

THE PROSE WRITINGS OF CHARLES WESLEY

THE FAME of Charles Wesley rests solidly upon his verse, which was undoubtedly his *métier*. His prose, however, should not be neglected. The first of his many publications was in prose—*A Short Account of the Death of Mrs Hannah Richardson*. This eight-page pamphlet, priced at 1d., appeared in 1741, went through four editions in two years, and was reprinted at widening intervals even into the nineteenth century. It presented the simple story of a young woman's spiritual trials, a story which gave the lie to the contemporary teaching of Philip Henry Molther, the Moravian, that the means of grace are both useless to the unconverted and unimportant to the converted, teaching summed up under the term 'stillness'. The pamphlet is a model of unadorned narrative, even though it does not achieve the staccato quality of John Wesley at his best. The opening sentence ushers the reader immediately into the presence of Hannah Richardson: 'I was hastily call'd to one that was a-dying.' By means of a 'flash-back', Charles Wesley then outlines her religious awakening and subsequent long months of spiritual darkness. In particular he stresses the manner of her seeking for the light:

She waited in a constant Use of all the Means of Grace; never miss'd the Communion, or hearing the Word, tho' all was Torment to her, for she never found Benefit; nothing, she said, affected her, there was none so wicked as her. I am a Witness to her many Complaints and Wailings. Yet she persisted with a glorious Obstinacy. . . . She did not sit *still*, till she should be pure in Heart, but redeem'd the Time, and bought up every Opportunity of doing Good.

He adds this comment:

See here a Pattern of true Mourning! A Spectacle for Men and Angels! A Soul standing up under the intollerable Weight of Original Sin! Troubled on every Side; perplexed, but not in Despair; persecuted by Sin, the World, and the Devil, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; walking on as evenly under that Load of Darkness, as if she had been in the broad Light of God's Countenance. Whosoever thou art that seeketh Christ sorrowing, *Go thou and do likewise*.

Eventually the light shone, and the closing sentences portray Hannah Richardson's peaceful death:

Her Hope was full of Immortality, her Looks of Heaven, 'till with Smiles of Triumph she resign'd her Spirit into the Hands of her dear Redeemer. Death wanted all its Pomp and Circumstance of Horror. She went away without any Agony, or Sigh, or Groan. She only rested; and sweetly fell asleep in the Arms of Jesus.

In this lovely tract—the first venture in Methodist biography—is heralded not only the natural eloquence of Charles Wesley, but his literary discipline. *Hannah Richardson* came from the same pen that was to revise the manuscript poems on the Gospels and the Acts seven times in thirteen years, constantly trimming and polishing a word here, a phrase there.

Of Charles Wesley's published sermons we must speak only briefly, since his preaching is discussed in another article. For our present purpose it is sufficient to point out that the popularity of his sermon preached before the University of

Oxford in 1742 ('Awake, thou that sleepest'), which passed through over fifty editions, was due more to the fervour of its language than to the compulsion of its argument. John's own summary is accurate: 'In connexion I beat you; but in strong, pointed sentences you beat me.'¹ Charles Wesley's only other prose publication was the rare sermon on *The Cause and Cure of Earthquakes*, occasioned by the vigorous tremor of 8th March 1750. The scientific introduction is followed by a lengthy historical survey which moves swiftly through examples of the devastation and demoralization caused by earthquakes. Only the closing quarter, a forceful call to repentance as the 'Cure of Earthquakes', is really preaching proper.

These three items form the extent of the prose certainly published by Charles Wesley himself, though an account of his musical sons was published by the Honourable Daines Barrington in the *Philosophical Transactions* for 1781 and also in his *Miscellanies*, and it is likely that Charles Wesley was the author of the anonymous *Strictures on the Rev. Dr Coke's Ordination Sermon, preached at Baltimore, in the State of Maryland, in December 1784*. Among the handful of manuscript items which survive, the most important is that 'On a Weekly Sacrament',² but this, like his early sermons, suffers from a turgidity of style that occasionally affected even John Wesley in his youth.

Easily the most important of Charles Wesley's prose writings are his journals and letters. In actual fact, these two categories overlap considerably. Not only does his formal journal incorporate many of his letters, but scores of his letters, particularly to his brother John and to his wife, were in the form of journals, with brief personal messages appended. John Wesley normally 'wrote up' his journal from a diary; Charles seems to have transcribed much of his journal from his letters, which are often fuller in detail—though it is by no means certain in every case which version came first. Various scribes made copies of these journal-letters, both for private circulation, and for public reading in the Societies on the monthly 'letter-days'. A number are extant in the hand of John Wesley. Of the scores which must have circulated, only fifty appear to have survived. They commence on the eve of Charles Wesley's departure from Georgia in the summer of 1736, and end in the autumn of 1756, when he was in the North of England endeavouring to prevent a separation from the Established Church.

Charles Wesley was continually being urged to follow his brother's example in publishing his journal. Indeed, in 1749, in order to persuade Mr and Mrs Gwynne that financially he was an eligible suitor for their daughter's hand, he included his sermons and journals as literary property which he might eventually publish. Already he had been at pains to retain copies of most of his journals, even though in some cases greatly abbreviated. These were written up on numbered pages and bound into a thick octavo volume which was bequeathed to his widow with the charge to keep it in her personal possession. Dr John Whitehead published extracts from this document in his life of Charles. Eventually it was sold by Charles Wesley junior to the Wesleyan Methodist Conference. At one stage it had been lost, but was discovered among some loose straw on the floor of the public warehouse where Charles Wesley junior had for a time stored his furniture. Unfortunately, the volume had suffered serious damage then or earlier: several leaves had been cut away from the binding, though not removed,

and other sections were completely missing. In effect the journal proper finishes on 31st August 1751, after which there are occasional fragments covering from a few days to a month each. Even the 'complete' sections of the journal, however, are very unequal, and a detailed description of one incident may be followed by a few days' complete silence.

This journal was published by Thomas Jackson in 1849, after he had used lengthy extracts in his biography of Charles Wesley. With all its defects, this or the later reprint remains the standard edition. Fifty years ago Nehemiah Curnock was working on an authoritative edition similar to that of *John Wesley's Journal*. John Telford entered into Curnock's labours and used some of Curnock's transcriptions of shorthand passages when in 1910 he published the first of three projected volumes of *The Journal of Charles Wesley*. This edition, though far from adequate, presents the standard text for the first two and a half years of the journal, in some ways the most important section of all.

Charles Wesley's letters are nothing like so numerous as those of his brother, and the unfamiliar handwriting, combined with the lack of signature or date, has undoubtedly led to the loss or neglect of many. The only attempt so far to publish them is that of Thomas Jackson, who appended 106 of them to the *Journal*. He made a valiant attempt to place these in chronological order, but in many cases was a long way off the target. John Telford, in his *Life of Charles Wesley* (pp.314-15), rearranged Jackson's selection in what was more nearly their chronological order, but still dated at least sixteen of them incorrectly. From this it will be gathered that Charles Wesley's less orderly habits as a correspondent have created problems almost unknown to the students of the letters of his brother John. Even with the extra evidence available through the amassing of transcripts of seven hundred letters of Charles Wesley, the present writer is still in some doubt about the dating of eighty of them, though in only eight cases has it not been possible to assign an approximate date. Much work remains to be done in tracing missing letters, in deciphering shorthand copies, and in piecing together sometimes flimsy clues to their date, before a really worthy standard edition of Charles Wesleys' letters can be ready for publication. Here, as in the case of the journal, however, the results will more than justify the immense labour involved. Both in journal and letters there is much of permanent value. This is perhaps particularly true of the letters, since two-thirds of them cover periods for which no journal is available. The first letter extant was written from Oxford to his brother John on their mother's birthday, 20th January 1727/8, and contains his first recorded verse. The last, dated 13th February 1788, is to a music-dealer about an overlooked account:

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In literary and historical values, journal and letters stand together. Both contain the occasional memorable saying. Such is the reply to his wife's complaint about her spiritual condition: 'Next to feeling Christ Present, the most desirable state is to feel Christ absent.'³ The Talmudic echo used for the Wesley memorial in Westminster Abbey comes from one of Charles Wesley's letters: 'God will look to that matter of Successors. He buries his workmen, &

still carries on his Work.'⁴ Touches of humour are frequent, as when he describes a night spent in the West Street Chapel, Seven Dials:

I lodged (rather than slept) at the Chappel-house. An old Woman's Hooping-Cough made me keep a Watchnight, ag[ains]t my will.⁵

Most of the humour has a caustic bite, as in his regular description of John Wesley's shrewish wife—'my best friend'—and a sentence written to his daughter Sally: 'Your studies are, I presume, as usual, directed by chance.'⁶ Charles Wesley's strong satirical vein, notably revealed in his controversial and political verse, is constantly exemplified in his prose:

I was sent for to baptize a child. It gave me occasion to speak upon faith. One of the company was full of self-righteousness. The rest were more patient of the truth, being only gross sinners.⁷

Like that master of brevity, his brother John, Charles Wesley practised a scrupulous economy in his use of words—witness a letter to John Nelson:

MY BROTHER,

You must watch and pray, labour and suffer. My spirit is with you. You will shortly be wanted in Yorkshire.

Farewell.⁸

This crispness of phrase lends vivid drama to many a longer narrative, of which there are (comparatively) many more in the journal of Charles than of John Wesley. One example is his account of a stormy journey from Bath to London in December 1748:

Fri. Morn. Soon after 4 set out in Thick Darkness & Rain. We had only one Shower; but it lasted from morning to Night. By half hour past 8 we got in sad plight to Caln[e]; set out in an hour, as wet as we came in, sore ag[ains]t my companion's Will, who did not understand me, when I told him, I never slack my pace for wind or weather. In a quarter of an Hour I was again wet to the skin, the wind driving the Rain in our faces so violently we c[oul]d scarce sit ou[r] horses. It grew stronger & stronger, the nearer we came to the Downs. I foresaw the Trial approaching, & prepared for a Storm. It was ye fiercest I ever knew either by Land or by Sea. Before we had rode half a mile on the Summit of the Downs, the Wind took my Horse off his Legs, & blew me off his Back. I durst not mount again, the Beast was blown down so often. Forty times, I believe, I was overturned & born[e] to the ground. Never had I such a combat with ye Wind. It was labour indeed to bear up against it.

'No Foot of Earth unfought the Tempest gave!'

Many times it stopt me as if caught in a Man's arms; Once it blew me over a Bank, & I drove me many yards out of the Road, before I c[oul]d turn. For a Mile & an half I struggled on, till my Strength was quite spent, when I came to mount my weary beast. How we got 16 miles farther I cannot tell; for when we came to Hungerford there was scarce any Sense or Life in us. My Fellow traveller was only less wet & battered than me. We w[oul]d have shifted our Cloaths, but our Linnen in ye Bags was in ye same Condition with ourselves. However we dried it in some time & changed. I almost lost the use of my Right Arm. It cost me all my Rhetoric to set my Companion out again. He rode on groaning so far as Newb[u]ry, ten miles from Hungerford, & then refused to stir a step further. I was forced to drop him & ride alone.⁹

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Although Charles Wesley's prose (with the exception of his youthful sermons) merits a more prominent niche in general literature than it has received, its chief importance is historical. Occasionally a 'newsy' letter to his wife from London contains points of importance for the social or political historian. His accounts of the Gordon Riots furnish interesting evidence:

You read a very small Part of the mischief already done in the Papers. . . . B. Thackwray was an Eye-witness. He saw them drag the B[isho]p of Lincoln out of his coach, & force him to kneel down. They treated him unmercifully: began to pull the house down to w[hi]ch he fled for shelter: & were scarcely persuaded by the Owner (whose wife big with child was almost frighten[e]d to death) to let him escape at 11 at night.

Another B[isho]p wisely cried out 'Huzza, no Popery!' & was dismissed with Shoutings. . . .

Imagine the Terror of the poor Papists. I prayed with the Preachers at the Chapel & charged them to keep the peace. I preached Peace & Charity, the one true Religion; & prayed earnestly for the trembling persecuted Catholics. Never have I found such love for them, as on this occasion: &, I believe, most of the Society are likeminded.¹⁰

Thus he tried to think with Christian love of those whose principles he hated. With less success he tried to be impartial during the War of American Independence, advising Thomas Rankin, one of the preachers:

As to the public affairs, I wish you to be like-minded with me. I am of neither side, and yet of both; on the side of New England, and of Old. Private Christians are excused, exempted, privileged, to take no part in civil troubles. We love all, and pray for all, with a sincere and impartial love.¹¹

In the actual event, however, Charles Wesley was unable to preserve this desirable detachment, particularly when the question of American independence became inextricably linked with that of separation from the Church of England through his brother's ordinations for America.

Of far greater importance is the light thrown by Charles Wesley's journal and letters on the progress and the problems of Methodism. They are invaluable for their portrayal of bold experiments in evangelism, of conversions, persecution, tireless labours, harrowing anxieties and doubts, heartening success—records sometimes supplementary to other sources, sometimes unique. One early example is the account of the execution at Tyburn of ten criminals with whom Charles Wesley had been in frequent touch for some days:

I prayed first, then Sparks and Broughton. We had prayed before that our Lord would show there was a power superior to the fear of death. Newington had quite forgot his pain. They were all cheerful; full of comfort, peace, and triumph; assuredly persuaded Christ had died for them, and waited to receive them into paradise. Greenway was impatient to be with Christ. The Black had spied me coming out of the coach, and saluted me with his looks. As often as his eyes met mine, he smiled with the most composed, delightful countenance I ever saw. Read caught hold of my hand in a transport of joy. Newington seemed perfectly pleased. Hudson declared he was never better, or more at ease, in mind and body. None showed any natural terror of death: no fear, or crying, or tears. All expressed their desire of our following them to paradise. I never saw such calm triumph, such incredible indifference to dying. We sang several hymns; particularly,

*Behold the Saviour of mankind,
Nail'd to the shameful tree;*

and the hymn entitled, 'Faith in Christ', which concludes.

*A guilty, weak, and helpless worm,
Into thy hands I fall:
Be thou my life, my righteousness,
My Jesus, and my all.*

We prayed Him, in earnest faith, to receive their spirits. I could do nothing but rejoice: kissed Newington and Hudson; took leave of each in particular. Mr Broughton bade them not be surprised when the cart should draw away. They cheerfully replied, they should not; expressed some concern how we should get back to our coach. We left them going to meet their Lord, ready for the Bridegroom. When the cart drew off, not one stirred, or struggled for life, but meekly gave up their spirits. Exactly at twelve they were turned off. I spoke a few suitable words to the crowd; and returned, full of peace and confidence in our friends' happiness. That hour under the gallows was the most blessed hour of my life.¹²

Nor is the value of Charles Wesley's testimony damaged by credulity or exaggeration. Indeed he himself (and apparently others) believed that it was John Wesley whose enthusiasms carried him away into credulity, to which Charles had to administer the cold douche of reasoned criticism. He was by no means so ready to countenance the many claimants to Christian Perfection, writing to Joseph Cownley:

One who is now called Perfect was at first called A soul in its first love. Strip y[ou]r correspondent of her enthusiasm, & she is neither more nor less than A believer living up to her privileges. My B[rother] will be convinced of this more & more. Trust him to God.¹³

About many of the revivalistic phenomena he was strongly critical, as is seen in the following account of the work at Newcastle in 1743:

Today one who came from the alehouse, drunk, was pleased to fall into a fit for my entertainment, and beat himself heartily. I thought it a pity to hinder him; so, instead of singing over him, as had been often done, we left him to recover at his leisure. Another, a girl, as she began her cry, I ordered to be carried out. Her convulsion was so violent, as to take away the use of her limbs, till they laid and left her without the door. Then immediately she found her legs, and walked off. Some very unstill sisters, who always took care to stand near me, and tried which should cry loudest, since I had them removed out of my sight, have been as quiet as lambs. The first night I preached here, half my words were lost through their outcries. Last night, before I began, I gave public notice, that whosoever cried so as to drown my voice, should, without any man's hurting or judging them, be gently carried to the farthest corner of the room. But my porters had no employment the whole night; yet the Lord was with us, mightily convincing of sin and righteousness.¹⁴

History has proved that Charles Wesley was also more clear-sighted than his brother in assessing the tendencies and eventual results of the rising status of the lay preachers, of the licensing of preachers and preaching-houses under the Toleration Act, and especially of John Wesley's ordinations. To John Nelson he wrote:

I think you are no Weathercock. What think *you* then of licensing yourself as a Protestant Dissenter, & baptizing & administering the Lord's Supper—and all the while calling y[ou]rself a Church of England-man? Is this honest? consistent? just? . . . John, I love thee from my heart: yet, rather than see thee a Dissenting minister, I wish to see the[e] smiling in thy Coffin.¹⁵

Whatever the rights or wrongs of the situation, Charles saw clearly whither the divine compulsion was leading Methodism, and continually challenged his all-but-idolised elder brother to halt the progress towards separation. Indeed it may be claimed that the letters of Charles Wesley furnish the largest unpublished source of information upon the separation of Methodism from the Church of England.

For some people the main value of Charles Wesley's letters and journal will be biographical, though we must not attempt to illustrate this aspect here. Certainly it is impossible to do him justice without using them fully. So many aspects of his life are illuminated therein—his youth, conversion, and early evangelistic labours, the genesis of some of his hymns, his marriage and family life, his relationships with great and humble, Methodist and non-Methodist, his untiring pastoral concern, his over-hasty judgements and his rapidly varying moods, and especially the transparent depths of his unaffected piety. And throughout all, even in the literary expression of his frequent moods of despair, there shine forth glimpses of the poet whose hymns did more than any literature except the Bible to express and to promulgate the evangelical message of the People called Methodists.

FRANK BAKER

¹ *John Wesley's Letters* (Standard Edition) V.16 (27th June 1766).

² Printed as Appendix III of John C. Bowmer's *The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in Early Methodism*.

³ MS. letter to his wife, 3rd January 1760 (Methodist Book Room).

⁴ MS. letter to James Hutton, 25th December 1773 (Moravian Archives, London).

⁵ MS. letter to his wife, 15th February [1759] (Methodist Book Room); cf. *Journal*, II.259.

⁶ MS. letter, 30th May 1780 (Methodist Book Room).

⁷ *Journal*, I.107 (15th June 1738).

⁸ Letter of (February 1746), published in Thomas Jackson's *Early Methodist Preachers*, I.144.

⁹ MS. letter to Sally Gwynne, 15th December [1748] (Methodist Book Room).

¹⁰ MS. letter to John Wesley [6th June 1780] (Methodist Book Room).

¹¹ 1st March 1775. [*John Wesley's Letters*], VI.143, &c.

¹² *Journal*, I.122-3 (19th July 1738).

¹³ MS. letter to Joseph Cownley (Wesley's Chapel, London).

¹⁴ *Journal*, I.314 (4th June 1743).

¹⁵ MS. letter, 27th March 1760 (Methodist Book Room); cf. Jackson's *Life of Charles Wesley*, II.184-5.

BROTHERS CHARLES AND JOHN

THE partnership of John and Charles Wesley', said Mabel Brailsford, 'has passed into a legend, fixed for all time in the twin profiles of the medallion on the walls of Westminster Abbey.' We tend to forget, however, that there was a third brother, Samuel, the eldest of the family. What the partnership would have been like had Samuel survived into the golden age of the Methodist Revival we can only guess, but no assessment of the relationship between John and Charles can ignore the influence of Samuel upon them both. His seniority in years made him in some sense *in loco parentis* to his brothers; his liberality defrayed the cost of Charles's education both at Westminster and at Oxford until he became a King's Scholar in 1721; and, more important, he so impressed his own mind and personality upon his younger brothers that for fifty years after he was gone his dead hand lay heavily upon them both. Charles's rigid churchmanship, for instance, and John's desperate attempts to justify his ever-widening breach with orthodoxy, owed more to Samuel than we can know.

For all that, the fact remains that the Methodist Revival was the work of two brothers and not of three. It rarely happens that two brothers are alike, either in appearance, in temperament, or in gifts, and John and Charles Wesley were no exception to the rule. Being brothers, it would be strange if they had never quarrelled, even in the Lord's work, but in that work each was providentially complementary to the other, and each recognized the other's worth. In December 1753, when John was desperately ill, Charles, who was persuaded that his brother's time had come, told the Society at the Foundery that 'I neither could nor would stand in my brother's place . . . for I had neither a body, nor a mind, nor talents, nor grace, for it';¹ and in this modest disclaimer of personal ambition Charles does by implication esteem his brother's character and work. Similarly, when John came to write a memorial tribute to Charles in 1788, he stated that 'his least praise was his talent for poetry'.² Despite their many disagreements, some of which were fundamental and persistent, neither lost his true regard and affection for the other. 'I have a brother who is as my own soul', wrote John; and Charles referred to themselves as those 'whom God hath joined together'. Certainly this more than ordinary brotherly affection was more clearly manifest in the earlier than in the later years. Charles originated and organized the Holy Club, but handed over the leadership to John when the latter returned to Oxford; both formed Societies and together signed the first 'Rules'. The *Minutes* of the first Conferences were described as 'Conversations between the Rev. Mr Wesleys and Others', and various publications were often issued under both names. The 1780 *Collection of Hymns*, for instance, gave no indication as to which brother had written which hymns. On small matters they could differ and yet defer to each other. Charles for a time gave up tea-drinking out of respect for his brother's opinions; John disapproved of a special seat being reserved in their chapels for the Countess of Huntingdon, but said: 'On this point I yield to my brother's judgement'; and Charles, when asked by John to examine the classes at the Foundery, wrote in his *Journal* on 23rd May 1744: 'I took up my cross, to oblige my brother.' The evidence, we suggest, is abundantly sufficient to justify Charles's description of his brother as 'my last,