

A Quaker Influence on Modern English Literature:



Caroline Stephen and her niece, Virginia Woolf



By Alison M. Lewis

CAROLINE EMELIA STEPHEN (1834-1909) has enjoyed a long-standing reputation among Friends as a Quaker theologian. *Quaker Strongholds* (1891) is considered a "Quaker classic;" one hundred years after its first publication, Friends General Conference book catalog calls it "one of the clearest visions of our faith." Stephen was also the author of *Light Arising: Thoughts on the Central Radiance* (1908) and *The Vision of Faith* (1911).

People who know Caroline Stephen and her writings are often unaware that Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), one of the most innovative forces within the genre of the modern English novel, was her niece. Woolf used concepts of psychology and relativity to produce new ways of expressing consciousness in works such as *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927). In addition to her progressive artistry, she is known for her strong stands on feminism and pacifism.

Copies of *Light Arising* and *Quaker Strongholds* were in Virginia Woolf's private library to the end of her life. So much of the old forms and the family ties of her past life were jettisoned when she and her siblings recreated themselves in Bloomsbury that it seems unlikely that she would have retained these books for purely sentimental reasons. They must have been meaningful to her on some deeper level. In light of this, it is informative to look at the link between these two women, who were both outstanding in their respective fields, and particularly interesting to consider the influence of Stephen's Quakerism upon Woolf's writing.

CAROLINE Emelia Stephen was the younger sister of Virginia Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, who was knighted for his editorship of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Two distinctive and contradictory portraits of Caroline emerge. The first has its roots in Leslie Stephen's book of family remembrances, *The Mausoleum Book*. He writes that Caroline's health was damaged and her life ruined by an unrequited love who left and died in India. Though there is absolutely no substantiation for this story, it has taken on a life of its own and is repeatedly retold by most of the Woolf scholars and critics who do not ignore the existence of Caroline entirely.

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Quentin Bell, Woolf's nephew and biographer, follows his grandfather's lead in forwarding the theory that Caroline's ill health was due to a broken heart. The picture he presents of Caroline is that of "an intelligent woman who fell, nevertheless, into the role of the imbecile Victorian female" and who "at the age of twenty-three settled down to become an invalid and an old maid". This romantic story of a lost love persists in the most recent Woolf biography by James King: "Early in life she had fallen in love with a young man who had not been responsive and had taken himself off to India. In Milly [Caroline], Leslie saw a woman whose life had been destroyed by a broken heart. Leslie saw Milly as weak-willed and indecisive."

Woolf, on the other hand, recognized in her aunt the same pattern that played out in the lives of her own mother and half-sister, and stated in her aunt's obituary that "attendance upon her mother during her last long illness injured her health so seriously that she never fully recovered". Jane Marcus, the feminist critic who first looked seriously at Caroline, followed Woolf's theory in reasoning that Caroline's ill health was due to playing the role of "a dutiful Victorian daughter and sister, nursing at the sickbeds and deathbeds of her family". Caroline's mother died in 1875; Caroline suffered another collapse the same year while caring for Leslie and his daughter following the death of his first wife.

IT IS PERHAPS NOT SURPRISING that Leslie Stephen might have been eager to shift some of the blame for Caroline's broken health from himself to a mythical lover. But even more damaging is the fact that he makes every effort to denigrate Caroline's writing. Her work is "little" he says, perhaps in contrast to his own "big" work. He misnames *Quaker Strongholds* in his memoir as *Strongholds of Quakerism*, and calls it "another little work of hers".

Virginia Woolf and her siblings from a young age had accepted their father's view of their aunt, who was called "Silly Milly" or "Nun" or "The Quaker" and was often a figure of fun in their early lives. However, an important encounter between the two women was to take place in Virginia Woolf's early adulthood. Virginia was twenty-two years old when her father died in 1904, and at this time she suffered another of the mental collapses she had experienced since childhood. She was sent to recover in the home of her Quaker friend, Violet Dickinson, where she stayed for almost three months. Later she was sent for additional rest to Caroline's Cambridge home, known as "The Porch," which she called at one point "an ideal retreat for me".

It is, indeed, not easy to define the precise kind or amount of indulgence which is incompatible with Christian simplicity; or rather it must of necessity vary. But the principle is, I think, clear. In life, as in art, whatever does not help, hinders. All that is superfluous to the main object of life must be cleared away, if that object is to

She attended Cambridge Meeting with Caroline and offered to bring Violet there on a visit as well. Caroline found freedom from intellectual and theological controversies in silence, and Virginia found a new type of freedom as well. In her life at the Stephen household, "silence was a breach of convention" and mindless small talk a requirement. The focused quiet of Quaker meeting must have

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be fully attained. In all kinds of effort, whether moral, intellectual or physical, the essential condition of vigour is a severe pruning away of redundancy. Is it likely that the highest life, the life of the Christian body, can be carried on upon easier terms?

The Quaker ideal, as I understand it, requires a continual weighing of one thing against another--a continual preference of the lasting and deep over the transient and superficial.... If we bear in mind the essentially relative meaning of the word "superfluous," it is obvious that such a testimony against "superfluities" does not require any rigid or niggardly rule as to the outward things. To my own mind, indeed, this view of the matter seems to require at least as clearly the liberal use of whatever is truly helpful to "our best life" as the abandonment of obstructing superfluities. No doubt a testimony against superfluities is very liable to degenerate into formality, and to be so misapplied as to cut off much that is in reality wholesome, innocent, and beautiful....

— Caroline Stephen,
Quaker Strongholds

given Virginia a needed opportunity to rest, turn inward, and recollect herself from her trauma without having to "perform" for others.

Although there was sometimes tension between the two women, Caroline's presence must have also been of help. Virginia writes of her aunt: "We talked for some nine hours; and she poured forth all her spiritual experiences. All her life she has been listening to inner voices, and talking with spirits". This revelation may have been very important to Woolf, who had been troubled by voices at the worst points in her mental illness. To hear of someone having a similar experience cast in a positive light must have been reassuring to her. On another level, her aunt's experiences might have also encouraged her to take her own "inner voice" more seriously, a necessary step in becoming a writer.

It was during this period of recuperation that Virginia began to explore her writing talents more seriously. While at The Porch, she aided F.W. Maitland in the preparation of her father's biography. Both Violet and Caroline encouraged Virginia's own writing. She also began to write and submit short articles to *The Guardian*, a church-related weekly, and at one point she even considered writing a description of Quaker meeting for this publication. It was in *The Guardian* that Virginia Woolf's first published article appeared at the close of 1904.

BY THE TIME SHE BEGAN ENCOURAGING Virginia's writing, Caroline had already published a number of well-received books herself, in spite of her lack of formal education. This was surely also a source of inspiration to Virginia, who had always resented and regretted her own lack of education. Caroline refers in *Light Arising* to "the unlearned for whom and as one of whom I write" and stresses the need to cultivate the ability "to think for ourselves; to construct out of our own actual experience some sort of creed". Virginia certainly did learn to think for herself, and to construct out of her own experience, not a creed, but some highly original works of art. In fact, the basis of her originality may lie precisely in the fact that she was not educated in the

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conventional sense. She thus found herself free from literary conventions passed down in the classroom and allowed herself to create in an entirely new style.

Caroline's first book, *The Service of the Poor* (1871), was a study of religious sisterhoods, institutions that held a great deal of appeal for her. She ends up arguing against the sisterhoods and in favor of the patriarchal family, "which needs for survival the unpaid cheerful labor of its unmarried daughters". This position vindicates her own role played out as the "daughter of an educated man," but the amount of effort which went into researching and describing the sisterhoods betrays a continuing ambivalence toward this path not taken.

In joining the Society of Friends, Caroline Stephen gained what she had longed for, and yet argued against, in *The Service of the Poor*: the right to live her life as a nun. She became a "sisterhood of one," donned the plain grey dress of Quakers and spent the rest of her days in spiritual pursuit, taking time for writing and speaking on spiritual topics. She became the most eloquent spokesperson for her faith in her day and according to Jones "the influence of her exposition of [the Society's] central ideals and practices was very great both within and beyond the Society". She also directly influenced a generation of young Friends, from the Quaker students at Cambridge who visited her when she resided there, to the Young Friends of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, to whom she wrote in 1907.

Virginia Woolf never had a desire to be a nun, although she did refer to herself as retreating to a nunnery when she wrote. And she did propose the creation of an "Outsider's Society" in her strongly feminist *Three Guineas*. In spite of the radical nature of this work, there are many ways in which the Outsider's Society recalls the sisterhoods of Caroline's first book. Woolf echoes the traditional monastic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience when she recommends to women that "in the practice of your profession you refuse to be separated from poverty, chastity, derision and freedom from unreal loyalties". She defines poverty as "enough to live on but no more". She advocates women's right to work, earn money and not be dependent upon others, but she does not advocate blind ambition. Women should be different from men in this respect; they should be able to see that greed and high salaries for one class of people means abject poverty for another.

Woolf's call for chastity has been termed "intellectual chastity". By this she meant "you must refuse to sell your brain for the sake of money". Intellectual celibacy would free women of the external restraints on thought that so concerned Caroline Stephen. In Woolf's plan she did not advocate obedience for her Outsiders, but rather derision and freedom from unreal loyalties. Although she seems to be flying in the face of all that the established order finds sacred, Woolf was not really suggesting lawlessness. She seemed to have a sense similar to Caroline Stephen's that obedience to your own moral leadings would result in actions that would benefit the individual and society.

Caroline Stephen lived to the age of seventy-five. She died in 1909, after a short illness and a long life. As her niece wrote in her obituary: "The last years of her life among her flowers and with young people round her seemed to end fittingly a life which had about it the harmony of a large design". In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf's persona tells of her Aunt Mary Beton,

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who rather poetically and not unlike the heroic Percival of *The Waves*, "died by a fall from her horse when she was riding out to take the air in Bombay". It is from this aunt that the speaker receives her legacy of five hundred pounds a year, an event which means more to her than gaining the right to vote. Money of one's own was needed before one could gain the privacy afforded by a room of one's own.

In real life, Caroline Emelia Stephen was Woolf's "Aunt Mary." When Caroline died in 1909, Virginia was left a legacy of twenty-five hundred pounds. Virginia already had some money of her own from her father's estate, but it was a meaningful gesture on Caroline's part to contribute to the support of her unmarried, unstable, creative niece.

When Woolf further records that "my aunt's legacy unveiled the sky to me, and substituted for the large and imposing figure of a gentleman, which Milton recommended for my perpetual adoration, a view of the open sky" she hints at more than one level of what Caroline's legacy meant to her. Obviously, Caroline's money gave her financial security and independence from the domination of any larger-than-life "gentleman" playing god.

But Caroline also gave another sky-opening legacy to Virginia. She gave her a sense of freedom from the power of patriarchy and showed her an open, feminine space where the "inner voice" is heeded rather than the priest's or the father's, and where a feminine silence held truth that was beyond any argument with words. The model of a woman taking control of her own life and writing her own books with a view toward the greater good helped to give Woolf the confidence that she later expressed when she said "I feel that by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else".

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