

A Friendly Letter

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Dear Friend:

What's for free? Fifty of these bumperstickers are. They are produced by George Nicklin, a psychiatrist and member of New York YM, in dark blue on white vinyl, 3" by 12". If the message speaks to thy condition as it did to mine, just send me a stamped, self-addressed envelope, and I'll rush it back to thee posthaste.

**say no to
DRUGS, ALCOHOL, TOBACCO**

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Now for some brief updates on current topics:

* President Reagan has appointed several more of the first board members of the U.S. Institute of Peace. Those listed earlier in Issue #54, mostly right wing, will now be joined by Evron Kirkpatrick (husband of former U.N. Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick), Dennis Bark of the Hoover Institution, W. Scott Thompson of the Fletcher School at Tufts University (and a stalwart of the Committee on the Present Danger), and Allen Weinstein, president of the Center for Democracy. Some USIP supporters are still grimly optimistic, saying it's better than nothing, etc.; others, including yours truly, are more and more fearful that the USIP may end up being, not stillborn but rather turned into a monster before our eyes.

* Also in Issue #54 we mentioned the case of Tony Campolo, a noted evangelical speaker/writer who was hounded out of a speaking engagement recently for preaching essentially Quaker doctrines about the universality of God's work and the inadequacy of creeds. We didn't know then that Campolo is also slotted as the main speaker at "YouthQuake '86," an ecumenical Quaker conference planned for Mexico next summer. We have also learned that there were questions about his "soundness" reported at a YouthQuake planning committee meeting last month. But the committee, to its credit, reaffirmed his place on the program. Let's hope they can stick to their scheme of letting a non-Quaker freely preach Quaker doctrines to Quaker youth at a Quaker conference; they would be setting a badly-needed example by doing so.

* Finally, we turn once more to Quakers in Kenya. In Issue #52 we told of reports of a new split among the YM groups there, led by East Africa YM's longtime Executive Secretary Thomas Lung'aho (not L'Ungaho, as we misspelled it then). That report may not have been entirely accurate: it now appears that Lung'aho and EAYM are cooperating with the two other recognized Kenyan YMs. But there is still trouble; a breakaway former EAYM clerk has filed lawsuits alleging that his is the only legitimate Quaker group in Kenya. The prospects for these suits are unclear; some say they are negligible, others say wait and see. We hope this latest version of the situation is more accurate; but we will continue to watch that space.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

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THREE PIOUS QUAKER MYTHS

Here's the first one: For fifty years, the story "An Ill Wind" has greeted tens of thousands of readers when they opened The Friendly Story Caravan, published by Pendle Hill, and The Children's Story Caravan before that: Presented as a tale "of Real People and Places" it recounts an incident during the American Revolution in which a British privateer sails into Nantucket harbor, knowing the island to be mainly populated by Quakers, who are prosperous but unarmed, and thus easy pickings for its licensed plunder. However, the ship's commander is met by William Rotch, the wealthiest and weightiest Nantucket Friend, who treats the invader to a courteous tour around Nantucket town, showing it to be uniformly friendly, charitable and peace-loving. The captain, so abashed at the contrast thus presented to his perfidious plans, ends up shaking Rotch's hand and returning to his vessel. Then, the story concludes, "the ship weighed anchor, trimmed her sails, and to the surprised relief of all Nantucket, sailed peaceably out of sight."

Yes, it's a lovely story. The only trouble with it is that it isn't true. In fact, the history of Nantucket during the American Revolution was of just the opposite character: not just once but repeatedly privateer ships--both British and American--came into the port bent on plundering the town--and did just that. The island's standard histories tell the sad story, and none records such a remarkable change of heart by a would-be raider.

Another Quaker Tall Tale

The next myth is painful to undermine, because it has become a pillar of the tolerant self-image on which liberal Quakerism humbly prides itself. It is the one about William Penn and his sword, and is told among other places in Elizabeth Janet Gray's often reprinted biography Penn, as part of the dashing young soldier's growth into full Quaker witness: "William, who had given considerable thought to the sword which he still wore, asked George Fox what he ought to do about it.... 'Why,' said George Fox, 'wear it as long as thou canst.'...the next time they met, George Fox said: 'William, where is thy sword?' And William answered: 'I took thy advice. I wore it as long as I could.'"

Yes, another fine and often reprinted story. (It is mentioned twice, for instance, in London YM's influential Christian faith and Practice.) But alas, an undoubtedly apocryphal one. An investigation into its origins traces it back to a life of Penn by Samuel Janney published in 1852. Janney's footnote on the anecdote states that it was "Related to me by I.P. of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, who had it from James Simpson." Which is to say, two unverified oral sources, one unidentified, which could not go back more than about the turn of the nineteenth century, 80 years after Penn's death. A later, more careful biographer, Catherine Owens Peare, cites a manuscript contemporary with Penn and attributed to him which gives a very different account: That when he was first arrested with Friends, in Ireland in 1667, he unbuckled his sword at the doorway to the prison, "and handed it with a bow to a bystander, announcing that henceforth he would walk unarmed in an armed world."

Still Another Tall Tale

Last, but not least, there is the frequently heard account of Stephen Grellet "preaching to nobody." In it, as retold most melodramatically by L.V. Hodgkin in A book of Quaker Saints, the young, evangelically-oriented Quaker minister one day found himself irresistibly drawn by "a Voice" to preach in a backwoods woodcutters' camp he had once visited. "Stephen knew quite well Whose Voice it was that was speaking to him," so off he went into the wilderness, only to find the camp empty and abandoned. The urge to preach was nonetheless irresistible, so he entered the deserted dining-shanty, and "although no single human being was to be seen, he PREACHED, as he had never preached in his life." We are assured that "Stephen never forgot his mysterious journey into the backwoods," and sure enough, many years later, crossing London Bridge, a stranger rushed up, grabbed him and exclaimed that he had been hiding in the woods nearby, heard the sermon, was himself converted from a "worse than rough, bad; worse than bad, wicked" way of life, and in turn converted all the other woodmen in his crew, three of whom had since become missionaries and had converted hundreds more apiece. He had been searching ever since for the stranger who had so long ago brought him the message of salvation when "preaching to nobody."

Another fine story, especially for the evangelistically-inclined; but almost certainly another piece of whole cloth. Why? The most compelling reason is that Grellet never mentioned it in his own autobiography; and Hodgkin's source turns out to be an article in The American Friend in 1895, clearly homiletical in intention and citing no sources.

But one might well retort, So what? Why the nitpicking? There are several reasons.

First of all, the three stories cited here are not isolated examples. There are many similar tales, published in numerous collections, many of which have likewise been passed along for generations like family heirlooms, under the color of history though with little more solid foundation. But thus treating them uncritically as historical displays an unseemly laziness on the part of those who have so often repeated and reprinted them. For despite their familiarity, none of these three tales is well-documented, and it takes no great effort to see through them. That few have taken the trouble to check, even when preparing a document as important as London YM's faith and practice, should be troubling to those Friends for whom our reputation for truthfulness counts for something.

Truth In Advertising Applies Here, Too

Accuracy is also important in considering the function of such stories. Each of them was intended to uplift, inspire, and instruct. As the editor of The Children's Story Caravan put it, the stories "illustrate the ethical principles and religious truths that the Society of Friends considered of primary importance." Yet for such principles to be reliably transmitted, the vehicles had better be able to withstand the scrutiny of thoughtful people who care about history. Otherwise we risk not just rejection but ridicule.

Take "An Ill Wind" for example. In the Caravan's 1935 edition, there is a "historical note" at the back which says it is "based on an incident contributed by Howard T. Jones of West Branch, Ia.; 'taken from a manuscript book of a friend now deceased,'" a good enough indication of its dubious claim to historicity, and a tacit admission that the editors had neither time nor inclination to check it out. This note does not, however, appear in the newer Friendly Story Caravan, which has been one of the most widely-circulated Quaker books of modern times. But thus is the groundwork for debunking laid; and as anyone who has dealt with young people growing up in our cynical society should know, it is only a short step from debunking to demoralization in such serious matters.

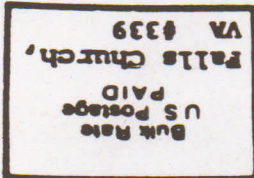
The Difference Truth Makes

More than simple accuracy is at stake here, however. The attitudes so inculcated are also deeply suspect. "An Ill Wind" is an instance of what could be called the "magic wand" notion of Quaker peace witness; it is one of several stories in that book and others in which the threat of violence is painlessly warded off and dissipated simply by a Quaker's quiet firmness. But the real history of Nantucket shows that the Quaker peace witness there much more often meant enduring great suffering without recourse. Putting it this way would make it not only better history, but also better Quaker testimony, and better Christianity--after all, Jesus too declined to fight, but he did not thereby escape the cross.

Similarly with Penn and his sword. While tolerance is surely a virtue, liberal Friends apply it somewhat selectively. Does any one, for instance, recall a yearly meeting which sent a letter to the president urging him to "Wear thy Star Wars and MX missiles as long as thou canst"? In other words, our practice rather strongly suggests that there is also a time for speaking truth to power, forthrightly and even discordantly. This should be no surprise to fans of George Fox, since a dispassionate look at his career will show it tilted rather more to that confrontational side than to our seemingly cosmopolitan tolerance. The same goes for "Preaching to Nobody." Stephen Grellet's actual career is a remarkable enough record of faithfulness to leadings without the need for such silly embroidery.

At Pendle Hill The Friendly Story Caravan is up for revision and reprinting, and at Friends General Conference there is talk of reprinting another venerable collection of such stories. While much that is true and valuable can be found in them, there is also much sentimental deadwood, and a new generation of editors which cares about our Society should be careful and ruthless in sorting out the two.

INSIDE: PUNCTURING THREE
PIOUS QUAKER MYTHS



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

On Eleventh Month 27 and 28, 1917, federal authorities unconditionally released the last of over 200 women prisoners. The women had been arrested for protesting the failure of the administration of Woodrow Wilson to push for passage of the women's suffrage amendment to the constitution. The chief organizer of the protests was Friend Alice Paul, who also wrote the Equal Rights Amendment.

This particular campaign had begun in First Month, 1917, with all-women picket lines and vigils outside the White House. Then in Fourth Month, President Wilson took the U.S. into World War One. Patriotic war fever swept the nation, but Paul's group, many of whose other leaders were also Friends, declined to endorse the war effort, and even used Wilson's pronouncements against him in its protests, insisting "Democracy should begin at home." Soon enough their peaceful picketers were being arrested, and many sent to a filthy prison in Virginia. Several began hunger strikes, and authorities force-fed them, with a brutality that produced a national public outcry. Alice Paul fasted in jail for twenty two days herself, and authorities insisted she undergo a psychiatric examination. Not long after the prisoners were released, Woodrow Wilson announced his support of the amendment, which finally became law in Eighth Month, 1920.

QUAKER CHUCKLES

I'll drink to That?

In the Wall Street Journal of 10/4/85, a large ad featured a bottle of imported Warteck Beer, under the bold headline, "*For the Movers and the Quakers.*" The copy beneath this tableau went on to describe the beverage as "For all walks of life, whether fast or slow...." (But it didn't say which was which.) Oh yes, it must be noted, for Truth's sake, that Warteck Beer is non-alcoholic.

And Speaking of Speaking Truth....

Mom to an eleven-year-old, on the way home from Northern Yearly Meeting: "Well, was this a good Yearly Meeting for you?" "Oh yes, I played touch football and volleyball the whole time!" Mom: "What did you learn about the Quakers?" "Well, you know So-and-so (a well-respected Friend)? Boy, is he *agressive!* And you you know What's-his-name (an even weightier Friend)--well, everyone thinks he is fat, but I can tell you he is **SOLID!**" --Thanks again to Raquel Wood
