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Excerpt
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A Life
OF
NICHOLAS FERRAR

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NOTE

OF literary forms, biography is the *genre intime*; and with all its wealth of detail, all its authenticity, John Ferrar's *Life* of his brother fails in the very quality in which one might have supposed it to be pre-eminent. Few people, one imagines, are saints to their brothers; but the following pages belong rather to hagiology than to history. John lived all his life under the potent influence of his brother's sanctity. Nicholas was indeed a saint; but saints have their faults, and for the minor details which make the personality of Nicholas live, the reader is referred to the *Selection of Family Letters*.

The community founded by Nicholas Ferrar was made up of some thirty-five to forty people. Its numbers were by no means stable: additions were made from time to time, and some of the original members went off to make homes of their own.

At the head of the family, until her death in 1634, was old Mrs Ferrar, exercising a kind of benevolent despotism over her sons and daughter and their families. Part of this authority was delegated to Nicholas, who although not the eldest son enjoyed a precedence by reason of his peculiar gifts and because he was in Holy Orders. His brother John seems to have shown a complete ineptitude in all practical affairs, whether concerning family business or his own private life. Nicholas is constantly called upon for advice and help—a state of affairs which provides much incidental entertainment to a reader of the *Letters*. It is Nicholas who has to deal with the recalcitrant Bathsheba, John's second wife; and he is even drawn into the question of the boys' breeching, a volcanic topic at Little Gidding. John had four children: Mary, who died young, John, Nicholas, and Virginia: all by his second wife.

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John Collett and his wife Susanna (the sister of Nicholas) left their home at Bourn in Cambridgeshire to join the family on their settling at Gidding in 1625. There were sixteen Collett children, of whom a daughter, Susanna, married the Reverend Joshua Mapletoft of Margaretting in Essex. Three of the Mapletoft children, John, Mary, and Ann, came later to live at Little Gidding; and Arthur Woodnoth, a cousin of Nicholas, sent his son Ralph to be brought up in the family.

To this list of inmates must be added the servants (their number is uncertain), the three schoolmasters, and the four old widows who lived in the "Almhouse".

Persons who were not members of the family resided at Little Gidding for long periods. We find Joshua Mapletoft writing to Nicholas with a request to allow one Mr Stroother to come and help him for a while in his cure at Margaretting. Sir John Danvers, George Herbert's stepfather, writes the following to John Ferrar from "Chelsey the 19th of Nov. 1631":

> Sr According to the free acceptance of my motion concerning my Godson Sr Iohn Brownes sonn & Heire I haue taken confidence to direct him vnto Gidding apprehending throughout as vpon conference wth Mr Woodnoth his frends Expectation will very well & thankfully concur wth that Coorse which your family Schoolmaster & schollers doe prosecute, for future good. the rest I must leave to farther tymes expression wth Ever acknowledging your whole familyes love & great respect. which bindes me to them & you in quallity of
>
> A most assured loving frend
> I. DAŪERS

Susanna Beckwith of Aldborough thanks old Mrs Ferrar, in a letter (20 October 1632) about her son's "long abod in your worthy family", for "that good operation which your worthy example & loueing children hath wrought in my son that he purposeth more carefulnes in religious exercizes then heare to for". And of course innumerable strangers from far and near came to

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satisfy their curiosity about a place whose fame was not confined to these islands; a full account of which visits may be read in the *Life*.

Nicholas from time to time had to go up to London on family business; Mrs Ferrar and the Collett sisters paid visits to Margaretting; Bathsheba kept in touch with her relatives in London. Apart from these occasional excursions, the community kept very much to itself. There was a purpose for which it had been formed, which was served neither by receiving nor by paying visits. This purpose was the pursuit of sanctity.

All his life Nicholas had been an idealist, a dreamer of Utopias, a seeker after the perfect community. He had loved the life at Clare, in an age when the Colleges were the nearest approach, in England, to a monastic existence; and would have returned to that grey palace when his travels were over, had not his parents desired him to live with them. While abroad he must almost certainly have seen something of the new community system which had sprung up in the Oratories of St Philip Neri; whose disciple, and second head of that community, Baronius, he quotes with approval in *The Winding-Sheet*. There are many points of similarity between the Oratorian practices and the rule of Little Gidding. And even during the years when the affairs of the Virginia Company absorbed his thoughts and energies, the dominant idea did not leave his mind, as the scheme he sponsored for a Red Indian College indicates. The *Story-Books*, too, abound in praises of great legislators and ideal commonwealths, and there is a curiously Utopian passage in *The Winding-Sheet* on the felicities of the Isle of Man.

The plague which drove Mrs Ferrar and her family from London into the seclusion of Little Gidding would appear to Nicholas, then, as a sure sign from God. *Haec est via: ambulate in ea*. Nicholas had a mind accustomed to signs and wonders, and miraculous interventions. Fortified by this conviction he refused a professorship of geometry and the hand of an attractive young woman

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worth ten thousand pounds, and began, very quietly, his astonishing task. On that remote Huntingdonshire upland the flame of the monastic life was rekindled in *Ecclesia Anglicana*.

The fascination which the retired and celibate life must always have had for Ferrar is clearly seen in the *Story-Books* and the *Short Moral Histories*. These abound in tales of hermits taken directly from the *Vitae Patrum* and other records of the desert solitaries. It was an ideal which would have found scant sympathy with most Englishmen in the seventeenth century; but, for the little group of Anglican scholars of whom Lancelot Andrewes is the most famous, it formed part of that appeal to the primitive and undivided Church on which rested the distinctive claims of the Church of England. The passion for holiness which in those early ages drove courtier and cowherd alike into the desert, found its expression as much in a sweet charity as in bitter and unparalleled austerities; and the Christian doctrine that supernatural virtue does not destroy the warm and simple virtues of kindliness and friendship, but gives human nature its perfection, was never more clearly vindicated. This was the chief lesson which Nicholas learned from his study of the ascetics, and it was upon this balance of human affection and superhuman charity that his community at Little Gidding rested.

Such an equilibrium must depend upon the goodwill of individuals; and even more, perhaps, in the case of so unique a community as the Ferrars', upon the genius of its head. We see, from a reading of the family letters and of *The Winding-Sheet*, that the balance was often severely upset; but, on the whole, Nicholas's faith was justified, and we can only marvel at the man who could reconcile the passions and interests of forty people of all ages to willing co-operation in a life which might so easily have meant nothing but intolerable tedium and friction.

An essential part of the lesson which Nicholas learned from his hermits was the danger of unrelieved spirituality. What was dangerous for the solitary, indeed, would have

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been catastrophic for a community like his; and even religious orders have found it impossible to live the life of prayer and praise without that "fit mixture" of contemplation and action of which the Earl of Manchester speaks so cogently:

> Man was not made for contemplation onely, his part is to doe as well as understand: In earthly things to be an actor, of heavenly things to be a Spectator. Therefore his felicitie consists neither in rest nor action, but in a fit mixture of both.
> [*Manchester al Mondo:* Contemplatio Mortis et Immortalitatis. 1638–9.]

Little Gidding became, therefore, a veritable hive of industry. The *Life* gives a full and vivid account of all the dispensing, teaching, embroidering, bookbinding, and so on, which occupied those hours at Little Gidding which were not devoted to religious duties; and examples of the community's efficiency are preserved in marvels of needlework and binding, to the admiration of visitors to Little Gidding church and the British Museum. For twenty years these holy activities went on unceasingly, and the poor people round about learned to know afresh the benefits of monastic charity, until that bitter winter of 1646 when the quiet Huntingdonshire lanes were filled with the tramp of the iconoclasts.

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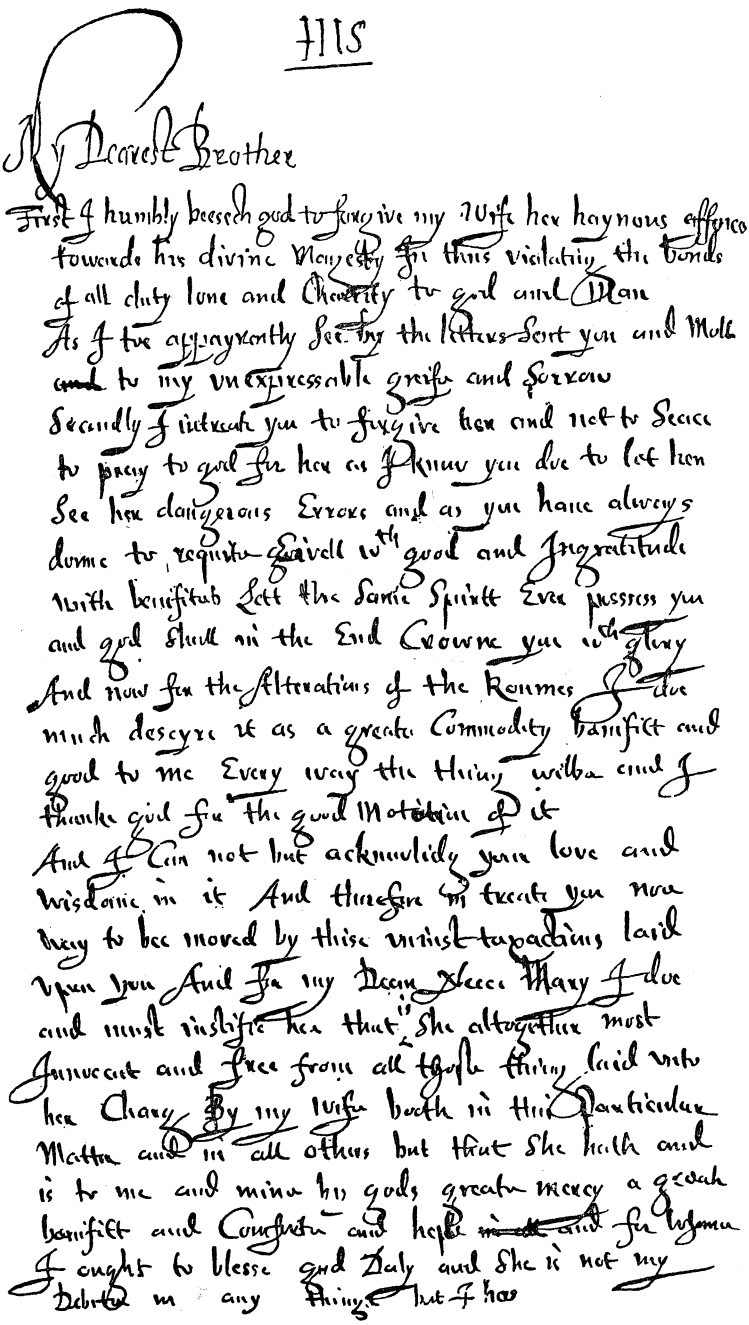

First page of a letter
from JOHN FERRAR TO NICHOLAS
(see Letter XXXVII, p. 290)
(*reduced*)

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Some Directions for the Collecting Materials for the writing the Life of Mr Nich: Ferrar.

[Then follows the Account of his Life, beginning *In the Name of God. Amen.*

N.B. This is only an Extract of a much larger Account.]

WHEN he was born, his Parents[1] had then alive two Sons more[2] and 2: Daughters,[3] so we account him the third Son.[4] He came into the World Febr: 22, An: 1592,[5] was christned the 28:th day[6] in the

[1] For an account of his parents, Nicholas and Mary Ferrar, see pp. 66–68.

[2] John and Erasmus. Two other sons, Richard and William, were born after Nicholas.

[3] Mayor (*Two Lives*, p. 3) has the note: Susanna, afterwards Mrs. Collett, alone is *named* in Peckard's *Life*.

[4] Peckard (*Memoirs*, p. 9): [The children] were all constantly trained in virtue and religion. Their daily practice was to read, and to speak by memory some portion of the Scriptures, and parts of the book of martyrs: they were also made acquainted with such passages of History as were suited to their tender years. They were all instructed in Music; in performing on the Organ, Viol and Lute, and in the Theory and Practice of Singing: in the learned, and modern languages; in curious Needleworks, and all the accomplishments of that time.

[5] 1592/3.

[6] *Jebb*, 165: A day (I find) he registered as more memorable than his birth-day, esteeming it (as he ought) a greater blessing to be received into the Catholic Church, than to come into the world.

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Parish of S^t^ Mary Stayning, in Mark Lane—London—named Nicholas after the name of his Father—a lovely child,—fair & of bright hair like his Mother—the Bible was the Book—in the World to him dear & pretious—the next Book—the Book of Martyrs, he took great delight in—& the Story of Bp: Ferrar he had perfect, as for his names sake[1]—

About the year 1598: The Bp: of London held at S^t^ Magnus's Church a Confirmation, whither M^r^ Fraunces his Schoolmaster brought the s^d^: N.F. to be confirm'd, as he was the 2:^d^ time by his own contrivance—& being ask'd by his Master, Why did you so—reply'd cheerfully, I did it because it was a good thing, to have the Bp's prayers & Blessing twice, & I have got it—& now his Parents resolv'd to send him & his Brother William to a School in Berkshire near to Newberry to one M^r^ Brooke's House a Minister & y^r^ old acquaintance, a famous Man when he lived in the Old Jury London, who had already y^r^ two Elder Sons there at School, & 30: Gentlemen & Merchants Sons of London, keeping a Schoolmaster in his House to teach all of them, he only had an eye upon y^r^ learning & good manners, who himself was a very severe Man, & with his very lookes kept all his Boarders in exceeding great awe & Reverence—while preparations were making to send them—It pleased God to permit a sore

[1] *Peckard*, 14: He was particularly fond of all historical relations, and when engaged in this sort of reading, the day did not satisfy him, but he would borrow from the night; insomuch that his mother would frequently seek him out, and force him to partake of some proper recreation. Hence, even in his childhood, his mind was so furnished with historical anecdotes, that he could at any time draw off his schoolfellows from their play, who would eagerly surround him, and with the utmost attention listen to his little tales, always calculated to inspire them with a love of piety and goodness, and excite in them a virtuous imitation.

Jebb, 166: Even at this time of day he fancied being a clergyman, and made his friends laugh heartily at a request he very solemnly made to his mother: *that whatever his brothers wore, he might wear no lace, but only plain clean banns, for he was resolved to be a clergyman;* and he would take no denial, but all his clothes must be plain.

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