

## BOOK REVIEWS

Mary Ann Yanness, *Levi Coffin, Quaker: Breaking the Bonds of Slavery in Ohio and Indiana* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2001), pp. x + 74. Paperback. U.S. \$10.00. ISBN 0-944350-54-2

American Quakers who gained national or international prominence usually did so as a result of their work in reform or international peace. Clarence Pickett, Rufus Jones and Henry Cadbury fall into this category. So does John Woolman, who is perhaps the best-known American Friend. But close behind Woolman is Levi Coffin, the Indiana anti-slavery reformer who merged his energy for religion with his concern for social justice to help bring down the empire of slave holders in the American South. Mary Ann Yanness's study joins nearly a dozen books of historical fiction and non-fiction that have been written about Coffin since his death in 1877. Coffin's own *Reminiscences* were published in 1898, and since then, authors of children's books, professional and amateur historians, black pride advocates, and inspirational writers have found Coffin to be good grist for their mills. Yanness's work falls into the last category. She begins by noting Coffin's commitment to 'the faith of his ancestors' which, she tells us 'emboldened' him. And she closes her little volume by comparing Coffin's vision to that of Martin Luther King, the modern social justice reformer. In between she introduces us to aspects of the life of this remarkable nineteenth-century American reformer.

Yanness clearly likes Coffin, and wants her readers to like him too. She gives us insight into his family beginnings in North Carolina, his efforts at establishing an African-American school there, and then his marriage and his removal to Ohio and Indiana, where other reform-minded Friends were also trying to help freed slaves establish communities, safety and educational opportunities. Coffin's struggles to keep his faith and his vision alive in the face of individual hostilities, and eventually, in the face of civil war, and then what she terms his 'final call' as he worked to build British and American support for freed people after the Civil War—all of this Yanness chronicles in readable, accessible language. And always she keeps her eye—and ours—on Coffin's religious faith as the empowering force in his work.

Yanness's essay is, in many ways, a short sermon. She recounts aspects of Coffin's life and then asks the rhetorical question, 'Does America yet understand?' And it is understanding this aspect of Yanness's writing that we get an answer to the question, 'Why do we need yet short another biography of Coffin?' In fact, though much has been written about him—and the best account to date of him and his context is in Thomas Hamm's *God's Government Begun* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995)—we still do not have a modern, full-length, authoritative and scholarly study of this fascinating man. But that is not

what Yanessa is about. Instead, this volume is about bringing Coffin alive again for a new generation. If Yanessa, who is a speaker for the new Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, seeks to educate the Center's docents and visitors, so as to increase their understanding of the intricacies of Underground Railroad, this easily readable little volume will serve that function well.

The strength of Yanessa's work is that it portrays Coffin not as a giant, not as larger than life, but rather as an ordinary man, drawn by his conscience to grow into the work to which God calls him. Readers who remember that the nineteenth-century American West was a Mecca for various Americans and Europeans seeking utopian social perfection will see him in context, and ask themselves if they believe they might envision and work for a better world. In short, Yanessa's readers will be inspired to meet this man who helped shape a time and a movement.

Though this is not designed to be a scholarly study, Yanessa raises some insightful issues that *should* interest scholars. She mentions, for example, that while abolitionism has become inextricably linked to our historical memory of early Friends, abolitionism is neither an obvious, nor an inevitable result of Quaker faith. She reminds us that many Friends held slaves, were loathe to relinquish this privilege, and it required some well-focused theological manoeuvring to create anti-slavery rhetoric within Quaker thought. Only with careful research did nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars find evidence in the thought of Penn and Fox that supports an anti-slavery posture. Yanessa also invites us to explore further the kinds of questions raised by Jean Soderlund in *Quakers and Slavery: A Divided Spirit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985). Soderlund chronicles the difficulty Delaware Valley meetings had with ridding their meetings of the blight of slave-holding, but we need fuller exploration of the community life in North Carolina that resulted in subsets of meetings removing themselves to the western frontier. In her discussion of the divisions *within* Quaker abolitionist communities about means and ends—schemes to colonize freed people in Africa or the American West, Free Produce strategies, and the risks or values in flaunting the laws—Yanessa invites future researchers to investigate the divisions and shifting loyalties that abolitionism and the Underground Railroad engendered within and among meetings and families. And in her gentle reminder that the black recipients of Coffin's largesse were not helpless but were themselves creative and savvy strategists, she affirms our modern understanding of African Americans as 'do-ers' and active agents, rather than only the recipients, the 'done for' and the passive pawns.

Yes, this volume invites new work on Coffin. We want to know more about his ancestors' lives in North Carolina, about their lives in New England that sent them to North Carolina in the first place. We want to know more about the terrain and demography of the region out of which he worked, and we want to have this information connected to the larger economic questions of markets, trade routes, the profitability of farming through the economic depressions of the 1830s and the dislocation and relocation of Native Americans in these same years. We want to know about other settlers in this part of the frontier, and we want information about Coffin's networks, and the sources of cash and information that kept him going through these years. We want to check his *Reminiscences* against contemporary confirming evidence to test how much of his memory is consistent with other information.

This is not a scholarly volume. It breaks no new ground, adds no modern interpretation or analysis to Coffin's own memoirs (which were republished in the 1960s as Arno

Press sought to rescue from obscurity a number of African-American history classics). Her bibliography consists of an array of secondary literature, and includes a mix of general histories, scholarly studies and popular accounts of the Underground Railroad and its times. But it does remind us that Coffin's legacy is an important segment of American history, of African-American history, and of Quaker history. And it will make accessible, for the popular audience, the story of a man of conscience whose legacy has much to say to us today about how we might all grow into the work of our consciences.

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Anna M. Speicher, *The Religious World of Antislavery Women* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), pp. xii + 242. Paperback. US \$19.95. ISBN 0-8156-2807-1.

This study is a product of a new direction in the social history of women in the nineteenth century, one that recognizes the centrality of religion in the lives of many women activists in a range of reform and feminist movements. Anna Speicher's focus is the antislavery movement in the United States, and its relation with the women's rights movement that sprang up among some of the women involved in those campaigns. Antislavery meetings provided some of the first occasions when middle-class women reformers in the United States took on the role of public speakers addressing 'promiscuous' audiences (audiences composed of both men and women). The opposition they encountered in so doing rapidly led them also to explore the subjection of their sex. Much has been written on this subject, but there is little that has focused on the religious motivation of such women activists.

Anna Speicher asks, 'What forces sustained women who embarked upon what was certainly an unconventional, and sometimes an unpopular, even dangerous course of action?' Her working hypothesis in beginning her study was that their religious beliefs and values provided them with a keen sense of social justice, and strengthened the will that was needed to embark on and sustain such activities. Anna Speicher explores this argument through five case studies: the sisters, Angelina and Sarah Grimke, Lucretia Mott, Abby Kelley Foster and Sallie Holley. All except Sallie Holley were members of, or had at some time a connection with, the Society of Friends. These cases were chosen, however, according to a particular set of criteria not linked specifically to their religious orientation: a public identity as an abolitionist; a willingness to travel in the cause and speak on it to mixed public meetings; the legacy of a significant body of primary source material, especially in the form of personal letters and journals. As Anna Speicher acknowledges, these criteria together serve to exclude any consideration of some notable African-American women abolitionist speakers. Her discussion moves between biographical and analytical chapters, making this an accessible and readable introduction to debates around the study of the abolition movement.

The findings made by Anna Speicher require her to amend her original hypothesis, however, so that she argues that religion was not simply a sustaining resource for these five women, but 'the fundamental organising principle of their entire lives' (p. 2). She disputes, therefore, a common argument with regard to such reformers, that reform *became* their religion. Rather, she suggests, that their religious world view was the *prompt* to their