

## METHODISM AND THE '45 REBELLION

TWO hundred years ago England was faced with its last great civil war— if that indeed is the correct term for the invasion from Scotland of the Young Pretender, Prince Charles Edward Stuart, and his army of Scots. Though the Stuarts had been driven out in 1688, and the Hanoverian line established, Protestant monarchs sat uneasily on the throne of Britain. Plots and counter-plots were the rule, even after the Old Pretender's attempt to regain the crown in 1715 had failed. The supporters of the Stuart dynasty—the 'Jacobites'—became identified in the popular imagination (as they largely were in reality) with the 'Papists', the members of the Roman Catholic Church. The two terms became interchangeable forms of abuse, used indiscriminately of anyone who was unpopular. It was perhaps inevitable that Methodism, coming to birth in these troublous days, should be stigmatized as an underground movement organized by the supporters of the Stuart cause.

As early as 1739 John Wesley had written in his *Journal*:

Indeed the report now current in Bristol was that I was a Papist, if not a Jesuit. Some added that I was born and bred at Rome.

Wesley's indignant refutation of the charge overlooks a probable cause, the circulation in Bristol of Captain Williams's account of Wesley's High-Church procedure in Georgia, whence he had only recently escaped. Indeed, one contemporary description of Wesley's actions in Georgia specifically charged him with Papist practices. From Bristol these tales quickly spread throughout the country. In Wales, for example, one clergyman vowed that 'upon his personal knowledge' Wesley was a Papist. In 1741 the rumour was going round London that Wesley 'kept two popish priests in his house', and was being paid by Spain (which country had been at war with England for two years) to raise an army of 20,000 in support of an intended Spanish invasion. In 1742 similar accusations were still finding acceptance, one deranged young woman causing much unrest even among the Methodists by her vehement claims:

I assure you, Mr. Wesley is a Papist, and so am I; he converted me. You know how I used to pray to saints and to the Virgin Mary! It was Mr. Wesley taught me when I was in the bands.

A year later Wesley took the opportunity of poking fun at people's credulity in such matters, describing in his *Journal* some churchyard debaters discussing his sermon:

Some said, 'He must be a Quaker'; others, 'an Anabaptist'. But, at length, one deeper learned than the rest brought them all clearly over to his opinion, that he was a *Presbyterian-Papist!*

A new version of the rumour arose in Cornwall in 1743. This was to the effect that John Wesley (or someone pretending to be him, for reports also said that he was in prison, or that he was dead) had been seen in the company of the Young Pretender, who was travelling under the incognito of 'John Downes'

As a matter of fact Wesley was in Cornwall with someone calling himself John Downes—for the good reason that such was his real name. He was one of Wesley's preachers, and a touch of fever keeping him indoors probably led to the belief that he was in hiding. In later years a similar rumour was to attach itself to Charles Wesley, the Pretender in this case being his 'charioteer', James Waller.

All this was but the prelude to the storm. So far the Methodists had been attacked with words alone. A change in the international situation brought a drastic alteration. France—like Spain, a predominantly Roman Catholic country—began giving support to the Stuart claims to the throne of Britain. A great army was assembled at Dunkirk. In February 1744 the invasion of England seemed imminent. The country seethed with rumours. Then the weather took a hand, a storm scattering the French fleet. For the moment, danger was removed.

The inevitable declaration of war against France, in March, roused great enthusiasm. Popular zeal against all suspected Jacobites and Papists was intensified. The Government itself had ordered 'all Papists and reputed Papists' to leave London by 2nd March. John Wesley had intended leaving town about that time in any case, but realized that this would be accepted as a confession of guilt. He therefore resolved to stay an extra week. He even had a long conversation with the officers who were searching in the largely French district of Spitalfields, whilst a sullen crowd catcalled him. Three days later he wrote, but on second thoughts did not present, an address 'To the King's Most Excellent Majesty', avowing that the Methodists

detest and abhor the fundamental doctrines of the Church of Rome, and are steadily attached to your Majesty's royal person and illustrious house.

Nevertheless, when Wesley returned from his journey to Bristol it was to find a summons to go before the Surrey justices, who were still not satisfied about his loyalty. When he cordially agreed 'to take the oaths to his Majesty, and to sign the declaration against Popery', they seemed a little taken aback.

Meantime Charles Wesley was proclaiming the loyalty of the Methodists in the north, whilst in the Midlands some of the lay-preachers were being hauled before magistrates and hectored into swearing oaths which they were not even allowed to read. One of them, John Healey, managed to get in a shrewd dig about Methodism's supposed alliance with Popery. When asked to take the oaths he replied:

I will take them now; but I would not before I heard [the] Mr. Wesleys; for I was a Jacobite till they convinced me of his Majesty's right.

When Thomas Westall, another lay-preacher, held his hands in front of his eyes it was immediately remarked: 'See, see! He is confessing his sins!'

As Charles Wesley rode south from Newcastle, he heard that evidence was being collected to prove him a Jacobite. He later made a copy of the warrant in question, calling for

information against one Wesley, or any other of the Methodist speakers, for speaking any treasonable words or exhortations, as praying for the banished, or for the Pretender, etc.

Like his brother, Charles Wesley lacked neither courage nor resolution. He decided to go out of his way in order to face his accusers and stamp on this rumour at its birth. He took oath before the justices concerned, and when they would have dismissed him, turned defence into attack. He refused to go until all the evidence had been sifted, and his character fully cleared, maintaining (truly enough) 'It is no trifling matter. Even my life is concerned in the charge'. Most of the evidence rapidly melted away, his accusers being afraid to face him. One point only remained. He admitted to having prayed 'for the banished', but pointed out that by this he had not meant the Stuart Pretenders, but 'those that confess themselves strangers and pilgrims upon earth, who seek a country, knowing this is not their place'. Even then he would not go until he had taken the oaths again, and 'till they acknowledged in explicit terms "my loyalty unquestionable" '.

Thus at the very outset of the serious rioting caused by the imminent rebellion the two Wesleys had clearly defined their position. For some months, however, the rank and file of Methodist preachers and people continued to suffer. For instance, on 11th April 1744, which was a National Fast Day on account of the threatened invasion by the Pretender, the incumbent of St. Ives preached so furiously against the Methodists as Jacobites and Papists that riots ensued.

One of the worst forms of persecution was that imposed with some show of legality by the press-gangs. Early in the century, dread of a Stuart invasion had brought into being a law 'for the better recruiting Her Majesty's Army and Marines', which gave justices power to

levy such able-bodied men, as have not any lawful calling or employment or visible means for their maintenance and livelihood, to serve as soldiers.

In March 1744, immediately after the declaration of war on France, the press-gangs got to work in earnest, and many justices made a special point of inciting them to take Methodist preachers. One of the first to be impressed was Daniel Sant of Nottingham. The reputed Pretender, John Downes, was also taken, being thrown into Lincoln gaol for his own safety. The most well-known case is that of John Nelson, the Birstal mason, who was finally released (partly through the influence of the Countess of Huntingdon) in July. Another preacher, Thomas Beard, was not so fortunate, dying as a result of his impressment.

The persecutions continued during the whole period that rebellion could be sensed in the air. Nor were legal forms always observed. In Cornwall the justices, led by Dr. Walter Borlase, brother of the famous antiquarian, directed their attention against Methodists who obviously did not come under the scope of the recruiting Act, being 'well known to have lawful callings, and a sufficient maintenance thereby'. The same thing was happening in Wales, whence Howell Harris wrote that they were

hunted like partridges, but still the work prospers. Four of our brethren have been pressed, and are now in Brecon Gaol. One of them was apprehended last year. Of the other three, one was a private man, one a Welsh schoolmaster to Mr. Griffith Jones, and the other taught an English school.

The Countess of Huntingdon's preachers seemed particularly victimized during these months, without receiving any redress from the magistrates. When she complained to Lord Carteret he replied, on 19th November 1744, in the following placatory terms:

Madam: I laid your remonstrance before His Majesty, the King. My Royal Master commands me to assure your Ladyship that, as the father and protector of his people, he will suffer no persecution on account of religion; and I am desired to inform all magistrates to afford protection and countenance to such persons as may require to be protected in the conscientious discharge of their religious observances.

His Majesty is fully sensible of your Ladyship's attachment to the House of Hanover; and has directed me to assure your Ladyship of his most gracious favor and kindest wishes. . . .

The first Methodist Conference, meeting at London in the summer of 1744, reflected little of the seething unrest of the times, although it did consider the lawfulness of Christians bearing arms, and also the desirability of invoking the powers of the law against rioters.

John Wesley was at a loss to understand the persecution, especially after public avowals of loyalty had been made. He thought that it was perhaps based on the fact that the Methodists preached 'inward, present salvation, as attainable by faith alone', which because of its unfamiliarity was regarded as a Papist doctrine. 'For this', he wrote in March 1745,

we were represented, both from the pulpit and the press (we have heard it with our ears, and seen it with our eyes), as introducing Popery, raising sedition, practising both against Church and State; and all manner of evil was publicly said both of us and those who were accustomed to meet with us.

The literary activities of the Wesley brothers during this period reveal both the difficulties and the opportunities of the time. On the one hand Charles Wesley wrote *Hymns for Times of Trouble*, *Hymns in Time of Persecution*, and *Hymns to be Sung in a Tumult*. On the other John Wesley commenced a series of small tracts urging the man (and woman) in the street to face up to his (or her) civic duties. These were entitled *A Word to a Drunkard*, *A Word to a Swearer*, *A Word to a Protestant*, etc. In the last-named he urged people to think more about their supposed religious principles, and not to remain content with being Protestants in name alone, seeing that 'the open Papists are on the very point of swallowing up the pretended Protestants'.

The days immediately preceding the actual rebellion continued to bring persecution to the Methodists. In the spring of 1745 there was a serious outbreak of rioting at Exeter, in which

some of the women were lamed, and others stripped naked and rolled most indecently in the kennel [i.e. the gutter], their faces besmeared with lamp-black, flour, and dirt.

It was to continue in a modified form throughout the days of the Stuart invasion, though not with the same intensity as in the months of foreboding which had preceded it. In July an attempt was made to press John Wesley himself as a soldier, though his calm courage warded off a threatening tragedy, and eventually caused the perpetrator of the outrage to slink away with his tail between his legs.

In April 1745, the English fighting in France were defeated in the bloody battle of Fontenoy, in which John Haime and other Methodist soldiers proved themselves models of bravery. Encouraged by this omen, the Young Pretender set sail in June for Jacobite Scotland. The news of the sea-fight which preceded his landing was not allowed to interrupt Wesley's preparations for his second Conference, which was held at Bristol a few weeks later. The Conference over, Wesley set off on his tour of the Midlands. The Young Pretender and his 'seven men of Moidart' had by now rallied a strong army round them, and at Perth Charles Edward had proclaimed his father King.

Reaching Sheffield on 11th September, Wesley heard that the danger in the north was becoming really serious. He made a typical decision: 'I judged it best to go straight to Newcastle.' Newcastle, of course, was regarded as the Pretender's obvious first objective, and reinforcements were being rushed there. Wesley arrived just in time to hear that Edinburgh had been captured. His *Journal* describes vividly the feverish preparations now made to defend Newcastle against the approaching invader. He also tells how the Methodists were called fools for deciding to stay in their 'Orphan House' outside the city walls, whilst more prudent citizens were trundling their possessions into fortified safety.

On 21st September the English suffered a shattering defeat at Prestonpans, the news reaching Newcastle the same day, and causing a near-panic. It was in this battle that gallant Colonel Gardiner fell, one of the few English to stand firm. Wesley read appreciatively of his exploits in his funeral sermon by Philip Doddridge, which Lady Huntingdon sent him the following January—he was also to read Gardiner's *Life*, and to make a pilgrimage to the scene of his death. On the day of the battle Wesley wrote to the Mayor of Newcastle, once more proclaiming the loyalty of the Methodists:

All I can do for his Majesty, whom I honour and love—I think not less than I did my own father—is this: I cry unto God, day by day, in public and in private, to put all his enemies to confusion; and I exhort all that hear me to do the same; and in their several stations, to exert themselves as loyal subjects, who, so long as they fear God, cannot but honour the King.

To this letter Wesley added a private note of exhortation, pleading with the Mayor to use his influence to stop 'the open, flagrant wickedness, the drunkenness and profaneness, which so abound even in our streets'. Whilst he continued to move about the neighbouring countryside encouraging the members of the Methodist Societies, the conduct of the general public weighed more and more heavily on Wesley's heart. On 15th October he wrote a tract entitled *A Word in Season: or, Advice to an Englishman*. No one can read this and remain unmoved by his burning conviction that this may be the last chance the English people

will have for repentance. He writes with all the urgency of an Old Testament prophet:

We have now war at our own doors; our own countrymen turning their swords against their brethren. And have any hitherto been able to stand before them? Have they not already seized upon one whole kingdom? Friend, either think now, or sleep on and take your rest, till you drop into the pit where you will sleep no more!

He cannot agree with the consoling thought that, after all, conditions would be no worse under Stuart than under Hanoverian rule:

Nothing is plainer than that the Pretender cannot be King in England, unless it be by conquest. But every conqueror may do what he will; the laws of the land are no laws to him. . . . How dreadful then is the condition wherein we stand? On the very brink of utter destruction! But why are we thus? I am afraid the answer is too plain to every considerate man: Because of our sins.

Wesley proceeds to enumerate these sins in detail, calling men to a fresh dedication to God, the only reliable ally. The message is hammered home by a hymn:

*Regard, Thou righteous God, and true,  
Regard Thy weeping people's prayer,  
Before the sword our land go through,  
Before Thy latest plague we bear,  
Let all to Thee, their Smiter, turn,  
Let all beneath Thine anger mourn.*

*The sword which first bereaved abroad,  
We now within our borders see:  
We see but slight thy nearer rod,  
So oft, so kindly, warn'd by Thee:  
We still Thy warning love despise,  
And dare Thine utmost wrath to rise.*

*Yet for the faithful remnant's sake,  
Thine utmost wrath awhile defer,  
If haply we at last may wake,  
And trembling at destruction near  
The cause of all our evils own,  
And leave the sins for which we groan.*

It was also felt necessary in this pamphlet to emphasize once more Methodist loyalty to the Crown, so the tract ended with another hymn, 'For His Majesty King George'—rather a feeble production, one must confess, even though its sentiments were sound.

After staying for some weeks within call of Newcastle, and the threatened danger not materializing, Wesley finally returned to his interrupted Midland tour, arriving at Leeds on 5th November to find Gunpowder Plot celebrations in full swing,

the town full of bonfires, and people shouting, firing of guns, cursing and swearing, as the English manner of keeping holidays is.

He reported to the Magistrates the news that had reached him on the road, that the Pretender was marching south, apparently avoiding strongly-guarded Newcastle. The news spread so rapidly that not only were the streets emptied as by a cleansing breeze, but when Wesley resumed his journey he had to complain of

many interruptions in the way by those poor tools of watchmen, who stood, with great solemnity, at the end of almost every village.

The enemy took Carlisle and reached Manchester, where was a strong Jacobite faction. On 4th December the Young Pretender arrived as far south as Derby. The news threw London into a panic. So great were the demands on the Bank of England that a financial disaster was averted only by paying all withdrawals in sixpences. There was a noticeable turning to religion, and Wesley could write:

The alarm daily increasing concerning the rebels on the one hand and the French on the other, we perceived the wisdom and goodness of Him who hath His way in the whirlwind. The generality of people were a little inclined to think, and many began to own the hand of God.

He was in London himself at the time, putting the finishing touches to his *Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, 'the state of public affairs loudly demanding that whatever was done should be done quickly'. He repeated the message of his *Word in Season*, but for more educated minds. He pleaded that the ruling classes should no longer support the persecution of the Methodists by joining forces with the

infamous, scandalous rabble-rout, roaring and raging as if they were just broke loose, with their captain Apollyon, from the bottomless pit.

But even as he wrote news arrived which made him feel that he was asking for the impossible. In the last section but one he revealed what had happened to still another Methodist preacher:

Just now, viz., on the 4th of this instant December, the Reverend Mr. Henry Wickham, one of His Majesty's Justices of Peace for the West-riding of Yorkshire, writes an order *To the Constable of Keighley*, commanding him, 'to convey the body of Jonathan Reeves' (whose real crime is, the calling sinners to repentance) 'to His Majesty's gaol and castle of York; suspected', said the precept, 'of being a spy among us, and a dangerous man to the person and government of His Majesty King George'.

God avert the omen! I fear this is no presage either of the repentance or deliverance of our poor nation!

Wesley was mistaken, however, at least as to his second fear. This very day marked the limits of the Pretender's march into England. His officers, some of whom had from the beginning condemned his headstrong determination to

invade England at all, would go no farther south. On Black Friday, 6th December, the retreat began. Popular fear did not immediately subside, however. On 18th December, the day set aside for a National Fast, every church in London was packed for all the services, and Wesley noted that 'such a solemnity and seriousness everywhere appeared as had not been lately seen in England'. The battle of Culloden, on 16th April 1746, finally removed the Stuart danger, and on the following 9th November Wesley could record in his *Journal*:

The day of Public Thanksgiving for the victory at Culloden was to us a day of solemn joy.

Even though he rejoiced at the overthrow of the Young Pretender, Wesley was to reveal, at any rate in later years, a sneaking admiration for the romantic exploits of that dashing young man. Shortly after its publication in 1785 he read Boswell's prelude to the full-length *Life of Dr. Johnson*, the *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* From this he took extracts, which appeared from time to time in his *Arminian Magazine*. Now one of the main features of Boswell's book was a four-thousand-word account of the Young Pretender's wanderings and final escape. This so captured Wesley's interest that he lifted the whole passage practically verbatim—quite contrary to his usual abridging technique—and published it in three instalments in the *Arminian Magazine* for 1790. He gave no indication as to the origin of the story, entitling it simply 'An Account of the Escape of the Chevalier, after the Battle of Cullodon'. This plagiarism, though a normal practice, was on this occasion gently reproved by his printer, who added to a passage in the first person this note: 'The name of the Writer of this Narrative did not come to the Printer's knowledge.'

Such was the loyal attitude that Methodists had adopted during the '45 Rebellion that they can be pardoned for expecting that allegations of being Jacobites or Papists would quickly cease. But no! In 1747 Wesley wrote to his banker-friend, Ebenezer Blackwell, regarding the work in Cornwall:

Some of the gentlemen (so called) are almost the only opposers now. . . . The most violent Jacobites among these are continually crying out that we are bringing the Pretender; and some of these worthy men bear His Majesty's commission as Justices of the Peace.

Two years later Bishop Lavington launched his reasoned but rancorous attack in a book entitled *The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compar'd*.

Though the specific charge of Jacobitism gradually lost point, and was dropped, Wesley had continually to defend himself from charges of being allied with Rome. In 1768 Archdeacon Blackburne wrote:

The Popish party boast much of the increase of the Methodists, and talk of that sect with rapture. How far the Methodists and Papists stand connected in Principles I know not; but I believe it is beyond a doubt that they are in constant correspondence with each other.



On reading this, Wesley indignantly exclaimed:

What amazing ignorance, . . . not to say impudence, does it imply, for anyone at this time of day to tax me with having any connexions with Popery!

But it mattered not. Such reports continued to circulate till Wesley's death, and even after. As recently as 1875 a clergyman publicly accused Wesley of being a 'virtual Papist'.

Yet although in his old age Wesley could still be captivated by the Young Pretender's exploits, the tenor of the greater part of his life had revealed him as strongly—almost bitterly at times—opposed to the Roman Catholic faith. It has been suggested that his attitude passed on a heritage of Rome-hating to the Methodist people. In view of the bitter persecutions which the supposed connection of his followers with Rome brought, it is remarkable that he showed as much charity as he actually did towards the Roman Catholics. In the very heart of the rebellion he was telling his people to

abhor every kind and degree of persecution, let your heart burn with love to all mankind . . . to Christians, Heathens, Jews, Turks, Papists, heretics; to every soul which God hath made.

(One notices, of course, the careful distinction made between Christians and Papists!) Twenty years later, answering still another charge of Popery—made this time by one of his former friends—he wrote:

'Oh, but Mr. Hervey says *you* are *half* a Papist.' What if he had *proved* it too? What if he had proved I was a *whole* Papist? (though he might as easily have proved me a Mahometan). Is not a Papist a child of God? Is Thomas à Kempis, Mr. De Renty, Gregory Lopez gone to hell? Believe it who can. Yet still of such (though Papists) the same is my brother and sister and mother.

We rise from a study of Wesley's reactions in a most trying period of British history with a vivid impression of his calm courage, his refusal to be betrayed to extremes by party-cries, and his never-failing charity. Little wonder is left in our minds that the followers of such a man could help so greatly in averting from England the horrors of a revolution such as was to overtake France in later years, when John Wesley himself had passed over where the hand of rebellion could no longer reach.

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