

# WESLEY'S ADVISER IN FOUNDING THE METHODIST CHURCH

## A Biographical Sketch

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

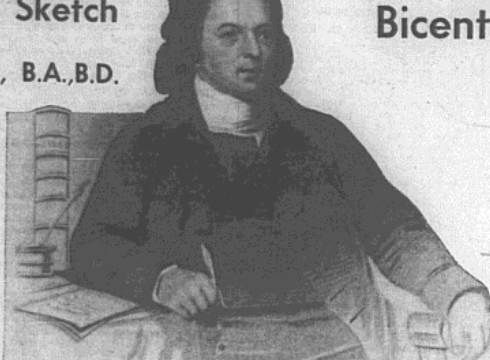
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The Rev. Dr. Thomas Coke, from the engraving by A. H. Ritchie.

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# 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 organization, 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 ecclesiastical history affords. 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 evangelization 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 acceded the plan, which was carried out in the starting of Coleridge 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 project. 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!

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

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AT 8 a.m. Mr. W. GIBSON, General Secretary of the C.S.S.M. Staff, will be in charge. There will be a special service for the Services and Camps Reunion. Closing Address by Mr. Isaac.

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