Quakers in Coalbrookdale: Women, War and Money

Grace M. Jantzen

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt
Part of the Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol99/iss1/11

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quaker Religious Thought by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.
QUAKERS IN COALBROOKDALE: WOMEN, WAR AND MONEY

GRACE M. JANTZEN

Quakerism, indeed, made its chief impression, not as one might perhaps expect, upon theology or philosophy, but upon social history,” and in particular the social history of England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The principle contributions, through science, industry and commerce, were to the development of democracy, the industrial revolution, and economics especially the rise of capitalism. All this they achieved not in spite of but because of their firm adherence to Quaker testimonies. This is the burden of Paul Emden’s book *Quakers in Commerce: A Record of Business Achievement.* It is more than sixty years since Emden’s book was written, but its central message valorising the significance of Friends for the progress of modernity is part of Quaker mythology.

But now the “progress of modernity” is itself being questioned! From many sides the whole idea of progress is challenged: what counts as progress, and who is doing the counting? Was the rise of science and the industrial revolution on balance a forward or a backward movement for humanity, giving rise as it has to luxurious “living standards” in the affluent West, but also to a century of the most devastating wars, planetary degradation and economic exploitation the world has ever known? Is capitalism compatible with social justice? What sort of democracy was being fostered: how did it impact on issues of gender, race and class? More and more the legacy of modernity is under scrutiny; less and less is there an inclination to hold it up as an unambiguous sign of human progress.

That being the case, the idea that Quakers are at the vanguard of the development of modernity becomes rather less a cause for self-congratulation and more an occasion of moral scrutiny. How actually did Quakers stand in relation to the industrial revolution and the rise of commerce and capitalism? How did their works and discoveries contribute to modern warfare even while they personally held to the peace testimony? Did their teachings of egalitarianism actually foster the flourishing of women, or did Quaker women become a wing of nineteenth-century respectability? In short, to what extent...
did Quakers contribute not only to the progress of modernity but also to its ills, and to what extent did they stand at an angle to it? Could a reexamination of their practices enable us not only to temper our Quaker complacency but also to find some contemporary responses, at the end of modernity, to the problems modernity spawned?

In this essay I wish to probe those questions by way of a case study of the Quakers in Coalbrookdale, one of the main centers for the development of iron and thus of the industrial revolution. I shall investigate three main aspects: Coalbrookdale economics and its relation to capitalism; Coalbrookdale production and its relation to war; and the structure of gender relations among Coalbrookdale Quakers. Before proceeding to that analysis I shall first set out briefly how the Quaker testimonies have usually been seen in relation to business; and second, I shall sketch the story of Coalbrookdale and its Quakers.

1. Business and the Quaker Testimonies

i) Consider Quaker integrity. “Are you honest and truthful in all you say and do? Do you maintain strict integrity in business transactions and in your dealings with individuals and organizations? Do you use money and information entrusted to you with discretion and responsibility?”

Although these words are from the current Book of Discipline of British Friends, they echo the attitudes to money and business affairs of the earliest Friends. Since taking of oaths was prohibited, it was the more incumbent upon Friends that all the necessity for them should be eliminated. Quakers were to be utterly trustworthy in word and deed, private and public. As a result, “Friends acquired a collective reputation for honesty,” a reputation, it is held, that made it virtually inevitable that they would be at the forefront of banking and other forms of commerce and capitalist venture where financial probity was valued. Moreover because, like other Dissenters, Quakers were barred from the universities and the professions, they found their way increasingly into trade and industry, helped along by the Dissenting Academies which emphasized scientific learning. Thus, as a standard Quaker history has it,
Friends were excellently placed to take advantage of the accelerating pace of technical change....The frugal Quaker way of life provided just the kind of abstinence that would allow the accumulation of capital....It seems, therefore, that the mercantile Friends were riding a rising wave of economic prosperity which carried many of them on to considerable fortunes.4

But for all their probity and frugality, this might as well be a different planet from that of the early Friends, who had looked not for justice and integrity in a secular world, but for the new Eden or the Kingdom of God on earth. In Doug Gwyn’s words, capitalism was substituted for the covenant.5 I shall return to this.

ii) With regard to gender relations, early Quaker practice had been vastly more radical than mainstream English society. It would be fanciful to say that women and men ever enjoyed complete equality; nevertheless, early Quakers gave considerable leadership in their recognition that “that of God in everyone” included women as well as men; and they suffered considerable ridicule for their acceptance of women as ministers and missionaries. The establishment of separate women’s meetings, though in some respects allowing for a two-tier system, also fostered Quaker women’s leadership abilities and recognized their spiritual and practical competence.6 Quaker women, most notably Margaret Fell Fox but also a host of others including Elizabeth Hutton, Elizabeth Bathhurst, and Mary Dyer, feature prominently in any accurate account of seventeenth-century Friends.7 When we come to the Coalbrookdale Quakers, we again encounter women of very considerable stature, especially Abiah Sinclair Darby, wife of Abraham Darby II, Hannah Darby, their daughter, wife of Richard Reynolds, and Deborah Barnard Darby, their daughter-in-law, wife of Samuel Darby. I shall have more to say about them later. But the very fact that they are most naturally introduced in connection with their marriages and family connections, rather than standing in their own right, should already sound some warning bells. Paul Emden draws attention to the “inter-connection between hymeneal relations and speculation enterprise” (p. 38) which characterized Quaker business generally and Coalbrookdale Quakers in particular; and John Punshon agrees that “the marriage rules of the society strengthened its prosperity by the prospect of dynastic marriages” (p. 109). To what extent were Friends maintaining their testimony to gender
equality, and to what extent were they adapting themselves to the
gender relations of secular modernity in which home and family and
private life is the necessary underpinning of a capitalist system?

iii) The peace testimony is perhaps the most constitutive of all Quaker
self-definitions. From very early in the Quaker movement George Fox
had renounced all outward forms of strife or warfare; and a defining
moment in the conviction of a young man like William Penn was
the moment when he realized that he could wear his sword no longer.
This was not merely a negative renunciation of violence, but a posi-
tive commitment to “the Lamb’s War,” an effort to bring about the
peaceable kingdom of God on earth." Spiritual conflict must use spir-
itual methods, not weapons of war: justice and peace cannot be
achieved through arms.

And it was indeed justice that was being sought: perhaps most
famous of all Quaker phrases in the admonition derived from George
Fox that we are called to live “in the virtue of that life and power that
takes away the occasion of all wars.” This obviously involves more
than refusal to fight. It includes also a stance toward the invention
and manufacture of armaments and their trade, and economic profit
from war-making. More broadly still, it works toward the develop-
ment of social and economic structures that foster good will rather
than antagonism, brought about not least by inequalities of wealth
and status gained by one group at the expense of others. Quaker busi-
nesses, whether in textiles or chocolate or Coalbrookdale ironworks,
are regularly held up as examples of good employer-employee rela-
tions, counter-examples to the “satanic mills” exploiting workers of
the industrial revolution. To what extent, when we look more close-
ly, did they actually further the peace testimony, and to what extent
were these capitalist ventures after all implicated in war and the occa-
sion of war?

To set the context for the investigation of each of these questions
—which turn out to be interlocked—I shall briefly sketch the story of
the Darbys and their development of the iron industry.

2. Quakers in Coalbrookdale

The story of the Coalbrookdale Quakers begins with Abraham Darby
I, born in 1678 to John and Ann Darby, probably a small farmer, in
Worcestershire. Abraham was apprenticed when in his teens to one
Jonathan Freeth, a maltmill maker in Birmingham, who was a “public Friend”: this argues for the Darbys also being Quaker, possibly from early in the history of Friends. In any case Abraham Darby became a “weighty Friend” in his own right, and meanwhile acquired a knowledge of casting iron and working a forge. His apprenticeship complete, he married Mary Sargeant, also a Quaker, and set up his own maltmill business in Bristol where there were many Friends connected with the iron trade. Together with one of his apprentices, John Thomas, Darby discovered a method of casting pots in sand, for which he received a patent; and when he left Bristol to take over a small ironworking in Coalbrookdale his intention was to make pots and kettles, at the time very much in demand. One of Darby’s most important discoveries was how to use coal rather than charcoal for his smelting furnaces. This freed him from dependence on fuel from surrounding woodland, and developed instead the mining of the local coal seams.

Abraham and Mary Darby’s eldest child, also named Mary, married Quaker Richard Ford, who managed Coalbrookdale ironworks for nearly thirty years after the early death of his father-in-law, developing the smelting process and extending the business. When Abraham Darby II came of age he became joint manager with Ford, and again inventions, expansion and profit continued apace. Darby II married Margaret Smith, and their daughter Hannah will enter the story again in a moment. After Margaret’s death, Darby II married Abiah Sinclair, a widow, whose life we will consider in Part 3, and together they had four more children, including Abraham Darby III.

Darby II died in 1763 when Darby III was still in his early teens. He had followed the pattern of his father: in 1757 he “married his daughter Hannah to his partner Richard Reynolds” as Emden puts it (p. 33). Reynolds was in charge of the ironworks until Darby III was old enough to join the management, after which they continued together. Reynolds was the first to make and use iron rails instead of wood for tramroads, an invention without which the development of tram and then steam trains for the movement of coal, goods and (later) people would have been inconceivable: it could be said that Coalbrookdale literally made the tracks on which the industrial revolution would run.

Reynolds became prodigiously rich, and eventually retired to Bristol. Under Darby III’s management two further very major inventions that changed the world took place in Coalbrookdale. The
first was that Coalbrookdale became the place where the cylinders for the engines, invented by James Watt, were first manufactured for general use. The second was that the world’s first great iron bridge, constructed by Thomas Telford, was cast and built across the river Severn at Coalbrookdale under the direction and at the instigation of Darby III. The combination of iron bridges, iron rails and steam engines was essential for the development of industry and the transportation of raw materials and manufactured products. Coalbrookdale constructed the infrastructure of modernity.

Darby III’s son Francis, when he became (joint) manager of Coalbrookdale in 1810, took it in still another direction. He was fond of music and the arts, and developed the use of cast iron for decorative purposes: cast iron railings, balconies, gates, and other ornaments much loved by nineteenth-century gentry. Francis was a Quaker, but “lax in his opinions.” His nephews, Abraham Darby IV and Alfred Darby, were even less enamoured of Quakerism and joined the Church of England, building Holy Trinity Church in Coalbrookdale in 1854. During their time the ironworks manufactured huge plates for the hulls of iron ships, thus effecting the change from modern ships to iron, now driven by steam rather than sail.

This story is obviously only the barest of sketches; but it is enough to trace interlocking trajectories of wealth, invention, and gender relations. By successive inventions Coalbrookdale moved from the manufacture of pots and kettles to the ironware needed for the factories, trains and ships that made modern commerce and warfare possible. By keeping it in the family dynasty, there was an accumulation of wealth but also a singleness of purpose (albeit with diversifications) in research and development. And it is tempting to say that if Quaker probity and frugality were crucial to the emergence and success of Coalbrookdale, that very success and the wealth and luxury it generated eventually undermined the commitment to Friends’ way of life and an abandonment of Quaker principles.

With this summary in mind, I propose now to examine more closely the issues of women, war and money as they emerge from the case study of Coalbrookdale Quakers.

3. Women

The story of Coalbrookdale is as much a story of the women as of the men, though they rarely get more than an honourable mention by the
male historians. Even then, they are often cited not for themselves but because of the light their memoirs or journal entries cast on the progress of the ironworks and the new inventions and procedures that were being introduced. Like many eighteenth-century Quaker women (and middle class religiously observant women of other denominations) several Coalbrookdale women kept journals in which their spiritual struggles and insights jostle with the daily affairs of their families and the doings of the furnaces and forges in the dale. Whereas historians have frequently used these diaries to help chronicle the stages of the industrial revolution, I want to look more closely at the gender relations for which they provide evidence. The most detailed of the journals are those by Abiah Darby, wife of Abraham Darby II, and by Deborah Darby, wife of their youngest son Samuel, between them extending from about 1725 to 1810, the time of the greatest industrial advance and activity in Coalbrookdale. There are also memoirs and letters by Hannah Darby Reynolds and Hannah Rose, daughter of John Thomas who was closely associated with Abraham Darby I in the beginnings of the Coalbrookdale enterprise.

From Hannah Rose’s account comes a glimpse into the life of Mary Sargeant who became the wife of Abraham Darby I. She was the daughter of a bleacher of linen yarns. As a young woman she fell accidentally into the boiling furnace, and was taken out for dead: she said she had seen angels who “took her to a very fine place…and she desired to stay there it was such a glorious Place, but they told her she must return to the World again and if she lived a sober Religious life till the end of her time she might come there again…. .” Mary made a good recovery, but whether as a result of this accident or for some other reason, “after when she was married, was troubled with an asthmatic complaint and if her Husband was from home she would sitt [sic] all night and sleep by the Fire.” (HR in AD, p. 18). When he was home her presence was presumably required elsewhere, as she gave birth to at least eleven children, seven of whom died young, during the seventeen years of her marriage. Husband and wife died within a year of each other, both aged about forty. Rachel Labouchere says of Mary,

It is to be hoped that at last she was allowed to go to “The Glorious Place” …Mary fully deserved a place of shining peace, guarded by angels, for she had patiently passed through much sorrow and anxiety, borne many children, suffered always from
one of the most trying conditions—that of asthma—and had never experienced the blessing of a settled home for herself and her family (AD, p. 31).

Such a summary would of course not be atypical of many English middle class women of the early eighteenth century. But was it typical of the Quaker women? If it was (and historians of the period don’t seem to question it), then the much vaunted gender equality among Friends was severely limited. Abraham was immersed in his growing business, up to his neck in inventions and in business deals of all sorts; he was also steadily active in Quaker affairs, for a time clerk of quarterly meeting. The picture is one of him travelling frequently, while Mary could “sitt [sic] all night…by the Fire”: whether with relief or in loneliness we cannot tell, but in either case hardly as an equal in either business or the Quaker affairs. When he died—intestate—she seems to have had little clue about how to proceed financially and was at the mercy of the men who tried to resolve the administration of the business, at least one of whom, Thomas Bayliss, was apparently less than generous, if not downright unjust. There is no account of her asserting herself. She went to stay with relations, and died within the year (AD, pp. 30–1).

In complete contrast to Mary Sargeant Darby is Abiah Maude Darby, wife of Abraham Darby II. For both Abraham and Abiah theirs was a second marriage. Abraham had been widowed and left with a young daughter, Hannah (later Hannah Reynolds). Abiah also had been widowed while still very young. The account she gives is revealing. Abiah was brought up in a strict and very prosperous Quaker home in Sunderland, where her father was a wealthy coalfitter. Very early she felt a calling to Quaker ministry but simply could not bring herself to open her mouth in meeting: her account shows severe inner conflict between reticence and what she felt as divine command. When she was seventeen she fell in love with a man named John Sinclair, a devout Quaker who travelled in the ministry. But, she says tellingly, “Friends were against him as he had not so much in the World as I had” (AD, p. 7). So here we find Quakers, Abiah’s parents but also others, opposing a marriage on the grounds of difference of wealth and special standing (not, note, on religious grounds). Moreover Abiah herself, when she wrote her journal some years later, does so in a tone that puts herself in the wrong for persisting in her wish to agree to marry him. Her parents, and the Quaker meeting, eventually gave grudging consent, and Abiah and John were married.
but she writes regretfully, “the conduct of my mind quenched the Holy Spirit in me, filling my mind with the cares of life in my tender years” (AD, p. 8). They had a baby daughter; and then both father and daughter died in a smallpox epidemic before Abiah was twenty-one. What did she feel about this early bereavement? Her journal was written much later, for the children of her second marriage, so it would hardly express raw grief or loss. Even so, its tone of relief, even rescue, as though God had removed these “cares of life” and freed her for the ministry, says a good deal about the guilt she felt at having married a man of whom her parents had not approved—on monetary grounds. When she reconsidered the matter in 1769, long after the journal entry quoted above, she again wrote of the “baneful blast of temptation,” and thanks God that God “dealt tenderly with me compassionate to my dangerous state and bid me live” (AD, p. 160), by removing her husband and child from this earth.

Abiah did not make the same mistake twice. The next time she married she ensured that it was to a man of great substance and special standing, Abraham Darby II. In comparison to the lives of the men and women who worked in his valley, upon whom she literally looked down from her house above the smoke and the din, her life was one of considerable luxury and privilege. Yet although she was now married to an eminent man, one who was, moreover, supportive of the life of Friends, Abiah still struggled with her “disobedience” and doubts about her ability to minister “the exceeding weighty burden of the word” which she felt was “plainly shown…that was the last time Divine Mercy should be offered to me” (AD, p. 47). She agonized with guilt, despair, rejection and compulsion, until finally in a Meeting for Worship in Coalbrookdale in 1748 she stood up and said a few words, and was immediately overwhelmed with relief and joy.

Gradually, Abiah began to minister more frequently. She spoke at Meetings for Worship; she spoke “at Table.” This latter was a Quaker custom during the eighteenth century whereby a silence would be kept after a meal, and anyone might minister. Since there was a steady stream of visitors to Coalbrookdale, both of travelling Friends and of businessmen and industrialists who came because of the ironworks, Abiah would often have a significant audience. Again her journal records the struggles she experienced at such ministry, which she felt was laid upon her as a duty but against which, also, she recoiled. But she gradually learned that the only way to obtain peace of mind was to obey the compulsion to minister when it came upon her.
Over the next ten years, as their family gradually grew, Abiah and Abraham travelled together from time to time to Wales Yearly Meeting and London Yearly Meeting, where Abiah often ministered. Eventually, Abiah began to feel constrained to “travel in the ministry,” a frequent practice among Friends since the earliest days of the Society whereby women or men would travel to other parts of England or abroad to encourage Friends and convert unbelievers. Friends who felt under concern to engage in such travel asked for a certificate of approval from their own Meeting, and went in pairs or larger groups as they felt directed. In 1759 Abiah obtained her certificate, Abraham having “unity and sympathy with her,” and set off with a companion on a visit of several months to the north of England, leaving Abraham and four small children at home (AD, p. 85). She did the same again in the autumn of 1760; and in September 1762 she went south to Bristol and London and east to Norwich, returning home early in the New Year. In her journal she remarked that she had been able “to discharge her duty and sound forth the Gospel” and “to trumpet with power to the stopping of the mouths of gainsayers” (AD, p. 122). We will listen to this trumpet again in a moment.

Abraham had been increasingly unwell while she was away, as she knew from the letters she had received, and by the time she returned home he had only two months left to live. Labouchere, commenting on this, sees it “less and less understandable that she should have left him for quite so long a time,” but is sure that Abraham “was in complete agreement...acknowledging the ‘power of her concern,’ and the importance of her work in the ministry, without question” (AD, p. 122). What evidence Labouchere could possibly have of Abraham’s feelings on the matter she does not say. But Labouchere is surely right to say of Abiah,

Her life as a minister had become stronger than her role as a wife and mother and this could and did happen in the history of women ministers. Of necessity she was the pivot of the domestic scene, but she left home and family to the care of others (AD, p. 122).

And of course that was possible only because of her privileged situation in which “others” were available: servants and nannies as well as Darby relatives and other Quakers in Coalbrookdale. There is no record—and it is inconceivable that there should be one—that any of the workers, male and female, employed by the Darbys in
Coalbrookdale ever travelled in the ministry or were able to take an active role in the Society of Friends: they were much too busy working for the Darbys.

In summary, the travel in the ministry for which Abiah Darby is honoured by Quakers is misunderstood if it is interpreted in more than a very qualified way as an indication of a Quaker commitment to equality, whether of gender or of class. It is true that Quaker women could be recognized ministers, and that this was a marked difference from the gender relations prevailing in the established Church, though other Dissenters, notably Baptists and the emerging Methodists, also had women preachers. But the Quaker woman who travelled in the ministry was still “the pivot of the domestic scene.” At least in the case of the Darbys, there is nothing to suggest that Abraham took over the usual “female” tasks: rather they were delegated to other women. Nor did Abiah involve herself in running the ironworks or its supporting industries such as transport and coal mining. Gender relations and gender roles seem to have been much the same among the Darbys as they were among the rest of the rising prosperous middle class in the eighteenth century, whether we look at Abraham Darby I and his wife Mary who liked to “sitt all night by the fire” whenever she could, or Abraham Darby II and the increasingly formidable Abiah. The only real difference was that Quaker women could be recognized ministers and could be certified by their Meetings to travel in the ministry. This is not insignificant; but neither should it be seen as gender egalitarianism in any more general sense.

Moreover, when we examine the content of the ministry for which Abiah was recognized, further questions emerge. In such records as there are of Abiah’s ministry during her husband’s life and her much more extensive travel in the ministry after his death, both the motivation and the content are perhaps not what contemporary Quakers would wish to discover. I have already written of the struggle between compulsion and reticence that brought Abiah to minister in the first place. As I read her journal, I find the sequence of compulsion, resistance, intense guilt, and then relief repeated many times. Indeed she often records this sequence of feelings in her journal without recording much of the content of what she had to say. It is as though she is more concerned with the release of her feelings than with the message itself: since she believed that her message came from God, this focus on her internal state is, to put it mildly, not the emphasis we might
expect. There are many examples. In October 1760, Abiah and some companions were in Hereford, travelling in the ministry. After having Meeting with Friends, and exhorting the mayor and the bishops, she still felt great distress: in her words, she could have “no peace without giving up to go into the street to proclaim repentance” even though she says “it was harder to me than giving up my Life” (AD, p. 95). Having delivered her message of “Great Dread,” she then writes that she “felt clean” though fell into “a profusion of weeping” which she says was for the people of Hereford but which gives every impression of acute emotional reaction to the intense conflict she had undergone. A very similar incident is recorded for April 1766, in Shrewsbury, where she writes that she felt “under deep exercise to go in to the streets, after much conflict gave up to it—it was hard to submit to—but no other way appearing to obtain peace” (AD, p. 148). Of another time she writes of her shame and embarrassment at preaching on the street corner, “my Duty which no Worldly consideration would have prevailed upon me to have done” (AD, p. 150). On one occasion she resisted what she felt to be her duty and went home, only to return a week later to perform the task, “having learned obedience by the things I have suffered and had an awful time with them” (AD, p. 151). What shall we make of this? Many Quakers know the sense that they have been given a ministry to deliver, whether at Meeting for Worship or in some other setting; many also know the “quaking” both at the content of the message and at the sense of inadequacy of the “earthen vessel” through which the ministry flows. Is this what Abiah Darby is writing of? Perhaps so. But my reading of her journal gives me much more an impression of guilt and conflict than of quaking at the ministry received.

This impression is strengthened by the glimpses we have of what she said: she seems often to have focused on evil, repentance, judgment and hell fire—and also “the lawfulness of women preaching” (AD, p. 132) and presented herself as a “trumpet.” An unfortunate instance is her letter of June 1753, to Brooke Forester, member of Parliament for Wenlock, just after his wife had died. Rather than sending a message of comfort and condolence, she wrote a lengthy exhortation on his conduct, with warnings of “the second death and the Lake that burns for ever and ever” (AD, pp. 60-61). She wrote and distributed four booklets against the immoral pleasures of the times: not only gambling and racing but even country dances and music making, warning of divine judgement and retribution.” Her
views were very strict. When her nephew Samuel Maude married a non-Quaker, Ann Cranage, Abiah found it all but intolerable and would have nothing to do with them. The fact that Ann Cranage and her family were devout Methodists was no help (AD, p. 131): non-Quakers were simply not acceptable. These views were not unusual among eighteenth-century Quakers. Nevertheless her journal bespeaks a rigidity and need to control on the one hand, and a sense of guilt, inadequacy and inner conflict on the other, that I find troubling in one who is held up as a model for Quaker women.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that, especially in her later years, Abiah Darby was the central figure of the extended Darby family, providing a home for children and grandchildren, and hospitality for countless visitors and relatives, often for extended periods. She was loved and greatly respected, not only by those who came for short periods but also by those like her daughter-in-law, Deborah Darby, whose home was in Abiah’s house for almost fourteen years, from relatively early in her married life until Abiah’s death in 1794. Their continued mutual esteem in such circumstances speaks volumes for both women.

Deborah Barnard Darby, daughter of another well-to-do Quaker family, married Samuel, Abiah’s younger son, in 1776. Samuel was a sensitive young man with literary inclinations. He was put in charge of the London branch of the Coalbrookdale interests, and the couple at first lived in London. Samuel, however, was unwell in London, and from early in their married life was afflicted by a nervous illness which in later years meant that from time to time he had to be taken into care. By 1779 the business in London was in difficulty. It is not clear whether or how this was connected with Samuel’s illness—as cause or as effect—but certainly Quakers at that time took a very dim view of business failure, and the necessity for his brother Abraham III and senior members of the company to come down to London, to shut down that branch of the business, and dispatch Samuel and Deborah to Coalbrookdale to live with Abiah cannot have been easy for any of them. Deborah’s journal speaks of “painful feelings”—not only her internal pain, but also, it seems, strain between herself and Samuel, and probably also with her Darby in-laws, possibly including Abiah (DD, p. 31). She was not yet twenty-five, and had already borne two children, the first of whom had died after only a few months.

Whatever occasional difficulties there may have been between them, Abiah and Deborah were very close. Deborah was entrusted
with transcribing Abiah’s journal, and thus had before her, in person and on record, the example of travelling in the ministry. Perhaps it is not surprising that before long Deborah, too, was engaging in ministerial journeys. She went on numerous such journeys of several months’ duration in England, and on one to Ireland, and then 1793 went on a journey to America, not returning until 1796. When she left, her two surviving sons were fourteen and eleven years old, her husband chronically and sometimes severely ill, and Abiah increasingly frail: both Deborah and Abiah knew when they parted that they were unlikely to meet again, as indeed they did not. All these things notwithstanding, Labouchere comments that “as in Abiah’s case in the past, no family consideration out-weighed her ‘concerns’ in the ministry, provided there was a reasonable assurance of the care of dependants” (AD, p. 248)—an assurance again provided by the wider family at Coalbrookdale, made possible by their prosperity. There is a detailed account of the places Deborah visited, both in America and in her extensive journeys in Britain and Ireland before and after the American journey; but almost no record of the content of her ministry. Neither however, is there the undercurrent of guilt and struggle typical of Abiah’s journal.

What are we to make of these journeys of Deborah Darby? Is this heroic self-sacrifice, leaving all she loves best in order to obey a divine call? Or is it a superb opportunity to have long breaks from a domestic situation that must have had considerable strains? Or is it both? Certainly the Quaker practice of women travelling in the ministry bespeaks much more freedom and independence, at least for the duration of travel, than would be typical of middle class English women in the eighteenth century. But as I have already suggested, it would I think be considerable overstatement to say that this indicates gender equality among Quakers, even for those few who travelled, let alone for those many for whom travel was never an option.

The industrial revolution among Quakers in Coalbrookdale as elsewhere in England depended heavily on women, but not on women as equals. It was reliant on a family dynasty in which the men married women of wealth and social standing whose families were in related trades and with whom there could be advantageous business relations, like the Rathbones with their Liverpool shipping company. And it would have been impossible without the women who provided hearth and home and hospitality to visiting businessmen (who might also be relatives through intermarriage): these women includ-
ed not only the wives of the protagonists but a series of unmarried and unsung sisters and daughters. Only with the heaviest of qualifications could the women of Coalbrookdale be seen as feminist fore-sisters. They, like other middle class women, were the foundation upon which patriarchal capitalist modernity could be built.15

4. WAR AND ITS OCCASIONS

In relation to the Peace Testimony, the record of the Quakers in Coalbrookdale is similarly mixed. The Quaker folktale is that the Darbys refused to have anything to do with the manufacture of armaments, preferring to take heavy financial losses rather than involve themselves in making instruments of warfare. There is truth in this, but the reality is much more complicated and much less comfortable.

The mainstay of the business in its early years under Abraham Darby I and his son in law, Richard Ford, was pots, kettles, pans and “furnaces,” i.e. three-legged cauldrons. These have been thought of as kitchenware, and doubtless many a cast iron pot and pan from Coalbrookdale was sold in markets up and down the country. But a very large part of the manufacture was for export. Nehemiah Champion, an exporter based in Bristol ordered up to thirty tons of pots and kettles at a time on a regular basis; other exporters also had substantial orders. This looks innocent, until we find that “Africa proved to be an almost insatiable market” for the three-legged pots, and that the pans were exported in large numbers to the Americas for boiling sugar.16 Pots and kettles are not guns. They were, however, the essential equipment for the slave trade in honour of King Sugar; and the Bristol–Africa–America triangle was notorious. There is little doubt that the early wealth and success of the Coalbrookdale iron-works rested in part—and always at least one remove—upon the slave trade and the sugar plantations of America and the West Indies.

Much closer involvement with war was to follow. During the 1730s there was increasing tension between England and Spain over the colonies in America, and from 1739 to 1745 the two countries were at war. From 1740 onwards, the Coalbrookdale Company was busy boring guns and cannon, and until about 1748 hundreds of tons of armaments were cast, bored and turned, and supplied to armed merchant ships and possibly privateers. That this was highly lucrative for the growing company is obvious; it is also obvious that it is in
direct conflict with the Quaker Peace Testimony. Arthur Raistrick, while acknowledging this, presents the involvement in armaments as an anomaly for the Coalbrookdale Company, probably due to the Goldney partners who had a large percentage of shares and were heavily involved in trade with the West Indies. Once Abraham Darby II came of age and took charge of the works, he set about to “get rid of the gun trade” even if it took him a year or two to do so.\textsuperscript{17}

But this glosses some troubling issues. In the first place, the Goldneys were also Quakers, so shunting the responsibility for the arms trade on to them and away from the Darbys does not remove it from the Society of Friends. But second, the Goldneys and Darbys had worked together very closely indeed ever since Abraham I began the iron works. The Goldney fathers and brothers were frequently in Coalbrookdale, and there is many an account of their stays in Sunniside, the Darby home, and the hospitality Abiah gave them, and also of the reciprocal visits of various Darbys to the Goldney home in Clifton near Bristol. It is less than credible that they would lead the Coalbrookdale Company into major areas of manufacture and trade against the wishes of the Darbys. Third, and most worrying, is the evidence given by Barrie Trinder in his book on the industrial revolution that armaments were manufactured in quantity in Coalbrookdale through most of the eighteenth century, possibly until as late as 1790. Trinder says that

The Coalbrookdale partners maintained their interest in the manufacture of cannon and shot during the Seven Year War…. The New Willey Company was heavily involved in the armaments trade. In 1761 the partnership’s sales included quantities of shells, shot and cannon….In subsequent years armaments remained one of the staple products of the Willey works, and in both the American War of Independence and the wars with revolutionary France, the Calcutts ironworks made many cannon.\textsuperscript{18}

Now, the Calcutts works, though in the same area of the Severn valley as Coalbrookdale, was not owned or operated by the Darbys. Neither was the New Willey Company after 1759, when it was taken over by John Wilkinson and partners, not Quakers. So it is true that the Darbys were not manufacturing guns after about 1748. As Raistrick says, during the Seven Years War, in spite of the highly lucra-
tive market, “Reynolds and Darby [III] refused all orders for guns and armaments and continued with their normal production of pots and domestic castings, steam engine parts and pipe work, and pig iron, now largely for the forges” (p. 91). This probably meant a short term decrease in profits, though in the longer term it ensured that when the war was over the domestic market the Coalbrookdale partners had built up did not collapse as did those heavily dependent on armaments. Whether this was a matter of Quaker principles or just sound business sense or both could be debated.

Whatever the case, it seems clear that in 1775 when hostilities resumed the Darbys did take a very firm stand on the Peace Testimony. It became obvious that the price of iron would increase with soaring demand. “Reynolds and Darby, not wishing to profit by a war condition, proposed to their larger customers that they should name a fair price for pig iron…” which was then the fixed price for the years that followed. Nevertheless the growth of demand because of the war meant a great volume of trade and high profits. If the Darbys did not make armaments themselves, they certainly gained as a result of the war. Moreover they worked in close cooperation with Wilkinson and the New Willey Company, which as already said was heavily involved in the manufacture of guns, shot and cannon. It was just during this time that the Iron Bridge was built (the list of subscribers was assembled in 1775 and the bridge constructed in 1778–9), and John Wilkinson was the man who worked most closely with Abraham Darby III in the planning, finance, and construction of this famous edifice. On the other hand, even while working closely with Wilkinson and offering him frequent hospitality, the Darbys were certainly aware of the Peace Testimony and wanting to affirm it. In 1778 Abiah wrote to her niece Rachel Maude regarding the threat of a French invasion for which the government was proposing to send militia to guard the coasts. She commented,

These are Steps of Prudence for many to take who believe outward arms lawful and at times the Almighty hath to appearance made use of such means to bring about deliverance, but we, who are brought out of, or at least profess to be brought out of—the Spirit of Wars—look further and depend upon and Trust in the Divine Protector… (AD, p. 195).
The ambivalence is palpable. In summary, it seems that the later generations of the Darby family in the eighteenth century were rather more tender of conscience about the relationship between their wealth and war and its occasions. As already noted, Darby III and Reynolds were willing to suffer financial loss rather than make guns as had been done in the previous generation. Moreover several of Darby III’s generation worked hard in the campaign against slavery and the slave trade: Deborah Darby and Richard Reynolds II among them.20 There is no need to detract from the superb work against slavery and war and its occasions that was done by the Coalbrookdale Quakers, sometimes at considerable personal cost. But neither should we ignore the fact that by then the family fortune and the industrial revolution that shaped modernity had already been built upon these evils.

5. Money

It can safely be said that capitalism rests squarely on the industrial revolution, and that the industrial revolution rests on the inventions and manufacture that were produced by the ironworks of the Coalbrookdale Quakers. Even the most ardent supporter of the growth of industry acknowledge that there were sometimes appalling conditions for workers in the “dark Satanic mills.” Coalbrookdale itself was taken as an image of hell, its furnaces belching fire and steam.

Dreadful the view—in dusky spires
The smokey columns rise,
And fiend-like forms stir up the fires which redden all the skies...
Dire sounds I heard—I saw with dread
The fiery surges swell...

So wrote Richard Shackleton about his visit to Coalbrookdale in 1784, only to continue that in Abiah Darby’s house on the hill above the noise and smoke he found a little bit of heaven. And it is usually assumed that in Quaker enterprises this little bit of heaven21—or at least decent and humane working conditions and housing—also extended to the workers, who were far better off working for Friends than in other factories or mills.
There are two separate issues here that I want to investigate. The first is to ask what sort of capitalist assumptions and practices were operative among Coalbrookdale Quakers. To what extent do they represent an acceptable and humane face of capitalism, especially in relation to their employees? The second issue goes deeper. Even if the Quakers of Coalbrookdale were decent capitalists, is the capitalist system they helped to inaugurate itself a good thing? Or is it a sell-out of an earlier vision of the Kingdom of God on earth, an acquiescence in the idea that this is a secular world? Is it indeed an acquiescence that helped to make it so?

i) Quakers and the human face of capitalism

A vignette preserved from the earliest days of Abraham Darby I in ironworking could stand for the emergence of capitalism as a whole. Darby, like other iron workers, was looking for better methods of casting his pots and kettles so that neither the pot nor the mould would be damaged. After several experiments had failed, one of Darby’s apprentices, John Thomas, asked permission to try. John Thomas’s daughter, Hannah Rose, gives this account of the incident:

John Thomas…asked his master to let him try, so with his leave he did it, and afterwards his Master and him were bound in Articles in the year 1707 that John Thomas should be bound to work at that business and keep it a secret and not teach anybody else, for three years. They were so private as to stop the keyhole of the door.22

What is usually emphasized in accounts of the rise of science and the development of industry is the experimental method, which we here observe in action. But the ingredient that allies it to capitalism is just as important: its secrecy. Even the keyhole must be plugged lest any competitors spy, grasp the process, and use it themselves. This would deprive Darby’s company of its profit advantage: they will be able to make more money than their fellow ironmasters only if they have an effective but secret technique. After several centuries of capitalism we are so inured to such procedure that we are likely not to take much notice how completely capitalism is constituted by the intense competition we see here: competition for technical advance that is at bottom competition for profit. That plugged up keyhole shows that
other ironmasters were perceived as competitors or rivals who must be kept in ignorance of the technique; and when Thomas’s experiment was successful, he and Darby agreed to a bond whereby, for a price, Thomas agreed not to divulge to others “the art and mystery of casting and moulding of Iron Potts [sic].” The question of whether the discovery is for the good of humanity and should immediately be made public does not arise. Commercial rivalry—putting it bluntly, the desire to make money—is taken for granted. My point here is not whether or not such rivalry, which is after all constitutive of capitalism, is a good thing. My point, rather, is that the Quakers of Coalbrookdale from the beginning bought into it without scrutiny.

Sometimes the mythology around early Quaker business enterprises, including that of Coalbrookdale but also banking, chocolate manufacture, and so on, gives the impression that Quakers were frugal and had a simplicity of lifestyle that freed them from love of money. Their motives for business had to do with honest labor and the good of humanity, not acquisitiveness. But at least in the case of the Coalbrookdale Quakers, that is pious nonsense. From the above account of secrecy and rivalry it is already apparent that financial profit was a central consideration. And there is plenty of evidence that they liked and enjoyed having money and being able to spend it, not least in building substantial and relatively luxurious houses for themselves in which they could offer lavish hospitality. Abraham Darby II, writing in 1756 of the success of one of his furnaces in making iron, said with satisfaction that it could be “sold off as fast as made at profit enough will soon find money enough for another furnace and for the pocket too.”

There were differences among the Coalbrookdale Quakers, of course. Richard Reynolds, sometimes regarded as a “Quaker saint,” became prodigiously rich through his management of the company. But in 1773 he wrote to his wife that “whether an increase or a decrease of outward riches seems most probable is a matter of great indifferency to me….If I attain to purity of heart and meekness of temper, how little of worldly riches will be sufficient, and if either the one or the other of the former will be prevented by having even so much as I have of the latter, may I be deprived of it.” Reynolds was undoubtedly sincere in these sentiments. He became one of the major philanthropists of Bristol after his retirement there, giving away vast sums of money and earning the esteem and gratitude of the Bristol poor who lined the streets in their thousands at his funeral. Reynolds
was perhaps both the richest and the least enamoured of money of the Coalbrookdale Quakers, but his sentiments were shared by many of them, and philanthropy was part of their lifestyle. Laudable as this is, it is obviously dependent on commercial success and financial profit on a large scale. It may be capitalism with a human face; but there can be no doubt that it is indeed capitalism: Coalbrookdale was never a charity!

Reynolds, and the Darbys, were concerned for their workers, and tried to provide decent housing, care of the old and the sick, and at least by the end of the eighteenth century some provision of schools for children. Their enterprise in ironworks was much more humane than many other capitalist ventures of the period, and it would have been better to have been an employee of the Coalbrookdale Quakers than of many another factory or mill owner. But again there is complexity. In 1756 there was general unrest among factory workers because of the high price of food. Riots broke out, and though they may not have been instigated by Coalbrookdale men, these men joined in with men from the surrounding area. A letter from Hannah Darby, daughter of Abraham Darby II, paints an alarming picture of intimidation, looting and threat: “they committed great outrages they broke open houses barns etc and took anything they could meet with….” Darby tried to buy them off, giving “one of our Clerks 20 guineas to have given to the ringleaders”; he also deputed some of his men “to stand with money in their hands to give them at our lower gate to prevent them from coming up to the house for fear of frightening my Mother…” but this last tactic did not work. The rioters plundered many a house, and “came back in droves loaded with booty.” “Moste of them called at our house but did not offer any violence—several hundreds had meat and drink this time—we baked bread three days together and sent several miles for it besides, for there was not a bit of bread nor corn nor flour to be had for money, for some miles about—so that the country was in the greatest distress.”

Significantly, the rioters called themselves “levellers,” the name of the seventeenth-century group that tried to resist the spread of capitalism and worked for a much more egalitarian society. But the “gentlemen” of the area, the owners of the works, “mustered up several hundred men, to suppress them, they were all armed” and fired on the mob three times before it turned and fled and the resistance was broken. Concluding her letter, Hannah Darby writes that the rioters
“had agreed to Plunder all our houses and they intended to have begun with our house...but through Divine favour were prevented – they have took many prisoners, and we hope it is all over...”

Several of the prisoners were duly hanged and others transported. Divine providence was praised by the Quakers: truly God is on the side of the capitalists! There is no indication of soul searching about whether their policies and practices could have made the workers desperate enough to riot; and their provision of food and drink is clearly an attempt to buy them off rather than an effort to ameliorate the conditions that brought about the unrest. Quiet is brought about by violent repression, including gunfire at the mobs. The Quakers may not have participated in this themselves, but there is no suggestion of disapproval, only thankfulness that “through Divine favour” it succeeded. But surely some questions need to be raised about who God “favours,” and at whose expense? How humane can the face of capitalism be? To what extent must it ultimately depend on violence, usually kept hidden, but ready to come to the fore if capitalism is seriously challenged?

**ii) Quaker capitalists and the Kingdom of God**

These questions take us to the heart of the matter. In the mid-seventeenth century, various groups including the Levellers, the Diggers, and other sections of Puritans were hopeful of bringing about the Kingdom of God on earth. Jesus would come again and take his throne, and the world would be ordered along the lines of peace and justice for all people. So strong was the hope and belief that this would take place that Oliver Cromwell, as Lord Protector of England, refused to take the throne or be crowned king, lest Christ the true king should arrive and Cromwell be exposed as a usurper. Just what the conditions and consequences of Christ’s return would be was disputed between groups, but many of them, especially the Levellers and Winstanley’s Diggers, looked for radical egalitarianism including the redistribution of property and wealth which divided the rich from the poor.

The early Quakers were among these groups. They believed that the Kingdom of God was within, and that the peaceable “Lamb’s War” would overturn the corrupt and unjust system of judgment and enter into a new covenant. This covenant would be one in which all people were valued, goods and work were shared, and the “seed of God” was overall. Violence would have no place; neither would
poverty or oppression. The Spirit of God, manifest in Quaker Meetings for Worship, would have ultimate authority. Early Quakers had not fully worked out what the characteristics of the Kingdom of God on earth would be in practical terms; but they assumed it would follow the lines of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7), and that its details would emerge as people could receive them. In their radical witness, early Friends were a major threat to the political and economic structures of monarchy and Protectorate alike, and their religious underpinnings; many, therefore, were imprisoned and died in their quest for the covenant.

With the restoration of the monarchy and the political and religious compromises it betokened, the energy of many of these groups dwindled and disillusionment set in. Many, like the Levellers and Diggers, disappeared altogether. Others, especially the Quakers, found their way to a different understanding. To a large extent they accepted the idea that the Kingdom of God was not going to arrive anytime soon. Charles, not Christ, sat on the throne of England. If Christ could reign at all, he could reign only in human hearts, separate from the kingdom of this world. In English (and indeed European) culture generally, the idea of the saeculum took hold. In literal terms, saeculum refers to time, specifically the time between the creation of the world and its final judgment. This came to be understood as the time during which the world was left to humanity. God withdrew to “heaven,” and humankind was given freedom to make what it could of the world, politically, scientifically, and economically. “Secularism” is thus the system built upon the absence of God, who leaves the world to humans and to the workings of natural law, and does not intervene. This is not necessarily irreligious: God will eventually bring the whole world to judgment when the saeculum is over. Moreover, each individual must expect to answer before God for one’s actions. But the Kingdom of God is deferred: for the individual until death; and for the world until after the final judgment.

Douglas Gwyn, in his important book The Covenant Crucified, has shown the extent to which late seventeenth-century Quakers, including George Fox in his later years, accommodated themselves to this way of thinking. It was obviously not a perspective within which the idea of the covenant could thrive, except in a more and more private and internal way. In politics, in business and in science, Quakers would try to be true to their personal and corporate principles of honesty, simplicity, peace, and caring for the welfare of others; but they
would not try to bring about fundamental change to the political or economic or scientific structures. By the eighteenth century, indeed, Quakers were at the forefront of financial and business enterprises and had become thoroughly respectable. No longer were they a public nuisance for God. They were bankers and businessmen and philanthropists who kept quaint customs like using “thee” and “thou,” wearing special costume, and allowing women ministers, but they were firmly on the side of the entrenched social order, and certainly no threat to it.

There were exceptions, to be sure, most notably John Woolman and the campaign against slavery, which had huge political and economic implications. But the Quakers of Coalbrookdale, I suggest, were very much a part of the rise of secularism. They were good Quakers: they kept their Meetings faithfully, travelled in the ministry, used their wealth to alleviate distress, and at least latterly refused involvement with the manufacture of armaments. But they did not want the overthrow of the political and social structure, nor did they look for the Kingdom of God on Earth. It is because of this that we can see the cracks between the Quaker testimonies and the actual practice of the Coalbrookdale Quakers. When the testimonies came into conflict with the gender relations necessary for the underpinning of capitalism, or the need to make a profit even if it supported occasions for war, or conflict with hungry workers, the Quakers of Coalbrookdale reached for compromises which we may find natural enough but which would have been unconscionable for early Friends. By adopting secularism, they helped to bring it about.

Were they wrong to do so? Was it not rather prudence and good judgment to discern that Christ’s return was not imminent, and that it would be better to make this world as good a place as possible than to wait for heaven to arrive? The extent to which that suggestion seems like common sense reveals the difference between ourselves and the radical covenant thought and practice of early Quakers: we have gone down the same road as Coalbrookdale, and accept to a large extent the political and social structures of industrial capitalism and its aftermath. But the early Quakers, filled with “enthusiasm,” believed that the Kingdom of God could come on earth; indeed that its Seed was already within them growing up like a mustard tree. So full of joy were they at that of God within them, so eager to share it and turn the world upside down so that there would be peace and justice rather than war and oppression, that they gave their lives if nec-
necessary to bring about the new covenant. What if we were to do the same? Might it not turn out to be true?

NOTES

2. Quaker Faith and Practice 1.02.37 (Britain Yearly Meeting, 1999).
10. The Journal of Abiah Darby is in the Library of Friends House, London; that of Deborah Darby is in the personal possession of her descendant, Rachel Labouchere. Rachel Labouchere has written the lives of these two women, based in large part on their journals: Abiah Darby (York: William Sessions, 1988) and Deborah Darby (York: William Sessions, 1993), hereafter AD and DD.
11. Hannah Rose’s memoirs are held at Friends House Library, London, under the title “J.T. Dickinson’s account of Abraham Darby’s life”; hereafter HR.
14. In this failure to record much of the content of their messages, the journals of Abiah and Deborah are unlike those of some other eighteenth-century Quaker women who also left detailed accounts of their travels in the ministry. See Bacon, ed., Wilt Thou Go On My Errand?
17. Ibid., pp. 66-8.
20. One could speculate about why this came about. Perhaps it is not coincidental that John Woolman had visited England, including Deborah’s home when she was in her teens: he made a considerable impact on her and indeed on English Quakers generally.

21. Quoted by Hugh Barbour in his Foreword to *AD*, p. xiii.

22. Quoted in Raistrick, p. 20. Raistrick points out some discrepancies in dating Rose’s account (pp. 20–22) but they do not affect my point.

23. Raistrick, p. 22.

