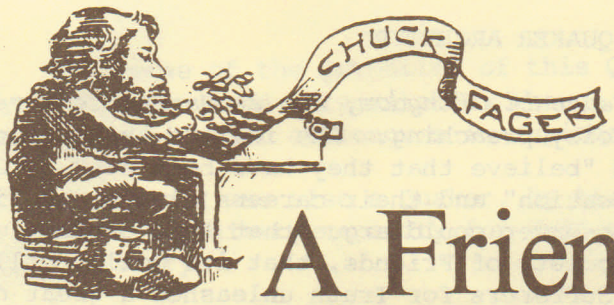

A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Thirty-Six ISSN #0739-5418 Third Month, 1984

Dear Friend,

I knew it was premature to say, as I did last month, that my experiences with computers were over the hump. Not so! Since then, I have been so rash as to have even purchased my own, a machine on which I am assured I will be able henceforth to handle my mailing list, the preparation of such documents as this, and a myriad of other tasks. So I am assured. We shall see tomorrow, when I attempt for the first time to print out the labels for my subscription list, whether this is indeed so. (If you receive this issue sometime in Fifth Month, it wasn't.)

In the meantime, it is now the third anniversary of *A Friendly Letter*, and as with so many of its predecessors, this issue is coming out late in the month. I have had occasion to reflect on why that is the case recently, as a new subscriber from Maryland sent along with a check a lengthy letter detailing his deeply felt disquiet over the many sins of the modern news media, a category in which I am so bold as to include myself and this effort. He spoke warmly of such things as arrogance, triviality, sensationalism and credibility gaps. By and large, he was on target.

None of his barbs, he assured me, were directed at this journal(at least not yet, since he was new to it); but the issues he raised are not new to me. Most have been raised by one or another angry letter now cooling in my fat file of correspondence from readers. And most are raised by *me* in connection with each issue: Am I sensationalizing issues like the struggles over homosexuality in various groups? Is there more than a tolerable amount of arrogance in my willingness to express my views on various issues before us? Do I raise the curtain on events and problems which would be better left to be dealt with behind the veil?

By and large, I am able to say that I remain persuaded that *A Friendly Letter*'s record has been serviceable to Friends. Even so, this confidence is not built in, but has had to be struggled for virtually every month, for every issue. If last month's issue was constructive, accurate and balanced, well and good; but that gives me no guarantees about *this* month's number. So for each issue, my preparation includes not only the work of reporting, researching and interviewing; indeed, that is the easy part. Next comes the matter of discernment, whether and how this material can be put into a serviceable form.

I don't say this to apologize for anything, except my proclivity to lateness of publication. At bottom, *A Friendly Letter* is a religious more than a professional undertaking, so I will continue to try to weigh each issue in the Light, however long that takes. As I continue, I appreciate the support (including the criticism) you have so willingly offered me.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

THE AMBIGUOUS POWER OF A QUAKER ARCHETYPE

In his fine novel of early Quakerism, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, Jan de Hartog features a character who is terrified of George Fox and his noisy preaching. She insists that while such religious innovators are "drunk with God" and "believe that they have been sent by God to change the world," even so they "thrive on persecution" and their careers always end "in violence and horror and death...." An unfriendly observer could argue that this pattern was more than verified by the first generation of the Society of Friends, that its motley collection of Seekers of Truth, Publishers of Truth, and Sufferers for Truth unleashed a great deal of violence in the course of their religious crusade for the Light of Christ Within.

Presumably we can look back from the distance of three centuries and say the tumult was worth it, both for our Society and for society at large. Even so, this process must often have been an ambiguous and even unnerving one to live through, especially on the movement's fringes where the founders' vision was not so clearly shared. And to be sure, there has been no dearth of distinguished historians, from Macauley to Boorstin, who have argued in effect that the Quaker witness, considering the violence it evoked, was indeed more trouble than it was worth.

A Familiar Story With and Unfamiliar Moral

This sense of the ambiguity involved in our history has been much with me over the past several weeks, ever since I learned that Ronald Reagan would award the Presidential Medal of Freedom posthumously to Whittaker Chambers on Third Month 26.

The story of Whittaker Chambers and his role in sparking the anti-Communist crusades of the late 1940s and 1950s has often been told. His charge that Alger Hiss, a distinguished former State Department official, had joined him in spying for Russia during the 1930s eventually sent Hiss to prison, launched Richard Nixon as a national figure, and laid the groundwork for McCarthyism(though Chambers himself despised McCarthy and his witchhunts).

What has not been reflected on often is how well Chambers' actions fit into the archetypal Quaker model of seeking, publishing and suffering for Truth. Yet Chambers became a Quaker not long after defecting from the Communist underground, and wrote very eloquently in his memoir, *Witness*, of the depth of meaning he found in Friends' worship. In his last years, living in seclusion near Westminster, Maryland, he joined Pipe Creek Monthly Meeting. He often sat in its small, hilltop meetinghouse, which looks out over a lovely, peaceful valley. Indeed, the very title of his testament, *Witness*, has a double meaning, referring both to his role as a witness in the Hiss case and to his conception of his efforts in these years as a witness to Truth against an implacable enemy.

Two Who Witnessed and Suffered For Their Truth

Furthermore, when the Hiss case became public, Chambers spoke of his role in it as being one which would involve much suffering for him; indeed, he said it would entail his own slow self-destruction. Skeptics dismiss this as mere self-dramatization, of which he was indeed capable. But events bore out his words: In the years of controversy which followed, he lost his job as an editor of Time magazine, suffered several heart attacks which left him bedridden for long periods, experienced a near-constant sense of deep melancholy, and finally died in 1961 under mysterious circumstances which may have been suicide(he had tried it before).

There are still those who regard Chambers as a scoundrel and his "witness" a fraud and a frameup. I am among those who believe he was telling the truth about Alger Hiss, but I say that only for the record; this controversy is not what concerns us here. Rather, what has struck me is how well the Quaker model of seeking and suffering for truth shows through his actions, and how much power to affect history, for good and evil, it thereby proved itself still able to generate, 300 years after it had first appeared. Indeed, it does not seem exaggerated to say that in many ways Chambers' "witness" became a fulcrum of American history after World War Two.

The sense of the potential of this Quaker model was reinforced as I studied Chambers' career and discovered a remarkable, though even more ambiguous, parallel to it in the life of one of Chambers' other colleagues in espionage, Noel Field.

Noel Field was also a Quaker, by birthright, of a New England family. His application of an almost hereditary capacity for dedication to truth as he saw it became another fulcrum of modern history.

Field was not shy about trading on his Quaker identity; yet he had also decided, by early adulthood, that Communism was the form of Truth for him. Like Alger Hiss, he was a promising State Department official in the 1930s; indeed they were good friends. But Field apparently shrank from the underground's request that he spy on his own government. To resolve this conflict between ideology and scruple, he finally left the US, to work for international organizations. There, he later said, he could spy for Russia with a clear conscience, since he was not working for any government in particular. During World War Two he was hired to head the Unitarian Service Committee's European program, which he turned into a Communist front, using it almost exclusively to help Communist activists escape from Nazi territory. While his work was clearly focussed on one group, he was a dedicated relief organizer, and helped many Communists who later became key figures in the new Marxist governments of Eastern Europe.

"Fieldists" and Their Fearful Fate

Once Whittaker Chambers described his Communist past, Field's Communist connections also came out, and Field became afraid to return to the US. Out of work, in 1949 he went to Czechoslovakia, where he thought he had been promised a job. But rather than escape a witch-hunt, he walked right into another, far more terrible one: he was arrested by the secret police, and spent six years in prison without charges or trial. His wife was also imprisoned, and neither knew if the other was alive.

Why? His dedicated refugee work during the war had somehow become in Joseph Stalin's mind the centerpiece of a paranoid fantasy about a farflung CIA plot to overthrow his East European dominions. On this vision was built the long horror of the postwar purge trials, with thousands executed and tens of thousands imprisoned for the wholly imaginary crime of being "Fieldists." The only evidence against many of the victims was that Field, the devout Communist Quaker, had helped them escape the Nazis and therefore had met them. Field himself was tortured into making a false confession, and then kept in solitary confinement in a basement cell throughout these long dark years. (The story of these purges has been briefly told in a book, *Operation Splinter Factor*, by Stewart Steven; Noel Field's sad story is recounted well by Flora Lewis in her book *Red Pawn*.)

The Faithfulness of Noel Field

One would think such treatment would have disillusioned Field. But incredibly, it did not. He came out of prison after Stalin's death avowing his forgiveness of his misguided captors and reaffirming his faith in Communism as the way of the world's future. He settled in Budapest, defended the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, and died there in 1972. His performance, in fact, was like nothing so much as an updated version of the "sufferings" of many an early Friend who emerged from horrible ordeals with their faith refined as by fire, praying for their persecutors as much as for their victims.

Field is all but unknown today, while Chambers remains, at least to Americans like Ronald Reagan, a legendary and heroic figure. To Friends, these men's stories ought to provide much food for sober reflection on the meaning, the ambiguities and the still-explosive implications of this tradition we hold so dear. Once it gets loose in the world, especially if it is made the victim of a false god, not just an individual but whole societies can be put at risk. It was not for nothing that Jan de Hartog's character was unnerved by the figure of George Fox. Nor was the apostle Paul simply exaggerating when he charged his fellow believers(in Philippians 2:12) to "work out your salvation in fear and trembling."

INSIDE: WHITTAKER CHAMBERS AND NOEL FIELD--
QUAKERS AT THE HUB OF HISTORY

From: Chuck Fager, *A Friendly Letter*
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THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

In Third Month, 1857, John Bright was defeated for reelection to the British Parliament. His defeat was due to his outspoken and untiring opposition to the Crimean War, a Vietnam-like disaster then running its bloody course. Bright had stood almost alone among public figures in opposing the war, which he did on both principled and practical grounds, and the abuse he took for his opposition was both fierce and unremitting, ending in his unseating as a member for Manchester. Nor had Bright been immune to this storm of criticism; he had suffered a nervous breakdown the previous year, and his recovery had been slow; his defeat for reelection added insult to injury.

But this was not to be the end of his parliamentary career. Later that spring, a member from Birmingham died, and local political leaders, who were devoted to Bright's free trade economics if not his pacifism(Birmingham was the center of the British munitions industry), asked the Quaker if he would stand for the seat. He agreed, was elected without opposition, and served with great distinction for thirty more years.

QUAKER CHUCKLES

Can you imagine how embarrassed a certain weighty Friend once was on a particular summer First Day when the elders came for a visit? They were all on the porch, sipping tea, when two of the host's children got into a noisy brawl on the grass in plain sight.

"Children," reproved the Friend, "remember the Golden Rule!"

"I remember it, father," replied his daughter. "But Billy did it to me first."

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From Miami Meeting in Florida comes the following limerick, "The Lament of the Assistant Clerk":

When the clerk's on a trip far and wide,
I really can't say I preside.
No president here--
As a Quaker, I fear,
You could say I commit Clerkicide!
