

# Looking Back

By T. EDMUND HARVEY

IT is a good thing at times for a community as well as for individuals to look back across the years and note the changes they have witnessed, whether with regret for what belongs now to a vanished world, or with thankfulness both for the guiding of an unseen hand and for the evidence of signs of life and of new creative activity not foreseen in those earlier days. We must try to bear this in mind in considering the contrast between the life of the Society of Friends today and that of a couple of generations or more ago, which older Friends recall in memory.

Change there must be, if there is life and growth. Any community which remains static, content to reproduce the experience of the past, is in danger of atrophy and of torpor which is near to death. But change is not necessarily good in itself, unless it be truly the outcome of life.

Old folk who look back tend to see the earlier years in the mellow golden light of autumn and to forget the shadows. On the other hand they may not call attention to what was of great importance to their life and growth, just because they assume that it was there all the while.

There is no doubt that two generations ago both meetings for worship and meetings for church affairs took a far larger share of the time, and in many cases also of the thought, of Friends generally than they do today. There were two meetings to attend each First day, the morning meeting lasting usually for an hour and a half or longer: the evening meeting was shorter and often it included the reading of a previously selected passage of Scripture, which might or might not be followed by an exposition. Then there was the mid-week meeting at which the attendance was smaller, but it was regularly attended by a number of Friends, some of whom left their shops or places of business to be present. Monthly Meetings were valued occasions and Quarterly Meetings were important social events, as well as religious opportunities, extending always for two whole days; hospitality

on a wide and bountiful scale was provided in the homes of Friends, whose children looked forward (and later backward) with pleasure to the custards and jellies and other good food which abounded then, but in some families would not be seen in such abundance on any other occasion. There was a long interval after these Quarterly Meeting dinners, before the next session, so that older Friends might retire to bedrooms and rest, while young ones might go for walks together. There was great interest in meeting Friends from distant parts of the Quarterly Meeting, some of whom were only seen on these occasions: the personality of notable ministering Friends, men and women, is thus still bright after sixty years; but these meetings were also welcomed as occasions at which younger Friends from a distance could meet each other, and old cousinships were kept up and new friendships formed, which often led to a more intimate relationship.

It must not be forgotten that a large number of well-concerned Friends, mostly of maturer years, were members of meetings for ministry and oversight, to which all recorded ministers, elders and overseers belonged, and to which ultimately a few others could be invited; they may have sometimes taken too much time, but they gave the opportunity for the unhurried consideration of great spiritual issues, and this was perhaps especially the case with the Yearly Meeting on Ministry and Oversight which immediately preceded the Yearly Meeting itself and might be the means of greatly influencing its course. The disappearance of such a meeting before the opening of Yearly Meeting has I believe been a loss to the Society as a whole.

It must be recalled that the large attendance at meetings for discipline was encouraged by the fact that it was still rare for younger Friends, or their elders, to go to a theatre or even a concert or oratorio. The performance of a conjurer was however, not frowned upon, and fortunate Quaker children were sometimes able to visit the famous conjurers' entertainment of Maskelyne and Cooke, which often included something suspiciously like a tiny piece of drama: the dramatic instinct too found a delightful outlet in watching performances of Punch and Judy, especially during a seaside holiday. The travelling circus was looked at askance, but the occasional visit of a menagerie was a cause of great pleasure

to Quaker children. Otherwise, there were only occasional lectures, sometimes, but rarely, illustrated by lantern slides, to act as counter-attractions to Friends' gatherings. A whole day was devoted usually to the attendance of Monthly Meetings and these often provided opportunity for a short country walk or a visit to some place of interest, like the ebbing and flowing well, near Settle. Nor were the business meetings without interest to younger members and any one with a strong sense of humour might often find some incident to recall with a chuckle of satisfaction, as when at one country Monthly Meeting the clerk told us that he had to report to the meeting a burial in the burial ground not after the manner of Friends. A good woman not in any way connected with the Society had written to him to confess how, in order to secure her brother's peace of mind, she had secretly buried by night his amputated leg in the Quaker burial ground, his clergyman having previously refused to allow it to be buried in the Churchyard. Her action had brought peace in mind and body to the poor man in hospital, who had been worrying as to what might happen to him at the Resurrection.

Sometimes our thoughts were carried with interest back to spiritual adventures of the past, as when I remember old William Gundry reporting to Friends at Leeds on the almost obsolescent Guide Fund of which he was Treasurer, and explaining how it was originally started to pay the expenses of a younger Friend who would be assigned to guide and accompany a Friend travelling in the ministry on the last stages of his journey to our town and to the next place he felt called to visit. It might be a fruitful companionship and we may recall how the young Henry Tuke was deeply impressed by thus accompanying John Woolman on the last stage of his journey to York where he was shortly to die in active service. Some of the phrases the children heard at these business meetings were not always explained as this one was: there may be many children who hearing reports from different meetings of the amount raised during the year by collections for the national stock, thought of this, not as for the Yearly Meeting Fund, but as a patriotic if somewhat inadequate effort by Friends to lessen the burden of the National Debt. Others, hearing of a Friend "retiring this year by rotation" from a committee, looked forward in vain to seeing

that Friend gyrating slowly until the door of the committee room was reached.

But what of the deeper influence of the meetings for worship? At Quarterly Meeting there faced us in triple ranks in the ministers' gallery a great array of weighty Friends, some of them esteemed and well-known ministers who thus became more than familiar names to us; a smaller but a like weighty array were to be seen at Ackworth General Meeting, while week by week in all the larger meetings the silent effect of the presence of the familiar figures we were wont to see in the gallery was a lasting one, quite apart from any spoken message. A child got to know the lines on the face, the shape of the mouth, the look in the eyes, until the personality of a Friend with whom he had never spoken became familiar to him and might even retain an affectionate place in his memory after many years.

In all cases, of course, men and women Friends occupied different sides of the meeting house, this division continuing in the ministers' gallery after it had begun to disappear in the body of the meeting. Early in the present century I recall that one beloved minister who sat at the head of the meeting, when first confronted with the suggestion that ministers and elders in the gallery should sit without separation of the sexes, gravely observed "I don't think I could feel easy in meeting with a woman Friend on *both* sides of me". He had already been sitting for years with his dear wife on the one side of him. In the gallery the central place on the top row was occupied by the recorded ministers, next to whom sat the elders; overseers usually sitting on the seat below. Meeting for Worship on First day morning lasted usually for an hour-and-a-half or longer: ministers often, but by no means always, spoke at greater length than today, and would generally introduce their message by a quotation from the Scripture. One woman minister had a gift of arresting attention by choosing for this obscure and scarcely known Biblical passages such as "At Parbar westward, four at the causeway, and two at Parbar".<sup>1</sup>

In the large morning Meeting it was difficult for a young or inexperienced speaker to venture on the serious task of taking part for the first time in ministry: there was danger in looking too much to the ministers' gallery, and in the

<sup>1</sup> 1 Chron. xxvi. 18.

ministers themselves unconsciously hindering service from others. While the content of the ministry was predominantly evangelical in doctrine, there had remained throughout the nineteenth century ministry of a more mystical character. One instance of this stands out in my memory. Daniel Pickard was speaking in Leeds Meeting: "The beauty of the lily, the fragrance of the rose, they were not put on from without, they were wrought from within". He then went on to point us to the "Inward Teacher ever present" to whom he would have us turn. That must have been some fifty years ago; his words so impressed me that I wrote them down shortly afterwards.

Sermons were perhaps often too long, but they also gave opportunity for the thoughtful consideration of great themes, as well as for casting light on notable passages from the Bible, and practical counsels on the personal problems of conduct. Beneath the quiet surface there was a ferment of active religious and social life at work in the life of the Society of Friends of which men like Edward Grubb and Edward Worsdell were harbingers, Rendel Harris, Thomas Hodgkin and John William Graham each in different ways pioneers, but in which a unique seminal influence was exercised by John Wilhelm Rowntree.

The Meeting for Worship of those days gave him a rich opportunity for prophetic service: Yearly Meeting with its greater elasticity than is afforded by the crowded agenda of today, provided ample field for him to bring his message home, and Friends were deeply moved by the fire of that message. In those days there was no place for prearranged speakers to open a subject, or speak in the discussions: the clerk decided on the course of the deliberations of the meeting, subject to the overruling authority of the meeting itself. There was no printed,<sup>1</sup> or written agenda, but it was known that the consideration of the state of the Society would occupy several sessions, often following on the triennial reports from different groups of Quarterly Meetings, which themselves afforded the opportunity for insight into our weakness and deficiencies as well as encouragement in the evidence of life.

Men and women Friends met separately both in Yearly

<sup>1</sup> The first printed Agenda, indicating "*probable* course of business", dated from 1899.

Meeting and all the subordinate meetings, but occasionally communicated messages to each other on matters of joint concern, while sometimes a minister, always accompanied by two elders, after bringing his concern before the meeting would seek through the appointed messengers the concurrence of the Women's Meeting to his appearing before it. In the same way a woman Friend might appear before the Yearly Meeting. I believe that the last occasion on which a man Friend thus addressed the Women's Yearly Meeting was when a minister who was himself a widower appeared, accompanied by two other widowers, and spoke from the words "Thou gavest me no kiss".

A gradual transition to the present method of joint sessions came through joint sessions being held, occasionally at first, and then for an increasing number of sessions. Fifty years ago much of the important themes with which Yearly Meeting is concerned were outside the scope of its deliberations. The Friends' Foreign Mission Association, the Friends' Home Mission Committee and several other committees were then independent bodies, though reporting by permission to Yearly Meeting.<sup>1</sup> Thus the sessions of Yearly Meeting were not overcrowded and it was customary to adjourn in time to allow in the evening the holding of the annual or other special meetings concerned with these specific services, among them as well as those already mentioned, being the very important Friends' First-Day School Association, comprising both the children's schools and the great number of Friends' Adult Schools in which a large proportion of the members of the Society were actively engaged.

These large associations and committees had a small number of concerned Friends working for them as a salaried staff, usually in inadequate and overcrowded quarters and at very small salaries, but there were hardly any Friends employed in its service by the Society itself. Indeed I remember Edward Little recalling Thomas Pumphrey of Ackworth saying to him, about 70 years ago: "There are only two paid officials in the Society of Friends, the Recording Clerk of London Yearly Meeting and the Transcribing Clerk of

<sup>1</sup> The F.F.M.A. first was permitted to present a brief report to Y.M. in 1882; and the Friends' Home Mission Committee in 1883, but for some years this did not involve their discussion by Y.M.

Yorkshire Quarterly Meeting". (The transcribing clerk of course only received a modest honorarium.)<sup>1</sup>

We have gained greatly since then in the efficiency with which many of the concerns of the Society have been carried out, but has it been wholly gain? Two or three generations ago, it is true, there were more Friends with leisure to undertake the unpaid work of the Society, and by no means all of them well-to-do Friends, for they included some with very small incomes; today it is natural to look to the able and devoted company of the large and energetic staff of workers attached to Friends House and the various central committees of the Society, when appointments have to be made; sometimes in consequence the latent gifts of less known members are perhaps not as much made use of as the general well being of the Society might call for. The following up of the concern of the Society's committees, when they depended entirely on unpaid voluntary workers, was thrown back upon the membership of the Society as a whole. A concern brought by a Friend before a meeting might lead to an *ad hoc* committee being appointed, but also might result in the encouraging of that Friend himself to go forward with his concern, and his liberation by minute for the purpose.

I believe much has been lost by the too general rarity in recent years of religious concerns being brought by individual Friends before their Monthly Meetings. Even though the collective wisdom of standing committees and of their experienced staff is often of great value, it cannot take the place of the sharing of a concern by the meeting as a whole, and the help which this may bring to the Friend on whom the concern is laid.

If there has been some real loss in this respect there has been given us as a Society the possibility of a great enrichment of life in other ways, though one far too little appreciated and made use of, in the opportunity for religious study and for making the contribution which Friends should give to Christian thought and to the quest for truth. Way had been opened for this by the Summer School movement and

<sup>1</sup> For long the Library itself had no room of its own, but was kept in bookcases in the old Meeting for Sufferings room. It was not until 1901 that Norman Penney was appointed by Meeting for Sufferings as its first full time Librarian, while only in xii mo. 1902 did the Meeting decide to allow the room to be called "The Library" and to be used regularly for Library purposes.

by its extension and continuation committee, leading up to the founding of Woodbrooke, not by any formal committee of the Society, but largely owing to the devotion and insight of a very small group of two or three deeply concerned Friends. Up till then the Society of Friends had been largely dependent for the intellectual development of its religious life, apart from one or two scholar bankers like Frederic Seebohm and Thomas Hodgkin, upon its educationists, schoolmasters, schoolmistresses and teachers, with some help from members of the medical profession, and from members, like Rendel Harris, who came to Friends in adult life and owed their scholastic education to others. It is indeed marvellous that in spite of this restriction on religious life and thought there should have developed such a hunger for the food of the spirit which met the need of mind and heart, as was evinced by the first Scarborough Summer School in 1897, and by its successors. Yet though Woodbrooke has done much, and its Extension committee has had a wide service in giving guidance and stimulus to religious study, even yet they have not been utilised as fully as they should have been.

We are glad to make use today of the contributions to Christian life and thought which have been made by Free Churchmen, Anglicans and Roman Catholics, as well as by foreign scholars; but we have still hardly given an adequate return of the product of Quaker scholarship, apart from the the great work of William Charles Braithwaite and that of Rufus M. Jones in America with its world-wide influence. But have we yet, either as individuals or as a Society come to realise the implications of the great commandment: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy *mind*"?

It would be well if the changed outlook in the Society of Friends on social, industrial, racial and international problems could be made the subject of detailed studies, for in the last fifty or sixty years doors and windows have been opened both in our minds and in opportunities for service. Yet all the while one can trace the influence of the life and love of God at work through human lives, continuously renewed and reproduced in our Quaker experience by the work and the teaching and the central personality of Jesus, and transmitted to us by countless humble disciples, amongst whom we must increasingly recognise the wonderful inspiring

and encouraging influence of John Woolman, the study of whose life and the full text of whose writings are now available to us as to no previous generation. Yet through the years that are gone they have borne their silent witness and challenged the conscience of many a reader.

Thus, as we compare conditions today with those of two generations ago, while we may regret much that has been lost, and wish that we might share the uncrowded lives, the absence of rush and hurry of an earlier day, yet we must be thankful for the living heritage which has been handed on to us, which cannot be preserved except as something living and subject to change, a heritage which calls upon each succeeding generation to make its own sacrifice that the work of the Kingdom of God may go forward.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to the editor for much of the substance of the footnotes on pp. 55, 56 and 57.

### Accounts for the year 1952 and *Journal*, vol. xliv

	£	s.	d.		£	s.	d.
<i>Journal of Friends' Historical Society</i> , vol. xliv, parts 1 and 2 .. ..	214	15	4	Balance brought forward .. ..	201	6	0
Stationery .. ..	35	18	2	Anonymous donations, 1951 and 1952 ..	200	0	0
Expenses, including postage .. ..	31	13	11	Subscriptions .. ..	199	2	2
Equipment for storage of stock of <i>Journals</i> ..	21	14	2	Sales .. ..	26	2	11
700 copies of Tolles' <i>Atlantic Community of Early Friends</i> ..	72	12	4	Interest on Post Office Savings Account ..	2	16	0
Donation towards Rowntree's <i>History of Guildford Meeting</i> ..	10	0	0				
Balance carried forward to 1953 ..	242	13	2				
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	£629	7	1		£629	7	1
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Examined with the books of the Society and found correct.

(Signed) BASIL G. BURTON.

16.vii.1953.