

INTRODUCTION TO THE DIARY OF SARAH FOX NÉE CHAMPION
Madge Dresser

Sarah Champion Fox (1745-1811), lived for most of her life in Bristol. She is best known as the sister of Richard Champion, a porcelain manufacturer and partner with the pioneering chemist William Cookworthy and political agent for the then Whig politician Edmund Burke.¹ Sarah Champion was part of her brother's social circle and had a considerable one of her own. She knew a number of the movers and shakers of the late eighteenth century including the evangelist John Wesley, the writer Hannah More and the anti-slavery campaigner Thomas Clarkson. She was on intimate terms with some leading business families of her time: the Frys (chocolate), the Galtons (guns) and the Lloyds (banking) and she knew many more whose names mean little to us today, but who were influential in their time.

On her death, Sarah Fox, as she had then become, reportedly left forty volumes of closely written journals behind her. All that apparently remains of this prodigious source is a 500 page manuscript of 'extracts'.² These were made in 1872 by John Frank (1809-1900), a schoolmaster and editor of the Quaker magazine, *The Friend*, whose grandfather had known the Champions well.³ A fair copy of this manuscript resides in the Bevan-Naish collection at Woodbrooke College, near Birmingham and it is this document which has been transcribed and annotated for the present BRS volume.....

History has to make do with what evidence survives, and as sources go, this is a still a very rich one. If Sarah Champion Fox's letters⁴ are more revealing about her personal feelings, showing a playful and spirited side to her only hinted at in the diary, they are relatively few in number. We do not know if others were destroyed by relatives but the ones surviving in the major Champion correspondence were written when she was young and they seem to have been copied out by her own, older, more censorious self.⁵ It is left to her diary to inform us about her marriage, at the age of 45 to a Plymouth widower, the banker Charles Fox, and give us a sustained picture of her life-long comings and goings,

¹ Hugh Owen, *Two Centuries of Ceramic Art in Bristol being the History of the Manufacture of 'the True Porcelain' by Richard Champion....*, (Gloucester: John Bellow, 1873); Deborah M. Olsen, 'Richard Champion and the Society of Friends,' *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, vol. 102, (1984), pp. 173-195; P.T. Underdown, 'Burke's Bristol Friends,' *TBGAS*, vol. 77, (1958), esp. pp. 128-135.

² There are rumours that these forty volumes do still survive in private hands, but I have not as yet been able to trace them. If such rumours are true, then it is to be hoped that the publication of these extracts might encourage the present owners of the original diary to make it accessible to scholars.

³ The journal had originally been in the possession of Philip Debell Tuckett (1801-1872) of Frenchay (a relation of Sarah Champion Fox's brother-in-law). John Frank, who made the extracts, was the grandson of the Bristol China manufacturer Thomas Frank, and the son of Arnee Frank a pin manufacturer, both of whom appear in the extracts. Some parts of the original diary are published in *The Friend*, vol. 1, part iv (1874), pp. 72-73, a journal which he edited at the time. See Friends House Library, (hereafter FHL) catalogue entry under Diary of Sarah Fox. According to one source, the full diary was still extant in 1908. See Norman Penney's note on Sarah Champion Fox in E.T. Wedmore, 'Thomas Pole, M.D.', *Friends' Historical Society Journal Supplement*, no. 7 (1908), esp. pp. 44 and 45.

⁴ Most of these letters can be found in the collection of the Champion Correspondence (hereafter CC) held at the Bristol Record Office (hereafter BRO)-

⁵ A number of the letters are extracted into a digest which seems to be in some sort of chronological order, whilst others are complete with dates and names of those addressed.

her religious belief and the wealth of friends, relatives, acquaintances and associates who formed her coterie. This is the first time this document has ever been published.

Although her diary occasionally bears witness to great political events and touches on the lives of the famous, her usual concerns are more modestly focused. Though a life-long member of the Society of Friends, Sarah Fox's name appears only intermittently in the minutes of the Bristol Women's Monthly meetings, and were it not for the diary, one might wrongly conclude she was a marginal member of the city's tightly-organised and largely prosperous Quaker community. In fact the Bristol Quaker who sent the Rutter manuscript to London in 1916 thought no one in her city would be interested in it, since its author had no descendants and the diary contained 'few incidents of particular importance in it'.⁶ It is true that the picture the diary affords us is painted on a relatively small canvass, but it spans a full and multi-layered life. It begins with her troubled childhood and an often anxious young adulthood, through to a late and apparently companionable marriage followed by a tragically premature widowhood. It ends only at the beginning of an infirm old age. The diary's ultimate purpose may well have, as Felicity Nussbaum has argued about Quaker women's autobiographies in general, had as much to do with the presentation of an idealised self as with any unvarnished or intimate revelations.⁷ But we can still glean much of significance from it by reading between the lines.

Her own particular motives for writing her journal seem to have included a more personal dimension: she enjoyed writing. She had learned to write by the age of nine, and as her teenage self told her brother:

When I am left alone, [writing] is my principal employment and I am very well pleas'd to find that my favourite amusement carries so much Instruction with it and that whilst I am pursuing pleasure.⁸

Indeed the portion of the diary covering the years up to 1784 appears to have been compiled for her brother Richard to take with him when he left Bristol for Staffordshire that same year.⁹ It is clearly based largely on notes or journal entries made at the time the events described took place. Although religious belief is a constant theme, it is not the only one. The recurring motifs of death and salvation are present throughout the whole of the surviving extracts, it is true, but they are woven into a detailed record of her quotidian experience.

Certainly, Sarah Champion Fox led a relatively privileged life. The Champions were members of the Society of Friends (i.e. the Quakers), the largest Dissenting group in England. The Bristol Quakers were, by the eighteenth century, relatively prosperous and the Champion family, along with the Lloyds, the Goldneys and the Harfords had been the largest subscribers to the Bristol congregation in the middle of the century.¹⁰ Yet to

⁶ Mary Ann Tanner to Norman Penney, 10 October 1916, FHL, MS Box D.

⁷ Felicity Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England*, (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1989, 1995) pp.58-64.

⁸ Sarah Champion to Richard Champion, 17 September 1760, CC, BRO, 38083 (1-3), no. 3.

⁹ See Diary entry for September 1784.

¹⁰ M.H. Simpson, 'Bristol Friends and the Friars Meeting House, *Journal of the Friends Historical Society*, vol. 47, (1955), p. 28; 'Proceedings and Cash Accounts of the Committee for Building Friars Meeting House,' Society of Friends Collection, Bristol Record Office {henceforth BRO}SF/A12/1; Roger Angerson, 'Descriptive List of the Records of the Bristol and Frenchay Monthly Meetings of the Society of Friends', (unpublished typescript, Jan. 1963)., BRO; Madge Dresser, 'Protestants, Catholics and Jews: Religious

categorise Sarah Champion or her family simply as members of ‘the middling’ or ‘upper-middling ranks’ does not do full justice to the difficult material circumstances which they experienced nor to the role which religion, gender and premature death played in mediating their class position. Sarah’s grandparents’ generation of Quakers were only just recovering from the intense political persecution the Society of Friends had suffered in Britain up until 1696.¹¹ Even during the early eighteenth century, Quakers’ goods were still being routinely distrained in consequence of their refusing to pay Church tithes, and throughout Sarah’s life, they were prohibited from attending university or from holding political office. It is true that her paternal grandfather Richard Champion was a successful soapmaker, member of the Bristol Brass Company and contributor to Abraham Darby’s early iron works, and that his second marriage in 1711 to the devout and well-respected American Quaker Ester Palmer, was probably to his material advantage. But all this did not guarantee their children a comfortable life, for both husband and wife died from disease three years after their marriage leaving their new born son Joseph (Sarah’s father), and his two year old sister (her Aunt Sarah) as orphans. Both siblings were evidently well-provided for economically, but both, perhaps as a result of their early misfortune, appear to have been troubled and difficult people throughout their lives. Joseph grew up to be a merchant of some substance, and his marriage to Elizabeth Rogers, the daughter of a prosperous Quaker family from Frenchay,¹² at first promised a more settled family life. But this too was cut short. Three years later, Elizabeth was to die from a tubercular fever. The three children of their union were Sarah, the author of this diary, Richard and Esther Champion. As we shall see, they too suffered early in life in both material and emotional terms.

Both as a child and as a grown woman, Sarah’s economic security was at times uncertain, or at least dependent on the patronage of others. When her newly-widowed father decamped from Bristol a year after her mother’s death to London, Sarah was taken in by her maternal grandmother. (Her younger brother and sister were left to a nurse in the Wiltshire town of Westbury until they were eight and six respectively). Although Esther later joined her grandmother’s household, Richard was sent to London to stay with his father, much to his sisters’ distress. Up until his re-marriage to a young widow when Sarah was eight, Sarah saw her father once or twice a year, and his relations with his mother-in-law were tense. When the latter died, Sarah, then nine, and her sister were split up again, staying with two different aunts, Esther with her mother’s sister and Sarah with her father’s. By now, her father’s attentions seemed focused on his eldest son and Sarah’s new half-brother Joseph. On the plus side, her father’s half-brothers Nehemiah and Richard ‘Gospel’ Champion, both Quaker merchants, kept in contact with Sarah and her siblings and may have provided them with financial support.¹³

Difference and Political Status in Bristol 1750-1850’ in Madge Dresser and Phillip Ollerenshaw (eds.), *The Making of Modern Bristol* (Tiverton: Redcliffe Press, 1996), p. 105.

¹¹ William C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism* (original edition Cambridge University Press, 1955, 2nd edition York : William Sessions Ltd., 1979), p.123; Russell Mortimer, *Early Bristol Quakerism: the society of Friends in the City 1654-1700*, (Bristol: Bristol Branch of the Historical Association, 1967); R. S. Mortimer, ‘Quakerism in Seventeenth Century Bristol’, (unpublished typescript in two volumes, University of Bristol M.A. thesis 1946), A170.

¹² Frenchay village, now part of South Gloucestershire is just to the north of Bristol near Winterbourne and is the site of a small local Quaker museum.

¹³ This Nehemiah Champion died in 1766 and is not to be confused with his relative and namesake who founded the Warmley brass works. W. E. Minchinton speculates that Richard, at least, may have received a legacy on the death of his Uncle Richard. See the Introduction to the Guide which accompanies the Microfilm of W.E. Minchinton, (general ed.), *The Letterbooks and other Champion Correspondence*, BRO 38083 (1-4), p.4.

It was not until she was fourteen years old that she came to stay for a short time in her father's London household. It is clear that her father and his new wife were part of a more sophisticated and worldly set than her Bristol relatives. Sarah was amazed by London, by its gas lights and its bustle, but ambivalent too. Her not altogether convincing disavowal of the theatre there shows her to have been both shocked and intrigued by the gaiety to which she had been exposed. She clearly expressed her distaste for the spiritual and emotional atmosphere at her father's house. Was it mere priggishness, an adolescent's resentment of a remarried father or deeper family dysfunction which caused her to write the following journal entry?

Much as I loved my brother nothing could compensate for the disagreeable things I met with in a six weeks visit. Every day produced some new scene of confusion, quarrelling and, a neglect of attending places of worship, paying no regard to the Sabbath, never reading scriptures, and profaning the most sacred names by a wonton {sic} use. These and many other things made me earnestly wish to return home.¹⁴

Sarah then returned to stay with her Aunt Lloyd who first lived in the Castle Green in Bristol's centre and later at a country house in Stoke Bishop, then less than three miles to the north west of the city. In 1762, she records excitedly that her adored brother was dispatched by his father back to Bristol to learn a trade with their uncle Richard 'Gospel' Champion.

It seems likely that Sarah was financially dependent on her father. His attempt to impose an uncongenial marriage settlement on her sister reminds us that fathers remained their children's legal guardian until their marriage. He also fell into a 'violent' rage over his son Richard's elopement at the age of twenty one with Sarah's girlhood friend Judy Lloyd (no relation to her aunt). This leads us to wonder whether he continued to support Sarah financially after she went to live with Richard and his wife. There seems to have been some sort of break with her father possibly around this time as decades later she bitterly describes having just discovered a cache of angry letters from her father whose existence had long been kept from her 'out of kindness' by some protective relative.¹⁵ Unmarried women from the 'genteel' end of the middling ranks had very limited options for supporting themselves independently. In some cases fathers might arrange independent financial provision for their daughters as part of a marriage settlement, but these were usually administered by male trustees, not the daughter herself. Unmarried women had less chance of such provisions being made. By the latter half of the eighteenth century, single women could lose their social status by working outside the home and even when circumstances forced them to do so, they could rarely earn a living wage.¹⁶

As Richard Champion grew to become well established in Bristol: being admitted to the mercantile elite when he joined the Society of Merchant Venturers in 1767, he was able to

¹⁴ See Diary entry for 1759.

¹⁵ See Diary entry for 2 February 1789.

¹⁶ Bridget Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England*, (London: UCL Press, 1994) pp.221-239. See also Olwen Hufton, 'Women Without Men: Widows and Spinsters in Britain and France in the Eighteenth Century,' *Journal of Family History*, vol. 9, no. 4 (1984), pp. 361; Olwen Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: a History of Women in Western Europe*, vol. 1. (London: Fontana Press, 1997), p. 500.

maintain a house in the commercial district of Castle Green, near his porcelain manufactory, and a summer residence in Henbury, about five miles to the northwest of Bristol. Sara's social circle widened to include some prominent people outside the Society of Friends.¹⁷ Visits with friends and relatives to the spa at Cheltenham further broadened her social horizons. They exposed her to the attractions of pretty dresses and flirtations with dissipated young officers, both of which proved briefly tempting, but made her as anxious as an Austen heroine about how to maintain propriety in such situations.¹⁸ Such encounters with the upper echelons of provincial Society continued as her brother became Edmund Burke's right hand man in Bristol's Parliamentary election of 1774, but her main core of acquaintances and friends remained the staunchly respectable Quakers.

Travelling ministers of both sexes could find a ready welcome in any of the Quaker meeting houses whose network extended throughout Britain and Ireland, North America and the Caribbean. A surprising number of itinerant preachers or ministers came to Bristol. Most if not all of these names will be unknown to readers today and most were probably not much regarded outside Quaker circles in her own era. To the casual reader of this diary, they appear on first acquaintance as unexceptional, rather dull people. But once the identities of these people are investigated, a vibrant, often radical transatlantic network of activists emerges, a surprising proportion of them female. Such wide-ranging investigation has of course been hugely facilitated by the employment of internet search engines, followed up and reinforced by further archival and text-based research. The resulting picture proves Sarah Champion Fox's circle included female as well as male ministers, many of whom were widely-travelled, resourceful and actively involved in bearing witness to, if not overtly challenging, injustice.

These activists, it is no exaggeration to say, were extraordinary individuals who between them travelled with energy and focus throughout Britain, Ireland,¹⁹ America, the Caribbean and continental Europe to bear witness to their faith. Many were connected by marriage, friendship or blood to other reformers. To cite only one example, Catherine Peyton, whom Sarah Fox first met at Cheltenham spa, travelled in her twenties nearly 9,000 miles through America with her fellow minister Mary Peisley. (Their first-hand encounters with native Americans and enslaved Africans in North Carolina radicalised them and her critical observations on the institution of slavery feature in her published memoirs under her married name, Catherine Phillips).²⁰ Phillips spent a good deal of time in Bristol and features many times in Sarah's diary.

Sarah Champion Fox, as I have elsewhere discussed, had links with both merchants and abolitionists, and was won over to abolition by the late 1780's.²¹ The fact that all these people came to Bristol confirms the city's status as an important Atlantic port and helps to explain its increasing cultural sophistication as the eighteenth century progressed.

¹⁷ See S.C. to Sukey Rogers, 7 May 1761, CC, BRO, 38983 (5), no. 3.

¹⁸ See for example S.C. to M. Dallaway, 9 July 1766, and to Richard Champion, August 1767, CC BRO 38983 (5), nos. 116 and 128.

¹⁹ Mary Ridgeway and Phoebe Speakman for example were among those who worked in Ireland before coming to Bristol.

²⁰ Catherine Phillips DQB; BRO, Minutes of the Women's Monthly Meeting 6 September 1783, SF/A2/2.

²¹ See Madge Dresser, *Slavery Obscured*, pp.146-147.

Bristol in the 1760's and 1770's was a place of real intellectual ferment and cultural change. Scientific advances were celebrated by Quaker ministers²² and exploited by Quaker manufacturers, including the Champions and the Frys. Sarah Fox's diary shows her to have shared some of this enthusiasm. Whilst in Bristol, she scanned the heavens with a telescope,²³ noted the transit of Venus, expressed intrigued scepticism about animal magnetism, and was literally shocked by an early electrical experiment. She recorded an early balloon flight from the city and gossiped about an experiment at Dr. Beddoes's pneumatic institute. Much has been written about Richard Champion's involvement in the new cultural developments²⁴ and it was partly through him that his sister was exposed to new ways of thinking. She attended a public lecture he had organised (probably on a medical topic), although she afterwards professed her initial reluctance to do so on the grounds of propriety, since it was commonly considered indecorous for young unmarried ladies to attend mixed-sex public events. Most significantly, her letters and diary record too that smallpox vaccinations were routinely carried out in Bristol by the Quaker surgeon Abraham Ludlow as early as 1768,²⁵ nearly three decades before Jenner's famous inoculations. Some familial connection seems likely between Abraham Ludlow and Daniel Ludlow the apothecary from Chipping Sodbury to whom Edward Jenner was later apprenticed.

Richard Champion and a number of Quakers were involved in medical charities in Bristol, including the establishment of the Bristol Royal Infirmary and the Bristol Dispensary. The young Sarah Champion took a keen interest in this by the end of the century and was herself involved in a range of philanthropic bodies, including the Quaker workhouse, the 'Magdalen' or 'penitentiary' for seduced girls and the Bristol Blind School. She personally visited Newgate prison and like her brother was particularly concerned by the plight of the small debtors incarcerated there. Although her pronouncements about the poor sound to readers of our century annoyingly patronising, it is evident that Sarah Fox was much affected by the condition of the poor. She was constantly visiting the impoverished, the bereaved and the infirm. Her personal nursing of the dying twelve year old black servant, Ned; her clothing and feeding the destitute young urchin Sally Eady (with whom she kept in close touch for many years); her real distress at the plight of the poor in general all show an undeniable tender-heartedness. This tender-heartedness was matched by more formal activity in her later years. She seems to have been on the management board of the Friends' school for the blind and became an official visitor to the Friends' Workhouse.....

Sarah Champion Fox was neither a celebrity nor a gossip, but her diary affords us a fascinating glance into Bristol's past.

²² William Savery's Sermon 'An Age of Uncommon Events' made in 1796, remarks that '...men of science have been exceedingly curious in their researches: they have brought up some new and before unheard-of things to view; and probably some of them may be turned to advantage to their country, in ages to come, though they are not *now* altogether usefully employed in the world.' This can be read by accessing: <http://www.qhpress.org/quakerpages/qhoa/ws05.htm>

²³ Although the diary's only reference to a telescope is when Fox used it to witness the eclipse of the moon in 1802, her correspondence indicates she saw 'the planets, Jubiter *{sic}* Saturn and Venus thro a very good teliscope *{sic}*' around 1769. See CC, BRO, 83083(5), no. 209-210.

²⁴ Deborah M. Olsen, 'Richard Champion and the Society of Friends,' p. 179-184. P.T. Underdown, 'Burke's Bristol Friends,' *TBGAS*, vol. 77, (1958), esp. pp. 128-135.

²⁵ See the Diary entry for 20 March 1768 and accompanying note. Both Richard and Sarah Champion's letters allude to the inoculations which were performed at Barton Hill, Bristol. See for example, S.C. to M. Dallaway, n.d. but c.1769, CC, BRO 38083 (5), nos. 209-210. He is listed as an M.D. in Sketchley's Bristol Directory of 1777.