

**“THIS DISTINGUISHED BLESSING”
SARAH WESLEY, JR.’S WITNESS TO
A TRIO OF FAITHFUL DEATHS**

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Among the archival holdings of the Bodleian Library of Oxford University are the papers of Colonel Martin and Judith (née Cowper) Madan, and two of their daughters: Maria Frances Cecilia Cowper (1726-1797) and Penelope Maitland (1730-1805). About 1750 this family formed connections with both Wesleyan and Calvinist Methodism. Penelope (née Madan) Maitland, in particular, became a friend of the family of Charles Wesley. Thus among this archival collection are thirty-two manuscript letters written by Sarah Wesley, Jr. (1759-1828), the daughter of Charles Wesley, to Penelope Maitland.

Since Penelope Maitland (like her mother) was a poet, many of the letters reflect Sarah, Jr.’s interest in literary culture. But five of the letters have particular interest to Wesley Studies. They convey Sarah’s firsthand accounts of the deaths of Rev. Charles Wesley (March 29, 1788), Rev. John Wesley (March 2, 1791), and Martha (Wesley) Hall (July 12, 1791). Sarah, Jr., was likely the only person present at all three deaths and comments in one of the letters on “this distinguished blessing—to see a whole family ‘die in the faith.’” To be sure, what Sarah witnessed was the passing of only the *last three* children of Samuel and Susanna (Annesley) Wesley, but the lives of these three were closely intertwined with one another, with Methodism, and with Sarah, Jr.

Her letter to Penelope Maitland was not Sarah Wesley Jr.’s only epistolary account of her father’s death. Her earliest account (dated April 4, 1788) was sent to her uncle John, who quickly published it in the *Arminian Magazine*.¹ By comparison to this well-known letter, Sarah’s (previously unpublished) account to Penelope is brief, but perhaps more revealing of her sense of loss and pain.

The best known firsthand account of John Wesley’s death is by Elizabeth Ritchie, who helped care for him at the time.² Sarah, Jr.’s account to Penelope Maitland is found in two letters—one sent the day before his death, describing how he was facing his illness; and a long letter almost two weeks after his death. Together these two letters confirm and add scattered details to the account of Ritchie (such as the last words that Sarah’s mother spoke to her

¹*Arminian Magazine* 11 (1788): 407–409.

² Elizabeth Ritchie, *An Authentic Narrative of the Circumstances Relative to the Departure of the late Rev. John Wesley* (London: New Chapel, March 8, 1791).

brother-in-law).³

Turning to Sarah, Jr.'s beloved aunt, Martha (Wesley) Hall (1706–91), there are again two letters to Maitland describing Martha's last illness and death. In this instance, Sarah's letters provide the only known firsthand account of Martha's passing (and have not been published previously).

Together, these five letters bear eloquent testimony both to the close ties in the Wesley family and to the ideal of the "faithful death" in early Methodism.⁴

Sarah Wesley, Jr., to Penelope (Madam) Maitland⁵

[London]
April 16, 1788

We all thank you, dear madam, for your sympathy.

I purposed writing to acknowledge your kind attentions during our distressing anxiety,⁶ but the heartlessness with which I have set about everything since prevented me from addressing *you*, to whom I owe a warmth of gratitude my present state of mind cannot well enable me to express. My dear mother⁷ is supported wonderfully. My brothers⁸ are well, and I *doubt not* will show their respect for the best of fathers by new attentions to her.

For myself I can say little, though I think my spirits are better than my health. My affliction was aggravated by being *till the last hour* unexpected, and it is likely to be lasting, as it is less a passionate grief than a settled sorrow. To the last hour I attended, saw the change of death in his dear countenance, felt the cold sweats come on, and heard the only words he was able to utter.⁹ They were prayer, they were peace!

The happy spirit fled so easily we knew not the exact moment it departed. His hand was in mine sometime after. I gazed upon him, pallid, serene, as he lay. Waited to catch another breath, in vain! And neither wept or fainted!

The house unite in cordial best acknowledgments with, dear madam,

Your afflicted and affectionate,

S. Wesley

³ Sarah Wesley, Jr.'s letters to Penelope Maitland were first discovered by John Walsh, who published transcriptions of these two on John Wesley's death in *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 56 (2007): 1-9.

⁴ The following letters are transcribed imposing modern standards of capitalization and punctuation, but retaining typical British spellings.

⁵ Sarah Wesley, Jr., to Penelope (Madam) Maitland letter, Oxford University, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Misc. c. 502, ff. 47.

⁶ Her father, Charles Wesley, had died on March 29, 1788.

⁷ Sarah (Gwynne) Wesley (1726–1822).

⁸ Charles Wesley, Jr. (1757–1834), and Samuel Wesley (1766–1837).

⁹ In her letter to John Wesley, Sarah records these words as "Lord—my heart—my God!"

Sarah Wesley, Jr., to Penelope (Madan) Maitland¹⁰

[London]

[Tuesday, March 1, 1791¹¹]

Dear Madam,

By the time this letter reaches you it is probable my beloved uncle will have joined the society of blessed spirits.¹² He was seized with fever and general debility some time ago, but exerted himself as usual, and so much so last Friday that a fatal relapse took place. There is no human hope of recovery, but great cause of spiritual rejoicing. His soul is already in heaven and his conversation (whether in delirium or perfect intellectual power) evinces it. His speech frequently fails, but we can distinguish the frame of his spirit.

Sunday he articulated

And oh this life of mercies crown
With a triumphant end.¹³

At another time he said, “there is no entering heaven but through the blood of the covenant, through Jesus!”

A little after:

I the chief of sinners am
But Jesus died for me.¹⁴

He suffers no pain, receives all in a sweet and thankful manner, and on finding great difficulty in speaking began a prayer, “Lord thou dost all things well. Thou givest strength to those who can speak and to those who cannot.” Then feebly he attempted to sing, but could only repeat audibly that favorite hymn of his:

I’ll praise my Maker whilst I’ve breath
And when my voice is lost in death
Praise shall employ my nobler powers;
My days of praise shall ne’er be past
Whilst life, or thought, or being last
Or immortality endures!¹⁵

I have not time to add many other striking and consoling particulars,

¹⁰ Sarah Wesley, Jr., to Penelope (Madan) Maitland letter, Oxford University, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Misc. c. 502, ff. 62–63.

¹¹ While the letter is not dated, Sarah mentions the date in the opening of her next letter.

¹² Indeed, John Wesley died the next morning, March 2, 1791.

¹³ Charles Wesley, Hymn on Psalm 71:8, *Scripture Hymns* (1762), 1:266.

¹⁴ Charles Wesley, Hymn on 1 Cor. 2:2, st. 1, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1742), 259.

¹⁵ This hymn by Isaac Watts was indeed a favorite of John Wesley. He included it in his very first 1737 *Collection of Psalms and Hymns*, (9-10), and it appeared in several of his other published collections including the 1780 *Collection of Hymns for the People Called Methodists*.

having the delightful privilege of attending his last hours, and indeed am now writing in his chamber.

Knowing your esteem for this excellent and extraordinary man induces me, my dear madam, to send this incoherent account, besides the respect I feel for the many kind, condescending marks of your attentions toward

Your truly indebted and affectionate servant,

S. Wesley

I have borne a sympathizing part in several events of your amiable family, and should have written, but frequent indispositions and many anxieties have kept me silent.

Sarah Wesley, Jr., to Penelope (Madan) Maitland¹⁶

[London]

Monday, March 14, 1791

I did design to have addressed my dear, honoured friend before—to have thanked her for her sympathy, her letters, and her kind consolements. But such has been the distracted state of my mind, of my situation, and of everything around me, that even at this moment I am ill qualified to give the account which particularly induces me to write.

The Tuesday before my beloved uncle died was, I believe, the day I sent my letter to Totteridge.¹⁷ In the afternoon he gave orders for his burial: that it might be in woolen, his body laid in the Chapel, and all the money which he had about him given to the stewards for the poor, which was done in his presence.

He then called up the family to prayers. One of the preachers prayed earnestly and he pronounced the “Amen” with great energy after every interesting petition. When it was ended he took each person in the room by the hand and affectionately bid them “Farewell!” My mother came to visit him in the evening, and cried “You will soon be with your dear brother, at rest.” He answered, “He giveth his servants rest.”

His faithful attendant, Miss Ritchie,¹⁸ (an excellent woman from the north of England) had, at his desire, spent the winter in London for this purpose. She was with us by his bedside, and brought him a spoonful of orange juice (the only thing he seemed to sip with pleasure), upon which he solemnly gave out his usual grace: “We thank thee Lord for these and all thy mercies. Bless the Church and king, and grant us truth and peace, for Christ’s sake!”

Soon after he said, “The heavens drop fatness!”¹⁹ He causeth his servants

¹⁶ Sarah Wesley, Jr., to Penelope (Madan) Maitland letter, Oxford University, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Misc. c. 502, ff. 64–68.

¹⁷ Penelope Maitland lived in Totteridge Green, near Barnet, Hertfordshire.

¹⁸ Sarah spells “Richie” throughout. Elizabeth Ritchie (1754–1835) was the daughter of a surgeon in Otley, Yorkshire. Her parents were Methodists and John Wesley often stayed at their home. In 1801, she married Harvey Walklate Mortimer.

¹⁹ See Ps. 65:11.

to lie down in safety.²⁰ The God of Jacob is our refuge!"²¹ At another time, "God is with us!" He repeated it again, and the third [time] lifted up his feeble hand and shouted "God is with us!"

He dozed the greater part of the night, but interruptedly; spoke often, and once clasped his hands as in fervent prayer, but we could not distinguish the words. Indeed the fear of putting him to the least pain prevented dear Miss Ritchie and myself from asking him much that we longed to hear; for he would kindly attempt to answer, disregarding his own ease in death as he did in life.

Wednesday morning, about eight o'clock, he drew his breath shorter, but without struggle. A little noise in his throat, but not loud enough to be called the rattles, intermixed with all he now spoke, for he continued in striving to utter something for his divine Master. We could just distinguish "Lord." At another time "I'll praise." His restlessness abated towards nine, his speech nearly failing. Once I thought he thanked me, feebly endeavoured to press my hand, and said to a favourite preacher, "Farewell."

After this we could no longer distinguish any words, though his lips continued to move, and we all imagined he began his usual hymn: "I'll praise my Maker whilst I've breath . . ." His hands and feet continued warm, but the paleness of death overspread his dear countenance. Without one convulsion, struggle, or groan he gently sighed out his devoted soul into his Redeemer's bosom!

This was about twenty minutes before ten, Wednesday morning. Many of his pious children surrounded his bed at this moment, and one of the preachers gave out:

Happy soul, my days are ended
All thy toilsome days below!
Go, by angel guards attended
To the sight of Jesus go!
Waiting to receive thy spirit
Lo the Saviour stands above . . .²²

Here his voice faltered, and fortitude gave way to grief.

But I believe every person in the chamber felt the divine influence. It was a great consolation to me to be "in the assembly of the saints on earth" at such a time, and to receive sweet testimonies of their sympathizing love!

Our family were to have attend the funeral, and I look forward with mournful pleasure to the discharge of this last duty. But by the injudiciousness of some well-meaning people, who gave public notice that the body might be viewed, the crowds were so large, mixed, and tumultuous that they feared disturbance in the last solemn rite, and interred him by five o'clock in the morning.

²⁰ Cf. Hosea 2:18.

²¹ Ps. 46:7.

²² Charles Wesley, "For One Departing," st. 1, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1749), 2:75.

Forty thousand people were computed to have surrounded the chapel Monday and Tuesday. Nothing was ever like it excepting Wilkes's mob.²³ And if the happy spirit could have been grieved by anything on earth, I am sure this public exhibition, and indecent rabble, would have grieved it. To add to the impropriety of the whole, they dressed up the poor body in the gown and band.

In respect of temporal matters, my dear uncle had died as he lived. His plan, his profession, and his conduct prove he did not make a gain of the gospel of Christ, nor enrich his family with *any part* of the immense sums which passed through his hands. None of his chapels would he so accept that they could ever be called *private* property. They are all fixed in the hand of trustees for the continuance of the work of God. He never did receive the least emolument from them himself, and immediately put them out of his own power.

The interest of a small debt arising from my father's books is (and I speak it to his honour) all that he has left to us, and 40 pounds to my aunt Hall.²⁴ She bears the loss like one about to join him soon—without lamentations, tears, or regret. She views him (as she told me just after he expired) not as a departed friend but a blessed saint, and gently chides every appearance of grief in those who profess the same supporting faith. But her fortitude is constitutionally great. She desires me to join with my mother's her respectful love and Christian salutations, mentions with great pleasure former conversations with dear Mrs. Maitland, and doubts not of renewing the intercourse in a better world.

To me the loss is most heavy. I had the honour of being distinguished by him in the kindest manner, oftenest enjoyed his society, chiefly indebted to his tenderness! When we lose a dear friend it is no small aggravation of grief to recollect every act towards ourselves was love! But my soul acquiesces! And when I consider the everlasting Friend—the support of the desolate—is the *God of my* fathers, it seems a consolation beyond any words to express!

To you, my dear madam, I will not apologize for the length of this. I thought you would wish the particulars I endeavored to collect, and shall send as soon as I can obtain another, a *printed* account.²⁵ It is not written as perspicuously as I could have desired, but the state of mind which Miss Ritchie was in when she sent it to the press is excuse sufficient.

It gave me concern to hear so poor an account of Miss Maitland's²⁶ health. Moderate exercise, frequent change of air, and attention to diet, without *medicine*, I believe the best prescriptions in all cases.

²³ John Wilkes (1725–97), a radical English politician, published a strident criticism of King George III in 1768, and was imprisoned as a result. A large gathering of his supporters gathered in St. George's Field in south London in protest, and several were killed when government forces tried to disperse the mob.

²⁴ Martha (Wesley) Hall.

²⁵ Ritchie, *Authentic Narrative*.

²⁶ This is likely Penelope Judith Maitland (1760–1846), who did not marry until 1802.

I began this long scrawl Friday. Saturday Mrs. Cowper²⁷ favored us with a call. I should have enjoyed her society much more if some people had not happened just before to come in, but I could plainly perceive her sympathy and kindness. She looked like your *own* sister, dear madam, and obliged I always shall feel myself to your excellent family—but in a particular manner to your dear self. With much affectionate gratitude and distinctive respect I must ever subscribe

Your indebted friend,

S. Wesley

The hair I could not obtain.²⁸

Sarah Wesley, Jr., to Penelope (Madan) Maitland²⁹

City Road [London], next door the Chapel house
Tuesday, July 12, 1791

My dear Madam,

Having been at Margate³⁰ for my health these two months, and not being willing to write without a frank, I delayed acknowledging the kindest, most comforting letter I ever was honoured with, even by you.

I came suddenly to London to attend my good Aunt Hall, who is very near eternity. Some sweet testimonies of her happy state I will send to you, as soon as my dejected spirits will permit me to copy them over. She sends her dying love and, notwithstanding little contrarities of sentiment, trusts you will both meet around the throne to celebrate the love of our Lord through eternity! These are nearly her words—but I should not wonder if the perturbation of my mind retained more of the sense than the expression.

Oh what a privilege to minister to the future heirs of glory!

It appears she cannot survive many days, perhaps hours.

Dear madam! I always think of you in my afflictions. If your sympathy was not more than common, I should not have addressed you on these sad occasions. But I need the prayers of the pious and the kind.

Your indebted friend,

S. Wesley

My mother is not with me. I would save her all the pain that is unnecessary on these trying scenes, and my dear aunt only wished for me. I shall remain with her till the change takes place.

Address: “To / The Honourable Mrs. Maitland / Totteridge Green near / Whetstone Turnpike.”

²⁷ Possibly Maria Frances Cecilia (Madan) Cowper (1726–97), who *was* Penelope’s sister, or possibly the daughter-in-law of Maria, married to her son William Cowper (1750–98).

²⁸ Maitland had apparently requested a strand of John Wesley’s hair.

²⁹ Sarah Wesley, Jr., to Penelope (Madan) Maitland letter, Oxford University, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Misc. c. 502, ff. 71–72.

³⁰ Margate, Kent, a seaside town.

Annotation: by Maitland: “N.B. The difference of my sentiments with this excellent saint was my being a Calvinist.”

Sarah Wesley, Jr., to Penelope (Madan) Maitland³¹

Chesterfield Street [London]
Thursday morning, July 21, 1791

Dearest Madam,

The papers have probably informed you of my loss.³² Your kind letter came three days after it, and your sympathy comforted me.

My beloved aunt departed this life on Tuesday evening, the 12th. Her end was not (to appearance) so near. She had none of the pains, none of the convulsions of death. Her senses, her faculties, and her affections, even to the last, were alive and vigorous as ever. The same tender concern for others, and interest in their welfare and comfort, distinguished her throughout the whole illness—or rather confinement, for “illness” it could not properly be called. As she approached her end her spirit seemed to partake that heaven to which she was hastening in a particular manner. A little before her death she called to me, expressed a joy she could not describe, and bid me witness a glorious scene which only *she* was permitted to see. Then, pressing my hand, and leaving me that *seal* of testimony which some Christians denominate “assurance” and others “pardon,” she raised herself in the bed and her last word was “shout.” We could not ascertain the moment of her departure, as she had no struggle—not even a sigh.

Fuller particulars of the blessed state her mind was in I have lent to the minister who is to preach her funeral sermon Sunday (Dr. Whitehead).³³ When he returns it, I will enclose it to you.

My excellent aunt had been always a calm, conscientious Christian; never talked of those triumphs and visions which warmer imaginations often mention (not that I mean to undervalue or deny the existence of these in some excepted cases). But “to fear God and keep his commandments,”³⁴ which she had done in an exemplary manner from her very infancy, appeared to her the *test of faith*, disclaiming at the same time all merit, all glory, but to him who works in us both to will and to do what is acceptable in his sight.³⁵ At the last, however, her evidences amounted to joy and triumph, and *I* was favored to be the witness of this.

Ah my dear Mrs. Maitland, notwithstanding the thankfulness I ought to

³¹ Sarah Wesley, Jr., to Penelope (Madan) Maitland letter, Oxford University, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Misc. c. 502, ff. 73-74.

³² Martha (Wesley) Hall’s death was reported in the *Whitehall Evening Post* (July 12–14, 1791), p. 3; *Morning Herald* (July 14, 1791), p. 3; and *The Public Advertiser* (July 15, 1791), p. 4.

³³ John Whitehead (1740–1804) was a physician who provided medical advice to both Charles and John Wesley, and their sister Martha. He was also a Methodist lay preacher and had preached John Wesley’s funeral earlier.

³⁴ Eccles. 12:13.

³⁵ Cf. Phil. 2:13.

feel at this distinguished blessing—to see a whole family “die in the faith”—my dejected heart thinks of its own loss more than their happiness. My filial affections have been extremely (I fear, idolatrously) strong, and they have been tried to the uttermost. I was going to say “But I have yet a mother, brothers, friends.” In *all*, and each, I feel I *can again die!*

Religion, to those possessed of *many* things, is the *best*; but to the *afflicted*, it is the *only* consolation. When the soul is bowed down with sorrow, how sweet it is to pour it out—oppressed and desolate—into the bosom of our heavenly Father! To believe he appoints all dispensations, and know that he loves his feeble creatures, far banished from him in a vale of tears!

We attended the funeral Tuesday, and as I am left the executrix, it was by my order plain, and a walking burial. Her dear remains were placed by my uncle’s³⁶ and this hymn was sung over her:

Away with our sorrow and fear
We soon shall recover our home!
The city of saints shall appear
The day of eternity come!
From earth we shall quickly remove
And mount to our native abode
The house of our Father above
The palace of angels and God!³⁷

I delayed writing till I could feel myself calm enough to be thus minute. My aunt much loved and respected you, dear madam. You will rejoin her in a happier world, and a better society, whither she is gone before!

My mother and brother³⁸ (Samuel is out of town) unite in most respectful dues with

Your afflicted, affectionate, and ever obliged friend,

S. Wesley

³⁶ Rev. John Wesley, in the City Road Chapel yard.

³⁷ Charles Wesley, Hymn VIII, st. 1, *Funeral Hymns* (1746), 11.

³⁸ Sarah (Gwynne) Wesley and Charles Wesley, Jr.