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## Charles Wesley in Ireland

BY REV. FRANK BAKER, B.A., B.D.

(Being the substance of an address delivered in the Centenary Church, St. Stephen's Green, Dublin, at the Bi-Centenary Meeting on August 9, 1947.)

The importance of John Wesley's visits to Ireland can hardly be exaggerated, and he should naturally be in the forefront of our thoughts when we give thanks for 200 years of Irish Methodism. When he stepped ashore on St. George's Quay, Dublin, on August 9, 1747, a new era for Ireland was inaugurated. Twenty more visits, generally much longer than this first tour of exploration, were to confirm his early impressions of the great promise of this venture. Even as an old man he continued regularly to make the arduous sea voyage, spending his eighty-fifth birthday in Ireland. Indeed, had he lived another two months he would have died in Ireland—if an Englishman be permitted such an Irishism. For his last illness came just before the time when he would have embarked on his biennial visit to Dublin. It is well known that some of the London Methodists complained that he spent so much time over his Irish tours—about six whole years of his ministry in all. To which he replied: "Have patience, and Ireland will repay you."

Wesley, M.P. for the county, and an intimate of Dean Jonathan Swift—as readers of the "Journal to Stella" will remember. Before his death in 1728 Garret Wesley had tried to secure an heir of the same name, his choice falling on young Charles, then a student at Westminster School. After his father had told him it was his own responsibility, Charles had finally refused the tempting offer. In later life John Wesley was to say that this had been "a fair escape." Yet on that September morning of 1747 Charles might well have wondered. He probably knew that the heir who had taken his place, Richard Colley Wesley, had in 1746 become Baron Mornington, though the glory of his grandson, the Duke of Wellington, he would never know. Maybe in their recent conversations John had spoken of the death in 1745 of Garret Wesley's widow, a fact recalled during his visit by the advertisement of her house for sale. Later on Charles might have an opportunity of searching out that old house, and of pondering on what might have been.

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usual compliments to our lodgings." Among these "compliments" was the title "Swaddler!" which he was to hear again the next morning even from the lips of a child of four. His host later on ful. Speaking generally, the welcome from the Anglican clergy was half-hearted at best, and was easily turned to bitter enmity. Yet many clergy acknowledged the truth of the Methodist teaching, and some of them preached such a strong



time over his Irish tours—about six whole years of his ministry in all. To which he replied: "Have patience, and Ireland will repay you."

Yet although through the years John Wesley played by far the most important individual part in the founding of Irish Methodism, the more limited work of his brother Charles must not be overlooked. Although Charles Wesley only spent about eight months there, those eight months were crucial ones during the opening years. John Wesley's first brief visit convinced him that sound leadership was required if the cause were to be thoroughly established, and one of his most urgent tasks was to see that such leadership was forthcoming when he resumed his interrupted work in England. True, he was leaving Thomas Williams and John Trembath behind, but on neither of them could he depend absolutely. "Brother Charles," his acknowledged second-in-command, must be sent for. So two urgent letters were despatched to Charles Wesley.

When the second letter arrived Charles Wesley was in London. It was Friday, August 21. After fulfilling his preaching duties for the week-end, he took part in a farewell gathering, of which he said: "We parted at the Foundery in fervent prayer, particularly for the conversion of some Romish priest." Taking with him Charles Perronet, son of the Vicar of Shoreham, he rode hard journeys across country to the meeting-place fixed by his brother, and was a little relieved to arrive first, so that men and beasts had a breathing space. The little conference with his brother over, Charles was in the saddle again, and was kept there for another 25 hours before reaching Holyhead, whence he eventually embarked at 10 p.m. on September 8, arriving off Dublin the next day, after a rough crossing.

What were his thoughts as he transferred to the smaller packet-boat that was to convey him into Dublin? Almost certainly of the past, as well as of the immediate future. For his first visit to Dublin might so easily have happened under far different circumstances. A wealthy branch of the Wesley family owned much property in the County of Meath, and when Charles Wesley was a youth the head of this branch was Garret

ment of her house for sale. Later on Charles might have an opportunity of searching out that old house, and of pondering on what might have been.

There was not much time for day-dreaming, however, when Charles Wesley first landed in Dublin. For he arrived to find the young society in grave trouble. Furious persecution had broken out against them, and all his tact and courage would be needed to hold them together. He was only able to piece together the full facts a week later, when he wrote in his Journal:

"On Sunday, August 30, a mob of Papists and Protestants assaulted the house where the society was met after evening service. They met them going out, with sticks and stones, knocked down several, both men and women, and beat them in a barbarous manner. Some escaped the back way; others retreated to the house, and shut the door. The mob broke it open, and another inward door, tore down the desk and forms, carried two large counters, chairs, and part of the wainscot into the street, and openly burnt all, but what they stole.

"There was a warehouse over the preaching-room, which they broke open and ransacked. Above one hundred pounds' worth of goods they seized as lawful prize, and committed the rest to flames.

"They have often threatened our lives. Mr. Patterson they knocked down, and cut in several places while on the ground; then threw him into a cellar, and cast stones on him. Mrs. Young and many others were treated in the same manner. Half-hour past nine the Mayor came with his guard, and saw with his own eyes the havoc the mob had made. Some of the poorest, Papists mostly, were sent to Newgate; but the better sort made a mock of his authority, and walked about the town, from alehouse to alehouse, with the constables, whom, by drink and money, they had secured of their party."

Small wonder that Wesley began his ministrations in the "shattered room in Marlborough Street" from the text, "Comfort ye, my people!" There was no disturbance until the service was over, when "the rabble attended us with the

usual compliments to our lodgings." Among these "compliments" was the title "Swaddler!" which he was to hear again the next morning even from the lips of a child of four. His host later on explained how it arose, from John Cennick's frequent use of expressions such as: "I curse and blaspheme all the gods in heaven, but the babe that lay in the manger, the babe that lay in Mary's lap, the babe that lay in swaddling clouts." From this he had been nicknamed "Swaddling John," or plain "Swaddler," and the name not only clung to all the lay preachers of Irish Methodism, but to its clergy and people as well.

Wesley's account of the Society meeting for this his second evening in Ireland closes with words revealing his certainty of divine guidance in this venture:

"I met the Society, and the Lord knit our hearts together in love stronger than death. We both wept and rejoiced for the consolation. God hath sent me, I trust, to confirm their souls, and keep them together in the present distress."

The possibility, even probability, of martyrdom was always present to his mind, but he wrote back to England: "I cannot repent of my coming hither in such a dangerous season. . . . The hairs of my head are all numbered: and if my Master has more work for me, I shall certainly live to do it." Strangely enough, it was not until seven weeks later that one of the hundreds of stones hurled at him found its intended target, though his comparative immunity had been due at least in part to the self-sacrifice of his Methodist defenders.

Under Charles Wesley's encouragement and guidance the Dublin Society made steady progress. No "Romish priests" such as the London Methodists had prayed for were yet converted, but many of the Roman Catholic poor came regularly to the Methodist services, and rejoiced in the Methodist hymns—Wesley even came across a boy whistling them in the streets! Soon a converted Roman Catholic, Thomas Walsh, was to become one of Methodism's most scholarly preachers.

With the adherents of the Anglican Church Wesley was even more success-

ful. Speaking generally, the welcome from the Anglican clergy was half-hearted at best, and was easily turned to bitter enmity. Yet many clergy acknowledged the truth of the Methodist teaching, and one of them preached such a strong sermon against persecution that the rumour went round that Charles Wesley had bribed him! Like his brother John, Charles set the example to his followers of attending Anglican worship every Sunday. On his first Sunday in Ireland he had taken Holy Communion at St. Patrick's, though both before and afterwards he preached to great crowds in the open air on Oxmantown green. A few months later Dean Corbet was to acknowledge that Methodism had greatly increased the number of his communicants—a fact exemplified by the huge silver communion vessels which eventually had to be made.

In addition to preaching, visiting and marshalling converts into the Society, of course, there were many other things for Charles Wesley to do. A valuable ministry was commenced at the Newgate Prison, where the Roman Catholic executioner was at least "half converted" by a prisoner who had come under the influence of Methodism. There was the knotty problem of getting the Methodists settled in hired preaching-houses for the winter, for landlords would not long put up with the mobbing, plundering, and destruction which too often was associated with such unwelcome tenants. Charles Wesley also busied himself raising money to build a permanent chapel. Methodist literature had to be provided, and even in 1747 there were over a dozen publications to be shepherded through the well-known press of Samuel Powell at Dublin. Strangely enough, only one of them was a sermon, whilst at least nine were little collections of hymns, including a unique hymn-book which Charles Wesley probably prepared specially for the Irish people. And, perhaps, most important of all, the people needed tuition in the novel practice of singing those same hymns.

Yes, Charles Wesley certainly had his hands full. But by the beginning of December the work could be sent farther afield, and in February, 1748, Wesley himself followed—to Tyrell's Pass and on



## Charles Wesley in Ireland

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to Athlone. Near this latter place he and his companions were ambushed, and one of the preachers was almost killed, being narrowly rescued by soldiers from Athlone. On the return journey, says Wesley,

"We marched very slowly for the sake of our patient till we came to the field of battle. It was stained with blood abundantly. We halted, and sang a song of triumph and praise to God."

After six months, in March, 1748, John Wesley came to his brother's relief, following up the new ventures that had been started. The 1748 Conference kept them both away from Ireland for a time, but that self-sacrificing six months had laid a solid foundation. In the autumn Charles Wesley was back again, however, consolidating the pioneering work of Williams and Robert Swindells at Cork, where he eventually got the Society established in an old theatre. Terrible persecutions ensued in Cork, the mob being aroused to fury by a ballad singer, Nicholas Butler. Here again the magistrates joined forces with the law-breakers, completing their deliberations by edicts such as this:

"We find and present Charles Wesley to be a person of ill-fame, a vagabond, and a common disturber of his Majesty's peace, and we pray he may be transported."

This delayed pronouncement, however, dated August 19, 1749, was made rather late in the day. Charles Wesley had already left the country, never to return. During his two visits his health had suffered badly, and the crossings were a nightmare, for he was certainly **not** a good sailor. He had been carefully nursed back to something approaching health by the one whom he was soon to marry, Sally Gwynne. And Sally Gwynne seems to have been one of the deciding factors in keeping Charles Wesley henceforth on *terra firma*. In another 10 years his preaching and pastoral work in England was to be limited to the London and Bristol areas. Yet his interest in Ireland remained. He kept in touch with Methodism there by correspondence, and was occasionally able to render valuable help at a distance. His heroic part had been loyally and successfully played in Irish Methodism's first year, however, and he could hand over the reins to his brother John with an easy conscience. As he himself had written—"the word of the Lord runs very swiftly among them, and there is a promise of a glorious harvest."