

‘Novel Reading and Insanity’: Nineteenth-Century Quaker Fiction Reading Practices

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Abstract

Standard histories of nineteenth-century Quakerism note that fiction reading was prohibited or strongly discouraged in the Religious Society of Friends, and multiple public documents from the period indicate that pronouncements against reading fiction, especially for young people, were ubiquitous until almost the end of the century. However, records found in minutes kept by Quaker-only reading groups or in the library holdings of Quaker reading societies show that, in private or semi-private settings, Quakers were regularly acquiring fiction as early as the 1820s. Through an examination of some of these records and the histories of some Quaker reading groups, this article complicates our historical understanding of how the Religious Society of Friends adapted to a new information technology, engaging a powerful tension between their testimony of integrity and their belief in continuing revelation.

Keywords

fiction reading, reading practices, information technology, reading societies, Friends Book Society of Birmingham, Manchester Friends Institute.

Introduction

In a brief article entitled ‘Novel Reading and Insanity’ published in December 1864, the *Friends Intelligencer* lent its imprimatur to a report by Dr Ray, of the Butler Insane Asylum in Providence, Rhode Island, that ‘light reading’ was to blame for the increase of insanity at the present time. ‘Generally speaking’, the *Intelligencer* claimed, ‘there can be no question that incessant indulgence in novel reading necessarily enervates the mind and diminishes its power of endurance’ (611). This American Quaker periodical wished to make clear its opinion that the

consumption of fiction was a passive, emotion-inducing enterprise, requiring little from a reader and eventually productive of disease:

In novel reading ... the mind passively contemplates the scenes that are brought before it, and which, being chiefly addressed to the passions and emotions, naturally please without the necessity of effort or preparation. Of late years a class of books has arisen, the sole object of which is to stir the feelings, not by ingenious plots, not by touching the finer chords of the heart and skillfully unfolding the springs of action, not by arousing our sympathies for unadulterated, unsophisticated goodness, truth and beauty, but by coarse exaggerations of every sentiment, by investing every scene in glaring colors and, in short, by every possible form of unnatural excitement. ... The sickly sentimentality which craves this kind of stimulus is as different from the sensibility of a well-ordered mind as the crimson flush of disease from the ruddy glow of high health. (612)

Nineteenth-century Quaker denunciations of fiction, at least in publicly sanctioned statements, both reiterated commonly voiced anxieties about novels *and* added to standard anti-fiction rhetoric a particular Quaker twist, especially by condemning depictions of physical violence and the promotion of mental passivity. But even though Quakers had both general and sect-peculiar reasons for policing novel reading, and even though the strength and ubiquity of their public condemnations might suggest a monolithic prohibition by Quakers against reading fiction, the record of actual Quaker reading practices shows otherwise.¹ Standard histories of Quakers leave the impression that it was only late in the nineteenth century that members of the Religious Society of Friends came to embrace fiction and other arts (particularly music and theatre-going),² but in

1 To date there has not been extensive scholarship on Quakers and their attitudes toward novel reading. I mention below (in the next note) some of the general comments historians have provided. For further reading, please see the recent *Quakers and Literature* (2016), particularly my introduction to that collection, and Nancy Cho's essay, 'Literature', in the forthcoming *The Cambridge Companion to Quakerism* (2018).

2 Abbott et al. (2003) note that 'Indulgence in sensory gratification, "vain imaginings," and useless ornamentation were distractions from attending to the pure Life' and telling stories that never happened was considered untruthful among Quakers (11). Pink Dandelion (2010) lists 'avoidance of the arts, literature, and anything that was fictional or might excite the natural emotions' (101) as a particular Quaker custom in the Quietist period, which extended into the early part of the nineteenth century. In *Victorian Quakers*, Elizabeth Isichei (1970) notes that vestiges of 'Quaker puritanism' – meaning, in the main, prohibitions against music, fiction reading, theatre going and other worldly pursuits – were beginning to fade by the 1840s (155). She contends that the Quaker transformation from a distinctly separate sect into a more culture-in-general-accepting denomination had taken place by the 1880s in Britain. One such change was the 'gradual acceptance of novel reading', which *The Monthly Record* attributed in 1873 to the influence of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Isichei 1970: 156).

Of course, concerns about novel reading and the right kinds of reading in general were ubiquitous across Britain in the nineteenth century. Alfred Austin, writing in *Temple Bar Magazine* in 1874 complained that 'Reading ... has become a downright vice, – a vulgar,

private and semi-private settings early nineteenth-century Quakers did not fully subscribe to the fiction embargo their public documents suggest. Especially among Quakers whose success in business in places such as Birmingham and Manchester propelled them into the upper reaches of the rising middle class, reading practices – as shown in the records of Quaker-only reading societies, lecture societies and lending libraries – varied with regard to fiction more widely than has been generally understood.³

With the term ‘reading practices’, I refer both to what nineteenth-century Quakers *actually were reading* and to the mechanisms by which they attempted to *regulate* this developing educational and entertainment technology. I also invoke John Guillory’s thinking about reading as an ‘ethical practice’, as nineteenth-century Quakers vigorously promoted reading as ‘an instrument for self-improvement’ (Guillory 2000: 41). Records of nineteenth-century Quaker reading portray a serious-minded, decidedly pro-education and socially progressive, but in many ways culturally conservative, group experimenting carefully with a burgeoning technology as radically transformative for them as the Internet has been for us. These members of the Religious Society of Friends found themselves in the midst of a knowledge explosion, and the drop in the cost of reading material combining with the rise of literacy allows us to conceive of reading printed materials in the nineteenth century as a new form of information technology. Given their long-standing commitment to education, Quakers were greatly vexed by the tension inherent within this new reading as a practice, its potential for social and moral advancement vying with its potential to encourage vice, falsity and the enervation of mind and spirit. Aligning the history of Quaker pronouncements against certain kinds of reading with Quaker reading practices shows vividly how Friends laboured to reconcile the tension between progress and continuing revelation and the urge not to conform to the ways of this world.⁴

detrimental habit, like dram-drinking ... a softening, demoralising, relaxing practice, which, if persisted in, will end by enfeebling the minds of men and women, making flabby the fibre of their bodies, and undermining the vigor or nations’ (qtd in Mays 1995: 170). Mays (1995) examines the intense focus, in periodicals especially, during the second half of the century on the problems with reading perceived as ‘a disease of the individual and social system’ (166).

3 My explorations of reading practices among Quakers follow some of the same thinking that guides Jonathan Rose (1995) in his piece on working-class reader responses to Dickens. I focus here, however, on the simpler question of determining what Quakers were reading in this period, not their responses to it.

4 Early nineteenth-century American yearly meeting discipline books also denounced the novel and other forms of stimulating pleasure reading. The Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Book of Discipline (1808), as well as those from New England (1809), Baltimore (1806), New York (1823) and Virginia (1814) yearly meetings, contains a section entitled ‘Books’, which explains the yearly meeting’s oversight over any and all publications addressing ‘the religious principles or testimonies’ of Friends (*The Old Discipline* 1999: 17) as well as an exhortation to members of the Society to exercise great caution in reading. This statement,

Quaker Prohibitions against Fiction and the Arts

Nineteenth-century censures against novel reading and other frivolous pursuits have their roots in early Quaker theological thinking. In fact, the Quaker prohibition against artistic endeavour as worldly, false and frivolous might even be seen as a founding principle of the Society; its presence in George Fox's, William Penn's and Robert Barclay's writings suggests it as a bedrock premise. For Fox, writing in *Gospel Truth Demonstrated*, in the section of the book called 'A Hammer, To break down all Invented Images, Image-makers, and Image-worshippers. Showing how contrary they are both to the Law and Gospel' (366), the central problem lies in the base falsity of representation itself, the substitution of one thing for another, as well as the usurping by human beings of the role of the Creator:

And therefore, all friends and people, pluck down your images, your likenesses, your pictures, and your representation of things in heaven, things in the earth, and things in the waters; I say, pluck them out of your houses, walls, and signs, or other places, that none of you be found imitators of his Creator, whom you should serve and worship; and not observe the idle lazy mind, that would go invent and make things like a Creator and Maker, any thing (I say) that is in heaven, the earth, or in the waters above or below. (367)

Barclay, when outlining the meaning of integrity in 'Proposition 15 – Vain and Empty Customs and Pursuits', notes that '[t]he chief purpose of all religion is to redeem men from the spirit and vain pursuits of this world, and to lead them into inward communion with God', and condemns all artistic and other endeavours and the pleasures they produce that are not directed toward spiritual development:

Theatrical productions which are not beneficial, frivolous recreation, sports and games which waste precious time and divert the mind from the witness of God in the heart, should be given up. Christians should have a living sense of reverence for God, and should be leavened with the evangelical Spirit which leads into sobriety, gravity, and godly fear. (389)

Frederick Tolles, the twentieth-century literary scholar, in an article on Quaker aesthetics, notes how this well-known statement by William Penn from *No Cross, No Crown* – 'How many plays did Jesus Christ and his apostles recreate themselves at? What poets, romances, comedies, and the like did the apostles and saints make or use to pass away their time withal?' (qtd in Tolles 1959: 489–90) – 'put an end to discussion' about the value of imaginative literature for Quakers (Tolles 1959: 489).

from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, is typical: 'And it is earnestly recommended to every member of our religious society, that they discourage and suppress the reading of plays, romances, novels, or other pernicious books; and printers and booksellers in profession with us, are cautioned against printing, selling, or lending such books; as it is a practice so inconsistent with the purity of the Christian religion' (*The Old Discipline* 1999: 18). Most of these disciplines also include queries meant to restrain members from engaging with 'pernicious books'.

These theological pronouncements, so central in identity formation within the Religious Society of Friends, along with other Quaker writings, make it abundantly clear that only certain kinds of reading – the Bible, autobiographical accounts in journals of religious experience, history, spirituality – were generally acceptable for Quakers. As Timothy Larsen demonstrates in his study of the Bible and its place in Victorian culture, in the journals and letters of Elizabeth Fry (1780–1845), whom Larsen dubs ‘an international celebrity in her own lifetime and almost certainly the most well-regarded British Quaker’ of the nineteenth century’s first half (Larsen 2011: 169), the very word ‘reading’ refers solely to reading the Bible (Larsen 2011: 175). For her there was only one book.

Across the nineteenth century other members of the Religious Society of Friends expressed sentiments similar to those found in the 1864 *Friends Intelligencer* piece noted above. The anonymous author of *An Essay on the Impropriety of Reading Novels*, published in London in 1826, had gone somewhat further in speculating that novel reading leads women into dangerous liaisons and men into duelling:

The moral tendency of such reading is decidedly mischievous, for there are many dilemmas into which the characters are sometimes brought, and the most mean expedients are resorted to by them; even the hand that is stained with blood, is often looked upon as one that nobly exhibited an action of gallantry, patriotism or honour; and who can prove that such things leave no impressions upon the minds of readers? Who can say how many unfortunate females have been ruined by villains that have received their libidinous impulse from the pages of a Novel? Who can say how many cards have been exchanged – how many swords drawn – how many lives sacrificed – to the false sentiments of honour implanted by a Novel? Who can say that he has ever found his moral feelings improved by a Novel? (2)

Even as late in the century as 1880, William Kite, a Quaker librarian at the Germantown Friends Free Library in Philadelphia, fretted that novel reading could lead a factory girl to fantasise about life above her station and a simple boy reading of ‘false deeds of daring’ to become ‘unfitted for the hard duties of life’ (6). Kite also lamented the link between fiction and madness, informing his readers as follows: ‘I could tell of one young woman of my acquaintance, of fine education, who gratified a vitiated taste for novel-reading till her reason was overthrown, and she has, in consequence, been for several years an inmate of an insane asylum’ (6). Kite claims that a properly managed library, however – which means one without novels – can correct young people’s reading habits:

But I will be met with the assertion that young persons will not read unless tempted to do so by these exciting volumes. I can say that eight years of experience in the care of a library from which novels are strictly excluded enables me to state that such views are erroneous. If unprofitable books are denied them, they can be induced to accept better, and can be turned to useful reading by a little care on the part of the librarian. (7)

Later eighteenth- and early-mid nineteenth-century Quakers were certainly by no means alone in their objections to fiction, and novel reading in particular. Their prohibitions were of course firmly grounded in a well-established theological tradition, but the rise of the novel brought censure from many quarters. As Jacqueline Pearson (1999) demonstrates in her comprehensive study of women readers of this period, commentators from many different political persuasions agreed that novels were 'horrid trash', 'utterly unfit' for young women because the books' indulgence in 'passion and pleasure' could lead to corruption of 'both the head and the heart' (Pearson 1999: 83). Novels were widely viewed in British culture as a frivolous waste of time, as 'addictive', as productive of 'false expectations' (a phrase used commonly in anti-novel invective) and, for women readers, as too stimulating, especially of sexual desire (Pearson 1999: 82–83).⁵

As a religious body, however, Quakers may have been particularly positioned to view fiction as antithetical to the foundations of their belief structure. As the novel developed, Catherine Gallagher (2006) argues, its early examples laid bare the problems attendant upon being gullible, being easily deceived, being emotionally impetuous and making financial investments based on innocent trust. What the early novel implicitly discouraged, therefore, was 'faith', cautioning its readers, indirectly of course, to replace belief with 'ironic credulity', a world-view consistent with modernity's emphasis on 'disbelief, speculation, and credit' (Gallagher 2006: 345–46). Such modern views Quakers would have found anathema, threats to the principles and values that supported their practical testimony of integrity and their religious faith in God. Thus Quakers may have opposed novel reading explicitly both for the more general reasons awash in British and American culture at the time *and* implicitly because the scepticism this reading practice promoted defied the theology that had sustained them since the 1650s.

Quaker Reading Groups and Libraries in Nineteenth-century Britain

These public pronouncements against fiction reading, spanning the century, voice anxieties about a new information technology. In part, and not unexpectedly, Friends grappled with the new technology by gathering in reading communities. In 1821 a group of London Quakers formed the Literary and Reading Society of Friends.⁶ This group gathered, as its privately printed 1825 *Catalogue* informs us, in order to provide 'a source of innocent gratification and mutual improvement'

5 See Pearson's (1999) chapter 'A dangerous recreation: women and novel reading' for further information regarding the cultural debate over novels (196–218).

6 As Paul Kaufman (1969) makes clear, the development of libraries, book clubs and reading societies began in the latter portion of the eighteenth century. Two such societies were established in London in 1787 (The Reading Society, Paul's Head) and 1790 (Mr Roome's Book Society) (39). Kaufman notes that the Birmingham Book Club (established possibly as early as 1745 [51]) is particularly important historically, in part because of its being 'quite the opposite of orthodox in political sentiments' (52).

(iii), part of the main purpose of which was to place ‘within the reach of the younger part of the Society of Friends a judicious selection of books, and thus providing a resource for the employment of their leisure hours, more profitable than many to which their attention might otherwise be directed’ (iii). By 1825 the Society had 109 members and had amassed enough books and periodicals to produce a 40-page catalogue of acquisitions intended to provide young men, in particular, with righteous alternatives to the dangers of the Metropole, what the writer refers to as ‘this “resort and mart of all the earth”’ (vii), where distractions present themselves all too often in the forms of ‘pernicious books’. Because at the present time, the ‘Prefatory Note’ concludes, ‘the press teems on every hand with publications of an injurious tendency’, therefore ‘it is only by rendering works of a contrary nature equally accessible’ that such unfortunate influences may be counteracted (viii). Although their 1825 *Catalogue* clearly evinces a certain fastidiousness towards choosing books, it also opens the door to new works:

But whilst the Society is debarred, by an adherence to those principles which form its bond of union, from admitting into its Library certain classes of work, it cannot fail to be remarked, that there are others of a strictly legitimate tendency, few of which have hitherto contributed to enrich its shelves. (iv)

Such works were mainly those of topography, natural history and science,⁷ but the catalogue does list at least two works of fiction: Washington Irving’s *The Sketch Book* (published 1819–20) and *Bracebridge Hall* (published 1821) (*Catalogue* 1825: 5, 32). Even though in the very next year the anonymous writer of *An Essay on the Impropriety of Reading Novels* (1826) would complain that ‘Bacon and Milton, Newton and Locke, have given place to the authors of *Waverly* and *The Sketch Book*’ (6), the library of the Literary and Reading Society of Friends included two collections of Irving tales. The great bulk of material in the library catalogue demonstrates that the founders of the Literary and Reading Society wanted young Quakers reading travel books, histories, poetry (the listing includes Wordsworth’s *The Excursion*, multiple poems by other late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century poets, well known, like Cowper and Goldsmith and McPherson, and less so, like Robert Bloomfield, a working-class poet in the mould of John Clare), natural history, philosophy (John Locke and Edmund Burke are present) and surprisingly fewer theological and religious texts than one would assume. But the presence of these two Irving works demonstrates that the prohibition on fiction reading was not as monolithic as has seemed the case.

The variety of things Quakers actually read becomes even clearer when we consider the records of the Friends Book Society of Birmingham, a cross between a book club and a private lending library formed by Quakers in 1822

7 The library catalogue includes, for example, Gilbert White’s *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* [36], a treatise on minerals by Robert Jameson [23] and Bewick’s *History and Description of British Birds* [5], which makes an appearance in the opening chapter of *Jane Eyre*.

that, interestingly, finally disbanded only in 2012. Six Quaker men founded the group, but women became full members within two years.⁸ A printed copy of the Society's Rules shows that this book society funded its operations through an annual subscription of one guinea, fines for non-attendance at meetings (one shilling for regular meetings but two shillings and sixpence for missing the book sale meeting) and the annual sale of books that had completed circulation among the membership. The rules also stipulate that Book Society members had to be members of the Religious Society of Friends and that withdrawing from such automatically meant withdrawal from the Friends' Book Society. The members met on the first Wednesday of each month to consider books to purchase, many of which were bought from a printer named Benjamin Hudson in Bull Street, Birmingham. The Friends' Book Society Minute Books scrupulously record, in various hands by different secretaries from 1822 onward, the members' choices for each month, sometimes even recording the number of votes each proposed volume received for and against. New members' names could be brought forward at one meeting, requiring a majority of two-thirds of the members present to move the nomination forward to the next meeting of the Society, at which time a majority of three-quarters was required to approve for admission.

One might presume that, particularly in its early days, the Friends' Book Society purchased only religious tracts and inspirational memoirs, but this was far from the case. Although in the group's early years they never ordered popular novels (say the gothic romances of Mrs Radcliffe or Sir Walter Scott's historical fiction) and definitely controlled for 'objectionable' texts,⁹ the recorded book orders demonstrate that these Quaker readers did indulge a fairly wide range of taste in just-published literature, biography, travel, history and so forth, and considered improvement through literary discussions at their meetings a priority.¹⁰ So just how far did the Friends' Book Society's reading choices extend?

As would make sense among a group of forward-thinking Quakers, the Friends' Book Society ordered books detailing the evils of slavery, including works like A. Mott's *Biographical Sketches and Interesting Anecdotes of Persons of Colour* (York, 1826), Charlotte Elizabeth [Tonna]'s *The System; A tale of the West Indies* (Dublin and Edinburgh, 1827) and *The Negro Slave. A tale. Addressed to the women of Great*

8 The six male founders were Paul Moon James, Benjamin H. Cadbury, George Gibbins, Joseph Shorthouse, Robert White and Thomas Southall. The minutes of 3 November 1824 show that Rachel Lloyd proposed Eliza Dearman as a member and that Eliza's membership was approved (*The Friends' Book Society Minute Book 1822–1830*, MS 2160/1/1).

9 The minutes from 5 May 1824 show that 'some members' found the *New Monthly Magazine* an 'objectionable book for circulation' and therefore decided to discontinue it.

10 The minutes from 2 March 1825, for example, include the following statement: 'It has been suggested this Evening that much advantage would arise from more general literary discussion at the meetings of the Society, and this appearing to be the unanimous opinion, the members are severally requested to think of some plan that would attain the object and introduce it at the next meeting.'

Britain (London: Harvey & Darton, 1830). Later in the century they ordered what we now know as well-thumbed conduct books, Sarah Stickney Ellis's *The Women of England* in 1839 and *The Daughters of England* in 1842. Poetry was very popular with the group, particularly in the 1820s and 1830s, during which period they agreed to share the following texts:

- Poems, by John Clare (ordered in 1824) (probably *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (London: Taylor & Hessey, 1820 or the third edition published in 1821))
- Historical Sketches, by Felicia Hemans (ordered in 1824) (probably *Tales and Historic Scenes, in Verse*, 2nd edn [London: John Murray, 1824])
- The Forest Sanctuary, by Mrs Hemans (ordered in 1826) (probably *The Forest Sanctuary and other poems* [London: John Murray, 1825])
- The Golden Violet & other poems, by L. E. L. (ordered in 1827) (probably *The Golden Violet, with its Tales of Romance and Chivalry, with other poems* [London: 1827])
- The Records of Woman & other Poems, F. Hemans (ordered in 1829) (probably *Records of Woman: with other poems* [Edinburgh & London: William Blackwood & T. Cadell, 1828])
- The Shepherd's Calendar by James Hogg (ordered in 1829) (probably *The Shepherd's Calendar* 2 vols [Edinburgh & London: William Blackwood & T. Cadell, 1829])

This interest in poetry, particularly in verse by Letitia Elizabeth Landon (L. E. L.) and Felicia Hemans, shows how much the Friends' Book Society reading choices were following general cultural trends. These writers were both prolific and exceptionally popular in this period.¹¹

Also ordered were histories by Sir Walter Scott (his *History of Scotland* in 1830 and *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft, addressed to J. G. Lockhart, Esq.* [by Sir Walter Scott, Bart. London: John Murray, Albemarle Street. [1830]) in the same year, but none of his novels. They perused a *Life of Byron* in 1830, but not his poetry. They determined to read an edition of Gilbert White's *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* in 1830 as well and de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* six years later.

Most interesting for our purposes, however, is the fact that this group of Quaker readers chose to spend their pooled resources repeatedly between the late 1820s and the early 1840s on Christmas gift books or literary annuals. The names of various literary annuals are listed time and again in their purchase records and include the following titles: *The Amulet* (ordered 1827, 1830), *Forget*

11 See Susan Brown's (2006) entry on 'The Victorian Poetess'.

Me Not (ordered 1827) *Winter's Wreath* (ordered 1827, 1830), *Literary Souvenir* (ordered 1827), *The Keepsake* (ordered 1827), *Time's Telescope* (ordered 1828, 1831), *Friendship's Offering* (ordered 1828, 1830), *The Landscape Annual* (ordered 1830, 1831, 1838), the *Christian Keepsake* (ordered 1836, 1838) and *Heath's Picturesque Annual* (ordered 1842). Many, though not all, of these volumes issued once a year contained substantial amounts of fiction, particularly what we might term courtship literature: short pieces about young men pursuing the hands of young women, often with embellishments depicting them in the midst of amatory pursuits (as shown in Fig.1).

These repeated purchases of literary annuals by the Friends' Book Society reflect, like the acquisitions of poetry by Hemans and Landon, how squarely these Quakers were fitting themselves into early Victorian literary sensibilities. With the advent of steel-engraved printing, the gift book market exploded in England in the early 1820s and their popularity continued for some 30 years. These annuals, given as Christmas gifts, were lavishly illustrated anthologies of poetry and prose, as well as, in the case of the *Christian Keepsake*, accounts of missionary endeavours in the far reaches of the empire. Their history in terms of the Victorian book trade, their value as parts of a gift economy, particularly among women, and their status as commodities symbolising cultural capital have been explored by numerous scholars.¹²

The most unusual literary annual choice for this group of Quakers was probably *The Keepsake* for 1828, which they agreed to purchase in December of 1827. This volume, a new entrant on the gift book stage, as its preface makes clear (v–vi), was particularly well appointed, embellished with very fine engravings and printed on heavier paper than many of its competitors. The frontispiece, in particular, shows anything but plainness (see Fig. 2).

It features a portrait of an upper-class young woman adorned with a three-string necklace of pearls and an empire waist dress with multiple ruffles. Her hair falls in a riot of curls, she holds a posey in her hand and her earrings bespeak both substantial wealth and leisure time. The title of the frontispiece is 'Selina', and the volume tells us it was engraved by Charles Heath, based on a painting by Sir T. Lawrence, P. R. A. Like other literary annuals, this first volume of *The Keepsake* emphasised heavily the quality of its embellishments, the very term for which should have alerted simplicity minded Quakers that this book contained reading primarily for entertainment, not edification. As if the frontispiece were not enough to announce clearly *The Keepsake's* role in promoting the frivolities of courtship rituals, the 1828 volume also includes examples of courtship fiction,

12 For initial studies from book collectors, see Faxon (1973), Felmingham (1988) and Thompson (1967). For explorations of gender and literary value in relation to the gift books, see Hawkins (2002), Kutcher (1998), Lodge (2004) and Rappoport (2004), as well as Rappoport (2012) on how literary annuals featured in women's gift-giving. Kathryn Ledbetter's extensive work on the annuals (1994; 1996; 1997; 2002) is particularly illuminating. See also Hoagwood and Ledbetter (2005) more generally on materiality and women's writing. For further reading on the explicitly Christian gift books, see Hood (2010).

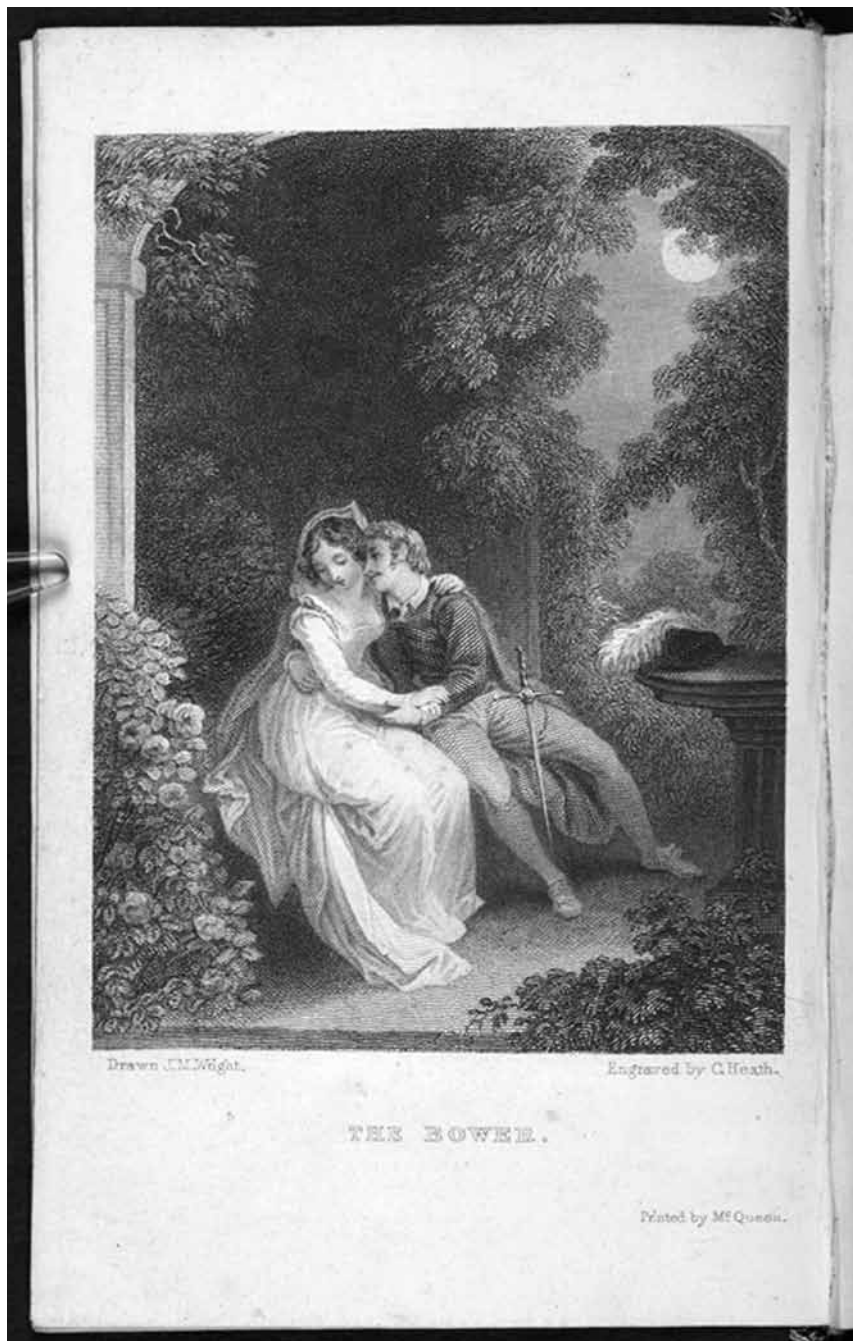


Fig. 1. 'The Bower', from *Friendship's Offering* (1827), from a picture by W. M. Wright, engraved by Charles Heath, and printed facing the title page.



Fig. 2. 'Selina', from *The Keepsake for 1828*, based on a painting by Sir T. Lawrence, P. R. A., engraved by Charles Heath.

most especially a romance story entitled 'Place des Roses, or, The Lady's Dream'. One wonders whether the Friends' Book Society was aware of *The Keepsake's* content when it ordered this volume; the fact that it did not order any other editions of this gift book, which was published annually until 1857, might suggest that members found its fancy more than their simple ways could abide.

The literary annuals ordered by the Friends' Book Society of Birmingham constituted a polyglot set of readings, varying widely across genres and sensibilities from love poetry through travel writing, abolitionist literature and village fiction, to what we would today consider celebrity journalism.¹³ Some pieces in the 1828 volume of *Friendship's Offering: A literary album, and Christmas and New Year's present*, for example, represent this range of genres, from the frivolous to the earnest. This fifth annual volume of *Friendship's Offering* features poetry and fiction by well-known writers such as Letitia Elizabeth Landon, John Clare, Amelia Opie and Mary Russell Mitford, as well as lesser-known nineteenth-century authors. The volume is dedicated to the Princess Augusta, which suggests much about the volume's intended audience, and is embellished with a number of beautiful engravings, as was the practice with these gift books. Two quick examples provide a sense of the range of texts in this volume that the Birmingham Friends would have been reading in 1828.

The volume includes a poem by Letitia Elizabeth Landon, 'Venus taking the Bow from a Sleeping Cupid' (188 ff.), embellished by a highly sensual engraving (see Fig. 3).

The engraving depicts a sleeping Cupid, couched on a reclining Venus's lap, as she removes his bow from where he has been clutching it. It is not exactly the sort of image of which a staunch Quaker would have approved. The penultimate text in this volume, however, would have probably found plenty of approbation among Friends reading it. 'The Captive' is an anonymous abolitionist poem accompanied by a highly sentimental embellishment of an African man in chains, entitled 'The Captive Slave'. The poem recounts the story of a Spanish slave ship becalmed on the ocean for six days. All aboard – crew and 600 slaves – perish except for one slave, who comes up onto the deck as a storm rises. The ship, not manoeuvred in any way by him (in a manner reminiscent of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*), ends up delivering him back to Africa a free man and the ship itself sinks. These examples show that some Quakers in Birmingham were perusing a variety of literary and other texts.

As it was for others, the nineteenth century proved to be a time of significant cultural turmoil among the Religious Society of Friends, and their

13 The 1828 volume of *Friendship's Offering* includes a fiction piece called 'The Maid of Normandy. A Tale', by a Miss Emma Roberts (171–87); a travel piece by J. S. Buckingham entitled 'Excursion Across the Island of Bombay, to Salsette' (310–18); and an account of Sir Walter Scott's study by Richard Thomson (identified in the table of contents as 'The Author of "Tales of an Antiquary"').



Fig. 3. 'Venus stealing the Bow of Cupid', from *Friendship's Offering* (1828); engraved by W. T. Fry from a sculpture by Smith, p. 188.

reading practices provide an interesting means of tracking such change. Quakers developed, however, a distinctive means of managing change, one that placed profound value on procedural clarity (even conservatism) that, ironically, served as the very means by which cultural changes came to be allowed. The records of the book societies give us a glimpse of just how this was accomplished. While the Friends' Book Society of Birmingham and the Library and Reading Society of Friends in London both operated through carefully articulated and controlled sets of rules for the purchase of shared books, within those careful strictures these Quakers were clearly able to move out in their reading choices somewhat beyond what would have been considered proper by the Religious Society of Friends in general. It is well worth noting that while the sets of operating rules for both book societies in Birmingham and London establish very clear and careful procedural guidelines, neither set out *prima facie* prohibitions against particular books or even classes thereof.¹⁴ Thus the Quaker prohibitions we have discussed against novel

14 We have discussed the rules for the Friends Book Society of Birmingham above. The 1821 rules for the Library and Reading Society of Friends in London show clearly the emphasis on procedure over specific prohibition. Here is Rule 13: 'Any book to be admitted into the library, shall first have been proposed at one monthly meeting, and information respecting its contents and price shall be given by the proposer, and then shall be allotted for at the next meeting; when three-fourths of the members present shall approve of it, otherwise the book shall be rejected, and shall not be again proposed for at least six months' ('Rules of the Society').

reading seem not to have been treated as absolute, ontological ones, but rather as functional or situational. It is clear that these book societies, which, according to one source, played a key role in nineteenth-century Quaker reading practices, allowed for ongoing revelation regarding which books ought to be read.¹⁵

Birmingham was also the home of the Friends' Reading Society, a subscription library founded in 1829 and lasting until 1983. Like the London Literary and Reading Society, the Birmingham Friends' Reading Society developed as a means of providing proper leisure-time activities for younger people, but its practices proved somewhat more restrictive than those of its London counterpart. The impetus for developing the Friends' Reading Society came from a minute approved in May 1828 by London Yearly Meeting that monthly or quarterly meetings take it upon themselves to establish libraries that would be especially helpful in providing proper leisure-time activities for younger Friends. As J. D. Hunter (1968) notes in a history of the early period of the Friends' Reading Society, Birmingham, as a rapidly expanding industrial centre in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, was a city where Quakers had particular concerns about the distractions available to their younger members. The population expansion there led to substandard housing, overcrowding and poverty, along with the ready availability of the kinds of distraction – particularly drink – so often used to take the sting out of such problematic living conditions. The Friends who founded and maintained this subscription library, like their counterparts in London, were deeply concerned about providing alternative entertainments, and a library stocked with the right kind of reading material was seen both as an antidote to readily available sensational literature and as a gathering place for young people to discuss matters of importance. Hunter's research shows that, at its founding, the Friends' Reading Society specifically excluded 'Novels, romances and political works' (48). The committee in charge of purchasing books and ensuring the library's rules also worked to suppress any 'objectionable' books that had been 'inadvertently introduced' (48). The Society's records show that in August 1831 the committee determined that Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, purchased earlier that year, was not 'suitable for circulation' (50). In 1834 the committee cancelled an order for Isaac D'Israeli's *Curiosities of Literature*, having also found it unsuitable (50).

By 1858, however, the Friends' Reading Society library had reinstated D'Israeli's *Curiosities*, as the catalogue published that year indicates (*Catalogue of*

15 In his *Memoir*, recently edited by Liz Longhurst, Samuel Drewett – a Quaker born in Luton in 1851 into a strict Quaker family and educated at Ackworth, a Quaker school in Yorkshire, who became an art critic and journalist in Paris later in life and died in 1903 – recalls his family's restrictive ways in the 1850s and 1860s. Although Drewett chafed at the limitations of his upbringing and managed to escape to Paris, he reports that 'all the best books of the day excepting the lighter fiction, came into our hands through the medium of a "Book Society", one of the best institutions I know of, and existing on the same basis as far as I am aware, only amongst members of the Society of Friends. We had therefore plenty of literature, and our evenings were largely spent in reading' (Longhurst 2011: 26).

Books ... Birmingham [1858] 50). This does not mean that the library broadened its scope of readings very widely. The 1858 catalogue includes no novels; it includes two sections entitled 'Literary Essays' and 'Literary History', neither of which contains works we now consider important literary texts from the period. The 1910 catalogue shows a much-expanded collection, but mainly in terms of travel, scientific, biographical and religious texts. Only three novels had made it into the Birmingham Friends' Reading Society library by 1910: Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), Butler's *The Fair Haven* (1873) and Walter Pater's *Marius, the Epicurean* (1885). But these are clearly novels of a different sort than those that we now think of as classic Victorian fictions. Works by a number of the leading novelists of the period are listed in the 1910 catalogue, including Charles Dickens, George Eliot, H. Rider Haggard, Margaret Oliphant, Sir Walter Scott, Anthony Trollope and William Makepeace Thackeray, but they are represented in this catalogue only by their poetry, travelogues or other non-fiction works. Many other nineteenth-century writers familiar to us now appear in the catalogue as well, but they tend to be poets and essayists. The 1910 catalogue lists 17 separate works by Alfred Tennyson (129), as well as poetry by William Wordsworth, Christina Rossetti, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Felicia Hemans, Coventry Patmore, Edgar Allan Poe, Sir Walter Scott, William Morris, Leigh Hunt, John Keats, Percy Shelley, Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Matthew Arnold and even Lord Byron. By 1910 the library even included Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* and Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*. Although Quaker theology in Britain had become much more liberal by the end of the century and the prohibition against marrying out of the sect had been lifted, the Friends' Reading Society seems to have honoured its original prohibition against novels and romances, with the slight exceptions noted above, at least into the first decade of the twentieth century.

Despite the fact that American Quakers were publishing nervous diatribes against the evils of fiction (and even certain kinds of poetry) as late in the century as the 1880s,¹⁶ generally in Britain Quakers were becoming more open to the value of

16 In addition to William Kite's *Fiction in Public Libraries* (1880) discussed above, see two tracts published by the Tract Association of Friends in Philadelphia in 188[?] and 1882 entitled *On Fiction Reading and Demoralizing Literature and Art*, respectively. The anonymous author of *On Fiction Reading* reports that a physician at the Mount Hope Institution for the Insane in Boston claims that a 'fertile source of derangement has appeared to be indulgence in the perusal of the numerous works of fiction with which the press is so prolific' (2) and that he has seen 'several cases of moral insanity, for which no other cause could be assigned than excessive novel reading' (3). In the same tract, another Massachusetts doctor reports the same problem in even more colourful, narrative language: 'I have seen a young girl, whose table was loaded with volumes of fictitious trash, poring away day after day and night after night over highly-wrought scenes and skillfully-portrayed pictures of romance until her cheeks grew pale, her eyes became cold and restless, and her mind wandered and was lost. The light of intelligence passed behind a cloud, her reason hopelessly benighted. She became insane – incurably insane – from reading novels' (3). This tract goes on to

novel reading as the century moved into its final quarter. One Quaker institution, the Manchester Friends Institute, can be viewed as a catalyst in the alterations of Quaker reading practices. While many of the changes British Friends faced in the latter half of the nineteenth century were religious and social in nature – the lifting of the ban on marrying out of the Quaker faith in 1860 being perhaps the most prominent example – historical evidence suggests that reading practices were shifting as well within the context of a general liberalisation in the Society.¹⁷ When it was founded in 1858, the Manchester Friends Institute grounded itself in the idea (as a report written by Joseph P. Forster in 1870 indicates) ‘that great latitude must be given of personal opinions made subservient to a wiser policy, than that of endeavouring to restrict its [the Institute’s] literature and lectures to the expression of any one sided view’. Twelve years after its establishment, the Manchester Friends Institute prided itself on an open-minded willingness to embrace varying points of view. Although the Institute sponsored multiple activities, its library was considered ‘one of its chief advantages’ (as the introduction to the 1874 version of the library catalogue stated) (*A Catalogue of Books*), and it prided itself on the fact that the Institute’s library ‘table caters for every taste’ (*Souvenir* 1908: 14). The 1897 *Catalogue* of the Institute’s library shows a remarkable difference in terms of its fiction holdings in comparison with Quaker library holdings earlier in the century. Its literary offerings are relatively extensive, listing novels by Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Jane Austen (*Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*), Sir Walter Scott, Nathaniel Hawthorne (*The Blithedale Romance*), William Makepeace Thackeray (six novels), Mrs Gaskell, Charles Kingsley (lots of his novels), Mrs Oliphant (*The Makers of Florence* and *The Makers of Venice*) and Charlotte Brontë. In addition to now-classic works of fiction, the catalogue also includes a six-volume *Poetical Works* of Byron, lots of Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Poetical*

detail the ‘Criminal Effects of Novel Reading’ (3) as well, including the story of a young man who became the editor of a prominent religious periodical but whose life went to ruin as the result of, he confessed, ‘*the reading of novels*’ (4), as well as a brief account of a sixteen-year-old boy who became a thief of ‘periodicals full of the fascinations of fiction’ after having spent ‘some twenty-five dollars for such trash’ and, running out of money, was so tempted to continue in his reading vice that ‘he was led to steal some twenty papers to gratify this morbid appetite’ (5). Lest we think only novel reading causes such problems, the *Demoralizing Literature and Art* tract reports that, in addition to the problems caused for young boys and girls by the ‘trashy literature’ available at newsstands with ‘graphic illustrations of the thrilling story’ (6), now ‘on the counters of most bookstores, and in the bookcases of many professors of religion, the complete works of poets who have, in some of their writings, abandoned their exalted gifts to ministering to the lowest and most excitable passions of our weak human nature, in the most seductive language. The impure thoughts and images infused into the moral being by this unhallowed poetry, like certain poisons taken into the blood, may remain there for life, to be only rendered inert by continual resort to Divine grace’ (6). The medical language here indicates just how pernicious such literature was seen to be.

17 Thomas C. Kennedy’s (2001) book provides detailed information about changes in the Religious Society of Friends during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Works, Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man* and plenty of John Ruskin and Alfred Tennyson. It is clear that some Quakers had broadened their reading lists by the close of the nineteenth century.

Given the fact that the Manchester Friends Institute – primarily through its open-mindedness in hosting lectures by Quakers whose theological views varied widely at a time when the predominance of Evangelical theology and practice was being challenged – served as the epicentre of the so-called ‘Manchester Crisis’ or the ‘Manchester Difficulty’ in the 1860s, it is not surprising that its library’s catalogue would include, certainly by 1897, quite a range of novels that were not available in other Quaker repositories.¹⁸ Acquiring controversial materials for the library, however, was not an easy matter. Much earlier, at the end of 1862, the Institute library committee had approved the acquisition of some books over the objection of some concerned Friends, including Bishop J. W. Colenso’s commentary on the first five books of the Hebrew scripture, the publication of which had led to his excommunication. While this might appear to have been a victory for the younger, liberal-leaning faction of Friends in the Manchester area, Kennedy (2001) suggests that ‘the liberal triumph also had a Pyrrhic quality’ (57). Three members of the Manchester Friends Institute general committee resigned in protest at the decision to acquire these books, one of whom was James Hodgkinson. In his resignation letter Hodgkinson wrote that he ‘could not agree with the policy of simply purchasing “any book ... which is not decidedly immoral or a well-known novel”’ (Kennedy 2001: 57). This statement reveals that in 1862 there was significant controversy, even at a more liberal institution such as the Manchester Friends Institute, regarding what books were appropriate to lend to Friends, particularly younger ones, and that novels were still readily linked with immorality among Quakers in this cursory manner. Thirty-five years later, of course, the library had collected quite a number of ‘well-known’ novels.

Conclusion

The research reported here constitutes a preliminary investigation of nineteenth-century Quaker reading practices. There were multiple other Quaker reading groups and libraries on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as ‘book meetings’ for young people (Abbatt 1988: 180), and many individual readers whose personal reading records warrant further examination. For example, Elizabeth Taylor Cadbury (1858–1951), a well-regarded and well-known Quaker leader in education and other issues and the second wife of George Cadbury, the chocolate manufacturer and developer of

18 The ‘Manchester Crisis’ might be characterised as a significant, multi-year theological dispute between Evangelicals in London Yearly Meeting, the then-dominant theological position among British Quakers, and younger Friends, particularly David Duncan, whose lectures at the Manchester Institute caused it to be seen as ‘a centre for liberal, anti-evangelical religious inquiry’ (Kennedy 2001: 55). For a thorough account of the ‘Crisis’, see Kennedy 2001: 47–85.

the model factory village of Bourneville near Birmingham, grew up in a progressive London home with significant literary interests. Before moving to Birmingham after her marriage to George, Elizabeth was 'a member of various Quaker reading circles and debating societies' (Scott 1955: 40), including the Portfolio Society, a Quaker literary group that produced a quarterly magazine called the *Hoi-Polloi* for a time (Scott 1955: 40). We know from her biographer that she was an avid reader of Thomas Carlyle and that she read Darwin's *Origin of Species* in her early twenties (which would have been about 20 years after its initial publication) (Scott 1955: 37), but her other reading habits have yet to be examined.

The particular distinctions Quakers drew between acceptable private and publicly sanctioned reading practices (especially in school settings) – as evidenced in the 1838–39 report from the Committee of Women Friends investigating the 'Effects produced on the minds of school girls, by the reading of tale books and books partially fictitious; and to consider where the line of prohibition can best be drawn' ('Report of the Committee of Women Friends' 1842) – as well as gendered differences in reading, also bear additional investigation.¹⁹ But the rich history here of nineteenth-century Quaker reading does begin to suggest that, in working to adapt growing information technologies to their theology and educational aspirations, Quakers were engaging a powerful tension between their desire for simple integrity and their belief in 'continuing revelation'. This tension within Quaker reading practices mirrored well those in nineteenth-century culture at large, caught as it was between the magnetic pull of progress and nostalgia for a simpler past. And it is little wonder that we, drowning in our own information overload, gaze back to those forbears for consolation and, perhaps, inspiration.²⁰

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19 Flint (1993) explores nineteenth-century reading practices for women in general, but a more specific examination of such among Quakers would be valuable. Catherine Sloan's (2017) recent work on reading practices at Croydon Friends' School in the nineteenth century illuminates some of these issues.

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