

Public Friends Report to London Yearly  
Meeting on their Missions to America,  
1693-1763

ENGLISH and Irish Quaker ministers who visited America during colonial times are generally considered important contributors to the success of Quakerism in America. Rufus M. Jones described their functions as prophetic; upon divine calling they went to pronounce the word of God or "Truth" among those within and without the fold.<sup>1</sup> More recently Frederick B. Tolles has pointed out the role of these so-called "Public Friends" as bearers of culture within the broad framework of the "Atlantic Community".<sup>2</sup>

The number of these ministers, both men and women, is remarkably high, and perhaps the most complete lists are those in the possession of Frederick Tolles and the Friends House Library in London. Although both are composites of pre-existent sources, neither presumes to be definitive. The first list records nearly 150 missions to America between 1655 and 1700, while the one in London cites more than twice as many between 1656 and 1900.<sup>3</sup>

At present, however, our knowledge of these "Publishers of Truth" is scattered and incomplete. Private correspondence and remote records of various meetings throughout England, Ireland, and America have yielded some material, but the printed journals of a relative few of these people, published as devotional literature before the end of last century, have been the most popular and readily available repositories of information.

One important source, hitherto unexplored systematically, is the manuscript minutes of London Yearly Meeting.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rufus M. Jones, *Later Periods of Quakerism* (London, 1921), I, 227-230.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick B. Tolles, *Quakers and the Atlantic Culture* (New York, 1960), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28. The English version, in typescript, is a collaborative effort by the librarians at Friends House, London.

<sup>4</sup> James Bcwen, *The History of the Society of Friends in America* (London, 1850), 2 vols. Here they are used for illustrative purposes but not examined *per se*.

Between 1693 and 1763 the Meeting received thirty-eight accounts of missions to America, representing the travels of approximately fifty men, some of whom made several trips and reported more than once.

Admittedly, minutes are questionable sources of knowledge. Often they are transcriptions of oral deliveries, liberally edited by various clerks who blur the truth through reliance on precedent established by the sponsoring organization, personal involvement, and varying capacities at taking dictation. To some extent, this argument is applicable to the relevant minutes of the annual meeting of Friends in London. Of all such accounts, about thirteen are almost useless either because of their brevity or their similarity to earlier minutes. Entries like these are usually written in the third person and cite little more than the name of the speaker, the destination of his mission, his safe return, and the Meeting's satisfaction with his endeavour. Others, although slightly longer and more distinctive in content, are also limited in value. Cast in the impersonal voice, they are the products of considerable editing.

By far the most valuable kind of minute, however, is the direct transcription of a written statement, fifteen in all in our period. These were presumably read aloud and later given to the clerk for entry into his book. Their length varies from three to eighteen manuscript pages, and sometimes they cite the signatures of the copyists, thereby indicating some measure of accuracy. Comparison of the actual manuscript reports given to the Yearly Meeting and the clerks' rendering of them shows they were rather careful, at least in this case, to preserve the spoken word.<sup>1</sup>

Considered collectively, however, the contents of this latter type of minute support what is already known about the increase in the number of colonial Friends and their simultaneous spiritual decline, especially during the eighteenth century. As regards growth, Josiah Langdale made this pronouncement before the Yearly Meeting in 1705: "The

<sup>1</sup> Compare a rough-copy MS. in Friends House Library, London, with the London Yearly Meeting Minutes, Volume 6, pp. 233-239; also two of Henry Frankland's in the Library's Portfolio 26.83 and 32.121 with the London Yearly Meeting Minutes, Volume 7, pp. 340-344; also the same for Joseph Gill in Portfolio 2.43 with the Yearly Meeting Minutes, Volume 8, pp. 333-339. Hereafter, these Minutes will be referred to as LYMM.

Lord is Inlargeing his Tents in those wilderness Countrys."<sup>1</sup> Four years later Thomas Chalkley was equally rhetorical in his opening remarks: "Truth prospers in the General, in a blessed manner, the Friends of it are in love and unity one with another." He found enlargement particularly evident in Pennsylvania, where there were thirty established meetings and more than twenty meeting houses, the largest built of brick.<sup>2</sup>

Further evidence of growth is found in the reports of those preachers who gained perspective from successive trips to the colonies; often they were impressed favourably by the results of their former labours. In 1715 James Dickinson reported that during his most recent trip with Thomas Wilson he found "good Effects of their former Travells",<sup>3</sup> and in 1717 Josiah Langdale said the same about the work of his predecessors, especially in Rhode Island and elsewhere in New England.

Expansion beyond this Quaker stronghold and those of Philadelphia and Nantucket into areas like Connecticut and the South is also documented in these minutes. The Puritan control of Connecticut was trying to early Quakers, but in 1700 Aaron Atkinson was able to say he was the first Friend to hold an informal gathering for worship in New London. Although John Richardson found Friends in Connecticut persecuted by fines, he must have had a similar experience to Atkinson. In 1703, referring to the residents of Connecticut colony, he said: "an Entrance is made among them."<sup>4</sup> New meetings in the South were mentioned by Dickinson in 1715 when he told about a place in Virginia where there had been no Friends before. A more precise illustration of Friends' penetration into new areas is in Samuel Bownas' report of 1729. He said:

I observed it as a great mark of ye Increase of Friends in ye Several Provinces, the Number of our Meeting Houses Builded, where there were none in my former journey; vizt. in New England belonging to Boston Government, The Province of Maine and Rhoad Island Government, 12; In New York 6; In ye Jerseys nine; In Pensilvania 13; In Maryiand 4; In Virginia 9; In

<sup>1</sup> LYMM, Vol. 3, p. 199.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 5, p. 131.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 77.

North Carolina 3; in ye whole 56. And there are about 12 Places more that want meeting-houses to be Built where there are none, and several of ye old ones want to be Enlarged<sup>1</sup>.

The corresponding decline in spiritual purity which followed the shift from an agrarian way of life to a more commercial and prosperous one is also noted in approximately ten other reports. Some are strikingly severe. In 1708 John Fothergill and William Armistead spoke of the integrity of Friends in Pennsylvania as well as the presence of potentially dangerous "backsliders", who "sometimes occasion inward sorrow to Friends".<sup>2</sup> Sixteen years later John Appleton told his countrymen that the eastern shore of Virginia exhibited "the greatest apostacy"<sup>3</sup> he ever saw, an observation echoed less strenuously about the same region by Samuel Bownas five years afterwards in 1729. Between 1757 and 1761 four out of six men, including Samuel Fothergill, Christopher Wilson, John Hunt, and John Storer, all lamented the "declension" of faith among believers.

Beside trends in size of membership and spiritual health, the minute-reports of these fifty men reflect the various issues which plagued their Quaker brothers in the New World, and references correspond well to the actual periods when the matters became crucial and receded in importance.

The controversy in the 1690s with George Keith, who asserted the importance of historical Christianity and the Scriptures, continued into the next century. Although Thomas Turner's account in 1705 indicates many former followers of Keith in the Jerseys had turned away from him by then, another by Samuel Bownas two years later describes a disturbance Keith caused at the Yearly Meeting in 1702 in Philadelphia and his own extended imprisonment (1702-1703) after an encounter with Keith on Long Island.<sup>4</sup>

Ranters, those individuals with antinomian and even anarchistic inclinations, were also considered trouble-makers like Keith, especially in New England. Their activities are similarly commented on by several Public Friends. Ranters were particularly strong on Long Island even at the end of

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 7, p. 103. Punctuation modernized.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 396.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 6, p. 230.

<sup>4</sup> Compare LYMM, Vol. 3, pp. 331-334 with *An Account . . . of Samuel Bownas* (London, 1756), pp. 56-95.

the seventeenth century, a fact substantiated by Aaron Atkinson in 1700, and they continued to make things difficult there for some time according to John Fothergill's remarks in 1708. Ranterism was also the subject of Samuel Bownas' comments in 1707 in which he told his colleagues that Friends in New England were humble but the spirit of Ranters "does greatly Clogg the Wheels and wants more liberty than Truth".<sup>1</sup> The persistence of these emotionally religious people was registered by Joseph Gill in 1737 who found them at New Milford and by Samuel Hopwood in 1745 who encountered them in eastern Connecticut.

Early manifestations of commitment to Indians' welfare by Friends who followed the example of Fox and Penn are present in the narratives of men like John Fothergill, William Armistead and Thomas Chalkley. In 1708 Fothergill and Armistead told how an Indian at Nantucket "said tho he understood not our words yet laying his hand on his Breast, said it did him good there".<sup>2</sup> In a letter read before the Yearly Meeting in 1712, Thomas Chalkley described how an Indian queen told him he was the answer to a dream: transported magically to London she met William Penn who told her he would shortly come to her country to preach to her people. Anticipating the overt hostilities of the French and Indian War, Benjamin Kidd alluded in 1725 to troublesome Indians at Dover.

While the dates of this study terminate prior to Friends' concentration on the plight of Negroes in America, the Minutes of the Yearly Meeting in London do reveal an early concern. An account by Aaron Atkinson from the beginning of the eighteenth century, tells how Negroes in North Carolina welcomed him with tenderness and broke into tears upon hearing him preach. Sixty years later, John Hunt echoed the remarks of Christopher Wilson and foreshadowed future events when he attributed some of the degeneracy among Friends in Virginia to "the keeping of Negroes and letting fall their Christian Discipline".<sup>3</sup>

Fresh information about Public Friends' itineraries, whereabouts, and duration of mission is readily apparent in the Minutes. This is especially valuable for those who are

<sup>1</sup> LYMM, Vol. 3, p. 334.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 394.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 11, p. 359.

relatively unknown, but it also holds for the group in general.

More than half of the narratives give some indication of the places visited by each individual, and study reveals a general pattern of travel. By far the majority either landed at Philadelphia or one of the smaller ports in the Chesapeake Bay area. Evidently the travellers made special efforts to attend as many quarterly and yearly meetings as possible, sometimes making the one at Philadelphia the beginning or climax of their tours. Often they spent several weeks and months in this stronghold of Quakerism, either working on the faith of believers there or holding "opportunities" in nearby areas. Many of those who landed in Maryland or Virginia had already been to the Caribbean, and they then ventured as far south as South Carolina before turning northward to Pennsylvania and the Jerseys. Long Island was inevitably a stop along the way to the strong colony on Rhode Island. Boston and Nantucket were usually visited, while Sandwich, Scituate, and Dover in Massachusetts and New London, New Haven, and New Milford in Connecticut colony less often. With the exception of Thomas Thompson and Josiah Langdale on their second mission and John Appleton, few began their journeys in New England.

Although it is difficult to determine just how far these men ventured into the frontier because areas are more often referred to than towns, Charleston, in the Carolinas, where Joshua Fielding landed in 1725 and 1729, may well have been the southernmost point and Dover (New Hampshire), near Portsmouth and Kittery (Maine), where Benjamin Kidd preached, the northernmost.<sup>1</sup> The absence of references prevents consideration of a western boundary.

Commenting on the number of Public Friends from England and Ireland in the colonies at one time, Frederick Tolles says that "there was scarcely a time during the second half of the seventeenth century when one or more Friends from the British Isles were not travelling in some part of the American colonial world".<sup>2</sup> In spite of their

<sup>1</sup> In a letter from Charleston dated 2nd Mo. 26th, 1755, Samuel Fothergill told his wife he had been as far south as Georgia, "120 miles further than any Friend hath travelled on religious account". See George Crosfield, *Memoirs of . . . Samuel Fothergill* (New York, 1844), p. 175.

<sup>2</sup> Tolles, *Quakers and the Atlantic Culture*, p. 28.

limited representation, the Minutes of London Yearly Meeting suggest, nevertheless, this statement is applicable to the eighteenth century as well. For example, the records show that during the year and a half or so William Piggot was in the colonies, between 1726 and 1727, he met three other ministers, Joshua Fielding, Joseph Taylor and Rowland Wilson. The records of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting show Samuel Bownas was there at the same time,<sup>1</sup> making a total of five for one year. Similarly, in 1742, Samuel Hopwood met John Haslam, Edmund Peckover and Michael Lightfoot at Burlington. Here again, at least four ministers were in the colonies at the same time.

Perhaps the most immediately available details provided in these documents are the dates establishing the amount of time the men spent in the colonies. Twelve accounts contain such data, and this is especially helpful in the case of the following nine, for whom information is difficult to find.<sup>2</sup> Though sometimes inconclusive, the dates are as follows:

- William Baldwin, Lancashire  
arrived in Virginia 11th 3 mo. [May] 1709
- Thomas Thompson, England
- Josiah Langdale, England  
left London after Yearly Meeting 1715  
arrived Boston 13 7 mo. [September] 1715
- John Appleton, Lincolnshire  
left London 17th 6 mo. [August] 1720  
left America 11th 3 mo. [May] 1723  
arrived in Ireland 5th 5 mo. [July] 1723
- William Piggot, London  
left London 2 mo. [April] 1726  
arrived Philadelphia 24th 4 mo. [June] 1726  
arrived at London 10 mo. [December] 1727
- Joshua Fielding, London  
left London 8th 9 mo. [November] 1725  
arrived Charleston 25th 12 mo. [February] 1725  
left America 17th 4 mo. [June] 1728
- Joseph Gill, Dublin  
left Bristol 7th 3 mo. [May] 1734  
arrived Philadelphia 6th 7 mo. [September] 1734  
left America 1st 9 mo. [November] 1735  
arrived Dublin 22nd 11 mo. [January] 1735

<sup>1</sup> As recorded in Rufus M. Jones, *Quakers in the American Colonies* (London, 1911), p. 542.

<sup>2</sup> For the other three see *A Brief Journal of . . . Thomas Wilson* (Dublin, 1728); *A Journal of . . . James Dickinson* (London, 1745); and *An Account of . . . Samuel Bownas* (London, 1756).

Edmund Peckover, Norfolk  
 arrived New York 16th 7 mo. [September] 1742  
 Samuel Hopwood, Cornwall  
 left England 9th 5 mo. [July] 1741  
 arrived England 14th 7 mo. [September] 1744

Taken together, then, these manuscript minutes are of significance. In contrast to the frequently studied printed journals of Public Friends, they tend to reflect, all things considered, a greater sense of immediacy; they are vivid records of Fox's belief that religion is a personal experience, in this case as it pertains to divinely appointed individuals whose missions were exemplary, noteworthy, and conducive to further work in the field. The ministers' own awareness of this incentive value is apparent in the comments of Dickinson and Wilson who, in 1693, told those present at the Yearly Meeting how the colonists "have a great need of being visited, and Friends there much desire it".<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the hope of some Indians that more meetings be held among their youth was relayed by Thomas Chalkley in 1712.

The over-all objectivity of the more complete accounts also enhances their usefulness as historical documents. Unfavourable observations and experiences are included along with good news about "Truth's progress" in the colonies. Unaffected by the awesome assemblage at Yearly Meeting, the ministers spoke forcefully, honestly, and sometimes with a sense of humour that usually accompanies a sense of balance and respect for truth. In 1715, for example, Dickinson and Wilson very likely provoked a chuckle when they told how Cotton Mather, trying to establish a ministry on Nantucket, was told there were three things barred from the island: "Lawyers Priests & Wolves."<sup>2</sup> Somewhat less amusing, perhaps, is Samuel Bownas's statement in 1729 that in the Jerseys and Pennsylvania "Professors Flock to meetings, Especially when Strangers are among them".<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, the Yearly Meeting's general approval is implicit in its practice of devoting sometimes a full day at its gatherings to listen to those narratives and to register them in its permanent records. Although it continued to do this over a span of seventy years, its members sometimes were critical.

<sup>1</sup> LYMM, Vol. 1, p. 349.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 5, p. 133.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 7, p. 96.

In a letter dated 4th 4th mo. [June] 1700 John Tomkins, a representative at the Yearly Meeting that year, wrote his friend Sir John Rodes about it, particularly the report of Aaron Atkinson:

takeing up time unseasonably in giving a narrative of his travailes, with so much indiscretion, as it gave advantage to some, who look not with the best eye towards America. So it greatly grieved his ffrds, and being that discourse took up an hour and a half of the last two hours we had to spend, the hurt both to himself and the meeting could not be recovered.<sup>1</sup>

More indirect evidence of disfavour is found in the increased brevity and sense of perfunctoriness in the minute accounts as the eighteenth century progressed. By far the fullest reports come from the first few decades of the century, while eight out of nine given between 1752 and 1763 are little more than one sentence in length.

Two possible explanations of this tendency come from a look at the general religious milieu in England at the time and at the shifting interests of the Yearly Meeting itself. By mid-century the religious fervour which was encouraged by evangelists like Wesley permeated Quakerism as well, but its quietest response may have inhibited public revelations of the sort prompted by missions abroad. At the same time, the Yearly Meeting was increasingly involved with matters of church organization, the formulation of discipline, answers to its queries, and visitation of the faithful.

If Rufus Jones is correct in describing the work of Public Friends who went to America during colonial times in terms of prophecy, their actual words as recorded in the minutes of London Yearly Meeting are also prophetic and worthy to be considered reliable records of the past. Their lack of reference to the "Great Awakening" and the pending Revolution does not diminish their value but underscores their true nature which transcended temporary religious and political events, thereby contributing to the permanence of the Atlantic Community.

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<sup>1</sup> *A Quaker Post-Bag*. Ed. Mrs. Godfrey Locker Lampson (London, 1910), p. 162.