

JOHN WESLEY AND WILLIAM LAW

A Reconsideration

I HAVE great respect for my friend the Rev. Frederick Hunter and his views, but am just as anxious as he is to arrive at the truth about John Wesley, even though this entails entering a kindly dissent from the arguments of a good friend. Having carefully considered those arguments, I think I see a number of flaws, and in general remain unconvinced. My position remains basically the same—that Wesley may indeed have read William Law's *Christian Perfection* in 1727 or 1728, a year or two after its publication, and that he may have read the *Serious Call* almost immediately upon its publication in the dying months of 1728, but that it is much more probable that he first read the *Serious Call* in December 1730, followed by *Christian Perfection* in 1732. Although I shrink from anything approaching controversy, I believe that readers should be enabled to study both arguments and to make up their own minds on the value of the evidence and the cogency of the reasoning. Here I content myself with a few remarks—mainly generalizations—upon the difference between Mr. Hunter's approach to the subject and my own.

Mr. Hunter in his article cites a further reference by Wesley to his introduction to Law's writings. This is in *The Principles of a Methodist* (1742), though here Wesley mentions neither work by name, so that no question of the order of reading is involved. It may well be that there are other references, for I did not conduct an extensive search for such. Even if ten additional references were adduced, however, it would not make the argument from numbers any stronger. I strongly dissent from Mr. Hunter's view that "the historian's task is to try to discover a consensus of the four statements". This is akin to the argument that if a sufficient number of secondary authorities repeat an error it must therefore become the truth; in such a case—which occurs frequently in Wesley studies, as in other academic work—the historian's task is rather to penetrate behind the secondary authorities to the primary authority. In the instance under consideration, where three passages repeat with variations the theme of an earlier statement upon which they may well be based, the truth is not to be reached by harmonizing all four, but by checking the original statement against other factors and other documents, more especially against contemporary documents unlikely to be influenced either by a faulty memory or by a changing perspective.

I fully agree that my argument from specific entries in Wesley's extant diaries cannot be conclusive because of the absence of earlier diaries, and indeed I went to some pains to state as much; the missing diaries covering 27th February 1727 to 29th April 1729 may indeed have contained a reference to Wesley's reading of one or of both books. I would still claim, however, that this is "barely

possible . . . but highly unlikely". I grant that Wesley did indeed read some books—especially books important to him—more than once. The diary entries undoubtedly referring to the reading of these two volumes, however, are in such a form as to imply—though certainly not to prove—that the books were then read for the first time. The daily entries are supplemented by references in Wesley's monthly summaries, which seem to have been reserved for especially important events; in the case of the *Serious Call* Wesley also makes an entry in his annual summary of important events. Both readings are followed after a brief interval by records of "collecting" the books. Nevertheless this presumed first reading may in fact have been preceded by a still earlier one, as in the case of Francke's *Nicodemus*, noted by Mr. Hunter. In the absence of the early diaries to prove or possibly disprove this, it would certainly be irresponsible to claim that Wesley could not have read them during those undocumented months; in the presence of the proof of later readings, however, it seems reasonable to suggest that this careful reading and collecting fits the pattern of a first reading, and therefore strongly reduces the likelihood of an earlier reading.

Although I am not impressed by a multitude of witnesses if there seems good reason to believe that they are false witnesses, or merely mistaken witnesses, yet I agree that Mr. Hunter's added reference from Wesley's *Principles of a Methodist* is both pertinent and important: "I had been eight years at Oxford before I read any of Mr. Law's writings." As Mr. Hunter points out, Wesley entered Oxford in June 1720. His apparent argument, however, that this could imply a reading in the summer of 1727 because January–March 1728 could under the Old Style correctly be described as "1727" has no force, because Wesley's "eight years" clearly begins in 1720, and therefore cannot end earlier than June 1728. I would plead, however, that Wesley scholars should not be unduly literalistic in founding arguments upon Wesley's later recollections of dates and periods. He was much too concerned about his primary evangelistic and pastoral work to spend the necessary time in the research by which alone such statements could be made reliably specific, and seems therefore to have been content with approximations, as I believe he was in this instance. Such a sentence as this might well prove a very shaky *foundation* for an argument, though it might serve usefully as *confirmation*. On this basis I personally would not dare to claim that Wesley *must* have read one or other of Law's books during the twelve months beginning June 1728 and ending June 1729, rather than earlier or later, even though the statement certainly creates a *probability*. The weight of this probability, however, must be measured against that of other probabilities.

Mr. Hunter rightly challenges the impression given him by my statement that Wesley claims to have read the two books "shortly after . . . March 1726". He apparently takes me to mean "within a few weeks", whereas my intention was "within a few months, or

a year or so". My language was not sufficiently precise. I agree with him that the word "now" in section 5 of Wesley's Conversion account might well imply that he met Law's writings not only immediately upon going to Lincoln College, but some months after this new setting had furnished the incentive to undertake new rigours in the use of his time. It is indeed barely possible that the "now" stretched as far in Wesley's mind as 1730, with which section 6 begins. It seems much more natural, however, to take Wesley's implication as earlier rather than later in this four-year period. That, surely, is what he himself did later in his letter to Newton, specifically dating the beginning of his acquaintance with Law as in 1727; similarly in the *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* he spoke of it as "a year or two after" 1726. Certainly Wesley's stricter economy of time began in 1726, and is epitomized by the well-known phrase contained in a letter of 5th December that year to his brother Samuel—"leisure and I have taken leave of one another."

Obviously I agree with Mr. Hunter that Wesley would have served his own controversial purposes better, and would have saved future historians an immense amount of trouble, if he had carefully undertaken his own research in documents available to him but denied to us, and then issued the results in a detailed factual statement. It is quite true that Wesley could have strengthened his case if he had referred to his diaries and shown that (on my theory) he did not meet Law's writings until 1730; it is similarly true that he could have strengthened Mr. Hunter's case by referring to his earlier diaries and pin-pointing the possible earlier date when he studied the *Serious Call*, and at the same time have preserved himself from the printed error of claiming to have read it a year before it was published. However lamentable the fact, however, this does not seem to have been Wesley's method. The more I study him, the more convinced I become that during the major part of his active ministry he rarely carried out any close research into the documents which he himself had accumulated—documents such as his notebooks and diaries and the early editions of his own writings. Indeed, I am proposing at some future date to write an article giving details of some of the many instances when Wesley's memory, unfortified by research into primary documents, undoubtedly played him tricks. One of these instances is concerned with another refinement of the careful economy of time upon which he embarked at this period. In later years Wesley claimed that he began his habit of early rising by means of a few days of experiments, and never forsook that habit. The evidence of his own diary, however, proves that these experiments were spread over many months, with a number of failures and fresh starts; it was only after fifteen months that the set pattern of later years was established. It was this general background of approximation that I had in mind even more than the specific case of his reading of Law when I wrote that his statements in this particular instance furnished

additional evidence that in Wesley's memory past events, even important events, changed dates, and even relative positions, with kaleidoscopic ease.

Perhaps I should move from generalizations to two or three specific points. In introducing his own statement of my argument, Mr. Hunter on occasion shifts the emphasis. It is quite incorrect, for instance, to claim that the readings set by Wesley for his Oxford pupils in 1730-1

aroused [my] suspicions of Wesley's subsequent apparent claims that he had read these two books at least two years, at most four years, before this.

For many years I have been troubled by the glaring discrepancy of Wesley's apparent implication that within a year or so of his becoming a Fellow of Lincoln in March 1726 he had read a book which is dated 1729, even though it may have been published as early as November 1728. Study of Wesley's diaries in connexion with work on my forthcoming Wesley bibliography unearthed diary proof of his actual reading of Law's works at later dates, thus giving more substance to my long-standing disquiet. The research into his reading-lists was an afterthought, though it apparently confirmed the other findings. I would not wish to place too much emphasis upon the absence of Law's writings from these lists, though the evidence has more value than Mr. Hunter believes. He argues that the terms of Wesley's teaching office "reduced his ability to set devotional books". The lists themselves effectively disprove this: far more devotional works are set than any others.

Mr. Hunter seems to contest my statement that the Conversion account as it relates to William Law was "heavily charged with remembered emotion", stressing instead that Wesley was "much offended" with Law. I find no difficulty in accepting Wesley's own account of both points, that "although" he was offended by many parts, yet they did exercise a profound impression upon him. Indeed, the following sentence reads like a classic conversion experience: "The light flowed in so mightily upon my soul, that everything appeared in a new view." Mr. Hunter promises to show that these words in fact extol not Law's writings, but the Bible. I find quite unconvincing, however, his argument that that particular enlightenment must have come from the scriptures because some years later Wesley used the phrase "the light" in a context which in part referred to the Bible. Although assistance in interpreting unusual phrases may well be sought in other passages, fairly common expressions such as "the light" must surely be assessed almost solely within their particular context. The argument would have been stronger had Mr. Hunter pointed out that in the Conversion account Wesley's sentence had been preceded by the claim that Law's writings convinced him more than ever of "the exceeding height and breadth and depth of the law of God"—again rapturous Pauline language, where "the law of God" might conceivably refer to the

Bible, though in its context I have taken it to refer to God's plan of saving man by obedience to His will. Again, although I do indeed believe that Wesley was enthusiastic about Law's writings, it is hardly correct to state that I "based my argument" on this enthusiasm. My argument was based upon discrepancies in Wesley's later statements which seem largely to be resolved by the documentary evidence of his diaries.

In all my arguments, however, I cannot for a moment accept that Wesley was guilty of any deliberate attempt to mislead his readers, and it would surely be the farthest thing from his mind that he was twisting the facts of his life for his own controversial or even evangelical purposes, however worthy. Therefore I must refute the pejorative implications of Mr. Hunter's statement :

Dr. Baker claims that Wesley deliberately altered the order of his reading the books (1730-2, which, presumably, he remembered !) in order to put the books into the order in which they were published, which he had also remembered !

I believe that it mattered little to Wesley in what order the books had been either published or read, and that he would never dream of issuing false statements about such matters. I agree that, on the face of things, it does appear strange that Wesley should forget the order in which he read such important books, and also (perhaps) of their publication, especially in his middle years, when he was surely less liable to errors of memory than he was later on. Something is wrong with his accounts, however, and I still believe my suggestion about what actually happened is the more likely of the alternatives.

FRANK BAKER.

[Mr. Hunter, who has read Dr. Baker's *Reconsideration*, writes to say that he still finds "the consensus of Wesley's four accounts more credible in face of all evidence". With this we must close the discussion, and leave our readers to make their own judgements.—EDITOR.]

We gratefully acknowledge the following periodicals, which have come to hand since the publication of the list in our last issue. Some of these are received on a reciprocal basis with our own *Proceedings*, and we are glad to take part in this mutual exchange of historical information.

The Baptist Quarterly, July and October 1970.

Transactions of the Congregational Historical Society, May and October 1970.

The Journal of the Friends' Historical Society, 1969.

The Local Historian, Nos. 2 and 3, 1970.

The Journal of the Historical Society of the Presbyterian Church of Wales, September 1970.

The Journal of the South Australian Methodist Historical Society, October 1969.

The Bulletin of the Wesleyan Theological Society (USA).

Methodist History, July and October 1970.

Cirplan, Michaelmas 1970.

We have also been interested to receive a copy of Bulletin No. 5 (1970) of the Japan Wesley Association, bearing the title *Wesley and Mission*.