

Diversity and Complexity in Quaker History

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Quaker history is a vibrant field in the discipline of history. Quakers have been prolific writers and careful record keepers. Dedicated Quaker archives and public archives that house Quaker records offer researchers substantial collections that give insight into the institutional and personal world of the Religious Society of Friends and its members. Historians have made excellent use of these materials. This survey of Quaker history, focusing especially on work published in the past twenty-five years, highlights the diversity of topics and variety of methodologies that have enriched and strengthened this area. It also suggests directions for further research in what is a promising and growing field of study.

Quakerism – Origins and Development

The origins and growth of the Religious Society of Friends has drawn the attention of many scholars. Given its place as one of multiple radical sects that emerged and disappeared in the tumultuous civil war years of mid-seventeenth-century England, origin histories are often connected to explanations of Quakerism's longevity. Dandelion and Angell (2013) identify the beginning of modern Quaker Studies with the work of Robert Barclay of Reigate and the 1876 publication of *The Inner Life of the Religious Societies of the Commonwealth*. Since much of this early Quaker history was written by Friends for Friends, authors' theological views often influenced their interpretations. Barclay's evangelical stance led him to interpret early Quaker history in a way favourable to evangelical Quakerism with George Fox as its central evangelical character. Similarly, Rufus Jones (1909, 1911, 1914, 1921, 1927) and William Braithwaite (1912, 1919), influenced by their affinity for liberal Quakerism, interpreted Quaker history through the lens of mysticism. Intended to help transform twentieth-century Quakerism, their seven-volume Rowntree history series also had a profound impact on twentieth-century interpretations of Quaker history. For instance, as Alice Southern (2011) has shown, they took a dim view of the long eighteenth century of Quakerism and its "quietist" impulse, resulting, until recently, in an inadequately researched and poorly portrayed era. Neither Jones

nor Braithwaite have been without their critics. Scholars have questioned the importance of Christian mysticism to the origins of Quakerism, offering alternative theological positions as central to the movement's genesis. These have included Puritanism (Tolles 1960, Barbour 1964), prophetic Christianity (Benson 1944, 1966), apocalyptic and eschatology (Gwyn 1986, Moore 2000, Dandelion 2005), and radical holiness (Spencer 2007). Non-theological explanations have also been offered as the reasons for Quakerism's emergence at a particular time in a particular place. Marxist historians Christopher Hill (1972) and Barry Reay (1985) drew greater attention to the important context of the Civil War and the rise of radical religious sects, something developed by Quaker historian H. Larry Ingle who urged other Quaker historians to engage with narratives outside of Quakerism. Reviewing the historiography of Quakerism's beginnings, Ingle contends that debates in the field evolved so independently of mainstream histories of the period that "one can read the works of two of the main participants in the debate and hardly realize that two civil wars and a revolutionary upheaval formed a violent backdrop for the rise of Quakerism" (1987, p. 79).

Ingle's observation about origin histories has also been reflected more generally in Quaker history, which has been, until recently, largely sectarian. Overview histories published after the comprehensive Rowntree series often remained tangential to a larger political, social, or cultural narrative and have had little meaning outside the Society itself. Included in this literature are *The History of Quakerism* (Russell 1942, [1979]), *The Quakers* (Sykes, 1958), *The Rich Heritage of Quakerism* (Williams 1962, [2006]), *Friends for 300 Years* (Brinton 1964, [1997]), *The People Called Quakers* (Trueblood 1966, [2002]), and *Portrait in Grey* (Punshon 1984, [2006]). Despite their denominational approach, and in some cases sectarian approach within Quakerism itself, these volumes continue to hold an important place in Quaker history, evident in the fact that Quaker publishers have reprinted most of them. In the past thirty years, efforts to interact with mainstream history and engage audiences outside the Society of Friends have produced a fertile field of inquiry in Quaker history. Pink Dandelion's introductions to Quakerism (2007 and 2008) as well as *The Cambridge Companion to Quakerism* (Angell and Dandelion 2018) situate the religious community into its social, political, and religious historical contexts and explore the factors that transformed it into its diverse present-day expressions. One hundred years after the Rowntree series, Angell and Dandelion's *Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies* (2013) provides an encyclopedic overview of Quaker history, highlighting historiographical trends, interpretations, areas where analysis is changing, and topics that need examination. Richard Allen and Rosemary Moore revisit Braithwaite's *Second Period of Quakerism* (1919)