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John Griffiths: A Missionary Recruit of 1831

IN the *Baptist Quarterly* for January, 1959, I gave an account of two bundles of unpublished letters connected with Samuel Pearce, of Birmingham. A third bundle of papers placed in my hands by the late Dr. S. Pearce Carey came from the same family circle and relate to the Rev. John Griffiths,¹ who went out from Birmingham in the service of the Baptist Missionary Society in 1831 and died of yellow fever after only nine days in Jamaica. Though few in number, the papers tell a poignant story. John Griffiths was a member of the Cannon Street church and had married Louisa, daughter of Rebecca Harris (née Hopkins), sister-in-law of Samuel Pearce.

In the earliest of these letters Griffiths speaks of having been "favoured with a religious education," and of being "very early the subject of religious impulses." But in his early teens he passed through a lengthy period of doubt and uncertainty and this continued even after he became at the age of sixteen a teacher in the Cannon Street Sunday School. Peace of mind came at length and in the summer of 1824, when nearly nineteen, he was received into the membership of the Church by the Rev. Isaiah Birt.

Five years later we find Griffiths convinced that he had been called to the Christian ministry and making application to Dr. W. H. Murch for training at Stepney College. "I have long had an ardent desire for this work," he wrote in September, 1829, "but never mentioned it to anyone, till requested to engage by those upon whose judgment and experience I could depend." His letter includes a clear and careful statement of his "views of the leading doctrines of the Word of God." A letter of resignation from the staff of the Sunday School, written from Derby a few months later, shows how important an influence this work had had on him, though he regretted that he had not given more particular attention to each boy under his care. It was a satisfaction to him to be able to introduce a younger brother to the staff of the school.

John Griffiths' college course at Stepney under Murch and Samuel Tompkins was not a long one. Reinforcements were urgently needed for the mission in Jamaica. Serious and fatal illnesses had thinned the ranks of the missionaries. Most of the planters were

¹ Both the B.M.S. Centenary Volume and the Annual Report of Regent's Park College give his name as Griffith, J., but in all these letters and on the Marriage Certificate the name appears as Griffiths.

hostile to their activities, as well as angry and alarmed at the campaign being waged in England for the abolition of slavery. Among the slaves there was unrest, the product of the often inhuman conditions under which they had to live and work, of frequently deferred hopes of redress and of wild rumours. By the end of 1830, Griffiths had been accepted by the B.M.S. Committee for the West Indian Mission and in January, 1831 received from the Secretary, John Dyer, via his assistant J. Stanger, a list of the things he should take out with him. "Instead of giving the Female list," wrote Dyer, "we have of late presented £20 to the wife of the missionary for her to lay out in clothing. I therefore now enclose a cheque for £40, being £20 for yourself on account, and £20 for Miss Harris. The balance I can pay when you come to town."

The list of things as given by Mr. Stanger is now of some interest. It is headed "Necessary Outfit for Jamaica":

A Suit Black Clothes
 6 Flannel Waistcoats
 6 do. Drawers
 12 Cotton Shirts
 12 Irish do.
 12 Cravats. 1 Blk. Silk Hand^d
 12 White Pocket Hand^{ds}
 6 Drill, Jean or Nankeen Trowsers
 1 Morning Gown
 3 pr. Shoes
 1 Hat
 1 Silk Umbrella
 12 Towels
 6 Net Nightcaps
 12 Cotton Hose
 4 pr. Worsted Socks
 1 Boat Cloak
 2 pr. Sheets, large
 2 Blankets, 1 Counterpane—large
 4 Pillow Cases
 1 Mattress of Hair or large Bolster, 4 Feather Pillows
 Stationery, Penknives
 Razors and Strop
 Cloth & Shoe Brushes & Blacking
 Portable Desk
 Candles & Soap
 Earthenware or China, but not Glass

Two remarks are added:

"If Mr. Griffiths has not any particular Friend, a Taylor, a son of S. Stanger at Fen Court will be glad to make his clothes—The Blk. & the Trowsers.

"The flannel Waistcoats & Drawers may generally be bought ready made, advantageously.

"If Mrs. G. has time to make the shirts & lighter articles it may be best."

“The Ship should be seen and the Cabin recognised—if available. Bed for the voyage be provided, by the Captain, and Mattrass &c. need not be procured here, as they are as cheap or cheaper in Jamaica.

“If Mr. Griffiths has a sufficiency of any of the above specified, they need not be enlarged except clothing, as Blk. Clothes, Trowsers &c. which are much higher in price in Jamaica. Articles for a Female may be judged of by the above.

“The Portable Desk, is made *solid* & can be had at Fen Court as usual.”

On 1st March, 1831 John Griffiths married Louisa Harris in Saint Martin's Church, Birmingham. Two of the children of Samuel Pearce—Louisa's first cousins—had already gone from Birmingham to India in the service of the B.M.S. The Griffiths set sail for Jamaica some ten weeks after their wedding. In a letter she subsequently sent to her father, Joshua Harris, Louisa gave extracts from her journal :

Monday 23rd. Very fine; pass'd Brighton, slight breeze made but little progress.

24. Wind more brisk, fine, a little rain, pass'd the Isle of Wight; when sitting at table it has appear'd as if in shore we have had so little motion. In the evening the Captain pray'd with us in a very fervent and feeling manner. When looking at the past and present all appears mercy we feel the prayers of our dear friends in England on our behalf have been answered.

25. Sailed westward along the English coast but not in sight of land, fair wind and very fine day.

26. Wind much in our favour, blew very hard, the ship roll'd much and the waves ran so high that at times they broke over the deck all the port holes were stop'd. The sea look'd beautifully grand. Much rain in the afternoon. My dear John and I very sick several times. We could not have family prayer this evening in consequence of the rolling of the vessel and the men being so wet.

27. Scarcely any wind. In the evening brother Wilcox preach'd. The Captain and nearly all the passengers and sailors were present.

28. Wind rather more favourable. About 9 at night a Vessel from Teneriffe bound to Bristol spoke to us as she pass'd.

29. Sunday. My dear John preach'd this morning, nearly every person present, the day very fine, it was delightful to see all the sailors clean'd, and most of them with books in their hand and all wore the appearance of a Sabbath, we felt very thankful we had such a Captain. In the evening Brother Bleby preach'd.

30. We are now passing the Bay of Biscay, fine wind in the morning but rain and calm in the evening, saw a great number of Porpoises.

31. Today have little wind and that unfavourable though the day is otherwise pleasant.

June 6. Have just passed the Bay of Biscay, quite calm; they let down the small boat and most of the gentlemen went in it a considerable distance from the Vessel and after being rowed about by some of the sailors for a time returned quite safe.

11. The weather has been fine but very light winds, are not yet

more than 300 miles from land; it is so calm today that several of the gentlemen bathed in the open sea at the bow of the Vessel, but the pleasure which this would have given to them was very much lessened by one of them getting too far from the Ship he was in much danger and had not my dear Husband been in the water at the time he must have been lost as none of the rest were able to swim so well nor had they courage to go to his assistance, the cry for a rope to throw to him created much alarm at our end of the ship, and I, fearing it was my dear John in danger was as you will readily believe, more alarmed than any of the rest, a thousand thoughts rush'd into my mind, as it were in a moment, and I was almost distracted, but had the unspeakable satisfaction soon after of seeing for myself that he was indeed safe, and heard with much pleasure that he had been the means of saving the one who was in danger.

13. Very calm today, the Captain and some of the passengers went out in the boat and caught seven turtles which were asleep upon the surface of the water.

23. The wind is now favourable, were not certain at the end of last week whether the breeze was the trade wind or not but now find it was. Yesterday cross'd the tropic of Cancer at 32 i/c deg. longitude. Had much bustle and nonsense on board today, by the ceremony of Neptune coming on board, which is this; one of the sailors dresses himself in a sheepskin and smears himself over with grease and paint and comes on his hands and knees, this is called Neptune, followed by another which if possible is made to look more horrible than himself which they term the Bear, after they have been on the deck among the females they take those of the gentlemen who have not cross'd the line before and having smear'd their faces with tar scrape them with a piece of stick which they call shaving them and then throw a quantity of water and thus the ceremony ends rudely enough as you will believe. Mr. G. and those who did not choose to join in this rough sport gave the sailors some money and were exempt.

July 8. Saw St. Domingo about 7 this morning, were 12 or 15 miles to the south of it; expect to see Jamaica tomorrow morning. Cannot tell the pleasure we feel at the thought of being on shore soon. This morning a Brig spoke to us, appear'd very suspicious and it was believed she was a Pirate (they are frequently met with here), but was intimidated by seeing so many on board and our guns ready for use.

10. At 5 in the morning we saw what are call'd the blue mountains of Jamaica, felt unspeakable pleasure to behold the long wished for Island. At 10 saw Port Royal & Kingston: anchored off Port Royal at 11, were quite charmed with the beauty of its appearance. Most of the passengers went on shore to see the town but as we did not know of any friends being there we intended to spend the day on board and go with the vessel to Kingston in the morning. As we sat reading together two negroes came on board about 12 o'clock. They were sent by Mrs. Phillippo who was there a few days for the health of her little girl.

Mrs. Phillippo was already acquainted with Louisa Griffiths and both she and her husband were warmly welcomed at Port Royal. John Griffiths preached in the evening to a large and attentive congregation and, as he came down from the pulpit, exclaimed: "It is my heart's desire to live and die amongst this people." The next morning the young couple, accompanied by Mrs. Phillippo, made their way to Kingston and, after a few days there, moved

inland to Spanish Town. Within a few hours of their arrival there, however, John Griffiths complained of a headache. The following morning it was clear that he was in the grip of the dread yellow fever. Within a day or so he was dead, having been on the island little more than a week.

It fell to Joshua Tinson, who had spent nine gruelling years in Jamaica, to write to John Dyer in London telling him the sad news. The letter was written from Spanish Town on 20th July, 1831. It is significant of the acceptance by that generation of the costliness of the missionary enterprise in terms of human life and of their preoccupation with public events that the first page of his letter deals with the general situation. Its vivid phrases deserve quotation :

I know not when this will reach you, as the Packet has just sailed; but whenever it comes to hand, should you not be previously informed on the same subject, it must give you pain.

We live in a most eventful period in reference to this country—which seems greatly to partake of the general ferment felt throughout the Nations—Meetings are being called through the Island, by *Coloured* as well as white slave holders, to oppose government in attempting the abolition of slavery—The slaves are not ignorant of what is going on in England, and many fear that they will soon cease to be quiet under their burdens—Incendiaries are almost daily attempting to set fire to Kingston—A Proclamation has been issued, & read in all the places of worship, offering a £1000 reward for the conviction of the guilty—Men's hearts are failing them thro' fear—and if we are to believe the cry of many,—public confidence is greatly shaken.

Disease as raging with unparalleled violence. The small-pox like a plague, is sweeping through the streets of Kingston, and hurrying to the grave from 12 to 15 persons daily. Many more than 2000, have already died of it in that city alone! It still continues to rage with unabating fatality. 'Tis now appearing with equal horror in this town, yesterday 8 or 9 were buried who had fallen victims to this alarming visitation! Fever is also prevalent. The principal Medical Gentleman here, is so beset with applications to visit the sick & and the dying, that he is forced to hasten through the streets when on his way to his patients, to escape the importunities of new applicants, and this, simply out of compulsion to those he has already under his care.—But I must hasten to write on a subject which comes still nearer home—is filling us all with sorrow & which I scarcely know how to communicate.

By the end of September, 1831, both Mr. and Mrs. Phillippo and the widowed Louisa Griffiths were back in England. Phillippo sent to Thomas Swan, the Cannon Street minister, a full account of John Griffiths' last hours and of the funeral in Spanish Town.

Not long after her return to this country a son was born to Louisa Griffiths. He and his mother found shelter again with Joshua Harris in the house in Birmingham. The bundle of papers given me by Dr. Pearce Carey contains two further letters. The first was

written in May, 1841 by Louisa to her father. She was not expecting to live very long and, after thanking Joshua Harris for his many past kindnesses, commends her boy to his further care. The second dated 21st September, 1854, is from John P. Griffiths himself, by then a young man of about twenty-two years of age living at Elwood Hill, near St. Kilda, not far from Melbourne, in Australia. He writes to one of his Harris cousins on a small slip of thin blue paper. His script is well-formed, clear and regular, easy to decipher, though, in the manner of the Victorians, he saved paper and postage by continuing at right-angles over the earlier part of the letter.

My dear Cousin,

I now take the opportunity of doing what I have so long neglected, writing to you. I was very glad to find a tangible proof in your kind letter that you kept a corner in your memory for me. Your own letter came to hand about a fortnight ago—the “Madras” steamer brought the mail, she was only 57 days in coming. We shall be able by and by to take a trip to your side of the world and back in three months or so. That would be a very pleasant way of getting out of the dust and heat which in the summer here are so very trying. You really can form no adequate idea of a hot wind day. All that has been said of the “blast of a furnace”—clouds of dust so great as to darken the sun—is true and I remember one day last summer the dust blew to such a degree that at midday it was so dark that houses were undistinguishable at a few yards distance. This is no exaggeration. I feel at a loss what to tell you more than in other letters I have about the country. I have not seen much of it, not having been up in the bush or at the “diggins,” and there many things that would be interesting to you, from being daily seen lose all the charm of novelty and fail to strike me. So you must write and ask me everything you wish to know. I will not promise to answer all your queries, but all I can I will, you may depend upon my veracity. I think from what my description has been you will not be tempted to make a voyage to Australia. I am glad to hear that you past last Autumn and Spring so pleasantly. I have no doubt you were glad to return home if only to have the pleasure of listening to Mr. Landels, a privilege I should much enjoy. His course of sermons must be most interesting. Can't you send me some sketches of them? Do try. I am much obliged for the “Journal” you sent with your last letter. I will send you an *Argus* from time to time. I cannot now answer Caleb's note. I will soon, tho' I don't think I can promise to enclose an opossum, the postage would be tremendous! Please give my love to him, Rebecca, Anna, Emily, and a kiss for dear little Pearce. I enclose a billet doux for Sophia. I am very glad to hear your Grandma is so well. Give my love to her, please remember me to the Griffiths and Mr. Sing, if you have an opportunity. I ought to have written to him long ago.

The little piece of sea-weed I enclose thinking you might like it, there are great quantities on the beach here & some very pretty shells. Hoping to have the pleasure of hearing from you again soon.

I am with sincere love,

Your affect^d Cousin,

J. P. GRIFFITHS.

ERNEST A. PAYNE