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Review of Gentle Invadors, #2

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It’s a pleasure for me to take part in this discussion of an important book that, I think, makes contributions both to Quaker and to women’s history. As those of you who are familiar with Gentle Invaders will doubtless realize, I am not in a position to pretend steely-eyed objectivity about it or its author. Linda wrote this as her M.A. thesis at the Earlham School of Religion under my supervision, a learning experience for both of us in a number of ways, and was kind enough to ask me to write the introduction when Friends United Press agreed to publish it. My chance for constructive criticism came earlier. I want to talk some about Linda’s accomplishments in this work, and use that as a springboard to reflect on questions about the history of Quakers and people of color.

The contributions of Gentle Invaders to our understanding of Quaker history are many. As Linda realized in pursuing her research, the work of Friends among the freed people in the South during the Civil War and Reconstruction left behind an enormous body of material—correspondence, diaries, reminiscences, reports to both Quaker and civil officials, numerous articles in Quaker periodicals, even a few periodicals devoted exclusively to this project. I think it was probably the most concentrated, focused, and concerted effort American Quakers had ever undertaken. Indeed, unless it was the Reconstruction work that led to the founding of the American Friends Service Committee in 1917, sending hundreds of Friends to France and enlisting the support of thousands more at home, I’m not sure there has ever been anything to compare to it. But while the Reconstruction work produced detailed accounts by Friends like Rufus Jones in its immediate aftermath, the Friends who went south in the 1860s and 1870s had no chronicler who caught the Quaker or popular imagination. Friends or fellow travelers like Laura Towne, Levi Coffin, and Laura S. Haviland later produced reminiscences that provided striking accounts, but they came years later. Not until the 1920s did Francis Anscombe produce his “Contribution of the Society of Friends to the Reconstruction of the Southern States,” a University of North Carolina dissertation that contains an enormous amount of useful information but also bears the unmistakable marks
of having been supervised by a disciple of William A. Dunning. The general revival of interest in African American history that accompanied the Civil Rights movement gave rise to work that involved Friends, such as Elizabeth Jacoway’s history of the Penn School or Katherine Smedley’s biography of Martha Schofield, the Philadelphia Friend who gave much of her adult life to African American education in South Carolina. Before Selleck, however, no modern historian had attempted a general treatment of this Quaker project.

Selleck makes several contributions. The foremost, of course, is to inform us about the extent of what Friends attempted and accomplished. Relatively few in numbers, they still sent hundreds of workers into the South between 1861 and the end of the century. Many of their enterprises proved short-lived, but others, like the Penn School and the Schofield Normal and Industrial School in South Carolina, or Southland College in Arkansas, endured into the twentieth century. For many Friends these enterprises represented their most ambitious attempts to date to serve non-Quakers of any race.

Selleck also reminds us how central women were to this enterprise. Quaker women, of course, could refer to a tradition of women traveling in the ministry that went back to the seventeenth century. Teaching was a “woman’s occupation,” but it was unusual for Quaker women to engage extensively in teaching among the “world’s people,” or at such a considerable distance from their homes. Selleck is sensitive to questions of how gender shaped the experiences of these women who went south. It is worth noting that while these women encountered social ostracism and economic coercion, not to mention the frequent destruction of school buildings and other property, they apparently did not face the kinds of murderous personal violence that supporters of white supremacy used against African Americans—male and female. Nevertheless, the potential was always there, and I don’t think we should understate the courage such a work required. As was often the case in such charitable enterprises, women took primary responsibility for forwarding the work, even as all-male boards of control might oversee the accounting or send down directives.

Finally, Selleck grapples with one of the most vexing questions for any Quaker historian, let alone contemporary Friends: why, historically, have there been so few black Quakers? Ever since Henry J. Cadbury’s painstaking 1936 article in the *Journal of Negro History*, we have known the story of the tortuous process of how
Philadelphia, the most important of all the American yearly meetings, decided to admit black members. Over the years we have added a few more details, identifying a few more African American members here and there and deepening our understanding of Quaker racial attitudes. The major recent contributions to this discussion, by Philip Benjamin, Jean Soderlund, and Thomas Slaughter, have focused on the Philadelphia area as well. All three conclude that while Friends were consistently opposed to slavery, they often shared other racial attitudes of the larger American society. Indeed, Soderlund goes so far as to argue that Quaker treatment of their own freed slaves in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century presaged the future general attitude of white Americans–legal freedom without legal equality, and with subordination and segregation.

Linda is somewhat skeptical of this argument, seeing it at its worse as ahistorical, applying the standards of racial sensitivity of contemporary America to a very different place and time. But we still have to explain why Friends not only attracted relatively few black members, but also showed little interest in doing so. I’d like to devote the remainder of my time to some speculations on this subject, looking at questions of diversity among North American Friends and then passing on to some specific and critical changes that were taking place among Gurneyite Friends, the largest of the Quaker bodies, in this same period, and how they both opened and closed windows of opportunities for the creation of a multiracial Society of Friends.

As I mentioned earlier, previous research on Quakers and race has tended to focus largely on the Delaware Valley. Here I will make my first plea for more work. While Philadelphia was the spiritual and intellectual center of American Quakerism well into the nineteenth century, a majority of Friends were not members of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. Quaker slaveholders and slave traders lived in New England, New York, the Chesapeake, and in North Carolina. We have some sense of how they moved toward emancipating their slaves, but little sense of the attitudes toward race that underlay that emancipation. And by the time that Selleck treats, the post-Civil War era, a majority of American Friends were living west of the Appalachian Mountains. There is evidence that those Friends’ attitudes toward race were more complex than those that Soderlund and Slaughter found in the Delaware Valley before the Civil War.
Here I am relying on the preliminary findings of work I have been doing with a group of students at Earlham on Quakers and African Americans in the Old Northwest from 1800 to 1860. So far, we have found contradictory evidence. On the one hand, some Friends, at least, shared the attitudes of their white neighbors. As early as 1826, one Friend near Richmond, Indiana, was warning Quakers in North Carolina not to attempt to settle more free blacks in Indiana, since their influx was leading to a growing hostility both toward free people of color and toward Friends. Moreover, the Friend warned, “there was as much of it in the minds of members of our Society here as in other people, that they say as others do that they ought to be free, but they do not want them here.” One woman Friend in Indiana in the 1840s was quoted as saying she would fear for her safety if the slaves were freed; and Elijah Coffin, the clerk of Indiana Yearly Meeting (Orthodox) in the 1840s, went so far as to pen secretly an essay calling for the abolition of slavery to be linked to the creation of an independent black nation in the Great American Desert, with the freed blacks forcibly removed to it. In 1874, a report of a lynching of an accused black rapist in Hancock County, Indiana, noted Quaker hats among the participants. William Tallack, an English Friend who traveled among American Quakers in 1859 and 1860, found a general feeling in Ohio and Indiana that blacks simply were not drawn toward Quakerism because “their minds are unable to appreciate the abstractions and refinement of our spiritual views; they must have in their worship loud prayers, camp meetings, much singing and colloquial exhortations, or else they are apt to go to sleep.” There can be no question that such a view was fundamentally racist, since the description of suitable methods of worship would have been equally applicable to whites at the time.

On the other hand, there are just as many indications of a lack of prejudice. Geography certainly indicates something: several studies have shown that black communities in antebellum Indiana and Ohio were disproportionately located near Quaker communities. In many Indiana and Ohio counties, free blacks disproportionately bore the names of North Carolina and Virginia Quaker families. If there was segregation in meetinghouses when blacks attended worship, there is no record of it, and the few surviving burial plats we have for Quaker cemeteries before 1860 indicate that when “colored” people are identified, and many were buried in Quaker graveyards, they were not segregated. Black children attended Quaker schools, and at least one wrote how the teachers “did not say is your face white or is it
black; but come in and we will aid you all we can; and we are disposed to act under the golden rule and be governed by it.” When Friends provided funds for blacks to maintain their own schools, they did so at least in some cases because black parents found the plain language and mandatory meeting attendance of Quaker schools strange and disquieting. Indiana Yearly Meeting, both Hicksite and Orthodox, strongly condemned colonization and racial violence and called for legal equality for free blacks.

Neither side, moreover, should ignore a fundamental truth. Before 1860, virtually no Quakers of any persuasion, whether Orthodox or Hicksite, Gurneyite or Wilburite, showed much interest in proselytizing for new members. Prior to the revivalist movement, converts to Quakerism of any background were few, as Friends depended largely on the children of members to keep up their numbers.

The work among the freed people coincided, however, with a critical change. By the 1860s, Gurneyite Friends, the largest of the three Quaker groups, probably about 60 percent of all American Friends, were showing stirrings of an aggressive evangelistic spirit that manifested itself in an interest in drawing converts to Quakerism. Many of the Gurneyite Friends who would be active in this effort, like Dougan Clark, Jr., and John Henry Douglas, had worked among the freed people. By 1866, Douglas was writing: “It has been said that we cannot make Quakers of these people…I most earnestly say that if we would we can make living Quakers of them.”

Yet that did not happen. Gurneyism was relatively weak among Philadelphia Friends. Hicksites and Orthodox there continued to send money and individuals south for decades, but showed no more interest in attracting black converts than they did in making Friends of the Irish or Germans or other European immigrants who were flooding into the city, or even in attracting fellow old stock native-born middle-class whites.

Among Gurneyites elsewhere, the situation is complicated. By the 1870s, the very things that supposedly would attract African Americans—vocal prayer, singing, colloquial preaching, and all of the apparatus generally of holiness revivalism—were sweeping through meetings from New England to Kansas, and later on to the Pacific Coast. Yet even that brought in relatively few African Americans.

The reason, I think, is twofold. First, even as they were still supporting work in the South, both Orthodox and Hicksite Friends
enlisted in the Grant Administration’s “Peace Policy” and began intensive efforts to “civilize” various Plains Indian nations. Some of the mission projects Friends began in the 1870s are still with us. For whatever reason, Friends became more interested in supporting work among Native Americans than African Americans, and it is doubtless true that Quaker resources were not sufficient to do both.

Secondly, the Gurneyite movement toward revivalism brought in thousands of converts. New meetings appeared in places where no Friends had previously lived, often without a single birthright member. They had little knowledge of or interest in Quaker distinctiveness. Most of these converts could probably just easily have joined another evangelical denomination (and often did later), but had been swept into Quaker revivals. When they remained Friends, they often were actively hostile to such Quaker peculiarities as pacifism, the ministry of women, and commitments to African Americans.

Thus the historic Quaker tie between blacks and Quakers in many places frayed or was lost completely. There were exceptions, of course. Quaker schools like Earlham and the Cleveland Bible Institute admitted black students, and Indiana Yearly Meeting supported Southland until it collapsed in 1925. But evidence is overwhelming that between 1870 and 1920 most American Friends came to embrace the racial attitudes of the larger American society. And that embrace manifested itself in forms that ranged from the exclusion of blacks from the Philadelphia-area Quaker schools and colleges to the membership of thousands of midwestern Friends in the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s.

The 1920s also saw the beginnings of a reversal of that Quaker declension, but that is another story. For now, let us acknowledge a debt to Linda for telling us a story that had heretofore been largely unappreciated, and hope it will stimulate a conversation that will lead to pondering the implications of the story she has told well.