

Mary Simpson of Boynton

Mary Simpson did not come to Boynton in 1856 as a stranger. She had lived in the vicarage, next to the church, adjoining the grounds of Boynton Hall. Her mother was the daughter of Sir William Strickland, Bt. Lord of the Manor & patron of the living. Mary's father, Rev. Francis Simpson, had been presented to the living in 1832, Perpetual Curate of Boynton and Vicar of Carnaby. He resigned when Mary was 19 at the end of 1840, but returned in 1856 to hold his former incumbency until he died in 1869.

So, returning to her old home as a mature woman of 35, she would naturally look upon the life of the neighbourhood with new eyes. She saw many things which wouldn't have attracted any particular notice from a young girl. This is the impression she gives in her earliest extracts from her diaries and correspondence collected into the book, "Ploughing and Sowing". This book begins with a description of the agricultural employment system there in July 1856, and reads as if from a letter to a friend,

"Every farm, 12 in the parish, comprises 6, 7, to 20 plough lads, according to the size of the farm; ages varying from 14 to 24, the greater part are in their teens. These people are all changed every year at Martinmas November 21st. Their masters, have very little control over them, clergymen still less, they are sadly ignorant and lawless; a large proportion can neither read nor write. One Sunday, seeing 10 or 12 lounging about a farmyard in their working dress, as if unconscious that it was Sunday and the church bells were ringing, made an impression which has never left me."

She had a vivid sense of the intellectual, moral and spiritual impoverishment of the ploughboys. A large proportion of them could neither read nor write. In the East Riding villages in 1851-60, 24% of the bridegrooms, 37% of the brides didn't even sign their names. Some had regularly attended elementary schools, but they usually left to work at the age of 9 or 10, or as early as 8.

She wrote,

"Any knowledge, whether religious or secular, acquired in early childhood, if not kept up, fares in most cases like the seed that fell by the

wayside. If, then, we cannot hope to add greatly to the small stock of knowledge gained before the age before working begins, let us at least aim to keep it together till the mind is capable of retaining and valuing it."

She also wrote,

"In many there is at that age a longing for light, an eager desire for knowledge, which soon dies of starvation; and if left as they are, by the time they are married men with families, they will value education as little for their children as their own parents valued it for them".

The fact that ignorant parents had little sense of the benefits of education was not to be wondered at. What shocked Mary Simpson was the complete indifference of so many farmers to their responsibility for the greater part of the year to the youths and girls whom they employed, and living in their farmhouses. She was to remark later that their attitude was less surprising when one saw what minimal educational provision satisfied them for their own sons. She wrote, "Seeing is believing. I had heard all my life that farmhouse life was demoralizing".

When summer brought a little more leisure time, Mary found that if they once began a habit of going to Bridlington after their work, "There is little more good to be done with them, whereas in her evening school they were at any rate out of harm's way". We are left to speculate what evils lurked in Bridlington.

She also found many instances of boys being kept at work for the whole of almost every Sunday in the year. It was her conviction that, despite the difficulties inherent in it, the existing farmhouse system could in good hands be made a source of blessing to the community, instead of being the curse that everyone admits it is now. She describes how she walked into a kitchen, telling the assembled lads that she would teach them if they would come. The response produced in her both pleasure and trepidation.

"I was much pleased by the way my offer was met; the grateful surprise, the shy but earnest thanks, the fears that I should find them so dull, etc. and this when I had half expected only surly or insolent replies. It almost took from me the power to speak".

Resting from her first term of night school while the farm workers were

busy with the harvest, Mary had time for reflection, she wrote what might be called the first draft of a philosophy of education.

“I have serious doubts about the desirability of teaching much arithmetic to those who have as yet so very little knowledge, and so few general ideas. I know it would sharpen their wits, but that is not the first thing to be thought of; they have hearts that must be touched; consciences that need awakening; minds to enlarge and elevate. I would rather teach something of geography, history, poetry, and music, first. I know that arithmetic would help them more to get on in the world; but neither do I think that is the thing most to be desired. We ought all to contend against the notion that seems creeping in more and more, that the great end of education is to enable us to improve our circumstances in life, and not to give us sources of higher enjoyment, which will make us more independent of such things. Let us beware, lest education should be made to increase and foster covetousness, the crying sin of the age, instead of counteracting it”.

Miss Simpson also played a leading part in bringing about a change in hiring practices at Bridlington. The girls were hired in the Corn Exchange, and the mistresses remarked with surprised satisfaction how much better behaved the girls were than when hired in the streets, where all was confusion and rude joking and jostling among the lads.

Mary Simpson died in Leicestershire in 1884, aged 64. In due course, as a memorial to her valiant labours, a fund was raised to restore the Chapel of Ease at Fraisthorpe then in the Parish of Carnaby, and the subscribers included Gladstone and many other eminent churchmen. A plaque in the chapel commemorates this.

Other Quotations.

“Hope stimulates men to diligence”.

“When you failed, you left off, and when I failed I went on”.

“You may excite such a desire for knowledge, that they will be eager to study the books you supply, in the precious hour of leisure that is usually wasted in idleness or something worse”.



The Chapel at Fraisthorpe.

The Fraisthorpe Chapel Dedication Plaque reads:

“This chapel of Fraisthorpe, dedicated in early times to S. Edmund, king and martyr, was rebuilt in 1893, by the offerings of churchmen and churchwomen in all parts of England, as a memorial of the missionary work among farm servants wrought by Mary Emily Simpson, authoress of “Ploughing and Sowing”, which in the words of Dr. Christopher Wordsworth, sometime Bishop of Lincoln, has made the parishes of Boynton and Carnaby with Fraisthorpe, “ memorable in the parochial annals of the Church of England”. She died in 1884 and is buried at Claybrooke in Leicestershire.

Opened by the Rt. Rev William Dalrymple, Lord Archbishop of York, July 10th 1893.

Colman Ivens, Vicar. Mason Rounding, Churchwarden.”

Bro Rick Hudson from researches by Bro John Walker