The Beautiful Soul of John Woolman, Apostle of Abolition

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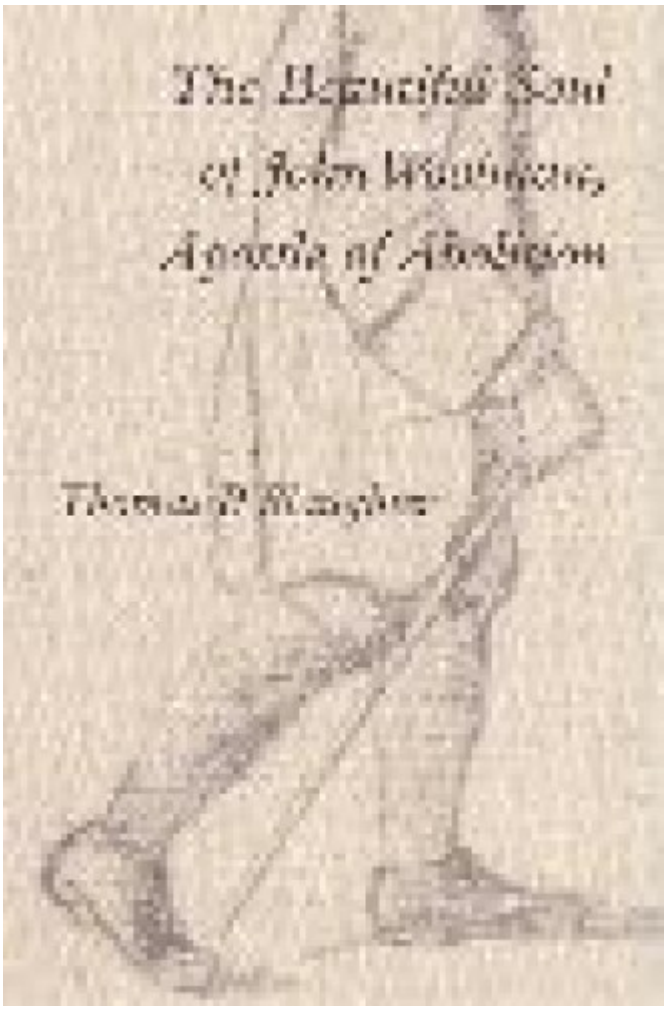
In Review



The Beautiful Soul of John Woolman, Apostle of Abolition

Thomas P. Slaughter
Hill and Wang

In the years preceding the American Revolution, the New Jersey tailor John Woolman (1720-1772) opposed many of the evils of his day. He was not particularly concerned about the British Parliament's taxation policies. Instead he protested slavery, the unjust dispossession of American Indians and the abuse of animals, as well as exploitative economic relations generally. He spoke and wrote passionately, and he expressed his views dramatically. In the 1760s Woolman began wearing undyed clothes as a protest against wasteful fashion, and he announced that he would never consume sugar, molasses or rum because those products were made with slave labor. In the early 1770s he walked across England to bear witness against the mistreatment of coach horses.

Woolman was a Quaker who, as Thomas P. Slaughter tells us in this new biography, modeled himself on the early Christians and the Old Testament prophets. He belonged to a peculiar 18th-century religious community, but it is almost impossible for modern readers, on first encountering Woolman, to escape the conclusion that he was ahead of his time.

Woolman helped turn the Quakers against slavery, but he did not acquire fame until after his death and the publication of his journal, in which he described the gradual, often painful process through which he came to recognize his own complicity in an economy founded on slave labor and sought to explain the implications of this discovery. The journal is a compelling piece of autobiography, and it provides much of the material for Slaughter's narrative, but it can be a frustrating historical source.

Confident that God spoke to them directly, 18th-century Quaker journal writers recorded dreams, visions and other revelatory experiences with an eye toward advancing God's instructive purposes. They often shared drafts of their entries with other Quakers and revised their journals in an ongoing effort to get their messages right. The revision process could last a lifetime because the text of each journal would be published only after the writer's death. At that time the journal would be revised one last time by a committee appointed by the Quakers' Overseers of the Press.

The Quaker journal writers wrote in a complex social environment, but they tended to describe themselves alone. Though they occasionally discussed social encounters, family relations and business practices, they did so only with divine purposes in mind. They believed that the only real significance to be found in their stories

stemmed from their personal relationship with God.

Woolman's journal thus leaves many things out, so to round out his narrative Slaughter draws upon his subject's other writings, including essays, letters and account books. He also relies on his own intuition and tales that have been passed down through generations. Unfortunately, Slaughter indulges in extravagant guesswork, and the end result too often resembles fiction.

The journal, for example, fails to identify Woolman's childhood friends or tell us much about the books he read in his early years. Slaughter therefore relies on an oral account first recorded in the 1930s by a descendant of the Quaker merchant John Smith for the information that Smith was Woolman's childhood friend. Slaughter then discusses some books that he knows that the Smith family had access to, paying particular attention to *Paradise Lost* and *Don Quixote*. Speculating with disarming abandon, he suggests that the young Woolman disliked all poetry, but that he would have been intrigued by Cervantes.

Woolman's later years are better documented, thanks in part to Quaker meeting records. But when Slaughter discusses Woolman as an adult, he continues to speculate, often needlessly. For example, Woolman mentions in his journal that he met some Indians in Philadelphia in 1761, but he does not name them. Slaughter tries unsuccessfully to identify the group, apparently unaware that other records of the encounter exist: Woolman met the Munsee preacher Papunhank on the occasion in question. Papunhank was a prophet whose beliefs seemed to resemble Quakerism, and his visits to Philadelphia in 1760 and 1761 caused a sensation among Quakers on both sides of the Atlantic.

Slaughter does not explore the transatlantic institutional Quaker context in which his subject worked. Many of the issues that preoccupied Woolman, including slavery, the treatment of Indians and the payment of wartime taxes, generated wide-ranging discussions involving Quaker meetings as far apart as London, Philadelphia, North Carolina, Virginia, New York and New England. Nonetheless, influenced by the way Woolman told his own tale, Slaughter consistently depicts him as intellectually alone. Other antislavery campaigners get short shrift.

There are other omissions and errors in Slaughter's research. He follows the lead of an earlier biographer in insisting that Woolman was the ghostwriter of the Philadelphia Quakers' 1754 statement against slavery, but the evidence for that

assertion is weak. Had he examined the original editions of Woolman's first two antislavery pamphlets, he would not have asserted that Woolman added a subtitle to the second piece to signal that he had written it for a larger audience, including not just Quakers but "the Professors of Christianity of every Denomination." Both pamphlets carried the same subtitle. If he had consulted the original imprint of Woolman's pamphlet *Considerations on Pure Wisdom*, he would not have titled his chapter on Woolman's life in 1758 "Pure Wisdom"; nor would he have relied on that essay for evidence of the author's state of mind in that year. With input from the Overseers of the Press, Woolman composed and published *Considerations on Pure Wisdom* not in 1758, but ten years later, in 1768.

Chronology is not Slaughter's principal concern. On the contrary, he presents Woolman as a man whose fundamental beliefs never changed, who sought to maintain rigorous consistency and who stayed—as Quakers are supposed to stay—simple. This leads him to sidestep or ignore the slow, gradual and often incomplete evolution of Woolman's thinking.

Speculating about the young tailor's thoughts in 1746, Slaughter writes, "Wearing clothes made from fabric that his parents had bought from a merchant who also sold West Indian rum was tantamount to embracing the slave trade." Woolman never articulated such a position, and he certainly had not reached that conclusion as early as 1746. As Slaughter much later briefly acknowledges, Woolman sold West Indian rum in his own shop until the mid-1750s, and as a householder he acquired and distributed the liquor for at least a decade longer.

Similarly, Slaughter asserts without evidence that Woolman refused to step on plush carpets or sit on soft chairs. If that had been the case, someone would have commented on it, and there is a comfy chair at Swarthmoor Hall in England that has been preserved like a relic since the 18th century because Woolman is supposed to have sat in it.

Slaughter works intuitively, and he paints with a broad brush in an effort to capture the deep meaning of Woolman's life and message. Ironically, however, because he invents some details, ignores others and collapses the story line, his work seems to run counter to Woolman's fundamental belief that God communicated to him through a series of precise, immediate experiences. The best way for anyone to learn from Woolman would be to examine his life and ministry carefully.