



# DISCOVERY

Edited by  
FREDERICK E. MASER

## Something New and Something Old in a Wesley Letter

Another original Wesley letter recently came into my possession. It is one of the numerous letters Wesley wrote to Mrs. Eliza. Bennis. An outline of her life appears in a book written in 1882 by Charles Henry Crookshank and entitled *Memorable Women of Irish Methodism in the Last Century*. It was published in London with the imprint of the Wesleyan-Methodist Book-Room.

Mrs. Bennis was born in Limerick in 1725 of Presbyterian parents. In 1749 Mr. Robert Swindells, a Methodist preacher, on his way to Waterford, passed through Limerick where he preached in the streets, only to be followed by a mob that hooted and hissed at him. Eliza. Bennis, however, having heard good reports of the sermon, attended the evening preaching. She was deeply affected, and a month later was the first to join a Methodist class formed in Limerick by Swindells. She became a very useful Methodist throughout the community and in neighboring towns and cities. She met John Wesley and began lengthy correspondence with him. Crookshank does not say when she was married, but he does state that through her prayers her husband was converted and became a Methodist. His business prospered, bringing him great wealth. Later he experienced financial reverses, and on his death his wife faced serious monetary problems. However, her children and grandchildren were a comfort to her. With her family she emigrated to America where she died at Philadelphia in 1802.

Her family evidently cherished her correspondence with John Wesley and in 1809 her son, Thomas, published Wesley's letters to his mother under the title *Christian Correspondence*. Dr. Frank Baker has located fourteen of these letters in various institutions, and now my letter brings the figure to fifteen. Others may still be somewhere in private hands.

## Fun for Researchers

The letter provides plenty of work or fun for researchers. To begin with, accompanying the letter is a black and gold mat, suggesting that at one time the letter had been framed. At the bottom of the mat are these

words written in gold and artistically spaced: "Original Letter Written by John Wesley to Mrs. Eliza Bennis, London, Eng. February 12, 1773. Given by her daughter as compensation for medical services to Dr. William Gray of Philadelphia."

Who was Dr. Gray? How many other Wesley letters were disposed of by the Bennis family in this way? What would have been the monetary value of a Wesley letter at the time this letter was given to the good doctor? Was the doctor a Methodist or an avid collector of eighteenth century material? Some enterprising researcher may one day discover the answers to these and other questions that might arise.

The original letter presents another problem. It was published in Telford's eight-volume edition of John Wesley's letters, but Telford's version differs in many ways from the original. The original also differs from the version in *Christian Correspondence* which agrees with Telford, suggesting that Telford took his version not from the original letter but from its garbled version in *Christian Correspondence*. Maybe the letter had already been given to Dr. Gray before the little volume of Wesley letters was published by Thomas Bennis in 1809. Thomas may have been working from a copy that still remained in his possession — an incorrect copy!

In turning to the original letter, it should be noted that at least six persons are mentioned in the letter for researchers to track down. I, myself, am pointing to only two very important aspects of the letter.

In the first paragraph of the letter Wesley suggests that Mrs. Bennis reminded Mr. Glassbrook of a means for securing a revival that they had successfully used on a previous occasion. "[Use] ye same means, and you will find ye same blessing." According to Telford, "Mrs. Bennis had written on January 23, 1773 that all the Societies in the three neighboring circuits had spent the first of the month as a day of fasting and prayers to intercede for a revival of God's work. The congregations at Limerick since then had increased, and seventeen had been added to the Society." Now Wesley is reminding Mrs. Bennis and, through her, the leadership at Limerick that it might be well to use the same method once again in hope of reviving God's work.

It is good advice for twentieth-century Methodism as it was when Wesley first wrote in 1773.

Another important statement in the letter was called to my attention by Dr. Frank Baker. The statement does not appear in Telford's version but only in the original letter. Wesley wrote: "I am glad Mr. Scott has so much courage, as to receive the preachers. And still more so, that Mr. Fleury is rather a Friend than an Enemy. This hath God wrought!"

Baker states this clearly refers to the Rev. George Fleury about whom much is written in Volume 9 of the Wesley Works Project, pp. 389-401 and 581-582. The following quotation from these passages is sufficient to explain why Wesley was happy that Fleury was no longer an enemy but a friend:

Methodism was introduced to Waterford, a cathedral city on the southeast coast of Ireland, by Robert Swindells, in or about the year 1748, and a preaching-house was built in 1759. The society was a struggling one, but strengthened by Wesley's almost biennial visits from 1752 onwards. The cathedral clergy did all they could to disrupt the work. After Wesley's visit of almost five days in June 1769, the Rev. George Lewis Fleury attacked the Methodists from the cathedral pulpit. Two years later, when Wesley again stayed for nearly five days, it was known in advance that Mr. Fleury was about to attack the Methodists in cathedral sermons, and Wesley was able to attend the cathedral twice in order to hear them. He records, 'At eleven, and again in the afternoon, I went to the cathedral, where a young gentleman most valiantly encountered the "grievous wolves," as he termed the Methodists. I never heard a man strike more wide of the mark. However, the shallow discourse did good, for it sent abundance of people, rich and poor, to hear and judge for themselves. So that the court, at the top of which I stood, was filled from end to end.' (Wesley's Journal, April 28, 1771.)

When Wesley wrote to Mrs. Bennis in 1773, Fleury had now become a friend rather than an enemy to the Methodists which Wesley felt was something God had wrought.

The original letter from Wesley to Mrs. Bennis follows:

Feb. 12, 1773

My Dear Sister

When we draw nigh unto God in his appointed ways He will surely draw nigh unto *Us*. Pray remind Mr. Glassbrook of using ye Same means, & you will find ye same Blessing. And when you write, encourage Mr. Slater, to do at Waterford, as he did at Limerick. I am glad Mr. Scott has so much courage, as to receive the Preachers: and still more so, that Mr. Fleury is rather a Friend than an Enemy. This hath God wrought.

I can observe by Mrs. Dawson's manner of writing, a very considerable Change in her Spirit: More acquaintance with God, more Humility, & more artless, simple Love. She is an amiable Woman: I love her much: and so I do all of the Family that I know.

Charles Harrison does not see with my eyes, or he need have gone no further than Athlone. I wish he does not make a foolish bargain at last, one that he will repent as long as he lives. He surely will, if he does not acknowledge God in his way, but leans to his own understanding.

As long as you trust, not in Yourself but in Him that has all power in Heaven & in Earth, you will find his Grace sufficient for you, & His strength made perfect in your weakness. Look to Him continually; & trust in Him, that you may increase with all the increase of GOD. I am

My Dear Sister

Your ever Affectionate Brother

JWesley

I have entitled this piece "Something New and Something Old in a Wesley Letter." The letter is old in that it was published by John Telford in 1931. But it is new in that we now have a new and correct version taken from the original draft. If in addition to the information I have given about his letter, any student wishes to track down some of the names mentioned in the letter I will be happy to publish the findings.