

John Wesley's First Marriage

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To those familiar with the story of John Wesley's frustrated courtship of Grace Murray and his rebound into the jealous arms of Mrs. Mary Vazeille the title may sound a trifle odd. "But Wesley was married only once," they will say. "What is the man talking about? Surely not about Grace Murray!" That, however, is the case. The fascinating book which Professor Augustin Leger entitled "Wesley's Last Love" could more correctly have been entitled "Wesley's First Marriage." In this lecture I am not attempting to psycho-analyze either Grace Murray or John Wesley, nor even to recount in minute detail the tortured twistings of their strange love affair. Rather I am trying to throw light on the forgotten marriage laws of Wesley's England, and the way in which he became entangled in them. It is a study of Wesley's first marriage as a legal contract rather than as a personal relationship.

An understanding of Wesley's relationships with Grace Murray and his rival John Bennet is impossible without ridding ourselves imaginatively not only of twentieth century social customs but of twentieth century laws. We have become accustomed to a legal system which makes divorce easier and marriage harder than they were during the first half century of Wesley's life. The line of demarcation in English marriage law is 1754, when Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act came into operation. This "introduced for the first time the principle that marriage was a civil contract in which the State as well as the Church was concerned."¹ Previously marriage law was an ecclesiastical jungle into which only the bravest dare venture at peril of their sanity as well as their fortune.

The curious may follow in the pages of that great ecclesiastical jurist—and Wesley's opponent—Bishop Edmund Gibson, how in 1541 King Henry VIII secured the legalization of marriages celebrated in the Church of England and consummated, even though there existed a previous contract of marriage, so long as this had

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1. *English Historical Documents*, Volume X, 1714-1783, ed. D. B. Horn and Mary Ransome, London, 1957, pp. 242-7.

not been consummated. This was a minor aspect of the severage of the umbilical cord which joined the Church of England to mother Rome, though Roman law remained the happy hunting ground for legal precedents. Gibson's *Codex Juris Ecclesiastici Anglicani* also shows how seven years later this Act was repealed in order to safeguard such unconsummated contracts of marriage, or "spousals." "The king's Ecclesiastical Judge" was empowered to try all contested cases, and where the existence of a contract was proved "to give sentence for matrimony, commanding solemnization, cohabitation, consummation and transaction [i.e. treatment], as becometh man and wife to have." Refusal to comply with his order was punishable by excommunication and permanent imprisonment. A further Act of 1603 made bigamy a capital felony, and insisted that private spousals or marriage contracts were true marriages, even though they did not have the full weight of marriages duly solemnized in the Church.² Such private marriages remained legal and binding until 1754.

It is necessary to distinguish between a private *promise of marriage* and the private marriage itself. Writing of marriage contracts in his *Ecclesiastical Law*, Richard Burn put the matter thus: "Spousals *de futuro* are a mutual promise or covenant of marriage to be had afterwards; as when the man saith to the woman, I will take thee to my wife, and she then answereth, I will take thee to my husband. Spousals *de praesenti* are a mutual promise or contract of present matrimony; as when the man doth say to the woman, I do take thee to my wife, and she then answereth, I do take thee to my husband."³

Like Gibson, Burn urged that contracts of marriage ought to be undertaken before witnesses and in the presence of a congregation. Nevertheless, though ecclesiastically irregular, a marriage contract made in words of the present tense was until 1754 a legal marriage, with or without a written agreement, with or without witnesses, with or without a religious ceremony, with or without consummation. Even though it was somewhat simpler to nullify a marriage unaccompanied by these features, especially consummation, the essential element was the declaration of the two contracting parties. In 1749 John Wesley entered into such "spousals *de praesenti*" with Grace Murray, so that she thus became his legal wife, technically

2. Edmund Gibson, *Codex Juris Ecclesiastici Anglicani*, 2nd ed., London, 1761, pp. 416-447, 1274-77; cf. Henry Swinburne, *A Treatise of Spousals*, London, 1686, pp. 231-2, and William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 4th ed., London, 1771, vol. 1, p. 439.

3. Richard Burn, *Ecclesiastical Law*, London, 1763, vol. 2, pp. 16-19.

subject to all other matrimonial procedures and duties under pain of death.

Wesley realized the legal ramifications of what he was doing on this occasion far more clearly than the vast majority of his contemporaries, let alone the post-1754 general reader. Especially was this true because he had been vicariously dragged through the tangled undergrowth of English marriage law as a young Oxford tutor many years before he met Grace Murray. He had served as intermediary in a dispute which to some extent foreshadowed the circumstances of his own tragic experience, and whose outcome undoubtedly furnished one of the reasons why he was content to leave his own lawful wife in the arms of another. After a brief introductory glance at Wesley's own first marriage, we will return to it after studying this earlier incident which gives it much fuller significance, yet has so far remained unknown to his biographers.

Twice-widowed Grace Murray, the 32-year-old housekeeper at Wesley's headquarters in Newcastle, engaged in a remarkable triangular dance with him and one of his preachers, John Bennet, linking hands first with one and then with the other until the spectators grow dizzy. In August 1748 Wesley lay ill in the Newcastle Orphan House, and his enforced leisure gave him more appreciative eyes for his housekeeper, who also served as his nurse. About August 12 he spoke the first tentative words: "If ever I marry, I think you will be the person." Shortly afterwards he proposed to her "more directly," and she gave him a "voluntary and express promise" of marriage. This was a contract *de futuro*.⁴

Less than a month later, on September 7, Grace Murray similarly promised herself to John Bennet, to whose enquiry "Is there not a contract between you and Mr. Wesley?" she answered, "There is not." This she did "partly out of love to him [i.e. Bennet], partly out of fear of exposing" Wesley. To their request for his blessing Wesley returned "a mild answer, . . . supposing they were married already." In fact this was yet another contract *de futuro*.⁵ The following spring and summer Grace Murray accompanied Wesley on his

4. A. Leger, *Wesley's Last Love*, London, 1910, pp. 1-3, 12, 59; John Wesley, *Journal*, Standard ed., ed. N. Curnock, London, 1938, vol. 3, pp. 365-7. For the various editions of Wesley's account of his relations with Grace Murray, see Frank Baker, *Union Catalogue of the Publications of John and Charles Wesley*, 1966, p. 208. The original manuscripts is in the British Museum, but Dr. Leger's version is reliable and reasonably accessible.

5. Leger, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-4, 11-12, 60; Wesley, *op. cit.*, III, 376; John Bennet, MS diary in Methodist Archives, London, Sept. 7, 1748.

biennial preaching tour around Ireland, both as "servant and friend" and as "a fellow-labourer in the Gospel." During this time she exchanged no correspondence with John Bennet, and his name so seldom cropped up in their conversation that Wesley was convinced that no obstacle remained to his renewed and deepened affection. In Dublin, about the middle of July, 1749, they took a step from which in his mind at least there was no drawing back: "The more we convers'd together, the more I lov'd her; &, before I return'd from Ireland, we contracted by a Contract *de praesenti*." Whether or not they privately used a part of the "Form of solemnization of matrimony" in the *Book of Common Prayer*—and this remains at least possible—Wesley and Grace Murray alike repeated a formula in words of the present tense signifying that henceforth they were man and wife, probably the words, "I take thee to my wedded wife" (or husband").⁶

Hardly had Grace Murray set foot on English soil, however, before a passing fit of jealousy caused by gossip about her newly-espoused husband prompted her to write to Bennet. He renewed his pursuit of her to such good effect that on September 2 she completely ignored her Dublin contract, which in fact constituted a legal marriage, and said, "I *will* marry John Bennet"—the "will" implying futurity rather than insistence. This took place, strangely enough, in Wesley's home town of Epworth, and apparently with his acquiescence, for Bennet had persuaded him that Grace wanted to renounce her employer in favour of another of his lay employees. On the face of it this seemed a more suitable match, and Bennet claimed that Grace was much more deeply in love with him than with Wesley. It seems certain that Wesley already knew from a study of the standard work on marriage contracts, Henry Swinburne's *Treatise of Spousals*, that a contract *de praesenti* could in fact be dissolved by mutual agreement, provided that sexual intercourse had not taken place.⁷

The following day, however, Grace herself told Wesley that she loved him better than Bennet, but was afraid that Bennet might "run mad" if she didn't marry him. In the light of this revelation Wesley pondered the advisability of pressing his legal rights, and her legal duty. After three days of hesitation, on September 6 he urged her to make up her mind. She replied, "I am determin'd by Conscience, as well as Inclination, to live & die with *you*." Wesley nevertheless gave her time for still further consideration. Then on September 21

6. Leger, *op. cit.*, pp. 5, 62-3.

7. Swinburne, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

they solemnly renewed their Dublin contract *de praesenti*, this time in the presence of a witness, another of his preachers, Christopher Hopper. Wesley rode off contentedly, assured that there could now be no possible hitch; they were legally married, in fact twice legally married, even though as yet there had been no church ceremony and no consummation.⁸

Wesley had reckoned without a strange series of misunderstandings and maneuverings which culminated two weeks later, on October 3, 1749, with the solemnization of Grace Murray's marriage to John Bennet. The consummation of John Wesley's first marriage was frustrated alike by John Bennet's near-blind frenzy of desire, by Grace Murray's vacillation and her vagueness about her true legal standing, by Charles Wesley's impetuous fears for Methodism, and by John Wesley's deliberate sacrifice of dreams of domesticity to the claims of his apostolic ministry. Wesley knew without any shadow of doubt (as Grace Murray possibly did not) that in the eyes of the law they had been married ever since their first contract *de praesenti* in July, particularly as two months later it had been confirmed before a witness, and thus made easily susceptible of proof. There would have been little difficulty in overthrowing her union with John Bennet as bigamous. Experience had already taught him, however, to what extended heartache and frustration such matrimonial litigation might lead. This knowledge reinforced the urges of Christian charity and the desire to protect the good name of Methodism, and so for the third time he was content to let her go.⁹

It was through one of the least known members of the "Holy Club" that Wesley had been introduced to a similar tragic matrimonial entanglement in 1731. One of his Oxford notebooks was later used to record the names of the band members of the Foundery Society, including that of Grace Murray. By coincidence the chosen volume also summarized the important events of the year 1731, including the following cryptic note: "July 29. Mr. B. married Mr. G.'s wife."¹⁰ "Mr. B." was John Boyce, son of Sir John Boyce, three times Mayor of Oxford. He had matriculated at Christ Church, Oxford, in July, 1727, aged 16, and became one of Charles Wesley's pupils, graduating in 1731. While still an undergraduate he had fallen in love with Margaret Hudson, a girl of his own age, the only

8. Leger, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8, 12, 62-3, 77; cf. Bennet's diary, Sept. 2, 1749.

9. Leger, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-98, especially pp. 78, 87, 89.

10. *Wesley Studies*, London, 1903, pp. 53-4; the notebook is in the Methodist Archives, London.

daughter and heiress of Dr. John Hudson, late Librarian of the Bodleian. Her twice-married, twice-widowed mother, Mrs. Hall, strongly disapproved of their courtship, and the couple had not seen each other for sixteen months when Mrs. Hall and Sir John Boyce suddenly brought them together. Less than a week later, on July 29, 1731, they were married in the parish church at Cowley by Fifield Allen of Christ Church.¹¹

Mrs. Hall and her daughter lived at Eynsham, and the "Mr. G." of Wesley's note was their vicar, the Rev. John Goole. At the time of the wedding he was away in Oxford. On his return he at first refused to believe the shattering news, for he was himself espoused to the girl by a contract *de praesenti*. When the forty-year-old widower had first "addressed himself" to Margaret Hudson, aged eighteen, at Eastertime, 1730, she first blew hot, then cold. A year later, however, she welcomed his advances, and although they agreed to defer a public ceremony until she was twenty-one, on June 10, 1731 they entered into a "most binding and sacred engagement," in which they used the office of Matrimony in the *Book of Common Prayer*. At the time, however, neither of them realized that this contract made in words of the present tense did in fact constitute a valid marriage, although the word "spouse" was used between them.¹²

Once convinced that his betrothed had indeed married Boyce, Goole complained in writing to her mother, and on September 15 served a writ on Boyce and his bride, suing them for damages of £3000. This may well have hastened the ailing Mrs. Hall's death shortly afterwards. In November, 1731, the Court of Common Pleas awarded him £200 damages, the cost of the expensive trousseau which he had bought.¹³

Meantime Goole's attention had been directed to Henry Swinburne's *Treatise of Spousals*, and he realized that his case was far stronger than he had originally thought. Even a hasty glance at the preface would convince him of this:

11. John Foster, *Alumni Oxonienses*, "John Boyce"; Oxford Historical Society, vol. 41, pp. 347ff.; Rawlinson MSS, Bodleian 15072, vol. 5, pp. 30ff.; MS letter of Charles Wesley, June 11, 1731, in Methodist Archives, London; *Dictionary of National Biography*, "John Hudson (1662-1719)"; John Goole, *The Contract Violated*, London, [1734], pp. 3-5, 41, 46, 60-79, 88-9.

12. Goole, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-20, 28, App. 5-10, 14-31; Foster, *op. cit.*, "Goole, John."

13. Goole, *op. cit.*, pp. viii-ix, 21-4, 32-8; "Goole and Boyce," eight documents forming a file of forty pages in the Court of Arches Archives, Lambeth Palace Library, London, especially November 3, 1732, items 5-8.

There is no difference in substance betwixt *spousals de praesenti* (which make up a principal part of this book) and matrimony; only the public office, and the greater solemnity of the act, together with a benediction of the minister, are by law requisite to compleat the matrimony, before it be capable of those legal effects of dower and legitimation of issue. But *in foro conscientiae* [before the tribunal of conscience] they are as much man and wife, as if all legal requisites and solemnities had been performed. Nay, as to some legal effects also, a contract *de praesenti* has the same force that a lawful *marriage* has; for the contract is indissoluble so long as the parties live; and if either party shall after such contract attempt to marry elsewhere, that marriage is null and void *ratione praecontractus* [by reason of a precontract].¹⁴

This made him seriously doubt whether it was legally possible for him to agree to the negotiated settlement being urged by Sir John Boyce, and he told Boyce's emissary that "he believed he should be obliged to part Mr. Boyce and Miss Hudson."¹⁵

Goole sought legal advice from Dr. Henry Brooke, a barrister better known to later generations as the friend of John Wesley and the author of *The Fool of Quality*, a novel so successfully abridged by Wesley that it became a best-seller. Boyce also consulted Brooke. He told them both that in his opinion Goole was unable to release Margaret Hudson from her contract in order to legalize her subsequent marriage to Boyce, but that the case was "nice," so that it was desirable to secure other opinions. For these Boyce offered to pay, whereupon Dr. Brooke drew up the following "State and Queries" for submission to Doctors Commons, the London headquarters of the Doctors of Civil Law:

A. B. Single woman, aged nineteen and upwards, without consent of friends, enters into an absolute contract *de praesenti* of marriage with *C. D.* After such contract *A. B. de facto* [actually] marries *E. F.*

1. *Q[ue]ry*. Is it in the power of *C. D.* to give *A. B.* such a release from the contract aforesaid, as will make her marriage with *E. F.* legal and valid?

2. *Q[ue]ry*. If such a release may by law be given to *C. D.*, would it not be proper for *A. B.* and *E. F.* to solemnize matrimony over again?¹⁶

John Wesley was enlisted as Brooke's envoy. He duly visited London, secured the opinions, and on January 17, 1731/2, made certified transcripts. That from Dr. William Strahan confirmed Brooke's judgment:

14. Swinburne, *op. cit.*, pp. [iv-v].

15. Goole, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-9, App. 58, 61.

16. Goole, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-40, 43, 48-50, App. 2-4.

A contract *de praesenti* is a real marriage, and only wants the outward form and ceremony: and it is not in the power of the contracting parties to release one another from such contract. I don't think the woman's being a minor . . . will much vary the case. For she was of sufficient age to contract matrimony; and altho' she ought not to have entered into such contract without the consent of her parents or guardians, yet the want of such consent does not destroy the contract, no more than it would destroy a marriage solemnized in the face of the church.

Dr. George Paul's opinion was to the same effect :

By the canon law, as it is received in England, and become part of the laws of the realm, a contract in words of the present time, seriously and solemnly made, is, in truth and substance, matrimony indissoluble. It has been the general opinion of learned divines and lawyers, that, *tho, there should be no evidence, according to the rules of the law, of such spousals*, the parties having really, tho' secretly, contracted themselves, yet they are thereby become so far man and wife before God, that neither can, with a safe and good conscience, marry elsewhere, so long as the other party liveth.

A woman may contract herself absolutely when she is *pubes*, which is deemed at law a ripeness of age fit for marriage, in women at 12, in men at the age of 14 years.

Upon the whole case therefore, I am of opinion, that *A. B.* aged 19, by entering into an absolute contract of the present time with *C. D.*, may be compelled, by ecclesiastical censures, to solemnize a marriage with him in the face of the church; and that the marriage with *E. F.* will (upon proper proofs of the above-stated contract) be adjudged null and void in law.¹⁷

The opinions were placed before both Boyce and Goole at a meeting in Dr. Brooke's chambers, with Wesley also present. Boyce clearly recognized the weakness of his position, and seemed determined not to cohabit with Margaret Hudson until it had been legally settled whose wife she was, though he was later dissuaded from that honest course, especially as she was already pregnant. Boyce also agreed to let Goole have copies of the legal opinions in return for copies of Margaret Hudson's letters to Goole, the attested copies in each case to be prepared by their mutually acceptable go-between, John Wesley. Accordingly Wesley's diary for January 17, 1731/2 records: "Monday 17th. 12½ at Mr. Goole's, in talk. 1 dinner. [2?] read M. Hudson's letters; in talk. 4¼ set out."¹⁸

17. Goole, *op. cit.*, App. 2-4.

18. Goole, *op. cit.*, pp. 42-3, 76-8, App. 2-4; Wesley's MS diary, Methodist Archives, London, transcribed by the Rev. Wesley F. Swift.

John Goole sought a final decision at the highest level, the Court of Arches, constantly insisting that this was his moral duty, in order to warn the Boyces and those similarly placed of the mortal as well as immortal danger of living in sin.¹⁹ By this time Margaret Hudson was well on in pregnancy, and bore a child as the case against her was in its opening stages; he was baptized John on May 14, 1732.²⁰ (Incidentally, it is remarkable how many Johns appear in this story: Goole, Boyce, and their intermediary Wesley were all named John; so was Margaret Hudson's father; so was Boyce's father, and now his son; so also was the man who later stole John Wesley's own wife from under his nose.)

The case dragged on. By the time it came to trial in June, 1733, Margaret Hudson was nearing the birth of her second child. These two children seem to have furnished strong though irrelevant arguments in her favour, supporting the pressure and possible bribery that Goole suspected. Certainly trickery was used against him; apart from the lavish and unimpeded blackening of his own character, her advocates managed to find a weak link in the ecclesiastical law. Her minority was no more a defense than the lack of witnesses, but Swinburne's *Spousals* made it clear that "when these words of the present time are uttered in *jeast* or *sport* . . . such wanton words are not at all obligatory in so serious a matter as is matrimony." Accordingly she pleaded that her contract was undertaken as a joke—even though it involved the solemn use of the prayer book and the acceptance of expensive presents. The Dean of the Arches, Dr. John Bettesworth, was clearly much in sympathy with the young woman. Even Dr. Paul forsook his earlier written opinion and signed the final judgment that the "pretended marriage contract . . . was and is null and void and altogether invalid in law." Goole even had to pay the legal costs on pain of excommunication.²¹

Immediately this sentence was passed John Goole declared that he would publish his vindication. In six or seven weeks it was ready, and on July 26 he sent it to Wesley, asking him to read it, and to communicate the contents to Boyce. On August 1 or 2, Wesley replied:

19. Goole, *op. cit.*, pp. v. 42-5; cf pp. 67, 76.

20. Court of Arches, "Goole and Boyce," especially Goole's deposition, November 3, 1732, item 4.

21. "Goole and Boyce," Court of Arches; cf. Goole, *op. cit.*, pp. 44, 62-75, 87-9, App. 32-6.

Sir,

I sent Mr. Boyce word yesterday, that I was apt to think you were so far from the desire of revenge, which he had been informed you every where shewed, that if he could propose any other way of satisfying that desire of clearing your reputation which a Christian ought to have, you would yet desist from your design of publishing your case.

Goole did indeed ask Margaret Hudson (now legally Boyce) to sign a testimonial to his "justice, fidelity, and honour," but heard nothing until October, when the desired satisfaction seemed no nearer. In December 1733, therefore, he set about publishing *The Contract Violated*, which in his dedication "to all lovers of truth, sincerity, and honour" he described as an "unparallel'd case."²²

The *Gentleman's Magazine* entered a simple announcement of Goole's 170-page pamphlet in the issue for May, 1734. His avowed end of seeking to expose the dangers of secret marriages, however, as well as the sluggishness of the ecclesiastical courts, was more fully served by the *Grub Street Journal*, which serialized the case. Issue No. 248 for Thursday, September 26, 1734, described it as "of such an extraordinary nature that it deserves to be more generally known. It may hinder persons from rashly entering into private solemn contracts; in the performance of which they will probably meet with great difficulties and inconveniences. And it may divert those who have been perfidiously deceived, from vainly exposing themselves to very great trouble and charge by seeking a redress at law."²³ John Wesley learned the second lesson, if not the first.

Until the 1754 marriage reform, however, others continued to fall into the same trap, and the unfortunate results occasionally appeared even in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, which Wesley frequently read. He would surely shake his head in sympathy in 1740 when he read of a young man whose secretly contracted wife was similarly married in church to another man. High ecclesiastical authorities again supported the first husband, but he refused to press his claim, saying, "I knew I could have done myself justice afterwards, but that being impossible without exposing her to the whole nation, I chose rather to suffer myself than that she should."²⁴

In a similar position to this young man John Wesley found him-

22. Goole, *op. cit.*, pp [iii], v-xii; the prohibition of its publication and sale in Oxford caused difficulty and delay; see pp. xv-xvi.

23. Copy in Rawlinson, MSS, vol. 5, p. 42, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

24. *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1740, pp. 172-5; cf. 1748, p. 329, and 1751, pp. 328, 570.

self a few years later. Repeatedly Grace Murray urged that their Dublin contract should be sealed by public matrimony, but Wesley insisted that three prior steps were necessary: he must get the matter straight with her other suitor, John Bennet; in accordance with a longstanding agreement he must secure the consent of his brother Charles; and he must seek the understanding prayers of the Methodist preachers and people. Grace agreed to wait for a year. And so at her request they renewed the contract *de praesenti* at Hindley Hill, Northumberland, with trusty Christopher Hopper as witness. That on this occasion they used a part of the prayer book order receives some confirmation from one of her letters four days later: "If Mr. Bennet comes . . . I must not see him. It will tear my soul to pieces; seeing I can by no means help him now. For whom God hath join'd together, no man can put asunder." An hour after the simple but solemn ceremony Wesley took horse for Whitehaven "with not one uneasy thought, believing God would give us to meet again, at the time when he saw good." This was on Thursday, September 21, 1749.²⁵

A tiny cloud of foreboding on the horizon, however, loomed nearer, heavy with tragedy. The following night Wesley was disturbed by a dream in which John Bennet hinted that Grace Murray was living with him. On the Saturday, without any conscious realization of what he was doing, Wesley began his first letter to his doubly-contracted spouse with the lines:

There is I know not what of sad presage
That tells me we shall never meet again.²⁶

On Sunday words in the first lesson pierced his heart like a sword: "Son of man, behold I take from thee the desire of thine eyes with a stroke!" Immediately, he says, "a shivering ran thro' me, & in a few minutes I was in a fever."

Wesley had written other letters designed to hasten the date of his public union with Grace Murray. That to John Bennet, however, went astray, and the one to Wesley's brother sent Charles into a panic of activity to prevent a step which he was convinced would ruin their work. On the Monday Charles burst upon John in Whitehaven, denouncing this unsuitable match with a woman already betrothed to another. For some reason, probably because Charles

25. Leger, *op. cit.*, pp. 14, 62-3, 89.

26. Cf. Shakespeare, *Richard II*, ii. 2. 142-3, "Farewell: if heart's presages be not vain,/We three here part that ne'er shall meet again."

was too heated to think clearly, John was unable to convince him that his own marriage contract with Grace Murray was both prior to Bennet's and more binding. In any case Charles did not possess John's intimate knowledge and vicarious experience in this matter. Eventually they agreed to sleep on it, and then to submit the issue to their venerable friend, the Rev. Vincent Perronet of Shoreham.

The following day, however, Charles unexpectedly left ahead of John, and when John arrived at Hindley Hill it was to hear that Grace Murray had ridden off behind Charles two hours earlier. The foreboding grew stronger. He exclaimed with Job, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away! Blessed be the name of the Lord!" Abandoning his first intention of pursuing them, yet realizing that this was "giving up all," he returned for his week-end activities in Whitehaven. On Sunday, October 1, he confessed, "I was in great heaviness; my heart was sinking in me like a stone." Only in the services did he find any relief. That night he prayed for a sign of God's will, and in a dream saw Grace Murray executed. The following evening he received a message from his old pupil and friend George Whitefield pressing him to come to Leeds, where Charles also would meet them. Accordingly the following day, Tuesday, October 3, he rode to Leeds, arriving at nightfall. He did not know it, but this was his wife's wedding day.²⁷

Charles Wesley was determined to save John from folly and the work of God from disruption. Leaving his brother at Whitehaven he had ridden posthaste to Hindley Hill, bursting in upon a Grace Murray already perplexed and distressed by John Wesley's foreboding letter. He gave her a pastoral kiss, said "Grace Murray, you have broke my heart!", and promptly fainted. On recovering he handed her an accusing letter which he had written the previous day, and was thus delivering in person. She apparently assumed that it conveyed the sentiments of John as well as of Charles, and agreed to go with him to Leeds to meet the two claimants to her hand. Nearing Durham, they learned that Bennet was at Newcastle, and on her request (or at least with her agreement) turned north once more to seek him out. Charles Wesley similarly took Bennet by storm, to such effect that on the following morning, Tuesday, October 3, he and Grace were married by the Rev. Richard (?) Brewster in St. Andrew's Church, Newcastle.²⁸

27. Leger, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-6, 79-86.

28. Bennet, MS diary, October 3, 1749, which names "Mr. Bruister"; for

When John Wesley arrived for the Leeds rendezvous Whitefield tried to break the news gently: he was certain that Charles would not show up until he had seen Grace and Bennet married, in spite of Whitefield's own attempts to persuade them to wait. He himself was quite convinced that Grace was Wesley's wife, but (as he expressed it) Charles's "impetuosity prevail'd & bore down all before it." Sure enough, Charles did not arrive for their meeting on Wednesday. On Thursday morning an advance messenger brought the news—"they were married on Tuesday." An hour later came Charles himself, still hot with indignation against his brother. He called John a villain and renounced all ties of Christian friendship, while Whitefield and John Nelson tried tearfully to reconcile them. At length Charles was brought to his senses, seemed "utterly amaz'd" to discover the true contractual relationship between his brother and Grace, and began to lay all the blame on her.²⁹

Little by little, patiently and painfully, John Wesley was able to unravel the tangled threads and to see how a series of misunderstandings in the minds of all the chief participants had led to this bewildering and saddening mix-up. Describing his interview the following day with Bennet and Grace, when for a long time they "sat weeping at each other," John Wesley summed it all up: "Between them both, I knew not what to say or do. I can forgive. But who can redress the wrong?"³⁰

Certainly John Wesley himself was not prepared to redress the wrong. Better than most people he knew that the law was fully on his side. He would have had far less difficulty than John Goole in proving his contract *de praesenti* with Grace Murray, and thus annulling her bigamous union with Bennet. Granted, there remained a little uncertainty as to how an ecclesiastical court would react, even in the clearest of cases. In his favour, however, were not only the strongest legal arguments, but his own prestige, over against that of his lowly preacher. Surely he must have won his case! Yet there seems no evidence that he ever seriously pondered bringing the matter before the courts. Swinburne's *Spousals* allowed for the dissolution even of a contract *de praesenti* by the mutual agreement of the parties before consummation. This course would bring least suffering to the two friends who had thus injured him, least damage to the work

the probable identification with Richard Brewster see Venn's *Alumni Cantabrigienses*; no suitable candidate offers in Foster's *Alumni Oxonienses*.

29. Leger, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-88.

30. Leger, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-98.

of God. This course he followed. He bowed his head to the bitter blow and poured out his heartbreak in tearstained verse.³¹

It would be pleasant to end our story with a paragraph describing how all concerned lived happily ever after, but this would fall short of the whole truth. A hasty summary of their fortunes, however, seems in order. John Goole later repented the publication of *The Contract Violated*, terming it "an inaccurate apology, wrote perhaps under too quick a sense of irreparable wrongs"; he himself faded into obscurity, and his death is not recorded in the *Gentleman's Magazine*.³² John Boyce left the area to become rector of Saintbury, Gloucestershire, where he died in 1776, seventeen years after his wife Margaret. Their first child survived to young manhood; two other boys, including their second child, William, entered the Anglican ministry and served their father's parish for a time; three others of their eight children died in 1748, probably during some epidemic.³³ John Bennet remained on friendly terms with Charles Wesley, but his relationships with John were always strained; he left the Methodists to become an independent minister, and died in 1759. Grace survived him until 1803, writing in her diary on the 48th anniversary of their marriage, "What seas of grief God has brought me through none but he and myself know." Their first child, born August 22, 1750, was also christened John; another son lived to write a biography of his mother.³⁴

As for the bereft John Wesley, yet another convalescence gave him leisure to study yet another widow who used a gentle hand in nursing him, and to whom he proposed marriage. Once more he was married under a cloud of secrecy, which has not yet been fully pierced, with results that were notoriously less congenial and less fruitful either for him or for Methodism than his marriage with Grace Murray might well have been. That, however, is another story.

31. Leger, *op. cit.*, pp. 98-105.

32. Rawlinson MSS, vol. 5, p. 31, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

33. D. MSS, "Boyce," Society of Genealogists, London.

34. William Bennet, *Memoirs of Mrs. Grace Bennet*, Macclesfield, 1803, pp. 22-4, 71; cf. John Bennet's MS diary, Methodist Archives, London.