1666*: A Review

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In 1657, Richard Baxter, the Puritan minister of Kidderminster, made the following observation about the brand-new sect of Quakers: “No wise man can be a Quaker, because their Religion is an uncertain thing; And so is not that Religion that must save us. The things that they agree in, besides the furious opposition of others, are but a few broken scraps of Doctrine, which they never yet set together, as making the substance of their faith: I never met with man that heard of any sum or body of their Divinity, Faith or Religion, which they have published: No not so much as in a Catechism, or short Confession.” Baxter was more nearly right than wrong about the Quakers, at a time that the latter had been in the public eye for only five years. Nobody could have referred Baxter in 1657 to any Quaker classics, such as a Journal of George Fox or an Apology of Robert Barclay, because they did not exist. The composition and publication of those books lay decades in the future.

Rosemary Moore is a scholar who has taken very seriously what has frankly been an almost unimaginable situation to Quakers of most succeeding generations, as we look back to the Quakers circa 1657. How can we account for the substantial appeal and enormous growth of what seemed, to many sober contemporaries such as Baxter, a frenetic, overly argumentative, and absurdly heterodox new religious movement? For reasons of historical verisimilitude, she refused to rely more than absolutely necessary upon a romantic view of the origins of Quakerism written down as memories decades later. Instead, she searched among the extensive controversial literature of the 1650s and 1660s and the letters between Friends from that period that have

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been preserved to ascertain from the “scraps of Doctrine” and history what the earliest Quaker movement was really like. She wanted to show how Quakerism solidified into a movement that could survive the tempestuous times of its birth to become a movement that a “wise” man or woman could embrace. The degree to which she has realized her objectives is very impressive.

Quaker opponents were not the only ones who yearned for a more solid account of Quaker origins. William Penn, whose conviction occurred in the year following the endpoint of Rosemary Moore’s narrative, wrote a significant letter on behalf of the Meeting of Sufferings in 1676. Addressing his letter to all of the Monthly Meetings and Quarterly Meetings throughout Britain, Penn pleaded for material that could be used to write a thorough Quaker history:

“Dear Friends, it hath long lain upon the minds of many Faithful Friends, to have a true and punctual account, so far as can be obtained of the last breaking-forth and progress of the blessed Truth to this very day (at least for the first 20 years, that make up by the common Acceptation one full age).” His purpose was to “leave to posterity a plain, true, and full narrative or History of, as well, the most memorable Matters of Fact, as Doctrine: the want of which after the Apostles Decease was the Occasion of much Mischief to the Church.” In order to prompt memories, Penn provided fourteen queries.

Several queries dealt with origins of Quakerism. “When and by whom the Testimony was first brought amongst you? Who received the Truth first in those parts? When meetings and mensmeetings were begun?” Many questions dealt with opponents and the sufferings inflicted by them. Penn encouraged the preservation of information relating to sufferings of both those who brought and received the message, as well as any “Judgments of God” on those who inflicted the Sufferings, and any “mercies of God” in causing those who hated Friends to repent of their wrongdoing. Other queries addressed those who had left the movement and become apostate: “Where bad spirits have risen, and false brethren appeared with their Judgment and their End?” Also, “what Eminent Friends dyed each year; especially if any Considerable Testimony fell from them?”

So Penn and the Meeting for Sufferings looked for a Heilgeschichte, a sacred history, that could be put side by side with the Acts of the Apostles, and in fullness and accuracy would favorably
compare with the latter. While Moore shares with Penn a desire for a thoroughgoing completeness and accuracy in her account of early Quakerism, she and other modern historians of Quakerism often depart from Penn’s pious and bold assumption that God’s purposes may be easily ascertained through the historical narrative of this, or any other, period. For Moore’s purposes, Penn’s pleas already came too late. Since the works resulting from Penn’s data collection “were written from a later perspective, they can rarely be safely used to establish matters of Quaker faith and opinion before 1660.” (231) And looking at Penn’s list of queries, which encompassed well the concerns of Quakers of the 1670s and not necessarily those of succeeding generations, one might well say that her methodological suspicions are well justified.

Along with her stringent criteria and justifiable suspicion of historical sources separated by decades from the events they attempted to record came an enviable attempt on Moore’s part to be absolutely as complete as possible in her use of contemporaneous sources. John Punshon, Professor emeritus of Quaker Studies at the Earlham School of Religion and Quaker Tutor at Woodbrooke when Moore was undertaking her studies, shared with me the following anecdote concerning the genesis of Moore’s project. Moore came to him and told him that she wanted to read every letter written by a Friend to another Friend during the first ten years of the Quaker movement. Clearly, such thoroughness could enable one to write a better-informed book of Quaker history than any that ever came before. If one were to base one’s judgment on this book, one would say that most probably she fulfilled her objective. She has read through not only the letters, but the mass of usually prolix and turgid pro-Quaker and anti-Quaker tracts, and given us a wise and scintillating first cut from these sources. This is a work of tremendous originality, depth and wisdom. It can be seen as a high point in the three-and-a-half-century quest for a historical Quakerism for which Penn and Baxter represent, in their own ways, beginning points.

I traced back to the primary source a few (about a dozen) of Moore’s several hundred footnotes and was very impressed with her accurate and thoughtful use of her sources. I found only a few very minor discrepancies. The most interesting discrepancy that I discovered had to do with her discussion of impropriated tithes. Moore claims that John Pearson, an author of a 1678 tract entitled Antichristian Treachery, asserted that, in the 1650s, Fox had advised...
someone to buy out an impropriator. This is not quite correct. Pearson was on Fox’s side in the Wilkinson-Story dispute, and he (and his coauthors) denied the allegations by Wilkinson-Story partisans that Fox had, in fact, advised the buying out of impro priators. Yet Pearson’s retrospective reasoning is not very convincing; he lays the greatest emphasis on his assertion that such advice would have been out of character for Fox (at least for the older Fox that he knew, we might be tempted to add). Pearson also included the affidavits alleging that Fox did advise buying out appropriators. These affidavits had been gathered from Nathaniel Cripps and Robert Arch by the Wilkinson-Story partisans, so the other side is amply presented in Pearson’s work. Thus, while Pearson does not take the position that Moore claims he does, this book does add modestly to the 1650s evidence adduced by Moore to the overall tentative conclusion that Fox “may well have” advised the buying out of impro priators in the earlier time period. On the methodological point, her use of John Pearson’s tract perhaps unwittingly strengthens the case she has made so convincingly about the dangers of using sources compiled decades later in attempting to find out what the Quakers really believed and practiced in the 1650s.4

Moore’s book works at several different levels. Most usefully to the beginning reader, it works as a thorough, evocative, and innovative narrative of Quaker beginnings. One need have no prior knowledge to make use of her book. Her coverage is admirably comprehensive in regards to the faith and practice of early Friends. Chapter nine, for example, on “Walking in the Light,” examines early Quaker practice in the area of disciplinary arrangements, handling of sexual misconduct, refusal to pay tithes, refusal of oaths, refusal to use pagan-originated names of days and months, truth-telling, refusal of customary greetings, refusal of hat honor, family life, lack of ostentation in dress, objections to music, seriousness and lack of joking, business ethics, peace witness, engagement in missions, ministry of women, going naked for a sign, fasting, tendency toward a dualism of matter and spirit, and affirmation of the goodness of creation. In analyzing these topics, she is fully cognizant of the secondary literature. Her discussion on the peace testimony, for example, incorporates recently published insights by Barry Reay, Larry Ingle, and Richard Greaves. It should be obvious that there are not many important matters regarding the personal conduct of Quakers in the 1650s and 1660s that have been omitted from such a wide-ranging account.

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She steers a dependable middle course between the Scylla of hagiography (on which Penn seems in danger of shipwreck) and the Charybdis of complete debunking. She is both concise and precise, with an unerring eye for the needle in the haystack, a most useful gift when reading seventeenth-century Quaker books. For example, she can and often does convincingly bring together for us two illuminating sentences separated by pages of prolix and confusing text, with a great sensitivity for context and meaning. All the reader will see is her ellipses. This kind of scholarship is unobtrusive, and unless you have looked into her sources as I have, it is hard to appreciate what care and hard work went into fashioning a single useful quotation.

But this book works well at entirely another level, that of historiography. There is a great deal of useful commentary on the sources here, a level of commentary only possible by someone who has perused the historical level with the thoroughness that Moore has. One example is her discussion of the matter of miracles. Many scholars of Quakerism are familiar with the classic text of Henry Cadbury, now reissued in a brand new edition, on the subject of George Fox’s Book of Miracles. Cadbury showed that Fox had left a manuscript, now lost, that claimed he had performed many miracles, and Cadbury attempted a partial reconstruction of Fox’s manuscript from the notes that remained. But Moore states that “if sources of information from the 1650s are looked at, a different picture emerges.” She found just one claim of a successful healing in the correspondence of the initial Quaker decade, and that came from Richard Farnworth in 1652, “aged twenty-two and very excitable.” (131) In general, Quakers were painfully aware of how difficult it was to produce miracles and were usually reluctant even to try. In addition, something touted as a divine miracle might equally well be viewed as demonic witchcraft, so Moore suggests that Fox and his Quaker contemporaries were well advised to steer clear of attempts at miracle working. This is the kind of commentary that can only issue from the thorough immersion in the sources that Moore so obviously has engaged.

Moore knows not only her sources in their original, but also her sources as they have subsequently been used by other scholars, and will often insert subtle commentary to cue in her more knowledgeable Quaker readers as to whether they should be alert to something they are likely to have encountered elsewhere. A quotation from Isaac Penington evidencing great ecumenical sensitivity evokes the com-
ment from Moore that “although often quoted by modern ecumenical Friends,” his remarks were “not typical of the time.” (218) On the contrary, a passage from George Fox praising the goodness of creation, she tells us, deserves to be better known than it is. It is “worth quoting as an indication that ‘walking in the light,’ and denying ‘the world,’ did not mean abhorrence of creation.” (128) What Moore’s handling of both these Fox and Penington quotations shows us is that the search for a historically accurate account of the past and the search for a usable past are not an either/or proposition. Modern Quakers can and should look at the past in both ways. What she aims to do, as unobtrusively as possible, is to give us what we need to look at the past with eyes that can give us both kinds of information simultaneously.

Particularly in her footnotes, she will often provide commentary on the secondary scholarship that is extraordinarily responsible. One could use as an example her comment on Michael Sheeran’s book analyzing Quaker business processes, a book that has been widely used in many monthly and yearly meetings. Sheeran, she writes, “has a useful first chapter on the early period, but beware error page 20 n. 4 regarding Perrot’s supporters.” (279) I looked up Sheeran’s note; it is indeed erroneous. One of the banes of scholarly existence is the mistaken data that gets widely dispersed from work to work due to scholars’ haste and carelessness in failing to adequately check out their sources. There is no sign of such haste or carelessness in evidence here. To the contrary, her commentary to Sheeran’s footnote shows the lengths that Moore will go to point out to her readers the problems that could exist in her sources. This is the kind of book that is well worth reading with two bookmarks, since her notes are grouped as endnotes, and the reader will miss some informative nuggets without reading her notes.

In all probability, the historically minded Baxter and Penn would have greatly enjoyed the kind of historical treatment Moore gives to the early Quaker movement, were they around to be enjoyed a little more than three centuries later. It shows a maturation in historical sensibility, an ability to use the enormous resources that are available (both primary and secondary sources) in a most illuminating and helpful way. It is a magisterial example of the practice of the historical craft. It is probably not definitive in its treatment of early Quakerism. (The word “definitive” is probably overused anyway.) But it will certainly be instrumental in raising the standards in
scholarship on early Quakerism. Every future historian of this movement will be greatly indebted to Rosemary Moore’s clarity, industry, care, thoughtfulness, balance, and sensitivity.

NOTES


3. The most minor are as follows. In the quotation from Francis Higginson, *Irreligion of Northern Quakers*, found on Moore’s page 145, the word “is” should be inserted after the word “beginning” in the fifth line of that quotation; also, there should be an ellipsis inserted after the word “auditors” on the ninth line of that quotation. Also, the initial reference in chapter 9, footnote 50 (Moore’s page 271), the page reference to John Lilburne’s book should be 13-14, not simply just 14, as it stands. For a book of the magnitude and complexity of Moore’s, these are very minor errors. Everything else I checked was completely accurate.

4. John Pearson et al., *Antichristian Treachery Discovered and Its Way Block’d Up* (n.p., n.d.), 137-142; Moore’s citation of this work can be found in her footnote 18 to chapter 9 on page 270. Pearson was replying to a book by William Rogers (who was of the same Quaker faction as John Story and John Wilkinson); Rogers’ book was entitled *The Christian Quaker Distinguished from the Apostate and Innovator*.

