

‘ON BEHALF OF ALL YOUNG WOMEN TRYING TO BE
BETTER THAN THEY ARE’:^{*} FEMINISM AND QUAKERISM
IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: THE CASE OF ANNA
DEBORAH RICHARDSON

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ABSTRACT

Historians of the early British women’s movement have frequently drawn connections between the theology and practice of Quakerism and the involvement of female Friends in nineteenth-century ‘women’s rights’ campaigns. These connections are usually expressed in terms of religious, organizational and environmental factors particular to Quakerism, and embody the assumption that the cultural milieu of Quaker women was peculiarly conducive to the development of ‘feminist consciousness’. This article examines the complexity of these assumed links, through an exploration of the life and writings of Anna Deborah Richardson (1832–1872) of Newcastle Monthly Meeting. Through her close association with Emily Davies, who established the first women’s college at Cambridge, Anna was part of the first organized British women’s movement in the 1860s. The article considers how far her feminist activities were motivated and inspired by her membership of the Society of Friends, or whether factors outside her religious community exercised a more significant influence.

KEYWORDS

Anna Deborah Richardson, Emily Davies, Quakerism, feminism, education, women’s movement

Introduction

From the mid-1850s, female Friends were prominent in a range of campaigns around ‘women’s issues’, to a disproportionate extent in relation

* From a letter by Anna Deborah Richardson to Richard Potts, 26 June 1862, EDvii/LOC5. Davies papers, Girton College, Cambridge.

to the size of the Society in the population as a whole,¹ leading to claims that, 'Quaker women participated in, and in the most significant cases led, the major reform movements, including that for women's rights and participation in the public sphere'.² Female Friends were amongst the first to understand the contradiction between a commitment to human justice as expressed in the anti-slavery movement and the subordinate role of women within western society.³ It was also a Quaker, Anne Knight, who, in 1847, published the first leaflet calling for women's suffrage.⁴

The visibility of female Friends within the early women's movement has, indeed, led to an orthodox interpretation that Quaker women, because of their distinctive beliefs and practices,⁵ somehow displayed a group propensity towards feminism.⁶ Levine describes Quakerism as a 'spawning ground

1. Membership of the Society of Friends (Quakers) in England and Wales was estimated to be 14,530 in 1856, or one in 1,100 of the general population. J.S. Rowntree, *Quakerism, Past and Present: Being an Inquiry into the Causes of its Decline in Great Britain and Ireland* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1859), p. 75.

2. S.M. Stuard, 'Women's Witnessing: A New Departure', in E.P. Brown and S.M. Stuard (eds.), *Witnesses for Change: Quaker Women over Three Centuries* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), pp. 3-25 (3).

3. See, for example, K.I. Halbersleben, 'Elizabeth Pease: One Woman's Vision of Peace, Justice, and Human Rights in Nineteenth Century Britain', in *Quaker History* 84 (1995) pp. 26-36 (3); also C. Midgley, 'Anti-Slavery and Feminism in Nineteenth Century Britain', *Gender and History* 5 (1993), pp. 345-62 (348-49).

4. G. Malmgreen, 'Anne Knight and the Radical Subculture', *Quaker History* 71/2 (1982), pp. 100-113.

5. Factors identified as providing causal links between Quaker faith and practice and the construction of 'feminist Friends' include, most importantly, the belief in spiritual equality of all, regardless of race, class or gender, which led to the toleration of Quaker women preachers and the participation of female Friends in church management through their separate Meetings for Discipline. Also significant was their cultural milieu—the Quaker 'peculiarities', especially the testimony to plainness and the tight networks which enabled the dissemination of ideas and activism. For a full discussion of these factors, see E.A. O'Donnell, 'Woman's Rights and Woman's Duties. Quaker Women in the Nineteenth Century, with special reference to Newcastle Monthly Meeting of Women Friends' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sunderland, 2000), pp. 10-23.

6. Historians have discussed the problems of applying the term 'feminism' to women in a period (mid-nineteenth-century) 50 years before it was coined. Caine describes the varied usage, whether in connection with any women active and articulate at the time, to confining it to those identified as espousing a particular beliefs or engaged in certain activities which forwarded the cause of 'woman's rights' (B. Caine, *Victorian Feminists* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992], pp. 4-7). For the purposes of this

of feminism⁷, while Banks argues for the 'significance of the Quaker movement as a source of feminism', the Society providing some of the earliest and most important leaders of the women's movement.⁸ More recently, however, this perception of women Quakers has been challenged as 'inaccurate, largely mythic, and based on generalization from the actions of a small number of individual Friends'.⁹ Radical Quaker women who identified with a feminist agenda may have been the exception rather than the rule,¹⁰ and the assumption of an intimate connection between feminism and Quakerism sustained by the activism of very few women, whose presence in virtually every campaign to extend women's role in the second half of the nineteenth century has led to the illusion that they were representative of female Friends in general. This, in turn, has given rise to the mistaken conviction that the Society of Friends itself fostered and encouraged feminism.

Morton cautions against treating the nineteenth-century Quaker community as if it were a discrete and separate grouping, with little relation to wider social and economic developments.¹¹ The growing affluence of Quakers and the espousal of Evangelical Christianity by dominant members of London Yearly Meeting contributed to closer relationships with other churches, as well as the adoption of middle-class values and the dilution of Quaker 'peculiarities'. Evangelicalism, it has been argued, interacting with economic and social change brought about by the Industrial Revolution, led to a redefinition of gender roles—exaggerating the split between the public, 'masculine', world of politics and work, and the private, 'feminine', sphere of home and family.¹² Women's role was to regenerate the nation's morality

article, the term is defined as: an awareness of gendered subordination together with a desire for autonomy and self-determination. 'Feminist consciousness' means the possession of such awareness.

7. P. Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England: Private Roles and Public Commitment* (London: Blackwell, 1990), p. 33.

8. O. Banks, *Faces of Feminism. A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1981), p. 24.

9. P. Lunn, "'You Have Lost Your Opportunity": British Quakers and the Militant Phase of the Women's Suffrage Campaign, 1906-1914', *Quaker Studies* 2 (1997), pp. 30-56 (30).

10. S.S. Holton and M. Allen, 'Offices and Services: Women's Pursuit of Sexual Equality within the Society of Friends, 1873-1907', *Quaker Studies* 2 (1997), pp. 1-29 (3).

11. V. Morton, 'Quaker Politics and Industrial Change, c.1800-1850' (unpublished PhD thesis, Open University, 1988), pp. 7-8.

12. Evangelical gender ideology is discussed in, for example, J. Rendall, *The Origins of*

through their domestic influence over husband and children. This had both conservative and radical possibilities—while apparently confining them to the home, it also provided the spiritual justification for women to carry their mission to purify society into the public domain, through philanthropic and moral crusades. The emergence of modern feminism coincided with an increasingly large public and philanthropic role for women, involving organised activity in close association with other women.¹³ For female Friends, this entailed their exposure to the ideas of women from outside the Society.

This article examines the life and writings of Anna Deborah Richardson of Newcastle Monthly Meeting, to uncover the influences and motivation which led her to develop ‘feminist consciousness’. For she was, by her own confession, undoubtedly a ‘women’s right-er’,¹⁴ but the extent to which she could be described as a ‘feminist Friend’, implying that the main spur to her commitment came from a particularly ‘Quakerly’ attitude, is far less certain.

‘The want of a definite aim’: The Early Years of Anna Deborah Richardson

Anna Deborah Richardson was born in 1832, the eldest of 11 children. Her father, Edward Richardson, was co-owner of a Newcastle tannery; her mother Jane, the only child of John Wigham of Edinburgh, had ‘a taste for intellectual pursuits’¹⁵ and ‘an ardent poetic nature’.¹⁶ The family lived in the Newcastle Quaker enclave at Summerhill, off Westgate Road, until 1852, when they moved to a much larger house in nearby Elswick. The Edward Richardsons belonged to the leading family of Newcastle Preparative Meeting, most of Anna’s near relatives holding offices in the Preparative and Monthly Meetings.¹⁷

Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States, 1780–1860 (London: Macmillan, 1985), pp. 73–77.

13. B. Caine, *English Feminism, 1780–1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 89.

14. This term was used by Emily Davies in a letter to Anna Deborah Richardson in October 1865. Referring to the ‘present generation of “Women’s Right”ers’, Emily was clearly including her friend in that definition. E. Davies, ‘Family Chronicle’, part 5, p. 433. Davies papers, Girton College, Cambridge.

15. J.W. Steel, *A Historical Sketch of the Society of Friends ‘In Scorn Called Quakers’ in Newcastle and Gateshead, 1653–1898*, (London: Headley Brothers, 1899), p. 161.

16. A.D. Richardson, *Memoir, with Extracts from her Letters* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: J.M. Carr, 1877), p. 1.

17. E.A. O’Donnell, ‘Woman’s Rights and Woman’s Duties’, pp. 207–208.

Edward and Jane allowed their daughters an unusual degree of freedom in their childhood.¹⁸ Both Anna and her younger sister Elizabeth (Lizzie) were described as fearless horsewomen, who enjoyed bareback riding.¹⁹ Anna’s education began before she was three years old, with instruction by her mother in the ‘three-Rs’ and moral behaviour.²⁰ From 1839, Anna attended local Friends’ day schools, then in 1846 she was sent to a Quaker private school at Lewes in Sussex, run by the Dymond sisters. The school was run on ‘strictly Quaker lines’,²¹ the main literary fodder being the lives of Quaker worthies, described by Anna as ‘[d]reary works, which I used to devour for the sake of the thread of narrative which ran through them’.²²

During her time in Lewes, the ill-health which dogged Anna for the rest of her life first became evident. Distressed at the news of the Irish Famine, Anna began a regime of ‘self-imposed fasting’,²³ so impairing her health that she was unable to return to school after the summer break in 1847. After one term at the Edinburgh Moray Place Institute during a visit to her grandfather that autumn, where she won prizes for drawing and essay-writing,²⁴ her formal school-days were over. Her brother recorded that ‘she never ceased to lament that her course of regular study had been so interrupted, that she had been, as she put it, so imperfectly educated’.²⁵

Anna spent the next year teaching her brother John and sister Lizzie at home. John wrote that it was ‘impossible to describe how she enthused us... I think I learned more during the year that I studied with Anna than in the next two years at school’.²⁶ In about 1850, she became engaged to be married, a relationship ‘fully approved of by her friends’,²⁷ but the engagement was broken off after only a few months. ‘[A]ll the intensity of love was thrown back on herself to lie miserably wounded for many a long and weary year’, wrote her brother. ‘She felt that her ship of love had been

18. See the entry for Elizabeth Spence Watson in the *Annual Monitor* (1919–20), p. 287. The *Annual Monitor*, first published by Friends in 1813, was an annual collection of obituaries (various publishers).

19. E.S. Watson *Annual Monitor* entry (1919–20); also A.D. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 3.

20. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 2.

21. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 5.

22. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 6.

23. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 12.

24. Richardson, *Memoir*, pp. 12–13.

25. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 13.

26. J.W. Richardson, *Memoirs, 1837–1908* (Glasgow: Hugh Hopkins, 1911), p. 35.

27. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 14.

wrecked at the very mouth of the harbour, and she could never again be persuaded to risk her heart in such a navigation'.²⁸

Anna has been described as 'an unusually well-read and cultivated woman', but one who was 'much occupied at home, according to the usual lot of elder sisters in large families'.²⁹ In 1855, for example, she accompanied her brother Edward to Paris where he was studying chemistry, to keep house for him. Her letters at that time reveal her isolation: 'the life here (be sure not to let anyone know I confessed it) is very lonely and I suffer exceedingly from homesickness'.³⁰

An indication that Anna was unlikely to settle for the role of self-sacrificing spinster appeared in a letter written to Lizzie in 1853. Describing a conversation with their father, she expressed her dissatisfaction with 'the want of a definite aim' in women's lives. Despite his encouragement of Anna's intellectual development, Edward's reply reflected his belief that women belonged within the domestic sphere. A woman's lot was by 'far the nobler of the two, inasmuch as [men] are the drones immersed in work, and often drudgery'. 'The natural reasons for the cultivation of the intellectual powers are stronger [for women] than any other', he argued, since their purpose in life was to uphold 'every noble thing against the sophistry of interest'. Anna should strive to eliminate 'the disparity of intellect' between the sexes, broadening the 'narrow range of thought to which women habituate themselves', so as to safeguard the moral purity of the home.³¹

His opinions embodied the assumption that his daughter would fulfil herself through marriage, but Anna remained single, eventually finding her 'definite aim' in 'undertak[ing] the blessed work of helping forward a new path for unmarried women—the one class with whom my sympathies are deepest'.³²

Anna Deborah and the Early Women's Movement

Anna's search for a 'definite aim' in life led her outside her close-knit community of Friends and relations. The catalyst for this was her meeting

28. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 14. Research has failed to discover either the identity of her fiancé, or the reason for the estrangement.

29. B. Stephen, *Emily Davies and Girton College* (London: Constable & Co. Ltd, 1927), p. 54.

30. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 80.

31. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 80.

32. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 168.

with Emily Davies, the daughter of a Gateshead minister. The two became firm friends, as well as collaborators in a number of 'women's rights' campaigns, particularly the scheme to allow young women access to higher education through a female college at Cambridge. Their own inadequate education and the limitations imposed by society on middle-class spinsters like themselves, made both 'fully alive to the need for Higher Education for women'.³³ 'If single women are to be anything better than bores', wrote Anna in 1868, 'they must be regularly trained for useful work of various kinds, adapted to our very complex and disordered social condition'.³⁴

Emily's education had been even less thorough than Anna's, who had at least the benefit of intellectual parents, and who continued to follow a self-devised course of study throughout her life. '[M]y mind wants looking after dreadfully', wrote Emily to her new friend, 'and I consider you responsible for it'.³⁵ Anna 'stimulated and encouraged [Emily's] taste for reading',³⁶ and taught Emily a little Greek and Latin, although '[e]ven this brave effort was broken into when Anna's mother was taken ill; as the eldest of a large family, Anna was expected to take over the running of the household'.³⁷ The two also instigated classes in arithmetic and Latin for 'a few girls with one exception all members of the Society of Friends'³⁸ and sometime between 1859 and 1861, lectures were held for young ladies 'by the cordial liberality of one of the chief Physicians of the town in his own house, on physiology'.³⁹

By this time, Emily had learned of the existence of an English 'women's movement' after meeting Barbara Leigh Smith, a founder of the *English Woman's Journal*, during a visit to Algiers in the late 1850s.⁴⁰ Through Barbara, Emily encountered the Langham Place Circle in London: women

33. S.A. Richardson, 'Recollections of Emily Davies', p. 1. Stephen Papers, Girton College, Cambridge.

34. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 213.

35. Stephen, *Emily Davies*, p. 54.

36. Stephen, *Emily Davies*, p. 54.

37. D. Bennett, *Emily Davies and the Liberation of Women* (London: André Deutsch, 1990), p. 16. It is interesting that all of Emily Davies' biographers inaccurately describe Anna as two years older than Emily, when the reverse was actually the case; they appear to base this assumption on the way that Emily often defers to Anna's opinions, as if to an older woman.

38. S.A. Richardson, 'Recollections', p. 1.

39. S.A. Richardson, 'Recollections', pp. 1-2. These were also attended mainly by young Quaker women.

40. B. Caine, *Victorian Feminists*, p. 68.

who were effectively the founding members of the first organized 'women's movement' in England.⁴¹ Following their example, Emily established a Northumberland and Durham Branch of the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women early in 1861: she was its secretary and Anna a member of the acting committee.⁴² A register of governesses was drawn up, book-keeping classes for women begun, and enquiries made into the conditions of work for women in local factories.⁴³ Emily also wrote a series of letters to the local press, drawing attention to the lack of employment opportunities for women.⁴⁴

Following the death of her father in 1861, Emily moved to London, where she became deeply involved in all the activities of the Langham Place circle. From September 1862 she edited, firstly, the *English Woman's Journal*, then, when it folded, the *Victoria Magazine*.⁴⁵ Anna was recruited to write book reviews for these magazines; in 1863, Emily requested a 'notice' of about five hundred and fifty words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *The Great Christian Poets and the English Poets*.⁴⁶ Emily also tried to persuade her friend to join the Kensington Society, a discussion group for women, when it was set up in 1865. 'I wish you belonged to the Kensington', she wrote in May that year. 'We are getting a delightful set of members... If you will let me propose you as a member, I will send you the selection of papers read'.⁴⁷

In 1868, Emily also failed to persuade her friend either to attend lectures at Cambridge University in order to qualify as an 'officer' to the new women's college which was then on the brink of opening,⁴⁸ or to assume the position of Local Secretary of the College Committee.⁴⁹ Anna Deborah declined the latter, claiming that, '[b]esides a narrow circle, atrabilioussness, and journeys to Grasmere, my education has been too defective for the post'.⁵⁰ She also believed she was too old to become a tutor, as Emily had suggested:

41. Caine, *Victorian Feminists*, p. 69.

42. Davies, 'Family Chronicle', p. 211.

43. Stephen, *Emily Davies*, p. 56.

44. E. Davies, 'Letters to a Daily Paper, Newcastle-on-Tyne' (1860). Republished in *Thoughts on Some Questions Relating to Women* (London, 1910).

45. Caine, *Victorian Feminists*, p. 70.

46. Davies, 'Family Chronicle', pp. 289-90.

47. Davies, 'Family Chronicle', p. 422.

48. Davies, 'Family Chronicle', p. 617.

49. Letter from E. Davies to A. Richardson, May 1868. ED Box XVII GC 1/6. Davies papers, Girton College, Cambridge.

50. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 219.

If only I were ten years younger, and had good lungs, I think I should have been tempted to sink a part of my little property in the concern, for the sake of being appointed a coach, or something of the sort, sub judge, of course, which would remove such an act from the region of bribery. However, my family duties seem transparently clear now.⁵¹

Instead, Anna confined her activities, when not needed by her family, to canvassing on behalf of Emily's scheme to set up a women's college at Cambridge, and to privately pursuing her academic interests. In 1860, at the age of 28, she had contemplated the employment options open to her. Considering a career in medicine, she complained that, 'fagging about' knocks me up, and I don't think I could stand night attendance on any one'; hence she found 'the thought of Hebrew...more captivating'.⁵² But Anna also wrote of having to guard against her 'old ambitious spirit'.⁵³ 'I know I could do good, with what I have already gained, in a quiet, humble way, anywhere', she continued. 'Who made me to differ, that I should do more than this?'⁵⁴

Despite this heart-felt cry of frustrated ambition, Anna was luckier than many of her contemporaries. An independent income allowed her to spend much of her time at Heugh Folds, a house built to her own design in the Lake District. Here she enjoyed entertaining many stimulating visitors. A younger unmarried sister, Caroline, undertook many of the family duties which Anna would otherwise have been obliged to perform. For example, in October 1870, Anna wrote about the imminent arrival of Caroline at Heugh Folds 'for a short while, and a rest', after a period helping their sister Lizzie with her 'home troubles' while her husband was away administering 'funds to the starving peasants near Sedan'.⁵⁵

'Poor Quakerism! How much I think on that.'⁵⁶

Anna's Spiritual Crisis

By the late 1860s, when Emily Davies was trying to persuade her friend to become more involved in her feminist circle, Anna's health had worsened.

51. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 214.

52. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 175.

53. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 175.

54. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 175.

55. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 225.

56. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 180. From a letter written by Anna to her sister Caroline in 1860.

She was also undergoing a religious crisis, culminating in her being baptised into the Church of England at Grasmere in June 1866.⁵⁷ Her brother remarked in later years that:

I have sometimes thought that if Anna's health had permitted her to engage in more active work, her intense theological feelings might have been somewhat modified. Whether for the better or not, who can say?⁵⁸

Anna had long expressed dissatisfaction with aspects of the Society. In 1856 she had noted her delight in finding:

books of undeniably good life, in places where our worthy elders do not choose to look for it, ie the army and universities...it is to be trusted that, as these steady lights rise on all sides, there will be less and less of the revolting spiritual conceit, which comes out every now and then under the phrases of 'Our Israel', 'Peculiar People' etc.⁵⁹

Writing to a young woman who was anxious to become a Quaker, she reflected that 'our singularities as Friends...are of small importance', although she hoped that 'the Society will hold together, as a band of labourers, until its views on war and oaths, and an earnest ministry, are more fully received in the Church at large'.⁶⁰ Once other churches had accepted these 'doctrines of Christian Truth', the work of the Society would end.⁶¹

In 1867, Emily Davies requested information from Anna about Quaker women for an essay on 'The Quaker System', to be published in a collection of writings relating to women she was editing. Anna found the proposal 'not at all a wise idea'.⁶² Sending a copy of the Quaker *Book of Discipline* to Emily, she warned that although this would undoubtedly aid an understanding of Quakerism, there was also 'a vast body of tradition, only understood by members', which, moreover, was in the process of 'getting more and more mixed and diluted'.⁶³ In short, Quakerism 'has changed and is changing'.⁶⁴

Anna also deplored the Society's 'curious non-applicability to the

57. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 201.

58. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 201.

59. Richardson, *Memoir*, pp. 92-93.

60. Richardson, *Memoir*, pp. 119-20.

61. Richardson, *Memoir*, pp. 119-20.

62. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 214.

63. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 216.

64. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 214.

masses'.⁶⁵ Writing to Emily Davies, she described her aunt Ann's 'bitter grief' when four girls from the Newcastle Ragged and Industrial Schools, an institution which trained vagrant and delinquent children for useful work, had taken a house together 'for shameless purposes'.⁶⁶ 'But then there is not a fair religious machinery so to speak to prop them', she explained. '[T]he training is Presbyterian—Quaker—far too vague I venture to think—good I dare say as far as it goes for good people, but not for bad'.⁶⁷ Responding to a proposal by Richards Potts to introduce inspection into Quaker schools, she warned that, 'in spite of its democratic basis, the Society of Friends is a highly conservative body, jealous of innovation'.⁶⁸

While continuing to admire many of the Friends that she knew, Anna was scornful of those 'strict Friends...[who were] apt to fall into the delusion that they do all things for conscience's sake'.⁶⁹ As early as 1855, she had expressed her impatience with those who do 'what I grumble at very much in the Society of Friends—talking of the faith of Quakerism, instead of the faith of Christianity'.⁷⁰ She was also scathing about the quality of preaching in Quaker meetings, remarking that 'no one who has left dissent can be supposed to wish to hear [dissenting preachers] again'.⁷¹ Anna approved of the 'equal vow' that was made in the marriage procedure, but was not entirely sure whether Quaker men *genuinely* believed in a more equal and authoritative status for women than was usual in that period:

I do not know whether it is our equal vow, or the more solid education of the women with the inferior education of the men, which brings them nearer together; but certainly, men Friends, however boorish, are free from that hateful covert patronage and condescension to women, which the manners of very few gentlemen outside are without, so far as my small experience goes.⁷²

Similarly, while there was a tendency in Quaker men to leave administration to women, they thought that 'they do enough if they supply them well with funds'.⁷³

65. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 149.

66. Anna Deborah Richardson to Emily Davies, no date. ED Box IV 55. Davies papers, Girton College, Cambridge.

67. Richardson to Davies, ED Box IV 55.

68. Anna Deborah Richardson to R. Potts, 1860. ED vii/ LOC 2. Davies papers, Girton College, Cambridge.

69. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 192.

70. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 78.

71. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 78.

72. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 216.

73. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 215.

While Anna approved of the abandonment of many Quaker 'peculiarities' in the 1860s, she felt that the contemporary Society of Friends was out of touch with its earlier doctrines. She referred to 'older Friends who are dying out', who 'seemed to realise, to a wonderful degree, the Mediatorship of Christ— how it stands in the midst of *all*, the very smallest even, of the difficulties and perplexities of life, and brings those who accept it, through them, into harmony with the Father's will'.⁷⁴ Her break with Quakerism was ostensibly because she believed she should 'receive baptism in the full sense in which I think it is evidently required by our Lord',⁷⁵ thus rejecting the Society's opposition to outward sacraments. She found the teaching of the Anglican Church, 'so much more a development....of what...the old [Friends believed], and so much richer and like *that* in substance, than the greater part of the ministry of modern Friends is'.⁷⁶ Hannah Maria Wigham, writing after Anna's death from Bright's disease in 1872, claimed that the early Friends were Anna's 'highest ideal of Christian life', but, 'as that seemed impracticable, she felt most rest for her spirit in that portion of the Church of England to which Pusey, Keble, and others belonged'.⁷⁷

'I love her in a way I fear you would condemn as romantic':⁷⁸

Friendship with Mary Grace Taylor

Anna's 'study of the New Testament, in the original, and of the early Fathers...had led her to take the strongest views of the nature and efficacy of the sacraments',⁷⁹ but her choice of the Anglican Church may have also been influenced by her passionate attachment to a woman called Mary Grace Taylor, whom she had met during a family visit to the Lake District in about 1852.⁸⁰ Mary's grandmother, the writer Mrs Fletcher, lived at Lancrigg, near Grasmere. Part of the attraction of the area for Anna was her acquaintanceship through Mrs Fletcher with the many writers and intellectuals who

74. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 214.

75. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 201.

76. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 251.

77. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 292. It is interesting that Anna was first introduced to Pusey's sermons by her great-uncle George Richardson, a minister in the Society, who had 'pointed out to her the resemblance of [Pusey's] deep views of spiritual truth and those of the early Friends'.

78. Letter from Anna to Emily Davies, February 1868. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 220.

79. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 292.

80. J.W. Richardson, *Memoirs*, p. 60.

were drawn to the home of Romanticism.⁸¹ Anna was immediately captivated by Mary, finding her a 'very fascinating young lady, whom it is a delight merely to look upon. Her conversation was admirable—such stores of literature set among very rich thoughts of her own'.⁸²

Anna's brother commented that the 'friendships which Anna formed, always with girls older than herself, were almost painful in their intensity'.⁸³ This describes her feelings for Mary Taylor. Whenever Anna visited the Lake District, she hoped to find Mary there; in 1857, she reported fighting 'against the disappointment of not seeing Mary Taylor... I wished for it, perhaps too much'.⁸⁴ In 1859, she was able to spend a 'great deal of time alone with Mary Taylor...a great privilege...for though she is not much older than I am, she is, every way, far better'.⁸⁵ 'I have not', she continued, 'even among our own dear friends, been with any one whose sound judgment of right, combined with great sweetness, is more constantly brought to bear on every action of life'.⁸⁶

Anna's feelings for Mary appear to have been far stronger than Mary's for Anna: on the receipt of some photographs from Mary in 1859, she wrote that '[t]he first thing I did was to apply a strong magnifier, with an eager, tremulous hope of seeing your face again'.⁸⁷ However, 'to my disgust, only the beautiful glistening crystals of the metallic surface came out, and no face whatever was visible below'.⁸⁸ Anna nursed a longstanding hope that Mary would one day agree to an outing in a pony chaise. "[J]ust possible" was what you said three years ago. You don't know how I have schemed upon those two words, nor how pleasant it is to have the thought pass into a warmer and more hopeful region.⁸⁹ A fortnight later, Anna told her friend of a 'handsome bridle which my brother gave me three years ago, and

81. Mrs Fletcher, *Autobiography of Mrs Fletcher with Letters and other Family Memorials, Edited by the Survivor of her Family* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 2nd edn, 1875), p. 243. For an account of Mrs Fletcher, see *Dictionary of National Biography* (London, 1909), pp. 298-99. Wordsworth had helped Mrs. Fletcher buy Lancrigg. Her son-in-law was the arctic explorer and naturalist Sir John Richardson (no relation to Anna) and one of her neighbours at Lancrigg was Dr Arnold, the former headmaster of Rigby.

82. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 24.

83. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 14.

84. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 115.

85. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 154.

86. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 154.

87. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 162.

88. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 162.

89. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 163.

which...I have stored by for your use in a box, lest everything else should get shabby. It has a delicate double rein, just suited for your hand, and I wanted to see you and Minnie⁹⁰ together—loving you both as I do.⁹¹ Now, however, Anna was using it herself, since 'that hope is quite buried, and I will never attempt to resuscitate it'.⁹²

Anna acknowledged the existence of a 'barrier' between Mary and herself, 'although I do not think I should see it, if you did not stand on the other side and say, "take care"'.⁹³ The barrier was religious in origin: Anna described Mary as High Church, with rigid views towards dissenters.⁹⁴ She appealed for greater tolerance:

You are very right in a full 'awakening to the glories of your inheritance', only wrong in your severity towards those who do not share them; and if you should ever be led to take a more benignant view of the circumstances in which it has pleased our Heavenly Father to place some of your fellow Christians, perhaps you will remember what I have now said, and speak to me afresh.⁹⁵

Although Anna later embraced High Church Anglicanism, the relationship remained largely one-sided. In 1871, Anna wrote to Mary to explain why she had not visited her on a recent visit to London, 'because you had never—even casually—said I might, and I did not like to ask for that great pleasure again'.⁹⁶

You see, supposing you had not altogether opposed it, then I should have had a painful recollection to serve me until my next meeting you; while, now, I have a most delightful one from Grasmere, flowing with its richness into every duty of each hour, and I try not to think of the good I have missed.⁹⁷

Mary had earlier warned Anna that she was 'too eager in seeking such a pleasure'⁹⁸ but even so, Anna could not resist hoping that Mary would break her journey to Scotland at Newbiggin-by-the-Sea, where Anna was staying: 'these things need not take more than three days off the other

90. Anna's horse.
91. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 167.
92. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 167.
93. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 163.
94. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 168.
95. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 164.
96. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 266.
97. Richardson, *Memoir*, pp. 266-67.
98. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 266.

claims on your time'.⁹⁹ 'However', she concluded, 'I am not going to be silly enough to build up any little castle about it'.¹⁰⁰

Mary Taylor's 'radiant intellect'¹⁰¹ provided much academic stimulation; Anna's letters are full of discussions of texts recommended by Mary. The relationship was also an outlet for Anna's passionate and romantic nature, a need not satisfied by Emily Davies. She confessed to Emily in 1868 her 'immense opinion' of Mary, loving her 'in a way that I fear you would condemn as romantic', continuing that she 'never dare let that side of me confront [your] fearful reasonableness'.¹⁰² But she was eager for her two friends to meet, and delighted to obtain Mary's endorsement for the women's college at Cambridge.¹⁰³

Holton writes that 'romantic friendships were commonplace among women in the nineteenth century',¹⁰⁴ while Cott sees these friendships as expressing 'a new individuality on women's part, a willingness and ability to extract themselves from familial definition and to enter into peer relationships as distinct human beings'.¹⁰⁵ Levine also writes of intense and passionate friendships between members of the mid-nineteenth century feminist community, which provided mutual support and sustenance against the contempt, ridicule, and even hostility of much of society.¹⁰⁶ This 'social milieu of active women' differed from the single-sex socializing which was common in Victorian England, in that the 'feminist' social pattern was not based solely around domesticity.¹⁰⁷ Emily Davies often acknowledged her debt to Anna's friendship and support in achieving the women's college; it was to her that Emily turned when she needed to talk over any important decisions with a 'kindred spirit'.¹⁰⁸ 'You don't know how much pleasure it gives me to be working with you at this', wrote Emily to Anna in 1868. 'It is

99. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 267.
100. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 267.
101. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 34.
102. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 220.
103. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 221.
104. S.S. Holton, *Suffrage Days: Stories from the Women's Suffrage Movement* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 60.
105. N. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman's Sphere' in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 190.
106. See chapter 4, 'Understanding the Empty Places: Love, Friendship and Women's Networks', in P. Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 60-75.
107. Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England*, p. 62.
108. Davies, 'Family Chronicle', p. 515.

a remarkable fact that all the people who take up the college heartily are the very best and nicest one knows'.¹⁰⁹ For Emily, Anna's death of Bright's disease in 1872 'meant the loss of a most faithful and sympathetic friend'.¹¹⁰

'[T]he clamour of a few fanatics':¹¹¹ Anna Deborah and Feminism

Anna Deborah Richardson was undoubtedly a 'feminist', in the sense that her opinions and life-style indicate both a clear understanding of gendered subordinations, and a desire for autonomy and self-determination. She delighted in finding examples of women who had succeeded in traditionally male roles:

One thing I must not forget, which pleased me greatly. Kilnoch was without a steward six months last year, and M.J. Lecky was, all that time, away. Susannah Tyler, the housekeeper, managed it entirely herself, directing and supervising the men; and she said the only difficulty she had, was to prevent her mind being unduly absorbed in the interest of it.¹¹²

Elsewhere, she commented with approval on 'the brave independence' of a female acquaintance's life,¹¹³ while she found John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* 'the very best thing hitherto done on the subject'.¹¹⁴

Often called upon to fulfil family duties, such as accompanying her mother to Nottingham for an eye operation in 1870,¹¹⁵ Anna's preferred lifestyle was to be in residence at her cottage in the Lake District, where she could be independent and freely entertain her like-minded friends. She was also closer to the possibility of seeing Mary Taylor there. Anna could not find the companionship, intellectual stimulation and shared values within her north-east Quaker community, however loving and generally supportive those relationships were. In 1867, writing to Emily about Annie Jemima Clough's scheme for local lectures aimed at women, she commented:

Even if it only gives a little temporary stimulus, it is something, and it may be an encouragement to the mute inglorious blue girls of the district to find that there are people in the world who do not disapprove of their tastes...¹¹⁶

109. Davies, 'Family Chronicle', pp. 629-30.

110. Stephen, *Emily Davies*, p. 267.

111. From a letter by Emily Davies to Anna Deborah Richardson, March 1868. E. Davies, 'Family Chronicle', p. 595.

112. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 178.

113. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 221.

114. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 253.

115. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 254.

116. Davies, 'Family Chronicle', p. 535.

Her comments reflect her own sense of isolation within her provincial environment.

Because of this, the extent to which Anna Deborah Richardson can be described as a 'feminist *Friend*' is somewhat problematic. Although she continued to support some of the Society's testimonies, such as 'our precious Quaker doctrine on war',¹¹⁷ she was clearly disaffected with others for at least a decade before she formally joined the Anglican church.

Anna belonged to the most prominent Quaker 'dynasty' in the Newcastle monthly meeting area during the nineteenth century. Richardsons of either gender filled the 'weightiest' offices in their local meetings and were among the most active participants in the Meetings for Discipline.¹¹⁸ Yet Anna herself never became involved in these meetings. It would seem that she was reluctant to commit to her Quaker inheritance long before there was any suggestion of her leaving the Society.

For single female Friends of Anna's generation who enjoyed relatively affluent circumstances, an acceptable way of finding fulfilment outside the sphere of domesticity and the Society's Meetings for Discipline, was through 'good works'. The commitment of her female relatives to philanthropic and reform bodies was prodigious, but although Anna was said to have visited the poor and helped to run mothers' meetings, as well as being involved in the building of workmen's dwellings near Heugh Folds,¹¹⁹ these activities were decidedly *not* her life's work. She summed up her attitude to philanthropic activities by writing that, 'I like so much to have *some* work of this kind',¹²⁰ but felt her real 'blessed work' was to help 'forward a new path for unmarried women'.¹²¹ The path she chose, in keeping with her love of academic study, lay in forging a route for women into higher education. It is not surprising that she found a 'kindred spirit' in Emily Davies, who, having rejected the possibility of studying medicine with her friend Elizabeth Garrett, remarked that 'there seemed to be no other opening to any sort of career, and I did not care to take up parish work as the business of my life'.¹²²

Friends as a body were not opposed to the education of girls and Anna's parents were said to be unusually supportive of cultivating 'the intellectual

117. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 144.

118. E.A. O'Donnell, 'Woman's Rights and Woman's Duties', p. 210.

119. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 205.

120. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 175.

121. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 168.

122. Davies, 'Family Chronicle', p. 244.

interests of their children',¹²³ regardless of gender. However, in education, as in other areas of life, 'social custom proved stronger than spiritual insight for a long time'.¹²⁴ The education of the Richardson girls received a lower priority than that of their brothers, as was the case in most Quaker families.¹²⁵ There was also a lingering suspicion towards academic study for its own sake. A young Quaker woman studying for the Newnham entrance exam in its early years wrote:

I think work like yours and mine just now gives one rather a feeling of selfishness—the aim is so very definite and so entirely for our own immediate advantage. But then how often a man's business must seem so—and our final aim is not selfish.¹²⁶

Anna Richardson's personal quest for intellectual satisfaction led her to steep herself in the works of all the important political and religious thinkers of the day, from Ruskin, Macaulay and F.D. Maurice, to Jebb, Lecky and Mill, as well as in the literature of Goethe, Browning, George Elliot and others. She also studied Greek, in order to read the New Testament in its original form, the better to understand the Truth. Perhaps the suspicion of some Friends towards this depth of academic study was justified, since it was through her perusal of the New Testament in Greek that she became convinced that the Society was misguided in its opposition to the sacraments.

Anna's belief that Quakerism, as practised in the mid-nineteenth century, had deviated from its earlier spiritual roots forms an interesting connection with a number of other 'feminist Friends'. Lucretia Mott, a radical woman Friend and early suffragist, was part of the American Hicksite Quaker faction, described as 'more loyal to the older [that is, non-Evangelical] Quaker tradition', allowing women to be more 'assertive, initiating actions and undertaking concerns without waiting for the approval of the men'.¹²⁷ Anna

123. See the entry for Elizabeth Spence Watson, *Annual Monitor* (1919–20), p. 287.

124. W.A.C. Stewart, *Quakers and Education* (London: Epworth Press, 1953), p. 181.

125. E.A. O'Donnell, 'Woman's Rights and Woman's Duties', pp. 95–99.

126. Quoted in M. Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850–1920* (London: Virago, 1985), p. 136.

127. M.H. Bacon, *Mothers of Feminism: The Story of Quaker Women in America* (Philadelphia: Friends' General Conference, 2nd edn, 1986), pp. 93–94. The 1827 schism between Orthodox and Hicksite Friends in America was precipitated by the concern of the former about doctrinal orthodoxy. Elias Hicks opposed the new evangelicalism, insisting on 'the primacy of the Christ within the believer over the Christ of the Bible'. (Bacon,

wrote to Emily Davies of meeting 'very intimate friends' of Lucretia Mott in 1868, commenting that she 'had always heard of her as a most remarkable woman'.¹²⁸ In Britain, Anne Knight, who demanded female suffrage as early as 1847, found the 'White Quakers' of Ireland a more sympathetic group than the mainstream, Evangelical body.¹²⁹ Alice Clark, feminist historian and suffragist, also looked to early Friends for inspiration in her political activities:

In some ways I skip all the decorous intervening generations of Friends and my sympathies go direct to the contemporaries of George Fox, who protested in the steeple-houses against the false teaching of the priests...¹³⁰

Although Anna's disaffection with the Society led her into High Church Anglicanism, it is possible that she too was impressed by the radical activities of the first Quaker women, leading her to identify with the Society's earliest manifestation.

Conclusion

Although a large number of women Quakers contributed to the development of the early women's movement through their participation in philanthropic and reform movements, which expanded women's roles into the 'public' sphere, research suggests that very few were informed by a self-conscious awareness of the subjection of women, or an ideological commitment to redressing the gendered imbalance in society. Examination of aspects of Quakerism identified by historians as being key factors in the development of early feminism amongst female Friends demonstrates the extent to which this was constrained by their cultural milieu. The pressures to group conformity, for instance, which placed corporate well-being above the assertion of individualism, made defiance of the Society's norms difficult to sustain. Also significant, paradoxically, was its self-image of already

Mothers of Feminism, p. 92) Amongst other early women's rights activists who were Hicksite Friends were Susan B. Anthony, Florence Kelley and Alice Paul. However, Hicksites were not united on this issue, many being Quietist and therefore disapproving of 'mingling with outsiders in reform movements' (Bacon, *Mothers of Feminism*, p. 94).

128. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 223.

129. Malmgreen, 'Anne Knight', p. 110.

130. From a letter to Mary and Anna Maria Priestman, 26 June 1908, quoted in Holton, *Suffrage Days*, p. 168.

being in possession of equality in its gender relations, through a management structure which 'masked [gendered] hierarchy in the rhetoric of spiritual equality'.¹³¹

Moreover, women Quakers who overstepped the boundaries of propriety in their activities faced the disapproval of their religious community.¹³² Whilst public involvement in philanthropic and reform movements was usually encouraged by the Society of Friends, there were limits as to what was permissible. Some 'feminist Friends' responded by turning to the wider radical community for support; while remaining Quakers, they 'tended to pursue their spiritual goals through more secular channels'.¹³³ Although religious faith undoubtedly informed their political views, they frequently found themselves outside the mainstream of Quaker opinion. The small number of Quaker women who could be described as feminist in the early years of the nascent British women's movement tended to be at some distance from their religious community, like Anna Deborah Richardson.

They were also responding to developments in society as a whole, rather than demonstrating a particular 'Quakerly' predisposition to feminist ideas, especially as the Society of Friends drew closer to the norms of 'the world'. The assumed relationship between Quaker women and the development of feminism can therefore be inverted, placing them not in the vanguard, but as those whose feminist consciousness was only raised *after* they came into contact with women whose ideas were more radical than their own.

Born in the 1830s, Anna belonged to a pioneer generation of women, who not only campaigned to allow women access to higher education, but also on other women-centred issues, such as forming the first women's suffrage committees and lobbying Parliament for changes to married women's property rights. Subsequent cohorts of female Friends in the second half of the nineteenth century were able to take advantage of the painfully slow gains made. Emily Davies called the first students at Hitchin

131. Holton and Allen, 'Offices and Services', p. 21.

132. For example, Elizabeth Heyrick, who was the first to call for immediate rather than gradual abolition of slavery in the British Anti-Slavery movement, met with hostility or indifference (K. Corfield, 'Elizabeth Heyrick: Radical Quaker', in G. Malmgreen [ed.], *Religion in the Lives of English Women, 1700–1830* [London: Croom Helm, 1986], pp. 41–67). Similarly, Anne Knight, who published the first pamphlet specifically calling for women's suffrage in 1847, was obliged to turn 'from the fellowship of Quaker cousinhood and philanthropic association to the broader community of radicalism' (Malmgreen, 'Anne Knight', p. 104).

133. Holton and Allen, 'Offices and Services', p. 6.

the 'spoiled children of fortune...what might not have been done, if we had had such chances!'¹³⁴ Anna herself found that the 'whole life of the students [at Hitchin] looked only *too* intellectually luxurious'¹³⁵ during a visit there in 1871.

The daughters of Anna's sisters and cousins found their path to self-fulfilment much smoother. Her sister Lizzie, only six years her junior, was permitted to attend the Newcastle School of Art, studying under the Pre-Raphaelite painter, William Bell Scott.¹³⁶ She not only had the example of her older sister in developing feminist ideas, but also the whole-hearted endorsement of her husband, Robert Spence Watson. Together, they campaigned on a wide range of issues,¹³⁷ including women's suffrage, and their mutual support enabled them to remain fully integrated into the life of the north-east Quaker community. Their daughter Mabel, born in 1864, was a student at Newnham College where she passed the Mathematics Tripos exam in 1886, later becoming the first superintendent of women students at the Durham College of Science at Newcastle.¹³⁸

Lizzie and Mabel were able to build on the trail-blazing activities of their sister and aunt; Anna Deborah was a far more isolated figure, and depended on her friendships with non-Quaker women to sustain her feminist activities. She could not find the fulfilment she craved within the Society's embrace and her 'old ambitious spirit' led her to remove herself both physically and spiritually—to the Lake District and High Church Anglicanism—thus creating her own community of 'kindred spirits'. The

134. From a letter written to Anna, quoted in Stephen, *Emily Davies*, p. 207.

135. Richardson, *Memoir*, p. 267. Hitchin was the first location of the women's college which Emily Davies and Anna had campaigned for; it relocated to the purpose-built Girton College in 1873.

136. See entry for Elizabeth Spence Watson, *Dictionary of Quaker Biography* (DQB), typescript, Friends' House Library, London.

137. For example, in addition to her suffrage activities, Elizabeth (1839–1919) was a founder, with her husband, of the Gateshead High School for Girls; the Secretary to the Committee of the Ragged and Industrial School for Girls for over 30 years; President of the Women's Liberal Association (which she helped found); a Poor Law Guardian; and a member of the Women's International League, the Tyneside Peace and Arbitration League, the British Women's Temperance Association, the Gateshead Nurses' Association, and the Girls' Friendless League. During the First World War, she helped conscientious objectors. See H. Corder, *Elizabeth Spence Watson, 1839–1919* (Sunderland: 1919); also DQB and *Annual Monitor* (1919–20), pp. 286–96. She was also the mother of six children.

138. See entry for Mabel Richardson (née Spence Watson) in DQB.

compensations for the narrow lives of many unmarried women Quakers—the close relationships inside their Society and the roles of minister or participant in its discipline, as well as the satisfaction derived from doing ‘good works’—were simply not enough for Anna.

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