

THE ROMNEY PORTRAIT OF JOHN WESLEY

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In the 1920s a leading London physician and amateur antiquarian, Sir George Buckston-Browne, attended an auction and was struck by the appealing features of an old portrait. It was reportedly a minor provincial auction on a wet day.¹ The picture was simply listed as "portrait of a Gentleman in a red coat," and attracted little attention. He was able to buy it very reasonably. Subsequently, he became convinced that it was the work of the leading London artist of the late 18th century, George Romney, and, further, that it was of John Wesley. In 1926 Browne presented it to Wesley House, the Methodist theological school in Cambridge, England, in honor of his friend Sir Thomas Barlow's 80th birthday. Barlow was a Wesleyan Methodist.

Thus began a saga which has created confusion since. There are two questions to be addressed. Is it by Romney? Is it of Wesley? The first question is, for our purposes, readily disposed of as probably being of lesser interest to readers of *Methodist History*. There are arguments for its being by Romney, although Romney experts have expressed scepticism. Buckston-Browne claimed to have found "GR" scratched into the paint, which he interpreted as Romney's signature. Experts disagreed. That matters little in relation to whether it is of Wesley, although one factor, the complete lack of provenance, tells against either.

When the portrait was presented to Wesley House it unleashed a small storm of controversy that spread to the correspondence pages of serious London papers, *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*. It was suggested that it might equally be of Jeremy Bentham or Benjamin Franklin.² Certainly the physiognomic similarities seem as sustainable as that it is Wesley. The Methodist historian F. F. Bretherton, whose file remains in the Wesley Historical Society library,³ was drawn into the debate.

Buckston-Browne's theory was that Romney made this painting when Wesley first arrived at his house for a sitting. He imagined that Wesley had ridden over from his house in Highbury and Romney received the celebrated minister in person. Before the flush of riding on a crisp winter morning had faded from Wesley's cheeks, and before Wesley had changed out of his outdoor clothes, Romney made a rapid painting of his first impression. This, he conjectured, remained in Romney's studio and after Romney's death when the studio was dispersed in chaos, as it was, the picture disappeared only to emerge over a century later.

¹This auction has not been identified.

²See the U.S. \$100 bill.

³At the Wesley Centre, Oxford, England.

This theory is at variance from established fact at several points. The circumstances of the Romney portrait are rather different. Wesley's *Journal* details the "painter" occupying 9.00 - 11.30 on the morning of Monday, January 5, 1789 when Wesley commented on the rapidity of Romney's work, "Mr Romney is a painter indeed. He struck off an exact likeness at once and did more in one hour than Sir Joshua [Reynolds] did in ten."⁴

This masks the evidence of Wesley's private diary that there were actually three further sittings for the portrait, all four on consecutive Mondays—December 29, 1788, and January 5, 12, 19, 1789.⁵ In a letter to Mrs. Tighe, who commissioned the picture, on February 7, 1789 he stated, "I have sat four times to Mr. Romney."⁶ For his first sitting on December 29, 1788 he wrote, "8.30, chaise, Painter!"⁷ Early on a winter Monday morning he was driving through the streets of London to attend a fashionable artist's studio in Cavendish Square. This neatly disposes of Browne's suggestion that he went on horseback. Browne had also picked up an idea that Wesley was living then at Highbury Place, which Methodist historians quickly scotched. Wesley was, of course, living at his house in City Road.

The sittings probably followed a routine pattern for a portrait studio.⁸ The first sitting, quite brief according to Wesley's diary, would have been occupied with arranging Wesley's pose and sketching in the outline of the composition. At the second, Romney would have painted Wesley's face, which he would have finished at the third sitting as well as painting in clothing and background. The last sitting, again brief, was an opportunity to make any final adjustments before the picture was varnished.

George Romney (usually pronounced "Rumney") was by 1789 the leading London portraitist. Gainsborough had died the previous year and Reynolds, who scathingly referred to Romney as "the man in Cavendish Square"⁹ was all but retired. Many paintings attest to the greatness of Romney's skills. By 1790 he was earning £3,000 per year, although his mental health was deteriorating. He was a prolific painter who in 1783, for instance, received 593 sittings and worked rapidly. If the "Cambridge Romney" was a "quick sketch" of Wesley, it is fair to ask why it became a finished portrait, when Romney was so busy that he left many works unfinished, including some that he was paid for, and why he used a "painted oval" which went out of fashion twenty years before.

⁴W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds., *Journals and Diaries, The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 24:118.

⁵Ward and Heitzenrater, 24:268-270.

⁶John Telford, editor, *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (London: Epworth Press, 1931), VIII: 114-115.

⁷Ward and Heitzenrater, 24:268.

⁸See Marcia Pointon, *Hanging the Head* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 36-52, and William Vaughan, *British Painting – the Golden Age* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 38-44.

⁹D. Cross, *A Striking Likeness, the Life of George Romney* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 81ff.

The likelihood of Romney's being particularly impressed by Wesley is also potentially an overstatement. Romney's portfolio included many celebrities so he was unlikely to have been impressed by this elderly clergyman. Moreover, he could be described as a humanitarian radical, possibly unsympathetic to Wesley, especially after the French Revolution. Why the sitting was arranged at the early hour of 9:00 a.m. is unclear. Romney did not normally commence his studio work until 10:00 which suggests an early start at Wesley's behest. Wesley may not have been as welcome at the painter's as we might suppose.

This leads me to mention another theory, although there is not space to deal with it here in full. In 1936 A. H. Carr suggested that Romney had, for whatever motive, based his portrait of Wesley on his picture of the actor John Henderson as Falstaff.¹⁰ I used to consider this fanciful and far-fetched, but have changed my mind. I now realize that Romney was in fact almost preoccupied with images from Shakespeare and was at that stage busy painting scenes from the plays for Boydell gallery.¹¹ His sketches of Henderson as Falstaff are in the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge.¹²

Was this some mischief on Romney's part? Is it a ridiculous theory? The Romney portrait does *seem* to indicate a man weighing more than 125 pounds, even given his gown. Carr suggested that Wesley instructed Spilsbury, the engraver who also acted as agent, to overpaint the shoulders. In Spilsbury's engraving it is true that the shoulders follow an unnaturally sharp outline, which is not the case in the later engraving by Ward. Moreover, earlier this year I looked at Romney's original canvas, loaned to Bridwell Library, Dallas, Texas, by the Philadelphia Museum of Art for their *Wesley in America* exhibit.¹³ There are signs that the shoulders may possibly have been overpainted.

Page Thomas at Bridwell Library also gave me another piece of evidence. Wesley's response to the picture was conventional for the 18th century: "A most striking likeness," a phrase used time and again as a sitter's comment. However not all agreed. Adam Clarke's wife wrote of Mr. Wesley's presenting her (a modicum of understandable conceit is detectable!) with a framed print of himself in August 1789. Almost unquestionably, given the date, it would have been Spilsbury's engraving of Romney's portrait of Wesley. However, she wrote, "I value it much, as the gift of my revered father, but I cannot esteem it as bearing a strong resemblance to himself; it is by no means a striking likeness."¹⁴

¹⁰Heinz Archive, iconographic notes, John Wesley/2/4, National Portrait Gallery, London.

¹¹Cross, 143ff.

¹²Patricia Jaffe, *Drawings by George Romney [in the] Fitzwilliam Museum*, Cambridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

¹³Philadelphia Museum of Art, PL 865.

¹⁴Mary Ann Clarke Smith, *Mrs. Adam Clarke: Her Character and Correspondence . . .* (London: Partridge and Oakey, 1851), 76. I am grateful to Page Thomas for this reference.

Wesley's consistent response to the prospect of having his picture painted, or at least as recorded for the public in his *Journal*, was that of incredulity. "I yielded to the importunity of a painter" (December 22, 1787)¹⁵; and "I could scarcely believe myself—the picture of one in his eighty-seventh year!" (February 23, 1790).¹⁶ Again, this is conventional language. Was he really pleased with Romney's picture? He wrote to Mrs. Tighe, the wealthy Irish supporter who commissioned the portrait, on February 7, 1789:

I have sat four times to Mr. Romney, and he has finished the picture. It is thought to be a good likeness and many of my friends have desired an engraving taken from it. But I answer, "The picture was not mine but *yours*. Therefore I can do [no] thing without your consent." But if you have no objection, then I will employ an engraver?.¹⁷

Does this suggest a hint of dissatisfaction? If read carefully ("It is *thought* to be a good likeness"), there is just that possibility. He does *seem* to be distancing himself from the project. If he were to employ an engraver, he may have wanted to keep the publication of the image under his control. These are facets of 18th-century portraiture.

Unlike most contemporaries, and partly to speed the painting process, Romney usually painted on twill canvases with coarse bristle brushes, resulting in a thick impasto surface. This contrasted, for instance, with Gainsborough's practice of building layer upon thin layer to achieve his characteristic translucency. As a result, the very rapidity of Romney's work gives this rather ordinary portrait an impression of restless energy which so well conveys the essential John Wesley. Untypically, Romney did not employ assistants to paint in drapery or scenery, so Wesley would have sat for the artist himself each time.

His treatment of Wesley is not one of his great portraits. In reality the majority of portraits were not masterpieces but just everyday business. Walpole described Wesley at this time, "a lean elderly man, fresh coloured, his hair smoothly combed; but with a soupçon of a curl at the ends, wondrous clean, but as evidently an actor as Garrick."¹⁸

Jonathan Spilsbury, who acted as agent and engraver of the picture, paid £30 on Mrs. Tighe's behalf for the painting and frame, and it was dispatched to Ireland on July 19.¹⁹ Wesley visited her in Ireland June 25, 1789,²⁰ a visit later expressed in a painting by Spilsbury's daughter Maria, which makes a visual reference to the Romney portrait.

¹⁵Ward and Heitzenrater, 24:68.

¹⁶Ward and Heitzenrater, 24:166.

¹⁷Telford, VIII:114-115.

¹⁸Arthur Chamberlain, *George Romney* (London: Methuen, 1910), 155-156.

¹⁹John Kerslake, *Early Georgian Portraits* (London: H.M.S.O., 1977), 299.

²⁰Ward and Heitzenrater, 24:144.

George Romney painted several members of Mrs. Tighe's family.²¹ Coming as he did from the north of England, he was popular with provincial clients who generally appreciated that he charged less than some of his London rivals. Wesley probably appreciated his bluff north-country directness and certainly his speed. Remaining static in a given position was against Wesley's nature and might in part explain why portraits before 1780 are few and far between. A number of likenesses were sketched as he preached, walked, or even shaved.²² His main dislike of Sir Joshua Reynolds (and that is another tale) is that he occupied so much of Wesley's precious time.²³

From the evidence of both Wesley's *Journal* and *Diary*, together with known portraits, the majority of portraits were made during the last ten years of his life. This is, of course, quite understandable. Wesley had lived long in the public eye, with a considerable reputation. At 80 years of age he was possibly less controversial than formerly. Certainly the tenor of the Methodist movement had changed as it was growing numerically in Britain and America.

Portraits of Wesley in those years are virtually all, certainly when in London, dated to the winter months when other activity or traveling was curtailed. A curiosity is that they are nearly all made on a Monday or a Saturday. They are also mostly timed to an early hour, for which there may be two explanations and both could be true. Wesley might have been more available at that hour. Gentry who were sitting for their portraits would probably not be about before mid-morning, especially in the winter. Wesley would have been up much earlier as was his lifelong habit and by 8:00 a.m. well on with the day's business. A second reason is that the light at that time in the morning, especially in winter, could be the best light of the day.

Sitting for one's portrait in the 18th century meant more than having one's picture taken. Pointon and others have described the business complexities, social engagement, and other nuances which were involved in this indispensable feature of mannered living.²⁴ In centers such as London and Bath, having one's picture taken represented a whole process and position. In many ways the portrait artist provided the public face not only of "polite society" but of society at large. The studio, the gallery, and the print shop were busy places of sometimes merciless social comment and critique.

Which is the "real" Romney? Provenance is always key in assessing the authenticity of a portrait, or other historic objects for that matter. Copies of the "Romney" portrait of Wesley proliferate. There are at least ten. The one in the Philadelphia Museum of Art has a proven history. Romney's original was sold by Mrs. Tighe's executors in 1815 for £40 to a "member of the

²¹H. Ward and W. Roberts, *Romney: a Biographical and Critical Essay with a Catalogue Raisonné of His Works* (London: Agnew, 1904), Vol. II: 169.

²²Ward and Heitzenrater, 22:436.

²³Ward and Heitzenrater, 24:118, and John Wesley to Henry Brooke, October 15, 1771, *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, xx, 51ff.

²⁴Pointon, 36-52.

Wesleyan community”²⁵ – possibly the businessman Joseph Butterworth. Williamson noted Butterworth’s acquisitive tendencies²⁶ and he is known to have been interested in Wesley pictures. At the J. H. Butterworth sale (Christies, March 1, 1873) it was bought by Cassels, then sold June 30, 1906 for £720 to the London dealers Agnews²⁷ who in turn sold it to John H. McFadden of Philadelphia. He bequeathed his collection to the Philadelphia Museum of Art.²⁸

Other “Romneys” have mixed backgrounds. By comparison, that in Christ Church, Oxford, is claimed to be an early copy, possibly by Spilsbury. In reality nothing is clear before its purchase in 1890.²⁹ So the “Cambridge Romney” has very little to support its claim. It is impossible to prove that it is *not* Wesley but, as I hope I have indicated, the evidence is so stacked against it that the likelihood becomes remote. Could it be of Wesley, but by another artist? That of course is possible, but again the little matter of provenance is a major obstacle, and Buckston-Browne made much of the spurious “signature.” Another obstacle is that many portraits can be authenticated by the resultant engravings. There are none of this one.

In my work on Wesley portraiture over the years I have observed a marked tendency for sentiment to overrun objectivity. Of the many “Wesley portraits” I have *seen*, so often I have been assured that “this is the original” — when clearly that is nonsense. I have to introduce a note of caution. Whereas there are doubtless still Wesley items to be uncovered, assuredly “all that glitters is not gold.”

Earlier this year I saw Romney’s original picture for the first time. At my suggestion, Bridwell Library borrowed it for their exhibit.³⁰ I have looked at Wesley portraits over a number of years, to the extent that I suppose I rarely *see* them as works of art, but more as historical artifacts. I have examined a number of copies of the Romney ranging in quality. So I came to *see* Romney’s actual work with interest. I was looking for Romney’s painting technique, for evidence of restoration or overpainting, for physiognomic detail of Wesley’s face.

What came as a surprise was how I suddenly realized that I was engaging with the portrait as a work of art. As with all good pictures, I was drawn into the picture, holding an inner conversation with it. I found myself asking questions of an inscrutable Mr. Wesley, questions of the artist, questions to

²⁵Anon (J. W. Hamilton, et al), *John Wesley’s Rooms in Lincoln College, Oxford* (New York: Oxford University Press/Methodist Book Concern, 1928), 31.

²⁶Barry Williamson, “The Spilsbury Portrait of John Fletcher,” *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, xlvii:44ff, 46, 48.

²⁷See *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, v:251.

²⁸Kerslake, 299-300, Hamilton, 31.

²⁹Heinz archive, iconographic notes: John Wesley. National Portrait Gallery, London. The price paid was 150 pounds sterling.

³⁰Bridwell Library Exhibit, “John Wesley and America,” February - April, 2003.

which the picture could respond. This I had not expected and I found it an exhilarating experience. Much later, my mind went back to some lines by the poet William Cowper.

Romney! expert infallibly to trace,
On chart or canvas, not the form alone
And 'semblance, but however faintly shown,
The mind's impression too on ev'ry face³¹

³¹William Cowper, "To George Romney, Esq; on his picture of me in crayons" [October 1792] in H. S. Milford, editor, *The Poetical Works of William Cowper* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).