

## Wilson Armistead, 1819-1868

**W**ILSON Armistead<sup>1</sup> came of a Leeds family of faithful Friends, active in the Meeting from its beginning. In the early nineteenth century they lived in Water Hall, just south of the river, and a hundred yards from the Meeting House compound, with its boarding school, master's residence, the five Friend houses of Camp Lane Court, the library, and the burial ground. It was all surrounded by a high wall, but there was enough space within for the caretaker to mow the grass and sell hay every summer. Wilson grew up with this place as centre, and a hundred Friend families within easy walking distance, strongly disciplined, and clearly marked out by dress, speech, and conduct from the general population.

The firm at Water Hall was Joseph and John Armistead, mustard manufacturers and oil crushers, a prosperous business, and Wilson grew up to be the head of the firm and worked pretty hard in it. In the Meeting he was a quiet Friend, rarely chosen as representative to M.M. or Q.M. He was neither overseer nor elder, and not a minister or public Friend, and he is not among the fifteen men Friends of the Peace Committee which stirred the whole city, nor on the occasional committees which Friends appointed from time to time for their private discipline.

Recently, however, a publishing firm asked the Leeds Reference Library about a pamphlet by Wilson Armistead, dated 1865, advocating public libraries for Liberia and Sierra Leone.<sup>2</sup> This subject, at that date, is surprising. But all Wilson Armistead's work is surprising: to be surprising is

<sup>1</sup> Wilson Armistead, born 30.viii.1819, son of Joseph (brush manufacturer) and Hannah Armistead, of Water Lodge, parish of Leeds; died 18.ii.1868, of Leeds, oil merchant, aged 48, buried 22.ii.1868, Woodhouse cemetery. *The British Friend* records his death in its issue of 2.iii.1868, as "At his residence, Virginia House, Leeds, aged 49," and *The Friend* likewise.

Wilson Armistead, of Leeds, oil merchant, married 15.v.1844 at Witton, Mary Bragg, spinster of Allonby, daughter of John Bragg, manufacturer.

Children: Joseph John (b. 14.i.1846); Arthur Wilson (b. 22.i.1851); Anthony Wilson (b. 27.v.1853), also 2 daughters, Sarah Mercia (?) (b. 15.viii.1849), and Mary Louisa (b. 15.vi.1856).

<sup>2</sup> *Public libraries for Liberia and Sierra Leone*, 4to, 1865.

a quality required in a publicist, which is just what he was. Joseph Smith's *Descriptive catalogue of Friends' books* (1867 etc.) gives forty-six titles under his name, rather more than half dealing with slavery, and rather less than half with lives of Friends and Quakerism, including an edition of Fox's *Journal* (1852), Anthony Benezet (1859), James Logan the "distinguished scholar and Christian legislator, Secretary, Chief Justice and for two years Governor of Pennsylvania" (1851). Fox's *Journal* has very useful historical and biographical notes: 5,000 copies were printed to sell at five shillings, and there was a liberal allowance to purchasers for gratuitous distribution.

The *Memoirs of James Logan*, in spite of a disclaimer by Armistead, serve to counter some misrepresentations of William Penn himself, and of Friends in Pennsylvania; but the great value of the book is in Logan's letters and papers, which reveal his great integrity, patience, and courage, and the philosophic mind he had. "Though engaged in a vast hurry and load of business," he wrote to Thomas Story, "I could not forbear making reflections on the springs of thought and action in mankind, and latterly concluded that all our knowledge is but relative." Wilson Armistead describes Logan's botanical experiments on maize, published in Latin in Leyden in 1739, and in an English version by Dr. Fothergill in 1747. Logan was interested in navigation and astronomy, and in the sciences generally, in the way of those times. Our particular interest here is that this is the sort of company Wilson Armistead keeps. In the introduction to the *Memoirs*, he speaks of himself as a compiler, as he does again in the preface to his life of Benezet (1713-1784), the advocate of the injured Negro, the friend of the Indian, who sought out the unfortunate "and every child of sorrow was his brother." Let anyone read such pages in this book as the half-dozen in which the relief of the Acadians is described, and he will feel the power of simple narrative. Exiled in 1755 by the British Army from their homes in Nova Scotia, these French-speaking Catholics found themselves, 500 of them, in Philadelphia without resources, among a strange people and hopeless, until there appeared this ugly little man full of kindness, French-speaking too, and able to interpret for them and to prepare a memorial on their wrongs to be submitted to the King of England.

Of Armistead's other publications on Quakers and Quakerism, the most notable is his "*Select Miscellanies*" six volumes, pocket size, published in 1851, 1852,<sup>1</sup> full of short articles, anecdotes, passages from the Journals, short and not so short poems on religious subjects, accounts of sufferings, press cuttings, praise of Friends by themselves and others, notes of sermons heard, stories of God's providences: the whole jumble of our life as it comes. Occasionally there are pieces of superb quality like the noble letter from Edmund Burke to Mary Leadbeater, daughter of Richard Shackleton, on her father's death.<sup>2</sup> Burke had been a scholar in Abraham Shackleton's school at Ballitore in County Kildare, and Richard and he had become lifelong friends. Another is an article of Reminiscences of Ackworth School, fifteen pages of lively narrative, showing the other side of the medal from Joseph J. Gurney's contemporary imprint on that institution.<sup>3</sup>

Wilson Armistead's religious position is shown in a short piece most worth preserving:

There is such a thing as a very small gift in a great many words; and there is such a thing as a large gift in a very few words. We do not want an eloquent ministry; we do not want a flowery ministry; we want a *living* ministry; we want a *baptizing* ministry; a ministry that will break a hard heart, and heal a wounded one; a ministry that will lead us to the fountain and leave us there.

It seems almost irreverent to say it, but the compiler of this great number of small articles was looking to serve readers in an age of desultory reading: "In these days of desultory reading," he begins his preface, "the Press is teeming with light and trivial publications." And he goes out to meet such readers.

We turn from this interest to the passion of his life, the fight against slavery, and against all distinctions by colour. The titles explain themselves: "Memoirs of Paul Cuffe, a Man of Colour" (1840); "Calumny Refuted by Facts from Liberia" (1848); "Slavery Illustrated in the Histories of Zangara and Maquama, Two Negroes stolen from Africa"

<sup>1</sup> Jack Caudle's article, "The grave of William Penn" bases some of its argument on evidence contained in Volume 6, 1851; see *Jnl. F.H.S.*, vol. 50, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Edmund Burke to Mary Leadbeater, dated Beaconsfield, 8th September, 1792. Printed in *Select miscellanies*, IV, 329-31.

<sup>3</sup> VI, 32-47.

(1849); "The Crowning Crime of Christendom" (1850); "A Cloud of Witnesses against Oppression" (pp. 144); "Further Testimonies for Freedom" (1859); "The Leprosy of Methodism" (1860); "Facts versus Fiction—Will the Nigger Work?" (1863).

In 1853 appeared a whole volume of tracts. On the cover are the words, in gold lettering, "Leeds Anti-Slavery Tracts." "First Half Million Issue." There is a picture on the cover in gold colouring of a Negro man in chains, with the text underneath "Am I not a Man and a Brother?" Eighty-two tracts are bound up in the volume amounting to some 350 pages of printed evidence of the brutal and degrading institution of slave-holding. "Packages of such tracts," he says, "should be distributed in emigrant ships; America should be deluged with these missiles." The tracts are missiles: 500,000 strokes for freedom, is the author's description of them. They were sold by W. Cash, Bishopsgate Street, London, and by Jane Jowett, Friends' Meeting Yard, Leeds, and could be obtained through any bookseller. Before the first half million could be supplied Armistead had another 300,000 ordered. For the purpose, at the time, it would be difficult to imagine a more vigorous and exciting book. There are engravings showing slaves in chains, or being scourged, and portraits of some of the best known men of education and culture in negro communities.

The matter for these tracts came largely from America, no doubt collected on the visit Armistead paid to the United States in the summer of 1850. This was reported in eighteen articles in *The British Friend* between 1850 and 1853,<sup>1</sup> long articles that give the reader time really to see the Atlantic and the United States, and leisurely observations to let him share the pleasure and pain of it all. These articles would make fifty full pages of our present *Friend*. They were printed in small book form for private circulation (pp. 144) "but, for want of time, never completed." Considering the feeling of freedom and spacious wandering that fills the articles this last note is sad commentary. One suspects that Armistead returned from his great voyage to a life of overwork, and gave up all relaxation and much time needed for sleep to severe and sedentary labour in the cause of the

<sup>1</sup> "Reminiscences of a visit to the United States, in the summer of 1850"; articles begin with the issue 11th mo. 1, 1850.

oppressed. These *British Friend* articles include heart-rending stories, but they also show the traveller wholly given up to the new scene, to the beauty and wonder of the country, to delight in new pleasures and new friendships.

We have reserved to the last the most ambitious work Armistead undertook. It carries the title "A Tribute to the Negro." It appeared in 1848, a work of 564 pages, luxuriously printed by subscription, each page with ornamental panels. It is dedicated to outstanding negroes, "noble examples of elevated humanity," "the Image of God cut in Ebony." The author allows himself to be as ornamental as his page and continues:

Has the Almighty poured the tide of life through the Negro's breast, animated it with a portion of His own Spirit, and at the same time cursed him, that he is to be struck off the list of rational beings, and placed on a level with the brute?

The list of subscribers to the book obtained by this young man aged 29 years, we are told, would have occupied thirty pages. He sacrificed the list to allow space for more biographies of famous negroes. The subscription list "embraced nearly a thousand of the most conspicuous characters in the walks of benevolence and philanthropy, including the Sovereign of the most enlightened country of the world." Was this Queen Victoria?

"I court no man's applause," he goes on, "nor do I fear any man's frown. Conscious of many imperfections, I feel thankful in having completed this humble 'tribute' in aid of the cause of Freedom, Justice, and Humanity."

Part I of the work is of 187 pages, refuting the supposed constitutional inferiority of coloured people. It is the second part that is vital to the argument. Armistead gives fifty or more biographies of good and even famous Africans: Toussaint L'Ouverture has 31 pages to describe him. For the freed slave the author, out of sheer love, is disposed to claim too much. But he *knows* the true situation and that the effects of slavery take time to remove.

It is curious that in the midst of all this strenuous propaganda Armistead, under an assumed name, could publish (1855) a quite considerable work, printed by Longmans, with the title, "Tales and Legends of the English Lakes and Mountains," ostensibly to raise funds for the cause. He was a lover of Nature, and a student, and there are two or three

small papers by him in botany and entomology. He gave up a great deal in this field, and still more at home, working himself out too soon.

On 21st October, 1867, William Lloyd Garrison, the Abolitionist, came to address the citizens in Leeds Town Hall. Wilson Armistead was chosen to present an address of welcome, and it should have been a day of triumph for him. But it was too late, the matter was regarded as settled, France and Prussia were moving to the centre of the stage, and the anti-slavery celebration was "numerically not well attended." However, with the piety of his kind, Wilson Armistead still, as every day, praised the Lord for His goodness; and was content to be, in the old Friends' phrase, once more and for ever among those that are quiet in the land.

WILFRID ALLOTT