

*Elias Hicks, the Writer*

Elias Hicks was reluctant to publish a record of his life. In 1823, his close friend William Poole wrote to him, asking if he intended to leave a journal of his life and experiences for future generations. Hicks' initial response was negative. As a Quietest, he distrusted any and all prepared ministry. He felt that everything he did must be under the direct inspiration of the Inward Light, so as to address the immediate needs of the people he was with. What he said to people in Philadelphia one day was what God called him to do then and there. However well suited it was for that audience, he did not feel at liberty to repeat it to other people at another time.

In response to Poole, he wrote, "although I have made some notes of my journeys and of some things that have transpired in the course of my pilgrimage, yet I have doubts of latter times – whether there is a propriety and any real utility in so much written testimony, whether it does not tend to clog and shut up the avenue to better instruction, and whether what is revealed to one generation is as likely to be as profitable to a succeeding generation as to that to which it was particularly directed and opened. And therefore, to intrude that upon a succeeding generation that was particularly adapted and suited to the state of a previous one, may it not have a tendency to cause the succeeding generation to look back to the letter instead of keeping a single eye to the Spirit, which can only furnish us with knowledge and ability to make progress in reformation."

Prodded again by Poole, he expanded on this theme in a later letter: "Could I pen down something that might be useful to the present and succeeding generation, and then be obliterated, it might not be amiss. But as I am looking forward in the faith that greater and brighter things will be opened to a succeeding generation than I and the people in this generation can bear, this makes me unwilling to leave anything of my experience that might tend to hinder the reception of those new and advanced revelations."

In the end, however, his friends' pleadings won him over. In the last year of his life, he compiled a manuscript, titled *Some Account of the Life, Exercises, and Experience of Elias Hicks*, from various travel and home journals, and from copies of letters he had saved.

At that time, the Society of Friends required that all such manuscripts be reviewed and approved by the yearly meeting's Meeting for Sufferings before publication. Although I have found no specific documentation that Hicks submitted his manuscript for their inspection and oversight, it seems unlikely that he would fail to observe "the good order of Friends." As a result, following his death, control of Elias Hicks' public image would have passed to the leadership of the Hicksite Yearly Meeting in New York.

The book published as the *Journal of the Life and Religious Labors of Elias Hicks* in 1832 differs greatly from what Hicks himself had written. Thousands of changes were made, ranging from individual words to the elimination of an entire trip through the eastern shore of Maryland and Delaware. Some of these edits seem to have been motivated by the ongoing conflicts between Hicksite and Orthodox Quakers. The wounds of separation were still raw. Numerous meetings at all levels were contending with wholesale disownments and disputes over ownership of records and property. Mindful of this situation, the committee charged with oversight of the manuscript seems to have carefully expunged material they judged would prove embarrassing or provide their Orthodox opponents with ammunition in the ongoing skirmishes. In particular, dreams and visions, most personal reflections and statements of religious belief, and even positive references to former companions who were now in the Orthodox camp were removed.

Other passages were removed or modified in the interest of shortening the work to a more manageable length, but the committee seems to have felt that some words or phrases were inappropriate. For example, "tarry" is frequently changed to "remain," and where Hicks had written, "we arrived in the edge of the evening," they substituted, "we arrived in the evening." The result was a book that is, for the most part, a dull compendium of travel notes. It conveys in detail where Hicks went, who he stayed with, and the lengths of his journeys, but only hints at what he thought or said, and fails to give voice to the spirit of the man.

Several volumes of sermons (taken down in shorthand and edited by others) and a collection of his letters were also published at this time. There is, of course, no way to judge the accuracy of the sermon transcripts, but the original manuscripts of most of the letters selected for publication are available in the Friends Historical Library at Swarthmore College. Comparison of the originals to the published versions shows that they have been subject to similar emendation.

None of these volumes remained in print for long and the myth of Elias Hicks has overgrown the reality of the man. In the nearly two centuries since his death, there have been two major biographies. The first, *The Life and Labors of Elias Hicks* by Henry W. Wilbur, was published in 1910. Depending almost entirely on printed sources, to a great degree it reflects the views of the Hicksite editors of the 1830s. The second, by Bliss Forbush, was published in 1955. Forbush had access to many of the original manuscripts for the letters and the memoirs, and the result is a better representation of the man, but an underlying bias is revealed in the title, *Elias Hicks: Quaker Liberal*. As you will see below, characterizing Hicks

as a liberal fails to do justice to this complex man. All of these books are now out-of-print.

*The Essential Biography*

Elias Hicks' mother died when he was about eleven years old. His father seems to have been overwhelmed by the burden of raising six sons alone and soon afterward sent young Elias to live with an older brother. Growing up with inadequate adult supervision and minimal formal education, Hicks ran with a rough crowd of older boys, but a religious crisis in his late teens turned his life around. In 1771, he married Jemima Seaman, and through that marriage, claimed his membership among Friends. It is difficult to imagine that he could have engaged in his life of ministry without her love and support. They had eleven children together, but only four would survive them. Of their daughters, one died as an infant, one at about two years of age, and a third at twenty, while giving birth to their first grandchild. All four sons were to die as teens from a devastating, wasting disease. There are few outward signs of the grief Jemima and Elias bore from these deaths. Jemima died on March 17, 1829 and was buried on her husband's eighty-first birthday. Elias survived for just less than a year, following her on February 27, 1830.

