The Destruction of the Methodist Chapel at Bridgetown, Barbados, October 19, 1823

by Robert Michael Reed

The destruction of the Methodist Chapel in Bridgetown, Barbados on October 19, 1823, precipitated a cause celebre, the repercussions of which eventually reached the chambers of the British Parliament. Although a relatively minor incident on the surface, the demolition of the structure by a mob of local citizens presented British anti-slavery forces more fuel to add to their allegations that colonial officials were not protecting the right of religious freedom in the West Indies, especially with respect to Negro slaves. On Barbados itself the incident led to increased pressure by white colonists to censure further Methodist activity on the island. The efforts of these colonists proved successful in discouraging the Wesleyan Missionary Society from appointing a new missionary pastor to Barbados until early 1826, but not in preventing Methodists from continuing to meet together for prayer services. Finally pressure from the House of Commons itself, in the form of a resolution growing out of a debate over the chapel's destruction in June of 1825, forced the colonists to back down, and to grant religious freedom to all peoples of the island. The new missionary, Moses Rayner, arrived in Bridgetown in February, 1826, to resume pastoral services once again to the Methodist population of Barbados. This paper will examine the events leading up to the razing of the chapel and the reactions to that action, both on the island of Barbados and in England.

Methodist Activity on Barbados Prior to 1820

The commencement of Methodist missionary activity on Barbados arose out of a visit to the island in 1788 by Thomas Coke and three associates, Robert Gamble, Matthew Lund and Benjamin Pearce. Coke, through the efforts of a Mr. Button, a local tradesman and leader of Methodist meetings in
Bridgetown, secured a room in which to speak. His reception at this occasion and one the following evening prompted him to leave his colleague Benjamin Pearce at Bridgetown as the island's first Methodist missionary.1

By 1793, the Methodists on Barbados possessed a small chapel in the center of Bridgetown. At this time the local society's membership stood at fifty-one (thirty-four whites, seven colored, and ten blacks), and it remained near that figure for some years, due to local prejudice against Methodists. These ill feelings arose mainly from a strong infusion of aristocratic pride, contempt for novelties in religion, and the missionaries' friendship for the Negro, which gave rise to rumors that the Methodists were in reality agents of the anti-slavery movement in England. Added to the above listed prejudices was a belief that the missionaries' preaching encouraged a rebellious attitude among the slaves, which could lead to the overturning of the slave system on the island.2

A Methodist preacher faced a hard life on Barbados. People often shouted insults at him as he walked through the streets of Bridgetown, and at various times bands of unruly men disrupted the chapel services. As a result services were often suspended, and the missionaries were seldom able to remain on the island for any length of time, most leaving within a few months of their arrival.3

A slave revolt in 1816 further intensified anti-Methodist sentiment and stifled whatever progress the missionaries had made. After the insurrection great alarm arose among the island's white inhabitants, many of whom wanted to stamp out all Methodist activity on Barbados. Yet the Synods of 1816 and 1817, after studying the situation on Barbados, concluded that the work there might continue to prosper, with God's help, if a chapel could be built and a suitable preacher could be secured.

The man selected to undertake the new responsibilities on Barbados was Moses Rayner. He arrived on the island in 1818, to carry out the task of erecting a chapel. His work was made easier by the fact that the island's Methodists had carried on as

2. Ibid., 190.
3. Ibid., 190-191.
best they could, even though they had not had a minister for some time. Yet, on the other hand, Rayner faced problems from the growing anti-Methodist sentiments of the island's white inhabitants. However, he was able to proceed with the chapel plans, aided by £600 in local subscriptions. He superintended the construction of the chapel from beginning to end, never hesitating to pitch in and work himself wherever he could. With his persistence and perseverance the chapel was completed and made ready for use in a short time.4

The Ministry of William James Shrewsbury

William James Shrewsbury succeeded Rayner early in 1820. He was soon joined by William Larcom, a young missionary fresh from England appointed to assist him. The two of them authored a letter to the Wesleyan Missionary Committee, dated March 28, 1820, in which they gave their general impressions of the situation on the island. This letter, which was later to cause Shrewsbury the greatest odium, commented rather unfavorably upon the moral condition of the island's slave and free Negro population:

The free black people who live in town are, many of them, exceedingly given to profanity; especially the watermen; for they swear and blaspheme the name of God with almost every breath. Indeed, swearing is the crying sin of the land; for it is no uncommon thing to hear little children, in their first essays towards speaking, curse the God that made them, although they know not what they do. As it regards the moral condition of the slaves, that is nearly the same. Polygamy, adultery, fornication, blasphemies, thefts, lying, quarrelling, and drunkenness: these are the crimes to which the generality of them are more or less addicted. They live and die like the beasts of the earth: for "No man careth for their souls". We are happy, however, to find a few honourable exceptions. On one estate, belonging to a gentleman at home, a place of worship is erected for his slaves, and a clergyman appointed to Preach to them every Sabbath day: besides a school, in which the children are placed under the tuition of a governess, and initiated into the first rudiments of learning.5

4. Ibid., 194-195.
In commenting on the religious condition of the slaves, Shrewsbury and Larcum noted that very little had been done to instruct the slaves in the elements of the Christian faith. Most of the slaves did not even attend worship services, although many stood outside the churches, holding their masters' horses during the time of the service. The slave owners seemingly had made no effort to get their slaves into church or to provide religious instruction for them. Yet, the effects of such training was apparent, Shrewsbury and Larcom maintained, as none of the slaves who had received religious instruction had participated in the 1816 slave rebellion. Shrewsbury and Larcom, however, reported some success in ministering to the slaves, as they had instituted fortnightly preaching services on three estates in the area around Bridgetown.6

Larcom was soon afterwards transferred to Tobago, and Shrewsbury was joined by the Rev. John Nelson and his wife. The two men soon built up the congregation in Bridgetown to a considerable size. William Harding, owner of one of the estates on which the missionaries preached, provided materials for the erection of a chapel on his land. The missionaries soon began to conduct services there on Sunday and Wednesday evenings. Shrewsbury was apparently very popular among the blacks, especially for his preaching, and he was also well respected by the island's Jews, many of whom attended Sunday evening services at the chapel in Bridgetown. Yet, the white population, for the most part, tended to scorn the two missionaries. Some even went so far as to harass them verbally as they walked along the streets of the city.7 The following excerpt from Shrewsbury's diary recounts a typical incident:

September 14, 1821. — In the present week, I have been called to suffer much reproach for the sake of Christ Jesus. Tuesday evening while preaching at Searle's, Mr. --- behaved so indecorously, that I thought it my duty to reprove him, at which he was highly offended, and after uttering the most awful imprecations, and calling me a "d— d Methodist son of a wh—", he declared again and again, some scores of times, his wish that I was lying and — in the flames of hell. I thought it useless to argue with a raving madman, and therefore, suffered him quietly to spend his fury.... The next morning he talked more calmly, and wondered that I should speak to him so violently. I told him the violent speaking lay

6. Ibid.
7. Findlay and Holdsworth, 195.
with him, not with me. "Well, I shall never go again to trouble you: I attended as a compliment to you." "Why, sir, I thought you went to worship God." "No, I did not; it was purely out of compliment to you, but I will not go anymore." "I have no desire, sir, that you should, I said." Here we parted. Thursday afternoon I rode to Kendall. No one being in the room where I sat, I took from my pocket a volume of Wesley's "Library", and for some time read quietly. Presently, a young spark came stamping through the room I was in, swearing and blustering without provocation, purely to annoy me, at which gentlemanly conduct those in the next room burst into laughter.... At dinner the same young man (Mr. —), with his merry companion, (Mr. —), engrossed the whole of the conversation, which was the most frothy, silly, nonsensical stuff ever uttered by man, attended with perpetual tittering and laughing. [The entry continues with the conversation at the table, which revolved around the nature of "a true Christian" and the content of the Scriptures, especially the story of Samson.] 8

Upon retiring from the table, Shrewsbury notes that his two antagonists "immediately poured out wine, and began to curse the 'd—d' Methodist parson" whom they heartily abhorred. 9 Such occurrences, as we have noted, were the common fate of Methodist missionaries on Barbados.

In spite of tribulations such as the one described above, the mission work showed signs of prospering. In a letter to the Rev. W. D. Goy of Grenada, Shrewsbury wrote that the Society was never in a better state, with the classes and prayer meetings being well attended. Twenty-four members had been added to the church and the financial situation had improved, with the result that the debt on the chapel was paid off early in 1823. The situation, on the plantations, however, remained little changed, as Shrewsbury and Nelson were unable to gain ground with their ministry to the slaves. 10

At this time events were transpiring in England which would affect Methodist work on Barbados, especially in terms of rekindling prejudice against the missionaries. For in January, 1823, an organized movement to liberate all slaves within the British empire was inaugurated with the establishment of the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Dominions, more commonly called the

9. Ibid., 107.
10. Findlay and Holdsworth, 196.
Anti-Slavery Society. In its prospectus, the Anti-Slavery Society declared human bondage to be contrary to the spirit and precepts of Christianity as well as repugnant to every dictate of natural humanity and justice. The Society openly declared its intention to secure immediate amelioration of the slaves' lot, as well as their ultimate freedom, by any means that was both prudent and lawful.\textsuperscript{11}

In March, 1823, Thomas Fowell Buxton, the Anti-Slavery Society's parliamentary leader, made known to the House of Commons his intention to bring forth a motion on the question of slavery. That motion came on May 15, 1823, ending with the following resolution:

\begin{quote}
That the state of slavery is repugnant to the principles of the British constitution, and of the Christian religion, and that it ought to be abolished throughout the British Colonies with as much expedition as may be found consistent with a due regard to the well-being of the parties concerned.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

In the debate which followed the introduction of this resolution it became clear that the West Indian interests, long a force in the Commons, were not about to allow Buxton to have anything without a real fight. Foreign Secretary George Canning, spokesman for the government, stated his opposition to slavery, but said that the present was not the right time for its abolition. However, he did offer a list of ameliorative measures to be put into immediate effect, which would improve the lot of the slaves' existence. Buxton eventually withdrew his motion to declare his support for Canning's resolutions, which were then adopted by the Commons.\textsuperscript{13} Canning ordered the Colonial Secretary, Earl Bathurst, to forward a copy of his speech and of the resolutions (mostly regulations governing the personal lives of the slaves) to all governors of West Indian colonies.\textsuperscript{14}

On June 14, 1823, prior to receiving Bathurst's dispatch, Sir

\textsuperscript{12} Parliamentary Debates, second series, IX, 274-275.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 278-294.
\textsuperscript{14} Klingberg, 213.
Henry Warde, governor of Barbados, notified the Colonial Secretary of an "uneasiness" among his people over Buxton's proposed motion. The slaves were especially restless, as they suspected that they might be emancipated. The Governor enclosed a copy of his proclamation to the slaves in which he assured them that there were no grounds for the rumors circulating among them concerning their freedom. Such news, he noted, he would not withhold from the slaves. The proclamation closed with an exhortation to all owners and managers to read and explain its contents to their slaves in an effort to assure them that nothing had been kept from them.¹⁵

The arrival of Earl Bathurst's dispatch and the continual flow of rumors coming into the island from British sailors as to the activities of the Anti-Slavery Society on the homefront upset the local white population, especially the planters. Many men were heard to voice their unflattering sentiments about Buxton, Wilberforce, Clarkson, and other champions of abolition. A number of the planters revived the rumors that missionaries, and notably the Methodist missionaries, were agents of the Anti-Slavery Society. Such gossip proved troublesome for Shrewsbury, now the sole Methodist missionary in Bridgetown.

Although Shrewsbury had never been well liked by most whites and had received a few verbal assaults, he now faced more serious problems. For example, one evening at a meeting there was a knock at the door and someone yelled for Shrewsbury. The missionary headed for the door, but friends restrained him from going outside. After some time the man outside was induced to leave, but before departing he fired a pistol into the air and shouted, "I had this for Shrewsbury, but he would not come out."¹⁶

The most odious effect of Shrewsbury's ministry, as far as white males were concerned, was that a number of black women refused to live in concubinage with white men. Such a circumstance, no doubt, greatly enraged the more licentious of the whites, and some were heard to say, "Shrewsbury has done this."¹⁷ This fact coupled with the rumor that their antagonist

¹⁵. Parliamentary Papers, 1824, XXIV, 463ff.
¹⁶. Shrewsbury, 133.
¹⁷. Ibid.
was in league with the Anti-Slavery Society intensified all the more their hatred against the missionary.

When the news of a slave insurrection in nearby Demerara (now Guyana) reached Barbados, the verbal abuses increased. Shrewsbury describes the local sentiment against him in a letter to his friend W. D. Goy:

If I passed in the streets, indignant eyes met in every direction; gentlemen in stores would come to the door, and stand gaping at me as at a monster, till I was out of sight; and sometimes they would utter such sayings as these: “That fellow ought to have a rope tied around his neck; hang him.” Or, more elegantly, — “D—d rascal of a Methodist parson, he ought to be kicked into H—ll.” In the mean time it was struck up in the commercial rooms, “that Methodist preachers in Demerara were imprisoned, they being deeply implicated in the insurrection,” & c.18

The letter to the Missionary Committee of 1820 mentioned above also came back to haunt Shrewsbury. Some men claimed that the letter, published in the missionary notice of October, 1820, contained the sentence, “The slaves ought to take their liberty by force, if it could not be attained”19 or, similarly, “If the slaves cannot otherwise obtain their freedom, they ought to rise and take it by force.”20 Shrewsbury attempted to counter this slander by placing the missionary notice, which contained the letter, in the commercial rooms for public inspection. This action considerably calmed the public outrage against him until a Bridgetown printer published certain excerpts from the letter in his newspaper, complete with his own comments upon them. This move fired the public resentment once again, with some men even claiming that Shrewsbury had placed a fraudulent letter in the commercial rooms.21 Others even said that they had seen the missionary’s letters, in which he had said, “The planters are so horribly cruel, that sometimes they bore out the negroes eyes.”22

Shrewsbury reported that every sermon he delivered became a topic of conversation among the island’s whites. They

20. Shrewsbury to Goy, November 11, 1823, in Shrewsbury, 134.
21. Shrewsbury to the Committee, October 18, 1823.
22. Shrewsbury to Goy, November 11, 1823, in Shrewsbury, 135.
accused him of endangering the peace of the colony and with arranging secret meetings with the slaves, at which he would relay to them the latest news from the Anti-Slavery Society.  

Until Sunday, October 5, all of the assaults against Shrewsbury had been verbal, but that evening the worship service at the chapel was violently interrupted. A group of white men surrounded the chapel, armed with thin glass bottles filled with a mixture of lamp-oil and assafoetida (the fetid gum of a local tree). The men hurled the bottles through the chapel's windows at the congregation just as they were arising from prayer. One bottle missed Shrewsbury's head, but others hit a black man and a black woman, cutting them. The vandals, having heaved their "bombs", beat a hasty retreat. During the confusion, a lawyer, Mr. Nelson, leaped onto the communion table and encouraged the assailants. Shrewsbury hastened from the pulpit to remove his wife to safety, as she was in the advanced stages of pregnancy. (However, the next day it was reported that he bolted out of the pulpit "like a horse".) When he returned to the sanctuary he continued the service, although a crowd of whites continued to pelt the walls of the chapel with a steady barrage of rocks. The next day Shrewsbury decided to advertise a reward for the apprehension of the culprits who disturbed the service, but changed his mind upon hearing remarks shouted at him as he walked toward the newspaper office, figuring that it would be a useless undertaking.  

The missionary pondered what he could do to insure future protection from such assaults. He knew he could not expect any help from the island's magistrates (one of whom let it be known that he would personally lead a group of any who would join him to pull down the chapel), or the constables, all of whom were known to be unfriendly toward the Methodists. Finally, he decided to station twelve of his members around the outside of the chapel on Wednesday evening. These men, he thought, could identify any persons who might disrupt the evening prayer service so that he could have them arrested. Yet these efforts proved fruitless as a band of rock throwers ran off the lookouts and disturbed the service.  

23. Shrewsbury to the Committee, October 18, 1823.  
24. Shrewsbury to Goy, November 11, 1823, in Shrewsbury, 136-137.  
25. Ibid., 137-138.
The following Sunday, October 12, was also marked by violence. A large group of people gathered in the sanctuary, while a mob of over one hundred surrounded the chapel. Shrewsbury had heard rumors that there would be trouble, but he decided to conduct the service anyway. His account to the Committee of what transpired follows:

We sung and prayed in tolerable peace; but, as we rose from prayer, two men wearing masks, and armed with swords and pistols, came riding swiftly down the Chapel street and as they got opposite the door, presented their pistols, and fired. One pistol did not go off, and the other providentially did not discharge its contents within the Chapel, but just at the bottom of the window, which as soon as the mob saw, they shouted, Fire! Fire! to create alarm, that those who were within, waiting to injure us, might take advantage of the confusion to effect their purposes. After a few minutes I gave out a hymn, and was enabled to deliver the sermon with tolerable composure, although, we were every now and then annoyed by the throwing of stones; but no one received injury.26

The following day a magistrate summoned Shrewsbury to appear before him on October 23, to answer charges as to why he had not enrolled in the colonial militia. Shrewsbury replied that the Toleration Act granted him immunity from such service, but the magistrate did not withdraw his summons.27

Friends advised Shrewsbury to have the Wednesday evening service of the 15th at five o'clock in an attempt to avoid further violence, and he reluctantly agreed to do so. But an hour before the service was to commence, Shrewsbury received a letter advising him not to open the chapel, as a murder would surely be committed if he did. Considering the letter's advice and his wife's delicate state of health, the missionary cancelled the prayer service. He also decided to move from the minister's residence, above the chapel, to his wife's brother's home for safety. A large mob gathered around the chapel at six o'clock, but did little more than pelt it with rocks.28

On Thursday the 16th, Shrewsbury called upon Governor Warde to secure protection for himself and his wife and to clear up the problem over the summons to appear before a magistrate's court for not enrolling in the militia. The Governor

26. Shrewsbury to the Committee, October 18, 1823.
27. Ibid.
28. Shrewsbury to Goy, November 11, 1823, in Shrewsbury, 140.
advised Shrewsbury to apply to the magistrates for protection. Shrewsbury then proceeded to relate the prejudice of the magistrates against him and the action of one in serving him a summons. Warde replied that he was sorry for Shrewsbury, but that no man on the island was more abused than he (the Governor) had been; and that any protective measures by him in Shrewsbury's behalf would be looked upon as "the arm of tyranny". Shrewsbury then brought up the matter of his service in the militia, presenting the Governor with his license to preach and recalling the provisions of the Toleration Act, which exempted clergymen from such service. The Governor refused to take any action on his own, saying that Shrewsbury should petition him in council regarding the matter. To which Shrewsbury replied, "Sir, I am a friendless, unprotected individual; in applying to your Excellency I have done my duty, and can do no more," and then left the Government House. 

The missionary then attempted to see the Attorney General, but learned that he was "extremely ill". His visit to the Solicitor General's office also proved fruitless, as that gentleman was away from town for three weeks.

A clergyman friend advised Shrewsbury to cancel Sunday services at the Chapel on the 19th. Shrewsbury did so with reluctance, and along with the other Methodists attended an Anglican service that morning. Yet the postponing of services did not stave off an outbreak of violence at the chapel that evening, during which the building was destroyed by an angry mob.

During the course of the week preceding the 19th, a "secret committee," as Shrewsbury designated it, passed out circulars to various citizens urging them "to pull down the Methodist Chapel the next Sunday evening." No signatures appeared on the circulars, "but certain letters of the alphabet, which were understood by the parties."

29. William J. Shrewsbury to the Committee, October 29, 1823, in "Riot in Barbados and Destruction of the Wesleyan Chapel and Mission House." This pamphlet containing correspondence of Rev. William J. Shrewsbury may be found among the William Smith Papers, William R. Perkins Library, Duke University. Hereafter cited as Shrewsbury to the Committee, October 29, 1823.

30. Shrewsbury to the Committee, October 18, 1823.
A large group of men responded to the secret missives and assembled at the chapel by six o'clock, armed with hammers, saws, hatchets, crowbars and other necessary implements for razing a building. Before seven they had broken into the chapel where they demolished lamps, benches, pews, the pulpit, and anything else they could find. They then proceeded upstairs to the minister's quarters, where they smashed windows and doors, tossed out the cooking utensils, chopped up the furniture and destroyed the missionary's library of over three hundred volumes; after which they ripped the roof off and pulled down the walls. Using some linen which they found in the house, the mob made several flags and gave three cheers for the work they were doing. The rioters continued their demolition activities until well after midnight, when they finally dispersed for the evening. All the while a large group of spectators watched the nearly two hundred men engaged in fiendish activity, during which time no civil or military authority made an attempt to check the mob or to disband them.

The Shrewsbury, as was noted, had retreated to the home of her brother, Dr. William King, for their own safety. But at about nine o'clock a friend came there to report on the mob's activity and to warn the missionary that the crowd might come to the King home to get him. Dr. King arranged to have Mrs. Shrewsbury hidden in a nearby hut, while Shrewsbury himself and another of his brothers-in-law disguised themselves and fled into the country to the home of another friend.

The next morning Shrewsbury returned to Dr. King's to find his wife safe and secure. The only incident had occurred at two in the morning when four men rode by the house, shouting, "Down with all the Methodists, down with all the Methodists!" Soon after daybreak, at the urging of their friends, Shrewsbury and his wife decided to flee the island for their safety. A boat was privately chartered and by three in the afternoon, the Shrewsburys were on their way to St. Vincent. Even aboard the ship, however, the missionary's trials continued as his wife went into labor about half way to St. Vincent, but fortunately she did not deliver until they had landed. In remembrance of their recent trials and tribulations, the parents named their first-born son, Jeremiah.31

31. Shrewsbury to the Committee, October 29, 1823.
Meanwhile on Barbados, the mob was not finished with its activity. For on Monday evening another large group of men assembled to finish the leveling of the chapel, going so far as to roll the stones from the chapel off a cliff into the sea. When they disbanded that night, hardly a fragment of the chapel remained. 32

**Reaction to the Chapel's Destruction and Further Harassment of the Island's Methodists**

With the Chapel and the minister's residence razed and the Shrewsburys forced to evacuate the island, the rioters and other like-minded citizens issued the following manifesto:

_GREAT AND SIGNAL TRIUMPH OVER METHODISM, AND TOTAL DESTRUCTION OF THE CHAPEL!!!_

Bridgetown, Tuesday, 21st Oct., 1823

The inhabitants of this island are respectfully informed that, in consequence of the unmerited and unprovoked attacks which have repeatedly been made upon the community by Methodist missionaries (otherwise known as agents to the villainous African society), a party of respectable gentlemen formed the resolution of closing the Methodist concern altogether: with this view they commenced their labours on Sunday evening; and they have the greatest satisfaction in announcing, that by twelve o'clock they effected the TOTAL DESTRUCTION OF THE CHAPEL

To this information they have to add, that the missionary made his escape yesterday afternoon, in a small vessel, for St. Vincent; thereby avoiding that expression of the public feeling towards him, personally, which he had so richly deserved.

It is hoped that, as this information will be circulated throughout the different islands and colonies, all persons who consider themselves true lovers of religion will follow the example of the BARBADIANS, in putting an end to Methodism, and Methodist Chapels throughout the West Indies. 33

The Governor of Barbados, Sir Henry Warde, issued a proclamation offering a £100 reward for information leading to the capture of anyone involved in the incident. 34 The so-called

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32. Shrewsbury to Goy, November 11, 1823, in Shrewsbury, 142-143.
33. Parliamentary Papers 1825, XXV, 171. See also Shrewsbury, 147-148.
34. The text of this proclamation may be found in the Postscript to “The Late Insurrection in Demerara, and Riot in Barbados”, among the William Smith Papers, William R. Perkins Library, Duke University.
Secret Committee responded with a counter proclamation:

Bridgetown, Barbados
Thursday, Oct. 23, 1823

Whereas, a proclamation having appeared in the Barbadian newspaper of yesterday, issued by order of his Excellency, the governor, offering a reward of one hundred pounds for the conviction of any person or persons concerned in the said-to-be riotous proceedings of the 19th and 20th instant; public notice is hereby given to such person or persons who may feel inclined either from pecuniary temptation or vindictive feeling, that should they attempt to come forward to injure, in any shape, any individual, they shall RECEIVE THAT PUNISHMENT which their crimes will justly deserve. They are to understand that to impeach is not to convict, and that the reward offered will only be given upon conviction, which cannot be effected whilst the people are true to themselves.

And whereas it may appear to those persons who are unacquainted with the circumstances which occasioned the said proclamation, that the demolition of the chapel was effected by the rabble of this community, in order to create anarchy, riot, and insubordination, to trample upon the laws of the country, and to subvert good order: it is considered an imperative duty to repel the charge and to state, firstly, that the majority of the persons were of the first respectability, and were supported by the concurrence of nine-tenths of the community; secondly, that their motives were patriotic and loyal, — namely to eradicate from this soil the germ of Methodism, which was spreading its baneful influence over a certain class, and which ultimately would have injured both church and state. With this view the chapel was demolished, and the villainous preacher who headed it, and belied us, was compelled, by a speedy flight, to remove himself from the island.

With a fixed determination, therefore, to put an end to Methodism in this island, all Methodist preachers are warned not to approach these shores; as if they do, it will be at their own peril.35

When Governor Warde saw this proclamation, he asked his council what he should do. They advised him to take no notice of it.36

From St. Vincent Shrewsbury wrote a letter dated October 24 to his former congregation in Bridgetown, in which he urged them to “love one another”; “be patient towards all men”; “be circumspect in all conduct”; “attend conscientiously to every relative duty”; “attend the means of Grace”; and “be humbled,

35. Parliamentary Papers, 1825, XXV, 173. See also Shrewsbury, 149-150.
36. Ibid., 137.
and be encouraged.” 37

In a letter of October 29, to the Missionary Committee, Shrewsbury related his fate and the destruction of the chapel in detail. He closed the letter with his own analysis of the causes behind the hostile feelings toward himself and the razing of the chapel: 1) The letter of March, 1820, to the Committee; 2) Rumors of his alleged references to cruelty to the slaves; 3) The local opinion that all Methodist missionaries were agents of the Anti-Slavery Society; 4) Earl Bathurst’s dispatch containing new regulations regarding the privileges and treatment of slaves; and 5) The charge that Methodist missionaries had been behind the recent slave insurrection in nearby Demerara. 38

After Shrewsbury’s departure from Bridgetown, the Society did not completely collapse, largely due to the efforts of two free black women: Mrs. Ann Gill and Miss Christine Gill. Mrs. Gill conducted meetings in her home and also met with small groups in other places throughout the town. The magistrates forbade public Methodist services of any kind; and they also watched the homes of prominent Methodists to insure that their order was obeyed. A mob threatened to pull down Mrs. Gill’s house one evening, but did not. Mrs. Gill was soon afterwards brought before the police court and ordered to stop her evangelizing activities. As the Apostles had done before her, she replied, “We ought to obey God rather than men.” 39

In a letter to Shrewsbury, dated November 11, Mrs. Gill related the present condition of the Society:

The members of the Society are driven, closer to one another than ever....We cannot meet at present, from the fierceness of the persecution, as we wish; but we do so well as we can....The enemies of the Lord are mad against me; but the Lord has given me the grace and faith according to my day. 40

Other Methodists received harassment at the hands of the local authorities. Someone fired a shot into the home of a Mrs. Humpleby, a supporter of Methodism, although not a member of

39. Shrewsbury to the Committee, October 29, 1823.
40. Quoted in Findlay and Holdsworth, 202, and in Shrewsbury, 158.
the Society. Later she was hanged in effigy along with four other figures, including one labeled “Wilberforce” and another “Shrewsbury”. Shrewsbury’s former servant, Mary Roach, also suffered under the heavy hand of the magistrates, but she rejoiced in the fact that the Lord had not allowed even a hair of her head to be injured. One of the more simple members of the Society summed up the spirit of the group, when someone asked him, “What will you do for a church now?” to which he replied, “You pulled down the chapel, but my church is my heart, and you can’t get easily at that.”

Meanwhile, on St. Vincent the governor of that island refused to allow Shrewsbury to preach until he had some proof of his character. The governor despatched the Rev. Moses Rayner, Shrewsbury’s predecessor at Bridgetown, to Barbados to secure testimonies in behalf of Shrewsbury’s character. While in transit, Rayner received a note warning him to remain only twenty-four hours on the island, during which time he would be strictly observed. But when Rayner’s boat pulled into the Bridgetown harbor, two small crafts loaded with magistrates and constables pulled alongside to warn Rayner that they would only guarantee him safe passage to shore, and no more. Three midshipmen volunteered to perform Rayner’s duty and went ashore to fetch the required testimonies. Upon his return, Rayner gave the documents to Shrewsbury. The deposed missionary then presented them to the governor, who, after reading their contents, granted Shrewsbury the privilege to preach on St. Vincent. Shrewsbury stayed in the West Indies until May 24, 1824, when he and his family departed from Grenada for England. They remained in the mother country until being appointed to Madagascar by the Methodist Conference of 1825.

On Barbados anti-Methodist sentiment continued to remain high. A group of concerned men, eight to ten in number, served as a deputation to neighboring islands in an attempt to induce the citizens there to follow the example of Barbados and drive out the Methodists. Their embassy, however, proved unsuccessful, as they were ordered to leave most places they

41. Findlay and Holdsworth, 203; and Shrewsbury, 164.
42. Findlay and Holdsworth, 203; and Shrewsbury, 166-167, 173, 207-211.
To counter the pressure of its enemies, the Methodists of Barbados published an "appeal of the Wesleyan Missionaries of this Island to the Public." The appeal contained eleven questions regarding the character and actions of Shrewsbury and seeking the reasons behind such activity on the part of the mob. To these queries were appended statements to the effect that Methodists were not the despicable people they were made out to be; that Methodist missionaries were not related in any way to the Anti-Slavery Society; and that no Methodist missionary in the West Indies had ever been disloyal or seditious to his government. 44

The Conference did not appoint anyone to Barbados immediately following Shrewsbury's expulsion, but in the summer of 1824, the Rev. Moses Rayner was reappointed to the island. Yet, Rayner was unable to fill that appointment as the Methodists in Bridgetown warned him that it was still too dangerous for a missionary to come there. 45

Just prior to the first anniversary of the chapel's destruction, the committee of public safety issued the following proclamation:

The committee of public safety, understanding that opposition will be given them, and from high authority, to the decree so unanimously resolved at their late meeting, whereby it was notified to the Worthy their intention of dining together, and spending the remainder of the day in love and harmony, and then proceed to the business of the night. In consequence, it is hereby made known to all whom it may concern, that for the avowed purpose of rooting eternally from their shores the damned doctrine, and public exhibition of Methodistical hypocrisy, now again rearing its baneful head, and spreading its beasted and pestilential principles amongst us, we have decreed that from and after the said memorable, the blessed 21st October, more dear to firm and true Barbadians than Trafalgar to Britons, that we will, with fire and sword root out and destroy, all and every abettors of Methodism and Methodists. So help us our God!

(Signed) "Rock" 46

This fulmination was aimed chiefly at Mrs. Ann Gill, whose house the committee planned to raze in commemoration of the chapel's destruction the year before. Mrs. Gill appealed to

43. From a speech by Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, June 23, 1825, Parliamentary Debates, second series, XIII, 1304. See also Klingberg, 229.
44. Shrewsbury, 169-170.
45. Ibid., 173.
46. Quoted in Shrewsbury, 174.
Governor Warde for protection from any violence which might be directed at her home. 47 The governor ordered troops to surround Mrs. Gill's house on the night in question, thus thwarting the plans of "the Worthy", who had to settle for burning her in effigy. 48 She thanked the governor in a courteous letter for his efforts in her behalf.

Yet, the day Mrs. Gill mailed this letter, she received a note, signed by four magistrates, stating that they had reason to believe that her house was serving as an arsenal for arms to be used in a riot and warning her that she would be held responsible for any outbreak of violence. 49 Mrs. Gill quickly replied to the charges, saying that her house contained no arms or ammunition, save her nephew Bovell's militia musket. 50

The situation in regard to anti-Methodist prejudice remained unchanged on into 1825. Yet the Society continued to add a few new members, even though they had neither a minister nor a sanctuary in which to worship. Rayner attempted to come to Bridgetown once again in April, but was prevented from landing. As his ship approached Carlisle Bay, he received warnings not to come any further, or else he would be put to death.

Earl Bathurst, the Colonial Secretary, in a letter to Governor Warde, stressed the freedom of all classes to celebrate divine worship services in private homes and their right to all religious rights and privileges afforded them by law. Furthermore, Bathurst asserted the right of Methodist missionaries "to re-establish themselves in Barbados, and to rebuild their chapel," 51 and that this right must be maintained by the governor!

Bathurst's instructions angered the local populace, which denounced him and Governor Warde for seeming to be in compliance with the directives. The committee of public safety went to work once again and circulated the following manifesto, a copy of which was forwarded to Rayner:

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47. See Shrewsbury, 174-175, for the text of Mrs. Gill's letter.
48. Findlay and Holdsworth, 205.
49. Parliamentary Papers, 1825, XXV, 189; Shrewsbury, 175-176.
50. See Shrewsbury, 176, for the text of Mrs. Gill's reply to the magistrates.
The Barbadian House of Assembly proved itself no friend of Methodism, as is evidenced by an address to the governor on April 5, 1825. This letter called to the governor's recollection a section of Hall's laws dating from the time of Charles I, which strictly enjoined all people to conform themselves to the government and discipline of the Church of England. This law, passed to discourage puritans and dissenters from settling on the island, had never been repealed, so the Assembly reminded Governor Warde. Furthermore, the Assembly members informed Warde that they considered the Church of England and its ministers sufficient enough to care for the needs of the people of Barbados, and that no other hostile groups or sects should be allowed to subvert the principles of the established church.

Upon receiving this communication from the Assembly, Governor Warde convened a council to request their advice and opinion on how to proceed. Their answer, dated April 8, and signed by seven members, advised the governor to warn any prospective Methodist missionary of the crisis situation on the island and to urge the missionary "for the sake of humanity not to expose Bridgetown to the calamities which are likely to result

51. Parliamentary Papers, 1825, XXV, 186.
52. Quoted in Shrewsbury, 178-179.
53. See Shrewsbury, 179-181, for the text of the Assembly's address.
from such a commotion, as an attempt to land, will, in all probability, occasion."  

The governor sent a copy of the Assembly's address, of the Council's opinion, and his own personal letter to Rayner. This missive informed the missionary that militia forces had been put at the disposal of the magistrates to insure his safety upon arrival. However, the governor went on to warn Rayner of the consequences that his presence might result in. Rayner declined to come to Barbados under such volatile conditions, and soon set sail from St. Vincent for England, still leaving the Methodist flock on Barbados without a shepherd.

In May, of 1825, Mrs. Gill was summoned to appear before a local court on a charge of holding illegal meetings. The venerable lady pleaded "not guilty" to the charges, as she maintained there was nothing unlawful about the assemblies held in her home. The presiding magistrates thought otherwise and indicted her. She appealed to her friends in England for their prayers and financial support, as her legal expenses were more than she could bear at present. Her trial was set for a later date.

**The Debate over the Chapel's Destruction in the House of Commons**

On June 23, 1825, the repercussions from the chapel's destruction and Shrewsbury's expulsion reached the House of Commons. Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, leader of the Anti-Slavery Society's parliamentary forces, presented the following motion to the Commons:

> That an humble address be presented to his Majesty, that this House, having taken into their most serious consideration the papers laid before them relating to the demolition of the Methodist Chapel in Barbados, and the expulsion of Mr. Shrewsbury, a licensed preacher of religion, deem it their duty to declare that they view with the utmost amazement and detestation, that scandalous and daring violation of law; and to beseech his Majesty to take such steps as shall secure the rebuilding of the chapel at the expense of the colony of Barbados; and also, to assure his Majesty, that this House will afford him every assistance of such outrages, and in

54. Quoted in Shrewsbury, 181.
55. See Shrewsbury, 181-182, for an extract from Governor Warde's letter to Rev. Rayner.
56. Shrewsbury, 184-186.
order to secure ample protection, and religious toleration to all his Majesty's subjects in that part of his dominions.\textsuperscript{57}

In his speech which preceded and introduced this motion, Buxton gave in his own words, "a plain, dry, abstemious narrative"\textsuperscript{58} of the events surrounding the incident of the chapel's demolition. His "narrative" began with testimonials attesting to Shrewsbury's good character and proceeded to spell out in detail the situation on Barbados before, during, and after the destruction of the chapel, all the while demonstrating Shrewsbury's innocence in regard to having done anything to incite a riot. Just prior to offering his motion, Buxton delivered a scathing broadside on the state of British justice:

The rioters were white men, and not the hair of the head of one of them has been touched. Had men with black skins committed such one-half, one hundredth part of such, enormities...had a negro whispered in the secret ear of his son, one sentence of dissatisfaction with his condition, or one natural sigh for liberty what a massacre, what lashings, what gibbetting would have followed!...But being white men, and not blacks, civilized men, and not savages — "gentlemen", forsooth, "of respectibility", which aggravates their guilt a thousand fold — their riot is patriotic — their proclamation is loyal; because they are "true lovers of religion", they pull down a chapel, and prosecute their neighbour, out of love and harmony! — The black insurgents have quivered under the halfbreeds, and are rotting on the gibbets of Demerara — the white insurgents hold the king's commission; administer the laws; are the senators and magistrates of Barbados! "Equal-handed Justice" is the boast and glory of the British constitution.\textsuperscript{59}

Wilmot Horton, the under secretary for colonial affairs, took the floor after Buxton. Horton accepted Buxton's account of the incident, but raised questions about the effect of Shrewsbury and Larcom's March, 1820, letter to the Committee. He was of the opinion that the contents of the said letter led the West Indians to believe that Wesleyan missionaries may have been agents of the Anti-Slavery Society. Horton also took pains to defend Governor Warde's conduct during the affair, saying that Shrewsbury had taken the wrong course in by-passing the magistrates and going straight to the governor.\textsuperscript{60}

William Smith, a friend of the abolition movement, followed

\textsuperscript{57} Parliamentary Debates, second series, XIII, 1311.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 1285.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 1310.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 1311-1318.
Horton. Smith heartily agreed with Buxton's assertion that Shrewsbury had done nothing to incite the white inhabitants of Barbados to the action they had undertaken. He furthermore came down hard on the conduct of the Barbadians, maintaining that they needed to be taught their conduct in regard to this chapel and Shrewsbury was an embarrassment to the mother country.61

Joseph Butterworth, Treasurer of the Wesleyan Missionary Society, rose to speak after Smith. He noted that the Society had not acted so as to stir up a commotion on the homefront in regard to the incident in question. In fact, the Society did not even push to have the present motion introduced, such was "the spontaneous act of the honourable mover" (Mr. Buxton). Butterworth, then, proceeded to point out the beneficial results of Methodist activity in the West Indies, citing numerous letters to the Society from West Indians as evidence of his claim. He closed by defending Shrewsbury's action in distributing copies of his March, 1820 letter — a move that was done in defense, not defiance, he said.62

Following Butterworth, the Secretary of Foreign Affairs, George Canning, took the floor. Canning characterized the demolition of the chapel as "unjustifiable, indefensible, a violation of law and justice, a defiance of all legal authority, a flying in the face of parliament and of country."63 The Foreign Secretary noted that he could not find the "slightest ground or suspicion" in regard to Shrewsbury's conduct (a comment which brought cries of, "Hear, hear," from the House). After dealing with questions of the conduct of the governor, the government at home, the magistrates of Barbados, and the rioters, in regard to the incident in question, Canning offered an amendment to Buxton's motion which he thought more appropriate to the situation:

That an humble address be presented to his Majesty to represent to his Majesty, that this House, having taken into their most serious consideration, the papers laid before them relating to the demolition of the Methodist Chapel in Barbados, deem it their bounden duty to declare that they view with the utmost indignation that scandalous and daring violation of the law, and having seen with great satisfaction the instructions which have been sent out by his Majesty's Secretary of State

61. Ibid., 1318-1320.
62. Ibid., 1320-1324.
63. Ibid., 1324-1325.
to the governor of Barbados, to prevent a recurrence of similar outrages, they humbly assure his Majesty of their readiness to concur in every measure which his Majesty may deem necessary for securing ample protection and religious toleration to all his Majesty's subjects in that part of his Majesty's dominions.  

(Canning's amendment differed from Buxton's in that it said nothing about rebuilding the chapel, and it substituted the word "indignation" for "amazement and detestation," as he saw this word as more "parliamentary").

After Butterworth asserted that the Missionary Committee would be pleased with Canning's proposed amendment, Henry Brougham arose to speak. He noted his approval of the Foreign Secretary's proposal, but then proceeded to lambast the rioters, whom he said had "in an amiable excess of sensibility...had only burnt down a chapel — only made a great riot — not only levied war against the king and committed high treason (a laugh)."

Brougham also asserted that the Church of England alone should not be saddled with the responsibility for providing religious instructions to slaves. In fact, he even suggested that Oxford and Cambridge educated clergymen might be "unfitted for the task of converting and educating the unfortunate beings, who ought to be the peculiar objects of proselytism and instruction." The Methodists, so said certain West Indian Anglican clergymen, were probably better suited to undertake this effort. Therefore, they should be allowed to do so.

After brief speeches by Ralph Bernal, Ralph Manning, and Dr. Stephen Lushington, Buxton rose to reply to what had been said:

I hardly know, that it is necessary for me to trouble the House with any reply. No defence of the conduct of the rioters has been offered. The hon. under Secretary (Horton) has borne testimony to the accuracy of my statement; and the right hon. Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (Canning) has, with his usual manliness, given vent to feelings of indignation in language at least as strong as any that I used. Upon what, then, have we now to dispute? The facts are confessedly true — the inference is undeniable. The right hon. gentleman alters a phrase or two of my resolution. With this I am abundantly contented: for he has left me — and that is all I care for — the declaration of the Commons of England, that we will have religious toleration in the West Indies.

64. Ibid., 1329.
65. Ibid., 1333.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid., 1345.
Buxton, after a rousing denunciation of slavery and connected evils, withdrew his motion, and the House resolved *nemine contradicente* to adopt Canning's proposed motion.\(^{68}\)

**Resumption of Methodist Missionary Activity on Barbados**

The Wesleyan Conference of 1825, meeting after the adoption of Canning's motion, resolved to reopen the Barbadian mission under the leadership of Moses Rayner as soon as possible. The Missionary Committee notified Mrs. Gill of its intent to send a missionary and offered to defray legal expenses for her trial. She noted in reply that her friends had taken care of her and sometime later she wrote that all charges against her had been dropped. Mrs. Gill also expressed her gratitude and joy to the committee that a missionary would soon be back in Barbados. Rayner finally arrived in Bridgetown in February, 1826. Despite posted warnings that he would be tarred and feathered, he landed without incident and began to preach and conduct services where he could.

Although the Barbadian press and some whites protested the resumption of Methodist activity, the magistrates did not interfere in Rayner's ministry, which showed signs of prospering. A few slave owners even allowed Rayner to preach on their plantations, and one plantation owner, William Reece, even erected a chapel on his land that had room for 400 worshippers. In Bridgetown, services continued to be held without interruption—a welcome relief from the days of Shrewsbury.

Plans were eventually made for the construction of a new chapel. Mrs. Gill sold her property on James Street to the Society as a building site. The cornerstone for this edifice was laid on May 14, 1828, and within a year the new chapel with a capacity of 1,000 was opened for worship. A home for the minister was also built beside the new chapel.\(^{69}\)

**Conclusion**

Here we shall close our chronicle of the demolition of the

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Methodist Chapel in Bridgetown, Barbados. We find Methodism once again firmly established on the island and beginning to flourish. Yet, the implications of this incident had effects reaching far beyond resumption of missionary activity in a British colony. For what appeared to be merely a local affair turned out to be a *cause célèbre* that was eventually discussed in the British House of Commons. The real significance of the chapel's destruction by the mob was not the restoration of Methodist missionary appointment to Barbados, but rather its ramifications for religious freedom for all peoples in the West Indies and, to a lesser extent, for the British anti-slavery movement. For as the details of the mob's activity and the attitude of the colonial whites toward religious instruction for slaves became known, the British public became sensitive to the real situation in the West Indies. The Anti-Slavery Society's parliamentary members, led by Buxton, seized upon the chapel's destruction and the expulsion of Shrewsbury as an example that West Indian planters, particularly those of Barbados, were doing very little to guarantee their slaves the religious freedom that was legally and morally theirs. The handling of the Shrewsbury affair by the proponents of abolition also did much to tarnish the image of the West Indian planters. For the planters had long maintained that they were carrying out all of Parliament's dictates in regard to the rights and privileges of slaves, especially in the realm of religious instruction. Yet, the evidence marshalled by Buxton and Brougham, in particular, showed that such claims were invalid. Furthermore, the colonial governments, at least that of Barbados, were doing little, if anything, to insure the right and safety of non-established church missionaries to carry out their ministries. When the Commons' debate over the expulsion of Shrewsbury closed, religious freedom for all peoples in the West Indies was much closer to becoming a reality, and one more nail had been driven into the coffin of slavery in the British Empire.