

## **The Development of Ecospirituality among British Quakers**

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### **Introduction: The Historical Roots of Quaker Environmentalism**

In 1993, Dibdenshaw Quaker Meeting, in which I was carrying out ethnographic research, decided to replace the standard 300 watt bulbs in the meeting room with low wattage long life bulbs. This essay is an exploration of the wider context and meanings of that decision.<sup>1</sup>

This article focuses on the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain and concerns the ways in which the norms of the group have come to determine, at least partially, the ways in which individual members relate to the environment and to the ethics of consumption. In their history, Quakers were, indeed, led to accept a particular understanding of the moral nature of commodities, and of their consumption. Since their beginnings in the mid-seventeenth century, Quakers have been more or less typical ethical consumers in so far as their decision either to buy or refrain from buying this or that item is informed by their moral judgement: it is right to own this, it is wrong to own that. During the first hundred years of the movement (1650-1750), Quakers adopted a system of discipline in which committees at various organisational levels (from the local to the national) imposed upon the membership a strict regime of prescriptions and proscriptions. These lists of dos and don'ts, justified at root by reference to Biblical text, concerned just about every aspect of life. The discipline enforced by these rules determined what Quakers could and should not own, the kinds of employment they should take, and their attitude to the consumption of commodities of all kinds. Even customary practices surrounding funerary rituals were severely curtailed, gifts were refused, meals were eschewed, and headstones were either banned or made to conform to the simplest form possible. Should individual members ignore the strictures of the group then, they would receive warnings from senior members, and if their ill discipline continued, they could expect to be disowned, or expelled, from the Society. More than anything else, it was their acceptance of this all-pervading discipline which defined them as Quakers. Put simply, the discipline demanded plain living—the conscientious and intentional avoidance of unnecessary consumption. This discipline shaped and has

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<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, "Quaker" and "Friend" are synonymous terms referring to members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). "Dibdenshaw" is a pseudonym.

continued to shape the Quaker view of consumption, and is primarily defined by the principle which I elsewhere call *plaining* (Collins, "Plaining").<sup>2</sup>

The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) grew up during a period of exceptional social, political and economic upheaval during the years of the English Revolutions in the mid-seventeenth century.<sup>3</sup> It was a period that spawned numerous religious sects. Although these various faith-based social constellations were different in many ways, they had one important thing in common: an overt allegiance to "the simple life," or as I would prefer to say, *the plain* (Coleman and Collins; Collins, "Practice of Discipline").<sup>4</sup> The great majority of Quakers were well enough off to be in a position to choose what and what not to consume. In terms of dress, however, it was not enough to know that "it is not lawful for a Christian to use superfluities in apparel, as are of no use save for ornament and vanity," because this injunction does not make clear what is to be counted as a "superfluity." Friends needed spelling out to them what counted as plain dress—hence the torrent of minutes issued by various formal meetings containing the requisite information upon which Friends had to act.

Supported primarily by Biblical text, the testimony to the plain was less a matter of economy or society and more a matter of theology—or more precisely of faith. A statement was issued by the Yearly Meeting of 1691:

It is our tender and Christian advice that Friends take care to keep to truth and plainness, in language, habit, deportment and behaviour; that the simplicity of truth in these things may not wear out nor be lost in our days, nor in our posterity's; and to avoid pride and immodesty in apparel, and all vain and superfluous fashions of the world. (*Quaker Faith and Practice* 20.28)

This short paragraph proves important for at least two reasons. First, the text clearly indicates that one should consume only what one needs (avoiding "all vain fashions of the world"), that this is central to Quaker faith and practice, and that this constitutes a manifestation of the "truth," that is, God. Second, the text has not only survived to the present but is included in the latest edition of the Book of Discipline, the materialisation of the Quaker canon, thereby demonstrating the continuity of this principal testimony. We have here a mode of spirituality, dating from the mid-seventeenth century, which claims explicitly that less is more. I shall go on to argue that this discipline nourished the roots of an ecospirituality, grounded in ideas of the plain and plaining. First, however,

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<sup>2</sup> For a brilliant historical overview of the plain, see Auksi.

<sup>3</sup> For further details concerning the historical development of the movement and its characteristics, see Braithwaite's *The Beginning of Quakerism* and *The Second Period of Quakerism*. See also Bauman's *Let Your Words Be Few*.

<sup>4</sup> Regarding Quaker discipline, see also Collins, "Discipline" and "Quaker Plaining as Critical Aesthetic."

we need to consider the means by which this faith and practice came to be established and sustained.

## **Quaker Discipline**

Quaker discipline, justified Biblically, was strictly maintained from the outset (Collins, "Practice of Discipline"). How was this achieved? There were several reasons but two appear of particular significance. First of all, George Fox (the first leader of the movement) was not only a charismatic preacher but was also blessed with a genius for organisation. Fox established a simple though effective structure which became more or less complete by 1690 and has remained mostly intact until the present day:

Preparative (local) Meetings (PM)  
↑↓  
Monthly (county) Meetings (MM)  
↑↓  
Quarterly (regional) Meetings (QM)  
↑↓  
Yearly (national) Meeting (YM)

The arrows represent minutes (or in this context directives) which were sent up and down the organisational ladder. This exceptionally rational organisation, together with the proscription against "marrying out," facilitated the construction of a tightly knit and extremely well-disciplined group. Elders and Overseers were expected to police their meetings and bring those who were thought to be "walking disorderly" to book. The various prescriptions and proscriptions multiplied enormously after 1660 and were circulated freely throughout the Society. The process became increasingly formalised after 1700, when all Meetings were expected to respond to a set list of rules, setting out the extent to which a Meeting was "abiding in the Light." At the same time, members policed one another. What would now be called peer group pressure, ever present given the closed nature of the Society, functioned as a means of checking the quotidian decision-making of individuals. Surveillance was then intense and for the most part Quakers did indeed abide by the rules. After all, they would have been drawn into the group largely because they subscribed to these beliefs and practices, and would have been familiar with the central testimonies (against church taxes and the military, for instance).

The vast number of rules which Quakers were expected to assimilate gave them the ability to distinguish what was and what was not plain, and so they developed a plaining gaze. Consumer items which had newly come onto the market—as had

umbrellas in the mid-eighteenth century—were routinely proscribed. A hat was considered plain, but not an umbrella (Chambers). In today's terms, Quakers preferred to conserve natural and other resources, eschewing the nascent consumerism of eighteenth-century England. However, the emphasis was on the denial of outward "show," probably because in this way Quakers might most obviously differentiate and distance themselves from "society."

Friends, in addition to being unusually well organised, were literate (Peters). This enabled leading Friends to communicate by letter to newly forming Meetings all over England. Fox, himself, was a prolific writer and communicator sending out thousands of epistles, many of which offer (for the most part Biblically grounded) advice on how to live the Quaker life. Minutes sent down to local Meetings (PMs) were expected to be acted upon promptly, and for decades after 1700, each Meeting had to respond to an initial query regarding its spiritual health. The theology of the group was worked out in a more or less *ad hoc* way, often during skirmishes, both in print and more directly public debate, with divines (clergy or priests).

In Bourdieu's terms, the Religious Society of Friends generated a particular habitus (Bourdieu; Collins, "Habitus"). The group was well organised, inward-looking and steadfast in its faith and practice. Friends encountered one another at home, at Meeting and, in many cases, at work. Children growing up in Quaker families were socialised into the Society from birth, developed friendships among Quakers, often went to school together, and often were apprenticed into businesses owned and managed by Quakers. By 1750 the Society of Friends comprised a web of kinship networks: the community was tightly knit and one's life was perpetually exposed to the critical eye of one's peers within the group. Social control ensured that discipline was strictly maintained. Any miscreants would find themselves, after a sometimes lengthy period of interviews, cast out from the group, and thereby deprived of the benefits accruing to members—including financial aid in difficult times.

However, the plain should not be confused with the cheap.<sup>5</sup> The characteristic dress of eighteenth-century Quakers was cut from a grey cloth which was heavy and relatively expensive. Well-off members might have furnished their homes plainly (in the aesthetic sense) but not inexpensively. In this case, it was not the quality of cloth which underwent plaining, but the cut, colour and pattern. "Gay" colours and patterns (including stripes and checks) were listed as proscribed in several minutes sent down before and after 1700. The discipline implied (always) that to pay too much attention to the outward (and especially regarding gestures and dress, to one's public front) was to pay too little attention to one's inward state—to that place where God/Christ was located.

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<sup>5</sup> For further discussion of this issue in the American context, see Shi.

Until the mid-twentieth century, discipline was generally something imposed on the membership by decidedly patriarchal Quarterly and Yearly Meetings. Since the 1950s (at least), this "top-down" pattern of imposing prescriptions and proscriptions has become less prevalent. One reason for this is the tendency towards congregationalism within British Quakerism; another is the ready assimilation of ambient social trends, including a growing individuality and dislike of "discipline" per se. Discipline has become far more a matter of individual conscience.

### **The Challenge of Economic Success**

By 1860, the Society had undergone major changes. There is an oft repeated anecdote about Elisabeth Fry, considered a "gay Friend," that is, one who trod a narrow line between membership and expulsion on account of her (relatively) flamboyant dress and life-style. Many of those families who had been of the middling sort a century before were now wealthy bankers, manufacturers and industrialists.<sup>6</sup> For families (one might say dynasties) such as the Lloyds, Gurneys, Cadburys, Frys, Rowntrees, and Huntleys and Palmers, living the plain life became a serious challenge (Raistrick; Walvin).<sup>7</sup> Let us take Henry Ashworth and his family, for instance (Boyson). Henry was of sound Lancashire yeomanry stock. His grandparents and parents began to shift their interests from agriculture to trading and manufacture, and eventually into the manufacture of cotton. Whilst Henry's father had become a Quaker in 1793, his mother, Isabel, was born into a Quaker family of considerable standing. Henry and Isabel sent all their children to Quaker boarding schools, and as adults, they married Quakers. Besides, they were dependable members, regularly attending business meetings. The Ashworth children had assimilated the Quaker habitus long before they grew into adulthood. Henry, the eldest child, came to play a leading role in the financial and administrative life of Quakerism in Lancashire. He and his wife set up home in a twelve-bedroomed mansion on his 102-acre estate overlooking his factory just outside Bolton: clearly "the simple life" proved a relative concept. Boyson suggests that Henry was a pragmatist both in business and in his Quakerism. Henry remained a weighty member of the Society throughout his life, but by middle age, he was hunting and shooting, smoking cigars and drinking port. The fortunes of the Wood family climaxed after Henry found himself in the heartland of cotton manufacture. In the early 1850s, he rented various

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<sup>6</sup> Although eighteenth century Quakers were not as central to Weber's thesis in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* as were Calvinists, they do, however, warrant at least a brief mention in Ch. 5. Commenting on Barclay's *Apology for the True Christian Divinity* (with particular reference to Puritan asceticism), Weber correctly maintains that "The campaign against the temptations of the flesh, and the dependence on external things, was, as besides the Puritans the great Quaker apologist Barclay expressly says, not a struggle against the rational acquisition, but against the irrational use of wealth" (171).

<sup>7</sup> Walvin (Chapter 3) refers to the challenge as that between "plainness and plenty."

shooting lodges, eventually renting the 14,500 acre Rottall Lodge in north Forfarshire at £500 a year. Boyson adds: "Henry Ashworth did not look or act like a typical Quaker [...] he dressed extremely well and at the age of eighty-four bought a black beaver waistcoat and a black beaver swinging coat with silk linings from a Savile Row tailor" (254). Such men were inheriting large amounts of capital and are unlikely to have felt comfortable with the restrictions imposed by Quaker discipline. They may have begun moving in Quaker circles but soon found themselves mixing and mingling with the families of other manufacturers, regardless of their denomination. Indeed, it was the haemorrhaging of members in the first half of the nineteenth century (membership reached a low of 13,859 in 1861) that led to the implementation of far-reaching changes to Quaker discipline—including the ending of endogamy and the rescinding of "the peculiarities," that welter of rules relating to dress, pastimes, language use, and so forth (Isichei 111-43; Kennedy 12-46).

### **Quakers, the Environment and Consumerism**

After 1900 the stream of proscriptions and prescription reduced to a trickle and finally stopped altogether. By the time I came to carry out ethnographic fieldwork among Quakers in the North of England during the 1990s, the surveillance of Friends by other Friends had more or less ended. By this time, Quaker discipline was considerably more subtle, because more private; Quakers were expected to police themselves on the basis of guiding anecdotes collected in a less and less Biblically oriented Book of Discipline. The most recent edition was published in 1994 under the title *Quaker Faith and Practice*, and it is significant that the word "Christian" was dropped from its title. The overall tone of the book suggests a discernable change, in that the balance between formal religion and a more informal spirituality tipped towards the latter, with a greater emphasis on broadly environmental concerns. Given that the Book of Discipline is readily available in every Quaker meeting house and is presented to every individual who comes into membership, the historical trajectory of the Society is never far from view. Passages taken from the book are regularly referred to during worship and often form the basis of study and meditation groups. The current edition contains numerous excerpts from Quaker writing which oppose more or less overtly the development of consumerism. Chapter 20 is entitled "Living Faithfully Today" and includes the following excerpt from Quaker writing:

If John Woolman's approach is the right one for the Society of today it is not enough to go over our own behaviour in detail, cutting a bit here and pulling back a bit there; we must be concerned with our and society's attitude to life as a whole, to "live answerable to the design of our creation." (Michael Lee in *Quaker Faith and Practice* 20.34).



Michael Lee refers in this excerpt to the eighteenth-century American Quaker, John Woolman. Woolman was prominent in the early abolitionist movement and as such, he remained energetic and consistent in his condemnation of slavery throughout his life. During his many travels both in America and in Europe, Woolman insisted on paying the slaves who served him in the homes of slave-owners. He refused to be served with silver cups, plates and other utensils, because he believed that slaves were forced to mine precious minerals for the rich. We can safely assume, then, that he also chose not to purchase such goods and persuaded others to do likewise. In later decades, Quakers and other abolitionists attempted to persuade others not to buy sugar and tobacco for the same reason. Woolman, however, explicitly states that picking and choosing what one consumes is really not the key issue—living one's life in the light of one's conscience, which for Quakers (at least in centuries prior to the twentieth) is the Light of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

In Chapter 25, "Unity of Creation," we find the following extract, this time a part of a minute from Norfolk & Hunts Quarterly Meeting:

As to our own planet which God has given us for a dwelling place, we must be mindful that it is given in stewardship. The power over nature that scientific knowledge has put into our hands, if used in lust or greed, fear or hatred, can bring us to utter destruction. If we choose life, we may now feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and heal the sick on a world scale, thus creating new conditions for spiritual advancement so often till now prevented by want. Many of our resources—of oil, of coal and of uranium—are limited. If by condoning waste and luxury we overspend the allowance God has given us, our children's children will be cheated of their inheritance. Limited too is the annual bounty of nature. The material foundation of our life is the tilling of the earth and the growing of food [...] We must conserve the goodness of the soil and not exploit it [...] (*Quaker Faith and Practice* 25.07)

The explicit condemnation of 'luxury' refers once more to the valorisation of the plain, and indirectly to ethical consumption. At the same time, the minute keys into the concept of stewardship, one which grew in significance among environmentalists during subsequent decades. The reference to "our children's children" further emphasizes this idea.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Greening of Meeting: an Ethnographic Example**

During the early 1990s, I carried out two years of ethnographic fieldwork in Dibdenshaw Quaker Meeting. During this time, I noted many instances which seemed to me to indicate a "greening" of the Meeting. Like most Quaker Meetings in Britain, Dibdenshaw occupied a building which it owned. In this case, meetings no longer took

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<sup>8</sup> Woolman wrote: "Every degree of luxury hath some connection with evil" (Woolman in Moulton 205).

<sup>9</sup> For a comparative discussion of consumerism within faith groups, see Thomas.

place in the original Victorian structure, removed during road-building by the local council, but in a new building provided to replace the old in the centre of the town. Constructed during the 1960s, the new meeting house was not particularly efficient in relation to energy consumption. However, it was designed as a practical building which would serve not only the needs of local Friends, but also of local groups who wished to use its rooms for gatherings and events. During my time with the Meeting, discourse relating to green issues developed in a number of interesting ways. I shall go on to describe some of these in detail.

The meeting house was divided internally into a number of spaces, the largest being the meeting room, in which Friends gather for worship on Sunday mornings. A striking feature of this room was the arrangement of large, black, tubular lampshades which hung in a circle from the high ceiling, housing huge 300 watt light bulbs. An announcement was made after worship one Sunday morning, signalling that two of these bulbs had blown and that replacements could no longer be found. A lengthy debate ensued and the matter was referred to Preparative Meeting (PM—the formal business meeting held every fourth Sunday). After further discussion, the decision of PM was to refer the matter to Finance and Premises Committee (FPC, responsible for the upkeep of the building). In the meantime, Friends continued to discuss the issue before and after meeting for worship, as well as at various other formal and informal gatherings during the following weeks. The subsequent report to PM from FPC recommended that the unavailability of the standard light bulbs provided the Meeting with an opportunity to switch to energy-saving bulbs (which in 1990 were still something of a novelty). The debate continued for some time. Some Friends had not heard of the new bulbs, others thought they were far too expensive (despite their considerably longer life). One or two asked whether they would provide enough light, and it was agreed that they would not—certainly if fitted into the large existing shades. However, the majority of Friends stressed the importance of saving energy, and the Meeting agreed to ask FPC to bring tangible suggestions to the following PM. FPC readily concurred with the recommendation that "the green option" should be taken, and discussion fell to other, largely aesthetic, considerations, in relation to the light shades. After considerable debate, FPC suggested to PM that long-life light bulbs be installed in the meeting house and that they be housed in round, white lampshades. During the previous months, continuing dialogue and some subtle and not-so-subtle persuasion had taken place, which meant that those at PM offered few comments on the decision to go ahead with low energy light bulbs. One or two people suggested that the Meeting go further and that low energy bulbs be installed throughout the building. A note was made by the clerk that this should be discussed further at a later meeting. The discussion then turned to the style of the new light-shades, which some believed spoiled the aesthetic integrity of the room.



A number of members of the Meeting were by this time also active members of environmental groups, including Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. These Friends brought fliers and other written material into the meeting house, which were arranged on tables and sometimes displayed on pin boards. Attention would be drawn to this literature, and I was sometimes encouraged to attend meetings in the town organised by environmental organisations and advertised in these materials. A number of Friends spoke on "green issues" during meeting for worship, which provoked further discussion around the meeting house. The Quaker group rented out the five rooms in the meeting house, and environmental organisations either had their rent reduced or waived altogether. In these various ways, the status of environmental concerns among Dibdenshaw Quakers was increased. As members of these organisations, local Friends, moreover, played an increasing role in green issues in the town and, to some extent, in the region. It might be argued that "the environment" became an increasingly middle-class issue from the 1960s onwards, and that given the socio-economic character of Quaker Meetings, it was inevitable that Quakers would come to reflect the ambient tendencies of their class. As I have already shown, however, Quakers have and are well aware that they have a long tradition of caring for the natural world. It nevertheless remains true that these tendencies came together, creating a certain synergy during the 1980s.

There was, in addition, much informal talk about gardens and gardening among Friends. The meeting house was surrounded by lawns and flower-beds, maintained largely by the caretaker with the help of members. During these informal conversations, the idea was aired that the Meeting redesign a part of the rear garden as a "wild garden," including a pond and wild flowers indigenous to the British Isles. Two Friends brought this idea to PM, suggesting that the plan would considerably improve the local plant and animal ecology. Although the idea was warmly received, several older Friends wondered whether what was already a very pleasant garden should be "dug up without good reason." In response, one Friend stood and quoted from *Quaker Faith and Practice*, emphasising the point that we are stewards of the natural environment and should do what we could to protect it. Another spoke movingly on the "wonders of God's world" and "the opportunity to create a bit of heaven in our own backyard." Towards the end of the item, one of the younger members suggested that such a wild garden might have an important educational impact on both members of the Meeting and those people belonging to organisations that rented the rooms. Several agreed that the children of the Meeting might be involved in the project and that they would learn much from it.

The wild garden was indeed a "project." About 33% of the rear garden was entirely cleared, a pond was dug, and wild grasses and flowers planted. Shell, the large international oil company, was at that time running a programme which offered small

grants to local environmental projects. The Meeting applied for funding and received £280, which was spent on seeds and plants for the pond. A light fence was erected between the wild garden and the rest of the garden for safety's sake. Since the developing wild garden could be viewed from inside the meeting house, the work provoked a great deal of discussion. For many months, the garden "looked like a small bomb site, complete with crater," as one Friend remarked. As the "wild meadow" began to grow, the flowers came through, and the pond grew over and looked increasingly "natural." The doubts subsided and most (but not all) Friends warmed to the project. During meeting for worship, children were taken into the wild garden in good weather to collect and observe insects, to pond-dip, and to draw flowers. Friends drew the attention of visitors to "our environmental project" and visited similar projects in the locale, partly in order to share useful knowledge. The wild garden was further debated as the winter approached, and the Meeting heard that the "meadow" would not be mown. Several Friends said they thought the wild garden "looked a mess," particularly as it sat next to a perfectly neat "suburban" lawned garden. By contrast, an elderly Friend remarked that she appreciated the "simplicity" of the wild garden, explaining that it would look after itself, would require no chemical treatment or "weekly manicures." She said this fully appreciating the cost of the project as well as the amount of work that had gone into constructing the garden. I heard echoes of the Book of Discipline on numerous occasions during talk relating to the garden. Consumption might always be explained and legitimised by alluding to the "naturalness" or environmental value of the purchase.

In this way, green issues were brought by individuals to the notice of Friends and became a part of the narrative life of the Meeting. Connections were regularly made between the local practical issues and the historic Quaker testimonies relating to the right use of resources, and to the environment more generally.

### **The National Facilitation of Green Discourse: Quaker Green Action**

Apart from local projects described in the section above, Quakers were, from the 1980s, increasingly pro-active in environmental concerns at a national level. That is, local work was not only generated locally, but also prompted and co-ordinated by central groups and committees. During the final quarter of the last century, an apparently anti-capitalist tendency manifested itself in a number of more or less overlapping social movements, concerned as they were with the environment and ecology: natural capitalism, fair trade, green politics, sustainability and New Age spiritualities, and, of course, ethical consumption. It was within this ambient social climate that a group was formed within Britain Yearly Meeting (that is, by Quakers in the UK). In 1986, Quaker Green Concern (QGC) was established to provide support

and networking opportunities for environmentally-aware Friends in Britain and to promote environmental awareness among Quakers. The group was reflexive from the outset, as demonstrated by the statement written by the organizing committee:

In 1996 QGC acted to ensure its methods of working as well as its aims were sustainable. It changed its bank account to a social bank and ensured that its publications and stationery were 100 per cent recycled post-consumer waste or equivalent. Increasing use is now made of email and some newsletters are sent electronically. The "officers" travel by bike and train and shared meals are vegan with local, organic ingredients. The network changed its name to Quaker Green Action (QGA) in 2002 and began a more pro-active program encouraging members to arrange for workshops to be held at their Meetings.

([http://fore.research.yale.edu/religion/christianity/projects/quaker\\_green\\_action.html](http://fore.research.yale.edu/religion/christianity/projects/quaker_green_action.html))

Quaker Green Concern (previously Quaker Green Action) constituted an informal network of Quakers active in raising awareness of "green issues" within the Society during the 1990s. It provided resources and information through its website, the quarterly *earthQuaker* newsletter, and a number of other publications. Its webpage includes a list of "Green Advices and Queries."<sup>10</sup> In using the term "Advices and Queries," the authors immediately locate the document within the historical tradition of Quakerism—"Advices and Queries" have been issued at least since the early eighteenth century. Indeed, of the first four, items 1 and 3 have been taken from the current "Advices and Queries" published as the first part of the current edition of the Book of Discipline (*Quaker Faith and Practice*, 1994). The term "Green" has become so widespread it hardly needs explaining, but it clearly implicates the authors and their document (and intended readership) into the current burgeoning interest in such issues:

1. "If pressure is brought upon you to lower your standard of integrity, are you prepared to resist it? Our responsibilities to God and our neighbour may involve us in taking unpopular stands. Do not let the desire to be sociable, or the fear of seeming peculiar, determine your decisions." (Advices and Queries, 1994, No. 38)
2. We are subject to all the persuasive powers of commerce and are influenced by family, friends and neighbours. Take time to understand yourself, your real needs and your true potential. Try to bring all your actions in line with this understanding and your knowledge of the world around you.
3. "Try to live simply. A simple lifestyle freely chosen is a source of strength. Do not be persuaded into buying what you do not need or cannot afford. Do you keep yourself informed about the effects your style of living is having on the global economy and environment?" (Advices and Queries, 1994, No. 41)
4. Consuming more than we need may divert resources from the provision of essential services at home and abroad. Reusing, recycling and repairing will all reduce your footprint on the Earth. However refusing, and so doing without unnecessary goods, is the most powerful action.

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<sup>10</sup> Originally published by The Earth: Our Creative Responsibility Group, a group formed under the auspices of Quaker Peace and Social Witness, a Central Committee of Britain Yearly Meeting.

Items 1 (relating to the Testimony to honesty and integrity) and 3 (Testimony to the plain) firmly contextualise the "Green Advices and Queries" into Quaker discourse (as does item 13, another excerpt from the "official" "Advices and Queries"). Item 2 constitutes, implicitly though clearly, a "greening" of the Testimony to the plain. The point is, we are told, to discipline the whole of one's life, "all your actions," in terms of the Testimony. Item 4 relates explicitly to consumption. Since the mid-nineteenth century, Quaker texts have tended not to specify particular items which offend the testimony to the plain, but rather suggest that plaining is itself a moral imperative—the detail is left to the individual. Note how contemporary parlance ("reusing," "recycling," "footprint") is introduced in order to "modernise" what is, in principle, a seventeenth-century discourse.

Quaker Green Action was incorporated into the "Living Witness Project" (initiated in 2002 and now a Registered Charity). The project partly involves engaging as many Quaker Meetings as possible in adopting the "Green Advices and Queries." The Project website lists 83 participating Meetings (as of 21/4/2009) and these Meetings largely fund the Project.<sup>11</sup> Under the heading "The Nature of the Project," we read:

The project involves developing and supporting a growing and vibrant network of Quaker meetings exploring their corporate witness through study groups and practical activities, and seeking to learn from the experience. The support takes the form of:

- Link Group meetings, which take place at least once a year and welcome representatives of all participating Quaker meetings and organisations. These are the main focus for sharing experience, developing shared vision, building the LWP community, and for empowerment, learning and evaluation within the project.
- A newsletter, produced every three months, including project news and articles from Link Group members.

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<sup>11</sup> Besides being presented in many Meetings around the UK, the project was also covered in a special edition of *The Friend* (the Quaker weekly) dated 5 January 2007. The project is further publicised on other Quaker-owned websites. The Co-ordinators recently reported directly to the Executive Committee of the The Religious Society of Friends (the Committee is known as "Meeting for Sufferings") in 2007. The relevant minute reads:

S/07/12/3:

Quakers and the Environment

We have received an inspiring paper on Quaker work on Sustainability prepared by Elizabeth Allen, clerk of Quaker Peace & Social Witness Central Committee, and Laurie Michaelis, Joint Coordinator, Living Witness Project, who have introduced it (paper S/07/12/A).

We thank our Friends for the work they have done together to bring us a report which reflects both local and central concerns and activities. We have been challenged to consider what we are going to do about this together.

We have received copies of area meeting minutes and correspondence received (paper S/07/12/B plus an additional minute and letter tabled today as noted) on environmental issues as listed below [...]

(<http://www.quaker.org.uk/Templates/Internal.asp?NodeID=129850>).

The Living Witness website is found at: <http://www.livingwitness.org.uk/aboutus.html>.

- Facilitated workshops around Britain with a variety of themes and approaches (“LWP on the road”). These are organised with Link Group members to engage and empower Friends and others in their own communities, developing shared vision, a sense of community, and practical action.
- Practical tools including an “ecological footprint” sheet, a booklet of actions for sustainable living, and resources for group activities in meetings. Materials are under development on the ecological footprints of meetings, environmental audits, and approaches to setting up activities in meetings.
- Personal support, information and advice for Link Group members and other Friends developing their personal and corporate witness to sustainable living.
- A web site at [www.livingwitness.org.uk](http://www.livingwitness.org.uk) with information about the project and downloadable documents.

The project is co-ordinated and supported on a day-to-day basis by the project co-ordinator, Laurie Michaelis, supported by a management group of Oxford Quakers. Decisions about project direction are taken by our six trustees in consultation with the Link Group. (<http://www.livingwitness.org.uk/aboutus.html>)

The Living Witness Project seeks, then, to further the "greening" of Quaker faith and practice. Although the obvious emphasis of the statement is on organisation—which does not come across as unsurprising given the degree of accountability likely to be expected of the Project and its leadership—and although the term "ethical consumption" is absent, its relevance is implied throughout. However, unlike the early prescriptions and proscriptions which rained down upon the membership, discipline is increasingly presented as "self-discipline," pursued under the guidance of a small group of knowledgeable members. The project seeks to persuade Quakers that "green" issues should be taken seriously and that they should at least question the ways in which they live their own lives. Implicit (and sometimes explicit) in this advice is the moral obligation to ponder carefully one's propensity to purchase what might be considered unnecessary or even harmful (to the environment and to others).

## **Conclusion**

Between 1750 and 1950, the intense and intrusive discipline that was upheld through open and continued surveillance of individual Quakers slowly diminished. Nowadays, there is an increasing emphasis within Quakerism on the dissemination of information (rather than rules), particularly relating to issues such as human rights and the environment. But on top of this lies the continuing narrative of Quaker faith and practice, which is sustained in multifarious ways. It is this narrative which facilitates a conceptual and practical continuity between the present and the past, as the ethnographic examples and account of Quaker Green Concern indicates. Contemporary Quakers are less restrained and constrained by the minutiae of rules and regulations which determined how one should behave in any particular situation. For instance, faced with items for purchase, Quakers today are more likely to make purchases based on

what can be thought of as informed choice. The information on which choices are made remains in keeping with traditional Quaker faith and practice, but individuals are no longer subject to the intrusive scrutiny as they once were.

In the early years of the movement, Quakers articulated their relationship with the natural world in ways which we find rather abstract today. There were several reasons for this. In the first place, while unusually aware of the importance of conserving resources (both "natural" and "manufactured" ones), seventeenth-century Quakers did not have the vocabulary to specify the complex relationships between human beings and the natural world, since ecology as a discipline had yet to develop into the increasingly precise science it has lately become. The first generation of Friends focused on their inner lives, thereby minimising the significance of consumption. They preached this message in public and in their own meetings for worship; they also wrote epistles to each other and to the general population, published pamphlets, and debated with clergy in the streets and churches. The testimony to "Right Consumption" is emphasised in the quasi-canonic Book of Discipline which was first published in the eighteenth century and which has passed through many editions since then—the newest appearing in 1994, as *Quaker Faith and Practice*.

In recent decades, a testimony founded on Biblical text and developed over the course of three centuries found itself, finally, in step with the times. The pursuit of "the simple life" has increasingly become a characteristic of Western Society. The advent of Quaker Green Concern was the logical development of a foundational Quaker testimony, but at the same time, it also reflects the ambient social climate—a climate which has, likewise, generated the Green Movement and a growing interest (especially among the middle classes) in "sustainability."<sup>12</sup> Let me return, finally, to my original objective. This article has attempted to provide the historical and contemporary context needed to understand the decision to switch to long-life light-bulbs made by Dibdenshaw Quaker Meeting in 1993. The decision was an instantiation of a process, plainning, which has been centrally important to Quaker faith and practice, to the movement's orthopraxy, since its origins in the mid-seventeenth century. However, the decision is significantly keyed into the recent fascination with "the Environment." What we have here then, in miniature, is an intersection of the pre-modern and the modern, accompanied by a distant echo of Bruno Latour's claim that the distinction itself remains questionable (Latour). Quaker plainning is predicated on the dichotomy between the spiritual and material. Quaker faith and practice have tended since the 1650s to

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<sup>12</sup> Hundreds of books have appeared during the past decade or so which directly address one (or usually several) of these overlapping discourses. See, for example, Elgin; Lane; Lippe; Pierce; Princen, Maniates and Conca (eds.); Schor; St. James. Quakers have also participated in this wider debate; see, for instance Pym and Whitmire. For a useful brief discussion of these issues with particular reference to ethical consumerism, see, for example, Hilton (298-328) and Sassatelli (182-192).



valorise the former: the consumption of the material world which, paradoxically, cannot be avoided, is made good by defining consumed goods as plain.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The process is akin to Strathern’s notion of "conversion," that is, "the manner in which people convert things to their own ends" (Strathern x).

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