

Unsettled Friends

Church Government and the Origins of Membership
Presidential address to the Friends' Historical Society, 1967

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IN first month 1706 Dorking Monthly Meeting decided that Friends had no obligation to support James Carpenter, because he had been "Chaffering in divers things which he doth not understand". I cannot be the first President of this Society who would have been in danger of a like fate, were it not for the hidden support of the Librarian. I trust that he will index this paper under M as well as C.

My interest in this subject began from an unpublished transcript, which I made many years ago, of the minutes of Huntingdon Monthly Meeting. In twelfth month 1692 that meeting decided to give Richard Taylor of Coln corn to the value of five shillings "not as a Friend, but as an object of Pitty, to whom they extend their liberality". Richard Taylor was apparently a Friend of some weight, referred to as early as 1675; his decline to be an "object of Pitty" is not chronicled. Similarly in eleventh month 1693, one Ephraim Willis fell sick of the small-pox, and Friends "after diligent Considerason weighing his Dissolut and Loose Conversason cannot as a Friend Relieve him but hath out of Compassion (sent him twenty shillings) as an object of Pitty". The first use of the phrase "Object of pity" was in 1683, when William Lockington was given five shillings "he being a poor man, and one that makes friends graves".

These references drew my attention to the rather obvious fact that, although there was no precise definition of membership until 1737, there must have been, at a much earlier time, a fairly clear idea of those who were and were not Friends; and I wondered how much we could find out about the implicit concept of membership in those early days, and about its origins. The story, as William Charles Braithwaite tells it, is of a sad decline from a time when "a person was known as a Quaker, through professing with Friends" to a

Church containing members by birth and tradition. Rufus Jones describes the process more clearly:

Persons who had been "convinced of Truth", who duly attended meetings for worship, and who professed with Friends were considered to belong to the Society. The privilege of attendance at the business meetings was not in the early period an inherent right of those who belonged in the fellowship, but was dependent upon invitation from persons of weight and authority. In other words, the Monthly Meeting was "select". Lists of persons entitled to transact the business of the Church were kept by Monthly Meetings, and these persons composed the working "fellowship of Truth", while around them gathered a large fringe of persons who attended meetings and "professed with Friends", though they were not felt to be quite "seasoned in the Truth" and thus there was in practice a "select society" within the Society . . . (from this) London Yearly Meeting now drifted over to a settled policy of birthright membership (which led) . . . to the necessity of carrying, around the living nucleus of the Society, a great fringe of persons who had no first-hand insight and no triumphant experience of the power by which men live.¹

Similarly Arnold Lloyd describes how "the unfettered fellowship of 1650 had developed into a closed Society with rules governing the removal and settlement of all its members".² I do not of course doubt the existence of a marked change of attitude between 1650 and 1740, though our historians have perhaps been a little too ready to give praise to that which is early and blame to that which is later. My thesis is simply that the origins of the idea of membership can be traced to an early time, and are in turn linked to views current in the wider community long before 1650.

Let us first look at the use of the word "member". In 1677 John Clark of Rickmansworth left his wife and went to live with Elizabeth Winkfeild, a single woman, an action which our Monthly Meeting for the Upperside of Bucks. not unnaturally considered "a very evil example showed to al other loose and disorderly persons". They therefore declared "yt although ye said John Clark and Eliz: Winkfeild have at sometimes come to our Meetings (whose Meetings are wel known to be publick and open to al) yet were they never received or owned by us, as living Members of yt heavenly

¹ *Later Periods of Quakerism*, pp. 106-110.

² *Quaker Social History*, p. 43.

body . . . in wch our unity stands, nor otherwise regarded by us than as such as might possibly gather into their understandings some Notions of Truth to talk of, as too many do, who notwithstanding are enemies to ye Cross of Christ Jesus". This is membership in a Biblical sense: for a more everyday use we need go no further than the Monthly Meeting for the North West Parts of the County of Lincoln in ninth month 1678, when Winteringham Meeting reported a controversy between John Johnson and John Dent "boath being members of the said Meeting". And although it is said that the first printed use of the full phrase "the Society of Friends" was in 1800,¹ Horsham Monthly Meeting in eleventh month 1706 was using the phrase "We the said people Doe Disown him to be a member of our Society".

In the Upperside of Bucks. the spiritual judgement as to who was or was not a Friend was freely made and recorded. John Stratton, a Latitudinarian, "had not ye appearance of a friend, but of one whose mind was roving and at liberty, though he pretended to have been long convinced" (5.1682). Timothy Child "came and sat among Friends, and the power of the Lord fell upon them in a wonderfull manner . . . But ah alas! he remained hard and obdurate, persisting in his own justification . . . it was declared by Friends, yt in ye State and condition wherein he now stood he had no right to sit among friends, as a Member of ye Meeting, but . . . was an uncivil Intruder upon ye Meeting" (12.1682). William Fisher had a bastard child, and was dismissed as "a Man that by going to Friends Meetings, hath gotten the name of a Quaker amongst his Neighbours, though not regarded by friends" (2.1683). Grace Hawks of Chesham, who from a child had attended meetings with her mother, was married by a priest to a "man of the world": "Friends yt know her, seeing her to be a proud vain Lass, did never value her as a friend, yet" (6.1687).

Membership at this period thus involves convincement, recognition of the reality of that convincement, and continuation in Christian practice; it is continuously probationary. Such an idea is inconsistent with any precise list of members. One of the important points of difference

¹ Lloyd, *op. cit.*, p. 145n: but T. E. Harvey, *Quaker language*, p. 28, instances a use of the term "Religious Society of Friends" in an address to George III in 1793.

between George Keith and both Philadelphia and London Yearly Meeting in 1693-4 was his sponsorship of a more precisely regulated scheme, which included the recording as members of those who made open confession of their faith: an idea which, in its application to young people, may even at that date have been a reaction against their acceptance by "birthright".¹ It is clear, however, that even a birthright Friend at the end of the seventeenth century would soon decline in status to a mere "object of pity" if he departed noticeably from Friends' practices.

What is the relationship of all this to Friends' care of the poor? The rules for removals and settlements agreed in 1737, which deemed Friends to be Members of the Quarterly, Monthly or Two-Weeks Meeting "within the compass of which they inhabited or dwelt the first Day of the Fourth Month 1737", were an extension of rules agreed in 1710, 1711, and 1729. But the rules of 1710-11, so far from being a stage in the decline from unfettered fellowship to a Society bound by rules, were in one respect an attempt to inject some charity into practices which date back for a quarter of a century: and these practices were taken over from legislation of 1662, which in turn was only an extension of ideas which were centuries old.

Let us start with the Act for the Better Relief of the Poor of this Kingdom (14 Charles II cap. 12) of 1662, commonly known as the Law of Settlement and Removal. This provided:

Upon complaint made by the churchwardens or overseers of the poor of any parish, to any justice of the peace, within forty days after any such person or persons coming to settle . . . in any tenement under the yearly value of ten pounds (it shall be lawful) for any two justices of the peace, whereof one is to be of the division where any person or persons that are likely to be chargeable to the parish shall come to inhabit, by their warrant to remove and convey such person or persons to such parish where he or they were last legally settled . . . unless he or they give sufficient security for the discharge of the said parish.

The idea here contained, that each person has a settlement in a particular parish which has an obligation to help him in time of need, is very old. What was new about this Act

¹ See "Gospel order and discipline", printed from MS. c. 1693 in *J. Friends Hist. Soc.*, vol. 10 (1913) pp. 70-6.

was that it provided a legal means of "deportation", not just of those who *had* fallen into need, but of those who *might* become a charge on the parish.

Left in this form, the Act would have prevented the movement of labour for seasonal work exceeding forty days in duration; for anyone who stayed forty days unchallenged acquired a settlement in the parish. Section 3 therefore provided that it was lawful for a person to move so as "to work in time of harvest, or at any time to work at any other work, so that he carry with him a certificate from the minister of the parish, and one of the churchwardens and one of the overseers of the poor, that he has a dwelling and is declared an inhabitant there". This is what Friends would call a "notice of removal not involving transfer of membership"; it retained the obligation to assist in time of need in the original home parish, even though the need might arise when the man was away elsewhere at his work.

This Act was open to evasion, and in 1685 an Act (1 James II cap. 17) prescribed that the forty days were to be computed from the delivery of a notice in writing "of the house of his or her abode, and the number of his or her family, to one of the churchwardens or overseers of the poor"; and a further Act in 1691 (3 William and Mary cap. 11) required the notice in writing to be read "on the next Lord's day, immediately after divine service, in the church or chapel of the said parish. And the said notice is to be registered in the book kept for the poor's accounts." Two later Acts refer to a tendency to confuse the certificate with the notice in writing. It will be seen that the effect of presenting a notice in writing which, after being read in church, remained unchallenged for forty days, was equivalent in Friends' terms, to the acceptance of a certificate of removal.

The 1691 Act provides also that a person who serves any public annual office in the parish during one whole year, or who pays his share towards the public taxes or levies of the parish, "shall be deemed to have a legal settlement therein". Such a settlement could also be acquired by an unmarried person being lawfully hired for one year as a servant (an Act of 1697 requires that this service shall be with the same master throughout), or by a person being bound as an apprentice and living in the parish. Children

naturally acquired the settlement of their parents—being, in effect, birthright members of their parish; and until 1744, indeed, a bastard was settled where he was born, which was a powerful incentive to the parish to force wedlock on unmarried mothers.

In the light of this survey of national legislation, consider the following minute from the Upperside of Bucks. in twelfth month 1685:

This Meeting understanding yt One Eliz: Grey, Grand child to ye widow Grey of Amersham, was lately sent from Uxbridge, where she was servant, to Amersham to be kept by friends there, being lame and not able to keep herself, and finding upon inquiry, yt her Parents lived at Longfords in Middlesex, and she herself was settled at Uxbridge both before and since her lameness; ye Meeting ordered Tho: Dell and Wm. Grimsdell to speak wth some of ye Friends of Uxbridge . . . and let them know, That it is ye judgmt. of this Meeting, yt ye said Eliz: Grey doth not belong to this Meeting at Amersham, nor ought to be put as a charge upon any Meeting in this County. And yt therfore this Meeting doth desire ye Friends of Uxbridge to remove ye said Eliz: Grey back again; wch in case they refuse or neglect to do, it is then ye agreemt. of this Meeting, yt ye Friends of Amersham do, within two weeks space at furthest, reconvey ye said Eliz: Grey to Uxbridge from whence she came.

Uxbridge sent her back again, and a conference was needed to settle the matter. Similarly in twelfth month 1693, Huntingdon Monthly Meeting minuted as follows:

Foreasmuch as Peter Browning who about seven years ago lived at Warmington and Removed to London but is now returned from thence because he expectes his healthe better in the country . . . (and has) a great desire to settle at Colne in this said County. So the said Peter Brown, having been no settled Inhabitant at London aforesaid Warmington is therefore the last place of his Legall settlement. And its Friends Advice in this case that he go and settle at the said Warmington or at Peeter-Borough where by reason of the smallness of his stock he may take a Chamber and work Journey-Work (as a shoemaker).

Oxford Monthly Meeting in tenth month 1708 agreed

as an Answer to Newbury Friends—Relateing to Jane Plumer after having Inquired of D. Flexney Concerning her being his Servant and cannot find by Enquiry that she has right by her Living at Witney to have maintenance from friends here, being no Covenant Servant: But if so: not Being capable of Service: of right ought to return to her native place, and if that particular Place of Newbury are burthen'd with her, The County ought (as

is usuall amongst friends) to Assist in helping her. And because of her being here But Not having Right to be Our poor we take it not well that friends of Newbury should Endeavour for a Certivicate from us, with a Design, Because of her being Disabled to fix her on us . . .

Quarterly Meeting, however, decided that she did belong to Witney.

These and similar examples show that Friends took over the practice and much of the spirit of the national legislation, applying it with surprising rigidity. At Yearly Meeting 1710 the subject was raised and on the morning of 2nd June it was minuted: "The friends following are desired to meet and consider of what is propper to be made for a settlement Between County & County and Between Monthly Meeting and Monthly Meeting Relating to the Removeal of poor friends from one place to another."¹ A solid committee of twenty is named "or any Eleven of them to meet in the Back Chamber at Grace-Church street at the 2d hour this Afternoone". Next day Joseph Wyeth reported on behalf of the committee.² Friends desiring to move are requested to get a certificate. This certificate is deemed to be accepted if the receiving meeting accepts their collections or puts them into any service of the meeting; this is a direct echo of the Act of 1691. Similarly a settlement could be obtained by being a servant for one year. But a Friend who does not contribute or undertake service obtains a settlement, not in forty days, but in three years. However, the uncharitable attitudes suggested by the Bucks. and Oxford minutes quoted above were in the following year restrained by a provision that, if a Friend travels without a certificate and falls into need, only half of the charges incurred on his behalf during the first three months can be recovered from his home meeting. The full 1710 text is as follows:

First If any poor Friend or Friends for the Time to come should Incline to Remove themselves and Familyes from the Limitts and Compass of one Quarterly or monthly meeting to another, That before they unsettle themselves, they

¹ YM MS minutes vol. 4, p. 137.

² Although he presented the report, there appears to be no evidence for Lloyd's statement that "it was Joseph Wyeth . . . who in 1710 drafted the first rules defining membership of the Society" (*Quaker social history*, 1950, p. 43 and note 72, p. 47, referring to YM MS minutes vol. 2 in error for vol. 4).

aplye themselves to such meetings to which they belong for advice & Counsell therein, of which if the said meeting to which they aplye doe approve, that they then give a Certificate signifyeing such Meetings consent to their Removeal.

- 2dly When any friend or friends having such Certificate as above shall bring their Certificate to any meeting to which it may be directed, and the Meeting accept and Receive their Collections for the poor, or put the said friend or friends into any service of the Church, in the Compass of the meeting they Remove into, such Receiving their Collection or Employment may be well deemed a settlement within the Compass of such meeting—and alltho such friend or friends may not be of ability to Contribute to the Collection for the poor, or the services of the Monthly Meeting, yet such friend or friends behaving him or themselves according to Truth, and not any ways chargeable to the said meeting for the space of Three years after the delivery of his or their Certificate, they may then also be well deemed to belong to the meeting within ye Compass of which they shall soe Three years Inhabit.
- 3dly Servant Men or Maids bringing a Certificate as aforesaid being hired for one year, and serving the same faithfully and honestly, that then after such years service they also may be well deemed to belong to the Meeting within the Compass whereof they served, if they deliver'd into the Meeting within that Terme ye Certificate they had.
- 4thly If any *professing Truth contrary to former advice* Remove without a Certificate and fall into want and aplye to any friend for Assistance, that then the friend to whom they aplye may write to the Meeting to which the Distressed shall say he or they did belong, to acquaint that Meeting of such a Necessitous person and know how such person or persons did stand in the unity of friends, and if such Necessitous persons have not been denyed before they became thus Chargeable That then the meeting from whence they came and to which they did belong shall Reimburst the Charges they have been or may be at on their Accot.

This Agreement to continue but four years unless it be then Renewed.¹

It was the fourth of these clauses which was to raise immediate difficulties. The following year a paper was received from the Quarterly Meeting in Wiltshire² relating

¹ YM MS minutes vol. 4, pp. 141-4.

² *ibid.* p. 204. Wiltshire QM 2.ii. (April) 1711 had minuted: "The Meeting orders the Representatives that shall be appointed for London, to desire the Friends of the Yearly Meeting there to explaine the 4th Paragraph of a paper from the last Yearly Meeting relating to the settling the poor among Friends" (Wiltshire QM minutes 1708-1734, p. 49).

to the 1710 document, and it was referred to a committee headed by Thomas Ellwood. The committee recommended "that the fourth Article mentioned in the said settlement be wholly laid aside". Yearly Meeting, however, with a mind of its own, judged that "an Amendment may answer the end better then laying of it aside" and the following is the 1711 text:

If any poor friend or friends shall unadvisedly Remove from their Habitations without a Certificate and fall into want, and applye to any friend where they come for Assistance, that then the friend to whom they applye, may write to the meeting to which the distressed shall say he or they did belong, to acquaint that meeting of such a Necessitous person, and know how such person or persons did stand in the unity of Friends, when they Removed, and if such necessitous person have not been denyed, or were owned before they became thus chargeable, That then the meeting from Whence they came, and to which they did belong, doe Reimburse half the Charges which have been expended on the account of the Necessitous, for any time not exceeding Three Months, in which time, the meeting from whence they came shall desire the Necessitous friends to Return, which they are desired to doe with all reasonable Expedition, soe soon as health and ability of body shall Admitt, and the friends where they are, are desired to advise and assist them in such Returne, after which neither meeting is obliged to continue their care and Charge in case they Refuse, But if they be such as are not friends, or are disorderly persons, pretending to profess Truth, then neither friends from whence they came nor friends to whom they doe come are to be under any obligation to maintain such Necessitous persons, yet not to Restrain ye Charity of any particular friend or friends from affording present Relief to any Necessitous Person.¹

The 1729 rules catch up with the 1697 Act by requiring servants to serve with one family throughout. More important, they return to the earlier practice by requiring the full charges of an "unsettled" poor Friend to be paid by his home meeting. The 1737 rules contain the odd provision that, though membership is transferred immediately a certificate is *delivered* (not accepted), it is (so to speak) transferred back if the member falls into want during the first three years; for the liability to relieve then returns to his former meeting. An apprentice gains the settlement of his master or mistress, not in three years, but in forty days—another echo of the national legislation; and wives

¹ *ibid.* pp. 207-8.

and children are to be deemed members of the Monthly Meeting of the husband or father.

The attempts at Quaker legislation were as productive of dispute as the national legislation. Thus, in 1740, Peel Monthly Meeting refused to support Nicholas Witchell although he had lived in the Peel Quarter for seven years. On being challenged by Quarterly Meeting, the Monthly Meeting said that it could not comply with the 1737 rules "because they lay upon us an unequal and unreasonable burden too heavy for us to bear". By 1741 they had persuaded Yearly Meeting to rule that a Quarterly Meeting is to help a Monthly Meeting which is "overcharged". In 1747 we find Nicholas Witchell again complaining of lack of support, and the Monthly Meeting was advised to "show tenderness towards him". As he died of convulsions in 1761, aged 77, it appears that eventually they did so.

The case of Nicholas Witchell was not exceptional. Yearly Meeting throughout the eighteenth—and to a lesser extent the early nineteenth—century was preoccupied by proposition after proposition from quarterly meetings, suggesting changes in the rules of settlement or asking guidance in specific cases. When, at last, in the great 1861 revision of Discipline, the rules were finally abolished, Thomas Pumphrey, the headmaster of Ackworth, could write as follows to Josiah Forster: "I rejoice in the abrogation of our rules of settlement, and the presenting, instead of them, in bold relief, the great duty of Christian benevolence; love to man as the reflection of love to God, and this love manifesting itself in relieving the outward necessities, and sympathizing in the varied trials of our fellow members".¹ These are imposing words. It may be, however, that the abandonment of the rules of settlement resulted quite as much (and probably more) from easier economic conditions than from any impressive change of heart which had come over the Society. But these later years are not part of my story. I have been concerned to show that the 1737 rules of settlement were not, as some Quaker historians have maintained, a watershed between the Eden of an unfettered fellowship and the dead land of formal membership. I conclude that, around 1685, although Friends with one part

¹ *Memoir of Thomas Pumphrey*, ed. John Ford, 1864, p. 279.

of their minds were regarding membership as a matter of the spirit, to be judged by faith and conversation, they were simultaneously capable of some practical hard bargaining about where the membership came to rest. The contrast between this early period and 1737 is not as great as we may have thought. And I find it pleasant to reflect that the certificates for transfer of membership (or certificates of removal, as most of our monthly meetings will call them, whatever Yearly Meeting 1966 may have decided), are the direct descendants of the "notice in writing" required by the Act of 1685.

Recent Publications

William Penn: Politics and Conscience. By Mary Maples Dunn. pp. x, 206. Princeton University Press. London: Oxford University Press, 1967. 48s.

This book provides a very useful analysis of Penn's political philosophy, its thesis being that his apparent inconsistencies in thought and practice arose from his paramount interest in toleration and liberty of conscience, in furtherance of which he was ready to make use of whatever instruments were available.

There is also an interesting comparison between Penn's constitution in Pennsylvania and the design for an ideal commonwealth contained in James Harrington's *Oceana*, a contemporary Utopia.

More Quaker Laughter. A Further Collection of Quaint and Humorous Stories. Collected by William H. Sessions. pp. x, 144; 18 illustrations. William Sessions Limited, The Ebor Press, York, 1967. 15s. 6d. (postage 10d.).

Readers of the former collection by William H. Sessions of Quaker Stories, *Laughter in Quaker Grey* (also obtainable from William Sessions Limited for 10s. 6d., postage 10d.), will be glad to have this further selection from his fund of stories; he had prepared it for publication in the months preceding his death. The stories come from all periods of Quaker history, though they may not all be equally historical.