

Thomas, K.H., *The History and Significance of Quaker Symbols in Sect Formation* (Series in Quaker Studies, Vol. 2). Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002. pp. xxi + 178, ISBN 0 7734 7228 2, Cloth, £69.95, \$109.95.

This is an interesting book and a worthwhile contribution to the academic study of Quakerism in Britain. *Quaker Symbols* has a simple structure; it is divided into ten chapters each of which is sub-divided into a number of sections, some of which are very short. Thomas begins with a useful consideration of key terms, notably, 'religion' and 'symbolism' though deals with relatively few perspectives on each. In Chapter 2 Thomas provides a brief account of seventeenth century Quaker ideology and presents the largely Durkheimian analytical framework in the context of which subsequent chapters need to be understood. Thomas argues that the sacred/profane dichotomy cherished by Durkheim coincides, to some extent, with a dichotomy manifested in Quakerism, that is, inward/outward. So in structural terms we have:

sacred: profane :: inward:outward

This can be read as 'sacred is to profane as inward is to outward'. But as Thomas rightly argues this is not a perfect mapping because for Durkheim 'profane' has two quite different meanings. On the one hand it provides a residual category for all that is not sacred and on the other it refers to a force or power which is categorically opposed to the sacred. In my view this is all to the good. Given the degree of what might be called 'slippage' in what we might bravely call early Quaker theology, a measure of conceptual ambiguity serves only to make the mapping (and Thomas's analysis) more believable. In any case, Thomas argues that in the Quaker world-view, the tension generated by the 'sacred/profane' dichotomy generates a space for action which is simultaneously symbolic and non-symbolic, both ritualistic and non-ritualistic. It is an ideological sleight of hand which has been practised partly consciously, partly unconsciously by Quakers from 1652 to the present day. In much of the rest of the book Thomas explores those aspects of Quakerism which are the direct product of this tension.

Thomas explores the symbolic significance of meeting houses, church government, of head, hat, and hair, speech and silence, and the 'peculiarities'. Although the author rarely discusses any one subject in very much depth there is much of interest here. Certainly, there are flashes of insight which I would like to have seen developed. To provide just a single example: in relation to the 'symbolic content' of meeting houses (pp. 128-31) she hints that absence (of religious material culture) means presence but draws short of adequately discussing this possibility.

Occasionally, Thomas asks a question which is not quite the right one. She enquires, 'Can it be said that the meeting house is a symbol?' (p.130). In this instance her reliance on a broadly structural functional approach prompts her to select a mallet from the analytical toolbox when something a little finer would probably have produced a more nuanced question. She herself suggests throughout this book that the meeting house is a complex, multifaceted and ever changing space; it is, she shows quite clearly, polyvalent in its meaning: there are many

meanings which vary temporally and from one place to another – some of which will be corporately shared while others are appreciated only by individuals, families, or groups of close friends.

*Quaker Symbols* is a revised version of Thomas's Masters thesis written from within the religious studies tradition and this accounts for its particular pattern of strengths and weaknesses. Among the book's considerable strengths are its clarity of purpose, its straightforward organisation, its more or less jargon-free prose and most of all its wide-ranging development of a particularly fertile field of research. On the other hand her analysis has certain format-driven limitations. Her theoretical approach is rather dated and over-dependent on one or two authors. Much excellent work has been done on ritual and symbolism during the last twenty years or so, much of which would have further illuminated the material presented here, including the work of Catherine Bell's *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), whose concept of ritualisation might have helped Thomas shed a little more direct light on the ways in which Quaker ritual and symbolism helped determine power relations both within the organisation and between it and other institutions.

Sometimes she is a little too rigorous in sticking to a pre-determined word-limit, leading to arguments which are thinly presented. For instance, in her all too concise discussion of the meeting house, it would have been a fruitful exercise to provide two or three case studies focusing on particular examples – this would have enabled the author to make clear the similarities and differences of buildings built at different times, in different places and with different objectives in mind.

It is all too easy to over-generalise in writing about religious faith and practice, especially when one's data is largely gleaned from written sources. Occasionally, though, her account rather too readily follows the insider account. For example, her statement that 'A meeting house is valued for its charming domestic simplicity' might be true in some cases but surely not in others (e.g. Manchester Mount Street, London Euston Road, or York). Again, she states baldly that there are (in meeting houses) never any 'religious' pictures illustrating gospel stories, or God or the saints (p.126). The fact is that for one reason or another such representations are sometimes displayed in meeting houses. In such instances we are getting rather too much Quaker ideology (the way insiders imagine things to be) and too little accurate description (the way things actually are). However, this is a relatively minor gripe and on the whole Thomas is careful to avoid making unjustified claims.

Ritual (and symbolism) is a complex subject at the best of times and is especially so in the case of those groups which claim to eschew it. Thomas has presented us with an articulate, concise and well-argued account which will, I hope, stimulate others to attempt further theoretical development of material available both in the several excellent narrative histories of Quakerism as well as in the voluminous primary records.

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