

The Fearless Benjamin Lay: The Quaker Dwarf Who Became the First Revolutionary Abolitionist. By MARCUS REDIKER. Boston: Beacon Press, 2017. 212 pages. Cloth.

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Benjamin Lay (1682–1759) may have been a little person but, as Marcus Rediker makes clear in this insightful biography, *The Fearless Benjamin Lay*, he was no small man. A zealous, vegetarian, environmentalist, Quaker abolitionist ascetic who lived in a cave for the last twenty-five years of his life and shocked many with his use of guerrilla theater, Lay is precisely the type of marginalized and radical member of the Atlantic world that Rediker has worked on for the past thirty years.¹ As he relates, Rediker first encountered Lay while he and Peter Linebaugh were writing *The Many-Headed Hydra*. “Intrigued by his early opposition to slavery and by his fearless guerrilla theater,” Rediker considered Lay worthy of “a study all his own” (151). Rediker has fulfilled this by constructing a biography presented as an “intellectual history ‘from below’” (5), pulling apart the strands of Lay’s radicalism—“he was a Quaker, philosopher, sailor, abolitionist, and commoner” (6)—and the influences that made him the first revolutionary abolitionist. Contending that Lay was “a throwback to . . . early radical Quakers” (19), Rediker posits “a new genealogy of antislavery” with origins among the poor, well before late eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers and “middle- and upper-class abolitionist ‘saints’” (148) made the cause fashionable.

Though small in stature, Lay cast a significant shadow on the comfortable, consumer-oriented lives of Quaker elites throughout the Atlantic world. Quakers’ success in eighteenth-century commerce and banking has been discussed at length by historians since Frederick B. Tolles’s 1948

¹ From 1987 to 2017, Marcus Rediker has written, coauthored, or edited ten books. The majority have focused on the world at sea created by sailors, merchants, and pirates: Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (Cambridge, 1987); Bruce Levine et al., *Who Built America? Working People and the Nation’s Economy, Politics, Culture, and Society*, vol. 1, *From Conquest and Colonization through Reconstruction and the Great Uprising of 1877* (New York, 1989); Peter Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, 2000); Rediker, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (Boston, 2004); Clare Anderson et al., eds., *Mutiny and Maritime Radicalism in the Age of Revolution: A Global Survey* (Cambridge, 2013); Rediker, *Outlaws of the Atlantic: Sailors, Pirates, and Motley Crews in the Age of Sail* (Boston, 2014). Other volumes have examined aspects of the transatlantic slave trade: Emma Christopher, Cassandra Pybus, and Rediker, eds., *Many Middle Passages: Forced Migration and the Making of the Modern World* (Berkeley, Calif., 2007); Rediker, eds., *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York, 2007); Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion: An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom* (New York, 2012).

Meeting House and Counting House.² Many factors—including involvement in the slave trade and shipping and selling the products of slave labor—contributed to the considerable wealth Quakers accumulated in the eighteenth-century transatlantic economy. Accordingly the Quaker testimony on slavery in this period was particularly complex and dynamic in ways that have not always been appreciated. In long-standing popular imagination, Quakers have been envisioned as abolitionists from their beginnings.³ Some scholarly histories have adopted this view, and, as Elizabeth Cazden notes, “even Quaker historians stressed Quaker anti-slavery rhetoric, ignoring inconvenient contrary facts or treating them as isolated slips between theory and practice.”⁴ This perspective, however, ignores the arduous and divisive eighteenth-century debates through which Quakers across the Atlantic world defined their testimony against slavery by the mid-1750s. Rediker positions Lay and to a lesser extent Ralph Sandiford (1693–1733), whose antislavery work Lay continued, at the center of these disputes. That approach fits well with recent interpretations presented by Brycchan Carey, J. William Frost, Jon R. Kershner, and Geoffrey Plank, who situate the work of famed abolitionists such as John Woolman (1720–72) and Anthony Benezet (1713–84) within a much longer tradition, in some cases extending

² Frederick B. Tolles, *Meeting House and Counting House: The Quaker Merchants of Colonial Philadelphia, 1682–1763* (1948; repr., Chapel Hill, N.C., 2012). A sampling of recent works includes Douglas Gwyn, *The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and the Rise of Capitalism* (London, 2006); Margaret Ackrill and Leslie Hannah, *Barclays: The Business of Banking, 1690–1996* (Cambridge, 2007); Mike King, *Quakernomics: An Ethical Capitalism* (London, 2014); Esther Sahle, “A Faith of Merchants: Quakers and Institutional Change in the Early Modern Atlantic, c.1660–1800” (Ph.D. diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2016); Andrew Fincham, “Factors Supporting the Rise of Quaker Commerce,” in *Quakers, Business, and Industry*, ed. Stephen W. Angell and Pink Dandelion (Longmeadow, Mass., 2017), 9–33.

³ Distinct Quaker values are called “testimonies.” These principles, such as simplicity, peace, and equality, inform the lives of individuals, meetings or congregations/parishes, and the Religious Society of Friends as a whole. Because Quakers lacked a written creed, the collection and eventual publication of testimonies was a mechanism to encourage, even impose, uniformity among Quakers throughout the Atlantic world. Thus, Quaker testimonies are not static. A recent overview of the literature examining the relationship between Quakers, antislavery, and racial justice can be found in Robynne Rogers Healey, “Diversity and Complexity in Quaker History,” in *Quaker Studies: An Overview: The Current State of the Field*, ed. C. Wess Daniels, Healey, and Jon Kershner (Leiden, 2018), 13–50, esp. 22–26. There are also a number of chapters examining recent historiography in Stephen W. Angell and Pink Dandelion, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies* (Oxford, 2013). See especially Emma J. Lapsansky, “Plainness and Simplicity,” *ibid.*, 335–46; Elizabeth Cazden, “Quakers, Slavery, Anti-slavery, and Race,” *ibid.*, 347–62; Lonnie Valentine, “Quakers, War, and Peacemaking,” *ibid.*, 363–76; Mark Freeman, “Quakers, Business, and Philanthropy,” *ibid.*, 420–33; Jackie Leach Scully, “Quakers and Ethics,” *ibid.*, 535–48. For Quakers in the popular imagination, see James Emmett Ryan, *Imaginary Friends: Representing Quakers in American Culture, 1650–1950* (Madison, Wis., 2009).

⁴ Cazden, “Quakers, Slavery, Anti-slavery, and Race,” 347.

back to the earliest Quakers.⁵ Similarly, Julie L. Holcomb has located the origins of the free-produce movement in seventeenth-century Quaker meetinghouses and contends that though the movement itself failed, its supporters did not, for they shifted the ideological context of the slavery debate to make neutrality impossible. Certainly Lay's guerrilla theater and his 1738 book, *All Slave-Keepers That keep the Innocent in Bondage, Apostates*, forced Quakers, especially slave-owning Quakers, to consider the morality of slavery.⁶

There is much to applaud in Rediker's book beyond its persuasive retelling of Lay's heroic story. Rediker is adept at navigating the space between mainstream history and Quaker history, a promising direction for both fields of study.⁷ And clearly Rediker has worked to understand Quakers as more than flat, caricatured actors dressed in gray. Rather, he casts them as complex people, bound by similar interests—including a unique faith perspective—that shaped the behavior of others who moved in the same historical time and place. Rediker makes excellent use of the extensive Quaker archival collections on both sides of the Atlantic. Moreover, he worked closely with Quaker archivists who have a deep understanding of their unique records and with scholars of Quakerism whose expertise assisted in situating Lay the Quaker within the politics, economics, and social issues of his time and place. Familiarity helps Rediker paint a careful portrait of Lay and the "radical Quakerism [that] was the foundation of Benjamin's worldview" (20). This is also reflected in Rediker's nuanced summary of the foundations of Quakerism—including George Fox's shared

⁵ Brycchan Carey, *From Peace to Freedom: Quaker Rhetoric and the Birth of American Antislavery, 1657–1761* (New Haven, Conn., 2012); J. William Frost, "Quaker Antislavery: From Dissidence to Sense of the Meeting," *Quaker History* 101, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 12–33; Geoffrey Plank, *John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom: A Quaker in the British Empire* (Philadelphia, 2012); Jon R. Kershner, "The Valiant Sixty-First? John Woolman's Apocalyptic Eschatology and the Restoration of the Lamb's War," *Quaker Studies* 18, no. 1 (September 2013): 23–49; Carey and Plank, eds., *Quakers and Abolition* (Urbana, Ill., 2014); Kershner, *John Woolman and the Government of Christ: A Colonial Quaker's Vision for the British Atlantic World* (Oxford, 2018). Rediker rightly points out that Jean R. Soderlund showed that antislavery sentiment emerged in the 1730s and 1740s, not the 1750s (34, 80, 177 n. 20). See Soderlund, *Quakers and Slavery: A Divided Spirit* (Princeton, N.J., 1985), 8, 43, 46.

⁶ Benjamin Lay, *All Slave-Keepers That keep the Innocent in Bondage, Apostates* (Philadelphia, 1737); Julie L. Holcomb, *Moral Commerce: Quakers and the Transatlantic Boycott of the Slave Labor Economy* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2016). Though the title page of Lay's book says it was published in 1737, it was actually published in 1738, as Rediker notes on 161 n. 3.

⁷ The necessity of greater conversation between these two fields was the focus of my Quaker Studies Research Association 2016 George Richardson Lecture, published in Robynne Rogers Healey, "Speaking from the Centre or the Margins? Conversations between Quaker and Non-Quaker Historical Narratives," *Quaker Studies* 22, no. 1 (September 2017): 3–20.

leadership and the contest between antinomianism and Foxian centralization—which, importantly, reinforces Christopher Hill's recognition that a respectable narrative had to be crafted by later Friends because the "early Quaker movement was far closer to Ranters in spirit than its leaders later liked to recall" (165 n. 12).⁸ In chapters 2 and 3, furthermore, Rediker demonstrates a keen awareness of Quaker meeting politics and hierarchies and the way that local particularities affected Benjamin and Sarah Lay wherever they were in the Atlantic world.

To be sure, Lay was not unique in his disagreements with elite Friends and meeting hierarchies; many of the theological controversies and schisms of the seventeenth century contain an element of the tensions he magnified.⁹ What distinguished this eighteenth-century Quaker was his approach—his fiery, prophetic, apocalyptic discourse resembled that of the earliest Friends rather than that of his contemporary critics. Lay refused to submit to—or, in some cases, even recognize—meeting discipline, proclaiming his righteous indignation against "the covetous" (59) leadership in multiple ways. Consider this sampling of Lay's guerrilla theater: smashing tobacco pipes in the ministers' gallery at Yearly Meeting to protest slave labor, luxury, and the use of tobacco; dressing in sackcloth and denouncing slave owners in Quaker meetings as well as in other denominations' gatherings throughout Philadelphia; pretending to kidnap a neighbor child to encourage the child's parents to think about the feelings of their young slave's parents; smashing his dead wife's teacups in the public market to protest the treatment of laborers involved in the harvest of tea and the sugar that sweetened it; and, most spectacularly, in the midst of Yearly Meeting, plunging a sword through a bladder of pokeberry juice, spattering "blood" (2) on those around him while prophesying a dark and violent future for Quaker slave owners. At a time when the Religious Society of Friends had invested immense effort in becoming respected and not just tolerated

⁸ Excellent summaries of Quaker origins and Restoration Quakerism can be found in Rosemary Moore, "Seventeenth-Century Context and Quaker Beginnings," in Angell and Dandelion, *Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, 13–28; Richard C. Allen, "Restoration Quakerism, 1660–1691," *ibid.*, 29–46. On early Quakerism, see H. Larry Ingle, *First among Friends: George Fox and the Creation of Quakerism* (New York, 1994); Rosemary Moore, *The Light in Their Consciences: Early Quakers in Britain, 1644–1666* (University Park, Pa., 2000). An insightful assessment of some of the ways eighteenth-century Quakers revised their own history can be found in Erin Bell, "Eighteenth-Century Quakerism and the Rehabilitation of James Nayler, Seventeenth-Century Radical," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 59, no. 3 (July 2008): 426–46.

⁹ See for instance Clare J. L. Martin, "Tradition Versus Innovation: The Hat, Wilkinson-Story and Keithian Controversies," *Quaker Studies* 8, no. 1 (September 2003): 5–22; Krista J. Kesselring, "Gender, the Hat, and Quaker Universalism in the Wake of the English Revolution," *Seventeenth Century* 26, no. 2 (Autumn 2011): 299–322.

members of British Atlantic society, Lay's methods were unwelcome to most of his contemporaries, but they have likewise been unwelcome to many celebrating them when telling the story of abolitionism.¹⁰ Ironically, the very theater that makes for such compelling reading today unsettled most historians of abolitionism.¹¹ Lay was difficult to ignore when alive but easier to sideline once dead.

Though powerful Friends found Lay's guerrilla theater annoying, his 1738 treatise *All Slave-Keepers* was considered beyond the pale. Rediker accurately likens Lay's book to a commonplace book or "multipurpose scrapbook," which "suited Benjamin as a democratic form of expression" (75). Another biographer suggests that Lay's book "constitutes an autobiographic scream."¹² However described, the volume is a diverse collection of biblical quotes, personal reflections, excerpts of letters, and indictments against slavery that was a "confused jumble of pages" (3) when Lay delivered it to Benjamin Franklin for printing. Powerful Friends reacted swiftly, publicly renouncing Lay and his book through a thrice-printed notice in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. The use of printed material to shame or challenge wayward Friends has a long tradition in Quakerism, a skill honed during the pamphlet wars of the Interregnum, and both Lay and his opponents drew on it.¹³ Lay's own jeremiad was versed in this literature and method, as is evident from the volumes he carried to Philadelphia in 1732 and the extent of his personal library. And as Quakers constructed the hierarchical machinery and systems of local, regional, national and/or international meetings, and took their place as respectable members of Atlantic society, leaders—or weighty Friends—imposed behavioral oversight on all members. Managing print materials was part of this process. Nothing could be published on behalf of the Religious Society of Friends without the approval of the appropriate meeting or committee. In the United Kingdom, the Second Day Morning Meeting reviewed, revised, or rejected submissions.¹⁴ In the

¹⁰ See Robynne Rogers Healey, "Quietist Quakerism, 1692–c.1805," in Angell and Dandelion, *Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, 47–62; Healey, "From Apocalyptic Prophecy to Tolerable Faithfulness: George Whitehead and a Theology for the Eschaton Deferred," in *Early Quakers and Their Theological Thought, 1647–1723*, ed. Stephen W. Angell and Pink Dandelion (New York, 2015), 273–92. The shifts within Quakerism during this period are examined at length in Richard C. Allen and Rosemary Moore, eds., *The Quakers, 1656–1723: The Evolution of an Alternative Community* (University Park, Pa., forthcoming).

¹¹ Rediker does concede that Lay is both acknowledged and studied by Quaker historians. Nonetheless, "he is almost totally unknown to the general public" (5).

¹² Andreas Mielke, "'What's here to do?' An Inquiry Concerning Sarah and Benjamin Lay, Abolitionists," *Quaker History* 86, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 22–44, esp. 38.

¹³ See Moore, *The Light in their Consciences*; Kate Peters, *Print Culture and the Early Quakers* (Cambridge, 2008).

¹⁴ Betty Hagglund, "Quakers and Print Culture," in Angell and Dandelion, *Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, 477–91, esp. 483.

British North American colonies, the Overseers of the Press, a committee of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, wielded that authority.¹⁵ Once this machinery was in place, no piece of Quaker writing was exempt, and this control changed Quaker printing. As Betty Hagglund shows, “prophetic and mystical texts fell out of fashion. So too did texts by Friends who were critical of other Quakers or their writings.”¹⁶ *All Slave-Keepers* was both. As Rediker demonstrates, then, Lay was out of step with the Quakerism of his contemporaries, especially slaveholding, wealthy, and politically powerful Friends. But he was self-consciously reviving a type of prophetic voice reminiscent of early Quakerism.

For all the book’s strengths and careful analysis, there are times when Rediker overstates his claims. For instance, in discussing Essex County, where Lay grew up, he writes, “As historian Adrian Davies has shown, religious radicalism had a long underground existence in Essex. The Lays were part of it” (15). Rediker does not provide sufficient evidence to support the certainty of this claim. Moreover, Rediker’s correlations of Lay’s childhood work as a shepherd and his theological positions, and his labor as a glover and his vegetarianism, are not entirely convincing. And suggesting that “Benjamin’s agitation may have had an impact on the ‘Great Awakening’” (188 n. 43) stretches linkages beyond the evidence. Rediker’s use of the term “Board of Overseers” (3) to refer to the Overseers of the Press is confusing. Overseers, along with elders and ministers, were an important part of monthly meeting structure and the maintenance of discipline in the daily life of Friends; the Overseers of the Press was a committee of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. They are not the same thing.

But these are minor criticisms of what is otherwise a strongly researched and compellingly argued analysis of the life and influence of Lay. Placing the genesis of eighteenth-century abolitionism among commoners instead of elites is not a surprising assertion coming from a Marxist historian such as Rediker. And the life of Lay supports his claim. But must it be either/or? Scholarship on slave resistance and abolitionism among African Americans shows that abolitionism was not championed only by whites.¹⁷ And the majority of Quakers who became abolitionists were of middling status. As part of a more nuanced interpretation of abolitionism, Rediker’s work enriches the historiography by expanding the framework of study to include those at the bottom of the social order. Moreover, Rediker provides a helpful model for the careful integration of sectarian and mainstream histories.

¹⁵ J. William Frost, “Quaker Books in Colonial Pennsylvania,” *Quaker History* 80, no. 1 (1991): 1–23, esp. 7; Hagglund, “Quakers and Print Culture,” 482.

¹⁶ Hagglund, “Quakers and Print Culture,” 485.

¹⁷ See for instance Junius P. Rodriguez, ed., *Encyclopedia of Slave Resistance and Rebellion*, 2 vols. (Westport, Conn., 2007); Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, Conn., 2016).

His thorough research on Quakers and Quakerism has allowed him to analyze Lay within the contours of both Quaker and Atlantic history without resorting to simplistic or distorted representations.