



DISCOVERY

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THE ELIZA BENNIS COLLECTION

The newly established Wesleyan, Holiness, Pentecostal Research Center of Asbury Theological Seminary has recently acquired a collection of materials surrounding the ministry of Eliza Bennis, a key lay leader in Irish Methodism, who corresponded with both John Wesley and John Stretton.

Born in Limerick in 1725, Eliza grew up in a Presbyterian home where she experienced the loss of her father when she was only eighteen. A couple of years later, she married Mitchell Bennis who was “master of the corporation of Saddlers.” Demonstrating a growing religious interest, Eliza was converted to faith in Jesus Christ under the ministry of Robert Swindells who was the first Methodist missionary in Limerick.¹ Sincere, energetic and remarkably focused, Mrs. Bennis soon became a class leader in the Methodist society meeting in her home town, and John McGregor aptly described her as “the golden spur.”²

Eliza Bennis was impressed with the ministry of Thomas Olivers, who was a part of the Limerick circuit early in 1757, and she especially appreciated his preaching on the topic of entire sanctification.³ A few years later on August 2, 1763, as an important letter of this collection written to none other

¹ Charles Henry Crookshank, *History of Methodism in Ireland* (Reprint ed. Charleston, South Carolina: BiblioLife, 1885), 45.

² H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, eds. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, England: Oxford UP, 2004).

³ Crookshank, 118.

than John Wesley demonstrates, Eliza Bennis testified to the graces of entire sanctification in her life which Crookshank argues had actually occurred two months earlier, on June 2. "Lord Jesus, Thou are the only object of my soul;" Bennis wrote, "Thou has taken possession of my heart, and there is no room for any beside Thyself."⁴ It was during this same year that Mrs. Bennis was instrumental in leading John Stretton to saving faith as she visited Waterford. Some of the letters of this present collection represent an exchange between Bennis and Stretton as she encouraged him along the path of Christian discipleship. Later on Stretton made his way to Newfoundland where he supported the missionary efforts of Laurence Coughlan at Harbour Grace.

Experiencing "unspecified trials," Eliza and Mitchell Bennis left Limerick in 1773 and headed for Waterford.⁵ With the death of her husband in 1788, Mrs. Bennis immigrated to Philadelphia shortly thereafter where she died in 1802. Seven years later a collection of her letters, which included correspondence with John Wesley and several Methodist preachers, was published in that same city. A portion of that published correspondence is reflected in the current collection whose items that follow should prove to be of considerable interest to serious researchers:

1. Eighteenth-Century unpublished Methodist hymn.
2. October 9, 1770, Original 2pp. (Autographed Letter, Signed; henceforth ALS) from John Stretton to Elizabeth Bennis. Dated from Carbonear, Newfoundland. Over 90% of the content is intact.
3. December 18, 1779, 2pp. ALS from John Stretton to Elizabeth Bennis.
4. December 24, 1774, Extensive 1p. ALS by Eliza Bennis to John Wesley, Autographed by John Wesley.
5. December 29, 1773, Extensive 1p. ALS by Eliza Bennis to John Wesley. Parts of this letter were published but much was left unpublished in *Christian Correspondence. Being a Collection of Letters, written by the Late Rev. John Wesley and Several Methodist Preachers in Connection with Him to the Late Mrs. Eliza Bennis, with Her Answers* (1809).
6. March 27, 1773, 1p. autograph letter by Eliza Bennis to Jonathan Hern, published in *Christian Correspondence*. This is a letter to one of the earliest preachers of Methodism in Ireland from Eliza.
7. From Mrs. Eliza Bennis . . . To the Rev. John Wesley, August 2, 1763, Limerick. This is an extensive 2pp. autograph letter by Eliza Bennis to Wesley. This is the best articulation of her experience of entire sanctification in the collection.
8. Original 1778 ALS from John Stretton to Eliza Bennis, published in *Christian Correspondence*.
9. Original 1799 ALS from a prominent American Methodist, Zachary Myles, to Thomas Bennis. This is a letter by an early correspondent of Francis Asbury and influential early American Methodist who published

⁴ Crookshank, 168.

⁵ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

in the *Arminian Magazine*.

10. Eighteenth-Century 2pp. ALS to Eliza Bennis from a Dublin Methodist. This letter is not signed.

FRAGMENTS:

*13-line eighteenth-century fragment addressed to Eliza Bennis regarding the "Doctrine of Holiness."

*10-line eighteenth-century fragment probably to Eliza Bennis from Brother RB with an early notation on the rear, "Bourk."

*13-line eighteenth-century letter, author unknown.

MISCELLANY:

*In 1752, Wesley was having trouble with backbiting, rumors, etc., in the Methodist societies. He, Charles and a group of leaders came up with six rules that became a part of a discipline to be exercised by all in this important area. This artifact appears to be contemporary to the time of production, that is, 1752.