

Newcastle-upon-Tyne Friends and Scientific Thought:

Reminiscences

By LAWRENCE RICHARDSON

MY earliest recollections go back to about 1875, when 5 or 6 years old. There were three tall broad-brimmed hats at the head of Newcastle meeting, the tallest in the middle; all kept on throughout, as a matter of religious principle. Other men might put their hats on or off as they thought fit. On the women's side were several Quaker bonnets. Men and women kept strictly to their separate sides of the meeting house. In speaking, some women used a curious high-pitched sing-song. The Sunday morning meeting lasted a full hour and a half, and except for two or three families with carriages, everyone must walk there and back. Children's meetings were held monthly, and Thomas Hodgkin interested us in the Parables. Much the greatest change within my memory has been in the expression of our religious feeling and thinking.

In 1886, at the age of nearly 17, I left boarding school and attended meeting morning and evening regularly and decided that I ought to try to think things out for myself. It was a time of great controversy both within and outside the Society.

There was a long controversy in the pages of the *Nineteenth Century* between W. E. Gladstone, standing for the freedom from error of the Bible, and T. H. Huxley, attacking that view. In books, Matthew Arnold was giving an outline of Biblical origins and saying that miracles do not happen in our experience and that we can and must find some better basis for religion. Novels, like *Robert Elsmere*, by Mrs. Humphry Ward, and *The Story of an African Farm*, by Olive Schreiner, were widely read and discussed.

Inside the Society the more vocal portion (but certainly not all) were laying great stress on the need for *belief* in Bible and creed; and for evident conversion—"you *must* be born again." Some would go so far as belief in "every word from

cover to cover"; to give way on one word was to give away everything; had not Christ himself endorsed the Story of Jonah and the Whale and the fate of eternal punishment for unbelievers? Very common was the belief that to have doubts was *wrong*; to talk about them was to endanger the souls of others. (But had not Tennyson written a generation earlier "There breathes more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.")

About the year 1887 the editor of *The Friend* was conducting a special mission in Newcastle Meeting House and I heard him explain Christianity in these words—"God was so just that he *had* to punish someone for the sin of Adam; but he loved mankind so much that he put all the punishment on to his own son Jesus, so that those who believed on him might be saved from future punishment." I am quite sure now that many other members would have disliked that as much as I did, but no one told me so. I was much puzzled and worried greatly over many points of doctrine.

The final upshot was that I revolted rather violently. If Christianity meant that sort of creed, then I must give up Christianity. No doubt I was crude; and pugnacious—but I was having to fight for my spiritual and intellectual life against influences that would have stifled it. There are some rather sore memories and I cannot but feel that Newcastle Meeting and the Society in general failed rather badly in its dealings with those of us who revolted. There was pity for misled youth; there was not understanding. It was not persecution and was well meant, but there was a painful social pressure; we were not irreverent or irreligious, but such views must not be allowed to feel themselves at home; so it meant feeling like a fish out of water in any religious gathering; it meant going into the wilderness for 10 or 12 years.

Thomas Hodgkin asked half a dozen of us to his house once or twice and that was definitely understanding and helpful; he knew the difference between Jehovist and Elohist in Genesis (which is the A B C of Biblical origins); what he said in meeting was always interesting, though he was not so outspoken as I wished; I think he was very anxious to avoid controversy.

My attendance at meeting became very irregular. But for my friendship with John Wilhelm Rowntree ("that dangerous young man" as some called him) I should probably have

resigned my membership and might have drifted into indifference. I have heard Neave Brayshaw say that the Society lost a whole generation of young people. It must have been much harder for some of the older generation, people like John William Graham, Frances Thompson and many others; but we did not learn of them till later.

Things were moving however, if slowly. In 1888 there came before Yearly Meeting the "Richmond Document", an elaborate creed drawn up in America with the help of some English and Irish Friends. I don't like it now any better than I did then. A great many were very anxious to adopt it; it is quite possible that a majority would have said that for themselves they agreed with it; but though circulating it with the *Proceedings*, Yearly Meeting very wisely decided not to bind itself to a creed. If that had been done, it would certainly have split the Society.

Things continued to move if slowly. In 1895 there was a Home Mission Conference at Manchester with, I believe, some very straight speaking. In 1897 came the first Scarborough Summer School. I was rather out of health and did not go—which was my loss.

I got to the second Summer School at Scarborough in 1901 and what a revelation it was!—a company in which one could speak freely, ask any questions; devotional meetings where one did *not* feel like a fish out of water; lectures by experts as to the origins of the Bible, which made it far more interesting and therefore far more valuable—a group of human documents with contradictions and errors in plenty, savage atrocities even—but from which one could wash out the gold and let the rest go. Rendel Harris on the quarrels of St. Peter and St. Paul, made the latter far more human and understandable, if still often not profitable.

John Wilhelm Rowntree's early death in 1905 was a very great loss, but the work went on with a wider sense of responsibility. Many other Summer schools followed. Woodbrooke was founded and the Swarthmore lecture. The battle for free inquiry had been definitely won, though rumblings still continued in some places.

The Summer school movement was the work of a number of people who realized the importance of the results of research in Biblical matters and also in the origin of mankind according to the Darwinian theory; and who also felt that

there need not be, *must* not be any loss of real religion in accepting these results. Its leaders were John Wilhelm Rowntree, Rendel Harris, Joshua Rowntree, William Charles Braithwaite, Rufus Jones, Neave Brayshaw, Edward Grubb, H. G. Wood and many others.

Newcastle meeting felt the effects of course, though it was several years more before, in great fear and trembling, I could screw up my courage to speak in the meeting for worship. I was goaded to it by an address as to the way in which wonderful miracles which we could not have believed without religion, proved the power of God. It took weeks to find words to express, without being too controversial, the sense of dependability that is to be found in the regular order of outward Nature and in the inner life as well. I need not have been so frightened; no one jumped on me; I got good encouragement from two or three older friends.

For full fifty years now our meeting in Newcastle has had a pretty continuous succession of lectures, discussions and fellowship meetings, and just because we do not wish to debate in the devotional meetings, it is the more necessary that we should have other opportunities for learning, for free discussions, for exchange of opinion. For several years, Louie Pumphrey had at her house regular discussion meetings for young Friends; I was very glad of the opportunity of attending some of them. One cannot attempt to name all those who helped the meeting. Robert Lunnon and Nora Gillie brought to it a refreshing openness of mind. Alfred Brown more than anyone else in the rather short time he was with us, stirred us to activity and increased attendances. Herbert Corder of Sunderland was very encouraging.

This question of avoiding controversy in the meeting for worship may continue difficult, for if it is carried too far, it may be very deadening. Long after our congregation as a whole had abandoned the view of the verbal inspiration of Scripture, there seemed to be a tacit understanding that nothing must be said to throw doubt on it. I remember a feeling of delighted surprise when a leading minister went so far as to describe a certain verse as shining like a gem in the otherwise *dull* book of Proverbs. That particular difficulty has disappeared, but has there been a similar tacit understanding, to avoid any expression of doubt as to the infallibility of Jesus? Has this prevented our *thinking* about Him? Cer-

tainly I recognize Him as our greatest teacher and I have no wish to quarrel with those who have genuinely "fallen in love" with Him as Robert Lunnon put it. But for myself I get the best understanding of Him by asking questions. What *sort* of a man was He? Did He share the popular religion and even some of the popular superstitions, e.g. demoniacal possession? Were there not limitations and even mistakes? Does He not towards the end seem to become somewhat unbalanced and embittered? Even so, He remains our greatest teacher.

And now I am too deaf to hear most of what is said in meeting. I still feel a bit of a rebel sometimes. It may be that early experiences have given my mind a permanent set, so that I cannot use phraseology that comes easily to many Friends. We have to use figurative language and our figures of speech may differ when we mean the same thing. I can feel at home as I could with no other body.

Recent Publications

IN *The Protestant Dissenting Deputies*; by Bernard Lord Manning, Edited by Ormerod Greenwood (Cambridge University Press, 1952), we trace the story of a London committee of delegates from up to 100 or more congregations of the historic dissenting churches in the metropolitan area. The body consisted of lawyers and business men conversant with city and government practices, and still exists. It was formed in the 1730s when there seemed a possibility of repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts under Walpole's later administration. The monthly meetings of the Deputies provided opportunities for applications in the proper quarters for the redress of local and private as well as general and public grievances under which dissenters laboured well into the nineteenth century.

The book pays tribute to John Bright's work in the church rates question, but points out that the Deputies' records do not show the Society of Friends in an amiable light. That may be true, but it does not excuse author or editor from dating or qualifying statements before publishing them. When were Friends privileged to worship in secret, and did they exercise this "privilege"? On page 213, "Many statutes had confirmed [Friends'] peculiar privilege of making declarations in place of oaths. They could sit in Parliament as a result of this privilege." These easy phrases hardly represent over a century's work for emancipation from disabilities, many of them never felt by those who could take an oath. It took a Select Committee in the Reformed House of Commons of 1833 to decide to allow Joseph Pease to make his affirmation and take his seat, the first Quaker to do so, though John Archdale had been elected in 1698.