

THE ANGEL PARADOX: ELIZABETH FRY AND THE ROLE OF GENDER  
AND RELIGION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN

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To my parents, Rudie and Carol Matheuszik  
and in loving memory of  
Kay Emery and Alice Ann Herzon

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All illustrations appear courtesy of The Library of the Religious Society of Friends, London.



**Figure 1:** Elizabeth Fry, by George Richmond (1843). Courtesy of The Library of the Religious Society of Friends, London.

## INTRODUCTION

In December 1812 Stephen Grellet, a Quaker minister from the United States, arrived in London on a religious mission. One of the main objectives of his visit was to minister to the poor and laboring class, and to that end he held several large meetings for worship for the unemployed and working poor. On New Year's Eve he preached at Devonshire House, the large Quaker meetinghouse in Bishopsgate, to hundreds of weavers from Spitalfields.<sup>1</sup> Also preaching that day was Elizabeth Fry, the 32-year-old wife of a tea merchant and banker from the neighboring borough, the City of London.<sup>2</sup> Although she was a relatively new minister—she first began preaching in late 1809—Fry was already a respected minister within the Quaker society; she had been formally recorded as a minister in March 1811.<sup>3</sup>

Several weeks after the service at Devonshire House Grellet—together with William Allen and William Forster, two London Quakers who were well-known for their philanthropy to the poor and involvement in social-justice causes—visited inmates at the local jails and prisons, including Newgate, London's main prison.<sup>4</sup> Grellet was troubled by the conditions he observed on

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Seebohm, ed., *Life and Gospel Labours of Stephen Grellet*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Henry Longstreeth, 1862), 216. Not all of those attending had come to hear Grellet preach. Grellet noted that some believed that the meeting had been convened to distribute bread, and that their protests threatened to disrupt the service. Order was restored, however, after William Allen, a local Friend who frequently provided food for the poor, explained that the meeting was a religious service. According to Grellet's journal, it does not appear that this misapprehension led many to leave, as he again characterized the crowd as "dense."

<sup>2</sup> *Life of William Allen, with Selections from his Correspondence*, vol. 1 (London: Charles Gilpin, 1846), 158–59.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 14 March, 1811, the Library of the Religious Society of Friends (hereafter LRSF).

<sup>4</sup> Prison visiting was a long-standing practice within the Quaker community; its origins date to the beginning of the Religious Society of Friends in the mid-seventeenth century, when many of its members were imprisoned for their beliefs. By 1660 some individual meetings were already

the women's side of Newgate prison.<sup>5</sup> The facilities were dangerously overcrowded, with approximately 300 women (some with their infants or young children) crammed into two wards and two cells measuring, in total, roughly 190 square yards in size.<sup>6</sup> This space was both their living and sleeping quarters; at night they slept in three horizontal tiers, one group on the floor with two groups in hammocks, while during the day the hammocks were rolled up. Not surprisingly, Grellet found the air so foul that it was "almost insupportable." The inmates were not segregated either by age or the type of crime committed, nor was there segregation between those accused of a crime and those convicted. There was no prison clothing allotted to the women, which meant that those who had sold or pledged their clothes for food or drink wore little more than rags. The prison offered no opportunity for employment, so they spent their time drinking, gambling, playing cards, fortune-telling, dancing,

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sending lists of the "sufferings" of their members at the hand of the government to the clerk of the London Yearly Meeting. In 1675 Friends set up a committee, the Meeting for Sufferings, to collect reports from all local meetings about members of the Society who had been imprisoned, fined or had property seized in cases where practicing their beliefs put them at variance with the law. Quakers published a yearly report of their sufferings because they believed that it was their duty to bring truth to light. Exposing their oppression reinforced the Quakers' already strong bonds of community. Quakers also believed that shining a light on government persecution of Quakers might lead the government to repent their actions; failing that, publicizing Quaker sufferings might stir up public opinion, which could put pressure on the government to change their ways. After imprisonment of Quakers and distraints on their property eased, the Meeting for Sufferings evolved; Quakers' concerns for social justice causes such as the anti-slavery campaign, poor relief, and education were expressed via the Meeting for Sufferings. John Punshon, *Portrait in Grey: A Short History of the Quakers*, 2nd ed. (London: Quaker Books, 2006), 100 and 107-108; and William C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism*, ed. Henry J. Cadbury (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 281-85. Though by the late eighteenth century Quakers were rarely imprisoned for their religious beliefs, some traveling ministers had continued the practice of prison visiting.

<sup>5</sup> Seebohm, *Stephen Grellet*, 1:220-24.

<sup>6</sup> *Sketch of the Origin and Results of Ladies' Prison Associations, with Hints for the Formation of Local Associations* (London: John and Arthur Arch, 1827), 2. Grellet estimated that there were between four and five hundred women incarcerated in Newgate during his visit; however Fry and other contemporary sources place the number around 300. Seebohm, *Stephen Grellet*, 1:223. At the time, the inmates were responsible for their own cooking and washing, which also took place in these rooms.

singing, begging from visitors, fighting with one another, dressing up in men's clothing, and "reading improper books."<sup>7</sup>

Grellet was even more disturbed by the state of the sick room. "I was astonished beyond description," he wrote in his journal, "at the mass of woe and misery I beheld. I found many very sick, lying on the bare floor or on some old straw, having very scanty covering over them, though it was quite cold; and there were several children born in the prison among them, almost naked."<sup>8</sup>

Forster and Grellet knew that the Frys were spending the winter at their London residence in St. Mildred's Court, a ten minute walk from Newgate, so they called on her and entreated her to visit the prison and help the female prisoners, especially with regard to their clothing. After inspecting the conditions herself, Fry and Anna Buxton, a fellow Quaker and the sister of Fry's brother-in-law, Thomas Fowell Buxton, made flannel clothing for the prisoners, which they distributed during two subsequent visits.<sup>9</sup> Shortly after these visits, she surveyed the conditions in the other London prisons, where she likewise distributed clothes to those in need.<sup>10</sup>

Over the next several years Fry was preoccupied by her religious ministry, family matters, and by problems in the Fry family business. In late

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<sup>7</sup> *Sketch of the Origin and Results of Ladies' Prison Associations*, 3; Katherine Fry and Rachel Cresswell, *Memoir of the Life of Elizabeth Fry*, vol.1 (London: Charles Gilpin, 1847), 205; and Elizabeth Fry, testimony, 27 February, 1818, in House of Commons, "Report from the Committee on the Prisons within the City of London and Borough of Southwark," *Sessional Papers, 1818–1822, Crime and Punishment: Prisons*, 8 May, 1818, vol. 8, p. 34, repr., *British Parliamentary Papers: Reports and Papers relating to the Prisons of the United Kingdom with Minutes of Evidence and Appendices, 1818–22* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1970). Citations are to the original report.

<sup>8</sup> Seebohm, *Stephen Grellet*, 1:224.

<sup>9</sup> Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir of Elizabeth Fry*, 1:205–6. Anna Buxton and William Forster married three years later, in 1816.

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Bragg to an unknown friend (copy), n.d., John Thompson MSS, vol. 1, fol. 57, The Library of the Religious Society of Friends, London (hereafter LRSF). Though the letter is undated, internal evidence dates the letter to 1813.

1816, however, she visited Newgate again and decided to become more involved with the female prisoners there. In the spring of 1817 she founded the Ladies' Association for the Reformation of Female Prisoners in Newgate—all but one of the twelve founding members were fellow Quakers—and together they pressured prison officials to allow them to establish a school for the children in prison with their mothers (eventually expanded to serve inmates who could not read), institute a daily routine supervised by a female matron and inmate monitors rather than male guards, organize daily Bible readings, and arrange for the women to engage in sewing, spinning, and knitting in return for financial compensation.

Fry did not set out to become prison reform activist; in July 1817, however, Robert Owen praised the reforms she had introduced in Newgate in an article in *The Times*.<sup>11</sup> The subsequent publicity surrounding her work in Newgate established her as an authority on prisons and the behavior of female criminals, and she received letters from women and men across the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States who were interested in replicating her work in their own local prisons. Responding to women interested in forming visiting committees modeled after the Ladies' Association for the Reformation of Female Prisoners at Newgate, and magistrates who wanted to put into practice some of the changes implemented there, led her to think about prison administration and criminal justice more globally. While as an evangelical Quaker she believed in the redemptive power of a Christian life, as a prison reformer her objective was not just to convert prisoners to Christianity (though that always remained an important goal), but also to deter crime by reforming

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Owen, letter to the editor, *The Times*, 30 July, 1817: 3C.

prisoner behaviors. Over the coming years, Fry inspected over a hundred prisons in the United Kingdom and Europe; co-founded the British Ladies Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners; testified before Parliament three times; spoke out against capital punishment, excessive use of the treadmill, and the separate system; advocated that female inmates be supervised by female officers, preferably in all-female prisons; provisioned convicts sailing to Australia with books and tracts, as well as goods to make quilts and other sewing projects, which would keep them occupied during the long voyage (the latter could be sold upon their arrival to support themselves); and called attention to the need for half-way houses to help prisoners transition back into society.

This dissertation uses Fry as a lens to study intersections of gender, religion, social welfare, and public policy in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain. While Fry is the central subject of the dissertation, it is neither a biography nor solely about the state of prisons and criminal justice reforms during this period. Instead, Fry serves as a means to analyze how women used religion and contemporary rhetoric about the “natural” character and role of women to negotiate gendered distinctions between public and private in order to open up and explore spaces within the public sphere in which women could be active, as well as the resistance these efforts provoked from individuals who sought a more limited role for women in public life.

In many respects Fry was atypical for her time. Most politically active women were either single or the mothers of adult children, whereas in 1817 Fry had nine children between two and sixteen years old. Moreover, Fry’s activism occurred independently of her husband at a time when the norm was for

women to be involved in the public or political causes in which their fathers or husbands were active.<sup>12</sup> Fry and her coadjutors also operated in a space respectable women ordinarily did not occupy, in close proximity with individuals whose behavior contravened social and gender norms. While Fry believed that women were called to fill traditional roles of wife and mother, she argued that women also had an important role to fill in public life: caring for “the helpless, the ignorant, the afflicted, or the depraved, [particularly] those of their own sex.” Fry argued that, in order to properly carry out this womanly duty, women must not act individually, as a typical lady bountiful, but collectively, by formally organizing into committees and societies. In so doing, she argued, women would have “nearly, if not quite, an equal influence on society at large” as men.<sup>13</sup> Yet while Fry’s female-centric approach was progressive, and presaged important developments in the women’s movement, this dissertation shows that the underlying motivation for her activities were rooted in existing religious, humanitarian, and social reform movements.

### British Prisons and Criminal Justice Reforms

When Fry first began working in Newgate it was not because she was interested in systematic prison reform, but because she was appalled by the abysmal conditions of the prison and the behavior of its inmates. She was not alone in her horror at the state of British jails; in 1773, John Howard began a systematic evaluation of the country’s prisons, and his books on the subject

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<sup>12</sup> Fry’s husband, Joseph, subscribed to, but was not actively involved in, a number of philanthropic associations, including the Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Fry, *Observations on the Visiting, Superintendence, and Government of Female Prisoners* (London: John and Arthur Arch, 1827), 2.



prompted private and public individuals to follow his lead and advocate for criminal justice reform.<sup>14</sup> The evolution of penal reform in the British Isles into a system recognizable to present-day observers, however, was neither linear nor of short duration. There was no national prison system—prisons were administered by local boroughs and counties, and the conditions of prisons and prisoner management therefore varied widely. While a few prisons were new purpose-built structures, most were old and ill-suited for safe and healthy confinement. Constructed in a variety of shapes and sizes, the older prisons were poorly ventilated, dirty, without exercise yards, and—as was the case in Newgate—lacked sufficient rooms to separate debtors from prisoners, the tried from the untried, the “confirmed” or “hardened” criminal from petty or first-time offenders, and in some instances even men from women.<sup>15</sup> In some cases, the structures and/or the walls surrounding them were so deficient that escape

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<sup>14</sup> John Howard, *The State of the Prisons in England and Wales* (Warrington: William Eyres, 1777). Jonas Hanway, Sir George Onesiphorus Paul, Samuel Denne, and William Smith likewise published tracts on the need for prison reform. See, for example, Jonas Hanway, *Solitude in Imprisonment, with Proper Profitable Labour and a Spare Diet* (London: J. Bew, 1776); William Smith, *State of the Gaols in London, Westminster, and Borough of Southwark* (London: J. Bew, 1776); and Sir G. O. Paul, *Considerations on the Defects of Prisons, and their Present System of Regulation* (London: T. Cadell, 1784). In 1819, Fry and her brother Joseph John Gurney followed Howard’s example, when Gurney published a detailed description of over thirty jails in northern England and Scotland they had visited the previous year. Joseph John Gurney, *Notes on a Visit Made to Some of the Prisons in Scotland and the North of England, in Company with Elizabeth Fry*, 2nd ed. (London: John and Arthur Arch, 1819). Individuals interested in prison and criminal justice reform in the first two decades of the nineteenth century include Sir James Mackintosh, Sir Samuel Romilly, Jeremy Bentham, Henry Grey Bennet, and the Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline, which was co-founded by Fry’s brothers-in-law Thomas Fowell Buxton and Sam Hoare.

<sup>15</sup> In 1818, fifty-nine of 518 prisons did not have the ability to separate male and female prisoners; and another 136 were only able to divide prisoners by gender. These statistics were compiled by the Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline and quoted in Anthony Highmore, Esq., *Philanthropia Metropolitana: A View of the Charitable Institutions Established In and Near London* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1822), 532. Unrestrained mixing, reformers argued, made prisons schools of vice where the innocent and the new offenders learned the tricks of the trade from career criminals. Though the problem of contamination became an important element of the argument nineteenth-century reformers made for the necessity of prison reform, the idea itself was not new. See Howard, *State of the Prisons*, 20–21; Hanway, *Solitude in Imprisonment*, 61–85 and 107–124; Paul, *Considerations on the Defects of Prisons*, 8–9; and Thomas Bowen, *Thoughts on the Necessity of Moral Discipline in Prisons* (London: F. and C. Rivington, 1797), 5–6.

was relatively easy. As a result, many prison officials resorted to “ironing,” that is, securing prisoners in irons fastened around the leg, hand, or even waist and chained to the wall or floor. There was also a large discrepancy between facilities in the amount of money allocated to feed and clothe each prisoner; while some provided a decent daily fare, the allowance at other prisons was at or below subsistence level. Accordingly, prisoners typically relied on food and clothes provided by friends, family, and charitable strangers. This necessitated easy access between prisoners and outsiders, a policy reformers insisted was detrimental to public safety, as easy intercourse was conducive to “contaminating” the visitors. Prisons also varied as to the amount of bedding, clothing, and heating provided. In some, prisoners slept on the floor or on straw, while in others they were supplied with basic beds, sheets, blankets, and pillows. Firing, to heat the cells during cold weather, was not universally provided; in some instances prisoners were required to pay for their own firing, while some prisons lacked any means of heating.

Though a number of new prisons were built in the second half of the eighteenth century, they were not constructed in proportion to the population growth of the period. According to 1818 statistics, one hundred of the British jails were built to accommodate a total of 8,545 prisoners, but actually held 13,057.<sup>16</sup> Fry testified before a House of Commons committee on prison reform in February of that year that in Newgate each prisoner had only between

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<sup>16</sup> Highmore, *Philanthropia Metropolitana*, 533. Theoretically, gaols were for pre-trial confinement, and Houses of Correction served as prisons. However by the late eighteenth century the distinction had become blurred, as many gaols housed inmates post-confinement. As the British Ladies Society was active in gaols, county and borough jails, bridewells, and Houses of Correction, this dissertation uses the collective term prisons.

eighteen inches and two feet by six feet space to sleep.<sup>17</sup> Another reason for the increasingly overcrowded jails of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was that while the number of prosecutions increased the number of quarter sessions and assizes did not. Minor offenses could be dispensed with in petty sessions, over which one or two local magistrates presided. Intermediate-level offenses were tried in the quarter sessions, while the most serious crimes were prosecuted before a judge and jury at one of the assizes. Most counties held assizes twice a year, so anyone confined immediately after a quarter session or assize spent 3–6 months in prison before trial.<sup>18</sup>

Prison infirmaries were frequently not equipped to deal with sick inmates, and regular attendance by a doctor was not always available. Given the poor ventilation, filth, meager food portions, lack of clothing to protect against the cold, and insufficient or absent heating it is not surprising that diseases spread easily among the prison population and, on occasion, into adjacent neighborhoods. In 1750, for example, Newgate prisoners infected with typhus spread the disease to members of the courtroom in which they were being tried, resulting in the death of over fifty courtroom officials, jury members, and spectators.<sup>19</sup> Prisons themselves were run like fiefdoms. Gaolers, who obtained their jobs through patronage or by buying the post, profited from prisoners by requiring them to pay a variety of fees, or by selling spirits and

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<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Fry, testimony, 27 February, 1818, “Report on the Prisons within the City of London,” 41.

<sup>18</sup> In London trials were held eight times a year, at the Old Bailey. In Northumberland, Cumberland, Westmoreland, and Durham Counties assizes were only held once a year. During times of trouble, such as food riots or industrial worker conflicts, however, special assizes could be called into session. Clive Emsley, *Crime and Society in England, 1750–1900*, 3rd ed. (London: Pearson Longman, 2005), 13–14.

<sup>19</sup> Known as the “Black Assize,” this outbreak eventually led to the rebuilding of Newgate. Michael Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain: The Penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution, 1750–1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 44–45.

providing luxuries to wealthier inmates. There was also an active subculture within the prisons. On entry prisoners often had to pay a fee to existing prisoners; those who were unable or refused to pay were beaten. Since the majority of prisons did not provide employment for the prisoners, as Fry had discovered at Newgate, this meant that the prisoner engaged in a variety of anti-social and immoral behaviors. Prisoner conduct often went completely unchecked, because some gaolers did not live on the premises and so exerted little oversight over the prisoners. When gaolers did punish refractors, punishment could include a lengthy stay in a dark cell, as a result of which some prisoners went insane. The power of the gaolers over inmates, which was supposed to be supervised by magistrates, was frequently unrestrained, as the latter tended to neglect their duty of inspection because of the prevalence of disease and the unruly behavior of the prisoners.<sup>20</sup>

Imprisonment was not, in and of itself, a routine punishment during the early modern era, at least not in comparison to the modern-day practice of sentencing offenders to long periods of confinement. Individuals who were in prison were debtors who were held until they could discharge their debt; those awaiting trial, transportation, or execution; prisoners sentenced to short periods of corrective detention;<sup>21</sup> and tried prisoners who had been declared

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<sup>20</sup> Howard's investigation of English and Welsh prisons raised public awareness on this issue. Parliament, however, was slow to address these abuses, and even when it legislated against abusive practices it did not provide the funds necessary to ensure that the law was put into effect. Thus although the House of Correction at Coldbath Fields in London was designed according to Howard's principles, when it opened in 1794 its first governor was Thomas Aris, a former baker who proved to be as greedy as some of the gaolers who had repulsed Howard and his readers. Aris' despotism went unchecked by Middlesex justices. See Emsley, *Crime and Society*, 271; and Howard, *State of the Prisons*. For examples of abuses by a succession of Newgate gaolers (including an instance where the gaoler was convicted and hanged for the murder of an inmate), see Anthony Babington, *The English Bastille: A History of Newgate Gaol and Prison Conditions in Britain, 1188–1902* (London: Macdonald, 1971).

<sup>21</sup> Most sentences were under six months; a two-year prison term was considered a long sentence.

innocent but who could not afford the discharge fee imposed by the gaoler. Instead, criminals were punished by fines or against their body—including flogging, branding, and execution.

In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, capital punishment was seen as an effective deterrent to crime. Executions were a symbol of royal authority over its subjects, and the terror of the gallows (it was thought) would enforce obedience and deference in the lower classes.<sup>22</sup> On its face, eighteenth-century law appears to have been very harsh: there were, for example, over 200 crimes for which the death penalty applied.<sup>23</sup> Some victims, however, refused to prosecute offenses bearing the death penalty (cases at the time being brought by the victim, not the state) because he or she believed the penalty

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<sup>22</sup> By pointing to cases in which members of the upper class were convicted of, and executed for, murder or treason, the ruling class could argue that the law was impartial with respect to class. According to Douglas Hay, however, this was a slight of hand because where before the law primarily dealt with offenses against the state and those committed against individuals, the increase in capitalist enterprises meant that in the eighteenth century nine tenths of criminal law was about maintaining property, and thus a tool by which the propertied ruling elite elicited deference from their social and economic inferiors. Douglas Hay, "Property, Authority and the Criminal Law," in *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, E. P. Thompson (London: Allen Lane, 1975), 17–63. John Langbein takes issue with Hay's argument; he contends that this Marxist interpretation of a class-bound instrument of justice is based on a selective reading of texts. In reality, he argues, the criminal justice system served the interests of mostly non-elite crime victims. John Langbein, "Albion's Fatal Flaws," *Past & Present* 98 (February 1983): 96–120. Peter King, furthermore, points out that post-verdict judicial discretion, which played an important role in the executive clemency process, was not—as Hays argued—influenced by elite intervention: the respectability of the convicted was less relevant than the offender's good character, youth, the circumstances that led to the commission of the crime, and the poverty of the offender as a motive. Peter J. R. King, "Decision Makers and Decision-Making in the English Criminal Law, 1750–1800," *Historical Journal* 27 (1984): 25–58.

<sup>23</sup> According to E. P. Thompson, the most notorious of these laws were known as the Black Act (1723), which created roughly 50 new capital offenses aimed at protecting property rights; these laws took aim at customary practices, such as fishing on ecclesiastical and royal lands, which agricultural laborers had come to see as a traditional right. E. P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978). The strict enforcement of forest laws after the crown passed to the Hanovers led to (relatively minor) retributory violence on the part of yeoman and customary tenants, which in turn was succeeded by the passage of the Black Act. Thompson argues that the Black Act signaled an important shift from England's pre-capitalist society to capitalism, and it was also a way of reinforcing authority, which had taken a hit from the violence organized by the Blacks on royal and private property. The majority of the death penalty statutes, however, were extraordinarily specific in nature, so that most capital cases were prosecuted under laws dating to the Tudors and Stuarts. See also Hay, Linebaugh, and Thompson, *Albion's Fatal Tree*.

disproportionate to the crime.<sup>24</sup> In addition, juries sometimes did an end-run around capital statutes by convicting thieves, but valuing the stolen item(s) below the threshold at which the death penalty applied, in some cases even when it was patently obvious that the value of the goods stolen was well in excess of the value assigned by the jury.<sup>25</sup> And finally, many of the death sentences were commuted to transportation as a sign that the justice system (and by extension the king and his government) was merciful.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, however, capital punishment came under increasing criticism for its lack of efficacy in deterring crime and in decreasing social antagonism; executions had become spectacles enjoyed, not feared, by the hoi polloi. Non-capital punishment was also a matter of concern: prisons were described as dens of vice, where communal living made it possible for new offenders to be schooled in criminality, and whipping destroyed reputations and caused offenders to no longer fear the censure of society. Rather than rehabilitating offenders and reintegrating them into society, many of the upper and middling classes preferred to remove law breakers through the system of transportation. Although most of the problems raised by early nineteenth-century criminal justice reformers had been publicized by Howard and others, the need for a national system of justice and a punishment other than transportation or hanging began to resonate more widely in the public

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<sup>24</sup> Not all refusals to prosecute were due to moral objections to the death penalty; given the time and expense involved, some victims did not proceed in exchange for compensation. Others declined prosecution because they did not want it known publically that they had been victimized, as it might have a negative impact on their business reputation. See Randall McGowen, "From Pillory to Gallows: The Punishment of Forgery in the Age of the Financial Revolution," *Past & Present* 165 (November 1999): 126-27.

<sup>25</sup> Peter King argues that the law was not just a place of conflict, but a space in which all social groups could cooperate and gain concessions from one another. King, "Decision Makers," 25-58.

mind. It is within this debate that Fry emerged as an authority on prisons generally and on female prisoners specifically.

### Historiography

For over a century a key question for scholars analyzing the history of women has been whether women's lives improved over time. The answer for 'la longue durée' is generally accepted to be yes,<sup>26</sup> but scholarly opinion has been divided at times about whether the period from the eighteenth century to the Edwardian era represented an era of progress or regression. Until the 1980s, this question was often reduced to women's legal rights and the economic position of women—what type of work she did, and how (and to what extent) that work was valued, monetarily and non-monetarily. In recent decades more sophisticated analysis of the question of "improvement" addresses not only the working roles and material quality of women's lives, but women's cultural, social, and political contributions and the power relationship between men and women.

Historians who were part of the Whig interpretation of history argued for the continual (if gradual and uneven) advance of the lot of women during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>27</sup> Some historians of the economic lives of

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<sup>26</sup> Though there are some notable exceptions, particularly with respect to work, as both Judith Bennett and Amanda Vickery show in two notable review articles. Judith M. Bennett, "History That Stands Still: Women's Work in the European Past," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 2 (1988): 269–83; and Amanda Vickery, "Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History," *The Historical Journal* 36, no. 2 (1993): 383–414.

<sup>27</sup> Ivy Pinchbeck, for example, argues that industrialization made more work opportunities available to women, even if women's compensation for these jobs was lower than the compensation for men, and that these opportunities eventually led to women's emancipation. In the interim, women's lot was improved because they exchanged heavy labor for the easier work of attending machines; for single women the advantage was even greater because they received their wages personally, which promoted a sense of freedom. Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution, 1750–1850* (New York: G. Routledge & Sons, 1930).

women, in contrast, postulated a golden age in the years prior to the first Industrial Revolution, when women worked side-by-side with their husbands and children to meet the family's consumption needs. Since women's work was essential to the family's survival, their economic role was not only accepted but respected. During the transition to the industrial mode of production this "domestic industry" model was surpassed by the "family industry" model, in which some members of the family worked for wages; since most of this work still occurred in the home, women's contributions continued to be valued. When commercial production replaced home-based production, however, women's unpaid domestic work was no longer viewed as productive (even when women supplemented the family income through casual wage-work). Since women's partnership with their husbands had been predicated on the labor they provided to help meet the family's needs, and women's labor no longer had the same value it had had before, this meant that women were no longer equal with men in the family enterprise.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> A foundational text for this argument is Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*, repr. (London: Routledge, 1992), first published in 1919. A more sophisticated reworking of Clark's three-stage model is Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work, and Family* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1987). Tilly and Scott argue that economic changes alone do not explain the changing nature of women's work over the last three hundred years: demographics and, particularly, family cycles such as women's age, the ratio of single women to men, marital status, age at marriage, illegitimacy rates, number of children, and their children's ages also had an important impact on how, when, and where women worked. Yet despite their insistence that there is no "one story" of women's work, Tilly and Scott retain Clark's idea of three stages, although they rename them as the family economy, family wage economy, and family consumer economy; and they also shift the timing for the onset of industrialization to the early 1700s. Other scholars who argue that the change in the means of production during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries led to a degradation of women's work include Bridget Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1989); Deborah Valenze, *The First Industrial Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the English Working Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Hill, Valenze, and Clark all examine the changing valuation of women within the lower classes; Valenze and Clark argue that the making of the working class was not merely a function of the economic marginalization of the lower orders, but a gender project as well. For a review of the debate over continuity vs. change in the lives of British women from the perspective of economic history see Pamela Sharpe, "Continuity and Change: Women's History and Economic History in Britain," *The Economic History Review* 48, no. 2 (May 1995), 353-69.



One of the problems inherent in the notion of a pre-industrial golden age where women had value because they worked in collaboration with men is that this value is tied only to a woman's labor. Furthermore, while women may have been on near equal terms with men in contributing to the material needs of their family, this does not mean that men saw women as their equals, or even as their partners. Feminist scholars have pointed out that patriarchy—the idea that men are the heads of household, primarily responsible for the welfare of the family (and, by extension, the primary leaders of the community and state)—transcends the means of production. As the patriarchs of the family, men had power and authority to direct more than just the labor of women, regardless of the current system of production. For feminist scholars of the 1980s, therefore, the Marxist school of analysis fell short because it failed to pay much attention to the role and significance of gender in the formation of class consciousness or to account for the fact that women were oppressed by more than the exploitative capitalist system.<sup>29</sup>

Socialist feminists attempted to redress this imbalance, but their analysis remained tied to production. Feminists, on the other hand, see the economic life of women as only one component within the system of patriarchy.<sup>30</sup> They contend that with the denigration of women's economic contributions to the family, the nature of their role within the family changed.

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<sup>29</sup> Joan Wallach Scott offers an excellent critique of not just the almost complete absence of women in E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, but the absence of gender as a category of analysis for examining the formation of class consciousness. Joan Wallach Scott, "Women in *The Making of the English Working Class*," *Gender and the Politics of History*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 68–90. This gap in Thompson's work has been addressed by several socialist-feminist historians, notably Anna Clark in *Struggle for the Breeches*.

<sup>30</sup> For a good review of the theoretical divide between Marxist historians, socialist feminists, and feminists, see Theodore Koditschek, "The Gendering of the British Working Class," *Gender & History* 9, no. 2 (1997): 333–63.

Rather than individual family members each contributing the same thing (i.e. labor), the family enterprise was now based on the differing contributions of women and men: men were to provide for the economic needs of the family, women for the family's social and domestic needs. This idea—that the natural role of women was the private, domestic sphere while the public sphere of politics, work, and association was the province of men—is known as separate sphere ideology or the cult of domesticity.<sup>31</sup>

Thus while scholars who argue for a separate sphere thesis point to its origins in the disjunctions wrought by the transition from a predominantly agricultural society to industrial capitalism, they also argue that separate sphere rhetoric was shaped by social and cultural ideas, in particular the eighteenth-century cult of sensibility and Evangelicalism, which arose toward the end of the century.<sup>32</sup> “Class and gender,” Leonore Davidoff and Catherine

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<sup>31</sup> A number of historians, most notably Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, argue that the idea that there were separate spheres for men and women was initially a middle-class project: a wife who was not employed was a marker of the family's middle-class status. See Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 2002) and Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle-Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992). Anna Clark, Sonya Rose, and Deborah Valenze have shown, however, that the idea of the man as the family's breadwinner was appropriated by the working class. Though of necessity many women from the lower classes had to work, the battle over gender roles deeply influenced working-class consciousness, organization, and political radicalism. Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches*, 2–3; Sonya O. Rose, *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); and Valenze, *First Industrial Woman*, 128–54. See also Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 68–90. It should be noted that while most scholars see separate spheres developing toward the end of the eighteenth century, Dror Wahrman has made a powerful argument that the link, in contemporaries' eyes, between “middle-classness” and domesticity was conditional; and that at least for political discourse this link did not come into being until after the 1832 Reform Bill. Dror Wahrman, “Middle-Class Domesticity Goes Public: Gender, Class, and Politics from Queen Caroline to Queen Victoria,” *Journal of British Studies* 32, no. 4 (1993): 396–432. He also argues that the notion of a middle-class had more ideological than economic origins. Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, 1780–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>32</sup> G. J. Barker-Benfield argues that the cultivation of sensibility brought about the cultural and intellectual self-awareness of women, but that by the end of the eighteenth century some men and women contested the movement of women into the public sphere that the philosophy of sensibility had made possible; instead, they tried to foreclose women's participation in the public arena. G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), xxviii, 351–95. Dror Wahrman argues that

Hall argue, “always operate together, [and] consciousness of class always takes a gendered form.”<sup>33</sup>

The scholarship surrounding separate spheres ideology of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century became a compelling field of inquiry for scholars of women and gender because it seemed to address the fundamental concern underlying the question of whether women’s status has advanced or declined over time—namely, the desire to demonstrate that the subordination of women is not natural, but a cultural construct (even if it is, as some posit, a persistent one). Anne Summers notes that

it was not a concept plucked out of the air to justify the focus on women’s history, as distinct from the kinds of social and economic history which were already receiving attention [in the 1970s]. It was, in fact, a concept which leapt from the pages of 19<sup>th</sup>-century writers themselves, whether male or female; from their published debates on suitable forms of employment for women of different classes, and on the proper content of education for girls; from discussions of appropriate behaviour and deportment for women in the class of ‘lady,’ or ‘gentlewoman’; from endless eulogies of motherhood and home life. The issue of the different kinds of social space occupied respectively by men and women engrossed the writers and readers of published periodicals, and is amply illustrated in the private letters and diaries of the time.<sup>34</sup>

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while the possibility that the boundaries of gender were fluid and porous in the mid-eighteenth century, this attitude underwent a sudden shift at the end of the century. Not only were gender identities seen as fixed, but transgressions (whether serious or playfully) were culturally unintelligible. Dror Wahrman, “Percy’s Prologue: From Gender Play to Gender Panic in Eighteenth-Century England,” *Past & Present* 159 (May 1998): 113–60, and Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). Linda Colley points to longer roots for ‘fixed’ gender identity in an essay on Philip Francis (1740–1818), a member of Calcutta’s Supreme Council, which supervised the East India Company. Colley argues that Francis’s view of differentiated gender roles were already well established before he arrived in India in 1774. Linda Colley, “Gendering the Globe: The Political and Imperial Thought of Philip Francis,” *Past & Present* 209 (November 2010): 117–48. For the role of Evangelicalism in separate spheres, see Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, especially chapter 1; Valenze, *First Industrial Woman*, 141–54; and Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class*, 75–107.

<sup>33</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 13.

<sup>34</sup> Anne Summers, *Female Lives, Moral States: Women, Religion, and Public Life in Britain* (London: Threshold Press, 2000), 5–6.

While for some scholars the existence of separate spheres was obvious and unproblematic, since in the 1990s a growing body of scholarship has demonstrated that this rhetoric may have been influential but did not always dictate how women actually lived. In particular, scholars have shown that while the presumption of a dichotomy between feminine/masculine that was the foundation of separate sphere rhetoric provides insight into the legal and institutional barriers that were designed to disable or restrict women's activities in the public sphere, that ideology was complicated by women's positionality. Geographical location, class, race, and kinship and friendship networks, for example, enabled women to circumvent or negotiate legal and customary bars to their participation in the public sphere, and many women who did not need to work nevertheless eagerly entered into the public sphere, in politics, business, or volunteer associations.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Amanda Vickery's article, "Golden Age to Separate Spheres?," provides an excellent review of the literature on separate spheres, and the limitations of this paradigm. Arianne Chernock's analysis of radical male reformers discussing women's right to vote in the 1790s demonstrates that the concept of citizenship as exclusively male was not yet fixed during this period. Arianne Chernock, "Extending the 'Right of Election': Men's Arguments for Women's Political Representation in Late Enlightenment Britain," in *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, ed. Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 587–609. Other scholars who argue that women, from all classes, were very much active in the public sphere include Linda Colley, Amanda Foreman, Helen Rogers, and (for the second half of the nineteenth century) Antoinette Burton. See Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 237–81; Amanda Foreman, *Georgiana: Duchess of Devonshire* (London: HarperCollins, 1998); Helen Rogers, *Women and the People: Authority, Authorship and the Radical Tradition in Nineteenth-Century England* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2000); and Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). And though Hannah More in mid-life began to advocate a conservative role for women that limited them to the domestic and local philanthropy, her own life shows how difficult it could be to maintain strict boundaries between public and private, and that rhetoric did not mean the same as practice. Anne Stott, *Hannah More: The First Victorian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Furthermore, despite the legal restrictions of coverture, women were economic actors and participated in legal proceedings. For an excellent study of the variety of ways women were active in business see Nicola Phillips, *Women in Business, 1700–1850* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2006); Amy Louise Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1993); and Maxine Berg, "Women's Property and the Industrial Revolution," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 24, no. 2 (1993): 233–50 (though Berg does see a tightening of women's control of property by the mid-Victorian period). For women's management of debt and credit see Margot Finn, "Women, Consumption and Coverture in England, c. 1760–1860," *The Historical Journal* 39, no. 3 (1996): 703–22; for the active participants of women in the courts, see Jenny Kermode and Garthine

Even though historians have demonstrated that there is compelling evidence that contemporary adherence to separate sphere rhetoric (by both women and men) was far from universal, the separate sphere thesis continues to be *the* paradigm applied to the study of nineteenth-century women's lives. Most of the scholarship on separate spheres either builds on or critiques the definition of the public sphere developed by Jürgen Habermas in *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*. Habermas argues that during the Enlightenment the public sphere was transformed from being invested in the person of the ruler (or ruling class) to a space where the bourgeoisie, as private citizens, came together outside the authority of the state to engage in rational-critical discourse on general rules governing human relations.<sup>36</sup> Critics of Habermas argue that this definition of public is too limited. Leonore Davidoff, for example, argues that for the eighteenth century at least, the meaning of public was not fixed: it encompassed public opinion, but also included politics and activities done in the name of public good. And by the nineteenth century

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Walker, eds., *Women, Crime and the Courts in Early Modern England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); and S. M. Waddams, *Sexual Slander in Nineteenth-Century England: Defamation in the Ecclesiastical Courts, 1815–1855* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000). On women's contributions to eighteenth-century urban society and the role of the urban setting in constructing gender during this period, see Rosemary Sweet and Penelope Lane, eds., *Women in Urban Life in Eighteenth-Century England* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2003). Finally, respectable women also moved in public spaces such as pleasure gardens, the theater, and shopping centers. See Miles Ogborn, *Spaces of Modernity* (New York: Guilford Press, 1998), chapters 3–4; and Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998). Kathryn Gleadle sounds a note of caution, however, to the recent trend within the historiography of characterizing separate spheres as proscriptive rhetoric; she argues that private/public sphere discourse was a tool contemporary men and women used to make sense of their lives and construct their own subjectivity. Kathryn Gleade, "Our Several Spheres': Middle-class Women and the Feminisms of Early Victorian Radical Politics," in *Women in British Politics, 1760–1860: The Power of the Petticoat*, ed. Kathryn Gleadle and Sarah Richardson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 134–52.

<sup>36</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

the market economy was also considered part of the public sphere.<sup>37</sup> Some feminist scholars also argue that while Habermas stressed that access to the public sphere was open to any social group (provided they exercised reason), in reality the structure of the public sphere excluded women from participation in public discourse.<sup>38</sup> Here again, though, other scholars disagree, arguing that women did participate in public debate.<sup>39</sup>

To a large extent the pervasiveness of separate spheres hinges on what types of activities are considered private, and what constitutes public action.

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<sup>37</sup> Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 228. Nancy Fraser argues that taking Habermas' differentiation between symbolic and material reproduction as a binary, as outlined in *Theory of Communicative Action*, is fraught with ideological potential, whereas a pragmatic-contextual interpretation sees the potential for flexibility of these categories. Fraser also finds a degree in kind rather than absolute difference more useful when applied to Habermas' "socially-integrated" and system-integrated" action contexts. Drawing strict boundaries between the "official capitalist economy" and the modern family unit, she contends, obscures how intra-family dynamics are intrinsically bound up with money and power. Nancy Fraser, "What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender," *New German Critique* 35 (Special Issue on Jürgen Habermas, Spring-Summer 1985): 95–131.

<sup>38</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*; and Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*, 2nd edition (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988). Nancy Fraser, however, argues that the feminist response to Habermas, by extending the definition of the public sphere to "everything that is outside the domestic or familial sphere," has rendered the concept much less useful than Habermas' original formulation. In so doing, she contends, such scholarship blurs the boundaries between "three analytically distinct things: the state, the official-economy of paid employment, and arenas of public discourse." Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 56-80.

<sup>39</sup> Though they were criticized for their participation, women did—for example—take part in the London debating societies of the 1770–1790s, even forming several societies of their own. Donna T. Andrew, "Popular Culture and Public Debate: London, 1780," *The Historical Journal* 39, no. 2 (1996): 405–423; and Mary Thale, "Women in London Debating Societies in 1780," *Gender & History* 7, no. 1 (1995): 5–24. Ann Jebb, the wife of the radical Unitarian clergyman John Jebb, was a well-known author of newspaper articles and pamphlets advocating religious, education, and political reform who also hosted tea parties for fellow reformers and commented on the manuscripts of William Paley, Henry Taylor, and her husband. Anthony Page, "'A Great Politicianess': Ann Jebb, Rational Dissent and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Women's History Review* 17, no. 5 (2008): 743–65. On women's participation in Enlightenment thought see Knott and Taylor, *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* (see note 35), particularly Taylor's chapter on Mary Wollstonecraft's critique of enlightened male gallantry and Elizabeth Eger's discussion of the intellectual community of the Bluestocking Circle. Taylor, "Feminists versus Gallants: Sexual Manners and Morals in Enlightenment Britain," 30-52; and Eger, "'The Noblest Commerce of Mankind': Conversation and Community in the Bluestocking Circle," 288-305. Anne Stott argues that while More is often seen as a conservative antithesis to Wollstonecraft, she recognized the value of rationalist thought, especially with respect to the role it played in the education of women. Anne Stott, "Patriotism and Providence: The Politics of Hannah More," in *Women in British Politics* (see note 35), 39.

Philanthropy, for example, is often considered an extension of the private sphere, whereas trade organizing activity is not—even though both were aimed at improving public welfare.<sup>40</sup> Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century women may not have served in official or administrative positions, but this did not mean that they did not have political influence and indeed political power. Elite and middle-class women leveraged their social position and connections, petitioned Parliament, participated in salons and committee meetings, and wrote pamphlets and letters that developed and disseminated their political ideas.<sup>41</sup> Even lower-class women wielded power on public policy through “disorderly” behavior such as bread riots. Political power, as Elaine Chalus, Kathryn Gleadle, Clare Midgley, Jane Rendall, Anne Stott, Amanda Vickery and others have shown, is not limited to having the vote or being an elected or appointed official. Rarely does one person, or a small group of people, have absolute power over the rest of society; instead, it is almost always a category of degree or kind, categories that are fluid and can be manipulated.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Another example is women’s leadership in the boycotts against slave-produced goods, which for the most part is not seen as on par with the anti-slave trade and anti-slavery lobbying led by men such as Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce. A notable exception is Clare Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780–1870* (New York: Routledge, 1992), who highlights the fluid boundaries between philanthropy and political activism. On the challenges in differentiating between public and private see Anna Clark, “Women in Public in the Eighteenth Century,” *Wiener Zeitschrift zur Geschichte der Neuheit* 1, no. 2 (2001): 60–78; and Susan M. Okin, “Gender, the Public, and the Private,” in *Feminism and Politics*, ed. Anne Phillips, Oxford Readings in Feminism Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 116–41.

<sup>41</sup> Elaine Chalus, “Elite Women, Social Politics, and the Political World of Late Eighteenth-Century England,” *The Historical Journal* 43, no. 3 (2000):669–97; Gleadle and Richardson, *Women in British Politics*, particularly the introduction and chapters 1–4; and Amanda Vickery, ed., *Women, Privilege, and Power: British Politics, 1750 to the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

<sup>42</sup> Anna Clark argues for four categories of female political action: the efforts by aristocratic women to influence elections and distribute patronage; cultural critics who accepted women’s involvement in public debate, provided they did not actively engage in the political process; women who coopted the rhetoric of patriotism and citizenship for general (but not gendered) ends; and feminists who challenged patriarchy and called for greater women’s rights. Anna Clark, “Women in Eighteenth-Century British Politics,” in *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* (see note 35), 570–86.

Furthermore, too often resistance to women's voices and actions is seen as evidence of a lack of female power, influence, or authority, rather than a sign of women's participation in the public sphere. This logic is problematic when you consider that there were many men who, like women, did not have the vote, as well as many who lacked great economic resources.

The recent growing interest in religion as a field of inquiry further complicates the scholarship on the history of gender. Most of the research on religion in nineteenth-century Britain has been, until recently, focused on prominent religious controversies, the evolution of the position and power of the Church of England vis-à-vis the state, the rise of Evangelicalism, and major ecclesiastical leaders;<sup>43</sup> where women were considered, the prevailing interpretation (particularly when it came to Evangelicalism) was that religion was a conservative force in women's lives.<sup>44</sup> In recent years, however, not only has religion become an important category of analysis,<sup>45</sup> but there is more

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<sup>43</sup> See Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966) and idem, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); K. S. Inglis, *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1963); P. T. Marsh, *The Victorian Church in Decline: Archbishop Tait and the Church of England, 1868–1882* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1969); Richard A. Soloway, *Prelates and People: Ecclesiastical Social Thought in England, 1783–1852* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969); E. R. Norman, *Church and Society in England, 1770–1970* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976); G. I. T. Machin, *Politics and the Churches in Great Britain, 1832–1868* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977); Alan D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England* (London: Longman, 1980); Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795–1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); and David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

<sup>44</sup> For example, Barbara Caine, *English Feminism, 1780–1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Olive Banks, *The Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981). Joan Wallach Scott argues that in E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* religion and spirituality are portrayed as irrational, non-disciplined, and excessive, and tends to be conflated with the feminine (though she does note that not all women are "frenzied prophetesses" like Joanna Southcott. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 76–78.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, the opinion piece by Stanley Fish, "One University, Under God?," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 51, no. 18 (January 7, 2005), C1-C4; and the recent roundtable, "Will Religion Become the Intellectual Center of the Academy," *Western Conference on British Studies Annual Meeting* (Dallas, TX), October 19–21, 2006.



interest in exploring the way in which religion could be used by women as a tool to make claims for female authority, and thus a way to open up spaces in the public sphere in which they could be active, and even carve out a vocation for themselves.<sup>46</sup>

### Elizabeth Fry in the Historiography

While dozens of popular press biographies have been written about Fry in the century and a half since her death (most of which are hagiographical or at least sympathetic),<sup>47</sup> there has been surprisingly little scholarly work on her. Anne Summers, U. R. Q. Henriques, and Robert Alan Cooper credit Fry with having little influence on criminal justice reform. Summers argues that while women like Fry could be *in* public spaces (my emphasis), they were merely sharing the same space as men—just as, as she claims, diners and waiters operate in the same space but in very different ways. There are two articles by Anne Summers: the first analyzes how Fry’s concern that the mental health of prisoners would be affected by isolation was out of step with the form of confinement that was in vogue with public and prison officials in the 1830s, while the second examines how Fry conceived the relationship between her

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<sup>46</sup> For example, Deborah Valenze’s excellent study of female preachers within Methodism who were members of the working class shows how they used religion to resist the upheavals brought about by changes in the means of production. Deborah Valenze, *Prophetic Sons and Daughters: Female Preaching and Popular Religion in Industrial England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). See also Kathryn Gleadle, *The Early Feminists: Radical Unitarians and the Emergence of the Women’s Rights Movement, 1831-1851* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995); and—for the second half of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries—the special issue, “Between Rationality and Revelation: Women, Faith and Public Roles in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” *Women’s History Review* 7, no. 1 (1998). It should be noted that the research to date has generally focused more on the role of religion for lower-class women or for middle-class and upper-class women of a slightly later period than the one in which Fry was most active within the public sphere.

<sup>47</sup> Most biographies were published during the nineteenth century, and are analyzed in chapter five. For twentieth-century biographies see Janet Whitney, *Elizabeth Fry: Quaker Heroine* (Boston, 1936); June Rose, *Elizabeth Fry* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980); and Jean Hatton, *Betsy: The Dramatic Biography of the Prison Reformer Elizabeth Fry* (Oxford: Kregel Publications, 1986).

volunteer work and state reforms, arguing that she did not consider her exertions an end in itself, but rather a means to effect state intervention in the treatment of prisoners, even while acknowledging that state authority itself was at times the “abuser.”<sup>48</sup> U. R. Q. Henriques, in an article on the rise and fall of solitary confinement as the preferred method of prison discipline in the early to mid-nineteenth century, briefly notes the career of Fry; he argues that she may have been a humanitarian, but contemporaries considered her a celebrity whose efforts entertained some public officials but who was a nuisance to prison officials.<sup>49</sup> And Robert Alan Cooper asserts that Fry’s ideas about reforming prisoners through “productive labor, classification, and religious instruction” were—with the exception of using matrons to supervise female prisoners—derivative, and ultimately were rejected in favor of silence, solitary confinement, and hard labor, practices that were enshrined in the Prison Act of 1835.<sup>50</sup> It is true that ultimately Fry’s approach was challenged by alternate theories of prison discipline, but some of her practices were included in previous legislative acts, including Peel’s Prison Act of 1823, or adopted in penal and transportation policies.

Randall McGowen, Annemieke van Drenth, and Francisca de Haan examine Fry from a Foucaultian perspective. McGowan sees Fry’s work as part

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<sup>48</sup> Anne Summers, “Elizabeth Fry and Mid-Nineteenth Century Reform,” *Clio Medica* 34 (1995): 83–101; and Summers, “‘In a Few Years We Shall None of Us that Now Take Care of Them Be Here’: Philanthropy and the State in the Thinking of Elizabeth Fry” *Historical Research* 67 (June 1994): 134–42. Both articles were slightly revised and incorporated into a larger work on Fry, Florence Nightingale, and Josephine Butler. Summers, *Female Lives*.

<sup>49</sup> U. R. Q. Henriques, “The Rise and Decline of the Separate System of Prison Discipline,” *Past & Present* 54 (February 1972): 61–93. There were certainly individuals who viewed Fry as a nuisance, but—as discussed in chapters three and four—this primarily pertained to the mid-1830s on, not the early period of her activism.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Alan Cooper, “Jeremy Bentham, Elizabeth Fry, and English Prison Reform,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 42 (October–December 1981): 675–90.

of a movement to replace terror with sympathy: instead of using violence (in his example, capital punishment) to regulate behavior, penal reformers sought to create a more humane society by establishing new social connections based on feeling and concern for the well-being of others. This new sensibility stressed sympathy between classes based on a shared humanity: thus criminals were supposed to experience not physical pain, but “civilized pain,” that is, pain at the thought of the hurt their criminal action had inflicted on others. If this sympathetic link was established, it could lead to the reformation of the offender; if not, it served as a validation of the distance between the classes. McGowen argues that while the reformers saw their beliefs as a purely benevolent measure, when the objects of reform failed to respond as desired, sympathy was a coercive power that ensured order and repressed social difference.<sup>51</sup>

Van Drenth and de Haan argue that the “caring power” demonstrated by religiously inspired but lay persons like Fry is the transition point between Foucault’s concept of the “old” pastoral power administered by ecclesiastical authorities and the “new” pastoral power administered by secular authorities.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Randall McGowen, “A Powerful Sympathy: Terror, the Prison, and Humanitarian Reform in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain,” *Journal of British Studies* 25 (July 1986): 312–34.

<sup>52</sup> Annemieke van Drenth and Francisca de Haan, *The Rise of Caring Power: Elizabeth Fry and Josephine Butler in Britain and the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999). They conclude that the philanthropic activity undertaken by Fry and others empowered middle- and upper-class women, because they developed a new gender identity that did not revolve around care for their own family, though this is based on, as one reviewer notes, “potted” biographical narratives rather than sustained analysis. Fiona Montgomery, review of *Rise of Caring Power*, *English Historical Review* 116 (June 2001): 740. Van Drenth and de Haan’s definition of this “new” gender identity is limited, moreover, by the fact that what constituted femininity in this specific historical context is not defined beyond the assertion that religious motives led woman to express kindness and caring to individuals less fortunate than themselves. Van Drenth and de Haan also take a Whiggish approach in arguing that Fry’s work contributed to the roots of the modern welfare state, and that her work broke the class barrier between the ladies and prisoners. And as Sonya Michel notes, while van Drenth and de Haan take pains to distinguish caring power from maternalism (as developed by Seth Koven and Michel) because they believe the latter does not sufficiently account for Fry and Butler’s religious motives, they do

While they assert that caring power was a coercive power, they provide only a brief treatment of Fry's activities in the British Isles, and do not link these to what Fry and her cohort believed working-class femalehood and femininity ought to look like.

Fry is one of six subjects in a chapter in Alison Booth's book on collective biographies of women and the focus of one chapter in Timothy Larson's study of the importance of the Bible to Victorians.<sup>53</sup> She is also referred to or briefly noted in some of the literature on criminal justice reform in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>54</sup>

### Chapter Synopses

The first chapter of this dissertation, "The Making of a Religious Woman," draws on scholarship on gender performativity to examine Fry's efforts as a teenager and young adult to work out her own personal moral code, and the steps she took to make that ethic manifest, both internally and externally.

While the scholarship on Fry has acknowledged that religion was a central

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not clarify whether the concept of caring power should complement or displace maternalism. Sonya Michel, review of *Rise of Caring Power*, *Social History* 27, no. 2 (May 2002): 258–61. For Koven and Michel's concept of maternalism see Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, "Womanly Duties: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States, 1880–1920," *Journal of Social History* 95, no. 4 (1990): 1076–1108.

<sup>53</sup> Alison Booth, *How to Make It as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004); and Timothy Larsen, *A People of One Book: The Bible and the Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Lucia Zedner, *Women, Crime, and Custody in Victorian England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 113, 116–22, 149, and 175; Tammy C. Whitlock, *Crime, Gender and Consumer Culture in Nineteenth-Century England* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 161; Richard R. Follett, *Evangelicalism, Penal Theory and the Politics of Criminal Law Reform in England, 1808–30*, *Studies in Modern History* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 89, 100, 103, 146, and 185–6; Ignatieff, *Just Measure of Pain*, 142–48, 150–53, 156, 165–67, 169–70 and 179; Martin J. Wiener, *Reconstructing the Criminal: Culture, Law, and Policy in England, 1830–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 133–4; Kay Daniels, *Convict Women* (St. Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 60, 69, 100, 110–17, 121–25, 130, 155, 177, and 242; and Deborah Oxley, *Convict Maids: The Forced Migration of Women to Australia*, Series in Australian History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 209 and 212. Fry is not mentioned in Emsley, *Crime and Society*, even though he devotes a chapter to gender perceptions of crime.

aspect of her life and work, little to no attention has been paid to *how* religion came to be such an important part of her identity. Though Fry's religious identity was crucial to her later prison reform activism, it cannot be understood teleologically. Instead, it was made, unmade, and remade through a process of negotiation, adaptation, and choices within a specific historical context.

The second chapter, "From Lady Bountiful to Prison Reform Activist," examines how Fry translated her religious beliefs into action, and her attitude about the relationship between private moral principles and public action. When she first began working in London's Newgate prison in 1813 the venue of her work was unusual for a woman, but it differed little in character from the benevolent charity practiced by other women of means. This chapter analyzes how the practical experience of her efforts to improve prison conditions and reform prisoners in one prison (including the interactions this necessitated with male authority figures), coupled with the public attention accorded her after an article about her work appeared in *The Times* in 1817, transformed her into an activist who inspected prisons throughout the United Kingdom and testified three times before Parliament.

The next chapter, "Religion and Gender in Prison Reform, 1813–1845," analyzes the role these two categories played in the tension between reformation and punishment in the criminal justice system and who was qualified to make knowledge claims about the female criminal, as well as gendered conceptions of the relationship between Christianity, social reform, and the state. By examining the activities and penal reform philosophy of Fry and her female associates, this chapter fills a critical gap in the chronological history of prison reform: the scholarship to date has focused primarily on

prison reform in the eighteenth century and after the 1832 Reform Bill, and largely ignores the contribution of Fry and the British Ladies Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners.

The fourth and fifth chapters analyze the public image of Fry, thus providing another lens through which to explore how religion could enable nineteenth-century women to be active in the public sphere. “The Celebrated Mrs. Fry” examines how Fry attained status as an expert on prison reform, and how this influenced her writings on women’s role in public life and the many philanthropic associations she established. It also deconstructs the meaning of and challenges to female celebrity during this period: Fry’s celebrity, while instrumental in making her activism possible, was an unstable commodity, and this chapter explores how society and Fry’s friends and co-religionists reacted to her celebrity, as well as how Fry squared their responses with her prison reform activism. “Remembering Elizabeth Fry” analyzes how Fry’s public and private actions were chronicled in the fifty years after her death. Biographies of her during the Victorian era constructed competing narratives of her life: although a few biographers championed her as proto-feminist icon, most characterized her as a model woman and Christian. This chapter considers the linguistic choices of Fry’s biographers and the strategic decisions they made about which aspects of her personal and professional life to include in their works.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE MAKING OF A RELIGIOUS WOMAN

[We] are called to repentance through the tender mercies of God in Christ Jesus ... has not the Holy Spirit of God shown to you the sinfulness of sin; have you not already seen that it would bring you into darkness, into sorrow, into despair, and eventually to destruction? ... come just as you are to the footstool of your crucified Lord; that through him who died for you, you may obtain pardon, remission of sins, and that peace which the world can never give. ... This living, saving, justifying faith is a powerful and practical principle! those who possess it must know a change of heart, a being turned from evil to good, a being brought out of darkness into God's marvelous light, even becoming new creatures.<sup>1</sup>

Elizabeth Fry's contemporaries and biographers considered her religious faith inextricably linked to her work as a prison reformer and philanthropist, and typically depicted her as the quintessential Christian woman. Despite this acknowledgement, however, biographies of Fry pay little attention to the form and nature of her piety, and how these changed over time. Instead, their descriptions of her religious life are limited to a truncated version of her conversion narrative (she became a plain Quaker in 1798) and a brief account of how her vocal ministry, which began in 1809, led to her being acknowledged as a minister by her Monthly Meeting of the Society of Friends in 1811.<sup>2</sup> Since

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Fry, "Sermon delivered at the Quarterly Meeting, 29 December, 1835," in *Sermons and Prayers Preached by Joseph John Gurney and Elizabeth Fry* (London: Hamilton Adams & Co., 1836), 80–81.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, *A Brief Notice of Elizabeth Fry* (Manchester: Manchester District Tract Association of Friends, 1857); Emma Raymond Pitman, *Elizabeth Fry*, new ed. John H. Ingram, Eminent Women Series (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1889); James Macaulay, *Elizabeth Fry* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1890); the memoir written by her younger brother: Joseph John Gurney, "A Brief Memoir of Elizabeth Fry," in *Illustrations of the Law of Kindness*, ed. George Washington Montgomery, 3rd edition (London: Wiley and Putnam, 1847), 232–60; as well as the biographies written or sponsored by the Religious Society of Friends: "Elizabeth Fry," *Testimonies Concerning Deceased Ministers, Presented to the Yearly Meeting of Friends, Held in London, 1846*

most of these works are hagiographical, it is unsurprising that they do not analyze Fry's religious beliefs—whether in her private life, her religious ministry, or even her public work—in order to provide insight into the relationship between gender and religion during her lifetime (1780–1845).<sup>3</sup> This emphasis on the public over the private Fry is likewise the case in the comparatively little scholarship on Fry and the British Ladies Association for the Reformation of Female Prisoners (BLS) published to date; there are only a handful of journal articles and a few books that dedicate a chapter (or portion of a chapter) to the work of Fry and other female prison visitors. Given the short nature of these works, the authors focus primarily on Fry's religious beliefs as they pertained to her work in prisons, only providing a brief narrative of her earlier life for general context.<sup>4</sup> Demonstrating that she had strong religious

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(London: Edward Marsh, 1846), 16–28; “Elizabeth Fry,” *The Annual Monitor for 1846, or, Obituary of the Members of the Society of Friends in Great Britain and Ireland*, n.s. no. 4 (1846): 101–139; and *A Biographical Sketch of Elizabeth Fry* (London: The Tract Association of the Society of Friends, 1863). There are fuller accounts of Fry's life prior to her involvement in prison reform in Katharine Fry and Rachel Fry Cresswell, *Memoir of the Life of Elizabeth Fry*, 2 vols. (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1847) and Susanna Corder, *Life of Elizabeth Fry* (London: W. & F. G. Cash, 1853), as well as two modern-day biographies, June Rose, *Elizabeth Fry* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980); and Jean Hatton, *Betsy* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2005). Like the shorter treatments of Fry, however, they are biographies written for a general audience, and contain a narrative of Fry's life, not scholarly analysis.

<sup>3</sup> For Fry's biographers the mere fact that Fry was a devout Christian was sufficient evidence to support the conclusion that her religious views were the catalyst for the prison reform work she began in 1816/17. Though they are not wrong in this conclusion, and Fry's popular fame does rest on the work she did as a prison reformer and advocate, the form and substance of Fry's religious beliefs were integral to the choices she made in her private and public lives. The importance of religion to Fry's prison reform activities is detailed in chapter three.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Summers, *Female Lives, Moral States: Women, Religion, and Public Life in Britain, 1800–1930* (Newbury: Threshold, 2000); Annemieke van Drenth and Francisca de Haan, *The Rise of Caring Power: Elizabeth Fry and Josephine Butler in Britain and the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999); Michael Iganatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain: The Penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution, 1750–1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), chapter 6; Kay Daniels, *Convict Women* (St. Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1998); Randall McGowen, “A Powerful Sympathy: Terror, the Prison, and Humanitarian Reform in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain,” *Journal of British Studies* 25 (July 1986): 312–34; U. R. Q. Henriques, “The Rise and Decline of the Separate System of Prison Discipline,” *Past & Present* 54, no. 1 (1972): 61–93; and Robert Alan Cooper, “Jeremy Bentham, Elizabeth Fry, and English Prison Reform,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 42, no. 4 (1981): 675–90. For one recent book emblematic of the tendency to privilege analysis of male over female reformers, see Richard R. Follett, *Evangelicalism, Penal*



beliefs and that these underlay her work in prisons is not, however, in and of itself enough to demonstrate the complexity of the function religion could play in shaping women's lives during the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century. Fry's religious identity and position did not appear spontaneously and fully-formed. Instead, it was made, unmade, and remade through a process of negotiation, adaptation, and choices.<sup>5</sup> The making of Fry's religion was informed both by her own choices and the historical context of religion in her lifetime. It was a relationship not just between herself and her God, but encompassed her friends, family, religious community, and eventually the public at large.

Religion not only played a vital role in defining her own interpretation of what it meant to be a woman, but forced those around her to adopt strategies to adjust to, contain, or contest the particular exemplar of gender that Fry modeled.<sup>6</sup> This chapter argues that Fry's religion, both in her personal life and public work, was instrumental—it shaped who she was and her position as a woman, Quaker, and public figure—and thus was infinitely more complicated and pro-active than the broad strokes with which her biographers and previous scholarship have sketched it suggests. Examining these moments, therefore, not only provide insight into the life of Elizabeth Fry, but demonstrate some of the strategies used by late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century women to

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*Theory and the Politics of Criminal Law Reform in England, 1808–30*, Studies in Modern History (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> I borrow this concept of a subjectivity being made, unmade, and remade from Miles Ogborn, *Spaces of Modernity: London's Geographies, 1680–1780* (New York: Guildford, 1998), 73.

<sup>6</sup> Analysis of how Fry's family, friends, associates and the general public responded to the brand of femininity Fry espoused (consciously and unconsciously) is examined in later chapters: chapter four examines the private and public responses to her celebrity during her lifetime, and the final chapter analyzes the strategies used by her biographers to mold the "identity" of Elizabeth Fry after her death.

construct who and what they were, within both the private and the public spheres. With women's participation in the public sphere increasingly under assault in the years after the French Revolution, religion opened an important channel for female activism just as other avenues were being closed.<sup>7</sup>

To redress the imbalance that has privileged the religion in Fry's public life over the role it played in her private life, it is necessary to situate the process of Fry's self-formation in the broader historical canvas of her time.

Charles Taylor argues that the notion of self, and that an individual has agency in forming that sense of self, is not a trans-historical concept, but rather a modern concept of interiority closely linked to morality. Modern identity is defined by our capacity to ask of ourselves who we should be, as an individual and as a member of society, and the creation of a positive value system by reflective process.<sup>8</sup> This chapter demonstrates what Fry defined as "good," and how she came to be consumed by a desire to shape her own identity by being and doing good. It examines key moments that reveal how decisions Fry made

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<sup>7</sup> For scholarship that treats religion as a positive force in women's lives in this period see Sue Morgan, ed., *Women, Religion, and Feminism in Britain, 1750–1900* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); Deborah Valenze, *Prophetic Sons and Daughters: Female Preaching and Popular Religion in Industrial England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); and Kathryn Gleadle, *The Early Feminists: Radical Unitarians and the Emergence of the Women's Rights Movement, 1831–1851* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995). On the importance of religion to Catherine Macaulay see Sarah Hutton, "Liberty, Equality and God: The Religious Roots of Catherine Macaulay's Feminism," in *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, ed. Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 538–50. Though the scholarship has in recent years for the most part viewed religion in positive terms, there are some scholars who argue that religion was an institution through which patriarchy wielded a conservative, constraining force. Such scholars include Olive Banks, *The Faces of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981); and Barbara Caine, *English Feminism, 1780–1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989). That the self has a history, and varies across time and space, is of course itself not new; Taylor builds on earlier work by Marcel Mauss and Clifford Geertz. See Marcel Mauss, "A Category of the Human Mind: The Notion of the Person; the Notion of the Self," trans. W. D. Halls, in *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, ed. Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, and Steven Lukes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1–25; and Clifford Geertz, "From the Native's Point of View: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding," in *Cultural Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion*, ed. Richard A. Shweder and Robert A. LeVine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 123–36.

as part of this journey of the self shaped her religious worldview, her relationship with family and friends, and even her body—decisions that eventually, if unintentionally, put her in a position of an internationally acclaimed prison reformer.

In *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England*, Dror Wahrman takes up Taylor's challenge to analyze the historicity of self. Wahrman argues that during the first eighty years of the century, a period he calls the *ancient régime* of identity, the categories of gender, race and class were "mutable, malleable, unreliable, divisible, replaceable, transferable, manipulable, escapable, or otherwise fuzzy around the edges."<sup>9</sup> The idea that identity was flexible meant that deviations from the norm did not result in existential crisis, or undermine society. However, during the last two decades of the eighteenth-century—the first two decades of Fry's life—the idea that identity could be assumed or laid down at will fell precipitously out of fashion. In the aftermath of the American Revolution, stability was valued over contingency, and an emphasis on a solid internal core replaced a willingness to accept a flexible exterior. As a result, Wahrman claims, conceptions of gender, racial, and class identity came to be seen as fixed and innate. Fry grew up within this environment, but her search for a solid moral interior would challenge some aspects of the new gender ideology, an ideology that historians have labeled the doctrine of separate spheres.

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<sup>9</sup> Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 198. For anxieties about female conduct/identity in the periphery of the British empire in the 1770s, see Linda Colley, "Gendering the Globe: The Political and Imperial Thought of Philip Francis," *Past & Present* 209 (November 2010): 117–48. Colley argues that Francis' obsession with linking appearance and virtue was symptomatic of his fear that that female immodesty corrupted male virtue.

Separate sphere ideology (sometimes referred to as the cult of domesticity) held that women and men have different roles and responsibilities because of their biological sex: men were to provide for the economic needs of the family, women for the family's social and domestic needs. Thus the natural role of women was the private, domestic sphere while the public sphere of politics, work, and association was the province of men. As noted in the introduction, historians have demonstrated that there is compelling evidence that contemporary adherence to separate sphere rhetoric (by both women and men) was far from universal; the concept of separate spheres was attenuated by a variety of factors, such as geographical place, class, income, and social/familial networks. Legal and institutional barriers designed to disable or restrict women's activities in the public sphere certainly existed, but as scholars have amply demonstrated, women negotiated and circumvented the legal and customary bars to their participation in the public sphere.<sup>10</sup>

### The Religious Society of Friends

In Fry's case, the primary complicating factor was religion, specifically her membership in the Religious Society of Friends.<sup>11</sup> She was born Elizabeth

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<sup>10</sup> For an excellent review of the literature on the separate sphere paradigm see Amanda Vickery, "Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History," *The Historical Journal* 36, no. 2 (1993): 383–414. See also Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 2002); Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle-Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); and Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> How kinship networks were also key to her ability to being an actor in the public sphere is discussed in subsequent chapters.

Gurney on May 21, 1780 in Norwich, Norfolk County.<sup>12</sup> Betsy, as she was known to her family and friends, was the third daughter of John and Catherine (née Bell) Gurney,<sup>13</sup> joining her elder sisters Catherine (born 1776) and Rachel (1778). Over the next eleven years eight more siblings were born: John (1781), Richenda (1782), Hannah (1783), Louisa (1784), Priscilla (1785), Samuel (1786), Joseph John (1788), and Daniel (1791). The Gurney children's Quaker lineage was illustrious—Catharine Bell's maternal great-grandfather was Robert Barclay, the famous Quaker apologist.<sup>14</sup> John Gurney was part of a prominent and well-connected Quaker family which had had great financial success in the cloth trade, importing Irish wool and exporting finished woolen goods; in 1775 he became a partner in the Gurney family bank established by his cousins John and Henry Gurney.<sup>15</sup> By 1786 Gurney was so prosperous that he took a

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<sup>12</sup> I have elected to refer to Fry by her married name instead of her maiden name in this chapter for both consistency and readability. Citations for Fry's writings are given according to her name at the time they were written—Elizabeth Gurney before August 1800 and Elizabeth Fry thereafter.

<sup>13</sup> A son, John, born in 1777, had died a year later. "Elizabeth Fry (1780–1845) born Gurney," in *Dictionary of Quaker Biography*, vol. Fry-Fryd, The Library of the Religious Society of Friends, London (hereafter LRSF) and "John Gurney (1749–1809)," in *Dictionary of Quaker Biography*, vol. Gurney, J-Gz, LRSF. The *Dictionary of Quaker Biography* (hereafter DQB) is a manuscript collection of biographical data and other personal information on major Quaker figures compiled by The Library of the Religious Society of Friends staff (either unknown or identified only by initials), which have been collated in binders. There are no page numbers.

<sup>14</sup> Most notably, Robert Barclay, *Theologiæ verè Christianæ apologia* (Amsterdam: Jacob Claus, 1676), translated as *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity etc.* (London: s.n., 1678); and Barclay, *A Catechism and Confession of Faith etc.* (London: s.n., 1673). His writings were collected two years after his death as *Truth Triumphant etc.* (London: Thomas Northcott, 1692). Catherine's maternal grandfather, Daniel Bell, had been a well-known Quaker minister for 53 years. "Daniel Bell (1685/6-1758)," in *DQB*, vol. Bell. According to his entry in the *DQB*, Bell was "sound and edifying in his Testimony, often drawn forth in Points of Doctrine with great Clearness, which tended to the opening the Understanding into the Doctrine of the Christian Faith and Practice. ... we believe him to have been a sanctified Vessel for the Lord's Use." Several of John Gurney's ancestors also had been noted Quakers; his great-grandfather, John Gurney, had been imprisoned for his beliefs during the reign of James II, and his father, another John Gurney, was five times clerk of the London Yearly Meeting, a position given only to individuals held in high esteem within the Society of Friends. Clerks had a great deal of power: they directed the agenda and wrote the epistle that summarized the business discussed during the yearly meeting and was distributed to all the monthly meetings as the will of the yearly meeting. "John Gurney (c.1655–1721)," *DQB*, vol. Gurney, J-Gz; and "John Gurney (1715/16-1770)," *DQB*, vol. Gurney, J-Gz.

<sup>15</sup> The social origins of early Friends were modest, but by the eighteenth century a number Quaker families, including the Gurneys, had achieved great commercial success. The financial links between various Quaker-owned enterprises was strengthened by Friends' practice of

long-term lease on Earlham Hall, a large seventeenth-century mansion approximately two miles outside Norwich; he subsequently purchased the adjacent property to create a large estate. The property boasted a wooded park, brook, and numerous gardens, and the Gurney children spent much of their free time enjoying the outdoors.<sup>16</sup> The Gurneys thus lived in what many contemporary Britons considered an idyllic home—an elegant house outside the bustle and grime of town, surrounded by tastefully landscaped gardens and natural woods.<sup>17</sup>

Toward the end of the eighteenth century the Religious Society of Friends consisted of roughly 20,000 members.<sup>18</sup> Since most of Fry’s personal and public decisions were predicated on her religious convictions it is imperative to understand the peculiar nature of Quaker beliefs, practices and rituals, as well as the state of the Quakers and of religion generally in society at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Quakers, or the Religious Society of Friends,<sup>19</sup> are a dissenting Protestant sect established in the 1640s

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endogamy, which created complex familial networks. The practice of the travelling ministry further strengthened these relationships by ensuring a continuous exchange of ideas and information throughout the Quaker community. For an account of businesses and occupations in which Quakers achieved distinction see Arthur Raistrick, *Quakers in Science and Industry: Being an Account of the Quaker Contributions to Science and Industry during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (London: Bannisdale Press, 1950). On the early sociology of Friends in one county (Essex) see Adrian Davies, *The Quakers in English Society, 1655–1725* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), chapter 11.

<sup>16</sup> Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir of Elizabeth Fry* 1:2–3. Today, Earlham Hall houses the law school of the University of East Anglia. It was in the Gurney family until at least 1895.

<sup>17</sup> On the importance of home and garden to Britons in the long eighteenth century see Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); and Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, chapter 8. The Gurneys employed a number of live-in staff, including a butler, governess, nurse, and groundskeeper.

<sup>18</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 30. This is roughly half of what their numbers had been 75 years prior; the decrease can be attributed to the fact that marrying a non-Quaker was grounds for disownment. There had also been some migration to the American colonies when the Northwest Territories opened up in 1787.

<sup>19</sup> Justice Bennet dubbed George Fox and his followers Quakers in 1650, when Fox appeared before him on blasphemy charges, because they “bid them tremble at the word of God”—though he may have been using a term that was already commonly used. George Fox, *Journal, or*

primarily by the preaching of George Fox (1624–1691). Many seventeenth-century English Protestants were dissatisfied with the established church, which they believed had not fully divested itself of Catholic practices and acted as an agent of social control for the state. Known as Puritans, they rejected episcopacy and the Book of Common Prayer, believing that the scriptures were the only written authority capable of settling questions of faith. Puritanism itself, however, was not a cohesive set of doctrinal beliefs, nor was there a unified strategy on how to achieve a thorough reformation—some believed in changing the Church from within, while other groups believed that political power bred ambition, greed, and pride, and thus the only way to attain spiritual renewal and return to the purity of the early Church was to set themselves apart from existing political and religious structures.<sup>20</sup>

Persecution of Friends on the basis of their religious beliefs generally resulted from local prejudices and ignorance, rather than a systemic state

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*Historical Account of the Life, Travels, Sufferings, Christian Experiences, and Labour of Love, in the Work of the Ministry, of that Ancient, Eminent, and Faithful Servant of Jesus Christ, George Fox*, ed. Nigel Smith (London: Penguin Books, 1998), chapter 4. It was not until the eighteenth century that they adopted the name Religious Society of Friends; the first recorded use of this term was in 1793. John Punshon, *Portrait in Grey: A Short History of the Quakers* 2nd ed. (London: Quakerbooks, 2006), 85–86.

<sup>20</sup> Punshon, *Portrait in Grey*, 17–41; William C. Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, 2nd ed. rev. Henry J. Cadbury (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955); Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism*, 2nd edition rev. Henry J. Cadbury (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), chapter 1; and Davies, *Quakers in English Society*, chapters 1–4. Puritans who believed in transforming the system from within reached the peak of their political power during the Interregnum, but divisions within the Puritans soon revealed that while there was consensus that the old system was corrupt, there was no consensus on what its replacement should look like. Furthermore, in a system where religious and political power were intertwined, any attack on the religious orthodoxy equaled an attack on those in political power; accordingly, the Cavalier Parliament was as intolerant of dissenting religious practices as the previous regime, and in 1650 passed the Blasphemy Act, which prohibited expressions of pantheism and antinomianism. Although Friends were neither, to outsiders some of their teachings bore a close enough resemblance to pantheism and antinomianism that they were imprisoned under these laws. Misinterpretation and apprehension about Friends' beliefs also lay behind the mass imprisonment of Friends—as many as 4,230—after the Fifth Monarchy Men revolt in London (1661), when they were suspected of being a part of this millennial plot designed to inaugurate the rule of the saints. The Quaker practice of prison visiting originated in this era. Punshon, *Portrait in Grey*, 41–43.

policy, since their beliefs fell within the tests established for tolerated sects. Most often Friends were arrested for refusing to pay church tithes or—because during the first decades of their existence they were a missionary society and traveled the country to spread their set of beliefs—under the Vagrancy Acts. Once arrested, they often got into further trouble because they refused to take an oath or remove their hats at their trials; refusing to do so meant they could be imprisoned under a contempt charge and jailed for an indeterminate period. The fact that they were not outlawed as a religious group does not, however, mean that they did not suffer from legal restraints. The Test and Corporation Acts (1661 and 1673) barred them from holding public office or serving as military officers. The Five Mile Act (1665) prohibited Quakers and other nonconformists from living, or building a church or meetinghouse, within five miles of any incorporated town. The Quaker Act of 1662, which had created penalties for anyone who refused to take an oath, also made it illegal for more than five nonconformists to hold a religious meeting. In addition to imprisonment, Friends also suffered financial hardships since distraints were frequently levied against their property as punishment for their various offences.<sup>21</sup> The harassment of Friends was just one more mark of distinction for a society that already saw itself as set apart from other Christian denominations. That outsider status became an important component of their collective identity, and contributed to a sympathetic concern for individuals and groups marginalized by society.

Friends argued that individuals can have a direct experience with God: neither clergymen nor sacraments were needed to mediate between God and his

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<sup>21</sup> Braithwaite, *Second Period of Quakerism*, chapters 2–3; Punshon, *Portrait in Grey*, chapter 4; and Davies, *Quakers in English Society*, chapter 13.



people. Instead, people could experience God through “the inner light,” which Friends claim is a manifestation of the spirit of God that is present in everyone, and should not be confused with one’s conscience or intellect. The light plays a vital role in Friends’ belief system because it shows people their sins and the way to salvation. Friends argued that in order to access this inner light it is necessary to focus inward—to ignore all outward distractions and tune out one’s own thoughts—until one hears God’s voice. Once they have tapped into this inner light, they then are able to discern the truth revealed by God, whose spirit will transform them, heart, soul, and mind.

It was this belief—that God is present in everyone—that led some to regard them as pantheists during the early years of the Society. This was not, however, the case: although Friends believed that man could *access* the light, they did not consider it to be in them in the sense that it was a part of what made them human; in fact, because they viewed man as sinful, and the light as divine, they considered human nature, in its natural state, an opposition to the light. Friends believed that it was only in submitting to the truth of the light, namely acknowledging that one is a sinner and can only be redeemed from sin through the grace of God, who died in the person of Jesus Christ in order to atone for man’s sins, that man becomes reconciled to the light.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Punshon, *Portrait in Grey*, 46. Friends call this process conviction, since it entails becoming convinced of one’s sin. Since early Friends privileged the inner light over logic and reasoned theology, this also formed the basis for the claim by their contemporaries that Quakerism was a mystical religion. Unlike most mystical religions, however, there is a corporate aspect to Quaker mysticism: in their meetings for worship Friends sit in silence, waiting together to hear God’s spirit. Sometimes meetings were entirely spent in silence; however, if during a meeting someone felt that he or she had had an “opening”—that is, truly heard God’s voice reveal insights into particular passages of the scriptures or into the meaning of life generally—that person then communicated to the rest of the congregation this divinely-inspired truth, either through personal testimony or in the form of an extemporaneous sermon. On the importance of the inner light to Quaker theology and the capacity Quakers attributed to it to transform individuals and, consequently, lead to “love, compassion, peace, justice, ... unity and wholeness,” see Gerard Guiton, *The Early Quakers and the ‘Kingdom of God’: Peace, Testimony and Revolution* (San

Friends also differed from many other Protestants in that they did not consider the Bible to be the Word of God, but rather a representation of it. Fry's ancestor Robert Barclay, a contemporary of George Fox who became known as the Quaker apologist for his books on Quaker beliefs, wrote that the scriptures "are only a declaration of the fountain, and not the fountain itself, therefore they are not to be esteemed the principal ground of all Truth and knowledge, nor yet the adequate primary rule of faith and manners."<sup>23</sup> Yet while Friends believed that the Bible was not the primary source of God's word, they did view it as a reliable secondary source. The primary source, the true Word of God, they argued, is Christ; accordingly, they believed that a true leading by the inner light took precedence over the declarations of the Bible. The historical revelation of the scriptures may have been divinely inspired, but it was the continuing revelations given to mankind by the Holy Spirit through the inner light that were authoritative. The importance of the Bible to Quaker faith reached its nadir during the Society's quietist phase in the eighteenth century; it was only at the turn of the nineteenth century, when some Quakers developed ties with Evangelical Anglicans, that emphasis on the primacy of the Bible as the source of divine revelation developed (a movement—as will be seen below—with which Fry was intimately connected).<sup>24</sup>

Friends were also distinctive in that they rejected creeds, rites, sacraments, and a paid clergy. They believed that the society's core beliefs

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Francisco: Inner Light Books, 2012). The quote is on page v. The Quaker emphasis on unity underlay Fry's belief that repentant criminals should be reintegrated into society, discussed in chapter three.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Barclay, *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity, as the Same is Held Forth, and Preached, by the People, Called in Scorn, Quakers*, 5th edition (London: s.n., 1703), 67.

<sup>24</sup> Punshon, *Portrait in Grey*, 140–42 and 188; and Rufus M. Jones, *The Later Period of Quakerism*, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan and Co., 1921), chapters 2–3.

should be demonstrated in the every-day lives of its members, rather than in a formal doctrinal statement or systemic theology.<sup>25</sup> These beliefs, known as testimonies, reflect Friends' collective view of their relationship with God and mankind. While there never has been a definitive list or definition of Friends' testimonies, the most important are the testimonies of simplicity, peace, integrity, community, and equality.<sup>26</sup> The testimony of simplicity reflects the Biblical exhortation that while Christians must live in the world, they are not to be of the world.<sup>27</sup> In theory, this entailed limiting material possessions to the necessities of life. Corporally, this testimony was manifested in how the meetinghouses were built: unlike churches, which often feature liturgical symbols, stained glass, paintings, and statues, meetinghouses are unadorned structures with only simple wooden benches. Friends were also to practice simplicity in their personal lives, which gave rise to the practice of plain dress. Friends held that wearing fashionable clothing promoted a sense of vanity and superiority, and since fashions changed more quickly than the clothes wore out, keeping up with the latest fashion trends entailed a waste of money. Friends who observed plain dress accordingly wore clothes in dull colors (often grey) that were cut in simple patterns and lacked accessories.<sup>28</sup>

The testimony of integrity applied to both the professional and personal lives of Friends: being honest not only meant refusing to lie, but also refusing to mislead others. Since politics, the military, and the law profession were closed to Friends during the eighteenth century (politics by law and the military and

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<sup>25</sup> Punshon, *Portrait in Grey*, 57.

<sup>26</sup> Jones, *Later Period of Quakerism*, vol. 1, chapter 5.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, John 15:19, 1 Corinthians 7:31, Ephesians 2:2-3, and James 4:4.

<sup>28</sup> Punshon, *Portrait in Grey*, 140; Jones, *Later Periods of Quakerism*, chapter 6; Davies, *Quakers in English Society*, chapter 3; and Braithwaite, *Second Period of Quakerism*, chapter 18.

law on religious principle), the dominant professions among Friends were science and business. Close kinship networks and the ties of religious fellowship contributed to the Friends' better than average success in these endeavors, and the fact that they were overrepresented in commerce and industry contributed to their having more political influence than their numbers would otherwise suggest. Their reputation for being honest and fair was key to the success of Friends who entered new industrial enterprises and the banking business in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>29</sup> For a religious group built upon principles of simplicity, however, such worldly success was troubling; it was not unusual for Quaker men to retire early and devote their remaining years to service to the Society and/or philanthropy.<sup>30</sup> Having integrity also meant accepting responsibility for one's actions. Until the second half of the nineteenth century, Friends who declared bankruptcy were disowned (though often only temporarily) from membership.<sup>31</sup> Finally, the testimony of integrity lay behind Friends' refusal to swear oaths, since doing so implied that if they did not testify under oath they might not be truthful;

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<sup>29</sup> Raistrick, *Quakers in Science and Industry*. Friends, for example, achieved distinction as traders and merchants, in the iron industry, mining, chocolate-making, and banking; some Quaker businesses became national and international concerns (the Lloyds and Barclays banks still exist, while J. S. Fry & Sons, chocolate makers, merged with Cadbury's shortly after World War I. The pharmaceutical company Allen and Hanburys was purchased by Glaxo Laboratories, now GlaxoSmithKline in the mid-twentieth century). There were also prominent botanists, chemists, geologists, and doctors who were Friends. See also James Walvin, *The Quakers: Money and Morals* (London: John Murray, 1997); and Punshon, *Portrait in Grey*, 127–35.

<sup>30</sup> Walvin, *Quakers: Money and Morals*. Joseph Gurney Bevan, for example, retired at 41 from his chemist business. "Joseph Gurney Bevan (1753–1814)," *DQB*, vol. Ber-Beva.

<sup>31</sup> Joseph Fry and his brother William Storrs Fry were disowned after the Fry & Chapman bank declared bankruptcy in late 1828; Joseph Fry was reinstated in 1836, William Storrs Fry in 1839. "Joseph Fry (1777–1861)," and "William Fry (1768–1858)," *DBQ*, vol. Fry-Fryd. Joseph Lancaster, founder of the Lancasterian school in London, was disowned for debt in 1818. "Joseph Lancaster (1778–1838)," *DBQ*, vol. Lan-Lav.

Friends argued that Christians should be truthful at all times, and therefore did not need to attest that what they said was true.<sup>32</sup>

The peace testimony reflects Friends' conviction that all violence is wrong. Friends were often imprisoned or assessed heavy fines for their refusal to participate in wars; for Fry and her coadjutors it was the basis for their opposition to capital punishment. While the individual experience of the inner light was a vital component of Quakerism, it was balanced by the corporate nature of their association: the testimony of community expresses the Society's belief that individual believers, not the church itself, are the community of God; this is why the Friends' place of worship is called a meetinghouse, and the reason why in most meetinghouses benches are in a square so members can see each other and know that they are part of a community. This interpretation of community is also evident in how Friends arrive at decisions affecting the society. Since Friends desire that their policies are in accordance with God's will for the community, rather than debating the issue and then putting it to a vote they are expected to speak only if they feel that what they have to say comes directly from God. Each member is obliged to listen to what the others have to say; a decision is only reached if there is consensus within the meeting that they are in accordance with God's will. Friends describe this process as finding a "way forward" or "coming to unity."<sup>33</sup> This emphasis on consensus and community would, as will be discussed in later chapters, inform Fry's insistence

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<sup>32</sup> The scriptural basis for their refusal to swear oaths is Matthew 5:33–37.

<sup>33</sup> If a member or members feel strongly that the consensus does not reflect God's will, they can hold up the decision. If the Friend is uncertain, but does not want to stand in the way of the community present, he or she may "stand aside," in which case the decision is settled, despite that members' lack of support. On Quaker testimonies, see Jones, *Later Periods of Quakerism*, vol. 1, chapter 5.

that prisoners consent to the ladies' services and superintendence and that the BLS committee operate on a consensus model.<sup>34</sup>

A whole set of Quaker dos and don'ts arose from these testimonies. For example, because some of the days of the week and months of the year were named after pagan gods and the Roman Caesars, they used numbers instead (for example, 3 May became 3<sup>rd</sup> day, 5<sup>th</sup> month). They disapproved of acting, since it meant pretending to be someone you were not. Singing was frowned upon, as some lyrics exalted secular pastimes such as fighting, chivalry, sports, or drinking; but even songs with spiritual themes came under scrutiny because there was no guarantee that the singer was sincerely feeling the words he or she was singing. They rejected novels, which they felt were concerned with secular themes. Learning to play a musical instrument was fine in theory, but becoming a skilled player required a significant investment of time, time that ought to be put to more important purposes. As a result, music lessons were looked on with disapproval. Drawing was acceptable if it was used to create likenesses from nature, because such drawings had practical value in observing, documenting, and understanding God's creation. Art that dealt with historical or mythical themes, however, were deemed inappropriate, and portraiture was proscribed because it could give the sitter an inflated sense of his or her value. Field sports, cards, and games of chance, too, were against Quaker values. All these rules give the impression that Friends were a dour people, and their insistence that members of the Society must avoid the above activities because such habits might, in extreme cases, have negative

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<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Fry, *Observations on the Visiting, Superintending, and Government of Female Prisoners* (London: John and Arthur Arch, 1827), 17; and Minute of the British Ladies' Society for Promoting the Reformation of Female Prisoners, at a Meeting of the Committee Specially Summoned in Consequence of the Removal by Death, of Mrs. Fry, Temp. Box 9-18-9, LRSF.

consequences demonstrates a remarkable lack of trust in an individual's capacity to exercise judgment and self-control. Underlying these rules, however, is a concern about how best to use one's time while on earth. If you professed belief in Quaker principles and beliefs, then your goal was not to enjoy the here and now, but to seek a greater understanding of God and to grow more perfect in His eyes. Doing so could only be achieved by seeking truth, not by wasting time pursuing activities that are ephemeral, and that would give you joy. Interiority was key, but it was made visible in the exteriority of dress, speech, and behavior.<sup>35</sup>

The testimony of equality reflects Friends' belief that all humans are equal before God. Although the Society initially drew most of its members from the middling classes, they rejected distinctions based on class because they believed that their message was for everyone.<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, they refused to use honorific titles and to remove their hats indoors or before judges, and used the familiar "thee" and "thou" rather than the formal "you," since all of these practices implied distinctions between individuals on the basis of class or status. The testimony of equality was behind Friends' opposition to slavery and their support for humane treatment of Native Americans, the mentally ill, and prisoners. It is important, however, to stress that the testimony of equality stated that everyone had equal value, not that everyone should have equal social or economic status.

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<sup>35</sup> Braithwaite, *Second Period of Quakerism*, chapter 18; Jones, *Later Periods of Quakerism*, vol. 1, chapter 6; and Punshon, *Portrait in Grey*, 149–52.

<sup>36</sup> Punshon, *Portrait in Grey*, 127. The emphasis on equality was also made manifest in the nature of their worship: unlike other Christian denominations, where services are led by one minister and the congregation is oriented toward that one person, any Quaker who felt called by the inner light to speak during worship service could do so at his or her discretion. This practice, together with the Quaker practice of sitting in rows of benches that faced each other, decentered their worship space.

For Fry, the most immediate relevant aspect of the testimony of equality was that it extended to the religious equality of women; in the Religious Society of Friends, both men and women served as ministers and elders. Women had played an important role in the initial phases of the Society—Margaret Fell, George Fox’s wife,<sup>37</sup> probably kept the movement alive while he was in prison—and there was a large body of texts written by “ordinary” Quaker women during the first several decades of the Society addressing the theological, political, and practical concerns of Society members. These texts ranged from prophecies to stories of imprisoned Quakers and Parliamentary petitions. Female thought thus had an important impact on the early beliefs of Quaker society.<sup>38</sup> Pastoral care was divided equally between two men and two women at each local meeting, and the vows given in the Quaker marriage ceremony—to love and be faithful to one’s spouse—applied to both husband and wife. Even in the official

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<sup>37</sup> Bonnelyn Young Kunze, *Margaret Fell and the Rise of Quakerism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

<sup>38</sup> Catie Gill, *Women in the Seventeenth-Century Quaker Community: A Literary Study of Political Identities, 1650–1700*, Women and Gender in the Early Modern World Series (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005); Kate Peters, *Print Culture and the Early Quakers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), chapter 5; Kunze, *Margaret Fell*, particularly chapter 6; Rosemary Foxtan, *Hear the Word of the Lord’: A Critical and Bibliographical Study of Quaker Women’s Writings, 1650–1700* (Melbourne: Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand, 1994); and Hugh Barbour, “Quaker Prophetesses and Mothers in Israel,” in *Seeking the Light: Essays in Quaker History in Honor of Edwin B. Bronner*, ed. J. William Frost and John M. Moore (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1986). On early Quaker women’s ministry, see Bonnelyn Young Kunze, “Vesells Fitt for the Masters Us[e]’: A Transatlantic Community of Religious Women, the Quakers, 1675–1753, in *Court, Country, and Culture: Essays on Early Modern British History in Honor of Perez Zagorin*, ed. Bonnelyn Young Kunze and Dwight D. Brautigam (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 1992). For the eighteenth century, see Phyllis Mack, “Religion, Feminism, and the Problem of Agency: Reflections on Eighteenth-Century Quakerism,” *Signs* 29, no. 1 (2003): 149–77; Mack, “In a Female Voice: Preaching and Politics in Eighteenth-Century British Quakerism,” in *Women Preachers and Prophets Through Two Millennia of Christianity*, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 248–63; and Rebecca Larson, *Daughters of Light: Quaker Women Preaching and Prophesying in the Colonies and Abroad, 1700–1775* (New York: Knopf, 1999). For the nineteenth century see Sandra Stanley Holton, *Quaker Women: Personal Life, Memory and Radicalism in the Lives of Women Friends, 1780–1930* (London: Routledge, 2007); and Alex Tyrrell, “‘Woman’s Mission’ and Pressure Group Politics in Britain, 1825–60,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 63, no. 1 (1980): 194–230.



obituaries Quaker men and women are treated equally, since they are testimonies of their faith rather than their worldly accomplishments.<sup>39</sup>

The most visible and important role in the Religious Society of Friends, however, was that of the unpaid ministry. Anyone who felt called by the inner light to speak could do so; if, after a period of time that could be several years, members of the local meeting agreed that an individual had consistently spoken the truth and thus had the gift of ministry, they asked the monthly meeting to recognize him or her as a minister.<sup>40</sup> In the seventeenth century, Friends were actively engaged with outsiders because they believed that hearing the inner light was a call to action, both spiritually and materially. Early Friends ministers were missionaries and, like the Methodists of the eighteenth century, traveled across the country preaching their message. Together with written missives, the traveling ministry kept this small religious community connected and (relatively) cohesive theologically.<sup>41</sup> Not all ministers traveled, and many ministers only traveled locally or regionally; however, there were a significant number who traveled throughout the United Kingdom, America, and the

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<sup>39</sup> Patricia Howell Michaelson, "Religious Bases of Eighteenth-Century Feminism: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Quakers," *Women's Studies* 22, no. 3 (1993): 281-95. See, for example, "Joseph Gurney," *Testimonies Concerning Joseph Gurney and Isaac Stephenson, Printed by Direction of the Yearly Meeting of Friends, 1831* (London: Harvey and Darton, 1831), 3-11; "Elizabeth Fry," *Testimonies Concerning Deceased Ministers, Presented to the Yearly Meeting in London, Held in London, 1846* (London: Edward Marsh, 1846), 16-28; "Mary Fox," and "Joseph John Gurney," *Testimonies Concerning Deceased Ministers, Presented to the Yearly Meeting in London, 1847* (London: ), 3-10 and 50-64; "Dorcas Coventry," *Testimonies Concerning Deceased Ministers, Presented to the Yearly Meeting in London, Held in London, 1848* (London: Edward Marsh, 1848), 20-23; "William Forster," and "Lydia Ann Barclay," *Testimonies Concerning Deceased Ministers, Presented to the Yearly Meeting in London, Held in London, 1855* (London: Edward Marsh, 1855), 14-29 and 30-37.

<sup>40</sup> Jones, *Later Period of Quakerism*, 121-27.

<sup>41</sup> On building community in the absence of direct contact or geographical proximity see Alan Macfarlane, *Reconstructing Historical Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), chapter 1.

continent.<sup>42</sup> Margaret Hope Bacon has calculated that between 1700 and 1800 more than 200 ministers traveled between Britain and America, roughly one-third of them women. They ranged in age from eighteen to seventy-two, with an average age of forty-five; although some were single or widowed, many were married and left small children with their husbands or sisters. Long-distance travel carried enormous risk; in addition to the perils of road and ocean, they faced public prejudice and in some places imprisonment for their beliefs. Some became ill or died during their journeys, while others lost loved ones during their absence. Since women ministers typically did not travel on their own, but in the company of another female minister or female Quaker, they developed close, long-lasting friendships with their companions, bonds that in some cases survived subsequent marriages and vast geographical separation.<sup>43</sup>

During the Interregnum, as Friends were establishing themselves as a religious community, there was little emphasis on administration or the discipline of individual members. By the 1660s, however, Friends realized that in order to survive as a group they needed to establish guidelines for the Society as a whole and for individual members. The process of establishing what would become known as the London Yearly Meeting began in 1668, when a group of ministers from across the country decided to create a centralized organization that would administer Quaker affairs.<sup>44</sup> While Friends emphasized the spiritual

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<sup>42</sup> Jones, *Later Period of Quakerism*, chapter 7.

<sup>43</sup> Margaret Hope Bacon, "An International Sisterhood: Eighteenth-Century Quaker Women in Overseas Ministry," *Friends' Quarterly* 28, no. 5 (1995): 193–206. Thirty-one of the seventy-four women who crossed the Atlantic were British, the rest were American. On the history of the Quaker's travelling ministry see Jones, *Later Periods of Quakerism*, chapter 7; and Braithwaite, *Second Period of Quakerism*, chapter 13.

<sup>44</sup> Punshon, *Portrait in Grey*, 106-107; and Jones, *Later Periods of Quakerism*, vol. 1, chapter 4. Between meetings, administrative concerns were dealt by smaller administrative units. The smallest units were called the monthly meeting, and consisted of all the meetings in a given region; the intermediate unit between the monthly meeting and the yearly meeting was the

equality of men and women, women initially did not have an equal voice in the administration of London Yearly Meeting, as they were not part of the business sessions (though female ministers were sent to Yearly Meeting as representatives). Some of the American yearly meetings, the Irish Yearly Meeting, and several British quarterly meetings had women's meetings, but despite periodic lobbying a separate Women's Yearly Meeting was not created until 1784. Even though this gave Quaker women greater authority than that held by women of other denominations, that authority was still delimited, as it was subordinate to the London Yearly Meeting.<sup>45</sup>

They also established a set of disciplinary procedures. Because Friends thought of themselves as people whose lives were testimonies of God's redeeming grace, they felt that it was important that neither the Society nor its members tarnish that witness. The disciplinary process addressed transgressions against Quaker beliefs so that the Society's standards would not be contaminated by any encroachment of outside influences. If it was felt that a member of the Society was not acting in accordance with the principles and

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quarterly meeting, which was composed of the monthly meetings within a larger province. The purpose of the yearly meeting was to decide what was and what was not consistent with Quaker principles and practice, to arbitrate internal disputes, provide counsel to local, monthly, and quarterly meetings, to encourage the ministry, and to advise members of the Society of their shortcomings. The yearly meeting also solicited statistical information from the monthly and quarterly meetings, including the number of births, deaths, convincements, imprisonments, and fines levied against members. Over time, these "queries" expanded to include requests about the spiritual state of local meetings. At the conclusion of each yearly meeting the clerk of the meeting wrote an "Epistle," which was a letter circulated to all meetings that summarized the consensus arrived at during the yearly meeting and served as an appraisal of the spiritual condition of the Society. In 1995 London Yearly Meeting was renamed Britain Yearly Meeting; for clarity purposes, however, this dissertation will use the designation by which it was known during Fry's lifetime. Braithwaite, *Second Period of Quakerism*, chapters 9–10.

<sup>45</sup> Margaret Hope Bacon, "The Establishment of London Women's Yearly Meeting: A Transatlantic Concern," *Journal of the Friends Historical Society* 57, no. 2 (1995): 151-65. Bacon argues that part of the resistance to a separate women's meeting may have been because women already ran two other meetings, the Box and Two Weeks Meetings, which served the needs of the poor. Another point of contention was the insistence by some women that the women's meeting have sole authority over female members. See also Helen Plant, "'Subjective Testimonies': Women Quaker Ministers and Spiritual Authority in England: 1750–1825," *Gender & History* 15, no. 2 (2003): 296-318.

practices of Friends testimonies, two or more members from that individual's meetinghouse, usually elders or leading members of the meeting, would visit the offending member and counsel him or her to amend the perceived transgression. Failure to do so could lead to the individual being "disowned," the term used by Friends to indicate the involuntary termination of a person's membership in the Society.<sup>46</sup> Unlike excommunication, however, disownment was not designed to punish the offender, but rather to demonstrate to him or her the seriousness of the offence so that he or she would become convinced of their error and repent.<sup>47</sup>

Although the original goal in setting up these disciplinary procedures had been to maintain the purity of Quaker principles and practices so that the Society would be seen as a shining example of the Christian faith and thus be attractive to potential converts, over time they contributed to the opposite, for through their efforts to avoid contamination from the outside world the Society increasingly began to insulate itself from that world rather than seeking to

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<sup>46</sup> The scriptural text used by Friends to justify disownment is in Matthew 18:15–17. Members who laid down their membership voluntarily were recorded as having resigned their membership. Disownment barred the individual from attending business meetings (i.e. monthly, quarterly, and yearly meeting), but it did not ban them from attending meetings for worship or social interaction with members of the Society, nor did it signify that the person had lost their salvation. Furthermore, disowned members could be reinstated to membership if they acknowledged, in writing, that they had sinned and sincerely repented their action(s) and their statement was accepted by the monthly meeting as genuine.

<sup>47</sup> Grounds for disownment included actions specifically forbidden by scriptures such as fornication, adultery, profanity, lying, stealing, and prosecuting fellow members of the Society without submitting to (or exhausting) internal arbitration, but also actions that went against Quaker principles such as participating in or supporting military activity, swearing an oath, taking the test of obedience, and consistent failure to attend meeting for worship. Marrying outside the Society, attending the wedding of a Quaker to a non-Quaker, neglecting family responsibilities, drunkenness, gambling, slander, failure to pay a debt (including a business failure that resulted in bankruptcy), dishonesty, and attending a place where there was music or dancing or permitting it at home were also grounds for disownment. Slaveholding was added as a disownable offence in the eighteenth century. The actual practice of disownment varied in time and place—the Norfolk Monthly Meeting, for example, was fairly lax about disownments during the late eighteenth century (which is why the Gurneys were never disowned), while disownments for the transgressions listed above were fairly common in America. By the mid-nineteenth century many of the grounds for disownment were ignored or abolished.

transform it. Thus despite the missionary activity in the first decades of its existence, the Religious Society of Friends never became a large religious organization.<sup>48</sup> The decreasing emphasis placed on missionary outreach during the eighteenth century meant that most of the subsequent additions to the Society were the result of birth rather than conviction.<sup>49</sup> The traveling ministry changed as well. Whereas in the beginning decades of the Society Friends traveled the country to spread their sectarian beliefs, later Friends ministers traveled from one local meeting to the next (particularly those in more remote areas) in order to encourage and support those who were already members of the Society; they also paid pastoral visits to families in the meetings within their own monthly meeting, and visited Friends in prison. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the Society entered a quietist phase, during which the dominant view was that man cannot know God through reason, logic, intellect, or emotion but only by becoming passive and opening oneself up to God. As a result, Quaker quietists stressed the importance of silence in worship and were skeptical about vocal ministry, which they believed arose more from the human desire than divine inspiration. Expressing enthusiasm about one's faith was considered vulgar.<sup>50</sup> This inward emphasis (both as a Society and within the Society) continued until the late eighteenth century, when Friends became active in social justice causes, particularly the anti-slavery movement.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> In 1715, for example, there were approximately 39,000 members, spread over 696 meetings of varying sizes. Punshon, *Portrait in Grey*, 123.

<sup>49</sup> Punshon estimates that by 1750 as much as 80% of the Society's members had been born to Quaker parents. Punshon, *Portrait in Grey*, 156.

<sup>50</sup> Jones, *Later Periods of Quakerism*, vol. 1, chapters 2–3; and Bacon, "International Sisterhood," 203.

<sup>51</sup> On Quaker participation in the anti-slavery movement see David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), chapter

The increase in the number of birthright Quakers also meant there were members of the Society who were less committed to Friends principles and practices than those who were convinced Friends because their membership was more of a cultural and familial inheritance than a matter of religious belief. One measure of the weakness of many members' ties to the Society during this period was the increasing number of disownments and resignations from the Society because of "marrying out," that is, marrying a non-Quaker. Others, while unwilling to break testimonies that would cause them to be disowned, decided not to adhere to the practice of plainness, which generally was not a disownable offence. By the end of the eighteenth century such Friends became known as "gay Friends;" Friends who practiced plain speech and dress were called "plain Friends." Adopting plain dress and speech thus became a sign that a birthright Quaker had been persuaded to live a religious life.

### The Gurneys of Norwich

John and Catherine Gurney were gay Friends: they did not adhere to the Quaker code of plain dress or speech, and were sociable with individuals from many different denominations and ways of life. John Gurney in particular enjoyed "worldly" activities such as hunting, dancing, music, and singing.<sup>52</sup> In the early years of their marriage Catherine Gurney explored the beliefs of other Christian denominations, particularly Unitarianism, but eventually recommitted herself to Quaker (though not plain) principles. She read the Bible

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5; and Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Absolutism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006), especially chapter 7.

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Rachel Gurney to Elizabeth Fry, 2 November, 1803, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 116-17, The British Library, London (hereafter Egerton MS).

to her children, encouraged them to pray,<sup>53</sup> and expected them to attend the Sunday meeting for worship (unless ill, which Fry frequently was), but the Gurney children disliked attending meetings for worship, as they frequently were bored with the long and often silent meetings for worship. “Goats was dis” was a recurring refrain between them, referring to their disgust of the Goats Lane Meetinghouse which the family attended.<sup>54</sup>

Catherine Gurney insisted her daughters be educated in subjects that were not usually taught to girls at this time, such as Latin and mathematics, in addition to the more usual subjects of French, geography, natural history, and drawing.<sup>55</sup> The traditional skills needed to run a household such as plain work, the cutting of linen, the tasks associated with entertaining guests, and comportment were also part of their curriculum, though in a description of her education plan for her daughters Catherine Gurney lists these activities after the above academic subjects. When it came to their religious education, Catherine Gurney taught her children the “divine truths” contained in the Bible, but while she wanted them to have a “broad and firm basis of Christianity” she did not believe in teaching them the beliefs of individual sects,

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<sup>53</sup> Catherine Bell Gurney, “Memorandum for the Duties of the Day,” Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 36-37. In a memoir written by Fry’s eldest daughters, this memorandum is dated April 1788, when Fry was eight years old. Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir*, 1:3.

<sup>54</sup> One Christmas Sunday Richenda Gurney wrote the following in her journal: “I shall not say much of this day, as indeed it is not worth saying much about. It was flat, stupid, unimproving, and Sundayish. I spent *four* hours at Meeting! I never, never wish to see that nasty hole again.” Ironically, Richenda would marry an Anglican clergyman; she and her husband, Francis Cunningham, were active in the teetotaler movement. Richenda Gurney, journal entry, 24 December, 1797, quoted in Augustus J. C. Hare, *The Gurneys of Earham*, vol. 1 (London: George Allen, 1895), 70. The previous year, Louisa Gurney wrote that she “stayed at home to-day and had a pleasant morning. I am always so happy to escape from the claws of Goat’s.” Louisa Gurney, 5 April, 1796, in Hare, *Gurneys of Earham*, 1:51.

<sup>55</sup> Michèle Cohen challenges the idea that male schooling during this period was superior to female domestic education; she argues that more work needs to be done on the difference between men and women’s education. Rethinking the categories of “method” and “system,” Cohen contends, may lead to a more productive understanding of the education of girls during this period. Michèle Cohen, “‘To Think, To Compare, to Combine, to Methodise’: Girls’ Education in Enlightenment Britain, in *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* (see note 7), 224–42.

including those held by the Quakers.<sup>56</sup> Other than reading the Bible and attending First Day meeting for worship, the Gurneys did not compel rigid conformity to Christian doctrines or the practice of Quaker testimonies. So while the Gurney children grew up in a family and community that had a tradition of religious belief and were expected to have a general knowledge of biblical scriptures, they were not expected or pressured to “be” religious or to see religion as defining their identity.

Despite her mother’s efforts Fry was an indifferent scholar. She rose much later than her older sisters, often missed classes because of an assortment of minor ailments, and generally evinced little interest in her studies. As an adult this was a source of great regret for Fry, for she was never confident of her spelling, grammar, and punctuation (her letters and journals typically read like stream-of-consciousness) and she knew that her handwriting lacked the elegance expected from a woman of her socio-economic station.<sup>57</sup> There is also no indication that she retained any knowledge of Latin, and her grasp of French was rudimentary.<sup>58</sup> She was, however, shrewd in matters of

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<sup>56</sup> Catherine Bell Gurney, *Plan of Education*, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 37–38.

<sup>57</sup> David Barclay, her maternal uncle, was forced at one point to add the following postscript to a letter: “Please in future to remember to write more distinctly to an old man, who does not use Spectacles, & wishes not [to] be obliged to call for assistance.” David Barclay to Elizabeth Fry, 19 March, 1804, Egerton MS 3672A, fol. 126. Her younger brother, Joseph John Gurney, ended another letter with the request that “a letter from thee however misspelt will be most grateful to thy most affectionate brother.” Joseph John Gurney to Elizabeth Fry, 7 January, 1810, Egerton MS 3672A, fol. 214. The fact that she was aware that there were deficiencies in her grammar and spelling is a boon for historians since, as a result, she often drafted letters she deemed too important to send out with strikeouts or errors. Not only are some of these drafts extant where the original letter has been lost, but where both are still extant the choices she made about which words/thoughts to include or exclude in the final version reveals which ideas she felt were more significant or compelling.

<sup>58</sup> Whereas her sisters occasionally wrote letters in French (see, for example, Priscilla Gurney to Katharine and Rachel Fry, 4 February, 1817, Egerton MS 3673A, fols. 84–85), on her trips to France Fry struggled with even the most basic efforts to communicate in French.



business,<sup>59</sup> and throughout her life was enthusiastic and knowledgeable about natural history.

In comparison with the large body of primary sources written by Fry during her adult life there is little direct primary evidence of Fry's early childhood. Like her sisters, she kept a journal from an early age; however, in 1828 she destroyed all of her journals prior to 1797, substituting a short summary (supplemented by her adult recollections of her childhood) in their place.<sup>60</sup> She describes her childhood as pleasant, though marred by weak spirits and a nervous disposition, along with a morbid fear of the dark and water. Her fears and periodic illnesses, combined with a reserved disposition, made her, she claimed, "little understood, and thought very little of, except by my mother and one or two others. I was considered and called very stupid and obstinate." Though her tone implies she saw herself differently, she

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<sup>59</sup> When the Fry bank was in trouble, for example, her brothers consulted her rather than her husband in their examination into the state of the bank. She also advised her sisters on maximizing profit from the handwork done by the girls attending the Norwich school Fry had started before her marriage. Louisa Gurney to Elizabeth Fry, 25 September, 1805, Egerton MS 3672A, fols.159–60.

<sup>60</sup> Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir*, 1:7. As noted in chapter five, Fry's journals and correspondence were not private in the modern-day sense; though entries and letters were personal, there was a presumption that they would be semi-public during her lifetime, and could be published after her death. It was common practice at the time for letters to be circulated within family and friendship circles in order to share personal information and political or philosophical ideas and activities. Even as a teenager Fry was accustomed to others reading her journal; she and her sisters regularly let their sister Catherine read their entries. As an adult, Fry acknowledged that her journals would be read by others. When Fry wished to keep letters confidential, she either made a "private" notation on the top, or wrote within the text that the information should not be shared. See, for example, Elizabeth Fry to Katherine Fry, 29 November, 1828, Egerton MS 3674, f. 70 and Elizabeth Fry to Hannah Buxton, 1 January 1830, Egerton MS 3674, f. 131. Such letters, however, were the exception rather than the norm. On the practice of women circulating letters to keep friends and allies up to date with political news and new ideas, see Sarah Richardson, "Well-neighbour'd Houses': The Political Networks of Elite Women, 1780–1860," in *Women in British Politics, 1760–1860: The Power of the Petticoat*, ed. Kathryn Gleadle and Sarah Richardson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 56–73; and Anthony Page, "A Great Politicianess': Ann Jebb, Rational Dissent and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Women's History Review* 17, no. 5 (2008): 743–65.

acknowledges that she did not like learning or pay great attention to her lessons, and was inclined to be stubborn and contrary.<sup>61</sup>

The first cataclysmic event in Fry's childhood was the death of her mother in 1792 after a short illness. After her death, the Gurney children were largely left to their own devices. Though a fond and indulgent parent, John Gurney provided little direction or guidance to his young children. Their habit of reading the Bible in the morning or evening appears to have lapsed, and they became close friends with individuals of other faiths, including Catholics and Unitarians, whose beliefs strict Quakers found particularly troubling and contrary to true Quaker principles.<sup>62</sup> In the absence of their mother's guidance the eldest Gurney girls were also left to their own devices with respect to their reading. Many in Norwich society were receptive to the new political and social ideas of the period, and John Gurney frequently entertained people who were interested in such ideas. His friendship with Dr. James Alderson, a member of the Corresponding Society, was particularly significant since it led to a life-long friendship between his daughter Amelia and the Gurney children. Amelia, who married the painter John Opie and subsequently became a well-known author,

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<sup>61</sup> Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir*, 1:9 and 11. Fry claimed that she felt inferior to her elder sisters, though she was close to her sister Rachel, who remained her best friend until the latter's death in 1827. Catherine Gurney, writing years later about this period of Fry's life, claimed that Fry "had more genius than any one, from her retiring disposition, gave her credit for in her early days. ... She disliked learning languages, and was somewhat obstinate in her temper ... her aversion to learning was a serious disadvantage to her, and though she was quick in natural talent, her education was very imperfect and defective." Catherine Gurney, undated recollection, quoted in Hare, *Gurneys of Earham*, 1:37.

<sup>62</sup> Anthony Pages notes that Unitarianism's interest in scientifically understanding nature and its emphasis on individualism and liberty fostered a critical engagement with authoritarian discourses and practices. Advanced Unitarians believed, he argues, that men and women "shared a common capacity for rational thought. Thus Joseph Priestley declared that 'the minds of women are capable of the same improvement ... as those of men.'" Female Unitarians like Ann Jebb, for example, were active and influential in intellectual and philosophical circles. Anthony Page, "'A Great Politicianess,'" 751. Though there is no evidence that the Gurneys were personally acquainted with Priestley, they were close friends with Maryann Galton (later Schimmelpenninck) and Samuel Tertius Galton, who knew Priestley through their family's association with the Birmingham Lunar Society.

was close friends with several noted literary and artistic individuals, including Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, Sir Walter Scott, Sarah Siddons, and Philip Kemble. Through her, the eldest Gurney girls became familiar with the works of Wollstonecraft, Godwin, Thomas Paine, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.<sup>63</sup> John Gurney also encouraged his children to sing and dance, despite the fact that these activities went against Quaker testimonies.

### Becoming Religious: Fry's Search for Identity

Such were the influences on Fry for the first decade and a half of her life. But despite the life of privilege her father's wealth afforded her and the uncommon education she had received Fry was not entirely happy—she was profoundly uneasy about her character, lifestyle, and beliefs, which to her seemed to lack seriousness and purpose. One of the earliest of her extant journal entries from April 1797 captures her sense of uneasiness:

Without passions of any kind how different I should be! ... I should like to have them under subjection; but it appears to me, as I feel, impossible to govern them, my mind is not strong enough. ... I believe by not governing myself in little things, I may by degrees become a despicable character, and a curse to society; therefore, my doing wrong is of consequence to others, as well as to myself.<sup>64</sup>

Later that same month, she reflected further that “entering into the world hurts me; worldly company, I think, materially injures, it excites a false stimulus, such a love of pomp, pride, vanity, jealousy, and ambition. It leads to think about dress and such trifles and when [at home] we fly to novels, scandals, or

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<sup>63</sup> Catherine Gurney, Jr., undated recollection, in Hare, *Gurneys of Earham*, 1:80–82. Though Wollstonecraft, Godwin, Paine and Rousseau were the only authors Catherine Gurney mentions by name, her use of &c. implies that the sisters read more than just these four authors. In 1825, Amelia Opie became a Quaker in large part through the ministry of Fry's brother Joseph John, with whom she remained close until his death in 1848.

<sup>64</sup> Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, April 1797, The Library of the Religious Society of Friends, London (hereafter LRSF).

something of that kind, for entertainment.”<sup>65</sup> For Fry, natural human behavior is inherently uncivilized, driven by impulses that are not only detrimental to the long-term happiness of the individual, but undermine the fabric of a harmonious society. Even in these early journal entries it is possible to see a desire for a moral interiority that Charles Taylor argues is so significant to the development of the modern self.<sup>66</sup> It is also important to note Fry’s belief that negative, unsocial behavior must be restrained by mental self-control. Furthermore, as discussed below and in later chapters, Fry believed that simply acknowledging what constituted desirable vs. undesirable behavior was not sufficient, but a process that required ongoing vigilance. The notion that a person must discipline oneself would form a cornerstone of Fry’s own identity, and play an important role in her ideas for prison reform.<sup>67</sup>

It is unclear from surviving records when Fry’s formal schooling with the Gurney governess ended; if at this point she was still under the governess’ care, the end was no doubt in sight. Once they were out of the schoolroom, the Gurney girls occupied themselves like many other wealthy young women of the period, by reading, writing letters, doing handwork, going on walks or rides, visiting friends and family in the Norwich area and entertaining friends and family in turn, as well as occasionally seeing to the sick, infirm, or poor on their father’s estate and in the surrounding neighborhood. Catherine, Rachel and

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<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 25 April, 1797, LRSF.

<sup>66</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*.

<sup>67</sup> Though Fry believed that individuals needed to be vigilant about their behavior and spiritual state, she found criticism of her own actions from Quaker elders irksome. See Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 5 June, 1817, Norfolk 519/1; and Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 17 November, 1818, LRSF. The significance of the concept of discipline in prison reform in the late eighteenth and early decades of the nineteenth century—a concept brought to historiographical prominence by Michel Foucault—and the role that discipline, both internal and external, played in Fry’s prison reform activities, will be discussed in chapter three.

Betsy also helped the governess with the younger girls' lessons. In the evenings they wrote in their journals and spent time together as a family, often singing, dancing or acting pantomimes, or went to a dinner and/or dance at a friend's house.<sup>68</sup> From time to time they visited family members who lived further away or accompanied relatives to the latter's second home, for periods ranging from several days to several months.<sup>69</sup> The Gurney girls never had to worry about finding paid employment, and it was not necessary that either they or their brothers marry for any reason other than affection—though value was placed on marrying a respectable and, in the case of the Gurney daughters, financially solid member of society.<sup>70</sup>

In the original manuscript of Fry's journal she never states or even hints at what brought about this sense of dissatisfaction. The previous year she had

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<sup>68</sup> For examples of their activities see Elizabeth Gurney, journal entries, 12 June and 12 December, 1798, LRSF; Richenda Gurney to Hannah Gurney, September 1801, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 104–105; and Richenda Gurney to Elizabeth Fry, 24 September 1803, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 113–15.

<sup>69</sup> London, Cromer, and Brighton were typical destinations. Shorter trips tended to be a holiday; longer stays were often tied to health—either their own, if the family felt they needed convalescing (both Rachel and Priscilla would die of consumption), or that of a sick relative, whom they would nurse. See, for example, Elizabeth Gurney to Joseph Fry, 31 July, 1800, Egerton MS 3672A, fol. 90, on a spur-of-the-moment trip she took to Cromer just three weeks before their wedding; Louisa Gurney to Elizabeth Fry, 1 May 1805, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 151–52 on Louisa's care of a sick aunt; and Rachel Gurney to Elizabeth Fry, 21 October 1805, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 161–62 on Priscilla Gurney's care of their cousin Chrissy, who was physically disabled.

<sup>70</sup> The variety of marriages contracted by the Gurney siblings reveals the family's emphasis on affectionate marriage over marriage for property or place: Fry, the first to marry, wed a plain Quaker whose family was successful in the tea business; Catherine, Rachel, and Priscilla never married; Richenda married the Reverend Francis Cunningham; Hannah married Thomas Fowell Buxton, whose mother was a Quaker (both would eventually leave the Society of Friends); Louisa married Samuel Hoare, a wealthy banker whose family were gay Quakers (they too would leave the Society of Friends); Samuel married within the Society, as did Joseph John (on three occasions); and Daniel married the daughter of the Earl of Erroll. With the exception of Rachel's romance with John Enfield, the son of John Gurney Jr.'s tutor, John Gurney Sr. (and the elder girls with respect to their younger siblings) were certainly pleased when affection was found with someone who came from a well-to-do Quaker family, but neither wealth nor religious affiliation were absolute bars to potential unions. The Gurney's willingness to tolerate marriages to non-Quakers was evident as early as 1803, when they supported John Gurney Jr.'s proposal of marriage to Susan Hammond, whose family were Anglican (the engagement did not come to fruition). See Rachel Gurney to Elizabeth Fry, 11 November, 1803, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 118–19; Priscilla Gurney to Elizabeth Fry, 14 November, 1803, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 120–21; and Catherine Gurney to Elizabeth Fry, 28 November, 1803, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 122–23.

been very sick; though the nature of her illness remains unknown (some of her biographers allege it was a nervous breakdown), it was sufficiently serious that in February 1796 she was sent to a doctor in London, and this brush with her own mortality may have given her pause.<sup>71</sup> Given her age—she was almost seventeen at the time—she may have been uncertain about what lay in her future. Neither of her elder sisters was married; Catherine, who was now twenty-one, had been placed in charge of the Earlham household and the younger siblings after their mother’s death, a responsibility she resented. Later in life Catherine claimed that her family responsibilities as the eldest child were “a continual weight and pain which wore my health and spirits.”<sup>72</sup> Rachel, on the other hand, had secretly fallen in love with Henry Enfield, a Unitarian whose father was John Gurney Jr.’s tutor. When the romance was discovered in 1796, John Gurney Sr. forbade her from seeing him until she turned twenty-one.<sup>73</sup> It is therefore possible that her sisters’ experiences had dampened her own expectations about the prospect of marriage in her future and raised in her mind the question of how she could profitably spend her time should running her own household and motherhood not be in the cards. For someone who was highly intelligent but aware of her own educational deficiencies an alternate career to the domestic probably seemed out of reach.

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<sup>71</sup> Rose, *Elizabeth Fry*, 12, and Hatton, *Betsy*, 41. Joseph John Gurney, in his brief biography of his sister after her death, suggests a link between her illness and subsequent religious turn, though he seriously telescopes the time period involved; “soon afterward” was actually a year later. Joseph John Gurney, *Brief Memoirs of Thomas Fowell Buxton and Elizabeth Fry* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1845), 36. Louisa Gurney wrote that “I do not know what we shall do when Betsy comes home, for we are all afraid of her now, which is very shocking.” Louisa Gurney, journal entry, 14 April, 1796, quoted in Hare, *Gurneys of Earlham*, 1:52.

<sup>72</sup> Hare, *Gurneys of Earlham*, 1:34.

<sup>73</sup> While John Gurney Sr. had been liberal when it came to his children associating with individuals from other Christian denominations, the official reason he gave for his refusal to sanction Rachel’s romance was the fact that Henry Enfield was Unitarian. Though Rachel’s feelings toward Enfield did not change during the separation, her religious beliefs had and she no longer agreed with Enfield’s Deism. Hare, *Gurneys of Earlham*, 1:116-18.

Another possible impetus behind Fry's desire to work on her character and change her behavior may have been rooted in the relationship she had with her siblings, particularly her sisters. Although the siblings were close, and would remain so for the rest of their lives, the negative qualities Fry describes offhand in her 1828 recollection of her youth appear to have been qualities that on occasion bothered her siblings a great deal.<sup>74</sup> Her sister Louisa writes that one of her biggest shortcomings was speaking unkindly to Fry, because the latter provoked her by lording over her younger siblings, being extremely stubborn, repeatedly abstaining from family activities due to phobias (particularly with respect to water-related activities)—which Louisa felt cast a pall on the rest of the family's enjoyment of these occasions—and for her tendency to command a greater share of attention from friends and visitors.<sup>75</sup> After Fry's death Catherine Gurney contrasted her sister's behavior before and after she had found religion:

In contemplating her remarkable and peculiar gifts, I am struck with the development of her character, and the manner in which the qualities, considered faults when she was a child, became virtues, and proved in her case of the most important efficacy in her career of active service. Her natural timidity was, I think, in itself the means of her acquiring the opposite virtue of courage. ... Her natural obstinacy, the only failing in her temper as a child, became that finely tempered decision and firmness which enabled her to execute her projects for the good of others. What in childhood was something like cunning, ripened into the most uncommon penetration, long-sightedness, and skill in influencing the mind of others."<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> In 1796, after Fry returned from a trip her father hoped would relieve her depression, her twelve-year-old sister Louisa wrote "Dearest Betsy! She seems to have no one for her *friend*, for none of us are intimate with her." Louisa Gurney, journal entry, 14 April, 1796, in Hare, *Gurneys of Earham*, 1:52. This may have been a slight exaggeration or naiveté on the part of a younger sister since for the most part Fry and Rachel were very close.

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, Louisa Gurney, journal entries, 26 April, 1797 and 17 January, 1798, in Hare, *Gurneys of Earham*, 1:64 and 74.

<sup>76</sup> Catherine Gurney, undated recollection, quoted in Hare, *Gurneys of Earham*, 1:38.

With time (and hindsight), Fry's failings may have become assets to her public career, but during her childhood they were a source of irritation to her siblings. Certainly Fry was aware of the impact her words and behavior had on her siblings; at one point she created a list of behavioral dos and don'ts in an effort to reinforce better behavior patterns: "I must not ever be out of temper with the children; I must not contradict without a cause; I must not mump when my sisters are liked and I am not; I must not allow myself to be angry; I must not exaggerate ... remember! it is a fault to hurt others."<sup>77</sup> Whatever the root of her anxiety, her journals make it clear that from this point on she made a conscious effort to improve her behavior.

While it is possible to infer from extant sources some of the motives behind Fry's efforts to change her behavior, the same cannot be said about why she was so concerned that her lifestyle was too worldly, and that she was becoming too proud and vain. Certainly her immediate family did not agree with this assessment, and the meetinghouse they attended was considered by at least one visiting minister to be one of the most gay in England.<sup>78</sup> It is possible that Fry's concern may have been sparked by her paternal uncle, Joseph Gurney of Lakenham Grove, who tried to be a spiritual guide to Fry and her siblings, and frequently admonished his older brother for his lapses from Friends principles and practices. Although by this time he was a plain Quaker, in his youth he allegedly had submitted to the "vanities of the world ... was ardent in the pursuit of pleasure ... and took great delight in manly exercises

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<sup>77</sup> Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 7 July, 1797, LRSF.

<sup>78</sup> William Savery, journal entry, quoted in Francis R. Taylor, *Life of William Savery of Philadelphia, 1750–1804* (New York: The Macmillan Company), 429.



and the sports of the field,”<sup>79</sup> and thus understood the worldly enticements the Gurney children faced. He frequently described his own religious conviction and the joys he had found in adhering to Quaker principles and practices, and encouraged his nieces and nephews to be more regular in attending meeting.<sup>80</sup> After her conversion Fry considered her uncle a spiritual advisor, but there is no evidence in her journals or letters to indicate when this aspect of their relationship commenced. While it is certainly plausible that during the mid-1790s she began to think seriously about her uncle’s advice on behavior and lifestyle choices, given her general lack of interest in religion, and in Quakerism specifically, it is equally possible that she dismissed his admonitions during this period, and that it was only after her own conversion that she recognized a need to have counsel from someone already close to her who had more experience in matters of faith.

While it is likely that what motivated Fry’s self-evaluation stemmed primarily from her personal experiences with family and friends, it is not possible to rule out that larger social and cultural influences might have been at work. Since Fry destroyed the journals she wrote prior to April 1797, the period when her self-evaluation commenced, only limited information is available about her engagement with the current political, social, and cultural ideas apart from her familiarity with the works of Paine, Wollstonecraft, Godwin and Rousseau. However, both her father’s dinners with reform-minded

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<sup>79</sup> “Joseph Gurney (1757–1830),” *DQB*, vol. Gurney, J-Gz. Joseph Gurney was acknowledged as a minister in 1807.

<sup>80</sup> For Joseph Gurney’s efforts to encourage her spiritual development (including descriptions of his own religious journey to show how he had overcome some of the uncertainties Fry felt) see, for example, Joseph Gurney to Elizabeth Fry, 20 November, 1800, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 96-97. In 1802, Fry wrote that she loved him “as a religious character, and as my near and dear relation.” Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 18 May, 1802, LRSF.

members of Norwich society and her friendship with the daughter and son of Samuel Galton Jr., who was a member of Birmingham's Lunar Society, likely provided a window to such ideas.<sup>81</sup> At one point she appears to have been a passionate supporter of the French Revolution;<sup>82</sup> her silence on the subject in the surviving journals might be an indication that she regretted her early support for the French Revolution in the wake of the excesses of the Reign of Terror, and that being forced to question her political principles led her to reconsider or examine other principles, behaviors and attitudes. There is little doubt that the reality of living during a period of prolonged war with France would have been a subject of discussion in a household as well-read and cultured as the Gurneys', and for an anxious, impressionable young girl the uncertainty of life must have been obvious.<sup>83</sup>

Whatever the root(s) of her anxiety, her journals make it clear that from this point on she made a conscious effort to shape her own identity by defining certain behaviors as good and working to cultivate these behaviors while simultaneously trying to eliminate behaviors she deemed unattractive, immoral, or unproductive. Equally clear from her journals is that while the religious path

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<sup>81</sup> The Lunar Society included famous scientists and inventors such as Matthew Boulton, James Watt, Joseph Priestley, Erasmus Darwin, Sir William Herschel, and Sir Joseph Banks. M. C. France, *Mrs. Mary A. Schimmelpenninck* (London: Religious Tract Society, n.d.), 66. Samuel Tertius Galton (referred to as Tertius in the Gurney correspondence), may also have been a member of the Lunar Society, and Maryanne documented some of the Lunar Society's activities. Robert E. Schofield, *The Lunar Society of Birmingham: A Social History of Provincial Science and Industry in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963).

<sup>82</sup> In 1832, a Lady Smith wrote the following to Fry: "I have preserved with care a token granted to me many years ago, a lock of your fair hair tied with tricoloured ribbon\_ to remind me of our principles at that time when you were an enthusiast for the French Revolution." Lady Smith to Elizabeth Fry, 7 December 1832, Add. MS 73529, fol. 71, The British Library, London (hereafter BL).

<sup>83</sup> In 1803 the Gurneys felt strongly enough about the possibility of a French invasion that they made plans to move their household from Earlham to Ely, a nearby town surrounded by marshes, which they considered safer than Norwich. Priscilla Gurney to Elizabeth Fry, 14 November, 1803, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 120-21 and Catherine Gurney to Elizabeth Fry, 28 November, 1803, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 122-23.

she eventually pursued was influenced by her family's religious heritage, it was not pre-ordained. Had her family not been Quakers, it is unlikely that Fry would have been familiar with the beliefs of the Religious Society of Friends, given the small size of the denomination.<sup>84</sup> But this background did not necessitate that at some point she become a committed Quaker. During the early part of her quest to better herself, Fry did not have strong religious convictions or believe she had a personal relationship with God, even if she did attend meetings on a semi-regular basis. In May 1797, for example, she recorded in her journal that "I love to 'look through Nature up to Nature's God.' I have no more religion than that, and in the little I have I am not the least devotional."<sup>85</sup> This is a clear indication that Unitarian influences still remained present in her thought. On those occasions when she did think about "being" religious it was because she saw religion as an emotional support system: "it seems so delightful to depend upon a superior power, for all that is good; it is at least always having the bosom of a friend open to us (in imagination), to rest all our cares and sorrows upon."<sup>86</sup> Several months later, reflecting on her eventual death (something she was somewhat morbid about for most of her life) she

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<sup>84</sup> In fact, given the general lack of interest in Christian doctrine and practice among the Gurney children during this period it is surprising that so many of them did eventually adopt strong religious beliefs, though only four of them remained within the Society of Friends until death. Catherine and Rachel were eventually baptized into the Church of England, Catherine in 1809 and Rachel in 1820. John Gurney Jr. was not very interested in religion until (at least in Fry's estimation) the very end of his life; Richenda married a clergyman of the Church of England; Hannah married a Quaker but she and her husband, Thomas Fowell Buxton, were disowned for "not attending meeting and worshipping elsewhere," Hannah in 1816 and Buxton in 1817. "Thomas Fowell Buxton (1786-1845), *DQB*, vol. Bus-Bz. Louisa and her husband, Samuel Hoare, were disowned for the same reason, in 1821 and 1820, respectively. "Louisa Hoare (1784-1836)," *DQB*, vol. Hj-Hoc. Priscilla became a plain Quaker in 1811, and a minister in 1813; "Priscilla Gurney (1785-1821), *DQB*, vol. Gurney, J-Gz. Samuel became a Quaker overseer and elder, while Joseph John became an influential Quaker minister and theologian. "Samuel Gurney (1786-1856)," and "Joseph John Gurney (1788-1847)," *DQB*, vol. Gurney, J-Gz. Dan never liked Friends' principles, particularly the female ministry, and became a member of the Church of England, though it is not clear to what extent he was a religious man.

<sup>85</sup> Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 16 May, 1797, LRSF.

<sup>86</sup> Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 12 August, 1797, LRSF.

continued along the same lines: “What a comfort must a real faith in religion be, in the hour of death; to have a firm belief of entering into everlasting joy. I have a notion of such a thing, but I am sorry to say, I have no real faith in any sort of religion; it must be a comfort and support in affliction, and I know enough of life to see how great a stimulus is wanted, to support through the evils that are inflicted, and to keep in the path of virtue.”<sup>87</sup>

For young Betsy, God thus was an impersonal force, something only worth contemplating and appreciating for being responsible for the world’s existence and not—as she would later believe—someone who was her spiritual father, master and the redeemer of her sins through an historical act of self-sacrifice on behalf of mankind. Nor did she see religion as a system of beliefs or a set of moral values to be followed because one believed in a God who had defined what was good and what was evil and required those who believed in him<sup>88</sup> to live their lives according to this code, but rather something more ephemeral that, because it was outside oneself and greater than any one individual, could be a prop onto which people who believed in such things could displace their worries, fears, or responsibility for the unpleasant aspects of life. As Fry saw it, any change in her behavior and lifestyle choices would have to come from a personal commitment to live her life according to principles *she* had defined as virtuous, and not by relying on an external, divinely-created code of morality. Moreover, she believed that to change herself lay within her

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<sup>87</sup> Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, January 1798, LRSF.

<sup>88</sup> For purposes of clarity I follow the traditional use of the male pronoun in referring to the Christian God.

own power; it did not—as religious believers held—require that there be a divine force at work.<sup>89</sup>

Although none of Fry’s immediate family was deeply religious at this point, there were some people in their lives who were people of faith. In addition to their Uncle Joseph and his wife Jane, who was an elder in the Society of Friends, this included John Pitchford and Maryanne Galton, both of whom were deeply religious, as well as Mr. Kinghorn, a Baptist minister. Though Pitchford was a Roman Catholic, he took pains not to advocate specifically Catholic doctrines to the Gurney family, focusing only on general Christian beliefs.<sup>90</sup> Galton, who was a particular friend of Catherine Gurney, had become a devout Quaker in the mid-1790s and frequently discussed the religious questions she was exploring with Catherine, Rachel, and Betsy.<sup>91</sup> There were interesting similarities between Galton’s past and that of the Gurney sisters: she too was a descendant of Robert Barclay, had received an unusually broad education for a woman, and her mother was a Unitarian. Her family was associated with the leading intellectual and commercial elite of Birmingham; Galton was familiar with her father’s participation in the Lunar Society and likely discussed her interest with the Gurneys, as they too were interested in new scientific and philosophical ideas. After her mother became very ill she was sent to live with her aunt, Lady Watson, where she met Priscilla Hannah Gurney, Lady Watson’s

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<sup>89</sup> She writes, for example, that “I must try by every stimulus in my power, to strengthen myself both bodily and mentally, *it can only be done by activity and perseverance.*” Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 15 August, 1798, LRSF (emphasis is mine).

<sup>90</sup> See, for example, Louisa Gurney, journal entry, 31 July, 1796, in Hare, *Gurneys of Earlham*, 1:64–65. For months during this period Pitchford was an almost daily visitor at Earlham, spending hours “reading, singing, walking, boating, and playing cricket and finishing up the evening with a dance.” Hare, *Gurneys of Earlham*, 1:83.

<sup>91</sup> “Maryanne (Galton) Schimmelpenick (1778–1856),” *DQB*, vol. Sb-Sd. Maryanne eventually resigned her membership in the Society and joined the Methodists, and later the Moravians.

step-daughter and a cousin of the Norwich Gurneys who was a traveling Quaker minister and who would be an important figure in Elizabeth Gurney's spiritual development. In some of her later journal entries Fry claimed to have held skeptical or deistical principles during this period, and though her friends urged her to read books about Christianity, she declined. Nevertheless, in time, these influences led the eldest Gurney girls to think more about the principles of Christianity.<sup>92</sup>

For over a year Fry struggled between her desire for worldly pleasures and her longing to put the superficialities of her life aside and become a kinder, more generous, and thoughtful individual. Her journal entries alternate between expressing her longing to be good and do right, and regret or despair when she slid back into old patterns of behavior.<sup>93</sup> Fry's journaling was itself performative, a form of cognitive therapy—by repeatedly chronicling how she saw herself in the present and how she wanted to behave in the future, she was not just reminding herself of the type of person she wanted to be but reinforcing

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<sup>92</sup> "I seldom or never thought of religion ... [I told my friends that] till I felt the want of religion myself, I would not read books [about Christianity]; but if ever I did, would judge clearly for myself, by reading the New Testament, and when I had seen for myself, I would then see what others said." Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 21 April, 1798, LRSF. After Fry's conversion Catherine and Rachel were still somewhat skeptical, but eventually they too decided to be practicing (though unlike Fry not plain) Quakers. Neither, however, was truly comfortable with Friends beliefs and peculiarities, and eventually they left the Society of Friends for the Church of England, Catherine in 1809 and Rachel in 1820.

<sup>93</sup> At the beginning of August 1797 she wrote: "I see what would be acting right, but I have neither activity nor perseverance in what I think right." Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 1 August, 1797, LRSF. At the end of the same month, she continues this idea, noting that she was "very far from what I ought to be." Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 30 August, 1797. At the beginning of the following year, she is still thinking along similar lines: "I am a bubble, without reason, without beauty of mind or person; I am a fool. ... What an infinite advantage it would be to me, to occupy my time and thoughts well. I am now seventeen, and if some kind, and great circumstance does not happen to me, I shall have my talents devoured by moth and rust. ... I must use extreme exertion to act really right, to avoid idleness and dissipation." Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 18 January, 1798, LRSF.

behavior patterns she believed would help her achieve that goal.<sup>94</sup> At one point she lists a set of rules for herself to live by, because she felt that she needed a “regular plan of conduct” to regulate her behavior. The list included admonitions to always be occupied with something, to act with thoughtfulness, never to stray from the truth, never speak badly about other people, never get irritated or be unkind, and never give in to unnecessary extravagances.<sup>95</sup> She does not record whether or not she actually reviewed this list on a regular basis to compare her actual behavior to her stated goals (or if she did, how often), but given that her journal entries for the coming year indicate that she continued to be concerned about the same issues it is likely that she reviewed this list at least periodically.<sup>96</sup> This focus on obsessively detailing her moral struggles in her journals fits into the contemporary format for spiritual journals. William Wilberforce, for example, also followed this convention by recording what he perceived as his personal weaknesses and failures in his journals; according to Anne Stott, exposing the darker aspects of his character gave him spiritual and emotional strength to face his public duties. It thus functioned as a relief valve for what journal writers of this genre viewed as their sinful nature.<sup>97</sup>

Up to this point, the changes Fry sought to make had more to do with her behavior toward others and moderating her tendencies toward pride and vanity than outright rejection of entertainments of which Quaker testimonies

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<sup>94</sup> Cognitive therapy typically includes creating a list of goals the person wants to accomplish, which are continually reviewed, as well as reminders to “do it anyway” (i.e. practice the behavior(s) desired, even when one is not so inclined) and give oneself credit for practicing the behavior skill. Doing so, according to cognitive therapy practitioners, weakens one’s tendency to give in to old habits, and strengthens new patterns of behavior.

<sup>95</sup> Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 8 May, 1798, LRSF.

<sup>96</sup> Her younger brother, Joseph John Gurney, created a list of his own when he was about the same age, which he reviewed daily.

<sup>97</sup> Anne Stott, *Wilberforce: Family and Friends* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.

disapproved.<sup>98</sup> Nor did she consider religion the means through which she would achieve a personal transformation. In late 1797, however, this began to change; she began to think that it would be difficult to live a principled life without religion and that if she did “have” religion she would be superior to what she was at present. However, she still acknowledged that she did not feel any religion, and did not expect to do so.<sup>99</sup> Fry’s emphasis on the importance of “feeling” religion is not unimportant: according to the eighteenth-century culture of sensibility feelings worked from outside stimuli inward onto the heart, rather than the reverse.<sup>100</sup>

Roughly a month after Fry bemoaned her inability to feel religion she heard a sermon by William Savery, a forty-eight-year old American minister who was visiting meetings throughout the United Kingdom, and who spoke at the morning Meeting at Goats Lane Meetinghouse on February 4, 1798 and at a public Meeting at a larger venue that evening.<sup>101</sup> Since the Society of Friends eschewed a formal, paid clergy, Quaker ministers were not tied to individual congregations in the way ministers from other denominations were: as noted earlier, any acknowledged minister who felt called to travel to other meetings

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<sup>98</sup> In November 1797, for example, Louisa Gurney notes that “Betsy went to the assembly last night, and danced a great deal.” Louisa Gurney, journal entry, 16 November, 1797, in Hare, *Gurneys of Earlham*, 1:69. Around this time the Gurneys met Prince William Frederick, afterwards 2nd Duke of Gloucester and Edinburgh, who was stationed in Norfolk with his regiment (the prince’s father was the third son of the Prince of Wales; his great-grandfather was George II). Prince William Frederick visited Earlham regularly over the next several months, occasions that often turned into dances. Richenda Gurney, journal entry, 12 January 1798, in Hare, *Gurneys of Earlham*, 1:72. The Gurneys and Prince William Frederick remained friendly—the Prince’s wife, HRH the Princess Mary (a daughter of George III), was the primary patroness of several of Fry’s charities, while the prince himself was interested in prison reform.

<sup>99</sup> Elizabeth Gurney, journal entries, December 1797 and January 1798, LRSF.

<sup>100</sup> On the importance of sensibility to gender see G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>101</sup> According to Savery, about 200 Quakers attended the morning meeting, while *The Norfolk Chronicle* reported that nearly 2,000 people came to the evening meeting. Taylor, *Life of William Savery*, 424–25 and 429.



could obtain permission from his or her monthly meeting to do so (if the trip was abroad, permission from the Yearly Meeting was required). This practice had developed early within the Quaker community, and as a result Quakers were accustomed to hearing a wide variety of preachers.

Little is known about the content of Savery's preaching in morning Meeting, beyond the reference in his journal that he spoke on the topic "Your fathers, where are they, and the prophets do they live forever." That evening, he spoke about the need to adhere to the first principles of Christianity, particularly "peace on earth and good will towards men," arguing that the innovations of "human authority"—particularly creeds and articles—produce infidelity.<sup>102</sup> Fry was surprised at the deep impression Savery's preaching made upon her, as to this point she had not had deeply religious beliefs; furthermore, having grown up in a gay Quaker family and community receptive to Enlightenment ideas she was inclined to look upon individuals who were deeply committed to their spiritual beliefs (particularly if they were also passionate about them) as holding ideas that were antiquated and lacking sophistication. Enthusiasm for religion had been closely associated with the Methodist movement in the mid-eighteenth century, and since Methodism was appealing to the lower classes, for most Quakers religious enthusiasm had become linked with being common. (Evangelicalism among the middle-class was a newer phenomenon; Quakers at the time were still largely quietist).<sup>103</sup> That evening

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<sup>102</sup> William Savery, journal entry: and *The Norfolk Chronicle*, 10 February, 1798, quoted in Taylor, *Life of William Savery*, 429 and 425.

<sup>103</sup> Jones, *Later Periods of Quakerism*, vol. 1, chapters 2–3; and Bacon, "International Sisterhood," 203.

she described the apprehension and hope Savery's message had sparked in her.

"At first I was frightened," she wrote in her journal,

that a plain Quaker should have made so deep an impression on me; but how truly prejudiced in me to think, that because good came from a Quaker, I should be led away by enthusiasm and folly. ... I hope to be truly virtuous; to let sophistry fly from my mind; not to be enthusiastic and foolish; but only to be so far religious as will lead to virtue.<sup>104</sup>

Fry's family was likewise surprised at her reaction, which her younger sister

Richenda described as follows:

Betsy's attention became fixed, and at last I saw her begin to weep, and she became a good deal agitated. As soon as Meeting was over, she made her way to the men's side of the Meeting, and having found my father, she asked him if she might dine at the Grove [their Uncle Joseph Gurney's house] where William Savery was staying. He consented, though rather surprised by the request. ... As we returned in the carriage [that afternoon], Betsy sat in the middle, and astonished us all by weeping most of the way home. The next morning William Savery came to breakfast, prophesying a high and important calling into which she would be led."<sup>105</sup>

Savery's visit marked a turning point in Fry's life; it prompted Fry to link being religious with being virtuous, the goal she had already set for herself. Savery's prediction that she would do important work was vague since what that work would be was open to interpretation—motherhood, for example, could be deemed a high and important calling—but in using the word "calling" he clearly implied that this work would be accomplished by embracing religion. Regardless, Savery's assertion that Fry could do something important was clearly appealing for a young woman searching for a purpose in life. A month earlier she wrote that "if some great circumstance does not happen to me, I

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<sup>104</sup> Elizabeth Gurney, 4 February, 1798, LRSF.

<sup>105</sup> Richenda Gurney, undated recollection, in Hare, *The Gurneys of Earlham*, 1:99. The day after they first heard William Savery Richenda noted that "Betsy, who spent all yesterday with him, not only admires, but quite loves him. ... To me he is quite different from the common run of disagreeable Quaker preachers." Richenda Gurney, journal entry, 5 February, 1798, in Hare, *Gurneys of Earlham*, 1:75.

shall have my talents devoured by moth and rust;”<sup>106</sup> after meeting Savery, she wrote that perhaps she too might become a preacher. Moreover, she was convinced that if this did indeed come to pass, her own past disbelief would enable her to be very good at it: “I should be able to preach to the gay and unbelieving better than to any others,” she wrote, “for I should feel more sympathy for them, and know their hearts better.”<sup>107</sup>

Fry was so mesmerized by Savery that when he resumed his traveling ministry and left for London she begged her father to allow her to go there herself. Her father consented, hoping that the entertainments London offered would temper her new infatuation with religion, but his hopes would be dashed.<sup>108</sup> Though she enjoyed her time in London, she concluded that it was “not the place for heartfelt pleasure;” instead, she longed for the quiet of Earlham, where it would be easier to nurture the “glimmering of light” Savery’s sermons had opened in her heart, and determine whether through religion she might not find that sense of purpose she desired.<sup>109</sup> This reference to having “at

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<sup>106</sup> Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 18 January, 1798, LRSF.

<sup>107</sup> Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 6 February, 1798, LRSF. The idea that her disbelief would be an advantage probably stems from her experience with Savery, for she wrote that “he having been gay and unbelieving only a few years ago, made him better acquainted with the heart of one in the same situation.” Elizabeth Gurney, quoted in Taylor, *Life of Savery*, 431.

<sup>108</sup> William Wilberforce’s mother had tried a similar tack nearly two decades earlier to wean him from the Methodism he had imbibed while living with his uncle and aunt outside London by recalling him home and exposing him to the amusements of Hull. In Wilberforce’s case, this was for a time successful, though he would famously converted to Evangelicalism roughly twelve years after his mother had withdrawn him from his uncle’s care. Stott, *Wilberforce*, 15.

<sup>109</sup> While in London, Fry attended dances (which she enjoyed) and plays at Drury Lane (which she did not). She also enjoyed attending the opera, not only because she had her hair formally dressed and wore a little face paint and as a result thought herself pretty, but also because of the grand company, which included the Prince of Wales. Vanity and a fascination with people of rank were two of the character traits she found difficult to resist throughout her life. Seeing Savery again, however, made a deeper impression, particularly a sermon he preached on a text from Revelations (though she is not specific as to which text). Elizabeth Gurney, journal entries, 26 February–17 March, 1798, LRSF. In addition to attending meetings at which Savery preached, Fry was also present at several dinners held in his honor. Though Fry’s biographers focus on the impact Savery had on Fry, she also made an impression on the minister; there are a handful of references to “dear Betsey Gurney” in his journal during this period. In April, after receiving a

least a glimmering of light” is the first reference she makes in her journals to the inner light, the Quaker term for the spirit of God within a person.<sup>110</sup>

After Fry returned to Earlham she began to spend more time reading the New Testament. She was not yet committed to more than that; as she remarked on several occasions, her goal was to examine New Testament doctrines and not “make sects the subject of my meditations.”<sup>111</sup> Fry’s family was alarmed, however, about her growing interest in religion. In March 1798 her sister Richenda noted that she felt “extremely uncomfortable about Fry’s Quakerism, which I saw, to my sorrow, increasing every day. ... we all feel about it alike, and are truly sorry that one of us seven [sisters] should separate herself in principles, actions, and appearance from the rest.”<sup>112</sup> The Gurneys, steeped as

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letter from Fry asking for his advice, he responded that his “attachment has not been more Cordial nor agreeable to any young Friend in England, and my heart leapt with Joy to find thou art willing to acknowledge, a State of “Hunger and Thirst after Righteousness.” He then exhorted her to resist the temptations that would come her way; he himself had experienced “what it is to be under the Imperious & Slavish [sic] Dominion of my own uncontroled [sic] Passions” but had through faith found a sense of peace. William Savery to Elizabeth Gurney, 13 April 1798, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 48–49.

<sup>110</sup> During Savery’s stay in London he visited Newgate prison on several occasions; he also attended the execution of one of the men he had visited in prison. While in London, Savery stayed with John Fry, likely Joseph Fry’s uncle, and visited Newgate in the company of another Fry relative, Jane Fry. Taylor, *Life of William Savery*, 336–37. There is no extant evidence, however, that Fry was aware of his visits to Newgate or whether, if she was aware, she remembered his visits after Grellet and Allen exhorted her to visit Newgate’s female prisoners in 1813.

<sup>111</sup> Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 8 May, 1798, LRSF. Later that month she repeated this sentiment, stating that she had “not yet been long enough a religionist to be a sectarian.” In fact, that day she went to hear a sermon at St. Peter Mancroft, an Anglican church in the center of Norwich, and stopped at Norwich Cathedral on her way home. Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 27 May, 1798, LRSF.

<sup>112</sup> After Fry’s return from London, Richenda commented that Fry “has seen a good deal of William Savery ... from the workings of her own mind and her acquaintance with him, Betsy seems to be changed from a complete sceptic [sic] to a person who has entire faith in a Supreme Being and a future state.” Richenda Gurney, journal entries, 4 March and 22 April, 1798 in Hare, *Gurneys of Earlham*, 1:88–89. As an old woman Catherine Gurney wrote that “a change [in Betsy’s behavior] became daily more evident in her, and appeared more and more as a reality, though at that time we could not in the least understand it, and it was a very great cross to me. ... When she told me she could not dance with us any more ... it was almost more than I could bear, and I tried to argue with her, and begged and persecuted her.” Catherine Gurney, undated remembrance, in Hare, *Gurneys of Earlham*, 1:101.

they were in Enlightenment thought, were perplexed at what they considered Fry's rejection of reason and philosophy.

Fry struggled with her family's dissatisfaction with her growing religiosity. "I certainly seem to be on the road to a degree of enthusiasm," she wrote, "but I own myself at a loss how to act. If I act as they would wish me, I should not humbly give way to the feelings of religion; I should dwell on philosophy and depend more on my own reason than anything else."<sup>113</sup> Fry, however, increasingly believed that only religion could help her overcome the weaknesses she perceived in her character and become the person she hoped to be. "Religion," she felt, "is far more likely to keep you in the path of virtue than any theoretical plan ... it acts as a furnace on your character, it refines it, it purifies it; whereas principles of your own making are without kindling to make the fire hot enough to answer its purpose."<sup>114</sup> Self-discipline alone, in Fry's opinion, would not sufficiently motivate good behavior; instead, an external discipline—namely, a belief that her actions would be judged by a higher authority—was required. She sought to reconcile her lingering misgivings by reading works such as Robert Barclay's *Apology for the True Christian Divinity* and Isaac Watts' *Logic, or the Right Use of Reason in the Enquiry after Truth &c*, both of which emphasized using reason in the pursuit of religious truth. These texts helped convince her that believing in religious principles was not emotional, but rather rational, even though religion produced an emotional response.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 29 April, 1798, LRSF.

<sup>114</sup> Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 21 April, 1798, LRSF.

<sup>115</sup> Elizabeth Gurney, journal entries, 19 May, 24 May, 28 August and 7 December, 1798, LRSF. She also read Johann Kaspar Lavater, *Secret Journal of a Self Observer*, trans. Peter Will (London: T. Cadell Jr. and W. Davies, 1795). Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 22 April, 1799, LRSF.

Fry decided to put her budding beliefs into practice by starting a school that met twice a week in the Earlam laundry room for several of the lower-class children in her neighborhood. At the time, such schools were popular among the middle class as a way to teach the lower classes how to read; they were also seen as a means of alleviating what many of the middle class perceived as a deficiency of morals in the lower classes because they used the Bible and other religious texts as the instructional materials.<sup>116</sup> Certainly Fry saw her school in this light, for in describing her initial efforts she specifically cited her belief that using the Scriptures would increase morality among the lower classes.<sup>117</sup>

In the summer of 1798 John Gurney took his eldest daughters on a tour of Wales and the southern and western counties of England. In early September they stopped at Coalbrookdale, a cast iron factory owned by the Quaker Darby family, where they visited Priscilla Hannah Gurney (a cousin of John Gurney), Deborah Darby, and Rebecca Young. Fry was inspired by the example of these women, who were all well-known ministers within Quaker society. Darby and Young frequently traveled together in the ministry, and had recently returned from a well-publicized three-year journey in America (1793–1796) where they held meetings for African Americans and had visited prisons.<sup>118</sup> In 1789 they

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<sup>116</sup> Hannah More was an early and enthusiastic supporter of Sunday schools; see Anne Stott, *Hannah More: The First Victorian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). On the Sunday School movement, see Philip B. Cliff, *The Rise and Development of the Sunday School Movement in England, 1780–1980* (Nutfield, Surrey: National Christian Education Council, 1986); and Leslie Howsom, *Cheap Bibles: Nineteenth-Century Publishing and the British and Foreign Bible Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). But as Thomas Laqueur points out, many Sunday schools were actually run by members of the working class, and served as focal points for working-class community. Thomas Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working Class Culture, 1780–1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

<sup>117</sup> Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 13 June, 1798, LRSF.

<sup>118</sup> Two or more ministers traveling together was a common practice among the Quakers, particularly if the journey was long or if one of the ministers was a woman. Fry, for example, often

had visited meetings in Norwich; there is no evidence that Fry was present at the meetings they attended during their visit (or, if she was, whether they had an impact on the then nine-year-old),<sup>119</sup> but they were examples of the numerous female ministers (both resident and traveling) Fry would have heard at her meetinghouse, and seen ministering to individual Quaker families in their homes. As Sheila Wright has shown, female Quakers who traveled in the ministry shared particularly close personal and spiritual friendships, which provided them with practical and emotional support.<sup>120</sup> It was also common practice among the Quakers to publish the journals of well-known male and female ministers after their death; though it is not clear to what extent Fry read these journals, she was aware of their existence.<sup>121</sup> Fry therefore was fully cognizant of the possibilities for women to be leaders in Quaker society, both on

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traveled with her sister-in-law, Miss Elizabeth Fry, who became a minister in 1814. "Elizabeth Fry (1779–1844) of Plashet Cottage," *DQB*, vol. Fry-Fryd; and "Deborah Darby (1754–1810) born Barnard," *DQB*, vol. Dar-Dat.

<sup>119</sup> Rachel Labouchere, *Deborah Darby* (York: William Sessions, 1993), 90.

<sup>120</sup> Sheila Wright, "'Every Good Woman Needs a Companion of Her Own Sex': Quaker Women and Spiritual Friendship, 1750–1850," in *Women, Religion and Feminism in Britain, 1750–1900*, ed. Sue Morgan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 89–104.

<sup>121</sup> She references, for example, reading an account of a young woman named Rathbone, whose decision to dedicate her life to God she much admired. Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 2 September, 1798, LRSF. Conversion narratives were a popular genre in the second half of the eighteenth century. See D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Stott: *Wilberforce*, 3 and 24–25. For female Quaker journaling see Helen Plant, "'Subjective Testimonies,'" 296–318. In 1818 Fry notes that at some point in the past she had read John Richardson's journal, which was first published in 1757 but had since been reprinted several times. Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 26 September, 1818, LRSF. Examples of popular female Quaker journals that she may have read include Sarah Grubb, *An Account of the Life and Religious Labours of Sarah Grubb* (Dublin: R. Jackson, 1792); Elizabeth Stirredge, *Strength in Weakness Manifest: in the Life, Various Trials, and Christian Testimony of Elizabeth Stirredge*, 4th ed. (London: n.s., 1795); Mary Neale, *Some Account of the Religious Experiences of Mary Neale, Formerly Mary Peisley, Principally Compiled from Her Own Writings* (Dublin: John Gough, 1795); Margaret Lucas, *An Account of the Convincement and Call to the Ministry of Margaret Lucas* (London: n.s., 1797); and Catherine Phillips, *Memoirs of the Life of Catherine Phillips* (Philadelphia: Robert Johnson & Co., 1798). Though called journals, there was no set format to these publications: sometimes they were collections of letters spanning the person's lifetime, some were selections of letters on a particular theme, others were edited versions of the individual's diary, and in some cases they were collations of letters and diary entries with additional information added by the editor. Howard H. Brinton, *Quaker Journals: Varieties of Religious Experience Among Friends*, 3rd ed. (Wallingford, Penn.: Pendle Hill, 1996), xi.

the local level and further afield through the traveling ministry, and the attendant emotional rewards.

Darby, Young, and Priscilla Hannah Gurney not only demonstrated through their own lives how religion could expand a woman's sphere of influence and action beyond the confines of the home, but they also spoke of the comforts she could find through religion—that God was a “Father to the fatherless, and a Mother to the motherless,” and that she would experience peace in the present, and everlasting glory in afterlife.<sup>122</sup> For a young girl whose mother's death six years earlier had hit her hard and left her without real parental guidance, one who moreover was morbidly afraid of death, these words must have been particularly striking. Darby and Young also encouraged Fry to pursue the ministry herself. Where Savery foretold in vague terms that Fry would have a “high and important calling,” Darby was more specific. She told Fry that she was to become “a light to the blind; speech to the dumb; and feet to the lame,”<sup>123</sup> and Fry was excited that a woman such as Darby should think she was to be a minister. Once again, Fry was being told that a life of religious service would bring purpose to her life; that evening Fry wrote in her journal that she had decided to be a Quaker.

Fry's decision to become a Quaker was the culmination of a year and a half-long quest to find her own sense of self and create a moral compass for her life. Subsequent accounts of Fry's life, particularly those written by people who knew her later in life, have ascribed more to Fry's statement that she “was a Quaker” than is warranted. Though Fry had decided to become a Quaker, at

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<sup>122</sup> Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 3 September, 1798, LRSF.

<sup>123</sup> Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 4 September, 1798, LRSF.



this point she was not a believing Christian. Her religion was functional: she embraced the rituals and practices of Quakerism, but not its essential principles of faith. For Fry, religion was merely a system of moral codes to guide her conduct and give her a sense of purpose and meaning. Despite the fact that she regularly read the Bible, she still had only a rudimentary understanding of Christian doctrine: the form of Quaker beliefs, rather than their substance, dominated her thinking on religion.<sup>124</sup> Thus during the summer of 1798, both before she declared herself a Quaker and after, Fry struggled to reconcile her family's lifestyle with the *practices* of plain Quakers. The process of deciding whether or not she agreed with these principles was not smooth, and she vacillated between joining her family at dinner parties, dances, and pleasure outings and rejecting such activities as worldly temptations.<sup>125</sup> Much as she enjoyed these activities, she also felt that the Quaker practice of plainness was

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<sup>124</sup> Unlike the entries from her adult years, Fry says very little about her doctrinal convictions at this point of her life: her journals refer to religion only as a support to leading a more virtuous life and an aid to resisting temptation. She notes that her favorite chapter is 1 Corinthians 15, which is about the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of the dead. On the one hand this indicates she believed that Christ died to atone for man's sins (see verse 3), but given that most of the chapter is about the fate of believers after death (verses 12–58) and Fry was rather morbid about death, it is likely that she found a measure of comfort in the promise of afterlife. Elizabeth Gurney, 6 October, 1798, in LRSF.

<sup>125</sup> See, for example, the following journal entry: "This evening I have got myself rather into a scrape; I have been helping them [her sisters] to beg my father for us to go to the Guild-dinner, and I don't know whether it was quite what I approve of, or think good for myself; but I shall consider, and do not intend to go, if I disapprove of it." Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 12 June, 1798, LRSF. During the summer tour with her father and sisters she had to decide whether or not she should go to the Assembly Rooms at Weymouth, where there was likely to be a ball; go to a play while they were in Dawlish; or attend a military review in Plymouth. Her realization that refusing to participate would hurt her father's feelings made her decision more difficult, as the following account makes clear: "I am uncertain about going to the [Weymouth Assembly] Rooms to-morrow. ... I hear there is to be a ball, and I don't doubt we may go: if I go, I shall enter the world and fall very likely into some of its snares. Shall I feel satisfied in going, or most satisfied in staying at home? I believe in staying at home. The worst of all will be I shall have to contradict the will of all the others, and most likely to disappoint my father by not going; there is the rub, if I don't go perhaps he will not let the others go. I think I shall leave it on these grounds; if I can stay at home in any way, do—but if I cannot without vexing my father I must go, and try not to be hurt by it." Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 29 July, 1798, LRSF.

a practical way to protect herself against the temptations of the world.<sup>126</sup> And abstaining from these activities was difficult since her family did not support her decisions. In the coming months, however, she slowly gave up dancing and singing, eventually even refusing to sing when only her family was present.<sup>127</sup> That summer she had already begun to wear more simple and drab clothing; in September 1798 she also began to use plain speech, and in April 1799 she switched to the Quaker system of using numbers to designate the day of the week and the month of the year and began wearing the Quaker bonnet.<sup>128</sup> In addressing people with “thee” and “thou” and in her daily decision to wear Quaker clothing Fry assumed a religious identity. As Dror Wahrman argues, under what he terms the *ancient régime* of identity, putting on (or removing) clothes could change a person’s identity. “Specific to the *ancient régime* of identity,” he notes, “was the possible literalness with which dress was taken to *make* identity, rather than merely to signify its anterior existence.”<sup>129</sup>

The maturation of Fry’s religion from simplistic practices to deeply-held faith was long and far less dramatic than her proclamation in September 1798 that she was a Quaker, and developed from her study of Scriptures, her interactions with other Quakers and Christians from other denominations, and through her efforts to demonstrate her interiority by helping others. Over the course of the following decade Fry’s beliefs thus became aligned with

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<sup>126</sup> Elizabeth Gurney, journal entries, 3 and 23 August, 1798, LRSF.

<sup>127</sup> See, for example, her journal entries for 27 September, 19 October, and 12 December, 1798 as well as well as 1 March, 1799, LRSF.

<sup>128</sup> Elizabeth Gurney, journal entries, 9 September, 1798 and 6 April, 1799, LRSF. For ease of use, I do not follow the Quaker system for days and dates.

<sup>129</sup> Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self*, 176-79 and chapter 1. Wahrman dates the shift from the *ancient régime* to the modern notion of selfhood to the last two decades of the eighteenth century. Dress, however, was such a distinctive and historic symbol of Quaker beliefs that, in this regard, the transition was retarded.

evangelicalism, as according to David Bebbington, the four characteristics of evangelicalism are “*conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *Biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.”<sup>130</sup>

In the two years following Fry’s decision to become a plain Quaker she devoted much of her energy to reading about Christianity and helping the local poor, especially through her school, which by mid-1800 had grown to include over 70 pupils, affectionately referred to by the Gurney family as “Betsy’s imps.” She also founded a small day-school for girls in Norwich.<sup>131</sup> At this point she faced another life-altering decision: whether or not to accept a marriage proposal from Joseph Fry. When Fry first expressed his intentions Fry was far from open to the idea of marriage.<sup>132</sup> Part of her hesitation was due to the fact that she was not particularly attracted to Joseph; another part was because she believed that she was called to a religious ministry, and felt that being a wife

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<sup>130</sup> David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2. On Quaker evangelicalism, see Punshon, *Portrait in Grey*, 180–89. On the history of Evangelicalism in Britain see also John Wolfe, *The Expansion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Wilberforce, More, Chalmers and Finney*, vol. 2, *A History of Evangelicalism: People, Movements and Ideas in the English-Speaking World*, ed. David Bebbington and Mark Noll (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007). For the evangelical interpretation of political economy and its influence in shaping political and social movements within evangelical circles, see Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785–1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

<sup>131</sup> Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 13 June, 1798, LRSF. Some of the day-school students subsequently became Gurney family servants.

<sup>132</sup> Several months after Fry first made his intentions known, John Gurney Sr. wrote the following to Fry in response to a letter in which Fry had proposed coming to Earham to see Betsy: “I must however candidly tell thee, that with every proper & respectful attention to thy own good qualities & a due regard for thy worthy connections it appears to me that Betsy can by no means feel such a reciprocal regard as to furnish an inducement to thy further visit\_ I therefore recommend thee seriously to consider whether it might not be ultimately more to thy own ease to relinquish thy intention [of visiting].” John Gurney Sr. to Joseph Fry, 13 December, 1799, Egerton MS 3672A, fol. 61. Fry had known the Gurney family for some years, as he had attended the same school at Wandsworth as Fry’s brother, John, and was subsequently placed with the Quaker Robert Holmes in Norwich. Hare, *Gurneys of Earham*, 1:107.

and mother would make it more difficult for her to heed that calling.<sup>133</sup> But while she found great satisfaction in her work, there were advantages to a union with Joseph. The Frys were plain Quakers and their tea business was located in London, which had a substantially larger community of Quakers than Norwich; accordingly, within their large circle of friends and acquaintances it would be easier to be a plain Quaker than amongst her own family. Despite these advantages, Fry agonized over her decision. In a letter to Joseph her sense of hesitation is clear:

I am come to this decision, if when we are quietly together, the great uneasiness I suffered last time we were together at the thoughts of an union with thee should return, it will show those feelings not to be groundless, but such as will most likely decide us in one way\_ on the contrary, if I can look forward to it with satisfaction & cheerfulness, it will in all probability lead us to *take other steps* ...<sup>134</sup>

Fry was aware that while the female ministry was an accepted practice within the Religious Society of Friends, having a family could make traveling more difficult. Husbands had to agree to their wives' trips, and arrangements for childcare needed to be made before any trip was contemplated. That said, if a woman remained convinced that she was led to travel in the ministry, her local meeting would override family opposition. Fry only relented after Joseph promised that he would not interfere with her religious calling, and they were married in August 1800.<sup>135</sup> Though Fry's desire for a religious ministry was not

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<sup>133</sup> In a letter to one of her plain Quaker cousins Betsy wrote that when Fry first proposed in July 1799 "I thought it better to refuse him. ... I had known much of him in his younger days & he had been then rather a subject of *redicule* [sic] *to us*\_. Since our stay in this neighbourhood [Clapham, outside London] he has renewed his addresses. ... I have had many *doubts* ... my most anxious wish is that I *may not hinder* my spiritual *welfare*\_ which I have too much feared as to make me often doubt if marriage were a desirable thing for me at this time" (emphasis is hers.) Elizabeth Gurney to Joseph Gurney Bevan, 26 April, 1800, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 73–74.

<sup>134</sup> Elizabeth Gurney to Joseph Fry, 26 March, 1800, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 69–70.

<sup>135</sup> Even after their engagement Betsy was reserved: "The thoughts [sic] of being thy *wife* this time two months is to me surprising the thoughts of being married is *so odd*\_ ... Indeed Joseph I seem

unusual among the Quakers, in a broader context her attitude was unusual. Where earlier in the century the fact that Fry was considering not to be a wife and—more importantly from a gender point of view—not to be a mother would have been less remarkable, by the turn of the century maternity and femininity were seen as coeval.

During the early years of her marriage much of Fry's time was in fact taken up by her responsibilities as a wife and mother (the Frys had eleven children between 1801 and 1822) as well as her charitable work: for example, in 1803 her local meetinghouse appointed her trustee of two funds for poor widows, and three years later she was appointed visitor to the Friends school and workhouse in Islington. But living in London, the nexus for British Quakers, did have the promised advantage of close contact with people who shared her beliefs; in fact, she was now the least plain Quaker of her immediate circle. The Frys were members of Gracechurch Street Meeting, located in the City of London, which was long recognized as one of the wealthiest Quaker meetings in Britain.<sup>136</sup> As discussed in chapter two, fellow Gracechurch Street Meeting member William Allen would play a pivotal role in both Fry's religious ministry and prison advocacy.<sup>137</sup> Fry became increasingly active within the

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*leaving much for thee*" (emphasis is hers). Elizabeth Gurney to Joseph Fry, 15 July, 1800, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 82–83. When he prepared their Certificate of Marriage (the equivalent of today's personalized wedding vows), he informed her that he had substituted the words "affectionate & faithful Husband instead of loving as I thought thou would like it better." Joseph Fry to Elizabeth Gurney, 4 August, 1800, Egerton MS 3672A, fol. 92.

<sup>136</sup> Braithwaite, *Second Period of Quakerism*, 499. The meetinghouse burned in 1821, destroying most of the meeting's records, including those pertaining to Fry.

<sup>137</sup> Allen was involved in a variety of social causes, including the Spitalfields Soup Society, the Society for the Relief of the Labouring and Manufacturing Poor, the Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor, the Mendicity Society, and the British and Foreign Bible Society. He was also keenly interested in penal reform; he co-founded, with James Mill, the journal *The Philanthropist*, for which Jeremy Bentham was an early contributor. Vanessa Morton argues that Allen reflects a blend of "Whig 'progressivism' ... [that] infused concepts of Political Economy, Mathusianism and Utilitarianism with evangelicalism." Vanessa Morton, "Quaker Politics and

Quaker community, and the Frys frequently hosted Quakers visiting London from other parts of the country and from America.<sup>138</sup> During London Yearly Meeting, when Quakers from across the country came to discuss the current state of the Society of Friends, she hosted dinners at their home in St. Mildred's Court. (This was a long-established Fry family practice; Joseph's parents and then his elder brother had been the previous occupants at Mildred's Court, the residence being attached to the Fry tea business).

When George Dilwyn, an American minister, stayed with the Frys in November 1800 she began to read from the Bible at breakfast; this practice, which was unusual for Quakers during this period, gave her a daily chance to reflect on and often discuss with her husband and visitors the meaning of text she had read.<sup>139</sup> In adopting family Bible-reading Fry aligned herself with the newly emerging evangelical movement within Quaker circles, which placed renewed emphasis on Bible reading. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, the growing influence of evangelical Quakers within the London Yearly Meeting resulted in epistles emphasizing the importance of scriptural authority; in 1805 the epistle explicitly encouraged parents to read the Bible with their

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Industrial Change, c. 1800–1850" (PhD diss., Open University, 1988), 36. Through his various philanthropic engagements Allen associated with philosophers and social and political reformers like Patrick Colquhoun, Sir Samuel Romilly, Sir James Mackintosh, Basil Montague, Henry Brougham, and David Ricardo. He was heavily involved in the reorganization of the Lancasterian School between 1808 and 1811, and invested in Robert Owen's New Lanark mill. Fry was close with Allen and his wife, Charlotte; he was one of her occasional partners in the traveling ministry throughout her life—their last major trip together was the 1840 tour of various countries on the Continent. Also part of the Fry and Allen network were the Forsters of Tottenham: William Forster Sr., a land agent, and his sons William Jr. and Josiah. William Forster Jr. accompanied Grellet and Allen to Newgate in 1813; his future wife, Anna Buxton, was a friend of Fry whose brother married into the Gurney clan.

<sup>138</sup> Well-known Quakers who stayed with the Frys include George Dilwyn, Henry Hull, Priscilla Hannah Gurney, and Ann Dymond. John Gurney to Elizabeth Fry, 20 November, 1800, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 96-97 and Rachel Gurney to Elizabeth Fry, 11 November, 1803, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 118–19.

<sup>139</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entries, 11, 12, 14 and 15 November, 1800, LRSF.

children in order to “implant, in the susceptible and retentive minds ... principles of preservation against the temptations of future life.”<sup>140</sup> As Vanessa Morton notes, the 1813 epistle endorsed Friends’ participation in circulating Bibles, an indirect reference to the British and Foreign Bible Society.<sup>141</sup>

During these years her siblings also began to be more interested in religion, which gave her the opportunity—both through correspondence and during their mutual visits<sup>142</sup>—to articulate her growing understanding of Biblical doctrine.<sup>143</sup> In this her brother Joseph John was the most influential in

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<sup>140</sup> Joseph Gurney, *The Epistle from the Yearly Meeting, Held in London from the Twenty Second to the Thirty First of the Fifth Month, Eighteen Hundred and Five: To the Quarterly and Monthly Meetings of Friends in Great Britain, Ireland and Elsewhere* (Philadelphia: Kimber, Conrad & Co., 1805), 3. As noted above, Joseph Gurney was Fry’s paternal uncle.

<sup>141</sup> Vanessa Morton, “Quaker Politics and Industrial Change,” 24.

<sup>142</sup> Though by her marriage Fry was removed from daily contact with most of her family, they still saw each other frequently: most years she spent a month-six weeks at Earlham, and her various sisters visited her for weeks or even months at a time (one or two of them typically came to support her in the weeks prior to and after giving birth). Furthermore, in the decade after her marriage three of her siblings moved to London: in 1801, Sam apprenticed in the Fry business, living for a time with his sister and her husband; in 1806 Louisa married the Lombard Street banker Samuel Hoare; and the following year their sister Hannah married Thomas Fowell Buxton.

<sup>143</sup> Only a few of her letters to her siblings from this period survive, but the letters her siblings wrote to her make it clear that she frequently discussed spiritual matters with them. These letters reference conversations begun during visits by her and to her, as well as respond to the doctrinal questions she raised in previous letters, and cite or allude to theological books she had recommended. See, for example, Catherine Gurney to Elizabeth Fry, 26 February, 1805, Egerton MS 3762A, fols. 145–46; Rachel Gurney to Elizabeth Fry, 28 April, 1805, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 149–50; Rachel Gurney to Elizabeth Fry, 21 October, 1805, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 161–62; Elizabeth Fry to Rachel Gurney, draft letter, n.d. [1805?], Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 162–63; Elizabeth Fry to John Jr. and Elizabeth Gurney, n.d. [24 December, 1806–6 January, 1807], Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 179–80; Elizabeth Fry to John Gurney Jr., n.d. [1808?], Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 195–96; Rachel Gurney to Elizabeth Fry, 1809, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 197–200; Joseph John Gurney to Elizabeth Fry, 7 January, 1810, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 213–14; and Louisa Hoare to Elizabeth Fry, 7 July, 1810, Egerton MS 3672A, fol. 223. Not all of her siblings were receptive to her ideas; see, for example, John Gurney to Elizabeth Fry, 8 December, 1810, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 236–37. Fry notes in a letter to her cousin Joseph Gurney Bevan that she is discussing spiritual beliefs with her sisters, though they “do not see exactly as I do.” Elizabeth Fry to Joseph Gurney Bevan, [July or August] 1808, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 187–88. Richenda Gurney, who converted to the Church of England and subsequently married the Rev. Francis Cunningham, wrote Fry a long letter in 1812 explaining her religious views; though she conceded that there were aspects of Friends’ beliefs that she approved of, she had come to see the Articles of Belief and liturgy of, and sacraments celebrated by, the Church of England as more important than Friends’ testimonies. That Fry was open to diverse religious opinions, is inferred at the conclusion of Richenda’s letter, where she writes that “I therefore cannot help encouraging thee, for the advantage of both parties, to continue to cultivate free intercourse and intimacy with those who differ from thee.” Richenda Gurney to Elizabeth Fry, 4 April, 1812, in Hare, *Gurneys of Earlham*, 1:242–48. After Richenda’s marriage, Fry wrote that “to have a clergyman for a brother-

the evolution of her thought. Gurney had devoted his young adulthood to the study of theology (he spent several years with a tutor at Oxford), and became the leading evangelical theologian of the Society (Quakers who rejected evangelicalism derisively referred to adherents of this movement as Gurneyites.) Fry's uncle Joseph Gurney, the author of the 1805 epistle encouraging family Bible reading, was another prominent evangelical Quaker. During this period the Frys and Gurneys also developed close ties with prominent evangelical Anglicans, including William Wilberforce, John Venn (the rector of Clapham), the Reverend Edward Edwards, and the noted Cambridge theologian and founder of the Church Missionary Society, Charles Simeon.<sup>144</sup> Thomas Fowell Buxton, who led the abolition movement in Parliament after Wilberforce's retirement, married Fry's sister Hannah in 1807. Fowell Buxton was just one more member of the extended Gurney clan involved in the anti-slavery movement: Fry's maternal great-uncle, David Barclay, her second cousin Joseph Gurney Bevan, and Samuel Hoare Jr., the father of her brother-in-law (another Samuel Hoare) were heavily involved in the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, while "the Gurneys of Norwich," Christopher Leslie Brown claims, "made the county of Norfolk an early center of abolitionist movement."<sup>145</sup>

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in-law is very different to having one for a friend, a much closer, and yet stronger call for preserving sweet unity of spirit, that we should ... offend as little as is possible by our scruples, and yet—for the sake of others as well as ourselves—faithfully maintain our ground." Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 4 July, 1816, LRSF.

<sup>144</sup> In 1830 Fry wrote the preface to one of the late Venn's sermons on the slippery slope of sin, in which she stated that "my own observation and experience [working with prisoners] strongly confirm the truths which are attested in this Sermon." John Venn, *A Sermon on the Graduate Progress of Evil* (London: J. Hatchard & Son, 1830). According to the preface, the sermon was printed with the permission of Venn's family.

<sup>145</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 444. Thanks to endogamy, Quaker family ties can be complex, and contributed to the close ties within the Quaker community. Samuel Hoare Jr., for example, was joined in the abolition cause by his brother-in-law, Joseph Woods and Capel Hanbury, whose son



As noted earlier, the Bible, rather than Christian traditions and interpretations, had been central to Fry's religious conversion, but her mature faith also embodied Bebbington's other three characteristics of evangelicalism: conversionism, activism, and crucicentrism. With respect to crucicentrism, Fry's journals begin to refer to Jesus Christ as "the Saviour" in 1801, implying she believed in his historical death as atonement for mankind's sins.<sup>146</sup> Conversionism applied, at this point, almost exclusively to Fry herself (the primary exception being her continued involvement in running Sunday schools); in time, however, she would be more active in seeking to convert others. Her activism, as discussed in the following two chapters, began before her first visit to Newgate, and her prison reform efforts were driven by her religious views. Fry also began to take a more critical view of Quaker practices; though she continued to wear plain dress, for example, she also believed that the Society should be bound by the principles it subscribed to, rather than insisting on rigid adherence to the outward forms of those principles that had built up over time. Where Fry's decision to practice Quaker rituals had been a sign of her decision to "be a Quaker," and practicing the rituals disciplined her conduct during the conversion process, she came to see the limits of ritual: if undertaken without reflection of the meaning behind the practice, it lost its ability to create community, and became mere tradition enacted by rote.

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Cornelius married William Allen's daughter Mary. William Allen's third wife was Samuel Hoare, Jr.'s widow. Cornelius' second wife, Elizabeth Sanderson, and her sister were early associates of Fry in the prison reforms in Newgate. Another Fry tie with the abolition movement was her friendship with Richard Phillips, a co-founder of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Phillips, a close friend of Thomas Clarkson, was also involved in the Lancaster School and the BFBS; he and Fry travelled together in the ministry on several occasions. "Richard Phillips (1756-1836)," *DBQ*, vol. Peo-Ph.

<sup>146</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 26 July, 1801, LRSF. In 1808, an entry in her journal is more explicit, stating that "it is only through the redeeming power of Christ [that] we can look for salvation." Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 17 October, 1808, LRSF.

Conformity to appease the opinion of others, she felt, was more likely to weaken the Society than help it grow and prosper.<sup>147</sup> In part this was due to her growing exposure to, and tolerance for, the practices of other Protestant denominations.

Fry's religious maturation even had an impact on how she wrote in her journal: until May 1806, the entries are recollections and thoughts written as if she were confiding in a close friend or simply recording them for her own edification; thereafter, some of her entries directly address God, in which she pours out her hopes and fears and asks for divine guidance. The following year her journal includes a new set of questions for herself, questions that were quite different than the lists she wrote in 1797 and 1798. Instead of admonishing herself to keep her temper and refrain from contradicting, sulking, exaggerating, and hurting people's feelings (1797) and reminding herself to keep busy, be thoughtful and truthful, and never be unkind or extravagant (1798), she reminds herself to do her duty to God and her fellow man in a manner that served Him and not herself, to resist earthly temptations, and to faithfully execute her responsibilities as a wife, mother, and mistress.<sup>148</sup> Fry had always been convinced that the authority for Christian belief stemmed from the Bible rather than expository texts; now, however, the references to her belief in the doctrine of salvation by faith, and the evidence that she felt she had a personal relationship with God, demonstrate that within ten years of her decision to become a plain Quaker she had become evangelical (the Quakers, as a whole, came somewhat later to evangelicalism than other Protestant denominations).

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<sup>147</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 7 May, 1805 and 20 May, 1807, LRSF. Fry's judgment was correct: the Society declined in numbers during her lifetime, and after 1859 Friends were permitted to marry outside the Society without being disowned; the following year, plain dress and speech were made optional. John Punshon, *Portrait in Grey*, 215.

<sup>148</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, August 1807, LRSF.

Fry had never forgotten earlier predictions that she would become a minister and, as her spiritual faith deepened, she frequently wrote in her journal of moments where she wondered whether she should preach. In 1801, she wrote that Sarah Lines had reported in meeting on her recent journey, and specifically noted that Lines had remarked how she had felt rewarded by the experience.<sup>149</sup> Yet while she was powerfully attracted to the ministry, she was not convinced that it was her calling to do so at this time; and without a clear belief that it was her duty to preach, she felt doing so would cause more harm than good.<sup>150</sup> Her disappointment that her life at present did not include a religious ministry as Darby, Savery, and other Quaker ministers had predicted, and her acceptance that a ministry was divinely ordained rather than within her own power is reflected in the following passage.

I have been married eight years yesterday; ... my course has been very different to what I had expected; instead of being, as I had hoped, a useful instrument in the Church Militant, here I am a care worn wife and mother, outwardly, nearly devoted to the things of this life: though at times this difference in my destination has been trying to me; yet, I believe those trials, (which have certainly been very pinching), that I have had to go through, have been very useful, and brought me to a feeling sense of what I am; and at the same time have taught me where power is, and in what we are to glory; not in ourselves nor in any thing we can be, or do, but we are alone to desire that He may be glorified, either through us or others, in our being something or nothing, as He may see best for us. I have seen, particularly in our spiritual allotments; that it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps: it is our place, only to be as passive clay in His holy hands, simply and singly desiring, that He would make us, what He would have us to be. But the way in which this great work is to be effected, we must leave to Him, who has been the Author, and we may trust will be the Finisher of the work: and we must not be surprised to find it going on differently, to what our frail hearts would desire.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 4 February, 1801, LRSF. For other examples of Fry's conflicting impulses on entering the ministry see Elizabeth Fry, journal entries, 7 June, 1806 and 16 October, 1809, LRSF.

<sup>150</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 29 May, 1801, LRSF.

<sup>151</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 20 August, 1808, LRSF.

It was not until after the death of her father in 1809, which she claimed “appeared to *break the ice* for me,” that she began to speak during meetings for worship.<sup>152</sup> Initially this was very difficult for her: she was plagued by doubts about how others would judge what she had to say about the scriptures. This inner struggle was not unique to Fry; Helen Plant argues that this was a common discursive framework for Quaker women contemplating the ministry. In their journals Plant finds a recurring motif of feminine self-alienation: when first contemplating the ministry, they express their “natural” timidity and physical inferiority, their worries about the impact the ministry will have on their responsibilities as wives and mothers, and their fear of stepping into the public eye. Once they embarked on their public ministry, however, this “acute psychological suffering” was replaced by a sense of calm and acceptance that the will of God had triumphed over personal weakness. This discursive framework of emotional suffering, followed by the emotional relief and peace in submitting to God’s will rather than one’s own, thus linked female Quaker ministers to the women who had gone before them and to the women who would follow their example. By adhering to this narrative, female ministers sustained a sense of community based on their common experience of suffering. In contrast to the feminine narrative of self-alienation, the discourse shared by male Quakers entering the ministry centered on transcending their worldly roles and responsibilities, specifically their participation in business. Transcending the self, Plant notes, was easier than alienating the self. The decision to adopt plain speech and dress, and thus be exposed to ridicule from

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<sup>152</sup> Elizabeth Fry to an unknown friend, July 1810, Egerton 3672A, fols. 224–25 (emphasis is hers).

family, friends, and society, was also part of this discourse of suffering, though it was not a gendered one; men—including Fry’s brother, Joseph John Gurney—also worried about how people would react to the peculiarities of Quaker dress and speech.<sup>153</sup>

Despite the qualms Fry expressed in her journal, however, she remained convinced that she was being led by the inner light to share the truths revealed to her, and she began to speak frequently in meeting.<sup>154</sup> Within a year she had received permission from her local meeting to travel to meetings outside her own monthly meeting—she visited meetings in Essex in September and December, in Surrey in November, and in Norfolk in December 1810. Her preaching was well-received, and on March 14, 1811 she was formally acknowledged as a minister.<sup>155</sup> In the coming years Fry would travel often in the ministry, leaving her husband and young children for weeks and sometimes months at a time. Fry herself seems to have had no regrets on this front, though it did place a strain on her relationship with her eldest daughters, Katherine and Rachel. Ironically, Fry would not have that one close female traveling companion that, as Sheila Wright points out, was such a distinctive characteristic of women Quaker ministers. Instead, Fry traveled with a variety of fellow ministers, male and female, including William Allen, Henry Hull,

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<sup>153</sup> Plant, “Subjective Testimonies,” 296-309. See also Brinton, *Quaker Journals*, 35–40.

<sup>154</sup> Fry expressed her concerns about entering into a vocal ministry with family and sought council from trusted spiritual advisors such as Priscilla Hannah Gurney, Joseph Gurney Bevan, and her uncles, David Barclay and Joseph Gurney, who were already ministers or elders. See Elizabeth Fry to Priscilla Hannah Gurney, 25 January, 1810, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 215–16; Elizabeth Fry to Joseph Gurney Bevan, draft letter [1810], Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 219–20; Elizabeth Fry to an unknown friend, July 1810, Egerton MS 3672A, fols. 224–25; and Elizabeth Fry, journal entries, 30 October, 3 and 16 November, and 4, 9, and 22 December, 1809, LRSF. It should be noted that while Fry wrote extensively about her feelings of personal inadequacy, she was not particularly exercised about the effect her ministry would have on her maternal duties.

<sup>155</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 14 March, 1811, LRSF.

William Forster, Josiah Forster, Mary Dudley, Rebecca Christy, her sister, Priscilla Gurney, her brothers, Joseph John Gurney and Sam Gurney, and her sister-in-law, Elizabeth Fry.

Though Fry would remain a committed Quaker for the rest of her life, she formed close associations with many Christians of other denominations. Some of these connections developed out of friendship networks established by members of her own family who converted to Anglicanism (her sister Richenda, for example, married the Rev. Francis Cunningham); other relationships formed through her support of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS), or via her friendship with London Quakers like William Allen, who had a large circle of evangelical Anglican friends. In Fry's opinion, agreement on principles superseded differences over form.<sup>156</sup> Though female ministry was far less common in other denominations, Fry's vocal ministry impressed non-Quakers: at a dinner celebrating the founding of the Norwich chapter of the BFBS, held at Earlham, she prayed before a party that included six Church of England clergymen and three dissenting ministers. Joseph Hughes, a Baptist minister and secretary of the BFBS, remarked that dinner was

succeeded by a devout address to the Deity, by a female minister, Elizabeth Fry, whose manner was impressive, and whose words were so appropriate, that none present can ever forget the incident; or ever advert to it, without emotions alike powerful and pleasing. The first emotion, was surprise; the second, awe; the third, pious fervour.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth Fry to the Rev. Edward Edwards, 20 April, 1810, quoted in Fry and Cresswell, 1:157; and Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 23 August, 1811, LRSF.

<sup>157</sup> Joseph Hughes, undated recollection of 10 September, 1811 dinner party, quoted in Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir*, 1:177. Joseph John Gurney called the party a "perfectly harmonious mixture of High Church, Low Church, Lutheran, Baptist, Quaker! It was a time which seemed to pull down all barriers of distinction, and to melt us all into one common Christianity." Joseph John Gurney, no date, quoted in Hare, *Gurneys of Earlham*, 1:230.

While Fry had had no formal theological training, by this point she was sufficiently confident in her understanding of biblical doctrines that when the Reverend Edward Edwards, an Anglican minister who had become a friend as a result of his close relationship with her brother John and sister Catherine, challenged her to defend her faith, she wrote a lengthy letter reconciling Quaker beliefs with the doctrines of atonement and justification by faith.<sup>158</sup>

As this chapter has shown, religion played an important role in shaping who and what Fry was, though not in the way she initially expected. How these religious beliefs and values would be worked out in the public sphere is examined in the following two chapters. Chapter two describes how Fry became involved in prison reform and analyzes how the practical experience of her efforts to improve prison conditions and reform prisoners (including the interactions this necessitated with male authority figures in the prisons and in public office) led her and her co-adjudicators to become prison reform activists. Chapter three then examines in more depth the activities of the British Ladies Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners and the religious worldview of its members, focusing on how their beliefs led them to argue that prisons should be places to reform the morals and behavior of prisoners rather than sites of punishment alone.

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<sup>158</sup> Elizabeth Fry to Rev. Edward Edwards, rough draft [1812], Egerton MS. 3672A, fols. 249–50. It should be noted that while this is the most explicit description of her theological beliefs up to this point, there are shorthand references to atonement and justification by faith in her letters to her siblings as early as 1806. See Elizabeth Fry to John Jr. and Elizabeth Gurney, draft letter [24 December, 1806–6 January, 1807], Egerton MS. 3672A, fols. 179–80. Edwards was a close friend of John Venn; in 1830 Fry wrote an introduction to a sermon by Venn published at his family's behest after his death. Edwards was also acquainted with Thomas Scott and John Newton, who were renowned evangelicals.

## CHAPTER 2

### **FROM LADY BOUNTIFUL TO PRISON REFORM ACTIVIST**

The benevolent Mrs. Fry, whose enlightened and persevering exertions have converted Newgate from a nursery of vice into a school of reform, has been during the last week on a visit of inspection into the prisons at Durham and Edinburgh, and is now prosecuting her journey into the north of Scotland. Her excellent character seems to be so fully appreciated wherever she goes, that she may reasonably hope for the highest reward which such a mind can obtain—the general adoption of her humane and judicious plans of prison-discipline.<sup>1</sup>

Elizabeth Fry was a prison reform activist in an era when women did not have the right to vote, faced restricted educational opportunities, women's waged work was valued less than that of men, and married women had few legal rights independent of their husbands. Yet Fry traveled throughout the United Kingdom to inspect prison conditions, worked with government and local prison officials to enact reforms within the prisons, and testified three times before Parliament. She inspired women across the nation to take up the cause of prison reform, forming "ladies committees" that visited female prisoners and superintended reforms in their local prisons. To her contemporaries Fry was an example of the contributions a woman could make to public welfare despite the legal and institutional barriers that restricted her activities in the public sphere. This chapter analyzes Fry's evolution from a charitable woman active in her local community to an internationally-recognized activist for prison and criminal justice reform. As such, it focuses on Fry's actions rather than the

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<sup>1</sup> *The Times*, 9 September, 1818: 2F



philosophy that motivated them; Fry's views on the purpose of prisons and the treatment of prisoners are examined in the following chapter.

In order to understand Fry's change from a lady bountiful to a political activist it is essential to interrogate what constitutes power, specifically as it pertains to effecting political and social change. The prevailing assumption in the early years of the history profession was that power rested in the hands of the ruling elite, a point of view that largely ignored non-office holders. Certainly, in the early nineteenth century a minuscule percentage of the British population did wield a disproportionately greater authority than the rest of the public. Over the last fifty years, however, scholars have challenged the idea that political authority rested only in the king, his ministers, members of Parliament and other elected or appointed political offices, as well as whether political power was vested only in people eligible to vote, and whether government employees were the sole arbiters of how laws were implemented. In doing so, scholars demonstrated the importance of extra-parliamentary individuals and political pressure groups as political actors whom earlier scholarship dismissed as irrelevant or of little consequence to the development of public policy. Politics is complicated and chaotic rather than rational because it is a social organization. Factions, public opinion (whether genuine or manipulated), public personas, kinship networks, and the cult of personality surrounding some prominent political actors, Elaine Chalus notes, all blur the lines of political authority.<sup>2</sup> Members of Parliament and ministers of state, while clearly influential, were thus not the sole seat of political power.

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<sup>2</sup> Elaine Chalus, "Elite Women, Social Politics, and the Political World of Late Eighteenth-Century England," *The Historical Journal* 43, no. 3 (September 2000): 669-97.

As noted in the introduction, scholars have shown that—despite the rhetoric of separate sphere ideology—the public sphere was not a space in which only men operated. Not only did women participate in the exchange of ideas, but they actively engaged in the political life of the nation. The wives and daughters of the aristocracy and political officials furthered the political ambitions of their family members and the political factions they belonged to through social activities and campaigning.<sup>3</sup> Women also influenced politics through group action; for example, they petitioned parliament, hosted salons, participated in debating societies and committee meetings, and organized anti-slavery boycotts.<sup>4</sup> And female writers (even conservative ones like Hannah More) contributed to public discourse.<sup>5</sup> Yet despite the growing body of scholarship on

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<sup>3</sup> It was a common practice for women to campaign on behalf of their male relatives. Georgiana, the Duchess of Devonshire, is perhaps the most famous example because she was viciously attacked in the press for her campaign activities on behalf of Charles James Fox in 1784. Amanda Foreman, *Georgiana: Duchess of Devonshire* (London: HarperCollins, 1998); Helen Rogers, *Women and the People: Authority, Authorship and the Radical Tradition in Nineteenth-Century England* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2000); and Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1994). Women’s epistolary exchanges were another important forum for and tool of women’s political engagement. Sarah Richardson, “‘Well-neighbour’d Houses’: The Political Networks of Elite Women, 1780–1860,” in *Women in British Politics, 1760–1860: The Power of the Petticoat*, ed. Kathryn Gleadle and Sarah Richardson (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 58–60.

<sup>4</sup> Rogers, *Women and the People*; Anna Clark, “Women in Public in the Eighteenth Century,” *Wiener Zeitschrift zur Geschichte der Neuheit* 1, no. 2 (2001): 60–78 and Susan M. Okin, “Gender, the Public, and the Private,” *Feminism and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 116–41; Gleadle and Richardson, eds., *Women in British Politics*; Amanda Vickery, ed., *Women, Privilege, and Power: British Politics, 1750 to the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Donna T. Andrew, “Popular Culture and Public Debate: London, 1780,” *The Historical Journal* 39, no. 2 (1996): 405–23; Mary Thale, “Women in London Debating Societies in 1780,” *Gender and History* 7, no. 1 (1995): 5–24; Clare Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780–1870* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Phyllis Mack, “Religion, Feminism, and the Problem of Agency: Reflections on Eighteenth-Century Quakerism,” *Signs* 29, no. 1 (2003): 149–77; Phyllis Mack, “In a Female Voice: Preaching and Politics in Eighteenth-Century British Quakerism,” in *Women Preachers and Prophets Through Two Millennia of Christianity*, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 248–63; and Alex Tyrrell, “‘Woman’s Mission’ and Pressure Group Politics in Britain, 1825–60,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 63, no. 1 (1980): 194–230.

<sup>5</sup> Anne Stott, *Hannah More: The First Victorian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Though Hannah More in mid-life began to advocate a conservative role for women that limited them to the domestic and local philanthropy, her own life shows how difficult it could be to maintain strict boundaries between public and private, and that rhetoric did not mean the same as practice. As Stott notes, More’s book of advice on how to form the character of Princess Charlotte incorporated her political views. Anne Stott, “Patriotism and Providence: The Politics of Hannah More,” in

the impact women had on politics, some scholars maintain that vestiges of the old school still exist. Chalus contends that there still remains an unspoken bias that “the only ‘real’ politics is high politics. In order to be ‘real,’” she argues, “actions and venues must be shown to have some direct impact on high politics and policy decisions.”<sup>6</sup> Chalus claims that this is particularly applicable when the subject is female participation in politics: there is still, implicitly or explicitly, resistance to acknowledging that women could be political actors. Yet as Kathryn Gleadle and Sarah Richardson note, contemporaries distinguished between legislators and politicians; the former were elected officials, whereas “politicians were characterised more broadly as being those who were highly active and extremely knowledgeable in the field of politics.”<sup>7</sup> This chapter argues that it is within this broader definition that Fry’s post-1817 activism is situated.

Fry’s initial forays into London’s Newgate prison were private acts of charity, not part of a scheme to agitate for wide-scale changes in prison administration or legislative reform of the criminal justice system. In late July 1817, however, roughly eight months after Fry began working with the female prisoners in Newgate, her activities were reported by the press and she quickly

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*Women in British Politics* (see note 3), 39–55. Anthony Page article on the rational dissenter Ann Jebb notes that more than 30 of her letters to the editor advocating for the Feathers Tavern petition were published in London newspapers. Though written under a pseudonym, her authorship was widely known in reformist circles and were considered by many to have been an important contribution to the campaign to permit Anglican clergy to reject orthodox doctrine. Page does add, however, that it was easier for women to be active in the public sphere of print and philanthropy than in politics. Anthony Page, “‘A Great Politicianess’: Ann Jebb, Rational Dissent and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain,” *Women’s History Review* 17, no. 5 (2008): 743–65.

<sup>6</sup> Elaine Chalus, “Elite Women, Social Politics,” 673.

<sup>7</sup> Kathryn Gleadle and Sarah Richardson, “The Petticoat in Politics: Women and Authority,” in *Women in British Politics* (see note 2), 7. They note, for example, that the radical Sarah Jane Maling was acknowledged as a skillful political debater, and point to the Friends of the Oppressed, which argued for a free press. Ann Jebb was called a politicianess by Abigail Adams; for Jebb’s influence on political debates, including her newsletter and pamphlet writing, see Page, “‘A Great Politicianess,’” 743–65.

became famous for her efforts to rehabilitate prisoners. Criminal justice reform had become a matter of public interest in recent years thanks to concerns about the increase in the crime rate after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, and efforts by advocates for criminal justice reform—including Sir Samuel Romilly, Sir James Mackintosh, and H. G. Bennet, as well as pressure groups such as the Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline, the Society for the Diffusion of Knowledge upon the Punishment of Death, and the Society for Investigating the Causes of the Increase of Juvenile Delinquency—to educate the public about existing iniquities in the legal system.<sup>8</sup> The publicity accorded Fry established her as an authority on the reformation of prisoners (particularly female prisoners), and transformed the nature of her work from its narrow focus on female inmates of Newgate to prison and criminal justice reform on a national scale.

Yet despite Fry's contemporary fame (discussed in chapter four), she has been marginalized in the scholarship of criminal justice reform. In large part this is because toward the end of her life penal philosophy shifted away from rehabilitating prisoners (which Fry advocated) to punishing prisoners through separate confinement and "irksome" labor as a means of deterring future criminal acts. Furthermore, by the 1830s her authority appeared to have been

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<sup>8</sup> On fears of crime, particularly property crime, see Clive Emsley, *Crime and Society in England, 1750–1900*, 3rd ed., *Themes in British Social History* (Harlow, England: Longman/Pearson, 2005); Andrew T. Harris, *Policing the City: Crime and Legal Authority in London, 1780–1840* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004); and George F. E. Rudé, *Criminal and Victim: Crime and Society in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). For fears on female deviancy and middle-class reform efforts see the chapter on the Magdalen Hospital in Miles Ogborn, *Spaces of Modernity: London's Geographies, 1680–1780* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1998). For the evolution of crime as an offence against property see Douglas Hay, Peter Linbaugh, and E. P. Thompson, eds., *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Allen Lane, 1975); and E. P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: the Origin of the Black Act* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975). For a critique of Hay's interpretation that the criminal code served the interests of the propertied elite, see John Langbein, "Albion's Fatal Flaws," *Past & Present* 98 (February 1983): 96–120.

supplanted by a professional cadre of prison administrators and inspectors. As the final chapter of this dissertation argues, during the Victorian era there was a concerted effort to portray Fry as a benevolent rather than an active woman in order to present her as a woman who conformed to, rather than challenged, normative views on gender in the Victorian era. By focusing on Fry's acts of kindness toward prisoners and other disadvantaged members of society rather than her activism, Fry's biographers minimized her contributions to the women's movement; in celebrating her compassion and generosity they congratulated themselves both for their commitment to Christian benevolence and sympathy for the underprivileged of society and their belief that individuals and society could be improved. In the process, they obscured equally interesting aspects of the historical context and complexity within which Fry operated.

Though the academic scholarship on Fry is limited, with respect to her political influence scholars have echoed the judgment of the prison inspectors William Crawford and the Reverend Whitworth Russell, who in their 1838 report to the House of Lords characterized the rehabilitative approach as well-meaning but ineffectual.<sup>9</sup> Anne Summers, for example, argues that while Fry and the other women involved in prison reform "occupied" the space of the public sphere, they had at most moral influence, not real authority or power—though she concedes that "the relative success of Elizabeth Fry and her associates in gaining entry to a secular public institution undoubtedly gave

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<sup>9</sup> Crawford, William and Whitworth Russell, "Home District," *Third Report of the Inspectors Appointed Under the Provisions of the Act 5 & 6 Will IV. c. 38 to Visit the Different Prisons of Great Britain* (London: W. Clowes and Sons, 1838), 35. As noted in chapter three, Crawford and Russell's negative assessment of rehabilitation and moral education reflected the fact that the separate system, which they advocated, was far from universally accepted as the best mode of punishment. The 1838 report thus was propaganda for the need for a separate system, rather than a reflection of its widespread adoption.

enormous encouragement to other women to do the same,” particularly in institutions that were “more accessible citadels.”<sup>10</sup> U. R. Q. Henriques, in a brief note on the career of Fry, argues that Fry’s work amused some public officials but was a nuisance to prison officials.<sup>11</sup> Robert Alan Cooper dismisses her influence both because her ideas about reforming prisoners through classification, religious instruction, and employment were not new (with the exception of hiring female matrons to supervise female prisoners), and because prison philosophy eventually embraced policies that emphasized silence, solitary confinement, and hard labor.<sup>12</sup>

Though Cooper is correct in his assessment that Fry was not an original thinker and that the rehabilitative approach came under increasing criticism in the middle part of the century, this chapter argues that this does not negate her historical significance. Rather than accepting her actions as a foregone conclusion of her religious faith, it examines the evolution of her involvement in the prison reform cause and how the practical experience of her efforts to improve prison conditions and reform prisoners—including the interactions this necessitated with male authority figures in the prisons and in public office—led

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<sup>10</sup> Anne Summers, *Female Lives, Moral States: Women, Religion, and Public Life in Britain, 1800–1930* (Newbury: Threshold, 2000), 14 and 48. Summers argues for the existence of separate spheres despite the fact that women were physically in the public sphere using the following analogy: “[a] virtual separation of spheres is something that we all experience on a daily basis: we have only to think of adults and children, diners and waiters, to know that exactly the same space can be occupied at the same time by different people in quite different ways.” While this is an interesting argument, the fact that these situations generally imply an unequal power relationship (though not inevitable so, as many diners and parents would no doubt attest), neither does it negate the fact that both are relationships, in which both parties have an important role to play. It should also be noted that Summers lays greater emphasis on the latter part of Fry’s career, and the resistance the women of the British Ladies Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners faced after Fry’s death in 1845, rather than the successes they achieved in the first ten to fifteen years of their movement.

<sup>11</sup> U. R. Q. Henriques, “The Rise and Decline of the Separate System of Prison Discipline,” *Past & Present*, 54 (February 1972): 61–93.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Alan Cooper, “Jeremy Bentham, Elizabeth Fry, and English Prison Reform,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 42, no. 4 (1981): 675–90.

her to develop an increasingly public position on penal reform and prison administration. Drawing on a more extensive collection of sources than previous scholars have used to analyze Fry's public influence (including manuscript letters, journals, pamphlets, Parliamentary testimony, and newspaper articles), this chapter argues that even though Fry did face opposition to her activities in prison (particularly after the mid-1830s), not all of her ideas about penal reform were adopted, and only one of her reform ideas was original to her, this does not mean that Fry was not an activist, or that she only had moral influence. Activism is about promoting, not achieving, change; moreover, few activists achieve all of their aims. Furthermore, power and authority does not reside solely in the ballot box or in holding public office or a Parliamentary position—it can also be found through the collective action of private individuals, by educating the public through the printed word, and through personal relationships with those who wield political power directly. Fry was important not because she introduced new ideas on prison reform but because those ideas began to resonate more widely in no small part thanks to her: the novelty of a female prison reformer commanded public attention, and this in turn gave her authority. And even when alternate approaches to criminal justice began to supplant her views, her stature as a reformer continued to give her access to public forums in which she could critique these methods.

“Do as thou wouldst be done unto”

As noted in the introduction, Fry first visited Newgate prison at the behest of Stephen Grellet, an American Quaker minister who appealed to her on humanitarian grounds to alleviate some of the miseries of the female prisoners.

After inspecting the prison herself, Fry and Anna Buxton (1784–1855), a fellow Quaker and the sister of Fry’s brother-in-law Thomas Fowell Buxton, distributed clothing, clean straw, and medicine to the female prisoners.<sup>13</sup>

For Fry’s biographers this is *the* dramatic moment, the one from which they date her decision to become involved in prison reform: one look at the female prisoners and she had found a cause into which she could sink her teeth. In reality, Fry’s reaction was muted and terse, as the two entries in her journal about these visits reveal: in the first, she simply states that she was “engaged in some laudable pursuits, more particularly seeing after the prisoners in Newgate.”<sup>14</sup> The following day she records that

Yesterday we were some hours at Newgate with the poor female felons, attending to their outward necessities; we had been twice previously. Before we went away, dear Anna Buxton uttered a few words in supplication, and very unexpectedly to myself, I did also. I heard weeping, and I thought they appeared much tendered; a very solemn quiet was observed; it was a striking scene, the poor people on their knees around us, in their deplorable condition.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For a description of the conditions of the female wards at Newgate in 1813, see *Sketch of the Origin and Results of Ladies’ Prison Associations, with Hints for the Formation of Local Associations* (London: John and Arthur Arch, 1827), 2–3; Katherine Fry and Rachel Cresswell, *Memoir of the Life of Elizabeth Fry*, vol. 1 (London: Charles Gilpin, 1847), 205; and Elizabeth Fry, testimony, 27 February, 1818, in House of Commons, “Report from the Committee on the Prisons within the City of London and Borough of Southwark,” *Sessional Papers, 1818–1822, Crime and Punishment: Prisons*, 8 May, 1818, vol. 8, p. 34, repr., *British Parliamentary Papers: Reports and Papers relating to the Prisons of the United Kingdom with Minutes of Evidence and Appendices, 1818–22* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1970). Citations are to the original report. See also Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 24 November, 1812, The Library of the Religious Society of Friends, London (hereafter cited as LRSF); and Margaret Bragg to an unknown friend (copy), n.d., John Thompson MSS, vol. 1, fol. 57, LRSF. Though the letter is undated, internal evidence dates the letter to 1813.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 15 February, 1813, LRSF.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 16 February, 1813, LRSF. In 1816, Anna Buxton married William Forster. To her brother-in-law Thomas Fowell Buxton Fry elaborated further on the deplorable nature of the prison, saying that “all I tell thee is a faint picture of the reality; the filth, the closeness of the rooms, the ferocious manners and expressions of the women towards each other, and the abandoned wickedness, which every thing bespoke are quite indescribable.” Thomas Fowell Buxton, *An Inquiry Whether Crime and Misery are Produced or Prevented, by our Present System of Prison Discipline* (London: John and Arthur Arch, 1818), 101.



Apart from Fry's low-key response and the fact that she does not record having any further interest in alleviating the conditions under which the prisoners were held there are two additional points that support the argument that Fry's biographers have placed too much emphasis on this first series of visits to Newgate. First, though the venue was certainly unusual, the type of service she provided—those basic outward necessities—were no different than the charity she had practiced for the past fifteen years. In both her London and country residences she had a room of fabrics and medicine to supply the needs of the poor, and when winters were bad she had large quantities of soup made for the local poor. In 1803 her local meetinghouse had appointed her trustee of two funds for poor widows, and she frequently visited the "sick and sorrowful" as a part of her ministry.<sup>16</sup> This type of philanthropy was typical for middle- and upper-class women of the time. Somewhat less common was her decision to learn how to vaccinate against small-pox, a procedure she urged upon many in the East Ham area. Nor did she give indiscriminately, but investigated the circumstances of those cases where the individual was personally unknown to her, even if this meant venturing into the slums of London as, from experience, she knew that not all supplicants were in true need.<sup>17</sup> Her daughters describe one example of a particularly deprived woman who, holding a child sick with

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<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entries, 22 March, 1813 and 24 January, 1814, LRSF; Fry and Cresswell, *Memoirs*, 1:172. Fry and Cresswell remembered with particular fondness accompanying their mother on her visits to the inhabitants of "Irish row" in East Ham, as well as to the gypsy camp that stopped in their neighborhood once a year for several days. Fry and Cresswell, *Memoirs*, 1:170–72; and Rachel Cresswell, *Memories of her Mother, in a Letter to her Sisters* (privately printed, 1846), 17–18.

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 4 October, 1804, LRSF. On this occasion, after much searching but being unable to find the woman who had appealed for help, Fry concluded that the woman had been deceitful; but in the process she found a couple of other women she judged to really need her help. Another instance where she refused a person's request for help occurred when she visited the home of a supplicant and "found her dress, house, and furniture, almost like a gentlewoman's. ... this person wants £30, to clear her only of debt." Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 11 September, 1802, LRSF.

the hooping cough, was begging in the street. Finding the woman's answers to her queries suspicious, Fry insisted on accompanying her to her home, where she found additional sick and neglected young children. When she returned the following day with a physician, she found the premises had been vacated. Her inquiries in the neighborhood revealed that the children were on the parish, and that the woman—who had been hired as their nurse—allegedly not only kept them ill so she could use them for begging, but to hasten their death, which she would then conceal from parish officials so she could continue to receive the stipend she received for their care.<sup>18</sup>

While Fry was frequently engaged in acts of charity and had developed shrewd judgment in investigating and assessing the individual cases of mendicancy brought before her, this does not mean that she was an activist for the poor. Rather, she was a typical “lady bountiful”—a woman of means and leisure who would alleviate the basic needs of the poor, either when she encountered them or upon application. She did not have a systematic approach to charity, a plan for changing the conditions of the destitute or disenfranchised, or a desire to identify and eliminate the root causes of poverty.<sup>19</sup>

The second reason too much emphasis should not be placed on Fry's 1813 visits to Newgate is the fact that she rarely visited Newgate between February 1813 and late 1816; she did not visit Newgate at all, for example, in

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<sup>18</sup> Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir*, 1:117–18.

<sup>19</sup> This does not mean that she was unfamiliar with the work of local and national societies for the poor; as noted in the previous chapter, her friend William Allen was active in the Spitalfields Soup Society, the Society for the Relief of the Labouring and Manufacturing Poor, the Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor, and the Mendicity Society. On female charity, see F. K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); and Kathleen D. McCarthy, ed., *Lady Bountiful Revisited: Women, Philanthropy and Power* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

1815.<sup>20</sup> Yet Fry's biographers argue that these first visits made an indelible impression on Fry. In the memoir of their mother, Katherine Fry and Rachel Cresswell write that

the sorrowful and neglected condition of these depraved women, and their miserable children, dwelling in such a vortex of corruption, deeply sank into her heart, although at this time, nothing more was done than to supply the most destitute with clothes. ... She carried back to her home, and into the midst of other interests and avocations, a lively remembrance of all that she had witnessed in Newgate; which within four years induced that systematic effort for ameliorating the condition of these poor outcasts.<sup>21</sup>

The fact that the reforms she undertook in 1817 were not begun earlier is attributed to the fact that she was too preoccupied with personal matters—the Fry business was under financial pressure, she had a lengthy illness, gave birth to two more children (her ninth and tenth), and continued to be active as a minister, both in her own meetinghouse and as a traveling minister. She also had to cope with the deaths of John Gurney, her eldest brother, Joseph Gurney Bevan, a second cousin who was a close family friend and one of her spiritual advisors, and her five-year-old daughter Betsy. There is no reason to discount the idea that the plight of the female prisoners that Fry witnessed in 1813 made an impression on her; the question is whether they were so shocking to her that she resolved, at this time, to engage in a “systematic effort to ameliorate” their conditions, and only personal circumstances prevented her from immediately implementing them. Given that when Fry first visited Newgate she already was familiar with some of the hardships and horrors the poor suffered, that on the rare occasions when Fry did visit Newgate between 1813 and the end of 1816

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<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Fry, testimony, 27 February, 1818, “Report on the Prisons within the City of London,” 36.

<sup>21</sup> Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir*, 1:205–206.

she continued to only provide clothing and other basic necessities to the prisoners, and that there is no indication in her journals that she considered such actions any differently than the other charity she bestowed upon the poor—nor any references to an intent to do more—it is reasonable to conclude that the answer is no.

Precisely what prompted Fry to become more involved with Newgate is unclear, but some of the circumstances typically cited as hindrances to her becoming involved in prison reform before 1816 actually made her later work possible. The French blockade, coupled with some imprudent loans to the family of Eliza (Bowzer) Fry, the wife of Joseph Fry's brother William, had placed the Fry tea business and bank in jeopardy, and required a bailout by the Gurney brothers in 1812 and 1816. Failure in business usually led to disownment among the Quakers because being unable to honor business commitments transgressed against the Quaker testimony of integrity. In order to continue to meet the Fry businesses' commitments, the Frys had to reduce their expenses while still keeping up the appearance of prosperity, thus preventing additional losses likely to result if the bank and tea businesses were perceived as shaky. Accordingly, in 1816 the two eldest daughters, Katharine and Rachel, were sent to live with their aunt Rachel Gurney, who was in charge of the bachelor household of their uncle Dan Gurney, then resident in King's Lynn. The eldest boys, John and William, were sent first to their uncle John at Earlham, and then to boarding school. Richenda and Joseph, who were next in age, went to live with the family of their uncle Sam Gurney in Hampstead, where they shared the schoolroom with their cousins. Only three-year old Hannah, two-year-old Louisa, and baby Sam remained with their parents.

These measures eliminated the need for a governess and tutor, as well as reduced the family's general living expenses. In addition, the family closed their home in the country and spent the winter of 1816/17 at their home in St. Mildred's Court, which required less money for its upkeep than the estate in Plashet.<sup>22</sup> As a result of their financial circumstances, Fry was now geographically close to Newgate for an extended period of time and, with fewer children to care for, had more time to devote to charitable causes.

It has been said that the evangelical fervor of the Clapham Sect was fueled by prayer, commerce, and philanthropy; the same can be said of Fry's family and friends.<sup>23</sup> The active network of humanitarians in London crossed confessional divides, and most philanthropic and civic-minded individuals were active in a variety of public welfare movements.<sup>24</sup> Until the latter part of the eighteenth century many British Quakers were disinclined on principle to participate in political activities, but this stance began to change as many in the

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<sup>22</sup> Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir*, 1:248–49. This arrangement continued for nearly a year, after which all but John and William—who remained at boarding school—returned to live with the Frys.

<sup>23</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Marriage and Morals Among the Victorians* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 25.

<sup>24</sup> William Allen's many philanthropic and humanitarian interests, for example, are detailed in Vanessa Morton, "Quaker Politics and Industrial Change, c. 1800–1850" (PhD diss., Open University, 1988), chapter 3. In addition to the abolition movement and prison reform, Thomas Fowell Buxton was a leader on the Parliamentary debate on abolishing the practice of *sati* in India. Clare Midgley, "From Supporting Missions to Petitioning Parliament: British Women and the Evangelical Campaign against *Sati* in India, 1813–30," in *Women in British Politics* (see note 2), 81. For an excellent study of the charitable community in London during the eighteenth century, and the philosophy that motivated these individuals, see Donna Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police: London Charity in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989). Boyd Hilton provides an superb analysis of how attitudes of public probity and personal responsibility within the evangelical community contributed to political economic theory in the late eighteenth and first few decades of the nineteenth century, and the wide influence this school of thought had on social and economic policy. Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795–1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988). Thomas Chalmers, one of the influential evangelical political economy theorists, developed a close association with the Gurneys, Fry, and Buxton in the early 1820s. How Fry and the BLS were situated within this larger historical context is explored in chapter three.

Quaker community became convinced of the inhumanity of the slave trade.<sup>25</sup>

The Gurney were Whiggish; in 1796 the family supported Bartlett Gurney's unsuccessful campaign for Parliament.<sup>26</sup>

As noted in chapter one, Fry's family was closely connected to the anti-slavery campaign, Lancaster school movement, and the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS). Nor was Fry the only person in her extended family interested in prison reform at this time: in 1808, her brothers-in-law, Thomas Fowell Buxton and Samuel Hoare, along with William Allen, a fellow Quaker and Fry family friend, and the barrister Basil Montagu had founded the Society for the Diffusion of Knowledge upon the Punishment of Death. In the list of subscribers to that organization for 1810 her husband is listed as a committee member, and among the society's subscribers were her brothers John and Sam, her cousin Joseph Gurney Bevan, and her uncle Joseph Gurney.<sup>27</sup> Buxton and

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<sup>25</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), chapter 5; and Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Absolutism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006), chapter 7.

<sup>26</sup> John and Bartlett Gurney were great-grandsons of John Gurney (1655–1721); Bartlett's father and uncle established the Gurney bank. John Gurney and his brothers eventually became partners in the bank, and after Bartlett's death control of the bank went first to John Gurney Sr. and subsequently his son (Fry's brother) Samuel Gurney. "Bartlett Gurney (1756-1803)," *DBQ*, vol. Gu-Gurney, H. Sam Gurney subsequently merged the bank with the bill-broker company Richardson, Overend & Company; the new company was renamed Overend, Gurney & Company. Bartlett Gurney's opponent was William Windham, the secretary of war, whom he nearly defeated. Louisa Gurney records that the Gurney children watched the election from a window overlooking the market place. "We had blue cockades, and I bawled out of the window at a fine rate—'Gurney for ever!' ... In the evening, as Eliza and I were walking, Scarnell [the Gurney's butler] came home and told us that Windham had got the election. I cannot say what I felt, I was so vexed—Eliza and I cried. I hated all the aristocrats: I felt it right to hate them." Louisa Gurney, journal entry, 30 May, 1796, quoted in Augustus J. C. Hare, *The Gurneys of Earham*, vol. 1 (London: George Allen, 1895), 53. Though a birthright Quaker, Bartlett Gurney resigned his membership in 1785.

<sup>27</sup> *The Origin and Object of the Society for the Diffusion of Knowledge upon the Punishment of Death* (London: J. McCreery, 1811), appendix. In the 1812 edition of the same pamphlet, Joseph Fry is no longer listed as a committee member. The author of this pamphlet (probably Basil Montagu), credits the inspiration for forming the society to having read a "tract on the punishment of death and prison discipline [whose] title page announced, 'Read at the Philadelphia Society for alleviating the Miseries of Public Prison,'" given to him by a Quaker friend. *Origin and Object*, 5. The Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons was itself comprised of a substantial number of Quakers. Michael Meranze, *Laboratories of Virtue: Punishment, Revolution*,

Hoare were also associated with the Society for Investigating the Causes of the Increase of Juvenile Delinquency; in 1815, a committee of twelve members began a minute investigation of the prisons in London.<sup>28</sup> This effort led to the founding of The Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline and the Reformation of Juvenile Offenders (SIPD) in 1818, of which Buxton and Hoare were founding members. It was during this period—likely in 1816—that Hoare asked Fry to accompany him to the Coldbath Fields House of Correction in the Clerkenwell area of London to inspect the female inmates. Since this visit preceded her return to Newgate in late 1816, Hoare later speculated that this visit may have led Fry to conclude that prisons were a place she could make herself useful, and that she focused her attention on Newgate because it was closer to St. Mildred’s Court than the other London prisons and bridewells.<sup>29</sup>

In the years between Fry’s visits in 1813 and 1816 prison officials had made several changes to ameliorate the conditions under which the female prisoners were held. In 1813, the tried and the untried lived in two wards and two cells, and slept on the floor; in the interim, additional space was allocated, so that the women’s side of the prison now included eight wards and five cells, as well as a yard. Two grates were installed to keep prisoners separated from their visitors, though this did not eliminate begging, because prisoners used long-handled wooden spoons to bridge the gap. Prisoners now slept on rope-

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*and Authority in Philadelphia, 1760–1835* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1996), 143, n. 29.

<sup>28</sup> *Report of the Committee of the Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline and for the Reformation of Juvenile Offenders* (London: Bensley and Sons, 1818), 10.

<sup>29</sup> Samuel Hoare to Katherine Fry, 22 December, 1846, Egerton MS 3675, fols. 201-202, the British Library, London (hereafter cited as Egerton MS); and Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir*, 1:259. The SIPD actually may have been established in 1816; the sources are not definitive on the date the society was founded. Other SIPD members who were part of Fry’s family and social network include Samuel Gurney, her brother-in-law, Francis Cunningham, William Allen, Josiah Forster, William Crawford, and John and Walter Venning.

mats, though crowding in the sleeping cells was still a problem: each prisoner had only between eighteen inches and two feet by six feet, “almost like a slave-ship,” according to Fry. Apart from these amendments to the physical arrangement of Newgate, however, Fry found that the conduct of the women continued as before.<sup>30</sup>

As noted above, up to this point Fry’s involvement with the female prisoners at Newgate had been limited to alleviating their most pressing material concerns by providing clothing and occasionally food and medicine. It is possible that her brothers-in-laws’ interest in investigating the causes of crime led her to consider what measures might have a more substantial impact on changing prisoners’ lives than simply providing for their basic necessities. Since she was a minister, it seems natural that she would be interested in promoting religious belief among the prisoners; however, Quakers as a denomination were latecomers to Evangelicalism, and only in recent years had begun to evangelize outside their own society (a result, in part, of their growing association with Evangelical Anglicans on philanthropic and humanitarian causes). Even before being declared a minister, Fry was making tentative attempts to impress upon others the importance of living according to religious principles. In June 1807, for example, she confides in her journal that

to-day I have been to try to draw a poor young woman from her evil course: I felt my own incapability to help her, and my lukewarmness. But I desire that if it be right I may receive a little help, and be enabled in some measure, to assist in drawing a poor sinner into a better path.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Fry, testimony, 27 February, 1818, “Report on the Prisons within the City of London,” 41.

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 22 June, 1807, LRSF.



She also began to distribute tracts and cheap Bibles, and in September 1811 attended the founding of the Norwich branch of the BFBS, of which her brother Joseph John Gurney was an instrumental member.<sup>32</sup> By 1814, Fry was convinced of the importance of sharing her faith with others, writing of her hope “that I may not stand in the way of other’s salvation ... and that I may, if consistent with the Divine will, be made instrumental in saving others.”<sup>33</sup> Fry was convinced, she informed her eldest sons in a letter written shortly after they had gone to boarding school in 1817, that if religious principles were adhered to, good moral conduct would follow.<sup>34</sup> When she resumed her visits to Newgate, therefore, she began to read the Bible to them and speak about “Christ having come to save sinners, even those who might be said to have wasted the greater part of their lives estranged from Him.”<sup>35</sup>

The situation of the children in Newgate, however, particularly engaged her attention. At that time there were approximately thirty children confined on the woman’s side; a few were themselves convicts, but most were incarcerated with their parents since prison rules permitted children under the age of seven to be admitted with their parents. Fry was concerned about the negative influence being raised among criminals was having on these children, a feeling that to her mind was confirmed when she was told that “the first language they began to lisp was generally oaths or very bad expressions.”<sup>36</sup> In recent years prison reformers had become increasingly concerned about what they perceived

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<sup>32</sup> Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir*, 1:172 and Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 10 September, 1811, LRSF.

<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 20 March, 1814, LRSF.

<sup>34</sup> Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir*, 1:253.

<sup>35</sup> Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir*, 1:259.

<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Fry, testimony, 27 February, 1818, “Report on the Prisons within the City of London,” 34.

as an alarming rise in juvenile delinquency, particularly the increase in the number of juveniles accused of theft. The SIPD itself grew out of an earlier association, the Society for Investigating the Causes of the Increase of Juvenile Delinquency. The SIPD attributed the rise of juvenile delinquency to the breakdown of social and family ties consequent to socio-economic changes wrought by the industrialization and urbanization of society.<sup>37</sup>

Peter King's review of contemporary court records attributes the rise of juvenile delinquency between 1780 and 1820 not to urbanization and industrialization itself (including migration to the cities or declines in apprenticeship and rural living-in service), since rural areas experienced a corresponding (if slightly delayed) rise in juvenile crime. Instead, he points to changes in attitudes about the nature of childhood and fears about socio-economic change on existing social structures.<sup>38</sup> The reconceptualization of the notion of childhood consisted of a belief that there was a period of childhood during which children needed to be protected from the harsh realities of life. While the financial resources of the middle-class enabled them to give their own children time devoted to education rather than employment, the working-class did not have the means to hire tutors or send their children to school full-time. Since working-class parents were busy working, their children were, in the minds of middle-class reformers, insufficiently supervised. Such children, accordingly, were either idle or spent their time scavenging or engaged in petty

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<sup>37</sup> The lack of reliable series of statistics on juvenile crime rates across the British Isles prior to 1830 have made it difficult for historians to assess the extent to which juvenile crimes actually rose between 1780 and 1830. Contemporaries also had no fixed definition of juvenile—most capped the upper age limit between 17 and 19 years age, but some categorized single under 20s as juvenile as well, and this further complicates analysis of juvenile crime in this period.

<sup>38</sup> Peter J. R. King, "Decision Makers and Decision-Making in the English Criminal Law, 1750–1800," *Historical Journal* 27 (1984): 25–58; see also Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police*, chapter 6.

theft. As a result, educating working-class children was considered to have a deterrent effect on crime rates because it kept them busy and gave them a moral foundation they might not be receiving at home.

Concerned about the moral welfare of the children in Newgate, Fry approached the mothers in February 1817 about establishing a school and, finding them to be supportive of her idea, met with the governor and ordinary of Newgate, as well as Sheriffs George Bridges and Robert Kirby to secure their permission. The men expressed skepticism that the idea would work and, at a second interview, told her that a search of the prison had not yielded a suitable room. Undeterred by their suggestion that she give up the idea, she searched the prison herself and found an unused cell, which the sheriffs then gave her permission to use as a schoolroom. The inmates selected Mary Connor, who had been convicted of theft, as the governess, and Fry recruited several of her Quaker friends, including Mary Sanderson, to help superintend the school.<sup>39</sup>

Though the founding of the Newgate school marked a turning point for Fry in the sense that from 1817 until her death in 1845 she would be consistently active with prison work, it was still not an atypical activity for a “lady bountiful.” Since the late eighteenth century providing schooling for children of the working classes—typically Sunday schools, though increasingly day schools as well<sup>40</sup>—was popular among the middle class as a way to teach

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<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 24 February, 1817, MC 519, vol. 1, Norfolk Public Record Office (hereafter Norfolk 519/1); Buxton, *Inquiry*, 103–104; Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir*, 1:260; and Elizabeth Fry, testimony, 27 February, 1818, “Report on the Prisons within the City of London,” 34. Mary Sanderson (1788–1846), the daughter of John and Margaret (Shillitoe) Sanderson, married Sylvanus Fox in 1821. Sanderson was originally from Yorkshire before moving to London, where he became a partner with a wholesale tea-dealer and subsequently held a partnership in Sanderson, Fry, Fox & Co.

<sup>40</sup> Hannah More was an enthusiastic supporter of Sunday schools; see Stott, *Hannah More*. But as Thomas Laqueur points out, many Sunday schools were actually run by members of the working class, and served as focal points for working-class community. Thomas Laqueur, *Religion*

the lower classes how to read; as noted earlier, they were also seen as a means of alleviating what many of the middle class perceived as a deficiency of morals in the lower classes because they used the Bible and other religious texts as the instructional materials.<sup>41</sup> The school Fry started at Earlham in 1798 for the lower-class children in her neighborhood had nearly eighty pupils by the time she married in 1800.<sup>42</sup> After her marriage she continued to be interested in education: she visited the Ackworth school for Quaker children in 1799 and examined some of the children, and in 1801 met Joseph Lancaster to discuss his teaching method, a peer tutoring approach where older pupils taught younger students what they had learned.<sup>43</sup> When the Frys moved to Plashet, a hamlet near East Ham outside London in 1809, she began another school for

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*and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working Class Culture, 1780–1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, “Address of the Committee for Promoting the Royal Lancasterian System for the Education of the Poor,” *The Philanthropist, or Repository for Hints and Suggestions Calculated to Promote the Comfort and Happiness of Man* 1 (1811): 277–80.

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 4 August, 1800, LRSF. When Fry first began her Earlham school, improved morality was her stated motive: “I have some thoughts of by degrees increasing my plan for Sunday evening; and of having several poor children, at least, to read in the Testament and religious books for an hour. ... It might increase morality among the lower classes, if the Scriptures were oftener and better read to them.” Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 13 June, 1798, LRSF.

<sup>43</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 9 July, 1801, LRSF. Joseph Lancaster’s school, located in Southwark, London, was founded in 1798. A committee of Friends, led by William Allen, took over the school in the mid-1810s after learning of Lancaster’s financial mismanagement and the school was renamed the British and Foreign School Society. Fry, who served on the BFSS’s ladies committee, implemented the Lancasterian method of instruction in Newgate’s school in 1817. For a description of the Lancasterian “monitoring” system see Joseph Lancaster, *Improvements in Education, as it Respects the Industrious Classes of the Community: Containing, a Short Account of its Present State, Hints towards its Improvement, and a Detail of Some Practical Experiments Conducive to that End* (London: Darton and Harvey, 1803). In 1811, members of the committee included Joseph Fry, David Barclay, Gurney Barclay, Henry Brougham, Thomas Fowell Buxton, Samuel Gurney, Samuel Hoare, Jr., Luke Howard, James Mill, Basil Montagu, Richard Phillips, and Sir Samuel Romilly. “Address of the Committee for Promoting the Royal Lancasterian System,” 280.

the daughters of the local laborers, though she hired Harriet Howell as the teacher because she did not have the time to instruct the pupils herself.<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, the next change Fry and her associates implemented was one urged upon her by the tried prisoners themselves; they too, wanted to learn to read and knit rather than spend their time in forced idleness. The classroom, however, could only accommodate a few of the younger women, and in any case, Fry was convinced that the prisoners' bad habits were so ingrained that unless they were constantly employed, any attempt to reform them was futile.<sup>45</sup> Since there was no appropriate workspace, and no provisions for labor, it appeared to Fry and her associates that nothing could be done to reform the female prisoners. Superintending the school, however, required the ladies to spend a great deal of time in Newgate, which resulted in increased interactions with the inmates. Greater familiarity with the prisoners, coupled with the latter's persistence in asking for employment of some kind, soon persuaded the lady visitors to look into the feasibility of setting up a workshop. The ladies concluded that not only would this entail setting aside a room for the workshop, obtaining the necessary raw materials, and locating an outlet for the finished goods, but would require setting up rules and regulations along with a system to monitor prisoner compliance as well as hiring a matron who would live with the prisoners and superintend both the work and prisoner behavior. To that end, twelve women (all but one of whom were Quaker) formed a committee, known as the Ladies' Association for the Improvement of the Female Prisoners

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<sup>44</sup> Howell had previous experience in organizing schools based on the Lancasterian system. According to Fry and Cresswell, the school served about seventy girls, and still existed when they published the memoir of their mother in 1847. Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir*, 1:169–70.

<sup>45</sup> Buxton, *Inquiry*, 102–103.

in Newgate (later changed to the Ladies' Association for the Reformation of Female Prisoners in Newgate);<sup>46</sup> their goal was to

provide for the clothing, the instruction, and the employment of the women; to introduce them to a knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, and to form in them, as much as possible, those habits of order, sobriety and industry, which may render them docile and peaceable whilst in prison, and respectable when they leave it.<sup>47</sup>

When the ladies first proposed the experiment they received little encouragement, both within their own private circles and from prison officials. They were told that the prisoners would steal the raw materials or finished goods, that unlike women from the country city women were not accustomed to hard labor, and that the prisoners were so committed to a life of vice and

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<sup>46</sup> The Newgate Association was funded by private donations from the members' families and friends rather than by subscription—for example, in 1819 Fry's uncle, Robert Barclay, authorized her to withdraw £25–50 from his account for her work at Newgate. Robert Barclay to Elizabeth Gurney, 25 November, 1819, Egerton MS 3673A, fol. 149. Fry's brothers, Joseph John Gurney and Sam Gurney, as well as her cousin Hudson Gurney were also generous donors. Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir*, 1:282. As a result, there are no printed works listing the original twelve members; nor is there a list of members in the manuscript sources consulted for this project. The only women who were definitely involved with the Newgate Association from its founding (apart from Fry) are Mary Sanderson (later Fox) and Dorcas Coventry, who like Fry were acknowledged ministers of the Society of Friends, and Mrs. Anglezark, the wife of the clergyman in East Ham. Sophia de Chevie was involved from early May 1817. In 1821, the founding members of the British Ladies Association for the Reformation of Female Prisoners, which drew its members from the Newgate Association, were Fry, her sister-in-law, Elizabeth Fry of Plashet Cottage, Mary Sanderson, Dorcas Coventry, Abigail Pim, Martha Savory, Hannah Messer, Ann Newman, Ann Christy, Mary Hager, Elizabeth Dudley, and Jane Lewis. Memorandum of the Committee for the Improvement of Female Prisoners, n.d., Port. 34, fol. 27, LRSF. Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir*, 1:273. Four other women who may have been involved from the very beginning are Elizabeth Pryor, Elizabeth Robson, Mary Forster, and Elizabeth Sanderson (later Hanbury). Several of the women who became involved in the Newgate Association were already in another civic organization, the Ladies Committee of the British and Foreign School Society, founded in 1813. This included Mary Dudley, her daughter Elizabeth, and Martha Savory. See Joyce Goodman and Camilla Leach, "At the Center of a Circle Whose Circumference Spans all Nations': Quaker Women and the Ladies Committee of the British and Foreign Schools Society, 1813–37," in *Women, Religion and Feminism in Britain, 1750–1900*, ed. Sue Morgan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 53–69; and Leslie Howsom, *Cheap Bibles: Nineteenth-Century Publishing and the British and Foreign Bible Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 41. With the possible exception of de Chevie these women were all part of Fry's personal network of family, friends, and fellow Quakers. Initially Fry's personal connections were important in other local associations as well (Amelia Opie, for example, who had been friends with the Gurneys since Fry's childhood, was the secretary for the Norwich Ladies Association for Prison Discipline and a weekly prison visitor), but as the movement spread it broadened beyond Fry's circle of family, friends, and acquaintances. Jacobine Menzies-Wilson and Helen Lloyd, *Amelia, The Tale of a Plain Friend* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 225–26.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir*, 1:266.

idleness that they were beyond redemption. Even if the experiment were to succeed at first, they were told it would eventually fail because once the prisoners' bad habits and ways of thinking reasserted themselves, the ladies had no way to enforce their authority. Thanks to her experience as a minister, however, Fry had become a persuasive speaker, and despite their conviction that the ladies would not succeed both the Rev. Horace Salisbury Cotton and John Addison Newman (Newgate's ordinary and governor, respectively) agreed to cooperate with the committee. Sheriff Bridges agreed to pay the salary for a matron and allocate a room for her to live in as well as a room for the workshop, but argued that unless the prisoners consented to the experiment, the whole enterprise was sure to falter. Fry agreed and on April 10, 1817, the committee—together with the sheriffs, Cotton, and Newman—held a meeting with the roughly seventy prisoners then in Newgate.

The women agreed to the proposed rules,<sup>48</sup> and within three months the prisoners made approximately 4,000 items (primarily shirts) and knitted 220 pair of socks;<sup>49</sup> by February 1818, roughly 20,000 items had been made and—contrary to the skepticism expressed before the project began—only three items went missing during this period. On average, there were eighty women, and each woman earned eighteen pence per week.<sup>50</sup> Though most of the items were

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<sup>48</sup> The rules for the inmates and the duties the ladies committed to are discussed and analyzed in chapter three.

<sup>49</sup> Letter from an unknown correspondent, n.d., *Female Convicts in Newgate*, Temp. Box 9/18, fol. 8, LRSF.

<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth Fry, testimony, 27 February, 1818, "Report on the Prisons within the City of London," 35 and 37. According to Fry, from these earnings the prisoners collectively subscribed £4/month for their upkeep, to which the Association contributed an additional £8/month. When H. G. Bennet visited the workshop in May 1817 he reported that there were seventy-eight women present, of which fourteen had been sentenced to a short period of incarceration and the other sixty-four were to be transported (four had been capitally convicted for coining). He notes that six of the women were between fifty and fifty-eight years old, and that there were seventeen children living with their mothers in Newgate. H. G. Bennet, *A Letter to the Common Council and Livery of*

disposed through Messrs. Richard Dixon and Co., a company that made clothing to be sent to Botany Bay, visitors who attended the Friday open house could purchase the finished goods on the spot. For a number of years, the Newgate Association also sold the prisoners' goods at an annual bazaar.<sup>51</sup>

Introducing work into Newgate changed prisoner behavior faster than even Fry and her associates expected; within two weeks, Newman noted a marked improvement in the behavior of the female inmates and in prison discipline under the care of the Newgate Association (which at this time consisted only of the tried, not the untried prisoners). One month after the experiment had begun the Newgate Association wrote to the Corporation of London, asking for their support in making the changes at Newgate permanent. On May 3, 1817, the Right Hon. Matthew Wood, Lord Mayor of London; Sir William Curtis, M.P. and past Lord Mayor; Aldermen Joshua Jonathan Smith, John Atkins, and Samuel Goodbehere; and Sheriffs Bridges and Kirby visited the prison in the company of Fry and some of the other members of the Newgate Association. Several of these men had visited the prison several months earlier and agreed that the situation was much altered. The following week, the Committee of Aldermen not only sanctioned the Newgate Association's activities, but they agreed to pay the matron 52 guineas yearly (a salary that the Newgate Association supplemented with an additional £20) and

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*the City of London, on the Abuses Existing In Newgate, Showing the Necessity of an Immediate Reform in the Management of that Prison*, 2nd ed. (London, 1818), 10.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth Fry to Sir Robert Peel, 3 April, 1823, Add. MS 40355, fols. 193–94, BL; Hannah Fry to Joseph Fry Jr., 2 March, 1825, Egerton 3673A, fol. 206; and *Sketch*, 58. The 1825 sale raised £300. In 1840, a “fancy sale” at the Egyptian Hall in Mansion House to support the BLS netted just over £1,000.



gave the ladies permission to punish refractory women by putting them for a few days in solitary confinement.<sup>52</sup>

### The Making of an Activist

The workshop marked an important step in Fry's evolution from Lady Bountiful to prison reform activist, though at the time Fry herself did not recognize it. In a letter written to her sister Rachel in March 1817 she states that "I think until I make some efforts for some amendment in the plans for the women I shall not feel easy but if such efforts should prove unsuccessful I think that I should then have try'd to do my part and be easy."<sup>53</sup> If Fry had been committed to prison reform as a cause, one failure would not have persuaded her to give up her activism. But in the process of setting up the workshop, Fry was obliged to do three things that would be preconditions to her activism: first, she had to reflect on the purpose of prisons; second, she was forced to gather a group of women together in order to accomplish her goal; and third, she had to interact with prison and government officials.

In an undated memorandum from this period Fry writes that "the object of a prison should be to punish and to lessen rather than increase the crimes of

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<sup>52</sup> Buxton, *Inquiry*, 112–13; and minutes of the Committee of Aldermen to Consider all Matters Relating to the Gaols of this City, 3 May and 10 May, 1817, Temp. Box 9/18, fols. 2–3, LRSF. Roughly six months after the workshop opened on the tried side, the untried female prisoners requested that a similar effort be made for them. The Newgate Association agreed, but it was never as successful as the workshop on the tried side of the prison. Some of the reasons were structural: there was less space on the untried side, so they were unable to classify the women, and they also found it difficult to get enough work to keep the women occupied. Another reason was due to the fact that the untried women had not yet been convicted, and many of them were either preoccupied with preparations for their trials or believed that they might not be convicted. According to Fry, the untried were mostly occupied in making patchwork counterpanes. As of 1827, the Newgate Association continued to work with the untried, though most of their work was educational in addition to daily Scripture readings. *Sketch*, 12–13; and Elizabeth Fry, testimony, 27 February, 1818, "Report on the Prisons within the City of London," 42.

<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth Fry to Rachel Gurney, 10 March, 1817, Egerton MS 3673A, fols. 93–94, BL.

the country,” an objective she believed was most likely to occur if the following conditions were met: the complete segregation between female and male prisoners; that prisoners were employed on a regular schedule; that friends and family of the prisoners could only visit them by permission rather than on demand; that the prison and the prisoners were kept clean; that the prisoners had a right to sufficient food and enough clothing (preferably a prison uniform) to keep them modestly covered, but that the most industrious workers should have better provisions than the disorderly and disobedient; and that spirits and improper language should be banned. This, Fry wrote, required the introduction of a matron and monitors, the formation of a female committee who would superintend the work, and a system of rewards for good work and behavior.<sup>54</sup> Though this memorandum reveals that Fry had definite ideas about the purpose of prisons and how changes might be made to make them conform to that purpose, she also notes that she still needed to read Howard and consult with men who knew how prisons other than Newgate were administered, particularly those that were well-run. While many of Fry’s ideas from this memorandum were implemented in the founding of the Newgate workshop and Newgate Association, several of them were not. Though the prisoners’ visitors were required to behave with propriety, their visits were not proscribed, nor was the matron’s salary paid out of the prisoners’ earnings, as Fry first envisioned. And although Fry wanted the ladies committee to be composed of women from

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<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Fry, undated memorandum, *The Object of a Prison*, Egerton MS 3763A, fols. 100–101, BL. Fry’s brothers-in-law were not the only men of her acquaintance who were interested in penal reform; in 1816, William Allen, a prominent Quaker humanitarian, went on a traveling ministry to several Continental countries during which he inspected a number of local prisons. Fry’s sister-in-law, Elizabeth Fry of Plashet Cottage, was a member of his traveling party, so Fry was fully apprised of his endeavor. Miss Elizabeth Fry to Sarah Fry, 7 July, 1816, Egerton MS 3673A, fols. 54–55.

different religious denominations, in the first instance the Newgate Association was composed exclusively of Quakers (the only exception being Mrs. Anglezark, the wife of the East Ham rector), a situation that would not be remedied until some months later. In thinking about how to make effective changes within Newgate, therefore, Fry was obliged to learn different modes of prison administration as well as what other individuals interested in prison and penal reform, both past and present, thought on the subject. That she personally knew men interested in penal reform no doubt made it easier for her to acquire a broader understanding of prisons.

As previously mentioned, until February 1817 Fry for the most part carried out her charitable work by herself; when she founded the Newgate school, however, she did not have the time to superintend its activities on her own, and thus had to recruit other women to help her. The workshop required even more lady visitors to ensure its success, which led to the founding of the Newgate Association. Initially, Fry was not best pleased by the prospect of working with a larger group of women. For one, if too many people knew what she was doing these women she did not think suitable for the work might ask to be involved, requests that Fry worried might be difficult to refuse.<sup>55</sup> Another reason Fry was hesitant about working with other women was because doing so meant she would not have complete control over the project, since the women were bound to have their own opinions on the subject.<sup>56</sup> In time, however, Fry came to appreciate that effecting change beyond Newgate prison was not the

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<sup>55</sup> Edward Harris to his sister, 22 April, 1817, Temp. MSS 902, fol. 3, LRSF.

<sup>56</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 3 March, 1817, 519/1, Norfolk PRO.

work of an individual, but of a movement and, as will be seen below, she would stress the importance of collective action.

Finally, establishing the school and workshop were important preparatory steps to Fry's development as a prison reform activist because it required her to meet with prison officials and local authorities and persuade them to support the proposed reforms. Though by early 1817 Fry was no stranger to public speaking, her previous experience had been almost exclusively before fellow Quakers. While Fry's experience as a minister made it easier than it otherwise would have been for her to speak with officials, she still stated that "being obliged to confer at times with strangers, and men in authority, is to me a very unpleasant necessity."<sup>57</sup> Having learned how to work successfully with local authorities during the first six months of 1817, however, meant that Fry already had experience working with men in authority when she decided to expand her field of interest beyond Newgate prison, an effort that required working with government ministers, members of Parliament, and prison officials across the United Kingdom. As a Quaker, however, Fry's political sociability was circumscribed: Quaker testimonies rejected many of the contemporary social activities that were forums for women's political sociability.<sup>58</sup> Instead, Fry called on officials (often in company with a high-

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<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 7 March, 1817, Norfolk 519/1.

<sup>58</sup> Society dinners and balls, for example, were spaces in which Fry could not move as a Quaker. When, very late in life she attended a banquet in order to discuss prison reform with important politicians and public figures, some Quakers were highly critical of her decision. This incident is described in chapter four. Fry did interact with male reformers and Parliamentarians at the modest and more intimate dinners hosted by her brother Samuel or brother-in-law Samuel Hoare. (While Joseph Fry supported his wife's activity, he was himself not particularly involved in philanthropic causes beyond donating money to and attending the annual meetings of the societies in which his wife's family were active. See, for example, Elizabeth Fry to unknown recipient, 26 April, 1828, SC 044 Fry MSS, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania (hereafter SC 044 Fry MSS), in which she expresses a desire to see several gentlemen from Oxford who were interested in prison reform and whom she had met at Hoare's home.

ranking female aristocrat like Mary, Countess of Harcourt); wrote letters to senior members of government like Lord Sidmouth and Sir Robert Peel, and reform-minded politicians like William Wilberforce; developed a network of female aristocratic patronage; and, as described below, testified before Parliament and wrote tracts about prison reform.

Initially, however, Fry's vision for prison reform was limited to Newgate, and neither she nor her associates sought public recognition for their efforts. Fry's involvement with prisoners might have remained at this level if not for the fact that only a few months after the founding of the Newgate Association their work came to the attention of the media. In July 1817, Robert Owen—by then already a well-known social reformer—published a lengthy article in *The Times* in which he explained a plan he had recently proposed to “relieve and remoralize the poor, and the unemployed of the working classes.”<sup>59</sup> This plan was based on the reforms he had enacted in his mills at New Lanark, which themselves were based on his belief that education and environment played an important role in reducing poverty and immoral behavior. Anxious to provide proof that treating people with kindness in conjunction with providing education and employment could produce radical change in the behavior of the working classes, he described his recent visit to Newgate as evidence that his proposed plan was based on sound principles: “We were met in every instance,” he wrote, “there was not one exception, with kind looks and the most evident feelings of affection in every prisoner towards Mrs. Fry. ... With an alacrity and pleasure that would be commended in the best trained children, in attending to

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<sup>59</sup> Robert Owen, *The Times*, 30 July, 1817: 3. Fry herself had shown Owens around Newgate; though it is not clear whether they knew each other prior to Owen's tour on July 24, 1817, it is likely that Fry knew of him because William Allen was an investor in Owen's mill at New Lanark.

parental requests, they were ready and willing to comply with her advice.”

Anxious to demonstrate that the poor eagerly welcomed reformers who treated them with kindness and commiseration, he recalled that the prisoners had watched Fry until she was no longer in sight. Overall, Owen concluded,

had not experience long made known to me the simplicity and certain effects of the principles which had here been carried into practice, I might have been led to inquire, What profound statesman had been here? What large sums had been expended? How many years of active and steady perseverance had been necessary to accomplish this extraordinary improvement, which has foiled even the British Government and legislature to effect during the centuries they have existed! And what would have been my astonishment at the simple narrative which was told me? That this change from the depth of misery to the state described was effected, by Mrs. Fry, and a few benevolent individuals of the society of Friends, in three months!<sup>60</sup>

Fry (the only member of the Newgate Association named in Owen’s article) was not particularly pleased at having been brought to the public’s attention. She believed in the Quaker testimony of simplicity, and she worried that being made much of—especially by people in positions of rank or authority—would make her proud, or lead people to give credit to her rather than to God for the changes wrought within the prisoners.<sup>61</sup> However, despite her initial distaste at the publicity Owen’s article brought to her work, it had important consequences. The fact that a respectable woman (moreover one who had young children at home) had not only ventured into a place many called a hell above ground but had managed to have an impact on prisoner behavior

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<sup>60</sup> Robert Owen, *The Times*, 30 July, 1817: 3. Owen tried to rationalize his hyperbolic account of the reception of Fry’s reform by noting that despite the “constant habit for years of reading the mind in the countenance among the lower classes, I could not discover, throughout the numerous apartments we visited, one line of feature that denoted any inclination to resist, in the slightest degree, Mrs. Fry wishes.” As discussed in the following chapter, however, Fry was far less sanguine that most prisoners welcomed moral reform.

<sup>61</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entries, 4 August, 1817; 28 August, 1817; and 1 January, 1818, Norfolk 519/1. Fry was also perturbed that it was Owen who brought to her the public’s notice because she did not approve of his opposition to religion. The publicity accorded Fry, including Owen’s extraordinary efforts to publicize his plan, are discussed in greater detail in chapter four.

caught the public imagination, and within months press coverage had made her internationally known as a prison reformer; as a result, she received letters from women and men across the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States who were interested in replicating her work in their own local prisons. Fry's own weekly turn at the Bible-readings at Newgate became a public spectacle: so many people wanted to see her read to the prisoners that tickets had to be issued.<sup>62</sup> Responding to women interested in forming their own visiting committees, and magistrates who wanted to implement some of the changes described in Owen's article, led her to think about the problems of prison administration and penal policy more globally, rather than those affecting just her "own" local prison, Newgate.<sup>63</sup> In addition to the moral reformation of prisoners through daily Scripture reading, education, and employment, Fry and other members of the Newgate Association began to consider the architecture of prison buildings, the living conditions within prisons, transportation, and capital punishment.

Fry's first major opportunity to express her opinion on some of these subjects came on February 27, 1818, when she testified before a committee investigating the state of London's prisons in the House of Commons.<sup>64</sup> A

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<sup>62</sup> Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir*, 1:291. For a sample ticket, see figure 2, chapter four, in Box 7/12/17, LRSF.

<sup>63</sup> In an undated memorandum from this period, for example, Fry asks herself "What have I to do? read Howard\_ consult with clever & charitable men & endeavour to learn the management of different prisons more particularly those that are best conducted." Elizabeth Fry, undated memorandum, "The Object of a Prison," Egerton MS 3673A, fols. 100–101.

<sup>64</sup> Twenty of the thirty-three witnesses before the House of Commons committee worked or had worked in London's prisons (Newgate, Giltspur-street, White Cross-street, Borough Compter, Dartmoor, as well as the Bridewell and Bethlam hospitals) as either keepers, physicians, chaplains, turnkeys, or apothecaries. Three witnesses—Patrick Milne, Esq., Col. Thomas Wood, and Sir William Curtis—were also members of the committee; another, Sir William Elford, was a former MP. The committee also called the commissioner of the transport board, the architect of Dartmoor, and the foreman of the Bridewell coroner's jury, and three members of extra-Parliamentary pressure groups: Fry, Peter Bedford, and Stephen Lushington, Esq., LLD, another

portion of her testimony was devoted to recounting some of the circumstances surrounding the founding of the school and the workshop, and describing the policies and procedures adopted by the Newgate Association. The remainder was devoted to describing some of the deficiencies of Newgate as a prison, and some general observations on prison administration. With respect to Newgate, she discussed the quality and quantity of food provided to the prisoners, how clothing was provided for inmates who were not properly clothed, the amount of space allocated for sleeping and the type of bedding supplied by the prison, the lack of soap, and her observations of the health of the prisoners and the care provided in the infirmary. Since one of the acknowledged deficiencies of Newgate was that it was seriously overcrowded, Fry suggested that the government purchase the building immediately behind Newgate, which the College of Physicians was planning to vacate, and presented a letter from the president of that institution in which he promised not to seek any profit from the transaction.<sup>65</sup>

But Fry also used this occasion to articulate a few points that demonstrate she was beginning to have a wider vision of prison administration. She argued that reforming prisoner behavior required religious instruction, classification, employment, and—in the case of women—being cared for entirely by women and segregated from men, preferably in a prison of their own. She also discussed her views of separate confinement: while she agreed that it

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former (and future) MP. Bedford and Lushington were called in their capacity as members of the SIPD.

<sup>65</sup> Fry subsequently discussed plans with local and national officials for new prison facilities in Liverpool, Dublin, and on the island of Jersey. Elizabeth to Robert Benson, 8 November, 1820, SC 044 Fry MSS; George Howard, Viscount Morpeth, to Elizabeth Fry, 9 February, 1838, Add. MS 73529, fol. 85, BL; and Elizabeth Fry to Lord John Russell, n.d., MC 234/14, Norfolk Public Record Office, Norwich.



would be a good policy to confine prisoners in individual cells at night, she did not think it would be advisable to keep prisoners in solitary isolation during the day: working with each other and spending their meals and recreation time together promoted industry and good behavior, she argued, whereas complete separate confinement was detrimental to the prisoners' physical and emotional well-being.<sup>66</sup>

The report published by the committee later that year acknowledged the efficacy of Fry's reforms, stating that "the benevolent exertions of Mrs. Fry and her friends, in the female department of the prison, have indeed, by the establishment of a school, by providing work, and encouraging industrious habits, produced the most gratifying change."<sup>67</sup> Likewise, the Grand Jury of the City of London praised her work; in their February 1818 presentment, they declared that

they cannot conclude this Report without expressing, in an especial manner, the peculiar gratification they experienced in observing the important services rendered by Mrs. Fry and her friends, and the habits of religion, order, industry and cleanliness which her humane, benevolent and praiseworthy exertions have introduced among the female prisoners; and that, if the principles which govern her regulations were adopted towards the males as well as the females, it would be the means of converting a prison into a school of reform, and instead of sending criminals back into the world (as is now too generally the case) hardened in vice and depravity, they would be restored to it repentant, and probably become useful members of society.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Elizabeth Fry, testimony, 27 February, 1818, "Report on the Prisons within the City of London," 34–45. For draft notes for her testimony, see Elizabeth Fry, notes, Egerton MS 3673A, fol. 97. Though Fry's prison reform views on classification, education, and employment could be applied to male prisoners as well, the Newgate Association had little interaction with the male inmates. In some of the smaller local associations, however, ladies visited and superintended both male and female inmates. Sarah Martin, for example, visited and superintended both male and female inmates in Yarmouth prison. *Sarah Martin, The Prison-Visitor of Great Yarmouth: A Useful Life* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1872). During her prison tours Fry inspected both the men and women's sides.

<sup>67</sup> "Report on the Prisons within the City of London," 5.

<sup>68</sup> Grand Jury Presentment, February Session 1818, reprinted in "Report on the Prisons within the City of London," 212. The Grand Jury of the City of London's report earlier that year also praised the Newgate Association's work: "We further beg leave to state ... the gratifying pleasure

Clearly, Fry's contemporaries did not consider her a gadfly, or someone who only exerted moral influence rather than being an agent of change. That Fry was considered an authority on understanding the criminal can also be seen in decision of the a shareholder of the Bank of England to consult her about how bank-notes might be redesigned so as to make them more difficult to forge.<sup>69</sup> The work of the Newgate Association was also cited in Parliamentary debates as evidence that prisons, if suitably set up, could be sites of reform and not just places to warehouse criminals, and that therefore similar efforts should be undertaking in prisons throughout the United Kingdom.<sup>70</sup>

The second expansion of Fry's criminal justice activism was on the issue of transportation. Worried that the long trip to the penal colony in New South Wales would undermine the progress in industry and behavior made by the women, the Newgate Association classified the women on board ship into groups of twelve based on age and criminal offense with a monitor elected from amongst them. The ladies provided them with Bibles, tracts, and materials for knitting or to make patchwork quilts (which the women could then sell once they arrived) and set up a small school for the children who accompanied their mothers.<sup>71</sup> Initially, the Newgate Association's work with convict ships was

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we received in witnessing the exertions of Mrs. Fry and the ladies who kindly assist her in attending to and instructing the female prisoners, whose reformed deportment, and cheerful acquiescence to their wishes, demonstrated with a force no language can describe the affection these unfortunate women entertain for these intelligent, humane, and active females," John Gann, Foreman of the Grand Jury, "State of Newgate," *The Times*, 21 January 1818: 3B.

<sup>69</sup> "Bank of England," *The Times*, 20 March, 1818: 3A.

<sup>70</sup> Henry Petty-Fitzmaurice, Marquess of Lansdowne, *Speech of the Marquis of Lansdowne, in the House of Lords, June 3d, 1818, On Moving for Certain Information Relative to the State of the Prisons in the United Kingdom* (London: Bensley and Son, 1818), 15-16.

<sup>71</sup> Katherine Fry, Egerton MS 3763A, fols. 136-38. The first ship provisioned by the Newgate Association was the *Maria*, which sailed May 18, 1818 with 126 women and twenty-five children, and arrived September 17, 1818. Lachlan Macquarie, diary entry, 17 September, 1818, ML Ref: A774, pp. 7-11, Mitchel Library, Sydney [Microfilm Reel CY301 Frames #409-413]. Once the

merely an extension of their work in Newgate, but within two years their ad-hoc efforts were officially supported by the government.<sup>72</sup> Fry also sought to hire respectable women who were emigrating to New South Wales to act as matrons on the ship, and though she recognized that authority for deciding who went to the penitentiary and who went to Botany Bay could not be invested in the Newgate Association, she did attempt to persuade officials of the advantages of consulting her and her associates as to which offenders were amenable to reformation and thus deserved to remain in England.<sup>73</sup>

Another penal question that interested Fry was capital punishment. The peace testimony reflected Friends' belief that violence was wrong, and as a result they were on principle opposed to the death penalty; Fry wrote that it was "a disgrace to a country so eminently conspicuous in promoting [in] so many ways the cause of humanity."<sup>74</sup> Several of her friends and family had been

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practice of outfitting the convicts was regularized, each woman was provided with the following: "one Bible; one Hessian apron; one black stuff ditto; one black cotton cap; one large Hessian bag (to keep her clothes in); one small bag containing: one piece tape; one ounce of pins; one hundred needles; four balls of white sewing cotton; one ditto black; one ditto blue; one ditto red; two balls of black worsted, half an ounce each; twenty-four hanks of coloured thread; [also] one [bag] of cloth, with eight darning needles, one small bodkin fastened on it; two stay-laces; one thimble; one pair of scissors; one pair of spectacles, when required; two pounds of patchwork pieces; one comb; one small ditto; knife and fork to each mess [each mess consisted of six women]; ball of string." Elizabeth Fry, *Observations on the Visiting, Superintending, and Government of Female Prisoners* (London: John and Arthur Arch, 1827), 66. See also British Ladies Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners minute book, 23 July, 1827, D/S 58/3/1, Hackney Archives, London. The minute book records that in 1827 the cost of these materials was 14 shillings and 9 pence per convict.

<sup>72</sup> Matilda Wrench, ed., *Visits to Female Prisoners at Home and Abroad* (London: Wertheim and Macintosh, 1852), 186.

<sup>73</sup> Elizabeth Fry to Mary, Countess of Harcourt, Egerton MS 3673A, fols. 139–40. Two decades later, Fry advocated that matrons be hired for each ship at now at government expense. Sir James Graham, then home secretary, advised Fry that although "according to the strict letter of the Parliamentary Vote [he] may not be justified in paying the passage money for two matrons in a Female Convict Ship out of the Public Purse, yet I am willing to stretch a point in form of an Experiment, [which] I think worthy of trial, and [which] comes to me recommended by your high authority." Sir James Graham to Elizabeth Fry, 18 April, 1842, Add. MSS 79727, fol. 67, BL. Though there is no question that Fry's authority as a prison reformer in the United Kingdom had waned by the 1830s, she still had supporters within government.

<sup>74</sup> Elizabeth Fry, n.d., Egerton MS 3673, fol. 142.

interested in reforming the death penalty statutes since at least 1808, despite the fact that as bankers and bill-brokers they were potential victims of offenses that were punishable by death. It is probable that Fry concurred with their views in the abstract before she first visited Newgate in 1813, but the issue took on a more concrete form when she began to visit Newgate on a regular basis, for it became her habit to visit with the condemned prisoners, often the day before they were hanged.<sup>75</sup> She also believed that, far from being an effective means of deterring crime, capital punishment actually retarded prison discipline, and impeded efforts to reform criminals since the penitent criminal was just as likely to be hanged as the unrepentant criminal. Though the salvation of prisoners' souls was one of her concerns, she was cognizant of the fact that for many criminals the possibility of obtaining an earthly reward for good behavior was their only motivation for change.<sup>76</sup> In February 1818, some of the London papers published two letters written by women under the superintendence of the Newgate Association on the morning of their execution for forgery. The first letter, written by Mary Ann James, was addressed to her fellow prisoners; she spoke of how she had turned from a life of sin and accepted "the true light of the Gospel," and exhorted them to follow her example. In the second letter, which was addressed to Fry, Charlotte Newman thanked the members of the Newgate Association and expressed a feeling of calmness and composure because she believed herself sanctified through the saving grace of Jesus

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<sup>75</sup> Elizabeth Fry to Rachel Gurney, 10 March, 1817, Egerton MS 3673A, fols. 93–94; and Elizabeth Fry, memorandum, 4 March, 1817, quoted in Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir*, 1:263. At first, this was a trial to her, and she resolved to exercise some care in fulfilling this duty since it was so painful to her. Fry also visited condemned male prisoners; see Fry and Cresswell, 1:380 and 2:199.

<sup>76</sup> Elizabeth Fry, n.d., Egerton MS 3673A, fol. 141.

Christ.<sup>77</sup> Since one of the letters was addressed to Fry, it is unlikely that they made their way into print without her knowledge or approval; in emphasizing that the two women had repented of their sins and acknowledged that they were redeemed by the power of Jesus Christ's sacrifice on their behalf the letters were probably intended to stir up public interest in reforming the laws on capital punishment.

Capital punishment, however, would hand Fry her first defeat as an activist. Soon after the Newgate Association commenced their work, they had been given permission by Lord Sidmouth, the home secretary, to inform the prisoners that if they demonstrated improved behavior he would be willing to listen to appeals from the ladies for a mitigation or pardon of their sentences. Fry noted in her 1818 testimony that on a number of occasions Lord Sidmouth had acceded to petitions for clemency presented to him by the Newgate Association.<sup>78</sup> But in April 1818, Fry's appeal on behalf of Harriet Skelton, who had been convicted of passing forged banknotes, caused a rift between her and Lord Sidmouth. Skelton claimed that she had only passed the forged notes to prevent her brother from going to jail for debt—which would have left her destitute—and had been engaged in doing so for only five weeks. Fry was persuaded that Skelton was not a hardened criminal, but someone who had

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<sup>77</sup> Charlotte Newman to Elizabeth Fry, 17 February, 1818; and Mary Ann James to her fellow prisoners, 17 February, 1818, both quoted in Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir*, 1:309–311. A copy of an identically-worded letter as Newman's letter, but from Mary Ann James to Fry, is preserved in the Library of the Religious Society of Friends, London; whether an error was made in the transcription, or there may have been some prompting involved, is unknown. The latter is possible since the letter reverses the two names twice, once in the signature and once in the postscript—that is, the two names are transposed in both places. Mary Ann James to Elizabeth Fry (copy), 17 February, 1818, Port. 38, fol. 186, LRSF. Mary Ann James did, however, write another distinctly different letter to Dorcas Coventry expressing the same sentiments as in her letter to Fry. Mary Ann James to Dorcas Coventry, n.d., Temp. Box 9/18, fol. 4, LRSF.

<sup>78</sup> Elizabeth Fry, testimony, 27 February, 1818, "Report on the Prisons within the City of London," 36–37.

made an error out of fear of destitution and under pressure from her brother; furthermore, while in prison Skelton had been a model prisoner. In pressing her case to both Lord Sidmouth and the directors of the Bank of England, Fry enlisted the help of HRH Prince William Frederick, the Duke of Gloucester and Edinburgh, and Henry G. Bennet, M.P., but to no avail—Skelton was hanged on April 24, 1818.<sup>79</sup> Lord Sidmouth and the bank directors were displeased by Fry's lobbying and for some time communication between them and Fry was severed.<sup>80</sup> The fact that the effort to get Skelton a pardon was covered in the press, though Fry herself was not named,<sup>81</sup> must have made the situation worse: her daughters claimed that Fry had been the "indirect means of causing much excitement on the subject of Capital Punishment. Government was becoming embarrassed."<sup>82</sup>

The issue of forgery was a hot topic; since the Bank of England first issued £1 and £2 notes in 1797, and thus made notes readily available to working-class people, forgery had increased dramatically, leading to more executions.<sup>83</sup> Immediately above the *The Times*' account of Skelton's personal

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<sup>79</sup> "Execution," *The Times*, 25 April, 1818: 3F; and Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir*, 1:312–314.

<sup>80</sup> Elizabeth Fry to Lord Sidmouth, 2 May, 1818, Egerton MS 3673A, fol. 128; Elizabeth Fry to Mary, Countess Harcourt, n.d., Egerton MS 3673A, fols. 139–40.

<sup>81</sup> "Recorder's Report," *The Times*, 20 April, 1818: 3A. The details of Skelton's life included in the article were designed to evoke sympathy for her plight: orphaned at age 3, she was raised respectably but married a man with a "most abandoned and vicious character: for 8 years she had to bear every thing malice or barbarity could inflict." After being abandoned by her husband, Skelton sought refuge with her estranged brother only to learn that he regularly passed bank notes. She claimed that she refused to participate in his crimes until he threatened to abandon her unless she passed notes to pay off his £60 debt.

<sup>82</sup> Fry and Cresswell, 1:314.

<sup>83</sup> "A Brief History of Banknotes," Bank of England, <http://www.bankofengland.co.uk/banknotes/Pages/about/history.aspx> (accessed February 22, 2013.) The following year the satirist George Cruikshank created a satirical version of the Bank of England's notes, with skulls, rope coiled to make the pound sign, and eleven hanging men and women. For a copy of Cruikshank's print see "George Cruikshank, Bank Restriction Note," The British Museum, [http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight\\_image.aspx?image=k137896.jpg&retpage=17330](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_image.aspx?image=k137896.jpg&retpage=17330) (accessed February 22, 2013.)

background and the circumstances that led to her offense they included an excerpt from the *Leed's Mercury* that reported that, of the seventy-four individuals who received a capital sentence in the most recent assize in Lancaster County, all but six had been given a reprieve. Five of the six people who did not have their sentence commuted were convicted for forgery, leaving the *Leed's Mercury* to remark that "it is impossible to refrain from asking whether there is not a manifest and palpable impropriety in continuing upon our statute books a punishment so manifestly disproportionate to most of the offenses with which it is connected."<sup>84</sup> One of the key arguments criminal justice advocates used to argue for criminal code reform was that there were too many statutes that imposed capital punishment. The laws condemning criminals to death for economic crimes in particular were targeted as inhumane.<sup>85</sup> Inflation, for example, had lowered the threshold at which the death penalty applied since the statutes were first enacted. The question about the severity of punishment for forgery had been raised the month before Skelton's execution at the semi-annual Bank of England's shareholders meeting. B. Shaw referred to the "almost daily" newspaper account on the issue, and suggested a public competition "with a view of discovering some mode of rendering bank-notes less capable of imitation." Shaw claimed that, in light of his own investigations in Newgate and his conversation on the subject

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<sup>84</sup> "Criminal Law," *The Times*, 20 April, 1818: 3A.

<sup>85</sup> Randall McGowen argues that such legislation was not the result of an arbitrary or slapdash process, as contemporary reformers sought to portray it. He points out that the passing of the 1729 forgery statute, one of the most important such acts, rested on legislators' belief that creating and circulating falsified private credit notes defrauded not just the individuals whose names appeared on the notes but undermined the prosperity of the nation as a whole, since the financial system depended on the good credit of the signatories names. Randall McGowen, "From Pillory to Gallows: The Punishment of Forgery in the Age of the Financial Revolution," *Past & Present* 165 (November 1999): 107–140.

with Fry, the prospect of devising some new method of manufacturing bank notes that were difficult to forge seemed feasible.<sup>86</sup> With respect to forgery, however, government officials like Lord Sidmouth and Sir Robert Peel resisted the calls for repeal.

By the following year, Fry was once again pleading for clemency on behalf of prisoners sentenced to death, but no longer did so in the conspicuous manner she had employed in the Skelton affair. In 1827, Fry advised women involved in prison visiting that

much disadvantage will generally accrue from endeavours on the part of the visiting ladies to procure the mitigation of the sentences of criminals. Such endeavours ought to never be made, except when the cases are remarkably clear; and then through the regular official channels. Deeply as we must deplore the baneful effects of the punishment of death, and painful as we must feel it to be, that our fellow-creatures, in whose welfare we are interested, should be prematurely plunged into an awful eternity; yet, while our laws continue as they are, unless they can bring forward *decided facts* in favor of the condemned, it is wiser for the visiting ladies to be quiet, and to submit to decrees, which they cannot alter.<sup>87</sup>

While Fry's efforts to obtain a pardon for Harriet Skelton showed her that there were definite limits to her ability to be an advocate for prisoners, this quote demonstrates that it did not cause her to abandon her position on capital punishment, as some biographers and scholars have claimed. Instead, she learned to be more judicious in choosing which cases to advocate and that, on this issue, it was more effective to use "regular official channels" than

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<sup>86</sup> "Bank of England," *The Times*, 20 March, 1818: 3A. In response, the chairman of the meeting noted that producing forgery-resistant notes was more difficult than the general public realized. Moreover, the issue "had engaged their attention for 20 years; ... [it was] a subject that occupied the attention of the Directors night and day." It is probably that the B. Shaw referenced was Benjamin Shaw, whose wife was one of Fry's coadjutors.

<sup>87</sup> Fry, *Observations*, 25. Fry also advocated for clemency on behalf of male prisoners, though in consultation with prison officials who were more familiar with the circumstances of the crime and the offender. In 1830, for example, she asked the governor of Newgate if John Gorman's case was "deserving;" if so, she was willing to personally defray the cost of "petition &c&c." Fry also asked him to give Gorman's wife, who had twins, ten shillings. Elizabeth Fry to William Wintner, 6 November, 1830, SC 044 Fry MSS.



drumming up public opinion and using her well-connected friends and supporters to pressure officials. It is also important to note that while Lord Sidmouth and the bank directors were upset with Fry over the Skelton affair, she continued to draw other important public officials to her cause. In July 1818, for example, she escorted Nicholas Vansittart, the chancellor of the exchequer, on a tour of Newgate.<sup>88</sup>

As much as Fry was interested in transportation and capital punishment, however, her primary field of activism would be concerned with the physical structure of prisons and the treatment of prisoners. Though Fry initially had been upset about the publicity Owen's article had brought to her work, the correspondence she received, and the visitors who poured into Newgate to see the Newgate Association's work first-hand, made her recognize that people now looked on her as an authority on the moral reformation of prisoners. Whereas in establishing the Newgate school and workshop Fry had to be persuasive in order to overcome public officials' skepticism, the reputedly successful outcomes of these endeavors, as reported by the press, meant that many people now listened to her opinions. In order to speak more authoritatively about prisons, however, it was necessary for her to see prisons other than those in the metropolis. Here, again, her status as a Quaker minister facilitated her activism: whenever she traveled in her capacity as a minister she also inspected the prisons along her way. During her first major prison inspection tour—a two-month trip to Scotland and the north of England in the summer of 1818 in the company of Joseph John Gurney—she visited thirty-three prisons, three bridewells, and four houses of correction. At each prison

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<sup>88</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 8 July, 1818, Norfolk 519/1. Vansittart's sister, Sophia, was a fellow committee member.

they took detailed notes and then submitted a report, with recommendations for improvements, to local magistrates.<sup>89</sup> She and her brother also held public meetings, which often drew large crowds.<sup>90</sup>

The following year, Joseph John Gurney published *Notes on a Visit Made to Some of the Prisons in Scotland and the North of England, in Company with Elizabeth Fry*, a 170–page pamphlet describing the conditions at each of the prisons they visited, along with general recommendations on how to improve prison facilities and prisoner behavior. The pamphlet’s stated goal was to inform the public of the

*real* condition of these places of confinement [because] the better the actual state of our prisons is known and understood, the more clearly will all men see the necessity of those arrangements, by which they may be rendered schools of industry and virtue, instead of the very nurseries of crime.<sup>91</sup>

The minute inquiries made by Fry and Gurney bear a striking resemblance to the series of questions posed in *Inquiries Relative to Prison Discipline*, a pamphlet published the same year of their tour that was designed to elicit an accurate report of a prison’s condition, policies, and practices. The pamphlet listed 175 questions, grouped in the following categories: the situation of the prison; descriptions of the interior, the day rooms, the night rooms or cells, the infirmary and treatment of the sick, and the officers; how the prisoners were admitted; the prison’s policy for admitting the friends of prisoners and visitors; provisions for moral treatment, classification, education, and employment; the

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<sup>89</sup> Joseph John Gurney, *Notes on a Visit Made to Some of the Prisons in Scotland and the North of England, in Company with Elizabeth Fry; with Some General Observations on the Subject of Prison Discipline*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, Hurst, and Brown, John and Arthur Arch, and Hurst, Robinson and Co., 1819), vi; and newspaper clipping, 1818, SS 50, LRSF.

<sup>90</sup> For example, in Aberdeen, Glasgow, and Liverpool; see Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 13 September, 1818, LRSF.

<sup>91</sup> Gurney, *Notes*, v. Though these were public meetings for worship, individuals who came to the meetings were able to meet and talk with Fry as a result of these forums.

system for reward and punishment; the provisions for religious instruction; the exercise facilities; the prison's food and clothing allowances; the state of cleanliness of the prisoners and the prison; and how prisoners were discharged.<sup>92</sup> As might be expected, Fry and Gurney were interested in whether the prisons maintained strict separation between men and women, classified their prisoners, and provided them with employment and religious instruction. However, they also provided detailed information about the physical security of the prison and its ability to adequately accommodate the number of prisoners confined in it, the size of the cells and yards, whether there were provisions for solitary confinement, the extent to which prisoners had communication with non-prisoners, who paid for the prisoner's upkeep, the extent to which prisoners were visited by a doctor and a chaplain, whether the insane were incarcerated in the prison, under what circumstances the prisoners were ironed, and whether there was sufficient ventilation, food, clothing, bedding, a space for exercise, and wood for fires during the winter months. *Notes* did not confine itself to description, but often explicitly stated Fry and Gurney's opinion on the relative quality of the prison: some were judged defective, their occupants forced to live in wretched, filthy, and miserable conditions, while others were deemed orderly, well-appointed, and under excellent administration. Prisons run on the principles they advocated—inspection, classification, and employment—received particular praise, and the benefits of this system to the local community (reduction in recidivism, less trouble with the inmates and less expensive to administer)<sup>93</sup> were highlighted in order to

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<sup>92</sup> *Inquiries Relative to Prison Discipline* (London: Bensley and Sons, 1818).

<sup>93</sup> Gurney, *Notes*, 65, 71, 74, and 81.

encourage other prisons to adopt these methods. They were particularly impressed with facilities that, while not actual Panopticons, were nevertheless built so that the prisoners were under near constant observation by prison officials.<sup>94</sup> Fry would later provide input during the planning process of several new prisons, including the debtor's prison in Sheffield, and an all-female prison in Dublin.<sup>95</sup>

At least two editions of *Notes* were printed; Fry found it a useful propaganda tool, and she and her associates distributed copies to officials, correspondents, supporters, and individuals they hoped to interest in their cause.<sup>96</sup> Among the supporters of prison reform it was positively received—Henry G. Bennet, M.P., for example, in presenting a petition to the House of Commons, noted that “the great want of classification of prisoners in many of the country gaols would be evident to any person who had read the valuable work on the subject by Mr. Gurney and his sister Mrs. Fry.”<sup>97</sup>

The 1818 prison tour did more than familiarize Fry with a cross-section of prison facilities and prison administration systems in the United Kingdom;

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<sup>94</sup> These were the Edinburgh Bridewell and the York House of Corrections. Gurney, *Notes*, 44 and 95–96.

<sup>95</sup> Sarah Smith to Elizabeth Fry, 22 November, 1829, Egerton MS 3674, fols. 129–30, and George Howard, Viscount Morpeth, to Elizabeth Fry, 9 February, 1838, Add. MS 73529, fol. 85.

<sup>96</sup> See, for example, Mary, Countess Harcourt, to Elizabeth Fry, n.d., quoted in Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir*, 1:341–42; and Mary, Countess Harcourt, to Katherine Fry, 5 February, 1819, Egerton MS 3673A, fols. 143–44. Countess Harcourt describes her intention of recommending the pamphlet to her friends, and her plans to send copies to Princess Augusta and the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester.

<sup>97</sup> “Scotch Boroughs,” *The Times*, 10 March 1819: 2C. Bennet was at this time a leader of the prison reform movement in Parliament. Though Bennet was already well known for his outspoken opposition to the policies of Viscounts Castlereagh and Sidmouth, the following year he would gain particular notoriety for his support of Queen Caroline, and later his reputation would be sullied by accusations that he had importuned a male servant abroad. Roland Thorne, “Bennet, Henry Grey (1777–1836),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online ed. by Lawrence Goldman, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/view/article/37179> (accessed June 28, 2008).

she and her brother were often accompanied on their prison inspections by local magistrates, sheriffs, or other public officials, as well as men and women interested in prison reform. Some of the officials she met were enthusiastic about reforming their local prisons, and sent her updates on the progress of their reforms.<sup>98</sup> Fry also encouraged the women she met to form ladies associations modeled on the Newgate Association, and personally organized the founding of associations in Glasgow, Carlisle, Liverpool, York, and Edinburgh.<sup>99</sup> These networks were further strengthened by another tour in 1820 of at least fifteen prisons in the north of England, several of which she had inspected in 1818; during this tour, she again held public meetings in some of the towns and villages she visited.<sup>100</sup> The prison tours also affirmed Fry's commitment to prison reform, as a letter written to Walter Venning, a SIPD member then resident in St. Petersburg, where he was active in reforming prisons reveals. "The more I am acquainted with the subject," she wrote,

and the more extensive my observation of the effects of prison discipline is, the more confident I feel of its importance; and that although the work will be gradual, yet through the Divine blessing, its result will be sure. Not only that many will be stopped in their career of vice, but some truly turned from their evil ways, and the security and comfort of the community at large increased ... It will be found in this, as in every other good work, that some trials and some discouragements will attend it; but

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<sup>98</sup> Gurney, *Notes*, vi, 12, 20, and 80; and Joseph John Gurney to Katherine and Elizabeth Fry, 30 March, 1819, Egerton MS 3673A, fol. 145.

<sup>99</sup> Gurney, *Notes*, 56, 75, and 97; "The News," 20 September, 1818, SS 50, LRSF; and Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 13 September, 1818, LRSF.

<sup>100</sup> With Fry were her husband and two eldest daughters; while Fry visited prisons and spoke at Quaker meetings, the original purpose of the trip was to strengthen existing and develop new business contacts for the Fry tea business. Katherine Fry to Rachel and Priscilla Gurney, 15 September, 1820, Egerton MS 3673A, fol. 163; Elizabeth Fry to her children, 25 September, 1820, Temp MSS 61/9, fol. 14, LRSF; Newspaper clipping, SS 94, LRSF; and Katherine Fry to Rachel and Priscilla Gurney, 8 October, 1820, Egerton MS 3673A, fol. 173. Fry formed at least one new ladies' association on this trip, in Nottingham. Katherine Fry to Rachel Gurney, 24 September, 1820, Egerton MS 3673A, fol. 165. In Scorton, North Yorkshire, about 120 people—nearly the whole village—came to a meeting Fry held in the local hotel. Katherine Fry to Rachel and Priscilla Gurney, 8 October, 1820, Egerton MS 3673A, fols. 174–75.

the great end in view must induce those engaged in it to persevere, and use increased diligence to overcome them.<sup>101</sup>

Fry's prison tours further raised her profile as a prison reformer, and led to an increase in her correspondence, both from men and women interested in prison reform and from the ladies' associations founded during and after the two tours—by 1821, there were seventeen of the latter in the United Kingdom, and another four abroad, in St. Petersburg, Russia; Turin, Italy; and Berne and Geneva, Switzerland.<sup>102</sup> Though a corresponding committee of the Newgate Association assisted Fry in responding to requests for information,<sup>103</sup> the volume was such that Fry and her associates decided to move beyond merely responding to queries on how to establish a ladies' association modeled on the Newgate Association and providing advice about the problems their correspondents faced. Instead, they decided to harness the collective knowledge and power of these associations into a national organization devoted to prison reform. Accordingly, in 1821 Fry and eleven of her Newgate associates founded the British Ladies' Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners (BLS). This organization was formal in nature: it had a mission statement, elected officers including a treasurer and secretary, a set of resolutions governing the activities of the society, and met monthly to transact business.<sup>104</sup> The structure of the

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<sup>101</sup> Elizabeth Fry to Walter Venning, Esq., 1820, quoted in Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir*, 1:382.

<sup>102</sup> *Sketch*, 20.

<sup>103</sup> One example of this correspondence is Fry's letter to Thomas Harrison, Esq. of Brixton, in which she encouraged him in his efforts to introduce a chaplain, matron, and school in his local prison, and enclosed a copy of the regulations adopted at Newgate. Elizabeth Fry to Thomas Harrison, Esq., 20 December, 1821, Port. 42, fol. 59, LRSF. As her letters to Harrison and Venning show, Fry's ideas were not just of interest to women.

<sup>104</sup> Fry and Frances Williams were elected treasurers, and Ann Steinkopff and Elizabeth Dudley were elected secretaries of the BLS for its first year. *The First Report of the Committee of the British Society for Promoting the Reformation of Female Prisoners* (London: William Belch, 1822). Most accounts state that the society was founded in April (see, for example, *Sketch*, 18), but a

BLS was much like other humanitarian organizations, which is not surprising given that she and many of her associates were related to or friends with men active in various humanitarian causes; however—as I will discuss later in the chapter—it was atypical for the period for a female-dominated civic organization to be organized in such a formal manner.

All existing ladies' associations were made members of the BLS, and were requested to send annual reports specifying the following information: the current number of association members; whether local officials supported their work; whether their prison classified its prisoners and employed a matron to supervise the female prisoners; the type of employment provided for the prisoners and what was done with the finished product; information about the prison's school or other method of instruction for illiterate prisoners and/or their children; the average number of female prisoners; the size of the prison's food allowance and its policy on clothing prisoners; the rate of recidivism; and any other pertinent information about their activities—particularly any positive measures of success from their work.<sup>105</sup> The data in these reports was then used to write a printed annual report which was submitted to government officials, local chapters, and subscribers. And once a year the BLS held a public meeting to which government officials, members of the local chapters, and other interested individuals were invited; the meetings presented the accomplishments of the BLS and its member chapters, and were designed to

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memorandum by an unknown author describing the founding and purpose of the organization dates the first meeting to June 2, 1821. It also states that at this meeting the organization was called The Association for Bettering of the Condition of Female Prisoners; the change to include "ladies" and "reformation" was not only more descriptive of the society's membership, but more descriptive of its purpose. Memorandum of the Committee for the Improvement of Female Prisoners, Port. 34, fol. 27, LRSF.

<sup>105</sup> *Sketch*, 66; and Memorandum, *Committee for the Improvement of Female Prisoners*, n.d., Port. 34, fol. 27, LRSF.

encourage attendees to continue to promote policies that furthered the reformation of prisoners.<sup>106</sup>

This emphasis on collecting data and success stories is a mark of the BLS' professional approach to prison reform. Initially, the novelty factor of their work—coupled with the general impression officials and spectators who visited Newgate had that the behavior of the prisoners had been transformed by the changes made by the Newgate Association—was sufficient to garner support. But once this initial enthusiasm began to dissipate, Fry, her associates, and their surrogates pointed to program outcomes, testimonials, and individual success stories in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of their methodology and thus continue to generate support for their cause—a tactic still popular with fundraisers and activists. In her 1818 testimony before the House of Commons committee, for example, Fry described one prisoner who, since her release, had been making her living by knitting—a skill she had learned in prison—and was punctually repaying the small loan the Newgate Association had given her in order that she might be respectably established.<sup>107</sup> The following year, Joseph John Gurney testified before the House of Commons Select Committee on the State of Gaols that since the Newgate Association began their work the rate of recidivism was seven times less than it had been previously.<sup>108</sup> In *An Inquiry whether Crime and Misery are Produced or Prevented*

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<sup>106</sup> Elizabeth Fry to Rachel Gurney, 1 May, 1823, Egerton MS 3673A, fol. 190.

<sup>107</sup> Elizabeth Fry, testimony, 27 February, 1818, “Report on the Prisons within the City of London,” 36.

<sup>108</sup> Joseph John Gurney, testimony, 21 May, 1819, in House of Commons, “Report from Committees: Gaols and Other Places of Confinement,” *Sessional Papers, 1819, Report from the Select Committee on Gaols and Other Places of Confinement and to Whom Several Reports Returns and Petitions were Referred with Minutes of Evidence and Appendix*, 12 July, 1819, vol. 7 (repr., *British Parliamentary Papers: Crime and Punishment, Prisons*, vol. 1 (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1968), 322. In 1821, Samuel Hoare reported at a public meeting of the Society for Improving Prison Discipline that recommitments for female prisoners had dropped at least 20%,



by our Present System of Prison Discipline, Buxton wrote that the governor, matron, and chaplain of the Millbank penitentiary described the prisoners from Newgate as “more correct and decent, than those who were sent from any other prison,”<sup>109</sup> an assessment echoed in 1823 by the surgeon superintendent of the convict ship *Mary Ann*.<sup>110</sup> And the following year Major Palmer, inspector general of Irish prisons, wrote that it was his

confirmed opinion, founded on practice and experience, that all benevolent associations of females to visit that department in any gaol, has ever in Ireland been marked by an increased degree of order, cleanliness, industry, and reformation, in proportion to the energy, zeal, and attention paid by the visiting Ladies. ... Major Woodward entirely agrees with me in the sentiments I have expressed, and adds, that in the space of three months, he has seen a total alteration in the female department of a gaol, where vice and disorder had reigned triumphant previously, and attributes the change to the benevolent exertions of a Female Association.<sup>111</sup>

Emphasizing falling recidivism rates, expressions of repentance, and new (or reacquired) habits of honesty, punctuality, order, and industry—results which would be appealing to men and women of property—was a sound strategy for ensuring continued support. Another method was to demonstrate to the public that a prominent government official, such as Sir Robert Peel (who had succeeded Lord Sidmouth as home secretary in January 1822), supported their

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though this figure included Borough Compter in addition to Newgate. “Freemason’s Tavern,” *The Times*, 4 June, 1821: 2F. The SIPD’s 1821 report lists the figure as 40%, which the *Edinburgh Review* found so incredible that they attributed it to an unintentional error rather than misrepresentation. Nevertheless, they argue that a truer measure of success lay not in reduced recidivism, but a decrease in the number of offenses committed. The Newgate Association’s report, included as an appendix in the SIPD’s report, received a more favorable assessment; the ladies, the reviewer wrote, “speak with becoming modesty and moderation of the results of their labours.” “Review of The Third Report of the Committee of the Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline, and for the Reformation of Juvenile Offenders,” *The Edinburgh Review* 36 (February 1822): 355.

<sup>109</sup> Buxton, *Inquiry*, 116.

<sup>110</sup> *Sketch*, 30.

<sup>111</sup> *The Third Annual Report of the Committee of the British Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners* (London: William Belch, 1823), 19–20 and *Sketch*, 33–34.

work. In 1823, for example, they obtained his permission to include a description of his recent visit to Newgate in their annual report for this very reason.<sup>112</sup>

In addition to acting as a clearinghouse for information about ladies visiting associations and a centralized lobbying organization, the BLS took over responsibility for classifying and outfitting female convicts awaiting transportation, and continued to respond (post paid) to local association queries. The BLS was successful in expanding the number of local ladies associations—within five years, the number of local chapters had nearly doubled, from 17 to 31.<sup>113</sup> Shortly after the BLS was founded in 1821 they expanded their continuum of care even further by opening two institutions: the first, in 1822, was an asylum for discharged prisoners (under the age of 35) who had no friends or family to help them transition into a respectable life. The second, a house of discipline and school for reform for girls between the ages of seven and thirteen who either had committed, or were predisposed to commit, a crime opened in 1825 after consultations with Peel.<sup>114</sup> Both were under the superintendence of a formally constituted subcommittee of the BLS, and were governed by a set of rules.<sup>115</sup> At the asylum the women worked during the day

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<sup>112</sup> Elizabeth Fry to Sir Robert Peel, 3 April, 1823, Add. MSS 40355, fols. 193–94, BL; and Sir Robert Peel to Elizabeth Fry (copy), 5 April, 1823, Add. MSS 40355, fol. 195, BL.

<sup>113</sup> *Sketch*, 43.

<sup>114</sup> *Proposal for Instituting a House of Discipline, and School of Reform, for Viciously Disposed, and Neglected, Female Children*, January 1825, Add. MSS 40373, fols. 295–96, BL; Elizabeth Fry to Sir Robert Peel, 23 February, 1825, Add. MSS 40373, fol. 293; and Sir Robert Peel to Elizabeth Fry, 24 February, 1825, Add. MSS 40373, fols. 297–98. Peel subscribed £20 from his private funds for the new venture; another subscriber was Lady Byron.

<sup>115</sup> The twelve members of committee for the house of discipline were Mrs. B. Shaw, Ann Steinkopff, Elizabeth Fry, Mrs. Foster, Dorcas Coventry, Mrs. R. Bevington, Mrs. J. Hagen, Mrs. W. Christy, Elizabeth Dudley, Miss Elizabeth Fry, Martha Savory, and Mary Dudley. *Proposal for Instituting a House of Discipline*, January 1825, Add. MSS 40373, fols. 295–96, BL. The House of Discipline was supervised by a committee of eight. *Sketch*, 63.

and read (or learned to read) in the evening; the girls in the house of discipline learned to spell, read, and do needle-work, as well as general housework skills.<sup>116</sup>

In 1827 Fry published *Observations on the Visiting, Superintendence, and Government of Female Prisoners* (hereafter *Observations*), a pamphlet that was both a practical guide on how to establish visiting societies and a manifesto of her beliefs about the role and behavior of women (both of which varied according to class) in society. Fry's opening paragraph in *Observations* is a nod to the existence of separate sphere rhetoric: as was typical for female authors of non-fiction, she offers a token apology for intruding into the public sphere through publication. Her brief admission of "incompetency for the task of writing" and "reluctance in sending to the press" an account of the principles for visiting prisons is immediately followed by an assertion of competency as a philanthropist and reformer—her "long experience of the nature and effects of the system pursued by the [British Ladies' Society for Visiting Prisons]" and the fact that she had been repeatedly requested to provide information on this, her area of expertise, "induced" her to compose this pamphlet.<sup>117</sup>

Fry continues by laying out her philosophy of a woman's duty. She acknowledges that women are to fill the "station of a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother, or a mistress of a family," but while she recognizes that they should not

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<sup>116</sup> *Sketch*, 59–64.

<sup>117</sup> Fry, *Observations*, 1. As noted above, pamphlets and epistolary networks were important forums through which women contributed to public discourse in the first half of the nineteenth century. Alex Tyrell notes that women deployed their literary talents for both conservative and progressive ends: while some female writers inveighed against activities that, in their view, undermined domestic harmony, others either participated in pressure group politics as unpaid secretaries to male family members or contributed to political discourse in their own right. Eliza Cropper, for example, was as involved in the anti-slavery movement as her father, James Cropper and the Olive Leaf Circle women contributed articles and addresses advocating the peace movement. Alex Tyrell, "Woman's Mission' and Pressure Group Politics in Britain, 1825–60," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 63, no. 1 (1980): 194–230.

forsake these “rightful” roles of womanhood, she argues that women’s duties are not limited to such roles.<sup>118</sup> Instead, she contends, the gentleness, sympathy, compassion, serenity, capacity for firmness, and discerning character of women suits them a “more extensive field of usefulness,” namely, caring for “the helpless, the ignorant, the afflicted, or the depraved, of *their own sex*.”<sup>119</sup> It is important to note that Fry’s challenge to separate sphere rhetoric is more than arguing that women should not be limited merely to familial roles: she urges women to *formally* organize themselves into committees or societies dedicated to helping the less fortunate. To that end, Fry recommends a process by which to establish local associations to visit female prisoners: she advises that the ladies interested in visiting prisons gain permission from the local magistrate, persuade a lady of rank and influence to act as patroness, and then adopt a set of resolutions. These resolutions include establishing themselves as an association affiliated with the British Ladies’ Society for Visiting Prisons (with which, Fry suggests, they should correspond yearly), annually electing a committee “consisting of a treasurer, secretary, and not less than six other members,” and that this committee should meet at least monthly.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Fry’s views on this predated her activism: in a letter to her sister, Rachel, she wrote that “I find we may be employed in arranging laundries, kitchens, and such things, until our heart is too much in them.” Elizabeth Fry to Rachel Gurney, 19 November, 1814, Egerton MS 3673A, f. 22–23, BL.

<sup>119</sup> Fry, *Observations*, 3 (emphasis is hers). That gender-based differences made women best suited to care for fellow women was an argument for women’s work that is discussed in chapter three. It is worth noting that while Fry’s emphasis that women should care for other women implies they should not be caring for men, this did not mean she precluded a complete segregation between the sexes: when inspecting prisons, Fry examined both the men and the women’s sides, and on occasion she visited condemned male prisoners in Newgate. See Gurney, *Notes*; and Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir*, 1:380.

<sup>120</sup> Fry, *Observations*, 12–14. Although at this point in the text Fry is explicitly concerned with forming local associations for visiting female prisoners, elsewhere she makes it clear that establishing a formal society to carry out charitable work is best, regardless of who the target audience is. See Fry, *Observations*, 4. Fry herself followed this maxim in other philanthropic endeavors: in addition to her work as a prison advocate, she also established committees to offer assistance to the “deserving” poor in Brighton and Guernsey, raised funds to outfit over 600

It is clear that by organizing women into formal societies Fry envisions that the activities undertaken by members of these associations were public, not private functions, for she explicitly distinguishes the work done by societies such as the British Ladies' Society for Visiting Prisons from the charitable acts of individual women on behalf of the poor in their neighborhoods. She writes that while "private walks of Christian charity" were to be commended, they are far less effective than collective action on behalf of others, because by uniting their forces women would be able to act more efficiently, both in terms of their own time and in their ability to accomplish "all their charitable objects."<sup>121</sup> Thus the former, individual efforts should be a supplement to the latter, collective actions and not vice versa. And by organizing themselves to serve groups of individuals in need, not just the select individuals within one's personal sphere of influence, Fry argues that women not only will fulfill the full measure of a woman's duty, but in the process they will have "nearly, if not quite, an equal influence on society at large" as men.<sup>122</sup> By the time she wrote this in 1827, Fry and her colleagues had already demonstrated that this could be the case: in addition to alleviating the miserable conditions of individual prisoners under their care, their activities had brought public attention to the situation of prisoners. Some credit for the passing the 1823 Goals Act, which legislated minimum standards regarding prisoner care, can be attributed to the spotlight Fry and her associates brought to bear on the necessity for prison reform. The

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coastguard stations with religious and educational books, and created the Protestant Sisters of Charity, which trained and arranged employment in private homes for nurses. All of these were formally organized, with rules and elected committee officials.

<sup>121</sup> Fry, *Observations*, 4–6.

<sup>122</sup> Fry, *Observations*, 2.

supervision of female prisoners by women officers, an innovation introduced by Fry at Newgate, was specifically required under the Act's provisions.

What is interesting about Fry's insistence on the formal organization of women to serve the needs of others is that this was unusual for her time. According to Davidoff and Hall, participation in formal voluntary associations, of which one type were philanthropic societies geared toward a specific need such as educating the laboring poor or alleviating an illness, was primarily a male-dominated activity, a means of demonstrating middle-class masculinity. These societies were not only a place for homosocial association, but were sites where men could demonstrate their economic and, increasingly as the nineteenth century progressed, their political power. Although these organizations were civil, they were able to influence public opinion and thus public policy. They also afforded a space for men to enact rituals and ceremonies that reaffirmed their hegemonic masculinity.<sup>123</sup>

Davidoff and Hall note that while women participated in philanthropic associations, it was usually in a subordinate position. They were rarely formal members of the societies (typically they were covered under their husband or father's membership) or held leadership positions, even though they were entrusted with many of the practical aspects of the associations' work, such as visiting the poor or raising funds. Davidoff and Hall acknowledge, however, that while "some divisions between men and women were enshrined in ... custom and practice ... [or] association rules and regulations, none were so set as not to be open to contestation and negotiation."<sup>124</sup> This was particularly the case when

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<sup>123</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 416-20.

<sup>124</sup> Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 429.

the subjects of philanthropic intervention were female. It is true that some philanthropic associations were formed, organized, and run by women; the scope of such organizations, however, was almost invariably limited geographically (even female anti-slavery societies, the cause with which female voluntary activity in the early nineteenth century was perhaps most closely identified, were local and not national). The norm was to structure male and female voluntary activities so that women would not become, as William Wilberforce said, embroiled in the “warfare of political life.”<sup>125</sup> The *way* in which women engaged in philanthropic activities was therefore of vital importance. On the one hand, helping a fellow human being in distress was not only acceptable, but part of a woman’s “spiritual mission.” On the other hand, women were not to participate in activities that conflicted with prevailing gender norms of modesty and propriety. Despite these limitations, Davidoff and Hall argue that philanthropic activity could be, for middle-class women, something like a profession. Thus while the boundaries of male and female spheres may have been defined rhetorically, in practice female philanthropic activities contested the presumed dichotomy between the (male) public and the (female) private spheres.

As this chapter has argued, Fry’s understanding of the role of women in many ways challenged the norm outlined by Davidoff and Hall. She believed in formally organizing all-female philanthropic societies, and personally recruited

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<sup>125</sup> Quoted in Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 429. Wilberforce was not absolutely against women’s participation in the public sphere. Wilberforce’s friendship with Hannah More shows that circumstance and context of women’s participation in political affairs attenuated his position. He helped More, for example, draft a petition to permit Anglican missionaries to work in India; as Anne Stott notes, “provided the cause was good, ... Wilberforce [did not see] anything transgressive in a woman petitioning parliament.” Stott, “Patriotism and Providence,” 41. Wilberforce also supported Fry, and encouraged her to continue her prison reform activities after Joseph Fry’s bankruptcy in late 1828. William Wilberforce to Elizabeth Fry, Fry Notabilities, 40/2 and 40/3, the Library of the Religious Society of Friends, London.

the eleven co-founders of the Newgate Association. Neither it nor the BLS were auxiliary societies to organizations founded by men. Furthermore, the reformation of female prisoners was not geographically limited. As a result of Fry's advocacy, throughout the kingdom ladies who were interested in working with female prisoners in their community's prisons established local societies, and at her recommendation these societies were affiliated with the BLS. And, as previously stated, women were both members and leaders of these associations, holding elected positions such as treasurer or secretary—unlike the practice of most voluntary associations.

Fry was only the most visible example of a woman's ability to make a career out of social reform. Fry's Newgate initiatives may have made her a celebrity, but by drawing on the knowledge she gained from her tours of prisons and the correspondence between the local and national committees she came to be seen as an expert on prison reform. This expertise was recognized by public officials: government leaders such as the home secretary regularly corresponded with her about her proposed reforms, she testified twice more before Parliament (in 1832 and 1835), and when touring prisons she had letters of introduction that in effect acknowledged her as an authority in her field, a field that was firmly rooted in the political sphere. Yet while Fry was the acknowledged leader of the visiting ladies' prison reform movement, her ability to draw on the collective efforts of the visiting ladies committees made it possible for them, as a whole, to influence public opinion and exercise political power.

Two editions of *Observations* were printed in 1827; that same year, the BLS also published *Sketch of the Origin and Results of Ladies' Prison*



*Associations, with Hints for the Formation of Local Associations*, which—as its title suggests—described the history and successes of ladies’ associations, and which also had two editions. Copies of both were distributed in order to inform and motivate existing and potential supporters of their work;<sup>126</sup> two further updated and much expanded versions of *Sketch of the Origin and Results of Ladies’ Associations* were published in 1839 and 1852.<sup>127</sup> 1827 was also the year Fry and Joseph John Gurney conducted another major prison tour, this time in Ireland. Later that same year they jointly published a report on their visit; though unlike *Notes*, which contained a prison-by-prison description followed by general observations on prison reform, this report summarized their conclusions on Irish prisons, other public charities, and the condition of the Irish people. Fry returned to Ireland in 1832 and 1836, once again inspecting prisons and consulting with local officials.

While Fry had considerable authority as a prison reformer in the first decade of her work in prisons, by the 1830s the BLS began to experience increased resistance to their efforts from men eager to reclaim the authority lost to Fry and her female associates and who sought to displace their presence by pushing for the professionalization of prison administration. Opposition also

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<sup>126</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth Fry to William Fry, 21 April, 1828, Egerton MS 3674, fol. 45; Elizabeth Fry to Katherine Fry, 30 September, 1828, Egerton MS 3674, fols. 57–58; and Elizabeth Fry to Richenda Reynolds, 25 August, 1832, Temp. MSS 61/9, LRSF, which contain requests that *Observation, Sketches* and/or annual prison reports be sent to her (in one case, 50 copies of the ladies’ prison report); since her daughters state that she always traveled with a supply of tracts, presumably these requests were made because she had not brought sufficient copies with her. A copy of *Observations* was given to Queen Adelaide, who became a supporter of the BLS; in 1840 she agreed to be the patroness of the Institution of Nursing Sisters, founded by Fry. Elizabeth Fry to Joseph Fry, 6 October, 1830, Egerton MS 3674, fols. 149–50, and HRH Adelaide, Queen Dowager, to Elizabeth Fry, 14 July, 1841 (copy), SA/QNI/W.1/3, Wellcome Library, London.

<sup>127</sup> *A Concise View of the Origin and Progress of the British Ladies’ Association for Promoting the Reformation of Female Prisoners* (London: Hatchard and Son, 1839); and Wrench, *Visits to Female Prisoners*. The original edition of *Sketch* is 66 pages; *Concise* is nearly double in length at 126 pages; and *Visits* is 324 pages.

increased from reformers who believed that the justice system should focus on punishment, not rehabilitation, and that hard, unproductive labor and separate confinement were more effective deterrents to crime than skill-building and religious instruction. Despite this resistance, Fry and her associates continued to advocate on behalf of prisoners. Fry herself recognized that one of the challenges of being an activist was to sustain the same level of commitment to the cause once the initial enthusiasm had worn off. In 1832, she discussed this issue in a letter to her sister-in-law, Elizabeth Fry.

I so deeply feel the importance of a steady perseverance in this cause, my belief is that if this is the case much more will in due time be accomplished in it, but there is great danger in all these undertakings of growing faint & weary in our minds, when they are first begun there is generally much zeal shown in them but if any great end is to be accomplished it must mostly be done by going steadily forward long after the novelty is over to ourselves or others & continuing to seek to do what we do unto the Lord & not unto men \_ From my long habit of visiting prisons I see & desire very thankfully to acknowledge that much has already been effected, but I see also there is still much to be done, & experience teaches us we have often to wait some time quietly for the openings before we can take any fresh steps, even where we see they should be taken, but I hope we shall remain willing & ready to do what may open for us in this interesting & christian engagement.<sup>128</sup>

Though advocating for the moral reformation of prisoners was more difficult than it had been previously, this did not mean that Fry was completely devoid of influence. As will be seen in greater detail in the following chapter, a number of the BLS' goals, including the use of matrons, classification of prisoners and regular inspections of prisons had been enacted through penal legislation in 1823 and 1824 (though not all local prisons complied with the provisions of these bills until further legislation was passed in 1835). In 1832, Fry testified before the House of Commons Select Committee on Secondary

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<sup>128</sup> Elizabeth Fry to Miss Elizabeth Fry, 15 December, 1832, Egerton MS 3674, fols, 191-92.

Punishments about her concerns about the separate and silent systems;<sup>129</sup> in 1835 she gave evidence to the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Present State of the Several Gaols and Houses of Correction in England and Wales in which she argued against the separate system and the practice of female inmates working on tread-wheels, as well as outlining her views on the subject of religious instruction, employment, prison diet, and the need for female matrons on convict ships.<sup>130</sup> And in 1836, she worked with Lord John Russell on reforms to the prison on Jersey.<sup>131</sup>

That Fry had become a prison reform activist rather than merely a humanitarian can be seen by contrasting it with her activities in two causes she became involved in later in life, as well as the work of Sarah Martin. Fry was the driving force behind the creation of libraries for over 600 coast guard stations, stocked with 52,464 religious and educational books, pamphlets, and tracts.<sup>132</sup> As with her work with female inmates, the goal was moral reformation; with the

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<sup>129</sup> Elizabeth Fry, testimony, 23 March, 1832, House of Commons, "Report from the Select Committee on Secondary Punishments; Together with the Minutes of Evidence," *Sessional Papers, 1831-1832*, 116-29 (repr., *British Parliamentary Papers: Report from Select Committees on Financing Convict Establishments Erecting Penitentiary Houses and other Matters Relating to Transportation and Secondary Punishments: Crime and Punishment, Transportations*, vol. 1 (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1969). The committee's report expressed their continued support for the work of lady visiting committees: "[we] cannot forbear directing the attention of The House to the evidence of Mrs. Fry, to show what assiduous attention and proper management appear to have effected on the most abandoned characters; ... [we] are of opinion, that every facility should be afforded to those benevolent persons who undertake the task of visiting our prisons and affording moral and religious instruction to their inmates." "Report from Select Committee," *1831-1832*, 12.

<sup>130</sup> Elizabeth Fry, testimony, 22 May, 1835, House of Lords, "Report from the Select Committee on Gaols and other Places of Confinement," in *Sessional Papers, 1835*, 327-43 (repr. *British Parliamentary Papers: Report from the Select Committee on Gaols and Other Places of Confinement and to Whom Several Reports Returns and Petitions were Referred with Minutes of Evidence, Crime and Punishment: Prisons*, vol. 1 (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1969).

<sup>131</sup> Elizabeth Fry to Lord John Russell, n.d., Norfolk P.R.O., MC 234/14. In 1836 Russell also smoothed the way for the BLS to visit the convicts in Millbank Penitentiary. Elizabeth Fry to Thomas Fowell Buxton, 8 December, 1836, Egerton MS 3674, fol. 212.

<sup>132</sup> *Report of the Committee, Acting under the Sanction of His Majesty's Government, for Furnishing the Coast Guard of the United Kingdom with Libraries of Religious and Instructive Books, &c.* (London: James S. Hodson, 1836), 3-4.

exception of obtaining permission to create libraries from the relevant officials and a grant to underwrite the cost of some the books, however, this enterprise was entirely private. The majority of the funds to purchase the books were solicited from private individuals, and she did not involve the government in selecting titles, distributing the books, or maintaining the libraries. The second cause pertained to women's work: in 1840, she founded the Protestant Sisters of Charity (renamed the Institution of Nursing Sisters), a temporary nursing service. Women were trained at two London hospitals, and then hired out on an as-needed basis. Although this was an important milestone in the professionalization of women's work, it was not marketed as such. This was because, unlike prison reform, the Nursing Sisters served one individual at a time. Thus where in *Observations* Fry publicly extolled the importance of women corporately caring for the afflicted of her own sex, the availability of the Nursing Sisters to care for individuals (regardless of gender) was spread through word of mouth within Fry's kinship and social networks. Finally, that Fry was an activist can be seen by comparing her to Sarah Martin, a seamstress from Yarmouth who dedicated her adult life to the reformation of prisoners in her local jail. Although Martin provided employment and religious instruction to the inmates on the model advocated by Fry, her efforts were entirely confined to one jail, and she did not lobby local or national officials for legislative change for penal reform or publish her thoughts on the criminal justice system.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Martin received financial support from the BLS to carry out her work. She became known posthumously through a 1847 pamphlet by the Religious Tract Society; in 1872, the Religious Tract Society published a "new and improved memoir." *Sarah Martin, The Prison-Visitor of Great Yarmouth: A Useful Life* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1872). That Martin received a measure of posthumous recognition was likely because she was a single woman without the support of immediate family and thus had to earn her living as a dressmaker. The 1872 tract trumpeted the fact that she carried out her prison-visiting alone, without the "help or under the auspices of a committee," a woman "not of a robust constitution,—a little woman, of gentle, quiet

Having examined Fry's evolution from lady bountiful to prison reform activist, the following chapter examines how religion and gender influenced Fry and the British Ladies Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners' approach to the administration of criminal justice.

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manners; and during the greater part of her time, working with her hands for daily bread." *Sarah Martin*, 62–63.

## CHAPTER 3

### **GENDER AND RELIGION IN PRISON REFORM**

In 1852, Matilda Wrench published *Visits to Female Prisoners at Home and Abroad* on behalf of the British Ladies' Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners (BLS).<sup>1</sup> Wrench's account of the thirty-five year history of the prison visiting movement in the United Kingdom, Europe, and America includes many examples of the female prisoners helped by the various ladies' associations, such as M. R., a young girl "very ignorant, not only of the elements of learning, but of the principles of morality," who after her release regularly read the Bible to a woman confined to her bed and taught poor children how to read. The ladies also helped E. B.—imprisoned in Giltspur-Street Compter for a failed suicide attempt prompted by the "misconduct and illtreatment" she experienced at the hand of her husband—find employment upon her release from prison. A. H. was so grateful to the ladies who taught her to read, write, and the skills of a domestic servant during her imprisonment and subsequent two-year stay at one of the BLS' refuges for discharged prisoners that she tried to donate £10 to the BLS. In Chester, a woman who came to repent of her crimes thanks to the tutelage of the visiting ladies demonstrated her remorse after her discharge from prison by leading authorities to a stash of base coin. There were also

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<sup>1</sup> Initially the society was named The British Society for Promoting the Reformation of Female Prisoners; this was changed in July 1828 to the Ladies' British Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners, and then to the British Ladies' Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners (the final change occurred at some point between 1838 and 1840; the exact date is unknown because there are no minute books or annual reports for that time period). For clarity, the organization is referred throughout this chapter by the last designation, both because it was the final name and the society operated under this title for several decades. British Ladies Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners minute book, 28 July, 1828, D/S 58/3/1, Hackney Archives, London.

stories of many women whom the BLS reunited with family or placed in jobs in which they served with distinction, often marrying and leading—according to BLS records—respectable lives.<sup>2</sup>

These vignettes—which Wrench culled from the BLS’ annual reports—were designed to demonstrate the efficacy of the work performed by the members of the BLS to deter crime by reforming female criminals into productive and moral members of society, and thus justify their participation in the public sphere. The examples, however, also provide insight into the ideals that animated the work of female prison reformers. In the first instance, they illustrate contemporary social values: dedication to work and family, literacy, caring for the welfare of others, and adhering to ethical norms. Perhaps more significantly, however, these examples reveal the fundamental questions these women and others were asking, both of themselves and society at large—what responsibilities does the state have toward its citizens, and what is the role of the individual, male or female, in promoting public welfare and shaping public policy? Moreover, how do those roles and responsibilities apply to the issue of criminal justice? A prerequisite to answering these questions was the need to define the purpose of the criminal justice system. Is it solely to punish past offences, or should penalties be such that they also act as a deterrent to crime? What level of power should the state have over the bodies and minds of criminals? Should penalties be purely punitive, or should resources be devoted to the reformation and rehabilitation of the offender? Furthermore, what methods will produce the desired outcome(s)? Answering these questions

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<sup>2</sup> Matilda Wrench, *Visits to Female Prisoners at Home and Abroad* (London: Wertheim & Macintosh, 1852), 32–33, 35, 45–47, 67, and 126. A. H.’s donation was refused, and put instead into a savings bank for her use.

required some understanding of what offences were most common, who committed crime, and why.

This chapter examines how Fry and the BLS answered these questions and the role gender and religion played in shaping their responses. It argues that they used contemporary discourse about the “natural” traits and affinities of women to make the case that they were best suited to understand and address issues of female criminality, punishment, and rehabilitation. In so doing, it became one more way women circumvented or subverted the ideological assertion that the role and responsibility of women lay in the domestic sphere and asserted their right to participate in public affairs. Through a more in-depth examination of the scope of the BLS’ activities than covered by previous scholarship, it argues for the importance of these women to the prison reform movement. It also asserts that while the religious women who worked with female offenders thought that socio-economic hierarchies were divinely ordained, they also believed that everyone was equal in the sight of God. Accordingly, they conceived society as a community in which all individuals were bound by mutual ties of responsibility to each other for the spiritual and material welfare of all. Though they believed that individual abilities might differ, and rank and wealth was the natural order of things, their beliefs also dictated that this did not give the rich and powerful license to deprive others of their dignity or physical well-being. They took seriously the Biblical statement that in the afterlife God would reward those who had helped the poor and afflicted; descriptions of their work often referenced Christ’s declaration that

I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I



needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. ... [For] whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.<sup>3</sup>

### Crime and Punishment in the British Isles

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century there was a shift in how the state treated criminals; under the new system third-party justice began to shift away from punishing the body via execution or non-lethal corporal punishment to sentencing criminals to periods of confinement or transportation. The new emphasis on incarceration prompted an effort to seek consensus about what the conditions of that confinement ought to be. Should it merely restrict a person's liberty, or should criminals perform additional penalties while in prison—and if so, what should these be? Furthermore, how could prison terms both punish past criminal acts and deter future transgressions against the law?<sup>4</sup> In answering these questions criminal justice reformers found three aspects of the existing prison system particularly worrisome: the physical condition of prisons, the treatment of prisoners, and inmate behaviors.

If the new philosophy of criminal justice emphasized incarceration, then extended periods of confinement meant that prisons would house more criminals at any given time than under the previous regime. Since most existing prisons had not been built with this penal philosophy in mind, there was a serious capacity shortage. This pressure on the prison system was further

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 25:35-36 and 40.

<sup>4</sup> Except for crimes against the state, prosecutions were pursued privately, either by the victim or his/her lawyers. This only began to shift in the 1830s, as cities and municipalities established police forces, which increasingly took over prosecutions. The police continued to be responsible for all but the most sensitive or prominent prosecutions until 1986, when the Crown Prosecution Service was created to separate policing and prosecution services.

compounded by the increase in population and the shift from a rural to a more urban society. Frequently prison space was so limited that officials were unable to “classify” prisoners by physically separating them into groups except in the most rudimentary ways, such as by gender or debtors from accused and convicted criminals. In some cases even this basic division was impossible.<sup>5</sup> As a consequence, in many prisons inmates were not separated based on age, the type of offense, criminal history, or even the convicted from those who were awaiting trial. For reformers this system was unacceptable because it made moral contamination possible: the young or the new offender, by their intimate association with career felons, could learn criminal skills not yet known to them.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the moral check that prevented people from committing crimes—which new offenders presumably had broken only once to this point, possibly out of desperation or a momentary impulse—could be dulled by fraternizing with individuals who did not care about society’s rules.<sup>7</sup> Nor should someone who was imprisoned for libel, reformers argued, be forced to mingle with a person convicted of a violent felony; likewise, someone who had been

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Joseph John Gurney, *Notes on a Visit Made to Some of the Prisons in Scotland and the North of England, in Company with Elizabeth Fry; with Some General Observations on the Subject of Prison Discipline*, 2nd ed. (London: John and Arthur Arch, 1819), 15–16, 18, 23, and 82.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Fry, testimony, 27 February, 1818, in House of Commons, “Report from the Committee on the Prisons within the City of London and Borough of Southwark,” *Sessional Papers, 1818–1822, Crime and Punishment: Prisons*, 8 May, 1818, vol. 8, p. 36 and 43, repr., *British Parliamentary Papers: Reports and Papers relating to the Prisons of the United Kingdom with Minutes of Evidence and Appendices, 1818–22* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1970). Citations are to the original report.; Thomas Fowell Buxton, *An Inquiry Whether Crime and Misery are Produced or Prevented, by our Present System of Prison Discipline* (London: John and Arthur Arch, 1818), 10; Gurney, *Notes*, v, and 124–26; and H. G. Bennet, *A Letter to the Common Council and Livery of the City of London, on the Abuses Existing In Newgate, Showing the Necessity of an Immediate Reform in the Management of that Prison*, 2nd ed. (London, 1818), 4, 7, and 25. Bennet states that a third of the occupants of Newgate on December 20, 1817 were innocent (either because subsequently no bill was found against them or they were found innocent), yet because of overcrowding they had been confined in the same rooms as career criminals. Bennet, *Letter to the Common Council*, 24.

<sup>7</sup> Criminal behavior also took place within prisons; Bennet notes that bank notes were forged in Newgate. Bennet, *Letter to the Common Council*, 7.

raised with good values and had never before broken the law should not be obliged to live with a career criminal.

On the one hand, classification appealed to individuals who valued scientific/statistical investigation. Just as the physical world could be scientifically understood, human nature too could be discovered, understood, and molded.<sup>8</sup> If criminals were grouped, then their behavior could be monitored and understood, and from that solutions to the causes of crime could be posited and proved. The prison experience could be rationalized and the appropriate measures of punishment imposed so that inmates relearned the “natural” consequences of vice and virtue, that is, pain and pleasure. With respect to women, many reformers were wary of the consequences of too much physical pain; instead, they sought to get female inmates prisoners to experience sorrow.<sup>9</sup> This attitude is reflected in accounts that describe Fry’s ability to cause prisoners to weep.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Donna Andrew’s study of major London charities in the eighteenth century traces the shift, in the last decades of the century, from giving out of a sense of socio-religious obligation to an attitude that giving should contain or eradicate social problems. Andrew argues that to discover and address the roots of crime and poverty philanthropists combined “elements of evangelicalism, political economy, Malthusiansim, and utilitarianism.” Donna Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police: London Charity in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989) 169. Boyd Hilton’s analysis of the intersections of evangelical thought and the theory of political economy shows that the latter contained its own moral agenda, despite the fact that it was discussed as theory. One of the central subjects of his study, the Rev. Thomas Chalmers, became friends with the Gurneys and Frys in the 1820s. Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795–1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> An excellent analysis on this subject is Randall McGowen, “A Powerful Sympathy: Terror, the Prison, and Humanitarian Reform in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain,” *Journal of British Studies* 25 (July 1986): 312–34.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, *An Hour in His Majesty’s Gaol of Newgate, on Friday the 22<sup>nd</sup> December, 1820*, 2nd ed. (London: Henry Teape, 1820), 9. Pain, whether physical or emotional, is an integral element in the Biblical narrative; it presumes that through pain, mankind discovers the grace of the divine, and thus is drawn nearer to God. Christian prison reformers, therefore, did not absolutely reject the infliction of pain. Instead, they wanted a system of punishment that was calculated to lead inmates to repentance. Turning to God required reflection, and could not be accomplished through the mindless application of pain, which had no productive purpose.

On the other hand, the desire for order stemmed from a society where social structures and traditional divisions were under pressure from radical demographic and economic shifts; for people of means and/or rank this indiscriminate mixing was a sign of the larger social disorder and the potential for further mayhem. Asserting order within prisons thus was a conservative measure, one that reassured members of the old order that change was manageable. For if divisions between the redeemable and unrepentant prisoners could be imposed, then it was possible that those who were redeemed would, after their release, continue to respect the rules of society, both criminal and social. This perspective assumed the social nature of association: we are influenced by those around us. If criminals could become worse by their association with even more hardened offenders, then they should not only be kept separate, but should be exposed to the positive influence of lady visitors, who modeled socially accepted mores.<sup>11</sup>

Unchecked association was especially problematic in the case of women. If women were the more innocent, gentler sex then female crimes were not just an offense against society, but against their gender. The indiscriminate mixing in prison further unsexed these women by removing them from the society of respectable women and putting them in proximity of women of loose or lax morals. According to Sir Richard Phillips, one of London's sheriffs, "all the ordinary feelings of the sex are outraged by their indiscriminate association [when the] shameless victims of lust and profligacy are placed in the same chamber with others, who, however they may have offended the laws in

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<sup>11</sup> As chapter four demonstrates, critics of lady prison visiting argued that social contamination worked only in one direction: the morals and habits of female visitors would be degraded by their association with criminals, regardless of whether or not the inmates under their superintendence were hardened criminals.

particular points, still preserve their respect for decency and decorum.”<sup>12</sup> This situation was further aggravated when prisons failed to maintain boundaries between female inmates and men (either visitors or fellow prisoners). For Fry and her associates even unsupervised contact between prison officials—excepting the doctor and chaplain—was inadvisable, since the qualifications for, and supervision of, male keepers and turnkeys were minimal and therefore they were liable to not be much more respectable than the inmates they supervised.

The second issue reformers criticized were the conditions under which prisoners were held. As noted in the introduction, there were no national regulations governing the amount of food, heating, or bedding provided, which accordingly varied greatly from prison to prison.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, most prisons did not have prison uniforms, so that those who sold or pledged their clothes for food were insufficiently clothed. Many prisons were also unsanitary and accordingly were breeding grounds for disease. In Newgate, for example, inmates were not guaranteed soap; the sheriffs sometimes had funds to provide

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<sup>12</sup> Sir Richard Phillips, *A Letter to the Livery of London Relative to the Views of the Writer in Executing the Office of Sheriff* (London: T. Gillet, 1808), 95.

<sup>13</sup> Examples of the varying level of food can be found in Gurney and Fry’s account of their 1818 inspections of jails in Scotland and northern England. The Preston House of Correction, for example, provided “twenty ounces of good bread daily, besides a quart of gruel for breakfast, and the same for supper; and for dinner a quart of soup, which on certain days of the week is exchanged for a moderate allowance of boiled beef and potatoes, or of cheese.” At the Manchester New Bailey, inmates received “one pound and a half of bread daily; for breakfast a quart of oatmeal gruel, the same for supper; for dinner (on three days) half a pound of beef and one pound of potatoes; on three other days, a quart of pease [sic] soup, and on the remaining day, a quart of broth or stew.” At the York city jail, in contrast, prisoners lived on “one pound and a half of bread and a pennyworth of milk per day.” The Perth County jail only “allowed two pounds of good bread daily.” The Carlisle county jail’s threepence-half penny per day allowance was, according to Gurney, “cruelly small; for, except when bread is very cheap, it is absolutely insufficient for the due support of life. Gurney, *Notes on a Visit*, 38, 59, 70, and 79. The *Edinburgh Review*, which preferred solitary confinement and the treadmill to classification, productive employment, and reformation, agreed that a standard diet was necessary. “Diet differs so much in different prisons,” they note, “that six weeks in one prison is as severe a punishment as three months in another.” They recommended that prisons should adopt a uniform system, albeit differentiated according to the prisoner’s sentence. The lowest class would receive only bread and water, while the highest class could have a free diet. “Prisons,” *The Edinburgh Review* 36, no. 72 (February 1822): 364.

soap, but this was, in Fry's experience, an exception rather than the norm.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, medical care was limited: many prisons had no or limited funds to buy medicine, and a doctor's services were not always available. The conditions under which inmates were confined—both spatially by the absence of classification and with respect to their bodily wellbeing—thus raised the question of whether these circumstances were simply part of the prison experience or constituted additional punishment. Reformers believed that such conditions aggravated the sentence, pointing out that the state should not expose petty offenders, the untried, and the non-violent offender to starvation or potentially fatal diseases. Depriving criminals of their liberty was just, but a civilized society ought not also condemn criminals to a place that had the potential to permanently disable or kill them, merely because they lacked the resources (or friends and family who could supply them with resources) to properly feed, cloth, and keep themselves healthy.

Finally, reformers worried about how the prisoners spent their time while in prison. As Fry had discovered in Newgate, the prisoners had no productive employment, so they passed their time gambling, dancing, fighting, reading "improper" books, and begging from visitors. In addition, because liquor was available for purchase, they were often intoxicated. According to Newgate's governor, the women "stupefy themselves to get rid of all reflection," and as a consequence "have ceased to have any consciousness of [their] sex."<sup>15</sup> For

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<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Fry, testimony, 27 February, 1818, "Report on the Prisons within the City of London," 40.

<sup>15</sup> Horace S. Cotton, testimony, cited in Bennet, *Letter to the Common Council*, 6; and Elizabeth Fry, testimony, 27 February, 1818, "Report on the Prisons within the City of London," 34.

respectable members of society the need to reform the manners and morals of British prisoners was manifest.

Among individuals concerned about the state of the criminal justice system there were three (sometimes competing and sometimes complementary) views of the purpose of the criminal justice: to punish offenders for their actions, to deter crime, and to rehabilitate or reform criminals. Reformers like John Howard and the ladies of the BLS believed in the universality of sin, and therefore that prisoners had to be treated as human beings who could be redeemed, both religiously and socially. Punishment was necessary, but it had to be balanced with an awareness of the circumstances that precipitated the criminal act. This required not only the humane treatment of prisoners in jail but an obligation to assist people whose personal circumstances might tempt them to commit a crime as well as helping those who had been released from prison. The BLS, as will be discussed in more detail below, believed in refuges and temporary support out of jail, and sufficient food, clothing, and clean accommodations as well as classification, educational and spiritual instruction, employment, and inspection within prison.

Other reformers (as well as proponents of the existing system) maintained that the classification and moral reformation approach made prisons places of refuge rather than punishment: the *Freethinking Christian Quarterly Review* pointed to the chairman of the London workhouse committee's report that a poor woman had inquired "whether she might not get to Newgate, under the care of Mrs. Fry, *by stealing a little something*."<sup>16</sup> Instead

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<sup>16</sup> "The Freethinking Christians' Review of the Religious World: Mrs. Fry," *The Freethinking Christian Quarterly Register* vol. 2 (1825): 252 (emphasis is theirs). This objection was not reserved to lady visitors; the male-run SIPD was criticized, hyperbolically, for wanted to provide

they advocated for cellular prisons where criminals could be totally separated from each other. Not only did this method prevent criminal contamination, but the solitude, they claimed, would enable reflection and repentance (advocates of this method were split on whether prisoners should do work in their cells). Cellular prisons were seemingly successful in the United States, especially Pennsylvania, and advocates for separate confinement eagerly seized upon this example. The advantage of the separate system was that it required less supervision, however it was also much more expensive than classification because it required the construction or renovation of prisons with individual cells. Thus where separation was not fiscally possible (which was often the case), the enforcement of silence was adopted, on the principle that if prisoners were forbidden to talk with each other, then moral contamination would not be possible. In extreme cases the separate and the silent system were used together.<sup>17</sup>

The nature of prison employment was another hotly contested issue: should prisoners be forced to do hard labor—such as picking oakum or working

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prisoners with “Turkey carpets and tea and toast.” For similar sentiments that improving the conditions within prisons would make them “places rather of accommodation than punishment,” see Lord Sidmouth, quoted in “Proceedings in the late Session of Parliament,” *The Gentleman’s Magazine* (November 1818): 454; and Corrector, letter to the editor, 5 June, 1820, *The Gentleman’s Magazine* (July 1820): 26.

<sup>17</sup> The most extreme attempt to discipline prisoner’s bodies and minds was made at the London penitentiary, Pentonville, which opened in 1842. While not a true Panopticon, Pentonville’s architecture was modeled on Jeremy Bentham’s idea: five large wings, several stories high, arranged like a Y bisected at the fork by two of the blocks. Watchtowers were stationed between each spoke and along the high wall encircling the penitentiary. Prisoners were housed in individual cells with a small inspection hole for the wardens. Life within Pentonville was strictly regulated: prisoners were forced to rise, eat, work, and sleep at proscribed times. They rarely left their cells, and when they did they were forced to put on a mask to preserve anonymity. Silence was strictly enforced; violators were sent to “dark cells” in the basement. Michael Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain: The Penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution, 1750–1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 3–11. Not surprisingly, some inmates went insane (between five and fifteen each year according to Ignatieff) while others committed suicide. Upon their release many prisoners suffered what would now be called post-traumatic distress syndrome. Both the separate and the silent systems began to fall out of favor in the 1850s, as prison officials came to realize the deleterious effects on prisoners’ mental health.



on a crank- or treadmill, or should severe measures be rejected in favor of teaching prisoners useful skills, such as reading and a trade? Advocates for the former approach contended that burdensome and unproductive work acted as a deterrent by creating an environment that was harsher than the life lived by the “lowest free laborer,” while proponents of the latter approach argued that it was better for society to prepare inmates with the skills needed to lead a productive life after the completion of their sentence.

Though there is extensive scholarship on the history of crime and punishment in eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Britain, comparatively little work has been done about the role of gender in criminal justice reforms during this period.<sup>18</sup> In part this is due to the fact that contemporaries were more concerned about male and juvenile criminality, but it also reflects a preoccupation with understanding the history of the radical transformation in the administration of criminal justice during this period, to which female prison reform activists appear at first glance not to have played as important a role to this process as the leading male prison reformers and prison reform

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<sup>18</sup> Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain*; Clive Emsley, *Crime and Society in England, 1750–1900*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Pearson Longman, 2005); Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, E. P. Thompson, eds., *Albion’s Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Allen Lane, 1975); E. P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Richard R. Follett, *Evangelicalism, Penal Theory and the Politics of Criminal Law Reform in England, 1808–30*, Studies in Modern History (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Martin J. Wiener, *Reconstructing the Criminal: Culture, Law, and Policy in England, 1830–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Verso, 2003); and V. A. C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People, 1770–1868* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). Where female criminals are the subject of study, it is either for the Victorian era, transportation, or retail theft by women. See Lucia Zedner, *Women, Crime, and Custody in Victorian England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Kay Daniels, *Convict Women* (St. Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1998); Deborah Oxley, *Convict Maids: The Forced Migration of Women to Australia*, Series in Australian History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Tammy C. Whitlock, *Crime, Gender and Consumer Culture in Nineteenth-Century England* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005).

organizations.<sup>19</sup> The traditional Whig interpretation of criminal justice reforms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries argues that, motivated by enlightened humanitarian impulses and the desire to rationalize an inefficient (and therefore in their judgment ineffective) justice system, reformers like John Howard, Jeremy Bentham, Sir Samuel Romilly, Sir James Mackintosh, and Thomas Fowell Buxton, and pressure groups like the Society for the Diffusion of Knowledge upon the Punishment of Death and the Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline and the Reformation of Juvenile Offenders (SIPD)<sup>20</sup> campaigned for the overhaul of the British criminal justice system. But the hagiographies of these reformers (including Fry) are more about how nineteenth-century society saw itself than critical analysis, and later historians have challenged this interpretation of virtue and progress. Social historians have argued for the class nature of criminal punishment: as societies developed new social structures, new systems of punishment were required. Since industrialism required a free labor market, there was a need to adopt a system

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, U. R. Q. Henriques, "The Rise and Decline of the Separate System of Prison Discipline," *Past & Present* 54 (February 1972): 61-93; Anne Summers, *Female Lives, Moral States: Women, Religion, and Public Life in Britain, 1800-1930* (Newbury: Threshold, 2000); and Anthony Babington, *The English Bastille: A History of Newgate Gaol and Prison Conditions in Britain, 1188-1902* (London: Macdonald, 1971). According to the 1824 SIPD report, 2,147 women were committed for trial in England and Wales in 1817, compared with 11,758 men. In London and Middlesex 529 women and 2,157 men stood accused of a criminal act in 1817. Of the 13,932 total number of offenses (by both men and women) in 1817, 9,396 (67%) were simple larceny complaints. The next highest number of crimes by category were the 627 burglary charges (4.5% of the total). Larceny from the person accounted for 519 charges, "coin, putting off, and uttering counterfeit" for 346 charges, and receiving stolen goods for 335 charges. *The Sixth Report of the Committee of the Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline and for the Reformation of Juvenile Offenders* (London: J. and A. Arch, 1824), 311, 313, and 315.

<sup>20</sup> Fry's brothers-in-law Buxton and Hoare, as well as William Allen, a noted London philanthropist and friend of the Gurney and Fry families, were founding members of the Society for the Diffusion of Knowledge upon the Punishment of Death; her husband, brothers John and Sam, cousin Joseph Gurney Bevan, and uncle Joseph Gurney were subscribers. In 1815 Buxton and Hoare were part of a committee of the Society for Investigating the Causes of the Increase of Juvenile Delinquency which conducted a detailed investigation of London prisons; this investigation led to the formation of the SIPD in 1818. See *The Origin and Object of the Society for the Diffusion of Knowledge upon the Punishment of Death* (London: J. McCreery, 1811); and *Report of the Committee of the Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline and for the Reformation of Juvenile Offenders* (London: Bensley and Sons, 1818).

based on corrective detention that prepared inmates to adopt the orderly and repetitive work patterns of an industrializing society.<sup>21</sup> One of the most influential schools of thought, inspired by the pioneering work of Michel Foucault, has focused on how the criminal justice system transformed from a spectacle designed to show the king's power to a means of disciplining the bodies and minds of the members of the lower classes to regulate behaviors that served the needs of a capitalist society.<sup>22</sup> According to this view, the old system of terror had lost its efficacy, for the crowd often sympathized with the condemned, or considered the executions entertaining. Thus a new system that the general population considered odious was required, and the disciplinary system of punishment was born.<sup>23</sup> Nearly forty years after Foucault first published his groundbreaking analysis of the paradigm shift during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in how the state treated criminals—

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<sup>21</sup> Thompson, Hay, and Linebaugh are among the most notable historians of this school. See also George Rudé, *Criminal and Victim: Crime and Society in Early-Nineteenth Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1995). Though Foucault's primary evidence is based on an examination of the French criminal justice system, subsequent historians have applied his theory to the criminal justice system in Western Europe and the United States, generally. For England, see Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain*. According to Foucault, prisons were not the only means for disciplining its citizens at the disposal of the state: schools, armies, and hospitals also systematically molded the minds and bodies of the members of those institutions. On the disciplining philosophy of Bentham and Fry, see Randall McGowen, "A Powerful Sympathy," 312–34. See also Miles Ogborn, "Discipline, Government and Law: Separate Confinement in the Prisons of England and Wales, 1830–1877," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, n.s., 20, no. 3: 296–311. For a critique of the Foucault's ideas, see C. Fred Alford, "What Would It Matter If Everything Foucault Said About Prison Were Wrong?," *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (2000): 125–46.

<sup>23</sup> For a survey of the history and historiography of the criminal justice system during this period, see Emsley, *Crime and Society in England*. Emsley notes that the Whig interpretation is deterministic, while Foucault's theory used broad strokes to describe change, rather than examining in detail why these changes came about. Ultimately, Emsley concludes, "it is difficult to see how changing ideas about crime and criminals and changing practices in criminal justice and punishment during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could not have been related to changing ideologies and economic and social structures. The question is whether the links were quite as one way as Rusche and Kirchheimer and Foucault suggest; or whether, as Gordon Wright has argued with reference to France: 'It is more likely that the relationship between values and socioeconomic base, then as now, was reciprocal—that base and value-system combine to shape society's view of men and the world.'" Emsley, *Crime and Society*, 12.

when third-party justice shifted from disciplining the body to disciplining the mind—his interpretation continues to engage scholars of the history of criminal justice reform.

### The Role of the State and the Individual in Public Welfare and Security

The growth of capitalist and industrial businesses in the eighteenth century increasingly loosened the traditional relationship between the landed elite and their laborers and the masters of trades and their apprentices. Old methods of exerting control and discipline over the lower classes had gradually eroded, as the remnants of manorial and ecclesiastical regulations were supplanted by new systems of justice. Part of the anxiety about the breakdown of traditional bonds of society were bound with a recognition that in more urban settings it was difficult to have personal knowledge of an offender's character which, as Peter King has shown, was one of the factors that influenced eighteenth-century sentences.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, in close-knit communities knowledge of a person's character could mitigate the stain of imprisonment, and as a result former inmates might be given a second chance. In cities, however, where no such knowledge existed, the punishment extended beyond the prison sentence itself. This transition period between the old and the new economy also produced a great deal of financial insecurity and uncertainty, particularly for those who had previously labored in agricultural or home-based occupations. These social changes prompted a debate about individual versus state responsibility for public welfare and security. Opinion was divided between those who argued for more central authority and national regulation of

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<sup>24</sup> Peter J. R. King, "Decision Makers and Decision-Making in the English Criminal Law, 1750–1800," *Historical Journal* 27 (1984): 25–58.

issues affecting public welfare and security, those who rejected the call for greater state authority in favor of individual and voluntary association intervention, and those—like Fry—who called for a mix of both approaches.<sup>25</sup>

Members of the middle and upper classes were not insensitive to the needs of the lower orders. Traditionally, the church played an important role in relieving the needs of the poor, sick, and distressed. During the eighteenth century, however, there was a rise in individual and group humanitarianism. Howard claimed that his prison tours were motivated by a sense of duty to his fellow countrymen and a love of country: the social contract that bound society together imposed on him an obligation to relive the miseries of those less fortunate than himself.<sup>26</sup> Howard is an example the growing assertiveness of the emerging middle-class as political actors. His expose of the problems of Britain's prisons—particularly the fees imposed on inmates by prison officials and the miserable conditions of prisons, which made them breeding grounds for disease—were an indictment of the local and national elite, who were failing to uphold their part of the social contract, whether by negligence or corruption.

By the turn of the century there were a variety of charitable institutions to serve individuals in need.<sup>27</sup> Anthony Highmore reported that in 1822, for

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<sup>25</sup> One of the arguments against the creation of a police force in London was that it undermined the traditional liberties of the English; opposition to Robert Peel's first attempt to legislate a police force characterized it as the first step on a slippery slope toward the tyranny of the state over the individual. However, the metropolis was hardly unpoliced in the eighteenth century; instead, Andrew Harris argues, the debate over Peel's police reforms reflects a tension between local and central control over defining criminality and administering justice. Andrew T. Harris, *Policing the City: Crime and Legal Authority in London, 1780–1840* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2004).

<sup>26</sup> John Howard, *The State of the Prisons in England and Wales* (London: Warrington, 1777), 4.

<sup>27</sup> The literature on the political and benevolent motives behind the enormous expansion of private institutions or movements devoted to social conditions and humanitarian causes is vast. See, for example, David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Thomas Haskell, "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility," *American Historical Review* 90 (April and June 1985): 339–61 and

example, London had “22 hospitals or asylums for the sick, for the lame, and for pregnant women; 17 dispensaries for gratuitously supplying the necessitous with medicines and medical aid at their own habitations; ... besides 127 places for the reception of the aged and infirm.”<sup>28</sup> In addition to formal institutions, there were also organizations, both small and large, that served the indigent and the sick of the metropolis in their homes or provided temporary shelter. Typically these charitable organizations served particular populations (such as the Widow’s Friend and Benevolent Society), specific areas of the city (such as the Mother and Infants Friend Society, which provided funds and temporary use of a box of linen to poor expectant mothers in the parish of St. Swithin), or for short-term needs—for example, the Nightly Shelter to the Houseless, which provided food and shelter to the homeless during the bitter winter of 1819/20.<sup>29</sup>

Though one motive for such charity was concern for the welfare of disadvantaged members of society, the middle and upper classes were also concerned about public order; the Guardian Society and Asylum for the Preservation of Public Morals, for example, provided temporary housing for prostitutes taken up by the magistrates, while others railed against the pernicious influence of drink.<sup>30</sup> Philanthropy, therefore, could be preemptive

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547–66; and John Ashworth, “The Relationship between Capitalism and Humanitarianism,” *American Historical Review* 92 (1987): 813–28.

<sup>28</sup> Anthony Highmore, Esq., *Philanthropia Metropolitana: A View of the Charitable Institutions Established In and Near London* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1822), xxi–xxii. This publication is a supplement to an earlier compilation of roughly 450 charities in and around London; it describes the work of more than 60 additional charities founded since the publication of the first volume in 1810. Highmore was a London solicitor and friend of Granville Sharpe who was active in the anti-slavery campaign and interested in charities; he served as secretary of the London Lying-in Hospital.

<sup>29</sup> Highmore, *Philanthropia Metropolitana*, 323, 333, and 447.

<sup>30</sup> Like the late nineteenth-century furor over the “enslavement” of young girls into prostitution, late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century remonstrations against prostitution claimed that the overwhelming majority of prostitutes had entered their profession against their will, and that in “99 cases of 100” associating with profligate women led to illicit activities. In the 1810s, one of the

policing measure. Another motive behind ostensibly philanthropic activities was the self-serving desire to reduce the number of poor people relying on the relief provided by the parishes under the Poor Laws.

Most scholars argue that voluntary associations were places where middle-class men could engage in rituals that affirmed their standing within the hegemonic masculinity, while women's activities in such organizations demonstrated that they conformed to contemporary ideals about femininity. Although many of these charities had a committee of ladies, who undertook the practical work of investigating the merits of each case presented, and providing the actual services to those who met the society's criteria, the patrons and officers of these associations were, however, almost invariably male. This meant that the ladies were acting under male authority, even if in many cases they had considerable discretion in carrying out their assigned duties.<sup>31</sup> There were a few philanthropic associations formed, organized, and run by women, however, the scope of such organizations was almost invariably limited geographically. In London there were a few organizations, like the Female Friendly Union Society,

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periodic intervals when interest in suppressing prostitution peaked, businesses and residents of the City of London sent petitions to Parliament demanding more rigorous laws for prosecuting soliciting and brothels (prostitution itself not being illegal). See Highmore, *Philanthropia Metropolitana*, 418–27. For a study of the relationship between voluntary associations and morals, see M. J. D. Roberts, *Making English Morals: Voluntary Association and Moral Reform in England, 1787–1866* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police*. For the Victorian period, see Judith Rowbotham and Kim Stevenson, eds., *Criminal Conversations: Victorian Crimes, Social Panic and Moral Outrage* (Columbus: The Ohio University State Press, 2005).

<sup>31</sup> Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 2002). As noted in the previous chapter, Fry herself, prior to founding the Newgate Association, was involved in relieving the needs of the poor; though she does not record the names of the societies in which she was active during this period, it is probable that she was involved with the Guardian Society and the Spitalfields Benevolent Society, since her brother-in-law William Fry was treasurer of the former and Thomas Fowell Buxton and Samuel Hoare Jr. were patron and vice patron of the latter. According Highmore and newspaper accounts of the period, Fry was the principal woman involved in providing food and shelter, as well as making arrangements for the spiritual care, of the women resident in the Nightly Shelter. The public nature of her involvement with the shelter, however, resulted from the fact that by 1819 she was already famous for her work with Newgate prisoners, which had become public news in July 1817.

which provided for the relief of those who “through sickness and casualty are reduced to temporary distress” that were founded and run by women. The number of women involved in such charities, as well as the funds available to them, were typically (though not always) smaller than in the charities in which men were the founders and officers.<sup>32</sup>

If women’s participation in political life was controversial, then the *way* in which women engaged in philanthropic activities serving political ends was therefore of vital importance. While helping a fellow human being in distress was considered part of women’s “spiritual mission,” women had to exercise care in how they carried out those activities so as not to provoke criticism that their actions conflicted with prevailing gender norms of modesty and propriety. The BLS both conforms to and challenges this interpretation. The reforms these women instituted were consistent with the duties of a wife and mother: ensuring that those they cared for were properly attired, teaching proper behavior, taking care of the sick, and practicing practical crafts such as knitting or sewing. In their dealings with the prisoners, Fry insisted that the visiting ladies demonstrate modesty, kindness, and gentleness, for in so doing they would be a model the female prisoners should emulate. Yet on the other hand, the BLS was not explicitly geared to teaching women how to be mothers and wives; they were more concerned with teaching inmates about moral values and

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<sup>32</sup> The committee of the Female Friendly Union Society, for example, consisted of eight women who spent £40–45 per year. The Dorcas Society, one of the larger charities run by women, had fifteen committee members and spent £116 in one (unnamed) year. In contrast, the Widow’s Friend and Benevolent Society spent £1,617 in a twelve-month period between 1816 and 1817, while the Nightly Society’s expenses for the winter of 1819–1820 were £4,049. There were exceptions to the rule of smaller women’s organizations vs. large male associations: the Southwark Female Society, which was run by women and provided food, clothing, coal, and work for sick and indigent residents of the seven parishes of Southwark, as well as support for pregnant women, spent £1,079 in 1821. Highmore, *Philanthropia Metropolitana*, 320–21, 327–29, 333–36, 447–57, and 615–22.



skills that would enable them to survive after their release. The BLS also had a prominent public profile, advocated on behalf of female prisoners (individually and as a whole), and—contrary to the society’s name—were international in scope.

### Lady Prison Visitors

The lady prison visiting movement began in early 1817, with the school Fry established for the roughly 30 children then living in Newgate prison (most were there because children under age seven could stay with their incarcerated mothers, but a few were themselves accused or convicted of a crime).<sup>33</sup> Fry observed that the children used some of the bad language they heard from inmates, and worried about the negative influence living in prison had on their moral development. Accordingly, she asked the inmates whether they would like her and a few of her Quaker friends to establish a school for their children. Fry’s suggestion was welcomed by the mothers “with tears in their eyes,” according to her testimony before the House of Commons committee investigating the state of prisons in London the following year, because “they knew so much the miseries of vice, that they hoped their children would never be trained up in it.”<sup>34</sup> This account of the inmates’ emotional reaction to the prospect that their children would be in a better environment is a narrative Fry and the BLS repeatedly invoked over the years, namely that female prisoners were not unfeeling or beyond redemption. As the BLS’s official account of the

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<sup>33</sup> Bennet stated that on December 20, 1817, one female convict in Newgate was only eleven years old. Bennet, *A Letter to the Common Council*, 28.

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Fry, testimony, 27 February, 1818, “Report on the Prisons within the City of London,” 34.

origin of the society noted in 1827, although these women were in prison, they still had motherly feelings, which was perhaps the most essential mark of what it meant to be a woman during this period.<sup>35</sup>

The school was a success and soon expanded to include women who were unable to read and write. When the inmates also implored Fry and her friends to provide them with employment since they disliked living in enforced idleness, Fry realized that a more formal approach was necessary. On April 10, 1817, Fry, several fellow Quaker women, the local sheriffs, and Horace S. Cotton and John Addison Newman—Newgate’s chaplain and governor—met with approximately seventy of the female inmates of Newgate prison to discuss implementing a new regime. Fry explained to the women that, since most of them had few external resources to alleviate their immediate needs and they had nothing productive to do while in prison, the officials had agreed to let them create the Association for the Improvement of Female Prisoners at Newgate (known as the Newgate Association), which would run a workshop where inmates would do needlework, knitting, and spinning. Half of the proceeds of their labor would be available immediately so they could buy clothing (which was not provided by the prison) and food (to supplement the prison’s meager rations), while the other half would be set aside for their release. As an incentive, the committee pledged to give them 1 shilling for every 5 shillings earned during the trial period of the project. Fry spoke about the benefits of hard work, both financially and to their moral welfare, and the reward she herself felt from living a life devote to religious principles. Mary Sanderson then read the rules and regulations the committee had drawn up,

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<sup>35</sup> *Sketch of the Origin and Results of Ladies’ Prison Associations, with Hints for the Formation of Local Associations* (London: John and Arthur Arch, 1827), 6.

each of which the women were required to approve or amend. The rules prescribed all prisoners to do needlework, knitting, or other work, and proscribed “begging, swearing, gaming, cardplaying, quarrelling, or immoral conversation.” The women were to be divided into classes according to age and the type of crime they had committed, with each class headed by a monitor elected by the women. The monitors were responsible for superintending the behavior of their class, and to report any infraction of the rules to the live-in matron hired by the Newgate Association, who kept a record of such transgressions. Provisions were made to remove the monitor from her position if she herself broke the rules. Finally, the women agreed to assemble twice each day, at 9 a.m. and 6 p.m., when the Holy Scriptures would be read to them. The prisoners gave their assent to the rules, elected monitors for each class, and were assigned to workshops according to their skill level. Once word of the Newgate Association spread, women organizing local prison visiting committees were urged to adopt the same rules, and Fry always insisted that prisoners had to consent to the services provided by the visiting ladies.<sup>36</sup>

The following month London’s committee of aldermen officially sanctioned the rules by agreeing to pay the matron’s salary; they also gave the ladies the power to punish refractory women by placing them in solitary confinement for a few days.<sup>37</sup> The rules were later amended to include the

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<sup>36</sup> *Memorandum of the Institution of Some New Regulations in Newgate Prison for the Promotion of Order and Industry amongst the Female Convicts*, n.d., Egerton MS 3673A, fols. 95–96, the British Library, London (hereafter cited as Egerton MS); Edward Harris to his sister, 22 April, 1817, Temp. MSS 902, fol. 3, LRSF; *Sketch*, 7; and Elizabeth Fry, *Observations on the Visiting, Superintending, and Government of Female Prisoners* (London: John and Arthur Arch, 1827), 12–14.

<sup>37</sup> Buxton, *Inquiry*, 112–13; and minutes of the Committee of Aldermen to Consider all Matters Relating to the Gaols of this City, 3 May and 10 May, 1817, Temp. Box 9/18, fols. 2–3, LRSF. The matron received 52 guineas at year from the city, which the BLS supplemented with an additional £20 per year.

appointment of a keeper of the women's yard, who superintended the inmates' behavior while in the yard and informed them when they had visitors. A second amendment specified that the prisoners should keep themselves and their living space clean, and forbade them from pledging their clothes. The ladies also found it expedient to require the women to wear a ticket identifying the class to which she belonged.<sup>38</sup>

For their part, the committee would spend five days a week (Monday–Friday) in the prison, and create a schedule with each member of the Newgate Association committing themselves to one particular day of the week (Fry attended Newgate on Fridays). Initially, the visitors spent the whole day at Newgate; in time, however, they were able to scale back to just a couple of hours each morning. On Mondays two committee members superintended the school, and operated a lending-library for the prisoners; on Tuesdays three or four ladies counted the work completed the previous week by the more skilled prisoners, distributed raw materials for the week, and paid the prisoners the half-share of their earnings, setting aside the remainder for their release; on Wednesdays, two ladies did the same for the prisoners unable to do fine needlework and who therefore worked with course linen, calico, and flannel; Thursdays three ladies superintended the prisoners who knitted; and on Fridays, the day the prison was open to visitors who wished to inspect the committee's work, three to five ladies were responsible for showing the visitors around the female part of the prison. Saturdays the ladies did not visit Newgate as the prisoners spent that day washing, ironing, and cleaning.

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<sup>38</sup> Precisely when the rules were amended is unclear; the amended list is included in the *Sketch of the Origin and Results of Ladies' Prison Associations*, printed in 1827. *Sketch*, 53–55.

The Newgate Association also had a sub-committee that, after each quarter session, conducted a prisoner intake assessment: they recorded the name, age, and sentence of each prisoner and determined who could read and assigned them to a class or to the school accordingly. This subcommittee was also responsible for distributing, at given intervals, rewards for good behavior, typically clothes or religious books. Eligibility for rewards was determined by the register book maintained by the matron. When monitors observed prisoners breaking the association's rules, they reported the offenders to the matron, who recorded a mark next to the prisoner's name for the day. The value of the prisoner's reward was reduced by three pence for each mark. Women who were re-offenders received less than first-time prisoners. It should also be noted that the Newgate Association did not adhere rigidly to the idea of paying prisoners only half their wages on the spot and reserving the rest for their release; according to one of their reports, while this plan was recommended by the Newgate Association, it was up to the women to decide whether or not to adhere to the savings scheme. For those who were in desperate financial straits the members of the Newgate Association decided it was not advisable to ask them to comply with this aspect of the program.<sup>39</sup>

Materials for their work were supplied by Messrs. Richard Dixon and Co., a company that made clothing sent to Botany Bay.<sup>40</sup> Within a few weeks sixty-five women had made 344 shirts, 64 shifts, 59 aprons, and 250 pinafores; after three months they had sewn approximately 4,000 items and knitted 220 pair of socks, and by February 1818, Fry reported that the number totaled roughly

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<sup>39</sup> *Sketch*, 56-58, and Gurney, *Notes*, 154-155.

<sup>40</sup> *Sketch*, 7.

20,000 items. On average, there were eighty women, divided into seven classes; each woman earned about eighteen pence per week.<sup>41</sup>

Fry's rehabilitative approach was predicated on establishing a personal relationship with the prisoners (much like evangelicals sought to create a personal relationship between the believer and God). Only by winning the prisoners' trust and support, she felt, would true amendment be possible. The principle of on-going engagement led them to consider the needs of prisoners once discharged from prison, whether into the community or transported to the penal colonies. It required an individualized approach, one that assessed each inmate and treated him or her accordingly. Seeing prisoners as individuals, however, was tempered by a religious belief that there were certain truths about human behavior that broadly explained sinful behavior, including the commission of crime.

In 1818 Fry conducted the first of a series of prison tours that would take her across the United Kingdom and, after 1838, several continental countries. She was already well-known thanks to newspaper articles, pamphlets on prison reform that included information about the Newgate Association, and her testimony before Parliament earlier that year, and as a result local women were eager to meet with her during this and later tours about forming their own local visiting associations. Combined with her media profile (discussed in the following chapter), this led to a dramatic increase in Fry's correspondence on prison matters. Accordingly, Fry decided to harness

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<sup>41</sup> Bennet, *Letter to the Common Council*, 10; letter from an unknown correspondent, n.d., "Female Convicts in Newgate," Temp. Box 9/18, fol. 8, LRSF; and Elizabeth Fry, testimony, 27 February, 1818, "Report on the Prisons within the City of London," 35 and 37. According to Fry, from these earnings the prisoners collectively subscribed £4/month for their upkeep, to which the Newgate Association contributed an additional £8/month.

the collective knowledge and power of these associations into a national organization devoted to prison reform and together with several members of the Newgate Association founded the British Ladies' Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners. The BLS acted as a clearinghouse for information about ladies visiting associations and as a lobbying organization, speaking on such issues as the construction of prisons;<sup>42</sup> the need for matrons in prisons and on board convict ships; the use of the treadmill; the drawbacks of the separate and the silent systems; the necessity for providing proper accommodations for convicts newly arrived in Australia; prison diet; and the need for classification, instruction, employment, and government prison inspectors.

As noted in the previous chapter, the BLS was formal in nature, which was atypical for female-dominated associations of the period: it had elected officers, a set of resolutions governing the activities of the society, and monthly (later quarterly) meetings to transact business. Local chapters were requested to send annual reports specifying the current number of association members; whether local officials supported their work; whether their prisons classified their prisoners and employed a matron to supervise the female prisoners; the type of employment provided for the prisoners and what was done with the finished product; information about the prison's school or other method of instruction

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<sup>42</sup> As early as her 1818 testimony before the House of Commons Fry had advocated for separate prisons for women and men. See Elizabeth Fry, testimony, 27 February, 1818, "Report on the Prisons within the City of London," 34–45. For draft notes for her testimony, see Elizabeth Fry, notes, Egerton MS 3673A, fol. 97. Fry also she corresponded with magistrates and government officials about the plans for the erection of several new prison facilities. These included the debtor's prison in Liverpool and the all-female prison in Dublin. Her advice on the latter was acknowledged by Viscount Morpeth, Chief Secretary for Ireland. See Elizabeth to Robert Benson, 8 November, 1820, SC 044 Fry MSS, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania (hereafter SC 044 Fry MSS); and George Howard, Viscount Morpeth, to Elizabeth Fry, 9 February, 1838, Add. MS 73529, fol. 85, the British Library, London (hereafter cited as BL). She also lobbied Lord John Russell, the home secretary, for a new (or at least radically changed) prison on the island of Jersey. Elizabeth Fry to Lord John Russell, n.d., MC 234/14, Norfolk Public Record Office, Norwich.

for illiterate prisoners and/or their children; the average number of female prisoners; the size of the prison's food allowance and its policy on clothing prisoners; the rate of recidivism; and any other pertinent information about their activities—particularly any positive measures of success from their work.<sup>43</sup>

The data from these reports and the BLS minute book was then used to write a report for the annual meeting to which government officials, members of the local chapters, and other interested individuals were invited. After the annual meeting the report, together with a summary of the audit conducted by the association's treasurers, was printed. One copy was sent to each subscriber, and two to each local chapter; some were set aside for future distribution to interested officials and potential supporters; and the remaining copies were left for sale at three booksellers, J. and A. Arch in Cornhill, Hatchard and Son in Piccadilly, and Seeley and Son, Fleet Street.<sup>44</sup>

Collecting data and "success" was necessary once the initial novelty of lady prison visiting wore off.<sup>45</sup> Pointing to program outcomes, testimonials, and

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<sup>43</sup> *Sketch*, 66; and memorandum, *Committee for the Improvement of Female Prisoners*, n.d., Port. 34, fol. 27, LRSF.

<sup>44</sup> The annual reports left at booksellers cost one shilling but generate little revenue. According to eight of the nine extant annual reports, the highest amount collected in one year was £10 and four shillings. The initial print-runs ordered varied, from a high of 2,000 in the 1820s to a low of 400 in the late 1830s. There are indications that additional copies were printed as needed; but the decline in the print-run size is likely due to the fact that after 1827 *Sketch of the Origin and Results of Ladies' Prison Associations* and Fry's *Observations on the Visiting, Superintending, and Government of Female Prisoners* were used as publicity materials. See BLS minute book, 30 June, 1823; and 18 June, 1838, D/S 58/3/1, Hackney Archives (hereafter Hackney D/S 58/3/1).

<sup>45</sup> At first the appearance of success alone was sufficient to gain support for their cause. Buxton states that the Lord Mayor, sheriffs, and aldermen visited Newgate a month after the workshops began and were astonished to find that where "riot, licentiousness and filth" had prevailed, there was now "order, sobriety, and comparative neatness in the chamber, the apparel, and the persons of the prisoners." Since Buxton was a prison reformer himself, as well as Fry's brother-in-law, his account must be read with a grain of salt. Thomas Fowell Buxton, *Inquiry*, 113. Nevertheless, he was not completely exaggerating the reception given to the work of the Newgate Association, as the public testimonial of the Grand Jury of the City of London attests. They note that the female prisoners' "reformed deportment, and cheerful acquiescence to [Fry and her associates'] wishes, demonstrated with a force no language can describe the affection these unfortunate women entertain for these intelligent, humane, and active females," John Gann, Foreman of the Grand



individual “success” stories was designed to demonstrate the effectiveness of their methodology and thus continue to generate support for their cause. Gurney’s *Notes on a Visit*, for example, included a letter from a former convict who saved £2 from her wages in order to make restitution for the theft that had landed her in Newgate; she wrote that having been unable to locate the man from whom she had stolen, she instead wished to donate the money to the Newgate Association.<sup>46</sup> The BLS’ success can be measured by the fact within seven years the number of local chapters more than tripled, from nineteen to fifty-nine.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to annual reports, the BLS released several publications about prison visiting in order to inform and motivate existing and potential supporters of their work. Two editions of Fry’s *Observations on the Visiting, Superintending, and Government of Female Prisoners* were printed in 1827; that same year, the BLS also published *Sketch of the Origin and Results of Ladies’ Prison Associations, with Hints for the Formation of Local Associations*, which

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Jury, “State of Newgate,” *The Times*, 21 January 1818: 3B. See also “Report from the Committee on the Prisons within the City of London and Borough of Southwark,” 5.

<sup>46</sup> Gurney, *Notes*, 160–62.

<sup>47</sup> This did not include foreign associations that reported on their progress to the BLS; in 1821 there were four affiliated associations, in St. Petersburg, Turin, Geneva, and Berne. *The First Report of the Committee of the British Society, for Promoting the Reformation of Female Prisoners* (London: William Belch, 1822), 15. There was a large jump in the number of Irish associations, from nine to thirty-six, as a result of Fry’s 1827 tour of Ireland. That same year, two additional continental associations were added, in Basle and Cleves. *The Seventh Annual Report of the Committee of the Ladies’ British Society* (London: Edmund Fry, 1828), 44. In 1840, the last year for which annual reports appear to be extant, there were thirty-eight committees or associations in Great Britain (after 1828 the Irish associations were no longer listed in the BLS annual reports), and twenty-four on the continent, in France, Holland, Belgium, Switzerland, Prussia, Hanover, and some of the smaller German states. *The Eighteenth Annual Report of the Committee of the British Ladies’ Society, for Promoting the Reformation of Female Prisoners* (London: Edmund Fry, 1840), 46. The figure also does not include prisons where women visited as individuals rather than as members of an association, either because there was insufficient interest in forming an association or where local officials objected to the presence of a ladies committee and the women worked around this resistance by visiting inmates as private citizens.

also had two editions.<sup>48</sup> Two further updated and much expanded versions of *Sketch* were published in 1839 and 1852.<sup>49</sup> 1827 was also the year Fry and Joseph John Gurney conducted another major prison tour, this time in Ireland. Later that year they jointly published a report on their visit. The society also tried to control as much as possible the information about the history and practices of prison visiting in publications that were not put out by the BLS.<sup>50</sup>

Though the BLS publications were written with a view to informing the public, encouraging more women to become prison visitors, and to advocate for specific reforms, in doing so they achieved an equally important goal, namely to raise funds for the society's activities. To that end, they included an explicit appeal for money as well as a list of subscribers and donors.<sup>51</sup> Their efforts were sufficiently successful that on several occasions they had enough extra funds to purchase exchequer bills.<sup>52</sup> As noted below, the BLS was actively involved in

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<sup>48</sup> Fry—and likely other BLS members—also personally distributed copies to individuals interested in their work. See, for example, Elizabeth Fry to William Fry, 21 April, 1828, Egerton MS 3674, fol.45; Elizabeth Fry to Katherine Fry, 30 September, 1828, Egerton MS 3674, fols. 57–58; and Elizabeth Fry to Richenda Reynolds, 25 August, 1832, Temp. MSS 61/9, LRSF, which contain requests that *Observation*, *Sketches* and/or annual prison reports be sent to her (in one case, 50 copies of the ladies' prison report); since her daughters state that she always traveled with a supply of tracts, presumably these requests were made because she had not brought sufficient copies with her. The decision to write a summary of the history of ladies' prison associations was prompted by a request by a judge for a sketch of their activities. The project commenced in July 1825, but was not sent to the printers until March 1827. BLS minute book, D/S 58/3/1, Hackney.

<sup>49</sup> A *Concise View of the Origin and Progress of the British Ladies' Association for Promoting the Reformation of Female Prisoners* (London: Hatchard and Son, 1839); and Wrench, *Visits to Female Prisoners*. The original edition of *Sketch* is sixty-six pages long; *Concise* is nearly double in length at 126 pages; and *Visits* is 324 pages.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth Fry to Adèle du Thon, 30 August, 1821, MC 511/1/2, Norfolk PRO on the publication of Adèle du Thon, *Re.Histoire de la secte des amis suivie d'une notice sur Madame Fry et la prison de Newgate, à Londres* (London: W. Phillips, 1821); and Elizabeth Fry to R. Ackermann, 1 January, 1824, SC 044 Fry MSS.

<sup>51</sup> It was common practice at the time for charities to publish lists of their donors (or lists of their most prominent supporters) in order to establish credibility as a reputable organization; the goal, of course, was to raise more funds. Many of the larger organizations also periodically published subscriber lists in newspapers; see, for example, the list inserted by the Society for the Suppression of Mendicity in *The Times*, 28 December, 1818: 2A.

<sup>52</sup> In the extant annual reports, the exchequer bills were purchased as follows: in 1823, £203; in 1824, £207; in 1829, £104; and in 1840, £600 ("invested at 5%"). *The Second Annual Report of*

provisioning the women aboard convict ships prior to their debarkation to the penal colonies in Australia, an expense that consumed the majority of the association's budget. The pressure for cash eased in 1827 when the government acceded to their request to reimburse the society, on a trial basis, some of the costs associated with providing supplies to the women on board convict ships. The experiment was a success, and the government gradually assumed more and more of the costs, eventually paying the expenses entirely.<sup>53</sup>

Though in her travels Fry met with thousands of individuals from all levels of society interested in ladies' prison associations, the actual number of women willing to commit the time to regular prison visits was never very great. At any given time, there were rarely more than a dozen women active in each prison; in some prisons, only a few were regular ladies visitors.<sup>54</sup> In Yarmouth, Sarah Martin was the sole prison visitor, faithfully carrying out religious and educational instruction to both male and female prisoners. In Britain, the members of the BLS and its chapters were composed primarily of middle-class

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*the Committee of the British Society, for Promoting the Reformation of Female Prisoners* (London: William Belch, 1823), 43; *The Third Annual Report of the Committee of the British Society, for the Reformation of Female Prisoners* (London: William Belch, 1823), 50; *The Eighth Report of the Ladies' British Society, for Promoting the Reformation of Female Prisoners* (London: Edmund Fry, 1829), 42; and *Eighteenth Annual Report*, 45.

<sup>53</sup> The initial grant from the Navy Board for this trial period was £43 17s; the total expense for five ships outfitted for the year ending April 1828 was just under £250. By the end of the year the commissioners of the Navy Board elected to pay the entire expense incurred by the BLS in outfitting all convicts ships sailing from both England and Ireland. By 1840, the last year for which there is an extant financial statement for the society, this contribution amounted to £641. According to BLS records, the Newgate Association outfitted four ships between May 1818 and June 1820; thereafter, the duties were taken over by the BLS convict ship sub-committee. Between 1821 and July 1827, the latter took care of an additional 15 ships (the number of convicts, and therefore the number of ships sent out each year had gradually increased over this period). For the entire period, 1,801 convicts were provided with the standard care package, at a total cost of £1,316 6s 2d. BLS minute book, 23 July, 1827; 31 March, 1828; and 1 December, 1828, D/S 58/3/1, Hackney; and *Eighteenth Annual Report*, 45.

<sup>54</sup> In 1840, for example, the BLS annual report reported the number of lady visitors who visited each London prison: thirteen at Newgate, nine at Millbank, nine at Cold Bath Fields, four at Whitecross Street prison, five at Tothill Fields, four at Giltspur Street, four at the Bridewell, and one at Clerkenwell. Several women visited more than one prison; in total there were thirty-four women who regularly visited at least one of the city's prisons. *Eighteenth Annual Report*, 9–10.

women (initially most of them Quakers), though not exclusively: Mary, Countess of Harcourt, and Sophia Vansittart, the sister of the chancellor of the exchequer were active members of the Newgate Association, and Lady Jane Pirie, whose husband was elected lord mayor of London in 1841, was a member of the BLS.<sup>55</sup> HRH Princess Mary of Gloucester, daughter of George III and the BLS' patroness, corresponded with Fry on prison matters and Fry periodically visited her to update her on the society's activities.<sup>56</sup> The BLS also had a number of noblewomen who served as vice-patronesses of the society; though most only lent their name and financial support to the society, several kept abreast of BLS activities, and a few occasionally visited prisons themselves.<sup>57</sup> Though plain Quakers advocated simplicity in dress and believed that all men were equal and thus eschewed using honorifics and titles, Fry had learned early in her work the importance of royal and noble patronage in promoting prison reform. When she expressed a desire in late 1841 to meet some government officials in order to promote the prison cause (new ministers had come into office between 1838 and 1841, a period during which she had significantly scaled back her domestic prison activism as a result of a long illness and several continental voyages), Lady Pirie invited Fry to a formal dinner at Mansion House and seated her in

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<sup>55</sup> Elizabeth Fry to Mary Lloyd, 5 February, 1842, Add. MS 73529, fols. 167–70, BL.

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth Fry to HRH Prince William Frederick, the Duke of Gloucester, 28 December, 1821, SC 044 Fry MSS; Elizabeth Fry to unknown recipient, 6 June, 1826, SC 044 Fry MSS; Fry-Harcourt correspondence, Fry Notabilities 45/3-7; 46/1-3; 47/1-4; 48/1-4, LSRF; and HRH Princess Mary, Duchess of Gloucester, Fry Notabilities 10/2-4, 11/1-7, 12/1-4, 13/1-2, 14/1-3, 15/1-5, 16/1-4, 17/1-4, 18/1-4, 19/1-7, and 20/1, LSRF. The third annual report states that the princess and her sister, HRH the Princess Augusta, visited a prison on "late journey." *Third Annual Report*, 23–24.

<sup>57</sup> Between 1821 and 1840, this included the Duchesses of Beaufort and Sutherland; the Marchionesses of Cholmondely, Wellesley, and Westminster; the Countesses of Bandon, Derby, Roseberry, Darnley, Grosvenor, Verulam; the Dowager Countess of Morton; the Viscountess Lorton; and Lady Byron, Lady Calthorpe, Lady Mackintosh, Lady Rolle, and Lady Louisa de Spaen. On the continent, members of the nobility and even royalty took a more active role in the affairs of their local association.

the place of honor between Prince Albert and Sir Robert Peel, thus offering Fry an extended opportunity to promote her views on prison reform.<sup>58</sup>

The personal relationships Fry developed with socially influential women and leading politicians enabled the BLS to have a greater significance than their relatively small number would suggest. Few philanthropic organizations at this time, however, were large; the SIPD, which scholars have given greater weight than the BLS as a catalyst for prison reform also had a relatively small core group of active participants. An important reason for the BLS' influence was Fry's continued public visibility and the skill with which she and her associates put this celebrity to work to promote their organization and the values—described below—that animated their work.

#### A Continuum of Care: The Ethics of Female Prison Advocacy

Many of the religious values driving Fry and her associates appear in *An Hour in His Majesty's Goal of Newgate, on Friday the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December, 1820*, a pamphlet published anonymously by a gentleman who had attended one of the “public days” held each Friday at Newgate prison for individuals interested in prison reform, during which they could observe one of Fry's Scripture readings and inspect the prison school and workshops (others, of course, came purely for entertainment). The author, styled as “M,” describes the scene: the visitors and

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<sup>58</sup> In her journal Fry reports that she did speak with a number of public officials; she discussed the all-female prison being built (something she had argued for since at least 1818) with Sir James Graham, the new home secretary; her concerns about restrictions on religious liberty on the Continent with Lord Aberdeen, the Foreign Secretary; and the condition of the penal colonies with Lord Stanley, the Colonial Secretary. During dinner, she spoke for nearly two hours with Prince Albert and Sir Robert Peel on a variety of subjects, from raising children to the importance of living a Christian life, the state of Europe, and of course prison reforms. Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 18 January, 1842, LRSF. Whether her lobbying was in fact effective, however, is unclear.

ladies entered the room and took their seats facing the bleacher-like benches for the prisoners. A bell was rung the seventy-odd prisoners arrived

in a very orderly manner, quietly and respectfully; and took their places with great decorum. All were tidily dressed in a close and neat manner, their caps clean. ... When all the prisoners were assembled, their appearance rendered some effort requisite to recollect that these were *convicts*. ... The eyes of the prisoners were fixed on Mrs. Fry. ... The silence was at length broken by that mild voice which the prisoners had often heard.”<sup>59</sup>

The Bible passage Fry chose for that day was Romans chapters 12 and 13, which instruct Christians not to conform to worldly desires; that people do not have the same role in life, and therefore one should not look to be more than what God ordained; to reject evil, and love others in the same measure as you love yourself; that when evil is done to you, not to repay the action, but do what society considers right; and to submit to political authority. It specifically prohibits murder, theft, sexual immorality and debauchery, drunkenness, and debt. Fry then preached at length about the relevance of these passages to the prisoners if they persisted on their present course, namely that they faced judgment not just on earth, but also in heaven for their crimes (thus conflating crime with sin), but emphasized that no matter how far they had fallen in the eyes of man, God would still extend them mercy. To emphasize the importance of amending their lives at once, Sheriff Williams read a message of repentance and an exhortation to follow her example from a fellow prisoner, Sarah Price, who been executed several days earlier, in which she exhorted the inmates to repent.

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<sup>59</sup> Anonymous, *An Hour in His Majesty's Gaol of Newgate, on Friday the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December, 1820*, 3rd ed. (Ipswich: S. Piper, n.d.), 7–8. The publication is commonly attributed to Sir James Williams.

Romans 12 and 13 thus provided a divine justification for those who wished to emphasize hierarchy, good behavior, and law and order. It is this sort of discipline that scholars have pointed to as evidence that prisons and other institutions were reconceptualized in order to serve the needs of capitalism and a more centralized government. But the passages also impose a reciprocal obligation on non-offenders, whether victims or not, and this was equally important to the ethic that motivated female prison reformers. The apostle Paul states that though everybody has a different function “each member belongs to all the others.”<sup>60</sup> Loving one another, according to Paul, should be expressed by living in harmony and associating with individuals who are of low position. Even those who transgressed against human laws fall within this category, for according to biblical doctrine, all men and women, whether deserving and undeserving, are “*convicts* under the *divine* law.”<sup>61</sup> Anthony Highmore, Esq. echoes this sentiment in a book about charities in and around London, writing that “there can be no charity among any people unless there is a general love flowing throughout their common intercourse.” For charity, he states, should be “unlimited to persons or relatives, or circumstances or station, but exercised alike to all *as one great family in which all are equally allied*.”<sup>62</sup> It is also significant that Fry and her associates always insisted that no services should be provided without the “deliberate and voluntary” consent of the prisoners: if the obligation was reciprocal, then the consent also had to be mutual.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Romans 12:4. Other favorite readings of Fry were Psalms 25 and 51; Luke 15, Ephesians 4, and Hebrews 12.

<sup>61</sup> *An Hour in Newgate*, 18.

<sup>62</sup> Highmore, *Philanthropia Metropolitana*, xiii and xxiii.

<sup>63</sup> Fry, *Observations*, 17.

“M” goes on to reflect that since all men are susceptible to temptation, no one should think of themselves more highly than those who had committed a crime. “The enquiry [could not] be repressed,” he concluded, “had *I* been thus tempted and artfully entangled, should *I* have escaped more than these?”<sup>64</sup> Though Fry and her associates believed that humans are inherently sinful, they were not blind to the environmental causes of crime; both of these views underpinned their sense of obligation to those who from material want or lack of religious training committed crimes. In *Notes on a Visit*, for example, Fry and her brother pointed to industrialism and urbanization as contributing to the large number of prisoners in Aberdeen compared to Dundee in 1818. In Aberdeen, where a few cotton factories employed about 5,000 men and women, the jail held sixty inmates on the day Fry and Gurney inspected it. In contrast, Gurney observed, “the manufacturing poor at Dundee work separately, each in his own cottage,” and the Dundee jail was empty.<sup>65</sup> Wrench summarized this view in *Visits to Female Prisoner at Home and Abroad* as follows: “Is it then for us then, liable as we are to fall under the same temptations, but hedged round by the Providence of circumstances, so to order our system of punishment, that, instead of correction, it almost necessarily involves destruction to the criminal?”<sup>66</sup>

Fry’s choice of the twelfth chapter of Romans is also interesting because it provides a religious justification for the ladies’ activities. Romans 12:4–8 states that “just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ ... [we] have different

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<sup>64</sup> *An Hour in Newgate*, 17–18.

<sup>65</sup> Gurney, *Notes on a Visit*, 34.

<sup>66</sup> Wrench, *Visits to Female Prisoners*, 202–203.



gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently, if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully."<sup>67</sup> The women of the BLS and its chapters took this message to preach, serve, teach, encourage, give generously, lead, and show mercy literally. Fry was not a feminist in the sense that she did not seek to lift some of the legal disabilities women suffered prior to the second half of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, nor did she conceive of women voting or holding office. She was more interested in practical action than in delineating a feminist agenda; nevertheless, on the few occasions where she did speak or write publicly about the role and duties of women, she stressed that women should not be limited to being a wife, mother, and mistress.<sup>68</sup>

The most explicit account of Fry's views on the role of women in public affairs appears in her 1827 tract, *Observations on the Visiting, Superintending, and Governing of Female Prisoners*. In the introduction she states that it is a "dangerous error" to assume that women should only act as mothers, wives, and siblings. Though she concedes the importance of domestic duties, she used gendered discourse to argue for female participation in the public sphere. The characteristics so closely associated with femininity—"their gentleness, their natural sympathy with the afflicted, their quickness of discernment, their

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<sup>67</sup> The female prison visitors gave precedence to this Pauline precept over his belief that "a woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent." 1 Timothy 2:11-12.

<sup>68</sup> In a letter to her newly married daughter, Richenda, Fry writes that a wife must submit to her husband, but that "the Lord is served first [and] the husband next." Elizabeth Fry to Richenda Reynolds, "Hints for a Wife," n.d., Temp MSS 61/9, LRSF.

openness to religious impressions”—made them, Fry argued, ideally suited to perform activities that promoted the welfare of society as a whole. Furthermore, not only did women have the skills necessary to help the individuals in prisons, lunatic asylums, workhouses, but they were also necessary because they acted as “a most important check [against] a variety of abuses, which are far too apt to creep into the management of these establishments.”<sup>69</sup> Finally, Fry invoked the notion that women share a bond based on their sisterhood. This bond, she argued, meant that lady visitors would develop deeper relationships with the women under their care than men were able to, and this would make the moral reformation of their charges more likely. Even the chaplain—valuable as his services were—was limited by his gender. “There is,” Fry wrote, “a part of the moral and religious instruction of female prisoners, which cannot be communicated to them so well, so safely, or so efficaciously, as by *the ladies who visit the prison*. The instruction to which I allude is all of a private nature.”<sup>70</sup> Women were not the only ones who made this argument; Gurney wrote that “no persons are so well calculated to superintend depraved women, as the virtuous of their own sex.” The best plan, Gurney argued, was to place “our female criminals under the government and protection of those, who accurately understand their wants, and know how to care for them, as it respects both the body and the mind.”<sup>71</sup> In 1824 a reader of *The Freethinking Christian Quarterly Review* defended Fry and her associates against charges

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<sup>69</sup> Fry, *Observations*, 5.

<sup>70</sup> Fry, *Observations*, 43 (emphasis is hers).

<sup>71</sup> Gurney, *Notes on a Visit*, 122.

that they were carrying out work that only men should perform by arguing that the “secret history” of women would only be shared with other women.<sup>72</sup>

Robert Alan Cooper argues that Fry had only one innovative idea—the introduction of female matrons to superintend female inmates—but a closer examination of the BLS’ range of activities show that they were at the forefront of new rehabilitative approaches to criminal justice as a whole, and not just within prisons themselves.<sup>73</sup> The BLS conceived a broad continuum of care for potential, current, and former criminals that also encompassed convict ships, colonial factories, refuges for discharged prisoners. During the first year of its operation the Newgate Association confined its efforts to the female prisoners and their children in Newgate, however as they developed relationships with the inmates they became more intimately aware of the prisoners’ life-histories and recognized that in order to be more effective they needed to expand their efforts. In 1818, therefore, they began to visit the women aboard convict ships. Before Millbank prison was changed to a depository for women awaiting transportation, convicts were sent directly to the ships from prisons across Great Britain (those from Ireland were sent to ships departing from Cork). Convicts could spend several weeks on board while waiting for the ship to fill up and for favorable winds before departing to Australia. As noted earlier, until 1828 the Newgate Association (1818–21) and then the BLS (1821–28) paid all or most of the cost required to outfit each woman with basic supplies and the means to make patchwork quilts to occupy their time on the long voyage (the sale of which helped maintain the women on their arrival in the colonies). After

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<sup>72</sup> “Defence of Mrs. Fry,” *The Freethinking Christian Quarterly Review* 2 (1825): 158.

<sup>73</sup> Robert Alan Cooper, “Jeremy Bentham, Elizabeth Fry, and English Prison Reform,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 42 (October–December, 1981): 675–90.

1828 the government assumed the expense but entrusted the BLS to purchase and distribute the supplies.<sup>74</sup> The ladies also classified the convicts, appointed monitors and school-mistresses, and placed a supply of books and tracts for their reading in the hands of the surgeon superintendant, the government's sole representative on board. He also took charge of small rewards which were distributed to those monitors and school-mistresses who diligently performed their duties once they arrived in the convict colony.

The BLS attempted to extend their influence beyond convict ships to the treatment of convicts upon arrival in the colonies, but their efforts were frustrated by distance and the fact that there were few "respectable" women who could superintend the large number of women in the factories in which they were held while awaiting assignment. Furthermore, most of the available assignments were in the businesses and homes of former convicts who, on the whole, the BLS did not believe were suitable masters or mistresses. The challenges the BLS faced are evident in the example of Lady Jane Franklin, wife of Sir John Franklin, the Lieutenant Governor of Tasmania (1836–1843). Before Franklin's departure Fry asked Lady Jane to inform her of the conditions at the local factory; Caroline Frazer, another BLS committee member, asked that Franklin inform her of how women Frazer had superintended prior to their transportation fared. Nearly two years after her arrival in Tasmania, Franklin confided to her sister that she had yet to write either Fry or Frazer. Her excuse

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<sup>74</sup> Each convict was supplied with the following: "one Bible; one hessian apron; one black stuff ditto; one black cotton cap; one large hessian bag (to keep her clothes in); one small ditto containing one piece of tape, one oz. of pins, one hundred needles, four balls of white sewing cotton, one ditto black, one ditto blue, one ditto red, two balls of black worsted half an oz. each, twenty-four hanks of colored thread, one of cloth with 8 darning needles, one small bodkin fastened on it; two stay laces, one thimble, one pair of scissors [sic], one pair of spectacles, when required, two lbs. of patch-work pieces, one comb, and one small ditto." Each "mess" of eight women also received a knife, fork, and ball of string. Fry, *Observations*, 66.

for failing to write Fry was that the “system of female transportation, —and particularly of female assignment in service,—so faulty and vicious, that to attempt to deal with the women ... seems a waste [of] time and labour.”<sup>75</sup>

It was not until August 1841, four and a half years after arriving in Tasmania, that Franklin finally wrote a lengthy letter to Fry about her observations of the treatment of female convicts. She wrote that the assignment system subjected convicts to temptations of licentiousness and vice because most of them worked for former convicts. While on assignment, they were not subject to punishment, and while in the factory (prior to or between assignments) they were given ample food, had no gainful employment, and were not subject to any discipline. As a result, Franklin argued, “it has no pretension to be a place of reformatory discipline—it seldom fails to turn out the women worse than it finds them.”<sup>76</sup> Moreover, the factory had only a few individual cells, so that the inmates mixed indiscriminately, and maintaining the silent system was impossible because there were only five prison officials to superintend over 400 women. Classification, religious instruction, and employment were therefore, in Franklin’s view, impractical.

Nearly two months later Franklin’s assessment of the hopelessness of extending the BLS’s sphere of influence to Tasmanian convicts in order to combat the evils of the existing system was checked by the formation of the Tasmanian Ladies Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners, for which she agreed to act as patroness. A committee of ten women agreed to visit the

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<sup>75</sup> Lady Jane Franklin to Mary Simpkinson, 4 October, 1838, in George Mackaness, *Some Private Correspondence of Sir John and Lady Jane Franklin*, part 1 (Sydney: D. S. Ford, 1947), 37–38. Franklin had not written to Frazer because she had been unable to obtain information on Frazer’s protégés.

<sup>76</sup> Lady Jane Franklin to Elizabeth Fry, 3 August, 1841, in George Mackaness, *Some Private Correspondence of Sir John and Lady Jane Franklin*, part 2 (Sydney: D. S. Ford, 1947), 28.

factories, assist government instructors, and offer suggestions to the government on how to improve “both of the interior discipline of the Factories, and of the regulations under which the Convicts are assigned out for Service.”<sup>77</sup> Explicitly modeled on the BLS, with whom they pledged to correspond, the TLS was spurred to action by the publication of *The Prisoners of Australia*, which described the deplorable condition of the convicts confined in the factory at Paramatta.<sup>78</sup> Their stated goal was “the salvation of Souls.”<sup>79</sup> Less than a month later, however, the new society nearly foundered as a result of the publication of a newspaper article attacking the committee; this temporarily caused four of the ladies to withdraw their support for fear of becoming “objects of public notice or animadversion.”<sup>80</sup> Ironically, it was the personal intervention of Franklin that rescued the fledgling association, who managed to persuade the leader of the defecting faction that the paper in question was a vile and unprofessional paper.<sup>81</sup>

In response to Franklin’s letter, Fry forwarded a copy of the “most important parts” of Franklin’s assessment of the problems of the female convict system in Tasmania to Lord Stanley, the Colonial Secretary, together with comments she had received from Kezie Elizabeth Hayter, the TLS’s secretary. Fry and Lady Jane Pirie subsequently met with Lord Stanley to discuss the

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<sup>77</sup> Committee members to Lady Jane Franklin, September 1841, *Society in Aid of the Measures of Government for the Religious and General Instruction of the Female Convicts of Van Diemens Land*, in Mackaness, *Franklin Correspondence*, 2:30–31. See also memorandum, Lady Jane Franklin, 27 September, 1841, in idem, 2:33–34.

<sup>78</sup> Charlotte Anley, *The Prisoners of Australia: A Narrative* (London: Hatchard and Son, 1841).

<sup>79</sup> Committee members to Lady Jane Franklin, in Mackaness, *Franklin Correspondence*, 2:30.

<sup>80</sup> Lady Jane Franklin to Mary Simpkinson, 12 October, 1841, in Mackaness, *Franklin Correspondence*, 2:34.

<sup>81</sup> Lady Jane Franklin to Mary Simpkinson, 13 October, 1841, in Mackaness, *Franklin Correspondence*, 2:38.

problems.<sup>82</sup> Fry recommended that the factory be run more as a house of correction or house of refuge, and suggested that the government refrain from building a new prison until there was a greater consensus on the “best mode of buildings and discipline.” In the interim, she forwarded a list of regulations previously used at the prison at Paramatta in New South Wales.<sup>83</sup>

In 1822 the BLS expanded its continuum of care by opening an asylum for recently discharged prisoners in Westminster. Administered by Caroline Neave, a member of the BLS steering committee, the Westminster Asylum was open to women under the age of 35 who had no friends or family to help them transition back into society after their release. Its initial capacity was for nine residents; over the years this capacity grew to twenty-two, until a new house was obtained in 1836 to accommodate fifty residents.<sup>84</sup> During their two-year term of residence, the women were taught to do “needlework, washing and getting up linen, baking and cooking for the establishment, and every kind of household work.” In the evening they received religious instruction and, if necessary, were taught to read and write. Residents were subsequently placed in service or restored to family and friends. This refuge later came under the patronage of Queen Victoria, and was renamed the Royal Female Philanthropic Society; between 1822 and 1852 the asylum served 813 discharged prisoners.<sup>85</sup> The Westminster Asylum took in the “most hopeful” cases—i.e. those the ladies

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<sup>82</sup> *The Times*, 31 March, 1842: 5E.

<sup>83</sup> Elizabeth Fry to Lady Jane Franklin, 29 August, 1842 in Mackaness, *Franklin Correspondence* 2:51-52.

<sup>84</sup> *Second Annual Report*, 31.

<sup>85</sup> Wrench, *Visits to Female Prisoners*, 116-21. Residents who were found to be unsuitable (“after a decent trial”) were referred to other refuges for the destitute.

judged most amenable to reform.<sup>86</sup> The emphasis on education and marketable working skills was not just because such skills would help discharged inmates maintain themselves (and thus not be a burden to the tax-payer) but because in doing so they would be more inclined to live according to the moral values the ladies promoted.

In 1825 the BLS expanded further by opening another refuge, this time for the girls between the ages of seven and thirteen who either had committed, or were predisposed to commit, a crime. Opened after consultations with Sir Robert Peel, the “House of Discipline and School of Reform for Viciously Disposed and Neglected Female Children” taught its charges how to spell, read, and needle-work, as well as general housework skills.<sup>87</sup> Between 1825 and 1832 the refuge for girls had 103 residents, all but two of whom were thieves. According to Neave, to the committee’s knowledge only two girls had been subsequently committed to jail, though another four had “returned to evil courses.”<sup>88</sup> Both the Westminster Asylum and the House of Discipline were

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<sup>86</sup> Women convicted of more serious offenses were recommended to the Refuge for the Destitute, which was unaffiliated with the BLS. In her testimony before the 1832 House committee on secondary punishments Caroline Neave stated that many of the residents were found guilty of “trifling offenses, such as pawning a garment, or taking two or three shillings.” During their residence the women were closely supervised by three matrons and the visiting ladies. When asked whether there was “apprehension on the part of any body going there” Neave claimed that the women considered the refuge “their great boon; they are cast out friendless and destitute.” Caroline Neave, testimony, 23 March, 1832, House of Commons, “Report from the Select Committee on Secondary Punishments; Together with the Minutes of Evidence,” *Sessional Papers, 1831-1832*, 124 (repr., *British Parliamentary Papers: Report from Select Committees on Financing Convict Establishments Erecting Penitentiary Houses and other Matters Relating to Transportation and Secondary Punishments: Crime and Punishment, Transportations*, vol. 1 (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1969).

<sup>87</sup> As noted in chapter two, in the 1810s prison reform activists were alarmed by a perceived increase in juvenile delinquency, and this eventually led to the formation of the SIPD. No institution specifically for underage female criminals existed at the time; the SIPD did operate a similar refuge for young boys. *Proposal for Instituting a House of Discipline, and School of Reform, for Viciously Disposed, and Neglected, Female Children*, January 1825, Add. MSS 40373, fols. 295–296, BL; Elizabeth Fry to Sir Robert Peel, 23 February, 1825, Add. MSS 40373, fol. 293; and Sir Robert Peel to Elizabeth Fry, 24 February, 1825, Add. MSS 40373, fols. 297–298. Peel subscribed £20 from his private funds for the new venture. See also *Sketch*, 59–64.

<sup>88</sup> Caroline Neave, testimony, 23 March, 1832, “Minutes before the Select Committee,” 123.



under the superintendence of a formally constituted subcommittee of the BLS, and were governed by a set of rules. The BLS provided grants to cover unfunded operating costs, as contributions raised by members of the committee specifically for the asylum did not fully cover their expenses.<sup>89</sup> The BLS also established a patronage society in 1839 that assisted prisoners immediately upon their discharge to reunite with their families or obtain employment. Before their release from prison, each prisoner was assigned a patroness who ascertained their “character and disposition” in order to make the necessary arrangements; the patroness also acted as a mentor.<sup>90</sup> The Elizabeth Fry Refuge, a temporary asylum that bridged the gap between prison and assignment to a permanent asylum, opened in 1849.<sup>91</sup> In addition to the London refuges, asylums for discharged prisoners or young children were opened by local associations in Edinburgh, Perth, Cork, Dublin, Derby, and Liverpool.

The women engaged in prison visiting were well aware that, despite their best efforts, reforming prisoners was not an easy task, and that instances of lapsed reform or refusal to change behavior would by far outweigh instances of reform. Once the initial acclaim excited by the novelty of their work had worn off, they increasingly acknowledged in both private correspondence and public

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<sup>89</sup> The twelve members of committee for the house of discipline were Mrs. B. Shaw, Ann Steinkopff, Elizabeth Fry, Mrs. Foster, Dorcas Coventry, Mrs. R. Bevington, Mrs. J. Hagen, Mrs. W. Christy, Elizabeth Dudley, Miss Elizabeth Fry, Martha Savory, and Mary Dudley. *Proposal for Instituting a House of Discipline*, January 1825, Add. MSS 40373, fols. 295–96, BL. The House of Discipline was supervised by a committee of eight. *Sketch*, 63.

<sup>90</sup> Wrench, *Visits to Female Prisoners*, 100–110.

<sup>91</sup> In the two years between the opening of the Elizabeth Fry Refuge and the publication of *Visits*, this refuge served 194 women; through this service, thirty-two were returned to friends, seven assisted in emigrating, twenty-four placed in service, seventy-three transferred to other refuges, ten returned to their parishes, six sent to hospital, one enabled to become a sick nurse, and seventeen were discharged for misconduct or left on their own; the remaining twenty-four were still resident. Wrench, *Visits to Female Prisoners*, 130–34.

reports that in many cases their labor was rejected or resulted in only temporary change.<sup>92</sup> As discouraging as this was, their repeated refrain was that they undertook their work out of a sense of faith and dependence not on their own power to effect change, but upon God's. Furthermore, they saw it as a spiritual duty, one where patience and faith was their own reward. Since faith might be weak, they repeatedly pointed to the parable of the single seed in John 12:24–26, which states that a seed on its own brings nothing, but that once sown it produces many new seeds. According to this parable, God honors his faithful servants, even if they do not see the seeds they sow bear fruit.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, though the discouragements were many, the ladies took heart from the expressions of gratitude they received. One inmate, for example, desired to subscribe a penny a week to a missionary society as thanks for the help she received in prison; others wrote thank you letters from Australia.<sup>94</sup>

To be sure, the effectiveness of reforms proposed by the BLS depended in large part on the conditions within each prison. Some prisons did not have room to classify the prisoners into different groups; in others, inmates were imprisoned for such short periods that it was impractical to set up workshops. In such cases scholastic or spiritual instruction had little impact. And as the practice of separate confinement grew, the work became more labor-intensive since instruction had to be conducted one-on-one rather than in groups. Much

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<sup>92</sup> Fry wrote, for example, to the outgoing sheriff of London that she desired that though changes might not have been as immediately apparent as he might have wished, that she hoped he would not allow this to discourage him in the future. Elizabeth Fry to John Garrett, Esq., 5 November, 1822, SC 044 Fry MSS.

<sup>93</sup> See, for example, *Seventh Annual Report*, 11.

<sup>94</sup> *First Annual Report*, 7; *Second Annual Report*, 20–21; and Wrench, *Visits to Female Prisoners*. It was not uncommon for the BLS to receive multiple letters from women on the same ship; and some of those transported kept them informed of major events in their lives years after leaving the United Kingdom.

also depended on the level of willingness on the part of local officials to support the ladies' activities. In some places ladies associations were refused sanction by the authorities; however, in several cases the women circumvented this by visiting prisoners as private individuals rather than representatives of a formal association.<sup>95</sup>

Though the BLS emphasized cooperating with local officials, and were gratified when Parliament legislated measures they had advocated, this did not inhibit them from asking individual officials to circumvent legislation where they believed their system to be superior. After the 1823 Goal Act, which stipulated the provision of regular religious instruction, went into effect and the chaplain of Newgate proposed that the women should attend the chapel daily, the Newgate Association appealed to the aldermen for permission to alter this plan. Though the "daily attendance of the women at the Chapel," they wrote

[is] according to the letter of the Act of Parliament\_ We take the liberty of stating that we believe it would be fully complying with its meaning & spirit if the method were adopted of such prayers as the Chaplain may point out, being read to the women by the matron, before they are locked up of an evening; as some of the Association read portions of the Holy Scriptures every morning on the week days, and this reading has we believe been of peculiar advantage to the poor Female prisoners under our care\_ ... whereas we think experience has shewn that the daily attendance at Chapel, lessens in the minds of the prisoners the importance and weight of public worship, & has too frequently appeared rather to dissipate than really edify them.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> The third annual report of the BLS asserts (no doubt with more confidence than was warranted) that in two unnamed localities they believed the refusal was based on a "misunderstanding on the part of the magistrates respecting the news of these Associations, and the plans usually adopted by them, which your Committee flatter themselves would not incur their disapprobation, were they made more fully acquainted with them, and judicious visitors permitted a few months' trial." *Third Annual Report*, 13. In 1828, a request to establish a committee at the Horsemonger Lane Gaol was refused by a majority of the members of the quarter sessions, even though it had been one of its members who had asked the women to make the appeal; that same year, the Surrey Refuge Association was dissolved because officials believed that the recent appointment of a chaplain had made their services redundant. BLS minute book, 30 June, 1828, D/S 58/3/1, Hackney.

<sup>96</sup> Elizabeth Fry, on behalf of the Ladies Committee, to the Alderman of the Goal Committee, care of the chaplain of Newgate, 9 January, 1824, SC 044 Fry MSS. Though no record survives as to whether the committee's appeal was successful or not, another appeal nearly two decades was: in

One of the earliest articles on Fry and the BLS contends that the ladies associations had little authority and were considered by prison and government officials to be a nuisance as early as the end of the 1820s, and certainly after the appointment of prison inspectors in 1835.<sup>97</sup> As noted earlier, some local officials resisted or rejected the formation of ladies associations. However, while the BLS minute book confirms that a number of associations could not be formed as had been hoped, or were temporarily suspended or permanently closed, this was not solely, or even predominantly, because of official disapproval or a more pervasive acceptance of separate sphere ideology. In most cases, associations discontinued their activities because there were not enough women to carry them out—illness, lengthy periods away from home for health reasons or travel, and lack of interest were the most common reasons given. Associations also became irrelevant in smaller communities whenever there were few or no committals, or those committed remained in prison less than a week before they were sent to larger prisons elsewhere. The 1835 annual report notes that the majority of local associations had in fact been “more active than during any former Year; giving the Committee Reason to conclude that the Interest of the Prison Cause is increasing.”<sup>98</sup> That ladies associations were not

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response to Fry’s request that the government send two matrons to superintend the women on the next convict ship, Sir James Graham wrote her that “altho’ perhaps according to the strict letter of the Parliamentary Vote [I] may not be justified in paying the passage money for two matrons in a Female Convict Ship out of the Public Purse, yet I am willing to stretch a point in form of an Experiment, wh I think worthy of trial, & wh comes to me recommended by your high authority.” Sir James R. G. Graham to Elizabeth Fry, 18 April, 1842, Add. MS 79727, BL.

<sup>97</sup> U. R. Q. Henriques, “The Rise and Decline of the Separate System of Prison Discipline,” *Past & Present* 54 (February 1972): 61-93.

<sup>98</sup> *The Fourteenth Annual Report of the Committee of the Ladies British Society for Promoting the Reformation of Female Prisoners*, reprinted in House of Lords, “Report from the Select Committee on the State of Gaols, &c.,” in *Sessional Papers, 1835* (repr. *British Parliamentary Papers: Report from the Select Committee on Gaols and Other Places of Confinement and to Whom Several Reports Returns and Petitions were Referred with Minutes of Evidence, Crime and Punishment: Prisons*, vol. 3 (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1969), 551.

marginal can be seen by the following anecdote from the same year: when it was decided that Millbank would not be a penitentiary but rather a central facility in which all female prisoners sentenced to transportation were confined prior to boarding a convict ship, Fry wrote to Lord John Russell, then the home secretary, informing him that this would upset their system of promoting discipline and order among the women. She asked, therefore, that he instruct officials to allow a ladies' association to be formed at Millbank, so that the work previously carried out in prisons throughout the kingdoms could be continued in this new facility. Russell made the necessary arrangements.<sup>99</sup>

Fry and her associates always claimed that their humanitarian activities were a product of their religious calling, and evangelicalism's emphasis on the redemption and reformation of the individual, combined with the belief that all humans are equal in the sight of God, certainly informed their prison work. Reforming criminals was not just about taking each inmate "from a condition of depravity and wretchedness, and restor[ing her] to happiness, as a useful and respectable member of the community."<sup>100</sup> While the individual prisoner certainly benefitted from the ladies' interventions, but the women of the BLS were also motivated by the benefits accrued to society as a whole. As Fry noted at the conclusion of *Observations*, "let our prison discipline be severe in proportion to the enormity of the crimes of those on whom it is exercised; and

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<sup>99</sup> Fry also asked Russell for some say in the hiring process of female officers for Millbank; though it is not clear whether this request was granted, her request was not unusual as she had been consulted in the hiring of matrons and other officers (including male officers) at a variety of prisons, including Dublin and the Factory at Parramatta, New South Wales. Elizabeth Fry to Lord John Russell, November 1836, , SC 044 Fry MSS; Elizabeth Fry to unknown recipient, 24 January, 1837, SC 044 Fry MSS; Elizabeth Fry to Lord John Russell, n.d., MC 234/14, Norfolk PRO; Elizabeth Fry to Thomas Fowell Buxton, 8 December, 1836, Egerton MS 3674, fol. 212; and BLS minute book, 12 May, 1837, D/S 58/3/1, Hackney.

<sup>100</sup> Fry, *Observations*, 4.

let its strictness be such as to deter others from a similar course of iniquity ... let us ever aim at the diminution of crime, through the just and happy medium of the reformation of criminals.”<sup>101</sup>

Fry’s *Observations* is, in fact, more than a treatise on the necessity of redeeming depraved prisoners by turning them into respectable, morally righteous women. Fry is interested in turning these women into useful members of society, and *Observations* is suffused with references that make clear that she had internalized the values prized by capitalists. Fry writes that prisoners must learn not just habits of morality, but also those of industry.<sup>102</sup> These habits include order, method, and regularity, the “economical arrangement of time, and ... a suitable division of labor.”<sup>103</sup> Scholars, including E. P. Thompson, have already demonstrated that the transition from a household-based economy to an industrial economy required a shift in how the lower orders worked. Before, many artisans labored only until they had met their weekly needs, which meant that they did not keep a regular schedule; they also completed an entire project, rather than performing a repetitive, specialized task. In the new economy, employers needed a workforce that would show up when expected, and work the expected number of hours; furthermore, specialization or piece-work was a more economical arrangement than having one employee complete a task from beginning to end. The traits described above thus reflect the behavior expected by employers in the new industrializing economy. Fry’s recommendation that ladies demonstrate confidence in the prisoners by entrusting them “with the care of various articles belonging to the

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<sup>101</sup> Fry, *Observations*, 79.

<sup>102</sup> Fry, *Observations*, 65.

<sup>103</sup> Fry, *Observations*, 6.

committee”<sup>104</sup> can also be seen as a mark of class interest in a society where employers desire workers who would not abscond with supplies or unfinished goods.

Fry also recommended the value of classifying and promoting inmates based on merit. She advocated that prisoners should be divided into four classes, based on character and criminality, each marked by differences in the quality of their clothing and the amount of labor they performed. Prisoners were not locked in their categories, however; as they demonstrated improved conduct, the ladies could reward them by promoting them into a higher class, with its attendant rewards.<sup>105</sup> Fry notes that another effective way to encourage prisoners to reform their conduct is by letting them experience “the sweets of industry.”<sup>106</sup> While most of the money they received was to be set aside for their release, they did have access to some of it, which they could spend on non-essential food items like tea and sugar. In Newgate, the ladies even established a shop where the women could buy such items “at a fair market price.”<sup>107</sup> These measures—classification, promotion, and consumption—are values associated with industrialization. Yet as this chapter has argued, subconscious strategies based on class position were balanced by a belief that at its root, mankind was one in its status before God, and that it was their duty to love one another as they would love themselves.

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<sup>104</sup> Fry, *Observations*, 22.

<sup>105</sup> Fry, *Observations*, 34–36.

<sup>106</sup> Fry, *Observations*, 49.

<sup>107</sup> Fry, *Observations*, 58–59.

## CHAPTER 4

### **THE BENEVOLENT MRS. FRY: CELEBRITY AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE**

In 2002, the British Exchequer issued a new version of the five-pound note; on the back is a portrait of Elizabeth Fry and detail from a posthumous painting of her reading to inmates at Newgate prison to honor her work as a prison reformer and philanthropist.<sup>1</sup> Fry's image is now more widely circulated than at any point in the past, yet many Britons either do not know who she was or only vaguely remember learning about her in school; shortly after the note debuted, the BBC wrote that "though [Fry was] undoubtedly a member of the great and good, is she a slightly obscure choice for this rare honour? ... Most previous selections have tended to be household names."<sup>2</sup> This is in stark contrast to the celebrity she had throughout the British Isles during the last three decades of her life, when she was one of the most famous women of her time.

Fry's celebrity is noteworthy because it was unusual for a woman in the early nineteenth century to receive mostly positive attention for her activities in the political realm;<sup>3</sup> examining her celebrity thus provides another lens through

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<sup>1</sup> The portrait is a reproduction of an engraving by J.J. Hinchcliff of a portrait by Mary Martha Pearson; the Newgate scene is from a painting by Jerry Barrett (c. 1860).

<sup>2</sup> "The Five Pound Question: Who is Elizabeth Fry?," *BBC*, May 21, 2002, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/1998863.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/1998863.stm) (accessed November 1, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Examples of prominent women who were denigrated for their public activities in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries include the duchess of Devonshire, who was widely satirized for the canvassing she conducted on behalf of Charles James Fox in the 1784 Westminster election; Mary Wollstonecraft, whose character was attacked after her death when her sexual history was made public; Hannah More, whose tracts and Sunday School efforts were denigrated by male literati; and Catherine Macaulay, whose intelligence and political beliefs were publicly mocked by Samuel Johnson and whose second marriage to a much younger man made her the object of ridicule. Queen Caroline, the estranged wife of George IV, was used as a symbol of political opposition to the unpopular king, an image she herself promoted for her own purposes. For the duchess of Devonshire, Wollstonecraft, More, and Queen Caroline, see Anna



which to explore the extent to which religion could enable middle-class women in the first half of the nineteenth century to be active in the public sphere while also exposing the personal and public tensions that such actions provoked. The first part of this chapter explores the making of Fry's celebrity, situating it within the historical context of fame in the first half of the nineteenth century. The second part examines how Fry's celebrity, while instrumental in making her activism possible, was an unstable commodity, focusing on how society, her family, her co-religionists, and indeed Fry herself responded to her celebrity and the impact these challenges had on her ministry and prison reform activism.

### Celebrity in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain

Fry's celebrity (and of course the celebrity of others in her time), as well as the cult of celebrity, had been made possible by three developments in the eighteenth century: first, a dramatic increase in both the size of the reading public and in the availability of and access to reading materials (notably the newspaper, periodicals, and pamphlets written to publicize a variety of political, social, religious, and humanitarian issues and perspectives);<sup>4</sup> second, a

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Clark, *Scandal: The Sexual Politics of the British Constitution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); for the persistence of Wollstonecraft's image as an Amazonian and woman of unbridled sensuality see G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); on the public failures of Hannah More see Anne Stott, *Hannah More: The First Victorian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); on the calumny of Catherine Macaulay see Cecile Mazzucco-Tham, "As Easy as a Chimney Pot to Blacken": Catherine Macaulay 'The Celebrated Female Historian,'" *Prose Studies* 18, no. 3 (1995), 78-104; and on Queen Caroline see Dror Wahrman, "Middle-Class Domesticity goes Public: Gender, Class, and Politics from Queen Caroline to Queen Victoria," *Journal of British Studies* 32, no. 4 (1993): 396-432; Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the English Working Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Jonathan Fulcher, "The Loyalist Response to the Queen Caroline Agitations," *Journal of British Studies* 34, no. 4 (1995), 481-502.

<sup>4</sup> John Feather, "The Power of Print: Word and Image in Eighteenth-Century England," in *Culture and Society in Britain, 1660-1800*, edited by Jeremy Black (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 60. In his study of the poet Byron, Tom Mole agrees that modern celebrity was made possible through industrialized print culture, and argues that visual representations of Byron were

significant rise in the number of voluntary associations; and third, the expansion of the postal services. Equally important to the development of celebrity as an historical phenomenon was the emergence during this period of the idea of individuality: achievement was no longer seen as something almost exclusively limited to the lucky few born into positions of power and who therefore were in a position to achieve something worth remembering by succeeding generations. Instead, people believed in the possibility of creating an identity unique to themselves, regardless of class. Accompanying this shift was a growing acceptance of and desire for contemporary rather than posthumous fame, for those who achieved public renown during their own lifetime removed themselves from the powerlessness of anonymity.

As Benedict Anderson and others have argued, the proliferation of newspapers and periodicals, particularly within the provinces, facilitated the emergence of an imagined community: for by reading of news outside their own neighborhoods, individuals identified with others living far away with whom they shared similar values or activities, and thus imagined themselves part of a larger, national community.<sup>5</sup> Newspapers and periodicals, by repeatedly reporting on the activities of certain individuals and thus promoting them to fame, led to an increase in the number of biographies published. Over the course of the eighteenth century the biography was democratized as the subjects of biographies increasingly were individuals who attained status

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important in shaping both his public image and cultural impact. Tom Mole, *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991); Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion in Late Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

and/or recognition based not on birth or military prowess but through talent, intellect, diligence, and virtue. Once biographies became popular, the market demanded new celebrities whose stories could be consumed.<sup>6</sup>

The sense of synchronicity fostered by newspapers and periodicals was reinforced by participation in voluntary associations. Through clubs and philanthropic organizations individuals could react to issues of interest that were reported in the newspapers, and thus exert political agency, on a local and potentially even a national level. Finally, the expansion of postal services was important because it enabled individuals to communicate with persons reported in the press, either directly or via letters to the editor. The postal service was also a vehicle for the distribution of privately printed pamphlets and tracts.

The expansion of the press obviously meant that people throughout the British Isles, rather than just those in her local community or kinship network, learned of Fry's activities, while the postal service enabled women who read of her exploits to contact her about how to establish ladies' associations to visit their own neighborhood prisons; likewise, prison officials intrigued by her ideas on prison organization and how to improve prison discipline and prisoner behavior could contact her for further information. In the months after the initial press coverage of her activities at Newgate, literally hundreds of letters arrived at her London residence in Mildred's Court each week from across the United Kingdom and Europe. Starting in the 1820s, Fry routinely sent copies of her pamphlets and the BLS annual reports to people who expressed an interest in prison reform, and had parcels of these publications sent to her while travelling whenever demand exceeded the number she had brought with her.

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<sup>6</sup> See Cheryl Wanko, "Three Stories of Celebrity: The Beggar's Opera 'Biographies,'" *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 38 (Summer 1998): 481-83.

Copies of the BLS annual report were also mailed to subscribers outside London. As a result, by 1830 there were nearly 50 local “ladies associations” modeled on the association Fry had established at Newgate.

In her own time Fry was not characterized as a celebrity; according to the Oxford English Dictionary the word itself was not used in printed form until 1849.<sup>7</sup> Individuals were referred to instead as “celebrated” as, for example, “Catharine Macaulay, the Celebrated Female Historian.” The term has come to mean, according to the 1989 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, “the condition of being much extolled or talked about; famousness, notoriety; a person of celebrity; a celebrated person; a public character.”<sup>8</sup> According to Stella Tillyard, there are similarities between the attributes of contemporary celebrity and celebrity in the eighteenth century when “someone possessing celebrity was at a simple level someone celebrated, the centre of a throng, a person surrounded ... adored in the here and now by an audience.”<sup>9</sup>

The attention the press’s initial coverage of an individual provided could lead to a sort of feedback mechanism whereby the early treatment in the press stimulated the public’s desire for more knowledge or gossip about that individual. Frequently the appeal of celebrities was that they functioned as an ideal—a generic, normative representative of bourgeois values—despite the fact that the source of their celebrity was based on their extraordinary qualities or actions. In *The Frenzy of Renown*, Leo Braudy argues that while fame celebrates

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<sup>7</sup> The word does appear in Samuel Johnson’s *The Rambler No. 165*, but not in the sense described by Stella Tillyard, “Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century London,” *History Today* 55, no. 6 (2005), 8–9; Samuel Johnson, LL.D., *The Works of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., In Nine Volumes*, vol. 3, “The Impotence of Wealth: The Visit of Scrotinus to the Place of His Nativity,” in *The Rambler*, vol. 2, October 15, 1751.

<sup>8</sup> “Celebrity,” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., prepared by J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> Tillyard, “Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century London,” 21.

uniqueness, that uniqueness must be reproducible: the celebrated person has to be different enough from the rest of society to stand out, but not be so far out of the boundaries of social norms that he or she undermines the social fabric. It also must be a life that others aspire to, and thus can be imitated.<sup>10</sup> The problem with celebrity, Braudy notes, is that while it appears from the outside that the celebrated individual has found and fixed their own true individuality (a wholeness that the reader desires for him or herself), in reality the celebrated person is trapped in the image of who their audience wants them to be. Fame, according to Braudy, thus entails the audience's respect for a person's individual nature, but it is more the appearance of individuality than an expression of individuality.<sup>11</sup>

In Fry's case, the initial spate of articles praising her reforms at Newgate in 1817 and 1818 transformed her from private individual to a "public body" created on the basis of the reputation of her public name. Within a fairly short period of time—approximately a year—she became the human sign for female

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<sup>10</sup> Though the audience might imitate their favorite celebrity, and thus render the actions that brought the celebrity fame no longer unique, very few of the audience imitators received the same or even a small measure of the fame accorded to their hero(ine). Thus fame became the only "unique" feature remaining to the celebrity. Among Fry's imitators, only one—Sarah Martin, a dressmaker in Yarmouth—had accounts of her life and labors published. A small pamphlet printed for circulation around Yarmouth was forwarded to the Religious Tract Society in 1847, four years after Martin's death and two years after the death of Fry; the RTS then published 25,000 copies of their own short biography. In 1872, the Religious Tract Society published a "new and improved memoir." *Sarah Martin, The Prison-Visitor of Great Yarmouth: A Useful Life* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1872). Even so, the written memorials to Martin pale in comparison to the numerous and much longer biographies of Fry. That Martin received a measure of posthumous recognition was likely because she was a single woman without the support of immediate family and thus had to earn her living as a dressmaker. The 1872 tract trumpeted the fact that she carried out her prison-visiting alone, without the "help or under the auspices of a committee," a woman "not of a robust constitution,—a little woman, of gentle, quiet manners; and during the greater part of her time, working with her hands for daily bread." *Sarah Martin*, 62–63. In fact, Martin regularly received financial support from the British Ladies Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners.

<sup>11</sup> Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History*, with a new afterword (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 6–8. Mole argues that Byron was one of the first modern celebrities, and explores the tension between Byron the artist, his audience, and the commercial industry through which Byron's celebrity was produced and mediated. Mole, *Byron's Romantic Celebrity*.

philanthropy and action in the public sphere; how she and others handled the public image her celebrity created was an issue not just during the remaining 28 years of her life, but—as the following chapter will show—one that transcended her death in 1845.

### Becoming “Mrs. Fry”

The fact that a middle-class woman such as Fry was engaged in philanthropic endeavors was, of course, in and of itself not sufficient to make her a celebrity.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Fry’s early charitable efforts—establishing a school for young children on her father’s estate and visiting the local poor, infirm, and ill before her marriage, giving food and clothing to destitute women who came to her house in London after her marriage, and serving as trustee of a fund for the poor widows of Gracechurch Street meeting house, which Fry and her husband attended in London—were no different from the benevolent actions carried out by thousands of other women who had the leisure to pursue such activities.<sup>13</sup>

While by the mid-1810s Fry’s charitable activities had earned her a reputation as a benevolent woman within the Quaker communities in Norwich and London, she had done nothing that warranted her being known to society

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<sup>12</sup> As noted in chapter two, Catherine Hall, Leonore Davidoff, and others have demonstrated that upper- and middle-class women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were actively involved in charitable endeavors, both on a personal level by providing food and basic necessities to the poor in their neighborhoods and by participating in philanthropic associations. With respect to latter, however, they typically assumed a subordinate position: they were rarely formal members of the societies (usually they were covered under their husband or father’s membership), nor did they hold leadership positions, even though they were entrusted with many of the practical aspects of the associations’ work, such as visiting the poor or raising funds. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1750–1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 416-20.

<sup>13</sup> F. K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); Kathleen D. McCarthy, ed., *Lady Bountiful Revisited: Women, Philanthropy, and Power* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Dorice Williams Elliott, *The Angel out of the House: Philanthropy and Gender in Nineteenth-Century England* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2002); and Beth Fowkes Tobin, *Superintending the Poor: Charitable Ladies and Paternal Landlords in British Fiction, 1770–1860* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

at large. Nor did her first visits to Newgate prison in January 1813, during which she distributed flannel clothing, medicine, and clean straw to the female inmates, bring her wide-spread attention, even within Quaker circles. As discussed in chapter two, however, during the winter of 1816/17 the nature of her activities in Newgate changed: she pressured prison officials into letting her establish a school, hired a female matron and organized a system of elected inmate monitors to supervise the prisoners instead of male guards, introduced daily Bible readings by the lady visitors, and arranged for the inmates to engage in sewing, spinning, and knitting and be compensated for this work. Within months she concluded that the informal way in which she was conducting her work at Newgate was inadequate for the task at hand, and formally organized “The Association for the Improvement of the Female Prisoners in Newgate.” What distinguished the Association compared to other female philanthropic endeavors for its time is that from its conception it was not an ad-hoc arrangement, but a formal society with a mission statement, elected officers, and a schedule of assigned duties for each member—as noted above, women were rarely members of philanthropic associations in their own right, nor did they typically establish formal organizations. This association consisted exclusively of women; initially, there were twelve members, all but one of whom were members of the Religious Society of Friends.<sup>14</sup> After the Fry’s work in Newgate became public knowledge, the composition of the association (as well as those modeled on the Newgate association throughout the British Isles and

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<sup>14</sup> The lone exception to this network of Quaker women was Mrs. Anglezark, the wife of a clergyman from Fry’s Plashet neighborhood. Original documents of the mission statement, officers, and minutes from the early years of the Newgate Association are not extant, but are referred to in the memoir written by Fry’s two eldest daughters, who had been Fry’s amanuenses during this period. The Hackney Record Office, London, holds the BLS minutes for 1821-38.

abroad) broadened, and consisted of women from a variety of denominations and of different social ranks, although Quakers continued to be a disproportionately larger number of members in the Newgate and later the British Ladies Association for the Reformation of Female Prisoners.<sup>15</sup> Fry's celebrity established her as a role model to which other women aspired, and Fry used this to urge them to create formal associations when establishing local prison visiting societies. Thus, while Fry's celebrity was not due to the fact that she established a formally-organization association, she could promote this format because of her fame.

Although neither Fry nor her associates sought public recognition for their efforts, as described in chapter one they were part of a well-established network of individuals committed to social and humanitarian reform, and word of their activities spread through this community. Robert Owen, a mill owner dedicated to social reform, particularly education and labor reform, had published several essays on his educational reform principles in 1813; in 1817 he visited London to lobby Parliament for poor law reform. William Allen, a prominent Quaker businessman, philanthropist, and Fry family friend, was a partner in Owen's New Lanark mill,<sup>16</sup> and it is likely that Owen learned of Fry's work in Newgate through Allen. He requested that Fry give him a tour of Newgate, which she did on July 25, 1817. A week later Owen published the first

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<sup>15</sup> Mary, Countess of Harcourt and Sophie Vansittart, the sister of Nicholas Vansittart, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, worked closely with Fry to promote prison reform in the early years of the Newgate Association and the BLS. Lady Jane Pirie, wife of Sir John Pirie, a shipbroker elected as sheriff of London (1831-32) and Lord Mayor of London (1841-42), was another prominent supporter of the BLS during the later years of Fry's life.

<sup>16</sup> William Allen and two other Quakers, John Walker and Joseph Foster, established a school on the New Lanark model in Spitalfields. Robert Owen, *The Life of Robert Owen, Written by Himself, with Selections from his Writings & Correspondence*, vol. 1 (London, Effingham Wilson, 1857; repr., New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1967), 153. Citations are to the Kelley edition.



of three articles in the London papers about the growing distress suffered by the working class and his plan to relieve that misery by improving their living and working environment, providing education, and reforming their moral habits. The first contained an account of his tour of Newgate with Fry, describing in glowing terms the dramatic change she had effected: “The apartments and the persons of the prisoners were clean and neat; order, regularity, decency, and almost cheerful content, pervaded the whole of these heretofore miserable and degraded wretches! ... [The school children were transformed] from filth, bad habits, vice, crime; from the depth of degradation and wretchedness—to cleanliness, good habits, and comparative comfort and cheerfulness!” Not having visited Newgate previously, this was inherently speculative on his part, though his readers would not have known this fact. The children in the association’s school, he claimed, “looked on [Fry] as human creatures might be imagined to look upon beings of a superior, intelligent, and beneficent nature.”<sup>17</sup> Owen’s praise was motivated by self-interest, since he was trying to persuade the government to reform the poor laws; including Fry’s work as a successful example of someone who improved the physical and moral state of women who were in the most wretched circumstances possible was an effort on his part to show that new ideas based on principles of education and improved environmental conditions could improve social conditions even in the most depraved places like a prison. Owen further boosted the distribution of his article by purchasing 30,000 additional copies of the paper, which he sent “to the minister of every parish in the kingdom,—one to each of the chief

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Owen, *The Times*, 30 July, 1817: 3; or Robert Owen, *A Supplementary Appendix to the First Volume of The Life of Robert Owen, Containing a Series of Reports, Addresses, Memorials & Other Documents*, vol. 1A (London: Effingham Wilson, 1858; repr. New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1967), 78–80. Citations are to the Kelley edition.

magistrates and bankers in each city and town,—and one to each of the leading persons in all classes.” This being insufficient to fulfill the “extraordinary excitement in the general public” Owen then published 40,000 broadsheets of each article; after three days, according to Owen, all copies had been picked up by members of the public.<sup>18</sup>

Fry was the only member of the association mentioned in Owen’s article, and therefore the only person who achieved public acclaim for the Newgate reforms. She was uneasy about the public attention; since childhood she had struggled with a desire for recognition and praise from others, and she worried that public praise—especially from people of rank or in positions of authority, whose approval she knew herself to be particularly susceptible to—would give her a false sense of pride, or lead people to give her rather than God credit for the prisoner’s changed behavior.<sup>19</sup> In this Fry drew on a Christian trope dating back to St. Augustine, whose *Confessions* argues that living for worldly recognition is a hollow pursuit, and that the emptiness of the self can only be filled by look toward God and the heavenly rewards of following God’s will. For Augustine, the soul—a person’s inner identity—rather than the outward body seen by the world was the essence of a person. Thus the purpose of the Christian’s voyage through life is to discover one’s true self rather than focusing on the materiality of earthly existence. Augustine’s concept of the soul as the true essence of self is embodied in the Quaker testimony of simplicity, which

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<sup>18</sup> Robert Owen, *Life of Robert Owen*, 156. Owen decided not to print additional editions of the broadsheets since the cost of printing, together with his prior purchase of the newspapers, had cost him £4,000. Owen does not give the date of publication for the broadsheets, but he states that the expense was incurred in a two-month period.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entries, 4 August, 1817; 28 August, 1817; and 1 January, 1818, MC 519, vol. 1, Norfolk Public Record Office, Norwich (hereafter Norfolk 519/1). Fry was ambivalent about the fact that it was Owen who had brought her public notice, since he opposed religion.

instructed Friends to reject earthly things, including public acclaim, and instead focus on heavenly rewards. Yet while Augustine may have rejected his early attempts to achieve public recognition and turned to Christianity, in writing about abjuring the pursuit of public fame he still required an audience, even if the message was to praise God rather than self. Fry recognized this tension between the private search for self and the public act of giving glory to God by spreading accounts of lives lived according to God's word; how she wrestled with this paradox in her own case is explored below.

Fry may have initially preferred to keep her activities out of the public eye, but once public acclaim was forced on her, she had to adapt to the public attention paid to her and her work. The letters she received from women and men interested in her work led her to think about the problems of prison administration and penal policy more globally, rather than just those facing the female inmates in her own local prison.<sup>20</sup> Part of the interest in her work came because an increase in the crime rate after the end of the Napoleonic Wars and fears about law and order in the wake of the return of tens of thousands of demobilized soldiers who roamed the country in search of jobs meant that crime—and efforts to reform criminals in order to prevent future crimes—was a matter of great concern (especially for people of means, since most crimes were petty theft);<sup>21</sup> another reason for the attention Fry received was because she

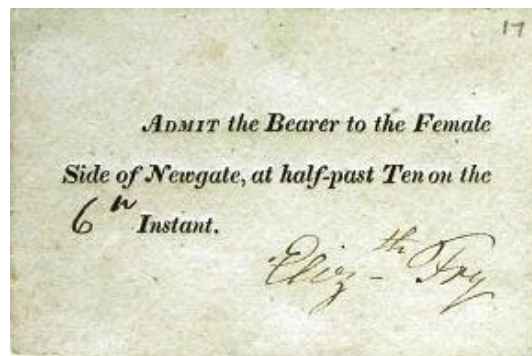
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<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, little of this correspondence has been retained. Fry's eldest daughters, Katherine and Rachel, who had recently returned home from an extended visit in King's Lynn, Norfolk, with their aunt Rachel and uncle Dan Gurney acted as Fry's amanuenses for this correspondence. Katherine Fry and Rachel Cresswell, *Memoir of the Life of Elizabeth Fry*, vol. 1 (London: Charles Gilpin, 1847), 291.

<sup>21</sup> In 1818, an estimated 107,000 individuals who at one point were imprisoned in British prisons. Anthony Babington, *The English Bastille: A History of Newgate Gaol and Prison Conditions in Britain, 1188–1902* (London: Macdonald, 1971), 173. Newgate was supposed to have a capacity of 317 prisoners and 110 debtors, but was grossly overcrowded; in January 1814, for example, it held 822 criminals and debtors. H. G. Bennet, *A Letter to the Common Council and*

was a curiosity—a woman who dared to descend into a place no decent woman should be, a “Hell above ground,” according to the Revered C. B. Tayler, inhabited by people considered no better than savage creatures, driven by vice and ignorant of even the most basic habits of civilized life.<sup>22</sup>

Fry’s weekly Bible-readings to the prisoners at Newgate soon became a spectacle: in April 1818 Fry wrote that “the prison and myself are become quite a show.”<sup>23</sup> In fact, so many people—ministers, politicians, philanthropists, diplomats, nobility and men and women of the middle-class—came to watch her readings that tickets had to be issued (figure 2). These passes were more than mere symbols of Fry’s celebrity: they are also physical evidence of the power that celebrity conferred on her.



**Figure 2:** Newgate Pass<sup>24</sup>

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*Livery of the City of London, on the Abuses Existing in Newgate*, 2nd ed. (London, 1818), 5. On fears of crime, particularly property crime, see Clive Emsley, *Crime and Society in England, 1750–1900*, 3rd ed., *Themes in British Social History* (Harlow, England: Longman/Pearson, 2005); Andrew T. Harris, *Policing the City: Crime and Legal Authority in London, 1780–1840* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004); and George F. E. Rudé, *Criminal and Victim: Crime and Society in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); for fears on female deviancy and middle-class reform efforts see the chapter on the Magdalen Hospital in Miles Ogborn, *Spaces of Modernity: London’s Geographies, 1680–1780* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1998); and, for the evolution of crime as an offence against property see Douglas Hay, Peter Linbaugh, and E. P. Thompson, eds., *Albion’s Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Allen Lane, 1975); and E. P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: the Origin of the Black Act* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975).

<sup>22</sup> C. B. Taylor, journal entry, cited in Augustus Hare, *The Gurneys of Earlham*, vol. 1 (London: George Allen, 1895), 283.

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 29 April, 1818, Norfolk 519/1.

<sup>24</sup> Box 7/12, fol. 17, LRSF. Photographed with permission by Deanna Matheuszik. Another example, stating that the bearer should be admitted “at a Quarter before Eleven” with “no

They not only acknowledge that Newgate officials authorized the Association's reforms, but in distributing the tickets they delegated to her the authority to act as gatekeeper to those who wished to witness the reforms in action. Moreover, that the tickets were printed, requiring only that she add the date and her signature, speaks to the fact that the volume of requests to see her bible readings exceeded reasonable expectations for her to produce handwritten notes authorizing visitors.

Whereas the initial portrayal of Fry as a reformer came from a private individual, recognition from public officials soon followed. In January 1818, the grand jury of the City of London published an address to the mayor of London and the city's justices in *The Times*, in which they expressed

the gratifying pleasure we received in witnessing the exertions of Mrs. Fry and the ladies who kindly assist her in attending to and instructing the female prisoners, whose reformed deportment, and cheerful acquiescence to their wishes, demonstrated with a force no language can describe the affection these unfortunate women entertain for these intelligent, humane, and active females.<sup>25</sup>

The same day *The Times* also published an extract from a pamphlet written by Henry Grey Bennet, the member of Parliament from Shrewsbury, in which he notes the "great and important change for the better" that had taken place under Fry's management. "No praise of mine," he wrote, "can add weight to the tribute of general applause which Mrs. Fry and her Committee of Friends have received from all who have witnessed their efforts."<sup>26</sup> More noteworthy than Bennet's praise is the fact that the only section of his 42-page pamphlet *The*

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admittance after," is held in the SC 044, Fry MSS, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania (hereafter SC 044, Fry MSS).

<sup>25</sup> John Gann, Foreman of the Grand Jury, "State of Newgate," *The Times*, 21 January 1818: 3B.

<sup>26</sup> "Extract from the Hon. Mr. Bennet's Pamphlet on the State of Newgate, Addressed to the Common Council and Livery of London," *The Times*, 21 January 1818: 3B. For the full pamphlet see Bennet, *Letter to the Common Council*.

*Times* reprinted pertained to Fry. Roughly the same time as Bennet's report on the Newgate Association Fry's brother-in-law Thomas Fowell Buxton wrote a pamphlet on prison discipline that included a 20-page report on how Fry and later her associates had become involved in Newgate and the activities of the association over the past year; the pamphlet went through six editions in 1818.<sup>27</sup>

Six months after Owen's article established Fry as a prison reformer in the public imagination the power that celebrity conferred on her was given concrete form when she was asked to give evidence before a committee of the House of Commons investigating the state of London's prisons. The committee's decision to request Fry's testimony did not immediately give her additional public attention, as account were not published in the press, but it speaks to the fact that Fry's sphere of influence had grown from the confines of Newgate into the innermost chambers of national power.<sup>28</sup>

The report published by the committee later that year acknowledged the efficacy of Fry's reforms:

The benevolent exertions of Mrs. Fry and her friends in the female departments of the prison have indeed, by the establishment of a school, by providing work and encouraging industrious habits, produced the most gratifying change.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas Fowell Buxton, *An Inquiry Whether Crime and Misery are Produced or Prevented by our Present System of Prison Discipline*, 3rd ed. (London: John and Arthur Arch, 1818). Buxton was elected member of Parliament for Weymouth and Melcombe Regis later that year.

<sup>28</sup> It is not clear who issued the initial invitation to Fry to testify, but it was a decision that would have required assent from a majority of the committee members, a proposition that was not inevitable, as Robert Owen discovered. In 1816, he appeared before a committee investigating the poor laws, but before he could begin he was asked to withdraw. After waiting all day and the next in an antechamber, Owen was finally informed by the committee's chairman that for two days the committee had discussed whether he should be permitted to give evidence; a "small majority" had finally prevailed, and Owen was barred from testifying. Owen, *Life of Robert Owen*, 131-33.

<sup>29</sup> House of Commons, "Report from the Committee on the Prisons within the City of London and Borough of Southwark," *Sessional Papers, 1818-1822*, 8 May, 1818, vol. 1, p. 5 (repr., *British Parliamentary Papers: Reports and Papers relating to the Prisons of the United Kingdom with*

That summer, Fry spent two months in the north of England and in Scotland with her brother Joseph John Gurney, during which they visited 40 prisons and houses of correction. Accounts of her travels were published in local papers, some of which were subsequently republished in the London papers.<sup>30</sup> The following year, Gurney published a pamphlet that contained a detailed account of the prisons they inspected, and the conclusions they had drawn as a result on how prisons should be administered.<sup>31</sup>

People from different walks of life came to meet Fry: the novelist Maria Edgeworth, whose fiction explored social, religious, and gender-based issues, claimed that her primary reason for visiting London in 1822 was to “become personally acquainted with the woman who has done the most good of any woman of this age.”<sup>32</sup> Hannah More gave Fry a copy of her book, *Practical Piety*, which she inscribed with the following: “As a token of veneration for her heroic zeal, Christian charity, and persevering kindness to the most forlorn of human beings. They were naked and she clothed them; in prison, and she visited them; ignorant, and she taught them, for His sake, in His name, and by His word who went about doing good.”<sup>33</sup> More, after a religious conversion in the 1780s, wrote

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*Minutes of Evidence and Appendices, 1818–22*, Crime and Punishment: Prisons, vol. 8, Shannon: Irish University Press, 1970), 83.

<sup>30</sup> *The Times*, 9 September, 1818: 2F; and *The Times*, 23 September, 1818: 3A. Reports of Fry’s visits to prisons and mental asylums outside the Greater London area continued to generate press throughout her life; some of those printed in provincial newspapers were reprinted in *The Times*; see for example, reprints from the *Liverpool Mercury* in *The Times*, 14 November 1820: 3B; from the *Southampton Chronicle* in *The Times*, 29 March 1824: 2F; from the *Dublin Evening Mail* in *The Times*, 23 February 1827: 2F; and the *Glasgow Courier* in *The Times*, 20 September 1838: 5C.

<sup>31</sup> Joseph John Gurney, *Notes on a Visit Made to Some of the Prisons in Scotland and the North of England, in Company with Elizabeth Fry; with Some General Observations on the Subject of Prison Discipline*, 2nd ed. (London: John and Arthur Arch, 1819).

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in June Rose, *Elizabeth Fry* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980), 117.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Hare, *Gurneys of Earlham*, 2:6-7.

tracts for the working class in which she extolled the virtues of living a sober, industrious life and preached that the working class should trust in God, behave with humility, and be grateful to their social superiors for the latter's kindness to them. More saw Fry's work as an example of the principles of humanitarianism that she advocated.

Fry even received attention from the royal family for her prison reform work; at a visit to the Egyptian Hall on April 29, 1818 where members of the royal family were inspecting students from the City of London National Schools Queen Charlotte stopped to speak with Fry, an unusual event as the queen was not noted for speaking to commoners. Fry noted the event in her journal:

Much public respect was paid me, and except the Royal family themselves, I think that no one received the same attention. There was quite a buzz when I went into the Egyptian Hall, where one to two thousand people were collected; and when the Queen came to speak to me, which she did very kindly, there was I am told a general clap.<sup>34</sup>

The following day an account of the visit, including the fact that the Queen spoke with Fry, was appeared in *The Times*. Several months later *The Times* reported another encounter between Fry and members of the royal family, in this case the Duke and Duchess of Kent and Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, at an inspection of British and Foreign School Society's school.<sup>35</sup> Fry

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<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Fry journal entry, 29 April, 1818, The Library of the Religious Society of Friends, London (hereafter LRSF). See also *The Times*, 20 April 1818: 3C. Also present was the Duchess of Gloucester, who would later serve as the president of the British Ladies Association for the Reformation of Female Prisoners; Fry had met the Duke of Gloucester as a teenager when he was stationed in Norwich and had visited Earlham Hall on several occasions. The duke, who was interested in social reform causes, maintained a cordial relationship with Fry and her brothers Joseph John and Samuel Gurney. Other royalty, nobility, and dignitaries present included the Duke and Duchess of York, the Duke of Kent, the Prince of Hesse-Hombourg, the Earl of Harcourt (whose wife became a close associate of Fry in prison reform), the Lord Mayor of London, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Bishop of London.

<sup>35</sup> Prince Leopold was the widower of Princess Charlotte, the only child of the Prince Regent and thus second in line to the throne before her death the previous year. The Duchess of Kent was Leopold's sister and had married the Duke in May 1818; the following year she gave birth to the future Queen Victoria. In 1831 Prince Leopold was chosen as king of Belgium.



and three other members of the school's ladies committee were mentioned before a list of several prominent men also present, including Sir Alexander Johnstone (a former colonial official in Ceylon currently serving as an Admiralty judge) and Sir Robert Wilson (a general who had been a liaison to the Imperial Russian army and a member of the Liberal party who had recently been elected as the member of Parliament for Southwark). This may be an indication that the publishers saw her name as having a greater cache with their readers than these distinguished gentlemen;<sup>36</sup> what is clear is that, within a year of the publication of Owen's article, politicians and members of the social and literary elite viewed Fry as someone who had performed a public service sufficiently noteworthy that she merited acknowledgment on their part.

### The Power of Celebrity

Fry's ability to negotiate her newfound celebrity into political currency was greatly facilitated by two factors: her religious affiliation and the nearly unwavering support of her husband. As noted in chapter one, a distinctive feature of the Quakers is that they eschew formal, paid ministers; moreover, they believe in the religious equality of men and women and thus—unlike most Protestant denominations at the time—acknowledged female ministers. When Owen's article was published, Fry had been a minister for seven years, and the experience she gained speaking at Quaker meetings across the country gave her the confidence to speak in public before non-Quakers, especially politicians and members of elite society. Fry was also fortunate in her marriage. When she finally consented to marry Joseph Fry in 1800, he promised that he would not

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<sup>36</sup> "Royal Visit to the Central Schools," *The Times*, 5 August, 1818: 3A.

hinder her charitable or religious work, and for the most part he adhered to this promise, even though her religious ministry and prison work sometimes led her to leave home for months at a time.<sup>37</sup> So when Fry decided pursue prison reform on a systemic basis rather than just working with the inmates of Newgate prison, it was a more feasible enterprise for her than for most other contemporary women.

While Fry's celebrity made her an object of spectacle, her public reputation as someone who had brought about beneficial changes in the physical bodies and behavioral conduct of female prisoners enabled her to transform her celebrity into real political agency. Whereas at Newgate Fry had to rely solely on her persuasive powers to convince the prison's officials to let her conduct what was then an unproven experiment in dealing with female prisoners, the successful outcomes of these endeavors, as reported by the press, made her as a respected authority on prison reform. As noted above, her reputation led to her being asked to testify in Parliament on the reforms she had enacted at Newgate, and resulted in her being welcomed by local officials and notables during her tours of prisons, particularly the 1818 tour of prisons in the north of England and Scotland and an 1827 tour of Irish prisons. Had Fry not been publicly lauded for her prison reform efforts she still would have been able to visit these prisons, given that relatively unfettered access to prisons was common at the time; members of the Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline were also inspecting prisons during the same period.

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<sup>37</sup> For example, Fry spent two months in northern England and Scotland in the fall of 1818; more than three months in Ireland in early 1827; and three months in Europe during the spring of 1840. See Joseph Fry to Elizabeth Fry, 13 March, 17 April, and 24 April, 1840, Egerton MS 3675, fols. 117, and 130–2, British Library, London (hereafter Egerton MS). In fact, Joseph Fry was more irritated by her religious and prison activities when they travelled together; see, for example, her journal entries while traveling in France and Switzerland in June 1839, LRSF.

Where Fry differed was in the reception accorded her; when SIPD members visited prisons it was typically either individually or in groups of two or three, whereas when Fry visited she attracted a large entourage. At an inspection of Carlisle's goal on September 19, 1818, for example, she was "accompanied by several of the Magistrates and a considerable number of ladies and gentlemen, who had spontaneously assembled on hearing of her intention."<sup>38</sup> That evening Fry met with people interested in hearing her stories about reforming female inmates, and formed a ladies association to visit Carlisle's prison. This scene was repeated wherever she went. In 1820, *The Gentleman's Magazine* observed that Fry had conducted a detailed inspection of the Derby County Gaol and that, having judged its ability to classify and discipline prisoners subpar, her recommendations to remedy the gaol's deficiencies were "now under serious contemplation of the magistracy."<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, the pamphlet Gurney wrote based on their observations during the 1818 prison tour would not have had much of an impact, locally or nationally, without Fry's fame. Her celebrity enabled her to attract a following that she used to establish a national network of protégés who carried out her ideas on the local level and, through the reports they sent to the British Ladies Association, provided an on-going source of data about prison conditions and prison reform outcomes.

Other prison reform activists invoked her name when speaking about the conditions of British prisons and the manifest necessity to reform prison administration and approve new prison construction. Sir James Macintosh, a

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<sup>38</sup> *The Times*, 23 September, 1818: 3A.

<sup>39</sup> "Domestic Occurrences," *The Gentleman's Magazine* (November 1820): 461.

prominent Parliamentary advocate for prison reform, called Fry “the more than female Howard.” On the one hand Macintosh’s comment implied a binary between male and female; yet by using the “more than” appellation he also suggested that she had exceeded Howard’s achievements—at least rhetorically. As noted above, H. G. Bennet, another member of Parliament who, like Fry, believed in the classification system—separating the tried from the untried, prisoners from debtors, and the hardened criminal from the new offender—had invoked her efforts to implement this system in his appeal to the Common Council and Livery of the City of London to build a larger facility that could not only accommodate the growing population of female prisoners in London goals but was purpose-built to adopt the classification system. Bennet argued that until a new prison was built there was a limit to Fry’s ability to reform prisons given the physical limitations of the present prison. “Mrs. Fry may do much to relieve present misery; ... she may remedy magisterial neglect; she may relieve individual wretchedness; she may lessen all the evils attendant on [the present] mode of confinement;—but the disease is past her cure.”<sup>40</sup> Parliamentary discussions also referenced Fry and were subsequently reported in the press; for example, in June 1818, the Marquis of Lansdowne, while discussing the increased crime rate in the House of Lords, “panegyricized the conduct of Mrs. Fry, who had been instrumental to the reformation of many of the prisoners in Newgate.” The following February, William Wilberforce likewise praised the

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<sup>40</sup> Bennet, *Letter to the Common Council*, 29–30. The letter was dated December 31, 1817; the second edition contains a short postscript dated February 5, 1818 acknowledging some of the ideas advocated in his pamphlet had been implemented by the Council in the interim. Henry Grey Bennet, the son of the earl of Tankerville served as the member of Parliament for Shrewsbury from 1806-1807 and 1811-25. He was one of the progressive reformers in the House of Commons, working with Samuel Romilly to reform criminal law, including ending the practice of goal fess, flogging, and capital punishment.

positive results Fry had achieved in reforming female convicts in the House of Commons.<sup>41</sup>

Although Fry was primarily involved in prison reform, her celebrity could be wielded for other philanthropic or social causes as well. During the winter of 1819/20 she joined her brothers-in-law Buxton and Samuel Hoare to open London's first shelter to feed and house the homeless during one of the worst winters in Britain for the past hundred years.<sup>42</sup> Another instance occurred in 1824 when, while convalescing at Brighton, she was asked to organize a committee to inspect the homes of the poor in order to provide financial assistance to those in legitimate need. In short order she created the Brighton District Visiting Society, and persuaded the Earl of Salisbury to be the president, and the bishop of Chichester, the Dean of Salisbury, and Viscount Molesworth to act as patrons. Though such activities had no direct bearing on her prison reform work, they did support her image as a public figure and kept her in public view.

Fry's name was also used to solicit help for individuals in need: in July 1819 a public appeal for a subscription to help a mother with six young children establish a school after the family had been reduced from "comfort and independence to a state of extreme indigence" by the father's imprisonment for debt acknowledges Fry's £1 donation.<sup>43</sup> The following year another public

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<sup>41</sup> "Proceedings in Parliament," *The Gentleman's Magazine* (November 1818): 454; and "Proceedings in Parliament," *The Gentleman's Magazine* (March 1819): 258.

<sup>42</sup> "Shelter for the Houseless," *The Times*, 21 January 1820: 3A.

<sup>43</sup> *The Times*, 19 July, 1819: 1A. It was common practice at the time to place advertisements soliciting money to help the worthy poor, and to legitimize (or appear to legitimize) these appeals by noting subscriptions already received from people whose name might be known by readers. Likewise, philanthropic associations published lists of their donors, with the amount contributed. See, for example, the advertisement placed by the Society for the Suppression of Mendicity, which lists 100 donors, including Fry. *The Times*, 28 December, 1818: 2A.

subscription, this time to help defray the trial costs incurred by the family of a recently-acquitted young woman, alleged that upon hearing of the innocence of the petitioner's daughter Fry had provided £5 for their legal fees.<sup>44</sup>

Initially Fry did not take an active role in using her celebrity to publicly promote reform. While she provided information to Buxton and Gurney for their pamphlets, she did not publish her own account until 1827. Where possible, she also tried to limit the use of her name; in 1822 she wrote that "instead of E.J. [Fry] I should simply put \_\_ \_\_ two marks in that way and not make any mention of the individual because I believe ... for all it has been so much my allotment I have a particular dislike to appearing in print."<sup>45</sup>

Not all accounts, however, that appeared during the years immediately after Owen's article were the work of family, fellow prison reformers, or journalists.<sup>46</sup> Once she became a public figure others used her image for their own personal gain by publishing sketches of her life, which often included a portrait.<sup>47</sup> The production of these unauthorized life sketches and portraits were doubly problematic for Fry. Unlike the reports, articles, and pamphlets that

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<sup>44</sup> *The Times*, 19 June, 1920: 2A.

<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth Fry to William Allen, 24 July, 1822, SC 044 Fry MSS. In Quaker circles it was common practice to include the husband's name when referring to the wife in order to distinguish between women with the same name (there were at one point four Elizabeth Frys—Fry herself, her mother-in-law, and two sisters-in-law; Fry was known as Elizabeth Joseph Fry.)

<sup>46</sup> In 1820, a pamphlet described one visitor's recent attendance at Fry's reading. The pamphlet, published without attribution but ascribed to Sir William James, went through several editions; proceeds went to support the "Fund for the Relief of Female Prisoners," though it is not clear whether this was the Newgate Association or a part of the Sheriff's fund. *An Hour in His Majesty's Gaol of Newgate, on Friday the 22nd December, 1820*, 2nd ed. (London: Henry Teape, 1820). According to *The Freethinking Christian Quarterly Review*, one bookseller alone sold 1,700 copies; it cost sixpence. "The Freethinking Christians' Review of the Religious World: Mrs. Fry," *The Freethinking Christian Quarterly Register* 2 (1825): 238.

<sup>47</sup> An August 1822 advertisement for the "Percy Anecdotes," for example, offered a 40-part series of "finely engraved portraits, titles, and vignettes" of "distinguished characters" such as Fry, "Mrs. Siddons, Sir James Mackintosh, ... Duke of Wellington, Napoleon Bonaparte, Robert Owen, esq., W. Wilberforce, esq., [and] Mrs. Hannah More." Each part was priced at 2s. 6d. *The Times*, 21 August, 1822: 4A. See also Hugh Campbell's "Fruits of Faith," a collection of elegies and stanzas advertised in 1825 as a potential Christmas present. *The Times*, 8 December, 1825: 4A.

focused on the Newgate Association's activities, unauthorized accounts paid attention to her as an individual, which put her at odds with Quaker principles of simplicity. Second, the accounts were not always true or the likenesses accurate.

Though Fry initially chose not to respond to bad or inaccurate press publicly, instead privately informing friends, fellow Quakers, and public officials of the true facts of the case (as she saw them), with time she came to realize that some misinformation had to be publicly refuted or it could damage her credibility. In 1823, for example, a brief notice appeared in *The Times* stating that Fry had attempted to prevent a prize-fight between Bill Neate and Tom Spring by offering £500 to the former in return for withdrawing from the contest.<sup>48</sup> This report was an issue for Fry both because it linked her to an activity considered unladylike (the report states that the ladies present “were of that itinerant class who attend like pick pockets at large meetings, to gull the simple and unwary”) and because the large financial compensation allegedly offered could have been put to much more profitable charitable purposes (at the time donations to charities typically ranged between £1–10). The following day *The Times* published a letter to the editor in which Joseph Fry stated that “my wife and I will be much obliged by thy insertion ... of a few words, contradicting the absurd story copied from the Bath and Cheltenham paper, of having interfered to prevent the late battle between Spring and Neate; the whole of which is without the slightest foundation in truth or probability.”<sup>49</sup> That it was

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<sup>48</sup> *The Times*, 22 May, 1823: 4B. The alleged offer was, according to the paper, declined because £500 was only a fraction of the potential profit Neate might receive from the contest. The original report appeared in *The Bath and Cheltenham Chronicle*.

<sup>49</sup> Joseph Fry, letter to the editor, *The Times*, 23 May, 1823: 3G.

Joseph Fry, and not his famous wife, who submitted the letter reflects a desire to position Fry as a respectable wife; if she had publically defended her actions this might have led to further criticism that she had acted inappropriately for a woman. *The Times* appears to have received a response to their publication of Joseph Fry's letter, causing further investigation on their part, as four days later they published a short correction noting that "the story as originally related is literally true, excepting only that Mrs. Fry did not make any offer of money. It was not, however, Mrs. Fry so well known in the metropolis; but another Mrs. Fry of the same family."<sup>50</sup> The "other" Mrs. Fry was Joseph Fry's sister (though the specific relationship is not mentioned in *The Times*), who like her famous sister-in-law was a Quaker minister and was active in local prison visiting. Had the Frys been solely concerned about the reputation of a female member of their family, the publication of just the letter to the editor—which refuted Fry's involvement in the affair without revealing her sister-in-laws' actions—would have been preferable. When the episode could not be put to rest with Joseph Fry's letter, it was more important to preserve Fry's public reputation than that of her sister-in-law.

The Frys also responded to allegations in 1824 that female prisoners had been transported by coach to a convict ship, and moreover had in the process behaved inappropriately. As this represented a direct attack on Fry's prison work, they were particularly concerned about refuting this report. Joseph Fry wrote a letter to the editor of *The Times* in which he stated that convicts were moved via hackneys. Moreover, they decided to show that the government disputed the account, and thus officially exonerate Fry's public reputation. To

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<sup>50</sup> *The Times*, 27 May, 1823: 3G.



that end, Joseph Fry included a letter from J. H. Capper, Esq. of the home secretary's office, who at his request had made inquiries into the reports and speculated that "the females alluded to in the public prints, were a set of loose women going to that port to meet a ship about to be paid off."<sup>51</sup>

The Frys also decided that they needed to address the visual images of Fry as by the early 1820s there were at least three unauthorized portraits of her in circulation. An engraving of Samuel Drummand's bust of Fry appeared in 1818 (figure 3); Richard Dighton's engraving of Fry, seated at a table in front of a grated window and reading a large bible appeared in July 1820 (figure 4); and in August 1821 W. T. Fry created an engraved head-and-shoulder profile based on Dighton's portrait (figure 5).



**Figure 3:** *Mrs. Elizabeth Fry*, engraving by Samuel Drummand (1818). Courtesy of The Library of the Religious Society of Friends, London.

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<sup>51</sup> Joseph Fry, letter to the editor, 10 May, 1824: 3F. Ten years later Fry herself wrote to the *Times* after the newspaper stated that she had paid for 50–60 books to be donated to each coastguard station in the United Kingdom. She asked the editor to correct the statement that she had provided the libraries "at her own expense," as the 40,000 books sent to the coastguard libraries had been "defray'd partly by the late government & partly by private subscriptions and the assistance of various charitable book societies & booksellers." *The Times*, 1 February, 1836: 1G; and Elizabeth Fry, letter to the editor, SC 044 Fry MSS. That Fry submitted the letter under her own name may have been because she had more confidence in her public role; however, it may have been that since her husband had declared bankruptcy in late 1828 they felt it was more politic that the request originate from Fry rather than Joseph Fry.



**Figure 4:** *In Prison and Ye Came Unto Me*, by Richard Dighton (1820).

**Figure 5:** Elizabeth Fry, engraving by William Thomas Fry (1821). Figures 4 and 5 courtesy of The Religious Society of Friends, London.

All of these likenesses portray Fry wearing the bonnet and shawl worn by plain Quakers. Drummand depicts Fry with a flat, generic face with firm but feminized lips. The two young children above Fry in W. T. Fry's engraving reinforces the impression of youth given to Fry in the original Dighton print; though in these portraits Fry appears to be in her late teens or early twenties, when Dighton created his portrait in 1820 Fry was forty years old and the mother of nine.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>52</sup> The eldest of Fry's children, Katherine, was twenty, the youngest was five. W. T. Fry's portrait is jarring since, instead of offering a visual representation of Fry's prison work, the sheaf of wheat and cornucopia evokes an image of plenty. The cherubic toddler wearing a cloak who is giving coins from his purse to a half-naked child begging on the side of the road links Fry with the idea that those with financial means helping the distressed.

In her journal, Fry states that the public portraits of her were “disagreeable” to her family; the fact that W. T. Fry shared the same last name may have been the last straw, as that fact could cause the public to assume that his etching was a true likeness of Fry (he was not related to the Quaker Frys) and that the Fry family were profiting from the sale of this portrait. Furthermore, the innocent youthful look presented in the Dighton and Fry engravings obscured her maturity and the confidence she now had in her capacity as a prison reform activist. Since “it would be a trial to [her] family” if these were the only portraits of her, Fry reluctantly agreed in February 1823 to her husband’s request that they commission Charles Robert Leslie, a member of the Royal Academy of Arts, to paint her portrait (figure 6), despite the fact that doing so put her at odds with Quaker principles.<sup>53</sup>



**Figure 6:** Elizabeth Fry, by Charles Robert Leslie (1823). Courtesy of The Library of the Religious Society of Friends, London.

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<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 23 February, 1823, LRSF. Joseph Fry, who loved art, also commissioned Leslie to paint a portrait of himself. Two years later, for example, he purchased several valuable paintings while on a business trip in France (one of which was reputed to be a Rembrandt), an act that displeased his wife both because it transgressed against her Quaker beliefs and because of the cost—the Fry family business had already been bailed out twice by her brothers, and would face bankruptcy again later that year; the business troubles were likely already evident when Fry made his purchase.

Leslie's painting captures the luxurious texture of Fry's Quaker shawl (she liked to wear silk shawls and gowns), but in contrast to most contemporary portraits there is no sense of place; to compromise with Quaker aesthetics she is depicted against a dark background rather than in front of a grand interior room or an outdoor setting. The painting was not meant solely for the private consumption of the Fry family or as a relic for future Fry generations of their ancestor, but a publicity tool: Mary Martha Pearson subsequently used the painting to create an engraving that, as figure 7 shows, functioned like the modern-day autographed celebrity photo.<sup>54</sup>



**Figure 7:** Elizabeth Fry, engraving by J. J. Hinchcliff after a portrait by Mary Martha Pearson (n.d.). Courtesy of The Library of the Religious Society of Friends, London.

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<sup>54</sup> Fry memorabilia was not limited to her portrait; her signature on letters was cut out and collected along with the autographs of other famous people. Ironically, in the *Gentleman's Magazine* obituary of Fry, they note that there are several portraits of Fry, but the only artists they name are Richard Dighton and William Thomas Fry's portraits. "Obituary of Mrs. Fry," *The Gentleman's Magazine* (December 1845): 646. As late as 1892 there was still a market for Fry pictures: see Wilfred Whitten, *Quaker Pictures* (London: Edward Hicks Jr., 1892), 65–72 and 75. Reproductions of Fry portraits were available from the publisher.

After the initial spate of publicity in both the newspapers and in criminal reform pamphlets in which Fry was singled out for recognition, subsequent accounts shifted to collective accounts of the activities of lady prison visiting committees. In 1821 Fry and her associates had founded the British Ladies Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners to coordinate the actions of the local associations. As noted in chapter three, the BLS published annual reports detailing the progress of the movement, both locally and nationally, and held annual meetings; both kept Fry in the public eye. Fry continued to be active in the prisons of the metropolis, inspected prisons when she travelled in the ministry, and corresponded and met with magistrates and government officials like Sir Robert Peel, the home secretary,<sup>55</sup> but media accounts of Fry between 1822 and 1827 decreased compared to press coverage between 1817 and 1821. This relative lull came to an end in 1827, ten years after she came to the public's notice. In February 1827 she embarked on a ten-week religious visit of Ireland, during which she also inspected prisons, lunatic asylums, and hospitals. A pamphlet about her trip, addressed to Lord Wellesley, the Lord Lieutenant for Ireland, appeared later that year.<sup>56</sup> That year, the BLS published *Sketch of the Origin and Results of Ladies' Prison Associations*, an official history of their efforts to date.<sup>57</sup> Even more significantly, Fry herself published

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<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth Fry to Thomas Harrison, Esq., 20 December, 1821, Port. 42, fol. 59, the British Library, London (hereafter BL); Elizabeth Fry to John Garrett, Esq., 5 November, 1822, SC 044 Fry MSS; Elizabeth Fry to Sir Robert Peel, 3 April, 1823, Add. 40355, fols. 193–94, BL; Sir Robert Peel to Elizabeth Fry, 5 April, 1823, Add. 40355, fol. 195, BL; Elizabeth Fry to London Aldermen, 1 September, 1824, SC 044 Fry MSS; Elizabeth Fry to Sir Robert Peel, 23 February, 1825, Add. 40373, fol. 293, BL; and Sir Robert Peel to Elizabeth Fry, 24 February, 1825, Add. 40373, fols. 297–98, BL.

<sup>56</sup> Elizabeth Fry and Joseph John Gurney, *Report Addressed to the Marquess Wellesley, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Respecting their Late Visit to that Country* (London: John & Arthur Arch, 1827).

<sup>57</sup> *Sketch of the Origin and Results of Ladies' Prison Associations, with Hints for the Formation of Local Associations* (London: J. and A. Arch, 1827); a revised edition appeared a dozen years later.

*Observations on the Visiting, Superintendence, and Government of Female Prisoners* (hereafter *Observations*), a tract that laid out not only her principles for the reformation of female prisoners but also detailed her views of women's work.<sup>58</sup> In the introduction and first chapters of *Observations* Fry deploys the discourse of separate gender identities and roles to argue for women's involvement in public affairs; the remaining chapters describe the steps women should take to create a formal association and how they should carry out their activities, including the proper approach to interacting with prison officials and inmates; the behavior with which lady visitors should conduct themselves; the need for and duties of the female matron under the committees' supervision; how to classify female inmates and teach them to read; the type of religious instruction the ladies should limit themselves to; the proper inmate employment, medical care, food, clothing, bedding, and heating; and recommended follow-up care for discharged prisoners.

With *Observations* Fry fully embraced her celebrity, using it not just to advance prison reform but to make a larger claim for women's participation in the public sphere. By the time Fry wrote *Observations*, she and her colleagues had demonstrated that her assertion that women could play an important role in public affairs; not only had the ladies committees alleviated some of the miserable conditions of individual prisoners under their care, but their activities had raised public attention of the iniquities of the criminal justice system. Some credit for the passing of Sir Robert Peel's Prison Act in 1823, which legislated

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See *A Concise View of the Origin and Progress of the British Ladies' Society for Promoting the Reformation of Female Prisoners* (London: Samuel Bentley, 1839).

<sup>58</sup> Elizabeth Fry, *Observations on the Visiting, Superintendence, and Government of Female Prisoners* (London : J. and A. Arch, 1827).

minimum standards regarding prisoner care, can be attributed to the spotlight Fry and her associates brought to bear on the necessity for prison reform. The supervision of female prisoners by women officers, an innovation introduced by Fry at Newgate, was specifically required under the Act's provisions. Fry herself took an active part in distributing *Observations*, *Sketch*, and the *Report to Lord Wellesley*; while her intent was to promote the BLS and women's work, doing so supported a revival of her celebrity.<sup>59</sup> A decade later, she also took a public stance about women's religious ministry by participating in a large public meeting for worship (a religious service open to non-Quakers) organized by her cousin Hannah Backhouse. Thanks to Fry's celebrity, the meeting drew many members of the nobility and distinguished foreign visitors.<sup>60</sup>

#### Criticism of Fry's Celebrity

While Fry learned to use her celebrity to promote prison reform and women's involvement in the public sphere, celebrity was a still commodity, subject to the whims of the reading public, not all of whom agreed with Fry's public activities or her views. Fry's celebrity status was also an issue for some within her familial and religious networks. Fry was not subjected to the type of

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<sup>59</sup> While travelling in 1828, for example, she wrote her son William to ask that six copies each of *Observations*, *Sketch*, and *Report to Lord Wellesley* be sent to her in Stafford. Elizabeth Fry to William Fry, 21 April, 1828, Egerton MS 3674, fol. 45, BL. In 1830 she gave a copy of *Observations* and other BLS publications to Queen Adelaide. Elizabeth Fry to Joseph Fry, 6 October, 1830, Egerton MS 3674, fols. 149–50.

<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entries, 8 and 14 July, 1838, LRSF. Though Fry had preached in non-Quaker settings for some time, they were either smaller affairs, with people who were closely associated with her or the Quakers generally, or spontaneous. This event, held at Westminster Meeting House in London, and was publicly promoted as a female-led meeting. Fry privately worried about women holding public meetings, since she knew that this was not sanctioned in many denominations. (In 1827, while Fry toured Ireland, the *Dublin Evening Mail* inserted the following brief notice: "Mrs. Fry.—But I suffer not a woman to teach ... but to be in silence."—*St. Paul to Timothy*, c. ii. v. 12.—The celebrated Mrs. Fry preached yesterday at the Meeting-house belonging to the Society of Friends." Reprinted in *The Times*, 23 February, 1827: 2F. Despite her apprehensions, Fry preached on the female ministry, "endeavouring to show that truth must not be despised, because it came through weak instruments."

vitriolic press Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire received when the latter campaigned for Charles James Fox in 1784, but because Fry was a public figure her private life, her reform activities, and her associations with politicians, royalty, members of the nobility, and—on the part of some of her co-religionists—non-Quakers, became fair game for criticism either because her critics believed she had gone beyond the activities deemed acceptable for a woman, disagreed with her vision for prison reform, or violated Quaker principles.

The precariousness of female celebrity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries focused, in the first instance, on a woman's sexual behavior, whether real or perceived. The trope that royalty and the aristocracies were licentious was wielded for political purposes: the lampoons of the Duchess of Devonshire's extramarital activities and her supposed domination of her politically apathetic husband were followed, a quarter century later, by leaks of the "secret" investigation into the alleged infidelities of Queen Caroline. Condemnation of sexual misadventures, however, was not limited to the social elite. William Godwin's memoir of Mary Wollstonecraft publicized his late wife's prior relationship with Gilbert Imlay (which had resulted in the out-of-wedlock birth of Wollstonecraft's oldest daughter), which seriously damaged her public reputation. Actresses were also suspect; the liaisons of some prominent actresses with royal or aristocratic men were presumed to be commonplace within the profession.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> On the limits of celebrity for actresses see Wanko, *Roles of Authority*; and Laura Tobey Engel, *Fashioning Celebrity: The Memoirs and Portraits of Eighteenth-Century British Actresses* (Ph.D. dissertation: Columbia University, 2001).



Of course, not all celebrated or famous women were tarnished by allegations of extramarital shenanigans—the spinster Hannah More is one example. Like More, Fry could not be accused of inappropriate sexual behavior; despite her initial ambivalence about Joseph Fry, they had developed a close, affectionate marriage. Instead of sexual lust, she could be accused of lusting for attention from those with political and social power. Fry noted that “for all I have had this support from many of my fellow mortals ... yet I believe many in society [fellow Quakers] have great fears for me and mine & some out of our society do not scruple to spread evil reports, as if vanity or political motives led me to neglect a large family.”<sup>62</sup>

In 1823, *The Freethinking Christians' Quarterly Register*, in the first of several attacks on Fry and the Quakers generally, denounced “busy, bustling, bountiful ladies, full of pride and piety ... at the head of [which] stands the celebrated Mrs. Fry; and though one of the sect of Quakers, a sect who affect to disregard the praise of this world, and to do good deeds in private ... [is] noised abroad in the world, and even the senate resounds with her praises.”<sup>63</sup> Two years later, they continued to express their outrage at Fry’s fame. “We feel authorized,” they state, “in adducing her example as illustrative of our objections to the ... practices of the whole tribe of pharisaic professors of all sects; who, under the cloak of charity and religion, are but vaunting their own virtues, and promoting their own ends.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 1 July, 1818, Norfolk 519/1.

<sup>63</sup> *The Freethinking Christians' Quarterly Register*, vol. 1 (London: Sherwood, Jones, & Co., 1823), 174–75. The Freethinking Christians were a new and relatively small denomination founded in 1798 by Samuel Thompson, who was in the wine and spirits trade. It is not clear how widely the *FCQR* circulated, but it was advertised (with article titles) in *The Times*. See, for example, *The Times*, 10 October, 1823: 3G, and *The Times*, 1 May, 1824: 2F. Each copy cost 2 shillings.

<sup>64</sup> “Mrs. Fry,” *FCQR* 2:225.

According to *FCQR*, Fry was culpable in her celebrity, rather than an unwitting and unwilling recipient. They point to the fact that it was her brother and brother-in-law, Joseph John Gurney and Thomas Fowell Buxton, who championed her work through their pamphlets. They also note that the cost of Gurney's *Notes* was "very dear," implying that the author and his sister had profited from its publication.<sup>65</sup> The cheaper *Hour in Newgate*, though written by a non-Quaker, was sold by Quaker booksellers and its readers were directed to send any donations for the Newgate Association to Joseph Fry's bank, Fry and Chapman.<sup>66</sup> According to *FCQR*, this tract was further proof that, rather than engaging in "silent and unassuming endeavors," Fry was performing a public act of theater. They observe the *Hour in Newgate*'s dramatic language—"the secretary's office 'surmounted with bayonets; the lobby dark, stone-vaulted, and dismal;' the men on guard with 'stern aspect: enormous grated and iron-guarded doors, massive bolts and confined space.'" The theatricality of the scene continued when, in the room appointed for Fry's reading, she proceeded to sit "in the centre of the ampitheatre" and, after a "bell [rang] up the curtain, as it were," the inmates appeared to take their place on the stage.<sup>67</sup> The frontispiece engraving of this scene (figure 8), *FCQR* claims, only reinforces Fry's exhibitionism, and prompted them to commission a facsimile with the satirical caption "An Hour in Newgate, Exhibiting Mrs. Fry and her friends, as published by the Quakers (figure 9).

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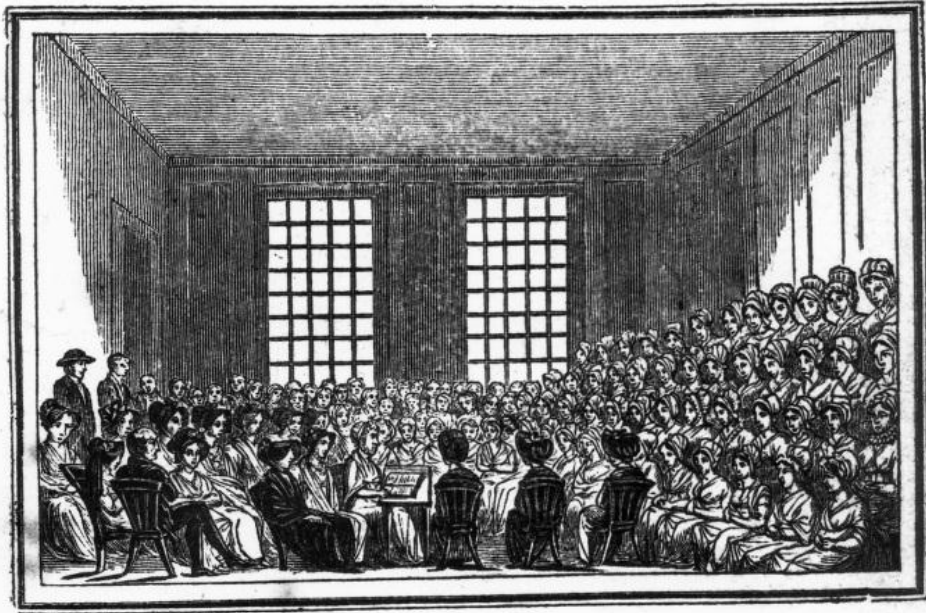
<sup>65</sup> William St. Clair's analysis of the sale of literature during this period reveals that more expensive publications may have been out of the reach of the ordinary reader, but should not be equated with profit. William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), chapter eleven.

<sup>66</sup> "Mrs. Fry," *FCQR* 2:239.

<sup>67</sup> "Mrs. Fry," *FCQR* 2:238–41.

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**AN HOUR**  
IN  
**HIS MAJESTY'S GAOL**  
OF  
**NEWGATE,**  
ON  
**FRIDAY THE 22nd DECEMBER, 1820.**



**SECOND EDITION.**

**LONDON:**

PRINTED BY HENRY TEAPE, TOWER HILL;  
FOR J. NISBETT, CASTLE-STREET, OXFORD-STREET; AND  
EDMUND FRY, HOUNDSDITCH.

*The Profits, if any, will go entirely to the increase of the Fund for  
the Relief of Female Prisoners.*

**Figure 8:** *An Hour in His Majesty's Gaol of Newgate* title page (1820). Courtesy of The Religious Society of Friends, London.



**Figure 9:** "An Hour in Newgate." Exhibiting Mrs. Fry and her friends, as published by the Quakers (1825). Courtesy of The Library of the Religious Society of Friends, London.

Fry and her followers, *FCQR* mockingly adds, should "own themselves indebted to us, for thus contributing in *their own way*, to extend their celebrity."<sup>68</sup>

Criticism of Fry's alleged desire for fame was not limited to members of the press; some of Fry's family and fellow Quakers also critiqued Fry's public profile, albeit less vituperously than *FCQR*. In 1827, Louisa Hoare wrote acerbically of her sister's popularity to her son, "Do you see the reports in the papers of Aunt Fry and her doings in Ireland? Catholics, Protestants, high and low, learned and ignorant are drawn to your aunt by a sort of witchery."<sup>69</sup> Some Friends were irate when they heard that Fry had been at a banquet at the

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<sup>68</sup> "Mrs. Fry," *FCQR* 2:238. According to The Library of the Religious Society of Friends, London, the caricaturist was Thomas Rowlandson and the plate was produced by Augustus Charles Pugin. By focusing on Fry's celebrity, *FCQR* fails to recognize that Fry's Newgate Bible readings, whether witnessed, reported, or visually depicted, were not as powerful in subverting separate sphere ideology as testifying before Parliament, corresponding and meeting with officials and politicians, and organizing local chapters.

<sup>69</sup> Quoted in Rose, 131.

Mayor of London's residence to mark the commencement of the new Royal Exchange,<sup>70</sup> which was attended by royalty, court officials, and government ministers; they particularly objected to the fact that toasts were made—a practice Quakers abhorred—even though Fry had not risen to participate. Lydia Ann Barclay stated that she was “grieved ... about E. J. Fry's intercourse with the great;” Fry's cousin, Hannah C. Backhouse, had at first been “rather startled” after reading in the papers that Fry had attended the banquet; as she reminded Fry, “some [Friends] are pretty strongly of the opinion that harm must be done by such as thyself giving a license to attend entertainments which experience has often shown lead into very promiscuous company & practices.”<sup>71</sup> The following month, in reference to Fry hosting the King of Prussia for lunch after giving him a tour of Newgate, Barclay wrote that “true Friends are greatly grieved with E. J. Fry's royalty proceedings, but I do not hear of anything being done about it, they are as much afraid of touching her as ... the Norwich Friends are of Joseph John Gurney.”<sup>72</sup>

Fry was cognizant that her celebrity conflicted with the humbleness required by her faith and opened her up to censure. She confided in her journal that she had “felt of late fears lest my being made so much of so much respect

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<sup>70</sup> “The Dinner,” 18 January, 1842, *The Times*: 5A.

<sup>71</sup> Lydia Ann Barclay to Celia Wilcocks (copy), 3 February, 1842, N.B. III, fol. 62, LRSF; and Hannah C. Backhouse to Elizabeth Fry, 30 January, 1842, Add. MS 73629, fols. 150–53, BL. Upon reflection, Backhouse and her husband concluded that Fry did not act “inconsistently with our religious principles, it is quite within the range of possibilities that for a special purpose thou should have made thy appearance there.” Fry, her daughter Katharine, and a friend, Mary Newsome, wrote letters to concerned Quakers explaining Fry's actions and defending her decision to attend the dinner (they argued that it had been a prime opportunity to discuss the prison cause with prominent and influential men—Fry had been seated between Prince Albert and Sir Robert Peel). See Mary Newsome to unknown recipient, 17 January, 1842, Temp MSS 725/10, fol. 26, LRSF; Elizabeth Fry to Josiah Forster (copy), n.d., John Thompson MSS vol. 2/144, fol. 181, LRSF; Elizabeth Fry to Susanna Corder, n.d., John Thompson MSS vol. 2/144, fol. 181a, LRSF; Elizabeth Fry to Mary Lloyd, 5 February, 1842, Add. MS 73529, fols. 167–70, BL; and Katharine Fry to Mary Ann Davis, January 1842, Egerton MS 3675, fols. 157–60, BL.

<sup>72</sup> Lydia Ann Barclay to Celia Wilcocks (copy), 18 March, 1842, N.B. III, fol. 62, LRSF.

paid me by the people in power in the city & also being so publicly brought forward may not prove a temptation lead to something of self exaltation or worldly pride.”<sup>73</sup> On numerous occasions she rationalized her frequent contact with the high and mighty with the argument that she brought attention to her charitable work and to the beliefs of the Society of Friends, thus raising their profile in society. Her hope, she claimed, was not to receive attention purely for attention’s sake, but rather as a means to impact the ways in which her peers treated the materially disenfranchised and to affect the conduct and hearts of these individuals.<sup>74</sup>

Public opposition to Fry also came from those who believed her activities were contrary to normative gender roles. *The Freethinking Christian Quarterly Review*, which denounced Quakers as religious hypocrites whose principles and practices were “pernicious to the interests of real Christianity,” reserved a particular distain for Fry. They subscribed to a strict gendered dichotomy between public and private; women should be “gentle, modest, and retiring,” and thus were “unsuited to public business. ... We seek for the woman in the retirement of private life—in that sacred, domestic circle of which she is the

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<sup>73</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 28 August, 1817, Norfolk 519/1. On the other hand, she recognized that complete self-effacement also did not help the prison cause—she had to act as if she was somebody worth listening to. See also Elizabeth Fry, journal entries, 7 March and 4 August, 1817, Norfolk 519/1.

<sup>74</sup> On one occasion, for example, she wrote that while her Newgate readings could be a trial to her, “so many attend, and often such a variety; and some of such high rank, I should think so little accustomed to hear the truth spoken. ... the desire of my heart respecting them it is this—that the cause of truth and righteousness may be exalted, my Lord glorified, and living faith in Him promoted.” Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 2 May, 1822, MC 519/2, Norfolk Public Record Office, Norwich (hereafter Norfolk 519/2). See also Elizabeth Fry, journal entries, 29 April, 1818, Norfolk 519/1; 28 October, 1818 and 29 November, 1820, LRSF; Elizabeth Fry to Josiah Forster (copy), n.d., John Thompson MSS vol. 2/144, fol. 181, LRSF; and Elizabeth Fry to Mary Lloyd, 5 February, 1842, Add. MS 73529, fols. 167–70, BL.

solace and the joy.”<sup>75</sup> Fry and her cohort did the very opposite of what women should do: instead of “shrinking from the touch of impurity,” they sought out close contact with the most depraved and dissipated people in society. In doing so they not only perverted the female character, but wasted the time and attention that should be devoted to their families. “Mrs. Fry,” the authors disdainfully note, “has a family of *nine children*, most of them young; and she also has a husband, although no one seems to suspect that there exists in the world such a person as *Mister Fry*” (their italics).<sup>76</sup> However, while they condemned Fry for spending her time with prisoners instead of her family, the more serious aspect of her offence was not that prison reform occupied her time, but that it occupied her mind.<sup>77</sup> Some readers appear to have criticized *FCQR* on the grounds that Fry was a woman and therefore they should not have attacked her; the *FCQR* responded that Fry had opened herself up to censure because she was “a public character in the strictest sense of the designation—as much so as Wilberforce, as Cobbett, or Carlisle [sic]” who had undertaken tasks that only men should carry out: “taking into her own hands the duties of the state secretary for the home department; and, in our metropolis, performing

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<sup>75</sup> “The Freethinking Christians’ Review of the Religious World: Quakerism,” *The Freethinking Christian Quarterly Register* 1, no. 4 (London: Sherwood, Jones & Co, 1823): 174.

<sup>76</sup> “The Freethinking Christians’ Review of the Religious World,” *The Freethinking Christian Quarterly Register* vol. 1 (1823): 174–5. In a subsequent issue the authors sarcastically noted their relief at having since seen Joseph Fry’s name in the papers, thus confirming his existence. They had only meant to pity, not disrespect, Joseph Fry with their claim that he was a cipher; but continue that by “an inversion of the order of Nature, the public labours and public honours of the lady ... put a complete extinguisher upon the gentleman.” “Mrs. Fry,” *FCQR* 2:227. In a letter to the editor of *FCQR*, one gentleman defended Fry and her associates, claiming that rather than being contaminated by their contact with female prisoners, by teaching the inmates to read and work they were actually not just installing “habits of order and cleanliness” in their subjects, but were further cementing those habits in their own lives and in that of their families. “Defence of Mrs. Fry,” *The Freethinking Christian Quarterly Register* 2, no. 6 (1824): 158.

<sup>77</sup> “Mrs. Fry,” *FCQR* 2:229.

the functions vested by the laws in the city magistracy.”<sup>78</sup> If Fry acted like a man, then they would treat her as they would any other male public figure.

Quakers were far more egalitarian with respect to women’s ministry and female ministers—even wives and mothers—taking lengthy trips for religious purposes was an accepted practice.<sup>79</sup> Though Fry’s ministry may have been in accordance with Quaker beliefs, but that did not mean that all Quakers believed women could be active in public affairs.<sup>80</sup> And some who did not reject the idea of female participation in the public sphere thought that there should be limits on those activities if they, in their opinion, took too much time away from a woman’s role as mother and wife.

Members of the Society who disapproved of her work pointed to the fact that her husband, while professing to be a Plain Quaker, nevertheless enjoyed concerts, hunting, and other activities frowned upon by the stricter adherents of the Society of Friends. Her children, meanwhile, demonstrated a decided lack of piety and had a reputation for bad behavior. In an era when femininity was closely tied to raising children to be good citizens (which most still presumed to include a religious life), Fry’s children were seen by some as evidence of her failures in domestic duties.<sup>81</sup> Fry herself found her children’s behavior trying;

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<sup>78</sup> “Mrs. Fry,” *FCQR* 2:227.

<sup>79</sup> Margaret Hope Bacon, “An International Sisterhood: Eighteenth-Century Quaker Women in Overseas Ministry,” *The Friends’ Quarterly* 28, no. 5 (January 1995): 193–206; and Phyllis Mack, “In a Female Voice: Preaching and Politics in Eighteenth-Century British Quakerism,” in *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity*, eds. Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 248–63.

<sup>80</sup> Though Quakers had become prominent within the anti-slavery campaigns in the United States and Britain, initially there had been significant division within the Quaker community about whether this was appropriate behavior for a sect that saw themselves as a “separate people.” See David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975); and Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Absolutism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006).

<sup>81</sup> In time, her children did embrace Christianity, though most of them left the Society of Friends, which some Quakers attributed to her having failed in her maternal responsibilities. Five of her



although she loved them, she often expressed herself at a loss on how to deal with them: while a “very precious charge,” she wrote, “at times they appear too much for me.”<sup>82</sup> Though she agonized about her children’s failings, and her own as a mother, she found it easier when she could leave them to the ministrations of her husband and siblings, finding greater satisfaction and less frustration in her dealings with prisoners. In 1820, for example, she wrote that she did not expect to spend much time with her children in the coming months, and that while they did consume a significant portion of her mind and time, her “household cares [are] at times a weighty burden ... It is what I have no natural taste or power for, and therefore it is so difficult to me.” On the other hand, she found the “public field of service in the prison cause affords a wonderful opening for usefulness; if I had time I should have enough to do without attending to almost anything else.”<sup>83</sup>

At the 1817 yearly meeting some of the delegates argued that her busy public life had led her to neglect her family; they accused her of running after fame and deliberately sending away six of her children to family members so she could spend time at Newgate.<sup>84</sup> Unbeknownst to the delegates, however, the

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ten living children left the Society or were disowned because they married Anglicans; another, William Storrs, renounced his membership. While Katherine never formally renounced Quakerism she set aside plain practices of speech and dress.

<sup>82</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 28 July, 1817, Norfolk 519/1.

<sup>83</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 5 November, 1820, LRSF. This was not a new sentiment; an earlier entry revealed the contrast between her feelings about the effects of her maternal versus her prison responsibilities: “A remarkable blessing still appears to accompany my prison concerns; perhaps the greatest apparent blessing on my deeds that ever attended me. How have the spirits of... the poor afflicted prisoners appeared to be subjected. .... My beloved children do not appear sufficiently under the influence of religion. ... Oh! that I could prosper at home in my labours, as I appear to do abroad.” Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 17 December, 1817, Norfolk 519/1.

<sup>84</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 5 June, 1817, Norfolk 519/1. Fry notes that “others fears for me that I should in consequence [sic] [of her prison work] neglect some home duties. ... I have much desired as it respects some of our dear friends in the station of elder & also some of our ministers who appear rather busy in watching over some of us younger ones (I fully believe they think for

financial pressures produced by the War of 1812 and the recession at the end of the Napoleonic wars, coupled with an imprudent loan made by Joseph Fry's brother to his wife's family, had brought the Fry bank to the edge of bankruptcy. The eldest Fry children had been sent to Fry's siblings to reduce the financial burden on the family, not so she could focus on her prison work. Fry was unable to refute the accusations because they were obliged to maintain a public image of prosperity to forestall any questions about the solvency of both the tea business and the bank. The charge of neglect weighed heavily on Fry, although she did appreciate the fact that her children were now under the more strict supervision of her siblings Catherine, Rachel, Joseph John, and Daniel. The criticism did not, however, deter her from continuing to be active in prison reform.

Nor was Fry's public position welcomed by all of her family. While her husband and her brothers Joseph John and Samuel Gurney supported her public endeavors, her brother Dan, who had converted to Anglicanism, strongly disagreed with the Quaker belief that men and women were equal in service before God and believed that women had no role to play in the public sphere. Dan Gurney, although grateful that Fry nursed members of his family when ill, did not even allow her to read the Bible to, or pray with, them in the privacy of his home. That she was publicly lauded for her activism was, accordingly, a sore point for him.<sup>85</sup> Fry's celebrity was perhaps most difficult for her eldest

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good) that I may not admit unkind or improper feelings towards them ... can we wonder if they are a little allarmed [sic] at new engagements such as my prison [work]." Charges of maternal neglect dogged Fry; she was cautioned again in 1818 and in 1823. In 1818 she was distressed at Friends who "give way to what appears to be a gossiping slanderous spirit ... [their] watching over one another for good, degenerates into a spirit of watching over one another for evil." Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 17 November, 1818, LRSF.

<sup>85</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 19 April, 1837, LRSF. Even before she became a prison reformer her brother Dan disapproved of her public role as a minister; see Elizabeth Fry, journal entries, 3

daughter, Katherine, who was sixteen when Fry came to the public's attention, and to whom many of Fry's domestic duties were delegated. Though Katherine herself became active in prison reform as an adult, she never married, and lived her life in the shadow of, and in service to, her mother.<sup>86</sup>

There were some who defended Fry's ability to balance her public and private duties. A reader of *The Gentleman's Magazine*, for example,

Repels the charge that has been brought against Mrs. Fry of neglecting her family ... the numerous family and large domestic establishment of Mrs. Fry are conducted throughout with the utmost propriety, the several departments being all under her judicious and active superintendence. Notwithstanding the various claims on her attention, she never appears oppressed nor distracted; nor does her zeal in the holy cause of humanity ever lead her to infringe on those domestic duties which every female is called upon conscientiously to fulfil [sic].<sup>87</sup>

Although it is not known who the correspondent was—or even his competence to render judgment on Fry's execution of her domestic responsibilities—his defense indicates that there were those who felt she was not wrong in participating in the public sphere, despite the fact that she was a wife and mother.

Equally serious, from the Quaker perspective, was the bankruptcy of the Fry and Chapman bank in late 1828. The testimony of integrity required Friends to not mislead others, either in their personal or professional lives, and not being able to honor a business' financial obligations implied dishonesty. For Friends, financial mismanagement by any of its members was not just a personal failing because it violated a core Quaker principle, but was something

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November, 1809, and undated [December 1809], LRSF. Her brother John, who died in September 1814, before she became famous for her prison reform work, shared Dan Gurney's opinion of Fry's religious ministry; had he lived, it is likely that he would have shared his younger brother's objection to Fry's activities in the public sphere.

<sup>86</sup> See, for example, Rachel Gurney to Katherine Fry, 21 August, 1821, Egerton MS 3673A, fols. 178–79; and Rachel Gurney to Katherine Fry, 25 June, 1823, Egerton MS 3673A, fols. 193–94.

<sup>87</sup> Cryptos, "Minor Correspondence," *The Gentleman's Magazine* (September 1820), 194.

that stained the reputation of the Society as a whole. As noted above, the Frys' financial troubles dated to 1812, and over the years had required repeated infusions of cash from the Gurneys.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, since contributions to her prison reform efforts were made to Fry & Chapman, both Friends and the general public questioned whether her household and charitable expenditures had been appropriately separated. Although this was not the case—her brothers Joseph John and Samuel and her uncle, Robert Barclay, and cousin, Gurney Barclay, had been underwriting her charitable expenditures—there was no way to effectively dispute the rumors.<sup>89</sup>

The bankruptcy had a chilling effect on Fry's reception in the Friends community (her husband was disowned by the Society of Friends as a result in 1830, and not readmitted until 1837).<sup>90</sup> She could no longer host out of town

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<sup>88</sup> William Fry, whose loan to his in-laws had been a huge factor in the tea business' near bankruptcy in 1812, was also a partner in Fry and Chapman. Nor was Fry & Chapman the only bank to fail in the 1820s; there had been a series of bank failures in 1825. Joseph Fry's personal estate repaid its debts in full; William Fry's personal estate (£26,786), repaid fifteen shillings on the pound before 1833, and the full estate debt was settled in January 1833. The bank's debts were considerable—£398,102; by 1844, creditors had been repaid six shillings on the pound. "Court of Bankruptcy," *The Times*, 1 February, 1833: 4F; and "Fry and Chapman's Bankruptcy," *The Times*, 24 February, 1844: 8F.

<sup>89</sup> See, for example, Robert Barclay to Elizabeth Fry, 25 November, 1819, Egerton MS 3673A, fol. 149, BL. This was not the first time Joseph Fry's business reputation had been called into question: he was the banker, and a director, of the Equitable Loan Bank, an investment scheme that loaned money (in exchange for pledges) at a 10% rate rather than the 20% traditionally charged by pawnbrokers. *The Times*, 29 March, 1824: 2F. The fund advertised that it had £2 million in capital, in shares of £50. Fry was far from being the only Quaker or prominent member of society associated with the fund; the Duke of York was patron, and the vice-presidents and directors included sixteen members of Parliament, as well as lawyers, and businessmen. Advertisement, *The Times*, 7 May, 1824: 2A. In the March 29 announcement *The Times* stated that "it is said to be brought out under the auspices of Mrs. Fry;" this was another instance where the Frys decided to publicly refute what some would have considered improper behavior by a woman. In a letter to the editor, Joseph Fry expressed his "unqualified contradiction of that part of the article which couples her name with that institution. ... [she was] one hundred miles from London during the whole time, and ignorant of the existence of such a plan, until after it was announced ... I believe few persons," Fry continued, "have a more correct sense than herself of what is becoming her sex and station." Joseph Fry, "Letter to the Editor," *The Times*, 10 May, 1824: 3F. For criticism of the Equitable Loan Bank see "Mrs. Fry," *FCQR* 2:234.

<sup>90</sup> Elizabeth Fry to Joseph John Gurney, 27 July, 1837, Gurney MSS 1/228, LRSF.

Quakers during yearly meeting, a Fry tradition that predated her marriage.<sup>91</sup> Because of the dishonor the bankruptcy case brought on the Fry name, her siblings pressed her to withdraw from the public eye,<sup>92</sup> advice she ignored after receiving encouragement from William Wilberforce.<sup>93</sup> Her ability to do so, however, was circumscribed by the bankruptcy: Quakers who wished to travel to other meetings had to apply for authority from their local meeting, and in 1829 and 1830 her plans to travel to attend various Meetings and, as was her usual practice, in the process visit prisons were thwarted because she was denied permission to do so by her local meeting. In one case, a trip to Suffolk, permission was granted but prominent Friends in Suffolk told her she was not welcome, and the trip had to be cancelled.<sup>94</sup>

Opposition to Fry's work by her fellow Quakers was not limited to her shortcomings as a wife and mother or her public profile after the ignominy of the Fry bankruptcy. Fry was also criticized by some of her co-religionists for the way she practiced her faith. As described in chapter one, Fry was "enthusiastic"

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<sup>91</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entries, 7 June, 1829 and 14 May, 1830, LRSF.

<sup>92</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 6 January, 1829, LRSF; for further discouragement by her siblings see journal entries, January–August 1829, LRSF. Writing to her daughter, Rachel, Fry confided that the bankruptcy was "one of the deepest trials to which we are liable; its perplexities are so great and numerous, its mortifications and humiliations so abounding." Elizabeth Fry to Rachel Cresswell, 27 November, 1828, quoted in Hare, *Gurneys of Earham*, 2:44. The following year the Fry finances had improved enough for the family to move to a smaller house close to their previous estate outside London; the "Upton Lane" home, which by modern standards would be considered a large house, was close to Ham House, Samuel Gurney's residence. Gurney, who had apprenticed in the Fry tea business in 1801 at the age of fifteen and had lived with the Frys during his apprenticeship, had long supported his sister financially, and it was his assistance that made the Fry residence at Upton Lane, and Fry's continued travel ministry and prison reform activities, possible. Samuel at times also accompanied her on her religious and prison trips; in February 1830, for example, they visited one of the female convict ships prior to its debarkation to Australia, and they travelled together in the ministry and visited prisons in 1824, 1826, 1836, and 1840.

<sup>93</sup> William Wilberforce to Elizabeth Fry, Fry Notabilities, 40/2 and 40/3, LRSF.

<sup>94</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entries, July 1829 and June 1830, LRSF. In time, censure of Fry diminished. On June 16, 1836, for example, she noted that twenty-nine people had visited her home, most of them on her account. Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 18 June, 1836, LRSF.

about religion, which at the time was decidedly out of fashion, and her habit of kneeling in prayer, passionate preaching, and belief that the Bible should be one's compass rather than following the "Inner Light," as traditional Quaker thought held, set her apart from some of her co-religionists. Fry's belief in the redemption and reformation of the individual placed her within the Evangelical movement, which was still nascent within the Society of Friends. Given that Fry was now the most famous Quaker of her time, the fact that she was not representative of quietest Quakerism troubled those who disliked evangelical practices. Her reception among traditional Quakers was, therefore, at times cool; this was particularly the case in the north of England and in Scotland during her 1818 tour of prisons. It was not until the mid-1820s and 1830s that her brand of Evangelical Quakerism became mainstream.<sup>95</sup>

Finally, members of Fry's family and fellow Quakers did not always support her willingness to cross confessional divides. Fry realized that in order to obtain wide support for her prison work that work would have to be nondenominational. But not only was she willing to ensure that she could not be accused of spreading distinctly Quaker values and beliefs, she was willing to work with individuals from other denominations, and to speak at, or visit, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and Catholic venues.<sup>96</sup> Her refusal to let doctrinal divisions stand in the way of caring for the disenfranchised broadened her understanding of other faiths. In her youth, for example, she believed that

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<sup>95</sup> See John Punshon, *Portrait in Grey: A Short History of the Quakers* 2nd ed. (London: Quakerbooks, 2006); David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989); and Elizabeth Isichei, *Victorian Quakers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970).

<sup>96</sup> Fry's daughter Rachel, for example, was angered by her mother preaching at a Methodist chapel in April 1837. Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 19 April, 1837, LRSF. Fry wrote that Rachel and her husband, Frank Cresswell, "nearly dispise Friends & I fear all dissenters from the established Church."

nuns devoted their lives solely to prayer and thanksgiving, but after witnessing the care provided by nuns in Dublin and at the St. Omar and St. Louis hospitals in France she publicly praised them for their piety and charity, seeing in them fellow laborers for Christ. On the latter occasion she even attended High Mass, which she judged as having “something of the work of true religion,” although she qualified that it was “under what appeared to me the rubbish of superstition and show.” At a Quarterly Meeting shortly thereafter Fry was irritated by a fellow Quaker’s insistence that the Quakers were a chosen people, a designation Fry felt applied to all Christian denominations.<sup>97</sup> Fry’s outlook was also tempered by her family’s many conversions to the Church of England, including that of four of her sisters, two of her brothers, and six of her children.<sup>98</sup>

Fry’s celebrity status also opened her up to public criticism on specific aspects of her prison reform approach. Despite the overwhelmingly positive praise of Fry in the first few years after Owen’s article, there were also those who did not agree with some or all of her ideas. The first concerted attack on her authority as a reformer and philanthropist came after her tour of prisons in the north of England and in Scotland in the company of Joseph John Gurney. The trip lasted two months, and they visited jails in both large cities such as Edinburgh, Liverpool, and York as well as smaller communities like Haddington, Kinghorn, and Kirkaldy. Early the following year Gurney published a 170–page report based on his sister’s notes that detailed the conditions of

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<sup>97</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 15 October, 1836, LRSF; and Elizabeth Fry to her children, 12 May, 1839, Temp MSS 61/9, fol. 58, LRSF.

<sup>98</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entries, 7 May, 1805; November, 1808; 23 August, 1811; 12 September, 1811; and 4 July, 1816, LRSF. See also Fry, *Observations*, 4.

each jail, as well as general observations and recommendations on prison discipline.<sup>99</sup> While many reformers welcomed the information contained in the report, it also came under fire from some prison officials and magistrates who felt threatened by the public attention the report brought to the state of their prisons. Although Gurney was able to provide evidence to refute many of the criticisms leveled at their report,<sup>100</sup> Fry was acutely sensitive to the public disparagement of her activities. Writing in May 1819, she observed that

the difference of last winter and this has been striking, though I then had my deep conflicts, I was, as it were, marvelously raised up ... How did the righteous compass me about, from the Sovereign, the Princes, and the Princesses, down to the poorest, lowest, and most destitute; how did poor sinners of almost every description seek after me, and cleave to me— What was not said of me? What was not thought of me? may I not say in public and in private, in innumerable publications, &c. This winter ... I find the tongue of slander has been ready to attack me. The work that was made so much of before, some try to lessen now.<sup>101</sup>

The *Edinburgh Review*, which advocated the tread-wheel and solitary confinement rather than classification, employment, and education wrote that “Mrs. Fry is an amiable excellent woman, and ten thousand times better than the infamous neglect that preceded her; but her’s [sic] is not the method to stop crimes. ... There must be a great deal of solitude; ... hard, incessant, irksome, eternal labour; a planned and regulated and unrelenting exclusion of happiness and comfort.”<sup>102</sup>

Even officials with whom Fry had a cordial relationship spoke publically against what they viewed as the limits of her methods. H. G. Bennet, after

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<sup>99</sup> Gurney, *Notes on a Visit*.

<sup>100</sup> James Ewing, for example, sent Fry information about Glasgow prisons and some planned improvements to these prisons and forwarded to Gurney to be included in the third edition of *Notes*. Joseph John Gurney to Katherine Fry, 30 March, 1819, Egerton MS 3673A, fol. 145.

<sup>101</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 1 May, 1819, LRSF.

<sup>102</sup> “The Third Report of the Committee of the Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline, and for the Reformation of Juvenile Offenders,” *The Edinburgh Review* 36 (February 1822): 374.



praising Fry and the Newgate committee for their efforts, argued that inspection, classification, employment and discipline could not fully reform criminals if prisons were not built to physically separate prisoners. Allocating funding to build new prisons required legislative action, and this was something that was outside the purview of Fry and her cohort.<sup>103</sup> Henry Addington, Viscount Sidmouth, the home secretary from 1812–1822, in a response to the Marquis of Lansdowne’s praise of Fry during a discussion of criminal justice reform, attributed the increased crime rate in part due to a decrease in the “dread of imprisonment having been, in a great measure, done away by the efforts made from philanthropic motives to render prisons places rather of accommodation than punishment.”<sup>104</sup>

Lord Sidmouth’s contention that more habitable prisons promoted rather than diminished crimes was echoed in a letter to the editor of *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, in which the author argued that “the false philanthropy which would convert our Prisons into comfortable Hotels and that morbid sensibility which cannot bear to see or hear of the infliction of pain or ignominious punishment upon a criminal are ... among the prime causes of the increase of petty offenders.”<sup>105</sup> And George Holme-Sumner in an 1825 debate on the merits of female prisoners using the treadwheel at the General Quarter Session of Surrey county, asserted that if “the diminution of re-commitments under Mrs. Fry’s system was 40 per cent., the tread-wheel discipline has caused a diminution of

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<sup>103</sup> Bennet, *Letter to the Common Council*, 28–30; and H. G. Bennet, “Scotch Boroughs,” *The Times*, 10 March, 1819: 2C. As noted in chapter two, Fry herself called for new prisons to be built, and was consulted during the construction of several prisons.

<sup>104</sup> Lord Sidmouth, quoted in “Proceedings in the late Session of Parliament,” *The Gentleman’s Magazine* (November 1818): 454.

<sup>105</sup> Corrector, letter to the editor, 5 June, 1820,” *The Gentleman’s Magazine* (July 1820): 26.

200 per cent.” Even if their county had its own version of Mrs. Fry, which he thought unlikely given her “rare” abilities, “there was no necessity of their resorting to the system of which she was the great authoress.”<sup>106</sup>

Although disheartened by the criticism she received from some quarters, Fry found that there were still many who flocked to her. During a trip to Ireland in 1827, she was often accompanied by as many as 100 people to various prisons, and at one public appearance over a thousand people came to hear her speak.<sup>107</sup> Yet by the 1830s, several prominent prison reform activists—including her brother-in-law Samuel Hoare and William Crawford, the secretary of the SIPD and one of the prison inspectors appointed in 1835—shifted away from rehabilitation to deterrence and punishment through unproductive labor and separate confinement, and as their views gained traction Fry’s celebrity had less currency than in former years. Although she was called twice more to testify in Parliament, both times she did not receive the unalloyed positive reception accorded her when she testified before the House of Commons in 1818. Most of the questions directed at Fry by members of the House of Commons Committee on Secondary Punishment in 1832 were non-confrontational and designed to solicit her opinion of the effectiveness of existing methods of secondary punishment and her views on some of the changes contemplated by the committee. One member, however, challenged Fry’s position: “Does not the whole of your view,” he asked, “tend rather to the encouragement of crime in

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<sup>106</sup> “The Tread-wheel for Females,” *The Times*, 12 January, 1825: 3B.

<sup>107</sup> Elizabeth Fry to Joseph Fry, 12 April, 1827, Add MS 73529, fols. 30–31; Elizabeth Fry to Gurney Fry, 21 April, 1827, Add MS 73529, fols. 36–37, BL; and Cresswell and Fry, *Memoir*, 2:29 and 2:40.

the present state of society, than to its prevention?”<sup>108</sup> The tone of this question was, however, the exception rather than the norm.

The prison inspectors, established in response to the House of Lords Select Committee on Gaols and Other Places of Confinement to which Fry gave evidence in 1835 were more critical of her efforts. In an effort to assert official male authority over the ladies visiting committees, William Crawford and Whitworth Russell, the inspectors for England and Wales, characterized her reforms as well-meaning but ineffectual. Although Fry is not named in their report, their target is implied: reformers who continued to insist on the harmful effects of separate confinement, the usefulness of teaching prisoners to read and learn regular habits, and the practice of treating them with kindness and providing them with the means to improve themselves had, they claimed, transformed prisons from hell-holes that the destitute and degenerate would be eager to avoid into sanctuaries for vagrants and beggars.<sup>109</sup> Though it was now more difficult for Fry to gain support for her reforms from local officials, prison administrators, the new prison inspectors, and criminal justice reformers in Parliament than previously, this did not mean that she had no influence; she continued to lobby government officials. In 1834, she wrote that “at the Admiralty, I have lately had important requests granted; at the Home Office,

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<sup>108</sup> Elizabeth Fry, testimony, 23 March, 1832, House of Commons, “Report from the Select Committee on Secondary Punishments; Together with the Minutes of Evidence,” *Sessional Papers, 1831-1832*, vol. 7, pp. 116-29 (repr., *British Parliamentary Papers: Report from Select Committees on Financing Convict Establishments Erecting Penitentiary Houses and other Matters Relating to Transportation and Secondary Punishments: Crime and Punishment, Transportations*, vol. 1 (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1969). Fry does not appear to have been fazed by the accusation, replying that in prisons where the tried and untried were separated and provided with “decent bedding and fair food, plenty of employment and instruction” the recidivism rate was lower than in prisons where disorderly habits prevailed. The remaining questions directed at Fry were inquisitorial rather than accusatory.

<sup>109</sup> “Home District,” *Third Report of the Inspectors Appointed Under the Provisions of the Act 5 & 6 Will IV. c. 38 to Visit the Different Prisons of Great Britain* (London: W. Clowes and Sons, 1838), 35.

they are always ready to attend to what I ask; and at the Colonial Office, I expect that they will soon make some alterations in the arrangements for the female convicts in New South Wales.”<sup>110</sup>

Despite the decrease in Fry’s influence, the need of reformers who believed in deterrence rather than rehabilitation to create a distance between their beliefs and Fry’s only solidified her public persona, even though their efforts rendered that persona as a benevolent amateur rather than the expert authority status she had previously enjoyed. In the press, Fry’s image was now cast more as a humanitarian than a reformer; in 1836, for example, *The Times* noted that “the celebrated Mrs. Fry, who has so laudably exerted herself to improve the morals of our sailors, has extended her philanthropy to the men employed in the coast-guard.”<sup>111</sup> When Fry’s activism was noted in the media, it was in the court circular, rather than in articles. Rather than accounts of her activities, these notices simply reported when she called on various government officials.<sup>112</sup>

Though Fry’s celebrity no longer afforded her the same power as before, during the last dozen years of her life her celebrity abroad increased. Her prison reform work had been well publicized on the Continent and in America, and during five tours of Europe between 1838 and 1843 she was invited to meet and

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<sup>110</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 21 April, 1834, LRSF. In 1842, the Colonial Office finally acceded to Fry’s request that a matron travel on each female convict ship to ensure that the discipline provided by the ladies in various prisons did not break down during the long voyage to the penal colony.

<sup>111</sup> *The Times*, 1 February, 1836: 1G.

<sup>112</sup> See, for example, her visits to Thomas Spring Rice, Secretary for War and the Colonies; with his successor, Lord Glenelg; accompanied by Sir Thomas Wilde to the Marquis of Normanby, Secretary of the Home Office; accompanied by Lieutenant-Colonel Miller to the Marquis of Normanby; and with Lady Jane Pirie, the wife of London’s mayor, to Lord Stanley at the Colonial office. *The Times*, 2 July, 1834: 5A; 1 May, 1840: 5B; 24 September, 1836: 4F; 14 January, 1840: 4D; 5 April, 1841: 5A; and 31 March, 1842: 5E.

discuss her work with the kings and queens of France, Hanover, Belgium, Prussia, the Netherlands, and Denmark, and her activities were reported in local newspapers. On the continent her celebrity still translated into political agency; at home, however, her continental engagements, while noted in the press, did not engage with her ideas but stemmed rather from a sense of pride that an Englishwoman could command such attention from nobility and royalty on the Continent.<sup>113</sup>

Fry's conviction that she was called to serve God through her prison reform activism flew in the face of contemporary rhetoric that a woman's duties as wife and mother had to come first. As Fry demonstrates, female celebrity therefore was not a straightforward matter of being in the public eye; it could be used as a tool to overcome opposition to her participation in the realm of public affairs. As this chapter reveals, however, while celebrity could open doors for women, it also posed a danger, for it opened them up to criticism of both their public and their private actions. But despite the challenges to her public standing, in the end Fry managed to transcend celebrity: rather than attaining a fleeting popularity the public's continued desire to acknowledge her extraordinary efforts meant that her celebrity was transformed into a fame that even transcended her death. This process, and the agendas of her biographers, are described in the following chapter.

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<sup>113</sup> *The Times*, 9 March, 1840: 5A; 1 May, 1840: 5B; 20 May, 1840: 6B; 6 September, 1841: 3F; and 15 September, 1841: 7A.

## CHAPTER 5

### REMEMBERING ELIZABETH FRY

On Saturday, October 18, 1845, the body of Elizabeth Fry was interred at the Friend's burial ground in Barking, Essex. Quaker funerals were to be simple affairs, without rituals or a formal service. Instead, it was an opportunity for silence and reflection, although—like at any Quaker Meeting—any Friend who felt called to speak could do so. In Fry's case, however, this simple proceeding turned into a spectacle, as the celebrity she attained in life extended to her now silent body. In addition to the carriages carrying her family and friends, people from all walks of life came to see her body laid to rest. The *Chelmsford Chronicle* noted that

We may observe no funeral ever created so great a sensation in that neighbourhood; from an early hour in the morning carriages of various descriptions might be seen proceeding to Upton [Lane], in addition to hundreds of pedestrians of all classes and both sexes, anxious to witness the funeral obsequies of one whose life was marked by every virtue which could tend to render her name illustrious not only to the present but succeeding generations. We cannot close without offering our humble tribute of respect to the memory of one so eminent for her philanthropy and benevolence as Mrs. Elizabeth Fry. By her death society has lost one of its greatest ornaments.<sup>1</sup>

When Fry first came to the public's attention in 1817, her political activism pushed the boundaries of accepted gender norms. However, while there were individuals who criticized her participation in public affairs because of her gender, the fact that she was atypical—a spectacle—enabled her to open up a space with the public sphere in which to operate. As noted in the previous

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<sup>1</sup> "The Late Mrs. Fry," *Chelmsford Chronicle*, reprinted in *The Times*, 24 October, 1845: 5A.

chapter, media interest in Fry's domestic activism had diminished considerably in the last decade of her life. Though Fry continued to lobby government officials for prison reform during this period, her activities were largely conducted out of the public eye. Media coverage of Fry's activism was almost exclusively limited to her inspection of Continental prisons, meetings with European royalty, the tour of Newgate she gave Frederick William IV, king of Prussia, and his subsequent luncheon at her home, and the banquet she attended commemorating the new Royal Exchange. Like the *Chelmsford Chronicle's* article of her funeral, these accounts praised her benevolence rather than her activism. In celebrating her compassion these reports held her up as a model of British womanhood where her character mattered more than her accomplishments.<sup>2</sup> This temporal shift in tone aligns with Davidoff and Hall's argument that it was in the 1830s and 1840s that the idea of "gainful employment for ladies was widely denounced."<sup>3</sup> After Fry's death this emphasis on privileging her womanly nature became the dominant characteristic of published narratives of her life.

While Fry as an exceptional woman may have been accepted (or at least tolerated), as an example to other women Fry's public profile was more problematic for those who were ambivalent about or disapproved of women's participation in politics. Fry herself—through correspondence, her public tours of prisons throughout the United Kingdom, and her 1827 pamphlet on prison visiting—had encouraged women to form formal associations to superintend not

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<sup>2</sup> *The Times*, 6 September 1841: 3F; January 18, 1842: 5A; January 20, 1842: 4F; January 31, 1842: 5B; February 1, 1842: 4F; and February 10, 1842: 5C.

<sup>3</sup> Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 2002).

just prisons, but hospitals, lunatic asylums, and workhouses.<sup>4</sup> As a highly visible illustration of what a woman could achieve beyond the domestic, Fry inspired hundreds of women joined local prison visiting associations, and it is probable that women interested in other public policy issues took some measure of inspiration from her example.<sup>5</sup> In the Victorian era, however, Fry's life story was molded to suit a more conservative agenda. This chapter examines the construction of the memory of Fry during the Victorian era, focusing on how her biographers dealt with the tension between Fry as an exceptional and as an exemplary woman. It argues that while a few biographers portrayed Fry as a symbol of a widening sphere of action for women, the majority of Fry's biographers depicted her as a model Christian, a model woman, or—given the number of character traits that applied to both categories—a model Christian woman.

The production of Fry biographies reflected contemporary concerns about the role of women in society, a role that was being contested between individuals who believed women belonged in the domestic sphere and those who envisioned a wider sphere for women.<sup>6</sup> Some women used the rhetoric itself to challenge and subvert separate spheres: Fry herself did so in the

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<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Fry, *Observations on the Visiting, Superintending, and Government, of Female Prisoners* (London: John and Arthur Arch, 1827), 5.

<sup>5</sup> While it is impossible to ascertain the extent to which Fry motivated later female activists, some of the late-Victorian biographers assert that Fry was an inspiration to Florence Nightingale. In 1840 Fry founded the Protestant Sisters of Charity, a nurse training program and temporary in-home nursing service. Though Fry had contemplated the idea of a nursing service organization for some time, the final impetus to put the plan into action occurred when she visited Theodor Fliedner's school for nursing in Kaiserswerth in May 1840. A decade later Nightingale trained at Kaiserswerth, and two "Fry Nurses" (as the Protestant Sisters of Charity were often called) accompanied her to the Crimean War.

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent introduction to the struggle over women's role in society see Martha Vicinus, ed., *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977). On women's legal status Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage and the Law in Victorian England, 1850–1895* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989);



introduction to *Observations* when she argued that women should not be limited to her family responsibilities. The second half of the nineteenth century was a transformative period for British women. At the outset of the century, married women had few independent legal rights from their husbands and restricted educational opportunities. Women's work was also valued differently than that of men: in the late eighteenth century the concept of the male breadwinner wage emerged; this idea, promoted by political economists and evangelists such as Thomas Malthus and Hannah More, argued that men should be paid a wage sufficient to support a family and became an important component of separate sphere ideology by tying employment with masculinity.<sup>7</sup> However, although women's rights and opportunities expanded during the second half of the nineteenth century, the narrative that there were innate differences between men and women that prescribed—or at least shaped—the role and activities of each gender exerted a strong influence on contemporary understandings of femininity. It is against this changing tableau, where two competing conceptions of the social organization of the sexes sought to define women's lives, therefore, that the biographies of Fry must be read.

Alison Booth's insightful study of collected works of female biography in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries demonstrates that Victorian prosopography had a dual role: to shape individual subjectivities and, consequently, a collective national selfhood. Biographies were not just eulogies,

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<sup>7</sup> Deborah Valenze, *The First Industrial Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Bridget Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1989); Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the English Working Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Sonya Rose, *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); and Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*. At the outset the idea of separate spheres for men and women was a middle-class project: a wife who wasn't employed was a marker of the family's middle-class status, though the idea of the man as the family's breadwinner would be appropriated by the working class.

but self-help manuals for the reader and testimonials to a community's or a nation's eminence. Prosopography was particularly useful because it typically entailed grouping subjects according to type: constructing categories and selecting representative models for those categories served to valorize the ideal the author wished to illustrate. For authors who promoted separate spheres there were tensions in writing prosopography, since the biographical subjects generally achieved fame because they had acted (at least at some point) contrary to conventional practice, and exercised personal agency. Such women needed to be cast as exceptional in order to reify the norm of gender difference. Booth notes that if, as Renan posits, creating a national narrative means forgetting much of the details of the past, then the same applied to writing Victorian-era prosopography: differences between individual women had to erase.<sup>8</sup>

This chapter argues that this principle of erasing differences between female biographical subjects applied not just to prosopography, but took place in single-subject biographies as well. According to Booth, Fry was the second most popular subject of Victorian-era prosopography after Joan of Arc; she was included in 36 collected works of female biography between 1850 and 1930, and only surrendered her second-place status to Florence Nightingale in the third decade of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Studying the evolving historical memory

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<sup>8</sup> Alison Booth, *How to Make It as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Between 1850 and 1870 Fry was included in fourteen "non-specialized" collections; this tied her for first place with Hannah More, Lady Jane Grey, and Lady Rachel Russell. She appeared in another 14 collections between 1880 and 1900, which meant she tied for third place with Queen Victoria, after Charlotte Brontë (15) and Joan of Arc (16). Between 1910 and 1930 Fry was included in 8 collections. Florence Nightingale appeared most frequently in collections of this period (15), followed by Queen Victoria and Louisa May Alcott (11); Jenny Lind (10); Joan of Arc, Clara Barton, Frances Willard, and Rosa Bonheur (9). Mary Lyon and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, like Fry, appeared in 8 collections. In the same period Hannah More appeared in only one

of Fry during the Victorian era demonstrates how her biographers increasingly sought to gloss over or ignore the complexities, nuances, and contradictions of her life in order to render her biographical subjectivity a “safe,” or at least safer, account than her lived life. By championing her as a paragon of womanly virtues and Christian values, her biographers attempted to domesticate her public persona; rather than a prison reform advocate, she was portrayed as an angel of mercy.

The sources for this chapter are obituaries and 25 printed testimonials and biographies of Fry published, with one exception, during the Victorian era. Nine were published between Fry’s death in late 1845 and 1849, four in the 1850s, three in the 1860s, one in 1870, three in the 1880s, five in the 1890s, and one the year after Queen Victoria’s death in 1901. They range in length from a one-page encyclopedia entry to the two-volume, 1,018–page memoir assembled by her two eldest daughters; the average length of the biographies is 156 pages. Nine of the biographies were written by women and thirteen by men (including two written by her brother Joseph John Gurney); the authors of the remaining four are anonymous. Six of the biographies were published by Quaker and two by Sunday School presses; six are either chapters or sections in books on notable women, and three books were part of a series of biographies on exceptional women. One was originally a sermon, and another a lecture given to the British Ladies’ Association for the Reformation of Female Prisoners (BLS).<sup>10</sup> This chapter compares these biographies with manuscript

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collection, a precipitous drop from the 1880–1900 period when she appeared in eleven collections. Booth, *How to Make it as a Woman*, 394–96.

<sup>10</sup> The mean for these biographies is 36 pages. Not included in this list of biographies is a shorter version of Fry’s memoirs that Rachel Cresswell abridged, with some additions and alterations,

and printed sources produced while she was alive, analyzing the language the biographers used to describe those parts of her life they included, as well as the strategic choices they made about which aspects to include in their biographies, and which they decided to gloss over or ignore altogether.

### Obituaries

The memorialization of Fry began immediately after her death through public and private obituaries. This chapter examines five such remembrances: the obituary and account of Fry's funeral by *The Chelmsford Chronicle*, both of which were reprinted in *The Times*; the obituary in *The Gentleman's Magazine*; an anonymous author's letter to the editor of *The Bath Chronicle*; and the printed minute of the British Ladies' Society.<sup>11</sup> Though Fry's public prominence had peaked two decades earlier, the level of respect and acclaim accorded to her activism and philanthropy at the time was sufficient to merit more than just listing the dates of her birth and death, her lineage, surviving family, and funeral plans. However, though each acknowledges her prison reform efforts, all but one of the obituaries focus primarily on her initial work in Newgate and only briefly noted that she had inspected prisons throughout the United

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from the two-volume memoir (five editions of this biography were published, in 1856, 1868, 1877, 1883, and 1886).

<sup>11</sup> Chelmsford is the county town of Essex, the county in which the Frys resided at the time of her death. "The Late Mrs. Fry," *The Chelmsford Chronicle*, reprinted in *The Times*, 20 October, 1845: 8A; "The Late Mrs. Fry," *The Chelmsford Chronicle*, reprinted in *The Times*, 24 October, 1845: 5A; "Mrs. Fry," *The Gentleman's Magazine* (December 1845): 644–46; Anonymous, letter to the editor, *The Bath Chronicle*, 4 November; and Minute of the British Ladies' Society for Promoting the Reformation of Female Prisoners, at a Meeting of the Committee Specially Summoned in Consequence of the Removal by Death, of Mrs. Fry, Temp. Box 9–18–9, The Library of the Religious Society of Friends, London (hereafter LRSF). The readership of the BLS minute was probably smaller than the other obituaries; it was likely circulated primarily within the Quaker community and distributed to BLS and local association members and their supporters. Thomas Timpson quotes extensively from the minute in his collection of prominent religious British women. Thomas Timpson, *British Female Biography, Being Select Memoirs of Pious Ladies in Various Ranks of Public and Private Life* (London, Aylott and Jones, 1846), 312–14.

Kingdom and on the Continent (though the *Gentleman's Magazine* also discussed her effort to provide each coastguard station with books). The obvious exception is the BLS minute, as the committee was familiar with the full extent of her activism. Even the BLS minute, however, is circumspect in how it described her work: rather than focusing on the nature of her activism they describe its form: her “unswerving continuance” in pursuing reform, her intimate knowledge of prison discipline, and her extensive network of contacts, which furnished her with information on individual prisons she then shared at the BLS annual meetings.

Despite the fact that over the past decade advocates for the silent and the separate systems had disparaged the reformist approach promoted by Fry and the BLS, the obituaries revert to the positive coverage of the late 1810s, lauding her efforts to inculcate moral and religious precepts in the prisons' inmates. The *Chelmsford Chronicle*, for example, writes that Newgate, “which was previously a scene of riot, licentiousness, and filth, was exchanged for order, sobriety, and comparative neatness,” a statement that is almost identical to Owen's original claim in July 1817.<sup>12</sup> Both the *Chelmsford Chronicle* and the *Gentleman's Magazine* excerpt a quote from the Grand Jury of London's 1818 report, in which they expressed their appreciation for, and support of, her initiatives.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, while celebrating Fry, both accounts also clearly establish gendered limits to her sphere of action: the *Chelmsford Chronicle* characterizes her as “one of the greatest philanthropists (*of her own sex*) which

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<sup>12</sup> “The Late Mrs. Fry,” *The Times*, 20 October, 1845: 8A. Robert Owen's description claimed that they had gone “from filth, bad habits, vice, crime; from the depth of degradation and wretchedness—to cleanliness, good habits, and comparative comfort and cheerfulness.” Robert Owen, letter to the editor,” *The Times*, July 30, 1817: 3C.

<sup>13</sup> Coverage of the Grand Jury's report, including the above quote, initially appeared in “State of Newgate,” *The Times*, 21 January, 1818: 3B.

this country ever produced,” a sentiment the *Gentleman’s Magazine* echoes in stating that Fry’s work “in the cause of suffering humanity wee such as never perhaps were equaled by an individual *of her own sex*.”<sup>14</sup> It further advances this distinction by contrasting John Howard and Fry: whereas Howard’s activism was primarily aimed at the inmates’ “physical state,” Fry’s focus was on the “higher object” of reforming the prisoner’s character. Though Fry, like Howard, worked to ameliorate the treatment of prisoners and improve the conditions of prisons, because she was a woman her contributions to the material aspects of prison discipline were ignored. It was because of this loftier purpose that Fry was, as the *Chelmsford Chronicle* noted, “one of [British society’s] greatest ornaments.”<sup>15</sup> In characterizing her as an ornament, the *Chelmsford Chronicle* simultaneously celebrated the nation that had produced and recognized such noble humanitarianism, while casting Fry as a decorative accessory. Since an ornament is an embellishment and not the foundation, Fry’s gender delimited her to adjunct status.

While the obituaries recount Fry’s claim to fame, all of them devote more space to describing Fry’s character and her demeanor in carrying out her public activities. The impact Fry had on others was seen as an important component of her effectiveness: the *Gentleman’s Magazine* claims that Fry “obtained almost instant respect, from the nobleness of her appearance, and the pious expression of her countenance” from prisoners, while averring that few would

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<sup>14</sup> Italics in both are mine.

<sup>15</sup> “The Late Mrs. Fry,” *The Times*, 24 October, 1845: 5A.

forget that even the King of Prussia had been moved to kneel in prayer while observing Fry's Newgate reading the previous year.<sup>16</sup>

While the *Chelmsford Chronicle* and the *Gentleman's Magazine* could offer only generic assessments of Fry's character and behavior, more personal reflections appeared in the *Bath Chronicle* and the BLS' printed minute. The former, written by a self-described "eye-witness of, and a sharer in, Mrs. Fry's early labours," praised Fry's "guilelessness of mind," her serenity, self-denial, "tenderness of feeling," and single-minded dedication to her work. Her ability to understand human nature and self-possession were, the author claimed, always apparent, regardless of whether she was with prisoners or princes. While the gender of this writer is unknown, like the *Chelmsford Chronicle* and the *Gentleman's Magazine's* reporters, the author qualifies Fry's claim to public acclaim with a defense of her womanly nature: "The annals of Protestant matrons afford us no public character of this tone, who, as the private lady attached by all the ties of domestic life, has come forward, with all the delicacy and refinement of a woman, to put in force, with discretion and constancy, plans of practical utility ... which at this time have been made, with modification, serviceable to all Europe."

The author is also careful to note that Fry knew her place; she was "endowed with an acute perception of what was due to the station and feeling, the character and position, of all whom she knew."<sup>17</sup> The letter also signals the legal limits of Fry's work: she proffered "enlightened representations to those in power," but it was they "alone could grant permission to do what she deemed

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<sup>16</sup> "Mrs. Fry," *The Gentleman's Magazine* (December 1845): 644–45.

<sup>17</sup> Letter to the editor, *The Bath Chronicle*, in Temp Box 9–18–13, LRSF.

necessary towards the diminution of crimes and abuses incident to the prison.” Both the *Chelmsford Chronicle* and the *Gentleman’s Magazine* go even further to demonstrate Fry’s need for masculine sanction of her activities: creating a school for poor children at Earlham before her marriage only occurred “by permission” (*Chelmsford Chronicle*) and with the “entire concurrence” (*Gentleman’s Magazine*) of her father. Later, it was Joseph Fry’s “independent fortune and generous mind” (*Gentleman’s Magazine*) who “materially aided her praiseworthy exertions by appropriating a large sum annually to her use, by which Mrs. Fry was enabled to extend the sphere of her usefulness.” The *Gentleman’s Magazine* also opens their obituary by noting her family relationship with Joseph John Gurney and Thomas Fowell Buxton, “two individuals whose benevolence is honored wherever human wretchedness is commiserated.”<sup>18</sup> Both the *Bath Chronicle* and the BLS minute, in contrast, do not reference her male relatives.

Though all of the obituaries describe Fry’s Christian traits, they vary in the degree to which they address her membership in the Religious Society of Friends. The *Bath Chronicle* makes only an indirect reference to her status as a Quaker by noting Howard’s belief that the prison reform movement would be taken up by Friends. The *Chelmsford Chronicle* acknowledges that Joseph Fry was a member, that she was a credit to the Society, and alludes to the Quaker practice of simple, unostentatious funerals. The *Gentleman’s Magazine*, however, briefly notes that she was a respected preacher, and even acknowledged as such by some who were not Quakers.

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<sup>18</sup> “The Late Mrs. Fry,” *The Times*, 20 October, 1845: 8A; and “Mrs. Fry,” *The Gentleman’s Magazine* (December 1845), 644.



Though the BLS does not directly address Fry's Quaker affiliations, the writing style assumes that its readers knew this fact: the words 'friend' and 'meeting' are capitalized throughout, in accordance with Quaker custom when referring to members of the Society and the worship service and administrative bodies. It also describes her practice of addressing committee members "in the language of prayer or in devout addresses," language typically used by Quakers to describe preaching.<sup>19</sup> They also note that Fry "delighted in that 'unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace;'" this phrase is used by Quakers to reflect their practice of arriving at a consensus in their administrative meetings, rather than using a top-down approach to management of church affairs. That the committee was not speaking solely to a Quaker audience, however, can be seen in their emphasis on Fry's ecumenicalism: she "rejoiced to recognize the broad and independent basis of Christian truth and affection."<sup>20</sup>

### Quaker Memorials

Publishing memoirs of or extracts from the personal journals of prominent Friends was a long-standing and important tradition within the Religious Society of Friends, and they produced the first biographical accounts of Fry's life. Given the Society of Friends' belief in the female ministry (which they did not conceive as limited to their own community), these offer a positive endorsement of Fry's public activities—though, as the previous chapter demonstrates, this support was not universal; not all Quakers accepted Fry's

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<sup>19</sup> Minute of the BLS, Temp. Box 9-18-9, LRSF, 1.

<sup>20</sup> Minute of the BLS, Temp. Box 9-18-9, LRSF, 2.

justification for the form some of her public activities took, even if the work itself was lauded, and thus required justification in Quaker memorials.

Fry's younger brother, Joseph John Gurney, wrote the first account of her life, *Brief Memoirs of Thomas Fowell Buxton and Elizabeth Fry*, published the year of her death.<sup>21</sup> Gurney's biography was reprinted at least twice as a newspaper article,<sup>22</sup> and a slightly revised versions appeared in 1848. Two significantly revised version of Gurney's biography were published in 1846 and 1847: the first revision appeared in *The Annual Monitor for 1846, or, Obituary of the Members of the Society of Friends in Great Britain and Ireland*, while the second revision was published as an appendix to the third edition of George Washington Montgomery's *Illustrations of the Law of Kindness* (1847).<sup>23</sup> The differences between the two revisions were prescribed by the respective reading audiences: like the original *Brief Memoirs*, *Illustrations of the Law of Kindness* targeted the general reading audience, while the *Annual Monitor* was primarily read by Quakers. Accordingly, the *Annual Monitor* version contained considerably more changes from the original text than those in *Illustrations*. Both *Brief Memoirs* and *Illustrations* describe Fry's decision to reject worldly things and devote herself to God, as well as the fact that she became a minister

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<sup>21</sup> Joseph John Gurney, *Brief Memoirs of Thomas Fowell Buxton and Elizabeth Fry* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1845). Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, a former MP active in the anti-slavery cause and Fry and Gurney's brother-in-law, had died 19 February, 1845.

<sup>22</sup> *Sketch of the Late Elizabeth Fry*, n.d., Temp MSS 902/6, LRSF. The clipping preserved at The Library of the Religious Society of Friends does not indicate which publication it is from, however, it was republished in *The Christian Guardian, and Church of England Magazine* (London: Seeley, Burnside, and Seeley, 1845): 540–46, which notes that it had been previously published in *The Norfolk News*.

<sup>23</sup> "Elizabeth Fry," *The Annual Monitor for 1846, or, Obituary of the Members of the Society of Friends in Great Britain and Ireland*, n.s., no. 4: 101-139; and Joseph John Gurney, "A Brief Memoir of Elizabeth Fry," in George Washington Montgomery, *Illustrations of the Law of Kindness*, 3rd ed. (London: Wiley & Putnam, 1847). It should be noted that while Gurney wrote the majority of the latter version, some of the additions to this text were contributed by an anonymous member of the Ratcliff and Barking Monthly Meeting (to which Fry belonged) who had been her co-worker in the prison cause.

in the Society of Friends, but the primary focus in these versions is her work in prisons and other philanthropic causes. The *Annual Monitor* biography, in contrast, pays much greater attention to her religious ministry.

Though brief (none exceed 38 pages), when read together Gurney's memoirs offer the most supportive assessment of both aspects of Fry's career—her religious ministry and her prison activism—than any other biography. This is not surprising, since Gurney shared these interests with her; he, too, was a prominent Quaker minister, and travelled with Fry on numerous trips in the ministry. During these visits Gurney accompanied her during her inspection of local prisons and prison visiting associations. After both their tour of Scotland and northern England in 1818 and their 1827 tour of Ireland, Gurney published pamphlets detailing their observations of the prisons they inspected.<sup>24</sup> Gurney also accompanied her on her 1841 and 1843 tours of Continental prisons, though by this time he had turned his attention to the anti-slavery movement.<sup>25</sup> In praising his sister, Gurney thus tacitly promoted his own ministry. Gurney's emphasis on public over private also can be seen in the fact that though each of the three memoirs is roughly 35 pages long, in each Gurney devotes only one short paragraph to her qualities as a wife and mother.

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<sup>24</sup> Joseph John Gurney, *Notes on a Visit Made to Some of the Prisons in Scotland and the North of England, in Company with Elizabeth Fry; with Some General Observations on the Subject of Prison Discipline*, 2nd ed. (London: John and Arthur Arch, 1819) and Elizabeth Fry and Joseph John Gurney, *Report Addressed to the Marquess Wellesley, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Respecting their Late Visit to that Country* (London: John & Arthur Arch, 1827).

<sup>25</sup> Gurney travelled to the West Indies and the United States between 1837 and 1840; though he inspected several prisons during his visit, the anti-slavery cause was the primary motive for his trip. His sister's connections enabled him to personally appeal several monarchs to support abolition during their Continental tours.

Given the brevity of each of the biographies, Gurney does not provide detailed descriptions of Fry's public and religious careers: rather than focusing on specifics on what she did, and how she carried it out, in *Brief Memoirs* and *Illustrations* he describes her interests and the character and personality traits that made her accomplishments possible. He highlights, for example, the breadth of Fry's philanthropic and civic interests: in addition to prison reform she also worked to improve the treatment of the mentally ill, established a professional home nursing service, provided shelter and services for the homeless, founded District Visiting Societies to assist the 'deserving' poor, conceived of and then spearheaded an effort to set up libraries for every coastguard station in the British Isles, assisted relatives involved in the abolition movement, and was active in the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) and the Religious Tract Society (RTS), personally distributing thousands of Bibles and tracts—including a tiny book (five by seven inches), containing two Bible passages for each day of the year, verses she herself selected.<sup>26</sup> Gurney's emphasis on her involvement with the BFBS and RTS—which he does not mention in *The Annual Monitor*—is of particular interest because these were well-known evangelical organizations. While there was an evangelical wing within the Religious Society of Friends, because the Quakers were such a small denomination many British men and women were unfamiliar with its religious beliefs. Mentioning these two organizations signaled to the non-Quaker readers of *Brief Memoirs* and *Illustrations* that Fry's theology was Bible-based and thus

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<sup>26</sup> Gurney, *Brief Memoirs*, 49–52; and Elizabeth Fry, *Texts for Every Day of the Year, Principally Practical and Devotional* (Norwich: Josiah Fletcher, n.d.). Fry's journals note that she first printed her "textbook" in 1830. There were at least three English editions, but none of the editions extant in The Library of the Religious Society of Friends, London, are dated. In addition, Fry's textbook also was translated into French, German, and Italian for distribution during her Continental tours.

palatable to the larger Christian community. Gurney further drives this point home by pointing out that while she was committed to Quaker principles she had a “catholic spirit,” was a firm proponent of religious liberty, and believed in salvation by faith, not works.<sup>27</sup>

While Gurney notes certain character traits of his sister that separate sphere ideologists would construe as inherently feminine qualities (her care and compassion for others, her kindness and sweet temper),<sup>28</sup> he pays more attention to traits that enabled her to operate effectively within the public sphere, and were less obviously female traits in the eyes of his contemporaries: in her relations with men in authority, for example, she was not obsequious or flattering but tactful, even tempered, perseverant, never ruffled, versatile, and always prepared to act when an opportunity presented itself. Moreover, Fry was aware of “exactly how far to go, and she went just so far, and no farther” to obtain her objectives.<sup>29</sup> Highlighting that Fry took a tactical approach is significant because it stood in stark contrast to the recent shift within the abolition movement—the major humanitarian endeavor of the period—from the meliorist approach of earlier abolitionists to a call for immediatism. This change was driven in large part by women; incremental change had come to be negatively associated with the wheeling and dealing of male politicians. As virtuous women, therefore, it was important to stand firm on principles, rather than bartering for short-term gains.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Gurney, *Brief Memoirs*, 58 and 65.

<sup>28</sup> Gurney, *Brief Memoirs*, 37–38 and Gurney, *Illustrations*, 234.

<sup>29</sup> Gurney, *Brief Memoirs*, 52–54, and 59.

<sup>30</sup> Alex Tyrell, “‘Woman’s Mission’ and Pressure Group Politics in Britain (1825–60),” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 63, no. 1 (1980): 194–230; and Carol Lasser, “Immediatism, Dissent, and Gender: Women and the Sentimentalization of Transatlantic Anti-Slavery Appeals,” in *Women, Dissent, and Anti-Slavery in Britain and America, 1790–1865*, ed.

Fry's ability to keep things organized and orderly was, according to Gurney, also vital to her success. Fry may have had the requisite feminine qualities, but in Gurney's estimation her rational, business-like rather than emotional approach to interacting with public officials produced results. Gurney's description of Fry's effectiveness as an activist, however, is not confined to her manner: he also affirmed her literary authority. She wrote, he noted, a "simple yet forcible pamphlet, explanatory of her views of a right prison discipline for females, and of the true principles of punishment in general," and added that the two prison reports referenced above reflected her views and were widely circulated.<sup>31</sup> Gurney's emphasis on Fry's published work is significant because, unlike later Fry biographers, he does not characterize her as merely dedicated to the religious and moral reform of prisoners, but emphasizes that her activism was actuated by theoretical principles. For Gurney, it was this use of reason, both written and verbal, that garnered her support from public officials and patronage of her projects from royalty, both in Britain and abroad.

In *The Annual Monitor*, however, which was for the Quaker community, Gurney reverses his emphasis; the only public cause he notes is her prison work. Instead, he dwells largely on her religious ministry, describing the impact her ministry had within the Religious Society of Friends, on prisoners, and on individuals from other denominations as powerful and persuasive. "She was not only instrumental in *sowing* the good seed," he writes of her preaching, "but she

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Elizabeth J. Clapp and Julie Roy Jeffrey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). On the shift to immediatism see David Brion Davis, "The Emergence of Immediatism in British and American Antislavery Thought," in *From Homicide to Slavery: Studies in American Culture*, ed. David Brion Davis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>31</sup> Gurney, *Brief Memoirs*, 46-48.

was enabled effectually to *nurture* it” as a mentor to new believers.<sup>32</sup> To that end he adds five-page description of her spiritual tutelage of a person who had been unfamiliar with Friends principles, including extracts from Fry’s correspondence with this individual that chronicles her mentees’ spiritual maturation.<sup>33</sup> He praises her command of the Holy Scriptures, and calls her a mother in Israel, a phrase typically used to describe female leaders within the Christian community who exhibit wisdom, judgment, and compassion.<sup>34</sup> Joyce Goodman and Camilla Leach have argued that within the Society of Friends this term, while drawing on maternalist language, signaled the educational role of female ministers in the public sphere, and that it can be read as political discourse.<sup>35</sup>

Another significant addition in *The Annual Monitor* is his defense of Fry’s attendance of a banquet at Mansion House in 1842. A number of plain Quakers vociferously criticized her decision to attend an event that had no spiritual function, particularly since during the dinner toasts—a practice Quakers strongly objected to—were made. Furthermore, in their eyes the prominent attention paid to her at this event (she was seated between Prince Albert and Sir Robert Peel, the Prime Minister) was inconsistent with the Quaker testimony of simplicity. Though Gurney, like Fry, believed in the Quaker testimonies, he agreed with her rationale that by attending the banquet, at which the leading public authorities were present, she was able to advocate for prison and other

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<sup>32</sup> Gurney, *Annual Monitor*, 117.

<sup>33</sup> Gurney, *Annual Monitor*, 117–22.

<sup>34</sup> Gurney, *Annual Monitor*, 116.

<sup>35</sup> Joyce Goodman and Camilla Leach, “At the Center of a Circle Whose Circumference Spans All Nations’: Quaker Women and the Ladies Committee of the British and Foreign School Society, 1813–37,” in *Women, Religion and Feminism in Britain, 1750–1900*, ed. Sue Morgan (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 63–64.

civic reforms.<sup>36</sup> Gurney argues that there were Biblical precedents for Fry's actions:

It has, at times, pleased the Almighty, in order to effect purposes of mercy towards his rational creatures, to lead some of his chosen instruments into circumstances which, to the eye of human reason, might appear to be utterly incompatible with that separation from the spirit and practice of a sinful world, that becomes the servant of Christ.<sup>37</sup>

He goes on to compare her with Joseph who, “arrayed in vestures of fine linen,’ with a ‘chain of gold about his neck” as a symbol of his office became the means by which the worst effects of a long famine in Egypt and its surrounding areas were averted.<sup>38</sup> Highlighting Joseph’s sumptuous clothing must have reminded his Quaker audience that Fry herself had attended the banquet not dressed according to the fashion of the day, but in plain Quaker garb; her attire, therefore, had served as a visible marker of religious difference against the formal attire of the other attendees. The analogy, in effect, declared Fry as God’s chosen instrument; in putting her calling side by side with that of one of the preeminent figures of the Old Testament, Gurney asserted God’s will for Fry—and by implication, other women called by God—to be active in public life. Questioning Fry’s public role thus become tantamount to questioning God.

While it was common practice within Quaker society for family or close friends to publish the memoirs or selections from the journals and correspondence of prominent Friends, the Society annually published

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<sup>36</sup> In her journal Fry reports that she did speak with a number of public officials; she discussed the all-female prison being built (something she had argued for since at least 1818) with Sir James Graham, the new home secretary; her concerns about restrictions on religious liberty on the Continent with Lord Aberdeen, the Foreign Secretary; and the condition of the penal colonies with Lord Stanley, the Colonial Secretary. During dinner, she spoke for nearly two hours with Prince Albert and Sir Robert Peel on a variety of subjects, from raising children to the importance of living a Christian life, the state of Europe, and of course prison reforms. Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 18 January, 1842, LRSF. Whether her lobbying was in fact effective, however, is unclear.

<sup>37</sup> Gurney, *Annual Monitor*, 127.

<sup>38</sup> Gurney, *Annual Monitor*, 128.



*Testimonies Concerning Deceased Ministers* to memorialize ministers who had died in the preceding year. Like the *Annual Monitor*, its target audience was the Quaker community; however, while the *Annual Monitor* included biographies of any Quaker who achieved a measure of distinction, either within or without the Society, *Testimonies* was limited to acknowledged ministers. Fry's religious ministry was written by the Monthly Meeting of Ratcliff and Barking.<sup>39</sup> It was customary for these testimonies to be prepared by the minister's monthly meeting; Elizabeth Fry had been a member of the Plaistow meeting, a unit within the Ratcliff and Barking monthly meeting, since moving to Plashet in 1808.

Though written by different monthly meetings, the *Testimonies'* biographical sketches followed a common format. They begin by stating the minister's parentage and place and date of birth, followed by a short synopsis of his/her youth. This section follows one of two trajectories: the minister in question either exhibited unity with Quaker principles from childhood, or underwent a period during which he or she was tempted by worldly ways before (re)discovering the truths of Friends testimonies and principles. For Quakers born in the second half of the eighteenth century this was often included a reference to flirtation skeptical, i.e. Deist, ideas. Ministers who strayed from the religious path were excused on the grounds that their experiences gave them the patience and compassion to minister both young Quakers who were distracted by earthly temptations and the irreligious.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> "Elizabeth Fry," *Testimonies Concerning Deceased Ministers, Presented to the Yearly Meeting in London, Held in London, 1846* (London: Edward Marsh, 1846), 16-28.

<sup>40</sup> Dorcas Coventry was, for example, "at an early age ... brought under the regulating power of the cross of Christ." "Dorcas Coventry," *Testimonies Concerning Deceased Ministers, Presented to the Yearly Meeting in London, Held in London, 1848* (London: Edward Marsh, 1848), 20. Likewise,

The testimony then proceeds to describe the circumstances of the subject's entering into the vocal ministry. As Helen Plant notes, this was a quasi-ritualistic process whereby the individual, upon first feeling the call to speak, agonized over whether this was a true calling or a selfish desire to be heard. Beginning the vocal ministry, however, was followed by a sense of peace signaling that the calling had been true.<sup>41</sup> The testimonial then reported when the applicable Monthly Meeting officially recorded the subject as a minister (there was no set period of trial; typically the minister spoke for 2–3 years before their formal acknowledgement, but the period could also be a matter of months).

The testimonial concluded by describing the form of the individual's ministry and their death. In some instances the minister's service had been limited to his or her Monthly Meeting or service as elder in their local Meeting. For those who embarked on a travelling ministry and/or served as a representative of the yearly meeting, however, a more detailed account was included as they were considered the ambassadors of their Monthly Meeting. Where applicable, the Meeting also described the minister's specific

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William Forster was "from childhood sensible of the convictions of the Holy Spirit." "William Forster," *Testimonies Concerning Deceased Ministers, Presented to the Yearly Meeting in London, Held in London, 1855* (London: Edward Marsh, 1855), 15. Fry's uncle Joseph Gurney, in contrast, "yielded in various respects, when a young man, to the vanities of the world ... he was ardent in the pursuit of pleasure." "Joseph Gurney," *Testimonies Concerning Joseph Gurney and Isaac Stephenson, Printed by Direction of the Yearly Meeting of Friends, 1831* (London: Harvey and Darton, 1831), 4. As noted in chapter one, Fry had made the same argument about the usefulness of her pre-conversion experiences to ministering others: "I should be able to preach to the gay and unbelieving better than to any others for I should feel more sympathy for them, and know their hearts better." Elizabeth Gurney, journal entry, 6 February, 1798, LRSF.

<sup>41</sup> Helen Plant, "'Subjective Testimonies: Women Quaker Ministers and Spiritual Authority in England: 1750–1825,'" *Gender & History* 15, no. 2 (2003): 296–318; and Howard H. Brinton, *Quaker Journals: Varieties of Religious Experience Among Friends*, 3rd ed. (Wallingford, Penn.: Pendle Hill, 1996), 4 and 35–40.

audience(s).<sup>42</sup> The sketch concludes with a description of the minister's final days.

The *Testimonies*' adherence to this formulaic pattern performed an important disciplinary function within the Society of Friends. By following a set chronological sequence it prescribed a fixed narrative of what it meant to be a Quaker. Unlike other biographical subjects, the ministers memorialized in *Testimonies* did not earn distinction by breaking away from convention, but rather conformed to an essentialized conception of Quakerness.

The Ratcliff and Barking monthly meeting wrote Fry's testimonial. They affirmed that her ministry was doctrinally sound, and that as a consequence they had supported her many religious journeys, both within the British Isles and abroad.<sup>43</sup> Though they note the nurturing aspects of her ministry (such as comforting mourners and exhorting young people), they emphasize that she was particularly effective in describing why people needed to be saved, and warning those who had fallen prey to worldly temptations of the consequences of turning their backs on God.<sup>44</sup> While their stress was on the public nature of her

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<sup>42</sup> Given the importance of the testimony of simplicity to the Society, the testimonials took pains to highlight whenever a male Friend retired from business to devote himself to a higher spiritual purpose than the pursuit of Mammon.

<sup>43</sup> Ministers who wished to embark on a travel ministry were required to ask permission of their local monthly meeting and, if they wanted to go abroad, that of the yearly meeting as well. The meeting would issue a certificate attesting that they supported the proposed trip, which the minister would lay before each meeting he or she visited. This was necessary not only to affirm the bona fides of the minister, but because the visited meetings were expected to shelter and care for the visiting minister and would not want to be taken advantage of by someone who was not traveling with the official sanction of his or her meeting. Fry's certificate for her 1827 trip to Ireland, for example, read in part: "The said proposals [for Fry and her sister-in-law to travel in the ministry], having had our deliberate and solid consideration ... we think it right to set them at liberty to perform the same: informing you that they are ministers of the gospel, in unity and good esteem with us. We commend them to the affectionate care of those amongst whom their lot may be cast." "To the Friends of the Nation of Ireland," Ratcliff and Barking Monthly Meeting, 24 December, 1826, quoted in Katherine Fry and Rachel Cresswell, *Memoir of the Life of Elizabeth Fry*, vol.1 (London: Charles Gilpin, 1847), 18–19. The certificate was signed by seventy members of the monthly meeting.

<sup>44</sup> "Elizabeth Fry," *Testimonies*, 22–23.

religious ministry, both within the Religious Society of Friends and the community at large, they also underscored the qualities that made her a “good” Christian: she placed her dependence on God, was meek, treated rich and poor alike, was humble despite the public accolades she received, and bore her afflictions with grace, courage, and trust in God.<sup>45</sup> Though as Quakers they naturally supported a woman’s public ministry, it is not surprising that they also expressed their approval of her “philanthropic exertions,” which they argued was “no hindrance to the exercise of her gospel ministry, but were remarkably blended with it.”<sup>46</sup> During Fry’s lifetime Quakers, who were barred by their testimony of peace from serving in the military and until 1829 had been barred by law from public office (though even after the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts many members of the Society still refused to stand for office) had channeled their civic energies into a variety of public policy causes, including the anti-slavery movement, prison reform, and education. Both Quaker men and women were active in these causes, sometimes in separate committees, sometimes acting in concert, and the *Testimonies* typically includes brief descriptions of the member’s activities.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> “Elizabeth Fry,” *Testimonies*, 24 and 26-28.

<sup>46</sup> “Elizabeth Fry,” *Testimonies*, 23.

<sup>47</sup> Goodman and Leach, *Women, Religion and Feminism*, 53–65; Clare Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780–1870* (London: Routledge, 1992); Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Absolutism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006), chapter 7; and Auguste Jorns, *The Quakers As Pioneers in Social Work*, Studien über die Sozialpolitik der Quäker, trans. by Thomas Kite Brown Jr. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1931).

## View from the Periphery: Thomas Timpson's Biography of Fry

The Reverend Thomas Timpson published the first extended biography of Fry in 1847.<sup>48</sup> Timpson, a dissenting minister and the secretary for the Committee of the British and Foreign Sailor's Society, served as the secretary of the Committee for Furnishing the Coast Guard of the United Kingdom with Libraries of Religious and Instructive Books, an endeavor conceived of and spearheaded by Fry. Fry first became interested in coastguard men when she observed one of them on patrol while convalescing in Brighton in 1824. Informed of the solitary nature of their work (to prevent them from forming ties with the locals that might interfere with the execution of their duties they were prohibited from speaking with locals or visitors), she decided to furnish a library for them so they could have something useful and improving to think about during their long hours on watch. The books, donated by the BFBS, appear to have been warmly received.<sup>49</sup> Eleven years later, during a visit along the southern coastal cities of England, she decided to organize a fundraising drive to furnish all coastguard stations with libraries. After eighteen months, over 52,000 books, pamphlets, and tracts had been distributed to more than

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<sup>48</sup> Thomas Timpson, *Memoirs of Mrs. Elizabeth Fry; Including a History of Her Labours in Promoting the Reformation of Female Prisoners, and the Improvement of British Seamen* (London: Aylott and Jones, 1847). Timpson's biography is 348 pages. The previous year, Timpson published a collective biography of 55 "pious" British women, grouping into eight categories: queens, princesses, martyrs, learned ladies, instructors, philanthropists, poetesses, and minister's wives. Fry was one of seven women included in the philanthropist category. This volume was advertised in his 1847 Fry biography (inserted before the title page) as a work of "nearly 200 12mo pages ... elegantly bound in cloth" and includes quotes from six positive reviews from periodicals such as *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*; *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*; the *Nonconformist*; and *Baptist Magazine*.

<sup>49</sup> Rev. Doctor C. F. A. Steinkoff to Elizabeth Fry, 12 July, 1824; Lieutenant C., R.N., to Elizabeth Fry, 22 March, 1825; and William Bell and D. Stringer to Lt. C., R.N., 21 March, 1825, quoted in Fry and Cresswell, 1:473-76.

600 coastguard and district stations for the coastguard men, their wives, and their children—over 20,000 individuals in total.<sup>50</sup>

Timpson's biography is worth noting because it is the only biography written prior to the publication of Fry and Cresswell's *Memoir of the Life of Elizabeth Fry* by someone who was not intimately connected to Fry. As someone who was only on the periphery of her life, he knew little about Fry's personal history or religious ministry other than what had been previously published. As a result, with the exception of the chapter on the coastguard libraries and a few written reminiscences he solicited from people they both knew, his sources are pamphlets, newspaper articles, circulars, and Gurney's memoirs, most of which he quotes at great length. Since most of the pamphlets were published by the BLS, Timpson's *Memoir* contains not only a thorough history of the work Fry and her associates undertook in prisons and on convict ships, but offers many detailed examples of the success they had in persuading public officials to enact reforms within the penal system as well as examples of how their work produced change in the lives of individual prisoners.<sup>51</sup> Timpson's focus on Fry's political activities provides a stark contrast to later biographies that either balance the public and private aspects of Fry's life or emphasize her femininity.

Timpson's chapters on the formation of the coastguard libraries and her character are particularly interesting because he includes not only his own memories of how Fry directed the campaign to fund and outfit the libraries

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<sup>50</sup> Timpson, *Memoirs of Mrs. Elizabeth Fry*, 218; and *Report of the Committee, Acting under the Sanction of His Majesty's Government, for Furnishing the Coast Guard of the United Kingdom with Libraries of Religious and Instructive Books, &c.* (London: James S. Hodson, 1836), 4.

<sup>51</sup> These include Thomas Fowell Buxton, *An Inquiry whether Crime and Misery are Produced or Prevented, by our Present System of Prison Discipline* (London: John and Arthur Arch, 1818); *Sketch of the Origin and Results of Ladies' Prison Associations, with Hints for the Formation of Local Associations* (London: John and Arthur Arch, 1827), an official publication of the BLS; and the BLS' annual reports for 1829, 1835, 1840–1842, and 1844.

(many of the books were selected by her, though there was an all-male committee that officially signed off on the list of books given to each library), but includes more than a dozen letters she had written him in which she offered suggestions as to next steps. These included suggesting that a first step should be a survey of the stations to find out how many men, women, and children lived at the stations, as well as how far each station was from a school or place of worship. As evidence of Fry's "admirable preparations for dispatch in business," he includes a lengthy to-do list she had prepared prior to one of the committee meetings; in it, she notes the letters she needed to write, questions she wanted the committee to answer respecting the state of funds, whether they should expand their efforts to include libraries for cutters, whether each station needed a supervisory committee once the books had been distributed to keep them self-sustaining, whether they should ask the government to pay certain expenses, and if they should apply for book donations from booksellers.<sup>52</sup> As such, these chapters offer perhaps the best glimpse into the process of Fry's work.

#### Family Remembrance: Katherine Fry and Rachel Cresswell's Memoir of Fry

Even though both *The Annual Monitor* and *Testimonies Concerning Deceased Ministers* were widely read within the Quaker community, and the fact that Gurney's memoir was published in newspapers and in a revised edition suggests that it reached a wide audience outside the Quaker community, the most significant memoir written by a family member or friend of Fry's was the two-volume *Memoir of the Life of Elizabeth Fry* by Katharine Fry

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<sup>52</sup> Timpson, *Memoirs of Mrs. Elizabeth Fry*, 290–93.

and Rachel Cresswell, Fry's eldest daughters. Originally published in 1847, a second edition, with revisions and additions, was published in 1848, followed by five editions of an abridged version (1856, 1868, 1877, 1883, and 1886). But while Fry and Cresswell loved their mother, and appear to have agreed with her penal philosophy, they were more ambivalent about her assuming a public role, both as a minister and as a policy advocate, a position that would manifest itself in how they constructed the *Memoir*.

Fry was conscious of the impact her celebrity had on her personal life and public work. Although she realized that it gave her power to advocate for prison reform, she also recognized its inherent instability and the danger it possessed to damage her personal and professional reputation. Furthermore, as a Christian Fry worried that being exalted in men's eyes would tempt her to succumb to vanity, deriving pleasure from the accolades of man rather than humbly submitting herself to God's will, or lead others to attribute her successes to her own power rather than being the work of God. As the previous chapter shows, Fry deliberately tried to manage her image during her lifetime, and she also took steps to frame how she would be portrayed after her death. Fry's expectation that biographies would be written about her was not vanity on her part: vignettes of her life, poems about her, and unauthorized portraits had already been published. Furthermore, it was common practice within the Society of Friends to publish journals of prominent or well-respected ministers, and given her standing as one of the most famous Quakers of her time Fry knew that there would be demand for a memoir of her life.

In 1828 she destroyed her earliest journals (the earliest surviving entry is dated April 1797), and substituted a short summary of her early life in their



stead.<sup>53</sup> There are also passages in her journal that are obscured by dark ink and places where individual pages have been removed. It is unclear what she sought to hide in doing so; given that most of her deletions relate to her childhood, and pick up at the point where she began to question her behavior toward others, particularly her inability to control her passions, she might have felt that her behavior prior to this point was so inconsistent with her later religious life that she did not want future generations to read the precise details. Fry may also have wanted to highlight her conversion; erasing the details of her life before April 1797 would ensure that the narrative began at this pivotal point of her life rather than with the minutia of childhood. Other deletions appear to relate to instances when her frustrations with individual family members was so great that she departed from her practice of not including such events in her journal, and which she later felt were either unsuitable for outsiders to know or detracted from the image of herself she wanted the readers of her journal to come away with.

It should also be noted that Fry self-edited by largely conforming to the standard conventions for Quaker journaling. According to Howard Brinton, Quaker journals are typically not a daily activity diary, but rather a space in which the author focused on his or her spiritual state. The goal of a Quaker journal was to constantly examine the state of the author's heart and soul, in order to strengthen his or her spiritual life. A common refrain in Quaker journals is the individual's internal struggle to discern and/or pursue the leadings of the inner light, followed by a sense of peace achieved once the path has made clear, or the task directed by the inner light accomplished. Fry, for

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<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, July 1828, LRSF.

example, struggled over the prospect of a combined religious and prison visiting trip to Scotland and the north of England, questioning whether she was truly being called by God to conduct this trip. "I have long had it on my mind," she writes

to attend the half years meeting in Scotland ... I truly desire to stand open to what is right for me ...I am ready to believe that unless I leave husband, children, & household safely that no duty of the kind of leaving them will be at present required of me but if these concerns are right for me in due time then will be way made.<sup>54</sup>

Several weeks later, however, she adds that "my way appears gradually to open for my going into Scotland. I have found my mind much relieved since I gave up to it."<sup>55</sup> When Fry does describe events or her actions they are almost always tied to a spiritual purpose. Thus after attending a dinner at the residence of the Lord Mayor of London with her husband, she writes that it was "a change of atmosphere spiritually, but if we are enabled to abide in Christ, and stand our ground, we may by our lives and conversation glorify God, even at a dinner visit."<sup>56</sup> Accordingly, much of her public work is included only incidentally in her journal, giving her spiritual life and purpose precedence over her activities as a prison reformer.

Finally, Fry made her eldest daughter, Katharine, her literary executor, entrusting her journals and letters to her care. Katharine Fry, the only one of her daughters to remain unmarried, had spent her adult life as her mother's amanuensis, and had dedicated her life to helping her mother both in the prison cause (she was a committee member of the British Ladies Society for the

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<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 18 July, 1818, MC 519, vol. 1, Norfolk Public Record Office (hereafter Norfolk 519/1).

<sup>55</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 6 August, 1818, Norfolk 519/1.

<sup>56</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 19 February, 1823, LRSF.

Reformation of Female Prisoners) and by relieving Fry of some of her domestic duties. As such, she was most familiar with the image Fry wanted to project to the world.

The *Memoir of the Life of Elizabeth Fry*, compiled and narrated by Fry's two eldest daughters from Fry's journals and letters, was published in 1847; this two-volume memoir became the primary evidence used in subsequent Fry biographies, and thus was the bulk of what was known about Fry's private life. Katherine Fry and Cresswell had begun work on the memoir of their mother within two months of Fry's death. In December 1845, Cresswell privately printed *Memories of her Mother, in a Letter to her Sisters*, much of which would be used in the memoir.<sup>57</sup> Cresswell's purpose in writing *Memories* was not to provide an account of Fry's public work, but to "to dwell upon her womanism, her tenderness, and that extraordinary mixture in her character, of determination and self-mistrust; of courage and timidity. Qualities in themselves so contradictory-controlled, directed and sanctified by religion."<sup>58</sup> To that end Cresswell included a long letter from her aunt, Catherine Gurney, describing Fry's childhood and the effect her decision to become a plain Quaker had on her father and siblings and some picturesque reminiscences illustrating Fry's compassion toward the sick and poor. Interestingly, however, though this pamphlet purported to be Cresswell's memories of her mother, she writes very little about Fry as a mother. She describes her as gentle, firm, graceful, and tender, but generally not very involved in their religious instruction or education. She notes Fry's concerned but calm demeanor toward her after she

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<sup>57</sup> Rachel E. Cresswell, *Memories of her Mother, in a Letter to her Sisters* (Lynn: Thew and Son, 1845).

<sup>58</sup> Cresswell, *Memories of her Mother*, 4.

had stepped on a nail, and how much she and her siblings liked to join Fry while gardening, visiting the local poor and infirm, and the time they spent together as a family on winter evenings.<sup>59</sup> This, however, is the sum total of her assessment of Fry as a mother. It is also worth noting that Cresswell makes only passing references to Fry's ministry and her prison work, probably because she disliked both aspects of Fry's public life. Writing of Fry's prison engagements she states that "the occupation to her time and mind was a great loss to us. It often made me impatient and indisposed to assist her."<sup>60</sup> She also disliked the strict supervision the Society of Friends exercised on its members' activities, which was particularly vigilant with respect to its ministers and their immediate family,<sup>61</sup> and resented her mother's frequent absences from home that her religious engagements required. Cresswell, a member of the Church of England since her marriage in 1821, also disagreed with the Quaker practice of permitting female ministers, on one occasion accusing her mother of embarrassing her in front of her Anglican friends and neighbors by speaking at a Methodist chapel in her neighborhood.<sup>62</sup> In fact, nearly half of *Memories* is devoted to the final two years of Fry's life, when her health had deteriorated and

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<sup>59</sup> Cresswell, *Memories of her Mother*, 16-20.

<sup>60</sup> Cresswell, *Memories of her Mother*, 22. Fry had hoped that both of her eldest daughters would help her with her work, but Cresswell's obstinacy meant that Katharine had the larger share; though she devoted herself to supporting her mother's various causes, this was another source of discontent for Cresswell, since Katharine did so even when she found the work distasteful.

<sup>61</sup> Cresswell, *Memories of her Mother*, 6 and 69.

<sup>62</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 19 April, 1837, LRSF. Cresswell and Katharine Fry had spent nearly a year living with their maternal aunt and uncle in 1816-1817, who had both entered the Church of England. Though Cresswell was disowned from the Society of Friends because of her marriage to a non-member, her dislike of Quaker beliefs and practices probably would have led her leave the Society sooner or later even had she not married an Anglican. On Methodist preaching see Deborah Valenze, *Prophetic Sons and Daughters: Female Preaching and Popular Religion in Industrial England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). For contemporary defenses of the female ministry see Joseph John Gurney, *Observations on the Religious Peculiarities of the Society of Friends* (London: J. and A. Arch, 1824); and the American Harriet Livermore, *Scriptural Evidence in Favour of Female Testimony, in Meetings for Christian Worship* (Portsmouth, N.H. R. Foster, 1824).

she was rarely active either as a minister or in the prison cause. Cresswell's memories of this period, and the excerpts from Fry's journal entries and letters she includes, dwell on her mother's efforts to deal with some spiritual anxiety brought on by her increased infirmity and the deaths of more than half a dozen close family members,<sup>63</sup> followed by her eventual return to a trust in and dependence on the will of God.

Though this text was not available except to family members and friends, Cresswell's bias toward Fry's feminine and religious character over her professionalism and activism is important because a close reading of *Memoir of the Life of Elizabeth Fry* reveals a similar effort, albeit more subtly, to emphasize Fry's spiritual life and womanly compassion. *Memoir* isn't a standard biography dominated by narrative supplemented by quotes from primary sources. Though neither Katharine Fry nor Cresswell were plain Quakers and they knew that the *Memoir* would be read outside Quaker circles they followed—with a few important exceptions—the standard format for Quaker journals. As Howard Brinton has argued, in published Quaker journals the usual format is reversed: primary sources, either letters or diary entries, predominate. The emphasis is in the individual's spiritual life, which he identifies as having several distinct phases: a period of frivolity during youth, a turn toward serious behavior and a decision to adopt plain speech and dress, a period of inward tension over responding to the call to a spoken ministry, followed by a commitment to

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<sup>63</sup> These deaths, which occurred between 2 July, 1844 and 19 February, 1845, included her sister-in-law, Elizabeth Fry, a fellow minister and frequent traveling companion who lived on the grounds of the Fry estate in Plashet; her brother-in-law, Thomas Fowell Buxton, her associate in the prison reform cause; her son, William Storrs Fry and two of his daughters; her grandson, Gurney Reynolds; and a niece and her newborn child.

following the measure of inner light given to the best of one's capacity.<sup>64</sup> Since Fry had largely followed the convention of Quaker journaling even after becoming a prison reform advocate her daughters' decision that nearly two thirds of the *Memoir* consist of entries from Fry's journals rather than primary source material related to her prison work is revealing about which side of their mother's life they wished to emphasize: her spiritual or her public life. The first four chapters of volume one, for example, describe Fry's childhood, her quest to lead a virtuous life, and her eventual turn to religion as the means of bettering herself—and are followed by another four chapters on her early years as a wife and mother and the maturation of her faith.

Although Fry herself wrote more in her journals about her religious faith than about her day-to-day activities, her daughters also edited the original entries that might be seen as undermining the notion that she was a good Christian, wife, and mother. Entries in which she described criticism of her public or private actions were excluded unless an explanation or excuse for her proceedings could be provided. As noted in the previous chapter, not all Friends supported her prison work, and Fry expressed her anger at the censure some of them directed at her, and these entries were omitted unless Fry described them as occasions for spiritual growth.<sup>65</sup> References to dissention within the Fry household, or bad behavior by her children, were also deleted. On a number of occasions, for example, she despairs over the naughtiness and “volatile tongues” of some of her elder children.<sup>66</sup> In January 1818 she writes

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<sup>64</sup> Howard H. Brinton, *Quaker Journals: Varieties of Religious Experience Among Friends*, 3rd ed. (Wallingford, Penn.: Pendle Hill, 1996), 4–5.

<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entries, 24 March; 5 June; and 19 September, 1817, Norfolk 519/1.

<sup>66</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entries, 13 December, 1816; 3 and 21 July, 1817, Norfolk 519/1.

I have felt remarkably depressed lately from feeling how much hold the world has of my husband, children & household. My spirit at times feels ready to faint within me ...I feel as if I had not natural spirits to encounter the elder children when they are naughty more particularly dearest Rachel whose words and spirit are at times too much for me.<sup>67</sup>

Though these omissions were no doubt motivated by a desire not to expose their own failings and that of their father and siblings to the public, omitting them hides the fact that at the same time Fry was praised for her work at Newgate there was trouble at home. Not only might readers have interpreted her inability to control the behavior of her children as a sign that she was not a good mother, but they probably would have condemned her as abandoning her motherly duties for leaving them to travel in the ministry or visit prisons despite, as Fry herself wrote, “their critical age and state.”<sup>68</sup> Another area of editing pertained to the entries in which Fry castigated herself for what she perceived as personal failings. Again, her daughters were selective in which of these they did and did not include. When paired with a desire to overcome these self-identified shortcomings or to experience spiritual growth, they were included. As Fry herself had noted in her journal,

My original intention in writing this journal has been simply and purely the good of my own soul, but if after my death those who survive should believe that any part of it would conduce to strengthen and encourage others ... I am willing it should be exposed, even if my weaknesses are acknowledged, so long as they lead to the love of Him who has in tender mercy manifested Himself to be Strength to my Weakness, and a Present Help in every time of need.<sup>69</sup>

Excluding those entries that were not tied to spiritual growth, while understandable from a relative’s point of view, meant that the remaining entries only made Fry appear to be more saintly in her behavior than she really was.

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<sup>67</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 6 January, 1818, Norfolk 519/1.

<sup>68</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 13 December, 1816, Norfolk 519/1.

<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, July, 1828, LRSF.

But it is not just the preponderance of journal entries in *Memoir* or the manner in which they were edited that favored her spiritual qualities over her political accomplishments. Equally important are the other primary sources included, principally letters and memoranda written by or to Fry, which constitute approximately fifteen percent of the text. Of these materials about half pertain to spiritual or family matters, and the rest to her public engagements. It is the latter category of documents that is particularly interesting. Fry and Cresswell took a minimalist approach, including only a small portion of the great body of published and unpublished documents about their mother's public causes. In effect, the information about their mother's work presented in *Memoir* was little more than what was already general knowledge. The most detailed accounts are of Fry's first visit to Newgate prison and the condition of the prison and the behavior of the prisoners at that time, her initial efforts in setting up the Newgate school and workshops, her opposition to capital punishment, and the early efforts to regulate arrangements on board the convict ships. Even here, however, there are some curious gaps: they tended to focus on goals and outcomes, and not process. Thus they included the rules established for the inmates of Newgate, but do not describe how the members of the Ladies' Association for the Reformation of Female Prisoners in Newgate divided up their supervisory and administrative responsibilities. The founding of the BLS, established four years after the Newgate association to act as a clearinghouse for information for local committee chapters and lobbying organization is mentioned only in passing, and thereafter only referenced when Fry herself remarked on having spoken at



the BLS annual meeting.<sup>70</sup> Nor do they include extracts from the BLS annual reports, which chronicled the successes of the various chapters in changing the lives of individual prisoners and of the BLS in moving the agenda of prison reform forward. This omission is particularly striking since Katharine Fry was a member of the BLS committee, and had access to their minute book and any extant annual reports not in her mother's papers.

Another interesting strategy was their decision on which letters on prison business to include, and which to exclude. After Fry had become famous, she received hundreds of letters from individuals interested in replicating the reforms she and her associates had made in Newgate; while they mention this correspondence, none are included in *Memoir*, nor are copies of Fry's responses, though those still extant contain interesting information about her penal philosophy and her recommendations on how to effect change.<sup>71</sup> Most of the letters that they did include emphasize how Fry changed lives, not how she worked with officials to enact prison and penal reforms. For example, they included a letter from a condemned prisoner thanking Fry for "your very great attention to the care of my poor soul;"<sup>72</sup> another, from a prisoner sent to the convict colony in New South Wales, echoes this sentiment, writing of her

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<sup>70</sup> In fact, the *Memoir*, which is chronological, does not mention the BLS until three years after it was founded. Fry and Cresswell, 1:464.

<sup>71</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth Fry to the Marquis Calbert de Barol, 6 December, 1820, Dreer Collection, vol. Philanthropists, 163:1, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (hereafter HSP); and Elizabeth Fry to unknown recipient, 14 June, 1842, Vaux Papers, HSP. In the latter she states that "if our British Society reports are attentively read they will explain our arrangements," but goes on to list five of the "principle objects that we keep in view." Fry and Cresswell would have had access to a reasonable sample of these letters, since her correspondents often saved her letters, particularly after she became famous. Since a number of such individuals were connected with local chapters of the BLS, it would not have been difficult to borrow these letters (as they had from family and friends). In addition, Fry often kept drafts or copies of important letters.

<sup>72</sup> Charlotte Newman to Elizabeth Fry, 17 February, 1818, quoted in Fry and Cresswell, 1:309.

most sincere thanks for the heavenly instruction I derived from you and the dear friends [of the Newgate association], during my confinement in Newgate. In the month of April, 1817, how deep did that blessed prayer of your's [sic] sink into my heart; ...Believe me, my dear madam, I bless the day that brought me inside of Newgate walls; for then it was that the rays of Divine truth shone into my dark mind. ...these few sentiments of mine I wish you to make known to the world, that the world may see that your labour in Newgate has not been in vain in the Lord.<sup>73</sup>

But while spiritual transformations are celebrated, the efforts of Fry and her associates to teach prisoners to read and write, to learn practical skills such as knitting and sewing to enable them to support themselves after their release; their efforts to ensure that female prisoners were supervised by female officers, both in prison and on the convict ships; and their efforts to improve the conditions under which prisoners were held are not remarked upon.

Fry and Cresswell's efforts to play down their mother's expertise on penal policy is clearly revealed in their narrative of a dinner at which Fry conversed with François Guizot, the French foreign minister who had previously been minister of education and ambassador to London.

It was no common ordeal for woman, weak even in her strength, to encounter reasoning powers and capabilities such as his: their motives of action arising probably from far different sources, but curiously meeting at the same point; her's from deep-rooted benevolence, directed by piety in its most spiritual form; his from reflection, observation, and statesman-like policy, guided by philanthropy, based on philosophy and established conviction—yet in the aggregate the results the same: an intense desire to benefit and exalt human nature, and arrest the progress of moral and social evil, and an equal interest in ascertaining the most likely methods of effecting the desired end.<sup>74</sup>

Benevolent and pious Fry may have been; but as previous chapters have demonstrated, her penal philosophy had been as much the product of reflection

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<sup>73</sup> Harriett S. to Elizabeth Fry, 10 July, 1820, quoted in Fry and Cresswell, 1:267–268.

<sup>74</sup> Fry and Cresswell, 2:452.

and observation as Guizot's.<sup>75</sup> Fry and Cresswell's repeated emphasis on the spiritual side of Fry, whether in her personal life or as a component of the prison reforms she advocated, consistently diminished her expertise and professionalism as a prison reform advocate. It is no surprise, therefore, that most of Fry's biographers found her to be someone who could be portrayed as an exemplary Christian and/or woman, rather than as someone who challenged gender norms.

### A Model Christian Woman

The standard definition of a Christian is someone who professes their belief in Jesus as Christ and resolves to live his or her life according to the teachings of Jesus as revealed in the Bible—though of course the emphasis on what constitutes the core of Christian behavior has varied in time and place. Portraying Fry as a model Christian was important not just because religion and femininity were so closely linked in the nineteenth century, but also because the Christian faith was under pressure from developments in biology and philosophy. The question of the extent to which society had become secularized remains a hot topic of debate. The concept of secularization is a slippery construct, one that is virtually impossible to measure except, perhaps, across long periods of time, and requiring consideration of the position of

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<sup>75</sup> That public officials considered Fry's expertise on penal matters the result of her observations in prisons is evident from the questions they asked of her during her 1832 testimony before the House of Commons's Select Committee on Secondary Punishments, in which they asked for her opinion on a variety of penal-related matters, from how to repress crime to how to treat offenders, to specifics on the state of prisons in Ireland in Scotland, debtor's prisons, and convict ships. Elizabeth Fry, testimony, 23 March, 1832, House of Commons, "Report from the Select Committee on Secondary Punishments," *Sessional Papers, 1810–1832*, 22 June, 1832 (repr., *British Parliamentary Papers: Reports From Select Committees on Financing Convict Establishments Erecting Penitentiary Houses and Other Matters Relating to Transportation and Secondary Punishments*, Crime and Punishment: Transportation, vol. 1, Shannon: Irish University Press, 1969), 116-129.

religious institutions in society as well as the extent to which religion informs the thought and behavior of members of society.<sup>76</sup> But whether British society had become more secular or not, religion continued to have an important role in public and private life, and challenges to its authority were met by Christian apologists both theological and historical. Celebrating Fry's Christianity, and more particularly its effect on individuals and the community-at-large, reaffirmed the value of Christianity to society.

To make Fry a model Christian required a demonstration of both her faith in Christ, and her behavior as a Christian. Consequently all of the biographies include an account of her conversion from a life of skepticism to belief, though the length devoted to this period in Fry's life varied, usually—but not always—according to the length of the biography itself. Though the level of detail varied, one of the vignettes of her conversion process frequently included was her 1797 trip to London. Situated between the period when she first began to study religion and her decision to become a plain Quaker, this period demonstrated that she had been exposed to earthly temptations but decided to turn her back on the world and devote herself to God and the life to come.<sup>77</sup> “She gave up her all to follow Christ,” as one biographer wrote, “her vanity, love of dress and admiration, her bad temper and selfishness.”<sup>78</sup> As a sign of her

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<sup>76</sup> For a discussion of secularization, see Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800–2000* (London: Routledge, 2001); J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1660–1832: Religion, Ideology and Politics during the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Maurice Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England*, volume 2, *Assaults* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

<sup>77</sup> See, for example, *A Brief Notice of Elizabeth Fry* (Manchester: John Harrison and Son, for The Manchester District Tract Association of Friends, 1857), 2; and Sarah K. Bolton, *Lives of Girls Who Became Famous* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1886), 243.

<sup>78</sup> J. E. Brown, *Elizabeth Fry, The Prisoner's Friend* (London: The Sunday School Association, 1902), 13.

decision she adopted the plain dress and speech of the Quakers, and allowed herself to become, as her biographers repeatedly observed, what the prophet Jeremiah had urged the Israelites: clay in the potter's hands.<sup>79</sup> The importance of demonstrating her faith and that she had resigned herself to God's will is also evident in the space devoted to the last two years—and more particularly the last few weeks—of her life, a period when illness kept her largely confined to the home. As John Wolffe has argued, “the manner of a believer's death was perceived to be the ultimate test of his or her faith, and a source of vital testimony and inspiration to the living. Thus narratives of deathbeds were a crucial part of biographies.”<sup>80</sup> As Fry's biographies attest, this was a test that Fry passed with flying colors.

Since femininity was strongly linked to religion during this period, it is not surprising that there is significant overlap in what constituted being a good Christian and a good woman—hospitality, diligence, modesty, respect for authority, thankfulness, being loving, gentle, longsuffering, meek, temperate, and having self-control were markers both. And while examples of how Fry exhibited these qualities are littered through the biographies reviewed for this chapter, two shared qualities deserve special note: her humility and her dedication to the prison reform cause. Because her prison reform advocacy had made her famous, biographers took great pains to stress that she did it not for

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<sup>79</sup> *A Biographical Sketch of Elizabeth Fry* (London: Tract Association of the Society of Friends, 1863), 11. For some of Fry's biographers it was equally important to prove her evangelicalism, and included references to support this aspect of her faith. According to David Bebbington, the four characteristics of Evangelicalism are “*conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be change; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *Biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.” David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2. On Quaker evangelicalism, see John Punshon, *Portrait in Grey: A Short History of the Quakers*, 2nd edition (London: Quakerbooks, 2006), 180–89.

<sup>80</sup> John Wolffe, *The Expansion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Wilberforce, More, Chalmers and Finney* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 102.

her own sake, but for love of God. “Celebrity found and left her the same humble and devoted servant of her God,” wrote the author of *Women of Christianity, Exemplary of Acts of Piety and Charity*.<sup>81</sup> A more hyperbolic (and erroneous) statement came from Irene Ashby, who wrote that “if Elizabeth Fry had not been true to the core she must have been spoilt by all this adulation and publicity; but in her absorbing devotion to the end of saving these women she had literally no time to notice the attention she attracted.”<sup>82</sup> Most, however, provide a more accurate account, recounting how Fry frequently worried about the temptations posed by the attention paid her, and her fears that it would prove a hindrance to her religious and prison causes.

Fry’s selfless dedication to the prison cause is also belabored. “Once she had undertaken to perform what she believed to be her duty, no discouragement deterred her from pursuing it,” Corder wrote. “She laboured on with a quiet, patient perseverance, until she saw it accomplished—yet she trusted not in her own strength—she committed herself and her cause to the disposal of the Lord.”<sup>83</sup> Corder’s reference to Fry’s labor, a term she and others frequently apply to the tasks Fry and her associates undertook, itself evokes the maternalist discourse at work in many Fry biographies. In fact, according to some of her biographers Fry was so selflessly dedicated to her work that she worked herself so hard that her body repeatedly broke down under the strain.

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<sup>81</sup> Julia Kavanagh, *Women of Christianity, Exemplary for Acts of Piety and Charity* (New York: D. Appleton, 1852), 352.

<sup>82</sup> Irene M. Ashby, *Elizabeth Fry* (London: Edward Hicks, Jr., 1892), 109.

<sup>83</sup> Susanna Corder, *Life of Elizabeth Fry* (London: W. & F. G. Cash, 1853), 423. See also Charles Gordelier, *A Lecture on the Public Life and Character of Elizabeth Fry* (London: Ward and Co., 1862), 6.

Alison Booth has argued that group biographies published during the Victorian era were not just leisure entertainment, but were designed, by incorporating positive and negative examples, to instruct young women on proper female behavior.<sup>84</sup> And as noted above, eight of the Fry biographies reviewed for their chapter were part of a book or series of books on notable women. As late as the mid-eighteenth century, women continued to be portrayed as Eve, their gender identity associated with uncontrolled desire, individuals who were prone to impulse and uninhibited passion. But as noted earlier, during Fry's lifetime a woman's gender identity had been transformed; whereas Eve had once symbolized a woman's natural state, now it stood for an unnatural woman, and woman's true nature was now linked to her reproductive ability. As mothers, women possessed instincts that, according to the mid-nineteenth century author Peter Gaskell, were so strong that even if a woman had had no social intercourse, no "knowledge of her sex and its attributes, ...[she] would, should she herself become a mother in the wilderness, lavish as much tenderness upon her babe, cherish it as fondly ... sacrifice her personal comfort, with as much ardour, as much devotedness, as the most refined, fastidious, and intellectual mother."<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, woman's motherly qualities gave her moral influence, not just over her children, but on the men in her life. Thus, according to Gaskell,

Her love, her tenderness, her affectionate solicitude for his comfort and enjoyment, her devotedness, her unwearying care, her maternal fondness, her conjugal attractions, exercise a most ennobling impression

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<sup>84</sup> Booth, *How to Make it as a Woman*, 32–40.

<sup>85</sup> Peter Gaskell, *The Manufacturing Population of England, Its Moral, Social, and Physical Conditions, and the Changes Which Have Arisen from the Use of Steam Machinery; with an Examination of Infant Labour* (1833; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1972), 144–45, quoted in Mary Poovey, *The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 7.

upon his nature, and do more towards making him a good husband, a good father, and a useful citizen, than all the dogmas of political economy.<sup>86</sup>

Even care outside the family was defined in maternal language. As one Fry biographer put it, when “some glimpse of the pain and travail of the world comes to [women] in the midst of their gay, thoughtless lives ...the mother-life awakes within them, and they go out, at least in spirit, from their brilliant surroundings, to seek some balm for those wounded spirits. ... life is sad and they would fain ease it.”<sup>87</sup>

Many saw this image of woman as vital to the maintenance of the social fabric. Women who refused to be limited by this conception of femininity, who asked for the right to divorce, to control her own property and be accountable before the civil courts, to have an education on par with a man’s, and to work whether or not she needed to in order to survive challenged the social and political authority idealized by separate sphere rhetoric. But gender order, according to a number of feminist historians, had even larger implications. As Mary Poovey has argued, “this image of woman was also critical to the image of the English national character, which helped legitimize both England’s sense of moral superiority and the imperial ambitions this superiority underwrote.”<sup>88</sup>

Though a close reading of Fry’s life demonstrates that she was very much active in the public sphere, many of her biographers found ways to mold her story into one that celebrated the womanly characteristics held dear by separate sphere ideology. Their efforts began with descriptions of her childhood education; as Fry herself acknowledged, she was an indifferent scholar as a

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<sup>86</sup> Gaskell, *Manufacturing Population*, quoted in Poovey, *Ideological Work of Gender*, 8.

<sup>87</sup> Ashby, *Elizabeth Fry*, 20.

<sup>88</sup> Poovey, *Ideological Work of Gender*, 9.



child, though testimony from her siblings and the evidence of her later life indicate that she was intelligent, well-read, and a keen observer. Nevertheless, several of her biographers stress that “she did not excel in mere school studies,”<sup>89</sup> and that while her mother tried to instruct her in subjects not typically taught to girls at the time (including Latin and math) she was “considered rather stupid and dull” which, E. R. Pitman noted, was made worse by the fact that she was frequently ill. “Delicacy of health,” she noted, “combined with this natural stupidity to prevent anything like precocious intelligence;” instead, Fry had “penetration, tact, [and] common-sense; she possessed remarkable insight into character.”<sup>90</sup> Others ignored the question of her education altogether, leaving the impression that she had had no schooling beyond the household management skills taught to girls of her class.<sup>91</sup> Emphasizing the deficiencies of her early education set the stage for what, according to these authors, would motivate Fry’s philanthropy: she was not a bluestocking, a female intellectual who understood public policy; rather, she understood people and it was this intuition, rather than reason, that guided her work in prisons.

How then, would Fry eventually become involved in prisons? To authors who sought to portray her as an exemplary woman, the answer lay in her piety and benevolence toward those less fortunate than herself. “Nothing,” we are told, “gave her so much satisfaction as visiting the sick and the poor, relieving

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<sup>89</sup> William Render, *Through Prison Bars: The Lives & Labours of John Howard and Elizabeth Fry*, 2nd edition (London: S. W. Partridge & Co., 1894), 98.

<sup>90</sup> Emma Raymond Pitman, *Elizabeth Fry*, new ed. edited by John H. Ingram, Eminent Women Series (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1889), 4–5.

<sup>91</sup> See, for example, *Biographical Sketch of Elizabeth Fry*; and Bolton, *Lives of Girls*, especially p. 242.

and instructing them.”<sup>92</sup> Thus several stories designed to illustrate these qualities appear over and over again. The first is her decision to open a Sunday School for the children living on or near her father’s estate outside Norwich;<sup>93</sup> though how Fry, with her own limited education and lack of access to Sunday School publications, “managed to control and keep quiet so many unruly specimens of humanity, was a standing problem to all who knew her.” It must, they concluded, have been her organizational methods, the fact that it was easier to exert one’s will over weaker minds, together with “the strong, earnest longing of an enthusiastic young soul to benefit those who were living around her.”<sup>94</sup> Another oft-repeated tale of Fry’s benevolence to neighbors, and her desire to spread the Gospel news to unbelievers, was of her frequent visits to “Irish row,” the dilapidated lane of housing where Irish immigrants had settled in East Ham, as well as her annual visits to the gypsies who camped near the Fry estate on their way to a local fair. Whether attending the Irish or the gypsies, she provided them with food, clothing, and spiritual advice. Her advice was not always appreciated—after visiting the family of a Irish woman who had just passed away, for example, she noted that a paper-cross had been placed on the woman’s bosom and “slightly alluded to the uselessness of the cross as a symbol, but urged the attention of those present, to the great doctrine of which

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<sup>92</sup> *Elizabeth Fry, or, The Christian Philanthropist* (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1851), 38.

<sup>93</sup> Even the encyclopedia entry on Fry considered this important enough to include despite the overall brevity of the entry. H. G. Adams, ed. *Cyclopaedia of Female Biography: Consisting of Sketches of All Women Who Have Been Distinguished by Great Talents, Strength of Character, Piety, Benevolence, or Moral Virtue of Any Kind* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1869), 314. See also Bolton, *Lives of Girls*, 244; Gordelier, *Lecture on Elizabeth Fry*, 9; *A Brief Notice of Elizabeth Fry*, 1857, 4; and James Macaulay, *Elizabeth Fry*, *Excellent Women* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1892), chapter 3.

<sup>94</sup> Pitman, *Elizabeth Fry*, chapter two; and Corder, *Life of Elizabeth Fry*, 50.

it was intended to remind them;”<sup>95</sup> but she is said to have won over the local Catholic priest, and he did not object to her distributing copies of the Bible and religious tracts.

References to Fry’s skills as a nurse were also commonly included in her biographies; whether her patients were family members, the converted Jew who regularly attended her Newgate readings, or the stranger who had been thrown from his carriage and lay on the side of road with a portion of his skull missing, all received an equal portion of Fry’s tender care;<sup>96</sup> and she was an early advocate for vaccination, as a result of which, her daughters claim, “small-pox was scarcely known in the villages over which her influence extended.”<sup>97</sup> One biographer, after praising Fry for her nursing skills—though she notes it arose “more from loving perception and tact than from any special aptitude”—asserts that Fry “never lost this womanly tenderness which is so difficult to retain in the battle of life, the loss of which men so much dread for the women who come out before the world.”<sup>98</sup> And that Fry was instinctually aware of people’s suffering was illustrated by the following story: one day, while walking down the street, she saw a well-dressed but sad-looking woman. Fry stopped and asked her what was troubling her; though initially reluctant, after being taken to the

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<sup>95</sup> Corder, *Life of Elizabeth Fry*, 148–50.

<sup>96</sup> Corder, *Life of Elizabeth Fry*, 333; The story of the “poor man at Clapham,” a dying converted Jew, is retold in *Elizabeth Fry, or, The Christian Philanthropist*, 273–74; Gordelier, *Lecture on Elizabeth Fry*, 22; and Ashby, *Elizabeth Fry*, 108; for the story of the man on the road, see Gordelier, *Lecture on Elizabeth Fry*, 21.

<sup>97</sup> Fry and Cresswell, *Memoir*, 1:172.

<sup>98</sup> Ashby, *Elizabeth Fry*, 114–15. People who knew Fry might have taken issue with Ashby’s assessment that Fry had no real nursing skills; Corder, who knew Fry later in life and whose biography was the only biography published with the family’s consent, wrote that “she displayed, in cases of illness, great presence of mind, a quick perception of the changes taking place in the patient, a singular readiness in expedients to meet them, much judgment and skill in the administration of remedies, and the whole combined with a quiet, cheerful manner, and most tender sympathy, so as to inspire complete confidence and dependence on herself in the sufferer, as well as the assistants.” Corder, *Life of Elizabeth Fry*, 333.

nearby house of one of Fry's brothers, the young woman confided that she had been on her way to drown herself in the Thames.<sup>99</sup>

Mention of other standard feminine attributes or behaviors were also not omitted, such as the fact that she was a devoted mother and wife. Care was also taken to portray her as a good mistress; as Corder states, "for many years [she] displayed singular wisdom and economy in her household arrangements."<sup>100</sup> Fry herself might have disagreed with this assessment; on one occasion in her journal, for example, she remarks that she was

Tried by my servants appearing dissatisfied by what I believe to be liberal things; I feel these things when I consider how false a view we may take of each other, and how different my feelings towards them are from being ungenerous, which I fear they think. I know no family who allows exactly the same indulgences, and few who give the same high wages, and yet I do not know of any one so often grieved by the discontents of servants as myself.<sup>101</sup>

Fry's delight in and love of nature, whether in her gardens at Plashet or the scenery she observed on her travels, is also often referred to—an appreciation of nature being yet another mark of her femininity, since being in tune with the natural world was seen as womanly, just as men were attuned to material world.<sup>102</sup>

For those who believed in St. Paul's injunction that women should be seen, and not heard, in church, Fry's status as a minister of the Religious Society of Friend posed an obvious problem to her status as a model woman,

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<sup>99</sup> *Elizabeth Fry, or, The Christian Philanthropist*, 401-402; and Gordelier, *Lecture on Elizabeth Fry*, 23-24;

<sup>100</sup> Corder, *Life of Elizabeth Fry*, 393. See also Ashby, *Elizabeth Fry*, 37.

<sup>101</sup> Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 11 February, 1814, LRSF. Fry actually cared very much about the welfare of servants; in 1825 she founded a Servant's Society, a self-help provident society into which servants could deposit funds as a hedge against future illness or old age. See Elizabeth Fry, journal entry, 21 April, 1825, LRSF; and Gordelier, *Lecture on Elizabeth Fry*, 18.

<sup>102</sup> On the importance of gardens as a marker of middle-class status, and as a place where both men and women could interact with nature and each other, see Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 370-75.

though this was solved easily enough by either ignoring that fact altogether, or only alluding to it without explaining the responsibilities her position entailed.<sup>103</sup> That she frequently traveled in the ministry—sometimes leaving her family, including young children, for weeks or even months at a time—went unsaid in these accounts.<sup>104</sup>

Since Fry warranted biographies because of her work in prisons, biographers who disagreed with, or were ambivalent about, women working in the public sphere had to be creative in how they dealt with this aspect of her life. Their primary strategy was to place most of their emphasis on the condition of Newgate when Fry first visited the prison, and the initial reforms she and her associates introduced in 1817; only rough sketches of Fry's subsequent prison reform efforts are included in the biographies written by individuals who questioned a woman's participation in public affairs. This approach is sensible; as I argue in chapter two, when Fry first embarked on her Newgate visits she was not a prison reformer, nor did she contemplate becoming one; instead, she was acting as a "lady bountiful," albeit in a space that was not the usual field of action for a charitable woman; it was not until after word of her work was leaked to the press and she was forced to deal with inquiries about the changes the Newgate association had instituted at Newgate that she began to examine penal policy systematically. Virtually all accounts include in their description

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<sup>103</sup> Though an essential component of Quaker belief is that one is not to speak unless moved, in that moment, by the Inner Light (which they see as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit in everyone), and therefore do not prepare sermons, there are some records of their vocal ministry. Fry herself occasionally noted in her journal which texts from the Bible she had spoken on, but on occasion their sermons were anonymously recorded (though probably by visitors and not by a fellow Quaker). See, for example, *Sermons and Prayers Preached by Joseph John Gurney and Elizabeth Fry* (London: Hamilton Adams & Co., 1836), which contains five prayers or sermons by Fry, and Elizabeth Fry, "What Owest Thou Unto Thy Lord?," *Sermons Preached by Members of the Society of Friends* (London: Hamilton, Adams & Co., 1832), 25–28.

<sup>104</sup> Two examples are Bolton, *Lives of Girls*; and Macaulay, *Elizabeth Fry*.

the physical conditions of Newgate when Fry first visited it. This included the fact that there were only four rooms for nearly three hundred inmates, that in these rooms they lived, cooked, washed, and slept, without bedding, on the floor; the lack of discipline—there was no employment, little supervision, and no classification according to offense to separate the hardened criminal from the neophyte offender (the idea that prisons were nurseries of vice was a common refrain); and the appearance and behavior of the prisoners. As one biographer stated, the prisoners were “covered with a few tattered garments, filthy in the extreme, affording scarcely any protection from the inclemency of the weather... Drunkenness prevailed to a fearful extent ... Swearing, gambling, and fighting, filled up every hour of the day.”<sup>105</sup>

Descriptions of the horrific conditions she encountered during her initial visits were designed to elicit revulsion at the idea that such conditions had still existed in a country famous (at least in their eyes) for its moral superiority while simultaneously highlighting not only Fry’s compassion for these castoffs of society but her selflessness in devoting her time and energy to alleviate their material hardships. How, wrote Irene Ashby, “could she bear this close contact with misery so loathsome, with womanhood so degraded, with scenes so appalling? Self with her had been second through long years in the little things of life, and now it was answer enough that these were her sisters and there was none other to save [them].”<sup>106</sup> But it was equally important to emphasize that Fry was not contaminated by her close contact with these unwomanly creatures, as the following excerpt from the Reverend George Crabbe’s poem shows:

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<sup>105</sup> *A Biographical Sketch of Elizabeth Fry*, 34.

<sup>106</sup> Ashby, *Elizabeth Fry*, 73.

“One I beheld! a wife, a mother, go  
To gloomy scenes of wickedness and wo;  
She sought her way through all things vile and base,  
And made a prison a religious place:  
Fighting her way—the way that angels fight  
With powers of darkness—to let in the light.  
Yet she is tender, delicate and nice,  
And shrinks from all depravity and vice;<sup>107</sup>

In fact, rather than Fry being tainted by her interactions with the female prisoners of Newgate, it was the prisoners who were transformed by their association with Fry. By agreeing with Fry’s suggestion that a school should be established in prison for their children in order to shield them from the worst effects of prison (children under seven, at that time, being permitted to remain with their parents in prison) the women demonstrated that “low as they were in sin, every spark of maternal affection had not fled.”<sup>108</sup> Though Fry herself frequently stated that the goal of prison discipline should be to reduce crime, the subsequent reforms enacted by the Newgate association in the spring of 1817—such as establishing a workshop in which the women were employed in sewing, spinning, and knitting, instituting a daily routine supervised by a matron and inmate monitors rather than male guards, classifying inmates according to age and offense, daily Bible readings, and ensuring that all prisoners were properly clothed—were all measures that promoted “proper” womanly behavior. In agreeing to cooperate with the changes the Newgate association instituted and promising to adhere to the rules set up by the visiting ladies to regulate inmate behavior, the prisoners had taken the first

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<sup>107</sup> Rev. George Crabbe, “The Maid’s Story,” *Tales of the Hall* (1819), in ed. George Crabbe, *The Poetical Works of the Reverend George Crabbe with His Letters and Journals, and His Life, in 8 volumes*, vol. 7 (London: J. Murray, 1834).

<sup>108</sup> Pitman, *Elizabeth Fry*, chapter 6.

step on their road to redemption; not only were they being rescued from a life of crime, but they were restoring their womanly nature. As evidence of this effect, a number of Fry's biographers point to one particularly ferocious woman who was described on first acquaintance as "yelling like a wild beast: she rushed around the area, with her arms extended, tearing everything of the nature of a cap from the heads of the other women.' But this very woman was, however, through the grace and mercy of God, humanized under the instruction of these christian [sic] visitors: she became 'a well-conducted person,' and married respectably."<sup>109</sup>

One of the most striking commonalities in the Fry biographies reviewed for this chapter is the recurring reference to Fry's voice. Variouslly described as charming, peculiarly solemn and sweet, silvery, pure and penetrating, and persuasive,<sup>110</sup> her biographers claim it fixed the attention of her audience—whether they were in prison or a palace—and moved them deeply, often to tears. One story frequently included concerned the reaction of a "near relative of the Duke of Wellington" who, having attended one of Fry's Newgate Bible readings, who was

*'amazed at the reverence of Mrs. Fry in reading the Scriptures, and the attention of the prisoners. His heart melted in tenderness while he listened to her faithful and compassionate addresses to her serious congregation: he had never before seen any thing like it.'* He was an officer in the royal navy, and it was remarked, by one who was present, "When Mrs. Fry kneeled down and offered prayer ... the gallant captain was overcome: he burst into tears, and wept like a child."<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> A *Biographical Sketch of Elizabeth Fry*, 41.

<sup>110</sup> Kavanagh, *Women of Christianity*, 357; A *Biographical Sketch of Elizabeth Fry*, 58; C. Rachel Jones, *Some Norfolk Worthies: With Authentic Portraits of Nelson, Elizabeth Fry, Lady Jane Grey, Princess Pocahontas, and Amelia Opie* (London: Jarrold, 1899), 117; and Brown, *Elizabeth Fry*, 63.

<sup>111</sup> *Elizabeth Fry, or, The Christian Philanthropist*, 169.



Emphasizing the quality of Fry's voice over the knowledge embodied in her words was yet one more way her biographers elevated her emotional appeal over her expertise. From contemporary accounts it appears that Fry's voice was indeed compelling; but as her brother, Joseph John Gurney, wrote, while the "modulations of her deeply-toned voice gave great effect to her reading" it was her words, not the sound of her voice, that were persuasive.<sup>112</sup>

### Conclusion

Alison Booth notes that although biographies of famous women have been around for centuries, a recurring refrain by female authors of this genre is the conviction that women are absent in historical accounts of the past. Whether Christine de Pizan in 1404 or Virginia Woolfe's narrator in *A Room of One's Own* five hundred years later, the lament is the exclusion of women from history followed by a discovery of notable women whose lives can be catalogued and presented as models of women's contributions to history. Booth argues that the repeated attempts to "rediscover obscure women" and insert them into the historical narrative, despite the fact that "so many of the recurrently 'obscure' have been recognized time and again"<sup>113</sup> is a paradox of women's history. Women "have had to reinvent the wheel of women's history generation after generation," Sybil Oldfield claims, while "men [can] live within history."<sup>114</sup> Fry embodies this phenomenon: though her image and an engraving of a posthumous re-imagining of one of her Newgate readings (figure 8) graces the back of the £5 note, hers is not a household name nor are her contributions as

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<sup>112</sup> Gurney, *Brief Memoir*, 43 and 39–41.

<sup>113</sup> Booth, *How to Make it as a Woman*, 5.

<sup>114</sup> Sybil Oldfield, *Collective Biography of Women in Britain, 1550–1900* (London, Mansell, 1999), xi, cited in Booth, *How to Make it as a Woman*, 20.

a prison reform activist recognized in the scholarship of the changing landscape of criminal justice in nineteenth century Britain. Despite the fact that Fry was one of the most popular subjects of female biography in the Victorian era, the image of her life presented over the course of the second half of the century served to erase her involvement in new approaches to defining and managing criminality until all that remained was the memory of a benevolent Christian woman.



**Figure 10:** *Mrs. Fry Reading at Newgate* by Jerry Barrett (c. 1860). Courtesy of The Library of the Religious Society of Friends, London.

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