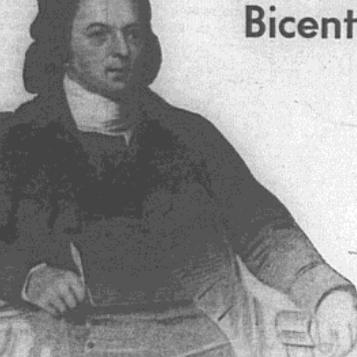


WESLEY'S ADVISER IN FOUNDING THE METHODIST CHURCH

A Biographical Sketch by REV. FRANK BAKER, B.A., B.D.



The Rev. Dr. Thomas Coke, from the engraving by A. H. Ritchie.

THE date of Thomas Coke's birth has caused a little confusion among historians. Some have engraved it in marble as October 9, 1747. Others, following Samuel Drew, have favoured September 9, a claim confirmed by an entry in the register of St. Mary's, Brecon.

"October 5, 1747, Thomas, son of Mr. Bart. Coke, Apothecary, and Anne his wife, was baptised."

In those days, of course, the title "Mr." was reserved for people like the squire and parson. Bartholomew Coke was indeed quite a figure in Brecon, occupying its highest municipal offices. Thomas, his third and only surviving son, enjoyed all the benefits that money and influence could provide. From the old Grammar School at Brecon he went on to Jesus College, Oxford, as a "gentleman commoner," one exempt because of higher fees from much of the normal discipline. Graduating in 1768, he returned to Brecon to assume positions of responsibility in the local government. He was even a J.P. at 24.

Thomas Coke seemed marked out as a leader of men. Nor was his appearance against him. The homeliness of his stocky figure was offset by a dignified carriage. His ruddy farmer's face was lit by flashing dark eyes and a charming smile, his high forehead crowned with wavy black hair, worn long after the fashion of the day. His voice was normally soft and musical, his demeanour friendly and cheerful.

The gateway to most professions then was Holy Orders. On June 10, 1770, Coke was accordingly ordained deacon, proceeding M.A. three days later. In 1771 he changed his little curacy of Road in Somerset for that of South Feithorn in the same county, being ordained priest on August 23, 1772. He was little more than a religious automaton, however, loyally performing the duties of his parish, but deriving no spiritual benefit from them. His religious experience was

apparently quickened by one of Wesley's former lay preachers, Thomas Maxfield, and at last, in his own words, he "was given a vivid consciousness of the divine presence, and from this moment became a new creature." In 1775 he was created Doctor of Civil Law by Oxford University—though he sometimes described himself as L.L.D., which was popularly regarded as an alternative to D.C.L. This should have been a step towards preferment, even though the promise of a stall in Worcester Cathedral had not materialised. But Coke had been introduced to the work and writings of John Wesley, and the adventure of Christian service called to him more than did a cosy sinecure.

At last, on August 26, 1776, the eager youth of 28 was brought face to face with John Wesley himself, now an old man of 73. Coke was tremendously impressed, though rather disappointed when Wesley told him to go back to his own parish, where he was now preaching to over a thousand every Sunday. He went, however, and pretty well turned it into a Methodist Circuit, much to the annoyance of the more influential parishioners, who

eventually succeeded in securing his dismissal.

AGAIN Coke sought out Wesley. This time the interview ended differently. "Go out," said Wesley, "go out, and preach the Gospel to all the world." This was in 1777. Thomas Coke was now a Methodist. Soon he was Wesley's right-hand man, private secretary, treasurer, proof-reader and deputy President of the Irish Conference.

When in 1784 John Wesley took the most crucial ecclesiastical steps of his life, he relied largely on Coke's legal advice. In February he erected the annual Conference into the official ruling body of Methodism, after Coke had drawn up the necessary Deed of Declaration. Against Coke's advice, however, he insisted on the "legal hundred" members, for whose sins of omission the doctor was sometimes wrongly blamed.

Wesley's next plan was to secure an adequate ministry for Methodists in America. He suggested that Coke should submit to Presbyterian ordination at his hands, with a view to going out to America to ordain other

preachers. Coke was very reluctant, but eventually agreed. Accordingly, on September 3, 1784, Wesley ordained him "superintendent." This rather ambiguous term Coke took to be almost the equivalent of bishop, and with that understanding went forth to ordain Francis Asbury as his co-bishop, so that jointly they could found the Methodist Episcopal Church of America. Although Coke's position as a British citizen rendered him suspect, he played a very important part in stabilising American Methodism. Altogether he visited America nine times, and even toyed with the idea of making the States his permanent headquarters.

Coke was in America when he heard of Wesley's death on March 2, 1791. Returning to England as speedily as possible to take control, he soon discovered that British Methodism would not submit to another spiritual dictator, however wise and benevolent. He swallowed his obvious disappointment with good grace, and although for six years he was denied the position of President of the Conference, he performed the duties of Secretary with efficiency and tact. A danger of dictatorship passed, in 1797 he was elected President, and again in 1805.

It was in part the frustration of many of Coke's ambitious schemes for the government of Methodism at home that diverted more and more of his energies overseas. He was an incurable missionary from the first, of course—the pioneer of Home Mission schemes for rural areas, a promoter of Sunday schools; eager to establish Methodism more firmly in Scotland and Wales; and one who regarded Ireland as a second home.

He dreamed of world conquest, however. Even before his first visit to America he had circulated his *Plan of the Society for the Establishment of Missions among the Heathens*, though with America clamouring for attention Wesley persuaded him to let Africa

and India wait awhile. Early in 1786, however, furnished with a commendatory preface from Wesley's own pen, Coke was insisting that Methodists should become mission-minded, with *An Address to the Pious and Benevolent, proposing an Annual Subscription for the Support of Missionaries in the Highlands of Scotland, the Isles of Jersey, Guernsey, and Newfoundland, the West Indies, and Provinces of Nova Scotia and Quebec*.

Though the plan for an "Erse Mission in the Highlands and adjacent Islands of Scotland" came to nothing, Coke's other projects bore rich fruit. The Conference of 1786 supported them, with the result that later in the same year Coke found himself on the high seas bound for British North America with three missionaries, whilst another companion was to be sent on from there to the West Indies. Familiar and dear to Methodists is the thrilling story of how the "friendly adverse winds of heaven" blew them 2,000 miles out of their course, so that eventually all were employed in building up a magnificent missionary work in the West Indies, where Coke was to make six evangelistic tours in all.

COKE'S enthusiasm for missions was infectious. On one occasion the captain of a man-of-war remarked, "He seems to be a heavenly minded little devil; he coaxed me out of two guineas this morning." It was while seeking a donation for missions—and securing two hundred guineas—that Coke met his wife. His two marriages, however, were but brief though happy domestic interludes in the declining years of a man whose first love was his work. Everything was sacrificed for this—money, time, energy, personal ambitions and comfort, and eventually life itself. One can only marvel how he found time to publish dozens of sermons, addresses, appeals, reports, and journals, in addition to a six-volume Bible commentary, a revised edition of the Methodist hymn book, a three-volume *History of the West Indies*, and a revised and enlarged version of Samuel Wesley's *Life of Christ* in verse—not to speak of a long treatise on Methodist doctrines. Most well known of all was his *Life of the Rev. John Wesley*, written in collaboration with Henry Moore.

All the money derived from his publications, as well as his private fortune, was expended unstintingly in the service of Methodism in general, and of the missionary cause in particular. The "balance due to treasurer" in his accounts was written off even when it amounted to over £2,000. It was the same when in 1813 he persuaded a reluctant Conference to begin planning for thirty years. It was the offer of his entire fortune, of £26,000, that finally turned the scales.

After months of bustling activity, on December 31, 1813, Thomas Coke set sail with six missionaries for Ceylon, the first stage to India. A new year was dawning—and a new era for Methodist missions. The pace of his life had begun to tell, however. His companions saw the signs of approaching death on the evening of May 2, 1814, during the night he struggled out of bed, to die of apoplexy. The next day his body was committed to the Indian Ocean. As his memorials point out, however—"His days were past, but his purposes were not broken off; for the mission which he had planned was made abundantly to prosper." At least one of those young missionaries who accompanied him sought to perpetuate Coke's memory by calling his own son, Thomas Coke Squance. Yet Coke's true memorial is not in marble, nor yet in a name, but in the missionary zeal with which he has fired the Methodist people.

Thomas Coke and American Methodism

By Professor HALFORD E. LUCCOCK
(of Yale University, Divinity School)

IT is to be hoped that the bicentenary of the birth of Thomas Coke may bring deserved remembrance and honour to one who is in America something of a "forgotten man." He is not that in British Methodism. But to the vast majority of American Methodists he has become merely a name, when even that. The qualities and services that should be associated with the name are vague and often inaccurately remembered. The person who first described Thomas Coke as "the dapper little doctor" will have a grave deal to answer for at the Judgment Day! For the phrase gives a false impression of Coke as an exhibitionist, aristocratic and a bit pedantic; a picture which is a distorted caricature, to say nothing of its lack of warmth and range.

The reasons for this comparative neglect of Dr. Coke are easy to see. One is that in the Methodist tradition in America Coke has been overshadowed by Asbury. Coke spent altogether in America only three years. Asbury spent forty-five. Asbury was the more colourful, "glamorous" figure; his incredible journeyings on horseback, his influence in shaping the Methodist Church, have made him a legend. More than that, while Asbury paid high tribute to Coke, calling him

on one occasion "the greatest man of the last century," he never accorded to Coke a place equal to himself and, on occasion, elbowed him out of the way. Also, Coke laboured under the handicap of appearing at least more of a British figure than an American one, at a time when, after the Revolution, feeling still ran high. All these things have contributed to what is a serious underestimate of Coke's great contributions to American Methodism.

There is no space here to do even slight justice to Coke's amazing personality. He was a scholar and a man of rare culture, and yet stood up under the most taxing amount of rough travel during a lifetime. He was a man of learning and able to move in aristocratic circles, and yet made himself a champion of the lay preacher. He was a man of wealth, yet adopted a way of life which called for constant physical privation and hardship.

Four great and lasting contributions of Dr. Coke to the development of American Methodism may fittingly be stressed.

I. HE contributed greatly to the successful launching of the Methodist Church, its organisation, structure and spirit. When Coke came to America in 1784, after having been ordained by John Wesley as Superintendent of Methodist Societies in America, he stepped into as difficult a situation as any in the history of the Church. There was a great chasm between Wesley's desire and plans and that of the American preachers. Wesley did not desire the formation of a separate Church, which owed no authority to him. Asbury was the acknowledged leader of the American Methodists, and rested his authority on the vote and support of the preachers. If Coke had not been able to grasp the whole situation quickly, and subordinate his personal prestige and the authority of Wesley's appointment for the larger good of the Methodist Church in America, he could have introduced discord and conflict which would have been a heavy handicap to the whole movement. Coke showed great statesmanship and great unselfishness in his acceptance of the situation and in his co-operative spirit in fitting into the

mood and temper of the Christmas Conference. This was a remarkable achievement for one with such a quick temper as Coke had. It made a contribution to the stability and progress of the Church which is hard to over-estimate.

II. PERHAPS Coke's greatest achievement lay in his being the father of Methodist Missions. He has been called, with real justice, "the Foreign Minister of Methodism." We can look at his portrait and say truly that this was "the face that launched a thousand ships"—missionary agencies that in the end have sailed all the seven seas of the earth. He was the first world traveller of Methodism, and brought into its consciousness its first vivid sense of world mission, and responsibility. In a manner unique in the annals of Christianity he strode the Atlantic like a Colossus of Rhodes, a large feat for a man with legs as short as his.

For all the time during which he acted as one of the two Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States he had virtual charge of the Irish Conference, presiding over it more often than Wesley himself. He also travelled incessantly throughout England and the West Indies. He crossed the Atlantic eighteen times, defraying his own expenses, for he was a man of wealth and lavished on Methodist missions during his lifetime nearly all of his wealth. Indeed, a strong claim could be made for Coke as the first of that modern company of large givers to Christian enterprises; for he gave more money to evangelisation than any other Protestant of his time. In his own person Coke represented what might be called the whole foreign missionary enterprise of Methodism. He founded the Wesleyan Missions in the West Indies, and in many parts of England, Wales and Ireland, and though he himself never reached either continent, in Africa and Asia.

On his first voyage to America Coke read the lives of Francis Xavier and David Brainerd, of Xavier's life he wrote in his Journal, "O for a soul like his! I seem to want the rings of an eagle and the voice of a trumpet that may proclaim the gospel through the South." It is one of the picturesque coincidences of the romance of Providence that on the very day on which David Brainerd, the missionary

to the American Indians, whose journal played so great a part in launching the missionary movement of the nineteenth century, died Thomas Coke was born. Before the start of William Carey, Coke was possessed with a consuming zeal for foreign missions. In proposing a mission to India before Carey and Thomas went out in 1793, it was a poetic culmination of his life that its last enterprise should be the Great Britain to go to India, and that he should die on his way to India at sea.

III. COKE left an indelible mark on the educational work of American Methodism. He came to America with plans for a college. Asbury nearly seconded the plan, which was carried out in the starting of Collesbury College at Abingdon, Maryland, in 1785. Coke was indefatigable in collecting money, but the enterprise was ill-thriven from the beginning. The regency death of Asbury in 1793, the needs of the time and place, financial difficulties accumulated and two fires closed out the school. Through the impetus which this scholarly Doctor of Laws of Oxford gave to the educational outlook and zeal of Methodism was never lost.

IV. COKE was also a quickener of the social conscience of the new Church. The most common criticism which he had made of him was that he was "over-impulsive." But that impulsiveness was a source of power. Coke led in the witness of the Church against slavery. He was mobbed many times for his outspoken protests against it. He made a determined effort to have slaveholding made a bar to partaking Communion. Through his influence the Virginia Conference petitioned the General Assembly of Virginia to pass a law for the immediate gradual emancipation of slaves. He was passionate and determined, and left a legacy which has had a permanent force in keeping American Methodism fronting great social issues.

Through every activity he made a tremendous contribution to the evangelistic passion of the Church, just at the time when the opening up of a continent called for great impetus for evangelism. The very spectacle of this scholar, and fine gentleman in the best sense, seizing every opportunity to preach and save souls, undaunted by the roughest conditions imaginable, often enduring sixteen hours a day in the saddle, left a lasting stimulation to the zeal for Christ which stirred preachers into the moving host beginning the great trek across the continent.

When we remember that Coke spent only three years altogether in America, this was a record to astound the angels!

C.S.S.M.
V.P.S.C. and I.S.C.
THE SCRIPTURE UNION

REUNIONS AGAIN

CENTRAL HALL, WESTMINSTER
Wednesday, September 10
AT 5 a.m., 1 Session and Camps Reunion

Chair: Mr. A. SHUTIN GARR, M.B.E. (Hon. Secretary, International Christian Fellowship)

Concluding Talk by Mr. R. HUDSON POPE (C.S.S.M. Staff Worker)

Session & Camps Reunion take part. The Singing will be led by a Choir of Campers.

A 90-minute Tea at 4.30 p.m. Tea Tickets, 1s. 6d. obtainable from C.S.S.M.

AT 8 a.m. Mr. W. GIBSON, General Secretary of the C.S.S.M. Staff, will be in charge. This is a special service for the Summer Services and Camps Reunion.

Closing Address by Mr. Isaac.

All are welcome at both meetings.

C. S. S. M.
8, Wigmore Street, London, W.1.

COLWYN BAY for Autumn holidays

Where the joys of summer still linger, and can be enjoyed to the full in less crowded surroundings.

All amenities, croquet, tennis, etc. in the sheltered 1947 Guide, 12 pages, postage 3d., for information Bureau 20.

“A Biographical Sketch [Thomas Coke].” *Methodist Recorder* (September 4, 1947): 7.

A Biographical Sketch:
Bicentenary of the Birth of
Dr. Thomas Coke

The date of Thomas Coke’s birth has caused a little confusion among historians. Some have engraved it in marble as October 9, 1747. Others, following Samuel Drew, have favoured September 9, a claim confirmed by an entry in the register of St. Mary’s, Brecon:—

“October 5, 1747. Thomas, son of Mr. Bart. Coke, Apothecary, and Anne his wife, was baptised.”

In those days, of course, the title “Mr.” was reserved for people like the squire and parson. Bartholomew Coke was indeed quite a figure in Brecon, occupying its highest municipal offices. Thomas, his third and only surviving son, enjoyed all the benefits that money and influence could provide. From the old Grammar School at Brecon he went on to Jesus College, Oxford, as a lordly “gentleman-commoner,” one exempt because of higher fees from much of the normal discipline. Graduating in 1768, he returned to Brecon to assume positions of responsibility in the local government. He was even a J.P. at 24.

Thomas Coke seemed marked out as a leader of men. Nor was his appearance against him. The homeliness of his stocky figure was offset by a dignified carriage. His ruddy farmer’s face was lit by flashing dark eyes and a charming smile, his high white forehead crowned with wavy black hair, worn long after the fashion of the day. His voice was normally soft and musical, his demeanour friendly and cheerful.

The gateway to most professions then was Holy Orders. On June 10, 1770, Coke was accordingly ordained deacon, proceeding M.A. three days later. In 1771 he changed his little curacy of Road in Somerset for that of South Petherton in the same county, being ordained priest on August 23, 1772. He was little more than a religious automaton, however, loyally performing the duties of his parish, but deriving no spiritual benefit from them. His religious experience was apparently quickened by one of Wesley’s former lay preachers, Thomas Maxfield, and at last, in his own words, he “was given a vivid consciousness of the divine presence, and from this moment became a new creature.” In 1775 he was created Doctor of Civil Law by Oxford University—though he sometimes described himself as LL.D., which was popularly regarded as an alternative to D.C.L. This should have been a step towards preferment, even though the promise of a stall in Worcester Cathedral had not materialised. But Coke had been introduced to the work and writings of John Wesley, and the adventure of Christian service called to him more than did a cosy sinecure.

At last, on August 26, 1776, the eager youth of 28 was brought face to face with John Wesley himself, now an old man of 73. Coke was tremendously impressed, though rather disappointed when Wesley told him to go back to his own parish, where he was now preaching to over a thousand every Sunday. He went, however, and pretty well turned it into a Methodist Circuit, much to the annoyance of the more influential parishioners, who eventually succeeded in securing his dismissal.

Again Coke sought out Wesley. This time the interview ended differently. “Go out,” said Wesley, “go out, and preach the Gospel to all the world.” This was in 1777. Thomas Coke was

now a Methodist. Soon he was Wesley's right-hand man, private secretary, treasurer, proof-reader and deputy President of the Irish Conference.

When in 1784 John Wesley took the most crucial ecclesiastical steps of his life, he relied largely on Coke's legal advice. In February he erected the annual Conference into the official ruling body of Methodism, after Coke had drawn up the necessary Deed of Declaration. Against Coke's advice, however, he insisted on the "legal hundred" members, for whose sins of omission the doctor was sometimes wrongly blamed.

Wesley's next plan was to secure an adequate ministry for Methodists in America. He suggested that Coke should submit to Presbyterian ordination at his hands, with a view to going out to America to ordain other preachers. Coke was very reluctant, but eventually agreed. Accordingly, on September 2, 1784, Wesley ordained him "superintendent." This rather ambiguous term Coke took to be almost the equivalent of bishop, and with that understanding went forth to ordain Francis Asbury as his co-bishop, so that jointly they could found the Methodist Episcopal Church of America. Although Coke's position as a British citizen rendered him suspect, he played a very important part in stabilising American Methodism. Altogether he visited America nine times, and even toyed with the idea of making the States his permanent headquarters.

Coke was in America when he heard of Wesley's death on March 2, 1791. Returning to England as speedily as possible to take control, he soon discovered that British Methodism would not submit to another spiritual dictator, however wise and benevolent. He swallowed his obvious disappointment with good grace, and although for six years he was denied the position of President of the Conference, he performed the duties of Secretary with efficiency and tact. All danger of dictatorship passed, in 1797 he was elected President, and again in 1805.

It was in part the frustration of many of Coke's ambitious schemes for the government of Methodism at home that diverted more and more of his energies overseas. He was an incurable missionary from the first, of course—a pioneer of Home Mission schemes for rural areas; a promoter of Sunday schools; eager to establish Methodism more firmly in Scotland and Wales; and one who regarded Ireland as a second home.

He dreamed of world conquest, however. Even before his first visit to America he had circulated his *Plan of the Society for the Establishment of Missions among the Heathens*, though with America clamouring for attention Wesley persuaded him to let Africa and India wait awhile. Early in 1786, however, furnished with a recommendatory preface from Wesley's own pen, Coke was insisting that Methodists should become mission-minded, with *An Address to the Pious and Benevolent, proposing an Annual Subscription for the Support of Missionaries in the Highlands of Scotland, the Isles of Jersey, Guernsey, and Newfoundland, the West Indies, and Provinces of Nova Scotia and Quebec*.

Though the plan for an "Erse Mission in the Highlands and adjacent Islands of Scotland" came to nothing, Coke's other projects bore rich fruit. The Conference of 1786 supported them, with the result that later in the same year Coke found himself on the high seas bound for British North America with three missionaries, whilst another companion was to be sent on from there to the West Indies. Familiar and dear to Methodists is the thrilling story of how the "friendly adverse winds of heaven" blew them 2,000 miles out of their course, so that eventually all were employed in building up a magnificent missionary work in the West Indies, where Coke was to make six evangelistic tours in all.

Coke's enthusiasm for missions was infectious. On one occasion the captain of a man-of-war remarked, "He seems to be a heavenly minded little devil; he coaxed me out of two

guineas this morning.” It was while seeking a donation for missions—and securing two hundred guineas—that Coke met his wife. His two marriages, however, were but brief though happy domestic interludes in the declining years of a man whose first love was his work. Everything was sacrificed for this—money, time, energy, personal ambitions and comfort, and eventually life itself. One can only marvel how he found time to publish dozens of sermons, addresses, appeals, reports, and journals, in addition to a six-volume Bible commentary, a revised edition of the Methodist hymn book, a three-volume *History of the West Indies*, and a revised and enlarged version of Samuel Wesley’s *Life of Christ* in verse—not to speak of a long treatise on Methodist doctrines. Most well known of all was his *Life of the Rev. John Wesley*, written in collaboration with Henry Moore.

All the money derived from his publications, as well as his private fortune, was expended unstintingly in the service of Methodism in general, and of the missionary cause in particular. The “balance due to treasurer” in his accounts was written off even when it amounted to over £2,000. It was the same when in 1813 he persuaded a reluctant Conference to begin the mission to India which he had been planning for thirty years. It was the offer of his entire fortune, of £6,000, that finally turned the scales.

After months of bustling activity, on December 31, 1813, Thomas Coke set sail with six missionaries for Ceylon, the first stage to India. A new year was dawning—and a new era for Methodist missions. The pace of his life had begun to tell, however. His companions saw the signs of approaching death on his face. Going early to his rest on the evening of May 2, 1814, during the night he struggled out of bed, to die of apoplexy. The next day his body was committed to the Indian Ocean. As his memorials point out, however—“His days were past, but his purposes were not broken off; for the mission which he had planned was made abundantly to prosper.” At least one of those young missionaries who accompanied him sought to perpetuate Coke’s memory by calling his own son Thomas Coke Squance. Yet Coke’s true memorial is not in marble, nor yet in a name, but in the missionary zeal with which he has fired the Methodist people.

By Rev. Frank Baker, B.A., B.D.