

# WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP, AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

LETTER 145

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*Dear Friends,*

*We've been hearing a lot about women's rights recently. I'm not at all sure that we know just how long this has been a source of contention, or indeed how negatively women have been regarded since times past. Attitudes persisting in many quarters today shock those of us who have come to regard all human beings as individuals with equal rights to respect and opportunity.*

*Did you know that in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century England women were considered by many to be "the silly and weaker Sex" and "naturally apt unto all mischiefe" (Anonymous, 1646)? John Knox, the Protestant reformer, maintained that women were physically frail, mentally feeble and lacking in leadership ability. In 1558 he wrote an article entitled "The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women", using biblical references to reinforce his view that women should be submissive and subject to men in all things. In other words, they should be seen but not publicly heard.*

*Early Quakers, with their belief that God is directly and equally accessible to all human beings, challenged this attitude. Against considerable opposition they encouraged women to express their spirituality. From 1667 George Fox was instrumental in setting up women's meetings in England, Ireland, Barbados and New England. In this and throughout his life from 1652 he was supported by a remarkable woman - Margaret Fell. I have decided to devote this letter to an account of the life and work of the woman who did so much for the Quaker movement in its earliest days.*

*Yours in Friendship,*

Ruth Gadgil.

## **Margaret Fell's Life**

Margaret was born into the Askew family in Lancashire, England, in 1614. At the age of 17 she married Thomas Fell, landowner, Judge of Assize, Member of the Long Parliament and Vice-Chancellor of the County Palatine of Lancashire. Their home was Swarthmoor Hall, near Ulverston. Thomas and Margaret were married for 26 years and had 9 children of whom the first 7 were daughters. In 1652, 6 years before Thomas died, George Fox visited Swarthmoor Hall. Thomas was away, but Margaret met him and invited him to attend and speak about his faith at the local parish church. She and many in her household were immediately convinced and Margaret soon became a Quaker.

*It pleased the Lord so to open my understanding Imediately in the time of G Fs [George Fox's] declaration. That I saw perfectly Just then that wee were all wrong, & that we were but Theives, that had stolen the scriptures. which caused me to shed many tears. And I satt down in my pew & wept all the while ...*

Thomas Fell supported Margaret in her new beliefs, but although he opened Swarthmoor Hall to Friends for their meetings he was never a formal member of the Society. His home became the headquarters of the Quaker movement and was later used by George Fox as the base for his work.

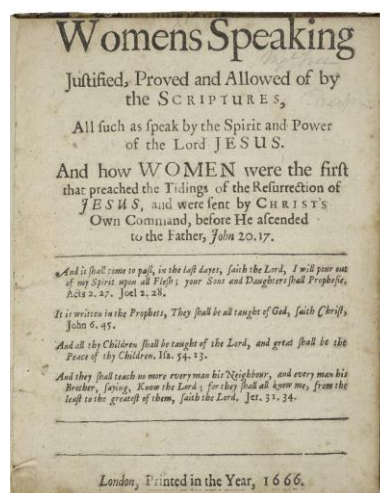


Following her conversion, Margaret began to express her new beliefs at meetings and in print. After Thomas Fell's death in 1658 she travelled twice to London to petition King Charles II and his parliament for freedom of conscience in religious matters. In 1664 she was arrested for failing to take an oath and for allowing Quaker meetings to be held in her home. This resulted in a period of 6 months in Lancaster gaol, during which she wrote religious pamphlets and epistles. After this she was sentenced to life imprisonment and forfeiture of her property. She was eventually released by order of the King and Council.

Margaret married George Fox in 1669 at the age of 55. Although their marriage lasted until his death in 1691 they spent little time together. Immediately after the marriage Margaret was again imprisoned in Lancaster, this time for breaking the Conventicle Act which banned all religious meetings other than those of the established Church of England. Shortly after her release George departed for America on a religious mission. He was imprisoned on his return in 1673 and Margaret went to London to intercede on his behalf. After his release in 1675 they spent about a year together at Swarthmoor. Margaret remained there, but George spent most of the rest of his life in London or abroad. Margaret was 77 when he died, but she continued to take an active part in Quaker affairs until her own death at the age of 88. In spite of the several periods of imprisonment, she and the Quaker movement benefitted from her considerable wealth and status throughout her long life.

### **Margaret Fell's work and beliefs**

Margaret, with George Fox and William Penn, was a founder of the Religious Society of Friends and a member of the Valiant Sixty early Quaker missionaries. She was a writer, and produced at least 23 printed works, mostly in pamphlet form. She helped to sustain the Quaker movement through correspondence with a large number of Friends. As an established member of the gentry she was often called to intercede in cases of persecution or arrest of outspoken Friends, including George Fox.



Margaret is perhaps best known for her 1666 pamphlet *Womens Speaking Justified*. In this she presented arguments supporting the recognition of women's spirituality and the right to express it. She maintained that in spiritual matters the views of women carried as much weight as those of men. This was not feminism as we know it because she did not call for any wider socio-political emancipation of women. The concept of equality with men in any public arena was revolutionary at that time and gave rise to widespread criticism from those who opposed preaching by women.

Margaret was totally concerned with the "Inner Light" which tends to lead people away from worldliness. She had no patience with any preoccupation with plain dress or rigid rules for behaviour, believing that spiritual matters should transcend earthly considerations. She was one of the first writers to publish the Quaker philosophy of peace and non-violence, and she was able to make sure that her views were heard by King Charles and his parliament.

In order to assist the Friends who set out to take the Quaker message to London and the south of England, Margaret established the "Kendal Fund", collecting money from Westmorland and other northern counties. Although she was imprisoned several times she remained a woman of considerable wealth and social status.

Quakerism owes much to the courage, determination and generosity of this remarkable woman.

### **Weekends at the Quaker Settlement, 76 Virginia Road, Whanganui 4500**

#### **13-15 July – Living well until the end**

Exploration of emotional and practical aspects of ageing, with suggestions about ways to help.

**Facilitator: Rosemary Tredgold**

**Contact: Di Dobson**

[diannecdobson@gmail.com](mailto:diannecdobson@gmail.com)

#### **27-29 July – Renewal of creation**

Reframing of the Quaker tradition within the global horizon that defines our lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Facilitators: Woodbrooke Tutors, Whanganui and Christchurch Friends**

**Contact: Anne Mohrdieck**

[annemohrdieck@gmail.com](mailto:annemohrdieck@gmail.com)

***The Wider Quaker Fellowship is an association of persons of diverse backgrounds who wish to have ties with the Religious Society of Friends without necessarily being in its membership, or who, through isolation, illness or some other circumstance are unable to attend a Monthly Meeting.***

***Any person who finds the fundamental Quaker testimonies and the Quaker way of life, with its emphasis on sincerity and simplicity, compatible with his or her philosophy of life is welcome to join the Fellowship. A request to the Clerk will ensure enrolment as a member.***