

Print Culture and the Early Quakers

Review Number:

626

Publish date:

Friday, 31 August, 2007

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ISBN:

9780521770903

Date of Publication:

2005

Price:

£53.00

Pages:

273pp.

Publisher:

Cambridge University Press

Publisher url:

<http://www.cambridge.org/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521770903>

Place of Publication:

Cambridge

Reviewer:

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This is a significant and provocative book about the early Quakers and their use of print in England from late 1652 to the end of 1656. It begins with an argument: 'Quakers were highly engaged with contemporary political and religious affairs, and were committed in very practical ways to the establishment of Christ's kingdom on earth' (p. 1). Peters identifies the 'pamphleteering activities of the early Quaker movement' as central to their 'active political participation' and as 'one element in an extensive proselytising campaign which also used preaching, silence and symbolic performance, as well as private letters' (pp. 1, 252). She develops her case in eight chapters, structuring her book into three parts. These focus upon; (I) Authorship, production, and readership; (II) Identity and discipline; (III) Religious and political debate.

As Peters observes, the Quakers were numerically the most important of all religious groups to emerge during the English Revolution. Barry Reay, for example, estimated that by the early 1660s there were certainly between 35,000 and 40,000 Quakers, and perhaps as many as 60,000 (1). Following Richard Vann's characterization of early Quakerism as a 'movement' rather than a sect, Peters deals briefly with the historiography. Her starting point is to acknowledge Alan Cole's seminal work on the Quakers and politics which rejected the largely denominational view that early Quakers were pacifists aloof from political life. However, she then questions the notion that the Quakers were a radical remnant of a failed revolution who played little active part in the history of the 1650s (pp. 3-5). To appreciate Peters's challenging contribution to this debate, it is worthwhile considering how her approach fits in with the wider picture of early Quakerism that has emerged from previous studies.

Like other religious groups that survived the Restoration, the Quakers refashioning of their history and identity began early and in earnest. Unsurprisingly, while several of their enemies provided a genealogy for them that stretched from the mystics and spiritual reformers of continental Europe such as Paracelsus, Hendrik Niclaes, Valentin Weigel, and Jacob Boehme to their immediate forerunners-Levellers, Baptists, Seekers and Ranters-Quakers themselves preferred to concentrate upon the sufferings of their founding fathers and mothers. Coupled with this martyrology were biographical studies of the leadership and their more prominent followers. There was also a related emphasis on genealogy, local history, and bibliography that chimed with antiquarian research interests. From William Sewel's early-eighteenth-century history of the rise of the Quakers to William Braithwaite's early-twentieth-century account of the beginnings of Quakerism these narratives had common elements. Thus Quaker origins were explained as a long-term development of the Reformation and contextualized against the backdrop of Civil Wars, regicide, and revolution. The major personality was George Fox, although there were other valiant first publishers of truth. These pioneer evangelists followed in the Apostles' footsteps, boldly preaching their message of the revelation of Jesus Christ as an indwelling presence-the light within. Despite religious persecution they remained steadfast in their opposition to clerical authority, church worship, infant baptism, tithes, and oath taking, refusing to take the sacrament of the Lord's Supper or remove their hats, and using plain speech. Gathered primarily from northern Seeker communities these Quakers, as they were scornfully called, engaged in theological disputations with groups of Presbyterians, Independents, Baptists, and Ranters. Itinerant preaching spread their ideas from the fertile soil of the northern counties to the midlands, eventually reaching London, Bristol, and beyond. Thereafter they crossed the sea westward to Ireland, the West Indies, and North America; eastward to the Dutch Republic, German territories, and Ottoman Empire; southward to France, Spain, and the Italian states. Significantly, women took an active part in these missions and their preaching was defended. So too was the conduct of those engaged in prophetic behaviour like attempting to perform miracles-including raising from the dead-fasting excessively; eating their own dung; becoming silent; trembling; dispensing with items of clothing; going barefoot, bareheaded, and partly or entirely naked; blackening their faces; donning sackcloth; and casting ash upon their heads. Calumnies were also vigorously refuted, notably that Quakers blasphemed, suffered from mental illness, were epileptics or bewitched, and that they were Jesuit or Franciscan agents despatched from Rome to foment sedition. Indeed, their lack of involvement in anti-government plots was stressed as was their simple desire for liberty of conscience expressed through printed addresses to Parliament. Highly organized, they corresponded extensively and held regular meetings that developed into institutional mechanisms for imposing doctrinal uniformity. Moreover, they collected funds nationally for a common treasury which was variously disbursed relieving prisoners and sufferers, buying clothing and books, and subsidizing printing.

While there is no watershed in Quaker historiography there was a gradual shift from a predominantly self-serving denominational version which venerated the founders towards a more critical appraisal of their role within the movement and its broader contribution to the English Revolution. The bulk of this work, as before, was biographical and regional, concentrating on the leadership's itinerant preaching combined with Quaker sufferings in local and national context. Yet there was also renewed interest in old questions. Hence Geoffrey Nuttall rejected Rufus Jones's suggestion that Quaker origins could be traced to continental Anabaptism, spiritualism, and mysticism, insisting rather that Quakerism was indigenous, having evolved from English puritanism. Further studies examined the early Quakers' interests in law, medicine, Hermeticism, Hebrew, and Jews as well as their attitudes towards the Bible, Apocrypha, and extra-canonical texts. Others considered the meaning of the Quakers' prophetic gestures and the symbolism of silence together with their understanding of eschatology and apocalyptic belief that they were the children of light called to fight the Lamb's war in the last days. The social origins of Quakerism also received more attention, as did their customs, costume, and manners. So too did their opposition to tithes and controversies with rival religious groups-notably Baptists and 'Ranters'. In addition, scholars explored early Quaker speech, testimonies and self-representation, noting the emergence of a distinctive literary style. At the same time a number of books and articles extended our knowledge of women Quakers, focussing on their activities as prophetesses, preachers, pamphleteers, publishers, and letter writers.

The sources from which these studies of early Quakerism were constructed are well-known. Like Baptists and Muggletonians, Quakers carefully collected, collated, and copied manuscripts which, together with bound volumes of printed tracts, constitute the majority of the group's archive. Among the most important collections for this period are the Abram Rawlinson Barclay and Swarthmore manuscripts, which have both been transcribed. There are also calendars available of George Fox's papers and the Swarthmore MSS, as well as published extracts from State Papers relating to Quakers. In short, historians of the Quaker movement tread on well-worn ground. Consequently, Peters's contribution is not based on the discovery of a range of new documents but on a reinterpretation of existing evidence. How far she has succeeded in advancing her claims is open to debate.

Writing, as Peters concedes, was 'not an inherent part of being a Quaker'. Nonetheless, she maintains that it contributed to the movement's growth during the early 1650s and that it 'played an important practical role in the establishment and maintenance of the Quaker ministry' (pp. 16, 18, 23). She estimates that about one hundred Quaker authors had their writings published by 1656, contributing to a total of 291 publications. The most prolific was James Nayler, whose name is attached to almost one-fifth of all Quaker publications between 1652 and 1656 (pp. 21, 22). Peters also notes that papers, letters, or printed tracts could be 'more widely dispersed than oral preaching' and suggests that Quaker authors expected their writings 'to function in lieu of their preaching'. Furthermore, she asserts that a major purpose of Quaker writing was to convince potential followers by publicizing their cause to the outside world (pp. 26, 29, 31, 42). Her emphasis on writing and authority in the early Quaker movement is of course vital if she is to sustain her thesis. For if writing was unimportant to Quakers then it follows that they did not attach as much significance to print as she insists. Indeed, there is a strong counter-argument to be made which Peters is quick to minimize. It is not known how many Quakers were literate, nor how many read or heard Quaker writings, but less than 0.3% were published authors. Early Quaker worship was largely silent, while prophecies were generally enacted through a combination of speech and symbolic gestures. Moreover, Quaker ministers walked up and down the land and even sailed across the sea to spread their message. If these men and women believed that writing had made itinerant preaching redundant they could have stayed at home instead of feeling inspired to follow scriptural precedents. Clearly writing played a key part-especially for the leadership, whose message was more widely disseminated, whose activities were commemorated, and whose absence was replaced by a textual trace. Yet it must be seen as operating in conjunction with other factors in facilitating the spread of Quakerism. Peters recognizes this, though I feel her case is unbalanced.

Peters stands on firmer footing when she deals with the production and readership of Quaker pamphlets. She claims that Quaker leaders produced printed tracts as 'a very precise tool', addressing specific audiences. In addition, she connects the movement's expansion during the summer of 1654 and the subsequent concentration of Quaker ministers in London with the elections for, and assembly of, the first Protectorate Parliament (pp. 43, 46, 48). If correct, this reinforces her suggestion that early Quakers were politically active, although it is fair to point out that Quakers had travelled to London before and continued to journey there afterwards. Elsewhere Peters highlights the important contribution of Giles Calvert, who issued or sold, either individually or in partnership, more than 475 known different publications, of which about 200 were by Quaker authors. Quakers also entrusted Calvert with forwarding their letters and this trust was reciprocated with loans that Calvert gave to Quakers newly arrived in London. Peters is at her most assured when discussing the financing and distribution of Quaker publications, elaborating on earlier work on the Kendal Fund. She continues this theme by looking at pamphleteering in East Anglia. This case study, however, originated as a chapter in an edited collection and its modified inclusion is ill-judged since the scope of her book calls for examples on a national scale. Nonetheless, her notion that the Quaker leadership had a strategy for spreading their faith by targeting urban centres with a proselytising campaign that would create martyrs for the movement whose experiences and sufferings could then be publicized to a wider audience through the medium of print-and, it must be said, by word of mouth-deserves to be taken seriously.

Part II begins with a discussion of the printed identity of the movement. This too derives from an earlier essay, yet read as an isolated chapter it is extremely effective. Here Peters persuasively argues that printed tracts were 'instrumental to the rapid establishment of a visible "Quaker" movement in the early 1650s' (p.

91). She shows how authors neutralized the pejorative connotations of the term 'Quaker' by bearing it proudly and emphasizing scriptural texts which stated that God favours those of a contrite spirit who tremble at his word. I am in agreement: religious controversy and persecution were important elements in the formation of Quaker identities. Even so, Peters goes further, maintaining that self-identifying Quaker authors were 'writing not as individuals, but under the auspices of their religious movement'. Evidently she sees no tension between this statement and the following; 'there is no fixed pattern for authors emphasizing their Quaker status over their own individual status'. And she acknowledges that Fox and Nayler sometimes used just their names or initials on the title-pages of their tracts (pp. 111, 112). She also claims too much in holding that 'use of the term "Quaker" epitomizes the cohesive nature of their publications' (p. 123). This point needs to be qualified. Quakerism was not a movement free from personal rivalry and schism and while the earliest sources for internal dissent are commonly found in manuscripts and non-Quaker publications there was a shift post-Restoration as splinter groups increasingly used printed tracts to rally support. Her fifth chapter on women and pamphleteering is likewise adapted from a previously published paper. Again, read in isolation it is excellent. This time Peters focuses on discipline and the very specific role printed tracts played shaping a doctrinal position 'on the spiritual equality of women, and on their fitness for public ministry' (p. 125). Using evidence largely drawn from manuscript letters she reveals that 'women were integrated into the early movement and were active participants in its growth', receiving 'money, support, shelter and inspiration from the very close network of Quaker missionaries' (p. 150).

Part III starts by looking at pamphleteering and religious debate. Challenging the widely-held view that the Quakers' pamphlet debates initially lacked theological coherence or sophistication, Peters contends that pamphleteering was 'an integral part of the Quakers' campaign to achieve universal religious participation'. However, I disagree with her characterization of Quakers as 'spiritual millenarians' and do not see how she can describe their millenarianism as 'mystical' (p. 154). Indeed, she barely touches on the Quakers' decidedly non-secular participation in the Lamb's war and the accompanying performance of prophetic gestures. Peters also ascribes homogeneity to rival Fifth Monarchist, Baptist, Independent, and Presbyterian congregations that sits oddly with our knowledge of their variegated nature, though it does accord with a tendency in Quaker polemic to lump their opponents into distinct groups. Her seventh chapter on print and political participation is, I think, more problematic still. Rejecting arguments which have emphasized 'the alienation of Quakers from the worldly politics of the 1650s', Peters attempts to show how 'print served to transform accounts of local prosecution into an explicitly political context', asserting that it was their 'use of print which signalled and facilitated widespread participation in the struggle for religious toleration' (pp. 193, 194, 195). Yet part of her description of how Quakers were prosecuted in the localities repeats earlier material and lacks a comparative dimension: Baptists and Muggletonians, for example, were equally attuned to legal process and precedent. Nor does she adequately explain why Quakers might engage in law reform or participate in the establishment of a truly godly commonwealth for reasons other than self-interest. After all their vision of the impending millennium was no Baconian 'Great Instauration', nor were they Erastians upholding the authority of magistrates to keep the peace and enforce a judicial definition of blasphemy. Equally unconvincing is her claim of an emerging 'Quaker lobby' addressing central government, presenting local instances of religious persecution 'as evidence of the need for legislative change'. Peters even admits that 'such tracts were often written as prophecy rather than as direct pleas or petitions', adding that Quaker authors 'dismissed petitions as deferential'. She concludes by appearing to contradict her initial position; 'printed tracts addressed to central government were not intended to achieve specific legislative or political change' (p. 210). I also disagree with her suggestion that 'the early movement emerged as a multifaceted political campaign which combined the private lobbying of political leaders with printed tracts urging widespread participation to achieve godly rule' (p. 212). Indeed, I see little evidence to support it. Her final chapter on James Nayler and the crisis of 1656 depicts his 'symbolic re-enactment of Christ's entrance into Jerusalem' and subsequent trial as the culmination of the Quaker leadership's political campaign for 'religious settlement' (pp. 233, 234). If so, then why were 'discussions of Nayler's actions and his trial' 'strikingly absent' from most 'Quaker tracts of this time, despite a barrage of hostile publications'? Again, if Quakers tended to eschew petitioning how significant was it that most petitioners were 'Quaker sympathisers rather than Quakers' (pp. 245, 247)? As for her other contention that 'Nayler's trial confirms the very tight organization which lay behind Quaker pamphleteering and the movement as a whole', one wonders how this

event could have been preceded by leadership struggles if the Quakers were as unified a movement as Peters claims (pp. 234, 238, 239). Indeed, I find it ironic that she ends a book which sees the Quakers' printed output as careful, cohesive, and consistent with the most dramatic and damaging schism in the history of early Quakerism.

Notes

1. Barry Reay, *The Quakers and the English Revolution* (Hounslow, 1985), pp. 11, 26-29. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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