

An "Amateur" . . . in penal reform

A book review by
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WHEN MARGERY FRY died in 1958 at the age of 84, Lord Templewood, who knew her well, wrote: "an entrancing figure has passed from the world of philanthropists and social reformers. Throughout her long life good looks and good works were combined in a delightful harmony, expert knowledge and human sympathy never parted company".

Now, almost 10 years after her death, she will be remembered by many as a broadcaster, penal reformer or college principal but to others she will be a name only; confused, perhaps with her distantly connected Quaker kinswoman, Elizabeth Fry.

This biography by Enid Huws Jones, who had known Margery Fry since 1930, introduces the reader to a delightful and remarkable person of whom it was said by a schoolgirl visitor: "We did not even know that she was a penal reformer but she seemed to know how to live". It was a life rich in

experience and the book is written with great perception and warmth. I like illustrations in a biography and the photographs of Margery Fry are happily chosen. As a girl her face was described by a governess, quoting Browning:

"Like a Catherine-pear

The side that's next the sun".

In later life, someone recalls "her dark greying hair brushed back, a few strands escaping not untidily, a dress of some soft material with lace at the neck, the colour warm and pleasant neither garish, nor dull".

Margery Fry was born in 1874, one of the nine children of Edward Fry and his wife Mariabella Hodgkin. Her father "had travelled in half a lifetime from an unpretentious house in Bristol, where the cocoa business, still precarious, was carried on in a shed at the end of a backyard, to a position of eminence at the Bar". He became a judge and on retirement was Britain's representative at the Hague. Her mother lived to be 94 and throughout her long life extended a strong influence over her children. Her brother, Roger, was the eminent

Margery Fry—The Essential Amateur by ENID HUWS JONES, Oxford University Press, 42s.

painter and art critic. None of the sisters married and throughout the book we get fascinating glimpses of them. At 89 Agnes, writing to her only remaining sister said of Margery: "And I want all these admirers to know she was wonderful as a sister as well as a penal reformer".

Brought up within the framework of a Quaker family of substance in Highgate and Bayswater, Margery went to the school which was later to become Roedean and then to Somerville College, Oxford where she read mathematics. She remained at Somerville as librarian and produced a play written by her cousin by marriage, Robert Bridges, to celebrate the opening of the library. In 1926 she returned to Somerville as principal but her energies were not confined to academic life. She was warden of a hostel for women students in Birmingham (in 1904 the salary was £60 a year), a member of the Staffordshire County Education Committee, one of the first woman magistrates, an original member of the University Grants Committee and a governor of the B.B.C. In the first world war she served with the Friends War Victims Relief Committee in France (her sister Ruth Fry was secretary of the organisation).

In 1919 she became secretary of the Penal Reform League and soon united it with the Howard Association thus creating the Howard League for Penal Reform and remained its secretary until 1926. "Penal reform", it has been said,

"was her life work—or rather, the one among her innumerable interests to which she devoted most of her public time". She travelled widely and visited prisons wherever she went. She collected facts, she wrote articles and made speeches, she had penal reform included in the agenda of the League of Nations, she was appointed to the Home Secretary's Advisory Committee on the Treatment of Offenders. All this was very valuable and important but above all she was "a person of almost infinite compassion and understanding".

As an old lady she was attacked in the street and had her handbag snatched. She declared she had never said "criminals were nice people". In her very last years she undertook all the research to support her proposal to give financial compensation to the victims of crimes of violence. She cared not only about prisoners but about prison staffs. Of a party at her London house in the 1930s she wrote: "They stayed late, they ate lots, and they asked to come again. Holloway Prison stayed to the end and took off the 'floral decorations' to grace the gaol".

Roger Fry spoke of his sister's "great ingenuity and practical wisdom". In her time as a school governor she concerned herself with the drains and encouraged needlework classes to mend clothes. She had a flair for figures and illustrated many of her talks with graphs which she made herself having "discovered that graphs embroidered in bright wools on checked

glass-cloths were more conveniently stored than crisp paper rolls in an untidy cupboard or a bulging handbag".

The book is enriched by quotations from her own writing. Her one book *Arms of the Law* was published in 1951 but throughout her life she wrote many articles and speeches and above all letters. From a lecture tour in China she wrote: "The beds are like tombstones and the pillows are stony griefs. The Chinese politeness is absolutely invulnerable. It's unthinkable that they should give one the criticism that one's longing to get". And in August 1940 she described London as "tired and stale, much more autumnal than the country, a region of petrol smells and sparrows and white cabbage butterflies".

She had a magnificent voice and was a public speaker for many causes. In the last years of her life she was known to millions as a member of the B.B.C. Brains Trust. She made frequent broadcasts and appeared on television. "There's comforting that Margery Fry is" said a woman viewer in South Wales.

Margery Fry was a person of abounding energy and fun. In her 80s she was taken by two boys for

a sail in their boat off the coast of Essex. She painted (she had wanted to become an artist like her brother, Roger), played the flute and took delight in birds. Two of her ambitions were to achieve the abolition of capital punishment and see a bearded tit.

"I think the whole human being is such an unknown thing that we've got to attack our ignorance from every possible side", she wrote, and in the field of penal reform she was active in promoting the educational programme and professional social workers in prisons, campaigning for the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Offenders and encouraging research. Of Maurice Waller, chairman of the Prison Commission she had said "he has kept the unofficial mind, the sense of what might be, unblunted by dealing with what is".

By upbringing a Quaker, Margery Fry eventually resigned from the Society of Friends and died an agnostic. Her influence was enormous, she was a public figure and a personal friend and as the writer of her obituary notice in *The Times* said: "she cared passionately about prisons because prisoners were people and she loved her fellow men and all their works".