



DISCOVERY

edited by
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A Double Letter John Wesley and Thomas Coke to Freeborn Garrettson

by J. Hamby Barton

Dr. Rowe recently uncovered in the Drew archives this remarkable double letter: Wesley to Garrettson and, on the reverse of Wesley's letter, Coke to Garrettson.

The sheet on which the letters are written is small, measuring 16 by 20 centimeters. Wesley's handwriting, though not strong is clearly legible. The cancelled lines, beginning "In", "way" and "self" are tantalizing but irrecoverable. From the bleed-through which blots Coke's letter it appears that Coke supplemented with a brush blot Wesley's simple "squiggle line" cancel (visible following "In"). The substitution of "States" for "Provinces" in the first paragraph is in Coke's hand as is the superscript "not" in paragraph 2, line 2. Note the firmer strokes, the shape of the letters and the different slant.

At the time, February 1786, Wesley and Coke were together in London. Wesley's letter to John Stretton, written on February 26 also has a note from Coke referring to his intended visit to Nova Scotia. Coke had been away from England from September 1784 to June 1785 in the business of organizing the American Church. He continued in England through the 1786 Conference in Bristol when William Hammet and John Clarke were appointed to Nova Scotia. Hammet was ordained by Wesley at the Conference together with William Warrener who was appointed to the West Indies.

Freeborn Garrettson was appointed to Nova Scotia together with James Cromwell by the American Christmas Conference in Baltimore, 1784-85. The work in Nova Scotia had previously been carried on independently by William Black who had immigrated from Yorkshire in 1775. Black journeyed to America in 1784 and attended the Christmas Conference. He returned, possibly in company with Garrettson and Cromwell. In response to the request Garrettson supplied the statistics reported by Coke to the Conference at Bristol: three preachers, three-hundred whites and two hundred blacks.

Freeborn Garrettson, from his admission "on trial" in 1776, had been an acknowledged leader among the native American preachers. He had helped to organize the Christmas Conference where he was elected and ordained Elder and volunteered for the mission to Nova Scotia. Upon his return to the States for the meeting of the Conference in 1787 he found that Wesley had designated him to be ordained Superintendent. The Conference, afraid of Wesley's intention, refused to promote Garrettson unless he agreed to move permanently to Nova Scotia. He declined, but continued in his role of leadership.

James O. Cromwell was a prominent American preacher who was one of those selected by the Conference for ordination as Elder at the Christmas Conference. Cromwell and Garrettson both returned to America in 1787.

The proposal to re-enforce the work in Nova Scotia by sending preachers directly from Britain was part of Wesley's and Coke's concept of uniting the British Isles, the United States, the West Indies and Canada in a pan-Methodist connection. This grand design, so evident in all the early missionary work, never bore fruit except in Coke's labor.

Coke and the three missionaries sailed September 25, 1786 for Halifax, but a long, stormy passage landed them instead in Antigua on Christmas Day. The fearful voyage and the missionary prospect of the West Indies led Coke to leave Hammet and Clarke there rather than continue to Nova Scotia.

The 1786 edition of the Prayer Book to which the letters refer is one of Wesley's most attractive volumes. It was done in two major versions, *The Sunday Service of the Methodists in the United States of America With Other Occasional Services*, and *The Sunday Service of the Methodists in his Majesty's Dominions With Other Occasional Services*. The versions differ in the prayers "for the

King” and “for the rulers of the United States” and in the Articles of Religion relating to Civil Authority.

These newly discovered letters are significant in shedding additional light on the manner in which Wesley and Coke worked together. Wesley initiated, Coke executed. Wesley suggested preachers should go to Nova Scotia; but he would not press them; Coke assured Garrettson that “one, perhaps two” would come with him in September. On the revision of the Prayer Book Wesley said, “we will consider what can be done”; Coke promised to bring one or two hundred copies. Coke was Wesley’s “right hand”, but we can see in this letter that their works were complementary.

London
Feb. 25, 1786

My Dear Brother

In the States */sic./* you know, y^e Dissenters do not at all object to our corrected Common Prayer Book. But I do not confine myself: I constantly add Extemporary Prayer, both to the Morning and Evening Service. I will communicate what you say concerning “adapting the Prayer books to the Northern Provinces to Dr. Coke & we will consider what can be done.

If you are in the way to the Kingdom, you must not expect to travel in it long without meeting a cross.

----- [three lines cancelled] -----

It is a doubt with me, whether it will be possible for us to send over any Preachers before y^e Conference. For whoever comes, must come of his own free Choice. I dare not so much as *advise* anyone to go. It must be of his own motion.

Be little in your own eyes, & God will exalt you. You sh^d not delay sending your Journal to

Your Affectionate Friend & Brother
J. Wesley

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To Mr. Garretson

My very dear Brother

Mr. Wesley writing in great haste, delivered me y^e Letter on y^e other side to read & c—[correct?] & to add to it whatsoever I thought necessary. I would have you introduce y^e Prayer-book every where, as far as you possibly can without giving *great* Offence: but I w^d not give *great* Offence to precious souls even for y^e best of forms. I purpose, God willing, to be at *Hallifax [sic.]* in *Nova Scotia* about the latter end of next September, or perhaps about y^e middle of it. I will then meet you, God willing, & as many of the Preachers as can be collected, in Conference. I shall also, God willing, bring with me one or two hundred copies of our abridged Liturgy, suited to the British Dominions. It is now the Prep. I have no doubt that I shall be able to bring one, perhaps two, Preachers with me to Nova Scotia. Keep Bro: Cromwell with you, if you can, till I come over: unless his health requires he sh^d return to y^e States.

I believe you are a Man of Prayer, & trust you will continue, yea, increase in holy Fellowship with God. & you will infallibly increase in every thing that can administer true happiness to y^r Soul. I have no objection, if you see it necessary, to y^r holding a little Conference, before I come. Write an Acc^t [account] of the numbers in Society to Mr. Asbury & me: & pray often for your most affectionate Friend & Brother

Thomas Coke