QUAKER CONSTITUTIONALISM AND THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF JOHN DICKINSON. By Jane E. Calvert. Cambridge University Press 2009. Pp. 382. ISBN: 0-521-88436-5.

In some respects, the very title of Jane Calvert's *Quaker Constitutionalism and the Political Thought of John Dickinson* seems to contain an oxymoron. Quaker theology is not generally associated with concepts that seem as rigid as "constitutionalism." Members of the Religious Society of Friends are noted for their social and religious spontaneity, for their refusal to be bound by hide-bound traditions and conventions, and by their tendency to remain aloof from participation in the political arena. This reality is among the reasons that Calvert's arguments are so fascinating and important.

It is helpful to provide context by pointing out that even while eschewing formal contracts, Friends have shaped their theology and behaviors around what might be described as contractual premises. For example, Quakers' refusal to swear an oath of truth is partly based on the premise that by taking an oath of truth (as in legal testimony) they were implying that there might be times when they were *not* telling the truth—but Quakers' contract with each other, their God, and their communities require that one is *always* honor-bound (contracted) to speak only what is true. It is also helpful, by way of context, to recall that the American Civil Liberties Union and the Friends Council on National Legislation (the nation's first religious lobbying organization) were established by Quakers and their allies to operate as consistent (and persistent) watchdogs and consciences for America's political and legal behaviors.

Modern scholars of social and legal history have opened new and interesting discourse about the origins of American federal ideologies. Are these ideologies descended from Puritan town-hall democracy? Borrowed from early New York Native American models of confederacy? Derived from the modern humanist ideas of such as John Locke and Benjamin Franklin? Out of what muse did Hamilton, Jay, and Madison's "Publius" shape the ideas of good government? Calvert's study of early Quakers' concepts of community governance suggests that the foundations of modern American democracy are more beholden to Quaker theology and tradition than Quakers are given credit for.

Sharpening our focus on the fact that politics is about process as much as product, about *how* laws and communities are shaped as much as *which* laws and communities are made, Calvert has captured a delicious tension between Quakers' quest for unity and their equally fervent concern with protecting the voice of the individual, creating a carefully-crafted vessel that can both withstand and encourage dissent. She's also caught hold of another tension that has bedeviled Friends since their founding: the tension between wanting the world to follow Quakers' example, but wanting Quakerism to remain unique. (This concept is partially codified by Friends as a desire to be "*in* the world but not *of* it"). Situating her argument within a wide literature stretching across several centuries—including Quaker writers (past and present), political theorists, scholars of theology, philosophy, and the law—Calvert has composed a seamless thesis that isolates elements of eighteenth-century political behavior and matches them to long-standing Quaker tradition to conclude that many of our notions about early Friends' shyness about politics have been ill-informed. Having painted the backdrop, she then traces the development of Dickinson's thought, suggesting that though Dickinson was not himself a member of the Religious Society of Friends, the very fact that his ideas so closely parallel the thinking of his many Quaker colleagues suggests the compatibility of Quaker thought with the conceptual framework of Revolutionary-era political thinkers. (16-17)

Quaker Constitutionalism is a sophisticated argument about the parameters of civil disobedience, which opens and sharpens a much needed discourse that will engage scholars of Quakerism, of American democracy, and of theology—especially Puritanism and other Protestant sects. In doing so, Calvert uses some provocative words and phrases not normally associated with Quaker historical narratives—words like "aggression" and "political strategy"—to challenge the long-held misapprehension that Friends' "pacifism" aimed to sidestep disagreement and conflict. On the contrary, Calvert argues, Quaker pacifists are what has sometimes been labeled "pacifist aggressive"—exhibiting a "non-violence" that is simultaneously "peaceful and loving" and "confrontational."

Because she writes in a lucid and straightforward style, Calvert's presentation—especially Chapters Two and Three—is remarkable in its clarity. Her exploration of John Dickinson as the personification of Quaker thought will wake up scholars who thought that everything important had already been said about the Founding Fathers. Not everyone will agree with Calvert's interpretation, especially since she

calls into question the conclusions of many of the authorities of the period. But Richard and Mary Maples Dunn will have to think about what Calvert says. So will Edmund Morgan, Peter Wood, Gary Nash and many others. Some of Calvert's detractors will argue that she imputes far too much power, influence, and consistency to Quaker political thinking, and that using isolated excerpts from seventeenth-century Quaker thinkers such as Robert Barclay, William Penn, and their contemporaries distorts their thinking so that it seems more coherent than it in fact is. Many will also insist that these ideas were not uniquely Quaker, but were merely articulated by Quakers out of the general zeitgeist. Others will insist that she has incorrectly given credit to Quakers for developing the theo-political posture that underpins American participatory democracy, instead of the secular rationalism that is *really* the basis of American democracy. Yes, Calvert's argument is likely to send off some sparks.

When I teach students about Quakers and Quakerism, I stress my conviction that early Friends were theologically radical, but socially and economically conservative. Now Calvert has given me new ammunition: I'll now raise with students the possibility that Quakers' social/economic "conservatism" is built on a foundation of theological *and political* radicalism.

There's a good flow to Calvert's narrative, and excellent transitions between chapters and between sections. The organization, laid out in the table of contents and the introduction, moves the reader through one section on Quakerism in general, then Quakerism in Pennsylvania, followed by a section that makes a persuasive claim for "the political Quakerism" of John Dickinson. The thought-provoking epilogue about the persistence of Quaker constitutionalism (based on the argument that the strength of American democracy is its reliance on confrontation between political leaders and private citizens) should leave readers cogitating about Calvert's argument. Sometimes, however, perhaps overly-sensitive to the boldness of her own argument, Calvert's argument takes on a tone of arrogance. There are also several areas where the argument could be fleshed out more. It would be nice to have a more full discussion of how Quaker notions of "continuing revelation" inform their commitment to civil disobedience. She touches on this issue in her discussion of the 1690s Keithian controversy (121), but more could be done with it. The same is true of the brief reference to Pauline Maier's *Resistance to Revolution*. Might Calvert give a richer discussion of Maier's notion of what constitutes a "legitimate" reason to riot? The "rules" for rioting, as Maier lays them out, are not unlike the

rules of dissent that Calvert lays out for Quakers. Such comparisons could be explored more fully.

But my complaints are small things. In this narrative, Calvert succeeds brilliantly in her quest to make us rethink John Dickinson, the non-Quaker whose political and social thought was deeply colored by "Quaker influences." (16-17) Like Benjamin Franklin, who was often content to let himself be identified as a Quaker (188-89), Dickinson's context of being steeped in, admiring of, and comfortable with Quaker communities and ideas helps to explain not only why later historians thought of him as Quaker, but also why he may have sometimes made the same assumption about himself. In exploring Dickinson, Quaker theology, Revolutionary political thought, and the relationships between them, Calvert has invited us into fresh territory, and she has done so with graceful style.

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