

## The Wilkinson-Story Controversy in Reading.<sup>1</sup>

The history of this controversy in Reading is interesting because one is able to appreciate the effects of the different positions on the conduct of the Meeting, and one also realises how bitter the discussion became, and how lasting were its effects.

It may be well to state briefly wherein the disaffected Friends differed from George Fox and the Yearly Meeting. In the first place, they were jealous of George Fox's influence and authority, and declared that he would become as a pope. Secondly, they were jealous of the Yearly Meeting, which they compared to a supreme Court of Judicature. Thirdly, when asked, "Ought not Christian Churches to disown for breach of fundamental articles?" they answered, "that if such articles were against the Light of Christ in the individual conscience, was not the requiring of submission an infringement of Christian Liberty?" Fourthly, they objected to the Society's rule requiring abstention from payment of tithes. Fifthly, they objected to the establishment of Monthly and Quarterly Meetings for Women, saying that already women had more power than ability to make use of it. And lastly, they defended the practice of fleeing in time of persecution, and of discontinuing usual Friends' meetings in order to escape the cruel provisions of the Conventicle Act. Dr. Thomas Hodgkin says in his *George Fox*,<sup>2</sup> "One can see that the very existence of the new Society and, it might almost be said, the cause of religious freedom in England, were at stake, and that with all their bold words on behalf of Individualism, these opposers of all Church authority in the new community would, if victorious, soon have had neither community nor individuals left."

Wilkinson and Story were represented in Reading by Thomas Curtis and Ann his wife, Benjamin and Leonard Coale, Leonard Key, Robert Payne, Thomas Tudway, and

<sup>1</sup> An account of the controversy, in which John Wilkinson and John Story, both of Westmorland, took the leading part, is given at some length in John S. Rowntree's *Micah's Mother; or a Neglected Chapter in Church History*, London, 1893. See also *Wiltshire Notes and Queries*, June, 1903. Westmorland, Wiltshire, and the West of England generally were principally affected by this opposition to law and order. Several leaders of this movement joined other Churches and became bitter opponents of Quakerism, but the majority of the Separatists returned to the fold.

<sup>2</sup> *George Fox* in "Leaders of Religion" series. London, 1896, p. 249.

Robert Pocock. These Friends were the most prominent in the Meeting; the Curtises and Coales had joined the Society when the Meeting was started in 1655. Leonard Key was a most powerful minister. The majority of the Meeting did not follow these leading Friends but remained within the Society; the most prominent among them were John Buy, William Lamboll, Abraham Bonnifield, and Christopher Cheesman.

The first reference we have to the dispute is in George Fox's *Journal*, anno 1677—"I was at Friends Meeting at Reading, and in the evening had a large meeting with Friends; next day there was another meeting about holding a Women's Meeting, some of them, that had let in the spirit of division, fell into jangling and were disorderly for a while till the weight of Truth brought them down." There is a Monthly Meeting minute, 26-9-1680, reprimanding J. Buy, who had written to London asking what action he should take, and exhorting him "not to be so forward and active in sowing discord." Four months later John Buy and others were reprimanded for writing to London complaining of what was being taught. B. Coale was Monthly Meeting clerk and wrote pretty much what Thomas Curtis and he agreed upon.

The disagreements grew rapidly fiercer though there was yet no open rupture. The Meeting House had been built in 1671 by Thomas Curtis, who had been partially reimbursed by Friends, and had handed it over to four trustees appointed by the Meeting. Now, in 1681, three of the four trustees were of Curtis's party, who, seeing a rupture imminent, disregarded the opinion of their co-trustee, and handed back the property into Curtis's hands, making him sole owner, thus securing to their side the principal asset.

The Sunday evening meeting was of a more public and probably more lively character than the morning meeting and the Wilkinson-Story party objected to it, and attempted to spoil it by starting an afternoon meeting. Neither would they allow the Women Friends of the Quarterly Meeting to hold a half-yearly Meeting at Reading, at the time of the Men's Quarterly Meeting. Thomas Curtis declared it not suitable that Women should go gadding about the county away from their household duties. Whereupon he clinched his argument by locking the Meeting House doors and walking off with the key. The Women had to meet in an adjoining malt-house.

These Women's Meetings were started by George Fox, which was a prime reason for the dissentients to have none of them. Thomas Curtis's attitude to George Fox is in the sharpest contrast with his attitude of some years before when he addressed Fox as "he who should come, not born of Flesh, but of the Spirit." Benjamin Coale was clerk of the Quarterly Meeting, and he had disseminated William Rogers's Separatist book, entitled, *The Christian Quaker*. In fifth month, 1681, many Friends in the Quarterly Meeting resolved to supersede B. Coale, and in second month, 1682, they appointed William Austill as clerk. Twenty-nine men Friends signed a paper removing B. Coale, and ordering that he should be paid what was due to him. William Austill began to write the minutes, but Thomas Curtis tore the papers from him. Benjamin Coale acted at that meeting, but refused to show what minutes he had made, saying, "It is below *men* to concern themselves with such as you are." The minutes were not then read over as now, but the book lay upon the table at the end of the meeting "for all faithful friends to see if they please, how the business is entered and recorded." After considerable discussion Coale and Curtis agreed to let the other Friends look at the book for half an hour, Curtis sitting watch in hand, while Leonard Coale and Benjamin Coale stood by to guard the book.

As the Meeting for Sufferings refused to recognise B. Coale as clerk, in second month, 1683, the two parties in the Quarterly Meeting held their Meeting at the same time in the same room each with its own clerk; and at the next Quarterly Meeting they finally and entirely separated.

In Reading, however, Friends still continued to meet together and quarrel, the Wilkinson-Story party allowing Friends to marry without liberating certificates, walking about the room when William Lamboll was speaking, and keeping on their hats during prayer from Friends with whom they did not agree.

The Orthodox Friends appear to have intoned their testimonies in meeting, justifying it as a further growth in Truth, but Thomas Curtis declared that "singing out testimonies in a Public Meeting as some do, is an abomination to the Lord." In sixth month, 1684, the two parties sat back to back in Monthly Meeting in the same room, each party with its own clerk. But the following two months the Orthodox met for business in a room above the Meeting House; however, in ninth month, 1684, T. Curtis and his

party coming early locked the door of the upper room, and, to quote their own account, "Friends [*i.e.* their own party] being pretty many Meeting in ye lower room there came in also J. Buy and William Lamboll and several of their company, and the windows being shut, they desired to sit down with Friends but after some disorder went all away and left us." Thus two Monthly Meetings were formed, but for another year the two parties met together for *worship!*

Then the Wilkinson-Story party desired "that Thomas Curtis shut up ye doors, seeing it is only the house that keeps us together for which Thomas Curtis is liable to be fined if ye magistrates be strict upon us." How different from the spirit of earlier years when he had gone to prison time after time for having meetings at his house! He locked the door, and later "made a wall with bricks before it, for, having stopped up the witness in themselves, they would fain stop it up without, the door being a witness against them." So the Meeting House remained unused for seven years, the Orthodox meeting in the yard outside in the wind or rain as a protest against their eviction. Curtis and his friends met in private houses.

In the meantime, complete separation rendering verbal conflict impossible, both parties took to print and a stream of pamphlets issued from the press. They are full of personal abuse and recriminations, mixed with the well known theological arguments of the two divisions. The following is a list of all the pamphlets that I have been able to discover on the subject :—

Date.	List of Pamphlets.	Author.
25/1/1685	The Lybeller Carracteriz'd or a Hue and Cry sent after him - - -	- B. Coale and L. Key.
25/2/1685	A Stop to the False Characterizers Hue-and-Cry - - - -	- W. Lamboll and J. Buy.
3/1685	A Reply to A Stop to false Characterizers, etc. - - - -	- L. Key.
1686	Reasons why the Meeting House Doors were shut up at Reading	- T. Curtis and B. Coale.
4/4/1686	Something in answer to the above Reasons - - - -	- W. L. and J. B.
1692	Reasons for shutting Meeting House Doors, Reading - - -	- L. Key.
1692	An Expedient for Peace - - -	- Bristol Friends.
3/4/1693	Revival of the Difference - - -	- L. Key.
4/4/1693	Proposed Expedients for true Reconciliation - - - -	- B. C. and C. Harris.

- 21/4/1693 The late Expedients tenderly considered - - - - - G. Whitehead, W. Meade, and others.
- 5/1693 Deceit Discovered, and Malice Manifested in L. K.'s late paper - - - Thomas Ellwood.

In 1693, when all fear of fines had passed, the Separatists went back to their old house, and the others seeing that further protest was useless, took rooms on lease in London Street. They continued separate until 1716, when they re-united in a new house on the same site as the present house in Church Street.

The Wilkinson-Story faction, weakened by death and possessing no fresh life, were induced by Thomas Story to capitulate and admit their fault. Thus ended a controversy that had lasted thirty-six years.

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## The Handwriting of George Fox.

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A correspondent, William F. Miller, of Sidcot, has kindly furnished some interesting information respecting the interpretation of the words "helxe don dos" in the handwriting of George Fox referred to in the first number of *The Journal*.<sup>1</sup> It should be mentioned that the words should read "helxn don dos." William F. Miller writes that there is no mention of an Alexander Dundas in the records of Scottish Friends, but suggests that the person referred to is Helen Dundas, widow of the William Dundas alluded to in Sewel's *History*. William Dundas is also not mentioned in the records, probably having died before the date at which the records commenced, viz., 1669, but the name of his widow Helen frequently occurs. It will be seen that four out of the five letters in "helxn" and "helen" occupy identical places. The difficulty is that the closest examination will not get rid of what is apparently an *x*, and also that George Fox usually formed the letter *e* distinctly.

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<sup>1</sup> Art. *The Handwriting of George Fox*, p. 9.