QUIP 2026 talk

QUAKERS AND PUBLISHING

Just to introduce myself: my name is Joanna Godfrey Wood and I have been a Quaker all my life. I was born into a Quaker family, in the liberal unprogrammed tradition, in the UK. I attended a Quaker boarding school. I am presently a member of North-West London Area Meeting, soon to be London Area Meeting, in Britain Yearly Meeting. My working life was in book publishing and I worked as an editor for around 40 years, mostly in illustrated non-fiction publishing, focusing on lifestyle, alternative health, green issues and mind-body-spirit topics, including many aspects of religion and spirituality.

This talk is in two parts: the first is about what I publish and why, and the second is about Quaker publishing more generally, past and present.

About my publishing

I started writing and publishing my own books post-retirement and they are all Quaker-themed. I attended the Equipping for Ministry course at the Woodbrooke Quaker study centre and embarked on a project to study

the writings of Margaret Fell, one of the first generation of Quakers. I found myself transcribing her work from 1710, which is titled *A Brief Collection of Remarkable Passages.* This work will soon be republished in two volumes by Inner Light Books at Barclay Press under the title *Dear Hearts: Collected Writings of Margaret Fell*, with new introductions by Stuart Masters, Ben Pink Dandelion and myself. The title *Dear Hearts* is a nod to the way Fell writes in many of her pieces. That is how she addresses her readers quite frequently, with love. She is bold, critical and forthright in what she says and how she thinks people ought to live, but behind her words there is always great love.

In the process of doing this work, I have of course been hugely inspired by Fell's writings, and she has been the inspiration behind all my Quaker writing so far. To try to answer the first part of the issues before us about Quaker publishing I will talk about my own publishing rather than anyone else's because that is what I know best. My books *Travelling in the Light* and *In STEP with Testimony* both take themes that we are familiar with in Quakerism today and explore how they are found in the writings of Margaret Fell. To give an example, in terms of Quaker values (simplicity, truth, equality, peace etc) my eye snagged on the theme of 'peace' in Fell's writings. For example, '…the Members have the same care over one another, and where one Member suffers, all

the Members may suffer with it. And here is the Unity of the Spirit, and the Bond of Peace.' So the word 'peace' here is more about 'peace within' and showing peace towards each other, while today we might more easily understand it as 'feeling peaceful' or striving for 'peace in the world'. This caused me to remember and write about my youthful participation in anti-war demonstrations. So in my work transcribing Fell's original *Brief Collection*, I was focusing on how early Quaker thinking might inspire us today. Fell continued to set me thinking in my two next books: *In Search of Stillness* and *In Search of Hope,* but in these I take her inspiration more broadly and suggest practical ways to help us live in our modern world, now. Stillness, in my interpretation, is about feeling the still spot within, and listening and meditating. Fell says: 'wait in the silence and Earthliness, and Obedience, wait Patiently, and you shall have the Light of Life.' This led me to write about how we can all find inner stillness while waiting in silence, whether in meeting for worship or at other times and my book offers guided meditations for doing this. In I*n Search of Hope* I was inspired by Fell's words" 'Therefore all turn to the voice that calls you, this is the way, walk in it. And that which turns and draws your minds towards God, the Light, which cometh from the Father of Light turn to, and there will ye witness a living Hope.' These words led me to explore how we can all find hope in the fleeting, uplifting moments of everyday life.

But why did I home in on Fell? Well, she has been much overlooked over the centuries, and men have received the lion's share of the attention. This may sound familiar. All I can do here is give a deep sigh – but it's not too late to broadcast Fell's thoughts and explore her great contribution to Quakerism. Quakers always had equality at their very heart, but they made concessions to the way things were in the world in the seventeenth century. Fell played a very important part in the founding group at the start of Quakerism, and we can be sure that her ideas were alive, respected, listened to, and taken seriously as Quakerism gradually took shape in the early years of the first generation. She played a major role not just in the administration and nurture of travelling Friends, but in the ideas that made Quakerism a distinctive and important departure from the status quo.

Writing about Quakerism and getting my books published have become extremely important ways of exploring my faith and my self. Some people have liked what I have done; others have not. But that is the way of things. Sales will never be as good as titles in mainstream publishing might be, but that has never been part of my mission and it cannot realistically be the expectation of publishers when they are doing their projections and forecasts. Quaker publishing, at least in the UK, is a niche activity and you can't really compare

it with other kinds of publishing. Perhaps if the titles found markets worldwide, then we might start seeing bigger sales. However, some of the ideas we look at in the books might not necessarily find a receptive readership, since culture and styles of Quakerism worldwide vary hugely.

I suppose my favourite kind of Quaker writing falls into the category of 'spiritual memoir'. That is my mode of exploration. I just get an idea or a direction and start trying to go further and express it. I am a great fan of Julian of Norwich, the 14th-century mystic. So I like Julian's idea about 'Godness' being in us, and us being in 'Godness', and this gives me the confidence to try to write down what is within me. I also like Julian's approach to writing, which is to sit with an idea or an experience, and meditate on it, going into layers beneath the surface, if possible. Many of us find that the act of writing allows us to dig deeper and explore without boundaries, giving us back many treasures, which we can then share. This was roughly what Julian did as an anchoress when she was voluntarily walled-up in her cell in Norwich, so that she could be led further and write down what she wanted to express. She was relieved of the mundane duties of other women, who had to marry to survive, do a great deal of manual work, often with many household and caring responsibilities. The same, but different, was probably true for Margaret Fell, who was

cast into gaol because of her Quaker ideas and actions but who then found that she had time available to be able to think and write. Although I am not myself imprisoned, I try to sit with an idea over a long time and priotize writing as a quiet contemplative activity. I drill down until I find the words to say what I have found within. This may involve delving into the past, making comparisons, just trying to unravel something and seeing what I can learn from it. I just like to express what I find within.

So now some comments about Quaker publishing, past and present

One of the things Quakers have not been good at over the centuries is spreading the word about our faith path. I think a good start was made in the seventeenth century, with the writings of George Fox and others. But since then I feel various factors have crept in. There may have been a fear of prosletysing, or trying to persuade others to adopt religious ideas, which may have held some writers back. And this lasts to this day. I often hear a reticence amongst Friends about saying the ‘wrong’ thing, or failing to say the ‘right’ thing. But are we missing out on the opportunity to let others know who we are and what we do? The vast scope of possibility in Quaker ideas. While there have been some very good books published, I think there could be more and they

could be more widely available in high street bookshops. At present you don't see them in the main market place. We tend to keep our explorations and our findings to ourselves rather than broadcasting them, and this means that we are not reaching the people who might want to hear about them and read them.

Another thing that I think could have been holding us back is that traditionally anything we published had to be shared and discerned first by the Quaker community, so that the writing did not just arise from the leadings of one individual. I myself have been challenged over this very issue when a couple of Friends did not agree with my approach, which probably seemed somewhat unconventional, perhaps. But what comes up for me, as a Quaker, is, to my mind, Quaker. And that is good enough. So though I always listen to constructive advice, the views of others sometimes feel as though my best self, my precious ideas, are being watered down or even removed because of a drive for Quaker consensus or 'correct Quaker thought', which sometimes seems a bit vague and woolly, and trying to avoid offending anyone. In any event, Quaker ideas gradually get modified as the decades go by. However, I feel we need some sort of framework and some certainty in this day and age and we need to put our Quaker ideas out there because they are current and relevant, of use in the modern world. We should not let them remain hidden way back in the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and consigned to the bin of history. We have a duty to demonstrate how our Quaker heritage is for our use now, in the present day, for anyone who wants or needs it. Perhaps we could agree that there does need to be some form of editorial guidance or oversight, otherwise people who think they are writing on behalf of Quakerism, in the name of Quakerism, might not really be. They might be giving a misleading account.

To return to the issue of editorial support for Quaker writers: we do have to be a bit careful about how this sort of oversight might be arranged. Perhaps a small group needs to be set up to work through the writing process with the author, in the traditional Quaker way. However, this can be very time-consuming and be asking a lot of those involved. Spiritual discernment would have to be a major feature in guiding the content of the book. I have certainly read some very good Quaker books in which this has been an important part of the process. Another point to consider is that editorial support does not seem to be offered routinely in mainstream book publishing today and so it's left to the author to write the book however they see fit – and hope that it passes muster. So the author, if they want to, has to find their own editorial supporters, who might offer critique and helpful advice. However because these may be friends and relatives, loyal co-workers and so on, the end result may be

uncritical, written to please the author, rather than being an objective review, highlighting weaknesses as well as strengths.

Ultimately, with Quaker books, word of mouth seems to be what matters most in terms of a book gaining a good reputation and the books selling, usually, via author book talks and signing sessions, study groups, Quaker bookshops, and via special orders placed with mainstream local bookshops and online.