

Testimony to the Grace of God in the Life of Mary Doreen Rowntree

Born 23rd July 1921 and died 20th October 2021

A time worn photo of Leeds (Carlton Hill) Quaker Meeting House caretaker's cottage shows a female figure. This was probably Annie England, who together with her husband Horace, was a caretaker at the Meeting House from 1932 to 1956. Their daughter Mary, a Friend since her birth, has died aged 100.

Naturally, Mary attended the old Carlton Hill Meeting House as a child and went to the Quaker school at Ackworth. As a child, she was influenced by her parent's generation of young active Quakers. Her father and all four of his brothers refused to fight in the First World War which resulted in Horace's imprisonment and the premature death of her uncle Ernest after suffering appalling treatment in prison. Horace continued to be active in the Peace Movement throughout his life and often helped in the Northern Friends Peace Board Office, which at that time, was based at the Meeting House. Given this upbringing, it's not surprising to discover that Mary was imbued with the values held by her family. These values were to take her on coach-trips to London in the 1980's for witness against war-preparations at national CND demonstrations and would lead her to a lifelong abhorrence of the arms trade.

On 14th August 1943, Mary married Martin Rowntree, at her home meeting in Leeds. Martin was also a Quaker and Ackworth School old scholar. A copy of their Quaker Wedding Certificate has, for many years now, been on display at the historic Gildersome Quaker Meeting House on the edge of Leeds.

Married life saw three children and a move to Pontefract, where Martin worked in the Probation Service. Mary shared his desire to help those most disadvantaged. Later, Mary's father Horace would also join the family when he reached his final years.

Though Mary and Martin had deep Quaker convictions they were strongly independent thinkers and sometimes this could lead to conflict,

particularly when questions of Quaker practice were raised. Mary's sense of justice permeated her life and led her to resign from her position of school secretary in support of a work colleague who was being treated unfairly.

After retirement Mary and Martin moved back to Leeds in 1988 to the newly built Quaker House development, occupying a flat just uphill from the original Carlton Hill Meeting House where Mary had lived as a child. This allowed Mary a commanding view of the garden, car park and new Meeting House. She was then able to invite newcomers to the Meeting home to cheese and biscuits. She quickly became a 'Matriarch' figure and provided service in many ways including that of Convenor of the Finance & Property Committee. It was in this capacity, in 1990, that she oversaw the appointment of a young family as Wardens - over thirty years later, Robert, who is still the Warden, fondly remembers Mary's 'Yorkshire Tiffin' that greeted them when they arrived in Leeds.

Mary and Martin became central to the small Quaker House community of residents. They were also active in the management of Age Concern, which occupied part of the new Meeting House, as well as partaking in the many activities offered, including the Art class and the Weekly Bridge Class which was one of Mary's passions. Both Mary and Martin shared a vision of community building and were keen for it to develop into the future. They were influential in the development of Bedford Court, built by the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust, with the intention of providing exemplary housing support for people reaching their final years. On occasions, this passion to 'build community' Mary's way could be felt by others as overpowering.

In meeting for worship Mary was a powerful presence - one friend reflecting on Mary's life said that *'she was always so serene in Meeting, looking quite saintly as she sat so still with her eyes closed that I was in awe of her. I remember the occasion when a visitor came to meeting and began asking questions after a while. This had a number of people anxious to help him, and it took a quiet comment from Mary that "Friends, this is a meeting for worship" to bring everyone back into the silence.'*

In time the new Leeds Meeting grew to be much bigger and more diverse and as age encroached, Mary and Martin began to find greater comfort in the quieter and smaller meeting of Gildersome. In 2003 they moved to Bedford Court where Mary and Martin were again central to many of the community events taking place including the regular Meeting for Worship. One visitor to Mary at this time recalls *'She was always pleased to see us. She was one of those people who never seemed old, and who always had a twinkle in her eye.'*

Mary died soon after her 100th birthday still an inspiration to many who visited her. She had continued to be the backbone of the regular small meeting for worship at Bedford Court until it was interrupted by Covid-19. She died in a Quaker home amongst family and Friends, as she had lived her life.

