

George Fell and the Story of Swarthmoor Hall

PREFACE

Much is known respecting the seven daughters of Judge and Margaret Fell, and much has appeared in print—letters from and to them exist in abundance, but little has been discovered respecting the only son, George Fell, and no private letters written by him are known to have survived.

JN the north-western portion of the County of Lancaster, largely detached therefrom by its natural formation, is the district known as Furness, and when our story opens the family of Fell was in occupation of a portion of this self-contained region, centred in Swarthmoor Hall, with several surrounding properties. The family was not of long prominence—it does not appear in the Muster Roll of 1574—but a son of the house, Thomas Fell, was greatly to increase its prestige.

Thomas Fell, son of George Fell, was baptized on the 4th of June, 1598. He embraced a legal career, and on the 20th of October, 1623, he was admitted to Gray's Inn, London. As time passed he occupied many public positions of honour and profit.¹ As revealed in his father's will, he had a sister Alice and a brother-in-law, Thomas Gateskill. In 1632 he took to wife Margaret, daughter of John Askew; and partly through this connection, and partly by subsequent purchase, the near-by property of Marsh Grange in "Plain Furness" was added to his paternal inheritance of Swarthmoor. In late life Margaret thus recalls her early days :

I was born in the year 1614 at Marsh Grange in the parish of Dalton-in-Furness in Lancashire, of good and honest parents and of honourable repute in their country. My father's name was John Askew; he was of ancient family of those well-esteemed and called gentlemen, who left a considerable estate. I

¹ See Appendix in concluding portion.

was brought up and lived with my father until I was between seventeen and eighteen years of age, and then I was married to Thomas Fell of Swarthmore. My father had children only me and another daughter, and he left us as good as six thousand pounds when I was married to my husband.

Nine children appeared in the family between 1633 and 1652—seven daughters and one son reached adult age. It is the one son whose life-history I am endeavouring to sketch, George Fell, who bore the name of his grandfather. The date of his birth does not appear but it occurred about the year 1639, and he has been placed fourth in the family sequence, Margaret, Bridget, and Isabel preceding him and Sarah, Mary, Susanna and Rachel being his juniors.²

The education, which would be the special concern of the father for his son and heir, began early. A resident clerical tutor was engaged and, as was frequently arranged, another youth was introduced to join in the studies.³ William Caton was to become George's helper and companion—a lad three years his senior. Caton has left an intimate account of this connection and I cannot do better than quote his record as given in his published life:⁴

When I was about fourteen years of age my father took me to Judge Fell's there to learn with a kinsman (a priest) who was preceptor to the aforesaid judge's son; and thereby I came to have an opportunity to be conversant with them that were great in the world. I was in due time promoted to be a companion, night and day, to the judge's son, and did eat as he did eat, and lodged as he lodged, and went after the same pleasure which he went unto, as to fishing, hunting, shooting, &c.

In those days there remained an integrity in my heart towards God, and often did I call upon his name; to that end I would linger in the chamber until the judge's son with whom I lodged was gone down,

² The addition to the family of Leonard Fell and Henry Fell, by Gerard Croese in his *History*, 1696, is pure fabrication.

³ As, for instance, in the case of Nathaniel Meade and his first-cousin, Richard Lower (*Jnl. F.H.S.* ix. 182).

⁴ *Journal of Life*, 1689.

that afterwards I might go to prayer alone. After we had learnt some time together in the judge's family we were removed to a school in the country, at a place called Hawkshead, where I met with many temptations and seldom good company. But as Providence ordered it, we did not stay long at that school but returned to Judge Fell's.

Meanwhile the new-old principles of Quakerism were spreading in the north, and the apostles thereof penetrated into the by-path of Furness. The hospitality of the Hall had been freely given to travelling exponents of the various religious thought of the day, but a deeper impression than any hitherto given was shortly to be made by the arrival of George Fox, the leader of the Quaker movement, about the mid-summer of 1652. Religion was the common talk of the day ; meeting William Lampitt, the minister of the parish, the newcomer and the minister fell to discussion, and, to the discontentment of their hostess, into disagreement. The utterances of George Fox and those who accompanied him made a great impression on Margaret Fell and the elder children, as also on other members of the household. The judge was absent on circuit, and when nearing home he was met by some of his friends who told him that his household had been "bewitched," but on arrival, and after an interview with George Fox, his apprehensions were overcome and he became favourably disposed towards Friends, permitting meetings to be held in the Hall and following the proceedings from his justice-room. "He had tender care over the Lord's lambs." The impression upon the daughters was deep and lasting, they all married Quaker husbands of repute.

Caton, George's boyhood companion, tells us that the son of the house was at first impressed by the new teaching, but,

meeting with many temptations, his heart was drawn aside from the truth. At that time I had not left the school but did go along with Judge Fell's son thereto, and he, being somewhat convinced of the same truth and somewhat touched with the same power, it was the easier and better for me. Howbeit we were often wild, vain, and wanton, and sported ourselves in folly, to the extinguishing of the good oftentimes in ourselves.

The only reference to George Fell in the *Journal* of his future step-father, George Fox, narrates how youthful curiosity brought him into imminent danger.

Judge Fell's son, running after to see what they would do with me, they threw him into a ditch of water, some of them crying, ' Knock out the teeth of his head.'

An anti-Quaker view of the defection of George Fell is provided in a tract called *The Quakers Shaken*, printed in 1655 :

This pretended prophet James Milner lives at Bay-cliff in Lancashire and delivered lying oracles whereof there were many both eye and ear witnesses, and amongst others George Fell (called Zebedee by the said Milner). He was before that time bewitched with the delusions of the Quakers, but afterwards never followed them more. blessing God that He had opened his eyes to see the delusions of Sathan and those manifold snares wherein they had been entangled.

The term Zebedee was a favourable appellation. One of the " lying oracles " is thus described : " That there should be a great draught of fishes which he himself with Zebedee must draw, which (as 'tis reported) proved to be but a codling."

The conversions at Swarthmoor soon became known—Thomas Killam, a Yorkshire Friend, wrote to M. Fell, 2 x. (December) 1652 : " My tender love to thy son George Fell, desiring and beseeching the Lord that they [he and his sisters] may be faithful servants in His vineyard." (Swarth. MSS. 4. 85.) And Richard Farnsworth referred to him in a letter dated 2 x. 1652. A postscript to a letter from George Fox to Friends, which was to be delivered at Judge Fell's, and which was subsequently endorsed by Fox and dated 1652, reads : " George, be watchful and low that the tender plant may grow in thee." (Swarth. MSS. 7. 37.)

At the close of his school days the legal profession was chosen, and George Fell was entered at Gray's Inn, London, on the 9th of February, 1652/3, when about fourteen years of age. Although thus removed from home influence, and his

early Quaker impressions having become dissipated, Fell was still the object of solicitude on the part of the home-circle and numerous Friends of Truth. There are brief references to him in letters of Henry Fell and Leonard Fell in 1656, and Thomas Salthouse in 1657; and John Rous, his future brother-in-law, wrote to M. Fell from Barbados, 24 iii. 1657: "Remember my dear love to thy husband and to thy son George, for there is that in them both which my soul loveth." (Swarth. MSS. 1. 79.)

The maternal heart was drawn out in loving caution and advice; a letter has been preserved, endorsed and dated by George Fox: "M. F. to her son, 1657," which is worth quoting in full:

George

My dear love, take heed of wildness, lightness and vanity, and take heed of pride getting hold of thee. My dear heart, keep in the fear of the Lord thy Creator, who hath created thee and brought thee forth, and preserved and kept thee all thy lifetime until now. Now beware that thou requite Him not evil for good in sinning against Him and transgressing against that in thy conscience which tells thee thou shouldst not do evil nor wickedly and so sin against God.

My dear babe, if thou mind the Lord and fear Him thou wilt be with me as present, and there thou wilt be kept safe from all dangers. If thou keep in the fear of the Lord thou wilt be kept from all temptation and be delivered from all evil, but if thou depart from the fear of the Lord, then thou lies open to the temptations and will be drawn away with the enemies of thy soul.

My dear love, all the ways of the wicked will come to naught and perish though never so delightful for the present, yet woe and misery will be the end of all sin and wickedness; therefore, my dear love, turn from evil and sin and take heed of rashness and forwardness and headiness. Keep these down and strive for patience, and thou wilt see the blessing of God will be upon thee. My dear one, I cannot forget thee; my cries to my Heavenly Father are for thee that thou may be kept and that the measure of Him in thee may be preserved.

that of many of his north-country associates. His step-father-to-be records the action of the magistrates in Lancashire: "You talk of a King, a company of you, but where were ye in Oliver's days? and what did ye do then for him?" For his service to the Parliament he must now obtain the royal pardon:

1660. June. Petition of George Fell of Swarthmore to the King for pardon; his father was a great malignant and purchased fee farm rents, value £220, but he, being only lately of age, has received none of the said rents, nor has acted in any way against his Majesty.

June 22. Warrant for a grant to George Fell of Swarthmore, Co. Lancaster, of pardon for all treasons, misprisions of treason, etc., since November 2, 1640, with restoration of goods. (*Cal. S. P. Dom. 1660-61*, 50.)

Margaret Fell wrote to her children, 24 v. 1660:

Your brother is well, he was here [at her lodgings with Elizabeth Trott in Pall Mall] yesterday, and sealed the lease to his sister; but he hath not got his pardon sealed yet, but he doth not fear but get it done.

And Margaret, Junior, added: "My brother is well; he comes here sometimes, I know that his love is to you." There is not infrequent mention in letters of love-messages between the brother and his sisters.

News of promotion soon reached the north. Bridget Fell, the newsagent of the family, wrote to her mother, 22 v. 1660, on her return home:

It was all abroad in the country when we came home, of my brother's being one of the life-guards, and of his pardon at great cost that he was at in that. (*Spence MSS. 3. 69.*)

And his mother wrote to Bridget:

I am in hopes to get your brother down into the country for he had need of; for he hath been more idle this time than ever he was. But the Lord is my

strength and trust concerning him whom I believe will prevent his wickedness and preserve him.

It is interesting to find that there was a reunion of mother and son in London, during the time Margaret Fell and her daughter Margaret were in London striving to obtain the release of George Fox from his imprisonment in Lancaster Castle. Margaret the younger wrote from "Pelmell," 30 viii. 1660, to her sisters at home: "My mother, with my brother and myself, are all in health," and from the same letter we learn that George Fox, on his liberation, had joined the family party. It was shortly before George Fell's marriage. How little we are told, when we would know so much of what transpired in the lodgings in Pall Mall. (Thwaite MSS.)

During George Fell's life in London among legal associates he became acquainted with a barrister named Edward Cooke, who was also an author. Friendship with the brother brought Fell into acquaintance with his widowed sister, Hannah Potter, and this soon ripened into closer fellowship, resulting in marriage. The following is the official record:

Dec. 21, 1660. George Fell of Swarthmoore, County Lancaster, Esquire, Bachelor, aged about 22, son of Thomas Fell, late of the same, deceased, and Hannah Potter of St. Saviors, Southwark, County Surrey, widow, about 22, with consent of her father, Edward Cooke, at St. Dunstan in the East of St. Margarets, Lothbury, London, by licence. (A. R. Justice, *Clarke-Dungan Genealogy*, 1923, 520, taken from the Harleian Society publication, vol. 24, 1886.)

Sister Margaret may have been present at the wedding, for Bridget wrote her, 23 xi. 1660/61:

I would have thee to let us know the manner of my brother's marriage, what the woman is every way. Compose as much as thou can in a little room. (Spence MSS. 3. 80.)

The reply does not appear to have been preserved.

Two children were born of the marriage, Isabella and Charles, the latter shortly before his father's death in 1670.

The date of Isabella's marriage with Thomas Greaves does not appear. Bequests of a guinea apiece were made by George Fox to Charles and Isabella *Fell* shortly prior to his death in 1690/91, and Margaret Fox left one guinea each to Charles *Fell* and Isabella *Graves* in her will dated 1698, half the amount bequeathed to her other grandchildren. "*Brother Greaves*" occurs in a letter of 1693 from Thomas Lower to Margaret Fox. Thomas Greaves and Sackville Greaves are named in George *Fell*'s will.

Dr. Thomas Hodgkin sums up the characteristics of George *Fell* about this period :

He had kept his terms in London as a barrister and was now a Lancashire squire, a magistrate and a commissioner of militia, somewhat incapable, somewhat extravagant, and married apparently to an extravagant wife. (*George Fox*, 1896, 215.)

The question of the future of the estate at Swarthmoor became at once urgent. Earlier in the year Mary *Fell* had an interview with King Charles, who was told that, if he did not do something for her mother, "they would run her into a praemunire and get her estate from her and her children." The King replied : "They shall not have her estate from her." (M. *Fell* to her mother, 27 iv. 1664. Gibson MSS. 5. 55.)

Early in 1664 Margaret *Fell* was committed to Lancaster Castle for the "crime" of holding meetings at her house—"Multitudes of people at your house in pretense to worship God"—and for refusing to take the Oath of Allegiance. In September of the same year she had a sentence of praemunire passed upon her—outlawed, condemned to imprisonment for life, and all her property real and personal forfeited to the King—which drastic sentence called forth the memorable words : "Although I am out of the King's protection yet I am not out of the protection of Almighty God."

Feb. 19, 1664. Daniel Fleming, [local magnate], to Joseph Williamson, Secretary of State : Persuaded the sheriff and justices of the peace for Lancashire at Ulverstone by showing them Williamson's letter to send for Mrs. *Fell* ; She would not engage to have no more meetings at her house, having had them constantly for twelve years, and refused the Oath of Allegiance,

on which she was committed to Lancaster gaol, to be kept without bail till next Assizes ; hopes the judges will then tender her the oath again that she may be praemunired, which would abate the interest of that faction in this country. (*Cal. S.P.Dom. 1663-4, 489.*)

The imprisonment of the mistress did not cause the cessation of meetings at the Hall. Daniel Fleming wrote to Secretary Williamson, Oct. 1, 1664 :

There have been lately two or three sharp encounters betwixt Col. Kirkby and some Quakers who were Conventicled at Mrs. Fell's house since she was convicted of a praemunire, and show the great obstinacy of the sect. (*Cal. S.P.Dom. 1664-5, 24, Extracts, 221.*)

To be concluded

Friends and the Press-gang

At a General yearly Mtg of friends in Truth the 10 4 /mo. 1679 :

" The service of Supplying friends prest into the Kings Ships undertaken by Daniel Lobdy of Deal—Luke Howard of Dover gives the Meeting an Acct. that he has been very serviceable to several friends in that respect Since the Last yearly Meeting and this Mtg. desires Luke Howard to acquaint Daniel Lobdy that it is friends desire that he Continue in the sd. Service for the future."

At a Meeting at ye Bull and mouth the 24 3 /mo. 1678 :

" Upon Consideration of the often Sufferings of Friends by being impres't in the Kings Ships of warr, This Meeting desires that Daniel Lobdy of Deal in Kent will for the future upon hearing or having Acct. of any Friend or Friends prest into the Kings Ships to make application to the Captains or other Officers on Board for their Discharge and that all Costs & Expences by him laid out on that Acct. be reimbursed him by the several respective Quarterly or Monthly Meetings to which such persons belong."

Dying Sayings

In the Haws edition of *The Last Will of George Fox* (see *Jnl. F.H.S.* xxviii. 81) there is this N.B. :

" There is no confession of sin. Pope George, alas ! was all Perfection and Sinless, and his Disciples have ever since [been] so conceited of the sufficiency of their own merit that no true Quaker was ever known to Die with a ' Lord, have Mercy upon him ' in his mouth."