

Old wives tales: twenty-first century lessons from the lives of eighteenth century women

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Old
Wives'
Tales

Clare Heath-Whyte

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INTRODUCTION

Why would anyone bother to read about a load of women who lived more than two hundred years ago in a world very different from our own and in a rather obscure century? Surely the sixteenth century would be more interesting? It's familiar, it's fun – it's got Henry VIII and his six wives and Queen Elizabeth and the Spanish Armada. Or perhaps even the nineteenth century: Queen Victoria, railways, *Oliver Twist* and *A Christmas Carol*; Even the seventeenth century has Cavaliers and Roundheads, the plague and the Fire of London. The eighteenth century is generally seen as the boring bit in between, at least in Britain: the agricultural revolution and lots of dull kings called George.

The kings may have been a bit dull and/or mad and there are certainly more interesting things to study than the invention of the seed drill, but in terms of church history, the eighteenth century is one of the most exciting and important of all. The great nineteenth-century bishop J.C. Ryle said that at the start of the eighteenth century from 'a religious and moral point of view, England was sound asleep'.¹ By the start of the nineteenth century, it was very much awake. Evangelicals were becoming influential in all areas of life, from politics to education and business. Lives were changed as the gospel was preached and its implications for society were realized.

What had made the difference? The Evangelical Revival had made the difference – led by great men such as John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield in Britain, Jonathan Edwards in America, and built on by the following generation of men such as John Newton.

But why bother with the women? Most of them were not exceptional. They were ordinary Christian women, trying to live for Christ in challenging times. If they had not been related to these great men we almost certainly would know nothing about them. But because they were, we do, and the way they served Jesus in their lives can encourage us as we seek to serve Him in ours. They are part of that 'great cloud of witnesses' of faithful believers from the past, whose lives can encourage us to 'run with perseverance the race marked out for us'.²

In many ways the challenges facing these women in the eighteenth century were very different from our own. There was no struggle to maintain a work-life balance – the concept of a career woman was a long way in the future. Education for women was rare, and from birth the likelihood was that they would be dependent on their father, husband or sons. For almost all married women, life consisted of childbearing, child-rearing and household chores – without any of the labour saving devices that we take for granted. It was a very tough life; no antibiotics or painkillers, and around 40 per cent of the population died in childhood. Grief and pain were

everyday experiences. There were no pensions, NHS or benefits, and real poverty and hunger beckoned if the breadwinner was ill, grew old, died, or, in the case of Susanna Wesley's husband, Samuel, went to prison.

However, in some ways, although the details may have been very different, the difficulties of living a godly life in an ungodly world were similar to our own. Morality was something to be mocked. Drunkenness was rife, and although there were no cars, even in London, very few street lights, town centres on a Saturday night in the eighteenth century would in many ways seem familiar to us today. Hogarth's prints of *Gin Lane* show crowds of people guzzling cheap alcohol – it was said you could get drunk for a penny and dead drunk for tuppence. This situation had arisen as a direct result of government policy to support the distilling industry. Like today, profit trumped morality. It was a time when the slave trade was developing fast, and high-class prostitutes such as Kitty Fisher³ enjoyed celebrity status, with the press printing every detail of their sexual adventures. Child prostitution was common, and after the restraint of the English republic under Cromwell, all the old vices were back with a vengeance – bear-baiting, cockfighting – whatever took your fancy. There were also the everyday temptations to conform rather than be transformed; to trust in self rather than Christ; to complain about, rather than be content with, the life God has given us. As now, it was not an easy time to be a godly woman.

The church did not provide much of a lead, either. Although Jane Austen wrote at the start of the nineteenth century, the Church of England she described was similar to that in the eighteenth century. Clergy, like Edward Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility*, were often from wealthy families. 'The church' was a respectable occupation, leaving plenty of time for hunting and visiting friends. Any genuine Christian 'enthusiasm' was frowned upon. The Church of England seemed more concerned about conforming to society than challenging it. Nonconformist churches were not much better. Having sprung up in the much freer atmosphere during and after the Civil War, things had gone downhill. After the restoration of the monarchy and the introduction of the new prayer book in 1662, ministers who refused to use it were denied a licence, and nonconformist churches had become pernickety, dogmatic and inward-looking, with little concern for the lost.

Those women who tried, and often succeeded, in living a faithful Christlike life in that atmosphere can surely teach us something as we try to do the same more than two hundred years later.

Clare Heath-White

Author's Note: There are names and places in this book where spelling appears as original.

CHAPTER ONE



Susanna Wesley

Godliness in an
ungodly world

It would be great to be really godly, wouldn't it? It would be great to live wholeheartedly for Jesus, and to live to please Him. If only the world around us was less hostile; if only there were more opportunities to develop our gifts; if only our personal circumstances were easier; if only we were less busy – if only!

Susanna Wesley was a godly woman in a hostile world, with very few opportunities and difficult personal circumstances which meant she had no choice but to have a very busy life. She was the mother of Charles

and John Wesley, the founders of Methodism. In the United States there are numerous churches, schools and family centres named after her. She is almost seen as the patron saint of the home schooling movement, and from some Internet sites you could get the impression that not only was she sinlessly perfect, but also that she herself was the prime mover behind the entire Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century. But if she had not been the mother of famous men we almost certainly would not have heard of her.

Susanna was an exceptional woman, but like most women of her generation, and many in ours, her life was focused entirely around her family. She never held any position of influence in society or politics, and compared to the life of a woman in the twenty-first century she had few outlets for her many gifts. But it was the way that she lived that life that has led many to see her as a role model for Christian womanhood. She was not perfect, but she was determined to live for Christ in whatever circumstances she found herself. She is said to have explained, 'I am content to fill a little space if God be glorified.'

Susanna was born in 1669, at least a generation before the other women in this book. She was born at a difficult time, but also into personally difficult circumstances. Nowadays we may think of a family with any more than four children as being unusually large – but Susanna

was born into a family that was unusually large even by seventeenth-century standards. When a family friend was asked how many children Samuel Annesley, Susanna's father, had, he replied, 'I believe it is two dozen, or a quarter of a hundred.' Susanna's brother-in-law, John Dunton commented, 'This reckoning of children by dozens is a singular circumstance; an honour to which few persons ever arrive.'¹

Susanna was the youngest of *twenty-five* children. For many years there was little to live on, as her minister father had been thrown out of the Church of England in 1662, when he along with 2,000 others refused to abide by the new prayer book. By the time Susanna was born, the rules had been relaxed and the family had moved to London where Samuel started a meeting house in Little St Helen's Bishopsgate (now known as St Helen's Place). But money was always short and life was never easy.

Susanna did, nevertheless, have some advantages when she was growing up. Although large and poor, Susanna's family was loving and stable. Her father does seem to have been a very godly man who took the education of both his sons and daughters seriously. Susanna was very clever, and from a young age studied theology and French and possibly even Latin and Greek. For an intelligent child, her home was an exciting place to be. It was a meeting place for some famous thinkers of the day. Daniel Defoe, who wrote *Robinson Crusoe*,

was a member of her father's congregation, and he and others would meet to discuss all the current theological and political ideas. She was clever, but she was also a very godly child. She determined when she was quite small never to spend more time in leisure than she did in personal devotion. She reminded her son Samuel of this in a letter: 'I will tell you what rule I observed in the same case when I was young, and too much addicted to childish diversions, which was this – never to spend more time in any matter of mere recreation in one day than I spent in private religious duties'² – a practice she kept to all her life. Imagine a modern-day child choosing to spend the same amount of time praying and reading the Bible as they did playing, watching TV and messing around on the computer!

She was not just godly, she was extraordinarily self-disciplined. This self-discipline was just one part of a very strong personality. Although her strength of character certainly helped her to go against the flow and live a godly life in an ungodly world, it also caused family friction. At the age of 13 she decided to join the Church of England, even though her father had suffered so much by leaving it. As you can imagine, it didn't go down well, although her father accepted her decision graciously. She later claimed that by the age of 13 she had understood and considered all the arguments for and against joining the established church.³ Perhaps she had, but there may have been

other less intellectual reasons. Her future husband, Samuel Wesley, was a frequent visitor at her father's church and also at their home. He was six years older, also from a nonconformist family, and at almost the same time had decided to 'change sides' and join the Church of England. They finally married when she was 20 and he was 26.

They both had equally strong and stubborn personalities and, although their marriage seems to have been a genuine love match, their life together was not always easy. Writing to John in 1725 when she had been married for thirty-seven years, she wrote 'tis an unhappiness almost peculiar to our Family, That your Father and I seldom think alike'.⁴ On one infamous occasion, Susanna refused to say 'Amen' to Samuel's prayer for the well-being of William III, who Susanna did not believe was the legitimate king. Later her son John described what happened:

The year before King William died my father observed that my mother did not say Amen to the prayer for the king. She said she could not; for she did not believe that the Prince of Orange was a king. He vowed that he would never cohabit with her 'till she did. He then took his horse and rode away; nor did she hear anything of him for a twelve month. He then came back and lived with her as before.⁵

Susanna didn't make matters easier by writing to those she knew would agree with her position. The Reverend George Hickes encouraged her to stand firm and told her to 'stick to God and your conscience which are your best friends'.⁶ Susanna refused to back down and it was only after the family faced ruin when the rectory was burned down (for the first time!) that Samuel returned.

In that argument, Susanna's behaviour made the situation worse, but most of the difficulties she faced over her long life were not of her own making. She and Samuel struggled financially throughout their forty-six years together. Both came from relatively poor families, which meant that when Samuel entered the Anglican ministry they, unusually for the time, had very little financial support. In 1690 Samuel became the rector of the parish of South Ormsby in Lincolnshire. On a low income and with a new baby arriving every year, it was only Susanna's thrift that kept them afloat. Samuel was hopeless with money and believed that publishing his writings would help pay the bills. Although initially a few works went to print, his main project, a very long commentary on the book of Job, was never even finished.

Things got worse when the family moved to their new parish of Epworth, Lincolnshire. Samuel's politics and strict moral standards were not appreciated by his parishioners. One of the family's main sources of income was the flax that was grown on the glebe

land, and they kept cows for milk and cheese. To show their dislike of the rector, parishioners burned the flax harvest and mutilated the udders of their cows, as well as chopping off the leg of one of their dogs. They were constantly harassed. One night a gang kept up a constant din outside the house by banging and shouting. The wet nurse caring for the youngest child was so tired that she rolled over and smothered the baby in her sleep. Emotionally, the persecution must have been devastating, and financially it was disastrous. The rectory was set on fire twice. The first time it had to be repaired. On top of all their other financial difficulties, this finally plunged the family into debt.

Outside his church, just after a baptism service, Samuel was arrested and sent to prison in Lincoln Castle for non payment of debt. He was there three months, leaving Susanna to cope alone with a large family in a hostile parish, with no money. The second time the rectory was burned down, the family was asleep inside and could easily have been killed. John, 6, was miraculously rescued at the last minute, leaving Susanna to conclude that he was destined for future greatness.

The loss of their home meant that all the children had to be farmed out to local families while a new house was built, so all of Susanna's careful and meticulous parenting was undermined. As if that wasn't enough, their new home was apparently haunted for several

months by a poltergeist they called Jeffrey. The family seem to have been totally bemused by the banging and flying furniture. Samuel, who had been away when the haunting began, was unsurprisingly sceptical about the whole business, but was forced to change his mind when he experienced broken nights' sleep as domestic items flew about the bedroom. Whatever was going on suddenly stopped when the family decided the best course was to treat Jeffrey as a joke. The poltergeist never bothered them again.

Throughout these years, Susanna gave birth to nineteen children, only ten of whom survived infancy. She was also frequently ill, and from a young age suffered from rheumatism. She was often simultaneously pregnant, in pain, caring for small children and grieving for the loss of a child.

Today we cannot imagine coping with such hardship. In the West, we may find it challenging if we are not able to afford a foreign holiday or replace an ageing car. We feel we are justified in moaning if our lives do not turn out as we had hoped. We are used to the safety net the state provides when things go wrong, and even moderate suffering can cause people to turn away from God. Susanna did not just cope with her situation, she praised God for it and managed to work within it to glorify God. From prison her husband wrote: 'All this, thank God, does not in the least sink my wife's

spirits. She bears it with the courage which becomes her, and which I expected from her.'⁷ She used the gifts, personality and circumstances that God had given her to glorify Him.

How did she manage to do that? Above all, she had a godly perspective on her life which enabled her to praise God whatever she went through, as she viewed her sufferings in the light of eternity. She wrote realistically about her difficulties, 'I have enough to turn a stronger head than mine. And were it not that God supports me, and by His omnipotent goodness often totally suspends all sense of worldly things, I could not sustain the weight many days, perhaps hours' but then she continued, 'Upon the best observation I could ever make, I am induced to believe that it is much easier to be contented without riches than with them.'⁸ Again, she wrote:

*I think myself highly obliged to adore and praise the unsearchable wisdom and boundless goodness of almighty God for this dispensation of His providence towards me. For I clearly discern there is more mercy in the disappointment of my hopes, than there would have been in permitting me to enjoy all that I had desired.'*⁹

She trusted in God's omnipotent goodness. She knew

that He was in control of every detail of her life and that every detail, however painful, was being used by Him for her good, as she grew to know Him better and trust Him more in preparation for meeting Him face to face. As she encountered yet another crisis she summed up her attitude: 'Courage then; think of Eternity.'

This attitude was developed over a lifetime of prayer and Bible-reading. Nothing would divert Susanna from praying. If there is one anecdote that people know about Susanna Wesley, it is that when she was in a kitchen full of children and she wanted to pray, she would put her apron over her head to show that she was not to be disturbed. She may certainly have done this for an emergency 'arrow prayer', but even with her large family she never wavered from her childhood pattern of never spending 'more time in any matter of mere recreation in one day than I spent in private religious duties'. Each day she spent at least two hours in prayer and Bible study. She considered prayer a real privilege.

If but some earthly prince or some person of eminent quality were certainly to visit you, or you were to visit him, would you not be careful to have your apparel and all about you decent, before you came into his presence? How much more should you take care to have your mind in order when you take upon yourself the honour to speak to the Sovereign Lord of the Universe.¹⁰

After the birth of her last child, Kezia or Kezzy, she found more time to study and to write. Once her older children had left home she wrote to them weekly, and often included theological reflections in her letters. She also wrote theological treatises on the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments, and later a defence of her son John's ministry, which was anonymously published. Her writings show a woman of deep personal faith and wisdom, but some of her theology was pretty unorthodox. She prayed for, and even to, the dead. She was devoted to Christ and wrote at length in her letters about his work on the cross; however, she lacked assurance of forgiveness until shortly before her death. The epitaph that her son Charles wrote for her headstone implies that he thought that she had not been a true Christian until shortly before she died.

*... True daughter of affliction, she,
Inured to pain and misery,
Mourn'd a long night of griefs and fears,
A legal night of seventy years.
The Father then revealed His Son;
Him in the broken bread made known;
She knew and felt her sins forgiven,
And found the earnest of her heaven ...*

Although she had, perhaps, focused on the pursuit of holiness, which could appear a bit legalistic, to

call her long life 'a legal night of seventy years' seems harsh. The new Methodist movement's emphasis on 'enthusiasm' and emotion was at odds with the much more formal and intellectual approach of Susanna's generation. Through her writings we can see that she genuinely loved the Lord Jesus. Her love for Christ and her godly priorities influenced every aspect of her life. She was determined to do all she could to bring up her children to know and trust the Lord. Particularly after the disastrous second fire, in which John so nearly died, she rededicated herself to her children's education. In 1709 she wrote to her eldest son, Samuel, who was by that time away at school at Westminster, 'There is nothing I now desire to live for, but to do some small service to my children, that as I have brought 'em into the world, so that it might please God to make me (though unworthy) an instrument of doing good to their souls.'¹¹ Although, like her father, she valued education for both boys and girls, it was her children's souls that were her chief concern.

So often today, the ambitions of Christian parents for their children are startlingly similar to those of their non-Christian friends – a good education, successful career and happy relationship. We may say we value the Christian education of our children, but often our true priorities are exposed by the amount of time and money we spend on 'fulfilling our child's potential' compared to 'doing good to their souls'.

Susanna educated the children at home not out of principle, but from necessity. There was no money for education, but the three boys were able to go away to boarding school at age 11, this having been paid for by rich benefactors. The girls were entirely educated by their mother. She expected the same high standards of self-discipline in her children as she herself displayed. She developed a very strict set of moral and educational rules based on biblical principles by which the family lived. Sin and disobedience would be punished – but then mentioned no more. Good deeds should be commended. Each child's education started the day after their 6th birthday. After the birthday celebrations were over, work was to begin. Each child learned to read by working their way through the Bible, starting at Genesis.

Very unusually for the time, none of the girls were to focus on domestic duties until they had learned to read. Perhaps even more unusually, all of the children, boys as well as girls, were expected to help around the house. It does not seem that the children were naturally beautifully behaved, but their mother got the best out of them. One scholar has described the Wesley children as 'a cluster of bright, vehement, argumentative boys and girls, living by a clean and high code, and on the plainest fare; but drilled to soft tones, to pretty formal courtesies; with learning as an ideal, duty as an atmosphere and fear of God as law.'¹²

Susanna always treated each of her many children as individuals. She spent an hour a week with each child to find out about their interests and spiritual state. As each child left home, she continued to put aside the same amount of time by writing them letters. She kept them in touch with all the family news. There is a fascinating letter to the eldest son, Samuel, describing all the personal details of the second fire, such as, 'We had no time to take our clothes, but ran all naked.'¹³ Only a little later, although she was obviously still preoccupied by the devastation caused by the fire, she wrote to Samuel again. This time she was back to her usual self, focusing on his spiritual welfare, reminding him to 'Begin and end the day with him who is Alpha and Omega'. She also warned him to avoid the typical temptations facing a teenage boy.

If you indulge your unruly passions, if now you suffer yourself to love the world or anything in it, more than God, if you now neglect your private duties, your daily sacrifices of prayer and thanksgiving, or grow remiss or cold in their performance. If you now permit impurity, anger, hatred, malice or any kind of danger of intemperance to gain an ascendant over your mind, you are in danger of being eternally lost.¹⁴

Her letters to John after he left home covered many

tricky theological issues, and he often asked for her advice, even when he had become a celebrated religious leader.

Susanna's system for parenting and home education was thorough, godly and time-consuming – but did it work? Samuel, John and Charles all grew up to be moral and God-fearing men. John and Charles obviously went on to be the leaders of one of history's most dramatic revivals. However, they both said they were only converted in adulthood. As John wrote to a friend in 1738:

I feel what you say (though not enough), for I am under the same condemnation. I see that the whole law of God is holy, just, and good. I know every thought, every temper of my soul ought to bear God's image and superscription. But how am I fallen from the glory of God! I feel that 'I am sold under sin'. I know that I, too, deserve nothing but wrath, being full of all abominations, and having no good thing in me to atone for them or to remove the wrath of God.

Soon after, John wrote in his journal:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a

quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation, and an assurance was given me, that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

The next morning, Wesley wrote: 'The moment I awaked "Jesus, Master" was in my heart and in my mouth.'¹⁵ Their elder brother, Samuel, became a headmaster and pillar of the community, but was very antagonistic towards the 'enthusiastic' faith of his brothers and, later, his mother. Their seven sisters' lives were generally not very happy, but that was largely due to the lack of suitable and available husbands in rural Lincolnshire. Of the six that did marry, none had successful marriages. One died in childbirth a year after the wedding, one married a polygamist, three married violent drunks, and one faced financial ruin. Mehetabel (thankfully the family called her Hetty) ran off with a local lawyer who had no intention of marrying her. She returned home pregnant, and vowed to marry the first man who would have her. She was an educated, intelligent girl, but was married off to a local plumber, one of the already mentioned violent drunks.

From outward appearances, it may appear that Susanna's

rigorous educational system failed, but in very difficult circumstances Susanna did the best she could and was a good mother. She gave all her children, both boys and girls, a good moral and biblical education. She prayed for them and encouraged them until the day she died. Perhaps she did overemphasize the pursuit of holiness at the expense of grace, but in the religious context of her day she did her best to bring her children up to trust in Christ. Eventually, all but one did put their trust in Christ. It is a good reminder that there is no fail-safe method of parenting that will produce Christian children. As John realized, conversion is a work of God's grace, but Susanna played her part diligently and effectively.

Susanna was not just concerned for the spiritual welfare of her children, she also longed to see her husband's parishioners changed by Christ — and not just because their hostility had caused her so many problems. As the rector's wife, she was expected to be involved in visiting the poor and sick, but there were not many other opportunities for ministry. Her husband was a delegate to the Church of England's Convocation, the eighteenth century equivalent of General Synod, which required him to spend several months at a time in London.

While he was away, the temporary curate chose to preach, week by week, on the subject of debt avoidance.

Unsurprisingly, Susanna did not feel that this was of any great spiritual benefit to his congregation. On Sunday afternoons she started holding a small meetings for her family and servants, in which she read from Samuel's collection of sermons and led the gatherings in prayer. Soon the servants were bringing family and friends, some of whom had never attended church before. It was not long before the entire ground floor of the rectory was full to overflowing with up to two hundred people attending each week. The curate wrote, complaining, to Samuel, who wrote to his wife to tell her to stop. She replied:

... though the superior charge of the souls contained in the household lies upon you as the head of the family and as their minister, yet in your absence I cannot but look upon every soul you leave under my care as a talent committed to me under a trust by the great Lord of all the families of heaven and earth. And if I am unfaithful to Him or to you, in neglecting to improve these talents how shall I answer unto Him when He shall command me to render an account of my stewardship.¹⁶

Eventually, Samuel relented and allowed Susanna to continue with the meeting. The results were extraordinary. She wrote:

Besides the constant attendance on the public worship of God, our meeting has wonderfully conciliated the minds of this people towards us, so that we now live in the greatest amity imaginable; and what is still better, they are very much reformed in their behaviour on the Lord's day; and those who used to be playing in the streets, now come to hear a good sermon read, which is surely more acceptable to Almighty God.¹⁷

The parishioners, who had previously made the family's life miserable, were transformed. On Samuel's return the meetings stopped, but the effects lasted; there were no more mutilated cows or disrupted nights' sleep.

Not only was Susanna's life as a wife and mother difficult, but as a widow she faced an uncertain future. Samuel died in 1735, and Susanna had to leave the rectory. She was now entirely dependent on the generosity of her children. She moved five times in the space of four years, initially living with her unmarried daughter, Emilia. While she was there, John and Charles mentioned their plans for travelling across the Atlantic to Georgia on an evangelistic mission to the American Indians. She was recently widowed, destitute and in need of the support of her family. They both said they would only go if they had her heartfelt approval.

She replied; 'Had I twenty sons I should rejoice that they were all so employed, though I should never see them more.'¹⁸ It was soon after they returned from what proved to be a disastrous missionary journey that they were converted.

After her stay with Emilia, she lived with her son Samuel, then with her daughter Martha (and her rather dubious husband), first in Salisbury and then in London, before finally settling with John at the Foundery, the new Methodist headquarters, in 1739, where she lived until her death in 1742. In those few years she had to cope with the deaths of both her eldest child, Samuel, and of her youngest, Kezzy.

Despite this grief, it seems that her last years were good ones. As she got more involved with the new Methodist congregation at the Foundery, she enjoyed Christian fellowship and encouragement. For once in her life, she was able to enjoy receiving rather than giving. As she heard good biblical preaching, her assurance of forgiveness and her enjoyment of the blessings she had in Christ increased. Shortly before she died she wrote, 'My dear saviour, art thou come to help me in my extremity at last?'¹⁹ She died with her family around her, and her funeral, which John conducted, was attended by 'innumerable' members of her new church family.

In many ways, Susanna Wesley lived a 'little' life. She was, as many women still are, someone's

daughter, someone's wife, and someone's mother. The circumstances and the time in which she lived to us seem almost unbearably hard. She had few of the opportunities or advantages that we enjoy in the twenty-first century, but she managed to live a life that glorified God. She was not perfect and she made mistakes, but she used her gifts, her situation and even her difficulties to grow closer to Christ herself, and to encourage others to do the same.