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How the Quakers Invented America (review)

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making, testimony, mission, membership, diversity, and ecumenism. After conceding that the differences are great, he finds three commonalities: emphasis on inward encounter, business method, and testimony.

True to his other important studies of Quakerism, Pink Dandelion is insightful and thought-provoking. Quaker readers of many sorts will recognize themselves in his portrayal of their type of Quakers, though they may also find themselves challenged by some of his conclusions.

In short, this work makes a valuable contribution to Quaker studies, is a worthy companion and complement to Thomas Hamm's *The Quakers in America* (Columbia University Press, 2006), and deserves to be read widely.

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How the Quakers Invented America, By David Yount. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield. 2007, xix + 159pp. Bibliography and index, \$19.95.

Yount, a Quaker, author of nine previous books on religion, and a newspaper columnist with a potential readership of twenty-five million, paints an attractive portrait of today's unprogrammed meeting Friends. Most of this book is a series of inspirational essays about basic Quaker beliefs—silent meditation, Jesus, Bible, eternal life—that should appeal to many Friends and might attract outsiders to attend meetings for worship. This review is not about his idealistic vision of liberal Friends that serves to provide an introduction to Quaker beliefs and practices. Instead, it will concentrate on those chapters dealing with history and his title, "How the Quakers invented America." American history includes copious amounts of militarism, racism, sexism, greed, and oppression, but Yount does not wish to hold Friends responsible for these, and so he at times tones down his thesis to say that Quakers "contributed more than any other group to the founding ideals that sustain our national life." If true, how flattering to Friends, but the claim is more an example of his Quaker hubris than accurate history.

Yount's history fails the most basic tasks of a newspaperman: to be accurate and to check sources. His claim that Quakers made a greater contribution to American ideals than "any" other group is simply preposterous. There are so many exaggerations and factual errors in chapters 1 and 7 where he attempts to prove this thesis that readers would be well advised to skip these chapters. Pennsylvania was not the "model" for the U.S. and the Bill of Rights was not based on a "Quaker-drafted constitution of Rhode Island." In fact, there is no such document. I can't imagine where Yount learned that William Penn was the "greatest swordsman in Ireland," that seventeenth-century Quakers produced only one theologian, Robert Barclay

(identified as a Reformation figure in the Preface and correctly in the text), that Rhode Island abolished slavery in 1652. Quakers were called many names, but not “Friends of Truth.” As an example of Yount’s carelessness (and the failure of his editor and publisher to do even elementary fact checking), in a section on p. 81 William Penn is confused with his father, Charles II with William and Mary, and a false reason given for Penn’s loss of his colony in 1692: it was because he was suspected of treasonable support for James II and not over the defense expenditures of early Pennsylvania. There are many “facts” new to me in this book but since there are no footnotes, neither I nor other readers can easily determine when Yount has discovered something or is either stretching or misrepresenting the evidence.

In addition, Yount has not done the reading necessary to understand the nuances of Quaker history. He discusses Fox often without showing evidence of having read Hugh Barbour, Larry Ingle, or Rosemary Moore; he quotes Penn but should have read some modern biography and Melvin Endy on Penn’s theology; on colonial Pennsylvania, there are no citations to Frederick Tolles or Jack Marietta. Instead, Yount cites repeatedly Ronald Knox’s *Enthusiasm* and Daniel Boorstin’s *The Americans: The Colonial Experience*. I very profitably read these books forty years ago when in graduate school, but many of their conclusions need to be modified in light of more recent research.

The recent book Yount relies on is David Hackett Fischer, *Albion’s Seed: Four Colonial Folkways*—a book I recommend for those seeking to understand Quaker culture in colonial America. Fischer found much to admire in early Quakerism, but his book was an attempt to show how the U.S. came from four regional folkways: New England Puritans, Virginia’s planter society, Quakers in the Delaware River Valley, and Scots-Irish in the back country. Fischer did not identify all that was good with America as being the legacy of Friends and all that was bad as coming from somewhere else.

Yount also simplifies Quakers. When he discusses past practices and attitudes of Quaker family life, women’s rights, optimism, architecture, simplicity (not plainness), superstition, and education as creating American patterns, I kept waiting for the qualifications. A superficial similarity does not prove causation. How could one read the writings of early Quakers and not see the reliance on dreams, providences, and judgments as superstitious? Even at the end of the eighteenth century Thomas Clarkson and James Jenkins saw Friends as superstitious. Quaker families were not always child centered, the definition of “love” before and in marriage was not the same as today, and women’s spiritual equality often did not extend to other

realms. It took a long time before Friends repudiated their anti-intellectualism and opposition to higher learning. Yount has difficulty justifying Quaker pacifism, because he contrasts “ideological” pacifists with those who believe in non-violent conflict resolution and gives Quakers credit with supporting self-defense and the Second Amendment. Here Yount follows Boorstin who also had little sympathy with the Quaker refusal to support alleged just wars of “self-defense.”

If Yount had been more receptive to nuance he could have built an impressive case that Quakers and other inhabitants of the Delaware River Valley made major contributions to American ideals and that those who trace our norms only to the “secular enlightenment” are obtuse. But to say that liberty originated “not in the minds of secular Enlightenment thinkers but from the application of the Quakers’ Christian faith” is to replace one falsehood with another. The Delaware River Valley was a region where immigrants were welcomed, a land of religious and political liberty, a source of major reform movements including antislavery, Indian rights, women’s equality, and peace. Many Quaker attitudes were and are worthy of emulation, but others are not. Accept Yount as an able advocate for Quaker spirituality, but ignore his history. Exaggeration of our influence, even with the best of motives, however, does not conform to the Quaker testimony on truth telling.

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