

A Prophetess from the Vale of White Horse: Joan Vokins of West Challow

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Female prophecy has recently been the subject of a considerable volume of historical writing. While women have often been prominent in Christian religion, such prominence has generally been seen as problematic, and, as far back as the Montanists in the time of the early church, indicative of probable heresy.¹ Catholicism provided a safe outlet for female spirituality in closed orders or in beguinages, but such havens were not available in post-reformation England. Women could not avoid sharing in the great religious ferment of the seventeenth century, but the established churches, whether puritan or arminian, held fast to the Pauline restrictions on their participation in public debate.² By contrast, the religious sects that appeared and flourished in this period often had a female majority among their members, were sometimes founded (though almost never led) by women, and might on occasion be willing to countenance their appearance on the public stage.³

The historiography tends to concentrate on the writings these women left behind. Several hundred female preachers or prophetesses – the distinction is often hard to maintain – are known, and many of them, profiting from the relaxation or ineffectiveness of censorship at several times in the century, were able to have their works printed. Others left manuscripts and letters which might be put together after their deaths and published for the edification of the faithful. Literary historians, often of the feminist persuasion, have produced analyses of such works of the utmost sensitivity and sophistication.⁴

These studies lead to the conclusion that the social and legal circumstances of the time made it virtually impossible for a woman to fulfil most public roles, but that religion provided a loophole which could with suitable dexterity be exploited. Christianity provides a woman with an independent soul, for the salvation of which she, and not her father, master or husband, is responsible. To Calvinists, this is irrelevant, since predestination removes all responsibility from any earthly being; but most

of the sects were heterodox enough to believe that redemption was potentially available to all. Furthermore, woman, being the weaker vessel and devoid of the capacity for independent ratiocination of the male, was much more credible as a receptacle for special revelation from on high or as a conduit for divine messages and warnings to the sublunar world. A woman who believed she was being used by the deity in this way could justify her transgression of society norms in the name of a higher duty, and her action might be validated by any male of sufficient status who chose to accept her authenticity.⁵ This is by no means to say that prophetesses of the seventeenth century were in any way proto-feminists, seeking a tool to bypass and eventually remove the barriers that kept them from full participation in all aspects of public life. Advocates of full sex equality were few and atypical. There is no reason to doubt that prophetesses, like their male followers, were fully convinced of the reality of their mission.

The insights into female prophecy so far gained are indispensable, but do not fully satisfy the local historian who is interested in specific women active in a particular place. How do such women relate to the local community, to their family and to their congregation? What networks sustain them? Why does one woman stand up to testify to her religious gifts, while her sister, equally pious and perhaps equally gifted, refrains from doing so? The texts that have been so assiduously studied tend to be formulaic and deliberately silent on the private and social lives of their originators, but occasionally allow some biographical details to be gleaned. One Berkshire woman, Joan Vokins, has left sufficient such evidence for her to be used as a case study. What follows is an attempt to see the world through her eyes, and to understand her place in it, as a prophetess, in the way that she herself would have seen it.

On a day in the late summer of 1680 two Quaker women may be imagined riding slowly eastwards through what would later be the state of New Jersey. The younger one, following Quaker custom, was acting as escort and guide for the elder, a stranger to the region. The visitor was Joan Vokins, born Joan Bunce of Charney Bassett in the Vale of White Horse, and now wife of a yeoman farmer at West Challow, a short walk south of her birthplace.

Joan Vokins was not prepossessing to look at. About fifty years of age, she was a sickly woman, who had spent much of her life bedridden or housebound. The sources hint that she was partly crippled, and dependent on constant female help. She may have been anorexic, and was certainly subject to fits, whether epileptic or of a less distressing nature, seventeenth-century nosology is unable to tell us.⁶ But in spite of this, her facial expression was not one of unhappiness. Rather, it was one of satisfaction, of a job well done. She was, as she believed, at the end of an

assignment which had been difficult and even, at times, dangerous. She had worked hard, but had been completely successful. Now all she wanted was to get to New York and find a ship that would take her back to her family in the Vale before winter. At the back of her mind may have been the words 'before Christmas', but Vokins, as a Quaker, did not officially recognise Christmas.⁷

What was the nature of this 'assignment' that had taken her so far from her normal environment? Remarkable as it may seem, Joan Vokins was a soldier under military discipline. Not, of course, in the army of King Charles. The prince she served was Jesus Christ. As a Quaker, the Christ she worships was not a distant figure seated at the right hand of his Father, but was inside her. He was the indwelling Christ, the inward light. In his army, the chain of command was as short as it possibly could be. She received her orders direct from the Commander-in-Chief in person, and needed not even to report, since her superior officer was always on the spot and could make his own appreciations of any situation.⁸

It was about three years since she had first received her marching orders to proceed to the American colonies. Disobedience was impossible; she knew that any such disobedience would be punished, and feared that the punishment would be indirect, involving misfortune occurring to her family. She had a husband and six children, the youngest approaching adulthood; as a Bunce, she was part of one of the largest extended families in the Vale, and the endogamy of the Quakers had related her by marriage with many more. But, when she thought about it, disobedience was unnecessary. If Christ wanted someone like her, it was not for the sake of any personal strength she could contribute to his campaigns; it was rather to demonstrate his own power in the ability to use even such weak instruments as she was. For his own honour, Christ would not allow her to fail. She had only to carry out her orders, and success was assured; and she would, in due time, receive her wages.⁹

The decision was made in principle, but there had to be a delay which even Jesus Christ agreed was necessary. It was the time of the Wilkinson-Story schism among the Quakers. At base, this was a rebellion against the personal authority of George Fox and Margaret Fell; and, unsurprisingly, among its substantive demands was a cessation of the disorderly influence of females in the Quaker movement. If the Quakers were to aspire to the same respectability as the other dissenting sects, there must be an end to the female religiosity expressed in the pentecostalism which had given the movement its name, and to female initiative exercised through the women's meetings. The schism, which seems to have been largely urban, had powerful support in Reading, starting during a visit there by George Fox in 1677 when complaints were made about women's authority.¹⁰ In

1678, it was Joan Vokins who led the Vale delegation to the Reading summer meeting, where 'Amalek lay in wait by the way: and the opposite Spirit did strongly strive: yet our good Shepherd did visit his handmaids'. Christ gave her what later proved to be merely a temporary victory but one which confirmed her faith in her own prophetic status.¹¹

After this, there was no question of holding back. How the trip was organised and financed is uncertain. Vokins will have had no difficulty in convincing the leaders of her community of the reality of the call she had received. She was herself a leading member of the Vale Quakers, and sister-in-law of their minister, Oliver Sansom.¹² Whether she received administrative or financial help from a higher level, in London, is unknown. It was customary for Quaker communities to pay local expenses for official visitors, possibly extending to horse-hire, but there must have been need for boat fares, cash reserves, and emergency provision. At least one other Quaker traveller, Jane Whitehead, is known to have obliged her husband to meet her costs, but she confined herself to England; Richard Vokins was a substantial yeoman farming his four yardlands, but it is still hard to imagine him being able to pay for lengthy trans-Atlantic travel.¹³ The central Quaker organisation from time to time organised collections from the regional meetings 'for the service of truth overseas'. 1679 was one year in which this was done, and it was perhaps from this fund that her expenses were paid.¹⁴ If Vokins had merely set off at a venture, like the early Quaker apostles, trusting in the Lord to provide, the fact would certainly have been mentioned, but it is not. It is probably because of the time required to set up detailed arrangements that it was not until February of 1680 that she embarked at Gravesend. It was only then that she addressed a letter to her fellow-members of the Vale women's meeting telling them what she was about. Rumours earlier were inevitable, but she had been unwilling to announce her intention publicly in case some last-minute hitch had arisen to prevent the journey and leave her looking foolish and merely boastful.¹⁵

Arriving in New York in May 1680, Vokins travelled through Long Island, then went by sea to Boston, where a Quaker had been hanged only twenty years previously and Quakers still risked a whipping.¹⁶ She rode back and forwards through East and West Jersey, at that time being settled by a largely Quaker immigration, and further west to Pennsylvania, 'though it had not that name then'. Of what, in detail, she did in her travels, she has left us with few reports. She 'settled' a fifth day meeting in New York that had been 'lost', and in what would later be Pennsylvania she worked to organise meetings which, she admits, were not properly 'settled' until later.¹⁷ Only one incident figures in her letters as significant. In the country town of Newtown in Long Island, today a part of Brooklyn,

there was a group of Ranters led by one Thomas Case, whose practice was to invade Quaker meetings and disrupt them with mockery and insults. These Ranters were a serious problem to the Quakers; their meetings were reported to turn into three-day orgies, at which, it was alleged, poxes were passed on and bastards conceived. They were also accused of witchcraft. Orthodox fellow-citizens were only too liable to lump the Ranters and their Quaker opponents into a single, highly undesirable, category.¹⁸ On the day of a meeting, Vokins was so weak that she had to be carried into the meeting house by two Quaker women; but when 'the dark power raged' in the Ranters, the spirit inspired and strengthened her to prophesy until they slunk away in defeat. She was certainly over-optimistic in reporting the victory as decisive, but was able to repeat the performance at least once, at a four-day general meeting in Rhode Island.¹⁹ The actual technique of her triumph is not described, but probably follows that used, a generation earlier, by the Baptist prophetess Anna Trapnell against a group of heckling Quakers, and in our own day by politicians facing any hostile interviewer: speak loudly, speak fast, do not stop to draw breath, do not let your opponents get a word in edgewise.²⁰

Vokins reached New York, but there received fresh orders from her high command. Instead of returning home, she was to proceed to Barbados; providentially, there was a ship with a Quaker captain about to leave. The trip at this point turned into a near disaster. The ship was filled with a crowd of mixed nationality and colour, 'mostly', as she wrote without a trace of humour, 'very wicked'. It was the hurricane season, and they did not appreciate her incessant preaching, the apparently capricious desires of the inward light to land at small islands with Quaker communities, and her insistence that the storms they met were because the captain was trying to avoid them instead of setting a straight course for their destination. She was lucky not to be thrown overboard, but they did encourage her to disembark when they put into Montserrat for shelter, and contrived to sail away without letting her know. She was condemned to an impromptu tour of the Caribbean islands, at the mercy of winds and the availability of shipping. Wherever there was a Quaker community, she preached in the meeting houses; where there was none, she did so in the open street. Bereft of female travelling companions, she often had to sleep in her clothes; at Antigua, largely peopled by Irish Catholics, she was humiliatingly dependent on the sympathy of a local woman. Unable to find a diet to suit her, she lived, superbly, on a daily half-pint of Madeira wine, boiled down. She had sailed at Michaelmas, expecting a voyage of four weeks, and arrived at Barbados some time after mid-January.²¹

It was at Barbados, from her account, that she worked harder than at any other time in her trip. Travelling incessantly, she held two or three

meetings each day, preaching and missionising among the plantation workers, black as well as white. Finally, in April, Christ allowed her to sail for England where, disembarking in triumph, she fulfilled an earlier vow to disrupt a church service in Sandwich. Apparently seized with a reluctance to return home, she spent another three weeks preaching in Kent before going to London 'to visit friends', and thence to Berkshire. She had been away some eighteen months and felt 'better in Health than I had been for many Years'.²²

Such, at least, is the information that can be gleaned from, or between the lines of, the hagiographical collection of Vokins' writings published after her death. The materials had been gathered by Theophila Townsend of Cirencester, who already had a biographical study of another Quaker lady, Jane Whitehead, to her credit and presumably expected to complete this one too. The effort of collecting evidence must have been considerable and time-consuming, since the letters published included many to contacts in the north-eastern American territories, some of which had been sent from the Caribbean or written on board ship, where it is unlikely that copies would have been made and kept. It does seem that Quaker communities were accustomed to making copies of both administrative and exhortatory letters they received and sent, so that the originals would be available for further circulation; there are several examples in the minute-books of the Berkshire quarterly meeting and in the collections at Friends House Library in London.²³ In the end, it was Vokins' brother-in-law, Oliver Sansom, who put the book together and had it published in 1691. As is shown by the later edition of Sansom's own memoirs by Thomas Ellwood, and indeed by the same compiler's version of George Fox's notebooks, it is necessary to approach all such sources with more than the usual caution.

Thus, it may seem significant that Vokins as a child would refuse to go out to play with her friends, puritanically fearful of wasting her time in vanities. It may be concluded that the physical weakness which was such a feature of her later religious activities was already apparent, and that exclusion from normal childish activities was a factor in her religious development. This may indeed be the case, but precocious symptoms of religious angst were a frequent feature in Quaker, as in general puritan, conversion narratives. William Dewsbury dates his concerns to the age of eight, John Crook to that of eleven, Francis Howgill to twelve, Sansom to his 'tender years'.²⁴ Vokins' refusal to play with other children recalls the much earlier example of Dewsbury. Whether the responsibility was that of Vokins herself or of a later editor, her conversion narrative follows a pattern that had been firmly set a generation earlier. Some of her other activities, or the prominence accorded them in the published memoirs,

seem similarly imitative. Her encounters with the American Ranter Thomas Case recall not so much that of George Fox with the Coventry Ranters in 1649 as that of William Dewsbury with Jacob Bauthumley at Leicester six years later, when the Ranters 'went away in shame and contempt'.²⁵ Indeed her whole journey to the American colonies, followed by that to the Caribbean, can be seen as a conscious retracing of the steps of the Quaker apostle George Fox and his companions in their peregrinations of 1655–60, which first established Quakerism in these distant territories and in effect opened them to later Quaker immigration. The Quaker presence in Barbados had in fact been started by two women, Mary Fisher and Ann Austin.²⁶ Vokins' later trip of 1686 to Ireland, in which she impressed her hearers with her fortitude in spite of deteriorating health, can be seen as similarly derivative, for Sansom had been there in 1676 – and would go again in 1687.²⁷

In fact, there is something slightly archaic about many of Vokins' activities and writings in the last decade of her life; they seem rooted in the early, heroic, phase of Quakerism. Quakers in 1681 no longer performed street theatre or invaded church pulpits, as Vokins did in Sandwich on her return from Barbados. Such acts had been seen to be counter-productive, and the emphasis had turned towards the maintenance of established communities rather than the spreading of a new gospel, the silent meeting rather than mass 'quaking' and pentecostalism. The minister in Sandwich was understandably outraged by Vokins' usurpation, but the local magistrate could take a more relaxed attitude. What moved Vokins, it would seem, was a desire to emulate in her own person the acts of respected senior Quakers; to show that she, too, was fully committed to the movement, and as obedient as they had ever been to the commands of the inward light.

Psycho-history was only briefly fashionable among historians, leading to unprofitable argument about concepts of individuality and confusion between different levels of motivation; but it is nonetheless hard in the post-Freudian present to ignore the implications of Vokins' personal situation. In 1661, she was already the wife of a well-to-do but not particularly exciting yeoman farmer of West Challow, already a mother, possibly, as we have seen, already sickly. In that year, her younger sister Jane netted Oliver Sansom, charismatic and authoritative. Two years later, Sansom revealed himself as a Quaker and began the work of converting his family to the same belief. Vokins claims to have been quite ready to succumb, while her sister Jane was the hardest to convince and had to be subjected to relays of imported advocates before she realised that acceptance would be the price of a quiet life.²⁸ Later, although the two sisters would dominate the Vale women's meeting, Jane Sansom would confine herself to administrative and social tasks while Vokins

preached and inspired. By 1669, Vokins was in print, publishing a broadsheet of gentle reproach to those who persecuted Quakers.²⁹ From the very start of the Vale monthly meeting minutes in 1673, Vokins appears as an assiduous attendee, and after the women's meetings were held separately from 1678, her name was usually given the place of honour at the top of the attendance lists in the minutes.³⁰ In spite of her bodily weakness and the need to cover substantial distances on horseback when the meetings were held at the far end of the Vale, she averaged eight or nine attendances in years when she was not travelling further afield.

Vokins' letter to her colleagues from Gravesend in 1680 expresses the importance of this in her life. Her exploits in Reading in 1678 are further evidence; of all the demands of the Wilkinson-Story schismatics, it was only their desire to abolish the women's meetings that roused her to action. Once the meetings were safe, she was content. Her diversion in 1680 – by order of the in-dwelling Christ – from New York to Barbados, when she had intended to return home, can be explained by the same preoccupation. In December of that year there was to take place in Barbados an important conference of the local Quakers with representatives of the schismatics, which, in the event, she missed. It would seem that the Foxites carried the day, but only at the cost of a resolution providing that a majority decision of both men and women would be binding on all members, an obvious breach of traditional Quaker principles. The resolution was carried to various Quaker communities in the Caribbean, where some signed it and others did not, and reached London in April 1681. Fox and his closest collaborators, aware of the circumstances, returned a remarkably mild letter of protest, more concerned with the decision as giving propaganda opportunities to the schismatics than with its substance.³¹ How Vokins explained to herself the failure of providence to ensure her presence at the meeting is something on which her published memoirs are silent.

Hugh Barbour has written at length on the impact of conversion on puritans and Quakers alike.³² Often, especially in the mid-century period when religious enthusiasm was at its height, the experience was one of trauma and terror. Conversion was the resolution of an episode of psychological depression, yet it was not a return to autonomy. For the puritans, there was the recognition that salvation could never be certain, and that the devil was always at work to provoke a disastrous backsliding into carnal preoccupations. While salvation by good works was impossible, works less than good might be evidence of predestined damnation. The Quakers were in even worse case. Salvation for them lay in a determined abandonment of their own will to the dictates of the inward

light; nothing less than total submission was acceptable. And there was no knowing what Jesus Christ might ask of his believers. Quakers might be called on to fast for long periods and abstain from marital intercourse, to leave their families and roam the country or the world spreading the divine message, to perform outrageous actions provoking their neighbours to contempt and anger and their social superiors to repression. Yet there were always some in whom the recognition of the in-dwelling Christ aroused a very different reaction, empowering and liberating. To the antinomian Ranters of the mid-century, the uniting of their personal will with that of the deity meant transcendence rather than submission. Their desires were Christ in them; even sin came from God and was justified by him; even sex was a metaphor of unity: 'If that within thee do not condemn thee, thou shalt not be condemned'.³³ For women, similarly, the inward light could be a validation of the will, and a source of authority independent of the patriarchal society within which they operated. Joan Vokins' religion provided her with an individual role that would have been unavailable to an orthodox farmer's wife of the period; and if this role proved to be modelled on those played by men she admired, 'dear George' Fox and Oliver Sansom, it was nonetheless one freely chosen and in which she could, to an extent, write her own scripts. She loved and cherished her family, but where she was truly herself was among her friends of the Vale women's meeting. There she was appreciated at her own valuation, and her spiritual leadership was respected. Abolition of the women's meetings would have meant a loss of self, a bereavement, and she had no option but to fight against it. The victory she won was a divine vindication of her position; Christ had 'strengthened his hand-maids' and accepted to 'own', namely to endorse the women's meetings and take them under his protection.³⁴

For Joan Vokins, the alternative to prophecy was to be confined to the role of a simple, sickly, farmer's wife, a role of little freedom and much routine, in which she would have neither the special regard of her charismatic brother-in-law nor the particular respect of her peers among the women. Such a relapse into mediocrity, especially after her triumph of 1678, was unthinkable. Writing shortly before her death, she recalled the period prior to her conversion: 'I could not take comfort in Husband or Children, House or Land, or any visibles, for want of the Marriage Union with the Lamb of God'.³⁵ Christ was a more satisfactory husband than Richard Vokins. That she was a soldier in the War of the Lamb, specially chosen for particular missions, was part of her concept of self. In the last analysis, she followed the inward light and obeyed its commands because in her existential situation no other source of self-respect was available.

Notes

1. R A Knox, *Enthusiasm: a Chapter in the History of Religion* (Oxford, 1950), Ch.3; Karl Baus, *From the Apostolic Community to Christianity* (Freiburg 1965), Ch.16.
2. 1 Timothy 2:11-12; 1 Corinthians 14:34-35.
3. Claire Cross, 'He-Goats before the Flocks': a note on the part played by some women in the founding of some Civil War churches', *Studies in Church History*, 8 (1972), pp.195-202.
4. Phyllis Mack, 'Women as prophets during the English Civil War', *Feminist Studies*, 8 (1982), pp.19-45; Susan Dwyer Amussen, *An Ordered Society; Gender and Class in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1988); Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women* (California, 1992); Diane Purkiss, 'Producing the voice, consuming the body; women prophets of the seventeenth century', in Isobel Grundy and Susan Wiseman (eds.), *Women, Writing, History 1640-1740* (Athens, Georgia, 1992); Patricia Crawford, *Women and Religion in England 1500-1720* (1993); Hilary Hinds, *God's Englishwomen; Seventeenth-century Radical Sectarian Writing and Feminist Criticism*, (Manchester, 1996); Diane Watt, *Secretaries of God* (1997).
5. Manfred Brod, 'Politics and prophecy in seventeenth-century England: the case of Elizabeth Poole', *Albion*, 31 (1999), pp.395-412.
6. Joan Vokins, *God's Mighty Power Magnified* (1698), hereafter GMPM, pp.31, 41, 46, 121 and *passim*.
7. GMPM, pp.38, 51.
8. GMPM, pp.50, 79, 80, 86, 88, 90.
9. GMPM, pp.28, 32.
10. H R Smith, 'The Wilkinson-Story controversy in Reading', *Journal of the Friends' Historical Society*, 1 (1904), pp.57-61.
11. GMPM, p. 29. Berkshire Quakers' Quarterly Meetings, Berkshire C[ounty] R[ecord] O[ffice], D/F2 A1/2, 1-3.
12. Sansom's ministerial status was recognised in London; 'First-Days Meetings', [Friends'] H[ouse] L[ibrary], Mss. Vol. 40, Case 51/40, ff.131, 232.
13. T Townsend, *A Testimony Concerning the Life and Death of Jane Whitehead* (1676), p.13; V M Howse, *West Challow, a Parish Record* (Stanford in the Vale, 1985), pp.20, 22, 72.
14. W C Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism* (1912), p.360.
15. GMPM, p.48.
16. GMPM, pp.33-8.
17. GMPM, p.38.
18. H Barbour, et al, (eds.), *Quaker Crosscurrents: Three Hundred Years of Friends in the New York Monthly Meetings* (Syracuse, 1995), pp.12-3. A J Worrall, *Quakers in the American Northeast* (Hanover, New Hampshire, 1980), pp.65-6. R M Jones, *The Quakers in the American Colonies* (1923), pp.231-7.
19. GMPM, pp.34-5.
20. A Trapnell, *Voice for the King of Saints and Nations* (1658), pp.70-2.
21. GMPM, pp.38-43, 54, 59-64.
22. GMPM, pp.43-45, 47.
23. For example, FHL, Mss. Port 23/156; 169. See also GMPM, p.64.
24. Most of these examples are cited in Theodor Sippell, *Werdendes Quakertum* (Stuttgart, 1937), pp.223-59. For an example of non-Quakers, see John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666). For Sansom, see *The*

- Life of Oliver Sansom* (1710), pp.5-9. The type, as Sippell points out, is Nathaniel in John 1:48.
25. Accounts of these meetings are transcribed by Sippell, *op.cit.*, pp.96 note, 186.
 26. H Barbour, *The Quakers in Puritan England* (New Haven, 1964), p.60.
 27. GMPM, p.106.
 28. *Sansom*, p.12. GMPM, p.17.
 29. Joan Vokins, *A Loving Advertisement* (1670).
 30. Vale Quaker Monthly Minutes, Oxfordshire CRO., BOQM, 1/1/1; 4.
 31. Thomas Crisp, *Babel's Builders unmasking Themselves* (1681), *passim*. The date of the meeting is given as 23 December 1681, but the dates of publication in London and of Fox's letter of comment (20 June 1681) show that the correct year is 1680. For a file of preliminary correspondence between London and Barbados, see FHL, Mss. Port 23/156.
 32. Barbour, *op.cit.*, pp.95ff. For a contemporary example, see Richard Hubberthorne, *A True Testimony of Obedience* (1653), cited in Sippell, *op.cit.*, pp.258-9.
 33. Laurence Clarkson, *A Single Eye* (1650), in Nigel Smith (ed.), *A Collection of Ranter Writings* (1983), p.171.
 34. GMPM, pp.29-30.
 35. GMPM, pp.18-9.