

Offices and Services: Women's Pursuit of Sexual Equality within the Society of Friends, 1873 - 1907

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Abstract:

The presence of Quaker women at the founding of a social movement for women's rights in Britain in the late 1860s has received growing attention from historians in recent years. Yet the links between the religious faith of such Quaker women and their political radicalism has remained largely unexamined. A liberal theology which acknowledged the spiritual equality of women has been assumed to have prompted their involvement in a liberal politics, and more especially in women's rights campaigning. This article argues that the relationship between religious views and political action was more complex in this case. It suggests that the growing participation of Quaker women in moral and social reform movements in this period, together with their increasing access to office in local government and voluntary organisations, served, in fact, to fuel a reevaluation of their position within the Society of Friends. It concludes that indeed the constitutional arrangements of this body became a ground of gender contest as a consequence of women's enlarged role in the outside world.

Keywords

Women's Rights; Women's Movement; Quaker Women;
Society of Friends; Sexual Equality; Gender Politics.

Introduction

The relation between religion and political action in the nineteenth century has long been a major theme in the mainstream histories of this period. Equally, in the growing field of women's history, liberal Protestant theology has come to be accepted as an established, though largely unexamined, factor in the emergence of women's rights movements in this period. In particular, the more radical of the nonconformist sects have been identified as fertile ground for the growth of such movements.

Historical accounts of the Society of Friends, for example, have emphasised the relatively high standing of Quaker women within their religious community (Bacon 1989:3; Dunn 1980). The doctrine of the 'Inner Light' applies no distinction of sex, and women Friends played a central role in the formation and maintenance of their society, as visionaries, prophets, preachers and ministers, in Britain as in the United States (Mack 1992). And yet, as Patricia Crawford has recently argued, even within the most radical of sects understandings of sexual difference have been 'fundamental to religious thought' (Crawford 1993: 1, and see also 162-6; also Davidoff and Hall 1992, 107-118). Certainly, there was continuing resistance to extending the authority of Quaker women in this religious society from the last decades of the seventeenth century (Cadbury 1974; Scott 1985; Trevett 1991: 78-87; Ingle 1991; Mortimer 1996).(1) Similarly, Phyllis Mack has explored the gendered meanings attaching to Quaker forms of worship, and to Quaker understandings of the self (Mack 1991). What the Society of Friends did provide was an expanded opportunity for women to explore and give expression to their spiritual life. Overall, Crawford concludes, the unaccustomed roles available to Quaker women, most notably in preaching and ministering, made them 'more willing to challenge and transcend the constraints of sex and gender' (Crawford 1993: 137, 182). And it is certainly the case that historians of the women's movement in Britain have often noted the presence of Quaker women among its most advanced guard (Banks 1981: 23-6; Strachey 1978: 44).(2) Similarly, some of the 'mothers of feminism' have been identified among the Hicksite Quaker schism in the United States (Bacon 1989: 111, 179).(3)

In such accounts the relationship between the religious outlook of Quaker women and their role in the foundation of the nineteenth-century women's movement has been assumed to be relatively straightforward: a liberal theology will produce a liberal politics (e. g.. Malmgreen 1986: 6).(4) Yet recent research is suggesting a somewhat different pattern in Britain from the United States. The beginnings of the women's movement in Britain are now increasingly identified with a group of Unitarian women intellectuals and writers in the 1830s and 1840s (Gleadle 1995; Midgley 1990; Rendall 1987; Herstein 1985; Taylor 1983). Figures like the Chartist Quaker, Anne Knight, are notable exceptions rather than the norm (Malmgreen 1982; Taylor 1983: 265-75; Midgley 1990: 77-9). Hence, women Friends from the United States like the Hicksite Lucretia Mott, one of the moving spirits in the Seneca Falls convention on women's rights in 1848, found a far more sympathetic response among the Unitarians than the Quakers when she visited London in 1840 for the World Anti-Slavery Convention (Hallowell 1884: 170-9, 187-90; Howitt n. d.: 151-1).(5) Clearly, the legacies of a founding liberal theology proved not in themselves sufficient cause for the adoption of an advanced position on women's rights. The ideological, organisational and political context may shape varying, sometimes widely divergent, forms of expression of a liberal faith.

In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the British Society of Friends was under the sway of evangelicalism, and appeared decidedly conservative to many visiting Quakers from across the Atlantic. Catherine Hall has established the role of evangelicalism in elaborating and promoting a domestic ideology that delineated different spheres and forms of action for men and women (Hall 1979). Undoubtedly, many men and women Friends who leaned towards evangelical theology accepted aspects of this ideology (see e. g.. Davidoff and Hall 1992: 137-40). It is equally the case that long-established constitutional arrangements of the Society of Friends lent themselves to implementing a gendered division of the labour within it. Women Friends met in separate sessions from men Friends in the series of business and disciplinary meetings through which Quakers were organised at a local level: the monthly, quarterly and preparative meetings. They did not take part in

the business sessions of Yearly Meeting (henceforth YM), or in the Meeting for Sufferings, which operated effectively as the Standing Committee of YM. As one historian of the Society of Friends summarises the situation:

Though women ministers had been a part of Quakerism from the beginning, they were not always fully integrated into the administrative structure of the Society. Though in theory the sexes were on a footing of equality, in practice they were not . . . Women took little or no part in the central meetings in London (Punshon 1984: 85-6).

Even where Quaker women had their separate local meetings, these were in practice subordinate to the equivalent men's meeting. When women ministers sought to promote their own regular YM at the beginning of the eighteenth century, they were dissuaded. There was no Women's Yearly Meeting (henceforth WYM) in Britain until 1784, a century or so after such recognition had been achieved among Quakers in Ireland and the United States. And constitutionally it was the various men's meetings that remained the decision-making bodies of the society.

The women's meetings carried particular responsibilities for 'the relief of the poor, the placing of Quaker maidservants, the supervision of marriages and other things of a pastoral nature' (Punshon 1984: 17, and see also Godlee 1907; Godlee 1919; Bacon 1995). Increasingly over the course of the nineteenth century, Quaker women's meetings also played a major role in the promotion and organisation of moral and religious reform activity. But their role in the government of the society remained largely a consultative one. It has been argued that this division of the business of the Society of Friends was nonetheless an important asset for Quaker women (Dunn 1980: 44-6; Bacon 1995: 163). In their separate meetings, they institutionalised an area of authority particular to their sex. They learned how to conduct a meeting, how to manage accounts, how to keep records, how to draft public statements. Undoubtedly, all these skills made them especially desirable members of a range of women's rights organisations, in which Quaker women became a notable presence in Britain from the late 1860s onward.

It was only as the British women's movement progressed, that some Quaker women-rights advocates began with greater force to articulate an increasing dissatisfaction with their standing within their own religious society. The relationship between women's religion and women's politics was more complex in this instance than has generally been recognised. Their theology, and the arrangements pertaining within their church, may have given Quaker women valuable skills in campaigning for civil equality. But it was this political experience that prompted them to look more closely at the gendered ordering of their own religious society, and to work toward an equal standing for men and women Friends within the constitution of their church.

The price for such an advance, paradoxically, was gradually to forego the separate deliberative space which Quaker women had established for themselves, a space that had helped them establish a feminine identity notable for its strength, and a standing in their religious society that was high relative to that of women in other denominations. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the proposed loss of this space met with considerable resistance from some Quaker women, most evidently among those who accepted the existing sexual division of labour within their society, and who emphasised the particular capacity of their sex for the moral reform mission of Quakerism. Those who advocated the loss of the separate women's meetings were, in contrast, Quaker women most prominently engaged in a variety of women's rights campaigns. These two categories, though, were never completely exclusive. Most Quaker women's rights advocates were generally also committed temperance workers, for example, but they sought to further such causes by institutional and legal reforms, as much as by voluntarism, personal example and influence.

At issue, then, were differing conceptions of the social action proper to women, and of what constituted the advancement of their sex. Those who upheld the existing arrangements emphasised women's particular capacities and duties, and advocated a separatist strategy for upholding the distinctive position of women Quakers. Those who rejected the separation between men's and women's meetings saw such arrangements as maintaining the gendered hierarchy that governed their society. They

also tended to pursue their spiritual goals through more secular channels, blending their religious identity as liberal Quakers with their political identity as Radical reformers.(6)

Re-thinking the role of Women's Yearly Meeting

Nancy Cott has delineated the paradox that underlies that specifically twentieth-century phenomenon, 'feminism'. It lies in the pursuit of a sexual equality that includes acknowledgement of sexual difference, the search for a consciousness of sexual solidarity which also recognises diversity among women. As Nancy Cott explains, such paradoxes are

rooted in the actual situation of women, who are the same as men in a species sense, but different from men in reproductive biology and the construction of gender. Men and women are alike as human beings, and yet categorically different from each other' (1987: 5).(7)

While nineteenth-century women's rights advocates did not articulate such a distinctively 'feminist' awareness of the paradoxes of gender difference, they nonetheless had to live with them. And this situation inevitably gave rise to competing strategies for advancing the position of women. The councils of women Friends were not free of the perplexities to which the paradoxes of gender differences and gender hierarchies may give rise.

A determined effort to gain formal equality within the constitution of the Society of Friends did not get under way until the last decades of the nineteenth century, and only within the most liberal current of opinion among Quaker women. A number of those prominent in the Bristol, Somerset and Dorset Women's Quarterly Meeting (henceforth BSDWQM) played a key role in this movement.(8) They were also part of the Bright kinship and friendship circles, formed through the first marriage of John Bright to Elizabeth Priestman. The sisters of husband and wife established life-long friendships that survived the early death of Elizabeth Priestman Bright. The women of the Bright circle came to the fore in a number of women's rights campaigns in the late 1860s and subsequently. Its members were prominent, for example, in the

formation of a number of the leading suffrage societies in this period. They were also a moving force during the 1870s and 80s in the campaign for repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, legislation which undermined the civil rights of those designated prostitutes by the authorities in a number of naval and military towns (Holton 1996; Holton 1994). Prominent among the Bright circle were Margaret Tanner (nee Priestman) and Helen Priestman Bright Clark, her niece and daughter of the radical statesman, John Bright, and his first wife, Elizabeth Priestman. Within a few years of helping form both the suffrage and the repeal movements, they joined in the initial challenge to the lesser authority accorded women in the Society of Friends. This initiative was at least in part a response to the failure of the Society of Friends to endorse the women's suffrage demand.

Elizabeth Sturge, better known as E. M. Sturge was one of another kinship network important in the formation of the women's movement from the late 1860s.(9) She took up the question of equal voting rights for women in 1873, in a letter to *The Friend* which argued the contradiction between the Society's failure to take an interest in and support women's suffrage and its commitment to the spiritual equality of men and women. She saw a congruence between Quakerism and the aim of women's suffrage associations in seeking for all women 'a participation in the business interests of the world' (*The Friend* 1873: 15). In her view to assist in women's struggle was to participate in Quakers' ongoing stand for right against might. E. M. Sturge had already taken a prominent part in the beginnings of the women's suffrage campaign and knew the depth of opposition of leading Quakers MPs, such as John Bright, to this claim for sexual equality. In December 1871 he had responded to her request to present suffrage petitions to Parliament with the suggestion that she send such petitions to 'members who *entirely* agree with the object sought, if such are to be found'. He continued 'I voted with J. S. Mill three or four years ago but I am never free from any doubt as to whether my vote was a wise one.' He clearly saw women as a conservative force in politics, suggesting that their enfranchisement would 'tend to strengthen the party which hitherto has opposed every good measure passed during the 30 years in which I have taken part in

political affairs'. In addition, he claimed, 'it would add to the power of priestcraft in every part of the three kingdoms'. He finished this letter with the opinion that 'it does not seem very likely that the suffrage will be granted to women' (Bright 1871).

E. M. Sturge may have been responding to such views when she spoke on women's suffrage in John Bright's constituency in December 1872. She asked: 'how can Liberals expect women to be other than Conservatives so long as the Liberals are Conservatives towards them' (Sturge 1872). Her active involvement in local politics included becoming the first woman elected to the Birmingham School Board in 1873 (Tyrrell 1987: 245-6). She was only one of a number of younger Quaker women whose social and political activism outside of the Society of Friends was rapidly outstripping the opportunities available to them within its ranks. Another young Birmingham Friend, Anna Strongman Southall, wrote in support of E. M. Sturge's call for women's suffrage by emphasising how women Friends were taking a deep interest 'in the religious and moral welfare of the nation', and working hard for 'Peace, Temperance, and other kindred causes'. Hence, while noting that some Quaker MPs had voted against women's enfranchisement, she questioned why they should consider unfeminine the casting of a parliamentary vote (*The Friend* 1873: 35).(10)

At this point *The Friend* weighed in with an editorial on the matter of women's suffrage. This questioned the arguments of advocates of women's rights that their movement was 'the natural development of a principle which we have long upheld' by asking: 'But is this really so? Can the cherished principles of our Society be with any truth and justice associated with the movement on behalf of "Women's Rights"?'. While the phrase 'Women's Rights' conveyed a 'distasteful impression to most of us', the editorial noted that 'A great movement is undoubtedly in progress' and concluded 'in its essence the movement is a right one, and will in the end result in good'. But while *The Friend* equivocated, opinion was divided among Quakers about women's suffrage and on the desirability of strengthening women's authority within the councils of the Society itself (*The Friend* 1873: 56).

These issues came together in WYM in 1873 around discussions of the state of the Society of Friends. Both MYM and WYM felt a need to explore the declining state of the Society. A deputation from MYM announced to WYM its plans to hold a conference on 'the relative numerical declension' in membership of the Society, and 'the remedy, if such can be found. The Clerk of the WYM asked if women Friends were to be invited 'to unite in this Conference', and received the response that if such participation were requested, it would no doubt 'be fairly considered'. Several women spoke of 'the privilege' it would be if they were allowed to take part, but a more assertive note by also struck with one speaker declaring: 'she had much rather the invitation should come from the Men Friends than that they should ask leave to join'. Other members of WYM apparently expressed similar views on the issue, for the deputation from MYM withdrew 'after a somewhat unsettled visit' (*The Friend* 1873: 154; see also *The British Friend* 1873: 143).(11)

There seems to have been something of a generation gap at this meeting, one account reporting that 'a want had been felt of union and communion between elder and younger friends' (*The British Friend* 1873: 138). There was evident something of an undercurrent of criticism of those directing their energies outside the Society:

M. R. alluded to the danger of confining our labours to outsiders. The Apostolic injunction being to do good to *all* men, *specially* to the household of faith; and if her sisters not only worked *out* of the Church, but *in* the Church as well, the Society of Friends would soon revive, and be as strong as ever (*The Friend* 1873: 153).

On the other hand, Helen Clark felt that the action of the men 'in refusing to allow women Friends to unite with them in the proposed conference' should lead to a reappraisal of the position of women within the Society, suggesting that its reputation for a progressive outlook in this respect was under threat. She declared that women Friends had 'no voice in the management of affairs', and counselled her sisters 'no longer to cherish any delusions as regards their advantages' (*The Friend* 1873: 203).

In her experience the women's meetings had an air of 'unreality' as 'the little business they do has been for the most part already done for them in the men's meetings'. She asked how 'playing at business can be interesting for grown-up people?', pointing out how other organisations now offered women real opportunities to be involved and responsible:

I had lately the pleasure of attending the annual meeting of the Good Templars of England [a temperance organisation], and I could not but contrast the position women there with that they occupy amongst the Friends. . . . We are real working members in our lodge, and all our business is transacted openly, so that the interest we feel is a living one. Were it the same in our Meetings for Discipline, we should probably attend them with equal pleasure.

Consequently, she advised that the forthcoming conference might well consider how much the decline in the Society was due to its division in to two parts, 'one which legislates' and another 'which has no part in the conduct of its business'. She concluded by remarking that other dissenting bodies 'more numerous than the Friends' gave their female membership 'an equal voice in deciding on the affairs of the church' (*The Friend* 1873: 203).

Mary Waddington similarly linked the 'gathering of all legislative powers into the hands of the men' with the withering of the women's meetings. She quoted William Penn's affirmation that the Inner Light was shared equally with women even though they had 'only feminine' minds, and his insistence that women could not therefore accept that by virtue of their sex their 'common right and interest in human societies were forfeited'. Some women Friends, however, accepted that a separation of duties followed from sexual difference, and with it a sexual hierarchy. 'A. B.' declared:

I am a woman, and I have no special liking for being kept down; but I cannot shut my eyes to the fact that woman's position is subordinate to that of man, and that when she claims a right to an equal share in the management of the business of

our Society, or of the nation, she is stepping out of her sphere (*The Friend* 1873: 226-8).(12)

Others attempted to conciliate. John Bright declared that as

the Yearly Meeting had properly decided for women Friends not to take part in the conference, it was the more incumbent on those who went to consult with their wives and sisters and daughters as to their view on the matter, and carefully to study the best interests of that large section of the Society, our Women Friends' (*The Friend* 1873: 336).

In the event, the issue of women's involvement in business meetings occupied the conference only briefly. A number of different views were expressed, including the desirability of retaining women's own deliberative space where 'they should meet for the transaction of matters most important to the sex' (*The British Friend* 1873: 291-2). There was even a report that women Friends in Newcastle had rejected the suggestion of joining their meeting with that of the men. The final cautious recommendation ran thus:

Much advantage may arise from more general and frequent joint Conferences of men and women Friends, both in Monthly and Quarterly meetings, in relation to such subjects as may rightly engage the united concern of all the members of the Church (*The British Friend* 1873: 303).

As such it did little to address the claims put forward by Helen Clark and others. After the conference discussion of women's greater involvement in the management of the Society subsided for some years.(13)

It is worth noting here that the diaries of Helen Clark record a vigorous involvement in a range of reform and political organisations beyond temperance. She was especially active at this time, for example, in the campaigns for women's suffrage and repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts. But she records almost nothing about her spiritual life, and relatively little about her involvement in the Society of Friends, though she remained an active and committed Quaker to her death. In a very real

sense, the religious enthusiasm that had marked the founders of the Society of Friends, and the subsequent quietist piety of eighteenth-century Quakers, were turned among nineteenth-century liberal Quakers such as she into largely secular channels (Clark, H. Diaries).(14)

Quaker women advocates of sexual equality had met with only a limited response from their religious society in the early 1870s, but by the end of the decade Margaret Tanner was once more raising the issue. Following 1879 YM, she declared herself struck, in reports of the occasion, by 'the absence of all mention of the opinion of women Friends on the important questions that came before this representative assembly'. Once again, she drew attention to the contradiction between 'the putting forth of the Holy Head, upon the whole congregation of believers' and women's lack of any status in the governing bodies of the Society. She acknowledged Quaker women's relative privilege in the equal rights they enjoyed to the 'free exercise of the gift of ministry', as well as in membership of some local meetings for business and discipline. But, in her view, this only made their exclusion from YM all the more remarkable as 'all its business is transacted in dependence of the Holy Spirit, and on the wisdom that cometh from above'. She dismissed what consultation did occur with WYM as 'crumbs . . . as it were from the rich man's table'. She claimed the experience within WYM of 'the not unfrequent [sic] pouring out of a blessing by the Head of the Church, so rich and full that none need go empty away'. Hence she expressed her regret at the partition of the sexes, 'on account of the loss sustained by brethren as by sisters'. She believed that such neglect of those 'powers of usefulness' residing in women might prove 'as probable a source of weakness or decay in the Society of Friends as any that has hitherto been suggested' (*The Friend* 1879: 193). Her rhetoric drew, then, on the non-gendered doctrine of the Inner Light, and not the secular philosophies of sexual equality that informed her political activities. Her concerns were expressed in terms of the equal spiritual powers of her sex, and the well-being of her religious society, not the interests of her sex as such.(15)

Once more, there was only a minimal response from the society, a response which served simply to recognise the existing gendered division

of labour within it. The first joint session of the MYM and WYM took place the following year, its subject, the opium traffic (Godlee 1919: 116). Constitutional authority in this way remained with men, while some additional recognition was afforded the moral reform initiatives in the world outside, in which Quaker women enjoyed greater prominence. Over the following few years the BSDWQM, in which Helen Clark and Margaret Tanner were prominent, kept up the pressure (BSDWQM Minutes: 21 January 1879; 17 July 1883; 16 October 1883).(16) These were years in which the women's suffrage campaigns reached a high point, in anticipation of the 1884 Reform Bill. On the political stage Helen Clark was simultaneously taking a public stand against her father's opposition to women's suffrage. At a major Reform Demonstration in Leeds in 1883, over which John Bright presided, she helped bring the convention behind the inclusion of women in any new Reform Act, much to her father's displeasure (Holton 1996: 64). Her aunt, and John Bright's sister, Priscilla Bright McLaren wrote supportively: 'I cannot doubt for a moment that the impulse came from above and that thou wast quite right and he wrong. It is he who ought to keep silence when he sees all his women relatives for women's suffrage' (McLaren 1883).

The next year the BSDWQM declared itself to be 'unanimously of the opinion that some change is desirable in the constitution of Yearly Meeting, in order that women may have a larger share and influence in the work of the Society'. They recommended the following changes to the status of Quaker women: making them eligible to be members of the Meeting for Sufferings 'under the same regulations as Men Friends'; requiring that the clerks of MYM and WYM confer on the subjects to be brought before women Friends; establishing a similar joint consultation of between the clerks of its own men's and women's quarterly meetings (BSDWQM Minutes: 15 April 1884). These recommendations were introduced to WYM in 1884 by Charlotte Sturge, who explained that they had previously gone to women's monthly and quarterly meetings for consideration. They were 'designed to ventilate the subject' and to see if other quarterly meetings were prepared to join in taking the matter to MYM (*The Friend* 1884: 163). Matilda Sturge, her sister-in-law, spoke in support, reminding women Friends that the elements of church

organisation were merely man-made, the Book of Discipline not a 'Code of Laws 100 or 200 years old' but a compilation of 'extracts from Yearly Meeting Epistles and documents coming fresh each year' (*The British Friend* 1884: 146). Theirs was not a 'foolish cry for power' but sprang from a desire to strengthen the Society. While women in some parts of the country were involved in joint monthly meetings, quarterly meetings, and meetings for ministry and oversight, there remained 'something anomalous in the present position of the Women's Yearly Meeting'. A lively discussion followed. Though there was no agreement to forward the proposal to MYM, it was sent out to quarterly meetings for further discussion (*The British Friend*: 147; *The Friend* 1884: 162-3; see also BSDWQM Minutes: 15 July 1884)

Subsequently, however, men and women clerks of these local fora conferred as to the business that was now to be brought before them in joint session. The Bristol and Frenchay Monthly Meeting went further, and informed its quarterly meeting that all its sessions would now be joint 'unless otherwise appointed'. Its women's meeting continued in being, however, though from this time it met routinely only on a quarterly basis (BSDWQM Minutes: 17 January 1888). Such arrangements speak of the high value that many Quaker women continued to place upon their separate meetings. They were now beginning to establish equality within their local and regional meetings, but pending a similar advance at national level, it was evidently deemed desirable to maintain their own deliberative spaces. And a division of moral and philanthropic labour between men's and women's meetings of Quakers continued, both at regional and at national level. The BSDWQM, for example, agreed to take up the question of vivisection, while the equivalent local men's meeting decided against this. Similarly, the energies of the WYM continued to focus on the needs of their 'sisters', both inside and outside the Society of Friends (BSDWQM Minutes: 16 April 1889, 15 April 1890).(17)

For women active in political and social reform campaigns the other-worldly high-mindedness of the various women's meetings might seem tedious and time-wasting. A third generation of the Bright circle of

Quaker women was being raised with similar views in the late nineteenth century. Helen Clark's fourteen-year-old daughter, Alice, wrote in her diary after attending a quarterly meeting in 1889: 'The Women's Meeting is very dull. It consists mostly of a sandwich of ten minutes epistle and a quarter of an hour's meditation many times repeated, with perhaps one piece of business. I call it decidedly weak. I hope they soon will have entirely joint sessions' (Clark, A. Diaries: 16 July 1889).(18)

Here the question of the position of Quaker women rested for some years. And yet again there are parallels with what was happening in the secular campaign for women's suffrage. That movement, too, was taking stock and regrouping, after the failure to secure women's inclusion in the 1884 Reform Act. Between 1894 and 1897, however, a revival in its fortunes was evident, with married women at last winning the right to vote alongside single women in local government elections, the subsequent reunification of the movement within a single national body, and the first majority ever gained for a women's suffrage bill in the House of Commons. It was in this same period that Quaker women at last met with a significant measure of success when they renewed their demand for full formal equality within the Society of Friends.

Once more it was the BSDWQM which pressed for fresh consideration of the question. In 1895 it appointed a committee that included Helen Clark and her sister-in-law, Sophia S. Clark, to look into the question of the non-representation of women at MYM and the Meeting for Sufferings. This committee concluded that the present arrangements for a separate MYM and WYM were 'incompatible with the views of religious equality held by our Society'. Its report was forwarded to the WYM, and a similar report from the BSDWQM to YM, with the addition of a quotation from George Fox in the Society's Book of Discipline:

Faithful women called to a belief of the truth and made partakers of the same precious faith and heirs of the same everlasting Gospel of Life and salvation as the men are, might in like manner come into the profession and practice of the Gospel order, and therein be helpmeets to the men in service of truth, and the affairs of the Church, as they are outwardly in

civil and temporal things; that so all the family of God, women as well as men, might know, possess and perform their offices and services in the house of God (BSDWQM Minutes 16 October 1893, 15 January 1895, 16 April 1895, and see also BSDMQM: Minutes, 15 January 1895).

Other quarterly meetings sent up comparable minutes, suggesting an orchestrated effort on the part of women Quakers. Dissenters like P. H. Peckover, in contrast, regretted how 'women's meetings were being given up in some places, and swamped in joint conferences' (*The Friend* 1895: 358)

At WYM in 1895 Matilda Sturge once more argued the discrepancy between the Society of Friends' recognition of the spiritual equality of women and the exclusion of women from its main governing bodies. She claimed that as a consequence women 'only heard what went on by gossip in the yard. I a joint conference was held it was by grace rather than by right'. While she herself found WYM an occasion 'for delightful and useful interchange of thought' she found that the compromise of joint conferences of MYM and WYM inadequate to fulfilling the aspirations of Quaker women to take an equal part in the government of their society. She also noted that few women had spoken at such a joint session the previous day. Matilda Sturge was supported by Hannah Whittall Smith, a United States Quaker now resident in England, who recorded her initial shock at finding that MYM in London was, constitutionally, the YM (*The Friend* 1895: 382).

Margaret Tanner, in her turn, noted that there was much feeling among Quaker women that matters which should be decided equally with women were presently determined by the opinion of Quaker men alone. Joint local meetings could not by themselves ease such concern. Isabel Barrow also reported that in some areas men were loathe to meet jointly with women even for monthly meetings, and where they did so the men's Clerk might on occasion ask a woman to stop speaking on that grounds that she was 'not really a member of the meeting'. Elizabeth Stephens argued that she herself had 'taken a long time to come to a decision' on

the question, for she greatly valued her 'womanliness, and dreaded our stepping out of it'. She made it clear that it was developments outside the Society of Friends that determined her for such constitutional change: 'The position of women in the country, however, had changed, as to Boards of Guardians, voting [in local government elections], etc, and we must take our right place while retaining our modesty and humility of character' (*The Friend* 1895: 382; see also *The British Friend* 1895: 187-8).

It was agreed that a minute be sent into MYM, expressing the 'strong feeling' of the WYM that a committee should be appointed to consider the issue. It was read at MYM the next day, together with the similar minute from the BSDWQM. William Clark, husband of Helen, spoke in support, arguing that joint meetings in which men Friends continued to control the agenda provided no answer. A belief in spiritual equality could not sit easily with a situation where 'Every man Friend, however young and inexperienced, had the liberty of a voice in all matters, whereas the most experienced woman Friend had no voice at all' (*The Friend* 1895: 377). Finally MYM agreed to the request for a joint committee to examine the question of women's role in the society, as 'one that has taken great hold' (YM Position of Women Friends Committee 1895, henceforth PWFC). This body was established alongside another committee to make arrangements for the Manchester conference, the deliberations of which later in 1895 became a watershed in the history of nineteenth-century Quakers (Kennedy 1996)

The Committee on the Position of Women Friends in Meetings for Church Affairs in London Yearly Meeting was composed of twenty seven men and twenty five women, among whom were Helen Clark, her aunt, Margaret Tanner, and her husband, William Stephens Clark. The correspondence of this committee provides evidence of the continuing variety of views on a range of issues raised by the question of merging MYM and WYM. Some, like John S. Rowntree advised the simple expedient of removing the word 'men' from the relevant paragraph in the Book of Discipline (paragraph 5, p. 249). Other men declared themselves sympathetic to the goal of full equality but argued the impracticality of

both meetings sitting together because of size. Thomas Pumphry urged that joint meetings had already shown that this change in itself could not ensure full equality for their sisters: 'the women's voices are heard only in a very small minority'. He added that should they decide to speak up more in future, meetings would become unwieldy, and what was more, men would have to double the self-restraint already necessary in their men-only forums (PWFC 1895).

Both proponents and opponents of the merger adopted, then, the rhetoric of spiritual equality, and emphasised a concern to allow women the fullest expression of their spiritual leadings. And even those women who opposed the merger pressed for full equality between the separate meetings in considering and ruling on the business of the society. Mary Snowden Braithwaite was one such. She argued that all business of interest to both men and women should come before each meeting separately 'for their consideration and judgment, not simply as information'. In her view any more joint sessions than already occurred 'would not be to the advantage of either the men or the women, and would be very cumbersome and unsatisfactory'. She was prepared to see the two YMs conclude with a short joint session, and felt that women should 'be well represented' at the Meeting for Sufferings', but rejected any necessity for a requirement of equal numbers of women (PWFC 1895).

The final report of the committee was completed by April 1896, in time for the forthcoming separate YMs. It recommended that women Friends now be 'recognised as forming a constituent part of our Meetings for Church affairs equally with their brethren', that the two separate YMs be open to joint session, and that the concluding session be held jointly. The WYM and MYM would continue to have a separate existence, but their respective clerks, together with a Joint Committee on Proceedings, would decide which subjects should come before joint sessions, and which subjects should receive the consideration of both meetings before a final decision was taken. It was also advised that women become eligible for membership of the Meeting for Sufferings, while acknowledging 'the largeness and importance' of such a proposal. At the same time, however,

and somewhat undermining its previous recommendations, the committee concluded that the Minutes of the MYM should remain 'the official record of the decisions of the Yearly Meeting' (PWFC).

The report was considered at a joint conference of the two YMs. There J. B. Braithwaite tried to delay the decision for a year by referring the matter back to monthly and quarterly meetings. Helen Clark responded by asking men Friends to try to imagine themselves in the place of women Friends. She reported how difficult she found it to persuade those outside of the Society that Quaker women remained 'an inferior caste in all matters relating to control'. Once again, she pointed out that, given the acceptance of spiritual equality among Quakers, 'It did seem an extraordinary anomaly' not to allow women an equal role in the government of their religious society. While the conference was persuaded of the case with regard to YM, there was some stiffer resistance to women's appointment to the Meeting for Sufferings. It was argued by some men Friends that the subjects discussed there were sometimes of too delicate a nature to be put before women. Caroline Armfield responded once more with an analogy from outside the Society 'the point has been raised before, when the question of women taking seats on the Boards of Guardians came forward, but they did not find the difficulties insurmountable'. Equally, Helen Clark, pointed out that many of the subjects discussed at the Meeting for Sufferings were of great interest to women, for example, that of the Quaker peace testimony' (*The Friend* 1896: 358).

The report was accepted, and from 1896 the two separate YMs for the most part met jointly. It remained the rule, however, that 'when at any time a separate session of Men Friends is held, such session shall be considered to be the Yearly Meeting', and that the minutes of MYM continued to be the official record of that society's governing body (Godlee 1907: 54). For some years more, also, the WYM maintained two regular separate sessions to hear reports from its temperance campaigners and Missionary Helpers Union, work which many women Quakers continued to view as their particular preserve (Godlee 1919: 120).⁽¹⁹⁾ The rhetoric of spiritual equality continued to mask, to a

degree, a continuing acceptance of a gendered division of labour within the Society of Friends. And this in turn served to shore up the gendered hierarchy built into its constitutional arrangements.

Such a situation came to seem more and more unsatisfactory in the years that followed to those who sought full formal equality. The secular movement for women's suffrage had entered a more militant stage with the formation of the Women's Social and Political Union in 1903. This body found some of its earliest and most staunch supporters among members the women of the Bright circle. Once again, developments in the campaign for the vote were followed by fresh pressure to elevate the standing of women within the Society of Friends. Some Quaker women now raised at YM the possibility of discontinuing altogether the separate women's sessions. MYM had remained the official deliberative body of the Society of Friends whenever the women delegates withdrew for separate sessions. It was argued that as a consequence Quaker women continued 'to miss the right and privilege of taking their share in the work of the Church', and as a result were failing 'to exercise the responsibility which is theirs'. On several occasions in the previous decade women had found that decisions had been taken in their absence on matters that concerned them as much as men Friends (Godlee 1907: 54).(20)

Mary Jane Godlee as Clerk of WYM lent her weight to ending the separate sessions of the national body. In her work on the Arrangements Committee, she had become increasingly conscious of the difficulty of the timing of separate sessions of WYM, emphasising that 'the business of Yearly Meeting is done whether we are there or not; the Men's Meeting is *the* Yearly Meeting'. She argued, also, that no business came before MYM 'in which some women are not specially interested' (Godlee 1907: 54; Godlee 1919: 150). Even so, a few women continued to express concern that the work of YM was becoming so complex, its meetings so big and attracting so many able speakers, that 'many women get no chance, and their voices will often not carry in a large room'. Many felt better able to 'speak to their sisters with greater freedom' in women's sessions, and wished to 'preserve the power of meeting separately'. It was

also argued that the separate meetings provided at least the opportunity for some division of the work of YM so as to ensure a certain degree of participation from women (Godlee 1907: 54). Such counsels did not prevail, however, and 1907 saw at last the 'complete fusion' of the WYM with the main YM, and thereafter a women's conference became the only regular, national occasion on which women Friends took counsel with one another separately from men (*The Friend* 1907: 397-401; Godlee 1919: 150).

Conclusion

The liberal theology of the Society of Friends undoubtedly had mixed consequences for the political action of Quaker women. On the one hand it underpinned the relatively high standing of women within that Society, and the established areas of authority that followed from such a standing. It also informed organisational arrangements, notably in separate women's meetings, which allowed women to develop valuable skills for public life.

On the other hand, the doctrine of the Inner Light proved to be quite compatible with a sexual division of labour that created and maintained a gendered hierarchy among Quakers. It also masked that hierarchy in the rhetoric of spiritual equality, serving at the same time by such means to cut across the rhetoric of women's rights. Longstanding practices of conciliation and consensus-building among members of the Society also tended to favour the *status quo*, dampening the potential for direct conflict between the sexes, and serving as a considerable brake on the growing pressure for change. In addition to such theological and customary constraints, the existing constitutional arrangements of the Society had fostered a deep and longstanding appreciation of separatist strategies for advancing the status and authority of women.

Appeals to a liberal-fundamentalist interpretation of Quaker belief and practice continued to take precedence over secular ideologies of sexual equality, in the growing pressure for the complete merger of WYM with the main YM. Arguments for sexual equality within the Society were generally couched in terms of the maintenance of that Society (a growing

concern by the late nineteenth century), and a fuller realisation of its founding ideals and beliefs. Nonetheless, it was the experience of radical Quaker women in the political sphere that acted as a significant prompt for a re-evaluation of the constitution of their religious society. Pressure to realise full sexual equality within the Society of Friends followed from, and was continually fuelled by, the participation of leading Quaker women in the women's rights movement of the latter decades of the nineteenth century, especially when they encountered resistance or desultory interest among the growing numbers of Quaker men who entered Parliament in these years.

The relation between religion and politics was not only one way, from more liberal interpretations of Quaker theology to the politics of women's rights. Political campaigning on behalf of civil sexual equality fostered a more extensive conception of George Fox's woman 'helpmeet' of man than their founder may have envisaged. Quaker women Radicals saw themselves not as the auxiliaries, the assistants, of Quaker men, but rather as the 'moral engines' of their society.⁽²¹⁾ Their stand undoubtedly reflected a degree of disillusion about the religious clear-sightedness of their male brethren, especially in matters of social and moral reform. Thus religious belief was melded with political radicalism and consciousness of gender difference in their motivation for change. Participation in politics helped stir Quaker women to a lengthy and tenacious challenge to the gendered hierarchy that governed their religious lives. Indeed, the liberal theology of Quakers became as much a ground for gender contestation as a prompt to such action.

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Notes

1. For a summary of the US case, see Dunn 1987: 43. For an estimation of the situation in Britain by the nineteenth-century, see Isichei 1970: 107-8.
2. For more general discussions of religion and the social action of nineteenth-century women, see Bolt 1993: 55-61; Lewis 1991: 10-11, 305; Prochaska 1980: 9-17.
3. Hewitt 1984 explores the 'ultraist' politics of Hicksite women in both abolition and women's rights movements. The Hicksites were a schism within the Society of Friends in the United States that had resisted the influence of evangelicalism, and sought a return to the theology and practice of the early Quakers. For their reception in England, see Bronner 1975.
4. For an exceptional exploration of some of the tensions between Quakerism and the advocacy of women's rights, see Michaelson 1993.
5. On the strength of Evangelical Quakers in Britain, see Isichei 1970: 3-7.
6. Sklar 1990 provides an especially stimulating comparative analysis of links between abolition and women's rights in the British and United States movements at this time.
7. For a related discussion of similar issues, see Freedman 1979: 512-529, which argues that the erosion of such separate institutional bases in the pursuit of formal equality in part accounts for the decline of feminism in the inter-war period. Compare this line of analysis with Bacon 1989: 183 which portrays such separate institutions as an adolescent stage in women's emergence toward greater equality.
8. Cott's argument here concerns the inappropriateness of applying the neologism 'feminism' to nineteenth-century women's rights movements, and seeks to define the distinctiveness of the new 'feminist' consciousness that became evident in the last years of the suffrage campaigns in the USA, as was also the case in Britain.
9. The equivalent men's body will be referred to as the BSDMQM. The minutes of the joint meetings which became the more usual pattern in the 1890s are recorded in the BSDWQM.
9. For a preliminary picture of the Sturge network see Levine 1990: 9.

For obituaries of E. M. Sturge see *The Friend* 1906:53-4 and *Englishwomen's Review* April 16 1906:122-123. She was secretary of the Birmingham Women's Suffrage Association, and later held the position of Vice-President. Surviving correspondence between Helen Clark and members of the Sturge network suggest a possible linking between Bright and Sturge networks. A further aim of this project will be to chart the Sturge women's kinship network and its wider links in more detail

10. Southall herself was active on a number of social issues and was the first woman to teach in a male adult school (*Dictionary of Quaker Biography*; Whitney 1948).

11. The language in these accounts is especially opaque, but it is clear many Quaker men felt uneasy about the assertiveness evident among members of WYM. Joel Bean exhorted WYM, for example, 'as a Friend under a religious concern' and urged "Choose you this day whom ye will serve". He declared himself 'powerfully impressed with the conviction that very many . . . were yet in the valley of decision and that to some the opportunity might very shortly be closed'. Edward Tregelles similarly urged his sisters 'to be willing at once to give themselves to the service of their Lord' (*The British Friend* 1873: 143)

12. Evidently there was soul searching among some men Quaker over the decision taken at MYM. Alfred Bennett supported Helen Clark's position, and concluded that in the future the failure to invite women Friends to the conference 'will look like a barbarous relic' (*The Friend* 1873: 228).

13. Note also W. Pollard: 'Women's meetings for Discipline - How they can be improved' (*The Friend* 1873: 336-9 and 1874: 6-8).

14. For a more extended discussion of the secularisation and feminisation of religious enthusiasm, see the account of another Quaker woman prominent in reform circles in both Britain and the USA in this period in Campbell 1989.

15. Compare with the analysis of the rhetoric of gender in Hoganson, 1993.

16. The records of this women's quarterly meeting show that it took an active interest in women's rights questions beyond the Society, most notably the campaign for repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, see e.g. BSDWQM Minutes: 21 January 1879).

17. Topics selected for discussion at the WYM of 1891, for example, included 'Help for Sisters in Domestic Service and Factory Work', 'Young Working Women and their Leisure Hours', 'Training of Young Children' and 'Lady Guardians and Workhouse Visitors' (BSDWQM Minutes: 20 January 1891).

18. When Alice Clark and her mother visited the United States in 1900 and attended the Philadelphia YM where men and women still met separately, Helen Clark recorded: 'The meeting very dull and extremely slow. I thought the failings of women Friends seeming much the same as at home' (Clark, H. Diaries: 16 May 1900).

19. At quarterly-meeting level joint sessions now also became usual, though alongside retention of the possibility of special separate sessions for women where they felt this to be desirable. The women of the BSDWQM, for example, indicated that they would require such a sitting at the second and third such meeting each year - the quarterly meetings that preceded and followed YM. But the whole of the business of this quarterly meeting was, for the first time, conducted in joint session, and its representatives to YM were also generally composed equally of men and women, see BSDWQM Minutes: 20 October 1896, 19 January 1897. 20. In 1905, for example, MYM had altered the wording of an important document without consultation and endorsed a change of rule while the women representatives were absent in separate session. At the same time, it was acknowledged that many women Friends would find it 'a real loss' to give up their separate sessions: more women were able to take part in such proceedings than at joint sessions; some messages were felt to be more suitable for smaller gatherings; and women Friends often felt able to 'speak to their sisters with greater freedom' in separate session. All in all, it was accepted that WYM had 'tended to advance the spiritual life of our members'. Several alternative arrangements to a union of the two YMs now emerged reflecting such concerns. They included a regular separate conference of women Friends, and ad hoc sessions of the separate YMs as and when these were requested from, or thought advisable by the joint YM.

21. This term was coined by Unitarian women's rights activists (Rendall 1987), but it fits equally well with the understanding of their role to be found among Quaker women Radicals.

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