Introduction

Frank Baker

Whether we realize it or not, welcome it or not, most of us have multiple personalities. It is rarely, if ever, that a woman or a man is seen as exhibiting exactly the same traits of character at home, at work, and in social activities, in delivering a speech, or driving a car, or dealing with a youthful problem. We may be able to discourse with authority in some fields, but only hesitantly in other related fields; we may become excited about some forms of art or music, but remain cold or even antagonistic towards others. Every man – and every woman – is an island, nurturing some forms of his or her natural landscape, but letting other features run to waste, or attempting to replace them. To capture in a formula, even an extremely complex formula, the unique combination of characteristics comprising any human being, let alone assess their actions and achievements over a long lifetime in the public eye, is clearly impossible.

This becomes even less possible – if indeed there is anything less possible than impossible – when one is removed by a quarter of a millennium from the subject of one's assessment. Yet with a public and universal figure such as John Wesley it becomes tantalizingly desirable to discover what he was *really* like. Even in his own long lifetime he had become much of a legend, and because he was the founder of their family in the Church Universal, loyal Methodists experienced a strong urge to set him on a pedestal, not allowing any foibles to be seen in official biographies, and even refusing to admit that he might indeed have been sullied by any weaknesses. That time is long past, of course, and we are now trying to sort out what has happened to the various images people had of him; we are still asking what he was really like as a person, and what were his lasting contributions to church and society and to the world in

general. And all the time we are coming to realize more and more that whatever we discover must be fragmentary at best.

Anyone who sets out to be different from his fellows, of course, is bound to attract criticism, and mild criticism was certainly present in a half-humorous title bestowed on Wesley by one of the literary ladies in a Cotswold coterie with whom he eagerly corresponded, a title which perceptively diagnosed how he was striving to be different – 'Primitive Christianity'.[1]

Plenty of much more unpleasant mud was thrown at John Wesley from his Oxford days onward, though little of it stuck. The brands of mud that were thrown, and the measure in which they stuck, may indeed be used as one method of attempting to assess his true character – a kind of negative biography which is at least worth trying once, on a very small scale. The very title 'Methodist' was used as a jeering nickname, and the first printed attack upon Wesley and his colleagues, which appeared in a London newspaper, *Fog's Weekly Journal* for 9 December 1732, accused the Oxford Methodists of being hypocrites who 'use religion only as a veil to vice'. As the early Christians at Antioch had accepted their nickname as an honourable description, so did the Methodists, and Wesley similarly welcomed 'The Holy Club' as a 'glorious title'.[2] Although at times Wesley seemed to court persecution as if it were a sign of the favour of God, his more considered principles were explained in his 1732 apologia for Methodist self-discipline: 'We do indeed use all the lawful means we know to prevent "the good which is in us" from being "evil spoken of"; but if the neglect of known duties be the one condition of securing our reputation, why, fare it well.'[3]

Actually it was out of similar defamation that Wesley's *Journal* came – or at least its publication. It is indeed a sad and tortuous story which we read in Vol. 18 of the Bicentennial Edition, where we follow his tactless and fumbling love affair with Sophy Hopkey in Savannah – in which it is difficult to find any valid charge of impropriety or of even minimal ecclesiastical error, but merely a lack of worldly wisdom. Captain Robert Williams of Savannah, however, a Bristolian, was one of Wesley's enemies, and when he also returned to Bristol, he hawked about the streets a scurrilous broadsheet implying that Wesley had seduced Sophy. This scandal might well have undermined the nascent revival in the city, so that Wesley felt it incumbent upon him in 1740 to present a

genuine account of the affair by publishing (again in Bristol) the first *Extract of the Rev. Mr John Wesley's Journal*. This led eventually to twenty further extracts, the last only a few months after his death.[4]

Thirty-six years later his own estranged wife began a further round of vilification, having allowed an almost pathological jealousy to fester over the years because of her husband's warm pastoral familiarity with the many gifted women in his society. (It was indeed true, to use Alexander Knox's stilted phrase, that he 'had a predilection for the female character.'[5]) Mrs Mary Wesley handed over to a newspaper some of her husband's private pastoral letters to female followers, garbled in such a way as to imply his immorality. His brother Charles urged John to stay in London to defend his good name instead of taking his proposed trip to Canterbury with his niece. 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.'[6]

Another focal point of criticism was Wesley's supposed greed. He was reputed to have accumulated immense wealth from the contributions of his societies and from his multitudinous publications. Wesley grew weary of rebutting such charges by pointing to his simple life and his constant charities, though these were never flaunted. Among other concerns, he cared for widows and orphans, for the education of the young, and began the first free public dispensary in London. Hundreds of his tiny awakening pamphlets were distributed freely, and almost all of his larger works were published in the inexpensive duodecimo form at twopence or threepence instead of in the more fashionable octavo, at sixpence or a shilling. The spiritual and intellectual profit of his followers was what he sought, and their small but regular monetary contributions were intended simply to secure the payment of their expenses – and to help the poor. The true wealth accruing from his publications was in their devotional and intellectual stimulus to his preachers and to his societies.

Neither his early followers nor the more critical students of later generations have been able to discover any real vices in him, only the undue exaggeration of some of his virtues, which may indeed have occasionally caused unintended distress. Increasingly over the years the law of love was his major motive, although he

nevertheless sought also lesser virtues such as punctuality and courtesy, as well as strict honesty and truthfulness in all things. Occasionally his gentle trusting affection led him to neglect other things more important in worldly eyes, as in the instance of Sally's outing. He himself continued to hope that others would forgivingly follow his own precept: 'It is a rule with me to take nothing ill that is well meant.'[7]

This, however, did not prevent his occasional impatience with those well-meaning bumblers who frustrated his careful administration of the Methodist societies, and therefore – as he certainly saw it – the clear purposes of God. 'I hate delay:' he once wrote to his brother, 'The King's business requires haste!'[8] We have sometimes described as autocracy that firm control over people and preachers which he claimed was rooted in their own request that he should be their spiritual director.[9] His expectations of them were quite clear: 'All our preachers should be as punctual as the sun, never standing still, or moving out of their course.'[10] He constantly reminded them that his brand of Methodism made no pretence of being a democratic institution, and that their remedy was quite simple: if they felt dissatisfied with his authoritarian leadership, they were always at liberty to leave.[11]

He was sometimes accused of boasting, yet pride was an enemy with which he was constantly and consciously at war. One of his favourite expressions about the Methodist success story was Numbers 23.23, 'What hath God wrought!' His general demeanour made it clear, however, that this was by no means personal boasting, but a genuine desire to give glory to God for the providential rise of Methodism. He was truly humble, in accordance with his own definition: 'The knowledge of ourselves is true humility; and without this we cannot be freed from vanity, a desire of praise being inseparably connected with every degree of pride. Continual watchfulness is absolutely necessary to hinder this from stealing in upon us.'[12] When the anonymous clergyman 'John Smith' accused him of 'over-done humility' he replied: 'I am to this day ashamed before God that I do so little, [compared] to what I ought to do . . . I do not spend *all* my time so profitably as I might, nor all my strength, at least not all I might have if it were not for my own *lukewarmness* and remissness, if I wrestled with God in constant and fervent prayer.'[13] In fact, of course, he set himself what seem to us impossibly high

standards, and was genuinely distressed when he fell short of them.

Even then, in his forties, he was (as he later came to realize) too breathlessly energetic about his religious exercises. He diagnosed this possible flaw in himself in a letter to his brother Charles in 1766: 'I find rather an increase than a decrease of zeal for the whole work of God, and every part of it. I am φερόμενος [*pheromenos*, 'driven'], I know not how, [so] that I can't stand still.'[14] In a measure he had achieved calmness of spirit through most of his life because of his firm belief in a special providence, and his acceptance of people and events as they came and as they were.[15] However, just as 'John Smith' criticized Wesley's 'over-done humility', others might well regard as 'over-done equanimity' his claim: 'By the grace of God I never fret; I repine at nothing; I am discontented at nothing. And to have persons at my ear fretting and murmuring at everything is like tearing the flesh off my bones . . . This I want – to see God acting in everything, and disposing all for his own glory and his creatures' good.'[16] Perhaps it was the mood of the moment: but there were a million such moments in his over-busy life.

He continued to be guilty of many errors in dates and in facts, as he had been even during his middle years. He foreshortened in his 1782 memory the account of how he had dedicated himself in a few days to the practice of early rising – instead of over several months in 1729–30, as his diary proves to have been the case.[17] This was not because he intended to mislead his hearers, but because he was living in a golden glow of what God had managed to do with his life, in which the glorious end completely overshadowed the actual drudgery of the means.

John Wesley felt no shame in utilizing the actual words – usually condensed – of many authors whom he did not name, a literary crime which we now pejoratively term 'plagiarism'. To him, however, and to many of his contemporaries, this was a normal literary device, and the apt phrase or the cogent argument was to him far more important in itself than the remembering or repeating of its author's name. Sometimes, indeed, he may deliberately have withheld the identity of his source, for fear that it might set up a reaction that would diminish the impact of the quotation, as was possibly the case when he recited a devastating argument against the folly of war as by 'a late eminent hand' –

instead of referring to Jonathan Swift's *Gullivers's Travels*![18]. All of his hundreds of editings or re-writings of the works of others, however, were deliberately carried out to the glory of God, and he felt that he would serve God less effectively by spending precious time in composing an original essay expounding the works of God's grace if it were much simpler to reshape the writings of someone else. Always, however, his aim was clear: 'Goldsmith's *History* and Hooke's are far the best. I think I shall make them better. My view in writing history (as in writing philosophy) is to bring God into it.'[19]

Only very gradually did Wesley's furious pace slow down somewhat. In his *Journal* for 28 October 1765 he contrasted himself favourably with his former pupil, George Whitefield, who 'seemed to be an old, old man, being fairly worn out in his Master's service, though he has hardly seen fifty years'. 'And yet,' he continued, 'it pleases God that I . . . in my sixty-third year, find no disorder, no weakness, no decay, no difference from what I was at five-and-twenty, only that I have fewer teeth and more gray hairs.' On 28 June 1770, his sixty-seventh birthday, he wrote: 'I . . . am now healthier than I was forty years ago. This hath God wrought!' And a year later: 'I am still a wonder to myself. My voice and strength are the same as at nine-and-twenty. This also hath God wrought.'

The almost annual birthday reflections in his *Journal* from 1770 to 1790 remain equally buoyant into his seventies, but in his eighties reveal a slight relaxing of the interminable pressure, though (as shown by his daily diary from 1782 onwards) there was little change in his activities or timetable. His friends noticed, however, that his calmness amidst the busy turmoil was developing into a deep serenity. He was widely regarded among Methodists and non-Methodists alike as having something of the halo of saintliness about him. After the death of his younger brother in 1788 no one felt able to use his first name: he was 'Mr Wesley' to his followers, from the lowest to the highest. Most remarkable and revealing are his later birthday reflections. The longest was penned on 28 June 1788, written at his birthplace, Epworth, where he preached twice that day, and prepared the agenda for his forthcoming Conference. Apparently he considered the memorandum so significant that he had an amanuensis transcribe it, and he himself addressed the copy to Samuel

Bradburn, the most junior member of his preaching staff at the New Chapel, City Road, London – and the only non-cleric among them. It is lengthy, but it offers a suitable climax to our efforts to portray Wesley as he saw himself among his detractors:

> I this day enter my eighty-fifth year. And what cause have I to praise God, as for a thousand spiritual blessings, so for bodily blessings also! How little have I suffered yet by 'the rush of numerous years'! It is true I am not so *agile* as I was in times past: I do not run or walk so fast as I did. My *sight* is a little decayed. My left eye is grown dim, and hardly serves me to read. I have daily some pain in the ball of my right eye, as also in my right temple (occasioned by a blow received some months since), and in my right shoulder and arm, which I impute partly to a sprain, and partly to the rheumatism. I find likewise some decay in my memory, with regard to names, and things lately passed; but not at all with regard to what I have read or heard twenty, forty, or sixty years ago. Neither do I find any decay in my hearing, smell, taste, or appetite (though I want but a third part of the food I did once); nor do I feel any such thing as weariness, either in travelling or preaching. And I am not conscious of any decay in writing Sermons, which I do as readily and I believe as correctly as ever.
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> To what cause can I impute this, that I am as I am? First, doubtless to the power of God, fitting me for the work to which I am called, as long as he pleases to continue me therein; and next, subordinately to this, to the prayers of his children.
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> May we not impute it, as inferior means:
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> 1. To my constant exercise and change of air?
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> 2. To my never having lost a night's sleep, sick or well, at land or at sea, since I was born?
>
> 3. To my having sleep at command, so that whenever I feel myself almost worn out I call it, and it comes, day or night?
>
> 4. To my having constantly, for above sixty years, risen at four in the morning?
>
> 5. To my constant preaching at five in the morning, for above fifty years?
>
> 6. To my having so little pain in my life, and so little sorrow, or anxious care?
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> Even now, though I find pain daily, in my eye, or temple, or

arm, yet it is never violent, and seldom lasts many minutes at a time.

Whether or not this is sent to give me warning that I am shortly to quit this tabernacle, I do not know; but, be it one way or the other, I have only to say:

My remnant of days
I spend to his praise,
Who died the whole world to redeem:
Be they many or few,
My days are his due,
And they all are devoted to him.

John Wesley's death in 1791 led to a host of eulogies, followed by a group of biographies prepared too hastily and surrounded by controversy over the handling of his manuscripts. Even then there were a few critics of his views and idiosyncrasies, though the general tone was reverential and protective. The best brief assessment of these and subsequent biographies is by Richard Heitzenrater, in *The Elusive Mr Wesley* (1984), a fascinating and eye-opening two-volume introduction to 'John Wesley his own Biographer' and 'John Wesley as seen by Contemporaries and Biographers'.[20] The well-rounded scholarly full-length biography of Wesley that most of us seek still remains to be written, but its possibility has been drawing nearer almost every decade of this century, with its host of specialist studies, with the growing realization that Wesley was not monolithic either in his theology, his spirituality, or his ecclesiology, and especially with the assistance of a steadily accumulating series of definitive texts in the Oxford/Bicentennial Edition of his works.[21]

Explorations of the many facets of this great churchman whose life touched every decade of the eighteenth century continues to enthral students in many seemingly unrelated fields. This volume attempts to secure the views upon his life and influence of twenty scholars, each of whom has made her or his own mark, but sees Wesley differently from anyone else. Even a score of diverse writers, of course, cannot expect to assess him adequately, let alone produce a definitive biography. Each, however, touches upon something of importance which may help to furnish a more reliable cumulative impression of this many-sided man of God after two hundred and fifty years.

It is into a world of rapidly increasing knowledge about John Wesley that we introduce this series of essays, which come from so many different theological and denominational standpoints. We begin with a special essay about one of the more important aspects of this new knowledge, a study of Wesley's diary by Professor Richard P. Heitzenrater. From this we turn successively to some more general fields in which Wesley's presence has been strongly felt, those of Christian experience, churchmanship, the pastoral office, and evangelism.

With our focal point as the awakening experience which came to John Wesley on 24 May 1738, in the society meeting in Aldersgate, London, and its aftermath, Professor W. P. Stephens of Aberdeen University writes on 'Wesley and the Moravians'; Professor Frances Young of Birmingham University on 'The Significance of John Wesley's Conversion Experience', and Bruce Kent on 'John Wesley: Inspiration', a Roman Catholic's view of Wesley's personal religion. Different aspects of Wesley's churchmanship are discussed by Father Aelred Burrows, OSB, Monk of Ampleforth Abbey, on 'Wesley the Catholic'; Bishop Ole Borgen of Sweden on 'John Wesley: Sacramental Theology. No Ends without the Means'; the Rev. C. Norman R. Wallwork of Keswick on 'Wesley's Legacy in Worship'; Christopher Stell of the Rural Commission of Historical Monuments on 'Wesley's Chapels'; and the Rev. A. Raymond George, Warden of Wesley's New Room at Bristol, on 'John Wesley: The Organizer'. The theme of Wesley's witness as a pastor is expounded in varying ways by Lieutenant-Colonel David Guy, Literary Secretary of the Salvation Army, on 'John Wesley: Apostle of Social Holiness'; the Rev. Dr John A. Newton, Chairman of the Liverpool District of the Methodist Church, on 'Wesley and Women'; Bishop Maddocks of the Church of England on 'Health and Healing in the Ministry of John Wesley'; and the Rev. Wesley A. Chambers of the New Zealand Methodist Church on 'John Wesley and Death'.

The final essays deal with various aspects of Wesley's evangelical message. Professor Melvin E. Dieter of Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky, writes on 'Wesley Theology'; the Rev. William R. Davies, President of the British Methodist Conference and former Principal of Cliff College on 'The Relevance of John Wesley's Message for Today'. The Rev. the Lord Soper expounds 'Wesley the Outdoor Preacher', the Rev. Dr A.

Skevington Wood, 'Wesley as a Writer', and Dr Pauline Webb of the BBC Overseas Religious Broadcasting Service, 'Wesley the Communicator'. The symposium is rounded off, and reaches its true climax, with the essay of Dr Joe Hale, General Secretary of the World Methodist Council, on 'Wesley the Evangelist'.

On the occasion of the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of a great leader's spiritual birthday it is natural that we should take off our hats to the past, but with his example powerfully before us, it is certainly appropriate that we should also take off our coats to the future!

1

Wesley and his Diary

Richard P. Heitzenrater

No single name in the history of our tradition is more familiar to Methodists world-wide than John Wesley. Nevertheless, historians and biographers, as well as painters, have had difficulty for over two centuries in capturing a portrait of Wesley that commands a consensus as being true to life. The picture is usually larger than life, perhaps not unexpectedly so – Wesley was, after all, a significant historical personality. But in the process of depicting his significance, the epic proportions of his traditional public image often overshadow the human, personal aspects of the man. The task before us is not to redraw the portrait completely – that is neither possible nor perhaps necessary. The historian's task is to bring the portrait into the light, review it, and make whatever alterations are appropriate on the basis of new evidence or new interpretations. Wesley's private diary proves to be a very useful resource in this endeavour because it gives us such an close view of the personal side of the man.

Many otherwise unsuspecting Methodists, when they hear of Wesley's multi-volume private diary (many parts of which are as yet unpublished), wonder if these notebooks might reveal more than we would (or should) want to know about Wesley's private life. We can set such apprehensiveness aside at the outset. Only those who forget that Wesley was human will have any problem with these writings. And the Wesley-cultists actually have more to cope with in his letters than in his 'secret' diary.

The well-known stereotype of Wesley is essentially a 'public' image, built upon documents that were published during Wesley's lifetime – journals, sermons, tracts, hymns, and a few letters. This image depicts Wesley as he wanted the public to see him. The