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A Quaker Influence on Modern English Literature:

Caroline Stephen and her niece, Virginia Woolf

By Alison M. Lewis

CAROLINE EMELIA STEPHEN (1834-1909) has enjoyed a long-standing reputation among Friends as a Quaker theologian. *Quaker Strongholds* (1891) is considered a "Quaker classic;" one hundred years after its first publication, Friends General Conference book catalog calls it "one of the clearest visions of our faith." Stephen was also the author of *Light Arising: Thoughts on the Central Radiance* (1908) and *The Vision of Faith* (1911).

People who know Caroline Stephen and her writings are often unaware that Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), one of the most innovative forces within the genre of the modern English novel, was her niece. Woolf used concepts of psychology and relativity to produce new ways of expressing consciousness in works such as *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927). In addition to her progressive artistry, she is known for her strong stands on feminism and pacifism.

Copies of *Light Arising* and *Quaker Strongholds* were in Virginia Woolf's private library to the end of her life. So much of the old forms and the family ties of her past life were jettisoned when she and her siblings recreated themselves in Bloomsbury that it seems unlikely that she would have retained these books for purely sentimental reasons. They must have been meaningful to her on some deeper level. In light of this, it is informative to look at the link between these two women, who were both outstanding in their respective fields, and particularly interesting to consider the influence of Stephen's Quakerism upon Woolf's writing.

CAROLINE Emelia Stephen was the younger sister of Virginia Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, who was knighted for his editorship of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Two distinctive and contradictory portraits of Caroline emerge. The first has its roots in Leslie Stephen's book of family remembrances, *The Mausoleum Book.* He writes that Caroline's health was damaged and her life ruined by an unrequited love who left and died in India. Though there is absolutely no substantiation for this story, it has taken on a life of its own and is repeatedly retold by most of the Woolf scholars and critics who do not ignore the existence of Caroline entirely.

Quentin Bell, Woolf's nephew and biographer, follows his grandfather's lead in forwarding the theory that Caroline's ill health was due to a broken heart. The picture he presents of Caroline is that of "an

intelligent woman who fell, nevertheless, into the role of the imbecile Victorian female" and who "at the age of twenty-three settled down to become an invalid and an old maid". This romantic story of a lost love persists in the most recent Woolf biography by James King: "Early in life she had fallen in love with a young man who had not been responsive and had taken himself off to India. In Milly [Caroline], Leslie saw a woman whose life had been destroyed by a broken heart .Leslie saw Milly as weak-willed and indecisive ."

Woolf, on the other hand, recognized in her aunt the same pattern that played out in the lives of her own mother and half-sister, and stated in her aunt's obituary that "attendance upon her mother during her last long illness injured her health so seriously that she never fully recovered". Jane Marcus, the feminist critic who first looked seriously at Caroline, followed Woolf's theory in reasoning that Caroline's ill health was due to playing the role of "a dutiful Victorian daughter and sister, nursing at the sickbeds and deathbeds of her family". Caroline's mother died in 1875; Caroline suffered another collapse the same year while caring for Leslie and his daughter following the death of his first wife.

IT IS PERHAPS NOT SURPRISING that Leslie Stephen might have been eager to shift some of the blame for Caroline's broken health from himself to a mythical lover. But even more damaging is the fact that he makes every effort to denigrate Caroline's writing. Her work is "little" he says, perhaps in contrast to his own "big" work. He misnames *Quaker Strongholds* in his memoir as *Strongholds of Quakerism,* and calls it "another little work of hers".

Virginia Woolf and her siblings from a young age had accepted their father's view of their aunt, who was called "Silly Milly" or "Nun" or "The Quaker" and was often a figure of fun in their early lives. However, an important encounter between the two women was to take place in Virginia Woolf's early adulthood. Virginia was twenty-two years old when her father died in 1904, and at this time she suffered another of the mental collapses she had experienced since childhood. She was sent to recover in the home of her Quaker friend, Violet Dickinson, where she stayed for almost three months. Later she was sent for additional rest to Caroline's Cambridge home, known as "The Porch," which she called at one point "an ideal retreat for me".

> It is, indeed, not easy to define the precise kind or amount of indulgence which is incompatible with Christian simplicity; or rather it must of necessity vary. But the principle is, I think, clear. In life, as in art, whatever does not help, hinders. All that is superfluous to the main object of life must be cleared away, if that object is to be fully attained. In all kinds of effort, whether moral, intellectual or physical, the essential condition of vigour is a severe pruning away of redundance. Is it likely that the highest life, the life of the Christian body, can be carried on upon easier terms? ....

She attended Cambridge Meeting with Caroline and offered to bring Violet there on a visit as well. Caroline found freedom from intellectual and theological controversies in silence, and Virginia found a new type of freedom as well. In her life at the Stephen household, "silence was a breach of convention" and mindless small talk a requirement. The focused quiet of Quaker meeting must have given Virginia a needed opportunity to rest, turn inward, and recollect herself from her trauma without having to "perform" for others.

Although there was sometimes tension between the two women, Caroline's presence must have also been of help. Virginia writes of her aunt: "We talked for some nine hours; and she poured forth all her spiritual

> The Quaker ideal, as I understand it, requires a continual weighing of one thing against another--a continual preference of the lasting and deep over the transient and superficial.... If we bear in mind the essentially relative meaning of the word "superfluous," it is obvious that such a testimony against "superfluities" does not require any rigid or niggardly rule as to the outward things. To my own mind, indeed, this view of the matter seems to require at least as clearly the liberal use of whatever is truly helpful to "our best life" as the abandonment of obstructing superfluities. No doubt a testimony against superfluities is very liable to degenerate into formality, and to be so misapplied as to cut off much that is in reality wholesome, innocent, and beautiful....
>
> — Caroline Stephen, *Quaker Strongholds*

experiences .All her life she has been listening to inner voices, and talking with spirits". This revelation may have been very important to Woolf, who had been troubled by voices at the worst points in her mental illness. To hear of someone having a similar experience cast in a positive light must have been reassuring to her. On another level, her aunt's experiences might have also encouraged her to take her own "inner voice" more seriously, a necessary step in becoming a writer.

It was during this period of recuperation that Virginia began to explore her writing talents more seriously. While at The Porch, she aided F.W. Maitland in the preparation of her father's biography. Both Violet and Caroline encouraged Virginia's own writing. She also began to write and submit short articles to *The Guardian*, a church-related weekly, and at one point she even considered writing a description of Quaker meeting for this publication. It was in *The Guardian* that Virginia Woolf's first published article appeared at the close of 1904.

BY THE TIME SHE BEGAN ENCOURAGING Virginia's writing, Caroline had already published a number of well-received books herself, in spite of her lack of formal education. This was surely also a source of inspiration to Virginia, who had always resented and regretted her own lack of education. Caroline refers in *Light Arising* to "the unlearned for whom and as one of whom I write" and stresses the need to cultivate the ability "to think for ourselves; to construct out of our own actual experience some sort of creed". Virginia certainly did learn to think for herself, and to construct out of her own experience, not a creed, but some highly original works of art. In fact, the basis of her originality may lie precisely in the fact that she was not educated in the conventional sense. She thus found herself free from literary conventions passed down in the classroom and allowed herself to create in an entirely new style.

Caroline's first book, *The Service of the Poor* (1871), was a study of religious sisterhoods, institutions that held a great deal of appeal for her. She ends up arguing against the sisterhoods and in favor of the patriarchal family, "which needs for survival the unpaid cheerful labor of its unmarried daughters". This position vindicates her own role played out as the "daughter of an educated man," but the amount of effort which went into researching and describing the sisterhoods betrays a continuing ambivalence toward this path not taken.

In joining the Society of Friends, Caroline Stephen gained what she had longed for, and yet argued against, in *The Service of the Poor* : the right to live her life as a nun. She became a "sisterhood of one," donned the plain grey dress of Quakers and spent the rest of her days in spiritual pursuit, taking time for writing and speaking on spiritual topics. She became the most eloquent spokesperson for her faith in her day and according to Jones "the influence of her exposition of [the Society's] central ideals and practices was very great both within and beyond the Society". She also directly influenced a generation of young Friends, from the Quaker students at Cambridge who visited her when she resided there, to the Young Friends of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, to whom she wrote in 1907.

Virginia Woolf never had a desire to be a nun, although she did refer to herself as retreating to a nunnery when she wrote. And she did propose the creation of an "Outsider's Society" in her strongly feminist *Three Guineas.* In spite of the radical nature of this work, there are many ways in which the Outsider's Society recalls the sisterhoods of Caroline's first book. Woolf echoes the tradi tional monastic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience when she recommends to women that "in the practice of your profession you refuse to be separated from poverty, chastity, derision and freedom from unreal loyalties". She defines poverty as "enough to live on but no more". She advocates women's right to work, earn money and not be dependent upon others, but she does not advocate blind ambition. Women should be different from men in this respect; they should be able to see that greed and high salaries for one class of people means abject poverty for another.

Woolf's call for chastity has been termed "intellectual chastity". By this she meant "you must refuse to sell your brain for the sake of money". Intellectual celibacy would free women of the external restraints on thought that so concerned Caroline Stephen. In Woolf's plan she did not advocate obedience for her Outsiders, but rather derision and freedom from unreal loyalties. Although she seems to be flying in the face of all that the established order finds sacred, Woolf was not really suggesting lawlessness. She seemed to have a sense similar to Caroline Stephen's that obedience to your own moral leadings would result in actions that would benefit the individual and society.

Caroline Stephen lived to the age of seventy-five. She died in 1909, after a short illness and a long life. As her niece wrote in her obituary: "The last years of her life among her flowers and with young people round her seemed to end fittingly a life which had about it the harmony of a large design". In *A Room of One's Own,* Virginia Woolf's persona tells of her Aunt Mary Beton, who rather poetically and not unlike the heroic Percival of *The Waves,* "died by a fall from her horse when she was riding out to take the air in Bombay". It is from this aunt that the speaker receives her legacy of five hundred pounds a year, an event which means more to her than gaining the right to vote. Money of one's own was needed before one could gain the privacy afforded by a room of one's own.

In real life, Caroline Emelia Stephen was Woolf's "Aunt Mary." When Caroline died in 1909, Virginia was left a legacy of twenty-five hundred pounds. Virginia already had some money of her own from her father's estate, but it was a meaningful gesture on Caroline's part to contribute to the support of her unmarried, unstable, creative niece.

When Woolf further records that "my aunt's legacy unveiled the sky to me, and substituted for the large and imposing figure of a gentleman, which Milton recommended for my perpetual adoration, a view of the open sky" she hints at more than one level of what Caroline's legacy meant to her. Obviously, Caroline's money gave her financial security and independence from the domination of any larger-than-life "gentleman" playing god.

But Caroline also gave another sky-opening legacy to Virginia. She gave her a sense of freedom from the power of patriarchy and showed her an open, feminine space where the "inner voice" is heeded rather than the priest's or the father's, and where a feminine silence held truth that was beyond any argument with words. The model of a woman taking control of her own life and writing her own books with a view toward the greater good helped to give Woolf the confidence that she later expressed when she said "I feel that by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else".

Alison Lewis is a member of Central Philadelphia MM. A longer version of this article, with bibliographical references, was published in *Quaker Theology,* Issue 3, Autumn 2000. It is available online.

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From the Quaker Arts Archive:

A Friendly Conference on Art.

by Arthur Edwin Bye.

from the *Friends Intelligencer*, September 12, 1915

Chuck Fager recently turned up this 1915 article in the Friends Intelligencer *(a Hicksite precursor of* Friends Journal*). This forgotten event may be the first Quaker conference on the arts ever!* (Read Chuck's comments in Through Whittier-colored Glasses; or, Art is like Broccoli.)

During the week of Eighth month l5th-20th a Conference on Art was held at the Whittier Guest House, Hampton Falls [NH?]. It is the first time, to the knowledge of the writer, that a group of Friends has made any attempt to discuss subjects pertaining to art. That such a conference should be projected—no matter of how informal a nature—is indicative of a change in the Society of Friends.

This particular change is of a two-fold nature. First, it means that our Society is beginning to show an appreciation of the outwardly beautiful; second, it means that the interests of the members of the Society are becoming so varied and multifold that they no longer devote themselves ex- clusively to purely religious or social matters. The writer hopes to show that this new interest in art is just as surely an outgrowth of Quakerism, just as surely a vital concern of the Society, as any other religious or social interest can be.

To-day the housing problem, garden cities, etc., are interesting Friends. Why? Because we have learned that a life cannot develop to its fullest capacity in sordid surroundings. We have profited by the mistakes of our forefathers, in one respect at least, in that we no longer repress the natural love of the beautiful. Fortunately for the future of our Society, the present generation has been taught an appreciation for music. Vocal culture has been taught in our schools; but after two hundred years of neglect, it will take some time for us to be able to sing. Drawing has likewise been taught in our schools, but seldom has this instruction ever been carried farther than that of mere eye-training. As a people we are still as ignorant of aesthetics as our seventeenth-century ancestors.

It is one of the strange problems of psychology that the human mind should have revolted, as it did with the Puritans and the Quakers, against all emotional expression. Historically we have understood the reason to be a protest against the corruption of the seventeenth century. The early Friend saw the outward world as bad, and therefore, in order to give all his attention to the inward, spiritual life, it was considered necessary to be dead unto the world.

As a consequence of the silent worship, singing as a religious exercise, was abandoned. Hymn singing and chanting occupied the principal time of the worship of the churches. It was an outward form, producing a temporary exaltation of spirit, an emotional state, which left the worshipper in a weaker

condition than he was before he began to sing. The effect was considered as a sort of intoxication. The early Friends, too, saw that singing was often, if not generally, accompanied by revelry when it was not religious, hence it was dangerous, especially for the youth.

Until the Reformation the church was the great patron of the arts, and the arts only flourished through her patronage. Music and painting were so closely associated with the church, and church worship, that as late as the seventeenth century, when the church was generally corrupt, or seemed so,—when even the Puritan Reform was becoming empty and spiritless—so it can be understood that the arts shared the opprobrium of the church in the eyes of the Quakers. Painting, for instance, meant altar pieces wherein were represented sacred his objects of almost absolute worship. The Quakers saw men and women kneeling before statues and gazing in rapt veneration upon religious pictures. Art, apparently, encouraged the worship of images. Artists were engaged to paint banners whereon was represented our Lady enthroned, which banners were paraded about the streets on feast days and considered holy.

Such use of art was restricted more to Roman Catholic countries, but where the Friends did not see art employed for corrupt religious practices, they saw it employed—as in England—for purposes of vanity. Portraits savored of worldly vanity. Had England, however, been an artistic country—had Englishmen been naturally artistic, as was Holland and the Dutch—the early Friends might have had more patience with the arts in general. At that time, among Protestant countries, Holland was the chief in matters of art, and there painters were employed in the painting of genre subjects—of scenes from real life, of the pleasures and griefs of the poor—subjects legitimate for art from every point of view. The best artists of England were Dutch or Flemish, as Sir Anthony Van Dyke. But these were court painters, tribute payers to vanity. So in England, there was not a real art in the seventeenth century, and the Quakers, in consequence, had a distorted view of it.

But the mistake the Quakers made,—in their zeal for a religion pure and undefiled which consisted in the visiting of the fatherless and the widows in their affliction and of keeping one's self unspotted from from the world—their mistake was in casting aside entirely, as temptations of the Evil One, all that was externally lovely in the world.

This was just as true in the following century. One may take John Woolman as an example. Consider his care, as a tailor, never to make any clothing that would serve for anything more than a modest protection from the weather. Consider his personal appearance when he arrived in England. Consider his refusal to use articles of "luxury" of any kind. The influence of such men is not forgotten to-day, and well that it is so. But while we think of John Woolman, the figure of St. Francis of Assisi rises before us—another saint of the same self-denying type.

Francis of Assisi is perhaps the most popular of all the canonized saints and his memory the most venerated by non-Romanists to-day. St.Francis' universal influence, even in his own day, was realized to be a power of great force for or against the church, and so the church wisely folded her cloak about him and took him in. St. Francis appealed and has appealed ever since to the imagination of men. His life has in every generation been the inspiration of artists.

Why has he exerted such an influence on art? Among the many answers to this question, we may say, it was his own intense love for the beautiful, as illustrated in his sermon to the birds. He was himself a musician and a poet and an artist. He illustrates the fact this man who has been called the nearest semblance to his Master, that a man may be "perfect even as your Father is perfect," and love the beautiful world in which his Father has placed him.

But the typical—the average Quaker—has always been a successful man of business. I speak of the typical Quaker, not the Quaker at his best. He is the highly-respected merchant—and outwardly prosperous, became respected. The typical Quaker, however, should be, just as well, the man of imagination, the artist or musician.

Why? Because, the message of Quakerism is supposed to be one of the spirit. Art is of the spirit.

Quakerism has stood for simplicity. But simplicity does not mean a disregard for art. If the Friendly principle of simplicity is carried out in one's life, a knowledge of the laws of harmony and taste is needed. A consistent simplicity, whether it be of conduct or of environment, will lead one to a love for art, and art will be rightly understood to be not the pursuit of luxuries which only the leisurely can enjoy, but as a necessity to the fulfilling of the higher life which each one desires.

How is it that when a Benjamin West has arisen, he has been forced to leave the Society? Its atmosphere has stifled him. He has found himself of no use in the Society. There was no appreciation of his art. To-day, happily, with the belief that God has a use for every gift he has given, we are making more use of every kind and sort of man there is.

We have been wise in cultivating simple tastes and in avoiding what is bizarre, fanciful or the passing fashion of the moment. This tradition will protect us from the extravagances of the Futurists and Cubists. On the other hand we can err in becoming commonplace, lacking in individuality, possessing no originality. But a study of art, properly conducted, reveals beauties and mysteries hitherto hidden, broadens our knowledge of humanity, creates a wider sympathy, cultivates taste, develops character, and, more than all this, develops spirituality, for true works are creations of the spirit. Through them we can learn new workings of the spirit, have revealed to us new depths, and, with an understanding and appreciation of art, we can become leaders in a new field. Quakerism, if it could, like the church with St. Francis of Assisi, fold its cloak about the workers in the cause of art, would have a sphere.of influence wider than it ever had before.

It is to be hoped that the Conference on Art at the Whittier Guest House will not be the only one of its kind, but will lead to further group study in Friendly communities.

Commentary by Chuck Fager

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Clerk's Journal

Through Whittier-Colored Glasses; or, Art is like Broccoli

by Chuck Fager, FQA Clerk

IT CAN BE AN UNCOMFORTABLE ENTERPRISE to look back, especially at your own history. Who among us can be entirely proud of all that we've been, or where our special group has been? Or even our faith community?

Such thoughts have dogged me ever since I stumbled across the article, A Friendly Conference on Art , in an issue of the *Friends Intelligencer* from 1915.

At one level, this was a real find, the record of what was perhaps the first such gathering among Friends, certainly in the eastern US. But at another level, the piece raises questions which may have been new to Friendly readers then, but ought not to be so for us now.

The piece is largely a kind of hymn of praise, especially to the recent liberation of the Society from the bonds of enforced grey uniformity. This is understandable enough, and I unite with that sentiment. But what was it, as recounted here, that Friends had been freed for?

Consider, in response, this passage: "We have been wise in cultivating simple tastes and in avoiding what is bizarre, fanciful or the passing fashion of the moment. This tradition will protect us from the extravagances of the Futurists or the Cubists."

Ah yes, "extravagance." What a carefully chosen euphemism. Which is to say, Quakerism was being freed to embrace a thoroughly bourgeois, not to say Philistine sensibility, one that was safe from all the sharp edges of an emerging modernity.

This attitude is made clearer a few paragraphs farther, when the writer asserts that "...the study of art, properly conducted, reveals beauties and mysteries hitherto hidden, broadens our knowledge of humanity, creates a wider sympathy, cultivates taste, develops character, and more than all this, develops spirituality, for true works are creations of the spirit."

Ah—of course, how could we not have noticed: art is like broccoli—it's *good* for you!

How lovely. How elevated. How pre-World War I naive.

Of course, such late Romantic twaddle is just what we would expect from a group meeting at the Whittier Guest House, cozy on the spreading veranda of the Genteel Tradition the old Quaker bard embodied to his fingertips; Friends are in many respects the last holdouts of this tradition, even now.

There's truth in this proposition, of course; some art is good for you. But in the same month as this group gathered so genteelly in the fair New England summer, the armies of Europe were mobilizing to destroy each other, and with them the sensibility that could view the world through such Whittier-colored glasses.

In a century of war, the worst ever, what were we to expect of art? One wonders: if the Friends who opened the door to art in such a modulated and gingerly fashion in 1915 were upset by the Futurists and the Cubists, what must they have made of the screaming visual and existential cacophony of the Surrealists who soon came tumbling behind them in the wake of war and revolution? And of course the writers of the next generation too. Whittier disappeared in the dust raised by Hemingway, Joyce and a host of others, and his star has not yet risen again. (I say this sadly, for I am devoted to the old man, frequent mawkish notwithstanding; yet I understand his fate too.)

What, for that matter, would they make of the world of art today? Would a visit to any of the major contemporary museums in, say, New York or even Philadelphia, leave them still convinced that art is bound to be uplifting? And what would they make of our mass media, where some of the finest creative minds of our time are hard at work using art to persuade us, for instance, to drink vodka?

In point of fact, while I was thrilled to uncover this article, once read it left me with distinctly ambivalent feelings. The report scorns the early Friends' revulsion against the use of arts in Fox's time to promote idolatry, mindless luxury and consumption, not to mention political oppression. But I must admit, partisan of the arts that I am, it is these older warnings that echo in my mind more often than not, especially when I open a slick magazine, or turn on the television. And they usually ring truer than the ingenuous optimism of the Whittier House gathering.

We live in a world saturated with the arts; but they are arts which have been all but absorbed into the machine of consumption and manipulation that surrounds us all. Much of this art, no matter how brilliantly done, is not good for us, especially not for the spirit.

My own hunger is for Quaker art and artists who face this very mixed reality squarely, and then challenge and subvert it with their creativity and their spirit. Sometimes this challenge is will not be easy to see, but it is there nonetheless.

I have seen it happen, so I am not pessimistic. One feature of the best new art in my experience, is that it is truly new—I don't see it coming; and thus it can be a revelation, though not always a pleasant one. Like the Futurists, or the Cubists, in their moment.

The hazards of the outlook of 1915 are still with us, I believe, and I look forward to seeing Quaker artists articulate and engage them, and overcome them too.

A Friendly Conference on Art by Arthur Edwin Bye (1915)

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