

## An Exercise in Quaker Ancestor Worship

**A**BOUT fifty years ago, when visiting Friends at Bentham (Yorks.), I was having tea on Sunday afternoon at the house of Benson Ford, and in the course of conversation he asked me if I had any connection with the Robert Davis who was Clerk of London Yearly Meeting in 1781. I have, he said, a folio copy of the Epistle of that year bearing his name as Clerk, and he very kindly presented it to me.

In reply to his question I had to plead ignorance. I knew that among my Irish Quaker forbears there were Grubbs and Shackletons and Russells and Clibborns (collateral), but I was unaware of any direct ancestral connection with English Friends.

My curiosity being aroused, I set to work to find out how anyone bearing my name could ever have been Clerk of London Yearly Meeting! Knowing that my cousin, Isabel Grubb of Carrick-on-Suir, was a recognized authority on the history of Friends in Ireland, as well as on genealogy, I wrote to ask if she could throw light on this mystery, and she drew my attention to an article by William Ball which appeared in *The Friends' monthly magazine*, vol. 2, 1831.

This gives an account of a remarkable, probably unique, incident in the annals of Quaker history. Its title is "Some Account of the Shipwreck of Joseph Sparrow and Edith Lovell, in the year 1782." It occurs to me that a brief summary of this article may be of interest to readers of *Journal F.H.S.*, and so I will venture to re-tell the story in my own words, and shall try to do justice to its main features. What deductions may be drawn from the narrative must be left to the judgment of the reader.

It appears that the said Robert Davis, who lived at Minehead, had a large family, one of whom, Mary by name, became engaged to a young Friend, Joseph Sparrow, of Clonmel, Co. Tipperary. At that time an English Friend, Edith Lovell, residing in Bristol, paid a ministerial visit to Friends in Ireland during the latter part of the year 1781. Having concluded her service in the South, and being about to return home, it was arranged that Joseph Sparrow should accompany her to Bristol and then go on to Minehead to visit

his fiancée. It seems clear that Joseph Sparrow felt a strong desire to accompany Edith Lovell on this journey, and share with her the hazards of the voyage, so much so that, instead of embarking at Waterford, much nearer his own home, he went to Cork, from where Edith Lovell proposed to sail. After various enquiries about sailings they eventually left Cork for Bristol by the Elizabeth Packet on 29.xii.1781. All went well across St. George's Channel, the boat passed Minehead on a beautiful afternoon (though dark clouds threatened a change of weather) and continued smoothly on her way up the Bristol Channel, when a heavy storm broke and she was wrecked on the Culver Sands off the Burnham Strand. This disaster was caused, not by the storm but by the illness and death of the lighthouse-keeper, whose son was so busy attending to his father that he forgot to put fire in the beacon. When the vessel struck on the sands she was soon overwhelmed by rough seas.<sup>1</sup>

At this point we come to the most surprising and baffling part of the story. Passengers were being taken off, on to lifeboats, with all speed, but Edith Lovell stoutly refused to leave the sinking ship! Why? No clue is given and we are left to guess the answer. Did she fear to trust herself to the lifeboat? Did she feel that the boat was already overloaded and she must sacrifice her own life (and that of her companion) in order that others might be saved? Was she acting under a mistaken sense of divine guidance? The answer to these questions will never be known. All we do know is that the stop in her mind proved to be a full stop both for her and her companion who, being a gallant young man, felt it his duty to stay by her side to the end. "I will not leave thee", was his firm resolve.

<sup>1</sup> *The Gentleman's Magazine*, January, 1782 (p. 42), under date December 30th, [1781], has the following entry: "The Elizabeth Packet, Capt. Summister, on her passage from Cork to Bristol, struck on the Culver Sands, near the Steep Holmes, and bulged. In this dreadful situation a young gentleman from Canada and some of the crew got the boat out, into which 13 men and a woman ventured, intreating the Captain and the other passengers to come also, which they refused, chusing rather to abide by the wreck than venture a more immediate death in the boat. About a quarter past 10 at night the boat left the wreck, leaving behind them 24 persons. The boat was . . . thrown on shore near Uphill, about half past six the next morning. It is supposed the poor souls on board the wreck continued in their dismal situation till the flood tide swallowed them up." —ED.

The body of Edith Lovell was never recovered, but that of Joseph Sparrow was washed ashore seven weeks afterwards at the village of Quantoxhead and was immediately buried on the spot.

Naturally news of this event came as a shattering blow to the Davis family, and in particular to Mary, who had lost her future husband. She seems to have borne her loss with serenity and Christian fortitude.

The sequence provides the answer to my question: with many generations of Irish Quaker ancestry on both sides, how did it come to pass that a direct ancestor of mine was Clerk of London Y.M. in 1781? It appears that soon after this sad event, a brother of Mary's went over to Clonmel to visit the bereaved family, and whilst there he fell in love with one of the Sparrow girls, married and settled in the town. Hence it came about that many years later my father, one of his descendants, lived in Clonmel, and was at one time a partner in business with Ernest Grubb (father of Isabel Grubb and brother of Anna Southall of Birmingham). Later, before I was born, the family moved to within a few miles of Limerick and later still, after my father died, to Dublin. The plate which bears the family crest inscribed "Robert Davis, Clonmel" was handed down to me and is a treasured possession.

How unpredictable are the forces that shape our lives and determine our destiny!

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