

Some Notes on Early Dictionary References to Quakers

DR. SAMUEL JOHNSON in his *Dictionary*, published first in two folio volumes in 1755 chose to ignore the terms *Quaker* and *Quakerism* or we might have headed this article with some designation culled from the wit of the most famous of English lexicographers. That the wit would not have been spared to save Friends' feelings we may suppose—but that would have been all in the English tradition until well into the eighteenth century—as a little investigation will show.

Before the time of the Commonwealth there had been few English dictionaries. Those of Robert Cawdrey, John Bullokar and Henry Cockeram are the ones which spring to mind—and they were mostly confined to the “hard” words—those not in general use, those derived from other languages and those with specialized meanings. At a period when the English language was rapidly developing and assimilating words from foreign, and particularly the classical, languages at an astonishing rate, these “hard” word lists were necessary, but as dictionaries they are incomplete, they avoid the common words—and the difficulties of definition which common words always present. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the “hard” word lists continued alongside the growing list of general dictionaries. It is therefore not surprising that not all the word lists calling themselves dictionaries issued during the period contain mention of Quakers or Quakerism.

Those who watch the development of language note the time-lag that occurs between the acceptance of a term (perhaps as slang, perhaps a technical term) in conversation and its admittance into the dictionary—the canon of good usage. We look, therefore, some years after Gervase Bennett first gave the nickname “Quakers” at Derby in 1650 before expecting appearance in print.

Edward Phillips, nephew of John Milton and educated at Oxford, first issued his *New World of English Words* in 1658. Of this work (lifted in large part from the earlier *Glossographia* of Thomas Blount the Roman Catholic), I have seen the 4th edition, published in 1678. His definition sets the tone for many future compilers :

Quakers, a modern Sect of Religious *Enthusiasm*, who took that denomination at first from their strange gestures, and quaking fits, which come upon them in thair publick Assemblies.

Here is an echo of Gervase Bennett's jibe at Fox and the tales—true, false, or exaggerated—of the ways in which some Friends were influenced at meetings during the early years of the Quaker movement. We shall see that this aspect of the received definition was never to die out during our period, although it gradually became pushed well into the background.

Elisha Coles, "schoolmaster, and teacher of the [English] tongue to foreigners," author of a treatise on shorthand, published a dictionary in 1676. His definitions seem largely based on Edward Phillips' *New World*, but much shorter, as our extract shows :

Quakers, friends, a sort of modern enthusiasts.¹

Although this definition is so short as to be practically unintelligible, it is interesting as the first acceptance of "Friends."

In 1702, J.K. (probably John Kersey, of whom more later) issued *A New English dictionary : or, a compleat collection of the most proper and significant words, and terms . . . commonly used in the language. With a continued short and clear exposition. The whole digested into alphabetical order ; and chiefly design'd for the benefit of young scholars, tradesmen, artificers, foreigners, and the female sex, who would learn to spell truly.* Branching from the earlier spelling-books this compilation marks an advance towards the general dictionaries of modern times. The definitions are short, but marked by common-sense. In the 3rd edition (1731) we read :

*Quakerism, the Opinions or Tenets of
The Quakers, Modern Sectaries first so called from their
quaking Fits and strange Gestures.*

The resemblance to the information given by Edward Phillips is striking—although paraphrased and condensed.

Cocker's English dictionary appeared in 1704. It was supposedly compiled by Edward Cocker "the late famous practioner in writing and arithmetick" (d. 1676), and revised by John Hawkins (d. 1692), but more probably was simply the protégé of a group of London booksellers. It was revised for a second edition in 1715, and a third edition (apparently unchanged) came out in 1724. The short account of the Quakers in this last edition was probably taken from some other source. It seems to refer in part to the Keithian controversies of the 1690's, and quotes the second of the two Declarations required for the certification of Friends under the Toleration Act of 1689 (the first Declaration being one of allegiance to the Crown).

Quakers, a Party or Sect in Religion, who first appeared in *England* about 1652. So called, because at first they were taken with Tremblings, Shakings, and Quakings of the whole Body, which they attributed to the Operation of the Holy Spirit, but that Symptom ceased long since. They assert Perfection in this Life ; That the Light within, or the natural Conscience, is the Rule of Life and Practice ; That no Man ought to take an Oath ; That human Learning is no Qualification for the Ministry ; That they ought not to say *You*, but *Thee* and *Thou* in Conversation (which is indeed more Grammatical) ; That they ought not to put off their Hats to any one. They were formerly very plain in their Habits, but that Humour is much abated, especially among their Women, who

¹ *An English Dictionary . . .* By E. Coles. 1696 edition. The wording is unchanged in the editions of 1713 and 1732.

wear the richest Silks, and the Men the finest Cloth, Hats, and Perriwigs. One that was one of their own Party has charg'd them, That they do not own Jesus Christ, who was Crucified at *Jerusalem*, to be the Son of God, but that they Spiritualize and Allegorize his Death and Satisfaction ; though the Profession they make in order to secure the Liberty of their Meetings, runs thus :

I, A.B. profess Faith in God the Father, and in Jesus Christ his Eternal Son, the True God, and in the Holy Spirit, one God blessed for evermore. And do acknowledge the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be given by Divine Inspiration.

Three years later, in 1707, another dictionary appeared under the title : *Glossographia Anglicana Nova*. The anonymous compiler acknowledged his debt to other lexicographers, and the description of Friends bears all the marks of being lifted from some much earlier work. The wording is unchanged in the second edition of 1719.

Quakers, a Sect of Christians appearing first in the North of *England* about the Year 1650 ; They say that the Holy Spirit enjoyns them to use *Thee* and *Thou*, or the Plain Language ; and that *Quaking* (from whence their Name) is sometimes used by the Power of God, and justify their Extravagant Emotions from Texts of Scripture ; They suppose new Revelations still continued, and that their Ministers may thus supernaturally be enlightened up to the Degree of Prophecy and Vision ; They suffer Women to speak in their Assemblies, &c.

John Kersey comes into the picture again in the following year with his comprehensive but abridged general dictionary, *Dictionarium Anglo-Britannicum* (1708). His definitions¹ take us right back to Edward Phillips and Elisha Coles, but we now find the noun "Quakerism" firmly established in the language.

Quakerism, the Doctrine or Opinion of the Quakers.

Quakers, a modern Sect of Enthusiasts who took Name at first from their strange Gestures and quaking fits.

This definition is repeated almost word for word in the successive editions of the most popular pre-Johnsonian dictionary *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary*, by Nathan Bailey :

QUAKERISM, the Doctrine or Opinion of the Quakers.

QUAKERS, a modern Sect, who took their name first from their strange Gestures and quaking Fits.

Nathan Bailey was compiler of at least three dictionaries. He appears to have been a Seventh-day Baptist, and kept a boarding school at Stepney where he died in 1742. The first edition of *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary* appeared in 1721 and the thirtieth in 1802. In 1727, however, another work, apparently intended to supplement the first, came out : *The Universal Etymological English Dictionary, volume 2*. In this work Bailey wanders further than even Cocker from the first purpose of a dictionary and

¹ Unchanged in the 2nd edition, 1715.

gives much miscellaneous information, as the following extract shows :¹

QUAK'ER . . . a professor of Quakerism.

QUAK'ERS [a sect so denominated from those quaking motions and gestures, they appeared in at their meeting or assemblies for devotion] they appeared in *England* about the year 1650 ; some of their particular tenets are,

1. That they are required by the holy spirit to use *Thee* and *Thou*, or the plain language.

2. That quivering and quaking are now sometimes used by the power of God, and justify these extravagant motions from the scripture.

3. They believe new revelations still to be continued, and that their ministers may thus be enlightened up to the degree of prophesy and vision.

4. They own a distinction in the Godhead, an essential quality between Father, Son, and Holy Ghost ; but except against the word person, as too gross to express it.

5. They believe extraordinary commission or special manifestations of God to his children, in the highest degree of immediate revelations.

6. And from hence they infer that by virtue of this privilege, their ministers receive the gospel in the same manner as *Paul did, not of Man, but by the Revelation of Jesus Christ*.

7. They say that those who are not infallible are not in the spirit, and by consequence no ministers, and that every true member of the true church has certainty and infallibility of judgment, and knows the infallibility of the truth he professes ; yet they do not lodge this infallibility in any private person, nor in their whole church ; but that this infallible spirit, privately or particularly works in the hearts of men ; and that those who improve their talent, have the same rule of the holy spirit to read and understand the scriptures, that the apostles and prophets had when they wrote.

8. They deny that the holy scriptures are the only object (i.e. rule) of faith, or that the letter of the scripture (or written word) is the sword of the spirit.

9. They assert that the light within is the rule for every person to walk by, and that God speaks to men now in the same immediate manner, and as he did to the holy apostles and prophets.

10. They affirm that the lives of the saints are not at all sinful, and that it is the doctrine of devils to preach that men shall have sin and be in a warfare as long as they are on earth.

11. Quakers administer neither baptism nor the Lord's Supper, and disown the institution of both sacraments.

12. They likewise hold swearing unlawful.

13. They acknowledge that the civil magistrate is ordained

¹ Quotation from the 3rd edition, 1737.

of God to punish with the sword ; but say that it is not lawful for any of their party to make use of it.

14. They declare against paying of tithes, calling it an Antichristian yoke of bondage.

Nathan Bailey in this long entry gives the reader some idea of the specifically Quaker testimonies, which none of the previous compilers had succeeded in doing. For his third dictionary *Dictionarium Britannicum : Or a more Compleat Universal Etymological English Dictionary than any Extant* (1730, and 1736) Bailey goes back to his first work, and we find :

QUA'KERISM . . . the principles or tenets of quakers.

QUA'KERS, a modern sect, who first got their name from their gestures and quaking fits.

Close on the heels of Nathan Bailey came Thomas Dyche and William Pardon's *A New General English Dictionary* (1735). This was intended "for the Information of the Unlearned," those without knowledge of foreign languages, schools where the only language taught was English, and "the fair Sex." Here then we find a simple (if wordy) extract for the nouns Quaker, and Quakerism, and may imagine the extent of a simple eighteenth century Englishman's knowledge about the "people called Quakers."

QUAKER (S.) one that shakes or shivers with cold, fear, or some other agitation of the mind, from whence a large sect of Christians are so called, especially in *England*, and the dominions thereof, that at their first appearing about the year 1650, seemed to be agitated by some supernatural power, and acted and behaved as if possessed, pretending to the immediate and extraordinary inspiration of God's holy Spirit, that external ordinances are abolished, and that no sacraments are necessary, but that in every action the Spirit of God guides the faithful, and inspires them with the true knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures, &c.

QUAKERISM (S.) the principles or tenets of the people called Quakers.

Dyche and Pardon's *Dictionary* went through nearly a score of editions before the close of the eighteenth century. It is the last of the encyclopaedic type of dictionary issued before the appearance of Samuel Johnson's great folios which I have found.

"J. Sparrow, Gent." in his *New English dictionary, containing a compleat collection of useful English words* (1739)¹ seems to have gone back to Bailey's *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* for his short definitions :

QUAKERISM, the Doctrine or Opinion of the Quakers.

QUAKERS, a modern Sect, who were so called from their quaking Fits.

¹ De Witt T. Starnes and Gertrude E. Noyes, in their book *The English Dictionary from Cawdrey to Johnson, 1604-1755* (Chapel Hill, 1946), state that this dictionary is identical with three others published anonymously (1737), and over the names of B. N. Defoe (1735) and James Manlove (1741).

Benjamin Martin, ploughboy, teacher, inventor and writer, set out to construct a dictionary on scientific principles, without any encyclopaedic features. For all Martin's theories, his definitions of Quakerism and Quakers are not noticeably different from those of his predecessors (indeed, they seem to come almost word for word from Nathan Bailey's *Dictionarium Britannicum*). *Lingua Britannica Reformata* was published in two editions, in 1749 and 1754. The definitions given read :

QUA'KERISM, the principles, or tenets of the quakers.

QUA'KERS, a modern sect, who first got their name from their quaking, or trembling fits, in the exercise of their religion.

Thus we come to 1754, the year before the publication of Johnson's dictionary, and a convenient resting-place from which to look back on the changes in definition and description of Friends in the dictionaries of the past hundred years—and forward (perhaps through the eye of Daniel Fenning, whose *Royal English Dictionary*, second edition 1763, reads) :

QUAKERS, S. [so called from the extraordinary agitations they were under when moved, as they say by the spirit] a religious sect that arose during the interregnum, and founded by George Fox. Their particular tenets are built on Scripture misunderstood, and consist in believing that every person is at present inspired in the same manner as the Apostles ; hence they reject a standing ministry, and hold, that no one is authorised to preach, unless immediately inspired by the Holy Ghost ; they reject the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper as outwardly administered ; hold oaths on any occasion unlawful ; are extremely plain in their apparel, as well as in their language ; look on payment of tythes as inconsistent with the gospel, and are remarkably simple, and in general just in their dealings.

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