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Judith Roads' edition of Ratcliff Friends' minute books offers significant material on early Friends in what is today the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. The period covered, 1681-1701, was very significant for Friends, with active persecution before the 1689 Toleration Act enabled Protestant denominations to worship freely, although prosecution for, *inter alia*, non-payment of tithes, continued.

Free to view online, meaning it is more easily accessible for researchers of Quakerism or family history who are not based at universities, it may well be read in parallel to other works on early Friends which are also available online, such as the well-known published account of Friends' sufferings, Joseph Besse's *Sufferings of the People called Quakers* of 1753 (<https://archive.org>). Ratcliff Friends appear in Besse as follows: in 1684 soldiers prevented access to the meeting house (vol. 1, p. 471), and in 1685 several local Quakers were fined for meeting and then distrained – they had goods taken notionally to a value of the fines, but usually worth a far larger amount. (vol. 1, pp. 473-4) Perhaps most revealing of the systematic persecution of local Quakers, in the same year a 'vagabond informer' broke into the house of John Sellwood, a brewer, terrifying his wife, children and servant, to seize goods for the seventh time, as punishment for attending a meeting. However, the Minute Books, especially in their searchable online form, enable us to contextualise this further; for example, John was a Quaker from 1681 if not earlier (p. 8); in 1687 he was one of two male Friends overseeing the initially marriage plans of a Ratcliff Friend with a Quaker from another meeting (p. 64) and in 1688 was engaged in determining what should be done with items, including land in Pennsylvania, bequeathed to the meeting by a recently deceased Friend (pp. 68-70) as well as arranging apprenticeships, especially for poor Friends' children (pp. 70, 72) and taking on the role of treasurer. References to John as deceased, in his son John's intention of marriage to Mary Mash, in 1696, reveal he did not live long after the Toleration Act. Roads' work suggests that the lives of 'ordinary' Friends such as John, appearing briefly but quite strikingly in Besse's account, can be more richly contextualised for the benefit of family, local and Quaker historians, who might initially consult Besse for details of persecution.

Other important aspects of the work of interest to a range of readers include, for example, urban and architectural history: there are several references to aspects of the meeting house although it is no longer extant, giving insights into a lost urban environment in which gutters were needed to carry away water into the Meeting House Lane (p. 57). In addition to insanitary conditions, poverty is also apparent in references to poor Friends receiving support, including, in 1692, 'a poor woman who came out of Ireland' (p. 137), reflecting the desperation of Irish Quakers experiencing high levels of persecution. Despite this, high-status Quaker families are also apparent: in 1696 the son of Robert Barclay shared his intentions of marrying a young woman from Wapping, his celebrated father described simply as 'Robert Barclay of the same

place [Urie], deceased'. (p. 221) Marriage is unsurprisingly a frequent entry in the minute books, with occasional references to marrying out, sometimes in a fascinating, wider context of household and meeting dynamics – the 'widdow Smith' felt moved, for example, to assert to the meeting in Spring 1684 that 'shee is Cleare in the Mater concerning her daughter & former manservant and that thay went to the priest & took each other unknown to her.' (p. 37) Burial, another significant rite of passage, is also regularly referred to, with 'notes' and 'papers read' of burials frequently minuted, in addition to the need, in 1695, to identify a regular gravedigger 'that may bee fit for the Service'. (p. 204) The same year saw Friends keen to access a copy of the Act relating to the Marriage Duty Tax, by which the government sought to raise monies for war with France by taxing marriages and burials, and which did not discriminate between Anglican marriages that were recognised as licit, and non-Anglican marriages that were not recognised, other than for tax purposes.

Moving from the transcribed text to the context offered by its editor, Roads' introduction to the volume is timely and very useful, offering an overview of her technique in transcribing the manuscript by using the online tool Transkribus. Transkribus can, as she notes, be difficult to use for documents with multiple hands but can be 'trained', as she successfully did, with samples of writing and her own transcriptions, leading to clearer results which at times also helped her not only achieve swifter transcriptions, but sometimes also clarified difficult words. This is very significant for early modern historians and suggests that, although Transkribus and similar tools are not a simple replacement for the sometimes-arduous task of unpicking old handwriting, they can offer something more. Roads' philosophy is to make such work as widely accessible as possible, and the availability of the transcription online certainly achieves this, making a direct transcription, rather than a limited edited version, available to everyone with internet access. For historians especially, access to the complete work means we have not lost aspects of a document which might have become crucial to historical insights, as noted of other manuscript works of the same period. (Lamont, 2006: 239-240). When we consider Friends such as John Sellwood, the completeness of the Ratcliff transcription – although minute books are limited in form and to an extent content, reflecting administrative requirements of Quakers locally and nationally – reveals individual and group priorities in the 1680s and 1690s to a greater degree than works such as Besse, published in later years and for a very different purpose.

Overall, then, this is an extremely useful resource for Quaker history, family history, local history, the history of the household and family, poverty, urban and digital history. It would be very useful to see Roads highlight more of these areas, perhaps in future works.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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