

# HANNAH LIGHTFOOT: QUAKER QUEEN?

Mary L. Pendered begins her 1910 biography of Hannah Lightfoot with these words: 'Dimly outlined in a twilight haze of mystery that at once enchants and stimulates imagination, we have the love story of Hannah Lightfoot, shadowy heroine of a romance so vague and elusive as to seem, at first sight, evolved out of moonshine; yet withal so real as to have disturbed the minds of four generations so real as to have set currents of doubt and conjecture vibrating about a throne.'<sup>1</sup>

And the currents continue to vibrate: in 1997 a Channel Four documentary of Hannah's supposed son, George Rex, created a stir in the press; last year Hannah's 'granddaughter's 'tomb was discovered in a Welsh parish churchyard, and following that a couple of articles of 'new light on an old tale' appeared in *The Friend* eliciting a number of letters to the editor which further stirred the moonshine.<sup>2</sup>

Hannah Lightfoot, rumoured over many years to be the mistress-or-even-wife of George, Prince of Wales (afterward George III) was born on 12th October 1730, in the parish of St John's Wapping, to Matthew Lightfoot, shoemaker or cordwainer, and Mary, his wife, *née* Wheeler. Her father died of asthma in 1732 or 1733, and her younger and only brother in 1733. Apparently she was subsequently adopted by her uncle, Henry Wheeler (1704-1758), a respected linendraper at St James's Market.

While living with her uncle, Hannah, a noted beauty, attracted the attention of passersby at St James's Market including the young Prince of Wales. However, on 11th December 1753, Hannah married Isaac Axford (sometimes referred to as a grocer) of the parish of St Martin's Ludgate, at the chapel of the unfrocked priest, Alexander Keith at Mayfair Chapel (often referred to as 'Keith's Chapel') near Hyde Park Corner where 'knots were tied in the easiest and loosest manner possible.'<sup>3</sup> Mr Keith who owned the Mayfair Chapel and one also at Fleet prison, was excommunicated in 1733. From the moment of her marriage to Axford, Hannah appears to have disappeared.

The most reliable and undisputed records concerning Hannah Lightfoot are those of Westminster Monthly Meeting of which she and her family were members. On 1st January 1755, it was reported to Westminster Monthly Meeting that Hannah Lightfoot, a member, had been 'married by a priest, and absconded from her husband.' According to the following report given to Monthly Meeting, 3rd

September 1755, the marriage but not abscondence was confirmed by her mother. On 7th January 1756, it was reported by Monthly Meeting that Hannah was 'not to be found or spoken with.' Notice of disownment for marriage by a priest with a non-Friend was entered on 3rd March 1756.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Hannah's husband's name never appears on the Westminster Monthly Meeting records. and there are no more Quaker records for Hannah Lightfoot.

Isaac Axford remarried in December 1759: either he believed that Hannah was dead, or his first marriage was invalid. He did not die until 1816. The Act for Preventing Clandestine Marriages was passed in June 1753. As Arthur Lloyd-Taylor has suggested: 'It is just possible that the Lightfoot-Axford marriage was considered invalid through the passing of the new act.'<sup>5</sup>

A reference in *The Citizen* (24 Feb. 1776) implies that Hannah died a little before her mother whose death was in May 1760. We are now firmly in what Mary Pendered calls 'those mists and mists of fiction which have gathered about the Fair Quaker.'<sup>6</sup> To her credit, Pendered does an effective job of 'distingling from her thicket of briars the Sleeping Beauty of the 18th century.'<sup>7</sup> However, I give a warning to any reader of her opus: Mary Pendered utilizes 355 pages to present her case and often the reader feels that he is drowning in pursuit of substantial material.

However, in her preface, Pendered says that the main reason she wrote her book was because she had seen two letters written by Hannah Lightfoot to her mother and a sampler worked by her at school. Unfortunately the owners of the letters (handed down directly from Hannah's mother) refused to allow them to be made public. But from them, Pendered well remembers that 'Hannah Lightfoot was anything but chaste of soul' and was convinced that the letters' frequent allusions to 'a Person' or 'the Person' indicated the Prince of Wales, later King George III.<sup>8</sup>

Another biography, *The Lovely Quaker* by John Lindsay (London, 1939) basically ploughs through the same material as Mary Pendered's work, but is marred by Lindsay's persistent attempt to establish George Rex as the legitimate successor to George III.<sup>9</sup>

The earliest allusion to an affair between Hannah Lightfoot and Prince George seems to have been in the *Public Advertiser* (7th Sept. 1770) where she is referred to as 'the Fair Quaker'.<sup>10</sup> Other early accounts speak of her as 'Miss Hannah Lightfoot,' and it is not until 1821 in the *Monthly Magazine* that Isaac Axford is named as the person she married with the reason being that it was to forestall a morganatic marriage between her and the prince.<sup>11</sup>

In the stories which followed, it was stated that through the intervention of Elizabeth Chudleigh (1720-1788), the courtesan and bigamist who became the Duchess of Kingston, the Prince of Wales persuaded Hannah to leave her home and go through the form of marriage with Axford. Elizabeth Chudleigh was said to be the agent for their relationship, and some versions of the story have Prince George marrying Hannah and keeping her at a private residence such as the one in Peckham. Any number of children were attributed to the liaison.<sup>12</sup>

It is in 1866 that the Hannah Lightfoot-Prince George story re-appeared in sensational manner with the Ryves and Ryves v. the Attorney General case. Mrs Lavinia Ryves (1797-1871) took up her mother's claim to be an illegitimate daughter of the Duke of Cumberland, brother of George III. Mrs Ryves's mother, Mrs Olivia Serres (1772-1834) had herself re-christened as Princess Olive, daughter of the Duke and his first wife, Olive. She claimed that an alleged will of George III left her, as his brother's daughter, £15,000. In 1823 the claim had been found to be baseless. Despite this Mrs Ryves resurrected the issue and among other matters, produced documents declaring that a marriage ceremony between Hannah Lightfoot and the Prince of Wales took place in different months in 1759 and at two different places: on 17th April at Kew Chapel and on 27th May at their residence in Peckham. A jury repudiated Mrs Ryves's claim, but she maintained those documents had been authenticated by the leading handwriting expert of the day and were later hidden away at Somerset House.

The marriage documents are now available for public view at the Public Records Office at Kew and I have seen them. With the Westminster Monthly Meeting records, those at Kew are the most intriguing documents remaining in the Hannah Lightfoot saga. In the certificate for the Kew Chapel ceremony, Prince George signs his name as George Princeps; at the residence in Peckham as George Guelph (the name often given as the surname of the House of Hanover). In both certificates the officiating clergyman was Dr James Wilmot, eminent Oxford divine and a close friend of the royal family as well as the uncle of the aforementioned 'Princess Olive'!<sup>13</sup>

Among the witnesses is William Pitt, the 1st Earl of Chatham. I was told at Kew that a handwriting expert thinks that all of the signatures appear to be genuine. There are two other documents at Kew. One is from Dr Wilmot explaining the reason for there being a second marriage ceremony: 'I hereby certify that George Prince of Wales married Hannah Wheeler alias *Lightfoot*, 17th April 1759 but from finding the latter to be her right name I solemnized the union of the

said parties a second time 27th May 1759 as the certificates affixed to this paper will confirm'. Apparently Dr Wilmot had entered Hannah's mother's and uncle's surname in the parish records instead of Lightfoot.

Also at Kew is a will of Hannah Lightfoot dated 7th July 1762 from Hampstead. In it Hannah signs her name as Hannah Regina! She bequeathed 'whatever property' belonged to the 'dear offspring' of her 'ill fated marriage.' She commended her two sons and daughter to 'the kind protection of their Royal Father, my Husband, His Majesty George the Third.' Needless to say all of these documents at Kew have been highly questioned.

However, the plot thickens with an unusual theft at St Anne's Church, Kew (the successor to Kew Chapel) on 22nd February 1845. An iron strongbox containing the parish records was stolen and later found in the Thames but with all the records missing. Arthur Lloyd-Taylor (from a long-time family connected with St Anne's) insists his grandfather, Henry Taylor, engaged two local men through the desire of 'the Royal Family' to break into the church's robing room and remove the chest. Among the parish records was also a large bible which had been presented to the church by George III.<sup>14</sup>

At another church; this one in Wales, St Peter's, Caramarthen, work in the chancel recently uncovered the grave of Charlotte Augustine Catharine Dalton thought to be the grand-daughter of Hannah and Prince George. The vicar says that if the royal descent is correct it would explain why a magnificent pipe organ made for George III came to the church which has no other royal connections.<sup>15</sup>

Over the years there have been many suggested as descended from the Hannah-Prince George union; the most celebrated of these has been George Rex. Rex became marshal of the vice admiralty court at the Cape of Good Hope in 1797. David Olive, one of George Rex's descendants living in South Africa, appeared in a 1997 television documentary by Channel 4. This brought the Hannah Lightfoot tale to a great audience.<sup>16</sup> However, two years earlier-and completely unnoted in the programme Professor Ian R. Christie was able to trace back George Rex's authentic pedigree as far back as his paternal grandfather and the parents of the grandfather's wife. Christie showed that George Rex's surname was not a Latin pun as assumed by George Rex's champions but a true family name. His father was John Rex, a London distiller, and Christie concluded that 'There is not a scrap of real evidence to connect him with the King.'<sup>17</sup>

Like a hardy perennial, the story of the fair Quaker and the prince regularly crops up, and a curious further addition was presented in *The History of the Island of Antigua* (1894-1899 by Vere Langton Oliver,



Reputed Portrait of Hannah Lightfoot  
by Joshua Reynolds at Knole

where was published the Last Will and Testament of Robert Pearne dated 26th January 1757. Pearne left 'Mrs Hannah Axford (formerly Miss Hannah Lightfoot, niece to the late John Jefferyes, watchmaker in Holborn)', the yearly sum of £40 during the term of her natural life. The will appeared to indicate that Hannah was still alive after her supposed disappearance following her marriage to Isaac Axford. However, attempts to find Robert Pearne in registers and rate-books have been fruitless though Quaker records at Friends House indicate Jefferyes as having married Rebecca Wheeler in 1734.<sup>18</sup>

Another peculiar touch to the Hannah Lightfoot story is the existence at Knole of an oil on canvas (75x62 cms.), a portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds entitled *Miss Axford, reputedly Hannah Lightfoot, the Fair Quaker*. It is not known when Reynolds executed the work, but it was acquired by the 3rd Duke of Dorset before 1778. J. Bridgman in his *History and Topographical Sketch of Knole*(1817) said of the portrait: 'This is the Fair Quaker noticed by His Majesty when Prince of Wales.'<sup>19</sup> The sitter is half-length to right in white satin dress edged with lace and decorated with pink bows and white lace headdress. However, in his notes on the painting, Alistair Laing appears to doubt that this is a portrait of Hannah Lightfoot.<sup>20</sup> To this viewer, Laing does not present a very convincing case for his verdict.

Aside from the possible connection between Hannah and the prince, George III had at least two other associations with the Society of Friends. In 1772 the American artist, Benjamin West (1738-1820) who was raised a Quaker and certainly presented himself as such, was appointed the historical painter to the King and the two had a long and close relationship.<sup>21</sup> In 1761 George III asked the Quaker export merchant, David Barclay, to be his host at Barclay's Cheapside home where he and Queen Charlotte watched the Lord Mayor's procession. The King let it be known that he understood Quaker scruples and he did not expect any of the family to kneel when presented and the Quaker men kept their hats on.

The full story of Hannah Lightfoot may never be known, however, what has thus far surfaced is sufficient-and romantic enough- to say that there must have been some connection between the Fair Quaker and her prince: no need for further legends at all.

*David Sox*

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Pendered, Mary L., *The Fair Quaker Hannah Lightfoot and Her Relations with George III* (London: 1910), p. xv.
- 2 Channel 4, 'The Legend of George Rex', 5 July 1997; *The Sunday Telegraph*, 20 June 1997, p. 20. Also see *The Listener*, 14 June 1973, p. 804; *The Western Mail* (Wales), 8 Sept. 2000 and correspondence from the vicar's warden; *The Friend*, 3 Nov., 10 Nov., 1 Dec. 2000 and 2 Feb 2001
- 3 Lloyd-Taylor, Arthur, *The Taylors of Kew*, private publication, 1973; pp. 6-7.
- 4 Westminster Monthly Meeting minutes at Friends House Library, London.
- 5 Lloyd-Taylor, p. 7.
- 6 Pendered, p. xv.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Pendered, pp. xvii-xviii.
- 9 Lindsay, John, *The Lovely Quaker*, (London, 1939).
- 10 See Pendered, pp. 143 and 254.
- 11 See Pendered, pp. 114, 263, 307. In his article on George III in the DNB, Vol. V11, p. 1052, Walter Hepworth refers to *Monthly Magazine* as 'vile'. The most recent and authoritative biography of George III is: Hibbert, Christopher, *George III: a Personal History* (London: 1998) On pages 29n and 30n, Hibbert mentions Hannah Lightfoot and supports Christie's ideas later discussed in this article.
- 12 See Pendered's chapters xvii and xviii for extensive claims.
- 13 Wilmot was also a Fellow of Trinity College, Oxford and from 1782, rector of Barton-on-the-Heath parish in Warwickshire. Lloyd-Taylor (*op.cit.*, p. 7) says that Mrs Olive Serres later claimed in 1817 that the then late Dr Wilmot was not her uncle but in fact her grandfather. This was despite the fact that he was a bachelor!
- 14 See Lloyd-Taylor, *op.cit.* and Bloomfield, David, *Kew Past* (London: 1994), p. 87.
- 15 *The Western Mail* (Wales), 8 Sept. 2000.
- 16 The documentary mentioned in note 2 was produced on location in South Africa by British Pathe.
- 17 Professor Christie noted Horace Bleackley's references in *Notes and Queries*, 10 S. ix, 11 Jan. 1908; 10 S. ix 15 Feb. 1908 and 10 S. ix, 4 April 1908.
- 18 The only place where this volume appears to be available is the London Library.
- 19 Bridgman, J., *History and Topographical Sketch of Knole*, 1817.
- 20 Alistair Laing in KNO. p. 257 from the National Trust Archive, listed under *Sir Joshua Reynolds*.
- 21 Sox, David, *Quakers and the Arts: Plain & Fancy* (York: 2000). See chapter 2.