

# Viewpoint: Susanna Wesley

In the year of our Lord seventeen hundred and thirty-five [1735],  
I, Susanna Wesley, am now a widow.

Samuel died last week, on the 25th of April, at the age of 72. Four of our children were with him as the end approached. [Emilia, Sukey, John, and Charles] We buried him here in Epworth, in the churchyard, beside the church to which he had devoted 38 years of his industrious life.

## My Homes

I have lived here in Epworth for 38 of my 66 years, and now I must move; a new rector will soon be appointed to take over the parish. Here, I gave birth to 12 of our 19 children, and we buried six children here. My husband left few possessions, he still owed money, and his commentary on Job was not finished. Consequently I will be dependent solely on the charity of my children. I'm going first to stay with daughter Emilia who conducts a girls' boarding school at Gainsborough. Emilia's income is small, but it will provide the necessities of life. [After more than a year with Emilia, Susanna went to reside with son Samuel at Tiverton, September 1736. Nearly a year later, she went to live with Westley and Patty (Martha) Hall; she next went to live with John at his apartment in London at the Foundery which he acquired about December 1739.]

I've been thinking some about my other homes. Those of my girlhood were luxurious, compared to those of my married life. I was born in January of 1669, the last of the 25 children of Dr. Samuel Annesley. Father was born to devout Puritan parents, graduated from Oxford, was ordained and became pastor of a church in county Kent, and not too long after, moved to London. Then, in 1662, before I was born, Parliament passed the Act of Uniformity which commanded all ministers to conform to the beliefs and practices of the Church of England. Father was among the 2,000 who refused to submit to this edict. These men, called Dissenters or nonconformists, were ejected from their churches and from their parsonages, and were forbidden to preach. After about ten years, King Charles II relaxed some of the laws forbidding their activity, with the result that many of the surviving Dissenters launched into vigorous ministries. My father was among them. He leased a meeting-house in a London district known as Little St. Helen's, Bishopsgate Street, where he quickly built up a flourishing congregation. During the years of his pastorate in Little Saint Helen's, we lived in Spital Yard, a street of good homes in a highly respectable district. This is the home I remember. I was surrounded by good books and was taught to think for myself. If Universities had admitted women, I could have held my own among the scholars, including theological debates and the writing of scholarly papers.

Father's associates frequently visited our home, talking frequently about the differences between the Church of England and their own dissenting beliefs. Despite all their arguments and the practices of my father, I came to the conclusion that Dissent was wrong and that the Church of England was right. When I was 13, I quit the church of which Father was pastor and was received into one belonging to the Church of England.

## **My First Acquaintance with Samuel**

It was at about this same time that I became acquainted with my future husband. [Samuel was much shorter than I, only about 5 foot 4 inches, and of a somewhat military and autocratic bearing.] I was 13, and he was 19. His name at that time was Westley, with a "t" in the middle. Shortly after, he changed the spelling so as not to show disrespect to his father's name when, like myself, he departed from the Dissenter group to which his father had given his allegiance. So we had a similar background and a strong religious affiliation in common. Samuel spent five years as a student at Oxford, graduating in June of 1688, and we were married in November. We set up housekeeping in a small apartment on the Thames. [Samuel was 26 and Susanna was 19.]

## **Our Early Marriage Years**

Just prior to our marriage, Samuel was ordained in the Church of England and had taken a London curacy for 28 pounds a year. Finding it difficult to live on that small salary, he accepted a position of chaplain aboard a naval vessel on the Irish Sea because it promised 70 pounds a year. That life didn't agree with him, and he quit it after six months, with his wages delayed. While he was gone, I lived at a boarding-house, and so he joined me there. Next, Samuel acquired a position in the London suburb of Newington Butts as a curate at 30 pounds a year, and though the money didn't stretch far, we were happy, especially because of the birth of our first child, a son, whom we named Samuel after his father and grandfather. [Samuel was born at his grandfather's home in London.]

In July [1690], Samuel received a letter from South Ormsby, offering him a living there of 50 pounds, to replace their recently deceased rector. How different that was from my London upbringing! Located 150 miles away, in Lincolnshire, it was many miles away even from Lincoln, the only large town. South Ormsby, with a population of only 206, was perched on a rutted mud track, within the boggy moors and forests of the Lincolnshire Wolds. Here and there were gloomy little farmsteads, huddled amid scraggly pastures. The rectory was simply a mud hut with no glass behind the shutters. The goodwives had cleaned and swept it, but it was so small, just a room plus a loft.

## **Births and Deaths of Several Children**

Our second child was born there; we named her after me. She was so tiny, born much too early, listless and sickly. I was pregnant again within a year and named this child Emilia. In 1694, baby Susanna, our sickly second child, died. So did our first set of twins; they lived only a month. While at South Ormsby, two more children were born. We named our sixth child Susanna, after me and after her sister who had died; both she and I were usually called "Sukie." Our seventh child Mary we nicknamed "Molly." Molly was permanently maimed by a maid's carelessness. Despite our poverty, we did have a maid occasionally, as was the custom of the day, and in particular because I was confined to bed so often. With six pregnancies in the first eight years of our marriage, my health was poor.

### **Son Samuel Finally Talks**

Our oldest son Samuel was obviously bright, and yet, he didn't speak. At the age of five, he was getting old enough to begin reading and ciphering, and I longed to teach him. But how would I know whether he had learned his lessons if he didn't recite them aloud? Samuel was a happy child and usually obedient. One afternoon I realized that he wasn't with the other children, and I began to search for him outside, but to no avail. Back inside our cottage, I called out again, "Samuel, where are you?" And out from under the tablecloth came Samuel, answering in a gentle child voice, a voice I had never heard, "Here I am, Mother." After this incident, he spoke fluently. I set up school for him, and later I did the same for our other children. [Source: Sandy Dengler: Susanna Wesley, pp 81-88.]

### **Financial Problems**

We were facing some hard times. Samuel, as usual, was much in debt. So he accepted a curacy at two additional small charges, one at the parish of South Thoresby and two years later one at the parish of Swaby.

### **My Father's Death**

In late 1696, I learned that my beloved father was unwell. But because of the cost of travel and my family duties, I couldn't go to him. All I could do was pray and wait for letters reporting on his condition. When he died, it was with shock and disappointment that I learned that my name was not mentioned in his will. Except for one shilling to be paid to each of his children, he divided his estate between my brother Benjamin, and my unmarried sisters Judith and Anne. Then came a letter reporting that my sister Elizabeth had died -- Elizabeth who had often looked after me, who was most like me, and at whose wedding, I had caught the attention of her husband's friend Samuel Wesley.

### **Continued Financial Problems**

We hoped that hard times would be behind us when the opportunity came to move here to Epworth. Samuel's salary would be much larger--200 pounds compared to the mere 50 pounds at the South Ormsby parish. In particular, I was happy to move into a rectory that was larger and somewhat better than the one we left. Samuel was much encouraged by new opportunities associated with the appointment. He was invited to journey to London and other cities to preach to persons of wealth and influence. Unfortunately, Samuel had to meet his own travel expenses, and this cut deeply into our living. Moreover, he decided to try his hand at farming, but due to his inexperience, this venture actually increased rather than reduced his debts.

### **More Children**

Our eighth child Mehitabel arrived; we called her "Hetty." Over the next five years, I gave birth to five more babies, including another set of twins. All five babies died in infancy. And we had two terrible house fires here at Epworth.

### **My Husband Forsakes Me**

But perhaps my greatest sadness and sorrow came when I was forsaken by my husband. He left me, his family, and his church flock for nearly six months, then came back and lived with us as before. What led up to this was a miserable squabble between us. At prayers, Samuel observed that I did not say "Amen" to his prayer for King William. When he pushed for an explanation, I stated that I did not believe that William of Orange was our rightful king, a belief held by many at the time. In fact, a considerable body of Englishmen refused to swear allegiance to him; these people were known as "non-jurors," and several clergymen were expelled from their livings because of their refusal to recognize William of Orange as king. I'm sure that Samuel found my opinion a possible threat to his own clerical position. At any rate, this is what happened. "He immediately kneeled down and imprecated the divine vengeance upon himself and all his posterity if ever he touched me more or came into a bed with me before I had begged God's pardon and his for not saying Amen to the prayer for the king." [Source: a letter from Susanna to the Lady Yarlborough, March 7, 1701-2, as quoted by Arnold A. Dallimore: Susanna Wesley. Lady Yarlborough was a non-juror.]

I was pregnant when Samuel left, and in the midst of this mess, I gave birth to a daughter. By this time, King William had died, and a legitimate ruler came to the throne--Queen Anne. I named my daughter Anne for her.

### **Our House Caught Fire**

Meanwhile, Samuel was off to Lincoln. He even applied for a ship's chaplaincy. He came back once, stayed two days and then left me early one morning, saying he resolved never to see me more. Then came still another misfortune--our house caught fire; two-thirds of it burned, and most of our household goods were spoiled. At least the fire had one very valuable result. Samuel decided to stay at home and rebuild it, using the fire as his justification for doing so.

### **Reunited With My Husband**

We managed to patch our differences and come back together. Our relationship was strained, and I seldom left the house, devoting all my time and strength to my children. The following June, I gave birth to John Benjamin Wesley, the fruit of our renewed union. We nicknamed him Jackie. He was our fifteenth child.

The following year, we sent Sammy Jr. off to school at St. Peter's School attached to Westminster Abbey. That was very hard on me, him being so young. We could little afford to bear such expense, but my husband was determined he would give his boys the best education that the country could provide. Meanwhile, the girls and young John attended my school in the rectory. Even while our house was being repaired from fire damages, I set apart one room for the purpose of a school and conducted classes six days a week, from nine to twelve, and then from two till five. I practiced strong discipline. I provided both academic subjects and religious instruction. My basic purpose was "the saving of their souls."

## **Samuel Is Thrown Into Debtors' Prison**

Meanwhile, Samuel was occupied with political matters. This was a Whig region, and we were Tories. During a political protest outside our house, our nursemaid accidentally smothered our sixteenth child. Shortly afterward, Sam was thrown into debtors' prison in Lincoln. In his behalf, I went to John Sharpe, the Archbishop of York, and he and others came to Samuel's aid. Released from debtors' prison, Samuel then began talking about a plan that he had developed for the furtherance of foreign missions. He spoke of learning the Hindostan language and going to India, but nothing came of it.

## **More Children and a Second Devastating Fire**

That next year [1706, or early 1707] our Martha was born; we called her "Patty." Then came Charles just before Christmas of 1707, so tiny, no one expected him to live. But once he outgrew the setback of an early birth, he became by many measures my brightest, cheeriest, prettiest child, and certainly the most active.

Charles and Patty were toddlers and John not quite six, and I was eight months pregnant when we suffered a second devastating fire here in Epworth. It broke out about eleven or twelve at night, all of us in bed. We weren't aware of any fire until a corner of the roof fell upon Hetty's bed. She awakened and ran to call her father. He carried Emilia and Sukie, and Patty into the garden, then missing Jackie, ran back into the house to see if he could save him, but he was beat back by the flames. Jackie climbed up to the window, and called out to persons in the yard who climbed up to the casement and pulled him out just as the roof fell into his bedchamber. Meanwhile a servant broke out the glass in the parlor window and threw out Mary and Hetty. Samuel said afterwards that the fire probably began in the fireplace chimney. The entire rectory was consumed in flames-- the house, the furniture, Samuel's books, the parish records, and all of our family possessions.

After the fire, Samuel and I and little Charles went to live with parishioners here in Epworth, and within a month, baby Kezia was born. She was the last of our nineteen children. The other children were placed in various homes. Sukie and Hetty went to live with Samuel's brother Matthew, a prosperous physician in London.

## **The New Rectory**

Samuel quickly began the construction of a new rectory. He planned a house of solid brick, sufficiently large to serve our considerable family. Some of the costs were supplied by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, but a great deal of the expense [400 pounds] fell to him, which of course put him still further in debt.

In less than a year the rebuilding work on the rectory was completed, and we moved in, using furniture provided by the charity of neighbors. The children having been apart from me were much in need of discipline and training. I arranged a special private conference with each child once a week in addition to our daily classes. Samuel was absent often, making trips to London. So he hired a curate named Inman to help him in the parish, but Inman's sermons caused much dissatisfaction in the congregation. I found it disturbing that the people were left with so little spiritual guidance. I began

reading a sermon aloud from a book each Sunday afternoon, first just to my family and any neighbors, but soon I was speaking to large audiences, sometimes as many as 200. Samuel of course disapproved.

### **Only the Girls Now at Home**

We kept John at home until he was eleven, then sent him to London to attend the Charterhouse School. Then when Charles was nine, we sent him to live with his brother Samuel so he could attend the Westminster School. I taught the girls here at home of course. The future for daughters in our society isn't bright. The only employment positions open to young women are those of a teacher in a girls' school or a companion to some well-to-do lady. Marriage is the alternative, but only if they are deemed suitable matches. My daughters' hope was to acquire a measure of riches from my brother Samuel who had made a fortune in India.

### **My Brother's Disappearance**

In 1724, when we learned that he was returning to England, I made arrangements to travel to London to meet his vessel when it docked. This meant five or six days of traveling with a stop at an inn each night, an expensive venture certainly. But I looked forward to his arrival. The vessel on which he had left India docked in London on the day expected. But he was nowhere to be found. His personal goods were in his cabin, but the officers of the ship could tell me nothing as to the cause of his disappearance. It is probable that he was murdered and his body thrown overboard. I had no choice but to journey back to Epworth, hoping the girls would find suitable men to marry.

### **Samuel's Health Is Failing**

[In 1726] When he was 64, my husband suffered a partial stroke which left his right hand paralysed. This made him almost totally dependent on the assistance of others. Five years later, while we were out in our wagon, the horses took a gallop and out flew Samuel and his chair. He hit his head in the fall, quit breathing for a time and nearly died. He was never able to shake off the effects of this accident. He began to voice the desire for one of his sons to replace him in the rectory here at Epworth, but that was not to be. . . . I wonder what God has planned for my sons.

### **ADDENDUM**

#### **Susanna's Children (those who survived into adulthood)**

Samuel secured his Master of Arts degree, was ordained and returned to Westminster as a teacher. Twenty years later he moved to Tiverton in Devonshire where he became the headmaster of an endowed school. He was a gifted poet and an able, scholarly teacher. He was generous towards his parents, providing them with all his salary allowed. His widowed mother was heartbroken by the death in 1739 of this son, her first-born and her chief financial support.

Emilia found employment as a teacher at a girls' school in London and later at a school for girls at Gainsborough. She fell in love with a man who was a Quaker, but being

advised by her brothers that she ought never to marry anyone of that faith, she ended the relationship. [At age 44, about 1736, she married an apothecary named Robert Harper. He took her savings and left her eventually, with his debts and a sickly, dying baby.]

Sukie (Susanna) who had so counted on gifts from her uncle, "threw herself upon a course, vulgar, immoral man, little inferior to the apostate angels in wickedness," Richard Ellison. She almost died in childbirth, in November of 1731. Suffering from Ellison's vile behavior and cruel actions, Sukey fled to London, taking her children with her and never lived with him again.

Mary grew up crippled from an accident in her infancy. She was convinced that she would never find a man who would marry her. But in 1723 Samuel Wesley took into the rectory a young man by the name of John Whitelamb, who proved so obedient that Samuel taught him Latin and Greek and in 1730 sent him to Oxford University. He married Mary Wesley in 1734. Within less than a year, Mary died in childbirth.

Hetty (Mehitable) found the man of her dreams, and ran off with her lawyer knight, later to return when he refused to marry her. Five months pregnant she was disowned by her father and married off to William Wright, a journeyman plumber from Lincoln. They were very different in abilities, and Hetty was quite unhappy, especially because she lost three infants. She was a gifted poet, had some of her poems published. Susanna, after showing for three or four years that she had been wounded by Hetty's sin, came around to the point where she accepted her fully. A rich affection grew once more between them, especially after Samuel's death.

Anne (Nancy) Charles Ludwig says she died in infancy; but Arnold A. Dallimore, p. 136, says: "Little is known of her till, in her twenties, she married a land surveyor, John Lambert. He is spoken of as a well-educated, well-read man'. Lambert came of a respectable family and succeeded well in his profession. He appears to have been upright in his manner of life, but Charles reports that at one point William Wright was corrupting him with drink. None the less there are no reports of any idifficulties in Anne's marriage." Sandy Dengler, in describing Susanna's weekly visits with her children describes Anne (Nancy), p. 174: "Ten-year-old Nancy on first appearance seemed dull and listless. Susanna at last got to know the girl beneath the surface and learned quickly to appreciate her gentle, quiet, methodical way of thinking."

John "rose to such prominence and is so widely known that he needs little comment here. But a mythology has been built up around his memory which portrays him as virtually perfect, while a more careful examination of his life reveals that though he manifestly inherited the good qualities of both his parents he also possessed some of his father's less desirable traits." [Arnold A. Dallimore, p. 136]

Martha (Patty) At the age of 30, Martha met Westley Hall, and they became engaged. Upon a visit to Epworth, he met her younger sister Kezia and declared affection for her, but then returned to Martha, and married her. He became a curate in the Wiltshire village of Wooton and then in Flesherton near Salisbury. There he seduced Martha's seamstress. After the little one arrived Martha nursed it as tenderly as if it had been her own child. She did the same when he brought in another infant that some other woman

had borne to him. Martha herself bore ten children, but all except one died in infancy. Eventually, Westley Hall left England for a time, taking a woman with him to Jamaica. When she died, he returned to England. Little more is known of him, except that he died some thirty years later. Martha lived to be 85, was a gifted conversationalist, discussing philosophical matters with Dr. Samuel Johnson and others.

Charles undoubtedly had the happiest married life of all of Susanna's children. After attending Westminster School and Oxford University and, after being ordained, he went to Georgia with John. There he found little but trouble and remained there for only seven months. On his return to England he became involved with the Moravians, found an assurance of salvation on 21 May 1738. He was led by George Whitefield into the task of preaching in the open air and exercised a mighty ministry. He was the first to carry the Methodist message to the county of Cornwall, where Methodism won amazing triumphs. Charles was constantly active in composing poetry-- close to nine thousand poems, many of which were hymns.

Kezzie (Kezia) The last of Susanna's children, she proved rather weak as a child, lacking the energy that characterized the rest of the family. At age 19, she became a pupil-teacher in the school at Lincoln at which her sister Emilia had taught. She apparently had no male suitors, and was heartbroken by the false profession of love made to her by Westley Hall. Following her father's death and her mother's vacating of the rectory Kezia needed a home. She accepted an offer from the Halls to come and live with them, but this did not please John. He arranged for her to move to the home of a minister at Bexley. She fell into a lingering illness which terminated in her death at age 32.

### **Description of EPWORTH**

"Although separated by several miles from the ocean, Epworth was actually located on an island. Three rivers converged and enclosed a portion of land some fourteen miles in length, and the encircled area was known as the Isle of Axholme. A large majority of the inhabitants were unlettered and some were vicious, but a few were of a better class. Here, after arriving in 1697, Samuel and Susanna were to remain till his death thirty-eight years later." [Source: Arnold A. Dallimore: Susanna Wesley, p. 43.]

"Amid the thatched stone-and-clay cottages of Epworth stood occasional buildings of brick, some even with shake roofs. The population, Susanna had heard, was well in excess of two thousand-- probably more like twenty-five hundred--with another thousand in the nearby farms and hamlets. Epworth had real shops, and its church of St. Andrew, Sam's new bailiwick, hardly looked its age at all. Epworth was no London, but neither was it wee South Ormsby." [Source: Sandy Dengler: Susanna Wesley, p. 103.]

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