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‘The world is my parish’ revisited: John Wesley and the eighteenth-century global economy

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Introduction

During the eighteenth century the British economy expanded rapidly, its success built largely upon its leading role in the global trading system. John Wesley and his associates connected with this world in many different and sometimes surprising ways. Charles Wesley’s wife Sarah fronted an advertising campaign for Swedish tea;[1] the Wesleys’ great friend Ebenezer Blackwell traded in slaves;[2] and the missionary Thomas Coke set up a slave plantation in the Caribbean.[3] This paper first explores Wesley’s relationships with a number of leading merchants and entrepreneurs and gives examples of their engagement with his Methodist movement. It then considers how they reconciled their commercial activities, including participation in the slave trade, with their profession of Christian faith, and finally considers how Wesley himself felt able to condemn the slave trade while benefitting financially from it.

Mary Wesley (1710-81) and the global economy

An obvious starting point is to consider the sources of John Wesley’s wife’s wealth, since she was a merchant’s widow. Her riches were remarked upon in contemporary press reports of the marriage: thus *Read’s Weekly Journal* described her as ‘a Widow Gentlewoman of Great Beauty, Merit, and every Endowment necessary to render the Marriage State happy, with a Jointure of 300*l*. per Annum.’[4] Three key issues arise. First, how much money did widow Mary Wesley inherit from the late Anthony Vazeille, her Huguenot merchant husband? Second, what if any access did John Wesley have to it? And third—and most interesting—what were the sources of Anthony Vazeille’s wealth?

In his will, Anthony Vazeille left his widow £1,500.[5] A further sum of £1,500 was left in trust to his children, to be invested in government securities, with Mary to enjoy the income in her lifetime. However, Vazeille also left his three children the unquantified ‘residue’ of his estate: all the ‘ready money, bonds, bills, debts in foreign parts and at home’. A fourth child, Noah was born on 6 August 1747, two months after his father’s death on 12 June, and was not provided for in his father’s will. This led to legal action, involving John Wesley and his new wife Mary, who spent money on him without explicit authority. During the court case, in 1752, John and Mary Wesley presented three financial schedules to the court, which detailed the trading debts owed to Anthony Vazeille at the time of his death, the monies which they had succeeded in recovering, and their expenditure to date. These offer a detailed overview of the sources of Anthony Vazeille’s wealth.

As is well known, John Wesley had renounced his rights to widow Mary’s inherited riches on their marriage. As he explained to the court: ‘This defendant John Wesley for himself saith that he claimeth to or for himself

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[1] Sarah Wesley, letter ‘To the Proprietor of the Swedes Tea’, *London Evening Post*, 15-17 May 1777. The campaign continued in various newspapers until 28 June 1777, and at least fourteen such advertisements were published.

[2] See below.

[3] John Vickers, *Thomas Coke: Apostle of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1969), 171; and see below.

[4] *Read’s Weekly Journal*, 23 February 1751.

[5] Last will and testament of Anthony Vazeille, 22 March 1745, The National Archives [henceforth TNA], PROB 11/755/96.

no part whatsoever of the said testator's estate and effects . . . save and except for the maintenance and education of the complainants and the said defendant Noah Vazeille.'[6]

However, in practice, the evidence suggests that—at least in the earlier years of their marriage— the couple pooled financial resources in pursuit of Wesley's evangelistic endeavours. Indeed Ted Campbell has noted that 'reading John Wesley's letters to Mary in the years 1756 and 1757, one is struck by how similar they would seem to letters to one's business manager.'[7] Thus in a January 1756 letter Wesley commented: 'When I saw you, my dear, I did not expect to have so large a demand made so suddenly upon me. . . Unless you can help me out for a month or two, I must borrow some more in town.'[8] So Anthony Vazeille's wealth was—albeit to a small extent—deployed in support of the early Methodist movement.

The three financial schedules signed off by John and Mary Wesley in November 1752 show that Vazeille had operated on a large scale: when he died, his many trading partners owed him in total almost £34,000—some £6 million at present-day prices.[9] Anthony Vazeille's commercial activities, while focused on western Europe, spanned the globe. He was a figure of some consequence in the City of London; he was one of the leading merchants who signed a loyal address to the King dated 27 February 1744;[10] and a further statement in support of government financial stability on 26 September 1745.[11] His death notices in the contemporary press described him as a 'Spanish merchant', one specialising in importing wine and cloth.[12] The *General Evening Post* called him 'an eminent Spanish Merchant of this City, who had acquired a large Fortune in a few Years, with a very fair Character.'[13] But his interests were much more varied, both geographically and in terms of the goods in which he traded. London at this period has been described as a 'wholesale emporium' for a wide range of manufactured goods,[14] and this was Vazeille's core business.[15]

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[6] TNA, 'The joint and several answer of John Wesley, clerk, and Mary his wife . . .' dated 22 November 1752, Court of Chancery: Six Clerks Office: Vazeille vs Vazeille (1752), C11/2139/28. In her will of 4 September 1779 (TNA, PROB 11/1083/92) Mary Wesley cited the 'articles of agreement' by which John Wesley had renounced any claims to her personal fortune. Transcriptions of the key court papers, though not the financial schedules, are available at https://wesleyworks.ecdsdev.org/editorial-docs/jw-in-correspondence-1751-55.pdf (accessed 14 June 2024).

[7] Ted A. Campbell, 'John Wesley's Intimate Disconnections, 1755-1764, *Methodist History*, 51:3 (2013), 185-200, at 189.

[8] John Wesley to Mary Wesley (7 January 1756), Ted. A Campbell (ed.), *The Works of John Wesley, vol. 27, Letters III, 1756-1765* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2015), 1.

[9] According to the Bank of England's 'inflation calculator', https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator (accessed 8 April 2024).

[10] *London Gazette*, 25-8 February 1744.

[11] *London Evening Post*, 26-8 September 1745.

[12] Though the term was not confined to traders dealing solely with Spain; it might well include those linked with France (Professor Bill Gibson, in a note to the author).

[13] *General Evening Post*, 16-18 June 1747.

[14] R. C. Nash, 'The Organization of Trade and Finance in the British Atlantic Economy, 1699-1830', in Peter A. Coclanis (ed.), *The Atlantic Economy during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: organization, operation, practice, and personnel* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 110.

[15] On London merchants of the time see David Hancock, *Citizens of the World: London merchants and the integration of the British Atlantic community, 1735-1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Perry Gauci, *Emporium of the World: the merchants of London 1660-1800* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007); and H. E. S. Fisher, *The Portugal Trade: a study of Anglo-Portuguese commerce 1700-1770* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1971). For the Huguenots see for example I. Scouloudi (ed.), *Huguenots in Britain and their French Background, 1550-1800: contributions to the Historical Conference of the Huguenot Society of London, 24-25 September 1985* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press, 1987).

Figure 1 The geographical spread of Anthony Vazeille's business[16]

Places with which Vazeille traded[17]	*Comment*
Amsterdam	
Bilbao	
Cadiz	
Dunkirk	
Exeter	Had dealings with textile merchant John Baring
Gerona	
Königsberg	
Leeds	Presumably trading in textiles
Leghorn	
Lisbon	Presumably trading in wine
London	
Messina	
Milan	
Norwich	Dealing with John Custance, linen merchant
Oporto	Presumably trading in wine
Paris	
Riga	
St Petersburg	Exports included hemp, hides, caviar, tar and potash
Staines	
Turin	
Venice	
Verona	
Wakefield	Presumably trading in textiles

Figure 2 Some goods in which Anthony Vazeille dealt[18]

Coffee
Cotton
'East India goods'
Felt
Hides
Lemons
Linen, including 'Russia linen'
Port wine
Rice
Silk

One striking feature of Vazeille's business was his focus on European and Asian rather than transatlantic trade. At this period almost all coffee, for example, was imported from Mocha region of Yemen; Caribbean coffee production had yet to take off. However, another notable characteristic was his dependence upon banking services provided by the firm of Purry and Mellish; the firm accounted for some £15,000 or 64.5 per cent of the sums remitted to his estate and recorded in the second schedule of John and Mary Wesley's statement to the court. One of the two founding partners in this bank was the Swiss entrepreneur David de Purry (1709-

[16] TNA, 'The joint and several answer of John Wesley, clerk, and Mary his wife . . .' dated 22 November 1752, Court of Chancery: Six Clerks Office: Vazeille vs Vazeille (1752), C11/2139/28, schedules 1-3.

[17] The list shown here is not comprehensive.

[18] Those that were named in the primary sources.

86), who made his fortune in the triangular trade, including from Brazilian diamond mines worked by enslaved Africans—around 1750 these were estimated to employ some 5,000 enslaved Africans.[19]

His father Jean-Pierre Purry, a merchant adventurer, established a colonial settlement in South Carolina in 1731, believing that as it shared the latitude of the Holy Land, it would be equally fruitful. His venture, centred on the new town of Purrysburg, was intended to produce both silk and wine, using enslaved Africans, though in the event the colonists succeeded only in establishing a modest silk industry.[20] By the time Wesley visited the site in April 1737, the town was in a state of disrepair. In his *Journal* he recorded an apparent lament over the colonists' use of slave labour:

> Mr. Bellinger sent a Negro lad with me to Purrysburg, or rather to the poor remains of it. O how hath God stretched over this place 'the lines of confusion and the stones of emptiness'! Alas for those whose lives were here vilely cast away, through oppression, through divers plagues and troubles! O earth! How long wilt thou hide their blood? How long wilt thou cover thy slain?[21]

Ebenezer Blackwell (1711-82)

The banker Ebenezer Blackwell was an intimate friend of the Wesley brothers and a lifelong supporter of their movement to revitalize the Church of England. He was for example a founding trustee of John Wesley's City Road Chapel.[22] He offered the Wesley brothers advice and support on personal and financial matters, and he also donated to Methodist causes. His country home in Lewisham offered John Wesley a place of sanctuary for many years. His career with the Martins banking partnership, in which he was a partner from 1746, proved lucrative. The partnership held a range of investments, including (at Christmas 1746) more than £25,000 in East India Company bonds.

Blackwell was also active in business on his own account. In 1753 he invested in the voyage of the slave ship the *Black Joke*; the ship returned to London in 1755 but the venture was not a success and led to legal action.[23] However, maritime commerce offered a combination of high risk but also high reward, and in 1756 Blackwell began to invest in further voyages, though this time to India and China by East India Company ships. Blackwell typically invested £500 or £1,000 in a voyage, but sometimes more; thus in late 1765 he invested £2,000 in the voyage of the *Plassey* to Canton. Blackwell also held substantial personal holdings of East India Company stock; his personal ledger held by the partnership showed for example that at Christmas 1771 he received £90 in dividends on £1,500 in company stock.[24] At times he was active in the governance of the Company, as for example in the late 1760s and early 1770s, when he played a sometimes prominent role in

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[19] T. Vanneste, *Global Trade and Commercial Networks: eighteenth-century diamond merchants* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), 52.

[20] O. Stanwood, *The Global Refuge: Huguenots in an age of empire (*New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020) 196, 207-8, 213; H. A. M. Smith, 'Purrysburgh', *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine,* 10:4 (October 1909)), 87-219; Arlin C. Migliazzo, 'A Tarnished Legacy Revisited: Jean Pierre Purry and the Settlement of the Southern Frontier, 1718-1736', *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 92:4 (October 1991), 232-52.

[21] Entry for 27 April 1737, W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (eds), *The Works of John Wesley, vol. 18: Journals and Diaries I, 1735-1738* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1988), 181. Another entry describes Purrysburg as 'a town the most without the appearance of a town I ever saw, with no form or comeliness or regularity': ibid., 503-4. The sight made a lasting impression on Wesley, who in 1766 commented that the depressed and semi-derelict village of Grimsby 'put me in mind of Purrysburg'; entry for 18 April 1766, W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (eds), *The Works of John Wesley, vol. 20, Journals and Diaries V, 1765-1775* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 38.

[22] George J. Stevenson, *City Road Chapel London and its Associations* (London: George J. Stevenson, 1872), 250.

[23] TNA, Barton vs Cooper, E207/153/1, E133/18/48 &49. See also Andrew Lyall (ed.), *Granville Sharp's Cases on Slavery* (Oxford and Portland, OR: Hart Publishing, 2017), 369.

[24] Barclays Bank Archives, Martins Partnership papers, ACC 0009-0075, 'Ledger: current account, 1770-2'.

the business of the governing General Court.[25] John Wesley was well aware of Blackwell's involvement with the East India Company, as is evidenced by his circular to shareholders, probably in 1766, attacking the manipulation of company votes through the practice of 'splitting' holdings of shares.[26]

James Ireland (1724-1814)

Another merchant who was a friend and supporter of John Wesley was James Ireland of Bristol, a partner in the firm of Ireland and Wright, who were sugar and wine importers. The demand for sugar expanded hugely in the eighteenth century, mainly for use as a sweetener in tea and other foods and drinks. In 1660 per capita consumption in England was around two pounds annually; around 1700 this reached five pounds, and by the 1790s it exceeded twenty pounds.[27] Barbados was an early production hub, but during eighteenth century it was supplanted by Jamaica, which as James Walvin comments became 'far and away Britain's most valuable colony in the Americas.' Because of the sugar trade, he continues:

> The old trading routes to and from Europe were now complemented as Britain placed itself at the centre of a remarkable global trading system, importing goods from around the world for its own consumption but also —and crucially—for re-export to other parts of the world.

'It soon became impossible to disentangle great swathes of the British economy from the course and progress of the Atlantic slaving system', Walvin concludes.[28]

Like Ebenezer Blackwell, James Ireland saw the high returns potentially available from maritime ventures and financed three privateering expeditions during the Seven Years' War. He was also a partner in Ames, Ireland, Rowland Williams and Company, which operated the Quay Head sugar refinery, investing £3,000 in the business in 1760. With Ames he opened a distillery in Bristol in 1768. He was later one of the founders of the Bristol City Bank.[29] There is of course no doubt that James Ireland's fortunes were based on the plantation economy of the Caribbean. Ireland imported sugar, and in the eighteenth century around half of Bristol's sugar imports came from the slave colony of Jamaica alone.[30] His sugar refinery became 'one of the largest undertakings in Bristol'.[31]

Ireland was religious, endowing a charity to fund a lectureship in his parish of Brislington, Somerset.[32] He knew both Wesley brothers and was particularly close to the leading Methodist preacher Rev. John Fletcher; indeed, Peter Forsaith has described Charles Wesley and James Ireland as Fletcher's 'closest friends'.[33] John Wesley was a great admirer. His journal and diaries record several occasions when he went to Ireland's home

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[25] Clive Murray Norris, 'John Wesley and the East India Company: a case of "my enemy's enemy is my friend"?', *Wesley and Methodist Studies*, 15:1 (2023), 46-62.

[26] John Wesley to East India Company Voters (*c*.30 March 1766?), Randy L. Maddox (ed.), *The Works of John Wesley, vol 28: Letters IV, 1776-1773* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2023), 10-11.

[27] James Walvin, *Fruits of Empire: exotic produce and British taste, 1660-1800* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 119.

[28] Ibid., 124, 190.

[29] I. V. Hall, 'The Quay Head Refinery (1760-1859): another century-old enterprise', Bristol Archives, 36772, Box 4; I. V. Hall (?), 'The Ireland-Clayfield relations with (1) the Sugar House, Host St (2) the Wine and Spirit Company (3) the Bristol City Bank, All Saints Lane', Bristol Archives, 36772, Box 8; William Cave, *A History of Banking in Bristol from 1750 to 1899* (Bristol: W. Crofton Hemmons, 1899), 126.

[30] Donald Jones, *Bristol's Sugar Trade and Refining Industry* (Bristol: Historical Association, Bristol Branch, 1996), 13.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Bristol Archives, P. StLB/Ch/15, Charity Commission papers on the James Ireland charity.

[33] Peter Forsaith, *'Unexampled Labours'. Letters of the Revd. John Fletcher to leaders in the Evangelical Revival* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2008), 4.

at Brislington, near Bristol, for what he called tea and 'religious talk'.[34] They worked together to bring relief to French prisoners of war held in Bristol in 1759,[35] and in 1760 Ireland witnessed a legal agreement amending the leasehold arrangements for Bristol's New Room.[36] In a letter of 1785 Wesley described him as 'so pious and friendly a person'.[37] Though they had their disagreements, it was a long-lasting friendship.

Perhaps the most interesting episode in Ireland's religious engagement with Wesley's movement came with the soc-called 'Minutes Controversy' of the early 1770s.[38] This arose when Calvinistic Methodists such as Lady Huntingdon objected to the wording of a doctrinal statement in the published *Minutes* of Wesley's 1770 preachers' Conference, wording which seemed to suggest that salvation was obtained not solely through faith—and justification by faith was the central belief of the Protestant Reformation—but at least partly through the performance of good works. The key passage read:

> We have received it as a maxim that 'a man is to do nothing *in order to* justification. Nothing can be more false. Whoever desire to find favour with God should 'cease from evil and learn to do well'. Whoever repents should do 'works meet for repentance'. And if this is not in *order* to find favour, what does he do them for?[39]

As Henry Rack explains, 'To a Calvinist he seemed to be allowing merit to works, that we are saved at least partly by our works, even if this depends in some ultimate sense on grace.'[40] Opposition to the wording was led by the Calvinist clergyman (and cousin of Lady Huntingdon) Rev. Walter Shirley (1725–86), who planned to attend and lead a protest at the 1771 Conference to be held in Bristol. James Ireland was actively involved in the campaign and was made responsible for finding accommodation for the protestors.[41] We do not know what influence Ireland had on the campaign, and his involvement may have reflected his regard for Lady Huntingdon rather than any engagement with the substance of the dispute. However, the reduced emphasis on salvation by works which was agreed in 1771 would certainly have been a more comfortable theological position for one so closely associated with the slave trade.[42]

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[34] Diary entries for 20 August 1783, 3 September 1784, and 24 September 1785, W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (eds), *The Works of John Wesley, vol. 23, Journal and Diaries VI, 1776-1786* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 458, 497, 537; journal entry for 13 September 1789, diary entry for 27 August, W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (eds), *The Works of John Wesley, vol. 24, Journal and Diaries VII*, *1787-91* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 155, 328.

[35] John Wesley to the Editor of the *London Chronicle* (4 November 1759), Campbell, *Letters III*, 178.

[36] Bristol Archives, 41407/30, Trust deed relating to the New Room, Bristol, 9 April 1808.

[37] John Wesley to Robert Carr Brackenbury (15 February 1785), Randy L. Maddox (ed.), *The Works of John Wesley, vol. 30, Letters VI, 1782-1788* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2024), 311.

[38] Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1989), 450-61. See also B. Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973), 48-55.

[39] Henry D. Rack (ed.), *The Works of John Wesley, vol. 10, The Methodist Societies: The Minutes of Conference* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), 392-3.

[40] Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 454.

[41] Walter Shirley, *A Narrative of the Principal Circumstances Relative to the Rev. Mr Wesley's Late Conference, held in Bristol, August the Sixth, 1771* . . . (Bristol: Printed by W. Gye for T. Mills, 1771).

[42] The theological debate over enslavement can also be seen as part of the wider discussion of body-soul dualism. Anthony Reddie has argued that: 'Perhaps the most significant framing trope within the theological framework of evangelism amongst and catachesis for enslaved Africans, was the clear dichotomy between the body and the soul. . . It means that if one is a Christian slave owner, one can have faith in Christ and still own slaves, as God is only interested in the non-material, immortal soul . . .' A. G. Reddie (ed.), *Black Theology, Slavery and Contemporary Christianity* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 11.

Sir Philip Gibbes (1731-1815)

John Wesley's friendship with the slaveholder Sir Philip Gibbes, which developed some years after the publication of *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, is similarly surprising at first sight.[43] The eighteen extant letters from John Wesley to Sir Philip Gibbes's daughters, written between April 1783 and August 1785,[44] are warm and personal. Wesley admired the family for their benevolence and hoped for their conversion. He first met Sir Philip Gibbes on his second visit to the family's country seat of Hilton Park in August 1783, and the two developed an immediate bond. In a 1784 letter to one of Sir Philip's daughters, Wesley revealed: 'I love Sir Philip; I love Lady Gibbes.'[45]

The Gibbes's family wealth was also built on sugar—they owned a slave plantation on Barbados. Although we do not know if Wesley and Gibbes ever discussed African enslavement, Gibbes was an unapologetic participant in the slave trade, with a high public profile: he was for example active in the of the London-based Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce,[46] and (later) in the Barbadian Society for the Improvement of Plantership.[47] He had a reputation as a relatively humane slaveholder; the formerly enslaved Olaudah Equiano described him as 'a most worthy and humane gentleman' who 'saves the lives of his negroes, and keeps them healthy, and as happy as the condition of slavery can admit'.[48] Thomas Coke, prime mover behind the earliest foreign missions by Wesley's Connexion, visited him on Barbados in 1793, as part of a preaching tour of the plantations.[49] However, Gibbes's 1786 publication on plantation management, *Instructions for the Treatment of Negroes*, was unflinchingly unsentimental in arguing for reasonable living and working conditions for enslaved people: 'The system, which preserves and lengthens life, is the very system of drawing most labour from a gang of negroes. *Declining* negroes can do but little work. *Dead* negroes cease to work.'[50]

George Wolff (1736-1828)

George Wolff was another close friend of John Wesley's. He was one of his executors,[51] and a trustee of the City Road Chapel.[52] Born in Christiania, Denmark (now Oslo, Norway), the family moved to London in 1760 after his father's death. Wolff became a British citizen in 1767 and was a successful merchant trading between Scandinavia and Britain. The family firm offered banking services and were also timber merchants, importing

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[43] See Clive Murray Norris, 'John Wesley and Slavery Revisited', *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, 64:1 (2023), 15-23.

[44] John A. Vickers, 'The Gibbes Family of Hilton Park: an unpublished correspondence of John Wesley', *Methodist History*, 1968-04 (1968), 43-61.

[45] John Wesley to Elizabeth Gibbes (28 April 1784), ibid.

[46] *Transactions of the Society Instituted at London, for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce; with the Premiums offered in the Year 1787. Vol. V.* Second Edition (London: Printed by T. Spilsbury and Son, 1793), 367.

[47] Justin Roberts*, Slavery and the Enlightenment in the British Atlantic, 1750-1807* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 151.

[48] Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*. Fourth Edition, Enlarged. 2 vols (London: Printed for, and sold by the Author, 1789), I:210.

[49] Thomas Coke, *Extracts of the Journals of the Rev. Dr. Coke's Five Visits to America* (London: Printed by G. Paramore, 1793), 182.

[50] Philip Gibbes, *Instructions for the Treatment of Negroes* (London: Shepperson and Reynolds, 1786, reprinted with additions 1797), 75.

[51] See *Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland* (accessed 17 February 2024 at https://dmbi.online/); P. Borgen, 'George Wolff (1736-1828): Norwegian-Born Merchant, Consul, Benevolent Methodist Layman, Close Friend of John Wesley', *Methodist History,* 40:1 (October 2001)), 17-28.

[52] Stevenson, *City Road Chapel*, 250.

timber in their own fleet of ships from their estates in Norway.[53] Indeed the firm of Wolff and Dorville has been described as 'the most prominent firm of timber importers in London' at the time, supplying the expanding markets of house construction and shipbuilding.[54] Wolff invested his wealth in government securities and in other stocks such as those of the East India Company. In 1787 he was appointed the Danish-Norwegian consul in London.[55] Wolff had some business links with the Caribbean, but the extent of these is unknown. Thus, in August 1782 he appeared in court to assert the claim of a Danish compatriot to '26 pieces of cloth' lying in a warehouse on St Eustatius, the island seized from the Dutch by Admiral Rodney the year before.[56] While British merchants had been largely spared, the invading forces plundered the island's warehouses, seizing an estimated £3 million in booty—over £400 million in today's terms.[57]

Wolff's official Methodist obituary described him nonetheless as 'a man of great humility, and ardent piety: and one of the most liberal contributors to the funds of the Methodist Charities in London.'[58] He was also an active benefactor to the Danish community. He presented a splendid altarpiece, 'Christ in Gethsemane', to the Danish Church on Wellclose Square in East London, where his firm was based.[59] During the Napoleonic Wars, when for a period the kingdom of Denmark-Norway and Britain were enemies, Wolff and his brother Ernest followed Wesley's example by supporting some 3,000 Danish prisoners-of-war at their own expense.

In the context of John Wesley's strictures against ornamentation and luxury in dress, George Wolff's love of fashion is noteworthy. One Danish prisoner-of-war described a meeting with Wolff as follows:

> Mr Wolff received us like a Minister of the Crown granting an audience. He let us wait for half an hour in an antechamber, then had us ushered in, and received us standing at the other end of the room in full dress according to the fashion of the time, silk stockings, chamois satin short breeches, waistcoat of the same colour and material, and a violet brown dress coat.[60]

Like Ebenezer Blackwell, Wolff lived in a comfortable villa to which in later life Wesley retreated for rest and tranquil working conditions. In Wolff's case this was in the then rural suburb of Balham. Wesley's *Journal* features repeated visits to Balham in the 1780s. His personal accounts for 1782-90 survive, and record a series of £20 gifts from Wolff, in December 1783, January 1786, January 1789, and January 1790.[61] These gifts seem to have been made when Wesley was staying with Wolff.

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[53] Lambeth Archives, IV/22/1, 'Wolff family manuscript biography, prepared by a descendant, Violet Marie Moore, in 1915'.

[54] A. Polak, *Wolffs & Dorville: et norsk-engelsk handelshus i London under Napoleonskrigene* (n.p: Universitetsforlaget, 1968?), 148.

[55] Polak, *Wolffs & Dorville*, 154, 155. In that capacity we find him, for example, issuing a certificate of Danish nationality to a seaman in 1800—TNA, ADM 1/1643, f. 198, certificate of nationality issued by George Wolff for Peter Rocloffs.

[56] TNA, HCA 42/151, 'Claim no. 20, St Eustatius and its Dependencies', 17 August 1782. The island had been lost to the French in late 1781.

[57] P. J. Marshall, *Edmund Burke & the British Empire in the West Indies: wealth, power & slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 148-9. Value of booty estimated using Bank of England's 'inflation calculator' (accessed 8 April 2024).

[58] *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*, vol. LI (1828), 286.

[59] Lambeth Archives, IV/22/1. The two decorative friezes which adorned his offices are now to be found on the front of the Norwegian Embassy in Belgravia, London.

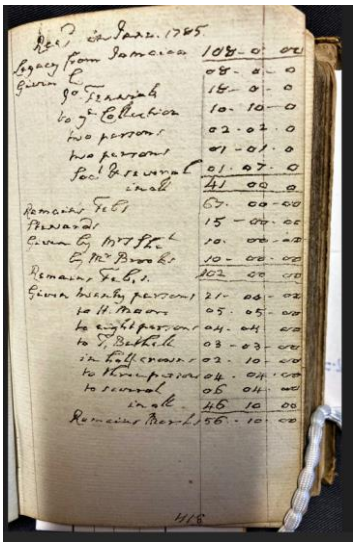
[60] Lambeth Archives, IV/22/1, f. 22. The author notes defensively that this was the age of dandies such as Beau Brummel.

[61] John Rylands Research Institute and Library, MA1977/157, John Wesley Papers (1724-90), JW III.X, Diary and Accounts 1782-90.

John Wesley and the 'legacy from Jamaica'

Aside from these (and many other) direct and indirect links with merchants and others engaged in the global economy, John Wesley on at least one occasion derived direct financial benefit from plantation slavery. One striking gift of £108 was recorded in January 1785 in his personal accounts as a 'legacy from Jamaica'. I have as yet been unable to establish from whom the legacy came, and of course there is no reason to think that the gift was solicited. But Jamaica was the richest of Britain's slave colonies and was notorious for irreligion and debauchery—indeed when Methodist missionaries arrived, they received a hostile reception from the planters and were long persecuted.

Figure 3 Extract from John Wesley's personal accounts, 1785



Wesley accepted this Jamaican legacy ten years after publishing his condemnation of enslavement in *Thoughts Upon Slavery* (1774). This January 1785 payment of £108 is the only payment with Caribbean connections that I have found in his accounts, though not all of these survive; however, his accounts from 7 December 1782 to July 1790 are in the John Rylands Research Institute and Library.[62] On the other hand, many gifts to Wesley were recorded as anonymous donations from 'friends', so there may have been other similar payments.

John Wesley spent January and most of February 1985 in London, before setting off for the Southwest of England at the end of February, where his calls included Salisbury, Plymouth, Bath and Bristol. On receipt of the £108 legacy in January 1785, he first gave £8 to his brother Charles ('C'), then £18 to the preacher John Fenwick. The third payment of ten guineas 'to ye. Collection' was a contribution by John Wesley to church funds and represented some 1 per cent of the £899.14s.4d. raised for Connexional expenses that year.[63] It was followed by a series of payments to individuals, most unnamed. Though his personal records are not entirely clear, the full distribution of the funds between January and March 1785 seems to have been as follows:

Figure 4 Distribution of the 'legacy from Jamaica', January-March 1785

destination	*amount*	*percentage of total*
objects of charity	£46.23	43%
preachers	£43.28	40%
Connexional funds	£10.50	10%
family	£8.00	7%
	£108.00	

[62] John Rylands Research Institute and Library, MA1977/157, John Wesley Diary and Accounts 1782-90.

[63] Rack, *Minutes*, 585.

In some cases, the story behind Wesley's actions can be ascertained. Thus the £2.13s.6d. [£2.68] gift to the preacher Robert Blake was presumably in response to his known shortage of money; Wesley had written to him in December 1784 and arranged for emergency funding of a guinea [£1.05].[64]

Merchants and morality

The evidence suggests that these businesspeople had no difficulty in reconciling their pursuit and enjoyment of wealth in this global economy—and even their direct participation in the system of enslavement—with a genuine Christian commitment. They did so in many ways, including by highlighting the doctrine of providence; by fair and humane dealing in business life; and by the practice of philanthropy.

Providence

A popular explanation given by the wealthy of their success and status—and even their involvement in trafficking Africans into enslavement—was the claim that this was simply the outworking of divine providence. John Wesley, for example, told Ebenezer Blackwell in 1748 that although his business activities risked distracting him from God, 'He has called you by his providence to this way of life.'[65] Forty years later, Wesley told Arthur Keene of Dublin that: 'You have great reason to bless God for the good state of your temporal affairs also. And indeed I have always observed, whenever the work of God goes on, He withholds no manner of thing that is good.'[66] We are told that the merchant John Horton, another of Wesley's friends and an indigo merchant:

> Had those just and comprehensive views of divine Providence, which lead to a cheerful acquiescence in the disposals of Heaven; and so sweetly had the influences of religion subdued his will, and regulated his affections, as to incline him under every adversity to submit to that power which it is impossible to resist, and to bow to that Wisdom which is universally extended.[67]

A year after Wesley's death, Thomas Coke, who was leading the movement's overseas missions, accepted a gift of a coffee and cotton plantation on the Caribbean island of St Vincent, and bought slaves to work it—an action he quickly regretted. When criticised for 'buying' and 'owning' slaves in the name of Wesley's Connexion, he responded: 'My friends on all sides urged that the present might be an exempt case, that the gift of the land was undoubtedly *providential*, and that the slaves purchased for the cultivation of it would certainly be treated *by us* in the tenderest manner.'[68] Such a capacious view of providence mirrored the Calvinist doctrine of 'double predestination': both the slavers and the enslaved owed their position in society to God's unchallengeable will.

Fair dealing and humanity

Fair dealing in business was highly praised at the time; the Anglo-Dutch merchant Gerard Van Neck, one of Blackwell's leading clients, combined fabulous wealth with a stellar reputation for the manner in which he conducted business. An encomium published shortly after his death claimed: 'Punctuality and probity were

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[64] John Wesley to Robert Blake (24 December 1784), Maddox, *Letters VI*, 292.

[65] John Wesley to Ebenezer Blackwell (14 August 1748), Frank Baker (ed.), *The Works of John Wesley, vol. 26, Letters II, 1740-1755* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 322.

[66] John Wesley to Arthur Keene (17 February 1785), Maddox, *Letters VI*, 316. The editor notes that this is a paraphrase of Psalm 84:11.

[67] Joseph Benson, 'Character and Death of John Horton, Esq.', *Methodist Magazine*, vol. XXVI (1803), 211-12.

[68] Thomas Coke, *Address to the Preachers*, 17-19, quoted in Vickers, *Thomas Coke*, 171.

seen in his dealings, they were the arts by which he invited, acquired and maintained his business.'[69] Wesley's celebrated 1760 sermon on 'The Use of Money' urged his members and supporters, many of whom—possibly a majority—ran businesses, to treat a competitor fairly, summarising his message thus: 'None can gain by swallowing up his neighbour's substance, without gaining the damnation of hell.'[70]

Both John and Charles Wesley had a high regard for the straightforward way in which Ebenezer Blackwell operated as a banker, as evident from Charles's funeral hymn for Blackwell, published in April 1782;

> Thro' life inviolably just
> He his integrity maintain'd,
> Most strictly faithful to his trust,
> An upright man of truth unfeign'd.[71]

Many thought that even the slave trade and slave plantations could be conducted in a principled and humane way. Blackwell's investment in the slaving voyage of the *Black Joke* led to a court case in which the captain sued him and the other co-owners; evidence given in support of his claim included one sailor's claim that: 'the complainant treated them [ie. the slaves] with great tenderness and gave them the usual & proper allowances of provision, and whenever he chastised any of them it was with great moderation and gentleness . . .'[72] And we have seen that Thomas Coke and Philip Gibbes also thought that slave plantations could be run humanely.

In short, eighteenth-century merchants and planters often argued not only that they had been allocated their station in life by God but that they were willing and able to carry on their businesses in a godly manner.

Philanthropy

A third commonly used argument was that any shortcomings in the conduct of business could be forgiven if the successful businessperson shared his or her wealth with those less fortunate. Wealthy people in Wesley's day were of course expected to engage in philanthropy, and a reputation as a philanthropist seems to have outweighed any public scruples about the source of the benefactor's riches. A prime example of this is Edward Colston (1636-1721), the Bristol merchant and philanthropist whose fortune derived in part from his active engagement in the trade in enslaved Africans. In 1790 Wesley published the memoirs of Silas Told, born in Bristol, who had served as a sailor on slave voyages before becoming a Methodist in London, and eventually chaplain at Newgate prison.[73] Told had received a free education in Colston's school and his volume included a four-page 'account of the character and piety of this worthy benefactor; and also of the wisdom and goodness of Almighty God in raising up so useful a man to posterity'.[74] In Wesley's day Colston's birthday was a public holiday in the city, observed by banks including James Ireland's.[75]

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[69] *Reflections, Moral and Prudential, on the Last Will and Testament of Gerard Van Neck, Esq; Deceased, in which His Character is Attempted* (London: Printed for James Roberts, 1750), 7.

[70] Albert C. Outler (ed.), *The Works of John Wesley, vol. 2, Sermons II, 34-70* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985), 270-1.

[71] Charles Wesley, 'On the Death of Mr Ebenezer Blackwell, Sunday, April 21, 1782', Duke University, Duke Divinity School, Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition, https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/default/files/documents/37_MS_Death_of_Ebenezer_Blackwell.pdf (accessed 6 July 2024). The hymn was also published in the *Arminian Magazine*, vol. VI (1783), 108-10, 164-6.

[72] Witness statement by James Murray, TNA, Barton vs Cooper, E/133/18/48.

[73] Silas Told, *The Life of Mr. Silas Told, Containing Many Instances of the Interposition of Divine Providence in his Favour, When at Sea; and in his Sufferings Abroad; Together with an Account of the Conversion of Several Malefactors, Through his Instrumentality. Written by Himself*. Second Edition (London: Printed by Sammells and Ritchie, 1790).

[74] Ibid. 3-7.

[75] *The New Bristol Guide* . . . (Bristol: R. Edwards, 1799), v.

John Wesley's theology and the global economy

John Wesley's thinking touched upon the ethos and praxis of eighteenth-century merchants in multiple ways. In some ways his approach was antithetical to good business; he launched his Methodist reform movement with a call to his followers to live communally and pool their resources, and when fund-raising showed little interest in the source of the money given and disbursed it at speed—as in the case of the legacy from Jamaica. On the other hand, he admired—and benefited financially and emotionally from friendship with—various successful and pious businessmen. His engagement with and understanding of the complexities of contemporary business led to obvious tensions and uncertainties in his approach in various areas.[76] Here are four more examples of his sometimes-complicated attitude towards money and business.

Wesley and the 'luxury trade'

One of the key drivers in the expanding global economy of Wesley's day was the trade in luxuries such as tea, sugar, silks and spices; East India goods, in particular, were primarily luxuries. In his sermon on 'National Sins and Miseries', preached on 12 November 1775, Wesley attacked the imperial trading system:

> When was luxury (not in food only, but in dress, furniture, equipage) carried to such an height in Great Britain, ever since it was a nation? We have lately extended the British empire almost over the globe. We have carried our laurels into Africa, into Asia, into the burning and the frozen climes of America. And what have we brought thence? All the elegance of vice which either the eastern or western world could afford.[77]

But while Wesley railed against luxury,[78] his intimate friend and financial supporter Ebenezer Blackwell was deeply engaged in the luxury trade, as of course were James Ireland and Philip Gibbes; his wife's money also derived from her late husband's business which was largely in luxury goods. And as we have seen, George Wolff, according to one contemporary account, dressed like a dandy.

Wesley and the 'bill trade'

Despite his friendship with a number of merchants and financiers, Wesley was suspicious of the world of finance. In a 1788 letter he condemned 'that execrable bill trade', adding that: 'In London I expel every one out of our Society who has anything to do with it. Whoever endorses a bill (that is, promises to pay) for more than he is worth is either a fool or a knave'.[79] The wording suggests that his issue was not with the use of bills as means of payment—indeed, this ubiquitous mechanism was the basis of the commercial transactions which generated his wife's wealth as well as that of Blackwell and other supporters. Rather, while Wesley accepted that trade as facilitating commercial exchange, he was critical of the use of bills in financial speculation, as where a paper bill was not backed by underlying assets but was used to speculate.[80]

Wesley and maritime trade

The standard model for financing ships' voyages, which were expensive, prolonged, and uncertain of outcome, was to share the risk through fractional ownership; thus, Ebenezer Blackwell held a sixteenth-share in the slaving voyage of the *Black Joke*. In perhaps his most explicit acknowledgment of the need for Methodism to

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[76] See Clive Murray Norris, 'Money and Business', in Clive Murray Norris and Joseph W. Cunningham (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to John Wesley* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024), 286-97.

[77] Sermon 111, Albert C. Outler (ed.), *The Works of John Wesley, vol. 3, Sermons III, 71-114* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986), 574.

[78] See, for example, his 1790 sermon on 'The Danger of Increasing Riches': Albert C. Outler (ed.), *The Works of John Wesley, vol. 4, Sermons IV, 115-51* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987), 183-4.

[79] John Wesley to Thomas Taylor (7 June 1788), Maddox, *Letters VI*, 693.

[80] Clive Murray Norris, 'Money and Business', 290.

be accommodating in its approach to Britain's maritime economy, Wesley agreed in 1770 an exception to the ban on preachers engaging in any trade, which had been enacted by the 1768 Conference.[81] In reinforcing the ban, the 1770 Conference noted: 'But observe, we do not object to a preacher's having a share in a ship.'[82]

Wesley and the slave trade

Most problematically, a number of John Wesley's associates—most obviously Blackwell, Gibbes and Ireland—were directly involved in the trafficking of enslaved Africans. And in 1785 Wesley accepted the legacy of £108 from Jamaica. We must always beware projecting our values back into the past, but we might well ask: how could he justify such links, in some cases years after condemning enslavement in his pamphlet *Thoughts Upon Slavery*? I cannot provide a complete answer but here offer two brief theological reflections.

First, Wesley also had a strong belief in divine providence, and was sure that he had been called directly by God to pursue his evangelistic mission—just as his business friends and supporters had been called to their trades. The legacy and other gifts, therefore, were simply part of God's overall plan for the work. It was not for Wesley or others to question how they came his way. This was, as we have seen, precisely the argument used by Thomas Coke when the Connexion acquired a slave plantation.

Second, Wesley typically disbursed the money he received immediately and for good purposes—and of course encouraged the businesspeople in his circle to do the same with their excess income. This was, as we have seen, what happened with the legacy from Jamaica; it was distributed within weeks, primarily to objects of charity and to preachers and Methodist missionaries. Perhaps Wesley felt that, whatever their source, such funds were consecrated in their use.

Conclusion

Through myriad routes John Wesley acquired an intimate knowledge of the fast-expanding global commercial economy of the eighteenth century. His wife's wealth, which he drew on in the early years of their ill-fated marriage, derived primarily from the European trade in wine and textiles, but also from importing coffee from the Yemen and commodities such as hides from Russia. His close friend and benefactor Ebenezer Blackwell, after an unprofitable attempt to enter the slave trade, specialised in financing trade with India and China. Wesley's mission to Georgia gave him first-hand experience of the multi-faceted transatlantic trading system, including the trafficking of Africans to American plantations, while Sir Philip Gibbes and the sugar merchant James Ireland were other supporters whose wealth derived from West Indian slave plantations—growing, trading and refining sugar and distilling spirits. Wesley himself had no apparent qualms in benefiting directly from profits drawn from the Jamaican slave economy—though to be fair he quickly spent his 'legacy from Jamaica' on others.

None of this is to criticise John Wesley. He was actively engaged with the world, and this was his world. It is simply to observe that Wesley personally, and his movement, drew on the resources generated by businesspeople active in the fast-expanding global economy of the eighteenth century, including in the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans. It can be no surprise that—consciously or unconsciously—Wesley's ministry responded to their needs and reflected their concerns.

[81] Rack, *Minutes*, 358-60.

[82] Rack, *Minutes*, 381.