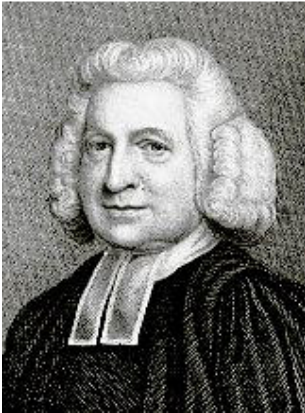


Charles Wesley AA

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Charles Wesley (1707-80)

The man who wrote the words of 'Hark! the Herald Angels Sing', 'Love Divine, All Loves Excelling', 'Jesus Lover of My Soul', and hundreds of other much-loved hymns was the sixteenth or seventeenth of eighteen children.

He was born in the rectory at Epworth in the Isle of Axholme in Lincolnshire, to parson Samuel Wesley and his wife Susanna. Born prematurely and seeming more dead than alive, the new baby was wrapped in wool for several weeks until he opened his eyes and cried. In 1709, when he was fourteen months old, the family almost burned to death when the rectory caught fire. Later there was a curious episode when the house was apparently haunted by a ghost which made dismal groaning noises and sounds of stamping about. Susanna Wesley, who never stood any nonsense, set out to drive it away by blowing a trumpet whenever the ghost ventured to make noises. After three months, it admitted defeat and departed, but the three Wesley brothers – Samuel, John and Charles – were fascinated by the haunting all their lives.

Susanna was the dominating figure in the children's lives. In 1732 John Wesley asked her to write an account of her rules for bringing up children. It is an alarming document, based on the principle that, 'In order to form the minds of children, the first thing to be done is to

conquer their will, and bring them to an obedient temper.’ To fail in this is to damn the child, body and soul, for ever. Make the child do as you bid, Susanna advised, ‘if you whip him ten times running to effect it’. ‘I insist upon conquering the will of children betimes because this is the only strong and rational foundation of a religious education....’

The little Wesleys were taught to fear the rod from a year old or earlier and to cry quietly, so that ‘that most odious noise of the crying of children was rarely heard in the house’. No toys were allowed, and no fuss permitted about swallowing medicine. They were taught the Lord’s Prayer as soon as they could speak, and their letters when still very small. The three boys all grew up to be strong and intelligent and the daughters were better educated than was common for girls at the time.

At the age of eight Charles was packed off to Westminster School. He was a lively, excitable, emotional boy and handy with his fists, which was just as well as the school was rife with bullying. In 1727 he followed his brother John to Christ Church, Oxford, on a scholarship, where he founded a small group for religious study which his contemporaries nicknamed ‘methodists’. Taken over by John, it was the foundation of the worldwide Methodist Movement.