

# John Wesley the Methodist

## Chapter I - A Race of Preachers

The Wesley Ancestry.--The First John Westley.--Samuel Wesley, Poet and Preacher.--Susanna Annesley.-- Piety and Culture.

So far as I can learn, such a thing has scarce been for these thousand years before, as a son, father, grand-father, atavus, tritavus, preaching the Gospel, nay, the genuine Gospel, in a line."

Thus wrote John Wesley to his brother Charles, thirty years after the date of organized Methodism, concerning their ancestry. He could have said with equal truth that his female ancestors were as distinguished as their husbands---his mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother being renowned for their gifts of genius, for their intense interest in ecclesiastical life, and for their suffering in obedience to conscience.

The founder of Methodism was not fully acquainted with the particulars of his remarkable ancestry. But in those rare moments when even the busiest of men naturally inquire about their forefathers he was profoundly impressed that Providence had favored his own household in a singular way. The ancestral line of the Wesleys revealed the fact that the principles of intellectual, social, and religious nobility were developing and maturing into a new form of pentecostal evangelism.

On the southwestern shore line of England is the county of Dorset, a part of which was called "West-Leas," lea signifying a field or farm. In Somerset, adjoining Dorset, there was a place called Welswey, and before surnames were common we have Arthur of Welswey, or Arthur Wellseley (Wellesley), and John West-leigh, and Henry West-ley. There were land-owners in Somerset named Westley in the days of Alfred the Great, in the ninth century. Sir William de Wellesley was a member of Parliament in 1339. His second son, Sir Richard, became the head of the Wesleys in Ireland, from whom descended Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, the conqueror of Napoleon at Waterloo.

We step out on firmer ground and get nearer home in stating that a grandson of Sir William, Sir Herbert, now called Westley, was the father of Bartholomew Westley, and great-grand-father of our own John Wesley.

Bartholomew Westley was about seven years old when James I came to the throne. He entered Oxford as the first on the list of coming students bearing the name of Wesley. After completing the Classical course he graduated in "physic," which was his means of livelihood for some years to come. In 1620, at the age of twenty-five, he married the daughter of Sir Henry Colley, of Castle Carberry, Kildare, Ireland, by whom he had one son named John.

Having taken "holy orders," Bartholomew Westley became a Puritan clergyman in the Established Church. In 1640 he was appointed rector of Charmouth, on the English Channel.

When the Puritan rectors were ejected by Charles Stuart after the Restoration of 1660 he lost his parish, but continued to preach as a Nonconformist pastor of a portion of his old parishioners. The Royalists stigmatized him as a "fanatic" and a "puny arson," because of his small stature, but he was much beloved by his flock, and much lamented at his death, in 1680, being then about eighty-five years old.

John Westley, son of Bartholomew and Ann, was born in 1636, and was consecrated to the ministry in his infancy. He was educated at New Inn Hall, Oxford University, and was an exceptional student. After graduation he began preaching as minister of a congregation at Whitchurch, and as a Nonconformist strenuously defended his right to do so without episcopal ordination. He suffered sorely in the persecuting times of the Restoration, being driven from his pulpit and thrown into jail. He had married a daughter of Rev. John White, of Dorchester, one of the most celebrated of the Puritan divines, and to them was born, at Whitchurch, in 1662, a son, Samuel. Westley died in 1678 at Preston, being then forty-two years of age, and having suffered many things for his principles of religion and ecclesiastical order. His widow survived him for forty years, and was lovingly cared for by her sons-Matthew, a surgeon of London, and Samuel, the rector of Epworth.

Samuel Wesley was born in 1662, in Dorsetshire, four months after the English St. Bartholomew's Day, upon which his father and his grandfather were ejected from their livings for Nonconformity. His father dying when he was a lad, his education was cared for by his mother, and in 1678 some friends of his family sent him to a Nonconformist academy in London. Here he made the acquaintance of the eccentric bookseller and literary man, John Dunton, afterward the editor of the Athenian Gazette, a precursor of the Tatler and Spectator. Here also he obtained entry, as the son and grandson of distinguished confessors, into the best Nonconformist circles, of which one of the leading families was that of a Rev. Dr. Annesley. One of his schoolfellows was Daniel Defoe. He heard Stephen Charnook and John Bunyan preach, made notes of many sermons, and wrote some verses and unwise lampoons.

He was about twenty years of age when he was asked to answer some strictures made upon the Dissenters, and while studying the subject he decided to leave Nonconformity and go over to the Established Church. With that quick impulse which distinguished all his subsequent life, he rose early one morning and started afoot for Oxford University, 'entering Exeter College as a servitor, with only two pounds and five shillings in his pocket.

The young collegian met his expenses partly by teaching and partly by his pen. He collected his poetical pieces, which were published under the title of *Maggots; or Poems on several subjects never before handled, by a Scholar, London*. The claim to novelty for "several subjects" is sustained by the titles of the pieces: *The Grunting of a Hog, A Cow's Tail, A Hat Broke at Cudgels, The Tobacco Pipe, The Tame Snake in a Box of Bran*. This curious book is extremely scarce. It was published by that odd John Dunton, with whom, as we know, Wesley was acquainted before he went to Oxford. Dunton had married Elizabeth Annesley, the sister of Susanna, who six years afterward became Wesley's wife.

At Oxford Samuel Wesley's character ripened. There was awakened in him a true pastoral feeling of compassion and responsibility by visiting the prisoners in the castle; as his sons did fifty years later, when he wrote to them, "Go on in God's name in the path your Saviour has directed and that track wherein your father has gone before you; for when I was an undergraduate at Oxford I visited them in the castle there, and reflect on it with great satisfaction to this day." As quaint old Fuller says, "Thus was the prison his first parish; his own charity his patron presenting him to it; and his work was all his wages."

He took his degree of B. A. in 1688, signing his name Wesley instead of Westley. He received his M. A. degree later from Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. Returning to London, he was ordained deacon by the time-serving but able Bishop of Rochester, Dr. Thomas Sprat, whom Dunton eulogized thus:

Nature rejoiced beneath his charming power; His lucky hand made everything a flower. On earth the king of wits (they are but few), And, though a bishop, yet a preacher too!

Twelve days after the Prince and Princess of Orange were proclaimed as King William III and Mary, Samuel Wesley was ordained a priest of the Church of England by Bishop Compton, of London, in St. Andrew's Church, Holborn.

Samuel Wesley became "passing rich" on 8 a year as a London curate, then obtained a naval chaplaincy, commenced his metrical *Life of Christ*, and in 1689 married Dr. Annesley's accomplished daughter Susanna on another London curacy of 30 a year. The young couple commenced their married life in Holborn, in lodgings somewhere near the quaint old houses still standing opposite Gray's Inn Road.

Susanna Wesley, the mother of Methodism, was the daughter of a Puritan minister, who has been called "The St. Paul of the Nonconformists." Her father, Samuel Annesley, nephew of the first Earl of Anglesea, was born at Haseley, in the Shakespeare country, in 1620, and educated at Queen's College, Oxford. He enjoyed great prominence as a preacher until the Restoration drove him from his pulpit in St. Giles, the largest congregation in London. His means saved him from distress, and made him a blessing to many of his dissenting brethren. He gathered a flourishing congregation in London and ministered to it for many years.

Annesley was tall and dignified, and of robust constitution He had an aquiline nose, a short upper lip, wavy brown hair, and a strong and penetrating eye. Severe persecutions did not disturb the geniality and cheerfulness of his Christian life. When John Wesley had set the Churches of England aflame with the doctrine of Assurance he asked his mother whether her father had ever preached it. She replied that he personally enjoyed it and confessed it for many years, but did not recollect hearing him preach upon it in particular. She therefore presumed he regarded it as a high privilege of a few. How well he lived and died let these words witness: "Blessed be God! I have been faithful in the work of the ministry above fifty-five years."

Shortly before his departure from this world, December 3, 1696, Dr. Annesley said: "Come, my dearest Jesus! the nearer the more precious, the more welcome!" "I cannot express the thousandth part of the praise that is due to thee. . . I will die praising thee .... I shall be satisfied when I awake with thy likeness! Satisfied! Satisfied!"

Dr. Williams, who founded the library now in Gordon Square, preached his funeral sermon, and exclaims: "O how many places had sat in darkness, how many ministers had been starved, if Dr. Annesley had died thirty-four years since! The Gospel he ever forced into ignorant places, and was the chief instrument in the education as well as the subsistence of several ministers."

The second wife of this leading London divine was a daughter of John White, a member of the Long Parliament, and a man of the highest repute. She was a woman of rare accomplishments and remarkable piety. The youngest of her children, Susanna, who became the mother of John and Charles Wesley, was born on January 20, 1669, in Spital Yard, between Bishopgate Street and Spital Square, London. Her home was probably in the last house, which blocks up the lower end of the yard. Here Susanna Annesley spent her girlhood, studied Church controversies, and asserted her personal decision, and hence she went forth to her wedding with Samuel Wesley.

"How many children has Dr. Annesley" inquired a friend of Thomas Manton, who had just baptized one of the family. "I believe it is two dozen, or a quarter of a hundred," was the startling reply. Susanna, the youngest, was perhaps the most gifted of the many beautiful and well-educated daughters. Her sister Judith was a very handsome and sturdy-minded woman, whose portrait was painted by Sir Peter Lely; Elizabeth, who married John Dunton, was lovely in person and character, and Susanna shared largely in the family gift of beauty. She was slim and graceful, and retained her good looks and symmetry of figure to old age. The best authenticated portrait of her is one that was taken in her old age and engraved under the direction of her son John. It shows "delicate aquiline features, eyes still vivid and expressive under well-marked brows; a physiognomy at once benignant and expressive." Her letters reveal "a perfect mistress of English undefiled," some knowledge of French authors, and a logical mind well read in divinity. The secret of her deep spirituality is revealed in one of her letters to her son: "I will tell you what rule I observed in the same case, when I was young, and too much addicted to childish diversions, which was this-never to spend more time in any matter of mere recreation in one day than I spent in private religious duties."

Bishop McTyeire's eloquent tribute to her virtues, graces, and gifts does no more than justice to this remarkable woman:

"When I was in Milan I visited the church where Ambrose preached and where he was buried; but I thought more of his patroness, the pious Helena, than of him. I thought of Augustine, and of that mother whose prayers persevered for his salvation; and in the oldest town on the Rhine I could not help being interested in the legend of Ursula and her eleven thousand virgins. But greater than Helena, or Monica, or Ursula, there lived a woman in England, known to all Methodists, and of whom in the presence of those I have mentioned it might be said, 'Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou hast excelled them all.' I mean the wife of the rector of Epworth, and the conscientious mother of his nineteen children; she that transmitted to her illustrious son her genius for learning, for order, for government, and I might almost say for godliness; who shaped him by her councils, sustained him by her prayers, and, in her old age, like the spirit of love and purity, presided over his modest household; and, when she was dying, said to her children, 'Children, as soon as the spirit leaves the body gather round my bedside and sing a hymn of praise.'"

Susanna Annesley, at the age of thirteen, was interested in the ecclesiastical and doctrinal controversies of the day. With remarkable independence she made up her mind to renounce Dissent and enter the Established Church, one year after Samuel Wesley had come to the same decision. It is possible that the two ecclesiastical conversions were not unconnected. Young Wesley was seven or eight years older than his future bride, and the friendship had already begun which was to ripen into love. In one of her later private meditations she mentions it among her greatest mercies that she was "married to a religious orthodox man; by him first drawn off from the Socinian heresy." The same feeling is expressed in the words of the epitaph from her pen inscribed on Samuel Wesley's tomb at Epworth: "As he lived, so he died, in the true Catholic faith of the Holy Trinity in Unity; and that Jesus Christ is God Incarnate, .and the only Saviour of mankind." It was natural that the thoughtful, fervent girl should be strongly influenced by one by whom she had been settled in a belief of such vital importance. "If the Puritans," says Dr. Rigg, "could not transmit to her lover and herself their ecclesiastical principles, at least they transmitted a bold independence of judgment and of conduct."

The girl of thirteen expressed her opinions against the Church of her distinguished father, however, with such tact and sweetness of spirit as to win his consent to her confirmation at St. Paul's. She was at once so decided and gentle, and he so tolerant, that the love between the father and daughter never lost its strength and charm.

"The Puritan movement in which she had been reared," says Buoy, "went with her into the Church of England. She entered it essentially a Puritan and that stern, heroic faith, softened by the grace of God, held her all her life. There was a providence leading this woman back to Anglicanism as plain as that which led the mother of Moses back to the court of Egypt, and she, like Jochebed, had her ministry-to train a child who should set the people free." "The Wesley's mother," says Isaac Taylor, "was the mother of Methodism in a religious and moral sense; for her courage, her submissiveness to authority, the high tone of her mind, its independence and its self-control, the warmth of her devotional feelings, and the practical direction given to them, came up, and were visibly repeated in the character and conduct of her sons."

We left the young curate and his wife in their lodgings in London, where they "boarded without going into debt." Here their son Samuel was born, who became the poet and satirist of Westminster School and master of Tiverton Grammar School.

In the autumn of 1690 the Marquis of Normanby presented Wesley to the living of South Ormsby, in Lincolnshire, worth 50 a year. Wesley himself describes the parsonage as "a mean cot, composed of reeds and clay."

His family increased "one additional child per annum." Again his pen came to the rescue, and Wesley published his Life of Christ, dedicating it to Queen Mary. At South Ormsby Wesley also published his treatise on the Hebrew points. Here also he wrote much for "The Athenian Gazette; or Casuistical Mercury, resolving all the nice and curious questions proposed by the ingenious." One third of the Gazette at this time was from Wesley's pen.

About the beginning: of 1697 Samuel Wesley was presented to the living of Epworth, in Lincolnshire, "in accordance with some wish or promise of the late queen;" here he continued for thirty-eight years, and here John Wesley was born on June 17, 1703, O. S., the

fifteenth of the rector's nineteen children. John Benjamin appears to have been his full name when christened, but he never used the middle name or initial.