

ONE-MAN BAND:

THOMAS COKE AND THE ORIGINS OF METHODIST MISSIONS

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When I became interested in Thomas Coke back in the 1950s, I was surprised how little seemed to be known about him, and how much that *was* “known” proved to be wrong — or at the very least questionable. That was one thing which drew me to him.

Another was the sheer variety of his commitments and activities. To American Methodists, Coke is primarily Asbury’s fellow bishop, who had a key role in the Christmas Conference in Baltimore and in the events that developed from it. To British Methodists (if indeed they have ever heard of him) Coke is first and last the “father of overseas missions” (and by that term we don’t mean “converting the Americans”). And what is noteworthy is this: his involvement in the formative days of the Methodist Episcopal Church and his pioneer role in overseas missions both date from the same year, 1784, and both occupied his time and energies concurrently during the years that followed. Coke was nothing if not a fireball of dedicated energy! It is as the missionary pioneer that Thomas Coke deserves our attention.

For a seemingly definitive statement about the origin of British Methodist overseas missions we may turn to the Constitution of the Methodist Missionary Society (popularly known as the MMS, and now the Overseas Division). This was adopted in 1943, and states: “From the beginning of Methodist Overseas Missions at the Conference of 1786, the initiation, direction and support of Overseas Missions have been undertaken by the Conference . . .” and it goes on to claim: “The Methodist Missionary Society is none other than the Methodist Church itself organised for Overseas Missions . . . and every member of the Methodist Church as such is a member of the Methodist Missionary Society.”¹ Both of these statements, despite their official stamp, are suspect and call for closer examination.

More recently, in his chapter on “Overseas Missions” in our new *History of British Methodism*, Allen Birtwhistle makes similar claims: that with the publication of Thomas Coke’s *Address to the Pious and Benevolent* in the spring of 1786, “the Methodist Missionary Society was launched” and that the Conference, meeting later that year “finally and

¹*Minutes of the [British] Methodist Conference, 1943, Appendix III.*

formally shouldered its overseas missionary responsibility."² This, like the wording of the Constitution on which it is a gloss, seems to me to do less than justice to a lengthy and complex process, a process in which 1786 was only one, and by no means the "final," stage. Both statements are closer to denominational propaganda than to the facts of history.

The reason for singling out 1786 in this way is straightforward enough. As Birtwhistle points out, it was in that year that Thomas Coke issued his *Address to the Pious and Benevolent, proposing an annual subscription for the support of the missionaries in the Highlands and islands of Scotland, the Isles of Jersey, Guernsey and Newfoundland, the West Indies, and the Provinces of Nova Scotia and Quebec*. Moreover, at the British Conference that year Coke's proposals were formally accepted and as a first step three men were ordained by Wesley and sent out to serve in Nova Scotia and Antigua, the first officially designated "overseas missionaries." The facts are not in dispute. It is the proper significance of these events that must engage our attention here.

As things turned out, fierce and persistent storms, in which Coke was quick to see the hand of Providence, drove the missionary party off course. The Nova Scotians were left "as sheep without a shepherd," and all three missionaries were eventually stationed by Coke in the Caribbean. There is, it seems, a divinity that rough-hews our ends, shape them how we will, and one that is prepared to defy even the will of the Methodist Conference.

The question we need to ask is: did these events of 1786 amount to a "final" and "formal" acceptance by the Conference of its missionary responsibility? If so, how fully did the Conference implement its decision in the years that followed? If not, what further stages intervened before the church eventually formalized its missionary responsibility in the shape of a Missionary Society? As is usually the case, the actual course of history was rather more complicated and a good deal less tidy than the convenient summaries suggest. Let us be duly grateful for that: Where would we, as historians, be without the in-built complexity and untidiness of life? You can always detect a theologian in the act of writing history by the smooth surfaces and carefully rounded edges.

As any self-respecting historian should, let me seek a way forward from 1786 by taking a lengthy step back. It has often been pointed out that, by its very nature and from its earliest days, Methodism itself was essentially a *missionary* movement. Mission was its *raison d'être*. Indeed, the missionary perspective and commitment were there from the outset in John Wesley's own background and experience. There was a missionary emphasis in his family, passed on to him through his mother, and it was a natural expression of this that led the Wesley brothers to offer for Georgia

²A *History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, Vol. 3, (London: Epworth Press, 1983), 5,7.

in 1735.³ In contrast to Whitefield, John Wesley paid no further visits to America, but his experience as chaplain to the raw new colony and as would-be missionary to the American Indians, left its mark on him. For one thing, it deprived him of any idealistic illusions about the “noble savage” eagerly waiting for the gospel to be preached to him.⁴

On the other hand, Wesley’s celebrated claim to a “world parish,” though partly rhetorical, was also an expression of his gospel of “free grace”—of the “pure, universal love” of the “God and Father of all.” And sooner or later this Arminianism had to find expression in some form of world mission.

In practical, down-to-earth terms, however, the British Isles proved to be a large enough parish even for a man as indefatigable as Wesley. So, for the time being, the mission which he found himself leading and organizing had its inevitable and understandable limits. And as the movement spread, in the years after 1739, more and more widely throughout the British Isles, his hands were quite full enough. He could be forgiven for concluding that, like his Master, he “was not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” It would have been a superhuman figure indeed that looked beyond the many opportunities that presented themselves on his doorstep—not to mention the problems, difficulties and setbacks with which he had to grapple within the British Connexion.⁵ And even Wesley, whatever his 19th century devotees may have believed, was not quite superhuman. Is it at all surprising, then, if, as wider horizons began to open up, Wesley (and even more, his Methodist followers) drew back, feeling their hands quite full enough already? It took an impetuous Welshman, and one still on the right side of maturity, to start things moving—or rather, to persuade his fellow Methodists to clamber onto a bandwagon that was already beginning to move.

But Thomas Coke did not succeed at the first, or even the second attempt. A survey of some significant dates will serve to remind us that

³See Susanna Wesley’s reference to the Danish missionaries to Tranquebar in her letter to her husband, February 6, 1712, quoted by John Wesley in his *Journal* under the date August 1, 1742; and cf., Martin Schmidt, *John Wesley: a theological biography* Vol. 1 (London: Epworth Press, 1962), 62, 134–5; also *The Young Wesley: Missionary and Theologian of Missions* (London: Epworth Press, 1958).

⁴The most detailed and most scathing of Wesley’s references to the American Indians, born of disillusioned idealism, is in his “Sixth Savannah Journal,” paragraph 23 of the notes he drew up for the Georgia trustees, where he dismisses them as “gluttons, drunkards, thieves, dissemblers, liars.” See also *The Works of John Wesley* (Bicentennial Edition) *Sermons*, ed. A. C. Outler, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), Vol. 1, 89, Vol. 2, 580; and cf., *The Appeals*, ed. G. R. Cragg, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), 54. (But like any preacher worth his salt, Wesley could adduce an opposite point of view if it served his purpose).

⁵For these, see John A. Vickers, *Thomas Coke, Apostle of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1969), especially chapters 4 and 13, and *The Letters of John Pawson*, edited by J. C. Bowmer and J. A. Vickers, Vol 1 (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 1994).

events move of their own accord, and not simply as a result of the resolutions we pass or the decisions we take. Leaving aside Whitefield's continuing work on the American continent, Methodism first began to take root outside the British Isles in the 1760s. This was the decade in which the first societies associated with Wesley's Methodism were formed in Maryland and New York. (I skirt decorously around the vexed issue of whether Strawbridge or Embury was the first to begin preaching, having no desire to find myself under attack by rival gangs!) But prior to either of these, at the very beginning of that decade Nathaniel Gilbert, a prominent layman in Antigua, began to preach to his slaves and formed a Methodist society. The direct influence of Wesley can be traced quite clearly here, since Gilbert had heard him preach in Wandsworth during a visit to England a year or two before.⁶ Antigua, then, has a well-documented claim to the earliest Wesleyan Methodist society outside the British Isles. And what is of greater significance for our present purpose, this was the earliest case of Methodist preaching to non-European non-Christians (whom in less prissy days we would have called "heathens"). After Gilbert's death, his society was held together by two native women, a negress named Sophia Campbell and a mulatto named Mary Alley (for once, at least, the facts come up to feminist expectations), until the arrival of yet another layman, John Baxter the shipwright-cum-local-preacher from Chatham dockyard in 1778.⁷ All this is by no means peripheral to our present theme, and we should at least pause long enough to acknowledge the contribution of such lay women and men, especially as so much of our history on both sides of the Atlantic has been heavily clericalized.

Another significant landmark: In 1778, the very year in which Baxter sailed to Antigua to work in the dockyard at English Harbour, the Conference turned down an opportunity to establish a mission in West Africa. The circumstances are of considerable interest in themselves and can be related, thanks to the journal of Joseph Benson, who attended that year's Conference as a young man of 30.⁸

Some years earlier, two young princes from Calabar in West Africa had been carried off to America and sold into slavery. They eventually made their escape with the help of an English sea captain, who brought them to England. Their case was examined by Lord Chief-Justice Mansfield and they were set free. In Bristol they were befriended and helped by some of the Methodists and on returning to Africa sent a plea for preachers. Two Germans, members of the Bristol society, responded, but died soon

⁶John Wesley's *Journal* under the dates February 17 and November 29, 1758; G. G. Findlay and W. W. Holdsworth, *The History of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society* (London: Epworth Press, 1921), Vol. II, 29-31.

⁷Findlay and Holdsworth, Vol. II, 32-37; Vickers, 149-51.

⁸Quoted in James Macdonald, *Memoirs of the Rev. Joseph Benson* (London, 1822), 75-76; cf., Vickers, 132.

after arriving on the coast that was to become known as "the White Man's Grave." The Conference of 1778 considered a request for others to take their place. A letter had been sent to the younger preachers about the proposed African mission and there were at least two volunteers. One was John Prickard, a Welshman of 34;⁹ another may well have been the young Scotsman Duncan McAllum, to whom Wesley wrote discouragingly just before the Conference, "You have nothing to do at present in Africa. Convert the heathen in Scotland."¹⁰ A legacy of £500 was available to cover the expense of the mission, but the Conference decided—perhaps at Wesley's instigation—against it. (Prickard says it was "on account of the war", i.e., the War of Independence, so we can perhaps shift the blame to the Americans!) At any rate, the opportunity was lost.

Especially significant is the fact that this was the first Conference which we know for certain that the young Thomas Coke attended. It was not much more than twelve months since he had been turned out of his Somerset parish and thrown in his lot with the Methodists, and Wesley was already finding him a useful assistant. In fact, according to Tyerman, Coke was the one who had sent out the letter to the junior preachers. It is not difficult to imagine his disappointment as he listened to the discussion and witnessed the decision not to go ahead with the mission. But he had caught the vision and the seeds sown at that time were to bear fruit, not thirty- or sixty-, but a hundredfold. The most direct result, though not the earliest one, was an abortive and unsuccessful attempt to establish a mission among the Fula people of West Africa in 1796. Coke played a major role in this and was largely to blame for its failure. Impulsiveness was one of his weaknesses, and in this instance the memory of a lost opportunity nearly twenty years earlier may have spurred him into precipitate action.¹¹

Returning to 1778, in the more immediate future, however, Coke's hands were full enough with administrative and diplomatic chores which are no part of the present story. The next significant date, at which the vision of missions to the heathen world resurfaces, is 1784.

Some time at the end of the previous year (1783) Coke's growing enthusiasm for foreign missions spilled onto paper. In conjunction with a lawyer friend, Thomas Parker from York, he drew up what he called a

⁹Thomas Jackson (ed.), *Lives of the Early Methodist Preachers*, 4th edition (London, 1872), Vol. IV, 184–6.

¹⁰*Letters of John Wesley*, Standard Edition, edited by John Telford (London, 1931), Vol. IV, 316. Wesley was here echoing (whether consciously or not) a letter from Walter Churchey to Joseph Benson dated May 18, 1774: "John Prickard wants to go to missions work to America [among the] American Indians. He's needed here. Indians! Why go to America to look for them! Their black souls are visible at home." (Quotation supplied by Marsh W. Jones from a ms at the Methodist Archives Centre, Manchester).

¹¹Vickers, 287–97.

Plan of the Society for the Establishment of Missions among the Heathens. This was prefaced by an address to "all the real lovers of mankind" and early in the new year he was busy sending copies to as many of his more well-to-do acquaintances as might be expected to lend their support. Anyone subscribing two guineas was to be deemed a member of the society and when the *Plan* was printed a total of £66.3s had already been received.¹²

It is worth noting that this was eight years before William Carey set in motion the creation of a Baptist Missionary Society by his well-known *Enquiry*. Two other significant and connected facts may be noted: first, that Coke's appeal was not to the Methodist people alone, but to a wider public, or at any rate, to those affluent enough to be able to contribute guineas to the funds. Secondly, the *Plan* went out without Wesley's blessing (and quite possibly without his knowledge). This goes a long way towards explaining why it stalled almost before take-off. The inaugural meeting of the proposed Society may well have taken place on January 27 as announced, but the rest is silence. Wesley had other ideas for using the time, the energies, and the talents of his young colleague during this climactic year, as his long life drew towards a close. There was his Deed of Declaration, giving legal status to the British Conference: Coke was to be involved in drafting that. And in the wake of American independence, Wesley was concerned to provide more adequately for the spiritual needs of his trans-Atlantic followers, who, in spite of having Asbury still among them, he saw as "sheep without a shepherd." At any rate, with the dearth of Anglican clergy in the newly independent States, they lacked properly administered Sacraments. In this matter, too, he needed Coke's help and Wesley was not the man to be thwarted by rival enthusiasms. So the *Plan* of 1783 was stillborn.

Coke, however, in his turn was not one to be so easily discouraged. He duly sailed for America that autumn, set aside by Wesley, by a form of ordination, to be "Superintendent" of the American Methodists. The Methodist Episcopal Church was inaugurated at the Christmas Conference, with Asbury and Coke at its head. And quite soon, to Wesley's dismay, the Superintendents were calling themselves "Bishops." Coke travelled widely through the newly independent States and returned home converted to the Republican cause. But through all this, his vision of world mission persisted, and by 1786 he was ready to try again. Which is where we came in!

This time, having learnt from experience, Coke was careful to gain Wesley's blessing and support in advance. His *Address to the Pious and Benevolent*,¹³ like the *Plan* of 1783, was addressed to a wider audience

¹²Vickers, 133-35.

¹³See Vickers, 136-146, etc.

than just the people called Methodists. But that should be no cause for surprise. There were many potential supporters who were not members of a Methodist society, but whose money was no less welcome for that, and Coke had his eye on them as well as on the Methodist people. In any case, it would be anachronistic to draw a clear line of demarcation between Methodists and non-Methodists at this period. Ten years later, when a loyal address from the Methodist people was under consideration, one of the strongest arguments against it was that it would give the impression that the Methodists were a distinct and separate body, rather than (as they had set out to be) a spiritual leaven among Christians generally.¹⁴ The reality was increasingly different from this ideal, but the argument, it seems, still carried some weight even in 1796. Even more, back in the 1780s, Methodism did not see itself as a sect, still less as a church, so the question, "How widely should we appeal?" simply did not arise. It is not surprising that, when we examine the lists of missionary subscribers that have survived, many of them recruited personally by Coke, we find the names of well-to-do sympathizers alongside those of rank-and-file Methodists.

In endorsing Coke's proposals at the 1786 Conference, Wesley and the preachers left the responsibility for implementing them on his shoulders, but did nothing to make his task possible. This is a familiar political ploy. (Voting a good measure *down* calls for more courage and conviction than voting *for* it without also voting the funds to make it possible. But in Coke's day it was, perhaps, a slightly more novel tactic.) Coke already had other responsibilities on his hands (which included sorting out legal wrangles over the possession of some of the preaching houses and presiding every other year over the Irish Conference in Wesley's absence). In spite of these and further regular visits to America, Coke now directed the missions, first in a growing number of West Indian islands, then, in Africa, and finally, not to say "fatally," in Asia. But also, let us not forget, nearer home, for it was largely Coke's initiative that also gave rise to home mission stations in the early years of the 19th century.¹⁵

Two aspects of this task may be singled out: the raising of funds and the recruitment and supervision of missionaries. For a number of years Coke undertook these tasks almost single-handedly. A large part of his own and his first wife's estates went to make up the short-fall in fundraising. To the very end, Coke's last line of argument when faced by a Conference hesitant about financial implications was to dip further into his own pocket. More and more he undertook the "drudgery divine" of

¹⁴See letter from John Pawson to Charles Atmore, Feb. 24, 1796 (original at the Methodist Archives Centre, Manchester). That this was a long-standing dilemma for the Methodists is indicated by Charles Wesley's opposition to his brother's "humble address" to the King in 1744. (Charles Wesley, *Journal*, Vol. 1, 354-5).

¹⁵Vickers, Chap. 20.

begging, sometimes from house to house, for the missions to which he had committed himself. His greatest fear was of failing to provide adequately for the needs of those he had recruited and sent out to unknown, inhospitable, and often isolated stations. They were young men and his relationship with them was paternal in a way that no committee could emulate, as we shall see.

Finding the right people was far from easy, and it is noticeable that, as time passed, fewer and fewer of those who offered for overseas were already in the itinerant ministry in England. Undoubtedly, Coke was sometimes too sanguine in his appraisal of a volunteer and some proved unsuitable. At best, some went out in faith and found they could not cope with the climatic, cultural, and political odds against them. Some were simply the wrong people and lacked the essential qualities for success in this or any other situation. This largely explains the dismal failure of an attempted mission to the Fula people of West Africa in 1795. It is to his credit that Coke always stood by those who failed to make the grade, knowing something at first hand (as his fellow preachers back in England did not) of the realities of missionary life.

A third aspect of his missionary task was that of educating and enthusing those whose support he needed. So, from 1787 on, a succession of "Reports," addressed to "the subscribers for the support of the missions" appeared under Coke's name, describing what was being attempted and achieved in the Caribbean. If these ceased abruptly in 1790, it serves to remind us that Wesley's death in 1791 was an enormous boulder thrown into the Methodist pond. The British connexion was thrown into turmoil (from which some would say it has never emerged), and it says a great deal for Coke's dedication and tenacity that the work overseas was sustained in the face of such formidable obstacles.

During this period, Coke was still effectively shouldering the missionary burden alone. It is true that the Conference of 1790 (the last attended by Wesley himself) appointed a committee "for the management of our affairs in the West Indies."¹⁶ But this seems to have been little more than an empty gesture. Besides Coke himself, the committee was made up of preachers from as far away as Bristol, Wakefield, and Dublin, together with three missionaries already stationed in the Caribbean. It is hardly surprising that there is no evidence that the committee ever met. The next two years were preoccupied with problems nearer home following Wesley's death. But in 1793, faced with a burgeoning debt, the Conference authorized a "general collection" to be taken in each congregation for the West Indian work.¹⁷ But it was still left to Coke to implement this.

¹⁶Wesleyan Methodist *Minutes* (1812 edition), I, 231.

¹⁷*Minutes*, I, 278.

It is fair to comment that throughout this period Conference was mainly concerned to put a curb on the missionary spending, rather than to take up yet more openings. It can also be said that, with someone like Thomas Coke in the driving seat, dual control was highly desirable! Quite apart from the missionary debts, the connexional finances were in considerable disarray in these post-Wesley years. So official restraint was understandable and justified. Nonetheless, that the missions survived and even expanded during this period was thanks to Coke, not to the Conference. Whatever the official histories may say, the plain facts of the case lend no support to any picture of Methodism as a whole eager to sustain and extend what Coke had so far achieved.

In surveying these years after 1791, we must never lose sight of the turmoil and dissensions into which British Methodism was thrown by Wesley's death. There were many issues to be debated and resolved. In particular, with the Methodist people still quite closely related to the Church of England, rival forms of churchmanship threatened to split the Societies from top to bottom and did result in the first of several divisions, the Methodist New Connexion, in 1797. Coke was very much involved in these affairs and it was against such a background that he continued his missionary efforts.

By 1794 the strain was beginning to tell. We get a glimpse of the situation in a letter Coke sent to a number of the American preachers, apologising that they had heard nothing from him for a long time. He wrote:

When I inform you of the crowd of important business on my hands, I think you will excuse me. Since my return from the West Indies [i.e., in the early part of 1793], I have twice visited Holland, Ireland once, and the principal societies in England twice. Besides, I am now devoting much of my time in order to make myself a perfect of the French language, that we may exert our utmost efforts for the saving of souls in France, when in the providence of God peace is established. [We must not lose sight of the fact that all this activity was undertaken in the context of the Napoleonic wars.] Added to all this, the raising the necessary fund for our missions in the West Indies entirely lies upon me; and that great work now costs us about £1200 Sterling a year.¹⁸

In that year, 1794, Coke responded to growing demands for detailed accounts to be published. (Part of the context of this was scandal over missing money from the connexional funds, which, curiously, does not feature in the official histories. Methodism has always been good at hushing up unedifying details.) Coke proposed to issue regular financial statements from then on. But such were the demands on him that nothing seems to have come of this. The situation deteriorated year by year, cushioned from disaster only by Coke's own personal giving and frenzied begging. In 1797 Conference authorized a collection throughout the country "in

¹⁸Letter of July 23, 1794, sent to a number of the American preachers, copies of which survive in the libraries at Garrett-Evangelical Seminary and the Baltimore Methodist Historical Society.

every congregation where it is practicable" and a search for suitable missionary candidates was launched.¹⁹

The following spring (1798) a quite different "Committee of Finance" was set up in London. Its purpose was to increase financial support for the West Indian missions. This marked a new departure in several ways. All the members, apart from the President and Vice-President, were prominent London *laymen*, which suggests that it was seen as a circuit, rather than a connexional body. Certainly its activities were focussed on London, where members of the committee were to involve themselves in seeking contributions to the fund. To me, the minute book of this committee is one of the most telling documents in the Overseas Division's archives. Seven resolutions passed at its first meeting are recorded there, followed by: "8th. The reasons for forming the Committee." But no reasons are added and the record grinds to a halt at that point. After a blank page, the book begins to record the minutes of an entirely different committee appointed six years later. What caused this premature demise is open to conjecture, but for my money it speaks of the understandable reluctance on the part of the London laymen to take a hand in the demeaning and often fatiguing task of begging.²⁰

So supporting the missions remained a problem, especially as the connexion as a whole faced severe financial straits. The Conference that summer did its best to dodge the issue, reverted to its former stance and encouraged Coke to seek *private* subscriptions wherever he could find them.²¹ Methodism was still not ready to commit itself unequivocally to the missionary task.

Perhaps as a result of this, after another year, in 1799 the Conference once more had to address the growing problem of the missions and at last showed signs of being willing to take more definite responsibility for them. Coke was from now on designated its "agent" and was asked to draw up yet another appeal for the West Indian missions. More significantly, it was agreed that the "general collection" should henceforth be an annual one.²² Among all the milestones on the road we are surveying, this one seems to me to mark a significant shift of emphasis, from individual initiative to corporate responsibility. But for its full implementation we still have to wait another five years.

¹⁹*Minutes* I, 380.

²⁰Vickers, 272.

²¹*Minutes*, I, 417: 'Dr. Coke is desired to make private collections, as far as possible among our Societies and among strangers for the Missions, and the preachers are to assist him in this business; and in those Societies which the Doctor cannot visit, the preachers are to do what they can by private applications for this purpose. And this is to be considered as a substitute for the public collection, on account of the temporal circumstances of our Connexion.'

²²*Minutes*, II, 27.

The last of Coke's nine American visits, in 1803, took him out of England for over nine months, leaving the administration of the missions in the hands of two London-based preachers, Joseph Benson and George Whitfield (the Book Steward). The effects of Coke's absence were disastrous, and early in 1804 the preachers in the London Circuit felt impelled to take emergency measures.²³ A committee was formed, made up of the London preachers and the laymen who formed the Committee of Privileges. A letter went out to every missionary, instructing him, among other things, to keep a journal and send it in twice a year. Steps were taken to sort out the chaotic missionary accounts (an early opportunity for the young Jabez Bunting to show his mettle) and to provide the subscribers with regular financial statements.

Coke's reaction to this on his return from America was a mixture of alarm and resentment, and the Conference lost no time in trying to diffuse the crisis. Benson's committee was replaced by a new one. This time it was made up entirely of preachers and designated a "Committee of Finance and Advice." At the same time Coke's role as "Superintendent" was confirmed. But some very personal cross-currents complicated his relationship with this new Committee. A combination of Coke's volatile personality and his close (almost possessive) relationship with both missions and missionaries made for a tense and over-heated atmosphere. This is very clearly reflected in the letters he wrote to the Committee in London as he travelled around the country during the next weeks and months. At the same time, he was also at work on his commentary on the Bible, six ponderous volumes published between 1801 and 1807. And, as ever, he was frantically begging for subscriptions to the missions. So, among other things, he complained bitterly of the time-consuming necessity of liaising with the new committee while he was out of London.

Reading the correspondence that has survived from this period brings you very close to both personalities and events. It is easy to see both sides of the matter: on the one hand, the difficulties the Committee faced in trying to work with someone so used to going (and having) his own way; and on the other hand, Coke's frustration and his growing concern that bureaucratic control might have disastrous results for the missions, and even more, for the missionaries.

At first, however, all seemed well. Coke attended the first two meetings of the new Committee in August. But by September 7, he had retreated to Raithby Hall, the Lincolnshire home of Robert Carr Brackenbury, to work on his commentary. From there he wrote:

I do assure you that I am thankful to God that I have a Committee of finance and advice taken out of my own ministerial brethren, to assist me in the Missions. I am growing old and cannot live long, and there is some degree of uncertainty respecting

²³For this committee and its repercussions, see Vickers, 273-81.

my engagements and connections in the United States of America. . . . Consequently, that my leading brethren among the Preachers should be led of God into the proper missionary spirit by the Providences of God and their own reflections . . . is very desirable.

I do believe, Brethren, that you and I shall act in perfect harmony together, after repeated explanations of our views and sentiments, unless perhaps you may be under a temptation to sacrifice the work in a degree, unintentionally, to a plan of economy which, in the general, even in respect to missions, is excellent. And it may be, that your very frugal spirit may be necessary to check my too ardent zeal.²⁴

But within a few days Coke had begun to have serious misgivings. Quite apart from the amount of time needed to keep in touch with the Committee, he felt ousted from his superintendency and, in particular, deprived of direct contact with the missionaries for whose wellbeing he felt personally responsible. A flurry of letters followed, especially from Coke's side, in which his concern burst forth. The Committee had great difficulty in reassuring him of their eagerness to help, not hinder, the work and to find a way of co-operating acceptable to him.

Coke was anxious lest undue frugality should hamper the progress of the missions, and in particular dreaded the possibility that bills of exchange might not be honored. This could do untold damage to the missionaries in the eyes of local society. He undertook to honor any such bills personally, if money was not available in the fund and urged, "We must not want to hoard money in missionary matters, but mind only the present *Now*—that is, the present year."²⁵ (This was more biblical than practical!) A few weeks later he was arguing that the Methodist missions were, in fact, very economically run:

A confidential friend of mine, a very leading man indeed in the [London] Missionary Society, confessed with surprise . . . that their missions cost them *proportionally* . . . twice as much as ours. Please tell the Committee this from me. A body of men, however wise, excellent and holy, are in great danger of being too severe, especially about money matters.²⁶

But he was even more concerned when the severity was directed at one of the missionaries. Such a case was that of Robert Shepley who, after several years effective service in the Caribbean had just returned home, on his own initiative, with his health seriously affected by the climate. To make matters worse, the Bristol customs officers accused him of bringing contraband goods into the country. Coke was not only loud in his praise of the work Shepley had done, but was convinced that he had been "framed," and intervened on his behalf both with the Bristol authorities and with the Missionary Committee.²⁷ Not for nothing did he come to be

²⁴Letter to the Missionary Committee, September 7, 1804 (Vickers, 277-78).

²⁵Letter to the Missionary Committee, September 18, 1804 (Vickers, 283).

²⁶Letter to Robert Lomas, November 8, 1804 (Vickers, 282).

²⁷Vickers, 285-86.

known as the "father" of the missions. For one thing, unlike any of the London preachers, he had first-hand experience of the conditions in which the missionaries laboured.

Although a *modus laborandi* was worked out, the volatile mixture of resentment and concern which Coke felt meant that it was never easy for those appointed by the Conference to work with him; and from time to time in the closing decade of his life personal emotions surfaced again. It was only in the last few months before he sailed for the last time from an English port, this time to fulfill a long-cherished dream of beginning a mission in India, that the first formal steps were taken to set up a network of support for the missions he had initiated and sustained for so long. Even then, the initiative was a local, not a connexional one. In the autumn of 1813, a group of preachers and leading laymen in the West Riding of Yorkshire convened a meeting in Leeds to inaugurate a Leeds District Missionary Society, its main purpose being the financial support of the missions already in progress.²⁸

Other Districts followed this lead and Coke left for Asia knowing that structured support was at last being organized throughout the country. Even so, it was not until 1818 that the Conference formally co-ordinated this upsurge of local initiative in the form of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society.²⁹

One detail is worth noting. Both in Leeds in 1813 and connexionally in 1818, membership of the Society was defined in terms of those who subscribed to the mission funds, just as in Coke's earliest proposals back in the 1780s. It was not yet true that "every member of the Methodist Church as such is a member of the Methodist Missionary Society."

Methodism was thus one of the last denominations to found a missionary society, even though it had been one of the first in the field of missionary work overseas, thanks largely to one man's vision and persistence. I began with a quotation from the Constitution of our British Methodist Missionary Society: "From the beginning of Methodist Overseas Missions at the Conference of 1786, the initiation, direction and support of Overseas Missions have been undertaken by the Conference." How far that claim, even if written on tablets of gold, is justified, and how far it is an official highjacking of the credit due to one man, has to be judged in the light of the facts.

²⁸Findlay and Holdsworth, Vol. 1, 38-54.

²⁹Findlay and Holdsworth, I, 73-77.