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Hannah Whitall Smith

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1965



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 volumes in the gigantic collection of letters written by Thomas Jefferson, laid down the dictum that "we need to collect and publish the writings of the men and women who have made contributions 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 letters 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 reading 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. Logan 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 personality 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 minister and make very noble sacrifices—and to be married and have 13 children."

Well, she did become married at 19, was a renowned speaker at religious meetings, had a family of famous children, 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 whatever 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 personalities and places portrayed in the letters.

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 contents, 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 refreshing breath of cool atmosphere wherever she went. These are remarkable letters written by a remarkable woman.