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James Peacock

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Tirril Hall, Tirril, Penrith CA10 2JE

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James Peacock

Who was John Bartram? Literary and Epistolary Representations of the Quaker¹

John Bartram was the pre-eminent figure in eighteenth-century American botany, appointed botanist by royal appointment to George III in 1765. ‘John Bertram’ is the figure who inhabits the pages of letter eleven of Hector de Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*. What is happening in the tantalising alteration of the single vowel? Although it is unlikely to reveal repressed memories of colonial violence, as the ‘Bedloe – Oldeb – Bedlo’ configuration does in Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘A Tale of the Ragged Mountains’, I would argue that far from being mere ‘typographical error’,² it self-consciously highlights the move from biographical mimesis into the precincts of fiction. In so doing, it advertises a traditional Quaker problem: the imperfect transmission of the self and its spiritual ideas through the debased language of man.

In his journal, John Woolman succinctly expresses the problem:

I found it safest for me to live in private, and keep these things sealed up in my own breast. While I silently ponder on that change wrought in me, I find no language equal to convey to another a clear idea of it.³

For the Quaker, this linguistic difficulty is an enduring one. If the still, small voice within speaks to us in the primitive, Edenic language by which ‘all things

1. This article grew out of a paper given at the British Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies annual conference at St. Hugh’s College, Oxford on 4 January 2004.

2. Edgar Allan Poe, *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1985), 401.

3. John Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 29.