

Thomas Coke

The Foreign Minister of Methodism

By Warren Thomas Smith

Saturday, September 18, 1784, may have dawned as just another day in Bristol, England, but in the province of God it was highly significant. “At ten in the morning we sailed from *King—Road* for *New York*. A breeze soon sprung up, which carried us with the help of the tides, about a hundred leagues from *Bristol* by Monday morning . . .” so Thomas Coke made the first entry in his *Journal*, a little volume published in 1793 and dedicated to John Wesley.

The small vessel was not unlike other ships of the time, yet it was playing a role in an important scene of church history. Three of the passengers were to open a new chapter in the religious life of America. Of these one was a dedicated Welsh gentleman who would travel at least a hundred thousand miles on a hundred separate voyages as the Foreign Minister of Methodism and Ambassador of Jesus Christ. Thomas Coke was sailing as the executor of John Wesley’s design for the people called Methodists. It is doubtful that this plump little clergyman, who stood just five feet one inch, fully realized the significance of the voyage he was undertaking. A church was about to be born, and he was to be a key figure in the first moment of its breathing.

Background of the Time

We cannot form an estimate of the life and work of Thomas Coke without considering the time-spirit in which he lived: (1) His was to be a background of war and threat of war. Napoleon for almost a quarter of a century was conqueror of Europe and a threat to England. Coke made eighteen voyages between England and America knowing that at any moment his vessel was in danger of capture by the French Navy or privateers, (2) We must be mindful too that this was the age of the slave trade. This “execrable sum of all villainies” as Wesley called it, was one of the first social evils which Coke attacked. (3) Also this was a century which, at first, had almost no interest in Christian missions. Coke’s “A Plan of the Society for the Establishment of Missions Among the Heathens,” published in 1784, came eight years prior to William Carey’s voyage to India and was one of the earliest tracts projecting a missionary program. Coke had to move against a stubborn inertia in convincing English and American churchmen that God was interested in the masses of Asia and Africa. (4) During these years the Church of England was asleep and a new and virile Methodism was born and growing rapidly. It was Methodism that attracted Thomas Coke and became the channel through which he did his work.

Early Years

Coke was born at Brecon in South Wales. Located in the valley of the Usk and Honddu rivers, the village is surrounded by hills known as “Brecon Beacons.” In Coke’s day, as in mid-20th century, ivy-covered ruins remind one of a feudal and monastic life which used to be. He never lost the love for his native town. In 1794, he wrote to a friend “If I do not go to Africa after the Conference, perhaps I may have the pleasure of visiting Wales . . .” As a missionary statesman he returned to Brecon and preached to a large congregation on his favorite text, Psalm 68: 31: “Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.” Coke Memorial Methodist Church stands today as a tribute to the son in whom Brecon takes much pride.

October 9, 1792. Coke wrote in his *Journal* “I am now forty-five . . .,” which of course would put the date of birth, October 9, 1747. Markers in Brecon, as well as some records, put the date at September of that year. Coke’s father, Bartholomew, was a well-to-do medical practitioner who held several public offices, testimony to his high standing in the community. To Bartholomew and Anne Phillips Coke were born three sons; the first two, John and Bartholomew, died in infancy. It is easy to understand that Thomas, the one surviving, was a great joy to the parents. The house in which the family lived still stands in Brecon, on High Street just across from the Town Hall.

Education began at Christ College (as it is now known) in Brecon. In later years Coke recalled the happy school days under his teacher, the Reverend Mr. Griffith. Coke was handsome (his round face with ruddy complexion was surrounded by a mass of dark curls which fell to his shoulders), witty and a reasonably good student with a large number of friends. He was fond of dancing and was considered the “catch” for the young ladies.

At the age of sixteen, he matriculated at Jesus College, Oxford, on April 11, 1764, as a Gentleman Commoner. Jesus College was, and still is, one of the smaller colleges of Oxford. The grey stone buildings with neat green lawns in the quads reflect collegiate charm and dignity. The chapel, while not grand, is very worshipful. Over the arched door is carved: *Ascendat Oratio Descendat Gratia*—Let Prayer Ascend, Let Grace Descend. Young Coke would have read that inscription daily on his way to morning prayers. For the young Welshman, Oxford offered both possibilities and temptations. The University, as most of its sister institutions of the period, had a low moral tone, and many of the faculty and students took a skeptical view of all things religious. People with whom Thomas Coke now associated, and for a time tried to follow, bore little resemblance to the unsophisticated neighbors of his home town.

Coke tells us that during the Oxford days the simple faith of his childhood was seriously challenged by the prevailing deism. A drunken tutor ridiculed the naive beliefs the boy brought from his home. “Eh! Coke! Do you believe the Adam and Eve story, eh?” During this period there came an inner struggle prompting the young student to turn to his books: Euclid, Aldrich, the usual Greek and Latin classics and a considerable religious literature including Bishop Sherlock’s, “Trial of the Witnesses of Jesus.” The copy which Coke probably read is still in the college library. Coke took his B.A. Degree on February 4, 1768, the Master of Arts was conferred in 1770, and he became a Doctor of Civil

Law in 1775.

Anglican Clergyman

At the completion of the Bachelor's degree, Coke left Oxford and returned to Brecon. At twenty-one he was elected councilman for the borough; at twenty-five, Chief Magistrate. Apparently for a time he had considered a legal career, which gave way to the urge to take Holy Orders. His call was doubtless both human and divine, springing not so much from burning religious conviction as from the desire to find a vital faith. Politics appears to have been active in this situation. Members of Parliament from Brecon assured the young Magistrate that he would be in line for a prebend in the Cathedral of Worcester. He returned to Oxford where he passed his examination for Deacon's Orders on June 10, 1770, and was ordained in the Cathedral of Christ Church, where John Wesley was ordained. He became a Priest on the 23rd of August, 1772.

The new Anglican clergyman returned to his home, grateful for the friends in government who had assured him of a quick rise in church circles, only to learn the promises were empty, for another had been granted the prebend. Coke refers to the "proficients in artificial friendship, who squeeze my hand, and beg me come tomorrow." An inconspicuous curacy soon offered itself at South Petherton in Somersetshire.

South Petherton is a quaint village and the church where Coke served is a handsome structure with an imposing tower. In five years and eight months he matured to an understanding of himself which opened the way for his future service. His preaching was sincere (he rebuked the villagers for the number of illegitimate children brought for baptism), and interesting enough to command a hearing from the community.

Coke struck up a friendship with Thomas Maxfield. He discovered writings of John Fletcher, with whom he corresponded, and he read the Sermons of John Wesley. A visit to a family of Methodists in Devonshire proved to be instrumental in his religious development. The South Petherton ministry now assumed a religious zeal usually associated either with fanatics or the followers of the Wesleys. Some communicants accused their curate of Methodist leanings. One evening while making his way along a cobblestone lane to preach, Coke felt a strange peace descend upon his soul. It was not a dramatic conversion but it made a change in the spiritual life of the young Anglican.

A meeting of John Wesley and Thomas Coke was inevitable. In August of 1776, Wesley had come into southwest England to preach at Taunton and Coke learned that the venerable man was to be the guest of James Brown of Kingston. Wesley wrote in his *Journal* of August 13, 1776:

I preached at Taunton, and afterwards went with Mr. Brown to Kingston . . . Here I found a clergyman, Dr. Coke, late Gentleman Commoner of Jesus College in Oxford, who came twenty miles on purpose. I had much conversation with him; and a union then began which I trust shall never end.

At this meeting, as the two walked in the garden, Coke really hoped Wesley would extend an invitation to join the Methodists. But Wesley advised him to return to his parish and establish cottage prayer meetings, "doing all the good he could, omitting no part of his clerical duty and avoiding every reasonable ground of offence."

The young Doctor was frankly disappointed, "I thought he would have said, come with me, and I will give you employment according to all that is in your heart." Nonetheless, he returned to his parish and began to follow Wesley's suggestion. There was new zeal in his sermons, the themes being those usually associated with field-preaching evangelists. He went so far as to urge the congregation to sing hymns and he began to substitute extempore prayers for the prayer book.

Such innovations provoked indignation from certain wealthy members who forced the absentee vicar to dismiss the curate. Sunday morning, March 30, 1777, Dr. Coke was abruptly and rudely told that he could no longer preach in South Petherton. Adding insult, the bells of the church were rung, "chiming him out." The following Sunday, Coke returned, not to preach in the pulpit but in the village square just beyond the church yard. A mob gathered with stones and clubs and a riot was prevented by the presence of two young dissenters, a brother and sister named Edmonds, who stood at the clergyman's side. Coke's effective years of service at South Petherton were over.

A second meeting between Coke and Wesley soon followed and the conversation is reported to have taken this turn: "I have no parish, no church! What shall I do?"

"Why, go out, and preach to all the world!" the founder of Methodism is supposed to have answered. In any case, on August 19, 1777, John Wesley wrote in his *Journal*: "I went forward to Taunton with Dr. Coke, who being dismissed from his curacy, has bidden adieu to his honorable name, and determined to cast in his lot with us."

The First Years as a Methodist

Thomas Coke entered the Methodist ministry just as he was completing his thirtieth year. He attended the Conference of 1777 at the New Room in Bristol, John Fletcher was present, and it was obvious that the saintly man, who was to have been Wesley's successor, was dying.

Coke's relation to the Anglican Communion remained the same as that of John and Charles Wesley, yet he was now a Methodist preacher. His name first appeared in the *Minutes* in 1778, at which time he was assigned to the London Circuit. The new Wesley Chapel at City Road was opened on Sunday, November 1, 1778, and later Wesley's adjoining house was completed. It was necessary to transfer Methodist headquarters from the old Foundry to the new City Road. John Wesley might well have had this in mind when he appointed Coke as his secretary. More and more authority was delegated to the young assistant.

Coke and Wesley make an interesting study in comparisons. Both were short in stature. Both were Oxford

graduates as well as Anglican clergymen. In temperament they were extremely dissimilar. Wesley was ever the self-controlled Englishman, while Coke was always the impetuous Welshman. Wesley viewed the difference in this manner:

Dr. Coke and I are like the French and the Dutch. The French have been compared to a flea, the Dutch to a louse. I creep like a louse, and the ground I get I keep; but the Doctor leaps like a flea and is sometimes obliged to leap back again.

Coke was a popular and capable preacher. He lacked the persistent logic of Wesley and the dramatic impact of Whitefield, yet he drew crowds. One of his triumphs came with an invitation to return to South Petherton where a large and joyous throng came to hear him. Again the bells of the church were rung; "We chimed him out . . . now we ring him in." As a result of his visit, a Methodist Society was organized; a church bearing his name flourishes there today.

In 1782, Wesley requested that Dr. Coke preside at the Irish Conference. For the remainder of his life, a period of 30 years, Coke discharged this responsibility. In effect, though certainly not in title, Thomas Coke was the Methodist Bishop of Ireland. At the time he entered the connection there were in excess of 6,000 Methodists in the Emerald Isle. By 1813, the number had grown to 28,707. Coke was greatly loved in Ireland and he in turn held a sincere appreciation for that beautiful country.

It was during his second visit in 1783 that Coke received word of the death of his mother. She had been living with her son in London. (Coke's father had died in 1773.) The family fortune was left to him and he used it freely in the work of Methodism. The Doctor was not a good businessman and when he later assumed leadership of Methodist missions, his bookkeeping proved to be a near calamity—which was equally true of his attempts at publishing books. He always paid his own travel expenses and made up large deficiencies.

During these years Coke played a major part in the preparation and execution of the famous Deed of Declaration. By this Deed, the Conference was given legal status and it assumed ownership of all the Chapels. The Deed, which was enrolled in February of 1784, restricted the term Conference to one hundred preachers, the publication of which evoked much criticism (especially from the brethren not listed) of both Wesley and, especially, Coke. The former maintained that he alone had prepared the list.

Wesley's Momentous Decision

In 1784, Thomas Coke's life merges with the stream of American history. Around twenty years previously, Methodist preaching had begun in New York by Philip Embury and Captain Webb, and in Maryland by Robert Strawbridge. In 1769, Boardman and Pilmore came to America, followed in 1771 by Francis Asbury and Richard Wright; Thomas Rankin and George Shadford arrived in 1773. All were lay preachers. During the American Revolution all the English preachers returned to England with one exception, Francis Asbury, about whom, Coke in his *History of the West Indies*, remarked:

The clergy abandoned their flocks, and in many instances the British missionaries, following their example, forsook their spheres of action. Mr. Asbury alone, unterrified by the threatening sword, remained at his station. Surrounded by dangers on every side, his vigour increased as his colleagues declined the work.

Through Asbury's repeated requests for ordained ministers John Wesley was made aware that positive action must be taken regarding America. It was Asbury's good judgment and skillful diplomacy which prevented a division in the American Societies over the question of ordination and the administration of the Sacraments. Wesley put the facts before Dr. Lowth, Bishop of London, who had supervision of the Anglican Church Colonies, but the bishop turned a deaf ear to the request that one of the Methodists be ordained.

Advanced in years, and having made provision for the government of the Societies in England after his death, Wesley now took bold action regarding the perpetuity of the Methodists in America. After years of study, especially of Lord King's book on the Primitive Church, he was convinced that the New Testament term Elder (*presbuteros*) was synonymous with Bishop (*episcopos*). He was equally assured that the primitive church in Alexandria had practiced a scriptural method in selecting and ordaining one of its own as elder or bishop. Thus, he, being a Presbyter of the Church of England, could set apart Thomas Coke as a General Superintendent. On February 7, 1784, Coke was called to Wesley's study at City Road, where a plan was unfolded. Just what Coke's immediate reaction was, we cannot be sure.

At the Conference held at Leeds the following July, Wesley presented his views to the preachers. Just how detailed a plan was given we cannot be certain. It may be that the consecration itself was not mentioned, only an announcement that Coke was to go to America. At this historic meeting Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey offered to accompany Dr. Coke.

In August, Coke wrote Wesley a letter which indicates the two had discussed the matter of the consecration:

The more maturely I consider the subject, the more expedient it seems to me that the power of ordaining others should be received by me from you, by the imposition of your hands

While in London, preparing to depart for America, the Doctor received a letter from Wesley requesting him to come to Bristol to receive "fuller power" and to bring with him James Creighton, an ordained clergyman. We have Wesley's own thoughts on the matter:

September 1, Wednesday—Being now clear in my own mind, I took a step which I had long weighed in my mind, and appointed Mr. Whatcoat and Mr. Vasey to go and serve the desolate sheep in America.

At four o'clock the morning of September 2, 1784, in Bristol, not many blocks from the New Room, in a dwelling (bombed during World War II) John Wesley placed his hands on Thomas Coke and Methodism received her first General Superintendent.

A storm of protest immediately broke. No one was more outspoken than Charles Wesley, who in a letter of March 3, 1785, wrote:

I can scarcely yet believe it, that in his eighty-second year my brother, my old intimate friend and companion, should assume the Episcopal character: ordain elders, consecrate a Bishop and send him to ordain our lay preachers in America.

This was shortly followed by a quatrain of doggerel quite unworthy of the sweet singer of Methodism.

So easily are Bishops made,
By man or woman's whim:
Wesley his hands on Coke hath laid,
But who laid hands on him?

Charles, along with others, charged that Coke was ambitious to become a bishop. "Do you not know and approve of his avowed design . . . ? Have you not made yourself the author of all his actions? . . . and your supporting him in his ambitious pursuits"

To these accusations John Wesley responded with his usual calmness: "I believe Dr. Coke is as free from ambition as from covetousness. He has done nothing rashly, that I know, . . . He is now . . . a right hand to me" While most of this argument was being debated, Coke, Whatcoat, and Vasey were in America, and the work of the Kingdom was going forward in a vigorous Methodist fashion. It appears that Wesley's step was justified by the results, both immediate and in subsequent history.

First Tour in America

John Dickins, a Methodist preacher in New York, welcomed the party to America, as recorded by Coke:

Wednesday, November 3, We are safely arrived at *New York*, praised be God, after a very agreeable voyage I have opened Mr. Wesley's plan to Brother Dickens, . . . he highly approves of it, says that all the Preachers most earnestly long for such a regulation, and that *Mr. Asbury* he is sure will agree to it. He presses me earnestly to make it public This evening I preached on the Kingdom of God within, to a precious little congregation.

Anxious to find Asbury, Coke started south, stopping in Philadelphia where he was introduced to the governor of Pennsylvania who proved to be a personal friend of Wesley. At Dover Delaware Coke records:

Here I met an excellent young man, *Freeborn Garretson*. [*sic*] He seems to be all meekness and love, yet all activity. He makes me quite ashamed, for he invariably rises at four in the morning, and not only he, but several others of the Preachers: and blushing I brought back my alarm to four o'clock.

After staying at the home of Judge Bassett, the party proceeded to Barratt's Chapel. Coke makes this observation of his meeting with the most important circuit rider in America:

About ten o'clock we arrived at *Barret's Chapel* [*sic*] so called from the name of the friend that built it, and who went to heaven a few days ago. In this Chapel, in the midst of a forest, I had a noble congregation, to which I endeavoured to set forth our blessed Redeemer, as our Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification, and Redemption. After the sermon, a plain, robust man came up to me in the pulpit, and kissed me: I thought it could be no other than *Mr. Asbury*, and I was not deceived. I administered the sacrament after preaching to, I think, five or six hundred communicants, and afterwards we held a love-feast. It was the best season I ever knew, except one at *Charlemont in Ireland*.

At such a meeting the congregation was moved to tears. Asbury was surprised at the news brought by Coke: "I was shocked when first informed of the intention of these my brethren in coming to this country; it may be of God."

On Asbury's insistence it was decided to call a Conference of all the preachers. Freeborn Garretson was dispatched "like an arrow from North to South" to announce the Conference which would meet at Baltimore on Christmas Eve.

Asbury had arranged for Coke to take a preaching tour prior to the Conference—"a route of about a thousand miles . . . , " a good test of the Doctor's mettle, led by Harry Hosier, an African American preacher. Asbury started a similar

mission, taking Whatcoat and Vasey with him.

At 10: 00 A. M., December 24, 1784, the Christmas Conference convened at Lovely Lane Chapel in Baltimore with the Doctor presiding. He records:

On Christmas Eve we opened our Conference which had continued ten days. I admire the American Preachers. We had near sixty of them present. The whole number is eighty-one. They are indeed a body of devoted disinterested men, but most of them young.

This was the first time the preachers had seen Coke and we cannot help wondering at the impression he made. He was every inch the Oxford gentleman with much charm and good manners. Some remarked "his complexion and voice were those of a woman." He experienced considerable embarrassment during his preaching tours in this country because the crude frontiersmen sometimes tittered at his seemingly effeminate manner and the shrillness of his tones (during times of excitement his voice reached a high pitch). His ability in preaching and praying, however, soon won the preachers attending the Conference. A British officer once characterized him as the "most heavenly minded little devil I have ever seen."

Asbury had insisted that the General Superintendent be elected by the preachers rather than appointed by John Wesley. By unanimous vote Coke and Asbury were accordingly elected Superintendents of the new Methodist Episcopal Church. Christmas Day, 1784, Coke, assisted by Vasey and Whatcoat, ordained Asbury a Deacon. The following day he was ordained Elder, Coke preaching the ordination sermon "On the Godhead of Christ." December 27th, Asbury was consecrated General Superintendent by Coke, assisted by Vasey, Whatcoat and Philip W. Otterbein, a German Reformed minister who was present at Asbury's request. Coke preached from Revelation 3: 7-11. During the Conference, sixteen other men were elected to be set apart as Deacons and Elders.

Important Actions

One of the actions of the Christmas Conference was a resolution regarding the emancipation of slaves. Coke was the unquestioned leader in this move and on May 7, 1785, he and Asbury called on George Washington to present a petition for abolition of the trade:

He received us very politely, and was very open to access After dinner we . . . opened to him the grand business on which we came He informed us that he was of our sentiments, and had signified his thoughts on that subject to most of the great men of the State.

During the months following the Conference, in almost every place he preached Coke denounced slavery in America:

I preached . . . at Brother *Tandy Key's* He told me, as we rode together, that he was determined to emancipate his Slaves (about twenty) I now begin to venture to exhort our Societies to emancipate their slaves I preached the Colonel *Bedford's* funeral sermon. But I said nothing good of him, for he was a violent friend of slavery, and his interests being great among the Methodists in these parts, he would have been a dreadful thorn in our sides, if the Lord had not in mercy taken him away. I went some miles to a dying friend, and spent about half the day with him drawing up his Will, in which he emancipates at the times there specified his eight Slaves. This is a good beginning.

Another important action of the Conference was the establishment of Cokesbury College. When Coke arrived plans had been made to start a school but under his persuasion it was decided to found a college. More than \$5,000 was collected and a site twenty miles from Baltimore, at Abingdon, was chosen. "The situation pleases me more and more . . .," Coke wrote. He made frequent visits to the institution and later commented "Indeed, the fear of God seems to pervade the whole college." Again he wrote:

I had several long conversations with Dr. *Hall*, our President, and am satisfied beyond a doubt, that he is both the Scholar, the Philosopher, and the Gentleman; he truly fears God Our new college . . . we trust will unite together those two great ornaments of human Nature, *Genuine Religion* and *Extensive Learning* Our object is (not to raise Gospel-Ministers, but) to serve our pious friends and our married Preachers in the proper education of their sons.

The ill-fated school was twice burned and, after the second fire, attempts to rebuild it failed. Although Cokesbury did not survive, in and through it a glorious dream was born. The program of higher education in modern America owes something to Dr. Coke, who thus early argued for a college instead of a school.

At the Christmas Conference plans were made for sending preachers to Nova Scotia as missionaries. Throughout his *Journal* Coke mentions "begging from door to door" for missions. Wherever people saw Dr. Coke they knew he would take an offering to further the cause of an ever expanding world parish. As he was nearing the end of his life he wrote:

Yet I cannot repent of the thousands of hours which I have spent in at once the most vile, the most glorious drudgery of begging from house to house. The tens of thousands of pounds which I have raised for the

missions, and the beneficial effects thereof, form an ample compensation for the time and all the labour.

Later Work in the United States

June 2, 1785, Thomas Coke sailed for England:

And now I took leave of my friends, and set out . . . for the ship *Olive-Branch* . . . But I think for many years I have not felt myself so effeminate (shall I call it?) as I did on parting with my *American Brethren*, The Preachers: and the sensation continued very painful for a considerable time after I left them.

The first voyage was over; there would be eight more.

Thomas Coke has been characterized, and justly so, as the “Foreign Minister of Methodism.” It has been said that no man of his day demonstrated more earnestness or more effective labor in the far-reaching witness of the Gospel. In the trips from England to America he served as the connecting tie between parent and rapidly growing child. Notice should be taken of some facts compiled by Jesse Lee. In 1784, the year of Coke’s first visit, there were 14,988 Methodists in America. By 1809, six years after his ninth trip, there were 163,038. Some of the later visits were brief. Of some we have no records. He constantly mentions the dangers faced: pirates, mobs and storms—always storms: “We have had little else but storms and squalls since we sailed.”

The fourth trip to the United States proved to be one of his most difficult. At this time he learned of the death of John Wesley. Coke had sailed from Jamaica on January 27, 1791, arriving in South Carolina a month later. He was at Port Royal, Virginia, when the news reached him.

A gentleman . . . sent us a general invitation to sup with him . . . I accepted it. Soon after I came in, he observed that the *Philadelphia Paper* had informed the public of the death of Mr. Wesley. . . . I evidently saw by the account, that it was too true—I had lost my friend, and that the world had lost a burning and a shining light.

As he rode to his ship he noticed that in almost all Methodist Churches the pulpits were draped in black.

It must be said that in the course of his many visits to America, Coke was not always appreciated and he was frequently misunderstood. With Asbury, Coke signed a congratulatory statement presented on behalf of the Methodists to the new president, George Washington. For this action he was only casually applauded in America and severely criticized in England. Some honors came to Coke, such as an invitation to address the United States Congress, but the real leader of American Methodism was Asbury. Coke remained a loyal subject of the British Crown which, together with his education and culture, kept him from being completely at one with the frontiersmen and preachers.

Coke’s Activity in the West Indies

Coke’s first visit to the West Indies was the result of a storm as he was making his second trip to the United States. His ship was delayed four months and driven badly off course, finally landing at St. John’s on the island of Antigua, on Christmas Day, 1786.

This day we landed in *Antigua*, and in going up the town of *St. John’s* we met Brother *Baxter* in his band, going to perform divine services. After a little refreshment I went to our Chapel, and read prayers, preached, and administered the sacrament.

The first Methodist preaching in the New World may have been in the West Indies. On January 17, 1758, Nathaniel Gilbert of Antigua, his wife and servants were converted by John Wesley at Wandsworth in England. When Gilbert returned to Antigua he began preaching to the slaves, forming a class of two hundred.

In 1778, John Baxter, a local preacher, was sent as a shipwright to the British Fleet which lay in English Harbor at Antigua. He found the group which Gilbert, then deceased, had formed and assumed oversight. In a few years it had grown to two thousand. Baxter had appealed to Wesley for help. It was not until June 2, 1785, however, when Coke was in Baltimore, that Baxter managed to come to that city to be ordained. The Christmas Conference of 1784 had appointed Jeremiah Lambert to Antigua but he died before reaching the Island.

Coke was accompanied on this first West Indies visit by William Warrener, William Hammett and John Clark. The three were left with Baxter for work in the West Indies. Thus Methodism grew under British auspices.

From the beginning Coke took this chain of little islands with its vast numbers of slaves and impoverished inhabitants completely to his heart. In all he made at least five trips to the islands; each time he devoted himself to supervision of missionaries, preaching, and working in behalf of the natives. Perhaps the most constructive work of his entire ministry was done here. His three volume *History of the West Indies* represents his great interest in the people, their history and their numerous and tragic problems. He made a trip to Holland in an attempt to secure from Dutch officials laws safeguarding the religious liberties of the inhabitants of St. Eustatius:

If a coloured man should be found praying—for the first offence he should receive thirty-nine lashes; and for the second, if free, he should be whipped and banished; but if a slave, be whipped every time.

He made a similar plea for the British-owned Islands where slaves were beaten for attending Methodist worship. He saw pulpit Bibles actually hung from the gallows and clergymen burned in effigy. As a result of his labors, Coke saw

not only a strong evangelical witness started in the West Indies, but the beginning of freedom of worship:

A very extraordinary name has been fixed on the Methodists in this Island—"Hallelujah!" Even the little negroes in the streets call them by the name of *Hallelujah* as they pass along.

The British Isles and the Continent

Perhaps Coke's most painful opposition came in his own British Conference in the form of a resentment against what was by some considered his ambition to become the second John Wesley. Although he was made secretary of the Conference fifteen times, the President's chair was not given to him until 1797, then again in 1835. His election as President of the Irish Conference was deferred a number of years. After serving as agent for British Mission Work, he was made President of the Missionary Committee. He made many blunders in directing the general program of a newly formed Missionary Committee, but he was also responsible for a vast amount of constructive work. Largely through his personal efforts, British Methodism developed a missionary program which flourishes today.

Coke had a great interest in Africa and once wrote:

During a series of years we have compelled Africa to weep tears of blood; let us now endeavour to brighten her countenance with smiles of joy, as some compensation for the injuries we have done her.

A projected mission to the Foulahs in Sierra Leone in 1796 failed, due to Coke's poor choice of missionary personnel. April 18, 1796, the governor of the colony wrote:

I am sorry to say, that most of the persons you chose for the propagation of the Gospel in the Foulah country, in Africa, have manifested to the world that they are strangers to the power of it themselves.

Coke obviously profited by the tragic mistake for the second such enterprise, in 1811, succeeded.

Coke's abortive attempt to establish Methodism in Paris during the height of the Revolution failed with "the eminent English divine" leaving the city as a mob threatened to hang him from a lamp post.

Successful missions were established at Gibraltar and among the large number of French prisoners of war. An impressive Home Mission project was undertaken in Wales and Scotland with a program of Sunday schools established in Cornwall. Coke made numerous visits to the Channel Islands and the Norman Isles. No wonder he wrote to a friend, "I have not had a morning to spare these 17 years. I cannot finish half my business any day. I have now between 50 and 60 letters to answer in Europe and America." He then adds with typical enthusiasm, "Yorkshire is all on a flame of love. I expect we shall have an increase of 5 or 6,000 this year in that country."

In the course of his lifetime Coke did an extensive amount of writing, little of which can be called creative. His largest undertaking was at the request of the British Conference, a four-volume *Commentary* on the Bible, published between 1801 and 1803.

Coke did not marry until late in life and then lost his first wife, Miss Penelope Goulding Smith, after five years of marriage. He then married Miss Anne Loxdale who died eleven months later. Both wives are buried in the family tomb at Brecon.

Ceylon and the Death of Coke

For years Thomas Coke had a growing interest in India. He wrote to William Wilberforce:

The Lord has been pleased to fix me for thirty-seven years on a point of great usefulness . . . And yet I could give up all for India. Could I but close my life in being the means of raising a spiritual Church in India, it would satisfy the utmost ambition of my soul here below.

He offered to become an Anglican Bishop in India but his idea was not taken seriously by either the Church of England or the Methodists.

The last years of Coke's life were spent in planning a mission to Ceylon, since the Anglo-Indian political situation prevented his going to India proper. Coke paid 6,000 pounds toward the project (the present purchasing power of this sum equals one hundred-fifty thousand dollars).

I am now dead to Europe, and alive for India. God himself has said to me, "Go to Ceylon!" I am as much convinced of the will of God in this respect as that I breathe; . . . I had rather be set naked on the coast of Ceylon, without clothes, and without a friend than not to go there.

As the party sailed on December 31, 1813. Coke offered this moving prayer: "Here we are, before God, six missionaries and two dear sisters, now embarked in the most important and most glorious work in the world."

Coke did not live to see his dream fulfilled. On the morning of May 3, 1814, one of the missionaries went to the little Doctor's cabin and found him lifeless on the floor. A massive coffin was constructed and with weeping missionaries standing by, all that was mortal of this servant of God was consigned to the depths. Could there have been a better place to have buried him? The sea had become his real home.

The Life and Work of the Man

From the standpoint of actual service rendered, Thomas Coke stands as one of Methodism's leading figures. From the aspect of personal life, he remains one of its most colorful personalities. Lacking the brilliance of Wesley and the plodding strength of Asbury, he was nevertheless present when leadership was needed. Subsequent history has proved that his capabilities far outweighed his limitations. Asbury, who was not noted for extravagant language, wrote:

By vote of conference, I preached the funeral sermon for Doctor Coke—of blessed mind and soul—of the third branch of Oxonian Methodists—a gentleman, a scholar, and a bishop, to us—and as a minister of Christ, in zeal, in labours, and in services, the greatest man in the last century.

As an individual, Coke had such a wide range of interest that he became an ecclesiastical “jack of all trades.” He mixed great devotion to God's work with a certain natural personal ambition. He had a faculty for making himself misunderstood on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet it must be said that he was endowed with an abiding love for people, especially the down-trodden of the earth. He saw need and had genuine compassion, whether for the impoverished American preacher, the slave of the West Indies who could not worship, or the Irish peasant driven from his home by an unjust overlord. Coke possessed the power to move people, though he often lacked the power to hold them.

Mention must be made of Coke's love of nature. Indeed, this was one of his most attractive characteristics. Regardless of how pressed he was under the weight of duties, he took notice of the song of the bird in the morning, the flowers of the springtime and especially the glories of the sun set. “I do not wonder,” he wrote, “that the poor Heathens worship the sun.”

Thomas Coke was wholeheartedly consecrated to the kingdom of Heaven. He was deeply and unreservedly committed to Jesus Christ. He was a true servant of his beloved Methodism and a dedicated follower of the “God who buries his workmen, but carries on his work.”

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