

FAMILY MEMORY, RELIGION AND RADICALISM:
THE PRIESTMAN, BRIGHT AND CLARK KINSHIP CIRCLE
OF WOMEN FRIENDS AND QUAKER HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

In the nineteenth century, women Friends frequently preserved private family papers – spiritual memoranda, letters, diaries, photograph albums, household accounts, visitors books and so on. One such collection holds the personal papers of women in, among others, the Bragg, Priestman, Bright, and Clark families, who lived during this period mainly in the regions of Newcastle, Manchester and Bristol. Such material allows an exploration of the domestic culture shared among these families and, in particular, the legacy of family memory preserved among this collection. A significant part of that legacy, it is argued, was the various representations of womanliness contained within it, especially as such representations might inform the role undertaken by three generations of this circle within women's rights campaigns. Its findings suggest the need to review aspects of the history of the women's movement by exploring more fully the personal and religious bases of early feminism; equally, it argues the value of a different focus for Quaker history in this period, especially in terms of the relationship between the religious beliefs of Friends and radical politics, including sexual politics.

KEYWORDS

Women; radicalism; feminism; evangelicalism; domesticity; memory

THE COLLECTION OF PRIVATE FAMILY PAPERS
AMONG THE PRIESTMAN, BRIGHT AND CLARK FAMILIES

For some years now my principal research has concerned a circle of women Friends, and has been made possible by the opportunity to work among a substantial private collection, the Millfield Papers.¹ This collection is unusual in its extent, ranging over time from the late eighteenth century to the interwar period in the twentieth century. It is unusual also in the variety of materials to be found there, one that ranges from ephemera such as pressed flowers, locks of hair and recipes, to private papers such as diaries, letters and unpublished memoirs, as well as a few organisational records such as the correspondence and minute books of a range of philanthropic and political bodies. It makes it possible to explore a circle of women, connected by kinship, friendship and religion, whose lives are largely neglected in existing narratives of church and gender history.² Here, I consider some of the issues that arise regarding research in such a collection and discuss some of my findings.³

Internal evidence suggests that the process of collecting these papers began with Rachel Priestman of Newcastle. She was recognised as a Minister by the Religious Society of Friends, like her mother, Margaret Bragg, and her grandmother, Rachel Wilson.⁴ She preserved some of the papers of her parents and their Bragg kin, together with material from her husband and some of his family, the Priestmans of Malton.⁵ A series of female descendants, or wives of descendants, for they were mostly women, extended the collection for a century or so after the death of Rachel Priestman. Much of this material is of a far more quotidian nature than the spiritual memoranda and memoirs that are central to Rachel Priestman's papers, and reflects ordinary, everyday life to a far greater degree. Equally, much of the material from the 1840s onward is also far more concerned with political than with spiritual matters. For many of the women represented here also led active public lives, especially through participation in electioneering, reform movements, local government, and the affairs of the Religious Society of Friends. They were unusual among women Friends in their commitment to the more radical demands of the women's movement from the 1860s onward and to reform politics more generally. Their presence raises fresh questions, not least, how to account for the emergence of this radical current and its particular perspective on women's rights among Friends.⁶ Family relationships and church membership were their most obvious shared characteristics, and the nature and extent of the Millfield Papers promised the possibility of being able to look beyond the public presence of these women, to ask whether there was anything distinctive in their domestic and religious environments to account for that presence.⁷

Private letters, and related 'life documents', may provide a range of data for the historian and sometimes contain evidence not found in the more conventional materials of history. But as well as the privilege that it brings, the opportunity to work among such a collection also comes with its problems. Not the least of these is the considerable amount of time and labour involved in

deciphering, analysing and interpreting such material, and the enormous 'dross' rate inevitable when attempting to mine such sources. Just collecting, selecting and ordering 'the facts' that such papers reveal about particular lives is a large enough task. That task itself raises certain methodological, epistemological and ethical issues for the historian regarding the use of such sources.⁸

The content of this 'counting house of dreams', this repository of memory, suggests a variety of purposes among its collectors: to provide a legacy of spiritual guidance for children and grandchildren; to create memorials of the dead; and to build an emotional storehouse, where the most important personal relationships for the living might be sustained and relived. Carolyn Steedman argues that when an archive is not filled with new meanings, it becomes no more than the 'dust' of the present.⁹ Internal evidence and living family memory both indicate that subsequent generations among this kinship circle have read and re-read selected parts of the collection, sometimes alone, more often with another family member or as a family group, and most especially in times of illness, grief and spiritual trial. The storing and reliving of its own history became a particular characteristic of the family circle identified here, it will be argued, a distinctive feature of a domestic culture that helped support successive generations of questing, questioning and unconventional women. So, the creation of a family archive will itself be one of the objects of study here. The meanings to be explored arise from the concerns of the present, however, and more particularly those that have grown out of the practice of women's history. The focus here, then, is an exploration of the varying representations of Quakerly femininity to be found within this archive, the diverse ways in which women Friends have thought about themselves, and been recalled, as independent, authoritative and womanly.

Such issues will be examined by following a female line of descent among the Bragg, Priestman, Bright and Clark family circle, in four individuals from succeeding generations whose personal papers have been preserved: Margaret Bragg; her daughter, Rachel Priestman; her granddaughter, Margaret Priestman (subsequently Wheeler and then Tanner); and her great granddaughter, Helen Priestman Bright (subsequently, Clark) (see Figure 1). The last three also each played an active part in the collection and preservation of the Millfield Papers. The discussion that follows will pursue three parallel lines of enquiry: the first creates a narrative that examines the place of kinship, domesticity and religion in the lives of these four women; the second tracks the putting together of the Millfield collection; and the third explores a facet of the domestic culture in which they were raised, and which they helped sustain, in the varying representations of Quakerly womanliness to be found within the family history created thereby.

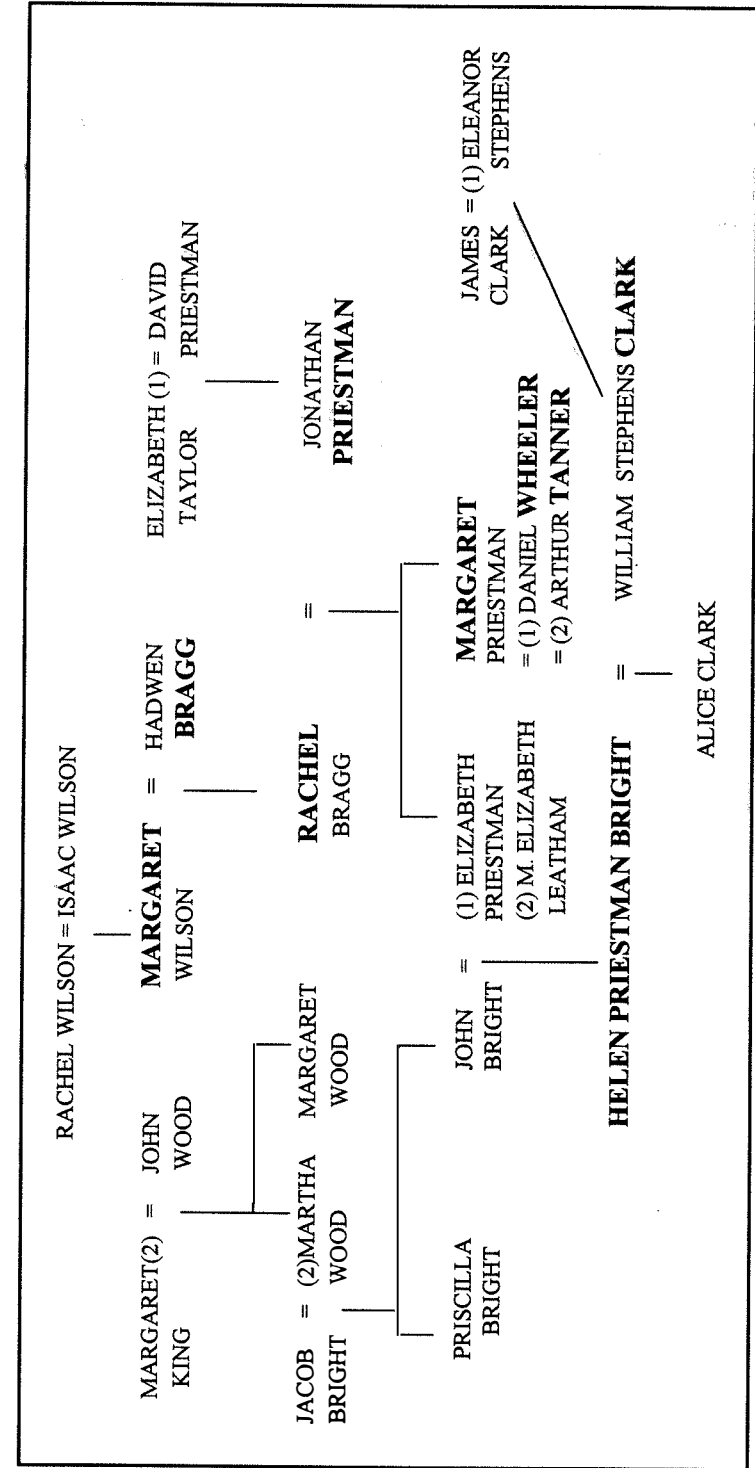


Figure 1: A female line of descent within the Priestman-Bright-Clark family circle of Friends (identifying only those women referred to in this article, and with the names of the four individuals who are the focus of the discussion in bold)

MARGARET WILSON (SUBSEQUENTLY, BRAGG), 1761-1840

The personal papers of Margaret Bragg are comparatively limited. Their preservation was most probably the work of Rachel Priestman, her only surviving daughter at the time of her death, for the Priestman papers form the next major set. We learn from the recollections of this daughter that in the early years of their marriage the Braggs lived above their shop, where their children were born. We also learn that their business prospered and that around 1805 the Braggs were able to build a house, Summerhill, in the sweeter air beyond the old city walls of Newcastle. A family letter from this time refers to Margaret Bragg's farming activities, while her account book for 1820, shows her busy in beekeeping, dairying and horticulture.¹⁰ Memories of her grandchildren indicate that, among her other skills, she was a cook of some note, while a roll of recipes suggests she was especially expert in brewing, wine making, and preserving fruit. From her own papers, we learn, too, that Margaret Bragg played an active role in the family business, the draper shop that her husband had opened a few years before their marriage.

Margaret and Hadwen Bragg evidently enjoyed what we now think of as a companionate marriage. The warmth of their relationship is evident in one of the few surviving letters written by Hadwen Bragg to his wife, one that also conveys a certain sweetness of character. He was recovering from a serious illness while Margaret Bragg was absent from home, and sought to allay her fears thus: 'The notes of the Cuckow and the Chaffinch, with the Blackbird, are cheering, the Grass may be almost seen to grow, all around seems revived.'¹¹ Both were remembered for their sympathy and kindness to those in need. Both became people of some standing in the Newcastle Meeting as Elders, while Margaret Bragg was also recognised as a Minister. But other accounts also portray her as a powerful presence. While one records her 'ability and some force of character', another puts this differently: 'endowed with a very superior share of natural abilities and possessing an active mind she was inclined to take part in the management of a variety of offices beyond the generality of her sex.' Yet others evidently charged her, to her distress, with being 'a busy body'. And one went further still to suggest that she 'ruled her household and possibly Newcastle Meeting with a firm hand'.¹²

Certainly, there is no evidence of a conventional gender hierarchy within their relationship, or in how they raised their children. Indeed, Margaret Bragg emerges as in some respects more privileged than her husband. She enjoyed a position of considerable authority within her church and the local Quaker community, an authority derived largely from her position among its spiritual leadership, but also, it appears, from her forceful personality.¹³ That position not only legitimated her frequent absences from her family in pursuit of her ministry, but also justified her greater freedom from the cares of business. After her husband's death, too, she appears as the senior member of the family firm in a partnership with her younger son, concerned to ensure that her surviving daughter's family received an equivalent inheritance.¹⁴

It was a common ambition among Friends such as these to seek retirement from business in good time to prepare spiritually for death. Margaret Bragg was able increasingly to withdraw from her work in the shop following the move to Summerhill. She made use of her own semi-retirement to think and write about religious issues in a set of memoranda preserved among her papers. These include her reflections upon an issue that was exercising many Friends at the time of her death, the absence of the sacrament of baptism within their church. The influence of evangelicalism among Friends, an influence that was widespread among kin of Margaret Bragg, accounted for many of these concerns. As a minister, and as one increasingly anxious about the rifts that were becoming evident among Friends by 1830, it was an issue that Margaret Bragg evidently felt to be a pressing one as she prepared herself for death.¹⁵ After a thorough searching of the scriptures, she reached the conclusion that they contained no justification for the adoption of baptism among her co-religionists. An account of her last days suggests her frame of mind as she lay dying in the summer of 1840. Apparently addressing her dead husband, she said, 'Ah my dear H. what to me now are all the smiles or the frowns of the World, in comparing the smile of an approving God.' After receiving the opinion of her doctor, she called her family to her and explained: 'I had rather go now that I am prepared I know that it will be trying to you at any time but I should be glad to be taken now.' Among the last words that her family thought they heard, were 'trials', 'patience', and 'sanctified', language that in itself suggests the influence of evangelical religion on both the writer and subject of this record.¹⁶ After her death her surviving papers, though relatively few, nonetheless ensured her a continuing place in family memory, as a model of a firm, capable and authoritative woman of considerable spiritual and mental powers, active in her church and her community, and skilled in business, housewifery, animal husbandry and horticulture.

RACHEL BRAGG (SUBSEQUENTLY, PRIESTMAN), 1791-1854

A much fuller record survives of the life of Rachel Priestman, for she seems to have preserved her papers in a more systematic and comprehensive manner than her mother. So there remains an extensive collection of the letters between Rachel Priestman and her husband, Jonathan, for example. This provides evidence about both the ideals and the practice of Quaker marriage, the character of which is replicated elsewhere in the collection, so as to suggest a shared egalitarian domestic culture within these circles. Rachel Priestman appears never to have assisted in a regular capacity in her parents' or her husband's businesses. A far clearer division of labour appears between men and women Friends of their social standing by the early decades of the nineteenth century. Even so, Rachel Priestman had received a sufficient education in, and acquired some broader knowledge of, business practice, enabling her to step in as required in the businesses of both her parents and her husband. In her letters

she might talk, then, of scrips and shares, or the preparations being made for a public meeting or visiting lecturer, alongside accounts of pie-making, lost house keys, and the health of children. Equally, Jonathan Priestman's letters when she was absent from home report on the progress of spring cleaning, the tempers and skills, or lack of them, of servants, and the personal care he provided for their infant children, including on one occasion setting aside time during the working day to spend with the new baby.¹⁷ So while there was a much sharper sexual division of labour in terms of involvement in business among this generation of middle-class Friends, it was by no means absolute.

Jonathan Priestman was a man of modest means when he married, a younger son who had made his own way in the world after an apprenticeship served in the family tannery in Malton. He accepted an opportunity offered him in a tannery owned by a Richardson cousin in Newcastle and, in time, became a partner in that business.¹⁸ Some years later, this partnership was dissolved and he established his own tannery and glue works. He followed his engagement to Rachel Priestman by making a will that reviewed his limited means. It also revealed that his father, in agreeing to the engagement, had undertaken to provide a sum of £1500 to allow Jonathan Priestman to establish a household of his own. (Explaining that no one else knew of this request, Jonathan Priestman asked that that sum become a legacy for Rachel Bragg, should he die before they married).¹⁹

There is also more extensive evidence of participation in civil society among members of the Priestman household in this generation, involving members of both sexes. Jonathan and Rachel Priestman both took an active role in philanthropic and humanitarian endeavours, sometimes alongside members of other churches, for example, in their work for the bible society or the abolitionist movement. Generally, such work was organised between separate societies of men and the associated 'ladies' auxiliaries. Those auxiliaries might be the more effective of the two, as was the case with the Bible Society, for example. Women were initially excluded from its government, however.²⁰ The Braggs raised their children to participate in such community service, especially in terms of personal benevolence toward poor and sick neighbours, and in the provision of education for the children of the poor. Otherwise, the Priestmans remained 'plain' Friends in their style of living, and much of their recreation was still largely lived among their co-religionists, in Quaker book clubs and essay societies, for example.²¹

The values and beliefs of Rachel and Jonathan Priestman also found expression in the education they provided for their children. Esther Stickney joined their household as governess in the mid-1820s, and taught all the Priestman children in their younger years. Her relationship with them and their parents was evidently a fond one, while her guidance to her charges was heavily weighted with evangelical religion.²² Some of the Priestman children attempted diaries that suggest they were encouraged to render an account of every waking hour and how it was spent. That of Margaret Priestman several times records, for example, '1 hour spent sillily today.' It also suggests that at times she might be

taken away from her studies to help her mother in housekeeping.²³ At other times the children were required to make a summary of their studies at the end of the school year. From this summary it is possible to build a picture of the curriculum provided in the Priestman schoolroom, one that included Latin as well as modern languages, considered then an advanced education for girls. The Priestmans also employed a part-time language master, William Doeg. He kept a record of the failings and misbehaviour of the young Priestmans, one that suggests they were spirited, even rebellious in behaviour, prefiguring perhaps the resistance to church discipline some were later to make, or their subsequent involvement in radical politics.²⁴ Elizabeth Priestman, their oldest child, was subsequently sent to a school in Stoke Newington, London, run by a Friend, Susanna Corder. Here, the curriculum was still more advanced for a girls' school at this time, including Greek, Latin, Mathematics and Science, subjects taught by outside male lecturers.²⁵ On returning home, Elizabeth Priestman evidently found it difficult to readjust to her family's restricted style of life. It fell to her grandmother, Margaret Bragg, to lead her from the 'wayward propensities of an unregenerate heart', and in time Elizabeth Priestman acquired a reputation for piety and goodness that lived on long after her early death. In the family memory of her, created especially by the memoir compiled by her mother, she became an idealised, saintly example of good womanhood, as those who die young so often do.²⁶

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Rachel Priestman's papers are her spiritual memoranda, in which she appears as an altogether more troubled and less confident figure than her mother. Hers was an altogether more anxious faith, and one more clearly shaped by evangelical religion.²⁷ Her original call to the ministry occurred after the mourning that followed her father's death. But several times she also recorded herself as in rebellion against God's will, most notably at times of grief for a dead baby, or the anxieties she endured over the serious illnesses of surviving children. Calls to a travelling ministry generally occurred after such a troubled period. One such came after the deaths, close together and in young adulthood, of two of her daughters, and took her to the United States for over a year. At other times, the call appears to have arisen out of concerns she felt for many of her own and her husband's kin who sympathised with the firmly evangelical Beaconite schism. For while Rachel Priestman's belief was clearly coloured by evangelical doctrine, she remained opposed to schism on such grounds and feared the spiritual fate of those kin in danger of departing the Society. She died after becoming ill while undertaking another travelling ministry in Ireland in 1854. It fell to Margaret Priestman, her oldest surviving daughter, to preserve Rachel Priestman's papers and to prepare a memoir of her mother's life from her spiritual memoranda and letters. This memorial provided a legacy for later generations, most especially as a record of spiritual trial as well as piety. Equally, it provided a further representation of a woman whose sense of calling many times required her absence from home and whose inner strength enabled her to fulfil duties that she would otherwise have gladly put aside if she could. In time, Margaret Priestman's papers also found

their way into the Millfield collection, leaving a legacy of a very different form of Quakerly womanliness from her mother's.

MARGARET PRIESTMAN

(SUBSEQUENTLY WHEELER, AND THEN TANNER), 1817-1905

Margaret Priestman was, over the course of her life, twice married and twice widowed, but remained childless. It was she, who, on the marriage of her older sister, Elizabeth Priestman, to John Bright completed the preparation of their home, and greeted them on their return from their wedding tour. She then remained for some months to help her sister adjust to her new life. Sisters appear regularly to have fulfilled such roles in marriages among these family circles at this time. There was also an expectation that siblings would forge further relations between the two families concerned. In this case it led to lifetime friendships between John Bright and his brothers and sisters and the brothers and sisters of Elizabeth Priestman, for example, that between Margaret Priestman and Priscilla Bright (subsequently, McLaren).²⁸

The bonds of such friendships were shortly to be further strengthened by the sorrows and tragedies that lay ahead for both families. For in the summer following her marriage, the health of Elizabeth Bright became a matter of growing concern among her kin. By this time she was pregnant and had recently nursed John Bright through smallpox. So after a holiday the couple took together with the Priestman family at Tynemouth, she stayed on at Summerhill to recuperate. Margaret Bragg, the grandmother who had become her guide as a young woman, was at this time preparing herself for death, and Elizabeth Bright extended her visit further for this final farewell. She wrote to John Bright of the comfort she drew from Margaret Bragg's peaceful passing: 'As I bent over her and kissed her cold lips and hands I could almost long for the same happy home – death had lost its sting – there was nothing awful there.'²⁹ A few months later she gave birth to a daughter, under the care of her mother, while Margaret Priestman took over the running of Summerhill.

In the months ahead Rachel Priestman became increasingly concerned at news of her daughter's increasing debility.³⁰ It became clear that Elizabeth Bright was in a 'consumption', that is, had become a victim of tuberculosis, a disease that claimed many young lives at this time.³¹ By the following summer, 1841, the Brights decided on a visit to Leamington Spa to consult a noted physician, Dr Jephson, while their baby, Helen, went with her nurse to stay with the Priestmans. Margaret Priestman came to nurse her sister, for John Bright was frequently required to return to Rochdale. It was stocktaking in the family firm, part of the annual business routine that had taken on still greater importance that year, for his father had decided partially to retire from business. Jacob Bright planned to let some of his mills to his older sons, and John Bright was in the midst of forming the firm that would become John Bright and Bros. He also

felt under an obligation to take part in the election then being held in Rochdale, on behalf of an anti-Corn Law candidate whom he had helped to sponsor in the constituency. The separation from Elizabeth Bright was especially painful in such circumstances, but John Bright wrote often in an attempt to cheer his wife. After appearing for a time to gain in strength, Elizabeth Bright, fell into a rapid decline in August, and John Bright was summoned urgently. Shortly, he had to tell his wife of the doctor's advice that death was near.³² Afterwards, her body was taken to Rochdale for burial at the Meeting House there.

Margaret Priestman stayed behind after the funeral to take care of her baby niece and to help Priscilla Bright who now had management of both her widowed father's and her brother's households. Their friendship deepened in the months that followed so that they began to think of each other as 'husband' and 'wife'.³³ So, too, did the friendship between John Bright and Margaret Priestman, a friendship that, it seems, might have ended in another wedding, but for the law against marriage to sisters of deceased wives. Such friendships were built not simply on shared private lives, and membership of the Religious Society of Friends, however, but also on a commitment to political radicalism. Here a generational difference among Friends becomes evident. Some of the original reservations that Rachel and Jonathan Priestman had at first voiced about John Bright's proposal of marriage to their oldest daughter related to his involvement in local protest movements, and his emergence as a fiery orator. John Bright always accepted such criticism with good grace, but also refused firmly to alter the path on which he had embarked, a path that eventually took him to a seat in the House of Commons.³⁴

He continued to present this path as a calling, one that arose both from the new political power of the middle classes after the 1832 Reform Act and from his capacity for public speaking. The exercise of the franchise, and the campaign to persuade others as to how to use that franchise, took on, by his account, an ethical imperative analogous to Rachel Priestman's call to the ministry. Just as he was campaigning to be elected to parliament, in the spring of 1843, she was preparing to leave her own domestic circle for over a year to undertake a travelling ministry in the United States. His calling, he suggested, was equally clearly to help secure 'the people's bread'.³⁵

Margaret Priestman and her younger sisters looked on with admiration as their friends among the Bright sisters also entered the campaign against the Corn Laws. They not only began to appear at public meetings calling for repeal, but also managed stalls at the Manchester bazaar that proved a great success in fundraising for the Anti-Corn Law League. The role of women in the League has recently begun to receive more considered attention from historians.³⁶ It has been argued, for example, that their presence helped make this cause an altogether more respectable one, for it served to soften the evident class-conflict underpinning this movement by emphasizing a moral dimension. The sexual division of labour within families like the Priestmans and the Brights had long made feeding the hungry the work of women. It was they who established and

managed the soup kitchens in times of need, when, for example, growing unemployment coincided with the high price of bread as it did in 'the hungry '40s'. For women such as these, bread now became both a political as well as a domestic fact of life, and one thereby requiring their presence, however circumscribed, in the political arena.

Margaret Priestman shortly commenced emulating the work of the Bright sisters and set about organising public tea parties and soirées in Newcastle on behalf of the League. Perhaps this unaccustomed public prominence was a spur to rumours about her, rumours that at one point in this period had her engaged to three different men, and not all of them Friends.³⁷ This, then, was the kind of irritant that might attach to a woman's entry into unaccustomed areas of public life. Another rumour proved more intriguing to Margaret Priestman for it claimed her as an advocate of women's rights.³⁸ She took this charge far more seriously. On the one hand, her response suggests that she had never previously thought of herself in this light. On the other hand, she did not dismiss the assumption outright, only maintaining that she had her own views on this matter that were unlikely to be in complete accord with such a reputation. For this was a period of transition when women such as she were beginning to take on quite unaccustomed roles and to imbue those roles with a spectrum of meanings. At this time, for example, the Priestman sisters joined the audience for a lecture on teetotalism by the first woman public speaker they had encountered.³⁹ Another twenty five years or so were to pass before any of the Bright or Priestman sisters addressed a public meeting, by which time they had, at least, attained the standing of matrons or become spinsters beyond marriageable age.

For the present, Margaret Priestman maintained her involvement in the campaigns for repeal of the Corn Laws, including assisting at the great Covent Garden Bazaar in 1845. The women of the Priestman-Bright circle all worked to make goods for sale, but Margaret Priestman also became a saleswoman there, standing in for Priscilla Bright who was at this time mourning the recent death of a brother. The bazaar coincided with the Yearly Meeting of Friends, and it was also during these weeks in London that Margaret Priestman renewed her acquaintance with Daniel Wheeler, who became her first husband. They settled in Bristol but this marriage ended after only two years with Daniel Wheeler's death from tuberculosis, during most of which time Margaret Wheeler was his nurse. Subsequently, according to the established pattern in her family, she wrote an account of his last weeks, one in which she sought signs of his salvation and religious sustenance for herself.⁴⁰ She remained close to her sister-in-law, Sarah Wheeler, who shortly married a noted Somerset minister, William Tanner (brother of the man she herself was to marry some years on). After the deaths of Sarah and William Tanner, it appears, care also passed to her of those Wheeler family papers that had been preserved by her sister-in-law.

The spirited, unconventional woman of her youth became over the years that followed a stately widow whose opinion carried considerable weight within her family circle. She eased the solitude and sadness that followed her husband's death by caring successively for two children whose temperament and behav-

our had evidently taxed their parents to distraction, one of whom was her niece, Helen Bright.⁴¹ Helen Bright subsequently lived with her for most of the year and Margaret Wheeler became in effect her governess, providing her with a similarly advanced education to her own, and one that continued when Helen Bright went away to school in Brighton in 1853. A year or so later, Margaret Wheeler married a struggling paper manufacturer of Cheddar, Arthur Tanner, and the couple established a new home in Sidcot. When Helen Bright married William Clark in 1866 and left her Lancashire home for Somerset, she took comfort from the presence nearby of the aunt who, like Priscilla Bright, had acted as her adoptive mother. Margaret Tanner was widowed once again only a few years later, and in her turn, was consoled by the nearness of Helen Clark and a growing band of great nieces and nephews.

Subsequently, the work of the Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts (LNA), formed in 1870, became her prime concern. Her gravitas lent respectability to a cause that was especially controversial for this legislation sought to reduce the incidence of venereal disease among the defence forces by requiring the medical supervision of prostitutes, or women thought to be prostitutes, in designated military and naval districts. Josephine Butler, another eminently respectable matron, was persuaded to lead the campaign to defend the civil rights of women who fell under the acts. Many among the leadership of the women's movement, however, thought it unwise publicly to take up so distasteful a cause, and Josephine Butler turned to women Friends interested in the rights of women to assist her. Margaret Tanner became treasurer of the LNA and was once again able to put to use her organisational and fund-raising skills, and her knowledge of bookkeeping. Her sister, Mary Priestman, worked alongside her as honorary secretary to the association. The campaign against the state regulation of prostitution, and its extension to Europe, became, for many of its supporters, a kind of crusade. So Margaret Tanner reported that a speech on this issue by Josephine Butler 'embodied as it were the highest aspirations and hope of our Cause - faith in God, and His will and power to give it victory.'⁴²

In these years, too, she and her sisters were part of a radical current within the women's suffrage movement, which also included the Bright sisters and which was active, too, in the temperance movement and in the founding of the Women's Liberal Federation.⁴³ Involvement in such campaigns evidently led the women of this family circle to question more decidedly their position within the Religious Society of Friends. Through the Bristol Quarterly Meeting they began to press for a merger of men's and women's meetings that would allow women Friends greater equality in the government of their church.⁴⁴ It proved a slow, gradual process that was not completed until a few years after Margaret Tanner's death in 1905. Nor did she live to cast a parliamentary vote. But she would have qualified, during her second widowhood, for a range of local government franchises that were granted women from 1869 on, and saw her niece, Helen Clark, and other women Friends begin to enter public office on local school boards and the boards of poor law guardians. At her funeral, Walter

McLaren (son of her old friend) spoke of hers as a life of public service, though this would not immediately be obvious from the papers that she left behind, all of which reflected rather her intimate relationships and emotional life, rather the numerous offices she had undertaken in voluntary associations of various kinds. In this they differed from the papers subsequently left by her sisters, and most especially those of Anna Maria Priestman. Yet, because of her extensive kinship and friendship networks within the women's movement and radical politics, even her private correspondence contains extensive evidence relating to her public life. After Margaret Tanner's death, Helen Clark, with the assistance of her daughter, Alice Clark, sorted her papers and the other family papers also preserved among them. In this way a further generation was introduced to the task of selecting and preserving the collection, and the extensive family memory stored therein.

HELEN PRIESTMAN BRIGHT
(SUBSEQUENTLY, CLARK), 1840-1927

The needs of Helen Bright, as a motherless child, had made her the hub of the kinship circle formed by the Priestman and Bright families. Though she spent much of her childhood with the Priestmans, she drew her religious outlook and values from her father's family. Like John Bright, she remained sceptical about religious enthusiasm in general and evangelical doctrine in particular. She also emulated him and another favourite among her Rochdale kin, her great aunt, Margaret Wood, in the forthright expression of her views. Margaret Wood had, too, become increasingly sympathetic to the Hicksite schism in the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and had shared the concern of non-evangelical ministers, like Sarah Lynes Grubb, at the growing standing of evangelicals among Friends. So, perhaps her influence also explains the lack of sympathy for evangelical religion evident in Helen Bright, for her great aunt's household provided a favourite place of refuge from the tensions in her own home.³⁵

Her strong views, imperious and unbending temperament, and directness of expression made her on occasion an extremely ill-mannered child, especially after her father's second marriage. This aspect of her personality created long-standing difficulties in her relations with her stepmother, the second Elizabeth Bright (born Leatham). Even her beloved 'Aunt Peggie', Margaret Tanner, was sometimes subject to the sharpness of her tongue. Responding to a reprimand from her aunt on the harshness of her language in a previous letter, Helen Bright responded: 'please don't shudder etc etc as it sounds very stupid - at least it makes me cross to hear it.' Yet she could also laugh at herself, and as she matured increasingly attempted to moderate her directness of manner: 'I have one great rule, viz to keep my mouth constantly smiling when I am in a bad humour.'³⁶ She responded to, and sought to emulate, the patience, affection and wise counsel of her Priestman relations with whom she often preferred to be

for the first few years after her father's re-marriage. Their importance to her derived also from their relationship to her dead mother and their readiness to share memories of the first Elizabeth Bright, not least in the memoir prepared by her grandmother, and the preservation of other mementoes that provided some substance with which to fill this great absence in Helen Bright's life. She also remained close to her father, despite the tensions of her Rochdale home, and in her youth became his companion during the travels he undertook when recovering from a breakdown. In adolescence, she became his political amanuensis at home, helping him keep some order among his books and papers, and retreating to his library to escape the domestic duties that generally fell to an oldest daughter. She shared his commitment to reform politics, and in the years immediately before her marriage, was introduced to the radical circles in London among which he moved.

Helen Bright had already turned down at least one offer of marriage when William Stephens Clark, a shoe manufacturer of Street in Somerset, began to court her. She discouraged her new suitor by the mocking and irreverent reception she gave his efforts to convince her of the truth of the beliefs and values in which he had been raised in 'a strict Evangelical Friend's family' (his description), and their initial correspondence came to an end. He never succeeded in changing her religious outlook, indeed he recalled that his own beliefs, 'which I always before thought firmly founded on a Rock, were to some extent shaken' by their exchanges.³⁷ The sympathy he offered after the death of a young brother revived their friendship, and over time he convinced her to accept him as her husband.

The Clarks shared Helen Bright's commitment to radical politics and she found William Clark far more receptive to her ideas on the rights of women than she was to his on religious matters. Eventually, they built the house, Millfield, which was to lend its name to the family papers brought together there. Her removal to Somerset following their marriage meant that she lived close not only to Margaret Tanner, but also to her two other Priestman aunts, Anna Maria and Mary, who settled in Bristol shortly after her marriage. They were to work together with Helen and William Clark, and others in their kinship network, on a range of women's rights issues, as well as in moral reform organisations and Radical Liberal politics, at the local, national and international level.

Helen Clark took over the care of the papers brought together by her Priestman relatives, including those of her three aunts, and added also papers that came to her from her Bright, Wood and Clark kin. Her own papers and those of one of her daughters, Alice Clark, the shoe manufacturer, company director, suffragist and historian of women's work who had helped in this task, were subsequently also preserved in this collection. Like Margaret Tanner, Helen Clark kept mostly private correspondence, and there is little 'official' material relating to her role in church, community and politics. Yet, also like her aunt, many of her personal relationships were closely tied to her public life (see Figure 2 which shows the extent of her kinship links amongst women's suffragists). So her papers tell us much, for example, about some of the internal tensions and

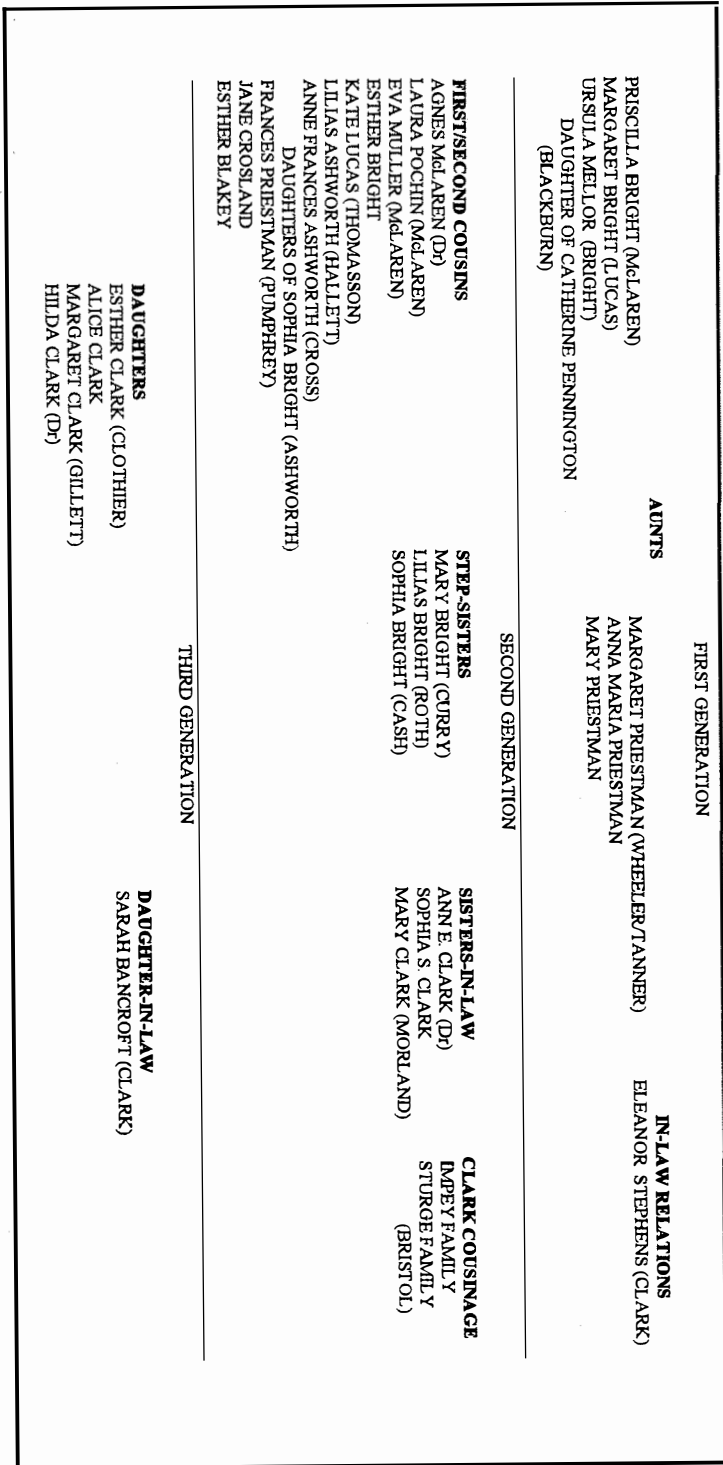


Figure 2: Some members of Helen Priestman Bright Clark's kinship circle known to support women's rights (Identified according to their relationship to her and with married names or professions in parentheses)

conflicts within the women's rights movement, and the role of the alternative, Radical-Liberal leadership of which she was a part. They also preserve a memory of Helen Clark as a decidedly forceful woman of strong views, but not always of a pleasing disposition – a very different representation to that of the mother she had not known. Perhaps this in part explains why her husband felt it right to leave his children a testimony that emphasised her goodness. There he bore witness to Helen Clark's life as one 'of true humility and unselfish devotedness to the good of others.' He was convinced he had lived 'in the presence of a life truly near the mind of Christ' and explained: 'when I dwelt on this I could not believe that any belief could be far wrong that led to such a life.'⁴⁸ Such an account provided another, quite different model for female descendants of how they, too, might make themselves 'good women', a representation based still on religious values, though quite different in form from those that shaped family memory of Helen Clark's own mother, her grandmother and her great grandmother.

CONCLUSION

The stories set out here serve to demonstrate how women Friends such as these constantly negotiated new roles for themselves within the public sphere. These Quaker households did not conform to the ideal of the middle-class home as a 'haven in a heartless world': a sequestered place that removed women from the cares and anxieties of business and affairs of state, and allowed them to create a purer sphere where men might find a restorative retreat from the moral corruption of the outside world. Rather, the homes of these families increasingly looked outward, to become centres of social service as much as personal care. In time, that openness and the ethical imperatives with which it was associated, allowed a moralised, even a sacralised, conception of political activism, a conception that might also serve to justify the participation of women, as of men. In time, too, women's involvement with a range of reforms led them to question the sexual, social and political subordination of their sex, not least within the governing councils of their own church.

The domestic culture of this kinship circle promoted also the preservation and communication of a shared family memory, in large part through the collection of personal papers. Such memory held within it diverse models of how to become a 'good woman', and many aspects of these challenged the stereotypical notions of middle-class femininity in this period. This particular political and religious heritage might help sustain the members of this circle, then, in the unconventional paths they chose. Such evidence points in turn to the complex origins of feminism, in the history of which the role of churches, of religious values, and of domestic cultures has only recently begun to receive recognition, in Britain at least.

It is similarly difficult to fit the variety of religious experience explored here

within the dominant framework that presently organises the history of the Religious Society of Friends in this period. That framework emphasises the significance of schism and of polarities of outlook in the contest over the influence of evangelicalism among Friends.⁴⁹ Many, however, reserved their strongest opposition for dogmatism, from whatever quarter it came within the Society. Their presence suggests the potential value of an alternative focus, on a middle ground where reformers came together, from across a wide spectrum of opinion regarding evangelical doctrine and influence. A study of Joseph Sturge, for example, notes his reference to 'a liberal party' within the Society of Friends by the 1840s, one that united evangelical radicals such as he with non-evangelicals like John Bright in their pursuit of reform.⁵⁰ Edwin Bronner's recent account of a 'moderate' current in London Yearly Meeting mid-century similarly offers a more complex picture, and one that again shows evangelical Friends working alongside figures like Helen Clark and John Bright to reform the government and discipline of the Society.⁵¹ Such interpretations suggest that religious and political goals might both cut across varying currents of thought on doctrine among Friends by mid-century.⁵²

The lives of the four women discussed here cover the whole period of these tensions and cross currents. The impact of evangelical theology is evident in both their actions and the records of their spiritual lives in memoranda, memoirs and letters. The individuals from the first three generations of this circle were all, to varying degrees, sympathetic to evangelical religion, but their openness to its influence affected each life somewhat differently. In contrast, Helen Clark was unbending in her impatience with this current among Friends. But all four women shared an opposition to spiritual arrogance and schism. Their lives demonstrate, then, how Quaker religion in this period encompassed a wide spectrum of responses to evangelicalism, even within a single family circle. Moreover, responses from differing points across that spectrum were capable of sustaining those Friends, women as well as men, who broke with established church values and with conventions of gender difference to take up fresh concerns and fresh opportunities in public life. Reconstructing the lives of persons previously largely excluded from history, such as these, may create fresh perspectives on larger questions, not least the construction of gender differences and gender hierarchies. Collections of private papers may contain meanings beyond those of family history, and prompt new narratives of church, community and society. Equally, they offer evidence of women's lives that challenged, and continue to challenge, conventional stereotypes of what it may mean to be a woman.

1 The Millfield Papers, Clark Archive, C. & J. Clark Ltd, Street, Somerset (henceforth, MIL). I thank the trustees for allowing me to research material in this Archive, and to present some of my findings here.

2 Though see, Isichei, E, *Victorian Quakers*, London: Oxford University Books, 1970; Kennedy, T. C. *British Quakerism, 1860-1920: the transformation of a religious community*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

3 On the nature of archives, and their relation to memory and the work of history, see Steedman, C., *Dust*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001, esp. 'The Magistrates', pp. 38-

65 and 'The Space of Memory: in an Archive', pp. 66-89.

4 See Benson, R. S., *Photographic Pedigree of the Descendants of Isaac and Rachel Wilson*, Middlesborough: William Appleyard, 1912; Somervell, J., *Isaac and Rachel Wilson, Quakers of Kendal, 1714-85*, London: Swarthmore Press, 1924, esp. pp. 154-55.

5 Boyce, A. O., *Records of a Quaker Family: the Richardsons of Cleveland*, London: Samuel Harris, 1889, esp. pp. xiv-xvii, 21, 50, 52, 60, 78, 88; Priestman, S. H., *The Priestmans of Thornton-le-Dale and Some of Their Descendants*, Sutton-on-Hull: privately published, 1955, pp. 15-16.

6 For accounts of other, varying routes for women Friends to involvement in public life and movements for women's rights, see, for example, Wright, S., *Friends in York. The Dynamics of Quaker Revival, 1780-1860*, Keele: Keele University Press, 1995; Plant, H., 'Gender and the Aristocracy of Dissent: a comparative study of the beliefs, status and roles of women in Quaker and Unitarian communities, 1770-1830, with particular reference to Yorkshire', D.Phil thesis, University of York, 2000; O'Donnell, E. A., 'Woman's Rights and Woman's Duties, Quaker Women in the Nineteenth Century, with Special Reference to Newcastle', Ph.D Thesis, University of Sunderland, 1999; O'Donnell, E. A., "'On Behalf of All Young Women Trying to Be Better Than They Are": feminism and Quakerism in the nineteenth century: the case of Anna Deborah Richardson', *Quaker Studies* 6 (2001), pp. 37-58.

7 On further aspects of the domestic culture and church culture of Friends, see my 'Religion and the Meanings of Work: four cases among the Bright circle of women Quakers', in Cowman, K. and Jackson, L., *Women and Work Culture in Britain Circa 1850-1950*, Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 2005 (forthcoming); and 'Kinship and Friendship: Quaker women's networks and the women's movement', *Women's History Review*, 2005 (forthcoming).

8 For a full discussion of some of these issues, see Stanley, L., 'The Epistolarium: on theorising letters and correspondences', *Auto/biography* 12 (2004), pp. 216-50; on the relation between 'reading practices associated with the epistolary' and the work of history, see Steedman, *Dust*, esp. p. 75. On methodological issues related to the use of letters and diaries, see also Jolly, M. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001 (2 vols).

9 Steedman, *Dust*, esp. p. 80.

10 Priestman, Jonathan to Priestman, Rachel, 25 June 1816, MIL 3/05; Bragg, Margaret, Account Book for 1820, MIL 15/05.

11 Bragg, Hadwen and Priestman, Jonathan to Bragg, Margaret, 3 June 1801, MIL 6/09.

12 Steel, J. W., *A Historical Sketch of the Society of Friends 'In Scorn Called Quakers' in Newcastle and Gateshead, 1653-1898*, London: Headley Bros, 1899, p. 61; Sansbury, R., *Beyond the Blew Stone: 300 years of Quakers in Newcastle*, Newcastle: Newcastle upon Tyne Preparative Meeting, 1998, esp. pp. 128, 155, 162, and compare, Somervell, *Isaac and Rachel Wilson*, p. 155; Bragg, Margaret to Bragg, Rachel, 29 August 1809, 6 October 1809, 6 November 1809, MIL 12/04.

13 On women's ministry and the authority it conferred, see Wright, *Friends in York*, pp. 39-49, and compare Plant, 'Aristocracy of Dissent', esp. pp. 131-38.

14 Parsons, William and White, William, *History, Directory & Gazetteer... of Durham and Northumberland*, 2 vols, Newcastle: White & Co, 1827, vol. 1, p. 11. Bragg, Margaret, 3 April 1837, memorandum explaining additional bequests to Rachel and Jonathan Priestman, MIL 11/04.

15 Bragg, Margaret to Priestman, Rachel, 29 July 1836, reporting the decision of members of the Crewdson family, related to her family by marriage, to be baptised, MIL 12/04.

16 Anon, Account of Margaret Bragg's last days, MIL 11/04, MP.

17 For example, Priestman, Jonathan to Priestman, Rachel, 8 June, 13 June, 23 June, 25 June 1816; 22 April, 29 April, 6 May 1818, all MIL 3/05; Priestman, Rachel to Priestman, Jonathan, undated letters from the early years of their marriage, MIL 4/01.

18 Priestman, Jonathan, Articles of apprenticeship to David and Joseph Priestman, 1803, MIL 3/04; Priestman, Jonathan to the Trustees of the Cordwainers Company, 6 February 1827; Agreement re the division of Richardson and Priestman, 6 August n. y. [c. 1827]; List with headings 'Skinners' and 'Tanners', showing the capital and salary of Jonathan Priestman, 1821-27, all MIL 3/02. A comparison of Parson and White, *Directory of Durham and Northumberland*, vol 1, p. 70 with the *National Commercial Directory, 1828-9*, London and Manchester: Pigot and Co, 1829, pp. 603, 605, 610, 597, suggests this partnership was dissolved at some point during 1827-28.

- 19 Priestman, Jonathan to Priestman, David, 19 February 1814, MIL 6/09(2).
- 20 Howsam, Leslie, *Cheap Bibles: nineteenth century publishing and the British and Foreign Bible Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 53.
- 21 Steel, *Historical Sketch*, pp. 79, 81, 83-88, 129, 153-54.
- 22 [Stickney], Esther to Priestman, Margaret, 8 September n. y. [1842], MIL 33/01(2) (a packet of similarly partially dated letters, mistakenly ascribed to Esther Bright in MIL); Stickney, Esther to Priestman, Rachel, n. d., MIL 26/01(13).
- 23 For example, Priestman, Margaret, Diary, 28 September 1824, MIL 16/03.
- 24 Doeg, William, 'Record of Misdeeds by Priestman Children', 15 November [1830]- 13 April 1833, MIL 16/03.
- 25 On Corder's school, see O'Donnell, 'Woman's Rights and Woman's Duties', p. 149.
- 26 Bright, Elizabeth, Memoir, compiled from her memoranda and letters by Rachel Priestman, MIL 16/04.
- 27 Priestman, Rachel, Memoir, compiled from her memoranda and letters by Margaret Wheeler, MIL 16/01.
- 28 See, the lifelong correspondence, Priestman/Wheeler/Tanner, Margaret to Bright/McLaren, Priscilla, MIL 31/01(4), and Bright/McLaren, Priscilla to Priestman/Wheeler/Tanner, Margaret, MIL 42/02.
- 29 Bright, Elizabeth, Memoir, MIL 16/04.
- 30 For example, Priestman, Rachel to Bright, Elizabeth, 27 November 1840; 2 September, 6 September 1841, MIL 15/01(2).
- 31 Rothman, S. M. *Living in the Shadow of Death: tuberculosis and the social experience of illness in American history*, New York: Basic Books, 1988, explores the social and personal implications of this disease.
- 32 Bright, John to Bright, Elizabeth, 26 June 1841, MIL 35/01(b); Bright, Elizabeth, Memoir, MIL 16/04; Bright, Elizabeth to Bright, John, in another's hand, 24 August 1841, MIL 31/01(4).
- 33 See, for example, Priestman, Margaret to Bright, Priscilla, 12 November 1841; n. d., post-marked 20 May 1842; 10 June 1844, MIL 31/01(4).
- 34 For example, Bright, John to Priestman, Elizabeth, 27 December 1838, MIL 35/01(a).
- 35 I discuss these issues at greater length in 'John Bright, Radical Politics and the Spirit of Quakerism', *Albion* 34 (2002), pp. 584-605.
- 36 Pickering, P. A. and Tyrrell, A., *The People's Bread: a history of the Anti-Corn Law League*, London: Leicester University Press, 2000; Morgan, S., 'Domestic Economy and Political Agitation: women and the Anti-Corn Law League', in Gleadle, K. and Richardson, S., *Women in British Politics 1760-1860: the power of the petticoat*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000, pp. 115-46.
- 37 Priestman, Margaret to Bright, Priscilla, n. d. [c. February 1844], MIL 31/01(4).
- 38 See, for example, Priestman, Margaret to Bright, Priscilla, n. d., and 16 September 1843, MIL 31/01(4), where she declares herself a 'suffragist' (i.e. a supporter of a more democratic franchise) but unconvinced of the wisdom of campaigning for women's enfranchisement.
- 39 Priestman, Margaret to Bright, Priscilla, n. d. [summer 1842], MIL 31/01(4). Her younger sister, Rachel Priestman jnr expressed greater ambivalence in reporting the event to her particular friend, Esther Bright, in an undated letter [summer 1842], MIL 10/03.
- 40 Wheeler, Margaret, several drafts of an account of her husband's last days and her own grief, n. d. [c. autumn 1848], MIL 29/17.
- 41 Her full name was Helen Priestman Bright, and she retained it after her marriage, usually signing herself 'H. P. B. Clark'. For brevity I will here refer to her as Helen Bright or Helen Clark as appropriate.
- 42 Tanner, Margaret to McLaren, Priscilla Bright, 5 November 1890, MIL 31/01(4).
- 43 See Holton, S. S., *Suffrage Days: stories from the women's suffrage movement*, London: Routledge, 1996.
- 44 Holton, S. S. and Allen, M., 'Offices and Services: women's pursuit of sexual equality within the Society of Friends', *Quaker Studies* 2 (1997), pp. 1-29; Kennedy, *British Quakerism*, esp. pp. 211-36.
- 45 I write more extensively about Margaret Wood in my 'Religion and the Meaning of Work', and in the book I am presently completing, 'Women Friends', to be published by Routledge.

- 46 Bright, Helen to Wheeler, Margaret, 10 October 1853, MIL 32/02.
- 47 Clark, William, S., Memorandum, n. d. [c. 1904], MIL 79.
- 48 Clark, W. S., Memorandum, MIL 79.
- 49 Compare, for example, Isichei, *Victorian Quakers*, ch. 2; Kennedy, *British Quakerism*, pp. 12-46; Ingle, H. L., *Quakers in Conflict: the Hicksite reformation*, 2nd edn, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1998 (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1986).
- 50 Tyrrell, A., *Joseph Sturge and the Moral Reform Radical Party in Early Victorian Britain*, London: Christopher Helm, 1987, p. 193.
- 51 Bronner, E. B., 'Moderates in London Yearly Meeting, 1857-1873: precursors of Quaker liberals', *Church History* 59 (1990), pp. 356-71, and compare with Holton, 'John Bright'.
- 52 Even patterns of doctrinal difference were also less simple than sometimes suggested, see Kerman, C. E., 'Elias Hicks and Thomas Shillitoe: two paths diverge', *Quaker Studies* 5 (2000), pp. 19-47, which compares the theology of Elias Hicks with the views of another minister, and prominent voice of 'orthodoxy', Thomas Shillitoe, and shows how they were united in a commitment to quietism - a commitment generally associated with 'conservative' currents within the society. Similarly, Hamm, T. D., "'A Protest against Protestantism": Hicksite Friends and the Bible in the nineteenth century', *Quaker Studies* 6 (2002), pp. 175-94, explores the significance accorded the bible by various shades of opinion among Friends in this period, and concludes that there was far greater uniformity than has previously been acknowledged.

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