

WESLEY'S DESIGNATED SUCCESSOR



WESLEY'S DESIGNATED SUCCESSOR:

The Life, Letters, and Literary Labours

OF THE

REV. JOHN WILLIAM FLETCHER,

Vicar of Madeley, Shropshire.

BY

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“THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE REV. SAMUEL WESLEY, M.A.,
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“THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE REV. JOHN WESLEY, M.A.,”

“THE LIFE OF THE REV. GEORGE WHITEFIELD, B.A.,”

AND “THE OXFORD METHODISTS.”

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I Dedicate this Book to my Wife

*Who has shared my joys and sorrows for nearly
thirty years.*

L. TYERMAN.

PREFACE

“JEAN GUILLAUME DE LA FLECHERE,” wrote Robert Southey, “was a man of rare talents, and rarer virtue. No age or country has ever produced a man of more fervent piety, or more perfect charity; no Church has ever possessed a more apostolic minister. He was a man of whom Methodism may well be proud, as the most able of its defenders; and whom the Church of England may hold in remembrance, as one of the most pious and excellent of her sons.”

“Fletcher was a saint,” said Isaac Taylor, “as unearthly a being as could tread the earth at all”

“Fletcher,” remarked Robert Hall, “is a seraph who burns with the ardour of divine love. Spurning the fetters of mortality, he almost habitually seems to have anticipated the rapture of the beatific vision.”

Dr. Dixon, one of the greatest of Methodist preachers, observed, “I conceive Fletcher to be the most holy man who has been upon earth since the apostolic age.”

No apology is needed for publishing the life of such a man, unless it can be shown that a life worthy of him is already in existence.

Excepting the brief and exceedingly imperfect biography by the Rev. Robert Cox, in 1822, only two Lives of Fletcher have been published since his death, ninety-seven years ago; namely, Wesley’s in 1786, and Benson’s in 1804.

It is true that, in 1790, the Rev. Joshua Gilpin, Vicar of Rockwardine, appended twenty-nine biographical “Notes” to different chapters of Fletcher’s “Portrait of St. Paul;” but the facts they contained, in addition to those which Wesley had already given, were not many.

A year later, in 1791, the Rev. Melville Horne, Curate of Madeley, published “Posthumous Pieces of the late Rev. John William De La Flechere,” a volume of 435 pages, nearly 400 of which are filled with Fletcher’s Letters to his friends. This volume has been of great service to me in the present work. Many quotations are made from it, and are indicated by the footnotes, “Letters, 1791.”

When Fletcher died, some of his admirers wished Mr. Ireland to be

his biographer; others desired Fletcher's widow to undertake the task. Both of them judiciously declined. Wesley was then fixed upon. He asked Mr. Ireland to supply him with materials, but Mr. Ireland refused: Mrs. Fletcher, however, rendered him important help. In unpublished letters to Sarah Crosby, she writes:—

“Mr. Ireland knew and loved my dear husband as scarcely any other person did; and if he chooses to print a journal of their travels and of the great spiritual labours of which he was an eye-witness, it would not be wrong. But this is not his intention. He only wishes to gather materials for me. With a good deal of labour, I have collected some sweet fragments, on different subjects, from little pocketbooks, but I have handed them to Mr. Wesley, who, however, tells me he has done nothing towards the Life, and that he has enough to occupy his time for a year to come. Indeed, he seems to be in doubt whether he will be able to write the Life at all. I hope the accounts I have given him will not be shortened; if they be, I shall repent that I did not print them myself.”

This was written on June 20, 1786, and shows that ten months after Fletcher's death, Wesley had not even begun Fletcher's biography. Fourteen weeks afterwards, he made a start. An extract from his journal is worth quoting:—

“1786. September 25. Monday. We took coach” at Bristol, “in the afternoon; and on Tuesday morning reached London. I now applied myself in earnest to the writing of Mr. Fletcher's Life, having procured the best materials I could. To this I dedicated all the time I could spare till November, from five in the morning till eight at night. These are my studying hours; I cannot write longer in a day without hurting my eyes.”

For little more than a month the venerable biographer, now in the eighty-fourth year of his age, devoted all the time he “could spare” in preparing the Life of one whom he pronounced the most “unblameable man, in every respect, that, within four-score years,” he had “found either in Europe or America!” The biography was finished in the month of November, and in December was published with the title “A Short Account of the Life and Death of the Rev. John Fletcher. By the Rev. John Wesley. *Sequor, non passibus æquis*. London, 1786.” It certainly was a “*Short Account*,”—a 12 mo volume of 227 pages, which would have been much smaller if the type and the space between the lines had been different. This was the first Life of Wesley's greatest friend, and his “Designated Successor”! The veteran was far too busy to do justice to his great “helper.”

Eighteen years elapsed before another and larger Life was given to the public. This was undertaken in 1801 by the Rev. Joseph Benson, at the request of Fletcher's widow, and of the Methodist Conference of that year. In 1804 it was published with the following title:—"The Life of the Rev. John W. de la Flechere, compiled from the Narratives of the Reverend Mr. Wesley; the Biographical Notes of the Reverend Mr. Gilpin; from his own Letters; and other Authentic Documents, many of which were never before published. By Joseph Benson." This is the only Life of Fletcher which, *in a separate form*, has been circulated during the last seventy-eight years.

Of course, during this long period of nearly fourscore years, many new facts and incidents, concerning Fletcher have come to light; and, among these new biographical materials, special mention must be made of the Fletcher MSS. deposited in the Wesleyan Mission House, London, in 1862. Since then, the Methodist "Committee on Book Affairs" has repeatedly expressed the opinion that a new Life of Fletcher ought to be prepared, and, at least, two of the foremost men in Methodism have been requested to undertake the work. One of the two is dead, and the other seems to have as much literary labour in hand as he is able to accomplish. Under such circumstances, I have had the temerity to attempt the task.

I have carefully used *all the biographical matter* that I have found in the "Short Account" by Wesley; in the Letters published by Melville Horne; in Gilpin's "Notes;" in the Life by Benson; in the Fletcher MSS., just mentioned; in other MSS. belonging to myself; in MSS. kindly lent to me; and in all the Methodist and other publications relating to Fletcher with which I am acquainted.

I have no artistic talent; and if I had, I should not employ it in writing biographies. In such publications I am only desirous to see the man, not the artist's drapery. I want to know his doings, sayings, and sufferings, rather than to read philosophic discourses concerning them. My aim, therefore, from first to last, has been to let Fletcher speak for himself. His Letters are invaluable; the man who can read them without being profited is greatly to be pitied. The extracts from his sermons show how the first Methodists used to preach. The chapters respecting the Calvinian controversy may, to some readers, be somewhat dry, but they could not be omitted, because that controversy was the great event in Fletcher's life, and hastened his death. Besides, it was by his publications on this subject that he rendered service to Wesley and the

Methodist movement, which neither Wesley himself nor any other of Wesley's friends could have furnished. I have refrained from discussing the truths which Fletcher's pen defended; but I have said enough to indicate what the doctrines were which created Methodism, and which alone can perpetuate its spiritual life and power.

The portrait of Fletcher is taken from an exceedingly scarce engraving, in the Methodist Museum, at Centenary Hall, London.

I think I may say, without exposing myself to the charge of arrogance or conceit, that, in this volume, the reader will find all the facts of any importance that are known concerning Fletcher, and that here, more than in any previous publication, is illustrated the intellectual and saintly character of one of the holiest men that ever lived.

L. TYERMAN.

STANHOPE HOUSE, CLAPHAM PARK, S.W.

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