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**Chris Skidmore, *Early Quaker Controversy in Reading: The Minute Books of the Two Reading Monthly Meetings, 1668-1716* (Reading: Berkshire Record Society, 2025) ISBN 9781739493035. Hardback, £25**

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A book review for Chris Skidmore, *Early Quaker Controversy in Reading: The Minute Books of the Two Reading Monthly Meetings, 1668-1716* (Reading: Berkshire Record Society, 2025).

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In this work, a transcription of two manuscript volumes of Quaker Meeting Minutes currently held in the Royal Berkshire Archives, Chris Skidmore has brought together rival accounts of the same period of South-East English Quaker history. It is not unusual to find early Friends' accounts of their experiences, particularly sufferings, paralleled by rival accounts such as those of the established church: non-payment of tithes, for example, are noted in ecclesiastical and civil courts records albeit as an offence rather than evidence of spiritual strength. However, it is much more uncommon to find accounts by two groups who both laid claim to be 'Quakers', during a schism in Reading which, as for Restoration Quakerism more broadly, Skidmore asserts, was due to internal tension, rivalry and struggles over authority and power. (p.viii)

Skidmore begins the volume by offering a helpful overview of the Quaker historical background to the schism, noting that the key cause was the decision of Benjamin Coale, shortly thereafter a member of the separatist meeting, to sell the published work of William Rogers when it had not been approved by the Second Day Morning Meeting, the London-based Quaker committee which checked the suitability of publications. Skidmore helpfully tabulates key entries relating to this and the following schism, from both meetings' Minute Books, which offer differing perspectives. (pp394–8) That some Friends described Rogers' work as 'a wicked book' (p.xvi) underlines its significance to some members of the original meeting and, as Skidmore notes, many of the other activities over which the meetings clashed – such as having separate women's meetings (p.xvi), although representing Quaker orthopraxy at the time, were bitterly resented; indeed, they were relatively recent innovations for older Friends. Although many Quaker meetings disciplined members for problematic behaviour, which sometimes similarly reflected responses to 'new' expectations (see e.g. Bell 2003, chapter 2 *passim*), Reading differed in the scale of the response and its duration, lasting thirty years and ending with the movement of both meetings into the same Meeting House in 1716. (p.xviii)

Certainly, both meetings were keen to highlight their legitimacy by referring to their origins, much as the first generation of Quakers had done in relation to the Bible, likening themselves to the early Christians and their persecution. (See e.g. Anon., p.2) For the orthodox meeting, their original minute book had been wrested from them: in early 1685 they noted that 'there was a Monthly Booke for many years before' (p.186), but Benjamin Coales had kept it and 'taken Part with that Spirit of Opposition, & Division... against orderly Proceedings' including the appropriate preservation of Quaker records which had been, the orthodox account continued, rejected by the schismatic Friends when Papers of Advice, for example, did not agree with their beliefs. (p.186). The separatists, meanwhile, held the original Minute Book and therefore, symbolically,

claims to legitimacy, noting within it later in the same year that in contrast to their meeting, 'the proselites' were making 'Clammour' near the Meeting House, which Skidmore suggests refers to the orthodox Friends' meeting outside the building. (p.111). It is fascinating to read that occasionally both meetings did hold a joint Monthly Meeting; in 1684, the orthodox Friends plus 'severall of the oppositts' (p.202) met and at one point argued over the significance of Women's Meetings, with one separatist asserting that 'the Power of God is against it'. That this was noted by orthodox Friends but not minuted by the Separatists is fascinating and although Skidmore does not, understandably, discuss the matter beyond identifying it (p.202) it is worth further reflection as an example of controversies arising from what were to become largely accepted aspects of Quaker church order.

Skidmore's introduction is very helpful in highlighting key aspects of the Minute Books, and the index similarly enables readers to identify key individuals, families and geographic areas. As a comparable recently published work, Judith Roads' transcription of the Ratcliff Minute Book of a similar period works well alongside this volume as another example of South-East English Quaker records made more easily available. Roads' work is in some ways, though, more accessible as it also exists online in full text, meaning it can be keyword searched for themes such as, *inter alia*, poverty, emigration overseas and different types of suffering at the hands of the authorities. Although these areas are certainly present in the Reading minutes, it is relatively difficult to identify them consistently amongst the 400+ pages of transcription. This is not intended as a criticism of Skidmore's extensive work, which at £25 is also affordable for most readers. Rather it is a call to publishers to make texts searchable for the benefit of, for example, genealogists, teachers, or historians of the poor, for whom such sources offer a wealth of information beyond immediate insights into Quaker history, as significant as they are.

For example, and by way of conclusion: the separatist meeting gave Sarah Trey, a local woman, money whilst she recovered from the smallpox in 1702 (p.159) and, several years later, in 1709, the orthodox meeting provided Sarah with money for cleaning the meeting room (p.327) and over the following seven years provided funds occasionally for rent. It is not clear if Sarah had moved to the orthodox meeting, or if she had links to both, but as, likely, a poorer woman, there may have been some effort on both sides to support her locally. Certainly she was widowed in her later years and in 1716 was likely at least in her 60s, based on Quaker burial records which noted her death in 1727. (see TNA RG6/1413) As a woman and a less well-off Friend, Sarah was less likely to appear in published works reflecting on Quaker experiences in the period which are accessible to modern researchers, such as Joseph Besse's *Sufferings*. It is therefore pleasing to

see such figures in the published Minute Books, especially as the Women's Meeting minutes are not extant, alongside the caveat that publishers could make works such as these more easily accessible, or at least more searchable, to enable a wider range of readers to appreciate less well-known figures and their roles in the Quaker past.

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### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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The National Archives (TNA), RG6 /1413 Berkshire and Oxfordshire Monthly Meeting of Reading and Warborough: Reading, Register of Births, Marriages and Burials.

