

BOOK REVIEWS

JENNINGS, Judith, *Gender, Religion, and Radicalism in the Long Eighteenth Century: The 'Ingenious Quaker' and Her Connections* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. viii + 196. ISBN 0-7546-5500-8, Hardback, £50.

Mary Knowles (née Morris), the 'ingenious Quaker' who is the subject of this biography, was a woman of some considerable skill. She achieved limited fame initially as a poet and wit, but is probably best known on two other counts. First, her needlework portraits won her the patronage of King George III and Queen Charlotte. Secondly, in what was to become a famous dinner party conversation with Samuel Johnson in the spring of 1776, she put up a stout defence of a young friend, Jane Harry, the daughter of a Jamaican woman known only as Mrs Harry and an English plantation owner, Thomas Hibbert. Jane Harry, brought up an Anglican, had incurred her father's disapproval and clearly also outraged Dr Johnson, by deciding to become a Quaker. The details of the conversation were later much disputed, and Jennings's careful work in tracing and comparing the various surviving accounts, and exploring their implications for our understanding of race, gender and religion in the eighteenth century, inevitably forms a substantial part of this book.

The study is structured as a 'double-layered narrative' using the life story of Knowles to provide examples that mark 'the intersection of gender, religion and radicalism' (p. 3). A major aim of the study is to highlight the importance of understanding Knowles's story in the context of developing tensions between 'Quakerism and Quakerliness' (p. 5). 'Quakerism' is understood as 'an unchanging set of beliefs', while 'Quakerliness' refers to 'behaviours and attitudes' (p. 10). Jennings traces the development of the outward style and values of prosperous Quakers like Knowles as they reconciled their religious faith with their integration into polite society.

It is of course a tall order to write a biography that gives a fully rounded picture of an individual within her or his wider context, and thereby offer insights into a range of shared experiences and perceptions. Jennings makes the task even more difficult for herself by using the device of the 'long eighteenth century', and holding to the wildly optimistic belief that the life of one woman (born in 1733 and dying in 1807) can inform our understanding of her chosen themes 'from the English Civil Wars to the eve of the Victorian age' (p. 2). The structure and scope of this work perhaps inevitably create a number of difficulties.

I certainly understand why Jennings has employed the concept of Quakerliness; Knowles's work is not represented in the more devotional collections of Quaker literature nor would she ever be regarded as one of the Quaker 'saints'. It is notable that the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry for Knowles makes no explicit reference to her being a Quaker at all. But, as this biography makes very clear, she both thought of herself and was widely thought of by others in terms of being Quaker; Boswell, for example spoke of her as a rich Quaker lamb (p. 63). Her extensive interactions with non-Quakers, as well as her celebrity, affluence and social accomplishments give us a very different but no less honest picture of eighteenth-century Quakers than has often been presented.

Ultimately, then, I do not find the assertion that Quakerism is 'an unchanging set of beliefs' that is different from 'Quakerliness' to be helpful. In terms of historical research, how can Quaker beliefs, in any meaningful way, be detached from the people who profess and practice what they understand to be those beliefs? And if individuals choose to define themselves as Quakers then some explicit and extensive engagement with Quaker theology in all its complexity is required. Unfortunately, however, theological developments tend to be treated very superficially in this study. Knowles's life coincides almost exactly with the rise of the Evangelical movement, and yet no reference is made to this at all. An understanding both of how 'polite society' and Quakers began to change in their attitudes towards a distinctively Evangelical Christianity was, in particular, an area where more background detail would have enhanced our understanding of the social, political and religious connections.

The device of presenting the narrative on two levels (with the life story and the interpretation of that in relation to the book's themes running concurrently) sometimes has the effect of overwhelming the reader with commentary on the supposed significance of each and every piece of evidence. Since a recurring point made in the book is that of Knowles's insistence on the right to self-representation, there is a certain irony in Jennings's tendency to intrude her own interpretation of Knowles's life at almost every opportunity. Provided the aims of the researcher are made clear and the scene has been adequately set, surely evidence can generally be allowed to speak for itself?

And there is certainly some wonderful evidence in this book. At its best, the work mirrors Knowles' own fine 'needle paintings' where deliberately irregular stitches allowed her to 'break free of the limitations imposed by her chosen medium' and thus to achieve her overall purpose. In much the same way, Jennings's work challenges conventions and aims to achieve the same effects of 'fine shading' (p. 75). Her portrait of Knowles is achieved by the careful marshalling of evidence, and is clearly the result of meticulous work. I was particularly impressed, not so much by the public achievements, as by Knowles's harrowing and astonishingly frank account of the physical and spiritual torments of her confinement in 1768, when a difficult labour nearly killed her and resulted in the tragic loss of her baby. The writing is in stark contrast to the polite and polished verses she so often wrote to amuse a wider circle. 'I knew not that an immortal soul could in abide in a body so tortured!' she wrote, 'methought I had fast hold of my Saviour's feet. . .methought like Magdalene I

folded my arms around them; and while the Surgeon's cruellest force was exerted, I cried "I will not let thee go" (pp. 32-33).

Judith Jennings is to be congratulated for bringing the life story of Mary Knowles to a wider audience, and her example serves as a spur for further research into the complex developments of the period. This book is a stimulating addition to the historiography of eighteenth-century Quakers.

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