

Selected Readings from Janet Whitney's (Wonderful) 1937 Biography of Elizabeth Fry

1. A Prophecy

At her cousin's house, at age 17, Elizabeth heard a vision of her life that set her on a path to becoming "useful" to people in need. She writes in her journal (with unchanged spelling):

"After we had spent a pleasant evening, my heart began to feel itself silenced before God and without looking at others, I felt myself under the shadow of the wing of God, and I soon found the rest dropp'd into the same state. I felt that there must be a meeting. There was: after setting a time in awful silence, Rebecca Young did speak most beautifully. She did retch (wrench) my heart. D. D. then spoke. I only fear she says too much of what I am to be - a light to the blind, speech to the dumb and feet to the lame. Can it be? . . . After the meeting my heart felt really light and as I walked home by starlight I looked through nature up to nature's God. Here I am now in Cousin Prissy's little room - never to forget this day while life is in my body.

"I now know what the mountain is I have to climb. I am to be a quaker."

As she lifts her pen to consider that word she realizes, with her honest logic, that it connotes, among other things, willingness sometime to speak in meeting. Alas! Down she comes from the heights of high resolve and exaltation. There are certain odd little difficulties in the way. She soberly notes them and their remedy. "There is another little matter that I do wish most hartily I could obtain which is to write and speak english better. My want of percevearance is my only objection."

Thirty years later, recalling her early education and its defects, she wrote: "I was considered and called very stupid and obstinate. I certainly did not like learning, nor did I, I believe, attend to my lessons, partly from a delicate state of health that produced languor of mind as well as body; but I think having the name of being stupid really tended to make me so, and discouraged my efforts to learn. I remember having a poor, not to say low, opinion of myself, and used to think that I was so very inferior to my sisters Catherine and Rachel..."

"I am to be a quaker." Feet to the lame; speech to the dumb. . . That was it. That was what she wanted, what she had been waiting for. Something to do. She sought a way of putting her new experience of religious feeling into touch with the world of reality. And the harder the better.

By September 9 the Gurneys were home again, and Betsy eagerly set to work. First she plunged into a course of grammar study and stiff reading; but self-improvement and self-discipline were not enough. She looked around to see if there was no one whom she could help, even with her small qualifications, - help *now*, to-day, - and her eye at once fell upon the salient spot. The countryside swarmed with children, totally untaught. Her very desire to educate herself taught her the value of education, and the crippled state of life without it.

Young Miss Gurney, measuring herself beside her cultivated friends, might "wish hartily to write and speak english better," but these poor children could neither read nor write. Their parents could neither read nor write. They had no one to tell them stories, to open to them the world of books. Even that most accessible library of all, the Bible, was closed to them. "We saw but one Bible in the parish of Cheddar," said Hannah More, "and that was used to prop a flower-pot."

Timidly Betsy took one little boy and read to him and taught him Bible stories, on Sunday evenings. He responded. He told his little friends. More wanted to come. Betsy took them up into the eleven-sided attic and taught them. The avidity of the poor little wretches was touching. The threat of banishment maintained discipline. Betsy, thrilled at her success, came out of the attic and took them into the laundry, where they did

not need to enter the house. From fifty to seventy children, of various ages, gathered there weekly, some of them already weazened and distorted by work in the factories of Norwich. Yes, at her very first halting step upon her new road of a useful, a dedicated life, she had become feet to the lame, eyes to the blind, speech to the dumb, although she did not notice it, and looked forward to that as to an entirely future state. Joy and energy filled her. Like Florence Nightingale when she went to Kaiserswerth and found for the first time "a better life for women, a scope for the exercise of morally active powers," Elizabeth also felt what it was "to love life, to find life rich in interests and blessings."

She followed the children into their homes, and found hunger, found sickness. She ministered to both, up to the top of her girlish capacity. On October 16 she wrote: "This afternoon I have been to see some one. May I one day be capable of virtue. May I really be able to lessen the sorrows of the afflicted."...

There seemed enough work in her school and in the village and city near her home to keep her busy the rest of her life. Strange! It had been there all the time and she had never noticed it. None of her sisters or friends had noticed it. All these neglected children, growing up like savages, losing even the little primitive culture of the home as their mothers and fathers were caught in the new industrialism and snatched into the factories, who was caring for them? Simply no one in the neighborhood but young Elizabeth Gurney. "Betsy's Imps," her sisters called them, and were thankful to have no such concern. After all, even if seventy children were learning something here, look at all the thousands who were not! It was a mere drop in the bucket. Some great reform was needed, some government measure; new laws, and so on. Just what, no one could say... So they did not help; but they did not hinder. They indeed respected. But...

2. The School at Plashet Manor

The matter of the education of the poor was much under discussion in the early nineteenth century. Some argued for a scheme of national education, and some maintained that book learning would only unfit the laborer, and especially his wife, for their tasks, and give them ideas above their station. "It is undoubtedly *to be desired* that everyone should be able to read," said the poet Wordsworth, in 1828, "and perhaps (for that is far from being equally apparent) *to write*." But he makes the point that one of the best and happiest men he knows is quite illiterate. "I cannot but think that there is too much indiscriminate gratuitous instruction in this country." His final argument is clinching. "Can it, in a *general* view, be good that an infant should learn much which its *parents do not know*? Will not the child arrogate a superiority unfavourable to love and obedience?"

As for a system of national education, fundamental principles apart, it would obviously be impracticable in a country like England. "In Switzerland, or Sweden, or Norway, or France, or Spain - or anywhere but Great Britain - it would be comparatively easy... My dear Wrangham, begin your education at the top of society; let the head go in the right course and the tail will follow."

But Mrs. Joseph Fry of Plashet House did not care a pin about heads and tails, about implications and far-reaching effects, about unfitting the laborer for his station or setting the child above the parent. She knew that reading and writing were tools for the soul, keys to regions of the spirit. And she set out to give them, and other benefits of schooling, to every child that she could reach. She did not think in national terms but in personal ones. Here were John Smith's five children, and the head gardener's two, and the coachman's seven, and the ten little rowdies of Judy O'Grady, and so on, in a sum of human units, as she grew *to know* her countryside, family by family. The school flourished exceedingly, and outlived her, being finally absorbed in the scheme for National Education.

3. Elizabeth Fry enters Newgate Prison

On a cold January day in 1817, in the gloomy vestibule outside the women's yard at Newgate, two turnkeys might have been seen arguing with a lady. The row inside the yard was as great as usual. Even while they talked, a woman rushed wildly out of a doorway and, with shrieks of furious laughter, snatched off the caps and headgear of every woman that she could reach. "And she wouldn't stop at doing that to you, ma'am. Tear off your things- scratch and claw you - that 's what they 'd do, ma'am." The turnkeys felt that delicacy forbade telling all that could be done by these harridans to a lady that ventured alone into their midst. They themselves knew better than to go in alone. They always went in two together; the Governor himself went in guarded.

But the lady was obstinate. She had in her hand a powerful permit from the prison Governor. She smiled, and gave the men a little money. But she talked *to* them with an unconscious authority, as she would have talked to her gardeners at home. "I am going in -and alone. I thank you for your kind intentions, but you are not to come with me," was the purport of her speech. At least, then, she must leave her watch behind. They could see the glittering chain on the quiet richness of her Quaker dress. But the unreasonable lady would not even do that! "Oh, no, I thank you. My watch goes with me everywhere. I am not afraid! Open the gate for me, please!" Charles Buxton, *Memoirs of Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, Bart.*, 64.

Reluctant, sullen, and very much alarmed as to results, the turnkeys pressed open the gate against the begging, scuffling crowd, and Elizabeth Fry went in. The gate clanged and locked behind her. There was an instantaneous silence of sheer astonishment. Then every woman in the yard surged forward. Curiosity can be as dangerous as violence in a rough crowd. The lady was surrounded, the turnkeys could only see the tip of her white cap. But no one was snatching. Now was seen one benefit of Quaker dress. It was not provocative. There were no feathers, no flying, fancy scarves to tempt a mischievous finger or an unsatisfied cupidity. And the Quaker dress was an outward and visible mark of religion. All these wicked women, as the Newgate prisoner had said, respected religion and believed in God. Yet Elizabeth was in great danger. If she should now show fear, or say or do the wrong thing - But she had never been less afraid in her life. Look, what is she doing now? She has picked up a filthy little child and it can be seen fingering her bright chain. She lifts her hand for attention, and she is attended to.

"Friends, many of you are mothers. I too am a mother. I am distressed for your children. Is there not something we can do for these innocent little ones? Do you want them to grow up to become real prisoners themselves? Are they to learn to be thieves and worse? ... "

Ah, she has touched the spot. She has pierced their armor to the very heart. What, save our children? Sobs and tears answered her appeal. They gave her a chair, and brought their children to show her. What tales they told in their inarticulate way, of wickedness, remorse, injustice, and despair! She remained with them for hours. She tried to cheer them up by mention of a mysterious person called Christ (some of them asked who he was) and by telling them a curious story about a man who owned a vineyard and hired laborers by the hour, and paid the people who came in at the eleventh hour as much as the people who came in at the first. But chiefly she was showing them how to do something that had been in former days the chief sign of their humanity and that had been crushed out of them by harsh bondage - she was making plans with them. And when at last she bade them farewell, and the barred gate opened for her civil egress, she left behind her an inhabitant very strange to Newgate, one usually as much abandoned at its doors as at the very gate of Hell, that revivifying spirit of human vitality called Hope.

What then was Elizabeth Fry's remarkable project? It was very simple. Hardly anyone could disagree with it. It required no Act of Parliament, nor any great outlay of money. In short, it was nothing more nor less than to start a school, in Newgate, for the children of prisoners and for juvenile criminals. This idea appeared to her as so natural, so modest in its scope, that she did not think it necessary to invoke the

aid of the noblemen's committee or of her stately brothers-in-law. By the genius of her common sense and practical simplicity, she took the shortest way to her end.

But it was much more than the shortest way. By invoking the aid of the women themselves, she put herself more than a hundred years in advance of the most advanced thinkers of her time. She set going in that instant the most genuine "reform" that any have been able to approach. It was a renaissance of soul.

On her next visit Mrs. Fry was welcomed as already a familiar friend. Remnants of lost manners returned to the women in response to her serene courtesy. They proudly presented to her the schoolmistress they had chosen from among themselves, a young woman called Mary Connor, recently committed for stealing a watch, but in other respects well qualified to instruct the young. Mrs. Fry praised their progress, and talked over with them in detail the necessary rules that would have to be established for the school. She could not go forward without the assurance of their complete cooperation. Armed with this assurance and with consequent definite suggestions and regulations, she then approached the authorities. They met her at the Governor's house - the two Sheriffs of London, the Ordinary, and the Governor of Newgate himself. It was one of the occasions when it was an advantage to be regarded as "richer than we really are." Only a lady of wealth and standing could have commanded the ear of these important men. As it was, they gave her every attention, but displayed, with all politeness, the usual official attitude. Her plan was a very nice plan, it did both her heart and her mind credit, but, alas! Mrs. Fry did not know Newgate as they did. These bad women were incorrigible, irretrievable. It simply would not work. Mrs. Fry still pressed for an experimental trial, and the badgered gentlemen promised her to look into it and to see her again. But at the second interview they expressed their regret that the experiment was impossible; after a thorough examination of the prison they were assured that there was not a single room that could be spared for it.

With an astuteness worthy of her brother Sam and with that other quality common to them both that had been known in their childhood as obstinacy, Mrs. Fry persuaded the gentlemen to commit themselves to the statement that the absence of a room was now their only objection. She then politely withdrew, and went down to her allies, the women prisoners.

To state her problem to them was to solve it. They felt they had space to spare. When Grellet had seen them, they had been crowded into two rooms and part of a yard. They now - owing to the pressure of Buxton's committee - had six rooms and a cell or two, and the whole yard. One of the smaller rooms was found to be, by common consent, unneeded for any other purpose, and Mrs. Fry therefore appropriated it as a schoolroom. "Upon this she returned to the Sheriffs who told her she might take it if she liked and try her benevolent, but almost hopeless, experiment."

The very next day was appointed for the start. Mrs. Fry was as impatient to begin as the prisoners themselves. No Gurney could ever see the virtue of delay.. .

She left the women full of business, occupied - happily and virtuously occupied - in tidying and preparing their children and themselves for the great chance. The next day she returned accompanied by a friend, Mary Sanderson, laden with old schoolbooks, installed Mary Connor as teacher, and formally opened the school. So casually and simply Elizabeth Fry began a work which within a few months had grown to a dimension which carried her name all over the country, within three years was to place her in correspondence, as prison adviser, with most of the crowned heads of Europe, and which since her death has given her a niche among the great women of history.

She opens her neglected journal at Mildred's Court, February 24th, 1817, and makes a hurried entry. "I have lately been much occupied in forming a school in Newgate for the children of the poor prisoners, as well as the young criminals, which has brought much peace and satisfaction with it; but my mind has been deeply

affected in attending a poor woman who was executed this morning. I visited her twice. This event has brought me into much feeling, attended by some distressingly nervous sensations in the night. . . . This poor creature murdered her baby; and how inexpressibly awful to have her life taken away! The whole affair has been truly afflicting to me; to see what poor mortals may be driven to, through sin and transgression, and how hard the heart becomes, even to the most tender affections. How should we watch and pray, that we fall not by little and little, and become hardened and commit greater sins."

4. Influence on Deportation to Australia

Mrs. Fry first came in contact with the convict ships when some of her own Newgate prisoners fell due for transportation. She found, one day, the jailers in a great state of nerves. They explained that there was always a riot in the prison the night before a transport. The women all went mad, got drunk, tore things up, broke and set fire to all they could, and fought all comers. Only by main force, and by putting irons on them, which in itself was a dangerous and difficult proceeding (the turnkeys were sensitive to being scratched and spit at), could they be loaded into the wagons which were to take them down to the ship. Anyone familiar with Hogarth's picture of the Execution at Tyburn knows what those open wagons were like, and can readily imagine how, when filled with chained women, they were pursued and surrounded by a yelling, jeering, cat-calling, mud-flinging mob all the way to the docks.

Elizabeth obtained all the facts, and then went to the Governor and asked to be given control of the situation. But she stipulated that there should be no ironing of prisoners, and no open wagons. They must be taken in closed hackney coaches. The Governor, now her loyal and admiring friend, consented, though with dubious warnings.

The night before the transport, Elizabeth stayed with her women until late, reading to them in her marvelous voice, comforting them, making plans for the voyage and for their future, and above all promising to go with them on the morrow all the way to the ship. Instead of a night of riot and wickedness, it was a night of sad farewells. The women who were to remain took up a collection for those who were to go, and generously pressed it on them. Friendship and pity had come to dwell in Newgate, along with self-respect. The next day, Mrs. Fry and some of the ladies came early to the prison. The poor transports got soberly into the closed hackney coaches, trusting in the protection of their friends, and drove quietly away. As one turnkey said to another, watching the procession leaving the gate of the prison, it was like a funeral.

The convict ship *Maria*, to which they were taken, remained six weeks in the river, and Mrs. Fry paid it frequent visits, driving in from Plashet during the summer of 1818. Before it left, she had established her sway over the stranger convicts brought from other prisons, had got the hundred or more women divided up into classes of twelve with their monitors, had numbers for them, - they valued the numbers, as it simplified the keeping of their own seats at table and their own small possessions, - and had provided them all with materials for the making of patchwork on the voyage. She had also established a school in the after part of the ship for the fourteen children on board, one of the prisoners to act as schoolmistress. Indeed, she saw them well started in industrious and orderly habits before the heart-wrenching day of final farewell.

When, after reading to them for the last time on deck, - sailors in neighboring vessels climbing up the rigging to see that strange sight on a convict ship, - she, with another lady, took the little boat for the shore, one of the prisoners leaned over the side of the vessel and said "very distinctly, yet with evident emotion," "Our prayers will follow you, and a convict's prayers will be heard."

From that time onward, Mrs. Fry visited and organized every convict ship that carried women prisoners to the colonies until her final illness in 1843. A total of 106 ships and 12,000 convicts came under her hands.' The whole system of transportation was doomed by the rising tide of public opinion after the Parliamentary report of 1837, but it lingered on by inertia for many more years.

One of Mrs. Fry's earliest experiences was to see twelve women arrive on board a transport handcuffed, having so made their journey. Eleven others from a distance had iron bands around their legs and arms, and were all chained together. If one got down from the coach, all must. Another woman had a fetter round her ankle, which, being in the beginning too small, had become deeply embedded in the swollen flesh. The agony caused by the process of its removal was so great that the victim fainted away. Facts like these had only to be represented in high places by Mrs. Fry to obtain prompt redress. Any ironing of women prisoners on their transit from prison to convict ship was presently made illegal. Another government regulation that she obtained related to mothers and children. Women convicts were to be allowed to take with them all their children under seven; and the mother of a nursing baby might not be embarked until her child was weaned.

The Ladies' Committee - now enlarged into the British Society of Ladies, with the Duchess of Gloucester as patroness soon had their activities down to a system. They knew what to do on board a transport, and what to ask for, and they had a set of gifts ready for each prisoner, to be marked with her own number for the voyage, and to be inalienably her own. This circumstance was in itself unutterably cheering to people long denied all possessions and all rights. These gifts were listed: "one Bible, one Hessian apron, one black stuff ditto, one black cotton cap, one large Hessian bag (to keep her clothes in) ; one small bag containing one piece of tape, one ounce of pins, one hundred needles, four balls of white sewing cotton, one ditto black, one ditto blue, one ditto red, two balls of black worsted, twenty-four hanks of colored thread, one of cloth with eight darning-needles, one small bodkin fastened on it; two stay-laces, one thimble, one pair of scissors, one pair of spectacles when required, two pounds of patchwork pieces, one comb, one small ditto, knife and fork, and a ball of string." The outbound ships touched at Rio de Janeiro, and industrious convicts were often able to sell their patchwork quilts there at a guinea each. But if not, they could readily sell them immediately on arrival at Sydney, and so obtain ready money and, more, a possibility of future employment. Under such comparatively cheerful influences, it is not surprising that "some captains of the convict ships, on their return to England, have reported well of the health, attention to cleanliness and improved appearance of the women during the voyage."