

## "My Dear Sammy": Letter to an Unspiritual Nephew

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**Abstract:** A letter of 1789 kept in the Sugden Heritage Collection of Queen's College Library, Melbourne, reveals the pathos of the spiritual search of the musically brilliant, mentally unstable and Roman Catholic nephew of the Revd John Wesley, the tercentenary of whose birth falls this year. This short essay explores the context in both John and Samuel's lives of the exchange, and builds on the ecumenical and pastoral fact that John, the founder of Methodism, recommends three Catholic authors for his nephew to meditate on. It then compares this personal advice with his public plea in *A Letter to a Roman Catholic*, written from Dublin forty years earlier.

THE SUGDEN HERITAGE COLLECTION held in an atmosphere-controlled room in the library of Queen's College, Melbourne, is a national treasure. The heart of it is Dr Edward Sugden's personal library. A Wesleyan Methodist minister, in 1888 he commenced as the first Master of Queen's and the first theological teacher for the Methodist Church in Victoria.<sup>1</sup> He later edited the two-volume *Standard Sermons of John Wesley*,<sup>2</sup> their first critical edition. He had also brought with him to Australia a collection of Methodist letters, books and journals which he bequeathed to the library. It has been added to since, both by purchasing other material of like vintage as they came available, and by adding to the collection of contemporary Methodist theology, missionary material and history, so that the Heritage Collections and Queen's library are a major source for the study of Australasian Methodism and its origins. While digging in its document drawers<sup>3</sup> looking for material to display in an exhibition of Wesley's work, I came across the following letter in Wesley's handwriting:<sup>4</sup>

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1. A good introduction to Dr Sugden is found in Norman Young's essay "Sugden as Theological Educator", *Proceedings of the Uniting Church Historical Society*, 7.2 (December, 2000).

2. London: Epworth Press, 1921.

3. With regulation cotton gloves, and under the guidance of the librarian, Ms Louise Elliott, whom I thank very warmly for her assistance.

4. It is referred to in Nehemiah Curnock (ed.), *Journal of the Rev. John Wesley MA*, (London: Epworth, 1938) Vol. III, 12, and in Michael Kassler and Philip Olleson, *Samuel Wesley (1766-1837), A Source Book*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001). L. Tyerman (ed.), *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley MA*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1871) vol. III, 589-90,

[Postmarked Froome]  
Sept 16<sup>th</sup> 1789

My dear Sammy,

It gives me pleasure to hear  
that you have so much Resolution, that  
you go to bed at ten and rise at four.  
Let not the increase of cold affright you  
from your purpose. Bear your cross, and it will bear you!

I advise you carefully to read over  
Kempis, the Life of Gregory Lopez, &  
that of Monsr de Renty. They are all  
among my brother's Books. I am,  
Dear Sammy,  
Your Affectionate Uncle and Friend,  
J. Wesley.

This is a letter to touch the heart. I was first struck by its generous tone. A nineteenth century biographer, Luke Tyerman, comments that it is "strikingly characteristic of the venerable writer".<sup>5</sup> I noted the Catholic spiritual books he had commended to his Catholic nephew. But what a daunting list! But then I wondered: is this an iron fist in a velvet glove? Why did "Sammy" need this good advice? How did he take it? I decided to dig further.

The year is 1789. The writer, John Wesley, is 86, within eighteen months of his death. He was born on 17 June 1703,<sup>6</sup> and this year the "People called Methodist" worldwide will celebrate the tercentenary of his birth. The venerable old man is by now regarded as "the apostle of England", still preaching and able to draw thousands, but in his journal he is complaining of problems with his sight, and the need to limit the

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gives the full text. (The new Oxford/ Abingdon edition of *Wesley's Works* has not yet reached the journal or letters of 1789; hence my use of the older – and less critical – editions.)

5. Tyerman, *The Life and Times*, 589.

6. The fruit of a reconciliation between his parents Samuel and Susannah, who had fallen out over the issue of loyalty to the Stuart line, breached with the arrival of King William in 1689, and repaired by the accession of Queen Anne in 1702. See *inter alia* Rupert E. Davies, *Methodism* (London: Penguin, 1963) 44-45. He was the fifteenth child, and his mother likely considered that enough. But Charles was the second last of her nineteen children.

amount of preaching he can do.<sup>7</sup> It is a long way from the warmed heart and the early fires of the Methodist mission.

Charles Wesley, his younger brother, the great hymn writer, died in the previous year, and was buried in the churchyard of St Marylebone, the church of the London parish in which he had lived for so long.<sup>8</sup> As Charles lay dying, John promised Samuel, Charles' younger son and the recipient of this letter, that he would be his "Father and his Friend" while he lived.<sup>9</sup> As will become clear, this was not simply a magnanimous gesture: Uncle John had an agenda.

Samuel was Charles' second son; his elder brother Charles Jnr was an accomplished organist and composer;<sup>10</sup> then came sister Sarah,<sup>11</sup> neither of whom married. In fact this letter is addressed on the outside to Sarah, though it is clear from the opening that it was intended for Samuel. (Why? So that Sarah might oversee the process of rehabilitation?)

Samuel was born in Bristol on 24 February 1766, to a very musical mother, Sarah Gwynne,<sup>12</sup> and a poetic father. When he was five, the family took an advantageous lease from an ardent Methodist who wanted Charles to have a London home,<sup>13</sup> and after a certain amount of oscillation between Bristol and London, the family settled at 1 Chesterfield Street, Marylebone. The letter was sent to that address.<sup>14</sup> Samuel is now 23 years old.

John Wesley was at Frome in Somerset. One nice sidetrack from this letter is that the postmark handstamp reads "Froome", which is an early spelling; four years earlier than keen historians of postmarks have discovered, so our letter has pushed back postal history by four years.<sup>15</sup>

John Wesley had based himself in Bristol for the previous month (from 5 September to 5 October) and was on circuit through the towns and villages. On the 16 September he was actually at Midsomer Norton ("in the evening I preached to our honest, earnest colliers at Coleford, most of whom attended again at five in the morning"), so he posted the letter at his next stop, Frome, where he also preached to a large audience.<sup>16</sup>

7. Nehemiah Curnock (ed.), *Journal of the Rev. John Wesley MA*, (London: Epworth, 1938) vol. VIII, 12. He remarks that he has no problems with writing!

8. The location of his grave is now unknown. A plaque in a garden section of the churchyard commemorates his burial.

9. Letter, 16/3/1788, see Kassler & Olleson, *Samuel Wesley*, 134.

10. Born 1757, died 1834.

11. Born 1759, died 1828.

12. Born 1726, died 1822.

13. Martha Colvil Gumley, 1702?-1787, widow of a General and godmother to Charles Jr.

14. It was later named "Great Chesterfield Street", but the family kept the old address. They also referred to their suburb by its old-fashioned name of "Marybone".

15. Letter to Ms Louise Elliott, Librarian of Queen's College, 17 August 2002, from Michael Kassler, who co-edited the collection of Samuel's letters.

16. Curnock, *Journal*, 12.

The date is mid-September. That accounts for the reference to “the increase of cold” which Samuel was not to let “affright” him, despite his regime of getting up at four in the morning. This is also John’s life-long regime; he was one of those men who needed little sleep, and probably slept very well when they did. But John had already had an hour’s prayer before the preaching service at 5 a.m. which was described as “the glory of Methodism”,<sup>17</sup> and is still practised by the Wesleyans of Tonga. John Wesley had been concerned with hygiene and physical health from boyhood; in 1747 he published a book of what we would call folk remedies, called *Primitive Physick*. It ran through twenty editions in his lifetime, and there are copies in the Sugden Collection. He was quite clear that physical and mental health, not to say spiritual, went hand in hand. So Sammy’s progress in these matters was important.

The second part of the letter indeed has to do with matters spiritual. He lists three spiritual writers, all continental Roman Catholics. John himself had published them in his *Christian Library*, fifty volumes of a theological *Readers’ Digest*, for the use of his lay preachers. Two precious sets of these are also in the Sugden Collection. But it must be said that it was unusual for an Anglican clergyman (let alone the founder of a movement like Methodism) to know Catholic writers so well. This was really the aspect which most caught my attention.

It is generally known that Samuel “converted” (dreadful word) to Roman Catholicism in 1784. That is a little too neat. Certainly his parents thought he had, but John, in a letter to Charles and Sarah,<sup>18</sup> points out that Sammy claims to have “changed his opinions and mode of worship” to that of Roman Catholicism, which is “quite another thing”. Conversion was a weighty word for John Wesley. John is doubtful of any spiritual interest in Samuel’s life at all, and thinks that his new friends will simply introduce him further to “forms, notions or externals” instead of true, heartfelt religion.

The key to this, it seems to me, is Samuel’s passion for music. He plays his first tune a month short of his third birthday on his father’s harpsichord; he learns to read his letters and words from the score of Handel’s *Samson*; he is composing from the age of six, but can only write down the notation from the age of eight (this is his oratorio *Ruth*). A visitor remarks that they have “an infant Mozart” in the house.<sup>19</sup> He goes on to teach himself violin, to study organ and pianoforte and then

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17. See Adrian Burdon, *The Preaching Service – the Glory of the Methodists, A Study of the Piety, Ethos and Development of the Methodist Preaching Service* (Nottingham: Grove Books [Alcuin/GROW Liturgical Study 17], 1991). John had preached at 5 a.m. of the day this letter was posted.

18. Kassler and Olleson, *Samuel Wesley*, 124, 2 May 1784.

19. The visitor was the distinguished English musician William Boyce. Mozart (b.1756) died in the same year as John Wesley.

to teach them; to compose and conduct. He becomes very much part of the musical establishment of London; he plays in a concert directed by J. C. Bach, "the English Bach";<sup>20</sup> he directs festivals at Covent Garden. But immediately before his conversion, he is working on a mass, the *Missa de spiritu sancto*, and he dedicates it (in 1784) to the Pope, Pius VI.<sup>21</sup> The attraction of the liturgical music of the Catholic Church, at a time when the Church of England had a very limited parish repertoire, and had barely discovered congregational hymns, was likely to be very high.<sup>22</sup> One could speculate on other attractions, but we need to remember that Samuel does not exhibit a great interest in religion, so perhaps John's comment on "notions and externals" is accurate. To be an English Catholic is also to have some high acquaintances, and for Samuel this appears to include the Duchess of Norfolk, wife of England's leading Catholic peer. Samuel also joins, in 1788, a Masonic Lodge. This is not quite the oddity it may seem to us – and it was another opportunity to make music.<sup>23</sup> (Mozart was, after all, a Catholic and a Freemason.) It has to be said, however, that Sam's Catholicism proved to be a brief and qualified enthusiasm.

Samuel married Charlotte Louisa Martin in 1793, four years after this letter, though his relationship with her goes back to 1782. To the scandal of his whole family, he embraced the unintended libertarian view of a mentor, that marriage was made by sexual intercourse, not by ecclesiastical ceremony, and he maintained this vehemently against the insistence of his family – every word of opposition from them strengthening his relationship – until the first child was conceived, when the argument collapsed and they married (though away from parish and family).<sup>24</sup> They had three children. By 1820, the problems in the marriage were becoming obvious, not least from the birth of Samuel Sebastian Wesley a decade earlier<sup>25</sup> (perhaps the greatest musician in the Wesley line) to one Sarah Suter,<sup>26</sup> their housemaid. He legally

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20. Johann Sebastian's youngest son; 1735-1782, tutor to Mozart.

21. In May 1785, the Pope replies with gratitude, via the Bishop. Kassler and Olleson, *Samuel Wesley*, 127.

22. Samuel discovered the riches of Anglican music in places like Westminster Abbey and some of the cathedrals, and in Cambridge. In the 1820s, he was a major figure in promoting it. But Roman Catholic music was open to him in London's embassy chapels, especially the Portuguese, where the liturgy and the music were elaborate and enticing.

23. He is suspended in 1791 for arrears; but goes on (in another Lodge) to become Grand Organist.

24. The story is told in Philip Olleson (ed.), *The Letters of Samuel Wesley, Professional and Social Correspondence 1797-1837* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) in the Biographical Introduction, *passim*. His mentor was an Anglican clergyman and somewhat naively propounded this position on biblical bases.

25. Born 1810, died 1876.

26. Born 1726, died 1822.

separated from Charlotte in 1812, and lived with Sarah, seven of whose numerous children by Samuel survived infancy.<sup>27</sup>

Morals aside, one might begin to suspect some instability in young Samuel Wesley. He has a long history of acute depression, with episodes of hypomania. And it becomes particularly clear in 1817, when he turns up in the middle of the night at his mother's house (where his older brother Charles and his sister are also living) "in a state of mind so deranged that the family was 'obliged to have a keeper'...and three days later, fearing the arrival of creditors, he 'flung up the window and himself out of it'."<sup>28</sup> He survives, but only just. After a rest cure by the sea, he returns, only to be committed to a private lunatic asylum in King's Road, Chelsea. He is released after just short of a year, and protests loudly that there is a distinction between "pure Distress of Mind" and "Insanity and Madness". He returns to two decades more of public and musical life. He died on 11 October 1837, and is buried in the same graveyard as his father, at St Marylebone.

Now let us return to John Wesley's interest in matters Roman Catholic. In the letter, he commends some religious reading to his wayward nephew. The first is Thomas à Kempis, author of one of the most popular spiritual guides of the high Middle Ages, the *Imitation of Christ*.<sup>29</sup> John had published an English translation of this under the title *The Christian's Pattern, or, a Treatise on the Imitation of Christ*, in 1735, so Sammy could read his uncle's own version. The *Imitatio* is a classic, and remains in print, though it is somewhat austere to modern eyes, focused on serious meditation on the death of Christ. Its major theme is world-renunciation, which was hardly Samuel's forte.

The second is "The Life of Gregory Lopez", which John published in abridged form in the *Christian Library*. Lopez (1542-96) was a Spaniard who went out to Mexico. "He lived as a recluse on a frugal diet, in a room which contained only a Bible, a globe and a pair of compasses",<sup>30</sup> though he had access to a library. He became rather famous in the way in which those with Spanish spiritual excesses do, and John Wesley was aware of this danger. For Wesley, the key thing was Lopez's extraordinary communion with God; but it is to be doubted if this is what he communicated to young Samuel.

The third and final recommendation is [the Life of] "Monsr de Renty". Count Gaston Jean-Baptiste de Renty (1611-49) was a French nobleman who removed himself from wife and wealth and founded in Paris a society of ladies for the perpetual adoration of the Blessed

27. Charlotte died in 1845. Divorce was beyond their means at the time.

28. Kasler and Olleson, *Samuel Wesley*, 14, 51f.

29. The work is usually attributed to Thomas, though not without dispute; it was published in the early fifteenth century.

30. Gordon S. Wakefield, *Methodist Devotion, The Spiritual Life in the Methodist Tradition, 1791-1945* (London: Epworth, 1966) 30f.

Sacrament. But this is not all: his philanthropic work was combined with his mystical interests, such that the sick, the aged, the poor and the exiled were gathered around him, in groups which may well be the true precursor of the early Methodist "bands".<sup>31</sup>

Both Lopez and de Renty represent the piety of the Counter-Reformation,<sup>32</sup> and à Kempis the monastic spirit of an earlier generation. No doubt John Wesley thought they might encourage the newly-reformed Samuel. The interesting thing is that John recommended only Catholic writers to his nephew, an ecumenical and pastoral touch. He adds the advice that "they are all among my Brother's books" – kept in Marylebone in his late father's library.

But like many parents concerned for their offspring, John was perhaps applying the stick rather than offering the carrot. He has in fact no high opinion of either Roman Catholic official theology ("un-scriptural opinions") or its liturgical practices ("idolatrous and superstitious"<sup>33</sup>). Such notions will not help Samuel, he tells Charles Jr and Sarah. Rather, religion is "happiness in God", or a "heart and life devoted to God" or "the mind that was in Christ Jesus",<sup>34</sup> and without these, Samuel's new religion will not save him.

Now we are at the heart of John's concern. In a letter of 19 August 1784, John now writes directly to Samuel, perhaps the most important letter of the series. He acknowledges that God has given him a "remarkable talent for music" (a comment perhaps not entirely free from John's own criticism of the church music of his time).<sup>35</sup> But God had also given Samuel a "desire to be a Christian". In the pursuit of this desire, Samuel (John says) has not always given attention to "weightier matters" than particular sets of opinions such as "Protestant or Romish".<sup>36</sup> Both Protestants and Roman Catholic, at this level, may miss the weightier matters.

Forty years before the letter that concerns us, John Wesley had published – from Dublin, *nota bene* – an open *Letter to a Roman Catholic*.<sup>37</sup> Life as the leader of the Methodists in Ireland had been exciting, involving riots in Cork; elsewhere Methodist homes were attacked and

31. So Wakefield, 31-2, following Henry Betts.

32. Though neither, as Gordon Rupp pointed out, was canonised by their Church.

33. Kassler and Olleson, *Samuel Wesley*, 124, the above mentioned 1784 letter to Charles Jr and Sarah.

34. Kassler and Olleson, *Samuel Wesley*, 124.

35. John did not like the work of his brother Charles's friend George Frederick Handel, whose choruses were full of "vain repetition".

36. Given John's knowledge of Scripture, "weightier matters" almost certainly echoes Matthew 23:23, in the context of Jesus' criticizing the Pharisees for concentrating on minutiae and missing the main thing: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgement, mercy, and faith..." (King James Bible).

37. Michael Hurley SJ (ed.), *John Wesley's Letter to a Roman Catholic* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968). A very early original is in the Sugden Collection.

mob violence unleashed against their people, and he himself had recently been burned in effigy. On top of this, and not for the first time, he had been told that his movement was Jesuitical. He has met Irish "Papists" whose bitterness from the days of the Boyne might still cause them to cut Protestant throats, though this is not his general view of the Irish, whom he rather likes.

His *Letter* begins from this context of violence and general disturbance in Ireland, and not least between Christians. He addresses his audience as a Protestant – an Anglican. He immediately asks if it is possible, even without changing opinions, for the two sides to live at peace. It is a very remarkable letter, unusual for its time, pertinent to the deepest divisions of ours. It could be recast for Israelis and Palestinians (let alone contemporary Irishmen). He then sets out an account of what "a true Protestant" believes, carefully and in order. The heart of this faith is the religion of love: this is "the old religion"; this is "true, Primitive Christianity". On this basis, he pleads that the warring communities resolve to do nothing to hurt each other, to speak nothing harsh or unkind of each other, to harbour no "unfriendly temper". Finally, he invites his readers "to help each other on in whatever we are agreed leads to the Kingdom". This is a truly eirenic letter; it cuts to the heart of human relationships; it is not satisfied with mere surface peace, the absence of war which leaves unresolved matters seething underneath. It suggests moving forward on a practical and agreed basis. Mediators could learn a lot from this *Letter*. It is a justly famous Christian epistle, and rightly celebrated, as it was in the ecumenical movement of the 1960s between Catholics and Protestants.

It is not a letter which can be *easily* transposed into the modern ecumenical spirit however. While I do not think it suggests an easy setting aside of theological differences, and is not "cheap ecumenism", it is an appeal of its time. The letter from John to Samuel in 1789 reveals John Wesley's deeper intention. All public religion can be debased by ignorance and malice; it can become formal, "culture religion" (to use a more modern expression). Its worship can become "mere ritual". On that basis, John Wesley believes he can make the same appeal for renewal to both the great Western streams of Christianity. Both his beloved Church of England, with its incomparable Liturgy, and the Church of Rome, with the musical and liturgical traditions which so attract Samuel, can fall short of the religion of Christ. Exemplars like à Kempis, de Renty and Lopez show that true Christianity can exist in the Roman Church, despite all that may seem to the contrary – and the same is true of Protestantism.

But what is needed in the followers of Christ in both traditions is the religion of the heart. Sinful men and women need to be "born again". This is a central theme which runs through all that John Wesley taught and promoted in the Methodist movement. He may take baptism for

granted in Christian England, but he expected to see the evidence of a real conversion to Christ before he was convinced that a person was on their way to heaven – and he set up his network of bands and classes and societies precisely to help them “pursue holiness”. The Holy Communion was a sacrament of the Church, to which only those who belonged to the Church should be admitted; yet it could also be a “converting ordinance”, and so he admitted people who showed a desire to change, who were ready for commitment.<sup>38</sup> Rebirth in the Holy Spirit was the only true initiator of good works; the Christian life is not merely a matter of going about doing good; such an ethical life is a fruit of the Spirit – and on that basis he argued the case against the social ills of his time, not on political grounds. Samuel’s music becomes a gift of God only when it is offered to God, otherwise it is a work of the Devil, and will become the means of his undoing.

It is a hard judgement, and it needs to be heard in its own context. John’s letter to Samuel reveals that this is his real purpose in writing. He commends Catholic writers to a Roman Catholic, hoping to win his reader not to a particular opinion of the Church Samuel seems to be adopting, but to a practice of faith which he knows Catholics in the past have maintained to an astonishing degree. He commends them to his Methodist preachers as well, along with the early Greek and Syrian Fathers, and a long list of Reformers, Puritans, and native Anglicans. His purpose is not learning for its own sake, but the fanning into flame of true piety, the spiritual source of the kingdom of God on earth.

In what were John’s last words on this matter before his own death, he wrote to Samuel in April 1790. He says he “cares not” whether Samuel is called a Papist or a Protestant; what grieves him – in a word – is that he has become a heathen. This “refined heathenism” is characteristic of “general religion” of whatever kind. His final plea is for Samuel to “give God his heart”.<sup>39</sup>

It is recorded that on 2 March 1791, Samuel was knocking on the door of John Wesley’s house in City Road, London at the moment that John died.<sup>40</sup>

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38. It is a myth that John Wesley held an “open table”, but he was generous in his door-keeping. For the development of Wesley’s practice of admission to Holy Communion, see John C. Bowmer, *The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper in Early Methodism* (London: Dacre, 1951) ch. VIII.

39. The content of this letter is summarised in Kassler and Olleson, *Samuel Wesley*, 28, Letter 29/4/1790.

40. Kassler and Olleson, *Samuel Wesley*, 29.