

JOHN WESLEY'S INTRODUCTION TO WILLIAM LAW

THESE is not the slightest doubt about John Wesley's spiritual indebtedness to William Law. There is very serious doubt, however, about the beginnings of that debt. Wesley lived so swiftly that he made frequent errors over quotations and dates, and seems seldom to have attempted any research to verify a point of this kind. In this instance there is strong reason to believe that, contrary to his own statements, he did not read Law's two best-known works until long after their original appearance, and that he read them in reverse order of their publication.

In the well-known account of his spiritual pilgrimage leading to the "warmed heart" of 24th May 1738 the fifth paragraph reads:

5. Removing soon after to another College . . . I began to see more and more the value of time. I applied myself closer to study . . . But meeting now with Mr. Law's *Christian Perfection* and *Serious Call* (although I was much offended at many parts of both, yet) they convinced me more than ever of the exceeding height and breadth and depth of the law of God. The light flowed in so mightily upon my soul, that everything appeared in a new view. I cried to God for help, and resolved not to prolong the time of obeying Him as I had never done before. And by my continued *endeavour to keep His whole law*, inward and outward, *to the utmost of my power*, I was persuaded that I should be accepted of Him, and that I was even then in a state of salvation.¹

These words are heavily charged with remembered emotion. This was undoubtedly a spiritual landmark for Wesley. Although no date is given, the implication is that the two books were read (in the order noted) shortly after Wesley had become a Fellow of Lincoln College in March 1726. Yet this could not possibly be, for although Law's *Treatise upon Christian Perfection* appeared in 1726, his *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* was not published until 1729, or at the earliest November 1728.² Thus Wesley must have been a Fellow of Lincoln for nearly three years at least before he could have read the *Serious Call*. As we shall show, it was in fact longer.

In a letter to John Newton written in May 1765 and first published in his *Journal* three years later, Wesley summarized his earlier statement:

In 1727 I read Mr. Law's *Christian Perfection* and *Serious Call*, and more explicitly resolved to be *all devoted to God*, in body, soul, and spirit.³

¹ John Wesley's *Journal* (Standard edn.), i, p. 467 (Wesley's italicizing restored from 1st edition.)

² The title-page bears the date 1729, but printers frequently used the date of the following year if a book were published in November or December, thus making it appear a "new" publication for a longer period. John Byrom bought a copy early in February 1729—see his *Private Journal and Literary Remains* (Manchester, Chetham Society, I, part 2 (1855), pp. 328-9).

³ *Journal*, v, p. 117 (italics added from 1st edition). The phrase "all devoted

This crisper claim is even more demonstrably inaccurate. In his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1766) Wesley returned to vague imprecision:

In the year 1726⁴ I met with Kempis's *Christian Pattern*. . . . A year or two after, Mr. Law's *Christian Perfection* and *Serious Call* were put into my hands. These convinced me more than ever of the absolute impossibility of being *half a Christian*. And I determined through His grace . . . to be *all-devoted* to God, to give Him *all* my soul, my body, and my substance.⁵

None of this vagueness and inaccuracy stems from any weakening of the impression made by the books. The spiritual impact was so important, indeed, that it dwarfed the need for historical accuracy, and Wesley's pressing round of evangelical opportunities seemed far more urgent than the research necessary to verify or correct his recollections of such data. The amorphous statements of the 1738 narrative and the *Plain Account* were clearly more defensible than the rash attempt at being specific in his letter to Newton, but each merely provides additional evidence that in Wesley's memory past events, even important events, changed dates and even relative positions with kaleidoscopic ease. Less than a decade after his introduction to William Law, he was confused about his reading of Law's famous books.

Unfortunately we have often tried to hold Wesley down too rigidly to such supposedly factual statements, and to search out evidence which can so be interpreted as to confirm our reluctance to acknowledge that in some matters his methods were far from meticulous. Nehemiah Curnock (or one of the contributors of editorial notes in the Standard edition of Wesley's *Journal*) was at fault in leaping to too hasty a conclusion. The footnote to the Aldersgate account of Wesley's first reading of Law notes:

In 1726 William Law's *Christian Perfection* was published. In December of the same year, immediately after a long visit to Stanton, as we learn from the Diary, Wesley was diligently reading William Law.⁶ Unfamiliarity with Wesley's diary can lead even careful scholars seriously astray, as in this instance, and we look forward to the day when we have a definitive edition of that storehouse of information. The diary for December 1726 does indeed contain one explicit reference to "Law", but the context makes it quite clear that the writer of that name was not intended: "t[alk] w[ith] Mr. K. of Law, Juries . . ."⁷ What almost certainly led Curnock astray, however—and following him two generations of Wesley scholars—were several

to God" is also underlined in the original letter, which is at the Perkins School of Theology, Dallas, Texas, USA.

⁴ In the 5th and 6th editions (of 1785 and 1789 respectively) this date was altered to "1729", apparently by error, though it may have been a deliberate correction of the Kempis statement, which incidentally improved considerably the statement about Law.

⁵ *Works* (ed. Thomas Jackson), xi, p. 367 (italics added from 1st edition).

⁶ *Journal*, i, p. 467 n.

⁷ MS. diary, 27th December 1726 (at Methodist Archives, London).

early morning entries at the beginning of the month which read "W.L.—." Few scholars would approach these inscriptions so readily as did my graduate student and colleague, Richard P. Heitzenrater, who knows more about Wesley's Oxford diaries than any person living: these documents indeed provide the core of his Ph.D. dissertation. When I showed him the entries, he immediately said: "Of course—*wall lectures!*" Nor can there be any real doubt that Wesley's diary did indeed note examples of his own participation in this ancient Oxford institution,⁸ though it was easy for his abbreviated references to be mistaken by the uninitiated for "William Law"—especially when just such an inscription was being sought. (In this there is an important moral for research workers!)

When, then, was Wesley in fact introduced to Law? Here we must interject a note of caution about our own findings. It is impossible to be absolutely certain about what is here claimed, for some of the evidence is missing, and likely to remain missing. The most important kind of documentation is the contemporary diary or letter written while the facts are still fresh, even though their full significance may not yet be realized. Even here it must be pointed out that not even Wesley's diaries and letters may be regarded as sacrosanct: they contain numerous errors in detail, such as incorrect dates or days of the week, as well as inaccurate naming of places and people; although most of these errors can be discovered by cross-checking, some will remain undetected. Wesley's diary is missing, however, from 20th February 1727 to 29th April 1729, and there is very little contemporary evidence, except his manuscript accounts. Any argument from silence, therefore, cannot be conclusive, though it must not be disregarded.

In Wesley's extant diary for 1726 and 1727 there is no mention either of William Law or of his *Christian Perfection*: in his diary between April 1729 and December 1730 neither William Law nor his *Serious Call* appear. It is barely possible that Wesley did read *Christian Perfection* in 1727 or 1728, barely possible that he read the *Serious Call* during the open weeks of 1729. Possible, but highly unlikely. If he had done, why was there no more evidence of his enthusiasm for these works among his pupils? On 22nd November 1729 he returned to Oxford from Lincolnshire, and immediately made contact with his brother's nascent "Holy Club". The following year he became a tutor, and took a batch of pupils under his wing, recording in a memorandum the dates when they came to him and the books he set them to read, and in his accounts the amount they paid him for tutelage.⁹ Most of these young men

⁸ Wesley was preparing for his M.A. degree, and the exercises for this included the preparation of six *solemnnes lectiones*—dissertations read in almost empty rooms, whence they were thought of as "lecturing to the walls", and the term "wall lecture" became current coinage.

⁹ Wesley's diaries, 5th April 1725 to 19th February 1727 and 30th April 1729 to 18th June 1732 (Colman volume III), both in the Methodist Archives, London. The list of pupils is in Colman volume VII, and the accounts for 1731-3 in Colman volume XVIII, also at the Methodist Archives, London.

men were set to reading (and in some cases abridging) *The Whole Duty of Man*, Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying*, Archbishop King's *Origin of Evil*, John Norris's *Christian Prudence*, Peter Browne's *Human Understanding*, or a selection of other works. Yet of fourteen men who were enrolled under his care in July 1730 and the following few months, only one was set to read Law's *Serious Call*, and none his *Christian Perfection*. Why?

It seems almost certain that until December 1730 Wesley had not read anything by William Law, though he probably knew of his high reputation, and especially of the acclaim which had greeted his *Serious Call*. Although this is rank speculation, it is entirely possible that the impetus for Wesley himself to read the *Serious Call* was furnished by the pupil, Robert Davison of Durham, to whom he officially assigned the book for reading under his supervision. He seems himself to have begun reading it from a borrowed copy on Thursday, 3rd December, and continued at this task during his early morning devotional hours until Wednesday, 16th December. Although the diary itself speaks only of "Law", the monthly summary of his reading for December 1730 makes this more explicit, "Law's Call to a H. Life", which is echoed by the annual summary (with the addition of "Mr.").¹⁰

So impressed had Wesley been with his reading of the *Serious Call* that on 9th April 1731 he began "collecting" it—making a digest in a notebook, which has disappeared. He continued at this task intermittently during his morning devotions until 1st November that year.¹¹ In May 1732 he paid 5s. to buy a copy for himself, reading passages to his mother and sister on 6th May during a brief visit to Epworth, and re-reading it himself between 7th and 11th July. This was the prelude to a pilgrimage to Law's home at Putney on Monday, 31st July 1732, when he spent an hour or so with Law in his garden. Law seems to have pressed upon him a copy of *Theologia Germanica*, which he read at intervals until 7th November. The minute he set down this book he took up Law's own *Christian Perfection*, apparently for the first time, and read this during the remainder of November and December, though again intermittently, not so avidly as he had the *Serious Call*.¹² In February he began others of Law's writings, and that same year "collected" *Christian Perfection*.¹³

The influence remained; the memory for detail speedily passed.

¹⁰ MS. diary, Colman volume III (Methodist Archives, London).

¹¹ *ibid.*; the monthly summaries read: for April 1731, "Coll 1/3 of Law", and for October "end Coll. Law's S. Call."

¹² The monthly summary for December 1732 reads "End Law's Xtn Perfection", but the diary itself contains no note of his actually ending it—the entries simply cease.

¹³ A summary of his studies in English, French, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Philosophy during 1731-4 noted under the first heading in 1731 "Collect Law's Call", and in 1733 "Coll. Law's Xtn Perfection". (Colman volume XVIII at the Methodist Archives, London.)

Within five years, or at the most seven,¹⁴ Wesley was associating both these books, in the order of their publication rather than of their apparent reading, with a quickening of his spiritual life, but speaking as if this had happened before the birth of the Holy Club. The evidence of his own contemporary manuscripts, however, goes far to prove that he met neither book until a year after he had returned from Lincolnshire to assume his full duties at Lincoln College, and that the *Serious Call* made the first and greatest impression upon him, eventually leading to a personal interview with Law, and thus to his acquaintance with the earlier but less well known work on *Christian Perfection*. Of both works he published abridgements—of *Christian Perfection* in 1743 and of the *Serious Call* in 1744—which passed through many editions, especially in the United States of America.

FRANK BAKER.

¹⁴ The *Journal* narrative may well have been written at the end of May 1738, but it was not published until the summer of 1740 (see my forthcoming article, "The Birth of Wesley's *Journal*", in *Methodist History*).

¹⁵ See Frank Baker: *Union Catalogue of the Publications of John and Charles Wesley* (Durham, North Carolina, 1963), Nos. 45, 48. See also the same numbers in Richard Green: *Wesley Bibliography* (2nd edn., London, 1906). For Law's influence on Wesley, see Eric W. Baker: *A Herald of the Evangelical Revival* (London, 1948) and J. Brazier Green: *John Wesley and William Law* (London, 1945).

MORE LOCAL HISTORIES

We acknowledge, with many thanks, the following handbooks and brochures which have been sent to us recently. We are always glad to have such evidence of the work of local historians, and they constitute a valuable addition to our Library.

Parkwood 100—centenary of Parkwood Methodist chapel, Huddersfield (pp. 76): copies, price 4s. 6d. post free, from the Rev. Keith A. Reed, 213, Scar Lane, Golcar, Huddersfield, Yorks.

Dumfries Methodist Church—One hundred years in Buccleuch Street (pp. 32): copies from the Rev. Eglon Sercombe, The Manse, 184, Annan Road, Dumfries, Scotland; no price stated.

One Hundred Years—centenary of Short Cross Methodist chapel, Halesowen: copies from the Rev. Thomas Soulsby, 28, St. Kenelm's Avenue, Halesowen, Worcs; no price stated.

Clement Street Church, Truro, 1875-1967 (pp. 22), by R. E. Tonkin: copies from the author at 19, Broad Street, Truro, Cornwall; no price stated.

Rosebery Road, Norwich, 150th anniversary (pp. 13): copies from Mr. Donald C. Taylor, 21, Clabon Road, Norwich, NOR 52 0; no price stated.

Methodism in Galleywood (Essex) (pp. 2), by Leslie W. Kinsey: copies from the author at 34, Hill Road, Chelmsford, Essex; no price stated.

Whickham (Co. Durham) West End centenary (pp. 70): copies, price 2s. 6d., from the Rev. Edwin Thompson, 9, Buttermere Avenue, Whickham, Newcastle upon Tyne.