



## DISCOVERY

Edited by  
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### **Charles Wesley Letter Sheds Light on John Wesley's Political Activism During the Revolutionary War**

As political unrest in Britain's North American colonies began to escalate, from the protests against the Stamp Act in 1765 to the Boston Tea Party in 1773, American Methodists found themselves in an awkward position—having the Wesleys, strong British Tory loyalists, as their leaders. The tensions came to a breaking point in the mid-1770s as the colonies began to take steps to sever ties with Great Britain.

The moral conscience of John and Charles Wesley, co-founders of the Methodists, moved them to support the early pleas of the North American colonists for liberty and justice. As late as June of 1775, just prior to the battle of Bunker Hill, John Wesley wrote to the British Secretary of State for the Colonies (Lord Dartmouth), with a copy to the Prime Minister and First Lord of the Treasury (Lord North), stating clearly that he could not help thinking that the Americans, as “an oppressed people, asked for nothing more than their legal rights.” But by year's end, after learning that the American demand for liberty had changed to independence, their inbred loyalty to “the powers that be” and their doctrine of nonresistance turned them against the rebels.

Older brother John published a string of royalist tracts beginning that fall (1775) with *A Calm Address to our American Colonies*, which strongly criticized the colonists for their “no taxation without representation” argument and their babbling about “liberty,” pointing out that the Americans were as free and as well represented as many British citizens. The taxes were needed to pay for the military protection from France and Spain that the colonists received. The provoking tract sold briskly—above 40,000 copies

in three weeks. By years' end a dozen different pamphlet printings had been published, as well as countless newspaper printings, on both sides of the Atlantic.

While Charles Wesley did not enter the publishing melee over the American war, he nevertheless wrote letters to many of his friends about the political situation in America, like Drew University Library's most recent manuscript acquisition, a letter to lawyer and poet Walter Churchey, in which he recommend several British and American tracts opposing independence. Churchey (1747-1805) evidences strong ties to Methodism. There is little doubt as to the value of his labors in planting and defending Methodism in Calvinist Wales, corroborated by the many letters that passed between him and John and Charles Wesley.

London, April 4, 1776

My dear Brother:

I have long owed you a Letter. My application in Mr. Broadbent's behalf did not succeed or I might have wrote sooner.

Be not troubled at *The Calm Address*.<sup>1</sup> It has done very much good. If you still are (what my brother and I were) partial for the Americans, I would wish you to reconsider matters, as we have done. *Audi alteram partem*.<sup>2</sup> I have read both sides, particularly Dr. Price.<sup>3</sup> Let me recommend to your impartial judgment Mr. Fletcher's *Vindication*,<sup>4</sup> *Americans Against Liberty*,<sup>5</sup> *The Rights of Great Britain Asserted*<sup>6</sup> & above all the letters of Massachusetts.<sup>7</sup> Read and weigh these (with prayers for light & a right Judgment). Then speak your mind.

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<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, *A Calm Address to our American Colonies*. London: R. Hawes, 1775.

<sup>2</sup> "hear the other side"

<sup>3</sup> Richard Price, *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty, the Principles of Government, and the Justice and Policy of the War With America*. London: T. Cadell, 1776. Unitarian Richard Price had joined forces with many Presbyterians to support the American cause.

<sup>4</sup> John William Fletcher, *A Vindication of the Rev. Mr. Wesley's "Calm Address to Our American Colonies": in some letters to Mr. Caleb Evans*. London: R. Hawes, 1776. Wesley's friend and compatriot published this strong defense of Wesley's pro-British views. Fletcher publicly reiterated his loyalty to king and constitutional monarchy in a stinging 1776 pamphlet *The Bible and the Sword* that moves beyond 'just war' and borders on 'crusade': "So long as the wicked shall use the sword in support of vice, the righteous who are in power must use the sword in defense of virtue." That Fletcher later became a favorite of the American Methodists is a tribute to the strength of his anti-Calvinism, which overcame any prejudice on their part against his political stance on the colonial rebellion.

<sup>5</sup> Ambrose Serle, *Americans Against Liberty: or, An Essay on the Nature and Principles of True Freedom, shewing that the Designs and Conduct of the Americans Tend Only To Tyranny and Slavery* (London: Printed for J. Mathews, 1775).

<sup>6</sup> James Macpherson, *The Rights of Great Britain Asserted Against the Claims of America*. London: Printed for T. Cadell, 1776.

<sup>7</sup> *Copy of Letters Sent to Great-Britain, by his Excellency Thomas Hutchinson, the Hon. Andrew Oliver, and Several Other Persons, born and educated among us, which original letters have been returned to America, and laid before the Honorable House of Representatives of this Province, in which (notwithstanding His Excellency's Declaration to the House, that the Tendency and Design of them was not to subvert the Constitution, but rather to preserve it entire) the judicious reader will discover the fatal source of the confusion and bloodshed in which this Province especially has been involved, and which threatened total destruction to the liberties of all America* (Boston: Printed by Edes and Gill, 1773).

[Churchey adds at bottom of page: "I have read all sides & I think North<sup>8</sup> wrong as time has proved." W.C.]

If I live to see Wales again, I shall hope to spend a day or two at Hay. The Lord increase you & the children whom he hath given you!, especially the Church in your house.

You see how my brother is treated by the news writers. No one, blessed be God, believes their lies & forgeries: & the more they curse, the more God owns & blesses him.

When you call at Brecon, give our love to our Aunt Juggy Gwynne & Hugh Bold<sup>9</sup> & all the brethren. That you may always abide happy in the love of Christ is the earnest prayer of, my dear brother,

Your faithful & affectionate Servant

C. Wesley<sup>10</sup>

Charles forte was poetry and he wrote several poems highly critical of the King's military leaders. A long poem on "The American War" (1779) bears harsh criticism for the inept British general, William Howe, who failed to press for complete victory once he had "driven the feeble Yankees out" of New York. In the fall of 1776, Howe's army pursued the Americans across New Jersey and over the Delaware into Pennsylvania on his way to capture Philadelphia. But inexplicably Howe ended the advance and retreated back to New York for the winter. Wesley describes the well-known scene:

He [Washington] seiz'd the moment of success  
The unsuspecting troops t'oppress  
The river cross'd his glory bent on  
And took them napping all at Trenton.<sup>11</sup>

Interpreting the foreign actions in the light of homeland politics, Charles viewed the general's disastrous delaying actions as disloyal of the King's commands in order to press gains for his own party's political position.

Another poem "To the American Rebels" bears equally harsh criticism for the disloyal colonists.

Our children whom we long have fed,  
And carried in our fondling arms,  
Nourish'd, and brought you up and led,  
Protecting from all hostile harms,  
Treasures immense on you bestow'd,  
And lavish'd seas of British blood.

Your unprovok'd Rebellion brings

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<sup>8</sup> Lord North, Prime Minister and First Lord of the Treasury, 1769-1781. North appreciated that the real issue at stake was not just taxation but power, and led Britain into the War of Independence with the full approval of King George III.

<sup>9</sup> Hugh Bold was the first Methodist steward in Brecon and four times the town bailiff.

<sup>10</sup> I am much indebted to Richard Heitzenrater for correcting my initial transcription of the letter.

<sup>11</sup> "The American War," *The Unpublished Poetry of Charles Wesley*, edited by S T Kimbrough, Jr. and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1988), 45, lines 156-159.

Our more disloyal deeds to mind,  
 (Disloyal to the King of Kings)  
 In league against your Country join'd,  
 Ye our ingratitude reprove,  
 Against our heavenly Father's Love.

....

Ye vipers who your Parent tear,  
 With evil all our good requite,  
 Ye cannot yet with us compare,  
 Who do our Loving Lord despise,  
 His yoke reject, his cross disclaim,  
 And put him to an open shame.<sup>12</sup>

Homeland opposition to military action against the colonies was strong, which made the pro-war stance of the Wesley brothers unpopular in many quarters, as the newly acquired letter attests.

At war's end, however, the Wesley brothers became more or less reconciled to the independence of the American colonies, and to the "liberty wherewith God had so *strangely* made them free." They grudgingly accept Britain's defeat as God's will. John listens to appeals from his American flock, and takes steps to form his North American followers into an independent church. When news of the plan leaks out, Charles Wesley fumes, blaming Coke's machinations and his brother's senility. Some of his witty verses on the occasion were also circulating, including the following:

So easily are Bishops made  
 By man's, or woman's whim?  
 Wesley his hands on Coke hath laid,  
 But who laid hands on him?<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> "To the American Rebels," *The Unpublished Poetry of Charles Wesley* (1988) 70-71, stanzas 2, 3 and 5.

<sup>13</sup> Frank Baker, *Representative Verse of Charles Wesley* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 367-370.