

JOHN WESLEY'S BIOGRAPHY AND THE SHAPING OF METHODIST HISTORY

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This paper is concerned with a controversy that arose over the publication of the post-mortem biographies of John Wesley. At first sight, it might seem that the squabble, which originated in the City Road Wesleyan society in London but was to spread through the Wesleyan movement, was over the potentially lucrative proceeds resulting from writing about a religious leader who had achieved, to use a modern phrase, cult status by the end of his life. A deeper analysis of the affair reveals that the competing claims to the right to produce Wesley's life-story came from two groups within Wesleyanism that vied to fill the power vacuum that arose after his passing. Moreover, the anatomy of this dispute was to foreshadow more widespread divisions in Methodism in the first half of the nineteenth century. At stake was the control of the hagiography of Wesley. Because of the manner in which he had led the religious movement he had founded, competing interests sought to gain the power he had held in his lifetime and which now lay waiting to be seized following his death. This paper will examine those competing claims and trace the issues which defined them. The controversy over the biography was not itself the cause of this power struggle, and the struggle was much more widespread than the London societies.¹ Nonetheless, an analysis of this issue does provide a case study of how Wesleyan Methodists sought to use their history to shape their future direction.

John Wesley died on March 2, 1791. At the time of his death there were over 56,000 members in the movement and up to three or four times that number attached to it but not in membership.² The network of preaching houses, grouped into circuits, spanned the British Isles, and extended to the United States of America as well as into parts of France. The circuits were served by lay preachers who travelled and were appointed to their "stations" by the annual conference, as well as by non-itinerant preachers who exercised a local ministry within the circuit. John Wesley's influence dominated the movement, and in his lifetime, he had put in place an organizational structure that would ensure that things continued after his death according to his plan. He had decided strategy; travelled the Connexion incessantly to inspire both

¹ George Smith, *History of Wesleyan Methodism* Vol. 2 (London: Longman, Green, And Roberts, 1857-1861), 390.

² Clive Field, "The Social Composition of English Methodism to 1830: A Membership Analysis," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 76.1 (1994): 153.

the societies and the preachers and to control them; he had, until 1784, controlled Methodist preaching houses, and after that he was still able to exert enormous influence in the decision-making and fiscal aspects of the organisation. The movement was deeply relational, as preachers were taken “into Connexion” first with Wesley and only later with the annual conference. His personality was a mixture of deeply pious evangelical fervour tempered with the traces of Oxford-Laudianism in which, as an undergraduate at Christ Church and as a fellow of Lincoln College, he had been nurtured. Above all, he could brook no opposition. It was that domination of the movement he founded that made Wesley appear all but irreplaceable. Wesley’s plan was to make John Fletcher, vicar of Madeley, his successor. Fletcher was reluctant to accept such a role and died before Wesley.

Despite the instruments of polity and governance that Wesley had put in place to preserve Wesleyanism as he intended, his death created a power vacuum, and the competing claims to fill it were made all too obvious in the controversy surrounding the production of a biography of Wesley. The situation had been predicted, for as an early historian of London Methodism remarked, “many prophecies had been uttered before the death of Mr. Wesley, that Methodism would soon come to nought and become as one of the bubbles of the age, after the founder himself was removed.”³ Given that to a large extent, Wesleyanism *was* Wesley, it was inevitable that there would be those who would attempt to maintain his presence at its heart; if not in the flesh, then certainly in the spirit; and in that, the task of constructing a definitive hagiography was vital. As Bruce Hindmarsh has shown, Methodism was adept early in its history at utilizing the printed word to present and maintain benchmarks of spirituality through biography,⁴ as illustrated best by the life-stories in the *Arminian Magazine* which first appeared in the 1770s.⁵

The personalities engaged in the dispute were the legatees under Wesley’s will to whom he had left the considerable *corpus* of his papers: Thomas Coke, John Whitehead, and Henry Moore. Coke (1747-1814) was an Oxford man and clergyman who had been removed from his curacy because of his Methodist leanings. He had played a major role in Wesley’s movement intervening for Wesley in troublesome situations. Wesley had ordained him as Superintendent for America, and with Asbury he left Bristol in 1784. Henry Moore (1751-1844) was Coke’s collaborator in the writing of one of the biographies. He would go on to revise the work extensively and publish it under his sole name in 1824. An itinerant preacher, he was one of the group ordained by Wesley for the English work in 1789. John Whitehead was born in Stalybridge in 1731 of a Moravian family. He later came un-

³ George J. Stevenson, *City Road Chapel London and Its Associations Historical, Biographical and Memorial* (London: Stevenson, 1872), 131.

⁴ D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 226ff.

⁵ Barbara Prosser, “‘An arrow from a quiver’: Written Instructions for Reading People: John Wesley’s *Arminian Magazine*, January, 1778–February, 1791” (University of Manchester, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 2008).

der the influence of Wesleyan preachers and eventually became a local preacher in Bristol, where he was apprenticed to a linen draper.⁶ Between 1764 and 1769, he served as an itinerant preacher before withdrawing from Methodism and moving to London, where he became associated with the Quakers, with whose assistance he was able to pursue medical studies at Leyden University, gaining a diploma in 1781. Back in London in 1784, he rejoined the Wesleyans and became a local preacher, and in 1790 sought to return to the itinerancy. Wesley declined his offer but made him his personal physician. Whitehead died in London in 1804.⁷

Of the papers left to Coke, Moore, and Whitehead, many were letters received by Wesley and "file" copies of his replies. At the time of Wesley's death, Coke was in America and Moore in Bristol, so Wesley's executors placed the papers in Whitehead's custody. Wesley's will had stipulated that his papers were to be burned or published, as the legatees saw fit. At the same time, the executors issued a warning about receiving any "spurious account of Mr. Wesley's life, signifying that a true history of him would be given and signed by them."⁸ The executors, along with the London preachers and some of Wesley's friends, then asked Whitehead to write a biography. Moore agreed that Whitehead could begin work on the Wesley papers. Coke appeared to know nothing of the project.

Hearing of the death of Wesley, Coke had returned to London in mid-1791. The details of arguments over payment to Whitehead and the custody of the papers continued through the year. Whitehead was convinced of the rightness of his case, arguing that "he had determined to comply with the request of the Executors and other friends, and to write the life of Mr. Wesley in the best manner I am able."⁹

The matter was discussed at the Wesleyan Conference of 1791, but no resolution was forthcoming. In September, 1791, Whitehead met with some of the preachers and the point was repeated about Moore "reading over Mr. Wesley's papers."¹⁰ This Whitehead refused until he had finished with them, and proposed that he should keep 50% of the profits of the publication and the remainder he would give to the preachers so long as the *Life* was published without alteration. Whitehead's retention of the papers was in contradiction to Wesley's will, and attempts by Coke and Moore to gain access to them were denied by Whitehead. At this point Whitehead drew three members of the City Road society, Crawford, Taylor, and Ryley, into the dispute in his support.

Whitehead's continued refusal to allow Coke and Moore access to the papers and his work to publish the *Life*, was followed by a resolution of the circuit meeting held in the West Street Chapel on December 9, 1791, to

⁶ John Rylands University of Manchester Library, MARC MAB 10/18.18. This typescript document has probably been copied from an original that is not identified here.

⁷ Dictionary of British Methodism at www.wesleyhistoricalsociety.org.uk/Dictfr1.html.

⁸ Stevenson, 132.

⁹ Wesley College, Bristol, Special Collection, D6/1/432.

¹⁰ Stevenson, *op.cit.*, 132.

deprive him of his status as a local preacher and Wesleyan membership. As well as this attempt to remove Whitehead from the stage, Coke was busy ensuring that any material that may have been of use in compiling the *Life* came to him. The Brecon lawyer, Walter Churchey (1747–1805), had sent some anecdotal material about his relationship with Wesley. Coke made sure this was delivered to him rather than Whitehead.¹¹

Meanwhile, Coke and Moore got to work on their biography of Wesley. Written in eight weeks, it was published in April, 1792. By the end of June, ten thousand copies had been sold; a second edition was prepared and published in July. Such a volume of sales was bound to affect the success of Whitehead's biography. In retaliation, Whitehead's supporters among the trustees imposed rents on the preachers' lodgings and on the Book Room. One of the trustees broke into Wesley's house, took an inventory of furniture, and demanded access to the title deeds of the preaching houses. The war of words escalated. Remarks Coke made about Whitehead led to a civil action, to which Coke issued a counter claim. The matter was resolved before reaching court but at a cost of £2000 to the London society. An action in Chancery to collect the rents levied by the trustees went to court in 1794.¹² The dispute even resorted to violence when some of the stewards assaulted the servants of the trustees ("hatch keepers," as they were called) in the City Road Preaching House.

It was reported that "Dr. Whitehead subsequently published his *Life of Wesley* in two octavo volumes, the first of which was issued in 1794, the second in 1796 but the work was not so much sought after and was not reprinted." Whitehead handed the Wesley papers to John Pawson, another itinerant preacher and also biographer of Wesley and was restored to his former status in Methodism. Whitehead either deliberately or by oversight, failed to inform Coke and Moore that the papers had been returned. Even more unfortunately, Pawson proceeded to burn some of the papers, observing that "All I thought to be of use I preserved, and not I think, a few useless ones."¹³ Moore, when he learnt of the vandalism, wrote urgently from Bath in an attempt to prevent the loss, and the surviving papers were sent him.

Coke and Moore's *Life* appeared first; Whitehead's, a little later. The financial implications of getting into print with what was bound to be best-seller may well have played a part in making the matter so heated, especially once it became clear that Whitehead was engaged in a private publishing venture which would remove the project from Connexional control. By late 1791, it was clear that the main focus of the controversy was not *why* the biography was being written but by *whom*. Content was not much of an issue either. In a letter to Henry Moore, the preacher John Pawson admitted that Whitehead's biography did not "appear half so bad to me as it did when

¹¹ Letter Coke to Churchey dated December 23, 1791 (MARC, PLP 28/7/30).

¹² Stevenson, 134.

¹³ Stevenson, 135

the controversy respecting the Sacrament was on foot.”¹⁴ This set the controversy over the biography in the context of the wider series of disputes that had arisen, not least as to whether the Wesleyan preachers should be allowed to celebrate the sacraments in the preaching houses. Members of the London society set up a Committee to support Whitehead under the chairmanship of Robert Crawford, comprising the executors of John Wesley's estate, John Collinson, Charles Wesley's executor and twenty-six other members. The deliberations of this “lay” group were published in 1792, making clear their challenge to the authority of the preachers, led by Coke, to control what went into the biography.

Coke and Moore's biography of Wesley sought to represent the “official” position. Thomas Coke was the power behind the scenes, and his correspondence shows that he took a leading part in ensuring the success of his version of the biography. In July of 1791, for example, Coke wrote to Joseph Benson (1789–1841) about his concerns over separation from the Church of England. Benson, like Coke, sought to maintain what they believed was Wesley's position: that his movement, despite its innovations, remain true to the Church of England. Wesley's periodic claims to be loyal to the Church were attenuated through his own particular understanding of the Church of England. His use of lay preachers; his participation in field preaching; and, towards the end of his life, his ordination of some of the preachers may all have lain safely within his understanding of the polity and doctrine of the Church. In this, Wesley was at odds with Anglican practice and discipline.

The issue of separation divided Wesleyanism. Part of the problem in the 1790s, as it had been for the previous forty years, was that there was no clear definition of what constituted separation from the Church of England. As Coke remarked to Benson, saying nothing was not an option. Silence, he observed, would only strengthen the position of those who sought “gradual and imperceptible separation.” This in turn would lead to a massive loss of membership, which would, he believed, be a “loss of our grand field of action.” This had political implications at a time when leadership was trying its hardest to control the growth of political radicalism within Wesleyanism. If Wesleyans were seen as a dissenting body, then “we would soon imbibe the political spirit of the dissenters” with the likelihood that “some of our people, warmest in politics and coolest in religion would toast (as I have been informed in a famous society did lately in the short hours of the night) a bloody summer and a headless King.”¹⁵

The controversy over the Wesley biography was a symptom of more complex issues that affected the Wesleyan movement following the death of its founder. Moore and Coke were a “pro-Wesley” lobby which aimed at maintaining a tight, central control over the Connexion, to prevent its sliding into dissent, where the arrangements Wesley had made before his death would be maintained. This gave rise to internal tensions concerning the domination

¹⁴ *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, Vol. XXIX, 131ff.

¹⁵ Letter: Coke to Benson, dated July 15, 1791 (MARC PLP 28/7/22).

of the travelling preachers over the societies. It is not correct at this stage to see this as a “clerical versus lay” matter. Nonetheless, what Whitehead and those who supported him came to represent was the voice of the members who sought to break the monopoly that the preachers held in the decision-making processes of the Wesleyan Connexion. These disputes were to have widespread effect across the Connexion. The parties around Coke and Whitehead had circulated printed copies of the series of letters which had gone between them between June and December of 1791. The Norwich circuit’s draft replies to the printed series have been preserved. Written in all likelihood by John Reynolds, the senior preacher in the circuit, the first was to Whitehead, and the second to Moore and Coke. To Whitehead, Reynolds made three points. First, the correspondence, which had been published and circulated, was not some private matter that affected only the individuals concerned. Secondly, the issue should be raised at Conference. Thirdly, a biography of John Wesley was to be viewed as an “official” publication of the Connexion, not a private publishing venture that might, or might not, be of financial advantage to the author. In the second letter to Coke, Reynolds revealed an insight into the partisan nature of the dispute. Coke and Moore’s biography, said Reynolds, is “ours,” which suggests that at least in this case, his alignment was with the preacher’s party.¹⁶

Used to justify their respective positions over the right to produce the Wesley biography, the published letters also reveal the wider disputes about the direction in which Wesleyanism might head after Wesley’s death. One such was written by “an old member of the [London] society,” possibly Whitehead himself, and states that there are three issues that are revealed in the biography he wrote. First, there were criticisms about the financial affairs of the Connexion and the manner in which the Conference had both levied and spent money. Secondly, there was a need to review the way the preachers were performing the work of God. Thirdly, “To delineate with a faithful (if not a masterly hand) the characteristic traits of the Rev. Mr. Wesley, drawn from a studious observation of his conduct and principles, during near eight and twenty years, that he was honoured with his intimacy and correspondence, interspersed with some interesting anecdotes.”¹⁷ Whitehead was not to be cowed by Wesley’s reputation, and he was determined to write about “the man as well as the minister.”¹⁸ The resulting portrait was not flattering: described as “the first mover of this machine of *Hypocrisy, Fraud and Villainy*”¹⁹ who started well and went wrong, Wesley was “ambitious,

¹⁶ Norfolk County Record Office, FC 16-1. Norma Virgo has published a transcript of the letters, and provided a limited commentary upon them. See *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* Vol. 55, part 2 (May, 2005), 53-63.

¹⁷ John Whitehead, *A letter to the Rev. Thomas Coke and Mr. Henry Moore occasioned by their proposal for publishing the life of Mr John Wesley A.M. in opposition to THAT advertised (under sanction of the Executors) to be written by John Whitehead M.D. . . .* (Bristol: J. Luffman et al., 1791[?]), ii-iii.

¹⁸ Whitehead, 6.

¹⁹ Whitehead, 34.

imperious, and positive even to obstinacy.” His learning and knowledge was “superficial,” his judgement too “hasty and decisive to be always just, . . . his penetration acute; yet was he constantly the dupe to his credulity and his unaccountable and universal good opinion of mankind.”²⁰ He was also accused of being inconsistent in his private opinions and public declarations that would call into doubt the sincerity of his Christian profession. The picture is complex: he carried no malice but was impetuous and impatient with any who contradicted him. His charitableness came in for criticism; he gave money away in order to get his own way and he “found out, that an hundred pounds would go further in half-crowns than in pounds.”²¹ He was also amorous in relationships, liked good food and fine wine, although never to excess. His religious conversion, whilst it conformed to a rational definition, perhaps lay short of what the writer described as a “Methodist conversion.”²²

Alongside this summary of Wesley’s character, in the broadsheet sent to the societies by Whitehead were assessments of the financial judgement of the Conference and the suitability of some of the preachers. In the case of the former, there are broad accusations of misappropriation of funds.²³ As for the preachers, there were anecdotal accounts of embezzlement by one at Beverley and an accusation of improper conduct towards a girl in Chesham. All this adds up to a thin case on any of the heads of Whitehead’s arguments. Nonetheless, they did define the ground for a major area of dispute in Methodism in the first few decades of the nineteenth century. Whitehead’s concern was that Methodism was moving from an absolute monarchy to the rule of the aristocracy. Citing an otherwise unidentified letter written by Wesley in 1788, Whitehead suggested that the founder saw that while “never will I bear a rival near my throne,” he recognised that there would be those preachers who make a bid for power after his death. It was to prevent this, in part, that he had introduced itinerancy into his movement. Alongside this struggle among the preachers, he predicted that “disputes and contentions that will arise between the preachers and the parties that espouse their several causes, by which means much truth will be brought to light, that will reflect so much to their disadvantage, that the eyes of the people will be opened to see their motives and principles.”²⁴

The controversy surrounding the publication of the *Life of Wesley* was, as this paper has shown, about more than money. At stake was the exercise of power by two competing groups in Wesley’s movement. On the one hand, there was the body of preachers, some of whom saw themselves as the corporate successors to the founder’s control over the movement. On the other hand, there was a group of articulate, and in some cases quite wealthy, “lay-

²⁰ Whitehead, 35.

²¹ Whitehead, 36.

²² Whitehead, 37.

²³ Whitehead, 31.

²⁴ Whitehead, 51-52.

men” who effectively bankrolled the societies, served as trustees, and represented a wider band of similar men across the Connexion who were reluctant to leave all the decision-making to the preachers in Conference. The reason why the biography of Wesley was important was that it represented the historic narrative that defined the movement. For the preachers it legitimated their claim to control. For the “laymen” the biography was an opportunity to point towards the flaws in Wesley’s character. From this, and because Wesley *was* his movement, flowed the criticisms that pointed to the need for a re-positioning of where power lay.

I began by making the point that this controversy provides a case study on how the control of the narrative of the history of a religious movement is an important ingredient in securing its identity and status. What differences were there, then, between Whitehead’s biography and the Coke/Moore version? I have noted that vast tracts of the biographies are identical—but it is in interpreting or commenting upon specific events that they differ. Take for example the year 1784, which saw two major innovations taken by Wesley. The first was the Deed of Declaration, establishing the Legal Hundred as the body corporate and therefore the legal owners of the property of the Wesleyan movement, which heretofore had been the personal estate of John Wesley. This body was made up of preachers initially selected by Wesley and who met as the annual Conference. The second event of that year was the ordination by Wesley of Coke and Asbury for the work in America. Broadly, Whitehead was critical of these developments, while Coke and Moore sought to provide an *apologia* for them. Commenting on these events, Whitehead noted they “destroyed at once the original constitution of Methodism.” These were the “seeds of corruption and final dissolution,” which “have since been carefully watered and nursed by a powerful party among the Preachers.”²⁵

The controversy over who had the right to publish an authoritative biography of John Wesley was a reflection of deeper struggles that were developing within Wesleyan Methodism in the first half of the nineteenth century. In conclusion, I want to suggest three key issues which were to become significant in that period and which were present in the biographical controversy. First, the death of Wesley created the opportunity for a new leadership, bringing new, radical values to the movement. The changes that resulted created tensions, not least between the preachers and the laymen, who were increasingly hungry for power. Secondly, there were those who felt the need to preserve, possibly in honour of Wesley’s memory, what they saw as the “old ways” of the movement. In reality, they were probably trying to create a Methodism which had never existed: a kind of golden age from the past.

²⁵ John Whitehead, *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A. some-time fellow of Lincoln-College, Oxford. Collected from his private papers and printed works; and written at the Request of his Executors to which is prefixed. Some account of his ancestors and relations: With the life of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A. Collected from his private Journal, and never before published. The whole forming a History of Methodism, in which the Principles and Economy of Methodists are unfolded*, vol.2 (London: J. E. Beardsley, 1793), 404.

Certainly, something of the old Methodism had been displaced in Wesley's lifetime as a result of the growth of the Connexion and the introduction of new structures and methods of leadership, because the movement he had led in the 1740s was very different from the one which existed at his death. This search for a golden past was to continue well into the nineteenth century. Writing in 1865, Thomas Jackson (1783-1873), in the introductory essay to the third edition of his *Lives of the Early Methodist Preachers*, encouraged a recovery of the practices of the past which had been lost. He went on to express his concern that it would be a poor day when a "converting and effective ministry," with lively prayer-meetings, class-meetings, love-feasts, and sacrament services should be a thing of the past.²⁶ That such a series of biographies of the early preachers should be published suggests that in fact, that time had indeed come, and what in reality Jackson was seeking was a recovery of the lost, a return to a golden age which was, by the time of his writing, long past.

Thirdly, the struggle for the right to produce the definitive biography was a part of a wider bid for power between the itinerant preachers, especially Coke and the Conference on the one hand, and the society members and local preachers, represented by Whitehead, on the other. For Moore and Coke, it was imperative that Wesley's authority and the consistency of his decisions were preserved, for they derived their power from that authority. Whitehead sought to address the powerlessness of the members in the decision-making structures of Wesleyanism. The death of Wesley made such a project possible, and the biography was a means of making such a possibility a reality. These competing positions were to define the divisions and secessions of the Wesleyan form of Methodism that were to be a feature of its history for the first-half of the nineteenth century.

²⁶ Thomas Jackson, *Lives of Early Methodist Preachers*, vol. 1 (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1865), xxxiii.