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Scrapbook Material

Hannah Whital Smith

1983

Box 10_26 (Scrapbook Materials- A Religious Rebel Reviews-1949)

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Unorthodox Apostle ^{Sunday} ~~Obituary~~

A Religious Rebel: The Letters of "H.W.S." Edited by Logan Pearsall Smith, introduction by Robert Gathorne-Hardy. (Nisbet. 10s. 6d.)

By HUGH TREVOR-ROPER

Oct. 16. 49

SAINTLINESS, that rare and exquisite virtue, is essentially natural and simple; unfortunately it is often dull. How delightful to find it, still the genuine substance, and yet gay, almost worldly in form! Hannah Whitall Smith, like her husband, Robert Pearsall Smith, was a Philadelphia Quaker, and her religious works have sold by the million. The proselytising journeys of this famous missionary couple, the intermixture of worldly splendour, real piety, theological mysteries, and the unfortunate debacle which destroyed the faith of the husband but enlarged and confirmed that of the wife, have been brilliantly described by their son, Logan Pearsall Smith, in his autobiography, "Unforgotten Years."

Now her own letters, collected by him and edited with an admirable memoir by his friend Mr. Gathorne-Hardy, give another, more direct glimpse into that to us barely credible world, the evangelical aristocracy of

Victorian England. There, among the wealth and splendour of high society, among preaching peeresses and cracked revivalists, this incorruptibly natural Quaker apostle moved like an Olympian spirit, in it and enjoying it, Ascot Races, Henley Regatta and all, and yet not of it: a lover of un-Quakerish elegance and all the diversity of the world, and yet immune from all temptation by its "vanities" (such as the intellectual life at the home of her son-in-law Bernard Berenson); an oracle whose gay unorthodox advice would often cause the grinding of teeth in pious homes.

"H. W. S." was the mother of three distinguished children, all of whom abandoned Quaker orthodoxy for a more literary, more intellectual world. These delightful letters, with their lucidity and occasional quiet malice, show that she, too, was half-way over on the road from perfect orthodoxy to perfect style.