

**INTRODUCTION TO
“SUSANNA WESLEY’S SPIRITUALITY:
THE FREEDOM OF A CHRISTIAN WOMAN”**

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The 350th anniversary of Susanna Annesley Wesley’s birth provides more than an opportunity to reflect upon the history of Methodism or the life of a pious woman whose sons founded a significant religious movement. This commemoration encourages scholars to continue engaging with Wesley’s life critically as they proceed to view it through a myriad of analytical and historical lenses.

In April, 1984, Charles Wallace’s significant article, “Susanna Wesley’s Spirituality: The Freedom of a Christian Woman,” appeared in *Methodist History*. This piece—which serves as the foundation of critical engagement with Wesley’s life—marked a historiographical shift in our understanding of a woman remembered as the “Mother of Methodism.” Prior to this point, Susanna Wesley’s story had long been limited to hagiographical sketches, where she served as a model of female piety and Christian motherhood. Wallace introduced readers to a complex woman who was both shaped by and transcended the constraints that women of her time faced. By contextualizing her life, Wallace invited readers into a more nuanced world where Susanna Wesley emerged as a human—rather than an idealized Saint—a thoughtful, reflective individual who gently pushed and probed against societal boundaries and made space for herself within the worlds of theology, practice and belief.

Like other historians who were beginning to take women’s narratives more seriously, Wallace turned to Wesley’s personal writings in an effort to understand her inner history. By allowing Wesley to speak for herself, Wallace presented a figure that enriched and complicated understandings of female spirituality. She was, he argued, a woman of conscience, a theological rationalist, and a proponent of religious experience. By approaching devotional life from these vantage points, Wallace suggests, Wesley challenged patriarchal biases in English religion during her lifetime, such as leading prayer meetings in her home, even while accepting many gendered social expectations. The tensions Susanna Wesley faced as an intelligent and deeply religious woman shed light on the complexities of female spirituality in an emerging evangelical world.

Wallace’s article, and his other work on Wesley, including a critical edition of her extant writings, invites us to reconsider the many layers and textures that comprise Susanna Wesley’s life. A lot of historiography about religion and women, agency, and gender has been written in the last thir-

ty-five years—such works inevitably inspire and motivate new readings of old topics. By reprinting Wallace's foundational piece, *Methodist History* is encouraging scholars to reconsider his work in light of new scholarship, a quest that can certainly inspire fruitful results. The new scholarship that is generated through such endeavors might consider a multitude of ways in which women and other underrepresented figures shed light on various aspects of religious history and culture; how, for example, can women like Wesley serve as lenses into larger social and cultural practices? And how can such stories be recounted in more nuanced and thoughtful ways?

While there remains a need for a definitive biography of Susanna Wesley, there is also a need for works that consider her life (and the lives of others) in broader contexts. For example, Wesley's story hints at the importance of religious community, both real and imagined. Her reading practices and deep intellectual engagement could be thoughtfully woven into and enrich scholarship on print culture. Questions about female education emerge at various points in her story. Her contemplative life, which is laced throughout her devotional journal, sheds light on the importance of religious interiority and the life of the mind. Her intellectual and experiential approaches to religion have the potential of enriching our understandings of conversion, both in its immediate and long-term contexts. Additionally, Susanna Wesley's story challenges definitions of agency, female roles and responsibilities, motherhood, and family relationships, all broadly defined. Quite simply, her story has the potential to shed additional light on why religion, particularly Methodism, appealed and appeals to women, as well as how religion influences the many ways in which women understand and express themselves.