

## **Naomi Pullin**

### **Magic Source: John Locke's letter to the Quaker preacher Rebecca Collier**

*The following is a letter purportedly written by the political philosopher and biblical commentator, John Locke, author of The Two Treatises of Government, and other works on religious toleration, education and human understanding. The letter was addressed to Rebecca Collier, a Quaker preacher, and her companion Rachel Brecken. The two women had reportedly preached at a Quaker meeting whilst on a ministerial tour to London in November 1699. John Locke was said to have attended this meeting and this letter gives a favourable account of his views on women acting as preachers in the Church, based on what he witnessed at the meeting where Collier was preaching.*

*The letter, which doesn't appear in Locke's wider corpus, but was in printed circulation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been scrutinised by scholars of Locke with a great deal of interest, but the prevailing view is that the letter is a forgery. The evidence to support this view was the dating of the letter, which in its printed form was November 1696, an impossible date for Locke to have attended the meeting. Moreover, when efforts were made to identify Rebecca Collier and her companion, they were unable to find any information about them, as neither were officially recognised Quaker preachers, and some copies of the letters had their names as Rebecca Collins and Rachel Buckon. It has also been argued that while the letter shows some congruity with Locke's remarks on female ministry in his Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St Paul, the language is unlike Locke's other correspondence. It was also accompanied by the rather fantastical story that William III was in attendance at the same meeting in disguise.*

*Even if the letter was a forgery, the Quaker community of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century clearly believed it was real, citing the encounter in multiple publications and circulating and copying manuscript copies of the letter. I have identified six manuscript copies of the letter and all bear the date 21 November 1699. I have also been able to identify both Rebecca Collier and her companion Rachel Brackon in the Quaker meeting minutes for Yorkshire, where both women are identified as having requested permission to travel to the South of England in the summer of 1699 to undertake ministerial service. Evidence of the Board of Trade minutes also shows that Locke was in London on 21 November 1699.*

*If we cannot prove the authenticity of the letter, what should we make of it in the context of Locke's wider reception and corpus? Why might a letter from an authority like Locke appeal to 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Quakers? What does the letter tell us about Locke's views, ideas, and attitudes towards female preaching?*

Grays Inn. November 21<sup>st</sup> 1699.

My sweet friends

A paper of sweetmeats by the Bearer to attend your Journey, comes to testify the sweetness I found in your society, I admire no converse more than that of the Christian freedom, and fear no bondage like that of pride and prejudice; I now see acquaintance by sight cannot reach the height of enjoyment which acquaintance by knowledge arrives unto; outward hearing may misguide us, but internal knowledge cannot err: we have something thereof, what we shall have hereafter to know, as we are known; and thus we with our other friends were even at the first view mutual partakers: and the more there is of this in the Life, the less we need enquire of what Country nation, party, or persuasion our friends are; for our own knowledge is more sure than another's is to us; thus we know whom we have believed.

Now the God of all Grace, grant you may hold fast that rare grace of Love and Charity, that unbiassed and unbounded Love, which if it decay not, will spring up mightily, as the waters of the sanctuary, higher and higher till you with the Universal Church swim together in the stream of Divine Love.

Women indeed had the honour first to publish the resurrection of the God of Love why not again the resurrection of the spirit of Love, and let all the Disciples of our Lord rejoice therein as does your partner

John Locke

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The above Letter was sent with a present of sweetmeats after a Meeting in London which John Locke was at, and which is said to have given him occasion to alter passage in his Paraphrase on Paul's Epistles, where he had explained the Apostles words as prohibiting Women's Preaching. It was reported that King William was also at the Meeting in disguise.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> London, L[ibrary of the] R[eligious] S[ociety] of F[riends], MS Vol S 487, Eighteenth Century Commonplace Book, p. 23.

A Letter from Jn: Lock to R: Collier and R: Buckon.

Grays Inn. Nov: 21<sup>th</sup> 1699.

My sweet friends

A paper of sweetmeats by the Bearer to attend your Journey, comes to testify the sweetness I found in your society, I admire no converse more than that of the Christian freedom, and fear no bondage like that of pride and prejudice; I now see acquaintances by sight cannot reach the height of enjoyment which acquaintances by knowledge arrives unto; outward hearing may misguide us, but internal knowledge cannot err: we have something thereof, what we shall have hereafter to know as we are known; and thus we with our friends were even at the first view mutual partakers: and the more there is of this in the Life, the less we need enquire of what Country, Nation, party, or persuasion our friends are; for our own knowledge is more sure than anothers is to us; thus we know whom we have beloved.

Now the God of all Grace, grant you may hold fast that rare grace of Love and Charity, that unbiassed and unbounded Love, which if it decay not, will spring up mightily, as the waters of the Sanctuary, higher and higher till you with the Universal Church swim together in the stream of Divine Love.

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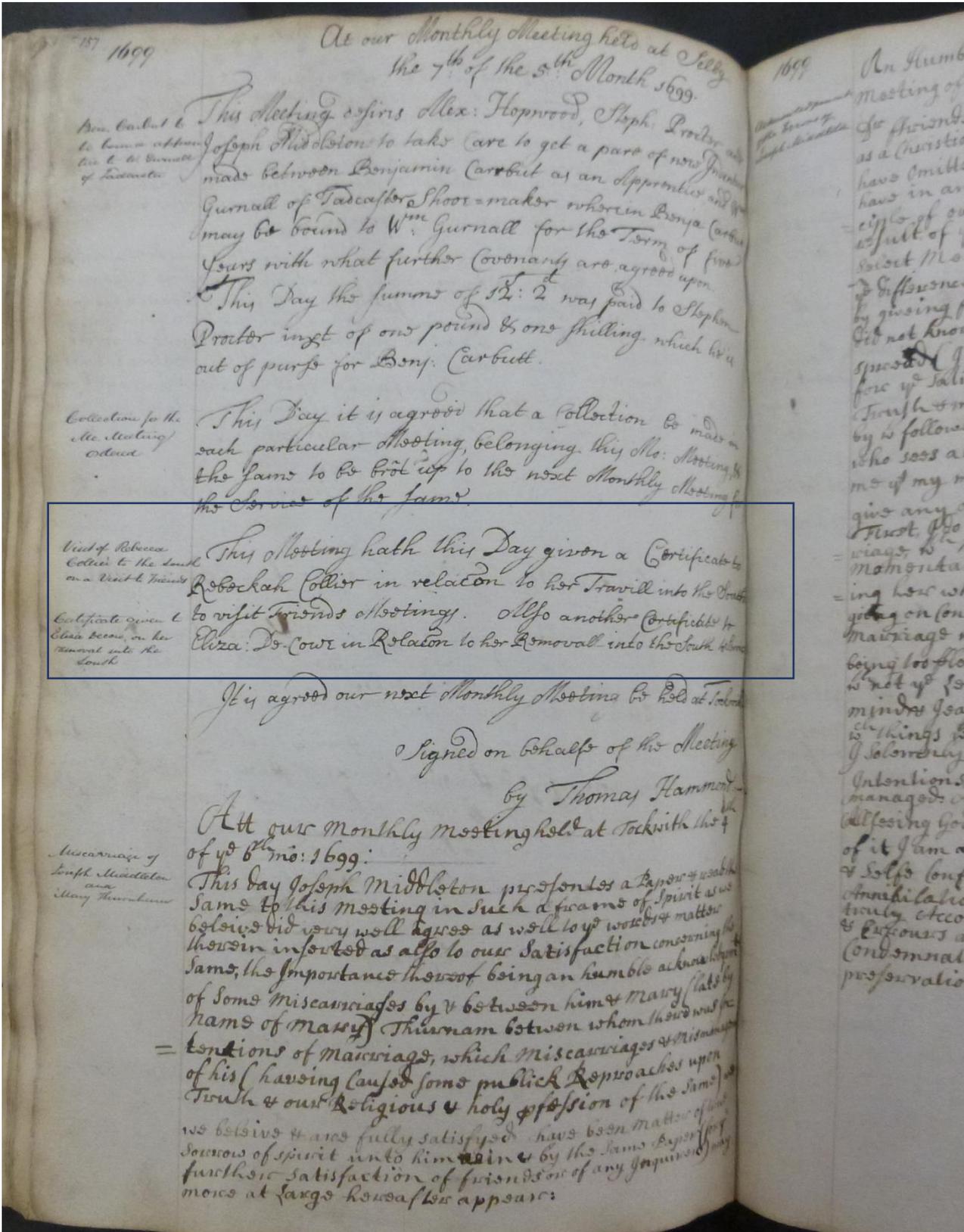
Jn: Lock.

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At our Monthly Meeting held at Selby the 7<sup>th</sup> of the 5<sup>th</sup> Month 1699 [7 July 1699]

[marginal note - Visit of Rebecca Collier to the South on a visit to Friends]

This Meeting hath this Day given a Certificate to Rebeckah Collier in relation to her Travill into the South to visit Friends Meetings. Also another Certificate to Eliza De-Cowe in Relation to her Removall into the South to service.



187 1699

At our Monthly Meeting held at Selby the 7<sup>th</sup> of the 5<sup>th</sup> Month 1699.

Ben. Carbutt to be bound to W<sup>m</sup> Gurnall for the Term of five Years with what further Covenaunt are agreed upon

This Meeting expires Alex: Hopwood, Steph: Proctor and Joseph Middleton to take care to get a part of new made between Benjamin Carbutt as an Apprentis and Gurnall of Tadcaster Shoemaker wherein Benja Carbutt may be bound to W<sup>m</sup> Gurnall for the Term of five Years with what further Covenaunt are agreed upon  
This Day the summe of £2: 2 was paid to Steph: Proctor in x<sup>t</sup> of one pound & one shilling which he is out of purps for Benj: Carbutt.

Collection for the 1<sup>st</sup> Meeting of the Year

This Day it is agreed that a Collection be made in each particular Meeting, belonging this Mo: Meeting for the same to be brot up to the next Monthly Meeting for the Service of the same.

Visit of Rebecca Collier to the South on a Visit to Friends

This Meeting hath this Day given a Certificate to Rebeckah Collier in relation to her Travill into the South to visit Friends Meetings. Also another Certificate to Eliza De-Cowe in Relation to her Removal into the South to service

Certificate given to Eliza De-Cowe on her Removal into the South

It is agreed our next Monthly Meeting to hold at Selby

Signed on behalf of the Meeting  
By Thomas Hammond

Miscarriage of Joseph Middleton and Mary Thurnham

At our Monthly Meeting held at Tockwith the 4<sup>th</sup> of the 6<sup>th</sup> Mo: 1699:  
This Day Joseph Middleton presents a Report & reveals the same to this meeting in such a manner of Spirit as we believe did very well agree as well to the words & matters therein imported as also to our Satisfaction concerning the same, the Importance thereof being an humble acknowledgement of some Miscarriages by & betwixen him & Mary (late) Thurnham betwixen whom there was pretensions of Marriage, which Miscarriages & Mismanagements of his (having caused some publick Approaches upon Truth & our Religious & holy profession of the same) we believe & are fully satisfied have been matter of great sorrow of spirit unto him & in & by the same Report (being further satisfaction of friends one of any Inquiries) more at large hereafter appears:

1699  
An humble meeting of the Friends as a Christian have omitted in an account of our Society Mr. D. Difference by giving it but not known spread of the force of the Truth & by is followed who sees a me of my give any Trust, Proviage, & Memento ing here we getting on our marriage & being too late is not yet so minded you is things to I solemnly Intensions managed: & Callousing God of it I am a & sold long Annihilate truly Acco & Confusion a Conditional preservation

**From our Monthly Meeting held at Whitby the 6<sup>th</sup> of the 4<sup>th</sup> month 1699 [6 June 1699]**

This day our Deare Friend Rachell Breckon acquainted us that it lies weightily upon her spirit to visit Friends in the South part of this Nation; wch wee Unanimously Consented to haveing good Knowledge of her life and Conversation wch hath been Commendable amongst Us and her service in the ministry wee are in true unity with.

