

## HUGH BOURNE AND THE MAGIC METHODISTS

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The study of the relationship between Hugh Bourne, one of the founders of Primitive Methodism, and the Magic Methodists is interesting since it touches on at least three themes in the emergence of new religious groups in the first part of nineteenth century England: continuing popular belief in magic and witchcraft; the role of signs and wonders in the life of the church; and the effects of making the transition from sect to church (or denomination) on the acceptability of such beliefs. A sketch of the background surrounding the rise of Primitive Methodism under the leadership of Bourne and others sets the stage.

As J. A. Jaffe has noted<sup>1</sup> the precise role of evangelical religion in the social history of the English working class is anything but settled. Ranging all the way from Elie Halévy's notion that the revolutionary fervor of France was absent in England due to many of the continental injustices being addressed by the Wesleyan revival to E. P. Thompson's thesis that Methodism was actually co-opted by capitalist domination which used its conservative nature and emphasis on work and discipline to subordinate factory workers. What is clear is that as the nineteenth century dawned, there were already those within the Wesleyan Connection who regarded John Wesley's 1786 words as coming to fulfillment: "I do not fear that people called Methodists will ever cease to exist either in Europe or the Americas. I only fear that they shall exist as a dead sect having the form of religion, but not the power thereof, and that undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast to the doctrine, spirit and discipline with which they first set out."

There can be no doubt about the Methodists, after Wesley's death, acquiring more of the form of religion. As Wesley understood they would, Methodist frugality and industry resulted in an ever increasing number of Methodists living lives of relative prosperity which brought, in turn, a desire for finer houses of worship, including organs, choirs and stained glass windows, and more regularly trained preachers. Accompanying the latter came the claim that full-time professional itinerants were the Methodist equivalent of Anglican clergy holding sacramental privileges. None of these developments were uniformly accepted perhaps because the

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<sup>1</sup> J. A. Jaffe, "The Chiliasm of Despair' Reconsidered: Revivalism and Working-Class Agitation in County Durham," *Journal of British Studies* 28, (January 1989), 23.

increased prosperity of Methodists was not uniform. In addition, the fact that the preacher-dominated conferences seemed, to some at least, to be altering the Wesleyan notion of lay workers laboring in lay communities, only exacerbated simmering tensions. Lay preachers outside the urban centers felt slighted. In this climate, the emergence of various new groups of Wesleyans, including the Bible Christians, the Methodist New Connexion, the Tent Methodists and various Independent Methodist Circuits, as well as the Primitive Methodists, is not surprising. Hugh Bourne's association with the so-called Magic Methodists may seem less expected.

The events of Bourne's early life are straightforward.<sup>2</sup> Born in 1772, Bourne was brought up in the state church by a devout mother but developed an interest in Quakerism. An introspective, quiet individual and voracious reader, he was converted in 1799 by reading John Fletcher's *Letters on the Supernatural Manifestation of the Son of God*. Subsequent to his conversion he and his mother joined a Wesleyan society where he became a lay preacher. While not a dynamic public speaker, often described in fact as holding his hand in front of his face as he spoke, he nonetheless was effective using what he described as a kind of "conversational" approach and favoring seasons of extended prayer to lengthy sermons. Having established himself as a timber dealer and carpenter he was able to finance the construction of the HARRISEAHEAD Wesleyan Methodist Chapel in 1802 following a revival in the area which had included his first open-air sermon at Mow Cop. This village on a high isolated hill straddling the Cheshire-Staffordshire border in North West England would eventually become forever associated with Primitive Methodism. It was Bourne's work in the area around HARRISEAHEAD that involved him in conversion work and open-air preaching, the unlikely matters that would lead to his break with the Wesleyans.

When Bourne had first introduced cottage prayer meetings at HARRISEAHEAD, he seems to have had Wesley's class meeting structure in mind, but because no experienced leader was provided by the regular itinerant, the meetings soon developed an unusually egalitarian style that must have seemed chaotic. After an initial hymn and opening prayer various persons would begin simultaneous prayer, ". . . untill (sic) the whole were exercising with all their faith, hearts, and minds, and with all their voices, and the noise might be heard a considerable distance."<sup>3</sup> Bourne regarded this clamor with unqualified approval: the sound of the gathering a witness in itself with the lively atmosphere engaging the attention of onlookers and new believers alike. It also afforded each individual the opportunity of praying aloud, including those who might have been reluctant in settings where they were more likely to be overheard. In hindsight, it would be perceived that a revival was beginning in these cottages. When Bourne was invited to speak at the regular

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<sup>2</sup> See Geoffrey Milburn, *Primitive Methodism*, (Peterborough: Epworth Press), 2002, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Julia Stewart Werner, *The Primitive Methodist Connexion: Its Background and Early History*, (Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 57.

class meeting at Joseph Pointon's cottage at Mow Cop about 1.5 miles away, the crowd was too large for the building so the meeting was moved outdoors. He ended his somewhat floundering sermon with the story of his own conversion and prepared to announce the closing hymn when the crowd broke into what might be described as a cottage prayer meeting writ large. Bourne would look back on this as "a camp meeting without a name."

Camp Meetings with the name would become a feature of the newly emergent movement largely due to the work of the eccentric American evangelist Lorenzo Dow. Denied a preacher's license in his home state of Connecticut, Dow cut a flamboyant figure across the United States as an independent itinerant whose main attention was given to Camp Meetings where the focus was on the full participation of all those gathered and not the control of preachers-in-charge. Unsurprisingly there was controversy surrounding Dow: he was admired and supported by Francis Asbury while looked upon with disdain by Thomas Coke. Controversy notwithstanding the phenomenon of the camp meetings could not be ignored. Dow spent much of 1804-07 in England spreading the word about camp meetings and instructing interested people in the techniques which had been so successful across the Atlantic. As the revival and outdoor preaching around Mow Cop continued and grew, Bourne was surely aware of articles describing camp meetings in America, such as the following from the *Methodist Magazine* by Joshua Marsden, an English Methodist, who had traveled in America:

I have heard many say that they never heard such praying, exhorting and preaching anywhere else. . . . The several times that I preached and exhorted at these meetings I was sensible of nothing but a constraining influence transporting me beyond myself, carrying me along with a freedom and fulness both of emotion and language quite unusual. . . . I am satisfied that the (camp meetings) are the right hand of Methodism in the United States and one main cause why the societies have doubled and trebled there within a few years.<sup>4</sup>

Even as Bourne and others planned a large-scale camp meeting for Mow Cop for the end of May, the Wesleyan Conference of 1807 passed two preemptive measures: first, they forbade "what are called camp meetings;" and second they directed that no unauthorized person "from America or elsewhere" be permitted to preach among English Wesleyans.<sup>5</sup> That year, *Methodist Magazine* ran the following notice from the Conference: "It is our judgment, that even supposing such meetings to be allowable in America, they are highly improper in England, and likely to be productive of considerable mischief."<sup>6</sup> These measures were obviously inspired by and directed against Lorenzo Dow. While Dow was not personally present at Mow Cop for the great outdoor meeting of May 31, 1807, generally regarded as the birth date of Primitive Methodism, his influence was noted in the saying,

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in Milburn, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Milburn, 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Methodist Magazine*, XXX, (London: Printed at the Conference Office, 1807), 452.

“No Dow, No Mow!” While it was clear that Bourne had by now alienated himself from the Wesleyan authorities, it took just over a year for his expulsion to be made official when, on July 18, 1808 he was excluded from Wesleyan Methodism. It was during this formative and tumultuous time, in June 1807, that Bourne walked thirty miles to observe for the first time the Magic Methodists and meet their leader James Crawfoot, an individual about whom he had heard “an evil report.”<sup>7</sup>

Somewhat older than Bourne (he was baptized in 1759) Crawfoot had been aware of spiritual things from a young age. He recalled meditating even as a child on matters such as God and the Devil, life and death, heaven and hell, rewards and punishments in the afterlife and what today would be called spiritual formation. He related how prior to the age of 12 he had met a crippled man who was preparing for death and asked the boy for his opinion of the Methodists. Believing that the Bible taught that knowledge could come from God through a variety of means, the young Crawfoot prayed for illumination and eventually had a dream in which he wanted to attend a cock-fight but was afraid that if he did the Devil would seize him. In that dream, he then saw visions of thrones in heaven and Satan preparing to punish him when he heard the words, “You must be good and go and hear the Methodists.” Once he related this revelation to the disabled man, the latter went to hear the Methodists and was converted. Crawfoot himself seemed to have been obedient to the content of the vision, living a pious life and upholding good morals. We have no further record of childhood visions.

By 1796 Crawfoot was a leader of a class meeting of the Methodist Society at Duddon Heath. Around 1800 or 1801 he moved to the Delamere Forest where he was recognized as a local preacher and served, among other places, the ‘Forest Chapel.’ By the time of Bourne’s visit, the group was becoming known locally as the “Forest Methodists” or the “Magic Methodists.” The reason became clear to Bourne when he arrived at Crawfoot’s home. He was initially unimpressed by the tall man sitting in a chair seeming to half-preach, half pass the time. Eventually the visitor realized that the meeting had not yet begun and that the group was in fact simply waiting for others to arrive. Then, after a hymn and a song, he observed,

a woman struggling, as if in distress, and wondered why they did not pray for her. But two women placed her in a chair, and she appeared to have fainted away. I then thought, this is their trance work. . . . at length the woman clasped her hands, and praised the Lord, and went on speaking occasionally without opening her eyes. She spoke of a fine green meadow, and said, ‘Let me lie down’. She then spoke of a fine river. . . she spoke of trumpets, and called out ‘Blow! blow! blow!’. She after a time called on a young woman by name, and said, ‘Leave it’. And shortly after that she awoke up and came out of her visionary state. I then went up to the woman to enquire, but all in vain; only one of the women said, ‘These things strengthen our

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<sup>7</sup> Henry Rack, “James Crawfoot and the Magic Methodists,” lecture given at the Englesea Brook Chapel and Museum on the occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Funeral of Hugh Bourne, 2003, 1.

faith.<sup>8</sup>

Bourne remained a few hours past the meeting's midnight ending and left convinced of Crawfoot's soundness, taking the signs and visions he had seen as a confirmation of God's grace.

Crawfoot's considerable influence over Bourne and the other leaders of the emerging movement is evidenced in the name they chose, for it was he who claimed to have heard John Wesley preach during his last visit to Chester on April 6, 1790. According to Crawfoot, at least as contained in later tradition, Wesley had given a strong appeal to "primitive Methodism" as an antidote to unhealthy developments within the movement. Indeed when Crawfoot was charged with unauthorized preaching at the Northwich quarterly meeting in December, 1807 he defended himself with these words: "Mr Chairman, if you have deviated from the old usages, I have not; I still remain A Primitive Methodist."<sup>9</sup>

While no one denies that Crawfoot and the Magic Methodists clearly had an influence on Hugh Bourne, the extent of that influence has been endlessly debated. After an eventual falling out and disillusionment with Crawfoot, a matter on which we will reflect presently, some of Bourne's writings minimized the impact, but contemporary journal entries and accounts speak otherwise. Bourne made such numerous trips to the Delamere Forest and participated in so many joint journeys with Crawfoot, always describing him as an effective preacher, full of the "power," that is the active and visible presence of God, that it is no surprise that many later commentators describe Crawfoot as Bourne's mentor or spiritual guide.

Bourne was impressed with the visionary work of the Magic Methodists for at least two interrelated reasons. If, as has been suggested, camp meetings were a public "show of force" by the emerging Primitive Methodists, displaying their power in numbers and fervor, were not the visions and other supernatural phenomena similar validation of their work within the movement? It was widely acknowledged that Wesley himself had recorded instances of persons experiencing visions and trances as a result of his preaching. At a more personal level, the visions were initially at least important for Bourne's understanding of his own role within the movement. There were a series of visions delivered mostly by young women during 1810-1811, the content of which cannot be underestimated.<sup>10</sup> These visions took a form closely resembling a Wesleyan preaching plan with individuals appearing in a clear hierarchy holding symbols of their role. Some had the trumpet of evangelism while other held a bowl denoting other spiritual gifts. If the

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<sup>8</sup> A later recollection recorded in , John W. B. Tomlinson, "The Magic Methodists and their Influence on the early Primitive Methodist Movement," in Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory, editors, *Signs, Wonders, Miracles: Representation of Divine Power in the Life of the Church*, (The Ecclesiastical History Society, 2005), 390.

<sup>9</sup> Rack, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Tomlinson, 393; also Rack, 4.

trumpet had been discarded or the bowl was held carelessly at an angle, divine disapproval of the individual was indicated. While women most often appeared in a separate grouping, slightly lower than their male counterparts, they were sometimes mixed in with the men. While it cannot be proven that Bourne's later firm affirmation of the role of women preachers can be tied to these visions, it seems likely. Furthermore, the hierarchy of the visions seemed to affirm Bourne's personal preference for playing a behind-the-scenes administrative role and leading a ministry of extended prayer meetings rather than one of preaching. James Crawfoot was almost always at the head of the plan (top of the hierarchy) followed by Lorenzo Dow, with Bourne appearing somewhere in the middle.

Bourne too was experiencing visions that guided his life and ministry. During a visit to Litchfield Cathedral he had a visionary experience warning him of the idolatry and insincerity present in the service and particularly among the clergy. He grabbed his hat and rushed out of the service, but found himself unable to leave the city for the rest of the day, experiencing distress for the place. "I asked James Crawfoot at the Forest about this," he wrote. "He said it was the sign of the times. It was Jesus Christ travelling in me. . . ."<sup>11</sup>

What are we to make of all this? As profoundly uncomfortable as such accounts would make later Primitive Methodist historians they are certainly not out of keeping with popular piety in the early nineteenth century. In his study of "Newspapers and the Popular Belief in Witchcraft and Magic in the Modern Period," Owen Davies reminds us that in many ways popular belief in the supernatural in the early nineteenth century were not far removed from that of the late seventeenth. The consultation of cunning-folk and fortune tellers coexisted comfortably with orthodox religious belief. (He points out, in fact, that until the end of the seventeenth century such belief *was* the orthodoxy.)<sup>12</sup> Writing of American Methodism of this period John H. Wigger makes observations that seem equally applicable to the British scene:

Early Methodism without enthusiasm would be like Hamlet, not without the prince, but without the ghost. Visions, dreams, and supernatural impressions not only held deep religious meaning, they also served to validate Methodism in the absence of more traditional hierarchies. For early American Methodists who found themselves struggling to come to terms with unprecedented social and cultural changes and with frequently hostile resistance from the broader society popular enthusiasm in many ways represented a more important theological construct than did Arminianism.<sup>13</sup>

Wigger further notes that in America this kind of what he calls "militant supernaturalism" continued longest in those areas of the South and West where it was less restricted by cultural and societal norms than it was in the North

<sup>11</sup> Tomlinson, 396.

<sup>12</sup> Owen Davies, "Newspapers and the Popular Belief in Witchcraft and Magic in the Modern Period," *The Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (April 1998), 140-141.

<sup>13</sup> John H. Wigger, "Taking Heaven by Storm: Enthusiasm and Early American Methodism, 1770-1820," *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Summer, 1994), 191.

East.<sup>14</sup> If one accepts Wigger's thesis, it is easily applicable to the potters, miners and other poor non-urban folk who formed the nucleus of Bourne's emerging movement in England.

It should be pointed out that Bourne was less accepting of the spiritual "lunatic fringe" than his detractors, both contemporary and modern, sometimes suggest. It is true, for example, that in 1810 Crawfoot and Bourne made pilgrimage to visit Joanna Southcott, the Devonshire "prophetess." She announced in September 1814 that she was pregnant with the Messiah. Given the facts that she was unmarried and then sixty-four years of age, the reaction was predictably outraged. "In every street, alley, court, and house, nothing was heard but the name of Southcott, coupled with expressions of astonishment, disappointment or profane ridicule," exclaimed the *Sunday Monitor*.<sup>15</sup> Using this association with Southcott to discredit Bourne is unfair for two reasons. It is anachronistic since until 1813 Southcott's public ministry was one of writing: she uttered prophecies which were recorded and published. The mystical pregnancy was a tragic anomaly: she was in fact dying. In any event when he visited her, Bourne was not overly impressed with her ministry, feeling that it contradicted Scripture and bordered on witchcraft.<sup>16</sup>

It is at this point in the story that the unexpected happens. Rather than slowing dying away over a number of decades as the movement became more established and made the transition from sect to denomination and as the modern scientific viewpoint came to be more widely accepted, the signs, wonders and other vestiges of the "Magic Methodists," abruptly ceased at the end of 1811. After the meeting in February, 1812 at which Crawfoot suggested the name "Primitive Methodist," Bourne's journal is inexplicably silent for over a year. Some feel that it may not have been kept at all during this period due to a time of depression brought on by disappointment in and disillusionment with Crawfoot. When Bourne emerged from this time of silence in March and April 1813 he stated that supernatural gifts were not necessary for faith, a very significant change indeed!

There are hints about what may have led to the dramatic shift. A widower when he met Bourne, Crawfoot had exalted a life of celibacy for preachers, but then remarried. It has often been suggested that it was this development which led Bourne, himself celibate and a strong critic of preachers who chose to marry, to repudiate all the practices of his former mentor, but it is not so easy since Crawfoot's second marriage did not occur until 1816. As tea-totalism became more of a Wesleyan and Primitive Methodist standard, Crawfoot's refusal to abstain from strong drink was no doubt a source of tension, particularly since Crawfoot may have been using part of the small

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<sup>14</sup> Wigger, 192.

<sup>15</sup> Susan Juster, "Mystical Pregnancy and Holy Bleeding: Visionary Experience in Early Modern Britain and America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, Volume LVII, Number 2, (April 2000), 249.

<sup>16</sup> Tomlinson, 394.

stipend he received as the Ranters' (as the Primitives came to be called) first, and for a time, only compensated preacher, to purchase the alcohol. Furthermore, Mrs. Dannel, one of the most prominent of the visionaries, was found to be in a bigamous relationship. It does seem that Crawfoot's strengths were in the area of public ministry, of soul-saving, not organization and administration. It is no wonder that later commentators have sometimes characterized him as either an Elmer Gantry-like charlatan or the purveyor of a kind of "rustic spiritism," with the emphasis on *rustic* who simply found himself over his head as the movement grew and advanced. And this advance was dramatic.

In an amazingly short time, Primitive Methodism became one of the most rapidly growing denominations of the nineteenth century. Bourne, now joined by William Clowes, a powerful preacher with a moving personal conversion story, became the leading figure in the new group. He wrote the rules for the new organization in 1814 and began the denominational magazine in 1819. By 1824, the membership was over 33,000 and within the next five years Ranter missionaries were sent to America. The Religious Census of 1851 showed a Primitive Methodist membership of 106,000, over one-third of the total of all Wesleyans in Britain.<sup>17</sup> Even early in this process of rapid growth, apparitions with the visionary Crawfoot and eccentric Dow at the top of the heavenly preaching plan with Bourne buried toward the middle clearly no longer spoke to the earthly situation. While he may have been the behind-the-scenes organizer, without his gifts the movement would not have grown as it did. Reflecting from the vantage point of 1860, John Petty observed that Hugh Bourne had, "... efficiently serv(ed) the denomination as the editor of its magazine and as the ruling mind in its general committee and annual assemblies."<sup>18</sup>

Like modern American Evangelicals who tell their story without referencing Abolition or Women's Suffrage, later Primitive Methodists would gloss over the role of the Magic Methodists and their chief spokesperson James Crawfoot. Yet there were surely both short-term and long-term influences. In the microcosm of the region there can be little doubt that those who were favorably impressed with the Forest Methodists in the Delamere area would have carried that positive assessment to Bourne's group. It is interesting that Primitive Methodism made little headway in that area after the falling out between Crawfoot and Bourne and that the Magic Methodists continued as a distinct group in that region until 1831.

There seems to be little doubt that, while he may have later minimized the influence, the visions and other spiritual expressions both impressed Bourne and, initially at least, affirmed his role as administrative leader of the movement. The long term impact, for Bourne, may have been a reinforcement of his somewhat severe and unbending character. He seems to have

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<sup>17</sup> Tomlinson, 397.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted by Milburn, 30.

reacted to Crawfoot's shortcomings in a way reminiscent of the Montanists and Donatists: personal faults invalidated the spiritual work. The truth is that certain kinds of supernatural beliefs and experiences continued long after Crawfoot's exit: there were dreams, 'particular providences,' guidance by sudden impulses, exorcisms of evil spirits and visions. These later visions, however, tended to be the kind common to all Wesleyans of the era: visions of the Last Judgment or Christ Crucified experienced most often as part of the spiritual struggle of conversion.<sup>19</sup>

Never again would Primitive Methodists rely on visionaries like the Magic Methodists to provide evaluation of individual spiritual gifts or to suggest the appropriate place of individual preachers in the emerging hierarchy. The Primitive Methodist Church would develop a circuit system not strikingly different from the other main Wesleyan bodies in England allowing the Wesleyan Methodists, Methodist New Connexion and Primitive Methodists to merge into the modern day Methodist Church in 1932.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Rack, 8-9

<sup>20</sup> Unlike in England, the Primitive Methodist Church in the US has resisted mergers and continues as a separate denomination.