Introduction

In November 1672, Female Friends meeting together at the Bull and Mouth Meeting House in London addressed an epistle to their 'Deare Friends and Sisters' in Barbados. They described their 'inseparable unity of the heavenly spirit of truth' and communicated how 'with one heart all the faithfull salute you in fellowship of the Gospell'. Despite the vast distances that separated these female correspondents, a sense of unity and spiritual oneness permeated their writing as they described the intimate connection they felt with their distant co-religionists. 'Our hearts open to you as yoars to us', they wrote, 'as drinking togeather in the one spirit of life and endless love, whereby all the faithfull partake of an invisible community to the refreshing and satiating [of] our souls.' Accompanying their letter was a package of books, sent with the Quaker merchant Thomas Hudson for the 'advantage of truth'.[1]

These correspondents were among dozens of Quaker Women's Meetings in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British Atlantic, sharing news about the current state of the Society in their regions, with expressions of a spiritually edifying nature. Whilst only two pages in length, this epistle stands as testimony to the powerful bonds shared by female Friends. It was the product of a collaborative endeavour – containing the names of seventeen female signatories who were acting as representatives for the 150 members who comprised the general Women's Meeting in London. Some of these names are known to the scholars of Quaker history. Most are not.[2] But it is the metaphor of the 'invisible community' in which these female writers

[1] Library of the Religious Society of Friends (hereafter cited as LRSF), MGR 11a4 London Women's Meeting Epistles, 1671–1753, fol. 25, London Women's Meeting to Women Friends in Barbados, 18 November 1672.

[2] The likely author of the document is Rebecca Travers. The sixteen other names attached to the epistle (as written) are Mary Elsone, Anne Raper, Ruth Grove, Grace James, Susan Yokley, Constance Wing, Ann Travers, Sarah Millman, Isabella Browning, Sara Stewert, Helena Claypole, Liddea Wade, Jane Neore, Sarah Brick, Mary Birkhead, and Ann Whitehead.

imagined themselves that fully encapsulates the sense of female fellowship fostered through their shared religious experiences.

The significance of maintaining contact with distant groups of women on the other side of the Atlantic extended beyond the emotional well-being of the women who subscribed their names to the epistles. It also solidified Quaker testimonies and beliefs and helped to create a uniform international religious movement. Yet the very existence of a transatlantic network of women corresponding with one another and exchanging knowledge, ideas, and material goods raises a multitude of questions for historians. How were these women's lives and social relationships shaped by their religious identity? How did they balance the competing demands of their religious calling with their secular obligations? What opportunities did they have for a public role within the movement? It also raises the more general issue of how far we should view ordinary women, who neither preached nor travelled, as central actors in the developing Quaker movement.

This is a book about the place of women in the transatlantic Quaker community. Quakerism was a movement that spanned the Atlantic world, spreading throughout England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, continental Europe, the North American colonies, and West Indies during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Quakerism was the fastest-growing denomination in Restoration England, posing a serious challenge to established religion, with some historians estimating that there were as many as 60,000 Quakers in England by 1660.[3] In the eighteenth century, its dramatic growth in colonies like Pennsylvania, New England, and West Jersey made it one of the most influential religious movements in North America. In this book, I explore the relationships and support structures that evolved within this rapidly growing transatlantic network. I show how being participants in this culture of exchange deepened the public roles open to female Friends at all levels of the movement and enriched their identities in unusual and important ways.

At its centre, this book argues that the process of institutionalisation enhanced rather than diminished women's roles within transatlantic Quakerism. In so doing, it will present a significant challenge to the prevailing feminist and gender scholarship. I show that far from experiencing a decline as the movement transformed from 'sect' to 'church', female Friends' everyday lives and domestic exchanges found an important place within the developing movement.[4] It is nearly twenty years since Natalie Zemon Davis

[3] Barry Reay, *The Quakers and the English Revolution* (London, 1985), p. 11.

[4] Max Weber put forward this view about the distinction between churches and sects in his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by Talcott Parsons with an introduction by Anthony Giddens (London, 2001). This was elaborated by Ernst Troeltsch who created a more clearly formulated thesis about the transformation of loose charismatic sects into bureaucratic churches in *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, vol. 1 (London,

published *Women on the Margins*, which argued that early modern women were particularly adept at managing multiple identities outside of official power structures and were thus able to transform the 'margins of society' into important social and cultural sites.[5] This book will show that Quaker women were no exception. Expanding Davis's thesis on the expectations and experiences of women in different faiths and recognising the complex identity of Quaker women as prophets, elders, worshippers, friends, wives, and mothers, I seek to understand their changing experiences as the movement adapted to different social, economic, and political environments. The approach knits together an assessment of the experiences of both ministers and 'ordinary' members of the Society that allows an investigation of an array of pursuits that have previously been considered as limiting for women.

No major work exists on the lives of Quaker women outside of their public roles as ministers, prophets, and missionaries. Yet within the unusually voluminous archives of Quaker family papers, diaries, spiritual journals, Meeting minutes, and epistles, we can glimpse the extraordinary ways in which otherwise ordinary members of the movement were able to shape international Quakerism. By taking a longer view of the movement's 'origins' and by placing non-itinerant women (those who never received a formal call to preach) alongside their travelling counterparts at the centre of the analysis, we can build a more accurate and comprehensive picture of women's contribution over its first century. As the epistle sent by the London Women's Meeting shows, they were self-conscious actors within a developing and expanding religious community. Reconstructing their experiences and identities provides the inspiration for this book.

FROM SECT TO CHURCH: WOMEN AND THE EVOLUTION OF EARLY QUAKERISM

Quakerism's origins, like those of many of the radical sects, came with the turbulent years of the English Civil Wars, when new and often apocalyptic ideas captured the imaginations of men and women across the sociopolitical spectrum. In the mid-1640s, unsettled by this climate, George Fox, a shoemaker's apprentice from Leicestershire, began a period of restless travel across the Midlands and Northern counties of England speaking with

1931). For a good discussion of the church-sect theory, see Richard L. Greaves, *God's Other Children: Protestant Nonconformists and the Emergence of Denominational Churches in Ireland, 1660–1700* (Stanford, CA, 1997), pp. 2–8.

[5] Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (London, 1995).

Baptists and other sectarian groups he encountered. This led him to develop a radical theology that drew upon the Protestant ideology of the 'priesthood of all believers' to stress looking inwards for God's guidance and spiritual truth, and teaching that salvation was possible for all, not only an 'elect'. Within the space of ten years, a new movement had emerged and rapidly expanded. Those receptive to the message of Fox and other early leaders used public preaching, handwritten epistles, and printed texts to spread their perceived 'Truth' to the widest possible audience, stimulating the conversion of men and women across the British Isles, Europe, and the Atlantic world.

The question of who made up the rank and file of the first Friends, however, is a subject of considerable historiographical debate. The early Quakers did not keep membership lists, and one of the difficulties in distinguishing Quakers from other separatists of this period is that this was a movement almost entirely established through the actions and words of itinerant preachers pursuing their own individual spiritual callings. It was not until 1676 that the first discernible 'Quaker' theology appeared in print, with Robert Barclay's *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity* (*Theologiæ Vere Christianæ Apologia*). Barclay had written the text 'to declare and defend the Truth', but it also provided a systematic statement of Quaker principles and doctrines that went on to shape the character of the movement for the next three centuries.[6]

Central to both Fox's and Barclay's visions was an insistence that those who were 'convinced' were to worship as a community of equals 'whether Jew or Gentile, Turk or Scythian, Indian, or Barbarian'.[7] Quakers united around the idea of a universal, God-given 'inner light', which they argued was present in all human beings regardless of their gender, social status, or race. This provided a significant challenge to conventional Christian ideals and social customs because it facilitated immediate revelation: God could speak directly to any individual without a human intermediary. This removed the office of paid educated ministers and meant that men and women from all social backgrounds were permitted to preach when they felt 'moved' to speak. Although the Bible continued to be viewed as a sacred guide, Quakers argued that the inner light was the only real source of divine revelation. Group meetings were therefore conducted in silence, as members waited to channel the word of God. In contrast to most Protestant reformist groups, Friends denied the church sacraments, denouncing them as distractions from genuine spiritual revelation. The church was not a building or an institution but a company of true believers. It was also highly mobile,

[6] Robert Barclay, *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity* (London, 1678), sig. B2r.
[7] Ibid., p. 83.

moving with 'enlightened' individuals into fields, marketplaces, shops, barns, and houses.

An unusually cohesive sense of community was forged through this shared experience of joining in spiritual union. From the earliest years, those who shared Fox's vision collectively referred to themselves as 'Friends' and described one another as being part of a shared 'fellowship', 'union', and 'family'.[8] This was encapsulated in a letter Anne Audland wrote to Margaret Fell in September 1655, when she declared: 'Dear sister in the pure Fountaine of eternall Love doe I behold thee; . . . my soul breathes after thee . . . [and] it is Impossible that ever I should bee seperated from thee.'[9] Audland's choice of expression makes clear that adherence to the movement's testimonies opened an expansive sense of identity that was no longer confined to local communities or biological families, but enabled members to imagine themselves as part of a larger world of godly people. What it meant to be both a personal 'friend' and a 'Friend' to the wider body of Quaker believers is a theme that underpins much of this study, but it is important to note that the collective appellation 'Religious Society of Friends', is not thought to enter official use until 1793.[10]

Writing and preaching were essential to the corporate identity of the first Friends, but the imaginary bonds of fellowship forged between believers were strengthened through the experience of suffering. Critics were enraged by almost every aspect of the Quakers' behaviour from their preaching style to their language, customs, and dress. Their emphasis on 'plainness' and 'simplicity', for example, led to a collective renunciation of vain and frivolous excess in outward appearance, language, and social interaction. This included flouting the rituals of social politeness, with male Quakers refusing to remove their hats before social superiors and abandoning honorific titles. They also refused to pay tithes or swear oaths. One of the biggest turning points in the first decade of the movement came with the ill-fated case of the early Quaker leader James Nayler, who took the theology of the indwelling spirit of Christ as literal fact and in 1656 infamously re-enacted Christ's famous Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem. Nayler was immediately

[8] Kate Peters, *Print Culture and the Early Quakers* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 97.

[9] LRSF, MS Vol S 81 Caton MSS vol. 3, pp. 435–436, Anne Audland to Margaret Fell, Banbury Gaol, 23 November 1655.

[10] William C. Braithwaite was able to uncover one dubious reference to 'Society of Friends', dating from 1665, but he argues that this was used in a 'descriptive' rather than a 'customary' sense. William C. Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism* (2nd edn, rev. H. J. Cadbury, Cambridge, 1961), pp. 307–308.

The Temporary Subject Catalogue at the LRSF notes that the first official use of the term 'Religious Society of Friends' is thought to be in the 1793 address to George III. It was in common usage by 1800 when Joseph Bevan Gurney published *A Refutation of Some of the More Modern Misrepresentations of the Society of Friends, Commonly Called Quakers*.

arrested, and condemned by Parliament to be flogged, bored through the tongue, and branded with the letter B (for blasphemy).[11] But, above all, Nayler's actions confirmed to critics that the Quakers posed a dangerous threat to religious and social order.

Even the public behaviour of less prominent members was enough to spark widespread criticism. Samuel Pepys's diary entry for 29 July 1667 remarked on 'a man, a Quaker' who had run through Westminster Hall almost naked, 'only very civilly tied about the privates to avoid scandal, and with a chafing-dish of fire and brimstone burning upon his head . . . crying, "Repent! Repent!"'.[12] Women also boldly challenged authority. A pamphlet in 1656 criticised the blasphemous actions of Susanna Pearson, who insisted that she could raise the Quaker apprentice, William Pool, from the dead.[13] Mary Fisher and Elizabeth Williams were whipped at the market cross in Cambridge after brazenly calling the scholars of Sidney Sussex College 'Antichrists' and 'a Cage of unclean birds' and the College 'a Synagogue of Satan'.[14] Perhaps even more astonishingly, a woman from Appleby was reported to have claimed that she was 'the Eternall Son of God' and when told that she was a woman, claimed 'no, you are women, but I am a man'.[15]

Underlying these dramatic actions was a powerful belief in their status as the persecuted people of God: a spiritual army fighting the Lamb's War. To their critics, however, they posed a dangerous threat. This came to have especial significance during the reign of Charles II, when Friends were fined and imprisoned in large numbers under the terms of the so-called Clarendon Code in the 1660s, which outlawed conventicles (religious assemblies of more than five people). Some estimates suggest that at least 15,000 Quakers were imprisoned or fined in the decades following these acts, with hundreds reportedly dying in prison.[16] Quakers were also punished for various other offences, such as non-payment of tithes, vagrancy, and blasphemy. The persecution experienced by the first Friends illustrates the ways in which they stood out from other dissenting groups as unusual and extreme. It was not until 1689, with the passage of the Act of Toleration and subsequent

[11] A good account of the Nayler affair is provided in Leo Damrosch, *The Sorrows of the Quaker Jesus: James Nayler and the Puritan Crackdown on the Free Spirit* (Cambridge, MA, 1996).
[12] Samuel Pepys, *The Shorter Pepys*, ed. Robert Latham (Harmondsworth, 1987), p. 814.
[13] Anon., *A Sad Caveat to All Quakers: Not to Boast Any More That They Have God Almighty by the Hand, When They Have the Devil by the Toe* (London, 1657).
[14] Joseph Besse, *A Collection of the Sufferings of the People Called Quakers* (2 vols., London, 1753), vol. 1, pp. 84–85 (hereafter cited as Besse, *Quaker Sufferings*).
[15] Francis Higginson, *A Brief Relation of the Irreligion of the Northern Quakers* (London, 1653), pp. 3–4.
[16] William C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism* (2nd edn, rev. H. J. Cadbury, Cambridge, 1961), p. 115.

Affirmation Act of 1696, that Quaker worship was legally tolerated and members were permitted to hold office without being compelled to swear an oath.

The brutal and widespread experience of suffering made a dramatic mark on the collective memory of the movement. But for those Friends who experienced constant ostracism and political stigmatisation, it had the positive effect of confirming their status as a gathered community of chosen people. This can be observed in the movement's appropriation of the name 'Quaker' in their printed writings, despite the fact that it was a highly pejorative label employed by their enemies to describe the physical shaking and trembling members experienced during worship.[17] One critic, for instance, likened 'quaking Fits' to 'Diabolical Raptures'.[18]

Moreover, it was through this profound experience of persecution that Friends were forced to reconsider their public presentation to wider society. In the late 1660s, George Fox, with the assistance of his wife Margaret Fell, began to establish a basic organisational structure for the Society. This came in the form of a hierarchical order of Meetings in those areas where Quaker members resided. The nature of the Quaker inner light meant that there was not a uniform set agenda for Meetings and no formal bureaucracy overseeing the direction they took. Each community of Friends, however, was overseen by a local Monthly Meeting, regional Quarterly Meeting, and national Yearly Meeting for business. The Yearly Meetings were held in London and the major cities of the American colonies. A Half-Year Meeting also existed in Dublin until it started meeting annually from 1798.[19] London Yearly Meeting was to become the chief source of authority in matters of faith and practice across the international Quaker community, and its widely circulated annual epistles set the tone for much of the Society's culture.

This structural transformation marks the movement's evolution from its first to second generation, as the efforts of its leaders moved from the creation of an 'invisible Church' to establishing a faith system that ensured the preservation of its customs and sustained its converts.[20] In many ways, it was a pragmatic response to a savagely hostile political environment, whereby Meetings became a means of obtaining relief and providing material, financial, and legal support for suffering Friends and their families. In addition, these institutional reforms also provided mechanisms to ensure the 'respectability' of the movement. The emergence of bodies like the Meeting for

[17] See Peters, *Print Culture and the Early Quakers*, pp. 91–123.
[18] Higginson, *A Brief Relation of the Irreligion of the Northern Quakers*, p. 16.
[19] The last Half-Year Meeting in Dublin was held on 1 May 1797. At this Meeting, it was agreed that the biennial national Meeting would be discontinued and that the Yearly Meeting of Friends in Ireland would be held at the end of April each year.
[20] Greaves, *God's Other Children*, p. 5.

Sufferings and Second Day Morning Meeting, for example, carefully controlled the Quaker message by censoring what was published and requiring ministers to be approved for travel by issuing certificates.[21]

There are, therefore, a range of possible ways of thinking about the gendered experiences and relationships that evolved within Quakerism. Historians are generally in agreement that the numerical significance of women within Quakerism, combined with the leading roles they played in the organisation's structure and in evangelising and missionary service, was unrivalled by any other movement or group in the revolutionary years. Long before other Christian denominations provided official roles for women as ministers, Quaker women were establishing themselves as preachers, some leaving their children in the care of their husbands and travelling as far as Rome, the West Indies, the Ottoman Empire, and the American colonies to spread the faith abroad.

Those women who converted to the movement, wrote, preached, and undertook missionary work have entered history as radical zealots and enthusiasts who stood apart in their social attitudes and defied patriarchal norms. A number of scholars have praised these public women for achieving social identities that were distinct from their position within families.[22] Their travels were characterised as a craving for freedom from their household cares. Called to deliver a written testimony to King Charles II in 1670, urging him to halt the persecution of Quakers, Elizabeth Stirredge spoke for many of her female co-religionists when she explained that her personal calling to ministry was to be placed before her domestic responsibilities. She noted that 'when I looked upon my children, my Bowels yerned towards them'. However, as she explained, she could 'get no rest, but in giving up to obey the Lord in all things that he required of me'.[23]

Stirredge's statement suggests that Quaker women's public roles were seen as incompatible with their expected duties as wives and mothers. Ordinary domestic concerns, as Hilary Hinds notes, were 'marginalised' within their writings, with family matters only being considered 'in an unfavourable comparison with the importance of their spiritual obligations'.[24] However,

[21] See Jordan Landes, *London Quakers in the Trans-Atlantic World: The Creation of an Early Modern Community* (Houndmills, 2015), pp. 4–21.
[22] Mabel Richmond Brailsford argued that Quaker women's public roles were not compatible with their duties as wives and mothers and should therefore be viewed as evidence of them craving freedom from household cares. Mabel Richmond Brailsford, *Quaker Women, 1650–1690* (London, 1915), pp. 223–225.
[23] Elizabeth Stirredge, *Strength in Weakness Manifest: In the Life, Various Trials, and Christian Testimony of That Faithful Servant and Handmaid of the Lord, Elizabeth Stirredge* (London, 1711), pp. 36–37.
[24] Hilary Hinds, *God's Englishwomen: Seventeenth-Century Radical Sectarian Writing and Feminist Criticism* (Manchester, 1996), pp. 176–177.

despite their seeming incompatibility, Stirredge's motherly responsibilities now extended to caring for a broader spiritual family. Her published account was addressed to 'my Children, that are coming up after me', but her experiences and counsel were intended for the universal edification of all young Friends.[25] The activities of many of the first early Quaker prophets challenged the patriarchal conventions of their age and could be viewed as protests against male power. Feminist scholars of the 1970s often admired the radicalism of the first Quaker women, whose struggles, they argued, marked the origins of the nineteenth-century campaigns for women's rights. Margaret Hope Bacon in *Mothers of Feminism* cited the struggles and actions of early Quaker women in America as 'a microcosm of the long struggle for gender equality in society at large'.[26]

Much of the existing scholarship on Quaker women tends to focus on this body of rather exceptional 'visionary' women, whose actions as travelling prophets and polemical authors sparked controversy and debate about the place of women in the evolving organisation. Women such as Margaret Fell, Elizabeth Hooton, Jane Holmes, Martha Simmonds, Mary Fisher, Katharine Evans, and Sarah Cheevers are now very familiar in the history of early Quakerism and to scholars of the seventeenth century more widely. Yet, as Christine Trevett acknowledges, such activities were beyond many female Quakers because of their familial and financial circumstances.[27] Phyllis Mack's seminal *Visionary Women* provides the fullest and most complex reading of the changing status of women within early Quakerism. She recognises that travelling ministry was a 'transient' experience that was integrated into other areas of women's everyday existences.[28] However, it is necessary to consider how we can reconcile the extravagant and public facets of Quaker women's experiences with the more private and personal aspects of their lives. Although Friends kept no formal membership records during this period, it is evident from the surviving data that women missionaries formed only a tiny minority of the female Quaker population at any particular time and it was only on exceptional occasions that they were inspired to write and preach on behalf of the Society.

The Quakers' desire to set themselves apart as a godly people and 'true church', eventually led to a more systematised, centralised, and conservative organisation. The period between 1692 and circa 1805 has been commonly defined as the 'Quietist' period in Quaker history, where persecution

[25] Stirredge, *Strength in Weakness*, pp. 1–2.
[26] Margaret Hope Bacon, *Mothers of Feminism: The Story of Quaker Women in America* (San Francisco, 1986), p. 3.
[27] Christine Trevett, *Women and Quakerism in the 17th Century* (York, 1991), p. 70.
[28] Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkeley, CA, 1994), p. 214.

had largely ended and leaders were more concerned with retaining members than with expansion. This inward focus and isolationism was also encouraged by the introduction of the multi-tiered system of Monthly, Quarterly, and Yearly Meetings for business from the 1670s, in which women had a special place. Informal Women's Meetings had existed in London from the late 1650s as a means of relieving Friends in the face of overwhelming suffering and hardship.[29] Inspired by the efforts of these women, it was whilst undertaking ministerial work in the American colonies in 1671 that George Fox proposed the creation of a nationwide system of separate Meetings for female Friends that recognised their special duties and roles as overseers of female members. He noted:

> there is many things that is proper for women to look into both in their families, and concerning of women which is not so proper for the men, which modesty in women cannot so well speak of before men as they can do among their sex … And many women are of more capacity than others are, and so they must instruct and inform the rest.[30]

Separate Women's Meetings for business were subsequently established across the British Isles and American colonies at Monthly, Quarterly, and, in some American colonies, Yearly levels. Whilst subject to geographical variation, the Women's Meetings were mainly accountable for overseeing the behaviour of female members; granting financial relief and material assistance to poor Friends; and overseeing the complex Quaker marriage discipline procedure.

The institution of this bureaucratic administrative structure has long been regarded as a particular development of second-generation Quakerism that brought a decline in women's significance and visibility.[31] The structure of the Meetings was patriarchal and facilitated the rise of a hierarchy of male leadership, with male elders dominating the national Meetings and the Men's Meetings holding the notional right to define the power of the female members of their districts. Moreover, the establishment of these female Meetings heralded a change in the role of women within the Society, as they channelled the sometimes publicly extravagant behaviour of the movement's female converts into more acceptable and conventional spheres. Some scholars

[29] See Landes, *London Quakers in the Trans-Atlantic World*, pp. 33–34; and Michele Denise Ryan, '"In my hand for lending": Quaker Women's Meetings in London, 1659–1700', University of California, Santa Cruz, PhD thesis (2003). I am grateful to Simon Dixon for this reference.

[30] George Fox, 'Friends Fellowship Must Be in the Spirit; and All Friends Must Know One Another in the Spirit and Power of God', undated, 'Book of Epistles of George Fox, 1666–1682', cited in Mack, *Visionary Women*, p. 286.

[31] 'With organisation', writes Patricia Crawford, 'female participation lessened.' Patricia Crawford, *Women and Religion in England 1500–1720* (London, 1993), p. 160.