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Research note: Region, Gender and Family, Print Culture, and Radical Puritanism: A Conversation between Stephen Angell and Euan McArthur

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Reflecting on two research notes in this edition of *Quaker Studies*, this conversation piece considers the commonalities between them and what they tell us about the direction of future research. The content of each note concerns Quakerism in a local context – examining specific civic, parochial, and educational debates in the East of England – suggesting a need to write Quaker history in a plural fashion. Both authors equally reflect, however, on the migration of disputes across regional and even national boundaries, as well as the insights close readings of texts can give us into their dispersion and the theological and practical relations between denominational groups. Looking forward, both authors affirm the need for a continued attendance to these topics, in addition to the representation of female agency as an authorial and inscribed presence.

Dear Euan,

I am delighted to have the chance to read your most informative research note. I see numerous areas of overlap with mine. Both notes share a regionality focused on the East of England. Chronologically, both are set during Cromwell's Protectorate or (in the case of your second tract) the later Commonwealth. Some of the similarities between our notes are simply jaw-dropping. Who would think that two Research Notes having to do with wolves in sheep's clothing (Mt. 7:15) would be published in the same issue of Quaker Studies? Both, in slightly different ways, attempt to assess the importance of the encounter of puritan university-trained elites with Quakers mostly bereft of such training.

Your basic objective of informing this journal's readership about two non-digitised tracts of great interest is extremely admirable and enlightening. By way of contrast, I am still trying to reckon with the gains in research that are afforded by access to a digital resource as sweeping (and now with a search engine) as Early English Books Online (EEBO).

Given that the East of England was also its most strongly puritan region, I am struck by, and I concur with, your description of 'a settled puritan-Quaker divide, with different communities regularly arrayed against each other'. I am wondering if the biblicism of the puritans, as against the more spiritualised approach to scriptures of the Quakers, might be the most fundamental issue at hand in all of the literature upon which we are commenting.

I wonder if we are giving sufficient attention to the divides within puritanism, not just Quakerism. My note makes a glancing mention of Anne Hutchinson, a leading figure in the New England antinomian movement, and a native of Lincolnshire in England's East. While Hutchinson did not live long enough to witness the rise of Quakers, both her younger sister, Katherine Marbury Scott, and her best friend, Mary Dyer, notably became Quakers. Does the rise of Quakerism constitute the most basic of puritan divides in England's East? How do these deeper connections between puritans and Quakers look differently when we transfer our gaze from the North of England, where the scholarship of Hugh Barbour[1] and others have concentrated, to the East? Or are we just better off seeing them as two fundamentally different movements?

Steve

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[1] Barbour, H., *The Quakers in Puritan England*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1964.

Dear Steve,

I found your note on the puritan-Quaker debates involving Firmin most thought provoking. Responses to the Quaker movement in the East of England, as elsewhere, were multi-layered. Both of our notes focus in-person and printed debates and attempts, by magistrates and ministers, to execute discipline. My own approach has been to explain the content and circumstances of two difficult-to-access pieces, while your note shows the puritan Firmin responding to two Quaker authors before a different set of Friends took up the battle against him. As with the differences between the more divided or dispirited Norwich Quakers of 1655, and the confident, sophisticated disputants in Cambridge in 1659, development is apparent at an early stage. For critics, the Quakers' eschewal of biblicism certainly constituted a continual stumbling block, something worth underlining in Whitehead's and Fox the Younger's *Truth Defending*: its opening response to Smith defended 'asserting the Scriptures or writings not to be the Word, but a declaration of that word, wherein are recorded words that God spoke'.[2]

Your note importantly suggests that debates between Quakers and opponents were situational, characterised by certain accidents of transmission and individuals' designs. The account of Firmin's text highlights the importance of Nayler's and Parnell's circumstances, as well as the histories of Firmin, his congregation, and the East of England. On these grounds, we should continue to explore to what extent the early Quaker movement achieved agency as a national body, particularly during its initial years.[3] George Fox's *Great mistery of the great whore*, which appropriated Firmin's 'Principles' from their original context,[4] represented one pole in such disputes – the tendency to synthesise arguments, and reduce opponents to a relatively uniform status – while the accommodations made in Norwich, and attacks by Whitehead and Fox the Younger on Cambridge scholars, local ministers, and 'Manifestarians' in the East of England remind us of specific situations.

Stablishing against shaking related that Firmin was responding to literature which his congregation had delivered to him. I found it interesting that there seemed to be negotiation at hand, with parishioners reading these works: they thought it appropriate to have Firmin respond, and Firmin addressed the congregation directly in his conclusion. This raises important questions surrounding the reception of Quaker and anti-Quaker literature. While Kate Peters's *Print Culture and the Early Quakers* (2005) brought home

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[2] Whitehead G., and Fox the Younger, F., *Truth Defending the Quakers*, London: Thomas Simmonds, 1659, p. 1.

[3] For an alternative account of the Cambridge debates discussed in my own note, suggesting that Smith and the University of Cambridge were targeted because of their national significance, see Williams, J., 'Dispute and Print in Cambridge, 1659', *The Journal of the Friends Historical Society*, 61, 2007, pp. 130–31.

[4] Fox, *The great mistery of the great whore unfolded*, London: Thomas Simmonds, 1659, p. 114.

the importance of understanding Quaker texts in the context of in-person debates, your note further illustrates the necessity of following the thread of specific print debates, as well as the dispersion of books. Analysing the social circulation of written texts – whether in manuscript or print – rather than a static model of intertextual dialogue, could certainly be furthered in Quaker studies.

I was struck across both notes by the ability of Quakers to exert an influence, either through older or newer publications, beyond prison confines. In the case of Parnell and the Quakers quoted in *The discovery of a Wolf in Sheeps Cloathing*, as well as John Lilburne,[5] George Fox, James Nayler, and others during the early 1660s, we see that the incarceration of leading Friends or even of Quakers *en masse* was not a panacea. Whitehead and Fox the Younger earlier wrote from their confines, and Parnell suffered unto his last; it was against such adversaries that Firmin felt it necessary to produce a lengthy work. Scholars have previously explored the significance of 'prison literature' in the early modern world,[6] and both notes speak to that debate.

Thinking about the interaction between Quakers and non-Quakers, particularly those you designate 'in-between' groups, will, I believe, prove fruitful. While Firmin's text is exclusionary, how it does this is important, by associating the Quakers with antinomians, Separatists, and Baptists, and conceding that some comparisons with Catholicism are inapt. Thomas Smith was a stout Anglican, and Firmin remained true to his convictions against other denominations. But Firmin also associated with some heterodox figures and was pushed, later in life, to a similar position of nonconformity to the Quakers. The General Baptist Henry Denne defended the Quakers against Smith, but publicly urged them to take oaths of loyalty following the Restoration.[7] Quaker individuals adjusted their strategies, whether regarding Atkinson, Firmin, or other Protestants after 1688, throughout this period. I have suggested elsewhere that areas of agreement between Quakers and other denominations are worthy of exploration,[8] and both mine and your notes highlight the significance of this.

EEBO and other digital resources make textual comparison increasingly possible, even if my own note covers two pieces not currently available by these means. Manuscript sources remain highly important to social histories of Quakerism, as is well illustrated in Adrian Davies's *The Quakers in English Society, 1655–1725*, which uses Essex as a case study.[9] Easier access to certain collections, following the train of

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[5] Lilburne, J., *The resurrection of John Lilburne, now a prisoner in Dover-Castle*, London: Giles Calvert, 1656.

[6] For an introduction, see the *Huntingdon Library Quarterly*, 72, 2009, on 'Prison Writings in Early Modern England'.

[7] Denne, H., *An epistle recommended to all the prisons in this city & nation*, London: Francis Smith, 1660, pp. 5, 8.

[8] McArthur, E. D., *James Nayler and the Quest for Historic Quaker Identity*, Leiden: Brill, 2024, pp. 87–88.

[9] Davies, A., *The Quakers in English Society, 1655–1725*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Norman Penney's printed volumes, might in future bridge the gap between historical research and historiography. Intensive and comparative explorations of seventeenth-century pamphlets remain important, as these notes show, however, given that they represent a distinct intellectual sphere. Close readings, whether of their contents or transmission, can pay dividends for a wide range of scholars.

Euan

Dear Euan,

Thank you for these very thoughtful reflections. I heartily agree with you about the usefulness of Adrian Davies's *The Quakers in English Society, 1655–1725*. Davies makes some significant comments about the crucial year 1655–56, and in general, demonstrates the indispensability of social histories for a better understanding of the seventeenth century origins of Quakers.

One matter largely absent from both of our Research Notes, but properly a growing concern among Quaker historians, is the impact of women's and gender studies on Quaker history. Your note mentions three women of different social classes, Margaret Fell, Martha Simmonds, and Ursula, servant of Thomas Symonds. While seventeenth-century Quakers are generally renowned for having an advanced view of women's participation in ministry, your note shows that, for Quakers of that period, women's agency was fraught with difficulty both in the wider society and among Quakers themselves. Margaret Fell, of whom you speak, was of course a gentry wife, then widow who married George Fox (the elder), and her agency has been widely celebrated, in recent biographies, collections of letters, and other works by Bonnelyn Young Kunze, Sally Bruyneel, Michael Birkel, Elsa Glines, and Kristianna Polder,[10] among others. Martha Simmonds's support of James Nayler was controversial in her own time, and historians have offered varied opinions of her life and witness since.

But what really arises from your note for me is a profound wonder about a woman whose surname appears not to be recorded: Ursula, servant of Thomas Symonds. She was not granted any agency, even a problematised one, as Fell and Simmonds were. The disowned Christopher Atkinson 'had the use of her body'. Referring to her derogatorily

[10] Polder, K., 'Biography of Margaret Fell,' in C. Wess Daniels and Rhiannon Grant, eds., *The Quaker World*, New York: Routledge, 2023; and Polder, 'Margaret Fell, Mother of the New Jerusalem', in Tarter, M. L., and Gill, C., (eds), *New Critical Studies on Early Quaker Women*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 186–201; Bruynell S., *Margaret Fell and the End of Time: The theology of the mother of Quakerism*, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010; Birkel, M., *The Messenger That Goes Before: Reading Margaret Fell for spiritual nurture*, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 2008; Glines, E. F., (ed.), *Undaunted Zeal: The letters of Margaret Fell* Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2003; Kunze, B. Y., *Margaret Fell and the Rise of Quakerism*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994.

as ‘the wench’, her former master Symonds merely observed that she was ‘now gone’. Atkinson was granted the dignity of a confession; Ursula was denied that dignity. Whatever happened to Ursula?

In my note, I hoped that Margaret Fell would turn out to be one of the sources for Firmin’s tract. Firmin sourced one of his quotations to ‘Fell, p. 5.’ And ‘M. Fell’ (an ungendered title page; she used ‘Margaret’ in the text of the tract) had published in 1655 a tract on *False Prophets, Anticrists, Deceivers, Which are in the World*. The timing made it conceivable that hers was the tract I was looking for. Eventually, however, I was able to determine that Firmin was actually citing a tract by an obscure male Quaker, Christopher Fell, entitled *A few words to the people of England, who have had a day of visitation, not to slight time but prize it, least ye perish*. Thanks to you, Euan, I know that, based on Norman Penney’s research as found in the notes to his 1911 edition of Fox’s Journal,[11] it looks likely that Christopher Fell was part of a Cumberland family which converted to Quakerism in 1653. Fell was travelling in the ministry in 1655, something that certainly makes it possible that he was the author of the tract in question. There is no indication that Christopher had any familial relation to Margaret’s husband, Judge Thomas Fell. Still, Christopher and Margaret knew each other. Penney suggests that their interaction was not cordial: Margaret wrote to Christopher accusing him of sending ‘a paper amongst Friends against a paper of Margaret Fell’s’.

I now believe that all the authors alluded to in my note are male. This accentuates how male-dominated the publishing world was in mid-seventeenth century England. Scholarly analysis of Quaker women publishing in the first decade of Quaker existence, 1646–56, has focused on Sarah Jones’s *This Is Lights Appearance in the Truth* (1650)[12] and Priscilla Cotton and Mary Cole’s thorough spiritualisation of gender in *To The Priests and People of England* (1655).[13]

However, Firmin apparently did not have access to either of these tracts. All of the fourteen Quaker or anti-Quaker tracts referenced by Firmin, as were the overwhelming majority of all tracts published by Quakers in the seventeenth century, were written by men, and the same was true of the two publications replying to Firmin. However, as mentioned above, one of Firmin’s fears was that Quakers were a rebirth of Anne Hutchinson’s ‘New England errour’. Firmin, and nearly all other 1650s writers of

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[11] Penney, N., ed., *The Journal of George Fox*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911, pp. 450–51.

[12] Hinds, H., ‘Sarah Jones and the Appearance of the Quaker Light’, in Tarter and Gill, (eds), *New Critical Studies*, pp. 13–21. Jones’s writing was anthologised in Garman, M., et al., (eds), *Hidden in Plain Sight: Quaker women’s writings, 1650–1700*, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1996, pp. 35–37.

[13] See, e.g., Hinds, H., *God’s Englishwomen: Seventeenth-century radical sectarian writing and feminist criticism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996.

anti-Quaker and Quaker tracts, would not even use her name,[14] even though she was one of the most consequential church figures in New England and North America prior to her death in 1643. Again, as in the case of Ursula, and Martha Simmonds, Hutchinson may have strongly served as a manifestation of male fears. In December 1653, Mary Fisher and Anne Austin had prophesied to the students at the University of Cambridge, near Essex, and they had been whipped while praying for their persecutors. In June 1654, Elizabeth Fletcher[15] and Elizabeth Leavens would be cruelly beaten when they preached at Oxford University. But, unlike male preachers like Christopher Fell, these four women never published tracts of prophecy.

In Wess Daniels and Rhiannon Grant's 2023 publication *The Quaker World*, the opening section on the history of Quakers, from origins to the twenty-first century, has just two chapters on the seventeenth century, both about Quaker women.[16] If their edited work is at all indicative of future scholarship, there will continue to be much interest in the intersection of women's and gender studies with studies of early Quakerism.

Steve

Dear Steve,

Thank you again. I agree wholeheartedly that female Quaker thought and practice remains an important area for future research. If the limelight shed on male Quakers was determined by their written or spoken output, social and geographical position, relations with one another, and chance (all played a role in Firmin's pamphlet and its responses), female Friends met further obstacles owing to their sex. In Atkinson's and Ursula's cases, evasion was ongoing: Whitehead's autobiography, *The Christian Progress of that Ancient Servant and Minister of Jesus Christ* (completed in 1711), gave an account of his time in Norwich which initially omitted mention of Atkinson's contribution to *Ishmael, and his mother* (1655), and rendered the account of the affair with the (unnamed) Ursula as 'Lewdness with a Servant-Maid'.[17] There are parallels here with other attempts to re-write Quaker history, as well as echoes of the reluctance of critics to name Anne Hutchinson, or consider Martha Simmonds's literature, rather than her person, following the Nayler

[14] In Quaker tracts, Hutchinson was occasionally referenced as the sister to Katherine Scott. See, e.g., Fox the elder, G., *The Secret Workes of a Cruel People Made Manifest*, London: s.l.: 1659, p. 10.

[15] Barbara Schell Luetke has augmented her historical novel, *The Kendal Sparrow: A novel of Elizabeth Fletcher*, Philadelphia, PA: Quaker Press of Friends General Conference, 2019 with 'Elizabeth Fletcher: The Youngest of the Valiant Sixty', in Daniels and Grant, (eds), *The Quaker World.*

[16] Luetke, 'Elizabeth Fletcher;' and Polder, 'Margaret Fell.' The section is entitled 'Global Quakerism'.

[17] Whitehead, G., *The Christian Progress of that Ancient Servant and Minister of Jesus Christ*, London: J Sowle, 1725, pp. 47–50.

scandal.[18] I wonder whether literary responses to female Friends could be tabulated more widely, following your analysis of Firmin's library, and whether reactions to specific female Friends, in particular Fell, could be considered more at length?

Female Friends were often 'misunderstood, even criminalised, by outsiders',[19] but also erased altogether. As the article you consider by Hilary Hinds suggests, detailing or even recognising female Friends' presence can be difficult.[20] In many cases, non-Quakers diminished female roles where Friends were open to acknowledging them. This was apparent in another case involving Atkinson. *The discovery of a Wolf in Sheeps Cloathing* briefly claimed that Atkinson converted another Westmorland individual, John Gilpin, to Quakerism. Gilpin had criticised the movement in *The Quakers Shaken* (1653), a second, 1655 edition of which detailed the prophecies of John Milner, a Quaker from the same Furness peninsula as Margaret Fell. Reneging on the temptation to portray female Quakers negatively, Gilpin referred only briefly to Milner's 'Wife' (Elizabeth) while naming several culpable males.[21] But Margaret Fell's *False Prophets*, which you touch upon, included James Milner's exculpation of his actions, signed by Elizabeth, outlining their dual responsibility, and describing their actions through the plural pronoun, 'we'.[22] This, and the widespread acceptance of female speaking, shows that willingness to uphold female agency remained important to early Friends. It remains the case, looking forward, that Quaker thought about women, the family, marriage and servants, particularly household members, be central to our research questions.[23]

Euan

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[18] Although see Caffyn, M., *The deceived, and deceiving Quakers discovered*, London: Francis Smith, 1656, p. 19; Wade, C., *Quakery slain*, London: s.l., 1657, pp. 34–37.

[19] Tarter, M. L., and Gill, C., 'Introduction' to Tarter and Gills (eds), *New Critical Studies*, p. 6.

[20] Hinds, 'Sarah Jones'.

[21] Gilpin, J., *The Quakers Shaken*, London: Simon Waterson, 1655, pp. 18–20.

[22] Fell, M., *False Prophets, Anticrists, Deceivers, Which are in the World*, London: Giles Calvert, 1655, pp. 12–14.

[23] For recent analyses, see Stephen W. Angell, 'Early Quaker Women and the Testimony of the Family, 1652–1767', in Tarter and Gills eds, *New critical studies*, pp. 50–68; and later sections on the family in Euan McArthur, 'George Fox the Younger: An early Quaker conservative?', *Quaker Studies* 29/1, 2024.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.