PRINTING and circulating religious tracts was a popular activity 150 years ago when the Tract Association of Friends was founded. Many prominent persons in all Protestant denominations shared in the work of the various tract societies. Distribution of these pamphlets was an important manifestation of the evangelical spirit which swept the nation at that period, and Quakers were not immune to the movement. Before long, Friends were publishing tracts by the hundreds to announce truths they believed were universal and to defend their peculiar beliefs.

Tracts, small publications seldom more than a dozen pages in length, were printed and distributed by the million in the nineteenth century. Benjamin Rush's *On the Effects of Ardent Spirits* was popular with many societies. Friends printed one entitled *A Christian Memento, with Observations on Some of the Prevalent Amusements of the Day*. Others were specifically religious, such as *Universality and Efficacy of Divine Grace, or What Shall We Do to be Saved?* These printings were placed on steamships for passengers to read, were given to those in prison, were handed out to school children, and were sent west to be distributed on the frontier.

The first tract societies in the United States were started before 1800; there were more than 100 such organizations by 1825 when the American Tract Society was created.¹ This body had an annual budget of $300,000 by 1850, and five years later it had 659 colporteurs, or house to house salesmen, distributing tracts and other

¹ W. W. Sweet wrote that the first one was founded in 1803, and that there were thirty-seven by 1825. *Religion in the Development of American Culture, 1765-1840* (New York, 1952), 187, 188. He used as his reference an unpublished Ph.D. dissertation by Malcolm Vivian Mussina, "The Background and Origins of the American Religious Tract Movement" (Drew University, 1936), which indicates the earlier date and the larger number.
material. The American Tract Society, like the Quaker body, was sensitive to the changing spirit of the times. It published five million copies of tracts and 150,000 books on the temperance question. When the anti-Catholic agitation began, the American Tract Society participated in the movement, and later attempted to woo Catholics to Protestantism, at the same time denouncing the "wicked" Papal cabal. During the antislavery struggle the American Tract Society joined that crusade.2

The London Religious Tract Society was producing more than three million tracts a year by 1814, and distributing ten million a year by 1825.3 It had more than 200 auxiliaries. In addition, there were other tract societies in the British Isles, including three Quaker tract associations, organized prior to 1816, when the Tract Association of Friends was formed in Philadelphia. The Tract Association of the Society of Friends (London) was founded in May, 1813, and the Bible and Religious Tract Association of Friends in Newcastle-upon-Tyne was apparently organized at about the same time. The Dublin Tract Association (Quaker) issued its first printing in December, 1814.4 The London group remained in existence until it combined with the Literature Committee of the Meeting for Sufferings of London Yearly Meeting in July, 1935.5 The Newcastle association stopped operation in the middle of the nineteenth century. Little is known about the history of the Dublin group, but it is described as the first philanthropic group "for which Irish Friends formed a definite organization." It published the Sermon on the Mount in "Irish" or Gaelic in its second year, and sent the tracts to the west of Ireland; but they were not given a hospitable reception by Irish Catholic farmers. By 1831, the Dublin Tract people are said to have published 250,000 copies of tracts, and their organization "continued to exist for many years after that date."6

3 Charles I. Foster, An Errand of Mercy, the Evangelical United Front, 1790-1837 (Chapel Hill, 1960), 76, 77.
5 London Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends, 1636 . . . Minutes, 147.
6 Isabel Grubb, Quakers in Ireland, 1654-1900 (London, 1927), 137.
Three tract societies were organized by Quakers in the United States soon after the Philadelphia group started. The Tract Association of Friends in New York opened in 1817, and the Baltimore Association of Friends for Publishing and Distributing Tracts on Moral and Religious Subjects was founded the following year. The Union Tract Association of Friends in the Western Counties of the State of New York also began in 1818, at Auburn. Friends at Richmond, Indiana, started a similar organization a few years later.\(^7\)

Scholars have commented on the fact that the American Tract Society (1825) was established during the same period that the American Bible Society (1816), the American Sunday School Union (1824), the American Home Missionary Society (1826), the American Society for Promoting Temperance (1826), and the American Peace Society (1828) were started. These groups all held their annual meetings in May, and, with interlocking directorates, there was much overlapping of membership.\(^8\)

The Tract Association of Friends was not only in step with a general movement, it was also part of a pattern which influenced Philadelphia Quakers during this period. The Friends Asylum Committee was formed in 1813, although the Asylum did not open until 1817. The Apprentices' Library Company of Philadelphia was created in 1820 to make books freely available to those who could not afford to purchase them. The Bible Association of Friends was founded in 1829, and the institution destined to become Haverford College was opened in 1833.\(^9\)

It is interesting to note that both Thomas Kimber and Daniel B. Smith were members of the governing bodies of all five of these organizations. John Paul and Abraham Pennock were members of the founding committee of the Asylum, of the Bible Association, and of Haverford, as well as of the Tract Association. Eleven of the early

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\(^7\) Smith, II, 811, 815. Although Mussina described the tract societies of many denominations, missionary societies and other groups, he omitted any reference to the Quaker tract societies. In his introductory chapters he discussed the seventeenth-century publications of Friends, especially the tracts printed in Philadelphia during the Keithian Schism in the 1690's, and those issued during religious controversies in New England.

\(^8\) Sweet, 262; Winthrop S. Hudson, *American Protestantism* (Chicago, 1961), 85, 86.

Managers of the Asylum were also Managers of the Tract Association, and seven of the founders of the Bible Association were also on the original board of the Tract Association.

The fact that Daniel B. Smith (1792–1883) was one of the founders of the Tract Association well-nigh guaranteed its success. Smith was born in 1792, the son of Daniel and Deborah Morris Smith. His father died in the yellow fever epidemic the following year, and his mother moved to Burlington. There young Daniel studied under Dr. John Griscom, the famed Quaker teacher, later returning to Philadelphia to be apprenticed to John Biddle, an apothecary. In 1820, he opened his own pharmacy and remained active in that field throughout his lifetime. He shared in founding the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy, and served as its president for many years.¹⁰

In 1816, when he helped organize the Tract Association, he also shared in starting the Philadelphia Saving Fund Society, and four years later, he was a co-founder of the Apprentices' Library. The year 1824, when he married Esther Morton, found him among the group which established the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. He was a co-founder of The Friend in 1827, the Bible Association of Friends in 1829, and the school which became Haverford College, where he served as a member of its original faculty and later as principal. A full-length biography of Daniel B. Smith would tell much about the place of Friends in Philadelphia in the nineteenth century.

The tract movement originated in a period when there was a shortage of printed material: on the frontier and in many foreign lands there was virtually nothing to read. Tracts stood a good chance of acceptance because there was little else available. Friends belonging to Philadelphia Yearly Meeting were receiving virtually no printed material from the Meeting in 1816.¹¹


¹¹ There were only two standing committees, the one for Westtown Boarding School and the committee for the gradual civilization of the Indian natives, and they did not send reports to all members of the Society. The yearly meeting did not send the "Minutes" as we know them today, but prepared an "Extract" which might run two or three pages in length. Copies of epistles were also sent to the various Friends meetings. There was no periodical, for The Friend was not started until 1827. The Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Rules of Discipline, first printed in 1797, were not widely available until the second edition in 1806. Friends did publish some books, and volumes were imported from London Yearly Meeting, but it is clear that a minimum of Quaker printed material reached Friends homes.
The Constitution of the Tract Association of Friends, published in 1817, was prefaced by the following statement:

A Number of Friends having convened in Philadelphia on the 15th of the First Month, 1816, to consider the propriety of forming an Association, for the printing and distributing of Moral and Religious Books and Pamphlets, principally such as explain and enforce the doctrines of the Christian Religion; after deliberate consideration, united in the belief, that such an association, under proper regulations, might be productive of much good.

Originally the organization was called "The Association of Friends, for the Printing and Distribution of Tracts on Moral and Religious Subjects," created to print such tracts as would "explain and support the principles of the Christian Religion, as held by the Society of Friends. . . . Although a preference shall be given to the Writings of Friends, this preference shall not exclude such Works of other Authors, as may be well adapted to the purpose." The plan was to dispose of the tracts "where they may be useful at prime cost, or by granting a gratuitous supply, and to adopt means for their general circulation." The founders of the Association agreed in the beginning that tracts would be translated into foreign languages. Furthermore, it was stated that "The Association shall conform in its proceedings to the rules of our Religious Society, respecting new publications."

The first annual report, issued February 21, 1817, listed twenty-five members of the Board of Managers:¹²

Dobel Baker
Thomas Dugdale, Jr.
Daniel Elliott
John C. Evans
William Evans
Samuel Haydock
Thomas Kimber
Thomas Kite
Joseph Lea
Thomas M'Clintock
John W. Moore
James Mott, Jr.
James P. Parke

Joseph Parrish
John Paul
Abraham L. Pennock
John Richardson
Charles Roberts
Daniel B. Smith
Joseph Snowden
Charles Townsend
Benjamin Tucker
George Williams
Ellis Yarnall
Ellis H. Yarnall

¹² The Managers have printed an annual report until recently, and much of the material in the following pages is based upon the annual report for the year under discussion. The archives
In addition to the Managers, the report also listed more than 250 other men and women who were members and contributors. It gave the titles of twelve numbered tracts, referred to four others, reported that 47,028 copies had been printed during the first year, and stated that more than one-half of these had been distributed. Among the first titles were Memoirs of John Woolman; Benjamin Rush's On the Effects of Ardent Spirits; Anecdotes of Gamblers; Little Sins; and William Penn's Rise and Progress of Quakers. Some tracts appealed to the young, some were reprints of earlier tracts, and all were designed to "explain and support the principles of the Christian Religion."

The headquarters for the Tract Association during its early years was at the bookstore of Benjamin and Thomas Kite, 20 North Third Street. When the Bible Association of Friends, assisted by Thomas P. Cope, constructed a new building at 50 North Fourth Street in 1832, the Tract Association moved to that location. Later it moved to 84 Arch Street where it remained until 1857, when it was established at 304 Arch. Following a later temporary move, the Tract Association occupied a new building at 302-304 Arch in November, 1915, and there it stayed until 1960, when the headquarters were transferred to 1515 Cherry Street.

Although the Tract Association was formed more than a decade before the Separation of 1827, it is clear that the Friends who founded it tended to be those who would be called Orthodox. Only one of the Friends on the Board of Managers in 1826, Joseph Parrish, was clearly a member of the Hicksite group, although some other Friends who resigned from the Association in 1827 may have also belonged to that following. In a later period, the Association seemed to be more closely connected with the Wilburite wing of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (Arch) than the Gurneyite element, and it has continued to nurture a conservative tendency down to the present day. 

of the Tract Association of Friends are presently at the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, Department of Records, 302 Arch St., Philadelphia, but will soon be transferred to the Quaker Collection, Haverford College Library.

13 Minutes of the Managers, 1816-1841, Feb. 10, June 2, 1829, Mar. 2, 1830. Department of Records, 302 Arch St. The terms used for the three branches of the Society of Friends in that period may be confusing. The Hicksites are usually thought of as the more liberal group theologically, as opposed to the Orthodox. However, within the Orthodox were the Gurneyites, who were more evangelical than the Wilburites. It is interesting to note that the Tract Asso-
It responded to the controversies of 1827-1828 by preparing and circulating tracts "exposing the unsound principles which are now disseminated abroad, and [defending] the doctrines of our religious Society in opposition thereto." They issued, *Review of Elias Hicks' Letter to Dr. Nathan Shamaker*, *A View of the sentiments of Elias Hicks respecting future Rewards and Punishments*, and *A Review of Elias Hicks' Letter to Thomas Willis on the Miraculous Conception of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*.

The annual report in 1830 stated that 332,000 copies had been printed up to that point, largely for the "illiterate or partially informed of this community." It went on to lament that "Other Associations circulate a great number of Tracts which though generally less valuable than our own make it more difficult to dispose of them to advantage at least in the city and its vicinity. . . ." Subcommittees of the Board of Managers took the responsibility for distribution. In addition, after 1832, auxiliaries were formed in other parts of the country; by 1833, there were eleven auxiliaries in six states. Twenty-five additional auxiliary associations were formed by 1851. After a lull, a few more auxiliaries were created in the 1880's, and then a decline began. Only seven auxiliaries remained in 1910, and after 1919 none are mentioned in the annual reports.

Before long, the Tract Association determined to extend its activities to the publishing of an almanac. From 1838 until 1890, it issued the *Moral Almanac*, known after 1890 as the *Friends Religious and Moral Almanac*. Its first twenty pages contained information about the Society, especially Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (Arch), and included twelve pages of the usual astronomical information, including a chart for each month. The last sixteen pages were filled with uplifting material taken from other publications and reprinted. Several thousand copies of the almanac were printed each year, and there were often extras. Friends often saved the sixteen-page section,

citation was initiated by the evangelical wing, as compared with the Hicksite element in the 1820's, but in the 1840's the Tract Association group of Friends was more conservative than the Gurneyites. See Edwin B. Bronner, ed., *American Quakers Today* (Philadelphia, 1966), ch. 1.

14 *The Friend* [Philadelphia] (Jan. 5, 1884), 175.

15 British Friends published *An Almanack for the Use of Friends* for 1795, and probably had one for five years before that. Smith, II, 372.
binding ten years of this material together to form a 160-page pamphlet or book for donation to a prison or a charitable institution.

As an example of the type of material found in these almanacs, the fiftieth issue, that for 1887, may be examined: page 21 contained an essay entitled “Solemn Warnings”; page 23, “Hurtful Reading”; page 24, “Courteous Reply to an Infidel”; page 25, a poem entitled, “Seeds”; page 26, “A Cause of Hard Times,” and “Getting Square”; page 27, “Practicing Deception”; page 28, “Let the Child Work”; and so on down to page 35, “Alcohol on the Muscle”; and page 36, “Wonderful Deliverance.”

The publication of almanacs had begun as early as 1685 in Pennsylvania. Friends had begun to issue them in 1687 when Daniel Leeds had William Bradford print an almanac as a broadside in Philadelphia. Leeds joined William Keith in leaving the Friends in the 1690’s, but he and his sons, Titan and Felix, were well-known almanac editors for many years. Other Quakers, such as Jacob Taylor in Philadelphia in 1700 and Isaac Collins in Burlington, New Jersey, in 1771, printed almanacs in the colonial period.

In 1810 Kite’s Town and Country Almanac was started, and a Friends’ Almanac was printed for 1831 by Marcus T. C. Gould. The latter was soon after edited by Joseph Foulke and was for the use of the Hicksite branch of the Society. William Collum became editor of Kite’s almanac in 1812, and also issued Poor Will’s Almanac, printed by Kimber and Sharpless. He was a natural choice as editor of the astronomical material in the Moral Almanac when it appeared in 1838. There were, of course, many other almanacs, clear evidence of their popularity in the 1830’s.

The Friends Religious and Moral Almanac continued publication until 1942, when restrictions caused by World War II led to its demise. For four more years, the Tract Association published a much smaller pamphlet, without the astronomical charts, but including “a few declarations, or testimonies to Truth, and quotations from Scripture, which we hold as important as ever.”

Another activity of the Tract Association was the publication of a calendar, first issued for the year 1885. A tract entitled On Heathen

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16 A complete set of the Moral Almanac and its successors is in the Quaker Collection, Haverford College Library, as are all of the numbered tracts, and most of the unnumbered ones.

names for Months and Days, printed at the same time, was reprinted on the back of the calendar. Also printed on it were “a number of pithy and useful sentiments,” and some early issues included engravings of George Fox and of Jordan’s Meeting House. Sales of the calendar rose from less than 1,000 copies in the early years to 1,500 copies in 1895. By 1910, it was selling nearly 5,000 copies, evidently its high point.

Henry J. Cadbury has written that tract No. 138, On Heathen Names for Months and Days, was first printed by the London Meeting for Sufferings in 1751. The Tract Association continued printing it until 1935, when it discontinued the tract “as a clearer and more correct statement now appears on the back of FRIENDS’ CALENDAR.” The revised statement still appears on this calendar, although it is covered by Twelfth Month and is seldom seen or read.

To return to the Association’s main endeavor, the printing of tracts, many of them were biographical sketches of important Friends: John Woolman, William Dewsbury, James Parnell, William Edmundson, William Penn, Thomas Story, Daniel Wheeler, Thomas Chalkley, Robert Barclay, Isaac Penington, Samuel Fothergill, and Stephen Grellet. In addition, brief statements about Quaker beliefs were printed and circulated. Some of these writings—by George Fox, Penn, Penington, and Barclay—are kept in print today by the Association. Other tracts stressed particular testimonies of Friends, such as plainness of dress, refraining from using “heathen names” for the months and days of the week, advocating the equality of women, and, of course, peace. There were also a number, typical of the period, which lingered over dying statements and deathbed conversions.

A reading of the annual reports of the Tract Association at approximately twenty-five-year intervals—1841, 1866, 1891, 1916, and 1939—discloses changing conditions under which the organization operated. The 1841 report stated that 144,183 copies had been printed during the year, and that 120,274 had been distributed. Some of these tracts had been sent to Haiti, Trinidad, and other West Indian islands, and nearly 22,000 to auxiliaries. Philadelphia

18 Friends believed that the months and days of the week were named for heathen gods, and preferred to use “First Month,” “Second Month,” etc., for January, February, etc. They said “First Day” or “Second Day” instead of Sunday or Monday.

19 The Friend (Jan. 18, 1934), 242.
outlets included the Western Soup House, the Moyamensing and Eastern Penitentiaries, and the Magdalen Asylum, a home for "fallen women." Members continued to place tracts on steamers and hand them out to seamen in port.

The report for 1865–1866 stressed aid given to freedmen in the South; more than 20,000 copies were sent to the schools Friends were operating in the South at this time. Tracts continued to be distributed in Philadelphia to some of the same institutions as before. A report in *The Friend* stated that "The expense of keeping up the stock of the publications of the Association . . . a large proportion [of which] are disposed of gratuitously, has been greater of late years than at some former periods, in consequence chiefly of a larger distribution and the increased cost of paper and printing."20 But the expense was worthwhile, as another article in the same journal recorded: "The Managers continue to be encouraged from time to time by learning of instances in which the reading of the publications . . . has been productive of solid satisfaction to individuals at a time when their minds were in a state peculiarly susceptible to impressions of good . . . the presentation of a tract may be as 'a word spoken in season,' or as seed sown in a prepared soil, we would encourage the continued co-operation of all in the judicious distribution of these treatises."21

The annual report for 1891 indicated that 86,636 tracts had been distributed all over the United States and Canada, and overseas to Bermuda, India, Japan, Syria, and to several European countries. No reference was made to the Association's seventy-fifth anniversary, just as the fiftieth anniversary had also been ignored, but five years earlier Edward Maris had prepared a summary of the Association at the end of seventy years. He reported that 7,204,226 items had been printed by 1886, most of them tracts, but including 346,506 *Moral Almanacs*. The printing of small books for children, according to Maris, had started in 1844.22

The following year Maris wrote that the Association was modernizing the tracts, rewriting some, and printing them in larger type. It was not uncommon to rewrite a tract completely, keeping the same

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20 *Ibid.* (June 8, 1867), 326.
Notably, in 1891, there was no indication of financial difficulty, a unique note in the history of the Association.

The 1891 report advocated the election of women managers: "We again call the attention of the Association to the importance of having an addition made to our list of publications for small children. We believe this is a work for which women Friends are especially qualified, and we ask that some of them be added to the Board of Managers the present year." Ruth S. Abbott and Jane T. Wetherill were named in 1891; Mary P. Dillingham was added the following year, and Rebecca K. Masters in 1893.

In its 1916 report, the Association finally took heed of the passage of time: "Perhaps this report would be incomplete without mention of the fact that one hundred years have elapsed since 'a number of Friends convened in Philadelphia in the First Month, 1816. . . .'" It continued: "We have inherited a responsibility in the example and faithful labors of our predecessors. We have large opportunities and an unlimited field to carry on a work begun with a righteous concern, and maintained, we doubt not, through a century of great development, largely in the same spirit. The promotion of this concern requires a hearty combination of faith and works. It requires an interest and sympathy, not only on the part of the Association, but also in the hearts of Friends here and elsewhere. It requires the spirit of service and also of sacrifice. We desire that the incoming Board and Friends generally may have these attributes in large measure, and that faithful laborers may be found who will carry on the work to the Master's honor and glory."

Statistics for 1916 record the printing of 128,000 copies of tracts, and the distribution of nearly 85,000 of them. But there was not enough money at hand for this good work, "due in part to increases in operating expenses, and in part to decreases in contributions and donations caused by the decrease of interested Friends." In another part of the report Friends' lack of interest in distributing tracts was again mentioned. Decline in the printing of tracts continued; in 1939 only 33,538 tracts were distributed and a mere 1,000 Almanacs sold.

23 Ibid. (Mar. 5, 1887), 246.
In 1946, the Association initiated the “Seed Emblem Series” of tracts, “embodying good type, convenient size for individual mailing, and with identifying colored covers.” Thirty thousand of these tracts were printed in the year 1947–1948, and the one by Thomas R. Kelly, *The Gathered Meeting*, quickly went into a second printing of 5,000. However, in 1950, the Managers reported that only 9,735 tracts had been distributed, including 2,880 old style tracts, 3,140 “E” series tracts, and 2,165 of the “Seed” series.

During its long history the Tract Association has tried to meet changing needs, and to prepare tracts to meet particular issues. Mention has been made of the tracts after the Separation of 1827, and of the effort to provide tracts for Freedmen after the Civil War. In 1848, after the Mexican War, Friends were concerned about the prevailing practice of illuminating windows to celebrate military victories, and issued 17,500 copies of a tract on that matter. In 1876 the Association realized that some tracts were too long to gain the attention they deserved; tract 11, *Religious Duties*, was broken down into nine separate tracts. When the controversy over the use of sacraments in some Friends meetings in the Middle West developed in the 1880’s, a special tract was prepared to remind Friends of Quaker beliefs concerning outward observances. “It is to be hoped that this Tract will have a service among some who profess to be Friends, but who advocate the use of outward bread and wine.”

In 1917, with World War I about to begin, the Association stressed its tracts on peace, especially No. 83, *The Example and Testimony of the Early Christians on the Subject of War*, and No. 46, *The Principles of Peace Exemplified*.

The Association also developed an interest in children’s literature and has continued that concern into the recent past. The report for 1852 included a list of nineteen juvenile tracts; some of these were religious in nature, while others emphasized natural history with tracts about bear, bison, fish, birds, bees and other insects. Then, too, there were the *Memoirs of James Parnell, A Dialogue on War, Music, and Dress*, and *Poems for Children*. A list of juvenile tracts available in 1930 included such items as: *George Fox; My First Lie; Touch Not, Taste Not, Handle Not; Kindness to Animals*; and *The

24 Ibid.
Deadly Cigarette. Presumably other publishers were producing material on nature for children, for the Tract Association had restricted itself to morality and religion.

Foreign language tracts were produced to fill special needs. In 1885, it was reported that No. 141, The Teaching of the Spirit of Christy had been translated into Chinese for the use of coolies in California. Material was translated into German, and money was given to German Friends in 1925 to pay for printing literature in Germany. Tracts have also been published in French and Spanish.

The Tract Association was founded in a period when there was a paucity of printed material, but conditions in this regard soon changed. For many years the Association has lamented a lack of interest in its work on the part of Friends generally, and has reported that outside groups are the ones that find its publications of value. In 1948, reference was made in the annual report to the use of the publications “by conservative Friends, Pastors of Friends Meetings; Ministers of other denominations, Christian workers and Evangelists, concerned Christians and seekers throughout the United States, among our neighbors in Canada, Mexico, and across the seas,” and in 1951 mention is made of reprinting a tract for Methodists.

Usually, the annual reports maintained a gallant optimism in the face of adversity, but in 1952 the report stated that the Association had “published less, and distributed fewer tracts than in the preceding year. This is in part the result of lack of Divine compulsion to speak through the brief and compact channel of the published tract.” Only a change in public acceptance of its form of literature can revive the Tract Association’s past vigor.

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