

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

Elizabeth Kirkbride Gurney's Correspondence with Abraham Lincoln: The Quaker Dilemma

IN OCTOBER 1862, ELIZA GURNEY traveled to the White House with three fellow Quakers to meet with Abraham Lincoln in order to offer the president spiritual comfort and support. Gurney's address to the president expressed deep empathy for the heavy weight of responsibility that he bore, and Lincoln was deeply moved by the sentiments she expressed. Several months after the visit, Lincoln initiated a correspondence with Gurney that continued for more than a year. This exchange reflects Gurney's—and the broader Quaker community's—commitment to addressing society's wrongs and the dilemma faced by the Religious Society of Friends when confronted by a war fought to end human slavery. This interchange between Lincoln and Gurney has been preserved in Gurney's memoir.¹ This memoir and the original of one of Lincoln's letters to Gurney are in the collections of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. A facsimile and transcript of that letter are printed below.

Background to the Meeting

Elizabeth (Eliza) Paul Kirkbride (1801–81) was born into a well-connected Philadelphia family of Quakers that associated with the evangelical Christian interpretation of the faith when Philadelphia Yearly Meeting separated into Hicksite and Orthodox branches in 1827. A recorded (recognized) Friends minister, Eliza was acquainted with other like-minded Quakers on both sides of the Atlantic, and through these associations she was introduced to Joseph John Gurney (1788–1847). Eliza Kirkbride married Gurney in 1841.

¹ Eliza P. Gurney, *Memoir and Correspondence of Eliza P. Gurney*, ed. Richard F. Mott (Philadelphia, 1884), 307–22.

Joseph John Gurney was a noted leader among evangelical (Orthodox) Friends. He emphasized a closer study of the Bible, association with other evangelical Christians, and engagement of the Christian gospel with the great social issues of the day. Highly educated, sophisticated, and articulate, he made a great impression on Orthodox Quakers during an 1837–40 visit to the United States, which led to a subsequent second separation among American Quakers into Wilburite (after the conservative Rhode Island farmer John Wilbur) and Gurneyite branches. During his travels in America, Gurney encouraged higher education among Friends, ecumenical cooperation with other Christians in peace, Bible and anti-slavery organizations, and a deeper evangelical faith. Gurney's opposition to slavery was further bolstered by witnessing slavery first hand when he journeyed into the American South in 1837 to visit among southern Friends who, themselves, had suffered greatly for their antislavery stand. His popularity was such that he preached to crowds of thousands and in 1838 preached in the House of Representatives to congressmen, senators, President Van Buren and members of his cabinet, and their families. Later he met privately with Henry Clay and Martin Van Buren to share his concerns about slavery and the treatment of Native Americans.²

The Meeting and Correspondence

When Eliza Gurney met with Abraham Lincoln in October 1862, her purpose, consistent with her evangelical faith, was simply to offer spiritual support and comfort. "I come in the love of the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ," she assured him. She told the president that her spirit had "been introduced into near sympathy with our Chief Magistrate in the heavy weight of responsibility that rests upon him," acknowledging a sense of spiritual connection, of empathy, of harmony and unity with him. The text of her address to the president is replete with references to Quaker concerns and sources of religious inspiration. Her confidence that Lincoln endeavored to "preserve a conscience void of offence toward God and man" was no mere statement of respect for his natural abilities. It obliquely referred to the belief of Friends that our natural reason and conscience are culturally influenced, but the *Light* in our consciences is pure, proceeds from God, and will lead into truth. Her acknowledgement of Lincoln's "true fast" to "loose the bands of wickedness" and sources of

² David E. Swift, *Joseph John Gurney: Banker, Reformer, and Quaker* (Middletown, CT, 1962).

oppression reflects the traditional Quaker opposition to “profession without possession,” to outward expression of religious ritual and observance without a true, inward transformation into the substance of the thing, and her belief that Lincoln’s actions were in keeping with God’s will. Gurney’s address is packed with biblical language that Lincoln would readily recognize and that provided a spiritual shorthand for communicating deep feelings.³

In his response to Gurney, Lincoln acknowledged a desire that would strike a chord with any Quaker: the earnest hope that his own will would harmonize with the divine will. And he even gave a tip of his stovepipe hat to a favorite theological premise of Friends (the Inward Light) in his statement that “if, after endeavoring to do my best with the light which He affords me, I find my efforts fail, then I must believe that, for some purpose unknown to me, He wills it otherwise.” Lincoln noted, again in sympathy with Friends’ principles, that he wished this war would never have begun and that it might have ended before this time.⁴

About a year after their meeting, Lincoln sent word to Gurney that he would like her to write to him, and she did so in August 1863. In her letter, Gurney continued to embed Quaker sensitivities, including addressing the president in the Quaker plain speech of “thee” and “thy”—a language of equality. She made veiled reference to the peace testimony, referred to the Quaker nonobservance of “holy days” in her expression of approval of Lincoln’s declaration of a day of thanksgiving, and alluded to Quaker confidence in the Inward Light in “Holy Spirit” language.⁵

Lincoln replied to Eliza Gurney a year later, on September 4, 1864. In his letter, he eloquently reiterated his faith that God had a purpose in bringing on and prolonging “this terrible long war,” even if mortals such as he and Gurney could not perceive that purpose. “Meanwhile we must work earnestly in the best light He gives us,” he told her. He acknowledged the dilemma that Quakers such as Gurney faced in these times: “On principle, and faith, opposed to both war and oppression, they [Quakers] can only practically oppose oppression by war.” Lincoln assured Gurney that he understood that dilemma even while he could not allow Quakers and other pacifists to be absolved from the responsibilities this war imposed, “For those appealing to me on conscientious grounds, I

³ Gurney, *Memoir*, 309–12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 313.

⁵ Eliza P. Gurney to Abraham Lincoln, Aug. 18, 1863, in *ibid.*, 314–16.

have done, and shall do, the best I could and can, in my own conscience, under my oath to the law.”⁶

Eliza Gurney responded on September 8. She continued to offer spiritual support and encouragement but would not let the president’s gentle jibe at the peace testimony go without comment. She acknowledged the dilemma Friends were in but reaffirmed both the biblical basis for opposing slavery and the Quaker opposition to redeeming one life by taking another: “The weapons of their [Quakers] warfare are not carnal. The Saviour has commanded them to love their enemies; therefore they dare not fight them.” Gurney thus invoked the early Quaker concept of “the Lamb’s War,” a nonviolent struggle against sin and evil within and without and the 1660 Declaration of Friends to King Charles II of England that forms the basis of the official Quaker peace testimony. Eliza Gurney concluded her letter with a paean to the Quaker propensity nevertheless for supporting Lincoln politically because of “the leniency with which their honest convictions had been treated” and because of their belief that Lincoln was “conscientiously endeavoring, according to his own convictions of right, to fulfil the important trust committed to him” by God. Her prophecy proved to be accurate as many Quakers expressed loyalty to the “Party of Lincoln” for decades to come.⁷

Lincoln’s Sympathies with Quakers

Abraham Lincoln’s expressed fondness for Eliza Gurney, and his assurance in his correspondence that he had sought to do all he could under the law to respond to Quaker appeals of conscience is indicative of an openness to Friends that went beyond a personal affection and the “Light” in his conscience. Lincoln claimed to be descended from Quakers on his father’s side, and local lore along the border between the Virginia and North Carolina foothills holds that his mother, Nancy Hanks, had Quaker connections.⁸ More directly, Lincoln had a deep admiration for the British Quaker parliamentarian John Bright, a plain Friend his whole life who served in William Gladstone’s cabinet and was revered for his eloquence and integrity. Lincoln’s respect for Quaker principles and

⁶ Abraham Lincoln to Eliza P. Gurney, Sept. 4, 1864, Abraham Lincoln Collection, Society Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; printed in *Memoir*, 316–17.

⁷ Eliza P. Gurney to Abraham Lincoln, Sept. 8, 1864, in *Memoir*, 318–21.

⁸ Seth B. Hinshaw, *The Carolina Quaker Experience, 1665–1975: An Interpretation* (Greensboro, NC, 1984), 21.

beliefs may have helped him turn the war for the Union into a war to end slavery. In June 1862, six Progressive Friends (Hicksite Quakers who supported more direct engagement with issues such as woman's rights, abolition, and Indian rights than did their more conservative, isolationist colleagues) visited the White House to urge immediate emancipation. The visit helped Lincoln find the language he needed to craft the first draft of the Emancipation Proclamation presented to his cabinet the next month.⁹

And, indeed, Lincoln did go far in honoring the conscientious objection of Quakers to war. One Friend who benefited from Lincoln's sympathy was Francis T. King, a wealthy businessman from Baltimore who, with a signed pass from Lincoln, headed a committee that directed aid to the suffering Quaker community in the South during (and after) the Civil War. King's pass enabled him and colleagues to carry funds and supplies to the remnant settlements of Friends in North Carolina devastated by the war.¹⁰ Lincoln also personally signed the release of Southern Quakers forced to march by the Confederate army into Northern battles and later imprisoned in Union jails. One such beneficiary of Lincoln's signature was Thomas Hinshaw, a North Carolina Quaker forced along with the troops to Gettysburg, although he refused to bear arms. When he was taken in by local Friends after Lee's defeat, other residents of the town intervened and jailed him and other Southern Quakers. Quaker appeals to Lincoln resulted in their release.¹¹

"The purposes of the Almighty are perfect, and must prevail, though we erring mortals may fail to accurately perceive them in advance," Lincoln wrote Gurney. "Surely He intends some great good to follow this mighty convulsion, which no mortal could make, and no mortal could stay."¹² Abraham Lincoln and Eliza Gurney may have disagreed on whether or not a war to end oppression was justifiable, but they believed that each was true to his or her own conscience and convictions, and for that they greatly respected one another.

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⁹ Abraham Lincoln, "Remarks to a Delegation of Progressive Friends," June 20, 1862, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ, 1953–55), 5:278–79; D. Elton Trueblood, *Abraham Lincoln: Theologian of American Anguish* (New York, 1973), chap. 2.

¹⁰ Francis T. King's pass, Friends Historical Collection, Guilford College, Greensboro, NC.

¹¹ Hinshaw, *Carolina Quaker Experience*, 150.

¹² Abraham Lincoln to Eliza P. Gurney, Sept. 4, 1864, Abraham Lincoln Collection, Society Collection; and Gurney, *Memoir*, 316–17.

Executive Mansion,

Washington, September 4, 1864.

Eliza P. Gurney.

My esteemed friend,

I have not forgotten—probably never shall forget—the very impressive occasion when yourself and friends visited me on a Sabbath forenoon two years ago. Nor has your kind letter, written nearly a year later, ever been forgotten. In all, it has been your purpose to strengthen my reliance on God, I am much indebted to the good Christian people of the country for their constant prayers and consolations; and to no one of them, more than to yourself. The purposes of the Almighty are perfect, and must prevail, though we erring mortals may fail to accurately perceive them in advance. We hoped for a happy termination of this terrible war long before this; but God knows best, and has ruled otherwise. We shall yet acknowledge His wisdom and our own error therein. Meanwhile we must work earnestly in the best light He gives us, trusting that so working still condu-

Autographed Letter Signed, on Executive Mansion letterhead. Abraham Lincoln Collection, Society Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

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Your people—the Friends—have had, and are having, a very great trial. On principle, and faith, opposed to both war and oppression, they can only practically oppose oppression by war. In this hard dilemma, some have chosen one horn and some the other. For those appealing to me on conscientious grounds, I have done, and shall do, the best I could and can, in my own conscience, under my oath to the law. That you believe this I doubt not, and believing it, I shall still receive, for our country and myself, your earnest prayers to our Father in Heaven.

Your sincere friend
A. Lincoln.

Lincoln Box

Washington, September 4, 1864.

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