

BRYCCHAN CAREY and GEOFFREY PLANK, eds., *Quakers and Abolition* (Urbana, Ill: U of Illinois P, 2014), 233 pp.

As Gary Nash writes in the final chapter of *Quakers and Abolition*, “The story of Quaker leadership in the abolition movement has been known and proudly recounted by Friends and friends of Friends for two centuries [...] yet public consciousness [about their activism] remains largely as it was in the days of our grandparents” (209). While Nash intends this quote to introduce his own exploration of the memory of Quaker antislavery, it also serves as a fitting conclusion to this volume, highlighting one of the chief accomplishments of the work as a whole.

To those scholars unfamiliar with the Religious Society of Friends or with its work on behalf of antislavery, *Quakers and Abolition* provides an excellent introduction. Each chapter illuminates important aspects of the history and theology of Quakerism, deftly navigating the reader through the at times perplexing features of Quaker faith and practice. At the same time, this volume proves much more than a primer or summary, and scholars well versed in the history of abolitionism will learn much from its contents. Editors Brycchan Carey and Geoffrey Plank bring together an impressive set of scholars whose contributions offer a richer and more complex portrait of Friends’ involvement in and leadership of the transatlantic antislavery movement than we have to date.

Too often, as in the 2006 film, “Amazing Grace,” Friends have been reduced to a mere presence in more mainstream scholarship regarding abolition. Silent, stoic, (and somewhat stodgy), they remain stock characters in the drama of antislavery. They are witnesses to the action but rarely its protagonists; as a result, they often linger at the margins and in the shadows of the narrative. What’s more, even those authors who highlight the Society’s involvement with antislavery tend toward an overly simplistic understanding of Friends: too often, these Quakers are good, moral, unyielding—the voice and conscience of a people. While appealing in its positivity, this portrayal is equally as distortive and erases the wide range of actions (and inaction) by Society members. There are, of course, notable exceptions—scholars such as David Bryon Davis and Christopher Brown, both often cited by the volume’s contributors, highlight

the complex political, economic, and social terrain navigated by worldly Friends—but by and large, two-dimensional caricatures have prevailed.

*Quakers and Abolition* seeks to correct these reductive analyses. Each of the essays grew out of presentations from the stimulating and productive “Quakers and Slavery, 1657-1865” conference organized by Carey and Plank held in Philadelphia in 2010. Taking place over three days and involving scholars from both sides of the Atlantic, the exchange was dynamic and fruitful. This volume brings together fourteen of the strongest and most constructive pieces, contextualized with a valuable introduction by the editors.

The monograph is divided into three discrete thematic sections. Part I, Freedom within Quaker Discipline: Arguments among Friends, examines the varying positions held by Quakers regarding slavery from the seventeenth century to the American Civil War (8). Five essays address the range of political positions held by both better- and lesser-known Friends, a project perhaps best encapsulated by the subtitle to and argument of Jerry Frost’s essay, “Why not more Quakers?” Here, Frost calls on us to recognize the diversity of Friends across time, space, and the political spectrum, an appeal ably answered by his fellow contributors. Ellen Ross argues for the radical nature of reformer Joshua Evans’s opposition to “an interconnected market system that perpetuated war,” using Evans’s transformation as a persuasive means of understanding how “the cultivation of personal transformation is prescribed as the most critical strategy for promoting social transformation” (15). In contrast, Thomas Hamm examines the ministry of George White, who—despite his personal opposition to slavery—demanded that his fellow Hicksites abstain from participating in any political or social movements and condemned the ecumenical and reforming spirit of the Second Great Awakening as a threat to religious liberty (45). Perhaps as evidence of White’s fears, Nancy Hewitt’s essay demonstrates how Amy Kirby Post’s political convictions led her not only through a series of religious affiliations—beginning with Hicksite, Congregational, and then Progressive Friends, before embracing spiritualism and ultimately Unitarianism—but also inspired her to collaborate with scores of non-Quakers. Finally, in one of the more innovative pieces in the volume, Anna Vaughan Kett deploys a

sophisticated reading of material culture to illustrate how the free-labor cotton clothes embraced by Quaker families (women especially) “embedded antislavery consumption practice into everyday life, as an embodiment of individual political belief” (57).

Part II, *The Scarcity of African Americans in the Meetinghouse: Racial Issues among the Quakers*, also consists of five chapters that “examin[e] the predominantly white Quaker meetings and the ways white Quaker slaveholders and opponents of slavery understood race and interacted with blacks” (9). Several essays address the racial prejudice of Friends, even those inclined toward antislavery, as well as their reluctance to embrace the radical tactics of immediate abolitionism. Kristen Block’s piece importantly pivots our attention to the Caribbean, resourcefully using sparse evidence (as well as creatively interpreting the lack of evidence itself) to imagine everyday spiritual encounters between seventeenth-century Barbadian Friends and the enslaved people with whom they interacted. Andrew Diemer expands our focus to the African continent and the nineteenth-century project of colonization, drawing on a debate between Moses Sheppard, a white Quaker colonizationist, and Samuel Ford McGill, a black emigrant to Liberia, regarding the morality of slavery, the American Colonization Society, and the U.S. Constitution. James Emmett Ryan uses the diary of Charles Edward Pancoast, an ambitious young Quaker apothecary heading west to seek his fortune, to illustrate how at least one “ordinary” Friend held a lukewarm position toward antislavery and retained deeply troubling ideas about the character and intellectual capacity of African Americans. In marked contrast, Maurice Jackson argues for the role of Anthony Benezet—a “good Quaker” if ever there was one—as a “catalyst” for the transatlantic anti-slavery movement, illuminating his far-reaching impact through an exploration of his religious and political convictions, his relationship with his family and friends, and his career as an educator and activist (106). Finally, in one of the volume’s more interesting and important pieces, Christopher Densmore elucidates the complex relationship between the Quaker and free black communities in Chester County, Pennsylvania and Greenwich Township, Cumberland County, New Jersey, arguing that while some Friends protected their black neighbors from the snares of slave catchers at great personal

risk and while many Friends promoted the education and advancement of the local free black community, African Americans still acutely felt Friends’ condescension and pity and resented the ways in which Quakers kept them at arm’s length.

Part III, *Did the Rest of the World Notice? The Quakers’ Reputation*, is composed of four essays that consider the “legacies left by the Quaker abolitionists in the wider antislavery movement and in historical memory” (10). Marie-Jeanne Rossignol crucially expands our perspective to France, exploring the friendship between J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur and Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville—forged in part as a result of their shared admiration of the Society—and the impact of their writings on the antislavery cause before, during, and after the French Revolution. Dee Andrews and Emma Jones Lapsansky-Werner cast fresh light on Thomas Clarkson (also an important friend of Brissot), persuasively arguing that his “Quaker trilogy” (*A Portraiture of Quakerism* [1806], *The History of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade* [1808], and *The Memoirs of William Penn* [1813]) introduced a new kind of “transformative history” that both “combine[d] the empirical drive of social science with the passion of social reform” (195) and “legitimize[d] radical—and internationally relevant—reform” (203). James Walvin’s essay pairs nicely with Andrews’s and Lapsansky-Werner’s, as it illuminates the decisive role of Friends in moving abolitionism toward becoming a “public,” “popular” and, indeed, “national” cause (166, 173). Gary Nash offers a valuable and fitting final essay that explains how textbooks erased the leadership of Quakers for two reasons: first, the authors (mostly from New England) remained disapproving of Friends’ theology, particularly their pacifism and stance regarding women’s equality, and second, the racist stereotypes of African Americans and Native Americans deployed by these authors made it impossible to include Quakers’ different attitudes toward and actions on behalf of either group. Lastly, it is worth noting that the volume concludes with a cumulative (and exhaustive) bibliography. This resource is a welcome and invaluable tool for scholars interested in deepening or broadening their knowledge about the role of the Religious Society of Friends in the anti-slavery movement.

The essays contained within *Quakers and Abolition*, both individually and taken

together, present a nuanced portrait of the Society and its members. Most chapters focus on particular individuals (an understandable approach given their origins as conference papers), and this orientation is both a strength and a weakness of the volume. The discrete pieces work quite well together and the reader will undoubtedly come away with an appreciation for the diversity of Society members, the variety of political stances held by them, and the divergent paths that led them to these conclusions. At times, however, the reliance on individual stories distracts slightly from the larger story that *Quakers and Abolition* seeks to convey about the role of the Society of Friends in the transatlantic anti-slavery movement, focusing our attention instead on the efforts of a small set of distinct individuals. The editors strive to provide a more comprehensive argument regarding the Society as a whole in their introduction, but more of this kind

of approach could have been helpful in a few more of the essays.

*Quakers and Abolition* is an important and timely volume. Carey and Plank, along with the fourteen authors contained therein, present thorough and judicious analyses of both Quakers and abolitionism. The book is remarkably transatlantic (in its contributors and its subjects) and will serve to expand and enrich our analyses of the British and American antislavery movement(s). The authors collectively contribute much to our understanding of Quaker history, the history of slavery, and the history of abolition. Perhaps even more importantly, the volume achieves that which it set out to accomplish: to “raise as many questions as [it] answer[s] and encourage further research into the relationship between Quakers and slavery in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries” (10).

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