

## Friends and the Inquisition at Malta

**A** GAIN, as a few years ago, I find myself in a position to supply some information about a confrontation of early Friends and the Inquisition, from the latter side. This is the long and well-known imprisonment in the island of Malta of two West Country British matrons, Katharine Evans and Sarah Cheevers. The preliminary paragraphs of an earlier article will serve as summary.<sup>1</sup>

In it I referred to the Malta chapter as important, but I had no idea that the records of it would become available. In fact, in 1941, referring to the Friends involved in Rome, in Malta, or Paris, I wrote:

“Specially addicted as I am to hunting out the opinions of Friends held by their opponents, I have often coveted a chance to look for these names [of Friends] in the records of the Holy Office, but I am told that the Church still jealously guards the archives of the Inquisition from inquisitive Protestants.”<sup>2</sup>

In spite of that, when in 1966 I happened to be at Woodbrooke, when a substantial number of men and women from Malta were in residence, I hoped I might form a connection to see if the material there was still so inaccessible; and later writing to one of them, I had a reply from a nephew saying that the gentleman I had written to had recently died, but offering to help me in my research. He said that “the archives of the Inquisition are housed in the Museum of the Cathedral of Malta, together with the archives of the Episcopal Curia. Last year a programme of micro-filming was commenced on these Archives, but as you can imagine, it will be years before all the documents housed in the Museum are photographed.” But he referred to a pamphlet published by Professor Andrew Vella of the Royal University of Malta on *The Tribunal of the Inquisition in Malta*. I sent for this by airmail and received it promptly and have decided with the author’s kind permission to cite

<sup>1</sup> “Friends and the Inquisition at Venice, 1658”, *Jnl. F.H.S.*, 52, 1968, pp. 39–45.

<sup>2</sup> “Letter from the Past”, No. 2, *Friends Intelligencer*, 1941; *Friendly Heritage*, 1972, p. 3.

the relevant section pretty fully, without waiting for complete microfilms and the delay of transferring their contents into an English article.<sup>1</sup>

Before quoting the pamphlet, I may mention the Quaker sources which lay stress upon the Friends' sufferings.<sup>2</sup> It will be seen that the account from the Inquisition reports rather the inquiries addressed to them by the inquisitional authorities. This is the same emphasis which was obvious in the accounts from Venice concerning John Stubbs and Samuel Fisher. The Quakers' answers refer to other Quakers travelling abroad, some of whom can be identified from our Quaker sources.

In the preface, the author raised from the modern Catholic point of view the question of the freedom to use such material. He says (p. 4):

There is nothing whatever to be feared from making these documents available to scholars. Before undertaking this research, I myself thought that there were many scandals and unpleasant incidents connected with this Tribunal, the publication of which might bring the Church into disrepute. But nothing of the sort, considering of course our human frailty, and the fact that the Church, though of divine origin, is composed of mere humans. Another point the reader must keep in mind is that if he desires to understand past events in their true light he should not judge them by a comparison with the present, since the idea of law and liberty in those days was not what it is today.

The printed account in Professor Vella's pamphlet runs (pp. 31-37):

<sup>1</sup> Royal University of Malta Historical Studies, (1) *The Tribunal of the Inquisition in Malta*, by Andrew P. Vella, O.P., Professor of History, first published in 1964, second impression in 1973, with the list of archive material brought up to date by Rev. J. Azzopardi. The volume on the Quaker women in the list of Registers of the Criminal Proceedings is Vol. LXX under the Inquisitor Jerome Casanate. The pamphlet summarizes the material very fully on pp. 31-37.

<sup>2</sup> See Joseph Smith's *Descriptive Catalogue of Friends' Books* under the headings, Evans, Katharine; Cheevers, Sarah; Sufferings; Baker, Daniel; and Robinson, George. Much of this is reprinted in Joseph Besse, *Sufferings*, 1753, ii, 399-420. Independent additional information was included in William Sewel's *History* and in George Fox's *Journal*, which explains how he secured their release finally, through the intervention of Lord D'Aubigny. See also C. V. Wedgwood, *Velvet Studies*, 1946, pp. 129-37, "The Conversion of Malta".

A curious event occurred under Mgr. Inquisitor Jerome Casanate. On the 21st December, 1658, two Quaker ladies reached Malta in a Dutch ship . . .

The reader may wonder why these two ladies, who were not Catholics, and as such did not fall under the jurisdiction of the Inquisitor, were imprisoned by him and kept for such a long time. Who was responsible? And why were they detained for nearly five years? They themselves blamed the Jesuits and the English Consul, the latter of whom they refer to as the Judas who delivered them into the hands of the former "that they might execute their cruel will upon them, or cause them to retreat their testimony and conform to them".

In the Inquisitorial Archives, *Registrum Sententiarum latarum in materiam S. Officii a Revmo Dno Hieronymo Casanate*, Vol. LXX, there is still extant a complete account of their trial, from their arrival in Malta to their deliverance, and from this we may gain further information.

It is reported that when these two ladies appeared in the streets of Valletta in Franciscan attire, three Friars Minor, Frs. Michael of Malta, Saviour of St. Nicholas and Francis Ottaviano, became alarmed and immediately carried out inquiries to see where they came from and where they were going to. Hence, two days after the ladies' arrival, Fr. Michael called on the Prior of the Conventual Church of St. John. After obtaining the necessary information, he appeared in the presence of the Inquisitor, Mgr. Jerome Casanate, and made the following statement, namely, that as the Island's Commissioner for the Holy Land he had been informed by another priest of his own Order that lately an Englishman, who claimed to be the Messiah, had reached Jerusalem and had told them that two ladies would soon be arriving there to confirm his mission. Suspecting that the two in Malta were the ladies referred to, and were followers of the heretic sect, he felt in conscience bound to denounce them.

Fr. Saviour, a Spaniard, appeared at the Tribunal on the same day to confirm this statement, requesting the Inquisitor to take the necessary steps, as the arrival of these ladies in Jerusalem—which was under Turkish rule—would be detrimental to the Franciscans residing in the Friary of the Holy Sepulchre.

The third Franciscan, Fr. Francis Ottaviano, declared that eleven months previously in Jerusalem, he had met an Englishman aged 18 years, George by name, who in England was a shoemaker. This Englishman was conveyed to the Franciscan Friary and after being questioned by their Theologians whether he was the Messiah, confessed that he was not the Messiah but his companion was, and his mission was to preach to the Turks and the Papists.

The impression given by this George, continued the Friar, was that he was an ignorant man, that at certain intervals a wave of emotion caused a trembling in him, but that he showed that he knew his Bible. This man belonged to a Religion newly founded in London in opposition to the opinion of the Englishmen, Turks and Papists. And since his stay in Jerusalem was considered as a danger to the Catholic priests, he had been sent back to England via

Marseilles the previous May. Before leaving he said that two ladies were following him. "I suspect", concluded Fr. Ottaviano, "that these may be the two."<sup>1</sup>

After hearing these witnesses, the Inquisitor summoned the English Consul whose name was Mr. James John Watts, in whose custody Katharine Evans and Sara Cheevers were staying. Watts, we learn, a gentleman of 37, had his sister in a Nunnery in Malta. Presumably he was a Catholic. He was questioned about the two ladies and testified on oath that they were Quakers, which *in linguaggio italiano vuol dire setta dei Tremolanti*. Moreover, he said, they contend that they have been inspired by God, Who appeared to them in the form of fire, to undertake this mission.

From London they sailed to Leghorn and stopped here in Malta on their way to Alexandria in Egypt. Being asked by the Consul whether anybody had sent them on that journey and who had sponsored their activity, they had answered that an English merchant provided them with all that was necessary and gave orders to his agents in Leghorn to give them any assistance they might need. They had a passport, concluded the Consul, which as far as he remembered, was written in Latin, Flemish and French.

On 24th December of the same year [1658], the Assessor of the Inquisitor, Fr. Saviour Pontremoli, and the Chancellor, Francis Zammit, called on the English Consul to interview the two ladies. As they refused to confirm their answers by oath, since, they said, God ordained "Swear not at all", the oath was instead imposed on the English Consul, who acted as interpreter to speak the truth and to keep secret whatever was being transacted in the Holy Office.

Sara was asked her name, surname, parents, country, status and religion. She answered that she was the daughter of William and Margaret, wife of Henry Scivers, of Slatenford in the Province of Wiltshire, England, and that she was 50 years old, and a member of the Puritan Religion, in scorn called Quakers, that is tremblers.

Asked why she had come to Malta, she answered that about a year ago, feeling an inspiration to go to London, she there met Katharine and together they embarked on the ship of Captain John Grin [Greene]. Asked whether she knew of any person or persons of her religion, she answered that two gentlemen had left London some time ago and proceeded to Italy but one of them died and the other was imprisoned in Rome. Moreover, she said, that she knew a man of 18 who also had left London but had since returned from Jerusalem. Two ladies also had returned from Alexandria where they went to preach the word of God as inspired by Him.

Then Katharine was interviewed, and as she too was reluctant to take the oath, Watts again acted as interpreter. Katharine declared

<sup>1</sup> The references to the Quaker who had been to Jerusalem and returned are all apparently to one individual, George Robinson. He left England in mid-September 1658 in the ship *Joshua* for Leghorn. He stopped briefly at Malta and elsewhere until he reached Jerusalem. The Turks and the Catholics quarrelled over him, but he finished his mission and apparently returned safely to England. See his own account appended to *A true account of the great tryals . . . of . . . Katherine Evans and Sarah Cheevers*, 1663, pp. 277-292, and later editions.

that she was 40 years old, the daughter of Roger and Anne, wife of John Evans, of the village of Inglesbeck [Englishbatch] of the Province of Somerset, England. She said that first she had been Lutheran like her parents, then changed to the Baptists, afterwards to the sect of Independents, and finally became a Puritan, the religion of the Apostles and the holy ancient Fathers, which religion, she said, some Englishmen call in scorn "Quakers". She said, moreover, that once she went to Ireland to preach to Henry Cromwell, son of Oliver Cromwell, entreating him to stop war since it was unlawful: there she was imprisoned but after four days set free again . . .

On the 27th December, by order of the Inquisitor, Mr. James Watts, the Consul, was ordered to keep the two ladies confined in his home and commanded not to allow anybody to communicate with them.

In the meantime the Inquisitor sent all the information he had gathered about the two women to Rome and on the 15th February [1659], Cardinal Barberino sent him instructions to make further inquiries about the sect of the two ladies and to find out the names of its members scattered all over the world. The Inquisitor, Mgr. Jerome Casanate, was also asked to repair his prison and then transfer the ladies to his custody. Barberino finally instructed the Inquisitor to consider the women mad, as they had done in Rome with the two Quakers who went there, one of whom had already died in the mental hospital. If treated as mad, wrote Barberino, they might be brought back to their senses and at the same time members of the same sect would be deterred from coming to Europe. Accordingly, on 4th April, the two ladies were taken from the Consul's house and imprisoned in the Inquisitorial prison.

For Katharine Evans and Sarah Cheevers see *Camb. Journal*, ii, pp. 374-5. Quaker sources spell Sarah's surname Chevers (or Cheevers) but say nothing of her parents or husband. Slatenford (Slaughterford) in Wiltshire is a location mentioned in Besse *Sufferings*, ii, 43, 45.

The two Friends who had gone to Italy were evidently John Luffe, who died in Rome in a mad house, and John Perrot who was imprisoned there but released. George Robinson is again referred to, and his age is given as 18 years. The two lady Quakers who had been to Alexandria and returned are not identified.

The Quaker accounts do not give the name of the English consul. They do mention, however, that he had his sister in a nunnery in Malta and that she desired to see the two Friends, and that they had visited her there with a priest.

Brought back from prison, on 7th April [1659], the two ladies appeared before the Inquisitor and this time Fr. Malachy of the Presentation, a Discalced Carmelite, acted as interpreter.

Mgr. Casanate asked them to mention the names of those members of their sect who were sent round the world to preach their religion.

Sara Scivers answered that as far as she was aware, besides the two gentlemen already mentioned, namely, the one who died in Rome and the other whose name was John Parat [Perrot], she knew a certain Thomas Bauls, a man of 26 and also another called Thomas, whose surname she did not know, a man of 30 years. There were, moreover, two ladies, whom both Katharine and herself had met in Leghorn, one named Mary Fisher and the other Patras. These two ladies had informed them that two other gentlemen were in Rome but by then had returned to England without being recognised, one named John Strips and the other Samuel Fiscer [Fisher]. Another lady named Hester Bisel, together with another whose name she could not recollect, had also left for Alexandria. Yet another was called George Robinson. Finally, she said, when she was on her journey she was told, but did not remember by whom, that a lady of the same sect had founded a congregation in Spain.

Two days later, both Sara and Katharine were again summoned by the court to give more details about those they had mentioned. Sara declared that two years before she left London, from six to eight persons had embarked on a ship named "Woodhouse", but she did not know their names. However, the Inquisitor, Mgr. Casanate, anxious to know more about that lady who went to found a congregation of Quakers in Spain, asked her from whom she learned that information. Sara replied that about six months previously, on her journey between London and Leghorn, she was told that a lady, by name Anne Garghel, was introduced to the King of Portugal, but the latter found a ship and sent her back to England before she had even reached Spain. Katharine, for her part, did not supply further information except that she confirmed that Anne Garghel was 24 years old, a former Catholic, had joined her sect, and had founded a congregation in Spain, but could not tell exactly where. Katharine on this occasion mentioned the names of Henry Fel and Robert Neiler.

Fr. Malachy, evidently an English-speaking Friar, is mentioned also in the Quaker account, sometimes spelled Malachi. Finally, he was sent to Rome to arrange for the arrival there of the two Quaker women.

The two Quaker visitors to Rome are here mentioned again, and one name John Parat is in Quaker records spelled Perrot. Thomas Bauls (*sic*) I do not recognize nor the other Thomas. Mary Fisher is correctly named, but her companion "Patras" has not been identified. The two men who visited Rome and returned are evidently John Stubbs (for Strips) and Samuel Fisher. Hester Bisel must stand for Hester Biddle, whose travels, as derived from Quaker sources, include a voyage to the Mediterranean.<sup>1</sup>

The *Woodhouse* contained eleven passengers but had sailed to America in mid-June, 1657, not to the Mediterranean. Anne Garghel (Gargil) and her experience in

<sup>1</sup> *Jnl. F.H.S.*, xlvii, 42.

Portugal are not without Quaker confirmation—in this case, in the first part of George Bishop's *New England Judged* (edition of 1702, p. 26 ff, cf., *Friendly Heritage*, 1972, No. 2). She was heard by the Inquisition there and sent on her way.

Henry Fel should be Fell, who also is known to have been in the Mediterranean as well as in the West Indies.<sup>1</sup> Robert Neiler is not identified.

The effort of Daniel Baker to secure their release at Malta in 1661 appears not to be mentioned in the Inquisition records. It was unsuccessful, and he returned home.

The two ladies remained imprisoned for four years until the new English Consul, Mr. Alphonse des Claus, petitioned the Inquisitor to release them. The Consul's petition was sent to Rome and on the 30th August, 1663, Cardinal Barberino with the approval of the Pope and the other Cardinals wrote to the Malta Inquisitor, instructing him to hand them over to the Consul, once there was no hope whatsoever of their conversion.

On the end of July 1664, the Consul pledged himself to pay *quartas quingentas*, that is, a fourth of the whole amount of rent drawn on his consulship, to be used in charitable works if the two ladies did not go back to their country and instead continued their "perverse works".

In their account Sara and Katharine tell us that "When they had been at the Consul's house eleven weeks, there came into the harbour one of the King's Frigates called 'The Sapphire'; the captain's name was Samuel Tistwel [Tiswell]. The Grand Master of Malta sent to the Captain of the Sapphire, to entreat him to take up almost forty passengers . . . namely, twenty-four Knights, Cavaliers, and their servants and two Quakers.

In the passage from Malta in this ship, they continued, they found their own Country-men much worse than most of those others that were of diverse Nations.

On returning home, Katharine Evans and Sarah Cheevers went with Gilbert Latey to thank Lord D'Aubigny for his intervention.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Jnl. F.H.S.*, liii, 119-120.

<sup>2</sup> For a modern review of this whole aspect of Quaker history, see W. C. Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, Chapter XVI, especially pp. 428-33. An interim account of these women in Malta sent to London by Henry Fell, June 18, 1661 is in Swarth. MSS. iv 184; printed in I. Ross, *Margaret Fell*, 1949, pp. 394f.

*Camb. Journal*, ii. 375 mentions a letter from S. Cheevers, written from the house of the English Consul to Friends of Street, Som., 20 viii 1662; it may be remarked in this connection that the date heretofore assigned for their return to England has been "about the end of 1662", and until the Maltese documents become available the dates in 1663 and 1664 at the end of Professor Andrew Vella's pamphlet account should be viewed with reserve. [Ed.].