

FREEBORN GARRETTSON AND NOVA SCOTIA

THE Rev. Freeborn Garrettson (1752-1827) was one of the greatest of the early American-born Methodist preachers, both able and devout. As a result there was some competition for his services among the leaders of Methodism, and for a time he became a bone of contention between John Wesley and the newly-formed Methodist Episcopal Church of America. The provinces of "British America" constituted the chief area of dispute, and the borders of the United States and Canada long continued a source of friction.

The short but fruitful Nova Scotian chapter in Freeborn Garrettson's life has been frequently told, perhaps best of all for the general reader in G. G. Findlay and W. W. Holdsworth's *History of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society*, vol. i, pp. 291-5, and in Wade Crawford Barclay's *History of Methodist Missions: Early American Methodism*, vol. i, pp. 166-72, which is more fully documented. The great pioneer work of William Black was consolidated by the appointment of two official missionaries by the Christmas Conference at Baltimore in 1784. These were Freeborn Garrettson and a less outstanding but experienced preacher, James Oliver Cromwell. They set off for Nova Scotia in February 1785, and after a stormy voyage landed at Halifax. After a month's effective ministry there Garrettson went on a three-hundred-mile tour through deep snow, preaching twenty times, making converts, and forming several new societies.

The work made rapid progress, and a Conference was planned for Nova Scotia late in 1786, Dr. Coke sending word that he himself would come and would bring further missionaries from England. It will be remembered that these missionaries, together with Coke, were diverted by storms to the West Indies, which thenceforth ranked higher in Coke's affections than Nova Scotia. The following spring Coke asked Garrettson to return to his native Maryland for a Conference which assembled in Baltimore on 1st May 1787. Garrettson was asked by Coke (at Wesley's desire, as well as Coke's) to become the "Superintendent" of the work in British America, including the West Indies. After some hesitation, Garrettson said that he was ready to tour the area for a year, and then to return for his ordination as "superintendent" if he found a "cordiality in the appointment with those whom [he] was requested to serve". This would have made him the third "superintendent" or bishop in American Methodism after Coke and Asbury, though having his sphere of labour actually outside the borders of the United States. There would have been one British-born "superintendent", Francis Asbury, exercising jurisdiction within the United States, an American-born "superintendent", Garrettson, exercising jurisdiction over all the adjoining British territories, and another Briton, Coke, exercising

general oversight in the name of John Wesley. It would have been an interesting situation.

The American Conference, however, changed its mind, and refused to part with Garrettson. The details of this change of tactics have never been discovered, and were not even known to Garrettson himself. Wesley, Coke and the Methodists of Nova Scotia were deeply disappointed, so much so that there was continual pressure upon Garrettson and others to attempt a reversal of the decision, even if it meant his severing his connexion with the American Conference. His letter on the subject to John Baxter of Antigua (who would have been under his episcopal wing) is quoted by Dr. Barclay from Nathan Bangs's *Life of the Rev. Freeborn Garrettson*, p. 159, but it is there given inaccurately in a number of points. In view of its importance for the history of both Canadian and American Methodism, it seems desirable to present a full and accurate transcript from the original, which is in the Lamplough Collection of our British Conference.

The letter is written on one of four quarto pages of laid paper watermarked "1776". The fourth page contains the simple address "The Revd. Mr. Baxter / Antigua" and the endorsement "1787 / To Mr Baxter". There are no signs of either seal or postmark, and the letter seems to have been delivered by hand. It reads:

Maryland
Sept. 10, 1787.

My very dear Br.

Grace Mercy and peace rest upon you.

I have been earnestly solicited by ye. Doct. and others, to become a member of ye. Conference in British America. I expect to meet Br. Asbury within a few Weeks, and know not but I shall be with you late this fall. I want to act in that sphere, in which I shall ye. Most glorify my dear Lord. The Cause of God lays near to my heart. Tho' my Connections hear [sic], are very near to me, yet at ye. Call of my God, I could cheerfully leave them. I expected to have been in Halifax before now, but there was no one to take Charge of ye. work in this Quarter, so that Necessity Called me to stay. I fear lest our Societies should decline in that Country. The work is very great in ye. states.

Extract of a letter I recd. from a pious Preacher in Virginia.

"Petersburg Augt. 3, 1787.¹

Glory, Glory to God for ever, There is ye. greatest work here, that I ever saw in any place, or read in Mr. Wesleys Journal. I was at a Qt. Meeting last Sat. & Sund. The Power of God Came down in a wonderful Manner before Preaching began—so that there was no other way to do, but to take near two Thousand People from ye. Cryes, and groans of ye. Mourners, a distance in ye. Woods, and Preach to them. There were five, or Six Thousand People at ye. Meeting. It was thought at this, and an other Qt. Meeting not far off, there were five hundred souls Converted. Within two Months in Brunswick, and Sussex-Cir[cui]ts we suppose there has been near a Thousand Souls

¹ Garrettson's writing is untidy and inconsistent, and this date actually looks more like "1769", though it seems certain that "1787" is intended.

set at Liberty. Oh, what a wonderfull work of God: if it continues so rappid much longer, few will be left behind. I hear ye. flame is spreading 150 Miles to ye. South of this & C.Q.C."²

Blessed be my good and gracious God for ye. revival in ye. four Cir [cui] ts I have ye Charge of. I feel my poor heart knit to my Jesus, but am ye. most unworthy of his Servants. I love you my dear Br. Give my love to Sist. B. and ye. Preachers with you. Sure some of my letters have missed your hand. do not forgit to write—I have not written to you as often as I might, but for ye. future I hope I shall not Neglect you. Pray for your unworthy

Tho' Sincere friend & Ser [van] t

FREEBN. GARRETTSON.

Though his labours were eventually denied to Nova Scotia, the rest of British America, and the West Indies, Freeborn Garrettson did not lose the love and the confidence of his friends in Great Britain. In 1789 John Wesley wrote:

My dear brother,

It signifies but little where we are, so we are but fully employed for our good Master. . . . You are following the order of His providence wherever it appeared, as an holy man strongly expressed it, in a kind of holy disordered order.

Wesley went on to press for a copy of Garrettson's journal for publication in the *Arminian Magazine*. Actually Wesley died before this arrived, and it was published in the United States. Nevertheless Joseph Benson presented serial instalments of the "Experience and Travels of Mr. Garrettson, in North America" in the 1794 issues of the magazine, and when Garrettson died in 1827 he was still sufficiently remembered and beloved in British Methodism for both an obituary notice and a portrait to appear in the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*.

FRANK BAKER.

² "C.Q.C." apparently stands for some "Quarterly Conference" (i.e. "Quarterly Meeting") of the preachers and churches supervised by an elder—possibly "Carolina" or "Cumberland" or "Campbell", though I find it so difficult to secure details of the early organization that these are little more than guesses. I would also hazard the guess (with a little more confidence) that the writer of the letter to Garrettson was James O'Kelly, the elder giving oversight of eight circuits in southern Virginia and North Carolina. It was he who led the first main secession from the Methodist Episcopal Church, in 1792.

Members of the Wesley Historical Society may be interested in the Society of Cirplanologists, which has been mentioned before in these pages and is devoted to the study of circuit plans, a hitherto neglected field. The Society is chiefly engaged at present in compiling a register of all plans still in existence dated before 1861. Would any member who possesses any such plans please write to Mr. E. A. Rose, 9, Silverdale Street, Higher Openshaw, Manchester, 11.

The President of the Society is the Rev. Dr. Oliver A. Beckerlegge, and the annual subscription is 2s. 6d., which includes two issues per year of the Society's bulletin. Interested members should write to the treasurer, Mr. A. Whipp, 29, Mather Lane, Whitefield, Manchester.