

WHAT SHOULD EIGHTEENTH CENTURY QUAKERS HAVE READ?

This article is a slightly expanded version of the first part of the annual lecture of the Association of Dissenting Historical Societies and Cognate Libraries delivered in October 2008 on Quaker reading in the eighteenth century. The second part was a compressed survey of the literature created specifically for a Quaker readership, and the third, very much work in progress, an account of what they were known to have read. The account given here is based on London Yearly Meeting though much of it will be true of Quakers in North America and elsewhere too.

What should eighteenth century Quakers have read? And what were they expected or instructed not to read? In describing the formal position and some of the advice in print of leading Friends I am aware that there was almost certainly advice given orally in local meetings and on a one to one basis between Friends where there may be occasional evidence in journals.

Advice and instruction came to the local meeting and individuals through the annual printed epistles of the yearly meeting held in London and in other forms of letter both printed and manuscript from the various national meetings including later in the century the women's yearly meeting. At two points in the eighteenth century collections of these advices were brought together and issued, in 1738 in manuscript as *Christian and Brotherly Advices Given forth from time to time By the Yearly Meeting in London* and in 1783 in print as *Extracts from the minutes and advices of the yearly meeting of Friends held in London from its first institution*, both known also as the book of discipline. Meetings were supposed to update the issued version from the yearly meeting epistles. These were reissued in printed collections beginning in 1760.¹ Meetings were expected to keep epistles and other papers for future consultation so that the earliest reference to reading in the printed epistles, from 1690, remained relevant in the eighteenth century. In connexion with the education of Quaker children it says that they are not to be sent: "to such schools where they are taught the corrupt ways, manners, fashions, and language of the world, and of the heathen in their authors..."² Further advice to parents and guardians followed in 1706, amongst other things they should "acquaint them [the children] with, and bring them up in, the frequent reading of the Scriptures of truth."³ This was reiterated in 1709 and in 1718 amplified to encourage the youth "in frequent reading of the Holy Scriptures, and other good

books."⁴

An early specific reference to the possession of literature by adult Friends comes in the epistle of 1720:

*It is also seriously advised, that no Friends suffer romances, play-books, or other vain and idle pamphlets, in their houses or families, which tend to corrupt the minds of youth; but, instead thereof, that they excite them to the reading of the Holy Scriptures and religious books. Let the Holy Scriptures be early taught our youth and diligently searched and seriously read by Friends, ...*⁵

In 1723 the epistle:

*...doth therefore earnestly advise and exhort [Friends] that they prevent, as much as in them lies, their children, servants and youth, ... from the having or reading books or papers, that have any tendency to prejudice the profession of the Christian religion, to create in them the least doubt or question concerning the truth of the Holy Scriptures, or those necessary and saving truths declared in them; lest their infant and feeble minds should be poisoned thereby, and a foundation laid for the greatest evils.*⁶

In 1729 similar advice worried about children and servants reading: "such books as have any tendency to lead their minds from God, and draw their youthful affections to a love of the world, and desire after the rarities and evils that are therein" and advised against: "such vile and corrupt books (some of which are have been published of late) as manifestly tend to oppose and reject the divine authority of the Holy Scriptures, and to introduce deism, atheism and all manner of infidelity and corruption, both in principle and practice".⁷ This concern was repeated the following year and in 1731 the epistle recommended the reading of the scripture by families and their servants.⁸ That there were reminders too in 1728, 1732, 1734, 1736 and 1738 suggests a serious and continuing worry on the subject, coupled with an assumption that adult Friends did not themselves need these reminders.

The 1738 *Christian and Brotherly Advices* collects together passages for permanent reference. So under "Scripture" it has ten passages drawn from earlier epistles justifying the grounding in scripture as an essential of the Quaker religious life. Often advice we have already encountered appears in this collection, in the section on "Children", on avoiding heathen authors (1690) and against reading books to the prejudice of the Christian religion or the truth of the scriptures. A passage taken from the written epistle of 1737 encourages the teaching of some modern [foreign] tongue to children for its later usefulness in trade. Another passage, not derived from one of the

printed epistles, under the heading "Defamation" was strongly against anonymous anti-Quaker literature: "Nameless Books and Pamphlets reflecting darkly on Friends, are Testified against, and it's desired that No such Books be Written, Printed, Published or Privately handed about, by any under our Profession for the time to come." That this was a real risk can be seen in the 1763 complaint from Yorkshire Quarterly Meeting to the Yearly Meeting about Quaker booksellers supplying books: "such as plays, loose romances, Novels, books teaching Musick, gaming, and other of evil Tendency."⁹

The printed epistles after 1738 contained regular exhortation to the reading of the scriptures by children, the young, and in families and to the avoidance of vain, idle and irreligious books and pamphlets, in all in at least twenty two epistles up to 1782. The words used sometimes change, the advice in 1766 was that masters and tutors of children should guard them against:

*"the dangers and allurements of evil communications, and the reading of profane and immoral writings (those powerful engines of Satan), whether they be such as directly tend to defile the affections, or, with a more specious appearance, to subvert the doctrines of Christianity by a presumptuous abuse of human reason, and by vain and subtil disputations, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ."*¹⁰

And this was spelt out again in 1772, advice to "all who are intrusted with the care of youth" was:

*To prevent them from spending the precious time afforded for better purposes, in amusing themselves with the pernicious works of stage-authors, and romances; which strongly tend to excite irregular passions, and to introduce them into the giddy pursuits and pollutions of a degenerate age; which in a little time, must terminate in disappointment and great distress.*¹¹

The 1783 book of *Extracts* has a passage written in 1764, not appearing in a printed epistle, which must be a response to the Yorkshire complaint in the previous year as well as reiterating general principles;

This meeting being sorrowfully affected, under a consideration of the hurtful tendency of reading plays, romances, novels and other pernicious books, it is earnestly recommended to every member of our society, to discourage and suppress the same; and particularly to acquaint all booksellers, under our name, with the painful anxiety occasioned to this meeting, by a report of some instances of selling

*or lending such books, intreating they would avoid a practice so inconsistent with the purity of the Christian religion.*¹²

As well as that there are now the familiar passages about reading scripture and the avoidance of frivolous and corrupting literature. The passage just quoted and one from 1767 along very similar lines are both in the section "Education." A number of earlier passages are repeated from the 1738 book.

In the remaining years of the century there are a few references along the same lines as before. In the 1789 epistle there is what seems to be an early appearance of a recommendation to Friends to read earlier Quaker writings:

*... we, at this time, also recommend the writings of our faithful predecessors and the accounts that are published of their experiences, labours, travels and sufferings in the cause of Christ. Those hours of leisure would be profitably employed in this manner, which are often wasted in reading the light and trivial publications, calculate to gratify the vain imagination, and feed that disposition that is always hankering after some new thing.*¹³

The epistles of the women's yearly meeting in London, constituted in 1785, expressed similar sentiments, that in 1789 encouraging the reading in families not only of the Scriptures "but such Books as may tend to acquaint them with the history and sufferings of their faithfull Predecessors."¹⁴ In the 1798 epistle this encouragement embraced "other works of truly pious writers, especially our worthy predecessors, who testified of what they experimentally knew, and some of whom sealed their testimony with their blood." "Truly pious writers" seems to go beyond the Society of Friends.

Queries answered in writing by meetings were a major feature of Quaker church government from the late seventeenth century, beginning with requests for factual information about sufferings, imprisonment, building of meeting houses and the deaths of public (ministering) Friends.¹⁵ The reference to reading was to the Scriptures in the early queries, in 1742 Quarterly Meetings had to answer to Yearly Meeting as the third query: "Is it your care by example and precept to train up your children in a godly conversation, and in frequent reading the holy Scriptures...?" In 1755 monthly meetings, both of men and women, were asked to answer the same queries to their quarterly meetings. In 1757 the third query was augmented by: "and are Friends faithful in Admonishing such as are remiss therein?" This query remained essentially the same up to the revision of the book of discipline in 1833. The General Advices adopted in 1791 included number V, "Friends are advised" "To guard carefully

against the introduction of pernicious books into their families."¹⁶

Use was made of the advice on reading in the yearly meeting epistles by the Yorkshire Quarterly Meeting to counter ecclesiastical criticism. A 1731 publication shows Friends using what had been internal advice to demonstrate their Christian position to the world at large. Thomas Story tells us in his *Journal* that:

*...the Meeting extracted some Paragraphs, out of our Yearly Meeting Epistles, from the Year 1706, to this Year 1731, containing earnest and repeated Advice to friends every where to read the Holy Scriptures...; and also not to read, or suffer to be read in their Families, any Books of Deists, Plays, Romances, &c. tending to the Discredit of the Holy Scriptures, and contrary to the Christian Religion. This Extract the Meeting committed to the Care of several to be printed and published, with a short Introduction...*¹⁷

While much of the advice to Friends quoted here has been negative there were some specific references to texts to be read by Friends and specific instances of texts printed for them to read. In 1716 Friends were referred to advice given "by our dear and worthy friend and brother George Fox... in the collection of his epistles, folios 92 and 300" which assumes reasonably ready access to the volume published in 1698.¹⁸ The 1718 epistle refers to sending each family of Friends a printed copy of a separate epistle giving caution and advice on "the growing evil of pride."¹⁹ In both 1730 and 1754 the decision was made to reprint Anthony Pearson's *Great Case of Tithes* because of a general falling short on Friends' testimony against paying "tithes, priests' wages.. and [for] the repairing of parish worship houses."²⁰

There is too advice in the writings of influential Friends. Robert Barclay's authoritative *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity* was the most substantial Quaker theological work available in the eighteenth century.²¹ Sections XVIII to XXI of his Proposition X argue against book learning compared with the influence of the Spirit. He encourages the use of the Scriptures, describing them in Proposition III, Section II, as "very heavenly and divine Writings, the Use of them to be very comfortable and necessary to the Church of Christ" while saying "we may not call them the principal Foundation of all Truth and Knowledge." Proposition XV is concerned in part with recreations and Barclay argues against many common recreations while in section IX he allows:

innocent Divertissements which may sufficiently serve for Relaxation of the Mind, such as for Friends to visit one another; to hear or read History; to speak soberly of the present or past Transactions; to follow after Gardening; to use Geometrical and Mathematical Experiments,

and such as other Things of this Nature."

William Penn's *No Cross, No Crown* should have been readily available in the eighteenth century, it was reprinted at least fourteen times from its first appearance in 1682 to 1800.²² It shows evidence of his wide reading and has numerous biblical quotations. Much is said about distractions from the Christian life and vain recreations including plays and romances. While "the *Best Recreation is to do Good*" it is acceptable to "*Study moderately such Commendable and Profitable Arts as Navigation, Arithmetic, Geometry, Husbandry, Gardening, Handicraft, Medicine &c.*"²³ Penn asks "What Poets, Romances, Comedies, and the like, did the Apostles and Saints make, or use to pass away their Time withal?"²⁴ His views are also expressed in the 1699 *Advice of William Penn to his Children, relating to their Civil and Religious Conduct* (first published in the 1726 works) which from its publication can be taken as applying to all Friends. They are charged to read the Scriptures daily, both at the beginning and the end of the day and to keep common-place books noting texts that impress them.²⁵ They are to:

*Have but few books, but let them be well chosen and well-read, whether of Religious or civil Subjects... The Spirit of a Man knows the Things of Man, and more true Knowledge comes by Meditation and just Reflections than by Reading; for much Reading is an Oppression of the Mind, and extinguishes the natural Candle; which is the Reason of so many senseless Scholars in the World.*²⁶

Later he advises reading such books of law "to enable you about your own Private Business only, or a Poor Neighbour's."²⁷ John Gough, in the introduction to the life of his brother James in 1782, quoted from Penn and the Yearly Meeting epistles. He writes: "The apostle's observation that 'Evil communications corrupt good manners' is in my opinion, applicable to corrupting books, as well as corrupting companions."²⁸

A near contemporary analysis by a non-Friend of the Society's stance on novels can be found in Thomas Clarkson's 1806 *A Portraiture of Quakerism*.²⁹ Clarkson spells out the prevailing Quaker arguments against reading novels, not he says "on account of the fictitious nature of their contents", an unsound argument that would discount allegories, fables and the use of parables by Christ. The argument is based on the "pernicious influence that they have upon the minds of those who read them" and Clarkson spells this out over half a dozen pages ending with a demonstration that the habitual reader of novels benefits much less than others from the moral improvement and pleasure that can be gained from books on

nature, science and religion. His remarks, representing the views of Friends, emphasise the particular risks to women “on account of the greater delicacy of their constitutions” in terms that today would be highly provocative.

So far as it is possible to establish what Friends actually read a study of the advice on reading given to them in various forms may shed interesting light on either their compliance with it or their independence of mind, most often exhibited in youth or as they drifted away from strict observance of the testimonies on plainness and simplicity.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Quotations are from the two volume edition of 1858 (London: Edward Marsh), *Epistles from the Yearly Meeting of Friends held in London...* cited as YME below. There were also sometimes written epistles which have not been published, see my “Written Epistles of London Yearly Meeting in the eighteenth century” in *A Quaker Miscellany for Edward H Milligan* (Manchester, 1985), ed D Blamires, J Greenwood, A Kerr
2. YME, p.48
3. YME, p.115
4. YME, p.149
5. YME, pp.157-8
6. YME, p.166
7. YME, p.185
8. YME, p.188,192
9. Quoted in W Pearson Thistlethwaite, *Yorkshire Quarterly Meeting*. (Harrogate, the author, 1972), p.292
10. YME, p.343
11. YME, v.II, pp.11-12
12. *Extracts from the minutes and advices of the Yearly Meeting of Friends held in London, from its first institution*, ([London] 1783), p.16
13. YME, v.II, p.77
14. These epistles were sent out in manuscript, quotations are from a volume of contemporary transcripts in my possession.
15. *Christian and Brotherly Advices*, 1738, queries to be answered to Yearly Meeting by Quarterly Meetings, 1682, 1696, augmented in 1701, 1703, 1720, 1721, 1723, 1725, 1735, 1737
16. *Extracts from the Minutes and Advices of the Yearly Meeting of Friends*, (London: printed and sold by W Phillips, 1802), p.149

17. *A Journal of the Life of Thomas Story*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: printed by Isaac Thompson, 1747), p.678
18. *A Collection of many Select and Christian Epistles, Letters and Testimonies...*, (London: printed and sold by T Sowle, 1698), not reprinted until 1831, YME, v.I, p.143
19. YME, v.I, p.150
20. YME, v.I, pp.187,288, there were editions in 1657, 1658, 1659, 1730 (London and Dublin), 1732, 1754 and 1762
21. There were at least 8 editions in the eighteenth century, with some substantial print runs
22. *No Cross, No Crown A Discourse Showing the Nature and Discipline of the Holy Cross of Christ...* second edition (London: printed for Mark Sanwer) 1682, quoted here from Penn's collected works, *A Collection of the Works of William Penn*, 2 vols. (London: Printed and sold by the ASSIGNS of J Sowle, 1726). The second edition is wholly rewritten from the first.
23. Penn, *Works*, v.I, p.355, ch.XV, section V
24. Penn, *Works*, v.I p.364, ch.XVII, section V
25. Penn, *Works*, v.I p.896, ch.I, section 6; p.897 ch.II, sections 1 & 2
26. Penn, *Works*, v.I pp.898-9, ch.II, section 19
27. Penn, *Works*, v.I p.900, ch.II, section 40
28. *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experiences, and Labours in the Gospel, of James Gough...* (Dublin: printed by Robert Jackson, 1782), pp.vii-xi, quoting I Cor. VX. 33
29. (London, Longman, Hurts, Rees, and Orme). Vol. I, pp.122-13