

A Lady of Cotton - Hannah Greg, Mistress of Quarry Bank Mill

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Hannah's Early Life

Hannah Gregg (nee Lightbody) 1766 – 1828 was the third daughter of Elizabeth Lightbody (nee Tylston) and Adam Lightbody. She was born into a family of Rational Dissenters, a descendant of Philip Henry, one of the 2,000 ministers ejected from the Anglican Church in 1662. She saw herself as a Rational Dissenter, a believer in reason and tolerance, all her life, even when the Unitarian denomination was established.

Adam Lightbody was a successful Liverpool merchant, dying when Hannah was only eleven and away at boarding school in Oswestry. The family were left as wealthy independent women. The two older daughters married well and although the family remained a close-knit one it did leave mother and Hannah able to choose a path most beneficial for Hannah. Rational Dissenters believed that daughters should be well educated. Liverpool was at that time a vibrant town having areas of squalor but also areas of splendour where the rising middle class merchants lived. It was a town of culture, which Hannah grew up to love. She appreciated the surrounding countryside and would walk and reflect on life.

However, in 1782 it was felt that Hannah would benefit from further education in London. She was proving to be a lover of learning and a great reader of books, quite an intellectual. Mother and daughter moved to London for three years so that Hannah could attend a school for daughters of Dissenters, at Stoke Newington run by two sisters, Miss Elizabeth Crisp and her sister Sarah. Hannah was impressed by its sixty rooms and 98 acres. It was exactly right for Hannah as she was able to learn French, mathematics, history, religion, literature, the classics, including philosophy, morals and ethics, geography and foreign literature. Those things required of a fully rounded young woman were also taught; deportment, dancing, sewing and music. Hannah disliked deportment lessons intensely. Mr Rogers, a relative of the family, a wealthy banker, with six children, lived close by.

Hannah was a star pupil. But she also benefited from the company she was able to keep outside school life. Thomas Rogers lived next door to Dr Price, the leading light of the Rational Dissenters, allowing Hannah to mix with the writers and intellectuals, many who worshipped at Newington Green. Mary Wollstonecraft was also part of this circle and from her Hannah learned the value and potential of a woman's mind.

Returning to Liverpool Hannah was a well rounded, confident young woman of twenty with a strong sense of social injustice, ready to embark on the next phase of her life.

Hannah, an independent young woman

Mother and daughter returned to a climate of optimism as the port and merchants of Liverpool thrived. Although Dissenters were marginalised, in the oligarchy of a Tory, Anglican civic power, they were cultured and charitable. Mother and daughter were respected within the Dissenting community, drawing from a network of successful merchants and manufacturers. They were educated and tolerant, interested in science and reason. Gender was no barrier for Harriet and she immersed herself in the social and political issues supported by the Dissenters, making notes and keeping a diary, which give insights into the circles in which she moved. Naturally she was concerned about the role of women, insisting on independent thought. She had long walks and talks with friends, one in particular that remained close throughout her life, Hannah Rathbone of Toxteth Park.

Being a close knit family Hannah often looked after her sisters' children. The social calendar was very full, travelling to visit sisters and friends, races, assizes, assemblies, theatre, concerts and art exhibitions. Being an unmarried heiress marriage was the natural next step. In order to entertain more widely they moved to a larger house in Bold Street. Not having a father Hannah turned to Dr Currie, Thomas Percival, with William Rathbone acting as a guide and mentor. Hannah also joined a literary and domestic discussion group called the Octonian Society. She was never to lose her enquiring mind, expressing it through her later work with her own children and those at Quarry Bank Mill.

Hannah believed that women, when married, should have a well furnished mind, being able to be a companion to her husband and mentor to her children, whilst also keeping a well ordered home. This was soon to be put to the test.

Meeting and marrying Samuel Greg

Hannah was swept off her feet in 1788, by Samuel Greg, marrying him in November of the following year. Samuel had inherited his uncle's textile business in Manchester, when he was only 22. Although he was reliable and trustworthy it must have been difficult later for Hannah to reconcile that he had also inherited two slave plantations.

Early married life was a challenge to Hannah. Moving from a house in a pleasant street in Liverpool, to a bachelor's town house in the middle of Manchester, where the street outside the front door was muddy and squalid, left Hannah homesick for Liverpool. Manchester was a growing mill town, lacking in culture at that time. Hannah was pregnant by 1790 and felt unprepared for the practicalities of married life.

Samuel was absorbed in business and the close companionship that Hannah had envisaged wasn't there. However, Samuel had purchased a site on which to develop a mill, with access to water power, outside Manchester near a small village called Styal; Quarry Bank Mill, with a cottage close-by, a place that Hannah could look forward to using as a holiday retreat, spending more time until eventually that became the family home and a place where she could flourish as could her growing family.

Her friend, Hannah Rathbone, had advised her to put her energies into building a family home at Quarry Bank with William Rathbone suggesting that she become a female preacher, which she was very unsure of, and also take on the education of the mill apprentices.

In the meantime a Dissenting family like the Gregs, who supported social and constitutional reform, were made to feel very uncomfortable in their Manchester home. The 1790s were an uncomfortable time for Rational Dissenters. In 1790 the Manchester Constitutional Reform Society was formed and Samuel was one of the first members. Hannah too spoke openly of ideas that were seen as radical and unpatriotic. When their situation became untenable Samuel and Hannah escaped to Samuel's Irish family in Ireland. It was here that Hannah's sympathy for Ireland was nurtured as can be seen in a letter she wrote:

...to be Irish has always been sufficient to make anything obnoxious to the English Government. (P104)

Family Life

By the time Hannah was 34 she had 10 children. As the business had grown so had Hannah's support, being able to manage the mill whilst Samuel was away on business matters. However, throughout her married life Hannah had to cope with recurring poor health, which constant child bearing and anxieties about the business, house, and political matters must have played a factor.

In 1795 Hannah's sister, Elizabeth, died leaving seven children, who were always welcome at the Greggs, although Hannah's mother picked up most of the responsibility for them.

Through all this Hannah had been working on the advice she had received from the Rathbone's earlier in her marriage. Although the children had a governess it was Hannah who supervised their education, writing material and basic text books that would be helpful. She worked with the Mill children after they had finished work and on a Sunday. As time went by her older children, particularly Bessy, helped the children to read. Hannah was involved with the wider welfare of the apprentices. Dr Holland would make regular medical visits to check on the children but he would also leave Hannah instructions of what may be needed before his next visit. In cases of illness, it was Hannah who was first informed, and she would care for a child in distress until their health returned. Their working hours were punishing, 12 – 13 hour six days a week, Sundays they had to attend church and do their lessons. The only holiday was on Christmas Day, when they would be entertained by the Gregg's. The work they had done through the year would be pinned on the walls, annual prizes awarded followed by a party. It was very important that everything was done to avoid contagious diseases spreading and keeping a close eye on their health was paramount. Samuel Gregg with forethought had bought the local farm so that the apprentices would have a nourishing diet, even though they worked gruelling hours.

Hannah had become a refined and respected woman by this time. She was not a social climber but did appreciate having thinking people around her. Spending more time at Quarry Bank Cottage prompted the Greggs to extend the house to accommodate visiting family and to give a better space to entertain. Having put her energies into making it a home for permanent living and establishing a home and garden, where children wanted to be, she then established a space where she could

entertain. This became a salon where leading minds of the day would visit, where social issues could be discussed, where new scientific thinking could be shared and where new ideas could be born.

The 1790s had been a bad time for Rational Dissenters with Enlightenment ideas being shattered in the wake of the French Revolution. 1798 – 1810 was a time of acknowledging the loss of these earlier hopes. The harvests continued to be poor with unemployment and poverty being high. Industry was changing with hand-loom weavers losing their livelihoods and families leaving the countryside for the towns. That William Rathbone became a Member of Parliament for Liverpool in 1806 came as a ray of hope in the surrounding gloom.

Hannah visited the poor and distressed in the local village of Styal, when she was at Quarry Bank, she continued to care for her own children and those at the Mill too. She was worried about the world, which her children would inherit and continued to feel that education was crucial for building a better world. It wasn't just about learning lessons but also about moral development. However, she was of her time and believed that everyone should be educated to fill their station in the world. She was a practical educator as well as book learning. Her first book demonstrates this. *The Monitor* was a collection of aphorisms and was used by other Dissenting teachers.

Hannah lived through a transitional time for women, or at least middle class women. She began to temper her writing, becoming more conservative. A woman's role was to be her husband's helper, 'angel in the house'. Welfare work was the work of women, and the social work they did always had a male figure head. The women may collect money for charity but a man would manage it. Nevertheless, Hannah always recognised the influential role she had to play.

As more workers were taken on, workers that came in from the countryside, looking for work, it was Hannah, who made the decisions and planned what was necessary. Styal village expanded, better housing was built, with gardens to grow fruit and vegetables for the family. 42 new houses had been built by 1822. In 1823 a school was built that not only catered for children but in the evening had talks for the workers. A village chapel was built in response to workers wanting their own Congregational and Independent Chapel. A shop was also built. Hannah and her children continued to be involved with the activities of the

village, having earlier set up a Sick Club for Women in 1817 and a Female Society in 1827. The house for the apprentices, closer to the factory, was extended. Hannah was not directly involved with this and left the running of the home to the matron and manager, although visiting for health and educational input.

In Manchester the situation had come to a head in 1819, when the militia intervened in a peaceful demonstration by mill workers and those out of work. Peterloo remains a scar on the history of Manchester's development. It was after this that the Reform movement really picked up, challenging, the Corn Laws, shorter hours for factory children, and representation. One can only imagine the vibrancy of the evenings, when the intelligentsia met together at Quarry Bank with Hannah acting as hostess. In spite of the family's reformist beliefs Robert Greg, who later took over from his father, could never bring himself to support the reduction of working hours for factory children.

Hannah's Own Faith

It is interesting to note that even when Theophilus Lindsey founded the Unitarian Society for promoting Christian Knowledge in 1791, Hannah retained her faith, which preferred a cross section of Dissenting merchants and manufacturers, worshipping at Mosley Street Chapel. Even when Cross Street Chapel, an influential centre for Unitarians, which in 1806 began proselytising for denominational Unitarians, Mosley Street remained aloof, keeping intact the characteristics of a non-denominational Rational Dissent. The Gregg's children were christened at Mosley Street.

Hannah remained true to her faith until her death in 1828 at the age of 61. Samuel had come to rely on Hannah and soon handed over control of the Mill to his second son Robert. Thomas his eldest was lazy and something of a failure in business terms. Samuel died six years later being bereft without Hannah.

Hannah would have been proud of her children though, with Bessy, in particular, having empathy for the working class and roles for women. Bessy became a leading local reformer in Liverpool. Her other children all displayed the influence that their mother had passed on to them as they continued living up to her high ideals and strong moral principles.

The book offers so much more about the social, political and religious life of the times .It is a must read for Unitarians in particular but also for anyone interested in learning more about Liverpool and Manchester of the Industrial Revolution.