

Elizabeth Hayes and the Victorian Age

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THE LIFE OF Elizabeth Hayes is fascinating and filled with such drama that it reads practically like a novel. She was, in fact, a flesh and blood woman whose life (1823-1894) covers a significant period in history, a time of great change and challenge. I would like to examine Elizabeth Hayes as a woman of her times, especially focusing on her early years from 1823 to 1856. Was she a typical or an atypical Victorian woman? What options were open to her? What historical focuses impacted her most? To answer these questions it is necessary to place Elizabeth within the historical context of Victorian England, concentrating particularly on the Industrial Revolution, the Oxford Movement, and the role of women in society.

The Victorian Age, from roughly 1837 to 1901, describes the period that Queen Victoria reigned as Britain's monarch. This was the period of the Industrial Revolution, and London became the center of influence for western civilization. Its population grew from 2 million to 6.5 million during Victoria's reign. Along with the exploding economic activity and new ideas, there was intense social unrest. The rural economy of the past was giving way to a new urbanization. The population also grew dramatically, with a strong immigrant population.

In 1832, with the passage of the Reform Bill, the vote was granted to the middle classes. The masses of poorer people were denied any real power, yet they provided the vast pool of cheap labor that enriched Britain. There were critical attacks made by some Victorian writers, such as Charles Dickens, who described the brutal working conditions of women and children who labored in factories and mines.

In the 1840's and 1850's the conditions of the working classes gradually improved, and England entered a time of prosperity and optimism. This period also saw the rise of religious controversy during the Oxford Movement, a crusade to strengthen the Church of England that eventually led many to become Roman Catholic. There were several schools of thought as regards religious belief, the Utilitarians believing it was outmoded superstition and the more conservative philosophers proclaiming faith as essential to humankind. The findings in the sciences, along with Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, were unsettling for many Victorians. People experienced serious conflict and anxiety, and grappled with religious questions and issues.

In 1851, a novelist, Charles Kingsley, wrote, "The young men and women of our day are fast parting from their parents and each other; the more thoughtful are wandering either towards Rome, towards sheer materialism, or towards un-Christian and un-philosophic spiritualism."

The Oxford Movement was a pivotal force in the life of Elizabeth Hayes, as it was for many. Dr. Edward Pusey, John Keble, and John Henry Newman were influential clergymen who contributed to the movement. Tracts were written and emphasis was placed on the writings of the early Church Fathers, apostolic succession, the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and individual confession. Many believers converted to Catholicism, including John Henry Newman, who left the Church of England for the Church of Rome in 1845.

In 1850, Pope Leo IX issued a papal bull, without notifying Queen Victoria, that divided England into bishoprics, effectively changing what had been the *status quo* since the Reformation. His language concerning the extension of the Catholic religion provoked Protestant feeling, and even the Queen, who was not intolerant, fumed against those members of the Church of England such as Pusey whom she saw as causing the split in the country. She wrote, "The present crisis is, I fear, the result of such a number of our clergy having at the present time such a leaning towards the Romish Church and shows how it is straining for power. It will, I fear, raise intolerant cries against innocent Roman Catholics, which I would deeply deplore and regret."

Along with the religious upheaval, there was also a revolution of sorts in terms of the role of women. With more women working, the "Woman Question" was raised. Issues of sexual inequality in politics, the economy, education, and social interaction began to surface. Women were treated like second-class citizens. Women's suffrage movements petitioned Parliament for the right to vote as early as the 1840's, yet it didn't become law until 1918. Between 1870 and 1908 the Married Women's Property Acts were passed, which allowed married women the right to own and administer their own property.

Traditionally, women were exalted on a pedestal, and that was the principal obstacle to achieving any change in status. The social reality left women few alternatives: for women of the middle and upper classes, marriage was the only option. Victorian women were often portrayed in contemporary novels as bored, with no outlets for their energies, yet that is a description of only a small and privileged segment of the population. The great majority of Englishwomen were employed as menial laborers on farms, in factories, and as domestics and seamstresses.

In the 1850's there were an estimated fifty thousand "surplus" or "odd" women in England. These were mainly middle-class women who were untrained, and when family funds expired, they had to find work as companions or governesses. These genteel spinsters, who previously might have lived with relatives in the country and performed domestic industry, were now alone and impoverished in the newly urbanized society. The seeds of feminism were sown, and during the late 1800's marriage came under attack as a social institution that enslaved rather than emancipated women. The "new woman" was clever, rebellious, free-spirited, well-educated, independent, and career-minded. Two women who found satisfying careers in Victorian society-contemporaries of Elizabeth Hayes-were Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) and George Eliot (1819-1880).

Into this rapidly changing Victorian society steps Elizabeth, born in 1823 to Philip and Mary Thomasine Hayes on the isle of Guernsey. Philip was an Anglican minister who operated a private boys' school in St. Peter Port. Elizabeth was the ninth of ten children and effectively the youngest, since her brother George died in infancy.

There is no account of Elizabeth's early years, so there is only speculation and conjecture. Elizabeth probably received a fine education from her Aunt Sophia Hayes, who ran a private school for girls. She also might have assisted her parents in running the house, since they took in boarders for the boys' school. Perhaps, being the baby of the family, she was the apple of their eye and a little spoiled.

Whatever the particulars, Elizabeth must have experienced an awful shock after losing her mother at fifteen and her father three years later. Philip Hayes left no will or provision of any kind for his children. At this point, one gets an inkling of the stuff of which Elizabeth was made.

Her unmarried sister, Fanny, remained in Guernsey, keeping house for their brothers. Elizabeth decided to seek work in England. Granted, there were few opportunities open to her, but just the fact that she did not choose the safe alternative of staying in Guernsey with her remaining family shows her to be a strong and independent woman even then.

With Elizabeth's background of good family and education, yet lacking any means, she could have become a governess in a wealthy family, as her contemporary Charlotte Bronte did. Instead she chose to teach in Blackheath, a suburb of London.

During these years 1843 to 1850, Elizabeth taught school and first came into contact with Dr. Edward Pusey and the whole Oxford Movement. How exciting and challenging it must have been for a young single woman in bustling London at that time! London was the center of economic and intellectual activity, and I imagine Elizabeth working hard and reading much and conversing with newfound friends.

Elizabeth came from a strong Anglican background: her grandfather, father, brother, and other close relatives were all ordained ministers in the Church of England. Her interest in the burgeoning Oxford Movement and the Anglican Sisterhoods was understandable. Dr. Pusey was instrumental in establishing the first Anglican Sisterhoods. It seemed to be an answer to some of the pressing social needs of the day. The Visitation Sisters and the Sisters of Charity in France proved to be irresistible examples from the Roman Catholic tradition.

When did Elizabeth begin thinking of joining an Anglican Sisterhood? Brian de Breffny places the date at about 1848 or 1849. He makes an interesting point in noting some of the hereditary traits of the Hayes family, including a talent for teaching, a desire to serve the Church, and an inclination towards celibacy. Significantly, only one of Elizabeth's nine siblings ever married.

Did Elizabeth desire to marry, and her lack of means or dowry make that impossible? Was she afraid of marriage after seeing the constant childbearing and early death of her mother? Did the "Woman Question" and the plight of poor working women affect her and awaken within her a feminist sensibility?

I believe that Elizabeth was deeply affected by the plight of poor girls and women in London, and that this sparked an interest in the Wantage Penitentiary and School. By far the most potent force in her life was her strong faith in God. She sought a way to live out that faith in practical ways and was led to the Anglican Sisterhood.

Elizabeth must have been an intense, serious, and capable young woman. Her niece, Frances Mary Dynham, described her aunt as "a most fascinating woman, very intellectual" during her stay at Wantage. Mother Marian Hughes comments that Elizabeth ". .. was herself a most charming and accomplished lady. . . ."

The Reverend William Butler, Vicar of Wantage, gladly welcomed Elizabeth Hayes on June 28, 1850, to help in the Women's Penitentiary. She came on the recommendation of Dr. Pusey. Rev. Butler was in great need following the departure of Elizabeth Lockhart. He was obviously impressed enough with Elizabeth's person and credentials to put her in charge of the Girls' School which opened a month later. Rev. Butler had nothing but praise for her over the next five years, as Elizabeth presided over the expansion of the Wantage enterprise. By the end of 1854, it grew to include a National School, an Infant School, a Middle School for tradesmen's and farmers' daughters, a training establishment for teachers, and an Industrial Training School for girls.

Elizabeth desired to train the girls in her school for a particular work, illustrating her grasp of the evolving economic situation in England as well as the altered role of women in society. Elizabeth wanted to prepare her charges for what awaited them.

She strikes me as having a clear vision and high expectations of what women were capable of accomplishing. Her self-confidence and inner authority grew as the Wantage School grew. Through it all, her sense of mission and belief in the dignity of the human person certainly came from her experience of a loving God. She knew herself to be loved and gifted by God, a God who made no distinction among his children: women or men, rich or poor, black or white.

Elizabeth's sense of commitment and responsibility probably blossomed after she was instituted as Superior of the School Sisterhood in July of 1855. It was following this appointment that trouble began with Rev. Butler. I think Brian de Breffny is correct when he concludes that Elizabeth took her new position very seriously and felt she could now make her own decisions regarding the community and its work. She herself would write in her journal years later, "What right have any of us to claim authority and not to take responsibility?"

Rev. Butler did not want to be relegated exclusively to the role of spiritual director, so a rupture of the relationship occurred in late 1855. The whole situation had to be tremendously disappointing for Elizabeth: to have it end so abruptly and on such bad terms with a man she had collaborated with for over five years. I think it can be seen as a power struggle resulting from Rev. Butler's inability to share power. He readily enough recognized the talents and strengths of Elizabeth when she was his subordinate, but not when she was his equal. He was not prepared to deal with women as equals, or to believe they were capable of running an establishment independent of a man.

Elizabeth's departure not only ended her work as an educator, but also left her at loose ends in terms of being a member of the Anglican Sisterhood. She was already contemplating becoming a Catholic before she left Wantage, and that decision weighed heavily upon her. Coming from such a staunch Anglican background, she must have felt she was turning her back on her family and her roots. Besides, the climate for newly converted Catholics in England was none too welcoming.

Nevertheless, Elizabeth showed characteristic courage and unshakable faith as she became a Roman Catholic at Farm Street Church in late 1856. She subsequently entered as a postulant with the Greenwich Community of the Sisters of Charity, where she had been staying.

At thirty-three years of age, almost the mid-point of her life, she was embarking on a new path and one that put her back at the beginning. She went from being Superior to being a postulant. Her humility and openness to the Spirit are evident. Elizabeth believed in herself and the God at work within her, and she was able to accept the sorrows as well as the joys of life. In her future years she experienced hardships and disappointments in Jamaica and Sevres, yet she never interpreted these as God's disapproval. She knew the paschal mystery deep down and accepted suffering as part of her life, a part of discipleship.

A quote from Elizabeth's Diary illustrates her mindset: "I think that much that befalls us is sent to teach us to know ourselves and so we are permitted thus to learn our own weakness. This ought not to make us despond! Grace would be stronger than nature if we were faithful in seeking diligently for it."

I think that Elizabeth had a profound self-awareness that may have come from being on her own from a young age. She had to become strong in herself and strong in her trust in God, since she often found herself alone. She was a product of her experience.

Elizabeth Hayes was also a product of the Victorian Age. She was a complex person who struggled firsthand with industrialization and its attendant poverty; who wholeheartedly participated in the Oxford Movement; and who became a very liberated woman in a time when women's status was changing. Was she typical? Definitely not. Though the role of women was in flux, few achieved what Elizabeth was able to, and I believe she was a role model for her time and still is for ours. She was a gifted and graced individual, a woman of great courage and perseverance, a woman for all time.

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