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RICHARD IRELAND AND JOHN WESLEY

AN intrinsically important Wesley letter to a hitherto unknown correspondent is something of a rarity. We are grateful to one of our members, Mr. L. E. S. Gutteridge, for starting us on a train of interesting research. Recently there passed through his hands the following letter, with its confession of Wesley's own tendency towards irascibility as a tactful approach towards a criticism of his correspondent's failings, and with its underlining of the difficulties which Wesley faced in begging money, even from wealthy folk, for the "New Chapel" in City Road, London, whose foundation stone he had laid only four days earlier:

Near London
April 25th, 1777.

Dear Sir,

We old men need not use ceremony toward each other: We have seen more of it in the world than we like. We may speak plain: What should hinder? We have no ill designs upon each other. My design ever since I saw you first at Dorking was to do you all the good I could. It is true this is not a very easy matter: for you are not too easy to be advised. Men of Seventy seldom are; for age is apt to stiffen our minds as well as our bodies. And perhaps you are a little too apt to lean to your own understanding: This I have frequently observed with concern. Do you not likewise halt on the same foot with me? Are you not warm enough? My anger would be as a whirlwind, if I did not watch continually. Does yours never break loose? Yet, I can say I never saw you in a passion. But does not God see? And is it not high time now you are on the verge of Eternity, to cast off every weight? To throw aside the sin that so easily besets you, and so prepare to meet your God?

But perhaps you expect I should say something on another head. Then I will, and with all plainness. You say, "Nay speak not of it: I tell you I will give nothing: not a shilling, not a farthing." Pray do not so say before you are asked. This is neither sense nor manners. "But there was no necessity for building." There was an absolute necessity. For as soon as the lunatics are removed from St. Luke's the Foundry will be pulled down. And we have multitudes of old and decrepit people, who can never get to Spitalfields or West Street. Yet

I allow there is no necessity for your giving anything, unless you love me, unless you love the Work of God, unless you desire to lay up treasure in heaven; Unless you desire the blessing of God to come now upon your Soul and Body and all that you have! If so you may send five, fifty, five hundred pounds to, Dear Sir,

Your affectionate Servant,

JOHN WESLEY.

Who was this unnamed, but obviously wealthy and somewhat obstinate Methodist? Along with the fact that, like Wesley, he was in his seventies at the time, his first meeting with Wesley at Dorking provides the most likely clue. An examination of all the references to Dorking in Wesley's *Letters* and *Journal* at first leads us on a false trail after Mr. Rose, the apparent founder of Dorking Methodism—though Wesley's mention of first seeing his correspondent at Dorking almost certainly implies that he was not actually living there, at least not in 1777. We pick up the scent again. At last we come on the following, in Wesley's *Journal* for 17th February 1780:

I preached at Dorking, and could not but reflect in this room I lodged the first time I saw poor Mr. Ireland. "Emphatically poor!" Poor beyond expression—though he left fourscore thousand pounds behind him!¹

Our minds immediately leap to the Rev. John Fletcher's wealthy patron, who was occasionally at cross-purposes with Wesley—James Ireland of Brislington, near Bristol. Alas, we soon realize that this Mr. Ireland had not relinquished his earthly treasure in 1780, a fact which leads to the Dorking reference being inserted in the *Journal* index with a query, for no other wealthy Methodist Mr. Ireland was known. For a time we ponder the possibility of confusion between the two James Irelands, father and son—the kind of thing that has occasionally occurred in Methodist as in other history. Alternatively, we wonder whether a misprint in Wesley's *Journal* might solve the problem—"Poor . . . though he left £80,000" having crept in instead of "Poor . . . though he leave £80,000". Yet somehow neither explanation seems very convincing.

We branch off in another direction. If a Mr. Ireland, dying between 1777 and 1780, had really left £80,000, he must have left some mark on the periodicals of the day, for this was a very considerable fortune, especially in the eighteenth century. A search in the *Gentleman's Magazine* is quickly rewarded. Among the "Deaths of considerable Persons" in the issue for January 1780 is recorded the death on 9th January of "Rich. Ireland, esq; of Riegate Place, aged 80."² Here at last is our man, wealthy, in his seventies in 1777, and to make assurance doubly sure, living at Reigate Place, about seven miles east of Dorking.

Wesley's first recorded visit to Dorking had been in 1764.³ The

¹ *Journal*, vi, p. 268.

² *op. cit.*, 1780, p. 51.

³ *Journal*, v, p. 43.

second visit he mentions was on 19th December 1770, though there may possibly have been others intervening. On this second occasion he preached also at Reigate.⁴ The assumption seems to be that Mr. Ireland met Wesley at Dorking, and invited him to Reigate, and it is noteworthy that Wesley preached there both in the evening and the following morning, presumably having stayed overnight at Reigate Place. A similar itinerary was followed in December, 1771.

Mon. 16. I rode to Dorking, where were many people but none were cut to the heart.

Tuesday. I went on to Reigate Place.⁵

Wesley goes on to describe this Surrey showplace:

In King Henry the Fourth's time this was an eminent monastery. At the dissolution of monasteries it fell into the hands of the great spoiler, Henry the Eighth. Queen Elizabeth, pleased with the situation, chose it for one of her palaces. The gentleman who possesses it now has entirely changed the form of it; pulling down whole piles of ancient building, and greatly altering what remains. Yet, after all that is taken away, it still looks more like a palace than a private house. The staircase is of the same model with that at Hampton Court: one would scarce know which is the original. The chimney-piece in the hall is probably one of the most curious pieces of woodwork now in the kingdom.

Richard Gough, in his 1789 edition of Camden's *Britannia*, is rather more scathing of Ireland's treatment of the palace than is Wesley, but he adds some useful details:

This priory founded by William Warren, earl of Surry [in the time of John], . . . afterwards successively the seat of the earls of Essingham and Peterborough and of Humphry Parsons, esq., lord mayor of London, was sold 1766 . . . to Zachary Ireland of Dorking, who, though it had been not long before rebuilt, pulled it down, and sold it piecemeal, and let the remainder to ordinary uses.⁶

Wesley himself, after describing the magnificence of Reigate Place, added the characteristic comment:

But how long? How many of its once bustling inhabitants are already under the earth! And how little a time will it be before the house itself, yea, the earth, shall be burned up!

Something of the same note was echoed in his first sermon at Reigate Place:

I preached in the evening to a small company on "It is appointed unto men once to die." All seemed moved for the present. They saw that life is a dream: but how soon will they sleep again?

Truly Wesley had little hope of those who trusted in riches entering the kingdom! It is just possible, of course, that this sermon was actually preached in Reigate itself, particularly as his earlier visit had mentioned Reigate only, as did the next in February 1773.

⁴ *ibid.*, v, p. 398.

⁵ *ibid.*, v, p. 441.

⁶ Vol. I, p. 175. Gough has erred in recording Mr. Ireland's Christian name as "Zachary", as may be seen from references to him in the *Victoria County History* of Surrey, iii, pp. 203, 236.

We believe, however, that for Wesley Reigate really meant Reigate Place, and his record of 15th November 1775 implies regular preaching at the mansion:

I preached at Dorking; the next evening at Reigate Place, I think to the largest congregation that I have seen there. But still I fear we are ploughing upon the sand; we see no fruit of our labours.⁷

This is the last mention of Reigate or Reigate Place, though Wesley's silence must not necessarily be construed as neglect, for many of his visits to places in the home counties are unrecorded in the *Journal*. The additional evidence of his diary, however, from 1782 onwards, proves that although he continued to visit Dorking, Reigate had been dropped from his itinerary, even though he travelled from London via Wandsworth and Mitcham, and thus could easily take Reigate on his way. It seems almost certain, therefore, that the small and struggling society there was abandoned, and that the reason was at least in part Wesley's estrangement from Richard Ireland, exemplified by this letter. FRANK BAKER.

⁷ *Journal*, vi, p. 83. In February 1773 he says: "On Monday the 15th and the following days I took a little journey into Surrey"; and in December 1774 he preached at Reigate to "a larger congregation than ever before".

Duncan Coomer, M.A., LL.D.

By the death of Dr. Duncan Coomer, at the age of sixty-nine, the Wesley Historical Society has lost a valued member and generous friend. In Southport and Bournemouth, where successively he resided, he held every office open to a Methodist layman, and was frequently a representative to Conference. Whilst he was in America as a representative to the Ecumenical Methodist Conference at Springfield, Mass., in 1947, the University of Washington conferred upon him the honorary degree of LL.D., and for the recent World Methodist Conference at Oxford he acted as Secretary, carrying out his arduous duties with characteristic thoroughness. He was a founder-member of the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship, and treasurer of the Friends of Reunion, two movements in which he was deeply interested.

These activities were not allowed to exclude wider interests. Besides being an amateur printer and bookbinder of considerable skill, Dr. Coomer was an expert historian. He was a member of the Council of the Royal Historical Society, and in 1944 was awarded the degree of Master of Arts at Liverpool University for a thesis on *English Dissent under the Early Hanoverians*, a book which revealed much careful research.

At a recent meeting of the Historical Association, Lord Quickwood spoke feelingly about Dr. Coomer as a staunch and valuable friend. This expresses exactly what he was to our Society, and the tribute will be endorsed by those who were associated with him in its executive. He acted for a long period as the auditor of our accounts, and his generosity to our Society, as to so many other good causes, will long be remembered. The memory of our friend will linger with us as that of one whose fellowship has enriched our lives, and to his widow we express our most sincere sympathy. F. F. BRETHERTON.