

## Book Reviews

Rebecca Wynter and Pink Dandelion (eds), *A Quaker Conscientious Objector: Wilfrid Littleboy's Prison Letters, 1917–1919* (Bath: Handheld Press, 2020), pp. 197. ISBN 9781912766277. Paperback, £15.99.

Wilfrid Littleboy was one of between 1,300 and 1,500 British men (about 150 of whom were Quakers) who registered as 'absolutist' conscientious objectors during the First World War and maintained that position until the end of the conflict. Unlike conscientious objectors (COs) in other categories, who performed 'work of national importance' in farms, factories and logistics on the home front, or allowed themselves to be conscripted into the Royal Army Medical Corps or Non-Combatant Corps, absolutist COs refused to cooperate with any form of wartime mobilisation. To pressure them to reconsider, and to deter others from following their example, the British state imposed a range of punishments on these individuals. A small detachment was sent to France in 1916. The bulk, however, served terms of imprisonment of varying lengths in British civilian prisons. As Rebecca Wynter and Pink Dandelion observe in their introduction, absolutist COs therefore spent the latter part of the war in a disorienting and repetitive 'cycle of arrest, tribunal, imprisonment, and release', followed by rearrest and subsequent re-entry into the punishment system (p. xxi).

Although they only ever formed a small proportion (less than 9%) of the total CO population, it has been the experiences of absolutist COs that have informed subsequent public understanding of First World War conscientious objection. Yet, as Wynter and Dandelion note, that understanding was itself shaped by the first wave of CO published accounts, such as the prison letters of Corder Catchpool, which appeared between 1918 and 1920. The publication of these accounts was largely activist in nature, intended to spotlight poor treatment and conditions and to agitate for change. Getting beyond what Wynter and Dandelion call the 'decades of myth' surrounding the CO experience will necessarily involve analysing other, less familiar, historical witnesses. Wilfrid Littleboy's prison letters, held in a family collection and published in this volume for the first time, provide a vivid insight into the experiences (and ordeals) of one ordinary

absolutist CO during and immediately after the First World War. However, these lengthy, sensitive, well-written letters ultimately do far more than that.

A 29-year-old accountant living in Birmingham when war broke out, Littleboy had been the first secretary of the Young Friends' Committee and he never wavered from his absolutist stance, ultimately spending 28 months in custody before his release in April 1919. Written largely to his parents and intended (like much correspondence written during the First World War) for wider distribution among family and friendship networks, Littleboy's letters are careful documentary records that testify not only to his emotional and psychological responses to captivity, but also to a wide variety of other matters. Littleboy describes in minute detail the conditions in the civilian prisons he was held in, covering everything from the other prisoners, to cleaning routines, guards, food, cell architecture and layout, and the wildlife and birds that frequented the prison grounds. He outlines the wartime social networks in these prisons, describing how Quaker and other religiously inclined conscientious objectors associated with each other—and worshipped together—in prison. Isolated physically as they were from the social connections of family, town and church, the textual lifelines provided by letters and books assumed an outsized importance for COs. Littleboy was careful to make the most of his limited mail privileges while in prison so as to reach as large a reading audience—and to squeeze in as much detail—as possible. (The often widely separated dates on the letters indicate the severe communicative constraints he was operating under.) The letters also indicate how important books were to him behind bars, and the specific practices and policies that were employed to build up a stock of titles in prison libraries for inmates to use. Littleboy often requested specific titles from his own collection, as well as loaned copies from friends, and eagerly took up reading recommendations from others. His letters provide detailed accounts of his reading—valuable evidence for the cultural historian. A seven-page appendix at the back of the volume provides a list of all titles referred to in the letters, indicating that Littleboy's voracious reading tastes in captivity stretched from theology to modern fiction, contemporary history, biography and philosophy. These titles indicate a mind engaging both with matters of faith and the wider war and its causes, while the letters indicate how these books could provide grist for intellectual exchange via correspondence, a mental outlet for Littleboy when, as he noted in a 24 November 1917 letter, 'prison life' presented 'the impossibility of chatting over such subjects with one's friends' (p. 77).

With an illuminating 45-page scholarly introduction by Wynter and Dandelion, as well as a foreword by Littleboy's granddaughter, Deborah Nash, *A Quaker Conscientious Objector* provides the reader with a wealth of information, both about the immediate environment in which Littleboy's letters were written and the wider context of First World War conscientious objection. The relatively new Handheld Press, which aims to publish 'new editions of ... forgotten fiction and lost authors' as well as to 'bring you stories from scholarly research, in plain English' in its Handheld Research series, is to be congratulated for enabling

these letters to enter wider print circulation. They will be a priceless resource for anyone researching the Quaker and CO experience in Britain during the First World War, as well as to a wider readership interested in life on the British home front during the conflict.

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Madeleine Pennington, *Quakers, Christ, and the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. xxix + 242. ISBN 978-0-19-289527-1. Hardback, £75.

*Quakers, Christ, and the Enlightenment* is a welcome addition to the study of early Quaker theology. Pennington sets out to review the evidence about the changes in theology in the Quaker movement between 1647 and 1700, and to take a fresh approach to the issue of causation. In particular, she rejects arguments that changes to theological perspectives were mainly prompted by the social and political events around the Quakers. Instead, she argues convincingly that developing theological perspectives also played a causative role, especially as they were formed in conversation with others. She explores in the detail the way in which Quakers during this early period worked to build a “theological reputation” as the true Church’ (p. 180), negotiating between their own strongly held beliefs and the mainly complex and changing theological positions taken by other groups around them.

The book has two parts. The first, ‘Moving Beyond a Socio-Political Model’, reviews the historiography of the Quaker movement to date and identifies an emphasis on social and political explanations that may not be warranted. The second, ‘The Quaker Christ, 1647–1700’, traces the development of Quaker Christology—and related topics, such as soteriology—through this early period. Over six chapters in the second section, Pennington provides nuanced appraisals of a wide range of types of evidence, including Quaker publications, letters, and minutes, anti-Quaker publications, and neutral or descriptive mentions of the Quakers in other texts. She shows the ways in which individuals within the Quaker movement could differ, both changing their own minds over time and disagreeing with or taking a different approach to others in the movement. Sometimes these differences could be incorporated into the movement—for example, George Fox both endorsed the work of Robert Barclay and continued to teach Christology, which was in opposition to that laid out in Barclay’s *Apology* (pp. 137, 158). Sometimes, as in the climactic chapter on the Keithian controversy, they could not.

The use of a wide range of sources enables Pennington to contextualise the changes within the wider movements of dissent and debates about orthodoxy,

and to show how both theological and social concerns were at play as the Quaker movement developed. Her conclusion about the split between Quakers in Philadelphia and George Keith demonstrates this balanced approach: 'For whilst a commitment to the sufficiency of the Light was clearly more important to Philadelphian Quakers than a technical debate regarding the necessity of faith in the historical Jesus, it is also clear they were more deeply concerned to prove their Christian faith than they were willing to pursue Keith in a theological debate on this point' (p. 207). Pennington is careful throughout to 'give nonconformists intellectual agency in their own story' (p. 212) and, although there is doubtless more to say about the many complex causes that give rise to change in movements like the Quakers, this is a welcome corrective to some previous approaches.

I predict that this will become a standard work in the history of the early Quaker movement. It will also be useful for those researching the development of nonconformist traditions more generally or exploring the history of the Enlightenment. Written for a primarily academic audience, it uses technical terms in a thoughtful and appropriate way, and evidences each claim thoroughly. Pennington's writing is patient and logical, working through the details of each point before summarising clearly. The provision of historical and theological context should allow readers who are not specialists, but who have some familiarity with Quaker history, to engage in the material, and extensive footnotes and bibliography will enable readers to follow up points of interest. I recommend this book especially to university and Quaker libraries, where it should find a wide readership.

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