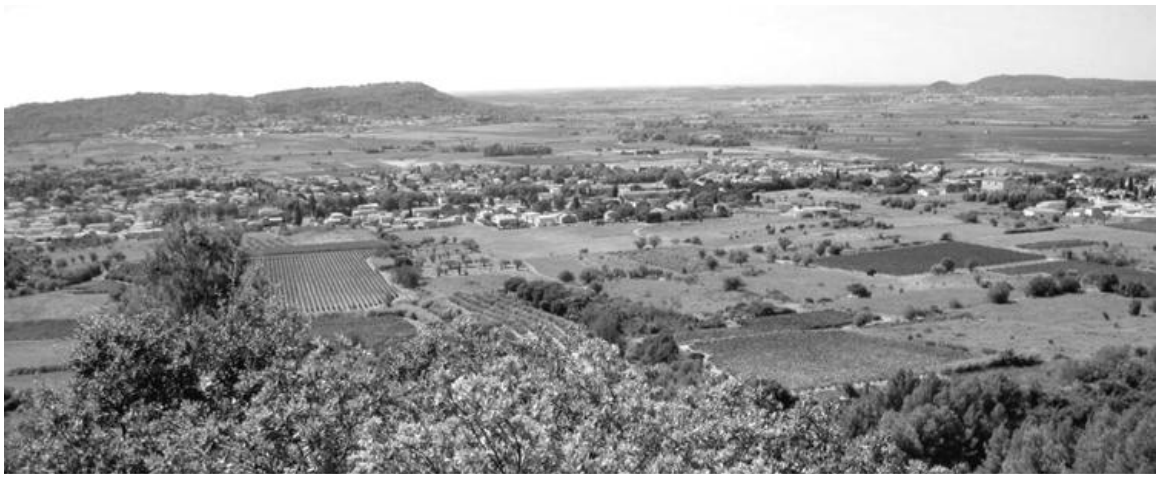

A Journey through Space and Time to the Quakers of France

Judy Pocock

We travelled in the print of olden wars;
Yet all the land was green;
And love we found, and peace,
Where fire and war had been.
They pass and smile, the children of the sword—
No more the sword they wield;
An O, how deep the corn
Along the battle field!

By Robert Louis Stevenson writing as W.P. Bannatyne,
epigraph to *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes*, 1879.

Introduction

As I travelled on the high speed train south from Paris, I really had no idea the world I was entering. If I had, I would have looked more closely and found memories and words to capture the feeling. I do remember speeding near and sometimes through craggy untamed mountains and stretches of green fields. I was on my way to visit the Quakers of Congénies in the south of France. I had learned about this small Quaker group from a fellow student in my internet Quaker Studies course, and I was on my way to visit him and his Meeting.

To me, the south of France was more of an exotic legend than a reality. Two Euros got me on the local bus from Nimes and, as it wound south from one tiny medieval village to the next, I hung on to my suitcase

worried that I really didn't have a clue if I was going in the right direction to the right place. Finally the driver, nodding, pointed to the door and, dragging my suitcase, out I dropped. Watching the bus pull away, I found myself on a crocked uneven road lined by walls of ancient houses. The street was empty, the little shop closed up tight, and the windows shuttered. As I stood on the street I was completely alone—no people, no cars, and no bikes— in a silence broken only by the sounds of birds. The houses, all shuttered and silent, seemed unlived in. The air was heavy with heat, moisture, and exotic smells. The sun was beating down and the sky was the most beautiful blue I had ever seen. Which way to turn and where to go? Truly dazed and confused and beginning to panic, I finally looked up and saw a sign on the corner of an old stone house, *Avenue des Quakers,* and struggling up and down the steep coble stone street, I arrived at number eleven, my destination.

High walls enclosed a tiny graveyard, a sprawling garden, and a Meeting House--making up The Quaker Centre of Congénies. I was welcomed into the Meeting House, built in 1822, by the Resident Friends and settled into an upstairs bedroom, kept cool by thick walls and the requisite shutters. Off they went for their mid-afternoon nap and I was left alone to explore. Wearing my lightest clothes, I ventured into the sauna-like outside world and explored the walled compound—the little graveyard with its warn stones bereft of names in the old Quaker tradition, the garden full of colourful flowers--all dominated by the large simple meeting house. The streets beyond the wall were still empty and the houses closed up and as I wandered I felt like I had stepped back in time with nothing but the odd parked car to remind me of the twenty-first century.

Where did these Quakers come from?

French Quakers seem like an oxymoron. France, nominally secular yet steeped in its Catholic history, seemed a strange place to find a group of Quakers, especially in the hedonistic South. Where did they come from and how long had they been in this Mediterranean valley bordered by the mountains of the Cevennes? What I had learned of their story from my fellow student and internet friend Denis was intriguing. During the American Revolution (1775-83), France and England, always at each other's throats, found themselves on different sides once again. French aid for

the American rebels provided the perfect pretext for Britain to declare open season on French ships travelling back and forth across the Atlantic. British ships were encouraged to attack and loot the French ships they encountered on the high seas with impunity. The owners of three ships took advantage of the policy, armed their trading ships, and plundered any French ship they came across amassing a huge fortune in the process. One of the owners of the ships, a Quaker Joseph Fox,[1] was appalled when he discovered what his partners had done. As an objector to both war and theft, Fox first tried to stop his partners' piracy, and when he was unable to accomplish that, he determined to make whatever amends he could. In 1785 he placed the following full page ad in the official *Gazette de France* and sent his son to Paris.

> Paris, Feb.24. The principles of peace and quietness which characterize the Society of Quakers forbid them from taking any part in wars, and does not even suffer them to partake of any profits which may arise from such a source. One of these peaceable people was inevitably concerned in some privateers, which his partners would fit out during the late war, notwithstanding all his remonstrances and opposition, and having received his share of the profits, has sent his son to this city to endeavour to find out the owners of the vessels taken […] and restore to them the part he has received of those prizes, for which purpose he has published the names of all the vessels taken by the privateers fitted out by his father's house, and desires the owners or their agents to apply to Dr. Edward Long Fox, Hotel d'Yorek, Rue Jacob, a Paris.[2]

The notice caught the imagination of many in France. Piracy was such an integral part of the culture of sea, war, and empire that the idea of an individual foregoing the spoils of war and volunteering to compensate an "enemy" for the damage done was a novelty worth gossiping about. So, not only the French ship owners directly involved responded to the news, but the story spread, including into the Southern area of Languedoc.

A community of religious like minds who called themselves Les Couflaires had existed in and around the village of Congénies since at least the late 17th Century. When members of the group heard about the ad and the pacifist Quakers they immediately became curious. They too were pacifists, and soon they found about other similarities between themselves and the Quakers. Like the Quakers they did not have professional paid ministers and meet in unprogramed worship, quietly waiting direct inspiration from God. They too believed that God dwelt within each individual and communicated directly without the need of ministers, creeds, or books to facilitate communication. Feeling that they had stumbled on a group with which they had much in common, five of the Couflaires were designated by their community to contact Fox and learn more about the Quakers. Letters were written but war intervened once again and when the Congénies community heard nothing back

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1 No relation to George Fox, a founder of the Society of Friends.

2 Charles Taylor, "Appendix: The Quakers of Congéniès" in *The Camisards* (London: Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1893), 442-43.

they set out for London to meet these like-minded strangers. Experience confirmed the affinity between the Couflaires and the Quakers, and in 1788 the first Quaker Meeting in France was established at Congéneis and, through the ups and downs of the last 230 years, exists there today.[3]

But where did these French Quakers come from? Were they influenced by a travelling Quaker missionary—after all early English Quakers did send missionaries all over the world carrying their message? Or did this little group spontaneously develop a theology so close to British Friends that on first contact they recognized their soul mates in every sense of the word? What forces shaped these Quakers and from what milieu did they spring? Were they part of a larger movement like their English compatriots, or were they unique, developing in isolation?

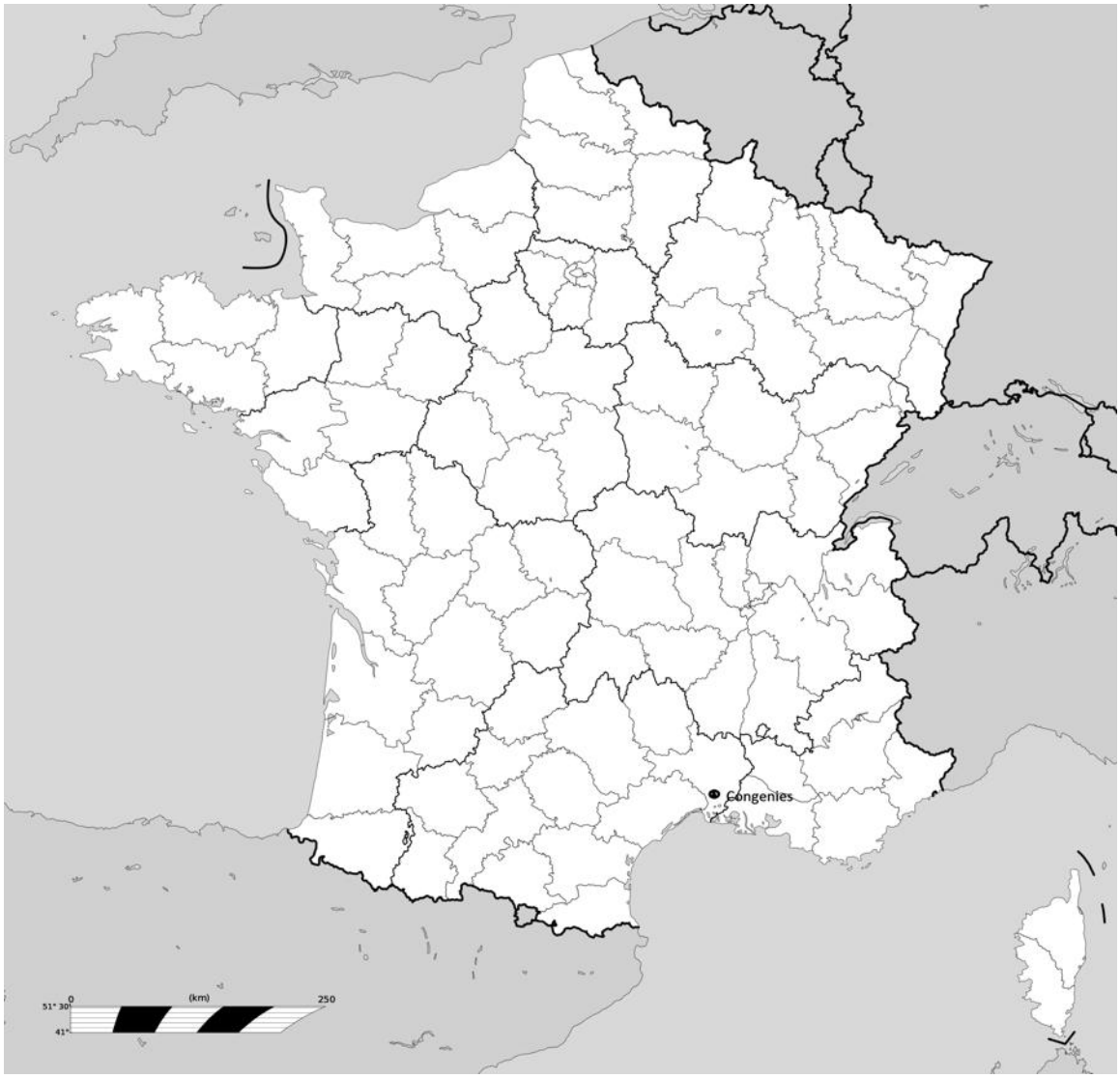
The Bigger Picture: Dark Times in the Larger World

These questions sent me on another journey—a journey to understand the essence of the world that I was entering and the Quaker presence in that world. Too often we spin narratives we call history, in isolation. Without context, without taken into consideration the forces at play surrounding and shaping the Quaker experience, I could never begin to understand it. Context may not be everything in creating history, but, without taking context into consideration, history can just become stories.

My model is historian Christopher Hill who captured the early English Quaker story by insisting on placing it in the midst of the chaotic English Revolution. If English Quakers emerged in the midst of what Hill called the world turned upside down, then French Quakers emerged in a world turned topsy turvy. In the sixteenth, seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Europe was rocked by crises—in religion, politics, the economy, and social relations. The world of Couflaires and their ancestors was ravaged by war, famine, social disruption, and disease, as fragmented feudal regimes painfully coalesced into nation states. Historians Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell, describe the period as one "characterised by apocalyptic expectations, eschatological speculations and millenarian dreams."[4] Suddenly, with Luther's points nailed on the

[3] "Quakers and the non-conformist tradition in the south of France," *Centre Quaker de Congénies: Quakers in France,* http://www.maison-quaker-congenies.org/origins-of-maison-quaker (Accessed 10 July 2017).

[4] Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Religion, War, Famine and Death in Reformation Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000),1.



church door, a new template for looking at the world began to infiltrate and then sweep across Europe and France was no exception. Although Luther had a following it was Calvin and his social experiment in Geneva who caught the imagination of the French looking for an alternative to the established Catholic Church.

It is important to note that we enter a period where there is a complete conflation

of politics and religion.[5] Traitors were heretics, and heretics were traitors. The Catholic hierarchy and monarchy spoke with the same voice and in spite of differences, and there were many, some ruthless, it was within the framework of one world view. The popularity of a new reformed Christianity not only threatened the Catholic Church theologically, but threatened the very basis of the social and political power.

At first a few intellectuals were attracted to the new religion, but soon Calvin's ideas spread far and wide. Initially Protestants met in secret but in 1559 the first Protestant Reformed Church was established in Paris and people, even members of the court, flocked to hear revolutionary sermons. The Calvinists, who soon became known by the name Huguenots, discovered Théodore de Bèze's French vernacular translation of the Psalms, and enthusiastic singing of these Psalms spread like wildfire.[6] Some historians contend that almost half of French nobility drifted to the new faith and converts also came from the bourgeoisie, artisans, and peasants. But it was in the South that the new faith rooted and thrived, especially in Languedoc and the mountains of the Cevennes. According to historian Brian E. Strayer, a "'Protestantization of the peasantry' [in the South] made these farmers and shepherds some of the most zealous defenders of Calvinism, as Europe would witness."[7]

The Huguenots even gained influence in court. Power of a precarious sort was in the hands of the King's regent, the Queen Mother Catherine de' Medici. An Italian outsider, Catherine was a Catholic of the modern Machiavellian type, and for her, protecting power and stability for her dynasty trumped religion. She appears to have no particular aversion to these new Christians, even seeing them as an interesting counter balance to the powerful Catholic Church and its allies, including the ruthless Guise family. However, as the Protestants grew stronger and bolder, the attacks against them became more strident. Calvinism was denounced as a "monstrous Heresy, arisen to ruin the world' with 'blood and flames'[…T]his new Babylon' was the 'origin of all evils' in France."[8] And when the full Catholic counter attack was launched it was devastating.

France fell into more than thirty years of perpetual war. Between 1562 and 1598 France saw nine wars of religion, most lasting for one to two years, each one ended by a treaty that occasionally improved the lot of the Calvinists. Strayer estimates that

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5 In understanding the force of religion in this period, I have found it useful to look at my own time and remember the words we used to express our hopes and dreams and wonder if sixteenth-century "millenarian dreams" and "apocalyptic expectations" stemmed from those same hopes and dreams. Literary scholar Northrop Fry argues that the biblical belief that history has meaning leading to a trauma filled struggle that ends with the birth of a new perfect world "is essentially a revolutionary form of thought and rhetoric" which enters secular thought with revolutionary movements in the eighteenth century (82-3). He argues that "For Marxists and other revolutionaries, a worldwide revolution is the central future event [like the apocalypse] that will constitute the antitype of history as a whole" (86). Frye's insights helped me understand how so many brilliant minds could firmly believe that the Apocalypse and the return of Jesus was around the corner and contemplate how so many of my generation, the sixties idealist, believed we were on the cusp of a revolution that would transform our twentieth-century world.

6 R.J. Knecht. *The French wars of religion, 1559-1598*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 2010), 13.

7 Brian E. Strayer, *Huguenots and Camisards as Aliens in France, 1598-1789: The Struggle for Religious Toleration* (Lewiston, N.Y.: E. Mellen Press, 2001), 8.

8 Strayer, *Huguenots and Camisards,* 14.

over one million Catholics and Calvinists were killed, and 300 towns flattened. Churches and Protestant Temples were destroyed, fields burned, pastors (and priests) assassinated, and children taken from their parents and forced into convents and Catholic schools.[9] Thousands left if they could, others were forced to convert, and still others were executed, burned, or broken on the wheel. Women who refused to convert were imprisoned and men were sentenced to life in the galley slave ships. In spite of the repression and almost perpetual war, many Huguenots continued to meet, reject the Latin mass, and lustily sing their Psalms in vernacular French.

This thirty years of war is best known for the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, a night and a day of terror which ended in the mass murder of between two and four thousand people, the looting and destruction of Protestant homes, and elimination of a generation of Protestant leadership.[10] De'Medici's scheme to smooth over differences with the old method, dynastic marriage, (marrying her Catholic daughter to the Protestant King Henry of Navarre) collapsed in a sea of blood and the wars became even more intense and ruthless. The war continued to a bloody draw, while the Protestant leader, Henry of Navarre, realizing that his military victories were not enough to ensure power, did the practical thing: commenting that "Paris is worth a Mass,"[11] converted, and was then crowned Henry IV of France.[12] The carnage officially ended with the Edict of Nantes in 1598.

This Edict was once considered an end to the French Wars of Religion, but historians now agree there was really a continuation of this war under a different guise. a cold (and sometimes warm) war replaced the raging hot war. The 1598 agreement, while granting Protestants many concessions, was often framed in ambiguous legal language. However, in spite of their minority position and the intensity of attempts to annihilate them, in 1598, the Huguenots emerged from the wars with "a formidable power bloc in France with its own structure, methods of military conscription, special passwords and codes, war treasury, and fortified towns."[13] In 1594 the Huguenots in the South were strong enough to form a state within a state, with a federation of nine provinces. With the 1598 Edict, Protestants won the right to have an independent existence, and the right to worship in 951 places (none in Paris or Cathedral towns). The Calvinists could now theoretically attend any schools, hold State office, entry all professions, and have access to bipartisan legal tribunals. These rights were framed by ambiguous legal language that was constantly challenged by the Catholic Parties and in many places these rights were only briefly honoured if honoured at all. In some places Protestants enjoyed their new freedoms for limited periods of time; in others the executions and imprisonment continued, either by a particular reading of the law or vigilante "justice." This so-called peace treaty lasted until 1685, but during the chaos of the entire period Protestants engaged in an ongoing struggle to hang on to or gain the rights they were thought to have won.

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9 Strayer, *Huguenots and Camisards,* 57.

10 Knecht, *French Wars,* 50.

11 Knecht, *French Wars,* 53.

12 Henri of Navarre, a consummate pragmatist, changed his religion six times in his life (Strayer, *Huguenots and Camisards,* 24).

13 Strayer, *Huguenots and Camisards,* 11.

Given the state of political power in France, it was no surprise that this was such a chaotic and contradictory time. Europe was riven by wars and intrigues as nation states emerged and the once hegemonic universal Christian Church painfully splintered. The court and government was split between bellicose Catholic factions and Protestants supported by pragmatic "friends." During periods of foreign involvement, when the King needed support from all his Protestant citizens and their friends abroad, there were periods of toleration. When the King needed money, the wealthy Catholic establishment would offer help under conditions that once again limited toleration. The chaos of the time is revealed by the nineteen assassination attempts on Henri IV's life, and the final successful one carried out by a Catholic conspiracy in 1610.

The Edict of Nantes had been reluctantly accepted by the majority under the assumption that assimilation of the Protestants into the majority Catholic Community would gradually but inevitably occur. This "peace" continued for over a hundred years and in spite of difficult times, the Huguenot community survived. Although thousands emigrated after the St. Bartholomew massacre and countless others followed Henry IV and converted, the community continued to grow, especially in the South. But a new King embraced a new approach. Asserting that "the king, my grandfather [Henri IV] loved you and didn't fear you; the king, my father [Louis XIII], feared you and didn't love you; me, I neither fear you nor love you,"[14] Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes and launched a viscous attack on the very existence of Calvinism in France. Pastors were expelled and executed if they remained behind. Believers were imprisoned or faced life as galley slaves. Temples were destroyed and the Protestant assemblies and the singing of the Psalms banned. By decree, Protestants disappeared in France to be replaced by New Catholics who were forced to choose conversion or death. Children were seized from parents and placed in Catholic Schools and convents. Babies, born of Protestant parents, and thus deemed illegitimate, were seized, baptized, and placed in orphanages. "New Catholics" did not dare miss a mass or be caught not venerating the Host as it was paraded through the town. Bodies of those who had refused the Last Rites were stripped naked and dragged through the streets. These mass "conversions" were reinforced by occupying troops, often billeted in the homes of the "new Catholics" and an army of missionaries spread across France. A Jesuit commented that the King's "'kind violence' had

14 Strayer, *Huguenots and Camisards,* 103.

'exterminated from France a dangerous Party' and brought 1,000,000 'precious pearls' into the true church."[15] With all the familiar tropes of othering and genocide, the Calvinists were seen as "as alien and as insidious as the Jewish microbe."[16]

The Lense Focuses: The South's 'Church in the Desert'[17]

In spite of repression, imprisonment, torture, kidnapping, and murder, Protestant Christianity did not disappear from France. In spite of the havoc let loose by the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, the Calvinist community in the South continued to grow. But this community was very different from its antecedents. Stripped of their pastors, books, and temples and abandoned by their wealthy and more educated elites, the future of the Protestants of France fell into the hands of, according to an historian, the "ignorant peasants and artisans who remained behind in "Babylon."[18]

These peasants, shepherds, and small artisans of the South were forced to re-invent their Church in order to survive. Primarily illiterate with their own language of Occitan, with no pastors or church organization to lead and guide them, and no contact with the outside world, these "simple" people took their future into their own hands and rebuilt their illegal underground church from scratch. A letter, by one of the banished pastors circulated in 1685, eloquently sums up the obstacles and challenges facing these pioneers:

> when people see its temples and alters demolished, it infants snatched from their mother's arms, its goods plundered, its liberty violated; when it sees itself without sacraments, dying without consolation; when it sees its compatriots… threatened with death, massacre, pillage; when it finds itself imprisoned within its own realm… All this… Sets the mind afire.[19]

And with their "minds afire," they built a very different kind of church. This *Church in the Desert*, as it became known, moved into the home and out to the rugged wilderness of the Cevennes mountains. With no official ministers, all became ministers; with no buildings to meet in, hundreds assembled in protected mountain valleys; with no educated teachers to pass on the creed, the home became the center for religious education and women became the teachers; with no official religious or political leadership, the people took up this task and organized; and without Bibles, books, or literacy, ordinary men, women, and children became prophets who channeled the voice of God.

In the *Desert*, hidden away in mountains or isolated corners of the valleys, this organic and charismatic congregation built its church. First hundreds and then thousands would gather, under the nose of the state and its military power, and hold their sacred assemblies, where ordinary peasants became pastors and the voice of God echoed through mountains and valleys. In the 1680s a new phenomenon swept through the Cevennes and the valleys of

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15 Strayer, *Huguenots and Camisards,* 172.

16 Strayer, *Huguenots and Camisards,* 173.

17 The title adopted by the Southern Reformed Church (Calvinist) was a reference found in Genesis to the wandering of the Hebrews for forty years.

18 Strayer, *Huguenots and Camisards,* 204.

19 Strayer, *Huguenots and Camisards,* 184.

Languedoc: more and more people received the gift of prophecy. Generally the Prophets were young, often women, and many children. Falling into trances or waking from dreams they preached, in perfect French,[20] the word of God, the importance of fidelity to the truth of their Church, and the need to prepare for Jesus's coming return. Nineteenth-century century historian Charles Taylor, in recounting an interview with Durand Fage a witness to the prophetic meetings, describes the euphoria of those early days:

> The people ran to these meetings with the utmost eagerness. Sometimes, in the midst of his sermon, the preacher would send out some of his audience to raise a sonorous hymn which was echoed from the woods and rocks and served as a guide to such as were still seeking their way to the meeting. "As soon as we heard these divine psalmody," says Fage, "we flew to the spot; words cannot express the ardor which burns with in us; we thought not of weariness, we became as light of foot as young deer.[21]

The state's repression, kidnapping, and murder had its effect but never succeeded in wiping out the Church and in 1700 another wave of prophets began prophesying. Up until this time the *Church in the Desert* had always been resolutely non-violent, embracing tactics of passive resistance rather than active rebellion. But these Prophets had a new message. No longer willing to wait patiently for God to punish their oppressors and open up the way to God's world, these Prophets called for a "holy war against the clergy" and their prophetic visions "predicted the overthrow of the Catholic Church and the imminent end of the world and the re-establishment of God's persecuted Church."[22] Taking advantage of the wild mountainous terrain, a peasant army waged a guerrilla war against the power of the French state. This army, known as the Camisards, with its innate knowledge of the land, overwhelming support of the people, and the courage of their convictions, were able to carry out lightning attacks and then quickly retreat to caves in the mountains until their next ambush. W. Gregory Monahan captures the essence of the historic Camisard War (1701-4):

> Their rebellion was a bundle of contrasts: the last of the violent French wars of religion and an early example of guerrilla warfare; an apocalyptic rising against the Beast of Revelation and the struggle for liberty; a war of brutal intolerance and ritual murder and a fight for tolerance and freedom of worship.[23]

The Camisard guerilla war not only weakened the established political and

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20 The fact that the Prophets, who were all Occitan speaking, prophesized in French was seen as miraculous. My suspicion is that years of signing the Psalms in French must have created a familiarity with French even though their spoken language was Occitan.

21 Charles Taylor, *The Camisards: a Sequel to The Huguenots in the Seventeenth Century*, (London: Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1893), 68. Note: Includes an Appendix: *The Quakers of Congenies.* ATL Historical Monographs Collection: Series 1,13 Century to 1893.

22 Taylor, *The Camisards,* 297-8.

23 W. Gregory Monahan, *Let God Arise: The War and Rebellion of the Comisards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2.

religious structures but also further opened the way for women. While men fought, religion retreated into the household and women became important teachers expanding their roles through the agency of prophesy. This often reversed "traditional gender roles in the family creating an interesting if temporary matriarchal leadership, which they were reluctant to surrender once the rebellion had ended."[24]

The Camisards, led by their young prophets whose strategy emerged from their dreams and visions, would rise up from their hiding places in the mountain caves, strike blows against the powers of the state, and quickly disappear. Foreshadowing the guerilla wars of the twentieth century, this early "people's army" managed to wreak havoc on the French Army and their Catholic allies. However in 1704 this resistance was finally crushed leaving the "*Heroic Church in the Desert*" (1685-1760) on its own to face the ongoing repression of the state.

Once again all the familiar brutal methods of repression were let loose on the people, but this time one group was the particular focus of attention. The Church and the State held the women of the Cevenes and Lagudoc as particularly responsible for the rebellion. The strength with which children resisted conversion was blamed on mothers who taught their children the elements of their faith. With men away fighting, women led assemblies, preached sermons, and baptized babies.[25] Some even took up arms and fought against the dragoons who were billeted in their homes.[26] Seeing these "new women" as a particular threat, campaigns were waged to drive them back into their domestic role, and hundreds were imprisoned indefinitely in The Tower of Constance, a prison built specially for them. One woman, punished for marrying in the *Church in the Desert*, spent thirty eight years in the Tower emerging only when it finally closed in 1768. An estimated one million children were declared bastard, many losing their families and all losing the rights of citizenship and inheritance.

The full force of the army and their Catholic allies was not the only obstacle the charismatic egalitarian Church in the Desert faced. As the French became distracted by wars and crises, pastors and Calvinist theologians were able to filter back into Southern France with the task of re-asserting the conventional Reform Calvinist Church. The returning leadership denounced prophetism as fanaticism, women's leadership as dangerous, and the radical Camisard roots best forgotten.

And Finally, Back to the Quakers/ Coufleurs

Like many movements, the believers of the prophetic *Church in the Desert* may have suffered common grievances, but they did not all embrace the same path forward. There were some who eagerly joined in with the non-violent movement but rejected the call to armed struggle, the Camisard Wars. This group clung to the belief that "thou shalt not kill" was fundamental to true Christianity and refused to participate in the violence of the Camisard uprising. This was the group that became known as the Couflaires and later found a home with the Society of Friends.

But there must be more to the origins of the Couflaires, these French Quakers.

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[24] Monahan, *Let God Arise,* 3.
[25] Strayer, *Huguenots and Camisards*, 372.
[26] Monahan, *Let God Arise,* 89.

Their interchange with Fox proves their presence in 1785. I was sure there must be more to discover. Where did they come from and how did they fit into the complicated fabric of religion and peasant life in the Cevennes and its neighbouring villages? Looking for Quakers in the many books on France's Wars of Religion and the Camisards is like looking for a needle in a hay stack. Finally I found a reference to an appendix in a book called *The Camisards* by someone called Charles Taylor. This book, published in 1893, was hardly the product of modern scholarship, and Taylor, in the one reference I discovered in a scholarly book, was dismissed as a romantic.[27] But, Taylor was all I had so it was Taylor who I must use. Some internet digging revealed that Charles Taylor was a British Quaker historian who had written a number of books on France and its Huguenot minority.

As archaic as Taylor's style and research methods might be, he did have a significant advantage over contemporary historians. Although the story he was unearthing had its roots more than a hundred years earlier than his life in the 19th century, the Quakers of Congénies, had a rich oral tradition. Taylor appears to have spent a significant time exploring the area and talking to local Quakers, many of whom were descendants from the original "Couflaires." The stories they told him were often fragmentary and even contradictory, but all anchored their history in the Prophets of *the Church in the Heroic Desert*. They traced their tradition to the brilliant lawyer and author Claude Brousson, who was known for leading *the Church in the Deserts* wide-spread campaign of passive resistance. Vowing to "fight only with the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God,"[28] in 1793 Brousson along with a group of leading pastors of the desert church, launched a campaign of "concentrated and non-violent resistance"[29] to the regime. Peasants in Languedoc, Dauphine, and Vivarais responded to the destruction of 122 of their temples by occupying them and holding religious services in their ruins.[30] Brousson was forced to flee but returned clandestinely until he was finely captured in 1698 when he was brought to the scaffold, strangled, and broken on the wheel leaving behind a large collection of inspirational writings that circulated widely.[31]

With the failure of the non-violent campaign, the majority of people rejected the tactics of passive resistance and were no longer "convinced that the use of the sword is forbidden by the gospel."[32] According to Taylor, there were some who received Brousson's Declaration who were still convinced that "the use of the sword was forbidden by the gospel [and] were ready to make every sacrifice rather than take up arms for their religion or repel force by force."[33] How did this small group emerge and what gave them the courage to defy both the regimes violence and the practice of their fellow peasant Camisards?

The first Quaker origin story Taylor

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27 Strayer, *Huguenots and Camisards,* 305.

28 Brian E. Strayer, Andrews University, "The Bellicose Dove: Claude Reconsidered, 1647-68," 3. www.oakwood.edu/historyportal/Ejah/ASDAH/Claude Brousson Reconsidered.htm (Accessed 17 July 2017).

29 Strayer, *Huguenots and Camisards,* 190.

30 Strayer, *Huguenots and Camisards,* 135.

31 Strayer, *Huguenots and Camisards,* 396.

32 Charles Taylor, "Appendix: The Quakers of Congéniès," 431.

33 Charles Taylor, "Appendix: The Quakers of Congéniès," 431.

retells is one he collected from Emilien Frossard, a Nimes pastor. Claiming he received this story from local Quakers, Frossard traced Friends back to the action of one prophet:

> "[N]one of the prophetesses," he said, "attracted so much attention or enthusiasm as Lucrèce – the moral influence which she exercise was so powerful as to cause uneasiness to the leaders of the Church, and as she persisted in speaking in the public assemblies a positive order was sent to her to refrain. On receiving this command, Lucrèce rose up, and in an inspired tone exclaimed 'Let whoever loves me follow me.' Many hastened after her and filled her house, which from time to time became a place for religious meeting."[34]

Taylor's pastor is unclear about the issues that divided the Prophet Lucrèce and her followers from the church "leaders" but one can surmise the pacifism of the little band was part of the problem. However, more central to the group's expulsion may have been the prophet Lucrèce herself. It was in 1715 the established reform church returned and launched their campaign to bring the *desert church* back into line. The "fanaticism" of prophesizing was suppressed and women were banned from preaching. Taylor suggests that this incident may have been the result of a "crusade undertaken by Antoine Court, a leader of the Reformed Church who clandestinely returned to the Church in the Desert, against the 'Inspired,' and especially against women preachers."[35]

Taylor found another origin story in a Quaker manuscript compiled in 1786: "A summary Account of the Friends of Congénies, Calvisson, and St. Gilles, near Nimes, in Languedoc, called by the World Quakers or Fanatics." This account dates the founding of the Couflaires twenty years before the story of the Prophet Lucrèce:

> The first Friend[36] whom their records mention to have suffered persecution was Claude Craistan, who, having preached about a quarter of an hour in a meeting of Friends assembled in a field, was seized, and suffered himself to be taken like a lamb. He was condemned to be hanged for having preached (as his sentence expressed it) *by the inspiration of fanaticism*, [on the] 12th mo.15,1698.[37]

Another Friend, Kamaini, was also sentenced to be executed in that same year but was allowed to escape by sympathetic captors. According to Taylor, another young prophet was claimed by the Congénies Quakers as their ancestor, Daniel Raoul. Raoul is remembered as abandoning his plough and became a wandering preacher to bring his message to ordinary people. Acknowledging, as an illiterate labourer, that he did not have the skills of the banished pastors, he none the less served the desert church faithfully:

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34 Charles Taylor, "Appendix: The Quakers of Congéniès," 431.

35 Charles Taylor, "Appendix: The Quakers of Congéniès," 432.

36 Here Taylor refers to the Couflaires as Friends well before they would have discovered the Quakers. It is unclear when the Couflaires become Quakers. They themselves self-identify as Quakers as early as their 1785 letter to Fox but English Quakers seem to date their Quaker identification from the time they are official accepted as Friends by British Friends.

37 Charles Taylor, "Appendix: The Quakers of Congéniès," 432.

> You see before you one […] who cannot even read; but I am one of the stones spoken of in the Scriptures who cry out when those which would otherwise have aroused you from your slumber have been removed.[38]

In 1702 Daniel Raoul and three of his followers were captured and condemned: Raoul and one of his companions to death, and the others to the galleys or the army. By this time most of Raoul's comrades had embraced armed resistance to the church and state that oppressed them, but he faithfully up-held the Prophets traditional stance of non-violent resistance. While in prison, Raoul got news of the Camisard uprising and dictated a letter to his comrades, "a warning," according to Taylor, "so solemn, and set forth in such forcible language, that it may almost be compared to the handwriting which Belshazzar saw on the wall":[39]

> We know well, my dear brethren, the violence you have suffered in being forced to go to mass and to send your children to the School of error. We know how the soldiers hem you in, lie in wait for you, and pounce upon you like wolves on lambs when you meet in secret to worship God; […] We are sensible how hard it is […] to resist the violent motion of nature, which, in spite of ourselves, rising in the depths of our hearts […]. But remember that you are Christians […and] the word of God incessantly admonished and taught you that the crimes of your enemy are no justification of yours […].You have enjoined on the authority of St. Paul to cherish and love even towards your enemies. This is the true mark of the Christian charity is patient and gentle; it takes no offense, but suffers and endures everything. In your case, it is not permitted to oppose force by force [...]. Blind people! Have you forgotten that is never permitted to do evil that good may come?[…] Drive therefore to obtain the end not by the works of darkness which you are committing, but by the sanctity of a good life.[40]

Raoul not only articulated pacifism, a trait that would become a hallmark of the Couflaires of Congéneis, he also levelled his criticism at *both* the Catholic Church and the Calvinist Reformed Church:

> As the dove, is a cleanly and pure bird, so our church must be pure, true and free from all defilement; but this cannot be said of the Church of Rome, nor of the Church of Calvin, w[41]hich incessantly defile themselves with all kinds of vice, impurity and murder. They have honey on their tongue, but gall in their heart, and their savage hands are always ready to shed innocent blood.

This was not a church to be reformed, but one, like the Catholic Church to be denounced.

The charge levelled against Raoul reveals

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38 Taylor, *The Camisards*, 67.

39 Taylor, *The Camisards*, 110.

40 Taylor, *The Camisards,* 112. According to Taylor "The authority on which this letter is ascribed to Daniel Raoul is that of a manuscript document preserved by a small body of Christians, chiefly inhabiting the Vaunage, whom we may call the Quakers of Congénies."

41 Qtd. in Taylor, *The Camisards,* 113.

other ways that this preacher and prophet was a forerunner of the Congéneis Quakers: "the crime (…) for which Raoul was condemned was that of having instructed young people in fanatical practices, and having impiously boasted that God had shed his Holy Spirit in his heart."[42] This "indwelling Holy spirit" and the "fanatical practice" of prophesying mirror beliefs and practices of the early Quakers of both England and Congéneis.

Although the origins of French Friends is still mostly a mystery, we do have an account from Christine Majolier, a Congénies Friend only a generation removed from the earliest days:

> My father and mother's parents belonged to a sect which had sprung from the "Prophets." Less visionary than these, though holding some of their views, and more spiritually-minded than the Protestants who surrounded them, they had adopted principles as to the spirituality of the Christian dispensation, ministry, and worship, very similar to those of Friends, before they knew of the existence of such a religious body. They met in silence to worship God and waited for the influence of the Holy Spirit before they expressed anything in their assemblies; and they considered that as the gift of the ministry is freely received it should be freely exercised. Contrary to the practice of their forefathers, who had so desperately defended themselves against the armies of Louis XIV and XV, they held the unlawfulness of war.[43]

We can see the Quaker like origins of Les Couflaires not only in the prophets who inspired them but also in those who they inspired. The family name Benezet appears in the earliest records of the Congénies Friends. In 1715 Jean Etienne Benezet's fled religious persecution taking with him his two-year-old son, Antoine, eventually making it to London and then Philadelphia. Antoine, later known as Anthony, joined London Friends at fourteen and, with his family, immigrated to Philadelphia.[44] There Anthony Benezet became a towering figure in the anti-slavery struggle. Like his friend John Woolman, Benezet played a central role in the debate within the Quaker community but his thought and writings also had a profound effect on the world outside the Society of Friends. According to Brycchan Carey, Benezet was "an able natural philosopher, a knowledgeable geographer, and a balanced historian."[45] His *Observations on the inslaving, importing and purchasing of Negroes* (1759) became one of the most important documents of the abolitionist movement. According to Carey:

> this pamphlet was the opening shot in an international, ecumenical campaign against the slave trade. Although Benezet could not know it, that campaign would lead to the slave

42 Taylor, *The Camisards,* 113.

43 Christine Majolier Alsop [1805-1879], *Memorials of Christine Majolier Alsop (1805-1876)* "Her own Autobiography furnishes the record of her early life, and has been largely used. Letters, journals, and papers supply the rest." comp. by Martha Braithwaite (London, England: H. Longstreth, 1882), 4.

44 Taylor, "Appendix: The Quakers of Congéniès," 433-34.

45 Brycchan Carey, *From Peace to Freedom: Quaker Rhetoric and the Birth of American Antislavery, 1657-1761.* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 212.

> trade being outlawed across the Anglophone world by the start of the 19th century.[46]

The Quaker/Couflaires peasants of Congénies were the well spring of one of the most influential Quaker prophets and intellectuals to ever live.

In spite of the hardships that *the Church in the Desert* continued to face, they experienced a few years of benign neglect that gave both Calvinists and the Couflaires sect some breathing room. The concerns expressed by the authorities reveal their slipping control of the unruly Calvinists. The reports sent back to the Centre note an "alarming" consistence of the Protestant presence: "Everywhere meetings are being held; one hears Psalm singing, without any attempts at concealment, both in the open country and in the towns."[47] The Dauphiné's Intendant sent back the following report:

> The Protestants number a fourth part of the population. They are quiet, but very obstinate in their errors. They are called New Catholics, but nothing can induce them to perform a Catholic act. They refuse to send their children to us for instruction, and if all the relapsed were to be punished, no one would escape.[48]

And from the Bishop of Alais in 1723:

> The heresy has made during the last three years more progress than in 35 years before. The meetings which formally were few and secret have become frequent and so public and numerous that more than 3000 persons have been present […]. The churches are abandoned; parents have ceased to send their children to schools; and those whom we have with great care brought up in the doctrines of the church, … readily fall back into error.… The punishment of the fanatics has made but a feeble impression."[49]

And finally from the Secretary of State, St. Florentin, in 1724: "I am informed in some provinces the priests find themselves alone in their churches: the bell for mass on Sunday serves for the meetings of the religionists."[50]

This pause in the intensity of state repression must have been a bit of a relief for the Couflairés as well as the other members of the *Church in the Desert*; however this momentary space allowed for another obstacle to intensify. Already separated from their fellow Huguenots by their commitment to pacifism and opposition to the Camisard War, this pause allowed elements of the established Calvinist Reformed Church to once again exert their influence on the equalitarian and innovative *Desert Church*. Beginning in 1715, the Calvinist church bureaucracy was re-established, and the unorthodox egalitarian and prophetic tradition of the *Desert Church* was purged. Women were once again excluded from leadership and the "fanatical" practice of ordinary people preaching and prophesying condemned. The Couflaires, who held true to traditional practices, were further marginalized. The

46 Carey, *From Peace to Freedom,* 212.
47 Taylor, *The Camisards,* 261.
48 Qtd. in Taylor, *The Camisards,* 261.
49 Taylor, *The Camisards,* 262-3.
50 Taylor, *The Camisards,* 263.

brief window allowing a measure of religious freedom for the dissenting sects of Languedoc was soon slammed shut not to begin to open again until the eve of the French Revolution.

I found little about the French Quaker experience during this difficult period of the eighteenth century. Froussard, the source for the Lucrèce origin narrative, tells Taylor that after 1715 "the traditions leave a vacuum, and are silent […]. They only represent [this community] as acting in a unique and independent manner, forgotten by the crowd of enthusiasts, participating in their ill fortune, but probably without following all their practices."[51] However by speaking to some of the descendants of the original Couflaires prophets, Taylor was able to glean a bit more information about the early life of this group. He was taken to a "retreat" where [the Quakers] used to worship "from the earliest times":

> [I]t was a wine cellar of the Brun family, and was provided with a recess in the wall in which the Bibles and Psalters were concealed. Here the simple people were custom to sit in silent worship, waiting with bowed heads until the Holy Spirit should move any among them to preach or to pray. The attitude in which they sat was well known to their neighbours, who in derision gave the nickname of Conflairés.[52] He learned that the Conflairés long preserved the prophetic gift [of] their Camisard ancestors.[53]

As little as Taylor or other sources have to offer on the mid- to late-eighteenth-century Couflaires he does discuss one of them, Paul Codognon. Codognon compiled a book on the community, and set out for Holland with the hope of having it published. He failed in this goal but, while in Holland, he learned about the Quakers in Britain and North America. In 1769 he set out, mostly on foot, for London to find out more about these Quakers and attended the Friends meeting in St. Peter's Court, Westminster. However, hampered by what Taylor calls his "reserved temperament" and, as an Occitan speaker, his lack of knowledge of either French or English, significant contact with the English Quakers would have to wait.[54] However, he did return home with two of their books in French, *No Cross No Crown* and *Rise and Progress of the People Called Quakers*, "concealing them under his shirt."[55]

It was not until Fox's advertisement

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51 Taylor, "Appendix: The Quakers of Congéniès," 435.

52 Although Taylor contends that the term Couflairés had a derogatory connotation ["Patois for Gonfluers, that is to say, Pouters"(436)], Françoise Tomlin in her article, "Quakers—in France and the World," translated from the French by Sara MacVane, does not identify it as such but defines the term as "filled," inflated' or "sighing" in Occitan, the local dialect. Tomlin is a current member of the Quaker Meeting at Congénies and has deep roots is the area including a familiarity with the Occitan language so I tend to find Tomlin's definition more persuasive than Taylor's. However there is no question that these Friends faced marginalization and discrimination. In his 1787 letter James Ireland reports that "other Protestants despised the Friends, clapping their hands at them as they walked along the streets" (446).

53 Taylor, "Appendix: The Quakers of Congéniès," 436.

54 I was surprised that Taylor and the letters from Quaker visitors to Congénies did not mention that most of these Quakers were not French speakers. One wonders how much of the simplicity and low level of understanding these foreign Quakers sometimes saw in their new fellow believers might be influenced by the fact they often did not speak the same language.

55 Taylor, "Appendix: The Quakers of Congéniès," 435.

caught the eye of the Couflaires some seventeen years later that the precarious tie became consolidated and this isolated community who held so firmly to their particular beliefs found unlikely soul mates in the now well-established Quaker community in Britain. What a welcome shock it must have been to discover they were not alone and what a surprise for the British Quakers to discover a group who shared their beliefs but whose lives and culture were so different from their own.

Contact Is Made

One of the earliest reports from foreign Friends visiting the newly discovered Quakers found that "[t]heir behaviour in the religious meetings recalls the state of things at the time of the old prophets."[56] James Ireland writing home in 1787 describes the little community he encountered. He estimated there were about two hundred Friends living in in Congénies and the surrounding area as well as several scattered families in the lower Cevennes.[57] His letter goes on to add that their "meetings frequently lasted three hours […] they follow mechanical employment and husbandry. Few or none are of independent means… They hire substitutes when drawn for the militia […]. They pay the fines imposed for refusing to ornament their houses on holy days during the procession of the host. They are winked at rather than tolerated."[58]

What a strange experience it must have been for Friends from Britain and America to encounter these peasant working people. It must have felt a bit like travelling back to their origins during the heady but traumatic days of the seventeenth Century. Like the early Quakers of the 1640s, these Friends were filled with the charisma of the Holy Spirit as they upheld their prophetic tradition; like early Quakers they refused to give up their beliefs and practices in the face of terrible persecution; and again like early Quakers they were mostly ordinary working people, many of them illiterate, who dared to throw their lot in with a group of outsiders who embraced the heresy that ordinary women and men could be preachers with a direct relationship to the Holy Spirit. And like other Quakers, these French Friends were conscientious objectors, refusing to participate in the Army.

We can see from the response of eighteenth and then nineteenth century Friends who travelled to meet these new found Friends, that the excitement and joy of encountering these rough peasant Quakers was tempered by the distance these British Quakers had travelled from their own simple roots. In the few letters from the period I was able to find and Taylor's comments on the letters and reports he was able to view, the response of the "established" Quakers was warm but coupled with a note of unease. In 1788 seven Quakers, two from England, three from the United States, and another three from Ireland, made the long journey to Congénies to find out more about these new found Friends.

In a lively letter written by one of the visiting group, Irish Friend Sarah Grubb, captures the joy combined with what must have been an element of shock experienced by both sides:

Our arrival drew out of their

56 Taylor, "Appendix: The Quakers of Congéniès, 448.
57 Taylor found another manuscript contending there were 250-280 Friends mostly in Congénies.footnote 446.
58 Taylor, "Appendix: The Quakers of Congéniès, 446.

> habitations the people in general: some looked at us with astonishment, and others with continents which put me in mind of Mary's salutation to Elizabeth.[59] These soon acknowledged us, and drew us into the house of a steady, valuable, widow where we were solemnly saluted and received and our minds melted together, and such a stream of gospel love flowed as some of us thought exceeded what we had before experience, though no words were used to express it. […] Our Friends are, most of them, poor industrious people, but we were favoured with all that was needful, though these things that we call so are scarce […] Peace of mind sweetens every inconvenience. We found these people different from our Society in their outward appearance, and in their want of settlement and sufficient quietude in their religious assemblies. But the humility and simplicity of their meetings, attended with a lively consciousness of their own weakness, made them ready to embrace every offer to help that is suited to their capacity and progress in the Truth. There are a few of them […] who furnish a hope that there will be a Society in this dark part of the world, established upon the right foundation. We soon found that to be useful to them, the visitors must be weak with the visited, and in Christian condescension bear with them, till Truth opened the door of utterance to show them a more excellent way.[60]

Taylor cites an interview that took place with two of the same party that again revealed the excitement and joy:

> On the coach stopping at the country inn, a large number of people surrounded them, manifesting the utmost goodwill and satisfaction […]. The three ladies… were moved to tears by the affectionate reception they met with, and by a sense of the "love of the universal father to his children, where ever they may be." The French Friends understood no English […] but the expressive language of the heart and the eye went far to make up for the deficiency.[61]

However, unease and a note of "Christian condescension" creeps in again in this interview: "their appearance and manner bore little resemblance to those of the society in England, but their honest simplicity, consciousness of their defects, and tenderness of spirit, won their hearts. Their behaviour in religious meetings recalls the state of things at the time of the old prophets. At the meeting at Congénies … several were strangely agitated and spoke in quick succession" (448). However, the visitors took their eldering responsibilities seriously, reporting that "after a few meetings had been held, and pastoral visits paid to many of the houses, the agitation ceased, and the meetings became more settled."[62] I can't help thinking that George

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59 Luke 1:41. And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost.

60 Reprinted in "Friends in France," *Friends' Weekly Intelligencer (1844-1853)*; Oct.12, 1850; 7, 29; American Periodicals, 225.

61 Taylor, "Appendix: The Quakers of Congéniès, 447.

62 Taylor, "Appendix: The Quakers of Congéniès, 448.

Fox and James Naylor would have been more comfortable with this group of working folk filled with the exuberance of the Holy Spirit, than their more staid Quaker descendants with their upper middle class lives.[63]

The visiting Quakers parted from their new found Friends with a sense of optimism, in spite of their concerns about their undeveloped faith and practice. Sarah Grubb ended her letter: "Truly, there is a hidden precious seed, scattered up and down … who are measurably gathered, both from the superstitious, and the vain world, and are seeking a foundation whereon they may rest the soles of their feet."[64] With encouragement from their visitors, Quaker organizational practices were strengthened and Congénies Friends founded a free school for both girls and boys in 1790. Although the acute persecution of the Huguenot minorities somewhat relaxed, the law forbidding religious celebration other than Roman Catholic was still intact, and Friends worshipped behind locked doors.[65]

Even though the isolation of the Languedoc Friends was alleviated from time to time by their new relationship with foreign allies, by and large they remained marginalized from the wider society. Unlike the English Quakers who early on attracted a few influential members, these peasant Friends had no one to speak or lobby for them in the corridors of power. This changed when a Protestant noble man and military officer, Jean de Marsillac Le Cointe, encountered the Quaker faith, quit the military, and joined the Society of Friends. Seeking out the Friends of Congénies, as an articulate well connected young man, he soon became their spokesman and advocate.[66] Marsillac was able to secure a royal edict excepting Friends from preforming water baptism and in 1787 Protestant marriages and baptisms were deemed valid. A clause was added that had significant relevance for Quakers: for sects that did not practice water baptism, parents' declaration of birth before a magistrate was sufficient.[67] This Edict was a huge breakthrough since it meant that finally children born outside of the Catholic Church (including Jews as well as Protestants and Quakers) could not be denied citizenship.

The French Revolution Comes

Religious war was not the only thing that rocked early modern France. Intense poverty, repression, famine and political upheaval led to the world truly turning upside down: revolution. The Congénies Friends, although far from the center of this earth-quake, felt the ramifications.

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63 In his introduction to 1961 edition of Braithwaite's *The Second Period of Quakersim,* Frederick B. Tolles summarizes the trajectory of English Quaker Development into the first half of the nineteenth century: "After triumphantly weathering the turbulent and stormy waters of the Commonwealth and restoration England, this society has emerged into calmer, safer seas, and a new kind of Quaker has arrived. He is no longer the prophet, the enthusiast, the firebrand, filled with apostolic zeal to win the world for truth. He is content with a less heroic role, a less vigorous and all demanding mission. Fateful practice of the religious economic virtues of diligence and thrift has brought prosperity. The coming of toleration coinciding with the achievement of worldly success has brought respectability" (XXXII).

64 "Friends in France," 225.

65 Taylor, "Appendix: The Quakers of Congéniès, 448.

66 Peter Brock, "Conscientious Objection in Revolutionary France," *Journal of the Friends Historical Society,* 57, no2 (1995): 166.

67 Taylor, "Appendix: The Quakers of Congéniès, 446-7.

Taylor tells us the Congénies Quakers:

> joined with their fellow citizens in the rejoicing which broke forth over the whole country when the National Convention struck off the intolerable burdens of feudalism and priestcraft; […] They shared in the civil enfranchisement which was one of [the Revolution's] earliest fruits and it ultimately secured to them a more free exercise of their religious principles.[68]

Although the French Revolution brought new freedoms to the Congénies Friends, it also brought major challenges. As Peter Brock points out in his article "Conscientious Objection in Revolutionary France," the "French Revolution, with the *levée-en-masse*, introduced the idea of universal military service as an instrument of the modern nation-state."[69] Along with compulsory military service, all were expected to swear an oath of loyalty to the new regime. Other European nations had won the right to conscientiously object to military service, Quakers now saw the opportunity to fight for that as well.

Although the peasant Quakers of Congénies were virtually unknown outside their own community, British and America Quakers were enjoying "widespread respect among France's advanced thinkers."[70] Voltaire's four letters about Quakers, the Quakers' stand against slavery and the slave trade, and Penn's American experiment encouraged a positive, if romantic, view of Quakers, and Marcillac, now a well-known medical doctor in Paris, found a number of important sympathizers who encouraged him to lobby the new revolutionary regime. In 1790, French Quakers submitted a petition to the legislature in an effort to gain military exemption, exemption from taking oaths, and permission to use their own practice of registering births, marriages, and deaths.[71] On 10 Feburary 1791 Marcillac, armed with authorization from the Congénies Quakers to act as *Député extraordinaire des Amis de France à l'Assemblée Nationale*, addressed the Assembly, then under the presidency of Mirabeau. Brock gives us a lively account of the day:

> On the day itself the Assembly chamber was packed. Deputies attended in large numbers and every place was taken in the galleries for the public so that many "spectators" had to be turned away. […] On entering the assembly chamber the three Quakers, according to an old custom of the Society of Friends, had kept their hats on. They also refused to wear the national cockades, though pressed to do so; and they persisted in their refusal even after being told that it was 'required by law, to prevent distinction', and that their safety might be endangered through mob violence generated by their failure to conform on this point. Nonetheless, despite such nonconformity […] the Quakers were given a good reception by the assembly. [Appealing to the principals of this new revolutionary leadership], the petitioners urged, "You have sworn never to imbrue

68 Taylor, "Appendix: The Quakers of Congéniès, 449.
69 Brock, "Conscientious Objection in Revolutionary France," 166.
70 Brock, "Conscientious Objection in Revolutionary France," 167.
71 Brock, "Conscientious Objection in Revolutionary France," 170.

> your hands with blood for the sake of conquest. This result brings you, and in deed the whole world, closer to universal peace. Thus you surely cannot view with hostility those who by their example hasten its arrival.[72]

Mirabeau's response was friendly, but he made his objections to the Quaker position clear:

> Don't you think the defence of yourselves and your neighbours to be a religious duty also? Otherwise you would surely be overwhelmed by tyrants! Since we have gained liberty for you as well as for ourselves, why would you refuse to preserve it? […] My brother, if you possess the right to be free, you have also an obligation to prevent anyone from making you a slave. Loving your neighbour, you must not allow a tyrant to destroy him: to do so would be the same as to kill him yourself. Do you desire peace? Well then, it is surely weakness that calls forth war. A general readiness to resist would procure universal peace.[73]

In spite of Mirabeau's response, the Assembly did not explicitly reject the Quakers' petition. Instead they ordered the petition and Mirabeau's response printed and sent to the *Comité de Constitution* for examination.[74] Although Brock argues that informal accommodation was sometimes made so Quaker conscripts were not forced to bear lethal weapons, as the Terror took over the state, and years of wars at home and abroad ravaged isolated France, these informal arrangements became more and more rare. Marcillac writes to a London Friend about the "divers trials, which in our weak state we have found painful and grievous, the civic oath, the obligation . . .to mount guard personally and to arm."[75] And even more desperate letter is sent to London by Cevenes' Quaker school master, Louis-Antoine Majolier:

> The nation is in a desperate condition… The authorities seize upon, indiscriminately, from the body of citizens a large number of men between the ages of 16 and 50. And we, too, shall not be exempt from the ballot. Judging dear friend, in what a sad state we find ourselves and what a trial we are having to undergo. While one law ordains that all citizens without exception must mount guard within the confines of their district, another requires everyone, the young as well as the old, to where the cockade; and anyone in our area who doesn't do this may expect to be roughly handled.[76]

Many of the notables who had shown sympathy for the Quakers' pacifist stance became casualties of the Revolution's excesses, and faced with both internal and external armed opposition, the various governments of the day depended more and more on armies of young men for their survival. In 1792 Marsillac was arrested in Paris for refusing to wear the cockade and only escaped prison with the intervention of Paris' mayor. In 1795 Marsillac, with his

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72 Brock, "Conscientious Objection in Revolutionary France," 170-71.
73 Brock, "Conscientious Objection in Revolutionary France," 171.
74 Brock, "Conscientious Objection in Revolutionary France," 172.
75 Brock, "Conscientious Objection in Revolutionary France," 175.
76 Letter to John Eliot, 18 August 1792, qtd. in Brock, *Against the Draft*, 173.

web of connections, left for the United States and soon England and France were at war. Peter Brock captures the isolation of the Languedoc Friends:

> Henceforward, the peasant boys of Congénies, and the simple Quaker villagers their parents, were left to face alone as best they could, the *levée-en-masse* and the military demands of successive revolutionary administrations and finally of the Napoleonic Empire. For most of this period France was at war with Britain while America was far away: thus Quakers abroad could be of little use in helping French Quakers respond to the military question.[77]

Even though the beliefs of the Languedoc Friends were no longer illegal, their isolation from so recently found allies and new challenges brought on by the government were devastating.

Forced conscription was a blow to all the poor peasant boys whose families eked out a living from the land. Christine Majolier Alsop, the daughter of the school master, witnesses the *levée en masse* of 1811 "when boys of 16 were taken from a parental roof, with a certainty almost that they would never return:"

> Congéniès, being on the high road from several towns and villages to Nîmes, I have often witnessed the anguish of the poor, disconsolate relatives who accompanied their children as far as our house, which stood at the end of the village, and there parted never to meet again. What has fixed itself the most in my memory is the screams and the wringing of hands which gave to my young and warm heart a thorough hatred of war and Napoleon.[78]

For Quaker boys it was even more devastating. Not only snatched away from home, land, and family, they were also expected to violate the most sacred tenant of their sect, thou shalt not kill. Many forced to join the army never came back, others foreshadowed generations of war resisters by immigrating to other parts of the world, and still others, in Taylor's words, "in this hour of sharp trial […] drew back from the way of the cross, and allowed the Christian testimonies which had been entrusted to them to fall from their hands."[79] The chaos of the war years, the economic crisis and the effect of the *levée-en-masse* resulted in a gutting of the population throughout Languedoc, especially the population of young men. With no Quaker men to marry, young woman married out and merged into the majority non-Quaker population. Although these conditions certainly hurt the Congénies Friends, their faith, their prophetic traditions, and their ongoing perseverance in the face of adversity gave them the strength to survive if in a somewhat reduced state.

Their new connections with foreign Friends provided both material and spiritual support. Although isolated from these new friends by the eruption of wars between France and Britain, American Friends were free to visit and, in spite of the barriers to such travel, some did. In episodes of peace, Quaker luminaries such as Elizabeth Fry

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77 Brock, "Conscientious Objection in Revolutionary France," 174.
78 Christine Majolier Alsop, *Memorials,* 14.
79 Taylor, "Appendix: The Quakers of Congéniès," 450.

visited the community and reported on being greeted by large and welcoming meetings. However, in letters a note of unease again creeps (and sometimes thunders) in to the reports sent back by the visitors. For example, Richard Jordan in his account of his 1810 visit expresses his discouragement "on finding very little of the Friend among them" in "their weak and disordered state […] and the consequence of having no rule or order of discipline to unite them in supporting and holding the testimony of Friends." After Jordan held stern and emotional meetings with "this remote, poor, hungry, destitute little company in the south of France" he regained some hope that "in our passing through this country, that there was a precious seed in many places, that would, at some future day, be gathered." I cannot help thinking that in spite of the closeness of the two communities, the peasant French Quakers, who had "not much appearance of the Friend about them," and often spoke neither English or French never escaped the strangeness of the "other" for their English Friends.[80]

Christine Majolier:
the Bridge between Time and Space.

There was one regular visitor who brought a totally different perspective to her encounters with the Congénies Friends, Christine Majolier Alsop. Born in 1805 in Congénies, the daughter of the school master, Lois Majolier, and descended from the Couflair prophets on both her mothers and fathers side, Christine Majolier was sent to England by her father in 1817. For the rest of her life she lived in England, eventually marrying an English Quaker but she often returned to visit her family and community in Congénies. She was at home in the most sophisticated Quaker homes in England—homes open to "men of all countries and of all shades of colour; Russians, Germans, Frenchmen, Swedes, Greeks, Italians, and Spaniards, North American Indians, West Indians, and many of the suffering sons of Africa."[81] She met Wilberforce and Clarkson and, through her mentor, William Allen, become involved in the movements to abolish slavery, poverty, and reformation of the prisons. Her fluency in French, English, and German made her a perfect interpreter, and she travelled throughout Europe with Quakers like Elizabeth Fry meeting politicians, royalty, and even some ordinary people. Her fluency in Occitan and her deep roots in the Prophetic tradition of the South made her at home in Languedoc and must have been a welcome bridge between the two Quaker cultures. Surely she must have had many stories to tell when she returned for her regular visits. Not surprisingly her accounts of Congénies reflect none of the "Christian condescension" of her fellow English Quakers and are full of sympathy and appreciation of their simple way of life. In her journal she writes about the way of life of French Quakers:

> The mode of living […] has many charms for those who love simplicity and ease, and who are imbued with the poetry of primitive life. It approaches more to having all things in common than anything I know. You can go in and out of each other's houses without the least restraint. If

80 "Richard Jordan's account of his Journey to visit Friends at Congenies and some other places on the Continent," in *Friends Weekly Intelligencer (1844-1845),* Oct.12, 1850: 7, 29; American Periodicals, 225.
81 Christine Majolier Alsop, *Memorials,* 71-2.

> one person has fruit, the other partakes of it. It is a constant interchange of kind offices, which is little understood elsewhere. All sorts of implements for domestic use or for agriculture -- even looms -- are constantly lent and borrowed; and it not unfrequently happens, rather inconveniently sometimes, that things are taken without ceremony and without leave: and although a person who has been accustomed to highly civilised life may feel the want of refinement, and of intellectual society, yet there is so much of real kindness, of devotedness in affliction, and of readiness to oblige, that there is not a little to give up when an exchange is made for a life more artificial and refined.[82]

Life lived by these French peasants and shepherds was not only reminiscent of the early English Quakers; we can see from Christine Majolier thoughts on her childhood experiences, it was also not that removed from life in biblical times:

> I must not leave the subject of my early childhood without mentioning the vivid impressions which were made on my mind by reading the Scriptures. Living as I did where the customs of the people as well as the aspect of the country are so similar to those described there, the Bible assumed a reality which I scarcely think possible in the case of children to whom such manners and customs are not familiar. The vines, the fig-trees, the pomegranates and the olives; the wheel broken at the cistern; the watering of the earth with the foot; the ox treading out the corn; the shepherd going before the sheep; the leading of the horse or of the ass to watering; the treading of the winepress alone; the figure of the man sitting down under his own vine and his own fig-tree, where none should make him afraid; all these and many other beautiful allusions, which must be lost on English children and all those inhabiting northern countries, were completely intelligible to me, and for each scene mentioned in the Bible I had a clear representation in my mind's eye. Our famous fountain at Congénies furnished me with more than one. There, when I used to be sent to fill my little pitcher with water, I used to fancy I saw Rebekah going down to draw water for the camels of Eleazar; not that I had seen camels there; but very often on a summer's evening I had seen flocks of sheep supplied in the same manner; and there also I fancied I could see our Saviour, sitting on the well, conversing with the woman of Samaria, whom I clearly pictured to my imagination with her pitcher in her hand, just such a one as I had myself.[83]

I suspect Christine Majolier played a pivotal role in supporting the French Friends. She resembles one of Sheila Rowbotham's hidden-from-history-women, although in many ways she is hidden in plain sight. She is mentioned in Taylor's appendix, although mostly in passing, and in her own memoir she modestly makes no claims for importance. However here was a

82 Christine Majolier Alsop, *Memorials,* 50.
83 Christine Majolier Alsop, *Memorials,* 83.

woman who passed through countless sophisticated British Quaker homes, caring for children, the sick and the elderly, helping with the collection of important men's papers, meeting interesting and progressive people, and travelling though out Europe involved at the heart of Quaker diplomacy, who at the same time never lost touch with her roots. She must have been a constant reminder to British fellow Quakers of their "simple" French Friends far away in both space and time, as well as a consistent support to her home community.

Quaker Life Goes On

Although the French Quaker Community struggled on through the nineteenth century, times did not get easier. American Quaker Stephen Grellet, in an 1807 letter from Congénies, describes a meeting in which police brought soldiers to break up a meeting who in turn "were so affected by Grellet's ministry, that they refused to obey orders."[84] He describes another meeting that was so large people had to assemble, like their ancestors, in an orchard, "hanging lanterns in the trees, into which also many climbed in order to hear what was said. […] 'I have,' writes S. Grellet, 'seldom known a more solemn stillness to prevail at a meeting; the Gospel descended like dew on the tender grass'."[85] In 1822 the Quaker meeting house was built in Congénies right next to Majolier's school, thanks to a gift from Philadelphia. The Quaker school, with support from abroad, continued up until the middle of the nineteenth century where, according to Françoise Tomlin, two hundred Quaker families still lived in the Congénies region. In spite of support from abroad, life continued to be difficult for the Quaker community. With perpetual war and oppression, more and more escaped to America and the rest of Europe. Young men continued to flee rather than be conscripted into the French Army. Although Taylor, writing in 1883, still finds Quakers to interview, and Quakers still hold meeting, and Christine's description of life in the community is still in tack, the community was already in decline. The last meeting for worship was held in the Meeting House in 1905, and the Meeting House was sold in 1907 and by 1928 the "last Quaker in Gard died … and the Quaker tradition disappeared in the South of France until 1995."[86]

However this was not the end of the Quaker presence in France or in Congénies. Near the end of her life Christine Majolier encountered a young Parisian social worker, Justine Dalencourt, and through her influence Delencourt became a Quaker and with others established a Quaker Meeting in Paris near the end of the 19th century. During World War I, French Quakers helped the families of soldiers at the front and rebuilt houses destroyed in the battle fields. With American Quakers they established two hospitals for the war's survivors which continued to operate up until 1924.[87] In 1919 Le Centre Quaker International à Paris, was founded and, in 1933, France Yearly Meeting was established. In 1937 French Friends established a refugee camp for Spanish children displaced by the Spanish Civil War.

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84 Taylor, "Appendix: The Quakers of Congéniès," 451.

85 Taylor, "Appendix: The Quakers of Congéniès," 451.

86 Françoise Tomlin, "Quakers-in France and in the world," translated by Sara MacVane in *Evangile & liberté* , 2016, https://www.evangile-et-liberte.net/2016/07/quakers-in-france-and-in-the-world/ (Accessed 10 July 2017).

87 Tomlin, "Quakers-in-France."

After Meeting potluck

During World War II, French Friends aided war refugees and helped Jewish refugees escape the Nazis and find refuge.[88] Quaker Gilbert le Sage used his role as government administrator to facilitate the escape of French and other European Jews through Vichy France, and was later given the Medaille de Justice by Israel for his role. According to René Nodot, Gilbert Lesage saved the lives of some 100,000 refugees.[89] In 1947 American Friends Service Committee and British Friends Service Council received the Nobel Peace Prize for their European refugee work and French Quakers shared in this achievement. French Quakers, never a large group, continue their work for peace and social justice up to today both in France and around the world.

Meanwhile, back in Congénies, the Friends Meeting House went through a number of metamorphoses until it finally came back into Quaker hands, this time into the hands of a retired British diplomat who used it as a private resident, calling it Villa Quaker. In 2003 France Yearly Meeting was able to buy the House and in 2004 the Maison Quaker was reborn and open for retreats, conferences, workshops, discussion groups and overnight visitors from France, Europe and throughout the world. And once again, every Sunday, Quakers gather in silent worship.

Back to the Beginning

This time, when I return to Congénies, my bus ride from Nimes will be different. It will still be magical -- the incredible blue sky, the rolling green field, with glimpses of the wild Cevennes mountains in the distance -- but now there will be a whole other element colouring my perceptions.

88 "Quakers and the non-conformist tradition in the South of France," Origins of Maison Quaker, Centre Quaker de Congénies, http://www.maison-quaker-congenies.org/origins-of-maison-quaker

89 René Nodot. *Mémoires d'un juste. Résistance non-violente 1940-1944* (Maisons-Laffitte: Éditions Ampelos, 2011).

Judy Pocock with long-time Congenies Friend

Will I imagine I hear echoes of Camisards belting out the psalms in unison? Will I think of the clandestine gatherings of ecstatic peasants meeting to worship in hidden mountain valleys? In my imagination, will I see of the prophetess Lucrene and those that followed her with their refusal to submit to violence or the subservient place prescribed for women? Will I think of all that blood spilled on this land as the Couflaires and their Camisard compatriots struggled to live and believe as they choose? I can't wait to go back and, like Stevenson, travel "in the print of olden wars" and see the deep corn and green along what once was "the battle field."

> "O my Dove that art in the clefts of the rock, hidden in the steep places, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice: For Sweet is they voice, and thy countenance is gracious." (Claude Brousson from one of his popular sermons, 1690)

The Huguenot Cross