

Quaker Women

Personal life, memory and radicalism
in the lives of women friends,
1800–1920

Sandra Stanley Holton

Quaker Women

One nineteenth-century commentator noted the ‘public’ character of Quaker women as signalling a new era in female history. This study examines such claims through the story of middle-class women Friends from among the kinship circle created by the marriage in 1839 of Elizabeth Priestman and the future radical Quaker statesman, John Bright.

The lives discussed here cover a period from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, and include several women Friends active in radical politics and the women’s movement, in the service of which they were able to mobilise extensive national and international networks. They also created and preserved a substantial archive of private papers, comprising letters and diaries full of humour and darkness, the spiritual and the mundane, family confidences and public debate, the daily round and affairs of state – and fond but frank views on John Bright, his home life and his hostility to their participation in the women’s movement.

The discovery of such a collection makes it possible to examine the relationship between the personal and public lives of these women Friends, explored through a number of topics including the nature of Quaker domestic and church cultures; the significance of kinship and church membership for the building of extensive Quaker networks; the relationship between Quaker religious values and women’s participation in civil society, radical politics and the women’s rights movement.

This new study is a must read for all those interested in the history of women, religion and politics.

Sandra Stanley Holton is now a Visiting Fellow at Trinity College, Dublin. Her previous publications include *Suffrage Days* (Routledge, 1996); *Feminism and Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 1986) and with June Purvis she co-edited *Votes for Women* (Routledge, 2000). Some of her earlier research into the Priestman–Bright circle has been published in *American Historical Review*, *Victorian Studies*, *Journal of Women’s History* and *Women’s History Review*.

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Quaker Women

Personal life, memory and
radicalism in the lives of women
Friends, 1780–1930

Sandra Stanley Holton

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In Memory of Reginald Stanley,
Ida Stanley and John Holton

And for my daughter, Flora,
Keeper of my garden and
Sunshine of my life

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
1 Introduction	1
2 Margaret Wood (1783–1859): Quaker spinster and shopkeeper	9
3 Kinship, money and worldliness	29
4 Rachel Priestman (1791–1854): a ‘public Friend’	47
5 Marriages, births and deaths: the formation of the Priestman–Bright circle	64
6 Religion, family and public life	80
7 Sisters, marriage and friendship	96
8 The single life: Anna Maria Priestman (1828–1914) and Margaret Wheeler (1817–1905)	110
9 Family, friendship and politics: Helen Priestman Bright (1840–1927)	131
10 Marriage, money and the networked family	147
11 Helen Clark, family life and politics	163
12 The changing order: family, friendship and politics in the late nineteenth century	181

13 Suffragism and democracy	200
14 The Priestman–Bright circle and women’s history	222
<i>Abbreviations in notes</i>	231
<i>Notes</i>	233
<i>Select bibliography</i>	264
<i>Index</i>	275

Illustrations

1.1	The kinship networks of Helen Priestman Bright Clark	3
2.1	Margaret Wood (1783–1859), mid-late 1850s	10
2.2	The Wood family of Bolton	14
2.3	The Bright family of Rochdale	16
4.1	Rachel Priestman (1791–1854), <i>c.</i> early 1850s	48
4.2	The Priestman family of Newcastle	52
8.1	Anna Maria Priestman (1828–1914) as a young woman	111
8.2	Margaret Tanner (1817–1905), <i>c.</i> late 1860s	122
9.1	The wedding party for Helen Bright and William Clark, 1866	145
10.1	The Clark family of Street	149
10.2	Sophia S. Clark (1849–1933) in middle age	153
12.1	Helen P. B. Clark (1840–1927), <i>c.</i> 1890	186
12.2	The Clark family outside Millfield, <i>c.</i> 1897	194
12.3	The three Priestman sisters, <i>c.</i> 1897	197
14.1	Helen and William Clark on their Golden Wedding anniversary, 1916	224

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1 Introduction

'Thou art most terribly dear, to leave thee is agony, but I know God can make hard things easy.' So Elizabeth Bright wrote to her husband of less than two years, John Bright, as she lay dying from consumption in 1841. She was at their lodgings in Leamington Spa where they had gone to consult an eminent physician. John Bright was making one of his brief returns to their home in Rochdale, to complete the stocktaking in his family firm, and to participate in an election there. The doctor believed there had been some improvement in her condition but she continued, nonetheless, to prepare herself for death: 'perhaps a brighter day may come, sometimes I believe it will but I try and wish to look the other way.' John Bright returned to help nurse his wife as often as business and electioneering allowed, and her sister, Margaret Priestman, provided day-to-day care. Hopes for Elizabeth Bright's recovery proved unfounded and increasingly she looked for some spiritual intimation that her soul was saved. Though she felt that even in a short and seemingly blameless life she had done much wrong, she also believed 'there is mercy and I have prayed for it'.¹ For, the Priestman and Bright families were members of the Religious Society of Friends (often called 'Quakers'), a church in which the influence of evangelical religion, especially its emphasis on personal salvation, had grown in previous decades.

As she lay dying, Elizabeth Bright asked that her bible and watch be kept for her infant daughter, Helen, and that her text book and a brooch containing some of her hair be given to her husband. As death approached she called her sister to her, and asked her to be kind to John Bright: 'He has been a good husband.' She requested all present to kiss her, saying her farewells 'with the calm of one whose most cherished ties to earth had been gently loosened'. Those present watched anxiously for evidence of her salvation, and recorded her last words: 'God has forgiven me' and 'Poor Mamma.' They took comfort also in observing no fear or struggle in her passing: 'her head drooped a little, a sweet smile lighted up the face of death and without a groan . . . her purified Spirit ascended to the God who gave it and to the Saviour who had redeemed it.'² Elizabeth Bright had made a good death, and she remained a symbol of feminine goodness and piety in family memory thereafter.³

2 *Introduction*

The continued upbringing of her infant daughter by close kin was also among Elizabeth Bright's last requests. During the previous months Helen Priestman Bright had been cared for at the home of her Priestman grandparents, Summerhill, in Newcastle. Subsequently, she returned to Rochdale and the care of her aunt, Priscilla Bright, who managed John Bright's household, One Ash, until his second marriage some years later. Priscilla Bright kept in constant touch with the Priestman family through letters to her close friends among the remaining Priestman sisters, most especially Margaret Priestman. Margaret Wood, aunt and neighbour of Priscilla and John Bright, similarly recorded life at One Ash for an extended cousinage in the United States that she shared with the Bright family. Regular visits between Brights and Priestmans continued, too, and her Priestman aunts eventually took over the education of Helen Priestman Bright for some years. In this way, she became the hub of a Quaker circle that encompassed several generations of the Wood, Crosland, Bright and Priestman families in Britain, one that had extensive links with kin in the United States through the Wood and Bancroft families (Figure 1.1, and subsequent Figures for each family). The significance of what, for brevity, I will call the Priestman–Bright circle extended beyond the emotional life of its members: it also created, preserved and extended a 'networked family' that might variously serve the pursuit of business interests, humanitarian campaigns, the reform of the Society of Friends, and middle-class radical politics that latterly included the campaign for women's rights.⁴

To a degree, the continuing strength and coherence of such connections rested on the creation and preservation of family memory. Letters, diaries and memoirs of the dead provided emotional, psychological and spiritual resources for the women and men of this circle, as they did in many other middle-class families. These papers served both as memorials for the dead, and as their gift to the living: readers might through them refresh their memory of the dead, find comfort for grief, confront their own mortality, celebrate goodness and piety, seek exemplars for spiritual growth and enlightenment, alleviate loneliness and sorrow, and preserve extensive bonds of kinship, despite physical separation and the passage of time.⁵ The gathering in of such material was undertaken originally only for an audience comprising near kin. It served to express and reaffirm shared religious, political and social values, not least in terms of the place of churches within civil society, and the space they provided for the enactment of forms of Christian citizenship for women as well as for men.⁶ It also served as a chronicle of family life and its connection with larger economic, social and political processes.

The creation and preservation of this family archive was a task largely undertaken by the women of the Quaker families concerned. Male kin might also from time to time keep diaries and write family letters and memoirs of the dead. But it appears to have been the women of this circle who ensured the continuing life of family memory by beginning the systematic creation, collection and passing on of such an archive, largely now contained within the Millfield Papers and the Sarah Bancroft Clark papers, both comprising

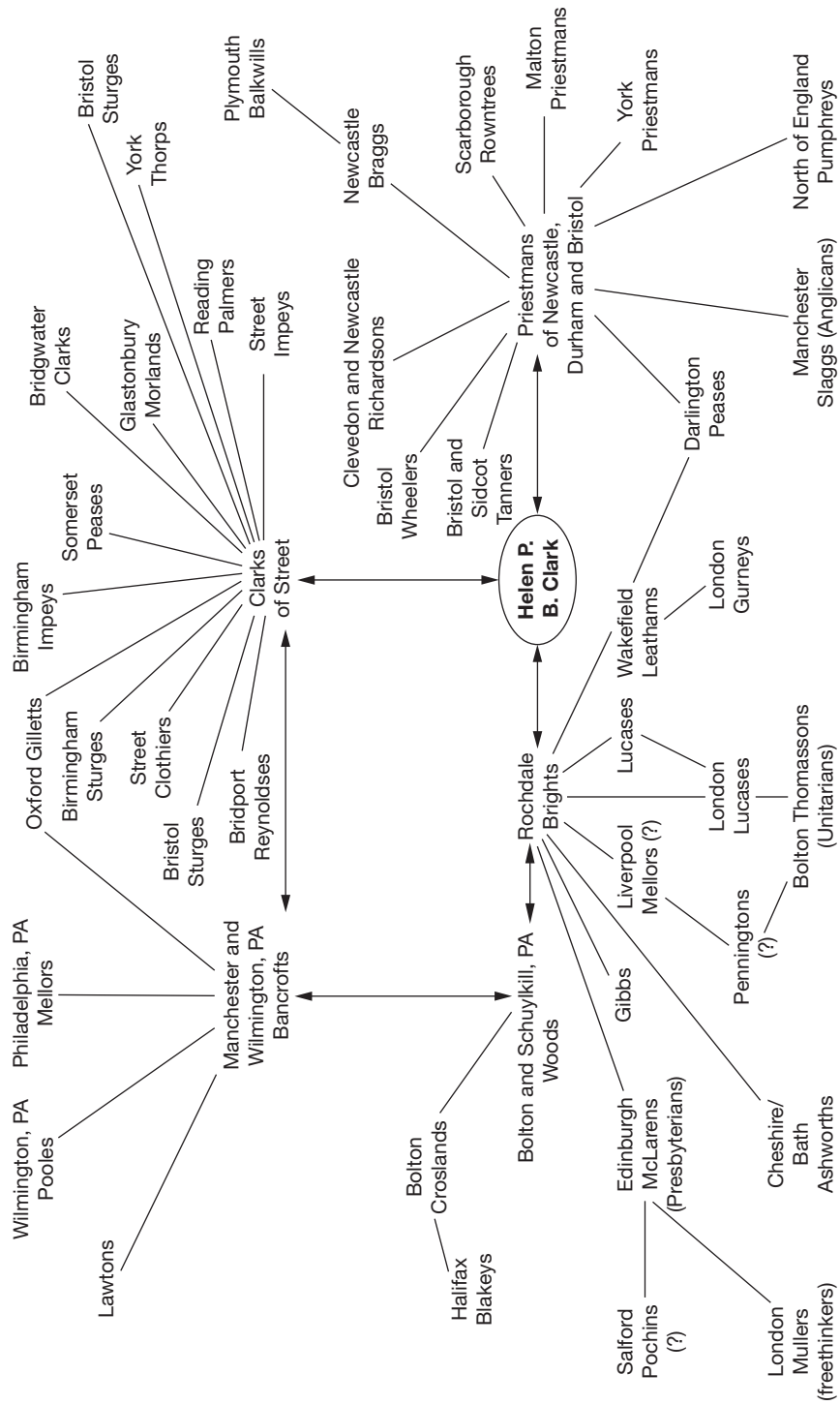


Figure 1.1 The kinship networks of Helen Priestman Bright Clark (with location where known, and religious affiliation where this is known not to be the Society of Friends)

women's private papers for the greater part.⁷ These sources provide a perspective on history through the written reflections of a group of related Quaker women from the modest but comfortably placed ranks of nineteenth-century shopkeepers and manufacturers. They include accounts of the spiritual life, domestic relationships, sewing groups, philanthropic societies, and close emotional relationships that formed female worlds among more well-to-do women at this time. But the women of this family circle also lived alongside men, of course, and the interests, activities and values of both sexes clearly overlapped, where they did not merge, at many points. Therefore, such sources provide not only 'insider' views of women's worlds,⁸ but also accounts of how women's prescribed roles within the family related to other worlds – of church government, of theological disputation, of voluntary organisation, of business, of politics, of class relations, of cultural pursuits, of various modes of intimacy between the sexes, of what it might mean among these circles to be Quakerly and womanly at this time. Such an archive offers, then, a fresh viewpoint from the more conventional materials of history: government papers, parliamentary debates, newspapers and so on, sources that overwhelmingly reflect how the world looked from the perspective of men, and of men in public life, belonging to various elites among their own sex. It also holds representations of a past world as understood through a particular religious mentality. This encompassed a considerable variety, as we shall see, but reflected, nonetheless, a distinctive meaning with which such women might invest their own lives, not least in a shared understanding of the relation between the past of their families and their own present.

Quaker women as a generality were better known at this time for the nicety of their domestic arrangements, for their good works, for their thorough if practical education and for notions of female modesty that led them in general to shun the public eye. The Anglican anti-slavery campaigner, Thomas Clarkson, promoted such a stereotype in his account of Friends, for example.⁹ But women Friends also appeared distinctive among their sex, and Clarkson concluded that such difference arose from their 'public character', noting, for example, how they might hold most of the offices in their church and take part in their own business meetings. Such participation, he believed, encouraged among women Friends the 'thought, and foresight, and judgment' that gave them this 'new cast' of character. He associated such an advance with a fuller realisation of Christian values among Quakers than among other congregations, where 'Women are still weighed in a different scale from men.' On the basis of such observations, he declared: 'This is a new era in female history.'¹⁰ His account contained a degree of overstatement, as we shall see, and more recent accounts of the position of women Friends in this period continue to veer between celebration and a more muted assessment.¹¹ Nonetheless, the significance of the roles of Quaker women as ministers, elders and overseers of the church, as probably among the first women to begin to limit their fertility in the nineteenth century,¹² and as philanthropists, humanitarians and reformers all suggest a picture that moves beyond the

stereotype of the domestic, retiring and modest woman Friend. So it may not seem so surprising that the presence of Quaker women has begun to be charted among the leadership of the radical wing of the women's movement from the mid-1860s.¹³

The presence of Unitarian and Quaker women has long been routinely noted in general histories of the women's movement. Now a more complex understanding is emerging: women Friends were not to the fore in the intellectual and ideological foundations of the women's movement in the 1840s and 1850s, for example,¹⁴ a role largely undertaken by a number of 'radical Unitarian' women whose ideas about women's position have recently received more extensive recognition.¹⁵ The Priestman–Bright circle joined the women's rights movement at a later stage, and they were also unusual among women Friends in such participation, as well as in their involvement in radical politics more broadly, and in their efforts to reform the government of the Society of Friends. Clearly, Quaker women differed among themselves as to how to enact the 'public' character identified in them by Clarkson, and those differences suggest changing understandings of women's nature and their proper place, of the meaning of 'public',¹⁶ and of the proper relationship between church and polity.¹⁷ The preservation of so many of their letters and diaries allows the historian to explore subjective understandings of such issues and of how these women engaged with the discourses of gender, class, race, religion and politics that surrounded them. Family relations were central to the roles women were able to play in civil society and in public life, and sources such as these also allow us to reconstruct particular domestic cultures, to examine them for distinctive characteristics and to explore further the role of gender relations in the creation of the middle class. They make it possible, that is to say, to view public life from the perspective of the domestic arena. In this case, the active creation, collection and preservation of personal papers among this circle of women suggest the importance of family history and memory in their understanding of the relationship of the present to the past. Such material also suggests the possible sources of union between personal and public selves, not least in responses they contain to the contemporaneous debate on 'the woman question'.

The response of members of this circle to evangelical religion will receive particular attention. A number of studies of the middle class in this period have established the importance of evangelicalism as a cultural force in shaping ideologies of gender difference, in the formation of class-consciousness and in the creation of civil society.¹⁸ Similarly, histories of the Society of Friends have emphasised the profound impact of evangelical beliefs on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Friends, especially as a major factor in the revival of Quakerism.¹⁹ The influence of evangelical religion also led to serious tensions and eventual schisms with the Society of Friends, in both Britain and the United States in this period. Its impact was various and complex among the Priestman–Bright circle, shaping the religious outlook of its members in differing ways, not least in their relation to public life. Money, too, shaped

the values and opportunities available to these six women. Middle-class women's relationship to property in this period was also complex, especially after marriage. It reflected a mix of legal restrictions and the decline of dower rights, along-side the growing use of marriage settlements and trusts, as well as informal understandings and domestic cultures that might challenge conventional expectations on such matters. Though the evidence is patchy, the sources examined here suggest the significance of what will be termed 'women's money', how it was constituted and controlled, how it informed gender relations within the family and the roles women might play both within middle-class enterprise, and outside the family, in this period.

The nature and content of this family archive allows an examination of what Amanda Vickery has termed the 'unpredictable variety of private experience'.²⁰ Its method is that of a 'microhistory' that explores the lives of particular persons, their relationship to each other, their mentalities and subculture, and their understanding of larger processes and structures.²¹ Its form is that of collective biography and the subjects selected here are examined in terms of their particularity, not for their typicality, or as exemplars.²² The discussion will focus on the lives of six women, selected from among three successive generations of this kinship circle to allow the narrative to move across time. Marriage among this circle of women seems often to have been less constraining than the conventions of the day might lead us to expect. Equally, the period covered saw new opportunities arising for single women among the middle class. So, of each generation one of those selected was married and one was single, allowing also a further point of comparison as marriage and spinsterhood placed women in a different relation both to their families and to their society. My choice was directed also to some extent by the power of individual voices, some of which emerge more strongly than others from the archive because of the forcefulness of a particular personality, individual powers of expression, a reflective turn of mind, contingencies in the survival of documents or a mixture of such elements. They share, that is to say, a particular ability to communicate between the living and the dead, to represent the self with some force in what was written and still may be read.

The creation and maintenance of family memory among this circle was encouraged through oral storytelling and its written recording, through the passing on of houses, furniture, books and, most of all, of old diaries and letters. Hence, some of the idiosyncratic declarations and expressions of my first subject, Margaret Wood (1783–1859) remain current in family memory even today. Almost two hundred years after her birth, subsequent generations of her kin might sit in her rocking chair, 'very handsome, but high and severe', enjoy the sampler on 'Industry' that she sewed as a pupil at Ackworth School, read her family chronicle, journal and letters, share recorded memories of her from those who had known her in life, and so learn from her cultural legacy.²³

A very different sensibility from Margaret Wood's emerges from the letters, memoranda and memoir of Rachel Priestman (1791–1854), a Quaker minister

and mother of Elizabeth Bright, whose story is considered next. Later chapters move on to discuss the lives of two members of the next generation, Margaret Priestman (1817–1905), subsequently, Wheeler and then Tanner), eldest surviving daughter of Rachel Priestman, together with that of a younger daughter, Anna Maria Priestman (1828–1914) who remained single; and, for the next generation, their niece, Helen Priestman Bright (1840–1927, subsequently, Clark), who was also Rachel Priestman's granddaughter, and Margaret Wood's great-niece. Prior to her marriage, Helen Priestman Bright sometimes joined Margaret Wood, her servant-companion, Eliza Oldham, and a second cousin, Jane Crosland, to form a lively 'hen household' of spinsters. The records relating to unmarried women such as these are much less complete, however, for the last generation studied here, reflecting their lessening embeddedness in family life. That change, in turn, was linked to new opportunities for single, middle-class women, changes evident in the life of Sophia Sturge Clark (1849–1933), sister-in-law, neighbour and friend of Helen P. B. Clark. She was a former kindergarten teacher active in local associational life, and among the earliest women elected to public office, as a member of the school board in her home town, Street, in Somerset, and who until mid-life kept a diary that reflected upon her position as a middle-class 'daughter-at-home'.

The Priestman–Bright circle was built upon kinship, and shared religious, social and political values. Kinship was a two-edged sword, among this circle at least, reflecting not only 'an assumed gender order', as Leonore Davidoff argues,²⁴ but also the means to confront and challenge that order. Here, the sibling relationship was especially important, for sisterly care might nurture, protect and enable the less fortunate among sisters and nieces, and was fundamental to the construction and maintenance of this circle. The sibling relationship provided, too, a model for civil society and a metaphor for social action, helping create the network of women activists that grew from mutual friendships shared among its members. Thus, Helen Priestman Bright may have remained 'a motherless child' in the eyes of many of her closest kin, but she several times expressed her thankfulness for the richness of her emotional relationships with a number of her aunts. Family relationships also led to the lifelong friendships she made among her cousins, and with many outside her own circle. So, the relationships of sister, aunt, niece and cousin figure as largely as those of mother, daughter and granddaughter in this account. For, these papers provide ample evidence of their importance beyond domestic life.

The lives of these six women covered a period from the 1780s to the 1930s, one of great economic, social and political change. The growth of industrial capitalism, major shifts in religious belief and practice, the emergence of new classes, political contestation and democratisation, shifting constructions of public and of domestic arenas, changing understanding of gender differences, and more especially of women's place in society, all shaped these lives. This study will focus on particular aspects of such change: the domestic culture of the Priestman–Bright circle, especially as it related to gender relations,

and to roles outside the family; the role of kinship in the creation of networks in which were united personal, church and public life; the mobilisation of such networks for business, religious and political ends; the varieties of religious experience among this set of women Friends, and the implication of such experience for their participation in larger arenas; the changing place of single women among families of 'the middling sort' such as these; the relation between personal life and public action in their lives. What follows is an account of such change, as recorded principally through the writings in which a group of women kin recorded, rehearsed and reflected upon their lives. Such a project is possible because of the collection and preservation of their personal papers, a collection by which they rendered themselves subjects of history, simultaneously private and public, domestic and political, restricted and expansive, constrained and free – like and unlike ourselves in terms of how such contradictions might be expressed, reflected upon, remembered and represented.

2 Margaret Wood (1783–1859)

Quaker spinster and shopkeeper

Quakerism and oppositionism

In 1821 the throne of the United Kingdom passed at last from George III to the Prince Regent. The coronation became an occasion for civic demonstrations of loyalty throughout the country that summer. Rochdale, an old Lancashire market town then being transformed by the mills of the growing cotton industry, played its part in the national celebrations. Five-year-old Priscilla Bright (1815–1906) was on a visit to an aunt, Margaret Wood (1783–1859), a sometime pastry cook of Bolton who now kept a confectioner's shop in Rochdale. As the child rushed to the window to watch the festivities, her aunt admonished: 'Come away, child! He's na but a pauper, and I have to help keep him.'¹ The story illustrates Margaret Wood's lack of respect for king and coronation, her notable capacity for blunt speech, and an idiosyncratic view of the world that often found expression in bathos and paradox – here, the image of a crowned head of state standing cap-in-hand before a provincial shopkeeper. But its reiteration through family memory serves also as a reminder of the origins of the Religious Society of Friends in the turmoil of the English Civil War and in the egalitarian values of the Levellers of that period, origins evident in a continuing rejection by Quakers of state religion and of a church headed by the monarch.²

Quaker theology maintained that a seed of the divine, the 'Light Within' or 'Inner Light', existed in everyone. Such a doctrine had implications for the religious leadership of the Society, and its ministers were voluntary and unpaid. A sense of calling to the ministry was generally encouraged (or discouraged) by the elders of a local meeting, and became formalised when a Friend was recorded as a minister by their local Monthly Meeting (the organisational grouping of a set of neighbouring 'meetings for worship', and the basis of representation within the government of the Society). The notion of the Inner Light also had implications for the position of women within the church: as it was universal, women as well as men might feel 'called' and be recognised as ministers.³ During Margaret Wood's lifetime women ministers were prominent in the religious leadership of the Society in some regions, and notably so in York.⁴ Women also served alongside men as elders and



Figure 2.1 Margaret Wood (1783–1859), mid-late 1850s

overseers, responsible for ensuring compliance with church discipline among members of their meeting. But in other respects Quakerism conformed more closely to the conventional gender hierarchy, and women Friends had no standing within the national government of their church. This resided in the Men's London Yearly Meeting and with the body that was, in effect, its executive committee, the Meeting for Sufferings. Women Friends had successfully campaigned in the late eighteenth century to establish their own London Yearly Meeting together with local counterparts.⁵ These sat simultaneously but separately from the comparable men's meetings, and in an advisory and consultative position only. Women's meetings might send concerns and suggestions, in the form of minutes, to the comparable meeting of men Friends, but they had no formal powers to ensure their consideration.

Quaker opposition to the union of state and religion in the Church of England was maintained despite decades of persecution under both Protector Cromwell and the restored monarch, Charles II. But with a new interpretation of the doctrine of the Inner Light by the theologian, Robert Barclay early in the seventeenth century, Friends came largely to eschew political activism. Barclay insisted that the Inner Light was something quite separate from human nature, an element of the divine that might be found only by the suppression of 'the creature' within and a passive waiting upon inner illumination from the Holy Ghost. This turn toward quietist mysticism also informed the increasing seclusion of Friends within their own religious communities, and a withdrawal, as far as possible, from worldly, 'creaturely' concerns. Members of the Society cultivated a sense of themselves as 'a peculiar people', increasingly marked out from their neighbours by the adoption of 'plain' dress and 'plain' speech, as well as a distinctive vocabulary. The discipline of the church allowed a Friend to marry only another member of the Society, on pain of 'disownment' if this rule was broken. Children of Quakers enjoyed membership of the church as a birthright. Others might become Quakers 'by conviction' but the Society of Friends had ceased by the eighteenth century to be the proselytising, evangelistic church of its early years.⁶

So, in many places Friends had become, by the late eighteenth century, a socially exclusive and secluded community. But such seclusion did not mean an end altogether to the fundamental oppositionism of Quaker church culture, an oppositionism that was written into the discipline of the Society. Friends were required to refuse all taxes levied for the maintenance of the Church of England, even though such refusal might mean imprisonment or more usually, by this period, the distraint of goods. The manners of their church enjoined civility to all, but refused deference to any worldly authority. So Friends were similarly required to resist other aspects of the established order, for example, by refusing to take oaths, or to serve in the militia or the magistracy. Though the mode of such protest was that of social seclusion, civil disobedience and passive resistance, it was nonetheless generally more rigorous than the oppositionism among other churches within 'Old Dissent'. It required a direct and continuing confrontation, albeit peaceful, with the state.⁷

For Margaret Wood, then, church history, culture and discipline all informed her lack of respect towards the new king: he represented both a state-maintained religion and government by aristocracy. In some areas such Quaker oppositionism might find expression also through political radicalism: around the turn of the nineteenth century Rochdale Friends received spiritual guidance from a Lancashire minister, Joseph Wood (apparently, no relation), who was also known for his radical political beliefs, beliefs that were shared by many of Margaret Wood's kin.⁸ She also identified herself with the industrious classes and against the landed classes, an identification reflecting a shared sense of dispossession and economic vulnerability that led many of her kin to emigrate to the United States. Despite her oppositional values, however, the quietist religious sensibility of Margaret Wood left her out of sympathy with political radicalism, and indeed, with any active involvement in national politics. It also left her out of sympathy both with the 'rational religion' of the Unitarians, and with the evangelicals' emphasis on Bible-study as the principal religious guide. Like most Friends, she valued the scriptures but believed they could only properly be understood with the aid of the Light Within.

Family, community and migration

The Wood family of Bolton (see Fig. 2.2)

Margaret Wood and her closest kin had their origins among tenant farmers in the Lake District who in the latter decades of the eighteenth century emigrated or left the land. Those that stayed in Britain continued to struggle economically, however, in the growing industrial centres of the Manchester region. So Margaret Wood's only surviving brother, John Wood jnr (1781–1849), followed earlier generations of his kin and emigrated to the United States with his first wife and children in the years following the Napoleonic Wars. Their father, John Wood snr (1747–1804), had also once contemplated taking such a step, as he struggled to make a living in Bolton.⁹ But, instead, he had stayed and gradually established a modest business as a clog maker and shoeshop keeper there. That business, it seems, was continued by his wife (another Margaret Wood, 1751?–1828, formerly King) for some years after his death. Perhaps it did not suit their only surviving son or perhaps it was incapable of supporting more members of the family, for, as we have seen, Margaret Wood also followed a different trade from her parents. Between 1805 and his emigration, John Wood jnr is recorded, variously, as a mustard manufacturer, a cotton-twist dealer, a cotton spinner and an accountant in Bolton. He briefly moved to Manchester as an accountant and then to a farm where he described himself as an accountant and auctioneer.¹⁰

Family correspondence suggests that he left for the United States in expectation of finding a more equal and open society. He is reported to have declared of his new country: 'We have a Government it is true, but we never

feel it . . . Never mind if people like England and Taxation let them enjoy their taste – it is not mine.¹¹ But similar aspirations evidently transferred themselves also to the oldest of the four Wood sisters, Elizabeth (1777–1845). She travelled to the United States as a single woman for reasons that are not known, returning in 1797. That homeward voyage was undertaken while Britain and France were at war, on a ship that was twice boarded by enemy forces.¹² The evident terror of such an experience did not, however, stop Elizabeth Wood from a second, permanent migration across the Atlantic in 1822, along with her husband, John Bancroft (1774–1852) and their thirteen children.

The Bancroft family of Manchester (see Fig. 2.2)

The Bancrofts shared a similar social standing to the Woods, composed of urban craftsmen and shopkeepers who none the less retained a hope of returning to farming. John Bancroft's family had a timber and chair-making business in Manchester, but he and Elizabeth Bancroft decided at some point in their marriage to take up agriculture.¹³ Thereafter they struggled to make a living as tenant farmers in Wales. Landowners were demanding rents that appeared extortionate to struggling farmers like themselves, as they contemplated the prices obtaining for their crops in the years following the Napoleonic wars. Their family was large, and in their last years in Wales the Bancrofts found it difficult to meet even the modest fees required to send one of their younger sons to Ackworth, the school founded in 1778 for 'Friends not in affluence'. Elizabeth Bancroft, like all the Wood sisters, had attended this school, but her younger daughters, at least, did not follow her there. Instead, two of them were sent to a small girls' school in Rochdale, where two of their aunts among the Wood sisters, Margaret Wood and Martha Bright (1788–1830), now lived. By 1821, John Bancroft was not only seeking family help with a son's school fees; he was also looking for family support in his decision to sell up and emigrate to the United States, a plan that would require the export of family capital to finance new endeavours there.¹⁴ After settling near Wilmington, on the Brandywine River in Pennsylvania, he reported 'the Burden of Taxes is scarcely felt, Tithes not at all, and Poor Rates almost nothing'. John Bancroft remained a regular reader of the pamphlets and journalism of William Cobbett. Years after migrating he still avidly awaited the arrival of the *Political Register*, sending £6 to a nephew in England with the instructions: 'I shall be obliged if thou will not omit sending me the Registers *every* month.'¹⁵

Before migrating, his response to the coronation of George IV in 1821 prompted further evidence of his radical political sympathies, in his references in letters to Queen Caroline. The new king's estranged wife had returned to England from voluntary exile on the death of George III. But her husband refused to permit her attendance at the coronation, and she became a rallying point for radicals such as these. Like many who shared his views, John Bancroft

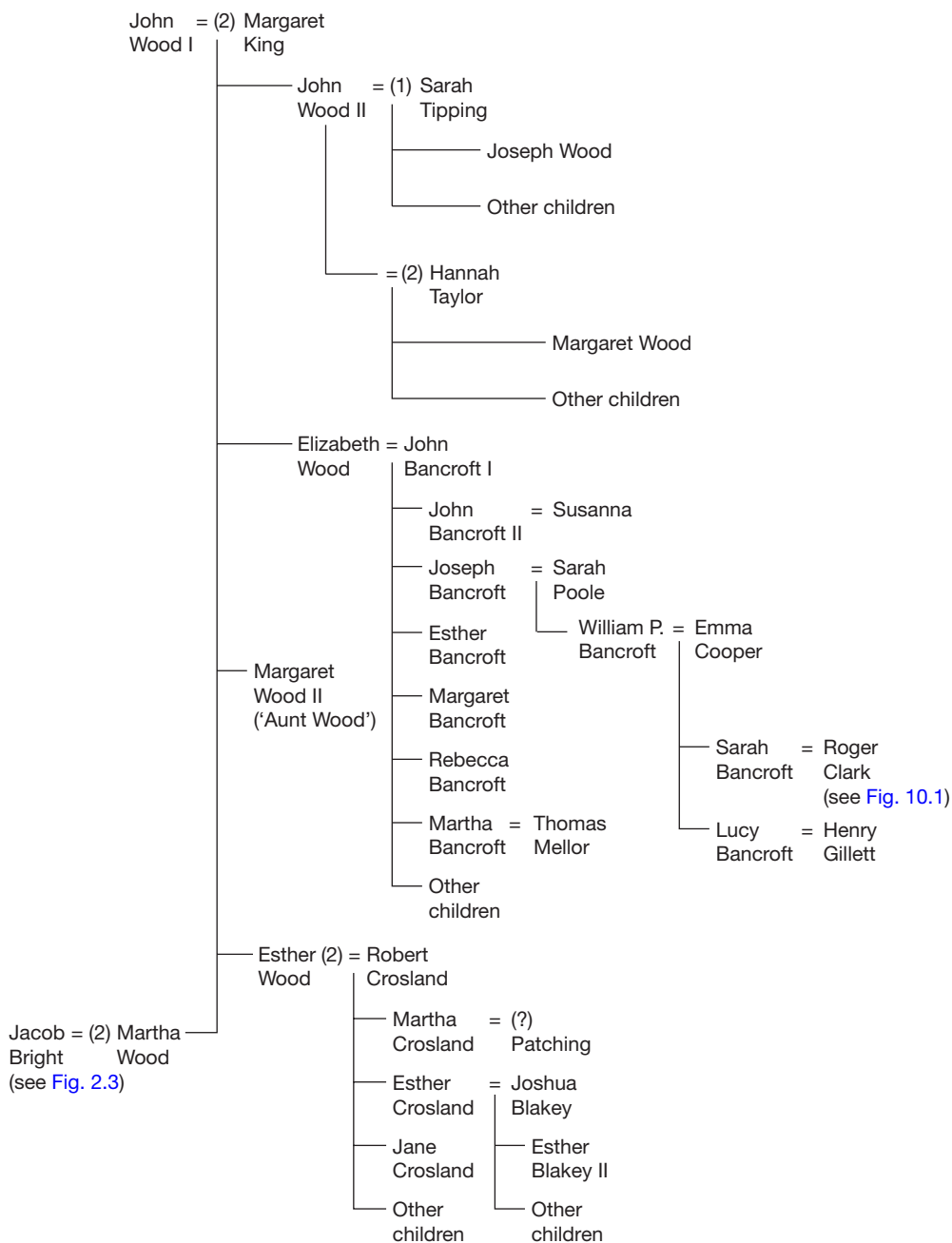


Figure 2.2 The Wood family of Bolton

Sources: J.T. Mills, *John Bright and the Quakers*, London: Methuen 1935; W.B. Clark Papers.

sorrowed at the queen's death shortly afterwards and looked forward to the protests that her funeral was expected to occasion. He was similarly saddened at the news of the death of Napoleon – after whom a grandson, born in the United States, was later named.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the Bancrofts sent their eldest son ahead to gather advice and information from their extensive network of kin already living in the United States. On departing England in 1822, they left behind their second son, Joseph Bancroft (1803–74), to finish an apprenticeship with his uncle, Jacob Bright, in Rochdale. For the Bancrofts planned to add spinning to their farming activities in the United States. So Joseph Bancroft remained a member of the Bright family circle at Greenbank, the house that adjoined one of his uncle's mills.¹⁷

The Bright family of Rochdale (see Fig. 2.3)

The Bright family resembled the Woods and Bancrofts in its social origins, religion, and an interest in radical politics, fostered among the children of Martha (formerly, Wood) and Jacob Bright in their shared reading of the local radical press.¹⁸ Though orphaned and impoverished as a child, Jacob Bright had had a few years schooling at Ackworth and then served an apprenticeship with a Derbyshire farmer as a handloom weaver. At the end of that time he and a fellow apprentice set out together with only a few shillings between them. They walked to the new industrial centres of Lancashire, where textiles were increasingly being produced by machinery within large factories. There, Jacob Bright was fortunate to find employment as a weaver at 5s a week, for his trade was already in decline as mechanised production methods began to displace hand crafts. His religious affiliation, the schooling provided him at Ackworth, as well as his evident abilities, helped in his rise from weaver to bookkeeper, and then salesman on the Manchester cotton exchange for his Quaker employers (the sons of the farmer to whom he had been apprenticed). In 1809, the year in which he married his second wife, Martha Wood, he was lent £6,000 capital by some other local Quakers with which to start his own cotton-spinning business in Rochdale. He received one third of the profits for seven years, by the end of which he had repaid the loan and was becoming a wealthy man in his own right.¹⁹ His political sympathies remained radical nonetheless, and a number of well-known local activists were employed in his mills.

The kinship circle formed by Woods, Bancrofts and Brights was, then, radical in orientation decades before John Bright, eldest surviving son of Martha and Jacob Bright, rose to national prominence as 'the Tribune of the people'. That radicalism grew from a sense of belonging to a class oppressed by a landowning aristocracy; by the protective trade tariffs, notably on corn, that they believed were levied unjustly so as to maintain government by a plutocracy; by an established church that levied rates for its own maintenance on members of other religious persuasions; and by a growing sense of conflict

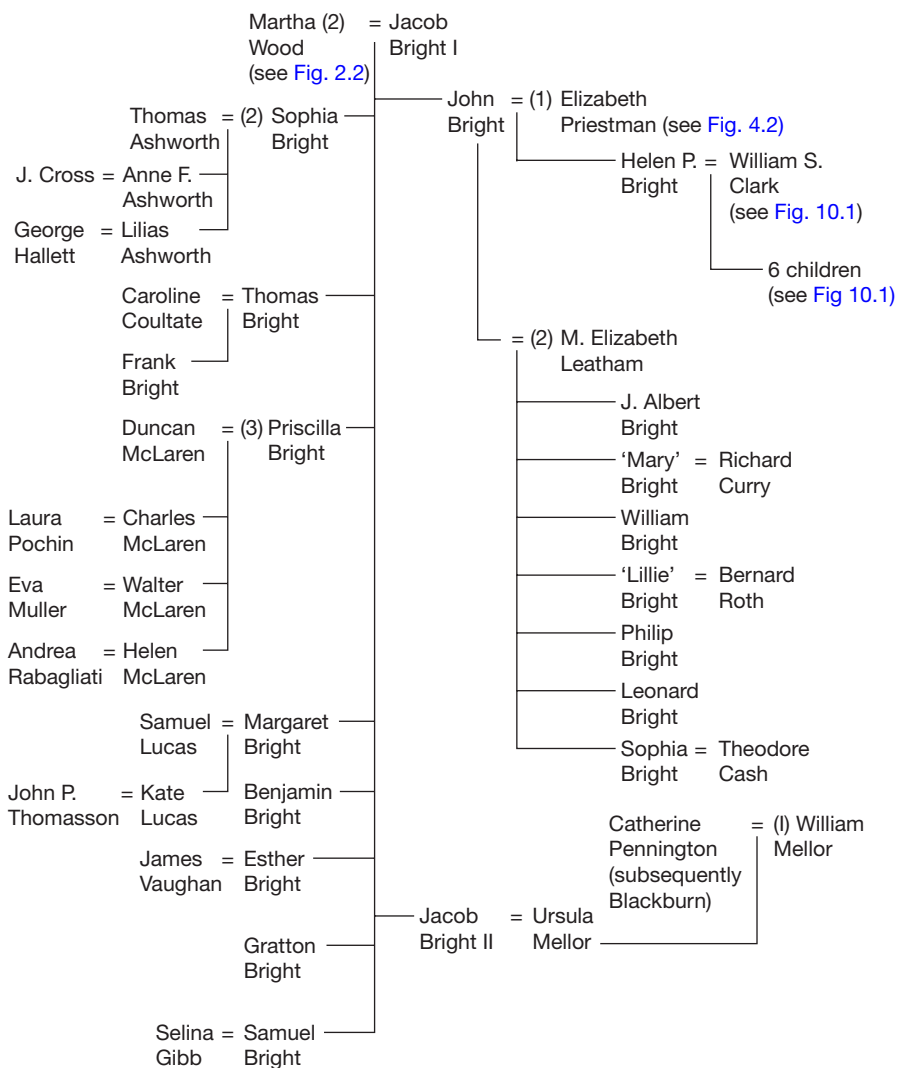


Figure 2.3 The Bright family of Rochdale

Source: J.T. Mills, *John Bright and the Quakers*, London: Methuen, 1935; McLaren family chart, CA.