

## BOOK REVIEWS

*The Beautiful Soul of John Woolman, Apostle of Abolition.* By THOMAS P. SLAUGHTER. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008. 450 pp. Illustrations, note on sources, notes, index. \$30.)

John Woolman was born in 1720 in western New Jersey and was the grandson of Quaker immigrants who helped build the commercial agricultural economy of the eighteenth-century Delaware Valley. He had a fairly ordinary childhood: he attended school, labored on the family farm, and then, as a young adult, went to work for a shopkeeper. Some years later he abandoned his mercantile career, which in his generation was a chief route to wealth, and instead became a tailor. This trade, for an honest, hard-working man such as Woolman, garnered him a steady income, but no riches.

In *The Beautiful Soul of John Woolman, Apostle of Abolition*, Thomas Slaughter explains that this career decision, among other choices Woolman made during his lifetime, has contributed to Woolman's renown as a Quaker saint. While the biographer provides ample discussion of Woolman's outward achievements, Slaughter's primary goal is to understand his inner life—the mystical experiences that required the New Jersey Friend to challenge leaders of his own religion and of the larger society. Best known for his collaborative opposition to slaveholding among the Society of Friends, Woolman traveled frequently as a Quaker minister, witnessed against war and violence, and preached and practiced simplicity, becoming increasingly ascetic in his clothing and way of life. His essay *A Plea for the Poor*, unpublished for two decades after his death in 1772, linked his testimonies against slavery, expropriation of Native American property, consumer excess, and inequality of wealth.

Slaughter depends largely on Woolman's spiritual journal, notably manuscript drafts and *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman* (1971) by Phillips P. Moulton. Moulton collated and annotated Woolman's manuscripts and, most importantly, reinstated material about his dreams that a Quaker committee excised before publishing the first edition in 1774. Slaughter also explores the influence of literature on Woolman, including the Bible, Quaker books such as William Sewel's *History*, and Enlightenment works. In particular, Slaughter believes Woolman found "authority to challenge his own church" from the principles and martyrdom of Jan Hus and writings of Thomas à Kempis. Woolman considered both men "sincere-hearted followers of Christ' and worthy of emulation, models of resolve in the face of contrary opinion within the church and, in Hus's case, also in the face of state authority" (174–75).

Thomas Slaughter began his study by trying to understand John Woolman's

distinctiveness, the qualities that have kept his journal continuously in print and have placed him among the coterie of religious leaders who are revered across denominational lines despite the fact that he “was one of many prophets in his day . . . [and] not the only abolitionist, mystic, critic of capitalism, ascetic, pacifist, holy man, or spiritual purist” (8). Slaughter found the typology of the “saint” in William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) of some, but limited, use, perhaps—in the end—because saints cannot be typified. While aspects of Woolman’s beliefs and motivations remain elusive, Slaughter provides us, through prodigious research and stimulating insights, the basis for working toward our own appreciation of Woolman’s gifts.

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*The Way of Improvement Leads Home: Philip Vickers Fithian and the Rural Enlightenment in Early America.* By JOHN FEA. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. 272 pp. Illustrations, appendix, notes, index. \$39.95.)

John Fea has written an excellent cultural biography of Philip Vicker Fithian’s relatively short but interesting life. Fithian is best known to scholars for his insightful journal comments on his experiences as a tutor in plantation Virginia, but Fea offers a well-crafted study that makes good use of Fithian’s voluminous journals, diaries, and papers, beginning with his early agricultural journal in 1766 and ending with his premature death as an army chaplain in 1775. Fithian was born into a middling family in southwestern New Jersey, and we learn through his accounts about some of the key events of the third quarter of the eighteenth century: the state of prospering yeoman and the seasonal cycles of rural life, the state of Presbyterian religion and American Protestantism in the post–Great Awakening era, the evolving struggle from resistance to revolution in the colonial crisis with Great Britain, and the Enlightenment as experienced in local communities and by ordinary residents of British North America. Fea’s “study of this ordinary farmer” situates Fithian in the locale of Cohansey, even as he explains how the young minister achieved a cosmopolitan worldview through his education, his travels to backcountry Pennsylvania, his circle of friends, and, most of all, his reading and self-examination (7).

Fea argues that Fithian’s Enlightenment life was marked by a “way of improvement,” a drive for education and ambition. It is best understood as a cosmopolitan experience rooted in a local experience, or as the author’s subtitle emphasizes, a “rural Enlightenment.” Fithian’s version of Enlightenment, Fea observes, occupied a middle ground between cosmopolitan ideals and local attachments (5). Ideas and institutions help root Fithian in his native locale while