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"MY DEAREST SALLY": THE MARRIAGE OF CHARLES WESLEY AND SALLY GWYNNE

In August 1747 during a brief visit to the remote gentleman's estate of Garth in Brecknockshire, Charles Wesley, 40 year-old bachelor and itinerant evangelist of dubious repute and slender means was introduced to Sally Gwynne, his wealthy host's attractive 21 year-old daughter.¹ Despite an age difference of nineteen years and a considerable gap in material circumstances, the attraction between the two must have been at first sight for after a correspondence lasting just six months, Charles proposed marriage to Sally in April 1748 during only their second meeting and was immediately accepted.²

The marriage of Charles Wesley in April 1749 represented a watershed in his ministry. Hitherto, Charles and his brother John had formed one of the outstanding evangelistic partnerships of the post-Reformation Church. Working in close co-operation, the Wesleys had criss-crossed Britain and Ireland for ten years laying the foundations of the Methodist movement. Contemporary accounts make it clear that Charles made a vital contribution to this process through a preaching and pastoral ministry that was second to none.³ After his marriage, domestic responsibilities started to encroach on Charles' itinerant preaching and he abandoned the travelling work entirely at the end of 1756. This withdrawal from the forefront of Methodism gave rise to awkward

¹ Charles Wesley (henceforth CW), Manuscript journal, 28 August 1747, Reference DDCW 10/2, MCA (henceforth CWJ).

² 'At night my dearest Sally, like my guardian angel, attended me... I asked her if she could trust herself with me for life and with a noble simplicity she readily answered me she could.' CWJ (shorthand entry), 3 April 1748.

³ Gareth Lloyd, *Charles Wesley and the Struggle for Methodist Identity* (Oxford: 2007), pp. 33-5.

questions concerning Charles' commitment to the cause. His brother John proved one of the sternest critics of Charles' refusal to travel, and as the years passed, the gulf between the brothers was widened by other factors, such as Charles' seemingly fanatical loyalty to the Anglican Church.

Despite the tension over Charles' retirement from the more strenuous work of the revival, it would be too much to claim, like Charles' contemporary John Berridge, that marriage 'quite maimed poor Charles'.⁴ John Wesley's younger brother did not completely sever his links with Methodism but remained a very active minister until shortly before his death at the age of 81. However, there can be denying the fact that his union to Sally Gwynne represented a point where his priorities changed from those of a single-minded and footloose evangelist to a devoted husband and loving father.

Charles' biographers have experienced difficulty in portraying this transition, torn between the iconography of a denomination that regarded the itinerancy as the bedrock on which Methodism was built, with the uncomfortable reality of a man who was the movement's co-founder and one of the greatest of hymn-writers, and yet who ultimately placed his personal needs above the Revival. Scholars have also been faced with the problem that Charles' marriage in 1749 coincided with the start of a process whereby he found himself increasingly at odds with certain sections of the Methodist community over a range of issues, particularly that of separation from the Church of England. How much his marriage contributed to this alienation remains unclear, although it would be fair to say that there has been a feeling within Methodist scholarship that 1749 was the year when it all started to go wrong as far as Charles Wesley, the Methodist, was concerned.

The fateful chance meeting of Charles Wesley and Sally Gwynne in August 1747 represents a key event, not simply for the two people most directly concerned, but also for Methodism. This article will examine the significance of Charles and Sally's relationship against both the personal and wider Methodist context.

To a contemporary observer, Charles and Sally would have seemed an unlikely match. The difference in age was a relatively minor consideration, but the considerable gap between the wealth of their families proved an almost insurmountable obstacle. The Wesleys were from a respectable background and Charles may have had aristocratic

⁴ Quoted by Nigel Pibworth, *The Gospel Pedlar: The Story of John Berridge and the Eighteenth Century Revival* (Welwyn, 1987), p121.

connections,⁵ but his immediate family had experienced acute financial difficulties. His father Samuel had been imprisoned for debt and his mother Susanna threatened with arrest for the same reason. Several of Charles' sisters throughout their lives needed financial help in order to provide the basic necessities of life, while Charles himself had struggled to get through school and university.

Sally's background was very different. The Gwynne family appear to have come from the ranks of the minor gentry⁶ and rose to greater prominence during the reigns of the later Stuart kings. Sally's father, grandfather and great grandfather were men with a talent for making money through the practice of law, acquisition of land and profitable marriage alliances. By the time Sally was born in 1726, the Gwynne family was wealthy and well connected: her father Marmaduke served as High Sheriff of Radnorshire and owned a considerable property portfolio.⁷ Sally and her eight siblings lived a privileged existence in a house staffed by twenty servants, one of two substantial family residences,⁸ a situation far removed from the financial insecurity that blighted her future husband's early years.

Charles Wesley could certainly lay claim to gentility because of his clerical orders and Oxford education, but without a substantial income, these assets would have counted for little when trying to win the hand of a woman like Sally Gwynne. The history of her family shows the importance attached to wealth when eighteenth-century upper class marriages were under consideration. Her father, grandfather and great grandfather had all married heiresses⁹ - Marmaduke's bride had come to the altar with a dowry of £30,000¹⁰ and while Sally's mother appears to have been an unusually lucrative catch, it is clear that marrying at least partly for money was considered not only acceptable, but even necessary in middle and upper class circles.

The lengthy negotiations that preceded Charles' marriage were complex and emotionally draining. The prospective groom appears to

⁵ There has long been a tradition that the Wesleys were related to the Wellesley family of Ireland who held the earldom of Mornington, although some modern authorities doubt the truth of this story. There may also be a link through Charles' mother Susanna to the Annesleys, the earls of Anglesey.

⁶ There are conflicting accounts of the exact antecedents of the Gwynne family. A.H. Williams, *The Gwynnes of Garth* (Brecknock Society, volume 14, 1970), pp. 80-1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 80-3.

⁸ In addition to the main family home of Garth, the Gwynnes spent part of each year at a house in Ludlow in Shropshire.

⁹ Williams, *The Gwynnes*, p. 81.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

have had little expectation that the desired union would actually come to pass, even while he was actively striving for it.¹¹ This was not simply the product of a nature that was characterised by dramatic mood swings, but was also a reflection of the fact that in asking the Gwynnes for the hand of their daughter, Charles knew that he was reaching above his station. However, he did enjoy an advantage: Marmaduke Gwynne was a devout layman who maintained a private chaplain for the daily reading of the Anglican liturgy to his household. He was also, more importantly, a supporter of the evangelical cause and had proved a good friend to both the Wesleyan and Calvinistic wings of the Revival. Sally's mother was less enamoured with Methodism,¹² but even she was broadly supportive of the proposed match and appears to have had a strong personal attachment to her future son-in-law.¹³ Despite this warmth of parental sentiment, news of the engagement was not well received by all of Sally's relations,¹⁴ and it was perfectly understood that the marriage would certainly not take place unless Charles could provide a legally binding guarantee as to the level of his wife's future maintenance.

After months of tough negotiations, the Gwynnes agreed to an arrangement whereby £2500 from the royalties of Methodist publications would be invested to provide an annuity for Sally's use.¹⁵ It is to the credit of her parents that they agreed to this settlement for it was considerably less than they might reasonably have expected from a prospective son-in-law. They even went so far as to allow their daughter

¹¹ 'Your dearest [mother's] consent so far is plainly miraculous, and what I never expected, although my friends insisted on it, as my duty to make the proposal.' CW to Sarah Gwynne, Ms letter, [15 January 1749] (MCA: DDCW 5/20).

¹² She was very hostile to Methodism in the early days of the Revival and reacted with horror when her husband entertained the lay preacher Howell Harris at their home. Her antipathy did subside, but she does not seem to have ever been particularly enthusiastic about Methodism. George Stevenson, *Memorials of the Wesley Family* [1876]), pp. 428-9.

¹³ For example, 'It was with difficulty I refrained this long from acknowledging the great kindness and generosity you have always showed me, especially when last at [Garth]. Could you see my heart, you would see there more gratitude, much more than I am able to express. . . .' CW to Mrs Sarah Gwynne, Ms letter, 3 January [1749] (MCA: DDCW 5/14).

¹⁴ Her oldest brother Howell Gwynne was hostile to the prospect of having Charles Wesley as a brother-in-law. CW to Howell Gwynne, Ms letter, [14 March 1749] (MCA: DDCW 5/41) and CW to Sarah Wesley, Ms letter, [March/early April 1750] (MCA: DDCW 5/70).

¹⁵ Ms settlement upon the marriage of CW and Sarah Gwynne, 9 August 1749 (MCA: DDCW 6/87).

the final decision as to whether or not she would marry Charles, which should be accounted quite rare for parents of their class and time.¹⁶ The money involved might have been comparatively paltry by Gwynne standards, but it certainly represented a burden for the Wesleys and their followers. During the winter of 1739 it cost just £700 to adapt the Foundery to use as the Methodist headquarters¹⁷ and it was not until 1752 that Conference introduced payment for the support of itinerant preachers and that was set at just £12 per annum.¹⁸ The fact that the Methodist movement sponsored Charles' marriage provided John Wesley with a hefty stick with which to beat his brother in future arguments.

The lengths to which Charles and Sally were prepared to go in order to make their marriage possible proves beyond doubt that theirs was a true love match. They were different people in many respects but their fundamental compatibility is beyond question. The facts of Charles Wesley's life are reasonably well-known but the same could not be said of his wife. We will now turn our attention therefore to Sally Gwynne - her background, personality and the small but significant part that she played in the Methodist story.

Sally was born in October 1726 and was baptised at Llanleonfel parish church just a short walk from the family house of Garth. Little is known about the detail of her early life but some conclusions can be drawn. She was educated at home with her sisters,¹⁹ in accordance with upper class practice of the time. In addition to training in domestic skills and social accomplishments, such as needlework and drawing, the girls were given a good grounding in general literacy. Sally displayed an aptitude for music; she possessed an excellent singing voice²⁰ and played the harpsichord, which musical talent she was to pass to her own sons in quite spectacular fashion.²¹

There is only one certain portrait of Sally in existence, and that was executed when she was an elderly woman.²² Nineteenth-century

¹⁶ CW to Sarah Gwynne, Ms letter, 23 January 1749 (MCA: DDCW 5/22).

¹⁷ Richard Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People called Methodists* (Nashville, 1995), p. 110

¹⁸ A. Kingsley Lloyd, *The Labourers' Hire: The Payment and Deployment of the Early Methodist Preachers (1744-1813)* (Bunbury, 1968), pp. 13-15.

¹⁹ Stevenson, *Memorials*, p. 428.

²⁰ Jackson, *Charles Wesley*, 1: pp. 588-9.

²¹ Charles Wesley junior (1757-1834) and his brother Samuel (1766-1837) were both musical prodigies.

²² For many years, it was thought that there was another extant portrait of Sally as a young woman, but modern authorities now believe that this is a depiction of Sally's sister-in-law Lady Rudd.

Methodist biographies describe her as being beautiful in her earlier years and while there is little contemporary evidence to support this, there is no reason to doubt it either. In December 1753 at the age of 27, Sally caught smallpox and this left her facially disfigured for the rest of her life - Charles Wesley stated at the time that he was 'glad to see her look so much older, and better suited to be his companion',²³ which remark seems strange to a modern reader but does confirm that his love for Sally was anything but superficial.

With regard to spiritual matters, the seeds of Sally's future bond with her husband were planted early. According to her friend Eliza Tooth, Sally 'from her very childhood evinced a thoughtful sense of religion, and had subsequently become a devout communicant. . .',²⁴ This picture fits with other fragmentary evidence that we possess - preserved within the Charles Wesley library in the Methodist Archives and Research Centre are several of the books that Sally owned before her marriage and the titles certainly suggest a religiously-inclined young woman. The subject matter of volumes bearing Sally Gwynne's autograph indicate that there was common ground with Charles in many areas of doctrine and practice - both for example were convinced of the necessity for holy living through the practice of prayer, bible reading and spiritual exercise.²⁵ Sally also leaned towards a High Church view of the sacraments,²⁶ which the Wesley brothers made a foundation stone of Methodist spirituality. As compatible as the couple were in this vital respect, they were not necessarily equals; one does not get the impression from Sally's correspondence that she was a spiritual leader or that she enjoyed a reputation for advanced or unusual piety. Her vocation was not to stand alongside her husband in the public or semi-public work of the Revival, but rather to support his ministry and raise their children in a Christian household.

In one important area of spirituality Sally did cause Charles some discomfort. At a young age she had been exposed to Calvinist influence through her father's friendship with the lay preacher Howell Harris.

²³ *The Methodist Magazine* 1823. p. 509.

²⁴ Stevenson, *Memorials*, p. 429.

²⁵ For example, Thomas Bisse, *The Beauty of Holiness in the Common Prayer* (1720); Thomas Ken, *The Practice of Divine Love Revised; being an exposition of the church catechism* (1718).

²⁶ For example, Edward Syngé, *An Answer to all the Excuses and Pretenses which Men ordinarily make for their not coming to Communion* (1726); Edward Lake, *Officium Eucharisticum; A preparatory Service to a devout and worthy reception of the Lord's Supper* (1732).

Sally had accompanied her father to Harris' preaching and according to Eliza Tooth, 'was quite open to receive the teachings of this good man.'²⁷ It is not spelled out in the sources, but this presumably included acceptance of the doctrine of predestination. This was potentially a source of embarrassment to Sally's future husband and brother-in law, who were both outspoken advocates of the diametrically opposed doctrine of free grace. Charles had been an aggressive opponent of Calvinism in earlier years and although his courtship coincided with a thaw in relations between the two evangelical factions, it is still ironic that he fell in love with someone who may have been sympathetic to a theology that he had once described as the 'snare of the fowler'.²⁸ After her marriage, Sally continued to attend the Calvinist Tabernacle chapel in Bristol for several years until she was gently warned by her husband that it might be politic to stay away 'at least for a while'.²⁹ Theological debate does not feature to any extent in correspondence between the couple, so it does not appear to have been a problem between them, but Charles' marital connection with a Calvinist family may have contributed to suspicion of him in certain quarters of the Wesleyan Itinerancy.³⁰

Sally was to remain throughout her long life a devout Anglican Methodist of the old school. She was a regular worshipper at both chapel and parish church, and would have seen no contradiction in this dual loyalty. Her viewpoint in this respect was perfectly in accord with her husband, who was memorably described by his biographer Thomas Jackson as the 'most rigid and unbending Churchman in the Methodist body'.³¹

In addition to her spiritual qualities, Sally appears to have been a personable young woman with good social skills and an excellent sense of humour.³² There is no extant criticism of her personality or conduct and she experienced few obstacles to acceptance by the Methodists, unlike John Wesley's wife Mary, who within a short time of her marriage

²⁷ Stevenson, *Memorials*, p. 429.

²⁸ CWJ, 28 May 1741.

²⁹ CW to Sarah Wesley, Ms letter, 24/25 December [1750s?] (MCA: DDCW 7/95).

³⁰ Mabel Brailsford, *A Tale of Two Brothers: John and Charles Wesley* (1954), p. 252.

³¹ Jackson, *Charles Wesley*, 2: p. 474.

³² 'We had a pleasant journey hither; with a young lady and 2 Clergymen. The Methodists, and the Wesleys furnished abundant matter for conversation. I laughed in my sleeve; but my Wife outright.' CW to Samuel Lloyd, Ms letter, 24 September 1754 DDCW 1/52.

³³ Lloyd, *Charles Wesley*, p. 135.

in 1751 was attracting hostile comment.³³ Sally liked to entertain,³⁴ and as a married couple the Wesleys enjoyed a wide circle of friends and acquaintances. Perhaps inevitably, this network tended to reflect Sally's privileged background - the couple's closest friends included Mary Degge, who married a son of the Duke of Rutland, Colonel and Mrs Samuel Gumley, the wealthy merchant Samuel Lloyd and Lady Gertrude Hotham.³⁵ However, humbler individuals were also welcome to the Wesleys' home, and itinerant preachers were frequently entertained there.³⁶

From the outset, Charles and Sally's marriage proved a mixture of the conventional and the unusual. In the several months after the wedding in April 1749, the couple travelled extensively visiting Wesleyan societies across Southern England³⁷ and these journeys were to continue, although with less frequency, until Charles' retirement from the itinerancy in 1756. According to Charles' testimony, his new wife adapted well to her unaccustomed situation and proved popular with the Methodist rank and file.³⁸ While on the road, the couple shared a horse with Sally riding behind her husband,³⁹ which must have been an unaccustomed mode of travel for someone of her background. Some of Sally's other experiences included a near brush with a highwayman, and from a journey to Norwich in 1754, an encounter with a hostile mob.⁴⁰ Despite these hardships, the first few months of wedlock appear to have been a particularly happy time. The pleasure that Charles took in Sally's company is explicit in both his manuscript journal and correspondence, while for her part, according to Thomas Jackson, Sally as an old lady

³⁴ 'Her hospitality was unbounded, and verged to excess ...' *The Methodist Magazine* 1823, p. 510.

³⁵ Lloyd, *Charles Wesley*, pp. 143-4.

³⁶ Brailsford, *A Tale of Two Brothers*, p. 173.

³⁷ In the period from their wedding on 8 April 1749 until moving into their first marital home in Bristol on 1 September of that year, Charles and Sally travelled from Garth to Ludlow, Bristol, London and then back to Bristol. The couple were not together or on the road for all of that time, but it is fair to say that they travelled far more than would have been usual for a newly married couple in the 18th century.

³⁸ For example, 'All look upon my Sally with my eyes.' CWJ, 24 June 1749; 'Our dear Mrs Vigors and her sisters sitting by salute you much in the Lord. They rejoice to see me, but their joy is not full because I have left half of myself behind.' CW to Sarah Wesley, Ms letter, 22 April 1749 (MCA: DDCW 5/48); 'Mrs Ware/Wane is impatient to have you among us, as are all our friends in the Lord.' CW to Sarah Wesley, Ms letter, [29 April 1749] (MCA: DDCW 5/49).

³⁹ Jackson, *Charles Wesley*, 1: p. 531.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1: pp. 588-9.

liked to regale her friends with stories of her days as the wife of a travelling preacher.⁴¹

From soon after the wedding, the couple were giving thought as to where they would establish their home. The two most logical choices, given Charles' responsibilities, were Bristol and London, and by May 1749 the decision had been settled in favour of the former.⁴² On September 1 the couple moved into a rented house in Barton Street, just a short walk from the New Room.⁴³ Recent research by Robert Brown⁴⁴ indicates that the Wesleys remained in this house for seventeen years and only moved to the better-known 4 Charles Street in 1766,⁴⁵ five years before they left Bristol for London.

Charles Wesley's excitement on first moving into Barton Street can clearly be seen in his journal:

1st September 1749: 'I saw my house and consecrated it by prayer and thanksgiving . . . at 6 our first guests, Mrs Vigor and her sisters passed a useful hour with us. . . At half-hour past nine I slept comfortably in my own house. . .

2nd September 1749: 'I passed the hour of retirement in my garden, and was melted into tears by the divine goodness.'⁴⁶

Charles' emotional reaction can be explained by the fact that his new residence was the first place that he could truly call home since leaving Epworth Rectory at the age of 8. From childhood until early middle age, he had lacked domestic stability and may in his darkest moments have doubted that he would ever settle down. Sally's late entrance into his life opened up for the first time the realistic prospect of a loving partnership, children and a home that he could call his own. Throughout the rest of his life, Charles gives the impression that he was always conscious and even somewhat surprised by this great blessing. The paramount importance that he attached to his marriage is in stark contrast to his brother John, for whom all personal ties took a poor second place to the

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1: p. 588.

⁴² 'I hired a small house. . . such a one as suited a stranger and pilgrim upon earth.' CWJ, 27 May 1749.

⁴³ Robert W. Brown, *The Bristol Residences of Charles Wesley* (WHS: Bristol branch Proceedings, no. 67, 1994).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Site of the recently established Charles Wesley House and Heritage Centre.

⁴⁶ CWJ, 1-2 September 1749.

Methodist movement.

Charles' commitment to family life was strengthened by the birth in August 1752 of his son John. He proved to be the first of eight children, four boys and four girls, born to the couple between 1752 and 1768. Tragically, no fewer than five of Charles and Sally's offspring died before the age of two,⁴⁷ a common occurrence in Georgian Britain. Some of the most moving documents in the family papers were written as a result of recurrent bereavement as the Wesleys came to terms with the fact that God's plan involved the loss of their children. Evidence of this test of faith can be seen in the following letter written by Charles to Samuel Lloyd in the aftermath of the death of young John Wesley from the smallpox:

'Think on a Man of Sorrows! But what are mine to my Masters? One Drop of His Cup He hath left me; and I trust, has sanctified it. My companion has lost her Isaac without a discontented thought. The Comforter, I would humbly hope, is come (or coming) with me to this House of Mourning. You claim a right of sharing in our sorrows, therefore I trouble you with this,

Pray as enabled, for

Your afflicted, faithful Friend

. . . My wife looking over this, will have me contradict her not having had a discontented thought.'⁴⁸

Thirty years after John's death, the scars were still sufficiently fresh for Charles and Sally to draw on the experience when consoling their friend Thomas Marriott on his own bereavement:

'Jesus wept - to see his creatures weeping: therefore he does not disapprove your feeling your loss; neither do you offer God a sacrifice which costs you naught. . . My partner sympathizes with yours. We lost our only son by the smallpox.'⁴⁹

It appears that such crises caused Charles to re-think his priorities. During the 1750s, he reduced his itinerant ministry until it ceased

⁴⁷ Frederick Gill, *Charles Wesley: The First Methodist* (1964), p. 176.

⁴⁸ CW to Samuel Lloyd, Ms letter, 12 January 1754 (MCA: DDCW 1/49).

⁴⁹ CW to Thomas Marriott, Ms letter, 24 September 1785 (MCA: DDCW 7/116).

altogether at the end of 1756 and although failing health and a poor relationship with the preachers contributed to this development, Charles' attachment to his family probably played a major part in his decision. This abandonment of itinerant ministry does not mean that Charles totally neglected Methodism - he remained a leading figure in both Bristol and London, spending part of each year away from home. The letters written during these absences are one of our main sources of information concerning his later life and ministry.

Charles' retirement from the road proved a source of intense irritation to his older brother, who famously allowed nothing to distract him from the work of the Revival. John declared just weeks after his own wedding that he could not understand a preacher travelling less as a married man than he did as a bachelor;⁵⁰ not surprisingly, the result was a relationship with his wife that was the very opposite of his brother's. John simply could not comprehend Charles' preference for a settled lifestyle and his comments on the subject grew more barbed as the years passed.⁵¹

The friction between the two men was exacerbated by other issues, some of which were directly related to Charles' marriage. The settlement of 1749 that guaranteed Sarah an annual income from the sale of publications had always been a source of concern for John and this was aggravated by the increasing financial strain associated with Methodist expansion. John's most emphatic statement to Charles on this subject came in a letter of 4 December 1751:

'There is another tender point, which I would just touch on. The quarterly contribution of the classes. . . is to keep the preachers, and to defray all the expenses of the house, but for this it never did yet suffice. For you therefore (who have a hundred and fifty pounds a year, to maintain only two persons), to take any part of this, seems to me utterly unreasonable. I could not do it, if it were my own case - I should account it robbery . . . I have often wondered how either your conscience or your sense of honour could bear it, especially as you know I am almost continually distressed for money. . . .'⁵²

John was also concerned by his brother's post-marriage circle of aristocratic and gentry friends. This particular bone of contention was

⁵⁰ Quoted by Luke Tyerman, *John Wesley* 3rd ed. (1876), 2: p. 106.

⁵¹ For example, John Wesley (henceforth JW) to Ebenezer Blackwell, Ms letter, 28 May 1753 (MCA: MAM JW. 1.59); JW to CW, Copy letter, 20 October 1753. Wesley, John, *The Works of John Wesley*: 26, ed. Baker, p. 527.

⁵² JW to CW, Ms letter, 4 December 1751 (MCA: MAMJW 5.50).

founded on John Wesley's unusually strong suspicion of high society and the corrupting influence of wealth.⁵³ Charles' visits to his wife's genteel family, and to Margate, a resort patronized by the Georgian upper class,⁵⁴ did not go down well with a man who had once told his fellow clergymen: 'The rich, the honourable, the great, we ... leave to you. Only let us alone with the poor'.⁵⁵

These links with the upper echelons of British life may in truth have affected Charles' contribution to Methodism in his later years. For the rich and respectable, attachment to the Church of England was more than just a means of satisfying spiritual cravings. The late eighteenth century was a time of increasing religious toleration, but there remained secular advantages to be gained by membership of the Established Church. In England and Wales, only Anglicans were allowed to graduate from the universities, be elected to parliament, hold commissioned rank in the military or be appointed to many civil offices.⁵⁶ It is true that many of these restrictions were falling into disuse, but there were still instances of religious discrimination.⁵⁷ Many of Charles' wealthy friends were evangelical sympathizers and contributed financially to the Wesleyan movement,⁵⁸ but for all their Methodist leanings, they had no wish to see a formal separation from the Church of England. The clash between these so-called Church Methodists and equally passionate advocates of separation formed the backdrop to the Connexion's internal affairs in the years after Charles Wesley's retirement from the itinerancy.

Charles Wesley's image has traditionally been that of a staunch Anglican loyalist in contrast to his brother, who regularly (and cleverly) alternated between attachment to the Church and promotion of *de facto* separation.⁵⁹ The extent to which Charles' pro-Anglican position was

⁵³ 'I gave all our brethren a solemn warning not to love the world, or the things of the world. This is one way whereby Satan will surely endeavour to overthrow the present work of God'. Quoted by Theodore Jennings, *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville, 1990), p. 132.

⁵⁴ 'I should wonder if Wales or Margate . . . did not hinder your taking any step which I desire'. JW to CW, Ms letter, 16 July 1755 (MCA: DDWes 3/110).

⁵⁵ Quoted by Jennings, *Good News to the Poor*, p. 49.

⁵⁶ Michael Watts, *The Dissenters: The Expansion of Evangelical Nonconformity 1791 - 1859* (Oxford, 1995), 2: pp. 417-418.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ For example, John Horton and Ebenezer Blackwell of the London Society and Henry Durbin and William Pine of Bristol.

deepened by close personal contact with wealthy Church Methodists is unclear. He had always espoused allegiance to the 'Old Ship' even before his marriage, but his views grew more strident after 1750. At the very least, his union with Sally contributed to bringing him into familiar contact with people who shared and reinforced his views.

The picture that we get of the domestic life of Charles and Sally Wesley is one of general contentment characterised by open expressions of love and commitment.

They were affectionate and concerned parents, who devoted considerable time and effort to the home education and well-being of their three surviving children, to the extent where their daughter Sally admitted that they were actually rather spoiled, especially by their mother.⁶⁰ Charles did on occasion try to live up to the conventional image of an emotionally detached Georgian patriarch,⁶¹ but this did not come easily to a man who wore his heart on his sleeve. His more normal reaction is illustrated by the following passage from a letter of 1763 inviting Sally to join him in London:

'Bring my lovely boy and girl, if you have any bowels of compassion in you. It is near nine weeks since I had a kiss from either of them. I expect to hear Charles [junior] repeat me several hymns, and that Sally [Sarah junior] has almost quite forgot to cry.'⁶²

Charles' short temper and quick tongue, a legacy from his own father, did occasionally get the better of him in his relations with his children, but unlike Samuel Wesley senior, he tended to follow up such outbursts with expressions of regret⁶³ - most unusual in parental relationships of the time.

⁵⁹ Summed up by the 19th-century Wesleyan minister Joseph Beaumont: 'Mr Wesley, like a strong and skilful rower, looked one way, while every stroke of his oar took him in the opposite direction'. Benjamin Gregory, *Sidelights on the Conflicts of Methodism during the second quarter of the nineteenth century* (1898), p. 161.

⁶⁰ 'her tenderness led her to an extreme of indulgence in the education of her children.' *The Methodist Magazine* 1823, p. 510.

⁶¹ "I not deceive you should take any notice of my son to me!" The confidence of some people! Why, I love him as well again as you do. Only can make the most of a little love by showing it, and I make the least of a great deal by hiding it.' CW to Sally Wesley, Ms letter, 11 October [1752] (MCA: DDWes 4/42).

⁶² CW to Sally Wesley, Ms letter, 3 July [1763] (MCA: DDCW 7/90).

⁶³ 'he would bemoan his natural warmth, which to us appeared in affection only, or zeal for good'. Sally Wesley to anon, Ms letter, 7 June 1826 (MCA: DDWes 6/14).

The Wesleys' home life was not all wine and roses and there are occasional hints of tension, but even these incidents possess a certain charm. In September 1749, a few days after the couple took possession of their new home, Charles was complaining in a letter to Ebenezer Blackwell that Sally's sisters appear to have taken up residence with them:

[Sally] is now tied to her house and sisters. Two of them we have with us, in our convent. How the great world and us shall agree, I cannot say, but shall see by and by. If they join in upon us, so as quite to swallow up our time - I shall run away outright, to London, Cornwall, Newcastle, Ireland - or America⁶⁴

On a more serious note, Charles commented critically shortly before he died on his wife's consistently poor handling of money,⁶⁵ and concern over paying the bills does seem to have been a constant headache, despite the fact that the Wesleys' documented household income placed them very much into the category of the middle class.⁶⁶ A more light hearted side to the couple's relationship is revealed in Sally's letter to Charles of July 1763 detailing the arrangements for her joining him in London with their children. She covers a myriad of subjects from the price of a carriage to whether or not their son and daughter should share the one bed. Sally also points out that she has been unable to open his bureau - because her husband had taken the key away with him. Charles' wry annotation on the document speaks volumes; 'Sally -just coming'.⁶⁷

One of the most interesting aspects of the Wesleys' marriage was its unusual balance. Charles seems to have been willing to defer to Sally's primacy, despite her sex and the fact that she was nineteen years his junior. In his letters he regularly told her that he was leaving decisions in her hands and he was at pains to stress the paramount place that she occupied. For example, in September 1749, he informed her of his intention to set out from London 'unless you send a prohibition',⁶⁸ and on another occasion he urged his wife 'just do as you please, I consent to it.'⁶⁹

⁶⁴ CW to Ebenezer Blackwell, Ms letter, 4 September [1749] (MCA: DDCW 1/23).

⁶⁵ 'Would you have me hire lodgings for us four? Who has money to pay for them? - that is a difficulty which never comes into your mother's head'. CW to Sarah Wesley junior, Ms letter, 24 August 1787 (MCA: DDWes 4/20).

⁶⁶ Lloyd, *Charles Wesley*, pp. 139-140.

⁶⁷ Sarah Wesley to CW, Ms letter, 2 July 1763 (MCA: DDWes 1/49).

⁶⁸ CW to Sarah Wesley, Ms letter, 29 April 1749 (MCA: DDCW 5/49).

⁶⁹ Quoted Brailsford, *A Tale of Two Brothers*, pp. 231-2.

Charles was conscious of this aspect of their relationship, although apparently unable or unwilling to do anything about it; he wrote to Sally on one occasion 'You give me no opportunity to make objections, for you ask my mind after the thing is done. Yet I cannot find fault as you pretty well know...'.⁷⁰ This side to the Wesleys' marriage, most unusual in an eighteenth-century context, aroused the passing interest of biographers. Mabel Brailsford referred to the 'overpowering influence' that Sally enjoyed over her husband, although she perhaps went too far when she asserted that 'the relation between Charles Wesley and his wife was one in which he played the feminine role.'⁷¹ It is particularly fascinating when one considers that Sally does not appear to have been unduly domineering, while Charles' often stormy relations with other people indicate that he was a rather forceful individual. More work needs to be done on the intricacies of Charles' personality before light can be shed on this puzzle, but perhaps one can see in this willingness to defer to a woman's lead, an echo of Charles' earliest years dominated by his remarkable mother Susanna.

Charles Wesley died in March 1788 at the family home in Marylebone, London. His final years were overshadowed by continuing disagreements with his brother and the Methodist preachers, and also by a stormy relationship with his youngest son Samuel, a rather unstable young man who appears to have taken pleasure in provoking his aged father. Sally lived on for another thirty-four years before passing away at the age of 96. She retained her faculties until almost the end and was always very protective of her beloved husband's reputation.⁷²

The marriage of Charles and Sally Wesley has been portrayed as representing close to an evangelical ideal. When Methodist historians consider their relationship, there is none of the air of embarrassment that clings to the marriage of Charles' older brother. Where John was distant and strangely formal in his dealings with his wife, Charles' relationship with Sally was passionate and unrestrained; John showed no inclination to moderate his bachelor lifestyle, but there was never any doubt after 1749 as to where Charles gave central place in his loyalties. Yet being part of a loving Christian partnership indirectly tarnished Charles' reputation; his biographers, particularly in the nineteenth century, often voiced

⁷⁰ CW to Sarah Wesley, Ms letter, 24/25 December [1750s?] (MCA: DDCW 7/95).

⁷¹ Brailsford, *A Tale of Two Brothers*, p. 231.

⁷² 'She was so jealous of the honour of her beloved husband. . . that her displeasure was marked towards any person whom she thought to have failed in this point. *Methodist Magazine* 1823, p. 510.

discreet criticism of his preference for a life of domesticity.⁷³ It is true that Charles' marriage had the effect of removing one of the key players from the national Methodist scene and this had an impact that can only be guessed at, but there was another more positive side to Charles' union with Sally Gwynne. Charles' experiences as a family man gave him a connection with ordinary people that his brother lacked. Many years after Charles' death he was remembered by older members of the London society as someone who was 'singularly tender and affectionate in his manner, when addressing those that were "afflicted in mind, body, or estate" . . . ' ⁷⁴ This characteristic of Charles Wesley as a minister and pastor forms a stark contrast to his brother, who wrote the following to his own sister on the death of her last surviving child:

'I believe the death of your children is a great instance of the goodness of God towards you. You have often mentioned to me how much of your time they took up. Now that time is restored to you, and you have nothing to do but to serve our Lord without carefulness and without distraction.'⁷⁵

John Wesley never fully understand the importance of family unlike his brother Charles and the vast majority of their followers for whom familial relationships formed an essential foundation for their lives and faith. Charles regarded his 'dearest Sally' as a gift from God and the love and devotion that he displayed renders him in this significant respect a far more human and sympathetic Methodist role model than John Wesley.

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⁷³ For example, Tyerman, *John Wesley*, 2: p. 358.

⁷⁴ Jackson, *Charles Wesley*, 2: p. 433.

⁷⁵ JW to Martha Hall, Copy letter, 17 November 1742. Wesley, John, *The Works of John Wesley*: 26, ed. Baker, pp. 90-1.

SINGING AT THE SCAFFOLD: CHARLES WESLEY'S HYMNS FOR CONDEMNED MALEFACTORS

On 10 July 1738, Charles Wesley recorded in his journal that he had begun visiting ten condemned men imprisoned in Newgate. It was less than two months after his conversion experience and he visited the men with reluctance: 'My old prejudices against the possibility of a death-bed repentance still hung upon me; and I could hardly hope there was mercy for those whose time was so short.'¹ In the prison he met a slave sentenced to death for stealing from his master:

I told him of One who came down from heaven to save lost sinners, and him in particular; described the sufferings of the Son of God, his sorrows, agony, and death. He listened with all the signs of eager astonishment; the tears trickled down his cheeks, while he cried, 'What! was it for me? Did God suffer all this for so poor a creature as me?' I left him waiting for the salvation of God.²

Other prisoners responded to Wesley's preaching with similar emotion. Later that week, while spending the night locked in Newgate with them, Wesley led them in singing a hymn his father had written with the title 'On the Crucifixion'.³ On 19 July, following the conversion of all ten men, Wesley accompanied them to their execution at Tyburn. Waiting at the gallows, the men again joined in singing hymns. Wesley noted: 'They were all cheerful; full of comfort, peace, and triumph; assuredly persuaded Christ had died for them, and waited to receive them into paradise.'⁴

This moving experience of ministering to the condemned established a habit that Wesley was to maintain throughout his life.⁵ Towards the end of his life, in his late seventies, he appears to have still been visiting and preaching to those facing execution.⁶ As the above account suggests,

¹ 10 July 1738. Thomas Jackson, ed. *The Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley, MA.* (1849) (Reprint, 1980), vol 1: p. 17.

² 12 July 1738. *Ibid.*, vol 1: p. 120.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 122-3.

⁵ See, for example, Wesley's journal entries for 12-19 July 1738; 11-12 September 1741; 22 February-1 March 1748; 20-21 August 1753. *Ibid.*, vol 1: 120-124; vol 1: 298-299; vol 2: 6-9; vol 2: 94-95.

hymn singing was part of this ministry. Both in Newgate and at Tyburn, Wesley sang hymns with the condemned. It is therefore not surprising to find that he composed a number of hymns for such situations. Among the thousands of poetical works that he wrote, there are eighteen hymns for those who have been condemned to death. One was published in *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1749) and ten were published in a separate collection of *Prayers for Condemned Malefactors* (1785), while the remainder were not published during his lifetime.⁷

This article examines the hymns that Wesley wrote 'for Condemned Malefactors'. It considers what they reveal about the theological meanings of the experience of execution for Wesley and for his fellow Methodists. It also analyses the significance of the hymns in relation to broader eighteenth-century debates about capital and corporal punishment. Understanding how Wesley's portrayal of execution reflected and resisted contemporary attitudes will shed light on the complicated relationship between the Methodist movement and its broader cultural and social context.

As Wesley's account of his visit to Newgate demonstrates, preaching the possibility of salvation to the condemned was a decisive marker of the new theology that accompanied his conversion. He had visited those in prison in his Oxford days, but had not then believed that a death-bed repentance could be acceptable to God. For the converted Wesley, however, as for early Methodists more broadly, death-bed conversions came to have great significance because they were a particular testimony to the amazing grace of God in justifying sinners who could in no way earn their salvation.⁸

Wesley's earliest published hymn for 'Condemned Malefactors' shows how the experience of the condemned could be interpreted as a demonstration of theological convictions that were central to Methodism.

6 In a note written on the manuscript of his *Prayers for Condemned Malefactors* (1785), Wesley noted: 'These prayers were answered, Thursday, April 28th, 1785, on nineteen malefactors, who died penitent.' George Osborn, ed. *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley* (1870), vol 8: p. 343.

7 These hymns were published in *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1749) and *Prayers for Condemned Malefactors* (1785). They can be found in Osborn, *Poetical Works*, vol 4: 460-461 and vol 8: 339-350. The remaining unpublished hymns can be found in S. T. Kimbrough and Oliver A Beckerlegge, ed. *The Unpublished Poetry of Charles Wesley* (Nashville, 1992), vol 3: pp. 317-321. I have not included in this analysis a number of hymns written for specific condemned individuals, such as William Dodd.

8 Henry Rack discusses Methodist attitudes to death-bed conversions in 'Evangelical Endings: Death-Beds in Evangelical Biography' *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 74, no. 1 (1992): pp. 47-49.

1. O Thou that hangedst on the tree
Our curse and sufferings to remove,
Pity the souls that look to Thee,
And save us by Thy dying love.

2. Outcasts of men, to Thee we fly,
To Thee who wilt the worst receive;
Forgive, and make us fit to die;
Alas! we are not fit to live.

3. We own our punishment is just,
We suffer for our evil here,
But in Thy sufferings, Lord we trust,
Thine, only Thine our souls can clear.

4. We have no outward righteousness,
No merits, or good works to plead;
We only can be saved by grace;
Thy grace will here be free indeed.

5. Save us by grace through faith alone,
A faith Thou must Thyself impart,
A faith that *would* by works be shown,
A faith that purifies the heart.

6. A faith that doth the mountains move,
A faith that shows our sins forgiven,
A faith that sweetly works by love,
And ascertains our claim to heaven.

7. This is the faith we humbly seek,
The faith in Thy all-cleansing blood;
That blood which doth for sinners plead
O let it speak us up to God!

8. Canst Thou reject our dying prayer,
Or cast us out who come to Thee?
Our sins ah! wherefore didst Thou bear!
Jesu, remember *Calvary*!

9. Number'd with the transgressors Thou,
 Between the felons crucified,
 Speak to our hearts, and tell us now
 Wherefore Thou hast for sinners died!

10. For us wast Thou not lifted up,
 For us a bleeding Victim made?
 That we, the abjects we, might hope,
 Thou hast for all a ransom paid.

11. O might we with our closing eyes
 Thee in Thy bloody vesture see;
 And cast on us Thy sacrifice:
 Jesus, my Lord, remember me!

12. Thou art into Thy kingdom come:
 I own Thee with my parting breath,
 God of all grace, reverse my doom,
 And save me from eternal death.

13. Hast Thou not wrought the sure belief
 I feel *this moment* in Thy blood?
 Am I not the dying thief?
 And art not Thou my Lord, my God?

14. Thy blood to all our souls apply,
 To them, to me Thy Spirit give,
 And I, (let each cry out,) and I
 With Thee in paradise shall live.⁹

Before examining the text of this hymn in detail, it is worth noting some of the issues that it raises for our broader interpretation of Wesley's hymns. In particular, the form of this hymn - a first-person description of the conversion of a condemned person - undermines any attempt to treat Wesley's hymns as the straightforward expression of his own emotional

⁹ 'For Condemned Malefactors,' *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1749) in Osborn, *Poetical Works* vol 4: pp. 460-461.

and spiritual world.¹⁰ Rather, this hymn shows Wesley attempting to lead the reader or singer - whose situation Wesley has himself never experienced - through a particular spiritual change or process. Wesley is not simply empathising with the emotions of the condemned person, he is actively directing those emotions. This alerts us to the role of Wesley's hymns as spiritual tools, which are designed not simply to reflect the experience of the reader or singer, but to shape that experience.

This particular hymn leads the reader or singer through a dramatic narrative of conversion. The narrative follows a pattern repeated in hundreds of Wesley's hymns.¹¹ It opens with a deep conviction of sin - 'Alas! we are not fit to live'. This is followed by a prayer for faith - 'Save us by grace through faith alone, / A faith Thou must Thyself impart'. This prayer makes a powerful appeal to Christ's compassion as demonstrated in his own salvific sufferings and death - 'Jesu, remember Calvary!' In the final verses, this prayer is answered by 'a sure belief, felt *that moment* in Thy blood'. This portrayal of conversion is similar to many depictions of conversion within both Wesley's hymns and Methodist culture more broadly.¹² The important Methodist convictions of justification through faith alone, substitutionary atonement and assurance of salvation are centre stage.

The situation of the person facing execution does, however, add distinctive elements to this portrayal. The 'malefactor' faces death as a punishment for crime and the hymn emphasises that the penalty 'is just'. Where other individuals might only face judgement in the next life, the malefactors 'suffer for our evil here.' Their impending death also requires a particular depiction of the relationship between faith and works: the faith that God gives the condemned man or woman 'would by works be shown' if they lived. This is a very Methodist emphasis on the importance of the connection between faith and good works, even in a

¹⁰ A number of scholars have analysed Wesley's hymns as primarily expressions of his own inner world. See, for example, F Luke Wiseman, *Charles Wesley: Evangelist and Poet* (1932), p. 199 and Richard E. Brantley, 'Charles Wesley's Experiential Art,' *Eighteenth-Century Life* 11, no. 2 (1987): pp. 1-11. I am arguing not that the hymns should never be read as guides to Wesley's experience, but that this is an inadequate approach to the hymns as a whole.

¹¹ For an extended discussion of the portrayal of conversion in Wesley's hymns, see Joanna Cruickshank, *Charles Wesley and the Construction of Suffering in Early English Methodism* (PhD Thesis, University of Melbourne, 2006), pp. 108-117.

¹² For an excellent analysis of Methodist conversion narratives, which largely follow this pattern of conviction of guilt, desire for grace and an experience of assurance of salvation, see D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford, New York, 2005), pp. 88-161.

situation where such works are largely impossible.¹³

In portraying the particular experience of the condemned person looking for forgiveness, Wesley draws upon an obvious biblical parallel. Just as the thief crucified next to Jesus asked for mercy and was promised paradise, so too the eighteenth-century criminal, standing beneath the gallows, can be confident of the availability of God's grace.¹⁴ As the hymn concludes, it echoes Jesus' promise to the thief: 'And I (let each cry out,) and I/ With Thee in paradise shall live.' Wesley returns to this parallel in other hymns. For example, one of the Prayers for Condemned Malefactors (1785) begins:

1. Return'd into Thy kingdom, Lord,
For good remember me,
And tell a penitent restored,
I soon shall be with Thee.¹⁵

Jesus' promise to the thief on the cross provided an important biblical argument against those who shared Wesley's former doubts about the possibility of death-bed repentance, but it also offered a comforting model for the condemned criminal doubting the possibility of grace.

The broader pattern of Wesley's first published hymn for 'Condemned Malefactors' is repeated in the later hymns. Though not all adopt the perspective of the 'malefactor', all assert the need for personal repentance and the possibility of grace. All rehearse the process by which the sinner is brought first to an awareness of guilt and then to a desire for mercy. Most also emphasise the terrors of hell as a spur to penitence, as in the following:

1. Faithful and True, Thy word we plead,
Met in Thy name to intercede
For the sad sons of woe,
Cut off by man, to death consign'd,
And justly swept from earth to find
Severer pains below.

¹³ For Charles Wesley's insistence on the importance of good works, see his sermon on 'Faith and good works' [Titus 3: 8] in Kenneth G. C. Newport, ed. *The Sermons of Charles Wesley* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 154-166. For John Wesley's conclusions on the same theological issue, see Henry Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* Third ed. (2002), pp. 390-393.

¹⁴ Luke 23: 39-43.

¹⁵ 'Hymn VI', *Prayers for Condemned Malefactors* (1785) in Osborn, *Poetical Works*, vol 8: p. 343.

2. With *Sinai's* thunderings, Lord, begin
 To rouse the sleeping slaves of sin,
 To o'erwhelm with guilty shame;
 Put them in fear, Thy wrath reveal,
 Shake o'er the opening mouth of hell,
 And scorch them with the flame.

3. Conviction's sharpest arrows dart,
 And pierce their adamant heart,
 Who now to falsehoods fly;
 That when their lies are swept away,
 Cut off from all resource they may
 To Thee for refuge cry.

4. Soon as Thou hear'st their contrite moan,
 "Save, or eternally undone
 We die the second death,"
 O let them call Thy death to mind,
 And sinking into *Tophet* find
 Thy mercy's arms beneath.¹⁶

Here the fear of 'the flame' of hell is encouraged because it will cause the condemned to 'fly' to God 'for refuge'. Other hymns describe the 'intolerable pain', 'tormenting flame', 'unquenchable fire' and 'weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth' which await the damned.¹⁷ Yet others warn that the unrepentant will be sent to 'that dreadful place below', plunged 'in the burning pool' and 'tormented in that quenchless fire'.¹⁸ A belief in the reality of hell was, of course, a part of broader Methodist theology, and an element in many Methodist calls to repentance.¹⁹ It was

¹⁶ 'Hymn VI', *Prayers for Condemned Malefactors* (1785) in Osborn, *Poetical Works*, vol 8: p. 340.

¹⁷ In Kimbrough and Beckerlegge, *Unpublished Poetry*, vol. 3: pp. 320, 317 and Osborn, *Poetical Works*, vol 8: p. 350.

¹⁸ Osborn, *Poetical Works*, vol. 8: p. 348, p. 344, p. 349.

¹⁹ Hell is mentioned in most of Charles Wesley's post-conversion sermons, but it is a major theme in only a few such as his sermon on 'The Cause and Cure of Earthquakes'. Newport, *Sermons*, pp. 226-237.

not, however, a major theme in many of Wesley's hymns.²⁰ The approaching death of the condemned men and women, however, created an urgency to their situation that seems to have heightened the emphasis on the coming judgement in these hymns.

The repeated emphasis on hell appears also to arise from Wesley's understanding of the condemned as particularly hard of heart. This, the hymns suggest, is because of their lives of crime. As one hymn asserts: 'Our hearts are harden'd from His fear,/ And countless sins our conscience sear'. In another the condemned is described as '... careless on the brink of hell,/ I no remorse, or sorrow fear.'²¹ Though the consciences of the condemned may be especially seared, however, their experience is still that of ordinary sinners writ large. Wesley's hymns repeatedly portray all people as having hearts sinfully hardened to both God's judgement and His grace.²²

While the hymns suggest that threats of hell may move the condemned to repentance, they also imply that even this may be ineffective. This is demonstrated in the following verses:

11. Past feeling through habitual sin,
My conscience sear'd for years has been;
Obdurate still my heart remains,
Nor shrinks at everlasting pains.

12. Hopeless, I must for ever die,
But He who pass'd the angels by
Beheld mankind with pitying look,
And on Himself our nature took.

²⁰ In this regard, It is mstrucltve to compare the hymns 'for Condemned Malefactors' with others of Wesley's hymns that are prayers for the new birth and sanctification. See, for example 'Hymns for Those that Seek and Those that have Redemption' in *Poetical Works*, vol 4: pp. 207-282 and 'Hymns for Love' in Osborn, *Poetical Works*, vol 8: pp. 354-386. In these hymns, published around the same time as the hymns for 'Condemned Malefactors', the horrors of slavery to sin and the desire for grace are evoked much more often than the fear of hell.

²¹ 'Hymn for a Condemned Malefactor' in Kimbrough and Beckerlegge, *Unpublished Poetry*, vol 3: p. 317

²² For a discussion of hard-heartedness in Wesley's hymns, see Joanna Cruickshank, "Appear as Crucified for Me": Sigh, suffering and spiritual transformation in the hymns of Charles Wesley' *Journal of Religious History* 33, no. 3 (October 2006) pp. 311-330.

13. He bow'd the heavens, He left His throne,
 He laid for all the ransom down.
 See there! He hangs on yonder tree!
 He bows His head, and dies - for me!

14. Return'd to heaven, again He lives,
 To harden'd thieves repentance gives,
 In penitence His grace reveals,
 And pardon on their conscience seals.

15. Turn then, my Lord, my God unknown,
 Whom with my parting breath I own;
 In death the kind conviction dart,
 And cast a look, and break my heart.

16. A day's a thousand years to Thee,
 Cut short Thy gracious work in me,
 And let me, swept from earth, remove
 The captive of Thy dying love.²³

The imaginary malefactor confesses that, after a lifetime of sin, even the thought of 'everlasting pains' does not produce repentance. In this hymn, as in many others, the hard-hearted criminal is instead brought to repentance through the imagined sight of the sufferings of Christ.²⁴ These sufferings are evidence of the compassion of Christ, which gives the condemned person confidence to ask for the change of heart that only God can give: 'cast a look, and break my heart.' As a result of this confidence in Christ's love, the hymn can assert the possibility that even in the short time of life remaining salvation is possible.

The narrative of spiritual change described in this hymn closely mirrors Wesley's account of his encounter with the condemned slave at Newgate. In response to Wesley's description of 'the sufferings of the Son of God', the slave wept and exclaimed: 'What! was it for me? Did God

²³ 'Hymn XI' *Prayers for Condemned Malefactors* (1785) in Osborn, *Poetical Works*, vol 8: p. 348.

²⁴ Wesley's hymns repeatedly present the sight of Christ's sufferings as having profound transformative power. I have explored this at length in "Appear as Crucified for Me": Sight, suffering and spiritual transformation in the hymns of Charles Wesley (*Journal of Religious History*) op. cit

suffer all this for so poor a creature as me?' Wesley's experience of the resulting conversion and assurance of this man and the nine others who died with him affirmed his belief that salvation was available to all. This central Methodist conviction appears in every one of his hymns 'For Condemned Malefactors'. Each concludes, like the following, in the confident hope of salvation:

4. The bottomless pit Expects us we know
 But we are not yet In torments below:
 Through boundless compassion We cumber the ground,
 And try if salvation And grace may be found.

5. Who consciously doom Ourselves to the flame,
 If such may presume To call on Thy name,
 Omnipotent Jesus, Thy nature make known,
 Our Purchaser seize us, And claim for Thine own.

6. Thy wonderful power Of saving exert,
 And at our last hour, With love in Thy heart,
 With mercy receive us Thy dearly bought prize,
 And dying forgive us, And take to the skies.²⁵

The rollicking metre of this hymn suggests its hopeful message. Though 'torments below' may threaten, the 'wonderful power' and 'mercy' of Jesus provides hope that even at 'the last hour' salvation is available.

This hymn, in conjunction with those analysed above, supports the contention that Wesley's hymns depict the plight of the 'Condemned Malefactor' as an intensified example of the plight of all humanity: deeply sinful, facing death as the wages of this sin, and desperately in need of grace. The conversion of the condemned was thus a powerful illustration of central Methodist convictions about the nature of salvation: in particular, justification by faith alone, the universality of God's grace and the reality of assurance. The theological significance of the conversion of the condemned may help explain the intense commitment that Methodists showed to evangelising the condemned, as

²⁵ 'Hymn XIII' *Prayers for Condemned Malefactors* (1785) in Osborn, *Poetical Works*, vol 8: p. 350.

well as the proliferation of tracts recounting their conversion narratives.²⁶

While the hymns reflect significant aspects of Methodist theology, they were also written in a broader cultural context. The period during which Wesley wrote hymns for the condemned saw major changes in the laws regarding capital punishment, and growing debates over the role and value of public execution. Reading the hymns in the light of this broader context suggests new angles from which to consider Wesley's attitude to executions.

In England, the eighteenth century saw a significant increase in the number of crimes that bore the death penalty. In 1688, about fifty crimes were eligible for the death penalty, but by the early nineteenth century this number had risen to over 200.²⁷ This increase was primarily a reflection of anxieties about the defence of property, in an age when commercial activity was on the rise. New laws were passed relating to property and commerce, such as fraud, shoplifting, forgery, receiving and embezzlement - and the death penalty was applicable to most of these offences. Increasingly, apparently small offences became capital crimes: from stealing a sheep to picking a shilling from someone's pocket; from cutting down trees in an orchard to breaking the border of a fishpond so that the fish escaped.²⁸

This so-called 'Bloody Code', with its huge array of crimes punishable by death, rested on the broad assumption that capital punishment would act as a deterrent to such crimes. As a common saying expressed it: 'Men are not hanged for stealing horses, but that horses may not be stolen.'²⁹ It was for this reason that executions occurred in full view of the people. 'The more public the punishment, the greater influence it has commonly had,' argued George Osborne in his defence of public execution in 1733.³⁰

²⁶ For a (highly critical) discussion of Methodist ministry to the condemned, see V.A.C. Gattrell, *The Hanging Tree; Execution and the English People, 1770-1868* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 376-382: John Walsh notes the theological significance of Tyburn for Methodists in 'Methodism and the Origins of English-Speaking Evangelicalism' in *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990* ed. Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington and George A. Rawlyk (New York, Oxford, 1994), p. 31.

²⁷ Frank McLynn, *Crime and Punishment in Eighteenth-Century England* (London and New York, 1989), p. 257.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, xii.

²⁹ Gattrell, *The Hanging Tree*, p. 5.

³⁰ George Osborne, *The Civil Magistrates Right of Inflicting Punishment* (London, 1733, pp. 8-9. Quoted in Randall McGowen, 'The Body and Punishment in Eighteenth-Century England' *The Journal of Modern History* 59, no. 4 (Dec. 1987), p. 661.

Jurists generally agreed, however, that deterrence did not require that every eligible criminal was executed - rather, too many executions would result in a contempt for the law.³¹ This produced a paradox: the explosion of capital statutes was not paralleled by significant growth in the number of actual executions. Judges and juries exercised considerable discretion over which cases actually received the death penalty. Overall, the number of hangings decreased between the mid-seventeenth and mid-eighteenth centuries.³² The extension of capital punishment to such a broad range of crimes, in conjunction with the almost entirely random imposition of the penalty in practice, led many to criticise the 'Bloody Code' as both unjust and ineffective.³³

A significant exception to this general decline in the number of hangings occurred in the late eighteenth century. In the mid 1780s, the end of the American war saw an influx of unemployed war veterans and the crime rate soared in England. The simultaneous end of transportation to America closed off alternative options for serious punishment of offenders. The 'moral panic' surrounding these developments meant that in the five years from 1783 to 1787, the rate of executions increased by 82 percent from the previous five years.³⁴ It was in the midst of this surge of hangings that Charles Wesley published his *Prayers for Condemned Malefactors*. Given that Wesley had previously published only one other hymn on this subject, it seems likely that his publication of this collection in 1785 was a response to this proliferation of executions.

What difference does this understanding of historical context make to our reading of these hymns? Clearly, the hymns represent only one individual's understanding of the appropriate response of the condemned man or woman. Various aspects of the hymns seem more significant, however, in the light of broader arguments about the relationship between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century evangelicals and executions.

As already noted, during the eighteenth century, Methodists and other evangelicals became increasingly involved in preaching to condemned men and women. In his lengthy study of executions in England between 1770 and 1868, V.A.C. Gattrell offers a very critical analysis of this

³¹ McLynn, *Crime and Punishment*, xiv.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 257-258.

³³ For a discussion of these critiques, see McGowen, 'The Body and Punishment', pp. 651-679.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p260.

evangelical ministry.³⁵ He argues that a pious concern for the life to come and the urgent need for salvation generally distracted evangelicals from the injustice and inhumanity of capital punishment during this period:

An ever more compulsive belief in salvation could comfortingly diminish the obligation to confront the dangers in the ramshackle processes of law and the pain it so often implausibly inflicted. For devout witnesses at the scaffold nothing helped to curb the anxious vapourings of empathy more than belief in the afterlife.³⁶

As Gattrell points out, there is no record of any of the many evangelical visitors to Newgate petitioning the courts for mercy on behalf of the men or women they visited.³⁷

Charles Wesley's hymns for 'Condemned Malefactors' could certainly be used to support some aspects of Gattrell's argument. The hymns repeatedly encourage the singer to confess his or her own guilt and the justice of the sentence under which her or she is about to die. A hymn entitled 'Just Before Their Being Led Out To Execution' begins:

1. Justice, thy summons we obey,
And come our forfeit lives to pay,
While God and man we justify,
And by a righteous sentence die.³⁸

Other hymns describe those under sentence of death as 'Justly by man condemned to die' or 'justly swept from earth to find/ Severer pains below'.³⁹ Yet others encourage the condemned people to acknowledge: 'Death as the wages of our sin/ Our just desert we find' or 'We have the wages of our sin,/ Who murderers of ourselves have been.'⁴⁰

This repeated emphasis on the justice of the death penalty is striking. As has been noted, the sudden surge in death sentences during the period when the majority of these hymns were published was primarily a result of property crimes. Many voices were raised in protest at the inadequacies of the justice system and the largely random imposition of

³⁵ See V.A.C. Gattrell, *The Hanging Tree*, pp. 371-395.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 376.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 380.

³⁸ *Prayers for Condemned Malefactors* (1785) in Osborn, *Poetical Works*, vol 8: pp. 344-345.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 341, 340.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 345, 349.

the death penalty.⁴¹ In these hymns, however, Wesley gives no voice to protestations of innocence or complaints of injustice. The condemned are repeatedly portrayed as conscience-hardened criminals, who are entirely responsible for their own suffering. These hymns certainly confirm our understanding of Wesley as politically conservative.

Moreover, the hymns do focus on the spiritual implications of impending death to the exclusion of other emotions or concerns. There is no lament here for dependents left unsupported, for loved ones 'left bereaved, or for the joys of life being lost. A desperate desire for salvation is the overriding emotional state evoked. This is not surprising, given Wesley's theological convictions. But it does demonstrate again that Wesley's primary concern in the hymns is not to empathise with the emotions of others but to shape and direct them to spiritually profitable ends. In this case, it is plausible that Wesley's emphasis on the spiritual fate of the condemned may have distracted those who shared his understanding from a critique of the system that had imposed the death penalty.

To some extent, then, the hymns for 'Condemned Malefactors' support Gattrell's assessment of evangelical attitudes to executions. However, a closer examination of both the hymns and the contemporary debates around execution reveals a more complicated picture. Randall McGowan has argued that eighteenth-century debates over capital and corporal punishment involved a fundamental conflict over the meanings of the suffering body. As noted, traditional attitudes to public execution promoted its importance as a deterrent against crime. Underlying this argument was a valuing of the 'body politic, a metaphor that spoke of a familiar set of relationships, of hierarchy and duty, and of a whole whose life was somehow directed by a purpose that no part could define.'⁴² This broader community or body politic was more important than any individual body.

This metaphor was repeatedly used in assize sermons and other addresses given on judicial occasions during the early eighteenth century. It conceptualised society as tightly connected through a web of relationships, but also as vulnerable to disease and corruption. As with the human body, such corruption might require drastic surgery to save the whole person. As McGowan points out, the most common metaphor used to describe public execution was that of 'amputation'. According to one contemporary defender of execution: 'The infected limb must be cut

⁴¹ See footnote 30, above.

⁴² McGowan, 'The Body and Punishment', p. 679.

off, even in mercy, unless it be greater benefit to preserve one limb of the body, than all the rest.⁴³ While ideally this process of ‘amputation’ would result in the repentance of the condemned individual, the primary concern was the well-being of the community. Within such an understanding of capital punishment, those who gazed upon the suffering bodies of the executed saw enacted the restoration of health to the body politic. The terrible cost of this restoration acted as a deterrent to any who might become ‘diseased’ or criminal themselves.

During Charles Wesley’s lifetime, there was a growing resistance to such representations of capital punishment. Reformers contended that public execution was inhumane and ineffective, doing more harm than good to both criminals and society. McGowan argues that these reformers reflected an alternative understanding of the suffering body, which gave primacy to the experience of the individual. For these reformers: ‘society was composed of separate bodies, of individuals who might be connected by interest and feeling rather than by a shared ceremonial life. The life of the individual was uniquely important, and sacrifice of the physical body would injure rather than heal the social body.’⁴⁴ Therefore, these reformers argued, the sight of a person being executed would not communicate complicated metaphorical meanings about the body politic; rather, it would overwhelm and distress the viewer.⁴⁵ This argument reflected an understanding of the human body as powerfully connected to individual identity.

Wesley’s hymns for ‘Condemned Malefactors’ reflect various aspects of these alternative understandings of public execution. Wesley affirms the validity of capital punishment, encouraging the condemned to accept their execution as a just repayment for their crimes. One hymn makes clear the deterrent value of the sight of an execution:

1. Our punishment accepting here
 With penitent remorse;
 With bitter grief, and torturing fear,
 We end our shameful course.

2. Set forth a spectacle to all,
 The refuse of mankind;
 We on our guilty brethren call,
 And leave a word behind.

⁴³ Joshua Fitzsimmonds, *Free and Candid Disquisitions on the Nature and Execution of the Laws of England* (London, 1751), p. 179, quoted in *Ibid.* p. 662.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 679.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 675-678.

3. Warning, ye sons of rapine, take,
 By our unhappy doom:
 Now, now your evil ways forsake,
 And 'scape the wrath to come.

4. Before the righteous wrath of men
 Your careless souls surprise;
 And give you up to lasting pain,
 And death that never dies.

5. Merciful God, to them extend,
 To us, Thy saving grace,
 And show Thyself the sinner's Friend
 To all our dying race.

6. And lo! Before Thy face to appear
 We now from earth remove,
 Concluding with an act sincere
 Of sorrow, faith, and love.⁴⁶

The portrayal of the condemned in this hymn would have been immediately recognisable to a conservative apologist for public execution. This is, however, the only hymn that speaks of the deterrent purpose of executions. The primary focus of Wesley's hymns is not on the social value of capital punishment, but on the individual experience of the condemned men and women. While defenders of public execution certainly hoped for a 'good death' on the part of the executed, this was a secondary benefit of the punishment.⁴⁷ For Wesley, individual salvation was of central importance.

Even as Wesley affirmed the justice of capital punishment, therefore, he downplayed its traditional meanings in favour of a controversial emphasis on the urgent necessity of individual conversion. In Wesley's own description of attending an execution, he said nothing of its moral lesson or its social purpose. Rather, he wrote of the personal assurance of the men who died, their 'comfort, peace and triumph'.⁴⁸ In focusing on the malefactor's experience in this way, Wesley opened the door to a more individualistic understanding of execution, one which undermined the traditional emphasis on the body politic.

⁴⁶ 'Hymn X' *Prayers for Condemned Malefactors* (1785) in *Poetical Works*, vol 8: p. 346.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 665-666.

⁴⁸ See footnote 4.

This interpretation is supported by Richard R. Follett's work on evangelicals and penal reform.⁴⁹ He demonstrates that in the early nineteenth century, there was widespread support for penal reform among evangelicals. Methodists were among those who joined the Capital Punishment Society, which sought to reform the legal system and so 'diminish the number of capital punishments.'⁵⁰ Underlying the efforts of this society and other similar evangelical initiatives was a general belief in the value of each individual, as created and potentially redeemable by God.⁵¹

These developments suggest that the theological meanings with which Wesley invested the condemned individual could ultimately have significant political consequences, even if Wesley himself would not necessarily have approved. The hymns present the experience of the 'Condemned Malefactor' as a dramatic enactment of the experience of all sinners who, without God's gracious intervention, face death and hell. The conversion of 'Condemned Malefactors' thus provided a profound demonstration that God's mercy extended to all, even those whom the hymns describe as 'outcasts of men'. At a time when the penal system appeared to many to be cruel and unjust, Wesley seemed oblivious to such doubts, insisting that those who were executed died by 'a righteous sentence.' By emphasising the individual spiritual significance of each of those who died, however, Wesley was part of a broader evangelical trend. The same conviction that led the condemned slave to believe that salvation was 'For me!' would ultimately lead some Methodists to join the campaign to reform the 'Bloody Code'.

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⁴⁹ Richard R. Follett, *Evangelicalism, Penal Theory and the Politics of Criminal Law Reform in England, 1808-1830*. (Basingstoke, 2001).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 138-141, pp. 85-87.

JOHN NELSON (1707-1774), STONEMASON AND ITINERANT PREACHER

WHEN John Nelson died in Leeds in 1774, thousands followed the funeral procession the four miles to his home at Birstall, weeping and singing hymns. An anonymous poet (probably Charles Wesley) wrote a 432-line elegy on his death, and in the years that followed, Nelson's published *Journal* was so popular that it went into many editions. 120 years after his death he was still felt worthy of a full-length biography.

Nelson has come in for high praise from students of Methodist history. Southey said of him: 'John Nelson had as high a spirit and as brave a heart as ever Englishman was blessed with.'¹ According to Walter Runciman, Cabinet Minister under Asquith, 'the first layman of the cause of which John Wesley was the head was John Nelson'² The Rev. J.S. Banks, a former President of the Wesleyan Conference, described him as 'a great evangelist - the Apostle of the North'³ Nelson's entry in the first *Dictionary of National Biography* recorded that 'as a preacher Nelson showed a power and exercised an influence scarcely inferior to Wesley's.'⁴

Yet Nelson is largely forgotten today. To mark his tercentenary it is worth considering how an ill-educated stonemason from the West Riding of Yorkshire came to make such a mark on religious life in the mid-eighteenth century.

Birstall, where Nelson was born in 1707, was then a centre for cloth-making. Defoe gave a vivid if perhaps over-rosy picture of the place Nelson knew in his youth: 'We found the country one continuous village, though mountainous every way, hardly a house standing out of speaking distance from another, and (which soon told their business), we could see at almost every house a tenter,⁵ and on almost every tenter a piece of cloth. . . . On every hill there were springs and coalpits. Having thus fire and water at every dwelling, there is no need to inquire why they dwell dispersed on the highest hills.'⁶

¹ *Life of Wesley* (1864 edition), p. 279.

² *Batley Reporter*, July 22, 1910.

³ *Birstall News*, July 23, 1910.

⁴ Ronald Bayne (1894).

⁵ Machine for stretching cloth.

⁶ *Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, Daniel Defoe (1724-7). [q. *Yorkshire Weekly Post*, Oct 27, 1894].

The Nelsons, however, were stonemasons, a family tradition that persisted in Birstall without a break until the last few years. John's father, William, was born in 1681. The picture we get of him in John's Journal indicates a God-fearing man, educated enough to read to his young family from the Bible. When he was nine, John had his first profound religious experience. He was already 'horribly terrified with the thoughts of death and judgment'⁷ but one Sunday night he was sitting at his father's feet as he read from Revelation, chapter 20, when 'the word came with such light and power to my soul, that it made me tremble, as if a dart was shot at my heart; and I fell with my face on the floor and wept. As my father proceeded, I thought I saw everything he read about; and the sight was so terrible, I was about to stop my ears, that I might not hear, but I durst not. When he came to the 11th verse, the words made me cringe, and my flesh seemed to creep on my bones'

Nelson's vision of the dead being judged before the throne of God followed him from that young age. He wrote: 'Whenever I had committed any known sin, I used to be so terrified afterwards that I shed many a tear in private; yet when I came to my companions I wiped my face, and went on again in sin and folly; but O! the hell I found in my mind when I came to be alone again, and what resolutions I made; nevertheless, when temptation came, my resolutions were as a thread of tow that had touched the fire.'

This passage raises two important considerations when studying Nelson's life: the alternating bouts of sin and remorse which haunted him until he met John Wesley many years later, and his ability to write down his experiences with directness and passion.

His parents found the young Nelson a handful. 'When thou wast a lad,' said his mother in later years, 'I had more trouble with thee than with any other child.' No doubt the courage, tenacity and strength of mind which later served Nelson so well were troublesome qualities in a youngster. Yet at fourteen he already had a sense of his destiny: 'I often thought if God would make me like Jeremiah, to stand and speak his words to the people in the streets as he did, I should not mind who cast dirt at me.'

Just before Nelson's father died, he said to his wife, 'I know that my peace is made with God.' The words set the sixteen-year-old John on a quest to acquire that knowledge for himself, but it was to take him sixteen years to find it. During that time he helped to build the parish church at Tong, just north of Birstall, where he met and married his wife

⁷ Except where stated, all the information about Nelson's life comes from *An Extract from the Journal of John Nelson* (1767 and subsequently).

Martha. They began to raise a family, but John 'loved pleasure more than God.' On his own admission, the self-indulgence included drinking, and the field sports of the day (including cock-fighting and bull-baiting⁸).

In an effort to escape the influence of his companions Nelson decided to leave home, to which the remarkably compliant Martha 'gladly consented.' His ability as a mason allowed him to earn good money and he settled in London on his own. The struggle to mend his ways continued and he felt obliged to fight with workmates who tormented him for not drinking with them. Having cleared £12. 15s. in savings, he went home again, only to fall under the same influences that had driven him away before. This time he took Martha to London with him, and they lived 'in peace and plenty.'

After some years Martha became ill and returned to Yorkshire with the children. Nelson stayed behind for a while before rejoining her. Finding he 'could not rest night or day,' he returned yet again to the capital, explaining to puzzled friends and family that he had 'something to learn that I have not yet learned.'

Sleeping badly and plagued by bad dreams, he tried church after church without success. He found Whitefield's preaching 'pleasant,' but could not understand him. In later years, hearing someone comparing John Wesley unfavorably with a pulpit celebrity of the time, Nelson replied, 'But he has not tarried in the Upper Room as John Wesley has done.'⁹

Finally in 1739 came the 'blessed morning to my soul' when John Wesley preached his first sermon at Moorfields. 'As soon as he got upon the stand he stroked back his hair and turned his face toward where I stood, and I thought fixed his eyes on me: his countenance struck such an awful dread upon me, before I heard him speak, that it made my heart beat like the pendulum of a clock; and when he did speak I thought his whole discourse was aimed at me. When he had done I said, this man can tell the secrets of my heart; he hath fully described the disease of my heart; but he hath not left me there, for he hath showed the remedy, even the blood of Jesus.'

Nelson's struggle with doubt and temptation continued until the moment when 'Jesus Christ was as evidently set before the eye of my mind, as crucified for my sins, as if I had seen him with my bodily eyes. And in that instant my heart was set at liberty from tormenting guilt and fear and filled with a calm and serene peace.' Back at his lodgings Nelson's new fervour and continual prayer alarmed the landlord and his

⁸ *Lives of the Early Methodist Preachers*, ed. Thomas Jackson 3rd e. (1865), vol i, p. 176.

⁹ *The Hidden Life of Prayer*, Rev. D.M. MacIntyre, (1945, 1st. pub. 1907), p. 83.

wife, and they turned him out - only to recant and ask him to show them 'how we may find the same mercy.' The wife too became a follower of Wesley.

Meanwhile Nelson was working as a foreman mason on an important project, William Kent's Treasury building, which still stands on Horse Guards Parade, Whitehall. One Saturday; the chief foreman told him to start some men on a job the following day because the Lord of the Exchequer¹⁰ wanted to see it finished. Nelson refused to work on a Sunday, and was dismissed on the grounds that religion had made him 'a rebel against the king.' 'No, Sir,' said Nelson, 'It hath made me a *better subject* than ever I was before. I would rather see my wife and children beg their bread barefooted to heaven, than ride in a coach to hell.'

When he went to collect his tools on the Monday, however, the chief foreman had thought again. 'He gave me good words and from that time carved better for me than ever before.' It was one of many examples of Nelson's ability to earn the respect of enemies and detractors through courage and principle.

Nelson continued to hear the Wesleys every Sunday until his skill as a mason led to a foreman's job on another important building, Clandon Park in Surrey, where he spent the summer of 1740. One day the owner's uncle, Arthur Onslow¹¹, engaged him in conversation, saying, 'This is a fine house, and a fine estate of land about it! But what will it signify? For a piece of land, six feet long and three broad, will fit me shortly.' Speaker Onslow was unduly pessimistic. He lived another 28 years.

The months away meant that Nelson missed the period of upheaval which separated the Wesleys from some of their allies. 'By his absence he had been spared....those contentions on points of doctrine which had torn apart the congregation in Fetter Lane, resulting in severance between the Wesleys on one hand and Moravians and Calvinists on the other.'¹²

Nelson was in no doubt on which side he stood. When two acquaintances maintained that the Wesleys 'denied the faith of the Gospel' through rejecting predestination and election, he disavowed their antinomian stance thus: 'You are gone out of the highway of holiness and have now got into the devil's pinfold. . . .resting in opinions that give you liberty to live after the flesh.' His former friends, believing themselves the elect, told him he was as stupid as Mr Wesley and that they would leave him in his 'blind estate.'

¹⁰ Robert Walpole (1676-1745).

¹¹ (1691-1768), Speaker of the House of Commons.

¹² *John Nelson: Mason and Missionary in the Heathen England of the Eighteenth Century*, Annie Keeling (1892), p. 27.

Calamitous news from Birstall - one child dead, another ill and his wife lame from a fall - caused Nelson to return home, but before he left, on October 19, 1740¹³ he introduced himself to Wesley after service in St. Paul's. As they walked to Upper Moorfields they talked. 'It was a blessed conference to me,' says Nelson, but otherwise records only Wesley's parting words: 'Take care you do not quench the spirit.'

With that injunction in mind Nelson set out to convince his friends and family that he had received assurance that his sins were forgiven. This, coupled with his determination to reprove sinners, caused alarm, not least to his wife and mother who begged him not to claim what no one would believe. Martha said she wished he had stayed in London. 'Your head is turned', said his mother. 'Yes, and my heart too, I thank the Lord,' he replied.

But slowly he made converts, first among the family, then among his neighbours. They would come to his house to dispute the new doctrine, their objections forcing him to defend it by quoting the Scriptures and expounding what he had read. The meetings grew so large he soon had to stand at the door to address the crowd that had gathered. Without planning it he had become a preacher.

The Countess of Huntingdon, before her rift with John Wesley, heard such good reports of Nelson's exhortations that she came to hear him preach. 'The Countess was delighted, and at parting told him, with her characteristic energy, that God had called him to put his hand to the plough, and great would be his punishment if he dared to look back for a moment.'¹⁴

The Rev. Benjamin Ingham, whose Moravian ministry was nearby, at first encouraged Nelson's preaching. But Ingham's quietist belief that his followers need only 'be still' and wait for God to save them was alienating him from the Wesleys. Nelson told John Wesley: '[The Moravians] are light and trifling in their behaviour; they are easy and thoughtless; having now no holy fear, no earnest care to work out their own salvation.'¹⁵

Wesley recorded that Nelson 'soon gave offence, both by his plainness of speech and advising people to go to church and sacrament. Mr Ingham reproved him; but finding him incorrigible, forbade any that were in his societies to hear him. But being persuaded this is the will of God

¹³ *The Journal of John Wesley*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock (1909), vol ii, p. 393 n.

¹⁴ *The Life and Times of the Countess of Huntingdon*, Aaron Seymour (1839), p. 254.

¹⁵ *The Journal of John Wesley*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock (1909), vol iii, p. 62.

concerning him, he [Nelson] continues to this hour working in the day, that he may be burdensome to no man, and in the evening 'testifying the truth as it is in Jesus.'¹⁶

Nelson put his differences with the Moravians more bluntly: 'I desired to die rather than live to see the children devoured by these *boars* out of the *German wood*.' Troubled by the experience he wrote to John Wesley asking for advice on 'how to proceed in the work that God had begun by such an unpolished tool as me.' Promptly Wesley sent word to an overjoyed Nelson that he should expect him the following Tuesday. He had dreamed of Wesley sitting by his fireside and now it was to happen.

Wesley spent a week in Birstall and described the effect of Nelson's preaching: 'Many of the greatest profligates in all the country were soon changed. The whole town wore a new face. Such a change did God work by the artless testimony of one plain man!'¹⁷ As Southey put it: 'Had [Wesley] been still doubtful whether the admission of lay-preachers should make a part of his plan, this must have decided him.'¹⁸

Someone who often heard him at that time described Nelson's workaday preaching style: 'He usually had his hammer stuck within the string of his leather apron on one side and trowel on the other; and after giving out his text he would pull up his small clothes [breeches] and begin, 'My dear brethren'¹⁹ As Nelson himself wrote to John Wesley: 'I am employed in hewing stone in the daytime, and at night calling sinners to the blood of Jesus.'²⁰ This involved starting work at 5 a.m., finishing at 6p.m., and then hurrying away to preach.

As he extended his evangelising beyond Birstall to other Yorkshire towns, and into Lincolnshire, Derbyshire, Cheshire and Lancashire, Nelson began to experience the hostility which Methodism aroused in the early days. In Manchester, where he was the first Methodist to preach, he was wounded in the head by a stone, and then arrested, though nothing came of it.

In August 1743 an invitation from John Wesley to go to London put Nelson in a quandary. With so much time spent preaching his earnings had fallen and his clothes were worn out. Martha told him: 'You are not fit to go anywhere as you are.' But a local tradesman, who was not a Methodist, came to the rescue with a gift of blue cloth for a coat and black for waistcoat and breeches. Another good neighbour, who was going to

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Short History of the People Called Methodists*, John Wesley (*Works*, vol xiii, p. 310).

¹⁸ *Life of Wesley*, (1864 edition), p. 254.

¹⁹ *Methodist Heroes in the Great Haworth Round 1734-84*, J.W. Laycock (1909), p. 11.

²⁰ *Lives of the Early Methodist Preachers*, ed. Thomas Jackson (1865), vol i, p. 175.

London on horseback, saved Nelson having to walk all the way by offering to 'ride and tie' with him (one rides the horse, and then has a turn walking, having tethered it for the use of the other who is following on foot). The purpose of the journey was so that Nelson could accompany Wesley on a preaching tour of Cornwall. Both addressed enthusiastic crowds, though Nelson's broad-shouldered presence sometimes came in useful when the mood became uglier. Wesley noted the pacific effect when Nelson 'spoke a little to the loudest, who answered not again, but went quietly away.'²¹ The tour was not without its privations. In St. Ives the two slept on the floor for about three weeks; Nelson's description shows that even in these conditions the Oxford-educated Wesley and his artisan companion were not quite equals: "He had my great-coat for his pillow, and I had Burkitt's *Notes on the New Testament*'.²² One night about three o'clock Wesley remarked: 'Brother Nelson, let us be of good cheer; I have one whole side yet, for the skin is off but one side.'

One morning after preaching Nelson had been offered a breakfast of bread and honey, but Wesley had had nothing and hunger drove him to pick blackberries by the wayside. 'Brother Nelson,' he complained, 'this is the best country I ever saw for getting a stomach, but the worst for getting food: do the people think we can live by preaching?'²³

The endurance required of an itinerant preacher was further tested when the pair sailed in a fishing-boat to the Scilly Isles. A storm blew up and, as Wesley put it, the waves began 'to swell and hang over our heads.' He encouraged his companions by leading them into the hymn 'When passing through the watery deep. . .'²⁴

Back in Yorkshire Nelson began to develop his talent as a formidable debater. He was no intellectual, but his Yorkshire bluntness, native wit and Scriptural knowledge caused those who chose to dispute with him to scratch their heads and think again. A man he met on the road to Leeds challenged his views on the blood of Christ as the foundation for salvation; he preferred to put his faith in doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with God. In Nelson's uncomplicated theology this meant that if his companion fell short in any of those duties he must be damned. 'Lord have mercy on me! You are enough to make any man despair,' said the man, and argued no more.

A clergyman who had preached against the knowledge of forgiveness

²¹ *John Wesley and the Methodist Societies*, John Simon (1923), p. 160.

²² The book on which Nelson laid his head was preserved and is held at the Wesley Cottage in Trewint.

²³ George Eliot refers to this incident in *Adam Bede*, chap. 3.

²⁴ *John Wesley and the Methodist Societies*, John Simon (1923), p. 164.

of sin on earth saw Nelson in the congregation and called for him to continue the argument. Nelson met his every point with quotations from the Bible and Prayer Book till the man pleaded: 'You have too good a memory for me,' and was reduced to calling for a pint of ale.

When a man told him that his doctrine was sound, but 'would far better become a church,' Nelson's forensic skills and gift for allegory allowed him to retort: 'Sir, if a man was hungry in the midst of a desert, and wholesome food was brought to him, he would not refuse to eat because it was not in the dining-room.'

Harder to contend with, even for a man of Nelson's stoutness of heart, was the continued aggression of the mob incited by their social superiors. Sometimes he was able by the power of his preaching to bring his attackers to repentance; and at Grimsby the efforts of the parson to silence him backfired. His opponent had given the rabble liquor 'to go with him to fight for the Church,' and hired the town drummer to drown out Nelson's sermon. The mob smashed the windows of the house where he was preaching and threw paving stones inside, egged on by the parson's brutal cries: 'If they will not turn out the villain, that we may put him in the black ditch, pull down the house!'

It was midnight when the drunkards finally fell out among themselves and dispersed. Disappointed, the churchman paid the drummer to return in the morning to disrupt the sermon again. In the event, after beating for some time the man laid down his drum and stayed to listen, telling the parson later that he would never 'disturb yonder people any more.'

At Nottingham Nelson had lighted squibs hurled at him as he preached, but while he was away his wife Martha was the victim of a far more serious assault. On her way home from a meeting in Wakefield she was set upon by a gang of women, who shouted: 'You are Nelson's wife, and here you shall die.' They saw she was heavily pregnant, but beat her so severely that she miscarried and never fully recovered from the experience. The magnanimity of both Nelsons is shown in his comment: 'But God more than made it up to her by filling her heart with peace and love.'

In 1744 the authorities became concerned about the unrest in Scotland which was to lead to the '45 uprising of Charles Edward Stuart, the Young Pretender. Commissioners were given powers to press into the army any who were disorderly or had no means of sustenance. In Birstall a plot was hatched by the vicar, the Rev. Thomas Coleby, who resented Nelson as a successful rival, and some alehouse-keepers who believed that his conversions were damaging their trade. A spell in the army, they

thought, would keep him out of their way.

Nelson was warned of this threat, but went ahead with a planned sermon at Adwalton. As he preached outside the house of John Booth he was duly arrested and later taken before the Commissioners at Halifax.²⁵ The hearing was a travesty of justice, with the vicar of Birstall claiming without foundation that Nelson had no way of earning his living, and the Commissioners, who drank and swore throughout, refusing to allow character witnesses. 'He was a preacher! That was enough. So he was sent for a soldier at once,' noted John Wesley.²⁶ Nelson was taken to Bradford and thrown into an empty dungeon below the butchers' shambles, where blood and offal ran down the walls.²⁷ Far from despairing, he fell on his knees on the filthy straw and 'gave God thanks, that he counted me worthy to be put in a dungeon for the truth's sake.'

The captain refused offers from well-wishers to make his imprisonment more bearable, so Martha and their friends kept him company from outside the door at times during the night. The courageous Martha, who was heavily pregnant, told him not to be concerned about her and the children.

Having been marched by stages to join Col. Blakeney's regiment at York, Nelson again found himself jailed. His crime: rejecting his soldier's pay. His complete lack of fear, and indifference to their punishments, led him to reprove the officers of the court martial for swearing and tell them that he refused to fight: 'I cannot pray for a man. . . . and get up and kill him when I am done.' Used to the nervous compliance of less resourceful men, the officers seemed uncertain how to proceed and sent him to his quarters.

Once known for handiness with his fists, Nelson was now to all intents and purposes a pacifist. But the corporal in charge showed such solicitude for him that he bowed to military discipline to the extent of taking part in training. When arms and uniform were forced on him he vowed to 'bear them as across' and do nothing to defile his conscience. By now his fame had spread as far as London, where one of the papers reported the pressing of a 'famous Methodist preacher,' adding: 'If the intention of his preaching was really to reform mankind, he can hardly have a better opportunity of exercising his talent than amongst the new recruits.'²⁸ They were more accurate than they knew, because Nelson's

²⁵ The chair on which he was standing is now owned by a descendant of John Booth.

²⁶ *The Journal of John Wesley*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock (1909), vol iii, p. 139.

²⁷ A plaque marks the site in Ivegate, and the dungeon door is held in Bolling Hall Museum, Bradford.

²⁸ *The Daily Post*, Saturday, May 12, 1744.

natural authority soon had his fellow soldiers minding their language in front of him.

Intrigued by this singular figure in their midst, many people in the town sought Nelson out in his spare time, to hear him sympathetically or dispute with him. One clergyman was so enraged by his calm defence of Methodism that he, shook his cane at him and offered to fight. 'I have done fighting, Sir,' said Nelson.

Defying the threat of a military flogging if he did so, he began to preach at open-air gatherings and made a number of lasting conversions. This was reported to his regiment and he was put in jail by a young ensign, but with his remarkable capacity for turning misfortune to advantage, he rejoiced: 'My soul was as a watered garden, and I could sing praises to God all day long.'

Not all military men were unsympathetic. The major before whom he had to appear disappointed the younger officers, who had been expecting the promised flogging, by sending Nelson back to his quarters, adding that he wished there were more men like him. The regiment was next posted further north, in anticipation of the Jacobite rebellion. As they left York many people begged him to return when he was free again, and bring John Wesley with him. On the journey Nelson was sought out by eager listeners in every town they paused in. He found the people 'hungry after the word, as if there were no Bibles in the nation,' and even earned the respect of his fellow soldiers, who offered to carry his gun on the long march. He had, as one writer put it, become 'the first unofficial Methodist chaplain.'²⁹

This was very much the result that Wesley, with an eye to converting sinners, had hoped for when he told Nelson on a visit to York: 'O lose no time. Who knows how many souls God may by this means deliver into your hands? Shall not all these things be for the furtherance of the Gospel?'³⁰ Charles Wesley, on the other hand, saw the situation less as an opportunity for evangelism than a wrong to be righted. 'We prayed mightily for our dear brother Nelson,' he wrote,³¹ and worked behind the scenes to have him released.

The foul-mouthed officer who had jailed him at York singled him out again at Darlington. When he took a cockade from a soldier's hat and stuck it in Nelson's, it tried the temper of even that most forgiving of men: 'The Lord lifted up a standard when anger was coming in like a

²⁹ *More About the Early Methodist People*, Leslie Church (1949), p. 14.

³⁰ *Wesley's Works* (1872), vol xiii, p. 152.

³¹ *The Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley* (1849), May 14, 1744.

flood, else I should have wrung his neck to the ground, and set my foot upon him, which would have brought a reproach on the Gospel.' Instead he prayed for his tormentor.

John Wesley came to see Nelson again at Durham, assuring him that his 'captivity would turn to the glory of God. . . and when you have fulfilled his good pleasure, he will break your bonds in sunder and we shall rejoice together.' It was soon coming. After the same officer had prevented him from attending church in Sunderland, the friendly major gave Nelson a week's leave in Newcastle. On his return he received a letter from Charles Wesley to say that Lady Huntingdon had obtained his release from the commander of the forces, Lord Stair. At the end of July 1744 he was freed, though it was conditional on the recruitment of a substitute. In a way that dwelt more easily on eighteenth century consciences than it might on today's, Charles Wesley encouraged London Methodists to pay a man to become a soldier in Nelson's place.³²

Nelson's forgiving nature was exemplified later in a letter he wrote to John Wesley about one of his persecutors: 'We have had a great awakening in this place, occasioned by the death of an old gentleman that was concerned in sending me for a soldier. About 2 months before he died he sent for me and I spake very plain to him; he trembled and wept bitterly and desired me to come again, and I found him under as great conviction as ever I did a man.'³³

But immediately on his return to Birstall there was a shock in store. After the success of his evangelising while in the army he met resistance among his erstwhile followers at home. In his absence a Moravian named Viney had gained their trust. Charles Wesley, on a visit to the town, commented: 'They received [Viney] upon my brother's recommendation (whose unhappiness it is still to set the wolf to keep the sheep), and he has served them a trick. . . so that they laughed at all fasting, and self-denial, and family prayer, and such-like works of the law. They were so alienated by that cunning supplanter, that they took no notice of John Nelson when he came back.'³⁴

In the manner of the times Nelson sought guidance by opening the Bible at random. His eye fell on Matthew, 3, 8, and taking it as his text he went out, stood on a table and preached to a large congregation. Responding to the power of his message, many told him afterwards that they had been 'deluded by the *German song*.' Viney himself 'hanged

³² *John Wesley and the Methodist Societies*, John Simon (1923), p. 235.

³³ *John Nelson: Mason and Missionary in the Heathen England of the Eighteenth Century*, Annie Keeling (1892), p. 131.

³⁴ *The Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley* (1849), October 25, 1744.

down his head and owned us no more,' though some 'continued in their *happy sinnership*.' One, calling himself a sinner who hoped to remain so, told Nelson: 'You and John Wesley are enemies to the Lamb; for you want people to be holy here: but the Lamb shall have the honour of saving me: I will not offer to save myself like you Pharisees.'

The following year Nelson published *The Case of John Nelson*, which recounted his army experiences and gave his name wide currency. In his travels round the country he found people came to hear him out of curiosity and he made many converts. But Methodists were suspected of being on the side of the Pretender and continued to arouse fierce hostility. Having stopped in Nottingham on his way to Bristol, Nelson was attacked by a mob when preaching and nearly choked when his mouth was stuffed with dirt from the drain. Undaunted, as soon as he had regained his composure he continued his sermon, and in a remarkable *volte face* the ringleader declared that Nelson was right and threatened to knock down anyone who touched him. He then guarded him to his lodgings and asked for his prayers - another instance of Nelson's gift for winning over seemingly intractable opponents.

Returning from Bristol, he found that 'at almost every place where I came to preach, mobs were raised, as if they were determined to kill me.' Preaching at Nottingham again he was hauled before an alderman, who accused him and Wesley of being 'the cause of all the commotions that have been in the land.' But yet again Nelson's burning sincerity and mastery of heart-felt rhetoric caused a change of heart. The office-holder softened, told Nelson he was a good man and ordered the constable to see he was not molested again.

Stopping for breakfast one day on his way to Kirkheaton he was surrounded by a crowd led by the parson's son. They were determined to drown him in the river, but when a man attempted to put a halter round his neck Nelson pushed it away and in so doing flung the man to the ground. A butcher holding a rope with which to drag him to the river quailed at the display of self-defence (an early writer described Nelson's 'great bodily strength and vigour'³⁵) and thought better of it. The constable arrived and was sufficiently impressed by Nelson's demand to be taken before the magistrate that he allowed him free passage from the town.

Worse was to come. At Easter 1747 Nelson was preaching outside York when a man shouted: 'Knock out the brains of that mad dog.' Thus encouraged, the mob began to stone Nelson and he was felled by a piece of brick. A gentleman helped him to his house, threatening the rioters

³⁵ *A Portraiture of Methodism*, Jonathan Crowther the Elder (1815), p. 332.

with jail if they would not disperse, and Nelson rested before setting out to preach at Acomb in defiance of his attackers.

This time other gentlemen ('miscalled,' as Wesley noted³⁶) incited further attacks on Nelson. One man threw him down, and when Nelson offered no resistance he jumped on his stomach till the wind was knocked out of him. When he had recovered, the 'gentlemen' and their followers continued to harrass Nelson and he was knocked down and got up eight times. When he was finally unable to rise they dragged him by his hair for twenty yards, kicking him as they went, and made to throw him down a well.

The near-certain death of Nelson was only averted by two gentlewomen, who happened to be passing, knew the men and remonstrated with them by name.³⁷ Shamed at being caught by female acquaintances they let Nelson go, but threatened: 'If Wesley comes on Tuesday we shall kill him; then we shall be quite rid of the Methodists for ever.'

The following morning Nelson's shirt was 'as if it had been stained with raw beef,' but this indomitable man declared that he was not so sore as he might have been and set off on a 35-mile ride to Osmotherley to tell Wesley not to risk his life by going to York. 'There was in his outward actions,' says Southey, 'a coolness and steadiness of conduct, which is the proper virtue of an Englishman.'³⁸

At this point, in Nelson's forty-second year, the narrative abruptly ends. It is futile to wonder whether he continued to keep a journal, or what happened to it if he did. But it is a loss to Methodist literature that nothing like so much detail is recorded of his remaining 26 years. For the extract we have is a remarkable piece of work for an ill-educated stonemason. It has been described as 'an imperishable monument. . . . worthy to be placed side by side with Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*,'³⁹ 'a blessing to thousands,'⁴⁰ and 'one of the most interesting and instructive of its kind in the English language.'⁴¹

There is no doubt that John Wesley tidied up the journal for publication - despite his command of language Nelson's punctuation was non-existent and his spelling so eccentric that it may even be that he was dyslexic. Otherwise one might have expected a better grasp of the

³⁶ *The Journal of John Wesley*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock (1909), vol iii, p. 290.

³⁷ A depiction of this dramatic scene was later published as an engraving.

³⁸ *Life of Wesley*, (1864 edition), p. 251.

³⁹ *Heroes of the Great Haworth Round*, J.W. Laycock (1909), p. 309.

⁴⁰ *A Chronological History of the People Called Methodists*, William Myles (1803), p. 18.

⁴¹ *The Centenary of Wesleyan Methodism*, Thomas Jackson (1839), p. 92.

essentials from a man who had read the Bible so assiduously. A sentence from one of several surviving manuscript letters he sent to Charles Wesley⁴² demonstrates this. The corrected version reads: 'My soul has been blessed in the north, but I have had two sore bouts of the gravel; yet when I could neither eat nor sleep for near a fortnight together, I could preach as well as ever.' What Nelson actually wrote was: 'my souel hath Bene blessed in the north but I have had tow sore Bouts of the greuel yeat when I Could nather eait nor sleep for near afotnite to gather I Could preach as well as ever.'

The letters also show that he needed no help in employing a vigorous prose style and that the telling use of imagery came naturally to him. He says his sermons were extemporised, 'as the spirit of God enables me,' and there is no reason to doubt that. Arresting phrases like these to Charles Wesley are perhaps the nearest we can come to imagining Nelson in full flow before a fervent outdoor congregation: 'God is with her in her exquisite pain and I trust she will come out of the furnace as gold refined in the fire;' 'he stood as a beaten anvil to the strike;' 'no other preaching will do in Yorkshire but the old sort that comes like thunderclaps upon the conscience;' 'among those that is lately converted God hath taken the highest twig and the lowest bough;' 'their old friend. . . . is gone to God as a shock of corn full ripe.'⁴³

The brutal persecution of the early years slowly subsided. John Wesley recorded that Bradford was 'now as quiet as Birstall. Such a change has God wrought in the hearts of the people since John Nelson was in the dungeon there.'⁴⁴ However Nelson found himself involved in several instances of strife within the movement. He played an influential part when present at the reconciliation of the Wesleys after Grace Murray married John Bennet, despite being engaged to John Wesley. The story of Charles Wesley's part in the affair, and the falling out of the brothers over it, has often been told; John Wesley's editor summarised its significance: 'A breach between [the Wesleys] must at that critical period have either rent the Methodist Society in twain, or, more probably, scattered it to the winds. The disaster was averted by the tact and tenderness of George Whitefield and John Nelson, and by John Wesley's extraordinary self-control and charity.'⁴⁵ Wesley himself put it more dramatically: 'Poor Mr Whitefield and John Nelson burst into tears. They prayed, cried and entreated, till the storm passed away. We could not speak, but only fell on

⁴² Methodist Archives, John Rylands Library, Manchester. PLP Collection.

⁴³ March 17, 1758; November 11, 1763; March 4, 1755; April 21, 1760; March 17, 1758.

⁴⁴ *The Journal of John Wesley*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock (1909), vol iv, p. 114.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

each other's neck.'⁴⁶

Bennet, an old friend and fellow preacher of Nelson's, later complained about him to Charles Wesley, but the curtness of the response suggested where Charles's sympathies lay: 'I know nothing of that letter....or John Nelson's corrupting the minds of any. What are the facts you allude to?'⁴⁷ Later Bennet accused Nelson of 'calling me in public a weather-cock, glorying and boasting that he had never varied in his thoughts from the beginning.'⁴⁸ The antagonism no doubt centred on Bennet's growing Calvinism, which caused him finally to break with the Wesleys.

When a Methodist was murdered in York Nelson gave evidence and reported to Charles Wesley that the horror of the case was at least mitigated by the opportunity it gave him to explain [Methodist principles] to Judge and Jury, Counsel and Sheriff, that I could not have any where else, and I doubt not, but that it will remove prejudice out of the minds of many, and be for the furtherance of the Gospel.'⁴⁹

In the controversy over the role of lay preachers Nelson was a firm supporter of the status quo. Charles Wesley, horrified to hear some of them were licensing themselves as Protestant Dissenters and administering the sacrament, wrote to him: 'John, I love thee from my heart; yet rather than see thee a Dissenting Minister I wish to see thee smiling in thy coffin.'⁵⁰

Nelson had been one of six signatories, including the Wesleys, to an agreement drawn up by Charles in 1752, which agreed never to leave the Church of England without the consent of all of them. His reply, though charitable to his colleagues, was reassuringly loyal: 'I think I would rather die to-day than live till to-morrow and break our covenant, and I have no more desire to license myself as a Dissenting Minister than I have to rob on the highway. . . . I believe that some of our brethren hath been drawn into it by others, and had no design in it but to protect themselves from the press and the Militia Act; but I could not do so for my part.'⁵¹

Despite accepting the secondary role of lay preacher without demur Nelson was a member of the inner counsels almost from the start. In 1747 he was one of only four laymen who joined with the Wesleys and four other ordained ministers to determine the doctrine and practices of

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Charles Wesley to John Bennet, March 15, 1750. Methodist Archives DDCW 1/41.

⁴⁸ *Mirror of the Soul: the Diary of John Bennet*, ed. Simon Ross Valentine (2002), p. 222.

⁴⁹ March 28, 1771.

⁵⁰ March 27, 1760.

⁵¹ April 21, 1760.

Methodism. According to one writer Nelson's influence was such that by 1767 the circuits of Birstall, Haworth, Leeds and York (i.e. those evangelised by him) contributed 23% of the membership.⁵²

He achieved this by sheer hard work, covering countless miles in all weathers, his saddlebags stuffed with Wesley's pamphlets to hand out in the towns and villages where he preached.⁵³ His lack of education was still the butt of the 'gentleman' and the satirist, as in this squib in which he is derided as 'a stone-cutter':

Don't mind your affairs, come abandon your cares,
 Come, come to the Methodist meeting.
 Of preachers they've store, I think I know four -
 All men of profound sense and learning;
 Our orthodox priests, who mere rhetoric teach
 Can't compete with their skill in discerning.
 A stonecutter leads, a barber succeeds,
 The third is a clergyman's servant,
 The fourth beats the drum, and his call is come, come,
 And he makes better pay than his serjeant.⁵⁴

Those who decried the work of the 'field-preachers' were asked pointedly by Wesley: 'Would you not let a thousand souls perish rather than be the instruments of rescuing them thus? Can you bear the summer sun to beat upon your naked head? Can you suffer the wintry rain or wind, from whatever quarter it blows? Are you able to stand in the open air without any covering or defence when God casteth forth His snow like wool, or scattereth his hoarfrost like ashes? And yet these are some of the smallest inconveniences that accompany field-preaching. For beyond all these are the contradictions of sinners, the scoffs both of the great, vulgar and the small, contempt and reproach of every kind; often more than verbal affronts, stupid, brutal violence, sometimes to the hazard of health, or limbs, or life.'⁵⁵

On top of this Nelson set himself a punishing regimen of self-denial. He would 'rise out of bed about twelve o'clock, and sit up till two, for prayer and converse with God; then he slept till four; at which time he always rose.'⁵⁶ For many years he had borne the anxiety of his wife's

⁵² *John Nelson and the Evangelical Revival in West Yorkshire*, John Hartley (1988), p. 14.

⁵³ Nelson's own saddlebags are in the Methodist Museum, City Road, London.

⁵⁴ *Glimpses of Early Methodism in York*, John Lyth (1885), p. 75.

⁵⁵ q. in *John Nelson...Annie Keeling* (1892) p. 143.

⁵⁶ *Lives of the Early Methodist Preachers*, ed. Thomas Jackson (1865), vol 1, p. 178.

continuing illness and the poverty that was the lot of the lay preacher. In this *cri de coeur* to Charles Wesley he wrote: 'We have but ten shillings a week in all, and that is to keep a servant out of, and wages to pay her, which takes four shillings at least out of it, and we have coals and candles for the house, and soap to find, which will take two more, and all the goods in the house to keep in repair; and my meat when in the round, and in my absence another preacher for it; so that my family hath not one shilling a week to find them both meat and clothes, so that I am going to hew stone again; and I think to quit the house, for after near eighteen years' labour, I find it will not be meat and clothes. O Sir, pray for me that I faint not at last.'⁵⁷

Though he battled on, the harshness of the life began to take its toll. In later life he had been 'so much disabled by...honourable scars received whilst fighting the battles of the Lord, that, suffering under a considerable degree of lameness, he was compelled to lean on a man's shoulders for support whilst preaching.... where there was no pulpit.'⁵⁸

On July 18, 1774 the once 'hearty John Nelson,' as Charles Wesley called him, died suddenly after eating with a friend in Leeds. He was 66. He was said to have been 'more lively, both in preaching and conversation, a few days before his death, than ever.'⁵⁹ There are several physical reminders of the work of this remarkable man: an engraving, two chairs on which he preached, his grave, desk and small study at Birstall, the buildings on which he laboured, the letters, the *Journal* and the long *Elegy on the Death of John Nelson*, published soon after his death.⁶⁰ But I leave a Victorian writer to sum up his pioneering contribution to the history of his faith. Even allowing for the hyperbole of the age, it is a fitting tribute: 'Perhaps no lay preacher ever raised up by Methodism has presented a better exemplification of what such an evangelist should be, a more admirable example of heroism, magnanimity, good sense, sound piety, hard work and courageous suffering. . . . Among the hundreds of clerical portraits in Arminian or Wesleyan Magazine, none equals his nobleness of person, tasteful simplicity of dress, manliness or attitude, and the repose, strength and benignity of his features.'⁶¹

JAMES HOGG

(James Hogg is a retired writer and broadcaster. He is the great-great-great-great-grandson of John Nelson.)

⁵⁷ March 17, 1758.

⁵⁸ *History of Methodism in Barnard Castle*, Anthony Steele (1857). p. 102.

⁵⁹ *Lives of the Early Methodist Preachers*, ed. Thomas Jackson (1865), vol i, p. 178.

⁶⁰ Available by email, with an article suggesting the author was Charles Wesley, from jmshogg@aol.com.

⁶¹ *The History of Methodism*, Abel Stevens (1864), p. 464.

ANNUAL MEETING AND LECTURE 2007

At the Annual Meeting of the Wesley Historical Society at the Nazarene College, Didsbury, Manchester on Saturday 30 June 2007, attended by 22 members and friends, the President of the Society, the Revd Dr John A. Newton reviewed the variety of ways in which the tercentenary of Charles Wesley's birth was being celebrated and the fortuitous conjunction of the tercentenary with the commemoration of the abolition of the slave trade, which had enabled attention to be focused on the role of both John and Charles Wesley in the condemnation of the slave trade.

The Minutes of the 2006 Meeting were signed as a correct record and the Executive Committee was appointed, including the new appointments of Dr John A. Hargreaves as General Secretary, Mr Keith Rothery as Assistant Treasurer and Dr E. Dorothy Graham as Assistant Librarian. There remains a vacancy for a Marketing Officer and offers would be welcomed to fill this key role. The President thanked Dr Dorothy Graham for her twenty-six years of distinguished service as General Secretary and she was presented with gifts of flowers and book tokens.

Tribute was also paid to thirteen members who had died during the year, including Geoffrey E. Milburn, a leading authority on Primitive Methodism. The General Secretary reported that the Legal Agreement relating to the Society's Library had finally been completed and expressed gratitude for the valuable legal advice provided by Mrs Susan Howdle. It was agreed that the Eayrs Prize be reinstated and that the decision to hold the Annual Meeting distinct from the Methodist Conference be reviewed in 2010.

The Treasurer, Mr Nicholas Page, reported a modest surplus to the accounts, but the Registrar, the Revd Donald Ryan, highlighted a continuing decline in membership and the need for the Executive to address this issue. Membership forms were now available for downloading from the Society's Website (www.wesleyhistoricalsociety.org.uk). The Conference Secretary reported on publicity undertaken for the triennial residential conference at Sarum College, Salisbury, exploring Methodist spirituality and devotion under the title of 'Sparks from the Fire' and a report had been received indicating that papers from the previous conference on 'Women in Methodism' were virtually ready for the press. The Editor, Mr E. Alan Rose, reported that Volume 55 of the Society's *Proceedings* had been the largest volume on record and that the most recent Annual Bibliography produced by Dr Clive Field had also been the most extensive yet produced, further underlining the considerable benefits of membership. The Society's Library

had also made valuable new acquisitions, including many items donated by the Revd John Munsey Turner. Members of the Local Branches present referred to some of the highlights of a wide-ranging programme of activities and Dr John A. Hargreaves provided details of the Annual Meeting for 2008 which would be held at Mount Zion Methodist Church, Halifax, on Saturday 28 June 2008. Professor Edward Royle, Professor Emeritus in History at the University of York, would take as his subject for the afternoon Annual Lecture: 'When did Methodists stop attending their parish churches? Some suggestions from mid-nineteenth century Yorkshire', which would be preceded by a supporting morning programme of shorter talks about the history of Mount Zion and the Hird collection of ceramics on permanent display at the centre.

The Annual Lecture, chaired by the Revd Dr Herbert McGonigle, former Principal of the Nazarene College, was not linked directly with the Methodist Conference programme for the first time since 1934. In his lecture on the subject of 'Charles Wesley, "warts and all": the evidence of the prose works' the Revd Professor Kenneth G.C. Newport, argued that Charles Wesley was no stranger to the challenges and difficulties of the Christian life. He pointed out also that there is substantial evidence to suggest that Charles was prone to bouts of depression and doubt. Charles was, he said, a contentious figure whose relationship with his brother John and with others in the early Methodist societies was not always an easy one and was at times extremely tense. In support of his case, Professor Newport drew attention to a number of hitherto un-deciphered shorthand passages found in Charles Wesley's manuscript journal, Charles's sermons and a number of his letters. Professor Newport ended by stating that it was his view that a portrait of Charles 'warts and all' (which was how Oliver Cromwell wished to be painted) was, for him, a much more inspiring one than the rather saintly picture that has more normally been presented. Travelling the Christian road, said Professor Newport, can sometimes be a difficult and lonely experience and in such circumstances it is good to meet a fellow traveller who can help show the way. For Professor Newport Charles Wesley is just one such figure. The lecture will be published in the *Proceedings* in February 2008.

JOHN A. HARGREAVES