

Our Bibliographers.

II. MORRIS BIRKBECK, 1734—1816.

In accordance with the proposal set forth by the Editors of THE JOURNAL in the issue for January, 1907, to publish, in succession, articles upon our bibliographers, John Whiting, Morris Birkbeck, and Joseph Smith, this account of the second of these worthies has been prepared.

The Birkbecks were an old family of distinction in Westmorland, their history dating back to 1515, when Henry VIII. granted arms to Thomas Birkbeck, at that time of Carlisle, "for his brave defence against the Scots."¹ Towards the close of the seventeenth century, a William Birkbeck migrated from Mallerstang in Westmorland, where his ancestors had held land since the reign of Henry VIII., to Settle in Yorkshire, and from him the Settle Birkbecks were descended. He established himself in business there as a woollen and general merchant, and from 1698, at least, was a prominent Friend. As in the case of many other thrifty and successful Quaker traders, out of the general business a banking business developed. William Birkbeck was married in 1703, at Settle Friends' Meeting House, to Sarah Armistead. The eldest son of this marriage, William, born in 1705, succeeded his father in the business. He married, firstly, in 1730, Sarah, daughter of Richard Morris, of Rugeley, surgeon; secondly, Deborah Wilson, of Kendal.

The eldest child of the first marriage was Morris, born 4th of November (old style), 1734. Comparatively little appears to be known of his early life and his business career, but the following incident, taken with permission from *The Birkbecks of Westmorland*, is worth recording.

The following remarkable story of her [Sarah Birkbeck's] death-bed I have condensed from an account (in the *Haunted Homes of Great Britain*, by J. H. Ingrave) written by the late Mrs. Charles Fox, of Trebah, near Falmouth, supplemented by Mrs. Fox's notes, sent me by her daughter, Mrs. Edmund Backhouse:—

Sarah Birkbeck had been in Scotland with a committee of Friends on a religious visit, and on their way back to Yorkshire she was seized

¹ For this and other family details see *The Birkbecks of Westmorland*, by Robert Birkbeck, F.S.A., privately printed, 1900.

with illness at Cocker-mouth. She had three weeks before left her three children at Settle with their father, under the care of a cousin, Mrs. Fairbank; the latter promised to keep a journal of all that concerned the children during their mother's absence, the post in those days being both uncertain and costly. The illness was so sudden that she died before her husband even heard that she was ill, and the Friends at Cocker-mouth with whom she was staying, seeing the hopeless nature of the attack, also kept notes of her last hours for the satisfaction of her family. One morning, between seven and eight o'clock, on Mrs. Fairbank going into the children's room at Settle, she found them all sitting up in their beds in a state of great excitement and delight, crying out, "Mamma has been here;" and the youngest child said, "She called 'Come Esther.'" Nothing could persuade them that they were mistaken, and the occurrence was carefully noted down to entertain the mother on her return. That same morning, as Sarah Birkbeck lay dying on her bed at Cocker-mouth, she said, "I should be ready to go, if I could but see my children." She closed her eyes, it was thought to open them no more, but after ten minutes of perfect stillness, she looked up brightly, saying, "I am ready now, I have been with my children," and then passed peacefully away. When the notes taken at the two places were compared, the day, hour, and minute were the same.

In Mrs. Fox's notes she wrote :—

"One of the children, Sarah, was my grandmother, afterwards wife of Dr. Fell, of Ulverston, from whom I had the above account almost literally as I have repeated it. The elder one was Morris Birkbeck. Both lived to old age, and retained to the last so solemn and reverential a remembrance of the circumstance that they would rarely speak of it or permit any allusion to it, lest it should be treated with doubt or levity. Esther, the youngest child, died soon after (5th July, 1741). Her brother and sister only heard the child say that her mother had called her, but could not speak with any certainty of having themselves heard the words, nor did they seem sensible of any communication from her, but simply of her standing there and looking at them.

"My grandmother and her brother were both persons remarkable for strong matter-of-fact rather than imaginative minds, to whom it was especially difficult to accept anything on faith or merely heresay evidence, and who by nature would be disposed to reject whatever seemed beyond the region of common experience."

On the 9th of July, 1762, Morris Birkbeck married Hannah Bradford, of Lancaster, at Wray, Lancashire, but the union was of short duration. She died early in 1764, the interment taking place at Settle, leaving a son, Morris, which name was successively held by a grandson and great grandson, the last of whom is still living. In 1776, Morris Birkbeck married Sarah Hall, who died at Guildford in 1804, leaving no child.

In 1773, Morris Birkbeck was in America, and purchased an estate in North Carolina. In 1774, among the names of Friends visiting the Island of Nantucket, occurs "Morris Birbeck, not publick [*i.e.*, not a preacher], Old England" (Hinchman, *Early Settlers of Nantucket*, 1901). He returned to England in 1774.

In 1784, Morris Birkbeck was engaged in an insurance business in London under the style of Birkbeck and Blakes. He appears to have resided some time in Dorsetshire, and he spent the latter part of his life at Guildford, where he died on the 14th of April, 1816, aged eighty-two years, the interment taking place at Guildford. The testimony issued by Guildford Monthly Meeting² states that in early life he "was more engrossed in worldly pursuits" than he apprehended was consistent with a religious life. He first engaged in the ministry in 1776; his messages were "far from being diffuse"; though not "frequent," they were characterised by "soundness of their doctrine and the instructiveness of their tendency." He is described as "a zealous supporter of the Christian discipline established in the Society." For many years he was a constant attender of the Yearly Meeting as well as of local Meetings. In conclusion, the testimony adds that his sun set in brightness and that "like a shock of corn fully ripe, he is gathered into the garner of eternal rest and peace." He was one of the Friends who signed an address to George III. on the subject of the war in 1793.

His son Morris (1764-1825) farmed at Blandford in Dorsetshire, 1785-1790, but in 1794 was farming 1,600 acres at Wanborough, Surrey. He was considered a gentleman farmer of the first order, and in advance of his age. His flock of Merino sheep appears to have been the first known in England. Subsequently he emigrated to Illinois, U.S.A., purchased a large estate, and founded the township of New Albion. He was the author of several works illustrative of his travels and observations in France and America. Though not remaining a Friend, he was the determined and successful opponent of the effort to make Illinois a slave State. An interesting portraiture of the man and an account of his life and labours are given

² See Testimonies, vol. 1, kept with other Yearly Meeting documents at Devonshire House.

in the *Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society* for 1904. He was drowned when crossing the Wabash river in Illinois.

Morris Birkbeck's half-brother, William, the eldest son of William and Deborah, remained all his life at Settle. He married Sarah Braithwaite, of Kendal. It was their son, Dr. George Birkbeck, who, settling in London as a physician in 1804, founded, with Lord Brougham, the Mechanics' Institution, which still bears his name. He was its first president, in 1824, and was also one of the founders of University College in 1827.

Morris Birkbeck's second half-brother, John, married Martha Gurney, of Norwich, 1780. Leaving his brother at Settle, he became, in 1782, a partner in the Lynn branch of the Norwich bank under the style of Gurneys, Birkbeck & Co. For interesting details respecting the Birkbecks of Norfolk, see *Annals of an East Anglian Bank*, by W. H. Bidwell, 1900.

From Morris Birkbeck's personal and family history we turn to his career as Quaker bibliographer, and his connection with the Reference Library at Devonshire House. He appears in three capacities: a collector and donor of books; a reader and commentator; a maker of catalogues.

His work as collector and donor is described in a label inserted in books presented to the York Meeting Library, now called the York Albert Library. Mention of it also appears in the folio catalogue of the Library, and in a codicil to his will.

The label runs thus:—

Morris Birkbeck, of Guildford, on the 8th of 6th mo, 1811, gave most of the Books in this library to York Quarterly Meeting, which has placed the whole under similar regulations, viz., To be perused in the Library; and not taken out of it, except for the use of any who may be engaged in writing on subjects relating to the Society [*sic*], and with its approbation.

If so taken out, a particular account to be taken of them and of their return, which is to be in due time.

Extracts from the codicil were produced to the Meeting for Sufferings, 4th of Fourth Month, 1817, and were thus recorded:—

The following Extracts from a Codicil to the will of our late Friend Morris Birkbeck were brought in and read. "Whereas I have been several years employed in endeavouring to procure a complete collection

of the several books and pamphlets written by Friends . . . from their first rise to the present time and the several editions thereof, as also the works of their adversaries. Now I do give and bequeath such Books and Pamphlets of the description aforesaid as I have collected unto Joseph Gurney Bevan of Stoke Newington. . . . and John Eliot the younger of Bartholomew Close, London, upon trust that they . . . shall select . . . such books and pamphlets . . . as shall not be found in the Library belonging to the Society of Friends . . . in their Meeting House in Houndsditch, and place the same in such Library towards completing of the same, and shall exchange any of my said books and pamphlets for any other . . . of the same kind in the Library . . . and after such selection or exchange, I give and bequeath the residue of my books and pamphlets unto . . . that they . . . place the same in Friends' Meeting House, York, there to remain as a Library . . . I also give and bequeath unto the said . . . all my manuscripts written by or relating to Friends . . . that they . . . after inspecting . . . the same and destroying such as shall appear best to do so, to deposit the remainder in the aforesaid Library in Houndsditch."

Thomas Thompson offered to make the selection. In 1819 sundry expenses arising out of the bequest were defrayed to the amount of £17 12s. 8d.

That Morris Birkbeck was a reader as well as a collector of books is fully in evidence. To anyone well acquainted with the Devonshire House Reference Library, his clear and careful, rather than cursive, handwriting is familiar, as also the M.B. monogram usually appended to his notes. His comments in the margins of his books were copious and spicy, and often very severe when dealing with "adverse" books. One instance from one of Francis Bugg's tracts will perhaps suffice. "This is the last I have met with of F. B.'s writing—like many other pieces of his, it carries a *Lie* on the face of it; there scarcely can be dirtier sheet among all the Filth he has produced. M.B."

M.B. adopted, in measure, the style of the seventeenth century controversialists who called a spade a spade.³

³ In a copy in D. of *A Brief Character of the Antient Christian Quakers*, "written by W. M. a witness for the Truth, as it was in the beginning," Morris Birkbeck has written, "Supposed to be W^m Mead's—who lost his Love to Friends, and the chief promoters of Good, in the Society—it is to be noted, that, though an extract is made to serve the turn from Jn^o Crook, W. Penn is barely mentioned, and G. Fox not at all, but large extracts, or quotations, from Backsliders: I am credibly informed that it was at his instance or thro' his means, that divers of the Journals of G. Fox were bound up & issued without W. Penn's Preface. M.B." Under this Joseph Smith has written, "More likely by Wm. Mather,"

His copy of the *Battledoor* bears the inscription: "This was Rich^d Morris's Book, of Rugeley, Staffords^{re} my Grandfather . . . Guildford, 6 mo. 26, 1815." A long piece of his writing follows. Many of the volumes of tracts are marked "examined 1800-1806. M.B." During these years he must have devoted much time to his favourite pursuit.

A note in his catalogue of Adverse Books reads: "N.B.—M. Birkbeck now presents his whole collection of Adverse Books, as of this Catalogue, to the Library in London; retaining only those marked with M.B. in the margin [list of some ten books appended] awhile longer in his hand; but to be called for at any time, if not sent, as being the property of the Society. M. B., Guildford, 7 mo. 1806."

As early as 1780 his interest in the Reference Library had commenced, for in that year he was appointed with Joseph Gurney Bevan and others to make a selection of books for it. In 1797, these two Friends were on a joint appointment for procuring books needed to complete the collection, "particularly modern ones."

Considering all that Morris Birkbeck had done and was doing for the Library, the extreme caution shown by the Meeting for Sufferings in the following minute of Sixth Month, 1808, is only intelligible on the supposition that it was drawn in accordance with his own wish. Surely he might have been entrusted with more than one volume at a time! "Morris Birkbeck is permitted to take from the records for the purpose of forming a general Catalogue of Friends works a single volume at a time of such as he may want, he leaving with the Clerk a memorandum of the same to be given up when the book is replaced."

Finally as to catalogues. Two manuscript catalogues are extant which give evidence throughout of Morris Birkbeck's careful work. One he called, "A catalogue of miscellaneous books and tracts, belonging to the Library of Friends, not inserted in the General Catalogue of Friends' Books, alphabetically arranged by Morris Birkbeck, 1802." This is a quarto book of about 200 pp.

and on another copy in D., M. Birkbeck has pencilled, "Unsound; suppose W. Mather an Apostate."

For William Meade's opposition to Penn's Preface, see *Friends' Quarterly Examiner*, 1902, p. 67.

It contains some additions in the handwriting of Joseph Smith and others.

The next, to which allusion has already been made, he calls "A Catalogue of Adverse Books or Books written against the Society of Friends, wherein is noted, in the opposite page [*sic*] some Answers which have been given to such Books. By Morris Birkbeck, 1806." On the title page is appended "Acts xxviii. 22. It is everywhere spoken against." This also contains entries by Joseph Smith and others.

The general combined printed and manuscript catalogue in two large quarto volumes, containing together over 400 pp., presents some difficulties as to compilation. Each volume is inscribed, "A General Catalogue of Friends' Writings from the Rise of the Society to the commencement of the year 1820, Containing the whole of the Catalogue by J. Whiting and the Additions made by Morris Birkbeck, which Additions have been arranged and revised by Thomas Thompson, of Liverpool, who has also supplied many of his own. N.B. Room is left for further insertions by way of continuation."

The title page is in a handwriting shewing a marked similarity to that of Morris Birkbeck, and there is other writing not unlike his, but the date 1820 is three to four years after his decease. A large part of the writing is clearly not his, nor is it the handwriting of Thomas Thompson. Possibly much of it was done under the direction of Morris Birkbeck, by someone who consciously or otherwise imitated his handwriting. In its construction John Whiting's printed catalogue of 1708 was used, the sheets being cut up and pasted on quarto sheets so as to leave spaces for marginal and consecutive additions. Entries in it appear which have been made by Abram Rawlinson Barclay, Joseph Smith and Charles Hoyland.

We take leave of Morris Birkbeck with regret that we do not know more about him, but, as with John Whiting, with gratitude for his enthusiasm and industry, of which such tangible results remain. In catalogue work John Whiting laid the foundation, Morris Birkbeck built the superstructure, and some day we must relate how Joseph Smith crowned the edifice.

ISAAC SHARP.