

## Elizabeth Fry: "Heretic" or Seer ?

IT is a matter of common knowledge that the young Gurneys of Earlham, as evidenced by published extracts from their diaries, were largely untrammelled in their beliefs by the doctrines in vogue amongst the Society of Friends, and that the change which her sisters observed in the thoughts and actions of Elizabeth Fry, after her memorable meeting with William Savery, were a source not only of irritation but also of concern to them, in that the liberty she had hitherto had in her beliefs appeared to be repressed, and she seemed to be willingly entering into the narrow and circumscribed limits of doctrine and conduct, which were looked upon as the necessary equipment of a "strict Friend". We, also, are apt to visualize her in later life, in spite of her successful experiments in social welfare, as a faithful and unquestioning adherent to the doctrines and practices of the Society. We find, however, from some of her letters, that she was by no means willing to accept without modification the ideas that were held in great esteem by Friends of that time on at least two questions, those of education and music. If it is correct to define a "heretic" as one who dissents from the traditional beliefs of the day, whatever the later verdict of the Society may be thereon, there is little doubt that this term might be applied even to such a stalwart example of Quakerism as Elizabeth Fry.

The main interest in the first two letters, both of which belong to the Gurney Collection of Manuscripts, is Education, or rather Boarding Schools. In the earlier one we are given a glimpse of the entry of Gurney Fry, at the age of 15, into the school kept by Joel Lean, at Fishponds, near Bristol. The scene might be paralleled at any time between the date of the letter and the present time, as the anxious mother leaves her son in the care of the school authorities, not without a certain amount of advice to the Headmaster with regard to school affairs.

Gurney Fry had been nearly a year at school when the second letter was written, and his mother's opinion of boarding schools, never very flattering, does not seem to have

improved in the meantime. Probably few Friends of her own or later times would entirely agree with her view of these " scenes of temptation ", but the present practice of shorter terms upholds her contention that lengthy periods at school without home influence may be far from beneficial.

The third letter contains many points of interest. It only came to light shortly before the Elizabeth Fry Exhibition at Norwich (1937), and was amongst the exhibits shown. Her views on music and the harm that may ensue from the repression of musical tastes are now fully recognized by the Society, but they were not generally accepted by Friends until forty or fifty years after the letter was written. Her plea that the younger people might be allowed to indulge in singing is far ahead of her time, and marks her as a true " seer ", whilst her home experiences lead her to denounce the immoderate pleasures of the table then indulged, it would appear, amongst some families of otherwise " worthy " Friends. There are many other points of interest in the letters here printed, with slight omissions which are indicated.

## I

Elizabeth Fry to Joseph J. Gurney, Norwich ; " By Romford ".

(Gurney MSS. I, 222)

Dagenham, viii.15.1831.

My dearest Joseph,

I am anxious at once to write to thee after my return from Bristol to tell thee & thy beloved wife that I paid an interesting visit to dear Aunt Fowler & Rachel<sup>1</sup> on my return home. When I made up my mind to take Gurney I concluded to give a day to cousin C. Gurney<sup>2</sup> & Aunt Fowler because I loved them too well to leave the neighbourhood without seeing them. I therefore in mind devoted 6d. day to this purpose but as it proved Bristol meeting day which lasted late it much shorten'd my visit to Elm Grove — James Sheppard & Bessy & Prissy Gurney were with me & by some accident aunt Fowler never got the letter mentioning my plan until just before I arrived therefore she was rather flutter'd & Saml. only gave her reason to expect me, but she soon recovered herself & we had I thought

a very interesting time together, she appeared very lively in spirit, minister'd sweetly to James—& I felt enabled truly to encourage her & spiritually I think we felt comforted & animated together. I was also more encouraged about her bodily state & see more reason for hope about her complaints than I did before I saw her, this I thought you would like to hear. Rachel was most kind & attentive to me, I was but poorly & they helped to comfort me up—we left them early in the morning but they were both up to see us off—Lucy Fowler was there & but poorly.

Now for my other history. I left home low & anxious & yet I did not feel easy not to go with Gurney, but as I went along I felt more quiet & peaceful & believed the step taken a right one—We arrived in Bristol very tired but had a *most* kind reception from Dr. Ball<sup>3</sup> & S. Allen<sup>4</sup> & I had no small pleasure in finding that Saml. & E. & the children were at Coombe & Clifton—I had one small trouble, my box did not arrive & I had not a single article of clothing except *shoes & gloves* & never did arrive until the day that I left Bristol—I entirely shifted as I could, on 4th day we went to Fish Ponds with Sam & Elizth.<sup>5</sup> & thoroughly saw into things *except learning* which we trusted to thee & I felt generally *much* satisfied but have an impression partly from Bristol friends that they are high & rather severe with their boys, though I did not see it in them—Gurney was altogether pleased & Joel Lean<sup>6</sup> *very* glad I went, he said he did not like children going without either their father or mother with them—I chose his bedroom, told my views, plans, &c., &c., some of which I believe will prove useful in the school as to *moral care*, indeed I believe I was in my right place & rather remarkably felt it to be the case—After this we all went to the Hillhouses, Gurney with us, where I well introduced him—as well as to Dr. Ball & S. Allen who appear willing truly to take him by the hand, that if it were only for my proper introduction to some of my kind friends I think my journey paid for, at his age I much value a little good association for him amidst friends & relations. I left him *very* satisfactorily under Sam & Elizth. care, they were to send him to Fish Ponds. Dear Wm. Foster & his boy arrived on 5th day which was very satisfactory & my being there I think was as important nearly for his boy as Gurney, I tried to do for him nearly

the same as mine, dear Agatha Hillhouse will I believe be much like a mother to them.

Thou will like to hear that Wm. Foster & myself had a satisfactory meeting on 6th day morn—S. Allen said it was largely attended for that day—Dearest Sam most kindly sent me home in one of his carriages with James Sheppard & therefore that journey cost me hardly any thing but as my purse is rather low just now & expenses rather heavy I *thankfully* accept thy offer as to *our* journey down which cost just £4—I hope I am not intruding in doing it but I find it best not to refuse *good offers*—I feel peaceful in having left Gurney—I am pleased to hear of thy public meetings & do believe that they are not labour in vain—I look to one or two at Barking but with women it is very humbling work. . . . farewell dearest Joseph much love to those around thee & believe me thy very affectionate & grateful sister

E. Fry.

<sup>1</sup> " Aunt Fowler and Rachel." Rachel Fowler and her daughter, of Melksham ; mother and sister of Mary, the second wife of Joseph J. Gurney, whom he married in 1827.

<sup>2</sup> " C. Gurney." Christiana Gurney, of Bath, daughter of Joseph and Christiana (*née* Barclay).

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Gawen Ball of Bristol (1766-1847).

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Allen, of Hitchin 1771-1868, a recorded minister and a keen supporter of philanthropic movements, especially the Peace Society.

<sup>5</sup> " Sam and Elizabeth." Samuel Gurney, brother of Joseph J. Gurney, and his wife Elizabeth (*née* Sheppard).

<sup>6</sup> Joel Lean (d. 1856, aged 76) kept a successful private boarding school at Fishponds House, Bristol, for the children of Friends. A prospectus, in the Library at Friends House, shows that the hours of study covered eight out of the twelve between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. Besides English subjects and mathematics, Greek, Latin, French and German were taught. Geography and drawing received attention once a week, while the evenings after supper were devoted to " Propositions explanatory of the christian Doctrines of the Society, accompanied by proofs from the Holy Scriptures." —ED.

## II

Elizabeth Fry to Joseph J. Gurney, Norwich.

(Gurney MSS. I, 224)

Upton Lane, vi.16.1832  
finished vi.20

My dearest Joseph,

I much wish to hear of your safe arrival at home—I have since I began received they truly welcome letter, I

can hardly tell thee how much I enjoy hearing from thee. I think thy account of your arrival home satisfactory, I hope that the rest before thou sets out again may refresh thee & be like a little brook by the way. I am quite clear that much stress upon the body & mind depresses the spirits which thou hast had of late but I am also clear that knowing what it is in however small a degree to have Christ within as the *well of water* springing up—heals, refreshes, strengthens body soul & spirit & raises up marvellously, this utterly unworthy as I am of it, I believe I may say that I know to be the case. I often think that it requires much care in the christian life not to make too much of suffering, *Almost boasting of it* : I do not my dearest brother in the *slightest* degree feel this applicable to thee—We know there is & must be fiery baptisms to be past through & at times *deep & real suffering* as some of us have indeed had to experience—but after all & through every discouragement we are called upon to rejoice ever more & in every thing to return thanks—& to look to the God of *hope* to fill us with all joy & peace in believing through the power of the Holy Ghost, I believe it well & right for those who love their Lord to look to the many blessing[s] & unmerited mercies granted them spiritually & naturally & remember that even if the cause they hold most dear does not prosper in themselves or others as they could desire—it is after all not *their cause* but His—Who will work & who can let it—It is curious my writing thus as I consider myself in a poor, low & rather conflicted state but I find as far as I understand it, that the real christian principle leads men to hope against hope.

I am just now rather full under my own dear family. Gurney takes up my time & attention, he is amiable & I trust going on well but I do not like the effect of so many years school & if I had fortune & power I think nothing hardly would induce my sending a boy many years to school, an injury to the character that I believe nothing is ever likely to remedy ; with increased knowledge which I have of these things I am increasingly against *all boarding schools* believing that there are hardly any where the chastity of the mind does not suffer—at all events try first to have the children strongly grounded in principle before they enter these scenes of temptation. Gurney has expressed nothing but satisfaction with the school he was in for the last

half-year. May Wm. & Hannah<sup>1</sup> upon entering their important duties know how to guard & protect the dear children comited to their care from contaminating each other. This is a most important point & should be done by night & by day—

My husband set off on another long journey yesterday which I feel. Poor accounts from Sandgate of Hannah and rather so of Rachel. I feel at times for my different children beyond what I can express in their various situations trials temptations & joys—but again now & then feel able to commit & leave them all to Him who can do all things for them—I am glad yours are going on well—Farewell dearest Joseph, much love to thy dear sweet wife who I increasingly feel a sister in bonds spiritual & bonds natural—much also to the dear children—& Society—H. Scarnel—W. Lean & Houson—

Thy much attached sister

E. Fry.

I owe Hewen some shillings or a pound which I wish to pay & send by Lathume, as a gift is a gift & a debt is a debt, therefore I prefer paying but beg to know what I owe.

Pray ask Wm. Lean where I am to pay his bill as I much wish to do it at once.

<sup>1</sup> William Lean was the son of Joel Lean, mentioned in the previous letter. In 1832 he married Hannah Scarnell of Earham, near Norwich; and they began their married life by taking charge of the new school opened by Warwickshire Quarterly Meeting at Camp Hill, Birmingham. It was under their care during the whole of its short career of ten years.—ED.

### III

Elizabeth Fry to Joseph J. Gurney, Norwich.

(In private possession of Q. E. Gurney, Esq.)

Upton Lane ii.27.1833

My dearest Joseph,

Pray forward the enclosed to Lucy Aggs. The ladies must do all they can to curry favour with the Matron. I much fear that all is not right in the Prison, or the Officers would not feel as they do. I have for some little time thought of writing to thee. I must first ask how it goes with thee, and whether there have been any further openings from within or without respecting Parliament?<sup>1</sup> It is one

of those cases that I should very much trust to these openings and in no way fret myself about it.

I am much interested about thy book.<sup>2</sup> I think it a subject so very important and likely to be so very useful its being handled by a religious person, so much handle has been made of it by the irreligious. There is one point I hope thou wilt dwell upon which is that of forming good and refined tastes in early life, it appears to me to be one important means of helping the human mind in a healthy state, that in recreations which are needful for it, it should be trained as much as possible to look to those things that bring profit as well as pleasure with them. My observation of human nature and the different things that affect it frequently leads me to regret that we as a Society so wholly give up delighting the ear by sound. Surely He who formed the ear and the heart would not have given these tastes and powers without some purpose for them, and I think my husband is a most striking proof of the real injury sustained from the restrictions of his early life wholly preventing his in any degree having cultivated in a sober and limited way his strong natural tastes ; it led him to break other laws of infinitely greater consequence, and I think his character has suffered materially from it. I also do observe that by not allowing the use of that which God has given a taste for, much less refined, and I apprehend safe things take possession, and in our Society we see it, I think, for more thought than in most about eating, particularly how things are dressed at table, etc. and that some grosser pleasures have been partaken of instead.

I also think music in certain states of body and mind very useful, and is thought to check and help insanity. I keep my views very much to myself, and do not see exactly how we can make any change, but in the formation of tastes it is a consideration. I often have felt in singing, as almost all of us do to our poor little babies as the sure means to cheer, comfort and lull them, we forget we are giving a taste that we afterwards have to suppress, but I am not without a hope and expectation that the day may come when under the restriction of christian bounds something of the kind may be admitted of our young people. I have rather unexpectedly entered this subject and I hope neither Mary nor thyself will look upon me as a heretic for doing it. I also fully see

and feel the other side of the question, and believe some are called upon to give it up, but I seriously doubt how far we should make it a general thing. . . .

I am thy most loving sister,

E.F.

<sup>1</sup> "Parliament". Joseph J. Gurney decided in 3rd month 1833 not to attempt a Parliamentary career.

<sup>2</sup> *Thoughts on Habit and Discipline*, 1844. See *Memoirs of J.J.G.*, 1902, p. 265.

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