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# THE NEW ENGLAND QUARTERLY

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## THE NEW-LIGHT QUAKERS OF LYNN AND NEW BEDFORD

FREDERICK B. TOLLES

I GOT some leaves out of your book—from your New Bedford Friends,” said Ralph Waldo Emerson to Lucretia Mott in 1858. “I remembered,” the Philadelphia Quakeress commented, “that his mind was enlightened beyond his pulpit and ordinances about the time of the enlightened Mary New[h]all’s (New Light) coming out, and I doubt not she had some influence on him.”<sup>1</sup> Literary historians, more addicted to the pastime of tracing “influences” than the practical-minded Lucretia ever was, have duly noted that, while supplying the Unitarian pulpit in New Bedford in 1834, Emerson read with interest an account of the “New-Light” movement among the New Bedford Quakers, that he was indeed impressed by some remarks of Mary Newhall, a New-Light preacher, and that he formed a lasting friendship with Mary Rotch, a prominent New-Light-turned-Unitarian. But the full story of the schism which convulsed the Quaker meetings of eastern Massachusetts in the early 1820’s has never been told.

### I

The troubles began in Lynn, soon after 1816, quickly spread to New Bedford, and set up reverberations which were felt

<sup>1</sup> Otelia Cromwell, *Lucretia Mott* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), 174.

in a few other neighboring towns. They reached a climax between 1822 and 1824. By 1825 they were all over, and the meetings settled back into their accustomed quiet, a quiet sometimes indistinguishable in this period of Quaker history from somnolence.

One does not have to be an economic determinist to see a connection between the disturbances which racked the Quaker meetings at Lynn and New Bedford and the new-found prosperity which came to the two towns after the War of 1812, when Lynn was burgeoning as the center of the American boot-and-shoe industry and New Bedford was taking over Nantucket's world primacy in the big business of catching whales. When Job Otis, a contemporary Quaker chronicler of the events, set down a list of the "predisposing or preparing features" of the upheaval, the first one he mentioned was "Outward ease and prosperity, and worldly possessions and honors, begetting pride and highmindedness, and dwarfishness in religion, with an increasing repugnance to the cross of Christ and its restraints."<sup>2</sup> And another writer, in a faintly satirical sketch of Quakerism in New Bedford (disguised as "Old Cribton"), remarked that the town was "a thriving place, and the Friends had prospered largely in their worldly affairs, and had long been laying by money from the sheer want of opportunities of getting rid of it."<sup>3</sup>

Alongside this circumstance of worldly affluence were two closely related developments which Job Otis also itemized for

<sup>2</sup> Otis, a New Bedford apothecary, wrote a six-hundred-page account (unfortunately no longer extant) of the disturbances, which William Hodgson used as the basis of his chapter on the New-Light movement in *The Society of Friends in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia, 1875), the only extended treatment of the subject in print. For Otis's list of predisposing causes see Vol. I, 25-26.

<sup>3</sup> "Reminiscences of Quakerism," *Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature* No. 331 (May 5, 1860), 284. It was probably no mere coincidence that the leading New Lights were to be found among the wealthiest families in the city, families prominently engaged in whaling and other mercantile and manufacturing pursuits: at least eight of the most conspicuous were later listed among the richest men in the state. *Names and Sketches of the Richest Men of Massachusetts* (1858), cited in John M. Bullard, *The Rotches* (New Bedford, 1947), 81.

us: "Too great intimacy with the people of the world . . . bringing in the spirit of the world and its attachments and associations," and "A (so-called) liberality of sentiment, according to the world's estimate, under pretence of Christian charity." According to the satirist of "Old Cribton," the younger and middle-aged Friends, intoxicated by prosperity, "suddenly threw aside their broad-brims and poke bonnets, and came forth . . . from the bondage of their youth. [They] looked with only half-disguised contempt on the bigotry and ignorance of their grandsires; and as if anxious to avoid all risk of being recognised as the descendants of a prudent and wary race, threw themselves headlong into the depths of every novel doctrine that German or American genius could devise."

Otis was probably right in believing that association with non-Quaker groups exposed the Friends to new and unsettling ideas. For a century and a half the Quaker communities of Massachusetts had carefully kept themselves insulated from contact with "the world's people," had lived off the inherited ideas of the Quaker tradition, reading none but Quaker books, thinking none but Quaker thoughts. But now, as Otis sorrowfully recorded, some Friends were joining Bible and tract societies and organizations for promoting free schools for Negroes. "These things might be well in themselves . . .," he admitted, "yet . . . in their several relations, bearings and tendencies there was a snare in them, tending to sap the strength of the Society in various ways."<sup>4</sup> When some of the New Lights went so far as to attend the ordination of a Unitarian minister, these contacts with the outside world had done their work, and when the same backsliders attended "an 'Oratorio,' or assembly for what is profanely styled 'sacred music,' uniting in the expressions of approbation given by the audience to certain portions of the performance," it was clear that from the traditional Quaker viewpoint they were far gone in apostasy and worldliness.<sup>5</sup> To put it differently, the ferment of

<sup>4</sup> *Memoirs of the Life and Religious Exercises of Job Otis, Written by Himself* (Sherwoods, New York, 1861), 156-157.

<sup>5</sup> Hodgson, *Society of Friends*, I, 89.

liberal ideas, which had been working within the other New England churches for a generation or more, was finally making itself felt within the confines of the Society of Friends.

Yet, whatever the “predisposing or preparing features” of the New-Light movement, the ideas of its leading exponents, even the bizarre conduct of some of them, had roots deep in the Quaker tradition, and the controversy was carried on from beginning to end within a distinctively Quaker framework. The Old-Light Elders, the conservators of tradition, considered themselves the guardians of true Quakerism, apostolic successors to the original disciples of the Inner Light; in their eyes the “new light” which the opposite party preached was simply “old darkness”—not the authentic inward flash of divine illumination but the weak and fallible faculty of natural reason. The New Lights, for their part, denied that they stood for any novel principle; they were only returning, they insisted, to the Inner Light as the early Friends had known it, unobscured by the incrustations of tradition, undistorted by the lens of a rigid discipline. In any case, the crucial issue between the two groups had less to do with the substance of belief than with the freedom of individual Friends to follow their inward Guide wherever it might lead them. The real target of the New Lights was not so much the doctrinal position of their opponents as it was the power of the Old-Light Elders to dictate the style of life and thought appropriate to Friends.

In these respects the lines were drawn in roughly the same fashion as in the devastating “separation” which was to occur a few years later over the teachings of Elias Hicks, dividing the Society of Friends in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and the Midwest into “Orthodox” and “Hicksite” branches. The events in New England may be regarded as a minor skirmish preliminary to that wider struggle, though there is little evidence of direct connection between them.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, Elias

<sup>6</sup> There had been a similar movement among the Quakers of Ireland around the turn of the century, in which the term “New Lights” had been applied to the party of revolt. See Rufus M. Jones, *The Later Periods of Quakerism* (London, 1921), 119; Isabel Grubb, *Quakers in Ireland, 1654-1900* (London,

Hicks himself visited Lynn and New Bedford on a preaching tour in 1816, and Old-Light historians of the crisis, writing with knowledge born of hindsight, tended to fix on him the blame for planting the seeds of dissension.<sup>7</sup> But probably the events now to be narrated would have unfolded much as they did had Hicks never set foot in Massachusetts. For the causes of the contention were inherent in the state of the Society of Friends in the early nineteenth century, and the struggle in the Lynn and New Bedford meetings was a recrudescence of the age-old conflict, as familiar in Quaker history as in the affairs of the "world," between freedom and authority, liberty and order.

## II

Around the year 1816 new voices began to be heard from the ministers' gallery of the Quaker meetinghouse on Broad Street in Lynn. It was not the fact that several of the preachers were women that troubled the Elders of the meeting, for the Society of Friends had never taken seriously the injunction of St. Paul: "Let your women keep silence in the churches." It was the substance of their sermons that caused the grave and reverend heads to shake in disapproval. The new crop of ministers, to whom the label "New Lights" was soon affixed, manifested a disturbing tendency to allegorize the plain words of Scripture, to interpret the familiar texts in novel and unsettling ways. They spoke of a new spiritual dispensation, in which perfection was possible to mortal men; they even questioned the necessity of belief in certain of the cardinal doctrines of Christianity. The chief offender was Mary Newhall, a young woman in her thirties, who had, it was said, "a fatal facility of entering into mystical speculations, and . . . great powers of language to express her thoughts."<sup>8</sup>

1927), 119. The label "New Lights" had been familiar to Americans since the Great Awakening of the 1740's, when it had been used to designate the revivalist party.

<sup>7</sup> *Journal of the Life and Religious Labours of Elias Hicks* (New York, 1832), 254, 260.

<sup>8</sup> A Memoir of the Early Part of the Life of Benjamin Kite. MS in the Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College, 146.

The Elders, convinced that this heterodox ministry proceeded from "the spirit of delusion," took measures to suppress it. They labored privately with the errant ministers, and, failing by this means to silence them, finally laid their heresies before the meeting for discipline.<sup>9</sup> There, however, the New Lights had enough partisans to preclude any united action to censure them. (Action was traditionally taken only by the unanimous "sense of the meeting.") Frustrated on their home grounds, the Elders took their problem to the Yearly Meeting of Ministers and Elders, held at Portsmouth, Rhode Island, in June 1821. There it was decided to send a special committee to inquire into the state of affairs in Salem Monthly Meeting. The committee duly met at Lynn in August. After hearing the complaints against Mary Newhall's ministry, it advised her to suspend her preaching, at least temporarily. This Mary Newhall refused to do: her gift in the ministry was from God, she said, and she could not decline to exercise it upon the command of men.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile her supporters, outraged at what they considered the oppressive measures of the Elders, began to make their objections known. They began with murmurings among themselves and protests in Monthly Meeting and ended in extravagant actions which became the talk of the town and landed

<sup>9</sup> The Monthly Meeting for discipline (now usually called the meeting for business) is the basic unit in the Quaker polity. The men and women held separate meetings. Lynn Friends belonged to Salem Monthly Meeting, held at Salem in January, April, and July, and at Lynn in the other months. Preparative Meetings were held at both places to "prepare" the business for the Monthly Meeting. Matters not settled in the Monthly Meeting could be carried to Salem Quarterly Meeting, which included, besides Salem Monthly Meeting, the meetings at Seabrook and Weare, New Hampshire. The ultimate court of appeal was New England Yearly Meeting, held at Newport, Rhode Island. There was a parallel system of "select" meetings, composed of approved ministers and appointed Elders, charged with the spiritual oversight of the membership. Each Monthly Meeting also had its Overseers, whose duty was to carry out the disciplinary measures agreed on by the meeting. See *Rules of Discipline of the Yearly-Meeting, Held on Rhode-Island, for New-England* (New Bedford, 1809).

<sup>10</sup> Samuel Philbrick, *Facts and Observations Illustrative of Some Recent Transactions in the Society of Friends at Lynn and Salem, Mass.* (Boston, 1823), 13-14.

some of them in court. One of the New Lights, a cantankerous young cordwainer named Benjamin Shaw, was heard to say he was determined to “pull the old order down, for they were a stiff, arbitrary set.” A young woman named Content Breed stood up in meeting one morning early in 1822, looking pale and haggard (for she had just risen from the sickbed), and pronounced a woe upon the Old Lights. “I appear among you,” she commenced, “as a minister of mercy to those who will receive the word of life, but a minister of judgment to those who resist it.” The judgments of the Lord, she went on dramatically, “are hanging over those who have been persecuting his children and will soon fall heavily upon them.” Mary Newhall herself did not spare the Old Lights. She accused them of a “dead formality,” declared that “the people were ‘priest-ridden’ and the ministers were ‘elder-ridden.’”<sup>11</sup>

The Old Lights were prompt to take notice of these animadversions. A committee of Overseers was sent to deal with Benjamin Shaw, but he declined to meet them “in a committee capacity” on the ground that their mission had not been sanctioned by the united sense of the meeting. The committee nevertheless reported unfavorably on him, and he was accordingly disowned (i.e., excommunicated, “read out of meeting”). The Monthly Meeting also ordered Mary Newhall to desist from preaching. These measures goaded some of the more excitable New Lights to new and sensational actions. On First-Day morning, February 10, 1822, in protest against the tyranny of the Select Meeting, Benjamin Shaw sought to take a seat in the ministers’ gallery—the raised seats at the front of the meetinghouse traditionally reserved for the ministers and Elders. This he was forcibly prevented from doing. After a scuffle he was ejected from the meeting and taken in

<sup>11</sup> *Trial of Benjamin Shaw, John Alley, Jr., Jonathan Buffum, and Preserved Sprague, for Riots and Disturbances of Public Worship, in the Society of Quakers, at Lynn, Massachusetts, before the Court of Common Pleas, Held at Ipswich, Massachusetts, March 16th, 1822* (Salem, 1822), 28-29; Philbrick, *Facts and Observations*, 25-26; Stephen Gould of Newport, Rhode Island, to Thomas Thompson, quoted in Bliss Forbush, *Elias Hicks: Quaker Liberal* (New York, 1956), 209.

a sleigh to the town poorhouse, where he was confined until late in the evening.<sup>12</sup>

Four days later—Monthly Meeting day, with the committee from the Quarterly Meeting in attendance—the Friends were settling down for the period of worship preceding the business session when Benjamin boldly seated himself in the “high seats.” One of the Elders requested him to come down. He refused. Two Friends were sent forward to remove him, whereupon “he braced himself against the railing and split the seat.” Nevertheless, he was carried bodily to the floor of the meetinghouse. When he tried to break away from his captors, he was “escorted” to the door. As the two guards with their prisoner were moving down the aisle, they were met by Caleb Alley, another New Light, in an unQuakerly posture—“his hands raised in a fighting attitude.” As Caleb was being surrounded, his father, John Alley, Jr., entered the meetinghouse and tried to make his way up to the ministers’ gallery, screaming “Let me go by” at the Friends who tried to obstruct his passage. Amidst the confusion still another New Light, Jonathan Buffum, a house-painter known for his “ungovernable temper,” managed to reach the high seats, whence he began haranguing the meeting. “You that profess to be quakers, christians,” he shouted, “have shewn forth by your conduct the fruit of your hell-born principles this day. . . . You thirst for our blood; you want to feed upon us; *this* I call spiritual cannibalism.”

To prevent further disorders the Elders terminated the meeting for worship and drew down the partition, separating the men from the women. Proceeding to business, the Monthly Meeting promptly disowned Jonathan Buffum and several other New Lights.

Next morning, Isaac Basset, a principal pillar of the “old order,” learned that John Alley, Jr. was in his neighborhood with a sword girded about his waist. The two Friends met on the street in mid-morning. “How dost th’ do, John?” said

<sup>12</sup> Philbrick, *Facts and Observations*, 15-16, 22-25, 28-29.

Basset, with an effort at geniality. Alley returned the greeting. Basset then advised him to take off the sword. "I won't," said Alley; "we won't be imposed upon by you." Basset innocently asked what he meant, and Alley replied: "You have imposed upon us—It is now Victory or Death—I shall carry this sword to meeting, and if you meddle with or impose upon us, I shall run you thro' as quick as a wink." "John, will thee do such a thing as that?" asked Basset. "Yes, I will," was the answer.

Good as his word, John Alley, Jr. appeared in meeting on the next First-Day, wearing his sword, and proceeded towards the high seats. Isaac Basset was ready. He stepped up to Alley, clasped him about the waist and pinioned his arms, while several coadjutors disarmed him by cutting his belt. Alley was then allowed to take a seat in the ministers' gallery alongside Buffum, Shaw, and several other New Lights, who had reached the high seats by climbing over the benches in the body of the meetinghouse. As soon as was seemly, the Elders closed the meeting to prevent further disturbances.

Word of the unusual goings-on at the Quaker meetinghouse traveled fast through Lynn. When the Friends gathered for their afternoon meeting, a large crowd had collected to watch the show. Once again Buffum, Shaw, and John Alley, Jr. took seats in the ministers' gallery. Isaac Basset rose and gave them a last chance to come down, which they declined, Jonathan Buffum bidding Basset himself sit down and cease being "disorderly." Friend Basset then addressed the assembly: the conduct of the persons in the gallery, he said, was "highly disorderly," and the Elders had "concluded to take a stand against it." At a signal from him, three Friends advanced to the front of the meetinghouse and proceeded with some difficulty to carry Shaw out amid cries of "Let him alone, don't touch him upon the peril of your lives." Buffum and Alley were removed in the same manner. They were all confined, under guard, in a neighboring house, together with Preserved Sprague, who had abetted them on a former occasion. Meanwhile, from the crowd of two hundred in the meetinghouse yard came shouts

of "Mob! Mob!" A deputy sheriff was hastily summoned from a nearby church, where he was attending service, to read the riot act. In the evening a sheriff arrived from Salem to take charge of the prisoners. They were arraigned next morning at Salem, and, declining to give bail, were committed to prison.<sup>13</sup>

Their trial took place on March 16 in the Court of Common Pleas at Ipswich, Justice Samuel Howe on the bench. The charge against them was disturbing the peace. Shaw, Buffum, and Sprague all pleaded "Not guilty." Alley caused a temporary hitch in the proceedings by announcing: "I am guilty *and* not guilty." His counsel requested him to plead "Not guilty." "I shall say what I have a mind to," Alley replied. After consulting opposing counsel, the attorney for the Commonwealth circumvented this difficulty by entering a *nolle prosequi* to the indictment against Alley on the ground that he was *non compos mentis*. Isaac Basset, as principal witness for the prosecution, then narrated at length the efforts of the New Lights to usurp the high seats. A number of other Old Lights followed him to the witness stand to confirm his account and establish the fact that those seats were by Quaker tradition reserved for approved ministers and Elders.

The defense attorneys attempted to prove, on the contrary, that the action of the defendants was in fact justified by Quaker tradition. After Shaw had been forcibly unseated on February 10, argued Mr. Cummins, "he and his friends . . . thought they had a call, a sp[i]ritual impulse, to go to the high seats, and bear testimony against this oppression." This mode of bearing testimony, he went on, was "according to the ancient usage of the people called Quakers. They acted conscientiously in going to those seats, and testifying against their being set apart for any particular portion of the society." Mr. Saltonstall, for the defense, pursued the argument. "The Quakers," he said, "have been always remarkable for their singularities; they are a peculiar people. . . . The conduct of the prisoners

<sup>13</sup> *Trial*, 12-18, 23-24; Hodgson, *Society of Friends*, I, 78-80; Philbrick, *Facts and Observations*, 31-33.

in taking possession of those seats was not more singular than the conduct of George Fox, who was in the habit of going into the houses of other religious societies, or *steeple houses* as he called them, and inveighing against them for their idolatry."

Mr. Merrill, attorney for the Commonwealth, objected to this line of argument. It was "impious arrogance and blasphemy," he contended, for the defendants "to set up any inspiration to justify them in violating the laws." "If they can prove themselves evil spirits, mere air," he continued sarcastically, "in that case they may go unpunished; but as long as they are palpable, something that we can see and feel, and confine within bars and bolts, they are amenable before civil tribunals to the laws as human beings and must be punished in the flesh for those sins of the spirit which lead them to commit such outrages upon the community." Judge Howe, after stating that "no person felt more respect for the society of Quakers than himself," upheld the objection, and the defense's most promising gambit was lost. At the end of the day, the jury found Buffum and Sprague guilty as charged and Benjamin Shaw not guilty "by reason of insanity."

No doubt Shaw, like John Alley, Jr., was temporarily deranged under the stress of religious excitement. Two physicians testified, one for the prosecution, the other for the defense, that he had shown signs of mental instability. Dr. Rowland Green of Plainfield, Connecticut, the prosecution's witness, had actually treated him professionally. He described to the court Shaw's extraordinary behavior during a recent Quarterly Meeting at Seabrook, New Hampshire. After the meeting had settled into silence, Shaw had gone up to the balcony, which ran around three sides of the building, "and stood upon one of the upper beams." "In about twenty minutes," Dr. Green recalled, "I heard a noise over my head, when the feet and legs of a man came down from the gallery over my head, and Shaw stepped down into the high seat."<sup>14</sup> Whether this unseemly bit of acrobatics was the product of insanity or

<sup>14</sup> *Trial*, 19-22, 32.

merely of ingenuity and a stubborn resolve to occupy the high seats by whatever means cannot now be determined.

But the defense attorneys were right in holding that dramatic acts like John Alley's wearing a sword into meeting or the New Lights' repeated efforts to station themselves in the ministers' gallery were familiar features of Quaker history. George Fox's walking shoeless through the streets of Lichfield, England, crying "Woe to the bloody city of Lichfield!" and James Nayler's entry into Bristol preceded by women singing "Holy, Holy, Holy," are well known but not isolated incidents. One may recall how a Massachusetts Quakeress had walked naked through the streets of nearby Salem in the seventeenth century as a "sign" to the Puritans that they should cast off the "filthy rags" of worldly righteousness. Even John Alley's symbolic sword had its precedent, for in 1738 Benjamin Lay had startled the Friends in their Yearly Meeting at Burlington, New Jersey, by entering the meetinghouse in a military cloak and wearing a sword, which he proceeded to thrust through a bladder of pokeberry juice, sprinkling the Quakers with "blood," to convince them of their cruelty in holding slaves.

The difficulty with such symbolic behavior is that it is not always free from ambiguity. From Isaac Basset's testimony it would appear that John Alley was prepared to use the sword, if necessary, against the Old Lights if they did not cease their oppressive actions. But that seems unlikely, unless Alley was really a dangerous madman. The more plausible interpretation is the one offered by the New Lights: that Alley wore the sword "as an outward emblem of the spirit of war which prevailed in the hearts" of the Old Lights.<sup>15</sup> That, after all, was the main issue, and the New Lights were simply adopting a traditional Quaker method of dramatizing it.

In any case, the "war" was soon won by the Old Lights. The proceedings in the courtroom at Ipswich were followed by

<sup>15</sup> Philbrick, *Facts and Observations*, 66. This explanation is confirmed by the New-Light author of *A Review of the Trial of John Alley, Jr., and Others on the Charges of Riot, &c. . . .* (n.p., 1823), 10.

drastic purgative measures in the meeting at Lynn. Two days after the trial, the Preparative Meeting recommended to the Monthly Meeting, over the protest of some thirty New Lights, that Mary Newhall be disowned. The next session of the Monthly Meeting proceeded to cast her out and, at succeeding sessions, sent nearly thirty of her followers to join her in the outer darkness to which her "new light" had led them. Approximately the same number of persons infected with her heresy at Salem were disowned at the same time.<sup>16</sup> Thereafter the meetings were undisturbed save for sporadic incursions by an occasional impenitent New Light still determined to bear testimony against the "old order."<sup>17</sup> Isaac Stephenson, a visiting English Friend, found a few of the "disaffected" present at both Lynn and Salem meetings in January 1824, but observed that the "spirit of Ranterism" was "pretty much quelled."<sup>18</sup> For a brief period the New Lights held separate meetings in Lynn, but the group had little cohesiveness and soon disintegrated. The Old Lights for their part exhibited a forgiving spirit. They permitted the schismatics to bury their dead in the meeting's burial ground. In 1829 Mary Newhall herself, the prime heresiarch, was to be laid to rest behind the meetinghouse where she had first delivered her provocative sermons. But the Elders were careful to erect a fence about the graves of the New Lights to quarantine them even in death.

<sup>16</sup> Philbrick, *Facts and Observations*, 37, 42, 53; Isaac Stephenson to Hannah Stephenson, January 7, 1824, Moses Brown School, Providence, Rhode Island.

<sup>17</sup> Content Breed was one of the most persistent. More than a year after her disownment, she was still attempting to testify against the Old Lights. On one occasion she attended a funeral clad in a diaphanous white gown and was ejected from the meetinghouse, whereupon she lay down at the threshold until meeting broke. Carried home, she proceeded to foretell the day of her own death. On the announced date several hundred people gathered to witness her translation to heaven, which, however, did not take place. She was compared in the contemporary press to Joanna Southcott. Isaac Stephenson to Hannah Stephenson, December 26, 1823, Moses Brown School; Hodgson, *Society of Friends*, 1, 86-87.

<sup>18</sup> MS diary of [Isaac Stephenson], 22, Moses Brown School.

## III

The storm center now moved south along the coast to New Bedford. There the issues and the parties were essentially the same as at Lynn, but with this difference: the New Lights in New Bedford were not poor cordwainers and house-painters but representatives of the wealthiest and most prominent families in the town, and the rebellion, though no less acrimonious, was carried on with more decorum, with less resort to theatrical antics, than the parallel movement at Lynn. New Bedford Friends had followed the events in Lynn closely; one of the liberals, Benjamin Rodman (of whom we shall hear more) had actually gone there at the height of the controversy and taken a seat in the ministers' gallery to show his unity with the insurgents.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, the peace of New Bedford meeting had already been troubled by the ministry of a home-grown heretic named Micah Ruggles. Formerly a militia captain, active in local politics, he had experienced a religious awakening in his late twenties, whereupon he had resigned all his worldly offices and joined the Society of Friends. He was an energetic, highly articulate young man: even Job Otis admitted that "his natural abilities were rather above mediocrity." Two years after he became a Friend, he began to preach, "coming forth in testimony . . ." according to John Comly, a sympathetic Quaker from Pennsylvania, "in the simplicity of a little child." To Job Otis, Ruggles' statements in meeting suggested rather the forwardness of a naughty child who needed to be disciplined. It was reported that on a "religious visit" to New York Ruggles had been "particularly abusive on Friends, telling them that they knew no more than monkeys," that in Philadelphia he had disparaged the Scriptures, declaring that "they were like the manna gathered yesterday, all worm-eaten." Upon his return to New Bedford he had been admonished by the Elders, but he had many partisans, who accepted his claims

<sup>19</sup> Philbrick, *Facts and Observations*, 47-48.

to a direct inspiration which superseded the written word of the Bible.<sup>20</sup>

Thus the lines were already formed and the ground prepared for battle when Mary Newhall came to town at the end of January 1823 and began preaching to large congregations, including many non-Friends, in the new brick Quaker meetinghouse on Spring Street.<sup>21</sup> On February 9, after she had spoken, Caleb Greene, one of the Elders, rose to denounce her doctrine and inform her hearers that she was no longer a member of the Society of Friends. Almost immediately, Samuel Rodman, a prosperous and dignified young shipowner, sprang to his feet to protest. The facts, he said, had not been accurately represented: Mary Newhall's disownment had been carried against the expressed objections of a large number of Friends and could not therefore be considered valid. In the afternoon Mary Newhall preached again. Towards the end of the meeting, she kneeled and offered a prayer ("appeared in supplication" was the Quaker phrase). Most of the Friends rose to their feet in accordance with Quaker custom to show that they united with her prayer. But about a third of the meeting—

<sup>20</sup> Hodgson, *Society of Friends*, I, 60-71; Elias Hicks to William Poole, December 26, 1821, *Letters of Elias Hicks* (New York, 1834), 92; *Journal of the Life and Religious Labours of John Comly, Late of Byberry, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1853), 262, 267-268. Several sources mention the circulation among the New Lights of a series of pamphlets called *The Celestial Magnet* (Providence, 1820-1821), written by David B. Slack, a recent graduate of Brown University. Slack's "celestial magnet" was something like the Quakers' Inner Light—an immediate divine influence which, he argued, was a sufficient guide to salvation, obviating the need for recourse to the Scriptures or faith in Christ. Hodgson, *Society of Friends*, I, 72; *Letters of Elias Hicks*, 92-93, 172.

<sup>21</sup> There are three contemporary accounts of these meetings and those which followed. The fullest is an anonymous narrative (hereafter cited as MS account) formerly in the possession of the late Rev. Alfred Rodman Hussey of Plymouth; it is now, through the generosity of Mrs. Hussey, in the Friends Historical Library. (This, incidentally, is the record which Emerson read in 1834 and from which he copied out Mary Newhall's words. See *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by E. W. Emerson and W. E. Forbes [Boston and New York, 1909-1914], III, 265-266). There are corroborative accounts in *The Diary of Samuel Rodman*, edited by Zephaniah W. Pease (New Bedford, 1927), and in *Life in New Bedford a Hundred Years Ago: A Chronicle of the Social, Religious and Commercial History of the Period as Recorded in a Diary Kept by Joseph R. Anthony*, edited by Zephaniah W. Pease (New Bedford, 1922).

the hard core of Old Lights—remained in their seats. The Old-Light Elders did not fail to notice that two members of the Select Meeting, Elizabeth Rodman and Mary Rotch, had joined in the prayers of the excommunicated heretic from Lynn. Two days later, Mary Newhall held an “appointed meeting” in the Congregational Church. All New Bedford by this time knew of her reputation for eloquence and originality; the pews were filled with New-Light Friends and other citizens of New Bedford. The Old Lights pointedly boycotted the meeting. After she had finished, there were brief sermons by Mary Rotch and Content Breed, the pale prophetess from Lynn. On the nineteenth of the month she returned to Lynn.<sup>22</sup>

The Old Lights breathed a sigh of relief and promptly set about measures to put the disturbed household of the faith in order. At the March session of the Select Meeting Elizabeth Rodman and Mary Rotch were brought on the carpet and required to show cause why they should not be deposed from the Eldership. Exemplary punishment of two of the foremost New Lights would surely quiet the threatening tempest and restore peace to the meeting. But the Old Lights reckoned without the familial loyalty of the Rotch-Rodman clan. Elizabeth Rodman and Mary Rotch were both daughters of William Rotch, formerly of Nantucket, the greatest entrepreneur of the whaling industry. Now nearly ninety, the old patriarch lived in his great mansion at the corner of Union and Second Streets and still came to meeting, the perfect figure of the antique Quaker, dressed in his “drab beaver, drab suit, the long coat and waistcoat, knee-breeches with silver buckles, and shoes also with silver buckles.” He regularly sat at the head of the meeting, but took little active part in the controversy, leaving that to his descendants, who were legion. (He “must have been Father Abraham himself,” said Emerson, “for every quaker body is his cousin.”)<sup>23</sup>

Elizabeth Rodman was a woman of sixty-five years, the wife

<sup>22</sup> MS account; *Diary of Samuel Rodman*, 22-23; *Life in New Bedford*, 15-16, 19.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Ricketson, *New Bedford of the Past* (Boston and New York, 1903), 6; *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Ralph L. Rusk (New York, 1939), III, 131.

of Samuel Rodman, Senior, a former Clerk of New Bedford Monthly Meeting and of New England Yearly Meeting. Thoreau's friend Daniel Ricketson described her as "a woman of superior ability and marked benevolence . . . beloved and respected by all who knew her." She was the mother of Samuel, Junior, and Benjamin, the two young men who had sprung to Mary Newhall's defense at the time of the first clash in the meetinghouse. Two of the most prominent New Lights, Andrew Robeson and Charles W. Morgan, both whaling merchants, were her sons-in-law; another, James Arnold, also a whaling merchant (later the founder of the Arnold Arboretum), was married to her niece; Micah Ruggles, who had first raised the standard of revolt in New Bedford, was about to join the family by marrying her daughter Lydia.<sup>24</sup>

Mary Rotch, nearly twenty years younger than her sister, was unmarried, but to everyone, whether related by blood or not, she was "Aunt Mary." She had a remarkable capacity for inspiring affection and respect. A woman of "large and majestic" figure and vigorous independence of mind, but withal of "perfect simplicity and kindliness," she had, according to one contemporary, "so much dignity and strength in her character and bearing that it was impossible for anyone to speak of her lightly." Margaret Fuller, who knew her well in later years, described the source of her spiritual strength in these admiring words: "No rapture, no subtle process, no slow fermentation in the unknown depths, but a rill struck out from the rock, clear and cool in all its course, the still, small voice." And Emerson, who also revered her, observed that "if she had said yea and the whole world had thundered in her ear nay, she would still have said yea."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Ricketson, *New Bedford of the Past*, 153. The ramifications of this luxuriant family tree are traced in John M. Bullard, *The Rotches*.

<sup>25</sup> *Autobiography and Letters of Orville Dewey, D.D.*, edited by Mary E. Dewey (Boston, 1883), 67-68; Bullard, *The Rotches*, 38; Murray Gardner Hill, "'A Rill Struck Out from the Rock': Mary Rotch of New Bedford," *Bulletin of Friends Historical Association*, XLV (1956), 8-23; R. W. Emerson, W. H. Channing, and J. F. Clarke, editors, *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli* (Boston, 1852), I, 320; W. Hale White, "What Mr. Emerson Owed to Bedfordshire," *Athenæum*, No. 2846 (1882), 602-603.

It was against these two women, formidable both by reason of their qualities of character and their large body of loyal supporters, that the Old Lights chose to make their trial of strength. But it was to be months before they could even persuade the Select Meeting to unite in a complaint against the two women, so powerful was their influence. Meanwhile, new tensions developed over the role of the Elders and Overseers, and two new ministers came to New Bedford from outside to keep the Quaker community in turmoil.

In the April Monthly Meeting Benjamin Rodman rose and pronounced a philippic on the Select Meeting; in particular he castigated the Old Lights for attempting to discredit Mary Newhall and for spreading libelous reports about those who did not agree with them. At the next Preparative Meeting the Overseers lodged a formal complaint against him for reflecting on the Elders. This, protested Charles W. Morgan, was "an attempt to control the freedom of expression in our meetings which was worthy to be compared with the bigotry of the dark ages and the spirit of priestcraft." The complaint was dropped for the time being, but Job Otis, who had emerged as the Old Lights' field general, proposed that a minute be made of it to keep the matter alive. To which Samuel Rodman replied tartly: "There is no danger of its dying while thou livest, Job!"

Hardly a business meeting passed in 1823 without a collision between the Old and New Lights. Two girls were "brought under dealings" in the Women's Meeting on account of their "dress and address"—specifically for wearing gay attire and "frequenting places of public amusement." When their transgressions were brought before the Men's Meeting, one of the Old Lights promptly agreed with the women's recommendation that they be disowned. He was rebuked by a New Light for giving his judgment without hearing the details of the case, whereupon Job Otis remarked that they "might judge from feeling without inquiring the particulars." The girls were disowned. When a young man, impatient with Old-Light strictness, tried to resign his membership, he

was informed by Job Otis that he had no right to withdraw voluntarily: he could not so easily cheat the meeting of its privilege of disowning him! And so it went throughout that troubled summer and autumn, the New Lights growing more and more rebellious against the traditional restraints of the "discipline," the Old Lights stubbornly determined to preserve the wall of separation between the meeting and the "world."<sup>26</sup>

If the business meetings were racked by dissension, the meetings for worship were hardly more peaceful. Hull Barton, a young man from Stanford, New York, came to town in June and preached in the meetinghouse. He admitted proudly that he had been disowned by his own meeting; nevertheless, he considered himself a true Quaker, divinely commissioned as a reformer "to hold up in greater perfection than it is displayed by any sect the purity [and] spirituality of the Gospel dispensation." In the language of the day Barton was a "come-outer"—a familiar early nineteenth-century type—but he could justify his position by the example of the seventeenth-century Seekers, from whose number many of the early Friends were recruited. "I consider," he wrote in a pamphlet published while he was in New Bedford, "that all religious practice is wrong in every case, wherein rules and excitements from without, instead of the principle of light and life in the heart, govern our conduct; and therefore I feel it a duty, to leave all outward societies. . . . I can take nothing as a rule to me, but the dictates of God's own Spirit to my mind individually."<sup>27</sup>

Even the New Lights admitted that they found young Barton's manner of preaching "loud and at times almost boisterous," but they recognized his sentiments as in unison with their own and welcomed him into their midst. The Old Lights tried to silence him, but he shouted them down and continued to hold forth with a stanchless flow of language. From New

<sup>26</sup> MS account; *Life in New Bedford*, 28, 31-32, 50, 55, 57.

<sup>27</sup> MS account; *Life in New Bedford*, 43; *An Exposition of Facts in a Letter to Stephen Gould, an Elder of the Society of Friends* (New Bedford, 1823), 23-24.

Bedford he sallied out to the neighboring meetings—to Rochester and Nantucket, to Portsmouth and Newport, Rhode Island—frequently accompanied by New Lights from New Bedford. At Nantucket he was forcibly ejected from the meetinghouse. At Portsmouth he was opposed by no less an antagonist than the redoubtable Moses Brown, who, however, failed to persuade his fellow Quakers to lay violent hands on the young man. On August 13 an anonymous Old-Light pamphlet was published in New Bedford, accusing Barton of “enthusiasm” and “Ranterism,” attacking him for coming to New Bedford “with the disposition of a demon, disturbing the order, peace, and harmony of our society; casting reproach, contempt and contumely upon the elders of our church, who have exercised an almost unbounded charity towards [him], branding them with the epithets of bigots, enthusiasts, and superstitionists. . . .”<sup>28</sup> Young Barton disappeared from New Bedford the very day the pamphlet appeared, but continued to preach in Quaker meetings elsewhere.<sup>29</sup>

The dust raised by this whirlwind had scarcely settled before the harassed Old Lights were confronted with another unwelcome and loquacious visitor, a wealthy and sharp-tongued young woman named Phebe Johnson, reported to have been disowned by her own meeting in New York. She chose to bear her testimony in a manner that was all too familiar—by preaching, uninvited, from the ministers’ gallery, but she compounded her offense by wearing a flaming scarlet

<sup>28</sup> MS account; *Life in New Bedford*, 43-46; *Diary of Samuel Rodman*, 24; *A Letter to Hull Barton, an Excommunicated Member from the Society of Friends; Now a New Light Preacher . . . By His Friend Notus Nimini* (n.p., 1823), 9-10 (Joseph Anthony attributed this pamphlet to Job Otis [*Life in New Bedford*, 52], though most bibliographers have identified “Notus Nimini” as George W. Ogden).

<sup>29</sup> Some years later, Micajah Collins of Lynn learned in Philadelphia that he had married one of his New-Light disciples, trusting to Providence to provide, since he was without purse or scrip. Asked how they intended to live, Barton replied, “On faith,” whereupon Micajah drily remarked that they would need “a few clams beside,” explaining that the first settlers of New England, after surviving the rigors of the first winter, had written to their friends across the sea that they had subsisted on “faith and a few clams.” *Memoir . . . of Benjamin Kite*, 148.

shawl.<sup>30</sup> Wearily the Old Lights protested: did not Phebe's presumption in taking the head of the meeting betray the same "desire of distinction" that she condemned in others? Stoutly the New Lights defended her: she had acted from conscience, and Andrew Robeson for his part "did not feel his mind disturbed by observing in what seats other Friends might be sitting; if they were satisfied themselves, it did not burthen him."

In November it was proposed in the Women's Meeting to write to New York, explaining that Phebe, having come to New Bedford without a certificate of good standing from her meeting, was disturbing Friends by taking the high seat and preaching unacceptable doctrines: it was therefore up to New York Meeting to discipline her. Immediately, a shrill, un-Quakerly pandemonium broke out on the women's side of the partition, as the New Lights rallied to scotch this move. Everyone spoke at once. Somebody said she believed the proposal was "in the spirit of Truth." "Those who dwell in the spirit of Truth," said Phebe calmly, "do not believe, they *know*"—and, as God was her witness, the charges against her were unfair. "Art thou come to be a ruler and judge over us?" demanded Elizabeth (Rodman) Rotch, Jr., an Old-Light maverick among the Rotches and Rodmans. One Friend gasped "Impudence!" and another shouted "I command thee to be still," but Phebe smiled and went on: "I have sent for my certificate, and I speak thus from the anticipation of its coming." To which Deborah Otis, Job's wife, responded with sarcasm: "Many things are anticipated that do not come." "All this time," reads the graphic manuscript account of the meeting, "folks were popping up and expressing their unity with the complaint, and their belief that they were endued with Divine ability to write it, Phebe preaching to them at every expression she could take hold of." At one point she remarked that "The Lord can do His own work." "Well, then," said Reliance Howland, "sit down and let Him do it!" The letter was finally sent.

<sup>30</sup> Hodgson, *Society of Friends*, 1, 85; *The Journals of Welcome Arnold Greene*, edited by Alice E. Smith (Madison, Wis., 1957), 212, 214.

Spurred on, no doubt, by the presence of a committee from Sandwich Quarterly Meeting, the Old Lights now renewed their attack on the opposition's most prominent leaders. The ministers and Elders decided in November to forward to the Monthly Meeting their recommendation that Mary Rotch and Elizabeth Rodman be removed from the station of Elder for having "so far given their support to certain persons who were disowned by Friends as to attend meetings appointed by them, and to manifest their unity in joining with them in vocal prayer." The final battle was joined.

It was to be fought through five successive Monthly Meetings, neither side giving or accepting quarter. The New Lights contended that the proposed action was not only contrary to the Discipline—Micah Ruggles could find no warrant for removing Elders except for "the habit of sleeping in meeting" and the two Elders in question were indubitably awake and alert; it was a patent attempt to purge the Select Meeting of New-Light sympathizers. They took the high ground that the real issue before the meeting was freedom of conscience and they quoted William Penn, Isaac Penington, and Robert Barclay to prove that that principle had been the rock on which the Society of Friends was founded. The Old Lights denied that they wished to abridge anyone's liberty but insisted that there was no principle more fully recognized in the Society than "the necessity of a watchful care over its members." They quoted passages from the Book of Discipline (and from Robert Barclay) to prove *their* point. It was the old dilemma of freedom versus order, and one of the Old Lights spoke truly when he observed that the two parties were not debating the same issue but "one [was] in favor of one thing and the other of a different thing."

As the controversy dragged on through the winter and into the spring, new, subsidiary issues cropped up, issues peculiar to the Quaker mode of conducting business and to the local circumstances of New Bedford Meeting. At one point Job Otis advised the Clerk to make a minute of unity with the

Select Meeting's recommendation in spite of the opposition. "In our meetings," he said, "things are not to be decided by numbers; Friends are to be understood as delivering their sentiments in submission to the meeting, and the Clerk must collect the sense of the meeting, having regard to the weight of character of those who speak." Otis was unquestionably correct in his description of Quaker business procedure, but it was a gratuitous insult to imply that the New Lights' judgment deserved to carry little weight. A member of the Quarterly-Meeting committee further incensed the New Lights by saying that, though he had attended meetings all over New England and New York, he "had never before been at one where he discovered so much activity on the part of those related by blood and affinity to the persons under notice." Again there was undoubtedly truth in what the Friend said, though the Rotches and Rodmans hotly riposted that their fundamental concern was not for their relatives but for the principles of their religious society. Isaac Stephenson, the English visitor, mildly observed that he thought some Friends "stamped their feelings too high" and recommended that they simply mention their views and then submit to the judgment of the meeting. To which Andrew Robeson responded that whether their feelings should be "stamped high or otherwise, he thought it would be right to stamp them as they really were."<sup>31</sup>

Feelings continued to be "stamped high," and unanimity was more remote than ever, when the Old Lights in March 1824 finally instructed the Clerk, over the protests of nineteen Friends, to make a minute signifying that the meeting was united in removing Mary Rotch and Elizabeth Rodman from the station of Elder. At the same meeting a complaint was introduced against Benjamin Rodman for attending meetings appointed by persons disowned and also for remaining in his seat when Deborah Otis had "appeared in supplication"—a

<sup>31</sup> All quotations in the above five paragraphs are from the MS account. There are parallel but less explicit accounts of the proceedings in the *Diary of Samuel Rodman*, 25-27, and *Life in New Bedford*, 64, 67, 70, 75, 81, 85.

sin precisely opposite to that for which his mother had been punished, but just as heinous.<sup>32</sup> A rash of disownments and resignations followed until virtually all the New Lights found themselves on the outside. From time to time during that summer and fall there were minor flurries of excitement in the meetings for worship and business, but the struggle over the right of Mary Rotch and Elizabeth Rodman to sit as Elders had been the crucial engagement. Having lost that battle, the New Lights had little heart for further exertions. By the end of 1824 even the echoes of the controversy had died away, and New Bedford meeting resumed its wonted quiet—smaller, weaker, but united at last.<sup>33</sup>

#### IV

At both Lynn and New Bedford the controversy had begun as a conflict over theological issues and ended as an irreconcilable difference over church polity. The Old Lights had won the latter contest by *force majeure*. The heretical doctrines of the New Lights had been stamped out, so far as the Quaker meetings were concerned, but the heretics had been turned loose to spread their ideas beyond the confines of the Society of Friends and thus to feed the growing movement of liberal religion in New England. It is important therefore to discover what those ideas were.

But first a curious paradox must be faced. The paradox is implicit in the very language which contemporaries used to describe the New Lights and their ideas. Benjamin Kite, an orthodox Friend of Philadelphia, called them “Unitarian fanatics,” and Stephen Gould, a conservative Elder of Newport, spoke in the same breath of their “deism” and “ranter-

<sup>32</sup> MS Minutes of New Bedford Monthly Meeting, 1808-1828, 278, 279, Moses Brown School.

<sup>33</sup> Like their counterparts at Lynn, some of the New Lights tried to maintain a separate existence; they met for a while in the disused Quaker meetinghouse on Spring Street and later at the Lyceum, but no permanent organization resulted. *Life in New Bedford*, 51; *Diary of Samuel Rodman*, 107-108; Ricketson, *New Bedford of the Past*, 153.

ism.”<sup>34</sup> If some of their views suggest the deism of Tom Paine or the Unitarianism of William Ellery Channing, the doings at Lynn and the fervid preaching of Hull Barton are reminiscent rather of the seventeenth-century Ranters or the more violent frontier revivalists. Such an amalgam of rationality and irrationality, of intellect and emotion, is hard to fit into the conventional categories by which we describe religious movements. Yet it was a characteristic development within the Quaker tradition, which from the beginning had combined the emotionalism of George Fox with the intellectualism of William Penn. One strain or the other had usually been dominant at a given period of history. Somehow for a brief moment in the 1820's the two elements were united again, though one could argue that emotion predominated at Lynn and reason at New Bedford.

The New Lights, according to Benjamin Kite, were not “united in any particular scheme or system of belief.”<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, there are few contemporary records of what they actually preached, and none of them left behind a comprehensive exposition of their teachings. Nevertheless, it is possible to collect from the writings of their opponents a kind of syllabus of their “errors” and, by checking these against a few scattered quotations from their sermons, to arrive at a fairly accurate notion of the trend of their thought.

The best starting-point is the excerpt from Mary Newhall's sermon of February 9, 1823 which caught Emerson's eye in the anonymous manuscript account of the New Bedford troubles. “As the stream does not rise higher than the fountain . . .,” she commenced. Now this was almost a direct quotation from Robert Barclay's *Apology for the True Christian Divinity* (1676), the *summa* of early Quaker theology.<sup>36</sup> It introduced the characteristic Quaker argument that the Light Within, not the Bible, was the final authority in religion, for

<sup>34</sup> Memoir . . . of Benjamin Kite, 146; Forbush, *Elias Hicks*, 208-209.

<sup>35</sup> Memoir . . . of Benjamin Kite, 141.

<sup>36</sup> Proposition III, section ii.

the Bible was only one expression of the Spirit constantly active in every human soul. Thus when the New Lights exalted the Light Within over its objective revelation in the Scriptures, they were reverting to the position of the primitive Friends, a position from which the more orthodox Quakers had, without realizing it, departed by attributing absolute authority to the revealed word of the Bible. Micah Ruggles made the most of this argument: "He with many others," he said, "had in reproach been called a New Light; he acknowledged no such name—he professed nothing new, he professed the same principle with George Fox, Robert Barclay, William Penn and the other founders of our society, and he thought all our difficulties might be traced to a departure from them." What Micah probably did not realize was that his own party, under the influence of eighteenth-century rationalism, had moved as far away from Fox and Barclay in one direction as the Old Lights, under the spell of eighteenth-century evangelicalism, had moved in the other. For there was undoubtedly some truth in Benjamin Kite's observation (if we look beneath the pejorative language) that "as the zeal of fanaticism burnt out, infidelity in many took its place. Their 'light within' had gone out in fallible Reason."<sup>37</sup>

As she continued, Mary Newhall broached another heresy, equally rooted in early Quaker thought—the notion of progress in revelation. She spoke of the Mosaic dispensation "in which the performance of certain rituals constituted the required religion," of the more spiritual dispensation of Christ, and of "the yet more spiritual and inward dispensation of the present day." There had been, in other words, a gradual refinement, a progressive purification of religion, starting with the primitive tribal cult of the early Hebrews, developing into the more spiritual religion of Jesus, and finally, in modern times, assuming an even purer, more elevated form, divorced from all outward observances, creeds, and doctrines. When Emerson was to hint at something like this in his *Divinity*

<sup>37</sup> MS account; *Memoir . . . of Benjamin Kite*, 147.

School Address, fifteen years later, it would be denounced as "the latest form of infidelity." And when Theodore Parker, still later, was to suggest the same line of thought in his sermon on "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity," he would raise another tempest of clerical vituperation. Yet this notion had been a commonplace among the early Quakers. Mary Newhall had to look no further than the writings of William Penn to find it in its classical Quaker form.<sup>38</sup>

From these two cardinal beliefs—the primacy and sufficiency of the Light Within and the new, spiritual dispensation in which men were freed from reliance on outward supports in religion—flowed all the other heresies of the New Lights. These can be quickly catalogued. Not only did they reject the Old-Light view that the Bible was a source of authority at least coequal with the Inner Light, but they treated the historical books of the Old Testament as pure allegory, not to be taken seriously as history. Some, for example, refused to believe "that the Almighty, consistent with His attributes, could ever have authorized the children of Israel to destroy the Canaanites."<sup>39</sup> They denied the existence of the Devil and the prospect of eternal rewards and punishments. Heaven and Hell, they insisted, were not localities on a cosmic map but states of mind to be experienced here on earth; thus they did away with "fear of the wrath to come" as a motive for righteousness and substituted for it the simple disinterested love of God. Mary Newhall for one carried her distrust of man-made creeds to the point of arguing that "belief is no virtue and unbelief no crime," and to this she added the corollary that "we are not bound to believe what we cannot understand."<sup>40</sup>

All these doctrines prepared the way for the crowning here-

<sup>38</sup> See *The Rise and Progress of the People Called Quakers* (1694) in *The Witness of William Penn*, edited by Frederick B. Tolles and E. Gordon Alderfer (New York, 1957), 7-19.

<sup>39</sup> Memoir . . . of Benjamin Kite, 141. Abraham Shackleton of Ballitore, Ireland, had been disowned by his meeting at the turn of the century for urging precisely this view. Jones, *Later Periods of Quakerism*, I, 293-296.

<sup>40</sup> Hodgson, *Society of Friends*, I, 73, 84; Isaac Stephenson to Hannah Stephenson, February 13, 1824.

sy: a denial of the full divinity of Jesus Christ and the efficacy of His vicarious atonement. According to John Wilbur of Hopkinton, Rhode Island, who visited New Bedford as a member of a Quarterly-Meeting investigating committee, the New Lights maintained that Jesus "was no more than a man, and, as a man, was made perfect through suffering." Isaac Stephenson, the visiting English Friend, had some close conversation with Joseph Rotch, Mary Rotch's nephew, from which he concluded that Rotch was a Unitarian; indeed Rotch "gave it as his opinion that half the Friends of our Society are so, but," Stephenson added charitably, "I don't believe it."<sup>41</sup> Whether Joseph Rotch was correct or not, it is a fact, and a significant one, that nearly all the disowned New Lights in New Bedford presently joined the Unitarian Church, over which the Reverend Orville Dewey, fresh from his service as assistant to William Ellery Channing at the Federal Street Church in Boston, had just been settled.<sup>42</sup>

Only two final observations remain to be made. When the "Great Separation," precipitated by the preaching of Elias Hicks, divided the Society of Friends in America into two distinct and antagonistic branches in 1827-1828, New England Yearly Meeting, almost alone among the major Quaker bodies, remained intact. The reason is clear: the separation had already taken place in two of its principal meetings, and the example of Lynn and New Bedford served as a warning to other meetings to close ranks in order to prevent further disintegration. And when Ralph Waldo Emerson came to New Bedford in 1834 to preach from Orville Dewey's pulpit, he found a peculiarly receptive audience. As the historian of New Bedford Unitarianism puts it: "It is doubtful if there was another

<sup>41</sup> *Journal of the Life of John Wilbur* (Providence, 1859), 46-47; Stephenson to Hannah Stephenson, February 13, 1824.

<sup>42</sup> A number of New Lights attended Dewey's ordination on December 17, 1823. During the service Benjamin Rodman in Quaker fashion "broke forth by way of thanksgiving for the increase and spread of what he called gospel light in the world." Hodgson, *Society of Friends*, I, 89. Samuel Rodman was apparently the only prominent New Light who did not become a Unitarian: he joined the Episcopal Church.

congregation in New England so well prepared to receive Emerson's message as this one was at that time, because of the large influx of liberal Friends. . . ." The same writer goes on to say: "The transcendentalism that Emerson was proclaiming was intellectualized Quakerism, pure and simple."<sup>43</sup> Though this formulation is undoubtedly oversimplified, it is true that Emerson became devoted to "Aunt Mary" Rotch and that her distinctive conception of the Inner Light was built into the structure of his thought.<sup>44</sup> But, what is of even more importance, the New-Light movement in the Society of Friends is yet another evidence of the yeasty working of religious liberalism in the mind of New England at the beginning of her Golden Day.

<sup>43</sup> E. Stanton Hodgkin, *One Hundred Years of Unitarianism in New Bedford* (New Bedford, 1924), 37.

<sup>44</sup> See Frederick B. Tolles, "Emerson and Quakerism," *American Literature*, x (1938), 157-164. Emerson had several other close friends among the former New Lights, especially James Arnold, Andrew Robeson, and Benjamin Rodman (at whose house he often stayed when he lectured in New Bedford). See *Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Rusk, Index, s.v., Arnold, Robeson, Rodman.