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Gillett's "Abolishing War: One Man's Attempt" - Book Review

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GILLETT, Nicholas, *Abolishing War: One Man's Attempt* (York: William Sessions Limited, 2005), pp. xii + 394. ISBN 1-85072-321-4. Paper, £15.00.

Nicholas Gillett's rather charming, refreshingly modest memoir of his long and eventful life as a Quaker witness for peace will surely be one of the last of this genre. Future social historians seeking to discover the texture of a very particular kind of twentieth-century Quaker life will certainly find a helpful resource here. Gillett's continuing life of service begins with his formative years in the rich culture of what one might describe as a sort of Quaker aristocracy—son of a distinguished Oxford banker and city councillor; great-grandson of John Bright; grand-nephew of Joseph Rowntree; linked through his mother's family to the Clarks of Street. His wife Ruth's grandfather was George Cadbury; and her parents, Henry and Lucy Cadbury, were the first Wardens of Woodbrooke. General Jan Smuts of South Africa and E.M. Forster were family friends; and J.M. Keynes wrote *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, 'with some help from a suggestion from my mother'. Gillett's autobiography provides a portrait of that now all-but-vanished world which has its roots in Victorian and Edwardian British Quakerism—a world where the social and educational opportunities afforded by parental business success inscribed a fervent sense of obligation in the hearts and minds of its sons and daughters.

As with so many of his contemporaries, Gillett's privileged upbringing and education at Leighton Park and Oxford University fostered a lifelong commitment to peacemaking and social justice rather than the pursuit of personal ambition and

security. His dedication to a distinctive vision of progressive education and its potential contribution to building a 'a culture of peace'—most especially manifest in his ceaseless championing of the Community Schools Movement—takes him from work camps in the Welsh valleys and in pre-*Anschluss* Austria to post-war teaching training programmes and memorable stints with UNESCO in the Philippines, Thailand and Iran. A passion for the development of institutions promoting international cooperation culminates in a term of service with the Quaker United Nations Office in Geneva and underpins Gillett's undiminished enthusiasm for the work of the United Nations Association. His pacifist convictions, tested by his experiences as a conscientious objector during the Second World War, lead Gillett and his wife, Ruth, into the heart of sectarian conflict as Quaker representatives in Belfast during the mid-1970s.

Gillett recalls these and other commitments in a warm, highly conversational style. He is clearly much more the storyteller, fond of the anecdote and of digression, than the ordered historian. This is a very personal, even idiosyncratic book—an invitation to 'the house of a hospitable author', as Gillett describes it, in keeping with his belief that 'the untidy rooms of busy persons provide insights into their characters and their concerns'. Gillett is always circumspect about his own achievements and those of the movements he has served. His account reminds the reader of a time when international institutions and NGOs unquestionably afforded far greater scope for improvisation, spontaneity, creative failure—and indeed, the personality of individual activists than such bodies do today. There is of course a necessary debate to be had here about the relative merits of this more individualised approach and the virtues of the drive to 'professionalise' the voluntary sector which has largely supplanted it in recent decades—partly as a response to the perceived shortcomings of a less structured and rigorously managed organisational culture. Gillett's book does not address these matters directly. But it does prompt reflection on the fact that the almost instinctive, vocational ethos of social service that animated the lives and visions of Gillett's generation of young Quakers is now passing into history. Members of the twenty-first century Religious Society of Friends concerned with the future health of its tradition of public witness would do well to consider whether a similarly inspiring and fortifying narrative for 'doing good' in the world is available for the nurture of the next generation—and how that might be sustained in a community where unifying narratives are increasingly rare.

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