

'THE INFERIOR PARTS OF THE BODY': THE DEVELOPMENT AND
ROLE OF WOMEN'S MEETINGS IN THE EARLY QUAKER MOVEMENT¹

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ABSTRACT

This article is a study of the development and role of early Quaker women's Meetings during the second half of the seventeenth century. It is based upon the contemporary records of the Owstwick women's Monthly Meeting, held in the East Riding of Yorkshire. Rather than focussing upon the individual travelling Quaker female ministers or their writings, as the historiography has tended to, it examines the everyday organisation and responsibilities that were held by early Quaker women. It argues that although the women's Meetings were regarded as inferior to those of the men, they evolved alongside each other and operated in tandem, each with their own areas of responsibility. This allowed women to gain status as a group, rather than as individuals, in the early Quaker movement.

KEYWORDS

Quaker, women, Meeting, support, discipline, division.

'The equality of men and women in spiritual privilege and responsibility has always been one of the glories of Quakerism.' So believed William Braithwaite in his classic history of the Quakers.² It is a view that, in today's society, Quakers will eagerly embrace. Quaker women played a prominent role during the early years of the movement, during a period in which they were generally regarded as second-class citizens. Despite this, however, historians of Quakerism have largely neglected the role of women during the later seventeenth and early eighteenth century. It was a role that was deeply controversial both within the wider society and the Quaker movement itself. Little research has been carried out at a local level examining the Quaker women's Meetings that existed in tandem with those of their male counterparts. This paper is an attempt to redress this. It will examine the women's Monthly Meeting at Owstwick in East

Yorkshire, based upon their own records found within the minute book. Unfortunately, it is the only women's minute book to survive from the East Riding for this period. Comparison will be made with the men's Meeting, making it possible to establish the different spheres of responsibility each Meeting held, and allowing the role that the Owstwick women's Meeting played during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century to be assessed.

Despite Braithwaite's view outlined above, the amount of space dedicated to women in his work is negligible. Within *The Second Period of Quakerism*, which deals with the years from the Restoration to the turn of the eighteenth century, women's Meetings and organisation only occupy four pages out of over six hundred. Braithwaite's early twentieth century paternalistic view was that the creation of women's Meetings 'taxed seventeenth century feminine capacity to the utmost', although he believed that 'this only adds to its significance as a landmark in the movement for giving woman her true place of equal partnership with man'.³ The development of women's Meetings is accorded an heroic status by Braithwaite, driven by the desire of George Fox to 'give them [women] their place, their right place, and stir them up to take it'.⁴

Details of Yorkshire women's Quarterly Meeting similarly receive little space in the work of Pearson Thistledwaite, *Yorkshire Quarterly Meeting 1665-1966*. Some four and a half pages of over four hundred manage to cover the work of the Meeting in the three hundred year period covered.⁵ However, this is more space than women's Meetings receive in other histories of Quakerism. Both Richard Vann and Hugh Barbour ignore the development and role of Quaker women's Meetings. More recently, Adrian Davies' work on Quakers in southern England has given them short shrift.⁶

This is not to say that the role of women in Quakerism has been completely ignored. Mabel Brailsford's book *Quaker Women 1650-1690* was published in 1915 and still stands as a useful text. In 1949 Isabell Ross' *Margaret Fell: mother of Quakerism* highlighted the unique position and role that Fell (later Fox) played in the development of the Quaker movement. More recently, Bonnelyn Young Kunze has examined the life of Fell and placed her as a central figure in the development of the Quaker movement in her book *Margaret Fell and the Rise of Quakerism*.⁷

Published research that has examined the role of women in early Quakerism has concentrated largely upon travelling women ministers and preachers or their writings, for example, Christine Trevett's *Women and Quakerism in the Seventeenth Century* and her more recent book *Quaker Women Prophets in England and Wales*. Trevett's most recent work does include a section about women's Meetings, as does Phyllis Mack's book *Visionary Women*, though the main emphasis is placed upon individual women prophets and ministers, and their role in challenging the assumptions and social order of a male dominated society.⁸ The concentration of research upon the prominent female individuals within early Quakerism reflects the importance that these women ministers and preachers had on the movement, and the fact that their role required attention following their general neglect by other historians of Quakerism such as Vann and Barbour.

Rosemary Foxtan has highlighted how female ministers contributed signif-

icantly towards the development of gender consciousness through their activities, their identification with each other manifested by the quantity of their writing that was published. She estimates that Quaker women accounted for 20 per cent of all women's published writing throughout the seventeenth century.⁹ This source material has been a rich mine for gender historians, to the detriment of less readily available local sources such as the local and regional meeting minute books. These local sources are also important for revealing the development of women's group identity and consciousness. Gender-separated meetings provided local and regional opportunities for Quaker women to interact with each other and organise themselves in a way that was unique within seventeenth century society.

The quantity and quality of information available within the women's minute books varies widely. For the most part Owstwick women's Monthly Meeting minutes contain little information other than the fact of where and when the Meeting was held, and which preparative meetings sent delegates.¹⁰ However, when sifted through there is enough information to enable the everyday business of the Meeting to surface. This is not the case with all women's Monthly Meeting minute books. The Meeting at Knaresborough, in the West Riding, only recorded epistles that were sent to them from the Quarterly and Yearly Meetings. The minute book does not contain any detail of the Meeting's everyday business.¹¹ As a consequence of this variable source material when women's meetings have been studied the main trend in the historiography has been to trace their general development from the central focus point of Women's Yearly Meeting; for example Margaret Bacon's work, which examined the role of American Quaker women's Meetings in supporting the establishment and development of Women's Yearly Meeting in London.¹² Lloyd's work *Quaker Social History* can be included in this category, but does include some detail of the business of the Meeting.¹³ It is worth briefly tracing the general pattern of development of women's Meetings, to allow comparison between national, regional and local levels.

Following the evolution of the Two Weeks men's Meeting in London in 1656 two women's meetings emerged, the Box Meeting and Two Weeks Meeting. They were largely concerned with charitable works. The Box Meeting, begun in 1659, and held weekly for the relief of the poor, was named after the box that was used to collect money. The Two Weeks meeting was initiated by the men's Meeting. It assisted with visiting both the sick and prisoners and with looking after the poor. This was the Meeting, co-operating with the men's Meeting, which could have served as a model for later women's Meetings.¹⁴ Bacon has argued that the existence of these two meetings made London Friends feel further women's Meetings were unnecessary. Few other women's Meetings developed in the capital until the mid eighteenth century. In 1755 the London Quarterly Meeting queried their Monthly Meetings about the existence of separate women's Meetings. Of the six Monthly Meetings that responded only one, Ratcliff, said it had always had a women's Meeting, which was still regularly attended.¹⁵

It was not until 1671 that an attempt was made to encourage the develop-

ment of women's Meetings across the country. On June 16 George Fox sent a circular letter calling for their establishment. In it there is an indication of the role that Fox believed that they should play: 'women may come into the practice of pure religion, which is to visit the widows and fatherless and to see that all be kept from the spots of the world'.¹⁶ Despite Fox's efforts there were wide regional variations in the development of the women's Meetings. The sanctioning of meetings did not necessarily lead to an uptake by members. Yearly Meeting encouraged their institution in 1675, 1691, 1707, 1744, and 1745. Such repeated advice is indicative of some reluctance. Not all Quakers were happy with the separate role and responsibilities that were being given to women. Amongst other points of dispute, controversy over the development of women's Meetings was a strong feature of the infamous Wilkinson-Story separation of the mid 1670s. The Wilkinson-Story separation was rooted in dispute between the right of the individual versus group consensus. Quakerism was founded on the basis of individual equality to discover and worship God without recourse to any formal organisation; hence the institution of formal Meetings with control over the actions of individuals was controversial.¹⁷

The first recorded women's Quarterly Meeting in Yorkshire was held on June 12, 1678. It was being held before then, however. Knaresborough women's Monthly Meeting book documents a 'General Womens Meeting' being held at York September 27, 1677.¹⁸ This was two years after Yearly Meeting's first encouragement to settle women's meetings, testimony that meetings were not settled across the country uniformly. At a local level the first entry for the Owstwick women's Monthly Meeting is April 6, 1676.¹⁹ Monthly Meetings were therefore being held in the region before Quarterly Meetings. The implication of this is that women's Meetings evolved from the local level upward rather than being organised from regional levels downwards.

It was not until the middle of the eighteenth century that Yorkshire women's Quarterly Meeting was established on a regular basis. No Meeting at all was held in 1696, 1698 or 1702. From 1707 to 1717 it was more common for only two meetings to be held a year rather than four. From 1718 Meetings were held three times yearly. It was not until 1778 that a quarterly arrangement was finally fixed.²⁰ It is worth noting here that all Quaker women's Meetings were principally for worship, with their bureaucratic responsibilities a secondary consideration. This fact was emphasised at the women's Quarterly Meeting held at York on June 24 and 25, 1679, when it was recorded that:

the Lord was pleased to break forth in and amongst us...after some of our honourable brethren had delivered unto us many weighty and heavenly exhortations...& a sweet conclusion made by prayer, we proceeded upon our business.²¹

Owstwick women's Monthly Meeting was made up of representatives from East End, Owstwick, Sutton and Hornsea preparative meetings. It was not until 1690 that the Meeting was regularly held at Owstwick. Prior to this it had been held alternately at a number of other villages in the East Riding, including

Halsham, Aldbrough, Ganstead and Ryhill, as well as being held in the city of Hull. The Meeting was held at the houses of women Friends in the area, rotating, as necessary, to be most convenient for those attending. No reason is given for the Meeting settling at Owstwick where a meeting house and burial ground had been acquired as early as 1670.²²

Quarterly Meeting records confirm that the two other Monthly Meetings in the East Riding were holding women's Meetings. The first recorded minute of Yorkshire women's Quarterly Meeting, in June 1678, includes a paper issued to all Monthly Meetings in Yorkshire, signed by delegates from Kelk and Elloughton, as well as Owstwick Monthly Meeting.²³ It also contains an indication of the possible size of the women's Meetings at Owstwick and Elloughton. Testimonies against tithes are recorded from some of the women's Monthly Meetings, signed by their members. Those for Owstwick and Elloughton record 49 and 23 names respectively. Kelk did not have a testimony recorded until 1679, which was signed by 28 women.²⁴

The attendance at Owstwick women's Monthly Meeting was not always so numerous, however. Like the Quarterly Meeting records, Owstwick Monthly Meeting minutes contain a number of gaps. Whether these are due to the minutes not being recorded or the Meeting not being held cannot be ascertained. There are minutes for only the first five months of 1683, and no records at all for the years 1686 and 1687. In 1681 the minute book notes that on January 5 'was the monthly meeting held at Owstwick but there was no appearance of the women.' The same is recorded for the following month's Meeting that was held at Ryhill. In both these cases the men's Monthly Meeting was held at the same time and continued as usual.

Not all the Preparative Meetings were diligent in their attendance at Monthly Meeting. During the years 1701-05 Hull Meeting's attendance is best described as patchy, though Hornsea Meeting is considerably worse. Matters came to a head with Hornsea Meeting in summer of 1705. After a long period of absence from Monthly Meeting one of the members, Elizabeth Hall, applied for money to help travel to London. After procrastinating for two Meetings it was finally decided at the August Meeting 'that nothing be given out of the stock'.²⁵ Following this rebuff representatives attended the next four Meetings, though soon slipped back into non-attendance.

Rather than being responsible for decisions of theology or church organisation women's Meetings were mainly instituted to play a supporting role for families and the poor. In an undated epistle 'To the Men and Womens Quarterly Meetings' Fox's opinion on their role was clearly stated:

There is many things that it is proper for women to look into both in their families, and concerning of women which is not so proper for the men, which modesty in women cannot so well speak of before men as they can do among their sex; and women are more in their families, and have more of the tuition of their children and servants than the men, they being always among them either for the making of them, or the

marring of them... And many women are of more capacity than others are, and so they must instruct and inform the rest... concerning ordering of their children and families.²⁶

In 1674 an epistle was sent 'from the Women Friends in London to the women Friends in the country, also elsewhere, about the service of a woman's meeting'. It outlined in greater detail the business that women's Meetings should have responsibility for:

To visit the sick and the prisoners...making provision for the needy, aged and weak, that are incapable of work...and poor orphans...for their education and bringing up in good nurture and in the fear of the Lord: and putting them out to trades in the wholesome order of the creation. Also the elder women exhorting the younger in all sobriety, modesty in apparel...and to stop tattlers and false reports...Also admonishing such maids and widows as may be in danger...either to marry with unbelievers, or to go to the priest to be married...And that maid servants that profess truth and want places be orderly disposed of...But chiefly our work is, to help the helpless in all cases.²⁷

In practice, the business of Owstwick women's Monthly Meeting was not as far reaching as the women Friends in London perceived. Figure 1 demonstrates that marriage proposals and poor relief dominated their everyday business during the decade that followed the institution of the Meeting. These years are when the minute book is most extant. No records survive for the years 1686, 1687, 1695, and 1696, making any statistical analysis for these later periods unreliable. The business of poor relief has been counted when money was granted by the monthly meeting to an individual. Marriage has been counted as the first time a couple appeared before Monthly Meeting to publish their intention of marriage.²⁸

The statistics show that the Meeting most commonly dealt with requests for permission to marry, which made up over three quarters of the Meeting's business between 1676 and 1685. The amount of poor relief handled by the Meeting is relatively small, and contributed to less than a quarter of the meeting's activity. However, the evidence from Owstwick confirms Lloyd's statement that the women's Monthly Meetings were mainly concerned 'with the detailed administration of poor relief and the liberation of young people for marriage'.²⁹ During this ten year period only one instance was found of the women's Meeting being involved in other business. This was a case of personal discipline, when a 'paper of counsel' was presented to Alice Leake. The men's Monthly Meeting instigated the paper, however. The women's Meeting merely noted that they 'had unity with the same'.³⁰ Any further details of the case are not recorded in either minute book.

The business of marriage and poor relief were also prominent in the everyday business of the men's Monthly Meeting at Owstwick. To allow direct com-

Owstwick Women's Monthly Meeting Business		
Year	Poor Relief	Marriage
1676	2	3
1677	4	4
1678	3	4
1679	1	6
1680	3	8
1681	1	8
1682	1	5
1683	0	4
1684	0	4
1685	0	4
Total	15	50
Percentage	23.1	76.9

Figure 1: Percentage of Poor Relief and Marriage Items before Owstwick Women's Monthly Meeting, 1676-85.

Owstwick Men's Monthly Meeting Business		
Year	Poor Relief	Marriage
1676	18	5
1677	14	6
1678	12	6
1679	12	4
1680	22	9
1681	10	9
1682	16	4
1683	18	9
1684	16	3
1685	21	5
Total	159	60
Percentage	72.6	27.4

Figure 2: Percentage of Poor Relief and Marriage Items before Owstwick Men's Monthly Meeting, 1676-85.

parison with the women's Meeting only these two areas of concern have been counted.³¹

It is immediately noticeable that the two figures for marriage are not identical. This reflects the fact that the minute books were not recorded with complete accuracy. Some information was either not recorded or not provided to the Meetings, as it should have been. The proportion of poor relief and marriage that was dealt with by the men at Owstwick Monthly Meeting is almost directly inverted to that of the women. The men had main responsibility for the relief of the poor. This can be contrasted with Lloyd's evidence from Bristol, where women Friends were responsible for poor relief.³² The different responsibilities that were held by the men's and women's Monthly Meetings were subject to regional variations. At Owstwick the men's Meeting had greater funds at their disposal, regularly holding in stock over four times the money that the women's Meeting did. Their greater concern with poor relief is a reflection of this.

The division of responsibilities along gender lines is highlighted within the area of poor relief. Each of the East Riding women's Preparative Meetings reported the needs of poor female individuals to Monthly Meeting as necessary. Monthly Meeting provided the centralised fund for poor relief. Charitable donations made at the Preparative Meetings were collected together at the Monthly Meeting, and held or distributed as necessary. In some cases individual donations were sent straight up to Monthly Meeting. On occasion, legacies were left that provided regular donations to the fund. Owstwick women's Monthly Meeting received a regular contribution during the early eighteenth century of two shillings and sixpence, left by a legacy from Thomas Gargill.³³

The recipients of poor relief from women's Monthly Meeting were exclusively female. Gargill's legacy is testimony to the gender division. Both the men and women's Monthly Meeting were left an annual sum to be distributed to the poor.³⁴ The responsibilities for poor relief were shared between both the men and women's Monthly Meetings, each taking care of their own members.

In March 1700 a list of queries was circulated from the Quarterly Meeting at York that outlined where the women's Meetings' responsibilities lay. They were recorded in the Monthly Meeting minute book. The opening query asked 'How are poor widows and women Friends provided for?'³⁵ It is possible that it was regarded as unfitting for men to have to rely on charity procured from women. On occasion the men's Meeting did provide money for the relief of poor women. It was a practical measure, due to the men's greater resources. This helps to explain discrepancies from the general pattern of gender-segregated poor relief described above. However, even when relatively affluent, Owstwick women's Meeting did not provide any poor relief to a male. The absence of any examples makes it unlikely that such a practice was acceptable. Such blurring of gender responsibilities was not yet possible.

When a couple decided to be married in the East Riding they had to appear and state their intention before both the women and men's Monthly Meeting. They were then required to return a second time, which allowed time for both their backgrounds to be checked for possible reasons why they should not be married. In the vast majority of cases nothing hindered them. The most common conclusion being: 'they being found clear of all other persons, Friends did consent that they may marry in the fear of the Lord.'³⁶ This rigid control regarding marital partners has been regarded as imposing strong discipline over personal morality. Mack has stated that in this role 'Quaker women sought to defend themselves and their families against the more insidious danger of assimilation to the loose morality and customs of Restoration society.'³⁷

However, evidence from Owstwick women's Monthly Meeting minute book suggests that it was not a case of strict, disciplinary matriarchs regulating marriage. It has been thought that marriage to a non-Quaker was not permitted, but in one case in July 1680 Elliner Gill of Owstwick was granted permission to marry Robert Wattondale, who was not a Quaker. The minute book records that Wattondale was 'a man who hath not frequented Friends meetings, neither hath Friends such unity with him as they could desire.' Despite this, it was decided that the marriage could go ahead 'for her sake'.³⁸ In January 1708 Thomas Galloway and Anne Clappison appeared before Monthly Meeting to declare their intentions of marriage, but 'she appeared not clear from one that was not a Friend'. Two women, Mary Blakes and Sarah Raines, were appointed to look into the matter and reported the following day that: 'they did not find her so clear as they could desire, but the man said he would not strive to hinder her from marrying and she acknowledging herself to blame for keeping of his company', permission was given for the marriage to go ahead.³⁹ In September 1711 William Sargeant and Mary Lyth declared their intentions to marry to Monthly Meeting. In this case 'the young woman being too comfort-

able to language, fashions and customs of the world Friends cannot have full unity with the marriage, yet not being willing to bear too hard upon them leave them to their liberty to marry'.⁴⁰ Elizabeth Stevenson acknowledged to Monthly Meeting in January 1713 that she had been 'giving encouragement to two [men] at once.' She was given permission to marry Samuel Smith.⁴¹

The ratification of the individual decision to marry by Owstwick women's Monthly Meeting, despite reservations, demonstrates the supportive role of the Meeting. The women's Meeting acted in an advisory capacity to aid individual decisions. They did not promote their own decisions or views upon the individuals concerned. In each of the above cases the men's Meeting came to the same conclusion, guided by that of the women. Interestingly, in the case of William Sargeant and Mary Lyth, the men's minute book records an ulterior motive. Their hope was to gently guide the couple towards the fold: 'Friends condescension may be somewhat instrumental in winning them nearer to the truth, which will undoubtedly lead them out of the vain fashions and customs of the world.'⁴² The aim was to instil individual discipline through spiritual advice and guidance, not impose group discipline and risk alienating individuals.

Men and women's Meetings had their own distinct areas of responsibility. Although these had to be co-ordinated they were essentially separate Meetings, working in tandem. The responsibilities were separated along gender lines. The rigidity of the gender barriers that existed within wider society was emphasised by such separation. In some cases the establishment of women's Meetings was promoted as helping keep women subservient to men. In 1685 William Loddington noted:

Women Friends meeting by themselves, may without the least suspicion of usurping authority over the men confer and reason together, how to serve truth in their places, in such things as are most proper and suitable for them, still submitting to the wisdom of God in the Men's meetings.⁴³

It was not only men that saw the role of the women's Meetings in this way. In 1678 Mary Penington wrote a pamphlet 'for those women friends that are dissatisfied at present with the womens meeting distinct from the men' in defence of women's Meetings:

Our place in the creation is to bring forth and nurse up, to keep things orderly, sweet and clean in a family...to preserve and keep wholesome and orderly things in this house. The men need not grudge us this place in the body, wherein we are meet helps, and usurp not authority over them, and act as the inferior parts of the body, being members but a finger or toe.⁴⁴

Not all Quaker women saw the role of their Meetings in this way. In a publication supported by women's Yearly Meeting, Mary Forster noted that female

Quakers, as well as male, had turned to the Light of Christ, and had become his daughters and servants. She believed that women's Meetings were 'meet-helps' to those of their male counterparts, and that 'in this we do assist each other in the spirit of Truth.' The assistance that Forster identified remained based around the family. She thought that the principal role women could play was to have influence over those around them so 'that the younger be trained up in that which is good, sober and discreet, chaste and virtuous.'⁴⁵

Owstwick women's Monthly Meeting recognised that their status lay below that of the men's Meeting. They were willing to defer any controversial decisions, thus avoiding any power struggle. Early in the development of the Meeting they made their position absolutely clear. In August 1676 Silvester Smith and Jane Browne appeared before the Meeting to declare their intentions of marriage. The minute book notes that 'their case being difficult it was referred to the men to consider as they feel is the truth.'⁴⁶ The difficulties of the case are not recorded in either minute book. The men gave permission to marry 'admonishing them to mind the fear of God'.⁴⁷

Despite such overt deference the women's Meeting was autonomous in matters of discipline regarding female Friends. In August 1709 Owstwick men's Meeting recorded that Thomas Galloway and his wife Anne had been 'rather a furtherance than a hindrance' in allowing a non-Quaker to take away Hannah Thompson to be married, despite the fact that 'they knew the man's intention.' Representatives from both the men's and women's Meetings were sent to speak to the Galloways, but received no satisfactory answer or explanation from them. The matter continued for a year, with the Galloways refusing to appear before either Monthly Meeting to explain themselves. Eventually the men's patience ran out, and in August 1710 Thomas Galloway was disowned. Significantly, however, Anne Galloway was not disowned. In October 1710 she agreed to speak to two representatives, Elizabeth Brodwell and Mary Blakes, from the women's Meeting. They reported that 'she did signify that she was troubled for it and said if it were to do again she would not do it.'⁴⁸ The men did not have the responsibility for the discipline of Anne Galloway. If they had, it can be assumed that they would have disowned her along with Thomas, since she had behaved in exactly the same way. It was two months after her husband's disownment that she showed any remorse. Owstwick women's Meeting could have disowned her during this time had they chosen to.

Evidence of the women's Meeting regulating personal behaviour exists in the case of Edward Richardson in November 1720. The men's Meeting had appointed three representatives, John Adams, John Barron and William Fairbairne to 'lay before him the uneasiness that Friends are under by reason of retaining his housekeeper.' This was to no avail as he was unwilling to relinquish her.⁴⁹ According to the men's minutes this is a request to let an unacceptable domestic employee leave. However, the women's minutes provide more detail. It is noted that Mary Fairbairne and Elizabeth Brodwell were appointed to speak to Hannah Smith, Edward Richardson's housekeeper, 'to persuade her to remove from Edward Richardson with whom she hath been concerned upon the account of marriage.' This request was being made because 'being to near

of kin Friends cannot admit it.'⁵⁰ Thus the women's Meeting saw that the duty was to regulate unacceptable sexual behaviour. How close the kinship ties were is not recorded. It is worth noting that in this case, as in the case of the Galloways, each Meeting disciplined their own. Gender boundaries were not crossed.

The responsibility of personal discipline was not limited only to sexual morality. A query from Quarterly Meeting asked how women friends kept 'out of the customs, fashion and language of the world'.⁵¹ Dress was to be kept simple. In 1707 Quarterly Meeting issued an epistle that laid out the 'needless fashion' that existed in the world: 'short skirted gowns, wide sleeves [with] long tabs... black silk hoods reaching down to their aprons with long white tabs coming underneath and long scarves... and handkerchiefs not put plain on, all which was the sense of this meeting Friends ought to keep out of.'⁵² Other areas of concern included maintaining the testimony against tithes and church rates, keeping children well disciplined and away from 'the company of world youth'. Women Friends themselves were to avoid the 'corrupt friendships of the world' and refrain from any gossiping that could bring about disharmony between Friends. 'No tale bearers, whispers, back biters or bearers of false reports' should exist 'but that they speak to the party concerned first'. Discipline was also to be kept when meeting for worship, one query asking 'how do Friends keep from sleeping in meetings?'⁵³

With such wide-ranging responsibilities Owstwick women's Meeting saw fit to assign two representatives to each Preparative Meeting that would have the role of 'overseers' and were to 'inspect into church affairs'. The first appointment was made in November 1699, though regular delegations were not made to visit families until February 1703.⁵⁴ The men's Meeting followed suit, but not until July 1708. Those that were appointed were desired to be 'weighty sensible friends of unblameable conversations'.⁵⁵ Women overseers found an established position as elders within the developing hierarchy of the Quaker movement. Though female individuals had held prominent positions in the past as ministers, they now gained an institutionalised position. It was a position that could be attained by any responsible women, not only those with the energy and charisma to be effective travelling preachers.

When put into practice, the system of Meetings that were favoured by Fox excluded women from church government by clearly defining the role and responsibilities of their Meetings. However, Mack has argued that 'the women's meeting was not a form of seventeenth century tokenism'. Women had the right to organise themselves, and had responsibilities within the Quaker movement, if only confined to the traditional female spheres of home and family. Furthermore, within these spheres they held the responsibility for discipline and instruction over males.⁵⁶ Though women had previously played such roles, for example running businesses or the household when their husband was away, it had always been informally, in the place of an absent male. Males had generally been recognised as holding ultimate power. Women's Meetings challenged these notions.

The development of women's Meetings was subject to wide regional fluctuation. In Owstwick the women's Monthly Meeting evolved alongside that of

the men, each operating separately but also in tandem, with their own spheres of responsibility. Late seventeenth and early eighteenth century society contained gender divisions that could not yet be broken down. The women's Meeting was not of equal standing to the men's. However, the women's Meeting gained important status for women as a group, rather than as individuals, and allowed women to organise themselves in a way that otherwise was not possible in society during this period.

NOTES

1. This article was originally given as a paper at a conference organised by the Yorkshire Quaker Heritage Project, 'Daughters of Light: Researching Quakers and Women in Historical Perspective', at the Edward Boyle Library, the University of Leeds, April 27, 2002.
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16. Cited in Braithwaite, *Second Period*, p. 273.
17. For the detail of the dispute and separation see Braithwaite, *Second Period*, Ch. 11.
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