

GERMS OF GOOD¹

The Growth of Quakerism in Australia

“Choose a clerk and give him a twopenny minute book.” This is all that is necessary to establish a Friends Meeting, announced Violet Hodgkin when reporting to Meeting for Sufferings in 1910 on her religious visit to Australia.² If Quakerism was so simple why did it not flourish in Australia? With a shortage of priests and church buildings, local pioneering men and women in the vast interior could have fulfilled many priestly functions, especially in a colonial culture where improvisation was necessary for survival. Some parishes were huge, up to one hundred square miles. In the 20th century it is difficult to imagine the reality of the roughness of early 19th century tracks, the immensity of wide, unbridged rivers, sometimes flooded plains, or heat searing above 40 degrees Celsius in summer. Violet Hodgkin continues:

In the back blocks of the Colonies, in some lonely farmhouse far away in the bush, there, all the conditions are on our side. How barren it would be to go to such a place and say, ‘You must wait for your service till a church is built. Wait until you can get money to pay a clergyman, to hire a room, to build an organ.’ No, the living message needed by these lonely souls is our message ... In the humblest circumstances, right in the heart of our daily needs, the true Church is waiting for our worship, the Sacrament of Life is offered to us”.³

In contrast to Violet Hodgkin’s zeal, Friends in Australia wrote, in their many epistles, about their small numbers and their inadequacy: “Where two or three are gathered in my name ...” became a sentiment repeated so often it became a cliché, somewhat tedious to the modern reader. “Numbers don’t count” and “We do not proselytise” were other similar attitudes.

The purpose of this article is to argue that the general Australian population was not interested in Friends, that the large number of nineteenth century public Meetings for Worship throughout the settled areas in court houses, school rooms and elsewhere; and the dissemination of tracts, did nothing to attract anyone to take up

membership in the Society of Friends. The main recruitment has always been from seekers after truth whose individual search has led them "to come home" as so many describe their experience of discovering the Society of Friends.

The mainstream churches were strong in Australia. Every township had a separate church and congregation for Anglicans, Catholics, Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists. This provided a community focus for large numbers of people. Side by side with this church affiliation were the secularists with their love of leisure induced by a sunny climate. Observance was no match for outdoor activities, especially football. The leisure seekers did not want the quiet, contemplative Society of Friends any more than the self-sufficient church congregations.

Most Quaker Meetings were small, and isolated one from the other, to British eyes unbelievably isolated from one another. Why was Melbourne Meeting, numerically big by any Quaker standard, the main disseminator of the inadequacy syndrome? The real reason for this attitude of insufficiency may well have been the severance from the vitality of Friends Meetings in England, where neighbouring Meetings were close. Unlike many English towns where one could not go out shopping without meeting another Friend, this would be a most unusual occurrence in Australia. Each colonial Australian Meeting was at least seven hundred miles distant.⁴ Moreover, within the capital cities themselves distance was still a difficulty, hindering opportunities for combining together. Apart from separation by distance there was also the limited means of all but a handful of Friends.

Quakerism in Australia was the result of individual and personal migration, rather than migration to further the Society of Friends. Germany Yearly Meeting, as an example, had the advantage, when it was founded of having had a well known Quaker presence in service work beforehand. The beginnings of Australian Quakerism were totally unlike the migration to the North American British colonies; there were no groups of Friends, or whole families of Friends coming to Australia en masse, no Quaker founded a colony like Pennsylvania, and no "Fathers or Mothers of the Church" (as one might describe seasoned Friends) already in Australia to receive the newcomer.

Melbourne Friends wrote to Meeting for Sufferings

one of the greatest disadvantages under which we are placed, is the general character of those who immigrate to our shores, being chiefly the young, or those who have no fixed purpose to induce them to settle amongst us.⁵

Many of the migrating Friends were nominal Friends, by "birthright", some young men's conduct, on arrival, causing worry and even distress. And one knows by the present day situation in Australia – not so much in Britain – that most children of Friends drift away from the Society. Indeed, it was rare indeed for children of Friends living *up country* to remain in the Society, especially after marriage to some-one of another religious persuasion. They preferred to attach themselves to more active Christian bodies. There was the isolated Quaker who came to Australia unwillingly, by forced transportation as a convict. One's heart goes out to a young Friend, William Reilly whose address was from Iron Gang No. 5, Baulkhan Hills, outside Sydney in the Census muster of 1828. (What was his 'crime', one wonders).⁶

From 1832, for six years, James Backhouse, and his travelling companion, George Washington Walker, visited Australia under a religious concern. They visited every penitentiary in Van Diemen's Land, and conducted house to house visitation throughout the island. They then travelled extensively through New South Wales. They promoted temperance, circulated tracts, and advocated humane relationships with the Aboriginal population.

Backhouse drew Friends together. The first Friends Meeting in Australasia was held in Backhouse's sitting room in Hobart Town – on 12 February 1832. A Meeting for business, under the guidance of Backhouse was soon established, and also, a little later, Van Diemen's Land Yearly Meeting, eventually incorporating the small Meeting in Sydney, and Eleanor Glifton – a lone Friend at Australind in Western Australia. Men and women who were to contribute enormously to the Society were convinced through the influence of Backhouse – the Probsting and the Mather families being the most notable, as well as several convicts such as Abraham Davy. Hobart was to remain a steady and solid Quaker Meeting. Backhouse also founded the infant Meetings of Sydney and Adelaide. More than any other Friend in Australian Quaker history, Backhouse achieved much for the Society of Friends. He was indeed the founding father of Australian Quakerism. Yet, it could not be claimed that even Backhouse fulfilled Violet Hodgkin's premise of attracting men and women to his faith that was supposed to be so suitable for the Australian outback situation.

There was a sprinkling of well concerned Friends in Australia. These were the noble Friends who persevered in maintaining a Quaker Meeting, almost without exception confined to a capital city. Among these were Alfred and Deborah Sayce who commenced

regular Meetings in their Little Bourke Street home in Melbourne, from July 1843. There was also Joseph and Hannah May of Mount Barker in South Australia and Rachel Hopkins in Brisbane. One cannot forget the other unnamed Friends who faithfully kept a Meeting going. One must likewise acknowledge those faithful Friends remote from any Meeting such as Algernon Wallis on the goldfields at Rokewood who kept contact with Friends by reading *the British Friend* and by having family readings on Sundays.⁷

There is always an exception to my generalisation. As far as casual migration is concerned South Australia is perhaps the exception. The colony attracted Friends because it was to be democratic, with equal rights and equal privileges. There was to be freedom of religion, no religious disabilities – and no convict labour. The colony was to be based on scientific “systematic colonisation”, which meant planned colonisation, unlike the haphazard colonization of New South Wales, and particularly the Swan River Colony in Western Australia. Indeed, this systematic colonisation was inspired by Edward Gibbon Wakefield, a cousin to Elizabeth Fry, brought up by his Quaker grandmother. Wakefield was in every way the antidote to Violet Hodgkin’s *Book of Quaker Saints!* Whilst serving a sentence in Newgate for eloping with a school girl, his “compassion for the victims of human savagery”⁸ led him to make use of his forced leisure by writing a series of newspaper articles entitled “A Letter from Sydney” in which he outlined what a planned colony should be like. The first Quaker migrants to Adelaide spoke of South Australia becoming a second Pennsylvania. Indeed there were fifty or sixty Friends within four years of the colony’s foundation (in 1836).⁹ British Friends at the 1839 Yearly Meeting subscribed enough money to send a prefabricated Meeting House to the Colony. The building still stands and is the oldest place of worship in South Australia still in its original state.

There are however two reasons why South Australia never became a “second Pennsylvania”. Foremost was the bankruptcy of the leading Friend in the community, John Barton Hack. Some Friends who had purchased land from him returned to England. The other reason was the financial depression of 1842 which persuaded would-be Quaker migrants, those who had purchased land in readiness, (but cautiously waiting to see how the initial years progressed), to abandon migration altogether.

There was a large influx of Friends to Victoria once gold was discovered in 1851. In the gold rush decade about 400 Friends went to Victoria.¹⁰ Many of these were young and transient. Almost without exception they were young men, in their early twenties. Very

few women Friends migrated during the gold rushes – about one to every ten men. Although gold was the attraction there were more immediate reasons: health, was significant, travel and adventure lured many including the well-known former Friend, William Howitt. An escape from poverty was especially a reason for Irish Friends who, roughly, made up one third of the Quaker population in Victoria. Other Friends came to set up business in the thriving capital of Melbourne.

After the gold rushes the migration of Friends to Australia was spasmodic. However, because Meetings had been settled in each capital city¹¹ there was a Friends Meeting ready to embrace the new arrival, and to offer contact if that newly arrived Friend should settle inland. Equally important, there was a Meeting to welcome the seeker.

Increasingly, certainly after the first world war, a high proportion of Australian Meetings consisted of convinced Friends.

There were also the rare occasions of persons completely isolated applying for membership. There is the unique example of Ballarat. Although there were about fifteen Friends resident in Ballarat, they believed that the time was not right to establish a Meeting. However, three men each in their thirties who knew nothing about the Society except what they had read and what they remembered from boyhood contacts¹² publicly announced themselves as the Society of Friends, hired a room in the Temperance Hall, and advertised their meetings in the *Ballarat Star*, regularly meeting from Easter Sunday 1867. Dissatisfied with “modes of worship as practiced by other denominations”¹³ and “grieved at the money-seeking ways of the ministers”, these “poor, uneducated but respectable” men were unaware that Friends in fact existed in Ballarat.

Astonished by the advertisement, Melbourne Meeting was immediately informed of the situation and sent a deputation to visit Ballarat in “Gospel love”. The deputation reported that these persons “expressed in a feeling manner their gratification of our visit to them” and that they were earnest seekers after truth.¹⁴

Ballarat was unique. Numbers in Australia always remained small. Friends are claimed to have been 0.015 per cent of the Australian population in 1910¹⁵ and despite the indefatigable Quaker enthusiasts Meetings remained small.

I now wish to discuss the impact of three outstanding individuals of these indefatigable Quaker enthusiasts: Joseph James Neave, Robert Lindsey, and Alfred Allen.

Neave was always on the move. He possessed a vigorous spirit. He visited Friends, former Friends, and even old scholars of Friends

Schools however remote, leaving behind a trail of happy memories. He held public Meetings for Worship in churches en route. He held several in the remote but magnificently beautiful Jamieson area where he believed several Meetings might be established, so interested were the local people. However, no such thing ever eventuated, even with the newspaper publicity which Neave was given. For instance, not far from Jamieson, at Mansfield in 1878, in a state of excitement because of the bushranger Ned Kelly's activities, some town youths, out for fun, tried to disrupt the Quaker silence of Neave's public meeting in that town. The editor of the paper decided to give these town hooligans a dressing down in his paper, but Neave spoke in their defence. Wherever he went, Neave witnessed the Quaker insights in which he believed so intensely. He loved adventure. En route from Bright to Omeo, visiting outlying Friends in each centre, he was forced "to sleep in the arms of a snow gum" on the Bogong High Plains from which he contemplated the opening session of the 1879 London Yearly Meeting.¹⁶ Certainly, isolated Friends were greatly cheered by Neave's face to face interest in their welfare, but there is no evidence that even one person was convinced through all Neave's strenuous activity. Although for years after one met those "though they had forgotten the name, yet remembered the "man" or "the sermon he preached in our church¹⁷."

Robert Lindsey, likewise held public meetings and distributed tracts wherever he went. He was in Ballarat three days after the Eureka uprising of the miners, having been stopped by troopers en route and searched for arms and ammunition. Martial law had been declared in the town. Lindsey was in the streets handing out peace pamphlets *Unlawfulness of wars and fightings*. "We should have had these a fortnight ago" said one. "You should have brought a thousand", said a disappointed man when the tracts had all been handed out.¹⁸ Lindsey's visit to Australia was well worthwhile. The wisdom of such an experienced Friend in their midst was of incalculable value. Within the Society Lindsey's efforts were important. He persuaded Friends in Mount Barker in the Adelaide Hills to build a Meeting House. He supported Friends in Melbourne to establish regular business meetings, even though he confided that they were "like bullocks unaccustomed to the yoke".¹⁹ But from the view point of Violet Hodgkin that Quaker Meetings were the answer to the Australian condition, there is no record to support achievement by Lindsey in settlers adopting this "living message needed by these lonely souls".

The one Quaker enthusiast who did have some measure of success in the 1860s (in leading people to Friends) was Alfred Allen. As a

youth he had left the Quaker faith of his mother and joined the Congregational Church in Pitt Street in Sydney. Whilst studying for the ministry his mother lent him *Barclays's Apology* saying it might be helpful. The *Apology* hit Allen with enormous intensity. "Most of my old friends deserted me" wrote Allen, "and from many a pulpit I was denounced as a dangerous infidel feigning to believe the Scriptures." Allen was an individualist, enthusiastically taking up Quakerism much to the consternation of the complacent local Friends Meeting, a rather inward-looking and small group that London Yearly Meeting would not officially recognise until 1887.²⁰ It was claimed that no other Friends Meeting had possibly had as chequered a career as Sydney. They tried to disown Allen in 1868. No common man, Alfred Allen eventually became a Liberal member of the New South Wales parliament, serving as Whip to the Parkes administration. At the age of 22 "he gathered round him a group of earnest young men for Bible study on Quaker lines." He established a second Meeting in Sydney, in Pitt Street. Eventually a party of these young men "who had come among Friends largely through his influence" left for Queensland where Allen tried to start a Friends settlement in the Buderim area. The settlement itself was far from successful, but Allen had drawn more people into the Society of Friends than anyone else.²¹

Allen, like George Fox, was not easily intimidated. When seven Anglican bishops descended upon Sydney for the opening of St. Andrews Cathedral, the greatest gathering of Anglicans yet seen in the Colony, (a public holiday was declared) Alfred Allen published a pamphlet "*Romanism, Ritualism, and formalism not Christianity*" criticising the biblical grounds for consecrating buildings. He was arrested on the Archbishop's orders when he tried to hand him one of these pamphlets at the ceremonial procession of the bishops. (He was released almost immediately after).²²

However, Allen's drive and public preachings attracted many to Friends. He wrote:

On first day afternoons I preached in Hyde Park to large crowds of hearers and Quakerism and the Quakers soon became the subject of conversation in many homes. In a short time the Meeting House on first day morning was filled and many convinced of Friends principles made application to the Devonshire Street Meeting for membership.

Regrettably, "each applicant was rejected and assured that I was a disturber of the peace," wrote Allen.²³ Sydney Meeting was frequently visited in this period by both Melbourne and Hobart Friends anxious to

breathe new and progressive life into the Meeting. Only in later years was Allen appreciated by Friends. Indeed the various generations of the Allen family have contributed enormously to the Society of Friends not only in Sydney, but in Australia as a whole.

It was quietly, without any dashing about the countryside, that Irene Glasson seventy years later, in the 1930s, drew more men and women into the Society of Friends than any other known member in Australia. As State President of the Young Women's Christian Association in Adelaide she would say in YWCA business meetings "Let's see what the *Book of Discipline* has to say", when difficult questions arose. This fascinated YWCA workers to find out what this *Book of Discipline* was. Irene Glasson also referred to Friends in discussion groups. Ultimately eight Friends claimed to have joined Friends through her influence.

From 1961 an Extension Committee advertised in national Australian newspapers and magazines and received hundreds of enquiries. The number of people who joined Friends as a result has never been calculated.

Quakers were publicly condemned during the first world war, even in newspaper editorials, for their attitude to war. On the other hand, in the early 1920s the Friends' War Victims Relief Committee received almost daily newspaper coverage as the campaign to raise money for stricken Europe gained public favour and momentum. There is no evidence that all this publicity, whether adverse or favourable, did more than create public consciousness of Friends.

Violet Hodgkin truly understood Quakers and honoured its ways. She had one year of excitement in Australia, with its repeated surprises of travel. We are now writing about no one defining moment, but about the broad highway of the decades, trying to raise life out of bald records. The minute books of two Monthly (from 1964 Regional) Meetings have been examined – Melbourne and Adelaide. They reveal that there is a steady procession of acceptances into membership by conviction. A table has been prepared mindful that a bare statistical number is a chilling reduction of each individual search for a meaningful faith.

Yet, what about that quip to Meeting for Sufferings? Violet Hodgkin's premise for establishing a meeting required something more: enthusiasm of which she herself possessed a huge amount, as well as sense in knowing how to keep Friends together.

If Friends were to award honours it should surely go to those faithful and unnamed Friends who drew other Friends together in fellowship, maintaining an unassuming pastoral interest in the membership and so giving purpose and enthusiasm to the group.

Numbers beget numbers.- This was probably the reason why Hobart always remained a significant area of Quakerism in Australia. Contrary

to Violet Hodgkin's dictum, a lively meeting will attract others and maintain momentum, stimulating a right feeling of sociability amongst the membership. This always seems to have been the case in Hobart where a solid group of Friends existed – to the extent that the city of Hobart undoubtedly possesses the greatest number of Quakers percentagewise to the general population. Hobart also initiated activities which provided outlets for information and work within the Society. Hobart Friends founded the Friends' School in 1887. This meant a steady number of Friends moving to Hobart either to join the teaching staff, as students, or families of Friends moving to Hobart for their children's Quaker education. Some of the school community were drawn into membership of the Society.

Although Quakerism was ideally suited for the Australian outback, it was never taken up. The hundreds of people who attended public Quaker meetings throughout the land, although curious, even approving, never felt led to join the Society of Friends.

Far more significant in the Australian experience has been Convincement: a steady procession of individuals, seekers after truth, who, after a long search, have found their home in the Society of Friends; and if not their home, then an anchorage in their on-going search. These seekers always come by self-motivation. Violet Hodgkin spoke while still in the blush of excitement: "Choose a clerk and give him a twopenny minute book" certainly; but the function of a Friends meeting is more: to be a community sensitive to "the promptings of love and truth".

There were pulses in Australia that the visitor could not discern in one year's observation. From 1902 a General Meeting (an annual residential week) encouraged and enlarged Friends from right across the continent. Annual Young Friends camps were held – the first was at Lawson in New South Wales in 1909 – which did much to strengthen the younger members of the Society in Australia. The General Meeting created the framework for much future activity. More significant was the peace movement. London Yearly Meeting sent to Australia five Young Friends²⁴ to work full-time for the Quaker-originated Australian Freedom League which vigorously opposed the compulsory clauses of the 1909 Defence Act...

The message of this study is that one does not know the sea by riding on the crest of one wave. There were intangible undercurrents at work which a casual visitor, bisecting the whole sweep of time in one quick year, could never discern.

Charles Stevenson

The following table is based on the reading of the minutes of two Australian Regional Meetings. This should be representative of all seven Regional Meetings in Australia. (There are no records for Attenders, some of whom remained so for many years.)

Decade	CONVINCEMENTS		MIGRATION		Total membership in Australia*
	South Australia	Victoria	South Australia	Victoria	
1860s	5	7	91**	68**	350
1870s	1	13	2	22	276
1880s	15	7	19	30	310
1890s	6	14	2	8	517
1900s	5	7	nil	12	504
1910s	15	24	5	20	552
1920s	12	29	11	7	654
1930s	6	11	3	5	683
1940s	15	18	3	10	632
1950s	12	25	11	23	711
1960s	34	19	11	19	824

*This total Membership in Australia by decade is estimated. It excludes Attenders and members of other Yearly Meetings residing in Australia. It is not clear whether Sydney is included in the totals prior to 1887.

** These numbers are inflated because many Friends only transferred their membership after 1861 when London Yearly Meeting officially recognised their Australian Meetings

Table of Friends known to have come to Victoria in the gold rush decade 1851-60, excluding the thirty adults already residing in the Colony

Marital status	male	female
Married (presumably before arrival)	46	42
Known to have married in the Colony	19	7
Single (but if married not specified)	171	12
TOTAL	236	61

Adults: 297, plus 93 children: equals 390

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 The title is taken from the Epistle of Iowa Women Friends to Australia, 1873: "... As we have contemplated you in your far off isles, your little meetings widely separated from each other, and thought of lone individuals seldom meeting with any large body of Friends the prayer has arisen that you may in your several localities indeed be germs of good that shall expand into comely and beautiful branches in the garden of the Lord..."
- 2 Violet Hodgkin had visited Friends in Australia and New Zealand together with her parents, Thomas and Lucy Hodgkin, and her brother, Lloyd. *The Australian Friend Fourth Mo 23*, 1910, p. 352.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 There were two exceptions: Adelaide and Mount Barker, Melbourne and Ballarat.
- 5 Letter to Meeting for Sufferings 30 Jan. 1856, Melbourne Monthly Meeting records.
- 6 M.R. Sainty and K.A. Johnson, Eds., *Census of New South Wales, Nov. 1828*, Library of Australian History, Sydney 1980, p. 314. It is possible that William Reilly who was transported in 1817 was mentally defective, perhaps alcoholic. On the other hand he may have been recidivist, for he seems to have been transported again in 1836. It is impossible to know without records.
- 7 Correspondence 1864 in Melbourne Regional Meeting archives.
- 8 C.M.H. Clark, *A History of Australia Vol. III*, Melbourne University Press, 1973, p. 43.
- 9 London Yearly Meeting claimed that there were many more Friends in South Australia, giving a precise figure of 112, but the Recording Clerk of the day was confused between what geographically constituted South Australia (thinking that Melbourne was the spot) and what was the named position of South Australia, midway along the southern coastline.
- 10 Compiled from various list of members held in Victoria Regional Meeting archives.
- 11 There was no Meeting in Perth until 1930.
- 12 Biographies written by Deputation from Meeting for Sufferings 1874-75.
- 13 Walter Robson's Diary (manuscript) 30 Dec 1867 and 20 Jan 1868.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 2 June 1867.
- 15 Bobbie Oliver, *Peacemongers, Conscientious Objectors to Military Service in Australia 1911-1945*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1997, p. 19.
- 16 *The Friend* (London) 1879, pp. 248-9.
- 17 *London Yearly Meeting Proceedings 1914: Testimonies Concerning Deceased Friends*, p. 32.
- 18 *Traveller Under Concern. The Quaker Journals of Frederick Mackie on his Tour of the Australasian Colonies 1852-55*. University of Tasmania 1973, 5th Twelfth Mo 1854, p. 253.
- 19 Diary of Robert Lindsey, unpublished.
- 20 The Meetings of Hobart, Melbourne and Adelaide were officially recognised by London Yearly Meeting in 1861.

- 21 Testimony of Sydney Monthly Meeting regarding Alfred Allen, 28 May 1918. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 August 1917.
- 22 *Brief Sketch of My Life*, by Alfred Allen, unpublished.
- 23 *Ibid.* (The minute books of Sydney Monthly Meeting have not been available to ascertain the number of applicants of which Allen alludes).
- 24 John Percy Fletcher, Arthur Watts, John Walsh Barry, Alfred Brown and Herbert Corder.