JOHN WESLEY TAKES A WIFE

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Viewed from a distance of more than two centuries, the fact that John Wesley possessed a wife and resided for a third of his life within the legal limits of the matrimonial state ought not to arouse undue attention. After all, the founder and leader of British Methodism had no solid doctrinal excuses for celibacy, and he continued, throughout his evangelical career, to discuss the issue of marriage with his lay and itinerant preachers. Although Wesley’s sisters suffered miserably from marriages to worthless fellows, while his brother Samuel the younger and his wife lost their children, the family of Charles Wesley functioned as a model eighteenth-century household, the proper spawning station from which would emerge some of the brightest notes of nineteenth-century British secular and religious musical composition and performance. And, of course, even if Samuel the elder and Susanna Wesley had their differences, their union still managed to add nineteen names to the parish register at Epworth, again proving that at least one aspect of marriage could, periodically, contribute toward the restoration of domestic order. Finally, other than having to resign his fellowship at Lincoln College, Oxford, Wesley’s marriage should not have restricted his personal life or his evangelical calling. “I cannot understand,” he wrote one month after the event, “how a Methodist preacher can answer it to God to preach one sermon or travel one day less in a married than in a single state. In this respect surely ‘it remaineth that they who have wives be as though they had none’ [1 Corinthians 7:20]” (Journal 3:517).

Although the preceding declaration certainly contributes toward an initial understanding of why the marriage between Molly Vazeille and John Wesley failed, it cannot be considered by itself. Out of proper context, it exists as nothing beyond an oversimplification of a complex social drama. At an all too obvious level, Molly Wesley’s jealousy of her husband’s female associates, her concern for her children, and her inability to cope with the open fields of rural Britain conflicted sharply and unalterably with Wesley’s commitment to the eighteenth-century evangelical revival. Few students have found the will to minimize the drama of those conflicts, primarily because certain Wesleyan scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries determined to promote the role of Molly Vazeille as a dark shadow across the otherwise angelic path trod by the Pauline image of her second husband. “There can be no doubt,” wrote John Telford, “that Mrs. Wesley’s conduct points to mental unsoundness; the whole story is tragic. The one compensation was that Wesley’s time and strength were more and more concentrated on his growing parish” (Telford, Letters 48).
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3:210). The Rev. Luke Tyerman, while noting that Wesley stood not entirely blameless for the failure of the marriage, nonetheless reserved his harshest judgments for Molly Vazeille: “... his twitting wife,” remarked the biographer, a woman capable of “cruel and almost insane behaviour. ... In no way was she a helpmeet for him. As a rule, she was a bitter, unmitigated curse” (Life of Wesley 2:109, 114).

The barriers preventing access to even the slightest justification for Molly Wesley's actions and reactions throughout the marriage appear difficult to surmount, primarily because of the unavailability of sources revealing her point of view. Almost each detail about the marriage comes from Wesley, various of his Methodist correspondents, or members of his immediate family. Nevertheless, one must examine what exists and encourage objectivity to yield proper answers.

As with all fully developed dramas, John Wesley's marriage begins with an epilogue—one perhaps even more complex than the main piece. Wesley had known the attractive Grace Norman Murray of Newcastle-upon-Tyne as early as 1742, when, during one of the frequent absences of her sea-faring husband, she journeyed to London and joined the Methodist society there. Henry Moore, an early Wesley biographer, described her as sweet of spirit and of person (see Journal 3:417). She suffered much from Alexander Murray's absences and the early death of their only child. When Murray perished at sea, she returned to Newcastle and increased her commitment to Methodism, particularly as matron of the Orphan House there. In August 1748, Wesley visited Grace Murray, became ill, and during the course of her nursing him back to health, proposed (or suggested) marriage. Unfortunately, because of his fever or otherwise, the Methodist leader failed to note Grace Murray's engagement to John Bennet, one of Wesley's preachers, no less. She, in turn, neither consented to nor discouraged the proposal, which Wesley interpreted (again, from his sick bed) as acceptance. Wesley then proceeded to arrange the marriage settlement according to the rigorous Methodist discipline.

In the meantime, Charles Wesley, still functioning high upon and active within the Methodist hierarchy, married Sarah Gwynne on 8 April 1749. When brother John visited them in early fall, he announced his intention to marry Grace Murray and presented the marriage settlement for his brother's signature. Acting in what he believe to have been in the best political interests of British Methodism—specifically that Grace Murray came from a low social class, that she had at one time been employed in service, and that John Wesley as founder and leader ought to remain celibate—Charles Wesley rode to Newcastle and simply expedited the union between Grace Murray and John Bennet. That event occurred at St. Andrew's Church, Newcastle, on 3 October 1749 (see Journal 4:417-421; Gill 145-150). The marriage produced five sons, but it ended ten years later.
upon the death of John Bennet—the very year when Wesley's relationship with Molly Vazeille evidenced its deepest deterioration. In any event, John Wesley believed he had been deceived by Grace Murray and wronged by his brother, an attitude that, partially, set the stage for his own marriage sixteen months later.

One of the bitterest pills swallowed by Wesley during the Grace Murray affair comprised the realization that he had obeyed his own rules, but had lost the game unfairly. Had he married Grace Murray soon after his recovery from the fever in Newcastle in August 1748, he certainly would have encountered Charles' opposition, but that would have subsided eventually, leaving the elder Wesley with a hard working and committed partner. However, Wesley refused to finalize his intention until he had adhered to his own discipline. Beginning with the formation of the Oxford Holy Club in 1729 and carrying through to the publication of the *Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others* (1744-1789), various sets of rules came forth to guide the conduct of both ordained ministers and lay associates (or helpers). Prominent among those caveats exists the following: "Take no step towards marriage without first consulting us [loosely identified as "your brethren"] with your design." That meant, essentially, that Wesley had to announce the name of the lady intended, consult with every Methodist society in England (thus allowing trustees to consider the question and to dispense advice), and then seek the consent of his brother, Charles (Journal 3:421, 515; Southey 338-339; *Works* 8:299, 308-309). Little wonder, then, after having lost Grace Murray, when the next opportunity arose, John Wesley determined to circumvent his own rules.

The circumstances surrounding the initial meeting between John Wesley and his future wife appear vague. Charles Wesley had met her in July 1749 at the London home of Edward Perronet; sometime in 1750, she accompanied Charles and Sarah Wesley on a week’s visit to the Gwynnes at Ludlow, stopping by Blenheim and Oxford before returning to London, where Mrs. Vazeille invited the couple to her home in Threadneedle Street (Gill 150). She had been married to a prosperous London merchant, Ambrose Vazeille, who, upon his death, bequeathed her £10,000 (at £300 per year), four children, the house on Threadneedle Street, and a country residence in Wandsworth. At the time of their marriage, John Wesley was nearing his forty-eighth year, while his bride had achieved the age of forty-one.

Wesley, himself, trod upon the stage of this bizarre drama on Saturday, 2 February 1751, sixteen or seventeen days prior to the actual ceremony. After consulting with his close friend, the Rev. Vincent Perronet, vicar of Shoreham, disclosing his intent to marry Mrs. Vazeille, and receiving a favorable response, Wesley announced, in his journal, that "I was clearly convinced that I ought to marry. For many years I remained
single because I believed I could be more useful in a single than in a married state. And I praise God, who enabled me to do so. I now as fully believed that in my present circumstances I might be more useful in a married state . . . (Journal 3:512). Four days later, for whatever reason, he met with the single men of the London society “and showed them on how many accounts it was good for those who had received that gift from God to remain single for the kingdom of heaven’s sake; unless where a particular case might be an exception to the rule” (Journal 3:512).

That meeting proved an appropriate prelude to subsequent events. According to Wesley’s journal (3:512), he entered into marriage “a few days after” 2 February 1751; the Gentleman’s Magazine reported the date as Monday, 18 February, while the London Magazine announced it as Tuesday, the 19th. In any event, Wesley preached at a house in Snowsfield at 5:00 a.m., Sunday, 10 February; he had planned to leave London the next day for the north. While crossing London Bridge he fell on the ice and injured his ankle; managing to reach Snowsfield chapel, he preached a second sermon, after which he had the leg bound by a surgeon and limped off to Seven Dials to preach still another sermon. The sprain proving exceedingly painful, Wesley made his way to Threadneedle Street—to be nursed by Mrs. Vazeille, to pray, to read, to converse, and to work on his Hebrew Grammar and Lessons for Children. If indeed the wedding occurred on 18 or 19 February, it must have been an interesting sight: on Sunday, 17 February, he had preached on his knees at the Foundery; by the next day, he still could not set his foot on the ground; on 19 and 20 February, he again preached on his knees! How he succeeded in leading his bride, a widow seven years younger than he, to the altar at Hayes church, there to be joined by the Rev. Charles Manning, remains a vision worthy of speculation. An “odd beginning,” noted one Wesleyan biographer, “—the bridegroom crippled, and, instead of making a wedding tour, preaching on his knees in London chapels” (Tyerman 2:105).

Apparently, John Wesley proved not the only one in pain during that curious affair. When, on 2 February 1751, he told Charles of his resolve to marry, the latter “was thunderstruck, and could only answer he [John] had given me the first blow, and his marriage would come like the coup de grace” (Journal 3:514). After Charles learned from Edward Peronnet the identity of the intended, he “retired to mourn with my faithful Sally. Groaned all the day, and several following ones, under my one and the people’s burden. I could eat no pleasant food, nor preach, nor rest either by night or by day” (Journal 3:514). Several days after 17 February, Charles Wesley “was one of the last that heard of his [John’s] unhappy marriage” (Journal 3:514). As events unfolded, John Wesley may well have wished that he had followed his rules rather than his emotions and that Charles had been afforded the time to react in a manner similar to his disruption of the Grace Murray affair.
Although the first four years or so of Wesley's marriage to Molly Vazeille proceeded tolerably well, considering the amount of time they spent away from each other, the history of that union bore evidence of deep strife and struggle. In the beginning, Molly's inability to keep pace with the physical demands of her husband's itinerancy, as well as illness to her and to her children, gave way to petty but numerous jealousies. Those jealousies compounded when, beginning September 1758, Molly could not resist opening and reading Wesley's correspondence—letters both written by and addressed to him. From the content of those letters, she imagined all sorts of intrigues and liaisons, particularly on the parts of Charles Wesley and her husband's female assistants. The extent of Wesley's anger may be measured by this letter written to Molly from Norwich on 23 December 1758:

Dear Molly,—I was much concerned, the night before I left London, at your unkind and unjust accusation. You accused me of unkindness, cruelty, and what not. And why so? Because I insist on choosing my own company! because I insist upon conversing, by speaking or writing, with those whom I (not you) judge proper! For more than seven years this has been a bone of contention between you and me. And it is so still. For I will not, I cannot, I dare not give it up. But then you will rage and fret and call me names. I am sorry for it. But I cannot help it. I still do and must insist that I have a right to choose my own company. Then you will denounce against me all the curses from Genesis to Revelation. You may so. But you gain no ground hereby; for I still cannot give up my right. Nay, but you will say all manner of evil of me. Be it so; but I still stand just where I was. Then you will show my private letters to all the world. If you do, I must assert my right still. All this will not extort it from me; nor anything else which you can do. You may therefore as well allow it now as after we have squabbled about it (if we live so long) seven years longer. For it is my right by all the laws of God and man, and a right which I can never part with. O do not continue to trouble yourself and me and to disturb the children of God by still grasping at a power which must be denied you by him who is nevertheless

Your truly affectionate Husband.  

(Telford, Letters 4:40-50)

Between March 1759 and March 1761, the struggle intensified over the same issues. Molly continued to intercept her husband's correspondence and to remove documents from his bureau. She even went so far as to move furniture in and out of his study, a direct assault upon his scholarly pride: “You have taken a bed to pieces,” he complained to her from Liverpool on 23 March 1760. “And you want to put it in my study. And I do not tell you whether you mayor no! Truly I cannot look upon this whole affair as any other but a pretence. For what need had you to take the bed in pieces at all? and what need was there (if it was taken in pieces) that it should lie in the one little room which I have when you have four rooms to yourself?” (Telford, Letters 4:89) Only five months earlier (23 October 1759) Wesley had written a lengthy letter to Molly, setting forth ten of his objections to her conduct: (1) her showing of his letters to others; (2) his inability to command his own house; (3) her spying upon him while at home; (4) her anger when he failed to provide her with every detail of
his travels; (5) her plundering of his study; (6) her browbeating and harassing of the servants; (7) her talking behind his back; (8) her slandering of him; (9) her lying to others about him; (10) her attacking, “with extreme, immeasurable bitterness ... all who endeavor to defend my character ... breaking out even into foul, unmannerly language, such as ought not to defile a gentlewoman’s lips if she did not believe one word of the Bible” (Telford, Letters 4:75-77).

One might reasonably assume 1761 to have been the final year of John and Molly Wesley’s marriage. To the contrary, by December of that year, they had re-entered the bounds of harmony, principally on account of Molly’s ill-health. Two years later, Wesley closed a letter to his brother Charles with, “We join in love to you both. My wife gains ground. She is quite peaceable and loving to all” (Telford, Letters 4:200). Again, on 9 July 1766, he informed Charles, “My wife continues in an amazing temper. Miracles are not ceased. Not one jarring sting. O let us live now!” (Telford, Letters 5:21) In mid-August 1768, while in Bristol, he learned of her serious illness. Taking horse immediately, the sixty-five year-old Wesley rode all night from Bristol to the Foundery in London, arriving at 1:00 a.m. Discovering that Molly’s fever had subsided, he remained with her for an hour, departed at 2:00, and returned to Bristol in time for evening service (Journal 5:282).

For Molly Wesley, however, recovery of health meant a return to ill-temper. By December 1767, she had once again left her husband—only to return the following year, depart again in late November 1769, return in 1770, depart in January 1771, return in June 1772, and leave for the final time shortly thereafter. At the Methodist Conference at London in August 1779, William Smith—a leader of the society at Newcastle-upon-Tyne who had married Jane Vazeille, Molly Wesley’s daughter, earlier that year—attended the sessions, but principally to propose reconciliation between his mother-in-law and John Wesley. “I talked freely to both parties, and did all in my power to lay a foundation for future union; but alas! all my attempts proved unsuccessful. I had to leave matters not better than I found them. It is, indeed, a melancholy affair, and I am afraid, productive of bad consequences” (Journal 6:246). Smith had been late in his attempt to salvage the marriage, but correct in his conclusions. Ten months earlier, on 2 October 1778, from Bristol, John Wesley had written his final letter to Molly: “As it is doubtful, considering your age and mine, whether we may meet any more in the world, I think it right to tell you my mind once for all without either anger or bitterness. ... If you were to live a thousand years, you could not undo the mischief you have done. And till you have done all you can towards it, I bid you farewell” (Telford, Letters 6:321-322).

Eventually, on 8 October 1781, the union between John Wesley and Molly Vazeille reached its natural end. “I came to London,” noted Wesley
in his journal for Friday, 12 October, "and was informed that my wife died on Monday. This evening she was buried, though I was not informed of it till a day or two after" (Journal 6:337). She was interred in the churchyard of Camberwell. On Monday, 15 October 1781, almost without breaking strike, Wesley "set out for Oxfordshire, and spent five days with much satisfaction among the societies" (Journal 6:338). He would continue to bathe in that satisfaction for the remaining ten years of his life.

Although Wesley’s marriage to Molly Vazeille contributes interesting and, at times, humorous details to the biography of the Methodist patriarch, it had absolutely no effect upon the history and development of Wesleyan Methodism. Molly’s tantrums may have caused Wesley moments of discomfort or embarrassment, but he never had to postpone a sermon or cancel an appointed round because of their stormy relationship. Thus, the unblessed event offers little from which to develop a new or significant conclusion. Had divorce been possible, the marriage would have ended considerably earlier than it did, but under Lord Hardwicke’s Marriage Act of 1753, only a special act of Parliament could have terminated the contract. “At first sight,” wrote W. E. H. Lecky, “nothing can appear more monstrous than that when two persons have voluntarily entered into a contract with the single purpose of promoting their mutual happiness, when they find by experience that the effect of that contract is not happiness, but misery.... Nature has abundantly provided for the stability of the marriage state when it promotes happiness. Why should the law prevent its dissolution when it produces pain?” (Lecky 1:493-495) Could the Irish historian, upon straying from his eighteenth-century narrative to climb a late Victorian sociological soap-box, possibly have had in mind the marriage of John and Molly Wesley? Who knows? Nonetheless, Lecky’s editorial upon divorce provides a most appropriate summation of the relationship between Wesley and his wife.

However, for a conclusion to the discussion of that relationship, one merely needs to turn to Wesley himself—to his single, unconditional solution to every problem, and his single, unconditional means for relieving all spiritual strain and pain: “O return to Him,” advised the Methodist patriarch in his 1785 A Thought Upon Marriage, “that made you happy before, and He will make you happy again.... Seek, accept of nothing in the room of, God. Let all the springs of your happiness be in Him” (Works 11:465). For John Wesley, marriage to Molly Vazeille proved but one additional burden of leadership; he would bear it and endure it, and then wait for a higher being to free him from it.
Works Cited


