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Skidmore's "Elizabeth Fry: A Quaker Life. Selected Letters and Writings" - Book Review

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SKIDMORE, G. (ed.), *Elizabeth Fry: A Quaker Life. Selected Letters and Writings* (Lanham: Altamira, 2005), pp. 238. ISBN 0-7591-0899-4, Paper, £15.99.

I have always thought of Elizabeth Fry's writings as an important source for many aspects of nineteenth-century history, notably the treatment of offenders within the criminal justice system, the role of women in philanthropy and middle-class family life. What surprised me initially about this edition was its publication in co-operation with the International Sacred Literature Trust. It would not have occurred to me before to think of Fry's writings as the kind of sacred text that fulfils the Trust's hopes to open up understanding between faiths and to transform the contemporary world.

Readers are not expected to try to understand these writings without some sense of context, and accordingly there is an introduction by Gil Skidmore, who has also selected and edited the passages reproduced. That introduction, of necessity, has to take us through Quaker history at breakneck speed, often conflating developments. Skidmore offers a wonderfully clear, succinct and moving exposition of insights concerning the Inward Light, conviction and the vitality of Quaker worship. Her explanation of the divisions among Quakers in terms of 'plain' and 'gay' resonates perfectly with Fry's own categorisation. Nevertheless, I found it frustrating that this introduction did not give more attention to the context of the rapidly growing Evangelical Movement that was gaining a new respectability in early nineteenth-century Britain, and all that stemmed from that both for the Society of Friends and for perceptions of the 'dangerous classes' who were to become Fry's vocation.

In the 'note on the text', Skidmore explains that her selections come primarily from the two volume printed version of Fry's writings, compiled by her two daughters after her death in 1845. It is worth remembering that the Society at that time still exercised considerable control over the publication of Quaker works. Evangelical Friends like William Savery who was so dear to Fry, and who figured prominently in the early journal entries, were very much in favour in Britain Yearly Meeting in the 1840s, while those like Hannah Barnard, who came in for Fry's criticism (pp. 53-54), most decidedly were not. It would not have been appropriate to the publishing remit here to probe too far into old theological differences, and thereby complicate a basic 'message'. However, if this edition were to be used as a primary source for nineteenth-century history, it would need particularly careful evaluation.

The book is structured in sections dealing chronologically with different periods in Fry's life: her youth, marriage, ministry, beginnings of prison work, family life, her husband's bankruptcy and the difficulties following this, a growing disenchantment with the Society in the late 1830s, and last years and death. The account is based primarily on the journal, but there are also some letters, and Chapter 6 comprises an extract from her 'Observations on the Visiting, Superintendence and Government of Female Prisoners' where she deals with the then controversial issue of women working in the public sphere.

The extracts are chosen and put together in such a way that the narrative moves along at a good pace while not obscuring the often halting nature of the 'spiritual journey'. Given the size of the Gurney and Fry families, the 'family chronology' following the introduction is invaluable, and there were times when I would have appreciated additional notes in the text explaining who was who.

This edition conveys strongly the sense of a dynamic life; it is fascinating to trace the developments in Fry's perceptions. The public persona of the calm, determined 'angel of Newgate' belies the reality shown here of an often doubting and nervous soul. Her Quaker conviction clearly gave her the strength to 'strike out' in the beginning, and challenge some accepted attitudes. The struggle to act according to conscience while not upsetting those dear to her, marks her journal throughout. It is interesting to observe how her dislike of what she saw as Quaker sectarianism grew as she came into contact with the wider world and ecumenical ventures. She became increasingly critical of Quakers' tendency to set themselves apart as a 'peculiar people'.

At the same time she appeared to become more class conscious as she mingled with aristocrats and monarchs, and even came to approve of 'titles in law' as 'marking classes in society appointed by a wise and kindly providence' (p. 131). She had often shown concern at how to treat with her servants, and when working with the poor she started to worry how to keep a sense of love and duty to those who 'not only view things differently from ourselves, but show towards us an improper feeling' (p. 136). Having placed such importance in language, dress and sobriety in her early years, she came to regard such things as 'minor testimonies', and not essential to true membership of 'the militant Church of Christ, and hereafter His Church triumphant' (p. 174).

Much of her disaffection in later years stemmed from her distress at the disownment both of her husband on his bankruptcy and of those of her children who married out of the Society. But there were surely deeper differences than this. Although Skidmore believes Fry never lost her belief in the authority of 'Christ within', nevertheless she shows a growing preoccupation for the Society 'to stand upon a scriptural and Christian ground' (p. 169). Even if 'Christ within' was enough for Quakers, she had no confidence in it as a means of leading to the 'conversion' of the poor who had to be instructed in the Bible. By the time her beloved brother, Joseph John Gurney, came to leave for his ministry in America there was a real sense that change was inevitable, and this is reinforced by the choice of the quotation for the chapter title, 'How the Tide Turns'.

This edition, of course, deals with the more personal and inward-looking aspects of Fry's life, and so wider conflicts, of necessity, have to be left hanging. Nevertheless, I found this a fascinating and 'digestible' selection that would really encourage me to explore further the complex issues alluded to. Fry claimed she liked to be plain in her writing as everything else, and Skidmore notes that she liked to use simple words rather than the somewhat obscure ministry of her contemporaries. Other evidence, however, suggests that the nineteenth-century public found her language, steeped as it was in Quakerism, difficult to understand, and I did not always feel very clear about the nature of her spiritual struggle. I accept that she would have regarded practical action and experience as being the way to find 'real religion'. Her efforts to reconcile the many competing demands on her time and conscience with honesty and integrity, certainly evoked a sympathetic response. However, I remain doubtful about the extent to which these writings could have a deeper inspirational impact today.

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