Elizabeth Fry, Amelia Opie

Two Lives

Janet Whitney : *Elizabeth Fry, Quaker Heroine.* Harrap. 1937, pp. 328, 12s. 6d.

Jacobine Menzies-Wilson and Helen Lloyd : *Amelia : the Tale of a Plain Friend.* Oxford University Press. 1937, pp. xii. + 299, 12s. 6d.

It is a curious and to some extent a consoling fact, that this year of 1937, which has been dedicated to re-armament and punctuated by wars, should see the publication of a standard life of Elizabeth Fry. The welcome that the book has met with is evidence, not only of the skill and sympathy of the author, nor even of the most noble qualities of its subject ; but of the longing with which our country, haunted by fear of war, can still contemplate the achievements of applied Christianity.

Janet Whitney has performed the service of breathing life into a great figure, who for nearly one hundred years has survived mainly in blue-books, and has only been recalled to memory for purposes of reference. Two years after her death, the pious task of writing the life of Elizabeth Fry was undertaken by two of her daughters, and the two stout volumes which resulted have shared the fate of the majority of standard works. Apart from the fact that, in common with all her children, they failed to understand their mother or sympathize with her nature, their book was doomed to early oblivion, because, after the accepted manner of Victorian biography it set the claims of propriety above those of veraciousness. Filial piety moreover, was at odds with the virtues of selection, and the volumes overflow with extracts from Elizabeth Fry's Journals, and with hortatory epistles, which can never have possessed any but a sentimental interest. " Her letters to her children ", comments her modern biographer, " are the only readable letters she ever wrote."

Now that close on one hundred years have passed, she has found a worthy and indeed an ideal biographer in Janet Whitney, a writer of great charm and humour, who was not only born and married into Quakerism, but has proved

herself in her sympathies and her gifts of leadership to be a true daughter of Friends.

The main outlines of the public life of Elizabeth Fry have always been clear in men's minds, tending to overshadow her private virtues, which were no less remarkable; and only the fact that not one of her eleven children remained a member of his mother's community has been cited from time to time as a damaging comment upon her outside activities. But in this new biography she has stepped down amongst us, tender-hearted and shrinking, and yet with how queenly a dignity. One lays down the volume,—and it is hard to lay it down before one has read every one of the 311 pages!—feeling that one has gained a friend. We see Betsy Gurney in her happy childhood at Earlham, always a little set apart from the merry throng of her brothers and sisters by her delicacy of body and her want of humour, and, as she grew into young womanhood, by her conversion to the "Plain Friends". Nowhere perhaps is her biographer's method more clearly shown, than in the opening chapter, where two lines of the earlier Life are expanded into as many sparkling pages, transporting us, like passengers in the mail coach held up by the string of laughing sisters, straight into the heart of the eighteenth century, and the family of "Gay Gurneys".

Either by accident or design, the Life of Amelia Opie, which was also published this year, forms a valuable pendant to Janet Whitney's more important work. The only daughter of the beloved Dr. Alderson of Norwich, she was a playmate and friend of the Gurney family, touching them in those early days rather upon the "gay" surface of their lives than upon the deep religious foundation which was later to form the basis of their friendship. When fate had brought Amelia to London as the second wife of John Opie, the famous Cornish painter, she rejoiced at Elizabeth's marriage, which transplanted her also from the country to be her neighbour in town. It is to Mrs. Opie's lively pen that we owe the picture of young Mrs. Fry's home in St. Mildred's Court, with its massive mahogany furniture, its staff of trained servants, and its "sense of comfort and good living". The portrait of the shy hostess, who at twenty years of age was facing her first confinement, ravaged by toothache, surrounded by uncongenial relatives-in-law, and cooped up

in a London Court, comes as a shock to readers who think of Elizabeth Fry only as the Angel of Newgate, in her comely and well-poised matronhood.

For all their old-time affection, there could be little intercourse between the two young wives during the years that followed. Amelia's childlessness left her free to cultivate the friendship of the fashionable and famous people who frequented her husband's studio, and to develop her own real talent for writing. As authoress of the much acclaimed novel "Father and Daughter," and wife of "the English Rembrandt," she was welcomed and fêted by the intelligentsia of both London and Paris.

Into these adventures Elizabeth had neither leisure nor inclination to follow her. During the ten years that succeeded the wedding call at St. Mildred's Court, Mrs. Fry had given birth to seven children; through the death of her father-in-law she had become mistress of the Fry mansion of Plashet, and from thence the whole countryside had benefited by her activities. The girl who at eighteen had gathered from 50 to 70 neglected children into the laundry at Earlham, and there, without help from her six critical sisters, had instilled into them the rudiments of learning and virtue, now, as lady of the manor, "set out to give the benefits of education to every child whom she could reach". She introduced vaccination, and kept her own neighbourhood free from the all pervading smallpox. On the day of her father's funeral she had taken the first and long dreaded step of a new career, and had begun to preach. Finally, in the first days of 1813, she went for the first time, with one companion, inside the women's prison at Newgate, at the request of Stephen Grellet, a travelling Friend from America, who had himself newly explored the horrors of that "hell upon earth".

"What hope is there for the remote claims of prisoners, however wretched, to press themselves upon a life so full?" So questions the author in a fine rhetorical passage, and herself supplies the answer.

When Elizabeth Fry died at 65, she had "reformed the bestial conditions among the women prisoners in Newgate Prison. Her institution of prison libraries and educational classes and her remedies for crime (had) gradually brought her world fame; her influence became felt in many countries of Europe; she was consulted by foreign Governments, and

won the friendship of Queen Victoria and King Frederick William IV of Prussia.

Elizabeth Fry's other work included the reformation of conditions in the ships that transported women convicts to Australia, the provision of libraries for coastguards, and the foundation of a training home for nurses in London. She was also instrumental in getting Parliament to prohibit the practice of suttee in India."

While these concerns were crowding upon her, and her family almost year by year increasing. Amelia Opie, left a childless widow at 38, had returned to Norwich, to knit up again her girlhood's friendships. The affection which sprang up between herself and Joseph John Gurney, who was nearly 20 years her junior throws the colour of romance over her middle years, and we see the handsome banker who was his sister's companion on her Continental journeys falling in love in spite of himself with the authoress whose sprightly conversation and defiance of convention both allured and shocked him. Won at last by her affection for Joseph Gurney and her admiration for his famous sister, Amelia adopted the profession and costume of a " Plain Friend ". She lived on into 1853, almost the last survivor of the happy Earlham circle, She who had flirted with Sir Walter Scott and seen Napoleon as First Consul, made her last excursion to London by the great adventure of the Railroad, and was wheeled round the Great Exhibition in a bath chair.

These two biographies, which have so happily appeared together, afford a singularly complete picture of England seen through the eyes of two notable and widely differing women, at that time of ferment and change in which their lives were set. There can be no comparison between the two friends in nobility of purpose and grandeur of achievement. Yet no one saw Amelia and did not love her. William Godwin and Holcroft in her youth, Joseph John Gurney in her middle years, and in her old age the great French sculptor David, all acknowledged her charm and looked to her for inspiration. Through her life of 84 years she gave with both hands to the sad world laughter, and the love of beauty, and unshakable fidelity of friendship; and surely like her more famous friend, she has heard her Master's " Well-done ", at the close.

MABEL R. BRAILSFORD