

## SON TO SOPHIA: A BYWAY OF METHODIST HISTORY

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John Wesley's accident-prone love affair with Sophy Hopkey in Georgia, glossed over by his early biographers, has remained an embarrassment to their successors rather than an opportunity to glimpse and portray "Wesley the man," clay feet and all. This article does not set out to tell that story yet again or to attempt any fresh interpretation of it, but rather to follow up its sequel.

Once Wesley had shaken off the dust of Savannah from his feet, the tendency of both his biographers and Methodist historians alike has been to take no further interest in Sophy Williamson, née Hopkey, but to bid her farewell and "good riddance" with an almost audible sign of relief. Now at last, they seem to say, the real story of John Wesley and the rise of Methodism can begin.

So far as I have been able to discover, no one has seriously asked, much less discovered, what happened to her or her marriage. And indeed, the surviving information is skimpy enough, as will become clear. But there *is* something of interest to be uncovered and not least the fact that the Williamsons had a son who grew up to be a parish priest. This information, which set me on the trail leading to this article, I owe to an American Methodist friend, the Rev. R. Edwin Green of St. Simons Island, Georgia.

Sophy Hopkey and William Williamson were married at Purrysburg, South Carolina, on Saturday, March 12th, 1737 and before long Sophy was pregnant, as we learn from a note in Wesley's diary for July 11th: "Mrs. Williamson miscarried."<sup>1</sup> A few months later the couple had removed to Charleston and there a son was born to them on September 13, 1739 and baptized on November 14 at St. Philip's Church.<sup>2</sup> The church register records the baptism of another son, William Thomas, on November 8, 1741 and his burial a few months later on May 13, 1742.

Joseph Taylor<sup>3</sup> Williamson grew up therefore as an only child and at some stage was taken to England by his mother. (Whether his father accom-

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<sup>1</sup>Wesley's *Journal*, Bicentennial Edition, 1, 230.

<sup>2</sup>Church register, September 13, 1739: Birth: 'Joseph Taylor, son of William Williamson and Sophia Christiana his wife.' Baptism: 'November 14, 1739—Joseph Taylor, son of William Christiana (*sic*) and Sophia his wife.' Extracts supplied by Mrs. Ann Andrus of Charleston.

<sup>3</sup>Probably named after a relative in England. A Joseph Taylor is named as patron of the living of St. Dunstan-in-the-West, London, in 1736 and 1758 and was succeeded as patron by the 'Miss Williamson' who presented the living to Joseph Taylor Williamson in 1763. The second name was dropped later in his life and *Alumni Cantabrigienses*, citing *Records of Old Westminster*, gives his name as 'Joseph [Taylor] Williamson.'

panied them is not entirely clear.) We next pick up his trail when he was entered as a pupil at Westminster School in September 1750, just before his eleventh birthday. In the absence of school records for that period, we know only that he became a King's Scholar in 1754 (as Charles Wesley had done forty years earlier) and left for Cambridge in 1759, at the age of 19.

Williamson was one of three Westminster "pensioners" to arrive at Trinity College that year. Admitted on June 14, 1759, he matriculated at Michaelmas and became a "scholar" the following year. In 1763 he took his B.A., was 8th Wrangler and won the Chancellor's Classical Medal. He proceeded to his M.A. in 1771, by which time he was ordained and settled in a London parish.

Williamson's tutor at Trinity was James Backhouse, who had been a Fellow since 1742 and had taken his B.D. in 1761. Backhouse was also responsible for the other two old Westminster scholars who entered Trinity that year. Peter David and Erasmus Warren do not seem to have matched Williamson's scholarly achievements, but did outstrip him in other respects. David became a Fellow in 1765 and both he and Warren proceeded to the M.A. in 1766, five years before Williamson. Lack of influential patronage or of financial resources may have played some part in this.<sup>4</sup>

Whatever disappointment may have rounded off his university career, within a year of graduating Williamson was ordained and was presented to a living. I have been unable to discover the place and date of his ordination, but in the absence of evidence to the contrary it seems most likely to have taken place in London.<sup>5</sup> At any rate, on July 14, 1764, "Joseph Williamson Clerk A.B. was admitted and instituted by the worshipfull the Chancellor of London to the vicarage of St. Dunstan's in the West in the City of London" on the presentation of a Miss Williamson, perhaps an aunt.<sup>6</sup> And here he was to remain (though latterly an absentee incumbent) for just over forty years, his hopes of preferment gradually fading into some degree of disillusionment. Such scraps of evidence as have survived suggest that the St. Dunstan's living was seen by the family, as well as by Williamson himself, as no more than a stepping-stone to better things. But that was not to be.

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<sup>4</sup>W. W. Rouse Ball and J. A. Venn, *Admissions to Trinity College, Cambridge*, 1911, vol. 3, p. 191. Whether Williamson's later claim to have forfeited the certainty of a fellowship by accepting a modest London living is more than a mixture of wishful thinking and disillusionment it is now impossible to say.

<sup>5</sup>Williamson's name does not appear in the surviving records of ordinations in the London diocese, which are fragmentary. But there is no trace of his having been ordained in either Ely or Norwich diocese.

<sup>6</sup>London Diocesan Register, Guildhall Library, Ms 9548, p. 46. A blank is left where the name of the patron was to have been inserted. Williamson himself, in a letter to John Wilkes, August 3, 1775 (British Library, Add.Mss 30, 871 f. 242) speaks of it as 'a living of small value in the gift of [my] family.' George Hennessy, *Novum Repertorium Ecclesiasticum Parochiale Londinense* (1898) gives Miss Williamson's name. By 1805, when he left the living, the advowson had passed to three members of the Clapham Sect, Henry Foster, John Venn and Richard Cecil, as trustees under the will of John Thornton of Clapham.

Many years later, in a letter to the Bishop of London he reported the value of the living as no more than £150–200 a year and explained that, as there had been no vicarage since the Great Fire of 1666, he had to occupy “a hired house.” “I believe my Lord there are few such Cure’s upon such small livings.” Elsewhere he speaks of the St. Dunstan living as one “of small value in the gift of his family; which he accepted at an early period of life; thereby giving up the certainty of a valuable fellowship and the probability of a situation far superior to what he holds at present.”<sup>7</sup>

Financially unrewarding as the living may have been, by the standards of his day Williamson may be said to have performed his clerical duties with some degree of conscientiousness. At least he lived in the parish for the first twenty-eight years and then claimed medical grounds for absenting himself and employing a curate. His name first appears in the parish records when he attended his first Vestry Meeting on August 29, 1764. A new table of burial fees was approved, an item of business that had been postponed from the meeting a week earlier. His next Vestry attendance was not until January 9, 1765, but thereafter he was regularly present until 1791, when he retired to Edmonton.

The parish registers of St. Dunstan’s go some way towards bearing out his claim to have performed the duties of the parish, such as they were, largely on his own. For example, he officiated at his first marriage on September 8, 1765, and from then on regularly officiated, with curates named Richard Hainsby and Thomas Iliff making only occasional appearances. Whether he was as conscientious over his less lucrative duties is not so clear from the records. From 1791 a John Moir begins to make a regular appearance and Williamson’s name disappears. He had retired to Edmonton and was nursing his health.<sup>8</sup>

There was, however, another and contrasted side to Joseph Williamson, encapsulated in the description of him in *The Record of Old Westminster* (which echoes his obituary notice in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*): he was “a good scholar, a bon vivant, and a member of the Beef Steak Club.” “Good scholar” is borne out by his Cambridge record, though once he had graduated he seems to have done nothing further to justify it. For the rest we have more circumstantial evidence.

The “Sublime Society of Beef Steaks” was founded in 1735 by the celebrated theatrical entrepreneur John Rich of Covent Garden. Good food and drink and convivial company were its *raison d’être*. Membership was restricted to 24, new members being recruited only when there was a vacancy to be filled. The artist William Hogarth was briefly a member in the 1740s; others

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<sup>7</sup>Document enclosed in a letter to John Wilkes, August 3rd, 1775 (British Library, Add. Mss. 30,871 f.242).

<sup>8</sup>The parish records are now in the Guildhall Library and include Vestry Minutes (MS 3,016) and marriage registers (MS 10,354/2).

included the Earl of Effingham, John Montagu, 4th Earl of Sandwich, and the radical John Wilkes. In 1780 we find the name of Samuel Johnson appearing in the list. Williamson was elected on November 11, 1769, possibly on Wilkes's nomination, in place of Lord Sandwich who was later listed as an "honorary member." (As the inventor of the "sandwich" to avoid interrupting his sessions at the gaming table, the noble Earl had perhaps allowed his other interests to divert him from the priorities enshrined in the Society's constitution.) From the surviving description of its initiation ceremony, the Society's prevailing ethos seems to have exemplified the unsophisticated (not to say "juvenile") mentality of the English upper classes.<sup>9</sup>

Membership of the Beef Steak Club brought Williamson into contact with influential people and potential benefactors, but for some reason or other with little reward. Chief among these was John Wilkes, and that in itself may have proved unfortunate for him. Wilkes was an unlikely companion for a respectable parish clergyman intent on promotion within the Church, worldly as that Church may have been in the 18th century. A notorious radical and subverter of the *status quo*<sup>10</sup>, he was treated with deep suspicion by the establishment and was unlikely to have much influence to wield on his friend's behalf among those who "mattered." Nevertheless, he seems to have done what he could, enough at any rate for Williamson to be able to sign himself not only "Your oblig'd humble servant" in 1775, but "Your old & sincere Friend" in 1793.

It may well have been Wilkes who put his name forward for the Beef Steak Club. At any rate, when Wilkes became Lord Mayor of London in 1774 he chose Williamson as his chaplain and this no doubt seemed to the young clergyman a stepping-stone to better things. A surviving letter shows that in the following year Wilkes was doing his best to obtain preferment for him. There are references to a living at Gravesend and Wilkes was using his influence, such as it was, with the Chancellor of the diocese. In support of this bid, Williamson could invoke the name of no less a person than Robert Hay Drummond, now Archbishop of York but, like Williamson, a product of Westminster School and one who, indeed, had taught him there. But nothing came of this and other efforts.

So Williamson soldiered on after his own fashion, at least until the state of his health (adversely affected, perhaps, by his "good living"?) caused him to leave the parish duties in the hands of a curate and retire to Edmonton. A certificate from his surgeon, submitted to the Bishop in 1804, speaks in terms of "a very severe paralytic affection and other infirmities."

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<sup>9</sup>The fullest account of the Society and its activities is in *The Life and Death of the Suiblime Society of Beef Steaks*, by Walter Arnold, 1871.

<sup>10</sup>DNB insists that 'By nature unquestionably he was no demagogue, but a man of fashion and a dilettante' and speaks of 'the constancy of his friendship.' In Williamson's case, at least, the value of the latter seems to have been outweighed by his more notorious qualities.

His absence from the parish he explained to the Bishop of London in 1804, in a flurry of letters probably inspired by the threat of an informer at a time when such clerical abuses as unauthorized absenteeism were attracting attention. "My Lord," he wrote from Edmonton,

I am so paralytic & so worn down by progressive infirmities, that I cannot indulge any rational hope of ever being able to enter Desk or Pulpit again. . . . Your Lordship undoubtedly know's [*sic*] I am one of the oldest Incumbents in the City of London, I have been forty years vicar of the Parish, in which I resided eight and twenty Years & wholly & solely [*sic*] attended the duties of the Situation: and when through infirmity I gave up residence I still continued to come to Town on Sabbathday's [*sic*], & take care of the whole of the Church-duty for ten years successively. Considering therefore the long period of my Labour in the Vineyard, & the advanced time of my Life [he was 63], I flatter myself you will not think me unreasonable in requesting the favour of a Licence for non-residence; in order to make my absence legal, & to shelter the little remainder of Life I have left, from the trouble & expence which the Malice or Avarice of any Informer may (for the sake of the penalty) subject me.<sup>11</sup>

The licence was granted, but within a year he had resigned his London living and accepted a rural parish in Sussex. The offer was all the more opportune because of problems over the fabric of St. Dunstan's with which the Vestry was reluctantly having to grapple. Williamson was drawn into this, at least by correspondence. Years of neglect had, it seems, led to complaints to the Bishop, to which Williamson had to reply. Admitting that the church needed "cleaning and beautifying" and "has been in a dirty state for some years past," he referred the matter to the Vestry. They in turn pleaded that the considerable expense involved in repairing the fabric of the church might hardly be justified in view of the current road-widening just to the west and the possibility that both Temple Bar and the church itself might soon have to be demolished. Under pressure from the Bishop, however, estimates were obtained amounting to nearly £1,000, which represented "an 18d rate on every house in the parish." Williamson's last service to them as their parish priest may have been a concession he won from the Bishop that the work might be delayed a few months. But the necessary repairs were, it seems, carried out. In spite of this, the 13th-century building was demolished in 1830 and replaced by the present church.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile Joseph Williamson had at last left for greener pastures; rather too late, however, for him to gain much benefit from the move. His new parish was the village of Thakeham in West Sussex, where he was instituted

<sup>11</sup>Letter to the Bishop of London, Lambeth Palace Library, Porteus Papers, Vol. 20, f.101.

<sup>12</sup>Two incidental details are of Methodist interest. (1) The church is very close to where the Fetter Lane religious society met. John Wesley was closely associated with this society in the months after his return from Georgia, though eventually breaking away from it and moving to the Foundery. (2) The name of Joseph Butterworth, legal and religious bookseller of Fleet Street, appears in the minutes of the Parish Vestry. Though not a member of that body, he was nominated as one of the Overseers of the Poor in 1804 and again in 1805, and though he declined to serve in that capacity, in 1805 he was a member of the committee appointed to oversee the repairs to the church.

on June 12, 1805, and died less than two and a half years later. His patron was another member of the Beef Steak Club, Charles Howard, 11th Duke of Norfolk, and once again his friends and associates do him little credit. The Norfolk family are pre-eminent among the English aristocracy, but the 11th Duke's succession to the title was the result of the quirky operation of the law of primogeniture and, as with the monarchy, had little or nothing to do with merit. "Jockey of Norfolk," as he was known among his cronies, had abandoned the family's traditional allegiance to Roman Catholicism for blatant political gain. A staunch Whig and an ally of Charles James Fox, he represented Carlisle from 1780 until he succeeded to the title in 1786. He is said to have been "immensely popular," presumably as a "man of the world." A notorious drunkard, known for his slovenly deportment, the frequent butt of the caricaturist James Gillray, and a crony of the Prince Regent, he was nevertheless credited with "much natural ability and a kind of rude eloquence" despite his lack of "regular education" (he had, in fact, been sent for a time to Douai). He spent lavish sums on the family seat at Arundel, buying books and pictures and encouraging such antiquarian works as James Dallaway's *History of Sussex*. In 1794 he was elected President of the Society of Arts.

Williamson and the Duke no doubt became acquainted as fellow "Beef Steaks" and this eventually led to the Thakeham appointment. This Sussex advowson belonged to the manor of Warminghurst, which for a century had been in the hands of the Clough family, but in 1805 was in the process of being sold to the Duke of Norfolk. This explains why, although presented to the living by the Duke, Williamson was actually instituted "on the presentation of the Rev. Roger Clough," still at that time both rector of the parish and lord of the manor. Clough was simultaneously resigning the living and selling the family seat.<sup>13</sup>

Like neighbouring parishes north of the South Downs, Thakeham is long and narrow, measuring about 6 miles by 2, by no means as compact as his City living had been. The population in 1801 was 539. The value of the living was given in 1839 as £585 net: a definite improvement on that of St. Dunstan's. Another difference between the city and the Sussex Weald is clearly reflected in the parish registers, where a noticeably high proportion of signatories did no more than "make their mark."

The new rector's signature to the declaration of conformity to the Anglican liturgy, legally required on his entering the living, was very shaky indeed, seeming to confirm the precarious state of his health. Nevertheless, whatever other duties he may or may not have performed in person, during his brief time in the parish he officiated at all but one of the eight marriages conducted between January 1, 1806, and March 20, 1807. (In the case of two further marriages, on June 20 and October 24, 1807, the name of the officiant

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<sup>13</sup>Diocesan records at the West Sussex Record Office: EP.I/3/10. The estate had been in the hands of the Butler and Clough family since 1702, when it was bought from the Quaker, William Penn. (John M. L. Butler, *The Clough and Butler Archives: a Catalogue* [1965].)

is left blank.) For the final reference to him we have to turn to the Bishop's Transcripts. The return for 1807, signed by Williamson's successor Will Groome, includes the burial of "the Rev. Joseph Williamson A.M., Rector" on November 9.

In this account of the clerical "son to Sophia" several gaps remain. I have so far failed to find any record either of his ordination or of his last will and testament. The latter might well answer the question of whether he ever married or had a family. (The argument from silence would suggest not, but there is one fleeting hint to the contrary in a resolution of the St. Dunstan's Vestry in 1805 expressing their "sincere thanks" for his services and cordially wishing "a long life to him and his family.") So far as Sophy herself is concerned, I have drawn a blank as regards her life after she left America behind. It is not even clear whether her husband returned with her and stayed on in England, or whether he went back to take care of the family property back in Georgia.<sup>14</sup> Uncertainties abound in the records of the Causton/Williamson family's continuing stake in Georgia and their traces are the harder to follow because there appear to have been two or three William Williamsons in the colony at that time. We know from colonial records that through his wife our William Williamson inherited the Ockstead plantation just outside Savannah on the death of her uncle Thomas Causton in 1745; that there was protracted litigation over it, so that he was not able to take possession until 1764; and that on his death<sup>15</sup> it passed to his son, who sold it "in a state of great deterioration" in 1802 for £100.<sup>16</sup>

Most tantalizing of all are the unanswerable questions about Williamson and John Wesley. Wesley for his part was no doubt happy enough to forget his mishandled affair with Miss Sophy and its sorry consequences. It did him little credit, perhaps even in his own eyes.<sup>17</sup> All the same, for over a quarter of

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<sup>14</sup>Virtually the only trace of William Williamson in England is from an anonymous communication sent to the *Gentleman's Magazine* shortly after Wesley's death. According to Richard P. Heitzenrater (*The Elusive Mr. Wesley* (1984) pp. 58–9, the writer was Philip Thicknesse, who as a young man had known both Wesley and the Caustons and Williamsons in Savannah.

<sup>15</sup>Date as yet unknown. No will has been traced, but it may be our William Williamson who is mentioned in a deed dated February 1771, in which Robert Halcrow, a London merchant, as executor to 'William Williamson late of Charles Town, South Carolina' appointed Alexander Torrie, Master of the *Prince George* of London, to act on his behalf in settling Williamson's affairs in 'South Carolina or elsewhere in North America.' Torrie in his turn appointed George Abbott Hall of Charles Town as his attorney for the above purposes on May 29, 1771. (Details supplied by Mrs. Ann Andrus.)

<sup>16</sup>An article on the Ockstead estate, on St. Augustine's Creek five miles east of Savannah, in the *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 23 (1939) pt. 1 pp. 30–38, gives details of these transactions. The inheritance was complicated by the fact that Causton died while at odds with the Georgia Trustees, who had charged him with irregularities in carrying out his duties as storekeeper at Savannah.

<sup>17</sup>A hint of Wesley's likely reaction to any encounter with the ghost of his American past is found in Philip Thicknesse's account of his chance meeting with Wesley, described in his *Memoirs* (1788). Cf. note 14 above.

a century these two men, fellow clergymen, were both in London for lengthy periods, and London was then by no means the sprawling metropolis of today. Did they ever meet and, if so, did either know of the link between them, already threatened with obliteration by the drifting sands of time? The answer to both questions is "Almost certainly, no." Yet the possibility remains. And these questions fan out into others equally unanswerable, equally tantalizing. Did Sophy ever speak to her family or friends, and in particular to her son, of those "old, unhappy, far-off" days on the coast of Georgia? Did Wesley, for his part, know of Sophy's return to London and, in particular, of her clerical son? If he did, he would certainly have disapproved very strongly indeed of the mixture of religion and worldly indulgence that characterized his life. We know that Wesley had received the sacrament at St. Dunstan's several times in 1738 and 1739, in the months just after his return from Georgia and while he was closely associated with the religious society in nearby Fetter Lane. Not in his wildest dreams could he have envisaged that three decades later the son of Mrs. Sophia Christiana Williamson would be vicar there. And there is no record of his returning to the church in later years, despite the considerable time he spent in London and the many churches in which he preached. Probably their paths never crossed; but for all that here is a potential situation ripe for dramatic treatment!