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Elizabeth Fry—A Note-Worthy Friend

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Northwest
Yearly Meeting
of Friends

Women's History Month – Elizabeth Fry

Women's History Month – Elizabeth Fry

Honoring Quaker women of the past to empower those in the present and the future.

“Elizabeth Fry—A Note-Worthy Friend”

by Paul Anderson, *Professor*, George Fox University



Her picture is on the five-pound British note. She brought about prison reform in Britain. Her school of nursing inspired Florence Nightingale. She was the first woman to address Parliament. She was visited in her prison-reform work by the King of Prussia. She was a recorded Friends minister who provided Bibles for people, established organizations for social reform, pioneered women's suffrage, and who was sponsored by Queen Victoria. Her name was Elizabeth Fry—a *note-worthy Friend*, indeed!.

Born into a Quaker banking family in Norwich, England, Elizabeth Gurney (1780-1845) was raised with a respect for Christian living and the values found in Scripture. Robert Barclay was her great grandfather, and her ancestors had been followers of George Fox. Nonetheless, Elizabeth did not always follow in the ways of devotion; in her journal she expressed concern over such “wicked inclinations” as flirting, anger, exaggeration, and giving way to luxury. As an 18-year old, however, when Quaker evangelist William Savery came to stay with the Gurney family on a ministry tour, Elizabeth was convinced of the truth and gave her life to Christ. In her own words,

“To-day I have felt that *there is a God!* I have been devotional, and my mind has been led away from the follies that it is mostly wrapped up in. We had much serious conversation; in short, what he said, and what I felt, was like a refreshing shower falling upon earth that had been dried for ages.”

William Savery had also prophesied that Elizabeth would make a difference for God in the world, and indeed, that came to pass. She was married to Joseph Fry at the age of 20, and several years later, the couple moved to London. She gave birth to eleven children and sought to raise them with a good education and a knowledge of Scripture. Inspired also by the preaching ministries of Priscilla Hannah Gurney and Deborah Darby, Elizabeth engaged in public ministry and was recorded as a minister in London Yearly Meeting in 1811.

After another traveling minister, Stephen Grellett, shared about the horrific conditions of the prisoners at Newgate Prison in London, Elizabeth made her own visit in 1813. Upon visiting the prison herself, she described being deeply troubled by the conditions: “...the filth, the closeness of the rooms, the furious manner and expressions of the women towards each other, and the abandoned wickedness....” She even spent the night there to get a sense of the situation and later encouraged others to do the same.

As a result of her efforts, women were given separate sleeping quarters from men, education was provided for their children, clothing and other necessities were provided for women, payment was made to prisoners doing work, and Bibles and sewing materials were made available to women in prison. Elizabeth also visited the prison on a regular basis, reading the Bible to inmates and encouraging them in ways of moral commitments. She founded the Association for the Improvement of the Female Prisoners of Newgate in 1816, and when she visited the following year, she reported that "...being like wild beasts [before], they [now] appear harmless and kind." Her working for prison reform in Scotland, France, and elsewhere even led to reforms in Russia, and in Britain, the Prison Reform Act was passed in 1823.

After seeing the body of a boy who had frozen to death, she established a Night Shelter in London in 1820. In 1840 she established a school of nursing, whose students were taken by Florence Nightingale to care for wounded soldiers in the Crimean War. No wonder her picture was chosen to "fill the bill" for the five pound British note. As a woman faithful to Christ's call to ministry, Elizabeth Fry not only made a difference; she also continues to be an inspiration for others in later generations. She is a note-worthy Friend, indeed!

This article is contributed by Paul Anderson, who is a professor in the College of Christian Studies at George Fox University.