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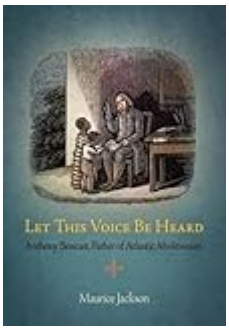
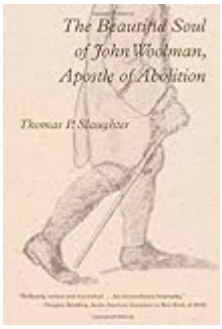


Maurice Jackson. *Let This Voice Be Heard: Anthony Benezet, Father of Atlantic Abolitionism.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. xv + 374 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4129-7.



Thomas Slaughter. *The Beautiful Soul of John Woolman, Apostle of Abolition.* New York: Hill & Wang, 2008. 464 pp. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-9514-8.

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Biography and the History of Eighteenth-Century Abolitionism

The biographies of John Woolman (1720-72) and Anthony Benezet (1713-84) are excellent examples of how individuals do often change the course of history (no matter how trite such a statement may seem to some). Although a particularly brutal form of servitude, New World slavery was merely one of the many forms of bondage whose existence had been unquestioned for thousands of years before a tiny group of Europeans began to attack it around 1700. And while many scholars have focused on the impersonal social, economic, and political forces which gave rise to transatlantic abolitionism, it remains the case that certain lonely prophets–foremost among them Woolman and Benezet–were among the first to light the fuse which led to the explosion of antislavery fervor in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century world. Almost inexplicably, neither Woolman nor Benezet has been the subject of a major biography in several decades, and so the appearance of

these two works is more than welcome. These books are all the more significant because authors Thomas Slaughter and Maurice Jackson do an excellent job of incorporating more recent scholarship into their well-written and thorough accounts of these antislavery figures. The narratives told by Slaughter and Jackson should appeal to a wide audience, since in addition to their interest for academics, these works are accessible to students or anyone curious about the early history of antislavery. Slaughter and Jackson demonstrate how the biographical form can balance both the demands for new research with the need for a good narrative. I would hope that their efforts inspire scholars to explore how other figures in different periods can relate the past's relevance for current moral or political struggles. Both of these books, I have little doubt, will be essential reading for years to come regarding Woolman, Benezet, and eighteenth-century antislavery in general.

The life of John Woolman epitomizes what Quakers call the âgrowth into holinessâ: a constant battle with the temptations both of the flesh and of the material world that might eventually lead to saintliness. If any Quaker came close to achieving holiness, it was Woolman. Many other sympathetic Christians or scholars of religion–perhaps most famously William James–have also recognized Woolman as an exemplary ascetic.[1] Woolman, quite simply, lived a life consistent with his principles, Quaker ideals set in opposition to exploitative practices and human violence of nearly every kind. Woolmanâs message was one of reforming the entire individual, and was not only focused on slavery. But as with other prophets, he felt that certain Quakersâ overdependence upon slavery epitomized the ostentation, greed, and selfishness sapping the Friends of their spiritual vitality in the mid-eighteenth century. Although concerned with issues of political importance, Woolmanâs life's work rested with reforming individuals one person at a time. He was therefore less of a public figure than Anthony Benezet in terms of his contact with non-Friends. This hardly means, however, that Woolmanâs impact was any less important than Benezetâs, at least as it pertained to the process of weaning Quakers from the use of African slaves. Woolmanâs extensive travels throughout the thirteen colonies and Britain was one way this minister worked on the consciences of Quakers to convince them to rededicate their lives to the simple path, whether regarding the accumulation of wealth, or the rejection of violence. It was Woolmanâs example that encouraged Quakers first to free their own slaves and then–starting around the time of the Revolutionary War–to begin to convince the outside world of the immorality of human bondage. It is also important to note that Woolman died before any of the major political achievements of antislavery, such as the *Somerset* case, or the gradual emancipation edicts in various state constitutions beginning with Massachusetts in 1776. Still, his influence on many social reformers continued long after his death.

Woolmanâs religious journey is best understood by going directly to the source: his journal covering more or less his entire life is perhaps as powerful a piece of devotional literature as any written in the English language. It may be because so much of our knowledge about Woolman comes from his journal that few comprehensive biographies have been attempted in the last century. The last and best biography of Woolman was Janet Whitneyâs *John Woolman, American Quaker* (1942). Slaughter renders a sympathetic account of Woolmanâs spiritual quest for holiness, trying to recapture much of the angst of his spiritual struggle, but also revealing Woolman to be very human when, for example, Woolman does battle with his own fear of succumbing to the numerous diseases present in the colonial world. Elsewhere in the text, Slaughter ably contextualizes Woolmanâs thinking within a long tradition of dissenting Protestant and mystical thought. Slaughter also diligently reconstructs the daily life of the eighteenth-century mid-Atlantic in ways reminiscent of Laurel Thatcher Ulrichâs treatment of Martha Ballardâs diary in *A Midwifeâs Tale* (1990). Although much of the evidence for Woolmanâs biography comes from his journal, as well as from some annotated source books compiled by other Quakers, Slaughter fills in the details of lesser-known events and ponders Woolmanâs reactions to many of the known facts of his life that Woolman did not describe in his writings.

Maurice Jacksonâs biography of Anthony Benezet weaves together many important aspects of this other Quaker abolitionist's life. Although both Benezet and Woolman played a similar role in trying to end Quaker involvement with the slave trade and slavery, Benezetâs public role as an essential mediator of the transatlantic movement represents an entirely different aspect of the early antislavery cause from Woolmanâs more quiet, personal struggle. Benezet was a French Ã©migrÃ©; a product of the same Atlantic economy as New World slavery. And unlike Woolman–who died just before the abolition movement really gained steam–Benezet took part in or witnessed many of the political actions that spread abolitionâs popularity throughout the British Empire in the 1770s and 1780s. Benezetâs biography is therefore an essential counterpoint and supplement to Woolmanâs life

story. As a man who collected and disseminated everything from African travel accounts to philosophical ruminations on the morality of human bondage in several different languages, it is not an understatement to declare Benezet one of the most noteworthy individuals behind the intellectual construction of the antislavery movement in the 1700s.

Jackson also recovers the radical view espoused by Benezet, namely, that Africans possessed similar intellectual capacity and ability for cultural refinement as Europeans. Benezet was far ahead of his time in terms of destabilizing deeply engrained notions of western European superiority so essential to the process of Western colonialism. Jacksonâs work on Benezet is both a biography and an overall history of eighteenth-century antislavery sentiment. Jackson enmeshes his subject in the early history of Quaker dissent; explains the physical environment Benezet found himself in when he endeavored to offer schooling to African-Americans in Philadelphia; and describes the numerous writers and thinkers who were influenced by Benezetâs writing, ranging from Olaudah Equiano, to Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, to William Wilberforce, and countless others. Benezetâs life story, as conveyed by Jackson, exemplifies the multiple connections and influences which typified an âAtlantic worldâ of the eighteenth century. Jackson is clearly responding in his work to a new generation of historians and scholars who have taken an increasing interest in the interconnections, influences, and contacts which transcended boundaries of empires and nation-states in the early modern world. Jacksonâs biography demonstrates how powerful the biographical narrative can be for Atlantic historians, by revealing the numerous cross-border connections and influences easily explained through one personâs life.

Jackson and Slaughter successfully balance the relationship of these two reformers both to their own church–the Society of Friends–and to the outside world. Given the fact that Benezet spent more of his time with non-Friends than did Woolman–in addition to the fact that Benezet was not as well known for his work in the Friendsâ ministry as was Woolman–Jacksonâs book is not as focused on Quakerism as Slaughterâs. And yet Jackson provides an important background for Benezetâs antislavery activism by explaining the role of Quakers both as slave traders as well as early critics of various forms of labor exploitation. Such critics presaged Benezetâs views, and in many ways Benezet stood upon the shoulders of lesser-known Friends such as Ralph Sandiford (1693-1733) and Benjamin Lay (1681-1760) when attacking slavery. Both Jackson and Slaughter deal sensitively with the religious motivations of Benezet and Woolman, taking seriously their interior belief systems, while also revealing the myriad other influences and connections these respective subjects possessed beyond their small Quaker community. In a sense, these biographies describe in microcosm the paradox of a small religious community called âFriends,â which stood aloof from the world in so many other ways, but which also influenced that world through a principled critique of war, slavery, luxuriant living, and other exploitative practices.

These books move beyond a sole focus upon church history, or theology, but at the same time they do not slight the role religion played in the early abolitionist movement. Nor do they downplay the essential role of the Quakers themselves in early attacks on slavery. As is often not appreciated by students of the anti-lavery movement, church institutions such as the Society of Friends played an irreplaceable role in providing conduits for social action in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American world, and it is hoped that more scholars will continue to acknowledge this social function of churches, in addition to the intellectual or spiritual inspiration for social reform arising from dissenting Reformed Protestantism.

For Quaker historians, Jackson's and Slaughte'rs efforts represent a near perfect balance of explaining Woolmanâs and Benezetâs backgrounds in a certain community, while also seeing their connections to much larger events and influences beyond the walls of the meeting house. In this way, both books build upon a significant body of Quaker scholarship, dating as far back as Frederick Tolles and Sydney James in the late 1950s, that positions Friends as central actors in all sorts of public, political endeavors stretching out from this at times clannish church.[2] Such a perspective on Quaker history is sometimes lost in the many church-centered histories focusing on the groupâs social teachings written by those Quakers who–understandably perhaps–stick mainly to theological or clerical issues specific to Friends, and perhaps only of interest to other Friends or students of radical Christian theology. As mentioned earlier, the life stories of Woolman and Benezet are not new to historians either of the antislavery movement or of Quaker history, and yet the works of Slaughter and Jackson read as fresh and necessary elaborations upon the views of historians from decades past. As with Slaughterâs work, Jacksonâs study reminds historians of how each generation of scholars should reevaluate figures or events long thought to have been definitively studied in order show how new per-

spectives and methods can build upon prior insights.

Notes

[1]. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (London, 1902), 239-341.

[2]. Frederick Tolles, *Quakers and the Atlantic Culture* (New York: Macmillan, 1960); Sydney James, *A People among Peoples: Quaker Benevolence in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1963).

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