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Book Review

Marcus Rediker, *The Fearless Benjamin Lay: The Quaker Dwarf Who Became the First Revolutionary Abolitionist* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017), 212 pp., $26.95 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-0-8070-3592-4.

This memorable book about a memorable man poses a question fundamental to the Age of Enlightenment: what did it take for Europeans and Euro-American colonists to oppose slavery? Perhaps the most extreme answer came in the form of one Benjamin Lay, a roaring, strident prophet who barged into Quaker meetings, sprayed animal bladders filled with red pokeberry juice on genteel, slaveholding Friends, and shouted: 'Thus shall God shed the blood of those persons who enslave their fellow creatures' (p. 2). At a time in the eighteenth century when slave ships carried some 80,000 captives *per year* from Africa to the Americas, Lay raged against the satanic trade. There could be no compromise, no gradual emancipation, no flim-flam about treating slaves more humanely. Slaveholders would be carbonized in eternal fire—slavery must end now.

Rediker's fascinating intellectual and religious biography traces the roots of the unbending attitude that put Lay at odds with virtually every other white person of his time. Among those sources, at least three stand out. Born in 1682 in Essex, England, Lay was a dwarf, a little person, four feet tall who, having experienced the derision often aimed at people with physical disabilities, developed empathy for fellow outcasts. A second-generation Quaker, he harked back to the antinomian spirit of the founding generation, the 'inner light' that prodded George Fox, James Naylor, and others to prophesy against the world's falseness. And as a poorly educated working man, a glove maker and sailor, he voyaged to the Caribbean sugar colony of Barbados, where he met African plantation laborers and saw firsthand slavery's terrible toll on fellow human beings. That experience changed him forever. He developed a brand of confrontational 'guerrilla theater', as Rediker calls it, that aimed to shock Quakers and other slaveholders out of their racist complacency. Anyone who owned or traded slaves, anyone who profited from slavery in any way—that is, most Anglo-Americans, including many of Philadelphia's most prominent citizens—got an intolerant earful in public. When patience gave out, Lay got evicted from one Quaker meeting after another in England and Pennsylvania.

There were white antislavery protestors before and after Benjamin Lay, but none surpassed him in zealotry. His hatred of slavery echoed in every aspect of his life. A vegetarian, he opposed violence against or exploitation of any sentient creature, weaving his own clothes from flax to avoid even using wool. A quintessential Quaker pacifist, he opposed war and capital punishment. He pioneered the tactic, adopted by later generations of Quaker abolitionists, of boycotting products made by slave labor, sugar above all. He shunned material possessions, living in poverty, on what he called 'the innocent fruits of the earth', in a cave in the countryside near Abington,

Pennsylvania. In harmony with nature, Rediker suggests, Lay embodied 'a new ecological consciousness', an ethical blueprint for conduct in a society whose comfortable lifestyle derived from the blood of others (p. 115). And whereas other abolitionists often harbored longstanding prejudices against people of African descent, Lay recognized them as human beings deserving of dignity and equality.

With little training as an author, Lay wrote a book, published by Benjamin Franklin in 1738, called *All Slave-Keepers That Keep the Innocent in Bondage, Apostates*, that, despite its stylistic eccentricities, laid out the religious basis for his position. Invoking not only the Golden Rule ('do unto others…'), as other antislavery writers did, Lay also quoted the Book of Revelation to frame the struggle over slavery as an unambiguous contest between good and evil. The dragons and many-headed beasts that belched forth from earth and sea in chapters 12 and 13 were the false prophets of slavery seducing the faithful with slick disguise and tempting words, meanwhile stamping foreheads with the slaveholders' 'Mark of the Beast'. Anyone who attempted to reconcile slavery with religion, as many putatively well-meaning Christians did, was therefore a diabolical antichrist who fixed the brand on fellow believers. For Quakers in particular, many of whom had long ago abandoned the apocalyptic vision of Fox and Naylor for worldly comforts, but who still clung to the notion of Quakers as a special godly people, this indictment was shocking.

Lay evokes an instructive comparison with Anthony Benezet and John Woolman, the two most famous eighteenth-century American Quaker abolitionists, a generation younger than Lay, who are widely credited with ushering in modern Quaker antislavery around the time of the American Revolution. Better educated, more polished, less judgmental than Lay, they built a cause through patient persuasion and appeals to common humanity rather than through self-righteous, and off-putting, confrontation. As such, they were more effective movement organizers by conventional measure. But as many Quakers themselves acknowledged, and as Rediker argues, it was Lay who set the template for all subsequent Quaker antislavery, who limned the essential themes and many of the tactics of the later movement, waging his battle as 'a lonely fighter against slavery for forty years, suffering endless persecution, ridicule, and repression' (p. 150). It was Lay whose unforgiving radicalism made less antagonistic approaches seem more safely respectable. In this regard the contrast offers fruitful lessons for participants in modern social justice movements seeking to define their message, audience, and strategy for maximum effect.

In his time, Rediker contends, Lay 'may have been the most radical person on the planet' (p. 150). Perhaps, though can we weigh his radicalism against that of, say, enslaved rebels who were broken on the wheel trying to overthrow slavery? Still, the argument is persuasive that Lay 'helps us to understand what was politically and morally possible in the first half of the eighteenth century—and what may be possible now' (p. 150). Lay was visionary in perceiving the interconnectedness of life and the universality of justice. His standard of personal morality and of minimal impact on the environment might prove impossibly high for most of us to meet. But he showed what a determined person with an unflinching devotion to a cause can achieve. How would Benjamin Lay respond to the resurgence of slavery in our own time?

Jon Sensbach
Department of History
University of Florida
jsensbach@ufl.edu