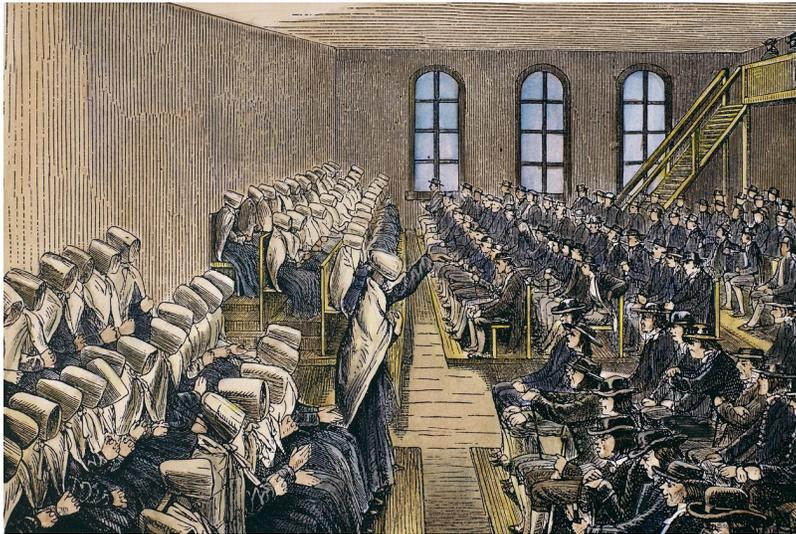


BOOKSHELF

# ‘World of Trouble’ Review: Caught In a Battle Zone

Quakers felt committed to pacifism and thus to only peaceful reform. It was a difficult position to take during a time of rebellion.



Quaker meeting in Philadelphia. PHOTO: GRANGER COLLECTION

*Robert K. Landers*

Dec. 15, 2019 2:47 pm ET

Henry Drinker and Elizabeth Sandwith, both Philadelphia Quakers, were wed in January 1761. He was the son of a scrivener (an office clerk) and, at age 26, a rising import-export merchant; she was the orphaned daughter of a merchant and ship owner. As they settled into married life, they had no inkling that, before long, the world they knew would be turned upside-down—by political agitation, economic boycotts and, ultimately, revolution.

Elizabeth kept voluminous diaries during these years, and she and Henry kept the many letters that they exchanged when separated. In “World of Trouble,” historian Richard Godbeer draws on those resources and others, including Henry’s business correspondence, to describe in illuminating detail the sometimes dramatic experiences of this Quaker family, living in a major colonial city during a time of rebellion and feeling incessant pressure to modify their religious convictions for the sake of the patriot cause.

Though Henry Drinker and indeed most Quakers in the American colonies condemned the crown's controversial policies—including the Stamp Act of 1765, imposing a tax on newspapers and various documents—they remained committed to pacifism and thus to only peaceful reform. It was a position that made Quakers, in the eyes of their increasingly rebellious fellow colonists, little better than loyalists.

Despite the pressure to join in the boycotts that Britain's policies had inspired, Henry and his business partner, a fellow Quaker, in 1773 became local agents for the East India Co. That company now had a monopoly on tea sent legally to the colonies and was soon reviled by American patriots, not least for a new imperial tax—the one that led to the Boston Tea Party that same year.

Four years later, after the revolution had begun, Drinker's willingness to ally his firm with the East India Co. proved catastrophic. "That unfortunate decision," Mr. Godbeer writes, "in combination with Henry's reputation as a leading Quaker," led to his arrest on suspicion of treason. Pennsylvania's revolutionary government never brought specific charges against him or the 29 others arrested, mostly Quaker pacifists who professed neutrality in the War for Independence and refused to join either side.

Drinker and the others were thrown into a makeshift prison. Ten of them agreed to sign an oath of allegiance to Pennsylvania's new regime and were freed. Henry and the 19 others, sticking to their stance of neutrality and their Quaker abhorrence of swearing oaths, refused. Despite lenient visiting privileges, the men and their families were outraged at what Elizabeth Drinker called "the tyrannical conduct of the present wicked rulers."

After about a week, the 20 men were sent into exile in Virginia. As the wagons carried them off, distant gunfire could be heard as patriots in the Battle of Brandywine tried (in vain) to halt the British advance toward Philadelphia. In Winchester, Va., the men were treated leniently after agreeing not to escape. The following April, Elizabeth and three other wives went on a risky mission to plead for the prisoners with revolutionary authorities, first stopping in Valley Forge, where they met cordially with Gen. George Washington. He gave them a pass to see Pennsylvania's executive council in Lancaster. On their way there, they learned that the council had decided to free the prisoners.

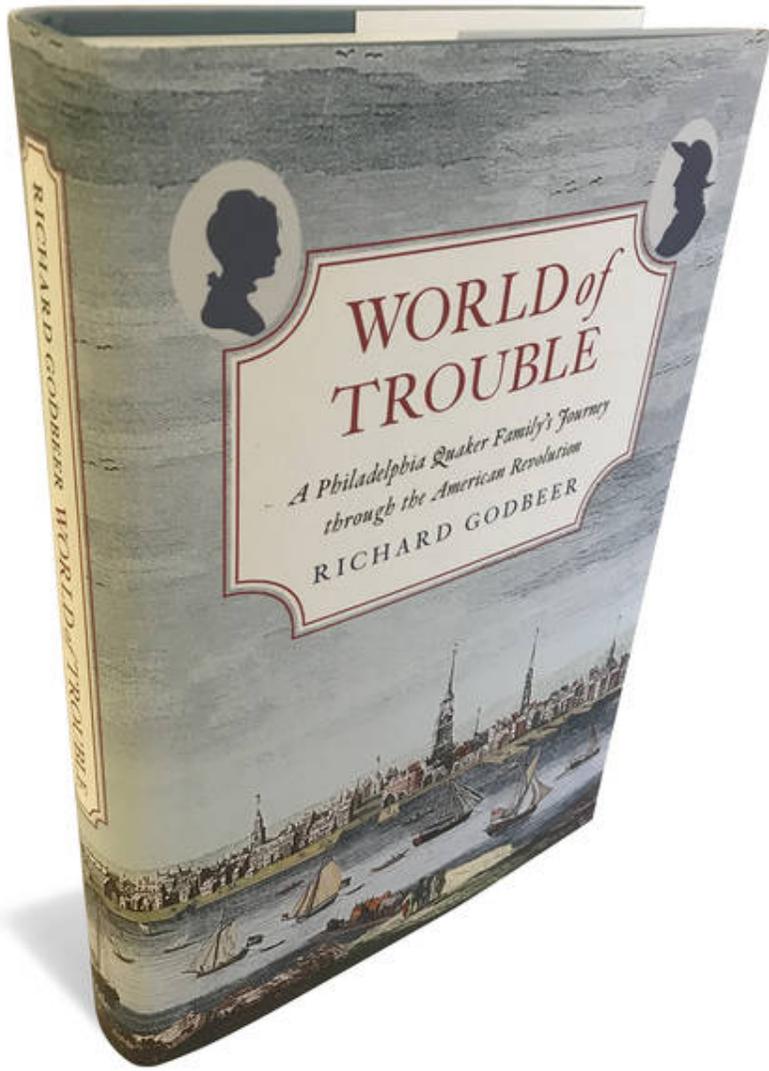


PHOTO: WSJ

---

WORLD OF TROUBLE

---

By Richard Godbeer  
*Yale, 460 pages, \$38*

---

And so, eight months after they had left Philadelphia, the men were finally allowed to return home. During those months, two exiles had died, and Henry himself had endured serious illness. For him and Elizabeth, and for their five surviving children (out of eight born by then), the forced separation had been, as Mr. Godbeer puts it, “a harrowing ordeal.” Henry and his business partner had closed their firm when trans-Atlantic trade collapsed, but he now turned his attention to a New Jersey ironworks of which he had become a part owner.

In Mr. Godbeer’s well-written and fascinating study—which goes beyond the war’s impact and seeks, insofar as possible, to capture the Drinkers’ lives in full—he presents Henry and Elizabeth sympathetically but not uncritically. While both “supported the emancipation of slaves,” Mr. Godbeer says, Elizabeth wrote in one diary entry that blacks were “near” but “not quite the same species.” Though she treated black servants as well as she did white ones, she harbored, in Mr. Godbeer’s view, a “deeply ingrained racism,” reflecting that of the larger society.

When news of the British surrender at Yorktown in 1781 reached Philadelphia, Quaker houses, such as the Drinkers’, that lacked celebratory candles in their windows were attacked by vandals. The Drinkers lost around 70 panes of glass. Damage elsewhere was worse, and Henry’s brother was badly beaten.

In the new post-revolutionary era, Elizabeth had to run her household with “increasingly assertive” servants, while Henry tried “to reinvent himself as an ethically driven entrepreneur,” Mr. Godbeer writes. He bought tracts of land in Pennsylvania and New York, hoping to sell parcels to Quakers who would form farming communities and treat the local Indian nations with respect. He also hoped to use his land’s plentiful sugar maples to turn maple syrup into a national replacement for West Indies cane sugar, thus “striking a blow against African slavery in the Caribbean.”

Both of Henry’s ventures proved disappointing—and financially draining. Even so, he and his wife, Mr. Godbeer says, had “created for themselves and their children a haven of comfort and loving support that sustained them well enough through all that they had to endure.” In the end, “World of Trouble” is a tale not only of resilience in the face of hardship but of the perils of exercising freedom of conscience—even when the cause that threatens it can be rightly seen as a fight for freedom itself.

*Mr. Landers, a writer in Baltimore, posts his reviews and essays at [robertklanders.com](http://robertklanders.com).*

Copyright © 2019 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.