

London Yearly Meeting Recollections

1917-1937

By WILLIAM F. NICHOLSON

The following article gives the substance of the address which the writer gave at the Annual Meeting of the Society in November, 1937, and which is here reprinted in response to the requests made at that meeting.

I HAVE been asked to recall some of the incidents of the time during which I was Recording Clerk and especially to deal with some of the more important changes agreed to by Yearly Meeting. The period begins with July, 1917, when the war had been in progress three years and when Quaker war-time activities were at their height. To realize their extent one has only to recall some of the Friends' Committees which were active at the time, such as the "Emergency", "War Victims Relief", "Service", "Visitation of Prisoners" or the "Ambulance Unit".

During my first week at Devonshire House, I was talking things over with my predecessor, Isaac Sharp, when we heard an air-raid alarm and, with the rest of those who were employed in Devonshire House, took refuge in the basement. It was in my early days as Recording Clerk that the Devonshire House premises were searched for men of military age who had not joined the forces.

One of the most interesting happenings during the time of Yearly Meeting, 1918, was the trial at the Guildhall of three members of the Service Committee for publishing without the Censor's leave "A Challenge to Militarism". Its Clerk and five other Friends were asked by Yearly Meeting to be present at the trial and if a suitable opportunity should occur they were encouraged to read to the Court the minute of the Meeting for Sufferings approving of the action of the Committee. In the Clerk's absence Mary Jane Godlee acted in his stead—the first occasion on which a woman Friend has presided over London Yearly Meeting.

All Friends Conference

At the same Yearly Meeting a report was received from a Committee set up two years before to try to arrange for a Conference in London, at the close of the War, on the Peace Testimony of Friends, to which all organized bodies calling themselves Friends should be asked to send representatives. The Conference was not able to meet till 1920 in consequence of the difficulties of travel. The delay gave the opportunity for a great deal of useful preliminary work by commissions on the different aspects of our Peace Testimony. It finally met in Devonshire House and was attended by nearly 1,000 representatives. Much of the success of the gathering was due to the able manner in which the discussions were guided by the Clerk, John Henry Barlow. Perhaps the greatest service that the Conference rendered to the Society was that it enabled Friends holding different outlooks to meet together to discuss matters of common interest. At one sitting a Friend from America who had made a suggestion was warmly supported by another from the same city. Although the two meeting houses which they attended were only a few streets apart the two Friends had never met before.

Correspondents

Ever since the separation in Ohio Yearly Meeting in the middle of last century the question of correspondence with American Yearly Meetings had caused a good deal of heart searching among Friends in England. The question was constantly being asked whether we had been right in ceasing all communication with the Conservative Yearly Meetings in America. The "General Conference", or Hicksite Yearly Meetings were looked upon as quite outside the pale and it was not till some thirty years ago that anyone ventured to ask for closer contact with them. But all the time there was with an increasing number of Friends an uneasy feeling that the attempts of London Yearly Meeting to sit in judgment on others with whose circumstances she was not well acquainted had not made for unity in America. At the end of last century London had official correspondents appointed for Dublin, Philadelphia (Arch Street), Ohio (Pastoral) and the thirteen Yearly Meetings which made up the Five Years Meeting. The chief duty of a Correspondent

was to accredit epistles and other official documents passing between his own Yearly Meeting and the Yearly Meeting for which he was correspondent.

After the Conference of All Friends English Friends felt that the time had come when they should cease any longer to draw distinctions between Yearly Meetings. At first it was suggested that a correspondent should be appointed for every group calling itself a Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends, but eventually, after correspondence with leading Friends in America, it was decided in 1923 to appoint no more correspondents but to send a copy of our General Epistle with a covering letter to every Yearly Meeting in America. A few years later a minute was sent to the Conservative Yearly Meetings expressing regret for the part that English Friends had taken in the separations of last century.

Revision of "Christian Discipline"

During the twenty years with which we are concerned the whole of *Christian Discipline* has been revised, though there was considerable difficulty in coming to an agreement on the revision of Part I, "Christian Doctrine". Yearly Meeting in 1918 was asked by two Quarterly Meetings to undertake the revision of Part I, which had been last revised in 1883, and which was very strongly Evangelical in its statement of the Quaker position. There was, however, so much opposition to a revision that Yearly Meeting decided to ask the Quarterly Meetings for suggestions. In the following year minutes and in some cases lengthy memoranda were forthcoming from the different Quarterly Meetings. Yearly Meeting, thereupon, asked Meeting for Sufferings to call a conference of Quarterly Meeting representatives to discuss in the light of these replies whether a revision of Part I was necessary and if so upon what lines it should be carried out. It was also suggested that if it felt able to do so it should produce a draft revision and a Special Statement for Seekers. In 1920 Yearly Meeting agreed to a Statement that had been prepared by the Conference under the title of "A word to all who seek Truth", while in 1921 a draft of Part I was presented and adopted under the title of "Christian Life and Thought of the Society of Friends". Instead of being a doctrinal statement this is an attempt to illustrate the Life and Thought of the Society of Friends by extracts from

the writings of leading members of the Society and from official documents of the Society during the whole period of its existence.

Recording of Ministers

There had been growing up in the Society for some years a strong feeling of dissatisfaction at the practice of the Recording of Ministers. Indeed there were Monthly Meetings that felt so strongly on the matter that they had for years ceased to record anyone.

In the early days of the Society those who travelled in the Ministry were known as Publishers of Truth. They were united in a close fellowship and met together every year from 1668 onwards. Every Sunday morning at 8 o'clock those Publishers of Truth who were in London met at the house of Gerrard Roberts to arrange what meeting each should attend and to enter the information in a book kept for the purpose. On the following morning they met again to talk over their experiences of the preceding day and make arrangements for the future. This was known as the Morning Meeting which afterwards acted as the executive of the Yearly Meeting of Ministry and Oversight.

In 1723 the Morning Meeting objected to a certain William Gibson entering his name in the book with the other visiting Ministers. He appealed to his Quarterly Meeting and afterwards to Yearly Meeting. The latter laid it down that in future no one should enter his name unless he carried a certificate from a Monthly or Quarterly Meeting and that the Morning Meeting possessed no power of disownment. So the practice of recording arose which remained with scarcely any alteration for two hundred years.

In 1922, as a result of a minute from Yorkshire Quarterly Meeting suggesting a consideration of the whole subject, Yearly Meeting asked for the views of Quarterly Meetings.

The reports received were of such an indefinite character that Yearly Meeting did not feel that it could come to any definite decision but it asked Meeting for Sufferings to report in the following year what consequential changes would be necessary if recording was discontinued.

This report was received in 1924 with the result that it was agreed to discontinue the practice. It is perhaps too soon to say whether the step was a wise one or not, though of

late years there has been in many meetings a larger number sharing in the ministry and fewer long sermons or sermons on points of theology. Another interesting development may be noted in some Monthly Meetings in which it is considered that a chief qualification for Eldership is a sharing in the vocal ministry of the meeting. I can remember the time when this was considered a serious disqualification.

Friends' Service Council

One of the most momentous of recent changes in the Society has been the amalgamation of the Friends' Foreign Mission Association and the Council for International Service to form the Friends' Service Council.

The Association was formed in 1868 by a group of interested Friends to spread the Gospel in non-Christian countries. It received for years no recognition by Yearly Meeting, but in 1873 it was agreed that the Association might every year report the fact that it had held its annual meeting.

Eight years later Yearly Meeting agreed to accept every year a report on its work. Finally, in 1917, nearly fifty years after its foundation, a new constitution was agreed to by which London and Dublin Yearly Meetings were to appoint the greater part of the Board. In 1918 Yearly Meeting asked Meeting for Sufferings to look into the need for a Bureau or Council for international information and training for service. A conference was accordingly called of those who were interested in the proposal. On its recommendation a Council for International Service with an Information Bureau and Literature Board was set up, consisting of about thirty members, chiefly representative of different committees of the Society. In the following year direct Quarterly Meeting representation was arranged for. This new Council was encouraged to establish settlements abroad, to be known as Quaker Embassies, to study local conditions and to attempt to give the Quaker message through the lives of the settlers.

At the same time it was decided to lay down the Continental Committee, the oldest standing committee in the Society, as it was felt that its work would be sure to overlap with that of the Council. The committee had been set up in 1817 to keep in touch with groups in France and Germany who held similar views to Friends on Worship and

War, and who had been visited during the previous year by a number of English Friends, one of whom was Elizabeth Fry.

The Council for International Service was also given permission to enrol as members of the Society of Friends suitable individuals who might apply for membership but were living in countries where there was no regular meeting.

In 1924 the Council reported complete co-operation in all fields with the American Friends' Service Committee and the taking over of the remaining work of the Friends' Emergency and War Victims Relief Committee.

Yearly Meeting in 1926 was so impressed by the importance of the World Service of the Society that it decided to adjourn till the autumn so as to give sufficient time for a discussion of the subject and to arrange for the more adequate support of the work. As the meeting house in Friends House was not yet completed this gathering met in Essex Hall. The attendance, however, was so large that the remaining sittings had to be held in a larger hall. The Conference was very strongly of the opinion that the work of Friends abroad should be unified. A commission representing various interested committees was accordingly set up to look into the possibility of merging into one body the Friends' Foreign Mission Association and the Council for International Service.

The scheme that was drawn up by this commission was accepted by the Yearly Meetings of London and Dublin and the new body came into being in 1927 as the Friends' Service Council.

As one looks back on what has been accomplished by this new Council during the first ten years of its existence one must feel thankful for the success of the union and hope that it may continue to receive the support of Friends in the splendid work it is accomplishing in so many fields with funds that are scarcely adequate.

New Premises

Perhaps the most momentous change in the past twenty years has been the removal from Devonshire House to Friends House.

It was in 1911 that the Home Mission and Extension Committee called the attention of the Meeting for Sufferings to the inadequacy of the Devonshire House premises for the

work of the Society. So a special Premises Committee was set up to look into the question of accommodation and to make recommendations. This committee obtained a valuation of the premises and consulted the various committees and associations with offices in Devonshire House as to their requirements. It also recommended that, if it should be decided to sell the Devonshire House premises, no action should be taken before some of the leases expired in 1918.

At first it was thought that, for the sake of economy, it would be better not to provide a Meeting House for Yearly Meeting on the premises; but in 1914 Yearly Meeting definitely decided that a Large Meeting House should form part of the scheme. This decision made it almost imperative that a new site would have to be sought. One site that was suggested was that of Westminster Meeting House. Meanwhile in order to make the property more saleable it was decided in 1921 to purchase the two portions belonging to the Six Weeks Meeting and Bethlem Hospital.

After inspecting a good many sites it was finally decided to purchase the Endsleigh Gardens site, covering as it did 96,000 square feet. One-third of this was ultimately re-sold. At about the same time the Devonshire House site was disposed of to the Northern Estates Company.

The removal from the old premises to the new took place at the end of 1925, though the Bookshop was able to carry on in its old quarters for another twelve months. So ended the Society's connection with the Devonshire House site—a connection going back to 1667, while Yearly Meeting had, with only three breaks, met regularly on the premises since 1794.

The move to Euston Road has meant many changes and the passing of many old customs and traditions. The new premises are so easy of access and so convenient in every way that an invitation for Yearly Meeting to meet elsewhere is not received with enthusiasm. However, the experiment of meeting last summer out of London was so successful that one hopes that in the future we may have provincial meetings at least once every three or four years.

Another result of the change of premises is seen in the greatly increased attendances at the various meetings of the Society and especially at the Meeting for Sufferings, which has at present an average attendance of over 180. Friends

House is also increasingly looked upon as a place where advanced movements are sure of sympathy and so the rooms are much in demand for meetings by such groups. It is reported that at a meeting of the Conservative and Unionist Associations in the Large Meeting House their leader congratulating the members on the harmony that had prevailed, suggested that it might in part be due to the atmosphere of the building in which they were meeting.

The Large Meeting House has housed many interesting gatherings during the last ten years. One thinks of a crowded session of Yearly Meeting to welcome Rabindranath Tagore ; a packed meeting addressed by Mahatma Gandhi ; a debate between Sir Oswald Mosley and James Maxton presided over by Rt. Hon. D. Lloyd George ; a mock trial with David Low accused of sedition in one of his cartoons ; or the Swarthmore Lecture by Prof. Eddington, when two additional rooms were filled and numbers failed to gain admittance. I think one could say that it was four magnificent meetings at Friends House that set the Peace Pledge Union on its feet.

We have, I think, acted wisely in being willing to let the rooms in Friends House to any reputable organization, provided it was not too patently working against all that we hold dear.

Among the activities that have been actively fostered at Friends House some should be mentioned. Perhaps the most outstanding have been the Lunch Hour addresses on Peace and Internationalism. The attendance and interest in these has been steadily growing. One of the regular attenders at these meetings informed the Chairman recently that although an Atheist he felt that Friends House was his spiritual home.

One evening a week a Club of Foreign Students is held in the Institute when as many as twenty different nationalities are sometimes represented. The evenings are occupied by addresses, discussions and social times. The chief difficulty facing the organizers is to limit the attendance.

An Adult School is also held on the premises and public meetings on Sunday evenings when advertised addresses are delivered.

There is a tendency at present to centralize Friends' work at Friends House with a very considerable increase in the number of those employed on the premises—the number at present being nearly eighty.

Birthright Membership

A subject which during the past thirty or forty years has caused Friends much anxious thought has been the question of Birthright Membership. This has been especially the case during the past twenty years.

The practice first arose as a by-product of poor relief in the Society.

In the early eighteenth century it was found necessary to check the constant migration of Friends who were seeking relief to other Monthly Meetings where more funds were available. It was accordingly decided that every Friend should be deemed a member of the Monthly Meeting within which he was residing in Fourth Month, 1737, and children were to be members of the Meeting to which the father belonged. In recent years, however, a growing number of Friends have objected to this automatic registration of children as members at birth and have advocated leaving the decision to the child when it has attained years of discretion.

In 1920 two Quarterly Meetings asked for a careful consideration of the whole subject of the Basis of Membership with a view to some such change being agreed to. A Committee was appointed which reported in the following year that after communicating with Monthly Meetings it had come to the conclusion that the feeling of dissatisfaction with Birthright Membership was not strong enough to warrant its abolition. But it suggested that the privilege should be extended to children where only one parent was a Friend provided both parents expressed in writing their wish for it and promised to bring up the child in accordance with the principles of the Society. This was agreed to by Yearly Meeting.

In 1922 Yearly Meeting was asked for a ruling in a case where the parents of a boy had requested the Monthly Meeting to remove his name from the list of members, he having been recorded years before as a Birthright Member. It was decided that there was nothing in our Discipline that covered such cases and Meeting for Sufferings was asked to look into the matter and advise Monthly Meetings. After a good deal of consideration a memorandum was agreed to advising Meetings, in cases where parents for conscientious reasons declined to sign a

birth-note, to frame a minute setting out the facts and to enter the child's name on a Supplementary List in the hope that the child might later claim its membership.

Yearly Meeting in 1928 decided that in the case of births where only one parent was a member the birth-note must be produced within three months of the child's birth.

Three years later one of the Quarterly Meetings suggested to Meeting for Sufferings that the rule should be rescinded granting Birthright Membership in cases where only one parent was a member. But when the Monthly Meetings were consulted the replies received were so various that the suggestion was dropped.

In 1935 Yorkshire suggested a form of Junior Membership which should terminate at a certain age when the child should have the option of applying for full membership or of letting its membership lapse. The Meeting for Sufferings, to whom the matter was referred, consulted Quarterly Meetings, but again the replies received did not indicate any clear unity of thought in the Society, and so Yearly Meeting in 1936 decided to drop the matter.

At the same Yearly Meeting, Meeting for Sufferings was asked carefully to examine the regulations about Children on the Supplementary List and to suggest alterations in the wording of the same that would make them clearer and more complete.

At the Yearly Meeting at Bristol, 1937, the suggestions of the Meeting for Sufferings were adopted, together with suggestions from Bedfordshire Quarterly Meeting, one of which places children with only one parent a member on the same footing in regard to the Supplementary List as those with both parents members.

Allotments

In the Industrial Crisis of 1926 a committee was set up by the Meeting for Sufferings to do what it could to bring about a settlement and to try to alleviate the distress in some of the industrial areas. In the following year this committee was laid down and the Home Service Committee was asked to administer any funds still in hand. This it did through a sub-committee, which was known as the Coalfields Distress Committee. This committee did a great deal to assist the inhabitants of the distressed areas to help themselves through

clubs, boot repairing centres and allotments, as well as by organizing a large distribution of clothes.

In 1930 this committee was wound up and the Allotments Committee was set up to continue the allotments work among the unemployed.

The last annual report of this committee told of over 135,000 men helped at a cost of nearly £60,000, half of which came from the men themselves.

Friends Trusts, Ltd.

Other happenings that should be mentioned are, first, the setting up in 1928 of Friends Trusts, Ltd., for the purpose of holding any of the trust funds of the Society that might be handed over to it, and second, the decision in 1936 to give a three years trial to a scheme for the pooling of fares of representatives to the Meeting for Sufferings.

Tabular Returns

The Tabular Returns for the twenty years are disappointing, showing an increase in membership in Great Britain of only 91. One must remember, however, that during the period the Supplementary List was started on which there are now 250 names. These formerly would have been reckoned as members.

The past twenty years has seen many changes in the Society. One of especial interest is in the character of the membership. We seem to be steadily losing those who belong to the old Quaker families while there is a steady influx of able, keen members, a large proportion of whom are interested in education. At present in Great Britain about one in every seventeen members is or has been a teacher.

Perhaps one of the greatest dangers we shall have to face in the future is the popularity of the Society. At present everyone praises us. The words of the Master often recur to me when I listen to such expressions—"Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you."