

Joyce Ransome. *The Web of Friendship: Nicholas Ferrar and Little Gidding*. Cambridge, UK: James Clarke, 2011. 291 pp. + 12 illus. Paper \$35.00 (ebook £26.25; PDF £31.50). Review by P. G. STANWOOD, UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA.

Little Gidding is a very small settlement, nestled in the gentle rolling countryside of Huntingdonshire, along with its neighbors Steeple Gidding and Great Gidding, with nearby Leighton Bromswold, where George Herbert was once curate. In the mid-1620s, Little Gidding and its old manor house and church became the place of a religious community that Nicholas Ferrar (1593–1637) established.

Ferrar was remarkably clever, proceeding to Clare College, Cambridge at the early age of thirteen, and four years later, in 1610, he graduated with a BA. His college elected him to a fellowship the same year, and he remained in Cambridge until about 1613, when he left for extensive travel on the Continent, with visits to numerous monastic and religious communities, returning in 1617, no doubt considering the formation of a holy fraternity in England. But at first Ferrar joined his brother John in managing the affairs of the Virginia Company, becoming its director in 1622. The failure of the company and the subsequent financial crises seem to have hastened Ferrar's decision to acquire the property at Little Gidding, to begin the restoration of its dilapidated buildings, and so to create a new community devoted to prayer, good works, and orderly living.

These details and many more are recalled and reassessed by Joyce Ransome in her fascinating and scholarly study of Nicholas Ferrar and Little Gidding. She has made excellent use of the familiar studies by Peckard, *Memoirs* (1790), Blackstone, *The Ferrar Papers* (1938), Maycock, *Nicholas Ferrar of Little Gidding* (1938), Muir and White, *Materials for the Life of Nicholas Ferrar* (1996), and others. But Ransome's work benefits from her extensive use of materials not so easily available to her predecessors. While the archive of Ferrar papers in Magdalene College, Cambridge remains a vital source for all of Ferrar's investigators, Ransome has also made use of the discovery of additional letters in this collection. She notes that the collection is now fully catalogued, available on microfilm, and now online. She observes that "the detail that the letters furnish makes possible a much

more revealing picture of relationships and family dynamics than was earlier possible. The sustained sequences of letters between Nicholas and Arthur Woodnoth and between Nicholas and Joshua Mapletoft give an unusual depth of insight into these three men and particularly into Nicholas as counsellor and friend. The letters also reveal him as a different style of counsellor with his older Collet nieces" (15). The thoughtful consideration of these additional documents brings special significance to her book—meaningfully titled *The Web of Friendship*.

While Nicholas Ferrar never married, his extended family included several siblings, notably Susanna whose marriage to John Collet produced fifteen children, and from that generation there were connections with the Mapletofts and the Woodnoths. Ferrar's brother John also enlarged the family with his wife Bathsheba. The community gathered not only family but also local neighbors, especially young persons in need of fundamental education. The initial chapters of Ransome's book, which are laid out chronologically, from the formative years of the Little Gidding community to its decline and posthumous life, describe the complicated relationships and strands of "the web of friendship"—a bewildering tangle of genealogies, friends, and acquaintances, largely presided over and managed by Nicholas Ferrar himself. The genealogical charts or pedigrees at the end of the book are both welcome and indispensable.

Most of the figures mentioned in this book appear briefly; but Ferrar is of course the principal actor, difficult and complex. He grew up in a pious family where Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* was regularly read, he was a precocious student of languages and culture, and he knew the world of business and politics. Ferrar emerges as a man of deep devotion, yet highly practical, industrious, and firmly in control of his little community. His concern for the English Church and "the good old way" led to his formation of "a little academy" and the various pedagogical efforts and artistic efforts of the Gidding community, notably "the story books" and especially the beautifully crafted Gospel Harmonies.

Ransome's book about Nicholas Ferrar and Little Gidding, like most of its antecedents, is above all a historical, even archival study, yet with greater attention to the personalities involved. She writes efficiently, with great sympathy for her subject, and with much knowledge

gained from prodigious research. Yet in spite of Ferrar's exemplary efforts to illuminate English devotional and ecclesiastical life, he remains somewhat distant and elusive. His translation of Valdeso's *Divine Considerations*, with his friend George Herbert's preface and notes (1638), was a late and posthumously published effort to offer light to a dark world. Through this and similar projects, "Ferrar hoped that Little Gidding, like the Boston of his contemporary John Winthrop, would be for his contemporaries a 'City Set Upon a Hill'" (133).

After Ferrar's death in 1637, the community continued for a number of years, but gradually declined, and had largely dispersed after 1657. Little Gidding would become a metaphor for a lost but glorious cause, memorably evoked in the hugely popular novel by J. H. Shorthouse, *John Inglesant* (1881). Here was a highly romanticized view of an age gone but in need of recovery, which fortuitously appeared during the apogee of the later Oxford Movement, and helped to support certain of its values. Perhaps Shorthouse has few readers today, but Little Gidding is well known through T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, where Little Gidding becomes the symbol of a place of achieved spirituality. Ransome properly eschews these later manifestations, for they do not fit into her plan or purpose. Yet one would welcome a book one day that explores the *literary* significance—real or imagined—of Little Gidding and its spiritual progeny.

Meanwhile, we are grateful for this new study of a fascinating family and place, all carefully situated in their seventeenth-century context. But a reservation and modest animadversion: the index is brief and inadequate. Yet the bibliography is too long, with many works of general or only marginal background interest about Ferrar or Little Gidding. And surely it is unnecessary to give the *Short Title Catalogue*, or other standard reference works. A general listing of early modern works has no end, but certain immediately relevant titles might have been included: Where is Richard Crashaw, Joseph Beaumont, J. H. Shorthouse, or T. S. Eliot? Herbert is obviously relevant, for his connection with Ferrar is of supreme importance, and indeed his works are duly cited, yet not in a standard edition—Hutchinson (1941, 1959) or Wilcox (2007)—but in an Everyman edition. But these points are mere quibbles about an immensely rewarding book.