

PROBING A WESLEY LETTER

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Before leaving for a research tour in England, my colleague Richard Heitzenrater sent me a letter passed on to him by a lady in Arkansas which she believed to be a letter by John Wesley. He had informed her that it was not a John Wesley holograph (it was neither in his hand, nor written on contemporary paper), yet some stylistic similarities suggested that it might be a later copy of one of Wesley's letters. It seemed important to carry out some further tests.

To begin with, the date, opening, and signature match contemporary original letters. John Wesley was in Bristol on September 22, 1788, and did (as the possible letter states) take a "place in the mail coach" the following Sunday to London.² Similarly, the hope that Wesley mentions of visiting Plymouth "next autumn" was fulfilled in August, 1789.³ But who would have been the recipient of the letter, and what would have been the occasion?

To answer these questions I turned to the *Minutes*, to see which preachers were stationed at Plymouth by the July, 1788 Conference. Lawrence Kane, an Irish Methodist who entered the itinerancy in 1783, was the supervising "assistant" in Plymouth in 1788. But he had been brought there the year previously.⁴ It seems unlikely that he would be complaining to Wesley about his current placement (as the possible letter reflects). Moreover, there are no surviving traces of letters passing between Wesley and Kane.

The second name on the list appointed to Plymouth by the 1788 Conference was George Wadsworth (d. 1797). Wadsworth had by this point nearly twenty years of service (entering the itinerancy "on trial" in 1770).⁵ In Charles Atmore's *Memorial* to such long-serving early itinerant preachers Wadsworth is described as "an honest, pious, good man."⁶ It seems even

¹ Frank Baker (1910–1999) retired from Duke Divinity School in December, 1979, an event marked by the founding of The Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition at DDS. For the 40th anniversary of this dual occasion the CSWT will make available online all of Baker's published essays, articles, and books. As we gathered these materials we uncovered an item that Baker prepared for publication late in life but never submitted. Since it deals with a John Wesley letter otherwise unknown, we judged it worth publishing posthumously. Randy L. Maddox edited Baker's initial draft, adding some more recent evidence and updating references.

² See John Wesley, *Journal and Diaries*, Sept. 22–28, 1788, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984ff.), 24:110–111, 258–259 (hereafter cited as *Works*).

³ Wesley, *Journal and Diaries*, Aug. 13, 1789, *Works*, 24:150, 290.

⁴ See *Minutes*, 1783 (*Works*, 10:531), 1787 (10: 625), and 1788 (10:647).

⁵ See *Minutes*, 1770 (*Works*, 10:380), and 1788 (10:647).

⁶ Charles Atmore, *The Methodist Memorial: bring an Impartial Sketch of the Lives and Characters of the Preachers* (Bristol: Edwards, 1801), 435.

more unlikely that he would have written to Wesley complaining of his appointment. And there are again no surviving examples of letters between Wesley and Wadsworth.

But things are quite different in the case of the third preacher assigned to Plymouth by the 1788 Conference—thanks to published autobiographical remarks we know that he corresponded with Wesley and that his situation in September, 1788 fits well the letter in question.⁷ Thomas Cooper (1760–1833) was born at Staincross, near Wakefield, to Methodist parents. He converted in 1779, began to preach locally, and pondered becoming an itinerant. In 1780 he “received a most affectionate letter from Mr. Wesley, and therefore hastened to Kingswood,” where he arrived “in the beginning of May, and continued there upwards of fifteen months.” In 1781, as a preacher on trial, Cooper traveled in the extensive Sevenoaks or Sussex circuit, where he rejoiced in the “most animating and highly profitable” conversation of Rev. Vincent Perronet (1693–1785), then about ninety years of age.⁸

In 1783 Wesley appointed Cooper to the Colchester circuit where, after a shaky start in Essex (not normally congenial to Methodists), he fostered a revival in Manningtree, at the head of the Stour estuary. The normal two-year term at a station (for successful preachers) expired for Cooper in the summer of 1785. Wesley routinely moved him to Cornwall, 300 miles from Essex, assuming that this would cause no problem. But Cooper notes:

As I was engaged to be married, and so long a removal would have prevented it, I begged very hard to be continued a third year, or at least to be sent to a circuit near at hand. My honoured father . . . did not see fit to indulge my request, and I found it hard to submit. I therefore married Miss Ann Pawninton, of Mistley, who with her mother built a new chapel for my sole use in Manningtree. Here I had a large congregation, and I laboured with all my power to win souls to Christ . . . I commenced preaching at Harwich, and the Lord gave me souls for my hire . . . I therefore formed them into a society.⁹

This meant that in 1785 Cooper desisted from traveling,¹⁰ and was not included in the 1786 *Minutes*. Yet he stayed in contact with Wesley, as evidenced by a letter from Wesley dated March 31, 1786, expressing hesitance about returning Cooper to a circuit before the upcoming yearly Conference.¹¹

Cooper's narrative continues: “After I had laboured alone in this manner somewhat more than a year, Mr. Wesley came to visit Colchester—where I hastened to see him and he received me most affectionately.” Cooper apologized for declining Wesley's appointment and stressed that he would like to return to the connexion. In response, Cooper records, “In February [1787], after I had seen Mr. Wesley in Colchester, he wrote to me that with

⁷ “Memoir of the Late Rev. Thomas Cooper; written by himself,” *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* 14 (1835): 1–14, 81–92.

⁸ Cooper, “Memoir,” 11–12 (see also *Minutes*, 1781, *Works*, 10:507).

⁹ Cooper, “Memoir,” 81–82.

¹⁰ See *Minutes*, 1785, *Works*, 10:569.

¹¹ This letter is held at The Methodist Archive and Research Centre, The John Rylands Library, shelf number MA 1977/101. It is unpublished but will appear in volume 30 of *Works*.

all speed I must go into the Birmingham circuit, Mr. Murlin being left."¹² Cooper completed the remainder of that spring for the ailing John Murlin. He was then both readmitted "on trial" by Conference in August, 1787, and assigned in his own right to Birmingham.¹³ At some point during this period his wife Ann died, having lived with him only "three years and a few days."¹⁴

While he does not mention it in his "Memoir," in keeping with the regular pattern of rotation Cooper was moved by Conference in August, 1788, to Plymouth.¹⁵ Once again he proved resistant to a move of this distance, writing Wesley with a request to go instead into the Derby circuit, appealing to some disorder as a reason.¹⁶ Wesley's response was sent to Birmingham in early September. Based on the letter below, it seems that by the time Wesley's response reached Birmingham Cooper had already left for Plymouth, and could not return to Derby within the two-week time frame Wesley had set (hence the reference to "providence").

Drawing these threads of evidence together, I judge that the letter shared with Dr. Heitzenrater (and given below) was written by Wesley, and was intended for Cooper:

Bristol
September 22, 1788

My Dear Brother,

I have much business to do in London. And as I do not depend upon seeing another year, I must be there as soon as possible; and to that end, have taken place in the mail coach for next Sunday night. If I should live to see the next autumn, I shall endeavour to see you at Plymouth.

As it was evidently the providence of God which placed you in your present situation, he will doubtless give you grace sufficient for it. Only take care to improve the Sabbath, and you will some day stand at the right hand.

I am

Your affectionate brother,

J. Wesley

By the time Wesley actually reached Plymouth again Cooper had been assigned by the following Conference to a new circuit, Wolverhampton.¹⁷

¹² Cooper, "Memoir," 82.

¹³See *Minutes*, 1787, *Works*, 10:623, 625.

¹⁴Cooper, "Memoir," 82–83.

¹⁵See *Minutes*, 1788, *Works*, 10:647.

¹⁶See JW's response, dated Sept. 6, 1788, in John Telford, ed., *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley* (London: Epworth, 1931), 8:87.

¹⁷See *Minutes*, 1789, *Works*, 10:679.