

## Meeting Fox in Fiction

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Six fictional depictions of George Fox (1624–1691) published between 1868 and 2019 are compared and discussed with reference to some relevant surrounding literature. It is argued that Fox is usually presented as a secondary character, with none of the books placing him at the centre of the narrative, and that in most cases the Fox character functions as a way for the author to introduce key Quaker ideas to other characters. The six stories are discussed in the context of their dates of publication and expected readership, with particular attention to age, gender, and religious tradition. It is suggested that the encounters with Fox in these novels function to provide both historical and spiritual education to the reader as well as an opportunity for the authors to lay out theological positions which are recognisably Quaker although not always historical accurate.

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## Introduction

This article examines six fictional depictions of George Fox (1624–1691), a charismatic leader of the early Quaker movement.<sup>1</sup> The fictional depictions discussed here are from:

- *On Both Sides of the Sea*, Elizabeth Rundle Charles, 1868
- *Friend Olivia*, Amelia E. Barr, 1890
- *Magnus Sinclair*, Howard Pease, 1904
- *The Peaceable Kingdom*, Jan de Hartog, 1971
- *The Sister of Mary Dyer*, Ann Bell, 2013
- *The Kendal Sparrow*, Barbara Schell Leutke, 2019

In each case, Fox appears in the novel, usually not as a central character but as a minor character who has a significant role in affecting the spiritual lives and resultant actions of the people around him. These six were chosen as the most substantial depictions of Fox found in a search of existing scholarship and library catalogues – although Fox is not central, this is a result of the authors' various choices; I did not leave out, but rather was not able to identify, any novels in which Fox had a larger role.<sup>2</sup> I argue that this encounter with Fox in the lives of fictional or fictionalised historical characters, often women, is used to express a theological claim about the potential role of Quaker teaching the lives of modern readers.

Fox is depicted sympathetically in all these stories, often by Quaker writers and/or by those with an intention to educate about Quakerism, and, even in brief appearances, he is shown to have a particular spiritual power. These fictional encounters with Fox can be read as expressing a modern spiritual understanding of the power of the Quaker tradition and ideas about what it means for someone to be charismatic as well as attempting to reconstruct what real encounters with the historical Fox may have been like. I discuss the authors of these novels and their assumed readership in more detail later to explore how their identities (for example, whether they are Quaker or not, and their gender) relate to their material.

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<sup>1</sup> In identifying these, I benefited greatly from the work of Farah Mendlesohn on fiction about the English Civil Wars, both in her book and private communications. Farah Mendlesohn, *Creating Memory: Historical Fiction and the English Civil Wars* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillian, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Four of the books are discussed by Mendlesohn. The other two were identified by searching the online catalogues of Woodbrooke Library (now held as a collection within the Cadbury Research Library at the University of Birmingham) and the Library of the Society of Friends (held at LSF). I also checked a number of other books set in the time period in which Fox did not appear directly. Future work could usefully include fictional forms other than the novel, such as plays and short films, which are not considered here.

Most of these stories do not deal with Fox's own life extensively – probably partly because his own accounts in the form of his Journal are so well known – but rather use the encounter with him as an opportunity for the central character, usually a woman, to gain a spiritual insight and make a change in her life. In what follows, I introduce each example, providing quotations illustrating the depiction of Fox and some contextual information, before considering all six examples together for patterns in the depictions.

### Fox's Appearances in Fiction

In Elizabeth Rundle Charles' *On Both Sides of the Sea: a story of the Commonwealth and the Restoration* (published 1868), characters, mainly the women Olive and Lettice, describe their memories of the events of this period, combining historical and political stories with extensive religious reflections as well as family concerns such as death, marriage, and potential migration to North America. Fox has “quite literally a walk-on part”, appearing as the main characters travel and offering both physical safety and spiritual teaching.<sup>3</sup> Charles describes him through the eyes of her first-person narrator, Olive:

As I was plodding on, seeking to soothe the infant in my arms, and singing soft songs to Maidie, a wild figure issued forth from a hollow tree, at sight of whom my heart stood still. He was clad in leather from top to toe.

But his carriage was grave, not like a plunderer, and he accosted me soberly, though without any titles (as Mistress or Madam), calling me “friend” and “thou”.

At once Annis recognized him, calling him “George”, and greeting him as one she honoured.<sup>4</sup>

This introduction is followed by a short interlude in the story in which the main characters follow Fox back to a cottage where they are sheltered and fed, and listen to Fox speak for several pages recognisably drawn from his Journal. There is less conversation with Fox than we will see in *The Peaceable Kingdom* (the main characters are less inclined to challenge him than Hartog's Margaret Fell), and less emphasis on his physical form than in other later stories, but there is a vivid description of the effect of his words:

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<sup>3</sup> Mendlesohn, *Creating Memory: Historical Fiction and the English Civil Wars*: 81. Later in *On Both Sides of the Sea* Fox's name appears again in discussions and letters, but not as a character.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Rundle Charles, *On Both Sides of the Sea: A Story of the Commonwealth and the Restoration*, (London, Edinburgh and New York: T. Nelson and Sons, 1877), [https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/\\_/l-c4AQAAAJ?hl=en](https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/_/l-c4AQAAAJ?hl=en). 140.

He could not have been more than six-and-twenty; but I confess his discourse came to me with marvellous power.

The words were sometimes confused, as if they were burst and shattered with the fulness of the thought within them. Something of the same kind we had noticed of old in Oliver Cromwell.

He seemed like one looking into depths into which he himself saw only a little way, and by glimpses; like one listening to a far-off voice, which reached his spirit but in broken cadences, and our spirits still more faintly, through the echo of his voice. Yet he inspired me with the conviction that *these depths exist*, and *this music is going on*; a conviction worth something.<sup>5</sup>

In later examples the last element of this, the idea that the meeting with Fox is a point of spiritual conviction or coming to agree with Quaker ideas, will be continued. In particular, we will see a number of other characters meeting Fox and leaving the encounter newly convinced of a religious perspective.

In Amelia E. Barr's *Friend Olivia* (published 1890), the main plot focus is the relationship of Oliva and Nathaniel Kelder, ending with their marriage. Fox appears repeatedly, sharing Quaker ideas and supporting characters who become part of the Quaker movement. His introduction, while in the middle of a disputation with 'Rev. John Duttred, the Independent minister' contains some physical details which will reappear in later writing:

The majestic figure, the noble sweetness of the face, the luxuriant hair, – not cut short, Puritan fashion, but falling upon the shoulders, with a slight natural curl in it, – the impressive manner in which he was speaking, and the rapt attention of those who listened to his words, made an instant impression upon Nathaniel.<sup>6</sup>

Nathaniel is introduced to Fox and:

Then George Fox rose and took Nathaniel's hand, and gazed at him with those piercing eyes which more than one judge found themselves unable to bear. "I have heard of thee, Nathaniel," he said; "now I see thee, and of the rest God will take care." As he spoke he looked at Nathaniel and he loved him, and there came into

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 141–2.

<sup>6</sup> Amelia E. Barr, *Friend Olivia*, (Hunt & Eaton, 1890), [https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Friend\\_Olivia/oX8Y-AAAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0](https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Friend_Olivia/oX8Y-AAAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0). 42–43.

both men's faces that mysterious something which is the recognition and salutation of souls. This incident scarcely interrupted the conversation. Slowly relinquishing Nathaniel's hand, Fox sat down and turned his solemnly radiant face upon Duttred.<sup>7</sup>

At this point in the story, Olivia is already a Quaker but Nathaniel is a Puritan who is encountering Quaker ideas for the first time. His encounter with those ideas as personified by George Fox is strikingly similar to some of the other encounters with Fox which are found in modern fiction: the encounter with Fox is also an encounter with Quaker ideas; the encounter with Fox is also a spiritual experience, an encounter with the Divine.

In Howard Pease's *Magnus Sinclair* (published 1904), a Protestant Londoner ends up travelling with a Catholic mercenary, who turns out to be the father of the woman with whom he falls in love. Their travels function as a way for the author to explore the historical setting with a particular focus on Charles Stuart and his return to the throne. Fox is again introduced as a way of introducing Quaker ideas to the plot. The two main characters are travelling up the Great North Road and stay at a succession of inns, and they are outside one of these:

At this moment the door of the inn swung violently open, and amidst an excited throng of folk we saw a thick-set figure of peaceable aspect and quiet demeanour, quaintly clad in leather breeches, who was being heartily belaboured and vociferously abused by a thin, small, squinting female.<sup>8</sup>

This is Fox, who has become unpopular with the hostess and drinkers at the inn for criticising their choice of drink. The following passage contains a number of features which have already become familiar in these fictional depictions of Fox, such as elements of the physical description and the message he gives, although it adds a stronger opposition to him than is seen in many. The unnamed first-person masculine narrator observes rather than taking an active role in events.

"Well then, neighbours," cried the woman triumphantly, "if the rantin' Quaker will neither drink ale 'imself nor let ye neither, give 'im, Hi says, a dose o' cowl'd water. Duck 'im, Hi says, an' stop 'is tongue from callin' down woe hupon howd Biggleswade."

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>8</sup> Howard Pease, *Magnus Sinclair* (Westminster: Archibald Constable and Co Ltd, 1904). 23.

“Ay,” cried a dozen voices in unison, “to the horse-pond with the ranting Quaker,” and therewith some seized him by the arms, some pushed him from behind and at once bore him away unresisting and uncomplaining down the narrow street.

At first sight there was something ludicrous in the vision of the little angry hostess, belabouring the broad-shouldered, leathern-breeched man, with the strong, quiet, brooding face, resolute nose, and deep and thoughtful eyes, who retaliated not, though of evident sufficient strength, upon his persecutors, but there was withal a serious dignity about him which could not fail to arrest the attention.

As they led him away, I overheard him quietly remonstrating against the violence they used toward him.

“Friend,” he said, “I do thee no wrong, I but ask thee to avoid excess in thy cups which leads unto lasciviousness. I would be assist thee to the mastery over thyself. Thou hast been, thou saidest, a soldier, and if thy earthly masters used discipline with thee for thy good, how much more shouldst thou use discipline with thyself to attain unto the Heavenly Kingdom and thy true Captain, Christ Jesus?

“I thou would but harken to the Light within thee—that Light which lightened the world from the beginning—thou wouldest cease from being drunken, thou wouldest use but Nay and Yea in thy converse, for whatsoever is more than this savourest of evil.”<sup>9</sup>

One of the ways in which Pease’s work is unusual is that he follows this remark by Fox with a footnote which quotes a corresponding passage from Fox’s *Journal*, a passage in which Fox describes himself “warning such as kept public houses” against allowing drunkenness.<sup>10</sup> Although there are some signs that the elements of Fox’s position and theology have been selected to be accepted to the modern reader (the emphasis on the Light within rather than on the sin which it reveals, for example), this is also a grounded attempt at representing Fox in some historical accuracy. It sets the tone for a story in which other Quaker characters are depicted positively but also in positions of conflict with others in society.

The question of historical accuracy cannot really be applied to other aspects of the depiction. Fox’s *Journal* does not describe his appearance to others, and as there are no contemporary portraits, the physical description given here and other fictional versions can be regarded mainly as an opportunity to provide a set of adjectives which

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 24–5.

<sup>10</sup> George Fox, *The Journal of George Fox* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952). 37.

express the author's opinions of him. Farah Mendlesohn, a historian, suggests that Pease may have been a Quaker (it is a traditional Quaker surname in some places), and this is certainly a sympathetic depiction; I suspect that the choice to focus on Fox's nonviolence and non-resistance may also have been shaped by visible British Quaker pacifism of the time such as in response to the South African War (1899–1902).<sup>11</sup>

The best known of Fox's appearances in fiction is Jan de Hartog's 1971 historical novel, *The Peaceable Kingdom*. Hartog's epic exploration of the formation of the Quaker movement was widely-read at the time of publication. It was reviewed by Martin Tucker in the *New York Times*, who among other perceptive comments, noted: 'extraordinary women rather than extraordinary men dominate this long novel'.<sup>12</sup>

Among Quakers, it was widely read but not always liked. It was soon being blamed for errors in other people's descriptions of Quaker history – in 1973 a contributor to *Friends Journal* wrote:

'The cause of several of the defects [in a recently published account of the history of the Quaker movement] is not far to seek. They can be traced to the influence of Jan de Hartog's *The Peaceable Kingdom*, a bestselling novel.'<sup>13</sup>

The errors which crept through from Hartog's fiction to other sources include the idea that Margaret Fell (1614–1702) was involved in prison reform, an idea which may have arisen from a confusion between Fell and Elizabeth Fry (1780–1845).<sup>14</sup> It is also very much the case, as Tucker's review hinted, that although Fox appears as a character the narrative focus is on the inner world and experiences of Fell. Events are described from her perspective. There is also an emphasis on the effect Fox has on people, especially women, around him, and the description of his eyes is a relevant comparison to several of the other depictions discussed here, and especially to the two more recent novels I discuss in the rest of this article. In the first scene in which Fell and Fox meet face to face: 'His eyes went searching on hers. They were blue, like a sailor's, and of an odd shape, rather slanted.'<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For more on British Quakers and the situation in South Africa, see Penelope Cummins, "British Quakers and the Boer War 1899–1902," in *The Quaker World*, ed. Rhiannon Grant and C. Wess Daniels (London and New York: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>12</sup> Martin Tucker, "The Peaceable Kingdom: An American Saga. By Jan de Hartog. 677 pp. New York: Atheneum. \$10.," *New York Times*, Jan 16, 1972.

<sup>13</sup> "Now and Then", "Fruits of the Peaceable Kingdom – Letters from the Past 267," *Friends Journal*, September 15, 1973.

<sup>14</sup> This is suggested by Clarke and I am inclined to agree. Eleanor Stabler Clarke, "Some Historical Questions About "The Peaceable Kingdom"," *Friends Journal*, June 1/15, 1972.

<sup>15</sup> Jan de Hartog, *The Peaceable Kingdom: An American Saga* (New York: Atheneum, 1972). p20.

It is not easy to be sure what this is meant to convey to the reader: is not clear to me that historically sailors, traditionally an ethnically diverse group involved in extensive travel, were more likely to have blue eyes than the rest of the population, so perhaps the reference is meant to imply to a comparison with sea or sky; the description of “rather slanted” eyes is even less easy to understand. Maybe the conclusion to be drawn is simply that Fox is visually as well as spiritually distinctive.

Fox and Fell do not agree on many things in this initial meeting, but pray together, and this begins a kind of relationship. In Tucker’s summary:

... Margaret Fell, who falls in love with the Quaker preacher George Fox, must exorcise the passion of sexual desire in order to achieve grace.<sup>16</sup>

The seeds of this process are sown in their first scene together. As well as the physical details, Fox is described from Fell’s perspective as “boorish”; when she asks “Do you perchance have a letter of introduction?” he answers plainly, “Yes,” and:

The insolence of his reply made her want to call Thomas Woodhouse and have him thrown off the premises. But his eyes kept her from doing so. There was no impertinence in them; he seemed absorbed by what he saw, heedless of the impression he made.<sup>17</sup>

The effect which Fox has on Fell continues to strengthen throughout their conversation. Fox describes a confrontation he had previously had with the warden of Derby jail, during which he shouted “Stop!” and prevented the warden from hanging a woman. Hartog gives Fell a strong reaction to this:

She gazed at him incredulously. But she had sensed his power when he shouted “Stop!” She too would have been incapable of acting against his will. It was disturbing, but intriguing; part of her would love to find herself reduced to helpless submission to a man’s sovereignty.<sup>18</sup>

More than fifty years on, modern readers may find the sexual and gender politics of this depiction “disturbing, but intriguing”, too. (Not just in heterosexual relationships: as Mendlesohn has pointed out, there is also a significant amount of homophobia in the

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<sup>16</sup> Tucker, “The Peaceable Kingdom: An American Saga. By Jan de Hartog. 677 pp. New York: Atheneum. \$10.”

<sup>17</sup> Hartog, *The Peaceable Kingdom: An American Saga*. P.20.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p.23.



narrative.<sup>19</sup>) Fell does, in fact, come to obey Fox later in the initial meeting scene when he suggests that they pray together in his own particular way, trying to put all thoughts aside.

She tried, and discovered that she had no thoughts, only awareness: of his presence beside her, the bees buzzing among the flowers, the scent of roses.

“Be still,” he whispered, as if in reverence, “silence the small thoughts that babble in thy mind. Be still! Wait upon the Lord...”

His faith in his own brand of magic was so persuasive that she closed her eyes and lifted her face, trying to eradicate her awareness of the world around her.<sup>20</sup>

Afterwards, she is reluctant to tell her children what has happened:

As they entered the cool, dark house, she wondered why she should have such an odd feeling of guilt.<sup>21</sup>

Hartog’s conclusion, not stated here but implicit in the rest of the story, is that she feels guilty because she has at some emotional level been unfaithful to her husband. The narrative ends before the time when Fox and Fell will be married, but Hartog is interested in foreshadowing that historical event.

As we might expect, the depiction of Fox here focusses on aspects of his theology which are acceptable to the era in which Hartog was writing. This is not to say that it is inaccurate, as such; allowing for the use of more modern language, these are ideas which Fox does express in his writing. For example, in 1658 he wrote to Lady Claypole, “Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit from thy own thoughts, and then thou wilt feel the principle of God to turn thy mind to the Lord God, from whom life comes.”<sup>22</sup> The question is the balance of emphasis, and the way in which that interacts with the narrative structure – for example, the decision to focus extensively on Fell and to explore her emotions both lends strength to the story and allows less space for some of Fox’s other teachings which may be more dramatic, more focussed on sin, and less acceptable to the modern reader.

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<sup>19</sup> Mendlesohn, *Creating Memory: Historical Fiction and the English Civil Wars*: 172.

<sup>20</sup> Hartog, *The Peaceable Kingdom: An American Saga*. p24-25. Ellipsis in original.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p25.

<sup>22</sup> George Fox, “Letter to Lady Claypole,” in *Journal of George Fox*, ed. J L Nickalls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952 (1658)), 346.

In her 2013 novel, *The Sister of Mary Dyer: the High Price of Freedom*, Ann Bell uses the fictional character of Martha Dyer to explore the real life and death of Mary Dyer, who was executed by the authorities in Boston for returning to the town despite a ban on Quakers. The episode in which Mary becomes a Quaker, begins preaching, and sets out on the path which will lead to her death is a relatively short section and towards the end of the book: of 367 pages in the novel, most of the first 250 do not mention Quakers. Instead, they explore the many different theological perspectives which are present in Mary and Martha's community, through the figures of women (especially Anne Hutchinson) and men who were involved in the Antinomian Controversy in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Mary is shown as especially close to Anne Hutchinson. Running alongside the struggles and travels of a small but growing family in a small and sometimes deeply divided colonial community are the religious debates which inform their thinking about the world. Quakers appear in this context, initially merely another of many groups, and characters around Mary sometimes do not understand her attraction to the new movement. This means that when Fox first appears, he is both set apart as different – he is said to be teaching something “deeper” than previous teachers – and has points of comparison, specifically with Anne Hutchinson.

The encounter begins when Mary Dyer happens to meet a woman, Sarah Leonard, at the market. Sarah is talking to another woman and praises Fox:

The first woman [Sarah] put down the turnip she was examining and shook her head. “I thought George Fox spoke as one who knows the truth and not one who could be easily swayed by self-righteous clergy.”

“How could you be so foolish?” the second woman said and stormed down the street.

Cautiously, Mary approached the frustrated woman beside her. “Excuse me,” she said. “I couldn't help overhearing your conversation. Could you tell me more about George Fox? Is he still teaching in the area?”<sup>23</sup>

No stranger to religious controversy – she has spent the first half of the novel alternately caught up in or actively participating in disagreements about religion in the colonies in North American – the character of Dyer shows an active interest in Fox when he is mentioned. The woman she has met tells her where to find Fox; Dyer invites her husband to attend the meeting as well but he declines; and three pages later she encounters Fox himself.

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<sup>23</sup> Ann Bell, *The Sister of Mary Dyer: The High Price of Freedom* (Georgetown, TX: Katy Crossing Press, 2013). P254.

When the women entered the house, a sense of peace enveloped Mary. Seated around the room were more than two dozen people talking among themselves. Standing in the corner was a man with a broad brimmed hat shading his face. His piercing eyes resembled those of Anne Hutchinson, and Mary found it hard to look away from him. *That must be George Fox.*<sup>24</sup>

This is their closest encounter in the story – they are not shown speaking alone at any point – but Dyer is sufficiently convinced that she chooses to stay in England when her husband sails home, effectively leaving her family for a period while she learns from (and is imprisoned with) the Quakers. During this time, she writes to her family:

I am looking forward to the time when God deems it suitable for us to be reunited. Until that time, be assured that God is teaching me great truths and leading me in the Quaker ways.<sup>25</sup>

This attitude will eventually lead to Dyer's decision to break the law, entering Boston when Quakers have been banned from the area, and hence to her execution. Although the character of Fox does nothing in the novel except preach, he is firmly situated as the central teacher of this movement which has shaped her new approach to life so deeply:

The gray drab walls of Swarthmoor Hall in North West England loomed before Mary Dyer as she hurried to the gathering where George Fox was to preach. Instead of seeing the drabness of the grey walls, she felt exhilaration watching people come from all directions to hear the leader of the Quaker religion speak. *Finally, I have found what I have been searching for. I have experienced the true Inner Light.*<sup>26</sup>

Other historical leaders of the early Quaker movement get very little space – Margaret Fell is mentioned but only in the context of the use of Swarthmoor Hall, her home. Others are not named at all, so that Fox is presented as standing alone rather than with the Valient Sixty and other Quaker preachers.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. P257.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. P268.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. P280. Readers familiar with early Quaker texts will note the modernisation of language here, including the use of the word 'Quaker' for the movement and the idea that it is a religion rather than a form of Christianity, and the 20<sup>th</sup> century phrase 'Inner Light' rather than the older 'Inward Light' or 'Light of Christ'.

The version of Fox in *The Sister of Mary Dyer* has only a little to say. His ideas appear in one direct speech and two places indirectly. I quote these in full since they are so brief.

An unnamed woman at the market, overheard by Dyer, describes what she disagrees with:

George Fox speaks heresy when he talks against the clergy and calls our churches 'steeple houses'. What is worse, he claims to hear directly from God.<sup>27</sup>

When Dyer is finally in the same room, Fox preaches:

"The light of Christ, or a measure of His Holy Spirit, is given to each person," he proclaimed loudly. "It is to this Light or Spirit that everyone must bring his thoughts, words, and deeds, to be judged. For God directly teaches His people about Himself."<sup>28</sup>

Finally, Dyer remembers his words later and reflects on them:

Mary slept little that night as the words of George Fox replayed through her mind. *People can receive guidance directly from the Inner Light God puts within all believers... What George Fox is teaching is similar to what Anne Hutchinson taught, only much deeper and more personal.*<sup>29</sup>

Later in the novel, Dyer relays some Quaker ideas to her family and others, but mainly focusses on these key ideas, Quaker practices such as using thee and thou for everyone rather than saying 'you' to social superiors, and her Quaker identity. Ultimately, her determination to remain faithful to the leadings that she receives in the Quaker style, to return to Boston, will result in her execution, and this forms the climax of the novel.

In her 2019 novel, *The Kendal Sparrow: A Novel of Elizabeth Fletcher*, Barbara Schell Leutke dramatizes the life of Elizabeth Fletcher, a young woman who travelled and preached with the early Quakers but about whom not much is known.<sup>30</sup> Leutke's fictional version is told as a biography, beginning with a young Fletcher with her family, then following her as she joins the Quakers and her career in ministry, to her death.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. P254.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. P257.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. P258.

<sup>30</sup> For a nonfiction biography of Elizabeth Fletcher by the same author, Barbara Schell Leutke, "Elizabeth Fletcher: The Youngest of the Valiant Sixty," in *The Quaker World*, ed. C. Wess Daniels and Rhiannon Grant (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2021).

Fletcher meets Fox early in her life and therefore early in the story, and is convinced by him and other members of the Quaker movement to join them and especially to begin preaching. She and another woman were the first Quakers to preach in Oxford, where the university students and others in the town whipped them out of the city. *The Kendal Sparrow* tells this story chronologically, with Fox's message and contact with early Quakers positioned as the turning point at the beginning her of story.

Compared to most of the previous examples, Fox plays a larger role in *The Kendal Sparrow* – only the narrative *The Peaceable Kingdom* spends a similar amount of time with him. As in *The Sister of Mary Dyer*, other characters meet him before our main character, Elizabeth Fletcher, encounters him directly. There are rumours about Quakers and other Quaker preachers (including Edward Burrough, who is in the scene quoted below) appear before a neighbour of Elizabeth's, Thomas, hears Fox speak and reports it to Elizabeth and others.

“It's like I can remember every word. “Mind the Light of God in your conscience,”” he quoted.<sup>31</sup>

Fletcher hears a good deal more reported about the Quakers, and becomes gradually more interested until Fox comes to visit himself. When Fox and Fletcher do first meet directly, it is again in the context of a larger group gathering, as in *The Sister of Mary Dyer* (but less like *The Peaceable Kingdom*). Again, as in both other novels, Fox's eyes are a point of attention.

George Fox stepped forward and smiled at Elizabeth. His blue, penetrating eyes caught her ordinary brown ones, and heat crawled up her cheeks.<sup>32</sup>

There are more group meetings and Fletcher hears about the experiences and sufferings of Quakers, including that many are spending time in prison, before a climactic scene at the end of Part 1 in which she speaks in a meeting:

“I see images of guidance, too,” she whispered aloud, her hands sliding down her hips and her heart galloping. “I see the birth of a new lamb, the gift of it making us happy and hopeful.” She snuck a peek at Auntie who raised her eyebrows, then gave a smile.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *The Kendal Sparrow: A Novel of Elizabeth Fletcher* (Philadelphia: QuakerPress of Friends General Conference, 2019). P40–41.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* P57.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p67.

After this, Fox speaks, and the narrative reaffirms that Elizabeth knows in her heart that what he says is true. From this turning point, Fletcher is soon invited to travel with the Quakers, to preach.<sup>34</sup> This leads to her imprisonment for a time as well as her career as a travelling minister and the author of a 1660 tract; most of her life is narrated in the rest of the novel, which ends with her death. The preaching that she does draws strongly on the words of Fox and other early Quakers, both historical and as imagined in the novel:

They reached St. Martin's at the crossroads and Elizabeth untied her bonnet, pulled it from her head, and began to preach to those milling there. She'd thought about how she'd start, deciding on the world she first heard George Fox preach.

"I'm alive with holy Spirit and happy to share it..."<sup>35</sup>

Fletcher's preaching could be taken to summarise the message of this novel, and to some extent all of them. This scene reflects the effect of characters called George Fox in this collection of novels as a whole: characters who meet Fox are influenced by him, in various ways but always in the direction of deeper understanding of Quaker ideas, frequently becoming convinced by the Quaker movement and sometimes embracing Quaker ideas to the point of suffering for them. Those ideas are modernised to some extent but can also be traced to the work of the historical Fox, as here where a phrase Fox used once in a letter ("that of God"), a phrase which has been taken up and used extensively by modern Quakers, is dropped in as a central point and expounded. Like Fletcher's character, the reader of *The Kendal Sparrow* becomes familiar with Quaker ideas through the encounter with a fictional Fox, and is given a model for responding to this through embrace and sharing of those ideas.

## Analysis

In each of these six stories, Fox appears as a type or example and not as a main character. His appearances are usually brief – even in *The Peaceable Kingdom*, where he spends much longer on the page, his relationship with Fell is key and she can be said to be a central character, rather than him. They are also very often a spiritual turning point for the central character, or at least sow the seeds of a future insight (as in *Magnus Sinclair* and *Friend Olivia*). In some ways, these moments are comparable to the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p156 This reported speech does not have closing speech marks in the original.

“transformative encounters” between Jesus and women found in some fiction, studied by Williams Telford.<sup>36</sup> However, Telford’s overall conclusion following his analysis of the relationships between women and Jesus in novels and films is that many of the depictions of Jesus are relatively conservative, with “Jesus... given a strong, masculine presence and a commanding albeit compassionate voice, and for the women with whom he interacts to be given a submissive presence and virtually no voice at all”.<sup>37</sup> About the depictions of Fox, almost the opposite could be said, as in the examples discussed in this article the characters who meet Fox are often empowered to at least a spiritual insight of their own and sometimes a whole preaching career. That being so, the best comparison between Fox in fiction and Jesus in fiction may be between these examples and a text which Telford identifies as a key exception to his overall conclusion: Michele Roberts’ *The Wild Girl* (1984). Of this Telford says, “In giving Mary her own voice, and emphasizing the mutuality of the relation between herself and Jesus, it presents... the most dynamic picture of the transformative encounter”.<sup>38</sup> In fiction which features Fox, women (and other characters other than Fox) are frequently given voices, the centre stage, and significant agency, within which their encounters with Fox are transformational moments – often changing the whole shape of their lives – but within which they maintain the ability to decide how to respond.

Within this general pattern, some other groupings of the six novels can be made. For example, they might usefully be grouped by publication dates, with three falling in the broad ‘late Victorian’ category, one as an outlier in the middle of the twentieth century, and two with much in common in the twenty-first century. R. M. Schieder’s analysis of late Victorian conversion stories provides a useful context for the three earlier novels in this study. They do not fit exactly into his model of conversion stories – *Friend Olivia* is closest with the narrative of Nathaniel’s religious development – but they do obviously owe a good deal to the wider publishing and reading context which he describes: a period in which “religion was not a matter either to be taken for granted or ignored”.<sup>39</sup> The ways in which this could also be true of the seventeenth century may explain why at least some authors chose to set their novels then; the ways in which this is also true for some people in the context of liberal religion in the mid-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries may be a factor in the similarities between these three

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<sup>36</sup> William R. Telford, “Jesus and Women in Fiction and Film,” in *Transformative Encounters: Jesus & Women Re-viewed*, ed. Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2000).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 390.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 371.

<sup>39</sup> R. M. Schieder, “Loss or Gain? The Theme of Conversion in Late Victorian Fiction,” *Victorian Studies* 9, no. 1 (1965): 30.



texts and the later ones.<sup>40</sup> The novels discussed in this article were far from alone in dealing with the complexities of religious belief and disagreement, and although I have selected those which feature Fox as a character, others also featured Quakers in other ways. The overarching theme identified by Schieder is conversion or movement between different types of religion: “Late Victorian fiction reflects the journeys of those who sought, either within or without the limits of Christianity, some kind of substitute faith or religion.”<sup>41</sup>

The two twenty-first century novels tell the life of a woman in a relatively straightforward way, drawing on available historical sources and recounting her experiences from childhood to death. Other characters may be added to balance out the plot and provide other perspectives – notably Martha Dyer, Mary’s fictional sister, and Fletcher’s family and friendships – but these do not overshadow the ‘beginning to end’ character of the narratives. There is sometimes a little foreshadowing, but other ways of playing with time often used in historical novels (such as jumping between time periods, characters recounting stories of the past, characters in the contemporary world learning about the past, or speculative devices such as time travel) are barely used. This observation is in keeping with Farah Mendlesohn’s analysis of many stories set in the same period, which notes that such stories are often told in straightforward ways because they are expected to have an educational function and are aimed broadly at young people. This is explicitly true of *The Kendal Sparrow* and could be true of *The Sister of Mary Dyer*. Mendlesohn’s assessment of historical fiction relating to the English Civil Wars was that the majority show markers of childhood and being aimed at young audiences (with variations in age and what youth means depending on the era of writing). This accompanies a “desire to educate” which shapes the fiction.<sup>42</sup> In accordance with Mendlesohn’s findings in relation to the older novels, both these more recent novels have (or at least begin with) young protagonists, both have protagonists present at key historical moments, and both use their protagonists used to introduce the reader to key figures of the age – including George Fox. Characters other than Fox are present in most of these stories but Fox’s unique hold on the modern imagination (shaped partly by his own efforts to record his experiences in his Journal and letters, and also by the work of many later historians) makes it difficult to give any other historical or invented character in the period

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<sup>40</sup> For a wider consideration of the developments in early twentieth-century liberal religion, which includes the analysis of some other religious fiction of the period, see Isaac Barnes May, *God-Optional Religion in Twentieth-Century America: Quakers, Unitarians, Reconstructionist Jews, and the Crisis Over Theism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

<sup>41</sup> Schieder, “Loss or Gain? The Theme of Conversion in Late Victorian Fiction,” 39.

<sup>42</sup> Mendlesohn, *Creating Memory: Historical Fiction and the English Civil Wars*: 14.



the same level of spiritual influence. Furthermore, the educational content of these stories is not limited to factual material, although that is often included, but also has spiritual, theological, and emotional elements. The profound spiritual changes which characters in these stories experience, including but not limited to those prompted by their encounters with Fox, can be regarded as part of the educational messages embedded by the authors.

It may also be relevant to consider the publishing context of the twenty-first century novels. The period in which the two twenty-first century novels discussed here were published saw a significant increase in self-published books – in 2013, Bowker registered 333,000 new self-published titles in North America (probably including *The Sister of Mary Dyer*<sup>43</sup>), while by 2019 there were 4,539,000 new titles<sup>44</sup> (probably not including *The Kendal Sparrow*, which was published by Quaker Press of FGC<sup>45</sup>). Within the rise of self-publishing and easier access to the market for small presses, independent book creation has become a much more achievable goal for many people. There is also much more choice for readers, the chance to build a small but steady readership in a niche area (as seen with Black writers, LGBTQ+ writers, and perhaps here with Quaker writers), and hence a change in the market at least among those readers who both shop online and are willing to experiment with independently published books. These books are not usually stocked in bookshops, except specialist ones – such as Quaker Books, the bookshop run by FGC. There can be an association of self-published books with lower editing standards, but also with higher levels of self-expression for authors and better representation of groups who are underrepresented in mainstream publishing. Books catering to highly specific interests flourish in this more diverse marketplace, including Christian fiction of many kinds, niche sub-genres

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<sup>43</sup> Publication information for *The Sister of Mary Dyer* appears differently in various locations. In the paperback copy I consulted it is listed as “Published by Katy Crossing Press”; Katy Crossing Press is no longer active but Internet Archive’s WayBack Machine recorded the Katy Crossing Press website ([www.katycrossingpress.com](http://www.katycrossingpress.com)) several times between 2009 and 2016. The tagline “Publish It Your Way” and description “Author’s Assistant and Publisher” appear on the homepage, the copyright for the site is owned by Ann Bell, and although books by several other authors are listed in the “Book Store” page, only Ann Bell’s books have a dedicated page. The Amazon pages for the book list Katy Crossing Press for the e-book and CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform for the paperback. I conclude that Ann Bell ran Katy Crossing Press and was therefore functionally self-publishing. “Internet Archive WayBack Machine: Katy Crossing Press,” [https://web.archive.org/web/20160401000000\\*/http://www.katycrossingpress.com](https://web.archive.org/web/20160401000000*/http://www.katycrossingpress.com).

<sup>44</sup> Jim Milliot, “Self-Publishing Is Thriving, According to Bowker Report,” <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/91574-self-publishing-is-thriving-according-to-bowker-report.html>.

<sup>45</sup> FGC is Friends General Conference, an association of Quaker bodies mainly in North America. Their publishing arm, Quaker Press, accepts proposals from authors and expects to publish one or two books a year. This would provide institutional and editorial support, and some marketing within the Quaker community, but is not equivalent to publishing a novel with an imprint of one of the ‘big five’ mainstream publishers. <https://www.fgcquaker.org/fgcprograms/quaker-press-publishing/>.

(such as Amish romance): one way to view these depictions of Fox would be against this background in which novels that feature him can more easily than before be marketed to a specifically Quaker readership.

To at least some extent, these are novels by Quaker authors for Quaker readers. Leutke is public about her Quakerism, saying in her Goodreads author profile: “I am a convinced, unprogrammed Friend, a member of Salmon Bay Meeting (Seattle, Washington) and North Pacific Yearly Meeting (in the north western part US near Canada).”<sup>46</sup> Jan de Hartog was also known as a Quaker and embedded in the Quaker community: according to an article in *Friends Journal*, he and his wife “lived the life many have dreamed of—full of adventure and full-flush living, yet Quaker to the core...”<sup>47</sup> Pease is harder to track down but Mendlesohn has suggested, based on his writing, that he was a Quaker.<sup>48</sup> I have been unable to confirm whether Ann Bell is a member of a Quaker community or Friends Church, and the other two authors definitely were not. Elizabeth Rundle Charles appears to have been an Anglican – as well as novels, she wrote hymns which appear in a number of collections. Similarly, Amelia Barr does not seem to have been a member of a Quaker community (having been both the daughter and the wife of ministers in other churches) but she was born in Ulverston, where Swarthmoor Hall is close by and the physical legacy of Fell and Fox likely to be known to locals.<sup>49</sup> It might be more accurate to say of the whole set that these are novels which use Fox to introduce Quaker ideas to a readership interested in spirituality, which sometimes includes Quaker readers.

Another aspect of the assumed readership is gender. Four out of six of these novels were written by women; five out of six of them feature women as main characters (the exception being *Magnus Sinclair*, in which it is two men who travel together); and of the encounters between Fox and a central character in the narrative, four out of six involve women (Olive in *On Both Sides of the Sea*, Margaret Fell in *The Peaceable Kingdom*, Mary Dyer in *The Sister of Mary Dyer*, and Elizabeth Fletcher in *The Kendal Sparrow*; in *Friend Olivia*, it is Olivia’s intended Nathaniel who is a Puritan and needs to encounter Fox in order to become a Quaker and able to marry her). For most of the history of the novel, women have made up a large percentage of both the assumed and actual readership

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<sup>46</sup> Barbara Schell Luetke, “Goodreads profile,” [https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/19751065.Barbara\\_Schell\\_Luetke](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/19751065.Barbara_Schell_Luetke).

<sup>47</sup> Ann Walton Sieber, “Jan de Hartog: Activist and Storyteller,” <https://www.friendsjournal.org/jan-de-hartog-activist-and-storyteller/>.

<sup>48</sup> Farah Mendlesohn, “Magnus Sinclair, by Howard Pease, 1903,” <https://treaseproject.livejournal.com/35119.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Anonymous, “Famous Novelist, Amelia E. Barr, Dies,” <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1919/03/12/97084755.pdf>.

– this is especially the case for books written by women.<sup>50</sup> A number of different effects arise from this gender dynamic. One is that readers are perhaps expected to identify with the character who meets Fox, rather than with Fox himself – not only because of their gender, since identifying with a character who has such dramatic spiritual experiences and presence could be difficult in any case, but highlighted by the gendered dynamics in some of these cases. Another effect is that in some cases Fox’s physical as well as spiritual attractiveness seems to be relevant to the straight women in the stories – perhaps most obviously in *The Peaceable Kingdom*, where Fell’s eventual marriage to Fox is a plot point, but hinted at in some of the other encounters. This dynamic also enables the authors to make a point about gender equality in the Quaker movement and to highlight the way in which women have been given authority and speaking roles within the community directly (if somewhat ironically) from the masculine founder-figure, Fox himself – this is particularly a feature of *The Kendal Sparrow* and *The Sister of Mary Dyer*, both of which have strong themes about women’s lives and prophetic roles.

Besides historical groupings, it would also be possible to sort them by thematic or plot devices. For example, the three of these novels (*The Peaceable Kingdom*, *The Sister of Mary Dyer*, and *The Kendal Sparrow*) the central woman in the story hears about Fox before she meets him. These are not cold openings, but preceded by some rumour or other information from someone else who has met Fox. This device, which is realistic for a well-known leader of a movement, gives the novelist the opportunity to establish what kind of person Fox is and the effects he has on others before showing the effect he has on the character he meets in the story. It also gives the character he meets more of the role of reader replacement, at least for Quaker readers and others who have already heard of Fox: like the character, a reader is familiar with some stories about Fox, and now ‘meets’ him for the first time. The author is thus enabled to speak to the reader, through the Fox character and with whatever charisma and spiritual authority he has been given in the narrative, about those ideas which seem to the author to be most important in the Quaker tradition. The archetypal reader of these books, a young Quaker woman seeking insight or direction in the history of the tradition, is thus offered both historical and theological education through the fictional encounter with Fox, taken for this purpose to be the man who founded the movement. In this way, Fox is both remembered and recreated in fiction which speaks to the present.

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<sup>50</sup> Recent research on this shows that in 2024 men are less likely to read books written by women. “Gender bias in men’s reading habits still exists,” Women’s Prize Trust, <https://womensprize.com/gender-bias-in-mens-reading-habits-still-exists/>.

## Competing Interests

[[COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT TO BE PROVIDED]]

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