

Elizabeth Fry at Newgate, 1820

A Polish Reminiscence

Charles Sienkiewicz (1793-1860), historian, bibliographer and minor poet, was in England in 1820 collecting books for Prince Adam Czartoryski. During his travels he kept a diary and the manuscript was acquired by the Polish National Library at Warsaw in 1948. It was published in 1953 by Bogdan Horodyski, and it includes the following account of a visit he paid to Newgate Prison, 4th August, 1820.¹

DECOPET² came, and invited me to accompany him to a religious meeting at Newgate prison. I went with him, and a Swiss clergyman made a third.

The prison was near the place of execution. We entered, after producing tickets which the prison guard did not at first recognize as valid. We crossed a few cells, each barred by a heavy grate which opened in turn for us to pass through, while pale light reflected on the opposite wall. Then we came into a small courtyard of the separate women's prison wing, where the prisoners were free to walk. Then we were conducted to the place which served as a chapel.

There we met Mrs. Fry, a Quakeress famous for her devotion to the cause of improving the prison conditions. She has the superintendence of the conduct of female prisoners, and has considerably improved their morals. Mrs. Fry, no longer young, was there in her simple Quaker dress, with only a bonnet on her head. Her daughter was there as well. Mrs. Fry does not take any reward for her pains, being sufficiently rich herself.

Soon another company of visitors came, and a bell was rung. Women prisoners started to enter and took their seats. The meeting began with a Bible reading and was held according to the Quaker ritual. The priest and preacher are women, and can officiate not only among the women, but among men as well. After the Bible reading all sat in silence. Then, unexpectedly, a woman from Mrs. Fry's company fell to her knees and started praying, or rather singing a prayer, with words which came into her mind. During this all the people knelt down.

¹ Karol Sienkiewicz: *Dziennik podróży po Anglii, 1820-1821*. Z. rękopisu wydał, wstępem i komentarzem opatrzył Bogdan Horodyski. Wrocław, 1953. The account appears at pp. 49-50.

² A tutor of Counts Constant and Andrew Zamoyski, former pupils of Sienkiewicz.

Besides the Bible, the Quakers do not use any other books and do not preach previously prepared sermons. In church they meditate, and whomsoever the Holy Spirit inspires—be it man or woman—he rises and speaks. If nobody feels inspired, worship ends in meditation only.

After the prayer had been sung, the people resumed their seats in silence. Then Mrs. Fry began talking; it was a kind of teaching, unaffected and reasonable. And with this the worship ended.

One of the prisoners fainted, and the visiting ladies revived her with their salt-bottles.

When the prisoners had left, the visitors signed in a book. When signing myself, I saw that I was there in the company of two famous authoresses, Mrs. Opie¹ and Miss Porter.² I asked for them to be shown to me, and I had sufficient time to take a good look at them, because the guests were viewing various fancy-work made by prisoners, which those who wanted, bought. Mrs. Opie is rather stout, with a cheerful countenance, but not attractive, and has a French vivacity. Miss Porter is a bit taller, slimmer, with a quiet and interesting face. Both of them are middle-aged. They had arrived together.

MAREK WAYSBLUM

Yorkshire Village. By Marie Hartley and Joan Ingilby. London: Dent. 1953. Pp. viii, 319; 1 plate. 18s.

In this account of the village of Askrigg in Wensleydale in Yorkshire, there are lively stories of the trials of the eighteenth-century highways surveyor building a turnpike—the surveyor was Alexander Fothergill, brother of the Doctor, and his task was not easy. There are many references to Friends in the district, commencing with George Fox's visit to Wensleydale in 1652, but none of them stand out more clearly than the aforesaid Alexander—the champion of the poor, the frequenter of ale-houses, attending meeting at Bainbridge, Hawes or Countersett, or riding out from Carr End to view the Highlanders retreating northwards in the '45.

¹ Amelia Alderson Opie (1769-1863) was later a valiant protagonist of the Polish cause during and after the insurrection of 1830-31.

² Jane Porter (1776-1850), novelist. Her first novel, *Thaddeus of Warsaw* (1803), based on the history of the Polish insurrection of 1794, won her fame in England and popularity among the Poles. She was active in relief work for Polish refugees after 1831.