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# Caroline Emelia Stephen

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**CAROLINE EMELIA STEPHEN (1834-1909).** Caroline Emelia Stephen, born on December 8, 1834, was notable for a number of reasons. Her connections were impressive: she was the unmarried daughter of Sir James Stephen (the noted Under-Secretary for the Colonies in 1836-1847), the sister of Leslie Stephen (author of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*), sister-in-law to Minny Thackeray Stephen and Anny Thackeray Ritchie (daughters of William Makepeace Thackeray), and aunt to Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell. Her grandfather, also Sir James Stephen, wrote the legislation that ended slavery in England. Known as a Quaker mystic, she is credited with bringing about the revival of the Society of Friends in the latter part of the nineteenth century through writings about her conversion. Raised as an evangelical associated with the Clapham Sect, she converted later in life when she attended a Quaker meeting and felt herself drawn to the silence and, through the silence, to God, feeling that the words of the Anglican Church no longer spoke to her. Her book *Quaker Strongholds* (1890) articulates the Friends' view of God as Light and Inner Voice; other books, such as *Light Arising: Thoughts on the Central Radiance* (1908) further explain her sense that God is available to all who are open to the inner silence, not just to a select few in a church.

Stephen was a complicated woman, defying many expectations of a typical Victorian woman. She wrote and published articles on things such as "Thoughtfulness in *Dress*:" exhorting young women to pay attention to the *John Stott* 579 color, size, shape, convenience, and economy of dressing. She disbelieved in women's colleges, thinking that women could not possibly wish to be forced to learn as men did; she changed her mind on this subject when her niece, Katherine Stephen, became principal at Newnham College. She wrote vigorously against the women's suffrage movement, believing that asking women to vote would divide their attention from their proper domestic duties and that voting would cause disharmony in the home when couples disagreed about candidates or issues. As it was, she believed, a woman's job was gently to exert influence at home to get the husband to do what she believed was morally proper. She decried the institution of sisterhoods in *The Service of the Poor* (1871), insisting that women could make excellent nurses without being motivated by religion and that religious associations or sisterhoods were undesirable when they required the renouncement of family and social ties, and especially when they asked women to live against the laws of nature by withdrawing from masculine society. One of her more controversial assertions was that Christians are not called to help the poor, but to help everyone, and that the poor have no special rights to be representatives of Christ on earth, and that when Jesus commanded charity, he meant charity for all, including the poor, but not excluding others. Fiercely anti-Roman Catholic (repelled by religious authority and the sacraments, among other things) and firmly ensconced in her position as a member of the upper class (she wrote an article on how to be a proper mistress to the servants), Stephen still urged tolerance toward all, and in her way, did much toward suggesting that understanding each other is paramount to participating in God's kingdom.

She died in Cambridge on April 7, 1909.

-KATHLEEN HEININGE