

Activism in the Antipodes: Transnational Quaker Humanitarianism and the Troubled Politics of Compassion in the Early Nineteenth Century

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In 1832, British Quakers James Backhouse and George Washington Walker, sailing in the British government cutter *Charlotte*, pursued the face of antipodean ‘slavery’ in the southern oceans. The travelling pair were convinced of its proliferation, especially in the Bass Strait, a rough sea frontier between the colony of Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania) and the mainland colony of New South Wales, Australia. Over the course of three weeks, with the support of George Arthur, Lieutenant Governor of Van Diemen’s Land, the Quakers would seek to witness the ‘sufferings’ of Aboriginal women and then to physically remove or ‘emancipate’ them from the apparent depredations of local sealers.¹

¹Penelope Edmonds, ‘Collecting Looerryminer’s “Testimony”: Aboriginal Women, Sealers, and Quaker Humanitarian Anti-slavery Thought and Action in the Bass Strait

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Collecting the testimony of these women and the sealers, many of whom were escaped or former convicts, was the key to the Quakers' investigative enterprise. At Circular Head, a small port on the northwest coast, Backhouse and Walker, along with Commandant William James Darling, sought to witness the 'sufferings' of two Aboriginal women who lived with sealers. They invited 'Jackey' and 'Jumbo' to leave the sealers and come on board the *Charlotte* to 'have some biscuit and soup.' Suspecting that the women would not express their 'real desires' as they were 'under some peculiar restriction thro' fear of the sealers,' Commandant Darling 'ordered the two women into the cabin' of the cutter to interview them.² Although the women's English language was partial and halting, the Quakers attempted to witness their 'testimony,' as they termed it. They enquired of the woman known as 'Jackey' if she 'would like to leave the Sealers, and go to the establishment on Flinders Island to live there with her own people.' 'No' was her answer. They then requested she tell him no 'gammon,' or falsehoods, and that if she 'wished to go he had the power to take her and that the Sealers should not hurt her.' As Backhouse related, 'Her countenance at once lost its gloom and with a burst of joy she exclaimed "Yes, I will go!" She now laughed heartily.' Again, of Jackey the Quakers 'enquired if [the sealers] ever beat her.' She replied 'Yes!' Backhouse asked: 'With a stick?' The woman replied: 'No. With a rope.' Backhouse closed the vignette: 'She remained in the cabin the rest of the day talking and laughing, with all the demonstrations of pleasure that escape from bondage might be supposed to produce.'³

The story of witness to the suffering of Aboriginal women, whom the Quakers took to be enslaved, was published in Backhouse's religious travelogue, *A Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Colonies*, and consumed by an avid evangelical metropolitan and colonial reading public.⁴

Islands,' *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2014, pp. 13–33. On the Black War, see Lyndall Ryan, *Tasmanian Aborigines: A History Since 1803*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2012.

²James Backhouse, Letter book, Friends House Library (hereafter FHL), 30 October 1832, p. 81.

³James Backhouse, Letter book, FHL, 30 October 1832, p. 81.

⁴James Backhouse, *A Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Colonies*, London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1843, pp. 99–100.

Above all, the Quakers' close attention to Jackey as a subject of compassionate concern reveals the multiple and overlapping humanitarian agendas that would reach their peak in the Australian colonies in the 1830s: anti-slavery, anxiety about the physical punishment of slaves and women, penal reform, and the degraded state of escapee or emancipated British convicts who would flee to the Bass Strait sealing islands. Their concern was, especially, the fate of Aboriginal peoples violently dispossessed by British settlers and government, a subject to which Backhouse would increasingly turn during his nine-year antipodean tour.⁵

The Society of Friends, or Quakers, was formative in the anti-slavery campaigns of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and crucial to the flowering of an evangelical humanitarianism critical of Britain's moral conduct in the colonies.⁶ Yet despite this, critical work concerning Quakers as distinctively networked and highly travelled 'activists' whose reach extended to the antipodean colonies and the Pacific has been, until recently, a neglected sphere.⁷ In line with new work that closely historicises transnational activism, this chapter considers the nine-year multi-colony tour (1832–1841) of Quakers James Backhouse and George Washington Walker as active campaigners in the pursuit of their particular moral empire in the Antipodes. The chapter explores their multi-reform agenda and, importantly, charts the shift from abolition to a concern for violently dispossessed Aboriginal peoples in these new colonies of settlement, reflecting a new and growing concern for humanitarians in the 1830s.

A key focus in historical scholarship on transnational human rights activism has been on the emergence of international nongovernment organisations (INGOs) as a twentieth-century phenomenon, particularly since the end of the Cold War era. INGOs are also associated with the formation of the United Nations (UN) in 1945, which formalised the term nongovernmental organization to refer to international

⁵Edmonds, 'Collecting Looerryminer's "Testimony,"' pp. 13–33.

⁶Brycchan Carey, *From Peace to Freedom: Quaker Rhetoric and the Birth of American Anti-slavery, 1658–1761*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.

⁷Penelope Edmonds, 'Travelling "Under Concern": Quakers James Backhouse and George Washington Walker Tour the Antipodean Colonies, 1830s–1840s,' *Journal of Commonwealth and Imperial History*, Special Issue on Humanitarianism, vol. 40, no. 5, 2012, pp. 769–788.

non-state actors who contributed to its project of global governance.⁸ Alternatively, the INGO is often considered to have arisen in the late nineteenth century with the establishment of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in 1839 and to have proliferated during the First World War.⁹ This chapter, however, seeks to broaden historical consideration of what constitutes ‘transnational human rights activism’ and the nongovernmental ‘transnational activist’ by looking to the witnessing practices of Quakers as a significant precursor of modern transnational humanitarian activism, in an era when global governance was nevertheless driven by empire and close engagement with its colonies and colonised peoples.

Locating Backhouse and Walker as nongovernmental actors within their transnational networks and what might be termed ‘affiliate groups,’ the chapter examines the historical conditions and enabling factors for their journey, as part of a long tradition, or ‘repertoire,’ of Quaker transnational religious travel and witnessing. Backhouse and Walker’s activism took on particular meaning in this ‘Age of Reform,’ both contesting and enabling settler colonial governance. Using diverse interpretive approaches including new work on transnational social movements and reflections on humanitarian travel writing, textuality, and networked action, in this chapter I propose that these Quakers therefore should be viewed as ‘institutional opponents:’ that is, as agents of empire who were also critical of its methods and advocated for political and moral reform. The chapter argues that special attention be paid to the central practice of Quaker witnessing of ‘sufferings’ and the collection of testimony as evidence—techniques routinely used by present-day activists and often referred to by sociologists as ‘human rights methodology’—for the promotion of social change through reporting powerful eye-witness accounts of oppression or injustice.¹⁰

⁸David Lewis, ‘Nongovernmental Organizations, Definition and History,’ in *International Encyclopedia of Civil Society*, Helmut K. Anheier and Stefan Toepler, eds., Heidelberg: University of Heidelberg, 2010, pp. 1056–1062.

⁹Thomas Davies, *NGOs: A New History of Transnational Civil Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 3–4.

¹⁰See Dorothy Q. Thomas, ‘Holding Governments Accountable by Public Pressing,’ in Joanna Kerr, ed., *Ours by Right: Women’s Right as Human Rights*, London: Zed Books, 1993, p. 83; Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998, p. 15.

By looking to the past, we also see the emergence of perennial questions about the deeply ambiguous and at times troubled role that humanitarian moral sentiments and eye-witness testimony may play, particularly in light of current debates about the ‘new humanitarianism.’ As Didier Fassin observes: ‘[M]oral sentiments are focussed mainly on the poorest, most unfortunate, most vulnerable individuals: the politics of compassion is a politics of inequality.’ At the same time, ‘the condition of possibility of moral sentiments is generally a recognition of others as fellow: the politics of compassion is a politics of solidarity.’¹¹ Humanitarian governance and its mobilising ‘humanitarian reason’ thus hold a central tension between inequality and solidarity, and may come to serve as ‘consensual force,’ even justifying military intervention or colonisation.¹² Arguing for historical continuity, I suggest that such tensions around moral sentiment and witnessing, cross-cultural encounters, and the imperial invasion of indigenous lands have been ever present, emerged from the imperial world, and are exemplified by the study of these Quaker activists.

Last, although the concepts of ‘activism’ and ‘transnational activism’ must be carefully historicised, conversely, historical scholarship nevertheless stands to benefit from the analytical insights of new sociological and political theory, thus promising fresh views of early nineteenth-century globalised humanitarianism as a form of antecedent human-rights activism. Crucially, such work prompts further thinking around what forms of networked, globalised, or ‘transnational’ political activism and what temporal periods constitute valid subjects of study in pursuit of the global activist, even those that seem to fail or miss, or which misinterpret their target of concern.

HISTORICISING THE QUAKER TRANSNATIONAL ACTIVIST: THINKING THROUGH NATION AND EMPIRE

Only in the late 1990s did scholars begin to examine critically the political activity, anatomy, and tactics of transnational advocacy movements. One of the central themes of such work has been to interrogate the processes of transnational collective action and, as Donatella della Porta and

¹¹ Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2012, p. 3.

¹² *Ibid.*

Sidney Tarrow have noted, to study the ‘coordinated international campaigns on the part of networks of activists against international actors, other states, or international institutions.’¹³ There has been, however, a tendency for this relatively new field of enquiry to be characterised by a presentism, with some authors citing the rise of the Internet as a catalyst for the rise of transnational social movements.¹⁴ By extension, the transnational activist is thus seen to be a product of the forces of contemporary globalisation and communication technologies. Such a view can be countered by a historical approach: historians of empire, especially those of new imperialism, have been inherently attuned to the multi-sited and transnational dimensions of empire and offer alternative readings which may problematise, extend, or test ways of understanding network theory and transnational social movements.

The existence of a highly networked and globalised Quaker abolitionist and humanitarian multi-reform agenda for empire in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries challenges and complicates assertions by some scholars, such as della Porta and Tarrow, that ‘[m]odern social movements developed with the nation state, and the nation state has for many years been the target for protest.’¹⁵ The deep entanglements of empire and modernity notwithstanding, antecedent forms of political activity and protest that we now term transnational can be found in such humanitarian movements of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, especially in the colonial realms of British expansion. Such political activity and protest were pursued by actors who, at that stage, could not have imagined the collective of ‘nation’ within these sites of empire. Their actions, however, were networked, global, and transcolonial, and since the imperial turn in scholarship, a closer examination of such political and humanitarian activity has prompted scholars to critique the privileging of the nation-state and to

¹³Donatella della Porta and Sidney Tarrow, ‘Transnational Processes and Social Activism: An Introduction’, in *Transnational Protest and Global Activism*, ed. Donatella della Porta and Sidney Tarrow, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005, p. 3.

¹⁴See, for example, Sean Scalmer’s discussion of this presentism in Sean Scalmer, ‘Mediated Nonviolence as a Global Force: An Historical Perspective,’ in Bart Cammaerts, Alice Mattoni, and Patrick McCurdy, eds., *Mediation and Protest Movements*, Bristol, UK and Wilmington, NC: Intellect, 2013, pp. 115–132.

¹⁵della Porta and Tarrow, ‘Transnational Processes and Social Activism.’

think productively both with and through the nation as the apparent sole site and arbiter of political action.¹⁶

The political scientist Sidney Tarrow has sought to counter presentist arguments that suggest we are entering an ‘unheralded age of global movements’ and has called for ‘comparatively bold historical studies’ of transnational movements. Seeking to historicise transnational social movements, Tarrow rightly observed the close connections in the late eighteenth century between the American Revolution, the Dutch Patriot movement, and the French Revolution.¹⁷ Scholars of contemporary transnational movements have also readily noted for some time now that historical movements such as the anti-slavery cause offer precursor models that warrant attention.¹⁸ Seeking to query the apparent novelty of transnational advocacy networks as a phenomenon of the late twentieth century, Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink have traced in brief the transatlantic anti-slavery movement from 1833 to 1865 and the international pressure for the abolition of slavery in the United States. Echoing Thomas Haskell’s idea of ‘recipes’ for political action that can be carried through over time and into new political causes, Keck and Sikkink highlighted the ‘collective action repertoires,’ such as boycotts and mass petitioning, that were key tactics in the abolitionist movement, stretching across continents. Further, as Eric Foner rightly observed, anti-slavery provided a ‘language of politics’ and a ‘training in organisation for critics of the emerging order.’¹⁹

New imperial and postcolonial studies have tended to view religious history as a minority concern, but more recently, a new imperial

¹⁶On the new imperialism and questions of the nation, see, for example, Antoinette Burton, ‘Introduction: On the Inadequacy and Indispensability of the Nation,’ in Antoinette Burton, ed., *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003, pp. 1–26.

¹⁷Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, Chap. 11 and p. 182. See also Keck and Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders*, p. 40; Huw T. David, ‘Transnational Advocacy in the Eighteenth Century: Transatlantic Activism and the Anti-slavery Movement,’ *Global Networks*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2007, p. 368.

¹⁸Keck and Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders*, p. 6.

¹⁹Eric Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 76. Also see Keck and Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders*, p. 43; Thomas L. Haskell, ‘Capitalism and the Origins of Humanitarian Sensibility,’ Parts I and II, *American Historical Review*, vol. 90, April 1985, p. 90, and June 1985, pp. 547–566.

religious history has emerged that views religion, and at times its possibilities for activism, as central to British imperial endeavour in its creation of ‘moral empire.’²⁰ There has been, then, increased attention to the politics, tactics, and networked and activist aspects of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century humanitarian endeavour. Similarly, there has been a renewed consideration of moral and social advocacy networks across the globe, or the so-called new humanitarianism, where in particular INGOs have been increasingly prominent in world politics. These humanitarian actors have become subject to increasingly rigorous critical analysis. In 2010 Samuel Moyn, in his influential study of the history of human rights, observed that the history of INGOs has been ‘barely assayed.’²¹ In answer to this, Thomas Davies explored the development of transnational civil society through the lens of INGOs, locating their deeper roots in transnational religious orders such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Orders of the Benedictine and Cistercian monks, Protestant groups such as the Moravian Church, and, in Asia, the Church of the East.²² These religious INGOs are notable, he observes, for their deep pasts, global reach, and historical tenacity, and ‘also for the crucial role they played in the development of horizontal relationships among people in different contexts before the emergence of the public sphere.’²³ Davies makes particular mention of the Quakers as having a significant role in the development of transnational activism and of their critical role in anti-slavery and peace activism.²⁴ Such avenues of interrelated scholarship as outlined here offer ways to bring to light historical continuities and to problematise moral activism and the ‘politics of compassion.’

Although many sociologists and political scientists acknowledge the pivotal early role of the activities of Quaker and other dissenting denominations in the anti-slavery movement, and characterise this as the ‘backbone’ of the movement in Britain and United States based on an evangelical humanitarianism, few have gone further to analyse closely

²⁰See for example, C.A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830*, London and New York: Longman, 1989; Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1860*, Oxford: Polity, 2002.

²¹Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2010, p. 316.

²²Davies, *NGOs*, p. 21.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴*Ibid.*

their networked political and religious tactics, or ‘repertoire,’ in detail. An exception is sociologist Huw T. David, who, in seeking to build on Keck and Sikkink’s study of the international campaign against slavery in America in the mid-nineteenth century, identified transnational advocacy on this issue occurring more than half a century earlier. Focussing on close links between American and English Quakers in abolitionist activism from the mid-1750s to the mid-1780s, David argued that Quaker anti-slavery mobilisation in this period was marked by ‘transnational cooperation’ and the ‘dissemination of ideas,’ forming transnational ‘networks’ that were not yet more formal ‘coalitions’ or ‘social movements.’²⁵ David examined this anti-slave-trade Quaker activism according to models developed by Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink of network development and found these models to be ‘broadly applicable.’²⁶ In particular, David sought to examine how the ‘seeds of abolitionist sentiment were nurtured’ by focusing on the ‘seminal role of Quakers’ and identified a ‘distinct network structure of Quakerism,’ which came to mobilise ‘a wider denominational coalition into a powerful social and political movement.’ Thus, David has argued that the Quakers, with their particular skills in international mediation and conciliation and their foundational role in the transatlantic anti-slavery movement, may be described as the world’s ‘first transnational human rights movement.’²⁷

David, as most scholars, has focussed on the transatlantic aspects, but the Antipodes after the American Revolution are also a valuable subject of enquiry. The 1830s represented a particular moment when the rapidly expanding colonies of Australia and the Cape Colony (South Africa), for example, became intense sites of metropolitan British humanitarian concern. Indeed, the rise of British humanitarianism occurred simultaneous to an aggressively expanding British settlement in these antipodean British colonies and intense violence against indigenous peoples in the 1830s—an apparent ‘paradox’ that has been highlighted by Alan Lester

²⁵Huw T. David, ‘Transnational Advocacy in the Eighteenth Century,’ p. 370.

²⁶Sanjeev Khagram, James V. Riker, and Kathryn Sikkink, eds., *Restructuring World Politics: Transnational Social Movements, Networks and Norms*, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2002; Keck and Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders*; David, ‘Transnational Advocacy in the Eighteenth Century.’

²⁷David, ‘Transnational Advocacy in the Eighteenth Century’; C.H. Mike Yarrow, *Quaker Experiences in International Conciliation*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978.

and Fae Dussart.²⁸ At this time the question of honourable colonisation and the fate of Indigenous peoples was often framed and argued within dominant Christian moral and evangelical understandings. Imperial governance and the politics and possibility of compassion became intense, intertwined subjects. Importantly, these debates were part of larger global imperial and political networks, and their attendant trans-imperial deliberations about violence and civilisation were driven, in part, by humanitarian Christian activists.²⁹

The Australian colonies were a significant site of overlapping humanitarian concerns about the rapid expansion of the British Empire. Of particular interest are the ways in which the abolitionist rhetoric of slavery during this period was effectively extended to convicts, indentured labourers, and Aborigines in the service of a broad humanitarian endeavour, reflecting part of the 'discursive explosion' of abolitionist debate across colonies of slavery and settlement in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.³⁰ As public Quakers, 'activists' Backhouse and Walker operated inside the empire and were complicit with its goals of colonisation, even if they understood their own goals to be driven by Christian compassion and benevolence. At the same time, they were overt critics of the empire and would come to indict both the British and colonial governments for the shame and stain of violent colonisation.

INDEPENDENT OBSERVERS: NETWORKS FOR REFORM

Backhouse and Walker would be among the first Quakers to arrive in the Australian colonies and establish a major presence there. Arriving just one year before the crucial *Slavery Abolition Act* in British settlements (1833) came into force, and coming from an atmosphere of

²⁸Lester and Dussart, *Colonization and the Origins of Humanitarian Governance*, p. 5.

²⁹Elizabeth Elbourne, 'Between Van Diemen's Land and the Cape Colony,' in Anna Johnston and Mitchell Rolls, eds., *Reading Robinson: Companion Essays to George Augustus Robinson's Friendly Mission*, Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2012, available [online]: <http://books.publishing.monash.edu/apps/bookworm/view/Reading+Robinson%3A+Companion+Essays+to+George+Robinson%E2%80%99s+Friendly+Mission/176/OEBPS/c05.htm> [Access Date 18 February 2015].

³⁰On the 'discursive explosion of the abolition debate,' see Brychan Carey, Markman Ellis, and Sara Salih, *Britain and Its Colonies, 1760–1838*, Houndmills: Palgrave, 2004, p. 1.

British ferment and humanitarian reform, these men brought their spiritual, intellectual, and political luggage with them across oceans, a driving humanitarian and evangelical Quakerism, with its concerns for justice and imperial reform.

Quakers were radical and socially marginal in the seventeenth century, but by the early nineteenth century, evangelical Quakers travelling ‘under concern’ were middle class, educated, influential, and well connected, and were accepted as humanitarian adjudicators who operated within the empire and yet lobbied to alter it. Backhouse and Walker were empowered to adjudicate the Australian colonies and their systems, as nongovernmental actors, and were materially supported in their investigative endeavours by Governor Richard Bourke of New South Wales and Lieutenant Governor George Arthur of Van Deimen’s Land, who charged them with writing reports on the colony’s treatment of convict Aborigines and the religious life of settlers. As esteemed public Quakers, Backhouse and Walker were, in the words of Arthur, ‘individuals unbiased and unprejudiced’ and therefore ‘likely to afford not only wholesome admonition to the convicts but useful suggestions to the government.’³¹ These Quakers were not missionaries: they did not seek to set up missions, nor to settle, but came from a radical dissenting faith, and were, rather, possessed of a ‘somewhat iconoclastic independence from the regular imperial missionary societies,’ writes Anna Johnston. Written with the tone and style of an official inquiry, their reports are often detached, and, as Johnston has observed, they ‘promoted themselves as independent witnesses to religious and colonial affairs.’³²

Backhouse and Walker’s journey, with its multi-reform agenda, spanned the Australian colonies of Van Diemen’s Land, New South Wales, Swan River in Western Australia, Mauritius (at that time Britain’s third largest colony of sugar slaves), and South Africa’s Cape Colony. This foundational trans-colonial journey had a significant impact upon colonial and imperial policy concerning imperial management of Aboriginal and enslaved peoples, convicted felons, and indentured labourers alike. With their elite connections and extensive networks of correspondents, the travelling pair were fundamental to the creation

³¹ Anna Johnston, *The Paper War: Morality, Print Culture and Power in Colonial New South Wales*, Crawley: UWA Publishing, 2011, p. 52.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 55.

and expansion of humanitarian networks in the Antipodes, where they made major humanitarian interventions in matters concerning Aboriginal peoples, penal reform, slavery, and education. In Van Diemen's Land, encouraged by Lieutenant Governor Arthur, the Quaker pair produced eight valuable reports on the living conditions of convicts and Aborigines. In the Colony of New South Wales, they produced three reports for Governor Richard Bourke, in which they assessed the penal settlements of Norfolk Island, Moreton Bay, and Port Macquarie, and the Aboriginal station in Wellington Valley. These reports were sent to the Colonial Office and the London Society of Friends and used by reformers of the penal system and by those concerned with the treatment of Aboriginal people in British settlements.³³ They were major contributors to the Molesworth Committee (1837–1838), which reported on convict transportation and eventually led to its end. Based on their experiences in the Australian colonies, Backhouse and Walker were key correspondents giving evidence to the 1837 *Select Committee on the Aboriginal Tribes (British Settlements)*.³⁴ Later, in Mauritius, they witnessed, as Backhouse wrote, a society 'just emerging from slavery,' and reported on the apprenticeship system and importation of indentured labour that took its place. During their two-year stay in the Cape Colony they travelled more than 6000 miles, toured all the mission stations, regardless of denomination, and addressed the fate of dispossessed Indigenous peoples, the treatment of Dutch colonists' slaves and indentured 'coloured' labourers, and the issues of education, children, and women.³⁵

³³Mary Bartram Trott, 'Backhouse, James (1794–1869),' *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Canberra: Australian National University, 1966, available [online]: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/backhouse-james-1728/text1899> [Access Date 7 February 2012].

³⁴United Kingdom, House of Commons, *Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Aboriginal Tribes (British Settlements)*, London: Published for the Society by William Ball, 1837; United Kingdom, House of Commons, *Report from the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Transportation; Together with a Letter from the Archbishop of Dublin on the Same Subject, and Notes by Sir W. Molesworth*, London: Henry Hooper, 1838.

³⁵See James Backhouse, *Extracts from the Letters of James Backhouse: When Engaged in a Religious Visit on the Island of the Mauritius, accompanied by George Washington Walker, Sixth Part*, London: Harvey and Darnton, 1839; Backhouse, *A Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Colonies*; James Backhouse, *A Narrative of a Visit to Mauritius and South Africa*, London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1844.

Backhouse was born on 8 July 1794 to members of a well-known Quaker business family of Darlington, Durham, England. He had trained for two years in a Norwich nursery, leading to his interest in Australian plants and his later description by historians as a naturalist or amateur botanist. His association with Quaker members interested in prison reform and transportation led to his desire to visit the convict colonies.³⁶ Backhouse's increasing activity in schools for the poor, prisons, temperance, Bible societies, and the Quaker ministry fed his interest in service abroad. As his memoir records, 'the subject of paying a religious visit to the Australian colonies pressed so much on my mind towards the end of 1830, that I believed the time to be come for moving in it.'³⁷ In September 1831, after the death of his wife, and with the financial support of the London Yearly Quaker Meeting, Backhouse sailed for Australia with the younger George Washington Walker, a newly converted member of the Society of Friends.³⁸ Walker was brought up by his grandmother in Newcastle. He was educated by a Wesleyan schoolmaster near Barnard Castle and apprenticed in 1814 to a linen draper. Walker was 'impressed by the probity and wisdom of his Quaker employers, and he left the Unitarian persuasion of his family in 1827 and became a member of the Society of Friends,' writes Mary Bartram Trott.³⁹

Indeed, it was prison reform that initially took Backhouse and Walker to the Australian colonies. By 1831, and after much consideration with the York Friends, Backhouse and Walker had made arrangements, as part of their travel to the Antipodes, to visit the 'Prisoner Population of our Convict Colonies.'⁴⁰ Throughout the early 1800s Elizabeth Gurney Fry (1780–1835), well-known British Quaker minister and prodigious reformer, travelled throughout England, Scotland, Ireland, Sweden, France, Germany, and Denmark to inspect the conditions of women in

³⁶Trott, 'Backhouse, James (1794–1869).'

³⁷Sarah Backhouse, *Memoir of James Backhouse, by His Sister*, York: F.B. Kitto, 1870, p. 41.

³⁸Ibid.; Mary Bartram Trott, 'Walker, George Washington (1800–1859),' *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Canberra: Australian National University, 1966, accessed 7 February 2012, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/walker-george-washington-2764>.

³⁹Trott, 'Walker, George Washington (1800–1859).'

⁴⁰Backhouse, *Memoir of James Backhouse*, p. 47.

prisons.⁴¹ Dubbed the ‘Angel of Newgate Prison,’ she was also deeply concerned with the plight of convicts transported to the Australian colonies. Fry encouraged Backhouse and Walker to journey to these colonies, where they agreed to visit and report on the welfare of the prison population there. Before their departure, a series of connections with key humanitarians and colonial elite enabled and authorised their travel to the colonies. They met with esteemed prison reformer and abolitionist Thomas Fowell Buxton, and Lord Goderich, Secretary of State for the Colonies, who gave them letters of introduction to the colonial governors. As Backhouse noted, ‘Sir T. Fowell Buxton also took pains to make way for me: he accompanied me to the Colonial Office, where he said much more for me than I should have dared say for myself.’⁴²

Imperial circuits were often based on military, scientific, or humanitarian personal and political connections, writes Zoë Laidlaw.⁴³ The travelling Quakers used networks of religious and political patronage and humanitarian circuits across the metropole and in the antipodean colonies to further their endeavours. They used both multi-denominational humanitarian and scientific networks to support their movement around the antipodean colonies. Backhouse and Walker became active correspondents within a global network of influential British humanitarians. Indeed, within two months of arriving, their first formal correspondence was to Elizabeth Fry, reporting on ‘The Emigration of Free Females to Van Diemen’s Land,’ and to Buxton on ‘Colonization the Rights of Aborigines.’⁴⁴ They were in correspondence with Quaker Thomas Hodgkin, who would later form the Aborigines’ Protection Society (1837). They would correspond with and visit prominent missionaries including Dr. John Philip of the London Missionary Society in the Cape Colony, George Augustus Robinson in Van Diemen’s Land, and the Reverends Samuel Marsden, John Dunmore Lang, and missionary Lancelot Edward Threlkeld in the colony of New South Wales. As the

⁴¹Thomas Timpson, *Memoirs of Mrs. Elizabeth Fry*, second edition, London: Aylott and Jones, 1847.

⁴²Backhouse, *Memoir of James Backhouse*, p. 47.

⁴³Zoë Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections, 1815–45: Patronage, the Information Revolution and Colonial Government*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005.

⁴⁴James Backhouse, ‘A Letter to Thomas Fowell Buxton on the Emigration of Free Females to Van Diemen’s Land’ and ‘A Letter to Elizabeth Fry on the Emigration of Free Females to Van Diemen’s Land,’ FHL, Letter book 1831–1834, Ms. vol. 1, p. S48.

senior partner, Backhouse positioned himself as a key interlocutor within this extensive and multi-denominational humanitarian network.

Historians of empire and colonialism have lately shown the highly fertile avenues of enquiry gained through transnationalist approaches. Scholars such as Tony Ballantyne, Alan Lester, and Zoë Laidlaw deploy the idea of ‘webs,’ which, as Ballantyne notes, allows for an appreciation of empire as a ‘structure, a complex system of overlapping and interwoven institutions, organisations, ideologies, and discourses.’ Their critical interrogation of ‘imperial networks,’ ‘circuits of empire,’ and ‘webs’ has opened rich new seams of scholarship that go ‘beyond comparison’ to illuminate ‘actual historical connections and disconnections between different sites of empire.’⁴⁵ Similarly, I suggest that advances in ‘network theory’ of transnational social movements emphasising ‘modular’ and ‘cellular’ arrangements of globalised collective action emerging from historical sociology and political science promise new ways of understanding the development of humanitarian advocacy operating throughout the British Empire.⁴⁶ This connection is especially true where questions of political connection and translation across national borders are critical.

Backhouse and Walker’s political activity might be described as a type of transnational activism operating not only within the Society of Friends, but also across a range of affiliated groups, forming an affective

⁴⁵Tony Ballantyne, ‘Rereading the Archives and Opening Up the Nation State: Colonial Knowledge in South Asia (and Beyond),’ in Antoinette Burton, ed., *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003, p. 113. See also David Lambert and Alan Lester, eds., *Colonial Lives across the British Empire: Imperial Careerings in the Long Nineteenth Century*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Alan Lester, ‘British Settler Discourse and the Circuits of Empire,’ *History Workshop Journal* vol. 54, 2002, pp. 24–48. Zoë Laidlaw, ‘“Aunt Anna’s Report”: The Buxton Women and the Aborigines Select Committee, 1835–1837,’ *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2004, pp. 1–28.

⁴⁶See Arjun Appadurai, ‘Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination,’ *Public Culture*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2000, pp. 1–19; David, ‘Transnational Advocacy in the Eighteenth Century’; Sean Scalmer, ‘Translating Contention: Culture, History, and the Circulation of Collective Action,’ *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2000, pp. 491–514. Appadurai distinguishes between globalization from above, defined by corporations, major multilateral agencies, policy experts, and national governments, and that from below, where local, grassroots actions mediate global politics. As Appadurai notes, the ‘most easily recognisable of these [grassroots] institutions are NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) concerned with mobilizing highly specific local, national, and regional groups on matters of equity, access, justice, and redistribution.’ Appadurai, ‘Grassroots Globalization,’ p. 15.

and political ‘web’ that mobilised humanitarian political action. Such groups included the Society of Friends, various penal reform groups, and leading humanitarians and anti-slavery activists such as Thomas Fowell Buxton, who directed the Parliamentary Select Committee on the condition of the Indigenous populations of Britain’s settler colonies, resulting in its 1837 *Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on the Aboriginal Tribes (British Settlements)*.⁴⁷ The inquiry took testimony over two years, including accounts of violence and atrocity, and its final report was written by members of Buxton’s evangelical abolitionist circle, principally by his cousin Anna Gurney of the prominent Quaker family, the Gurneys.⁴⁸ The colonial violence of settlers, often former convicts, was a central theme in the 1837 *Select Committee* report investigation into the condition of the Indigenous populations of Britain’s settler colonies.⁴⁹ Seeking to draw attention to the grim realities of Britain’s expansion, the report described the ‘appalling facts’ and ‘evidence of injustice and cruelty’ of colonisation, and painted the far reaches of Britain’s empire not as new lands or Edens but as ‘dark places of the earth, full of the habitations of cruelty’ where ‘every law of humanity and justice has been discarded.’⁵⁰ By the late eighteenth century, through the confluence of abolitionist and humanitarian currents, Quakers had come to define slavery as a particular form of ‘suffering’ and the slave trade an example of ‘cruelty.’⁵¹ Similarly, in the colonies of settlement, Quaker humanitarianisms would identify cruelty that incurred suffering, and where the ‘laws of humanity’ were suspended. Soon after the 1837 report, Quaker Thomas Hodgkin founded the Aborigines’ Protection Society (1837), described by Kenneth D. Nwora as an ‘important pressure group.’

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Elbourne, ‘The Sin of the Settler: The 1835–36 Select Committee on Aborigines and Debates over Virtue and Conquest in the Early Nineteenth-Century British White Settler Empire,’ *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2003.

⁴⁸ Laidlaw, ‘Aunt Anna’s Report,’ p. 6.

⁴⁹ Elbourne, ‘The Sin of the Settler.’ See also United Kingdom, House of Commons, *Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Aboriginal Tribes (British Settlements)*.

⁵⁰ United Kingdom, House of Commons, *Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Aboriginal Tribes (British Settlements)*, Preface, pp. v–vi. See also Elbourne, ‘The Sin of the Settler.’

⁵¹ Margaret Abruzzo, *Polemical Pain: Slavery, Cruelty and the Rise of Humanitarianism*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011, p. 18.

These metropolitan and affiliated organisations emerged from nineteenth-century philanthropic concerns and sought out reports, texts, and direct eye-witness accounts of suffering to provide evidence for their campaigns and to direct attention to peoples and situations that were deemed the most urgent and deserving. The mobility of text throughout humanitarian channels and its great reach thus moved these powerful sentiments beyond local colonial settings into interconnected colonial and metropolitan networks. Such writings reached a transnational humanitarian reading public, an affective community in both the metropole and the colonies, who were often moved in response to carefully crafted vignettes of the suffering Indigenous body and colonial depredation.

TRANSNATIONAL JOURNEYS: MOBILITY, TEXTUALITY, AND TRAVELLING ‘UNDER CONCERN’

Greater context is gained if we consider the multi-colony tour of Backhouse and Walker within a long tradition of Quaker mobility and travel with its origins in the mid-seventeenth century, and its well-established textual genre of narration of religious and investigative travel and the practice of print circulation. Backhouse and Walker’s antipodean journey was investigative, political, and strategic and must be viewed as part of a rich and long lineage, or ‘repertoire,’ of Quaker investigative travel, known as travelling ‘under concern,’ a religious and political Quaker tradition officially sponsored by the Society of Friends.

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there was a great amount of travel by Quakers across the Atlantic between Britain and the American colonies. English dissenter and founder of the Society of Friends George Fox (1624–1691) travelled throughout Britain as a radical, dissenting preacher and was often persecuted by the authorities who disapproved of his beliefs. Indeed, Fox’s ministry was defined by travel as he both preached and evaded prison, and during his life he undertook tours of Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. By the mid-seventeenth century, Society of Friends missionaries were travelling internationally. As H. Larry Ingle notes, ‘Quaker emissaries soon appeared in Ireland, Algiers, Constantinople, Rome, France, the Netherlands, northern Germany, and Poland, and there were also early forays into the English

colonies of Barbados, Jamaica, and the American mainland.⁵² Fox visited these British colonies between October 1671 and June 1673. Much of his work was concerned with expansion of the faith and the internal ordering of Quaker protocols. In New England Fox organised the first ever Yearly Meeting of Friends and in Barbados encountered African slaves for the first time.⁵³

The rise of print culture and the circulation of text were central to this travel enterprise. Quaker writings were voluminous, manifesting in personal and official letters, diaries, reports, official installments, and reports to their own Yearly Meeting, as well as travelogues and memoirs. 'From its inception,' writes Hilary Hinds, the 'Quaker travelling ministry was also a publishing ministry.' When George Fox announced his founding vision in 1652 of a 'great people,' his first act was to write, publish, and distribute a paper on his theology: 'travelling and writing went hand in hand,' writes Hinds.⁵⁴ Advancing an argument for the transnational nature of Quaker travel and advocacy, Sarah Crabtree argues that such itinerant 'Public Friends' were the 'lifeblood' of the transatlantic Quaker community and 'worked to unite its members behind a common set of principles'; they were the 'public face of the Society of Friends.'⁵⁵

The travelling Quaker ministry to and within American colonies was a well-beaten path by the eighteenth century. Such endeavour, at this time, was officially sponsored by Monthly (or local) and Yearly (now national) Society of Friends meetings, and was assessed and approved through internal Society of Friends decision-making processes and often financially supported by them. Travel was integral to the development of the rich Quaker transatlantic culture, and the travellers were not only men. As historian Rebecca Larson has shown, 'More than a thousand Quaker female ministers were active in the Anglo-American world before the Revolutionary War, when the Society of Friends constituted the Colonies'

⁵²H. Larry Ingle, 'Fox, George (1624–1691),' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, available [online]: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/10031> [Access Date 6 Feb 2012].

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Hilary Hinds, 'An Absent Presence: Quaker Narratives of Journeys to America and Barbados, 1671–81,' *Quaker Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2005, p. 6.

⁵⁵Sarah Crabtree, "'A Beautiful and Practical Lesson of Jurisprudence": The Transatlantic Quaker Ministry in the Age of Revolution', *Radical History Review*, no. 99, 2007, pp. 51–79.

third-largest religious group.⁵⁶ By the turn of the nineteenth century, Quakers had greatly intensified their public activism for peace and abolition, at times petitioning their respective governments across the globe. Quaker concern for the fate of indigenous peoples is also well known. In North America, Quakers were formal observers in ‘negotiations between the US Government and Native American Indian nations and witnessed treaty signings,’ and publicised the outcomes when they returned.⁵⁷ By the early nineteenth century, such travel under concern had moved well beyond the realm of the transatlantic to the British colonies of Australia, South Africa, Mauritius, and the new Pacific frontier, including Hawaii, Tahiti, and Aotearoa New Zealand. Such journeying relied upon and enabled the spread of extensive imperial networks, fuelled not only by abolitionist sentiment but more often by a multi-reform humanitarian agenda, including education, penal reform, and concern for indigenous peoples in Britain’s expanding settlements and plantations.⁵⁸

We must also locate this Quaker investigative journey and its particular repertoire of witness and textuality within the greater political context of the Age of Reform. In Britain, from the 1780s, major reformist initiatives, both moral and institutional, gave rise to changes in Parliament, the government, the law, the church, medicine, education, penal institutions, and slavery. After the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815), major unrest had emerged in Britain that contributed to these reforms and led to the social and administrative regeneration of England.⁵⁹ These developments extended beyond Britain to its colonies, and humanitarian and public concerns about the morality and economy of empire grew at home and abroad. Slavery had been abolished in 1807, and later, with the victory of the new Whig government, the Emancipation Act of 1833 for the Abolition of Slavery in the British Settlements was passed.

⁵⁶ Rebecca Larson, *Daughters of Light: Quaker Women Preaching and Prophesying in the Colonies and Abroad, 1700–1775*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999, p. 7.

⁵⁷ Crabtree, “A Beautiful and Practical Lesson of Jurisprudence”, p. 65.

⁵⁸ In the late 1830s Quaker Daniel Wheeler sailed in a ship purchased with Friends’ funds to the Australian colonies, New Zealand and the Pacific, to examine the ‘situation of the injured natives of the South Sea Islands,’ as well as Australian Aboriginal peoples, convicts and women. See Edmonds, “Travelling “Under Concern””.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Arthur Burns and Joanna Innes, *Rethinking the Age of Reform: Britain 1780–1850*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003; Christopher Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, pp. 139, 140.

The tour is also significant for its strategic urgency within the broad sweep of imperial reform and charged political climate in the 1830s, a peak period of humanitarian ferment, and with the rise of the travelling imperial inquiry after the Napoleonic wars—the ‘Age of Inquiry.’⁶⁰ As historian Zoë Laidlaw has outlined, between 1818 and 1826 there were sixteen British commissions of inquiry. Many were travelling: six travelled to non-European colonies and another three investigated Ireland.⁶¹ Later, in 1834, Britain’s ‘Poor Law Commission provided the template for 74 more inquiries alone.’⁶² Yet the Backhouse and Walker enquiry was also distinctive. Dissimilar to a formal colonial inquiry, it was not held in a courtroom, nor did it take place in London; it was neither a legal nor a minuted enterprise. This enquiry was conducted on the oceanic frontier. It was driven by faith, yet official, in the sense that it was formally sponsored and financially supported by the British Society of Friends and assisted by the colonial governors and the elite. This was an expensive and sometimes perilous Quaker humanitarian investigation of witnessing of a different character, with its collected testimony distributed across various humanitarian textual genres and multiple reading publics.

JOURNEYS OF REFORM: QUAKERS AS ‘INSTITUTIONAL OPPONENTS’

Considering networks and focusing on questions of connection, translation, and reception also enables exploration of those to whom these Quakers appealed, those who assisted them, and the nature of political information flow and policy change. Because Quakers possessed specific modes of networked political and humanitarian activity expressly driven by their faith, their political strategies and positionality can be studied. For example, in considering social protest in the mid- to late-twentieth century and transnational social movements, political scientists Jenkins and Klandermans utilise the concept of ‘institutional opponents:’ that is, social agents who oppose particular state policies, yet are acting within

⁶⁰See Zoë Laidlaw, ‘Investigating Empire: Humanitarians, Reform and the Commission of Eastern Inquiry,’ *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 40, no. 5, 2012, pp. 749–768.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid.

the formal political system, supported and sponsored by it.⁶³ Evangelical humanitarians such as Backhouse and Walker may be productively conceptualised in this way. For them, the state (or in this case the colonial governor or Colonial Office) was not merely the enemy, but ‘simultaneously target, sponsor and antagonist, as well as the organiser of the political system and the arbiter of victory.’⁶⁴ Although highly critical of the processes of British settler colonialism, and the dispossession upon which this new society of Van Diemen’s Land was formed, Backhouse did not seek its halt; rather, he argued for a Christian and humane colonisation, one based on civilisation, amelioration, and compensation for Aboriginal peoples.

By 1837 Backhouse would come to condemn the treatment and usurpation of Aboriginal peoples in the Australian colonies, yet simultaneously support colonisation and immigration. He and Walker worked hard to establish a new settler society and what they termed a ‘Christian colonisation.’ Governor Arthur sought their advice and they provided, as Arthur put it, ‘useful suggestions to the local government.’⁶⁵ Backhouse and Walker were keenly interested in the successful emigration and Christian settlement of free male and female colonists, and they actively proffered advice on colonial affairs on the building of a settler civil society.⁶⁶ Letter books from their time in Van Diemen’s Land reveal their concerns and advice to Arthur regarding settlement and the building of state infrastructure and bureaucracy, explaining to him how the Quakers registered marriages, births, and deaths, as well as proffering advice on the establishment of a postal system. Backhouse and Walker encouraged savings banks, benevolent societies and ladies’ committees

⁶³On Craig Jenkins and Bert Klandermans, see David, ‘Transnational Advocacy in the Eighteenth Century,’ p. 379.

⁶⁴See the ideas of political scientists such as Craig Jenkins and Bert Klandermans, *The Politics of Social Protest*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1995, p. 3. See also Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006, p. 211.

⁶⁵Edmonds, ‘Travelling “Under Concern”’; W.N. Oats, *A Question of Survival: Quakers in Australia in the Nineteenth Century*, St. Lucia and London: University of Queensland Press, 1985, p. 90.

⁶⁶James Backhouse, ‘A Letter to Thomas Fowell Buxton on the Emigration of Free Females to Van Diemen’s Land’ and ‘A Letter to Elizabeth Fry on the Emigration of Free Females to Van Diemen’s Land’, FHL, Letter book 1831–1834, Ms. vol. 1, p. S48.

for prison visits based on Elizabeth Fry's model. Operating within official and elite political and imperial circuits, they were also empowered to critique them. In April 1837, as he was preparing to leave the Australian colonies, Backhouse wrote to the Governor of the Colony of New South Wales, Richard Bourke, arguing forcefully that few people of 'reflection' could 'justify the measures adopted by the British in taking possession of the territory of this [Aboriginal] people', who had committed 'no offense against our Nation; but who ... had their lands usurped, *without an attempt at purchase by treaty, or any offer of reasonable compensation*, and a class of people introduced into their country, amongst which were many, both free and bond, who regardless of law ... *practiced appalling cruelties upon this helpless race* ... Upon every hand, it is evident that a *heavy responsibility* has thus been brought upon the British Nation; in which also the colonial government is involved'.⁶⁷

Backhouse therefore indicted both the British nation and the colonial government. Arguing for 'reasonable compensation,' he claimed that these governments had a 'bounden duty to make all the restitution in their power, by adopting efficient measures for the benefit of the Aborigines of Australia, in affording them protection and support, and in endeavouring to civilise and settle them'.⁶⁸ Backhouse, in line with a range of humanitarians at this time, argued that the government should use funds from the sale of lands taken from Aboriginal people for their amelioration.⁶⁹ In referring to the 'heavy responsibility' and 'bounden duty' of the British administration, Backhouse tied honourable compensation to civility in a manner highly suggestive of the doctrine of trusteeship enunciated by Edmund Burke, in which the guiding principle of trusteeship was that Britain had a sacred duty to the non-European people whom it ruled.⁷⁰

As adjudicators of empire, witnesses to suffering, and contributors to colonial reports and inquiries, Backhouse and Walker's work was

⁶⁷James Backhouse to Governor Richard Bourke, 25 April 1837, from Van Diemen's Land, in 'Letters to the Governor of New South Wales respecting the Aborigines', *A Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Colonies*, Appendix P, cxxiv. [Italics mine.].

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹See Edmonds, 'Travelling "Under Concern"'.

⁷⁰Andrew Porter, 'Trusteeship, Anti-slavery and Humanitarianism,' in Andrew Porter and William Roger Louis, eds., *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Vol. 3: The Nineteenth Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 198–221.

connected to and laid the groundwork for other humanitarians and evangelical Quaker activists, some at home in London, who did not travel. Medical doctor and Quaker Thomas Hodgkin (known today for identifying the disease Hodgkin's lymphoma) is a case in point. His letters and reports across a range of humanitarian concerns were prodigious, yet he rarely left his armchair. As Laidlaw observes, Hodgkin campaigned for the rights of indigenous peoples across the British Empire, but he too was a 'sympathetic critic' of both the missionary and anti-slavery movements, and was 'not afraid to question the tactics of his fellow campaigners, nor to reflect honestly and critically on their progress.'⁷¹ By the 1840s and especially by the 1850s, he was against imperial expansion and would be deeply frustrated that the fate of colonised peoples had not attracted the same intense level of concern and campaign action as had the anti-slavery cause in Britain. In 1836, in evidence to the Select Committee on Aborigines in 1836, Hodgkin opined that 'the slave trade and slavery was, with all its abominations, a smaller evil' than the effects of colonisation on southern Africa. Indeed, as Laidlaw points out, he made himself a controversial figure for suggesting that violence towards Aboriginal people was a greater sin than slavery, leading to disputes with the Anti-Slavery Society.⁷²

QUAKER WITNESSING: PICTURING SUFFERING FOR A TRANSNATIONAL AUDIENCE

Building on a long transatlantic tradition of Quaker investigative enquiry or 'travelling under concern' to witness the sufferings of others, Backhouse and Walker collected information and testimony from sealers, Aboriginal women in sealing camps in the Bass Strait, officials, settlers, military pensioners, and labouring convicts in chain gangs across the colonies.⁷³ Supported by colonial governors, they had the opportunity to explore the operation of the colonies of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land at all levels. In Van Diemen's Land, this included the arrangements by which convicts were 'appropriated' to settlers to work as 'assigned servants' in return for clothing, food, and lodging—but no

⁷¹Laidlaw, 'Heathens, Slaves and Aborigines,' p. 137.

⁷²Ibid., pp. 148–149.

⁷³Edmonds, 'Travelling "Under Concern."'

wage. The Quakers also travelled by sea to the more isolated penal stations, sites reserved for convicts considered to be serious offenders. They not only visited road gangs and pitied the chain gangs, where male convicts sentenced to hard labour toiled, but also the ‘factories’ where female convicts under punishment worked hard at the washtubs and other labour-intensive tasks. Flogging of convicts and women in the Bass Strait was one form of punishment that drew Backhouse and Walker’s particular attention and greatly agitated their moral and religious sensibilities.

Pain and suffering, as witnessed by Quakers travelling ‘under concern’ to slave plantations and to the violent frontiers of colonised lands, were both relational and, through visual and written text, made representational to a transnational audience. The problems of testimony and suffering are worth considering in the light of what Keck and Sikkink call ‘information politics.’ On the Bass Strait oceanic frontier, the abolitionist tactic of using, as Keck and Sikkink note, a ‘dramatic personal testimony to give ... facts human meaning’⁷⁴ and to persuade an audience far away was put to work by Backhouse and Walker. This ‘human rights methodology’ gives centrality to testimony and ‘dramatises the situation of ... victims in turning cold facts in human stories intended to move people into action’, they note.⁷⁵ Yet in this complex antipodean world of cross-cultural encounter between Aboriginal women and a new moral and evangelical empire, ‘facts’ were debatable, and issues of translation and mediation of the testimonies of these women who were construed as slaves reveal the curious travel and translation of abolitionist sentiment. This example gives us pause to consider the moments when, as Keck and Sikkink have pointed out, travelling advocates collected testimony of those they deemed to be oppressed and yet ‘local people ... sometimes lose control over their stories in a transnational campaign.’⁷⁶ Yet many of the women saw themselves not as enslaved, but as free, notwithstanding the real instances of sealer violence, according to Walker’s unpublished diaries of the visit to Flinders Island. Although in Walker’s mind the women had been held in a state of slavery, he wrote with acuity and admiration on their inherent agency, dignity, and freedom: ‘I have been

⁷⁴Keck and Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders*, p. 19.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid.

led to admire in them, along with their good nature, or desire to please and to be pleased, a certain independence of character, and a dignity, I may correctly term it, which reminds the observer that they have not in their own estimation forfeited their liberty. They appear to feel that they are a free people, and voluntary free agents.’⁷⁷ In the Bass Strait some Aboriginal women desired to stay with the sealers, and clearly could maintain their cultural practices in various ways. Some sealers no doubt cared for Aboriginal women, and they may not have wished to marry each other in Christian ceremonies. More recently, key scholars such as Lyndall Ryan and Patsy Cameron have argued for the women’s agency, as sealers in their own right, engaged in economic and cross-cultural relationships of mutual accommodation, where European men, too, could become indigenised.⁷⁸

On Flinders Island in the Bass Strait in 1832, the Quakers used the language of the ‘humane’ in opposition to barbarity and cruelty in their eye-witness testimony of the treatment, including the flogging of Aboriginal women whom they believed to be ‘enslaved’ to sealers. Walker wrote: ‘[S]ome ... bear testimony to the cruel treatment they have received from their unfeeling masters ... and were treated with great inhumanity by their inhuman men.’⁷⁹ By condemning slavery they also at once asserted their own humaneness, something which ‘struck at the heart of slaveholders’ and their critics’ moral identities, writes Abruzzo.⁸⁰ Yet the language of humanity, sympathy, and suffering too often centred on the body of the enslaved, colonized, or

⁷⁷Journals of George Washington Walker, 13 October 1832, p. 140, State Library New South Wales (hereafter SLNSW).

⁷⁸Lyndall Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1981; Lyndall Ryan, ‘Aboriginal Women and Agency in the Process of Conquest: A Review of Some Recent Work,’ *Australian Feminist Studies*, 1986, pp. 35–43. Patsy Cameron, *Grease and Ochre: The Blending of Two Cultures at the Colonial Sea Frontier*, Launceston: Fullers Bookshop, 2011.

⁷⁹Edmonds, ‘Collecting Looerryminer’s “Testimony,”’ p. 29. See also George Washington Walker, ‘Journals 1831–41’, B709 1832, Oct 1832, p. 132, SLNSW.

⁸⁰Abruzzo, *Polemical Pain*, p. 9.

subaltern subject, and on the infliction of pain on that body, rather than the 'rights of those subjects to be free from pain,' as Abruzzo suggests.⁸¹ Humanitarian compassion, sympathy, and witnessing could diverge widely from rights-based talk and action. Although Backhouse wrote passionately to Buxton on the 'rights of Aborigines' in respect of the colonisation of their lands while in Van Diemen's Land, he did not invoke the 'rights' of the Bass Strait Aboriginal women. Rather, he spoke of their cruel treatment by sealers and, employing the gendered language of moral protection, urged the women be protected against exploitation or abuse. Above all, the Quakers desired that the sealers marry the women so that their union should be a Christian one.⁸²

Rights discourse, and the way in which it is mobilised, is never in practice universal and too often it is gendered. Backhouse's language of morality and emancipation, of overcoming degradation, was aimed at the women's moral realignment, protection, and reform, and not at their 'rights' or freedom. Late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century humanitarianism and modern post-1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights discourse are not synonymous, and there is little direct linear connection between them. Rather, they may be traced as interrelated discourses arising from Enlightenment thought and related 'rights' talk and movements. Broadly, although the 'rights of man' were more formally concerned with the rise of liberal democracy, suffrage, and the structure and authority of the state to use its coercive power over citizens, 'rights' ideas deployed by abolitionists and humanitarians concerned international moves to recognise individual and collective duties towards others to protect against exploitation or abuse. Quakers such as Backhouse, who spoke of the 'just right of man, conferred upon him by his creator,' belonged to this latter group. The multi-sited, networked nature of Quaker reform certainly makes it a premier case study for scholars of transnational social movements, yet a historically located and specific analysis must be brought to this subject. David's claim that the Quakers may be described as the world's 'first transnational human rights movement' too readily collapses the contemporary transnational with late eighteenth-century empire and thus conflates humanitarianism with human rights.⁸³

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 48.

⁸² Edmonds, 'Collecting Looerryminer's "Testimony,"' p. 29.

⁸³ David, 'Transnational Advocacy in the Eighteenth Century'.

The myriad tensions and ambiguities around the politics of witnessing, moral sentiment, suffering, and the constitution of self and other are also amply apparent here. As Talal Asad notes, the dialogic relationship of sympathy in the mutual constitution of self and (colonised) other is ‘fundamental to asymmetrical relations of power.’⁸⁴ Such encounters between Europeans and indigenous peoples often threatened the integrity of the European colonising self, he suggests, leading to an ‘antithesis between the colonizing subject of sympathy and ... the colonized subject of suffering’ as interdependent identities.⁸⁵ Thus, sympathy and sentiment might be considered as both the constitution and assertion of self and other, and as key ‘emotional complexes shaping relations of domination and subjection.’⁸⁶

This uneven relationship is evident in the politics of witnessing: a witness can occupy the position of the ‘disembodied observer,’ as Dipesh Chakrabarty explains, which lends authority to their claims.⁸⁷ Yet ‘witness’ can also refer to the sense of being an embodied witness to one’s own suffering and trauma and of testifying to this experience. When intimate or personal experience is translated by a ‘disembodied’ witness, the object of compassion can lose control of her story. The dynamic between these two kinds of witnesses in Backhouse and Walker’s narrative of enslaved Aboriginal women is thus unequal: the victim of suffering is subordinate to the testimony about that suffering. It is critical to explore these troubling ambiguities of moral testimony and the interplay of witnessing and testimony, for, to echo Fassin, the ‘politics of compassion is a politics of inequality,’ and thus may operate in eliciting the ‘fantasy of a global moral community’ and come to act as ‘consensual force.’⁸⁸ In this way, we see how humanitarian discourses for the

⁸⁴Talal Asad, ‘Reflections on Violence, Law and Humanitarianism,’ *Critical Inquiry*, available [online]: http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/reflections_on_violence_law_and_humanitarianism/#_ftnref31 [Access Date July 14, 2014].

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 119.

⁸⁸Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, p. 3.

protection, civilisation, and uplift of Aboriginal people could too readily come to be rationalised as strategies for their control, surveillance, and dispossession.⁸⁹ The Aboriginal women, including Jackey, were taken to the remote ‘Establishment for Aborigines’ on Flinders Island. Here, with other Tasmanian Aboriginal people, and under the guise of protection and civilization, they were effectively incarcerated by the colonial government in the midst of the violent land wars between Aborigines and European settlers, known as the ‘Black War.’ Tragically, many of them would die there, not from the effects of slavery, but of disease, cold, and hunger, and from the rapacious British colonisation of their lands.⁹⁰

CONCLUSION

Travelling Quakers Backhouse and Walker were engaged in vigorous political reformist activity in the Antipodes. They may be viewed as activists, or active campaigners, who worked towards a moral, religious, and social improvement and were involved in some of the most salient and pressing questions of both empire and modernity: freedom, slavery, and other forms of unfree labour and indigenous dispossession. They were not agitators or activists operating outside the empire, nor were they uncritical imperial agents. Rather, as public Quaker evangelicals they occupied a complex position as ‘institutional opponents’ or ‘sympathetic critics’ working within imperial political circuits to broker various humanitarian reforms, however faltering, in the furtherance of their particular moral empire. Indeed, they indicted the British Empire for the violent usurpation of indigenous peoples in new colonies of settlement, yet condoned settlement in principle and argued for a moral or Christian colonisation. In this way, they were reformist, working to create change within the system, but not challenging the structure—that is, colonization—itself.

This significant tour to the Antipodes was enabled and nurtured by a tradition of Quaker travel, witnessing, and textuality of at least two

⁸⁹ See Tracey Banivanua Mar and Penelope Edmonds, ‘Indigenous and Settler Relations,’ in Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre, eds., *The Cambridge History of Australia: Indigenous and Colonial Australia*, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 342–366.

⁹⁰ Edmonds, ‘Collecting Looerryminer’s “Testimony”’; Ryan, *Tasmanian Aborigines*.

centuries. Its 'repertoire' or style of witness to suffering was further influenced by the nexus of the Age of Reform and the so-called Age of Inquiry with the rise of mobility and print culture in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. This time was a particularly heightened imperial moment that saw a crucial shift in mobilised humanitarian action from anti-slavery to concern for the welfare and protection of Aboriginal peoples in far-flung British settlements. These Quakers were also enabled by and, at times, beholden to the colonial state and colonial elite. Their activist relationship with the state, much like that of contemporary international nongovernmental organisations (INGOs), was as 'institutional opponents,' but this connection was also both fraught and symbiotic, revealing the ambiguities of sentiment and the troubled moral economy of compassion as entwined vectors of humanitarian governance and imperial power. Religious humanitarians have a long history of transnational activism, yet above all we see continuity as well as change. Although much work on religious transnational advocacy can be overly positivist, this case reminds us that the politics of compassion and witnessing are perennially problematic. The Society of Friends continues to have strong engagement with transnational activism today, and similar to other INGOs are driven by moral and religious sentiments, which have major roles in shaping the global, if fraught and complex, politics of compassion.

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