

***Over the Highest Mountains: A Memoir of Unexpected Heroism in France During World War II***  
 By Alice Resch Synnestvedt  
 Intentional Productions, 2005  
 Reviewed by Barbara Bucknall

The title deserves some comment. “Over the Highest Mountains” is a quotation from a poem that inspired the young Norwegian woman, Alice, and made her long for the extreme experiences that were to come her way later and be less than welcome when they came. Of her heroism in saving Jewish children in wartime France there can be no question, but the adjective “unexpected” gives me pause. Who did not expect it? Alice herself and those who knew the light-hearted young woman? Or was it unexpected in the larger context of those who stood by and did nothing to stop the Holocaust? Probably both meanings should be considered, especially in the light of the testimony of one of the children she helped to survive. He wondered if he would have been willing to take

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the same risk to save someone else. The story rattles exuberantly on from carefree prewar years in Paris, Vienna, and New York, through a nursing career fallen into almost by accident, to friendships that directed her course in the early years of the war and led to her distributing Quaker help, without being a Quaker, in and around Toulouse, in Vichy, France. Her chief mentor in this regard was Helga Holbek, a Dane who together with Alice organised help from the American Friends Service Committee, and undertook to help out in the concentration camp at Gurs, taking special care of starving Jewish children. Together, they selected Jewish children to be sent to the U.S. but taking children out of the concentration camp and hiding them in an orphanage or a convent or monastery seems to have been chiefly Alice’s doing.

Alice has a great deal to say about the friends she worked with but she goes into surprisingly little detail about the acts of courage and self-sacrifice that led to her being honoured later in Israel as a Righteous gentile. Instead, she often writes of the times when there was little she could do to help as when they took food and water to trainloads of deportees. It falls to the children she saved, at the end of the book, to give the true measure of her worth.

This memoir, filled with hilarious, as well as spine-chilling anecdotes, draws the reader along in the current of those war years as they

were lived from day to day, without the benefit of hindsight and with all the unexpectedness of actual events. Accounts of the Resistance and individual acts of escape scatter the pages in spite of Helga’s insistence that Alice do nothing to jeopardise Quaker neutrality. It is a fascinating narrative. 🍷

*Barbara Bucknall is a member of Pelham Executive Meeting.*

***A Year of Grace: A Novel***  
 By Margaret Hope Bacon  
 Quaker Press, 2002  
 Reviewed by Linda Foy

“A Year of Grace” opens with 76-year-old Faith Smedley waking up in the hospital. She has just come through an operation to remove a cancerous tumour from her stomach. She soon discovers she has about a year to live. Faith, a birth-right Quaker from Haverford, is not one to indulge in fear or self-pity. She says to her doctor, “I want to do this thing, this finishing, as well as I know how. There are so many places I want to visit and so many people I want to see. I want to plan my time very carefully.”

As Faith sets out to revisit her past, we learn she was active in the American Friends Service Committee during World War Two, and we get a glimpse of what that experience was like. She also decides to read through some letters she’s inherited, which were writ-

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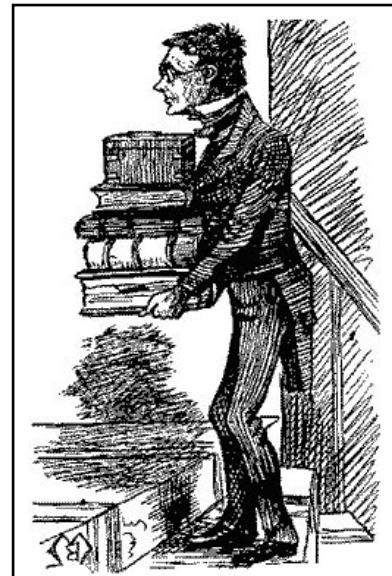
ten by her early Quaker ancestors. These end up being more interesting than she had anticipated. She begins to compare her life to some of her more stalwart relations.

Faith's children and grandchildren come and go throughout the book, too. The time is 1969, and her family mirrors the political spectrum of that era. We sense the background tension concerning Vietnam, and the unease associated with a life of privilege in a world filled with poverty.

Faith decides to upgrade the family cottage, located in a Quaker enclave, and spend the winter there with a close friend. She hopes for peace and quiet. As it turns out,

she's faced with a situation involving the village's mistreatment of migrant workers. She's tempted to look the other way, not sure she has the strength to engage in a new struggle. Her friends advise her to let it go but, of course, her conscience won't rest until she's taken some action.

This is a gentle straightforward book, which opens us to important issues. There is much Quaker language, a bit of history, some teachings, and a challenge or two. Perhaps what I enjoyed the most about the book is the way the author caused me to imagine what it would be like if I knew I was seeing or experiencing something for



the last time. For instance, the last Christmas dinner with the family, the last apple blossoms, or the last paddle in the canoe. I was reminded to notice the grace that fills my life, and to give thanks. ☺

*Linda Foy is a member of New Brunswick Monthly Meeting.*



### *Canadian Yearly Meeting National Listeners*



Canadian Yearly Meeting National Listeners, guided by Continuing Meeting of Ministry and Counsel, are available to listen to any Canadian Friend disclose harm done on matters of sexual harassment or abuse, or any other topic a Friend may need to discuss.

If you need a listener, the first step is to approach a trusted Friend within your Monthly Meeting (MM), or to go to your MM Ministry and Counsel. If this path is not comfortable, you may contact a National Listener. Listeners seek to be present from a place of spirit-centred openness - to hold the caller and the situation in the Light, and to listen with tenderness. Knowing the healing that comes from simply being heard, we offer you a safe and confidential space in which to speak. One call might be all you need. If not, we have the task of discerning with you what a next step could be: whether a committee of care, of clearness, or of oversight might be appropriate; or how to find other possible resources.

The National Listeners have experience in listening to issues around sexual abuse, and to other concerns.

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Whenever possible, please contact us first to arrange a mutually convenient time to speak later.