

Agrarian Unrest and the Early Lancashire Quakers

IN *The Quakers in Puritan England* (1964) Professor Hugh Barbour has suggested that Quakerism had its strength initially in the north of England, where the tenants had strongly protested against paying rising rents and impropriated tithes. Unfortunately he does not establish a direct connection between agrarian unrest and the rise of the Quakers.¹ To establish this, we need to know whether any of the early Friends had personally resisted the demands of their landlords before joining the ranks of George Fox. What happened in Cumberland, Westmorland and north Yorkshire is for another historian to discover, but the evidence for the Lonsdale hundred of Lancashire is very suggestive.

It is well known that north-west Lancashire was a stronghold of Quakerism during the Interregnum and that Swarthmoor Hall, the home of Judge Fell, was the centre of Quaker organization in the entire north of England. Few are aware that north-west Lancashire was also an area of sharp agrarian conflict. Both before and after the Civil War some landlords were imposing excessive "gressoms" or fines, reinforcing their claims to labour services and other servile dues, and refusing to recognize the tenant's right of inheritance.² The sixteen-forties also witnessed bitter opposition to the payment of tithes, especially in the parishes of Hawkshead and Cartmel.

In Cartmel the lay impropiator was Thomas Preston of Holker. Because of his royalism during the Civil War, he had been heavily mulcted by the Parliamentary authorities.³ Anxious to raise money, he tried to increase the rate of tithes and many of the parishioners refused to pay. On 7th September

¹ The only example given is the case of Grayrigg, Westmorland, on p. 77. But here he does not name any rebellious tenants, or their relatives, who subsequently became Quakers.

² B. G. Blackwood, "The Lancashire Cavaliers and their tenants", *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, Vol. 117 (1965), pp. 24-31.

³ *Calendar of Committee for Compounding*, ii. 1163-4, v. 3268.

1649 thirty of the inhabitants of Cartmel parish were summoned to appear before the Justices to answer complaints of Thomas Preston "touching the subtraccon" of their "tythes." On 1st June 1650 over one hundred of the parishioners were ordered to appear before the Justices to answer another complaint of Thomas Preston regarding non-payment of tithes.¹ In the circumstances it was only to be expected that the people of Cartmel would welcome to their district any religious leader, such as George Fox, who had denounced the compulsory payment of tithes, and Cartmel did in fact become a centre of Quakerism. As early as 1655 the sum of £1 5s. was contributed to the Quakers' Funds by "friends at Newton" in Cartmel.² The non-existence of Quaker minute books for this period is rather disappointing, but the existing evidence would suggest that George Fox recruited some of his supporters from those who had refused to pay their tithes in 1649 and 1650. The man who most stubbornly resisted the demands of Thomas Preston was Thomas Atkinson of Newton, who had denounced tithes as "popish and superstitious ceremonies" and who, on 1st November 1649, was said to be "behind for four or five yeares" in respect of payment.³ Fox mentions in his *Journal* a certain Thomas Atkinson whom he describes as "a friende of Cartmell,"⁴ and in 1653 the same Thomas Atkinson defended Quakers in a pamphlet entitled *Divers Queries*.⁵ Two other Cartmel parishioners who had refused to pay tithes to Thomas Preston were Richard Waller and John Rowland Braithwaite,⁶ and both seem to have become prominent Quakers. A Richard Waller appears as a Furness Quaker in 1654. A year later a person by the same name went as a Quaker missionary to Ireland.⁷ The name John Braithwaite is mentioned in Fox's *Journal* under date 1652. He

¹ Lancashire Record Office, Cavendish of Holker Papers, DDCa 8/39. Thirty-two papers concerning non-payment of tithe, 12th April 1649-5th June 1650. See nos. 9, 11, 22, 27, 30, 31.

² Friends House Library, Swarthmore MS. i. 252.

³ DDCa 8/39 no. 27.

⁴ G. Fox, *Journal*, ed. Penney (Cambridge, 1911), ii. 39.

⁵ See G. Fox & Richard Hubberthorne, *Truth's Defence* (York, 1653), pp. 1-45.

⁶ DDCa 8/39, nos. 30, 31.

⁷ B. Nightingale, *Early Stages of the Quaker Movement in Lancashire* (1922), p. 35; G. Fox, *Journal*, ii. 331, 336. N. Penney thought that the home of this particular missionary was probably Cartmel (*ibid.*, ii. 472-3).

is described as a youth of Cartmel who "became a fine minister of the Gospell", and John Braithwaite was in fact one of the Quaker missionaries to the south of England in 1654.¹ Other Cartmel parishioners refusing to pay tithes in 1649 and 1650 were Richard Britton, John Fell, Thomas Barrow and John Barrow. All these are Quaker names and appear in records of the 1660s. Also included in Besse's lists of Lonsdale Quakers for the years 1659-61 are many other persons who, although not specifically described as natives of Cartmel, were almost certainly some of the rebellious parishioners of the earlier period.²

There were also some Friends at Hawkshead who, just after the Restoration, were persecuted for their faith.³ Here, too, there had been strong opposition to the payment of tithes before George Fox arrived in the district. In 1646 Nathaniel Nicolson, the Roundhead lay impropiator, gave to the court of the duchy of Lancaster the names of thirty-five inhabitants of Hawkshead who had "for fower yeares last past . . . refused to pay any manner of tythes" to him.⁴ A study of their surnames suggests that many of these people were related to the Hawkshead Quakers.⁵

The early Friends also obtained support from those who had opposed rising rents and other dues. In 1639 and 1640 the tenants of Blawith, near Lake Coniston, had shown bitter hostility to their rack-renting landlord, William Ambrose, and after the Civil War two of their leaders—William Coward and Robert Wilson—seem to have joined the Quakers. In 1652 the tenants of Heaton, near Lancaster, told the Committee for Compounding that John Brockholes, their deceased Royalist lord, had refused to recognize their heritable rights and had forced them to take leases for lives involving "most unreasonable services by plowing, harrowing, shear-

¹ *Ibid.*, i. 46; E. E. Taylor, *The Valiant Sixty* (1951), p. 40.

² DDCa 8/39 nos. 22, 30, 31. Besse's lists of Quakers appear in B. Nightingale, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-58. See also pp. 110, 114 for Cartmel Quakers named in the records of quarter sessions. All the above-mentioned Cartmel parishioners, except Thomas Atkinson and John Braithwaite, appear in the Lancs. Register Digests in Friends House Library.

³ B. Nightingale, *op. cit.*, pp. 34, 110, 113, 114.

⁴ Public Record Office, *Duchy of Lancaster Pleadings*, D.L.1/373. This extract from Crown-copyright material appears by permission of the Controller, H.M. Stationery Office.

⁵ Some, like Gyles Walker and Edward Braithwaite, are later to be found in the Quaker Burial Registers.

ing, mowing and other personall and slavish burthens (which they had never before answered).” One of the more vociferous tenants—Thomas Hynd—seems to have become a Quaker, and was arrested in 1660 for attending a meeting of Friends at Lancaster.¹ It was, however, the most militant and exploited tenants—those of Yealand as well as of Cartmel—who supplied the Quakers with the most numerous and zealous recruits.

In 1642, 1648 and 1649 the tenants of Yealand, near Carnforth, complained to the Chancellor of the duchy of Lancaster about the excessive fines imposed by their landlord, Sir George Middleton of Leighton. The tenants told the court that their landlord was entitled to receive both general and particular fines of four years’ ancient rent: instead, he had demanded fines of up to thirty years’ rent. Occasional labour services and food rents were another grievance. These lingered on in parts of north-west Lancashire until well into the eighteenth century, but in the previous century the Yealand tenants already regarded them as obsolete. In 1649 the tenants of Yealand admitted that “by the Custome they ought . . . to performe such boones of plowinge etc And rent hens etc.” But on 12th November 1651 the jury of the court of the manor of Yealand declared that neither labour services nor food rents were authorized by manorial custom.² The following year George Fox held “a great meetinge” at Yealand,³ and apparently gained the active support of some of the tenants. Among the prominent opponents of Middleton in 1642, 1648, 1649 and 1651 were men with names like Hubbersty, Backhouse and Cumming, which later became well known in Quaker circles.⁴ Moreover, one of the jury which in 1651 declared against servile dues was John Hubberthorne.⁵ His wife, Jane, was shortly to

¹ For landlord-tenant relations in Blawith and Heaton, see B. G. Blackwood, *op. cit.*, pp. 27, 29–30. For the Quakers named, see B. Nightingale, *op. cit.*, pp. 29, 51, 110.

² B. G. Blackwood, *op. cit.*, pp. 25–7.

³ *Journal*, i. 61.

⁴ See Register Digests at Friends House. For the names of the Yealand tenants, see D.L.1/370, 379, 382 in P.R.O. and Yealand Court Roll, 1651, among the Towneley Papers in the Lancashire Record Office.

⁵ Yealand Court Roll, 1651. John Hubberthorne had previously been prominent among those tenants opposing Sir George Middleton’s heavy fines (D.L.1/382). For an account of the Hubberthorne family, see Elizabeth Brockbank, *Richard Hubberthorne of Yealand* (1929).

become a Quaker, while his son, Richard, was one of the earliest of Fox's travelling preachers. A number of other Yealand tenants, such as Thomas Watson and Mabel Jackson, later became Quakers, although not particularly prominent ones.¹

It seems, therefore, clear that in north-west Lancashire a number of the early Friends, or their relatives, had been both victims and opponents of landlord oppression. If similar evidence could be obtained for other parts of England, it might go some way towards explaining the early Quaker concern for social justice.

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¹ See Burial Registers (Digests at Friends House).