

First Methodist W. Ps.

BY THE REV. FRANK BAKER

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While still in the employ of the Wilberforces, young Thompson's loyalty to the Methodists was proclaimed. He became an enthusiastic local preacher, his preaching being "of the most awakening and energetic character," and his prayers in the old Manor Alley Chapel exercising an influence over at least one hundred years later. Thompson would also preach in houses and in the open air, in spite of being pelted by unruly mobs. In later years he was to finance extensive Home Missions activities in the Holderness area. When little more than twenty-one he was present at the unique Leeds Conference of 1778, at which two sessions were thrown open to all and sundry in order to discuss chapel affairs and projected missionary work. (This was exactly one hundred years before the first official "Representative Session" of the W.M. Conference.) Thirty-five years later, when Thompson presided at the inaugural meeting of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, he was to recall the deep impression made by that earlier gathering in the same building.

Thompson's zeal for Methodism was both revealed and strengthened by his marriage to Philothesa Perronet Briggs, who had been converted at twelve, and to whom Wesley had addressed a long series of letters while still in her teens. Wesley's "Dear Philly" was the daughter of his first Book Steward at the Foundery, and granddaughter of the revered patron of Methodism, the Rev. Vincent Perronet, of Shoreham, whose name the family perpetuated. Mrs. Thomas Thompson ably seconded her husband's work for Methodism in the Holderness area, and was described as "a constant visitor and benefactress of the distressed members of our Society in Hull." Their eldest son—born 1783, and baptised Thomas Perronet—secures a lengthy notice in the Dictionary of National Biography as a General, a keen politician (he was M.P. for Hull), and an economist.

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Six years later, in 1803, the Committee of Privileges was formed by Conference, its primary object being to protect Methodist preachers against unjust conscription in view of the threatened invasion of England by Napoleon. While the committee was to set in London, it was urged that it should contain one or two provincial members, "particularly Mr. Thompson of Hull." This committee did much to safeguard Methodist interests generally, and was responsible, largely through Thompson's influence as the only Methodist M.P., for defeating Lord Sidmouth's Bill in 1811, a Bill aimed at hamstringing the travelling and local preachers of Methodism.

Since that 1778 Conference, when his enthusiasm for missionary work had been aroused, Thompson's interest in such activities had remained strong. In 1813, a year before the death of Dr. Thomas Coke, who largely maintained Methodist Missions by his own personal influence, Thompson chaired the first great Methodist Missionary Meeting at Leeds—a meeting at which there was no collection! The enthusiasm aroused led to the formation of the official Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, of which Thomas Thompson was elected the first lay Treasurer. He remained on the committee until his death in 1823, when eloquent tributes were paid to his "piety, uprightness, generosity,

and Christian zeal." His death, was also marked by a special resolution of Conference, which appears in the Minutes for 1823.

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While Thompson was brought up in Methodism, Butterworth was an unwilling and "accidental" convert to it. Born in 1770, he was the son of a Baptist minister in Coventry, and as a young man attended Baptist services, though apparently without much enthusiasm. Educationally he had a much better start than farm-born Thompson, and was early sent to London to become a law bookseller. He succeeded in founding a large and prosperous business in Fleet Street. In his middle twenties he considered himself in a position to marry, yet without any definite attachment in his quest for a suitable wife a strange set of circumstances led him into the arms of the Methodist Church. A chance Baptist acquaintance gave him a letter of introduction to the Cookes of Trowbridge, whose daughter Frances this young man was courting. They were requested to take Butterworth to interview a young lady in Somersetshire, whose matrimonial qualities were highly recommended. (So they did it in the good old days.) Frances Cooke's youngest sister, Anne, accompanied Joseph on his visit of inspection. When they arrived at their destination, however, he did not even take the trouble to call on the young lady—we hope she was not expecting him—for he had decided en route that Miss Anne Cooke could not be bettered. A few months later they were married.

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In his work for Overseas Missions, already mentioned, he not only carried out the duties of General Treasurer, and Chairman of the Committee, but laboured extensively, encouraging local branches of the Missionary Society by his presence and prestige: Thompson's enthusiasm for Home Missions is paralleled by Butterworth's keen interest in Irish Methodism, for which he gave and begged financial help, and in which he unsuccessfully intervened in order to promote a union between the parent body and a secession.

Butterworth was a sympathetic friend to the Methodist ministry, and when a group of laymen spontaneously formed the "Society for the Casual Relief, when in Distress, of Itinerant Preachers and their Families," in 1796, it was Joseph Butterworth who became their Secretary. He also promoted in 1806 a scheme of Probationary Studies, which he called, "A Plan of Instruction, for those Preachers who are Admitted upon Trial."

No. 43, Fleet Street, Butterworth's house, became known as an important centre of social and spiritual, as well as business, activity. Thither Methodists, preachers and people alike, resorted for hospitality, help, or advice. From that house, and his home in Bedford Square, flowed forth in personal charity a very large proportion of Butterworth's profits for he was "at home" on one day of every week to anyone in need of financial assistance, often having over a hundred applicants on that one day. Though he never gave indiscriminately, very few were sent empty away. It was at Butterworth's house in Fleet Street that Wilberforce and the others of the "Clapham Sect" met to discuss many of their philanthropic projects. Here in 1804 the British and Foreign Bible Society was formed, the outcome partly of the pathetic story of "Mary Jones and Her Bible."

“First Methodist MPs.” *Methodist Recorder* (June 28, 1945): 7.

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