

BOOK REVIEW

ELIZABETH FRY

A BIOGRAPHY by JUNE ROSE
MacMillan: London: 1980.

Previous biographers tended to canonize Elizabeth Fry, making her appear to be impossibly saintly and unbelievably good. This state of affairs was due to the editing of her journals, by her daughters, after her death. This new biography, however, based on her unedited diaries and letters, removes her from her pedestal, and reveals her as an extraordinarily complex, contradictory, tormented personality, who defied the conventions of her age to fulfil her destiny. She had a difficult childhood. She was often overcome by loneliness and depression – yet had a fevered imagination and led a vivid inner life. However, she was sadly misunderstood by her family who considered her dull, stupid and over-religious.

Elizabeth Fry's strong religious feelings were the driving force behind her campaigns for the poor and down trodden. "The sight of suffering never failed to excite her compassion". She not only fought for an improvement in prison conditions (those of women in particular) but she also improved the appalling conditions prevailing on the transport ships to Australia, the miserable plight of lunatics and the poor in the work houses. Her influence was felt not only in England but all over Europe, and she was instrumental in improving prison conditions in Germany, France and Denmark.

Elizabeth Fry, like Florence Nightingale, came from a wealthy middle-class family. Members of the new middle-class who were classless in a sense, could see the horrors of the world around them with a new eye. It was a brutal age, frank in its obscene callousness and indifference to suffering.

Her achievement is all the more extraordinary when one considers the age in which she lived. Gently nurtured she was ill-prepared for the appalling degradation

that was to be seen in the slums, prisons, lunatic asylums and hospitals of Regency England. It is a measure of her sense of mission and strength of character that she braved these scenes of horror, filth and cruelty. Furthermore to have gate-crashed public life and the male preserve was in itself no mean feat for a portly mother of ten children in the 18th century. She was the precursor of the feminist movement although she herself would have been horrified at the idea.

She was the inspiration of Pastor Fliedner of Kaiserswerth who said "Of all my contemporaries none has exercised a like influence on my heart and life." She in her turn inspired by Fliedner's work at Kaiserswerth instituted the first order of nursing sisters in England. Florence Nightingale who was forty years her junior, admired Elizabeth Fry, and was encouraged by her to follow her calling. A number of Fry nurses accompanied Florence Nightingale to the Crimea.

During her lifetime this remarkable woman aroused hostility as well as admiration. Her co-religionists (Quakers) found her "worldliness" disquieting, her fellow penal reformers disapproved of her unorthodox methods; and her family felt neglected. She was tortured throughout her life by self-doubt and anxiety, torn between the opposing demands of her family, her religion, and her public – in this respect a thoroughly modern woman.

Elizabeth Fry's passionate desire to lead a useful life herself, and to encourage other women to work for the improvement of their own sex, had disturbed the placid, vapid lives of countless Victorian women. By working outside the home she and her followers had broadened the horizons of their fellow women and changed forever the confines of respectable femininity.

Any woman reading this book cannot help being struck by the fact that the problem of reconciling the roles of mother, wife and public figure are just as vivid and problematic today for the modern career woman as they were nearly two centuries ago for Elizabeth Fry.

LILIAN MEDLEN