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Peters' "Print Culture and the Early Quakers" - Book Review

Catie Gill
University of Loughborough

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Book Reviews

PETERS, Kate, *Print Culture and the Early Quakers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. xiii + 273. ISBN 0-5217-7090-4, Hardback, £48.00

Since the appearance, in 1994, of Kate Peters' contribution to the special issue of *Prose Studies* on 'The Emergence of Quaker Writing', then, in 1996, her PhD thesis ('Quaker Pamphleteering and the Development of the Quaker Movement, 1652–1656'), there has been much scholarly anticipation for this book. I am one of the many scholars whose work is indebted to Peters' doctoral study of the Quaker movement, and I am not alone. The recent *Cambridge Companion to Writing of the English Revolution* (edited by N.H. Keeble, 2001), for instance, clearly shows the inflected influence of Peters' work. Sharon Achinstein can observe with confidence that 'Quakers were extraordinarily efficient in coordinating and organizing their printing and dissemination of texts', adding that print was 'a means to consolidate community identity' (p. 63). Likewise, Thomas N. Corns acknowledges that 'As Kate Peters has demonstrated, publication was central to the rise of Quakerism' before explaining that 'itinerant preachers travelled equipped with tracts to distribute, and pamphlets often related to particular missions' (p. 83). The evidence provided in Peters' thesis, then, has already been integrated into the arguments of those literary critics who work on radical religious writing.

Peters' thesis made an impact; the book promises even more. *Print Culture and the Early Quakers* is more than an expansion and amplification of the earlier arguments. Peters has read all of the published texts in the Quaker canon (1652–56), plus swathes of anti-Quakerania: engagement with Friends' early writings is full and detailed. She aptly surveys such key genres as prison narratives, controversy literature (specifically, inter-faith disputes), and the political pamphlet or petition. Her work shows how Quaker consciousness of the importance of print developed: starting at a local level, Friends later achieved national prominence, through print. The added factor that distinguishes Peters' work is her striking recognition of the interdependence of printed and manuscript sources. The picture that is painted here is of a movement that consciously employed the medium of print to further its religious and political ends. More than that, print had a practical utility: it consolidated the work that ministers had done in person to establish Quaker Meetings; it capitalized on the notoriety of some Quakers; and it allowed Quakers to exploit key events such as imprisonment or trial. Quakers, then, 'made use of the written word in the fullest possible sense' (p. 42). Because Peters' work so carefully considers the manuscript sources, it becomes clear that Quakers' extensive use of print was indicative of calculated and highly

effective campaigns. 'Quaker pamphleteering was a self-conscious and carefully conducted activity, and an integral part of the Quaker campaign', Peters observes (p. 252).

Although Peters' work is of the greatest relevance to the study of the material processes of textual production, she offers keen assessments of the Quakers' religious and political themes. Of most interest, I think, is the identification of Quaker strategies of authorship aimed at engaging the reader. Peters contends that the texts reached out to an extended readership (local and national/Quaker and non-Quaker) and shows that, in doing so, their agenda was inclusive. The readership was to be engaged with as potential converts, for instance: '[Quakers sought] universal religious participation' (p. 154). This idea chimes with Peters' sense that authors' established purpose was to convince (in the spiritual sense of the word), rather than alienate, and perhaps the coherence of her position underestimates, a little, the antagonism Quakers reacted to and fuelled. Nevertheless, her assessment could potentially provoke new research into reader-response in the period; it certainly consolidates the link between orality and literature.

She is arguably unlikely to convince scholars who are bent on underestimating the significance of the Quakers' political thought to change their view. The recent revisionist assault on the radical writers of the revolutionary period (Levellers, Quakers, Ranters, Diggers) counteracts the supposed over-concentration on the sects with assertions that the effect of the radical minority was in fact limited. Peters does much to indicate that Quakers were challenging the legal structure, arguing for religious toleration, and were active petitioners of parliament. Yet her work does not go so far as, for instance, Rosemary Moore's recent *The Light in their Consciences* (2000), in establishing how the content of these tracts explores radical themes. But then, Peters does not aim to, since her motive is to explore methods of publication. If her study does not give a sense of a movement specifically engaged with matters of state it does, nevertheless, indicate that Quakers cannot be seen as the insular mystics that once they were believed to be, and neither can they be written off in the way that Christopher Hill's *World Turned Upside Down* (1972) implied. The chief factor here is that Peters's study ends before the period of greatest political imminancy: 1659–60 were key years for Quaker polemic. Her overview of the Nayler crisis of 1656 touches on the political and religious issues, but her focus is on how print was utilized.

Nigel Smith's contribution to the *Cambridge History of the Book* (Vol. 4, 2002) affirms that Quaker publishing was one of the 'two phenomena' to stand out as exceptional in the period 1557–1695 – the other being the Marprelate tracts (p. 412). Discussing these two phenomena, Smith maintains both were, 'highly orchestrated and very successful attempts to exploit the powers of the press', adding, they are 'significant' when charting the 'history of the modern press' (pp. 412-13). The importance of Quakers to scholars interested in the book trade therefore cannot be over-estimated. Furthermore, Peters' and Ian Green's essay ('Religious Publishing in England 1640–1699') in the same volume adds to the prominence of this sect. The Quakers present a unique case in the history of print, owing to their extensive records. Yet what is obvious from *Print Culture and the Early Quakers* is that this is a book that will be drawn on by scholars interested in the extensive canon of radical literature of the period for what it shows of the collectively managed, and

orchestrated, manipulation of print. Peters's book is rich in detail, original research, and keen insight: it is a book to read and re-read.

Catie Gill
University of Loughborough, England