

George Fox's Knowledge of Hebrew.

In the ninth volume of *The Friend* (Phila.), page 52, is an article entitled "The Study of the Ancient Languages." In it is a rather surprising item, stating:—

We are told that that enlightened instrument in the gathering of our religious Society, George Fox, placed so great a value on the original languages of the Bible, that he applied himself, amid the varied occupations of his laborious life, to acquiring a knowledge of the Hebrew.

A *Memoir of George Fox*, prepared by William and Thomas Evans in 1837, also mentions that "he spent considerable time and pains in acquiring a knowledge of one or more of the ancient languages."¹

A more definite assertion, however, is found in a footnote to page 336 of the second English edition of Henry Tuke's *Biographical Notices*, printed in 1826. Here the Editor of this particular edition says:—

It is a striking additional proof of George Fox's esteem for learning, that he himself acquired a knowledge of the Hebrew language. This circumstance was most probably overlooked by the Compiler, but it rests on the best authority. George Whitehead, the intimate friend of George Fox, in a pamphlet published in 1691, in reply to some severe animadversions on the ignorance of George Fox, declares that he was "able to understand, read, and write Hebrew." He had doubtless acquired this language for the purpose of reading the Old Testament in the original tongue.

Further references are so involved, they are difficult to present briefly. Around that early, and rather pretentious publication—*A Battle-Door for Teachers & Professors*,² etc., centres our evidence. Sewel, in his *History*, issued in 1722, thus describes it:—

¹ Evans's *Friends' Library*, vol. i., p. 104.

² The *Battle-Door*, examined through the kindness of David S. Taber, custodian of New York Yearly Meeting's Library, is an interesting and well-preserved copy of this curious old book. It was presented to this Library by Agnes S. Lawrence, a great-granddaughter of David Sands, the well-remembered American Minister. At the bottom of p. 34 is written in a scholarly hand: "Morris Birkbeck, Guilford, Surrey, Old England, to David Sands, Cornwall, Orange Co., State of New York, North America. 10th Mo. 31st, 1802." On the opposite page, at the bottom, apparently in David Sands's writing, is this statement regarding the above:—"Wrote by Morris Birkbeck, once in America, Companion to Robert Walker of Yorkshire, Old England. (1773-1775)." On the

Not long before this time [1660] George Fox, with the help of John Stubbs and Benjamin Furly, published a book called "A Battledoor." In this book were set forth examples of about thirty languages, to show that every language had its particular denomination for the singular and the plural number in speaking to persons: and in every place where description began the shape of a battledoor was delineated.⁴

The names of all three of these Friends appeared on the title page of the *Battle-Door*. This, in view of Gorge Fox's limited education, provoked the accusations of "deceit and hypocrisy" from his adversaries.

Fox writes in his *Journal* of his interest in its preparation and circulation:—

While I was prisoner in Lancaster Castle, the Book called the *Battle-door* came forth, . . . John Stubbs and Benjamin Furly took great Pains in the Compiling of it, which I put them upon: and some things I added to it. When it was finished, some of them were presented to the King and his Council, to the Bishops of Canterbury and London, and to the Two Universities one a piece, and many bought of them.⁵

Evidently leading Friends were interested in, and approved the work, for soon after its issue, John Stubbs wrote to G. Fox, "he was endeavoring to get the copies of the book away to several parts of the nation" as

inside of the back cover, in very ancient script, is the name "John Cudworth." Written on a narrow margin is "Mary Wilson." Benjamin Furly's name is signed in full to the directions for the pronunciation of French.

Toward the close of the book is a note by John Stubbs to the "Reader," containing an apology for the paging:—"Being not finished at one Presse we could not with convenience keep a constant order about the Number of the pages," etc. It also says:—"Notwithstanding the Endeavours of the Corrector there have many faults escaped the Presse, some of which have been mended with the Pen as thou may perceive." And the neat "mending" of 1660 may be seen throughout the book, and is especially conspicuous from page 35 to 50, the Hebrew portion.

After the publication of *Innocency against Envy*, Francis Bugg and other opponents of Friends claimed that "Eighty Pounds of mill'd money had been paid by Gerard Roberts, besides a Dozen Bottles of Wine given by M. Fell, to hire some Jew to assist G. Fox in preparing the Hebrew Portion of the Battle-Door." J. Whiting says, "Was that any *Crime*?"

The original cost of the *Battle-Door* is stated to have been "2s. 6d." In 1814 it was valued at three guineas, in 1819 at four guineas. A damaged copy sold in 1902 in Philadelphia for *fifty dollars*, and one in London a little later, for *one hundred dollars*.³

³ See Isaac Sharp's article, *The Friend* (London), 12th Dec., 1902.

⁴ Sewel's *History*. Phila. edition, vol. i., p. 364.

⁵ *Journal*, 1694, p. 245.

“ they had been much Enquired for,” and Margaret Fell, in a letter to George Fox in Lancaster Prison, dated London, 5th mo. 1660, wrote :—

The last First-day I was at Whitehall, . . . There was one with me who had some books ; three of the “ Battledoors ” were delivered : one to the King’s bed-chamberman, and another to the Dean of the chapel, and a third to a great man of the court.⁶

Sewel says of the *Battle-Door* :—

This work was promoted to public view by G. Fox to show the learned (if possible to convince them), that the custom of those called Quakers, to say *thou* to a single person, though it were to the King, and not *you*, was not irregular nor absurd . . . and that therefore they could not justly be charged with unmannerliness. . . .

At first, this ambitious effort was somewhat successful. King Charles expressed his approval, and George Fox wrote that “ it did convince People, that few afterward were so rugged towards us, for saying Thou and Thee, which before they were exceeding fierce against us for.” But over twenty years after its publication, when the sad period of controversy arose in the Society, this book became an object of especial ridicule with some. Francis Bugg, an apostate from Friends, and for many years their trying and persistent antagonist, was one of the most critical—and the “ severe animadversions,” referred to by the Editor of Tuke’s *Notices*, were doubtless those contained in two “ invective pamphlets ” written by him. In Joseph Smith’s *Catalogue*, fourteen pages are required for the list of Bugg’s controversial books and pamphlets, with their lengthy and too often malicious titles. In Friends’ Library, North Sixteenth Street, Philadelphia, forty-eight of these publications may be found. By request some extracts from the pamphlets referred to have been kindly copied by the Librarian, Mary S. Allen. One pamphlet was entitled : *The Quakers Detected, Their Errours Confuted, and their Hypocrisie Discovered* : printed for the Author in London, 1686. The other was : *Battering Rams against New Rome, containing a farther Discovery of the Grand Hypocrisie, of the Leaders and Teachers of the People called Quakers.*

⁶ *Fells of Swarthmoor Hall*, 1896, p. 172.

A few quotations from these pages of bitter denunciations will suffice.

From *Battering Rams against New Rome*, p. 15:—

The IX Instance of their [the Friends'] Hypocrisie. First, Your decrying all Learning; and next, Your assuming to your selves such Learning as you never had, nor do at all understand . . . that Geo. Fox, who but a little before sate upon is Shoemakers Seat, working Journey-work at Manchester, for his Master Geo. Gee, who could hardly write his Name,⁷ or read a Chapter without spelling; and that he of a sudden should be such a profound Scholar . . . Next, That you assume to your selves such Learning as you never had, nor do at all understand, I shall prove from another Book put forth by Geo. Fox, your great Doctor; Intituled A Battledoor for Teachers, and Professors to learn Plural and Singular, &c. . . . This George Fox . . . in this *Battledoor*, set his hand, and affixed his Name, to six several foreign Languages (of which he is not Master of one;) that it might go for current, that he was inspired with the Gift of Tongues; (for that he had any other Reason, I cannot understand;) which was such a piece of Presumption as no Age can parallel. The Languages to which his Name in the said Battledoor is affixed, are, the Latin, the Italian, the Greek, the Hebrew, the Chaldee, the Syriack . . .

This is followed by a challenge for G. Fox, G. Whitehead, W. Penn and S. Cater to prove Matters of Fact. This pamphlet was issued by John Gwillim in Bishopsgate Street, January 12th, 1690/91.

It is a pathetic coincidence, that at this very time George Fox lay on his death-bed at Henry Gouldney's, in White Hart Court, passing away the following evening, 13th of Eleventh Month, 1690/91.

This sad event may have caused the hearts of Friends to be more deeply stirred at F. Bugg's calumny. For an answer was promptly published in First Month, 1691, entitled, *Innocency against Envy in a Brief Examination of Francis Bugg's Two Invective Pamphlets against the People of God called Quakers*, etc. By G. W. and S. C.⁸ On page 15, we read:—

His [Francis Bugg's] ninth Instance against Us, is, Decrying all Learning, which is notoriously false. 1st, Divine Learning in Christ's

⁷ Sewel says, "Albeit he employed others, because himself was no quick writer, yet generally they were young lads," etc. vol. i., p. 47.

Also see G. Fox's *Journal*, p. 511, American Edition.

⁸ Uncertain whether "S. C." stands for Stephen Crisp or for S. Cater. The latter seems more reasonable, as he was *challenged*. The *Phila. Friend*, vol. iv., p. 118, for some reason gives it Stephen Crisp. In the Catalogues of Whiting and Smith, this pamphlet is not among the listed works of either.

School, we have ever preferred and loved. 2dly, Human Learning in its place, we have not denied but owned. . . . 3dly, Assuming to our selves such Learning as we never had, is also false. . . . 4thly, His other pretended proof, is G. Foxe's Book, entitled a *Battle-door for Teachers &c.* to learn Singular and Plural.—Why what Hypocrisie is in that Book? What hurt has that done him? Oh! G. F. has set his Hand and affixt his Name to six several Foreign Languages in it, as Latin, Italian, Greek, Hebrew, Caldea and Syriack. And what then? He is not Master of one (quoth F. B.), He is ignorant of the Grounds and Rules of these Languages; how have that People been cheated and deceived, who have believed him led by an Infallible Spirit, and that he had twenty-four Languages given him by Divine Inspiration in one night? And what of all this? Was he accountable for their belief? (if any did so believe) when he never told them that he had those Languages so given him? We never heard him profess any such thing, (nor any declare they so believed) who were more conversant with him than F. B. . . . Besides, though he was not Master of all those Languages, It was no shameful Hypocrisie to put his Name to the said Book, it being much in English, wherein these Languages are interpreted. There are also John Stubbs and Benj. Furley's Names to it, as well as G. F.'s, in the very Title Page, and they were Scholars.⁹ And G. F. was not so wholly Ignorant and Illiterate in all those Languages, as F. B. renders him; for he attained both to the Reading, Writing, and Understanding of Hebrew, and he might well fix his Name to the Book, both with respect to the matter treated on, the English, the Hebrew, and his care of Collecting the same, and yet not merit F. Bugg's Reproach of Cheating, Deceiving, Deceitful, Shameful, Hipocrisies, Juggles, feigned Miracles, out-doing the Papist's Legend. . . .¹⁰

It seems significant that these invidious accusations of deceit and duplicity were not made until nearly twenty

⁹ Of John Stubbs (1618-1674), William Sewel writes, "He was a man skilled not only in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, but also in the Oriental languages," (*History*, p. 113), and Maria Webb states, "He for a considerable time kept a school at Lancaster. In the evening he taught the Latin, Greek and Hebrew languages to private pupils" (*Fells*, 1896, p. 173).

Benjamin Furly (1636-1714) was a man of culture and literary tastes. Isaac Sharp says of him, "He issued books in English and Dutch, besides editing works in French. A catalogue of his books, issued at Rotterdam in 1714, after his decease, occupies over 360 closely printed octavo pages. It contains over 3,000 items, of which 249 were dictionaries and grammars of different languages" (*The Friend*, Lond. 1902, p. 816).

¹⁰ After the death of G. Fox, others brought similar charges. Notably Gerard Crœse in his *Historia Quakeriana*, published in Latin in Amsterdam in 1695, translated into English, and, after being reviewed by Friends, printed for John Dunstan, at the Raven in Jewen Street, London, 1696. Referred to by Sewel, vol. i., pp. 47, 364. Cotton Mather also made sarcastic allusions to G. Fox's Ignorance in his *Church History of New England*, published in 1701, which were answered by John Whiting in his *Truth and Innocency Defended*, pp. 113, 114.

years after the publication of the *Battle-Door*. The criticism of F. Bugg regarding G. Fox's name on the various title pages seems especially forced, as it was merely his signature to a pertinent little sentence—entirely of his own composing—an exhortation to believe in the Light of Christ, which was translated and used by the writers of the work as they went along. (See Whiting's *Truth and Innocency Defended*, pp. 113, 114.)

We have to admit that the principal claim for Fox's knowledge of Hebrew is found in a highly controversial pamphlet only. But it does not seem probable that his "intimate friend, George Whitehead," would even in such a production represent anything but actual fact.

Whitehead was "educated at the noted school of Blencoe, in Cumberland," where, it is said, "he made a considerable proficiency in those called learned languages," and was, apparently, entirely competent to judge intelligently. It would certainly seem extraordinary to question the veracity of one who was "for sixty-eight years a respected minister among Friends," and "for about fifty years a very eminent member of the Monthly Meeting of Devonshire House."

It is not to be presumed, however, that George Fox's knowledge of Hebrew, according to any modern standard for classical scholarship, at all approached proficiency.¹¹ Probably, his own statement at Holker Hall in 1663, three years after the *Battle-Door* appeared, best expresses its extent. When asked by Justice Preston, "Whether he did understand languages?" he replied, "Sufficient for myself; and that I know no law that is transgressed by it," etc.¹² That he so overcame his limitations, as to attain any knowledge of a language so difficult, is surprising, and furnishes an instructive evidence of the breadth of his interests. When, and where, amid the trying experiences of his busy life, he found time or opportunity for this, would be interesting to know.

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¹¹ Sewel says distinctly, "He was not skilled in languages. Neither was he skilled in English."

¹² George Fox's Journal, Phila. Edition, p. 371.