

Mary Russell Mitford on Amelia Opie

MARY RUSSELL MITFORD (1787-1855) was the only child of Dr. George and Mary (Russell) Mitford, of Alresford, in Hampshire. "At an early age she evinced great precocity of intellect." Her correspondence with many noted persons was published in three volumes in 1870, edited by the Rev. A. G. L'Estrange, a copy of which we have had on loan from the Woolwich Public Libraries, *per* the Central Library for Students and the Friends' Library in London. Her *Dramatic Works* were published in two vols. in 1854.

Of AMELIA OPIE (1769-1853) there are references in *Jnl.* vols. x. xiv. xvii. xix. She became a Friend in 1825. "She was still brilliant in old age and in the sober garb of a Quakeress, which the world said she had donned, instead of azure plumes and floating scarves, for love of a Gurney Adonis" [J. J. Gurney].

Our attention was first drawn to these extracts by our late friend and fellow-worker, Joseph J. Green.

Mary Russell Mitford to Sir William Elford, Bickham, Plymouth, from Three Mile Cross, February 19, 1825 :

". . . Talking of tales, have you seen Mrs. Opie's 'Lying' ?¹ She is all over Quakerized, as you of course know—to the great improvement, as I hear (I have not seen her) of her appearance. It is certainly a pretty dress. She *thee's* and *thou's* people; calls Mr. Haydon² 'friend Benjamin,' and directs to the Rev. William Harness after the same fashion, 'William Harness, Hampstead.' With all this, she is just as kind and good-humoured as ever; and Mr. Haydon told me that, in about a quarter of an hour's chat, she forgot her *thee's* and *thou's*, and became altogether as merry as she used to be. She has really sacrificed upwards of a thousand pounds copy-money for a novel which she had contracted for; and yet I believe there are difficulties still as to her admission to the sisterhood. You also may have heard say, that a certain Mr. Gurney³ is in some sort the cause of this conversion, and that there are difficulties there also; but of this I say nothing." *Life*, vol. ii., pp. 198 f.

The same, to Rev. William Harness, Kensington Gore, from Swallowfield, October 30, 1854 :

"My very dear Friend. I write to you having just read Mrs. Opie's *Life*⁴ and experiencing a desire to talk of it. What a miserable hash

¹ *Illustrations of Lying in all its Branches*, 2 vols, London, 1825, and several reprints.

² Benjamin Robert Haydon (1786-1846) was a celebrated painter. Among his pictures was that of the Anti-slavery Convention in London in 1840, and also "The Quiet Hour." See *Jnl.* vols. xiv. xv.

³ Joseph John Gurney—"my dearest and best friend."

⁴ *Life of Amelia Opie*, by Cecelia Lucy Brightwell, Norwich, 1854. There may be something in Miss Mitford's critique—next year appeared, by the same author, *Memoir of Amelia Opie*, a distinct biography, published by the Religious Tract Society.

they have made of what might have been so interesting! What a miserable hash *she* made of her own existence! Nothing is clearer than the hankering she had after her old artistic and literary world. She even contrived to mix gay parties with May meetings to the very last. But the want of congruity jars in the book, and must have jarred still more in actual life; more especially as those Fry and Gurney people—popes male and female, in their way—seem to have taken upon them to lecture the dear soul. How she declined in taste and in intelligence after joining the Friends! The most satisfactory thing in the whole work is a letter to her from Mrs. Inchbald—whose 'Simple Story' is worth a wilderness of Mrs. Opie's slipshod tales. I had not a notion how bad her English was till this reading.

"To come back to Mrs. Opie—as her life was a double one, so should have been her biography—one book rose colour for the world, another drab for the Quakers. I doubt, too, if it be permissible to ignore so entirely the absolute engagement she was under to marry Lord Herbert Stuart. (I forget names, but surely it was Lord Herbert, a lame man.) . . . I have seldom seen a biography, which suppressions on the one hand and glossings over on the other have rendered more unfaithful, more untruthful, than this Quaker biography. Mrs. Opie was herself so kind and excellent a woman, that she could well have afforded to have the truth told respecting her."

Life, vol. iii., pp. 292-295.

James Simpson and the "Hyps"

"I proposed to James Simpson to accompany us. After some pleasant tales which I told him—he is often subject to the hyps [hypochondria]—he consented, and got into the waggon and we set forward. After having got about half-a-mile he suddenly cried out: 'Stop, I can go on no further; old hyp is come upon me'; and went on to say he should catch cold and could not go any further. I immediately took out of my pocket a silk handkerchief and told him to put it on him; it was my wife's, and she was one of the better sort of preachers, and told him it might have some virtue in it. I told him a story of Christopher Wilson of our county [Cumberland] who sent for a tailor to make some clothes, and it being a wet morning the tailor got wet; so Christopher put his coat upon him till his own was dry. A person coming in said to the tailor: 'What is the matter? thou hast got on Christopher's coat!' He made answer he did not know; for he was very like to preach all the time he had it on! This little story tickled James so much that he got to laugh pretty much, old hyp left him and he cried out: 'Hoist the British flag and drive on.'

"JOHN HALL."

IRWIN, *Featherstones and Halls*, 1890. For James Simpson (1743-1811), of Philadelphia, see *Jnl. F.H.S.* xix.