



DISCOVERY

Edited by
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John Wesley and Queen Elizabeth

John Wesley in his *Journal and Letters* occasionally commented on various British rulers. His opinion of Queen Elizabeth I stirred my interest as the result of a Bible I had purchased. The Bible had once been owned by William Cecil (Lord Burghley), Prime Minister and Favorite of Queen Elizabeth I. He had presented it as a gift in memory of his wife to the Bishop of London, John King. King was Chaplain to King James who referred to him as the "King of preachers." The dealer who sold me the volume pointed out that the arms of King James were on the cover of the Bible as well as the initials of John King. On the title page and the final leaf were printed tickets indicating the Lord Burghley ownership and the fact that it was presented to John King, Bishop of London, in memory of his Lordship's wife. It is, indeed, a delightful Bible with unusual associations.

As I handled the Bible I remembered that some historians believe that Elizabeth I was the greatest ruler ever to ascend the British throne. I also recalled that whatever success she had was due in part to the guidance and good judgment of Lord Burghley whose Bible I now own.

Knowing that Wesley had commented on various of the British rulers, it was not unnatural that sooner or later I should turn to Wesley's *Journal and Letters* to see what the founder of our denomination had to say about Queen Elizabeth I.

Although I had read Wesley's *Journal* several times, I still was not prepared for the biting criticism which he wrote of Elizabeth I. However, the reason for his attitude is adequately explained when one reads his com-

ment on page 257 of volume five (May 1768). He had evidently been reading William Tyler's book defending Mary Queen of Scots. The volume is well written and seeks to show that Mary was a much maligned woman. "But then," asked Wesley, "how can we account for the quite contrary story. . . . Most easily. It was penned . . . (on Queen Elizabeth's order) by George Buchanan, who was . . . in Queen Elizabeth's pay; so he was sure to throw enough dirt. Nor was she at liberty to answer for herself. But what then was Queen Elizabeth? As just and merciful as Nero, and as good a Christian as Mahomet."

In November 1769 Wesley returned to this theme, this time after reading "Mr. Guthrie's ingenious *History of Scotland*." Wesley spoke again of Buchanan as being Queen Elizabeth's penioner and summarized his own opinion in these words, "Upon the whole, that much injured Queen [Mary] appears to have been far the greatest woman of that age, exquisitely beautiful in her person, of a fine address, of a deep unaffected piety, and of a stronger understanding even in youth than Queen Elizabeth had at threescore."

It is probably safe to say that Wesley was not the world's greatest historian. On the death of George II, he wrote in his *Journal*, "(Sat. 25, October 1760) King George was gathered to his fathers. When will England have a better Prince?"—a judgment with which many historians would disagree.

As Wesley aged, his attitude toward Elizabeth seems to have softened. In March 1780 he defended her in his letters from the charges of a Mr. O'Leary that she burnt heretics. He wrote, "But Queen Elizabeth and King James roasted heretics in Smithfield? In what year? I doubt the fact." A little later in his defense Wesley admitted that Queen Elizabeth put two Anabaptists to death; ". . . but what was this to the achievement of her sister?" Wesley was referring to Bloody Mary who succeeded Henry VIII on the throne and is reputed to have martyred numerous Protestants during her short reign.

In 1781 in a letter to Henry Fisher, he was still defending Elizabeth, but also adhering to his earlier position as to her morality. "But I do not remember that Queen Elizabeth or King James (bad as they were) burnt any heretics."

In a letter to the Methodist people, September 1789, Wesley pointed to a startling fact that occurred during Elizabeth's reign. He was writing about itinerant preachers, and he added, "But we were not the first itinerant preachers in England. Twelve were appointed by Queen Elizabeth to travel continually, *in order to spread true religion through the kingdom*" (italics mine). This bad Queen evidently did some good in Wesley's eyes.

In 1775/1776 appeared Wesley's four volume *History of England*. Although the first printing sold rapidly, the work soon disappeared, proving once again that Wesley was no historian. One of Wesley's biographers stated, "In historical composition Wesley did not excel. His habit of

generalizing, and reducing to a few heads, every subject of which he treated, and the too great confidence he had in the authority of his own assertions, when he himself was convinced, in some degree indisposed him to enter into that detail of evidence from facts, so highly necessary to establish a general principle in history and biography. His works, therefore, of this kind have not the same merit as his other compositions." (Whitehead, *Life of Wesley*, vol. II, p. 490.)

It must not be assumed, however, that Wesley's four volume history is totally without value. No less an authority than Francis McConnell, who wrote an excellent life of Wesley, strongly defended the work. He referred to the history "with admiration and gratitude." He pointed out that we must judge the history from the viewpoint of its purpose which was to give Wesley's people a readable narrative written from the religious point of view. "The result was instructive and interesting."

McConnell thought it odd that Wesley was "an intense partisan of Mary Queen of Scots," but he also lifted up a number of historical facts that can be found only in Wesley's history. One of these was that Wesley's father wrote some of the speeches of the famous High Churchman Sacheverell. McConnell, however, quickly added that "Wesley's authority is not always of the best on such points." On the other hand the Bishop claimed that Wesley's explanation of the War of Jenkin's Ear makes sense, at least to an Englishman, which is more than can be said for the explanations offered by some other historians.

In a very penetrating paragraph McConnell pointed out, furthermore, that we must judge Wesley's history with his purpose in mind. Wesley, wrote McConnell, "was time and again blamed for not hitting targets at which he did not aim. He was not aiming at historical research. He was not working among libraries or state archives." He was, after all, addressing his people and seeking to give them a readable, straight-forward account of the history of their country. In this he succeeded. He hit his mark. And although the history is laid aside today, it met a decided need in Wesley's day.

At any rate, we do not laud Wesley as an historian, and his opinions of King George, Queen Elizabeth and other monarchs must be received with great caution. We realize again how complex was the personality of John Wesley, about whom more has been written than about any other eighteenth-century character. With the publication of the Wesley's Works Project growing in popularity, we shall probably see more books on Wesley based on this solid scholarly foundation.