

## Quaker and Naturalist Too

By Os Cresson

For more than twenty years Os Cresson has been a leading light among nontheist Friends, his quiet, unassuming influence extending to Friends' communities in the United States, Britain and beyond. Os is a 100% Quaker, – and a one-hundred-per-cent naturalist without a trace of supernaturalism or mystical transcendentalism in his make-up. Not half-Quaker and half-atheist, not in two minds, nor standing with feet planted in two opposing camps, but “a person whose philosophies of science and religion and everything else, are bound to what we observe and what we infer from that”.

Clear as he is about his own position (he quotes the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of naturalism: “A view of the world, and of man’s relation to it, in which only the operation of natural [as opposed to supernatural or spiritual] laws and forces is admitted or assumed”) he is equally clear that this is only one position among many to be found in the modern, liberal, creedless Society of Friends. Os delights in this diversity and would have it no other way. Dogmatism is religion’s most relentless enemy within, and readers will find no trace of it in this book.

Os has never thrust himself into the limelight. He has written for Friends Journal<sup>1</sup> and contributed two classic essays to *Godless for God’s Sake*, the book which might be said to have given nontheist Quakerism lift-off when it was published in 2006. But many of his most valuable and insightful contributions have appeared in the transient medium of the internet, on the email forum [nontheist-friends@googlegroups.com](mailto:nontheist-friends@googlegroups.com)<sup>2</sup> and the website [www.nontheistfriends.org](http://www.nontheistfriends.org)<sup>3</sup> One reason for welcoming this book is that it snatches some of these gems from cyberspace and gives them new life on the printed page.

The result is not only a powerful personal exposition of religious commitment free of outdated supernaturalism but also something of a handbook for nontheist Friends of all descriptions – naturalist, humanist, atheist, devout skeptic – and an eye-opener for Friends who have found it hard to reconcile godlessness with traditional Quaker metaphysics. Os starts with a short section on Quaker Unity, but I would recommend coming back to that after first taking in a truly wonderful essay, *Quakers from the Viewpoint of a Naturalist*, which opens his second section. **This is probably the best short statement of what it means to be a nontheist Friend that I have read anywhere.**

In a third section, Os digs deep into Quaker history to reveal a developing strand of Quaker dissent, or open-mindedness, which he characterises as the roots which eventually flowered into Quaker nontheism. Here he builds on one of his *Godless for God’s Sake* essays, starting with Gerrard

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<sup>1</sup> Friends Journal is an American publication.

<sup>2</sup> An open forum set up by James Riemermann of the US

<sup>3</sup> A US web site set up by James Riemermann.

Winstanley and Jacob Bauthumley in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, moving on to 18<sup>th</sup> century “Quaker Skeptics” like John Bartram, the “proto-Hicksites” Job Scott, Abraham Shackleton, Hannah Barnard and Mary Newhall, and the Free Quakers of Philadelphia.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century he rediscovers David Duncan and the Manchester Free Friends, the Progressive and Congregational Friends of Longwood and New York, and the redoubtable Lucretia Mott (“I confess to great scepticism as to any account or story which conflicts with the unvarying natural laws of God and his creation”). Among several 20<sup>th</sup> century radicals he includes Henry Joel Cadbury, historian, Biblical scholar, social activist (“I can describe myself as no ardent theist or atheist... My own religion is mainly neither emotional nor rational but expresses itself habitually, or occasionally in action”).

This section concludes with an essay on Religious Naturalism in the Time of Fox. Os does not claim these giants for fully-developed naturalism or humanism, but offers them as examples of a free-thinking movement at the heart of the Quaker tradition which paved the way to an inclusive Quakerism where today’s nontheist Friends can find themselves at home. Here he has made a most valuable contribution to Quaker historiography, the more so since each entry is backed by source notes including an extensive bibliography.

No less valuable is the list of more than fifty recent books, pamphlets, articles and essays by Quaker nontheists which brings the book to a close.

**This combination of exposition and resource manual makes *Quaker and Naturalist* a must-read both for Friends already committed to a nontheist viewpoint and others willing to explore adventurously what it might mean to be both religious and godless, Quaker and atheist. I cannot recommend it too highly.**

**David Boulton**

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