

Remarks on the Letter in Cypher from Francis Howgill to George Fox.¹

A cypher, in the strict sense of the word, is a code in which certain arbitrary signs or symbols are made to represent certain words or combinations of words, and in which we may have identically the same phonetic sound represented by entirely different symbols. Now, in shorthand it is otherwise; the same phonetic is always represented by the same symbol, no matter in what combination that sound may occur, its chief aim being to represent words in the shortest way possible, and so attain speed in writing. Therefore it is obvious that in deciphering an unrecognized method of shorthand, when once we find the representative symbol for each sound, the rest is merely a matter of transliteration. But if we have to deal with a mixed shorthand and cypher, our task is increased a hundredfold, for where are we to draw the dividing line between the phonetic and arbitrary symbols?

To this latter type belongs the letter from Howgill to George Fox, which was published in the January number of *THE JOURNAL*, and brought to my notice by Dr. Winstone, of Russell Square, whose generous interest in all matters relating to the Society of Friends is so well known. It consists of a large number of imported and, so to speak, foreign symbols intricately woven into what was originally a regular system of recurring forms; for in the representative signs for "give," and "get" we see identically the same radical with the different modifications attached; and other similar forms, too numerous to mention, will be found on a very slight inspection of the vocabulary.

But, nevertheless, there is a mixture, for example, in the code used by the Friends of that date,

¹The subject of the use of a cypher in the writing of the early Friends is an interesting one. We do not think that it can have been a common practice, as only a few instances occur among a great number of early letters in *D*, and the transmission of secret correspondence does not seem to be in keeping with the open methods generally adopted.—Eds.

V 'may'; A 'man'; \ 'my' are
 phonetic; but G 'me'; ^{MD} 'magistrate';
 Again I 'they'; 7 'that' are phonetic,
 but t 'thou'; 8 'thy'; are arbitrary.
 Further { 0 'where'; 0 'which' phonetic.
 { V 'were'; ~ 'would' arbitrary
 { 17 'nothing': arbitrary.
 { 7 'not': phonetic
 { 7 'give'; 7 'god'; 7 'get': phonetic
 { 7 'that'; -7 'and get'; 76 'if that'
 are arbitrary

and numerous other examples can be produced to prove that there is in it a mixture of phonetic and arbitrary signs. And what still further augments the task of transcribing the Howgill letter is the fact that it is very badly written; the lack of differentiation between thick and thin strokes (so essential in shorthand), the abundance of blotches and corrections, the exaggeration of dots and punctuations into strokes, the disregard of the position of the supplementary strokes, all tend to make the subject more difficult to the uninitiated to read. But then we may argue, that as both the supposed writer of the letter and the receiver were not, as far as is known, men of high education, it ought not to present insuperable difficulties to a man of modern learning. That is all very well as far as it goes, but it would be unreasonable to contend, or even suggest, that the letter in question was the only one in cypher that ever passed between the two men: so, therefore, we may conclude that they frequently used this code, and so became well versed in its use, and eventually abbreviated and curtailed their compound symbols into simple ones.

One other point which is of great import, the combinations of symbols used in compound words are quite arbit-

rarily joined or not joined together, and the spacing between the words (so carefully attended to in another letter, to which we shall draw attention in a later paragraph) has been absolutely disregarded, and all the signs run into continuous lines, possibly not without some very good reason, probably to mystify unauthorized persons, into whose hands the letter might fall. To give a few illustrations of combined symbols :—

ff stands for 'deceit'; \rightarrow *f* 'false':
Y 'answer': \angle *p* 'accusations':
li 'everlasting': *IO* 'eternally':
ly 'injury': *pf* 'person': *JO* 'person':
ly 'restore': *p/q* 'satisfaction':
ivf 'slander': *f* 'through': *ly p* 'transgression'

These examples will, we think, serve to show that where we should expect a simple, or even a connected form of symbol, we find just the opposite. In fact there is no hard and fast rule which governs the system.

Very fortunately, in a collection of letters² of George Fox was found one in similar code, which bore a heading in longhand, identical to a letter in longhand directly underneath. It had been surmised that the two letters were one and the same, and we had the pleasure of proving that to be a fact. From the collection of symbols thus gained was made a short vocabulary, and it was hoped by its aid to transcribe the Howgill letter, but on comparing the two, in addition to the above-mentioned difficulties, unknown symbols kept cropping up, which would not allow themselves to be resolved by aid of the symbols in our possession; for this reason only a few unconnected words were decipherable.

It may be added, that on searching the books on Cyphers and Shorthand of that period (seventeenth century) in the British Museum nothing was found to correspond with the code in question.

² D. MSS. Box A.

Shorthand had been known for hundreds of years before this date. The earliest known application of shorthand mentioned in history is that of Cicero's slave Tyro, who used to take down notes and reports on legal and other matters for his master; and they are now called Tyronian notes, *Notæ Tyronianæ*. It is believed to have been introduced by the Greeks and so carried to Rome, and subsequently diffused more or less over the continent.

Suetonius makes mention of cryptograms, as distinct from shorthand, in the following passage,

“*In quibus epistolis, si qua occultius perferenda essent, per NOTAS scripsit.*” Suet. *Caes.* 56. “In which letters, if anything *secret* was to be communicated, he wrote it in cypher.”

That Seneca knew of shorthand, we gather from this passage in his *Epistolæ*,

“ . . . *verborum notas, quibus quamvis citata excipitur oratio et celeritatem lingue manus sequitur?*” Sen. *Ep.* 90. “Shorthand [*lit.* signs of words], by which speech, however rapid, is taken down, and the hand follows the speed of the tongue?”

Suetonius also refers to shorthand in *Tit.* 3; and Paulinus in *Dig.* 37, 1-6, showing that even then the two systems of cypher (*i.e.* code known only to those in possession of the key), and shorthand (*i.e.* the art of representing a large number of words by a few signs), were well known, and kept distinct.

Below is given a short vocabulary, collected from the second letter to which we have above referred, and from which the illustrations have been drawn. It is one from Margaret Fox to Edward Burrough on the subject of some books he was publishing, but where the necessity for using cypher arose is not easy to see. Also in the Howgill letter this does not explain itself, unless it was owing to the religious character of its contents, which we may presume from the frequent recurrence of the name of God.

The vocabulary is arranged in alphabetical order; and, however incomplete, is interesting as being the first step towards the elucidation of the Howgill letter, and also as exhibiting parts of a hitherto unknown cypher used by Friends of the seventeenth century.

It would be very satisfactory if some readers of THE JOURNAL could throw any further light upon this interesting subject.

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CYPHER SYMBOLS EMPLOYED IN THE
LETTER FROM MARGARET FOX TO EDWARD BURROUGH.
(17th Cent. c. 1660.)

A.		C. (could)	
a.	→	committed.	ϕ 1 ³ (? ted)
accusations.	∟ ρ (a.k.o)	courage.	2 7 (c.o.g)
am.	(crime.	5 1 (crim)
and.	-		
answer.	→ (n ? s. ca)	D	
any.	2.	d.	3
arm	∩ (arm)	dear.	3' (d. ca)
art	√ (art)	deceit	8 7 (d. str'd)
as	S	do	7
author	∩ √ (a ? s. ca)	down.	2
		dragon.	∩ 7 - (dr. g. n)
B.		E.	
b.	1	e.	2
be.	6	either	∩ ∩ (e. then)
beloved.	6 2 (6 ? ed)	everlasting	li
bind.	1 7 (bind)	eternally.	∩ ∩ ∩ (e. ? ly)
boldness.	1 2 3 (6 ?)		
books.	4	F	
brother.	2 3	f.	7
		false.	7 7 (f. l. o)
		friends.	7 7
		from.	2 2 (f. r. m)
		G.	
C.		g.	7
c.	1	gather.	7 ∩ (g. then)
can.	5	yet.	7' (g. t.)
cast.	5 8 (ca. st)		
carry.	5 √ (ca. m. g)		
chain.	7 -		
clear.	5 √ (cl. ca)		
corrupt.	ϕ		

LETTER IN CYPHER.

G. (could)		M. (could)	
give.	γ.	man's.	λ
god.	γ'	may	λ'
		me	6
H.		mind's	λ
have.	z	moved.	λ' (m:ed)
heads.	λ'	mover.	λ' (m:er)
him	λ	myself.	3 (me)
his	~	my	λ (m:it)
I.			
I.	.	N.	
in	✓	not.	7
if that	γ 6	nothing.	4
injury.	λ γ		
is.	'	O	
it.	~	o.	c
		of.	c
J.		offered	c' (of:ed)
justly.	~B. (j:st.ly)	or	v
		other.	c
K.		out	c (l.t)
keep.	6	own	L
know.	✓		
L.		P.	
l.	.	p.	σ
law	λ	person.	JO
lay.	c:	person.	10 (p:s:n)
let.	λ (l.t)	pit.	σ 1 (pit)
lies / mds	c.	power.	σ v. (ver)
love.	c	prefer	σ 1 (p:fer)
		punish	σ - h (pun:sh)
		put	σ 1 (p:t)
M			
m.	.		
magistrates	λ m		

LETTER IN CYPHER.

r. R.	v	u.	
restore .	v ₂ (r. str)	up.	c'
		upon	v
S:			
s.	p	w.	
satisfaction	p!q?y. (s.t.s.f.c.tn)	wire	v
seal	p c (s.l)	way	v
self	v	whatsoever	w
set	p! (st)	where	o
shall	h (s.l)	which	o
seized.	p p' (s.o.ed)	whose	Op
sister	p q (s. str)	who	c.
slander	v v f ²	with	o
so	S.	would	s
		write	v i (w.t)

T.

t.	l
taken	h
that	v
the	! (t)
they	t
there	v
therefore	v v (h.m.f.)
their	v.
thing	w z.
this	y
those	p
thou	t.
through	h.
try	y
to	z
transgressed.	h y p' (tr. s.d.)
tread	v' (tr.)
trud	v o (tr?)

From the above we gather the following phonetic symbols.

i. y.	.
er. or.	v
ed(t)	> (')
en. on.	-
st	s
then.	v