

An Anglican's observations on a Sunday evening Meeting at an Inn in Radnorshire, 1799

AMONG the papers of the Rev. James Plumptre¹ (1770-1832) of Clare Hall, Cambridge and minister of Great Gransden, Huntingdonshire (from 1812 to his death), is a manuscript of a tour through parts of England, Scotland and Wales, entitled "A Narrative of a Pedestrian Journey, . . . in the summer of 1799".²

Plumptre had already established himself as a writer by this date. He had published a study of "Hamlet" and written three plays during the years 1793-1798; one, *The Lakers, a Comic Opera* deriving at least its name from his earlier travels. Later, he was to publish collections of fables, songs, pamphlets, letters and sermons, with topics ranging from *Discourses on subjects relating to the amusement of the stage* (1808), to *The truth of the popular notion of Apparitions or Ghosts, considered by the light of Scripture* (1818).

From Friday 23 August to Monday 2 September 1799,³ Plumptre travelled through Wales. He had previously journeyed there whilst a student, during the long vacation of 1792.⁴ On Sunday 1 September he left the inn at Cwm Ystwyth, Cardiganshire, where he had stayed overnight, after visiting the Devil's Bridge and Hafod, the home of Col. Thomas Johnes, M.P., for Cardiganshire, famous for their picturesque and romantic landscapes.⁵ He took the road through the Elan Valley and reached "the Red Lion in time for dinner" at Rhayader (Rhayder), Radnorshire, but too late for afternoon prayers in the church. After taking a walk to explore Rhayader and Llansanffraid Cwmteuddwr (Cwm Toyther), he returned to the inn for tea and encountered three Quakers. His account of their Meeting, with its "stage-set" appealing to his dramatic sensibilities, provides an interesting contemporary record of Friends in Radnorshire.⁶ Plumptre is curious and tolerant, though not uncritical. His tolerance may well have been acquired from his father Robert Plumptre (d. 1788), President of Queen's College, Cambridge, who was known to have sympathized

¹ Cambridge University Library, Add. MSS. 5784-5867.

² MSS. 5814-5816, 3 vols.

³ MS. 5816, pp. 95-182.

⁴ MS. 5802, 2 vols.

⁵ MS. 5816, pp. 150-67.

⁶ Op. cit., pp. 174-7.

with the Dissenters Bill of 1772.⁷ James's ignorance of the nature of Friends' worship and the structure of Meeting was probably shared by many Anglican clergy. His only other comment on a religious sect in this tour of 1799, is a reference to the Methodist meeting house being open the Sunday afternoon he spent in Rhayader.⁸ He appears to have been disconcerted as well as amused at there being a "female preacher". As Plumptre's sister, Anna (1760–1818), "well known as a democrat",⁹ was a proficient linguist and had translated and published several German plays and published her first novel *The Rector's Son* in 1798, James could hardly have been unfamiliar with the changing active role of women in society. However, it seems he drew the line at active participation of women in religious services. He wrote of the encounter in his journal:

Whilst I was sitting at Tea, three Quakers, two males and a female rode up to the door. The landlord begged leave for them to be in my room, to which I immediately assented. They had tea at another table, and we conversed a little on common topics. The landlord soon came in and *half aside* told me they wished to have a sermon there if I had no objection. As it was Sunday Evening, and I supposed Quakers to be good sort of people and not particularly knowing their ways, I concluded they wished to read a sermon among themselves or perhaps with the addition of the people of the house, and therefore I said that so far from having any objection I should like to hear it myself. But I found it was to be a *meeting*. Never having been at a quakers meeting, now that one was come to me, I resolved not to lose the opportunity, and walking out for a short time, I returned at 7, the appointed hour, when I found the room filled with chairs set round and in rows. Two farthing Candles were set upon the chimney piece with black tea boards as reflectors, another was set on the top of a cupboard in the corner and a forth was stuck up against the wall with a fork.

The lady, who I found was to preach, was seated on a chair on one side, her head leaning on her hand and shaded by her bonnet. The men sat on each side of her. The room soon filled, and after waiting about a quarter of an hour, the lady arose. She began by only half sentences, in apology for her calling the meeting and for a weak woman preaching; at the same time instancing the woman of Samaria who was sent by Christ to her countrymen. She then recommended

⁷ This Bill, defeated in the House of Lords, May 1772, petitioned for relief of the clergy from Subscription to the Thirty Nine Articles. See D. O. Thomas, "Proposed Protest Concerning Dissenters: Richard Price and the Earl of Chatham", *Trans. Unitarian Historical Society*, vol. XVI, Oct. 1976.

⁸ MS. 5816, p. 173.

⁹ Henry Crabb Robinson, *Diary* (1869), vol. 1, p. 156.

silent devotion, after which she sat down again, and in a few minutes more began praying. That lasted about 10 minutes, another pause ensued and she then concluded with an address to the Congregation for not being more moved by her discourse, which I did not much wonder at, for there was neither method, matter nor elocution.

—neither wit, nor words, nor worth,
Action nor utt'rance, nor power of speech
To stir men's blood. *Julius Caesar* A3. S ()¹⁰

As to silent devotion or meditation I believe it is the intent of our church that we should practise it, by meeting together in the Church, some time before service begins, properly to recall our thoughts from worldly concerns; but, like many other excellent institutions of our Church, is shamefully neglected and few people come before, many not till long after the service is begun.

With regard to a female preacher, I know not how the Quakers and some other sects may explain those two verses I Cor. 14:34, 35. To me they seem as positively to prohibit it as words can: "Let your women keep silent in the Churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church."

I walked out while the room was clearing and then supped with the quakers. They were simple and kind in their manners and sensible.¹¹

The following morning James Plumptre rose at 5 o'clock to a beautiful day. Taking the road for Pen-y-bont (Penny-bont) and New Radnor, going out of his way to visit the waterfall "Water-break-its neck" in the Radnor Forest, he ended his tour in Wales by crossing "a small rivulet which divides Wales from England"¹² not far from Kington in Herefordshire.

Thanks are due to the University Library Cambridge for having made available a microfilm of Plumptre's tour.

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EDITORIAL NOTE: It has not proved possible yet to identify the three Friends concerned. One may have been Mary (Stokes) Dudley, the minister (1750–1823), then of Clonmel, who spent the years 1798–1800 in Britain at and about the Bristol Hotwells. She travelled a good deal in the West in the summer of 1799 accompanied by Robert Lovell (see *Life of Mary Dudley*, 1825, p. 235). Another likely candidate is Mary Capper (d. 1845, aged 90, of Birmingham, a minister about 55 years), who was in the region, sometimes travelling with Samuel Dyer, Mary Dudley and others, and who reached Worcester in September 1799.

¹⁰ Act III, Scene 2.

¹¹ MS. 5816, pp. 174–7.

¹² Op. cit., pp. 178–82.