

SAMUEL WESLEY'S CONFORMITY RECONSIDERED

WILLIAM GIBSON

Of the many “founding myths” of Methodism, the decision of Samuel Wesley to conform to the Church of England in 1684 is one of the most neglected and least understood. This is surprising given the value it has to help us understand the theological and ecclesiological environment in which John and Charles Wesley grew up. The treatment of Samuel Wesley's decision by his biographers also gives rise to concern since they proffer a number of explanations, in some cases without reference to the theological and political environment in which he conformed.

In part, this may be the result of the tendency to sanitize the background of John Wesley identified by H. E. Beecham.¹ Moreover, properly considered, Samuel Wesley's decision in 1683-1684 may shed greater light on his later theological positions, which have troubled historians of Methodism. Additionally, there has been little critical analysis of Samuel Wesley's conforming in 1684. Even Samuel Wesley's most recent biographer, Henry Rack, in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, recites the traditional accounts of Wesley's conformity without further exploration.²

A further difficulty with understanding accounts of Samuel Wesley's conformity is that while use has been made of autobiographical passages in his *A Letter from a Country Divine* of 1703, much less use has been made of the much more detailed *A Defence of A Letter Concerning the Education of Dissenters In the Private Academies: with a more full and satisfactory account of the same, and of their morals and behaviour towards the Church of England. Being an Answer to the Defence of Dissenters' Education* of 1704, which has considerable light to shed on his thought.

An understanding of Samuel Wesley's conformity has implications for the upbringing of John and Charles Wesley. Vivian Green concluded that “the Puritan impress was not lost” on Samuel Wesley despite his conformity.³ This article will show that they were born into a household in which the traditions of Presbyterianism focused on loyalty, monarchism and passive obedience. In the Wesley household, conformity to the Church was an under-pinning principle, born of teaching that stretched back to the 1680s and before. The sense of adiaphora, the focus on those things necessary to

¹ H. E. Beecham, “Samuel Wesley Senior: New Biographical Evidence,” *Renaissance and Modern Studies*, vol. VII (1963) 79.

² Henry D. Rack, “Samuel Wesley (1662-1735),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004).

³ V. H. H. Green, *The Young Mr. Wesley* (London: E. Arnold, 1961), 42.

salvation and the release of those things that were not, was also an important feature. John and Charles Wesley were raised on these principles and they informed their lives' work.

The earliest account of Samuel Wesley's conformity appears in Adam Clarke's 1823 work, *Memoirs of the Wesley Family*.⁴ Clarke advanced three descriptions of Wesley's decision to conform, which really amount to three accounts of the same motive, his disillusionment with the dissenting academies. Clarke claimed that Samuel Wesley abandoned Dissent because of the faults of the academies "which from one of his publications on the subject we learn were very reprehensible . . ." This publication was the anonymous tract *A Letter From a Country Divine To His Friend in London Concerning the Education of the Dissenters, In Their Private Academies; In Several Parts of this Nation*, a work drafted in the early 1690s, but not published until 1703. To support this he cited John Wesley's account of his father's conformity. In it, Wesley claimed his father had been asked to write a defence of the Dissenters and, in the process of examining the case for Dissent, "he himself conceived he saw reason to change his opinions and actually formed a resolution to renounce the Dissenters, and attach himself to the Established Church."⁵ The third source Clarke offered is Samuel Wesley's own account from a 1704 defence of his *Letter to a Country Divine*.⁶ This indicated that, while at Charles Morton's Dissenting Academy in Newington Green, he encountered two Anglican clergy, both relatives, one of whom, while he was in London visited Samuel and "gave me arguments against that Schism . . . as added to my resolutions when I began to think of leaving it [Dissent]."⁷

While he was a student at Oxford, Samuel was persuaded to write an account of the Dissenting Academies, probably a first draft of the tract that was later published as *A Letter From a Country Divine*, and perhaps the task referred to by John Wesley. During its writing Wesley met some fellow students of a dissenting academy whose conversation "was so fulsomely lewd and profane that I could not endure it; but went to the other side of the room." Samuel Wesley was not just offended by the students' vulgarity. Their political views were equally obnoxious to him. He wrote, "they all fell railing at monarchy, and blaspheming the memory of King Charles the Martyr, discoursing of their calves head club." They even talked of inserting a live cat or hare into a pie to frighten a monarchist cleric and cause a "halloo." As Clarke indicated, this seemed to be the culmination of "a predisposing bias to that separation for some time."⁸ Problematically, however, Clarke did not

⁴ Adam Clarke, *Memoirs of the Wesley Family Collected Principally from Original Documents* (London: J. & T. Clarke, 1823).

⁵ Clarke, 60-61.

⁶ Published as *A Defence of A Letter Concerning the Education of Dissenters In the Private Academies With A More full and Satisfactory Account of the same, and of their Morals and Behaviour towards the Church of England: Being an Answer to The Defence of the Dissenters Education* (London: Printed for Robert Clavel and James Knaplock, 1704).

⁷ *A Defence of A Letter*, 4.

⁸ Clarke, 64.

use the later passages of the *A Defence of A Letter Concerning the Education of Dissenters* in which Wesley develops his explanations.

Luke Tyerman, Samuel Wesley's first biographer, advanced somewhat different causes for his conformity. In *The Life and Times of the Rev. Samuel Wesley MA*, published in 1866, Tyerman suggested that it had not been Wesley's intention to conform when he went to Oxford. Like Clarke, Tyerman indicated that the atmosphere of Morton's Academy was strongly that of the "good old cause" of Puritan republicanism. Wesley was often encouraged by his fellow students to write squibs and lampoons against the Church and State. When Charles Morton heard students speak "disaffectedly and disloyally of the government," he rebuked his students for such views, telling them it was not their role to criticise those whom "God has set over us."⁹ So, if Samuel Wesley was developing the sort of disaffection to the strict political ideas of the Dissenters, he may have found fuel for it in his fellow students.

Tyerman located Wesley's impetus to conform in Dr. John Owen, who had served as vice-chancellor of Oxford during the Commonwealth, but was ejected at the Restoration. According to Tyerman, Samuel Wesley claimed that Owen wanted some students to enter the universities because he was expecting "the times to change" and that in due course the Dissenters would be looked on "with greater favour and their pupils be allowed to take university degrees." Owen enjoined all those who took this path not to subscribe to the Thirty Nine Articles of the Church of England at matriculation or take the oaths of uniformity required for graduates.¹⁰ In other words, Samuel Wesley's departure for Exeter College, Oxford, was not an abandonment of Dissent but an opportunity to advance it.¹¹ At this point, Tyerman's narrative of Wesley's conformity breaks down. He claimed that Wesley sought "divine direction" on the issue of conforming, which he wrote was "so weighty a concern and on which so much of my whole life depended." Tyerman recorded Wesley's assertion that the suffering of the Dissenters did not act as encouragement to leave Dissent: "I profess it was a thing which retarded me most of all."¹² He cited three further reasons not to conform: the debauched reputations of the universities; the hostility of the Church to Dissent; and the national feeling against the Church, which was, as Wesley claimed, so unanimous "that the bishops and hierarchy would certainly have a speedy fall."¹³ Finally Wesley's equivocation was broken by Owen's death. Owen's

⁹ Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. Samuel Wesley MA, Rector of Epworth, and father of the Rev. John and Charles Wesley, The Founders of the Methodists* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1866), 72, 73.

¹⁰ Tyerman, *Samuel Wesley*, 77.

¹¹ Wesley himself wrote that "I was possessed with an intire [*sic*] belief . . . that what they said to me was true, and that episcopacy would not stand long; and this I can appeal to God, was my real opinion even when I went to Oxford, and some time after I had been there . . ." (*A Letter to a Country Divine*, 7).

¹² *A Defence of A Letter*, 11.

¹³ Tyerman, 78.

will left a £10 exhibition and Wesley was urged to enter the university “with all speed.”¹⁴

In H. E. Beecham's discovery of a letter from Samuel Wesley, written from South Ormsby in August 1692, these accounts are supplements with a further explanation.¹⁵ Wesley asserted that Owen, despite his refusal to conform, retained an “inclination to the universitys” [*sic*], and wanted students to be

entered at som College or other tho Not matriculated, and then return to their old dissenting Tutors, hoping upon a change in their favour (w'ch they did as confidently look for as if an Angel had told it them) they might so far pr'vail as to have all the time allowed them in order to their degrees For this reason they sent me to Oxford I came thither, addressing myself to Mr. Crabb a Dorsetshire man and my countryman who was then h'd Librarian¹⁶ . . . with whom I had several discourses on the subjects in controversy between Dissenters and Church of England, & was pretty well satisfied in many things, tho Not so well as to come quite over at that time, resolving to consider further on a thing of that consequence¹⁷

In London, Wesley spent three months considering these issues, and finally concluded “that I lived in a groundless separation from the established Church” after which he returned to Oxford and matriculated at Exeter College.¹⁸ This account established more clearly the timing of these events. Owen died in August, 1683, and Wesley's matriculation at Oxford was recorded as November 18, 1684.¹⁹ Clearly Wesley's decision to abandon Dissent and conform was taken between these two dates, though he may have been building up to this decision for some time.

There remain, however, some important questions about these accounts. Clarke's account seems curiously insubstantial. Why would Wesley contemplate abandoning Dissent simply on the grounds of the foolish vulgarities of some fellow students, when, by his own admission, the universities were similarly plagued with students who could be vulgar and debauched? Why would Wesley find attacks on Charles I and the bragging of the imitators of the Calves Head Club so offensive? Why would Wesley consider entry to

¹⁴ In *A Letter to a Country Divine*, Wesley wrote that he was “obliged when convenience would permit, to get myself entered at one of the universities, without which none was to enjoy this exhibition . . .” and about ten others had such exhibitions (*A Letter to a Country Divine*, 4).

¹⁵ Beecham's letter was found in the letterbook of Dr Charles Goodall in the Bodleian Library and is listed as “MS. Rawlinson C406, 100-109.” The text is reproduced in full in H. E. Beecham, “Samuel Wesley Senior: New Biographical Evidence,” 102-108.

¹⁶ This was almost certainly William Crabbe, who was Dean of Exeter College and signed Wesley's caution money entry in the College Register, Clarke, 60. Foster lists him as: “William Crabbe, of Child-Okeford, Dorset, minister. Wadham College. matric. July 17, 1669, aged 15, B.A. 1673; fellow of Exeter College 1674-1687, M.A. Feb. 21, 1675-1676, B.D. March 19, 1686-1687, rector of Child-Okeford Inferior 1687, of Hammoon 1709-1719, and of Bloxworth, Dorset 1723, buried Aug. 12, 1747, aged 95” (J. Foster, *Alumni Oxonienses: The Members of the University of Oxford 1500-1714. Their parentage, birthplace and year of birth, with a record of their degrees. Being the Matriculation Register of the University* [Oxford: Oxford UP, 1892].)

¹⁷ H. E. Beecham, “Samuel Wesley Senior: New Biographical Evidence,” *op. cit.*, 103.

¹⁸ Beecham, 103.

¹⁹ J. Foster, *Alumni Oxonienses*.

Oxford on the possibility that there was going to be a political change which would enable him to obtain a degree? What was the nature of the discourses between Crabbe that influenced Wesley so seriously in 1683-1684? This article will reconsider Samuel Wesley's decision to conform in 1684 in light of these questions.

The first of these questions may be dismissed relatively easily, for while Samuel Wesley was clearly a pious, and perhaps prudish, man, it is unlikely that he would abandon Dissent simply on the ground of the vulgar and youthful conversation of some of his fellow students. This is all the more improbable since he had the highest regard for the Tutors of the two academies of which he had direct knowledge. Accounts in Tyerman's biography indicate that both Edward Veal, to whose academy in Stepney Wesley was first sent from his school in Dorchester in 1678, and Charles Morton, to whose academy Wesley went in 1680 when Veal's closed, were both men of considerable scholarship and held in high regard by Wesley. Wesley's regard for Veal and Morton may have fuelled his hope to go on to university, Veal being a graduate of Christ Church, Oxford and Trinity College, Dublin and Morton having graduated from Wadham College, Oxford.²⁰ Wesley also indicated that his thoughts first turned to conformity at the Newington Green academy when Charles Morton, the tutor, was arrested and excommunicated. Wesley wrote:

'Twas in this juncture of time, my Tutor being removed, for whom I had so great a respect and veneration, as hardly to dare what he affirmed, that I began to enquire more closely than I had formerly done, into the grounds of those differences, for which I saw our People suffer so much, and so severely, and whether I was satisfied in the truth and import of those Principles.²¹

Wesley's preoccupation in going to university, and further evidence of his tendency to venerate his tutors, is also glimpsed in a mention he makes of leaving the grammar school in Dorchester. In *A Letter from a Country Divine*, he refers to leaving Dorchester "from whence my master would have me gone to the university, having there provided a handsome subsistence for me . . ."²²

Wesley's later attack on the dissenting academies flies in the face of much recent evidence on the high quality of the education provided by the dissenting academies, and conforms closely to the polemical tone of the Tory High Church attacks on Dissent which so strongly influenced the

²⁰ Tyerman, 65, 66.

²¹ *A Letter from a Country Divine*, 5-6.

²² *A Letter from a Country Divine*, 2. Samuel Wesley's master at Dorchester was Henry Dolling.

Convocation controversy of 1703-1705.²³ By 1703-1705, Wesley had become a Tory High Churchman, who regarded Dissent as a threat to the stability of Church and State. In fact, of course, if the dissenting academies had been as bad as Wesley claimed in his *A Letter From a Country Divine* in 1703, they would not have attracted so much ire from Tories and would not, in 1714, have been the subject of proscription by the Schism Act. Nor would the academies have retained the support of the Dissenting community. The keen eye with which Dissenting congregations viewed the academies for signs of heterodoxy also meant it would be unlikely that the sort of vulgarity Wesley encountered was widespread.²⁴

The other questions raised by Samuel Wesley's conformity are more substantial. It is in answering these that, at last, some contextualising of Wesley's dilemma regarding the events of 1679-1688 is possible. The second question is why would Wesley find attacks on Charles I and the bragging of the imitators of the Calves Head Club so offensive? At first glance, Tyerman's surprise at Wesley's behaviour seems a significant problem. Tyerman commented that Wesley's father and grandfather were "ejected from their livings, reduced to beggary and hunted to a premature grave, and whose mother, in consequence of such tyranny, was even now pining in some obscure dwelling, crushed by the sorrows of a too early widowhood and . . . dependent upon the charity of her friends."²⁵ In spite of Tyerman's hyperbole, he had a point. Samuel Wesley appeared to have no reason to express loyalty or regard for Charles I, whose Laudian regime and reckless policies had brought the country to civil war and led to the Commonwealth. It was the restoration of his son in 1662 which had caused the ejection of John Wesley, Samuel's father, from the living of Winterbourne Whitchurch, Dorset, and which led to the family's penury.

It is certainly the case that Samuel Wesley's immediate forebears would not have been sympathetic to either Charles I or II. However, this lack of sympathy to the monarchy never led to treason, as Adam Clarke cleared Benjamin Wesley, Samuel's grandfather, from Anthony Wood's claim that he was responsible for betraying Charles II when incognito during the Civil

²³ For the dissenting academies see: H. McLachlan, *English Education Under the Test Acts, Being the History of the Nonconformist Academies, 1662-1820* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1931); Irene Parker, *Dissenting Academies in England* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969); D. L. Wykes, "The Contribution of the Dissenting Academies to the Emergence of Rational Dissent" in Knud Haakonssen, ed., *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996); B. Kirk, *The Taunton Dissenting Academy*, Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society, 2005; William Gibson, *Religion and the Enlightenment 1600-1800, Conflict and the Rise of Civic Humanism in Taunton* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007).

²⁴ For evidence of this close supervision, see William Gibson, *Religion and the Enlightenment 1600-1800*, 246 ff.

²⁵ Tyerman, 73.

War.²⁶ Nevertheless, Benjamin was a Puritan divine and not likely to have been sympathetic to Charles I although he may have been closer to the moderate Presbyterian model than his son. John Wesley, Samuel's father, was even less likely to be sympathetic to monarchism. According to witnesses against him, John Wesley "diabolically railed" against Charles I and extolled Cromwell. His "hell-fire" preaching included the claim that hell was paved with the skulls of children. Samuel's father also served a number of spells in the armed forces of the Commonwealth.²⁷

Bishop Ironsides of Bristol's interrogation of Samuel's father in 1661 revealed him to have been a Puritan of the strict sort. In speaking to Ironsides, John Wesley provided a model of the sort of circumspect answers a pronounced Puritan would give to evade episcopal vigilance. John Wesley told the bishop that he had been "sent" to preach at Whitchurch; he was evasive about whether he used the Book of Common Prayer and obscured details of his own ordination, saying only that he had been "examined touching gifts and graces." This was a typical Presbyterian response. When asked if it was true that he had resisted the Committee of Safety that had restored Charles II, he repeatedly fell back on the Act of Pardon and Indemnity which expunged guilt for the King's enemies, saying any of his offences had been wiped away. John Wesley's responses were so evasive that it prompted Adam Clarke to question whether he had formally received either episcopal or Presbyterian ordination.²⁸

After John Wesley's ejection in 1662, he went west to Somerset, and assisted Joseph Alleine and John Norman, ejected radical Puritan ministers of Taunton and Bridgwater, who were perhaps the most extreme and uncompromising Presbyterian clergy in the country.²⁹ Between 1663 and 1669, John Wesley was imprisoned four times as well as undertaking long preaching tours. As a result, he may not have been present for much of his son Samuel's childhood. After itinerant preaching for the next eight years, he died in 1670 at age thirty-three. The circumstances of his father, therefore, meant there was little that would endear Samuel Wesley to Charles I, let alone indicate that he was a martyr.

Integral to this sort of analysis of the churchmanship of Dissent is the assumption that Dissenting churchmanship operated in a binary model, albeit with a spectrum of opinion between the two poles of conformity and extreme Puritanism. This view is increasingly under challenge in the analysis of High and Low Churchmanship in the Church of England. The hard and fast division of High and Low Churchmen in this period does not stand up to scrutiny. Two case studies, of the High Churchman George Smalridge, Bishop of Bristol, and the Low Churchman, William Talbot, Bishop of

²⁶ Clarke, 18-24. Clarke pointed out that it was likely that Wood confused Clarendon's reference to a Mr. Westby of Charmouth with Benjamin Wesley. Wesley had not served in the army, as Wood alleged of the preacher who reported Charles II's incognito journey.

²⁷ A. G. Matthews, *Calamy Revised* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1934), 521.

²⁸ Clarke, 24-31.

²⁹ William Gibson, *Religion and the Enlightenment 1600-1800*, chapter two.

Durham, it indicates that the categories of High and Low Churchmanship cannot be sustained as a definitive and homogenous body of doctrines and ecclesiological tenets.³⁰ In the case of Smalridge, there were unmistakable signs that he subscribed to some Low Church, and even heterodox, views; and in Talbot's case it is evident that in spite of distinct Low Churchmanship, he supported some High Church sacramental views. These studies show that the doctrinal divisions between High and Low Churchmanship were permeable, and it was possible for churchmen to hold a range of ecclesiological and doctrinal opinions.

The same applies to Dissent. Some Dissenters can not be easily accommodated on a bi-polar spectrum when it came to ecclesiology and doctrine. Evidence of the diversity of views of some Dissenters can be seen in, for example, the lives of Edward Fowler, Richard Baxter, Benjamin Calamy, and Edmund Calamy senior and junior.³¹ In all cases, these, and other Dissenters, found themselves grappling with their responses to the political and religious switchbacks of the times. All of them found the separation from the established Church problematic and were occasional conformists with Anglicanism, not as a means to evade the Test Act, but to show their charitable intentions towards the Church of England. They also found themselves divided and ambivalent when it came to the doctrine of passive obedience to the civil power. Like Anglican High Churchmen, they could not conceive the grounds on which they would set aside biblical and ecclesiastical injunctions to passive obedience. But for the Dissenters the moment at which they abandoned passive obedience came in the 1640s; for High Anglicans it was 1688. Similarly Dissenters, like Baxter and the others, were equivocal on issues of monarchism, moving between opposition and support between 1658 and 1688.

This is exactly the point that Samuel Wesley develops at some length in *A Defence of a Letter*. Wesley makes it clear that, at first, the Presbyterians—unlike the extremist Independent preachers—disapproved of the death of Charles I, and that several ministers went to Cromwell before the execution to present him with a declaration against it.³² Wesley recognised that since 1649 many Presbyterians had joined the Independents in their views of Charles I. Wesley recorded that “from my very childhood” he had abhorred the execution of Charles I. It is unlikely that his father taught him this, but

³⁰ For Smalridge see William Gibson, “Altitudinarian Equivocation: George Smalridge's Churchmanship” in W. Gibson & R. Ingram, eds., *Religion, Politics and Identity in Britain 1660-1832* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005); and for Talbot, see W. Gibson, “William Talbot and Church Parties 1688-1730,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (March, 2007).

³¹ See, for example, M. Goldie and J. Spurr, “Politics and the Restoration: Edward Fowler and the Struggle for St. Giles Cripplegate,” *English Historical Review* 109.2 (1994); John Spurr, “Fowler, Edward (1631/2–1714);” N. H. Keeble, “Baxter, Richard (1615–1691);” Jim Spivey, “Calamy, Benjamin (*bap.* 1646, *d.* 1685/6);” Sharon Achinstein, “Calamy, Edmund (1600–1666);” and Alexander Gordon, “Calamy, Edmund (*bap.* 1634, *d.* 1685),” rev. Jim Benedict, all in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

³² *A Defence of a Letter*, 29, 35. Wesley also reported Baxter's “great grief” over the execution (38).

his mother—who probably had the whole responsibility for raising Samuel when his father was away preaching or in gaol—was the niece of Thomas Fuller, the High Church chronicler of the worthies of Britain, and a chaplain to Charles II. From his mother then, and from his old-style Presbyterian grandfather, Samuel probably absorbed a reverence for monarchy. When he later came to think of it, these feelings “came more freshly into my mind.” Wesley also recalled that the Presbyterian tradition in which he had grown up had a strict sense of the importance of passive obedience and the injunctions not to resist any king or tyrant. He also spoke of the “veneration” of Dissenters for Anglicans.³³

Clearly Samuel Wesley came under a range of influences during the critical period in which he was considering conformity. For example, in a passage in his letter to Charles Goodall, (unexamined by Beecham) Samuel Wesley referred to an episode after he had graduated from Oxford in the summer of 1688, just as the Glorious Revolution was about to break upon James II. Wesley mentioned that “Bp [Timothy] Hall of Oxford accidentally met me in the streets, with whom I had bin formerly acquainted when he liv’d at Mark Lane and I among the Dissenters, He remembered my face, spoke to me very kindly and bid Me come to his lodgings.” Wesley went on to say that he met Hall more than once and sometimes in company with Stephen Lobb, a Dissenting Minister. Lobb, he discovered, was “very great with the Bp.” Lobb challenged Wesley to join him in opposing the Test Act and claimed he owed it to his father’s memory to do so. Wesley responded that “I thought it became me to leave the Lawes and repealing them to the King and Parliam’t My business not being Politicks but Obedience.” Wesley and Bishop Hall then decided not to see Lobb any more. But Hall gave Wesley “several kindnesses” which prevented him from being tempted “in anything contrary to my duty and judgement.”³⁴

Of all Dissenters, Lobb and Hall were among the most doctrinally erratic. Lobb veered from extremes of Puritan independence in ecclesiology—to the extent that he was implicated in the Rye House Plot of 1683 against Charles II—to staunch cooperation with James II, whose Declarations of Independence he welcomed and whom he strongly supported. He switched from occasional conformity to rejection of Stillingfleet’s views on the groundlessness of Dissenting separation from Anglicanism; and his views on episcopacy also changed over time.³⁵ Timothy Hall is a much more surprising character. An Oxford graduate, he was ejected in 1662, conformed in 1668 and, when Samuel Wesley was at Veal’s and Morton’s academies, held the living of All Hallows Staining in the City, living, as Wesley wrote, in Mark Lane in the parish. During James’s reign he was a strong supporter of the King, being one of only four London clergy who was prepared to read the

³³ *A Defence of a Letter*, 29, 41, 48.

³⁴ H. E. Beecham, “Samuel Wesley Senior: New Biographical Evidence,” *Renaissance and Modern Studies* vol. 7, 1963.

³⁵ Richard L. Greaves, “Lobb, Stephen (d. 1699),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

King's controversial second Declaration of Indulgence in May, 1688.³⁶ This, together with suggestions that Hall was a crypto-Catholic, won him James's nomination to the vacant see of Oxford in July, 1688. He was consecrated bishop in October but, as the resistance to James swept through the country, the canons of Christ Church, Oxford refused to elect him and he could not be enthroned as bishop. Though he initially resisted the succession of William and Mary, he conformed eventually but died in April, 1690.³⁷ Bishop Gilbert Burnet called him "half a Presbyterian," though whether he thought the other half was Anglican or Catholic is unclear.³⁸

That Samuel Wesley knew, and was friendly with, Lobb and Hall places him among, to say the least, mercurial ecclesiological company. But these friendships confirm that Wesley was one of those Dissenters who did not hold exclusively to the strict Puritan-derived dissenting commitment to the "good old cause" of republicanism and the Commonwealth. He absorbed more moderate views from Dissenters who doubted whether the execution of Charles I had been justified and those who remained committed to passive obedience, even to unjust laws. He also esteemed Charles Morton for his insistence on passive obedience. The importance of passive obedience was also reflected on *A Defence of a Letter*, in which Wesley claimed

During the years I lived amongst you [Dissenters] I cannot remember that I ever heard one sermon against sacrilege or rebellion, or for external worship, or decency of behaviour in God's service; and this I am pretty sure of, that among several hundreds of the sermons which I wrote from your preachers, and have still by me, there is not one upon any of these subjects . . .³⁹

In the second letter discovered by Beecham, written in October, 1698, from Epworth, Wesley mentioned the books he and others read while at Oxford. Among those he mentions was "the King's Book . . . Bp Gauden's son was quoted as their Author. . . ." This is a reference to the *Eikon Basilike*, the work that purported to be "The Pourtrature of His Sacred Majestie in His Solitudes and Sufferings" in which Charles was depicted as a pious, saintly figure of true Christian charity.⁴⁰ Among extreme Puritan Nonconformists, the *Eikon Basilike* was a book which attracted fierce enmity. Jeremiah White recalled that, at meetings of Dissenters, a copy of the book was sometimes burnt after dinner, to demonstrate their hatred of monarchism.⁴¹ Samuel Wesley, consciously or otherwise, aligned the suffering of his father and grandfather with that of Charles I, portrayed in the *Eikon Basilike* as a man

³⁶ William Gibson, *James II and the Trial of the Seven Bishops in 1688* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2009).

³⁷ Edward Vallance, "Hall, Timothy (1639-1690)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Hall is also noticed in *Notes and Queries*, 3rd ser., 11 (April 1867).

³⁸ D. Macleane, *A History of Pembroke College, Oxford*, Oxford Historical Society, vol. 33 (1897), 309.

³⁹ *A Defence of a Letter*, 62.

⁴⁰ Beecham, 109. Gauden's father, Bishop John Gauden, claimed to have written the *Eikon Basilike* at the Restoration.

⁴¹ E. C. Vernon, "White, Jeremiah (1629-1707)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

hounded by his enemies to his death. It is remarkable that, when Lobb reminded Wesley of his duty to his father to oppose the Test Act, Samuel replied "I was indeed sorry for my Father's death, but he was but a private person" although Wesley also recounted that his father had died from "lying on the cold earth" and died in ten days.⁴² In short, theologically and ecclesio-logically, Samuel Wesley was almost certainly a heterodox Dissenter, selecting opinions on monarchy, passive obedience and the Church's relationship with the State from those of fellow Dissenters who found themselves in an era of dogmatic instability. Samuel Wesley appears to have stuck, probably from his father's teaching, to a view of monarchy and passive obedience that was derived from a strand of Presbyterian thought in the 1640s, but which declined in the next forty years, leaving Wesley with views that were unrepresentative of the majority of Dissenters.

The question of whether Wesley would consider entry to Oxford on the grounds that there was a possibility of going to be a political change which would enable him to obtain a degree, raises the issue of the political events around 1683-1684. By 1683, Charles II had abandoned his public commitment to religious liberty framed in the 1660 Declaration of Breda and pursued in the abortive Declaration of Indulgence of 1672. The former had been squashed by the Cavalier Parliament, which had passed the Clarendon Code of laws under which Samuel Wesley's father, and many others, were persecuted; the latter was abandoned after the Commons not only insisted on its revocation but followed it with the passage of the 1672 Test Act. While Charles II was thwarted in his attempts to grant religious freedom, his attitude to Dissenters changed dramatically during the 1670s.

The Popish Plot, which coincided with Wesley's arrival in London as a student at Veal's Stepney academy, created a feverish atmosphere. Within two years, Charles concluded that the Dissenters were among those who opposed the succession of his brother James on the grounds that he was a Catholic. The attempt to exclude James from the succession infuriated Charles who, from 1679, treated the Dissenters as electoral enemies, even supporting a campaign to excommunicate them as a means to deprive them of their votes.⁴³ In such tense times, the Dissenters were in a quandary. Should they draw closer to the Church of England, as fellow Protestants, to defend themselves from the prospect of the succession of a Catholic prince who was clearly committed to the return of England to the Catholic fold? Or should they support James in the hope that he would grant them a measure of religious liberty, as a pretext for relief of Catholics from the laws proscribing them? In either case, there was a possibility that the admission of Dissenters to the universities might be possible. Anglican gratitude for closing ranks against James, or royal gratitude for supporting the Catholic agenda could

⁴² Beecham, 106.

⁴³ William Gibson, "The Limits of the Confessional State: Electoral Religion in the Reign of Charles II," *The Historical Journal* 51.1 (2008), 27-47. It was during this campaign that Charles Morton had been imprisoned and excommunicated.

secure the Dissenters a range of advantages including the freedom to matriculate at the universities. These were the uncertain times in which Dissenters found themselves.

Undoubtedly some leading Dissenters, like William Penn, Henry Care, Vincent Alsop, Thomas Rosewell and Stephen Lobb, were prepared to go along with James and supported his Catholic regime because they saw it as the best means to achieve religious liberties for Dissenters. Indeed Samuel Wesley—perhaps keen to mitigate his own support for James—claimed that the “flower of English Presbyterian eloquence” was used to welcome James II’s Declaration of Indulgence in 1688.⁴⁴ But most Dissenters, like Roger Morrice, would not countenance cooperation with James. Arguably the collapse of James’s regime hinged not just on the resistance to his rule by the Church of England, but by the unwillingness of most Dissenters to throw their lot in with James.

In fact Wesley was one of those who clung to James, perhaps through an elevated view of kingship and passive obedience, but also perhaps in the hope that religious toleration might be achieved by doing so. Luke Tyerman could not quite believe Samuel Wesley’s attachment to James II, despite John Wesley’s own admission that “at first his father was very much attached to the interests of James.” Tyerman’s astonishment undisguised, he wrote of Wesley’s attachment to James:

It is deferentially submitted whether this was strictly true. It is scarcely likely that a young man of scholarship and honour, like Samuel Wesley, a young man whose father and grandfather had been ejected from their churches and hunted to their graves by the myrmidons of Stuart perfidy . . . would feel either much attachment, or any attachment at all, to a despotic and royal traitor.⁴⁵

But whatever the embarrassment of nineteenth-century Methodism about it, Samuel Wesley did support James II, and to the very end.⁴⁶ After most of his allies had deserted James, in the summer of 1688, when Queen Mary Beatrice gave birth to a son, derided as the “bed pan baby,” who was later the Old Pretender, Samuel Wesley was one of those who, at the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford, read poems they had composed in celebration of the birth. His poem is a high flying expression of obedience and loyalty to the King. When, that summer, Wesley heard James reprove the Magdalen College fellows for their resistance to him, he finally changed his mind and broke with the King.⁴⁷ Moreover among his undergraduate poems, *Maggots*, composed

⁴⁴ *A Defence of a Letter*, 25. Wesley quoted one petition of support in which Dissenters thanked James for “his Declaration [which has] restored God to his Empire over conscience . . .”

⁴⁵ Tyerman, 87

⁴⁶ Though it must be admitted that Samuel Wesley apparently dined frequently at Exeter College, Oxford with Thomas Dangerfield, a Whig opponent of James II, who was imprisoned in 1685 for his attacks on the King. Dangerfield had eloped with Sarah Annesley, sister of Susanna. So it may be that the Annesley girls was a bond between them. J. McElligott, *Fear, Exclusion and Revolution: Roger Morrice and Britain in the 1680s* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), 119.

⁴⁷ Tyerman, 90-91. Although this happened before the birth of the Prince of Wales.

and published in 1685 to earn Samuel Wesley money, there is no hint of any censure of James's policies, in contrast to many verses from Anglican hands during this period. So Samuel Wesley could well have thought entry to Oxford in 1684 might have led to graduation in due course without the necessity to conform.

A further important question is what was the nature of Wesley's discourses with William Crabbe that influenced him so profoundly in 1683-1684? Undoubtedly they would have touched on the contemporary arguments for the reunion of the Church and Dissent. First among these was the work of Thomas Tenison and Edward Stillingfleet, who had sought some form of accommodation with Presbyterianism in the 1670s, and which stimulated attempts to present bills to Parliament to ease the lot of the Dissenters.⁴⁸ In 1681, Edward Stillingfleet wrote *The Unreasonableness of Separation*, whose argument is apparent from its title. Stillingfleet, like many of his Anglican brethren, held that there was a real and immediate spiritual danger in the division between Protestants. Other clergy made similar arguments, in 1683, for example, Daniel Whitby wrote *The Protestant Reconciler; humbly pleading for condescension to Dissenting brethren in things indifferent and unnecessary, for the sake of peace; and shewing how unreasonable it is to make such things the necessary condition of communion*. The centerpiece of these arguments was the exploration of the adiaphora, the "indifferent things" which separated Anglicans and Dissenters, but which were not necessary for salvation. In fact in the two or three years before 1683-1684 there had been a flood of arguments in favour of Dissenters returning to the Church. In 1685, many of these were collected together and published as *A Collection of Cases, and other Discourses, lately written to recover Dissenters to the Communion of the Church of England, by some divines of the City of London*.⁴⁹

The arguments advanced by writers in the *Collection of Cases* were varied. Thomas Tenison, for example, argued that if Dissenters and Anglicans were divided they could not achieve "the keeping out of popery."⁵⁰ John Sharp argued that a "plea of conscience when truly made will [not] justify any Dissenter that continues in separation from the Church as established among us." He also suggested that, when a man was mistaken in his judgment, it would be a sin to act on such a mistake; and he argued that doubts were not the same as conscience and a man should not act on doubts.⁵¹ Benjamin Calamy advanced three reasons for not using conscience as a basis for separation. First, "the needless scrupling of lawful things hath done unspeakable mischief to the Church, especially the Church of England;" second, that

⁴⁸ R. Thomas, "Comprehension and Indulgence" in Geoffrey Nuttall & Owen Chadwick, eds., *From Uniformity to Unity, 1662-1962* (London: SPCK, 1962), 219 ff.

⁴⁹ For the importance of the *Collection of Cases*, see W. Gibson, "Dissenters, Anglicans and the Glorious Revolution: The Collection of Cases," *The Seventeenth Century* 22.1 (2007).

⁵⁰ *A Collection of Cases, and other Discourses, lately written to recover Dissenters to the Communion of the Church of England, by some divines of the City of London*, 1.250.

⁵¹ *A Collection of Cases* 1.399-440.

paying attention to the “necessary and substantial duties of religion . . . will make you less concerned about things of an inferior and indifferent nature” and finally, “if men cannot . . . conquer their scruples then they are advised to lay them aside, to throw them out of their minds, as dangerous temptations and act positively against them.”⁵² Calamy also questioned “whether there doth lie any obligation upon a private Christian to [be] absent from his parish church or to forebear the use of forms of prayer and ceremonies by law appointed, for fear of offending or scandalising his weak brother.” Calamy’s response was that the scriptural rules about “scandalizing” weak brethren only related to the conditions of the early Church, and that great and equal scandal was now done to the Church by the separation of Dissenters.⁵³ William King responded to Dissenters’ concerns that the Anglican liturgy was a human invention, he agreed with Dissenters that “it belongs only to God to give rules how he will be worshipped,” but argued that the Anglican liturgy had been constructed using the Psalms, features from the Gospels such as the Lord’s Prayer, and the letters of St. Paul, all of which formed a scriptural foundation.⁵⁴

The effect of this outpouring of Anglican sermons and tracts which sought to recover Dissenters to the Church was dramatic. A number of leading Dissenters, Thomas Jolley, Isaac Archer, Richard Baxter and Matthew Sylvester among them, recognized a sea-change in their relationship with the Anglicans.⁵⁵ There is no hard evidence that William Crabbe and Samuel Wesley read these sermons and tracts, but it seems highly likely that they did. If they did, Samuel Wesley’s earlier concern that the Church was hostile to Dissent might have been resolved, and another obstacle cleared in the path to conformity. What is obvious from Wesley’s own writing is that he was strongly committed to the idea of a “national church,” a theme as strong in Dissenter thought as in Anglican.⁵⁶ Moreover, the focus of the *Collection of Cases* on adiaphora certainly influenced Wesley. In *A Letter from a Country Divine* he reflected that “[t]he churches of all nations had different customs, which tho’ not essential to salvation, were so to communion; that they themselves had such Constitutions in their private church-government” Wesley wrote that he found “to my surprise, Bishops in all ages and places in the world over.” He commented that “the further I look’d, still more the mist cleared up.”⁵⁷ Thus the contemporary debates regarding the need for Anglicans and Dissenters to unite were the backdrop to Samuel Wesley’s conversations with Crabbe. There can be little doubt that Wesley found himself thinking that those elements which kept Anglicans and Dissenters sepa-

⁵² *A Collection of Cases*, 2.10-30.

⁵³ *A Collection of Cases*, 2.41-90.

⁵⁴ *A Collection of Cases*, 2.362-373.

⁵⁵ William Gibson, “Dissenters, Anglicans and the Glorious Revolution,” (2007).

⁵⁶ *A Defence of a Letter*, 8.

⁵⁷ *A Letter from a Country Divine*, 6-7. Wesley was ashamed that “we almost universally entertain’d a mortal aversion to the Episcopal order” and asked God and the Church to forgive his role in it. *A Defence of a Letter*, 4.

rated were not important for his salvation.

The influence of Samuel Wesley's wife on Samuel's decisions regarding conforming hitherto have not been examined by earlier generations of historians. Susanna Annesley, who Samuel married in November, 1688, was already conformed to the Church of England before they met. Despite her upbringing in a staunchly Dissenting household, Susanna conformed to the Church of England on grounds of conscience when she was just twelve in 1681.⁵⁸ Soon afterwards, Susanna got to know Samuel Wesley—probably at the marriage of her sister Elizabeth to John Dunton in 1682—and their friendship was born from long theological conversations. Susanna was clearly a forceful, spirited girl, and as Samuel Wesley's mind was turning to conformity, her voice added a further impetus to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles. Susanna equally admitted that her conversations with Samuel Wesley saved her from a drift to Socinianism. Presumably these conversations were maintained throughout Samuel's time at Oxford, since they married within three months of his graduation.⁵⁹ By later accounts, Susanna was both well-educated and forceful in her opinions, so it seems reasonable to credit her with some influence over Samuel Wesley's opinions.

In the 1680s, as Samuel Wesley was contemplating conformity, the Dissenting ministry was undergoing a change. The traditional, inflexible Presbyterian ministry, founded on Puritan principles of the "godly community" was declining. Those "fanatical preachers," like Joseph Alleine, who suffered imprisonment and privation, often died early as a consequence. The Dissenting clergy of the following generation were very different. Not only had the new generation not suffered the ejection of the "Black Bartholomew" in 1662, but they had also been strongly influenced by the writings of the Cambridge Platonists.

The Cambridge Platonists, such as Ralph Cudworth, Henry More and Benjamin Whichcote, argued for rationalism and moderation. They believed that reason was the proper judge of all disagreements, and advocated dialogue between the Puritans and the High Church Anglicans. The emphasis of the Platonists was not on the "godly community" but on rational Christianity in which reason and moderation should influence people in their daily and spiritual lives. This post-Puritan expression of ministry was far closer to the Anglican than to the Presbyterian model and enabled the majority of the Platonists to conform to the Church of England. The Cambridge Platonists were responsible for the conformity of many Dissenters.⁶⁰ Among them was Samuel Wesley.

In 1704, Samuel Wesley wrote that, "I have often reflected on my leaving them; I have thought of it, before I went, for it was not done rashly or suddenly, as well as since, and particularly at this present I own I fled

⁵⁸ C. Wallace, *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writing* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 71.

⁵⁹ C. Wallace, "Susanna Wesley [nee Annesley], 1669-1742" in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁶⁰ Gerald R. Cragg, ed., *The Cambridge Platonists* (New York: Oxford UP, 1968).

to the Church of England as to a sanctuary, but it was as a votary not a criminal”⁶¹ Samuel Wesley’s decision to conform to the Church of England appears to have been the subject of much retrospective Methodist myth-making, which sought to connect John Wesley’s Methodism to his Dissenting forebears without troubling to explain why his father conformed to the Church of England. Consequently it has not been subject to the scrutiny that it might be by Methodist revisionist historiography.

A close examination of the explanations of Clarke, Tyerman, and even Samuel Wesley himself, has often lacked the contextualisation with the wider religious historiography of late seventeenth-century England. This contextualisation includes the implausibility of Wesley conforming because of the behaviour of students in the dissenting academies and the possibility that Samuel Wesley’s ecclesiology was as permeable and variegated as that of some Anglicans. Early explanations did not consider the likelihood that Wesley was one of those Dissenters who drew close to James II in the hope of wider religious toleration or the possibility that Wesley’s discussions with William Crabbe incorporated the contemporary Anglican irenicism towards Dissent. Additionally, the influence of Susanna Annesley and the Cambridge Platonists all set Wesley’s conformity into a significantly wider context.

In the light of these explanations, Tyerman’s surprise at Wesley’s behaviour should no longer dominate Methodist historiography. Samuel Wesley’s conformity was not the behaviour of an erratic and eccentric theologian, but that of a man who was educated during the religiously turbulent and chaotic years at the end of Charles II’s reign. Like many others, Samuel Wesley did not hold to the strict Puritan models of “calves head” ideology, nor was he prepared to ignore the possibility that James II might grant religious toleration. He was also likely to have been influenced by the eirenic Anglican voices, as well as those of the Cambridge Platonists, and the distinctive opinions of the woman he sought to marry.

⁶¹ *A Defence of a Letter*, 58.