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THE BIRTH OF CHARLES WESLEY

WITH the approach of the 250th anniversary of Charles Wesley's birth there has been some apprehension as to the correct date for celebrating this event. Nor is this apprehension unnatural. Charles Wesley himself did not know when he was born. His *Journal* for 18th December 1736 reads:

I began my twenty-seventh year in a murmuring, discontented spirit; reading over and over the third of Job.

This implies that he was born in December 1710. In 1749 he wrote:

Mond. December 18th. My birthday. Forty years long have I now grieved and tempted God, proved him, and seen his works. I was more and more sensible of it all day, till I quite sunk under the burden.

This would make his birth-year 1709. The previous year he had been confused about the actual day, writing on 19th December to Sally Gwynne, soon to be his wife:

On Sat. morning I made an happy Mistake, thinking it my Birthday, & rejoicing continually, till at Night my Bro [the]r set me right. . . . Only I anticipated the Good, & had two Birthdays instead of One.

This was an accident, of course. Even as late as 1772, however, he was still not clear how old he was. He consulted senior members of his family. His sister Martha thought that he was born in 1711. John was nearer the mark in replying, "You could not be born later than December 1708".¹ So here we have four different years—1708, 1709, 1710, and even 1711, suggested as the year of Charles Wesley's birth—and all of them wrong!

John Whitehead, Charles Wesley's friend and physician, normally reliable in his facts, is the basic authority for the traditional information about Charles Wesley's birth:

Mr. Charles Wesley was born December 18th, 1708, old style, several weeks before his time, at Epworth in Lincolnshire. . . . He appeared dead rather than alive when he was born. He did not cry, nor open his eyes, and was kept wrapt up in soft wool until the time when he

¹ John Wesley's *Journal*, v, p. 330.

should have been born according to the usual course of nature, and then he opened his eyes and cried.²

Thomas Jackson's two-volume biography of Charles Wesley followed Whitehead in this statement, as did most other writers, including Adam Clarke and Robert Southey. This date is given on his memorial in Wesley's Chapel, City Road, London. G. J. Stevenson's *Memorials of the Wesley Family* (1876), often very unreliable, in this instance scores a hit. On page 385 he argues that Charles was born in 1707, not 1708, and his argument was accepted by Alexander Gordon, writing for the *Dictionary of National Biography*. John Telford, in his *Life of Charles Wesley*, also accepted Stevenson's contentions, at the same time mentioning Charles Wesley's own uncertainty, and the belief that no documentary evidence was available. He did adduce one further piece of evidence, however: the fact that in the register of admissions to Westminster School in 1721 Charles's age is given as thirteen. Since the elections took place in April, this would mean that he had become thirteen in December 1720, and was therefore born in 1707. Mr. Telford argued that since the boy's parents were then living and the events were fresh in their minds, this must be conclusive. This appears reasonable, but in actual fact the parents *were* wrong five years later when they tried to recall details of the birth and baptism of their older son John. This I was able to show from documentary evidence in the Diocesan Registry, Lincoln, at the 250th anniversary of John Wesley's birth.

The matter of Charles Wesley's birth can also be settled from the documentary evidence available at Lincoln. It has been generally known that some of the Epworth parish registers were missing, being burned in the 1709 fire. Samuel Wesley relied upon a faulty memory in supplying a certificate of John's baptism, such as was necessary when he offered himself for Holy Orders. Yet all the time the evidence was there, in Samuel Wesley's own hand, strangely overlooked by its author! For in accordance with normal ecclesiastical procedure at the end of each year the rector had supplied the Bishop of Lincoln with transcripts of the entries in the parish register. A number of these transcripts still survive, including the baptism of John, and—what is more important for our present purpose—that of Charles. This baptismal entry is in the year 1707/8, i.e. from March 1707 to March 1708 according to modern reckoning. It reads:

Decemb: 29—Charles, Son of Sam Wesley, Clerk, & Susanna.

Not the slightest hesitation need be felt, therefore, in celebrating this coming 18th December as the 250th anniversary of the birth of the world's greatest hymn-writer.

FRANK BAKER.

² J. Whitehead: *Life of the Rev. John Wesley* (1793), i, p. 97.

The March issue of *The Epworth Witness* is as racy and informative as its predecessors. The Rev. W. Le Cato Edwards writes of some interesting discoveries made during the restoration of the Old Rectory and of their significance. Copies (8d. post free) may be obtained from Mr. Edwards, Wesley Manse, Epworth, Doncaster.