

“AN INSTRUMENT FOR SALLY”:

CHARLES WESLEY’S SHORTHAND BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN DAVIS

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The early Methodists recognized the importance of being able to point to contemporary examples of Christian faith and piety as sources of encouragement and to provide patterns for personal adherence. For John and Charles Wesley it was a crucial matter that their doctrine could be “lived” in the real world of trials, conflict, and confusion. For this reason, then, the early Methodists were encouraged to communicate short testimonies of their conversions, spiritual victories, and triumphant deaths. These sorts of testimonies were probably shared as a source of mutual encouragement in the Methodist bands and societies. They have also survived as a body of early Methodist literature. Over one hundred fifty of these short testimonies, penned by early Methodist lay men and lay women, can be found among Charles Wesley’s unpublished papers.¹ One can only conjecture precisely what it was about Charles Wesley that attracted him to the task of collecting these testimonies. It might easily have been his mystical mood, or his willingness to analyze Christian experience; but in any event the task was a collateral concern to Methodist theology understood as “practical divinity.”²

Cast in the form of letters to Charles Wesley, these testimonies run the gamut of Christian experience; the majority speak of conversions, and triumphant lives and deaths, but there are also pieces — like the report of Mrs. Davis’s mastectomy — which demonstrate Christian courage in the

¹These short testimonies are found in the “Black Folio” entitled *Early Methodists*, located in the Methodist Archives, the John Rylands University Library of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, England.

²This phrase comes from John Wesley’s “Preface” to the 1780 Methodist Hymnbook. Cf. Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver Beckerlegge, eds., *The Works of John Wesley: Vol. 7, A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 73–75, for the text of Wesley’s “Preface.” Hildebrandt’s fine introduction explains the function of the hymns as “practical and experimental divinity” (1–22): “The terms ‘experimental’, ‘practical’, ‘scriptural’ are interrelated; it is not too much to say that they are interchangeable. They are used to distinguish ‘real’ from ‘formal’ religion, or, in one of Wesley’s key texts, the ‘power’ from the ‘form of godliness’. Experience is not a separate second source of authority; it finds out (*ex-periri*) the eternal truth of the Word of God. In John Wesley’s own phrase: ‘Experience is sufficient to *confirm* a doctrine that is grounded on Scripture’” (3).

midst of life's trials.³ Mrs. Davis, probably Mrs. Anne Davis, was one of the "faithful friends" Charles's family had in Bristol.⁴ Like the Wesleys, she eventually relocated to London, apparently seeking their companionship in the midst of her last illness. One of Charles's letters to his wife, Sally, hints at the reason for Mrs. Davis's relocation: "Her foes are those of her own household."⁵ Charles's cryptic reference received further explanation in John Wesley's *Journal*: "She . . . had a *kind* husband, who was continually reproaching her for living so long, and cursing her for not dying out of the way."⁶ A second letter from Charles Wesley to his wife affirmed his concern for Mrs. Davis and his confidence in the quality of her faith.⁷ Anne Davis died soon after Charles composed "A Hymn on the Death of Mrs. Anne Davis (Nov. 5, 1775)."⁸ The hymn praises God, "Giver of life and victory," for receiving the faithful woman — "our partner to the sky." Since Davis's later life was filled, as John Wesley recalled, with ". . . racking pains in her head day and night . . . which rendered her stone blind,"⁹ the hymn rejoices that her "sorrow is no more:/The long, dark hour is past,/And lo, to sight restored,/She gains the dazzling prize at last,/And sees her smiling Lord."¹⁰ It moves steadily from the example of Anne Davis's triumphant life and death to a prayerful petition, placed on the lips of the singer of the hymn: "On us the grace be shown,/Which saved our happy friend;/Saviour and Lover of Thine own,/O love us to the end!"¹¹

The Wesleys' reaction to the death of John Matthews provides further insight into the interconnection between these victorious lives and deaths and Methodist piety. Charles's *Journal* reports Matthews "still near the haven" on May 15, 1764.¹² John's journal entry for December 28 of the same year reports Matthew's passing with a fond recollection: "A man of so faultless a behavior I have hardly ever been acquainted with. During

³*Early Methodists*, item #48. It is directed "To Charles Wesley," and dated July 1, 1758. It is headed: "An Account of Mrs. Davis's behaviour during the operation of her breast being cut off[f]."

⁴Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Journal of Charles Wesley*, 2 Vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, reprint), II, 66 and 80.

⁵*Ibid.*, 207, Letter #39.

⁶Nehemiah Curnock, ed., *The Journal of John Wesley, A.M.*, 8 Vols. (London: Charles Kelly, 1916) Vol. IV, 90. John's journal entry for December 15, 1775.

⁷Jackson, ed., *Journal of Charles Wesley*, II, 223. In Letter #52 Charles wrote: "If our dear Mrs. Davis is come to *die* with us, give my life and blessing to her, and tell her I hope to share in her triumph over our last enemy [death], and to follow her shortly, if it be our Lord's will that I should see her safe landed before me."

⁸*Ibid.*, 376–77. Cf. George Osborn, ed., *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, 13 Vols. (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1868–72), Vol. VI, 338–39.

⁹Curnock, ed., *Journal of John Wesley*, IV, 90.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, selected verses.

¹¹*Ibid.*, verses three and four.

¹²Jackson, *Journal of Charles Wesley*, II, 243.

twenty years I do not remember his doing or saying anything which I would wish to have been unsaid or undone.”¹³ A letter from the elder Wesley to the poet-laureate of Methodism, dated December 31, 1764, reported Matthews’s death with the observation, “Here is a subject for your pen.”¹⁴ Charles’s pen obliged John with twenty-nine verses of a hymn “On the Death of Mr. John Matthews.”¹⁵ The journals of both brothers are replete with dying interviews, testimonies, and attestations that the Methodists “lived and died well.”¹⁶ In a similar way, Charles’s two published collections of *Funeral Hymns* (1746, 1759) and numerous unpublished poetical epitaphs often had their inception in the passing of faith-filled people like Anne Davis or John Matthews.¹⁷

The following letter on the life of John Davis — no relative to the Anne Davis mentioned above — is another example of the way Christian lives functioned as narratives of “practical divinity” among the early Methodists. This “Short Account” was penned by Charles Wesley for the devotional use of his wife Sarah (“Sally”). The tone and application of the material caused Wesley to style it an “instrument,” implying its edifying application as an instrument for devotion. The account has survived in Charles’s own hand, written in the shorthand of Dr. Byrom.¹⁸ This letter was discovered among six shorthand sermons, also authored by Charles Wesley, and recently reported to the readers of this journal.¹⁹ A longhand version of this same letter has survived among those many testimonies

¹³Curnock, ed., *Journal of John Wesley*, V, 103.

¹⁴John Telford, ed., *The Letters of John Wesley, A.M.*, 8 Vols. (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), IV, 280.

¹⁵Osborn, ed., *Poetical Works*, VI, 308–16.

¹⁶Jackson, *Journal of Charles Wesley*, I, 272–75.

¹⁷Osborn, ed., *Poetical Works*, IV, 188–367, for the contents of the first and second series of *Funeral Hymns*, as well as an additional thirty-one funeral hymns which were not published in Charles’s lifetime. The first edition of *Funeral Hymns* (1746) contained sixteen hymns that considered life and death in general terms. Their triumphalist tone is aptly expressed in Charles’s lines: “Happy who in Jesus live/But happier still are they/Who to God their spirits give,/And ’scape from earth away.” The second collection, published in 1756, contained another forty-three hymns, several of which were dedicated to the memory of specific figures. Virtually all of the unpublished funeral hymns were of the occasional sort, linked to the passing of people who were friends or associates of Charles Wesley. Unfortunately, no hymn on John Davis is extant.

¹⁸John Byrom, *The Universal Shorthand* (Manchester: John Hanop, 1776). The system was sold privately from the early 1720s onwards, and one of Byrom’s advertisements lists Charles Wesley as a subscriber.

¹⁹Thomas Albin, “Charles Wesley’s Earliest Evangelical Sermons,” *Methodist History*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Oct. 1982), 60–63, reports the discovery of Charles’s shorthand sermons. These sermons have been transcribed and published as an occasional publication of the Wesley Historical Society (England), under the title *Charles Wesley’s Earliest Evangelical Sermons* (1987). Two of these sermons also appear in my anthology *Charles Wesley: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 138–55, 172–83.

sent to Charles Wesley.²⁰ It is my opinion that the longhand version of the letter about John Davis was penned by a close friend, and was then abridged by Charles Wesley, who sent it on to his wife in shorthand. The few differences between the two versions of the report about John Davis will be indicated in the text below.

John Davis, the focus of this brief biography, was an early opponent of Wesleyan evangelism who was subsequently converted to the cause through the efforts of a co-worker. The text of the letter describes Davis as one who “worked with him . . . whom . . . he used to ridicule.” Davis eventually worked with both Wesley brothers as a lay-assistant, and John Wesley’s letter to Charles, dated July 10, 1772, commends Davis as a man worthy of his hire: “I am glad Mr. Davis has been with you; but he must not assist you for nothing. If he joins heart and hand, he should have seventy pounds a year.”²¹

Scarcely literate prior to joining the Methodists, John Davis acquired an insatiable appetite for piety and education. He taught himself the languages of scholarship and utilized them to gain a “comprehensive knowledge of things.” He served as a class leader for sixteen years, and Charles was convinced that “a more exemplary man was not among the Methodists.”

The “Short Account” lauds John Davis’s honesty and modesty, but John Wesley’s terse reference to Davis’s death also recalled his former years: “For some years John Davis was a mere mule; he would neither lead nor drive. But it is enough that he finished his course well; and we are sure Nancy Sharland did so.”²² John Wesley’s rather rough recollection of Davis’s character did not appear in the somewhat sanitized collection of correspondence appended to the Wesleyan Methodist Conference edition of Wesley’s Works.²³

The date of Charles’s “Short Account” can be established by a note, written in longhand, which appears on the back of the manuscript: “John Davis following A. Sharland—1786.” But there seems to have been some confusion between the Wesleys as to the identity of the righteous woman who preceded John Davis in death. John’s letter of April 6, 1786, links Davis’s death with that of *Nancy Sharland*.²⁴ Her passing was also marked

²⁰I am grateful to Dr. Thomas Albin, Professor of Christian Formation at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, for calling my attention to the existence of this longhand version of the letter. Cf. Black Folio, “Early Methodist Volume,” T.S.C., No. 49, at the Methodist Archives, John Rylands University Library of Manchester. Albin’s dissertation research, on “The Early Methodists” (Cambridge University), promises to open the faith-filled lives of these people to a modern readership.

²¹Thomas Jackson, *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 Vols. (London: Wesleyan Conference Edition, reprinted by Zondervan, 1958), XII, 139.

²²Telford, ed., *John Wesley’s Letters*, VII, 323.

²³John Wesley, *Works*, XII, 154.

²⁴Telford, ed., *John Wesley’s Letters*, VII, 323.

in John's *Journal* entry for February 20, 1786: "I paid my last visit to that saint of God, Ann Sharland, dying of a cancer in her breast, in continual pain, but triumphing over pain and death."²⁵ Nehemiah Curnock identified Mrs. Sharland as a "fruiterer in Mayfair," who died at the age of fifty and was buried at the Wesleys' Chapel on City Road (London).²⁶

Beyond the terse statements of a few letters and a half-sentence in John Wesley's *Journal*, this edifying instrument amounts to all the extant information about John Davis, the early Methodist lay man. The death notice for a Methodist missionary to the West Indies, reported in *The Methodist Magazine* and "Minutes of Conference" in 1815, was certainly for another John Davis – not the one lauded in this biography.²⁷ But even this scant record reveals that John Davis's life was transformed through the Methodist revival. Not only was he reconciled to God, but bonds of ignorance and hopelessness were broken, as his life was spent in humanitarian service. In a sense this "Short Account" stands as monument to those countless folk whose lives were inextricably altered and elevated by membership in a Methodist society. Perhaps this is precisely why this "Short Account" is so significant; it reminds us that the establishment of Methodism was not merely the work of two diminutive evangelists. The movement was embraced and carried forward on the shoulders of countless faithful people, whose names season the Wesleys' writings, but whose history has been pretty much forgotten. There is also a sense in which John Davis's story is the story of everyone; like most of us, the truth about Davis probably lay somewhere between the opposite assessments – between John Wesley's "mere mule" and Charles's "exemplary man." But the fruitfulness of Davis's life and faith serves as a model and an instrument – not only "For Sally."

I am grateful to Esther and Douglas Lister, of Leigh-on-Sea, England, for their hospitality and for checking my transcription of Charles Wesley's shorthand. My thanks are also extended to the British Methodist Archives and History Committee for their permission to print this hitherto unpublished account.

²⁵Curnock, ed., *John Wesley's Journal*, VII, 141.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷Francis Jackson, *An Index to the Memoirs, Obituary Notices, and Recent Deaths, Together with the References to the Local Histories of Methodism* (Westcliff-on-sea: Gage Postal Books, reprint, 1985), 16. Jackson reports the death of "John Davis," a native of London, who was employed as a missionary in the West Indies. Cf. Thomas Cordeux, ed., *Minutes of the Methodist Conference* (London: Wesleyan Methodist Conference, 1818), 90.

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Short Account of John Davis by an intimate friend of his.

About 24 years ago he was first brought to the knowledge of God.²⁸ The means which it pleased God to use was a person who worked with him and whom, with the rest he used to ridicule. But when God gave him a view of himself and his danger as a drowning man will catch at anything, he was running after all opinions.²⁹ One time he was minded to join the Quakers, another the Roman Catholics etc. But (as he afterwards advised others), he thought it right to prove all things, and hold fast that which was good. Such he judged Mr. W[esley]'s doctrine and society, which he joined, about 16 years since, and continued to meet as a leader as long as his health would permit. And I verily believe a more exemplary man was not among the Methodists.

To him godliness was profitable for all things. He had from school no further knowledge than the grammar; but by his thirst after a more comprehensive knowledge of things, with close study and application, he acquired the knowledge of the Latin, French, Greek, and Hebrew languages; but he never made a show of them. Rather his modesty concealed his talents from others.³⁰

He was strictly just and abounded in works of mercy, so that his enemies who would not freely speak well of him were constrained to say, "if there was an honest man in the world, John Davis was one."

It pleased God so to increase his substance that he became independent of the world which is so great a snare to others but proved to him [to be] a great blessing, for he was a good steward and glad to distribute to the ut[most] of his power to assist the [other] man.³¹ He was one of the first that established that most excellent institution of the Bible Society.

Amidst all his afflictions he was at last enabled to declare to me in words to this purpose: "that there was nothing in earth or heaven which he desired equally to so much as the presence of God as he had experienced in peace, unity and love." And he was willing to die or live, but to depart and be with Christ was far better.³² He was indulged with his desire on Monday Feb[ruary] 27, in the 48 [sic] years of his age, after a long sickness of three years. He followed Anne Sharland in just 48 hours.

²⁸The longhand version says "22 years."

²⁹The longhand version reads: ". . . in his own mind."

³⁰Longhand version reads: ". . . Hebrew, but for want of being known, he like those fine flowers which in the wilderness grow, whose beauty is lost for want of being seen, and so was that brilliant character of this quite ablest [. . . unclear]."

³¹The longhand version reads: "for the good steward he could give account of his stewardship, for in purse and person, both knowledge of things spiritual and temporal."

³²Longhand version reads: ". . . seemed to be his prevailing choice."