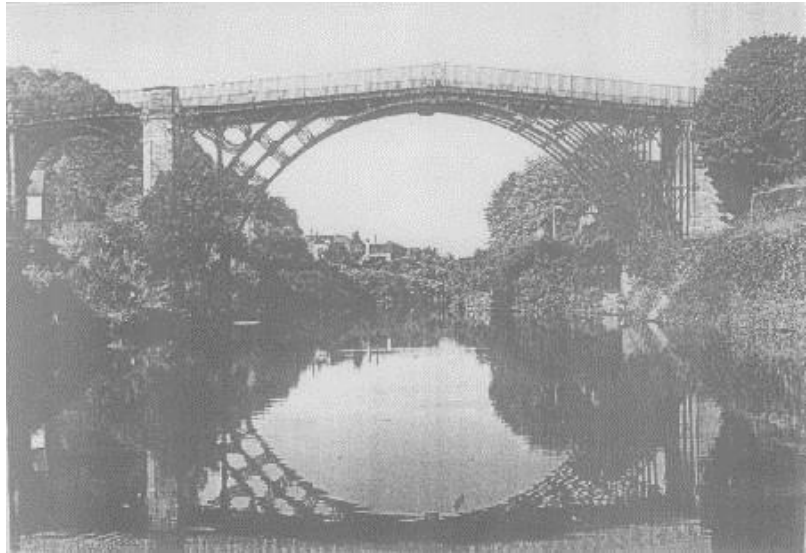


New Quaker Novel Blends History and Science Fiction

An interview with David
Morse, author of *The Iron
Bridge*

by Chuck Fager

The Iron Bridge, David Morse's new novel, is the story of the building of the world's first iron bridge, one of the key events setting off the Industrial Age.



Set in Shropshire, England in 1773, *The Iron Bridge* will be published by Harcourt Brace & Co. in July.

All the novel's major characters want the bridge built. John Wilkinson, a conniving arms maker, wants it as an advertisement for the beauty and wonder of iron. Abraham Darby III, Quaker owner of the largest ironworks in England, wants it built to further his family name.

And Maggie Foster wants the bridge built too. But she wants it built wrong. Maggie wants the bridge to topple, thereby hoping to divert the course of the nascent Industrial Revolution. In the fall of the bridge, she sees the saving of her world, a world that is in ecological ruin. Her world America in 2043.

Author David Morse is a member of Storrs Meeting in Connecticut. He has been a journalist and a restorer of old houses. When he was studying the history of the steel industry for a magazine article, his oldest son sent him an article about Ironbridge Gorge in England. The article set Morse's creative wheels turning, and six years later, *The Iron Bridge* is the result.

An excerpt from *The Iron Bridge* is included in the new FQA anthology [*The Best of Friends: Vol I*](#).

CF: *The historical setting in the novel, Shropshire in the 1770s, seems very detailed and convincing. How did you go about researching its history? Did you spend much time in the area? What resources did you use?*

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DM: I visited Ironbridge Gorge several times; also Liverpool and London, where parts of the novel are set. Much of the historical research was done in local English libraries, which include original sources such as ledgers and correspondence. Nothing excites me so much in research as handling those old papers, with their fading brown ink and remnants of wax seals. At the Royal Society, I even tried on Joseph Priestley's spectacles.

Published works also helped, including the journal of Abiah Darby, a Quaker minister and mother of Abraham Darby III; as well as secondary sources. Local historians and museum curators were helpful personally.

To capture the language of the era, I listened to tapes of older speakers and tried to extrapolate from them with the help of historical dictionaries. Old maps and engravings, including one of a Quaker meeting, helped further.

The task, after doing so much research, is keep it from showing not to display it.

CF: *According to the publisher, you spent ten years researching the steel industry, for the novel and a related article. What did you find most intriguing, and/or disturbing, about the history of steel?*

DM: Steel is inextricably bound up in the Western culture of violence. Cast-iron cannon cost much less than bronze and, along with muskets and steel armor, led directly to Europe's colonial expansion into the New World and Asia. This theme is central to my novel.

CF: *Tell me about Abraham Darby III, the Quaker ironmaster who was moving force behind the bridge. How close to the actual history of Darby and his family does your novel stick? Is the bridge still standing?*

DM: Darby is rendered as accurately as I could make him, although any fictional character takes on a life of its own. In the notes of meetings of the bridge subscribers are clues that suggest Darby may have been more reluctant than John Wilkinson to build the bridge of iron, and I exaggerate that reluctance in the service of art. I also intensify his Quakerly revulsion toward that era in his family history when cannon were produced at their Coalbrookdale works. Darby was an elder in the Madeley Meeting; he was certainly active in the Religious Society of Friends, as were his father and grandfather. The Darbys were part of the network of Quaker industrialists that included the Frys, Fothergills, Barclays and Lloyds. At Coalbrookdale, where the novel is set, Quakers were a tiny minority, dominant only in the more skilled trades and managerial positions at the ironworks.

The first Darby to turn to Quakerism was John (1649-1725), who was Convinced during the evangelistic Valiant Sixty's march south from north England through Bristol. Quakerism was passed on through his son, the first Abraham Darby who pioneered the use of mineral fuel (coke) as a replacement for charcoal in firing blast furnaces.

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Yes, the bridge still stands. A powerful presence, especially in the early morning mist.

CF: *When Maggie Foster comes "back from the future" 273 years to try and change the way the bridge is built, she sees it as a key turning point to worldwide ecological and political disaster. How close are Maggie's views of industrialization to your own?*

DM: Maggie and I are spiritual siblings. She just goes a little further.

CF: *Maggie lives, or maybe survives is a better term, in a secluded desert eco-commune, Ecosophia. But we don't get a full picture of the community or its history. Since we're closer in time to it than to Shropshire in 1773, can you tell us a little about the ideals and the structure of Ecosophia? Can you point to any prototypes of such communities?*

DM: Physically, Ecosophia bears some resemblance to the New Alchemy Institute on Cape Cod during the 1970s. New Alchemy was a sort of greenhouse, but not hermetically sealed off from the environment; it used recycling aquacultures, etc., with the aim of husbanding the earth's resources and minimizing environmental impact. It did not attempt, as Biosphere II did unsuccessfully several years later, to cut itself off completely from the environment.

Ecosophia was influenced by Quaker ideals. Governance is by "consensus" (what we would call Sense of the Meeting) achieved through periodic meetings involving most of the community, which numbers under 200 people. Founding principles are Openness (as opposed to secrecy), Nonviolence, Community, Mindfulness, and Harmony with the environment (to the extent that can be achieved in a world so violated by war and industry).

An example of Mindfulness is that automation is avoided in favor of human responsibility. Plants are watered by humans remembering or forgetting, rather than according to clocks or sensors. Exercise equipment generates electricity rather than consuming it. Menial tasks are rotated so that virtually everyone experiences them in the course of a six-month period.

CF: *In the novel, Maggie Foster joins the Darbys' Friends Meeting, even though she says she is more "sympathetic" than truly "Convinced," in Quaker parlance. But later her experience takes on a different character. I wonder if this is any way parallels your own journey. Your bio says you became a Quaker in 1995. Can you tell us something of how that came about? Was any of it related to your work on the novel?*

DM: That's a very perceptive question. For the longest time, I couldn't get my heroine to join the Quakers, even though it was an expedient way to infiltrate the Darby household and so made sense in terms of the novel's plot. I realized it was my own resistance. I am not a joiner. Finally, I was moved to become a Quaker. Maggie followed suit. In the meantime, that tension had become part of the book, and I think that's just as well. Part of Maggie's struggle is between her consciously constructed agenda on the one hand and her spiritual self on the other, which includes the irrational.

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What moved me to join was an unexpected sense of ministry around leading the movement to build a substantial addition onto our meetinghouse. I knew I had to join. I couldn't be only partly involved or partly a Quaker. In the course of that campaign, which I more or less shepherded from beginning to end, I felt a real presence of God in our communal efforts. The Way opened. It was like no other experience I've had. I felt, as Maggie did, a "molecule at the crest of a great curling wave." So you could say I moved from being simply sympathetic to Quaker ideals to becoming Convinced.

Writing the novel also made me aware of what a radical force Quakerism was in the 17th and early 18th centuries, with its women ministers and dedication to such movements as prison reform, and how Quakerism must really reinvent itself if it is to again become a vital force.

Building the new meetinghouse was a way of dedicating ourselves to the future of the meeting and the community around it. It brought us into a deeper community.

Both processes dominated my life writing the novel, and building the new addition. Each contributed to the other.

In the course of it, my wife developed cancer, went through chemotherapy and recovery. The meeting was tremendously supportive. There was a sense of pulling together.

CF: *The Darbys of the 1770s are portrayed as complicated, and by no means flawless examples of Quaker witness. After the research and writing of your novel, how would you sum up your reactions to them, and the key role Friends seem to have played in setting off the Industrial Revolution?*

DM: To be human is to be flawed. Many Quakers were less than admirable. Many were actively engaged in the slave trade. The Fry chocolate fortune depended on Jamaican sugar plantations run by slave labor. Another Quaker family, the Champions, were producing munitions. Quakers also pioneered the Black Drops, made from opium in the early 19th century. And in the case of the Darbys, there was no consciousness of the environmental despoilation that was visibly resulting from their ironworks.

But none of us is guiltless. The pickup truck I drive uses an embarrassing amount of fuel, and the plea from Amnesty International sits unanswered in my drawer. We Quakers make a grave error when we suppose we have a monopoly on conscience.

CF: *You worked on this novel for six years. What parts of the process were easiest for you, and which were most difficult?*

DM: Actually it ended up being seven years by the time I had made revisions to the galleys. I'm at a difficult time now, wondering whether it is going to find an audience.

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It was hard believing in myself all those years. It was especially difficult restarting when I got sidetracked for a period of several months.

The easiest parts, or in any case the most rewarding, were when the characters seemed to act with a will of their own.

CF: *Are you working on any other novel or major writing projects? If so, can you tell us about them?*

DM: I've just completed an article about a racial incident that took place at the University of Connecticut ten years ago, involving Asian Americans. I'm also working on some short fiction. I haven't yet decided the course of my next novel whether to make it historical or not. It will be rooted, as all my work is, in social action.

More information about The Iron Bridge and its background may be found on [David Morse's Iron Bridge website](#).

Types & Shadows is published quarterly by the Fellowship of Quakers in the Arts. Subscriptions are available through membership in the FQA.

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