

# Some thoughts on a year at Pendle Hill

By Sharon MacDonald

From September 2004 to June 2005, I had the great privilege of attending Pendle Hill as a Resident Student under the Dorothy and Douglas Steere Scholarship. Working on a doctoral study concerning Western women associated with Gandhi and the Indian independence movement, I had just returned from a research trip to India in early 2004. Close to the end of fellowship funding and just beginning to write my thesis, I was encouraged by a member of my meeting to apply for a scholarship to Pendle Hill (PH). As might be imagined, the idea of living within a Quaker community while working on a solitary writing project had great appeal. Pendle Hill's positive response to my application not only affirmed my work but also provided a grace period before I had to resume other responsibilities.

Because I consider my research subjects a part of the Pendle Hill experience, I will begin by introducing several of "my" women because of their connections with PH and the Philadelphia area. Years ago, on another research project, I began searching for the possible survival of the papers of a Nova Scotian suffragist and proponent of peace and arbitration in the early twentieth century, one Mary Russell Chesley,

"of Quaker descent." I knew that her daughter, Mary (Polly) Chesley, also a social activist, had joined the Religious Society of Friends in Britain. An inquiry at Friends' House library in London turned up a tantalizing piece of information – a memorial notice at the time of Polly's death in India in 1936, contributed by none other than M. K. Gandhi. His effusive praise for Chesley and her commitment to the Indian independence movement

studying at Bryn Mawr and they went to Quaker meetings together in the area. As well, I discovered through a period newspaper that Polly had spoken at a peace rally in Philadelphia on Armistice Day organized by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

In 1930, another Canadian, Mildred Osterhout (later Fahrni), attended Bryn Mawr on scholarship and spent time at the newly opened Pendle Hill. Muriel Lester, a British pacifist and guest speaker at PH in that first year, invited Osterhout to come to Britain to volunteer at Kingsley Hall, a settlement house Lester had founded in East London. Mildred responded to the call, and her time at Kingsley Hall coincided with Gandhi's stay there in 1931 during the Second Round Table Conference. Mildred visited Gandhi in India and seriously contemplated staying there to work. Ultimately, however, she returned to Canada where she became very active in the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR).

Three other women in my study had occasion to visit Pendle Hill. Mirabehn (Madeleine Slade), perhaps the Western woman most closely associated with Gandhi (and an early environmentalist), gave a talk at Pendle Hill while on a

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aroused my curiosity. Searching further, I soon discovered other fascinating women connected to the Indian cause. The fact that a number of the women were Quakers or closely tied to Quakers through the network of peace and pro-independence organizations only added to my interest.

As for the connections to the Philadelphia area, in 1923 Polly spent several months there volunteering with a Quaker relief organization. Pendle Hill did not yet exist; however, Polly regularly visited another Nova Scotian friend

speaking tour in the United States in 1934. Agatha Harrison, a British Quaker and key member of the India Conciliation Group, who served for many years as a facilitator in talks between Gandhi and the British authorities, visited Pendle Hill in 1953. At the time, she was serving on the UN Quaker team. Finally, Marjorie Sykes, another Quaker friend of Gandhi's and author of *An Indian Tapestry*, a chronicle of Quaker history in India, served as Friend in Residence at Pendle Hill in 1977.

This introduction to the women associated with Pendle Hill and area is just to provide some context for why my residency there had particular significance. For example, in order to add another thread of connection to Polly and my activist women from the past, I made my first trip into Philadelphia on Remembrance Day, a day of rain and wind, to attend an anti-war vigil. I wanted to honour Polly's participation in the peace rally that had taken place eighty-one years earlier. As I stood in the damp and cold with a pitifully small and bedraggled group of strangers, a wonderful conversation with a former Iraqi citizen transformed my initial feeling of gloom into one of blessed connectedness with both present and past humanity.

Before arriving at Pendle Hill, I knew from looking at the brochures and programming that I would be tempted to do everything *but* work on my dissertation. I confess that I yielded to temptation on a regular basis, especially in the craft studio; however, towards the end of the year I realised, with some consolation, that I had, in fact, written a reasonable portion of the thesis – far more than I could have accomplished had I stayed at home. In addition, I had experienced the many gifts that Pendle Hill had to offer. Attending Meeting for Worship every morning of the week became an important grounding for me. At one point, I thought that I might get started on my writing earlier in the day if I didn't attend daily but discovered that I could not do without this time of worship. Taking studio classes in

clay, paper making, and book arts opened up new areas of creative exploration. The daily and weekly chores in which all resident students participate; the special camaraderie of Wednesday work morning; digging and spring planting in the organic garden – all these activities helped to ground me in practical and physical ways. For someone who has been living and working alone for the past few years, community life offered opportunities for new friendships, the stimulation of conversation on questions of faith, and the chance to give and receive affirmation and support on so many levels. Although a centre for study and contemplation, Pendle Hill is a busy place — there are many activities going on at all times, either on campus or nearby. In the face of such choice, I had to learn to be selective and know when solitude was the best option.

If Pendle Hill sounds idyllic, well, in some ways it was, particularly for a student. However, as with any diverse group of individuals in close quarters, personality differences and occasional flare-ups of tension occurred. Often, in the “outside” world, personal conflict and resolution can be avoided because distance can be maintained – not so in a small community. Pendle Hill offered opportunities to practice addressing difficult situations in a Quakerly way. Formative learning periods seem to be all too rare after one has reached middle age. I found it exhilarating to be discovering and exercising new parts of myself. At Pendle Hill I experienced many moments of great joy, but I believe that the challenging times helped me to grow and deepen my spiritual life. I will be forever thankful to all who helped make my year at Pendle Hill possible. ☞

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... The lives of Young Friends sometimes stand out as radiant ... I believe that, at its best, religious life is about seeking and finding. In this context, it is worth remembering that it was an itinerant evangelist by the name of George Fox who, in 1643, at the age of nineteen, left a small English village, his family, and his apprenticeship to a shoemaker. Over the rest of his life, until his death in 1691, he lived an extraordinary life and became known as the founder of Quakerism.  
– Kyle Jolliffe, 1997