

SALUTE TO SUSANNA

By Frank Baker

Susanna Wesley was a daughter of the Puritans. She was born on January 20, 1669, according to the Old Style calendar, or January 31, if we reckon by our New Style calendar introduced ten years after her death in 1742. Her father was Samuel Annesley (c.1620-1696), nicknamed "the St. Paul of the Nonconformists." With the restoration of King Charles II in 1660, the Church of England again became episcopalian following the Puritan Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell and his son Richard. Annesley's conscience would not allow him to accept the *Book of Common Prayer* as revised in 1662, whereupon with two thousand other Puritan clergy, mostly Presbyterians like himself, he suffered ejection from the Church of England. Financially he suffered far more than most, for the Lord Protector himself had presented him to the extremely wealthy living¹ of St. Giles, Cripplegate, London, where lie buried Martin Frobisher the traveler, John Foxe the martyrologist, and John Milton the poet. Over the objections of some of his parishioners the presentation was confirmed by the new king; but conscience was more powerful still. Braving persecution, Annesley organized the largest Presbyterian congregation in London, numbering eight hundred members—an illegal "conventicle" for the holding of which his remaining personal property was confiscated.² Eventually the congregation was licensed under the terms of the Declaration of Indulgence in 1672, and was the center for the first public ordination of Nonconformist ministers (during an eight-hour service) in 1694. This was at Little St. Helens in Bishopsgate.

DAUGHTER OF THE PURITANS

Off Bishopsgate was Spital Square, in which still stands the five-storied brick home where Susanna was born, now owned by the Women's Fellowship of the Methodist Church. Samuel Annesley made his mark not only as a revered Puritan divine but as the father of a large family. When baptizing one of his children another well known Puritan leader, Thomas Manton (1620-1677), asked how many children he had altogether, to which Annesley replied that he "believed it was two dozen, or a quarter of a hundred."³ Although it is almost impossible to reach the full facts, twenty-five seems to have remained the grand total, with Susanna the last. For those who think with pity of his poor wife, I should soften the blow. He had two wives, having one child by his first wife, so that his second was the mother of only twenty-four! Two of Susanna's older sisters married well known characters of the time—the eccentric bookseller John Dunton, and (if a somewhat doubtful tradition

¹ Adam Clarke, *Memoirs of the Wesley Family*, 4th edn. (London: Tegg, 1860), I, 367. It was worth 700 pounds; a country curate might receive 20 or 30.

² John Stoughton, *History of Religion in England* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1901), III, 386.

³ Clarke, *op. cit.*, I, 381.

is correct) the famous writer Daniel Defoe, who was certainly an appreciative member of Annesley's congregation.⁴

As well as being scholarly, courageous, friendly, and patient under many sufferings, Samuel Annesley was a striking man of handsome, aristocratic appearance—he was, indeed, nephew to the Earl of Anglesey. Undoubtedly Susanna owed much to him both in appearance and in character, and her mind was both trained by her father and stimulated by his learned colleagues. She may indeed sometimes have been a little bored by their long-winded sermonizings. Like her elder sister Elizabeth, however, she became something of a theologian, able to cross the devotional t's and dot the casuistical i's of the Puritan scholars who thronged their home, and whom she was called upon to entertain. Many of them must have remarked the unusual combination in his youngest child—both beauty and brains, added to calm competence!⁵

Susanna Annesley put her brains to what seemed an extraordinary use. Apparently before her thirteenth birthday in 1682, although she deeply respected her father and all that he stood for, she had determined to desert Nonconformity for the Church of England. In her enthusiastic loyalty for the Divine Right of Kings she joined forces with those who regarded King Charles I, executed twenty years before her birth, as "the royal martyr." These loyal ones continued to observe the anniversary of that occasion, January 30, as a day of fasting in accordance with the new Prayer Book. As so often happens with enthusiastic converts, Susanna became an extremist in her churchmanship, allied to the Non-Jurors who were later squeezed out of the right wing of the church as the Nonconformists had been expelled from the left. Thus this young daughter of the Puritans put her religious independency to thoroughly independent use.

It was in that same year of 1682 that John Dunton married her sister Elizabeth. Present at the wedding was Samuel Wesley, a young student preparing for the dissenting ministry at Charles Morton's Dissenting Academy in Newington Green, where he was a fellow-student of Daniel Defoe. (Three years later Morton was so distressed by persecution that he emigrated to America, where he became the first vice president of Harvard College; he died in 1697.)⁶ Samuel was seven years older than Susanna, but they found themselves to be kindred spirits. Already he also had some doubts about the rightness of the Dissenters' position, and a few months of careful study of the controversy at Oxford in 1683 convinced him that he also must join the Church of England, and thus be able officially to matriculate at the university, which he did in 1684.⁷

The year of the Glorious Revolution in England, 1688, was a noteworthy one for Samuel and Susanna personally. In June

⁴ *Dictionary of National Biography*, article, "Defoe, Daniel."

⁵ Clarke, *op. cit.*, I, 396-8; II, 132.

⁶ *Dictionary of National Biography*, article, "Morton, Charles."

⁷ H. A. Beecham, "Samuel Wesley, Senior," in *Renaissance and Modern Studies*, Vol. VII, 78-109 (Nottingham, 1963), especially pp. 85, 103-5.

Samuel graduated at Oxford; in August he was ordained deacon by the bishop of Rochester, and was then unexpectedly offered a temporary appointment as curate of St. Botolph, Aldersgate, to replace one in distant Cornwall. This gave him the opportunity to marry Susanna in the parish church of St. Marylebone on November 12. Later he had to admit that the marriage was somewhat improvident, their only excuse being their "most passionate love," though he added, "all the hardships I have yet ever suffered or still do or may can never make me repent it."⁸ In order to take care of his new responsibilities Samuel Wesley accepted appointment as a navy chaplain, leaving Susanna living at her old home. There on February 20, 1690, she gave birth to their first child, called Samuel after his father, who had returned to London a few weeks earlier from a terrible six months at sea. After several months of a somewhat makeshift existence, during which he considered accepting a chaplaincy in Virginia, in the summer of 1691 Wesley received the living of South Ormsby in Lincolnshire. In 1695 he was presented to the more lucrative living of Epworth in the same county. More lucrative, but only a fraction of the value of that given up by his father-in-law at St. Giles, and one which never relieved Susanna Wesley from most of the problems of being the wife of an undoubtedly loving but not too practical husband, and the mother of his many children.⁹

MATERNAL DISCIPLINE AND DEVOTION

Susanna Wesley gave birth to her first child in 1690, a few weeks after her twenty-first birthday. Her last came twenty years later, almost to the month. Although no one has been able to accumulate full biographical details of all her children, and although Samuel Wesley certainly lost count of them, it seems fairly certain that they had nineteen altogether—nineteen in twenty years. It is perhaps needless to add that neither had heard of family planning. Between 1690 and 1710 never a year seems to have passed without her beginning or ending a pregnancy, though during several years she was free for many months at a time. This is explained by the fact that she (or her husband) believed in mass production. Susanna brought forth no fewer than three sets of twins, in 1694, 1699, and 1701. Of these six children, however, all but one died in infancy. The exception, Anne, married a land surveyor of Epworth, and their daughter Ann in her turn married a sea captain from New York, John Jarvis—strangely enough one of the founders of John Street Methodist Church there, where at least one of Ann's children was baptized.¹⁰ Four others of Susanna's children died in infancy or were stillborn, leaving her with ten children to rear—three boys and seven girls. (As was even more the custom in those days than in these, most of the rearing was in fact left to the mother.)

⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 87-90, 107-8.

¹⁰ *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* (henceforth "W.H.S."), Vol. XIX,

89-92, where by error it is assumed that it was Wesley's sister instead of his niece who married Jarvis.

As we have said, Susanna was an educated and thoughtful young woman and had her own ideas about raising children, some of which she had derived from the philosopher John Locke. The one which has constantly been attacked by modern educationists was her insistence that the first essential was "to conquer their will, and bring them to an obedient temper."¹¹ This she did so effectively that before they were much more than a year old all her children "were taught to fear the rod, and to cry softly," so that "that most odious noise of the crying of children was rarely heard in the house, but the family usually lived in as much quietness as if there had not been a child among them."¹² You may perhaps forgive her, saying, "Well, maybe if I had a family that size I should be driven to desperation as she was!" She would reject your sympathetic excuses, however, and proceed to argue her case—forcibly. She would point out that she had no intention of breaking her children's spirit completely, that insisting on obedience was merely the first painful step along the rough road which led a child from imposed discipline to the self-discipline of a fulfilled maturity. She would add that discipline must be exerted firmly but fairly, occasionally with a blind eye, and always with love and with appreciation for responsive obedience. She would claim that the parent who spoils his child by too easily giving him his own way "does the devil's work, makes religion impracticable, salvation unattainable; and does all that in him lies to damn his child, soul and body, for ever."¹³ How well she succeeded in her own happy blend of maternal discipline and parental affection is proved by John Wesley's request for a summary of her philosophy and practice of child raising to help him in his own educational work, and by the fact that the Wesley children in later life wrote more letters to each other on January 20 than on any other day. It was their mother's birthday, of course, and she was the enduring bond of their deep family affection.

She was confronted by problems from the outset. Her first child, Samuel, was slow to speak, as most boys are. In fact, if child psychologists had been available in those days even Susanna Wesley might have taken young Sammy to see one, for it seemed just possible that he was dumb, not uttering a word until he was nearly five years old. One day he disappeared with his favorite cat, and no one could find him anywhere. Susanna then went anxiously throughout the house, loudly calling "Sammy! Sammy!" From under a table at last came a muffled voice, speaking his first words: "Here I am, mother!" From that day he spoke clearly and in sentences.¹⁴

By that time Susanna had lost one baby girl and boy twins, and in addition to Sammy had a little girl of four, Emilia. She decided that if Sammy could now speak, he could learn to read. On February 11, 1695, the day after his fifth birthday, she so arranged her

¹¹ John Wesley, *Journal* (Standard Edition, ed. N. Curnock, in 8 volumes, London, Epworth Press, 1938), III, 35.

¹² *Ibid.*, 34.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 35-6; cf. John Wesley, *Works*

(ed. T. Jackson, in 14 volumes, London, Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, n.d.) VII, 92-3.

¹⁴ Clarke, *op. cit.*, II, 6, 137.

household chores that she was able to devote a few hours to teaching him the alphabet. On following days he was taught to read, beginning with the first chapter of Genesis, spelling out the first verse, reading it over and over "till he could read it off-hand without any hesitation," and then moving on to the second. Soon he was reading ten verses at each of the three-hour sessions that she gave him morning and afternoon, and by the summer was easily reading a chapter at a time and remembering every word he learned. Perhaps it was not quite as easy as it sounds, however. On one occasion Samuel Wesley found his own patience exhausted by his wife's, and exclaimed, "Why, my dear, do you sit there teaching that dull child that lesson over for the twentieth time?" To this she calmly replied, "Because the nineteenth is not enough."¹⁵ This same method she used for each of the other children as they reached the age of five. Thanks mainly to her efforts, they became one of the best educated families in England.¹⁶

AN HELP MORE THAN MEET

It must be admitted that although Samuel and Susanna remained deeply in love they did not always see eye to eye. Her longest period of freedom from childbearing arose from a serious disagreement. She was even more fanatic in her devotion to the royal family of the Stuarts than he, and in her view King William's only legitimate claim to the throne was that he was married to Mary Stuart, daughter of James II. These doubts apparently came to a head shortly after the death of the exiled James II in 1701, having been suppressed for some years after the death of Mary herself in 1694. One evening Samuel Wesley called Susanna to his study and asked why she had not said "Amen" at family prayers after the petition for King William. She replied, "Because I do not believe the Prince of Orange to be king." Upon this he proclaimed: "If that be the case, you and I must part: for if we have two kings, we must have two beds." Worse still, he went down on his knees and confirmed this resolution with a solemn vow.

One might think that after bearing fourteen of his children this was just the occasion Susanna Wesley had been waiting for. But no, she knew her wifely duty better than that. And after all, she was still in love with the man. In spite of all his bookishness, all his stubbornness, indeed perhaps partly because of them, she still loved him. Even the death of the king and the accession of Queen Anne, a good Stuart acceptable to them both, could not persuade him to change his mind. Then in July, 1702, the Epworth parsonage caught fire and the danger to his wife and family brought him to his senses. In the half-burnt parsonage he was reconciled to Susanna. The fruit of their reconciliation was a fifteenth child, born after twenty-five months of freedom from childbearing. Most of us have heard of him. His father christened him John. (Plain John, by the

¹⁵ J. B. Wakeley, *Anecdotes of the Wesleys*, 8th edn. Leeds: Dodgson, 1876. pp. 59-60; cf. George J. Stevenson,

Memorials of the Wesley Family (London: Partridge, [1876]), 169.

¹⁶ Wesley, *Journal*, III, 36-7.

way, not John Benjamin as he himself believed, through confusion with Anne's twin, born in 1701, who had commemorated in his rare double name twin boys who had died earlier.)¹⁷

MOTHER SUPERIOR

By this time her oldest child was a brainy boy of thirteen, and less than six months after John's birth Sammy went off to Westminster School, where as pupil and teacher he spent over half his life.¹⁸ He had been well prepared by his mother, who continued with the education of the five surviving girls from Emilia down through Susanna, Mary, and Mehetabel to Anne—all doting on their new baby brother. A few years later, after the birth of Martha in 1706 and Charles in 1707, this education took on an added spiritual dimension, largely centering on little Jackie. In February 1709 the rebuilt rectory once more caught fire, and this time was completely gutted shortly after the five-year-old boy was rescued "as a brand plucked out of the burning." Susanna Wesley was only a few weeks short of the birth of her nineteenth child, another daughter christened Kezia after the second of the daughters born to Job following the restoration of his family fortunes. (Samuel had recently begun his famous commentary on Job.) Once more the parsonage was rebuilt, this time of good solid brick. It remained intact until the present century, when it was turned inside out, brick by brick, and restored as a place of pilgrimage by World Methodism. During the rebuilding Susanna's children were dispersed for a year among a few friendly families, and her careful discipline thereby almost ruined.

During this last pregnancy Susanna had been desperately weakened, so that she and Samuel were once more occupying separate rooms, and it may well be that by mutual consent the "fire child" became their last.¹⁹ Although the rudimentary education of her infant children still occupied much of her time, more and more thought and care and prayer were given to preparing the older ones for their maturity, and especially in providing a practical theology of living. She maintained a thoughtful correspondence with young Samuel at Westminster.²⁰ She prepared a lengthy exposition of the Christian faith for adolescent Susanna, lodged with her uncle Matthew in London. This was followed up by a similar discourse on Christian conduct, and the promise (when she had more leisure) of further elaborations of various theological problems for the use of all her children.²¹ Of many such documents only one other has survived, however, this time in dialogue form, and dated two years later: "A Religious Conference between M[other] and E[milia]," headed with the Pauline motto, "I write unto you

¹⁷ WHS, XXIX, 50-7. For the confusion in names see Luke Tyerman, *Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley*, I, 15 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1870), and cf. the manuscript transcripts of the Epworth parish registers preserved in

the Diocesan Registry, Lincoln.

¹⁸ WHS, XI, 26-7.

¹⁹ Clarke, *op. cit.*, II, 34.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, II, 139-50.

²¹ *Ibid.*, II, 37-72.

little children, of whom I travail in birth again, until Christ be formed in you." ²²

When most of the family returned to the rebuilt parsonage the providentially preserved Jackie remained her especial care, and in May 1711, as he was approaching eight, she entered in her diary the resolve to "be more particularly careful of the soul of this child." ²³ During the following winter she underwent a deep emotional experience through reading Ziegenbalg's *Account* of two Danish Moravian missionaries and their work in Tranquebar. Two important Christian experiments sprang from this, which reveal this older Susanna Wesley as a kind of mother superior of a missionary order, carefully organizing the spiritual growth of her own especial charges but also training them to go out into all the world in the name of her Lord. She set aside an hour or so each evening to discuss spiritual and moral problems with each child in turn. Thursday evenings were devoted to young Jackie, and even when he became a grown man he yearned for those stimulating and stabilizing pastoral sessions with his mother. ²⁴

The other practice was far wider both in its range and probably in its eventual repercussions. Samuel Wesley was several times elected to Convocation, which met in London during the sessions of Parliament and governed the affairs of the Church of England. During his absences a curate was left in charge of the parish. In the winter of 1710-11, Mrs. Wesley was greatly distressed by the inadequacy of her husband's substitute and determined herself to make up for the deficiency. While the rector was away she normally conducted Sunday evening prayers for her family and these she enlarged in content until they became religious services. She threw open these services to the parents of their servant boy, and then to friends and neighbors of the parents, until as many as forty people attended. During the following winter of 1711-12, when as a result of reading the missionary book she became far more fervent and evangelical, as many as two hundred came, though they could not all have crowded into her kitchen but must have squeezed together in the hallway and stairs as well, while some had to be turned away. This time a few busybodies informed her husband that she was conducting what they called a conventicle, and what she called "our society." ²⁵ Her pastoral work led to improved relationships with most of the townspeople and a greatly increased attendance at regular church services, in spite of the poor preacher. She agreed with her husband's criticism, however, that it was somewhat unusual for a woman to take the lead in such matters, but asked what choice there was when no suitable man was available. She refused to desist upon his request alone, but would only do so if he wrote explicitly commanding it, for which decision he alone would then answer at the

²² Wesley Historical Society, *Publication No. 3*, ed. G. Stringer Rowe, London, 1898, 41.

²³ Henry Moore, *Life of the Rev. John Wesley* (London: Kershaw, 1824), I, 112.

²⁴ Clarke, *op. cit.*, II, 92; cf. John Wesley, *Letters* (Standard Edition, ed. John Telford, in 8 volumes, London: Epworth Press, 1931), I, 119-20.

²⁵ Clarke, *op. cit.*, II, 93, 96.

Day of Judgment. Tactfully and wisely (on this occasion, at least) Samuel backed down, and the parsonage meetings continued. Though thoughtful little Jackie could hardly be expected to realize it at the time, here were sown some of the seeds which later matured into John Wesley's own Methodist societies and his somewhat grudging acceptance of women preachers.²⁶

MOTHER OF METHODISM

Susanna Wesley's prayers and advice on reading and theology and conduct followed John Wesley to the Charterhouse School in London in 1714, as they did Charles to his eldest brother's Westminster School two years later. In both boys had been carefully instilled habits of disciplined thought and devotion, along with a deep sense of the majesty of God and the eternal worth of their fellowmen. The same was true when the two young men moved on to the university at Oxford. By her correspondence she continued to reinforce their scholarly and spiritual ideals, assisting from a distance in the development of the Holy Club, yet warning of the spiritual as well as the physical dangers of too ascetic a life.²⁷ Upon the death of her husband in 1735 she left Epworth to live with her oldest son Samuel. Upon his death also in 1739, John became her main support and in his Methodist headquarters at the Foundery in London she spent her closing years.

To the end she was a loyal mother to her two surviving sons and has many claims to be considered the Mother of the Methodism which they founded. Although at first doubtful about the wisdom of their itinerant preaching, those doubts were soon removed, and in 1739 she herself underwent a spiritual renewal akin to the assurance of salvation by faith which they proclaimed.²⁸ It was the aged Susanna who checked her son John (probably during the spring of 1741) when he rode posthaste from Bristol to put an immediate stop to Thomas Maxfield, who had been left in pastoral charge of the London societies, and had extended himself from the religious exhortations suitable for a layman to the authoritative expositions of Holy Scripture which John believed proper only to an ordained minister. Storming into her room at the Foundery he raged: "Thomas Maxfield has turned preacher, I find." She looked at him calmly for a time and replied: "John, you know what my sentiments have been. You cannot suspect me of favoring readily anything of this kind. But take care what you do with respect to that young man, for he is as surely called of God to preach as you are. Examine what have been the fruits of his preaching: and hear him also yourself." Having taken his mother's advice Wesley yielded, acknowledging, "It is the Lord: let Him do what seemeth Him good."²⁹ Thus was she largely instrumental in founding the lay itinerant ministry of Methodism.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 88-98; Wesley, *Journal*, III, 32-4.

²⁷ Clarke, *op. cit.*, II, 100-3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 110-20, 126-7.

²⁹ WHS, XXVII, 7-15.

A little later that spring Whitefield turned against the Wesleys because of their Arminian views, attacking them in print. Mrs. Wesley sprang to their defense, writing a 28-page pamphlet sufficiently convincing for John Wesley to publish, albeit anonymously. It was entitled, *Some Remarks on a Letter from the Reverend Mr. Whitefield to the Reverend Mr. Wesley, in a Letter from a Gentlewoman to her Friend*.³⁰ A letter written to the Countess of Huntingdon that July portrays Susanna's affectionate pride in her sons and their work of evangelism: "I do indeed rejoice in my sons, and am much pleased that they have in any measure been serviceable to your ladyship. You'll pardon the fondness of a mother if I exceed in commending them, but I've known few (if any) that have laboured more diligently and unweariedly in the service of our dear Lord: and, blessed be His great name, He hath set His seal to their ministry, and hath made them instrumental in bringing many souls to God. And though in the eye of the world they appear despicable, men of no estate or figure, and daily suffer contempt, reproach and shame among men, yet to me they appear more honourable than they would do if the one were Archbishop of Canterbury and the other of York, for I esteem the reproach of Christ greater riches than all the treasures of England."³¹

What a mother! What a woman! A year later, on July 30, 1742,³² John reported that his mother "went home with the voice of praise and thanksgiving." He buried her in the famous Nonconformist cemetery across the way from where his own most famous London chapel was later to stand. In Bunhill Fields she rested alongside a hundred thousand of her spiritual kin, including John Bunyan, Daniel Defoe, Isaac Watts, and William Blake. Her best memorial, however, is not the frequently renewed headstone, but her living memory in Methodism throughout the world. Perhaps this is appropriately symbolized by the seal of office handed over each year to the incoming President of the Women's Fellowship of the British Methodist Church—a pair of brown silk gloves which she wore at worship, neatly darned as a sign of her frugality, lovingly treasured as a testimony to her lasting influence.

A meditation in her private diary, written apparently while she had seven girls and two boys under her feet at the Epworth parsonage, may give a closing indication of her amazing spirit: "Though the education of so many children must create abundance of trouble, and will perpetually keep the mind employed as well as the body, yet [I] consider it is no small honour to be entrusted with the care of so many souls, and if that trust be but managed with prudence and integrity, the harvest will abundantly recompense the toil of the seed time, and it will certainly be no little accession to the future glory to stand forth at the last day and say, 'Lord, here are

³⁰ WHS, XXXV, 68-71.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

³² Not July 23, as given in Wesley's

Journal (Standard Edition), III, 29-31; the original edition, Bristol, Farley, 1749, 56, has the correct date.

the children which thou hast given me, of whom I have lost none by my ill example, nor by neglecting to instil into their minds, in their early years, the principles of true religion and virtue.'"³³ The worldwide harvest has indeed abundantly recompensed the toil of Susanna's seed time!

³³ Wesley Banner, London, 1852, 286.