

Derry & Raphoe Diocesan Library Project

Historic Libraries in Context CONFERENCE



The ‘old library’ of a provincial English Quaker meeting house, with particular reference to evidence for eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish Quaker culture

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In this paper, originally offered as a contribution to the conference to mark the final phase of the Derry and Raphoe Diocesan Library Project in June 2011, I seek to reinforce the enormous potential of such a rich and unique collection by showing what can be learned about the role of the post-Reformation denominational library from the example of a humble book collection in a small Quaker meeting house in England. Some implications for the preservation and use of collections for historical research are thereby highlighted. Even with a small collection, meaningful study requires a focus on certain aspects of the evidence, and here I have found that I could relate it most usefully to conference themes by looking at its evidence for Anglo-Irish Quaker networks.

The ‘old library’ of Bewdley meeting house in the context of Quakers’ historic book culture

The collection I am using for my case study is a comparatively insignificant collection of 129 volumes found in a Quaker meeting house in Bewdley in Worcestershire in the English Midlands. The collection offers little unusual to those familiar with Quaker literature, and many of the individual works would once have been found (and may still be found) in many other meeting houses. Most if not all could certainly be found in the larger historic Quaker libraries, notably at Friends’ House in London, and also at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in Birmingham, the Birkbeck and Leeds Friends’ Old Libraries in the Brotherton Library at Leeds University, Dublin Friends’ Historical Library and major Quaker libraries in the US.

Paradoxically perhaps, for a religious sect well-known for silent worship and an absence of formal liturgy, print culture has always been an important element of Quakerism. The case

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has been argued persuasively by Kate Peters who shows how, from their very early years, Quakers effectively gave themselves a corporate identity in their pamphlets and books.¹ The Religious Society of Friends (the formal name for Quakers) is also well known as a very diligent keeper of its own records. From 1673, the Society adopted a policy of keeping copies not only of all the work published in its name but also the considerable literature criticising Quakerism. Early efforts to keep abreast of all the relevant polemics came to form the basis of Friends House Library in London which contains a uniquely comprehensive collection of Quaker literature.

The Society also historically sought to act as censor on material published in the name of Quakerism. After early traumatic experiences in the Commonwealth and Restoration years, it was, in 1666, firmly established that work published in the name of Quakers would be subject to the tight formal control of the Society. A committee of ministers and elders (known as Second Day's Morning Meeting) inspected all manuscripts intended for publication. It was expected that even works published privately by Quakers would be submitted to this committee. The Society oversaw printing and distribution, and even booksellers were scrutinised to ensure they were fit to sell Quaker books.² Meetings were expected to keep catalogues of their libraries and loans (although sadly no such records survive for Bewdley Meeting).

From 1821, as evangelicalism became increasingly influential in the Society, it was urged that a meeting's books be made available to anyone who wished to read them.³ But in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Quakers were not especially adept at proselytising, and the Society struggled to keep up membership numbers. Admittedly this was for a variety of reasons, but the Quaker writers of the period were perhaps not as inspiring and certainly not driven by the same urgency as the highly effective pamphleteers of the seventeenth century.⁴

By the mid nineteenth century, Bewdley Quakers certainly were dwindling. For a time, there was only one family, that of Daniel Zachary of Areley Hall, which kept the meeting going at all.⁵ The proximity and support of wealthy Birmingham Quakers was a lifeline.⁶ Charles Sturge and Joseph Tangye bought property in the area, and in the following years revived and sustained the meeting.

¹ Kate Peters, *Print Culture and the Early Quakers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

² *Extracts from Minutes and Advices of the Yearly Meeting of Friends*, 2nd edn (London: no publisher, 1802), pp. 11-13; A. Lloyd, *Quaker Social History 1669-1738*, London: Longman, 1950), p. 150.

³ J. Desforges, "'Satisfaction and Improvement": A Study of Reading in a Small Quaker Community', *Publishing History*, 49 (2001), 5-47 (pp. 9-10).

⁴ However, we need to take care, in assessing the effect of reading on the historical subject, not to impose inappropriate perceptions of literary merit or to appreciate what may have inspired others in the past. A researcher can usefully exercise imagination to understand the reception of individual books in context. See, for example, Michele Lise Tarter, 'Reading a Quakers' Book: Elizabeth Ashbridge's Testimony of Quaker Literary Theory', *Quaker Studies*, 9/2 (2005), 176-190.

⁵ Worcestershire County Record Office, ref b898:2, BA1304: List of Members of Worcestershire and Salop Monthly Meeting, 1860-1899.

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A well-stocked library was an essential part of a Quaker meeting house, regardless of the comparative wealth of its members. Everyone brought up in the Society, children, servants and apprentices, male and female, was taught to read and write.⁷ Teaching literacy to the wider population was also increasingly a concern of Quakers in the nineteenth century. Charles Sturge's more famous brother, Joseph, was the driving force behind the Severn Street School in Birmingham which itself developed into the Adult School Movement, a key objective of which was to teach basic literacy. The Scientific and Literary Institute in Bewdley (renamed Bewdley Institute in 1875), which offered 'improving' recreational activity for the working men of the town, was in part financed by Charles Sturge's son-in law, Edward Pease (the son of Joseph Pease and grandson of Edward Pease, leading industrialists of Darlington).⁸ Founding libraries were a key part of Edward Pease's wider philanthropic endeavour, and in Bewdley meeting house there are ten books donated by him.⁹

Bewdley meeting's 'old library' is a collection that was made up of other collections. Quakers regularly circulated books amongst themselves, with individual collections dissolving and reforming over time. We can, in part, trace the transfer of books because owners routinely inscribed details inside the front cover or on the flyleaf.¹⁰ One hundred and seven of the books in the meeting house had at least one previous owner before they came to Bewdley, and of those, twenty one had more than two previous owners. Fifty seven of the 129 had, at one time, belonged to John Brewin. Apart from his own name is the inscription, '1863 to Friends Meeting House Bewdley'. At the time of the 1851 Census, Brewin was a dealer in coal, seed and malt in Cirencester. He died in 1854 but his wife, to whom he left his domestic establishment, did not die until 1863, the year his books passed to Bewdley.¹¹ What the Brewin family's connection was to Bewdley Meeting in particular is not clear. John had been born in Birmingham, but moved to Cirencester in 1804. The link was probably with Daniel Zachary, the mainstay of Bewdley Meeting in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, who had been a miller in Cirencester until he inherited Areley Hall in the 1830s, and from evidence in Birmingham Meeting's library committee minutes, it would seem that, on the death of a Friend known to the member of a meeting, approaches would be made to the

⁶ *The Living Part of the Meeting. A short history of Bewdley Quakers 1691-1991* (Upton-upon-Severn: privately published by Bewdley Preparative Meeting, 1991), p.7.

⁷ Thomas Clarkson, *A Portraiture of Quakerism*, 3 vols (London: no publisher, 1806), II, pp. 99-101.

⁸ Sue Brown, *Bewdley Institute. A Sketch from c.1875-c.1950* (Studley: privately published, 2003).

⁹ Might a process of making donations or loaning books to other libraries account for the discrepancy between the numbering on the spines of the books in the Meeting House (going over 350) and the actual number of books which remain there (129)?

¹⁰ Quaker owners can be identified by the distinctive way of writing dates, numbering months rather than using their 'pagan' names; for example 'Henry Howels 2nd mo. 18th 1801'.

¹¹ Edwina Newman 'John Brewin's Tracts: the written word, Evangelicalism and the Quaker way in mid nineteenth century England', *Quaker Studies*, 9/2 (2005), pp.234-248.

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family for books no longer wanted.¹² Of the remaining books in the collection, thirty six are inscribed with the name of Ann Mary Goodrick of Edgbaston (a suburb of Birmingham where many leading Quakers lived) as well as the ten books from Edward Pease.

Other evidence for multiple ownership can be found in the condition of the books. Two which have suffered damage to boards and spine, (and at least one of which belonged to Edward Pease), have been given loose brown paper covers for additional protection. The brown paper was itself 'recycled' following duty covering other books, since different titles are inscribed on the reverse ('Geo Fox' and 'Wm and Nathan Hunt'), and labels with large print numbers 29 and 106, whereas the Bewdley books mostly have handwritten numbers on small squares of white paper affixed directly to the bottom of each volume's spine.

In view of the way in which Quaker print culture of the period was policed, a meeting house collection would contain only 'approved' Quaker books, those that meeting members thought ought to be read.¹³ They reflect too the specific educational culture of the Society up to the early decades of the nineteenth century. One of several volumes in the collection of a series called *Piety Promoted* (comprising accounts of pious Quaker lives and dying sayings) was originally a gift from Samuel Alexander to his grand daughter Mary Ann Jefferys in 1819, while another has been lightly and expertly inscribed on the fly leaf, 'Robt Eccles 1774' and then on the inside cover in a clearly more childish but nevertheless careful cursive hand, 'Robt Eccles his book 6mo 17th 1780'. Education was something of a double-edged sword; while it was always considered important, it brought with it the perceived need to supervise closely the reading material available, especially to the young.¹⁴

Since most of the books were at least second hand by the time they came to Bewdley around the middle of the nineteenth century, their contents tell us considerably more about eighteenth century than nineteenth century Quakers, although we can conclude too that the very process of passing on and preserving such work speaks of an innate conservatism. Certainly, and in spite of the loss of the catalogue that the numbering of the books indicates must once have existed, Bewdley Meeting has cared for them with consistent diligence. Until recently, the meeting house itself (dating from the early eighteenth century) was falling badly in need of repair, and cold and damp were both a problem. Among other considerations, the good sense of continuing to house such a collection of books was questioned, but renovation work in 2008 has now ensured that it can be kept in its original 'home' in better conditions. There had been

¹² Woodbrooke Library, Minute Book Bevan Naish Library.

¹³ Private libraries of wealthy Quakers appear to have contained a wide variety of books, and the Society's advice on reading placed its emphasis on restricting the reading material of young people in particular. See Desforges, pp. 5-47 and *Extracts from Minutes and Advices of the Yearly Meeting of Friends held in London* (London: James Phillips, 1783), p. 223.

¹⁴ A significant amount of effort was expended on advising young people, and the collection also includes, for example, 'Some reflections on the importance of the religious life, offered to the younger members of the Society of Friends' (London: Darton and Harvey, 1834) and 'A letter to the young men of the Society of Friends by one of themselves' (London: Harvey and Darton, 1840).

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some feeling that the books might sensibly be donated to the nearby Woodbrooke Library (itself formed of Birmingham Meeting's historically significant collection transferred from Bull Street Meeting in 1938).¹⁵ Bewdley Meeting's books would however only have duplicated copies already held at Woodbrooke.

Approaching the books from the perspective of a social historian, I felt that I could at least usefully catalogue the titles,¹⁶ and also undertake some research that would help establish their unique value as a collection. The value of historic libraries to the community has been thrown into sharper relief by projects to digitise historical sources, such as Eighteenth Century Collections Online. I have become very conscious of the importance of 'digital humanities' for students' projects, and the ways in which research is increasingly directed through the undoubtedly excellent resources offered by searchable online databases. But such databases, while allowing for a whole range of new questions to be asked of primary sources, cannot answer some of the questions that can be asked of 'real' collections in their context. The questions I asked of the Bewdley collection for this paper focused on the processes by which the collection became embedded in the Meeting and what they tell us about Quaker networks and perceptions of the use and value of the books. Within that broader focus, I discovered the initially unlooked-for prominence of Anglo-Irish Quaker networks, and was thus able to ask some additional question about what the books would have told their provincial English audience of the state of Quakerism in Ireland in the eighteenth century.

Eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish Quakerism

By the late seventeenth century, Quakers had become a largely inward-looking sect, seeing themselves as a 'gathered remnant', a people who were to remain aloof from 'worldly' matters. They identified plainness and integrity as evidence of that status as God's 'peculiar people'. This is usually known as the Quaker quietist period and it marks a time when Quakerism might still be seen as a trans-Atlantic community marked out by 'the sectarian impulse to cohere around a single identity separated from the world', a theological culture which might be seen as lasting until the Great Separation in America of 1827.¹⁷

However, tensions were emerging in the eighteenth century. Mostly these revolved around an anxiety to maintain the distinctive Quaker understanding of faithfulness which was encapsulated in regular, specific advices issued from 1738 by national meetings, and then, in 1783, in the first published 'book of discipline'. There developed therefore 'a code of behaviour and consumption which was used to try to defend the spiritual'.¹⁸ In the course of

¹⁵ Woodbrooke Library, Minute Book Bevan Naish Library.

¹⁶ Detailed recording of the bindings and other aspects of the books' condition has still to be undertaken.

¹⁷ This is the periodisation reflected in Pink Dandelion, *An Introduction to Quakerism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 80.

¹⁸ Dandelion, pp. 66-8.

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the century, Quakers became susceptible too to the pull of Enlightenment rationalism on the one hand and the Evangelical movement on the other. At critical points, both were interpreted as undermining what had come to be regarded as traditional Quakerism.¹⁹ The tensions were particularly marked in the context of Ireland where it was perhaps particularly difficult to remain aloof from wider political and cultural influences and where, by the end of the century certainly, Quakers also had to confront what it meant to be Irish.²⁰

Not surprisingly, Quakerism in Ireland was established by English migrants. William Edmundson from Westmorland, who had served in the Parliamentary army in England and Scotland, had become a convinced Quaker and moved to Ireland in the early 1650s. He was the driving force behind the spread of the movement in Ireland. When George Fox (the founder of Quakerism) visited the country in 1669, he found that there were already about thirty separate meetings held in private houses in Ulster, Leinster and Munster, and the following year, a National Half-Yearly Meeting was set up, pulling together the various provincial meetings.²¹ In the definitive Quaker history of the period, William Braithwaite argues that Irish Quakers had an easier time than their English counterparts because 'they formed an important part of the Protestant community, whose ascendancy it was the main object of the Government to maintain', and that 'spiritual life' was able to flourish accordingly.²² The persecution that Edmundson and his co-religionists suffered was primarily at the hands of retreating troops defeated in the Battle of the Boyne. Quakers were clearly viewed as an integral part of English Protestantism in Ireland; nevertheless, in his journal, Edmundson is already writing in terms of the 'English Protestants' and the 'Irish' as if he sees Quakers as somehow separate from both.²³

Once the pressures of war were passed, the comparatively favourable economic climate for Irish Protestants, coupled with Quaker habits of prudence and integrity meant that they flourished in trade and business, so that wealth and the accompanying opportunity to be integrated into 'polite society' came to be seen as the real threat to the spiritual life. It was in Ireland that the need for strict discipline was expressed more forcibly and earlier than in England, and Irish writings were one of the ways in which the sentiments spread to provincial England. Joseph Pike was a zealous advocate of ensuring Quakers remained aloof from the rest of society and maintained a distinctive plain lifestyle. His epistles of 1722 and 1726 on

¹⁹ John Punshon, *Portrait in Grey. A short history of the Quakers* (London: Quaker Books, 2001) p. 159.

²⁰ Richard S. Harrison, *A Biographical Dictionary of Irish Quakers*, 2nd edn (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008), p. 201.

²¹ William C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), pp. 260-1.

²² *Ibid.* p.502.

²³ *A Journal of the Life, Travels, Sufferings and Labour of Love in the work of the ministry of that worthy elder and faithful servant of Jesus Christ, William Edmundson*, 3rd edn (Dublin: 1820), pp. 135-55. This edition is the one that John Brewin owned and which later came into the possession of Bewdley meeting.

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the need for reformation in the face of 'covetousness' and 'love of the world' are in one of the seven volumes of tracts that John Brewin collected and had bound.²⁴ Pike's concern was expressed even more forcibly by Dr John Rutty of Dublin in a pamphlet written in 1756, 'The Liberty of the Spirit and of the Flesh Distinguished'. Unlike the prophesying and proselytising pamphlets that characterised seventeenth century Quakers, this, like Pike's epistles, was directed at Quakers themselves. Rutty urged the Society to tackle those Quakers identified as 'libertines', that is, those who despite being favoured 'beyond many of our neighbours' with religious liberty, were nevertheless captive to 'the spirit of this world'.²⁵ He was troubled by these 'carnal men, who are no otherwise Quakers than by meer accident, and rather indeed by reluctance than by choice, who have little or no relish for the sublime truths of the Gospel, who vainly flatter themselves with the conceit of liberty, good sense, the free exercise of their rational faculties, and just apprehensions of their own temporal interest and honour'.²⁶ The conduct of such people threatened to 'dissolve and destroy all distinctions peculiar to this Society, to pull down the hedge and destroy the fence of Christian discipline, by which we should be preserved as a garden enclosed'.²⁷ The pamphlet was submitted to the National Meeting in Dublin which agreed that 1,000 copies would be printed at the Meeting's expense. One of these found its way into the possession of John Brewin, and this too is bound into one of his volume of tracts.²⁸

The Bewdley collection speaks of the close ties and shared concerns that existed among Quakers, and in large measure these ties were based on kinship and friendship networks, itself not surprising given the insularity of the Society. Good evidence of the strength and nature of the networks is to be found in an additional manuscript found inside the back cover of John Brewin's (subsequently Bewdley Meeting's) edition of John Gough's memoir of his brother James, compiled and published in 1782.²⁹ The Gough brothers originated from Kendal in Westmorland, but had settled in Cork. In 1752, John went to work in the Friends' School in Dublin, and in 1774 accepted the post of first headmaster of the new Friends' Boarding School in Lisburn, County Antrim.³⁰ John's memoir of his brother speaks of a Society conscious of battling with worldly temptation, and the sentiments are given a

²⁴ 'Joseph Pike to Friends in Ireland' (no publication details) in Bewdley Friends Meeting House Library, 'Tracts', vol. 209.

²⁵ John Rutty, 'The Liberty of the Spirit and of the Flesh distinguished: in an address to those captives in spirit among the people called Quakers who are commonly called libertines' (Dublin: printed by Isaac Jackson, 1756), pp. 3-4.

²⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 8-9.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p.19.

²⁸ Bewdley Friends Meeting House Library, 'Friends Tracts', volume 210.

²⁹ *Memoirs of the Life and Labours in the Gospel of James Gough of the city of Dublin, deceased. Compiled from his original manuscript by his brother John Gough* (Dublin: printed by Robert Jackson, 1782).

³⁰ Peter Lamb, 'Gough, John (1720-1791)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004); [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/11138>, accessed 17 July 2011] John's son had connections with the Irish book trade, becoming a printer in Dublin.

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heightened immediacy by the manuscript, which is of a poem by John Gough and addressed to 'John Fry and wife'.³¹ As well as the sharing of books, a strong manuscript culture was also an important element of Quaker networks in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, further cementing the links across countries and continents. In the example of the Gough poem, we can see how these elements of the culture operated in tandem. John Fry was a cousin, close friend and regular correspondent of John Ritty, who, in common with many Irish Quakers of the period had been born in England, (in Melksham in Wiltshire),³² before settling in Ireland. John Fry was a shopkeeper in Sutton Benger in Wiltshire. John Gough, as a teenager, had worked as an assistant in a Quaker school nearby, in Pickwick. Fry had visited Ireland, and he, Ritty and John Gough had worked together visiting families and seeking to encourage and enforce Quaker discipline, an informal practice of pastoral oversight that had begun in Ireland and was later to be formalised throughout the Society.³³

The poem suggests that Gough felt to some extent an exile in Ireland (although there is a sense in which he, like all Quakers of his time, felt alienated from the world at large). The opening lines suggest he had been inspired to send his news, and highlights the ways in which Quakers dutifully encouraged each other, although the critical self reflection of the remainder of the poem suggests little exhortation was necessary here. Quaker schools were comparatively numerous and well respected, but for Gough the relative success of Quaker educational enterprise was seen as holding snares of its own, causing the 'brethren' to 'err in devious ways' as they became caught up with the amusements of the arts and science and the 'worlds affairs'. It was easy to become 'too polite to mind a future state'. Gough rehearses the concerns about 'libertines', pointing out how their worldliness is hidden under formal conformity to prudence and plain dress, but he does not exclude himself from censure. The poem is effectively a paean to the value of careful oversight by worthy Quakers such as Fry and in particular towards the youth of the Society. As such, although ostensibly a personal message, it was doubtless intended (as would appear to have been common Quaker practice) for wider circulation, and thus by some link or other came into the hands of John Brewin in Cirencester (less than twenty miles from Sutton Benger) and thereby to Quakers in Bewdley.

The tensions and anxieties that are evident both in the poem and the published memoirs and tracts of the period up to the 1780s were to increase in the final decade of the century, leading to the first schism that began to fragment Quaker quietist culture. The example of another Quaker schoolmaster, Abraham Shackleton of Ballitore is taken as the key to developing the narrative of Irish Quaker history.³⁴ The boarding school at Ballitore had been opened by

³¹ A transcript of the poem is given in the appendix.

³² Brewin had at least some connection with Melksham Quakers too since three of his books were once owned by members of the Jefferys family of Melksham. Cirencester in the neighbouring county of Gloucestershire, is about thirty miles from Melksham.

³³ Braithwaite, pp. 504-5.

³⁴ Punshon, pp. 153-8.

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Abraham Shackleton I, a Yorkshire Quaker who had moved to Ireland in 1720. The school acquired a good reputation and educated non-Quakers as well as Quakers; Edmund Burke was one of its pupils. Abraham's grandson (also Abraham) succeeded to the position of master of the school from his father, Richard, in 1779. The Quaker culture in Ireland at the time meant that he had acquired a highly 'sensitised conscience', and attendance at the school suffered when, in 1789, he abandoned the teaching of the classics (even though it was essential to non-Quaker pupils hoping to go on to University) because it glorified the 'abominable trade of war'.³⁵ At the same time, while his stands might be seen in some respects as peculiarly Quaker, he was on a course that eventually led him into schism with Quakerism. A group of Quakers in Ulster known as the New Lights, and with whom Shackleton became associated, were already questioning Quaker insularity and adopting views that, reflecting the spirit of the Enlightenment, were increasingly republican and deist.³⁶ At the other end of the Quaker spectrum, evangelically inspired Quaker ministers from the US in particular were stressing the need to assert the primacy of scriptural authority, placing the focus of faith in the atonement.

These internal tensions were set against the backdrop of heightened national tension culminating in the 1798 Rising. In this crisis, Shackleton and Quakers of the Ferns, Ballitore and Enniscorthy area seemed to exemplify the principles of prudence and integrity that Quakers had been so anxious to follow,³⁷ remaining true to pacifist principles in the face of threats and attacks, providing a refuge for those caught up in violence and pleading for leniency as the fortunes of war turned about.³⁸ The situation in Ireland at the time was clearly not one from which Shackleton could remain detached, and the Quaker concern for internal discipline and plainness took a different turn through his experiences. Although he had been seized by rebel forces (on the basis that if he would not fight he could at least stop a bullet), he subsequently sued for pardons for the rebel forces once the army had won back the advantage. In a public letter to the army commander, Colonel Campbell, he wrote that 'among the people' there was 'no dark spirit of persecution' and that fears of a conspiracy were 'conceived only in the men of property, who are alarmed at the thought of losing it'; if only everyone were allowed to live comfortably, and 'if the rich did not insult the poor by their wanton extravagance [...] the two orders of society would coalesce, and religious distinctions would not be much thought of'.³⁹

³⁵ Harrison, p. 210.

³⁶ Harrison, pp. 201-2.

³⁷ J. Teakle, 'The Works of Mary Birkett Card, 1774-1817', 2 vols, (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Gloucestershire, 2004).

³⁸ Peter Lamb, 'Shackleton, Abraham (1752-1818)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/68181>, accessed 10 July 2011].

³⁹ Shackleton's address to Colonel Campbell quoted in Thomas Hancock, *The Principles of Peace exemplified in the conduct of the Religious Society of Friends in Ireland during the rebellion of the year 1798*, 2nd edn, (London: printed by William Phillips, 1826), pp. 118-20.

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If the sentiments expressed here might have been considered by some Quakers as politically radical, it was not this that appeared to lie at the heart of what became a destructive quarrel with the Society, and in particular with David Sands, an American evangelical Quaker who in 1798 was also in Ireland as part of his travels in the ministry throughout Europe. Shackleton could not accept Sands' position on the inerrancy of the Bible, having already rejected in particular the warlike god of the Hebrew scriptures and, in 1797, had refused to apply the epithet 'holy' to the Bible when required by his meeting to reply to yet more queries about the state of the discipline. He was disowned in 1801 after a protracted dispute, although, in judging him, the National Meeting did not so much side with Sands' position as make it a rule that there be 'no more spirit of speculation'.⁴⁰ A major split in Irish Quakerism resulted.

This narrative of events however would not have looked clear cut to those observing through the lens of the material to be found in the Bewdley collection; because Quakers were exposed largely to 'authorised' versions, the selection of the works available here reflects a specific slant on priorities and loyalties. Thus work sympathetic to Shackleton, notably William Rathbone's, *Narrative of Events that have lately taken place in Ireland*,⁴¹ is not in the collection. However, it would seem that John Brewin would have been aware of its existence since among his tracts is a volume produced as a riposte to Rathbone's defence of Shackleton, by a supporter of Sands. It hints at a quarrel that revolved not only around theology but also the claim that the defenders of Shackleton were influenced by the radical spirit of Thomas Paine.⁴² It would be hard to derive much more meaningful information from the tract in the collection however since it has been severely cropped in order to fit the volume, and much of the text is lost. Such cropping, of course, was not unusual and especially if the look of the volume on the shelf mattered rather more than the contents. But it is possibly a more significant indication of Brewin's mentality in this case since this is the only tract in the seven volumes to have been treated in this way. It seems unlikely that it would indicate sympathy for Shackleton, but it may indicate either indifference or dislike of what was seen as unedifying infighting, perhaps echoing the National Meeting's view that 'the spirit of speculation' was not appropriate.

A more detailed account of the Rising of 1798 as it affected Irish Quakers was published in 1824 by Thomas Hancock in his *Principles of Peace exemplified in the conduct of the Religious Society of Friends in Ireland during the rebellion of the year 1798*.⁴³ Thomas was

⁴⁰ Quoted in Maurice J. Wigham, *The Irish Quakers. A Short History of the Religious Society of Friends in Ireland* (Dublin: Historical Committee of the Religious Society of Friends in Ireland, 1992), p. 68.

⁴¹ W. Rathbone, *A Narrative of Events, that have lately taken place in Ireland among the Society called Quakers* (London: 1804). This book gives considerable detail showing how seriously Sands clashed with local Quakers.

⁴² *A Few Observations tending to expose the unfairness of some censure on the character of David Sands, in a publication called A Narrative of Events that have lately taken place in Ireland, among the Society called Quakers* (London: W Darton, 1804). The copy is contained in 'Friends Tracts', Bewdley Friends Meeting House Library, vol. 210.

⁴³ Thomas Hancock, *The Principles of Peace exemplified in the conduct of the Religious Society of Friends in Ireland during the rebellion of the year 1798* (London: printed by William Phillips, 1825).

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the cousin of John Hancock,⁴⁴ who had been on a religious visit to Wexford in 1798, was captured by the rebels, and made to attend a mass (although he was allowed to keep his hat on and remain standing). John Hancock had similarly become uneasy about Irish Quakerism's increasing obsession with its discipline, taken a rationalist view on biblical criticism and was known for his interest in radical political causes including Catholic emancipation. He had been disowned by his meeting in Lisburn in 1801.⁴⁵ Thomas Hancock had gained a medical degree at Edinburgh, and practised medicine with considerable success in London and Liverpool, being the kind of 'libertine' Quaker whose worldly success so exercised the Society. He left England in 1834 to settle again in Lisburn, where the Quaker testimony describes him as also returning 'heartily to embrace the principles of which he had formerly been a nominal professor'.⁴⁶ His first edition account of the events of 1798 (published a year after John's death) 'named no names' and made no reference even obliquely to Abraham Shackleton's role. However in 1826, a second edition was published, prompted by the discovery among John's papers of 'an interesting document from Ballitore' (Shackleton's address to Colonel Campbell) which has been added in full to the original Chapter V, and is an exception to the rest of the book in including names.⁴⁷ Thomas had planted himself securely in the now purged Irish Quaker fold. He would appear to have been nevertheless anxious to rehabilitate those Quakers who, though they had fallen from grace, had nevertheless played a significant role in a defining episode in Irish Quaker history. However, significantly, while *Principles of Peace* is among Bewdley Meeting House's collection, it is a first edition of 1825, and not the more explicit 1826 edition.

Finally, the collection includes the journal of David Sands, but this too gives little insight into the events of 1798.⁴⁸ Moreover the journal, the manuscript of which was in the hands of the Pease family, was not published until 1848, and the editing of the account reflects the extent to which evangelical sympathies had gained ascendancy in the Society. Sands is silent on the role played by Shackleton during the events of the Irish Rising of 1798; he describes arriving in Ballitore in June 1798 to find it still 'greatly distressed by a battle fought a few days before, between the insurgents and the British army'.⁴⁹ He returned to Ballitore six months later, but made no reference to Shackleton by name, merely recording that 'this was once

⁴⁴ 1762-1823. John's father, also John (died 1764) was a linen draper of Lisburn and left the legacy which had enabled the founding of the Friends' School of which John Gough had become first headmaster in 1774. The younger John had been sent to the Friends' School in Bristol.

⁴⁵ Harrison, p. 113.

⁴⁶ *The Annual Monitor for 1850* (London: executors of the late William Alexander, 1849), pp. 43-4.

⁴⁷ Hancock, 1826, Advertisement to second edition and p. x.

⁴⁸ *Journal of the Life and Gospel Labours of David Sands, with extracts from his correspondence* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1848).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

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a place of note as to Friends, but is now much on the decline'.⁵⁰ The editorial commentary remarks that Sands 'appears to have discontinued his journal' around this time, Quakers in Ireland '[d]uring the time of the Rebellion' being 'very careful that nothing should pass from one to another in writing, which, if should fall into improper hands, could be construed to their disadvantage'.⁵¹ The commentary adds the detail however that Irish Quakers were divided by a 'dangerous defection from the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, which several who had been high in profession gave way to'. The justification of Sands' position was on the classic evangelical grounds that the secessionists were regarded as having denied the gospel and the efficacy of Christ's propitiatory sacrifice. That different interpretations of the events were in circulation was acknowledged, being dubbed as 'unfriendly and improper' and designed 'to maintain the cause of those who were caught even in such great delusions'.⁵²

Reception and preservation of the books in Bewdley's collection: some conclusions

Thus it would seem that the 'winners' wrote the history and their versions were the ones that would have predominated among Quakers in the following centuries. Such a conclusion is based on the assumption, of course, that the contents of the books were read after they had been acquired by the meeting house. Reception is one of the most elusive aspects of book history. In the absence of lending records or minutes of reading groups, reception has to be deduced in the case of this collection from the state of the books themselves, and the all-too-easy to misinterpret little clues of use. Annotation is one of those, and this is certainly in evidence in Brewin's tracts, although the absence of annotation thereafter might reflect their new status as belonging to a meeting rather than an individual. Book marks might also suggest some use. There are some small paper scrap bookmarks which have become sufficiently well moulded into the pages to suggest age, and one contains enough letters to show that it was torn from a letter addressed to Brewin in Cirencester. Only one piece of evidence suggests that a book was read while in the possession of Bewdley Meeting. In the Memoir of William Tanner, a scrap of envelope has been used as a bookmark and the gum has fixed the scrap to the page. Conveniently, it includes the postmark 'Welling[ton] Salop MY 2 77'. So we can surmise that one reader from Bewdley Meeting got at least to chapter four in one of the books after May 1877. But it is hardly compelling evidence of extensive use.

It needs to be stressed that by the time these books came into the care of Bewdley Meeting the events they recorded (often with little narrative detail) were long past, the people they memorialised were long dead and even the theology they espoused had in many respects been modified. Many of them were outdated even by the time their previous owners had

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 187.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., p. 188.

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acquired them; for example, John Fry to whom the Gough manuscript is addressed died in the same year of Brewin's birth, 1775. And of those that were newer, published in the 1830s and 1840s, many were reprints or new editions of earlier Quakers' work.⁵³ At first I concluded that the collection might be seen as representing essentially the Quaker canon of the long eighteenth century, and of a time when Quakers might still be seen as a single trans-Atlantic theological culture, not yet divided by 'separations'. But this is only true up to a point. The publication of Hancock's *Principles of Peace*, and Sands' *Journal*, decades after the events, shows how competing elements within a fragmenting Quaker culture appealed to history to bolster and justify their position. This was certainly an ideologically-influenced collection. Nevertheless, even within institutional constraints, elements of individuality and idiosyncrasy have inevitably asserted themselves, by accident if not design, and these offer some additional insights into the networks and processes by which a set of ideas became embedded in a particular community.

However, there is little evidence that this work was widely read past the mid-nineteenth century. The eighteenth century experiences represented in the collection continue to be neither highly regarded nor repeated in modern British Quaker devotional literature. The reason the collection continues to be kept with such care, even when the individual books appear to have been, in truth, so little used, must stem in part therefore from the same sense of duty that appears always to have been given to these books. The current 'book of discipline' still requires meetings to keep the maintenance and use of their libraries under review: 'a well- stocked and organised library is a powerful aid to the life of a meeting and its outreach'.⁵⁴ While new books continue to be acquired, the old collection remains a constant tangible reminder of being part of a Quaker family that extends across time as well as space, even though the anxious, God-fearing, world-fearing theology which permeates so much of its content would not now be either widely recognised or understood.

I approached this study from the perspective of a historian of society and religion. I sought to show something of the collection's potential by including within it a smaller case study in which the evidence of selected works shows, both through the writing and networks, how Quakers in Ireland in the eighteenth century, influenced the direction of Quakerism, and how their concerns and disruptions would have caused ripples in geographically remote English meetings, in spite of the different political context.

I have no doubt that, with different interests and expertise, further meaningful questions could be asked of the collection, questions that simply could not be addressed if it were to be

⁵³ There are for example eight handsomely bound volumes of *Biographical, Narrative, Epistolary and Miscellaneous: chiefly the productions of early members of the Society of Friends: intended to illustrate the spiritual character of the gospel of Christ*, edited by John Barclay (London: Darton and Harvey, 1835-1845).

⁵⁴ *Quaker Faith and Practice. The book of Christian discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*, 2nd edn (London: the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends(Quakers) in Britain, 1995), 13.40-41.

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broken up. I have tried to show that a book collection is more than a body of accumulated facts and ideas, but can indicate an ongoing complex historical process. Like archaeologists, we can excavate the layers of its evolution. The challenges are considerable. Even with a small collection like Bewdley's, scraping away the layers of shifting ownership, trying to work out relationships between individual pieces of evidence, and setting the whole in a shifting context pose problems of interpretation and explanation. I also would not suggest that collections should be slavishly preserved or left untouched for fear of doing harm; being broken-up, reformed, restored and read was always part of their story and meaning. But there is a duty to leave a record of the 'trail' as far as possible, because, if studied in the developing context, a book collection can amount to more than the sum of its parts, providing information which the contents alone could never provide.

Appendix:

Transcript of a letter from the inside back cover of *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experiences, and Labours in the Gospel of James Gough*, late of the City of Dublin deceased (Dublin: printed by Robert Jackson, 1782), in Bewdley Friends' Meeting House Library.

A letter from John Gough to John Fry & wife

A Friend requested in a land remote,
That seems forgetting and perhaps forgot,
At length tho' late this salutation sends,
To you much lov'd and much deserving Friends:
But fear with too much justice you'll upbraid
A debt so justly due, so long unpaid,
Suppose me easy on a foreign shore,
That I regard not whom I see no more,
Far be at thought remov'd. _ no change of clime
Of scenes of life, or long revolving time,
My sentiments of friendship have decreas'd,
I love my Friends, not you the last, or least;
I own to long this duty I have withdrew,
Not paid the tribute to your friendship due;
The hearty friendship to preserve alive,
The cold to warm the dying to revive.
It's not to think, but to revive the thought,
To speak if present, write it if remote. _
Should you inquire I know your friendly care
You will inquire sincerely how I fare
Know that I live but live not as I would.
I've spent long years in hoping to be good,

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Perplex'd with business, with the Worlds affairs
Amus'd with science & oppress'd with cares,
Thro' all salvation that momentious thought
I ne'er forgot, nor follow'd as I ought;
Yet in degree as in my early youth,
To truth a Friend and to the Friends of Truth
My fancy oft recalls those days to view
When first I lov'd and was belov'd by you;
When mutual converse mutually cou'd please
And Sutton* lent me friendly hours of ease (marginal note: Bengel Wilts)
Truth buded then, the bud that promis'd fair
You nurs'd and water'd with a tender care
My steps confin'd to tread the narrow way,
Which leads to regions of eternal day;
The path with trembling feeble steps I trace,
Child as I was, I found the path was peace;
But soon to soon my feet were turn'd aside
Mine eye was evil and I lost my guide
Induc'd on man to turn my wandering eyes,
Not know the tempter in the sly disguise.
'He show'd me those a wider road cou'd keep
'Yet plain their dress the clothing of the sheep;
'See those in easier paths can move along:
'Can speak with greater liberty of tongue:
'Keep a midway to no extream incline
'Averse to the rigid and the Libertine,
'Such prudence gains these two important ends
'The world's esteem, and unity of Friends;
'These patterns follow, be their practice thine,
'Rouze up thy genius and in converse shine,
'Learning acquire, the paths to science tread
'For tis by science thou must earn thy bread,
'Emerge to light, obtain the Arts to please,
'Converse with freedom innocence and ease;
'Foolish! I heard but lost my station then
'And bartered peace to gain the smiles of men.
And now perhaps you may desire to hear,
How prospers truth and how the Brethren fare;
Ee'en here as there we err in devious ways,
Truth prosper'd here in our fore fathers days,
But we their sons in sentiments more wise,

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As new reformers in the Church arise;
To fashion out an easier path than they,
A wider passage and a broader way;
And think behave and speak as others do,
And as well bred and as polite as you,
Too much well bred to think or judge with weight
And too polite to mind a future state.
Nor suffers truth alone from Liberty,
Ye formalists Earth centred who are ye!
Ye wear our form and our opinion hold,
But will mistake the glitter for the gold;
Say what foundations of your hopes you know
Is truth a name, or is religion show;
The form of truth disguised the outward part,
The World, The World lies rooted at the heart;
These hug themselves not as they profess;
They save their penny and conform in dress;
The extravagance of libertines condemn,
And all who err, except they err with them;
For order plead, at liberty repine,
But what have these to do with discipline;
Hence ye profane, or else approach with fear,
And cleanse your hands, before you dare draw near,
Truth suffers much from liberty 'tis true,
And suffers much from such supports as you
Well discipline at least in form is kept,
In form and power before the fathers slept,
When rules had weight and truth was precious deem'd
And earth and earthly things as dross esteem'd;
But discipline in this degenerate day
In life and forms seems hastening to decay,
Rules are dispens'd but meet with small regard;
Much good advice unheeded and unheard.
The Church deplores to see the highway waste;
So much desertion of her solemn feasts:
Her sons debased in sensualities;
Her daughters stretched upon their beds of ease,
Contented both to range the world at large,
The drowsy fathers nodding o'er their charge,
Tis a sad truth but tis a truth to plain,
Most hasten backward to the world again:

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Yet some there are the virtuous and the just
True to the cause and honest to their trust,
Wise to o'ersee and skilful to discern,
Intent to watch and faithful to forewarn,
Who clean their hands, and hearts, and garments keep
In publick labour and in secret weep;
Firm and resolv'd their testimony bear,
Against the earthly, airy and insincere;
But to the weak whose young desires is true,
Impart with aid as I receiv'd from you:
To these may I in strict communion join,
Be peace resulting from such virtues mine,
And if the power of speech no time restore,
If I must see your faces here no more;
May I so live the remnant of my days
To my own gain and my Creators praise,
As that I may when this existance ends,
With saints be number'd and rejoin my Friends.

JG