
Clerk's Notebook:

An Appreciation of Elizabeth Gray Vining

In her autobiography, The Quiet Pilgrimage, Vining writes of finding a direction following her husband's death in a car accident after four happy years of marriage:

In a small, cheap, paper-bound edition of Emerson's *Essays* that came my way that winter...I found a passage in "Spiritual Laws" that leapt out of the page to speak to me:

Each man has his own vocation. The talent is the call. There is one direction in which all space is open to him. He has faculties silently inviting him thither to endless exertion. He is like a ship in a river; he runs against obstructions on every side but one; on that side all obstruction is taken away and he sweeps serenely over God's depths into an infinite sea.

My talent, I knew, was a small one, but not to be dismissed for that reason. In my early childhood I had confidently launched my little boat upon that river; now I must disentangle it from the reeds along the bank and try to reach the current once more.

by Chuck Fager, FQA Clerk

ELIZABETH GRAY VINING, who died on Eleventh Month 27 at 97, was an eminent figure among Quaker authors of the twentieth century. She was also a candid observer of many things, including both Quakerism and herself. Consider, for instance, what she wrote in 1939 for a compendium on *Contributions of the Quakers*, specifically the section on "the Arts":

This section, unfortunately, might almost be entitled: What the Friends Have Not Given. When they ruled music and decoration out of their meeting houses, the Quakers, being a consistent people, put music and art out of their lives too. So intent were they on worshiping God and helping man that they overlooked the healing and inspiring power of great music and great art....

Quakerism has produced scientists, as you would expect, for a scientist is one who gives his life to the search for truthQuakerism also produced saints, philosophers, philanthropists, reformers, prophets. Perhaps that is enough. Perhaps we should not ask for artists, too."

But it was not enough, certainly not for her. She also, by her own testimony, knew she wanted to be had to be a writer from the time she was a child. Her publishing debut came at the age of 13, with a story in *The Young Churchman*, for the princess-ly sum of \$2, and an encouragement from the editor to send more.

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From then her life was marked out by four poles: her brief marriage; Japan; Quaker Philadelphia; and through it all, her writing.

Born Elizabeth Janet Gray and raised in the Germantown area of Philadelphia, she married Morgan Vining in 1929. Less than four years later, her husband was killed, and she was seriously injured, in a New York automobile accident. If her physical recovery was long, her emotional healing went on for the rest of her life. Forty years later she wrote of "the long slow assimilation of grief. Sorrow becomes a companion, a way of life. Grief and joy are opposite poles; joy and sorrow often walk hand in hand."

She had done teaching and library work when, in 1946, she was selected to be an American tutor to the crown prince of the Japanese imperial family; one of the stated requirements for the position was that the tutor be "a Christian, but not a fanatic." When Vining quotes this description later, one can see the sly grin; she spent nearly four years in this assignment.

As personally enriching as this Tokyo sojourn was, she returned to the U.S. in 1950 to discover that it had also made her something of a celebrity. "Oh, Mrs. Vining!" gushed one matron, on meeting her in Maine, "How wonderful to meet you! I have never been so close to royalty before." She published several books based on her experiences in Japan, and one of them, *Windows for the Crown Prince*, was a best-seller.

Friends report that even in her last years, around the time of her birthday a sleek diplomatic limousine would pull up at Kendal, and disgorge the Japanese ambassador, often accompanied by a large spray of sumptuous flowers, for a courtesy call on behalf of her former pupil, now the emperor.

GIVEN THAT QUAKER CONNECTIONS paved the way for her Japan, one might think Vining had one of those long Quaker pedigrees. But in fact she was a convinced Friend, who was drawn magnetically to meeting in Washington, DC after her husband's death, when her native Episcopal services proved no help. "It was the silence that drew me," she wrote, "that deep healing silence of the meeting at its best, when the search of each is intensified by the search of all....I found each Sunday just enough of acceptance, of strength, of inner serenity to carry me through the week....My searching, restless, arid heart was like a stranded boat which was lifted for a time on buoyant waters from an ocean beyond the boundaries of selfhood."

Once inside the Quaker circle, however, she steeped herself in the most Anglophilic Philadelphia-centered version of the faith, rarely straying from a circuit that included Germantown Meeting, the AFSC headquarters downtown, and Pendle Hill, with side trips to Quaker and literary locales in England and Scotland. She was a charter resident of the Kendal Quaker retirement community a few miles west of Pendle Hill, and spent the rest of her life there.

This focus turned up frequently in her work. Vining spent three years working intensively on a biography of Rufus Jones, the icon of Philadelphia Quaker culture (though himself an immigrant

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from New England). The book explores Jones's thought and work deeply, reverentially, and well; but from it one will get little insight into why Jones was so reviled, by so many, for so long, even decades after his death. The opposition, by Vining's time, came almost entirely from outside Philadelphia, and is thus only barely worth notice.

She also wrote about Jones's idol, John Greenleaf Whittier, a biography of William Penn, and a historical novel, *The Virginia Exiles*, about a group of Philadelphia Friends who were falsely accused of spying for the British and taken prisoner by George Washington's army during the American revolution.

She was not entirely uncritical of her adopted community, however. Listen to the narrator from her 1967 novel, *I Roberta*, fingering the way old-time Friends had turned the plain language, originally used as a blow for equality, completely inside out: "Some Quakers have a way, which I dislike, of saying *thee* to other Quakers and *you* to outsiders. If there's a roomful of Friends and non-Friends, they'll sort it out quick as lightning, *theeing* the sheep and *youing* the goats in the same breath."

BUT IF HER RANGE OF VISION was sometimes limited, her sense of vocation was always clear: she was a writer. "I am with Book as women are with child," she once said. Besides best-sellers, among her 25 books, *Adam of the Road*, for young readers, was a Newberry Medal winner in 1943.

Yet for all her dedication, she spoke of this career late in life with an appealing modesty: "That I have never been the writer that I wanted to be has not greatly diminished my satisfaction in the work of writing. Every book has fallen short of my vision for it...There must be many people like me...not first-rate writers, but...born writers, who write because we would rather write than do anything else, because we are fulfilled while writing, because in some obscure way we feel guilty when we are not...."

As a younger member of this writer's fraternity, I smile and nod at the clear-eyed wisdom and balance of this last comment. Friends are fortunate that our contribution to the arts is much more real 60 years after she commented on the lack thereof; and Elizabeth Gray Vining's long life of creative labor is one major reason for the improvement.

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