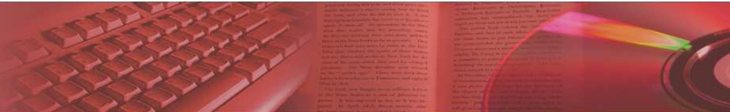
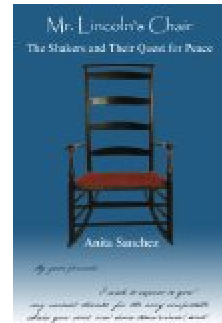


Anita Sanchez. *Mr. Lincoln's Chair: The Shakers and Their Quest for Peace.* Granville: McDonald & Woodward, 2009. Illustrations. v + 196 pp. $17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-939923-94-6.



Reviewed by Karen S. Campbell (Mary L. Cook Library)
Published on H-CivWar (December, 2009)
Commissioned by Martin P. Johnson

Lincoln and the Shakers

You will never kill the Devil with a sword.–Mother Ann Lee

Anita Sanchez's 196-page book about Abraham Lincoln and the Shakers is a good general introduction to the Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, also known as the Shakers. Sanchez covers all the classic topics associated with the Shakers in her text (woodworking and furniture, song and dance, musical notation, spirit drawings, health and food, architecture and barns, inventions, collecting, etc.) and supplies a concise history of the Shakers in England and then in America. The story of Mother Ann Lee is clearly related. The book touches on the unique elements found in Shaker theology, such as a belief in confession, celibacy, obedience, communitarianism, and pacifism. Sanchez's primary theme is the Shaker quest for peace as daily expressed in their practical faith and their highly disciplined utopian lifestyle. The spotlight on Lincoln fits well with the bicentennial year of Lincoln's birth, 1809-2009. Two worlds of learning, the study of the Shakers and the study of Lincoln, both of which can be rather exclusive, are brought together to shed light on pacifist issues during the antebellum period and the Civil War.

Chapters 3 through 9 introduce the Shakers and their religious point of view. In chapters 10 through 13, the theme shifts to the issues of conscription and pacifism and the Shakers' search for full exemption from military service. The next three chapters address the assassination of Lincoln and the decline of the Shaker movement after the Civil War.

Shaker aficionados, collectors, and scholars will probably not learn anything new by reading this book, but interested laypersons entering the Shaker world for the first time will find the book helpful and informative. For example, at the end of the book, they will discover a chapter entitled "Shaker Sites," which provides a map and short descriptions of all Shaker villages, from Sabbathday Lake, Maine, to Narcoossee, Florida; and from the villages in New England to West Union, Indiana. The book includes a good bibliography, although not exhaustive, and the footnotes are clear and adequate.

In the introduction, Sanchez describes the utopian Shakers as passionate "for never-ending and fearless experimentation" (p. 5). She portrays them as daring reinventors of the rules of society. Their utopian experiments of living a heavenly and morally higher life in their "Zions," their villages isolated from the world, were intended to be illuminating models of perfection for the "world's people" to emulate. Shaker villages were examples of their efforts to enlighten, recreate, and sanctify the world. Their emphasis on the "simplicity" of good behavior and "use" of things in a practical way were their attempt to live "unworldly" values and live on a higher moral plane. Even so, one of the weaknesses of this book is the same weakness often found in other general books about the Shakers; Shakers are portrayed as being a little bit too unique. Shakers should be studied and admired within the ebb and flow of the American reli-

gious experience, which, during the antebellum period, included a multitude of other utopian experiments both religious and secular; the Second Great Awakening revival; the growth of the "Evangelical Empire," as it was called; and the growth of Protestant churches. There was a great deal of religious experimentation and striving for spiritual perfection in antebellum America outside of the Shaker sphere and not exclusive to it.

The theme of pacifism was also not exclusive to the Shakers. Disillusionment with the violence of the campaigns of Napoleon in Europe and the War of 1812 in America spurred on the establishment of the Peace Society in England and a few years later the American Peace Society in 1815. The Peace Society advocated for arbitration as a substitute for war and strove to establish a Code of International Law and a Court of Nations. Quaker moral philosopher Jonathan Dymond in his work *Essays on the Principles of Morality* (1829) promoted an early form of civil noncompliance, foreshadowing Henry Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" (printed in1849) and William Lloyd Garrison's Non-Resistance Society (founded in 1838). Another international and influential peace society was Elihu Burritt's League of Universal Brotherhood (founded in 1847). An interesting study would be to examine the Shakers' relationship with these contemporary and secular peace organizations.

Another weakness of most general books about the Shakers is that many authors dwell on eastern Shaker villages and individuals with only a cursory nod to the believers in the "west." Henry Blinn and Elder Frederick Evans, important figures in the text, for example, were eastern Shakers. Sanchez, however, does discuss a petition sent from the Shaker village South Union in Kentucky to Lincoln signed by John N. Rankin and H. L. Eads asking for the president's understanding of their plight in the midst of the war–having their crops, produce, farm animals, and horses foraged by both Confederate and Union armies–and asking for exemption from military service. In response to their request, the local provost general was ordered to "parole" all legitimate pacifists like the Shakers.

At the core of the book are found two important stories dating from the Civil War years. They illustrate the Shaker quest for exemption when threatened with military conscription beginning in 1863. One story is related in the Shaker book, *Shakerism: Its Meaning and Message* (1904) by Anna White and Leila S. Taylor, concerning the visit of Evans with fellow Elder Benjamin Gates to the White House seeking a full exemption from military service for drafted Shaker men. The second story is about a chair that the New Lebanon, New York, Shakers made for and sent to Lincoln to thank him for helping young Shaker pacifists avoid military service. Lincoln's letter of thanks for the chair, dated August 8, 1864, can be found in the collection of the Shaker Museum and Library, Old Chatham, New York. It is also listed as "To the Shakers," in volume 7 of the *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln,* edited by Roy P. Basler (1953); and in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln: Supplement 1832-1865*, also edited by Basler (1974). Sometime between March 1863 and August 1864, Evans and Gates visited Lincoln; the visit probably took place closer to March 1863 than August 1864. Lincoln's note concludes, "And I must beg that you will pardon the length of time that, through an oversight in my office, has elapsed without an acknowledgment of your kindness" (pp. ii, 136). Like other pacifists, the Shakers did not waste any time after the creation of the Federal draft to petition the president or the Federal government concerning the conscription of their men.

The first Federal draft in the United States was established through congressional legislation on March 3, 1863. Until this date, pacifist men, such as Shakers, Quakers, and others, could avoid military service by simply not volunteering. However, after the establishment of the Federal draft, pacifists could no longer avoid enrollment without serious consequences. The compulsory draft forced pacifists to choose between the following options: fighting in the military; purchasing a substitute; paying a commutation fee of three hundred dollars; being persecuted as a non-resistor; or, if the drafted person did not report at all, being prosecuted as a draft dodger, which usually led to execution.

Sanchez states that "the Shakers' exemption from the draft, coming shortly after the first federal conscription act, was a precedent of deep significance" (p. 124). Firstly, the Shakers did not receive what they had asked for, full across-the-board exemption from military service. Secondly, none of the other "Peace Churches" received full exemption during the Civil War either. The Shakers were one among many church delegations that visited Lincoln in the White House seeking some kind of reprieve for their noncombatants, conscientious objectors, as they are called today. Other peace churches were the Brethren (Dunkards and the Old Order River Brethren), the Anabaptist churches (Mennonites, Amish, and Hutterites), the Moravians, the Society of Schwenkfelders, and the Quakers (The Society of Friends). Although Lincoln was quite sympathetic to genuine pacifists, the Federal government in general found the is-

sue of noncombatants thorny and difficult. The Federal draft was new, highly controversial, and severely resisted. This complicated matters and the petitions of noncombatants added to the difficulties. The question was how to be fair. How does one differentiate between "Winter Shakers" and sincere Shakers, or, between "War Quakers" and committed Quakers, for example? Because the draft was new and there were no clear-cut precedents, the military and the Federal government made and modified their policies concerning noncombatants as the situations arose.

Besides the pacifist groups of petitioners, virtually every Protestant church denomination as well as Catholic and Jewish communities sent delegations to visit Lincoln to share their concerns, complain, give advice, and, on occasion, pray with the president. Until the Conscription (Draft) Act of 1863, Lincoln dealt with every non-resistor individually. Each non-resistor was unique; some pacifists refused to fight but were willing or unwilling to do non-military service, or pay for a substitute or the commutative fee. Quakers objected to paying war taxes of any kind and objected to paying any fees to be freed from military service.

It was not until February 1864 that Congress passed an amendment to the Conscription Act of 1863. The amendment allowed only members of established pacifist religious sects to avoid military service by paying the three hundred dollar fee (the money was to be used to aid sick and wounded soldiers, not to pay for a substitute), by serving in hospitals, or by working with freedmen. Although this amendment satisfied the consciences of Mennonites, Dunkers, and Shakers, this new measure was still unacceptable to many Quaker conscientious objectors whose scruples would not allow them to have any kind of relationship with the military, even in charitable works. Eventually, the government decided on a practical practice that many military officers had resorted to and had recommended to the president: to "parole" nonresisters. The provost marshal, General James B. Fry, was ordered to instruct his subordinates to continue to draft conscientious objectors but then parole them immediately "until called for," a "calling" that would never happen.

Starting on page 212, Sanchez describes the encounter between Evans and Lincoln in the White House. Shaker elders and eldresses were famous for being fearless and unafraid of confrontation. Evans, of course, argued for exemption due to the Shaker belief in nonviolence and the Shaker custom of not voting or participating in any way in the political life of the nation. He also boldly made the point that many veterans of the American Revolution had converted to Shakerism after the war but had never asked for their rightful pensions. If the Shaker hierarchy at New Lebanon demanded payment of all those pensions, the amount would total $1,032,873.77. Lincoln is said to have replied, "You ought to be made to fight! We need regiments of just such men as you" (p. 123). The fire and determination of Shaker exceptionalism was in Evans's eyes. The Shaker draftees would be "paroled." The grateful Shakers invited Lincoln to come to New Lebanon for a vacation, a peaceful place to get away from the unbelievable grind of the Civil War. However, this was not meant to be. Lincoln had found his sanctuary at the Soldier's Home, a short distance outside of Washington DC.

Comparing Lincoln's response to Shaker Evans and his response to Quaker representatives, illustrates, I believe, some of the basic differences between Shaker and Quaker pacifists. The most famous Quaker visit, for example, was the visit of Quaker minister Eliza Paul Kirkbride Gurney to Lincoln on Sunday, October 26, 1862. Gurney was the American widow of Joseph John Gurney, the British founder and promoter of Orthodox Quakerism. Other Friends with her during this visit were John M. Whitall, Hannah B. Mott, and James Carey. She did not ask for any reimbursement from the Federal government. No Quaker Yearly Meeting had the authority to demand the pensions of "fighting" Quakers who had served during the Revolution. Lincoln was deeply moved by Quaker silent prayer and by Gurney's spontaneous prayer and exhortation. Since Gurney and company arrived at the White House solely to offer spiritual support to the weary president, Lincoln, who was constantly harangued by office seekers and officious persons who wanted to tell him what to do, was deeply impressed by her sincerity. The interview lasted more than the allotted fifteen minutes. Her prayer and Lincoln's response have survived. We also know that an exhausted Lincoln asked Gurney to write to him about a year after their interview and prayer together. Her letter to him has survived. It deeply consoled him. Quaker tradition claims that her letter was found in Lincoln's coat pocket after his assassination.

The comparison of these two visits would be a good start into a deeper study of similarities and differences between these two groups of pacifists. Although there are a number of similarities, there are many differences between Shakers and Quakers. For example, Shakers never voted or participated in politics directly, whereas

Quakers made these commitments individually. Most Quakers did vote. Officially Shakers were absolute pacifists. The Quakers were divided on the issue. Some Friends viewed the Civil War as a police action and not technically a national or international war. Consequently, force could be used to help preserve the Union. But liberal Quakers tended to be absolute pacifists. Shakers demanded obedience to a hierarchy of elders and eldresses. Quakers always emphasized the individual initiative of its members to obey directly "that of God" within themselves. Shakers followed the extremely strict Millennial Laws. Quakers eschewed dogma and doctrine. A small percentage of Shakers and Quakers were quiet abolitionists. Sanchez points out that the Shaker maple sugar industry was a stand against the use of sugar produced by slaves. This is comparable to Quaker Free Stores that refused to sell any product produced by slavery. A small percentage of Quakers were involved with the Underground Railroad. Although there are many stories, very little tangible evidence exists to prove that Shakers were involved in the Underground Railroad. Progressive Quakers were Spiritualists as were many Shakers. Both groups were pacifists who emphasized character development and understood that the inward spiritual journey was the "Lamb's War" against the violence of sin. They believed that this inward discipline was the true path to peace. However, sectarian Shakers and Quakers, who had objected initially to secular pacifism with its emphasis on politics and legislation, both developed a growing desire to cooperate with other like-minded people to attain a lasting and universal peace. *Mr. Lincoln's Chair* shines some light on the complexities of nineteenth-century pacifism, but there is much more to the story that could be told.

Unfortunately, Lincoln's Shaker chair has disappeared. This is sad since the chair was probably a master work of design and usefulness and a great comfort to its owner.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar

Citation: Karen S. Campbell. Review of Sanchez, Anita, *Mr. Lincoln's Chair: The Shakers and Their Quest for Peace.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. December, 2009.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25736

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.