

THE WESLEYS IN GEORGIA

By Dr. Frank Baker

Contrary to what some have claimed I believe both that Georgia meant much to the Wesleys and the Wesleys to Georgia. Their brief pioneering mission can in one sense be dismissed as a failure, but it was by no means a complete failure, and in it were many elements of success--success both immediate and on the spot, and also the seeds of the immense worldwide success which eventually came to the Methodist movement. Fully to realize both failure and success we must dig below surface appearances and exercise historical imagination--and both are difficult. Nor can we expect to do much about this in a mere half-hour's reading or hearing. I cannot attempt here to tell the complex story, but merely to sketch in its background and summarize its results.

It is enormously difficult for us to put ourselves in the buckled shoes and kneebreeches of these two young clergymen and their still younger companions, the Rev. Benjamin Ingham and the sugar merchant Charles Delamotte, as on February 6, 1736 they first set foot on American soil--on Cockspar Island near where Fort Pulaski now stands--and gained their first impressions of the marshes, the swamps, the pine barrens, and what Charles Wesley calls the "vest impervious forests"¹¹ of Georgia. Nor is it easy to imagine the manner of their coming, by tiny sailing boat during a voyage of over three months; nor of their journeying around Georgia, on horseback, or in flat-bottomed boat.

Up to 1733 the only inhabitants of this huge wilderness were a few tribes of Indians and an occasional Indian trader or runaway slave from South Carolina. In 1736 the only clear boundary was the Atlantic on the east, along which the founder of the colony, James Edward Oglethorpe, had purchased a six mile strip from the Indians. Here a handful of villages and plantations were strung together with the only town, Savannah, by a lace-work of waterways, though Oglethorpe did try, unsuccessfully, to build an arterial road. The only penetration inland was along the River Savannah, to the Swiss township of Purysburg and the neighbouring Salzburger settlement of New Ebenezer, about twenty miles north of Savannah. Atlanta and Macon were not dreamed of, and Augusta, 150 miles north of Savannah, was a mere plot of land with no houses--not even the fort had yet been built.

Savannah itself had been laid out three years earlier, and in 1736 there were about 200 houses and 700 inhabitants. John Wesley found a minister's house ready for him. Charles Wesley was not so fortunate in

Frederica, a garrison town being built as a buffer against the Spanish. He was not only the first minister there but one of the very first batch of about 120 people to lay it out, while he slept in a boat, a tent, or a hut--plagued by sandflies wherever he was.

England was flooded with romantic literature about Georgia, the latest--and last--British colony in North America, but actual conditions were grim. The idealism of the charitable founders, in seeking to help unsuccessful debtors find a new start, served to cut its own throat. Although the settlers sent over at the cost of the Georgia Trustees were hand-picked, they were after all mostly misfits, those who had failed to make a living in England, but were now expected to be successful under far harsher conditions. Nor did the subsidised industries of silk and wine prove practicable for them. On the other hand the large proportion of more affluent freeholders who paid their own passage out--1000 during the first ten years against 1800 sent by the charity--served to aggravate the situation, making a division between rich and poor, so that Oglethorpe complained to the Trustees: "The people who come at their own charge live in a manner too expensive,"¹³ Thomas Causton, the storekeeper and chief magistrate at Savannah, proved to be a tyrant and a swindler. A bitter trade war developed with South Carolina, as well as political rivalries and deep-seated personal animosities in Savannah itself. Added to this was the confusion of tongues and of religions. Even from Britain the nominal Anglicans with their Cockney background would certainly find it almost impossible to understand either the dialect or the point of view of the harsh Presbyterians from the highlands of Scotland; and with these were mingled groups of French Huguenots, German Lutherans, Moravians, a few Portuguese, Italians, and Dutch, and even some Jews--a bewildering mixture for a colony which still numbered fewer than two thousand when John Wesley left in 1737!

Undoubtedly the Wesleys were not the ideal men for this very unideal pioneering situation. The marvel is that they did so well.

John Wesley was a man approaching thirty-three when he set foot in Georgia, Charles just turned twenty-eight. Both were slim and small in stature: John was 5'3" tall and weighed 122 pounds in his later years; ⁴ Charles was no taller, though unlike John he turned portly in old age. John was an omnivorous scholar, a keen and logical thinker, a born organizer, and an ordained clergyman of ten years' standing. Charles leaned heavily on his brother, partly because he was so much older, partly because of his superior gifts of leadership, partly because he himself suffered from the ups and downs of a fiery artistic temperament. At this time both were in the midst of what we might call identity crises, both seeking the perfect life of religion by ever-increasing self-discipline in devotional practices, in denying themselves most bodily comforts, in service to the needy. And

yet these men whom others accounted saints knew that their religion lacked something vital.

This is what John Wesley meant when he told Dr. John Burton about his reasons for coming to Georgia: "My chief motive, to which all the rest are subordinate, is the hope of saving my own soul. I hope to learn the true sense of the gospel of Christ by preaching it to the heathen." Do not overlook his second avowed motive, however -- "to impart to them what I have received, a saving knowledge of the gospel of Christ." Here is absolute honesty: he knows himself called to be an evangelist, but before he can preach his message with conviction he must know from personal experience that what he offers is indeed the genuine gospel of Christ. Georgia was to be his testing-ground, where he believed the Indians to be the noble savages later idealised by Jean Jacques Rousseau. Said Wesley: "They are as little children, humble, willing to learn, and eager to do the will of God, and consequently they shall know of every doctrine I preach whether it be of God."⁵

Charles was almost equally idealistic and devoted to God, though it was only reluctantly that he had agreed to ordination just before they set sail in order that he might better assist his brother's mission. On the Simmonds he transcribed some of John's sermons so that he could preach them both on shipboard and in Georgia.⁶ On the threshold of the New World his lack of spiritual certainty plunged him to greater depths of self-despair than John's, and on the day they first anchored in the River Savannah he wrote back home: "In vain have I fled from myself to America. . . . If I have never yet repented of my undertaking, it is because I could hope for nothing better in England-- or Paradise. Go where I will, I carry my hell about me." Yet his truly pastoral heart shines forth from that same letter: "Give God your hearts; love him with all your souls; serve him with all your strength. . . . Let God be your aim, and God only! . . . To love God, and to be beloved of him, is enough."⁷

The mission to the Indians did not work out as the Wesleys had hoped. In Frederica Charles seems to have had little personal contact with them, though as official "Secretary for Indian Affairs" he spent much of his time issuing licenses to Indian traders, especially during his brief later stay in Savannah. John found his hands full with the many and varied problems of his duties as minister of Savannah, with such success that Oglethorpe tried to hold him back from the Indians. In July 1736 Oglethorpe reported to the Trustees: "The change since the arrival of the mission is very visible with respect to the increase of industry, love, and Christian charity. . . . But on their removal to the Indians we shall be left entirely destitute, and the people by a relapse if possible worse than before."⁸ Nor were the Indians

as receptive to new ideas as Wesley had believed, though he was impressed by the Chickasaws, and planned to learn their language. He sent to the prestigious Gentleman's Magazine an account of an interview with five Chickasaws on July 20, 1736, in which he faithfully recorded their religious views; this was printed with an introduction pointing out what "a deep and habitual sense of a divine providence is imprinted on the minds of those ignorant heathens, and how excellently they are prepared to receive the gospel."⁹ By the time this was published, however, almost a year later, Wesley had become thoroughly frustrated and disillusioned about the Indians in general. His attempts to convert Tomochichi were met with a proud refusal (which remained, however, one of Wesley's chief weapons against merely nominal Christianity): "Why, these are Christians at Savannah! Those are Christians at Frederica! Christians drunk! Christians beat men! Christians tell lies! Me no Christian."¹⁰ Thus rebuffed, Wesley went from one extreme of naivete to the other, accepting as truth many of the evil rumours that he heard, and reporting to the Trustees: "They are all, except perhaps the Choctaws, gluttons, drunkards, thieves, dissemblers, liars. They are implacable, unmerciful; murderers of fathers, murderers of mothers, murderers of their own children. . . . Whoredom they account no crime. . . ."¹¹

It was left to their ministerial companion and fellow Oxford Methodist, 23-year-old Benjamin Ingham, to keep the Indian venture alive. He lived for many months among the Yamacraws, at Musgrove's trading post, became reasonably proficient in their language and customs, and encouraged by Tomochichi ran a school for their children. This faded out, however, in February 1737, when he left for England to seek replacements, nor did his intention of returning materialise.¹² All things considered the Indian mission must be considered a failure. Yet its influence remained with John Wesley to the end of his life, and his sermons and other writings frequently drew upon illustrations--usually favourable--from Indian culture.

The Wesleys' work among the whites seemed at first more promising. Oglethorpe wisely warned them against a superficial emotional approach, advising them to "beware of loghouse converts".¹³ Both threw themselves into steady pastoral work and found in it great promise and fulfilment. When Charles Wesley arrived in Frederica to serve the "fifty poor families" there his depressions lifted, and he wrote in his Journal: "Tuesday, March 9. About 3 in the afternoon I first set foot on St. Simon's Island, and immediately my spirit revived. No sooner did I enter upon my ministry than God gave me, like Saul, another heart. . . . At seven we had evening prayers in the open air. . . ." And so it continued.

The same was true to a larger degree in the case of John. Granted

that his approach was unduly ritualistic for the rough pioneer settlers, nevertheless he proved a faithful pastor whose energy and dedication commanded the respect of the unprejudiced majority. Faithfully he conducted baptisms, weddings, funerals, prepared wills and administered first aid. Every day in town he spent three hours in visiting from house to house, and in order to converse with his widely-scattered and immensely diverse flock he added to the French which he already knew and the German which he had learnt aboard the Simmonds at least a smattering of Spanish and Italian. Every day he read public prayers morning and evening, and expounded the Second Lesson. He conducted weekly catechism classes for children and adults, administered the Lord's Supper every Sunday and Saint's day, and carried the elements to the sick and dying, whom he visited daily. Methodically he maintained mountains of statistics, as well as keeping his finger on his own spiritual pulse in a diary recording the religious mood and activities of every hour.¹⁴ He not only preached without a manuscript, but experimented with new forms of worship and fellowship. Especially noteworthy were the regular meetings for Christian fellowship apart from public worship, fore-runners of the Methodist society meetings in England, together with the singing of hymns--in 1737 he published America's first hymnbook, as opposed to a book of metrical psalms only.¹⁶ He even had the joy of experiencing a spiritual revival among the young people of Savannah.¹⁷

Nevertheless the promise was not immediately fulfilled. Both brothers suffered from the fact that they were earnest and eligible bachelors, becoming focal points for dissimulation, jealousy, intrigue, and gossip. Both refused to pay court to the wealthier and more influential colonists, but served where they felt the need was greatest, thus gaining the love of the poor and the active enmity of some of the rich. Both were inexperienced in the ways of the world, both committed serious errors of judgment and of tact. The work of both became so undermined that retreat was inevitable, especially after both committed the cardinal sin of antagonising the most influential members of their flocks.

Charles fell victim first. He rebelled in any case against wearing his official hat, as secretary to Oglethorpe, and entered in his *Journal* for March 16, 1736: "I was wholly spent in writing letters for Mr. Oglethorpe. I would not spend six days more in the same manner for all Georgia."¹⁸ Worse still, Charles not only found himself in the bad books of Thomas Hawkins, doctor and chief magistrate at Frederica, but of Oglethorpe himself. A malicious gossip told Charles that Oglethorpe had committed adultery with Mrs. Hawkins, and to even things out Oglethorpe was informed that she had committed adultery with Charles. Unfortunately both men believed what they were told, and Oglethorpe became so bitter toward Charles that he refused him even a board to sleep on, largely as a result of which

he contracted the dysentery which broke down his health.¹⁹ John Wesley came down from Savannah to investigate, managed to reassure Oglethorpe, and brought about a reconciliation. He then stayed on in Frederica, likewise incurring the wrath of Mrs. Hawkins, who on one occasion requested a pastoral visit--and then attacked him with a pistol and a pair of scissors!²⁰ Meantime Charles recuperated in Savannah, but remained frustrated, so that in July 1736 Oglethorpe granted him an honourable discharge, sending him back with official despatches to England. He had been four and a half months in Georgia--about the same length of time that he had spent on the Simmonds.

After a year in Georgia Benjamin Ingham also returned.²¹ John's turn was next. The eventual crisis is well known--his infatuation with young Sophy Hopkey; his announcement that he must remain celibate; her sudden and irregular marriage to William Williamson, giving the lie to some of her solemn declarations to Wesley; his correct but tactless refusal to serve communion to her, followed by the fury of her uncle and guardian Thomas Causton, who rigged a Grand Jury against Wesley, thus effectively driving him from America. John had been just under two years in Georgia, spending fourteen months in Savannah and the surrounding area, a total of three months during three periods in Frederica, and the remainder in wide travels, including two intermediate visits to Charleston, S. C. His spiritual work had undoubtedly been of value, as Oglethorpe reported to the Trustees, and as Whitefield was to reiterate when at Wesley's request he took over as one of the Holy Club volunteers canvassed in turn by Charles Wesley and Benjamin Ingham. After visiting in the Savannah area Whitefield testified: "The good Mr. John Wesley has done in America, under God, is inexpressible. His name is very precious among the people; and he has laid such a foundation that I hope neither men nor devils will ever be able to shake." This was written on June 2, 1738, after he had bid "Bon voyage!" to Wesley's lay companion from England, Charles Delamotte, who had been caring for the Methodist society and school which Wesley had founded in Savannah. Whitefield reported that "the poor people lamented the loss of him" also, as they had lamented Wesley's departure.²² He, too, had to a large extent been a victim of Causton's enmity.²³ Henceforth the Wesleys were represented in Georgia only by Whitefield and these humble followers.

A few tangible links with those pioneering days remain, such as Whitefield's orphanage and some buildings and sites in both Savannah and on St. Simon's Island. The spiritual links, however, are almost impossible to trace, though one suspects that some of these same poor people kept alive a flickering flame of devotion which was eventually rekindled by the visits of Wesley's preachers a generation later, to result in the beginnings of official Methodist history in Georgia.

In fact, however, this early Georgian Methodism is hardly the greatest element of success in the Wesleys' missionary sojourn, though it constitutes a mysterious and fascinating element which may yet be more fully documented. Of greater importance is the fact that in this pioneer setting both John and Charles Wesley came more clearly to realize that additional something that was needed for a dynamic fruitful ministry--the dimension of a personal assurance of salvation. This they had already suspected; this their Georgia ministry fully confirmed. And especially through some of their Moravian parishioners both on board the Simmonds and in Savannah their feet were set on the path that led to the warmed hearts of May 21 and May 24, 1738.

Not only can the motive power of later worldwide Methodism be traced to Georgia, however, but many of its methods. It was in Georgia, both in Savannah and in Frederica, that John Wesley began to hold the regular meetings for Christian fellowship outside church hours which later he termed "the second rise of Methodism"--the first being the formation of the Holy Club at Oxford.²⁴ It was in Georgia that he made his first experiments in the use of lay leaders in parish work, in the appointment of women as "deaconesses", in extempore prayer, in itinerant preaching, preaching in the open air, early morning services before the beginning of the working day, the use of hymns in public worship, even at the Lord's Supper.²⁵ Georgia furnished John Wesley both with the opportunity for pioneer experimentation in church work and a guiding thread leading him to the all-important spiritual experience which transformed him into one of the world's greatest spiritual leaders.

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