

Reminiscences of William Forster and Stephen Grellet

AT London Yearly Meeting, in 1845, an epistle received from Indiana Yearly Meeting referred to a separation which had taken place in that body on account of a diversity of sentiment which had arisen among them on the right course of proceeding in regard to anti-slavery efforts.

After serious and deliberate consideration, the Meeting united in an earnest and affectionate appeal to those who had withdrawn from the Indiana Yearly Meeting, and a delegation consisting of William Forster, Josiah Forster, George Stacey, and John Allen, was appointed to be the bearers of the Address, and for such labour in the love of the Gospel as the way might open for.

This delegation reached New York in the Ninth Month of that year (1845). From there they went to Burlington, N.J., to visit their ancient friend Stephen Grellet, and there, according to arrangement, I met them and accompanied them to Philadelphia. It is probable that all of these Friends had met before, but the pleasure of meeting again was most marked in William Forster and Stephen Grellet, who had known each other in sympathy and service in lands beyond the sea.

It was a most grateful privilege which I enjoyed of sitting with them at dinner, where we were joined by Stephen Grellet's wife, Rebecca Grellet, and listening to their very interesting and instructive conversation. Stephen Grellet was particularly entertaining, and related a number of remarkable incidents of his journey, made in company with William Allen, in Russia, Turkey and elsewhere, in 1818.

It was late in the afternoon before we left to take the steamboat on the Delaware for Philadelphia. Stephen Grellet accompanied the party to the wharf, and I remember that, as the boat pushed out into the stream, he took off his hat and waved us an adieu.

Arrived at Philadelphia, we were met by Marmaduke C. Cope,¹ who took charge of George Stacey and John Allen, who were to make their home with him, whilst I accompanied William and Josiah Forster to the house of Hannah Paul, widow of John Paul,² who had invited them to make her house their home while in Philadelphia.

After a few days spent in Philadelphia, these Friends took their way westward, *via* Baltimore. It fell to my lot to accompany them to the railroad station and to see after the checking of their luggage, which consisted of *thirty-two* pieces (not trunks, but valises, bundles and packages). When William Forster was in this country (1820-1825) he travelled in many of the newly and thinly settled parts of the west, where many of the Friends dwelt in log or sod houses of very limited capacity, lacking much in the essentials of comfort and convenience—and in memory of these conditions, and not taking into account the many changes which had taken place in the lapse of twenty years, he had brought with him from England a number of articles necessary for domestic comfort, a couple of pillows, several changes of sheets and pillow slips, towels, etc. The luggage of Josiah Forster, besides personal clothing, was largely made up of packages, Bibles, and other books and pamphlets for distribution.

The Friends stopped long enough at Richmond, Indiana, to attend the Yearly Meeting and to acquaint themselves with the location and circumstances of most of those who were the objects of their mission. In this arduous service the delegation spent about seven months, visiting the disaffected Meetings and communities scattered through the States of Ohio, Indiana and Iowa. On their return to England they made a written report to London Yearly Meeting in the Fourth Month of 1846, in which they modestly state:—"We offer no remarks as to the results of this work of faith and labour of love,

¹ The residence of Marmaduke C. Cope and his wife, Sarah W. Cope, had long been known for its hospitality to Ministering Friends. It was under their roof that John Pease, Benjamin Seebom, William Robinson, Stanley Pumphrey and others had made their homes while in Philadelphia.

² John Paul, an Elder of the North Meeting in Philadelphia, had accompanied William Forster during a large portion of his religious visit in this country (1820-1825).

committing all to the blessing of our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom alone it rests to carry out the exercises of the Church for the promotion of His own cause.”

Notwithstanding that the committee refrained from taking any credit for what had been accomplished, it is a matter of record that those separate Meetings, of which there were about thirty, were one by one disbanded, and the individuals composing them, with but very few exceptions, returned to their allegiance to Indiana Yearly Meeting. In speaking of this happy result, a member of the delegation said that, while each did his part, in so far as the way opened, for the recovery of those who had separated from their Friends, it was the kindly spirit and gentleness of William Forster that won them back.

In tearful tenderness a child,
A strong man in the right.

On their way homeward the members of the delegation stopped for some days in Philadelphia and attended the Yearly Meeting.

The personal appearance of these Friends is daguerreotyped on my memory. William Forster occupied a seat at the head of the Meeting on the left of the assistant clerk, the same seat which had been occupied in previous years by Jonathan Backhouse, Daniel Wheeler, Joseph John Gurney, John Pease, and Benjamin Seebohm. William Forster was somewhat heavy in person—large head with broad forehead, and a quiet expression of intelligence. As he sat there he seemed to be a motionless figure. For an hour or more I do not think he changed his position in the slightest degree. In striking contrast was his brother Josiah,³ who never seemed to be quite at rest. He gave close attention to all the proceedings, and not infrequently asked questions for further information, or made suggestions to which the clerk or other members courteously responded, and thus he was often the means of increasing the interest and animation of the Meeting.

William Forster spoke but twice during the week, and on one of these occasions, during the consideration of the state of the Society, he made a somewhat lengthy address

³ A Frenchman who had forgotten Josiah Forster's name described him as Monsieur "toujours courant." [Eds.]

which was taken down very nearly in full by a young member, who sent a copy of it to England, where it was reproduced by his biographer.⁴

The Second Delegation

In the year 1849, London Yearly Meeting issued an Address to Sovereigns and others in authority in the nations of Europe, and in other parts of the world, on the cruelty and wickedness of the Slave Trade and Slavery. William Forster, who had the largest share in the preparation of this Address, was also engaged in presenting it at many of the European Courts.

At the Yearly Meeting in London in 1853, it was felt that the time had come for the presentation of this Address to those in authority in the United States, and this important service devolved upon William Forster, Josiah Forster, John Candler, and William Holmes.

In the Ninth Month following, the delegation sailed for Boston, and from thence went to Philadelphia, calling at Burlington, as the delegation seven years previously had done, to see their beloved Stephen Grellet and others.

At Philadelphia the Forster brothers made their home at the house of Thomas Evans (their former hostess, Hannah Paul, being then deceased). John Candler and William Holmes lodged with Marmaduke C. Cope. William and Josiah Forster left the city for a day or so to make a short visit to their friend Thomas Wistar, Jun., at Abington, where M. C. Cope and I found them on the First-day following, and with them attended the Abington Meeting, where William Forster was largely engaged in the ministry, very much to the satisfaction and edification of the small company there assembled. We dined together at "Hilton," the former residence of the late venerable Thomas Wistar, Sen. After dinner, William Forster, taking me by the arm, asked me to have a little walk with him. We strolled together along a winding path through a grove of ancient trees. The converse of that half-hour has a cherished place in my memory. Stopping under a great mossy-cup oak tree beneath which the ground was strewn with acorns, he picked up some of them, and remarking on the curious

⁴ *Life of William Forster*, by Benjamin Seebohm, Vol. II. pp. 207-209.

mossy covering on the lip of the cup, he put a number of them into his coat pocket, saying that he would take them with him to plant in his garden in England. Dear man ! That home and that garden, and the dear companion whom he had left behind, and who was looking with anxiety for every line which came from his hand, he was never again to see.

We returned that day to Philadelphia, and on the day following the delegation set out upon their mission. They stopped at Washington and called upon the President, who received them with much cordiality, and from thence they entered upon the delicate purpose of their mission. They visited most of the governors of the Southern States, and also the governors of some of the States in the North. There was much excitement at this time in regard to slavery throughout the country, and much bitterness between the North and the South, and there was no little solicitude on the part of the friends of the English deputation lest they should meet with some ill-treatment ; but they were so circumspect in all their movements and conversation that, with very little exception, they were received with great kindness and courtesy ; every opportunity was afforded them to present the Address, and much freedom was enjoyed in an interchange of views.

In the early part of the year 1854, having very nearly completed what they had in prospect, they reached Tennessee, where William Forster was taken so ill that it became evident that they could proceed no further. In much discomfort and rapidly failing strength he continued for about two weeks, when, in great tranquillity, the end came, 24th of First Month, 1854.

Under a mound in the secluded gravegard by the little Meeting House at Friendsville, now rests all that was mortal of William Forster.

O friend ! O brother ! Not in vain
Thy life so calm and true,
The silver dropping of the rain,
The fall of summer dew !

How many burdened hearts have prayed
Their lives like thine might be !
But more shall pray henceforth for aid
To lay them down like thee.

JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

JOSHUA L. BAILY.