

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Charles Woodmason (c. 1720-1776?)

*The Journal of C.W., Clerk, Itinerant Minister in South Carolina*

Very little is known about Charles Woodmason, and his writings were not published until 1953, when Richard J. Hooker brought together his journal, letters, and sermons in *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution*. Yet we know equally little of other early American autobiographers like Madam Knight and Elizabeth Ashbridge. Their autobiographies stand as their only biographies.

According to Richard Hooker, Woodmason was born in England about 1720 and grew up, probably in London, as a member of the gentry' class and the Anglican Church. In about 1752 he went to South Carolina, probably expecting his wife and family to join him later. A fall from a horse and "a kick received in the Scrotum" made him impotent, however, and his wife "refused coming over to America." But Woodmason stayed, and during the next seven or eight years he bought over 2100 acres of land and 18 slaves. He became a member of the wealthy class of planters and merchants who ruled the colony. In 1762 he returned briefly to England, probably because his wife had died, but then came back and moved to Charleston, and entered into its civic and political life.

In 1765, misjudging the depth of the popular opposition to the Stamp Act, Woodmason applied to be a distributor of stamps, and suddenly found himself treated as "a faithless fellow—one that is a betrayer of the Country, and of the Rights and Privileges of America." Perhaps as a result, he then gave up political life to become an itinerant Anglican minister. He had long regretted the lack of Anglican ministers in the backcountry and absence of support the backcountry got from the wealthy residents of the coast, who used its residents merely as a buffer against the Indians. But this was a radical change in life for an educated, upper-class South Carolinian. So he made a short trip to England to be ordained, and then started back in June, 1766, the point at which the *Journal* begins.

As the reader can see, Charles Woodmason's *Journal* makes a fascinating contrast to other, more familiar or canonical American religious autobiographies. It is not a conversion story; it is not very introspective; it does not even concern itself with God. It is a social document, a powerful, often humorous, moving description of frontier poverty, ignorance, and brutishness, told from the point of view of a cultivated gentleman. Christianity, to Woodmason, does not mean salvation; it means a minimum of physical comfort and social refinement—and an end to nakedness, drunkenness, brawling, lechery, dirt, and hunger. Yet different as Woodmason's *Journal* is from, say, Edwards's "Personal Narrative," its values are all the closer to the mainstream of the American middle class. Woodmason might almost have been an ancestor to Caroline Kirkland's Mary Clavers in *A New Home*. Though writing from an establishmentarian perspective, he also bears comparison with the great Methodist frontier preacher, Peter Cartwright.

But the first and last brilliance of Woodmason is the energy, frankness, and roughness of his language. He kept this journal as a record of his travels and sacrifices (counting up the miles travelled and people baptized), as a record to show to his friends, perhaps, and an account (which he somehow anticipated) of how his anger and outrage at the backcountry gave way to sympathy and support. But he must also have kept his journal as a way of keeping his own sanity. The long lists of debauchery and notes on frontier trickery, like drowning out sermons with dogfights, are a kind of mental defense. As the ruffians tried to drown him out with the dogfights, he drowned them in words.

The text, including all notes and editorial matter in brackets, edited slightly for the present selection is from Richard J. Hooker, ed., *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1953).

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