

Esther Biddle and Her Mission to Louis XIV

IN the light of recent Quaker history it seems odd that what was probably the earliest attempt of a Quaker at mediation between the heads of states at war with each other met with the disapproval of Friends at the time. The story of Esther Biddle's visit to Queen Mary II in 1694, and to Louis XIV following it, is recorded by Gerard Croese,¹ but was purposely omitted by Sewel² as he makes plain in his introduction. It was, he says, a personal matter to herself, not approved by Friends (and ill advised), hence "not to be imputed" to them by inclusion in his history. Probably this is why it has remained buried for nearly two hundred and fifty years in Croese's not very reliable and almost unreadable volume. Indeed there is a note of doubt in even his account of Esther's mission (and also of Mary Fisher's visit to the Grand Turk in the same chapter) due, I think, to incredulity that *women* could have accomplished such hazardous journeys and interviewed such exalted persons. George Keith³ wrote to him that if God sent a message to the French King by Esther it could only be by such a miracle as that of Balaam's ass. But whatever the doubt and disapproval of her contemporaries, documentary evidence has recently come to light that confirms the story.

It has been necessary to condense Croese's account, but in doing this I have retained, as far as possible, his own wording.

Esther Biddle went to Queen Mary and, after complaining that the war between Christians with its suffering was a grief to her heart as a woman and a Christian, she asked the Queen to endeavour to end it. After the Queen had answered her, she asked leave to go to France to speak to the French King on the same matter and desired a letter from the Queen to the same effect. This was at first refused and she was warned of the difficulties and dangers of such a journey, yet for all that after much importunity she got a pass from the Queen's Secretary and forthwith set out. After various traverses she came to Versailles and applied to the exiled James II as to one to whom she had some years before been known upon a like occasion.

She delivered to him the letter she had written to King Louis. He gave it to the Duke of Orleans who promised to pass it on to the King, but she insisted on speaking to the King herself. "Am I permitted to speak to the King of Kings, and may I not speak with men?" Hearing

¹ Gerard Croese, *General History of the Quakers*, 1696, p. 267.

² Sewel, *History of Quakers* (1844 edn.), Vol. I, p. xvii.

³ Croese, p. 570.

of this the King admitted her to his presence. He entered the room full of Princes, Princesses, Prelates, and great men and spoke to her with his hat under his arm. Apparently she refused to believe it really was the King until he put on his hat. Then she gave him the substance of her letter, in which she prayed the King to make his peace with God and with the nations he was at war with and put a stop to such an overflowing and Rivulet of Blood that was shed.

The King replied, "But woman I desire Peace and seek Peace and would have Peace, and tell the Prince of Orange so." Having got passes from the King she returned to England via Holland, "having with all her endeavours effected nothing", says Croese, presumably because the war did not stop at once. He adds that while the Quakers think her story ought not to be doubted as she was known to be sincere and honest, others were more likely to heed it since she showed the letters given to her, "one signed by the Queen's secretary and the other by the King's command and with his own hand."

So much for Croese.

Neither of these letters found its way into any of the Quaker collections that have come down to us. But the record of the first of them I recently discovered in the Public Record Office. It is in Queen Mary's Entry Book where record was kept by the Secretary of State, Lord Shrewsbury, of actions ordered by the Queen herself. It reads as follows:

Passe for Hester Biddle a Quaker to go to Harwich or Gravesend and embark within 20 days for Holland or Flanders.

Dated Whitehall 5th of September 1694.

Shrewsbury¹

Corroborative evidence is to be found in Peel Monthly Meeting minutes. Esther Biddle was at that time a "poor Friend" of that meeting. For several years she received her five shillings pension in every single distribution recorded except for the months following the date of the "passe" until February, 1695. I conclude from this that it took her three or four months to fulfil her mission and return. How interesting it would be to know what the "various traverses" were, and since she was a "poor Friend" one wonders who united with her concern and made the journey financially possible.

A marginal note in the record of Esther's pass in the Queen's Entry Book presents a problem to which no authority consulted, Quaker or other, seems able to give a definite solution. In the space where sponsors' names are placed in other such entries appear the words "Minister etc. of St.

¹ S.P.D. 44 Entry Book 344, p. 248.

Sepulchres." She was living in St. Sepulchres parish when she died two years later. Did she perhaps have the backing of unnamed members of another religious body in her concern, so that here was an early joint pacifist deputation? Or alternatively is it possible that Esther herself, a woman, was recognised as a minister by the Whitehall authorities? It would be pleasant to think either of these explanations was the true one.

Not only in this culminating exploit near the end of her life, but throughout the forty years of her ministry Esther Biddle seems to have gone her own independent way. She apparently took no part in meetings for discipline, for Irene Edwards, in her study of the records of early women's meetings in London, did not find her mentioned once. Writing, and above all, preaching were her contribution. She had begun her ministry by 1656 and she was still preaching in London in 1694, the year she put her peace concern into action. According to Friends' Register she died two years later, 5.xii mo. 1696, aged 67.

We know little about Esther's early life until she met Francis Howgill, probably on his first visit to London, 1654, but after that her life is well documented. Of all early women Friends in London none seems to have been so active over so long a period of time or so frequently imprisoned. I have found references to fourteen imprisonments, and she is on Besse's list of twenty women and some sixty men who had, during the thirty years of persecution, "frequently exposed themselves at the hazard of their estates, liberties and lives . . . by preaching in assemblies for worship in London."¹

That Esther was an educated woman is evident from her handwriting and also from her command of language. Her own account, in one of her tracts,² of her background and upbringing shows she had not, like so many early Friends, been a member of one of the Seeker or Independent groups, but had always been a devoted, if unsatisfied, Church woman and a good Royalist. She says that her father had her "bishopped to gain a blessing for me," and that she lived many years in Oxford, then came to London where she sought satisfaction "evening, morning and noonday, in the Common Prayer" and when only one church was left in the

¹ Besse, *Sufferings of The Quakers*, 1753. Vol. 1, p. 484.

² Esther Biddle, *The Trumpet of the Lord*, 1662.

City she went to it.¹ She adds "when their books were burned I stood for them and my heart was wholly joynd to them, and when the King's head was taken off my heart and soul was burdened that I was weary of my life." She makes it plain in a much later letter to Francis Howgill that it was he who drew her to Friends.²

Thomas Biddle, Esther's husband was also an active Friend. He was a cordwainer and seems to have had a prosperous business in Old Change with a number of Quaker apprentices.³ This business was carried on till Old Change was burnt out in the Great Fire. They moved south of the river for a period, but evidently did not recover their former prosperity, for shortly after Thomas's death Esther became a pensioner of Peel Meeting, and at one time lived in one of the rooms behind the meeting house given over to "poor widows." The only one of their four sons who grew up was Benjamin, apprenticed first to his father, but later reapprenticed to someone else by Peel Meeting out of a bequest left for apprenticing sons of "poor Friends." But still Esther managed to travel in the ministry, visiting Scotland and Ireland during these years.⁴

Esther travelled far and wide in the ministry. She was arrested in 1656 at Banbury⁵ and at Launceston⁶ with John Stubbs and William Ames, with whom she was in Holland a little later.⁷ In that year she went to Newfoundland,⁸ which had then only a thinly spread population of a

¹ This was probably St. Peter's Queenshithe. There is a tradition that only one church in the City kept to the old form of Service throughout the Commonwealth, and Esther's contemporary account lends it further credence. Since Evelyn mentions (March 25, 1649) having heard Common Prayer ("a rare thing nowadays") in St. Peter's Queenshithe, it has been assumed that this was the one church. It was only a few minutes' walk from the Biddles' home. (*London Past and Present*, Wheatly and Cunningham, Vol. III, p. 22.)

² S.P.D. CIII, 75. The house in Watling Street where meetings were held following Howgill's first visit to London would be just around the corner from the Biddles' home in Old Change near St. Paul's, W. C. Braithwaite, *Beginnings of Quakerism*, p. 157.

³ W. C. Braithwaite, *Beginnings of Quakerism*, p. 157. One of them was William Biddle, ancestor of the Philadelphia Biddle family, who was probably his nephew.

⁴ *Journal F.H.S.*, x, 159; xii, 138.

⁵ Besse: Vol. I, p. 366.

⁶ *West Answering to the North*, 1657.

⁷ W. I. Hull: *Rise of Quakerism in Amsterdam*, 1938, 282.

⁸ *Journal of George Fox*, Cambridge, 1911, Edition. Vol. II, p. 334.

few thousand except during the fishing season, when ships from Bristol and other European ports crowded the harbour.¹ Hers is the only Quaker visit to it recorded. In 1657 she went to Barbados² and she seems to have made contact with George Fox himself in that year. She is said to be the woman who stopped him in the Strand and "prophesied concerning King Charles II three years before he came in." She said she must go and tell him, but George Fox, according to the Journal, sensibly told her to "keep it to herself for they would look upon it as treason."³

During the late 1650s she spent some time in Holland and seems there, as always, to have followed her own line, for Dr. Hull reports her to have been "a thorn in the side of Dutch as well as English Quakerism."⁴ One of William Caton's letters from Holland⁵ in 1661 mentioned that she and another woman Friend had been to "The Straits" some time previously. A contemporary Seaman's Calendar⁶ (of which George Fox is known to have possessed a copy) shows that "The Straits" at this period meant the Mediterranean from Gibraltar to Constantinople. What countries she visited and when the journey took place remains unknown. But it is perhaps not irrelevant that there exists a letter⁷ from her to George Fox dated from Cowes the 15th of Second Month (April) 1659. Cowes was at that time a port of call for ships from Holland to distant parts, so perhaps she was on the way to "The Straits" then. The tone of the letter is certainly compatible with such an assumption. She dedicates her "body sole and Speritt" for "the advancing of the Glorious Truth unto which I am called," and has

surrendered all for the Gospell's sake. I desire in the Lord thy prayers . . . and let us be remembered amongst you forever so in the Lord farewell. O that I could see thy face once more. . . . My life breathed to thee over all the mountains and the seas.

Esther Biddle's career as a pamphleteer may have begun as early as 1655, but the first of her "books" to bear a date was *A Warning to the City of London and the Suburbs Thereof* (1660). It consists mostly of an attack on luxury and corruption, and contains an account of the celebrations following

¹ Pedley: *History of Newfoundland*. 24.

² *Journal of George Fox*, Cambridge, 1911, Edition. Vol. II, p. 334.

³ *Journal of George Fox*. Ed. Nickalls, 1952, p. 355.

⁴ W. I. Hull: *Rise of Quakerism in Amsterdam*, 1938, 282.

⁵ Swarthmore MSS. Vol. I, p. 4-5 (Caton).

⁶ Phillips: *Seamans Calendar*.

⁷ Swarthmore MSS. Vol. IV, 164.

General Monk's arrival that is interesting to set beside Pepys's diary for the same day. She writes:

all trampling on the seed of God which lyeth low in you, some in darkness others in swearing . . . some pushing and haling and beating the lambs of God and all in disorder dishonoring God on the 21st of the 12th month 1659, your evil work and words did exceed in that day and night.

This was the day the secluded members of Parliament were admitted to the House, and voted to free the City members who were in prison. The rejoicings were very great according to Pepys,

Here out of the window it was most pleasant to see the City from end to end with the glory about it, so high was the light of the bonfires and so thick around the City and the bells rang everywhere.

He mentioned earlier that the City had been "openhanded" to the soldiers and that they were most of them drunk all day, which may perhaps explain the "pushing and haling."

Esther's tracts mostly follow the usual pattern of denunciation and prophecy of judgment on offenders, sometimes for their personal sins, but often for their treatment of Friends. A manuscript in Friends House Library, not in her handwriting but in her style and endorsed "Esther Biddle's message to King Charles" (1670) both denounces the luxury of the Court and demands that persecution should be stopped. But there is one "book" that is different. It is "The Trumpet of the Lord. . . . By Esther Biddle a Sufferer for the testimony of Jesus in Newgate" (1662). In it she appeals as a former churchwoman against the Act of Conformity, and ends on a defiant note of refusal to conform to "that vain religion" from which the Lord had set her "at liberty." No wonder that before the end of 1662 she was again in prison, this time for "writing a book."

We learn of this in a letter from Ellis Hookes to Margaret Fell which never reached her. The letter is now in the Public Record Office. It was intercepted at the Westmorland end, and its presence in the Public Record Office is probably due to the interception at the London end of a letter from Esther Biddle to Francis Howgill in Appleby jail in 1664. The Secretary of State in Whitehall sent this later letter to the Lord Lieutenant of Westmorland in order that he might use it to get information from Francis Howgill about people mentioned in it. The Lord Lieutenant bethought him of the letter

to Mrs. Fell, already in his possession which contained some of the same names. Howgill was interviewed by the jailer and agreed that the letter (signed Esther Biddle) was from a woman, but they could not believe that the "E. Bidle" of Ellis Hookes' letter could be the same, for the latter was a "writer of books", and, therefore, must be a man! However, they sent the whole correspondence to Whitehall to follow up the names of Friends mentioned in both letters,¹ and it was forwarded to Sir Richard Browne, the persecutor, to take action.²

Francis Howgill's jailer wrote "He much desired the letter, but to no purpose."³ It would have meant a great deal to him if he had been allowed to have it. The letter is full of affection and gratitude to Francis Howgill. It also gives news of persecution under the Conventicle Act and the deportations ordered at the "sessions." Others "have not been called, the Jury could not agree. The Lord did soe confound them, six were for Friends and six against them." Among those not called, Esther Biddle mentions Anthony Garnet, an apprentice of her husband's. A year later he was dead of the plague. She sent her love to various people and to "Anthony's mother and to all Friends as thou art."⁴ In this letter Esther tells of being ill-treated by the persecuting ex-Lord Mayor, Sir Richard Browne, in person. She writes (from Bridewell) of having been "taken from the Bull and Mouth where I was unmercifully used by Browne, he pinched me as black as a hatt and kicked me till I was sore and struck me on the mouth." This was not the only time she met with violence at that meeting house, or was taken off to prison from it.

There is one more letter⁵ of Esther's in existence, written a year later in November, 1665, the year of the Great Plague. It is to John Smith, a Friend in Surrey, and touches on the Biddles' personal life as well as on their varied Quaker interests. Its account of Friends transported to the West

¹ When eventually, together or separately, they reached the Public Record Office, Ellis Hookes' letter was filed according to its (earlier) date, but since all the names mentioned in the covering letter are underscored and no others, it seems pretty clear that this, the original letter, arrived instead of the copy promised in the covering letter and not found with it. (*Extracts from State Papers*, 1912, p. 224.)

² S.P.D. LXIII, 70; printed in *Extracts from State Papers*, 1912, 154.

³ S.P.D. CVII, 25; *Extracts*, 255.

⁴ S.P.D. CIII, 75; *Extracts*, 222-223.

⁵ A.R.B. MSS., 94; printed *Journal F.H.S.*, xlvi, 79-80 (delete note 2 on p. 80).

Indies has often been quoted. Mention is made of George Fox and other prominent Friends, their health and whereabouts. Then in the last quarter of the letter she comes to the real occasion for it.

Deare freind my husband desireth thee to acquaint Margarett Reynolds that he would have her son to come home, Anthony being dead, we have need of one; and if he cometh not he intendeth to have another in his stead and not to receive him againe. It is about three months agoe since our maid and Antony¹ dyed. I think here is not now much danger, soe farewell, my husbands love is to thee and Margarett my dear love salluteth all Friends that way. In haste I rest Thy sure Friend Esther Biddle.

It is a pleasant thought that the site of Thomas and Esther Biddle's home in Old Change, burnt over again in 1940, now lies in the middle of the permanent garden by St. Paul's.

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Recent Publications

Through a City Archway: The Story of Allen & Hanburys, 1715-1954. By Desmond Chapman-Huston and Ernest C. Cripps. London: John Murray, 1954. Pp. xv, 326. 25s.

Readers familiar with Ernest Cripps' history of Allen & Hanburys, published in 1927 under the title *Plough Court*, will welcome a larger and more comprehensive history by him and Desmond Chapman-Huston, quite as enjoyable as the former book. The new volume, *Through a City Archway*, not only brings the story up to date (including a graphic description of air raid damage in the second world war), but fills in the earlier period with new material formerly unavailable.

The book is beautifully produced and a pleasure to handle: paper print and binding are all good, and about fifty illustrations add considerably to its interest. Many of these are portraits of characters closely connected with the firm.

¹ Friends Registers record both of these deaths of plague, Anthony Garnet and "Biddle, Thomas, servant to, named Elizabeth." Their son Daniel died that same summer, but whether of plague or not is not stated. He was born 1st January, 1661. His mother as well as his father is on Besse's list of two hundred and eighty Friends crowded into Newgate during December, January and February of that year. One is left to wonder whether Esther was released before his birth or snatched away shortly after or even whether he was born in prison.