

PROPHET AND PROFIT: JOHN WESLEY, PUBLISHING, AND THE *ARMINIAN MAGAZINE*

BRIAN SHETLER

The *Arminian Magazine* was first published on January 1, 1778, but the seeds for its creation had been planted long beforehand. John Wesley, founder and life force behind the Methodist movement, had long desired to see his work and beliefs put into serialized format. An inspired moment following the Bristol Conference in August, 1777, led to Wesley developing a series of proposals for the magazine. These proposals would dictate the terms and temperament of the magazine, as well as establish Wesley as the dominant editorial voice of the serial. From that moment until his death in 1791, Wesley was heavily involved in nearly all aspects of the writing, editing, printing, and distribution of the magazine. Through a close examination of his letters, journals, and published works, this paper will explore how Wesley's various roles influenced the creation and publication of the *Arminian Magazine*.

John Wesley was not a man to hold back his thoughts or opinions. He was self-assured, confident, often unapologetic, and preached with a "forceful attitude"¹ that both gained and lost followers. These traits were apparent in many aspects of his life, including in his roles as writer and editor. His passion and dedication, sometimes verging on obsession, is particularly noticeable in his approach to the creation and dissemination of Methodist materials:

Indeed, one of the most striking features of Methodism is the extent to which Wesley tried to secure control over the discourse of the movement by remorselessly selecting, editing, publishing, and disseminating print Moreover, Wesley refused to allow his preachers to publish works independent of his control. He literally tried to supervise the entire spiritual literacy of his connection by establishing a sort of Wesleyan canon beyond which his followers were encouraged not to go.²

This sense of control was not limited to Britain. In 1773, at the first conference of American Methodism, Wesley (then in England) inserted the following notation into the conference minutes: "4. None of the preachers in America to reprint any of Mr. Wesley's books without his authority" This instruction came after the printing, by Robert Williams, of certain of Wesley's books without permission. In fact, the next notation in the conference minutes takes Williams to task for his actions: "5. Robert Williams to sell the books he has already printed, but to print no more, unless under

¹ Ralph Waller, *John Wesley: A Personal Portrait* (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2003), 48.

² David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2005), 58-59.

the above restrictions.” The events surrounding this reprimand “suddenly halted Robert Williams’ career as a Methodist publisher.”³ Though his publishing efforts had been successful, they had not been approved by Wesley and Williams was admonished. He gave up the ministry in 1775 and died soon thereafter.

The admonitions at the American conference is just one example of Wesley’s heavy-handed influence in the creation of a Methodist literary canon. His authority in publishing activities, according to Ralph Waller, was a signifier of Wesley’s jurisdiction over the entire Methodist movement:

Wesley did a great service to Christian education through his numerous publications. However, there is more than a hint that in producing all the writing himself he was exercising another form of control over the Methodist movement. He seldom seemed to have encouraged his preachers to write anything other than their Journals, and indeed forbade them to publish anything without his consent.⁴

While Waller is overstating things by saying that Wesley produced *all* the writing himself, the point is valid. Through the publishing arm of Methodism, John Wesley was able to demonstrate and assert his authority.

Prophet through Printing

Years before the publication of the first issue of the *Arminian Magazine*, Wesley had already become deeply involved with shaping the publishing arm of Methodism. By 1750, he had published (along with his brother Charles) “over 170 separate works, which had already passed through 500 editions.”⁵ With this prolific printing output, Wesley was “editor, author, or publisher of more works . . . than any other single figure in eighteenth-century Britain” aside from Daniel Defoe.⁶ The tremendous number of texts in which Wesley had a guiding hand (3,578 publications according to Rivers) demonstrate not only the large extent of his influence, but the longevity as well: spanning almost sixty years.

Relatively early (1750) in his publishing life, Wesley published a collection of religious works that he had handpicked and personally edited. In its original printed format, the collected works amounted to an impressive 50 volumes. The full title of this voluminous collection provides insight into the intent of Wesley’s work: *A Christian Library: Consisting of Extracts from and Abridgements of the Choicest Pieces of Practical Divinity which have been Published in the English Tongue*. He did not just desire to publish religious works for the laity to read, he wanted to make specific selections from the “choicest pieces” available.

³ J. Minton Batten, *An Outline and Bibliographical Guide for the Study of The History of the Methodist Publishing House*. (Nashville, TN: Methodist Publishing House, 1954), 3.

⁴ Waller, *John Wesley*, 111.

⁵ Frank Baker, “John Wesley: London Publisher, 1733-1791,” (Annual Lecture No. 3, The Friends of Wesley’s Chapel, London, May 24, 1984), 6.

⁶ Isabel Rivers, “John Wesley as Editor and Publisher,” *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, eds. Randy L. Maddox and Jason E. Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 145.

The need for this collection of works, he explained in the preface, was not because there were too few religious texts in circulation. Indeed, “we have in English as great a variety of books, on every branch of religion, as is to be found . . . in any language under heaven.”⁷ The problem was that there were too many texts from which to choose: “. . . this very plenty creates a difficulty. One who desires to make the best of a short life, is lost among five hundred folios, and knows not where to begin. He cannot read all . . .” Faced with this mountain of texts from which to choose, how can anyone “read those only that will best reward his labour”?⁸

The solution, according to Wesley, is to “extract the gold” out of the great pile of available texts. Wesley dedicated two full pages of the preface to setting up the need for this extraction, concluding that potential readers will be too overwhelmed or frustrated to complete the selecting themselves. All of this leads to a single question: “Who will separate the pure, genuine Divinity, out of this huge, mingled mass?”⁹ Who indeed:

I have made, as I was able, an attempt of this kind. I have endeavoured to extract such a collection of English Divinity, as (I believe) is all true, all agreeable to the oracles of God: as is all practical, unmixed with controversy of any kind; and all intelligible to plain men: such as is not superficial, but going down to the depth, and describing the height of Christianity.¹⁰

In a manner that can be seen as both self-sacrificing and self-congratulatory, John Wesley has taken up the mantle handed to him by none other than himself. He has endeavored to create a collection of the “choicest pieces” of Divinity, and done so in a manner that is “all agreeable” to God.

It was Wesley, and no one else, who was able to pull together the collection and give it to the people. By doing so, he has placed himself in the position of a prophet handing down the word of God to the masses. His audience was unable to interpret or understand these texts themselves, to the point where they can become “quite bewildered” and so unhappy that they “throw away all Religion.”¹¹ It is up to Wesley to ensure that this does not happen and to provide his audience with “explicit instructions about what, when and how to read . . . and they were to read the books Wesley advised and no others.”¹²

Wesley’s micromanagement in the selection of these works extends to his role as editor. While the texts are certainly worthy of being collected and printed, they are not all perfect in Wesley’s eyes. Due to the limitations of the available space as well as the questionable quality of some of the texts, Wesley has “been obliged, not only to omit the far greatest part of several

⁷ John Wesley, *A Christian Library: Consisting of Extracts from and Abridgements of the Choicest Pieces of Practical Divinity which have been Published in the English Tongue, Vol. I.* (London: Blanshard Publishing, 1819), vi.

⁸ Wesley, *A Christian Library*, vi.

⁹ Wesley, *A Christian Library*, viii.

¹⁰ Wesley, *A Christian Library*, viii-ix.

¹¹ Wesley, *A Christian Library*, viii.

¹² Rivers, “John Wesley as Editor,” 151.

eminent authors, but also to add what was needful, either to clear their sense, or to correct their mistakes.”¹³ His acts of selection and editing of material for publication often overshadowed the texts themselves:

Wesley published the works of these writers in a range of formats and prices, all designed to meet the needs of his different audiences, and all stamped in different ways with his authority. He was not concerned by questions of authorship that bother modern readers. He sometimes left the author’s name off the title page, and usually added his own, in the form “an extract of [the title of the work] by John Wesley.” He thus drew to the attention of his readers the fact that these works were his because they were chosen, shaped, and published by him, and that through this process he had given them a specific meaning.¹⁴

The control over the selection of material is only surpassed by the editorial power that Wesley wields. In his role as an editor, “whether of classic Christian texts or new writings and hymns, he would, without warning, alter or omit anything that offended his own taste or theology.”¹⁵ Whether or not we view him as an eighteenth-century prophet of print, Wesley’s guiding force over the text is undeniable.

This guidance can be clearly seen in a section called “To the Reader” that follows the preface. This section is intended as a primer for the reader to prepare them for the texts that they are about to encounter. Within the first volume this means the works of saints, which, while written with “true primitive simplicity”¹⁶ are the “pure doctrine of the gospel.”¹⁷ Not content to just let these texts speak for themselves, Wesley must offer another way in which to put his “stamp” on the content. Not only are these epistles written by contemporaries of the holy apostles, they are also approved by John Wesley.

The fifty volumes of *A Christian Library* demonstrate the degree to which Wesley wanted to control the printed word. He believed that his assessment and treatment of the text was the best available. His work as publisher and editor was done in the pursuit of a prophet’s mission: to bring God closer to all persons.

Profit through Printing

In addition to being a preacher, writer, editor, and publisher, John Wesley needed to be acquainted with the business aspect of publishing. He was aware of the limitations in funding that the Methodists would encounter and shaped the movement’s organization to work as efficiently and effectively as possible. Part of this approach was Wesley’s realization that the publication and distribution of printed works worked as recruitment tools and revenue generators for the Methodists.

Early on, Methodism thrived on the mobility of its adherents. This mo-

¹³ Wesley, *A Christian Library*, ix.

¹⁴ Rivers, “John Wesley as Editor,” 153-154.

¹⁵ Stephen Tomkins, *John Wesley: A Biography* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 47.

¹⁶ Wesley, *A Christian Library*, 6.

¹⁷ Wesley, *A Christian Library*, 3.

bile aspect was not limited to England:

In this way the symbiosis of a Methodist structure that was built for mobility and an international order of unprecedented population movement was a particularly important factor in the rise of Methodism from an English sect to an international movement.¹⁸

An expanding base meant that Methodism was growing, but it also meant that Wesley was further and further away from direct contact with the members of his movement. To reach the ever-growing population scattered throughout the world, missionaries were sent forth to different parts of the globe, including the British colonies in North America where Methodism especially took hold.

At the heart of all of this expansion was John Wesley. The system that he put in place to encourage “funding the evangelistic expansion of the Methodist movement” has been characterized as “stunningly successful” by David Hempton, among others. The most important aspect of this success was the reliance of traveling preachers on “the hospitality and regular subscriptions of a grateful laity.”¹⁹ Wesley was all too aware of this reality and knew just how much his people relied upon the kindness and generosity of others. He also realized that, in some cases, the more well-funded areas would have to pitch in to help those who were struggling:

You may remember it was observed at the Quarterly Meeting that the present contributions cannot support four preachers; and it was considered, What can be done either to increase the contributions or to lessen the expenses? The easiest way, we thought, to increase the contributions was this: Let our ablest Societies advance quarterly according to their abilities . . . If they can do this, nothing will be wanting.²⁰

Wesley follows this advice with specific amounts of money that 10 of the more well-off areas should be able to contribute. The amounts are not overly significant, but will help to save “several pounds in a year” for the lesser societies.

In addition to reallocating funds from wealthier areas to poorer ones, Wesley continuously urged his preachers to collect subscription costs on a regular basis. To let this income slip or go uncollected was sure to invoke a stern letter from Wesley. He was often worried about money and concerned with where the next set of funds would be coming:

I ordered Mr. Franks to pay £8 bill to-day, which is £4 more than I had in my hands. What we shall do for money till the next Conference I do not know. But the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. You do well to be exact in discipline . . . I will beg or borrow from William Newall—anything but steal.²¹

Wesley's devotion to the Methodist movement is evident in his willingness

¹⁸ Hempton, *Methodism*, 21.

¹⁹ Hempton, *Methodism*, 128.

²⁰ *JWL* VI: 277, September 11, 1777, to Samuel Wells. All quotations from John Wesley letters are taken from *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M. Vols. III-VIII* edited by John Teleford and published by Epworth Press, 1960 (hereafter *JWL*).

²¹ *JWL* IV: 169, January 25, 1762, to Matthew Lowes.

to “beg or borrow” money from friends or associates and in his insistence that his preachers collect all of the subscriptions that they possibly can.

Wesley’s detailed awareness of the financial situation of his preachers and the movement in general was not limited to subscriptions. He also paid very close attention to the publishing arm of the movement, particularly the sale of books and pamphlets. As part of this attention, Wesley became quite familiar with the costs associated with paper, ink, and printing. He would question costs that were quoted to him and pass along advice to others regarding their own publishing ventures. To the Rev. F. Garrettson, Wesley provided insight into how his understanding of the costs of the printing process changed over time: “Before I had printing presses of my own, I used to pay two-and-thirty shillings for printing two-and-twenty pages duodecimo. The paper was from twelve to sixteen shillings a ream.”²²

Wesley made himself aware of the costs and materials associated with printing in order to better understand how to get the most out of his publishing division. Thirty-five years prior to the above letter, Wesley was less sure of himself and of the printing process. In 1752, Wesley received a letter from Thomas Butts informing him that “after our printers’ bills are paid, the money remaining received by the sale of books does not amount to an hundred pounds a year.”²³ This money, which was intended to help support the Methodist movement and to prepare for additional publications, was not enough in Wesley’s eyes. In response to the letter from Butts, Wesley reached out to Ebenezer Blackwell, a London banker and Methodist layman, for advice:

It seems, therefore, absolutely necessary to determine one of these three things,—either to lessen the expense of printing (which I see no way of doing, unless by printing myself); to increase the income arising from the books (and how this can be done I know not); or to give up those eighty-six copies which are specified in my brother’s deed, to himself, to manage them as he pleases.²⁴ Now, which of these ways, all things considered, should you judge most proper to be taken.²⁵

This advice soon leads Wesley to relinquish control over the day-to-day management of the publishing operation. Blackwell advises that Butts and William Briggs (another of Wesley’s close associates) should step in and take over the publishing house, relieving Wesley of his duties there. His response back to Blackwell was hesitant to say the least:

I cannot easily determine, till I have full information concerning the several particulars you touch upon, whether it be expedient to make such an alteration (though it would ease me much,) or to let all things remain just as they are. Therefore I believe

²² *JWL* VII: 394, July 16, 1787, to Rev. F. Garrettson.

²³ *JWL* III: 92, May 23, 1752, from Thomas Butts.

²⁴ John’s brother, Charles Wesley, had an agreement with the press that he would receive 86 copies of his book of hymns and poems upon publication. These 86 copies were to be distributed for sale among Charles’ friends. Charles had not sold the copies as of yet and seemed hesitant to take them on. In the end, it would have been more beneficial (and faster) for the press to sell them outright.

²⁵ *JWL* III: 92, May 23, 1752, to Ebenezer Blackwell.

it will be best to take no farther step till I return to London.²⁶

The change, though, was in the best interest of the movement and in the best interest of Wesley himself. Soon after he sent this letter to Blackwell, he backed off the day-to-day operations of the publishing house. This not only allowed him to concentrate on more important aspects of building the movement, but it also helped ensure that a greater profit was made through printing. Wesley soon learned that a firmer grasp of the printing business was necessary if he wanted to work so closely with the publishing house. This was a lesson that would stay with Wesley many decades down the road as he sought to publish the *Arminian Magazine*.

A New Magazine

In a journal entry in August, 1777, John Wesley made a short, but significant, notation: “Thursday the 14th I drew up proposals for the *Arminian Magazine*.”²⁷ This was the entire mention of the magazine’s beginning in his journal. There is no discussion, at this point, as to the reasons behind the desire to publish a magazine or what inspired the idea. In letters to friends at the time, Wesley expressed a bit more excitement and interest in the proposal, but a few months passed before his excitement was reflected in his journal:

Having been many times desired, for near forty years, to publish a magazine, I at length complied, and now began to collect materials for it. If it once begin, I incline to think it will not end but with my life.²⁸

After waiting nearly forty years, the moment had finally arrived. On the same day as this journal entry, Wesley signed the prospectus for the magazine, officially setting in motion its publication. Wesley was already hard at work with the content of the first issue by the time this entry was written (including completing the Preface on November 1, 1777). Everything was in place for publication of the first issue on January 1, 1778.

The reasons for publishing the magazine are not overtly stated in Wesley’s journal entries of 1777. For all of the excitement and eagerness to publish that Wesley seemed to have, these feelings are not reflected in his own notes. There are, however, some clues of his intent to be found in a few of Wesley’s letters. Two letters, both dated October 18, 1777, are worth noting in particular.

²⁶ *JWL* III: 94, July 20, 1752, to Ebenezer Blackwell.

²⁷ *Journal* VI: 65, August 14, 1777. All quotations from the journals of John Wesley are taken from *The Works of John Wesley, Vols. 23-24: Journals and Diaries Vols. VI-VII* edited by W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, published by Abingdon Press, 1995/2003 (hereafter *Journal*).

²⁸ *Journal* VI: 176, November 24, 1777.

In the first letter, written to Walter Churchey,²⁹ Wesley discusses what may (or may not) be included in the magazine. Most importantly, it sets the groundwork for Wesley's near total control of the magazine's content:

We agree that no politics shall have a place in the *Arminian Magazine*. But poetry will; only my brother and I are the judges what pieces shall be admitted As to a review of religious books, it might be well; but I have two objections: (1) I scruple my own sufficiency for the work; (2) I would not at any price be bound to read over all the present religious productions of the press.³⁰

Wesley establishes from an early date that he and his brother would be the sole judges of the poetic content of the magazine. One can easily imagine that this control will extend to content beyond poetry as well. Three months before publication of the first issue Wesley is fairly certain what will and will not be included in his magazine.

This is made clear in the second letter of October 18, 1777. This note, written to Christopher Hopper, opens with some rumblings about John Hilton, who had recently withdrawn from the Methodist movement during the Bristol Conference. After Wesley dismisses any attempts to get Hilton to return, he moves on to a frank discussion of the magazine:

I hang out no false colours. Scriptural, Christian, &c., are all unequivocal words. I mean a magazine purposely wrote to defend Universal Redemption. Other magazines give forty pages for sixpence; this gives eighty for a shilling. My time is short; so I publish as much as I can at once, if haply I may live to finish it.³¹

We see in this letter what is at the heart of the magazine: the defense of Universal Redemption. Wesley wanted to provide a strong opposition to the belief in predestination that was being promoted in two Calvinist publications, *Gospel Magazine* and *Spiritual Magazine*. The *Arminian Magazine* provided an opportunity to do just that.

Wesley, according to Barbara Prosser, had "a deep personal hatred of the doctrine of predestination" and a "loathing of the rival magazines" that featured it.³² He saw the *Arminian Magazine* as "the only way to preserve Methodists and to make the Calvinists quiet . . . I publish it not to convince but to preserve."³³ This sentiment appears quite plainly in the opening of the proposals for the magazine that Wesley developed in August, 1777: "Proposals for printing, by Subscription, the ARMINIAN MAGAZINE; consisting of Extracts, and Original Treatises on Universal Redemption." The sole focus of the magazine, based on the opening text, is on championing univer-

²⁹ Churchey is sometimes credited as the person who suggested publication of a magazine to Wesley at the Bristol Conference in August, 1777. This has not been proven. Regardless of his role leading up to publication, Churchey did take an interest in the early issues of the *Arminian Magazine*, suggesting possible material for Wesley to include in the publication.

³⁰ *JWL* VI: 283, October 18, 1777, to Walter Churchey.

³¹ *JWL* VI: 284, October 18, 1777, to Christopher Hopper.

³² Barbara Prosser, "'An Arrow from a Quiver' Written Instruction for a Reading People: John Wesley's Arminian Magazine (January 1778-February 1791)" (PhD diss., University of Manchester, 2008), 50.

³³ *JWL* VI: 295, January 15, 1778, to Thomas Taylor.

salism.

Yet, while this is certainly the focus of the content, it is not the only concern or specification that Wesley had about the magazine. If we return to his October 18, 1777, letter to Christopher Hopper, we see that the next sentence after a defense of Universal Redemption is a mention of the size and cost of the magazine. The printing specifications of the *Arminian Magazine* were as much on Wesley's mind as was the content. Nowhere is this more evident than the conditions of the magazine that follow the opening proposal quoted above:

CONDITIONS

1. A number, containing 80 pages, in octavo, printed on fine paper, and with a new type, will be delivered monthly to each subscriber, at the price of one shilling.
2. It will be so printed, as to bind up in volumes, twelve numbers in a volume.
3. This work will contain no news, no politics, no personal invectives, nothing offensive either to religion, decency, good nature, or good manners.
4. The first number will be delivered on January 1, 1778, and continued the first day of every month.
5. Subscriptions are taken in at the Foundery, London; the New Room, Bristol; and by the booksellers in town and country—John Wesley, August 14, 1777.³⁴

Five proposals make up the document, with only one (#3) relating specifically to content—and then only what will *not* be included. The rest of the proposals relate directly to the printing, selling, and distribution of the magazine. This is not to say that Wesley cared more about the publication details than about the content, but it does show that he was very conscious of the magazine's physical layout and circulation.

The control that would be exercised by John Wesley over the magazine stands in some contrast to the control surrendered over the publishing enterprise in 1752. He anticipated how the magazine would be received by the public and was proud of the high quality craftsmanship with which it would be produced. In addition he was, surprisingly, flexible about the format. Though, "in general Wesley favoured the duodecimo format, squeezing twenty-four pages out of a sheet of paper,"³⁵ he realized that the octavo format was better suited for a magazine.

Once he had settled on the format, font, length, and price of the magazine, however, there was no flexibility. Within a few weeks of publication (and even beforehand), Wesley received letters and notes from readers with complaints and questions about the magazine—including about the shorter page count, smaller type size, and lack of images. Wesley answered these letters quite forcibly:

Does any one deny that a kite is bigger than a lark, or that Ogilvie has written a larger book than Virgil? And certainly there are larger magazines than ours; but it does not follow that they are better. Ours is reduced to half the price, and will contain

³⁴ Content taken from "Appendix One" of Prosser's "An Arrow from a Quiver" (2008).

³⁵ Baker, "John Wesley: London Publisher," 7.

forty-eight pages, which is the usual number for sixpence.³⁶

It is undeniably true that [the magazine] does not contain so many lines either in prose or verse as the *Spiritual Magazine*. And ‘Tonson, who is himself a wit, / Weighs writers’ merits by the sheet.’³⁷ So do thousands besides; but I do not write for these. I write for those who judge of books not by the quantity but by the quality of them, who ask not how *long* but how *good* they are.³⁸

“But you have no pictures or other decorations or embellishments which other magazines have.” It is true. But I will tell you what I have (if you cannot find it out without telling)—such paper as no magazine in *England* was ever printed upon before. Consider! this one single article costs more than all their fine embellishments put together.³⁹

From the page count to the paper choice, Wesley strongly defended the make-up of his magazine. However, opposition to the magazine was not limited to its physical characteristics. Some readers thought it was too controversial, that it pushed the idea of universality too strongly and aggressively to the reading public. Wesley also refuted these accusations with a strong tone:

I oppose magazine to magazine, though of a totally different kind [than the Calvinists]. But it seems you know nothing at all of the matter. You do not appear to have even read the Proposals. This Magazine not only contains no railing, but (properly speaking) *no controversy*. . . . Therefore a magazine of this kind is a new thing in the land; and those who formerly spoke against magazines may with a good grace recommend this as being quite another thing and published upon other motives. I do not desire any Calvinist to read it. I publish it not to convince but to preserve.⁴⁰

It seems that Wesley and the magazine were attacked from many sides. However, the number of complaints and criticisms were far outnumbered by its circulation and success. By the end of the eighteenth century, the readership had risen to “as many as a hundred thousand people.”⁴¹ Wesley’s great serial work did not “end with my life” as he thought it would, but continued strongly into the nineteenth century and beyond (lasting until 1969). During his lifetime, the creation of the *Arminian Magazine* allowed John Wesley to see success in both the prophet and profit of printing.

Engaging the Reader

No John Wesley-approved publication could go to print without some message or instruction for the reader. The *Arminian Magazine* was certainly no exception. Wesley included instructive materials for the reader in his large 1750 collection. In addition, he published specific advice on the prac-

³⁶ *JWL* VI: 291, December 8, 1777, to Joseph Benson. This comment from Wesley was in response to criticism about the magazine that he heard from a preacher *before* publication of the first issue. Word had gotten out that the magazine was going to be “smaller” than its Calvinist competitors and Methodist preachers were being questioned by their laity when they promoted subscriptions to the *Arminian Magazine*. This is Wesley’s response to such questions.

³⁷ Wesley is quoting from Matthew Prior’s *An Epistle to Fleetwood Shepherd, Esq* (1689).

³⁸ *JWL* VI: 312, June 5, 1778, to a Friend.

³⁹ *JWL* VI: 312, June 5, 1778, to a Friend.

⁴⁰ *JWL* VI: 295, January 15, 1778, to Thomas Taylor.

⁴¹ Hempton, *Methodism*, 67.

tice of reading in the 1772 publication of his collected works.⁴² This advice was intended to help the reader get the most out of the material: “. . . a few plain directions how to read this, (or, indeed, any other religious book) with improvement.”⁴³ Among the directions that Wesley proffered was to “assign some stated times every day” for reading in order to provide for the “improvement of your immortal soul.” He also cautioned his audience to “dispose your heart for receiving what you read” while being “sure not to read curiously and hastily, but leisurely, and with great attention.” Finally, he desired that his readers “select, also, any remarkable sayings or advices, treasuring them up in your memory to ruminate and consider on.”

The ideal reader for Wesley was a contemplative, spiritual, and cautious one. His hope was that his audience would take as much care in reading the material as he took in preparing it. In order to help his reader reach this level of engagement with the text, Wesley consistently sought to guide them. He did so, as we have seen, in 1735, 1750, and 1772—and he did so in January, 1778, when the *Arminian Magazine* was first published. Wesley’s “To the Reader of the *Arminian Magazine*” was placed on the front cover of the first issue. It was, according to Wesley, “usual” for the “compilers of Magazines to employ the outside covers in acquainting the courteous reader with the beauties and excellencies of what he will find within.” Wesley sees such a contrivance to be unnecessary. Instead, he is “content” with the idea that, “. . . this Magazine should stand or fall by its own intrinsic value. If it is a compound of falsehood, ribaldry, and nonsense, let it sink into oblivion. If it contains only the words of truth and soberness, then let it meet with a favourable reception.” While content to let the magazine stand for itself, Wesley still feels the need to defend his creation with a postscript at the end of his letter to the reader: “It will easily be observed, that this Magazine contains fewer articles than any other. This is not by accident, but design . . . I shall endeavor to begin and conclude as many things as possible in each number.” Wesley did not want to model his magazine after others that “trick” the reader into buying future issues by continuing a story from one month to the next. His aim is to contain all stories and arguments within the confines of a single issue. Not only is this a slight against competing magazines, but it is also a bit of a dig at the reader who might be tempted to “read curiously and hastily.”

These remarks to the reader were not limited to the front cover. Inside the first issue of the magazine, Wesley printed a lengthy letter regarding the publication of the magazine and its content. This letter positions the new magazine as a defender of universalism—one that “maintains that ‘God wil- leth all men to be saved.’” It also places the magazine as an opponent to the Calvinist periodicals. Unlike the “miscreated phantom” that the Calvinists

⁴² Most of this advice was reprinted from the 1735 preface to Wesley’s edition of *A Treatise on the Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis.

⁴³ John Wesley, *The Works of the Reverend John Wesley, A. M., Vol. VII* (New York: Emory and Waugh, 1831), 581.

publish, the *Arminian Magazine* would “faithfully promise not to insert any doggerel, nothing which shall shock either the understanding of the taste of the serious reader.”⁴⁴

Wesley’s concern for the “serious reader” is evident. He wishes for nothing more than a whole audience of serious people, those who follow his rules of reading and practice what he preaches through print. If not enough serious readers existed, then Wesley needed to distribute his instructions and guidelines as far and wide as possible to help to shape the audience into that model. In order to do that, he needed his preachers to push the magazine.

For many years following the publication of the *Arminian Magazine*, Wesley ended most of his letters to his preachers with encouragement to sell subscriptions of the magazine. Similar to the tone he took when discussing taking of collections, Wesley wanted an active approach to promoting the magazine. The progression of Wesley’s urgings is interesting to note. As time goes by, his insistence increases:

You two and Brother Pritchard should procure all the subscribers you can to the *Magazine*.⁴⁵

. . . procure as many subscribers as you can . . . Pray send me word in January how many subscribers you have procured in your circuit.⁴⁶

You did well to recommend the Hymn-Books, and you will do still better in taking every opportunity of recommending the *Magazine*. Be zealous! Be active! Stir up the gift of God that is in you!⁴⁷

Wesley greatly encouraged all of his preachers to “take a little pains . . . in recommending the magazine.”⁴⁸ He believed that the magazine was good for the reader (it “contain[s] the marrow of Christianity”)⁴⁹ and, along with other Methodist publications, should be distributed throughout a preacher’s circuit.⁵⁰

This was not only a way to engage the reader spiritually, but also economically. Though the number of readers hadn’t yet reached 100,000 there was still a fairly large (and ever-growing) Methodist base. The magazine

⁴⁴ Wesley, *The Works*, 581, 582, 503, 564, 563-564.

⁴⁵ *JWL* VI: 296, January 23, 1778, to Thomas Carlill.

⁴⁶ *JWL* VI: 357, October, 1779, to Thomas Carlill.

⁴⁷ *JWL* VI: 370, January 16, 1780, to Lancelot Harrison.

⁴⁸ *JWL* VI: 378, January 30, 1780, to Samuel Bardsley.

⁴⁹ *JWL* VII: 138, September 9, 1782, to Richard Rodda.

⁵⁰ Those preachers who decided not to follow Wesley’s urgings were met with a more aggressive response. William Robarts, a part-time Methodist preacher in Cornwall, reported to Wesley that he did not have the funds to purchase a subscription even for himself. Wesley’s response was: “You have neither son nor daughter; and yet you *cannot afford* sixpence a month for the *Magazine*! Nay, you could not afford to give a guinea in a pressing case, viz. at the instance of an old tried friend! . . . I do not know that in forty years I have *asked* a guinea of any other man that has denied me! So I have done! I give you up to God. I do not know that you will any more be troubled with, Your former Friend,” (*JWL* VII: 296, September 12, 1782, to William Robarts). Robarts, who was struggling mightily to keep his business afloat, was in no position to pay out anything to anyone beyond his creditors. His attempts to explain his situation to Wesley fell on deaf ears.

represented a new revenue stream for Wesley and his movement. As the membership grew, Wesley was able to print more books and more copies of the magazine, in turn helping the membership to grow even more. The economic concerns that had weighed heavily on Wesley in the mid-eighteenth century were seemingly diminishing. Within his letters and journals there are far fewer notes of concern about where and when the next influx of money will come. The *Arminian Magazine* wasn't the sole solution to Wesley's economic problems, but it certainly helped. Again, he created both prophet and profit in printing the magazine. And he retained control over both the fiscal and spiritual focus of the magazine except for one particular aspect.

The Curious Case of Thomas Olivers

During this period of editorial and publishing control of the *Arminian Magazine*, there was one area in which John Wesley had almost no power: printing errors. The magazine, from the very first issue, was replete with typographical errors, missing words and paragraphs, and text out of order—much to Wesley's annoyance. At the center of these errors was Thomas Olivers.

Thomas Olivers was born in 1725 in the village of Tregynon in Wales. His parents both died before Olivers was six years old and he was raised by a variety of family members until he turned 18. From a young age he was a trouble-maker who described himself as “the worst boy who had been in those parts for the last twenty or thirty years.”⁵¹ His short, but honest autobiography (originally published in the *Arminian Magazine* in 1779) details a young man who was susceptible to temptation, drink, and immoral behavior. It was not until he was in his early twenties that Olivers, while listening to a sermon by George Whitefield, was “deeply convinced of the great goodness of God”⁵² and turned his life around. After this revelation, Olivers was essentially a model-citizen and devoted his life to preaching and spreading the message of Methodism. In 1753, Olivers was asked by John Wesley to “go immediately into Cornwall” to preach.⁵³ This began a close relationship between the two men, one that would affect the future of not only Thomas Olivers, but also the *Arminian Magazine*.

After more than two decades of dedicated and distinguished service as a preacher, writer, and defender of the Methodist faith, Thomas Olivers was named the Corrector of the Press for the Methodist publishing division. He served in this position from 1776 to 1789. During this time he oversaw the printing and publishing of most Methodist publications, including the *Arminian Magazine*. While his literary talents were considerable and his polemical writings were impressive, his tenure as Corrector was anything but:

In this office he did not appear to advantage; and indeed he entered upon it too late

⁵¹ Thomas Olivers, *Thomas Olivers of Tregynon: The Life of an Early Methodist Preacher Written by Himself* (Tregynon, Wales: Gwasg Gregynog, 1979), 16.

⁵² Olivers, 20.

⁵³ Olivers, 33.

in life to afford reasonable hope of success. Having been long accustomed to read merely for the purpose of catching the sense of the authors whom he deemed it requisite to consult, it could hardly be expected that he would readily acquire the habit of that minute attention, not only to words, but also to letters and points, which is necessary to insure typographical accuracy.⁵⁴

All evidence points to many difficulties with the press, including the introduction of errors into the printing. Olivers has been referred to as “the most notorious, and the most dangerous,” of the various copyeditors and proofreaders that Wesley employed.⁵⁵ There is no doubt that he was the source of many problems at the press. This being the case, how does one explain his relatively long term of service as Corrector of the Press? If Wesley saw all of these errors why did he not get rid of Olivers sooner?

One possible answer lies in Wesley’s long-standing relationship with Olivers. From 1753 onward, Wesley was in close contact with the younger man. In a letter to Olivers in July, 1756, Wesley requested that Thomas “should write to me a little oftener, once a month at the least.”⁵⁶ The reason for this show of concern stems partly from Olivers’ penchant for getting into trouble as a teen and his drunken behavior as a young adult. From the moment that he became a Methodist preacher in 1753, he was under Wesley’s protection and ever-watchful eye. Wesley kept close tabs on Thomas Olivers—both directly and through others:

I am glad you have had a free conversation with T. Olivers. There is good in him, though he is a rough stick of wood. But love can bow down the stubborn neck. By faith and love we shall overcome all things.⁵⁷

I am glad there is so good an understanding among the preachers; a great deal depends upon it. But I hope you do not forget gentle Thomas Olivers. May not you venture to give him a hint that your “Hints” were incorrectly printed? If he says, “They were wrote so, I could hardly read them,” you can tell him, “I hope to write the next better.”⁵⁸

Wesley clearly cared about Olivers and wanted to see him succeed. He was proud of the work Thomas did as a preacher and writer (even recommending Olivers’ work to others). A father-son relationship developed between the two men over the years. Following Wesley’s death in 1791, Olivers “poured out the sorrows of his heart in an elegy of considerable length, and of great pathos” in which he referred to Wesley as “friend and father.”⁵⁹ Their close relationship was evident in this poem and in their personal interactions.

The relationship was not without its troubles, however. Nearly all of the difficulties stemmed from Olivers’ mistakes as reviewer at the press. From the first issue of the *Arminian Magazine* onward, Wesley had to deal with

⁵⁴ Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Lives of Early Methodist Preachers: Chiefly Written by Themselves, Volume 1* (Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire: Tentmaker Publications, 1998), 299-300.

⁵⁵ Baker, “John Wesley: London Publisher,” 10.

⁵⁶ *JWL* III: 183, July 10, 1756, to Thomas Olivers.

⁵⁷ *JWL* IV: 168, January 18, 1762, to Christopher Hopper.

⁵⁸ *JWL* VII: 382, May 6, 1787, to Peard Dickinson.

⁵⁹ Jackson, *Lives*, 303-304.

numerous errors and inconsistencies in the printing. These mistakes were “a perpetual source of vexation” to Wesley and sometimes resulted in “a complete perversion of the sense, even when subjects of importance were under discussion.”⁶⁰

At the end of 1778, when the compiled volume of the first 12 issues of the *Arminian Magazine* was put together, Wesley was forced to attach a lengthy list of errata from the past year at the back of the book.⁶¹ Along with this list of errors, Wesley promised that there would be no such list in the upcoming publications of the magazine. Unfortunately, this was not to be the case. The errors continued, resulting in an astounding number of errata: “. . . in 1786 he issued *seven* pages of the ‘most material’ of errata for Vols. I-VIII, which had been occasioned, he said, ‘by my absence from the press.’”⁶² The errors had become overwhelming and Wesley finally realized that he needed to step in and make a change. Change, however, was very slow to come.

Three years prior to the seven pages of errata, Wesley had confided to Joseph Benson that “I will mend or end T. Olivers as a corrector.”⁶³ Yet, he did not. There is no other reference to Olivers and his errors in Wesley’s letters or journals until the errata issues of 1786. Over the course of eleven days in late December, 1785, and January, 1786, Wesley “endeavoured to point out all the errata in the eight volumes of the *Arminian Magazine*. This must be done by me; otherwise several passages therein will be unintelligible.”⁶⁴ And still, Thomas Olivers kept his job.

It was not until 1789, eleven years after the first publication of the *Arminian Magazine*, that John Wesley finally gave up on his friend—at least in the role of Corrector of the Press:

I settled all my temporal business and, in particular, chose a new person⁶⁵ to prepare the *Arminian Magazine*, being obliged, however unwillingly, to drop Mr. O[livers] for only these two reasons: (1) the errata are insufferable, I have borne them for these twelve years but can bear them no longer; (2) several pieces are inserted without my knowledge both in prose and verse. I must try whether these things cannot be amended for the short residue of my life.⁶⁶

While he stated his unwillingness to “drop” his friend in his journal, a subsequent letter to Thomas Bradshaw shows that he was a bit more certain about the decision:

I cannot, dare not, will not suffer Thomas Olivers to murder the *Arminian Magazine* any longer. The errata are intolerable and innumerable. They shall be so no more. But he need not starve. He has the interest of some hundred pounds yearly. To

⁶⁰ Jackson, *Lives*, 300.

⁶¹ Ironically, when this errata list was inserted, Wesley’s note to the printer asking him to append this list at the back of the book was printed along with the rest of the text. This was possibly another error or oversight in the printing.

⁶² Baker, “John Wesley: London Publisher,” 10. Emphasis added.

⁶³ *JWL* VII: 179, May 19, 1783, to Joseph Benson.

⁶⁴ *Journal* VI: 383, December 26, 1785.

⁶⁵ Rev. James Creighton, who held the position of Editor of the magazine from 1789 to 1792.

⁶⁶ *Journal* VII: 149, August 8, 1789.

which I will add thirty pounds a year *quamdiu se bene gesserint*.⁶⁷

Wesley became intolerant of the problems that Olivers had caused. But, just as he bore with the man for nearly twelve years, he could not fully abandon his friend. A very generous severance of £30 per annum was enough to assuage Wesley of his guilt and enabled him to return to a more active role in the Methodist publishing house. As Wesley predicted, Olivers did not suffer for his loss of employment. He was a successful author and published numerous works before and after his time with the *Arminian Magazine*. Olivers outlived Wesley by eight years, but the two were reunited when he was buried in Wesley's tomb in 1799.

Conclusion

The story of Thomas Olivers provides a glimpse into a side of John Wesley that doesn't fully come across in his writings, letters, or journals. While he was certainly a controlling, powerful presence with a particular sense of the right way to do things, Wesley was no tyrant. For all of his forceful and domineering behavior, he was a man of faith and character.

Yet, while this side of Wesley should not be forgotten, it is not the part of him that drove the rise and spread of Methodism. That John Wesley, the one we see in most of the correspondence quoted above, was an extraordinary manager, leader, and publisher. The story of John Wesley as publisher was one of prophet and profit. Through his publishing ventures he was able to directly influence thousands during his lifetime and millions long afterward. All the while, keeping an eye on the fiscal concerns and considerations of a movement that was built directly from the ground up.

Wesley's legacy can be seen in the Methodist churches and organizations around the world today. He would certainly be proud of the great outreach that his "start-up" movement has become. During his lifetime, however, it may have been the *Arminian Magazine* itself that was his proudest achievement. For a man who rarely showed much emotion (beyond anger and frustration) the sheer giddiness that comes across in his journal when talking about the serial is surprising, but pleasant: "In the evening I retired to Lewisham, to prepare (who would believe it?) for a Monthly Magazine!"⁶⁸ Without his self-assured, controlling, and unapologetic manner, that magazine may never have come into being.

⁶⁷ "... as long as he shall behave himself well"; *JWL* VIII: 160-161, August 15, 1789, to Thomas Bradshaw.

⁶⁸ *Journal* VI: 160, January 28, 1780.