

New Light on Fanny Henshaw's Convincement

A NUMBER of old MSS. which were in the possession of Thomas Davidson of Fritchley have been recently lent to the Library at Friends' House by his daughter, Mrs. Constable, who inherited them after her father's death in 1928. Among them are sixteen closely-written pages of foolscap relating to Frances or Fanny Henshaw (afterwards Paxton and Dodshon), who figures as one of the three central characters in the volume *William Law and Eighteenth Century Quakerism*, published over my name in 1927. All but one of these pages are new material, and they throw much interesting light on the personality of Fanny and her situation during the few months preceding her escape (at the age of twenty-two) to a Quaker household. Readers of the book will remember that she was a friend of the poet, John Byrom, belonging to a Church of England family, and that she became a convert to the distinctive tenets of the Quakers, in spite of all the arguments of Byrom, and of the great William Law, and of the strong opposition of her own relatives, who even kept her in a sort of confinement. When staying with her uncle and guardian near Manchester she was in communication with some Manchester Friends and with Thomas Smith, of Balby, by Doncaster, and finally, about Christmas, 1736, when visiting another uncle in Doncaster, she migrated to the home of one of the Balby Friends. Soon after that she moved to Leek in Staffordshire, her old home, into another Friend household, possibly that of Joshua Toft (mentioned more than once in these new letters), in whose collection of MSS. most of the existing records of Fanny Henshaw are to be found.

I will now deal with each of the seven newly-discovered MSS., referring, as is really necessary for their full understanding, to those pages of *William Law and Eighteenth*

Century Quakerism which are relevant to their contents. All seven MSS. or their originals may be dated somewhere between about April 1736, and the end of the following October. The handwriting, abbreviations, etc., are characteristic of the eighteenth century, but the MSS. would seem to be copies, more or less contemporary with the original letters.

i. The first and longest document, running to nearly six foolscap pages, is the one of least interest. It is subscribed merely "Her Sincere Well-wisher," and consists of a long series of arguments against leaving the Established Church so as to join the Quakers, much in the style of William Law's letters to Fanny Henshaw, but not so happily expressed and condemning the Quakers still more severely, as the "worst of schismatics," etc. The writer was probably a clergyman. The following statement is a parallel to the opinions of John Byrom and William Law as to the worldliness of many Quakers which are quoted on pp. 119 and 146 :

"The spirit of the Quakers cannot be Divine, because it is inconsistent with itself; for example women must not curtseie, but may bow, must not wear lace, but may the finest linen, must not wear silks of gay colours, but may the richest of other colours; it is pride to have fine cloaths, or any superfluous about the habit, but not so to have the finest houses and furniture, and to enjoy all the superfluities of life."

The opening sentences of the letter give a fair idea of the character of the whole document :

"I have carefully considered Mrs. Frances Henshaw's account of herself, and am very sorry that the spirit of delusion has obtained so much influence over such a piously disposed person. . . . However I cannot but observe with pleasure that in all her paper she has not urged a single argument against leaving the Holy Catholick Church, the spouse of Christ, which they who have not for their Mother, have not God for their Father. She has mentioned a most powerful objection against the deluded people . . . viz. their not allowing the sacraments commanded," etc.

2. The second document, a three-page, unsigned letter of protest, beginning "Madam," and clearly meant for Fanny Henshaw, is of much interest, being without doubt the missing letter referred to on p. 97, in answer to which the skilful reply in defence of Fanny on pp. 98-102 was written. That reply appears to have been written to a clergyman by a member of the Established Church, who held the Quakers in very high esteem and who was well content, as he expresses it, that "many should differ in their articles of faith, though all agree in those of morality." All the words and passages in the reply (other than those taken from Scripture), which I have had printed in my book within quotation marks, are actually in this MS. (e.g. in both documents there is a word missing or understood before "as by a voice"—see p. 99 *ad fin.*), as well as numerous other remarks and expressions to which the reply can now be seen to refer (e.g. the "thorn of doubt" in the last paragraph of the reply). It is now also clear that the letter of protest follows Fanny's "Case" or *apologia* point by point (see p. 97) and that the reply of Fanny's unknown apologist follows the various points of that letter still more closely and adroitly. The apologist's attempt to show that the fashions of clerical dress are more ridiculous than those of Quaker attire was provoked by the following passage: "If you be arrived to that height of the Spirit or that degree of experience as to imagine that the will of God lies more in a Thou than a you, in a Band more than a cravat, or a plain more than a laced head [i.e. head-dress] or petticoat, I have nothing to say, you must e'en set up and speak in the congregation." The writer then naturally makes great play with "Sarah [i.e. May] Drummond" (see p. 90) and St. Paul's prohibition of preaching by women. A not unimpressive admonition is that "it is not the charm of cant and sound (falsely called the spirit), but the true sense and meaning of Scripture digested into virtuous practice, that produces happiness."

3. (a) The letter from which the following extracts are made was clearly written by Fanny Henshaw and is probably an earlier part of the same letter described in (b) below, or another letter to the same Quaker friend, Mrs. Aldam (of whom we know nothing):

"I've good reason to think any other but a friend would not excuse the trouble I give in writing so oft. . . . I believe we shall soon go into Lancashire to see an uncle [i.e. Mr. Sutton, her guardian] who lives at a place called Dam-house, 8 miles from Manchester [pp. 86 and 121]. He has had the care of us from children and has been like a father to us [p. 79]. To him I purpose to tell my real intentions of the hoped-for change. My cruel sister says I never shall be a Quaker while she lives, no! I sooner shall be confined. To which I doubt not but they'll endeavour to persuade my uncle, which, if he consents to, and God permit, I'm willing, nay, rather choose to submit to it, than thus to live in the world in a state of sin and vanity."

She then expresses at length her determination to submit to any punishment rather than "make shipwreck of faith and religion." "My greatest comfort is . . . the liberty of being alone to read the Scriptures."

"The inclosed lines are my opinion of a worthy friend whom I imagine ye know. Her character charms my very soul, tho' I never had the happiness of seeing her person. She was in Cheshire last summer; her name is May Drummond. T.R. has some acquaintance with her, and would gladly have had me to have seen her, but my sister was then very ill."

"This I fear may be the last time I can communicate my mind to thee, except ye are so good as to assert my moving cause, which I humbly submit to your superior judgement. . . ."

(b) What may be the conclusion of the above is inscribed "Directed to Mrs. Aldam in Doncaster, Yorkshire. Stamped Knutsford [Cheshire]: came to hand 9th 6 mo. [i.e. August] 1736." It runs :

"O my friends, my love to you's unbounded, the dear idea of you is my bosom friend and best beloved companion. My relations endeavour to persuade me that the good opinion I have of T.R. binds me in his favour, or I should see his intention was to have me for my fortune. In vain

I alledge all reasons to the contrary, and as much in vain are their endeavours to lessen my esteem for him. Yet, did I love him as the world imagines, I'd so far sacrifice my love to religion, never to entertain a thought of marrying him. For that would crown the world's suspicion that my change in religion was on his account, which is a thing too sacred to admit a rival. Yet (if ever he had a thought of me) I think I owe this to his friendship and what he has suffered on my account, ever to live single, which thoughts I ever cherished from a child, influenced, I believe, from the advice of Paul, whose writings I ever read with great reverence, in particular his conversion. . . . I've not time to read over what I've writ, but I know thy goodness will excuse all faults.

"I happened to-day to open the Bible on the last two chapters of Micah, the reading of which pretty much affected me, as did ever my friend's advice, in whom I found a faithful Monitor, who far from subtil flattery, clear-sighted to my errors, endeavoured not to veil them from me, but kindly would admonish me. He was to me what Peter was to Cornelius and Philip to the eunuch . . . for which I shall ever esteem him as a most sincere friend, who has at heart my soul's welfare, clear of all other views. If I've been too free in writing my sentiments, remember I've no friend but thee to whom I can do it—for who will hear the complaints of the afflicted ?

"Farewell, my friends ! . . . I could wish my Case made publick for the example of others. God is pleased at present to let my enemies to triumph over me, but I humbly hope by learning patiently . . . He will in His good time be merciful to me."

We know from Fanny Henshaw's narrative (p. 80) that she and her sister were boarding with friends in Cheshire for some years before she went on her epoch-making visit to Dam House. Fanny's "Case" was the name given to her *apologia* or Confessions sent to William Law and others (see pp. 87-93). For her friend "T.R." see my note (5) below. Aldam was a well-known Quaker name. One of George Fox's first disciples was Thomas Aldam of Balby, near Doncaster. This Mrs. Aldam may have been a married daughter of Thomas Smith of Balby.

4. The following poetical effusion I reproduce in full :

To Thomas Smith at Balby.

My dear friend,

My soul, a prisoner now to earthly ties,
Gladly would be released to seek celestial joys,
Bemoans her banishment and longs to be
At peace with God and to his people flee.

But how ?

O say, my friends, or I'm for ever lost,
Too long I have rebelled, I find to my sad cost,
Say by what means I may my freedom gain
And free my soul from worse than Egypt's chain !
For, under God, 'tis you alone can save
My soul from Hell, my body from the Grave ;
For now I'm wholly swallowed up with Greif,
No sect but yours can add to my Releif.

5. To Samuel Mellor in Manchester [or Miller, see pages 123 and 141].

In this letter, covering about a page of foolscap, Frances Henshaw expresses her thanks for the concern of Friends for her soul's welfare, and prays God that He may "give her to them at last." She laments her present sorrowful captivity in the language of Jeremiah. It appears that Samuel Mellor had visited her and had been the means of letters passing between her and her "good old friend" Thos. Smith. She would be glad to see Jos. Toft (of Leek) and thinks her uncle and guardian (Thomas Sutton) would "not take his coming amiss, he being an old acquaintance, and one whom I know my uncle has an esteem for." She refers to a woman friend at Kendal (possibly Grace Chambers, with whom she afterwards stayed, p. 167), who seems to have written her a letter in verse, concerning the sorrows of "Julia." This letter must have been written (probably in September 1736) after she had removed from Cheshire (see 3 above) to the neighbourhood of Manchester.

6. On the reverse of the last mentioned two communications is a long poem addressed by Fanny to May Drummond, the gifted Scottish preacher, which, to judge from the prose

conclusion, was sent or intended to be sent her as a letter. It begins :

“ Hail, happy May, to whom a power is given
The world to teach, and tread the path to Heaven,
Who in obedience to thy Saviour's call
Thy country hast forsook and kindred all.”

Later on the writer laments,

“ Oh ! had I too by thy example taught
Laid out my all this jewel to have bought,
I should not here have staid o'erwhelmed with Greif,
Absent from thee, and all dear Friends' Releif.”

She wishes that she had “ been ingrafted into Abraham's seed ” and “ helpmate with thee His blessed flock have fed,” and continues with reiterated praises of the “ Virtuous Maid,” whom she so much revered.

7. The last and longest of the writings composed by Fanny Henshaw consists, with only slight verbal differences, of the latter portion of her *apologia* or “ Case,” as printed on pages 91 (last half), 92 and 93, together with the final two paragraphs of the “ additions ” (including the reference to William Law as a “ worthy professor ” of the Church), which we have so far only had in Byrom's letter to Law (p. 135), and also with another interesting addition, the most informing portions of which are as follows :

“ What say ye, my Friends, do ye approve this Journey ? pray let me know ; for not a step would I stir in any case without your advice and approval. . . . I'm loath to bid adieu, my soul would with you build her Tabernacle, and writing to you is next to the satisfaction of being with you. O, I could be glad to see May Drummond ! . . . Pray acquaint her with my case, and if she judge me not utterly unworthy, a visit from her I should esteem the greatest favour her Charity can afford her distressed friend. I could almost have hoped to have seen Jos. Toft ere now, but he has not yet shewn that kindness.”

“ Dost thee, my friend, never travel this way ? I should rejoice, methinks, to see thee . . . you having

known the worst of me, O ! my Friends ! and I rejoice in your doing so, that ye be not deceived in me.

. . . " F. Henshaw. Farewell."

It is just conceivable that the " Journey " mentioned above is the same as the one referred to in MS. 3 (*a*) above, i.e. from Cheshire to Dam House. But in that case this part of the MS. would not fit with the previous paragraphs, which must, I think, have been written from Dam House, and the " Journey " would then be the critical one which Fanny made on horseback to Doncaster, where she was at last able to escape to her Quaker friends. The letter may have been written to Samuel Mellor, the recipient of MS. (5) above, or to his wife Lydia.

It may be seen that these seven MSS. taken together add very considerably and in a most interesting way to our knowledge of Fanny Henshaw at one of the most critical periods of her eventful life. I think, too, that their contents are almost altogether consistent with what we already know of Fanny's character and situation.

(1) We now have more evidence of the great efforts made by Fanny's family and acquaintances to keep her within the fold of the Established Church. The poor girl seems to have been bombarded with long, argumentative letters from clergymen and others, exposing the wickedness of the deluded Quakers.

(2) For the first time I think we learn that Fanny's only sister, to whom she was much attached, was bitterly opposed to her conversion. We may therefore suspect that her sister was the " near intimate " mentioned on p. 85, who believed that her change of faith was due to a distortion of judgment caused by her falling in love with a certain " strict " Quaker (whom we now know as " T.R. ").

(3) We now know more of Fanny's relationship to May Drummond (p. 73); (*a*) that it was in Cheshire in the summer of 1735 that Fanny missed going to hear that eloquent woman preach, with such remarkable psychological results (see p. 90), and not, as I had inferred, in the Manchester district a year later; and (*b*) that she was taking steps to get into personal contact and correspondence with her.

(4) From the MSS. it is clear that Fanny had acquaintance and correspondence with other members of the Society to a considerably greater extent and from an earlier date than had previously appeared to be the case.

(5) We now know more of Fanny Henshaw's attitude to the gentleman, who appears, for the first time, under the initials, "T.R." All that we were told before was that he gave her admirable spiritual counsel, which was indirectly the means of her final decision for Quakerism (p. 88), and that, as already mentioned, people thought that she was in love with him. Fanny, in her printed narrative, published, it should be remembered, and possibly composed years afterwards, denies that this was the case. Yet, when she asserts (in MS. 3 (b)) that the insinuations advanced against "T.R." could not lessen her esteem for him and that she owes it to him "ever to live single," one cannot help feeling that in her denials, "methinks the lady doth protest too much," and that she was at least half in love with him. She alludes to her friend in this new letter as being to her what St. Peter was to Cornelius, and so on, and as her "faithful Monitor," the precise expression which elsewhere she uses for the Holy Spirit (p. 91 and cf. pp. 81 and 82). Indeed the stern repression in the interests of religion of her affectionate feelings in this direction may well account largely for the ill-health and the neurotic symptoms which accompanied the long drawn-out crisis of her history. It is significant that these disappeared when her pent-up emotions were able to express themselves in another way on her beginning to preach in the newly-found liberty of the Friends' Meeting (p. 158). In view of Fanny's declaration (in MS. 3 (b)) of her choice of an unmarried life, it is interesting to remember that she was twice married in after years, but not to "T.R." One wonders if "T.R." was the person of whom it was reported to Dr. Byrom three years later that he had made an offer of marriage to Fanny (p. 151)—he had disliked the man, Byrom said, when he met him near Manchester in 1736. (Fanny was only finally landed safely in matrimony in 1745.) Incidentally we have not hitherto, I think, had any mention that she was heiress to "a fortune." As, however, she had come to feel herself required to lay aside "all the vanity and foolish amusements of the world," her income, during her long career as an active Minister of

the Society, was presumably chiefly spent in good works and to defray the cost of her numerous journeys for religious objects.

This is perhaps the place to mention that in a collection of letters “written by Divers Friends Deceased,” published in 1805 by John Kendall of Colchester (Letter xxxi. vol. ii.) there is a short letter, which, though the name of the recipient is not given, was evidently meant for Fanny Henshaw during the time of her persecution by relatives. (T. Edmund Harvey was apparently the first to notice the letter.) It was written from Balby by Thomas Smith (already mentioned above) and is quite clearly worded, with considerable skill, so as to pass the “censors” and possibly to have some effect upon them—for we know from John Byrom’s *Journal* that Fanny’s family at this time opened all her letters. Thus the writer begins, “The reading of thy letter gave me much satisfaction, as it informs me thou art treated with less severity than hitherto”; and he goes on to express a hope that her relations shall be led “to think that no one’s conscience ought to be forced,” and that everyone should be free to choose their own religion, and so on, ending with exhortations to Fanny, in the characteristic “quietist” doctrine of the period, to be “as passive clay in the hand of the potter” and to “save nothing alive in thee, which God hath appointed for death.”

STEPHEN HOBHOUSE.

There are notices of Fanny Henshaw (Paxton, Dodshon), in *Jnl. F.H.S.* xxi. xxiii. xxv-xxviii.

“Elder Tea”

II mo. 15, 1850.

DEAR FRIEND,

I do not regret that I missed the cup of Elder tea that thou thinks might have been administered to my advantage; to the best of my recollection it is not a very palatable drink. Elder flower-water is often used as an agreeable Cosmetic by those who are anxious to keep up a nice appearance, but at best it is only a superficial application. For my part I much prefer thy glass of Elder wine, and it being sweetened with love and spiced with kindness, I can take it readily and it warms my heart, and I hope it will have the effect of making my voice louder and clearer at a future time.

With love.

Thy oblig^d frd, J.B.