

11 April, 2005

Greetings again F/friends, and relatives--

Here I am, back in Woodbrooke--and I'm leaving for Ireland tomorrow. Last time I left off just as I had arrived in Bristol. So here's----"Following Job, Part III"

Friday March 18--Bristol--Walked over the harbor (by bridge, I assure you--not saintly enough yet to walk on water) and down a couple of miles along a disused canal to a remodeled warehouse--the Public Records Office--only to have the receptionist politely announce, "But we're always closed on Friday," as if Friday closures were the most normal thing in the world. Since I was due in Cardiff on Sunday, that was that.

Crossed another bridge and walked up the other side of the harbor, where posh waterside apartments have replaced rows of warehouses. Bristol's life from the beginning has been shaped by water--it's seen hard times but now has remade itself into a lively and attractive city. Inexpensive water busses run regularly up and down the harbor and into the several long docking areas in the city center, so the residents of the posh apartments can ride them to work.

Reclaimed my luggage from the hostel and went off to meet my next hosts, a delightful Quaker couple who threw themselves with great enthusiasm into making sure I had a good time and met half the Quakers in Bristol in the process.

Saturday, March 19--AM--explored Bristol Cathedral--the oldest part is an unusually beautiful Norman chapter house, where the monks once gathered to conduct business. It was so quietly serene that I didn't even take a photo--to set off the flash would have felt like a disruption.

Afternoon--off to Monthly Meeting with host Mike--representatives from all 7 Preparative Meetings of Bristol met there at Frenchay Meeting House, out in what was once a quiet country village. Meeting for Business seems pretty much the same on either side of the Atlantic. Is there a Quaker gene that compels us to micromanage everything??? Clerk finally called a coffee break, during which another Friend arrived, bringing with him a copy of a journal kept by a woman who had written about Job's visit to Frenchay--which his journal doesn't even mention. She even drove out especially to hear him preach--which he then didn't do. Her journal was a great excuse to skip the rest of Business Meeting.

Meeting House, overlooking the village green, is delightful, though not the one Job Scott knew--that was replaced by present MH in very early 19th century. He would have seen the burial ground in back, though--now a garden surrounded by a beautiful high wall of soft old red brick.

Hosts took me to a play tonight--Elmina's Kitchen--interesting but depressing piece about a West Indian immigrant's struggle to break out of the misery and crime of his neighborhood.

Sunday, March 20--Meeting for Worship at Redlands Meeting--then Preparative Meeting for Business--blessedly shorter than yesterday.

And off across the Bristol Channel to Wales--arrived in Cardiff, found city still in aftermath of celebrating the Great Victory--Wales beat Ireland in rugby--first time in years. City is rugby mad any time--especially now. Went to look for supper in a pub near my B&B and discovered it full of fans--watching the match all over again. Strange game--sort of like American football in soccer uniforms--very, very fast.

Lots of Welsh spoken on the street--especially by young people.

Monday, March 22--Picked up by Anglo/Welsh Friends, taken to their home in Penarth, charming "seaside" ("sea"=Bristol Channel) village on edge of Cardiff. Found that records office was closed today, so set off for Neath and Swansea (spelled Swanzey in Scott's time). Landscape a bit dreary, several decayed industrial sites along the way--this used to be one of the great coal-mining regions of Wales, but no longer so prosperous. Scenery improved nearer to Neath--weather didn't; it was pouring when I got there, wind turned my umbrella inside out.

Neath--interesting old village, even in the rain; Meeting House intriguing. Not the one Scott knew--this one dates to 1799--but built right up against the walls of a ruined castle. (English were always building castles around the edges of Wales, trying to keep the Welsh under control--never worked--Wales still sees itself as a separate country, reluctantly and temporarily attached to England; has its own Parliament now.) Small plot of ground was given to local Quakers by Lady Molly Somebody, in memory of her Quaker ancestors. Meeting House and adjacent burial ground both small, surrounded by high brick wall--looks a bit like a fortress itself.

On to Swansea--site of old Meeting House there has vanished--now occupied by a Post Office or something, but hit pay dirt in Swansea Public Library, which had a booklet on the history of Quakers in Swansea and Neath. Didn't mention Scot, but had much info on early Friends--who arrived very early and did very well--probably because they appealed to the fiercely independent Welsh. Many Welsh names on membership lists--Jones, Griffith, and the like, in contrast to Ireland, where most Friends were (and are) of English ancestry. When Scott was there, Friends were doing somewhat better than in England, where they were in a very "low state."

Tuesday, March 22--most of day spent at the Records Office--no trace of Scott, but the very famous travelling minister Deborah Darby was there at the same time; she got a minute, he didn't. Maybe he didn't say anything, maybe he was a bit in the shade.

Saved the tail end of the afternoon for Cardiff Castle--must be seen to be believed. In the early nineteenth century it was a ruin, with only the very ancient "keep" (the central, most heavily defended core) and a later manor house, all built on a really ancient Roman site (everybody wanted to keep an eye on the Welsh) Inherited in 19th century by a wealthy Scot, Lord Bute--who got an eccentric architect to redesign the house as Lord Bute thought it should be--like every fairy tale castle you ever imagined--romantic 19th century notions of medieval rooms covered in paintings and gilt and mirrors, "Arabic" rooms, a roof top "garden room" like something from a Roman villa with a little open courtyard--which eventually had to be roofed over because it leaked into the floors below when it rained. Charming and absolutely dotty.

Wednesday, March 23--Gloucester--quite a change. Cardiff and Bristol are lively attractive cities. Gloucester--distinctly a bit down at the heels. A small city, struggling to cope with an unusually large immigrant population, high rates of crime and teen pregnancy. Called the warden (caretaker) of the Meeting, was invited to supper in her tiny apartment built into the high wall which surrounds the Meeting House. Pretty, early 19th century building, built to replace the original building, which still stands--two old cottages knocked together in the 17th century. Toured the MH which has a beautiful "sash" partition of dark wood--like Uxbridge, raised and lowered by ropes. Interesting site--covered passage through the wall opens on a medieval alley which leads past an old church to the ruins of an old abbey.

Thursday, March 24--At last, sun! Seized the chance to see the sights--Gloucester is very compact, easily walkable. Retains the old Roman street plan--two straight main streets, crossing in the middle--lost in some medieval alley? just keep going--you'll get back to the Romans--whose ruins are still buried underneath the present city. Magnificent cathedral--huge round Norman columns, tons and tons of stone, yet so airy and full of light pouring through the stained glass, covering the columns with glowing patches of red and blue and purple.

Warm enough to eat outside--bought lunch from what has to be the most ancient fish and chips shop in the British Isles--a 16th century inn. (Real fish and chips--battered!) On to the Records Office, then a fast dash to the Cathedral for Evensong (for this, see last pastoral letter)

March 25, Good Friday--Had intended to go by bus to Nailsworth, one of the oldest Meeting Houses in England that's relatively unchanged both inside and outside from its early days--Scott would definitely have recognized it. But I was flummoxed by the bus schedules--could have gotten there but couldn't have gotten back.

So--had the gift of an extra day in Gloucester--more restful than a trip to Nailsworth anyway. Another glorius, sunny day, perfect for another visit to the Cathedral. (Is the sun really brighter and clearer in this country, or does it just seem that way because there's so much less of it?) The entire far end was closed for day long prayer services, but the beautiful cloister was open (it had been closed the day before).

Went to photograph the remains of the Meeting House Scott would have known, though considerably altered now. George Fox is said to have preached there.

Had lunch in a place almost worth missing Nailsworth for--not just for its good food at modest prices, but because it's a 15th century galleried inn called the "New" Inn. And 450 years later it's still an inn--entered through a wide covered passage, with a hotel upstairs, a restaurant, a pub, a wine bar, and a coffee/snack bar, all arranged around a long rectangular courtyard, with the galleries running all around the top. (There are also a fake brewery and a fake wine merchant, which are actually disguises for the men's and women's rest rooms--OK, so there's a faint flavor of Disney World about those bits--but the rest is more or less real.) On nice days, like today--you can eat at a picnic table set out on the wildly uneven cobblestones of the yard and think about poor

Lady Jane Grey, who was proclaimed Queen of England there in 1554, and shortly thereafter executed on the orders of Queen Mary. Plays were certainly put on in the courtyard--allegedly Shakespeare performed there as a young actor (oh, sure--George Washington probably slept there, too).

March 26, Saturday--to Oxford, where my Quaker hostess picked me up at the train. She's an Oxford grad, now music teacher; her husband's a retired professor from one of Oxford's more modern colleges.

March 27, Easter--Meeting for Worship with my hosts. Felt led to give a message saying we Quakers do pretty well at trying to mend the world, but so do other groups. But when others look at us, do they see people living transformed, "resurrected" sorts of lives? Quaker lives? Met the Meeting Librarian, had a useful chat about Meeting History.

Meeting house is new (1950's) but built behind an old house on the main road, St. Giles, and designed to blend with surrounding old buildings, complete with moss-covered tile roof (that British climate again.) However, the site of the Meeting House Scott knew is just a few doors up the street. He could have--probably did, look kitty-corners across the street at the great massive walls of Balliol College. (For you detective story fans, Lord Peter Wimsey is a Balliol man). In 1555, Bishops Ridley and Latimer were burnt at the stake around the corner in Broad Street, in front of the Balliol main gates, for refusing to become Catholic (Queen Mary again--not a very nice lady).

Spent the afternoon poking around the streets--climbed the most ancient tower in the city--Saxon--pre 1050. Then tea at with a lovely elderly lady--a very weighty Friend (writes books and pamphlets), whom I'd met at the FWCC triennial in 1997.

March 28, Monday--Records office closed (Easter Monday) so did a proper tour of the city. And had a great insight (I think) into Scott--Oxford was one of the earliest places Scott visited when he set out west from London (I'm doing his loop in reverse). He'd spent quite a while in London already, and I wondered why it wasn't until Oxford that he wrote his first major outburst against the Anglican clergy ("they must and will be shaken!"). But seeing Oxford, I think I understand. The colleges dominate the city--they are immense--enormous piles of stone that were ancient even in Scott's day--and they positively radiate **POWER** and **PRIVILEGE** and **ANGLICANISM**. By law, no Quaker (or any other Dissenter) could ever attend such a place, no matter how wealthy--which meant they were in effect barred from entering the professions. Scott was a college graduate himself--such an idea must have rankled. Nor could a Dissenter ever hold public office--but they still were required to pay heavy tithes to support the Church--Quakers who refused (as their Testimony said they must--the Bible said ministry was supposed to be freely given) had property confiscated--sometimes worth 2 or 3 times more than the demand. And here was Scott, in the very heart of Anglicanism, the place which bred the priests and bishops who were responsible for all this--and who were profoundly convinced that reason and civil order required that there be an established church, and that they should be it.

Today the Church is still “established” but tithes were done away with and there are Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists in the colleges--there’s even a Hindu in the House of Lords. So what in Heaven’s name was all the fuss about? It changed--and the world didn’t come to an end, the sects didn’t fall to fighting over which one would be on top, civil order didn’t collapse. Makes you wonder what other “essential” practices are equally pointless.

Loved the Natural History Museum--it’s all rather like a particularly delightful yet orderly Victorian attic--with a parade (literally) of animal skeletons (elephants at the back, a pig and a tiger in front--all according to size, you see), not to mention Alice in Wonderland’s dodo. Half way up a stairway, all by itself, is a colony of bees, busily making honey in their glass fronted hive, with a sort of tunnel to let them out through the window. And how could I resist a toy stuffed hedge hog in the gift shop (met a live one once--nearly as charming as the stuffed ones--people like to encourage them in their gardens.)

Closed the day with a pilgrimage to Holywell Cemetery--half overgrown, half tidy, because it’s carefully managed as a tiny wildlife sanctuary. And it’s the burial place of Kenneth Grahame, who wrote one of the most beautiful gems of childhood literature, *The Wind in the Willows*. It enchanted me as a child, and it still enchants me. The epitaph is lovely, and closes by saying that he died on the 6th of July, 1932, “leaving childhood literature, through him, the more blest.”

Can it be an accident that Oxford also produced that giant of serious fantasy writing, J.R.R. Tolkien (Lord of the Rings)? Maybe it’s something in the water.

March 29, Tuesday--Oxfordshire Records office. Nothing on Job--but much about local Quakers--wonderfully detailed Minutes by local Quakers. And they were in a sad state--steadily losing members (probably many to competition from the Methodists, a far more lively group, very strong in this area); couldn’t pay their bills, struggled to support impoverished Quakers (the poor Dumbleton’s never seemed to have enough, and kept needing to have their allowance raised by a shilling a week--and he needed a new coat; Joseph Collins had his washing and mending paid for, and he needed new trousers.)

The committee assigned to visit Friends who had stopped attending Meeting reported that most people were polite but non-committal, although some wouldn’t even see them. Yet in the middle of all this, they were sending out a committee to labor with Mary Greene, who was keeping company with “a young Man not of our Society.” I wanted to shout down the corridors of time, “Friends, get a grip! You have a lot worse problems than Mary Greene being courted by a local Methodist (or Anglican or whatever he was). She apparently told them to buzz off--in a Friendly way, I’m sure. But these were the kinds of things that were happening when Job Scott came through Oxford. Obviously they weren’t all the fault of the wretched Anglicans, but now it’s easier to understand Job’s rising level of distress as he visited Meetings like this here and elsewhere. How could he understand it except as a drift away from Truth among English Friends?

Spent the rest of the day at the County Library, and found one real gem--a pamphlet written in 1790 by an Anglican laying out in very clear and reasonable terms

why it was a self-evident necessity to have an established church (with “toleration” for the others, of course). The tone of sweet reasonableness and a patronizing sense of superiority would have been maddening for anybody who didn’t buy into his initial premises. Scott wouldn’t have read it, of course, but it was a perfect illustration of Anglican thinking at the time. And a perfect illustration of why we have the first amendment to the Constitution. The whole business was outrageous.

March 30, Wednesday--Back to London and the Penn Club, this time on the top floor--up with the owls and the bats and no elevator. Stairs narrow and steep, room long and narrow, no room for a dresser. Obviously the former servants’ quarters--but its OK for a few nights.

March 31-April 3, Thursday-Sunday--Mostly tidied up odds and ends, checking details at the Friends House Library, and organizing a box to mail home--which turned out to be absurdly expensive--it never used to be. But I didn’t want to lug around stuff I was finished with, so I sent it. Saturday tried to find Wandsworth Meeting--another building Scott would have known--found it, but no one there, and even though it’s right on the high street, the whole area was a bit tatty, and the Meeting House looked a bit sad. Wandsworth town’s only current claim to fame is that it’s home to Young’s Brewery, and the area smells faintly and rather pleasantly of hops.

So I grabbed a take-out (here called a take-away) sandwich and headed for Hyde Park--it was a sunny day, and shirtsleeves warm: such weather always brings Londoners pouring outside in droves (they see so little of it). There must have been thousands in the park--many families, including a rather charming sight--a Muslim father with three little girls in hijabs (the wrapped head scarf) and life jackets, slowly moving around the Serpentine pond in a paddle boat. And as always, the eccentrics--a girl of about twenty, dressed as a fairy. with fuzzy white wings and a yellow tutu; two women arm in arm, one about 60 in a long black gown with dead white make up, and her companion, about 25, in short shorts. (Maybe there was a costume drama about witches and fairies somewhere else in the park? Still doesn’t account for the shorts--maybe she was in the audience.)

And so, back to Woodbrooke to prepare for Ireland.