JOHN WESLEY AND THE AMERICAN INDIAN: A STUDY IN DISILLUSIONMENT *

by J. Ralph Randolph

In 1736 Benjamin Ingham, Charles and John Wesley arrived in the recently founded colony of Georgia. The three unusually devout Anglicans were not only concerned with the religious life of the settlers but also hoped to spread Christianity among the Southeastern Indian. None of them was to be successful in the missionary field, but the efforts produced quite dissimilar reactions. Charles Wesley quickly lost interest in remaining in the colony and soon returned to England. Benjamin Ingham displayed the most zeal in becoming an effective missionary, but after living a year with the Yamacraws, a small portion of the Creek Confederation, he went home. Arriving in Georgia determined to convert the natives, John Wesley also never realized his desire. Indeed, a combination of reluctance on the part of the Indians and personal frustration resulted in extreme disillusionment and harsh criticism of the Southeastern Red Men.

The men were united by more than personal friendship and the desire to aid the religious development of the new colony. They had attended Oxford University, and in 1732 Ingham had joined the small group of students and tutors organized by the Wesley brothers for methodical study and religious devotions which became known as the “Holy Club” or “Methodists.” The colonization of Georgia was a topic of serious discussion in England in the early 1730’s, and the three clergymen became interested in the project. After considerable deliberation and with the encouragement of General Oglethorpe and other Trustees, they agreed to make the voyage. Besides the desire to labor among the settlers and Indians, each of them believed that the experience would further his own spiritual life. After landing in February they quickly undertook their various responsibilities. None of them found the Georgia missionary field rewarding and within two years each had left the colony.

The Reverend Mr. Charles Wesley remained in Georgia the shortest time—only six months. Unlike his brother John and Benjamin Ingham, Charles Wesley expressed little desire to become an active missionary to the native Americans. He went to Georgia as the Secretary of Indian Affairs, and as such had the responsibility of issuing licenses to traders with the Indians. Although he probably learned of native culture and society from the traders, he did not

* This article is based on a chapter in J. Ralph Randolph’s British Travelers Among the Southern Indians, to be published by the University of Oklahoma Press this fall, and is used with the permission of the publisher.
report any comments nor did he record his own impressions of the Indians. He did observe the Red Men more than once. He was present when Tomochichi, chief of the Yamacraws,¹ and a few of his followers greeted the English upon their arrival in February, 1736, and shortly before he left Savannah he acted as recorder for a conference between Oglethorpe and some Creek leaders. He also may have seen some Indians while living at Frederica, but he made no mention of them in his journal. In July, 1736, Charles Wesley left Georgia and after a pleasant if unanticipated visit to Boston returned to England in December, 1736. Although he later indicated a willingness to return to Georgia as a full-time minister rather than as a secretary, he soon became completely involved in his work in Great Britain and never returned to the New World.²

The Reverend Mr. Benjamin Ingham remained in America for more than a year and exhibited great determination to work among the Indians. However, the only known comments of Ingham concerning his venture in Georgia were contained in a long letter written to his mother on May 1, 1736.³ He spoke of his initial reluctance to leave home, and his decision to go because of the persistence of John Wesley and his desire to remove himself from the numerous "temptations" of England to unsophisticated Georgia. He also described the friendly greeting of Tomochichi when the party arrived. On another occasion, he met two native hunters and traded some wine and biscuits for some venison. He concluded his letter by expressing the desire to teach the young Indians, especially the "young prince," but recognized some of the problems involved. Besides the "prince's" being "corrupted and addicted to drunkenness," the writer noted that the natives used no corporal punishment in


their educational process and questioned his own ability to do likewise.4

Ingham did attempt to remove one barrier to successful missionary work, that of communication. For several months he lived at the Musgrove trading post in order to learn the language of the Creeks, and he made progress in this endeavor, according to John Wesley. While learning the dialect, he also taught the native children in a school near the Yamacraw village. Tomochichi encouraged the missionary's efforts, but after he returned to England the school presumably disappeared.

The last report of Ingham's activities in the colony was by John Wesley in February, 1737. In a letter to a college friend, he mentioned that Ingham was still living near the Yamacraw village a few miles outside Savannah, but Wesley did not indicate the extent of his young colleague's activities nor the missionary's success. Benjamin Ingham soon returned to England for reasons which are not entirely apparent. John Wesley stated that Ingham went home to seek recruits for the missionary efforts in Georgia, but the Earl of Egmont reported that the young man informed the Trustees that he had returned "to take Priest's orders." Whatever the reasons, Ingham did not return to America despite his statement that he desired to do so. He soon broke with the Wesleys and associated himself with the Moravians. The departure of Ingham ended the only real attempt by the English to work among the Georgia Indians during the 1730's.5

The work of the Reverend Mr. John Wesley in Georgia began

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4 Ibid., pp. 64-66, 75-80. The "young prince" was doubtlessly Tonahowli, nephew and heir of Tomochichi who was chief of the Yamacraw. Despite Ingham's censure, he proved a valuable ally of the English until his death in 1743. Jones, Tomo-Chi-Chi, pp. 107-08 n. Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., notes the conflict that arose from the use of corporal punishment by Whites and the Indian's dislike of such disciplinary means. Salvation and the Savage: An Analysis of Protestant Missions and the American Indian Response, 1787-1862 (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), pp. 41-42.

with great confidence. In a letter written only a few days prior to his departure for America, Wesley was very enthusiastic regarding the opportunity to convert the Indians. Just as the early Christians labored among “heathens,” Wesley desired to do the same among the savage Red Men. In the same letter he also revealed the other major reason for his going to the colony; indeed, for him the primary reason was that of saving his “own soul.” Hopefully, his missionary activity among the uncorrupted natives would permit him “to learn the purity of that faith which was once delivered to the saints . . . .” Despite his strong desire and intent to work among the Indians, Wesley was actually appointed and paid to minister to the Whites. Probably neither he nor the Trustees foresaw any difficulty in his doing both. In reality, he was to enjoy no success among the Indians and made little effort to Christianize them. 6

The small group of Indians led by Tomochichi was the first Wesley observed. The minister noted that three of them including the chief wore European clothing, but despite his costume, Tomochichi had painted his face, wore beads in his hair and had attached a “Scarlet feather” to one ear. The women of the party presented the Whites with a jar of milk and one of honey. Wesley believed that the gifts were symbolic. If one would only treat the Indians as “children,” they would be as sweet as “honey.” Wesley was also encouraged by the words of Tomochichi. The old chief personally welcomed the clergyman for bringing “the great word” to his people, but admitted that the Indians were somewhat confused regarding Christianity, and that the rivalry between Great Britain, Spain, and France confused them even more. Perplexed he might be by the rivalry among the Christian colonizers, but he shared the British antipathy toward the Spanish and their attempt to convert the natives. Wesley recorded the chief’s sentiments in his journal. He wrote:

But we [the Indians] would not be made Christians after the Spaniards way to make Christians. We would be taught first, and then baptized. All this he [Tomochichi] Spoke with much earnestness, and much action both of his hands and head, and yet with the utmost gentleness both of Tone and manner. 7 Wesley was heartened by the man’s attitude. It does not seem to


7 The meeting is described in John Wesley, Journal, I, 159, and in Egmont Journal, pp. 131-32. The quote is taken from the letter account which is probably a transcription of a manuscript copy of Wesley’s journal to which Egmont had access.
have bothered him that the Indian had learned his prejudice against the Spanish and Catholics from the English.

The optimism of the young missionary soon changed to disillusionment and animosity toward the Indians for several reasons. Wesley came to America to labor among the Indians, but was unable or unwilling to undertake the task. From personal observation and from information furnished by men who had had long contact with the Southern natives he found that his belief in the simple, unsophisticated “heathen” to be naive and incorrect. And the entire Georgia ministry of John Wesley was largely one of controversy, strife and disappointment.

In the summer of 1736 Wesley wanted to leave the English settlements on the coast and begin his work among the Indians, but Oglethorpe refused permission. The denial was made partly because of the fighting between the Chickasaws, whom at this time Wesley felt were the best prospects for missionary work, and the Choctaws and their French allies, but the major consideration of Oglethorpe was the need of a minister in Savannah. In July, Oglethorpe wrote the Trustees requesting more ministers and indicated his fear of leaving the settlers “entirely destitute” if Wesley and Ingham both became active among the Indians. When Oglethorpe returned to England late in 1736, he again admonished Wesley not to leave the Georgia settlers.8

The personal contacts that the Anglican clergyman had with the native Americans were with the Yamacraws and the groups of Red Men who visited Savannah. In June and July of 1736 parties of Chickasaws traveled to the new colony. Wesley had several conferences with them and was especially interested in their religious ideas. He learned that they believed in “4 Beloved things above, the Clouds, the Sun, the Clear Skie, and He that lives in the clear Skie. That there is One lives in the clear Skie, & Two with him, Three in all.” The Indians also indicated that the “one” protected them from their enemies, and that men had souls that existed after death. The majority of the Chickasaws evidently believed that the “Souls of Red Men . . . walk’d up and down after death near the place where their bodies lye, for they often heard cries and noises [near] the places where any prisoners had been burned . . . ,” but one man “thought only the Souls of bad men walk’d, but that the good went up.” 9 Wesley indicated no surprise at learning of the ill-defined Indian concept of a Trinity and a Heaven.

He wished to return with the Chickasaws to their home, but they refused him permission because they were at war and “had no time but to fight.” When peace was established, he would be

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8 Ibid., p. 177; John Wesley, Journal, I, 238, 298 and John Wesley, Letters, I, 228-29.
welcome and could learn much more from the “Old Men of his [the Indian speaker's] nation.” Wesley also learned from the man that the “beloved One” chose each of the “old Men” as a child and taught him so that he had special knowledge. Despite the refusal, Wesley was impressed with the Chickasaws. In September, 1736, he wrote John Vernon, one of the Trustees of the colony, and expressed the hope of learning the Chickasaw language. He praised these Indians as “humble and peaceful” and admired them because they had “so firm a reliance on Providence, so settled a habit of looking up to a Superior Being in all the occurrences of life . . . .” 10

The comments of Wesley regarding the Chickasaws were his last favorable remarks on the American Indians. By the time of his correspondence with Vernon, he had already been rebuffed in his attempt to convert the Yamacraws. On one occasion when the minister pressed Tomochichi to become a Christian, the old chief heatedly replied, “Why these are Christians at Savannah! Those are Christians at Frederica! Christians drunk! Christians beat men! Christians tell lies! Me no Christian.” 11 Further discouragement came from persons who had intimate knowledge of the Southern Indians. In the summer of 1737 he talked with a Frenchman who had lived among the Choctaws and recorded the Frenchman’s belief that the gods of the Red Men were actually devils. After noting the man’s account of native cruelty, the minister added his own comment of “See the religion of Nature truly delineated!” Wesley had not always had such an adverse opinion of the Choctaws; in the previous year he had stated that he believed that the Choctaws were “the least corrupted” of all Indians. 12

By the time John Wesley had changed his attitude toward the Choctaws, he had become one of the protagonists in a controversy that divided the small colony of Georgia. Wesley came to have tender affections for Sophia Hopkey, a young lady of eighteen to whom he taught French and sought to increase her religious devotion. Miss Hopkey indicated her desire for marriage. Oglethorpe and the girl’s relatives in the colony desired the match, but after much soul-searching, Wesley hesitated, seemed to refuse and began avoiding Sophia. He was advised against the marriage by his friends within the colony, and he still hoped to work among the Indians, which would have been impractical with a wife. In haste, Miss Hopkey married one William Williamson at Purysbury, South Carolina. Wesley publicly noted that the marriage was questionable because proper bans had not been issued; he was privately hurt and confused. In August, five months after the marriage, the minister

10 Ibid., p. 178 and John Wesley, Letters, I, 228-29.
11 Quoted in Jones, Tomo-Chi-Chi, p. 103.
refused Mrs. Williamson Holy Communion because in his opinion she was inattentive during church services, had refused to seek forgiveness for her sins, and had not given proper notice of her desire to partake of Communion. She had also ceased to attend the study group organized by Wesley and perhaps he still resented the omission of the bans prior to the marriage.13

It was during the troubled summer of 1737 that evidence appeared of the change in Wesley's attitude toward the Indians. During this period his journal contained few references to them, but he had not forgotten the need for missionary activity. He had recently read David Humphreys' *Historical Account of the Incorporated Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts* (2 vols.; London, 1730), and believed that he had the solution to the problem of the English missionary activity. In a July, 1737, letter to Humphreys, Wesley stated his belief that success among the natives would come only after "one or more" missionaries had been put to death for their faith. Such evidence of zeal would convince the stubborn natives of the true belief of the English and also encourage others to continue the effort.14

The final months of John Wesley in America were extremely contentious and disheartening. Immediately upon his denial of Communion to Mrs. Williamson, her husband brought charges of defamation against the minister. A Grand Jury indicted him on ten counts, one, that Wesley had pressed his attentions upon Mrs. Williamson; and the others, ecclesiastical in nature. Wesley was never brought to trial. The Georgia officials stated that business prevented the appearance of Williamson, a chief witness, but Wesley believed that his opponents were unwilling to face him in court. Despite a court order forbidding his departure, Wesley secretly left the colony on the evening of December 2, 1737. After going to Charles-Town, he sailed for home. In London the Georgia Trustees sought information regarding the controversy that had disrupted their young colony. Shortly after Wesley's return the Trustees heard his testimony and found him innocent of the charges. Egmont indicated that he believed the minister to have been "indiscreet," but that his adversaries were "much more to blame." However, a few months later after more details were known the earl reported that the Trustees accepted Wesley's resignation "with great pleasure."15

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13 *Ibid.*, I, 355-95 *et passim*. All studies of Wesley's attraction to Miss Hopkey, his hesitation and disapproval of the marriage are essentially based on his journal. The letters he wrote while in Georgia and the Earl of Egmont's journal should also be consulted.

14 *John Wesley, Letters*, I, 225.

15 *Egmont, Journal*, pp. 107, 322-23, 331-33 and *Egmont, Diary*, II, 467, 481. Wesley's ministry in Georgia has been the subject of historical controversy. A recent article emphasizes the importance of the work of his later religious development. William B. Cannon, "John Wesley's Years in Georgia," *Methodist History*, I (July, 1963), 1-7.
Upon his departure from Georgia, Wesley made some general observations on the colony, and his conclusions regarding the American Indian were extremely bitter. He located and indicated the number of fighting men for five tribes, but indicative of his disenchantment was his censorious characterizations of the natives. He began with some general comments such as their tendency to use stealth in warfare and their habit of scalping or removing the ears of their victims. The only rule in Indian society was that each man sought “to do what he will, and what he can.” They placed no real value on marriage, and the mother often killed the children if the father deserted the family. Indeed, according to Wesley, “whoredom they account no crime, and few instances appear of an Indian woman’s refusing any one.” He went on and on with his catalogue of their supposed vices. They were “gluttons, drunkards, thieves, dissemblers, liars,” and “implacable, unmerciful, murderers of fathers, murderers of mothers, murderers of their own children; it being a common thing for a son to shoot his father, or mother, because they are old and past labor.” Despite his earlier disapproval of them, Wesley stated that the Choctaws might possibly be an exception to these general characteristics, but did not elaborate on his reasons for excepting them from his general condemnation.16

Having made these general aspersions, the disappointed missionary proceeded to note some peculiar traits for most of the tribes mentioned. Besides their habit of overindulging in food and drink, the Chickasaws were accused of being lazy and of being excessively cruel to their captives. The Cherokees were as cruel as the Chickasaws and less courageous. They also were covetous. At times his invective would get the better of his logic: though denouncing the Cherokees for intemperance, he added that they would not become inebriated unless the liquor were “on free cost.” The Uchees were deemed cowards, and the Creeks did not know “what friendship or gratitude means.” The Creeks also were highly opinionated and refused to learn new ideas, “least of all Christianity.” 17 Wesley may have had the retort of Tomochichi in mind when he made the last comment.

The characteristics ascribed to the Southern Indians by John Wesley obviously had very little if any rational basis and contained little factual information. His personal observations were limited to

A more critical study is E. Merton Coulter, “When John Wesley Preached in Georgia,” Georgia Historical Quarterly, IX (December, 1925), 317-51.

16 John Wesley, Journal, I, 407. It is perhaps needless to indicate that the Indians were guilty of few of the offenses attributed to them, but for a brief statement of the family life among these Indians, see John R. Swanton, Indians of the Southeastern United States (2 vols.; Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 137; Washington: Govt. Printing Office, 1946), II, 701-18.

17 John Wesley, Journal, I, 408-09.
the small group of Yamacraws near Savannah and the delegations of natives who visited the colony. Because of eager Europeans seeking to win and maintain the friendship of the Indians, some of the ones seen by Wesley were perhaps lazy and corrupted, but the minister's emotional travail and his failure to engage in missionary activity among the Indians no doubt colored his impressions of the natives. Shortly after his return to England he revealed the depth of his disappointment. In January 1738, he wrote:

It is now two years and almost four months since I left my native country in order to teach the Georgia Indians the nature of Christianity. But what have I learned myself in the meantime? Why, what I least of all suspected, that I, who went to America to convert others, was never myself converted to God. However, within a few months Wesley was to undergo the famous experience that greatly altered his life and profoundly influenced the religious history of eighteenth-century England.

The contact of Charles Wesley with the Indians proved to be quite limited and was more secular than religious in nature. Benjamin Ingham lived for some time among the Yamacraws, but only brief, tantalizing comments of the young man were recorded. The observations of John Wesley were especially noteworthy. Traveling to the New World with the purpose of converting the savages, the minister became bitter and frustrated. The Indians did not eagerly welcome the services of the missionary. This reluctance, his confused sentiments toward a young lady, and his disappointment following her marriage perhaps account for his harsh criticism of the Southern Indians. He was not the only colonial minister to experience failure in working with the native Americans, but his condemnations were extremely harsh and unrealistic.

There is need for a truly sound, scholarly biography of Wesley. The most thorough twentieth-century studies have been done by John S. Simon, but the works have some major errors. For example, Simon almost completely ignored Wesley's contact with the Indians, and, worse, in his few comments, he reveals a total lack of understanding of them. He praises Wesley's conclusions on the Indians as "that calm description of their [the Indians'] manners and customs." Simon, Wesley and Religious Societies, p. 127.

Quoted in ibid., p. 176.