

DOROTHY RICHARDSON AND THE QUAKERS

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‘To write is to forsake life’, Miriam Henderson says in *March Moonlight*. In 1907, the year in which Benjamin Grad introduced Dorothy Richardson to the Penrose Quaker family in Sussex, she was approaching the threshold that divided living from writing. She was thirty four. Her career as a writer had not yet properly begun, but the raw material of *Pilgrimage* was almost lived through. What was to have been a stay of a few weeks, to recuperate from miscarrying H. G. Well’s child and from overwork in general, turned into three years.

It was not her first contact with Quakers. She was always looking out for what Emerson called ‘the active soul’. She had long chafed against the male-oriented Anglican church in which she had been brought up, where ‘the preacher as often as not sermonized from unsound premises until your brain was sick’, and where ‘life is poisoned for women at the very source’.¹ For her, religion was ‘a piece of hard work, comparable to mining or mountaineering, its aim being to get in touch with the reality beyond the spheres but never interfering with our freedom to be as bad as we wish’.² The emphasis, as always with Richardson, is on freedom. Quite early on she was aware that ‘if one were perfectly still, the sense of God was there’ (I 458.). So when in 1901 Benjamin Grad took her to the Quaker Meeting House in St Martin’s Lane (where it still is) she found herself in a religious gathering that spoke more completely to her condition than any other had ever done; it was her my first experience of a sense of life and reality in a religious gathering. In the shared silence she was relieved of the tension between inner and outer self. At a Quaker Meeting, even though at this time men and women still sat in different parts of the room,

¹ Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage* Vol.1. (London: Virago, 1979), p.73. Henceforth, references in text.

² Letter to Peggy Kirkaldy 19 Nov 1946, in Gloria G. Fromm (ed.) *Windows into Modernism: Selected Letters of Dorothy Richardson* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), p.553.

women were not thought of as secondary. On the contrary, the inner life of the Meeting seemed to reside fully in the women who looked ‘enviously, deeply, richly alive on the very edge of the present, presenting the faith in their own persons, entirely self centred, self controlled, proud and serene and withdrawn, yet not withholding’ (III 329).

For the time being, however, that chance visit remained an isolated occasion. Almost thirty years passed between Dorothy’s stay with the Penroses and recalling it in *Dimple Hill* and *March Moonlight*. Personally, I have never had any difficulty in thinking of Dorothy Richardson and Miriam Henderson as obverse and reverse of the same coin, although of course in a number of ways Miriam is how Richardson wanted posterity to see her younger self. In *Dimple Hill* for instance Miriam and the Roscorlas come across as a good deal younger than they actually were at the time. Dorothy, feeling done out of her salad days, never did come upfront about her age. But that the Quaker way of life of the period, the house and its surroundings, are recreated with accuracy and clarity is borne out by correspondence I had in 1983 with Joan Penrose Jenkins, eldest daughter of Arthur Penrose (Alfred Roscorla of *Dimple Hill*.) I had got in touch with her through a letter to the Quaker journal, *The Friend*. She remembered that when Dorothy Richardson came for a short stay with them in the 1930s while she was writing *Dimple Hill*: ‘we young people had to be quieter because she was finishing writing a book’.³ Joan Jenkins confirms that the description of her earlier stay at Mount Pleasant is a remarkably correct one of the inside of the house and garden, as well of the Quaker Meeting. For instance, she says: ‘We do remember the skeleton of a bird in a glass case quite well, if we moved it slightly it appeared to be pecking at the glass to get out...’.⁴ Miriam thought ‘the experienced little skeleton still seemed full of life’ (IV 467).

So, freed from the intellectual, professional, emotional and sexual demands of her London friends, Dorothy/Miriam found herself among people who lived to the rhythm of the seasons. She may

³ Private correspondence.

⁴ Ibid.

have found them uncultured and their furnishings philistine but, geared to the farming year, they did not torture themselves with questions about the meaning and origin of life. Their full and busy lives left no gaps for doubting. They accepted themselves as they were, drawing their strength from a closely-knit Quaker community reaching back several hundred years. With them she experienced what life in London had lacked, most particularly the feeling that she could again belong to a family. The warm welcome she received, the small jobs she was allowed to do (helping to pick peaches or thinning out the vine), the confidence and trust placed in her right from the beginning of her stay - all in keeping with the Quaker way of life - encouraged her to think of herself as one of them. To begin with, it was just this family closeness which gave her a sense of freedom: she not only had time to herself, it was *benevolent* time; not only was she alone with summer trees among the lobelias of childhood, she was among people who respected each other and, most importantly, whose ideas were not at variance with their way of life. She did not have to struggle through dead hours of duty to try and salvage a margin of full living with the fag ends of her energies. Here, with a renewed sense of the fullness of life, something stirred in herself which she had not felt since 'long before she had come to London and been shut out from garden summers' (IV 463). There was a restorative spiritual rhythm in the way, for instance, that after the silent Quaker grace at mealtimes everyone emerged luminous. Having fed on things 'shop staled' in London, she savoured her meals with renewed zest, 'indeed felt that even in a potato grown upon their happy land some special virtues must reside' (IV 452). So her bruised spirit healed and flourished in the walled garden with its summer house and evergreen oak. In the buttercup meadows of the Sussex countryside, where, in the 'humming stillness of the pinewood ... life streams up from the mossy floor...'⁵

Of all the Penrose/Roscorla family Dorothy/Miriam was most immediately drawn to Sarah Eliza/Rachel Mary: 'this middle aged inexperienced girl, selfless and outturned....permanently attentive to guidance from within...' (IV 436). Miriam felt free to talk to her

⁵ Dorothy Richardson, 'Haytime', *Saturday Review*, 31 July 1909, p.132.

about topics like the new scientific theories about the likely gender of children in any given family.

The relationship with the brothers was slower to develop. In Alfred 'who knew the deepest truths' (IV 535) and who was an elder at the local Meeting, Miriam recognised the more Quakerly of the two, although it is Richard to whom she is drawn as a man. His mother had a stop in *her* mind about that relationship! The difficulties there are not specifically Quaker ones, though Mrs Penrose/Roscorla *had* locked her daughter in her room to prevent her from marrying a non-Quaker.⁶

Like pieces of Henry Moore sculpture in the landscape, the Penrose family formed rocks on which Dorothy could hang her thoughts. She was able to focus on the seasons, on the things going on around her, like the auction at which:

The Quaker brothers are less involved, less easily stimulated, at once more detached and more observant than their fellows. It is clear that they have come with their purchases already thought out, their decisions taken, and the limit of their bidding fixed... They bid quietly in gentle tones...⁷

Richardson's experiences in Sussex were key to her emergence as a writer. Her Sussex articles were published anonymously in the *Saturday Review* between 1907 and 1910. They made her a little money, not much, but enough for her to feel that in writing she was on the right life track.

Though in the Quaker week, each day is of equal value, the Sunday Meeting is nevertheless the nucleus from which the community draws its energy. Dorothy Richardson's life had lacked such a nucleus. As she wrote in the introduction to her anthology of the writings of the founder of the Society of Friends, *Gleanings From the*

⁶ Joan Penrose Jenkins wrote about this: 'Sara Eliza's marriage to Leonard Southwell was on 20th August 1914. Leonard Southwell was not a Quaker, the mother's main objection to the marriage and the reason for shutting her daughter in the room.': Private correspondence.

⁷ Dorothy Richardson, 'A Sussex Auction', *Saturday Review*, 13 June 1908, p.755.

Works of George Fox, she thought of the Quaker Meeting as ‘a sorting house for mystics and persons of the mystical type...a radiating centre of divine common sense, of practical loving wisdom at the heart of English religious life’.⁸

Englishness was of paramount importance to Richardson, it was the one aspect of herself that had not got lost in the social disorientation of her life following her father’s bankruptcy and mother’s suicide. Steadied by the routine of the Penrose household, she was able to reach down and rediscover wholeness in herself. She found ‘the truth that only in individuality carried to its full term can we find the basis of unity’.⁹

I’d like to digress here for a moment: it seems to me that the phrase *carried to its full term* echoes grief for her miscarried child. Her much younger friend Pauline Marrian (who was only 3 in 1907) wrote to me in 1983:

As for the loss of the baby, she...was curiously inarticulate about expressing it - it was too big and too private and too astonishing perhaps... She was not one of those odd people for whom the pregnancy is just a bore - she’d missed out badly on motherhood, but not altogether. - and that was a little triumph.¹⁰

As far as unity is concerned, it was the Society’s full acceptance of women that underpinned the feeling she belonged:

A woman born into a Quaker family....comes...into an atmosphere where her natural sense of a direct relationship to life her instinctive individual aspiration and sense of responsibility, instead of being either cancelled or left dormant, or thwarted and trained to run, so to say, indirectly, is immediately confirmed and fostered... because amongst Quakers, in a very true and deep sense, the world is home

⁸ ‘Introduction’ to *Gleanings from the Works of George Fox* (London: Headley Brothers, 1914), p.13

⁹ *Ibid*, p.9.

¹⁰ Private correspondence.

and home is the world...¹¹

The recognition of the public ministry of women was an act of faith. Such recognition did not stem from any kind of feminism. Richardson was adamant about her repudiation of feminism: 'A woodlouse can see Miriam isn't a feminist'¹² she wrote to her friend Koteliensky. It was faith of this sort that was helping to shape the new woman:

Her gift for imaginative sympathy, her capacity for vicarious living, for being simultaneously in all warring camps, will tend to make her within the council of nations what the Quaker is within the council of religions.¹³

The evocation of the Quaker meeting in *Pilgrimage*, where 'people live together, grow aware of each other's uniqueness' (IV 621) is, I think, unequalled in fiction with its ebb and flow from outer to inner and back (although in a letter to her sister Jessie Hale Richardson said that, as she saw things, her books weren't novels). Quaker meetings go on today much as they did then, although women, hatless, and men sit together. Miriam is impatient with herself for not being sufficiently centred to remain 'in possession of a power that was not one's own' - but then she comes down to earth with a touch of humility 'Who was she, that she should expect to find herself all at once in the presence of God?' (IV 500).

However, when, on the way home from Meeting, she is told that she is 'a Friend in all but name' (IV 540), she immediately feels cooped up. The fact that 'Quakers expect one to be one's own priest and prophet', initially appealing, begins to be burdensome. She is irritated by the 'pothor about birthright membership of the Society' (IV 592). Accustomed as she has been to conversation with people of the highest intellectual calibre, she cannot feel at

¹¹ Dorothy Richardson, *Quakers Past and Present* (London: Constable, 1914), p.78.

¹² Letter to S. S. Kotielensky, 1 Nov 1935, in *Windows on Modernism*, op. cit, p.99.

¹³ Dorothy Richardson, 'Women and the Future: A Trembling of the Veil Before the Eternal Mystery of "La Gioconda"', *Vanity Fair*, [New York], 22 April, 1924, pp.39-40.

ease with the Quaker acceptance and inclusion of the mentally disadvantaged. There is more than a touch of self-deprecatory irony in her exclamation 'Friends with the local idiot, she could now compose herself to arrive in heaven!' (IV 433).

But it is when she is on one of her walks that she finds her personal history makes her incompatible with Quakerism:

the church that confronted her silently reminded her that the depths of her nature had been subtly moulded long ago by its manifold operations and could never fully belong to the household on the hill (IV 451)

There is something within her that stands apart, unpossessed, something that makes her reluctant to let go of 'the immortal moment between taking stock of one's surroundings and becoming involved in them' (IV 561). She pines in equal measure to stay and to be gone. Nevertheless, it was her time with the Quaker family that strengthened her inner resources, making her free to 'Travel, while I write, down to that centre where everything is seen in perspective; serenely' (IV 619).

Richardson's first published book was a short history of the Society of Friends, *Quakers Past and Present* (1914). In her introduction she adumbrates the *leitmotif* of *Pilgrimage*: 'The artist lives to a greater or lesser degree in perpetual illumination...but he remains within the universe constructed for him by his senses...the great mystics...have consciously bent all their energies to breaking through the veil of sense, to making a journey to the heart of reality...a setting forth to seek something already found'.¹⁴

Of George Fox she wrote he was:

one in a big line of those who have ventured into the undivided truth they find stirring in their own souls...amongst the grand actives of European mysticism...he is characteristically the practical western

¹⁴ *The Quakers: Past and Present* (London: Constable, 1914), pp.34-5.

layman, the market place witness for the spiritual consciousness in everyman...he represents...the peculiar genius of the English temperament.¹⁵

She recognized that he was not only a liberator but also a steersman who put *being* before knowing, realising that the first step towards peace is to stand still in the light.

It was unfortunate for her that her tributes to a pacifist community came out during the First World War; and also that *Pointed Roofs*, the first volume of *Pilgrimage* published in 1915, was set in Germany. Dorothy Richardson never took the final step of joining the Society of Friends, although she occasionally attended Meetings. She needed to continue the pilgrimage untrammelled by commitment. She wrote: 'It is only by the pain of remaining free that one can have the whole world round one all the time' (III 20). She remained a seeker, a freelance mystic who made her writing her church. Words were her faith:

All that has been said and known in the world is in language; all we know of Christ is in Jewish words, all the dogmas of religion are words...Whether you agree or not, language is the only way to express anything and it dims everything. (II 99)

She devoted her life to trying to brighten the dimness. She struggled to find an all-embracing, multi-faceted way with words that would include the importance of non-verbal communication. For her, the essence of the pilgrimage was that it never ended, but that there are moments when seeker and sought are one, the kind of moments that made her feel she was 'the enchanted guest of spring and summer'.

¹⁵ 'Introduction' to *Gleanings from the Works of George Fox*, op. cit, p.8.