

Andrew Fuller as Letter Writer

SOME years ago I began a calendar of the letters of Andrew Fuller, the bicentenary of whose birth occurred earlier in the year. While at the headquarters of the Baptist Missionary Society, I became aware that there were a considerable number of important original letters in various places and it appeared to me uncertain whether they had all been used by Fuller's biographers. John Ryland, when he wrote the life of his friend, had the advantage of having in his possession a large number of letters as well as some of Fuller's diaries. Ryland's life of Fuller appeared in 1816 and was reprinted in 1818. Webster Morris, a younger contemporary, who had close contact with Fuller for a number of years, also issued some memoirs in 1816 and these appeared again in a corrected form in 1826. Andrew Gunton Fuller prefixed a fresh memoir to the collected works of his father, which appeared in 1831. A generation later, Thomas Ekins Fuller, A. G. Fuller's son, wrote a new life of his grandfather for the Bunyan Library. Later biographies and biographical sketches have been based almost entirely on these sources.

The Baptist Missionary Society possesses a number of bound volumes of correspondence coming from the days of the founders of the Society. It has also received of recent years gifts of groups of letters, such as those from Fuller to Saffery, and single letters to other correspondents. A few letters are quoted in the biographies of some of Fuller's contemporaries, the most important occurring in Hugh Anderson's *Life and Letters of Christopher Anderson* (1854). The magazines of the nineteenth century contain others. The remarkable Isaac Mann Collection of Letters, now in the National Library of Wales and catalogued by the Rev. F. G. Hastings (see *Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. VI. 1932-33), has a considerable number of Fuller items. My list now runs to over 550 letters, of which two hundred or more were not in the hands of Ryland, Morris, A. G. or T. E. Fuller. With much diligence and patience, Miss Joyce Booth, Assistant Librarian of Regent's Park College, has made a complete typescript copy of all these letters. They provide invaluable material for any future biographer of Fuller, historian of the Baptist Missionary Society or student of the Baptist history of the Napoleonic era.

No less than one hundred and fifty letters are to John Sutcliff, of Olney, who was two years older than Fuller and his close friend and confidant from 1776 onwards. The earlier letters show

the two young men engaged in thinking out theological issues together. The later ones are in the main concerned with the day to day business of the B.M.S. The earliest letter to Ryland which we have comes from 1783. The latest is the moving farewell epistle which Fuller dictated less than ten days before his death.¹ The letters to Carey begin in 1794. Fuller wrote lengthily two or three times a year. The main business, of course, concerned the mission in India, but he also sent Carey news of the churches in Britain and occasional comments on public affairs. The last letter to Carey was written in February, 1815. One of the missionaries in India had complained that Fuller did not write to him.

"I hope," says the then dying secretary, "he has ere now received a letter from me. But neither he nor any one else must expect to receive many more from me . . . I scarcely know how to get on from week to week. The death of dear brother Sutcliff adds to my labours, and my strength decreases, and the years are come in which I have but little pleasure in them. It is some comfort to me, however, that the Cause of God lives and prospers!"²

From 1800 onwards Fuller wrote frequently and fully to William Ward, and sometimes with a freedom that is not so obvious even in the Carey letters. In the middle years he wrote often to the younger missionaries. His correspondents in this country included John Fawcett, John Saffery, John Rippon (described in 1811 in a letter to Sutcliff as having got "old and obstinate"), Dr. Charles Stuart and Christopher Anderson, of Edinburgh, his father-in-law, William Coles, of Maulden, his much-loved nephew, Joseph Fuller, Joseph Kinghorn, Abraham Booth (with whom his relations were somewhat strained), and the Hopes, of Liverpool. Two groups of letter written to his wife, while he was away from home in 1802 and 1808 on tours for the mission, were used by Ryland in his biography of Fuller. It is possible there are a number of other letters in different parts of the country, yet to be discovered.

Five letters are of basic autobiographical interest, for they contain Fuller's own accounts of his early religious development. In 1798 he wrote two long and detailed letters to Dr. Charles Stuart, and seventeen years later, in January, 1815, not long before his death, he retold the story, in somewhat shortened form in two letters to a friend in Liverpool. In addition, he wrote another letter, somewhat similar in character, in November, 1809. Ryland, and subsequent biographers, made use of these letters, but they deserve renewed comparative study by all who would understand Fuller's theology and "where the shoe pinched" in the closing decades of the eighteenth century.

¹ See Ryland, p. 544; T. E. Fuller, p. 308.

² To Carey, 11 Feb., 1815.

No one can spend long with Fuller's correspondence without gaining a deepened respect and even affection for the writer. To casual acquaintances he sometimes seemed severe, and was charged by critics with using a sledge-hammer where a much lighter weapon might have been employed. A comment made by John Buchan in his study of Oliver Cromwell might be applied to Fuller: "A temper held in curb is a useful possession for a ruler, for it is no bad thing for the world to realise that somewhere there are banked fires." But the fires that burned inside Fuller's heart were those of a deep devotion to Christ and of physical and mental energies entirely consecrated to His service. After his death, Thomas Carey reported to his brother in India that Dr. Kerr had said that Fuller's inside was as completely worn out by intense application and study as any person's he ever knew in the last stages of consumption. The letters confirm the tenderness of his nature, his humility, and the long struggle he had against physical weakness. One comes to marvel at what this self-educated son of the fens accomplished as pastor, preacher, theologian and controversialist, as well as missionary administrator.

He wrote a clear, bold hand and his writing changed little during the course of the years. As a youth he had gained a reputation as a wrestler and he must have possessed considerable reserves of strength. He came no doubt of hardy stock, for his mother outlived him, dying in 1816 at the advanced age of 93. But the toil Fuller expended in equipping himself for his ministry began fairly early to affect his health. His first serious illness appears to have been in 1793, within four months of the founding of the B.M.S. His wife, Sarah Gardiner, had died the previous August, leaving him with the care of a young family.

"I first felt a numbness in my lips on Saturday seven-night," he wrote to Sutcliff in February, 1793, "I preached, however, on the Lord's-day with very little inconvenience, except in the evening, when I found a difficulty in pronouncing those words which have the letter P. On Monday it increased, and by Tuesday the whole side of my face was motionless, and so it still continues. The muscles have lost their use. One eye is very weak, continually watering almost. The cheek motionless, but not the jaw. The lips on one side almost without motion—somewhat swelled . . . Dr. Kerr, as well as my apothecary, thinks it will go off. I have had great weight upon my mind of late, and great fatigues. Have written on the mission business to Beantson, Sharpe, Crabtree, Fawcett, Hopper, Jones, Craps, Hall, Kinghorn (Norwich), Stevens (Colchester), Gill (St. Albans), Hinton (Oxford), Stennett, Rippon, Thomas, Dore, etc. Should be glad to hear from you. My family are but sickly."

The facial paralysis slowly passed off and in the summer and autumn of 1793, on the advice of his doctor, Fuller bathed daily

in the River Ouse.³ His marriage in December, 1794, to Anne Coles gave him domestic happiness again, but of the children of his first wife, Robert grew up a wild lad, causing his father much anxiety and sorrow, and dying in 1809, while Mary died in 1811 in early married life. Of the children of his second wife more than one died in infancy.

In the summer of 1800, while on a visit to London, Fuller strained his leg badly "by going too quick down a flight of stone steps."⁴ He had a severe feverish cold the following autumn after getting caught in the rain between Biggleswade and Bedford, but a much more serious illness overtook him in the summer of 1801 and kept him from preaching for three or four months. At an early stage he described some of the symptoms and remedies in a letter to Carey.

"I have for the past fortnight been very ill, having nearly lost my taste, smell, voice and hearing. Yesterday I was worked violently by an emetic—last night a blister was laid on my stomach—today I can but just move about . . . The pain in my stomach has been as acute, I think, as gout: but by a dose of castor oil I am almost certain to be relieved in an hour. Indeed I never knew it fail. And while the oil is operating, if the pain is very acute, hot bladders, or a hot tile or brickbat, rolled up in flannel, and applied to the part, gives ease."⁵

Most of his friends, he told Marshman three months later, apprehended his "going after dear brother Pearce."⁶

Thereafter Fuller was susceptible to frequent heavy colds. He told Carey in November, 1802, that, though nearly forty-nine years old, he did not feel "any decay of sight or powers bodily or mental," but that he supposed he would. Shortly afterwards, however, he had to take to glasses "but not of high magnifying power."⁷ Journeys to Scotland and Ireland and to many different parts of England, work on his expositions of the book of Genesis and on the preparation of sermons for print, administrative tasks for the B.M.S., difficult discussions with the newly-formed Bible Society and on "terms of communion," which was one of the controversial subjects of the day, kept Fuller more than busy in the subsequent years. On short excursions from Kettering he often travelled on horseback, and in March, 1808, had a bad fall, the effects of which troubled him while he was in London helping to defend the mission against its critics and the East India Company. By 1810 he felt an old man. He was spending ten or eleven hours a day at his desk, he told Carey,⁸ and was burdened by many tasks.

³ To Thomas Stevens, 5 Oct., 1793.

⁴ To Sutcliff, 8 July, 1800.

⁵ To Carey, 19-20 August, 1801.

⁶ To Marshman, 19 Nov., 1801.

⁷ To Carey, 10 Jan., 1810.

⁸ To Carey, 10 Jan., 1810.

The following spring he was again seriously ill, with symptoms not unlike those of 1801. For three months he was unable to preach and Sutcliff and Ryland had to go to Scotland in his place. Against the advice of his doctor, he had constant recourse to emetics. After a short journey to the north of England on which he preached twenty-two times, travelled 600 miles, and collected £645 at a cost of £32, he felt better and completed the first draft of his expositions of the book of Revelation. In London, in October, while organising petitions against Lord Sidmouth's bill attacking village preaching, he had an interesting conversation with William Wilberforce.

"I asked him if he had ever considered the proportion of *absenters* or *non-worshippers* in the kingdom? He asked what I thought of them. I referred him to the number of worshippers in London, Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester, compared with non-worshippers—not more than 1 in 8. I allowed the proportion to be greater in lesser towns and villages, but questioned if $\frac{2}{3}$ ths. of the nation were not habitually non-worshippers. He seemed affected with the thought. I then added to this effect—'you suspect us of undermining the church, and we suspect you of wishing to contract the toleration. Probably we shall prove like the mouse and the frog in the fable: while we as churchmen and dissenters are brandishing our spears at each other, the *absenters* will be as the kite that will pick us both up!'"⁹

By taking great care of himself Fuller got through the winters of 1811-12 and 1812-13 without any serious interruption. He thought he had benefit from wearing next to his stomach a dressed hare's skin sent him by a friend in Liverpool.¹⁰ But in the summer of 1813, after his successful exertions regarding the new Charter of the East India Company and the fifth and last of his tours to Scotland, he was seriously ill again with bilious attacks that recurred frequently and with gravely weakening effects during the remaining eighteen months of his life. Sutcliff died in June, 1814, and Mrs. Sutcliff ten weeks later. "O the loss of dear Sutcliff!" wrote Fuller to Ward.¹¹ He struggled on at his tasks, however, sometimes spending twelve hours a day at his desk,¹² but it was a losing struggle. Nearly three years earlier certain of the members of the committee of the B.M.S. had been anxious to make arrangements about Fuller's successor as secretary. Some of them wanted a reorganisation of the Society and the transfer of effective direction to London, and they were not over-tactful in the way they dropped hints to Fuller himself. He had no doubts at all that Christopher Anderson was the man to succeed him, but, as has so often been

⁹ To Ward, 7 Oct., 1811.

¹⁰ To James Deakin, 2 Feb., 1813.

¹¹ To Ward, 5 Sept., 1814.

¹² To Ryland, 11 Jan., 1815.

the case, such support did little to commend the suggestion to those eager for a change. Fuller's second choice was John Dyer, who, after an interregnum during which Ryland and Hinton directed the affairs of the B.M.S., was destined to become secretary.

"I would in general recommend whoever may succeed us," Fuller had written to Ward, "to beware 1, of a speechifying committee. We have never had a speech among us from the beginning: all is prayer, and brotherly consultation; and I do not remember a measure carried by a mere majority. We talk things over till we agree. 2, Of a fondness for multiplying rules and resolutions. An excess of legislation, if I may so call it, is perplexing and injurious. We have not imagined ourselves to be legislators, but brethren acting with you in the same object."¹³

The words were characteristic of the man, and their spirit is illustrated again and again in his letters to the missionaries. Most of the quotations I have given have concerned Fuller himself. One can also find in the correspondence comments about the international situation—a constantly troubled one during Fuller's lifetime—about the invasions threatened by the French, about slavery and war, and about public as well as theological issues. But his excursions into politics were rare. Fuller never departed from the view he had expressed to Carey in 1797.

"I am more and more of the opinion that political changes are matters from which it becomes good men in general to stand aloof. There may be instances in which they may be required to throw in their weight; instances also in which it may be their duty to speak plain and faithful language to rulers; and in all cases where they are called to take sides it ought to be on the side of right; but the political world is a tumultuous ocean; let those who launch deeply into it take heed lest they be drowned in it . . . Time is short, Jesus spent His in accomplishing a moral revolution in the hearts of men."¹⁴

Two further quotations may be given. The first is from the earliest letter we possess written to Sutcliff when Fuller was not quite twenty-seven years of age. It is a long and revealing letter, much of it occupied with the meaning of grace and the theme Fuller was to work out in his most influential publication, *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*. Sutcliff had promised to lend him Mosheim's *Church History* volume by volume, and he asks him for the second one.

"I found strange feelings in reading the 1st," says Fuller. "I have been used to read in the Old Testament numerous promises and prophecies of the glory of the New Testament state. When I took Mosheim in hand I expected to find the history answer the prophecy. But, alas, I found after the first century little else but cartloads of vain traditions, persecuting heretics to death, broils and contests about church preferments, in short comprising every evil work! I sat down

¹³ To Ward, 15 July, 1812.

¹⁴ To Carey, 18 Jan., 1797.

quite dismayed till one thought relieved me. It was this. Suppose an historian was to write a history of the state of the Church here in England in the 18th cent. What would he write? Why, if he was popular and in high place (without which his history would not reach many centuries forward) he would tell us who filled the Archbishoprics of York and Canterbury, and who are the Bishoprics of the various veerings about for church power, the sects of the age, etc., etc. However, we could say Blessed be God, pure and undefiled Religion has been upheld by an obscure people independent of these church crawlers. So thought I, doubtless Pure Religion in every period has been carried through perhaps by a people so obscure as seemed unworthy the notice of Ancient Historians, from whom we know the Moderns must derive all their materials."¹⁵

It was to the fostering of pure religion at home and overseas that Fuller devoted himself. Self-educated and without the advantages and refinements possessed by many of his contemporaries, he exercised by his forthrightness and integrity an influence on the subsequent course of religion in this country far beyond what is commonly acknowledged.

The final quotation is not from the correspondence. It is a description of Fuller the preacher by one who heard him as a young man and afterwards emigrated to America. In 1845 Joseph Belcher prepared an American edition of the complete works of Fuller, adding a number of notes of his own. The close of his eulogy may appear somewhat exaggerated, but the description as a whole is vivid and convincing.

"Imagine a tall and somewhat corpulent man, in gait and manners, though heavy and unpolished, not without dignity, ascending the pulpit to address his fellow immortals on the great themes of life and salvation. His authoritative look and grave deportment claim your attention. You could not be careless if you would; and you would have no disposition to be so, even if you might. He commences his sermon and presents to you a plan, combining in a singular manner the topical and textual methods of preaching, and proceeds to illustrate his subject, and enforce its claims on your regard. You are struck with the clearness of his statements; every text is held up before your view so as to become transparent; the preacher has clearly got the correct sense of the passage, and you wonder that you never saw it before as he now presents it; he proceeds and you are surprised at the power of his argument, which appears to you irresistible. You are melted by his pathos, and seem to have found a man in whom are united the clearness of Barrow, the scriptural theology of Owen, and the subduing tenderness of Baxter or Flavel."

ERNEST A. PAYNE.

¹⁵ To Sutcliff, 28 Jan., 1781.