

LADIES HUNTINGDON, GLENORCHY, AND MAXWELL: MILITANT METHODIST WOMEN

SAMUEL J. ROGAL

Since John Wesley's death in March 1791, biographers and social historians have underscored his relationships with women: Susanna Wesley's influence upon her son's spiritual, scholarly, and theological views; affairs with Betty Kirkham, Mary Granville, Sophia Hopkey, Grace Murray; the decision to marry Mrs. Molly Vazeille; and extended correspondence with a network of female society workers scattered throughout Britain. Evidence actual and anecdotal has perpetuated the notion of Wesley's attraction to extremely pious women whom he believed would contribute to the maintenance and development of his evangelical organization. He may even have sought spiritual and personal dominance over them, casting them into the image of the mother who claimed responsibility for nurturing his own attempts at social and religious reformation.

However, notable exceptions to the stereotypes of Wesley's women did exist, most obviously within the personalities and purposes of three widows of title: Selina Shirley Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon (1707-1791); Darcy Brisbane, Lady Maxwell (1743-1810); and Willielma Campbell, Viscountess Glenorchy (1741-1786). Although each shared Wesley's commitment to the revival of practical religion, each possessed wealth, independence, and strength to stand outside of his influence. Wesley's separate dealings with these women (they never joined with one another to form a religious union or alliance) ranged from attempts at cooperation and conciliation to outright confrontation and opposition.

The most recognizable of the three, the Countess of Huntingdon, requires little introduction. Her association with Wesley dates from 1739-1740, when both attended meetings of the Moravian religious society at Fetter Lane, London. Following the deaths of her two sons in 1744 and her husband two years later, she dedicated herself and her resources to a lifetime support of the religious revival. Approximately £100,000 for chapels, schools, colleges, preachers and chaplains earned for her such epithets as "Lady Bountiful" and "Mother of the Poor."¹ Of course, there were detractors. To the Earl of Stratford, Horace Walpole described a "beatific print just published . . . of Lady Huntingdon. With much pompous humility, she looks like an old basket-woman trampling on her

¹*Dictionary of National Biography*, 9:133.

coronet at the mouth of a cavern. — Poor Whitefield! If he was forced to do the honours of the *spelunca!*”²

For Wesley, however, Lady Huntingdon — with her wealth, influence, and right to appoint private chaplains — proved useful in his early efforts to revitalize the spirit of the kingdom. He visited her on nine occasions at Enfield Chace between April 15 and August 4, 1741. She suggested changes in his University sermon at St. Mary’s, Oxford, for July 24, 1742, urging him to abandon his initial thesis from *Isaiah* (1:21) — “How is the faithful city become an harlot!” — and to adopt one based upon *Acts* (26:28), “Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian,” emphasizing the differences between nominal and actual Christianity.³ For the next quarter century, there sounded but few discordant notes in their distant but cordial relationship.

Yet, there existed, between Wesley and the Countess, potential for discord. The preachers whom she appointed and controlled drifted, as did she, toward the Calvinist notion that certain individuals would achieve salvation, while others would be condemned to eternal damnation. They also embraced the Moravians and their pietism. Wesley stood in firm and stern opposition to what emerged as the Countess of Huntingdon’s Connexion — “she looks like the good archbishop,” observed Whitefield, “with his chaplains around him.”⁴

The degree to which the friction with the Countess’s preachers preyed upon Wesley may best be viewed from his correspondence with her during 1759–1764. Following a series of meetings in London on February 23–27, 1759, which Lady Huntingdon had arranged between the Wesleys and six of her preachers, he wrote to her on March 10 from Norwich, expressing “great satisfaction in conversing with those instruments whom God has lately raised up. . . . Perhaps . . . those who have but lately come into the harvest are led to think and speak more largely of justification and the other first principles of the doctrine of Christ; and it may be proper for *them* so to do. Yet *we* find a thirst after something farther. We want to seek deeper and rise higher in the knowledge of God our Saviour.”⁵ Wesley knew full well the extent of the Countess’s influence over her preachers and he tended to address his differences with them through her. “For a considerable time,” he wrote on (or about) March 20, 1763, “I have had it much upon my mind to write a few lines to your Ladyship; although I cannot learn that your ladyship has ever inquired whether I was living

²*Private Correspondence of Horace Walpole, Earl of Orford* (London: Rodewell and Martin, 1820), 3:434.

³*The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker, *et al.*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1990), 19:203; (1985), 131–141.

⁴*Dictionary of National Biography*, 9:133.

⁵*The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. John Telford (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), 4:57.

or dead. By the mercy of God I am still alive, and following the work to which He has called me; although without any help, even in the most trying times, from those I might have expected it from. Their voice seemed to be rather, ‘Down with him, down with him, even to the ground!’”⁶ The theological differences deteriorated into territorial disputes as the Connexion preachers attempted to convince Wesley to withdraw his preachers from every parish wherein an “awakened” minister resided. Wesley refused. Nor would he permit his preachers or himself to participate in an open debate on the theological differences between the factions. “To me,” wrote Wesley to Lady Huntingdon on May 16, 1764, “it still seems most expedient to avoid disputings of every kind—at least for a season, till we have tasted each other’s spirits and confirmed our love to each other. I own freely I am sick of disputing; I am weary to bear it. My whole soul cries out, ‘Peace! Peace!’—at least, with the children of God. . . . I ask but one thing; I can require no more,—‘Is thy heart right, as my heart is with thine? If it be, give me thy hand, let us take sweet counsel together and strengthen each other in the Lord.’”⁷ If unity could not be achieved, then Wesley determined to walk alone upon his own path.

In late summer 1770, the doctrinal differences between the Calvinistic and Wesleyan Methodists foreshadowed the end of meaningful relations between Lady Huntingdon and John Wesley. The publication of the *Minutes* of the 1770 Conference included Wesley’s statement on justification by faith: “God does in fact justify those, who by their own confession, neither feared God nor wrought righteousness. Is this an exception to the general rule? It is a doubt, God makes any exception at all. But how are we sure, that the person in question never did fear God and work righteousness? His own saying so is not proof; for we know, how all that are convinced of sin undervalue themselves in every respect.”⁸ That argument proved objectionable to Lady Huntingdon and her Calvinist preachers; she encouraged the Rev. Walter Shirley, her brother-in-law, to circulate a letter—drafted by her, but under his name—denouncing Wesley, accusing him of Papist sympathies, and announcing a meeting of the Calvinist connexion at Bristol at the very time and place of the Wesleyan Methodists’ annual Conference there on August 6, 1771.

The entire incident, with its exchanges of letters and declarations, festered for at least six years; but in terms of the deterioration of the Wesley–Lady Huntingdon relationship, the Methodist leader’s letter to her, from London on June 19, 1771, identifies and summarizes his feelings. “To be short: such as I am, I love you well. You have one of the first places in my esteem and affection. And you once had some regard for

⁶*Letters*, ed. Telford, 4:206.

⁷*Letters*, ed. Telford, 4:244.

⁸Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1872), 3:73.

me. But it cannot continue if it depends upon my seeing with your eyes or on my being in no mistake."⁹ According to one Wesley scholar, the Countess of Huntingdon's estrangement from Wesley may have resulted from the influence of two "ultra-predestinarians," Sir Richard Hill (1733–1808) and Augustus Montague Toplady (1740–1778), who convinced her of the errors and dangers in the 1770 Wesleyan Conference *Minutes*.¹⁰ No matter what the source, few will argue that the inability of the Calvinists and Wesleyans to reconcile personal and religious differences served only to detract from the effectiveness of the eighteenth-century evangelical revival in Britain.

Wesley's association with the second among these titled ladies, Darcy Brisbane, Lady Maxwell, proved relatively calm. The daughter of Thomas Brisbane of Brisbane and Bishops Town, she had married, in 1760 and at age seventeen, Sir Walter Maxwell of Pollock. Two years later, her husband and infant son died. Thus, before her twentieth year, this Scottish woman entered into widowhood, a state that would end only with her death in 1810. Despite having been raised in the Established Church of Scotland, she sought relief from her loss in strict piety and Wesleyan Methodism; on those plains, Wesley stood ready to embrace her.

The two met, initially, during May 26–30, 1764, when Wesley came to Edinburgh on his regular rounds; four months later, she determined to join the Edinburgh society. "I consider you are at present," wrote Wesley from Bristol on September 22, 1764, "but a tender, sickly plant, easily hurt by any rough blast." Yet, by then acutely aware of Lady Huntingdon's social and theological independence that had marshalled a hard core of Calvinist adversaries, Wesley warned, "Be wary of how you contract new acquaintance. All, even sincere people, will profit you. I should be pained at your conversing frequently with any but those who are of a deeply serious spirit. . . ." ¹¹ Five years later, on March 3, 1769, he wrote to Lady Maxwell from London, consoling her on the loss of a close friend, yet expressing his "pleasure to hear that you did not neglect our own preaching . . . to attend any other."¹²

A pattern began to emerge; Wesley sensed, in Lady Maxwell, a person of social and religious status whose influence would contribute strength to the Edinburgh society and encourage its discipline and numbers. Usually well distanced from Edinburgh, he sought not so much to control her as he struggled not to lose her. In early 1770, she announced plans to provide a school for three years of training for the poor children of Edinburgh, to open in July 1770. Wesley stepped forward to answer her call for pious

⁹*Letters*, ed. Telford, 5:259–260.

¹⁰*The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1909–1916), 5:460 and note 1.

¹¹*Letters*, ed. Telford, 4:263–264.

¹²*Letters*, ed. Telford, 5:130.

masters. "A diligent master," he wrote from London on February 17, 1770, "may manage twenty or perhaps thirty children. If one whom I lately saw is willing to come, I believe he will answer your design."¹³

Journal and diary entries reveal that Wesley visited, lodged, and occasionally preached at Lady Maxwell's residences in Edinburgh and Bristol on at least fifteen occasions between May 31, 1782 and September 26, 1789. However, there exists no reason to speculate upon the nature of their relationship. Simply, Wesley assumed the role of Lady Maxwell's spiritual comforter; when she announced that she had enjoyed distinct and separate communion with the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Wesley supported her: "Formerly," he wrote from Dublin on July 4, 1787, "I thought this was the experience of all those that were perfected in love; but I am now clearly convinced that it is not. Only a few of these are favoured with it. It was, indeed, a wonderful instance of divine mercy that, at a time when you were so encumbered with the affairs of this world, you should have so much larger a taste of the world to come."¹⁴

In August and September 1788, concern for Lady Maxwell's spiritual state again preyed upon Wesley. ". . . I mention [on August 8] one fear I have concerning you, lest, on conversing with some, you should be in any degree, warped from Christian simplicity. O do not wish to hide that you are a Methodist! Surely it is best to appear just what you are."¹⁵

A note of background lends credence to Wesley's fears. Sometime in 1785, Ladies Glenorchy and Henrietta Hope had provided land at Hot Wells, near Bath, for the erection of a chapel; the former, shortly before her death, had appointed Lady Maxwell to complete the scheme. Thus, Hope Chapel opened on August 3, 1788 under her patronage,¹⁶ and in October, Lady Maxwell left Edinburgh for Bristol. When Wesley became aware of a titled and wealthy woman, who for years had been besieged by his Calvinist rivals, opening a chapel, he reacted instinctively. A second Calvinist Methodist connexion and another Lady Huntingdon would have challenged even *his* endurance and patience.

Wesley's concern over the direction of Hope Chapel provides the proper transition to the third of eighteenth-century Methodism's independent women, Willielma Campbell, Viscountess Glenorchy. In 1761, she and her elder sister both married peers: the former to William, seventeenth Earl of Sutherland; Willielma to John, Lord Viscount Glenorchy, who died ten years later. As with Ladies Huntingdon and Maxwell, wealth and position allowed her to fill the marital void with religious and social projects. She built chapels to support preachers whom she approved: in Edinburgh, Carlisle, Matlock, and Strathfillan. Her will directed large

¹³*Letters*, ed. Telford, 5:182.

¹⁴*Letters*, ed. Telford, 7:392.

¹⁵*Letters*, ed. Telford, 8:83.

¹⁶*Journal*, ed. Curnock, 7:432; *Letters*, ed. Telford, 8:94-95.

sums to the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) for the maintenance of schools.¹⁷

The initial meeting, in May 1770, between Wesley and Lady Glenorchy occurred at the Edinburgh house, in company with Rev. Dr. Alexander Webster (1707–1784), minister (since 1737) of the Tolbooth Church, off Parliament Close. As the Viscountess reported, Wesley and Webster “agreed on all doctrines on which they spoke, except those of God’s decrees, predestination, and the saints’ perseverance. I must, according to the light I now have, agree with Dr. Webster. Nevertheless, I hope Mr. Wesley is a child of God. He has been an instrument of saving souls; as such, I honour him, and will countenance his preachers. I have heard him preach thrice; and should have been better pleased had he preached more of Christ, and less of himself.”¹⁸ From the outset, Wesley may well have realized that this woman would be difficult to mold into any form of his own spiritual image.

Despite their theological differences, when Lady Glenorchy needed a minister for her Edinburgh chapel, she turned to Wesley. The task would prove costly. What represented a gesture of Wesley’s open-mindedness in the midst of intense theological controversy, he sent to the Viscountess a pronounced Calvinist, the Rev. Richard DeCourcy (d.1803), curate to Walter Shirley (1725–1786)—a cousin to the Countess of Huntingdon. At the time of his appointment to the Edinburgh chapel, he belonged to Lady Huntingdon’s circle of evangelical preachers. Lady Glenorchy penned her reaction to the favor in February 1771: “Mr. DeCourcy is quite the person Mr. Wesley represented him, — of sweet disposition, and wishes only to preach Christ to poor sinners wherever he finds an open door.”¹⁹

However, the entire arrangement brought only trouble for Wesley. Beyond accusations and inferences, there seems little to support claims that DeCourcy actually and directly undermined the efforts of Wesleyan Methodism in Edinburgh. He did, most certainly, exercise influence upon the Viscountess Glenorchy. On June 28, 1771, she dealt a serious blow to Methodism in the Scottish capital: “Before I left Edinburgh,” announced the Viscountess, “I dismissed Mr. Wesley’s preachers from my chapel; first, because they deny the doctrines of imputed righteousness, election, and the saints’ perseverance; secondly, because I find none of our gospel ministers would preach in the chapel, if they [Methodists] continued to have the use of the pulpit; thirdly, because I found my own soul had been hurt by hearing them, and I judged that others might be hurt by them

¹⁷*Dictionary of National Biography*, 3:849–850.

¹⁸Thomas Snell Jones, *The Life of the Viscountess Glenorchy, with Extracts from Her Diary and Correspondence* (Edinburgh, 1822), 156.

¹⁹Jones, 223.

also.”²⁰ With the expulsion of the Wesleyan preachers, St. Mary’s Chapel stood in possession of DeCourcy and the Calvinists.

Realizing the precarious footing upon which stood the relationship between Wesley and Lady Maxwell, one need not be especially surprised at Viscountess Glenorchy appointing her, a supposedly avowed Arminian, sole executrix under her will and the principal manager of her chapels in England and Scotland. As early as January 27, 1770, Lady Glenorchy confessed that “My mind has of late been distracted with various opinions insensibly imbibed from others, which have drawn me away from the simplicity of the gospel, which have led me to depreciate ordinances and to seek a useless speculative life. Blessed be God, who has in Lady Maxwell raised up for me a friend in time of need. . . . Ever since my first interview with her, the Lord has been pleased to show me gradually from whence I have fallen, and has led me back to that singleness of heart which He enabled me to set out some years ago.”²¹ Wesley, aware of the relationship, attempted to position it in line with his own beliefs. “It will be by much pains and patience,” he wrote to Lady Maxwell on February 17, 1770, “that you will keep one in high life steadfast in the plain, old way. I should wish you to converse with her as frequently as possible.”²² As noted, Wesley may have been influential in convening conversations, but in this instance, attempts to influence their substance proved futile.

Women such as the Ladies Huntingdon, Maxwell, and Glenorchy underscore the notion that, during the evangelical revival in Britain of the middle and late eighteenth century, there resided pockets of regional and local activity that did not require material or even spiritual support from more obvious and prominent sources. None of the three women discussed herein could rival in geographical scope or historical significance the organization and influence of John Wesley — although the Countess of Huntingdon’s Connexion proved a worthy competitor and adversary. However, the varying degrees of their commitments to Calvinist Methodism and their own particular evangelical projects did not cower to the emotional appeal of Wesley’s personality or to the societal bonds and structural strength of Wesleyan Methodism. Certainly, Wesley encountered bold and loud political, theological, and social opposition during the course of his fifty-year mission — from the pulpits, the courts, the press, and the press gangs of the Establishment. The efforts of Ladies Huntingdon, Maxwell, and Glenorchy stood apart and above such opposition, demonstrating both the depth and dimension of Methodism in eighteenth-century Britain.

²⁰Jones, 239.

²¹Jones, 128.

²²*Letters*, ed. Telford, 5:182.