

THE REAL JOHN WESLEY

by Frank Baker

History, even modern history, too easily becomes mythology. Human beings are complex creatures, and even an innocent effort to oversimplify them can be quite unfair to their reputation. Some quirk of chance or the deliberate twisting of evidence by a prejudiced witness can work far worse damage, so that so-called history presents the villain as a hero, the worthy man as a scoundrel.

Recently I have read once more a remarkable "whodunit" by Josephine Tey, The Daughter of Time (1951). In a novel full of suspense and excitement she demonstrates how one of the villains of history was in fact a misused hero. That monster King Richard III, the supposed murderer of the princes in the Tower of London, turns out to have been a gentle and thoughtful humanitarian, while his successor Henry VII was undoubtedly the real instigator of the murder--if in fact there was a murder. Moreover Henry deliberately tried to suppress and twist the facts for his own ends. Through the aid of a venal bishop, John Morton, famous for "Morton's Fork," and Morton's dupes (including even Sir Thomas More, who in his support of Tudor Henry against Plantagenet Richard was far from Utopian), he succeeded in brainwashing every subsequent generation of English schoolboys, and not a few Americans.

This John Wesley himself knew, having been convinced by the arguments of Horace Walpole, and recording in his Journal for 17 June 1769: "I finished Historic Doubts on the Life and Reign of Richard the Third. What an amazing monster, both in body and mind, have our historians and poets painted him!....What a surprising thing is it, then, that all our historians should have so readily swallowed the account of that wretch who 'killed, and also took possession' of the throne; and blundered on, one after another!" He adds shrewdly, however: "Only it is to be observed, for fifty years no one could contradict that account but at the peril of his head."¹

¹ John Wesley, Journal (ed. Nehemiah Curnock, 8 vols., Bicentenary Issue, London, Epworth Press, 1938), V, 322. Although Maldwyn Edwards, John Wesley and the Eighteenth Century (London, Allen and Unwin, 1933), p. 44, uses this as evidence of Wesley's "total lack of critical judgment,"

Knowing all this John Wesley would hardly have expected any different treatment for himself and his movement in the history books--if indeed he expected to figure in them at all. At times he tried vigorously to keep the records straight, though mainly to secure the success of God's work of the moment rather than a favourable judgment from posterity. Rumours constantly circulated: the Methodists were supposed to be secret supporters of Rome, and Wesley was at one time seriously believed to be the Young Pretender in disguise.² It must be confessed also that Wesley himself innocently gave rise to some fictions about his own life that have been incorporated into the legendary picture. It is true that we know more about Wesley's activities, his writings, his influence, than about most men--indeed for fifty years we have an almost day by day account of his doings, and for over twenty years an hour by hour timetable. Yet in spite of all this detail about his actions, his reactions often escape us. It is difficult to be sure that we have understood him as a man--his personal qualities, his dreams and doubts, his motives, both primary and secondary, the impression he made on others, and what he really thought about himself--the peculiar mixture of humanity that it is so important and so difficult for us to estimate if we are truly to understand and appreciate anyone.

Over two centuries a hundred different biographers have assessed his character in twenty different ways. In an effort "To Tell the Truth" let me introduce you to a mere three versions of John Wesley. John Wesley No. 1 is the Methodist Automaton, a great orator with a remarkably tidy mind, who deliberately founded a new church to the glory of God, organized it with consummate skill and cold disregard for the personal aspirations of his helpers, being himself devoid of the warmer human feelings, but a somewhat humorless spiritual computer, aptly named

Walpole's main contentions are supported by a number of recognized historians. Cf. V. B. Lamb, The Betrayal of Richard III (1959), whose foreword states, "...the evidence for the traditional picture of Richard is of such a flimsy and suspect nature that a modern jury would, I think, rightly consider that on it there is no case to answer," and Taylor Littleton and Robert R. Rea, To Prove a Villain: The Case of Richard III (1964), who stress in their introduction the difficulty of finding the truth amid "the sinister fog of propaganda."

² See Frank Baker, "Methodism and the '45 Rebellion," London Quarterly Review, Vol. 172, pp. 325-33 (Oct. 1947).

a "Methodist". Now let us turn to John Wesley No. 2, the Compulsive Reformer, a devout and scholarly clergyman carried out of his depth by a sensitive conscience and urgent zeal, striving by calmly reasoned preaching and a renewal of sacramental devotion to infuse new life into an ailing church, genuinely distressed when that church rejected him, but convinced that Methodism was a part of God's will, Church or no Church. And now John Wesley No. 3, the Religious Megalomaniac, a spiritual demagogue whose personal life and church loyalty were completely revolutionized by an emotional conversion, after which by playing on the feelings of the poor and illiterate with hellfire preaching he organized a new church, at least subconsciously to satisfy the megalomania so typical of little men. Here we have three men claiming to be John Wesley. Will the real John Wesley please stand up!

Even if you believe (as I do) that No. 2 is nearer the mark, there are certainly elements of truth in the other two pictures. Even on the basis of voluminous documentation friends and enemies alike have made mistakes in interpreting Wesley's emotions, thoughts, motives. The real John Wesley in his fullness has escaped them all. Nor can I pretend to succeed where others have failed, especially in a brief paper. At least I will try to be honest in not seeking to defend any particular point of view, recognizing that John Wesley was human, that is, he presented his own blend of psychological contradictions. I will try to delineate and illustrate these, though far too briefly than would be necessary if each characteristic were to be developed adequately. Let us hope that the cumulative effect will be a lifelike representation of the real John Wesley, even though it is a rough sketch in crayon rather than a lifesize portrait in oils.

Radical Conservative

Like many, perhaps most of us, John Wesley's personality bundled together a series of contradictory characteristics, maintained both in tension and in balance by a unifying principle. We look first at the fact that he was what we might term a radical conservative. Each aspect of these apparently irreconcilable approaches to life came to him with his mother's milk and his father's table talk. Both his parents were enthusiastic converts from Presbyterian Puritanism to the episcopalian Church of England, and Samuel Wesley was the rector of the Anglican parish of Epworth, Lincolnshire, for forty years. Here John Wesley was born in 1703. In him was both in-

stilled and inspired a deep love for the Anglican way of life, its doctrines, its devotions, its ritual, its thought-forms, its ministerial authority. His parents apparently attempted to shield him from any taint of Puritanism, so that "Presbyterian" became for him almost a term of abuse.³ Not until his 40's did he come to sympathise with the Puritans, and not until his 60's did he discover the printed account of his own grandfather's tussle with the bishop of Bristol.⁴ By then an inborn streak of rebellion had fully developed, and in his Thoughts on Liberty (1772) he spoke bitterly of the Act of Uniformity of 1662, under which at least three of his ancestors had been thrown out of their pulpits: "So, by this glorious Act, thousands of men, guilty of no crime, nothing contrary either to justice, mercy, or truth, were stripped of all they had....For what? Because they did not dare to worship God according to other men's consciences."⁵ John Wesley himself was fully resolved to preach what he called the "genuine gospel"⁶ according to the dictates of his own conscience, although at the same time he was temperamentally unable to break away from the church of his father, if not of his grandfather, and to the end avowed his unshaken loyalty to the Church of England, of which in 1725 he was ordained deacon and in 1728 priest. For fifty years, however, he steadily continued to snip away one tie after another binding him to that church, so that by his death his societies were on the point of becoming an independent church in themselves.

This determination to remain true to conscience both in preserving the old and embracing the new whatever others may say or do takes a peculiar brand of courage which Wesley showed in plenty. His power over unruly mobs was largely the result of his physical courage. Although he often claimed that particular sticks

³ See Journal, I, 471; Works (ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols., London, Wesleyan Methodist Bookroom, n.d.), VIII, 366.

⁴ See Journal, IV, 93; V, 119; and Frank Baker, "Wesley's Puritan Ancestry," London Quarterly Review, Vol. 187, pp. 180-86 (July, 1962).

⁵ Works, XI, 39.

⁶ See Wesley, Letters (ed. John Telford, 8 vols., London, Epworth Press, 1938), V, 76: "Such a thing has scarce been for these thousand years before, as a son, father, grandfather, atavus, tritavus, preaching the gospel, nay, and the genuine gospel, in a line."

or stones aimed at his head were providentially diverted, he was struck at times, he did have his neat coat torn off his slender back, and sometimes he took the prudent course of escaping. Nevertheless his normal behaviour was to look a mob in the face and to keep on preaching.⁷

His moral courage was also noteworthy. He was not afraid to change his mind and publicly to admit his own errors. During his brief Georgia ministry he felt unable to administer communion to the devout pastor of the Salzburger community, Bolzius, because he was not episcopally ordained.⁸ Having himself in later years been frequently repelled from both pulpit and altar rail,⁹ in 1749 his published Journal referred back to that incident, exclaiming: "Can anyone carry High Church zeal higher than this? And how well have I been since beaten with mine own staff!"¹⁰ Similarly when he was seventy he repeatedly strove to correct in print the statements made in his early Journal that before that heart-warming experience of 24 May 1738 he was not a Christian.¹¹

John Wesley was never afraid to espouse an unpopular cause. Bristol was the English centre of the slave trade, upon which much of the city's prosperity depended. While slavery was being hotly discussed in 1788 Wesley publicly announced that he would preach on the subject two days later, which he did to a packed house, from a text which could be rationalized into support for the institution of slavery (Genesis 9:27), but which he turned into a weapon of attack.¹²

Thoughtful Activist

By temperament John Wesley was meditative; by calling he found himself thrust into unbounded activity. Thus again two opposite characteristics were joined in him. He was a thoughtful activist. Adam Clarke had from his

⁷ E.g. Journal, III, 98-104, with which compare Works, XIII, 190-92.

⁸ Journal, I, 370.

⁹ Cf. Works, VII, 422.

¹⁰ Journal, III, 434.

¹¹ See Frank Baker, "'Aldersgate' and Wesley's Editors," London Quarterly Review, Vol. 191, pp. 310-19 (Oct. 1966), especially pp. 318-19.

¹² Journal, VII, 359-60; cf. Maldwyn Edwards, John Wesley and the Eighteenth Century, pp. 119-21. The sermon was not published.

own lips an anecdote of Wesley's childhood. Only a few years after John's birth in 1703 Samuel Wesley remarked to his wife Susanna, "I protest, sweetheart, our Jack would not attend to the most pressing necessities of nature unless he could give a reason for it."¹³ Jack was so serious a child that his father prepared him for confirmation and communion when he was only eight.¹⁴ His elder brother Samuel admiringly reported that, having mastered Latin, Greek, and French at the Charterhouse School in London, at 15 or 16 Jack was "a brave boy, learning Hebrew as fast as he can."¹⁵ He entered Christ Church, Oxford, just after his 17th birthday, graduating B.A. in 1724 and M.A. in 1727. In 1726 he was elected a Fellow of Lincoln College, and found the university such an ideal setting for his somewhat exotic blend of scholarship and piety that in December 1734 he regretfully but firmly declined his dying father's urgent appeal that he should succeed him as rector of Epworth.¹⁶

Yet within a few months this same prim and pious little don left the somewhat sheltered cloisters of Oxford in the Quixotic attempt to conduct a sacramental experiment with the rough pioneers of infant Georgia, and an evangelistic experiment with the Indians there--only to be disillusioned on both counts. Nevertheless he returned, not to the secluded life of Oxford, but to the highways and marketplaces and slums of industrial England, misunderstood, persecuted, slandered, to become the best known private individual in the land, travelling farther than any man of his century--a quarter of a million miles--on roads dusty and spine-jolting in summer, well nigh impassable in winter, preaching as he went some 40,000 to 50,000 sermons, mostly from makeshift pulpits. Hardly the life of a meditative scholar!

Yet his scholarship was constantly turned to active pastoral uses. Most conversations he closed by quoting from memory a verse or two of poetry, sometimes a little

¹³ Adam Clarke, Memoirs of the Wesley Family, 2nd ed., London, for Thomas Tegg, 2 vols., 1844, II, 321.

¹⁴ See Frank Baker, John Wesley and the Church of England, Epworth Press, 1970, pp. 10, 342. Benson states that Wesley was eight when he took his first Communion; actually his ninth birthday occurred almost a month before Bishop Wake held his confirmation at Epworth.

¹⁵ John Whitehead, The Life of the Rev. John Wesley, 2 vols., London, Couchman, 1793, 1796, I, 381.

¹⁶ Letters, I, 167-78.

garbled, but always appropriate, often a brilliant summary of the point that had been made.¹⁷ His scholarship also led to an extension of his preaching mission in the field of publishing. He was one of the most prolific authors and editors of the day, he and his brother Charles having some 500 publications to their credit. Nor were these confined to obviously devotional works, but included textbooks in languages, science, medicine, literature--anything that would help men be more fully themselves, and thus the better able to glorify their creator. He was especially successful in distilling the essence from books which were too technical or too longwinded for the average reader, too expensive for the poor. Through his labours the Methodists became a reading people as well as a singing people.¹⁸

Charming Autocrat

John Wesley was both a woman's man and a man's man, gentle and courteous, yet a commanding leader--a charming autocrat. His childhood at Epworth was surrounded by women. As a baby and a young boy he was adored by five older sisters, while his one elder brother Samuel was away at Westminster School. He grew up at the knees of one of the most remarkable women known to history: beautiful, intelligent, devout, patient, and highly organised--as she needed to be with those nineteen children. Both obedience and courtesy were instilled in him as a child. He admired the product of his mother's educational philosophy so much that he made it his own, insisting that discipline must be imposed upon children fairly but firmly in order that they may eventually learn self-discipline. In later years his courteous charm made him a constant target for designing females, and he remained unduly naive in assuming that all women were as uncomplicated and well-balanced as his mother, who remained the ideal by which he measured them. Although furnished with a normal supply of the sexual urge he proved a bungling lover, and never became a father. He seems to have felt more comfortable in the role of brother during his middle years, and uncle as he grew older, to a host of admiring women of whom his wife became jealous to the point of psychosis, though there was never the

¹⁷ Thomas Coke and Henry Moore, The Life of the Rev. John Wesley, London, Paramore, 1792, pp. 525-26.

¹⁸ See Richard Green, The Works of John and Charles Wesley: A Bibliography, 2nd ed., London, Methodist Publishing House, 1906.

slightest impropriety in any of these relationships. Perhaps that middle-aged banker's widow whom he married in 1751 should have realised that although John Wesley was fascinated by Woman (with a capital W), no individual woman could ever hope to control him, for he was indissolubly married to his calling.

The same indefinable charm which melted women won men also to his side, frequently turning critics into admirers once they came into touch with him personally. John Wesley's considerate courtesy never turned into obsequious fawning, however, as did that of his colleague George Whitefield. Nor did it ever degenerate into flabby weakness in his dealings with others. He remained firmly in control of most situations, exerting a natural authority. When in 1729 he returned to Oxford after two or three years' experience of assisting his father as a parish minister, the handful of undergraduates gathered for joint study and devotion by his brother Charles automatically turned to him for leadership. Throughout his life Charles leaned on John, and when their views clashed, as they did especially over John's increasing separation from the Church of England, Charles simply faded into the background rather than oppose him publicly. At times John was somewhat peremptory in the exercise of his authority, as on the rare occasion when in a Methodist Conference Charles threatened to leave if his position was overruled--whereupon John exclaimed, "Give my brother his hat!"¹⁹ From time to time rebellion flared up in individuals among the remarkable group of laymen whom he enlisted as his itinerant preachers. Mostly these were mutterings under the breath, but occasionally they led to open criticism of his autocracy, which he thereupon defended with calmness and cogency. He had made no pretence of having organized the Methodist societies as a democratic movement. They consisted, he claimed, of those people and preachers who put themselves willingly and completely under his authority, and although he frequently consulted them, and followed their advice when he believed it sound, he was never prepared to be ruled by them.²⁰ Those preachers who over the years did leave him because of this autocracy frequently set up as autocrats on their

¹⁹ Cf. Tyerman, Wesley, III, 659. I am fairly confident that I have seen a contemporary account of the anecdote by a Methodist preacher, but cannot pinpoint it.

²⁰ See Baker, John Wesley and the Church of England, pp. 202-03, 215-16, 219-20.

own, as pastors of independent churches.²¹ The many who remained proved to be men of great capabilities, though often self-educated, men who recognized that their own greatest usefulness lay in staunch devotion to Wesley's leadership. They found it the easier to bow to his will because they knew that he usually exercised his immense power graciously, and always for the advancement of the work rather than of his own prestige.

Romantic Realist

Among the many combinations of contradictory characteristics in John Wesley perhaps the most interesting is that which we study last and at greater length. He was a strange blend of methodical habit and intuitive impressions, of meticulous logic and naive imagination: he was a romantic realist. He was the tidiest person alive, both in his clothing and his study, where his contemporaries avowed "there was never a book misplaced, or even a scrap of paper left unheeded."²² His mind was similarly tidy. He claimed that he was always in haste, but never in a hurry.²³ Like his mother he tried to see life straight, without any frills. Human reason was seated on the throne alongside divine revelation, and the findings of both must be checked by daily experience. Wesley deliberately trained himself in good habits, including the detailed diary which he kept meticulously from 1725 to 1791, wherein we find clear evidence of the methodical ordering of every day, beginning with an hour spent in Bible reading, meditation, and prayer. Only after careful enquiry did he agree that it might indeed be possible to know that one was saved, but once convinced he entered upon a course of deliberate activities specifically aimed at that end, which came on 24 May 1738.²⁴ Deliberately he restricted his own preaching and that of his preachers, telling them, "Go, not to those who need you most."²⁵ Those who thus came within his

²¹ E.g. John Bennet, Thomas Bryant, John Edwards, Titus Knight, Nicholas Manners, John Whitford.

²² Coke and Moore, Wesley, p. 525.

²³ Letters, VI, 292; cf. 203; VIII, 210, and Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society, XXIX, 149. Coke and Moore record (p. 527) that on one occasion when his chaise was delayed he was heard to say, "I have lost ten minutes for ever!"

²⁴ Journal, I, 471-72.

²⁵ Part of the 11th of the twelve "Rules of a Helper," first added the Conference of 1745. The original

orbit were methodically organized into tightly-disciplined societies. And so, while Whitefield's energies were largely dissipated in freelance evangelism, Wesley's were channelled into a church. Wesley deliberately avoided cathedral cities, deliberately sought out the underchurched industrial areas. Deliberately he neglected the rich, avowing, "They do me no good, and I fear I can do none to them."²⁶ Deliberately he damped Thomas Coke's missionary enthusiasm, lest Methodism should squander its resources in biting off more than it could chew.²⁷ He himself worked hard, but never wore himself out, insisting that God did not require suicide for sacrifice.²⁸

This realistic approach is revealed also in Wesley's sense of humour. He was able to poke fun at himself and others, though his Puritanism consistently rejected idle talk and foolish jesting. His humour was never slapstick, occasionally playful, sometimes cutting, usually rather dry and subtle. Many examples could be quoted from his Journal, but let me introduce you to his Complete English Dictionary--a deliberately high-sounding title for what was in effect a pocket glossary of difficult words in common usage.²⁹ His preface is packed with dry humour: "As incredible as it may appear, I must avow that this dictionary is not published to get money, but to assist persons of common sense and no learning to understand the best English authors....The only way, according to the modern taste, for any author to procure commendation to his book is vehemently to commend it himself....In compliance therefore with the taste of the age, I add that this little dictionary is not only the shortest and the cheapest, but likewise by many degrees the most correct which is extant at this day. Many are the mistakes in all the other English dictionaries which I have yet seen. Whereas I can truly say I know of none in this; and I conceive the reader will believe me: for

uses "want" in the sense of "need." See Works, VIII, 310; Wesley Historical Society Proceedings, VII, 83.

²⁶ Letters, IV, 260.

²⁷ See John Vickers, Thomas Coke, London, Epworth Press, 1969, pp. 132-38.

²⁸ Works, V, 359; cf. Letters, VI, 380; VII, 52, 90, 377; VIII, 190. (Wesley's phrase is "murder [i.e. self-murder] for sacrifice.")

²⁹ First published in 1753; see Green, Wesley Bibliography, No. 162.

if I had, I should not have left it there. Use then this help, till you find a better." The English style of Alexander Knox's tribute to Wesley's humour is far different, but it is worth recording his impressions after living with Wesley for several days in 1789: in company Wesley's "sportive sallies of innocent mirth delighted even the young and thoughtless; and both saw in his uninterrupted cheerfulness the excellency of true religion."³⁰

Constantly, however, Wesley's shrewd realism was betrayed by a romantic streak, which led some people to smile at his credulity; others to charge him with hypocrisy. In part this was perhaps due to his innate desire to see order in all things: he was sometimes inclined (as most of us are) to imagine an order and completeness not in fact present. Thus when describing the results of his conversion on 24 May 1738 he contrasted himself "after" with himself "before," claiming: "I was striving, yea, fighting with all my might under the law, as well as under grace. But then I was sometimes, if not often, conquered; now, I was always conqueror." Yet exactly a week later he recorded that he "grieve[d] the Spirit of God...by speaking with sharpness instead of tender love of one that was not sound in the faith," adding, "immediately God hid his face, and I was troubled."³¹ The one who was "always conqueror" was once again conquered. Wesley saw too many coincidences as the special interventions of providence, and this propensity for looking at life through rose-coloured spectacles became more noticeable through the years. It may well be that looking back in old age he exaggerated the success of his mission to Georgia, though in so doing he had some justification as a corrective to those who classed it as a complete failure. Certainly he romanticised his conversion to early rising. His sermon, "On Redeeming the Time," written in 1782, describes how during his Oxford days he sometimes lay awake during the small hours of the night, and became determined to find out exactly how much sleep his constitution required. Accordingly, he says, "I procured an alarum, which waked me the next morning at seven (near an hour earlier than I rose the day before); yet I lay awake again at night. The second morning I rose at six; but notwithstanding this I lay awake the second night. The third morning I rose at five, but nevertheless I lay awake the third night. The fourth morning I rose at four (as, by the grace of God, I have

³⁰ Coke and Moore, Wesley, p. 539.

³¹ Journal, I, 477, 481.

done ever since), and I lay awake no more."³² The final result is pretty near the truth; the process is pure romance. It is a dramatic and artistically satisfying story, but we have Wesley's own diary to show that the experiment was spread over many months during the years 1729 and 1730, with many fluctuations from different norms, with 6 a.m. the most usual until in August 1730 he came to alternate between 4 and 5 a.m.. In old age John Wesley's memory frequently played him tricks, but it was undoubtedly given great assistance by the glow of optimism which coloured most of his life, especially as he came to view it through the perspective of the years.

The charges of credulity against Wesley are in part linked with this positive and cheerful acceptance of life. He was never credulous in the intellectual sense. Indeed in philosophy he was a sceptic, in his approach to history strongly critical. His wide reading of the philosophers had convinced him that most of their teaching was debatable, and he was driven back to an even greater dependence upon the revelation of God in the Bible. In his sermon on "The Good Steward" he said: "After having sought for truth with some diligence for half a century, I am at this day hardly sure of anything but what I learn from the Bible. Nay, I positively affirm, I know nothing else so certainly that I would dare to stake my salvation upon it."³³ Similarly he was well ahead of his age in doubting the historicity "of many famous incidents which have passed current for many ages....I cannot believe," he said, "there was ever such a nation as the Amazons in the world. The whole affair of the Argonauts I judge to be equally fabulous."³⁴ Much of the story of St. Patrick of Ireland, like that of St. George of England, he averred, "smells strong of romance."³⁵

What, then, of his undoubted belief in the supernatural? First of all, he was sure that it was supported by the Bible, in which his faith was (as befitted the age) far less critical than ours. Secondly, many instances of the supernatural were supported by reliable witnesses, so that it was less folly to believe than not to believe. A good example is the case of Elizabeth Hobson of Sunderland, a clairvoyant who was very distressed because she

³² Works, VII, 69.

³³ Works, VI, 142.

³⁴ Journal, VII, 304-05.

³⁵ Ibid., III, 348.

had several visions of people in distant places at the times of their deaths, as well as other instances of what we now call extrasensory perception. Having interviewed many witnesses, notebook in hand, Wesley claimed in his Journal account that fraud and delusion were ruled out, and the fact that he could not understand the phenomenon was a very poor reason for rejecting it. He added: "One of the capital objections to all these accounts, which I have known urged over and over, is this, 'Did you ever see an apparition yourself?' No; nor did I ever see a murder; yet I believe there is such a thing.... Therefore I cannot, as a reasonable man, deny the fact, although I never saw it, and perhaps never may. The testimony of unexceptionable witnesses fully convinces me both of the one and the other."³⁶

The charge of credulity was justified, however, as far as it related to other people's statements about themselves, rather than their testimony to observed facts. Although Wesley approached events critically, he was abnormally unsuspecting about people. Charles Wesley stated that his brother was "born for the benefit of knaves," and undoubtedly he was often duped.³⁷ Perhaps, however, we should term this charity rather than credulity. It was all a part of his open-armed acceptance of life, his high and hopeful views not only of God but of man, his serenity, his magnanimity, which impressed most people, friends and enemies alike. His disgruntled preacher, John Hampson, son of an even more disgruntled preacher father, wrote the first debunking biography of

³⁶ Ibid., V, 265-75. After reading this account Boswell sought out Wesley for Dr. Johnson, but was not fully satisfied with Wesley's evidence.

³⁷ Dr. John Whitehead, who knew him well for over a quarter of a century, claimed: "No man was ever more free from jealousy or suspicion than Mr. Wesley, or laid himself more open to the imposition of others. Though his confidence was often abused,...yet he suspected no one; nor was it easy to convince him that anyone had intentionally deceived him. And when facts had demonstrated that this was actually the case, he would allow no more than that it was so in that single instance. And if the person acknowledged his fault, he believed him sincere, and would trust him again." (Whitehead, II, 470.) Cf. Charles Wesley's Journal for Dec. 7, 1736, and his letters dated Sept. 28, 1741 ("O that damnable virtue of credulity"); Aug. 4, 1752; Nov. 16, 1756; March 2, 1760; April 23, 1779; Sept. 27, 1785.

Wesley, but was constrained to emphasise his "placability and to maintain that "he had a great facility in forgiving injuries."³⁸ It was extremely difficult to convince Wesley that anyone had in fact deceived him, and if it were proved in one instance he refused to make a generalisation from that example alone, constantly taking back into the circle of his friends and colleagues those who had betrayed and injured him. He was the target of much abusive and even filthy writing. Even in his seventies Calvinistic ministers like Richard Hill and Augustus Toplady frequently and virulently attacked him in print, but Charles Wesley avowed that even in private John never spoke an unkind word against them.³⁹

Man of God

Thus we have seen that that strange bundle of life known to history as John Wesley was an usual mixture of qualities male and female, active and passive, introspective and outgoing, calculating and imaginative, conservative and progressive, so that it is always difficult to be sure that you have analysed the precise balance of ingredients held in tension in his particular human formula, and quite preposterous to think of him as a type or to describe him in terms of someone else. About one thing, however, there can be no hesitation, in spite of all the calumnies to the contrary during his own lifetime: he was a genuine man of God. He loved the old days insofar as they led men to God; he overcame his prejudices and experimented with daring new methods--as he believed, at the call of God; he thought deeply about God; he set aside an abnormal proportion of every day for private communion with God; he toiled long and courageously with no thought of anyone but God and His children; he was gentle and courteous to his fellowmen because they like him were children of God; he was an authoritarian in order that God's work should be carried out most efficiently, and to that end he was a man of method; his dreams were coloured by God, and his very errors in quotation and description were in large measure brought about by the fact that he would not take time out for research and the verification of minor details if he believed it could be spent more valuably in the immediate service of God. Through all, his days, in all

³⁸ John Hampson, [Jun.], Memoirs of the late Rev. John Wesley, 3 vols., Sunderland, 1791, III, 179-80.

³⁹ Autograph letter to James Hutton, 17 October 1773, in Moravian Archives, London.

his ways, God was at the centre.

In closing a simple homely anecdote may bring his admittedly rhapsodical tribute down to earth. It was recorded by Charles Wesley's daughter Sally. Her uncle John had promised to take her on a trip to Canterbury and Dover, probably in December 1776. The previous day Charles heard that John's jealous wife was handing over to the Morning Post for publication some letters which she had so doctored as to make him out a villain. Charles rushed over to the Foundery, urging that it would be folly to leave town in such an emergency. John must stay in town and protect his good name. To which John replied, "Brother, when I devoted to God my ease, my time, my life, did I except my reputation? No. Tell Sally I will take her to Canterbury tomorrow."⁴⁰

Over the years it is safe to say that I have come to know John Wesley better than I knew my own father. In all sincerity, and with all the weight I can muster, I claim that whatever his errors in memory, in judgment, in tact, throughout his long adult life until his death at the age of 87 in 1791, John Wesley consistently and courageously lived to the glory of God, never to the glory of John Wesley.

⁴⁰ Richard Watson, The Life of the Rev. John Wesley, 6th ed., London, Mason, 1835, pp. 203-04.