

## QUAKERS AND THE NATURAL ORDER

The historian John Gascoigne once observed that ‘a disproportionate number of British naturalists were Quaker.’<sup>1</sup> From the outset I have placed limits on my subject; if I didn’t we would be here all night.

In the first place I do not find some figures that interesting or noteworthy. So I do not pretend to have fully covered all the possibilities. Also I have centred my interest to flora and fauna, but realize that Quakers also have been involved with geology and other aspects of natural history.

We have reached an unparalleled period regarding the natural world; approaching the point of irreversible damage to the resources of nature. Scientists estimate that if destructive human activities continue at their present rates half the species of plants and animals on the earth could be gone by the end of the century.

Added to that, is the fact that our planet simply cannot sustain more increases of human population. When I was born in 1936 there were roughly 2 billion people. Now there are 6.2 billion with the numbers rising. If the multiplication of that basis had been rhinoceroses or something like caterpillars, we would be scared stupid.

One could go on endlessly with horrific statistics, but I will stop there. I don’t want to overly depress you. Thomas Friedman in *The New York Times* has said that our generation has entered a phase that no previous generation has ever experienced: the Noah phase with more and more species threatened with extinction by the Flood that is today’s juggernaut. We may be the first generation in human history that literally has to act like Noah to save the last pairs of species.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the original Noah story, however, we are the ones causing the Flood.

One of the horrible ironies of the threatened extinction of species comes at a time when we are both discovering new creatures as well as learning much more about the inner workings of others.

I heartily recommend the March 2008 issue of *National Geographic* on this point. An article entitled *Minds of Their Own* tells us that animals are smarter than you think-frighteningly so at a time we are obliterating their habitats. The elephant retains long memories and social ties and possesses a sense of self despite the fact that its original habitat is vanishing. The orangutan shows cognitive complexity and flexibility and maintains cultural traditions in the wild. The African

gray parrot counts, knows colours, shapes and sizes as well as having a basic grasp of the concept of zero. Longwool sheep recognize individual faces and remember them long term Border collies retain an ever growing vocabulary that rivals a toddler's and the bonobo makes tools at the level of early humans.<sup>3</sup>

I volunteer at Kew Gardens and often am in charge of visitors in the Palm House. We have a magnificent Jade Vine with flowers of blue resembling ceramics. A few weeks ago I was showing it to a group of Filipinos and was glad to tell them that its natural habitat was their country. Several said they had never seen it in the Philippines. Pursued on that point I had to relate the sad truth that due to deforestation it was unlikely that they would ever see the vine. I wanted to add but didn't that was the price paid for destroying forests to sell wood to China which ironically has destroyed many of its own forests.

*The Oxford English Dictionary* gives a definition of naturalism as a theory denying that an event or object has a supernatural significance; the doctrine that scientific laws are adequate to account for all phenomena. With this definition a naturalist studies natural as opposed to spiritual matters. However, there are also other meanings which include the spiritual dimension of naturalism as well and it is there where our interest lies.<sup>4</sup>

1988 Britain Yearly Meeting said that 'as a Religious Society of Friends we see stewardship of God's creation as a major concern. The environmental crisis is at root a spiritual and religious crisis; we are called to look again at the real purpose of being on this planet.'<sup>5</sup>

Harvard Professor Edward O. Wilson, a respected biologist, was raised a Southern Baptist in Alabama. In his extraordinary book *The Creation*<sup>6</sup> he asks: 'why is it that a large majority of practicing Christians have hesitated to make protection of the creation an important part of their magisterium?' Twenty years earlier another American, historian Lynn White, in *Science* magazine placed the blame for the ecological crisis on the Christian tradition.<sup>7</sup> White said that Christianity was the most anthropomorphic religion man has seen and it had no time for ecology.

Fundamentalist Christians went even further, opposing environmentalist concerns on the ground that the apocalypse was about to arrive any day so why be involved with ecology? More importantly to them Genesis clearly shows that man was given dominion over the created order by God: be fruitful and multiply meant just that.

But mercifully as the environmental crisis deepened so had our understanding of man's role in preserving God's creation. As Wilson

writes: 'The pauperization of Earth's flora and fauna was an acceptable price until recent centuries, when Nature seemed all but infinite and an enemy to explorers and pioneers... Now the fate of the creation is the fate of humanity.'<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore now there are biblical scholars who argue that the Genesis passages dealing with the Creation have been falsely interpreted-in particular the dominion God gave man over nature. Dominion came to imply exploitation. The intention was that man should be God's steward on earth which demanded a responsibility to care for the natural world.<sup>9</sup>

Aside from that it should be noted that there is no biblical injunction against slavery but Christianity itself contained the elements which ultimately abolished slavery. Similarly there has always been within Quakerism a desire to respect animals as sentient creatures.

Properly we begin our survey of Quaker voices with George Fox, the first Quaker. William Penn described him as 'a divine and a naturalist.'<sup>10</sup> By his own admission Fox first considered practicing physic as he put it. Delightful word physic, time honoured for the art of healing and still retained by the Chelsea Physic Garden.<sup>11</sup>

In 1648 Fox wrote: 'The Creation was opened to me, and it showed me how all things had their names given them according to their nature and virtue. And it was at a stand in my mind whether I should practice physic for the good of mankind, seeing the nature and virtues of the creatures were so opened to me by the Lord.'<sup>12</sup>

'Their names given them according to their nature and virtue.' This, of course, echoes Adam's naming of the creatures in Genesis. If there be a deeper meaning it must be an injunction for man to know and understand them for they come from the same hand of God as we. We are fellow creations.

Often Fox waxes poetically about creation and the creatures: 'Wait all in the light for the wisdom by which all things were made, with it to use all the Lord's creatures to his glory (and none to stumble one another about the creatures for that is not from the light) for which end they were created, and with the wisdom by which they were made, ye may be kept out of the misuse of them, in the image of God that ye may come to see, that the "earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof" and the earth may come to yield her increase and to enjoy her sabbaths.'<sup>13</sup>

George Fox's concern for the created order often went some distance. He believed that animals had a covenant with God and cited Hosea 2. 18 for this: 'Then I will make a covenant on behalf of Israel with the wild beasts, the birds of the air, and the things that

creep on the earth, and I will break bow and sword and weapons of war and sweep them off the earth, so that all living creatures may lie down without fear.' This follows the covenant made between God and Noah and his sons: 'I now make my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and every living creature that is with you, all birds and cattle, all the wild animals with you on earth, all that come out of the ark.

I will make my covenant with you never again shall all living creatures be destroyed by the waters of the flood.'<sup>14</sup>

Fox condemned hunting and hawking and many early Friends also objected to other such sports: bull and bear-baiting; cock-throwing and cock fighting.<sup>15</sup>

Best known for his tireless efforts to outlaw the slave trade, Thomas Clarkson published in 1806 a three-volume *Portrait of Quakerism*. According to observers like Howard Brinton it remains the best and most complete account of the character and practice of the Society of Friends in the eighteenth century.

In Section III of his *Portrait* Clarkson wrote: 'The word Benevolence, when applied to the character of the Quakers, includes also a tender feeling towards the brute-creation.

It has frequently been observed by those who are acquainted with the Quakers, that all animals belonging to them are treated with a tender consideration, and are not permitted to be abused.'

Clarkson continued: 'Quakers consider animals not as mere machines to be used at discretion, but in the sublime light of the creatures of God...'<sup>16</sup> Laudable words. Let's only hope that Friends today still measure up to Clarkson's praise in some measure.

Over in America as they had regarding slavery and the treatment of Native Americans Quakers stood apart from their contemporary religionists with their view of the natural world. Aside from George Fox, the Society of Friends has had some extraordinary individuals who have led the way in a variety of concerns. Reginald Reynolds had one particularly in mind when he said: 'The inspired person can generally succeed in dragging the Society after him.'<sup>17</sup> John Woolman (1720-1772) was the quintessential Quaker and has also been called the Quaker St. Francis. No Quaker has been more quoted by animal concern groups.

Woolman was raised on a farm on the banks of Rancoca Creek near Mount Holly in New Jersey where his father farmed and greatly repected varieties of creatures. While still a youth Woolman wrote that he was convinced in his mind that 'true religion consisted in an inward life wherein the heart doth love and reverence God the Creator and learn to exercise true justice and goodness, not only

toward all men but also toward the brute creatures...to say we love God as unseen and at the same time exercise cruelty toward the least creature moving by his life, or by life derived from him, was a contradiction in itself...'<sup>18</sup>

What a remarkable profession. Later in life Woolman not only championed Native Americans and was an anti-slavery pioneer but he also noted the oppression of oxen and horses which were often over-worked and Woolman walked to York rather than use the flying coaches which frequently oppressed and killed the horses used.

In *A Plea for the Poor* Woolman said:

Oxen and horses are often seen at work when, through heat and too much labour, their eyes and the emotion of their bodies manifest that they are oppressed. Their loads in wagons are frequently so heavy that when weary with hauling it far, their drivers find occasion in going up hills or through mire to raise their spirits by whipping to get forward. Many poor people are so thronged in their business that it is difficult for them to provide shelter suitable for their animals in great storms.<sup>19</sup>

Some Friends have suggested that animal welfare should not have much significance; efforts should go solely to human endeavours. Woolman's life brilliantly refutes that argument: it isn't a matter of *either* human concern *or* animal concern. It isn't either or but rather both.

In 1772 Woolman took his anti-slavery campaign to England. Even on board the ship he was moved by the suffering of fowls accompanying passengers.

Just before he sailed Woolman had written: 'The produce of the earth is a gift of our gracious Creator to the inhabitants, and to impoverish the earth now to support outward greatness appears to be an injury to the succeeding age.'<sup>20</sup> What a forward-looking insight that was- and voiced in 1772.

Regarding animal welfare Woolman had like-minded friends: Joshua Evans, John Churchman and Anthony Benezet among them. And all three protested against the slave trade and poor treatment of Native Americans as well. Like Woolman Evans wore clothes of undyed materials and once proclaimed: 'I consider that life was sweet in all living creatures and taking it away becomes a very tender point with me. The creatures were given, or as I take it, rather lent to us to be governed in the great Creator's fear.'<sup>21</sup>

As his name indicates Benezet was originally a French Huguenot. At age 14 he became a Quaker and in time a notable champion of

Black slaves. Also Benezet loved animals and had many pets. Once he declared: I often find more pleasure and instruction from the animal creation than human.'<sup>22</sup>

Churchman was steadfast in his anxiety over a growing worldliness among Friends and actively supported Woolman's anti-slavery campaign as well as attacking the poor treatment of livestock.

Anne Adams and Jean Hardy writing for Quaker Green Action in their admirable anthology of '*Friends' writings on that of God in all creation*' say that 'the remarkable thing we noticed, in compiling this anthology, is that there is a huge gap in Quaker writing about the earth between the seventeenth and the late twentieth centuries (apart from the remarkable John Woolman...).' <sup>23</sup>

But as Rex Ambler points out, all Christian groups during this long period were preoccupied with humanity: the earth was the domain of secular science only. This analysis of Quaker writing is flawed, however. It fails to mention two Quaker naturalists who have probably had a greater influence on non-Quaker naturalists than any others: father and son, John and William Bartram. Also absent are several Friends associated with the Bartrams.

John Bartram was born in 1699 in a farming area just outside Philadelphia and died the year after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. He is now recognized as the first American botanist, and in the opinion of the great Linnaeus, the creator of binomial nomenclature for plants and animals, Bartram was 'the greatest contemporary natural botanist in the world.'<sup>24</sup> said Linnaeus. Hardly a figure to be overlooked in any Quaker anthology.

So, how did this simple Pennsylvania farm boy arrive at such a position? There is an account which says that he was first attracted to botany when he overturned a daisy with his plow and fell to musing upon the symmetry of its structure.

John Bartram said to himself: 'What a shame that thee shouldst have employed so many years in tilling the earth and destroying so many flowers and plants without being acquainted with their structure and their uses?'<sup>25</sup>

Well, he certainly did something about that. Desirous of learning more about plants, he went to Philadelphia and purchased such books as he needed and began to become a self-made botanist. This was over the objections of his wife who thought that he was wasting his time.

He also began to correspond with Peter Collinson, the English Quaker naturalist who was already well connected with botanists who established the Chelsea Physic Garden which had been founded in 1673. Bartram was especially interested in medicinal plants and

supplied the garden with many American specimens which you can still see today.

Bartram was also close to Benjamin Franklin and the two founded the American Philosophical Society. In honour of Franklin he named a beautiful flowering tree in his honour-the *Franklinia alatamaha*.<sup>26</sup> Apparently he and his son were the first white men to see the tree and subsequently they saved it from extinction in the wild by bringing its seed back to Pennsylvania.

In a garden near Philadelphia-which still exists-the Bartrams cultivated some 200 species many of which were rapidly disappearing with the destruction of the wilderness by settlers.

William, John Bartram's son lived from 1739 to 1823 and was known as Billy the Flower-hunter by the Seminole Indians. Early in his life, Billy displayed a talent for drawing natural objects and was taught printing by Benjamin Franklin.

Billy became America's first great travelling naturalist. Predating Lewis and Clark as well as Audubon, he went into the wilderness by horseback, by canoe, and on foot botanizing his way across the whole of the southern wilderness-from the barrier Islands of Georgia to the bayous of the Mississippi River.

After four years of rattling around the backwoods of British America, he emerged with his saddlebags full of plants heretofore only known to Indians and his sketchbooks bulging with pictures of exotic animals. He wrote his *Travels* which remains a classic: albeit one largely known to naturalists. Like Woolman's *Journal* it fared better in England than America, and its images greatly influenced Coleridge and Wordsworth in their poetry.<sup>27</sup>

William Bartram explored nature with his emotions as well as his senses. He was westruck by gargantuan trees, terrified by battling alligators, and grieved by a pitiful bear cub whose mother had been killed by a hunter: the orphan bear, Bartram recorded, 'approached the dead body, smelled and pawed it, and appearing in agony fell to weeping and looking upwards, then toward us, and cried like a child.'<sup>28</sup> This is Quaker empathy at its best.

Such sensitivity to the suffering animals was rare in frontier America. As a Quaker Bartram like Woolman saw every living thing as part of a divinely ordained whole. Bartram's writings on occasion remind one of Francis of Assisi. He became a voice of nature hymning the praises of an all-creative God.

In one excerpt from his travels he wrote after viewing some of the marvels of primeval forests in Florida: 'Ye vigilant and faithful servants of the Most High. Ye who worship the Creator morning, noon and eve, in simplicity of heart. I haste to join the universal

anthem. My heart and voice unite with yours, in sincere homage to the great Creator, the universal Sovereign.

And although I am sensible, that my service cannot increase or diminish thy glory, yet it is pleasing to thy servant to be permitted to sound thy praise; for, O sovereign Lord-we know that thou alone art perfect, and worthy to be worshipped.'<sup>29</sup>

Again in northern Florida, he mused: We observed the tops of the trees so close to one another for many miles together, that there is no seeing which way the clouds drive nor which way the wind sets, and it seems almost as if the sun had never shone on the ground since the creation.'<sup>30</sup>

Again like Woolman, William Bartram was a bit of a prophet and could see future disaster with the ruthless destruction of the environment. On one occasion, returning to an area in Florida he had earlier visited with his father to witness senseless destruction of forests and clearing of land with no aim for future growth he declared: 'Man is cruel. Hypocritical, a dissembler, his dissimulation exceeds that of any being we are acquainted with, for he dissembles dissimulation itself.'<sup>31</sup>

Bartram also wrote some perceptive remarks concerning animals: 'I am of the opinion that the creatures commonly called brutes possess higher qualifications, and more exalted ideas, than our traditional mystery-mongers are willing to allow them.'<sup>32</sup>

Connected with the Bartrams were a group of Friends I will just mention in passing. Peter Collinson (1694-1768). With Collinson we enter an Anglo-American era of botanical exploration with a veritable Quaker network of naturalists developing. Collinson's contacts were so many that he was known as the 'pollinating bee'. When Sir Hans Sloane gave his great collections to the nation (the nucleus of the future British Museum) Collinson helped with the arranging of some 120,000 articles.<sup>33</sup>

As Collinson was pivotal to John Bartram; so was John Fothergill (1712-1780) for William Bartram. In 1762, he acquired the thirty-acre Upton Park in Essex where he established a garden which rivalled Kew Gardens. Fothergill made it financially possible for William Bartram to make his celebrated travels.

Collinson and Fothergill appear on the botanists' panel of the Quaker Tapestry and so does Sydney Parkinson (1745-1771). The Scots Quaker Parkinson was the remarkable botanical artist on board Captain Cook's first epic voyage to the South Pacific. Like William Bartram he was a keen observer of nature and remarkably he produced nearly a thousand botanical drawings before his untimely death from dysentery and malaria on his voyage. Parkinson was only

26 years old.

Also like Bartram Parkinson wrote a journal and one entry in particular is evocative of Bartram: 'The land on both sides...affords a most dismal prospect being made up chiefly of barren rocks and tremendous precipices...How amazingly diversified are the works of the Deity within the narrow limits of this globe we inhabit, which, compared with the vast aggregate of systems that compose the universe, appears but a dark speck in the creation. A curiosity, perhaps, equal to Solomon's, though accompanied with less wisdom than was possessed by the Royal Philosopher, induced some of us to quit our native land, to investigate the heavenly bodies minutely in distant regions, as well as to trace the signatures of the Supreme Power and Intelligence throughout several species of animals, and different genera of plants in the vegetable system...'<sup>34</sup>

In 1891 Friends formed an Anti-Vivisection Association which later became the Animal Welfare and Anti-Vivisection Society and in 1978 Quaker Concern for Animals. Quaker Green Concern now Quaker Green Action was later in development, formed in 1986. It is a gathering point for Quakers concerned with the global ecological crisis. Also there have always been a goodly number of Friends who maintain vegetarian and even vegan life styles.<sup>35</sup>

In our day we have a battery of Friends who have become concerned for the environment and are vocal in their concern and action. One Friend, Rex Ambler, who lectured in theology at Birmingham University wrote an article in 1990 which has had a widespread effect on Friend's attitudes.

The piece was in *Friends' Quarterly* and was entitled *Befriending the Earth: a Theological Challenge*. From the very beginning Ambler starts right into the debate: 'Up till now we have been able to take the environment more or less for granted...Our attitude to the environment has been shaped by a long history of industrial development for which the environment has been little more than a material resource, and one that, it was supposed we were fully entitled to exploit as much as much as our needs required...What is worse, our religious tradition, which might have been expected to challenge this assumption, has in fact gone along with it and offered little by way of an alternative. The realm of nature has hardly been the subject of religious concern.'<sup>36</sup>

Good strong stuff and long overdue. Again as Reginald Reynolds said: 'The inspired person can generally succeed in dragging the Society after him.'

Like Gerald Priestland I regard myself as an ecumenical Quaker, a member of a lay society or a contemplative order within the greater

Church of God.<sup>37</sup>

Over the centuries Quakers have been able to prod fellow religionists in certain directions and this often solely by example. John Woolman and like-minded Friends were anti-slavery pioneers before there was an abolitionist movement.

The Quaker peace testimony has influenced many outside our small community. But as Margaret Mead once commented: 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever does.'<sup>38</sup>

And now there are Quakers who see that we face the greatest challenge ever-the very future of our planet. The destruction of environments for financial gain is not new. As Woolman wisely warned more than 200 years ago 'impoverishing the earth now to support outward greatness appears to be an injury to the succeeding age.'

Even though today he is recognized as a Green prophet Woolman would never have dreamed that man would go as far as he has in destroying so much in our increasing power over nature.

But Woolman would recognize how difficult it is to get people concerned enough to make important changes in their life styles. Sometimes you think that even those who call themselves religious will have to see the melting ice come down the Thames and Hudson rivers.

As before in their history Quakers need to be led by the Spirit. We recognize God within us and within creation so Quakers can start with ourselves rather than wait for movements and authorities above and outside us. We believe that the kingdom of God can come through us and our response to the Light and Truth.

Appropriately the last advice and query in *Quaker Faith and Practice*, number 42 is as follows: 'We do not own the world, and its riches are not ours to dispose of at will. Show a loving consideration for all creatures, and seek to maintain the beauty and variety of the world. Work to ensure that our increasing power over nature is used responsibly, with reverence for life. Rejoice in the splendour of God's continuing creation.'<sup>39</sup>

*David Sox*  
*Presidential Address given at*  
*Britain Yearly Meeting on 25 May 2008*

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