

RIDING THE ROUNDS WITH JOHN WESLEY

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John Wesley developed a system of travelling the rounds or circuits of Methodist Britain which furnished many valuable by-products. This was the Methodist equivalent of the bishop's triennial visitation in the Church of England, except that the bishop normally gathered his clergy and laity into one place rather than travelling around the diocese with them, though a few even in Wesley's day nobly attempted annual summer confirmation circuits.¹ Even though in his own annual itineraries Wesley had probably travelled most rounds more frequently than the preacher then stationed there, and was familiar with the accustomed breaks for meals and lodging—often in Methodist homes²—yet the dimensions and patterns of each circuit were constantly being modified, and the man on the spot was clearly his best guide. This enabled Wesley to get to know the people who had newly come into the Methodist fold, and to have an insider's view of their families, their problems, and their possibilities. These accompanied circuit itineraries also brought Wesley much closer to his preachers, and he was able to assess their pastoral capabilities and personal foibles much more readily while sharing meals, and occasionally beds, over some weeks—in spite of the defenses which human nature would prompt them to erect against this magnetic little man. By this means also the preachers themselves came to know Wesley much more fully than was possible on more formal occasions such as the annual conference.

Wesley's revelation of himself was apparently much fuller while he rode on horseback alongside—or behind—his Assistant than when, as frequently in later years, they travelled together in a public vehicle, or in the carriage furnished for him by his friends,³ whose slightly more comfortable conditions allowed him to read and write. A leisurely ride furnished the occasion for personal discussions on a huge variety of subjects, and for Wesley's reminiscences of interesting incidents in his eventful career. The recording of such rides and such conversations by Wesley's preachers

¹See Norman Sykes, *Church and State in England in the XVIIIth Century* (Cambridge: University Press, 1934), pp. 115-138.

²See 'Hospitality Plans,' *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, XXV.11-13.

³In 1772 a riding accident brought on a hydrocele, which caused him to write: "I shall not ride any long journeys on horseback," being "advised to ride as much in a carriage as I can and as little on horseback." His friends immediately began a subscription to buy him a carriage. He was operated on for the hydrocele in 1774, and remained sufficiently comfortable to undertake restricted journeys. (See *Journal*, March 21, 1772, Jan. 4, 1774, and his letters of Feb. 29, March 4, 1772, and June 2, 1775.)

provides an important source of trustworthy information about him. It is somewhat strange that the biographies—and especially the autobiographies—of Wesley's preachers have been somewhat neglected apart from the valuable collection begun in 1837 by Thomas Jackson as *The Lives of Early Methodist Preachers* and rearranged by John Telford early in this century as *Wesley's Veterans*.⁴

To one of these autobiographies (not in Jackson) I turned again recently when I was asked whether the anecdote about Wesley's teaching barefoot in Georgia had any historical basis—and was asked twice in rapid succession by reputable historians. It occurred to me that it might be worth while to kill two birds—even several—with one stone, by recording in a scholarly journal not simply the original source of a fascinating and undoubtedly historical incident illustrating Wesley's pastoral and educational acumen, but also a brief sketch of one of his preachers to whom historians unwittingly owe much, and some samples from his detailed autobiography, including the full (and collated) text of the passage recording Wesley's noteworthy method of inculcating social tolerance.

The incident in question was first recorded in the autobiography of Thomas Rutherford, one of Wesley's lesser known preachers. This work was first prepared by Henry Moore, one of Wesley's literary executors, and published by a well known Methodist layman in 1807. The following year it appeared in installments in *The Methodist Magazine*.⁵

Thomas Rutherford was born June 2, 1752, in Northumberland, to a pious Scots Presbyterian family. At fourteen he lost his father, mother, and a sister in an epidemic, and in 1767 came under the influence of the Methodists, whom he officially joined in January 1769. He became a conscientious class-leader, and on May 13, 1770, "after much prayer, and many inward struggles, . . . exhorted from a passage of Scripture in the class, instead of meeting them in the usual way."⁶ He records with awe his first meeting with Wesley, "that extraordinary man," on May 21: "He was in the pulpit when I went into the chapel. His apostolic and angelic appearance struck me exceedingly. He appeared like one come down from heaven to teach men the way thither."⁷ In that same year he began diffidently to preach in Northumberland, and was encouraged by the

⁴For a comparison of these greatly varying collections see WHS *Proceedings*, XXII.102-5.

⁵Henry Moore, *An Account of the Lord's Dealings with Thomas Rutherford. The greater part written by himself; the remainder supplied from authentic documents* (London: Printed of J. Butterworth, 1807), 8v0, p. 128. Preface signed, "Leeds, April 15, 1807. H.M." (henceforth "Moore"). Cf. *The Methodist Magazine, for 1808* (London: Story, n.d.), issues for August, September, October, November, December, and Appendix, pp. 337-346, 385-394, 433-442, 481-493, 529-538, 577-544 (henceforth *MM*).

⁶Moore, p. 38; *MM*, 437.

⁷Rutherford even recorded a part of Wesley's exegesis of Heb. 8:10-12: "From that part of the text, 'For all shall know me, from the least to the greatest,' he said: 'We are ready to suppose that it should have been from the greatest to the least;' but after assigning several reasons why it ought not to be so, he showed, in particular, that that was not God's way; that religion had always begun at the least; that it began there in the days of our Lord, and of his

itinerant preachers to go farther afield in the Dales circuit during 1771. At the 1771 Conference his area was taken into the Newcastle circuit, for which the preachers appointed were Peter Jaco, William Thompson, and "one other."⁸ Accordingly, "they were in want of one to supply his place," and "a little before Christmas Mr. Jaco desired that I should take his place." At the Quarterly Meeting in the Orphan House, Newcastle, on New Year's Day, a group of preachers (both itinerant and local, including Cownley) "told me that there seemed a providential call for my engaging in the work of a travelling preacher—at least for my making a trial whether I was called to work in that respect or not. . . . It was agreed that I should make a trial. Thus, on the first of January, 1771, I engaged to become an itinerant preacher, and entered on the important work ten days after."⁹ Rutherford was officially "admitted on trial" at the 1772 Conference, and stationed in Aberdeen, where he remained also in 1773. His ministry may in effect be divided into three stages: Scotland, 1771-76 (Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh); Ireland, 1778-83 (Belfast, Londonderry, Lisburn, Dublin); and England, 1784-91 (Leeds, York, Stockport, Bristol)—though he had also spent interpolated periods in Whitehaven (1777) and Dublin (1789-90). He was appointed by Wesley as one of the original "Legal Hundred" by the Deed of Declaration (1784), retired in 1792, served as a supernumerary in London in 1804, and died there on May 30, 1806, aged 54. In 1780 he married Isabella Young of Coleraine, sister of Anne, the wife of his biographer, Henry Moore. Rutherford was survived by his wife (who died at Leeds in 1817); they had eight children, including four daughters, a son Henry who died in 1800, and William, who sailed for the West Indies that same year.¹⁰

After "thirty-four years of arduous and unremitting labour in the Lord's vineyard" (to quote Henry Moore's prefatory words) Rutherford failed in health, and "employed some part of his painful leisure in drawing up an account of the Lord's dealings with him." This manuscript account or Journal was based, apparently, on a diary which also came to Moore.¹¹

apostles, and spread and ascended with such rapidity that St. Paul tells us that in his day there were 'saints in Caesar's household.' The same, he observed, was the case in the present great revival of religion in our own land. It began among the least, but God hath so mightily prospered his work that now, said he, 'We can say, there are saints in Caesar's household!' " (Moore, 39-40; *MM*, 437-438.)

⁸Moore, p. 45; cf. *MM*, 440. The *Minutes* record the name of Joseph Cownley, but he was in effect a retired itinerant in the area, one with family responsibilities, but who could be relied upon to help in case of need.

⁹Moore, pp. 45-46; *MM*, 440-441.

¹⁰Moore, pp. 101-111, *MM*, 532-537 (Mather died August 1800).

¹¹See *MM*, 71, where a footnote reads: "We are sorry that we cannot make room now for an extract from Mr. R.'s diary. Perhaps we may, hereafter, be able to insert a part of it." Corresponding to this gap in the abridged *Magazine* extracts are pages 70-92 of Moore's published work, comprising extracts (apparently from the diary) dated "Dec. 6, 1775" to "Friday, May 3 [1776]."

The Journal went only as far as 1778, and it appears at least possible that it was prepared in response to Wesley's appeal for such documents, which he planned to publish in *The Arminian Magazine*. One example of his many pen portraits of his colleagues—not the most complimentary!—may be given as a sample: "I left Perth in the latter end of July [1773]. At the Conference Mr. Wright and Mr. Watkin were removed. Mr. Dixon was appointed Assistant, and Mr. Briden [i.e., Bredin] and Mr. Tatton were sent to us from England. I only met with the latter twice during the year. He was one of the greatest triflers I ever knew. It was hardly possible to be serious in his company; and yet he had an extraordinary talent for preaching the terrors of the Lord! He soon left us, and set up for himself as a dissenting minister."¹²

Wesley's account of the Georgia incident is here given along with its complete setting in Rutherford's Journal, collated with Moore's abridged account in the *Methodist Magazine* for November 1808 (at the time Rutherford was Wesley's Assistant for the Edinburgh Circuit):

In the beginning of May Mr. Wesley visited us. [I was then in Glasgow.]¹³ He preached in the evening of the day on which he arrived [May 8, 1776], and the next morning at five o'clock. Between six and seven he set out on horseback for Greenock. Mr. Rogers and I, with another friend, accompanied him. That was the only time I ever travelled with him when he rode on horseback, and it was one of the highest treats of the kind I ever enjoyed. As he could not read or write, as [he did] when travelling in his carriage, he gave himself up to conversation; which was at once replete with information and entertainment. We had got but a very little way out of town when we passed a gentleman's seat. Mr. Wesley asked me what the name of it was; but, alas, though I had passed it repeatedly, I could not tell! He said, "When I can learn nothing else, I like to learn the names of houses and villages as I pass them." His words carried reproof to my heart, and covered me with shame.

A circumstance occurred as we rode along, that led him to relate an anecdote which I shall never forget, and which I thought highly characteristic. We overtook a little girl without stockings and shoes (a thing very common in Scotland in spring and summer); he called her to him, and gave her a shilling, with a few words of advice. He then took notice of the custom, and added: "When I was in America, I taught one school at Savannah, and Mr. Delamotte¹⁴ taught another. He told me one day, that a part of the boys belonging to his school wore stockings and shoes, and the others did not; and that the former laughed at and ridiculed the latter, and thereby discouraged them; and that though he prevented their doing so when they were under his eye, they did it when out of school; so that notwithstanding all the pains he had taken, it appeared to be a growing evil, and he did not know how to cure it. I think (said Mr.

¹²Moore, p. 59; *MM*, 485. Thomas Tatton served as an itinerant 1771-73, was not stationed in 1774, stationed again 1775-77, and desisted in 1778.

¹³The sentence within brackets is added in *MM* only, as are subsequent passages added within brackets, except the date.

¹⁴Charles Delamotte was a layman who accompanied the three clergy (John and Charles Wesley, and Benjamin Ingham), to Georgia in 1735. Although he was a sugar merchant's son, Coulter and Saye's *List of the Early Settlers of Georgia* (Athens, 1949), notes his occupation as "schoolmaster." He was the last to return to England of the four companions, leaving June 2, 1738. He died April 14, 1796, aged 82.

Wesley) I could cure it; and if¹⁵ you will take the care of my school next week, I will take care of yours, and try; which he readily consented to do. Accordingly (added Mr. Wesley)¹⁶ on Monday morning I went into his school without either stockings or shoes. The children looked with surprise, first at me, and then at each other. I took no notice, but kept them to their work. I soon observed, however, that those who were without stockings and shoes began to gather courage, and look with an air of consequence, now they had the master on their side. I did the same every day during the week; before the end of which several of those who used to wear stockings and shoes came to school without them. Thus the evil was effectively cured.”—Though this was but a small matter, yet I think none but a person of a great and ready mind would have either thought of or practiced such a way of putting a stop to the evil; nor could anything be better calculated effectually to answer the end. It reminds me of a remark of the late Dr. Beatty¹⁷ of Aberdeen, after hearing Mr. Wesley in that city. Being asked by a gentleman who came with him what he thought of the sermon, he replied, “It was not a masterly discourse, and yet none but a master could have delivered it.”¹⁸

It is impossible to corroborate this story from contemporary evidence, for there is no mention of it in the journals or diaries which have survived from the pens of the Wesley brothers or Ingham, and the diary of Delamotte—he probably kept one as a part of their joint pact—seems to have disappeared. Nor would we really expect any such mention, for this was a minor incident, though a characteristic and highly revealing one. Because related about forty years after the event, we can feel fairly certain that it is unconsciously romanticized,¹⁹ though the basic facts are surely reliable.

¹⁵*MM*, “I told him, said Mr. Wesley, I thought I could cure it; and added, If.”

¹⁶*MM* omits the parenthetical phrase.

¹⁷Apparently the poet James Beattie (1735-1803); “the late” implies that this passage was inserted within the text in 1807 by Henry Moore. (*MM* spells the name ‘Beattie.’)

¹⁸Moore, pp. 92-3; *MM*, 489-490.

¹⁹For instances of such transformations in Wesley’s narratives, see Frank Baker, “The Real John Wesley,” *Methodist History*, July 1974, pp. 183-197, espec. 193-196.