

“ Life and Writings of Charles Leslie, M.A., Nonjuring Divine ”

EDWARD Gregory, of Bristol, has drawn our attention to a Life of this arch opponent of Quakerism, published in 1885, and the Manager of Friends' Bookshop, has, by energetic search, secured a copy for the Reference Library. This volume of 544 pages was written by Rev. R. J. Leslie, M.A. (1829-1904), vicar of Holbeach S. John, Lincs., author also of *The Life and Times of the right reverend John Leslie, D.D., Bishop of the Isles, Scotland and of Raphoe and Clogher in Ireland*, etc., 1885.

Charles Leslie (1650-1722) was a son of John Leslie (1571-1671),¹ known as “ the Fighting Bishop,” and he evidently inherited much of his father's combativeness. He was born in Ireland, and educated at Trinity College, Dublin. He married Jane, daughter of Richard Griffith, the Dean of Ross (Ireland). In 1686, he became Chancellor of Connor. He was a pronounced Jacobite and refused to take the oaths at the Revolution; and being dispossessed of his office he quitted Ireland and settled in London. He was a strong controversialist, and attacked in turn Deists, Jews, Quakers and Socinians as well as communities within his own Church.

We are specially concerned with Leslie's controversy with Friends as related in Chapter vi. of his *Life*. R. J. Leslie informs his readers that Friends “ formed a numerous and prominent sect at that time, compared with their present [1884] condition,” and he actually believes that “ one main reason among others of their gradual loss of influence and consideration, was the completeness and effectiveness of his [Charles Leslie's] confutation of their tenets and pretences. They never recovered from the blow he dealt”! Charles's *magnum opus* was called *The Snake in the Grass: or, Satan transformed into an Angel of Light, discovering the deep and unsuspected Subtilty which is couched under the pretended Simplicity of many of the principal Leaders of those People call'd Quakers*, and was first published in 1696, being followed by sequels and supplements under various titles. It is evident from the literature of the period that *The Snake* made a deep impression. In 1702, in response to an application from “ Mr. Cranston of Riegate ” for some books “ written against the

¹ John Leslie was born 14 Oct., 1571, and he died 8 Sep., 1671, five weeks only short of 100 years. He deferred marriage until he was sixty-seven years old, when he married Katharine Conyngham, the fourth daughter of the Dean of Raphoe. Katharine was only eighteen at the time of her marriage, and was one of twenty-seven children, many of whom died early. There were at least eight children by the marriage, the birth of the Non-juring Charles being thus recorded by the Bishop: “ In the year 1650, Thursday, July 17, at 7 o'clock in the morning, my sixth son was born, named in baptism Charles, whom may God preserve.” (*John Leslie's Life and Times*, 1885.)

Quakers to putt into the Lending Library there," he received "The Snake in the Grass, and the Vindication of the same," with books by Francis Bugg and George Keith (*Minutes of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1608-1704*, 1888, p. 220).

John Tomkins writes to Sir John Rhodes in Second Month, 1698: "Touching the book caled the Sn : in the Grass, it is a heap of Rubbish w^{ch} has been gathering this 40 years; Several parts, yea, most parts, have been answered again and again. . . . I think the book has had more paines bestowed upon it than it deserves" (*Quaker Post-bag*, 1910, pp. 135-138, 149).

Thomas Story writes in his *Journal* that he encountered a priest in Maryland in 1699, who had a *Snake* with him. "He was not willing to show the Title, or the Author's Name, but I perceived it was the *Snake in the Grass*; and then I exposed it as a very false Piece and Charles Lesly, the Author, as a Forger" (p. 231), and later, in 1716, when on a visit to his brother, George Story, then Dean of Limerick, there was trouble between them caused by his brother and sister's "deep Prejudice against the Truth, being poisoned by the invidious and wicked Writings of Lesly, that implacable and venomous Rattle Snake" (p. 548).

The "paines bestowed upon the book," considered by John Tomkins more than the book deserved, were taken principally by George Whitehead (1636-1723) in *An Antidote against the Venome of the Snake in the Grass*, 1697, and Joseph Wyeth (1663-1731), in his *Switch for the Snake*, 1699, but other Friends—Richard Scoryer, John Raven, Daniel Phillips, Benjamin Lindley, Joseph Besse, John Lewes, and a Devonshire clergyman—Edmund Elys²—endeavoured also to scotch *The Snake*.

Other anti-quaker writings by Leslie were *A Discourse proving the Divine Institution of Water-Baptism*, 1697³; *Present State of Quakerism in England*, 1701, for which see *post*; *Primitive Heresie Revived*, 1698; and *An Essay concerning the Divine Right of Tythes*, 1700. His works were published in two folio volumes in 1721, and in seven octavo volumes in 1832.

Leslie had considerable acquaintance with Friends, and it is said that he, his wife and two children took lodgings "in the house of a member of this community facing the new Exchange . . . the happy result

² For Elys, see THE JOURNAL, vii., 7-10.

³ To show the nature of much of the matter in Leslie's diatribes, the following may be quoted from his *Water-Baptism* (a pamphlet of sixty-four pages):

"But have the *Quakers* no *Figures*? . . . G. Fox made a great *Mystery or Figure* of his *Marriage*, which, he said, *Was above the State of the first Adam, in his Innocency; in the State of the second Adam that never fell.* He wrote, in one of his *General Epistles to the Churches* (which were read, and valu'd by the *Quakers*, more than *St. Paul's*), That his *Marriage* was a *Figure* of the *Church coming out of the Wilderness* [see *Camb. Jnl.* ii. 154 and note]. This, if deny'd, I can Vouch undeniably, but it will not be deny'd, tho' it be not Printed with the rest of his *Epistles*, but I have it from some that read it often. But why was it not Printed? That was a sad story. But take it thus. He Marry'd one *Margaret Fell*, a *Widdow*, of about *Threescore Years of Age*; and this

being the conversion not only of the landlord and his family, but also of several other persons," who had foregathered at the house of his Landlord to dispute with him. He was acquainted with William Penn, "a fellow Royalist." Our Author writes favourably of Penn, but cannot understand how he came "to embrace the delusions of this fanatical body."

Leslie's efforts to draw men to his way of thinking were said to be very successful. It is stated that he "brought more persons from other persuasions into the Church of England than any man ever did" (Loundes, *Bibliographical Manual*), and in Legg's *English Church Life from the Restoration*, 1914, we find the following (quoted from *A Letter concerning the validity of Lay Baptism*, 1738, by "Philalethes" [Hon. Archibald Campbell, 1691-1756]): "In that very year [1650] was born the Reverend Mr. Charles Lesley, whom God was pleased to make His instrument immediately and mediately of converting above 20,000 of them from Quakerism, Arianism and Socinianism" † (see THE JOURNAL, xii. 100).

One lapse from Episcopacy to Quakerism stirred the good man to the depths, as may be seen in the following account:

Samuel Crisp (c. 1670-1704), "while yet a school-boy, was inclined to religion and was zealously attached to the worship of the Episcopal Church" (MS. in D.). He was ordained a Deacon after leaving the University and placed in charge of two parishes in Norfolk (one being Foxley, where he resided). Then for a short time he was a private chaplain in London, where his duties were very uncongenial and wearisome. He writes: "I lived some time privately, in London, inquiring after the best things. There was then a great noise about the Quakers and George Keith (who was just then ordained deacon) was the talk of the town. So meeting one day with Robert Barclay's works in a bookseller's shop and understanding that he was a Quaker and an eminent writer amongst them, I had a great desire to read him." His conviction followed (*anno* 1700) though his new faith was somewhat shaken by contact with Charles Leslie and another clergyman. On the other hand, his attendance at Gracechurch Meeting and association with

Figure of the Church must not be *Barren*; therefore, tho' she was past Child-bearing, it was expected, that, as *Sarah*, she shou'd miraculously Conceive, and bring forth an *Isaac*; which *G. Fox* promis'd and boasted of, and some that I know have heard him do it, more than one. She was call'd, *The Lamb's Wife*. And it was said amongst the *Quakers*, That the *Lamb* had now taken his *Wife*, and she wou'd bring forth an *Holy Seed*. And Big she grew, and all things were provided for the *Lying in*; and he, being persuaded of it, gave notice to the Churches, as above observ'd. But, after long waiting, all prov'd *Abortive*, and the *Figure* was spoil'd. And now you may guess the Reason, why that *Epistle* which mention'd this *Figure*, was not *Printed*" (page 53; the same is repeated in Leslie's Works, ii. 707).

† A record of one such conversion is preserved in Leslie's *True and Authentic Account of the Conversion of a Quaker to Christianity and of her Behaviour on her Death-Bed*, printed 1757. The death-bed scene took place in March, 1700, but there is no indication of person by name. The scene was a strange one, very unlike the quiet passing of many a Quaker saint.

George Whitehead and others, finally decided him to unite himself with the Quakers, and quite shortly he became an usher in the school of Richard Scoryer in Wandsworth. He died of small-pox at Stepney, 1704, aged 34.

Charles Leslie, having failed in person, wrote letters to Crisp, on 24th Sept., and 30th Nov., 1700, to one of which Crisp wrote a reply from "Wansworth, 6th 9th Mo., 1700." These three letters were printed in Leslie's *Present State of Quakerism in England*, "wherein is shew'd that the greatest part of the Quakers in England are so far converted, as to be convinced. Upon Occasion of the relapse of Sam Crisp to Quakerism. Offer'd to the Consideration of the Present General Yearly Meeting of the Quakers in London, this Whitsun-Week, 1701." London, 1701, with Preface, in which he shows Crisp in as poor a light as possible—"not sound in his mind," etc. "This is the Man whom they set in the Scale, to Weigh against All those Quakers who have Lately been Converted," and then Leslie proceeds to an interesting classification of the Quakerism of the day, according to his view of it; concluding: "We may fairly compute 8 or 9 Parts in Ten of the Quakers in England are Converted."

Samuel Crisp's *apologia* for his change of religion is given in two letters written in or about 1702. These were printed as a pamphlet, and reprinted fifteen times during the next one hundred years.

Leslie paid several visits to the Royal exiles at St. Germain and was there some time after the sentence of outlawry passed upon him in 1710 in England, and was later a refugee in Italy. In 1721, he returned to Ireland, and "shattered in health, and exhausted in spirit, he breathed his last on April 13th, 1722" and was buried at Glaslough. Says his biographer: "His father led a stormy life; still more stormy was his."

Mr. Leslie's study of his ancestor's *Life and Writings* is very full. He is everywhere on the defensive and has unkind words to say of many persons. Of Friends he has a very poor opinion—"Adders' poison is under their lips still, but they do not bite so venomously and frequently in the nineteenth century as in the seventeenth. Nor with one exception have any parliamentary scorpions risen above the meanest level of mediocrity," and yet he adds: "Some other sects might advantageously take a lesson from their decorous and peaceable character." Apparently, he believes it true that there was a Quaker plot to murder Leslie—"A conspiracy was formed for the murder of Leslie. It was most deliberately organised by the Quaker leaders; and so eager and exultant were they in the prospect of its accomplishment, that nothing but a want of reticence on their own part, under the merciful care of Divine Providence, prevented its accomplishment."⁵

⁵ I have searched the periodic literature of the year 1885, but have not found any reference to this book. I understand that when it appeared, the late Thos. Gregory, of Bristol, wrote to the author asking for his authority for this charge and that the reply was: "I beg to be excused entering into any controversy concerning my 'Life of Charles Leslie, Nonjuror,' further than to say for your own information, that I have only repeated publicly made statements and to which no denial was attempted during his life-time"!