

# Wesley's Invisible World: Witchcraft and the Temperature of Preternatural Belief

Owen Davies

With my latest breath will I bear my testimony against giving up to Infidels, one great proof of the invisible world. I mean, that of Witchcraft and Apparitions, confirmed by the testimony of all ages.<sup>1</sup>

Born in 1703, John Wesley was nine years old when Jane Wenham was convicted and condemned to death at Hertford assizes for conversing with the Devil in the form of a cat, and thirteen when the family home at Epworth was the scene of a noisy haunting that we would now describe as poltergeist phenomena. Wesley was thirty-three when the Witchcraft Act was passed by the British parliament. This statute repealed the Witchcraft and Conjurament Act of 1604, and redefined witchcraft and magic as fraudulent crimes and not diabolic realities. That a young Anglican clergyman such as Wesley might believe in an invisible world of witches, ghosts, devils, and angels does not seem odd when viewed in this context. The most ardent and vocal persecutor of Jane Wenham was, after all, an ambitious young high church clergyman, Francis Bragge, Jr., not some foaming ranter or aged clergyman mentally and theologically stuck in the seventeenth century.<sup>2</sup>

Wesley wrote no more than a few paragraphs in all expressing his belief in witchcraft and ghosts, but during his lifetime, and after, the founder of Methodism was portrayed as the last of

---

1. John Wesley, ed., *Arminian Magazine* 5 (1782): 366.

2. Owen Davies, "Decriminalising the Witch: The Origin of and Response to the 1736 Witchcraft Act," in John Newton and Jo Bath, eds. *Witchcraft and the Act of 1604* ([Leiden : Brill, 2008), 207-32. On Bragge see Mark Knights, *The Devil in Disguise: Deception, Delusion, and Fanaticism in the Early English Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 215-5, 220-33, 237-8.

the demonologists, and his followers the sowers of counter-Enlightenment superstition.<sup>3</sup> In this context, he has been, and continues to be, a magnet for those seeking to exemplify counter currents in eighteenth-century educated society. It has been all too easy for historians to fill in the gaps of Wesley's demonology, to attribute to him all the characteristics of the devout intellectual witch believer of the witch-trial era. Historians who are usually sensitive to nuance can fall into this "Wesley trap." I and others have stated, for example, that Wesley staunchly opposed the Witchcraft Act of 1736. Yet nowhere did he explicitly state this opposition.<sup>4</sup> It is based on inference. So what exactly did Wesley write about witchcraft, where did he write it, why, and when? Context is the key to providing a more nuanced understanding of Wesley's demonology.

The link between Nonconformity and credulity regarding the preternatural was already well established by the late seventeenth century, with the Society of Friends, Presbyterians and Baptists being the focus of attacks.<sup>5</sup> In the 1650s the Quaker movement, like the Baptists, faced accusations of witchcraft and diabolism, but the subtle intellectual shift from a Neoplatonic to a Cartesian world over the ensuing decades led to a realignment of both groups with "superstition." Accusations of witchcraft were increasingly used as a political and religious metaphor, rather than a reference to the criminal offence.<sup>6</sup> Come the early years of the eighteenth

---

3. Owen Davies, "Methodism, the Clergy, and the Popular Belief in Witchcraft and Magic," *History* 82 (1997): 252-65.

4. Owen Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic, and Culture, 1736-1951* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1999), 12; Phyllis Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment: Gender and Emotion in Early Methodism* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 225.

5. See Clarke Garrett, *Spirit Possession and Popular Religion from the Camisards to the Shakers* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987); Nathan Johnstone, *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 265-86; Jane Shaw, *Miracles in Enlightenment England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), esp. 51-73.

6. Peter Elmer, "'Saints or Sorcerers': Quakerism, Demonology and the Decline of Witchcraft in Seventeenth-Century England," in Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester and Gareth

century and witchcraft and apparitions became ammunition in the debate that raged between Anglicans, Dissenters, Deists, and Theists about whether God continued to allow miracles. To deny the continued existence of the invisible world was tantamount to atheism said one side. To believing in it was a mark of irrationality, credulity or enthusiasm said the other.

We can see how these discourses played out in the case of the possession of the young Lancastrian Richard Dugdale, better known as the Surrey Demoniac, who in 1689-1690 vomited nails and stones in his fits.<sup>7</sup> Two notable Dissenters, Thomas Jollie and John Carrington, were involved in the dispossession and published an account of their success in 1697. Anglican clergyman Zachary Taylor, a splenetic critic of Catholics and Dissenters, responded with *Popery, Superstition, Ignorance and Knavery* (1698–9), accusing Dissenters of “whoring,” “forgeries,” and “superstition.” The influential Anglican clergyman, Francis Hutchinson, in his *Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft* (1720), referred to the “folly” and “vanity” of the Dissenters involved in the case. Dugdale’s father had sought out Anglican clergy but found them unresponsive to the issue, so he went to the Dissenters. “Five or six of their Ministers were there at a Time,” Hutchinson noted, continuing with smug satisfaction that, “all the Country flock’d in to see and hear them. At first they admired them; but after some Time, they began to make themselves merry with them.”<sup>8</sup>

---

Roberts, eds. *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. 167-9; Sue Friday, “Witchcraft and Quaker Convincements: Lynn, Massachusetts, 1692,” *Quaker History* 84, 2 (1995): 89-115; Ian Bostridge, *Witchcraft and its Transformations, c.1650-c.1750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Malcolm Gaskill, *Crime and Mentalities in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 96-105.

7. Henry D. Rack, “Doctors, Demons and Early Methodist Healing,” in W. J. Sheils, ed. *The Church and Healing* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982); Dewey D. Wallace, *Shapers of English Calvinism, 1660-1714: Variety, Persistence, and Transformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 40.

8. Francis Hutchinson, *An Historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft* 2nd ed. (London: R. Knaplock and D. Midwinter, 1720), 159. On Hutchinson’s sceptical views with regard to the invisible world see Andrew Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Whigs: The Life of Bishop Francis*

By the 1720s, the Quakers had distanced themselves from the miraculous spiritual milieu their founder had promoted—and on which his popular reputation was built, and retired from the public if not the private debate about ghosts.<sup>9</sup> Other well established dissenting groups had also, by and large, become publicly silent on the matter of the invisible world. Then Methodism emerged, breathing new life into the cinders of spiritual and providential discourse. The old accusations thrown at dissenting religion were dusted off, namely that enthusiasm was a front for sexual licentiousness and wild superstition. This is illustrated by Charles Macklin’s 1746 comedy, *A Will and No Will, Or a Bone for the Lawyers*, in which the sexually incontinent Widow Bumper, with fifteenth children and another on the way, stated:

You must know, Uncle, I am greatly addicted to be afraid of Spirits, Ghosts, Witches, and Fairies, and so to prevent terrifying Dreams and Apparitions, *I took a Religious Gentleman, a very good Man to bed with me—an Itinerant Methodist, one Doctor Preach Field.*

*Skin.*[uncle] Doctor Preach Field. I have heard of him.

Widow Bumper: O he’s a very good man, Uncle, I assure you, and very full of the Spirit.

When not being denounced as crypto-Catholics, critics likened this new outburst of enthusiasm to the sexual, political and religious chaos that inspired various radical sects during the Civil War. Methodists were rabble rousers threatening social order as well as Protestant orthodoxy, preying on the poor, weak and mentally ill for their own political ends.<sup>10</sup> Methodism,

---

*Hutchinson, 1660-1739* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), chs 4 and 5. (Page numbers would be better)

9. Rosemary Moore, “Late Seventeenth-Century Quakerism and the Miraculous: A New Look at George Fox’s ‘Book of Miracles,’” in Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory, eds. *Signs, Wonders, Miracles: Representations of Divine Power in the Life of the Church* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), 342-3; Sasha Handley, *Visions of an Unseen World: Ghost Beliefs and Ghost Stories in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007), 172-4.

10. See, for example, David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 32-54.

with its appeal to the emotions and the invisible world was quickly pathologized as a mania by the nascent psychiatric profession. Claims that the mad houses were full of Methodists were wide of the truth but effective propaganda. The pioneering insanity doctor James Munro Snr did battle with Wesley and Whitefield over the incarceration of Methodists in Bethlem hospital. What Munro and others diagnosed and treated as forms of insanity, Wesley and Whitefield believed were instances of divine or diabolic intercession, arguing that the treatment required was spiritual succour not vomits and purges.<sup>11</sup>

All the ingredients of these attacks on Methodism were represented in Hogarth's famous work *Credulity, Superstition, and Fanaticism* (1762). This popular engraving was a version of an unpublished double satire of Methodism and art connoisseurship entitled *Enthusiasm Delineated* that Hogarth had produced two years earlier.<sup>12</sup> The latter, inspired by George Whitefield's chapel in Tottenham Court Road, which opened in 1756, depicted a Methodist preacher in full flow with his wig flying off to reveal the tonsure of a Jesuit. A puppet of God (mimicking a depiction of God in a Raphael painting) hangs from one hand and the Devil from the other. A large thermometer with a Methodist's brain for a base gauges the religious and sexual fervour in the chapel. In *Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism*, Hogarth reworked the engraving by putting in a heap of references to notorious cases of gullibility and supernatural sensations, most within living memory, some stretching back to the early seventeenth century. So the puppet of God was changed to one of a witch on a broomstick, a woman on the floor is turned into Mary Toft the

---

11. Jonathan Andrews and Andrew Scull, *Undertaker of the Mind: John Munro and Mad-Doctoring in Eighteenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 81-93.

12. See Bernd Krysmanski, "We see a Ghost: Hogarth's Satire on Methodists and Connoisseurs," *The Art Bulletin* 80, no. 2 (1998): 292-310; Jane Shaw, "Mary Toft, Religion and National Memory in Eighteenth-Century England," *Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32, no. 3 (2009): 321-38; Misty G. Anderson, *Imagining Methodism in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Enthusiasm, Belief and the Borders of the Self* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012), 150-69.

rabbit woman. The figures of Christ held be three women in the congregation in *Enthusiasm Delineated* are now transformed into figures of the Cock Lane ghost, and the top section of the thermometer now has images representing the same. Perched on top is a figure of the Tedworth Drummer, who was the central actor in the noisy haunting of the house of John Mompesson in the early 1660s. Denounced as a fraud by some at the time, Wesley reported in his *Journal* for 1768 that his eldest brother had discussed the affair with Mompesson's son at Oxford, and that from the evidence he, Wesley, concluded the case was no trick but a diabolic manifestation.<sup>13</sup>

A youth sitting under the lectern now spews pins to represent the notorious Bilson boy possession case of 1620, while a copy of "Whitfield's Journal" lies in a basket at his side along with the accoutrements of a shoeblick. The brain and thermometer now rest on two books entitled "Westley's Sermons" and "Glanvil on witches." John Trusler (1735-1820), the Church of England clergyman and publisher who wrote the first compendious analysis of Hogarth's work in 1768, commented that the inclusion of these two titles was intended "to shew us, that superstition and credulity is the ground-work of fanaticism." A footnote explained that "Westley" is "a leader of a sect, called Methodist."<sup>14</sup> Three large puppets dangle from the pulpit each representing a well-known apparition—"expressive of the people's weakness" explained Trusler. There is the ghost of Julius Caesar, as described in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*; the ghost of Mrs Veal, a "true" story, which was made popular by Daniel Defoe in his pamphlet, *A True Relation of the Apparition of One Mrs. Veal* (1706); and another famous ghost story in popular literature, that of the ghost of George Villiers, whose apparition appeared to prophesy the murder of his son, the notorious Duke of Buckingham.

---

13. Michael Hunter, "New Light on the 'Drummer of Tedworth': Conflicting Narratives of Witchcraft in Restoration England," *Historical Research* 78 (2005): 311-53.

14. John Trusler, *Hogarth Moralized. Being a Complete Edition of Hogarth's Work* (London: S. Hooper and Mrs. Hogarth, 1768), 113.

The Cock Lane haunting was widely held as a beacon of superstitious credulity that reflected badly on all concerned. This included such notable figures as Samuel Johnson.<sup>15</sup> Most of those exhibiting an active interest were firm Anglicans yet most of the criticisms were directed at clergy who had Methodist alignments, though no leading Methodists were directly involved in the case.<sup>16</sup> Still, two of the key clergymen who investigated the affair had sympathies with the movement. One, John Moore, Rector of St Bartholomew the Great, remained an Anglican minister all his life, and the other Thomas Broughton (1712-1777), while being an early supporter of Methodism, likewise remained firmly in the fold of the established church. Horace Walpole was one of the loudest critics in public and private, painting Cock Lane as a Methodist plot, insinuating that its adherents had whipped up three such ghost sensations in Warwickshire to further their popularity.<sup>17</sup> In a 1766 publication he wrote of the Cock Lane ghost that “the Methodists expected such a rich Harvest, (for what might not a rising Church promise itself from such well imagined Nonsense as the Apparition of a Noise?).”<sup>18</sup> He expressed the same sentiments in earlier private correspondence, remarking that the Methodists “were glad to have such a key to the credulity of the mob. Our bishops, who do not discount an

---

15. See Owen Davies, *The Haunted: A Social History of Ghosts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 125.

16. On the Methodist involvement in the Cock Lane affair see, Handley, *Visions of an Unseen World*, 142-8; Davies, *The Haunted*, 82-3; Travis Glasson, “Missionaries, Methodists, and a Ghost: Philip Quaque in London and Cape Coast, 1756-1816,” *Journal of British Studies* 48, no. 1 (2009): 36-40.

17. This may refer in part to the case recorded in Richard Jago, *A Sermon Preach'd at Harbury in Warwickshire, May 4. 1744. On Occasion of a Conversation said to have Pass'd Between one of the Inhabitants, and an Apparition* (Oxford: n.p., 1755). See Handley, *Visions of an Unseen World*, 162-4.

18. Horace Walpole, *An Account of the Giants Lately Discovered; In a Letter to a Friend in the Country* (London: F. Noble, 1766), 2.

imposture, even in the subdivision of their religion, looked mighty wise, and only took care not to say anything silly.”<sup>19</sup>

Although it did not attract the same national notoriety as Cock Lane, in the same year a possession case at the Lamb Inn, Bristol, became a touchstone for similar private and public debates about the invisible world, anti-Newtonian philosophy, religious infidelity, Methodism and credulity. On this occasion much of our knowledge of the case derives from private not printed sources, particularly the diary of the Bristol accountant William Dyer and the narrative account written by his friend the chemist Henry Durbin, which Durbin instructed be published after his death to avoid reinvigorating the abuse he received in the newspapers for his ‘credulity’. Both men were Wesleyan Methodists, and Jonathan Barry’s meticulous analysis of the case shows how they wrestled with the veracity and import of the antics of the supposedly bewitched Lamb Inn girls. Their belief in the case ebbed and flowed depending on their empirical assessment of the girls’ behaviour, the observable influence of prayer and fasting, and the rough and tumble of the public debate.<sup>20</sup> They struggled in private with the sentiments expressed by Wesley in his *Journal* for 1764 regarding apparition accounts: “How hard it is to keep the middle way! Not to believe *too little*, or *too much*!” [*An extract of the Rev. Mr. John Wesley's journal, From October 29, 1762, to May 25, 1765* (Bristol: n.p., 1768), 103.]

So the portrayal of early Methodism as a dustbin of debunked supernaturalism and old-fashioned providentialism was sketched in part from received and well-worn criticisms of religious enthusiasm, but there is no doubt that early Methodism drew from and appealed to the

---

19 Letter from Horace Walpole to Sir Horace Mann, 25 February 1762, *Letters of Horace Walpole* (London: Richard Bentley 1843), 1: 70; Letter from Horace Walpole to George Montague, 2 February 1762, *Letters from the Hon. Horace Walpole to George Montagu, Esq.* (London: Rodwell and Martin, 1818), 277-8.

20. Jonathan Barry, *Witchcraft and Demonology in South-West England, 1640-1789* (Basingstoke: Publisher, 2012), 165-206.



widespread popular belief in magic, providence, spirits, dream interpretation, and faith healing. Methodism made theology relevant once again to the lives of the poor for whom the preternatural was fundamental to understanding and dealing with the harsh, chaotic world in which they lived.<sup>21</sup> Wesley was well aware of this, but he was also acutely conscious that the movement should reform and not foster various aspects of popular religion as well as culture. So magic was an iniquity however practised, and the popular resort to cunning-folk and fortune-tellers for cure and comfort had to be strongly condemned, and indeed such people were the target of the Witchcraft Act of 1736. Wesley may have shared the popular belief in witches, furthermore, but Wesley's witches were a different breed to those feared by the common people. Wesley defined witchcraft largely in terms of diabolic possession, a satanic affliction. There is little reference to the figure of the witch in Wesley's comments. He was not interested, it would seem, in the popular concerns and accounts of neighbourhood witches and *maleficium*, of witches inflicting debilitating illnesses, bewitching chickens, overlooking pigs, drying up milk cows, and causing misfortune in the dairy. Yet, such accusations were the substance of the vast majority of witchcraft accusations during and after the witch-trial era.

As Henry Rack has explored, Wesley was careful in positioning himself as a "reasonable enthusiast," well exemplified by his damage limitation exercise in the early 1760s with regard to the publicity generated by the prophetic enthusiasm of George Bell.<sup>22</sup> The nuanced but

---

21. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 431-6; John Rule, "Methodism, Popular Beliefs and Village Culture in Cornwall, 1800-1850," in Robert Storch, ed. *Popular Culture and Custom in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), 48-70; Davies, "Methodism, the Clergy"; Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic, and Culture*.

22. Kenneth G. C. Newport and Gareth Lloyd, "George Bell and Early Methodist Enthusiasm: A New Manuscript Source from the Manchester Archives," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* (1998): 89-101; Kenneth Newport, "George Bell: Prophet and Enthusiast," *Methodist History* 35, no. 2 (1997): 95-105. On Methodist prophetic culture more generally, see Kenneth G. C. Newport, *Apocalypse and Millennium: Studies in Biblical Eisegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 91-118.

fundamental differences regarding certain aspects of Methodism and popular religion were easily misunderstood or deliberately warped by critical audiences eager for the Methodists to provide rope with which to hang them in the court of public opinion. No wonder, then, that Wesley was cautious about the media in which he chose to promote the preternatural, witchcraft in particular. The astute American Methodist clergyman Abel Stevens (1815-1897) explained in an apologia for Wesley's "credulity" that as "a noteworthy proof of his good sense, they [accounts of the invisible world] seldom or never appear in his standard theological writings, hardly tinge the works which he left for the practical guidance of his people, but are almost invariably given as matters of curiosity and inquiry in his miscellaneous and fugitive writings."<sup>23</sup> So in Wesley's published sermons we find one on "Evil Angels" in which he explored how they ranged abroad—"we know that Satan and all his angels are continually warring against us, and watching over every child of man," a theme he continued in another sermon on "Wandering Thoughts," but there is nothing in the sermons on witchcraft and ghosts.<sup>24</sup> The invisible world was almost exclusively restricted to Wesley's *Journal* and the *Arminian Magazine*, and it is from these sources that the persona of Wesley as demonologist has been drawn.

Wesley's *Journal* may be a frustrating source in terms of understanding Wesley's inner spiritual life and theology, but it is a fascinating cultural document. More than any other Methodist work it helped shape the public perception, critical and sympathetic, of early Methodism, and provides the basis of any social history of the movement. Its publication history is revealing in itself, its cultural significance exemplified by the use of the passages regarding witchcraft and apparitions. While over the last two centuries it has often been read as a single

---

23. Abel Stevens, *The History of the Religious Movement of the Eighteenth Century called Methodism* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1859), 2: 397-8.

24. John Emory, ed., *The Works of the Reverend John Wesley* (New York: Waugh & Mason, 1835), 2: 142.

volume collection, sometimes abridged, the *Journal* was not a diary of private reflection published as a single defining account after the author's death. It was, in fact, published in twenty-one cheap pamphlet instalments produced every four years on average between 1740 and 1791, each bearing the title *An Extract of the Rev. Mr. John Wesley's Journal*.<sup>25</sup> It was inspired by a familiar literary religious genre of published letters and godly lives, and was intended as a vehicle for cementing and promoting the identity of a growing *national* community, and as a means of communicating with it in a familiar as well as a didactic way. Wesley expended much time and effort editing the journal extracts for publication, so his references to witchcraft, apparitions and other manifestations of the invisible world were undoubtedly included to serve a purpose. Attention to the chronology is important. Wesley had referred very briefly to witchcraft in entries for 1751 and 1764, but the first explicit defence of its reality and iniquity appeared in his *Journal* dated 1768, which was first published in 1774; so, over thirty years after the first volume was published, and at a time when the criticism of Methodist credulity had long been articulated.

In *Credulity, Superstition, and Fanaticism* the pin-spewing shoeblack's basket stands upon a book entitled "Demonology by K. James 1<sup>st</sup>," which, Trusler explained, was "a proof that these idle notions existed as well among the great and learned, as among the poor and illiterate."<sup>26</sup> This gets to the core of a fundamental intellectual chasm between Wesley and his critics. For Wesley, apart from the Bible, there was no greater evidence for the supernatural than the weight of credible testimony and venerable authority. History could not be re-written, and the

---

25. See Frank Baker, "The Birth of John Wesley's Journal," *Methodist History* 8 (1970): 25-32; Michael Mascuch, "John Wesley, Superstar: Periodicity, Celebrity, and the Sensibility of Methodist Society in Wesley's Journal (1740-1791)," in Rudolf Dekker, ed. *Egodocuments and History: Autobiographical Writing in its Social Context since the Middle Ages* (Rotterdam: Verloren, 2002), 137-61.

26. Trusler, *Hogarth Moralized*, 115.

opinions of the great minds of the past were not to be dismissed, excused or reinterpreted lightly. As he wrote in his *Journal*, with regard to witchcraft, “I have sometimes been inclined to wonder, at the pert, saucy, indecent manner, wherein some of those trample, upon men far wiser than themselves: At their speaking so dogmatically against what not only the whole world, Heathen and Christian, believed in all past ages, but thousands, learned as well as unlearned, firmly believe at this day.” That said, his empiricism required him to weigh the quality of the evidence before him, and to question the presentation and analysis of it.<sup>27</sup> Each instance or relation had to be judged individually on its worthiness as testimony. This is evident in Wesley’s comments on one of his much-thumbed late-seventeenth century defences of the invisible world, Richard Baxter’s *The Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits* (1691). Wesley admired much of Baxter’s theology and works, but was not going to relax his empirical approach to Baxter’s evidence. In the *Journal* for 1764 he wrote: “Mon. 10, and the three following days, I visited Canterbury, Dover, and Sandwich, and returned to London on Friday, the 14th. In the machine I read Mr. Baxter’s book upon apparitions: it contains several well-attested accounts; but there are some which I cannot subscribe to.” [*An extract of the Rev. Mr. John Wesley’s journal, From October 29, 1762, to May 25, 1765* (Bristol: n.p., 1768), 103.]

Wesley has often been written about as the heir or defender of Joseph Glanvill (1636-1680), and even described as an “admirer” by one historian.<sup>28</sup> He was certainly very familiar with Glanvill’s work, particularly the posthumously published *Sadducismus Triumphatus, or. Full and Plain Evidence Concerning Witches and Apparitions* (1681), which grew from an

---

27. On Wesley’s empiricism see Frederick Dreyer, “Faith and Experience in the Thoughts of John Wesley,” *American Historical Review* 88, no. 1 (1983): 12-30, esp. 23-4; Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 384-8.

28. Walter Stephens, “Strategies of Interspecies Communication, 1100-2000,” in Joad Raymond and Lauren Kassell, eds. *Conversations with Angels: Essays Towards a History of Spiritual Communication, 1100-1700* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), 40.

earlier work entitled *Philosophical Considerations Touching the Being of Witches and Witchcraft* (1666). But in his printed comments, he was not exactly fulsome in his praise. In his first published opinion on witchcraft, in the *Journal* for 1751, he wrote: “We rode to Camelford. In the way I read Mr. Glanvill's Relations of Witchcraft. I wish the facts had had a more judicious relater; one who would not have given a fair pretence for denying the whole, by his awkward manner of accounting for some of the circumstances.” [*An extract from the Reverend Mr. John Wesley's journal, from July 20, 1749, to October 30, 1751* (London: n.p., 1756), 104-5.]

In 1769 he was immersed in Glanvill again, and had not changed his opinion:

At my leisure minutes yesterday and to-day, I read Mr. Glanvill's Sadducismus Triumphatus. But some of his relations I cannot receive ; and much less his way of accounting for them. All his talk of Aerial and Astral Spirits, I take to be stark nonsense. Indeed, supposing the facts true, I wonder a man of sense should attempt to account for them at all. For who can explain the things of the invisible world, but the inhabitants of it? [*An extract of the Rev. Mr. John Wesley's journal, from May 14, 1768, to Sept. 1, 1770. XV. From May 14, 1768, to Sept. 1, 1770* (London: n.p., 1790), 48 ]

Wesley bridled at the presumptuousness that humans could or should seek to explain everything in nature. “I endeavour throughout not to account for things,” he wrote in *A Survey of the Wisdom of God* (1763), “but only to describe them. I undertake barely to set down what appears in nature; not the cause of those appearances.” [ *John Wesley, A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation: or a compendium of natural philosophy* (Bristol: n.p., 1763), vol. 1, v ] Glanvill, by contrast, while sharing the hatred of atheism born of materialism, and also the bottom line that denying witchcraft was giving up God, criticized the “superficial” enquiries of religious dogmatists (which could be fairly applied to Wesley in this respect). As a founding member of the Royal Society, Glanvill promoted the scientific principle of confirming or proving the existence of the invisible world through not only the quality of testimony, but the application of the scientific method. He wrote of “resolving natural Phenomena,” while cautioning, “we can

only assign the probable *causes*, shewing how things *may be* not presuming how they *are*.” In short, Glanvill speculated about the invisible world and Wesley did not.

As already mentioned, Wesley’s first published defence of the reality of witchcraft appeared in his *Journal* for 1768 (published in 1774). It evidently provoked complaints from his brother Charles. In a letter dated May 6, 1774, John Wesley replied to him: “I have no doubt of the substance, both of Glanvil’s and Cotton Mather’s narratives. Therefore, in this point, you that are otherwise minded, bear with me. Veniam petimusque damusque vicissim. Remember, I am, upon full consideration, and seventy years’ experience, just as obstinate in my opinion as you are in yours.”<sup>29</sup> The extent and nature of Wesley’s everyday discourse on witchcraft is unknown, though one assumes he was frequently broached regarding the subject on his many travels. We get a glimpse of the tenor of such conversations from an account of a Dublin dinner party attended in 1787 by the learned Methodist critic William Hales the Rector of Killesandra, Ireland, Thomas Coke (then President of the Irish Methodist Church), several assistant Methodist preachers, and member of the Dublin Society. According to Hale’s recollection:

The conversation during dinner, happening to turn on the subject of Witchcraft, I asked Mr. Wesley whether he had read, and if so, what he thought of Bishop Hutchinson’s book upon Witches?—After some pause, finding that he made no answer, I repeated the question; on which he declared, that Bishop Hutchinson and the whole bench of Bishops together, could not invalidate the reality of witchcraft.<sup>30</sup>

To prove his point he typically referred not to an instance of *maleficium* but to a case of possible possession in Northern England concerning a man who confessed that he and two of his brothers

---

29. John Wesley to Charles Wesley, May 6, 1774, Thomas Marriott, “The Rev. John Wesley on Apparitions and Witchcraft,” *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* 1, 2 4th S. (1845): 991; Luke Tyerman, *Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A., Founder of the Methodists* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1871), 3: 171.

30. William Hales, *Methodism Inspected, Part II* (1805). Extract reprinted in *The Orthodox Churchman’s Magazine and Review* 10 (1806): 143-4.

had committed murder. The three were executed but the supposed victim reappeared, it transpiring that he had fled to France for non-payment of debts. Wesley asked Hales, “was that not plain evidence of witchcraft or demoniacal possession?” “I rather ascribed it to phrenzy or madness,” wrote Hales. One of the preachers chipped in with a case of a violent haunting in Dungannon involving a malicious potato-throwing spirit. The conversation then took a familiar turn as to the falsity of Catholic miracles before Wesley looked at his watch and said he had to attend the Liffey-Street Chapel where ministers were gathered to pray over a woman possessed with an evil spirit. Responding to Hale’s doubts about their success, Wesley “declared, in a solemn tone of voice, that much might be done in this way by prayer and fasting”—though he clearly had not been fasting himself that day. Still, when he rejoined the party again that evening for tea, he reported that their efforts had not been in vain.

Despite all the brickbats that came his way due to his published and conversational thoughts on the invisible world, Wesley had no intention of keeping quiet for the better reception of his broader theology. The creation of the *Arminian Magazine*, a monthly publication that ran between 1778 and 1797, and which Wesley devised and edited until his death in 1791, provided another vehicle for amplifying the defence of the invisible world. The *Magazine* had a circulation of around 7000 copies a month by 1791, which was more than that contemporary literary institution the *Gentleman’s Magazine*. Wesley kept a close control over what his followers published and read, obliging his preachers to promote and sell his publications at every opportunity. As one critic noted in 1795: “There are thousands in this society who will never read anything besides the Bible, and books published by Mr Wesley.”<sup>31</sup>

---

31. Cited in David W Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989), 68.

John Hampson, Jr., a one-time Methodist preacher who disassociated himself from the movement in 1784, and became a Church of England clergyman, commented in his *Memoirs of the Late Rev. John Wesley*, that to give the *Arminian Magazine* “a just character, were no easy task. It is a strange medley of heterogeneous matter . . . a snug corner is reserved for witches and apparitions.”<sup>32</sup> Hales pointedly asked Wesley, “whether such imposing relations of witchcraft and ghosts, might not tend to support the spurious *popish miracles*?”<sup>33</sup>

After Wesley’s death, the criticisms were less diplomatically expressed. “Mr. John Wesley was remarkably superstitious this way”; observed an essayist in 1822, “the early volumes of the *Arminian Magazine*, done especially under his own eye, are full of the most appalling, but incredibly-fanciful stories.” In his biography of Wesley, Robert Southey referred to these accounts as “so silly, as well as monstrous, that they might have nauseated the coarsest appetite for wonder.”<sup>34</sup> Charlotte Brontë almost certainly had the *Arminian Magazine* in mind when one of the two lead female characters in the novel *Shirley*, Caroline Helstone, described a pile of “mad Methodists Magazines” as “full of miracles and apparitions, of preternatural warnings, ominous dreams, and frenzied fanaticism.”<sup>35</sup>

The *Magazine* had a much wider cultural reach than the few thousand Wesleyan households that purchased it. Copies were lent to friends and fellow members, read aloud at gatherings, distributed via circulating and chapel libraries. Children were encouraged to read it as

---

32. John Sampson, *Memoirs of the Late Rev. John Wesley, A.M. With a Review of his Life and Writings* (Sunderland: James Graham, 1791), 3:154. On Sampson see Henry D. Rack, “Wesley Portrayed: Character and Criticism in Some Early Biographies,” *Methodist History* 43, no. 2 (2005): 90-114.

33. See Davies, “Methodism, the Clergy.”

34. “Ghosts,” *The Recreative Review* 3 (1822): 439; Robert Southey, *The Life of Wesley: And the Rise and Progress of Methodism* (London: n.p., 1820), 2: 413. See also William Howells, “Cambrian Superstitions,” *Westminster Review* 17 (1832): 402.

35. See Lee A. Talley, “Jane Eyre’s Little-Known Debt to the Methodist Magazine,” *Brontë Studies* 33 (2008): 109-119.



part of their education. It was also perused out of casual curiosity by those who had no Methodist sympathies. So the readership must have been in the tens of thousands, and extended across the social strata. During the early nineteenth century, furthermore, some of the stories in Wesley's *Journal* and *Arminian Magazine* were reprinted in a popular compilation of preternatural phenomena, *News from the Invisible World*, produced by the former Cornish itinerant Wesleyan preacher John Tregortha. He settled down in the Midlands town of Burslem in 1790 where he kept a circulating library and churned out cheap tracts. Tregortha's stated aim in gathering numerous accounts of prophetic dreams and apparitions from "respectable" but deceased authors, was for the "support of our faith, and practice."<sup>36</sup> The Wesleyan content and purpose of the publication led the Quaker writer and chronicler William Howitt to mistakenly attribute authorship of *News from the Invisible World* to Wesley.<sup>37</sup>

A recent analysis of the preternatural content of the *Arminian Magazine* concluded that the vast majority of relations concerned dreams (mostly of Christ, Hell and Judgement Day), divine communications, and the seeing and hearing of spiritual beings. There were a few cases of miraculous healing and confrontations with the demonic.<sup>38</sup> Not surprisingly extracts from Baxter's *The Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits* were given an airing, as was Glanvill's account of the Tedworth Drummer, and the first substantive account of the now well-known account of the noisy haunting of the Wesleys' Epworth home in 1716-17. Let us focus, though, on the several accounts of witchcraft found in the "snug corner" of the *Arminian Magazine*. Considering his

---

36. Owen Davies, *Ghosts: A Social History* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 2: xiii-xiv.

37. William Howitt, *The Rural Life of England* (London: n.p., 1838), 2: 220.

38. See Liam Iwig-O'Byrne, "How Methodists were Made: The *Arminian Magazine* and Spiritual Transformation in the Transatlantic World, 1778-1803" (PhD thesis, University of Texas at Arlington, 2008), 76-92. See also, Richard Bell, "'Our people die well': Deathbed Scenes in John Wesley's *Arminian Magazine*," *Mortality* 10, no. 3 (2005): 210-23.

pendant for seventeenth century proofs, there was a huge amount of material from which to draw upon. What exactly did Wesley chose to include? What did he choose to ignore?

In 1782 Wesley included an account of the “Devil of Mascon,” which had first been published in French in 1656, with an English edition appearing two years later with a preface by the philosopher Robert Boyle.<sup>39</sup> The *Arminian Magazine*’s reprint of this was prefaced with the quote that began this chapter—and the sentence that followed, to wit, that the truth of witchcraft “was in the last Century acknowledge by all Europe.” To further support this statement, in 1785 the *Magazine* reprinted an account taken from *Saducismus Triumphatus* of the 1669 Mora witch trials in Lutheran Sweden, relating how numerous children accused adults of riding them to witches sabbats. Then in 1787 there was an account of the confession of Alice Huson at the York Assizes (1664), from Matthew Hale’s *A Collection of Modern Relations of Matter of Fact Concerning Witches & Witchcraft* (1693).<sup>40</sup> The young daughter of the Corbet family, of Burton Agnes, fell inexplicably ill. The girl claimed she was bewitched, but her parents were not persuaded. She was treated for natural ailments by physicians but to no avail. Only after four years did the parents come round to the conviction that witchcraft was responsible. Alice Huson and Doll Bilby stood trial for the crime. Bilby was found not guilty, while Huson was condemned but later reprieved. The Corbet’s journey from scepticism to belief after exhausting all other avenues appealed to Wesley’s empiricism, and Huson’s voluntary confession that she had made a pact with the Devil was worthy evidence of Satanic interference. Apart from the Mascon account these cases were printed without any editorial commentary. Abel Stevens approved: “he seldom gives a direct opinion of the supposed preternatural cases which he so

---

39. François Perrault, *The Devill of Mascon, Or, A True Relation of the Chiefe Things which an Unclean Spirit did* (Oxford: Richard Davis, 1658).

40. Matthew Hale’s *A Collection of Modern Relations of Matter of Fact Concerning Witches & Witchcraft* (London: John Harris, 1693), 58-9.

often records . . . they are presented with circumstantial particularity as the data for an opinion on the part of others.”<sup>41</sup>

One of the most telling relations in the *Arminian Magazine* appeared in 1786 and concerned an account of the possession of Mary Glover, a notorious case that spiralled into a sensational religious and medical conflict. In the spring of 1602 Mary Glover, a fourteen-year-old London servant girl began to exhibit the symptoms of possession. Friends and neighbours suspected she had been bewitched by an elderly neighbour named Elizabeth Jackson. Multitudes flocked to see Glover’s fits. The Bishop of London, Richard Bancroft, saw trouble in the oxygen given to the case, and so when Jackson was tried for witchcraft he appointed two respected physicians Edward Jorden and John Argent to assess Glover’s condition. They duly testified that Glover suffered from natural causes. Although still found guilty, Jackson was soon released, perhaps due to Bancroft’s influence. Glover’s torments continued.

In December 1602, Six puritan ministers, including Lewes Hughes, curate of the significant London parish of Great St Helen’s, Bishopsgate, in which Glover lived, “performed that good work of prayer, fasting, and supplication” to expel the devil. Hughes was holding Glover when the Devil apparently fled her body. This result he reported to Bancroft, who was outraged not only that no permission had been given to the ministers, who were, therefore, guilty of illegal conventicle, but that the Church had been dragged further into this popular London sensation. Only the month before, Bancroft had sanctioned the Oxford Professor Thomas Holland to preach at Paul’s Cross, with a message denouncing those who sought “to show the truth of religion by casting out devils.” Indeed, decades later Hughes recalled that, at the time, Bancroft had called him a “Rascall and varlot,” and he and his fellow minsters “Devill finders, Devill puffers, and Devill prayers, and such as could start a devil in a lane, as soone as an hare in

---

41. Stevens, *The History of the Religious Movement*, 397.

Waltham Forrest.”<sup>42</sup> Hughes was imprisoned and on gaining his freedom he left for Bermuda to set up a dissenting church.<sup>43</sup>

The *Arminian Magazine*'s account was based solely on Hughes' version of events published in the early 1640s when he was back in England pursuing his attacks against the Bishops of the Church of England—or Antichrists as he called them. Wesley would have seen Hughes in a sympathetic light, and the *Arminian Magazine* commentary on the case, no doubt written by Wesley, concluded:

seeing he [Hughes] has attested it as an affair in which five other Ministers, together with Dr. *Bencroft*, Lord Chief Justice *Anderson* and Sir *George Crook*, Recorder of *London*, were concerned; and seeing it was publicly tried at the Old Bailey, and the account published while the parties concerned were still living; is it not far more absurd to *doubt* the truth of it, than to *believe* it?<sup>44</sup>

As the details of the case given above show, though, Wesley's critical faculties were little in operation in writing this statement, which seemed to suggest that Bancroft was a fellow believer in the case. Wesley made no reference to the malign powers or otherwise of Elizabeth Jackson. He was clearly convinced of the possession but was he convinced of the witch's guilt and the appropriateness of her prosecution?

The only contemporary account of witchcraft included in the *Arminian Magazine* concerned the bewitchment and possession of a young woman of Cannoby (Canonbie) in Dumfries, a few miles from the English border. It was a parish described in 1855 by working-

---

42. Lewes Hughes, *Certaine Grievances, or the Errours of the Service-Booke Plainely Layd Open* (London: n.p., 1641), 15.

43. Details of the case are discussed in Michael MacDonald, ed. *Witchcraft and Hysteria in Elizabethan London: Edward Jordan and the Mary Glover Case* (London: Routledge, 1991); Thomas Freeman, "Demons, Deviance and Defiance: John Darrell and the Politics of Exorcism in Late Elizabethan England," in Peter Lake and Michael C. Questier, eds. *Conformity and Orthodoxy in the English Church, c. 1560-1660* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000), 56-61; Kathleen R. Sands, *Demon Possession in Elizabethan England* (Westport: Praeger, 2004), 175-91.

44. "Some Account of M. Jackson's Witchcraft," *Arminian Magazine* 9 (1786): 265.

class autobiographer James Dawson Burn as one of “the most noted places for witches and fairies that I remember, and where they lingered longest in the face of civilization.”<sup>45</sup> On November 3, 1781, a young woman of Canonbie dreamed that a local woman commonly thought to be a witch was to obtain power over her for a period of twenty weeks, after which she would either die or be freed from her possession. The next day the woman began to experience fits and the usual symptoms of the possessed. At the expiration of the twenty weeks the symptoms ceased and “she then desired thanks to be returned to Almighty God for her deliverance.” A letter describing the case, written by one who had been an eye and ear witness, was sent to the *Dumfries Weekly Journal* and passed on to Wesley. The facts of the matter were apparently investigated before being included in the *Arminian Magazine*. There was no need for further editorial commentary as the views of the letter writer, although nowhere stated to be a Methodist, accorded perfectly with Wesley’s. “What is very remarkable,” said the author, is that “some who formerly denied the existence of Witches, were that night fully convinced of their mistake, and I believe still continue so.”<sup>46</sup>

The *Arminian Magazine* studiously avoided well-reported contemporary cases of witchcraft. Wesley had no wish to be tainted by association with popular prejudice or popular justice against suspected witches, so several instances of witch swimming reported in the press, such as that at Tring in 1751, which resulted in one of the ring-leaders being hanged, another at Burton Overy, Leicestershire, in 1760, and a further case of swimming at Aston, Leicestershire, in 1776, went unremarked.<sup>47</sup> Unattributed newspaper reports, furthermore, did not pass Wesley’s empirical standards. Better to stick to venerable accounts verified by learned individuals.

---

45. James Dawson Burn, *The Autobiography of a Beggar Boy* (London: William Tweedie, 1855), 33.

46. *Arminian Magazine* 6 (1783): 100-102, 153-6.

47. See Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic, and Culture*, 96-7.

In 1788 the temperature raised by the *Arminian Magazine* was heightened by a sensational possession case in Somerset. George Lukins of the village of Yatton, Somerset, had exhibited the signs of possession on and off for nearly twenty years, but in May 1788 a former neighbour requested the evangelical Joseph Easterbrook, vicar of Temple Church, Bristol, to say prayers over the afflicted man. Easterbrook obliged, requesting that Lukins be brought to Bristol. Here he was visited by various Anglican and Dissenting clergymen. When it came to participating in collective prayer over Lukins, though, the case became a decidedly Wesleyan Methodist affair. “I applied to such of the clergy of the established church . . . as I conceived to be the most cordial in the belief in supernatural influences,” Easterbrook wrote, “but though they acknowledged it as their opinion, that his was a supernatural affliction, I could not prevail upon them to join with me, in this attempt to relieve him.”<sup>48</sup> The six men who eventually joined Easterbrook were Thomas McGeary, headmaster of the Wesleyan Kingswood School and five Wesleyan ministers on the Bristol circuit. The critics had a field day in the press, and the Lukins affair became another Cock Lane remembered for decades as an example of Methodist credulity and opportunism.<sup>49</sup>

Both the Lukins affair and the *Arminian Magazine* caused a boom in public debates about the invisible world. Methodist doctrine was also a frequent topic for London’s debating societies, and Methodists were keen participants.<sup>50</sup> While before 1788 there are only two recorded debates

---

48. Joseph Easterbrook, *An Appeal to the Public Respecting George Lukins* (Bristol: Printed for T. Mills, 1788), 7. The case has been meticulously studied in Barry, *Witchcraft and Demonology*, 206-56.

49. See, for example, *The London Magazine* 2 (1820): 193; *The Church Magazine* 1 (1839): 178.

50. Mary Thale, “Deists, Papists and Methodists at London Debating Societies, 1749-1799,” *History* 86 (2001): 328-47; Donna T. Andrew, ed. *London Debating Societies, 1776-1799* (London: London Record Society, 1994).

about apparitions, between 1789 and 1799 there were thirty-three.<sup>51</sup> In 1788, the Capel-Court Debating Society, Bartholomew Lane, for instance, held three successive Monday meetings on the question, “Is the Rev. Mr. Wesley censurable for publicly maintaining the Existence of Witches, the Doctrine of Apparitions, and Demoniac Possessions?” The Society’s debates apparently attracted those of a Radical bent. The advertisement for the second meeting noted that a false report had been spread that Wesley was the author of the question under debate and he was to attend to rebut the proposition. The proprietors of Capel-Court distanced themselves from the rumours, and opined “Whether Mr. Wesley will speak to this question time alone can determine.” The follow week they reported that the second debate had inspired “a wonderful assemblage of Wit, Ingenuity, and Metaphysical Disquisition,” with a clergyman concluding at the end that “it would be unfair to condemn Mr. Wesley unheard.” An adjournment was then agreed upon and apparently warmly supported by several of Wesley’s friends in attendance who agreed to try and coax Wesley to honour the final debate. Wesley did not oblige, but the Society’s organizers reported that those who attended were “numerous, brilliant, and respectable: Several characters of the first eminence among the Clergy and Laity honoured and assisted a Debate with their abilities, which after three evening’s investigation, terminated in Mr. Wesley’s favour.”<sup>52</sup> A fascinating outcome suggesting that Wesley’s defence of the invisible world was by no means the isolated conviction of a cranky aging enthusiast.

Wesley was no public advocate of the witch trials—of the campaign to exterminate those pitiful folk who supposedly succumbed to the Devil’s blandishments and intimidation; his was a battle cry against the Devil himself. He extracted and abstracted witches from the received concept of witchcraft better to defend and simplify his war against the continued satanic threat.

---

51. Thale, “Deists, Papists and Methodists,” 334; Davies, *The Haunted*, 128.

52. *World*, July 14, July 21, and July 28, 1788.

But in clinging to the language of witchcraft he only served to isolate himself publicly from the broader and well-engrained institutional acceptance of Satanic influence, which pervaded the rhetoric, rubric and testimony of criminality and British jurisprudence in the Enlightenment period.<sup>53</sup>

With the death of Wesley the temperature of the Methodist brain began to drop. In 1798 the *Arminian Magazine* was re-titled the *Methodist Magazine*. Once out of Wesley's hands the "snug corner" dedicated to the invisible world was closed down, and under the editorship of Joseph Benson between 1803 and 1821 the *Magazine* distanced itself more generally from Wesley's preoccupations, including the promotion of female preachers and reports of exciting revival meetings: in short it became a more sober, conservative, rationalist Nonconformist publication reflecting the general shift of Methodism away from the providential and evangelical to the institutional.<sup>54</sup> References to witchcraft were concerned strictly with Biblical reflection and with the "heathenish" beliefs encountered overseas by Methodist missionaries. The invisible world was a matter for the pagan "other": witchcraft *belief* and not *witchcraft* was now the

---

53. See Owen Davies, "Talk of the Devil: Crime and Satanic Inspiration in Eighteenth-Century England," (2007), [http://www.academia.edu/224811/Talk\\_of\\_the\\_Devil\\_Crime\\_and\\_Satanic\\_Inspiration\\_in\\_Eighteenth-Century\\_England](http://www.academia.edu/224811/Talk_of_the_Devil_Crime_and_Satanic_Inspiration_in_Eighteenth-Century_England). Erik Midelfort has observed the development of a similar discourse on "witchcraft without witches" in eighteenth-century Germany. See, Erik Midelfort, *Exorcism and Enlightenment: Johann Joseph Gassner and the Demons of Eighteenth-Century Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

54. See Josef L. Altholz, *The Religious Press in Britain, 1760-1900* (New York: Greenwood, 1989); Jonathan R. Topham, "The *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* and Religious Monthlies in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain," in Geoffrey Cantor et al., *Science in the Nineteenth-Century Periodical: Reading the Magazine of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 67-91; Louis Billington, "The Religious Periodical and Newspaper Press, 1760-1870," in Michael Harris and Alan Lee, eds. *The Press in English Society from the Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986), esp. 115-19.



problem.<sup>55</sup> So, when the young Wesleyan missionary William Binnington Boyce reported back from South Africa in 1831, he described having to deal not only with the murder of a suspected witch, justified by the locals “on the plea of ancient usage,” but also native suspicions that the missionaries had the power to bewitch. “Superstition results as naturally from Atheism, as from the most corrupted systems of Paganism,” he concluded.<sup>56</sup>

In 1845 the *Arminian Magazine*, renamed the *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*, included a brief note by Thomas Marriott, once dubbed the “Methodist antiquary” for his accumulation of works and manuscripts on the history of Methodism, compiling everything Wesley said on witchcraft in his published works. The article only stretched to two pages in all. There was no commentary other than that Samuel Wesley opposed his views on the subject. Two further articles appeared over the next few years, though, that attacked such beliefs without mentioning Wesley’s name. In 1847 it printed an article on the “Sources of Superstition” by the Independent minister, Rev. James Godkin, who was a missionary in Ulster. Godkin held that “credulity has always fostered superstition” and that while both Protestants and Catholics were prone to it and the marvellous stories that fed it, the “former generally condemn and resist them, while by the latter they are generally sanctioned and fostered.” Four years later, another piece “On the history of witchcraft” described how the witch trials of the seventeenth century were “a sort of infectious disease of the intelligence—a plague-spot of the age,” and once the absurdity of the accusations became clear to judges and juries witchcraft ceased to exist.<sup>57</sup> The message was clear: mainstream Methodism had purged itself of Wesley’s preternatural views. But stray from the

---

55. See Owen Davies, *Paganism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 65-83.

56. *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* 10, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series (1831): 860-2.

57. Thomas Marriott, “The Rev. John Wesley on Apparitions and Witchcraft,” *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* 1, 2 4<sup>th</sup> S. (1845): 989-991; *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* 3 4<sup>th</sup> S. (1847): 397-400; *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* 7, 4<sup>th</sup> S. (1851): 37.

orthodox organs of the churches and theologians, and Wesley's invisible world reveals itself here and there in the grassroots during the early nineteenth century.

Between 1819 and 1820 two cases of witch-induced possession excited the people of south Devon. The first concerned the four daughters of a grocer and lay preacher named John Kennard. The girls, like most of the supposedly possessed, were aged between seven and sixteen, and exhibited such characteristic symptoms as fits, running up walls, superhuman strength, moving objects and vomiting pins. Blame was placed upon an old woman who had an altercation with one of the girls. The case was reported in the local press, but does not seem to have been broadcast more widely by national newspapers. This was done by the Wesleyan Methodist preacher John Heaton.<sup>58</sup>

In his late thirties, Heaton (1782-1862), the son of Methodists, had, from around 1810, been a minister on the Truro circuit in Cornwall, becoming a preacher at the Ker Street chapel in Plymouth Dock in 1818, a community that supported a range of Nonconformist congregations. He was Wesleyan to the bone, admiring the founder's public defence of the reality of witchcraft and the invisible world. "Those who have said he was *credulous*," Heaton wrote, "have never yet shown a reason why he should not give proportionate credence to what he knew to be sterling evidence." There were no better collective proofs than the word of God, one's own eyes, and the "faithful testimony of men of sound judgement and unimpeachable veracity."<sup>59</sup>

---

58. James Heaton, *The Demon Expelled: Or, The Influence of Satan, and the Power of Christ, displayed in the Extraordinary Affliction, and Gracious Relief of a Boy* (Plymouth Dock: n.p., 1820); Idem., *The Extraordinary Affliction and Gracious Relief of a Little Boy* (Plymouth: n.p., 1822); Idem., *Farther Observations on Demoniac Possession, and Animadversions on Some of the Curious Arts of Superstition, &c.* (Frome n.p., 1822). The case has been skilfully analysed in Jason Semmens, "I will not go to the Devil for a Cure': Witchcraft, Demonic Possession, and Spiritual Healing in Nineteenth-Century Devon," *Journal for the Academic Study of Magic* 2 (2004): 132-55; Jason Semmens, "The Dock Dæmoniac: Or, A Study of Possession, Dissent, and Healing in Early Nineteenth Century Plymouth" (master's thesis, Exeter University, 2001).

59. Heaton, *The Extraordinary Affliction*, 126-7.

After service at Windmill-Hill Chapel on the February 29, 1820, Heaton was approached by a neighbour named John Lose, who told him that his step-son John Evens exhibited all the signs of demonic possession—convulsions, barking like a dog, swearing, suicide attempts, and “a furious antipathy to anything sacred.” It is likely that Evens was influenced by hearing of the Kennard case. The contagious effect of possession is well documented. John Kennard, who was on the District Committee of the Plymouth Dock Methodist Auxiliary Missionary Society, came to see Evens, telling his family and assembled witnesses that the boy was clearly troubled with the same satanic malady as his daughters. Heaton thought Evens suffered from occasional epilepsy, but this was merely an effect of his possession and not the cause. Medical men could not cure him, and so Heaton began to attend the boy on a daily basis. On the March 22<sup>nd</sup>, a concerted attempt to dispel the demon by prayer was apparently successful. But the symptoms commenced again soon afterwards. A second demon expelling was attempted on April 19th. Those who aided Heaton in his prayers over the boy included Thomas Robinson a Wesleyan Methodist minister attached to the Ebenezer Chapel, Eastlake Street, Plymouth; William Coath, a rope manufacturer associated with the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel, Gloucester Street, Plymouth; John Rendle of Polperro, a cordwainer and notably active Wesleyan lay preacher living in Bideford at the time; Thomas Sibly, who was possibly one and the same as the Thomas Sibly who was a geometry teacher at Kingswood Methodist School in 1833 and later Headmaster of the Wesleyan College, Taunton; Thomas May, who was on the District Committee of the Plymouth Dock Methodist Auxiliary Missionary Society; and William Almond, a baker who paid subscription to the Plymouth Dock circuit.<sup>60</sup>

---

60. *The Annual Report of the Methodist Auxiliary Missionary Society, for the Plymouth Dock District* (Plymouth Dock: n.p., 1820), 16; Plymouth and North Devon Record Office, PH/146; John Gould Hayman, *A History of the Methodist Revival of the Last Century, in its*

Evens said he was “overlooked” and described the witch responsible; “in several things, he imitated her exactly,” Heaton observed. But Heaton’s interpretation of this attempt to confirm the guilt of a suspected witch before a community of believers is highly significant, for he articulates what I think is Wesley’s position with regard to witches. Evens ‘asserting that he was bewitched, is not a sufficient proof of the fact: and it would be cruel to criminate a poor old woman without substantial evidence of guilt,’ wrote Heaton. “If it were true, that a wicked human being had employed evil arts to afflict him, that injury could not have been inflicted but by the agency of an evil spirit; therefore, to this great cause of the mischief our attention should be chiefly directed.”<sup>61</sup> Heaton, like Wesley it would seem, had no interest in punishing or ostracizing witches.

Heaton was also acutely conscious of the pitfalls of debate on the subject of witchcraft and possession: “Though frequently requested,” he reflected, “he did not think it prudent to narrate the case in public congregations; his words might have been misunderstood and misrepresented.”<sup>62</sup> To write long letters to friends and acquaintances would have been too much of a burden on his time, so publication seemed “the safest, the least objectionable, the most useful and satisfactory, and, all things considered—the best” means of proving the case and defending his involvement. Heaton had read Durbin’s posthumously published account of the Lamb Inn possession, and drew upon the stylistic narrative and empirical approach of that account. As Jason Semmens has observed, where it departed was in Heaton’s interjection of his own interpretations and the ascription of motive with regard to events.<sup>63</sup> The result was three pamphlets, beginning with *The Demon Expelled: Or, The Influence of Satan, and the Power of*

---

*Relations to North Devon* (London: Woolmer, 1885), 101, 118; *The History of Kingswood by Three Old Boys* (London: Publisher, 1898), 137; Semmens, “The Dock Dæmoniac,” 22.

61. Heaton, *The Extraordinary Affliction*, 30-31.

62. Heaton, *The Extraordinary Affliction*, iii.

63. Semmens, “I will not go the Devil for a Cure,” 135-6.

*Christ*. Heaton produced a second enlarged edition with the more subtle title *The Extraordinary Affliction and Gracious Relief of a Little Boy: Supposed to be the Effects of Spiritual Agency*.

Heaton explained that the first edition “was received with more satisfaction and approbation than the writer anticipated,” but there had been criticisms, not least that the original title was “so bold as to startle some readers, and prevent deliberate examination of their propriety.”<sup>64</sup> A third pamphlet entitled *Farther Observations on Demoniac Possession* developed the themes of the wickedness of resorting to charms and cunning-folk, and the falsity of Catholic exorcism.

The three pamphlets were studiously ignored by the *Methodist Magazine*, though *The Extraordinary Affliction* received a critical review in the *Imperial Magazine*, which was edited by the Cornish Methodist theologian Samuel Drew (1765-1833). The reviewer opined that the account might have served a useful purpose if Heaton had acted the “disinterested historian” and left it the readers to draw their own conclusions rather than be subjected to special pleading.<sup>65</sup> It circulated widely enough though. In 1848 George Sandby, Vicar of Flixton, Suffolk, commented that the *Demon Expelled* had sold well, and used it as a good contemporary example of how possession cases could be explained away as mesmeric illness.<sup>66</sup> William Howitt sent a copy of one of one of Heaton’s “curious” pamphlets on the case to Sir Walter Scott, who said he intended to make use of it in his work. Howitt referred to it as an example of how Methodists in general were “firmly persuaded of demoniacal possession,” which was far from the truth at the time.<sup>67</sup> A correspondent to *Notes and Queries* in 1870 remarked that he knew Heaton and had

---

64. Heaton, *The Extraordinary Affliction*, iii, vi.

65. *Imperial Magazine* 5 (1823): 270-2; cited in Semmens, “I will not go the Devil for a Cure,” 136. On Drew and Cornish Methodist critique see Clive D. Field, “The Mania of Methodism Reconsidered: Richard Polwhele’s Polemics against the Methodists, 1799-1836,” *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall*, New Series 2, 4 (1997): 75-89.

66. George Sandby, *Mesmerism and its Opponents*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Longman, 1848), 288.

67. Howitt, *Rural Life*, 2: 220.

discussed the matter of demoniacs with him, describing Heaton's published accounts as "very curious books."<sup>68</sup> Its curiosity value clearly piqued Lewis Carroll's interest, for we find a copy of *Demon Expelled* in his library.

In 1853 the *Local Preachers' Magazine*, the authorized organ of the Wesleyan Methodist Local Preachers, included an anonymous account of possible demoniacal possession observed the previous year. The author recalled reading Heaton's *Extraordinary Affliction* a quarter of a century before, and used the account to compare with the details of the one he had recently witnessed. It concerned a 37-year-old man, who had been inspired to attend class after hearing the revivalist Methodist minister James Caughey, whose sermons were full of the Devil and hell fire.<sup>69</sup> After three months he began to have fits, swearing terribly, and uncontrollably. In short he was convinced he was possessed. His family had him removed to a lunatic asylum, where he was visited by a dissenting minister, a Primitive Methodist minister, and the author (presumably a Wesleyan). On one occasion the man was released for a day to visit his sister—which became a pretext to have him "exorcised." Those gathered for the task were the aforementioned ministers, a preacher of the Wesleyan Association, and another of the New Connexion Methodists, plus a couple of other men of prayer. After several hours, they failed to expel the devil, but were heartened that they had weakened its power over the man. The author of the account was perplexed: "are the facts of this case sufficient to sustain the belief that it is a case of demoniacal possession? I cannot determine that question." "Mr. Wesley laid great stress upon such cases, as evidence of satanic influence and of the reality of the spiritual world. I wait for more light, and

---

68. William Bates, "Demoniacs," *Notes and Queries* 4<sup>th</sup> Series, 6 (1870): 79.

69. See, for example, James Caughey and Daniel Wise, *Earnest Christianity Illustrated* (Boston: n.p., 1855).

shall be glad to receive it from any of my brethren,” he concluded.<sup>70</sup> Such a letter would never have been included in the *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*, but the fact that it was in the organ of the “Wesleyan Local Preachers” suggests a greater grassroots adherence to Wesleyan spiritualism, and the facts of the case show how such instances of demonianism brought together interested parties from a variety of Methodist and Independent groups.

The sensational trial of William Dove in 1856 provided a belated opportunity for the critics of Methodism to wheel out the old accusations of credulity and superstition. From one of the most respected and influential Wesleyan families in Leeds, and brought up in the best Wesleyan schools, Dove fell in thrall to the supposed powers of a local wizard named Henry Harrison who inadvertently inspired Dove to poisoning his own wife. While in gaol, Dove wrote a pact with the Devil in his own blood, requesting his satanic majesty get him “clear at the assizes.” It was a sign of how mainstream the Methodist movement had become that no mud was flung in public with regard to Dove’s beliefs. Wesleyan Methodist newspapers were keen to portray him as a sad lunatic, other sections of the press denounced him as a cool, cold killer.

As Methodism became part of the establishment, new evangelical revivalist groups emerged who kept Wesley’s invisible world alive, thereby maintaining that earthy link with popular spiritual concerns and folk beliefs, and attracting familiar criticisms.<sup>71</sup> Hugh Bourne, leader of the Camp Meeting Methodists, wrote of reading about visions and trances in Wesley’s *Journals*, and at least for a short while he believed in the power of witches thanks to the influence of James Crawfoot, leader of the Forest or Magic Methodists. The two men first met in

---

70. “Demonic Possession,” *The Local Preachers’ Magazine and Christian Family Record* New Series, 1(1853): 10-13.

71. James Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey 1825-1875* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 231-2; Deborah M. Valenze, *Prophetic Sons and Daughters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 247-8; Robert Colls, *The Pitmen of the Northern Coalfield: Work, Culture, and Protest, 1790-1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 173.

1807 and over the next few years they worked closely together. Crawfoot was more heavily engaged in the battle against Satan and his minions, expelling demons and combating the powers of suspected witches. In one journal entry Bourne wrote that “it appears that they [witches] have been engaged against James Crawfoot ever since he had a terrible time praying with and for a woman who was in witchcraft.”<sup>72</sup> The extent of Crawfoot’s influence upon Bourne is a matter of debate, but it would seem that Bourne distanced himself from such views, or was at least silent regarding them, from 1813 onwards.<sup>73</sup>

Some of these various groups fed into what became the Primitive Methodist movement, with Hugh Bourne taking a lead role in its establishment and growth. But by the 1840s the Primitive Methodist establishment had already distanced itself from Wesleyan preternaturalism and Bourne’s early adherence to Wesley’s invisible world. The “Family Department” section of the *Primitive Methodist Magazine* for 1849, for instance, advised that telling children stories of witches, ghosts and goblins was “Abominable! Such impressions are often ruinous, lasting as eternity. Some children have been actually frightened to death!”<sup>74</sup> By the 1870s a Primitive Methodist chronicler of Skelmanthorpe, Yorkshire, could recall that the Wesleyans had done much to improve the moral character of the inhabitants but were unable to cope with a growing population who believed in witches and omens, and who were addicted to cock-fighting and foolishness—until the Primitive Methodist preachers arrived and “took a bold stand against the

---

72. Quoted in W.R. Ward, “The Religion of the People and the Problem of Control, 1760-1830,” in Geoffrey .J. Cuming and Derek Baker, eds. *Popular Belief and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 242.

73. See John N. Brittain, “Hugh Bourne and the Magic Methodists,” *Methodist History* 46, no. 3 (2008):132-40; John W.B. Tomlinson, “The Magic Methodists and their Influence on the Early Primitive Methodist Movement,” in Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory, eds. *Signs, Wonders, Miracles: Representations of Divine Power in the Life of the Church* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), 389-400; Henry Rack, *James Crawfoot and the Magic Methodists* (Englesea Brook: Englesea Brook Primitive Methodist Museum Committee, 2003). My thanks to Jill Barber for providing a copy of the latter.

74. *Primitive Methodist Magazine* 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, 7 (1849): 103.



follies and vices of the people.”<sup>75</sup> Once again the erstwhile witch believers had become the foes of “superstition.” Yet as we have seen, on the ground Wesleyans and Primitive Methodists continued to share interest and belief in the possibility of diabolic possession, if not witches.

\*\*\*

The mid-nineteenth century saw various Methodist apologies for Wesley’s belief in the invisible world, usually along the lines of that expressed by Abel Stevens: “When it is remembered that Wesley’s age was one of general scepticism among thinkers, we cannot be surprised if he revolted, in his great work, to the opposite extreme, and the error was certainly on the best side. Credulity might injure his work, but scepticism would have ruined it, or rather would have rendered it impossible.”<sup>76</sup> But then the growing enthusiasm for spiritualism in the 1850s held out the possibility that Wesley was right after all: the spirit realm could and did interact with the living. The age of miracles and providence was not dead. The first volume of *The Spiritual Magazine* in 1860 included an essay on “Spiritualism and John Wesley” in which the author claimed Wesley “was a Spiritualist, and dared to avow his spiritualism in the midst of the faithless, we had almost said, godless eighteenth century in which he lived. Yes, we repeat it, Wesley was an avowed spiritualist.” The account of the Epworth haunting from the *Arminian Magazine* was held up by spiritualists as important evidence that the spirit rapping at séances had precedence from a source of the highest worth. So the front cover of the first edition of the

---

75. *Primitive Methodist Magazine*, New Series, 12 (1874): 680-81. See also Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society*, 254.

76. Stevens, *The History of the Religious Movement*, 397.

*Spiritualist* newspaper in 1869 concerned the Epworth haunting.<sup>77</sup> Just as Wesley had based his convictions on the evidence of divines and philosophers born two or three generations before himself, so Wesley was now cited as venerable proof by subsequent generations of spiritual seekers. His views on witchcraft, which were inextricably tied to his belief in the spirit realm, were conveniently ignored in the process.

---

77. *The Spiritual Magazine* 1 (1860): 178; Georgina Byrne, *Modern Spiritualism and the Church of England, 1850-1939* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2010), 104-5.