



Susanna Annesley

1669 – 1742

“Children, as soon as I am released sing a psalm of praise to God,” whispered the seventy-three year old mother of the Wesleys minutes before she died. Five of her children were present. She had had nineteen, ten of whom had survived infancy. The most famous would be John (fifteenth) and Charles (eighteenth). A large family was nothing new to her. The day she was baptized her father had written a friend that Susanna was the most recent of “twenty-four or a quarter of a hundred, I am not sure which.” (The latter estimate was correct.)

Susanna’s spiritual and intellectual formation was rich. Her father was a learned Puritan clergyman whose home welcomed a stream of Puritan preachers, scholars and writers, among whom were Thomas Manton (his *Works* comprised 22 volumes) and John Owen, the ablest theologian among the Puritans and at one time the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University.

In 1662 The Act of Uniformity decreed that all clergy must conform to all beliefs and practices of the Church of England. Two thousand refused and were expelled from pulpit, parsonage and university during “The Great Ejection.” John Bunyan (author of *Pilgrim’s Progress*) was imprisoned. Others scabbled to feed their dependents, teaching school or preaching clandestinely whenever and wherever they emerged from hiding.

Little wonder that Susanna horrified her parents when at age twelve she announced that she was returning to the Church of

England! (Subsequently she wrote down her reasons for doing so, but her documents were destroyed in the Epworth rectory fire of 1709, the blaze in which six year old John narrowly escaped perishing.)

One year later at her sister's wedding she met nineteen year old Samuel Wesley. He too was moving from Dissent back to the Church of England even though his father had been fatally mistreated during The Great Ejection. (His father had died at forty-two during his fourth imprisonment.) In 1688 Samuel and Susanna were married. The marriage was troublous. Samuel, chronically in debt, kept his family in financial hardship; in addition he fancied himself a poet and scholar, deflecting time, energy and preoccupation to entirely forgettable poetry and a Latin commentary on the book of Job which consumed twenty-five years. Not surprisingly Susanna wrote, "I think we are not likely to live happily together."

One day Samuel noticed that Susanna did not say "Amen" to his prayers for the king. When asked to explain herself Susanna replied, "He [William of Orange] is no king; he is but a prince." Susanna supported British royal descent; the Dutchman was an interloper. "If we are going to have two kings in this house then we shall have two beds," fumed Samuel as he departed for London. Susanna insisted she would apologize if it could be shown where she was wrong; but to "apologize" insincerely for mere expedience would be a lie and therefore sin. An archbishop agreed that Samuel's absence was a violation of his marriage vows (by now they had had fourteen children). Five months later Samuel returned home; the night he and Susanna were reconciled John was conceived.

Cherishing the rich Puritan heritage of academic excellence Susanna set up a school in her home. Classes were held six hours per day, six days per week. "It is almost incredible what a child may be taught in a quarter of a year by a vigorous application," commented Susanna, ". . . all could read better in that time than most women can do as long as they live." The curriculum consisted both of academic subjects and of Christian instruction. The spiritual formation of her children was undertaken through her weekly private conversations with them all: "On Monday I talk with Molly, on Tuesday with Hetty, . . . on Thursday with Jacky" (as she always called John).

Judging the sermons of Samuel's assistant to be vacuous Susanna decided that whenever her husband was out of the pulpit the assis-

tant's feeble pronouncements should be supplemented by more nourishing fare. Whereupon she took it upon herself to read from a book of sermons to villagers who overflowed her home on Sunday afternoons. (As a woman in the Church of England Susanna was not allowed to "preach"; nonetheless ecclesiastical authorities deemed reading someone else's sermon aloud in public to be acceptable!) Years later when John hesitated at allowing a layman to preach, Susanna wrote, "That fellow is as much called as you are."

Her influence upon John and Charles, and through them upon worldwide Methodists, is incalculable. While Methodism came to display its characteristic spirit, its unique style (outdoor preaching to huge crowds of the unchurched, for instance), and its special emphases (not least its conviction that God could do something about sin beyond forgiving it), Susanna was the conduit for the Puritan riches that so largely formed the substance of Methodism.

Like Deborah of old she was "a mother in Israel" (Judges 5:7) as she bequeathed to her sons and their heirs the wealth for which her foreparents had suffered unspeakably: the necessity for doctrine as a provisional statement of the truth of God, vigorously disciplined discipleship, the believer's assurance of fellowship with Christ, intense concern for evangelism and pastoral care, veneration of the sovereignty of grace, and insistence on "faith working through love."

A few years before she died she had written John, "I have long since chosen him [God] for my only good, my all. . . ." The Holy One of Israel who had kept Deborah and Rachel, Ruth and Naomi, Elizabeth and Mary, Lydia and the unnamed woman who was a "mother" to the apostle Paul (Rom. 16:13) proved sufficient to keep Susanna as well.

Her remains are buried in the same cemetery as those of her Puritan foreparents: John Bunyan, John Owen, and Isaac Watts.

