Shorthand as a Seventeenth Century Quaker Tool

Some Early Shorthand Systems and Their Use by Friends

THE art of shorthand writing, well known to the Romans and practised by individuals during the middle ages, was revived in England at the end of the sixteenth century.

The first published attempt to construct a modern system was made by Timothy Bright, physician and clergyman, and issued by him under the protection of a royal patent in 1588. Bright's *Characterie* was highly ingenious but not strictly alphabetical. It consisted of a selected basic vocabulary, with the words set out in groups, and it was necessary to memorize an individual shorthand character for each word. Words not included in the basic vocabulary could be suggested by writing the initial letter to the right or left of the character for a synonym or antonym taken from the list. Despite the obvious difficulties of the method, Bright's invention was actually used both for composition and reporting, but it was soon outmoded by the first modern alphabetical system. This was entitled[1] *The Art of Stenographie, or Short Writing by Spelling Characterie*; it was invented and taught by the Revd. John Willis, and first published anonymously in 1602.

Some Quaker records from the seventeenth century contain passages in shorthand. Much of this material remained unread until quite recently. Some fifty years ago, in May 1911, George Severs, of Ferncliffe, Bingley, deciphered the shorthand copy of a letter written by Margaret Fox to Edward Burrough, and named the system used. In 1924, a preliminary study of the Haistwell Diary was made by the Department of Manuscripts at the British Museum. W. J. Carlton has contributed an article on Laurence Steel to the *Journal of the Friends' Historical Society*, 1928, vol. 25, pp. 7–23, republished with additions as a separate mono-

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[1] The title is that of the 5th edition, 1617 and later editions.

graph on the life of this seventeenth century Friend. More recently, with help and encouragement from Edward Milligan, Muriel Hicks and D. Elton Trueblood, the present writer assembled a representative collection of photostats and other materials on which to work while overseas.

I am not aware that any Friends used Bright's system, and John Willis's system is not represented among those so far deciphered from the manuscripts at the Friends House Library. It was, however, used in modified form by Robert Barclay, the seventeenth century Quaker Apologist,[1] and it is important historically for establishing the pattern upon which many of the later systems were constructed.

Although it was extremely cumbersome at many points, John Willis's system of *Spelling Characterie* passed through a number of editions, the fourteenth appearing in 1647. It consisted of an alphabet of simplified characters, largely derived from the current hand; signs for a number of the more common double consonants; rules for writing vowels and diphthongs; special signs for selected syllables, prefixes and suffixes; rules for the syllabic construction of words; lists of abbreviations and symbolic signs for some common words and phrases; and a general rule for writing the sound of a word rather than following the common spelling.

The next system to be published was that of Edmond Willis, a namesake but no connection of his predecessor. Edmond Willis's work, *An Abbreviation of Writing by Character*, had been used for some years before it appeared in print in 1618. According to both these authors, the early years of the seventeenth century were marked by the appearance of different teachers and practitioners of the art. Some of them may possibly have written and propagated systems of their own invention. A modification of Edmond Willis's system was used by the writer of two shorthand letters by George Fox preserved in the Abraham MSS.

Within a very few years, the number of published systems greatly increased, and authors were also issuing new and revised editions of their earlier works.

Several of these systems contain important common elements, such as identical characters for certain letters of the alphabet, similar methods of vowel expression, identical

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[1] *See* D. E. Trueblood, *Robert Barclay*, 1968.

or very similar symbols and abbreviations for words and syllables. Thus a common stock of shorthand characters was quite early established, and in many cases systems differed mainly in the meanings assigned to these standard forms.

The use made of unpublished systems, the variations between different editions of the printed works, and the over-lappings between different methods, complicate the problem of the modern transcriber, but they also add a certain zest to his task. This is a small field in which experience becomes of cumulative value. Shorthand notes are seldom labelled with the name of the system, and a knowledge of the details of several methods, as well as of the broad principles upon which most of them were constructed, can be particularly rewarding in the recognition and deciphering of hitherto unidentified materials. The would-be transcriber is also helped considerably by early Friends' use of scripture portions and of other distinctive phrases or expressions in their writings.

Some suggested uses of shorthand were indicated by Timothy Bright in the title of his book—*Characterie—An Arte of Shorte, Swifte and Secrete Writing by Character*—and later developed by other authors. They include rapid writing, or reporting ("To write as fast as a man speaketh treatably"); small or compressed writing, to allow the making, in a very small space, of notes for discourses or sermons; the making of personal extracts from books and other records; and the composition of notes and memoranda which would also enjoy a measure of secrecy. Some of these purposes were reflected in the titles which inventors gave to their systems, such as tachygraphy, or swift writing; brachygraphy, or short writing; semigraphy, or half writing; stenography, or narrow writing.

Early Friends made use of various shorthand systems for purposes which accord very well with the four functions listed above. Many contemporary sermons, discourses and legal proceedings, including some relating to Friends, were taken down in shorthand. In 1655–56, when George Fox was a prisoner at Launceston in Cornwall, he sent for Anne Downer, who walked 200 miles to help him by dressing his meat and by writing shorthand: she was, as Fox says, "very serviceable". Later, in 1677–78, Fox was accompanied by a

clerk, Edward Haistwell (or Haistwhittle), some of whose shorthand notes have now been transcribed. Preserved among seventeenth century Quaker documents are shorthand notes including copies and drafts of letters and epistles; marginal notes; entries in diaries or journals; and rough notes or jottings, some of which might well be described as "doodlings".

The basic systems used in the documents currently in hand include those of John Willis (*Art of Stenographie*, 1602); Thomas Shelton (*Tachygraphy*, 1626); Henry Dix (*Brachygraphy*, 1633); Theophilus Metcalfe (*Radio-Stenography*, 1633); and Laurence Steel (*Short Writing*, 1678). To these must be added a composite style, partially deciphered, based largely upon Edmond Willis (*Abbreviation of Writing by Character*, 1618), and at least one other method which has not yet been identified. (The date in each case is that ascribed to the first published edition, according to the chronological list compiled by E. H. Butler and appended to *The Story of British Shorthand*, 1951. For the shorthand systems mentioned in this paper, the titles are taken from John Westby-Gibson; *Bibliography of Shorthand*, 1887.)

The material so far transcribed and identified includes the shorthand pages of the Barclay Notebook; two copies of writings by Francis Howgill; an unsigned letter addressed to Oliver Cromwell and his Council; a "lost" paper by George Fox, dealing with the keeping of feasts and holidays; two letters apparently dictated by George Fox; marginal notes to material incorporated in Fox's Journal; two letters addressed to H.C. (Henry Cromwell) by E.C. (Edward Cook), one of them containing a confident assertion—". . . for thy saying of Charles Stewart coming there is little danger of that for I am persuaded that never any of his generation shall come to reign or trouble thee . . ."—that was not borne out by the event; and marginalia by Edward Haistwell and others.

In passing, Edward Haistwell's private tribute to Fox may be thought worthy of record. In the margin to his longhand journal of Friends' journey to Europe, Haistwell writes, ". . . at this Embden I E.H. lay sick till my dear mr G.F. had been at Fredrick Stat:" and then continues in shorthand, "and they were very loving people to me in my sickness and I thought every day a week till I saw G.F. again but blessed be the Lord I was well minded."

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And again, in some preliminary lines of shorthand, Edward Haistwell refers to himself as "G.F.s clerk who hath been with him", and adds, "The Lord will be with them that are faithful to them that are over them."

Work on some documents is not yet completed, but copies of current transcripts have been supplied to interested Friends and/or deposited in the library at Friends House, and it is hoped that these papers, rich in biblical allusions and social and political awareness, with illuminating insights into character and full of confidence, may throw some further light upon the early history of Friends, their interests and their activities.

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Recent Publication

The First Emancipation: the Abolition of Slavery in the North. By Arthur Zilversmit. pp. x, 262. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1967. 52s.

"Why did gradual abolition succeed in the North? Was it merely a confirmation of the unprofitability of slavery in the northern states, or was it abolished despite its continuing profitability?" These are two of the questions posed in this book; and with regard to the second, it is interesting that the author strongly maintains the view that abolition in the North was not the result of any economic necessity, but came about largely through ideological reasons.

The part played by Friends, as pioneers in the field, is emphasized. Indeed, the author (a non-Friend) goes so far as to say:

"The history of the early abolitionist movement is essentially the record of Quaker antislavery activities. Although a few non-Quakers firmly denounced slavery, the Society of Friends was the only group to advocate emancipation in the years before the American Revolution".

Sympathetic accounts are given of the work of William Southeby, Benjamin Lay (whose oddities are objectively described), Woolman, and Benezet.