

John Walsh – transcription of audio clips

1 Early Years and Grandfather

My parents were Methodist missionaries and I was born when they were on furlough but went back to India when I was a few weeks old and spent my first years speaking Bengali as well as English. My mother brought us children home, my father stayed out a few more years and then he returned and took various Methodist circuits in the North and ended up as chair of the district in Scotland, in Aberdeen.

My father's father worked in the mill as a mill hand but went to night school and pulled himself up into a job in what would now be called the public health department of his mill town. He was a local preacher of considerable power, much intelligence and bought as many books as he could afford, which rather cluttered up his terraced house. In his way a great man, and [he] had the longest funeral procession I think I've ever seen. It was huge because working in the health department he fought very hard for ordinary people to have good drains, good water supply – he was very much respected.

2 Inklings

The person I kept up with after I moved from Cambridge to Oxford was CS Lewis who was an influence on my life. He appeared, so to speak, by parachute as a Professor of Mediaeval and English Literature and was allotted to my college so I sat next to him many nights during the week so I got to know him, so that was important in some ways in that when I moved to Oxford he invited me to join this group called the Inklings. I never heard it called the Inklings by anyone who was there (but that was what it was originally called) which met in the Eagle and Child on Monday mornings and that was very interesting really. Tolkien was a member although he didn't come often and the Master of Pembroke College RB McCallum was a very interesting fellow. So that was part of my education.

3 Nature

An important part of my religious life has been what they now call the natural order. It's being outside and seeing landscapes, nature, green fields, purple-headed mountains and all that. I used to love mountains; I used to climb in the Alps when I was young and in Scotland a lot in winter and I always found mountains a place for reflection and comradeship, especially if you're on the end of a rope with somebody. And that's been an important thing in my life.

4 Building and Worship

I like the spire, I come out of the back door of my college which is Jesus and I'm a few hundred yards from seeing the spire down the end of the road. I think it's lovely; it's thin and tapering. Some poet says, 'A finger pointing at Heaven'. It's very graceful viewed head on.

The Oxford Anglican churches often don't have as much space for social events of a church kind and Wesley Mem is very prudently endowed for that. It can do anything from a pantomime to a children's party and fit them all in. A lot of other charitable institutions that use the premises... they like the atmosphere. I think that it plays a much more important role in the City life than people always realise. I've always attended Methodist church in the mornings. I've usually gone to support the College chapel which is vaguely Anglican in the evening of Sunday and I still do. I've always felt that that was more than an obligation - I liked the

change to liturgy now and again, and it was not very liturgical and always had good preachers though not as good as Wesley Memorial by a long way I thought!

5 Wesley Funeral and Research

I've written quite a lot of papers on Wesley who intrigues me. Quite a mysterious man. Not the man in the iron mask so to speak because he wrote about a million words of journal and letters which you can read and in which he was quite frank, but he still remains somebody.... errrr.... a lot of intellectuals' theological tributaries come into Wesley, which the Methodists don't realise, there's always a high church sacramental element which has been phased out rather but was very powerful in him. He's not what non-Methodists think either. They think of him as a ranter, standing up in a pulpit shouting. Whitfield was a ranter. When he preached, it was said you could hear him a mile away and when he sang, it's said you could hear him 3 miles away!

People describing Wesley as a preacher emphasise that he was calm. 'The placid flow of a clear stream' is how two people say almost the same thing; that he didn't shout, that he spoke clearly without much emotion until he got to the end when he raised his voice a bit as a bit of a peroration at the end.

I was struck by Wesley's funeral. There's a manuscript description in 'Bodley', strangely, of his funeral in which inside the chapel intense emotion, everybody weeping and wearing black, nearly everybody in black. Outside perhaps the largest crowd assembled in London in living or any memory of thousands of people who were not church goers who wanted to see or walk pass the catafalque. Two distinct sets of admirers really, or onlookers.

I try and put things in context to bridge the gap between religious history and secular history and make it clear that religious people spent most of their time being secular but that some secular people were infinitely more religious than anyone ever imagines. And so that has been to begin with unconsciously a motif in what I have published... that I try and put things in context. That's what historians are supposed to do.