

The Early Quaker Movement: George Fox, Elizabeth Hooten and Margaret Fell and the seeds of spiritual equity

By Annabel Short

A feminist is a woman who does not allow anyone to think in her place. —Le Doeuff 1991, quoted in Hampson 1996.

When I volunteered to prepare this paper for Christchurch Meeting to mark the birth and life of George Fox, I assumed it would involve historical research and would recount the importance of George Fox to our faith. A fact which is indisputable. However, not long after amassing a variety of sources on George's life, it suddenly became clear to me how well ahead of his time he was regarding his attitudes towards women, particularly their relationship with, and access to, spiritual leadership. Rather than an accounting of Fox's life and history (which has been covered extensively elsewhere) this flowed into how important his radical attitude towards women was at the time and how challenging this was to class and to patriarchy. These factors may well have contributed to both his, and early Quaker women's, persecution at the hands of both royalists (Catholics) and protestants (Cromwell). I have focussed on the very early years of the emerging faith and the role of two women at this time who made an historic contribution to its evolution.

This reflection on George Fox, Elizabeth Hooten and Margaret Fell and their leadership in the late 1640s and early 1650s begins with a short summary of their lives but strives to focus on the key messages for us. Rather than become mired in detail, I have strived to focus on their broad legacy; particularly as to how their acceptance of access to spiritual leadership by women laid the seeds for greater gender equality (in terms of public life), but not without great suffering. Historians in recent times have emphasised Margaret Fell's (1614-1702) advocacy for women's participation. At the same time, little attention has been paid to the role of women such as Elizabeth Hooten (1600-1672) and the instrumental role of George himself in facilitating women's leadership and participation. At this time, it was unthinkable for women to lead a religious movement and, as an example of Quaker women's contribution to our legacy, the following quotation illustrates their considerable activity during the 17th century.

The largest single body of printed texts by women during the Restoration was that of texts written by Quaker women. (Ezell 1993, p.124 cited in Mack, 2003)

It has been argued that there is "Little known about the first few years of Quakerism" (Moore. R., *Leaders of the Primitive Quaker Movement*, Vol. 85, No. 1, Spring, 1996: Pp.29-44) It is in the period 1640s to 1650s that few records remain compared with later periods of Quaker growth and development. However, it is in this time that the birth of Quakerism took place with the emergence of Quaker faith and practice.

George Fox, born 1624, we know was a man from humble beginnings who left his family home at the age of 18 in 1642 on a journey to seek spiritual guidance and revelation.

(<https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-Fox>) Only thirty per cent of the population at the time were literate – but despite a lack of formal education George both read and wrote extensively. As he travelled through towns and villages, he sought religious counsel and revelation or "openings" in the process of developing what was then a unique set of beliefs. During this early period, he was of the view that ministers "bred at Oxford or Cambridge" were not suitable to lead the Christian faith (Quaker Faith and Practice, Britain, Fifth Edition). The belief in the ability of people to have direct access to spiritual enlightenment and inspiration irrespective of gender or social class was a radical perspective for the time. As we know, the persecution of Quakers began in the late 1640s and early 50s when the early peace testimony fundamentally challenged authorities.

The following quote attributed to George from 1651 states that “I told the Commonwealth Commissioners I lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars and I knew from whence all wars did rise, from the lust, according to James's doctrine... I told them I was come into the covenant of peace which was before wars and strifes were”.

https://quaker.org/legacy/minnfm/peace/fox_1651.htm) This belief and the commitment it required was bound to bring George into direct conflict with royal power.

It was in the year 1647 that George met Elizabeth Hooton (born 1600) while he travelled in the Midlands in the Mansfield area at a time when he was experiencing prescient visions of “the ocean of darkness and death” counterpointed by the “infinite ocean of God's light and love” (Journal of George Fox). Elizabeth Hooton was a Baptist minister who regularly held group meetings in her house but who became inspired by George's by now evolving spiritual message of the possibility of direct experience of the divine. George was welcomed into Elizabeth's group and they became persuaded by his inspiration. It has been proposed that at this stage of his spiritual development George began with a ‘radical individualism’ and urged individuals to question their traditional beliefs and practices (Ingle, 1994).

Not long after meeting Elizabeth Hooton there is an account of a seemingly miraculous recovery of a woman who visited George while he was incarcerated in Nottingham prison. Various priests had attempted to heal her with fasting but none of their treatments improved her health. George urged Friends in Mansfield to support her, and he felt moved to recommend that she stay with Elizabeth Hooton and to hold a meeting there to improve her wellbeing. Following the first Meeting she appeared worse than before but after the second meeting was held, ‘a cure was affected’ (sic). (From Elizabeth Hooton, *First Quaker Woman Preacher (1600-1672)*, E. Manners (1914) Vol Two, Headley Bros. p.6)

George stayed with Elizabeth and her family and supported her calling to become active in Quaker ministry.

Elizabeth's preaching and actions were soon subject to control and punishment with a period of imprisonment in Derby after challenging a priest who ‘so resented her Reproof that he applied to the magistrate to punish her’. (Manners, 1914, p6) Elizabeth suffered further periods of imprisonment and punishment through the early to mid-1650s; none of which deterred her from continuing to support George Fox and early Quakers and from challenging priests: usually resulting in imprisonment. While incarcerated, Elizabeth advocated for improvement in prison conditions – separation of the sexes, banning alcohol and the ‘wantonness of women’ (sic) and refusing visits from ‘drunken’ priests. Elizabeth advocated for employment (a theme carried forward by Elizabeth Fry a century later), for reduction in fees (prisoners had to pay for their incarceration at the time), and for the removal of disordered persons (Manners, 1914). (As an aside we still incarcerate ‘disordered persons’ with regular prisoners in our women's prison system).

Elizabeth's ministry so impressed George that it was her words that led him to recognise that ‘God had anointed women for ministry as well as men’. (Manners, E., 1914)

Arguably it was this revelation that was critical in the further development of early Quakerism and radical in the historical context. Other sources report that George had long supported women's equal access to spirituality as the following quote highlights:

For the light is the same in the male, and in the female, which cometh from Christ, he by whom the world was made, and so Christ is one in all, and not divided; and who is it that dare stop Christ's mouth? that now is come to reign in his sons and daughters, Christ in the male, and Christ in the female? (From the *Woman Learning in Silence, Or the Mystery of the Woman's Subjection to Her Husband* – George Fox).

Stuart Master from Woodbrooke (no date) has argued that in the early origins of Quakerism - that is the years from 1640 to 1650 - women experienced the greatest freedom in terms of leadership.

O'Neill, in 2014 in *Sleeping with Margaret Fell: A Pilgrimage to 1652 Quaker Country* has conjectured as to why George became a firm supporter of women as leaders in the emerging faith. In addition to the quotation above, O'Neill also cites the polemic on *The Mystery of the Woman's Subjection to her Husband* (Journal of George Fox). According to O'Neill's research he also challenged ministers about women's right to speak in church even before Quakerism became a movement. (O'Neill, 2014)

It has been proposed that by the time George Fox met Margaret Fell his 'conviction of women's equality seems to have become fully actualised'. In 1652 George visited Swarthmoor Hall where Margaret Fell, wife of Judge Fell was a member of the Puritan gentry and mother to eight children. This is two years following George Fox's time in Lancashire and his stay with Elizabeth Hooten. Margaret, having listened to George, converts to the new faith along with her seven daughters. It is following her commitment to the new faith that Margaret begins providing support to itinerant Quakers and established a fund to support their families. After Judge Fell's death in 1658 she began visiting prisons and 'preaching throughout much of England' (Kunze, 1986). (Kunze, B. Y. (1986). An Unpublished Work by Margaret Fell. *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 130(4), 424-452.)

It is widely accepted within Quakers that

Theirs became an equal partnership across divisions of class, beginning the legacy of strong female leadership among Friends that continues to the present day. This is historically significant and unique by comparison to the origins of other European and American religions, which are patriarchal, with very few exceptions (Smith, A., 2024).

It was in 1656, following George and Margaret's growing leadership in supporting the new movement that George wrote: *The Woman Learning in Silence*. This early treatise questions the 'mysterie of the woman subjection to her husband' and goes on to quote the prophet Joel 'I will poure out my spirit upon all flesh' (George Fox, 1656) – meaning that all people have equal access to the spirit and this was in support of women's active participation in ministry.

It is of course not possible to know the details of the conversations that must have occurred between George and Margaret but this is the first reference by George to the Biblical message foreshadowing the right of all people to speak to others in God's name (Acts 2:17-18). Not surprisingly when conducting a Google search on 13/07/2024 with the above quote – conservative faith groups have interpreted only the first part of this quote to confirm their belief that women are to be viewed as subjects of their husbands and denied equal access to spiritual leadership and enlightenment. On the contrary, given what we know of George Fox's openness to women's leadership and public preaching in the new faith and based on what we know of Elizabeth Hooten, this was the beginning of a radical interpretation of the Bible teaching which Margaret Fell was to develop further in her seminal work: *'omen's Speaking Justified* (1666).

Whilst there had already been movement towards accepting women's equal participation in Quaker leadership: both spiritual and organisational, *Women's Speaking Justified Proved and Allowed by the Scriptures* presented a thorough argument based on Biblical texts (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/margaret-fell/>). I have enjoyed reading Margaret's interpretation of the Bible – as we know – interpretations remain contentious and some have argued that one can

find support for mutually conflicting ideas and propositions based on its interpretation (*The Jesus Seminar*, 1993), *Women's Speaking* (1666) demonstrates not only Margaret's grasp of the Scriptures but most significantly her ability to theoretically interpret the Bible - with the interests of women as its primary focus (a feminist hermeneutic). It is for this reason, along with her leadership in Quaker organisation that she became known by some as the 'Mother of Quakerism' (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/margaret-fell/#RespCrit>).

Thickstun (1995) has argued that 'In recovering positive biblical role models for women, Margaret Fell anticipates the work of the most radical twentieth-century feminist biblical scholars', in other words, Fell privileges charismatic speaking of God's word over silence:

Those that speak against the Spirit of the Lord speaking in a woman, simply, by reason of her Sex, or because she is a Woman, regarding not the Seed, and Spirit, and Power that speaks in her; such speak against Christ, and his Church, and are of the Seed of the Serpent.

And, in *The Mothers of Feminism: The Story of Quaker Women in America*, Margaret Hope Bacon (1986) proposed that

The experience Quaker women had accumulated in public speaking, holding meetings, taking minutes, and writing epistles prepared them for leadership roles when the time was ripe for a women's rights movement to emerge.

Based on this legacy I suspect that Quakers' ongoing encouragement for progressive beliefs and practices has continued in many shapes and forms. Their anti-slavery stand, promotion of access to education for girls, and ongoing commitment to gender and human rights have continued.

There are many existential challenges in the present context - the destruction of our planet is just one example, gender-based violence is another that ask of us to continue to bear witness and to contribute as much as we can in the tradition of our forebears.

Further References:

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