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Scrapbook Material

Hannah Whital Smith

1983

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Phila Inquirer Sept 27
1960



Hannah Whitall Smith

Letters of a Noted Quaker

PHILADELPHIA QUAKER: HANNAH
WHITALL SMITH. Edited by Logan
Pearsall Smith. Harcourt, Brace & Co.:
New York. 234 pp. \$3.

BY RICHMOND P. MILLER

To be returned to MR
PRESIDENT TRUMAN last spring,
in dedicating the first of 52 vol-
umes in the gigantic collection of let-
ters written by Thomas Jefferson, laid
down the dictum that "we need to col-
lect and publish the writings of the
men and women who have made con-
tributions to the development of our
democracy."

Jefferson wrote over 25,000 letters,
and in one of them said: "The letters
of a person form the only full and
genuine journal of one's life."

No count has been made of the let-
ters of Hannah Whitall Smith, of
Philadelphia, London and Oxford. But
shortly after her death, her prolific
literary son, in going over her papers,
came to the conclusion that "my
mother was a most remarkable and
brilliant letter-writer." So he made
a selection, and what fascinating read-
ing comes over the signature of
H. W. S.!

Lifetime of Letters

"Now dear Annie, I am going to tell
thee something, though I have not the
least idea thee will believe it." That
she wrote when she was aged 15. At
the end of her life, aged 79, she wrote:
"Our garden is a perfect show with
daffodils, and primroses, and blue
forget-me-nots and early tulips. Lo-
gan took me round this morning in
my wheeled chair. It is too lovely for
words. And such a heavenly day . . .
rich beyond words in wisdom and
goodness and love."

In between these two letters is a host

of them revealing a vigorous person-
ality representative of so many 19th
century women leaders who helped
mold the traditions and character of
our own background today.

Ambitions Realized

"I think I would love to be a min-
ister and make very noble sacrifices—
and to be married and have 13 chil-
dren."

Well, she did become married at 19,
was a renowned speaker at religious
meetings, had a family of famous chil-
dren, wrote books including a best-
seller with sales well over a million,
and learned the secret of growing old
gracefully.

A parade of well-known names with
comments on them runs through her
letters. One daughter was married to
the philosopher, Bertrand Russell,
another to the art critic, Bernard
Berenson. H. W. S. was at home
wherever she traveled, and in what-
ever circle she found herself or moved
vicariously with her children.

Logan Pearsall Smith has provided
copious and useful notes just where
they are needed to identify person-
alities and places portrayed in the let-
ters.

Biographical Preface

Robert Gathorne-Hardy has written
a brief and illuminating biographical
preface that is an essential to place
H. W. S. in her proper milieu.

First issued in England, the book is
now published with rearranged con-
tents, a title changed, and in type and
binding most fitting and commendable.

Here is humor and realism, together
with depth of living. Hannah Whitall
Smith must have been like a refresh-
ing breath of cool atmosphere wher-
ever she went. These are remark-
able letters written by a remarkable
woman.