

## John Bright and the "State of the Society" in 1851

THROUGH the kindness of J. E. Hodgkin of Darlington the Library has received the gift of a letter from John Bright to John Pease of Darlington. The letter is in answer to the latter's gift of a tract *A few Thoughts on the serious character of the objects of a Yearly Meeting*, by Samuel Tuke (1851), and gives fully John Bright's views on the questions which were then agitating the Society.

Developments in the Society at this period, and John Bright's attitude to them, are discussed in *The Quakers, their Story and Message* by A. Neave Brayshaw (1938 edition, pp. 284-7). In John Bright's *Journal* we find, under date 25th May, 1851:<sup>1</sup>

During this week attended a few sittings of the Yearly Meeting. Dissatisfied as usual at the determination of leading Friends to resist any changes or any fair consideration of the "State of Society." Spoke on Tithe question and on the constitution and usurpations of the Meeting for Sufferings.

From the text of the letter it appears probable that in one of the Yearly Meeting sessions John Bright had expressed his dissatisfactions and this led John Pease<sup>2</sup> to send him the tract mentioned in the opening paragraph.

Rochdale  
12 mo. 26. 51.

My dear Friend,

At the close of the last Yearly Meeting thou kindly sent me a short tract being "a few thoughts on the serious character of the objects of a Yearly Meeting" etc. I did not write to thee in reply, hoping long before this to have an opportunity of some conversation with thee on the subject, and now the whole matter is so long past that perhaps I am wrong in adverting to it at all.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from J. T. Mills: *John Bright and the Quakers*, II, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> John Pease (1797-1868) of East Mount, Darlington, was a distinguished Friend. He was acknowledged as a Minister at the age of 25. There are records of his visits to Rochdale in 1835, 1846, 1849 and 1862—but not in 1851. On the occasion of his earliest noted visit in 1835 John Bright accompanied him as guide to Manchester. Mills, *op. cit.*, I, p. 329.

With regard to the Tract, I may say that I do not in any way dispute its propositions,—they appear to me to point out, not incorrectly, the conditions under which an assembly of the members of a religious society should endeavour to undertake the duties of its office. It is impossible for me, or for any one, to pretend that the business of our Yearly Meeting might be well conducted with an absence of the religious spirit, and of a sense of individual responsibility among its members. I am for all this as much as any man ; not that I have attained to it, but I wish it to exist. But it appears to me that this is not the question to which I presume thy sending the tract was in some sort directed. I had made observations in the Yearly Meeting somewhat unusual, and out of the routine of the discussions common in that assembly, and I expect that thou and many others thought that I was severe, if not positively incorrect, in my judgment. Now I am free to confess my opinion that there are grievous errors, not in the *principles*, that is, the *religious* principles of our sect, but rather in its polity, and in its organisation ; and further, that these errors, or some of them, are discoverable by an honest and intelligent mind, even without any special and evident enlightenment of the nature to which the Tract refers. For example, it cannot require anything in the shape of direct influence from God to decide whether the appointment of *Elder* should be for life, or for a limited period, subject to revision. The truth of the question is on the face of it, and nothing but long practice could have induced any person to defend the present system as theoretically better than the substitute proposed. There was nothing like an argument brought forward against the change advocated by Edw<sup>1</sup> Ashworth—but friends spoke of their " feelings " with regard to it,—assuming a direction from a source against which there could be no appeal, and occupying precisely the same position that has been taken up by the majority of the Meeting, or of those who speak and act, on every occasion when any change has been first proposed. How often have the " feelings " of *Friends* been pleaded in defence of their refusal to pay lay-tithes ? and yet now they may be paid ; and by and bye, as any one may see who attended the Conference last year, there will be no Testimony borne against paying the rent-charge by a

<sup>1</sup> John Ashworth is intended.

refusal to pay them. Take the Tomb stone question ; how many hundreds of excellent and well meaning men have *felt* a positive horror at the idea of *Friends* ever permitting the erection of tombstones, and yet the Yearly Meeting has permitted it.

The question of Tythes, and the question of Tombstones are matters for consideration and discussion ; but to solve them merely by what Friends " feel ", is to subjugate the reason, and the domain of fact and experience, to a delusion ; and, it may be, to subject the course of the Society to the guidance not unfrequently of the feeblest heads in it. Take again the question of the powers of the Meeting for Sufferings,—that body ventured to reprove, by a general minute, somebody who had written a pamphlet. Is it pretended that the Meeting for Sufferings has any authority to advise the Yearly Meeting on any such matter ? I appealed to its constitution, and to its objects, as declared expressly in the minutes in the " Rules of Discipline," and shewed conclusively that it was not constituted for any such purpose, and that it was entirely out of its province. And what was the answer ? The minute was not adopted and sent to the Quarterly Meetings it is true, for it was too bad for that ; but one friend rose after another to say that he " felt " what a valuable body the Meeting for Sufferings was, and doubtless it was thought most heterodox to breathe a whisper of complaint against so venerable an institution. Now whether the Meeting for Sufferings was right or wrong in what they did ;—whether it had gone beyond its province or not, and whether writing a pamphlet was good or bad, surely were matters determinable by any man of common intelligence and common good intentions ? To determine this, no more required any special direction or enlightenment of the mind, than it does to determine on a judicious clause in an Act of Parliament ; and *to pretend that it does*, in my judgment, is only to prostrate and enfeeble the very faculties which are given us for our guidance in such matters. A religious and Christian man will hope and endeavour always to have his powers, whether of mind or body, subject to religious influence and control ; but he is not to place his reason, and his experience, and judgment, in abeyance, under the notion that something will influence his " feelings " and guide him aright.

I should like to see a little more plain common sense in the Yearly Meeting, and less of sentiment. We see a Society, which, we are told many times at all our annual assemblies, was specially raised up to teach certain great truths, and the value of which we are taught to estimate most highly, gradually drying up—becoming enfeebled and decrepid, and threatening even to become extinct ; and yet not an effort is made to discover any acting cause of mischief. If the subject is mentioned in the Yearly Meeting it is met by exhortations to " greater faithfulness ", which is generally supposed to mean a more strict observance of what are called our " *minor* testimonies ", as if the term *minor* could be properly used of anything which Christianity requires ; but no one dares to look the subject in the face, and to ask or to say why a Body with sublime principles, with great personal liberty of thought, and with a commendable practice before the world, finds itself dwindling into nothing, at a time when religion has more friends than ever before in this country. It may be right to send a member of the body to all the Courts of Europe on an Anti-Slavery mission, or to spend a whole sitting in considering the circumstances of an Indian village in the interior of America, but surely a Body of men, accustomed to reason, would not quietly witness the gradual but apparently certain extinction of the Society which it represents, without enquiring what was the malady, and if there was a cure ? And yet this is precisely what our Yearly Meeting does. It spends its strength on trifles, while the real questions which demand its consideration are passed away from, as not worth dealing with, or as too difficult and dangerous to be touched. Prayer is good, but the answer to prayer, so far as any practicable result goes, depends often on our own exertions, and it is no part of the intention of Providence to save a Society that neglects the commonest rules of self preservation.

I don't speak or write of these things without pain,—I think of them often and often with anxiety. I have a family who are to grow up in connexion with our religious society, and I need not tell thee that in connexion with their future, this subject has an aspect of great importance.

Friends are peculiarly unfortunate if from any cause they leave the Society—their training in it has done much to make it almost impossible for them to join any other Body,

and I can well suppose that to be unconnected with any religious association is no small calamity.

I should wish to see a Society growing in numbers, and in strength ; requiring nothing of its members not clearly required by the New Testament ; teaching them nothing as children, which they cannot defend as men ; having a polity and an organization which should include in its action all who are willing to aid in its work ; and rejecting such things as have no warrant in Scripture, and which unavoidably tend to shut out the world not only from joining with it, but even from an investigation of its tenets.

This is not the time to point out what changes are necessary, nor do I assume to be qualified to indicate them. But what I maintain is, that the Society is failing ; that heads, if not hearts, are wanting to run it ; that we are buried in a crust of near 200 years growth, and that if anybody suggests any departure from ancient practices, or even recommends an investigation into the actual results of some of our practices, he is concluded not to be under the influence which should preside in our meetings, and is met with a statement of what are the " feelings " of certain friends, and with exhortations " not to let in the reasoner."

I say nothing here of changes, with this one exception. So long as facts and reasons shall go for nothing, there can be no hope for us. When questions concerning or affecting the condition of the Society are looked at in a practical spirit, and when it is admitted that common sense, and experience are of some value in a Yearly Meeting then the Society will be in a condition fairly to examine its own position.

There is no revelation to be expected that will shake the prejudices of men long wedded to what exists ; but if a spirit of enquiry is encouraged and permitted without being frowned upon, we may hope that by and bye the Society will examine with an impartial mind, into the causes of its decay. It may be that we are destined to extinction, but if it be so, let it not be said that we refused to believe in our danger, and rejected all examination into the malady which destroyed us.

Forgive me for writing all this, and don't for a moment think of replying to it. I would not send it, if I thought it would involve thee or myself in a correspondence on these

subjects. I know I have subjected myself to no little unpleasant observation in consequence of what I have said on some occasions. Under the circumstances this must be expected. I have spoken honestly if not always wisely, and as thou, with the kindest motives I am sure, sent me a tract touching somewhat on these subjects, I have made my reply to thee, the opportunity for stating what I think and feel, perhaps more at length than is necessary, but I hope not more than thou wilt excuse.

I am affectionately Thy friend  
John Bright

To

John Pease  
Darlington.

I *mo* 27.52. I wrote this letter a month ago—but delayed sending it, doubting whether I should say anything on the subject to which it refers. I have concluded to send it, rather than merely to acknowledge thy kindness in sending me the Tract.

JB.