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Review Of "From Peace To Freedom: Quaker Rhetoric And The Birth Of American Antislavery, 1657-1761" By B. Carey

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Review

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BOOK REVIEWS

From Peace to Freedom: Quaker Rhetoric and the Birth of American Antislavery, 1657–1761. By BRYCCHAN CAREY. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012. 272 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$35.)

This well-written and informative book, distinguished by its careful attention to rhetoric, provides historical background for the more well-known narrative of American and British antislavery work of the later eighteenth century. In this exploration of early Quaker antislavery literature, Brycchan Carey argues that the “origins of most of the arguments made in the formalized antislavery campaigns that emerged from the 1770s onward can be found throughout writings produced by Friends in the century-long debate that took place from 1657–1761” (36).

The study of historical movements often demonstrates that by the time the goals of widespread social and political change have been achieved, early and crucial voices in the emerging movements have been forgotten. Carey has unearthed early Quaker antislavery voices and has composed a compelling narrative of their discursive history. Focusing on the development of a “discourse of antislavery,” with particular attention paid to the characteristic rhetorical maneuvers and patterns of thought in the texts and traditions he analyzes, Carey explores a lineage of antislavery discourse that links together writers who have often been perceived as voices in the wilderness. Generous and judicious in his use of quotations from these seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sources, including George Fox, William Edmundson, Alice Curwen, the 1688 Germantown Protest, George Keith, and John Hepburn, Carey demonstrates that “a sustained debate over slaveholding in fact subsisted . . . from at least the late seventeenth century” and argues that by the start of the eighteenth century antislavery sentiment “had a discursive existence” (25, 105).

In articulating the social and political dominance of Pennsylvania in the development of antislavery rhetoric, Carey suggests that the Quaker community became a crucial context for the growth of antislavery due in part to its “tight organization, congenial principles, culture of debate, and propensity to share ideas” (30). Among other topics, he considers theological and pragmatic arguments against slavery, the significance of writings of Ralph Sandiford and Benjamin Lay, the impact of the structure of the Society of Friends—in particular, the embedding of antislavery thought in the Quaker ritual of queries—and the significance

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of London Yearly Meeting on the formulation of antislavery thought. He discusses influential writings by John Woolman and Anthony Benezet, and he argues that the 1754 Philadelphia Yearly Meeting *Epistle of Caution and Advice, concerning the Buying and Keeping of Slaves* “recapitulates in essence almost the entire Quaker debate on slavery since 1688” (193).

In this survey of early Quaker antislavery literature, which begins with writings on slavery in Barbados, Carey acknowledges that many Quakers themselves were implicated in the brutality of slavery, and he points to the conflict of thought within the Quaker community in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting during the 1730s, for example (162). He demonstrates that throughout the period he studies, Quaker concern was predominantly with halting the purchasing of “newly imported slaves” much more than with asking people “outright to stop buying slaves” or emancipating those who were already enslaved (178).

Antislavery activism and rhetoric began to coalesce and gain momentum in the 1760s and 1770s in a transatlantic context, and a significant part of the momentum can be attributed to the development of an antislavery discourse from the late seventeenth- through the mid-eighteenth century among Quakers—and, in a particular way, among Quakers with a Pennsylvania and a Philadelphia Yearly Meeting connection. This readable and important book is a welcome addition to the history of antislavery work.

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The Cost of Liberty: The Life of John Dickinson. By WILLIAM MURCHISON. (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2013. 252 pp. Notes, index. \$25.)

The title of William Murchison’s biography on John Dickinson (1732–1808) does not reveal the high aspirations the publisher, Intercollegiate Studies Institute (a conservative “educational organization” whose first president was William F. Buckley Jr.), has for this slim volume. “It has been more than a half century since a biography of John Dickinson appeared,” the book jacket claims, promising that Murchison’s work “offers a sorely needed reassessment of a great patriot and misunderstood Founder.” An introductory publisher’s note asserts that Murchison has “correct[ed] the record at last” (x). All these statements are untrue. The author completely ignores the most recent biography, Milton Flower’s *John Dickinson: Conservative Revolutionary* (1983), and there is no reassessment or correction because Murchison, a journalist, only reports what others have already argued. Yet, even while depending heavily on secondary sources, he largely neglects the scholarship of the last forty years that could have helped him offer a convincing and new portrait of Dickinson.