

## Joseph Sams, Schoolmaster, Bookseller and Virtuoso

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THERE are numerous notices scattered about in Quaker and regional literature respecting this extraordinary man, but I do not know where, save in *D.N.B.*, any connected account of his life can be found. A request for information appeared in *Quakeriana*, vol. 3 (1896), p. 43, but this publication came to an end before any reply could be printed. It seems well to collect and connect these scattered fragments and make an attempt to reconstruct a brief life history from them.

Joseph Sams, son of Joseph and Esther Sams, of Wellington, Somerset, was born in 1784. He was an Ackworth scholar, 1794 to 1798. From 1804 to 1810 he was a reading and writing master at the school. During this period, he married, in 1807, Mary, daughter of James and Sarah Brady, of Doncaster (1787-1834). Thomas Firth (d. 1879), of Huddersfield, relating, towards the close of his life, his experiences at Ackworth in 1809 and 1810, describes Joseph Sams as a "fine old English gentleman—wore a three-cornered looped hat—called a three-decker<sup>1</sup>—buckles to his knee breeches, and also to his shoes," giving dignity, no doubt, to his appearance (*Hist. of Ackworth School*, 1879, p. 116).

On leaving Ackworth in 1810, J. Sams was appointed the first master of a school established by the Society of Friends in Darlington, later resigning this position and opening a school of his own. Details of his school announcements are given in *Past and Present, a Journal for Scholars of Friends' Schools*, 1903, p. 7. One, dated 1810, refers to "airy and agreeable premises," and states: "Care will be taken to guard against the use of provincialisms or other improprieties . . . in conversation," and "Suitable amusements . . . will be a means of inducing the children to

<sup>1</sup> There is in **D** a wooden case for a three cornered hat but, alas, no hat within.

return to their learning, at the appointed seasons, with redoubled alacrity." In 1819 it is stated that, with improved premises, "it is apprehended that the denomination of Parlour-boarders might now be suitably adopted by all."

Henry Spencer, the author of *Men that have gone from the Households of Darlington*, 1862, wrote of his "respected preceptor : "

Our venerated master possessed in happy combination all the essential qualifications for an efficient teacher of youth. He was gifted with a great intellect, he had amassed a vast and varied store of learning ; he was versed in the art of communicating precisely the kind and amount of instruction which any particular pupil required. . . . He was sometimes angry, often grieved, but never vexed.

And more of warm approbation with mention of several noted pupils (pp. 135-145).

I am not aware of the circumstances which led to the decision of Sams to open a school on his own account. "For reasons which we are unable to state, he resigned this post and commenced an academy on his own account" (Spencer, *op. cit.*), but from several statements in the "Journal of William Robson" (ms. in **D**), which covers the period January, 1817 to May, 1818, it appears that there was some disagreement between him and the Friends of Darlington, his conduct not being satisfactory to them :

5 mo. 1. 1817. Heard that Fredk. Smith and his family have concluded to come to reside at Darlington with the intention of opening a school there, to the no small dissatisfaction of Joseph Sams, as well as several of his own friends.

2 mo. 22. 1818. Cousin Mary Sams,<sup>2</sup> accompanied by her husband, came to my father's to see my mother. When sister Rachel went into the parlour to desire Cousin M. Sams to walk upstairs, cousin Joseph asked if it would be convenient to accompany her. [This was not approved.] Joseph said that he did not wish to stay more than 2 or 3 minutes and was about to follow his wife (it is very evident that he was afraid he would be the subject of conversation upstairs if he did not accompany his wife, and that he would not have come down without her), but Father told him rather sharply that it really would not do, so that Father & Joseph were left together in the parlour : Having the curiosity to hear the conversation I listened at the door. . . . My father asked him the reason why he so seldom permitted his Wife to come and see my Mother—a near relative. Father then called him to account respecting his preaching and told him how exceedingly trying it was to Friends to be so disturbed in their meetings for worship and that if he did not

<sup>2</sup> Mary Sams has been described as one of the "sweet and lovely of the earth."

desist from so doing he (my Father) should be under the necessity of taking steps to prevent him. . . . Poor Joseph had little to say in vindication of his conduct. . . . Finding that my Father had cleared his mind of what he had to say, I entered the room and put a stop to the conversation.

Joseph Sams closed his seminary at the Midsummer of 1824, but, prior to this, his interests and energies were with archæology rather than pedagogy. William Robson writes :

8 mo. 13. 1817. Joseph Sams arrived in Darlington last 5th day morning from his travels on the continent. . . . He did not visit Rome having penetrated Italy only as far as Venice.

From school-keeping Sams turned to book-selling. In 1831 he established himself in Prebend Row, Darlington, but continued his travels. Spencer, quoting Longstaff in his *History of Darlington*, states :

He visited not only the chief countries and cities of Europe but travelled extensively in Eastern climes, as Egypt, Arabia, Syria, Palestine, Asia Minor, etc. . . . He took advantage of these journeys for the circulation of the Holy Scriptures, and carried with him for that purpose copies of the Bible Society's translation into Arabic. At Alexandria he was presented to Mahommed Ali by the English Consul General, from whom he wrung a reluctant consent to offer for the acceptance of the Pasha, a beautifully bound copy of the Scriptures, which gift was accepted. In a notice of J. Sams in the first issue of the *Herald of Truth*, edited by Benjamin Wood, dated, "Liverpool, Eleventh month 1st, 1828," p. 15, it is stated that J. Sams had then been travelling two-and-a-half years.

As a result of these journeys he became a dealer in antiquities, and took business premises at 56, Great Queen Street, Lincoln's Inn, London. In 1822-6 he brought out *A Descriptive Catalogue of a valuable Collection of Books in various languages and almost every branch of Science and Literature*, etc., in three parts (copy in **D**), which contains 8,071 entries, interspersed with woodcuts by Bewick. Copies of this *Catalogue* were presented to Thomas Thompson, of Liverpool and Thomas Mounsey, of Sunderland (original letters in **D**). The former, in 1824, had commissioned J. Sams to obtain some information for him when in France.

There is a curious and by no means favourable notice of Sams in a review of *The Book Hunter in London*, which appeared in *Notes and Queries*, 8th series, viii., 499 (quoted in *Quakeriana*, vol. 3 (1896), p. 43) :

We wonder if the author, W. Roberts, knows the name of old Sams, the Quaker bookseller and miser, the most plausible old hypocrite and unmitigated old rogue that ever existed, whose skill in vamping up and doctoring a Cawood into a Pynson has been feebly imitated by our degenerate moderns, and at one time threatened to deluge the market with spurious editions. We have had rogues as unprincipled as Sams among those even whom Mr. Roberts essays to immortalize, but none so clever as he.

Another side of Joseph Sams's character is presented to us in John H. Bell's book on *British Folks and British India Fifty Years Ago*, 1892 :

The erudite Joseph Sams, the Egyptologist, was also a keen pro-Indian of Darlington, and, by-and-bye, an enthusiastic adherent of the movement in London and elsewhere. . . . (p. 40).

He was present at the great Anti-slavery Convention in the Freemasons' Hall, London, in 1840, and took part, with Joseph Pease, Senr., John Cropper and others, in one of the discussions—"ever zealous, ever practical, though in his old Quaker manner, somewhat odd and even grotesque" (*ibid.* p. 106). He also attended the second World's Anti-slavery Conference in 1843.

Joseph Sams purchased the premises at the corner of Prebend Row and Priestgate, and later sold them to my father, Harrison Penney. Joseph Sams died 18th March, 1860. I have heard my father say that close search was made of the premises after his death in the expectation of finding money hidden away, but the search resulted in disappointment. It has been stated (*D.N.B.*) that Sams used to secret his money in a screw ferrule at the end of a walking stick.

Joseph and Mary Sams had seven children. Four daughters and one son died, probably of consumption, within a few months of one another in 1831-2; two survived, Sophia Elizabeth (1823-1897, married her cousin, Joseph Sams (1808-1862), of Thornbury, Gloucestershire, and Frederic (1826- ). Spencer, *op. cit.* p. 145, states that Frederic "made his home in Australia." In the account of his sister, Sophia, in *The Annual Monitor*, 1898, it is stated that Frederic succumbed to the same complaint as his brother and sisters a few years later. He was certainly living in England in 1843, as his name appears among those Friends who signed the certificate which liberated John Pease for religious service in North America (copy in **D**).

NORMAN PENNEY.