

A Literary Circle in Sheffield in 1816

EXTRACT FROM A LETTER ADDRESSED BY SARAH SMITH OF SHEFFIELD TO HER ONLY SISTER, REBECCA SHORTHOUSE OF BIRMINGHAM¹

Carr Wood² 8 mo 11th 1816.

On 7th day we had such a company as it seldom falls to my lot to entertain; taken all together, affording not only enjoyment at the time, but permanent delight, when recollected, Josh & Ann Gilbert,^{3,4} Jane Taylor,⁵ James Montgomery,⁶ Maria Benson,⁷ & Geo. Bennett⁸ came

¹ Sarah Smith (1767-1845) was the younger daughter of Joseph and Hannah (Storer) Robinson, of Birmingham. Her elder sister was Rebecca (1765-1858), wife and widow of William Shorthouse (c. 1769-1838). The sisters helped their father in the retail department of his business. In 1799, Sarah married Samuel Smith, of Sheffield (1769-1821); there were no children. Samuel Smith and his brother William owned the first rolling mills for iron and steel erected in their town, and to this lucrative business succeeded Edward Smith (1800-1868), only son of the latter and the well-known Temperance worker and philanthropist.

The original letter from which these extracts are taken is in the possession of George Cecil Dymond, of Carrwood, Birkenhead. The extracts are printed in *Memorials of the Families of Shorthouse and Robinson*, a private circulation volume, printed in 1902 to commemorate the one hundredth birthday of Sarah Southall, 1901. A copy of the book was presented to D. by G. C. Dymond, in 1909.

² Carrwood was built by Samuel Smith in 1811; it occupied a beautiful site overlooking the Don, a mile or two from Sheffield. On Sarah Smith's death Carrwood was sold to a Sheffield manufacturer. The name survives in local topography.

³ Joseph Gilbert (1779-1852) was a Congregational minister at Sheffield and later at Nottingham.

⁴ Ann Gilbert (1782-1866) is better known as Ann Taylor, writer of children's poetry, with her sister, Jane Taylor. She married Joseph Gilbert in 1813.

⁵ Jane Taylor (1783-1824), younger sister of Ann Taylor (afterwards Gilbert) and daughter of Isaac Taylor. The poems by the sisters became immensely popular.

⁶ James Montgomery (1771-1854), poet, and newspaper editor. He was imprisoned in York Castle for libel in 1795 and 1796, and in prison he became acquainted with the Friends who were there on account of non-payment of tithes due George Markham, Vicar of Carlton. He wrote lines on the death, in 1803, of Joseph Brown, one of his fellow prisoners—"Spirit, leave thy house of clay," and lines also on the death of Richard Reynolds, 1816—"Strike a louder, loftier lyre." Montgomery is mentioned by Henry Wormald in his diary of his detention in York Castle, in very warm terms; attached to the diary (now in D., see *F.Q.E.*, 1878), is a letter dated 1808, from the Poet, enclosing a gift of £5 for his friend Wormald. On hearing of Sarah Smith's death he wrote a

to dinner & we were joined at tea by Elizth Read⁹ (her husband is in London), Emma Lance,⁷ Han^b Kilham¹⁰ & E. & A. Bayley.¹¹..It was a delightful day for most of them were intimately acquainted, & all had met before, & I think had been pleased to meet..The day was fine & we were sometimes out of doors & sometimes in, as we liked, & when in the room frequently changed our seats that all might partake of conversation where it appeared most animated. Jane Taylor is a sweet simple hearted affectionate young woman, she ran about like a fawn—Montgomery was all animation, tho' he has lately experienced what I think they say he calls the greatest trial he ever met with—a parting from Sarah Gales,¹² I have mentioned before I daresay that she had concluded to go & reside in America, at the very earnest request of her relations there, & a friend of theirs was deputed to take her over. She sailed on 2nd day in the Lancaster.

letter to her nephew, Edward Smith, recording the fact of their fifty years of friendship.

On one occasion Elizabeth Fry, accompanied with her daughter Rachel, had a meeting at Sheffield. It was very crowded and several men, including Montgomery, had, in consequence, to sit on the women's side. Meeting Montgomery at Carrwood, Rachel Fry (*aft.* Cresswell), "a lively, impulsive girl, said to him, 'And were you not very happy, Mr. Montgomery, sitting among the ladies?' 'Happy!' he replied, 'I was never so miserable in my life'" (*Memorials*, p. 38).

⁷ Not identified.

⁸ Bennett was a Sheffield gentleman, a traveller and pioneer missionary in the South Seas. He wrote copiously on his travels and was a frequent visitor at Carrwood. Montgomery prepared a record of the travels of Bennett.

⁹ Elizabeth Read lived at Wincobank Hall. She was foremost in the charitable work of Yorkshire, and probably a Congregationalist.

¹⁰ Hannah Kilham (1774-1832), *née* Spurr, married Alexander Kilham, a Methodist minister, in 1798, her husband dying the same year. In 1802 she joined Friends, from 1805 to 1821 she had a day and boarding school in Sheffield. Her only child died in infancy. She was a Minister and writer, and visited West Africa thrice in the interests of the natives. She died and was buried at sea, near Sierra Leone. Montgomery wrote a testimonial of her worth. See *Memoir*, by her step-daughter-in-law, 1837.

¹¹ E. and A. Bayley lived with a brother on the Occupation road not far from Carrwood. They were Unitarians and leaders in the intellectual life of Sheffield. Sarah Shorthouse, *aft.* Southall, was present as a girl of fifteen at the party described. The printed extracts from this letter, taken from a MS. by Sarah Southall, give "Ann and Mary Bailey."

The only surviving daughter of Sarah Southall, Margaret Evans, of Llanmaes House, near Llantwit Major, has kindly assisted in the preparation of these notes.

..Her Sister Ann¹² & Montgomery accompanied her to Liverpool, the latter sailed down the river with her, & came back in the Pilot boat, & it is said it was with great difficulty he was made to leave the ship at last. He was they say in love with her ; but having now made a firm resolution not to marry, he made no effort to detain her, believing it best for both to be separated, but M. Benson says he acknowledged when he returned, that when the parting moment came he would have given up all advantage—all connections beside, & have gone with her, rather than have parted—his sensibility is extreme, his care is as much as possible to hide it, if displayd, it would really amount to the ludicrous altho' perfectly [sincere]. We were some of us so cruel on 7th day as to laugh instead of crying at some things he said relative to this grand event of his life. Many of us were sorry to part with her however for she is a sweet-temper'd pleasant sensible young woman. We are exceedingly glad of the acquisition of Jos^b Gilbert & his wife as acquaintances..Tho' both admired Authers, they are as easy of access, & as free in conversation as any common person we meet in society ; indeed Jos^b Gilbert possesses a sweetness of mind & manners almost unequalled in his sex I think. Poor Isaac Taylor¹³ was left behind, he was so much afraid of the evening air, & tho' I wanted his company, I thought it better for him to stay, for he has taken cold lately & is in a very precarious state of health..

What was it to me to read of any being born again, till I was slain, and knew the heavenly baptism of Christ Jesus ?

WILLIAM DEWSBURY, in a sermon preached at Gracechurch Street, London, 6 iii. 1688, printed 1741, p. 14.

¹² The sisters Ann and Sarah Gales were, perhaps, daughters of the Mr. Gales who was editor of the *Sheffield Register* (afterwards the *Sheffield Iris*), the predecessor of Montgomery. He got into trouble with his paper and fled to America. Ann was Montgomery's companion and friend ; she kept house for him as long as she lived.

¹³ This was Isaac Taylor (1787-1865) son of Isaac Taylor, of Ongar (1759-1829), and brother of Ann and Jane. He wrote "The Natural History of Enthusiasm," "Ancient Christianity," etc. He was called "the Recluse of Stanford Rivers."

In a note to this reference to Isaac Taylor, Sarah Southall writes, "It is remarkable after this account that Isaac Taylor lived to be an old man ; he published many celebrated works."