

# Prison Visiting in 1819

Communicated by ARTHUR J. EDDINGTON

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THE following letter, begun in iii mo. and continued 6.v.1819, has been kindly transcribed by Arthur J. Eddington from the *Gurney MSS.* (Sec. III, 335), deposited by Mr. Quintin Gurney at Friends House. Of special interest are the picture of penal conditions and the efforts to improve them and also the writer's comments on Joseph John Gurney's connection with politics at an election which shows the old shrinking from the affairs of the world at war with a realization that a social reform such as the restriction of capital punishment necessitates political action.

Ann (Tuke) Alexander (1767-1849) was the daughter of William and Esther Tuke and was born at York. In her girlhood she helped her parents with the girls' school which they opened in 1784. She was at the same period herself a pupil of Lindley Murray. She first opened her mouth as a minister in meeting at the age of nineteen. In 1788 she began to travel in the ministry and in course of time visited many parts of England, Scotland, Ireland, America (1803-5) and Holland and Germany (1826). In 1796 she married William Alexander of Needham Market in Suffolk, who was one of the Friends associated with her father in the founding of The Retreat. Later they moved to York (1808) to the superintendence of the girls' school founded by her mother. There she engaged in many good works besides that described below. On the death of her husband in 1841 she removed to Ipswich for the rest of her days.

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Ann Alexander, from York 3<sup>rd</sup> mo. 1819 to Joseph John Gurney, Earlham, near Norwich.

My dear Friend,

Now that I am once more set at liberty from my late engagements in our City Jail, I feel an inclination to give thee a little summary of our proceedings, & of some circumstances which have thereby come to my knowledge, as strongly

corroborating the sentiments expressed in thy late Publication, which, proving the interest thou must now feel on account of the inmates of prison houses, I shall venture to proceed without further apology. Thou wilt perhaps recollect, when inspecting our Jail with thy sister E. Fry & the magistrates, seeing two men in one room as described in thy account, besides a Jew in a separate apartment. On our visiting Committee being introduced in form by two of our Aldermen, who were kind enough to gratify some of our feelings, by shewing us the *men's*, as well as the women's apartments; the two former very forcibly attracted my attention; & on enquiring, if the female visitors might be at liberty to sit down and read a little with them, &c, if they felt inclined to do so; Wilson and Peacock did not think it best to grant leave, but nodded assent to the Jailor, in a way which left him at liberty to use his own discretion in the matter. It so happened, that by the absence of one or both of my colleagues, I was left to go alone the first week of our visiting; when having then only one female under our care, after reading with, and communicating to her what little instruction seemed in my power, I felt very solicitous to make all the use I could of the permission allowed us respecting the men, which the opportunity seemed to afford; and finding the Jailor not only willing but apparently pleased with the proposal I was soon left alone in the day room with the two above mentioned. By a little previous inquiry, I found the elder, aged 63 was father of the woman then under our care, who confessed she had been the cause of his being in that situation, by stolen goods being put in his house by herself or her husband (now transported) who both declared he was perfectly innocent as to the theft, or any knowledge of the goods being secreted in his premises. By further inquiry of himself, I found he was a day labourer; & having little beforehand, had laid that little for rent, when he was committed in prison, so that he had only the Jail allowance stated in thy "notes", was without employment; could read but very indifferently, and was loaded with a chain of about 7 lbs. weight, the coldness of which, during the winter as he lay in bed, seemed to add much to his sufferings.

The other man, under 21 years of age, had been once on board the hulks, and also broke out of prison; so that closer confinement appeared more needful in his case than the other.

He was committed for stealing, had no employment, & in other respects shared with his colleague. On reading a chapter, and making a few remarks after it, they both manifested the greatest attention; the elderly man sighing deeply, & the other shedding many tears, which was the more extraordinary as we might have expected him totally destitute of feeling, as he had been brought up in scenes of vice from his childhood, having had no education; not even that of a Sunday School, & therefore could not read, & seemed to recollect no religious instruction but some prayers his mother taught him before her death, which happened when he was I think about 6 years old; His father died in his infancy. Whether on their minds or not, this visit and some others before any more were added to their number, made on my own a lasting impression, by their being owned more than at the time I might be fully aware of, by a degree of the presence of him, who came to seek and to save that which would otherwise be lost.

By a little subscription, the addition of Soup, Cheese, Soap, & coals when needful were soon added to their bodily comforts; & my two valued partners Alice Hornor & Dorothy Wilson being quite disposed to assist my endeavours for their improvement & comfort, the young man was supplied with a few books, slate, &c. & learnt both to read and write a little during his confinement, & the elder having learnt to make list shoes soon instructed his colleague by which means they made about 30 Pr and earned about 20<sup>s</sup>/ profit, most of which was reserved, and given to them on their discharge, as they were both acquitted.

After having gone on in the way just described, with increasing hopes of improvement, we were however much tried by the introduction of deserters, 3 in the course of our visiting; which, though only one staid till the last, had evidently a tendency to unsettle, & much counteract our endeavours for permanent amendment; but this was of little consequence compared with the introduction of five men at one time, sentenced by our sessions for transportation, who were added to their number, and, by some circumstances preventing two of our Committee attending; had been with them some days before it was my lot to make the painful discovery. On some remonstrance with the Jailor & endeavouring to convince him that all our efforts would be

frustrated, by such contamination he kindly provided a small room for Wilson & West, (the two first mentioned men) where they could be kept *partially* separate ; & might go on with their work, to the no small comfort of the elderly man in particular ; but not till after the anticipated effects of a week's association with some of the most abandoned, were but too apparent on the weak mind of the younger ; who, from that time never regained those feelings of contrition, which had often appeared very striking to the other visitors, as well as to myself.

After their discharge, on calling here for the money, they both expressed much thankfulness for the care extended ; but the old man's cup so overflowed, that, as he said, it seemed quite beyond his powers of expression ; adding " that he had been 26 weeks in the condition I have mentioned ; and he *thought he should have been quite lost*, had not something been done to add to his comfort " .

I will now turn to our females, Two servants were added for stealing in a very short time, to the one you saw in the prison. These girls, about 24 and 22 years of age, had long been immoral characters ; and it appears to us evident, had got into hands likely to finish the career of their moral depravity, had they not thus been arrested ; & , we were in hopes, brought to some sense of feeling. However about a week before their trial a woman of *infamous* character, evidently in liquor, was added to their number, during the time of my visiting. Distressing as was this occurrence, the Jail being then very full of men of different descriptions, there seemed no alternative. The effects were just what might have been forboded : they hardened each other and the young women's appearance & manner on their trial, were such as would completely out balance what we believe they might truly advance, as some extenuation of their guilty conduct. They were convicted, & sentenced to 1 year's imprisonment in the house of correction ; The woman you saw, to 2 years ; & the last inmate is now under sentence of death for robbery ; but in expectation that it will be changed to transportation ; She was still with them when we paid our last visit tho' we hope they will soon be separated.

To this discouraging account, I should however add, that it is said another day room for each sex, with a division of the yards, is in contemplation by our City magistrates ;

who have ordered a regular supply of Coals & Soap ; and 1 pennyworth of milk per day, to be added to the former allowance.

How strikingly do these cases prove the want of a thorough change of prison discipline ! but even with that, it appears to me, that the check so much needed to the increase of crime and misery will not be effected, but by that ameliorating of the penal code, which is now happily claiming some part of the public attention. It seems very strange, not to say unaccountable, that in this Christian country, the penal code of the Jews, who were under the immediate direction of the great Governor of the Universe, should be so little regarded. Crimes there mentioned as of the *greatest magnitude*, & held up as such by our Saviour himself in his sermon on the mount, as deviations from the law of *purity*, are here scarcely brought into consideration, whilst petty thefts, &c, meet with the greatest severity, were the laws fully executed. The plan of restitution, so admirably laid down in the Jewish code, and no doubt sanctioned by the spirit of the Gospel, though that of retaliation, or revenge, is expressly forbidden, seems much overlooked, except in America, where it has so long been acted upon with advantage.

An instance or two having just accured, which led me to think more deeply than before on this subject ; have induced me to communicate these things to thee, my Dear Friend ! in that freedom which I hope will be kept open between us, trusting to thy prudence and discretion, should any use be made of them or the preceding statements of such an obscure individual. One man from the Jail, who with the others sentenced for transportation have been also in some measure objects of my care, with the assistance of James Backhouse, was convicted of stealing a gold chain of some value, which by what I heard on the trial, had not been restored to the owner. He was sentenced to 1 month's confinement in the house of correction. Another man connected with the Jew (the latter acquitted) is under sentence of death, which will be lessened to transportation, for robbing the shop of a Widow, of goods, &c, to the amount of about 10 Guineas. Some of the goods have been returned, if not all. Now would it not be making a much better compensation to the Widow, to have that man confined to work, till he had made *full*

restitution ; and is it not also as much due to the woman who lost the gold chain ? Would it not also be much more to the advantage of the country, to erect penitentiaries, where such might be confined to labour till they had made restitution, paid all expenses of their prosecution and maintenance, & then be subject to as much longer confinement as circumstances appeared to require ? And would not the idea of such labour, with occasional solitary confinement, be much more dreaded by those whose habits of idleness and dissipation have brought them into such circumstances, than going to Botany Bay, or even the awful sentence of being executed ?

As thy valuable relative T. F. Buxton, is now, by his seat in Parliament, an influential Character, we may confidently hope he will use all his influence, in promoting that change of public measures on behalf of this devoted class of human beings, (and may I add that of poor climbing boys) which is evidently so much wanted ; and though many trials of faith and patience may await its completion, yet we may rest assured, that “ great is truth, and will prevail ” ; so far as those who are sincerely concerned for its promotion, preserve their faith in, & dependance upon, our all powerful intercessor and advocate.

*5th mo 6th* The preceding statement was hastily penned before my setting out for our late Q<sup>y</sup> Mee<sup>s</sup> at Leeds ; I therefore left it with our F<sup>r</sup> Esther Brown to transcribe, intending to finish & forward it, on my return home again. This, however, having been protracted five weeks, by attending Kendal Q<sup>y</sup> M<sup>s</sup>, visitting those in the Compass of Settle M<sup>y</sup> M<sup>s</sup>, & other religious engagements, finishing with the examination at Ackworth, I have not had much quiet settlement for resuming my correspondence with thee, till the present period. I now do it under the grateful persuasion, that the spirit of opposition which has appeared to thy book on Prison Discipline, & in which we who are *now* visitters to the females in the Castle may probably some time longer participate, will, by eliciting more of the truth, be one means of effecting its overthrow. This I trust will also be the case, thro : the mysterious workings of him, whose name is indeed “ Wonderful ”, respecting some of thy engagements for the benefit of the rising generation, under which thou hast shared my sympathy & must have felt the need of the full exercise

of that faith & patience, which constitute a part of the christian's panoply. But, my d<sup>r</sup> friend! there is one circumstance which I heard related in public company during my absence, & which was strongly corroborated by a letter being read out of a Newspaper addressed to thee on the occasion, which affected my mind too painfully to pass over unnoticed. I allude to the conspicuous part said to be taken by thee & thy valued bro<sup>r</sup> Sam<sup>l</sup> on acc<sup>t</sup> of your late City Election. As I cannot but believe, that serious reflection must lead to the full conviction, that the spirit of Electionering is as opposite to the example & precepts of him, who was "holy, harmless, undefiled, & separate from sinners"; as light is from darkness, it is always to me a matter of surprise, that religious characters under our name, can take any great share in this business, as it is now so generally conducted. The introduction, however, of some members into Parliament, who there is very good ground to believe will stand forward in the cause of suffering humanity or for the promotion of that great work of truth & righteousness, which in the present day, is so evidently advancing, may be a powerful plea in favour of supporting such characters by their votes & interest, tho the latter, I apprehend, ought to be very much guarded. But when one is held up as a candidate, who, from the lowness, & even inhumanity of some of his pursuits or amusements seems more fit to herd with the basest class of mankind, than to rank amongst the rulers of a nation professedly not only civilized, but christian—any very active measures being pursued for his promotion by those who are themselves public advocates for that "holy name which requires every one to depart from iniquity", appears so discordant, as to excite, not only surprise, but in the case alluded to, even a degree of astonishment. That there may have been misrepresentations, & extenuating circumstances, I can readily admit, & shou'd have rejoiced to have had them in possession at the time alluded to, but as that is now over, perhaps what is past will be best consigned to the pit of oblivion, except the profitable reflection of our own frailty, & liability, in an unguarded moment to give some occasion of censure to those who are watching every movement of such as have put their hands to a work equally pure & precious, with the most scupulous attention. I trust the feelings of sincere love & friendship, will warrant the freedom

of these remarks to the d<sup>r</sup> friend I am now addressing ; one for whom, according to my measure, I travail in spirit that no weapon formed against thee by the subtle enemy or any of his emissaries, may be permitted to prosper ; but that by dwelling deep, in humility & unremitting watchfulness, the beautiful description of the patriarch Joseph may become thy encreasing & enriching experience. I am much pleased with thy d<sup>r</sup> sisters selection of Hymns ; the next edition will, of course, want a few corrections &c. It quite does away the necessity of anything further in that way, at present ; I have therefore turned my attention to a small selection now in the press, " for the use of prisoners ", respect<sup>s</sup> which I shoud be glad of *your* sentiments, shou'd another edition be called for. I am with our united d<sup>r</sup> love to you all, & other near relatives thy sincerely affectionate & interested friend

Ann Alexander.

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## Friends Historical Society

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### Statement of Accounts for the year ended 31st December, 1933

RECEIPTS	£	s.	d.	PAYMENTS	£	s.	d.
Balance in hand, 31st				Postage and Petty Cash	6	10	0
Dec., 1932 .. ..	60	10	1	Annual Meeting Invitations .. ..	2	5	8
Subscriptions .. ..	73	6	2	Stationery .. ..	1	6	0
Sales .. .. ..	11	4	4	400 " Psychical Experiences of Friends " ..	23	6	0
				425 " Journal," xxx. ..	67	12	8
				Balance in hand, 31st			
				Dec., 1933 .. ..	44	0	3
	<u>£145</u>				<u>0</u>		
			7		<u>0</u>		
			7		7		

Examined with books and vouchers and found correct,  
15.ii.1934.

AUGUSTUS DIAMOND.

The Annual Meeting is reported on page 70.