

Judith Hayden: *In Search of Margaret Fell*, London: Quaker Books 2002, 189 pages, £6.00 (ISBN: 0 85245 335 3).

Reading the title, you may expect a scientific research with a lot of well-referenced quotations in antiquated language that is difficult to comprehend and footnotes arguing for or against some scholarly position. But instead of this, you will be immediately taken into the middle of Ulverston marketplace back in 1652, where you will soon feel Margaret Fell glancing at you. There's no escape from her stare – she's there in flesh and blood, and you can relive with her the moment when the then 28-year old George Fox convinced her of the truth he found.

Margaret Fell, born Margaret Askew in 1614, was a respected gentlewoman in Furness (then Lancashire, now Cumbria). Her home in Swarthmoor became one of the first regular meeting places for early Friends, being under the protection of Margaret's husband Thomas Fell. However, following his death in 1657 and the Restoration three years later, Margaret Fell quickly lost her privileged position and spent several prison sentences for the "crime" of religious dissent – like many Friends did in those days. In 1669, she married the ten year younger George Fox, but she saw of him even less than of her busy first husband (who was MP and Justice of the Peace in the Cromwell era). Her final years were dedicated to the task of organising Friends, but also to that of constantly reminding them that living in the Light is much more than dressing in a dull way and saying "thee" and "thou" to everyone. At the age of 86, she condemned Friends' rigid and uniform interpretation of plainness as a "silly, poor gospel" (p.171). She died two years later, in 1702, having outlived her younger second husband.

Judith Hayden's portray of Margaret Fell is to an ordinary historical account what a painting is to an architect's drawing. The colours may not all be accurate, some of the shapes and details invented – but it is much easier to relate to. We can see the "mother of Quakerism" as a real mother of eight daughters and one son and share her feelings, concerns, sorrows and joys – and shudder at the fervour and zest with which she fought for the right of Friends to worship in their own way.

Despite being more a novel than a research, the book still uses a lot of quotations from Margaret Fell's own writings, George Fox's journal and other contemporary sources, which are referenced in notes at the back. It is also interspersed with Judith Hayden's own memories and thoughts, yet another way of making Margaret Fell's life more relevant for us today.

The only disappointment comes towards the end. The final part must have been written in a hurry: the last twenty years of Margaret Fell's life are squeezed into only a few pages, a whole series of brief quotes (p.150) is not referenced or explained, thereby remaining somewhere between obscure and incomprehensible, and the page numbers for some references are inaccurate. It's a sad ending to an otherwise very good read.

Klaus Huber