

Correspondence between James Erskine and John and Charles Wesley

Randy L. Maddox

James Erskine (1679–1754) was the son of Charles Erskine, Earl of Mar (in Scotland) and his wife Mary. Since his older brother John succeeded to their father's title, James trained for a career in law. He was made a Lord of Justiciary in 1706, taking the title of Lord Grange, and raised to the bench the same year. In 1710 Erskine succeeded Adam Cockburn of Ormiston as Lord Justice Clerk. While sympathetic with the Jacobite cause, Erskine took no part in the 1715 Rebellion, which allowed him to stay in favor with Presbyterians in Scotland and active in the General Assembly. When Robert Walpole succeeded in excluding Scottish judges from sitting in the British House of Commons, Erskine resigned his judgeship and was elected a Member of Parliament in 1734. He generally resided in London from that point on, even after leaving Parliament in 1747.

Erskine was drawn into Methodist circles in the early 1740s by George Whitefield, who brought him to the attention of the Wesley brothers.¹ In the first known reference by either brother, Charles Wesley commented on Erskine being 'quite broken down' by his sermon in April 1744.² Erskine was soon offering aid to both brothers in Methodist matters.³ He was particularly helpful to Charles Wesley when the latter was falsely accused of inappropriate behavior in late 1744.⁴ Charles returned this favor in 1750 by helping restore the relationship between Erskine and his daughter.⁵

Given that Erskine was raised with Calvinist convictions, it is natural to wonder how he and the Wesley brothers negotiated their theological differences. Scholars have had access for some time to a few items of correspondence between Erskine and John Wesley that shed light on this question. The first item is an excerpt from a letter of Erskine to Wesley, written about March 10, 1745, that was published in a biography of Wesley shortly after his death.⁶ A transcription of Wesley's letter in response, dated March 16, 1745, was included in the 4th edition of Wesley's *Works*.⁷ Erskine's reply in early April 1745 was reproduced in abridged form by John Wesley in his published

¹See Whitefield's letter to John Wesley, Oct. 11, 1742, in *The Bicentennial Edition of The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984–) 26:87. Cited hereafter as *Works*.

²See S T Kimbrough Jr. & Kenneth G. C. Newport (eds.), *The Manuscript Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A.* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2008), April 29, 1744 (p. 403). Cited hereafter as CW, *Manuscript Journal*.

³Note, for example, Erskine's role in redeeming the preacher John Nelson, in CW, *Manuscript Journal*, June 6, 1744 (p. 405).

⁴See Nov. 28–30, 1744 (p. 429) and Jan. 26, 1745 (p. 434) in CW, *Manuscript Journal*.

⁵See June 22, 1750 (p. 595) and July 18, 1750 (p. 597) in CW, *Manuscript Journal*.

⁶See John Whitehead, *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley* (London, Couchman, 1793–96), 2:195; the excerpt is republished (and dated about March 10, 1745) in *Works*, 26:124.

⁷John Wesley to James Erskine, March 16, 1745, in Thomas Jackson (ed.), *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (4th edn., London: John Mason, 1840–42), 13:154; reprinted in *Works*, 26:128.

Journal.⁸ And a longer transcription of this reply (dated April 3–4), along with another letter from Erskine to Wesley dated September 4, 1745, were included in a collection of letters written to John Wesley published in 1797.⁹

The original manuscripts for the items just listed do not appear to have survived. But a few other manuscripts have come to light in recent decades. Frank Baker drew attention to two in volume 26 of *Works*, published in 1982. One is a memorandum in the Methodist Archives, dated April 23, 1745, that Erskine addressed to both Wesley brothers, commending their desire to maintain communion with evangelicals who differed from them on matters like predestination, while pointing out some practices of the brothers that he judged to deviate from this goal.¹⁰ The other is a brief letter from John Wesley to Erskine dated July 6, 1745, now held in Edinburgh University Library.¹¹ Two short manuscript letters from Charles Wesley to Erskine have also been located—one dated August 1, 1745, in Edinburgh University Library; and the other dated September 12, 1746, in The National Archives of Scotland.¹²

These few items suggest that, while Erskine continued to hold moderate Calvinist convictions, his interactions with the Wesley brothers were irenic in spirit, championing focus on the essentials of practical Christianity over disputes about contested areas of doctrine.

The purpose of this essay is to introduce further evidence about this relationship that has recently come to light. This evidence is an inventory of manuscripts of James Erskine that were passed down in his family. Specifically, there is a catalogue in The National Archives of Scotland of items in the estate of Lady Frances Erskine (1715–76), prepared by her trustees shortly after her death.¹³ Lady Frances was doubly related to James Erskine, Lord Grange—she was the daughter of John, his older brother; and in 1740 she married James, his son. The inventory of her estate includes (on pp. 13–20) a section listing 43 manuscript items that are either correspondence between James Erskine and the Wesley brothers or memorandums that Erskine prepared related to the Wesley brothers.

⁸See JW, *Journal*, May 29, 1745, *Works*, 20:66–68; cf. *Works*, 26:129–30.

⁹See *A Collection of Letters on Religious Subjects, from various ministers and others, to the Rev. John Wesley* (London: Whitfield, 1797), 37–40, and 40–43.

¹⁰Baker included an abridged transcription in *Works*, 26:132–36; the original is in the collection of the Methodist Archive and Research Centre, The John Rylands University Library, Manchester, England, MA 1977/503, Box 4, file 19.

¹¹The letter is transcribed in *Works*, 26:147; the original is at Edinburgh University Library, Special Collections, David Laing collection, LA.II.125.

¹²Charles Wesley to James Erskine, August 1, 1745, Edinburgh University Library, Special Collections, David Laing collection, LA.II.25; and Charles Wesley to James Erskine, Sept. 12, 1746, The National Archives of Scotland, ref. GD124/15/1567. Both letters will appear in a volume of Charles Wesley's letters being published by Oxford University Press in 2013.

¹³The National Archives of Scotland, ref. GD 124/15/1642. Gareth Lloyd drew my attention to this inventory; I am indebted to the National Archives for providing a copy, from which I prepared this transcription.

Unfortunately, the National Archives holds only the original inventory list, not the items mentioned on the list. The items were apparently sold or given away, since two letters on the list were acquired by David Laing (1793–1878), an avid Scottish antiquary, who bequeathed them to Edinburgh University Library. These two letters are the only items on the list for which we know the current location and have access to the contents. However, the list includes a brief description of every item, often with short excerpts. So perusal of the inventory provides further details on the relationship of Erskine and the Wesley brothers. It also leaves some tantalizing questions, like what John Wesley said concerning the status of blacks in his letter of January 29, 1746!

What follows is generally a transcription of the section of the inventory of Lady Frances Erskine's estate titled 'Letters of John and Charles Wesley, etc.' A few editorial revisions have been adopted. First, the original list adds honorific titles and frequently abbreviates both sender and receiver identifications; the transcription adopts a uniform style for listing each item, giving full names but no titles. Second, the original list places the date of the item at the end of the description, in the right hand column; the transcription moves it to the beginning, on the left. Third, while the items on the original list are placed in rough chronological sequence, a few are out of place; the transcription standardizes items in chronological order. Finally, for sake of completeness, the other items of correspondence between Erskine and the Wesley brothers noted above that do not appear in the original inventory are included in this list, placed in {styled brackets}, in their appropriate chronological location. Under the listing for each item in the original inventory the description of the contents of the item is quoted in full, with any editorial additions placed in [square brackets].

A List of the Erskine/Wesley Correspondence, etc. in Chronological Order

- | | |
|--------------|--|
| 11 June 1744 | Letter from Mrs. Anna Moll Millinor, Bedford St. [London], to James Erskine

'on being denied the right of communion on Sabbath the 10 th by Mr. Charles Wesley'
'Remark on back thereof by Mr. Erskine: "her spirit too bitter and unquiet, and seems not to see herself enough"' |
| [1744–45?] | 'Notes by Mr. Erskine with the view of drawing up a vindication of Mr. Charles Wesley' ¹⁴ |

¹⁴This set of notes is undated, but is likely related to Erskine's help in defending Charles from accusations of inappropriate behavior; cf. Nov. 28–30, 1744 (p. 429) and Jan. 26, 1745 (p. 434) in *CW, Manuscript Journal*.

- 1745 Draft letter from James Erskine to Charles Wesley
 ‘on the disputed doctrines of particular and universal redemption — subject treated in a clear and judicious manner’
- { 10 Mar. 1745 the letter from James Erskine to John Wesley noted above }
- { 16 Mar. 1745 the letter from John Wesley to James Erskine noted above }
- 01 Mar. 1745 Draft letter from James Erskine to John Wesley
 ‘relative to Mr. Edward’s treatise on redemption, and citing instances of the natural tendency of sectarian and particular views of religious subjects to bias the judgement, confirm men in error, and produce schisms, etc. — examples Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine in Scotland’ [cf. Apr. 3–4 letter noted above¹⁵]
- 12 Apr. 1745 Letter from John Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘dislike of passage contained in preface to Edwards’ *Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit*¹⁶
- { 23 Apr. 1745 Memorandum of James Erskine for John and Charles Wesley noted above }
- 28 June 1745 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘informing him of the success of the “Church Militant” and informing him that brother [Thomas] Maxfield had been pressed for a soldier’

¹⁵This is clearly a draft of the letter sent to John Wesley dated April 3–4, 1745, that is transcribed most fully in *Collection* (1797), 37–40. But that transcription does not contain the specific examples of Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine. Either James Erskine omitted these from the final draft, or they were omitted by both Wesley in his extract in his *Journal* and the editors of *Collection* (1797).

¹⁶Jonathan Edwards, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (Boston, 1741; reprinted, London: Mason, 1742). It is unclear which passage Wesley found objectionable. He deleted the entire preface when he published an extract of Edwards’s book in 1744.

- 06 July 1745 Letter John Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘relative to answering a passage in the *Craftsman*’¹⁷
- 01 Aug. 1745 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘meeting of “Conference” — salutation of the brethren’¹⁸
- 03 Aug. 1745 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘participating in satisfaction at return of the “poor prodigal” — [update on Thomas] Maxfield — and enjoining him to “check” J[ohn] Nelson on his everlasting egotism’
- 07 Aug. 1745 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘intimating Maxfield’s deliverance, application for Mr. Erskine’s influence to obtain a special discharge in his favour so as he might not be again pressed; reference to Mr. Erskine’s letter on “terms of union” which he stated had been universally approved, etc.’¹⁹
- {04 Sept. 1745 Letter from James Erskine to John Wesley noted above }
- 17 Jan. 1746 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘Gospel flourishing at Bristol and neighbourhood’

¹⁷This is the letter obtained by David Laing, now in Edinburgh University Library; transcribed in *Works*, 26:147.

¹⁸This is the other letter obtained by David Laing, now in Edinburgh University Library. Charles is writing from Bristol, on the opening day of the second annual Conference of preachers associated with the Wesley brothers. The body of the letter reads: ‘Many here salute you in the love of Jesus Christ, particularly the brethren met in Conference; who are much disappointed by your not coming. We should be glad if you would favour us with any questions which you shall think necessary to be considered. Our Lord is with us. O that he may continue with us till He has made us meet for our inheritance above! Remember us in all your prayers that we may be led into all truth and holiness. I pray God for Christ sake give you the fullness of his Spirit, that you *may know* the things which are freely given you of God!’

¹⁹The minutes of the Conference that had just concluded in Bristol contain no explicit mention of the ‘terms of union’ or their approval; cf. *Works*, 10:147–68.

- 29 Jan. 1746 Letter from John Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘negro, whether “skin constitute a sort of animal specifically different from man”’
- 29 Jan. 1746 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘proposed journey north whence he had received heavy tidings’²⁰
- 02 Mar. 1746 Letter from John Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘Mr. Erskine’s trials, of personal application, etc.’
- 16 Mar. 1746 Letter from John Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘stating that there are cases in which good may result by giving way, but that the one alluded to was not of that nature (there follows a very sensible remark)’
- 1746 May 20 Letter from John Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘on his experience and feelings’
- 14 June 1746 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘success of his labours on the Isle of Portland’²¹

²⁰The heavy tidings likely related to the attempted invasion underway from Scotland by Charles Edward Stuart (grandson of James II) hoping to retake the English throne. The threat was quashed in the Battle of Culloden in April 1746.

²¹Cf. CW, *Manuscript Journal*, June 4–9, 1746 (p. 461).

- 25 June 1746 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘giving satisfactory account of his visit to Tavistock, constrained to go to Plymouth, preaches in the streets, fields, etc. to the conversion of many from the doctrine of antinomianism, etc.’²²
- 02 July 1746 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘remarks on that “show of humility talking of oneself” and informing that he has preached last Sunday to nearly 8000 souls, etc.’²³
- 07 July 1746 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘informing him that “the word runs very swiftly” and soliciting his prayers’
- 07 July 1746 Letter from James Erskine to Charles Wesley
 ‘wherein he discusses at great length the doctrines of particular and universal redemption’
- 12 July 1746 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘success of his ministry’
- 12 July 1746 Draft letter from James Erskine to Charles Wesley
 ‘on the primary nature and notion of *being* — creator and creature; and of the independency and dependency necessarily thence resulting; with reference to the doctrine of particular and universal redemption. Explication of the term “predestination”, etc.’

²²Cf. CW, *Manuscript Journal*, June 14–20, 1746 (pp. 462–63).

²³In CW, *Manuscript Journal* (p. 464), Wesley lists the congregation gathered on Sunday, June 29 as numbering only 5,000!

- 20 July 1746 Letter from John Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘stating that he felt convinced that Mr. Erskine’s soul could not be saved till he had broke through “for what is this yielding, but giving place to the devil, and, in effect, giving up the children of God”’
- 12–28 July 1746 Draft letter from James Erskine to Charles Wesley
 ‘on practical Christianity, as independent of the disputed doctrines of particular and universal redemption’
- 1746 Draft letter from James Erskine to Charles Wesley
 ‘on the same topics (unfinished)’
- 12 July 1746 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘on the same subject and showing that the doctrine which he espouses and propagates, namely, general predestination, is the superior; that final perseverance most dangerous to young beginners etc. (very interesting letter)’
- 04 Aug. 1746 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘Route for the month, preached to above 10,000 souls previous evening at Gwennap’²⁴
- 09 Aug. 1746 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘success of ministration at St. Just, where, he states, “the leopards are all laid down with the kids”’²⁵

²⁴In CW, *Manuscript Journal* (p. 471), Wesley again lists the crowd at Gwennap on the evening of August 3 as numbering only about 5,000.

²⁵Cf. CW, *Manuscript Journal*, July 13–27, 1746 (pp. 466–70); the quotation is Isa. 11:6.

- 22 Aug. 1746 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘Reception at North Tresmeer; “disorderly walker” at Tavistock; inexpediency of preaching final perseverance to beginners — apt to “catch at the opinion before they are settled and grounded in grace”, etc; remarks on personal affections — account of parting at Gwennap, 12,000 present, etc.’²⁶
- { 12 Sept. 1746 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine noted above²⁷ }
- 14 Oct. 1746 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘recommending a Kingswood collier as a faithful and skillful man to advise with in his “worldly affairs” — reference to divisions in Scotland. His own flock “delivered from disputes”; and as to self and brother observes “as we *never had the thought of seceding or setting up for ourselves*, God who knoweth our simpleness and single eye, will, we humbly trust, preserve us from those snares in which so many mightier have fallen” — possible to keep clear of controversy in preaching, even to Papists’
- 28 Oct. 1746 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘glorious accounts of the progress of Cornwall; although *Satan rages above measure*’
- 02 Dec. 1746 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ““Grace given in Scotland, England, and Wales, or America hitherto, but as a few scattering drops before the shower”; sympathy in tribulation; Mr. Wesley’s old High Church prejudice, desires to see the divine right of Episcopacy disproved “if it *can be disproved*” — and that it is not *essential* to a church. Requests Mr. Erskine’s opinion and refers to Papins (?²⁸) a writer on the subject’

²⁶In CW, *Manuscript Journal* (p. 471), Wesley lists his parting crowd at Gwennap on the evening of August 10 as numbering about 10,000. He reaches Tresmeer by August 12, and comments about the impact of the disorderly walker upon the society in Tavistock on August 13 and August 20.

²⁷This is the letter held in The National Archives of Scotland. It is only two sentences long, arranging a meeting the next day.

²⁸The spelling in the summary is fairly clear, but does not seem to fit any known work. Perhaps Wesley is referring to *The Divine Right of Episcopacy Asserted* (London: Richard Sare, 1708); the author is identified only as a Presbyterian of the Church of England.

- 16 Dec. 1746 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘F. F.’s²⁹ vanity; his work not calculated to make proselytes. Travelling plan for the month’
- 24 Dec. 1746 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘remarks on private afflictions and Christian patience and fortitude; and on a question relative to the text Matt 5:16 which Mr. Erskine had submitted to him — Divine right of Episcopacy, scruples not altogether removed by Mr. Erskine’s opinion, etc. — Two more clergymen, a D.D. and his curate, “stirred up to thirst after the Lord and salvation of souls”,³⁰ accident at Hexham’³¹
- 10 Jan. 1747 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘acknowledges that through Mr. Erskine’s letter both he and his brother’s scruples are so far removed that they could freely hold communion with sincere dissenters of any denomination’
- 17 Jan. 1747 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘informing him that “a great door is opened at Leeds” etc., etc.’

²⁹Almost certainly Felix Farley; cf. letter of Dec. 15, 1753.

³⁰In CW, *Manuscript Journal* (p. 484), Wesley comments that on December 14, 1746, he ‘had two or three hours’ close conversation with the two ministers at Whickham.’ The current rector of Whickham was Robert Tomlinson, D.D.

³¹In CW, *Manuscript Journal* (p. 484), Wesley mentions preaching here on Dec. 18, and an attempt to disrupt him with a cock-fight.

- 21 Jan. 1747 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘mode of address (classical) “word grows mightily and prevails” at Leeds’
- 29–31 Jan. 1747 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘commenced at Taddington, with interesting account of ministerial labours there and finished at Sheffield, at which latter town he states he “*evaded the cross* last night by preaching three hours earlier than the time appointed, but ashamed of his fear”³² — Mr. Erskine’s affections and dream “*fratrem ne desere frater*”’³³
- 30 May [1747?³⁴] Letter from Rev. Charles Wesley to James Erskine
 ‘reminding him of intended “Conference” and requesting his queries’
- [?³⁵ June 1747] Draft letter from James Erskine to [Charles Wesley?]
 ‘containing suggestions as to regulation of discussions at Conference, and cautioning against allowing the adoption of different, or particular explications, or phrases, expressions of the same fundamental truths to interrupt or destroy the harmony of the Society’
- Jan. 1749 ‘Some observations on a sermon preached by Mr. John Wesley in the chapel in West Street near the Seven Dials, London on Jan. 1, 1749, by Mr. Erskine, written soon after the sermon was preached’

³²Taddington, Berkshire, was one of the ‘several places in or near the Peak’ where Wesley was active between January 25–30, 1747; cf. CW, *Manuscript Journal*, p. 488. He records that there were rioters in Sheffield on January 30, but not how he evaded them.

³³Virgil, *Aenid*, Book 10, line 600; ‘Let not brother forsake brother’ (Loeb).

³⁴The year is not specified in the inventory. 1745 is not likely because Conference was in October and is addressed in other letters. 1746 is ruled out because Conference was held that year May 12–15. The most likely is 1747, when Conference met in London on June 15–18. Also possible is 1748, meeting in London on June 2–6; but that would leave little time for Erskine to respond.

³⁵The draft is undated, but is almost surely a response to the preceding letter. The guidelines suggested fit well the topics discussed at the 1747 Conference; cf. *Works*, 10:188–209.

1753 Dec 15 Letter from Charles Wesley to James Erskine

‘regretting interruption of correspondence; death of Felix Farley; sickness of partner [i.e., his wife Sarah]; etc.’