Quaker Constitutionalism and the Political Thought of John Dickinson

In the late seventeenth century, Quakers originated a unique strain of constitutionalism, based on their theology and ecclesiology, that emphasized constitutional perpetuity and radical change through popular peaceful protest. While Whigs could imagine no other means of drastic constitutional reform except revolution, Quakers denied this as a legitimate option to halt governmental abuse of authority and advocated instead civil disobedience. This theory of a perpetual yet amendable constitution and its concomitant idea of popular sovereignty are things that most scholars believe did not exist until the American Founding. The most notable advocate of this theory was Founding Father John Dickinson, champion of American rights, but not revolution. His thought and action have been misunderstood until now, when they are placed within the Quaker tradition. This theory of Quaker constitutionalism can be traced in a clear and direct line from early Quakers through Dickinson to Martin Luther King, Jr.

Jane E. Calvert received her Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 2003 and is currently assistant professor of history at the University of Kentucky. Her articles and reviews have been published in History of Political Thought, Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, History Compass, Annali di storia dell’esegesi, Quaker Religious Thought, Journal of Religion, Quaker History, and Pennsylvania History. She has also received fellowships and grants from the University of Chicago (1996–99, 1999, 2001, 2002); Haverford College (2000); the Library Company of Philadelphia/Historical Society of Pennsylvania (2002); the Newberry Library (2005); the National Endowment for the Humanities (2005); the American Philosophical Society (2006); the Huntington Library (2006); and the David Library of the American Revolution (2007). She is currently working on an edited volume of John Dickinson’s political writings.
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JANE E. CALVERT
University of Kentucky
For Eric
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Looking back, I imagine I can see the beginnings of this book in my first year of college – at a Quaker school, reading Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*, and being entranced with his description of moderated political participation as the highest good. By graduation I had a growing collection of questions that needed answering – about Americans and how they relate to one another and their government and about Quakerism. Beginning this project as my master’s thesis at the University of Chicago was a first attempt to find answers.

As the study progressed through the dissertation and into this final form, teachers, mentors, colleagues, and friends shaped it and helped bring it forth with their own questions and observations. I can trace the birth of specific themes back to their words. Tom Hamm asked me what I thought of Quaker quietism. Martin Marty talked with me about the “leaky Quakers,” with their porous and fluid community. Catherine Brekus pushed me to think about whether Quakers were simply radical Puritans. Pauline Maier and Ethan Shagan thought with me about whether Quakers, as pacifists, could be considered Whigs. And, in a question that turned the dissertation toward a book, Cass Sunstein asked whether Quakers considered the constitution sacrosanct. While these snippets are hardly the only guidance I received, they are the moments that stand out in my mind as turning points in the development of my thesis. I hope my responses do justice to their queries.

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Above all, however, this project would not have emerged from the dark recesses without my husband, Eric Kiltinen. The questions he asked, drawing it out, and the hours he spent (often trapped in a moving car) listening to my inchoate musings cannot be enumerated. He has been an invaluable sounding-board, a learned theologian, a meticulous editor and index-helper, a competent computer-fixer, a reliable and loving cat- and horse-sitter, a steady Baconbringer-enhomer, cook, carpenter, and all-around Hausmann, and my friend. If there is anything worthy about this book, I owe it to him, because it could not have been written without him.

Lexington, Kentucky
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Abbreviations

APS American Philosophical Society


DPA Delaware Public Archives

FHL Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College

HSP Historical Society of Pennsylvania

HQC Haverford College Quaker Collection


JDP/LCP John Dickinson Papers, Library Company of Philadelphia


LCP Library Company of Philadelphia

### Abbreviations

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<th>Abbreviations</th>
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<tr>
<td>RRL/HSP</td>
<td>R. R. Logan Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania</td>
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<tr>
<td>PMHB</td>
<td><em>Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>PYM</td>
<td>Philadelphia Yearly Meeting</td>
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<td>WMQ</td>
<td><em>The William and Mary Quarterly</em></td>
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