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*From Quaker to Upper Canadian: Faith and Community among
Yonge Street Friends, 1801–1850 (review)*

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From Quaker to Upper Canadian: Faith and Community among Yonge Street Friends, 1801–1850. By Robynne Rogers Healey. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006. xxv + 292 pp. Maps, illustrations, graphs, tables, notes, bibliography, and index. £50.

This valuable study describes the assimilation of immigrant Quakers into the larger dominant Protestant society of Upper Canada. During the fifty year process in which their self-identity morphed from being a separated peculiar people to seeing themselves as part of the evangelical mainstream (or some other smaller subset of the dominant culture) they did not lose their distinctive values of "equality, simplicity, or peace." Nor did they stop using their methods of kinship ties and informal education in the home and meeting to transmit their values to younger members.

Healey traces the change through three stages or generations. In the first, from 1801 to 1815, the immigrants settled close together on the frontier of the military road, Yonge Street, in order to remain separate from non-Friends. The stability and strength of the community was strengthened by kinship and marriage and the informal education and socialization carried out in the home and meeting. Enforcement of the discipline was especially important in maintaining the community. Friends were challenged by the War of 1812, two waves of an unknown epidemic that carried off many seasoned Friends, and the separation of David Willson's Children of Peace.

In the second generation or stage, from 1815 to 1828, Friends employed the time-tested strategies of kinship, informal education, and enforcement of the discipline to rebuild the meeting. Immigration of Friends and non-Friends greatly increased, and the frontier receded. But the influence of evangelical Protestantism, revivalism, and the growing dissension within the world-wide Quaker body, tore apart the Upper Canadian Friends' meetings. After the separation, with each side claiming to represent "true" Quakerism, the definition and identity of Friends diversified. The larger Orthodox group turned to Protestants with similar doctrines, especially Methodists. Together they tackled issues common to both. The closed, conservative political elite of Upper Canada, allied with the Anglican Church, ignored popular pressure for equal access to land, and discontent against perceived corruption. A surprisingly large number of young Quaker men joined an armed rebellion in 1837. The revolt was put down in a day, and four men, including a Friend, were hung for their participation. Healey finds Quaker participation proof of Friends' integration into the Protestant mainstream.

The third generation of the community, from 1837 through the 1840s and 1850s, found Orthodox Quakers increasingly comfortable with exogamous

marriage, in dropping “plainness,” and in cherishing theologies indistinguishable from their evangelical neighbors. Nevertheless, Healey finds that all three groups of Friends held on to the basic principle of Quakerism, namely the equality of all believers. Sooner than their United States counterparts, the three groups of Upper Canadian Friends were able to socialize and work together toward common goals. They were now an important part of Upper Canada’s Protestant consensus, advocating temperance and abolition.

Is it true that by 1850 Orthodox Quakers in Ontario thought the key values of their faith were equality, peace, and simplicity? Or is that reading the record back from the present? Would not Orthodox Quakers have said that their basic tenet was evangelical Christianity: the infallibility of scripture, and acceptance of Jesus Christ as son of God and his death as atonement for the sins of mankind?

Healey does not see the fragmentation of the 1828 Hicksite-Orthodox separation (further divided in Upper Canada by the earlier separation of the Children of Peace) in a negative light. Instead, she applies a gendered analysis to conclude that the result was a happy initiation of Friends into mainstream society without a loss of their “unique values.” These values, which she repeatedly identifies as equality, peace, and simplicity, then provided additional leaven for the reform movements of the larger society. Healey carefully traces the role and power of women within their various Quaker communities, and then later in the larger society. She finds this an extremely valuable contribution of Quakerism.

Unintentionally and ironically, Healey’s study raises the issue of Quaker identity for today. Like so many contemporary scholars whose area is not 17th-century Quakerism, she takes a quick look at today’s liberal version and transposes it back to George Fox. The result is a travesty of the faith experienced and preached by early Friends. Clues are the anachronistic use of the Hicksite term “Inner Light” and an absence of Fox’s key statements such as “Christ is come to teach his people himself,” and “the Power of the Lord is over all.” But these criticisms are minor compared to the contribution of the author’s research and findings in the main part of her study.

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