

Heroes and Villains: Elizabeth Fry, LMF, March 15, 2009

Interviewer: Mrs. Elizabeth Gurney Fry, you turn 229 years old this May, 65 years of which you lived a bodily existence on earth. In Canada, there is an Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies designed to perpetuate your work. But for most, if anything is known about you, it was that you were a prison reformer and a Quaker!

However, as I have discovered, during your lifetime, you were catapulted to international fame through an amazing involvement in Newgate Gaol, when you were 36 years old and mother of eleven children. We'll talk about that shortly. You also became better known than any other woman in Britain and arguably Europe, except royalty, at a time women were not public figures in society or church.

You preached to thousands upon thousands in your lifetime, and were basically thronged like a rock star by the curious and admiring everywhere you travelled in Britain and in Europe. Your advice was solicited, your company sought after, and your expert witness requested, by an enormous variety of politicians, professionals, and royalty, not to mention untold numbers of the *hoi polloi*, especially the poor and marginalized.

You pioneered women's liberation long before the suffragette movement that brought women the vote.

You spoke and preached courageously to high and low about the crucial role of "religion" in the transformation of character. You founded numerous philanthropic societies, especially women's associations across Britain and Europe with highest society patrons, all for the less fortunate.

At the same time, you raised 11 children, many of whom were so unruly your own siblings dubbed them "Betsy's brats", most of whom rejected your Quaker faith in later years. Your husband never really caught the passion of your life's work, and on many occasions he totally exasperated you as did most of your daughters and sons. He never was close to the husband you had wished for. It was often enough a tumultuous relationship. You treated others' kids – by the teeming throngs – better than your own. Yet you became a paragon of the "virtuous woman" of the book of Proverbs, the ideal mother and wife, to multiplied thousands of admirers. After you died, two of your daughters published a thousand pages of hagiography about your life in two volumes. They thereby perpetuated a mythology begun by you of untrammelled saintliness and "virtuous woman" competence.

Finally, you grew up in a fabulously rich Quaker family, and never lost your taste for luxurious high living – even after your family went "bankrupt". For years previously however, you conspired with your Gurney side of the family to live a lie that kept up appearances so that no one would know the awful truth: your husband was a failed businessman whom the Gurney's did not want to allow to fail publicly for pride of family and sound business sense in which they had invested millions. So you lived a life of luxury at your birth family's and truth's expense...

E. Fry: Sir, this is really quite enough! I have practised the art of listening throughout a lifetime, first to God, and to others. I have listened to thee long enough to understand the criticisms all too well, that, may I suggest, smack of jealousy in no small portion?

Thou mayest as well add, since many do, that I repeatedly neglected my family in favour of my mission, going away months on end, anticipating full well the turmoil I'd return to. Thou mayest also say as many do that Holy Writ prevents a woman from performing public ministry; that a woman's place is in the home, pregnant, minding her children and supporting her husband; that a woman should not seek prominence apart from her husband.

Yes, I have struggled with these and similar issues all my married life. All my life too I have been nudged by an inner voice that I always have considered the promptings of the Holy Spirit. I was raised Quaker, yes, and indeed was born into a very wealthy Quaker family.

You may know that my childhood home is now the Law School of the University of East Anglia, that my father moved us to the country from our fashionable home and my birthplace on Magdalen Street in Norwich, the wealthiest neighbourhood in the world at the time.

I lived my entire life until our bankruptcy in 1828 wanting for nothing. Even that horrible experience that included our being excluded for a time from the Society of Friends, our very own Quaker church, my relatives, in particular my dearest brother Joseph John, supported all my missions very handsomely.

I believe you will find all my affairs are quite in order, including those of my husband. As to keeping up appearances, we really had no choice. And we really *did* have that money to spend, albeit it came not from my husband's business affairs that were really quite dismal, but from my beloved Gurney siblings.

I: Let's move on, Mrs. Fry.

I'd like to give a brief accounting of your life. Please help me out.

You were born Elizabeth Gurney to a Quaker family. Your father, Joseph Gurney, was a partner in Gurneys bank. The Gurney's and your mother, Catherine, part of the Barclay family, were among the founders of Barclays Bank that exists today. The Gurney name was a byword for fabulous wealth. Your mother died when you were only twelve years old. This was a terrible blow to you, who of all the kids were possibly most dependent upon your mother. As one of the oldest girls in the family, after her death you were partly responsible for the care and training of the younger children, including your brother Joseph John.

Joseph John Gurney, became famous for his abolitionist stance towards slavery and capital punishment, and was constant supporter of you, Elizabeth, throughout your entire reformer career. In fact, after your bankruptcy, he bankrolled you in all your mission endeavours.

E. F. Thou art right.

I guess my stirrings as a social reformer began when I was 18 years old. I became deeply moved by the preaching of William Savery, an American Quaker. Motivated by his words, I took an interest in the poor, the sick, and the prisoners. I began to collect old clothes for the poor, visited those who were sick in my neighbourhood, and started a Sunday school in the summer house to teach children to read.

I met Joseph Fry, a banker and also a Plain Quaker, when I was twenty years old. He proposed to me twice, and I turned him down each time. The third time, I'll confess with a lot of pressure from family, I accepted. We were married on 19 August 1800 at the Norwich Goat Lane Friends Meeting House and moved to St. Mildred's Court in the City of London. We had eleven children in all born between 1801 and 1822. I was recorded as a Minister of the Religious Society of Friends in 1811.

We eventually took over Plashet House in East Ham, a grand estate, after Joseph's parents' death, where we lived from 1809 to 1829. After our disgraceful bankruptcy, we moved to Upton Lane in Forest Gate. Yes it is true, we were disassociated from the Quakers for 10 years due to the bankruptcy. Joseph never understood banking.

I. Wasn't William Savery legendary for his slavery abolitionist work in the States? Didn't he in fact give you the words that carried you through a lifetime of ministry?

E. F. He really did leave a mark on me. He truly changed my life course.

What eventually catapulted me into public notice was however my involvement at Newgate Gaol, that, with over 1,000 prisoners, was the largest and most notorious prison in all Britain. I first visited there in February 1813. Prompted by a family friend, Stephen Grellet, I first walked in there with only my niece. The conditions I saw horrified me. The women's section was horribly overcrowded, some of whom had not even received a trial. They did their own cooking and washing in the small cells in which they slept. The smell of unwashed bodies, urine and excrement, alcohol and rancid food, sweat, blood and vomit, was all-pervading. The noise of hundreds of voices screaming, bellowing, wailing and sobbing, including pitiable cries of babies, overwhelmed. The gaoler did not want us even to enter the women's section. He said our very lives were at risk. We persisted. We had enough clothing for all the babies, and we were determined to go in.

We prevailed. The gaoler opened the enormous gate, and we entered. Fully 300 women lived there, dozens of whom immediately crowded around us. But they did no harm. To my horror however, they crawled with lice.

Over the next three days, Anna and I clothed every baby, brought in bales of fresh straw for all the sick women, and generally showed love to all there. On the final day, we prayed with the women. Many openly wept. We did too.

Then I went home and had a long, luxurious bath. I got up afterwards, and stared out into the darkness for a long time. Something was deeply stirring.

I was unable however to further my work at Newgate Gaol for nearly four years because of difficulties within our Fry family, including serious financial troubles in the Fry bank. My dear daughter Betsy died during this time. She was only five years old. For the second time the Gurney's bailed us out financially – at enormous expense. But we now especially had to keep up appearances. This deeply galled. On top of that, at Gurney family insistence, six of my children went to live with various of the wealthy Gurney's, for it was urged that our creditors could not see us spend money on governors and tutors, but my children needed proper direction and education. Keeping it in the family ensured it was done with discretion and proprieties maintained.

I hated it! But my children, alas, many were so unruly... We moved too, to less expensive quarters, from where I'd first visited Newgate Gaol. At Christmas, 1816, I returned, this time by myself, and found the women's section as vile as four years before. In the interval, I kept up all my charitable work, and even visited a few other gaols.

When I returned, after just one session all alone with the women, I approached Newgate's governor, its chaplain, and two sheriffs about founding a school for the children inside. They were totally opposed to this, saying educating these children was an impossible task. However, let me say, they knew I had powerful connections, not least my brother-in-law, Thomas Fowell Buxton, later knighted, who with another Quaker friend founded in 1816 the **Society for the Reformation of Prison Discipline**, whose patron was none other than Prince William Frederick, Duke of Gloucester. Thomas went on to become a famous slavery abolitionist.

After they told me that I could not start such a school due to lack of space, I took matters into my own hands. I returned to the women's gaol, and promptly got the women to agree to free up one cell. They also appointed Mary Connor, in gaol for having stolen a watch, as first teacher. The authorities finally gave in, as well they might!

The next day I returned, formally installed Miss Connor as teacher, and opened for business the first school in British prison history, with 30 students.

I. But didn't you have some misgivings at least, Mrs. Fry? I mean, you were charting whole new territory. And please tell me about other pursuits of yours, for your reforming zeal by no means stopped at prison reform.

E. Fry: Oh yes! It's all in my 47 volumes of diaries you know, indeed, much else that no eye will ever read but the good Lord's. For many pages were crossed out or consigned to the fire.

As to prison visitation, there was great sense of accomplishment right from the start. And I quickly learned of deeper, darker parts of Newgate, where the condemned to die lived. I too went there.

I also knew already from my encounter with Newgate's authorities that if I continued such work, there would be many similar encounters with men in authority. Did I really want to be involved in such a world? Was it right that even more than before, I would be led away from my family? And was it the sin of pride urging me forward, or was God really calling

me to something that was new? I was also acutely aware that no woman had ever done anything so bold.

I began to recognize the events at Newgate as critical, and that in some sense, there would be no turning back. A mass of conflicting feelings surged within. I was about to take on such a task at a time when women had no public role; I would inevitably be leaving my family for longer periods; and as a Quaker minister for five years by that time, I might be succumbing to what was creaturely/sinful. All these considerations caused intense anxiety, as did the thought of the reactions likely to result from family, Quaker colleagues and the world at large.

At the same time, the prospect of working among a group of people who were so desperately in need, and the knowledge that I had the skills and experience to undertake the task of relieving them, was exhilarating indeed. And also humbling, for by now, my Christian faith was well-established. And although it wavered at times of stress, I was convinced that I moved at God's command and that the inner voice that prompted me was indeed that of the Master. As to working alongside public men, I realized that my upbringing among the sophisticated company of Earlham, and my adult life had been spent among London's wealthy, cultivated and well-informed Quaker community. Therefore the prospect of spending time among people who had the control of human destiny in their hands was not daunting. In fact, for all the misgivings on the subject that I confided in my diaries, I knew I eventually moved among the rich and powerful with as much ease as among the prisoners of Newgate.

I soon began a system of supervision and required the women to sew and to read the Bible. In 1817 I helped found the **Association for the Reformation of the Female Prisoners in Newgate**. This led to the eventual creation of the **British Ladies' Society for Promoting the Reformation of Female Prisoners**, the first "nationwide" women's organization in Britain. In fact, I eventually formed societies of many kinds all across Britain and Europe every time I travelled, which became frequent.

Within two weeks, the workshop was a raging success, and it was quickly adopted throughout all London's gaols. You would not believe the revolutionary change to good order and cleanliness this brought to prisons and prisoners throughout Britain, and further afar!

- Also, every Friday, I began to do public Bible readings that eventually regularly drew the rich and the powerful to listen. Tears flowed each time.

Well, Thomas Fowell Buxton was elected to Parliament for Weymouth and began to promote my work among his fellow MPs. In 1818 I gave evidence to a House of Commons committee on the conditions prevalent in British prisons, becoming the first woman to present evidence in Parliament. I repeated this several times throughout my life. I became a noted and sought-out expert, I'll admit with due humility, the most noted.

My brother and I, Joseph John Gurney, also took up the cause of abolishing capital punishment. At that time, people in England could be executed for over 200 crimes. Early appeals to the Home Secretary were all rejected, until Sir Robert Peel became the Home Secretary, and we finally got a receptive audience, and saw great reduction in capital crimes.

We also persuaded Sir Robert to introduce a series of prison reforms that included the Gaols Act of 1823, arguably the most advanced piece of legislation of its kind at the time. That eventually led the way to the establishment of a professional system of prison administration and classification of prisoners throughout Britain. My brother and I also went on a tour of prisons in Great Britain, and published our findings of inhumane conditions in a book entitled *Prisons in Scotland and the North of England*. We eventually toured prisons throughout Europe, also making written reports replete with recommendations for the authorities.

As to other pursuits, yes. But they were all of a piece you know. I also helped the homeless, establishing a “nightly shelter” in London after seeing the body of a young boy on the streets in the winter of 1819/1820. In 1824, during a visit to Brighton, I instituted the Brighton District Visiting Society. The society arranged for volunteers to visit the homes of the poor and provide help and comfort to them. The plan was successful and was duplicated in other districts and towns across Britain.

In 1840 I opened a training school for nurses. The programme inspired a younger Florence Nightingale, who took a team of nurses to assist wounded soldiers in the Crimean War. She went on to reform nursing, and with that the role of women, around the world.

I also worked with my Quaker and Evangelical colleagues to abolish both slavery and the death penalty. Both eventually almost disappeared from the world.

I. You have already helped me understand some of your reforming zeal in the context of your life and times, Mrs. Fry. I guess I could wish you had simply been more honest about, say, your *complexity* and your *emotions*. No one knew, it seems and for instance, that you verged on alcohol and drug addictions, because of such medicinal use for your many bodily and emotional ailments. Sadly, by editing your diaries and thereby your life, by in your lifetime hiding your true financial status to keep up appearances, by attempting to remove all allusions in your diaries to your tortured faith racked with doubt, compounded by extreme self-doubts about your love of public life to the perceived detriment of your family life, you misled. Difficult relationships with your husband and your children in particular dogged your entire life and were intensely debilitating. You and your daughters after your death perpetrated somewhat a hoax about your “saintliness” that continued well into the twentieth century and is finally only changing into the twenty-first.

Why could you not have been, well, in a word, more *transparent*, and hence *accessible*?

E. Fry Sir, I thought I clearly informed thee of the need to keep up appearances!

I. Okay, Mrs. Fry! Okay.

Thank you for insights into your life. I’ll try to sum up a life incredibly lived:

- You feared death throughout your adult life, as you feared the dark to the point of debilitation throughout your childhood. Yet you were perceived by thousands upon

thousands as a beacon of light in a dark world, as a force for life that could be meaningfully lived, no matter how debilitated the person;

- As a Quaker, you were committed to seeing the light of God in every individual. Influenced by powerful resurgent Evangelical forces throughout the 19th century, you believed in and preached the power of conversion for individuals and society alike. You preached your message to untold thousands at a time even, and you joined reform causes from prison to abolition of slavery in league with international reform movements at an historical time of great receptivity to such endeavours. You also recognized the critical importance of social environment, education and attitude in bringing about positive change. Increasingly, you accepted the necessity of influencing others, the powerful and less powerful alike, through your own example, through ceaseless lobbying, and through what we today call networking.
- In your courage and persistence you forced a watching world to believe the most rejected by society – women condemned to imprisonment and abject hopelessness – on whom society projected its own fears and rejection, that there was always potential for profound transformation and growth. You were also powerful in rejecting the line drawn between the publicly convicted and those who escape such treatment, but are no less guilty of criminal activities.
- Your significance for women against the backdrop of fixed rigid religious and societal structures of their place is enormous. By walking alone into a public role, you convinced the women of your generation that they had worth beyond the domestic sphere, and that they could also participate in shaping and transforming both their own lives and the world.
- As an evangelist and preacher who addressed audiences of thousands, you demonstrated to the religious and secular world that “in Christ there is neither male nor female”, that social differentiation did not mean domination rather equality, arguably the single most powerful social legacy of Saint Paul. While consorting with the rich and powerful to support your causes, you paradoxically fulfilled the vision of Mary:
“[God’s] mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

*He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.*

*He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham
and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.” (Luke 1:46-
55)*

Amen!