Selecting from the Writings of John Woolman: 'On Christian Moderation'

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Abstract

In 1816 the Friends Tract Association published an excerpt from John Woolman's first antislavery essay *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes* with every reference to slavery edited out. The editors wanted to highlight Woolman's 'general' message, that those who maintained their health, lived humbly and served God were rewarded with true happiness. In the excerpt, using biblical citations and an invocation of the early Quaker colonisation of the Delaware Valley, Woolman asserted that God rewards his servants. The excerpt successfully highlights this easily overlooked feature of Woolman's lifelong ministry, but by omitting Woolman's discussion of slavery it violated his original intention. The excerpt appeared in the last year of Quaker consensus on the issue of slavery. The editors believed they could set the issue aside because they thought the Quakers were in agreement on it, but shortly after their excerpt appeared the Quaker consensus on slavery fell apart.

Keywords

John Woolman, *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes* (Philadelphia, 1754), Friends Tract Association, *Selections from the Writings of John Woolman* (London, 1816), Quakers and slavery

In 1816 a group of Quakers in London did something surprising. They republished John Woolman's first antislavery essay with every reference to human bondage left out. The editors explained that the essay contained 'many excellent observations of general import' beyond the issue of slavery, and it was those 'general' comments that had 'chiefly' caught their eye.[1] Thus Woolman's 1754 essay *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes* reappeared in 1816 without reference to slavery, as the

1 Woolman, J., *Selections from the Writings of John Woolman*, London: William and Samuel Graves, 1816, p. 5n.

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opening chapter in a 22-page compendium entitled *Selections from the Writings of John Woolman*. The collection also featured three excerpts from Woolman's other writings: two from his 1768 pamphlet *Considerations on Pure Wisdom and Human Policy*, and one from his 1770 work *Considerations on the True Harmony of Mankind. Selections from the Writings of John Woolman*, with the issue of slavery expunged from the antislavery essay, would be reprinted several times in the nineteenth century in Britain, Ireland and the United States.

The appearance of the edited essay marked a turning point in the public image of Woolman. He had received extravagant praise since the moment of his death, but within Quaker circles in the eighteenth century he had also been controversial. Writers and editors had been quite willing to express disagreement with him and even censored his journal.[2] The 1816 publication was not like those earlier acts of censorship. The publishers were not hiding Woolman's antislavery arguments. Only a year earlier they had published a memoir highlighting his opposition to slavery, and they introduced *Selections from the Writings of John Woolman* as a 'suitable companion' to that earlier work.[3] For this collection, however, the editors chose passages from Woolman's writings with wide-ranging 'general' implications. They presented Woolman as a man whose insights extended far beyond the controversies of his day.

By the 1820s, nearly all public commentary on Woolman exalted him. A poem by 'B. Barton' dated 8 December 1823 and republished in the 1830s and 1840s asserted that Woolman would be singing in the chorus when Jesus returned to raise and judge the dead.[4] Other Quakers placed Woolman in a circle of revered ancestors who had lived in a vaguely defined earlier, better age. In 1839, the English Quaker James Cropper promoted the publication of a new edition of Woolman's journal by arguing that it would

> hold up to the view of the members of our own society, an example of what practically constitutes a real Quaker, and to call the particular attention of my fellow members to the great decline and low state of things amongst us.[5]

Barton and Cropper implicitly pushed back against writers who downplayed Woolman's attachment to Christianity. In 1824, for example, Henry Crabb Robinson wrote of Woolman, 'His religion is love. His whole existence and all his passions were love!' While praising Woolman extravagantly, Robinson distanced himself from any embrace of Quakerism or even Christianity. 'If one could impute to his creed, and not to his personal character, the delightful

2 See Plank, G., 'The First Person in Antislavery Literature: John Woolman, his Clothes and his Journal', *Slavery and Abolition* 30 (2009), pp. 67–91.

3 Woolman, *Selections*, p. 4.

4 Barton, B., 'A Memorial of John Woolman', *The Friend: A Religious and Literary Journal*, 2 October 1830, 3:51. See also *A Journal of the Life, Gospel Labours, and Christian Experiences of that Faithful Minister of Christ, John Woolman*, Warrington, 1840, pp. 337–39.

5 *A Journal of John Woolman*, p. iii.

frame of mind which he exhibited, one could not hesitate to be a convert. His Christianity is most inviting – it is fascinating.'[6] In contrast to Robinson, Barton and Cropper concentrated on Woolman's biblically grounded Christian beliefs and his insistence on following Christ's example. Barton's poem made no reference to Woolman's opposition to slavery. Cropper observed disapprovingly that some Quakers thought Woolman had not placed enough emphasis on 'Christ crucified'. He considered that criticism misinformed.[7]

Selections from the Writings of John Woolman was part of an extended series. Earlier pamphlets in the sequence, published by William and John Greene on behalf of the Friends Tract Association, were works examining fundamental features of Quakerism. They produced a pamphlet on silence, another on the evils of theatre going and one on pacifism.[8] There was a summary of Woolman's life drawn from his journal and volumes devoted to the works of other famous Quakers, including Thomas Chalkley and William Penn. Taken as a whole, the collection was a guide to Quakerism, good for the education of youngsters, inquisitive adult Quakers and outsiders interested in Quaker belief and practice. By publishing and distributing *Selections from the Writings of John Woolman*, the Friends Tract Association reinforced Woolman's position as an important figure in Quaker history and a proponent of fundamental Quaker values. Though he and several of the other authors promoted by the Friends Trace Association were long dead, their words still gave comfort and useful instruction to readers in the nineteenth century.

Selections from the Writings of John Woolman ended with an excerpt from Woolman's 1770 essay *Considerations on the True Harmony of Mankind*, the most widely circulated of the works published in his lifetime.[9] In the excerpt Woolman expresses 'brotherly feeling with the poor' and grapples with a personal challenge he describes as a 'labour of the heart'.[10] Woolman belonged to the class of people entrusted with 'plentiful estates', and he describes that position as a trial. After all, 'It was the saying of our blessed Redeemer, "Ye cannot serve God and Mammon."' But Woolman argues that it is possible to be rich without 'a selfish application of outward treasures'. He writes,

6 Robinson, H. C., diary entry for 22 January 1824, quoted in Green, T., *John Woolman: A study for young men*, London, 2nd edn, 1897, pp. iii–iv.

7 *A Journal of John Woolman*, p. v.

8 Titles from the catalogue of the Friends House Library in London include Thomas Colley, *On Silent waiting upon God in Religious Assemblies*, London: William and Samuel Graves, 1816; Lindley Murray, *Sentiments on Several Pious and Eminent Persons on the Pernicious Tendency of Dramatic Entertainments and other Vain Amusements*, London: William and Samuel Graves, 1815; and *Extracts from Erasmus on the Subject of War, taken under the Title Antipolemus, Published in the Year 1794*, London: William and Samuel Graves, 1815.

9 Woolman, J., *Considerations on Keeping Negroes, Recommended to the Professors of Christianity, of Every Denomination, Part Second*, Philadelphia, 1762; John Woolman, *Considerations on the True Harmony of Mankind*, Philadelphia, 1770.

10 Woolman, *Selections*, pp. 18–19.

> A person in outward prosperity may have the power of obtaining riches, but the same mind being in him which is in Christ Jesus, he may feel a tenderness of heart towards those of low degree: and instead of setting himself above them, may look upon it as an unmerited favour, that his way through life is more easy than the way of many others.[11]

Woolman insists that the rich should be Christlike, or, perhaps more accurately, that they should share Christ's 'mind', adopt his sincerity and humility and live with his agonies, sorrows and love. The excerpt contains Woolman's extended reimagining of the trial, conviction and torture of Jesus. He concludes by expressing a wish that

> the believers in Christ may so abide in the pure inward feeling of his [Christ's] spirit, that the wisdom from above may shine forth in their living, as a light by which others may be instrumentally helped in their way, in the true harmonious walking.[12]

The first entry was taken from *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*, but since the editors expunged all references to slavery from that piece they had to give it a new name, and so they chose to call it 'On Christian Moderation'. I confess to being baffled as to why the editors selected that name. The word 'moderation' does not appear in the essay and, indeed, on the rare occasion when Woolman used that word in his journal, he did so sceptically. Reviewing his past behaviour, Woolman doubted whether he had done enough when he counselled moderation in the consumption of 'spirituous liquors'.[13] The problem with 'moderation' is its flexibility. In the eighteenth century, as today, drinkers may agree to be *moderate* but disagree over how much is too much. Woolman preferred to use clearer language.

'On Christian Moderation' was, in practical terms, just the second half of Woolman's original essay. It was what Woolman wrote after he had completed his explicit discussion of human bondage. But, as the editors understood, the observations and arguments contained in the second half of the essay appear different when separated from Woolman's explicit discussion of slavery. In the original, full-length essay, Woolman's discussion of slavery was so charged with immediate political significance that it overshadowed the broader, more general messages he offered in the second half.

'On Christian Moderation' provides strong evidence that Woolman articulated many of his foundational ideas early in life, and that he held on to his convictions with remarkable consistency.[14] As Jon R. Kershner has demonstrated, in his

11 Woolman, *Selections*, pp. 19–20.

12 Woolman, *Selections*, p. 22.

13 Woolman, *Journal*, p. 156.

14 For an overview of Woolman's theology see Kershner, J. R., *John Woolman and the Government of Christ: A colonial Quaker's vision for the British Atlantic world*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

writings and ministry Woolman constantly advanced the message that 'As Christ reigned in the human heart, the individual became Christ's agent and harbinger of the remade world one had already experienced spiritually.'[15] In his 1754 essay Woolman advanced that argument, as he would again years later in *Considerations on the True Harmony of Mankind*. But, while revealing underlying constant themes in Woolman's lifelong teachings, this early excerpt also provides a baseline allowing us to appreciate how much Woolman changed over the course of his ministerial career. Woolman described his life as a path of discovery, a succession of 'openings' into Truth. A youthful composition, 'On Christian Moderation' helps us appreciate how Woolman over time matured as a writer and evolved in the ways he expressed himself.

'On Christian Moderation' begins by declaring that, to be 'truly happy', people need three things: 1) 'a supply to nature's lawful wants' (access to clothing and shelter, and sufficient food and drink to maintain bodily health); 2) 'a peaceful and humble mind'; and 3) a commitment to service, 'to continue to walk in the path of the just'.[16] Woolman proceeds to give examples to clarify what levels of subsistence were 'lawful', how humble the mind should be and the kinds of sacrifice people should be ready to make in the service of God, ultimately to answer the question of what it means to be 'truly happy'. Woolman makes a few general observations about colonial society. He notes that children become arrogant when they are raised in an environment of 'fulness, ease, and idleness', and that Christianity exerts a 'happy influence' on 'the minds and manners of all real Christians'.[17] He observes that those who are 'selfish, earthly, and sensual' suffer from 'insatiable craving' and 'wander in a maze of dark anxiety, where all their treasures are insufficient to quiet their minds'.[18]

Of all his comments on the society around him, the most startling in retrospect is his account of early colonisation. Woolman's perspective would change in the 1760s following his meetings with Papunhank, but in this, his first essay, as edited in 1816, Woolman states,

> If we [inhabitants of America] call to mind our beginning, some of us may find a time, when our fathers were under afflictions, reproaches, and manifold sufferings. Respecting our progress in this land, the time is short since our beginning was small and number few, compared with the native inhabitants. He that sleepeth not by day nor night, hath watched over us, and kept us as the apple of his eye. His almighty arm hath been round about us, and saved us from dangers. The wilderness and solitary deserts in which our fathers passed the days of their pilgrimage, are now turned into pleasant fields; the natives are gone from before us, and we established peaceably in the possession of the land, enjoying our civil

15 Kershner, *John Woolman and the Government of Christ*, p. 11.
16 Woolman, *Selections*, p. 5.
17 Woolman, *Selections*, pp. 6–7, 10. See also ibid., p. 12.
18 Woolman, *Selections*, pp. 12–13.

> and religious liberties; and while many parts of the world groaned under the heavy calamities of war, our habitation remains quiet, and our land fruitful.[19]

Neither Woolman nor the editors in 1816 wanted to draw attention to the indigenous Americans' experience of dispossession and exile. Instead, this passage emphasises the 'manifold sufferings' of seventeenth-century Quakers and colonists, their willingness to confront apparent danger and God's benevolence in protecting them and allowing them to prosper. Woolman and his editors used this short account of Quaker colonisation to illustrate major themes in the essay: the value of a modest subsistence, the importance of humility and Christian readiness to give up everything to the service of God. 'Our fathers', Woolman tells us, were rewarded with happiness.

It is telling that the 1816 editors found it necessary to intervene in the text to clarify that when Woolman referred to 'we' at the start of his passage on colonialism he meant 'the inhabitants of America'. That may well have been exactly what Woolman meant by 'we'. To be more precise, the editors might have borrowed from the essay's original title page. In 1754 the essay had been directed toward 'the professors of Christianity [in America?] of every denomination'.[20] But eighteenth-century Quakers generally used 'professor' as a pejorative term meaning something like 'pompous faker', and there are clues within the passage, such as Woolman's claim that 'we' had avoided 'the calamities of war', which suggest that he had a narrower definition of 'we' in mind: Quaker colonists in the Delaware Valley. In 1816 the editors' readiness to conflate 'Quaker colonist' with white 'American' reflected a broad early nineteenth-century consensus among American citizens concerning the expansion of colonial landholding and the dispossession of the 'native inhabitants'. Since the administration of George Washington, Quakers had played a leading role in formulating and implementing US policy on 'Indian affairs'. By 1816 the Quaker position Woolman advanced in 1754 had become an 'American' one.[21]

Readers of Woolman's journal are familiar with the way he learned to describe revelatory experiences by closely examining apparently mundane episodes in his personal life. He advanced important moral lessons while recounting the moment when as a child he killed a bird with a stone, or when as a young man he became an energetic and moderately prosperous shopkeeper, or when, later in life, as a religious minister he accepted hospitality from slaveholders. Woolman presented

19 Woolman, *Selections*, p. 9. On Woolman's transformative encounters with Papunhank see Plank, G., *John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom: A Quaker in the British Empire*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012, Chapters Six and Seven.

20 Woolman, J., *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes. Recommended to the Professors of Christianity of every Denomination*, Philadelphia, 1754.

21 Plank, G., 'Quakers, Indigenous Americans, and the Landscape of Peace,' in Rogers Healey, R. (ed.), *Quakerism in the Atlantic World, 1690–1830*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021, pp. 179–99; Gallup-Diaz, I. and Plank, G. (eds), *Quakers and Native Americans*, Leiden: Brill, 2018.

these moments as turning points in his life, and he wrestled with their moral and religious implications until they led him to important spiritual discoveries. These discoveries, in turn, prompted Woolman to behave in new ways and to minister to others through his own behaviour, by avoiding certain products, for example, or walking when others rode, or wearing unusual clothing. In the late 1740s and early 1750s, when Woolman wrote the passages that became 'On Christian Moderation', he had not yet developed the persuasive skills he would hone while writing his journal, and he had not yet started to behave in his characteristically unusual, demonstrative, instructive way. 'On Christian Moderation' does not refer to Woolman's own behaviour. It does not contain any personal anecdotes, nor does it generalise from Woolman's immediate experiences. In this early piece of writing, Woolman drew most of his lessons from the Bible.

In one passage republished in 'On Christian Moderation' Woolman came close to summing up the entire biblical drama in a single sentence. On page 11 in the republished text he wrote,

> The state of mankind was harmonious in the beginning, and though sin has introduced discord, yet, through the wonderful love of God, in Christ Jesus our Lord, the way is open for our redemption, and means appointed to restore us to primitive harmony.[22]

Elsewhere in the excerpt Woolman cites Adam's 'primitive innocence' and invokes Paul's description of Abraham's search for 'a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God'.[23] He references Abraham's readiness to 'leave his country and kindred', risk his life and face hunger, escaping 'from one kingdom to another' until he 'became a mighty prince'.[24] He cites the 'afflictions' of Joseph and the 'troubles' of David and their ultimate triumph and redemption.[25] To illustrate humility he quotes Jacob praying, 'I am not worthy of the least of all thy mercies.'[26] Explaining the importance of kindness, he quotes God's reminder to Moses, 'Ye were strangers in the land of Egypt', and God's order 'Thou shalt not oppress a stranger, for ye know the heart of stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.'[27] He quotes Job's reminder that God will judge us on how we treat others: 'What then shall we do when God riseth up? and when he visiteth, what shall we answer him? Did not he that made us, make them? and did not one fashion us in the womb?'[28] He quotes from Jeremiah: 'I am the Lord, which exercise loving kindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth: for in

22 Woolman, *Selections*, p. 11.
23 Woolman, *Selections*, p. 6. See Hebrews 11:10.
24 Woolman, *Selections*, p. 7. See Genesis 23:6.
25 Woolman, *Selections*, p. 8.
26 Woolman, *Selections*, p. 8. See Genesis 32:10.
27 Woolman, *Selections*, p. 8. See Deuteronomy 10:19, Genesis 23:9.
28 Woolman, *Selections*, pp. 9–10. See Job 31:14–15.

these things I delight, saith the Lord.'[29] He cites God's sorrow over the failings and plight of the children of Israel: 'His soul was grieved for their misery.'[30] He ends the essay with these words from Moses: 'O that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end!'[31]

Woolman never stopped citing the Bible.[32] His journal is permeated with biblical references, as are all his essays. But, in contrast to 'On Christian Moderation', many of his later writings, such as the essays he wrote in England, mixed biblical references with vivid observations of the world around him and Woolman's personal experiences.[33]

It is difficult to reconcile a close reading of 'On Christian Moderation' with most recent historical interpretations of Woolman's 1754 essay. In his ten-page discussion of *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*, Thomas P. Slaughter relates the essay to the writings of earlier Quaker abolitionists Thomas á Kempis, Thomas Tryon, John Locke and the earl of Shaftsbury.[34] In his eight-page analysis Brycchan Carey argues that the essay is grounded in the 'Golden Rule'.[35] Historians of the Quaker anti-slavery movement have had much to say about Woolman, but few have emphasised that he ended this essay, his first public abolitionist statement, with a prophetic warning from Deuteronomy.

Several historians have concentrated on the circumstances surrounding the publication of the essay, grounding their analysis in Woolman's posthumous journal, published in 1774. Woolman's journal is far more familiar today than any of his essays and it serves as the starting point for most discussions of his life and work. In the journal Woolman recounts the years-long drama that surrounded the publication of *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*. The episodes he describes can easily distract attention away from the essay's religious message. In the journal Woolman reports that he wrote the essay after visiting North Carolina in 1746. He showed an early draft to his father Samuel, who recommended some changes. A few years passed, and then, in 1750, when his father was 'in his last sickness', the two men spoke about the essay. As Woolman was 'watching with him one night', his father asked him whether he had the essay ready and whether he would ask the Overseers of the Press to approve its publication. His father added, 'I have all along been deeply affected with the oppression of the poor Negroes,

29 Woolman, *Selections*, p. 11. See Jeremiah 9:24.

30 Woolman, *Selections*, p. 11. See Judges 10:16.

31 Woolman, *Selections*, p. 13. See Deuteronomy 32:29.

32 See Woolman, *Journal*, p. 305.

33 See Mott Gummere, A. (ed.), *The Journal and Essays of John Woolman*, New York: Macmillan, 1922, pp. 488–510.

34 Slaughter, T. P., *The Beautiful Soul of John Woolman: Apostle of Abolition*, New York: Hill and Wang, 2008, pp. 132–42.

35 Carey, B., *From Peace to Freedom: Quaker rhetoric and the birth of American antislavery, 1657–1761*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012, pp. 182–90.

and now at last my concern for them is as great as ever.'[36] After Woolman heard these words, the essay became a greater burden for him. In Woolman's words, 'the publication of it rested weightily upon me.' Finally, in 1754, he presented it to the Overseers of the Press, who made some 'small alterations' before approving it for publication by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting.[37]

Some historians, most prominently Jean Soderlund, have emphasised elements of the essay's publication history that Woolman left out. Soderlund argues that the Overseers of the Press might not have allowed the essay to be printed in 1746 or 1750. For decades, leaders of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting had struggled to avoid divisive debates over slavery. On several occasions the meeting had disowned antislavery writers. By 1753, however, a new generation was taking charge, and the composition of the committee overseeing publications had changed. Soderlund suggests that Woolman might have timed the submission of his essay carefully, waiting for assurances from the new committee members that the essay would be approved.[38] The essay's eight-year backstory tells us many fascinating things about Woolman's relationship with his father, the transformation of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and Woolman's maturation as a Quaker leader. The story is so interesting that in both Quaker and professional academic circles the essay has been examined primarily as a momentous and difficult political act. Scholars have paid so much attention to the young Woolman's reticence, deference and ultimate courage that they have largely neglected the content of the essay itself. The publication of this excerpt in 1816 was a bold effort to make readers pay attention to Woolman's 'general' messages.

'On Christian Moderation' contains messages that Woolman hoped would resonate with his readers in 1754 and which his editors in 1816 thought would have 'import' in the nineteenth century. One of those messages related to colonisation. Not only in his specific comment on recent American history, but more broadly in the biblical passages he chose to cite, Woolman argued that, if God's people behaved righteously, they would inherit the land and govern it justly according to God's direction. This was not just an opportunity for them, it was an obligation.

Since the time of his death in 1772, editors had been taking excerpts from Woolman's work, choosing to highlight some valuable lessons from his essays and journal while discarding material they considered extraneous, misinformed or distracting. Woolman expected this. He never thought his words were sacrosanct. In 1772, for example, he gave drafts of several short sections of his journal to the Quaker minister Sophia Hume and told her 'if she hath a mind to revise them,

36 Woolman, J., *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, Moulton, P. (ed.) Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1971, pp. 44–45.

37 Woolman, *Journal*, p. 47.

38 Soderlund, J., *Quakers and Slavery: A Divided Spirit*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985, p. 27.

and place them in better order, I am free to it'.[39] Like other Quaker writers of his generation, he expected his compositions to be reworked. Before publishing anything, he submitted the material to committees for review and approval. But the changes the editors made in 1816 were far more drastic than the 'small alterations' imposed by the Overseers of the Press in 1754.

To their credit, they found an effective way to get readers to pay attention to the second half of Woolman's first published essay, and there is much to learn from this often-neglected early sample of his work. *Selections from the Writings of John Woolman* has been out of print since 1871 and, even though it remains on library shelves and electronic editions are available, the passage of time and the book's deepening obscurity might make it easy to forgive the editors. Nonetheless, there can be no doubt that they tore the heart out of *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*. Woolman meant for his readers to approach the arguments contained in 'On Christian Moderation' with human slavery in mind. In 1754 he believed that the problem of slavery should, literally, come first. Even if we can understand why the editors made the choices they did, their editorial judgement in retrospect appears audacious. Their readiness to set Woolman's priorities aside reflected the peculiarity of their historical moment and shifts in the currents of Quaker and Atlantic history between 1754 and 1816.

Selections from the Writings of John Woolman appeared at a pivotal moment, at the end of a long, rare period of consensus among Quakers concerning the issue of slavery. Woolman's life and ministerial career helped mark the end of a bitter earlier period of conflict over slave ownership. He and other Quaker abolitionists of his generation seemed to win the argument, at least among the Quakers. No one thought that the problem of slavery had been solved, but within Quaker circles the worst of the Quakers' internal arguments seemed to be over. The Virginia Quaker Warner Mifflin expressed a confidence shared by many at the turn of the nineteenth century when he wrote that the cause of abolition was 'sanctioned by omnipotent Goodness' and that the abolitionists would inevitably prevail so long as they retained God's favour and stayed patient, righteous and peaceful.[40] It is likely that a similar confidence, bordering on complacency, inspired the editors of *Selections from the Writings of John Woolman* to look beyond Woolman's explicit discussion of slavery. The issue was important, but not urgent. It would be fine, at least for a moment, to consider the general arguments Woolman advanced without getting distracted by the specific controversies of the 1750s.

Two events in 1816 triggered escalating controversies that would eventually shake the confidence of many Quakers. In December of that year, almost certainly after *Selections from the Writings of John Woolman* had gone to press, antislavery activists began a vigorous campaign to establish colonies in Africa and populate

39 Gummere, *The Journal and Essays of John Woolman*, p. xii.

40 Mifflin, W., 'Warner Mifflin's Memoirs of his Life', (1796), *Friends' Miscellany* 5 (1834), pp. 193–214, at p. 212.

them with enslaved Americans who would receive freedom upon their arrival. Some African Americans, including the Quaker Paul Cuffe, supported this proposal, but a much larger contingent of black abolitionists vehemently objected, and some came to suspect that many white abolitionists were racist and intent on expelling them from their American homes. During the chaotic ensuing years, it was difficult to remain aloof or complacent in relation to the problem of slavery. Proponents of African colonisation considered the project a workable compromise that could gain the support of a powerful coalition of abolitionist groups and southern slaveholders such as Thomas Jefferson, who doubted that white Americans and freed black people could live peacefully together. Critics of colonisation questioned the project's practicality and cost. Even if it were practical, it would have taken decades to transport all the enslaved from the US to Africa, and in the meantime most of the enslaved in America would remain in bondage. Critics questioned the morality of reaching out to slaveholders while demanding more sacrifice from the enslaved. As the opposing positions hardened, many critics of colonisation recognised that flaws inherent in that scheme were also embedded in the 'gradualist' policies that Quakers had been advocating since the 1770s.[41] The argument culminated in the early 1830s with an acrimonious split between the gradual abolitionists and 'immediatists' who demanded fast action and opposed any compromise with slaveholders. The dispute between abolitionists exacerbated divides between Quaker meetings and contributed to the rupture of the American Society of Friends. In 1845, lamenting the divisive impact of the slavery debate within Quaker meetings, the leading Hicksite Quaker George Fox White declared hyperbolically, 'I had a thousand times rather be a slave, and spend my days with slaveholders, than to dwell in companionship with abolitionists.'[42]

The year 1816 also marked a turning point in British abolitionism. In April 1816, enslaved workers in Barbados took up arms in the island's first large-scale rebellion.[43] This was the first of three major revolts, followed by larger uprisings in Demerara in 1823 and Jamaica in 1831. Many abolitionists in Britain were dismayed by these events. They had claimed that the end of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807 would bring peace to the British Caribbean. According to the abolitionists' original plan, when the only enslaved people in the British West Indies were those who had been born in bondage, slaveowners would treasure enslaved children, encourage family life among the enslaved and build

41 Newman, R. S., *The Transformation of American Abolitionism*, Chapel Hill: Univeristy of North Carolina Press, 2002, Chapter Five; Diemer, A. K., *The Politics of Black Citizenship: Free African Americans in the Mid-Atlantic borderland, 1817–1863*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016, Chapter One.

42 Hamm, T. D., 'George F. White and Hicksite Opposition to the Abolitionist Movement', in Carey, B. and Plank, G. (eds), *Quakers and Abolition*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014, pp. 43–55, at p. 48.

43 Beckles, H. D., 'The Slave-Drivers' War: Bussa and the 1816 Barbados Slave Rebellion', *Boletín de Estudios Latinoamericanos* 39 (1985), pp. 85–110.

a sense of community on their plantations.[44] After the rebellions the reformers' ameliorationist programme appeared increasingly naive, and British abolitionists, including prominent Quakers such as Joseph Sturge and Joseph John Gurney, entered a tortuous debate over how to end slavery. The British empire formally abolished slavery in 1834, but the apprenticeship system that replaced it horrified Quakers such as Sturge and Gurney.[45] They and other British Quakers became advocates for immediate abolition.

Selections from the Writings of John Woolman appeared in print at the very last possible time when anyone could have thought that the Quakers agreed among themselves about the issue of slavery. That sense of agreement may have been illusory, but it allowed Woolman's editors in 1816 to put the problem of slavery aside.

Today, though Woolman can still generate controversy, he is revered within all branches of the Society of Friends. The circumstances surrounding the publication of *Selections* suggests that this widespread appeal may have something to do with timing. The Quakers have always been a diverse group, but during Woolman's lifetime they found ways to air their differences and find a communal way forward.[46] Woolman's journal describes the process in detail. He travelled widely and at every Quaker meeting he attended he was ready, if moved by the spirit, to speak. He was also ready to listen. Some of the most dramatic passages in the journal describe his attendance at difficult meetings where he faced other Quakers who disagreed with him. After the Hicksite separation of 1827, no travelling Quaker could do what Woolman did, because the members of the newly formed separate branches of Quakerism no longer met together. As J. William Frost has described it, 'In 1827 the Society of Friends, as a series of autonomous yearly meetings in Great Britain and America who shared religious beliefs, social concerns, and visiting ministers ceased to exist.'[47] Similarly, Sarah Crabtree has suggested that the Hicksite separation ended a long distinctive period when Quakerism was a single international movement, a small but surprisingly influential counterweight to divisive political currents associated with nationalism.[48] In the fractured, sectarian period that followed the Hicksite separation,

44 See Heuman, G., 'From Slavery to Freedom: Blacks in the nineteenth-century British West Indies', in Morgan, P. D. and Hawkins, S. (eds), *Black Experience and the Empire*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 141–65.

45 See Sturge, J. and Harvey, T., *The West Indies in 1837*, London, 1838; Gurney, J. J., *A Winter in the West Indies: Described in Familiar Letters to Henry Clay, of Kentucky*, London, 1840.

46 For a survey of divisions within eighteenth-century Quakerism see Healey, R. R., 'Quietist Quakerism, 1692–c.1805', in Angell, S. W., and Pink Dandelion, B. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 47–62.

47 William Frost, J., 'Why Quakers and Slavery? Why not more Quakers?' in Carey, B. and Plank, G. (eds), *Quakers and Abolition*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014, pp. 29–42, at p. 36.

48 Crabtree, S., *Holy Nation: The Transatlantic Quaker Ministry in the Age of Revolution*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Quakers retained a shared admiration for Woolman because his works had been placed in the Quaker canon before the Quakers divided.

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