H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kate Peters. *Print Culture and the Early Quakers.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xiii + 273 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-77090-3.

Reviewed by Ted Vallance (School of History, University of Liverpool)
Published on H-Albion (April, 2006)

Kate Peters's book is an important contribution both to the study of early Quakerism and the investigation of the role of print in the Civil War and Interregnum. Her work is divided into three sections: the first dealing with the organization of Quaker pamphleteering in the early 1650s, the second dealing with the role of print in the development of a recognizable Quaker identity, and the third dealing with the use of print in the Quakers' campaign for the "immediate establishment of a godly commonwealth" (p. 11).

The first section of Peters's book makes a convincing case that print had an integral part to play in both the Quakers' evangelizing efforts and in the cohesion and maintenance of the Quaker ministry. What emerges is a picture of a movement that was prolific in its written output but whose printed efforts were by and large the product of a small number of key (male) figures: Richard Hubberthorne, George Fox, Richard Farnworth, William Dewsbury, Edward Burrough, Francis Howgill and James Parnell. The pamphlets created by the Quaker leadership, Peters argues, served as a virtual ministry which could substitute for the personal presence of these figures when they were absent on missionary efforts elsewhere or confined to jail.

The second section offers the first detailed account of the etymology of the term "Quaker" and demonstrates how the movement quickly appropriated this term of abuse, coined by critics like John Gilpin, and repackaged it in order, again, to give both the semblance and substance of greater cohesion to the sect. The next chapter, examining women's preaching, also deals with the use of print to supervise and discipline the Quakers' followers. Peters argues that the largely male Quaker leadership developed a public position on the spiritual equality of women, which acknowledged their fitness to preach whilst negating the significance of their gender, as a ploy through which to deal with the *fait accompli* of women's public role in the sect. This was a recognition both of women's importance to the movement, built on the centrality of women in earlier groups of "Seekers" and Baptists from which the Quakers emerged, as well as the potential hazards (in terms of public perception of the movement) which the leadership saw as inherent in allowing women to preach. The doctrine of "spiritual equality," as applied by the male leadership, gave women Quakers nothing as women (in contrast to the gendered arguments of female preachers themselves), but permitted the masculine ministry to enforce its authority over those women it deemed were not preaching from the spirit. As Peters notes, the majority of cases dealing with internal discipline in the early Quaker movement related to women or were provoked by women.

The final section challenges the idea that the Quakers were essentially uninterested in politics or that their only political impact was negative in encouraging more conservative political and religious settlements. Peters looks at Quaker publishing on religious freedom and the prosecution of the blasphemy laws, Quaker political interventions, and the case study of the James Nayler affair in 1656. Peters demonstrates the links between the early Quakers and radical elements within the New Model Army, namely Captain Amer Stoddard.

As Peters admits "relatively few of the Quaker publications were concerned explicitly with issues of national political significance and, before 1659, none offered specific constitutional proposals" (pp. 226-227). (Peters chooses to eschew discussion of Quaker involvement in the political debates following the downfall of Richard Cromwell's protectorate, dealt with in the work of Barry Reay.[1]) Peters's argument, informed by David Zaret's work on the collective impact of mass petitioning[2], is that the Quakers' political and religious program emerged from a conglomeration of their many accounts of trials, persecutions, and religious debates and confrontations. She suggests that Quaker publications, detailing individual legal experiences of persecution, formed pieces of a wider program for Godly reformation and the establishment of a Christian common-

wealth which laid particular emphasis on the power of the people to effect its creation. Quaker tracts encouraged their readers to question their own ministers' qualifications to preach and challenge their authority publicly. The publication of the sufferings of Quakers for alleged blasphemy or disturbing the piece not only formed part of a denominational tradition but also "rehearsed the key issues of state interference in religion" and enabled readers "to raise concrete objections to their own prosecution" (p. 204). Leading Quakers saw the need to instill moral discipline into their followers as part of a wider project of establishing godly rule. Peters demonstrates that Quakers timed the production of their printed works to fit in with and respond to wider national political events, such as the calling of Barebones Parliament on July 4, 1653.

This is a very impressive and broad ranging discussion of the interplay of print, sectarian identity, and widening political participation. Peters has made extensive use not only of Quaker pamphlets (as one might expect), but also the manuscript records of the Society of Friends, which, as she demonstrates, provide us with unusually rich evidence of the relationship between authors, printers, and, to some extent, their audiences. What comes out of this discussion is an image of a Quaker movement which, through pamphlets, was able to assert a distinct, cohesive identity and whose leaders effectively deployed the printed word to regulate and, at times, chastise its burgeoning membership. Revisionist historians have often warned against talking of fixed, compartmentalized sectarian identities. Here we are presented with the case of a sect whose very success and longevity was based on its ability to promote and govern itself as a coherent group.

Notes

[1]. B. Reay, "The Quakers, 1659, and the Restoration of Monarchy," *History* 63 (1978): pp. 193 213; and Reay, *The Quakers and the English Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985).

[2]. D. Zaret, "Petitions and the 'Invention' of Public Opinion in the English Revolution," *American Journal of Sociology* 101 (1996): pp. 1497 1555.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Ted Vallance. Review of Peters, Kate, *Print Culture and the Early Quakers.* H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. April, 2006.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11657

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.