Bradney, A & F. Cownie, *Living Without Law. An ethnography of Quaker decision-making, dispute avoidance and dispute resolution*, Ashgate 2000.

This book is an account of Quaker decision-making, based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a single Meeting. Having found the book disappointing, I shall describe its basic structure and content before noting some of its more serious flaws. *Living Without Law* is divided into three unequal sections. The first consists of an introductory chapter which tells us that the subject of the book is relevant to debates in socio-legal studies, especially to alternative dispute resolution and legal pluralism. Section II comprises two chapters, a potted history of the Society of Friends in Britain and a short essay on 'contemporary Quakers'. No reasons are given for the inclusion of some facts and the exclusion of others and it is not clear why this specific accumulation of information might be relevant to the main subject of the book. There are six chapters in Section III, the first of which is a generalised account of (British) Quaker business method. The authors briefly describe their research methods in Chapter 5 touching also on ethical matters. In Chapter 6 we are given a straight-forward description of the Meeting investigated by the authors, including its participants and the way they organise themselves, its meeting house and the uses to which it is put. The business of Meeting is conducted more formally at Preparative Meeting and less so in the many committees. Chapter 7 provides an account of 'Leadership in Meeting' and deals briefly with clerks and convenors, elders and overseers, birthright Quakers, weighty Friends and spoken ministry during meeting for worship. The central issue of the book is finally broached in Chapter 8, and in the final chapter the authors describe and assess the nature of what they call 'Quaker Law'.

This book has significant weaknesses. First, it is insubstantial and includes considerable amounts of text derived from secondary Quaker sources. The ethnography we are promised in the title only gets going on p.103 and is all over by p.157. For a book which was six years in the making this is a rather thin outcome and the authors' argument suffers as a result. The authors explain, without a hint of irony, that they found so little conflict in this Meeting they would not have been able to write the book had they depended on that material alone. Furthermore, ethical scruples prevent them from describing what conflicts they did find in any but the broadest of terms. Even so, they do hint, intriguingly, that this Meeting does not handle internal conflict very well. Here, we confront an unpleasant vacuum at the core of the book – just where the authors' ethnographic approach might be expected to come up trumps, it fails entirely. So, if you turn to this book hoping to find out more about how Quakers go about solving disputes (whether in or out of Meeting), or about the numerous corporate and individual efforts of Quakers to involve themselves usefully in dispute resolution in their locale, you will be disappointed.

Secondly, the authors continually conflate the 'is' and 'ought' of Meeting. This is an easy, though extremely damaging, mistake to make and one that undergraduates in anthropology and sociology are trained to avoid. For

example, on p.80 we read that in Preparative Meeting, 'Everyone's view is taken into account, everyone who has something to say is listened to, and their ideas are considered seriously.' Although it is unclear whether or not the authors are describing one particular Meeting here or Meetings in general, it is nevertheless an incautious claim. The authors are quick to draw on 'in-house' texts which are biased towards the practices briefly described. Introductory texts such as those by Gillman, Gorman and others should, in an academic account such as this be taken as part of one's data, not of one's analysis.

Thirdly, major aspects of Bradney and Cownie's argument seem to me to be faulty. Chapter 9 seeks to place Quaker dispute avoidance/resolution outside the usual spectrum of conflict settlement which they site between the two poles of 'law' and 'warfare'. They argue that the spectrum itself is fundamentally characterised by violence. I find this argument and the rest of the chapter hard to follow primarily because of their confusion of the real and ideal and partly because of some obscure writing. The result is a series of claims for this Meeting which are simply not believable. For example, it is confidently stated (p.164) that Quakers obey the laws of the state only insofar as they do not contradict 'Quaker law'. This seems plausible until one remembers that Quakers generally become Quakers as adults, sometimes late in life. Until becoming a Quaker a person upholds the law, we must assume, for a variety of reasons (none of which need have anything to do with 'Quaker law' which is until later unknown to them) – the perceived unpleasantness of punishment for one thing – but then what kind of existential shift is required after an individual becomes a Quaker? My point is that they are making a statement which is unverifiable in terms of their ethnography and which may be unverifiable by any means whatever. A little later (p.165) we read: 'Quaker law lies at a deeper and more penetrating level than that of general principles of social behaviour. Quaker law lies in the obligation of continual and all-embracing inclusion in the community that each member of Meeting accepts with regard to all other members.' The first sentence is hard to fathom – I simply do not understand it. The second paints an extraordinarily rosy picture of Meeting which I find hard to believe. Such claims may be true but how do we know? All too often ethnographic evidence is absent.

Fourthly, their methodology is shaky. If one author were not already a Quaker most reviewers would criticise both authors for allowing themselves to be co-opted by the group. One author (the Quaker) took responsibility for fieldwork and conducted participant observation and semi-structured interviews. They interview 18 members but admit that this is in no way a representative sample – most interviewees are from the same occupational group, for instance. I have no problem with this, except that they go on to tout this category of participants as if they were representative thereby diminishing the voice of any who appear to hold opinions different to their own. For instance, on p.170 one interviewee is reported as saying (in relation to Quaker business methods): 'It's not so very different [to methods of taking decisions outside Quaker circles]'. This view may not be typical but it is undoubtedly

interesting, yet no attempt is made to get behind this person's thoughts on a matter which is central to the theme of the book – the individual's voice is not being taken seriously: a grave error in qualitative research.

Further minor flaws include the absence of an index, a lack of reading across the board and a rather weak discussion of research ethics. Their careless use of terms sometimes leaves them struggling to argue their point precisely. The term 'community' is introduced and used as if its meaning is transparent. That is simply not the case; anthropologists alone have spawned hundreds of definitions of the term which suggests that the authors should not merely assume that all readers (or participants) understand the same thing when using such terms. The one description of Meeting that might most usefully be used here is 'voluntary organisation', a term which has a fairly precise meaning and which, if used, could have opened up some useful comparative doors. All in all, this book provides an unusually frustrating read.

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