

## John Woolman Special Issue

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For most scholars of Quakerism, John Woolman (1720–1772) needs little in the way of introduction. Perhaps second only to George Fox in renown, Woolman, the Quaker tailor, farmer and abolitionist, has been studied and admired by generations of Quakers and others who have found his manner of living to be inspirational. Woolman has been championed as prescient by activists for racial, labour and environmental justice. He has been touted as an inspiration by those who pursue interfaith dialogue or who reject materialism. Spiritual seekers have found Woolman's writings to be timeless, authentic and rich. Each generation of Woolman's readers since his death have resonated with parts of his legacy and struggled with – or ignored – others.

This issue commemorates the 250th anniversary of Woolman's death in York in 1772. Over the past 30 years critical assessments of Woolman's historical context, theology, biblical interpretation and spirituality, literary and rhetorical methodologies, social consciousness, and relationship to marginalised groups have aided our understanding of Woolman and complicated simplistic caricatures of him.

I will attempt to give only a brief sketch of Woolman's life in these paragraphs; other events are recounted in the articles that follow. Woolman was born in 1720 and grew up on a farm in colonial New Jersey. From a young age he demonstrated a spiritual sensitivity that he would later imply set the foundation for his spiritual responsiveness. In between the young sensitivity and his adult spirituality was a period of spiritual rebellion in his young adult years that ultimately convinced him of God's love for him and for all creatures. From these early spiritual beginnings, Woolman eventually renounced human enslavement. He rejected any pursuit of wealth that was motivated by pride and that harmed others, such as the common practice of overworking field hands while plying them with alcohol. He advocated for American Indians and made a famous journey to visit the Native American town of Wyalusing in 1763. He had visions and dreams that he believed revealed truths that were unknowable to the mind locked in human reason. He eventually refused to wear dyed clothing and instead wore wool of the natural color, despite the angst it caused him for appearing to be different from

others in his religious community. In the last decade of his life he walked on most of his ministry travels, a practice that he asserted set a tone of meekness among colonial Quakers whom he generally believed had become too proud and were not adequately humble before God.

Woolman left a wife, Sarah, a daughter, Mary, and a body of literature when he died in 1772. His spiritual autobiography, the journal, is his most well-known writing. He also wrote essays on topics such as slavery, trade, poverty and greed. Some of his personal letters have been preserved, as well as epistles written in his official capacity as a committee member within Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. He also left notes and accounting ledgers. The 1972 publication of Phillips P. Moulton's critical edition of the journal, *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, stands out as an important milestone in Woolman studies because it analysed and made accessible the text of Woolman's original manuscripts.<sup>1</sup>

I am delighted to have been asked to guest edit this special issue to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Woolman's death, and I am pleased and excited to introduce the five multi-disciplinary articles selected for this issue. Each article provides ground-breaking scholarship in Woolman studies as well as a reassessment of Woolman's legacy.

Jean Soderlund shows how Woolman identified and critiqued the effects of English colonisation on American Indian communities, linking colonialism with enslavement and rum. Soderlund argues that Woolman viewed the self-interested decisions of English colonists as the root cause of the destruction of Lenape Indian sovereignty.

Jay Miller contends that Woolman inhabited the aesthetics of the stranger, which united the various parts of his work. For Woolman, Miller argues, one must embrace their own strangerhood through identification with Christ in order to approach the strangerhood of the other.

Geoffrey Plank demonstrates that some nineteenth-century editors of Woolman's antislavery essays repurposed and reconceptualised his legacy. While Woolman was already known as a tireless antislavery advocate, these later editors transformed Woolman's image for a new readership by asserting his universal importance beyond the social and political issues of his day.

Mike Heller and Ron Rembert address Rufus Jones's contention that, in his spirituality and ethics, Woolman exemplified the beatitude of meekness as described in the Gospel of Matthew: 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth' (Matthew 5:5). They argue that not only does the beatitude inform our interpretation of Woolman's spirituality but his incarnation of it also redefines our understanding of meekness.

Michael Birkel and Steve Angell approach Woolman's legacy through the writings of twentieth-century Quaker scholars Douglas V. Steere and D. Elton

1 Moulton, Phillips P. (ed.), *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1st edn, 1971.

Trueblood. By comparing two contemporaneous figures who were representative of the main traditions within Quakerism, the authors help us assess Woolman's ongoing legacy, as well as the diverse contexts and perspectives of those who have been impacted by Woolman.

The fresh ground cultivated by these authors demonstrates that there is much still to say about Woolman, and new methodologies will continue to provide additional perspectives. At least part of Woolman's legacy, then, is the recognition that a legacy is not static. It can change, adapt and refract light on to new topics and concerns; and this adaptive capacity is part of Woolman's ongoing appeal.

#### Author Details

Jon R. Kershner is an adjunct professor of religion at Pacific Lutheran University and instructional designer at the University of Washington. He is the author of *John Woolman and the Government of Christ: A Colonial Quaker's Vision for the British Atlantic World* (Oxford University Press, 2018) and edited *Quakers and Mysticism: Comparative and Syncretic Approaches to Spirituality* (Palgrave MacMillan Press, 2019).

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