

THE JOURNAL OF THE FRIENDS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Our Quotation—15

“The historian, qua historian, has nothing to do with literary form. His business is to set down facts plainly, unflinchingly and without any adornment that may distract the reader’s judgment or awake his dormant prejudices.”

Hon. J. W. FORTESCUE, C.V.O., LL.D., Presidential address of the
Royal Historical Society, London, 1925.

The Story of a Great Literary Venture

GEORGE FOX constantly urged Friends to record the occasions of sufferings they passed through in the proclamation of their religious principles and to send the record up to London. In the early days this appears to have been done, but as time passed there arose a need to have this advice iterated.

The Friend through whose agency there was a revival of activity in this direction was James Dickinson (1659-1741), a prominent and successful Minister. He tells us in his *Journal* (London, 1745, pp. 167ff) that he laid before Friends at Quarterly Meeting in York, in 1726, “the necessity

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to take care to preserve the Accounts of Friends' Sufferings." This Meeting "agreed that it should be offered to the Yearly Meeting in London," as also did Quarterly Meeting in Cumberland and those held at Lancaster and Kendal.

At the Y.M. in Third Month (May), 1727, James Dickinson laid his concern before the Meeting, which resulted in the passing of the following minute :

On a Proposition made to this Meeting by James Dickinson, seconded by divers countyes, This Meeting desires Friends of y^e meeting for sufferings to take upon them y^e care of Collecting and digesting by proper persons y^e sufferings & Imprisonments of ffriends for Tythes and on all other Accounts, into proper heads from y^e beginning of our being a People to this time (Y.M. Minutes, vol. vi. p. 399).

The minutes of the Meeting for Sufferings bear ample evidence of the care given to the matter by Friends of that body.

As often happens, the hour produced the man.

Joseph Besse (c. 1683-1757), who had been a writing-master at Colchester,¹ had come to London and was engaged at Friends' headquarters in literary work. A committee, consisting of John Davis, William Armitstead, Thomas Baskervill, Philip Gwillim, Lawford Godfrey, John Knight, Andrew Pitt, Joseph Willett and Samuel Scott, was at work sorting and putting in order books and papers in the Upper Room at Gracechurch Street Meeting House, which room had been recently enlarged and to which the Back Room was added, rented from London Friends, and Joseph Besse was occupied, under the care of this committee, in preparing loose sheets of Friends' sufferings for the binder and "making Tables" (*i.e.*, indexes) to the contents. (Three volumes of sufferings had been written and bound at an earlier period.) It was found that sufferings from various counties had not been transcribed, and Joseph Besse was asked to make good this deficiency.

In 1728 "Joseph Besse sent in nine volumes of ffriends sufferings Bound in Russia Leather and lettered on y^e Back with Tables to each. Compiled by him," and in 1729 three more volumes, to the year 1720.

¹ For more respecting him see *post*.

In 1729 the committee appears to have been charged, in addition, with the abridgement of the sufferings. The members decided :

That y^e said Joseph Besse do consider of and fform a Method for abridgeing y^e sufferings of ffriends from the year 1650 to 1660, and propose y^e same to this committee,

and that another be found to proceed with the work of transcription in order to binding. Joseph Besse further reported, under date of 29th of 10 mo. 1729,

that he does not think that Benjamin can do them [*i.e.*, transcribe sufferings] himself without omitting other Business, since every year has afforded it's own Work more than sufficient for him, which has occasioned y^e Omission of Transcribing into y^e Books y^e fforeign Epistles sent to y^e Yearly Meeting ever since y^e year 1690 and y^e Answers to them since y^e year 1701.

Benjamin Bealing had then served the Society over forty years as Recording Clerk.

The Meeting for Sufferings decided to forward to Y.M. the specimen of Besse's method of abridging ; the Y.M. of 1730 appointed twelve Friends " to Inspect y^e same," and, at a later sitting, approved their report

that y^e method proposed to y^e Yearly Meeting 1727 will answer y^e End, and we think proper y^t y^e ffriend proceed in y^e work under y^e Direction of y^e meeting for sufferings.

In pursuance of this the Meeting for Sufferings, 4 mo. 26, 1730, appointed the following Friends to advise Besse in his work : John Davis, Benjamin Bourne, Thomas Baskerville, John Bell (Gracechurch Street), Lascelles Metcalfe, Francis Davis and Philip Gwillim, and added, later, John Gopsill, Simeon Warner and Samuel Arnold.

Six months later the committee reported the reading over of the

first volumn of y^e Abstract of ffriends Sufferings Collected by Joseph Besse, with y^e Preface and Appendix, and do find y^e same carefully done, and Unanimously agree,

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it may be of Great Service to be printed, if y^e Yearly meeting shall think Convenient. And it is our Opinion Joseph Besse should have Twenty Guineas for what he has already done to y^e volume above mentioned.

The Y.M. of 1731 found "y^e work well done and doe think y^t the Publishing thereof will be of great service." It recommended a "subscription throughout the counties," but "something having Occurred on y^e affaire," the matter was referred again, 10 i. 1731/2, to Y.M. The minutes of Y.M. 1732 do not contain any reference to "y^e affaire," but in Fifth Month the Meeting for Sufferings took up the work again in earnest, in order that "the same may be most Expeditiously Publish'd, seeing y^e P^rsent Circumstances seems to call for it," and sent out "Proposals to y^e several Countyes for subscriptions for y^e same" (copy in **D**, dated 27 v. 1732, printed by Tace Raylton).

Meanwhile J. Besse went forward with the work of abstracting sufferings from 1660 to 1666 and he reported in 3 mo. 1734, "he thinks will make two volumes near as large as that already published."

Orders for volume one came slowly to hand ; in 3 mo. 1734, the total number of copies ordered was 1089. This book was issued in 1733, under the title: *An Abstract of the Sufferings of the People Call'd Quakers*, etc. "Printed and sold by the Assigns of J[ane] Sowle, at The Bible in George Yard, Lombard Street." The name of the compiler does not appear. There are full indexes and a list of "Principal Matters."

The Y.M. of 1734 approved the printing of volumes two and three, as per the following minute :

Att the Yearly Meeting held in
London from the 3^d to the 7th of the
4th Jnclusive 1734.

A minute from the Meeting for Sufferings was Read, signifying that Joseph Besse hath Proceeded in Abstracting ffriends Sufferings so far as that he thinks it will make Two Volumes near as Large as the first.

Jts left to the Meeting for Sufferings to proceed to have them Printed ; and in order to have any Mistakes which may have hapned as to Names of Persons or

Places &c. rectified: Joseph Besse is Desired to Transcribe what Relates to Each County to be sent down to them for that end, and that the Meeting for Sufferings do Satisfy Joseph Besse for that additional Trouble. And that the Respective Countys do Return Such Transcript to the Correspondents in nine months from the time they are sent Down: and with it to Send an account to the Correspondents what number of Books they will take off.

In 1737 these volumes were reported to be "ready for the press three years since and not yet printed" and Friends were urged to subscribe liberally, but the issue of volume one does not appear to have whetted the appetite for more.

The order to print volumes two and three was given by the Meeting for Sufferings to Tace Raylton, 11 mo. 6, 1737, and the volumes were issued in the autumn of 1738. The Y.M. of the latter year encouraged Joseph Besse to proceed as speedily as possible with the abstraction "of the rest in order to have them Ready for the Press when this Meeting may see meet to have 'em printed."

A fourth volume was ready in 3 mo. 1739 and extracts sent down to the counties for verification (returnable in six months). Here is Besse's bill:

	17 th ⁶ / _{mo} 1739
Meeting for Sufferings	
D ^r to Joseph Besse	
	£ s. d.
For collecting and composing the 4 th Volume of the Abstract of Friends Sufferings from the year 1666 to the Time of King Charles's General Pardon in 1672 10 th preface Appendix	24 3 0
For transcribing the same to be sent to the several Counties	8 8 0
	£32 11 0

Examined this bill and agreed to thirty two pounds eleven shillings.

6 mo 20 th 1739	SAML. ARNOLD PHILIP GWILLIM WM. CLARK
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The Y.M. of 1739 approved the printing of volume four ; and the next year the manuscript of a fifth volume was ready and approved. In 1741 Besse had ready two more volumes (six and seven) for the preparation of which and transcripts he received £56 14s. od. Also a further volume containing accounts of sufferings in foreign parts.

The position in which this enterprise now found itself was this :

Three volumes of *Abstracts* had been printed—1650 to 1665—and five more were in manuscript—1666 to 1689—all intended for issue in octavo. This position was considered by the Y.M. of 1741 and the following was minuted :

Our friend, Joseph Besse did inform this Meeting that he is of opinion that the said Sufferings together with the three volumes already published may be comprised within the compass of two volumes in folio and that charge of the said two volumes will very little exceed the Charge of Publishing them in five volumes in Octavo, which method the former volumes were published in. This Meeting ther'fore Request the Meeting for Sufferings to Prepare the said Work for the Press in two volumes in Folio, pursuant to Joseph Besse's Proposal: and that the Meeting for Sufferings do fully Gratify Joseph Besse for the great Trouble he has had in Collecting the said Work.

To Y.M. of 1744 Besse reported the completion of the manuscript for the two folio volumes. The three octavo volumes of print would doubtless serve as copy for the *Sufferings* in its new form, but we are not sure that all the contents of these volumes were reprinted, though the volumes disappear from use. A third volume of manuscript is mentioned as follows:

Met at the Chamber y^e 15 8^{mo} 1746. Pursuant to the appointment of the Meeting for Sufferings of y^e 10th present to consider What may be a recompence to Jos. Besse for collecting and preparing for the press the 3^d Volume of friends Sufferings in Foreign parts with those in Ireland and Scotland—and having duely considered the same are of opinion that he well Deserves the sum

of Forty two pounds for the labour and pains he has taken therein—

Entered

HENTON BROWN
JACOB HAGEN
RICHD. PARTRIDGE
THOMAS JACKSON
JOSEPH CROSS

[Endorsed]

Report of a Committee concerning the Labour of J. Besse in compiling a 3^d vol. of fr^{ds} Suffer^{rs}.

An insufficient response was received to a subscription-circular sent out in 6 mo. 1745, but the Y.M. 1747 ordered the printing to be taken in hand. After further reflection, however, or as a result of suggestions from the country, the method of presenting the records was emended by Besse, approved by the Meeting for Sufferings and committed by Y.M. 1748 to a committee of enquiry of forty-four Friends, including Samuel Bownas, Edward Higginson, Benjamin Kidd, Jonathan Peckover and Robert Barclay, "to inspect the specimen lately drawn by Joseph Besse." This committee reported unanimous approval and encouraged Besse "to compleat the whole in like manner."

In 1749 the Y.M. minuted the following :

This Meeting desires the Meeting for Sufferings to order the Collection of friends Sufferings in two Volumes in Folio, to be sent to the Press as Speedily as possible ; and that One Thousand Copys, including the number subscribed for, may be ordered to be Printed, which this Meeting Engages to take off ;

and in 1750 we read an instruction that no more than 1000 be printed " unless the printer will, at his own hazard and risque, accept to himself all the Books unsubscribed for, which fall short of that Number."

Towards the close of 1750 Besse reported completion of the matter for volume one, which equalled 1719 pages of manuscript and that he " had gone a great way in the Second." At this time he was paid " eighty four pounds more for his Pains & Trouble." Later he was paid another £84 for work on volume two, " the Tables and Preface excepted." In

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2 mo. 1753 he received "for eight months daily employment in preparing Tables to the two volumes, with the Preface and Conclusion to the Books," the sum of thirty guineas, and for correcting the press—"deliberately perusing the whole work," etc.—fifty guineas.

On the 20th of 7 mo. 1753, Besse presented to the Meeting for Sufferings the two volumes "printed and bound," doubtless proud of his work. The title was: *A Collection of the Sufferings of the People called Quakers*, etc. Luke Hinde, the printer, reported that of the thousand sets printed 719 had been sent to subscribers—the total ordered. The subscription price was twenty-two shillings. Hinde was paid £200, on account.

In 1753 Y.M. had the subject of the balance of copies under consideration, and in 1754 it instructed the Meeting for Sufferings "to advertise them at the subscription-price, being twenty-two shillings delivered in London, or to dispose of them in such other manner as they shall Judge best." John Fothergill and other Friends were asked to consider the best method of disposal of the surplus of 281 copies; the time for subscription was lengthened, and the volumes advertised in the press. Finally (14 vii. 1755), more than one hundred copies were distributed over 43 Quarterly Meetings,

expressly intended for the use of such Friends as are not of ability to purchase the Work, or to be lent occasionally to People of other Persuasions, where there is Prospect of Service.

It was also proposed to present copies to "some great Personages . . . as proper and seasonable Occasion may offer." Fifty copies were shipped to Philadelphia.

And thus, at last, after some thirty years of preparation, this great undertaking disappears from official view but the value of the work remains to-day and the two folios are constantly consulted with advantage by students of the past, especially in the realm of genealogy. "The work is conscientiously done, and may be generally relied on, but the sources behind it often yield fuller and sometimes more accurate information" (Braithwaite, *Second Period of Quakerism*, 1919, p. 285n).

Joseph Besse=
of Billericay, Essex.

Joseph Besse=Hannah Deborne.

b. c. 1683.

m. 9 viii. 1716.

d. 25 xi. 1757.

d. 17 ii. 1754.

George	Hannah	Sarah =	Thomas Bentley,	female inf.	female still-born.	Joseph
b. c. 1718.	b. 11 viii. 1720.	b. 14 vii. 1722.	of Southwark.	d. 26 viii. 1724.	20 ii. 1726.	b. 18 xii. 1728.
d. 8 x. 1722.	d. 29 ii. 1727.	m. 30 viii. 1746	and had issue.	aet. 4 days.		

MINUTES OF FRIENDS' SCHOOL
AND WORKHOUSE, CLERKEN-
WELL, LONDON.

16. xi. 1737. " This Committee, taking into consideration the choice of a Steward in the room of Richard Hutton, Deceas'd, Several Persons appeared and Offered their Service for said Place, . . . viz^t Joseph Besse, John Cooper . . ." (and 4 others).

20. xi. 1737. " It is the opinion of this Committee that we do not exceed the Sum of Forty pounds p Annum for the Salary of any Steward and his Wife, that shall be Choose."

24. xi. 1737. " Joseph Besse appearing before this Committee, desired to withdraw his request to be a candidate, for a Steward in this House."

6. xii. 1737. " John Cowper appearing with his Wife, before this Committee, declared their desire of serving this House, as Steward and Stewardess, agreeable to the resolutions and proposals of this Committee of 20th of 11th month past; & that his reason for dropping his offer last Committee Day, was from the probability of Joseph Besses being chosen."

A worthy biography of Joseph Besse is yet to be written. He was a son of Joseph Besse, of Billericay, Essex, born about 1683. He is described as a schoolmaster, of Colchester, on his marriage with Hannah, daughter of George Dehorne, in 1716. Prior to his marriage he had been employed as transcribing clerk to Essex Quarterly Meeting, as witness the following minute of Q.M. held at Colchester, 4 iv. 1716 :

Minute 16.—In consideration that y^e Clerkship lies too heavy upon such as have performed it for some considerable time past because of their business, this Meeting thinks fitt & accordingly makes choice of Joseph Besse to transcribe y^e minutes of each Quarterly Meeting & send them to y^e several Monthly Meetings ; & to record y^e Sufferings & Yearly Meetings Epistles & any other writing belonging to y^e Quarterly Meeting provided that he go not from home to do same ; & in consideration, that this Meeting obliges itself to give him forty shillings per annum & y^e said Joseph Besse accepts thereof having y^e books Minutes etc. sent to him from time to time. Joseph Besse is also to record the two last years Sufferings & Yearly Meeting Epistles & for so doing he is to have ten shillings.

At the birth of his daughter, Hannah, in 1720, he was living in " George's Court in John's Lane, Psh. of Clerkenwell," London, a member of Peel M.M. He soon entered into the literary life of Quaker London ; he edited the Lives of George Whitehead, Richard Claridge and William Penn, and, later, of Samuel Bownas. Some forty literary items are credited to him in Smith's *Catalogue of Friends' Books*. In 1730 Besse was at work making " tables " (*i.e.*, indexes) and collecting pamphlets for binding, his work in this and other directions surviving to this day and his hand-writing well-known to workers among books and manuscripts at Friends' headquarters in London. He acted as Recording Clerk in 1746-48, while, for some reason not yet evident, Benjamin Bourne was dispossessed of his office. The only son to survive him was Joseph, born 1728. Smith's *Catalogue* states that this son emigrated to Pennsylvania and he may be the Joseph mentioned below, although he would not be correctly described in 1765 as Joseph Besse, Jr.

WITHAM MONTHLY MEETING HELD AT CHELMSFORD,
25 2 1765.

Joseph Bessee,² Junr., one reputed a member of our Society, some years since going over to America without our knowledge, during which time (we understand) as well as before, his conversation and conduct was highly blamable; he being now returned to these parts again, and behaving in a manner notoriously scandalous, being guilty of Drunkenness, Lying and swearing to a great degree; and seeing it is apprehended that the reputation of our Society may be affected by his being deemed a Member thereof; We, for the clearing of Truth and Friends do hereby testifye and declare the said Joseph Bessee is no member of our religious Society, to evidence which denial, this minute is entered upon record.

On the loss of his wife, Hannah, who died at Chelmsford in 1754, Joseph Bessee went to live at Ratcliff near where resided members of his wife's family, the Dehornes, and he died at his residence, 25 xi. 1757. Samuel Fothergill was present at the funeral and spoke from the words: "It is a solemn thing to live and an awful thing to die" (vol. xii. see also vols. i. xiv. xviii.).

² Note the spelling *Bessee*, revealing the correct pronounciation of the name. Essex minutes per favor of C. B. Rowntree.

Richard Johns, of Maryland

As the name of Richard Johns appeared in several early volumes (ii. iii. v. vi.), it is satisfactory to be able to give further notice of this prominent Colonial Friend. The following appears in *The Parrish Family*, Philadelphia, 1925, p. 31:

"Richard Johns was born at Bristol, in old England, in the year 1645. He was not educated among the people called Quakers, but was religiously inclined from his youth. After he came to man's estate he emigrated to America and settled in Maryland and lived in a Friend's house where many of our worthies lodged, particularly George Fox, by whom he was convinced of the principles of Truth, to which he continued steadfast to the end of his days, which was the 16th of Tenth Month, 1717. He married Elizabeth, the widow of Thomas Sparrow and daughter of Henry Hosier. . . . She departed this life in 1715 in the Twelfth Month. . . . A Monthly Meeting was kept at their house upwards of thirty years."