

## JOHN WESLEY'S JOURNAL: PRESCRIPTIONS FOR THE SOCIAL, SPIRITUAL, AND INTELLECTUAL ILLS OF BRITAIN'S MIDDLE CLASS

SAMUEL J. ROGAL  
Illinois Valley Community College  
Oglesby, Illinois 61348-1099

Writing for *Blackwood's Magazine* less than eighty years following the death of John Wesley, the novelist Margaret Oliphant (1828-1897), in one of her "Historical Sketches of the Reign of George II," identified the life of the founder and leader of British Methodism as "no life at all in the ordinary sense of the word, but only a mere string of preachings. His journals are like the notebooks of a physician—a curious, monotonous, wonderful narrative."<sup>1</sup> Certainly, throughout the fifty-five years of that "wonderful narrative," from 14 October 1735 through 24 October 1790, Wesley did preach to congregations; and he did ride to and through hundreds of towns, villages, and cities in Britain, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. He inculcated religion; he conversed with practically everyone whom he met; he sympathized with, harangued against, and prayed for and with backsliders; and he read volumes of poetry, history, theology—even a bit of fiction. He also wrote sermons, tracts, dictionaries, grammars, biographies, and hymns.

All of the foregoing activities Wesley discussed within the covers of his journals. More importantly, however, those same journals exposed to the middle and lower classes of eighteenth-century Britain—to Wesley's contemporaries as well as to generation after generation of their offspring—a panorama of eighteenth-century British life and eighteenth-century British thought that otherwise may well have been denied them. Indeed, the journals of John Wesley laid claim, early in their production and development, to a clearly determined audience.

Wesley, himself, through his publishers and book agents in Bristol and London, issued his journals between 1739 and 1791 in

<sup>1</sup>Margaret Wilson Oliphant, "Historical Sketches of the Reign of George II: Wesley," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 104 (October 1868):429.

the form of what he termed “extracts,” each comprising a *duodecimo* volume of approximately a hundred pages. Further, he placed the extracts at the end of the 1774 edition of his collected *Works*, and subsequent volumes of the narrative became additions to editions of the *Works* published during his lifetime. There exists little doubt but that Wesley realized the value to others of those observations and experiences. Originally his reading audience comprised only family and friends, in addition to Wesley himself: “It not being my design to relate all those Particulars, which I wrote for my own Use only; and which would answer no valuable End to others, however important they were to me” (*Journal* 1:83).<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, Wesley did feel obliged to justify and to defend such experiences as the Georgia mission, his journey to Germany among Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf’s Moravian Brethren, his religious conversion, and the purposes of evangelical reform (or “Methodism”). His audience expanded considerably with the fourth extract for the period 3 September 1741 to 27 October 1743—the first volume of the journals published without a prefatory note of justification. By the time of that extract, Wesley’s evangelical journey had extended far beyond the limits of London and Westminster; and it is evident that with that section of the journal he had already become a pastor and preacher to the people of England, Ireland, and Wales. In the entries in his journals, he addressed his thoughts and his deeds to all whom he had converted and to those whose associations with British Methodism would be forthcoming.

### 1. *Wesley’s Purpose: To Set Forth Methodist Evangelicalism*

In the “Preface” to the third extract of the journal, covering the period from 17 September 1738 to 1 November 1739 and printed in Bristol by Felix Farley in 1742, Wesley announced his design to “declare to all mankind what it is that the Methodists (so called) have done, and are doing now—or, rather, what it is that God hath done, and is still doing, in our land. For it is not the work of man which hath lately appeared. All who calmly observe it must say, ‘This is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes’”

<sup>2</sup>Citations from John Wesley’s *Journal* will herein be given as in-text references. The edition of the *Journal* is that of Nehemiah Curnock, ed., *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, 8 vols. (London, 1909-16).

(*Journal* 2:67). At that same time, the founder and leader of British Methodism had set forth, upon the pages of a tract entitled *The Character of a Methodist*, an important variation of the same theme, the observation and meaning of the work of man on earth:

By consequence, whatsoever he doeth, it is all to the glory of God. In all his employments of every kind, he not only aims at this, (which is implied by having a single eye,) but actually attains it. His business and refreshments, as well as his prayers, all serve this great end. Whether he sit in his house or walk by the way, whether he lie down or sit up, he is promoting, in all he speaks or does, the one business of his life; whether he put on his apparel, or labour, or eat and drink, or divert himself from wasting labour, it all tends to advance the glory of God, by peace and good-will among men. His one invariable rule is this, "Whatsoever ye do, in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him."<sup>3</sup>

Wesley clearly viewed himself as the master Methodist, the representative and the demonstrator, the agent of God who would communicate the sound and the sense of God's work to those less capable (in his view) of understanding it. He intended that his journal would house the record of that work; he intended that those who read the accounts would find their ways to social and theological salvation. To that end, Wesley relied upon his plain, direct language and his highly homiletic tone to strike at the very souls of his middle-class readers. The journals would complement, by example and illustration, the exhortations delivered from pulpits and in open fields, and from town squares and steamy upstairs chapel rooms.

John Wesley, as apothecary of eighteenth-century evangelicalism, fashioned the elixirs by which Methodists might find their way out of the darkness of economic and spiritual despair. The style and tone of the journal narratives advance the heavy burden that Wesley himself bore in his personal commitment to labor in God's employ. Thus, between 5 and 10 December 1785, in his eighty-second year, he reported his having "spent every hour I could spare in the unpleasing but necessary work of going through the town [London], and begging for the poor men who had been

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, 14 vols. (London, 1829-31), 8:345.

employed in finishing the new chapel. It is true I am not obliged to do this; but if I do not, nobody else will" (*Journal* 7:129-130). Wesley sought neither self-righteousness nor self-pity, standing well above such motivations. Rather, he endeavored to strike at the very consciences of his readers, at their own sense of what they could do and what they might aspire to accomplish for the state and the status of fellow human beings.

However, Wesley's journals do not limit themselves to stabs at the moral nerves of apathetic or insensitive middle-class Methodists. Such a limited goal would, in turn, have unduly narrowed the scope and the purpose of the recital of his own experiences and would have mired them deeply in the sands of rhetorical redundancy. For John Wesley, the narrative records of his travels abound with descriptions of that which he perceived as God's creation passed on to humankind as the grandest of all legacies. He tried exceedingly hard to instill in his readers the full impact of that legacy. Thus, for instance, on Wednesday evening, 5 August 1747, while he was traversing on horseback the sixty-three miles of rough, mountainous Welsh road through Radnorshire and Montgomeryshire that would eventually take him to Merionethshire, Wesley observed:

... I was surprised with one of the finest prospects, in its kind, that I ever saw in my life. We rode in a green vale, shaded with rows of trees, which made an arbour for several miles. The river laboured along on our left hand, through broken rocks of every size, shape and colour. On the other side of the river the mountain rose to an immense height, almost perpendicular: and yet the tall, straight oaks stood, rank above rank, from the bottom to the very top; only here and there, where the mountain was not so steep, were interposed pastures or fields of corn. At a distance, as far as the eye could reach, as it were by way of contrast, "A mountain huge uprear'd/Its broad bare back"<sup>4</sup>—with vast, rugged rocks hanging over its brow, that seemed to nod portending ruin (*Journal* 3:310-311).

<sup>4</sup>Obviously a misquotation (or a version, perhaps, from Wesley's own edition) from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, 7:285-287:

Immediately the mountains huge appear  
Emergent, and their broad bare backs upheave  
Into the clouds.

Coming from one whose journal and diaries have been long considered as eighteenth-century spiritual backdrops to spiritual incantations from the pulpit, the preceding description appears especially secular—as though it would have fit comfortably into one of a score of travel narratives (in or out of fiction, even) that inundated the popular literature of the age. However, one must keep in mind that John Wesley tended to control his reliance upon secular imagery and secular emphasis; he wrote principally to advance the cause of his religious organization and to justify the choice of those who embraced it. For Wesley, the journey through Wales provided but one more opportunity to reveal to his audience the end product of God's providence, to serve (in Shakespearean terms) as Brutus' glass, thus reflecting to the most insensitive among the Methodists the results of God's works.

Critics and antagonists could scoff at Wesley's sermons, at Wesley's Conference minutes, at Wesley's tracts on medicine and the weather; but those same individuals could hardly challenge a faith anchored to the stark realities of a natural order that advanced the sharp outlines of the actual world. Thus, the Methodist patriarch carefully planted in his journals passages that allowed his readers to see the world as it existed, a world stripped of ornamentation and distortion. The strength of Wesley's descriptions of nature—including the clarity and the purity of their language—emerges as a quality that all but few readers could easily grasp and appreciate.

## 2. *Evidences of Wesley's Prejudices and Strong*

### *Personal Convictions*

However, that same collection of journal extracts also houses the prejudices of John Wesley: his attacks upon persons and institutions, and upon books and objects, which he had determined as detrimental to those who sought spiritual profit from British Methodism. Although Wesley had the benefit of both the bachelor's and master's degrees from Oxford, and while he retained his fellowship at Lincoln College until marriage forced him to resign, his critical method inclined toward the superficial and the expeditious. Rarely did he indulge in thorough analysis of person or object. Of course, he usually lacked sufficient time for such exercise. He read and reacted "on the run," as it were—reading while on horseback

or in chaise, and observing mostly from a geographical or chronological distance. Furthermore, his prejudgments often stemmed also from the self-imposed boundaries of his own faith: If anyone or anything ventured outside of, or conflicted with, his view of the Scriptures, he automatically rejected such opposition—and indirectly instructed his middle-class followers to do the same.

We may notice, as an example of the aforementioned process, John Wesley as a “cultural critic,” functioning as such within the narrow space of a six-day journey from Hampton Court to Dorking (Surrey) and back to London. On Friday, 7 February 1772, he walked through Hampton Court Palace and spent some time gazing upon the art therein. His reaction does not surprise us:

Of pictures I do not pretend to be a judge; but there is one, by Paul Rubens, which particularly struck me, both in the design and execution of it. It is Zacharias and Elizabeth, with John the Baptist two or three years old, coming to visit Mary, and our Lord sitting upon her knee. The passions are surprisingly expressed, even in the children; but I could not see either the decency or common sense of painting them stark naked. Nothing can defend or excuse this: it is shockingly absurd, even an Indian being the judge. I allow [that] a man who paints thus may have a good hand, but certainly *cerebrum non habet* (*Journal* 5:444).

Wesley’s attentiveness to specific detail reveals itself in the above passage, but it is obvious, too, that a hard-core biblical morality controls the beacons of Wesley’s “art-critical” orb. He stands always ready and willing to separate art from religious commitment and religious intent—and even to relegate the most respected among artists to the junkyard of ethical commonality, should that person fail to achieve the levels represented by Wesley’s own moral agency for the cultural and spiritual improvement of the unenlightened.

Three days later, on his way to Dorking, Wesley read a tract by William Jones (1726-1800)—perpetual curate of Nayland (Suffolk), musician, composer, and theologian—with the title, *Zoologica Ethica: A Disquisition concerning the Mosaic Distinction of Animals into Clean and Unclean: being an Attempt to explain to Christians the Wisdom, Morality, and Use of that Institution* (London, 1771). To his readers, he introduced that obscure piece as “ingenious,” particularly in terms of Jones’s unique moral interpretation of Levitical law: that God “intended it as a standing

warning to His people against the fierceness, greediness, and other ill properties which so eminently belonged to those beasts or birds that they were forbidden to eat or touch" (*Journal* 5:445).

The next day, Wesley came upon a totally different work, one by Laurence Sterne that aroused his prejudice against both author and title. Again, the tone and style of the journal entry sound a warning:

I casually took a volume of what is called *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*. *Sentimental!* what is that? It is not English; he might as well say *Continental!* It is not sense. It conveys no determinate idea; yet one fool makes many. And this nonsensical word (who would believe it?) is become a fashionable one! However, the book agrees full well with the title, for one is as queer as the other. For oddity, uncouthness, and unlikeness to all the world beside, I suppose, the writer is without rival (*Journal* 5:445).

Thus, within the space of five days and a single page, Wesley signals Methodists to beware of Rubens's indecency, to reject Sterne's linguistic caprice, and to embrace the ingenuity of Jones's observations upon clean and unclean beasts. In no instance did he attempt to delve beyond the crust of his conclusions; he reacted with immediacy and then, after brief reflection, usually transferred those same reactions onto the pages of his journal.

A similar process holds true for a work that would eventually assume special significance for Wesley and for British Methodism. On the day following Wesley's reading of Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* and on his return to London from Dorking, he read what he termed "a very different book": *An Historical Account of Guinea; or, a Caution to Great Britain*, by Anthony Benezet (1713-1784), who was a French Huguenot educated in London, a resident of Philadelphia, and a member of the Society of Friends.<sup>5</sup> For Wesley, Benezet's narrative awakened in him the evils of "that execrable sum of all villainies, commonly called the Slave-trade. I

<sup>5</sup>The title cited by Wesley in the journals is confusing, since Benezet wrote two books on the slave trade: *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain and Her Colonies on the Calamitous State of the Enslaved Negroes* (1766) and, five years later, the *Historical Account of Guinea: Its Situation, Produce, and the General Description of Its Inhabitants* (1771). Wesley's journal citation suggests a combined edition of Benezet's two works, or, perhaps, a lapse of memory on the part of Wesley between the time when he read both volumes and his making notation in the journal.

read of nothing like it in the heathen world, whether ancient or modern; and it infinitely exceeds, in every instance of barbarity, whatever Christian slaves suffer in Mohametan countries" (*Journal* 5:445-446).

Benezet's accounts would eventually lead Wesley to a connection within the anti-slave-trade movement headed by William Wilberforce. However, that association would be extremely loose. The abolishment of slavery and the slave trade in late-eighteenth-century England remained a *Quaker* project, and this meant that Wesley—through his journals, sermons, and tracts—could only inform and educate his Methodist followers rather than actually mobilize them toward a specific action. Nonetheless, the patriarch of British Methodism evidenced a strong, personal commitment to the cause to which Benezet had introduced him, and few who read the journal entries relative to that topic could fail to perceive Wesley's sincerity and intensity.<sup>6</sup>

Simply and obviously, Wesley viewed his journal as an important instrument by and through which he could fashion the thinking and strengthen the faith of those who had joined his religious organization. In addition, he sought to persuade them to form what he believed to be the proper values and priorities. Thus, in further illustration of these purposes of his, we may take note of his reaction to two museum displays. On Wednesday, 3 March 1773, he responded to an invitation to visit the museum of one James Cox, a jeweler in Spring Gardens, London.<sup>7</sup> The collection there consisted of unique pieces of time mechanisms and jeweled ornaments—items that found their way into descriptions by Horace Walpole and into the lines of Sheridan's *The Rivals*. Wesley's reaction reflected once again his antagonism toward the superficiality of items material and decorative: "I cannot say my expectation was disappointed; for I expected nothing and I found nothing but a

<sup>6</sup>See Samuel J. Rogal, "John Wesley's Role in the Abolition of Slavery and the Slave Trade," *Evangelical Journal* 3 (1985):21-36.

<sup>7</sup>James Cox's open room (or "museum") functioned between 1772 and 1775. Its owner (fl. 1757-1791) served in the employ of the East India Company, which presented Cox's works to various oriental potentates. Cox also worked directly, during the 1770s, for the Chinese and Russian courts. One item, given to the Emperor of China in 1766, represented a gem-encrusted golden chariot drawn along by a coolie and bearing a seated lady who fanned herself with one hand and who in the other hand held a fluttering songbird (see John Fleming and Hugh Honour, *Dictionary of the Decorative Arts* [New York, 1977], p. 211).



heap of pretty, glittering trifles, prepared at an immense expense. For what end? To please the fancy of fine ladies and pretty gentlemen" (*Journal* 5:499).

### 3. *Wesley's Descriptive Ability and Attention to Detail*

Nearly eight years later, on 22 December 1780, Wesley visited what then represented the nucleus of a collection which ultimately became the British Museum (then housed in Montague House). For his part, Wesley could well have been back in Cox's Museum, as he exclaimed:

What an immense field is here for curiosity to range in! 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 Herculaneum! Seven huge apartments are filled with curious books, five with manuscripts, two with fossils of all sorts, and the rest with various animals. But what account will a man give to the Judge of the quick and dead for a life spent in collecting all these? (*Journal* 6:301).

Again we witness Wesley's attention to detail—a careful description carried forth on the basis of clear spatial arrangements. Furthermore, the reader grasps the image as it extends forward and comes to rest upon a typical Wesley thesis, a moral variation upon the words of Eccl 1:2: "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity."

Interestingly enough, that same reader might well have noticed how carefully Wesley positioned the British-Museum entry in the particular section of his journal—or, more accurately, how carefully he had planned the events of the week to create the most profound effect upon someone who would take note of his activities. Thus, on 16 December 1780, he received word from the anti-Catholic instigator, Lord George Gordon, that the former wanted to see him. On the 18th Wesley gained permission for the audience, and on the 19th he spent an hour with Gordon in the latter's cell at Newgate Prison, where their conversation "turned upon Popery and religion." Then, two days following the British Museum tour—Sunday, 24 December—Wesley preached three times at three different London locations, "desiring to make the most of this solemn day" (*Journal* 6:301-302).

For some reason, he recorded nothing in his journal for 17, 20, 21, and 23 December—or, perhaps, he chose not to publish what he

had recorded therein. At any rate, he led the readers of those extracts along a path of obvious contrasts, upon a series of spiritual and moral fluctuations. Those experiences and reactions, recorded and placed strategically within the journal and handled with utmost editorial delicacy, encouraged Methodists to confront Wesley's administration one frame at a time, rather than to see it as a network of related actions and reactions. The journal, then, comes forth not as an autobiographical account governed by chapters or even episodes, but rather as a highly descriptive rotogravure, wherein each entry graphically advances its own moral lesson.

#### 4. *Conclusion*

John Wesley's journal echoes the sound and the sense of a spiritual and social leader guided by the conviction of his own role in history. Wesley's journal proves not as interesting or as lively as the prose fiction of the age, for he possessed neither the imagination nor the literary force of Smollett, Sterne, Fielding, or even Richardson. Nonetheless, the narratives complement that genre. While the novels abound with true imagination, spirit, wit, characterization, delightful imitation, and even some plot, Wesley's journals bare to the world the heart of a man obsessed by the sense of vocation, of a man who would but do a little work for God before he returned to the dust. "I am now an old man," wrote Wesley to begin the final year for his journal and of his life, "decayed from head to foot. My eyes are dim; my right hand shakes much; my mouth is hot and dry every morning; I have a lingering fever almost every day; my motion is weak and slow. However, blessed be God, I do not slack my labour. I can preach and write still" (*Journal* 8:35).

Such a self-portrayal hardly surprised anyone, especially since it came from a man who had begun his half-century-long narrative on the eve of his mission to Georgia, on the eve of his first significant failure. That self-portrayal came from a writer whose journal reverberates with moral and spiritual evenness and with stylistic consistency. Finally, it came from an eighteenth-century patriarchal figure who, in true Jonsonian fashion, never wrote a line or uttered a sentence but for a purpose. He wrote for an audience that could comprehend his designs, learn from his examples, and—most importantly—follow his notions toward ecclesiastical reform.