

## CHARLES WESLEY AND HIS BIOGRAPHERS

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Wesley F. Swift, former Editor of the *Proceedings of The Wesley Historical Society*, once wrote, "Charles Wesley has suffered at the hands of his biographers, or rather, by the lack of them." And he is right. In one library, for example, I found on a computer more than ninety items dealing with Charles Wesley, certainly a respectable figure. But they included only a handful of biographies. By comparison, John Wesley's biographers have been legion. Methodist authors have evidently been more intrigued by John than by Charles.

Methodists, themselves, when they think of Charles, usually think of him only in relation to his hymns and poems and their possible relation to some Methodist doctrine. This is strange since the journal of Charles Wesley, although covering only about twenty years, is, nevertheless, far more vivid than that of John. His letters are also more fascinating to read. Dr. Frank Baker, one of today's greatest Wesleyan scholars, has transcripts of over six hundred letters by Charles, only a selection of which have been published. But even this small sampling reveals a life full of interest and challenge to any intelligent reader.

In addition to his letters, the journal of Charles Wesley remains the best original source for any biographer. In 1849 Thomas Jackson published two volumes of the journal along with some selected letters and poetry. The journal covers only the years 1736 to 1756 and has numerous gaps. Jackson believed that Charles destroyed much of his journal, a theory supported by the fact that Charles refused to publish any of the work during his lifetime.

Jackson also added a story indicating how the entire journal was almost lost. He wrote:

It was purchased some years ago of the writer's heir, the late Charles Wesley, Esq. of musical celebrity; having, however, undergone some mutilations, the occasion of which it would perhaps be impossible to ascertain. A little while before it was purchased it was in great danger of being irrecoverably lost. It was found among some loose straw on the floor of a public warehouse in London, where the furniture of the owner was for a time deposited; several leaves in the volume being cut from the binding, and yet not removed.

However, some of the passages in the early part of the journal were omitted from Jackson's publication of the work, probably because they had been written in a then unrecognized shorthand. In 1910 John Telford, a Wesleyan scholar, published this early part of the journal and included

these omitted passages in brackets, the shorthand having been deciphered by Nehemiah Curnock.

The first attempt at a full length biography of Charles Wesley appeared in 1793 and was written by Dr. John Whitehead, physician to John Wesley. It was in reality a supplement to Whitehead's *Life of John Wesley*. It included the following sub-title:

To which is prefixed some account of his [John's] ancestors and relations: with the Life of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M. A. Collected from his private Journal and never before published

The section on Charles, which is based primarily on his journal, consumes more than half of the first volume. Many scholars have brushed it aside, arguing that with the publication of the Journal in 1849, its value is now negligible. The volume, however, is worth some attention if for no other reason than the rather astute appraisals Whitehead made at time of the two brothers:

Mr. John Wesley's great weakness was, a proness to believe every one sincere in his professions of religion, till he had the most positive, and, perhaps repeated proofs of his insincerity. . . . This exposed him to frequent imposition and mistake. The case was far otherwise with Mr. Charles: he quickly penetrated into a man's character, and it was not easy to impose upon him. He totally differed from his brother concerning the qualifications necessary for an itinerant preacher, and sometimes silenced a man whom his brother had admitted. The one looked at the possible harm an unqualified preacher might do to many persons; the other at the possible good he might do to some.

A man who writes with this penetrating discernment should not be casually brushed aside.

In 1841 Thomas Jackson wrote *The Life of Charles Wesley* . . . in two volumes. It was published by John Mason, London. Jackson was one of the leading Methodist scholars of his day. He was President of the British Methodist Conference in 1838 and again in 1849. Jackson relied heavily on the journal and other private papers of Charles Wesley which he used to good advantage. Swift says, "It contains little criticism and much adulation," which is true. But it still remains a standard reference work and is well worth reading. In 1899 an extensive index to the work was published by the Wesley Historical Society of England. In 1848 Jackson published an abridgment of the work entitled *Memoirs of the Rev. Charles Wesley*. It proved exceedingly popular in its day.

In 1886 John Telford, who later edited an eight-volume edition of John Wesley's letters, wrote a *Life of the Rev. Charles Wesley* published by the Religious Tract Society. Its 224 pages have been described as "realistic and discerning" and it proved a popular seller. It was revised and enlarged in 1900 making it now the best edition of this work. It is exceedingly scarce but well worth trying to find. It makes for very enter-

taining reading, although it can by no means be characterized as a definitive life.

Dora M. Jones wrote *Charles Wesley: A Study* in 1919. With no index, no critical apparatus and no bibliography, it is difficult to think of it as "A Study." It is attractively written, with more poetic than scholarly touches. She described the emotions of Charles on receiving an assurance of salvation in poetic terms: "The smile of God is in the sunshine and the peace of God on the sea. The birds are His choristers and the flowers make the place of His feet glorious." The book goes on in this style for 284 pages. The most that can be said for it is that it is a readable work.

F. Luke Wiseman, one of the foremost authorities on hymnology of his day, gave the Drew Lectureship in Biography in 1931 on *Charles Wesley Evangelist and Poet*. It is by no means a complete biography but rather a study of various phases of the poet's life in relation to his hymns. Published by Abingdon Press, it contains no index or critical apparatus and only a scanty bibliography. However, it has been termed "a delightful and at times moving commentary on the hymns."

An earlier study of Charles Wesley by Wiseman, which was later separately published, had appeared in 1909 as Volume One of *A New History of Methodism*, edited by W. J. Townsend, H. B. Workman, and George Eayrs. It is very brief although it comprises most of chapter four of the *New History*. Wiseman presented an interesting comparison of the two brothers. Among other remarks he stated, "John, though not deficient in emotion, was severely logical; Charles, by no means lacking in reasoning power, was strongly swayed by feeling. "The brief work, though helpful, makes no attempt at a full lengthy biography of the singer of Methodism.

Probably the most charming, informative and most original work on Charles Wesley in recent years is Frank Baker's short, 152-page work on *Charles Wesley As Revealed by His Letters*. It is an expanded version of the Wesley Historical Society Lecture delivered in Bristol in 1948. It was published by the Epworth Press. It contains a chronological summary of the life of Charles, a complete index and some critical apparatus. It also makes good use of the more than six hundred transcripts of Charles Wesley's letters in the author's possession. It was obviously written for scholars, but because of its style and readability, it can also be thoroughly enjoyed by the lay person.

Mabel Rich Brailsford in 1954 published a book entitled *A Tale of Two Brothers: John and Charles Wesley*. It was published in London by R. Hart-Davis in Soho Square. With no bibliography and no critical apparatus, it is in reality a life of neither brother. It deals mostly with the loves of the two brothers, with a large portion of the book given over to John Wesley's relation to Grace Murray, and to Charles Wesley's married life. It is not a scholarly work, and, though entertaining, it is not considered a satisfactory biography of either brother.

Bishop Charles Welsey Flint wrote *Charles Wesley and His Colleagues* which in 1957 was published by Public Affairs Press in Washington, DC. It is fully indexed and contains an extensive bibliography. The book has an introductory section containing laudatory appraisals of the work by Bishop Gerald Kennedy, Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam and Norman Vincent Peale. Reviewers, however, have been quick to point out that Bishop Flint gives more space to the colleagues than to Charles, himself, although only Whitefield is set forth in any great detail. Nevertheless, the Bishop amassed a great deal of material, which he effectively organized. His description of the family relationships of the poet and his home life are admirably presented.

Frederick Cyril Gill, who has written extensively about the Wesleys, in 1964 wrote on *Charles Wesley, the First Methodist*. It was published both by the Lutterworth Press in London and by Abindgon Press in the United States. With no documentation and no bibliography, it is obviously not meant as a scholarly work but rather as a popular presentation of a man whom more and more Methodists are seeking to know and understand. It satisfactorily fulfills its purpose.

In 1988 Arnold A. Dallimore wrote *A Heart Set Free: The Life of Charles Wesley*. It was published by Crossway Books, West Chester, IL, a Division of Good News Publishers. Dallimore is well known for his extensive two-volume biography of George Whitefield. A Canadian by birth, he is a Baptist who has shown a great interest in Methodism. His volume on Charles Wesley has been well researched, although it is not as complete a work as the author's masterly biography of Whitefield. It is fully indexed, and is attractively printed. Its chief fault lies in the fact that it is polemical, arguing in favor of the author's views about Charles Wesley rather than allowing the story to unfold naturally. However, it is an excellent antidote to a present tendency by some to diminish the importance of the conversion experiences of the Wesley brothers.

In addition to these biographies of the Methodist poet, there are a large number of short studies and longer books dealing with his hymns or some phase of his life and thought. John R. Tyson, for example, wrote *Charles Wesley on Sanctification, a Biographical and Theological Study*. Tyson is associate Professor of Theology at Houghton College. His work was published in 1986 by Francis Asbury Press. It is fully indexed with notes and a selected bibliography. The book is well done, but it can hardly be considered a biography of Charles since it centers mostly on Charles' view of sanctification as seen in his hymns. It gives but sketchy attention to the mission to Georgia and Wesley's conversion and little attention to his marriage and home life. However, it deals very satisfactorily with its main theme of sanctification.

It would be almost impossible at the present moment to write a definitive life of Charles Wesley. Many of his letters have never been

published, and no complete study has so far been made of the sources of his sermons, hymns and poetry. A Charles Wesley Society is soon to be formed. It will probably have for one of its goals to do for Charles Wesley what the Wesley Works Project has been doing for John, namely, publishing a correct text of his works along with suitable introductions and documentation of each of his volumes, revealing his sources and his ultimate purpose and goal. Once this has been accomplished then possibly a full length definitive picture of the man can be drawn.

One final word of warning. I have not appraised any of these biographies for their accuracy. I have merely sought to survey the field generally. When using a source like a biography, it is always well to check and double-check the author's statements, especially where the biographer is using secondary sources for information.