

NASHOBAN NARRATIVE

By W. H. G. ARMYTAGE

*"She beat Jemima Wilkinson, Joanna Southcote quite,
E'en mother Lee was nothing to our little Fanny Wright.
For she had gold within her purse, and brass upon her face,
And talent indescribable, to give old thoughts new grace."*

TO us, in the centennial year of Frances Wright's death, the emancipated woman is a commonplace, the labour union an accepted fact, and the welfare state a familiar phenomenon. Yet to her, these things were desirable ends, convictions rather than conventions, and she braved worse ribaldries than the above to bring them about.

She certainly deserved the epithet brazen. Orphaned at two and a half, precipitated into the society of Scots professors and philosophers, she quickly developed a precociously active intelligence. 'Can Truth be dangerous?' she once asked a mathematician, and receiving the reply 'It is thought so', she realised that Truth had still to be found. And she set about finding it in true Socratic fashion, questioning her friends, and where they could not answer, making other friends who could.

Indeed, her list of friends is very revealing. Apart from her Scots circle, she cultivated the venerable Jeremy Bentham, who persuaded her to publish a situation report on her spiritual odyssey, which she called *A Few Days in Athens*: the reader of which might be pardoned if he substituted Fanny Wright's name for that of Theon, the youthful Corinthian who seeks for Truth in the schools of Athens. Fanny's Athens, however, was spelt America: ever since she had read, at the age of seventeen, Carlo Giuseppe Botta's *Storia della guerra dell'indipendenza degli Stati Uniti d'America*. This was published in 1809, and Fanny read it three years after it appeared. In the war-torn Europe of that time, travel was circumscribed, but three years after the Battle of Waterloo, she and her younger sister Camilla decided to visit America by themselves, and see the new Athens.

They spent the winter of 1818 in New York, where twenty three year old Frances Wright was a great social success. Not only had she the entree to the Scots households of the city (Wilkes, the cashier of the Bank of New York introduced the sisters to many of the celebrities at his home) but she wrote a play which was produced at the Park Theatre. This play, os-

tensibly dramatising the struggle of the Swiss Cantons against the Austrians in the early fourteenth century, had an obvious moral directed at her own times. Altdorf was the symbol of freedom, the leader of a minority who struggles with his love and his ideals. It certainly seemed a tract for the times to Jefferson, who told Frances Wright that "Altdorf is a model of patriotism and virtue well worthy of the imitation of our republican citizens." Using this and other contacts on American soil, she travelled about the northern and eastern states of the Union, obtaining a first hand view of the people and their habitat, out of which appeared *Views of Society and Manners in America*. This was published on her return to England, and received considerable attention.

It also widened Fanny Wright's circle of friends. Not only did the venerable Jeremy Bentham welcome her to his home at Queen's Square Place but the equally venerable General Lafayette invited her to La Grange. If Bentham was her Socrates, Lafayette became her father. She became so ardent an admirer of the old general that she would write to him like an adoring daughter: "I am only half alive when away from you. You see you have spoilt me. In truth you have been and are too good for me. You must continue to love me, however, in spite of my little worthiness, for in truth I love you very, very much."

So it was not surprising that when Lafayette decided to revisit the scenes of his young triumphs, that the Wright sisters should be anxious to accompany him, and in 1824 Fanny and Camilla arrived in America for the second time. Fanny accompanied Lafayette when he met Madison, and was present when he addressed the Senate on 8 December, 1824. When Lafayette went South, Fanny and her sister went westwards to see the pioneer settlements of Economy (Pennsylvania), New Harmony (Indiana) and Albion (Illinois). It was at the last of these that she met George Flower, who fired her to project an experiment in freedom.

She seems to have taken up the scheme in the March of 1825, and, with her characteristic swiftness, it was outlined in a pamphlet by August. Lafayette's influence she acknowledged, for he had tried a scheme of slave emancipation on his estate of La Belle Gabrielle at Cayenne in French Guiana. Her scheme also owed something to the fertile and volatile Robert Owen, who was at that very time founding a community based on co-operative principles in Indiana. But George Flower seems to have been the real inspiration: he had been for some time an eager

advocate of emancipation, and two years before had financed the migration of a number of slaves to Haiti. And it was with George Flower that Fanny Wright journeyed southwards to seek a site for her great plan.

What was this plan? The prospectus called it *A Plan for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery in the United States without Danger of Loss to the Citizens of the South* and its main outlines were published by Robert Owen in the *New Harmony Gazette* of 1 October of that year. Briefly, it proposed to introduce negroes to the principle of co-operative labour so that they could, by labour, repay the cost of purchasing them from slave-owners. The length of their service was estimated at about five years after sickness, accident, the expenses of colonisation and misconduct was taken into account. As they withdrew from the slave-owners plantations, Fanny Wright envisaged a flow of white labour to take their places. She proposed to start with a hundred slaves, and a capital of forty-one thousand dollars, and while enabling the negroes to work for their purchase price and freedom, to afford them a comprehensive system of education for their children based on the Lancasterian system. The original site for this experiment in emancipation was to be either in Texas or in California—away from the slave-owners—, but in her travels with George Flower she settled upon the recently acquired lands on the Wolf River, not far from Memphis in Western Tennessee. These were inspected on October 8th and christened Nashoba, from the old Chicksaw name for Wolf. George Flower returned to Illinois to arrange for the transportation of his family to Nashoba (Camilla Wright amongst them) and Fanny remained to superintend the erection of two double cabins on the three hundred acre plot she had bought—a plot she subsequently increased to two thousand acres. She decided to invest ten thousand dollars of her own money, George Flower adding livestock and food to the value of two thousand dollars.

“Our first object” she wrote to a friend “will be to raise the common necessities of life, and as soon as possible to make all the clothing within ourselves, and when this is done to extend our views gradually, employing young hands in simple manufactures and organising a practical school of industry”

Her hopes ran high. She got a present of linen, shoes, blankets and other necessary items of clothing, and by February of the following year, the experiment was under way, George Flower

having arrived with his family and Camilla Wright. The slaves arrived, one family from South Carolina, and five males and three females being purchased in Nashville. Whites and Blacks settled down in Nashoba, the Whites in one cabin, the Blacks in another. They were soon joined by a fellow countryman of Fanny's, a Scot called James Richardson, and a Quaker called Richeson Whitby, a quondam disciple of Robert Owen.

The little party set to work with a will. They dug, they fenced, they built, they planted. Soon an apple orchard of five acres was created, a vegetable garden, fifteen acres of growing corn, and two acres of cotton. Among the labourers in this vineyard of redemption none worked so hard or enthusiastically as Fanny herself, creating a community from the wilderness. But this very enthusiasm proved her undoing. In less than nine months, she was seriously ill with a malarial fever, and so severe was the malady that she decided to seek the convalescent effect of a healthier climate. On December 17th, 1826, she made a trust of her Nashoba property, vesting it in their care "for the benefit of the negro race", with the proviso that as soon as their labour should have paid the clear sum of six thousand dollars to the trust, they should be emancipated and colonised.

Though the trustees numbered ten, and included Lafayette, the executive quorum of three lived in Nashoba itself: George Flower, Richeson Whitby and James Richardson. Another two trustees, Robert Jennings and Camilla Wright were also resident in Nashoba, but the real power seems to have lain with the first three. Nashoba's laws became more strict. There was something monastic in the new code:

"This community is founded on the principle of community of property and labour; presenting every advantage to those desirous, not of accumulating money, but of enjoying life and rendering services to their fellow creatures; these fellow creatures, that is, the blacks here admitted, requiring these services, by services equal or greater by filling occupations, which their habits render easy, and which to their guides and assistants might be difficult, or unpleasing. No life of idleness, however, is proposed to the whites. Those who cannot work must give an equivalent in property. Gardening or other cultivation of the soil; useful trades practised in the society, or taught in the school; the teaching of every branch of knowledge; tending the children; and nursing the sick—will present a choice of employments sufficiently extensive"

This new orientation of the community owed much to the influence of Robert Owen, whose New Harmony experiment in

Indiana, Fanny Wright had visited: it was symbolised by the inclusion of Robert Owen's name, together with that of his son Robert Dale Owen, on the list of trustees. Indeed, when the community experiment at New Harmony came to an end in 1827, Robert Dale Owen migrated to Nashoba hoping to find there "more cultivated and congenial associates than those among whom, for eighteen months past, I have been living."

But by far the most congenial person whom he found there was Fanny Wright herself. Though she was ten years older than he was, Fanny Wright's "tall commanding figure", and masculine face seemed to awe him, while her volatile and ranging intellect made him her disciple. By May 1827, he had accompanied her to New Orleans en route for Europe, where they hoped to find not only health for Fanny Wright, but further support for the Nashoba experiment. Camilla Wright stayed behind with Richeson Whitby and James Richardson. Unfortunately for the experiment, George Flower also left and returned to Illinois, so that the directive genius at Nashoba was James Richardson.

Now this was a most unfortunate circumstance. Richardson's acquaintance with Fanny Wright dated from her pioneer visit to Memphis. He was a Scot, imbued with the fearless courage of his race, of some education (he was said to have studied medicine) and a thoroughgoing doctrinaire. Owen, in his retrospective autobiography *Threading My Way* described him as "Upright, impracticable, and an acute metaphysician of the Thomas Brown school." These characteristics he now employed to wage open war on the conventions of the times, for being asked for situation reports on the progress of the Nashoba experiment, he sent such curiously worded items of information that the whole experiment was soon notorious. Had these reports been private, little harm might have been done, but he sent them to Benjamin Lundy, editor of *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*. The climacteric note was struck by his note dated June 17, 1827—

"Met the slaves—James Richardson informed them that, last night, Mamselle Josephine and he began to live together; and he took this occasion of repeating to them our views on color, and on the sexual relation".

Just what those views were might be seen from the fact that "Mamselle Josephine" was a quadroon.

That Camilla Wright and Richeson Whitby were domin-

ated by this apostle of miscegenation was obvious. Drawing together for mutual support, it was not long before they got married, and the settlement was shown up as inconsistent as well as perverse. Well might a correspondent of *The Genius of Universal Emancipation* on August 18th, 1827, describe Nashoba as a "great brothel". In far-away Europe, Fanny Wright was moved to remonstrate with Richardson:

"It appears to me that each and all of us bear a double character—as an individual and as one of a society associated for certain objects which in the circle of Nashoba we may speak in our individual character—but it will be difficult for us hereafter to speak so in the world. Any impression there given by us individually will be received as given by the society and does it not therefore behoove us to be cautious in provoking unnecessary hostility and misconceptions? . . . All principles are liable to misinterpretation but none so much as ours. If good taste and good feeling do not dictate their expression and guide their practice they will fall into (at all events momentary) contempt".

Back in England, Fanny Wright seems to have redoubled her efforts to gain further adherents to her side. Owen seems to have interested Leigh Hunt and Mary Shelley, while Fanny persuaded Mrs. Trollope to abandon the security of England and come over to Nashoba with her three children. Poor Mrs. Trollope. She was so affected by the tall, imperious Fanny Wright "unlike anything I had ever seen before, or ever expect to see again", that she came out on November 4th of that very year only to be "dismayed at the savage aspect of the scene". Appalled by that fact that "they had not as yet collected round them any of those minor comforts which ordinary minds class among the necessaries of life" she stayed at Nashoba for only ten days before departing to Cincinnati. The irony of that bitter disillusionment undoubtedly contributed in great measure to the tone of her later observations on *The Domestic Manners of the Americans*.

As circumstances closed about her, Fanny Wright struck out with a vigorous pen. *Explanatory Notes, respecting the Nature and Object of the Institution at Nashoba . . . Addressed to the Friends of Human Improvement, in all Countries and all Nations*, written on the voyage over, and published on her return, tried to gloss the rawness of Richardson's communiques. But in this, she confessed herself an advocate of miscegenation, and thereby sealed the fate of the experiment. Whitby had a nervous breakdown (as well he might have). Richardson left.

Young Owen, like Mrs. Trollope stayed only a few days before departing once again to New Harmony. Fanny Wright was left alone.

Characteristically she redeployed her resources. A Preliminary Social Community was established. An attempt was made to open a school. An overseer of the slaves, John M. Gilliam, was appointed. Things seemed to be running so well that in June of 1828 Fanny Wright felt able to visit her sister, now with her husband Whitby in New Harmony. But once more misfortune dogged the scheme. Gilliam was no more fitted to command than Richardson had been, and Fanny was forced to return, this time with Whitby and Camilla, whom she placed in charge of the scheme. She kept her word to the slaves. In 1830, she emancipated them. Not to be deceived this time by overseers or managers, she personally chartered a ship to take thirty of them to Haiti, where she had secured them an asylum. She then wound up the experiment, at the personal loss of some sixteen thousand dollars.

Though Fanny Wright had spent over half her fortune, and valuable years of her life in the Nashoban experiment, her ardour for emancipation was not diminished. Turning to journalism, she forged ahead on another tack, this time on behalf of the underdogs of her own sex and colour. From now on, until her death in 1852 her career is woven with the emergence of labour unions, movements for sex equality, and other liberal causes that characterise the emergent national story of America. The writer and lecturer role suited her style far better than that of the pioneer. Yet for all her efforts, nothing could quite erase from the minds of the public the flamboyancy of her defiance of nature and convention. She even married, but the masculine element could never quite take to Madame D'Arusmont (as she became in 1830, after the freeing of her slaves) and would roar—

"Oh Fanny Wright—sweet Fanny Wright we ne'er shall hear her more:

She's gone to take another freight to Hayti's happy shore.

She used to speak so parrot-like with gesture small and staid;

So pretty in her vehemence—Alas! departed maid.

Tho' we are men of age mature How can we rule ourselves?

Unless we all wear petticoats, we're laid upon the shelves!"