

The Journal of a Self-Observer

READERS of Quaker history are well acquainted with the *Spiritual Diary* of Dr. John Ritty (1698-1775), "the most extraordinary and unique Quaker document for a study of excessive fear of the 'creature' and for an exhibition of a life-long battle with self."¹

In the first volume of *Friends' Miscellany*, edited by John Comly (Philadelphia, 1834), there is a record of another Friend's soliloquies and reflections which may be placed along side those of John Ritty.

James Hamton, son of Benjamin and Ann Hamton, of Wrightstown, Bucks Co., Pennsylvania, was born in 1764.

In the year 1784 he commenced school-teaching in his native place. He wrote :

Being young, and naturally diffident I found myself ready to sink under the labour. My anxiety to discharge my duty among the pupils in a proper manner was, for some time, so great that I scarcely could sleep, or get from under the solicitude day or night.

Two years later Hamton accepted the position of head of the Montgomery Free School, which he found "very large and troublesome, being composed of almost all sects and denominations."

He was much helped and his spirits cheered by association with Dr. Charles Moore and his wife, Milcah Martha, who treated him with great kindness. But even here he could write :

All nature seems reviving this morning. The fruit trees are blossoming, the woods thicken with the opening buds, and among the branches the winged choir, sweetly melodious, warble forth their morning hymns to the benevolent Father of the Universe. Why, then, O my soul ! Why art thou so languishing ? Why, amidst all this profusion of gaiety, art thou so dejected ?

When his friends, the Moores, removed into Philadelphia, James quitted Montgomery and followed them, though his arrival in the Quaker city did not tend to any mental uplift.

¹ R. M. Jones, *Later Periods of Quakerism*, 1921, p. 65. John Baldwin's *Diary or Journal of Time* (1794, etc.) is another example (Comly, *Misc.* v. 249).

Since my arrival here, which was but a few days ago, my mind has been in a low, abased situation. Being among strangers, I have felt as a poor pilgrim, wandering much alone in this wide world.

On 2 mo. 1, 1787, he recorded :

Mental poverty hath been much my portion of late, and I have seemed to myself as a poor deserted wanderer in this wide and wicked world.

Somewhat later in the same year, James Hamton returned to Wrightstown, and began again, though reluctantly, the keeping of school. Here again he committed to paper many of his pathetic lucubrations.

Through unwatchfulness and the depravity of my heart, have this day been guilty of much vain, unworthy behaviour.

Of what this unworthy behaviour consisted we have hints in the following :

At a public examination of my school, evinced rather an unbecoming solicitude to display my children's literary improvement.

Accepted an invitation to go into the water and bathe. It was, as often heretofore, productive of much levity and folly.

A game of ball at noon ; lost ground by unwatchfulness.

Relapsed :—a game of ball, attended with unseemly mirth. Alas ! unworthy me !

Through a lamentable degree of weakness was led to repeat yesterday's folly at ball.

A return of weakness—a game of ball.

A game of ball, attended with noise and folly.

Further games of ball are recorded and regretted, also other forms of amusement.

A spell of play with the boys. Often heretofore induced to this, through a sensible want of corporal exercise ; but always feel a strong conviction for it, and find that even health, the most valuable of all outward blessings, is not to be purchased at the expense of the least virtue.

At noon, took a game or two of hand-ball with boys, at which I was full of laughter and folly.

Other remarks at this period are :

In discourse with a person laughed indecently.

Mind in darkness.

Comfortably regular.

Nearly fifty children to take care of to-day.

Preserved comfortably, steady, laboring for patience and a faithful discharge of duty among them.

A poor dull meeting.

Nearly a vacuum.

In Seventh Month, 1789, James Hamton resigned his post once more, turning from teaching boys to sharing with Joseph Inskeap a school for girls in Philadelphia, and again boarded with his friends, Dr. Moore and his wife.

References in his soliloquies to the girls under his care are fewer and there is no mention of their games.

Deeply exercised in the school. Endeavoured to ease my mind by seriously addressing those children whose conduct was improper. Much good, I have no doubt, would have been the consequence had the *manner* been as unexceptional as the *matter*.

We close with an extract from a "Eulogium on a very amiable Pupil, Anne Anderson, daughter of William Anderson, of Philadelphia, written chiefly to benefit her surviving companions":

Dear, lovely maiden! how can we but lament the loss of thee! So some fair floweret of the vale, scarce beginning to unfold its fragrant foliage on the mild bosom of spring, torn from its native stalk, is cast forth to rise no more. But restrain your tears, ye sorrowing relatives. Amanda is happy. Pleasant thought! Even now, perhaps, numbered among the beautiful spirits, a smiling seraph, she exults in glory, forever separated from the temptations, the sorrows, and vicissitudes of human life.

Ye dear and tender companions of Amanda, who loved her when living, and at her death, dropped over her the tear of commiseration, remember her and be instructed.

James Hamton died, somewhat suddenly, on the 7th of Eighth Month, 1792, unmarried and only twenty-eight.

We see Friend Hamton in another light when we are told that he compiled "an excellent compendium of English grammar."

"Jonathan Lacock near free school at Halifax, a quaker, and his wife—their eldest son going to cut a tree fell down on Thursday, Dec. 16. 80 was taken up almost dead, since then his lower parts from middle downward are indeed really dead, he hath no sense or feeling of them at all, strike, prick, punch them he cannot feel, there he lyes still as a sad spectacle—this is Decemb 26, 80, he dyed and was buryed in their own garden Jan. 8, 168^o, Lord sanctify it—two quakers spoke" . . .

OLIVER HEYWOOD, *Diaries*, ii. 299.