

Quaker Books in the 18th Century

From the point of view of a Country Quarterly Meeting

IN many counties of recent years there has been a quite new realization of the value of local history, and much of interest has come to light as local records have been studied with a view to finding out how the laws and decrees made by the higher authorities in London actually worked out and affected the ordinary folk of the day.

The same principle can be applied with usefulness to our early Quaker records. The Epistles and Minutes drawn up in London, whether by Yearly Meeting or Meeting for Sufferings, complete from the earliest days, are well-known to Quaker historians. It is therefore of further interest to find out how country Friends of the time, the rank and file of the Society, received these numerous documents from London and acted upon them.

The following study deals with one aspect only of Quaker activity, the distribution of Friends' books. The time is the second period of Quakerism, from the closing years of the seventeenth century to the middle of the eighteenth. The county is Gloucestershire, and the material drawn upon is the Book of the Quarterly Meeting which dates from 1670, and the almost untouched library of early Quaker books which still exists at Cirencester.

The first reference to Friends' writings in the Gloucestershire Minute book occurs in 1691. George Fox had died in January, and the Quarterly Meeting held at Cirencester in June "Agreed that friends doe take care to bring in an account of what bookes are in their meetings of George Fox, his wrighting, with the first and last words of them and also the date thereof."¹ It is significant that the Minutes give no word of lament, or of eulogy, for the departed leader, but instead record the care taken that his many messages shall be preserved.

In 1694 George Fox's *Journal* was published, and before

¹ This enquiry was made all over the country; its results are to be found in the MS. volume in the library at Friends House, London, called *Annual Catalogue of George Fox's Papers*. An abridgement of this was published by Henry J. Cadbury, in 1939.

the year was out Penn's full *Preface* had appeared, printed separately for insertion in the folio volume, and also as a small book.

Gloster, 26.xii.1694. Agreed yt William Penn's Preface be added to G. Fox his Journall that were given to ye severall meetings of this County.

Not long afterwards came a reprint of the book which rivalled in fame even Fox's *Journal*.

Gloster, 27.xii.1699. We Received a letter from the Meeting of Sufferings and Second day Morning meeting, Concerning particular friends subscribing to take of Robert Barclay's Appoligy, (they being now to be reprinted) for the servis of Truth. Agreed that Every particular meeting take Care to Subscribe . . . and send the number with all speed to London.

Until adequate subscribers were found the reprinting could not begin. The edition appeared in 1701 and, possibly owing to heavy sales, Gloucestershire Friends did not receive their consignment until the Spring of 1703, the year of yet another reprint.

Naylsworth, 25.iii.1703. We Received from London 70 of Robert Barclay's Appoligies, and also 5 books New England Judg'd,¹ Coms to £11-4-0.

In order to pay for these the Quarterly Meeting funds were literally exhausted, and after the Scribe had recorded the disbursements, another hand, evidently the Treasurer's, added a somewhat anxious note: "which was the Ballance and Nothing now Remaines in Stock." By a "double Colection", however, when each particular meeting faithfully contributed just twice its normal amount, the bill for the books was finally met and the stock replenished. The matter of the Apologies was still not ended. Due care must be taken to see that they were really used.

Cirencester, 29.xii.1703/4. Agreed that every Monthly Meeting bring in an Account how they have

¹ *New England judg'd by the Spirit of the Lord*. Published in 1661 by George Bishop (d. 1668), ex-army Captain and leading Bristol Friend, exposing the Massachusetts persecution of Quakers. 2nd edition 1702, with a "Postscript of the judgements of God that have befallen divers of the Persecutors".

disposed of Robert Barclay's Appologies and the names of those persons they have given them to.

A further large consignment of books was ordered by Gloucestershire within three months, in spite of the previous strain on their common fund.

Naylsworth, 30.iii.1704. We Received a letter to know how many of Charles Marshal's Journall books and Epistles¹ we will take of. Agreed to send for 100.

At times the records reveal a certain anxiety felt in London lest the publishers of Friends' books should become discouraged through inadequate sales, and an emphatic Minute was sent down to the counties from the Yearly Meeting of 1711.

It being represented to this Meeting that ye quantity of Bookes agreed on by some meetings will be no way Encouraging to ye Press but Rather an apparent Loss which is contrary to ye Desire and mind of this meeting. . . . We doe therefore Recommend to ye Consideration of Each Quarterly Meeting yt their Representatives come up prepared next year not only to discharge all their former Contracts and Agreements for Bookes Delivered But also to give encouragement by Entering into Some new ones with ye Printer.

The Quarterly Meeting Minutes note similar requests on various occasions.

Gloster, 29.xii.1704. We Received a letter from the Second day morning meeting at London to know how many of George Fox's Doctrinall Books² we would take of to Incourage the Printer. . . . Agreed to take of 13.

At first sight, such a number would not appear to be an over-generous encouragement to the printer, but there is another side to the picture. One of the thirteen books thus ordered by the Quarterly Meeting in 1704 is still at Cirencester. "George's Doctrinalls," someone who may well have known

¹ Charles Marshall (1637-1698) convinced by Camm and Audland, Bristol 1654, extensive preaching tour 1670-2, attending 400 meetings. Collected writings published under the title *Sion's Travellers comforted, and the Disobedient warned*.

² *Gospel Truth Demonstrated, in a Collection of Doctrinal Books Containing Principles Essential to Christianity and Salvation, held amongst the People called Quakers* (1706).

Fox personally has written familiarly upon the fly-leaf. "Cost 18/-. Purchased for Robert King and Edward Robinson." This was a high price even for a leather-bound folio, and what the sum actually meant to Friends of the day can be appreciated by a reference to current values. In Gloucestershire at about the same period a weaver was earning from 10/- to 12/- a week, and a considerable number of Quakers in the Cotswold area were engaged in this particular employment. A carpenter's wages were approximately 9/-, weekly, and a farm labourer's the traditional 9d. a day. Bread was 1d. a lb., beef 3d., and cheese 4d. It is not surprising therefore that the country Quarterly Meetings could only take a limited supply of these high-priced books, and that the sensible plan existed of two Friends sharing a purchase.

The central place which such volumes would take in the Quaker household of the past is readily seen, and a homely example from Cirencester well illustrates this point. Among the still earlier books upon the shelves is the Collection of Edward Burrough with the arresting title: *The Memorable Works of a Son of Thunder and Consolation . . . Printed for the Good and Benefit of Generations to come in the year 1672*. This volume has been put to the use more frequently associated with the family Bible, and records upon its last page the marriage of the owner and the births of his children. There is also added the family "Recipe for ye Cholick", an interesting assortment of medicinal herbs and roots "infused in three quarts of ye best brandy, to be taken three spoonsfull att a time or more".

Even the medium-priced books would be something of a luxury in the average Quaker home when privately purchased. The second edition of Fox's *Journal* (1709), in two volumes, cost 10/-. Barclay's *Apology* was 4/- in English, and 1/- more in French, Spanish, or Latin, "for the Information of Strangers". Friends of Nailsworth meeting in 1709 ordered ten copies of Ambrose Rigge's collected works *Constancy in the Truth*,¹ "ye price being 2/6 per book." Most of the well-known Journals, substantial 8vo volumes such as those

¹ Ambrose Rigge, of Westmorland (c. 1638-1704/5), settled at Gatton, Surrey, as a schoolmaster, to the indignation of the parish priest. "He thinks' to roost here, and impudently presumes to teach youth in his house." *Second Period of Quakerism*, p. 527.

written by William Edmundson and Thomas Chalkley, ranged in price from 3/- to 4/6. The best-seller of the period among Gloucestershire meetings was Anthony Pearson's *Great Case of Tithes*,¹ for as many as 400 copies were ordered in 1731. The tithe question was always a burning one, and this book, costing only 1/- in paper wrapper, could be widely distributed.

Penn's many writings were sold at varying prices from 30/- which bought the two magnificent folios of his *Collected Works* (1726), down to 4d. the price of his *Key*. The subtitle of this extremely popular booklet was *How to distinguish the Religion professed by the People called Quakers from the Misrepresentations of their Adversaries*," and it proved so useful that before the author's death it had reached twelve editions in English and had been translated into Welsh, French, and Danish. Penn appears to have been the only early Friend honoured by his publishers with a bibliography, and the *Compleat Index* to his works could be had for 6d.

To Quakers of the mid-eighteenth century, one of the most interesting publications of all must have been the autobiography of Thomas Story, for he had travelled the length and breadth of the land and was well known even in remote country districts. The book was published at a time when Friends could remember the actual visits to their neighbourhood to which he alludes, and he had stayed in many of their homes. In 1745, the Quarterly meeting recorded: "We have Received an Advertisement of an History of the Life, Convincement and Travel of Thomas Story deceased, to be printed at Newcastle-upon-Tyne." Thomas Story had left a legacy for the widespread distribution of his book to Friends' meetings, but it was thought that even more copies would be needed to meet the great demand. Isaac Thompson of Newcastle accordingly printed a further supply of this expensive folio volume "at his own risque". Only seven Friends in Gloucestershire afforded it for their own homes, but the meeting-house copies, still in so many cases available to-day, must have been among the most borrowed of any in the early libraries.

¹ Anthony Pearson (1628-c. 1670), Justice of the Peace in the northern counties, convinced by Nayler in 1653. Wrote "the standard book against tithes" in 1657, of which a fourth and enlarged edition was printed in 1730.

The production of Quaker books was not confined to England. Holland had been the stronghold of a small group of Friends from early days with a Yearly Meeting set up by Fox, and an Amsterdam printer had been the first to give Barclay's *Apology* to the world in its original Latin form, two years before it appeared in English. In 1720 the translation was planned of another famous work, Sewel's *History*, which had been first published in the Dutch capital in 1717.

Tetbury, 30.vi.1720. We Received some papers of Proposals for Printing ye History of the Christaine People called Quakers in English, done from ye Dutch . . .

These proposals materialized two years later in the English edition of 1722, *The History of the Rise, Increase, and Progress of the Christian People called Quakers, Intermixed with several Remarkable Occurrences. Written in Low-Dutch by William Sewel and by himself translated into English.* The price was 14/-. This weighty volume was evidently regarded with respect by local Friends. "This Book belongs to the Meeting," they wrote in the Cirencester copy, "and It's desired that it be kept clean and brought to ye Monthly Meeting once every Month."

When 1733 the first part of Besse's *Abstract of the Sufferings of Friends, 1650-1660*, was printed, Gloucestershire subscribed for 18, one for every particular meeting. The second part appeared five years later, and the counties were invited to correct it locally before publication.

Cirencester, 26.ix.1734. We Received from ye Meeting for Sufferings ye Abstract of Sufferings of Friends, 1660-1665, for our Perusall, in order to Rectifie any mistake we can apprehend with Respect to Names of Places or Persons.

The early volumes of *Sufferings* thus corrected still remain at Cirencester. It is comparatively rare to find them now in a Meeting-house library, for soon after, in 1753, there appeared his larger and more complete *Collection of Sufferings*, which entirely superseded the earlier work. This was not the first time that the co-operation of local Friends in the production of historical material had been suggested. In the opening years of the century they had furnished reports for the *Collection* which, preserved among Quaker archives, was

published by the Friends' Historical Society in 1907 under the title *The First Publishers of Truth*. The request from London for this information which was to prove so valuable to future Quaker historians was noted thus :

Naylsworth, 29.vi.1704. We Received a letter from the Second day Morning Meeting at London desiring an account of what faithfull labourers in the Gospell came first amongst us, if any dyed the place where, and their dyeing sayings with any other remarkeable things.

The official gathering together of death-bed testimonies began in 1701 with the publication of *Piety Promoted*, first edited by John Tomkins. The counties received a note from the Yearly Meeting of 1710 that " John Field hath now undertaken to Collect (in order to be printed) the dyeing sayings of faithfull friends as John Tomkins had done before, to whom you may send them." In his preface to the first volume in 1701 John Tomkins states quite simply his reasons for the work : Having in the course of my reading, met with many excellent sayings of our dying friends, that afforded me much satisfaction of mind, I have collected some of them together for the benefit of others : knowing that usually the words of dying persons make deeper impression on the minds of men, than words spoken at other times." It is this simplicity, allied to a genuine devotion, which redeems the narratives from morbidity, and it is to the credit of Friends that at least they turned to worth-while religious uses the tendency to dwell upon death-bed scenes so general in eighteenth century literature.

It is clear that the books were widely read up and down the country, for each Part as it appeared went through two, three, and sometimes four, new editions.

Quaker youth was even encouraged to study the work intensively, for in 1737 a translation into Latin was made by William Massey, a Wandsworth schoolmaster : *Pietas Promota . . . Studiosæ Juventiis latine reddita*. The influence of the publication was extended in 1770 by the translation into French of Seventy-two of the earlier narratives, the translator being Claude Gay, a native of Lyons resident in London. An interesting detail is that while the general narratives were in French only, " the expressions of

the dying Friend were in parallel columns of French and English".¹

The young people of the Society were brought up on them and towards the end of the century the narratives concerning the deaths of children were collected into one volume: *Examples for Youth in remarkable instances of Early Piety*. Selected by William Rawes, Junr., 1797.

It must have been an encouragement to the more remote meetings to know that if any of their members produced writings of particular merit, these might be printed in London for the edification of the whole Society. The Gloucestershire Minutes give one such example from the period.

Thornbury, 28.vi.1716. This meeting appoints . . . (6 Friends) . . . to Inspect into the writeings of Mary Edwards deceased, In order to see if they may be thought fitt to be sent to London to be Printed.

Mary Edwards had been a Minister of power among the first generation of Gloucestershire Friends. She had interviewed the Justices of Assize in 1685 on behalf of those imprisoned in Gloucester Castle. The report on her writings was favourable—"they may be of service to be printed"—and they were therefore sent to London to be submitted to the Second-day Morning Meeting. Over three years passed before the reply came back.

Gloster, 23.xii.1719/20. We Received two letters from London concerning some papers, or Epistles, of Mary Edwards of this County, (which was sent to London some time agoe in order to be printed) in which friends of London desires to have some short Testimony of the life and Service and Example for the Truth among friends of the said Mary Edwards . . . An Account being brought Into this meeting It's agreed that Thomas Loveday should take care to send it up to London to be printed with ye said Epistles,² and that this meeting should take of 150 more than is usually sent down by the Printer.

¹ See the valuable historical introduction to *Piety Promoted, Tenth Part*, by Joseph Gurney Bevan, 1810.

² *Some Brief Epistles, Testimonies, and Counsel of Mary Edwards*, published with a preface by George Whitehead, 1720.

The desire of local Friends that their books should be read widely by the general public is clearly evident.

Naylsworth, 29.vi.1732. Agree'd we should send for 18 Books more of *Ye Answer to Patrick Smith*,¹ for one to be sent to every particular meeting, and ye other six to be put in ye Bookseller Shops at Gloucester and Cirencester and ye Care alsoe of advertiseing ye said Book in ye Gloucester Journall² is left to William Humphris.

This experiment with the local booksellers led to a concern from Gloucestershire being laid before Yearly Meeting a few months later.

Tetbury, 4.iii.1733. Agreed that a Proposition be made to ye Yearly Meeting in London to Consider if It may not be of Service . . . yt Friends Books yt are sent down, may by Friends of ye severall countys be sent to severall or all ye Booksellers in this Nation, and Friends to allow ye Booksellers good Profit for what they sell, which we think may be of Service in Spreading of Truth.

The Yearly Meeting responded favourably to this idea, for soon after there is mention of "A Minute of ye Last Yearly Meeting wherein we find it advised for ye Spreading of Truth yt some Friends should be appoynted to treat with ye Booksellers of the County to know if they are willing to sell our Friends Books with good allowance for what they sell, they to Return them as cannot be sold." The ambitious suggestion that Friends' books might find a place in the shops of "all ye Booksellers in this Nation" lends point to Neave Brayshaw's comment: "The 18th century was not so destitute of attempts to spread a knowledge of Quakerism as is often supposed."³

The printers whom the Yearly Meeting of 1711 were so anxious to encourage were the Sowle family, the leading

¹ Patrick Smith, Vicar of Great Paston, Hunts, published in 1732 *A Preservative Against Quakerism*. This was answered the same year by Joseph Besse in *A Defence of Quakerism*.

² The first Gloucestershire Weekly Paper, founded 1722, and of considerable influence in the West Midlands because of the position of Gloucester on the main coach-roads.

³ Introducing an account of the Circular Yearly Meetings of the Midlands. *Handbook for Birmingham Yearly Meeting*, 1908.

publishers of Friends books over a considerable period of time. Andrew Sowle, the founder of the firm, had been frequently involved in the persecution of the later seventeenth century. His presses were smashed, and at one time about a thousand reams of printed books were taken from him. He seems to have submitted with cheerful courtesy, for it was his custom "when his persecutors had done their work and seized upon all, to set meat and drink before them". He was evidently a man of attractive personality, and held in high esteem by the many well-known Friends whose books he had produced. "The night before he died (in 1695), William Penn came somewhat late to visit him . . . and prayed that the Lord would give him the reward of his labour; for through him many blessed truths had been brought into the world."¹ Apparently Andrew Sowle had no son, for his wife Jane and his daughter Tacy successively followed him as heads of the firm. "She is both a printer and a bookseller," wrote a fellow publisher of Tacy Sowle in 1704; "she understands her work very well, being a good compositor herself."² Most of her books were produced from White Hart Court, Gracious (Gracechurch) Street, her premises adjoining the historic Meeting-house.

The books issued by this firm were of a very high quality. They used a particularly fine binding with a pleasing design stamped upon the leather, and it is possible at a glance to select their productions from many old meeting-house shelves. It was their custom to bind their trade lists into the back of the books they had printed, and these give valuable information as to the status of the firm, and the general books they were publishing in addition to those of largely Quaker appeal. The house was interested in medical works from its early days, and a proof of its reputation outside the Society was the publication, in Andrew Sowle's time, of a treatise by one of the highest doctors of the land. *Queries relating to the Practice of Physick, with Remarks upon some of them. Modestly Proposed to the Serious Consideration of Mankind . . . for their Information how their Lives and Healths may be better preserved.* By H. Chamberlen, Physician in Ordinary to the Late King Charles the Second. The treat-

¹ *Piety Promoted*, 1789 edition, Vol. 2. Account of Andrew Sowle.

² *Antiquarian Researches among the Early Printers of Friends' Books.* Published anonymously in Philadelphia, 1844.

ment of this particular King at the hands of his doctors in his last illness has become proverbial, and it is good to know that at least their intentions were better than their practice. A medical work which appeared in the succeeding generation is worthy of note as indicating a very advanced view for the early eighteenth century, and it is interesting that it should have been sponsored by Quaker publishers: *The good House-wife made a Doctor . . . Being a Plain way of Nature's own Prescribing, to Prevent and Cure most diseases . . . by Diet and Kitchin-physick only.* By Thomas Tryon, Student in Physick.¹ A companion volume attempted to explore the significance of dreams and the causes of mental illness. *A Treatise of Dreams and Visions . . . the Causes Nature and Uses of Nocturnal Representations To which is added A Discourse on the Cause and Cure of Phrensy, Madness, or Distraction.*

These book-lists, new from the London press, must have been studied constantly by the entire Quaker family when laying down Barclay's *Apology* or Sewel's *History*, and they doubtless served in small measure to keep country Friends in touch with the thought of the day. Every member of the household could find something of interest. The Quaker business man might buy, for 2/—, *A New Discourse of Trade . . . with several Weighty Points relating to the Companies of Merchants.* His children of school age could acquire, for 6d., *Instruction in right Spelling and Reading and Writing True English, with several Delightful things, very Useful and Necessary.* The word "delightful" could not often be applied to educational productions of the period, and it may be permissible to think that the Quaker publishers were pointing the way to the more attractive teaching of a later age.

Students of the early Quarterly Meeting Minutes cannot fail to be impressed with the close connection which existed between London and the provinces in Quaker circles, at a time when this was far from being the case in the general social life of the day, at any rate for those of humbler rank. The practical plan of appointing Friends in the city, as Correspondents who could be approached at any time, must have

¹ Thomas Tryon (1634-1703) was a writer also on mystical philosophy and vegetarianism and has been described as a link between Jacob Boehme and early Friends.

helped greatly to strengthen this connection, and their addresses, carefully copied into the Quarterly Meeting Book, of Gloucestershire, bring with them the atmosphere of eighteenth century London.

For 1731. William Clark. At ye Pensilvania Coffee House.

Daniel Weston. In Wapping. Winecooper.
Jos. Wood. Of Whitechappel. Cheese-
monger.

Thos. Jackson. At White Lyon Inn, Corn-
hill.

Thos. Smith. In Lombard St. Banker
and Jeweller.

At the Gloucestershire end the Correspondents were usually Friends of a similar substance. Daniel Bowly of Cirencester, Maltster: Thomas Loveday of Painswick and Stephen Wilkins of Nailsworth, both mill-owners in the Cotswold cloth trade. And among the many items of business dealt with by these representatives of Quakerism, whether in town or country, not the least important must have been the ordering and dispatching of the bales of Friends' books sent down so frequently by the carrier's eight-horsed waggon.

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