Testimony to the Grace of God as shown in the life of Ellen Gray Jarvis

 8/3/1922 – 17/12/2015

Ellen Gray Lunnon, known as Nell, was born into a Quaker family in 1922. As a birthright Friend, she absorbed spirituality and a sense of right ordering of Quaker ways from both her parents, who met doing relief work in Holland during WW1. Nell and her older brother Chris enjoyed a simple lifestyle and a family life rooted in faith and service as they watched their mother and father living their faith from day to day.

Central to Nell’s life was worship, with regular attendance at Meeting for Worship first at Newcastle-Upon-Tyne then at Stocksfield and eventually, after her father’s death when she was eight, at Torquay Meeting in South Devon. Lasting Friendships were made at the Quaker school at Sidcot where she was inspired by several staff members and then later at Somerville College, University of Oxford, where she studied modern languages. From here, realising she wanted to work directly with people, Nell trained as an almoner and found that she was able to cut through complex issues and see clearly what needed to be done before patients were discharged from hospital.

In 1946, after WW2, Nell’s concern for those in need took her out to Germany for two years with the Friends Relief Service to offer encouragement, love, psychological and practical support to German families who were feeling demoralised, hopeless and exhausted. She helped set up kindergartens, sewing rooms, feeding stations for children and older people and a cobbler’s shop. Her ability to empathise and her common sense enabled her to connect with people’s suffering. It was much later that this work was acknowledged for its humanitarian approach with the comment that ’You came, and you gave us hope’.

It was through Friends Relief Service that Nell met her future husband Roy Jarvis. They married in1949 and settled in a flat in Highgate in London. Here Betsy, Roger and Richard were born. Nell was a loving and supportive mother and a dedicated homemaker. She lived an ordered and orderly life, without fuss, complaint or personal ambition. She had a degree of ‘unreliance on material possessions’ and made sure her home was a place of welcome and loving friendship, where all might find the peace of God’s presence and feel refreshed and cared for.

As her children grew up, Nell chose to work part time as a primary school teacher. Being aware that not all young people flourished within the school setting, she took some children out on trips to continue their learning in museums and open spaces such as London Zoo, which was quite a novel idea at the time.

It should not be assumed, however, that Nell entirely abandoned her sharp intellect for a life of calm domesticity and the insightful development of children. She was an avid reader and a keen observer of others. Whilst openly acknowledging her own human shortcomings, there were times when she could not resist applying her quick mind to the quirks of others. In later life, this resulted in witty tableaux at Quaker parties, where ‘innocent volunteers’ found themselves acting out characters without prior knowledge of the script in Nell’s head! Many children’s stories, coming straight from her imagination, were told at bedtime at Quaker camp, which were invariably attended by adult Friends enjoying the tales with an added perspective.

Having many practical skills, Nell happily offered service in the community as well. It was in London that Nell and Roy became founder members of a small Recognised Meeting in Highgate and together became the Meeting’s ‘backbone’, taking on a number of roles of responsibility and invariably inviting Friends back to lunch after Meeting for Worship. Nell’s ministry is well remembered by Friends. She often spoke about the importance of prayer and her words appeared to emanate from deep inner strength. Her presence in the Meeting was grounding for many and continued to be so wherever she worshipped in later life.

Guided by the Light within her, her faithfulness to the Quaker testimonies was unwavering. She travelled her own spiritual journey, no matter what was happening around her and cherished that of God within herself and in those around her. Nell was able to let worship and her daily life enrich each other, seeing the spirit of God at work in ordinary everyday tasks and activities. In difficult times of grieving, she inevitably struggled and then internalised and accepted what life threw at her, strengthened by her steadfast faith.

After forty years in London, when she was in her late sixties, Nell, Roy and Roger moved to Hitchin. Here they made their spiritual home at Hitchin Meeting where Nell became involved with interfaith and church groups. While staying strong to the Quaker Way, she sought out and was comfortable with all faiths and maintained openness to other forms of spirituality. Feeling liberated from other tasks, she participated in peace activities including peace marches in London.

Throughout her life, Nell remained thankful for what she had and never lost her childlike sense of wonder, often ministering on this in Meeting for Worship as she grew older. She showed ingenuity and courage in adapting to the physical limitations of older age and continued to be creative, making cards and sewing her own clothes. Her enjoyment in literature, the natural world, reading and writing never left her and letters to f/Friends, sometimes in German, continued into her final years. At Sloe Hill Care Home near Hitchin, she took an interest in and cared about the other residents and staff members until her death in December 2015.

During her long life Nell lived as George Fox encouraged all Friends: ‘Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone’.

*George Fox 1656 Quaker Faith and Practice 19.32*