

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF LONDON WOMEN'S YEARLY MEETING; A TRANSATLANTIC CONCERN

The reformation of the Religious Society of Friends, which began in the American colonies in the 1750s and later spread to Great Britain is now recognized as an important milestone in Quaker history. The reforming ministers on both sides of the Atlantic began their work with the intention of rooting out the corrupting effects of wealth and power and returning Quakerism to its original simplicity. From their efforts, however, and in response to their preaching, came an unexpected result. As American historian Jack Marietta has pointed out to us, Friends turned their attention to philanthropic labours and in the process gave birth to the major social testimonies for which the Religious Society of Friends is best known today; the concern against slavery and for racial justice, and justice for Native Americans, the concern for prisoners and the mentally ill. Organizations dealing with these issues were formed in the second half of the eighteenth century in the United States and England.¹

It is sometimes assumed today that a social testimony to the equality of women has been part of the Religious Society of Friends from its beginning. While George Fox, Margaret Fell, and other early leaders stressed the spiritual equality of women, it was not until the nineteenth century that this belief was translated by Quaker women, primarily in the United States, into leadership in a movement for women's rights in the larger society. However some of the seeds of the concern for the granting equal status to women within the Society of Friends can be traced to this same time of reformation.

The reformers' chief object was clearly the spiritual reawakening of the society. One method to reach this goal was to strengthen the discipline throughout. Many more Friends were disowned for 'disorderly walking' and for marrying out, than had been the case before. There was also further emphasis on temperance and on the testimonies. Thus we find Susanna Morris, a 71-year old minister from Bucks County, Pennsylvania, on her third trip to England, rebuking English Friends in 1752 for their 'too frequent use of strong drink and tobacco,' and for their justification of defensive war.²

Another method for strengthening the discipline was the establishment of business meetings along the lines that George Fox has suggested 80 years earlier. This involved a complete system of both men's and women's business meetings on the preparative, monthly, quarterly and yearly meeting level as well as select meetings for ministers and elders. Mary Peisley of Ireland, travelling in North Carolina in 1753, was much troubled that the Quarterly Meeting was not 'select,' i.e. exclusive of non members.³

As meetings began to examine themselves in response to yearly meeting queries initiated by the reformers, it came to light that the women's business meetings were by no means uniformly established, especially in Great Britain. Why this was so is open to speculation. The resistance to women's meetings which came to a head during the John Story/John Wilkinson separation many have expressed a more widespread fear of women's assuming power. Particularly objectionable to some was the concept that a young couple wishing to be married should appear before the women's as well as the men's meeting for consent. As William Rogers, an apologist for the separatists, explained, some Friends while content to allow women to hold separate meetings to take care of the poor, 'became less affected to such Meetings, lest instead of being Servants to the Poor for Truth's Sake, and taking the weight and burthen of that Care from the Men, they should become *Rulers over both Men and Women.*'⁴

While in areas not affected by the Wilkinson/Story controversy, women's monthly meetings were established in the seventeenth century, with especially strong ones in Lancaster, Yorkshire, Lincoln, and Nottingham. London itself lagged behind the rest of the country. In 1755, London Quarterly Meeting queried its monthly meetings about the existence of separate women's meetings. Of six London monthly meetings responding, Southwark had never had a women's meeting; Westminster reported they were not in the practice of it, Gracechurch Street answered that they had once had a women's meeting but it had dwindled, and Devonshire House said it had set up such a meeting in 1753, in response to a recommendation of the Yearly Meeting. Only Ratcliff said it had always had a women's meeting, which was still flourishing.⁵

It may be that the existence of two strong women's charitable meetings, the Box and Two Weeks Meetings, both established to serve the poor, made London Friends feel further women's meetings were unnecessary. In 1748, when the lack of women's monthly meetings in the city was first raised at London Quarterly Meeting, in response to a concern from Lydia Lancaster of Lancashire Quarterly Meeting, the

Two Weeks Meeting was asked to assume the role and devote one meeting a month to dealing with such matters of women's discipline as clearing couples for marriage. It may also be that the fact that women's monthly meetings were given little role to play, with all the final decisions on discipline and marriage made by the men's meetings, caused the women's meetings to languish as was apparently the case with Gracechurch Street.⁶

One also wonders, however, if the fear of women's power, so general in the rest of society in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, did not play a role, especially in urban centres where Quaker men in business rubbed shoulders with men 'of the world,' and may have been influenced by their attitudes. Neither Quaker men nor women were freed from popular assumptions about women, and a false perception that Quaker women had been the extremists who had brought persecution down on the early Friends may have played a role.⁷

In the American colonies, women's monthly meetings appear to have been set up along with men's meetings in the areas covered by New England Yearly Meeting, New York Yearly Meeting, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, Baltimore Yearly Meeting, Virginia and North Carolina Yearly Meetings. In the frontier atmosphere of the new country, where all hands were needed, many of the small women's meetings began to take more responsibility than they were originally intended to do. Thus we see the women of Bucks County Quarter in Pennsylvania disciplining women members entirely in the women's meetings with no referrals to the men's meeting. This was also the case in Cane Creek Monthly, North Carolina, while in Blackwater Monthly Meeting in Blackwater, Virginia, the women had final authority in marriages.⁸

The establishment of women's yearly meetings both in Great Britain and in the American colonies was, however, not uniform. While Maryland had a women's yearly meeting in 1677, Ireland in 1679, Philadelphia in 1681, New York in 1729, Wales in 1749, several lagged behind. It was apparently as a result of the efforts of the reformers that a women's yearly meeting was established in Virginia and North Carolina in 1763, and New England in 1764. London strangely enough continued without such a meeting until 1784. Despite appeals from constituent quarterly meetings, the men's yearly meeting opposed the development of a regular constituted women's yearly meeting on the grounds it would divide authority. When the meeting was finally established, it was the result of a virtual campaign on the part of both British and American reformers who laboured for it from 1746 to 1784.⁹

The opposition to a women's yearly meeting in England apparently developed around the end of the seventeenth century. Up until then women Friends had regularly gathered in London at yearly meeting times and had addressed epistles to women Friends throughout the country and overseas. In 1697, the women ministers held a meeting during the men's yearly meeting and the next year they met with the yearly meeting of ministers. In 1700, they were meeting on Saturday, as did the men, to decide which of the city meetings they would attend during yearly meeting sessions. But at this point the men's yearly meeting announced that it had never given permission for the women to meet and that hereafter those ministers wishing to speak must leave their names at the men's meeting. Furthermore, they were adjured to keep quiet:

There being several women Friends in and about this city that have a public testimony for the Truth and have sometimes met on the Seventh-day, this meeting, having considered the same, do declare that they do not understand that ever this meeting gave direction for the setting up of said meeting; neither do they judge there is any necessity for it or service in the continuance thereof; and therefore do advise that when any public approved women Friends have a concern of service upon them to go to any particular public meeting in or about this city, they may leave their names at the Chamber, that Friends may have notice thereof; and such may, as much as may be, have an opportunity to clear themselves, and yet be careful not to interfere with their brethren in their public mixed meetings. ¹⁰

Later in the same yearly meeting they returned to the subject:

This meeting finding it a hurt to truth for women Friends to take up too much time, as some do, in our public meetings, when several public and serviceable men Friends are present and are by them prevented in their serving, it's therefore advised that the women Friends should be tenderly cautioned against taking up too much time in our mixed public meetings. ¹¹

How the British Quaker women felt about the suppression of their earlier meeting is unknown. Although women apparently continued to come up to London at yearly meeting time, to meet and to write epistles, they were not considered a meeting of record, and there are no minutes of this informal women's yearly meeting until 1759. However, in the minute book of the Box Meeting (1748-1760) is a paper dated Second Month 1746 and apparently written by Lydia Lancaster and signed by six prominent women ministers from different counties, giving some 'hint' of the value of having a national women's meeting, in order to halt the decline in women's meetings and to provide youth with a good example. ¹²

Now we desire it may be duly considered, how far a National Meeting for the Women, attended by two or more from each County (where there is a Quarterly Meeting held) of solid well concerned-women to attend such Meeting or Meetings, held at the same time & place where the Mens is, whereby they might be assisted & advised by them upon Occasion, how far it might Contribute to retrieve the present Loss, and assist the whole, & if upon a solid and due consideration it appear the most likely to prove effectual: We hope our Men Friends will not reject it but give us due Assistance therein.¹³

The women assured the men that it was not their intention to assume any authority that was not already intended and expected of them by the discipline, and observed that if such a meeting would cause too great a trouble and expense, then perhaps after it was properly established it could meet only every other year.¹⁴

There is no record of a response to this paper, but interest in the establishing of a national meeting spread and became a concern of a group of transatlantic travelling ministers currently at work in Great Britain. Among these were two Americans, John Pemberton and his brother-in-law, William Brown, both of whom became involved in the effort to establish such a meeting. In 1753, William Brown appeared at York Quarterly Meeting and proposed the establishment of a women's yearly meeting such as was held in Philadelphia. The women of York agreed and decided to submit the proposal to the women who met informally at the time of London Yearly Meeting.¹⁵

At this meeting held 12-6-1753 a committee was asked to write a proposal to take to the men's meeting, and two days later, it was accepted and signed by 28 women:¹⁶

Dear Friends

It is with thankful hearts we have to testify our unanimous Concurrence with the pious Zeal, and faithful Concern of Soul, manifested by our dear Sisters, in divers Counties of this Nation, for a needful reformation & Regulation in our Discipline, humbly hoping with them, that the Establishing an Annual Women's Meeting may be of great advantage in the furtherance thereof, wherein the Affairs of the Church, which properly come under our Notice, and particularly related to our own Sex, to whose Care the Education of the Youth in a great Measure falls, may be managed in the Wisdom of Truth, and beautiful Gospel Order, which becomes our high and holy Profession; and we conceive by the help of such a meeting, Quarterly and Monthly Meetings would be Strengthened and Encouraged in their faithful Endeavors, for the Promotion of this Great and honourable Work...¹⁷

Seven of the women present were then delegated to take the minute into the men's meeting. Two of the seven were American ministers, Susanna Morris and Phebe Dodge of Long Island. A third, Sophia

Hume, the granddaughter of Mary Fisher, was born in Charlestown, South Carolina, and was currently living in England. They were accompanied by Mary Peisley of Ireland, and Mary Weston, Catherine Payton, and Doris Hunter of England. All but the last had travelled in the ministry in the American colonies.

Samuel Neale, a minister from Ireland, who was later briefly married to Mary Peisley, gave an account of the event in his journal:

In this Yearly Meeting, a proposition came from the Women's Meeting, for the establishment of a Yearly Meeting upon the same foundation as the men's, with representatives from the Quarterly Meeting annually to attend it. It was brought in by Susanna Morris, Sophia Hume, Mary Weston, Mary Peisley, Catherine Payton, and another. I well remember the salutation of Susanna Morris, when they entered the meeting house; and she concluded with a short pathetic and living testimony, which had great reach over the meeting. The proposition, I had no doubt, was from the motion of Truth.¹⁸

William Brown also appeared in defence of the minute at this Yearly Meeting and was awarded "heavy blows" for his pains, according to Mary Weston.¹⁹ Despite these efforts of the reformers, the Yearly Meeting did not act upon the proposal until next year. Samuel Fothergill, himself in sympathy with reform, is supposed to have said, 'I see it, but not now; I behold it, but not nigh!' In 1754, instead of establishing a women's yearly meeting, the yearly meeting sent an epistle to all subordinate meetings, urging them to set up women's meetings for discipline. This minute was repeated in 1755, and had the effect of causing additional women's monthly meeting to be set up in London, and in motivating the men's monthly meeting in Bristol to ask the women to meet at the same time each month as they did.²⁰

John Churchman, an American reformer, had come to the yearly meeting with two changes he wished to see made: the creation of a national meeting of ministers and elders to precede the yearly meeting, and the establishment of the women's yearly meeting. Both would have brought London into conformity with practices in Philadelphia. Writing in his journal he expressed his disappointment in the yearly meeting and its outcome:

...divers weighty matters being therein proposed for consideration from several of the counties, which centred rather to benefit, though in the management of the affairs, there appeared in some a disposition to oppose what they thought to be new, notwithstanding the same things appeared very expedient to others, who, from their prospect thereof, might urge their sentiments rather too strongly.²¹

In 1765, the women of the informal women's London yearly meeting tried again. They minuted their decision that a proposal be made by some of their number to address all the women's quarterly meetings with an epistle asking them to send an account of the state of their women's meetings to the next annual gathering. Five women were given the task of taking this proposal to the men's yearly meeting, 'for their concurrence,' and thereafter to draft the epistle. The men, however, did not concur, but said they felt the matter was too weighty and must be held over another year. The women waited, but in 1766 the men turned down the proposal and prepared a minute to be read to the women, signed by 58 Friends, among them Samuel Neale:

It appeareth to this committee, that the Womens Meeting held annually in London at the time of the Yearly Meeting does not consist of Women Friends regularly deputed from any other meeting and that the forming of such a meeting has appeared to our predecessors, as it does to us a matter of great difficulty.

As therefore the meeting of a number of women Friends and of suitable ability, to carry on so weighty and important a work appears to us very doubtful and uncertain, & cannot but subject the few who are qualified to assist in this work to great inconveniency - it is therefore our unanimous opinion that the present is not the proper season for complying with the said proposal.²²

The women minuted that they received this negative response with 'becoming deference' and agreed that the weight of the concern must now be left on the shoulders of the men.

Learning of this disappointment suffered by their British counterparts, Philadelphia Women's Yearly Meeting in 1766 sent a minute to the Philadelphia Men's Yearly Meeting complaining that their annual epistle was not distributed to quarterly and monthly meetings in England, due to the lack of a women's yearly meeting, and suggesting that the yearly meeting as a whole propose to the Friends in London that 'the women may be favored with the same privilege we are in this respect.'²³

The men's yearly meeting appointed three men, John Churchman, Isaac Child, and Thomas Milhouse to deliver their message to the women:

...that they truly sympathized with the present circumstances of our Friends in England, and that they had appointed a committee to consider the affairs, who upon solidly deliberating they agreed to report what their sense and judgment that Friends here should abide under the weight of the concern and exercise, until a more convenient time offered to move thereon, especially as they had been informed that Friends in England had lately endeavored to bring about such a work, without the desired effect.²⁴

The Philadelphia women did not record how they received this message, but it is clear that they did not abandon their hope for the establishment of a women's meeting in England. Worsening relations between Great Britain and the American colonies slowed the stream of American ministers visiting England. Only one woman, Sarah Morris, made the trip between 1760 and 1782. But following the end of the American Revolution, a burst of reforming ministers arrived in England, 13 between 1781 and 1784, many of them apparently intent on addressing the long vexing question of the women's yearly meeting.²⁵

Two of the travelling ministers, William Matthews and John Pemberton, both of Philadelphia, raised the concern in the Lancashire Women's Quarterly Meeting on behalf of their Philadelphia Yearly Meeting sisters. The Lancashire women in response sent a minute to the influential London Two Week Meeting of Women Friends which was read on the 8th of 12th month, 1783.

Dear Friends,

We feel ourselves engaged to address you in this way in concurrence with the united desire of our much esteemed Friends John Pemberton and William Matthews, (from America) who in the course of their Religious labours with us, when gathered at this place last Quarter, amongst many other important remarks (evidently under the influence of Divine Love) they closely impressed us to request the circulation of those epistles you are favoured with from our Sisters on their side of the Water, that copies of them might be sent to each Quarterly Meeting in the nation, as our Women Friends there expected they had been addressing the society of our sex at large, till of late time they were informed their epistles were confirmed within the compass of a few, which had so much discouraged their minds as to cause them to apprehend they should be at liberty to drop their salutary correspondence, which consideration hath afforded divers of us who have been favoured to hear them read at your Quarterly Meeting, and have felt a mutual desire that our Friends in distant parts might have the like privilege, which we trust will come under the proper notice of rightly concerned minds, amongst you, and prevail *with such* to unite and concur with the above request, that so as Children of our Father we may be made instrumental in building one another up in every good work - In the Love of the Gospel we affectionately Salute you, and remain your Friends,

Signed on behalf of our Womens Quarterly Meeting held at Lancaster the 1st of 10th month, 1783. Margaret Kendal, Clerk.²⁶

This minute was sent by the Two Weeks Meeting to the 1784 women's meeting along with three similar statements from the quarterly meetings of women Friends at Hertford, York, and Kendal, all of which meetings Matthews and Pemberton had attended. At the London gathering were a large number of American ministers: Rebecca Jones, Mehetabel Jenkins, Patience Brayton, Rebecca Wright, William

Matthews, John Pemberton, Samuel Emlen, Robert Valentine, George Dillwyn, Nicholas Waln, and Thomas Ross. William Matthews and Robert Valentine attended the women's meeting, and according to his journal, William Matthews spoke for the creation of the women's yearly meeting. Rebecca Jones also addressed the women, urging them to take action to secure the privilege of having a meeting of their own. A committee of nine English Friends: Esther Tuke, Elizabeth Gibson, Alice Rigge, Christiana Hustler, Mercy Ransom, Martha Routh, Tabitha Middleton, Susanna Row, and Sarah Corbyn, were appointed to take a proposal for a women's meeting to the men's meeting, to be accompanied by Rebecca Jones, Mehetabel Jenkins and Rebecca Wright.²⁷

The women entered the men's meeting with Esther Tuke of York at their head. There is a tradition that John Gurney Bevan, a prominent Friend, said 'What is thy petition, Queen Esther? and it shall be granted thee; what is thy request? and it shall be performed.' The women, however, had to argue long and hard for their meeting. There was still a strong sentiment that power could not be shared. One Friend is supposed to have said that it would be preposterous to have one body with two heads, to which Rebecca Jones retorted, 'There is but one Head to the body which is the Church, even Jesus Christ, and in Him male and female are one.' Alice Rigge spoke well for the women's meeting, according to Rebecca Jones, and 'Martha Routh silenced David Barclay; he surrendered very unwillingly.'²⁸

At the adjournment of the sessions, the men Friends asked the women to hold an adjourned session in the evening to receive their conclusion. Four men, all friends of the measure, were appointed to take the minute to the women. They were Robert Valentine, William Matthews, Samuel Neale and William Tuke. The message they brought was positive, although guarded:

This Meeting, after a solid and deliberate consideration of the proposition brought in from the Meeting of Women Friends held annually in this City, agrees that the said Meeting be at liberty to correspond in writing with the Quarterly Meetings of Women Friends, to receive accounts from them, and issue such advice as in the wisdom of Truth from time to time may appear necessary and conducive to their mutual edification.

For this purpose it will be expedient that the said Meeting be a meeting of record, and be denominated, 'The Yearly Meeting of Women Friends in London,'; yet such Meeting is not to be so far considered a meeting of discipline as to make rules, nor yet alter the present Queries, without the concurrence of this Meeting.²⁹

Samuel Neale wrote a friend in America to describe the event. 'This was the *third* time it was before the meeting, and I was at each and I now saw the desire of my heart crowned; and carried over all opposition by its being established.' William Matthews recorded in his journal, 'Thus a work was brought about, which many had heretofore laboured for, and that not by the wisdom of the wise, not strength of argument of the eloquent, but in a way the Lord was pleased to cast up.' Rebecca Wright, Martha Routh and Patience Brayton also recorded the event in their journals. John Pemberton, visiting in Ireland, had been unable to attend this yearly meeting, although he had been present in 1753, when the subject was first raised. He wrote to a friend that he regretted not being there 'to join in promoting it.'³⁰

Others were not as pleased. An anonymous letter, printed in the *Memorials of Rebecca Jones* though not apparently addressed to her, reveals the sentiments of an opposer:

'The most remarkable occurrence this time was, that the women have obtained a point which they have long thirsted after - that is, a Yearly Meeting, regularly established by representatives from the Quarterly meetings. So thou may, at some future meeting, be a member of this female Parliament, who, if they take it into their heads, may recollect that they may, like Solomon's crown, be placed above the head....

I was no favorer of this measure, well knowing that POWER is a dangerous tool in some hands, who, if one gives them an inch, will take an ell. And so strong was my prejudice against it that, though most of the solid part of the men (and all the women to be sure) seemed to favor it under a right influence, yet I felt it not. Thus I have however obtained a teachable lesson of the strength and danger of prejudice, as well as to learn condescension to such as are entitled to it - for to set my own judgment and feeling in opposition to my superior, would be a presumption that I should not pardon myself for.'³¹

Although the Women's Yearly Meeting had been set up without any powers, the men continued to fear it. In 1787, Joseph Woods wrote to William Matthews that 'The Women Friends held long Meetings and appear very willing to be invested with greater power, but it was somewhat limited by the prudence of the men.' In 1793, Anna Price attended the Women's Meeting and was deputized with Martha Routh to inform the Men's Meeting of their deliberations. Although several men, especially Samuel Emlen of America, spoke encouragingly about the women's work, Price and Routh were followed out of the meeting by a critic:³²

...a certain young man who was fearful we should be too much set up, and convey too much encouragement to Women's Meetings. He spoke to M.R. who

was a match for him. I said nothing, but was painfully sensible that the life which was in Christ and may also be in us, was not so in dominion in the Men's Meeting as I thought we had witnessed it. Deep inward wailing and conflict of spirit was much maintained by many through our various meetings, but painful is the jealousy of Men Friends.³³

Having played a role in the creation of the London Women's Yearly Meeting Rebecca Jones afterwards kept up a correspondence with Christiana Hustler, Esther Tuke, and Martha Routh. Writing to Mary Bevan, also active in the yearly meeting, she urged the London women to make an independent decision in the case of Hannah Barnard, a New York Friend who had travelled in the ministry in England and Ireland and had been accused of heresy. Rebecca Jones may have agreed with the accusation but she was eager that the women make up their own minds:

I am much of thy sentiment respecting Hannah Barnard's case. I do hope the right thing will be done and that your women's Yearly Meeting will be owned by the presence of the great Head of the Church, which is composed of females as well as males, who alike have need to move under a sense of their own weakness.³⁴

In 1790, the men's meeting further recognized the women's meeting by drawing up a minute on its representative character with the stipulation that no Quarterly Meeting was to send more women to the women's meeting than men to the men's meeting. However, there was no relaxation of the rule that the women were to have no part in making rules of discipline. It was often restated in the women's meeting that it was not 'a legislative body.' And while the women of other yearly meetings, such as Philadelphia, were equally represented on many of their yearly meeting committees, and for years protested their exclusion from the discipline, sending up a stream of protests and suggestions and demanding eventually equal representation on the Meeting for Sufferings, the women of London Yearly Meeting apparently did not do so. As a result, Mary Jane Godlee, who wrote the chapter on the women's meeting in the history of London Yearly Meeting published in 1919, concludes that 'little real business was transacted' for many years.³⁵

In 1873, when the London Yearly Meeting decided to hold a conference on the state of the Society, it refused to allow women to attend, according to several correspondents who wrote in the pages of *The Friend*. One such correspondent Hannah Priestman Bright Clark,

wrote that she hoped this action would lead to a discussion of the position of women in the Society of Friends. Clark mentioned the notion that Quaker women had a tradition of equality, and pointed out that this was not true in meetings for business:

Many are already painfully conscious of the unreality of their meetings for discipline, since the little business they do has been for the most part already done for them in the men's meetings, and they have no voice in the management of affairs. It is needless for them to answer the Queries, as in the men's meetings the Queries are answered for all.³⁶

While few Quaker women attended the meaningless meetings for business, this author suggested, the same women flocked to the meetings of the Good Templars of England [a temperance society] where they were given an equal share in the business. A woman wrote in the same issue that she hesitated to promote the attendance of her daughters at the Quaker business meetings, when so little happens that 'interests and instructs.'³⁷

In 1884, the Quarterly Meeting of Bristol and Somerset sent up a minute suggesting a change in the role of women in the yearly meeting allowing them to be eligible for Meeting for Sufferings, and that some subjects of business be brought to the women's meeting. There was no apparent result from this action and in 1895, the same quarterly meeting raised the problem again. In 1896, Yearly Meeting agreed that 'in the future Women Friends be recognized as forming a constituent part of our Meetings for Church affairs equally with their brethren, and that they be eligible for appointment as members of the Meeting for Sufferings'. Finally, in 1908, the two meetings joined.³⁸

Women in some of the American yearly meetings began to work for full equality in the discipline and in Meeting for Sufferings, (renamed representative meeting) as early as 1836, and achieved it in most yearly meetings beginning in 1877. Some of the strongest of these, however, preferred to maintain their separate women's yearly meetings longer, into the 1920s. This was based on the fear that if men and women met together, women would obey the still current mores and remain silent, thus not making their full contribution to the Society. As one Quaker woman, a member of a pastoral meeting that had merged, observed, 'Much has been gained, no doubt, in the joint meeting, but has all been gained that should have been gained, and has, perhaps something been lost?'³⁹

One of the women who struggled for the equality of women within the Religious Society of Friends was the American abolitionist and

Women's Rights leader Lucretia Mott, who began as early as 1836 to protest the fact that men still made the final decisions in cases of discipline, even in her liberal, Hicksite meeting. Yet when challenged by radical Abby Kelley Foster, also a Quaker, who believed all meetings should be open to both men and women, she defended the women's separate meetings as having served an important role in the Religious Society of Friends.

Will not the ground thou assumes, oblige thee to withdraw from the Society of Friends? as all their meetings for discipline are with closed doors, not only against the world's people, but men against women, and women against men. And yet their meetings of women, imperfect as they are, have had their use, in bringing our sex forward, exercising their talents, and preparing them for united action with men, as soon as we can convince them that it is both our right and our duty.⁴⁰

Modern students of Quaker history, such as Mary Maples Dunn, president of Smith College, have pointed out that the Quaker business meetings for women in fact gave women what they most needed, a room of their own. Within the confines of the separate meeting, many women learned to keep accounts, to write epistles, to draft minutes, and to lobby their male counterparts, all capacities which served them in good stead when they began to move into the reform movements of the nineteenth century.

Unfortunately, the view that women's business meetings were of little interest had been widespread, and has prevented a thorough and systematic study of them. It is time more attention is paid. Phyllis Mack in her new book *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth Century England* has made a promising start in her reading of such seventeenth century women's minutes as are currently available, but much remains to be done.

A belief in the spiritual equality of women has been one of the strengths of the Quaker movement, and one of its contributions to the larger society. As interest grows in the history of women, more and more students are looking to early Quaker records for information on the Quaker pioneers. It is to be hoped that after years of neglect, the history of Quaker women's role in the church will receive the attention it justly deserves.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹ Jack Marietta, *Reformation of American Quakerism, 1748-1783*, 99; Among such institutions: the Friendly Association for Regaining and Preserving Peace with the Indians by Pacific Measures, 1757; the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery, the Relief of Negroes Unlawfully held in Bondage, and the Elevation of the African Race, 1775; the Philadelphia Society for the Alleviation of the Miseries of the Public Prisons, 1787; the York Retreat, 1796.
- ² Susanna Morris, *Memoirs*, typescript in possession of author, 80, 88.
- ³ Mary Peisley Neale, *Lives of Samuel and Mary Neale*, 342.
- ⁴ William Rogers, *The Christian-Quaker*, 65.
- ⁵ William Beck and T. Frederick Ball, *London Friends' Meetings*, 353-55.
- ⁶ Box Meeting Minutes 1748-1760, 26-10-1748. This minute book appears to contain minutes of the Box Meeting, the Two Weeks Meeting, the women's quarterly meeting, and some minutes of the group which met during yearly meeting.
- ⁷ Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women*, 203-205.
- ⁸ Marietta, *Reformation* 28; Margaret H. Bacon, *Mothers of Feminism: The Story of Quaker Women in America*, 44.
- ⁹ Mary Jane Godlee, 'The Women's Yearly Meeting' in *London Yearly Meeting during 250 Years*, 111. Arnold Lloyd, *Quaker Social History*, 118. William Braithwaite, *Second Period of Quakerism*, 287.
- ¹⁰ J.S. Rowntree, *Meetings on Ministry and Oversight*, No.2, 16. Braithwaite, *Second Period*, 287.
- ¹¹ Morning Meeting Minutes 6th of 11th mo. 1700.
- ¹² Insert in Front of Box Meeting Minute Book, 1748-1760. 'Considerations upon the service of the Discipline of the Church in general & the loss sustained by the want of extending the same amongst the women in particular.' Signed Lydia Lancaster, Margaret Raines, May Drummond, Mary Townsend, Alice Thistlewaite, Elizabeth Avery, Hannah Harris. I am obliged to Gil Skidmore for bringing this manuscript to my attention.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ John Pemberton, *Life of John Pemberton*, 32; Godlee, 102.
- ¹⁶ Box Meeting Minutes, 12-6-1753 and 14-6-1753.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Samuel Neale, *Lives of Samuel and Mary Neale*, 36.
- ¹⁹ Mary Weston to Israel Pemberton, jr. 23-5-1752, as in 'Egoism and Altruism in Quaker Abolition,' Jack Marietta, *Quaker History*, 82, Spring, 1993.
- ²⁰ *Memorials of Rebecca Jones*, 64; Beck and Ball, *Ibid.*; Minutes of Bristol Women's Monthly Meeting, 22-7-1755. Between this date and 1785 the Bristol women's minutes reveal a concern to play a larger role in disciplining female members and in marriages.
- ²¹ John Churchman, *An Account of the Gospel Labours and Christian Experiences of a Faithful Minister of Christ*, John Churchman, 179.
- ²² Women's Minutes, London Yearly Meeting, 21st of 5th month, 1766.
- ²³ Philadelphia Women's Yearly Meeting Minutes, 1766.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ 'Ministering Friends of America who have visited foreign parts on Truth's Service,' mms. list, Quaker Collection, Haverford College Library.
- ²⁶ Minutes, London Yearly Meeting for Women, 31st of 5th month, 1783.

- ²⁷ 'Journal of William Matthews', *Friends Miscellany*, VII, 274. Rufus M. Jones, *Later Periods of Quakerism*, 115; Minutes, London Yearly Meeting of Women Friends, 5th of 6th month, 1784.
- ²⁸ Rufus Jones, *Ibid.* 115; Rebecca Jones, *Ibid.* 65.
- ²⁹ Minutes, London Yearly Meeting, 1784.
- ³⁰ *Friends Miscellany*, III, 71-72; William Matthews in *Friends Miscellany* VII, 274; 'Some Account of Rebecca Wright's Travels in Great Britain and Ireland,' mms, Quaker Collection, Haverford College; *Memoir of the Life, Travels and Religious Experience of Martha Routh, written by herself and compiled from her own narrative*, 44; 'The Life of Patience Brayton,' *Friends Library*, X 461; John Pemberton, *The Life and Travels of John Pemberton*, 171.
- ³¹ *Memorials of Rebecca Jones*, 66.
- ³² Godlee, *London Yearly Meeting*, 112.
- ³³ *Friends Quarterly Examiner*, 1894, 195.
- ³⁴ *Memorial of Rebecca Jones*, 296.
- ³⁵ Godlee, 115.
- ³⁶ *The Friend*, Eighth Month, 1, 1873.
- ³⁷ *The Friend*, Ninth Month, 1, 1873.
- ³⁸ Godlee, 119-120.
- ³⁹ Mary Grove Chawner, *The American Friend*, (Ninth Month, 1912) 610.
- ⁴⁰ Lucretia Mott to Abby Kelley. Abby Kelley Foster Papers, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.