



Deposited via The University of Leeds.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/232642/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Bennett, B. (Accepted: 2025) A Volume of a 'Different Hue': Transatlantic Print and the Making of the Aurora Borealis, a Quaker Literary Annual. *Early American Literature*. ISSN: 0012-8163 (In Press)

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

Bridget Bennett is Professor of American Literature and Culture at the University of Leeds. Her research interests include abolition and antislavery, cultural representations of home, and transatlantic approaches to cultural texts. Widely published, her most recent book is *Antislavery in the Dissenting Atlantic: Archives and Unquiet Libraries, 1776-1865* (LSU Press 2025). Her work has also appeared in journals including *Early American Literature*, *Atlantic Studies* and *Journal of American Studies*.

A Volume of a 'Different Hue': Transatlantic Print and the Making of the *Aurora Borealis*, a Quaker Literary Annual

Abstract: This article directs attention to a short-lived Quaker literary annual, the *Aurora Borealis*. Immediately successful on both sides of the Atlantic, its editors discontinued their work after a single issue when faced with the opposition of London publishers who saw it as a threat to their domination of the market. It recovers the history of unfamiliar volume using two archives located on different sides of the Atlantic. The literary ambitions of a group of Friends was channelled into the production of a publication that modelled itself on a highly popular secular genre while shaping it along denominational lines. The annual's producers borrowed from commercial techniques to advertise and produce a volume that was familiar but nonetheless distinctive due to its non-metropolitan origins and its Quaker content. I argue that the existence of the annual enables further speculation about other publishing ventures on both sides of the Atlantic that should be demanding our attention, reimagining the contours of Quaker literary history and transatlantic print.

Keywords: *Aurora Borealis*, Society of Friends, Quaker literary annual, transatlantic, print, reading.

On 20 January 1834 a notice in the Washington-based *National Intelligencer* announced that a number of new works, were available from P. Thompson's bookstore.

Just received, the Friends' Annual, or Aurora Borealis, for 1834, edited by members of the Society of Friends, illustrated with plates. Price \$2.

Also on hand, a few copies of The Keepsake, Picturesque Annual, Book of Beauty, &c, &c. at reduced prices. ("Multiple Classified Advertisements")¹

Had prospective buyers made their way to that establishment they would have encountered a newly-published Quaker literary annual bearing many of the hallmarks of a highly marketable genre.² Its name deliberately invoked its origins in the North of England; indeed, one of its editors, George Atley Brummell, later described the *Aurora Borealis* as a 'Northern blast' of writing. (Newcastle Society of Friends) Yet, ironically, it resembled the natural phenomenon after which it was named in a different way too. It was an overnight affair, disappearing from view and cultural memory after a single issue. The transatlantic publication of this short-lived annual certainly appears to bely the idea that Quaker theology chiefly lends itself to a particular type of writing style or mode, suggesting a fruitful topic for further investigation.

The *Aurora Borealis* has a great deal to teach us about the literary enterprise of Friends, yet it has had no scholarly attention until now. This article offers an entirely new appraisal of an important and forgotten publication and its archives remedying the fact that its lack of longevity and its non-metropolitan origins have made it an outlier in the larger history of literary annuals,

gift books and Christian publishing.³ I direct attention to the way that this short-lived but successful Quaker literary annual marked a new stage in the movement of Quaker publication into the mainstream. Excitingly, not only is the print volume itself available as an object for us study but I have discovered considerable detail about its origins and the contexts within which it appeared, showing its significance as a print object. Recovering the volume and surrounding materials enables further speculation about the existence of other publishing ventures on both sides of the Atlantic that should be demanding our attention, including (potentially) as yet unknown repositories that will help us reimagine the contours of Quaker literary history in the early decades of the nineteenth century. As we will see, the volume successfully appealed across religious lines to a group of readers who felt they were not being served by existing literary annuals.

The *Aurora Borealis* originated in Newcastle upon Tyne when a group of Friends, who gathered together regularly to discuss literary texts, expanded their ambitions and decided to enter into print. Since they wanted to benefit from the vogue for literary annuals and gift books, they studied them carefully as they planned their own publication. At first glance theirs seems like an unlikely publishing enterprise for a number of reasons. First, it originated and was published in the North of England (though, cannily, the editors also secured it a powerful metropolitan publisher). In contrast, most literary annuals were published in London, the epicentre of British print. Second, though there was an emerging market for Christian books, including literary annuals, the words *Quaker* and *literary annual* appear to challenge and confront each other, creating an incongruous conjunction of a fashionable form with a denomination more usually associated with a plainness of speech, reading and dress. Quakers and non-Quakers were aware of this incongruity. Many Friends had reservations about moving away from familiar and tested kinds of Quaker print – for instance religious biographies and

sufferings texts. However, by the period that the Newcastle group started to plan their publication, the Quaker literary landscape was changing. Longstanding practices of the manuscript circulation of poetry and other forms had potential for print, just at the point at which printed texts were becoming cheaper and more accessible on both sides of the Atlantic. Friends contributed their writings and in a number of instances the misgivings of more conservative Friends were successfully overcome.

The annual's producers wanted to move away from older modes of Quaker print, such as sufferings narratives, religious biographies and deathbed testimonies. They planned further to develop forms of manuscript writing by ushering them into print and giving them longevity. At the same time, they wanted to introduce the works of Quaker writers to new readers. Despite the apparent eccentricity of the very idea of a Quaker literary annual then, the metropolitan publishers of existing literary annuals quickly recognised that the new publication was a successful amalgamation of Quaker sensibilities with popular literary form. This raises the question of exactly what it was that made the new literary annual pose such a risk to already-successful publications, especially given the Quaker reputation for plain simplicity. By examining its contents, I will demonstrate that the annual had stylistic and other features, not least its regional origins, that marked it out as interesting enough to pose serious competition in an already crowded marketplace. As Brummell later wrote, London publishers were disturbed by the existence of a volume 'so Borean in its character and birth' that dared 'to attempt to invade' their metropolitan space. The London publishers' 'determined opposition' made its editors think twice about their initial plans to continue publishing. He concludes, 'prudence determined the proprietors to cease from any further work – as they were not prepared to contend with such powerful opponents'. They had hoped their work would be a 'pleasing relaxation from their other varied secular engagements' (Newcastle Society of Friends) rather than aiming to make (or lose) them money, but it had instead become fraught

and stressful. Recognising the interest generated by the new addition to the genre of the literary annual meaning that it appealed across religious lines, competitor publishers forced the Quaker literary annual into a situation in which they chose self-censorship and failure despite their initial (and likely future) success. This decision suggests an intriguing continuity with earlier patterns of Quaker self-censorship in print practiced in the two preceding centuries, something Alex Kerner has described as 'a mechanism that on the one hand would preserve communal cohesion and on the other prevent unnecessary conflicts with the general society'. (46) In what follows I show what the annual's producers wanted to accomplish and how the volume was intended to fit into the larger Quaker literary trends and methods accompanying the transformation of print culture taking place in the early decades of the nineteenth century. These include the ways in which materials were solicited and collected through correspondence and within book societies, careful studying of competitors, and the use of print to advertise the planned publication. The history of the annual reveals intriguing and hitherto unknown details of a developing culture of Quaker transatlantic literary publishing and reading, something of increasing interest to scholars. ⁴

Two invaluable archives held in the special collections of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and University of Newcastle, make it possible to recount the story of the *Aurora Borealis*. ⁵ The Illinois collection is comprised of letters, manuscripts and a number of printed items, given by Brummell to his granddaughter May Beatrice Cooper in 1875. The Newcastle collection consists of the papers of Joseph Watson, a solicitor with keen literary ambitions. Both men were centrally involved in the production of the volume. The two collections, located on opposite sides of the Atlantic, reveal the evolution of the volume, encompassing the entire publication cycle from the process of soliciting manuscripts to approaching publishers and engravers. They show the importance of community and sociability in shaping and editing

works, determining what was, and what was not, deemed suitable. What started as the meetings of a small local group of readers and enthusiasts, closely connected through business, family and religion, gradually enabled its members to imagine themselves part of a wider coterie of the like-minded. They would become a kind of imagined community of transatlantic literary readers and writers brought together by the new literary annual.

Newcastle Quakers had extensive connections in the U.S. and criss-crossed the Atlantic paying family visits, engaging in trade and ministry, and visiting Quaker establishments such as schools and hospitals. There was a sizeable Quaker market for books in Pennsylvania and the Quaker annual had a significant appeal to American Friends and other American literary enthusiasts. The Quaker poet William Howitt who had contributed three items to the volume wrote to the editors on 26 November 1832 thanking them for a copy of the annual. He also urged them to explore the American market to expand sales. He writes, 'it would be good policy to engage an American writer or two, if Friends, the better. There was a young American Friend, I think, of the name of [John Greenleaf] Whittier (who adapted some beautiful verses in the *Literary Gazette*)'. (Newcastle Society of Friends) Howitt was probably referring to a poem Whittier published in June 1830 titled "To the Author of *The Improvisatrice*". The author in question was Letitia Elizabeth Landon (known as L.E.L.), who published a volume of that name in 1824. By the time the *Aurora Borealis* appeared Whittier was rapidly becoming associated with his publicly-espoused commitment to abolition. His poetry would soon be anthologised in abolitionist collections edited by Friends, on both sides of the Atlantic. A number of the contributors to the *Aurora Borealis* also published in the antislavery collections printed around this period.⁶ Learning about the conditions within which the Quaker volume was produced enables us to understand the way Friends' literary ambitions were generated within constraints around what was considered to be appropriate reading and writing. This

reveals the complex relationality of varied forms of activity including collective and private reading practices and manuscript circulation, as I will amplify later.

Literary Annuals and Gift Books

It was savvy of the Newcastle Friends to decide to enter the market for literary annuals. They were extremely popular between the early 1820s and about 1860, when sales were overtaken by ladies' magazines. British literary annuals initially dominated the market, but American annuals such as *The Atlantic Souvenir*, *Friendship's Offering*, *Leaflets of Memory*, and *The Memorial* proliferated and soon competed for readers, especially women.⁷ Their embellished covers opening to reveal pages containing the lavish illustrations that were a powerful part of their appeal. Borrowing from the tradition of the almanac, they were published at the tail end of the year, they appealed to Christmas shoppers seeking gifts. This means that by January 1834 *The Keepsake* and *Heath's Book of Beauty*, two of the volumes mentioned in the *Intelligencer* notice, were either about a month old or (more likely) just over a full year old. If the latter, the 'reduced prices' indicated the bookseller's desire to clear them from his shelves and make way for the most recent editions. All the works in the notice, except the Quaker annual, were published by the same London-based firm, Longman, Reese, Orme, Brown, Greene & Longman. From 1848 onwards *Heath's Book of Beauty* was published by the London publisher of the *Aurora Borealis*, Charles Tilt.

The *Intelligencer* piece shrewdly linked the new Quaker volume with annuals already familiar to American readers. *The Keepsake* (1828-1857) was edited by Frederic Mansel Reynolds. It contained multiple good-quality illustrations, the product of a steel plate process, and was well-known for its high production values. Its colourful decorative covers were part of its aesthetic appeal, helping it achieve international success; editions were published in Berlin, Leipzig,

London, New York, Paris and Philadelphia. Contributors included Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Felicia Hemans, Walter Scott, Mary Shelley, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Robert Southey, and William Wordsworth. The 1833 edition contained two stories credited to what it calls the 'author of Frankenstein', namely Mary Shelley. Explicitly named contributors included the Countess of Blessington, L.E.L., and Leigh Ritchie. Situating the *Aurora Borealis* alongside an annual that was publishing such a significant group of writers powerfully elevates the Quaker annual as a serious literary endeavour. Some of these figures either published in other literary annuals, or were closely involved with them. *Heath's Book of Beauty*, published from 1833 onwards, became well-known for the portraits of fashionable aristocratic women that dominated its pages. It was initially edited by L.E.L. and later by the Countess of Blessington. L.E.L. was a prolific contributor to literary annuals and edited *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap-Book* from 1832-1838 and the first volume of *Heath's Book of Beauty* in 1833. Such authorial and editorial overlaps were replicated in other ways; the successful format of literary annuals extended to similar works. One was *Heath's Picturesque Annual for 1832* (the 'Picturesque Annual' of the *Intelligencer* notice), an account of Leigh Ritchie's European travels, a volume which built on his name recognition within gift book culture. Like other annuals it was handsomely illustrated, containing twenty-six engravings of landscape and architecture by Edward Goodall made from drawings by Clarkson Stanfield. Illustrations were a part of its appeal to a developing reading public eager for accessible and entertaining works.

The *Aurora Borealis* imitated many of the formulaic elements of the genre of the literary annual, including diverse short items, a combination of poetry and prose, attractive illustrations and a beautiful cover. Its editors understood that popular appeal of literary annuals was likely to contribute to the success of their own endeavour. But they were also highly aware that many Friends would not consider literary annuals to be appropriate reading, since the producers of

secular annuals favoured entertainment over instruction or elevation. Friends would neither have approved of their literary contents nor of the images of fashionable women scattered throughout the pages of some of the most popular annuals, as well as publications such as *Godey's Lady's Book*, first published in Philadelphia in 1830.⁸ The Newcastle editors reshaped familiar structural features in line with their Quaker values, revealing their knowledge of the literary marketplace, something almost as surprising as the appearance of the *Aurora Borealis* itself. Like other annuals, it was attractively bound, contained high quality illustrations and a miscellany of prose (including fiction) and poetry. Contributors ranged from highly regarded local Friends such as Sarah Stickney and George Richardson, to much-anthologised writers such as Bernard Barton; H.F. Chorley (a prolific author and a critic for the *Athenaeum*); Mary, Richard and William Howitt, and Amelia Opie, a leading author, abolitionist and bluestocking who had become a Friend in 1825. Yet, in contrast with many secular literary annuals, its editors insisted that the profitability of their volume was not about how much it would earn financially, but how much it would contribute to - or *profit* - the lives of its readers. In this way it also borrowed from the emerging market for Christian texts, especially Christian annuals.

One of the earliest of these, *The Amulet. A Christian and Literary Remembrancer*, aimed 'to blend religious instruction with literary amusement' (iii) as its editor explained. Similarly, the editor of *The Religious Souvenir*, published in Philadelphia in 1833, reassured readers that 'not one line or word will be found in the volume which might cause a Christian to fear its being put in the hands of any one.' (Thompson 24)⁹ The *Aurora Borealis* positioned itself alongside other Christian publications while also having a distinctive Quaker element. Structurally speaking, each edition of *The Amulet* opened with a poem, something repeated in the *Aurora Borealis*. There were also overlaps in contributors, creating a sense of what we now call brand familiarity. Bernard Barton, Felicia Hemans and Amelia Opie all published in both annuals,

and the work of the engraver William Finden appeared in both *The Amulet* and the *Aurora Borealis*. Writing to the editors of the *Aurora Borealis* on 7 March 1832 acknowledging delivery of a prospectus for the planned volume, the engraver William Miller notes, 'I doubt not that in the Literary Department, your Publication will excell [sic] the flimsy and trifling materials which make up the greater part of the other Annuals, & I cannot therefore but wish it success on that ground, as well as from the connection it will have with the society.' (Newcastle Society of Friends) ¹⁰ He evidently believed the annual was making a valuable contribution. Such comments from a figure highly familiar with the market suggest why the *Aurora Borealis* would prove successful with readers and why, in turn, it offered a challenge to other literary annuals. The editors' careful attention to detail can be traced through every part of the planning for the publication. By turning to the volume as a textual object we can see the way they sought to shape and articulate Quaker literary sensibilities while using a familiar and successful formula.

The *Aurora Borealis*: Contents and Structure

The annual's contents show how faithfully it borrowed from, and reframed, the models offered by successful annuals. Its title page is set out simply, highlighting the key phrases the editors wanted to communicate – an idiosyncratic name marking it out as a beacon of Northern publishing, a popular genre and a distinctive religious community:

THE
AURORA BOREALIS,
A
LITERARY ANNUAL,
EDITED BY
MEMBERS OF THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS

On the page immediately following this is an illustration titled "The Bride", one of only two illustrative plates in the volume. It depicts a young woman wearing modest clothing, standing in front of a large window, the view half-hidden by a draped curtain. Her Quaker bonnet frames a serene face looking directly out of the page, with widely-set eyes that suggest both her intelligence and her mental fortitude, she appears to be measured and thoughtful. The substantial tree visible behind her is designed to intimate that the pair share deep-rooted strength. Though it is a domestic portrait, there is no sense of restriction within a house; a bag is on the table immediately in front of her suggesting that she is about to leave the room, or has just come inside. This subtly intimates that Quaker women, including this bride, had public obligations beyond those of their immediate households.

The original portrait was contributed by George Richardson, a member of a prominent Newcastle Quaker family, and well-known and highly respected minister. His son Henry Richardson, who contributed a poem to the collection, was married to Anna Richardson who is now most familiar for purchasing the manumission of Frederick Douglass. All of them were active abolitionists and peace campaigners, like many of those involved in the volume.¹¹ Brummell would serve as the secretary of the Newcastle Auxiliary Peace Society. This was founded in 1817 but became particularly active from 1831 onwards, not least because of the growing influence of the Richardson family, deepening connections with antislavery activism the impact of two Americans, Elihu Burritt and William Lloyd Garrison. (Scott and Megoran, 4) Richardson considered adding a rose or some other flower to the breast of the figure (perhaps further to signify purity and modesty) but presumably thought better of it, because the final image remains unadorned. The illustration, engraved by William Miller, sets the tone for the

volume. The annual's literary and thematic self-consciousness suggests the extent to which the producers had reflected carefully on contents. They were evidently keen to make sure that Quaker readers would find the volume a welcome and instructive contribution to their homes and libraries. The steady gaze of the young Quaker bride, absence of luxury, and simple clothing mark the difference between this image and those of the fashionable women depicted in other literary annuals. By comparing this image with a specific element of the 1833 edition of *The Keepsake* the distinctiveness of the *Aurora Borealis* is apparent.

<Insert figure 1 and figure 2 side by side here>

The Keepsake pairs a poem titled "The Bridemaid" by Mrs Agnes Strickland, with an accompanying image of a dejected and fashionable young woman. She is seated on an elaborate sofa in a well-furnished room that bespeaks wealth. Her face is in profile and she leans her head on her right arm looking wistfully away from the viewer. A wreath of roses lies on the ground at her feet and in front of her a single rose rests on a highly wrought and luxurious piece of furniture. The poem explains that she has been rejected by her false suitor and has instead just performed her role as the bridesmaid at his wedding to another woman. The wedding is over, the guests have departed, and she sits in solitary despair. The wreath of roses discarded on the floor and the solitary rose beside her signify her innocent love and his unfaithfulness. The wide sleeves and ribbons of her dress suggest luxury, as does the abandoned lute on the floor beside her. The musical instrument points to a key theme of the poem – that of abandonment. The poem explains that her lover used to admire her playing and now it reminds her of his perfidy. Though two images have structural similarities they are also distinct from each other. Both women are positioned in front of large, draped windows. While those of the Quaker bride are of plain Georgian design, the windows of the unhappy bridesmaid are of a more decorative gothic design. There is a lightness and easy geometric symmetry governing

the Quaker image, bespeaking a calm energy, compared with the flowing swirls of the furnishing and clothing of the bridesmaid intimating emotional and physical fatigue.

A further key structural feature the *Aurora Borealis* borrowed from annuals including *Heath's Book of Beauty* was that the first piece of writing in the volume responded in some manner to the opening engraving. *The Amulet* also followed this pattern and towards the end of its publishing life it even concluded with a poem in praise of the volume itself, something the *Aurora Borealis* would also emulate. But the Quaker volume also included another important element, a dedication to John Russell, the Sixth Duke of Bedford, whose patronage was solicited by the poet J.H. Wiffen, his Librarian for many years. This also suggests the way the producers were conscious of maintaining the annual's outward-lookingness, developing its appealing to readers beyond the Society of Friends. Barton's untitled poem, situated immediately after this, celebrates the intertwined qualities associated with Quaker writing and Quaker femininity. It declares, 'Lavish gilding count a sin;/ Let thy leaves attraction win,/ By the golden rules within.' (v) Barton suggests that the relative plainness of the outward appearance of the *Aurora Borealis* (in contrast to the most embellished literary annuals) allows its richness to be articulated through its content rather than showy display. The final stanza turns explicitly to the idea of the Quaker bride, linking the annual and bride, suggesting that it has a purity, straightforwardness and simplicity much like the young woman whose image adorns it: 'Whitest thoughts in whitest dress,/ Candid meanings best express,/ Mind of quiet Quakeress!' Right from the outset, then, readers are led to understand that the annual will be both structurally familiar while also preserving its distinctiveness. In this way it connected itself to a vein of interpretation of Quaker literary writing being articulated in contemporary reviews. For instance, an 1820 review of Barton's poetry from the *London Review* explicitly conflates his 'muse' with an idealised Quaker woman of the kind the writer 'invariably fallen in

love with wherever we have seen it' with 'the regular features, ever undisturbed by wayward or lawless feelings: - such is a Quaker beauty; graceful in reserve.' (Stokes, 514-515) This shows that by the time the volume appeared Barton, often simply known as "The Quaker Poet", had already been acclaimed for his work. His 1818 poem "The Convict's Appeal", protesting against the death penalty, had brought him fame, while his antislavery poetry also endeared him to other Quakers. His presence added kudos to this literary enterprise and he was its single most frequent contributor, with five pieces in total reproduced in the *Aurora Borealis*. Two of Barton's poems bookended the annual, giving them a key structural position and proleptic function revealing the way the producers hoped to shape expectations and mitigate criticism.

Having established the annual's Quaker origins, a three-page Advertisement sets out its ambitions:

To prevent mis-apprehension of their design in the publication of this small volume, the Editors think it proper briefly to describe its origin....this volume will be found to be of a different hue from that of the other annuals; it will necessarily breathe something of the spirit of that Society, of which, with a few valued exceptions, the writers in its pages are members. (vii-viii) ¹²

By describing the annual as being of a 'different hue from that of the other annuals' the Advertisement drew upon two related meanings of the word. The first suggests the explicit meaning of the word 'hue', meaning to take on a colour or a tinge. The second can be inferred from its homonym *hew*, suggesting the shaping or hewing of an object. Taken together it become clear that the volume will therefore be shaped *and* coloured in a distinctive manner governed by its Quaker ethos and origins.

The contents pages reveal a careful organisational symmetry. The first piece is a prose essay titled "George Fox and his Contemporaries" by William Howitt, immediately distinguishing the annual from its competitors. It is certainly difficult to imagine a piece about this eminent Quaker in *Heath's Book of Beauty*. Distinctive Quaker elements also characterise the next two pieces, namely J.H. Wiffen's "Appeal for the injured African" and "The condemned Covenanter's Appeal" by Lilius. Many of the contributors were simply identified by initials or pseudonyms. Overall, the volume was also characterised by the identifiably Northern theme immediately intimated by its name. There are several descriptive prose pieces about the Lake District and Scotland, both popular literary subjects in a post-Romantic era. These include W.G. Thompson's "Rose Aylmer: a Legend of Cleveland"; "Loch Leven Isle and Castle" by C.C.; "Helvellyn" by A.H.S.; and "Scene on Loch Ness" by S.R. In addition, there are items on exemplary lives or works as well as a substantial amount of poetry. There is also a landscape illustration titled "Rokeby" (the title of an 1813 poem by Walter Scott), produced from an engraving by William Finden.

The final prose piece "The Bride: A Sketch", returns to the theme with which the annual opened. Though its focus is the marriage plot, the story is wholly unlike the romantic courtship fiction beloved by readers of literary annuals, refusing their values and instead insisting on the value of a companionate marriage. It depicts the way a restless young man has his life transformed by marrying a young Quaker woman, finally realising the value of domesticity and family after a lonely bachelor life. It would be reprinted a few years later in Lorenzo Tuvar's *Tales and Legends of the English Lakes*, an edited miscellany for antislavery fundraising. Having reasserted the values with which the volume opened, "The Bride" is immediately

followed by five stanzas of "Valedictory Verses" by Bernard Barton. These reflect on the Northern lights after which the annual is named, asking rhetorically:

Reader! These pages take *their* name,

Our objects to imply;

As brief, as humble is their claim; --

Wilt thou that claim deny? (174) ¹³

By closing the annual with this challenge, it leaves judgement about its success or failure in the hands of readers, assuming a position of modesty familiar from Christian annuals. Drawing attention to the 'humble' nature of the annual's 'claim' ties the volume to Quaker virtues of humility while positioning the annual as analogous to the figure of humble petitioner making an appeal. Friends were very familiar with the model of the petition, one used with great frequency to lobby for the abolition of slavery. In the British abolitionist petition campaigns of 1788 and 1792 over six hundred petitions were presented to Parliament, while the 1688 Germantown Quaker Petition Against Slavery paved the way for Quaker abolitionist petitions in colonial and early America. The volume positions its readers as the arbiters of its success or failure.

The Origins of the *Aurora Borealis*

A number of changes taking place in the Society of Friends in the early decades of the nineteenth century produced the conditions within which the annual emerged. These included a new focus on Quaker education on both sides of the Atlantic, leading to the founding of schools offering a guarded education, bringing literacy to larger numbers of Friends. In direct consequence, increasing numbers of Friends were also able to compose and write for

themselves. In this way their literacy exceeded contemporary definitions that understood literacy as the capacity to read texts written by others (such as the words of God or those produced by the state).¹⁴ Some developed high levels of skill, meaning that they could parse texts and understand nuance, literary allusions and complex language. Teaching methods included copying by rote. At Westtown School in Pennsylvania children copied poetry (either manuscript or printed verse) into copybooks. In this way, as Elizabeth Bouldin has argued, Quaker poets such as Susanna Wright and Hannah Griffitts were brought into the canon by children who were themselves simultaneously being brought 'into the scribal circulation process'. (Bouldin 12)¹⁵ Within this context, poetry served an educational function while the copying of poetry and engagement with it was also a mode of socialisation more broadly.¹⁶ A particularly important British institution was Ackworth School in West Yorkshire, the model for several Quaker schools in the United States, notably Westtown, with which it was closely connected.¹⁷ A number of the individuals involved with the *Aurora Borealis* were either former Ackworth scholars (for example the Howitts, Henry Richardson and J.H. Wiffen) or had family members and friends who had been scholars. Many Quaker establishments - including Ackworth - were also strict about what constituted appropriate reading, and some literary texts fell short of their exacting standards. They thus limited students' access to works, avoiding those considered to contain immoral or frivolous material or those encouraging inappropriate forms of behaviour.

Many young Friends developed approved kinds of self-reflection, including through the formation of societies in order to regulate their lives. At some point around 1800, three young boys, all Yorkshire Friends with Ackworth connections, became concerned that they were not spending their time appropriately. They resolved to change their habits and formed a 'Society

for the Improvement of the Mind'. This had a number of rules to help them regulate them avoid engaging in unprofitable lounging about. The second rule was that,

It is resolved that we leave the Parlour as soon as convenient after Supper is over and retire to our Chamber, when reading, improving Conversation or other employment upon any instructive Topic or Subject any one may have to introduce shall commence. (C617, Sharp Family papers) ¹⁸

From what we can trace of their domestic reading practices it is clear that their reading included the work of William Cowper, whose poetry was much admired by many Quakers not least due to his staunch opposition to slavery. His blank verse long poem *The Task* (1785), containing a lengthy praise of domestic virtues was especially admired, as was his antislavery poem "The Negro's Complaint" (1788). One of the signatories to the rules of the society was Joseph Sharp, whose brother John, many years later, would later encounter a London review of the *Aurora Borealis* in a Philadelphia newspaper, as we will see. John Sharp was such an admirer of the poetry of Cowper that he made two separate copies of "The Negro's Complaint" and avidly read his poetry as he crossed the Atlantic to emigrate to the U.S. ¹⁹

A second factor influencing the development of Quaker literary writing in both manuscript and print was the growing wealth of many Friends. Their material security meant that they had more leisure time in which they could develop a variety of pursuits including the study, and production, of literary texts. Seeking to avoid the possibility of falling into bad habits, some also formed societies within which they could foster their interests with like-minded people, often within their own homes. This pattern developed from practices developed over a long period in many Quaker households but was fortified by access to print in a rapidly expanding

market for printed texts.²⁰ In Newcastle there were several societies promoting essay reading and writing, while the Askesian Society promoted science and natural history, as William Harris Robinson recollected in later years. (63) Though Friends had a long history of participation in such forms of social interaction, this pattern was increasingly seen in wider society too.²¹

Book and Literary Societies

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, as literary rates rose and the trade in printed books expanded rapidly, readers on both sides of the Atlantic craved access to printed texts. They understood the potential of transformation that was given by exposure to their contents; many enjoyed sociable gatherings with the like-minded in which books were read together, often aloud.²² Yet access was restricted for a variety of reasons, including limited financial resources, geographical location, literacy, gender and ethnicity. In addition, some enthusiasts had to overcome their participation in communities that held more rigid attitudes towards reading. Book societies were able to circumvent some of these difficulties, gradually introducing readers to an expanded body of texts. Samuel Drewett, a British Friend and former Ackworth scholar from a family in which access to reading was circumscribed, wrote that,

all the best books of the day excepting the lighter fiction, came into our hands through the medium of a "Book Society", one of the best institutions I know of....We had therefore plenty of literature, and our evening were largely spent in reading. (Hood 17)

The Friends who joined book societies to circumvent their limited access to print on both sides of the Atlantic were not alone. Around the same time, communities of free Blacks in the US were also exploring their possibilities. Elizabeth McHenry's work on the importance of literary

societies to such communities in the 1820s and 1830s shows the way that they provided vital opportunities that their members eagerly exploited. Literary societies had reading lists and regular meetings and though they varied in size, they offered members opportunities not just to access reading matter but also to engage in discussions and also enter into publication, in this way developing a Black public sphere. They fostered citizenship, activism and forms of resistance among groups whose access to books and education were restricted by racist policies. In addition to familiar forms of literature such as fiction and poetry, she notes the importance of a more capacious definition of the literary than the one scholars often rely upon, encompassing 'treatises, declarations, letters, appeals, and...journalism of every variety'. (3-4)

²³ In this way, too, there are clear overlaps with Friends. The Quakers who founded the *Aurora Borealis* were accustomed to meeting together for worship and for sociable gatherings. Though they could access books through some local institutions, they were not yet part of mainstream bourgeois society. Part of a close-knit community often living in proximity to each other, they had strong business and social ties and this could help foster conservatism. Yet it could also bolster collective endeavour and transnational social justice labour, for instance abolition and peace activism. This encouraged outward-looking behaviours and practices underpinned by reading, ministry, letter-writing and discussion. The strong sense of community combined with an increasing interest in the developing world of print was vital to the development of the Quaker annual.

On 27 April 1826 a mixed group of Newcastle Friends, ten men and two women, founded a Book Society (also sometimes called a Literary Society) that was so successful that it continued meeting for six decades until 18 May 1886, when its collection of books was sold and the meetings wound up. Its first secretary was George Atley Brummell. The book group printed a short prospectus announcing its foundation and explaining its objectives. This was reproduced

in a retrospective by Alfred Holmes in the 1890s. He writes that it 'is interesting as showing the attitude of mind towards public libraries, very different to the freedom of the present day.'

(96) The prospectus announced,

It has long been a desideratum with the best informed and most enlightened of our Society, to encourage the acquisition of useful knowledge, and utterly to preclude that of a decidedly hurtful tendency.

To propitiate so desirable an object, "Book Societies" have been established in many large towns, under such regulations as to ensure a strict observance of this very important and primary object.

Public Libraries are objectionable, inasmuch, as every subscriber may have free access to books of an injurious tendency, and that the youth may thereby acquire a desultory habit and fastidious taste, than which there is not a more prejudicial bias can possibly be given to the studious or recreative reader. But these objections are obviated, or at least very considerably lessened, by "Book Societies," into which no work can find admittance, the character of which is not previously known. (96)

The prospectus anticipates objections, aligning the advancement of 'useful knowledge' with a clear aspiration to avoid exposing Friends to anything of a 'decidedly hurtful tendency' by only admitting works deemed acceptable to Friends. It also points to precedents established elsewhere 'in many large towns' to reassure any anxious Friends that this was no wild innovation. Still, some older Friends were concerned about the Society; Holmes wrote that 'Grave fears were entertained lest the new Society should be the means of introducing unprofitable books into families' though once they realised 'nothing of an injurious tendency was contemplated' (96-97) they became more sanguine. Even after it was established it is clear

that members had different ideas about what was ethically acceptable or *profitable* reading matter.

Details of its early period reveal not just suggestions made and turned down but also the manner in which its members met and modes of sociability it promoted. Together, these give a sense of an emerging literary sensibility between members of what the prospectus described as 'members of the same household of faith'. (96) An early, rejected, text was Aaron Smith's autobiographical *The Atrocities of the Pirates: A Faithful Narrative of the Unparalleled Suffering of the Author During His Captivity Among the Pirates* (1824). The book was the dramatic account of Smith's experience of being taken captive by pirates as he travelled from Jamaica to England. Forced to navigate for them, he was eventually arrested for piracy before being tried at the Old Bailey. As a sufferings narrative, the book may have appealed to some Quakers. Accounts of persecution and sufferings, and also petitions, were some of the earliest form of Quaker print. But Smith's work tended more to the sensational, and even Friends who wanted to move away from earlier forms of Quaker print had reservations about how far and how quickly they wanted to move. Smith's work was at least considered rather being rejected outright.

The connections between the Book Society and *Aurora Borealis* become clearer in a five-page manuscript written retrospectively by Brummell. He writes,

For some few years previous to the publication of the *Aurora Borealis* there existed a Literary Club or Society of young men (members of the society of Friends) in Newcastle upon Tyne – their object being of a social as well as of a literary character – they met for a considerable time weekly – at each others [sic] houses – or lodgings, drank tea...Johnsonian

fashion and discussed over the cup that "cheers," but does not "inebriate" the merits of new books, and articles of a literary character -- whether in Reviews – Magazines or other publications. (Newcastle Society of Friends)

Keeping with Quaker principles of temperance, the young men met not in taverns or pubs but within domestic spaces, drinking tea. Doubtless dealing with the reservations of some Friends, the literary enthusiasts would have chosen the publications with as much care as they did their beverages. The foundation of this society created the conditions within which local Friends with literary ambitions could have their writing nurtured. Literary annuals were being read within the group, meeting with a mixed reception,

on several of these occasions the appearance of a new class of illustrated works excited considerable interest and discussion, these were the Annuals – works highly illustrated and handsomely got up in binding, gilt edges etc published at the festive time of Christmas, their titles being no less attractive as *The Keepsake*, *Forget me Not* etc etc their novelty commanded a large circulation – and popularity.

Though they were subjected to 'rather close and severe criticism' by the members of the group, they clearly had a significant impact on the development of the *Aurora Borealis*.

No detailed information appears to exist about which literary annuals the Newcastle Friends were reading beyond these sparse details. However, James Hood's work on the reading habits of the Birmingham Friends' Book Society show the overlaps in the reading practices of both groups. Around the time the Newcastle Friends were meeting together to discuss the literary texts they were reading, Friends in Birmingham were reading *The Keepsake* and *Forget Me Not*. A group of male Friends founded the Birmingham group in 1822 and by 1824, the

membership had expanded to include women. Its regulations (all of which were similar to the Newcastle society) included the payment of an annual subscription, regular attendance at meetings and membership of the Society of Friends. As Hood shows, its detailed records reveal that members were not solely focused on 'religious tracts and inspirational memoirs' but had interests extending to some popular novels and also an eclectic array of texts, 'just-published literature, biography, travel, history and so forth' while they 'considered improvement through literary discussions at their meetings a priority'. (10) Unsurprisingly, the group ordered a number of antislavery texts and collected poetry including that of John Clare, Felicia Hemans, L.E.L., and James Hogg, and historical work by Walter Scott (though not his novels). This shows the gradual liberalisation of attitudes to literature. Between the end of the 1820s and the end of the 1840s, the literary annuals purchased by the Birmingham Friends' Book Society included:

The Amulet (ordered 1827, 1830), *Forget Me Not* (ordered 1827) *Winter's Wreath* (ordered 1827, 1830), *Literary Souvenir* (ordered 1827), *The Keepsake* (ordered 1827), *Time's Telescope* (ordered 1828, 1831), *Friendship's Offering* (ordered 1828, 1830), *The Landscape Annual* (ordered 1830, 1831, 1838), the *Christian Keepsake* (ordered 1828, 1830), and *Heath's Picturesque* (ordered 1842). (11-12)

Strikingly, the group only purchased a single edition of *The Keepsake*, presumably sharing the kinds of 'rather close and severe criticism' made by the Newcastle group and also deciding it was not appropriate reading matter. Yet the fact that *The Amulet*, *Winter's Wreath*, *Time's Telescope*, *Friendship's Offering*, *The Landscape Annual* and *Christian Keepsake*, were all ordered more than once shows that they were considered acceptable reading.

It was after, perhaps even in consequence of, its own encounters with literary annuals that the Newcastle group developed their plans for the *Aurora Borealis*, something Brummell describes as follows:

the conclusion at length arrived at was, that upon the whole – a very considerable portion of the articles in them were too generally of a frivolous – and light character – and that an album of more substantial, and at the same time lively tone and character might be a successful undertaking, and a pleasurable work for the members to devote themselves to, with the assistance of their literary friends, and connections, thus originated the design of the publication of the Annual we are endeavouring to trace.

The words 'frivolous' and 'light character' describe the modes of writing, subject and tone that were disapproved of by Friends. Instead, Brummell's preferred terms, 'substantial' and 'lively tone and character' subtly indicate moral seriousness without the deadening implication of dullness. A spirit of joyful optimism pervaded their plans and 'pleasurable work', which progressed in a professional manner. Many of the figures who were responsible for the appearance of the *Aurora Borealis* were middle class professionals aiming for 'a successful undertaking'. Already involved with trade, their professional experience made them knowledgeable about how to advertise and launch the annual as a literary product in a highly competitive marketplace. So, despite claims that it was not their intention to produce a money-making concern, their volume was positioned within a group of competitors, using explicitly market-oriented advertising techniques. On 7 December 1831, having decided to press ahead with a publication, the future editors started to prepare for it by printing (and circulating) an announcement:

IT IS INTENDED TO PUBLISH,
IN THE WINTER OF 1832,

A
NEW LITERARY ANNUAL,
ENTITLED
THE AURORA BOREALIS;
TO BE CONDUCTED BY
MEMBERS OF THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS.

The one-page piece, carefully preserved in Brummell's papers, gives an invaluable insight into the next stage of the process of moving into print, a year later, exactly as planned. Yet it is difficult to find out about how, and to whom, it was circulated. Correspondence in Illinois and Newcastle shows that it was given or posted directly to some of the figures who eventually became contributors, with an accompanying letter soliciting contributions and support. The editors clearly understood what they were planning as a development in Quaker writing and endeavour. The document provides evidence of how they understood the significance of the proposed annual, through its contribution to the lives of younger Friends and to a wider readership. It opens,

The Philosopher and the Moralist unite in opinion, that, to restore the tone of the mind, when relaxed by severe exertion, and to enliven the monotony of every-day life, some species of recreation is necessary; and the Christian, endeavouring to render all things conducive to the highest and noblest purposes, will prefer selecting his pleasures from the ever-varied stores of sound and elegant Literature, to joining in vain and frivolous amusements.

This opening salvo uses the established formal mode of the appeal to authority, enabling the writers to justify their claims of the importance of literature in a healthy life. It invokes

categories of soundness and elegance as foundational to the choices of Christian readers while rejecting frivolity and vanity. At the same time, by using the expansive category of Christianity, rather than the more specific denominational reference to the Society of Friends, it reaches outwards beyond Friends. Endeavouring to cultivate authors and readers and simultaneously avoiding giving offence to more conservative Friends, the authors carefully explain the reasons they have decided to publish a literary annual. Young people are increasingly interested in literary pursuits and this has encouraged the development of literary conversations and texts, some of them taking place within 'numerous societies formed for the perusal and discussion of such compositions'. This echoes the description offered by Brummell's retrospective as well as by a more critical piece published in 1857 by George Richardson, notes that, 'With regard to the perusal of Friends' books, some of our young people have observed that they do not enjoy writings of such antiquated style' (5) and do not appear to understand the extent to which a number of older Friends have edited the writings of Robert Barclay and others to make them more accessible. Reading these two pieces together suggests a generational change. Younger Friends want their works to appeal more widely and to be circulated beyond the manuscript and scribal circulation familiar among Friends. Many were no longer satisfied by reading traditionally sanctioned Quaker texts. The announcement carefully explains that the compositions of young people have a limited audience and circulation. At present they are swiftly forgotten or their circulation is largely 'confined to the places whence they emanate'. The proposed annual will remedy this situation by enabling 'literary intercourse between one part of the kingdom and another' while 'preserving and publishing' works that would otherwise be forgotten and encouraging talent. It would also 'make rational amusement join hand in hand with mental recreation'. Ironically, then, longevity was built into its earliest ambitions.

At every stage the argument treads a delicate line between literary ambition and the limits of appropriateness. Comparing the proposed publication with existing annuals it notes that it will not seek to rival them, for 'whilst its Proprietors do not enter the field as rivals to their gayer brethren in the mode of "getting up," yet they hope to be able to produce a work of elegant literature, which shall contain within "what passeth outward show," – which shall be instructive without being dull, and lively without infringing on correct taste or sound principle'. Having reassured prospective contributors and purchasers, they go on to solicit contributions, outline costs and define the volume. The *Aurora Borealis* will cost seven shillings and six pence and will be 'printed with good type, on fine paper' and have two engravings (though if there are enough subscribers then this number will be expanded). The eventual size of the print run will be determined by sales. Finally, all correspondence should be addressed to Joseph Watson, a writer whose work had appeared in places such as *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* (whose more celebrated authors included Harriet Martineau, John Stuart Mill and Thomas De Quincey). Curiously, as Holmes reports, *Tait's* was rejected by the Book Society in 1832 because it was deemed 'unfit for this Society'. (98) It was returned to the publisher with a rationale for their disapproval. After a period of time it became one of the volumes the group regularly received, suggesting either that they had become more liberal, or that their objections had been noted and the publication had changed in consequence. But this also reveals that when it came to literature Watson was more liberal – even daring – than some of those around him.

The producers wrote directly to carefully chosen publishers, announcing their decision to launch a literary journal, outlining its aims and soliciting their involvement. Additional care was taken of every part of what followed. They decided upon a local publisher, Charles Empson, who had spent several years traveling in South America and the United States before setting up in Newcastle as a fine art bookseller.²⁴ He was an obvious choice, but the Friends

knew that they also needed a London publisher if they were to compete within the market for literary annuals. They approached an influential and a wealthy publisher, Charles Tilt of Fleet Street.²⁵ Tilt was an ideal and imaginative metropolitan publisher for a provincial volume wishing to break into a growing transatlantic market. He particularly championed illustrated works, including annuals. A publishing innovator, he was highly regarded for the creation of skilful shop window displays that drew in huge crowds and boosted sales. He also produced miniature editions of texts in attractive and specially made bookcases, which were popular with readers.²⁶ Its American publisher, Thomas Wardle of Philadelphia, was already well-known for his links to British publishing. In 1829 he had published an edition of a long-running literary annual, *The Literary Souvenir*, a volume with many connections to the *Aurora Borealis*. The poet Bernard Barton, a key contributor to the *Aurora Borealis*, helped solicit contributions to *The Literary Souvenir*. Priscilla Maden Wiffen, who was married to the editor of *The Literary Souvenir* J.H. Wiffen, was good friends with the poet Mary Howitt. Like her husband William and brother-in-law Richard, Mary Howitt was an important contributor to the *Aurora Borealis*. As the Poet Laureate Robert Southey wrote in 1831, 'The poems of William and Mary Howitt are known to all lovers of poetry; and who has not heard of Bernard Barton?' (Stokes 509) Including the work of these already familiar figures in the annual would help it achieve success. All of this augured well for the Quaker annual.

As essays, stories and poems were written by local Friends who wished to contribute to the annual, they were avidly discussed in meetings within households, where mixed groups gathered to hear contributions read aloud and discuss the future publication. The overlaps between the Book Society meetings and those focusing on the preparation of the annual include the fact that on more than once occasion each took place in the home of Margaret Bragg, a highly respected minister. A letter from Sarah Richardson to her Plymouth-based sister Susan

H. Balkwill on 24 January 1832 gives a sense of the growing enthusiasm for the publication, describing a gathering in Bragg's home:

Fancy her seated in her own corner, with a little round table and one candle, busy the whole evening knitting. Next her I sat, then Ellen, Isabella Watson, one of the Hewitsons cos. George Richardson, William Gray, Henry Hotham, Hadwen Priestman, then a large round table, on it books, papers, and a basket of flowers. W. Doeg and J. Watson seated at it as the readers, then Margaret Priestman, sister Ann, E. Clapham junr., Elizabeth Priestman, Mary Clapham, sister Rebecca, Anthony Atkinson, Chas. Bragg, Esther Stickney, David Doeg, Harris Dickinson's sister; then near the door, on a couch, drawn a little forward towards the fire, Rachel Priestman, my John, and Jonathan Priestman. (Steel 129)

Richardson's letter draws attention to a comfortable social world in which literary entertainment, in the form of reading aloud, combined with discussion and other activities including knitting. By the time the Quaker journal was published its contents would have been discussed in detail by this group of Friends.

The Reception of the *Aurora Borealis*

The volume appears to have been well-received, especially locally. A very positive undated review from the *Sunderland Herald*, in the Illinois collection, gives a strong sense of regional support for a non-metropolitan production. It opens with an acknowledgment of two specific qualitative differences between what it calls 'this annual' and 'those of metropolitan origin'. Its illustrations are 'not of so high a character' and the printing not 'as uniformly beautiful' as competitor volumes. However, it asserts, the Newcastle publication is 'fully equal to the best of them from a literary point of view'. Justifying its claim, it declares the *Aurora Borealis* a

'healthy literary work, well got up, distinguished by excellent articles upon a great variety of topics'. It praises the annual for its lack of 'showiness' and for the fact that there is 'less of that sickly and querulous sentimentality, which passes for fine feeling and highly wrought sensibility in the London Annuals'. The reviewer hopes that the volume will be well received 'in this, and the neighbouring towns'. The 'sickly' has no place in the *Aurora Borealis* but instead there is evidence of a 'strength, a soundness, and a liberality' while its 'invariable regard' for 'morals and religion...cannot fail to render it a favourite with the teacher of moral science and the Christian philanthropist'. Implicitly demonstrating this, the review ends by quoting Mary Howitt's poem "The Child's Faith" in its entirety, arguing that it 'would confer honour upon any miscellany'. The Illinois papers reveal that the question of appropriateness was raised on more than one occasion, usually favourably. Take the comments of William Howitt, who noted the appearance of a poem about antislavery stating that he thought that it is 'right' for this to be printed in a 'publication connected with the society'. (Spence Watson) ²⁷

Around the time of the *Intelligencer* notice, John Sharp, who had emigrated to Philadelphia in 1815, clipped a review of the *Aurora Borealis* from a local newspaper, and carefully preserved it. Sharp was a keen reader, especially of poetry and was enthusiastic about keeping up with events in England. Doubtless, these were both motives for why he kept a clipping concerning what the London review, reprinted in a U.S. paper, calls the "Quakers' Annual". The reviewer was evidently surprised that Quakers would involve themselves in the production of a literary album, writing,

We announced the promised appearance of this work some days since -- and in common, we suspect, with many others, have been rather curious to see what sort of a volume our "Friends" would produce. We certainly had not anticipated anything quite so gay as green

and gold. Let us however acknowledge at once that it does great credit to all parties; there are but two illustrations, but they are both good...the literature is thoroughly respectable and some papers are excellent. (C617, Sharp Family papers)

The reviewer's metropolitan incredulity is made evident by the use of the words 'our "Friends"', the double meaning of the formal name for Quakers also invoking a presumed intimacy. The annual's cover has obviously surprised the reviewer, who presumably expected something in line with the lack of ostentation of Quaker dress codes. Instead, its 'green and gold' made it resemble other literary annuals. Noting that there are 'but two' illustrations, it acknowledges that they are 'good'. Overall, it 'does great credit to all parties' and 'the literature' is 'thoroughly respectable', even 'excellent'.

The *Aurora Borealis* is a tantalising example of what might have become a transatlantically influential source of new Quaker writing. It provides evidence of the way in which the literary ambitions of a relatively small group, largely comprised of transatlantically-connected members of the Society of Friends in a city in the North East of England, were sustained and developed in regular meetings that took place within the homes of Friends. They were channelled into the production of a Quaker literary annual that was rapidly republished in antebellum America. By refashioning the genre of the literary annual in accordance with their ideas about appropriate and enjoyable reading, they were reshaping the market. They repudiated elements of the genre that they dismissed as frivolous and even morally damaging and calculated that a Quaker literary annual would be a suitable and marketable outlet for the kinds of works being produced by members of their own small literary society and others like it on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet they had to undertake a careful and fraught balancing act,

aiming both to capitalise on the popularity and format of literary annuals without departing from the beliefs and sensibilities of Friends.

Its publication marks a transitional moment in transatlantic Quaker literary writing, demonstrating a growing alignment with some aspects of wider secular culture alongside a desire, especially from younger Friends, further to integrate into wider society while also asserting their distinctiveness as members of a particular tradition. They were proud of their heritage and did not want to abandon it or betray it. At the same time, they saw themselves as being at the foreground of a progressive and modernising trend among transatlantic Friends and believed that the Society had to liberalise. They knew that their position was not without danger, and that their publishing enterprise might threaten the reputation of Friends. So they sought to mitigate this from the very outset by explaining their intentions at every stage of the preparation of the volume. They discussed their plans among local Friends, they wrote letters soliciting contributions, and they circulated a printed Advertisement explaining their ambitions. They aligned themselves with a genre that was demonstrably current, but also had Christian elements, while also changing and challenging it in ways that demonstrated their ongoing commitment with the values of their community. They chose the contents with great care, having already scoped out the field to understand what was popular with readers and what would be appropriate for a Quaker publication. Paradoxically, their very success led to their experiment's closure, after which it vanished from our purview – until now.

The rediscovered Quaker literary annual gives an opportunity for more expansive re-readings of the literary past, responding to the special issue's invitation to reflect upon how we might reimagine or reconstitute a Quaker literary tradition beyond the existing scholarly consensus. It raises a set of questions that cannot be answered with certainty but remain suggestive as

prompts for further reflection. How might the *Aurora Borealis* have helped to develop changes within literary annuals, had it continued beyond a single edition? To what extent might it have developed Quaker writing more broadly, regionally, nationally and internationally? What forms of cultural work might it have performed and how might it have contributed to the kinds of political and ethical work carried out by the tracts and print publications devoted to abolition, temperance and other causes that many Friends devoted themselves to developing? By telling the story of the *Aurora Borealis* I reflect upon what constitutes a usable literary past using untapped archival repositories in order to deepen our understanding of Quaker literary history. Resources such as these hold exciting potential for researchers seeking to reconstruct histories of ephemeral or short-lived ventures such as the *Aurora Borealis*.

WORKS CITED

- Ball, David M. *False Starts: The Rhetoric of Failure and the Making of American Modernism*. Northwestern UP, 2015.
- Bennett, Bridget. *Antislavery in the Dissenting Atlantic: Archives and Unquiet Libraries, 1776-1865*. Louisiana State UP 2025.
- Bouldin, Elizabeth. "'So Prays the Muse Unus'd to Artful Song': Female Friends and Eighteenth-Century Poetry." *Quaker Studies* vol.29, no.1, 2004, pp.1-20.
- Boyle, Andrew. *An Index to the Annuals*. Andrew Boyle Ltd., 1967.

Cho, Nancy Jiwon. "Literature" pp.69-87 in *The Cambridge Companion to Quakerism* ed. by Stephen W. Angell and Pink Dandelion. Cambridge UP, 2018.

Desforges, Jane. "'Satisfaction and Improvement': A Study of Reading in a Small Quaker Community, 1770-1820." *Publishing History* vol. 49, 2001, pp.5-47.

Faxon, Frederick Winthrop. *Literary Annuals and Gift Books*. Boston Book Company, 1912.

Graff, Harvey J. *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth-Century City*. Academic P, 1979.

Harris, Katherine D. *Forget Me Not: The Rise of the British Literary Annual, 1823-1835*. Ohio UP, 2015.

Holmes, Alfred. "The Friends' Book Society", pp.95-99 in Steel, *Historical Sketch*, 1899.

Hood, James W. "'Novel Reading and Insanity': Nineteenth-Century Quaker Fiction Reading Practices." *Quaker Studies* vol. 23, no.1, pp.3-24.

Kerner, Alex. *Lost in Translation, Found in Transliteration: Books, Censorship, and the Evolution of the Spanish and Portugese Jews' Congregation of London as a Linguistic Community, 166-1810*. Brill, 2018.

Lehuu, Isabelle. "Sentimental Figures: Reading *Godey's Lady's Book* in Antebellum America" pp.73-91, in *The Cultures of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*. ed. by Shirley Samuels. Oxford UP, 1992.

Monaghan, E. Jennifer. *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America*. U of Massachusetts P, 2005.

Newcastle Society of Friends. Aurora Borealis manuscripts, 1831-1842. at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

"Multiple Classified Advertisements." *National Intelligencer*, 20 Jan. 1834. *Nineteenth Century U.S.*

Newspapers, link.gale.com/apps/doc/GT3017597519/NCNP?u=leedsuni&sid=bookmark-

O'Donnell, Elizabeth. "Deviating from the Path of Safety: The Rise and Fall of a Nineteenth Century Quaker Meeting." *Quaker Studies* vol. 8, no.1, 2003, pp.68-88.

Resnick, Daniel P., and Lauren B. Resnick. "The Nature of Literacy: An Historical Exploration." *Harvard Educational Review* vol. 47, no. 3, 1977, pp.370-385.

Richardson, George. *A Catalogue of Books in the Library Belonging to the Society of Friends, of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne*. Thomas and James Pigg, 1857.

Robinson, William Harris. "Recollections of Newcastle Meeting Sixty Years Ago" pp.59-73 in Steel, *Historical Sketch*, 1899.

Scott, Matthew and Megoran, Nick. "The Newcastle Upon Tyne Peace Society (1817–50)", *Northern History*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2017, pp.1–17.

Sharp Family Papers, West Yorkshire Archives.

Spence Watson/Weiss Archive Series SW/2 – Correspondence to Joseph Watson, Newcastle University.

Spence Watson, Robert. *The History of the Literary and Historical Society of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne (1793-1896)*. Walter Scott Ltd., 1897.

Steel, John William. *A Historical Sketch of the Society of Friends "In Scorn Called Quakers" in Newcastle and Gateshead. 1653-1898*. Headley Brothers and the Bible and Tract Depot. 1899.

Stokes, Christopher. "Poetics at the Religious Margin: Bernard Barton and Quaker Romanticism." *The Review of English Studies* vol.70, no.295, pp.509-526.

The Amulet or Literary Remembrancer. W. Baynes and Son, and Wightman and Cramp. 1827.

Tuvar, Lorenzo [pseud.]. *Tales and Legends of the English Lakes and Mountains: Collected from the Best and Most Authentic Sources*. Longmans, 1852.

The Aurora Borealis, A Literary Annual, Ed. by Members of the Society of Friends. Charles Empson and Charles Tilt. 1833.

Thompson, Ralph. *American Literary Annuals and Gift Books*. H.W. Wilson Company, 1936.

Vincent, David. *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914*. Cambridge UP, 1989.

Williams, Abigail. *The Social Life of Books: Reading Together in the Eighteenth-Century Home*. Yale UP, 2017.

NOTES

¹ " Additional advertisements for the annual appeared in the *National Intelligencer* over the next few weeks. On 24, 25 and 28 January there were announcements that it was available via the Waverly Circulating Library for \$2.25. Hereafter I will refer to the annual as the *Aurora Borealis*.

² It was initially published in Britain as the *Aurora Borealis: A Literary Annual*, its subtitle explicitly drawing attention to its status as an annual rather than a Quaker publication. The American edition advertised in the *Intelligencer* was identical in every way except its title. This title, *Friends' Annual, or Aurora Borealis*, instead emphasised its status as a Quaker publication.

³ Some literary scholars argue that the genre itself is neglected. See Harris, 14-23. Other provincial annuals included *The Winter's Wreath*, published in Liverpool between 1827 and 1832. Like the *Aurora Borealis* it was published locally – by George Smith of Liverpool – but it also had two London publishers, George B. Whittaker and Hatchard and Son. Smith also published books out of London in partnership with Alexander Elder. In 1827 their firm acquired another literary annual, *Friendship's Offering*. From 1841 onwards an American version of this annual (essentially exactly the same volume) was published, continuing until 1856.

⁴ See Christopher Stokes' survey of the field in "'Poetics at the Religious Margin", 511-512.

For an overview of nineteenth-century Quaker reading see Nancy Jiwon Cho, "Literature".

⁵ Newcastle Society of Friends. *Aurora Borealis* manuscripts, 1831-1842. at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Spence Watson/Weiss Archive Series SW/2 – Correspondence to Joseph Watson at Newcastle University.

⁶ Just to give two examples, one such book is Wilson Armistead's *The Garland of Freedom* (1853) which contained poems by other American writers including Lydia Maria Child, William Lloyd Garrison and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Contributors to the *Aurora Borealis* who also appeared in an 1834 volume *The Bow in the Cloud* (which commemorated the abolition of slavery in the West Indies) included Bernard Barton, J.J. Gurney, Mary and William Howitt, and J.H. Whiffen.

⁷ See Katherine D. Harris' comprehensive and detailed account of the development and impact of British literary annuals and Ralph Thompson's comprehensive work on American literary annuals, the bibliographical work of Andrew Boyle and Frederick Winthrop Faxon's bibliography of literary annuals and gift books.

⁸ See Isabelle Lehuu's "Sentimental Figures: Reading *Godey's Lady's Book* in Antebellum America".

⁹ For more on the US market for Christian annuals of gift books see Thompson, 24-27.

¹⁰ Bernard Barton, Mary, Richard and William Howitt all also published in the 1829 edition of *The Gem*, which was edited by Thomas Hood.

¹¹ As Bennett argues in Chapter Two of *Antislavery in the Dissenting Atlantic*, both wrote abolitionist and peace tracts and were substantially involved in editing activities that certainly come under the rubric of literary writing.

¹² The name of the editors are not revealed anywhere in the volume, but William Harris Robinson recollected years later that 'Those taking the most prominent part in this publication

were Joseph Watson, Harris Dickinson, Henry Richardson, Anthony Harris Smith, and William Doeg. They were assisted by contributions from Wm. And Mary Howitt, Bernard Barton, Wiffen, the translator of Tasso, and a few others, mostly Friends.' (63) Though there is some overlap, Brummell writes that the key figures were himself and 'George Abbott, Anthony Harris Smith, Harris Dickinson, William Doeg, Joseph Watson, Anthony Atkinson, William White [?] Wilson, Charles Bragg'.

¹³ The first four stanzas read:

When fade the streamers of the north
 O'er Shetland's storm-swept isles,
 Who, that has felt their humble worth,
 Their transient light reviles?

Not theirs the vivid blaze of day,
 When no dark cloud is seen;
 Nor moon-light's soft and silvery ray,
 Fair, lovely, and serene: --

Yet well they glad the twilight hour,
 Or cheer the gloom of night,
 What time, in changeful forms they shower
 Their evanescent light.

And when they vanish from the sky,
 Like stars that shine to fall,

Some few, perchance, with partial eye,

Their memory may recal.

¹⁴ On changing definitions of literacy see Graff, David. Monaghan, and Resnick and Resnick

¹⁵ Children also copied the work of Phillis Wheatley and Anna Letitia Barbauld, sometimes in copybooks and sometimes in embroidered samplers.

¹⁶ Bouldin writes, 'Girls learned poetry as part of a guarded education, ministers employed verse for testimonies, and mothers turned to poetry as an instructional tool in childrearing...poetry supported female Friends' sociability.' (19).

¹⁷ See Bennett, chapter one.

¹⁸ C617, Sharp Family papers, West Yorkshire Archives.

¹⁹ When an adult, raising his American-born children, he joined the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery in 1836.

²⁰ See Jane Desforges' study of the reading practices of middle class London Quakers between 1770 and 1820.

²¹ Some Friends, such as Joseph Watson, were closely connected to the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle (popularly known as the Lit and Phil). In 1897 his son Robert Spence Watson wrote a detailed account of its history. Charles Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers*, published in 1835-36 but set in 1827, brilliantly captured their development as they became increasingly fashionable on both sides of the Atlantic. Ironically, the transatlantic popularity of *The Pickwick Papers* led to a deepening of interest in literary societies, clubs and newspapers, now modelled on those of Mr Pickwick and his companions.

²² Such gatherings are well described in the work of Abigail Williams.

²³ McHenry demonstrates the transformational consequences of membership, and also makes a powerful argument for reconsidering the category of the literary. Not only does she argue that many of the written texts produced by the figures she studies have been overlooked by scholars

because they have not met subsequent definitions of what constitutes the literary, but newspapers (rather than books) were 'the primary sites of publication and sources of literary reading for African Americans in the nineteenth century' and they contributed 'letters, essays, poems, and narratives' to such publications, all of which they understood as constituting literature. (12)

²⁴ He capitalised on his travels, for instance a few years later he published a collection of his illustrations titled *Places in Colombia* (1836).

²⁵ He wrote to the editors on 5 May 1832 setting out a breakdown of the financial agreement he proposed in response to their invitation.

²⁶ Browning, Logan Delano. "Tilt, Charles (1797–1861), bookseller and publisher." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. December 10, 2020. Oxford University Press. Date of access 6 Jan. 2025, <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/>>

²⁷ Along with several figures connected with the annual, Howitt had been educated at Ackworth School.