

JOHN WESLEY AS EDITOR AND ENCYCLOPEDIST

SAMUEL J. ROGAL

Although John Wesley's literary reputation appears to arise principally from his sermons, journal narratives, theological tracts, original hymns, and revisions of his brother's hymnodic efforts, he deserves closer critical consideration for his contributions as an editor of others' works and the dissemination of those pieces to his Methodist followers, particularly those without formal education. Wesley had developed, during almost six years as a resident tutor of Lincoln College, Oxford (November 1729 to September 1735), the ability to compile and to catalogue, to extract, to simplify, and to rearrange large and complex texts for his students. As he began to organize the religious institution known as Methodism, he even added varying degrees of censorship to his list of editorial modes, taking care to assure that his followers' journeys to spiritual and social salvation would not be unduly burdened by anti-biblical or anti-Christian influences. At the same time, however, despite his editorial heavy-handedness, Wesley dedicated his priorities to the codification of knowledge in an attempt to expand the educational and intellectual capacities of those who had determined to accept his invitation to participate in the eighteenth-century evangelical revival.

Following receipt of the Master of Arts degree in 1727, the twenty-four-year-old Wesley embarked, as had the twenty-four-year-old John Milton almost a century earlier, upon a rigid program of self-study that served as a preface to his editorial and encyclopaedic efforts and to his life-long evangelical labors. His plan of study dictated that Mondays and Tuesdays be devoted to classical Greek and Roman history and poetry; Wednesdays to logic and ethics; Thursdays to Hebrew and Arabic; Fridays to metaphysics and natural philosophy; Saturdays to oratory and the composition of verse; Sundays to divinity. For leisure, he continued to study French, which he had begun three years previously; for amusement, he took to experiments in

Samuel J. Rogal is Chairperson of the Division of Humanities and Fine Arts at Illinois Valley Community College in Oglethorpe, Illinois.

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optics; for exercises in mathematics, he read Euclid, John Keil, and Isaac Newton. Most importantly, after having digested the content of a text, Wesley would then transcribe, in a commonplace book, those passages he believed important or even artistic enough to preserve for later reference.¹

After having served as his father's curate in Epworth and Wroote, Wesley returned to Oxford to fulfill the responsibilities of his fellowship. There we observe him, as the junior fellow, presiding six times per week over the public disputations, from which he honed a number of skills that would serve him well as editor and encyclopaedist. First, he noted that "I could not avoid acquiring hereby some degree of expertness in arguing; and especially in discerning and pointing out well-covered and plausible fallacies. I have since found abundant reason to praise God for giving me this honest art. By this, when men have hedged me in by what they called demonstrations, I have been many times able to dash them in pieces; in spite of all its covers, to touch the very point where the fallacy lay; and it flew open in a moment."² Second, he approached books principally for the purpose of familiarity rather than for mastery. According to common practice, university pupils prepared for examinations through the process known as *collections*, in which they wrote a synopsis of the text, a set of analytical notes, and extracts of important passages. Wesley, himself, had acquired the habit at Christ Church, and he insisted that his own students at Lincoln pursue the same practice. With possible exception of Wesley's early reading at Christ Church, where he attacked with vigor those works that would have lasting influence upon him—Thomas à Kempis's *De Imitatione Christi* and Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living and Holy Dying*—and later, at Lincoln, where he discovered William Law's *Christian Perfection* and *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, Wesley never engaged in what could be termed serious and specialized literary scholarship. One can easily accept the observation that "the severe concentration on selected subjects and the rigid self-denial in the matter of current literature necessary to expert scholarship never characterized Wesley either at Christ Church or Lincoln. He knew more in the wider field than most of his contemporaries, and his knowledge was exact and fairly comprehensive; yet, the width of his learning impeded his flight upwards to the heights of professorial distinction. It is important to remember all this, because this very limitation, coupled with habits of economy in the rescue of spare moments for reading, made him...a leader of popular education—the best gatherer and scatterer of useful knowledge that Georgian England knew."³ Add to that observation the fact that most of those who received and digested the information belonged to the middle and lower classes of society in eighteenth-century Britain.

The extent to which Wesley applied his editorial and encyclopaedic craft to benefit his religious institution, Methodism, may be viewed—should one be willing to take the time for the screenings—through no less than 130 individual and serialized works published between 1735 and 1790. At the beginning of what can only be, in this discussion, but a small sampling of those productions stands *The Christian's Pattern; or, a Treatise of the Imitation of Christ. Written Originally in Latin by Thomas à Kempis*, published in 1735, prior to the departure for Georgia and issued again in 1741. Wesley translated the piece and, supposedly, prepared a preface "containing an account of the usefulness of this Treatise, directions for reading it with advantage, and likewise an account of this edition"; thus, the five-part preface focused on the writer, the treatise, "the temper requisite in order to read

it with improvement, the manner of reading it, and a commentary on "this edition."⁴ However, four of the five parts of that preface represent a mosaic of additional extracts from earlier versions of the *Imitation*: the 1634 Antwerp edition, the 1667 London English edition, and the 1682 Cologne edition. One would have to search long and hard to uncover the mind and the pen of John Wesley.

In 1746, 1747, and 1748, Wesley issued, for the pupils at his school for Methodist preachers at Kingswood, outside Bristol, the separate parts of *Lessons for Children*, each volume being fifty to fifty-five extracts from the Old Testament, with explanatory notes. "I have endeavored in the following Lessons," he wrote in his preface to Part I, "to select the plainest and the most useful portions of Scripture; such as children may the most easily understand, and such as it most concerns them to know. These are set down in the same order, and (generally) the same words, wherein they are delivered by the Spirit of God. Where an expression is less easy to be understood, I have subjoined a word or two by way of explication; but taking care not to detain you from your great work with comments longer than the text."⁵ Concerns for the spiritual state of Methodists led, naturally enough, to those for the body, and in 1747, a year after the establishment of his Bristol dispensary for the poor, Wesley published *Primitive Physick; or, an Easy and Most Natural Method of Curing Most Diseases*. His most popular work—twenty-three editions by the year of his death—the original and subsequent revisions consisted of a catalogue of heresay descriptions and cures gathered mostly from contemporary surgeons and apothecaries (even several from Wesley, himself) and from notes, letters, and tracts from a range of such scientific and medical theorists as Benjamin Franklin, Joseph Priestley, Hermann Boerhaave. Essentially, Wesley sought to silence the quacks and the charlatans among the medical practitioners of the day, believing that common sense and standard cures would allow most persons, at considerable savings to themselves, to function as agents of their own healing. Further, taking his editorial practices almost to an extreme, Wesley also published a two-penny pamphlet, *Primitive Remedies*, which proved nothing more than an extract of the second part of *Primitive Physick*.

Wesley's most ambitious encyclopaedic venture appeared between 1749 and 1755, the fifty-volume *A Christian Library: consisting of Extracts from, and Abridgements of, the Choicest Pieces of Practical Divinity which have been published in the English Tongue*. In his preface of 25 March 1749, from Kingswood School, Wesley announced that

I have endeavored 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; and yet not mystical, not obscure to any of those who are experienced in the ways of God. I have also endeavored to preserve a consistency, throughout, that no part might contradict any other; but all conspire together to make 'the man of God perfect, thoroughly furnished unto every good word and work.' But in order to do this, I have been obliged, not only to omit the far greatest part of several eminent authors, but also to add what was needful, either to clear their sense, or to correct their mistakes. And, in a design of this nature, I apprehend myself to be at full liberty to do so.⁶

Who and what contributed to the substance of that herculean editorial effort? The initial volume included the epistles of Clement of Rome, Ignatius, and Polycarp, whose authority Wesley held only below that of Scriptures; the martyrdoms of Ignatius and Polycarp; the homilies on Genesis of Macarius Magnus, and an extract of Johann Arndt's *True Christianity* (*Vier Bücher vom wahren Christentum*, 1606). The seven volumes published in 1752 offered extracts from the likes of Thomas Manton, Isaac Ambrose, Jeremy Taylor, Ralph Cudworth, and John Owens, while the more than three thousand pages of the final ten volumes offered the reader samplings from such Anglican and Nonconformist churchmen as Edward Reynolds, Robert South, John Flavel, Samuel Annesley (the editor's maternal grandfather), Robert Nelson, William Beveridge, and John Howe.

Indeed, little escaped Wesley's encyclopaedic mind and editorial hand. While nearing the end of the *Christian Library*, he discovered that the less sophisticated among his readers could not understand all of the words; to solve that problem he offered them definitions in *The Complete English Dictionary* (1753). Between 1748 and 1751 he produced Latin, English, French, Greek, and Hebrew grammars for the Kingswood scholars; six volumes of Law's tracts and letters saw print in 1772; Jonathan Edwards' *A Treatise on Religious Affections* in 1773; "concise" histories of Rome (1773) and England (1776). He even went so far as to issue a collection of his own compositions (both original and extracted) under the title *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection. As Believed and Taught by John Wesley from 1725 to 1765* (1770). Then, of course, there stands Wesley's contribution to the periodical literature of the eighteenth century, *The Arminian Magazine: Consisting of Extracts and Original Treatises on Universal Redemption*; fourteen volumes bore his heavy editorial imprint between 1778 and 1791, and the journal existed, under various titles, until well into the twentieth century. Essentially, Wesley hoped to cool the heated theological-political controversies generating against him from the Anglican periodicals of the day (principally Augustus M. Toplady's *Gospel Magazine*) with more moderate modes of pacific propaganda. Thus, the initial volume houses biographies of Arminius, Luther, Bernard Gilpin, Bishop William Bedell, Peter Jaco, John Atlay; six essays on the Calvinian controversy; fifty-nine letters and over fifty pieces of verse; three portraits (Wesley, Jaco, Atlay); and various responses by Wesley to readers' criticisms of the substance of the magazine.

One would certainly be remiss to neglect, in a survey of Wesley as editor and encyclopaedist, the Methodist leader's venture into fiction—a genre of literature from which he usually turned his eye. However, as long as a particular work evidenced even remote ties to his evangelical institution, the editorial effort held potential for spiritual profit. Thus, in Dublin between 1765 and 1770 (and in London: Printed for William Johnson, 1766–1770) appeared, in five volumes, *The Fool of Quality; or, the History of Henry Earl of Moreland*, by Henry Brooke (1703?–1783). Born in Dublin and educated at Trinity College, Brooke came to London, studied law at the Temple, and remained in the English capital to apply his legal mind to verse and drama. Returning to Dublin in 1740, he spent the remainder of his life composing fiction, verse, drama, and tracts advocating the relaxation of the penal laws against Irish Catholics.⁷

To compress Brooke's five volumes into a reasonable and workable summary looms as an arduous exercise, for Brooke—as though reeling from the effects of the recently published *Tristram Shandy* (1759–1767)—virtually buries his reader beneath a complex and

often confusing mosaic of character delineation, narration, scenic and historical description, and religious, social, and economic declamation. Henry (or Harry) Clinton, the "Fool of Quality" and the second son of the Earl of Moreland, provides some semblance of order to the piece as he proceeds through his education, maturation, and manhood. The second principal character, the Earl's brother, also carries the name Harry Clinton, but conveniently becomes Mr. Fenton; more, important, however, Brooke assigns to the latter the task of guiding young Harry toward eventual development into a responsible adult who employs both his fortune and position to help others. Simply, young Harry stands shrouded in his innocence, flanked on one side by the values of his father's decadent, polite society and on the other by the principles of his uncle's enlightened mercantile class. The uncle's influence predominates, and the student of eighteenth-century intellectual and cultural history willing to commit to the entire five volumes needs not read very far before realizing that Fenton's (and Brooke's) notions on the education of the complete and productive adult come directly from a combination of Locke's *Thoughts concerning Education* (1693) and Rousseau's *Emile* (1762). For Brooke, on the one hand, meaningful relations between parent and child emerge as especially important to the latter's maturation process; on the other, one's material resources in combination with spiritual (or Christian) strength become necessary for survival in a hostile world.

For at least two persons of historical and literary note, Brooke's *Fool of Quality* conveyed more than a slight degree of significance. The anti-Tractarian churchman, social reformer, and writer of fiction, Charles Kingsley, ever ready to encourage both economic and spiritual virtue within the English working classes, imagined the piece on the same influential level with Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, and thus he issued a two-volume edition in 1859. John Wesley, on the other hand, enjoyed the advantage of a direct association with at least one relative of Henry Brooke; that, in turn, led the Methodist patriarch to an initial reading of *The Fool of Quality* and then to the determination that the multi-volume novel offered varying degrees of intellectual as well as spiritual merit for those who would follow the social and moral dictates of British Methodism. In fact, he reacted with equal enthusiasm to another of Brooke's novels, *Juliet Grenville; or, the History of the Human Heart: A Novel*—this one in three volumes and published at Dublin in 1774.

The relative alluded to above, Henry Brooke (1738-1806), the novelist's nephew, resided in Stafford Street, Dublin, and eked out a living as a painter and drawing master. Wesley had met him during one of his visits to Dublin—perhaps as early as 1760—and their sporadic correspondence began in March 1762. Young Brooke joined the Dublin Methodist Society in April 1765; Wesley's diary indicates that he lodged and dined at his house during his visits of 1785 and 1789. In fact, the Methodist patriarch's last will and testament names Brooke as one of three persons each to receive an annuity of five pounds "left to Kingswood School by the late Roger Sheil, Esq."⁸

From Hull, on 8 July 1774, Wesley wrote to the younger Henry Brooke, declaring that "When I read over in Ireland *The Fool of Quality*, I could not but deserve the design of it, to promote the religion of the heart, and that it was well calculated to answer that design; the same thing I observed a week or two ago concerning *Juliet Grenville*. Yet there seemed to me to be a few passages both in the one and the other which might be altered to the better; I do not mean so much with regard to the sentiments, which are generally very

just, as with regard to the structure of the story, which seemed here and there to be not quite clear."⁹ Hesitant to contact directly the elder Brooke about his desire to edit both novels, Wesley sought out the nephew as negotiator. A month later (6 August), the latter replied, announcing his uncle's feeble physical condition, but at the same time declaring, "He is deeply sensible of your very kind offer, and most cordially embraces it. He has desired me to express the warmth of his gratitude in the strongest terms, and says he most cheerfully yields the volumes you mention, to your superior judgment, to prune, erase, and alter as you please. He only wishes they could have had your eye before they appeared in public."¹⁰

Shortly after the London publication of *The Fool of Quality*, a critic for *The Monthly Review* had posted this reaction to Brooke's novel, particularly interesting in light of Wesley's attraction to it: "A performance enriched by genius, enlivened by fancy, bewildered with enthusiasm, and overrun with the visionary jargon of fanaticism. We wish the author would give us an abridgement, cleared from the sanctimonious rubbish by which its beauties are so much obscured. In its present state, it will be a favorite only with Behmenites, Herrnhutters, Methodists, Hutchinsonians, and some of the Roman Catholics."¹¹ One cannot easily determine if Wesley had read that notice; most certainly, however, his offer to edit the two novels proved to have been a sincere one, not simply a reaction to sharp criticism.

Almost seven years passed before Wesley presented to the world his two-volume abridgement of *The Fool of Quality*. It appeared, in 1781, under its subtitle, *The History of Henry, Earl of Moreland. Abridged by the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.*, published at London by John Paramore, one of the most consistent of his London publishers and booksellers. In his introductory "Remarks to the Reader," written from Bristol and dated 4 March 1780, Wesley reveals his editorial reasoning.

The whimsical title prefixed to this book gave me such a prejudice against it, that I expected to find nothing in it worth reading. So I just opened it and threw it aside. But some time after, having read one page, I was clearly convinced it would be worth while to read the whole. I was indeed a little disgusted with the spinning out of the story, so as to fill five volumes; and wished some of the digressions had been pared off, that it might have come within a reasonable compass.¹²

Thus, Wesley hacked away at what he termed "uninteresting dialogues," "trifling and ludicrous incidents," "remarks upon the feudal government," and a "great part of the mystic divinity, as it is more philosophical than scriptural."¹³ Refusing all references to the terms "fiction" or "novel," Wesley instead catalogued Brooke's effort as a *treatise* "that sets forth in full view most of the important truths which are revealed in the oracles of God. And these are not only well illustrated, but also proved in an easy, natural manner; so that the thinking reader is taught, without any trouble, the most essential doctrines of religion."¹⁴

Recalling, for a moment, Wesley's offer to abridge both *The Fool of Quality* and *Juliet Grenville*, one can uncover no evidence that the Methodist patriarch further considered or even attempted the latter project. Obviously, the rigors of his regular and tightly scheduled travel commitments, the demands upon his brief moments of leisure time (spent,

mostly, maintaining correspondence and his journal), and his advancing years, kept abridgements of fiction low on his list of literary priorities. The exact ranking of fiction upon that list may be best observed in a portion of a letter from Wesley (18 August 1784) to Mary Bishop, who conducted a school at Keynsham, Somersetshire:

I would recommend very few novels to young persons, for fear they would be too desirous of more. Mr. Brooke wrote one more (besides the *Earl of Moreland*), *The History of the Human Heart*. I think it is well worth reading: though it is not equal to his former production. The want of novels may be supplied by well chosen histories; such as this own, *The Concise History of England*, *The Concise History of the Church*, Rollin's *Ancient History*, Hooke's *Roman History* (the only impartial one extant), and a few more. For the elder and more sensible children, Malebranche's *Search after Truth* is an excellent French book. Perhaps you might add Locke's *Essay on the Human Understanding*, with the Remarks [by Wesley] in the *Arminian Magazine*. I had forgotten that beautiful book *The Travels of Cyrus*, whether in French or English.¹⁵

The specifics of Wesley's encyclopaedic method—his role as extractor, arranger, and assembler—may easily be viewed through one of his several so-called biographies, *A Short Account of the Life and Death of the Reverend John Fletcher* (1786). Fletcher (1729-1785), born and educated in Switzerland, came to England in 1752, received orders as deacon and priest in 1757, accepted the living of Madeley, Shropshire, in 1760, supervised the Countess of Huntingdon's college for ministers at Trevecca (1768-1771), but really made his mark in the exercise of his pastoral duties among the colliers of Shropshire. "...you may easily observe," admitted Wesley in his preface, "that, in doing this, I am little more than a compiler; for I owe a great, if not the greatest, part of the ensuing Tract to a few friends, who have been at no small pains in furnishing me with materials..."¹⁶

A survey of the piece reveals the truth of Wesley's word. Of the approximately 45,000 words in the volume, less than ten percent came from Wesley's own invention; what remains consists of fifty-two separate narratives transcribed verbatim or paraphrased from seventeen sources—including twenty of Fletcher's letters to various persons, six personal accounts by Mrs. Mary Fletcher, and five accounts by a Mrs. Vaughan, a servant of Tern Hill, Shropshire. Wesley provided a broad introduction to each of the ten chapters and then turned the narratives over to the sources. For instance, in the sixth chapter—relative to Fletcher's ill-health at Newington and Bath, his stay in Switzerland, and his return to Madeley—the biographer invented only seven of the sixty-one paragraphs and included eleven of Fletcher's letters. Thus, the substance of the subject's tour from Switzerland to Shropshire comes from the eye and the mind of Fletcher, himself, rather than from the view of the biographer-editor. In the ninth chapter, focusing on Fletcher's character, Wesley stands ready to defend his method. Although he had known Fletcher for thirty years, the Methodist patriarch contended that "I am thoroughly sensible of my own inability to draw such a portrait as Mr. Fletcher deserves. I have no turn at all for panegyric: I have never accustomed myself to it. It gives me therefore no small satisfaction to find, that this is in a great measure done to my hands. The picture is already drawn; and that by no mean pencil. All then which I shall attempt is, to retouch Mrs. Fletcher's observations, and now and then add a few articles, either from my own knowledge, or from the information of others."¹⁷

However, from another point of view, that of the late twentieth-century student of Wesley's daily projects and activities, the founder and leader of British Methodism had little choice but to function as editor and encyclopedist, as opposed to laboring as an inventive writer. Essentially, he had neither the time nor the desire to attempt serious artistic achievement. None of his contemporaries doubted (as no one doubts today) the superficialities and the prejudices governing his knowledge of a broad range of disciplines, both humanistic and scientific. Admitting readily to his reputation as a compiler of others' literary efforts, Wesley viewed his own literary projects as another of his numerous responsibilities to the eighteenth century evangelical revival; he realized the necessity for scattering the proper ideological and intellectual seeds, as quickly as possible, among the membership of Methodist societies. "...you are a Christian minister," he wrote to Samuel Furley in July 1764, "speaking and writing to save souls. Have this end always in your eye.... Use all the sense, learning, and fire you have; forgetting yourself, and remembering only these are the souls for whom Christ died; heirs of an happy or miserable eternity."¹⁸ Nonetheless, in the capacity of editor and encyclopaedist, Wesley managed to contribute at least as much to the non-fictional general literature of the eighteenth century as did the more recognized *literati* among his contemporaries throughout the British Isles.

NOTES

1. Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1872), 1:55-56.
2. John Wesley, "Some Remarks on 'A Defense of the Preface to the Edinburgh Edition of *Aspasio Vindicated*,'" in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872), 10:353.
3. Nehemiah Curnock, ed., *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1909-1916), 1:20-21.
4. *Works* 14:199.
5. *Works* 14:216-217.
6. *Works* 14:222.
7. S. Austin Allibone, *A Critical Dictionary of English Literature and British and American Authors* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1872-1877), 1:251; Margaret Drabble, ed., *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 135; John Butt and Geoffrey Carnall, *The Oxford History of English Literature: The Mid-Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1979), 470.
8. *Journal* 8:343.
9. John Telford, ed., *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley* (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), 6:96.
10. Tyerman, 3:173.
11. Tyerman, 3:172-73.
12. *Works* 14:295.
13. *Works* 14:295.
14. *Works* 14:296.
15. *Letters* 7:228.
16. *Works* 11:276.
17. *Works* 11:341.
18. *Letters* 4:258.

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