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Frances Williams Browin:

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—ELIZABETH B. WELLS

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Frances Williams Browin: The Editor Retires

By Elizabeth B. Wells

OBSERVERS from "outside," including many puzzled Catholics, often speculate on how so few Quakers can accomplish so much. At the same time the reporters who cover Yearly Meeting and other such gatherings of Friends overlook at least one source of Quaker power when they wryly dismiss the gray-haired ladies who fill so many of those uncomfortable benches. These women of uncertain age are usually well-dressed but not conspicuously fashionable, despite the occasional flash of a red hat or coat, and they pretty well typify what the New York press refers to, not always in a complimentary tone, as a Philadelphia lady. Somehow the reporters never catch the dry wit and surprising concerns of these intrepid Quakers or realize the startling experiences they may have had or be having in the service of their concerns—in many professions and in various parts of the world.

Certainly they wouldn't pick Frances Williams Browin out of the crowd at Yearly Meeting or the Cape May Conference as a boldly creative and highly professional editor and writer during most of her adult life. The slender ladylike figure who scurried around among the attenders, quietly buttonholing prospective contributors to the Journal, always spoke in a low voice, but she asked questions that could be slightly impertinent when necessary. And her remarks usually made sparks, whether she was expressing an opinion (always positive), exerting pressure (not always gentle), or making a humorous aside (often disturbing). For in her amiable way she can be tart, unexpected, even prejudiced (in the right direction), then as suddenly disarmingly warm and sensitive.

As an editor she was always the professional, which is the highest accolade the many pros on the Journal Board of Managers can give to one of their own. She was so entirely committed to putting out the best possible magazine, such a perfectionist, even such a driver, that her closest colleagues often felt that we knew the spirited editor far better than the Quaker lady. She always kept us so on our toes that we never had time to savor that other Frances.

On her retirement, as we continue the Journal without her authoritative and intuitive sureness, we begin to wonder about this symbol of Quaker power and how she always kept so fresh and daring that creativity she brought to the development of ideas and writers for the magazine. As a career woman, she had been through the mill—from free-lance writer to editor of books, from ghost writer to book writer in her own name. So much a professional that this interviewer had to be constantly alert to keep Frances from interviewing the interviewer.

We knew of course that she was the widow of Beverly M. Browin, Philadelphia businessman who died in 1962. But we were a little surprised when she replied to our comment about her career professionalism, "But my marriage was the forefront of my life—not the background." And in describing the years with Beverly Browin she not only made that point but explained quite a good deal about the venturesomeness of her editorship.

Born into a Quaker family in Media, Pennsylvania; educated at Friends' Central School and Swarthmore College; related as sister, cousin, aunt, and in-law to more Quakers than we could keep track of, Frances Williams Browin never let herself be hemmed in by either Philadelphia or Quakerism. Shortly after graduating from Swarthmore she tackled New York, as many young writers do. There she had little trouble making her way in the writing business for four years, and there she met and married Beverly Browin, a young Kentuckian who had also come to New York to make his way.

The buoyancy that has stamped Frances as an editor also stamped the Browins' life from the start. With little money but plenty of confidence, they acquired a big old Oakland, fitted it out with camping gear and a bed across the seats, and set out to see America. They worked their way around the country for a year, getting jobs to keep them going—picking apples, reading proof, checking hats in a hotel, or whatever. They stopped a while in New Orleans, finally crossed to Los Angeles, made their way up the West Coast, spent a while in Seattle. (That was a wonderful time for young vagabonds—in the late 20's when the roads weren't too crowded with cars and wove intimately through villages and circled fields or cut across pastures—often with gates to be opened and closed. Remember?)

Eventually the Browins wound up back in Philadelphia on a visit to Frances' family, not meaning to stay. But Beverly got a good job here, so they settled down—or what passed for settling to them. During a good many of those years they went to Kentucky twice a year to visit Beverly's mother. Mostly by car, but always by a different route—to Kentucky via Canada or Florida, for instance, or by whatever place they hadn't seen before.

In between the car trips, they bicycled and tramped over the hills and dales of Pennsylvania, canoed on the streams and rivers. They explored the Delaware Canal on foot from Morrisville to Easton. There they first saw the house at Lumberville they later bought and worked on and in for the rest of their life together. Here on a lovely Bucks County bluff they spent their weekends and

summers. The balance of the week they lived in the Spruce Street apartment in Philadelphia where Frances did much of her writing and Beverly could come home for lunch from his office at Broad and Walnut.

Along the way Frances served a five-year stretch as assistant editor of the *Friends Intelligencer* when Sue Yerkes was editor. Later she was assistant to William Hubben on the FRIENDS JOURNAL, and then in 1963, on William's retirement, she took over the editorship.

Between these periods in Quaker journalism, she served in other roles, including a stint as one of Lippincott's medical editors. Then she was drafted to collaborate with Dr. Seale Harris on a biography of the discoverer of insulin, titled *Banting's Miracle.* She also collaborated with Dr. Harris on *Woman's Surgeon,* the life story of Dr. J. Marion Sims, who devised a famous bladder operation and founded the Woman's Hospital in New York City. Both are big, impressive books.

Her own books include several written for 12-year olds: *Captured Words,* the story of Sequoia, who taught the Cherokee Indians to read and write in their own language (and for whom the big trees in California are named); *Ginger's Cave,* a novel about an archeological dig in Arizona: *Big Bridge to Brooklyn,* The Roebling Story; *The Whozits,* about two families, new Poles and old Americans; *Looking for Orlando,* a story of the Underground Railroad and Quakers in the Kennett Square area of Pennsylvania (also published in England by Oxford); *Coins Have Tales to Tell,* American history as told through its coinage.

Her articles have appeared in *The New York Times, Christian Science Monitor, American Heritage, The Christian Century, Saturday Review,* and others.

When Frances came to the *Journal* as editor she specified that she would stay for only five years; her retirement on September 1 was long planned. Retirement? To travel, garden, or sit in the sun? No indeed! Frances has books to write, mostly biography and history—and her agent in New York is pushing her.

Luckily her apartment on Spruce Street is just around the corner from the Historical Society Library where she expects to spend much of her "free" time. And when Frances talks about her future ventures in the library her face lights up with a quick smile, giving us a glimpse backward into both the Friends' Central years and the vagabonding—and on into an exciting future, exploring in that most audacious of all frontiers, a great library. Retiring? Not Frances!

Elizabeth B. Wells, formerly on the staff of the *New York Sun* and a columnist for the Bell Syndicate, is well known to Friends as a member of Newtown (Pa.) Meeting and a member of the FRIENDS JOURNAL board of managers. She also helps her husband, Charles A. Wells, in publishing the newsletter, *Between the Lines.*

Discipleship or Curatorship?

By R. W. TUCKER

There is a dire warning, somewhere in Scripture, about the extreme unwisdom of tempting God. Its point is all too graphically demonstrated by a fire at Shrewsbury Meeting House in New Jersey. When I visited there this summer for the annual Shrewsbury Lecture, the Meeting had just been presented by the town with a highly commendatory plaque by which members of the Meeting were disturbed; the theme of meeting for worship was: "Are we organized for purposes of discipleship or of curatorship?"

One Friend said he sometimes thought it would be a good thing if the meeting house burned down. "I'm no arsonist, of course," he said, but suppose the town had not been first settled by Friends? Suppose the Meeting did not occupy a historic building, but met in a storefront? Would the town recognize its accomplishments then? Would it, indeed, *have* any accomplishments? If so, and if it were truly faithful to what the Lord asked of it, would not those accomplishments be more likely to bring it obloquy than praise? The Meeting seemed highly united around the view that its history and its historic building, valued though they were, should be regarded as frills, secondary to the purposes of radical discipleship.

So only a few weeks later the interior of the meeting house (including the controversial plaque?) was gutted by fire, I am told, and one wall has collapsed. For all I know, maybe by now Shrewsbury Friends are indeed meeting in a storefront. One is reminded of the Rufus Jones story about the farmer who said his evening prayers next to a dry stone wall, invariably ending by requesting that if his prayers be unworthy, let the wall fall upon him. But when one evening some naughty boys actually did push the wall down upon him, he sat among the rubble, raised his face indignantly to heaven, and cried, "Lord, thee ought to know when I'm only joking!"

I am sure Shrewsbury Friends are terribly disheartened by their disaster. I am equally sure they were totally sincere in feeling they had functions more important than historicity and curatorship. Now events have called their bluff. Can they rise to the challenge? Or will they divert all their energies for the next several years to rebuilding a museum? This is not only a Shrewsbury question; there are hundreds of other Meetings where the same confrontation with principle could usefully be forced upon Friends.

R. W. Tucker, a frequent contributor to the JOURNAL, not only has a concern for the preservation and use of historic Meeting houses, but is interested in tracing Quaker roots in other groups. In a recent letter he wrote, "The Episcopal Church across the street from Shrewsbury Meeting was the parish where George Keith, the Quaker heretic, finally settled down to be first rector of."