

**'The Air, the Tone, and Mannerisms of the Quakers':
The Quakers, the Protestant Ethic, and the Quaker Mormons**

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Abstract

That the Quakers achieved disproportional economic success throughout their history is beyond dispute, yet the cause of the Quakers' success has received considerable debate. Though the Quakers promoted an ethic of hard work and thrift that Weber noted, a number of scholars have noted the role that Quaker networks and meetings played in the Quakers' success and some have argued that the Quakers' networks accounted entirely for the Quakers' wealth. Yet the success the early Mormons had among lapsed Quakers in the Delaware Valley provides a window into how those with a Quaker heritage performed economically outside of the Quaker networks. The 'Quaker Mormons' were not only significantly wealthier than both their neighbors and the other Mormon converts in the area but also continued their disproportional economic success after their move to Utah. The success of the Quaker Mormons outside of any Quaker networks suggests that the Quakers' individual characteristics of hard work, thrift, and business acumen (traits the Quaker Mormons also possessed) played a major role in their success.

Keywords: economic success, Heber J. Grant, Mormons, networks, Quakers.

The Quakers' disproportionate economic success throughout their history has brought numerous attempts at explanation from scholars, of which Max Weber's is the most famous. Thus the issue of Quaker business acumen has tended to be caught up in the larger argument over the validity of Weber's Protestant-ethic thesis. The Protestant ethic has seemed a particularly good fit for explaining the Quakers' wealth considering the degree to which they promoted (and, many would argue, embodied) hard work and thrift. Yet, many scholars have argued that the Quakers' networks of monthly meetings along with ties of kinship through marriage were major tools in promoting the Quakers' economic success.¹ Some have gone so far as to argue

1. Such a claim likely would not have brought much protest from Weber: Weber spoke extensively about how individual ethics become institutionalized in

that the Quakers' networks were the sole explanation for the Quakers' wealth and that individual characteristics played no major role in the process.

Determining whether individual characteristics of hard work and thrift or supportive networks were the cause of the Quakers' economic success is difficult since the Quakers' ethics and networks always coexisted. However, Quakerism always had high attrition rates due to the rigorous standards of the faith; over the years, Quakerism produced numerous disowned Quakers. These individuals can be difficult to track, but my study of the early Mormon converts in the Delaware Valley found not only that numerous lapsed Quakers joined the Mormons there but also that these lapsed Quakers retained a number of Quaker cultural traits, one of the most striking of which was their wealth and business acumen. Indeed, the Quaker Mormons (as I call them here) make a good test case for the network argument because they had not only left Quakerism but would soon, often at considerable personal expense, leave civilization altogether by moving to Utah. Totally separated from any Quaker networks and often their past wealth, many of these Quaker Mormons nevertheless acquired significant wealth in Utah and played major roles in Mormon finance. The economic prowess of the Quaker Mormons suggests that the Quakers' ethos bred capitalistic success based on thrift, industry, and business acumen.

The Quakers served as Max Weber's quintessential example in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*: the Quakers connected 'a religious way of life with the most intensive development of business acumen', said Weber and succeeded because they both embodied honesty in their dealings and promoted 'rational labour

his later writings. Weber noted that in the United States church membership and business went hand in hand because joining a church 'follows only upon the most careful "probation" and after closest inquiries into conduct going back to early childhood'. Thus, 'admission to the congregation is recognized as an absolute guarantee of the moral qualities required in business matters. Baptism secures to the individual the deposits of the whole region and unlimited credit without any compensation. He is a "made man".' 'It does not matter', Weber declared, 'whether or not one be Freemason, Christian Scientists, Adventist, Quaker, or what not. What is decisive is that one be admitted to membership by "ballot", after an examination and an ethical probation in the sense of the virtues which are at a premium for the inner-worldly asceticism of protestantism and hence, for the ancient puritan tradition.' Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (trans. and ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills; New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 305, 307.

in a calling'.² Scholars have demonstrated again and again that the Quakers succeeded in business to a remarkable degree. Arthur Raistrick's careful study of Quaker industrialists and scientists led Michael Mullett to declare, 'Within a world in which Nonconformists outshone non-Nonconformists in economic performance, Quakers even stood out amongst their Dissenting brethren in all fields of measurable achievement, from the sciences to trade to manufacture'.³ David Pratt found that by 1790 as many as a quarter of English county banks were Quaker owned.⁴ Robert Enoch Buck's case study of industrialization in two American towns found a significant difference between Lynn, Massachusetts, with a heavy Quaker presence, and Buckfield, Maine, without one. 'Certainly the kind of calculative rationality that Weber discussed did play an important role in the industrialization process...in Lynn', which, Buck argued, had a 'qualitatively different...mentality of commerce [than] those in Buckfield'.⁵ Most significantly, Michael Watts found that in 1851 the Quakers' percentage among Britain's very wealthy was 50 times higher than the Quakers' percentage in the general populace.⁶

While Frederick Tolles declared that 'the so-called "Protestant ethic" ' was central to the Quakers' success in Philadelphia,⁷ Peter Mathias argued that 'the picture of a religious ethic acting directly upon the individual over-simplifies the direct impact of ideas upon events, by ignoring the opportunities and strength given by the facts of community amongst the faithful'. The Quaker networks, argued Mathias, 'provided an environment of mutual trust and confidence within which a private "invisible hand" could accommodate the advantages of each member with the benefit of all'. This was because

2. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (trans. Talcott Parson; (London and New York: Rutledge, 1992 [repr. 1930]), pp. 10, 98, 107.

3. Michael A. Mullett, 'Catholic and Quaker Attitudes to Work, Rest, and Play in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century England', in R.N. Swanson (ed.), *The Use and Abuse of Time in Christian History* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2002), p. 206.

4. David H. Pratt, *The English Quakers and the First Industrial Revolution: A Study of the Quaker Community in Four Industrial Counties – Lancashire, York, Warwick, and Gloucester, 1750-1830* (New York: Garland, 1985), pp. 76-77.

5. Robert Enoch Buck, 'Protestantism and Industrialization: An Examination of Three Alternative Models of the Relationship between Religion and Capitalism', *Review of Religious Research* 34.3 (1993), pp. 210-24 (217).

6. Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters. II. The Expansion of Evangelical Nonconformity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 332.

7. Frederick B. Tolles, *Meeting House and Counting House: The Quaker Merchants of Colonial Philadelphia, 1682-1763* (New York: Norton, 1963 [repr. 1948]), p. viii.