

## BOOK REVIEWS

David M. Butler, *The Quaker Meeting Houses of Britain*, Vols. I and II (London: Friends Historical Society, 1999), pp. 946 + xii. Hardback £75.00, Paperback £50.00. ISBN 0-9004-6944-7.

In this massive book, David Butler presents the reader with an account of 1300 meeting houses and 900 burial ground in mainland Britain. In so far as he describes buildings from 1652 to the present it is a complete account of every Quaker meeting house ever built in England, Wales and Scotland. As such it is a considerable achievement.

Following a brief introduction dealing mainly with references and sources, the buildings are described in alphabetical order by English county, the final two chapters given over to Wales and Scotland. For example, Chapter 11 (pp. 155-71) deals with County Durham. The chapter commences with a map indicating the location of all meeting houses and burial grounds, extant and no longer extant, in the county. There is a brief note on the organization of General Meetings and a list of county sources. The meeting houses are then described in alphabetical order. Under the first, Benfieldside, we read that the local meeting first came under Durham Monthly Meeting but removed to Newcastle Monthly Meeting in 1784 (use of specifically Quaker terminology is minimal and should not unduly confuse the layperson, though a glossary of such terms would be useful). There have been two meeting houses, the earlier built in 1700 and sold in 1924, the later built in 1843 and later demolished. For the first, Butler provides a plan and a reconstruction, for the second a plan (accompanied by a note, 'the plan approximate, and uncertain or internal arrangements') and sketch ('from a drawing of 1850'). The sources for both drawings and plans are given. From the accompanying text, we learn that in 1785 John Pemberton 'attended a General Meeting in Benfieldside, to which resorted many hundreds of people... The meeting house, though larger than many

would not contain half the people' (a quote taken from *The Life and Travels of John Pemberton*, 1844). The Benfieldside meeting houses are not untypical for the period and these drawings remind us, again, that for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Friends function wholly determined form. As I read the text, however, I begin to wonder what happened to those Friends who could not find a place in their meeting house at General Meeting. It is at this point that the historical imagination ignites. Later in the chapter, the entry for Darlington indicates that the present meeting house passed through a number of stages before arriving at its current form, funded primarily by the wealthy Pease family. The careful description of Darlington meeting house provided by the plans, sketches and text facilitates considerable historical understanding. We see, for example, how the main meeting room was once divided by a sliding wooden screen separating men from women (an arrangement common in parish churches at the time). We are not told when the screen was removed but one member of the meeting told me that he could remember sitting with his mother, away from the men, facing the ministers' stand, well into the 1920s. In such places Quakers are wrapped in their traditions, which can be read off their surroundings, no less than from quasi-canonic texts such as *Quaker Faith and Practice*. Implicit in this material culture, are issues of power and control, of gender and class. Comparing buildings from different periods we gain a strong sense of social, cultural and religious change, even within what remains an unusually tightly knit group. The 'culture of building' is an area of growing interdisciplinary interest.<sup>1</sup> Butler provides us with a vast quantity of raw material, it is up to the historians and social scientists to take up the challenges it provides.

Following the county chapters, there is a substantial appendix which is divided into four sections. After briefly dealing with a handful of key terms, Butler presents a short essay on the ways in which 'the premises' (and burial grounds) have developed since the seventeenth century, including notes on how meeting houses are warmed and how seating arrangements have changed. In the third section the ways in which meeting houses have been financed are explained, a list of architects involved with the buildings is provided and there is a note on Regis-

1. C. Brooks and S. Saint (eds.), *Victorian Churches* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); M. Johnson, *Housing Culture* (London: University College London Press, 1993); R. Waterson, *The Living House* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

tration along with some examples of building accounts. In the final section, we find evidence indicating the slow but steady appearance in meeting houses of 'creature comforts' such as kitchens and gardens, and the growing use of meeting houses as 'social institutes'—as mission halls and adult schools. The text concludes, rather idiosyncratically, with a note on space provided in the major London meeting houses for the Recording Clerk (a role not unlike that of a chief executive in other contexts). There is an index of all meeting houses and burial grounds described.

This is the *Gray's Anatomy* of Quaker meeting houses. Butler maintains a working architect's disdain for high fallutin' theory throughout. He has been as systematic as he possibly can be and the text is more or less free of analysis, historical or other. This may sound like a weakness but it is not. Indeed, one of the book's greatest strengths is the detailed description of one meeting house after another, the story progressing almost of its own accord as county follows county. The anecdotes and brief comments of those who have visited these buildings add spice and often provide an insight which will lead to a re-viewing of the plans and drawings.

For anyone who is familiar with books on architecture, and particularly books dealing with vernacular architecture the drawings and plans will come as no surprise. They are wonderful all the same. Butler has an architect's eye for detail both in the drawings themselves and for the importance of providing the sources of all drawings. It is hardly surprising that the best of them are those following a visit. This is not always possible of course and the author is to be applauded for the trouble he has taken to include drawings wherever possible—sometimes based on photographs sent to him by members of meetings.

At the beginning of the new millennium it is easy to discern the charm of some of these buildings; to our contemporary eye, they often seem quaint, even twee. We are children of a heritage culture in which pilgrims have been superseded by tourists. Indeed, organized Quaker tours of the Lake Counties have long been with us. The Society of Friends even has a number of its own heritage sites: Swarthmore Hall, Brigflatts, the Quaker Tapestry Centre, 1652 country and others. And this is all well and good, so long as we remember that such places have a history that is often far from quaint. The rural meeting houses in particular, remind us that at one time 'man-made' structures (the role of women in their creation remains relatively obscure) were formed from

local materials using local skills and fitted their natural environment. It is this quality that lends them an aesthetic appeal that is almost visceral.

Along with Brunskill, Clifton-Taylor, Waterson and others this is a book which will be of great interest to those interested in vernacular architecture;<sup>2</sup> along with Braithwaite it will provide an extraordinarily rich, almost encyclopedic resource for those interested in Quaker history;<sup>3</sup> for the church architecture buff (already familiar with the work of Hugh Braun, Addleshaw and Etchells and so forth)<sup>4</sup> Butler will become necessary reading; and for the general reader it is sure to provide hours and hours of pleasure and probably inspiration. This is a book of painstaking scholarship, a labour of love, a delight—let us ensure that every library, at least, soon has a copy. Finally, the Friends Historical Society should be applauded for finding the courage (and the resources) for publishing what will undoubtedly become, for a wide variety of readers, an invaluable guide.

Peter J. Collins

#### AUTHOR DETAILS

Peter Collins carried out his doctoral research on Quakerism at Manchester University and was awarded his PhD in anthropology in 1994. Since then he has published widely on various aspects of Quakerism, the Shakers and research methodology. He currently lectures in social anthropology at Durham University.

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2. R.W. Brunskill, *Traditional Buildings of Britain* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1981); A. Clifton-Taylor, *The Pattern of English Building* (London: Faber, 1972); Waterson, *The Living House*.

3. W.C. Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism* (London: Macmillan, 1912).

4. H. Braun, *Cathedral Architecture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972); G.W.O. Addleshaw and F. Etchells, *The Architectural Setting of Anglian Worship* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972).