

“Friends and Relief”

Quaker Encounters: Volume I. Friends and Relief. John Ormerod Greenwood. (William Sessions Ltd. £4.50.)

In writing this book, J. Ormerod Greenwood has placed present and future generations of Friends under a considerable obligation. Here, in one well-researched volume, is the full story (within limits) of Quaker activities in relief. The limits which have been set are an editorial necessity; domestic relief work is excluded; so is any kind of relief in connection with the long battle against slavery; and though Friends of many nationalities figure in the story, it is told throughout from the point of view of London Yearly Meeting. To widen its scope would not only have made the theme unmanageable, it would have detracted gravely from the essential unity of the book.

The picture presented by Ormerod Greenwood is a balanced one. This is a record of achievement, sometimes of almost incredible achievement, but human failures, personal misunderstandings, and muddled thinking have their place in it. Sometimes these are indicated by a telling phrase, as when he writes of Quaker contacts with the Russian sects from 1815 to 1930: “The recurrent pattern of disappointment was due largely to political circumstances, and partly (since each party of Quaker visitors travelled in the same pristine innocence) to Quaker ignorance of the Russian set-up and of the nature of the sects.” One may suspect that Friends have since learnt in a hard school to mistrust that pristine innocence. He can record vividly the long and often heroic story of Quaker relief work in the Balkans, and yet confess soberly that “a spirit of frustration and anti-climax broods over Quaker efforts in the Balkans to the last”. And in his fascinating account of the little-known Quaker work in Finland, he includes in a footnote a comment which one suspects may be truer of Friends today than we like to think: “even the exemplary Quakers were often less tidy in terminating a project than enthusiastic in setting it up.”

Throughout the book, but more especially in the earlier chapters, individuals and groups come alive. Ormerod Greenwood does full justice to the Quaker Evangelicals and to the more conservative Friends, to the reforming zeal of the younger Friends at the turn of the century and to the many-patterned Quaker witness of the two World Wars. He also does justice to the deeply-concerned men and women who worked with Friends but who—like William Norcott and James Long, Emily Hobhouse, Francesca Wilson, and Judge Fell in an earlier day—never bore the name of “Friend”.

Ormerod Greenwood seldom fails to pick up the connection between the particular aspect of Quaker endeavour in question, and contemporary thought and development. In his admirable first chapter, he writes not only of the Quaker Evangelicals, but of the first Evangelical Revival and the Clapham sect. In his second, with its illuminating account of the little-known relief work carried out in

Germany from 1805 to 1816, he picks up the threads again in a telling paragraph.

"We are left with the question why the splendid ecumenical precedent of German relief in 1805-16 was never renewed until after the second World War; and several answers suggest themselves. The Evangelical Revival was a divisive force in the churches, and became more so as time went on and it was met by the High Churchmanship of the Oxford Movement and the beginnings of Christian Socialism. In the period of peace after Napoleon it concentrated on 'Foreign Missions', most of them denominational, and on domestic issues, and by the mid-century it had lost its force. The test case would be the work of Florence Nightingale in the Crimean War, for she was surely a child of the Evangelical Revival even though her personal faith was mystical; she received no communal backing comparable to that of 1814. But the real answer is perhaps that the German relief of 1814 was the work of a group of friends long accustomed to act together in the campaign against slavery, in the affairs of the Bible Society and many other matters; they shared much more than a set of doctrines. Their families remained together though their doctrines changed, and re-emerged as a still potent force in the twentieth century in Fabian Socialism and literary Bloomsbury. The Stephens, Buxtons, Trevelyan, Forsters, Hobhouses, and many more whom we shall meet again in these pages are physically and literally the children of the Evangelicals even though, as children should, they went their own way."

The stark tragedy of the Great Hunger in Ireland and of the succeeding years is brought home to the reader not only through descriptions of the scene, but through clear indications of the suffering and strain involved for those (all too few) who sought to bring relief. Ireland won their hearts and kept them to the end, but the sheer physical exhaustion resulting from their efforts and the psychological distress brought about by constant misunderstandings in the outside world sapped their strength and in some cases shortened their lives.

The chapter on the Franco-Prussian War brings to life the stories told to the present older generation in childhood by parents who as little children helped to make bandages and dressings in Meeting efforts forgotten long since. I can remember an aged Friend whose replies to comments on wintry weather would always be: "Not as cold as the winter of 1870, at the time of the Franco-Prussian War!" The origin of the Quaker Star, the colourful personalities, Quaker and non-Quaker, engaged in the work, the ghastly pictures of pestilence and famine and human suffering, are all dealt with here, together with the unexpected touches which bring the scene vividly to life—for instance, the picture of "a nurseryman handing in his list of losses: camellias, fuchsias, gardenias, orange trees, roses, geraniums and myrtles to the value of 5,000 francs . . . how such details bring to life, like a canvas of Renoir, the beauty of a century ago, shattered by war." Such a sentence, and many another, will serve to pinpoint the literary quality of the book, which is very considerable, though inevitably higher in the earlier chapters than in the later ones, where

the complexity and sheer weight of the available material militate against it.

The early chapter on Russia, with its illuminating study of Tolstoy and the Tolstoyans, and the repercussions of their ideas in Britain, is admirably balanced, and the story of the Dukhobors is told fairly and with charity, though here one inevitably longs to know more of the experience of Friends on the other side of the Atlantic. “It is always a disappointment to find that a community of saints are merely a mixed group of human beings,” writes Ormerod Greenwood, and this discovery seems inevitably to recur in the long, fascinating story of Quaker Relief.

With the later chapters, the story swings into living memory, but with a prelude which may possibly be the most valuable part of the book. Ormerod Greenwood traces in the earlier pages of the chapter on Quakers in the First World War the origins of the spiritual re-awakening of the Society of Friends which enabled it, and especially its younger members, to meet the challenge of 1914 and the succeeding years. Though an entire book could be devoted to this theme, he gives a clear and reasoned account which within its scope is completely satisfying. One could wish that in his account of the Manchester Conference he could have found space to mention the reference to the Arts, which was to have its repercussions later on in an aspect of Quakerism of which he himself is an exemplary exponent, but doubtless this would have been outside the limits of his subject.

In his account of the work of the Friends Ambulance Unit during and after the Second World War, Ormerod Greenwood tells the story of a convoy in China, cut off from all contact with the outside world in the confusion which prevailed at the time. They had none of the “comforts of civilisation”; their clothes had gone long since and they wore the faded blue quilted cotton of the people; they had only four books between them—*War and Peace*, *Pickwick Papers*, *Vanity Fair* and the Bible—which they read aloud to one another in the evenings. Most of the bedding and medical supplies and equipment were gone. “As a medical unit they had lost most of their value,” writes Ormerod Greenwood. “But they were a living witness to Quaker faithfulness and impartiality, and they were part of the birth-pangs of the new China.”

Perhaps this sentence expresses as well as any other in the book the challenge it presents to Quakerism in our day. In so far as we can rise to meet such a challenge, may it yet prove to be a fitting epitaph for the puzzled, impoverished, striving, stubbornly idealistic Friends of our own day: “They were a living witness to Quaker faithfulness and impartiality, and they were part of the birth-pangs of the new world.”

E.V.F.