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Back to the Light: A Fresh Approach – George Richardson Lecture 2024

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Nigel Smith reflects on the process of editing Fox's journal and how Quaker Studies relates to work in literature.



Introduction: Some (Auto)biographical Background

I came to the study of early Quaker literature not through any family or personal background. Quakers met where I grew up in Potters Bar (in south Hertfordshire, on the northern edge of London) but did not have their own meeting house, and I had no contact with them. The town has a street called Quakers Lane, but that name is connected with the Quakers in the neighbouring village of South Mimms, visited by George Fox in 1677, and is another story.¹ I did gain a strong interest in the seventeenth century by flitting between the local Anglican church on Mutton Lane, dedicated to King Charles the Martyr (in the committee room of which Quakers met for worship in 1972; being 13 at the time I knew nothing about it and was more interested in Emerson, Lake and Palmer), and the Methodist church a few blocks away on Baker Street: that certainly put the meanings of the Protestant Reformation in England and how it has been lived out through time into my experience. At The University of Hull, a hundred and forty miles to the north and fifty miles to the east, in the late 1970s, meetings with my first tutor, Dr F. John Hoyles (1936–2021), were my first real encounter with a nonconformist: the son of a Methodist prison reformer, sent to Kingswood School, and who had traded a vibrant Christian socialism for Marxism. Hoyles channelled Christopher Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972) in his lectures, which book entirely inspired and dominated interest in seventeenth century radicalism at that time.²

I went to Oxford to research and write a doctoral thesis on radical literature and realised after a while that the key figure in the modern study of early modern radical literature was not necessarily Hill (1912–2003) but Geoffrey F. Nuttall (1911–2007), who was both a minister in the United Reform Church and a Quaker. I thought, at first, he must be no longer alive, but then was able to contact him after I had been awarded my D.Phil., and went to visit him in his retirement flat at Queen Mother Court in Bournville, a short walk from Woodbrooke College. He had deliberately moved there from Hampstead Garden Village in London to be near the College and its library, where, in the early 1940s, he had worked on his first monograph and what many consider his masterpiece, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (1946). A lot of the ideas in my first monograph *Perfection Proclaimed: Language and Literature in English Radical Religion, 1640–1660* (1989) about experience and immediacy gained their final shape through a dialogue with Nuttall.³

¹ 'South Mimms: Protestant Nonconformity', British History Online: <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/middx/vol15/pp302-304#fn7>, accessed 8 Dec., 2024.

² Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down. Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London, Temple Smith, 1972; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975).

³ Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1946; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Nigel Smith, *Perfection Proclaimed: Language and Literature in English Radical Religion, 1640–1660* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

I visited Nuttall two to three times a year in Bournville from late 1985 through to the end of the century, and even went on holiday with him to his favourite hotel at Oberhofen on the Thunersee in Switzerland for several years.⁴ I went to the Quaker meeting in Selly Oak on a Sunday morning many times with Geoffrey. Shortly after finishing the editing work on George Fox's *Journal*, I was certainly moved at such a Sunday meeting to speak with a gospel text, although I kept my peace. The Penguin Classics Fox's *Journal* project was his idea: we had mapped out a joint interest in the literature/religion crossover point (Nuttall had published a book on Dante in 1969), and were agreed that there was an interesting connection between the major modern editions of Quaker texts in the early twentieth century and the rise of literary modernism with its strong interest in capturing interior states of mind. Nuttall was good at finding out what people might be able to accomplish, then persuading them to do it. He had the idea of the Spence manuscript as a discrete text that should for once be presented on its own (despite the vitally important letters that were inserted into this narrative); I ran with it. I had already met Malcolm Thomas, the Librarian of Friends House in London; Malcolm strongly encouraged the edition and at first thought that the Friends Publication Committee would buy as many as 4,000 copies for distribution. This never happened: not because the edition was disapproved, but from a lack of available funding.

In what follows I outline a literary approach to the study of the Quaker movement, where the focus is not so much on religious ideas and practice, or on historical details, important as they are, but on the use of words as a manifestation of faith and the spread of that faith. I am interested in rhythms, rhymes, other kinds of sound and repetition, the components often associated with poetry, and also distinctive imagery, especially when it is a part of prophetic discourse. I show the benefits of this approach and how it leads to original understanding. I defend some of the positions I've taken and reaffirm the emergence of Quaker writing as a distinct expressive style from the broader array of often innovative kinds of radical Puritan writing in the earlier and mid-seventeenth century. I also show how Quaker writing as well as the Quaker movement took its place in English literary history, and, in the half century after 1660, how that integration was in part a consequence of Quaker success in communicating with and even converting some members of the English elite. The Quaker sense of a personal interiority, attendant on the inner light, offered modes of literary self-expression that only became more widespread after the rise of the literary Modernist movement in the early 20th century with the aesthetic concerns of authors like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf to map interior consciousness in the language of the novel. This relationship continues to the present, where works by

⁴ See further: Nigel Smith, 'Life and Works with Geoffrey F. Nuttall', *Congregational Historical Society Magazine*, 6.4 (2011), 159–70.

authors who happen to be Quakers are a significant component of literature in English, but are also in another sense as distinctive as is the movement itself.

1. The Literary Approach

Literary scholars, and some linguistics experts, pay close attention to what words do: their ability to facilitate deeply imaginative, unusual expression and to build compelling narratives (for instance in long poems, or novels) or to help make exciting, performed drama. Literary critics have long been attracted to the very distinctive prose style of the early Quakers, closely related as it was to how they spoke among themselves and with others. Perhaps it is better to say prose styles. Hilary Hinds shows how unusually interruptive Friends' use of the spoken, written and printed word was. Her work is for now the last word on the literary qualities of Fox's writings and those of his circle.⁵ These insights came after a long line of creditable commentary across several decades, pointing up the particular Quaker ways of expressing the sense of inspiration by the inner light.⁶ In the earliest years it was regarded as transgressive, sometimes extravagant and by many contemporaries most disturbing. Carla Pestana reproves me for not noticing that John Perrot's expression may have been extravagant, but his ideas were standard Quaker ones.⁷ That entirely misses the point. Highly gestured language was what marked out the Quakers, as a matter of substance, and to most people in the 1650s it represented an unwelcome threat of the new. It is true, as Pestana suggests, that by being imprisoned in Rome 1658–61 Perrot missed the key organisational

⁵ Hilary Hinds, *George Fox and Early Quaker Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), ch. 1.

⁶ See e.g., Luella M. Wright, *The Literary Life of the Early Friends, 1650–1725* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932); N.H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity in later Seventeenth-Century England* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1987), 182–3, 204–5, 243, 245, 252–5, 256; Thomas N. Corns and David Loewenstein, eds., *The Emergence of Quaker Writing: Dissenting Literature in Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Frank Cass, 1995); Hilary Hinds, *God's Englishwomen: Seventeenth-Century Radical Sectarian Writing and Feminist Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 121–3, 177–8, 185–7, 192–8, 202–4; Elaine Hobby, 'Prophecy, enthusiasm and female pamphleteers', in N.H. Keeble, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Writing of the English Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 162–78; David Loewenstein, *Representing Revolution in Milton and his Contemporaries: Religion, Politics, and Polemics in Radical Puritanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), ch. 4; Kate Peters, 'Quakers and the Culture of Print in the 1650s', in Laura Lunger Knoppers, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Literature and the English Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 567–90; Michele Lise Tarter, 'Written from the Body of Sisterhood. Quaker Women's Prophesyings and the Creation of a New Word', in Michele Lise Tarter and Catie Gill, eds., *New Critical Studies on Early Quaker Women, 1650–1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 69–87; Helen Wilcox, 'Sing and let the song be new': Early Modern Women's Devotional Lyrics', in Danielle Clarke, et al., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Women's Writing in English, 1540–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 185–6; David Parry, *The Rhetoric of Conversion in English Puritan writing from Perkins to Milton* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 73–6, 92–107. Literary studies of post-1700 Quaker writing are not listed here.

⁷ Carla Pestana, 'The Conventionality of the Notorious John Perrot', in Stephen W. Angell and Pink Dandelion, eds., *Early Quakers and Their Theological Thought 1647–1723* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 173; Nigel Smith, 'Exporting Enthusiasm: John Perrot and the Quaker Epic', in T.F. Healy and J. Sawday, eds., *Warre is all the World About: Literature and the English Civil War* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 248–64.

shift, giving the Quakers the capacity to survive during the early period of the restored monarchy, but his extravagant language had evolved before he was imprisoned, and was strongly part of his divisive presence once he was freed.⁸

I suggested in *Perfection Proclaimed* that early Quaker discourse was at an expressive extreme among other radical groups. This discussion occurs in a compressed five-page section at the end of the first long chapter on ‘Prophecy, Experience and the Presentation of the Self.’⁹ It is the end section of a complete chapter, and in it I argued that there was no apparent ‘I’, such as you would find in most experiential writing: for instance, in the kind of conversion narrative being produced by Congregationalists. I suggested that this was an explicit ‘silence’ of the self, perhaps in parallel to silent worship, and the ‘voice’ was the ‘light within’ – a driven messianic language of a calling. In that long chapter I typified radical Puritan writing as on a sliding scale where autobiography, known as the confession of experience, notably in the Independent or Congregational churches, moved towards the claim to speak with a prophetic voice. The Quakers were beyond even this kind of fashioning of prophetic identity, in their denunciative rhetoric that on the printed page looked like a profoundly level and equal difference, but yet was still inspired language. **Figure 1** is an example from a pamphlet by Hester Biddle, written from prison. Nothing of the world’s hierarchies appeared to be in it, even if it contained narratives of real-world events, as if the speaking voice was disembodied.

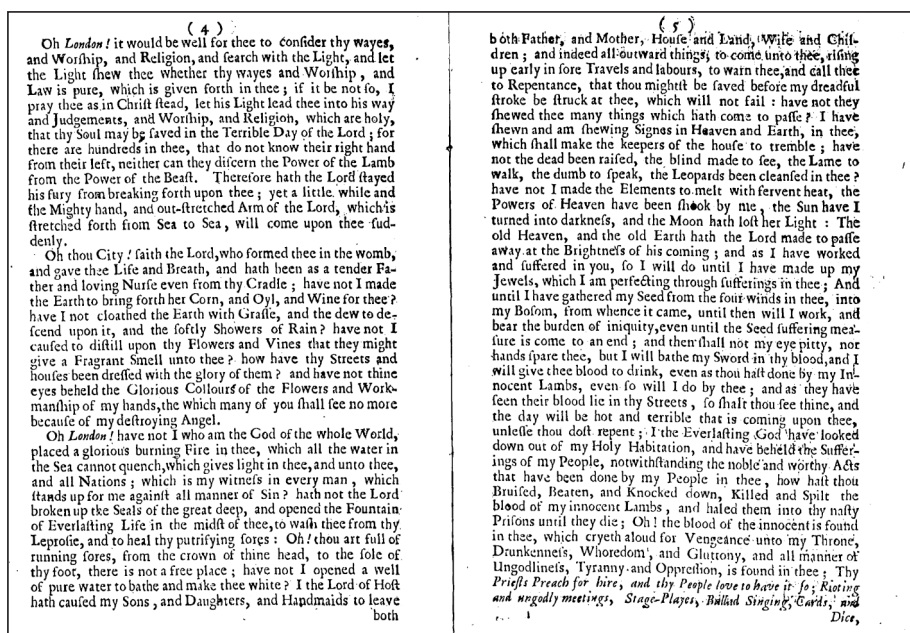


Figure 1 Hester [Ester], Biddle, *The Trumpet of the Lord sounded forth* (1662), 4–5.

⁸ See Rosemary Moore, *The Light in their Consciences: Early Quakers in Britain, 1646–1666* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000; revised Twentieth Anniversary Edition, 2020), ch. 15.

⁹ Smith, *Perfection Proclaimed*, 66–72.

Yet at the same time, in this earliest Quaker phase, I did argue for the interconnectedness of expression – especially with regard to imagery and positioning of prophetic insight – in Quaker writings with regard to many other authors and religious identities: comparing Fox for instance with Gerard Winstanley the Digger and Isaac Penington the younger before he became a Quaker.¹⁰ I was at pains to show that many of the stylistic features of early Quaker writings, as they had been described by Jackson I. Cope, were shared with other radicals, and that they were fundamental in embodying a sense of common identity while also being instrumental to early Quaker ideas of how words should work in the world.¹¹ Yet some scholars still seemed to ignore these connections, like Michael P. Graves when identifying the Quaker ‘sermon’ (the very term is problematic to me, almost a contradiction in terms), who did not read beyond the Quakers. Hilary Hinds in her excellent work on the little-known Sarah Jones and her three-page pamphlet *This is Lights Appearance in the Truth*, very uncertainly dated to 1650, might suggest the same.¹² This mode of expression might appear to involve an absolute negation of a worldly self, but some like John Toldervy felt it was an underhanded way of being very egotistical: ‘Self for the justifying of Self.’¹³ New work by Judith Roads and David Parry acknowledges the distinctively embodied acts of Quaker profession (refusing to swear oaths, going ‘naked as a sign’), and the incantatory, repetitive features of Quaker speech, where *ethos* (appeal to the authority of the speaker), is more important than *logos* (appeal to reason) and *pathos* (appeal to emotion). However, such discourse is still in Parry’s view part of the broader tradition of sermon rhetoric, even if such capacities were acquired outside of the universities.¹⁴

I also believe this literary approach extends to poetry, and so I do like the chapter on Quaker ‘Poetry, Testimonies and Pastoral Epistles’ in Rosemary Moore’s *The Light in their Consciences*, except that perhaps John Perrot, not mentioned here but given his own chapter, was the most significant first-generation poet, as I discussed in the essay that has drawn the attention of Pestana and Michele Tarter.¹⁵ An article by Moore does briefly

¹⁰ Smith, *Perfection Proclaimed*, 66–67.

¹¹ Jackson I. Cope, ‘Seventeenth-Century Quaker Style’, *PMLA*, 71.4 (1956), 725–754.

¹² Michael Graves, *Preaching the Inward Light: Early Quaker Rhetoric* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009); Hilary Hinds, ‘Sarah Jones and the Appearance of the Quaker Light’, in Tarter and Gill, eds., *New Critical Studies on Quaker Women*, 13–31.

¹³ John Toldervy, *The Foot out of the Snare* (1656), sig. A2², 7.

¹⁴ David Parry, *The Rhetoric of Conversion in English Puritan Writing from Perkins to Milton* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 92–107; Judith Roads, ‘Quaker Convincement Language: Using *Pathos* and *Logos* in the Seventeenth Century’, *Quaker Studies* 25.2 (2020), 189–205.

¹⁵ Rosemary Moore, *The Light in their Consciences: Early Quakers in Britain, 1646–1666* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000; revised Twentieth Anniversary Edition, 2020), ch. 16; see also *idem*, ‘Seventeenth-Century Published Quaker Verse’, *Quaker Studies*, 9.1 (2004), 9–16; Michele Lise Tarter, ‘“That You May Be Perfect in Love” The Prophecy of Dorothy White’, in Angell and Dandelion, eds., *Early Quakers*, 166; see also above, n. 4.

note the dimension, but again, without further reflection.¹⁶ I showed how Perrot's poem *A Sea of the Seed's Suffering* was a piece of adventurous Quaker writing, an allegory of the self enduring not merely persecution but even torture. I also showed how it is a learned poem, that it might legitimately be connected with Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* (the latter at the very least apparently in sympathy with the early Friends), and based on the enormously popular late sixteenth century French Protestant creation epic *Les Semaines* of Guillaume de Salluste, Sieur du Bartas.¹⁷ A lot of attention has been paid to the possible Quaker presence in Milton's late and great poems, not least through the blind poet's association with his amanuensis, the Quaker Thomas Ellwood, once his pupil, who helped with the dictation of the poetry, and moved Milton out of London to Chalfont St. Giles in Buckinghamshire during the Great Plague. A recent article by Andrew Brown discusses Milton's *Paradise Regained* as in some sense a Quaker text.¹⁸ Perrot himself knew natural philosophy and communicated with the Hartlib Circle, the forerunners of the Royal Society. While his divisive impact on the Friends is well documented, he also has a place in literary and intellectual history that deserves fuller exploration.

The sense that poetry by early Quakers was present in the record but tangential and inconsequential may have resulted in a broader oblivion for this verse in Quaker literary studies, so that in his otherwise excellent study of the nineteenth-century Quaker poet and penal reformer Bernard Barton (1784–1849), opponent of the death penalty, Christopher Stokes claims, following Moore, that there is no significant Quaker poetry in the seventeenth century.¹⁹ Much of the literature in the past is of little or no interest to today's general readers, and we study it for reasons other than that it is a good read. Barton was himself no Wordsworth or Tennyson. While the broader body of verse in early Quaker literature gathered by Moore might indeed appear to be fragmentary, and profoundly ordinary or unremarkable in quality, this is not always the case. Moore notes how this verse is often associated with Friends who at some point broke away from the main movement. Distinctive figures like Samuel Fisher, well educated, used verse instrumentally as part of their satire of more orthodox Christianity. In his attack on the scriptural literalism of the eminent Independent divine John Owen, Cromwellian-era Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, Fisher uses poetry as a brusque but humorous form of attack, spoken by the character of the 'rustic', with short syllabic words and syntactic units yet fully with the sense of Quaker inspiration:

¹⁶ Rosemary Moore, 'Seventeenth century published Quaker verse', *Quaker Studies*, 9.1 (2004), 7, n.16.

¹⁷ Nigel Smith, 'Exporting enthusiasm'; on du Bartas and Milton, see also Nigel Smith, 'Heteropoesis', *Milton Quarterly*, 57 (2024), 1–5.

¹⁸ Andrew S. Brown, 'Quakerism, Metadiscourse, and "Paradise Found"', *Studies in Philology*, 117 (2020), 606–626.

¹⁹ Christopher Stokes, 'Poetics at the Religious Margin: Bernard Barton and Quaker Romanticism', *RES*, n.s. 70 (2019), 509–26.

*I Trow, You'l Know, You Cannot Live in Sin,
 When All Dy Shall, who Live, and Dy there-in:
 Wherefore, before you Live You ought t' Eschew it;
 Then Must (I Trust) even whilst you Live, or Rue it.
 Read This (for 'tis a Riddle else) in th' Light;
 Heart Read, for th' Head herein obtains no Sight:
 Its Wis-dom Is too Dim this Depth to Enter,
 Un-lesse you Guesse by th' Spirit, which Dives to th' Center.²⁰*

I have described this verse elsewhere as a kind of deliberate 'anti-poetry', 'an art that is anti-art, a subversive display that belongs to the [Elizabethan Puritan satirical] Marprelate tradition (with the ludic side of Erasmus behind both of them), but that also voices the central Quaker focus on the spirit or light within.'²¹ This itself fits with the important work of Nicholas McDowell, who shows that many of the early religious radicals were educated and used that learning in their writing and activism.²² While the issue of poetry among the earliest Friends needs much more careful investigation, I would say that Stokes' dismissal is unwarranted.

Moving away from poetry, in the introduction to Fox's *Journal*, I picked up on what I knew to be Nuttall's undergraduate literary interests in the late 1920s and early 1930s, especially Virginia Woolf.²³ It seemed that the turn to the expression of interiority with 'stream of consciousness' technique chimed with the appearance of Fox's *Journal* as extensively and, as it were, anatomically edited by Norman Penney. Christopher Hill also noted similar connections between Joycean modernist narrative technique and the quality of narration in George Fox's *Journal*.²⁴ It was as if 'Eng. Lit.' has finally caught up with the Dissenting tradition. There are in fact very considerable Quaker presences in English literature that remain untapped but are a valuable resource for historians of the Quakers, quite apart from the distinctive modes of early Quaker expression.

²⁰ Samuel Fisher, *Rusticus ad Academicos* (London: Robert Wilson, 1660), sig. [(g)2r].

²¹ Christopher Stokes, 'Poetics at the Religious Margin: Bernard Barton and Quaker Romanticism, *RES*, n.s. 70 (2019), 509-26.

²² See Nicholas McDowell, *The English Radical Imagination: Culture, Religion, and Revolution, 1630-1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 140, 154, 157-159, 164, 167, 178.

²³ The letters I received from Nuttall in the late 1980s and earlier 1990s contained many allusions to Virginia Woolf novels. This was pointed out to me by Nuttall later on: shamefully (for a literature expert), I noticed none of them at the time, much though I treasure the letters.

²⁴ Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1972; Penguin Books, 1975), 233.

Hazel Wilkinson has recently uncovered Richard Castelman's wreck-focused *Voyage* (1726), once assumed to be fictional because it uses the genre of prose fiction as its model but is, in fact, a real account, containing hitherto unknown information about Quakers in colonial Virginia.²⁵ In other words, Quakerism has distinctively nurtured literary tradition, while that tradition is also a window into Quaker history. This is a connection that can be seen at work in more modern and contemporary authors, such as Basil Bunting, Philip Gross and Sybil Ruth, where an aesthetic has been identified incorporating among other elements: 'openness, ambiguity and seeking, dialogical engagement; ethical rather than moral writing; creative attention; an apophatic approach to the Divine; silence as presence and force.'²⁶ These observations must also acknowledge that many Quakers, in common with others in the Puritan tradition, were wary of 'merely' human capacities like imagination.

There is also the important feature of Quaker language usage and ideas of language that was not merely symbolic with regard to religious profession and activism, but also part of an ideological critique that was theological, economic, and potentially political. Thus, in an important but overlooked article of 2000, Meiling Hazelton, an American Rhodes Scholar in the later 1990s, argued that the early Friends, and especially George Fox, protested that the great evil was the commodification of language itself: that generally speech acts in society were the possession of the privileged, in order to produce an extractive, oppressive social order at the expense of the poor, while lawyers and priests were enriched:

Quakers sought to replace the old practice of rhetoric, inextricably linked to the social hierarchy, with a new "community" of speech. They sought a levelling of language that would free speech from commerce, verbal propriety from property. The Quakers' campaign for a redistribution of language may have built on Leveller arguments for a more equitable allotment of political power and on Winstanley's call for a communal ownership and working of the land. Yet the Quakers also transcended earlier sophisticated understanding of language and in their vision of a society reformed through language.²⁷

Hazelton saw in Fox an equation of the spiritual and the material: 'When Fox moves from the exhortation to "speak freely" to a description of labour in the vineyards, the

²⁵ Hazel Wilkinson, 'The Voyage of Richard Castelman (1726): A New Document for Transatlantic Literary Studies, *RES*, n.s. 70 (2019), 467–88.

²⁶ See Jonathan Doering, 'An Exploration of the Existence and Utility of a Quaker Literary Aesthetic in the Poetry of Philip Gross and Sibyl Ruth', *Quaker Studies* 26.1(2021), 3–110; Richard Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us: The Life of Basil Bunting* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Infinite Ideas, 2014).

²⁷ Meiling Hazelton, "'Mony Choaks": The Quaker Critique of the Seventeenth-Century Public Sphere', *Modern Philology*, 98.2 (2000), 269–70.

description reads as a metaphor for the dissemination of the Word; however, when he declares that the result of this free spiritual labour will be that “there will be little cause to call the Magistrates to give [the workers] maintenance, but they will all have enough,” the analogy between speech and manual labour seems to collapse into identity.²⁸ The proposals addressed to Parliament look as austere as Gerrard Winstanley’s utopia. At first the Quaker statement appears to be close to Winstanley, the Digger and mystical communist, and indeed ‘Fox echoed Winstanley his calls for some redistribution of land ... [but his] primary target was the buying and selling of language, which he believed was the key to the corruption of ministers, lawyers, and politicians.’²⁹ Suffering and persecution might include being compelled to pay a minister who baptised your child. Early Quaker discourse was thus beyond the Leveller insistence on the propriety of ‘self-ownership’, and on the Digger desire for common property ownership, and in a space where speech is free from the power relations and hence value-driven prejudices that infected the world. In the context of 1640–50s ‘radical writing’, this was the truly original contribution of Quaker discourse, a freedom from oppression in the act of speaking, that, it was assumed, would result in a rectification of inequalities. It was perhaps one of the most powerful objections to ‘priestcraft’ in the period, and one can see very clearly the appeal to a merchant like Benjamin Furly, who was convinced by James Parnell in 1655 at the age of 19. If it is possible to talk about Quaker epistemology (study of the foundations of knowledge), we also have a legacy from Hazelton to talk of Quaker critique.³⁰

2. Everyone a Quaker?

After the trauma for Puritans and Quakers of the restoration of the monarchy and the episcopal church, the adoption of the organisation structure by the Friends, their much less abrupt and denunciatory approach in speech and publication, and its eventual replacement by far more politically effective means of solicitation and persuasion (although the grim persecution of Friends continued with more than 400 deaths due to imprisonment in the period), we might say that Quakerism appealed more broadly as a more persuasive destination for some.³¹ As is well known, there were some famous converts among elite intellectuals, like Anne, Viscountess Conway and Killultagh (1631–1679) and Francis Mercurius van Helmont, baron of Helmont and Merode in the nobility of the Holy Roman Empire (1614–1698).³² That a power of godliness,

²⁸ Hazelton, “Mony Choaks”, 268.

²⁹ Hazelton, “Mony Choaks”, 269.

³⁰ See Laura Rediehs, ‘Quaker Epistemology’, *Quaker Studies*, 2.3 (2019), 1–92.

³¹ William C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism*, rev. Henry J. Cadbury, 2nd edn (1955; rpt York, 1981), 115; Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity*, 187.

³² See Jonathan Head, *The Philosophy of Anne Conway: God, Creation and the Nature of Time* (London: Bloomsbury Academic,

something divine, was felt to be in people, animating them, was widely registered, and part of the intensely-felt debate between on the one hand these spiritualists and on the other the rationalists, empiricists, and materialists. A good example, close to Quakerdom, is the philosopher-theologian Damaris Cudworth-Masham (1659–1708), accused of enthusiasm by her friend the philosopher John Locke. She was the daughter of the influential and immensely learned Ralph Cudworth (1618–88), Cambridge Platonist, and Master of Clare College (1645), then Christ’s College (1654), Cambridge, and we might think about this in the context of another Cambridge Platonist and close friend of Conway Henry More’s approval in the mid-1670s of Quaker piety. Are non-rational elements of human experience to be listened to, do they tell us something about ourselves, or are they a complete irrelevance, nothing to do with what we and the world really are?’³³ Locke was unremitting and suspected enthusiasm in Cudworth’s position: ‘you seeme to me very much to savour of Enthusiasme and soe will be very litle different from my Visionarys I meane in respect of their opinions and knowledg.’³⁴ She defended herself, arguing that while enthusiasts abandon reason, there are pious people who do not, and yet are open to acknowledging personal religious experiences that can only be judged by the ‘by the Sentient and Vital Faculties.’ Who is she or anyone to deny these experiences to anyone who is both virtuous and rational? Cudworth considered joining a Lbadist community, followers of Jean de Labadie (1610–74), in the Netherlands before she married Sir Francis Masham; she appears to compare them with the Quakers.³⁵ Locke would greatly expand the content of his correspondence with Damaris Cudworth-Masham by going into exile in the Dutch Republic and staying most of his time there with the Quaker Benjamin Furly, another of his close correspondents.

In the discussions overseen by Lady Conway at Ragley Hall, Warwickshire, George Keith, substituting for William Penn, appears to have inherited ideas on the transmigration of souls from van Helmont, who in turn was influenced by kabbalistic thought, and this area has been explored in important work by Michael Birkel.³⁶ I take seriously in this context Madeleine Pennington’s argument that it was in the Ragley

2021); Allison P. Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah in the Seventeenth Century: The Life and Thought of Francis Mercury van Helmont (1614–1698)* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

³³ See T.M. Luhrmann, *How God becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

³⁴ Locke to Cudworth, 21 February, 1682. Letter texts may be found in Jacqueline Broad, ed., *Women Philosophers of Seventeenth-Century England: Selected Correspondence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 120–230; R.V. MacNamee, ed., *Electronic Enlightenment Biographical Dictionary* (2008–23); <https://doi.org/10.13051/ee:bio/cud-wodamar004736>; accessed 30 November, 2023); *The Correspondence of John Locke*, ed. E.S. De Beer, 8 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976–89; electronic edn. Charlottesville, VA: IntelLex Corporation, 2004).

³⁵ Cudworth to Locke, 25 August, 1684; Broad, *Women Philosophers*, 148, n. 130.

³⁶ Michael Birkel, ‘Immediate Revelation, Kabbalah, and Magic: The Primacy of Experience in the Theology of George Keith’, in Angell and Dandelion, eds., *Early Quakers*, 256–72.

discussions that Robert Barclay developed his idea of the divine essence being present in mankind through that part of the godhead that is Jesus Christ (adopting a Trinitarian understanding), an important part of an ongoing elaboration of a Quaker ontology and metaphysics.³⁷ Here it is also worth noting that Pennington is adding welcome nuance to the views of the editor of the Conway Letters, Marjorie Hope Nicholson (1894–1981), who was an English literature professor of the intellectual historian kind at Columbia University in New York.³⁸ Nonetheless Nicholson’s fundamental understanding remains intact – that the Quakers were part of a revolt against ‘non-essentials’ in religion, and that it was, through the idea of the light within, part of a growing optimism, even perhaps part of what is called ‘the Decline of Hell.’³⁹

The Quaker facility with communication and the will to do so, no doubt exploiting and made possible by the elite social connections that some among the second generation of Friends were able to make, necessarily extended to the European continent, as the Quakers followed their instinct to connect and convince wherever likely converts were to be found. A rich community of English nonconformists and separatists had been coming to the Dutch Republic since the very early seventeenth century in order to find freedom to worship and following extant but growing international mercantile relations that they tried to exploit.⁴⁰

A much-discussed pamphlet entitled *The Light upon the Candlestick* (1663) has been attributed in its reception career to William Ames the Quaker, and even to the man who was in actuality its translator, Benjamin Furly.⁴¹ It is a translation of a 1662 Dutch original, and a reasonably faithful one, a treatise, *Het licht op den kandelaar*, now usually attributed to Pieter Balling, Amsterdam Mennonite, from the church with Flemish connections, a Collegiant and a member of the philosopher Baruch Spinoza’s circle.⁴² The tract is also sometimes attributed to Adam Boreel, perhaps even more a key Collegiant than Balling. Was it written by Boreel originally in Latin, and translated into

³⁷ Madeleine Pennington, *Quakers, Christ, and the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 148–55.

³⁸ Marjorie Hope Nicholson, ed., *The Conway Letters: The Correspondence of Anne, Viscountess Conway, Henry More, and their Friends, 1642–1684* (rev. edn., ed. Sarah Hutton; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

³⁹ Nicholson, ed., *The Conway Letters*, 379; D.P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell. Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).

⁴⁰ Claus Bernet, ‘Quaker Missionaries in Holland and North Germany in the Late Seventeenth Century: Ames, Caton, and Furly’, *Quaker History*, 95.2 (2006), 1–18; J.Z. Kannegieter, *Geschiedenis van de vroegere Quakergemeenschap te Amsterdam; 1656 tot begin negentiende eeuw* (Amsterdam and Haarlem: Scheltema & Holkema, 1971).

⁴¹ See William I. Hull, *Benjamin Furly and Quakerism in Rotterdam* (Swarthmore, Pa., Swarthmore College, 1941); Sarah Hutton, ed., *Benjamin Furly, 1646–1714: A Quaker Merchant and his Milieu* (Firenze: L.S. Olschki, 2007); Elaine Pryce, ‘“A New Order of Things”: Benjamin Furly, Quakers and Quietism in the Seventeenth Century’, *Quaker Studies*, 23.2 (2018), 191–218.

⁴² For the attribution to Balling, see the second Dutch edition: Pieter Balling, *Het Licht op den Kandelaar* (Amsterdam: Jan Rieuwertsz., 1684), sig. A2^{r-v}; Laura Rediehs, ‘Candlestick Mysteries’, *Quaker Studies*, 18.2 (2014), 151–169.

Dutch by Balling, or translated by Boreel into Latin? The important point to note is the ongoing dialogue between Quakers and Dutch Collegiants through the period, and not the now older view, associated with the historian of the Collegiants Andrew Fix, that initial 1650s mutual interest between the two groups in Amsterdam quickly led to distrust and dissociation, with incompatible eschatologies and views on the nature of reason.⁴³ These relations are also usually seen as of no mainstream or long term significance because the Quaker presence in northern Europe faded from the 1720s onwards, but the intensity and philosophical importance of these debates should make us think again.

The debate about the Balling treatise is important because he was in the highly original and iconoclastic philosopher Baruch Spinoza's circle and was eventually his publisher. Were the Quakers in fact expressing with the light within Spinoza's sense of essential consciousness, a version of his key term the *conatus*?⁴⁴ There is also the thesis of Richard Popkin that Spinoza was the 'young Jew' who had translated both the prominent English Quaker Margaret Fell into Hebrew, and been influenced by Samuel Fisher's critique of Calvinist Scriptural fundamentalism, the latter proposition taken less seriously than the former.⁴⁵ Furthermore, there is the potential connection with perhaps the most notorious Dutch freethinking treatise, *A Light Shining in Dark Places* (1668), by Adriaan Koerbagh. Its attack on orthodox Protestant institutions and theology was so fierce that its author was imprisoned and died in jail, unusual for the Dutch Republic, and the treatise suppressed. But many of its anticlerical ideas, and the tone of its vigor, are entirely consistent with early Quaker polemic. Christology and Koerbagh's insistence on settling questions with reason are the points of difference. Koerbagh himself was not sure whether the Quakers were Trinitarians or not, but he thought them 'spiritualists' who 'pretend to be inspired by the H. Ghost', and thus like the English Brownists, also resident in Amsterdam, 'simple foolish people.'⁴⁶ At least the Socinians had used reason to deny the Trinity but, said Koerbagh, they had not gone far enough. There is no room here apparently for the Quakers.

Was Balling's *The Light upon the Candlestick* as translated by Furlly meant to show a connection with the idea of the light within in Quaker understanding? If so, it must have been a challenge even to an early Quaker readership. The treatise has none of the

⁴³ Andrew C. Fix, *Prophecy and Reason: The Dutch Collegiants in the Early Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

⁴⁴ See Jonathan I. Israel, *Spinoza, Life and Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 273–83; E.G.E Van der Wall, *De Mystieke Chiliast Petrus Serrarius (1600–1669) en zijn Wereld* (Ph.D. thesis, Leiden University, 1987), 214–30.

⁴⁵ Richard H. Popkin, 'Spinoza's Relations with the Quakers in Amsterdam', *Quaker History*, 73.1 (1984), 14–28; *idem*, 'Spinoza and Samuel Fisher', *Philosophia*, 15 (1985), 219–236.

⁴⁶ Adriaan Koerbagh, *A Light Shining in Dark Places, to Illuminate the Main Questions of Theology and Religion*, ed. Michiel Wielema (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 245.

zeal of classic early Quaker writing and seems deliberately dry. English Friends reading the tract in 1663 would not have had the benefit of seeing the indubitably Quaker work by William Ames to which Balling replies, since it only appeared in Dutch.⁴⁷ *The Light upon the Candlestick* is not experiential or experimental but metaphysical. The opening paragraph is to do with the limitations of the signifying power of words, even if we have to use them. It has no immediacy whatsoever but might for some be tedious. The second page is more promising in the second paragraph, with the hint of a revelation: 'Moreover, 'tis not far to seek, but at hand; 'tis nigh thee, yea and in thy self. And there thou mayest experience the trial of that which we declare, which is the most certain and sure that can be desired.'⁴⁸ However, the next paragraph might begin with a statement recognisable to a Friend, but then reveals the light in decidedly metaphysical terms:

We direct thee then to within thyself, that is, that thou oughtest to turn into, to mind and have regard unto that which is within thee, to wit, *The Light of Truth, the true Light which enlighten every man that cometh into the world*. Here 'tis that thou must be, and not without thee. Here thou shalt find a Principle certain and infallible, and whereby increasing and going on therein, thou mayest at length arrive unto a happy condition: Of this thou mayest highly adventure the trial.⁴⁹

When we then learn that most men live by opinion rather than the light, we are in a Spinozan position, as articulated in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670); and another skeptical sentence that sounds like Cornelius Agrippa. It is only here that there is a fleeting association of the 'light' with Jesus: '*This Light then, Christ the Truth, &c. is that which makes manifest and reproves sin in man*', and the idea of the light as a presence by nature in man, so that the principle exists prior to any encounter with the Bible.⁵⁰ This appears to extend to an account of moral psychology or cognition:

What is there that hath not a powerful operation upon one or other of the Sences of man, through which passing over into the soul, the memory is so filled, that nothing else can enter. The eyes and ears stand so perpetually open to all things, that they never want an object to bring to mind the experience of that which pleased the body so well, And this stirs up the desire to enjoy it, yet all without satisfaction: The

⁴⁷ William Ames, *De Verborgentheden van het Rijke Godts* (Amsterdam, 1661); Jo van Cauter and Laura Rediehs, 'Spiritualism and Rationalism in Dutch Collegiant Thought: New Evidence from William Ames's *Mysteries of the Kingdom of God* (1661), with a Translation', *Lias*, 40.2 (2013), 105–175.

⁴⁸ [Pieter Balling], *The Light upon the Candlestick* (1663), trans. Benjamin Furly, 3. See also [Balling], *Het licht op den kandelaar* (Amsterdam: 1662).

⁴⁹ [Balling], *The Light*, 3.

⁵⁰ [Balling], *The Light*, 5.

objects are multifarious, the enjoyment can be but single and transient, and the causes incessant.⁵¹

Where there is so much indulgence in the ways of the world, the light has no ability to ‘spring or bubble up’, and this makes the Light seem far less important a presence than in fact it is or should be.⁵² The picture verges on the Manichean. Connections with Descartes’ explanation of consciousness and mind–body relations have been seen here; Descartes was certainly of major importance to the Spinozans.⁵³ If the light is the ‘first principle of religion’, what does this mean in an international and global sense: is the light the foundation of all religions everywhere, such that we might expect the possibility of cross faith dialogues and even reconciliations between faiths? The Collegiants, after all, had at least one Jewish member, and an earlier heterodox Mennonite in Amsterdam, Jan Theunisz., c.1610, constructed a careful interfaith dialogue with a visiting Moroccan embassy secretary, Ibn Al-Aziz.⁵⁴

As the text proceeds, there is a sense of the light without Jesus, and an obscuring of his identity. This propounds the sense of the inquiry as psycho–physiological: ‘And this cause must have in it whatsoever the effect produced hath in it: As for example*, if the effects of *Light* be produced, *Light* must do it, and nothing else.’⁵⁵ Furly’s early translation is in context a major piece of interruption, fusing epistemology, ontology and theology. It is not in the first instance a Quaker document, even if it does reflect parts of the Ames treatise on which it comments. It is no obvious and easy fit with Quaker expression as it was known in the early 1660s, as was once assumed, and howsoever Balling may have intended conciliation.⁵⁶ The translation and its publication is typical of the broad outreach, a kind of ambassadorship, that marks Furly’s career.

The leading Collegiant Mennonite Galenus Abrahamz maintained some sympathy, if also wariness, with the Quakers, and it was thought by his enemies that Dutch Quakers emerged from the Collegiant churches, although it is also true that some Quakers

⁵¹ [Balling], *The Light*, 5–6. The printed marginal comment reads: ‘No wonder the *Light* is no more known, while the darkness is so much loved.’

⁵² [Balling], *The Light*, 6.

⁵³ Rediehs, ‘Candlestick Mysteries’, 154, 158–9, 161, 163–7; Harold J. Cook, *Matters of Exchange: Commerce, Medicine, and Science in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 252–66.

⁵⁴ Dorrit van Dalen, ‘Johannes Theunisz and ‘Abd al-‘Aziz: a friendship in Arabic Studies in Amsterdam, 1609–1610’, *Lias*, 43.1 (2016), 161–189.

⁵⁵ [Balling], *The Light*, 7. There is a marginal note: ‘Where any see, there must needs be LIGHT.’ See further Maxime Rovere, ‘Shaping the Freedom of Speech, Toleration and Intimacy in Pieter Balling’s *Light Upon the Candlestick*’, in Nicole Gengoux, Pierre Girard, and Mogens Lærke, eds., *Libertinage et philosophie à l’époque Classique (XVIe–XVIIIe siècle). Les Libertins néerlandais* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2022), 103–36.

⁵⁶ Rufus M. Jones, *Spiritual Reformers in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1914; Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), 132.

became Collegiants. It was and remained for some time a two-way street. The treatise by Ames to which Balling responded was itself a reply to another treatise by Galenus. Galenus was not a rationalist Collegiant like Boreel, but understood that he ministered to a religion of the heart, and that might have helped him connect with the Quakers. Another early Quaker who came to the Netherlands, Stephen Crisp, and who enjoyed great success convincing people, especially away from the large cities, in the quieter, more agricultural provinces such as Friesland, joined Furly in the lengthy confutation of the spiritualist writer Antoinette Bourignon, who was connected with the Labadists.⁵⁷ Both Crisp and Furly were from Colchester, the former married to a Dutch woman from the expatriate mercantile community in Essex. Crisp's allegorical work *A Short History of a Long Travel from Babylon to Bethel* (1711) is seen as a key signal of transformation from prophetic denunciation to moralism, but the debt here is not to John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678, 1684). Crisp was fluent in Dutch and I strongly suspect was as much influenced by a well-developed Dutch Mennonite pious literary tradition, in which a major figure and work was Pieter Pietersz's *Wegh na Vreden-stadt, Waer in ghewesen wordt hoe men die vrede mach bekomen* [Way to the City of Peace] (c.1625).

This leads me to take some issue with Madeleine Pennington's claim for some convergence of Quaker understanding with the terms of the emergent (radical) Enlightenment.⁵⁸ We might equally say that another meaningful context is to put the early Friends in the company of the religious revival beginning in the second half of the seventeenth century and growing into the eighteenth: the rise of Pietism, in Germany, *der Pietismus*, and in the Netherlands, the *Nadere Reformatie*. Pietism was a collective quest for an emotionally sustaining religion after the mere legalism of later Lutheranism and the strictures of Calvinism.⁵⁹ This context had in fact been elaborated in great detail by the Dutch Church historian C.B. Hylkema, whose capacious study has never been translated, but it was summarised very effectively by Nuttall in the 1950s.⁶⁰ In the English and colonial American sphere and alongside the Quakers, this kind of depiction of a sphere of associated but yet still distinct identities might include on the one hand, the Philadelphian Society, led by the blind prophet Jane Lead, perfectionist and 'feminist' followers of Jacob Boehme, who were in competition with the Quakers

⁵⁷ Benjamin Furly, *Antionette Bourignon ontdeckt, ende haeren geest geopenbaert uyt haere vruchten, den geest Godts niet te zijn* (Amsterdam: Christoffel Cunradus, 1671).

⁵⁸ Pennington, *Quakers, Christ*, Ch. 7.

⁵⁹ Douglas H. Shantz, *An Introduction to German Pietism: Protestant Renewal at the Dawn of Modern Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); see also Pryce, "A New Order of Things."

⁶⁰ C.B. Hylkema, *Reformateurs: Geschiedkundige studiën over de godsdienstige bewegingen uit de nadagen onzer Gouden Eeuw*, 2 vols. (Haarlem: H.D. Tjeenk Willink en Zoon, 1900-1902); G.F. Nuttall, 'Early Quakerism in the Netherlands, the wider context', *Friends Historical Association Bulletin* XLIV.1 (1955), 3-18; 'Early Quakerism in the Netherlands, Its Wider Context', *Early Quaker Studies and the Divine Presence* (Weston Rhyn: Quinta Press, 2003), 155-84.

for followers, and on the other hand, the vegetarian cult induced by Thomas Tryon, highly prolific author, sometimes sharing with the Quakers the publisher Tace Sowle, and again perceived as something of a threat to the Quakers.⁶¹ It should be noted that the strongly anti-slavery Quaker, Benjamin Lay (1682–1759), was a very keen follower of Tryon, and is depicted in a painting by William Williams and Benjamin West holding a Tryon treatise.⁶² Like Furly, Lay owned 1640s English revolutionary books.

Conclusion

Friends today are convinced and brought together by many different factors, and Quaker history has been maintained very well for decades by a broad set of approaches. I much hope that it will continue to flourish and develop as we discover more of value about our past. In this piece, I have tried to make the case for the value of literary understanding as a relevant and valuable part of this knowledge: revealing the careful and purposeful arrangement of words as a tool of understanding and revelation. The early Friends used their prophetic and messianic language, part and parcel of their singular behaviour, as a shocking intervention in a world that mostly received it as an unwelcome assault. Then began the pushback: the harsh treatment and persecution of the Quakers that would not subside for decades, despite the many who became convinced. But Quaker discourse was a tool that not only facilitated the witness of the inner light. It also enabled an understanding of what was wrong with the world in the most obvious starting place: the discourse that each of us has to use from day to day, moment to moment, our mother tongue.

These features found their way into the weft of literary tradition, manifesting as a distinct discursive archive that remains to be extensively discovered. The early Friends had played a major role in the making of a personally known and governed religion. It may also have been a carefully regulated community, but it was far away from ‘priestcraft’ and clerical hierarchies. Ordinary people might discuss theological and cosmological truths, and this was the broad world of piety as the tumultuous but epoch-making seventeenth century gave way to the eighteenth. In this respect it is not the Enlightenment that matters, so much as the world of *das Pietismus*, or the *nadere Reformatie*. The eighteenth century was not just the Age of Reason. We should pay attention to the sheer range of explorative expression initiated, encountered, and absorbed by these early Friends.

⁶¹ On Lead, see Paula McDowell, “Enlightenment Enthusiasms and the Spectacular Failure of the Philadelphian Society,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 35 (2002), 515–33; on Tryon, Adam Bridgen, ‘Thomas Tryon (1634–1703): A Theology of Animal Enslavement’, in Andrew Linzey and Clair Linzey, eds., *Animal Theologians* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2023), 53–75.

⁶² Marcus Rediker, *The Fearless Benjamin Lay: The Quaker Dwarf who became the First Revolutionary Abolitionist* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017).

Competing Interests

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