

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

Testimony' of the Friends (she understands it as the 1660/1 Fox-Hubberthorne declaration to Charles II) is less a study of the declaration itself than a general outline of its outcomes in the style of Peter Brock's work on Quaker pacifism, *The Quaker Peace Testimony, 1660 - 1914* (Syracuse University Press, 1991). The chapter also touches upon Quaker attempts at mediating violent conflicts in various parts of the world, not least in South Africa itself.

Chapter Two is a brief relation of South African history from the first Dutch settlement of 1652 to the present day. Especially interesting is Tonsing's conflation of slavery in her US homeland and the black-despising context of southern Africa, the poignancy of the regression of the British abolition of slavery into racial discrimination and segregation. We are also treated to the progression of South Africa from its imperially-imposed white supremacist settlement of 1910, which established the Union of South Africa, to the fateful year of 1948 when the messianic but brutal Dr. Malan and his Herenigde Nasionale Party were elected. Malan's policies eventually crystallised into the grand Apartheid of Dr. H. F. Verwoerd (Prime Minister, 1958 - 66) who fell victim to an assassin in 1966. The story is then continued to the all-party elections of 1994 signalling the demise of Afrikanerdom.

Chapter Three sees us finally among South Africa Quakerism proper where we meet a number of heroes including Richard Gush (1789 - 1858), regarded as the father of Quakerism south of the Limpopo. Though he may not have actually been a Friend, Gush's Quakerly conduct in regard to the neighbouring African peoples of his chosen locality was both courageous and exemplary, and he is today remembered fondly among the Friends as one of their own. Chapter Four describes the Quakers in the context of pre-Apartheid segregation where journalist James Butler (1854 - 1923) features prominently along with Howard Pim (1862 - 1934), himself a leader in the wider society and founder member, *inter alia*, of the Joint Council of Europeans and Natives (later the South African Institute of Race Relations). We then take a sharp turn sideways in Chapter Five to encounter the history of the failed whites-only Quaker School (Inchanga) in Natal and the patrician attitude of the English Friends to their co-religionists in that Province. The story is interesting but sad and, while we are left somewhat bereft at the demise of the headmaster, the hapless Harold Caplin who was clearly an unsuitable appointment, Tonsing describes the souring of relationships within the local Quaker community with sensitivity. Needless to say, the school had a short life.

From Chapter Six onwards we enter the modern era and Apartheid, a pivotal element of the Cold War. The part played by Butler's indefatigable daughter, Mary Butler (1884 - 1977), and another leading Friend, Will Fox, is discussed well. Fox's acknowledgment in 1949 that 'most Quakers were not as concerned or involved in the country's racial problems as they should be' (p. 139) remained largely the case up to the Sharpeville massacre (1960). Subsequent chapters outline in general terms the Quakers' relationship to the black struggle for freedom, that is to say from the time of the Defiance Campaign (1952) to the controversy over international sanctions within the body of Friends (they were largely against) and then

to the very recent past. We are introduced to those valiant Friends who campaigned over a long period of time to end the evil of Apartheid. I particularly enjoyed reading of Marjorie Fleming who 'literally screamed at her fellow citizens to wake up and demand the government never again, never again, put their nation on trial' (p. 281). The early Friends had done much the same.

That *The Quakers in South Africa* is a descriptive work will ensure its appeal to those who want a generalist history of Friends in that country. The book is well written in accessible and sometimes racy language and is all the more enjoyable for that. Tonsing has made fine use of her interviews and research in both the United Kingdom and South Africa, quoting many hitherto untouched sources. Many of her quotations are excellent and they are nicely crafted into the text; memorable is Verwoerd's chilling assertion that 'if the native... [expects] that he will live his adult life under a policy of equal rights, he is making a big mistake [for] there is no place for him in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour.'

The most rounded chapter is the final one. Here Tonsing is excellent, giving us an over-all appreciation of the Friends' story in context, paying tribute to Mary Butler and Will Fox as being among the few Quakers who 'early on recognised South Africa's growing racial strife' (p. 278) and she states unambiguously that 'South African Quakers could have done more to oppose the trend of negative race relations that grew out of hostile legislation.' (p. 278).

But not just legislation. There is no concrete analysis of Apartheid, its wider socio-political and religious contexts, and of the tortuous relationship of the Friends to it. Too much time was spent, I felt, on the school and too little devoted to the significance of Sharpeville, Soweto (1976) and the death of Steve Biko (1977) and to the growth of South African Quaker Testimony. In this respect I would have liked more on John (1859 - 1921) and Davidson Jabavu (1885 - 1959), father and son black intellectual Quakers who, it seems, were treated in a shameful manner by the majority of South African Friends in their time. Tellingly, the Jabavus chose to register their membership of the Society in English Meetings rather than locally. In the relationship between these two men and their wider Quaker community lies the corpus of a great story.

Chapter Eight is entitled 'From Defiance to Resistance' but I was left wondering at the distinction. What exactly was the 'resistance' that took place and what precisely was the Quakers' response? In other words, what was the substantive characteristic of their religious-spiritual reaction to conflict within their country and region - Apartheid was not merely a South African phenomenon - and the ramifications of this for unity within their movement? More analysis and commentary of this kind, I feel, might have afforded greater insights into the religious nature of South African Quaker 'social witness' and how 'witness' itself presupposes Testimony.

That said, I liked *The Quakers in South Africa* very much. It will certainly make a valuable contribution to Quaker studies and Africa studies, while being of significance to students of South African religious history who will find of assistance the list of documentation that heads up the bibliography and the

sources of these essential papers (pp. 331-34).

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