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**'WE SHALL FOREVER EAT FRUGALLY OFF CLEAN PLATES': AN ANALYSIS OF THE BACKGROUND,
PRESENTATION, AND EFFECT OF THE 1986 SWARTHMORE LECTURE**

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This thesis presents an analysis of the background, presentation and effect of the 1986 Swarthmore Lecture (the Swarthmore Lecture takes place at the national Quaker Yearly Meeting, immediately prior to its proceedings), and its publication as a book entitled *Bringing the Invisible into the Light*. In a radical departure from the norm, the 1986 lecture was written and delivered as a co-operative endeavour by members of the Quaker Women's Group. It similarly diverged from the accustomed form of presentation in its incorporation of poetry, songs and dramatic readings. Its content, however, provoked the most controversy as it included highly emotional personal material, which raised the issue of sexist behaviour within the Quaker community. The author assesses its impact on the Society of Friends, tracing its genesis in the contemporary processes of social change. She concludes that although the lecture raised awareness of the power imbalance between men and women and its damaging consequences, and although it had a dramatic, long-lasting effect on the individuals who were involved or in the audience at the time, its impact on the Quaker community was not sustained over the longer term. She argues that it represents a lost opportunity.

Key words: Swarthmore Lecture, Britain Yearly Meeting, Quaker Women's Group, feminism, Christian feminism, sexism, gender

Key themes:

The immediate impact of the 1986 lecture's presentation and content on the Quaker community

The extent to which the lecture initiated radical change within the Quaker community, mainstream Christian bodies and society in general

The factors militating against the lecture's longer-term influence on the Quaker community

Of potential interest to: researchers and those with a general interest in the Swarthmore Lecture, Christian feminism, issues of sexism within the Quaker community, the impact of the women's movement on Quakerism

Introduction: Methodology

The author used a combination of textual analysis, group meetings and semi-structured interviews as the basis of her research. She consulted *The Friend* (an independent weekly Quaker journal) and the *Quaker Women's Group Newsletter*, as well as the Swarthmore Lecture Committee (SLC) Minute Book and correspondence file. She subsequently attended a residential Yearly Meeting in 2001 (the 15th anniversary of the 1986 lecture), from which she convened two group meetings: one comprising those who had been in the audience (as well as others who had been involved with the lecture or were interested in its impact) and the other composed of members of the Quaker Women's Group (QWG), who may or may not have been in the audience. Apart from a detailed feedback form, the meetings took the form of open discussions. She followed the group sessions with 17 semi-structured one-to-one interviews (seven interviewees had been in the audience, five were members of the Quaker Women's Group, three had been members of the Swarthmore Lecture Committee at the time, and a further two had no connection to the lecture or the QWG). These were supplemented by a number of informal interviews. She also used the platforms of *The Friend* and the *Quaker Women's Group Newsletter* to invite recollections and contributions. Although these requests met with little success – she received only three responses – they helped generate publicity for the research. The author states that she encountered little conflict of interest as an insider-researcher. On the contrary, she found it easier to collect data and access support, and was able to conduct her interviews in a more informal manner than is usually the case in such situations.

Chapter One: The Context of the 1986 Swarthmore Lecture

Overview

This chapter sets the 1986 Swarthmore Lecture within the context of the increasing influence of feminism in the Quaker community and in society at large. The author illustrates how, by 1986, the Society had reached a 'stage of transition', and the Swarthmore Lecture seemed poised to break out of its traditional academic format. The 1986 Yearly Meeting appeared to offer the perfect opportunity to present a lecture that would have 'relevance to the current condition and needs of the Society' in a way that was not 'a tidy, intellectual exercise' (SLC Statement 1982).

The history of women in British Quakers

Equality is a touchstone of the Quaker faith – the author cites the founder George Fox: 'For the light is the same in the Male and the Female which cometh from Christ...' – and women played leading

roles in early Quakerism, with many radical women ministers 'stirring up England with their preaching' during the 17th century. However, as the Society became more formally organised, women's voices were muted and their activity increasingly confined to specific pastoral issues. Yet by the end of the 19th century, following a 'quietist' period that was marked by an inward, conformist orientation, the move towards a more liberal theology paved the way for the 'paradigmatic shift' of the 20th. The author cites Dandelion (1996), who describes the years leading up to the lecture as ones of 'division and debate', reflecting the pluralistic nature of society.

Historical background to the 1986 Swarthmore Lecture

The Swarthmore Lecture was established in 1908 by the Woodbrooke (Quaker Study Centre) Council as a means of education and outreach: 'to interpret further to the members ... their message and mission, and to bring before the public the spirit, the aims and the fundamental principles of the Society of Friends' (Davis 1953). The lecture itself takes place at Britain Yearly Meeting, although it is not part of the formal proceedings, and is also published as a book. By the late 1970s, however, the Swarthmore Lecture Committee (SLC) was regarded as 'lacking in energy and vision', prompting a shift towards reinvigorating the lecture, using it as a platform for the presentation of ideas that would 'excite, explore and inform'. The 1986 lecture was a product of this move.

Feminism and Quakerism

Meanwhile, by the 1980s, feminism had developed into a political and social movement actively working to raise awareness of the gendered imbalance of power manifest in the structures of society. Christian feminism flourished during this period, as women rediscovered their spiritual roots and called for wider participation in the mainstream churches. It was no different in Quaker circles: 1978, for example, saw the formation of the Quaker Women's Group (QWG). The author believes that feminism and Quakerism have much in common, including a belief in equality and the essential importance of personal experience, and finds it no surprise that by 1986, feminism was making inroads into Quaker culture. The extent of these inroads is illustrated by the fact that the Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre began to run courses on women's issues, including single-sex courses on peace issues; many members became involved with the peace movement, including the all-women peace camp outside the Greenham Common US airbase; and the 1984 Yearly Meeting instituted a Revision Committee to update the Quaker Book of Discipline using gender-inclusive language. In this respect, the 1986 lecture, although significant, was not an isolated event. However, the author comments that some of the negative reactions to the lecture revealed the limits of feminism's influence on the Society.

Chapter Two: The Written Lecture

Overview

This chapter explores the history of the 1986 Swarthmore Lecture from the perspectives of the Swarthmore Lecture Committee (SLC) and the Quaker Women's Group (QWG). It considers the tensions generated by the suggestion that the QWG should be invited to present the lecture, and investigates the preparation of the text of the lecture for publication.

The history of the 1986 lecture

The author notes that out of the 76 lectures held between 1908 and 1985, only 11 were presented by women. By 1983, the SLC had become aware of this imbalance, and in the attempt to redress it, began to reappraise the lecture itself – its style, presentation and content. Yet the proposal to invite the QWG to present the lecture provoked controversy. Some committee members expressed concern over the growing influence of 'interest groups' or 'factions', and raised the issue of financing a group process – many of the women were unemployed and had no means of financing themselves. The author comments that it took nearly a year for the SLC to come to a decision on the invitation.

The Quaker Women's Group's perspective

Some members of the QWG also harboured doubts, believing that the group was set up with the purpose of supporting women and providing them with a 'safe place', without an agenda for public or political activity. Others expressed a fear that the SLC would 'interfere' with the manuscript in some way before publication. Despite these objections, the SLC was able to provide reassurance on the most troubling points, and relations between the QWG and SLC continued harmoniously.

The preparation of the book

The book of the lecture centred around eight topics – women and violence; feminist theology; Quakerism and feminism; women and peace; sexism in education; sexism in language; autobiographies; and 'herstory' (history written from a female perspective) – and women were encouraged to contribute writings, cuttings and ideas. A number of ad-hoc groups, Swarthmore preparation weekends and additional meetings were convened to facilitate the process. The resulting 21 contributions were gathered together by a small editorial group and put to 12 days of worship and concentrated work to produce the final text. Although not all contributions were used,

the group acknowledged all the contributors, claiming the final book to be representative of the experiences of Quaker women in general – the process was seen as ‘a form of collective ministry’. The SLC found the finished document ‘moving ... a brave and co-operative effort’.

The effects of the process on the QWG and on individuals

The QWG described the lecture as not simply a ‘book’ or a ‘lecture’ but a ‘process’, which it envisaged as stretching far beyond the actual publication and presentation. The unstructured and non-hierarchical nature of the QWG, which was integral to its function as a support group, raised some difficulties when the group faced the realities of producing a publishable text. However, the fact that it was a group effort, conducted in a spirit of worship, meant that it was free of overt conflict. The author believes that it exemplified the spiritual core of Quakerism at work; the unity of practice she discerns between Quakerism and feminism informed its collective nature.

Chapter Three: The Lecture as an Event

Overview

This chapter examines the effect of the lecture’s delivery on the Yearly Meeting. The author illustrates how it generated an emotional atmosphere that led to feelings of celebration and hope for the future, but also exposed underlying conflicts and tensions.

The presentation of the lecture

As with the written lecture, a small group was established to prepare a script for the performance of the lecture ‘in accordance with the spirit behind the writing’. Anonymity was seen as essential: about half the women who had contributed to the writing also participated in the production, but no woman spoke her own words. The performance of *Bringing the Invisible into the Light* consisted of readings, poetry, songs and periods of silence. The lecture was in this sense theatrical, and due to its novel method of presentation, as well as its subject matter, it attracted a far larger audience than usual. However, an entry in the *Daily Bulletin* (a notification of daily events that is produced during the Yearly Meeting) stressed that the content of the lecture would be ‘painful’ and ‘difficult’, and this appeared to supersede the ‘message of hope’ and ‘the vision of a future in which we shall all be truly free’ referred to in the *Documents in Advance*. The *Daily Bulletin*, the author contends, set the tone for the audience reaction – it meant that many were already predisposed to interpret the

lecture in a certain way. When the cast appeared and spoke, sang and recited poetry about their 'personal sufferings, anger, love, visions and hopes', the impact was immediate.

The effect on the Yearly Meeting

The lecture generated strong emotions. Some women in the audience welcomed the performance, finding it 'deeply moving' and truthful. Many of the men, however, felt deeply uncomfortable. What was particularly shocking to many Quakers (both men and women) was the idea that violence against women could take place within the Quaker community. Many accused the women involved of disloyalty. After the lecture, there was an opportunity to participate in workshops and discussion groups ranging widely over the issues raised. However, the author found that some of the participants of the performance felt they should have had far more follow-up support from the Quaker community itself, given the nature of the subject matter. The impact on the Yearly Meeting that followed the lecture was obvious in the number of amendments to the agenda calling for other forms of expression to be allowed and for a change in orientation. The charged atmosphere was replicated when the author raised the issue of the lecture 15 years later: it still aroused extreme emotions, both negative and positive, among those who had been present. She concludes that although its effect was partial, the lecture represented an important step forward at the time – but she goes on to argue in her thesis that the expectations it raised were not fulfilled later.

Chapter Four: The Immediate Aftermath

Overview

This chapter argues that although the lecture itself was not revolutionary – it was similar in many ways to feminist publications produced by other Christian groups at the time – it was revolutionary in the sense that it was not only published but also *delivered*, and thus had a greater impact.

The immediate effect on the Quaker community

The lecture met with extremely strong reactions, both positive and negative, and there was a high demand for the book for some time afterwards. This surge of interest was reflected in the level of correspondence in *The Friend* – there were 27 letters on the topic following the lecture. However, the author suggests that the readership, 'jolted out of complacency' by the lecture's content, fastened on the parts that fascinated or repelled them, and failed to discern the underlying message. Although there were a number of follow-up study groups, there was a marked reluctance to discuss

the issues in local Quaker meetings (Preparative Meetings), and the Woodbrooke study centre had difficulty finding participants when it held an event entitled 'Issues from the 1986 Swarthmore Lecture'. Referring to Dandelion's (1996) concept of a Quaker 'double culture', the author proposes that some of the issues raised – 'stillbirth, marital breakdown, lesbianism' – were regarded by members as belonging to their 'private life' rather than their public 'Quaker life'.

The effect on the Quaker Women's Group

It would appear that after the initial euphoria of the performance, many members of the QWG found the following weeks left them feeling exposed and vulnerable. Some women left the QWG immediately or soon after the lecture. In the immediate aftermath, the national group, and several of the local QWGs, swelled in membership, and new local groups were formed. Despite this, a major expansion of the QWG failed to materialise in the long run. The author found that the experience had forged strong bonds between the participants and this appeared to act as a barrier to those who wished to join the QWG later.

The immediate effect on outside bodies

The author warns that her evidence on the effects of the lecture outside the Quaker community is largely anecdotal, due to the difficulty of obtaining information on this subject. She comments that its publication appears to have had little immediate effect on other churches, although some of her informants believed it helped to raise consciousness, pointing out that it was followed by a spate of publications by Christian feminist groups concerning issues addressed by the lecture.

Chapter Five: The Longer-Term Effects of the Lecture

Overview

This chapter studies the longer-term repercussions of the lecture, and investigates the extent of its effect on Quakerism and the wider society. The author looks at the Quaker community in general, the Quaker Women's Group, the Swarthmore Lecture Committee, the SLC and Woodbrooke, as well as at mainstream churches and outside bodies, and draws the conclusion that the lecture's influence was indirect.

The longer-term effect on the Quaker community

The revision of Quaker Faith and Practice

Quaker Faith and Practice (the Society of Friends' Book of Discipline) was revised in 1995 in light of the changes 'in language, religious thought and social attitudes'. Revision had begun before 1986, but the lecture put the issue of inclusive language firmly on the agenda of the Revision Committee. Yet there was no explicit statement concerning the use of non-sexist language, and it was not adopted as a testimony (or Quaker principle). The author believes this may account for a 'slipping back' in recent years, arguing that sexist language can still be heard at Quaker gatherings.

The First International Theological Conference of Quaker Women

According to one of the author's interviewees, this groundbreaking conference (held in 1990) was a direct outcome of the Swarthmore Lecture, although others were more ambivalent about its provenance. The author sees it as a 'child of its time'. However, she agrees that the principles of co-operation and equality that formed the basis of its organisation showed clear parallels with that of the lecture. There was no follow-up to the conference, but the author believes that those attending subsequently incorporated their experiences into their personal and spiritual lives.

Issues of sexual and physical abuse

There were some members at the 1986 Yearly Meeting who could not accept that physical or sexual abuse could be found in Quaker homes. The author reports, however, that subsequent research in the US contradicts such assertions, proving that incidences of such violence are no less frequent in Quaker families than in the general population (Brutz 1990). The lecture opened the subject up to the Yearly Meeting, but the issues were given little consideration by the Society as a whole. It was not until 1995 that the Meeting for Sufferings (the executive body of the Yearly Meeting) approved a document drawn up in response to the 1989 Children Act. *Safeguarding Children from Harm* (1996) laid down guidelines for the safety and well-being of children and young people in the Quaker community, and in 1997, a group called Q-HAPSA (Quakers concerned for the healing and prevention of sexual abuse) published a booklet, *What Can We Say about Child Sexual Abuse?* The author argues that, although not a direct result of the lecture, the publications were the product of a climate of openness that could be partially attributed to it.

Work with young women

In 1989, a young women's group was initiated. For many young Quaker women, these regular meetings represented an opportunity to discuss difficult personal issues. Although it cannot be attributed directly to the 1986 lecture, the group was established in the years immediately following it, and was supported and enabled by women who had been closely involved in the lecture.

Study material, research, and the longer-term effect on Woodbrooke

In 1986, Quaker Resources for Learning launched a series of study packs, including two units exploring sexuality, language and feminist theology. The lecture similarly stimulated some direct academic research. In contrast, by the time of the lecture, Woodbrooke study centre had already recognised the importance of the Christian feminist movement, and addressed the need to run courses related to feminism and feminist theology. The Women's Peace Week referred to in Chapter One was organised in 1983. The author argues that throughout the 1980s and 1990s the study centre was 'quietly adjusting' to the growth of the women's movement. The lecture, therefore, did not have any dramatic effect on Woodbrooke, although the heightened atmosphere it generated may well have made it easier for the college to move in this direction.

The effect on the Swarthmore Lecture

The most visible effect, the author argues, was on the Swarthmore Lecture as an institution. She cites one of the interviewees as saying that 'the mould had been broken'. It opened the way for experimentation in the lecture's content and presentation – it was no longer deemed necessary for the lecture to be delivered by a single presenter standing at a lectern.

The longer-term effect on outside bodies

The author comments on the difficulty of ascertaining the lecture's longer-term effect on outside bodies. She considers the 1988-1998 Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women, which took place in the years following the QWG's presentation of the Swarthmore Lecture, and notes that this 'decade of hope' rapidly turned to frustration. The Anglican Church subsequently suffered devastating criticisms of its continuing inability to deal with sexuality and relationships, and of the dominance of an idealised 'Christian lifestyle', which implicitly condemned any deviation from an assumed norm. The author believes, however, that the presence of Quaker women at ecumenical gatherings during this period, as well as the publication of the lecture, had some influence on the events leading up to the 1992 vote in the General Synod for the ordination of women.

Chapter Six: Conclusion – An Immediate Impact but a Lost Opportunity

Overview

The author concludes that the lecture had a significant impact at the time, contributing to the raising of awareness of women's issues within the Quaker community. However, she argues that the opportunity to effect real, lasting change within the Society was not followed through, and its long-term effects were minimal. The only real impact was on the Swarthmore Lecture itself.

The reasons for the lecture's immediate impact

The lecture's impact was due to the fact that it was delivered at a week-long residential Yearly Meeting. Such meetings generally attract a wider age range of members, and are more representative of the diverse make-up of the Society than non-residential ones. Its residential nature also allowed for debates around issues raised in the lecture to continue throughout the week. The second factor was its presentation. It differed from any previous lecture in that it was presented as a dramatic event rather than an academic discourse, and its content included highly personal material, which described instances of rape and violence. The Swarthmore Lecture had always been regarded as 'epitomising the respectable, academic face of Quakerism'; this presentation, although delivered in 'a spirit of worship', represented a radical departure from the traditional fare.

The effect on the Swarthmore Lecture and on the individuals involved

The areas where the author perceives that the lecture had a permanent long-term effect were the institution of the Swarthmore Lecture itself and the individuals involved. The Quaker community accepted that the Swarthmore Lecture would never again be a 'tidy intellectual exercise' (see Chapter One), and future presenters would feel free to experiment with its presentation. However, it did not greatly change the imbalance between men and women presenters – for example, between 1997 and 2001 they comprised three men, one woman and the Young Friends General Meeting. The effect on individual members is more difficult to quantify, although it appears that for those present at its delivery the impact lasts to this day. The author notes that in her interviews and group sessions the atmosphere was highly emotional, and some of her respondents commented that partaking in the QWG and contributing to the lecture had given them the confidence to take on high-profile positions of responsibility in the Society.

The failure to make a real difference to the Quaker community

The author then turns her attention to why, despite the controversy it provoked or sense of liberation it imparted, the impact of the lecture was either temporary or confined to those directly involved. She believes this is due to the fact that the Swarthmore Lecture is not a part of the proceedings of the Yearly Meeting – that is, it is not a part of the system, and therefore there was no administrative mechanism to take up the issues raised. After the lecture, the author found that the QWG reverted to being a ‘safe space for women rather than an organisation working to bring about change’. Furthermore, as the effort had been both collective and anonymous, there was no single person able to take responsibility for pursuing the issues further within the Society as a whole. Meanwhile, the SLC, once it had sanctioned the publication and the presentation, failed to either support the women in the follow-up groups or answer the criticisms levelled at them. More important, the Society’s ethos militates against the display of emotions, preferring ‘quiet processes and small circles’ to initiate transformative changes within the community; it appears that, for many of the ‘weighty Friends’ (those who are regarded as possessing spiritual authority), ‘the medium obscured the message’. The equality of all human beings is a fundamental tenet of Quakerism, and this, the author contends, leads to a reluctance to accept that discrimination or sexism could be as endemic within the Quaker community as it is in society as a whole, albeit at a less pervasive level.

Conclusion

Although the lecture helped raise awareness among Quakers at the time, this did not resolve itself into direct action. As the author says, ‘the message had been delivered, but there was no quantum leap, and change came about slowly’. She argues that the lecture could be regarded as legitimising rather than initiating the slow movement towards change in the Society – none of the changes examined in Chapter Five represented a dramatic shift in direction and none can be directly attributed to the lecture. She concludes that the 1986 Swarthmore Lecture had given the Society a ‘window of opportunity to embrace gender equality in its entirety’, but no person or group came forward ‘to do the hard work’ of ensuring its message permeated all the structures of the Quaker community in a lasting way. The lecture, she argues, represents a missed opportunity.

Summary prepared by Fran Cetti (2012)