

Alias "John Smith"

In Wesley's Day

ENSCONCED in his garret-study under the eaves of the Orphan House, Newcastle, Wesley was writing his first contribution to a correspondence which

to fill a hundred closely-printed octavo pages. Around the building panic-stricken crowds were milling about, trundling their most valuable possessions to the haven of refuge behind the city walls.

It was Saturday, September 28, 1745; and since the Young Pretender had routed the English army at Prestonpans the week before, rumours of his advance into England had gained in strength and vividness. It now seemed certain that Prince Charlie and his wild Highlanders were on their way, their first objective Newcastle. The inner city was crammed with refugees. Business was at a standstill. But John Wesley was calmly sitting down—outside the city walls—to write a carefully phrased letter of over three thousand words, answering the criticisms against Methodism of a learned, but anonymous, clergyman. His answer is the more remarkable, coming as it does after over three months' delay, for which Wesley's explanation is, "I could not persuade myself to write at all till I had leisure to write fully." Leisure indeed!

Wesley's correspondence with "John Smith"—six letters on each side, stretching over a period of nearly three years—shows him matched with one who was his equal in logic and open-minded tolerance. The quality of the opening letter was such that Wesley determined to give it much fuller attention than he usually accorded to anonymous letters. Dated May, 1745, it had ended:—

"P.S.—As I live at a considerable

distance from London, I have no convenience of a personal conference with you; but a letter will find me directed to 'John Smith, at Mr. Richard Mead's, at the Golden Cross, in Cheapside.'

The identity of the individual behind this accommodation-address is an unsolved mystery. All we feel reasonably certain about is that the traditional belief that it was Dr. Thomas Secker, Bishop of Oxford, is wrong.

Coming into contact with Methodist influences in the West Country, "John Smith" made as thorough an investigation as he could of Methodist beliefs and claims. In particular, he had read Wesley's Appeals "to Men of Reason and Religion," of whom he rightly counted himself one. Whitefield's crude emotionalism he soon dismissed as unworthy to be classed with Wesley's scholarly zeal. Wesley, however, he could not understand. His apparent belief that the scriptural experience of being in direct touch with God can be repeated in modern times found "John Smith" sceptical, while the more exaggerated expressions of Methodist fervour, made him frankly impatient.

"These (I had like to have said enthusiastic; but I would willingly avoid all offensive words, these) rapturous expressions may pass sometimes in poetry, but are too flighty, methinks, for plain prose."

After a time a note of asperity creeps into the correspondence, on both sides. Wesley rebukes "John Smith" for levity and sarcasm, and is answered, "If this debate is to go any farther, I must insist upon your keeping your temper." Certainly Wesley's correspondent was the older man, by about ten years, but surely that was no excuse for treating Wesley as a rather precocious adolescent.

F. B.

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