



# DISCOVERY

Edited by  
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## NEW LIGHT ON THE METHODISTS AND THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR

We are more than proud to present our readers an hitherto unpublished letter of Captain Thomas Webb to Lord Dartmouth, and also a fully annotated letter of John Wesley to his Lordship. The contributor is Dr. Frederick V. Mills, Sr., Professor of History at LaGrange College, LaGrange, Georgia, Georgia's oldest independent school.

The Webb letter, which follows, speaks for itself. An additional note is necessary for the Wesley letter. When Dr. Mills discovered the original of the Wesley letter he thought it was a *first* until he discovered a copy printed in Telford's edition of Wesley's letters, Vol. VI, 155ff. However, Dr. Mills points out some interesting things about the Wesley letter. He writes:

Telford's is a *copy of a copy*. The enclosed is a *copy of the original* from the Dartmouth Papers. Moreover, it was during the research on this letter that I discovered the reason why John Wesley appeared to reverse positions on American affairs when in fact from a loyal Englishman's point-of-view he was perfectly logical.

We express thanks to Dr. Mills for two exciting letters and his illuminating comments and annotations.

### Thomas Webb's View of the American Scene as Reported to Lord Dartmouth

This letter written by Thomas Webb (1724-1796) expresses the strong Tory sentiments of a British officer and Methodist preacher on a series of events leading to the Declaration of Independence by the American colonies. Unlike Thomas Rankin—see *Methodist History* (January, 1985) for his letter of December 29, 1774—who advocated a policy of reconciliation to Lord Dartmouth, Webb urged coercion by naval force and economic restriction. Both men were "sons" of John Wesley and effective preachers, but their positions on American affairs were markedly different. The position which John Wesley took on the American troubles

as of June 14, 1775 are expressed in writing and "in confidence" to Lord Dartmouth in a letter of that date.

The importance of Thomas Webb's letter is that it expressed the view of one of the principal founders of Methodism in America and the preacher with the longest record of service in the colonies. Webb served in the British Army during the French and Indian War, 1754-1763. Back in England he was converted under the preaching of a Moravian minister. He later joined the Methodists through whom he met John Wesley. He returned to America in 1766. His service to Methodists in New York, where he assisted Philip Embury, and his preaching in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and other places are well known. Although Webb returned to England at least once (1772), his overall period of service in America probably lasted until 1778. Throughout his entire career, Webb's loyalty to King and Constitution was a hallmark of his service. Webb's example was, therefore, one reason why Methodists in America were suspected of being Tories during the War of Independence.

#### My Lord

I have the pleasure to acquaint your Lordship, that his Majesty's affairs upon the continent are in a much better situation than were supposed a few months ago; . . . in general have had time both to reflect, and to enquire into the nature of the present dispute between the Mother Country and her colonies; and many of the most sensible and dispassionate amongst them begin to be alarmed in their minds at the conduct of the New England people; from an apprehension that they have formed some latent scheme to overturn the constitution, and if possible, establish a democracy upon its ruins; and this opinion seems to gain ground daily; insomuch, that many people, and not only declare their sentiments, touching the conduct of the Bostonians in general, as leading to this mark; but are determined at all events, to oppose every attempt of this kind, at the hazard of their lives.<sup>1</sup> Add to this the measures of the Congress have been disapproved of, and rejected by the assembly of New York, which is one grand blow, and his Majesty's speech with the Parliaments address seems to have given the finishing stroke.<sup>2</sup> In short my Lord things appear so favorable at present that I believe if his Majesty's standard was to be hoisted, that three fourths of the people would

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*Note:* Permission to print Thomas Webb's letter to Lord Dartmouth, dated March 21, 1775, has been granted by the present Lord Dartmouth and is gratefully acknowledged. The original letter is in the collection of Dartmouth Papers, #1172, located in the Staffordshire Record Office.

<sup>1</sup>The events to which Webb refers are described in Benjamin W. Labaree's *The Boston Tea Party* (Oxford, 1968).

<sup>2</sup>These events are elaborated in Ian R. Christie's *Wars and Revolutions: Britain, 1760-1815* (Harvard, 1982), 108ff.

immediately join it. But many of his Majesty's friends think that there is a much shorter & a more safe way of reducing them to a proper state of obedience, without the effusion of much blood viz. by shutting up all the Ports on the continent, and this may be done with a few Frigates, & small . . . cruising along the coast; which would at once, stop all exportation, the consequences of which, must inevitably reduce three fourths of the trading part of the people to a state of indigenes and poverty; which will oblige them to brake thro all the resolves of the Congress, not only so, but the resentment of the people will be kindled against all future proceedings of this kind: but what would render it still more effectual, would be to find out a Market for these articles of British commerce calculated for the American Market, as it is but natural to suppose that numbers of manufacturers, & artificers will be discharged upon hearing the news of a nonimportation agreement and so become troublesome to government.<sup>3</sup> These considerations have induced me to collect some facts which have been transacted by the enemies of the constitution since those disputes have been agitated which I propose to publish in a Letter, addressed to all the artificers and manufacturers in Great Britain, in which I have endeavored to point out the true cause of all the present disturbance, both in Great Britain and America, namely that restless spirit of independency, which never can be happy under any government. I have sent the manuscript to Mr. Charles Wesley requesting it as a particular favour, that he would be so kind as to correct it for the press; and publish it immediately; and disperse it throughout all Great Britain: and happy shall I be if my poor endeavours should promote his Majesty's interest in the smallest degree.<sup>4</sup> I have only to add, My Lord, that my future efforts shall be employed to this end. I am my Lord with the greatest respect your

Lordships  
 most obt.  
 and most obliged  
 H mble: Sert.  
 T. Webb

New York  
 March 21st 1775

NB

I take the liberty to emblonze [?] for your Lordships personal, a copy of a Letter I wrote to my brother, upon the meeting of the

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.* Webb's view is consistent with action taken by the British government, but there is no evidence he helped shape that decision.

<sup>4</sup>No evidence has been found to determine whether or not Charles Wesley received and prepared Webb's manuscript for publication.

General Assembly of the Province of New York, I believe he has been very active for his Majesty's interest, & has had some influence over several people in the province, but particularly in Queens County where he resides.<sup>5</sup>

### John Wesley to Lord Dartmouth on the State of Affairs Between Great Britain and Her American Colonies

The position of John Wesley on the American War for Independence is frequently represented by reference to his *Calm Address to the American Colonies* published in 1775. Based on this treatise Wesley is identified as a Tory with little or no sympathy for the American cause. In the following letter which followed the military clashes at Lexington and Concord by two months and two days and preceded the publication of the *Calm Address*, John Wesley reveals empathy for the Americans "... an oppressed People [who] asked for nothing more than their Legal Rights: And that, in the most modest and inoffensive manner, the making of the thing would allow." Although this is a private letter to Lord Dartmouth, William Legge, Secretary of State for the colonies and president of the Board of Trade and Foreign Plantations, expressing this view was a bold gesture. Wesley courteously suggested a reconsideration of Great Britain's policy toward her American colonies.

What appears then to be a contradiction in John Wesley's position on the American colonies reflected in the following letter dated June 14, 1775, and October, 1775, when his *Calm Address* was published deserves attention. The explanation is that on August 23, 1775, King George III issued a Proclamation of Rebellion. Henceforth, those who corresponded, aided or abetted the North American colonies would be viewed as persons of traitorous designs. Before the Proclamation discussion of the colonial problem was diverse and widespread. Wesley's earlier view was within the boundaries of that debate. But after August 23, 1775, the policy was set and support was the duty of British subjects. Wesley forcefully stated his support of the government's policy in his *Calm Address*. In both instances Wesley stated his loyalty to the crown, but the changed legal status of the colonial problem provoked the Tory response for which John Wesley is most noted.

The second remarkable feature of this letter is Mr. Wesley's perceptive evaluation of the *realpolitik* of the time. He correctly predicted the

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<sup>5</sup>To date no evidence has surfaced to describe the status of Thomas Webb's brother. Thomas's intense loyalty to Britain is reiterated. For example, "let us, as Englishmen and freemen, assert ourselves in favour of his Majesty, and the British constitution, . . . And in the first place let us renounce every article contained in the resolves of the Continental Congress, . . ." This reference is to the Declaration and Resolves of the First Continental Congress, enacted October 14, 1774.

problems the King's forces encountered in a distant and hostile country; he anticipated the unity the colonies achieved; he foresaw hostile action by continental powers against Great Britain; and, like other authors, he drew an analogy from the predicament of Britain in the 1640's when King Charles I lost his crown to conditions in the 1770's. Although there is no evidence that these views of Wesley influenced British policy, his insights into domestic and foreign affairs deserve note.

### My Lord

I would not speak, as it may seem to be concerning myself with things that be out of my province. But I dare not refrain from it any longer. I think silence in the present case, would be a sin against God, against my Country, and against my own Soul.

But what hope can I have of doing good, of making the least impression upon your Lordship, when so many have spoke in vanity, and those far better qualified to speak on so delicate a subject?

They were better qualified in some respects: in others they were not. They had not less bias upon their minds: They were not free from . . . Hopes and Fears. Their Passions were engaged: And how easily do these cloud the eyes of the Understanding? They were not more impartial. Most of us were prejudiced in the highest degree. They neither loved the King, nor his ministers. Rather, they hated them with a perfect hatred. And your Lordship knowing this, if you was a man, could not avoid having some prejudice to Them: in such case it would be hardly possible, to face the full force of their Arguments.

They had not better means of information, of knowing the real tempers and Sentiments, either of the Americans on the one hand, or of the English, Irish and Scots, on the other. Above all they trusted in themselves, in their own power of convincening and persuading. I trust only in the living God, who hath the hearts of all men in his hand.<sup>1</sup>

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*Note:* Permission to print John Wesley's letter of June 14, 1775 to Lord Dartmouth has been granted by the present Lord Dartmouth and is gratefully acknowledged. The original letter is in the collection of Dartmouth Papers #1135, located in the Staffordshire Record Office. Reference to the existence of this letter is in Nehemiah Curnoch (ed.) *The Journal of John Wesley, A.M.* (R. Cully, 1960) Vol. VI, 67 and a copy is printed in John Telford (ed.) *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (Epworth, 1931), Vol. VI, 155 and a similar letter to Lord North, the Prime Minister, dated June 15, 1775.

<sup>1</sup>The relationship of the second Earl of Dartmouth, William Legge, to the Methodist movement is stated in *Methodist History* (January 1985), 116ff. Although John Wesley does not identify by name "those far better qualified to speak," he certainly means the King's ministers from Lord North, Prime Minister, to the members of the cabinet.

And whether writing do any good or no, it need do no harm. For it rest's within your Lordship's breast, whether any eye but your own shall see it.

All my Prejudices are against the Americans. For I am an High-Churchman, the son of an High Churchman, bred up from my childhood in the highest notions of Passive Obedience and Non-Resistance. And yet it speaks of all my . . . prejudices, I can not avoid thinking, (if I think at all) That an oppressed People asked for nothing more than their Legal Rights: And that, in the most modest and inoffensive manner, the making of the thing would allow.<sup>2</sup>

But waving this, waving all consideration of Right and Wrong, I wish to it Common Sense to use Force toward the Americans?

A Letter now before me, says, "Four hundred of the Regulars, and forty of the Militia were killed in the late Skirmish." What a disproportion! And this was the first Essay of raw men against Regular forces?<sup>3</sup>

You see, my Lord, whatever has been affirmed, these men will not be frightened. And it seems, they will not be conquered so easily, as was at first imagined. They will probably dispute every inch of ground, and if they die, die sword in hand.

Indeed some of our valiant officers say, "Two thousand men will clear America of these rebels." No, nor twenty thousand; nor perhaps treble that number, be they rebels, or not. They are as strong men as you: They are as valiant as you: if not abundantly more valiant. For they are, one and all, Enthusiasts; Enthusiasts for Liberty. They are calm, deliberate Enthusiasts. And we know how this first cipher

"Brothers' into sofest souls stern  
Laws of War, and thirst of ven-  
genance and contempt of Death."

We know, one can animate the others, will leap into a fire, or rush upon a Canon's mouth.<sup>4</sup>

"But they have no Experience of War." And how much more have our troops? How few of them ever saw a Battle? "But they have no Discipline." That is an entire mistake. Already they have learned as much as our Army. And they will learn more of it every

<sup>2</sup>The second half of this paragraph clearly modifies the view that Wesley held an intransigent attitude toward the American cause.

<sup>3</sup>The author of this letter is not ascertainable.

<sup>4</sup>Ronald A. Knox, *Enthusiasm, A Chapter in the History of Religion, with Special Reference to the XVII and XVIII Centuries* (Oxford, 1950). Chapters 17-21 are particularly important in understanding what Wesley meant by Enthusiasts.

day. So that in a short time they will understand it as well as their Assailants.

"But they are divided among themselves; So you are informed by various Letters and Memorials." So, I doubt not, was poor Rehoboam informed, concerning the ten tribes! So (nearer our times) was Philip informed, concerning the People of the Netherlands! No, my Lord; they are terribly united; Not in the province of New England only, but down as far as the Jerseys and Pennsylvania the bulk of the people are so united, that to speak a word in favour of the present English measures would almost endanger a man's life. Those who inform me of this, (one of whom was with me last week, lately came from Philadelphia) are no Sycophants, they say nothing to curry favour; they have nothing to gain or lose by me. But they speak with sorrow of heart, what they have seen with their eyes, and heard with their own ears.<sup>5</sup>

Those men think one and all, be it right or wrong, they are contending *pro aris and focus*<sup>6</sup>: for their Wives, Children, Liberty! What advantage have they herein, over men who fight only for pay? None of whom care a straw for the cause wherein they are engaged: most of whom strongly disapprove of it?

Have they not another considerable advantage? Is there occasion to recruit the troops? Their supplies are at hand, all round about them: Ours are three thousand miles off.

Are we then able to conquer the Americans, suppose they are left to themselves? Suppose all our Neighbours stand stock still and leave us and them to fight it out? But are we sure of this? Are we sure, that all our neighbours will stand stock still? I doubt, They have not promised it. And if they had, could we rely upon those Promises?

Yet it is not probable they will send ships or men to America. Is there not a smarter way? Do they not know where England and Ireland lie? And have they not troops, as well as ships in readiness? All Europe is well apprised of this: Only the English know nothing of the matter! What if they find means to land but ten thousand men? Where are the troops in England or Ireland to oppose them? Why cutting the throats of their Brothers in America! Poor England in the mean time!

"But we have our Militia, our valiant disciplined Militia: That will effectually oppose them." Give me leave my Lord to relate a little circumstance, of which one then on the spot informed me. In 1716

<sup>5</sup>The identity of Wesley's visitor is not known.

<sup>6</sup>"For altars and hearths." This phrase can be translated "for the sake of," or "on behalf of religion and home."

a large Body of Militia were marching toward Preston against the Rebels. In a wood which they were marching by, a boy happened to discharge his . . . piece. The soldiers gave all for lost, and by common consent threw down their arms, and ran for life. So much dependence is to be placed, on our valorous Militia?

But my Lord, this is not all. We have thousands of Enemies, perhaps more dangerous than French or Spaniards. They are landed already; they fill our cities, our Towns, our Villages. As I travel four or five thousand miles every year, I have an opportunity of conversing freely with many persons of every denomination, than any one alive in the three kingdoms. I can not therefore but know the general Disposition of the people, English, Scots, and Irish. And I know, a huge majority of them are exasperated almost to madness.<sup>7</sup> Exactly so they were thro out England and Scotland, about the year 1640: And in great measure by the same means: by Inflammatory Papers, which were spread, as they are now, with the utmost diligence, in every corner of the land. Hereby the bulk of the people were affectually cured of all Love and Reverence for the King. So at first dispising, then hating him, they were just ripe for open Rebellion. And I assure your Lordship, so they are now: they want nothing but a Leader.<sup>8</sup>

Two circumstances more deserve to be considered: the one, that there was at that time, a general decay of Trade, almost thro out the kingdom. The other, that there was an uncommon Dearnness of Provisions. The cause is the same in both respects at this day. So that causation, there are multitudes of people that having nothing to do, and nothing to eat, are ready for the first bidder; and that without enquiring into the merits of the cause, would flock to any that would give them bread.

Upon the whole I am really sometimes afraid, That "this evil is of the Lord." When I consider (to say nothing of ten thousand other vices shocking to human nature) the astonishing Luxury of the Rich and the *Profaneness* of rich and poor, I doubt whether general dissoluteness of manners does not demand a general visitation. Perhaps the decree is already gone forth from the Governor of the world. Perhaps even now

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<sup>7</sup>For a historical treatment of what John Wesley foresaw in June 1775 see Herbert Butterfield, *George III, Lord North, and the People, 1779-80* (Russell, 1968). Mr. Wesley's grasp of the realpolitik was remarkable. In only one particular did he err. France did send ships and men to America and formalized an alliance with the United States in 1778.

<sup>8</sup>References to the outbreak of the English Civil War in 1642 are frequent in the writings of this period. The historical setting is given in Christopher Hill's *The Century of Revolution, 1603-1714* (Norton, 1966).



“As he that buys surveys a ground,  
 So the destroying Angel measures it around.  
 Calm he—surveys the perishing Nation,  
 behind him stalks and empty desolation.”

But we Englishmen are too wise to acknowledge, that God has anything to do in the world! Otherwise should we not seek him by Fasting and Prayer, before he lets the . . . thunder drop? O my Lord, if your Lordship can do any thing, let it not be wanting! For God's sake, for the sake of the King, of the Nation, of your lovely Family, remember Rehoboam! Remember Philip the Second! Remember King Charles the first!

I am, with true regard,  
 My Lord,  
 Your Lordship's obedient Servant  
 John Wesley

14th June 1775  
 in the way to Dublin

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### More on Asbury Dickins and William Crawford

In the April, 1989 issue of *Methodist History* we noted in “Discovery” that Asbury Dickins had “backed the wrong horse” when he supported William H. Crawford for the presidency of the United States, and we wondered if he had even been nominated.

In response, we received an illuminating letter from the Rev. Richard S. Macha, pastor of the Valentine United Methodist Church, Valentine, Nebraska. Mr. Macha writes:

. . . Crawford *was nominated* by a congressional caucus for the presidency in 1824. At that time the caucus system was under attack and three competitors—John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay, and Andrew Jackson—emerged to challenge Crawford and the system that nominated him.

The election was decided in the House of Representatives because no candidate had a majority of the electoral college—the last time this occurred. Clay was eliminated because he had come in fourth, and Crawford was considered out of the running because of a serious illness—he had a stroke and died shortly thereafter.

We express our appreciation to Mr. Macha for his contribution, especially since it raises Asbury Dickins in our esteem since he was backing a man who apparently had a potential for becoming the President of the United States.