

THE LIFE OF
JOHN WESLEY

BY

C. T. WINCHESTER

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH LITERATURE IN
WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

WITH PORTRAITS

New York

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To
MY WIFE

PREFACE

A WORD of justification is due from any one who presumes to add another to the already numerous Lives of John Wesley.

The early biographers—except Southey—and most of the later ones have written as Methodists for Methodists. With that great religious movement of which Wesley was the leader, I have the most hearty sympathy; but I have endeavored to consider his work without narrowing denominational bias, and have emphasized certain important phases of his character that have often received comparatively little attention. Wesley was, indeed, primarily the religious reformer; but he is surely to be remembered not merely as the Methodist, but as the man,—a marked and striking personality, energetic, scholarly, alive to all moral, social, and political questions, and for some thirty years probably exerting a greater influence than any other man in England. I have ventured to hope that the story of such a life, told in moderate compass, may still be of interest to the general reader as well as to the student of religious history.

I am, of course, indebted to the older Lives of Wesley by Clarke, Watson, Moore, and Southey, and to the later ones by Stevens, Lelièvre, Overton, and Telford; while the laborious and monumental

work by Tyerman is a vast storehouse of facts to which all subsequent biographers must resort. Yet, after all, his own *Journal and Letters* will always remain the best, almost the only needful, authority for the life of Wesley; it is upon them that this book is chiefly based.

Two papers upon Wesley, by the present writer, appeared in the *Century Magazine* for July and August, 1903; by the kind permission of the Century Company, a few paragraphs from these papers are inserted, without essential change, in the following pages.

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JOHN WESLEY

CHAPTER I

PARENTAGE AND YOUTH

THE little market town of Epworth lies on the slope of a gentle eminence rising from the midst of that part of Lincolnshire which, because bounded on three sides by three little rivers and on the fourth by a canal, is called the Isle of Axeholme. As one stands in the churchyard, at the summit of the hill, the eye ranges for miles, in every direction, over a flat but fertile country, cut into green squares of wheat and pasture land. At the beginning of the eighteenth century the region had but recently been redeemed from the fens, and at its borders, near the sluggish streams, was still little better than a swamp, sodden and malarious. Its people were much below even the average of English rural intelligence at that time, heavy and lumpish, yet turbulent and without the stolid respect for order and tradition usually found in a long-settled community. The majority of them, unlike most English country folk at that day, were Whigs, not Tories, and had little reverence for the parson or the squire. Few of them could read or write; their manners were boorish, their speech vulgar and profane, their domestic morals corrupt. Of religion, even of its outward and conventional observances, they were for the most part

quite oblivious; many of the children born in the parish were never presented by their parents for baptism, and there were seldom as many as twenty communicants at the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. To this uninviting parish came, at the beginning of the year 1697, the Reverend Samuel Wesley, then in his thirty-fifth year, bringing with him his wife and four children, the youngest an infant in arms. And in the rectory here was born, June 28, 1703, his most famous son, John Wesley.

Samuel Wesley, rector of Epworth, came of priestly line. His grandfather, Bartholomew, and his father, John, were both Oxford men and clergymen, though it seems probable that John never received Episcopal ordination. During the troublous times of the Commonwealth, both were in sympathy with the Puritan cause, and both were ejected from their livings by the Act of Uniformity in 1662. Bartholomew Wesley lived to a ripe old age, supporting himself by the practice of physic after the church was closed to him; but John, who was subjected to repeated imprisonments after his ejection, broke down under the hardships of his lot, and died at the early age of thirty-four. From both grandfather and father Samuel Wesley inherited the sturdy personal independent character of the Wesley stock. His mother, to whom through her long widowhood he was tenderly devoted, was a daughter of the scholarly Puritan, John White, a member of the Westminster Assembly and one of the original patentees of the Massachusetts Colony. She was also a niece of that witty divine, Thomas Fuller, and it is perhaps this strain in his blood that accounts for the quaint humor of her son.

With such parentage and traditions it might have seemed improbable that Samuel Wesley would ever take orders in the Established Church. His mother had no such expectation, and, with the aid of some friends, sent him when he was eighteen to the famous academy of Mr. Marton on Newington Green, with the pious hope to see him a dissenting minister. But the young man seems to have found neither the teaching nor the temper of Mr. Marton's academy much to his liking, and was prompted by the bitter controversial spirit which prevailed there to examine for himself dispassionately the grounds of nonconformity. The result was that he decided to go to the University and prepare himself for orders in the Established Church. Knowing that this decision was likely to be painful to his mother, he kept his own counsel, and after praying long over the matter, rose early one morning, took his clothing in a bundle, and with forty shillings in his pocket, tramped to Oxford and entered himself as a servitor in Exeter College. Shortly after receiving his Bachelor's degree in 1688, he received orders, and after a year in London, a curacy, and nearly a year as chaplain on a man-of-war, he was recommended to the little parish of South Ormsby in Lincolnshire. He had married a few months before, and here, with his young wife,

"In a mean cot composed of reeds and clay,"

on an income of fifty pounds a year, "and one child additional per annum," he lived until his removal to Epworth.

Life in the Epworth rectory, though not so narrow as at Ormsby, to a man of Samuel Wesley's tastes and

aspirations could not have been easy. His income was now only about a hundred and fifty pounds a year; his family was large — “nineteen children in twenty-one years,” as he told his bishop — and the rector, who was doubtless a little deficient in worldly prudence, once at least knew the inside of a debtor’s jail. His parishioners, perhaps as ignorant and brutal a set of half-heathen as could have been found in England, disliking his politics, vexed and harassed him, burned his crops and hocked his cattle, and finally burned down his rectory. But the stout little man could not be soured or disheartened. He stuck to his post, and by cheerful performance of his duty at last lived down their prejudice and won a surly confidence. As to fear, whether of mobs or lords, he never knew what that meant. When a young man just out of the University, sitting one day in a London coffee-house, he saw a colonel of the Guards swagger in, swearing like the proverbial trooper, — “Here,” said young Wesley, calling to the waiter, “take this glass of water to the man in the red coat and ask him to wash his mouth out.” When the coarse mistress of the Marquis of Normanby, patron of the living in his South Ormsby parish, persisted in calling upon his wife, he took the obnoxious visitor by the arm and turned her out of doors — and then resigned his living.

He had a blunt independence, a promptness — sometimes a rashness — of decision, and a habit of obstinate defence of whatever he thought right. Always interested in public affairs, he had written, when just out of the University, the first pamphlet published in England in support of the Revolution settlement of 1688. When his wife, who did not share his loyalty

to the Prince of Orange, persistently refused to say Amen to his morning prayer for the king, "Sukey," said the emphatic rector, "Sukey, if we are to have two kings, we must have two beds," and mounting his horse rode away to London, where he stayed till the death of King William next year removed the cause of difference.¹ But, like many of his brethren of the Clergy, though a Whig under King William, he was a Tory under Queen Anne; and when the famous trial of Dr. Sacheverell came on, it was he — so his son John affirms — who wrote for that bumptious parson the famous speech he delivered before the House of Lords.

He coveted chiefly, however, the still air of delightful studies, and carried with him from the University to his remote Lincolnshire parish the tastes and habits of a scholar. His *magnum opus*, a Commentary on the Book of Job, though rather curious than valuable, is a monument of patient industry and research. Through all his early life he was ambitious of poetic honors also. While an undergraduate in the University he had gained a few honest shillings by publishing a thin volume of boyish rhymes which had at all events the merit of originality. At South Ormsby he wrote a sounding epic upon the life of Christ, put into a folio volume and dedicated to Queen Mary. Three years later came a still bigger volume on the history of the Old and New Testaments, inscribed to Queen Anne. And

¹ This, at all events, is the story as John Wesley told it. See *Methodist Magazine*, 1784, p. 606. But Mr. Tyerman, the biographer of both Samuel and John Wesley, rather scandalized by such conduct, is careful to remind us that the rector had business in London at that time as a member of Convocation, and that, as Convocation met December 31, and King William died on the 8th of the following month, his absence from his family need not have been very protracted.

when, in 1705, all England was ringing with the praises of Marlborough and Blenheim, Wesley was one of the loudest of the chorus of poets who celebrated that famous victory. His verses, first and last, were doubtless rather poor verses, just good enough to be damned by Swift in the "Battle of the Books" — where Wesley is despatched by a kick from the steed of Homer — and later by Pope in the "Dunciad." But, at all events, he cherished the poetic impulse, and transmitted it to all three of his sons. He was, withal, a genial man, with a quick enjoyment of all the humors of life, loved a moderate pipe and kindly talk, told a story capitally, and in spite of his occasional obstinacy must have been a delightful companion.

But although the rector of Epworth was always interested in both politics and letters, he always accounted both subservient to his work as parish priest. He brought to this work an earnest and active piety too rare in the English Church of that day. His lot was cast in a remote hamlet of the Lincolnshire fens, among a boorish folk who despised his learning and his piety. And here he labored for forty years, instructing, reproving, exhorting, visiting from house to house, knowing every soul in his charge by name, till he lived to see the number of his communicants increased tenfold, "not a papist or dissenter in the parish," and the moral tone of the community cleansed and elevated. And the heroic energy of the man dreamed of far wider fields. He was one of the very first Englishmen to urge active effort for the conversion of the heathen, and offered, if provision should be made for his family, to go alone as a pioneer missionary to the far East. His last words of hope for his own country must have been re-

called by his sons, in after years, with the solemn force of prophecy, — “Charles,” said the dying man to the son at his bedside, “be steady; the Christian faith will surely revive in these Kingdoms. You shall see it, though I shall not.”

But the dominant influence in the Epworth rectory was not that of the rector, but of his wife. Susanna Wesley was a woman to be regarded with some awe —

“nobly planned
To warn, to comfort and command.”

Lacking in humor, perhaps deficient also in the softer and more distinctively feminine graces, she had instead a remarkable dignity and poise of character. In clearness and force of intellect, in practical judgment, in deliberative steadiness of purpose, she was unquestionably the superior of her husband. A daughter of the great Dr. Annesley, the “St. Paul of nonconformity,” — she was his twenty-fifth child, — at the early age of thirteen she had gone over for herself all the arguments for dissent, and deliberately decided to enter the Church of England. At least so the biographers say; but it may be reasonably conjectured that the acquaintance with young Samuel Wesley, who was just then making a similar change, may have had something to do with her decision.

It is certain, however, that Susanna Wesley was always accustomed to do her own thinking. Her union with her husband was one of singular beauty and loyalty; but it did not imply any tame conformity of opinion, and she evidently found difficulty now and then in harmonizing her logical conclusions with her theory of wifely obedience. When Mr. Wesley, during one of his