PILGRIMAGE: DOROTHY RICHARDSON (1873 - 1957) AND QUAKERS

Dorothy Richardson's groundbreaking autobiographical novel *PILGRIMAGE* [1] is one of the landmarks of modernist writing. Few fictional heroines can be identified as closely with their author as Miriam Henderson with Dorothy Richardson. In what she preferred to call a pool rather than a stream of consciousness she sought the active soul in crystallisations of inner and outer experience, snapping each moment like a camera taking itself, trying for and sometimes achieving , cosmic clicks, those rare moments when seeker and sought are one. The pilgrimage is circular - the moment at which the thirteen volumes [2] of the novel end is also the point of time at which she began writing. *PILGRIMAGE* spans the years from about 1890 to 1912 though Dorothy Richardson was working on it for most of her long life, the distance between what she was writing about and the time of writing becoming greater and greater. She found her leitmotif in her first published book *QUAKERS PAST AND PRESENT* [3]. Herself something of a freelance mystic, she was drawn to Quakers because, as she says in her introduction:

> To the present writer George Fox appeals not only by the inherent strength of his mystical genius, not only because amongst his fellows in the mystical family he is, characteristically, the practical Western layman, the market place witness for the spiritual consciousness in every man, but also because he is essentially the English mystic.....he stands for liberty, for trust and toleration in a day of unchallenged religious and civil antagonisms and authoritarianisms. He stands for love, for the essential harmony of the creation in a day when warfare was the unquestioned and "divinely appointed" method of settling international differences and litigation and debate the accepted steersmen of private relationships...This reality that we ignorantly worship, the mystics have declared to us as goodness, beauty and truth. Fox called it God in man, the seed, the divine light.....

It was her Russian-Jewish emigré friend Benjamin Grad [4] whom she loved but felt unable to marry, who introduced her to Quakers. In

1896 he took her to the London Meeting House in St.Martin's Lane attended by many distinguished members of the Society of Friends: J.Bevan Braithwaite, Edmund Harvey, Frederic Taylor, Silvanus Thompson FRS, Anne Warner Marsh - a Philadelphia Friend - and Mary Jane Fox. Though the people at the meeting struck Dorothy as truly religious - she was particularly impressed by the status of equality accorded to women - this chance visit remained an isolated occasion for the time being. It was not until about six years later in 1902, after an affair with H.G.Wells [5] ended disastrously in a miscarriage and took her to the verge of a nervous breakdown, that she made contact with Quakers again. Again it was through the unfailing friendship of Benjamin Grad that she was introduced to the Penroses [6], a Sussex Quaker farming family.

They lived at Mount Pleasant, Windmill .Hill [7,] Herstmonceux. (Mount Pleasant stood on Windmill Hill until 1967 when it came down to make room for a housing estate.) The family had originated in Cornwall, moved to Ireland in the 17th century when they became Quakers, went from Ireland to Norfolk, then to London and from London to Sussex where they ran a flourishing market garden. There were eight children, six boys and two girls. At the time Dorothy Richardson joined the family, three of the six brothers - George, Robert [8] and Arthur [9] were unmarried and living at home. The younger girl had died, the elder Sara Eliza [10] was also unmarried and living at home. She was a capable, all-round sort of woman, had done missionary work in London and ran a school for local children in Herstmonceux known as SCHOOL HOUSE. She was also fond of music, a fondness that was not quite in keeping with the strict Quaker practice of those days. The penultimate volume of PILGRIMAGE: *DIMPLE HILL* contains the best account I know of in fiction of Quaker faith and practice.

Of the brothers, Robert, fourteen years older than Dorothy, was the one to whom she was most immediately drawn. Arthur, only four years older, was a less dominating figure than his brother. He married Maud Kitson in 1914 and continued living at Mount Pleasant running the nursery garden. He also continued the warmth and welcome of the Quaker household. It was this warmth that was most important to Dorothy who longed to be part of a family. Though she had been born, the brightest of four sisters, into a well-to-do family, her father went bankrupt and her mother committed suicide before Dorothy was twenty. She had had to survive on her wits: as teacher, governess, dentist's receptionist, reviewer, translator and essayist. It is difficult today to gauge the courage of a girl of seventeen in 1890, brought up to the good life, who took herself off by herself to teach

in Germany. She survived, but she never recovered from the social disorientation.

The Penroses placed trust and confidence in her right from the start so that what were to have been a few weeks' recuperation turned into a three year stay. With them she was released from the hurly-burly of London life (which she loved when she was in top form) with its intellectual, professional, emotional and sexual demands. Here, in the tranquillity of the Sussex Downs, she gained an insight into the principles and proportions of Quaker life. The family gave her small jobs to do and encouraged her to think of herself as one of them. It was a healing relief to be staying with a family of all whom liked and respected each other, whose way of life, though far from opulent or adventurous, ran smoothly without financial threat. Geared to the farming year, they did not torture themselves with questions about the meaning or origin of life, they drew their strength from a closely knit Quaker community. Dorothy Richardson flourished in the serene rhythm of their days, gradually finding her way into it:

> She was ready to raise her head. Inexperienced in this form of grace before meat she raised first her head to discover whether the other heads were still bent and found them all, as if with one consent, recovering the upright. As if here, too, as in every human activity, there seemed to be, was, a concrete spiritual rhythm...everybody had emerged from the silence luminous...but within the depths of the lamplight, moving at the heart of its still radiance, was the core of the shared mystery; far away within the visible being of light.[11]

She went with the family to the Herstmonceux Meeting House with its small well kept garden which had been the Quaker burial ground. Built in 1734, it stands on Bedlam Green, so called after the asylum which was once there. Persecution of members of the Society of Friends had died down. In 1723 nineteen Sussex Quakers had signed an Affirmation at Lewes Quarter Session and were no longer imprisoned for refusing to take an oath. George Fox had first visited Sussex in 1655, and the first recorded Quaker Meeting took place at Beeston in 1662. By the close of the seventeenth century Herstmonceux had begun to be the focal point of Quaker activity in that part of the country.

Dorothy Richardson had been brought up in the Anglican Church though she had never felt completely at home in it. In the Quaker Meeting she felt less of an outsider than she had ever done in Church:

> The room was utterly still. Half-way through the drawing of a deep releasing breath, she was obliged to hamper the automatic movements of her limbs that with one accord were set on rearranging themselves. Stealthily, her body straightened to sit upright, her head moved to relax the supporting muscles of the neck and came to rest a little bent... Even a beginning of concentration held an irresistible power. The next breath drew itself so deeply that she could prevent its outgoing from becoming a long, audible sigh only by holding and releasing it very gradually. It left her poised between the inner and the outer worlds, still aware of her surroundings and their strangeness and of herself as an alien element brought in by the sympathetic understanding of the Quaker enterprise...To remain always centred, operating one's life, operating even its wildest enthusiasms from where everything fell into proportion and clear focus. To remain always in possession of a power that was not one's own and that yet one's inmost being immediately recognised as its centre...be still and know. Still in mind as well as body. Not meditating for meditation implies thought. Tranquil, intense concentration that reveals first its own difficulty, the many obstacles and one's weakness and leads presently to contemplation, recognition...Reaching down once more into the featureless inner twilight, she found the outdoor world obtruding, assailing her ears with mid-morning chirrupings, the sudden chackle of a scared thrush in flight across a garden, sounds from distant farms and meadows. External contemplation, divorced from sympathetic imagination, had closed the pathway to recovery of the state whence a fresh beginning would be possible. Each effort to be still brought the outdoor world to mind. After all, it was her first Sunday...Who was she, that she should expect to find herself all at once in the presence of God?[12]

The outer eye continues its explorations sharpened by the concentrated attention of the gathering, nor do thoughts turn entirely inwards. The moment the silence is interrupted by words she feels something snap. For her, the verbal ministry of Meeting usually struck a discordant note.

Dorothy Richardson emerged from her association with the Penroses a fully fledged writer. They had considered her a Quaker in all but name but she never took the decisive step of joining the Religious Society of Friends. As a writer, she held herself intact in a perceptive state of mind in order to transmute into experimental fictional form everything that had happened to her. She was a seeker

and often she was as surprised as others by the form her writing took. When she was writing she travelled *down to that centre where everything is seen in perspective, serenely.*[13] Throughout her far from carefree life she never allowed her sensibilities to be blunted, her sense of wonder remained undiminished. Her friend John Cowper Powys, to whom *DIMPLE HILL* is dedicated, put his finger on the pulse of her writing when he says:

> Dorothy Richardson is our first pioneer in a completely new direction. What she has done has never been done before. She has drawn her inspiration...from the abyss of the feminine subconscious. Thus in estimating the ultimate value of her *PILGRIMAGE*, the task of appreciative criticism itself becomes an experiment in spiritual metempsychosis.[13]

Quakers had set Dorothy Richardson free to find and fulfil herself as a writer. In the end her writing remained her church.

Eva Tucker

NOTES

1. *PILGRIMAGE*: Virago Modern Classics 1979 ((Paperback).
2. First Editions: *Pointed Roofs* (1915) Duckworth
   Backwater (1916) Duckworth
   Honeycomb (1917) Duckworth
   The Tunnel (1919) Duckworth
   Interim (1919) Duckworth
   Deadlock (1921) Duckworth
   Revolving Lights (1923) Duckworth
   The Trap (1925) Duckworth
   Oberland (1927) Duckworth
   Dawn's Left Hand (1931) Duckworth
   Clear Horizon (1935) J.M. Dent & Cresset Press
   Collected Editions: *PILGRIMAGE* (including *Dimple Hill*) 4 vols 1938, J.M. Dent & Cresset Press; A. Knopf, New York.
   PILGRIMAGE (including *March Moonlight*) 4 vols 1967, J.M. Dent; A. Knopf, New York.
3. *QUAKERS PAST AND PRESENT* (1914) Constable
4. Michael Shatov of *PILGRIMAGE*
5. Hypo Wilson of *PILGRIMAGE*
6. The Roscorlas of *PILGRIMAGE: Dimple Hill*
7. Dimple Hill of *PILGRIMAGE*
8. Richard of *Dimple Hill*
9. Alfred of *Dimple Hill*
10. Mary Rachel of *Dimple Hill*
11. *Dimple Hill*, (Virago Modern Classics), p. 469.
12. *March Moonlight* (Virago Modern Classics, Vol. 4), p. 619.
13. J.C. Powys, *Dorothy Richardson* (Village Press 1931), p. 8.