



DISCOVERY

Edited by
FREDERICK E. MASER

NEW PATHS FOR RESEARCH

The idea that John Wesley was never more than highly discreet in his relationships with women is generally accepted by his biographers. In spite of the fact that he lived in a dissolute century when affairs of the heart were commonplace among the upper classes in England, and although Oxford in Wesley's day was especially notorious for loose living, no one has ever accused Wesley of taking part in any immoral escapades.

The same can be said for Charles, his brother, and certainly for Samuel, his older brother.

However, in the May 1985 issue of *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, John Vickers, a tireless researcher, states that while seeking the meaning of the word "Cabinet" in Wesley's day, he stumbled on this strange sentence in a letter from Thomas Hanby to James Oddie, "Let nobody know but yourself. Mr. W. has actually made love to Miss Ritchie, & there is no small stir about it in the Cabinet."

Here then are two new paths for researchers! One, what is the meaning of the term "Cabinet" in Wesley's day as related to the meaning of the term today? Who composed the "Cabinet"? How powerful was the "Cabinet" in influencing Wesley's decisions etc. and Two, did Wesley actually make love to Miss Ritchie?

Anyone analyzing Hanby's statement about Wesley and Miss Ritchie would need to take certain facts into consideration. One, who was Thomas Hanby? Hanby was no common gossip monger. He was a preacher of standing and substance in the Conference. Born in 1733, he became an itinerant in 1755. He was apparently highly regarded by Wesley, himself, who, in 1784 appointed him to the Legal One Hundred. These persons were appointed to hold all Methodist property after Wesley's death, and to legally compose the Conference, which up to then had been an undefined term. In 1785 Wesley ordained Hanby for work in Scotland. However,

when Hanby returned to England he continued to administer the sacraments much to Wesley's consternation who looked upon Hanby's ordination as a kind of limited authority to be used only in Scotland. A rift developed between the two men which may have reached back to an earlier date. At any rate, the rift widened when Wesley requested some of the preachers to investigate the matter, and, if possible, persuade Hanby to cease administering the sacraments. The widening of the breach, however, came some time after Hanby's letter to Oddie.

By any standards Hanby was a good preacher, leader and administrator. He was elected President of the Conference in 1794, only about three years after Wesley's death. At the time of his own death in 1796, he was the oldest preacher in the connection. It would seem as though Hanby's word could be trusted. What he said of Wesley may indeed have been founded in fact.

A second consideration is that Wesley met Miss Ritchie in 1774 when she was but nineteen years old and he was past seventy. He began a correspondence with her which proved a great blessing to her soul. She was at his bedside during his last illness, and she wrote an account of his last days. Wesley evidently willed her his gold seal, a gold pin and a silver fruit knife. The two were indeed very, very close friends in spite of the fifty or more years difference in their ages. But then, Wesley was a close friend of a number of women and his relationship with them was not always wise. In April 1789 he wrote a very foolish letter to a Mrs. Cock with whom he had corresponded. He was apparently annoyed at her choice of a husband and Wesley wrote:

I had hoped that if you married at all, it would be one of our preachers; then I could have stationed him in some circuit where I should have had frequent opportunities of conversing with you. (Telford, Vol. 8, p. 128).

At any rate, whatever one makes of these statements, the fact is that although Miss Ritchie was undoubtedly an attractive woman (she was later married to a man named Mortimer) and although Wesley thoroughly enjoyed her presence, it strains the imagination to suggest that at about 85 years of age Wesley would actually begin a physical-relation with a woman in her thirties.

The fact that Wesley was decidedly unwise in some of his relationships with females can hardly be denied, but that he was immoral throughout his life or toward the end of it, is difficult to concede. At least it would require more proof than one sentence in a letter from even a man of Hanby's standing.

The diaries of Wesley, which will eventually be published through the Wesley's Works Project, may help us here, but it is doubtful. One would need rather to examine the letters between the preachers and parishoners of Wesley's day including the letters from and to both his friends and enemies.

When Did Methodism Become a Church?

It has always been assumed that American Methodism became a church in 1784 at the Conference in Lovely Lane Chapel in Baltimore when the Methodist Episcopal Church in America was organized.

However, as one reads early Methodist history and notes isolated facts that crop up here and there, one is seized by the annoying idea that some of the early preachers did not think of Methodism in America as a church. They saw little difference in their status before and after 1784 other than that some of them now possessed new titles and some could now administer the sacraments. To all intents and purposes the preachers still thought of themselves primarily as evangelists. They were the driving force in a great spiritual movement that was meant to sweep the country and capture America for God and Methodism but not necessarily for Methodist Episcopal Church. In short, they were undecided whether they were still a movement or a church.

I pointed this out in a lecture I delivered at Perkins School of Theology in 1983 which is only now being published. The idea was re-enforced by the 1984 General Conference which set in motion a whole series of committees and commissions to report to the 1988 General Conference on doctrine, the ministry, the purpose of the United Methodist Church etc. In short, Methodism still does not know whether it is a church which has lost the vitality of a movement or a movement which is seeking to regain its former vitality by clothing itself in the accouterments of a church.

This came into my thinking once more when my wife and I were recently visiting a Book Fair in Boston.

In Brattle's Book Shop, where literally anything might unexpectedly turn up, I ran across a small copy of Bishop Beveridge's *Resolutions on the Most Interesting and Important Subjects etc.* The curious thing is that it was published in 1805 by Ezekiel Cooper for the "Methodist Connexion." This seemed strange to me since by this time we were supposed to be a church and the imprint should have read for the "Methodist Church."

I immediately sent the book as a gift to Drew University to be added to the collections of Methodistica and Wesleyana I had previously given to Drew University. Dr. Kenneth E. Rowe wrote me a gracious letter of thanks and pointed out that in his *Methodist Union Catalogue* he reported only four known copies of the little book — one in the American Antiquarian Society, one at Duke, another at the Methodist Publishing House and a fourth at the University of Texas. To this must now be added the copy I presented to Drew.

In addition, Dr. Rowe who is one of America's leading scholars in the field of Methodist History, made a quick survey of the books of discipline and found that "we used 'connexion' until Old Man Asbury passed on." Until that time the imprints read, "Printed for the Methodist

Connexion/Connection in the United States." The 1816 discipline, however, uses the word "Church." Is it possible that Asbury may have preferred/insisted on calling us a connection despite what happened in 1784? It is worth a bit of research and study, especially now when we are trying to discover our own identity.

At any rate, these musings of mine suggest some new paths for research which might lead to a better understanding of our history, our leaders and ourselves.

BOOK REVIEWS

Robert B. Steelman, *What God Has Wrought: A History of the Southern New Jersey Conference of The United Methodist Church*. Pennington, NJ: Conference Commission on Archives and History, 1986. 352 pp. \$15.50.

Add either an exclamation point or question mark to the title of this history and discover the complexity of doing Annual Conference history as reflected in this good work by the official historian of this Conference. Here is a strong affirmation of United Methodism, especially in its early days in the south of New Jersey, as particularly reflected in the camp meeting days. What God has wrought! Here also are the answers to lots of questions: what has God wrought in the 150 years of Methodism among the pines and people?

But one discovers questions being asked, also. For example, "will someone rise to the challenge and do the work necessary to tell the full story of our Conference Institutions?" Steelman writes: "This historian finds it much easier to write about the past, than to be historical about the present. The closer to one's own day it is, the more difficult it is to be objective historically." This history affirms the dilemma.

The commendable effort to include special chapters on the role of women and ethnic churches results in repetition and problems of sequence. It raises a question for all who do United Methodist history: how do we give proper attention to newly-found dimensions of our heritage, but manage to include them within the flow of our history?

Your reviewer, currently preparing a bibliography of Conference histories and examining many of them, finds a good blend of the affirmation and the questioning in this book that exceeds that of most Conference histories. The reader has a good view of the broader picture of the Church beyond New Jersey, too. There is not much attention given to events within New Jersey government and culture, and the interrelationship of church and society. Readers unfamiliar with the geography would welcome a map of the Conference.