George Fox and Narratives of Peace & Activism In The Quaker Tapestry

“That Spirit of Christ by which we are guided is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as evil, and again to move unto it; and we do certainly know and so testify to the world, that the Spirit of Christ, which leads us into all Truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons.” --George Fox

From their 17th century inception in England, Quakers sought vigorously as radical “Publishers of Truth” to proclaim their non-propositional faith through prophetic and apologetic witness. Many of their foundational works are centrally narrative in character. An important contribution to the on-going transmission of Quaker values is the recently completed ten-year project of 77 Quaker Tapestry panels modeled on the crewel work technique and story-telling tradition of the 11th century Bayeux Tapestry. These uniquely combined visual-textual panels rhetorically and aesthetically reprise aspects of historical Quaker distinctives through accounts of individuals and events central to three centuries of Quaker heritage. As a significant theological vehicle for apologetic teaching the Quaker Tapestry continues a long narrative tradition employing individual and community stories of “enacted Truth” within the larger context of Quaker belief. Five panels directly present pivotal episodes reflecting spiritual and physical struggles endured by founder George Fox. Using both verbal cues and visual metaphors the Fox panels present a heuristic format inviting both an aesthetic appreciation as well as a stepping into the Quaker meta-narrative through its iconic symbols and images.

George Fox’s Convincement

Quakerism arose amid political and religious convulsions of mid-seventeenth century England. Little wonder then such turmoil and religious intensity aroused a pensive young man’s search to make sense of his own life and times, as the central figure of a pondering young George Fox characterizes. In 1643 when he was nineteen, and a year after the opening salvos of the Civil War less than a mile from Fenny Drayton, he left home traveling about the Midlands seeking answers to his soul’s longing. This first panel compresses visually his rearing in a Leicestershire village as the son of a devout country couple. His mother Mary, he tells us in his Journal, was “an upright woman... and of the stock of the martyrs” while his father, Christopher, was a churchwarden whom neighbors addressed respectfully as “Righteous Crister” (1). These depictions reflect Fox’s significant Puritan roots as do the representative figures in the panel’s lower section. Also compressed as autobiographical background is Fox’s early apprenticeship as a shoemaker in nearby Mancetter.

Contrasted with these tranquil boyhood images, to the right of the meditative Fox figure are autobiographical images of his growing spiritual disaffection. The three foreground figures include Fox himself, a cousin, and another young man whom Fox had joined at a county fair table, invited by the cousin to join them in sharing a jug of ale. The drinking between his companions quickly turned rowdy. Fox relates in his Journal: “They began to drink healths and called for more drink, agreeing together that he that would not drink should pay all.” Offended “that any that made profession of religion should offer to do so” (3) Fox abruptly leaves. The incident precipitates a sleepless night and crisis point in which he anguishes over youthful vanity and life’s transitoriness.
Unable to find spiritual solace at his home church, for the next four years he wanders the Midlands seeking advice from Puritan and Anglican ministers and searching the scriptures for answers to his spiritual despondency.

Some advice he received appears wildly insensitive as spiritual counsel. Fox tells of a local Puritan pastor who “bid me take tobacco and sing psalms” while another “needs give me some physic and I was to have been let blood.” Relatives suggested he marry and settle down, others thought enlisting in the Parliamentary army might do him some good. For all his earnestness nineteen year old must have made something of a nuisance of himself. As the upper-right section here illustrates. Seeking out an Anglican divine at Coventry, Fox finds the clergyman tending his garden and engaging him in theological conversation:

Now, as we were talking together in his garden, the alley being narrow, I chanced, in turning, to set my foot on the side of a bed, at which the man was in such a rage as if his house had been on fire. And thus all our discourse was lost, and I went away in sorrow, worse than I was when I came. (6)

The anecdote allows Fox a touch of humor at the expense of professional clergymen ministering so ineptly. There may also be a bit of self-parody at this clumsy, overly eager young man seeking spiritual counsel. Nonetheless, the symbolism of an established Church minister carefully tending his backyard garden while insensitively tending to someone’s earnest spiritual need aptly reflects Fox’s (and the early Quaker movement’s) adamant rejection of comfortably paid “hireling priests” who were either deficient or seemingly cared little for their spiritual duties.

Fox’s spiritual struggles are finally lifted in a manner reminiscent of many great conversion stories from Augustine to Fox’s contemporary John Bunyan: “When all my hopes . . . in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, then, Oh then, I heard a voice which said, ‘There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to they condition,’ and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy” (10-11).

Out of such personal “openings” Fox began to share his experiences with others, and now in his early twenties began drawing large, attentive crowds. And as the panel’s bottom quote indicates he was soon injecting himself into religious controversy. The text seems innocuous enough today: A simple enough echo of Col. 1:18, but the quote is part of an episode in which Fox reports attending a large “steeplehouse” gathering at which several speakers were disputing theology and taking questions from the audience. A woman rises asking a question but is disallowed by a minister who rebukes her: “I permit not a woman to speak in the church.” Exercised by the priest’s rebuff of the woman’s honest inquiry Fox stands himself and asks the speaker: “Dost thou call this place a church? Or dost thou call this mixed multitude a church?” The clear implication being congregation over building. The priest however does not answer but instead condescendingly demands of the young “mechanic preacher” “what a church was.” Fox’s reply makes up part of the panel’s stitched quote: “I told him the Church was the pillar and ground of Truth, made up of living stones, living members, a spiritual household which Christ was the head of, but he was not the head of a mixed multitude [but] of an old house made up of lime, stones, and wood” (24). Far harsher confrontations are to follow in the wake of what now draws Fox into an extensive traveling and preaching ministry.

Derby Gaol
The second panel offering its enstoried depiction of a George Fox autobiographical episode is titled: “DERBY GAOL/1650-1.” Here the title starkly sets the framing historical episode from which the combined picture-text shapes its implied and overt narrative. The visual and textual layout of this panel structures itself through a more dispersed use of the picture plane illustrating concurrently several aspects of the same story. Together these complementing elements offer a montage-like narrative of four separately grouped images surrounded by linking text.

The narrative plot and attendant themes successively unfold as the view-reader interprets the different images in relationship to the imparted text. The 1650 Blasphemy Act sought to curb growing religious excesses by fringe separatists groups such as Ranters, who rejected all traditional religious restraints including moral laws. Thus, Quakers found their own often extreme theological and ideological assertions unwelcome and harshly dealt with by establishment Puritan authorities. At Derby Fox had been taken into custody, having publicly spoken after a minister and others gathered at a Puritan “great lecture” attended by “an abundance of the officers of the army and priests, and preachers . . . and a colonel that was a preacher.” A concerned Cromwellian Army officer escorts Fox and his companions off to the local magistrate for examination.

At the very center of the Derby Gaol panel is a Fox quote reminding the reader-viewer of a centrally unifying Quaker tenet: “I spoke to them of the Truth and of the Light within.” Such antinomian declarations terrified Puritan officialdom. While vigorously displacing papal and even Anglican authority themselves in civil and religious matters, the conservative Puritans defended the Bible as the only authoritative source for Christian faith and practice. Naturally enough, the established Congregational Church saw itself as the final arbiter of Biblical interpretation. Fox and his followers, in their obedience to God as “Children of the Light,” were unwilling to engage in compromise with those they saw as “hireling” apostates to a continuing bankrupt church system. The Quakers, for their part, generally viewed persecution as confirmation of their own witness to God’s Truth. In the Derby panel’s composition, almost in ligature-like fashion, the “Truth/Light within” quote connects itself pictorially with a represented George Fox. Imprisoned, he sits at a cramped writing table as if penning the quoted text which protectively envelopes him while at once projecting to the panel’s left of center where is depicted an assembled grouping of soldiers, garrisoned in another part of the fortress-prison.

At his Derby trial Fox had been questioned by magistrates for a marathon eight hours, yet he had only exasperated his inquisitors. From his cell Fox kept up his prophetic annoyance by writing letters to local Puritan ministers and to the magistrates who had committed him. The panel’s bottom partition contains another figure of Fox writing this time from the depths of Derby castle’s dungeon where he was eventually cast because he refused any compromise with his antagonists. Outspokenly, he condemned the Puritan ministers’ pride, their paid status amounting to selling “what the prophets and apostles have spoken,” and their generally standing in the way of those who would “come to the knowledge of the Truth.” Fox continued a relentless barrage of letters to local officials setting forth his radical theology and calling them to account for the injustice of his imprisonment for a faith “held in a pure conscience.”

A succession of visitors came to “dispute and discourse” with the charismatic prisoner, including a number from the garrisoned soldiers, many apparently leaving convinced. The outraged Puritan jailer sought to spy on Fox “to ensnare me,” only to end up convinced himself by Fox. The jailer then goes to Justice Bennet of Derby (the
magistrate, as one of the panel’s texts notes, who “first called us Quakers because we bid them tremble at the word of God”) and the justice finally “gave leave that I should have liberty to go a mile” (58). The hope, apparently, was that this meddlesome Quaker prophet-preacher would simply keep going “to ease the plague from them” and end his unwelcome disturbance and growing notoriety. To their dismay, Fox only used his granted liberty to walk into the nearby marketplace and about the village streets where he “warned people to repentance.” Then he would return to the prison afterward. As the panel indicates, Fox frequently addressed the local merchants and people regarding temporal ethics. Embroidered above depicted baskets of merchandise and flanked by the symbolic English village market cross a Fox preachment admonishes: “Deal justly and speak the truth.” Such an honestly adhered to business and social ethic became hallmarks of Quakerism, eventually winning them wide public confidence, as well as considerable economic power, for their honest business practices.

Fox’s embarrassed relatives eventually show up ready, along with others in Derby itself, to post a considerable bond for the young man’s release providing only “I should come no more amongst them to declare against the priests.” Called back before Justice Bennet, Fox would have none of it: “I could not consent . . . to blemish my innocency,” he reports. What ensues is a scene, depicted in the panel, illustrating not only Fox’s spiritual staunchness but symbolically dramatizing what is probably Quakerism most well-known ideological truth claim.

The dauntless Quaker prophet incites officialdom to further “strifes” near the end of his six months blasphemy sentence by refusing an offered captaincy in the Commonwealth army. Following Charles I’s execution and the Republic’s establishment in 1649, Cromwell’s Puritan troops had been actively engaged for nearly two years in a resurgent second Civil War putting down Royalist forces in Wales and Scotland and subduing an Irish rebellion. In the spring of 1651 Cromwell’s Parliamentary army faced the major crisis of a Scottish invasion led by Prince Charles, now crowned king of Scotland. The Puritan troops housed in the Derby House of Correction awaited an anticipated battle at close by Worcester. Apparently many of the soldiers were sufficiently taken with the charismatic twenty-seven year old Fox, that “they would have none but me” to become their leader in the upcoming battle:

So the keeper of the House of Correction was commanded to bring me up before the Commissioners and soldiers in the market place; and there they proffered me that preferment because of my virtue, as they said, with many other compliments, and asked me if I would not take up arms for the Commonwealth against the King (65).

The panel suggests this moment of high drama in the proportionally largest grouping of the montage scenes. Fox, with hat on, is shown standing and conversing before a small group of attentive soldiers while their Puritan officer stands a bit further off. In the contextually suggested story officials hoped to finally contain the maddening, if not mad, Quaker prophet by at least putting his magnetism to the service of the harried state. Fox, however, responds to the assembly in what eventually becomes the classic Quaker testimony rejecting war: “I told them, I lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars.” In the panel this famous quote is arranged as a text-wrap element flowing around the graphic boundary of Fox and the listening soldiers. It is as if spoken text flows from the figure of Fox himself pronouncing the panel’s essential theme; a theme in direct connection with the “Truth/Light within” quote placed directly below it in the composition’s larger central focus.
At first his startled listeners mistake Fox’s refusal for coy reticence, “that I did but compliment with them,” he says in his account of the episode (65). Obviously no one saw fit to inform the Commissioners that the intractable, plain-speaking preacher wasn’t adverse to dramatically and publicly rejecting conventional values not meeting his understanding of the Lord’s Truth:

They said they offered it in love and kindness to me because of my virtue, and such like flattering words they used, and I told them if that were their love and kindness I trampled it under my feet (65).

Predictably, the insulted military Commissioners’ reaction in this time of national crisis wasn’t to engage Fox in polite debate over his conflicting Quaker “covenant of peace.” As Fox goes on, and the panel’s lower partition encapsulates:

Then their rage got up and they said, “Take him away gaoler, and cast him into the dungeon amongst the rogues and felons”; which they then did and put me into the dungeon amongst thirty felons in a lousy, stinking low place in the ground without any bed. Here they kept me a close prisoner almost a half year (65).

Bloody Lichfield

In the autumn of 1651 finally released after nearly a year in Derby gaol, Fox makes his way toward Lichfield. A mile from the city he sights the three Cathedral spires, one still damaged from the Civil War, and writes later in his Journal: “like a fire in me. . . I was commanded of the Lord to pull off my shoes of a sudden.” Leaving them with nearby shepherds he enters the town compelled by a vision of blood flowing through the streets. Under the Holy Spirit’s guidance and in the manner of a latter day Old Testament prophet, he decries throughout the town: “Woe unto the bloody city of Lichfield” (71).

Fox’s street theatre-like demonstration, at the height of market day, is depicted in the lower left corner. Flowing, blood-like lettering visually suggests the intensity of his fulmination against the city. A graphically burning martyr appears in the lower foreground signifying both the Marian persecutions of a hundered years earlier as well as a historical tradition of Christian martyrdom under Roman rule. Silhouetted against the dark Cathedral spires a ghostly Roman soldier broods over the city. A barefooted Fox is twice seen walking through the city decrying to faceless, milling citizens its martyr-filled past, and by implication its current Civil War conflicts between King and Parliament.

The banner quote running in double length across the top section, underscores the tone and message of the Quaker prophet-preacher. The admonition uses visual boldface in its embroidered key terms of “Turn,” “Darkness,” “Light,” and “Spirit of God” emphasizing visually their imperative rhetorical weight. This exhortation is reinforced by the alliterative, urgent words placed over the two arrow-like Lichfield steeples: “Repent. Rethink.”

The outcome of such repentance and rethinking under Fox’s dramatic witness is symbolized in the center of the panel’s more affirming visualization. Juxtaposed to and situated above the condemned, dark images of Lichfield’s woe is a triumphant rising sun under which streams a multi-colored and diverse present-day humanity stretching back to the perspective’s vanishing point. Turning from Darkness to Light and the Spirit of God is a central theme of Fox’s ministry and becomes the embraced theme of those who would respond to these oppositional Light/Dark metaphors at Quakerism’s core. “Be still
+ cool in thy own mind” Fox once counseled the daughter-in-law of Oliver Cromwell as she lay ill and in terror of dying—the ultimate darkness. “Be stayed in the principle of God in thee,” he had written her, “. . . and thou wilt find strength. . . but looking at the light that discovers them. . . ” (Journal 347-48).

Underscoring verbally the panel’s kinetic image of Light-empowered humanity streaming toward Lichfield’s rebuked darkness is one of Fox’s most dramatic visions of humanity’s potential redemption. Occurring at the beginning of his ministry and culminating the emerging out of his dark-night-of-the-soul experience he records a vision of God’s infinite love that directly speaks to the condition of all persons: “I saw also that there was an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of light and love, which flowed over the ocean of darkness” (19). From such a vision, with increasing power and convicement, Fox sets upon his course of ministry and prophetic proclamation to an England woefully and bloodily beset by deep political and spiritual factionalism.

Firbank Fell

This panel depicts two famed preaching events of 1652 within the same week in the North Riding area of Yorkshire. Immediately below the place-time declaration is a significant turning point in the early Quaker movement: “Many groups of Seekers heard George Fox preach.” Fox had already begun preaching, at least occasionally, to some separatist Baptist and other Independent groups, often called Seekers. Now, there came a coalescing of the nascent Quaker movement, drawing whole congregations from the many Seeker groups around Sedbergh, Preston Patrick and Brigflatts. At the same time inducting some of its strongest leadership and ablest preachers to Fox’s message.

The panel’s center-left alludes to Fox’s initial arrival and preaching success outside Sedbergh church during midweek. He had come at the time of the annual hiring fair when large crowds were gathered. A hatted Fox with his walking stick is shown near a large tree preaching in the parish church yard. Visually both Fox figures metaphorically contend with the establishment church that has been emptied to hear the dynamic young preacher.

In the lower right hand corner is a supporting text for the prominent central figure of Fox preaching, reminding panel viewers of a central Quaker faith value: “Keep your feet upon the top of the mountain and sound deep to that of God in everyone.” This text’s second half is perhaps one of the most widely used doctrinal phrases among Friends. Expressed elsewhere in Fox’s Journal as “Answering that of God in everyone” (263), this foremost Quaker tenet connects with the notion of God’s indwelling Spirit bearing universal witness to proclaimed Truth. Inherent in the viewer’s vantage point, from behind Fox with his arms extended inviting the massing crowd, is an effacing of the man. However central and charismatic Fox might be the focus is on his “sounding” of the Inward Light of Christ, an image appropriation early Quakers preached was a responding to God because all had the witness of the Inward Light of Christ (Bauman 92). Such theology stood in marked contrast to Calvinist notions of election and saw Quakers take their ministry to Turks, Indians, Blacks, and others socially high or low. Fox records he preached to a crowd there “above a thousand people. . . God’s everlasting Truth and word of life about three hours. . . .” (108-9).

The exhorting figure of Fox occupies a commanding central position extending through two panel sections. Like the stitched quote, Fox’s feet are literally and metaphorically stitched upon the ascended mountain top from which he addresses the
gathered listeners before him, a counterpoised metaphor to depth’s “sounding” with an
exhorted invitation to join him on the mountain height. Additionally, these Seekers now
outside the traditional “steeplehouse” are being drawn orientationally from an empty
church “of lime, stones, and wood” to the Inward, true church in Christ. As Fox declared
to them: “Christ was come, who ended the temple, and the priests, and the tithes” (107).
Small wonder this growing movement caused such a backlash from the official state
church. Quaker success in adding to their numbers was view with alarm for their spiritual
leveling, democratic sentiments and advocacy for social justice. Such
radical dissent overlapping spiritual and political arenas was harshly persecuted by those
in authority who claimed it the state’s duty to ensure the gospel’s truth.

Ulverston

This final panel evokes a story told in the *Journal* of an angry congregation at
Ulverston. The minister and a local Justice of the Peace, implacable foes of the new
movement, incite the crowd after Fox has been invited to speak. Detractors quickly
turned the meeting into a melee as someone yells “Give him us!” and Justice Sawrey
reportedly shoves Fox toward planted disturbers: “So of a sudden all the people in the
steeplehouse were in an outrage and an uproar, that they fell upon me . . . with staves and
fists and books, and knocked me down and kicked me and trampled upon me. And many
people tumbled over their seats for fear and were knocked down . . . and the blood ran
down several people so as I never saw the like in my life” (127).

Constables take Fox to a common, whip him with willow rods then abruptly turn
him back over to a mob who have followed along. The Ulverston panel depicts the
continuing assault on Fox:

[they] then fell upon me with their hedge stakes and clubs and staves and beat me
as hard as ever they could strike on my head and arms and shoulders, and it was a
great while before they beat me down and mazed me, and at last I fell down upon
the wet common. There I lay a pretty space, and when I recovered myself again,
and saw myself lying on a watery common and all the people standing about me, I
lay a little still, and the power of the Lord sprang through me . . . that I stood up
again in the eternal power of God and stretched out my arms amongst them all,
and said with a loud voice, “Strike again, here is my arms and my head and my
cheeks.” (127-28)

The entire central section visually foregrounds this Christ-echoing invitation
wherein one “rude fellow” has stepped forward and struck Fox “a blow with all his might
just a-top of my hand, as it was stretched out, with his walking rule-staff”: “And my hand
and arm was so numbed and bruised that I could not draw it in unto me again but it stood
out as it was. Then the people cried out, ‘He hath spoiled his hand, for ever having any
use of it more.’ The skin was struck off my hand and a little blood came, and I looked at
it in the love of God, and I was in the love of God to them all that had persecuted me”
(128).

An arisen, but clothes-tattered, Fox stands fully erect in the mob’s midst with
arms outstretched before his tormentors, emblematically a scourged Christ figure. Fox’s
attackers, all armed with various implements are nevertheless cowering before the
upraised, restored prophet. Weapons, angry facial expressions, and threatening postures
notwithstanding, his antagonists are freeze-framed overwhelmed despite their unleashed
violence. Although country villagers, the mob’s participants are almost of Dantesque
intensity and are symbolized with traditional devil’s instruments.

Embroidered across the panel’s lower section is arranged the interpretative thematic quote from Fox’s fuller Journal account. The prophet-preacher’s non-violent, compassionate response to his attackers along with his miraculous healing dramatically enstories this evocative scene: “I looked at it in the love of God...and the Lord’s power sprang through me and through my hand” (128). Fox’s remarkable recovery threw the attacking crowd into disarray as the Quaker prophet forthrightly “declared unto them the word of life, and showed them their false Christianity and the fruits of their priests” (128). The cowed mob dispersed, although not without threatening to kill Fox if he ever returned to town again—which he immediately does.

One hardly fails to see the Biblical symbolism and narrative parallels in the panel’s juxtaposed visual-text combination. Such typology magnifies the contending mythic forces of good and evil. While a brutish portrayal of savage treatment by an overwrought mob, the opposing spiritual archetypes are uppermost in the panel’s symbolic reconstruction. The stakes (and staves) are temporal, yet cosmic: evil against good. God’s faithful prophet is at first struck down in the weakness of his physical flesh (although Fox himself must have been an incredibly robust man to have endured his many physical assaults and numerous drear imprisonments). The depiction shows the Quaker leader triumphantly restored in “the Lord’s power” to confound those forces resisting Truth’s messenger. God’s Truth cannot be deterred by physical beatings or threats.

Conclusion

And Fox remained undeterred. Certainly he and other early Quakers often suffered cruelly for it. This panel, as with others, evokes any viewer’s pathos for someone so unjustly reviled. Collectively the Fox panels, and the Tapestry overall, offer an enduring visual-textual metaphor of the inward power of God’s healing love toward outward hatred, violence and intolerance. For Quakerism, Fox’s powerfully modeled Truth affirms the healing response of insistent, nonviolent witness in “answering that which is of God in everyone.”

Core convictions at the heart of Quaker faith and practice depend heavily upon such autobiographical and community story for their non-propositional transmission. The Tapestry’s visual-textual encoding of theological and moral concepts aesthetically (re)presents iconic models of these core Quaker values. As a leading contemporary Friend once observed (although not specifically of the Tapestry), “How these convictions are expressed in personal, practical, relevant ways is the primary reason for this attempt to connect our Quaker past with our present and the challenges of our future. These connections become again our own convictions as we return to the revealed Word and the leadings of the Spirit. This is why Friends are Friends” (Willcuts viii).

The literary critic Wayne Booth has characterized the major values-imparting nature of story as “I am thinking the thoughts of another” (139). As reader-viewers of the Quaker Tapestry we are visually immersed into a narrative consciousness of the Quaker moral and spiritual ethos. The Tapestry through its interplay of iconic image and text defines a specific faith community’s ontology and praxis. The 77 panel assemblage reveals Quakerism’s value-paradigms by means of a “seeing” discourse-medium which presents characters, issues and events literally drawn via its crewel work technique out of Quakerism’s ongoing story of “enacted Truth.”
Works Consulted


The Quaker Tapestry website: http://www.quaker-tapestry.co.uk/.
