

# Thomas Shillitoe (1754-1836)

## *Some hitherto unpublished particulars*

By T. EDMUND HARVEY

THE memory of a loved and honoured forebear is often cherished for generations by members of his family who preserve with care some piece of furniture or other little thing which once was his, and not only old letters or documents associated with him, but sometimes also recollections of sayings or incidents otherwise unrecorded.

This was the case in the family of Thomas Shillitoe, my mother's great-grandfather, whose *Journal*, with characteristic reticence, gives hints only occasionally of the depth of his family affection, but leaves far more unrevealed.

### THE MAN AND HIS FAMILY

How warmly he was loved by his children and grandchildren is indicated by the way in which his memory has been held in regard by many descendants both within and without the Society of Friends.

His beloved wife Mary Pace, whom he married in the year 1778, was in feeble health during the later part of their lives, and his senior in age, though she survived him. This made all the harder the long absences from home which his arduous journeys in the service of the ministry involved.

On one occasion he returned from the Monthly Meeting at Hitchin to tell his wife that Friends had united with the concern which he had laid before them for religious service on the Continent. It must, I believe, have been on the 27th of 2nd mo. 1821, when, as we read in his *Journal*, he "opened a religious prospect my mind had long been exercised with, to pay a visit to some parts of Holland, Norway, Germany and the South of France, and to take up my residence for some time in those parts, and to seek out such suitable employ as was to be had to fill up my spare time." He had just been visiting Yorkshire and had

journeyed south with some exertion, in order to lay his concern before his own Monthly Meeting at Hitchin. This had involved, after attending Meeting at Wellingborough (and he had already walked over 30 miles on the previous day) being driven for some distance by a Friend and then walking about 18 miles to an inn at Shefford, which he reached about ten o'clock at night. His *Journal* continues, "After taking refreshment and ordering an early breakfast, having eight miles to travel to-morrow to meeting, I retired to bed. Second-day morning reached Hitchin in time for meeting." Clearly he had gone straight to the meeting and not first to his home on Highbury Hill. Thus it was that his wife now heard for the first time of this arduous duty lying before him. When he told her, she looked up calmly (and was there a smile on her gentle face?) with the words, "And how many shirts wilt thou require?"

Mary Shillitoe knew that the husband she loved was a man with ways of his own. He was to go on one occasion to London and wished to walk part of the way before taking the coach. She spoke to the driver of the coach at Hitchin and asked him to look out for her husband on the road. "But how am I to tell, Ma'am, which is your husband?" asked the puzzled driver. "When thou sees a man who is not like any other man, that is my husband," was her reply.

Reginald Hine, in his delightful *Hitchin Worthies*,<sup>1</sup> relates this incident in a slightly different form, as told him by my aunt, Mary Sturge Whiting, who was Thomas Shillitoe's great-granddaughter, and illustrates it by a description of Thomas Shillitoe recorded by the Rev. James Everett: "He was below the middle height, spare, active, buoyant in spirit, and appeared as if made of wire and muscle. He was generally attired in a 'pepper and salt' suit, with a dowlas shirt often open at the neck, and a chip hat, which he usually carried in his hand, or on his umbrella stick in hot weather. He walked vigorously, often with his coat over his arm." The driver of that coach cannot, after all, have had great difficulty in recognizing his prospective passenger.

We may supplement Everett's description by glimpses of Thomas Shillitoe's figure which we have in contemporary silhouettes, and in the lively portrait sketches by Samuel

<sup>1</sup> p. 187.

Lucas of Hitchin. His *Journal* gives to us glimpses of his inner life : at many points revealing touches show how in sensitive faithfulness to inward guidance, and to his apprehension of the duty laid upon him, this naturally timid man, who could be startled at the sight of a mouse or the mooing of a cow and dreaded the sight of a precipitous road, went through hardship and danger by land and sea in years of laborious travel in pursuance of his service. The message of his life, his humble, loving faithfulness and utter loyalty to his Master, lives on even though we may in many ways not share his application to the complex life of men of the implications of Christian discipleship.

Years ago there came to me as a gift from another descendant of Thomas Shillitoe a packet of old family letters and papers, most of which relate to the days of his last illness in the summer of 1836, when his family lovingly recorded and transcribed his words and messages to those about him. In the printed *Journal*, his editor, A. Rawlinson Barclay, faithfully reproduces a large part of these, but his narrative fails to include one or two little touches of humour, which show a lovable feature of which the serious pages of the *Journal* itself hardly give a hint.

Thus one loose page in the packet before me records : " On his requesting that something might be tied to the bedpost to hold by and it being said ' It must be made secure ', he replied, ' not as the flimsy door-post that Samson leaned upon ! ' " (He was a frail old man in his 83rd year.) Later on in the course of his illness he asked for a little cold water, adding " but not to cool my tongue, not to cool my tongue ! "

He had long been in deep inward sympathy with the social teaching of John Woolman, and it is characteristic of his concern for a simpler and juster way of life that one of these manuscripts records : " He said of his children that they were all comfortably settled : he hoped they would not be anxious after worldly matters. They (his children) had been in his daily prayers for their happiness. He prayed for his children and grandchildren that they might not be middlemen. ' O the middle men, they are filthy men. These unstable, unmeaning Quakers are offensive to God and man. Middlemen, these double-minded Quakers ! O to be one of them, these double-minded folks. Flee from

them as from a serpent ! ' ' His thought and love, however, went out to all wrongdoers. At another time he exclaimed, " O the depth of human misery, separated from divine harmony ! " More than once he spoke of his love going out to the whole human race " even the most wicked ", and added, " if it were not so, how miserable indeed should I feel."

Sometimes he was drawn to humble prayer for the Heavenly Father's mercy to himself in his weakness. " Pray have pity upon a sinner, upon a poor old man ! " His thoughts, too, turned to the gateway of life to which he was now so near. " I would not change situations with King William. I humbly hope I am going to meet the Emperor Alexander. O ; the dear, dedicated Creature ! "

#### HIS RELATIONS WITH CZAR ALEXANDER I AND KING GEORGE IV

Readers of his *Journal* will not forget Thomas Shillitoe's account of his two long private interviews with the Emperor Alexander in an apartment of the Palace at Petersburg in 1824, and how intimately they had conversed and joined in worship together. In that short time they had been drawn very close to one another. Two months later when he left Russia, Thomas Shillitoe brought home with him some keepsakes sent him by the Czar : he would never have wished for any such gift, but how could he send back these tokens of friendship ? One of them was a tiny inlaid miniature cabinet of tortoise-shell and ivory, with drawers for letters, which now stands near me as I write.<sup>1</sup>

Less than a year after they parted the Emperor died. He was never forgotten.

It may seem strange that it fell to the lot of one naturally timid, a man of very simple life who for years had earned his living as a working shoemaker and had no contact with the ways of ministers and courts, to seek and obtain opportunities to give the message with which, as he believed, he was entrusted by his Divine Master, to so many kings and princes. It was always with him a matter of painful

<sup>1</sup> Other similar mementos preserved by different descendants, a Russian New Testament with the autograph of Alexander, a tea-caddy, and a piece of Sèvres china, are mentioned by Reginald Hine in his *Hitchin Worthies*, p. 188 n.

exercise of spirit, sometimes involving long periods of distress and even physical prostration before the interview took place. But each time the way opened for him and when needful the right interpreter was forthcoming. Thus he had interviews with George III, with George IV as Prince Regent and later as King, with the Duke of Cumberland as Viceroy of Hanover (of which he later became King), with the King and Crown Prince of Denmark, with Frederick William III of Prussia and the Crown Prince (afterwards Frederick William IV), with Alexander I of Russia, and finally, in 1832 (accompanied by Peter Bedford), with William IV and then Queen Adelaide.

Yet of all these it was for George IV that he went through the greatest exercise of spirit. He was in deep trouble of heart for the man himself, surrounded by temptations, the prey of flatterers and of those who appealed to his sensual nature; yet not without his better moments, and still capable of turning to the way of life. In the letter which he presented to the Prince Regent at Brighton in 1813, Thomas Shillitoe had written: "Words fail me to set forth the conflict of mind which at times I have passed through for many years on account of thy precious, immortal soul," and a little later, "I believe, never has the report gone abroad and reached my ear of thy grand entertainments being about to take place, but my poor mind has felt sorrow on thy account; and in spirit I have been with thee as a mournful spectator at the banquet." When nearly eleven years later Thomas Shillitoe again saw George IV in the Park at Windsor and mentioned his presentation of his address at Brighton, the King replied: "I remember you did."<sup>1</sup> Did the King continue to remember?

In the early summer of 1830 George IV lay on his death-bed at Windsor. While the Yearly Meeting was sitting, the Duchess of Gloucester, the King's favourite sister, drove down in her carriage to old Devonshire House and William Allen and Elizabeth Fry were called out of the meeting to

<sup>1</sup> We owe our knowledge of these words to the editorial footnote in Thomas Shillitoe's *Journal*, vol. 1, p. 201. The *Journal* itself (vol. 2, pp. 2-3), with characteristic reticence, does not relate this. Abram Rawlinson Barclay, who carried through the editing of the *Journal* on the death of his brother John Barclay, to whom T.S. had given the MS. in his lifetime, had access to first-hand confirmation, through their friendship with Thomas Shillitoe.

her, when she informed them "that the King being in great extremity, both in mind and body, desired the prayers of Friends." "This request was communicated to both the Men's and Women's Meetings, and the business being suspended, each meeting became a Meeting for Worship during the rest of the sitting. Friends were requested not to speak of it out of meeting." This account is given by Thomas Davidson of Fritchley,<sup>1</sup> as related to him by Ann Hunt of Bristol (1810-1897) a year or two before her death. (It was the first yearly meeting she had attended and her memory of it would naturally be an outstanding one.) This is confirmed by a letter of Octavius Hunt quoted by Norman Penney in *Pen Pictures of London Yearly Meeting*.<sup>2</sup> "I had been reading with intense interest the account in Thomas Shillitoe's Journal of the letter he wrote to George IV, and delivered in person to him, and I asked Ann Hunt if there was any sequel to that letter, and she told me that she was sitting in the Yearly Meeting in 1830, when the Duchess came to the Meeting, and called some Friends out and asked the Friends to pray for the King. She further told me that the King had been asked by the Duchess if he would see a clergyman, and he said: 'No. Send for that Quaker,' meaning Thomas Shillitoe. Thomas Shillitoe was in the Y.M. when the message came, but he did not speak on the matter; and my aunt did not think he communicated with the King. I think she (A.H.) said that the information of the exact message of George IV was told to some Friend visiting the Court later on."<sup>3</sup>

There are other reports of words spoken by the dying King which tell of how his thoughts turned toward that old Quaker minister who had brought him years ago his message of outspoken reproof and tender pleading. "O that Quaker, that Quaker!" the King is said to have murmured sadly.<sup>4</sup> Francis C. Clayton, in his article in the *Journal of the Friends'*

<sup>1</sup> In *Journal F.H.S.*, ix, 173.

<sup>2</sup> Part II (Supplement 17 to *Journal F.H.S.*), 195.

<sup>3</sup> In Richard Cockin's account of the Y.M. of 1830, we read: "*Fifth-day afternoon* J. J. Gurney adverted to the illness of the King, which appeared to bring some weight over the Meeting." There is, of course, no reference to the subject in the Minutes.

<sup>4</sup> Reported by William Tallack in his life of *Thomas Shillitoe* (1867), p. 111.

*Historical Society*<sup>1</sup> on "George IV and Thomas Shillitoe," states that meeting in 1909 a great-grandson of Thomas Shillitoe, "I repeated to him the version I had heard, viz. that the Archbishop of Canterbury, approaching the King, informed him that his end was near and that he wished to offer the consolations of the Church. The King's reply was 'Send for that little Quaker, he is the only one who ever told me the Truth.'" "Mr. Shillitoe said," continues F. C. Clayton, "he heard a similar account, and that this interview was a most treasured memory in the family." Years ago I heard a different version, according to which the King had expressed a desire to see Thomas Shillitoe, but his indistinct speech had been misunderstood and instead, the Bishop of Chichester had been sent for, the mistake being only discovered too late for it to be set right.

It is interesting to note that while the *Dictionary of National Biography* states that it was the Bishop of Winchester (in whose diocese Windsor lay) who was called on by the Duke of Wellington to prepare the King for his end, Roger Fulford in his biography of George IV states that the Bishop of Chichester had two satisfactory conversations with the King, knelt by his bed and read the prayer appointed to be read in churches for the King's recovery, to which the King responded "Amen. Amen," and afterwards said that the prayer was in very good taste.

The King died on June 25th. When the news came to Thomas Shillitoe he was staying at Hitchin with his son-in-law and daughter, John and Margaret Whiting. My grandfather John Whiting and his brother Joshua were living as small boys in the house at the time and recalled in later years the solemn feeling which their grandfather's grief aroused in them. I remember my uncle Joshua Whiting telling me how he listened with awe to the sound of Thomas Shillitoe's footsteps as he paced up and down, alone, in his room overhead, up and down for hours, in an agony of sorrow.

The far-reaching love which sought the wellbeing of a man like George IV did not with Thomas Shillitoe involve any compromise with truth. In loyalty to truth, as he saw it, he made on his deathbed a solemn statement in disavowal

<sup>1</sup> Vol. xi, 195-208.

of the views and activities of one of the most prominent and esteemed of his fellow members of the Society of Friends, which cost him some exercise of spirit to make.

#### HIS TESTIMONY AS TO JOSEPH JOHN GURNEY

After Thomas Shillitoe's death reports reached a number of Quaker circles of his having dictated during his last illness a solemn testimony against the teaching of Joseph John Gurney. No reference of any kind to this appears in the account of his last days which is printed at the close of his *Journal*. What were believed to be quotations from this testimony must, however, have been circulated at an early date, as a letter from Jonathan Evans of Philadelphia, dated 9th mo. 11th, 1837, addressed to John Wilbur contained an extract.<sup>1</sup> Later, during his second visit to England (in 1853-54), John Wilbur, in replying to a letter to him from John Pease added a postscript in which he said: "Instead of proving J.J.G. to be sound by quoting his doctrines, thou hast brought to view the vague sentiments of his votaries; but I would advert briefly to the sentiments of that devoted and faithful servant of Christ, Thomas Shillitoe, who had known his course of life from his youth and had read his writings. He said in his last sickness, 'I declare that J.J.G. is an Episcopalian, not a Quaker.'"<sup>2</sup>

John Wilbur's quotation of Thomas Shillitoe evidently caused concern amongst some English Friends at that time, for amongst the papers now before me is an unsigned draft or copy of a letter by a son or daughter of Thomas Shillitoe which reads as follows: "Esteemed Friend, I believe I may state that my dear Father did not retract from what he said respecting J. J. Gurney and which was taken down by J. Hodgkin<sup>3</sup> a few days before his death. I do not know in what way J. Wilbur came in possession of a copy of the testimony, but certainly it was not sent him by any of our family. I heard such a paragraph was in the Book but

<sup>1</sup> The letter is printed in the *Journal of the Life of John Wilbur*, 1859, 228-30, but does not include the extract. Instead appears the editorial insertion: "[He here inserts an extract from Thomas Shillitoe's dying testimony, declaring J.J.G. to be no Quaker, &c., which is omitted.]"

<sup>2</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 546.

<sup>3</sup> The initial appears to be J, not T. John Hodgkin, the eminent Quaker minister, resided at Tottenham; his brother Dr. Thomas Hodgkin was the physician who attended T.S. in his last illness.



not having seen it myself I did not know how far it was correct.

“Thou art at liberty to make use of my name to W. Smeal if thou thinks best.” (The name of the Friend to whom the letter is addressed does not appear.)

It seems clear that weighty influence was exerted to prevent the widespread dissemination of the document, of which John Wilbur later made such use. There was considerable opposition, less than a year after Thomas Shillitoe's death, to the liberation of Joseph John Gurney for his visit to America by the Select Yearly Meeting of 1837,<sup>1</sup> and both then and later added weight might have been given to this opposition had the testimony of Thomas Shillitoe been generally known at the time. Among the papers before me are two copies of this testimony, in different hands, and apparently contemporary. The watermark in the paper of one is dated 1834, in the other 1827. There are small verbal variations in several places, but otherwise the text is substantially identical in each case.

More than a hundred years have passed away since the impact of the growing evangelical movement stirred the thought and life of the Society of Friends. Now that the bitterness of controversy has died we may be able to see that the evangelical Friends had indeed an important contribution to bring to the Society, and yet that there were vital truths for which those who were thought of as conservative Friends were contending which were essential to the message of Christianity as the early Friends apprehended it. We have reason to be grateful to Joseph John Gurney for the stimulus he gave to thought and social action, for his wide-hearted co-operation and fellowship with others outside the Quaker fold, his sense of the community of the Christian Church, his influence in promoting a teaching ministry, and for that pregnant saying of his, “We can never thrive upon ignorance.” But a teaching ministry cannot itself replace the prophetic ministry without immeasurable loss to the church. It was for this free prophetic ministry and the inward spiritual experience of communion that Thomas Shillitoe, Sarah Grubb and men like John and A. R. Barclay pleaded. With all their limitations they held fast to the

<sup>1</sup> This is described in a letter of Margaret Crosfield of Liverpool to John Wilbur (2nd mo. 23rd, 1838) in the *Journal* of John Wilbur, 231-2.

very heart of the religious experience through which the Society of Friends originated, and without which it would not be able to continue its distinctive service.

With this in mind we may be able to realize how deep was the concern which weighed on Thomas Shillitoe and led him upon his deathbed to give his witness. Here is the testimony which he dictated, in the wording of one of the two copies which for more than three generations have been silently laid aside.

“ I want a great deal of time and patience to hear what I have got to say and it must be faithfully delivered, for I am afraid at a future date it will devolve heavy on thy shoulders. It is extraordinary thou shouldst have come in at this juncture, for I have been wanting my son-in-law<sup>1</sup> to come in to put down what I am now better satisfied should be received by thee from my mouth, and I therefore declare unequivocally against the generality of the writings of Joseph John Gurney as being unquaker principles, not sound Quaker principles but Episcopalian ones, and have done great mischief in our Society, and the Society will go gradually down if it yields to the further circulation of that part of his work which they have it in their power to suppress. This is my firm belief, I have laboured under the weight of it for the last 12 months beyond what human nature is able to support, and the committee of the Morning Meeting which passed that last work must be willing to come forward to be sufficiently humble to acknowledge their error. And the Meeting for Sufferings must also be willing to remove its authority in allowing it to be given away to those not of our Society. I declare the Author is an Episcopalian, not a Quaker—the views received by him at Oxford still remain with him.

“ I love the man for the work's sake, as far as it goes, but he has never been emptied from vessel to vessel and from sieve to sieve, nor known the Baptism of the Holy Ghost and fire to cleanse the floor of his heart from his Episcopalian notions.

“ He has spread a linsey woolsey garment over our members, but in a future day it will be stripped off, it will be too short for them as they will be without Christ Jesus the Lord.

<sup>1</sup> John Whiting of Hitchin.

“ This is my testimony and I must sign it. If I had been faithful, I should have expressed it in the last Yearly Meeting of Ministers and Elders : But I hope I shall be forgiven. Oh Lord accept me with the best that I have ! I have had letters from America which confirm me in the truth of every part of what I now state. I believe, there is not one individual member of our Society in England, Scotland or Ireland more willing to do good than Joseph John Gurney, but willingness is not qualification.

“ This is my dying testimony to Quaker views, especially to the Ministry. What was Antichrist in George Fox’s days is Antichrist now. The clergy of this country to a man everyone of them are antichrist so long as they wear the gowns and receive the pay and continue building the people up in the relics of Popery which the Church of England left behind it. It will not do to speak of a man doing a great deal for a little pay and call him a Minister of Christ. It is grievous that any, especially a Minister in our Society, should so speak. They are Antichrist still since they lead the people away from Christ. And yet I love some of them for the work’s sake, as far as they go.”

It is not difficult for us to understand the hesitation which A. R. Barclay must have felt at including an account of this testimony or extracts from it in the record of the last days of Thomas Shillitoe with which his *Journal* concludes. His brother John Barclay, who had begun the task of editing the *Journal* and only completed a part of it before his death, evidently felt that there might be weighty opposition to encounter, as appears from a letter of his of 1838 cited in Reginald Hine’s bibliography appended to *A Mirror for the Society of Friends*. The citation runs :

(103) 1838. Letter by John Barclay of Stoke Newington to Joseph Grubb of Clonmel, Ireland, concerning the preparation of Thomas Shillitoe’s *Journal* for the press and the risk of its being censored by the Morning Meeting (MS. in the possession of the late J. Ernest Grubb of Carrick-on-Suir).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The letter is now in the Grubb Collection, Friends’ Historical Library, 6 Eustace Street, Dublin.

## Note

It is natural that we should wish to ascertain what "that last work" was which the Morning Meeting had passed concerning which Thomas Shillitoe made his protest.

In the minutes of the Morning Meeting for 1836 occurs the entry :

"Fifth Day Afternoon 17th of 3rd Month 1836. Met according to adjournment.

"At the two former sittings of this Meeting held on Second Day, an Essay was read, written by our friend Joseph John Gurney entitled *Strictures on certain parts of an anonymous pamphlet 'The Truth Vindicated,' with evidences of the sound and Christian views of the Society of Friends on the subject of the Holy Scriptures*. The Essay has been again read yesterday afternoon and at this sitting; and this Meeting finding nothing in the Author's reasoning at variance with our Christian principles, leaves the author at liberty to publish the same. This Meeting however thinks it right to add, that as the Essay is controversial in its character, and the work commented upon has not been in any way examined by this Meeting, it does not feel itself committed to the mode of the Author's reviewing the work on which he has animadverted. The judgment now given has been simply founded on the consideration that the Author's arguments are in accordance with the acknowledged principles of our Religious Society."

Though at first sight this would seem to refer to the work we are seeking, it is possible that we should consider an earlier and more important book to be the one which Thomas Shillitoe had in mind. Although several other books and pamphlets by Joseph John Gurney were printed at this period the only other one which is minuted as considered by the Morning Meeting during the years in question is a new and enlarged edition of a well-known work of his. In the minutes of Morning Meeting we read that on 1st month 13th, 1834: "Our friend Joseph John Gurney informed this Meeting at its last sitting that he was proposing to make

some additions to a new Edition of his *Observations on the religious peculiarities of Friends* submitted to this Meeting in the 8th month 1823 and subsequently approved ; the said additions are referred to the Committee now appointed who are to report to a future meeting." The committee consisted of William Allen, George Stacey, Josiah Forster, Elizabeth Dudley, Peter Bedford, John Barclay, Joseph Foster, Richard Barrett, John Kitching, Joseph Neatby, Elizabeth (Joseph) Fry, Elizabeth Fry, Susanna Corder and Rachel Foster.

A later minute of the 10th of 3rd month 1834 reads : " Joseph Forster on behalf of the Committee appointed on the revision of manuscripts reports that they have carefully considered what has been submitted to them by Joseph John Gurney as additions to his work on the distinguishing views and practices of Friends ; and that with some alterations proposed by the Committee, which the Author has with much readiness adopted, they are of the judgment that he should be left at liberty to print the same. The Meeting therefore confirms the judgment of the Committee."

I incline to the view that it was this work to which Thomas Shillitoe referred.

More than three generations have gone by since all these dear Friends have passed beyond the noise of controversy. So at length it is possible to bring to light the testimony of one who strove faithfully to serve the truth, as it was given him to see it. Then he knew in part and prophesied in part, but he was faithful to the end. His faithfulness still speaks to us, and, above all, that love which on his deathbed went out toward the whole human race, even the most wicked.

T. EDMUND HARVEY