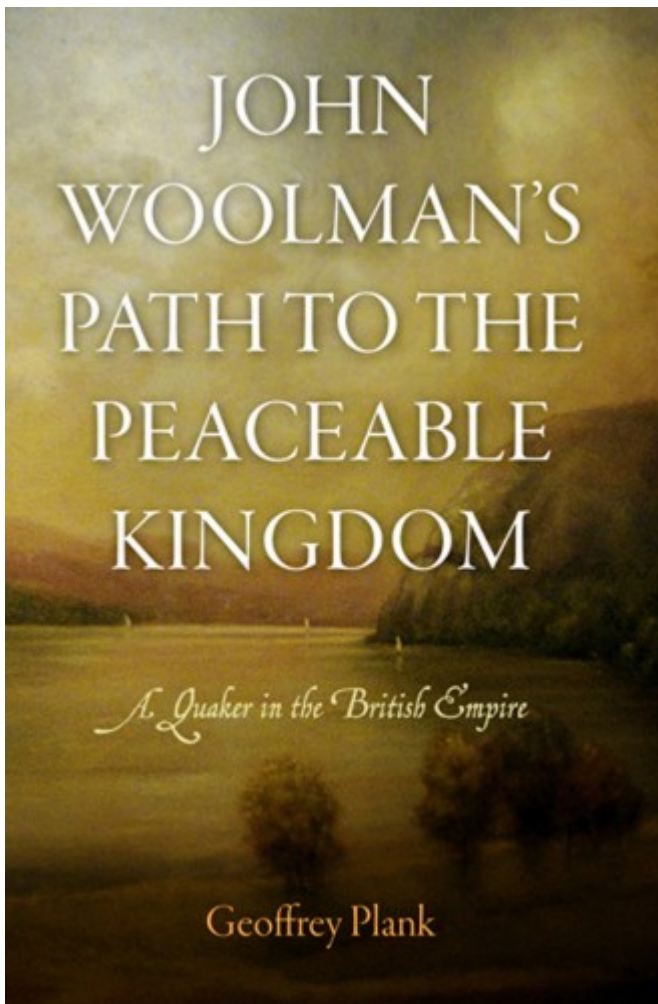


John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom, by Geoffrey Plank

reviewed by [Patricia Appelbaum](#) in the [June 26, 2013](#) issue

In Review



John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom

By Geoffrey Plank

University of Pennsylvania Press

This is a lovely book, a wonderful example of careful yet accessible history.

John Woolman, a Quaker of 18th-century New Jersey, is well known as an early abolitionist and an advocate of material simplicity. His journal, a spiritual autobiography, is an American and Christian classic, and people tend to remember Woolman as a heroic individual, as both a reformer and a saint.

Geoffrey Plank takes a broader view. His book situates Woolman in his many contexts and communities—with other early abolitionists; in transatlantic economic discussions; with farmers and shopkeepers, slaves and sailors. A professor of American studies at the University of East Anglia, Plank also reminds us of the wide range of Woolman's interests—from Native Americans to seafaring, from agriculture to eschatology.

Many of Woolman's concerns are remarkably timely today. The 18th century was, after all, the beginning of the modern age in many respects. It was a time of economic expansion, which affected land use, communities and religion. It was also an age of globalization when European empires were building worldwide economic networks. Woolman and others saw how consumer purchasing was tied to global commerce and how global commerce shaped even the smallest local transactions. Knowing this, Woolman reflected carefully on how to travel and on what to wear and use, what to buy and sell. His decisions were not just matters of personal purity but were meant to affect worldwide systems.

Woolman's political concerns are also surprisingly contemporary. For example, Woolman and other reformers gave up on legislative processes in favor of direct action, and issues like local food production, the export of staple food and the conduct of effective boycotts also have contemporary resonance. On the other hand, Woolman and others struggled with the implications of the Quaker peace testimony, which were less than clear-cut. The Seven Years' War, which affected Pennsylvania directly, raised far-reaching questions about war taxes, police action and the proper role of government. Quakers agreed that they should not bear arms or serve in the military. But what about paying someone else to serve in one's place? What about letting the army commandeer your horse and wagon?

Even in his rural location, Woolman was part of a large intellectual universe; he did not think alone. Through reading, correspondence, travels and Quaker intervisitation, he was acquainted with a wide circle of conversations about all these issues, both within and outside Quakerism. His reading included the likes of Isaac Watts, Thomas à Kempis and John Locke. And his personal inspiration—which Plank

explores with great sensitivity—was tempered by community. He honored Quaker institutional structures and worked within them. His major decisions, such as undertaking ministerial journeys, were submitted to Quaker bodies for approval. So were his publications, including his seminal works on slavery and poverty. At times he held back, whether for strategic reasons or for the good of the community. He did not insist on being prophetic at all costs.

Yet his prophetic witness did grow more intense over the course of his life. In his early work as a shopkeeper, he gradually ceased dealing in the products of slave labor—especially sugar and rum, the latter being so widely used that one contemporary shopkeeper said he couldn't make money without it. He also eliminated from his trade many things he considered frivolous or unnecessary. Woolman came to believe that if people would resist luxuries—and the concomitant sins of greed and covetousness—the world would produce enough for all without excessive labor for anyone. There would then be no need for slavery or indentured servitude or animal suffering. (Present-day readers might reflect on petroleum and sweatshops instead.)

Later, Woolman began wearing undyed clothing, not only because dye was a luxury but because it made the cloth less durable, so that one had to consume more. He rejected the use of silver, a move that complicated his work as a merchant and legal executor. He became concerned not only about the institution of slavery but about whether he owed slaves a personal debt.

Another example of Woolman's moral thinking unfolds in Plank's remarkable chapter on oceangoing travel. Woolman began with a biblical worldview: waters were a place of danger, and seafarers, who depended on divine protection, had to be in tune with God's purposes. In many ways they were not. Travel was conducive to sickness; food and other useful items were often lost in shipping; sailors risked their lives and lived in squalid conditions. On a larger scale, most maritime commerce was enmeshed with the slave trade. The goods that were traded for slaves were often unnecessary luxuries. And many ships carried guns in order to protect their cargo.

At the same time, Woolman felt a call to travel overseas in the ministry. How might he do this without profiting from the slave trade, indulging in luxury, exploiting labor or contravening God's will? At one point he offered to pay extra for his passage so that it would not be subsidized by immoral trade. On another voyage, he traveled in steerage with the sailors.

Woolman's ideals were thus intimately entwined with material things and expressed in material ways. His witness was visible and public—yet, as Plank points out, its meaning was not self-evident. Without an explanation, it could look like mere eccentricity, not symbolism. Plank does not speculate about the patterns of Woolman's spiritual life, but I wonder how Woolman's increasing intensity might be understood in light of classical spiritual direction. Did his intensity arise from spiritual growth, a deepened relationship with God? Could it have been a spiritually destructive perfectionism or a kind of compulsiveness? We can't, of course, make such judgments about a historical figure, but if we undertake an activist witness ourselves, we might ask such questions about our own practice. Then again, many of us might see ourselves in the pragmatic Quakers who shrugged and continued to deal in liquor and lace, silver vessels and decorative furniture.

This book rewards slow reading and group study. An adult class or small group would find much to reflect upon—as when Woolman observes that a meeting of 300 people running one minute overtime wastes the equivalent of five hours for one person; or when he says that wealthy people ought to practice “humility and plainness.” It also rewards a second reading. The book is organized thematically, not chronologically, so later chapters illuminate earlier ones as well as the reverse. Thus when we learn that Woolman walked from London to Yorkshire to avoid abusing stagecoach horses, we find new meaning in the earlier material on animal husbandry and the spirituality of walking. Readers might want to make a timeline to keep track of chronological overlaps.

The book also invites reflection on a larger scale. What is divine inspiration, and how do we recognize it? Is compromise possible on moral and political issues? What is best done privately, what publicly, what in a small community? What happens when your testimony of simplicity makes your life more complicated? How is religious conviction acted out in everyday practices? Family and church, work and business, nature and possessions: Plank's account of John Woolman teaches us how political and economic thought was grounded in the particulars of one life.