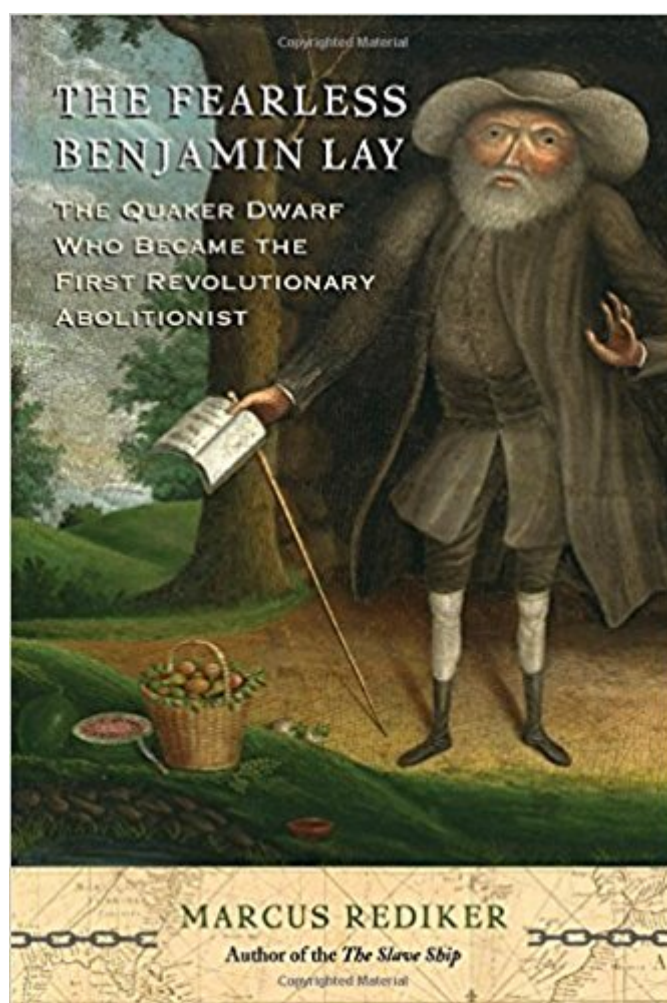


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# The Fearless Benjamin Lay: The Quaker Dwarf Who Became The First Revolutionary Abolitionist



## Synopsis

The little-known story of an eighteenth-century Quaker dwarf who fiercely attacked slavery and imagined a new, more humane way of life. In *The Fearless Benjamin Lay*, renowned historian Marcus Rediker chronicles the transatlantic life and times of a singular man—a Quaker dwarf who demanded the total, unconditional emancipation of all enslaved Africans around the world. Mocked and scorned by his contemporaries, Lay was unflinching in his opposition to slavery, often performing colorful guerrilla theater to shame slave masters, insisting that human bondage violated the fundamental principles of Christianity. He drew on his ideals to create a revolutionary way of life, one that embodied the proclamation “no justice, no peace.” Lay was born in 1682 in Essex, England. His philosophies, employments, and places of residence—spanning England, Barbados, Philadelphia, and the open seas—were markedly diverse over the course of his life. He worked as a shepherd, glove maker, sailor, and bookseller. His worldview was an astonishing combination of Quakerism, vegetarianism, animal rights, opposition to the death penalty, and abolitionism. While in Abington, Philadelphia, Lay lived in a cave-like dwelling surrounded by a library of two hundred books, and it was in this unconventional abode where he penned a fiery and controversial book against bondage, which Benjamin Franklin published in 1738. Always in motion and ever confrontational, Lay maintained throughout his life a steadfast opposition to slavery and a fierce determination to make his fellow Quakers denounce it, which they finally began to do toward the end of his life. With passion and historical rigor, Rediker situates Lay as a man who fervently embodied the ideals of democracy and equality as he practiced a unique concoction of radicalism nearly three hundred years ago. Rediker resurrects this forceful and prescient visionary, who speaks to us across the ages and whose innovative approach to activism is a gift, transforming how we consider the past and how we might imagine the future.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Rediker provides a valuable addition to abolitionist historiography. . . . A concise, solid biography of the first revolutionary abolitionist, a diminutive man who was decades ahead of his time. Kirkus Reviews Rediker adroitly describes nuances of the Quaker faith's evolution. . . . Lay's farsightedness and extensive advocacy deserves to be remembered. Publishers Weekly Admirers of Marcus Rediker's splendid *The Slave Ship* will be delighted by this historian's new book. Sailor, pioneer of guerilla theater, and a man who would stop at nothing to make his fellow human beings share his passionate outrage against slavery, Benjamin Lay has long needed a modern biographer worthy of him, and now he has one. Adam Hochschild A modern biography of the radical abolitionist Benjamin Lay has long been overdue. With the sure hand of an eminent historian of the disfranchised, Marcus Rediker has brought to life the wide-ranging activism of this extraordinary Quaker, vegetarian dwarf in a richly crafted book. In fully recovering Lay's revolutionary abolitionist vision, Rediker reveals its ongoing significance for our world. Manisha Sinha, author of *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* The unswerving eighteenth-century abolitionist Benjamin Lay, maligned when not ignored for many generations, has at last found his sympathetic biographer. In this captivating, must-read book, Marcus Rediker shows that Lay's disfigured body contained a mind of steel and a heart overflowing with compassion for victims of the Atlantic slave trade. Lay's place in the annals of American reform is now secure. If you're ready to have your mind changed about received wisdom on the eccentric, lonely early abolitionist who blazed the way for later antislavery stalwarts, read this brilliantly researched and passionately written book. Gary Nash, author of *Warner Mifflin, Unflinching Quaker Abolitionist*

Marcus Rediker is Distinguished Professor of Atlantic History at the University of Pittsburgh and Senior Research Fellow at the Collège de France. His books have won numerous awards and been translated into fourteen languages. They include *The Many-Headed Hydra* (Beacon Press, 2000; with Peter Linebaugh), *Villains of All Nations* (Beacon Press, 2004), *The Slave Ship* (2007), *The Amistad Rebellion* (2012), and *Outlaws of the Atlantic* (Beacon Press,

2015). Rediker is also the producer of the prize-winning documentary film *Ghosts of Amistad: In the Footsteps of the Rebels* (Tony Buba, director), about the popular memory of the 1839 Amistad rebellion in contemporary Sierra Leone. He lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

I have no real knowledge of Quaker history, so this book served not only to illuminate the life of one man, Benjamin Lay, but of the culture and beliefs (and sometimes hypocrisy) of Quakers from the late 1600s through the late 1700s. In particular, the author examines Benjamin Lay's opposition to slavery and his lifelong attempts to wean Quakers off their dependence on slaves and their implicit support of the institution of slavery through inaction and silence. I, like many Quakers of Lay's day, had a difficult time mentally commending this early abolitionist. I grew up in the Plymouth Brethren, a fractious and argumentative community that often broke off into splinter groups due to the divisive nature of pugnacious men who believed they, and only they, interpreted scripture correctly. I have no patience for the personality of a man like Benjamin Lay. But, as Prof. Rediker notes, often these fiery, uncompromising men were needed to shake up complacent people inclined to do nothing. I can agree with this, as applied to the issue of slavery, but it was hard for me to read about Lay as he went from congregation to congregation, spewing hatred in the guise of spirituality. He was firmly in the camp of antinomian thought -- he believed he had a direct line of communion with God, and no one could stand in authority over him. Boy, do I recognize this man! But I did appreciate the author's scholarly examination of the philosophy and thought behind Lay's beliefs, his methods, and his ascetic way of life. Today, we just dismiss outliers as nut cases, and mostly they are -- just internet trolls who sow discord with no cohesive philosophy of life. Lay, though uneducated, read widely, absorbing the thoughts of ancient philosophers as well as his educated peers. He was cunning, unrelenting, and as the title says, fearless. He paved the way for the next generation of Quaker abolitionists, who had the freedom to pursue the case in gentler and less divisive ways. I see that today, as the last generation of Christian missionaries often were firebrands who pursued their cause without compromise, paving the way for today's missionaries, who can further their cause through a better understanding of local culture and customs, and by turning the leadership of churches and schools over to nationals whom they have trained and built relationships with. This is an academic work, so you need to understand that it's not necessarily a gripping read. There's a lot of repetition as Prof. Rediker builds his arguments. But I needed it, as the terms and concepts were mostly new to me and might have been quite a jumble if I didn't hear them explained repeatedly.

This is a thin book about a most unusual man. Benjamin Lay was not only short in stature (he was

4'7"), he was also a firebrand abolitionist. Even his fellow Quakers weren't accepting of him. Lay did not relent. Through Marcus Rediker's thorough research one also learns about Lay's interesting life, his travels, and his many attempts to spread the word of abolition. Here was a man who was born poor and who taught himself most of what he preached. Lay was far ahead of his time even to Quaker standards. He published a book with the help of his friend Benjamin Franklin that had not been approved through the proper Quaker channels. He used strong theatrics when he spoke, and he was convinced of his ideology. He was kicked out of the Quaker Friends in 1738 but that didn't squelch his faith nor his convictions. The older he got, the more radical he became in his ideas toward equality of all mankind and animals. He gave up most of his living comforts to live in a cave and eat mostly vegetarian. These are all ideologies that were at least 100 years too soon for society. He died in 1759 little known to history until recently. Someone reading Lay's thoughts today would wonder why little was done to preserve Lay's status. In the end history will be kinder to Lay. Rediker's work on Lay brings the early part of the 18th century American life and thought more into perspective: the Quakers were clearly not the peace-loving egalitarian people they wanted to be seen as (that was only true toward powerful and wealthy officials). While this book covers a lot of religious thought of the Quakers, this is truly a work of history in its detail. A fine read for lovers of early American colonial life and thought.

• The Fearless Benjamin Lay • by Marcus Rediker brilliantly succeeds in resuscitating an obscure but vitally important Revolutionary hero for our time. Professor Rediker is a distinguished historian whose groundbreaking work has proven that revolution in the Americas was driven by struggle from the bottom-up. I believe that anyone searching for an authentic hero of American history should read this excellent book. Professor Rediker demonstrates how Benjamin Lay embodied a vital link between the English Revolution and the American Revolution. Benjamin Lay carried forward the largely forgotten radicalism of the Quaker movement to America where he challenged the Quaker slave-owning aristocracy. The author explains how Benjamin Lay used guerilla theater tactics, writing and rhetoric to inspire a younger generation of Quakers who would soon turn against slavery in the 1750s. More than this, we learn how Benjamin Lay's advocacy for peace, egalitarianism and harmony with nature makes him worthy of our admiration today. A small act of justice would be for the Quakers to reinstate Benjamin Lay to the faith that he was so unfairly ostracized for having the courage to speak truth to power. As the disgraceful statues of slave owners finally tumble down across America, perhaps we will find the space and the wisdom - to remember the fearless Benjamin Lay. I highly recommend this outstanding book to

everyone.

I took this book for one reason. I have been a Friend (conservative) for over 60 years. Throughout a lifetime of First Day school and Quaker studies, I had never heard of Benjamin Lay. This was an eye opening work and quite a pointed poke at the flaws of Friends' actual lives. History has painted Friends as quite virtuous but the truth as always is more complicated and nuanced. The author deserves a lot of credit for his scholarship and persistence. I really got a lot out of this slim book.

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