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Kennedy's "British Quakerism 1860-1920: The Transformation of a Religious Community" - Book Review

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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 backdrops 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 on 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 Society of Friends considers itself pre-eminently able to provide a Neo-Quakerism—a fresh understanding both by individual and society of the meaning of our great positive principle—life lived according to the ideal of Christ in close and vital communication with God (p. 292).

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... And where is the Methodist who joined the Society of Friends and buried his cello? In the end one has to ask whether the book is about art anyway. The biographical detail

**References:**


In one of two great set-piece dramas which make up the core of Kennedy's study, the frequently bitter struggle among British Friends to establish 'the ultimate seat of religious authority' (p. 23) during the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s is recounted with particular skill. The ongoing battle to determine whether that authority resided finally 'in the letter of Scripture or the inspiration of the Light' (p. 23) marked the moment when a well-educated, spiritually hungry generation of younger Quakers set out their theological stall and also displayed their considerable leadership potential. Kennedy explores the contours of this embattled landscape most effectively through his detailed assessment of the upheavals among Manchester Friends during those decades—when long-dominant Evangelicals were forced onto the defensive by a collection of nascent Liberals who had all the advantages of youth and energy on their side.

Kennedy gives the reader a vivid sense of the restlessness, discontent and occasional brashness which animated these Quaker Young Turks as they challenged what they experienced as the stifling atmosphere of mid-to-late Victorian Quakerism—a culture of stasis which they believed had prevented the Society's necessary encounter with a rapidly changing world-view. The generation which launched the 'Quaker Renaissance' project had taken their cue from John Stephenson Rowntree, whose influential Quakerism, Past and Present of 1859 had famously made the case that 'to ever again become the sort of dynamic spiritual force their ancestors had been... Quakers needed more knowledge of the wider world' (p. 40).

It was precisely this intellectual curiosity and a growing confidence in the righteousness of their case which was to spark the Manchester controversies which Kennedy charts so well—culminating in the disownment of the charismatic, if not exactly modest, liberal rebel, David Duncan in 1871. In Kennedy's gripping retelling, Duncan's tale has all the hallmarks of a Victorian Quaker tragedy with conscience, hubris, and even a dash of Friendly villainy all part of the mix. The response of that weightiest of Quaker Evangelicals, J.B. Brathwaite, to Duncan's untimely death shortly after his expulsion from the Society ('How wonderful are the ways of Providence!' p. 79) underlines the vulnerability with which Friends were wont to cling to their respective positions in the conflict.

In tracking the liberal generation through the years of A Reasonable Faith (1884), the Richmond Declaration (1887), the crucial Yearly Meeting of 1889, and the Manchester Conference of 1895, Kennedy is alert to the risks of over-simplification of the historical processes at work in the 'Quaker Renaissance'. While rightly celebrating the rejuvenating energies and limitless relish for authentic spiritual adventure of the 'Renaissance' generation, at the same time Kennedy recognizes the need to interrogate the occasional 'bit of Quaker mythology, partly self-constructed' (p. 115). In relation to key moments like the rejection of the Richmond Declaration at the Yearly Meeting of 1888, for example, Kennedy ventures that Quakers and others have at times perhaps allocated 'these younger members more celebrity and acclaim for the decisiveness of their contributions than they deserve' (p. 115).

The 'Renaissance' project of self-definition and proclamation may have been piloted by explicitly liberal Friends, but Kennedy is also careful to note that the contributions of more moderate or open-minded Evangelicals to the revival of the Society during this period were often a vital factor in the ultimate success of the enterprise. Ironies such as the staunchly Evangelical George Cadbury providing the fuel for some of the most powerful engines for the intellectual and spiritual regeneration of the Society of Friends—generously funding...
becomes the subject of the second of the set-piece dramas which bracket Kennedy's broader canvas. Kennedy's chapters on British Friends and the First World War are superbly crafted. It is unquestionably the finest account to date of that watershed in Quaker history when 'the war and the imposition of compulsory military service permitted a minority alliance of young radicals and middle-aged zealots to grasp the moment and lead their Society, kicking and screaming as may be, to support a radical interpretation of their historic, but previously amorphous, peace testimony' (p. 322).

This is to a large extent the story of the Friends Service Committee (FSC)—that bastion of Quaker absolutism which was to help keep the Society's official position on the war anchored firmly to the Peace Testimony and which would consequently achieve 'a moral influence that far outweighed the paucity of their numbers' (p. 351). The FSC's unswerving refusal to countenance special treatment or exemption for Friends facing conscription after 1916 or to allow the Society to be seduced into some sort of cozy accommodation with the Government which would protect its 'own' while allowing militarism to flourish unchallenged is presented here in all of its ferocity. Kennedy gives us an absorbing group portrait of a formidable band of Friends—many of them women—intent on making their line of war resistance the Quaker line, despite the fact that only a very few Friends took so extreme a position as that of the 145 Quaker absolutists who chose prison rather than compromise with the wartime State' (p. 333). As Kennedy points out, it was to be this relatively small group of witnesses—those who endured the harshest punishments as a consequence of their opposition to the war—who would go on to acquire the lion's share of authority in the Society of Friends in the inter-war period.

The conflicts between the FSC militants and the many Friends who were ready to justify participation in the war effort on patriotic and even religious grounds—as well as with those to whom the idea of some alternative form of national service such as the Friends Ambulance Unit was entirely acceptable—are investigated with rigour and a fine sense of balance. While keeping his eye fixed on the astonishing fact that this tenacious minority steadfastly refused to ensure that the Society of Friends would come to be regarded by many at the end of the period as 'a prophet society for transforming the world into the Kingdom of Christ' (p. 333), Kennedy does full justice to the complexity of Quaker viewpoints at play throughout the war and the imposition of compulsory military service permitted a minority alliance of young radicals and middle-aged zealots to grasp the moment and lead their Society, kicking and screaming as may be, to support a radical interpretation of their historic, but previously amorphous, peace testimony. Kennedy does full justice to the complexity of Quaker viewpoints at play throughout the period. Alongside the deeply moving testimonies of incarcerated absolutist objectors like Wildred Littleboy, Kennedy also reminds us of 'Renaissance' giant W.C. Braithwaite's support for work in munitions factories as an acceptable form of alternative service; Seebom Rowntree's role as a key wartime advisor to Lloyd George; and of the military service of the sons of George Cadbury, John Wilhelm Rowntree, and numerous other eminent Quaker families of the period.

Likewise, the discomfiture of prominent Darlington Friend, W.T. Thomson, on the grounds of his involvement in recruitment activities is contrasted with the renegade group of weighty Friends such as Sir George Newman and Lord Gainford who sought to blur the distinction between their personal enthusiasm for a League of Nations endowed with a collective security capacity and the Society's steadfast refusal to endorse such an approach to post-war international relations. Kennedy's navigation of these tensions among wartime Friends—fractures which nevertheless consistently failed to undermine the Yearly Meeting's 'unwavering adherence' (p. 425) to a radical Christian pacifist position on the conflict and its aftermath—is exceptionally surefooted.
living discipline as it was a throwing open of the Society’s doors in search of new freedoms. Central to John Wilhelm Rowntree’s vision was the need for the Society to create opportunities ‘for producing a ministry that was informed and inspired as well as free’ (p. 168)—an invocation to a greater intellectual and theological rigour that has more than a little resonance for British Quakerism as it enters its 350th year.

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What Punshon is attempting is an inward sense of the sacrificial nature of Quaker social testimonies. What is needed is a fresh sense of the way in which the Quakers have been unsung heroes to the world. The book’s final chapter, ‘The Dialogues’, provides a call to Friends: as we have not truly learned from the Puritans and Quakers, so have we not truly learned from our own discipline and tradition. It is a call to Friends: as we have not truly learned from the Puritans and Quakers, so have we not truly learned from our own discipline and tradition. It is a call to Friends: as we have not truly learned from the Puritans and Quakers, so have we not truly learned from our own discipline and tradition. It is a call to Friends: as we have not truly learned from the Puritans and Quakers, so have we not truly learned from our own discipline and tradition.