

Gleanings from the Correspondence of George Eliot

"I WAS brought up in the Church of England," wrote George Eliot towards the end of her life, "and have never joined any other religious society, but I have had close acquaintance with many dissenters of various sects, from Calvinists and Baptists to Unitarians." Her correspondence has now been edited in seven sumptuous volumes by Professor Haight and provides a number of references of interest to Baptists.

From her thirteenth to her sixteenth year she was at the boarding school in Coventry kept by Mary (1800-67) and Rebecca (1803-73) Franklin, the daughters of the Baptist minister, the Rev. Francis Franklin (1772-1852). Her letters make clear the debt she felt she owed to the school, and in particular to Miss Rebecca. In 1841, six years after she had left and when a new partner was being sought, she wrote: "The Misses Franklin are and have been enduring a complication of trials." Four years later she had Miss Rebecca to stay with her. In 1849 she sent her love to the sisters. Eight years later, she made enquiries as to how they were getting on, and when, in 1873 Miss Rebecca died, after a long period of mental weakness, she wrote: "She was always particularly good and affectionate to me, and I had much happiness in her as my teacher."

It must have been while she was at the Franklin school that George Eliot heard and met John Howard Hinton (1791-1873), of Devonshire Square Baptist Church. In 1860 she came to know his son, James Hinton, and recalled having breakfast with the father, whom she rightly described as "a Baptist minister of considerable note among Baptists."

George Dawson (1821-76) of Birmingham, was another Baptist minister with whom she was acquainted. In 1847, when his doctrines proved too liberal for his congregation at Graham Street, his friends built Dawson a new church where, as Professor Haight puts it, "elements of several sects were combined." On Dawson's death, George Eliot wrote: "George Dawson was strongly associated for me with Rosehill—not to speak of the General Baptist Chapel where we all heard him preach for the first time (to us)."

There are a number of references in the correspondence to Spurgeon. George Eliot shared the general interest in the great

preacher. While on holiday in the Scilly Islands in June, 1857, she records that "the excitement we saw in the town was owing to the expectation of Mr. Spurgeon, who was going to preach for the benefit of an indebted chapel." The following year she writes to a friend: "Your account of Spurgeon tallies with all I had conjectured from newspaper accounts and from one or two of his printed sermons which I have read—also with his portrait. The only thing that shook me with a doubt was Ruskin's testimony, but Ruskin is a man of strange whims." Ruskin had become a frequent hearer of Spurgeon at the Surrey Gardens Music Hall and contributed 100 guineas to the building fund for the Metropolitan Tabernacle.

In 1859, John Blackwood, the publisher of George Eliot's novels, wrote a long letter to George Henry Lewes after hearing Spurgeon preach. "His voice and elocution seem to me to explain his popularity," he said. "They are wonderful. As for his matter, I certainly shall not go to hear him again. As for doctrine, he announced in the most unhesitating terms the miserable hopeless creed of the extreme Calvinists that men are sent into the world preordained to Heaven or t'other place and that no conduct on their part can have the slightest influence on their future fate." But George Eliot continued anxious to hear Spurgeon for herself. No opportunity occurred until November, 1870, at the time of the Franco-German War. She was then fifty-one years of age and in poor health. Spurgeon was still only thirty-six. In writing to a friend afterwards, she expressed her satisfaction at being at last able to satisfy her curiosity, but her verdict was unfavourable.

"My impressions fell below the lowest judgment I ever heard passed upon him," she wrote. "He has the gift of a fine voice, very flexible and various; he is admirably fluent and clear in his language, and every now and then his enunciation is effective. . . . And the doctrine. It was a libel on Calvinism, that it should be presented in such a form. . . . It was the most superficial, grocer's-back-parlour view of Calvinistic Christianity; and I was shocked to find how low the mental pitch of our society must be, judged by standard of this man's celebrity. . . . Just now, with all Europe stirred by events, that make every conscience tremble after some great principle as a consolation and guide, it was too exasperating to sit and listen to doctrine that seemed to look no farther than the retail Christian's tea and muffins."

It was hardly likely that Spurgeon would appeal to one who, however sensitive her spirit in certain matters, had renounced the conventional in conduct as well as thought. That her description gives only a partial and prejudiced picture of Spurgeon as a preacher is shown by his influence over a number of outstanding Victorians of shrewd judgment.

Among those frequently entertained by George Eliot and G. H. Lewes, usually at Sunday tea-parties, were Dr. Joseph Frank Payne and his brother, John Burnell Payne. They were grandsons of John Dyer, the first full-time secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society, and first cousins once removed of Mary and Rebecca Franklin (see *Baptist Quarterly*, XIII, pp. 253f., 321f., XV, pp. 379f.). John Burnell Payne, who became a deacon in the Church of England, shared G. H. Lewes's interest in physiology and literature. When he called in February, 1869, he showed George Eliot one of the strange diaries of his grandfather, remarking that his use of evangelical language and allusions "showed refinement of nature." According to his notes of the conversation, George Eliot replied: "I have often remarked that people use technical religious language, quotations from the Bible especially, with a certain distinction of taste founded on their character and organisation. Your grandfather's sister, Mrs. Franklin (i.e. the wife of Francis Franklin, mother of Mary and Rebecca) was a remarkable instance. Her mind and conversation were impregnated with her impressions of the best religious books and of the Bible, but her quotations were always really significant and appropriate."*

Of Dr. J. F. Payne, the *Dictionary of National Biography* says: "Among the physicians of London there was not many of greater popularity in his time." There are records of his visits to George Eliot in 1869, 1871, 1872, 1874 and 1876. In a letter to him in 1876, she expresses her sympathy on the death of his mother, Eliza (Dyer) Payne, a remarkable woman, who should be remembered along with Mrs. Trinder, the Misses Franklin and Mrs. Todd among the Baptists who advanced the cause of female education. A verse about Martha Trinder, of Northampton, was probably applicable to them all:

"For well she studied every youthful mind,
 Ru'd by a smile, or by a frown controll'd,
 Kind to the timid—to the erring kind,
 And only to unfeeling folly cold."

ERNEST A. PAYNE

* I owe this quotation from the diary of John Burnell Payne to Mrs. Evelyn Murphy, one of Dr. J. F. Payne's daughters.