
John Wesley's London

by Samuel J. Rogal

Epithets to describe John Wesley's activities during his long and productive life have, by now, almost become clichés: “wrestling Jacob,” “man of fire,” “missionary on horseback,” “knight of the burning heart,” “the Lord's horseman,” “horseman with a torch,” “friend of the people,” and “minister to the world.” Such references, mostly in the form of titles to biographies and essays, tend to convey the image of a transient evangelist, roaming the English countryside at random, paying little attention to the necessity for organization or to the details of an itinerary.

Nothing could be further from the truth; the founder and leader of British Methodism stood as its single administrator —its finance officer, travel agent, moderator, and spokesman. Rarely, within the history of movements, societies, or institutions, do we find such centralized control; rarely, do we observe an individual so keenly aware of when, where, and how often he must visit a particular locality within the realm of his responsibilities.

Naturally, he required a base from which to direct the large but loose network of Methodist circuits, societies, and classes; naturally, he chose London, a city that would demand from him almost as much of his seemingly limitless energy as would the rest of the island-kingdom combined; “. . . all that life can afford,” proclaimed Samuel Johnson in praise of his nation's capital.¹ Within the context even of John Wesley's radically different definition and understanding of life, the statement accurately synthesizes and identifies his work in London between the return from Savannah on February 1, 1738 and his death 53 years later.

Knowledge of Wesley's background, his ideals, and his limitations appears sufficient to establish the point that the London emerging from his journals, letters, and diaries in no way resembles the view of

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the metropolis as presented by certain Londoners of note during the same and earlier periods. Throughout the diaries of Samuel Pepys, we see a city undergoing dramatic change and enduring traumatic events: the Restoration, the Great Fire, the Plague, threatened invasion. Nonetheless, in the midst of such events, Pepys manages to find the good life — to travel in high and merry company, to observe and record boisterous amusements and splendid fashions.

For James Boswell, at age 22, the London of 1762-63 proves, for a time, the perfect place to cast off (if only for eight months) the stern grip of his father's discipline and rigid Calvinism. In coffeehouses, theaters, brothels, ladies' bedchambers, taverns, and even in the pews of churches of several denominations, young Boswell attempts to see and do, in less than a year, all that previously had been denied him.

London is undoubtedly a place where men and manners may be seen to the greatest advantage. The liberty and whim that reigns there occasions a variety of perfect and curious characters. Then the immense crowd and hurry and bustle of business and diversion, the great number of public places of entertainment, the noble churches and the superb buildings of different kinds, agitate, amuse, and elevate the mind. Besides, the satisfaction of pursuing whatever plan is most agreeable, without being known or looked at, is very great. Here a young man of curiosity and observation may have a sufficient fund of present entertainment and may lay up ideas to employ his mind in old age.²

Certainly, Johnson shared a similar liking for a number of Boswell's pleasure palaces, although the great man was, undoubtedly, restricted in certain areas because of his age. However, Johnson's concept of London can best be understood in terms of his own description of and attitude toward the British capital: "... when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life. . . ."³

No one will deny that the same scenes — the same men, manners, institutions and buildings — that attracted Boswell and Johnson also existed for John Wesley. The significant difference, of course, is that while the former rode the waves of London's energy and intellectual stimulation, the latter plodded through the muck and the waste of what can only be determined as the *worst* of what the life of the city had to afford.

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Almost from the moment of his evangelical conversion at Aldersgate on May 24, 1738, Wesley set out to strengthen and then to elevate the souls of the London poor, to provide them some form of physical relief and spiritual consolation from their miserable lot. Thus, he plunged into the filthy garrets and underground cellars of St. Giles parish, Cripplegate, visited the wretched inmates of Newgate Prison, and even rode alongside the condemned as they made their way to Tyburn. Denied the rights granted to him upon ordination as a minister of the Church of England, he took to the open fields of Kennington Common, Whitechapel, and Moorfields. When the weather turned wet and cold, he transferred the business of conversion indoors — not to St. Paul's Cathedral, Christ Church, or Holy Trinity, but to a drafty second-story meeting room in Fetter Lane, a reclaimed royal armory in Upper Moorfields, a refurbished Dissenters' chapel in West End.

Splendid homes, crowded chop houses, or impressive temples of worship meant little for Wesley, as evidenced from one notation in his journal for Saturday, October 1, 1763: "I returned to London and found our house in ruins, great part of it being taken down, in order for a thorough repair. But as much remained as I wanted: six foot square suffices me by day or by night."⁴ He had, during his tenure at Oxford, embraced and fully committed himself to the ideals set forth by law in *A Serious Call*; self-denial stood as a principal condition to salvation; splendor lay only in God and in His impoverished human creatures on earth.

Little wonder, then, that the condition of the spirit — his own as well as others' — becomes the prism through which Wesley views the English capital. "That London is the worst place under heaven for preserving a Christian temper," he writes to Mrs. Mary Pendarves, "any one will immediately think who observes that there can be none where its professed, irreconcilable enemies, the lust of the eye and the pride of life, are more artfully and forcibly recommended."⁵ Thus, he uncovers lust and pride at almost every turn, in places where few of his contemporaries would even conceive of their existence.

In December 1780, at Montague House, predecessor to the British Museum, he finds that

One large room is filled from top to bottom with things brought from Otaheite; two or three more with things dug out of the ruins of the Herculaneum! Seven huge apartments

are filled with the curious books, five with manuscripts, two with fossils of all sorts, and the rest with various animals. But what account will man give to the Judge of quick and dead for a life spent in collecting all these? — (*Journal*, VI, 301).

Seven years earlier, he had come upon another museum, this one consisting of unique timepieces and jeweled ornaments, owned by James Cox in Spring Gardens, Charing Cross. “I cannot say my expectation was disappointed,” comments the founder of Methodism, “for I expected nothing, and I found nothing but a heap of pretty, glittering trifles, prepared at an immense expense. For what end? To please the fancy of fine ladies and pretty gentlemen” — (*Journal*, V, 499).

The fine and the pretty are recognized and immediately categorized into piles of meaningless *things*; such heaps hold no value for a man anchored to the plain and the practical, for a man dedicated to narrowing the gap between the extremes of opulence and want. And so, a tour through the tombs of Westminster Abbey in February 1764 produces the expected description of “heaps of unmeaning stone and marble,” while a walk through the Royal Society’s Physic Garden at Chelsea Embankment in November 1748 raises the question as to why so many plants, unidentified as to their “use and virtues,” are merely heaped together to gratify “idle curiosity” — (*Journal*, V, 46; III, 381).

Clearly, Wesley’s cold contempt for the trinkets and spangles, the marble and the greenery, adorning eighteenth-century London exposes his concern for a society seemingly mired in waste and suffocated by its own sin. However, he quickly dismisses such places as Cox’s Museum and Chelsea Physic Garden, preferring, instead, to attack the problem at its source: one live, potential Methodist means more to him than an entire building stuffed with Sir Hans Sloan’s imported fossils.

In other words, John Wesley appears completely at ease and assured of himself when he can operate upon his own ground, no matter how extensive the hazards or how bleak the prospects for success. For example, in Charles Square, Hoxton, a violent June thunderstorm drives away, in the middle of the sermon, both shepherd and flock; three weeks later, he loses his voice while preaching to a large gathering. Undaunted, he returns to Charles

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Square in the following month, this time armed with the sixth chapter of Micah; in the midst of his sermon, “a great shout began. Many of the rabble had brought an ox, which they were vehemently labouring to drive among the people. But their labour was in vain: for in spite of them all, he ran around and round, one way and the other, leaving us calmly rejoicing and praising God” — (*Journal*, II, 475).

Farm animals loom large as the ultimate in heavy machinery for Wesley's opponents, as evidenced by another skirmish — this one at Great Gardens, off Whitechapel Road, on September 12, 1742. “Many of the beasts of the people laboured much to disturb those who were of a better mind. They endeavoured to drive in a herd of cows among them: but the brutes were wiser than their masters.” Not totally disheartened by the failure of their unpredictable and obviously unmotivated cattle, the demonstrators rely on a more manageable weapon, the traditional stone:

One . . . struck me just between the eyes: but I felt no pain at all; and when I had wiped away the blood, went on testifying with a loud voice that God hath given to them that believe “not the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind” — (*Journal*, III, 45).

As early as 1739, having observed the success of George Whitefield, Wesley determined to exploit the single advantage from field-preaching: he could reach the ears, if not always the minds, of thousands, as opposed to the relatively small numbers who crowded the chapels and meeting rooms. Therefore, the disadvantages — hecklers, hired ruffians, press gangs, even the weather — failed to dampen his enthusiasm or darken his spirit. He simply believed that anti-Methodists demonstrations would run their course; by 1775, he had proven himself correct, as witnessed by a general decrease in harassment present at his open-air services.

What did discourage Wesley, particularly in London, were conditions over which he had no control; he could stand only as a helpless spectator and watch the Industrial Revolution gain momentum, ever widening the breach between affluence and poverty and creating the harsh contrasts that became the trademark of the eighteenth century English capital. Thus, he descends upon Bethnal Green, east of Spitalfields, to find descendants of Huguenot refugees, most of

them journeyman weavers, crowded into narrow streets and courts; in certain instances, three or four families occupy a single house. During the winter of 1776-77, Wesley moves among the members of his society residing in Bethnal Green, their miserable condition made worse by a severe cold spell that gripped the city, freezing even certain sections of the Thames. He noted in his journal for January 15, 1777:

Many of them I found in such poverty as few can conceive without seeing it. Oh why do not all the rich that fear God constantly visit the poor? Can they spend part of their spare time better? Certainly not. So they will find in that day when “every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour.”

Continuing his visitation the next day, he observes conditions unseen, at least in his experience, even at Newgate Prison.

One poor man was just creeping out of his sickbed to his ragged wife and three little children, who were more than half naked, and the very picture of famine; when, one bringing in a loaf of bread, they all ran, seized upon it, and tore it to pieces in an instant. Who would not rejoice that there is another world? — (*Journal*, VI, 136-137).

Indeed, another world does exist, although Wesley cannot quite see it. Within two weeks, David Garrick will offer to send to Mrs. Thrale “two hens, and whatever Number of Eggs You shall please to order”; on February 20, Horace Walpole will inform Rev. Cole that “The wind to-day is sharper than a razor, and blows icicles into one’s eyes.” But the weather is not to be Walpole’s primary concern; like Wesley, his thoughts will focus upon the matter of suffering: “I have bought at Mr. Ives’s sale (immensely dear) the shutters of the altar at St. Edmundsbury . . . they are worthy of the Bolognese school — but they have suffered in several places, though not considerably.”⁶

From the squalor of Bethnal Green, Wesley finds little difficulty in navigating the distance to the center of his evangelical activities, the prisons, hospitals, and workhouses of eighteenth-century London. Both John and Charles Wesley had begun their work in

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these institutions during the infancy of Methodism — in the winter of 1738-39, following John's return from Germany where he had sought to strengthen his ties with Count Zinzendorf and the German Moravians. Biographers of the two brothers, as well as historians of British Methodism, tend to make considerable noise about this aspect of their subjects' charitable work; obviously, both John and Charles spent time with and provided spiritual comfort to the miserable occupants of the prisons, workhouses, and hospitals, but neither can really be identified with the likes of James Oglethorpe or John Howard as true reformers of those asylums.

In fact, at the outset, they could not always gain admission to attend men who outwardly sought their assistance, as witnessed by two occasions — August 19, 1740 and April 1, 1741 — on which Rev. Mr. Wilson, the parish curate of Clerkenwell, refused John Wesley entrance to Clerkenwell Prison to pray with and for the condemned. Nonetheless, whenever possible, they kept at the task of trying to save the souls of London prisoners, especially those housed in Newgate and Marshalsea; one must always be aware, however, that on more than one instance, both the brothers expressed reservations regarding the probability of *genuine* deathbed repentance for persons so soon to meet with the King's hangman.

In a letter of January 2, 1761, to the editor of the *London Chronicle*, Wesley begins, "Of all the seats of woe on this side hell few, I suppose, exceed or even equal Newgate" — (*Letters*, IV, 127). Yet, he never really set down, in his letters or journals, a graphic description of the place — either of the structure itself or the so-called hellish conditions therein.⁷ Instead, his concern focuses upon what had become, for him, a quality far more important and far more dramatic than the usual sounds and odors of physical discomfort.

Thus, on December 26, 1784, he preaches a sermon at Newgate to 47 condemned prisoners.

While they were coming in there was something very awful in the clink of their chains. But no sound was heard, either from them or the crowded audience, after the text was named: "There is joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons that need not repentance." The power of the Lord was eminently present, and most of the prisoners were in tears. A few days after twenty of them died at once, five of whom died in

peace — (*Journal*, VII, 40-41).

As a contrast to this reserved, almost satisfied reaction, consider Wesley's outburst of February 3, 1753, following a visit to Marshalsea Prison, Southwark, which he styled "a nursery of all manner of wickedness. Oh shame to man that there should be such a place, such a picture of hell upon earth! And shame to those who bear the name of Christ that there should need any prison at all in Christendom" — (*Journal*, IV, 52). Such was the cry of frustration from one who expended considerable energy seeking mercy for those whom the present world had abandoned. And, seemingly, the present world wanted little help or interference from those unwilling to accept its conventions; "... we are forbid to go to Newgate, for fear of making them wicked," snarled Wesley in late February 1750, "and to Bedlam for fear of driving them mad!" — (*Journal*, III, 455).

However, not all charitable or penal institutions in eighteenth-century London stood as weigh stations of stink and sin, nor did they slam the door in John Wesley's face. Again, his success in converting souls at such places as the London Workhouse at Bishopsgate Street, St. Luke's Hospital in northern Moorfields, and St. Thomas's Hospital at Southwark was, at best, negligible; but at least his presence inside those buildings gives some life to the cold commentary and observation of contemporary tourists and statisticians.

Thus, on February 14, 1771, he sees the effects of generous endowments upon the London Workhouse: it "contains about a hundred children, who are in as good order as any private family; and the whole house is as clean, from top to bottom, as any gentleman's needs be." Then follows the usual question directed to the conscience of the nation: "And why is not every workhouse in London, yea, through the kingdom, in the same order? Purely for want either of sense, or of honesty and activity, in them that superintend it" — (*Journal*, V, 400-401).

At St. Luke's, for the poor insane, he takes time to study the register, expressing surprise "that three in four (at least) of those who are admitted receive a cure. I doubt this is not the case of any other lunatic hospital either in Great Britain or Ireland" — (*Journal*, IV, 541).

Finally, a visit to St. Thomas's in September 1741 brings forth

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the strongest reaction, for Wesley shifts his focus from beds and registry books to his real interest — people. Encouraged by the patients, he leads them in prayer and exhortation. He exclaims:

Oh what a harvest there might be if any lover of souls who has time upon his hands would constantly attend these places of distress, and, with tenderness and meekness of wisdom, instruct and exhort those on whom God has laid His hands to know and improve the day of their visitation —
(*Journal*, II, 503).

There exists a degree of honesty here so simple and so intense that it serves, perhaps more than any other piece of evidence, to cleanse Wesley of the mud thrown upon him by his rivals. Here is no self-seeking field preacher held aloft by the gusts of empty enthusiasm; here — inside the rooms and chapels of London's prisons and hospitals — is instead a single human being trying terribly hard to establish some moral and spiritual direction for the collective conscience of his nation.

Thus, with the emphasis upon that conscience, the London of John Wesley tends to be the city that students of eighteenth century British literature and history do not always see. His London is not particularly pleasant, nor does it necessarily offer much in the way of those dream-like notions about the "good life" in seemingly enlightened England. Instead, Wesley draws clearly a mural of religious experiences and activities — sermons, meetings, chapel and church services, charity work, writing, reading, meditation, rejection, abuse — set against a taut backdrop of frustration; there, hope and despair vie continually with each other to control man's physical and spiritual existence. On Tuesday, March 1, 1791, the day preceding his death, the 88 year-old patriarch of the British Methodists managed to pronounce these words:

Happy the man whose hopes rely
On Israel's God; He made the sky,
And earth, and seas with all their train;
His truth for ever stands secure,
He saves th' oppressed, He feeds the poor,
And none shall find his promise vain.

— (*Journal*, VIII, 138)

The passage constitutes his last extended utterance; but no one gathered about his deathbed in City Road Chapel expressed surprise that the lines provided Wesley the opportunity for one final comment upon the purpose of his long life as he practiced it throughout Britain and, especially, in its crowded capital.

Footnotes

¹James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, ed. R. W. Chapman (London: Oxford University Press, 1970). p. 859.

²Frederick A. Pottle (ed.), *Boswell's London Journal, 1762-1763* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1950), pp. 68-69.

³Boswell, *Johnson*, p. 859.

⁴Nehemiah Curnock (ed.), *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1909-1916), V. 32 (all references are to this edition).

⁵John Telford (ed.), *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), I, 75-76 (all references are to this edition).

⁶David M. Little, George M. Kahrl, and Phoebe deK. Wilson (eds.), *The Letters of David Garrick* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), III, 1151; *Private Correspondence of Horace Walpole, Earl of Orford* (London: Printed for Rodwell and Martin, Bond-Street, 1820), IV, 69-71.

⁷The thrust of this letter tends toward the specific of Newgate Prison in Bristol, particularly the dramatic reforms having taken place there. ■