

# GEORGE FOX & LEICESTERSHIRE

BY GERTRUDE ELLIS

Three hundred years ago this July George Fox was born in the village of Drayton, two miles from the Warwickshire border of Leicestershire. It seems fitting at this time that the Leicestershire Archæological Society should devote a few pages of its *Transactions* to considering his associations with what he called "my own country." These centre round his birth-place, Fenny Drayton, then called Drayton in the Clay, Leicester, Broughton Astley, Whetstone, Lutterworth, Swannington, and the "Vale of Beavor."

Of late years the study of mysticism, using the word to express "the type of religion which insists upon an inward revelation of God within the sphere of personal experience," has brought the *Journal* of George Fox into ever increasing notice. The *Journal* is also a window through which we can look into the England of the seventeenth century. This paper will concern itself with our familiar towns and villages as they are connected with certain stages in the development, and certain events in the life of George Fox as related by himself in its pages.

He tells us he was born "in the month called July, 1624, at Drayton in the Clay in Leicestershire. My father's name was Christopher Fox : he was by profession a weaver, an honest man; and there was a seed of God in him. The neighbours called him 'Righteous Christer.' My mother was an upright woman; her maiden name was Mary Lago, of the family of the Lagos, and of the stock of the martyrs." From William Penn's preface to the *Journal*, we learn that Mary Fox was "accomplished above most of her degree in the place where she lived." There we are also told that, even as a child, George Fox had "a gravity and stayedness of spirit not usual in children," which was fos-

tered by his "being brought up to country business; and as he took most delight in sheep, so he was very skilful in them; an employment that very well suited his mind in several respects, both from its innocency and solitude, and was a just figure of his after ministry and service." [William Penn, Preface to the *Journal of George Fox*, 1694. Tercentenary Edition, p. xv.]

George Fox shared the experience of many other religious leaders in having a time of solitary seeking for the light. He felt it necessary to break off "all familiarity with old and young," and our Leicestershire fields saw him wandering in "great sorrows and troubles" and walking "many nights by himself." But he also sought help from the "priests" of the neighbouring villages. By "priest" he means anyone who receives a stipend, of whatever denomination. He went as far as Lutterworth, and Coventry and Northampton in his quest, and even up to London, but found no one who could enlighten him. The "priest" of Mancetter told him "to take tobacco and sing psalms." Nathaniel Stephens, the "priest" of his own village, though he began by recognising the remarkable quality of his young parishioner, soon alienated him by using in his Sunday sermons what George Fox had said to him "in discourse on weekdays." These puritan "priests" and the many scattered groups of various denominations were all eagerly occupied in discussing problems of religion. Never before or since in England was there a time when theories of life and doctrine, founded on a literal interpretation of the Bible, were more constantly spoken of. Some of these groups were seekers in truth, and were earnestly looking for fresh inspiration. To others, theological argument was an interesting exercise in dialectic, unrelated to life and reality.

The long search of Fox was a preparation for his great discovery, which seemed to come to him in audible words. "When my hopes in all men were gone so that there was nothing outwardly to help me then I heard a voice which said 'There is one even Christ Jesus that can speak to thy condition.'" From this all else followed as he was "gently led along." Religion was not a revelation of something that had happened once for all, long ago, contained in a book, however deeply inspired, but the continually renewed guidance of the spirit of God which was to affect every detail of daily life. This experience and his testing

of it in every kind of situation, had a wonderfully unifying effect on the man. Dr. Rufus M. Jones says, in his Preface to Dent's Tercentenary Edition of the *Journal*, that "We see in George Fox at first an unstable psychic constitution very much like that which comes to light in the biographies of many other mystics and prophets . . . There were times, especially in the early period of Fox's life, when there were evident signs of profound disturbance in him, but his positive spiritual experiences steadily tended to organise and construct his life and to give him poise, solidity and power." The rest of his life was an attempt to share his first-hand experience with men of all degrees. No difficulty or hardship, neither imprisonment in the awful prisons of those days, nor perils of land and sea, nor the possibility of death at the hands of mobs or justices hindered him from bringing men into the freedom in which he himself rejoiced. "There emerged a profound conviction which lasted all his life that God and man are essentially related because their spiritual frontiers are continuous and undivided." Hence assumptions of special privilege in things human and divine; customs which shut out the common man from his heritage, or seemed to question his human value, were challenged. Underneath the superficially tiresome scruples as to the removal of the hat in courtesy, or the use of "thee" and "thou," lay a deeper truth which time has robbed of its significance. Continental usage, though that is fast changing, preserves the same distinction as seventeenth century England, in keeping "you" for superiors, and "thou" for inferiors in social station. England may be said to have adopted Fox's principle, though we have levelled upwards rather than downwards.

Fox was twenty-three when his great liberating experience came to him, and very soon he began that sharing of the good news that was only to end with life itself forty-four years later. Such sharing often involved collision with the authorities.

One of his earliest public appearances was at Broughton Astley, where he spoke at a meeting appointed by the Baptists, and men felt brought into touch with Divine power.

Then, after he had been in Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire "I went into my own country Leicestershire again and came to Leicester." Here he heard of "a great meeting for a dispute wherein Presbyterians, Independents, Baptists and Common-

Prayermen were said to be all concerned" to be held in a "steeplehouse," (St. Martin's). The account in full is quoted by Mr. Skillington in his *History of Leicester*, pp. 129, 130. See also *Journal*, pp. 14, 15.

Some of the experiences that Fox went through were for the sake of others. One of the most arresting in Leicestershire is connected with the "Vale of Beavor." "One morning as I was sitting by the fire, a great cloud came over me, and a temptation beset me; but I sate still. And it was said 'All things come by nature;' and the elements and the stars came over me so that I was in a measure quite clouded with it. . . . And as I sate still under it and let it alone, a living hope arose in me and a true voice which said 'There is a living God which made all things' and immediately the cloud and temptation vanished away and life rose over it all; my heart was glad and I praised the living God. After some time I met with some people who had such a notion there was no God but that all things came by nature. . . . Then I saw that it was good that I had been through that exercise."

He came back to Drayton in 1654, when he was thirty, to visit his relations after three years absence. He was always on affectionate terms with his parents. Nathaniel Stephens, the Puritan incumbent of Fenny Drayton, had waited for his coming to have a great dispute for which he had engaged the help of another minister. There, in a great hall, the question of tithes and a free ministry was argued, and at one moment Stephens seems to have acknowledged that there was truth in what Fox said. We can still hear their voices speaking; "'But neighbours, this is the business. George Fox is come to the light of the sun and now he thinks to put out my starlight.' But I said 'Nathaniel, give me thy hand'; then I told him I would not quench the least measure of God in any, much less put out his starlight, if it were true starlight—light from the Morning Star.'" But this movement of understanding was checked when Fox went on to charge him "to preach no more for tithes or any hire." A week later Stephens, with the reinforcement of seven other priests and a gathering of several hundreds of people, met Fox again. The wonderful rampart of ancient yews that still surrounds the churchyard at Fenny

Drayton, and overhangs the old brick wall, must have seen a strange sight that day as first Fox, and then the seven priests, and then Fox again, shewed from the Scriptures the ground for their belief. We get another vivid touch: "My father in the flesh though he was a weaver and a follower of the priests, (he was churchwarden) thwacked his cane on the ground and said: 'well I see that he that will but stand to the truth, it will carry him out.'"

That same year Fox was arrested at Whetstone, just before a meeting, by seventeen troopers of Colonel Hacker's regiment. "I told the Marshall he might let all the Friends go, I would answer for them all, so he took me and let them go." He was brought before the "Colonel, his Major and Captains, a great company of them; and much discourse we had about the priests and meetings, for at this time there was noise of a plot against Oliver Cromwell." Both Colonel Hacker and Captain Drury, in whose charge he was sent up to the Protector in London, gave him several chances of regaining his liberty; but the condition attached, of giving up his special work, could not be accepted. The account of his subsequent intercourse with Oliver Cromwell, and the Protector's saying "Come again to my house, for if thou and I were but an hour of a day together, we should be nearer one to the other," is full of interest. George Fox was never lacking in courage, and the next year, 1655, he went back to Whetstone, in spite of Colonel Hacker's threat that if he returned to Leicestershire he would imprison him again; "but all was quiet there. Colonel Hacker's wife and his Marshall came to the meeting and were convinced."

Seven years later, in 1662, the longest, and perhaps the most dramatic, of the visits of George Fox to Leicester took place. The Fifth Monarchy Plot had stirred up fear in the Cavalier Parliament of the Restoration, and the Quaker Act of May, 1662 (St. 13 & 14, Cav. ii, Cols. i) was specially directed against the danger apprehended from these people, who refused to take the oath of allegiance and persisted in holding their meetings. In consequence, a storm of persecution broke out, and before long more than four thousand Friends were in prison. In spite of this, meetings continued to be held. Fox himself was arrested at a Friend's house at Swannington, and brought before the lord Beaumont of that day [Thomas, third viscount Beaumont of

Swords in the peerage of Ireland], who, in spite of every assurance that Fox had no connection with plots or conspiracies, insisted on sending him and four other Friends to Leicester jail. "But when they had brought us back to Swannington, being harvest-time it was hard to get anybody to go with us, for the people were loath to go with their neighbours to prison, especially in such a busy time. They would have given us our mittimus to carry ourselves to the jail; for it had been usual for constables to give Friends their own mittimuses (for they durst trust Friends) and they have gone themselves with them to the jailer. But we told them though our Friends had sometimes done so, yet we would not take this mittimus. . . . At last they hired a poor labouring man to go with us who was loath to go though hired. So we rode to Leicester . . . . declaring the truth as we rode in the fields and through the towns . . . . one woman Friend carried her wheel on her lap to spin on in prison; and the people were mightily affected." Space does not permit of quoting the whole vivid account from the *Journal*. It may be found in Thompson's *History of Leicester*, vol. i, pp. 422, 423. But we see the arrival of the strange little company at an inn where the master of the house was reluctant to let them go to prison and "being himself in commission, he sent for the lawyers in the town to advise with and would have taken up the mittimus and kept us in his own house. . . . But I told Friends it would be a great charge to lie at an inn; and many Friends and people would be coming to visit us and it might be hard for him to bear our having meetings in his house; besides we had many Friends in the prison already, and we had rather be with them. So we let the man know that we were sensible of his kindness and to prison we went." In the prison we see George Fox exercising the gift of sturdy common-sense, which, combined with his special qualities of insight and discernment, made him such an acute reader of character. While ready to suffer to the uttermost in the cause of truth he saw no object in submitting to extortion and illegal tyranny. So he took the opportunity of a visit from a Friend, William Smith, to make enquiries. "I asked him whether the jailer or his wife was master. He said the wife was master. . . . Wherefore I desired William Smith to acquaint her, if she would let us have a room, and leave it to us to give her what we would, it might be better for her. He went, and after some reasoning she consented."

During the time, that they were in prison, about a month, they had "a meeting every First Day with the debtors and felons in the prison and others out of the city and county, the jailer not meddling," though before he had been very cruel to the Friends in prison, and "would come up with his great quarter-staff and mastiff dog and pluck them down by the hair of the head, but his mastiff dog when he struck Friends would take the quarter-staff out of his hands instead of falling upon Friends." When the Sessions came they were brought before the Justices in the old Gild-hall (see note, vol. i, p. 423 of Thompson's *History of Leicester*). Fox shewed the same fearless front in defending their cause against perversions of justice, and the *Journal* makes us see the bewildered justices, the peevish, affronted jurymen and the great concourse of people who followed the prisoners on their way back to prison after they had been brought in guilty. This crowd had to be recalled to the court by the crier and bailiffs. "When we were in our chamber again at the prison after some time the jailer came to us . . . and said 'Gentlemen it is the court's pleasure that ye should all be set at liberty except those that are in for tithes, and you know that there are fees due to me ; but I shall leave it to you to give me what you will.'—Thus we were set at liberty suddenly, and passed everyone into his service."

The climax is significant:—"Leonard Fell and I went back to Swannington."

What was the appearance of this man whose personality could never be ignored, but whom friends and foes alike felt to have some special import? He was big and strong till his great frame was broken by the hardships of his imprisonments. He had bright, piercing eyes, and his voice could be heard by large crowds in the open air.

The Leicestershire references in the *Journal*, taken by themselves, would give a one-sided impression of George Fox. Apart from the account of his childhood and early youth, they deal with his outspoken upholding of truth as it appeared to him. The weaver's son did not mince matters in confounding his opponents. Sometimes his search for reality in heart and life made him cut short wordy discussions and second-hand statements with stern denunciation, after the manner of the Hebrew

prophets. He was also apt to see "judgments" in the sad ends which befell some of the opponents of "truth." Those who realise his greatness, and the greatness of his service to religious freedom and the liberty of the individual, and to integrity in the dealing of man with his neighbour, may regret his manner of expressing his convictions on certain occasions. But we must consider the habit of the age. The saintly Baxter can use amazing latitude in describing the pernicious Quaker and even a slight acquaintance with the polemical writing of the day shows that the language of George Fox would arouse no surprise in his hearers except in its application to high and low indiscriminately. His friend, William Penn, accustomed to the ways of court and society, says of him "He was a man that God endued with a clear and wonderful depth, a discerner of other men's spirits and very much a master of his own. And though the side of his understanding which lay next to the world, and especially the expression of it, might sound uncouth and unfashionable to nice ears, his matter was nevertheless very profound; and would not only bear to be often considered, but the more it was, the more weighty and instructing it appeared. Having been with him for weeks and months together on divers occasions, and that by night and by day, by sea and by land, in this and in foreign countries; I can say I never saw him out of his place or not a match for every service and occasion. For in all things he acquitted himself like a man; a divine and a naturalist and all of God Almighty's making,"

We have dwelt specially on some of the Leicestershire associations with George Fox and space does not allow us to follow him through his labours up and down the country, his terrible imprisonments in Derby jail, Lancaster and Scarborough castles, in Doomsdale at Launceston, the most horrible of all. That in Worcester prevented him from fulfilling his journey to Drayton to see his aged mother after three years absence in America, and it was there he heard of her death, hastened by the news of his arrest. "I did in verity love her as ever one could a mother," he says. The name Mary ffox appears in the Fenny Drayton register of burials for the year 1673, preserved among the Leicester Archidiaconal records. Neither can we dwell on his relations with Judge Fell of Swarthmore Hall, near Ulverston,

and his wife and family, and his late marriage with Margaret Fell, long after she had been a widow and had shared for years in the aspiration and the suffering of the Quaker movement ; nor all the work of establishing the Quaker community, that filled the years till his death in 1691.

Those who wish to know more of George Fox can follow all these things, and many more, in the pages of his *Journal*. The edition published by the Cambridge University Press in 1911 has most valuable notes by Norman Penney, F.S.A. Messrs. Dent have issued, this year, a one-volume edition of the *Journal* at the price of five shillings. This has a very able preface by Rufus M. Jones, LL.D., of Haverford, Pennsylvania, who sums up the various aspects of George Fox, and sets him in relation, not only to the movements of his own day, but also to the historical development of the prophetic type of which he is such a conspicuous example. It contains also the famous *Preface* by William Penn. In *The Beginnings of Quakerism* and *The Second Period of Quakerism* written by the late William C. Braithwaite, LL.B., and published by Macmillan, the subject and period are treated with the true scholar's sense of values and of historical perspective.

This paper embodies many facts and suggestions contributed by Mr. William H. Rippin, though I have studied the sources independently.