SEEKING GOD'S WILL: A MONTHLY MEETING AT WORK IN 1804

You may remember Dr. Johnson's opinion of Quakers – that they did not deserve the name of Christians being little better than Deists and upstart sectaries. To which the well-read and confident Mary Knowles replied that Quakers believed 'what is called the Apostles' Creed with these 2 exceptions only – our Saviour's descent into Hell and the resurrection of the body'. These mysteries she said, 'we humbly leave just as they stand in the holy text' – whatever that was. Now that would start a lively correspondence in *The Friend.*

An account of this exchange was printed in June 1791 when Quakers were becoming unpopular and were soon to be much more so. They were by 1800 blamed for the radicalism of Thomas Paine, for failing to support their country in the war against France, and for hoarding corn in order to increase their wealth. Many magazines denounced their lack of patriotism.

Ministers and Elders were alarmed. Unlike Mary Knowles they knew that Deism had indeed infected Quakerism. Had not the London Yearly Meeting epistles for 1739 and 1740 warned Friends to be very careful to prevent their children and servants from reading 'vile books' which rejected 'the divine authority of Holy Scripture in favour of Deism, atheism, and all manner of infidelity'? Subsequently a 'large northern Quarterly Meeting' specified the works of Woolston by name, and directed that they be collected and burnt.

Accordingly Ministers and Elders had set about establishing a better discipline and since 1786 had met as a separate and select body. By the turn of the century, marshalled by the redoutable Joseph Gurney Bevan, they did their best to institute a Quaker orthodoxy. Henry Tuke's *The Faith of the People called Quakers in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ set forth in various extracts from their writings* appeared in 1801, and a second edition was printed the same year. In 1805 the same writer was responsible for *The Principles of Religion, as professed by the Society of Christians, usually called Quakers, written for the instruction of their Youth and for the information of Strangers.* By 1852 this had gone into 12 editions, and was also translated into French and German. In this way it was hoped to stem the dangerous free thought undermining the Christian basis of the Society.

It was too late; the damage, if damage it was, was already done. Abraham Shackleton in Leinster and John Hancock in Ulster had brought matters to a head, and in 1798 Ireland Yearly Meeting appointed a committee to investigate the Quaker tendency to schism. A year later it recommended the disownment of those out of unity with Friends' beliefs, and by 1801 that policy was being vigorously implemented. Thomas Greer was not exaggerating when he declared that these events were 'of such magnitude as to threaten the downfall of Quakerism in Ireland'. Although the parallel events in England did not merit so apocalyptic a description, the Hannah Barnard affair revealed equally profound differences.

Needless to say, there had always been Quaker rebels, those like Henry Finch, Henry Portsmouth, and William Matthews. They learned with dismay that great numbers of Irish Friends were being disowned, and that in London Hannah Barnard was being rudely harassed by J.G. Bevan. Surely something ought to be done. Thomas Foster, Robert Ransome, William Matthews, John Hancock, and William Rathbone exchanged letters. Eventually they decided to publish to the world the facts of the Irish Separation and, with some difficulty, persuaded a reluctant William Rathbone to edit them.

This highly successful Liverpool business man was the IVth of a famous line of William Rathbones. The sixth of them can be seen today as a statue on the river side of St George's Hall gazing out confidently as though welcoming the challenge of the future. His grandfather, our man, a courageous advocate of unpopular causes, the French Revolution and anti-slavery among them, had lived in a beautiful house, Greenbank on the outskirts of the city, and had pursued a lively intellectual life along with a number of mainly unitarian friends. His reading and discussions had made him dissatisfied with orthodox Christianity. We are concerned with his conduct in 1804, but he was openly expressing his religious doubts as early as 1793. In that year his sister Sarah Benson discussed with Job Scott of America her 'travail of spirit' on William's account when Job stayed in Liverpool on the way to Ballitore where he died ten weeks later (November 1793). A long letter which Job sent to William urging him not to put 'human reason in place of the Heavenly Light' will be found in the University of Liverpool's special collection.

William IV's father, William Rathbone III, for many years a Minister and Elder, had been widely respected as a Quaker of the old school. As long as he was alive the fourth William seems to have dutifully followed his example, but after his death in 1789, the son's Quakerism was apparently expressed mainly in his attendance at Meeting for Worship.

What, we may wonder, did he gain from it? Did he ever minister? After all, his well-known Manchester contemporary John Dalton was never known either to speak in Meeting for worship or even to mention religion in his private conversation. There is no knowing.

With the publication of *A Narrative, of Events that have lately taken place in Ireland,* however, William Rathbone challenged the Quaker hierarchy and did so in a very public way. In addition to querying the literal truth of the Bible, he complained that Elders were too powerful and that the American visitor David Sands was causing division. Yet he was quite unrepentant and continued to attend worship as usual. What should Friends do? Pretending everything was normal was scarcely possible. While a colourless 'good morning' or even 'Good morning, William' might serve before worship, such formulae seemed insufficient for the conversation in the lobby before going home. Perhaps some risked 'Nice day', or 'And how is thy family?' but neither were exactly inspirations for breaking tension. Somebody ought to do something. Overseers?.....Elders, perhaps?.....

Then on 24 June 1804 at the conclusion of a Preparative Meeting some Liverpool overseers spoke to him. Failing to persuade him that his book was a mistake, they met him again in similar circumstances seven weeks later and told him that they had reported the matter to Monthly Meeting which would now deal with it. So Hardshaw Monthly Meeting began its consideration of the 'Rathbone case' on 23 August 1804. It made its final minute on the affair six months later on 5 February 1805.

Typically as soon as it was over William Rathbone published his own account of it in his *Memoir of the Proceedings of the Society called Quakers belonging to the Monthly Meeting of Hardshaw in Lancashire in the case of the Author of a Narrative etc.* Though rare it is still to be found and is valuable because it gives in full the various written submissions Rathbone sent to the Meeting. But there is also, it transpires, another and more detailed account of the whole business. For after each of the Monthly Meetings one of Rathbone's friends sent him an account of what had been said, and William, methodical man that he was, filed these accounts away in his papers along with much other fascinating Quaker material. They form a small part of the Rathbone Collection in the University of Liverpool.

These accounts of Monthly Meeting, which claim to be 'uninfluenced by either partiality or prejudice', are prefaced by the admission that they are the result of 'imperfect recollection'. It is clear from the manuscript alterations and additions, however, that they were checked by a number of Friends, a fact which makes more likely their reliability; it is a guard

against the warning in Mark Twain's remark that the older he got, the more vivid became his memory of those things that never happened. They are the source of the rest of this account.

So on 23 August 1804 some 50 Friends (perhaps more) met as Hardshaw Monthly Meeting to begin their consideration of the Rathbone case, five months after the offending book had appeared. They were all men since in those deplorably unregenerate days women Friends still met separately for business. Acting as Clerk was Robert Barnard of Manchester. Aged 43 he was an experienced Friend who had in 1803 been Clerk of London Yearly Meeting so that he must have had close connection with many of the leading Quakers of the time. He could read Greek and know William Rathbone well since both were active members of Manchester's Literary and Philosophical Society where he had come to disapprove strongly of Rathbone's religious opinions. His assistant was Nicholas Waterhouse, a wealthy Liverpool cotton-broker.

On this first occasion the case was dealt with briefly and late in the agenda. Samuel Blain, a Liverpool overseer, reported that a book had been published by a member, William Rathbone, which tended 'to lower the Society in the eyes of the world'; he had refused when visited to 'confess error'; 'we therefore thought it best to lay the matter before the meeting'. This clear statement produced a variety of reactions: to show charity to the author; to take no notice of the book; and 'to bestow more labour before going further'. Although the Clerk voiced his disagreement with this last idea ('it does not seem to me that any good will be answered'), it was strongly supported so that he minuted that a committee of three was to visit Rathbone and report back. The American visitor Jesse Kersey was prominent in the discussion, pointing out that in his native land books were not published unless sanctioned by higher authority. Then, prompted by the barely controlled indignation of Samuel Blain and his ally Warrington elder John Bludwick, he urged Friends to keep 'their minds free from anything like warmth'. 'Already', he said,

> has one anonymous reply appeared written in a very illiberal manner, containing harsh and invidious suppositions as to the motives and views of William Rathbone. This is certainly improper.

No trace of the anonymous reply has survived.

The three Friends deputed to visit William Rathbone were James Cropper, his friend and one-time business colleague, Joseph Atkinson, a much-respected Manchester Quaker, and the steady John Field,

possibly related to the John Field of London whose many books are listed in Smith. They were received with courtesy and told William Rathbone of Monthly Meeting's concern. After discussion, their host left them alone for a while to compile their report. On his return he asked them for their findings and they briefly indicated them. Rathbone was afraid that he had not been correctly understood and further exchanges followed, until it was agreed that he would send the Meeting a written statement to accompany their report. So when at the start of Monthly Meeting on 25 October 1804 Joseph Atkinson handed the Clerk the committee's findings, he also gave in a letter from William Rathbone.

The Meeting proved long and difficult, a demonstration of the great risks Friends take in conducting their business discussions as they do. It started disastrously. For David Sands, the American who had with courage and success taken Quakerism into Maine and then crossed to the Old World, ministered at length in the opening period of worship. Far from drawing Friends together as they tried under guidance to find a common mind, he chose for theme the extreme political and religious conservatism that was a main source of the difficulties of Rathbone and his supporters. He compared the

> former good times when men feared God and honoured the King with the present degenerate state of politics in the Society when so many of its members were dissatisfied with the Government under which their lot was cast. But when these disorders appeared he recommended a vigorous attention on the part of Friends to use the sword as if it grew out of the wrist like fingers, adding from the Holy Scriptures 'cursed is he that spareth blood' (meant only in a spiritual sense).....

There was much more in the same vein.

When the Meeting eventually turned its attention to the committee's report, it fell at once into lively disagreement not about what it said but about their right to see it before William Rathbone. Why was he shown a private communication to others? What possible justification could there be for such a breach of confidence? There were heated exchanges between James Cropper and John Bludwick, the latter finally apologising 'for the warmth he had been led into.....Now as he got older he was apt to be nervous and had not that command over his temper he once had'. On hearing this brave admission John Taylor, loyal friend and travelling companion of David Sands, declared that there was no need for apology: 'John Bludwick has the good old cause at heart'.

At this point the Clerk said that Friends had not yet decided whether

or not William Rathbone's letter should be read – there were ten pages of it.

> It would have been better if William Rathbone had come to the meeting. It would have done away with the need for this discussion.

Here, says the account,

> was a long, low conversation upon whether or not the letter should be read.

It then lists those in favour of having it read, those against, and those undecided. Finally it was agreed that it should be heard in full.

As soon as the reading was completed, David Sands rose to condemn the letter's

> smooth, plausible language...I see with concern that it has produced a strong impression on the meeting.

And he complained of the treatment he had received in *A Narrative*. But Friends now became restive, several expressing disapproval, until one, William Leicester, announced in strong terms that David Sands ought to be silent. Others agreed, and after brief exchanges it was made clear that he should keep silent.

By now, apart from having heard William Rathbone's letter, the meeting was no further forward. There had been much speaking, some of it ill-tempered, none of it about William Rathbone and his book. Was there any way of bringing Friends to consider the matter before them? The Clerk tried once more. Perhaps, he said,

> the proper way is to appoint a number of Friends to examine the book and point out anything objectionable.

It was a simple, even obvious idea, and it had the merit that if acted on, it would allow Friends to get home in reasonable time. It brought Joseph Atkinson to his feet again. In addition, to presenting the Committee's report he has several times urged Friends not to hurry their deliberations, and it was he who now firmly set the Meeting on its right course. Indeed, in the end it was this quiet, public-spirited Manchester hat-manufacturer who, more than anyone, saw to it that Friends kept at their task until it was completed.

He now pointed out that the Clerk's idea was the right one, and should have been adopted at the outset. The business of whether or not

A Narrative should have been submitted to higher authority (the issue with which the committee had been largely concerned) was really an irrelevance: he was as much to blame as anyone for the time spent on this. It was clear that 'the best way to get right was to tread back the old steps and begin afresh'. It was perhaps an unfortunate choice of words, and the sorely tried Clerk, who had not seen the position as clearly as Joseph Atkinson, momentarily abandoned his detachment to exclaim,

> Begin afresh! Why, I think we are exactly in that situation we should be. The book is acknowledged by its author: he says were it to do over again, he should do it. A great deal of labour has been bestowed without producing any good effect, nor is it likely any extension of this labour would be attended with success, for I well know William Rathbone's opinion on such subjects, and I do not know that we could wish for more.

Nevertheless Friends came slowly to adopt the new idea.

There were, it is true, irrelevances and uneasy moments – 'Samuel Blain rose evidently violently agitated in defence of Liverpool overseers', James Cropper became 'rather warmed', and Roger Merrick, a man it seems of few words, told the persistent John Bludwick, 'Yes, thou hast often told us so, but the meeting is not of the same opinion'. These passages at arms inevitably prolonged the discussion but Friends firmly agreed to ask some of their number to examine the book and report back.

The meeting ended with a warning, this time from the Clerk:

> I hope no Friend now present will attempt to give a sketch of the speeches and sentiments expressed about this business for after so much has been said it is impossible to do it with any degree of correctness.

Before the start of the next Monthly Meeting on 22 November the Committee had 'laid their report on the table'. The formalities over, the Assistant Clerk read it through twice. Its findings were uncompromisingly clear:

i) William Rathbone approved the unorthodox views of the separatists, particularly in undervaluing the Bible;
ii) he had selected unrepresentative passages in Barclay and Penington to support his own views;
iii) he had given the impression that Quaker discipline was persecution; and
iv) he did not hold the Quaker view of 'immediate revelation', but generally 'threw down' the rules necessary and common in all well-regulated religious communities.

These damning conclusions meant that William Rathbone had lost his case. The eight Friends who had examined the book, though they had not for some reason included his friend James Cropper, were of differing outlooks; that they should have brought in such charges left little room for further discussion.

The Monthly Meeting seemed at first taken aback by the temerity of its own committee. There was, of course, no shortage of speakers; in that respect it was a typical Quaker business meeting. Its early exchanges were prompted by James Cropper's concern that Friends should understand and be fair to William Rathbone. As a result tensions revealed earlier, now re-appeared. Samuel Blain put clearly the dilemma known to all of us:

> It appears that there are two opposite opinions entertained by the Friends now present. I hope they will give each other credit for the sincerity of their intentions, and I think the majority should decide the question.

By this time it was clear that most Friends endorsed their committee's findings (by no means always the Quaker way).

Then without warning an unexpected intensity took hold of Friends. The Clerk mildly observed that William Rathbone had obtained the material for *A Narrative* 'with great secrecy', the implication being that this involved a breach of confidence – 'we all know that every society has some secrets of its own'. At these words William Haselden, a Liverpool shipbuilder, rose excitedly, saying:

> Secrets! Friends! I do not understand what these secrets can be. What! are we assembled as a papish enclave (*sic*) under a Vatican? Are we acting in a way we are ashamed of anyone knowing? If we are doing right what need have we to fear who sees our proceedings? The more they are examined if they are just, the more honour they will confer on us. Truth appears more beautiful from a nice examination. And while I am up I will just say, notwithstanding almost every Friend in the Meeting disapproves of this publication, that I believe that the writer was actuated by motives as pure, and had the cause of truth as much at heart, as any man in this Meeting. It was an act of justice and I return him my hearty thanks for having brought forward the subject in the manner he has.

Assuming that the words are a fair indication of what William Haselden said, and of the speech rhythms he used, it seems that he was moved to utterance in spite of himself. He plainly felt that William Rathbone was not receiving a sympathetic hearing – he may have admired him as a business colleague and fellow-Quaker, or he may have shared his views. Whatever the explanation, the use of the word 'secrets' had been

enough to release his pent-up feelings. The meeting had been taken to a deeper level. It remained there.

For William Haselden's words worked powerfully in John Bludwick, the Friend most angered by *A Narrative.* He spoke again now, with great bluntness and out of his pain and outrage that any member of the Society he loved could, by disloyalty, so undermine it. Friends must know, he asserted,

> that this book is of great public notoriety; it has been very industriously circulated up and down this kingdom and Ireland not only amongst the Society but amongst others of different religious professions. Can any man possessing common sense peruse this book, see the manner in which it exposes the Society and holds it up to the world, consider this a common case? I confess I cannot keep myself cool when I consider it. I am astonished that William Rathbone did not leave the Society before he published such a work as this. It is impossible he can consider himself as one of the Society after expressing such sentiments.
> He cannot be one of the Society who holds opinions like these. They completely undermine the very groundwork of our original profession, they sap the very root of every religious society as well as ours. Oh! It is a grievous thing. Friends! What must the world think of our Society if a member of it published sentiments like these? I really think the Committee have given a report such as every candid mind would expect who has perused this book. I do not see how they could consistently have done otherwise.

Here John Bludwick paused and sat down. But he had not unburdened himself of all he had to say, and after sitting through exchanges mainly to do with the need to visit William Rathbone and inform him of the committee's report, he rose again in

> great concern that William Rathbone should have suffered himself to have been twisted and worked upon in the manner he has by these people who have been disowned (ie. the Irish rebels). I regret it the more when I bring before my mind the character of his father, for so long a respectable member of our Society. For many years I was in the habit of considering him as a pillar of this Monthly Meeting. I looked up to him as a Father and I well recollect when I was first appointed Clerk to this Monthly Meeting his sitting by my side and assisting me, and it is a grievous thing, Friends, that a man with an understanding like that the son seems to possess should have ushered into the world a work like the present. But such is my regard for his Father that if William Rathbone could bring his mind to come openly forward and condemn the book, being convinced of his error, I should feel disposed to advise the Meeting to drop the business here, but I think we cannot expect anything of this kind from the deliberate manner in which this work has been published.

Even 200 years later these are deeply felt words. They may perhaps stand as a justification of the Quaker method of encouraging all members, young and old, lettered and unlettered, to take part in the

making of decisions. Something of the sort needed saying and John Bludwick was the man to say it. He was 64 at this time, had given a lifetime of service to Friends, and along with his Elizabeth was still a regular attender at Yearly Meeting. Underlying all the arguments was one simple fact: what Friends were struggling with was a denial of ways hallowed by their forefathers. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the disagreement it was painful for all of them. To the sensitive and thoughtful, calling in doubt the wisdom of our ancestors (Edward Burke's expression) always is.

The meeting now drew to a close, though persuading Friends to make up the committee to see William Rathbone proved very difficult. The Clerk advised anyone 'weak or mean enough to report at second hand' things said in the meeting to

> take care to inform William Rathbone that the objections which individuals have made to being on the present committee do not arise from any fear of him, but the respect we bear him as an individual, and it arises also from the delicacy that is felt in having a conference with him on a subject in which we differ so widely from him. I know that somebody communicates to him the speeches which are here delivered.

'I hope', said William Haselden, 'thou dost not allude to me'. 'No', said the Clerk, 'I do not mean to particularize anyone, but I know someone does it, and if thou art conscious.....' William Haselden interrupted: 'I can tell thee, Robert Barnard, I came here for no such purpose'.

It remained only to make a minute appreciative of the service of David Sands and for that worthy to minister and pray in his customary style. Friends had sat for 2¾ hours.

The Friends appointed to tell William Rathbone of Monthly Meeting's judgment met him at his Queen Anne Street office on 19 and 20 December 1804. He has left his own account of their conferences and sad reading it makes, witnessing to the antipathy between him and Robert Barnard and to his own determination to admit no fault on his side. Twice he charged the group in one particular with 'mean, dishonest and contemptible conduct'; then he became loftily magisterial, the Grand Inquisitor asking all the questions and sweeping aside any answers not to his liking. At one point he launched into a declamation, preferring the Separatists to the cold and lifeless disciplinarians as much as day to night and light to darkness – there is no point in quoting more of the exchanges. To their credit the five Friends remained quietly in control of themselves, and made a few shrewd remarks of their own. Later James Cropper said he did not think William Rathbone

'justifiable' in the language he had used, and William Rathbone admitted that he had been 'intemperately and culpably warm'.

From now on the affair moved steadily to its inevitable conclusion. William Rathbone, undismayed and still absenting himself from Monthly Meeting, wrote the Clerk a long screed defending himself against each of the eight charges he considered the committee to have made against him. It lay on the table at the start of the Meeting of 24 January 1805. No doubt, said Robert Barnard, the 'parcel of some bulk' related to the business before Monthly Meeting: should it be read in the Meeting or should a group of Friends retire, study it, and report? After a long, inconclusive discussion, John Thorp, a recorded Manchester Minister then just rising 60 (see the entry in Smith, Vol. 2 p. 742), said to the Assistant Clerk 'in a low voice'
'Nicholas Waterhouse, read it'.
So Nicholas read the first half, the Clerk the rest. This took some 20 minutes. At the end of it, the Meeting 'fell silent for 15 minutes'.

The Clerk then said that William Rathbone's submission no way altered anything: he was obviously 'not one of us'. But as before, the Monthly Meeting refused to be rushed, and predictably Joseph Atkinson urged Friends to take their time. A long debate broke out as to whether it was better to defer continuation until next month or to adjourn and resume later that day. Again there was 'a noisy discussion'. On the whole adjournment recommended itself. Still no agreement, until John Field remarked that their exchanges looked like taking as long as the proposed adjournment: why not 1½ hours? So 1½ it was.

The re-assembled Meeting was extraordinarily thorough. It heard read the whole of the proceedings since last August, six months ago, and then for the second time that day the whole of William Rathbone's latest submission. Then each of the eight charges was taken separately, re-read and discussed. Of course many of the arguments already used were repeated and Friends maintained the positions they had adopted at the outset. But there was dignity in the measured pace, and although the Clerk and others wanted to move things on, they were firmly restrained, as point by point the Meeting upheld each of its eight charges. It remained merely to appoint Friends to draw up a formal disownment.

Alas, just as it seemed the marathon proceedings were over a final problem presented itself. No one was willing to serve. John Bludwick suggested a period of silence, but Friends went on talking. The harassed Clerk at last lost his cool.

> I think we have now spoiled all – [he burst out]. We have gone on regularly till now and when we are just come to conclusion we show ourselves weak – I take a share of the blame myself. but the Meeting knows my reason. I have been particularly pointed at and marked out as being active in the business. I am unconscious of having the least personality towards William Rathbone. I may as well be open with you Liverpool Friends and say you are cowards. It happens that William Rathbone is a great man and you are his neighbours and therefore you wish to be excused.

Isaac Hadwen, Liverpool silversmith, said at once

> I do hope if such language as this is warranted by anyone's conduct he may be privately dealt with and not be attacked in this public manner.

Samuel Blain concurred, while John Goodier trusted that all felt brotherly love towards the erring William. Decorum thus re-established, three Friends were appointed to draw up a testimony of disownment – Samuel Blain, John Bradshaw and Joseph Atkinson. On 28 February in Manchester it was duly endorsed, a copy to be given to William Rathbone. It was also to be read out in Liverpool Meeting. The long business had ended.

At this point I find myself in difficulty. For on an occasion such as this you will properly expect some illuminating comments on these distant happenings. It is the historian's privilege to establish cause and effect, motive and achievement. We see so much more clearly and are so much wiser than our predecessors that we can pass confident judgment on them. Alas, I am no historian. I shall have to content myself with a few cautious observations.

First, we may agree, I think, that Hardshaw Monthly Meeting did pretty well. Compared with Liverpool Methodists ten years earlier Liverpool Friends were models of civility. For Methodist factions were so hostile that Superintendent Moore dug a hole in his garden and buried the Kilhamite pamphlets of Mr Isaac Wolfe. In reply Mr Wolfe's supporters nailed the preacher (Kilham himself) into the Mount Pleasant pulpit to prevent his forcible ejection, whereupon Superintendent Moore sent a servant to clear the chapel. There were similar if less violent diversions in Manchester and Leeds, and they did the Methodists little good.

Not that disowning a prominent and highly respected citizen did the peaceable Quakers any good either. Towards the end of 1804 they found themselves derided in an anonymous lampoon whose 24 verses are given in full in 'A Record'. *The First chapter of the Book of William the Scribe*

1. In the days of Napoleon the Emperor, when George III was King, a

man of the tribe of Levi whose name was William lived in an island of the Sea.
2. And behold this man.. wrote a book and got it printed.
3. And this book, behold it contained an account of the Children of Israel in the land of Erin.....
6. Then certain of the Israelites were exceedingly troubled.....
7. And they sought to turn him out of the Synagogue.
8. And he greeted them with an epistle.....
Ridicule is a great enemy of religion, though less damaging than apathy.

For William Rathbone there can be both sympathy and criticism. There must today be many Friends like him – questioning and individualistic. If we disowned them all how many members of the Society would be left? And in his case his many virtues pleaded for him trumpet-tongued. Yet at the same time he was an awkward customer. Like most modern Friends he had to test everything by his own understanding, and was either unaware of or indifferent to the pain he inflicted on others. And why did he choose to bombard Monthly Meeting with written words instead of attending it? If any of my hearers wish to judge him, they are unlikely to do so more devastatingly than did his friend William Roscoe, the pre-Ruskin enthusiast for Italian Renaissance Art. He (and no doubt other members of Liverpool's Unitarian circle) deplored the whole business of formal Monthly Meeting proceedings, arguing that once *A Narrative* had appeared it should be allowed to speak for itself.

> If you quit the Society, let your conduct be marked by that generosity which has distinguished every action of your life.
> You fight with unequal weapons and on different ground, and can never meet in fair contest. Consider my dear friend whether the fault you condemn in others may not attach to yourself; whether a society may not be persecuted by an individual as well as an individual by a society.

It was advice he would have done well to hear. [University of Liverpool, Rathbone Papers, II, i, 146.] Perhaps it was not in his nature to do so. He failed, for example, to learn from John Hancock who had supplied information for *A Narrative*. When their interchange of letters began John Hancock had already challenged Quaker orthodoxy; William Rathbone had yet to do so. The fact did not prevent him from taking the role of senior partner. This much is clear even though his letters have not survived. John Hancock's are full of rueful reflections – that Irish separatists were too precipitate (Rathbone Papers, II, i, 91), that 'asperity and irritation' had been harmful, (103) that many were prey to

unrecognised motives, that pleas for a conference for a candid exhange of views had been declined, and that he was left feeling despondent (Rathbone Papers, all 126). It seems that William Rathbone lacked John Hancock's quietly reflective honesty, his willingness to see both strengths and weaknesses in this position.

All these Quaker excitements in Liverpool were, it hardly needs saying, only a footnote to the story of the struggle of British Christians with the Enlightenment which by the end of the eighteenth century had, in Basil Willey's words, given them 'immunity from disturbing contacts with the transcendental'. So I would like in conclusion to indicate briefly some lines of approach to this unresearched problem as it affected Friends.

The leader of conservative Quaker resistance to the New Lights was the redoubtable Joseph Gurney Bevan who devoted much of his wealth, learning, and Quaker tutelage to resisting the reformers. The Bevan-Naish collection in Woodbrooke is built around the pamphlets he assembled as part of his campaign. Some are carefully annotated, and there are in one of the volumes two original letters from his opponents John Hancock and Samuel Stephens. Hancock pleads reasonably for a replacement of 'intemperate zeal' by calm investigation of the differences between Friends – 'if the new ideas are of God they will stand'. Bevan marked the letter with numbers to denote points on which he wished to comment. There are 21 of them and the paper expounding his objections is still in the Woodbrooke volume.

It was a battleground that had long been fought over, well described in John Redwood's *Reason, Ridicule, and Religion. The Age of Enlightenment in England 1660-1750.* Because of their efforts to be 'separate from the world' Quakers had kept clear of the contest until with Hancock, Rathbone and others it caught them up. The extremes of the two sides are Joseph Priestley's championship of free enquiry ('should free inquiry lead to the destruction of Christianity itself, it ought not on that account to be discontinued') and the Rev. Edward Copleston's 'The scheme of Revelation is closed and we expect no light on earth to break in upon it. Oxford must guard that sacred citadel'. (It was Copleston who caused Shelley to be sent down from Oxford for his *Necessity of Atheism.)*

The two extremes did not trouble William Rathbone. He never doubted that he was bringing Christianity up to date. His opponents must have found infuriating his claim to the very christian truths which they accused him of abandoning. He claimed to regard as of primary importance the apostolic injunction – 'Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ'. Yet, as one of his submissions to Monthly Meeting

stated clearly he regarded only 11 or 12 psalms as canonical, did not accept the virgin birth of Jesus, and denied his miracles and resurrection.

Unfortunately there were at the time no Quaker thinkers of authority who might have helped Friends through their difficulties. The only man who might have done had died in 1793: Job Scott. Again here is an eighteenth-century Friend who needs researching. According to J. William Frost of Swarthmore College, none is in progress. Yet when Scott came to England for the final months of his life he had a formidable reputation. On what did it rest? Can his background be investigated? Anyway he gave William Rathbone's "Reason" short shrift, and it is difficult to understand the reformers' repeated claim that Job supported their views.

This battle of long ago is still unresolved. Is truth to be found in the unchanging Christian revelation for all times and places, or is that revelation to be modified by say post-Enlightenment Liberalism? Who in Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* wins the argument between Naphta and Settembrini? Faced with the choice most Friends, I suspect, do what William Rathbone IV did – make some long-established basic assumptions, discard what seems out-of-date, and then complete their beliefs with their own home-spun ideas. Dr Johnson's 95th *Rambler* (12 February 1751) indicates the dangers of doing this; and Daniel Rops' *Church in the 18th Century,* while saluting Quakers as 'most estimable and harmless of heretics', asserts them to be 'too lacking in doctrinal bases to enjoy permanent success' (pp. 160-161) – it is not clear how Father Rops defines success in this context.

Unfortunately for Rathbone by 1800 great changes were afoot. What we call the Romantic Movement was bringing fresh ideas. Wordsworth was replacing Thompson, and Turner's paintings were calling in question the sober findings of Reynolds' *Discourses* (already infuriating William Blake). There was, in short, a different way of perceiving reality: Locke's mirror was being replaced by Coleridge's lamp or, to put it another way, the dissecting and recording of Reason's findings gave way to the search for the creative image. It is a pity that Rathbone did not have Coleridge for a friend, for by the early years of the nineteenth century he was vigorously attacking Locke, and was soon to encounter Schleiermacher's thinking which saw the Bible not as God's ventriloquist (Basil Willey again, on its use by fundamentalists), but as a historical and artistic document of a particular kind. It was an approach that rendered the eighteenth-century debate irrelevant.

It is sometimes claimed that Quakerism is a good meeting-place for theists of any faith, that it is well able to accommodate itself to the

changing fashions of belief that test all religions. Perhaps it could be, but it can hardly sustain the claim at the moment. There are apparently some 17,000 of us. – just imagine, 17,000 hot lines to God! It must seem to dispassionate observers that we are a collection of individuals rather than a disciplined group. Like William Rathbone each of us tends to press his or her own individual conviction, regardless of the hurt this may be doing to others. So Quaker Agnostics, for example, are mistaken in the eyes of Quaker Christians, and vice-versa. Whether or not it is possible to hold together in one society, let us say, Christians, Agnostics, Rationalists and Buddhists, I do not know. True, we put up with each other's mistaken beliefs. I am not aware that we try to see the world from the other's point of view. That needs a great effort of imagination.

In a letter to *The Friend* dated 3 November 1989 David Murray-Rust, the best Swarthmore lecturer the Society never had, reported that he along with Frances his wife and Hugh Doncaster, represented non-aligned Friends at a Woodbrooke conference where Quaker evangelicals, the New Foundation Group and the Open Letter Movement exchanged views. There was, wrote David, 'much fellowship and also much non-listening. I was apprehensive that a serious rift in the Society might occur'. It has, it seems, so far been avoided. Perhaps it does not matter. One interpretation of Thomas Aquinas' sudden suspension of work at the end of his life on his *Summa Theologiae* is that it was revealed to him that even his magisterial tomes were no better than straw for the burning compared with God's love. If that applies to religious systems, it perhaps applies no less to our historical theorizings.

POSTSCRIPT

There was one curious postscript to the William Rathbone affair. In attendance at the last Monthly Meeting was a young man born in Kendal but recently married and settled for the time being at Ardwick near Manchester. He was 24 and his name was Isaac Crewdson. Thirty years later he was to cause another separation among Quakers by publishing *The Beacon,* so called because it claimed that the Bible beckoned to men as the great light of truth which would answer their needs: it was the literal word of God. In common with all present he heard William Rathbone's disownment read twice. It included these words:

> "(William Rathbone) also appears not to have that belief in, or possess that reverend regard for the whole of the holy scriptures, which is due unto them; professing to believe, that with the genuine revelations, are blended not only many imperfections, but also some important errors."

The young Isaac Crewdson was the first to speak after the second reading. 'I hope', he said,

> the meeting will concur with me in thinking it best to leave out the whole of that paragraph relating to the Holy Scriptures".

Was he distressed to think of the impression it might make on other Christians? Or was he testing the feelings of Friends present? Whatever his motive, the meeting firmly refused to remove the words. This, the Clerk said, was no time 'to let the Bible fall to the ground'. His view was strongly supported. Was the Friend who objected satisfied? 'Yes', said Isaac Crewdson, 'I am satisfied'.

Even as the Rathbone affair came to an end, another separation was already in the making.

Neville H Newhouse

The above is taken from a tape prepared by Neville Newhouse and supplied by Irene Newhouse. It was played on 9 November 1991 following Neville Newhouse's death on 27 October 1991 during his tenure of the Presidency of the Friends Historical Society. Ed.