

A Woolman Attribution Denied

“IT seems improbable that a major Woolman document should still be lying, unknown and unprinted in Friends House Library; yet such appears to be the case.” So wrote Ormerod Greenwood in *Jnl. F.H.S.* xlviii, 1957, p. 147 and he proceeded to edit with appropriate introduction an “Extract of a Letter from John Woolman to Susanna Lightfoot.” It is a long piece of about six printed pages, which is long for even a whole letter of Woolman. It is taken from a copy “Wrote 17th of 4 mo. 1800 at London by J. C. [atchpool]” in Catchpool MSS. II, 305–10, and collated with two of three other known copies which vary only slightly.

Having lately steeped myself in Woolman, I discovered on rereading this that it did not seem to be at all in Woolman’s style. This is, I know, a subjective judgment, but it remains with me. I can only submit it to others who know Woolman well. The editor himself says of this piece “Here, more than anywhere even in the Journal, he [John Woolman] reveals the dark night of the soul which he sometimes knew, in phrases that have none of the careful simplicity of the Journal, but pour out in breathless profusion, the more moving from their formless and impetuous flood.” If there is any doubt of Woolman’s authorship, that doubt should at least be mentioned before the piece is further cited, as is done in Edwin H. Cady’s *John Woolman*, 1965, p. 136 note, as an example in Woolman of the survival of the “chanting” style of the early Quaker rhetoric. It is indeed an attractive piece of eighteenth century Quaker introspective writing. No wonder that the editor accepted its attribution to John Woolman.

At one point at least he was in error as he also later discovered. The piece had been previously published. It appeared in *Letters on Religious Subjects written by divers Friends Deceased Now first published by John Kendall*, London, 1802, Letter XVIII, pp. 49–57. There are several quite minor differences from the MS. and towards the end about twenty lines less in the Kendall publication. But none of the 138 pieces in that printed volume have an addressee’s

or writer's name. Without examination it is natural to assume that the Catchpool MS. copy is the ancestor of the form printed two years later. From a comparison of a note dated 1815 and signed by J. C. "One of his near connections" on page 40 of the *Memoirs of . . . John Kendall*, London, 1815, and the name Joseph Catchpool on the Colchester Monthly Meeting testimony, on p. xiii, I assume that there was a close connection between the two men.

In 1803 John Kendall published in London a second volume of *Letters on Religious Subjects*, as he anticipated in the first. There were seventy four, but this time he indicated the name of the author without exception, or at least the initials, and frequently the addressee. In two cases, letters 25 and 32, they are signed "John Woolman."

In 1805 Volume I was republished in Burlington by David Allinson, and at the end was an index of writers to "most of the foregoing letters," except Nos. 14, 18 to 20 and 123-132. With these exceptions they are assigned to Samuel Fothergill, Dr. John Ritty, Sophia Hume, and Richard Shackleton. All these Friends were contemporaries of John Woolman.

When the two volumes were reprinted as one in Philadelphia in 1831 these names were added as signatures in Volume I, though the second London edition of 1820, which also gave the two volumes in one, followed the practice of 1802 and 1803 for the respective volumes. It will be observed therefore that the alleged letter (Vol. 1, No. 18) of John Woolman to Susanna Lightfoot remained one of relatively few which never acquired in the later printed form the name of author or addressee, not even when reprinted in the American cities where Woolman had been best known. That of course does not argue that he did not write it, as would be confirmed if some other attribution should have been made or should still come to light.

HENRY J. CADBURY

ORMEROD GREENWOOD writes:

The attribution does not depend merely on the Catchpool MS., since there are a number of other MS. copies, one in Friends House MS. Portfolio 31, 88, another (which we collated) in the Proctor commonplace book, and yet another

(uncollated) in the Nicholson MSS. (Liverpool). All of these attribute the letter to Woolman. In addition, it is attributed to Woolman in a contemporary note on the flyleaf of the first edition of Kendall's *Letters on religious subjects* Vol. I, in Friends House library. There was thus considerable evidence for claiming it when it was published. Kendall's first volume contains two other (authentic) Woolman letters.

Yet I now feel that Henry J. Cadbury is right, and that it is probably not Woolman's; the length and style sound wrong, the circumstances are unknown, and all the copies we have seem to depend on one original which may have been in error.

Incidentally, there is an excellent short biography of Susanna Lightfoot (not used in the published note on her) in *A collection of memorials*, Philadelphia, 1787, pp. 400-09; it does not, however, throw any light on the letter or on any connection with Woolman.

Historical Research

Historical research for university degrees in the United Kingdom: Theses completed 1965. (Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research. Theses supplement no. 17, May 1966.)

- 91 The Quaker understanding of the ministerial vocation, with special reference to the eighteenth century. By Mrs. Lucia K. Beamish. (Professor H. Chadwick.) Oxford B.Litt.
 128 John Bright and the representation of Manchester in the House of Commons, 1847-57. By J. Skinner. Wales M.A.

Research on Irish history in Irish universities, 1965-6: Theses in progress in January 1966.

Dublin, Trinity College. M.Litt.

J. H. Holt—The Society of Friends and Irish relief during the great famine.