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England's voice for unbiased expression

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The historically persecuted, "Religious Society of Friends," also known by their derisively awarded but graciously accepted name, "Quakers" held their annual meeting of "Friends in Business," Thursday, August, 3<sup>rd</sup> 1865; or in "Plain Speech" as Quakers prefer to say it, 8<sup>th</sup> Month, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1865. The Meeting was held at the Quaker Center known as, "[Devonshire](#)" which is located in London's Bishopsgate. Quakers have occupied this complex of buildings since they first signed a lease agreement in 1666, just under two hundred years ago. It has grown over those years to include, three Meetinghouses, a bookstore, several homes and a large lecture gallery where yesterday's meeting was held. The architecture throughout the complex is striking and could be described by some as "austere" but would be more accurately described as "Elegantly Plain."

I don't know what I expected but upon arrival this reporter was surprised to discover a splendid array of undecorated but expensive carriages surrounded by attentive servants dressed drably in gray. One gets the impression that for a religion that prides itself on frugality many of these, "[First Publishers of Truth](#)" as they define themselves, are simply "playing" at being frugal for appearances sake. In fact, as is well known in London Society many of this group, which is made up entirely of men, are the product of [generations of great wealth](#). Those that are not currently wealthy are either well on their way or are being rescued from bankruptcy by their peers. It is understood that the basis for their reputation as a low-risk investment is that for Quakers bankruptcy is a sin and they normally will not allow one of their own to declare it. Examples of this kind make it clear to this Catholic observer that at least part of their strength in business is also owed to the closely knit support within this unique group of very religiously disciplined businessmen.

The story of Quaker's success in business changes depending upon whom you ask. If you ask a member of this Society their business success is due to their reputation for honesty in their transactions, which by the bye is the same answer you would expect to receive from any

member of any religion here in [Victorian England](#). But I can say that these Quakers in addition to making failed businesses a sin created what came to be called a “market price.” Meaning rich or poor everyone pays the same, too bad for those who are not quite poor but struggling, they; “Bob’s your Uncle” get the short stick.

Ironically their persecution appears to be a factor in their success. As a group they have traditionally been ostracized from Polite Society and that has forced them to forge their own separate path. For example, because they have not been permitted to study in Universities, years ago, they created their own schools where they became inbred. Further, their network of Meeting Houses and their fixed schedule of meetings with each other every three months regionally and once a year for the entire group has allowed them to freely communicate their needs, learn what others are doing and interestingly, how they can be of assistance to each other. What all of Britain knows is that what they have been “doing” for quite some time is building industries that include, Railroads, Bridges, shoes, ships, soap, Banks, kitchen matches, and many more including three major suppliers of chocolate.

Admittedly all this success got off to a good start more than one hundred fifty years ago in 1709 when the first of four [Abraham Darby's](#) started to use Coke as fuel instead of wood; (which was then and is now an endangered natural resource), to smelt iron. He simply duplicated the method the Brewers were using to make beer. Before anyone knew better, the Darby’s went from making pots and pans to building great ships and some beautiful [iron Bridges](#) that will last hundreds of years. The fruits of this success obviously gave them control over a large amount of money to be invested. A term was used yesterday that I had not heard before “[Capitalism](#)” which appears to be defined by them as, “Living and working in a way that releases the maximum human potential.”

It should be understood that at the present time this closed “Society” of Friends has risen to contain [fifty percent of the entrepreneurs](#) in all of Britain. While Quakers constitute only 1.8% of London’s population, they account for more than 17% of its export merchants and 2.5 % of its wealthiest families.

Quite an impressive performance.

Wealthy Quakers were never great in numbers but paradoxically while Quaker families were acquiring great wealth, they were simultaneously [diminishing in numbers](#). It is rumored within Victorian London’s Polite Society that when the privileged lifestyles of these families did not reflect their professed religious principals they fled for more comfortable surroundings.

But the fleeing wealthy Quaker families are just a tiny sliver of this Societies total members. Most of these Brethren are simple farmers living in the North and working long days trying to make ends meet like the rest of us. Unfortunately, the lives they are living make it impossible for them to attend events such as yesterdays. It is only the Gentleman of leisure that have time in their lives that can afford to attend and as such they often assume the leadership roles.

But of course, as the wealthy families disappear so does the number of lesser mortals. Their own records show that at their height in 1680, the “Religious Society of Friends” had nearly 60,000 members; by 1800 their number had dropped to less than 20,000. As of this writing just sixty-five years later they have been reduced to less 14,000. The fundamental problem causing this deterioration is simply that it is difficult to maintain and recruit believers when what required of them is that they retire their wardrobe, radically change their form of speech and adhere to a strict code of behavior. This while living beside the average Englishmen and their ambivalent relationship that exists between their religious beliefs and their everyday behavior.

Notwithstanding a shrinking society I was in attendance yesterday specifically to satisfy this reporter and all of my countrymen’s curiosity about just what the Quakers are doing with all these extremely deep pockets.

### **This was my experience:**

Before entering the gallery, I noticed Mr. John Hires the Pharmacist who has created an alternative drink for teetotalers handing out samples; to the men. Upon entering I was witness to a group of approximately fifty gentleman all dressed the same who were in an active period of social mingling. There was lots of shuffling around, loud greetings and vigorous shaking of hands among these “Friends;” as they call themselves. These (capitalized F) Friends regularly meet each other in their religious and business endeavors; which to this reporter appears to be one in the same. I am certain most of those in attendance were schoolmates and had been boyhood friends. For that matter their parents, grandparents and great grandparents probably were schoolmates and boyhood Friends.

Feeling very much the outsider, I kept expecting that I would receive some sort of written program or introduction upon entering but none was offered. That left me uncertain about how to proceed and I became increasingly self-conscious. The unspoken message was that I was being allowed admittance strictly as an “observer” which I understood to be defined as an attendee who is not permitted to participate.

Being “Catholic, a woman, and a Journalist” while dressed in, “conventional clothing” I certainly stood out. I half expected to be turned away before I got past the door. I was however “received,” not welcomed as warmly as one might have expected from a “Religious Society,” but I was not shunned either. All of the woman present were standing in the rear of the gallery. I instinctively sought shelter quickly, but quietly, by joining them.

As I took my place, I could see that within this half empty room “Birds of a Feather,” were flocking together. In one corner were the bankers; [Barclay’s](#), and [Lloyds](#), (which is an Insurance company posing as a bank) , and the Gurneys, who were the object of the popular expression, “[Rich as the Gurneys](#)”. Standing nearby was [Henry Christy](#) the Banker who at great expense to himself brought about change in Irelands [monocultural](#) food supply. Also engaged in the conversation but standing to one side I recognized, [Joseph Pease](#) whose family decided that transporting coal could best be done by steam locomotive and whose descendants eventually

manufactured the locomotive itself. I suspected many of these participants had followed the [train schedule](#) designed by Quakers to travel all the way from the outer reaches of Great Britain to London on railroads where the steam engines, the rails, the ground they are laid on and many of the bridges they passed over were all built by and often were the property of Quakers, and quite probably and conveniently financed by Quaker Banks. Speaking of Banks and profit, the accountants Samuel Lowell Price, Edwin Waterhouse and William Cooper were lurking nearby discussing something with each other.

Another small group in another part of the room having an animated discussion were the Confectioners, [John Cadbury](#) [Joseph Rountree](#) and Joseph Fry. The latter has just begun his “chocolate bar” business. These men are in fact business competitors but there they were with one hand on each other’s shoulder and the other hand trying to muffle a laugh, as a very entertained [Samuel Tuke](#) the great reformer stood nearby.

Of Course, I didn’t recognize everyone, but I did notice the inventor of the Lighthouses that protect all the Quaker trading ships carrying Quaker merchandise. His name is, [John Richardson Wigham](#) but he is often and understandably mistaken for [John Wigham Richardson](#) the Quaker builder of many of the ships the lighthouses protect. Standing nearby was [Joseph Crossfield](#) whose family brought about modern soap for which we are all most grateful. Mr. Crossfield was speaking with [Cyrus and James Clark](#), whose family started out making sheepskin rugs and turned it into a shoe manufacturing empire.

When the social mingling had run its course, people began to move toward their seats. By that, I mean “their seats” because those particular seats have graced the derrieres of generations of the same families.

From the safety of my position standing among the women in the rear of the gallery, I marveled at the military precision they employed as they all scurried around, sat down and made themselves comfortable; while the women in the back of the room felt their feet slowly swelling. Then, suddenly and in unison, without any prompting from anyone, the entire group entered into what felt like an endless period of empty silence, I had to struggle to appear reverent and resist gawking at this unusual behavior. I been told this would happen but without having received any guidance upon entering it was unexpected none the less.

When words fail us, it is quite common to sit quietly at a loved one’s side in loving support but I had never experienced a large group with a singularity of purpose like this one sitting together in deafening silence with everyone but myself seemingly in a trance. The believers present and their ancestors before them have observed this religious practice for more than two hundred years but as a first experience all I could do is try not to stare and hope my proper English breakfast passed quietly through my bowels.

Remarkably, although I had come as an observer, the silence present in the room quickly engulfed me and slowly but steadily I found I had stopped “observing” and my thoughts were folding into themselves again and again. It was in practice for me a “[transcendental](#)” experience as has been described by the Americans. I found myself so deeply into my thoughts it was

jarring when the person in charge ended the silence and began the substance of the meeting. The Quakers call that “person in charge,” a “Clerk” but they might also be called a “Master of Ceremony.”

I found it slightly entertaining that the heir to the Lloyd’s Bank Fortune would be called a “clerk” but it reflected the desire of the Quakers to be seen as egalitarian. Once the mysterious silence ended and Meeting finally began, I had the distinct privilege of hearing several very interesting presentations. They all described the general health of the various reform projects these Quaker Merchants and Industrialists were making in those businesses they have dominated for so long.

I will say first that the substance of what was presented was honorable.

This “Clerk” who was positioned on a bench facing the audience and was somewhat elevated allowing him to look down on everyone; “Lording” over us as any Anglican or Catholic Priest might do announced the stated purpose of the meeting and what the agenda was to be. Quakers have a whole host of inflexible lifestyle prohibitions; one of them involves personnel vanity. As a result, if the actual head of the “Family Business” were to report it would be seen as socially unacceptable. To compensate, all of the speakers were not the final authorities but were a relative, or senior employee which often times are one in the same.

The first to be recognized was one of the principal reasons I had come to this gathering, It was “Friend,” (as they call each other) Gregory Stemm, representing the Cadbury brothers [John](#) and [George](#). Together they hold a well-known history of maintaining a sense of responsibility toward their employees whether or not there are members of their Religious Society. To advance the quality of life these fortunate folks are already enjoying the brothers built a “Factory Town” they call “Bourneville.” Although the brothers have always retained ownership, the homes they built are open to Quakers and non-Quakers alike. Contrasting the [filthy streets of London](#), the houses in Bourneville have yards, with gardens and plenty of fresh air. George in particular has an interest in continually expanding his employee benefit programs. What was reported on this day was the progress of his company’s efforts at opening [retirement accounts](#) and purchasing Annuities for these long-term lucky souls. One can only hope these ideas will eventually enlighten the rest of the London’s “Labor Villains,” as has been described by my protege Mr. Dickens. Mr. Stemm also reported that George Cadbury had rented a Georgian mansion named [“Woodbrook”](#) where he eventually intends to open a Quaker study center.

When the Cadbury report had finished, their counterpart, Joseph Rowntree, also a satisfier of many a sweet tooth, was represented by Friend, Gary Crosby, CEO, who, not to be outdone by the Cadbury’s, brought the group up to date on the Rowntree’s family efforts at establishing a financially sound life Insurance Program which is called the [“Friends Provident Institution](#) (1832). Mr. Roundtree’s task is to convince these Quakers that purchasing Life Insurance is not the equivalent of gambling. He will need luck with that, but as we all know, “If any man can, the candy man can.”

Being an animal lover myself I was taken by the report given by a representative of Joseph Pease, Mr. Peter Crockett. This was regarding the Pease Families continued support for the prevention of the Cruelty to Animals. Friend Pease led the eventual passing of the [Animal Cruelty Act 1835](#) which amended the existing legislation to prohibit the keeping of animals for the purpose of **baiting** bulls, dogs, bears, badgers or "other Animal (whether of domestic or wild nature " .

The Act also banned (but failed to eradicate) **dog fighting** and **cockfighting**.<sup>[4]</sup>

Finally, Friend Daniel Striebig reported for the [C&J Clark's](#) shoe manufacturing company on its progress avoiding (the supposed sin of) bankruptcy being made possible by the generous support of their loyal peers. Mr. Striebig made it clear that in addition to emerging from bankruptcy their company is also making great strides in providing their factory workers with schools they can attend alongside their factory work. In addition, the company has opened a; theater, a library, an open-air swimming pool and a town hall.

Suddenly, when "Friend" Striebig had finished his presentation and again without warning, the "clerk" while still seated, quietly bowed his head and it was instantly and universally understood that this was the appropriate time for all to return to that mysterious silence where these soldiers in a "Lambs War' apparently take their refuge.

Although I do not understand the utility of this "Silent Worship" I must say I was moved by it. This religious practice is clearly a powerful and a very personnel experience.

As I returned to my KnightsBridge home while bouncing around in my Handsome Cab, I couldn't help but surmise that with such a storied history of so many social reforms Quakers have instituted in the Industries discussed that day, and reforms in hospitals, schools, prisons, and asylums, I shall in the future refer to them as, "Silent Revolutionaries."

*Virginia Mary Crawford reporting.*