

BOOK REVIEWS

Mellor, H. and J., *Seekers and Finders: Quakers in High Wycombe 1650-2000: a brief history*, York: Sessions, 2003. pp. vi + 98. ISBN 1 805072 307 9, Paper, £8.00

As the title suggests this is a brief history of Friends in High Wycombe over a considerable period of time and as a consequence, it does not treat its subject in any great depth. However, whilst it is clearly written for a Quaker audience, it does provide the non-Quaker reader with an insight into the history of a Meeting and unlike so many histories of Quaker Meetings, it has the merit of breaking away from the tendency to produce a hagiographical account of a local Meeting. The authors are to be applauded for their provision of some critical commentary and their use of secondary source material to back up their assertions. But the work would have been greatly enhanced if they had extended their secondary reading to include other works on similar Meetings. Existing work on York Monthly Meeting, for example, could have provided comparative material for Wycombe Meeting in both the seventeenth, late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This would have enhanced the sources the authors have used and would have enabled the Quaker historian to assess how typical or atypical Wycombe Meeting was in this period.

The book shows that, as with so many other Meetings, this was a Meeting which, whilst flourishing in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century in what we may regard as the early, enthusiastic years of Quakerism, was set to decline in the late eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century. The authors do not provide us with any information as to the numbers of Attenders or any information as to how many convincements took place in these years but it is probably safe to assume that there was a lack of new Members joining the Meeting. It is clear that this decline was largely caused by a lack of 'weighty' Friends to provide leadership and a consequential failure of the Meeting to attract new Members, resulting in a sharp decline in membership, a decline which was compounded by the resignation in 1836 of John Wilkinson who was clearly influential in his guidance of the Meeting. We have to assume that besides an inability to attract new members, there was also a subsequent decline in membership through disownments. Unfortunately there is no analysis of the number, rate and causes of disownments as a percentage of membership, and comparisons with other Meetings would probably have shown that Wycombe was not unique in suffering the loss of a considerable number of Members through disownment. High Wycombe was also not unusual in its loss of 'weighty' Friends in the 1830s as Evangelicalism became a contentious topic within the Religious Society of Friends, setting apart the more conservative Quietists from the Evangelicals led by J. J. Gurney. It is clear from other research that a combination of the good leadership of 'weighty' Friends and good Ministry, kept Meetings alive and provided guidance during these years of difficult doctrinal change. By 1864 High Wycombe Meeting was sadly depleted and there were only three Members, all of whom were of a considerable age,

and by 1870 this had been reduced to two and the Meeting finally closed later that year.

The authors have provided the reader with useful appendices and the text is fully footnoted for secondary sources but it is regrettable that they did not continue the footnoting to include the primary sources they have clearly spent so much time sifting through. It is also a shame that there is nowhere a list of the records which still exist for the Meeting nor where they are located. This would have made a book which is of interest to Friends even more valuable to Quaker historians.

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Tonsing, B. K., *The Quakers in South Africa: a social witness* (Series in Quaker Studies, Vol. 3), Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2002. pp. v + 354, ISBN 0 7734 7104 9, Cloth, £74.95, \$119.95.

A number of similarities exist between the experience of mid-seventeenth century Friends and that of the Quakers in South Africa during the Apartheid nightmare. Like their early counterparts, South African Friends constituted (as they do still) a tiny percentage of their country's population with approximately 108 adult members living among 40.5 million people, the official figure. They, too, are a relatively weak group who opposed political and ecclesiastical forces within an increasingly militarising and 'Third World' type environment. This they did in a variety of ways and at different times, but also at different levels of intensity and degree of political involvement as well as spiritual awareness (including their knowledge and experience of Quaker beliefs and practices) – all with varying effectiveness.

Betty Tonsing's extension of her 1992 PhD thesis stands as a good descriptive history of the Society from around the turn of the twentieth century to the mid-1990s when the first free general election for the entire South African body politic ended the National Party's all-embracing hold over that country's political affairs. Indeed, *The Quakers in South Africa* is the first published account of such. It adds to the fine contribution of Hope Hay Hewison's *Hedge of Wild Almonds* (Dent & Sons, 1989) which accounts for the growth of the Society in South Africa from c.1728 to the end of the Anglo-Boer War (1899 - 1902).

Tonsing's account of the South African Quaker odyssey is a painful one and is told in eleven chapters. After a brief introduction, Chapter One starts us on a sweeping journey starting in seventeenth century England with a succinct description of the advent of the early Quaker movement. We are then invited into the world of Quaker concerns and the Friends' philanthropic zeal, especially so as we move on to the American colonies where the reader is familiarised with Quakerism in that region and principally its development in the United States. Here Tonsing recalls the Friends' humanitarian campaigns towards Native Americans, their emphasis on education, their involvement in the abolitionist movement and their 'pacifism'. Her treatment of the 'Peace