

THOMAS COKE: MAN OF LETTERS

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In my more-than-half-a-century pursuit of Dr. Thomas Coke, his surviving correspondence has played a major part. Nothing else brings one closer to his personality, thoughts and moods on a day-to-day level. With a few exceptions the letters were written with a specific purpose and to be read by a known correspondent. For that very reason, as historical evidence they must be read in the light of the passing moment and the particular purpose for which each was penned. Whether or not we trace it to his Welsh temperament, Coke was one who unmistakably “wore his heart on his sleeve,” who spoke all too often in the heat of the moment and lived sometimes to regret his words. Wesley’s famous evaluation was a shrewd and frank one: “Dr. Coke and I are like the French and the Dutch. The French have been compared to a flea, and the Dutch to a louse. I creep like a louse, and the ground that I get I keep; but the Doctor leaps like a flea, and is sometimes obliged to leap back again.”¹ There are examples in both Coke’s life and his correspondence which illustrate this.

This does not mean, however, that we can always take his words at face value or his sincerity for granted. There were those in his own day, as there have been ever since, ready to question his motives and to accuse him in particular of ambition in his service of Methodism. The possibility of hypocrisy can never be dismissed out of hand, even (or especially?) where he is baring his soul, as in this passage to one of the American preachers, written towards the end of his return voyage in July, 1789:

I do assuredly love you, my dear Brother, with a pure love, fervently; and do entreat you most earnestly to pray for me. I am a much feebler creature than perhaps you may imagine me to be; and am utterly unworthy of the honours which God and my Brethren have heaped upon my head.²

All the same, the letters are all the more valuable to us as historical documents by virtue of being written from the heart of significant events, and not just in retrospect. So we can catch glimpses, sometimes conflicting and contradictory, of what was happening through the eyes of those directly involved in the events as they occurred. Genuine history never comes neatly pre-packaged. It was Coke’s fate to be at the center of events in the decades before and after the death of John Wesley, a period during which Methodism was developing from a spiritual movement to become a Church in its own

¹ Jonathan Crowther, *Life of the Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D* (1815), 233-234.

² *The Letters of Dr. Thomas Coke*, ed. John A. Vickers (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2013), 109; hereafter *Letters*.

right. That he was involved in what was happening (though in quite different ways and at a different pace) on both sides of the Atlantic makes this all the more meaningful.

Wesley's ordinations in Bristol early in September, 1784, were arguably his most provocative and controversial act, especially as they had implications, from the orthodox point of view, for the validity of the Methodist ministry which stems from them. This is not the place to revisit the controversy in detail, but merely to examine the light shed on the events by what Coke wrote about them. We learn from a letter Coke wrote to Thomas Williams that as early as October, 1783, he was envisaging a visit to America.³ Otherwise, his evidence is regrettably limited and ambiguous, being confined to two surviving letters to Wesley the following summer,⁴ plus a few passing references later on. Much ink has been spilt attempting to determine whether the blame for Wesley's actions should be laid at his own door or conveniently transferred to his minion, Thomas Coke. Only the recovery of any missing correspondence between the two men during that summer, or other evidence on the discussions they may have had, could finally settle the matter. In the absence of such contextual evidence, we risk interpreting Coke's letters in the light of our assessment of his character on other grounds; and more than one writer, convinced of his ambitious nature, have done just that. Nowhere in Coke's correspondence is it more important to let his words speak for themselves:

If someone in whom you could place the fullest confidence & whom you think likely to have sufficient influence & prudence & delicacy of conduct for the purpose were to go over & return, you [would] then have a source of sufficient information to determination any points or propositions.

In elaboration, he then urges three points:

1st that you might have fuller information concerning the state of the country and the societies than epistolary correspondence can give you. 2^{dly} That there may be a cement of union remaining after your death between the societies of Preachers in the two countries, & 3^{dly} Because (if the awful event of [your] death [should] happen, before my removal to the world of spirits) it is almost certain . . . that I [should]. have business enough of indispensable importance on my hands in these Kingdoms.⁵

I have attempted elsewhere to argue for a different interpretation of the known facts⁶ and must focus here on one main point. Coke's letters in 1784 are nothing if not pragmatic in his consideration of the reasons for pressing for Wesley's authorization by the most unambiguous and traditional means, that of the "laying on of hands." Having first argued for this as "the most scriptural" and "primitive way," his reasons are practical and realistic ones. As a relative newcomer still in his thirties and hitherto a stranger unknown among the American Methodists, and, moreover, with the War of Independ-

³ *Letters*, 45.

⁴ *Letters*, 51-54, 56-58.

⁵ *Letters*, 52-53.

⁶ Thomas Coke, *Apostle of Methodism* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1969; rpt. 2013), ch. 5.

ence still painfully recent, he is aware that he will need all the authority Wesley can confer on him if he is to fulfil the task Wesley has in mind. In particular, he will need to tread tactfully (perhaps warily even) in dealing with Francis Asbury, who by this time had established a position of authority largely independent of Wesley himself among the republican-minded American preachers. So Coke's suggestions to Wesley are essentially expeditious ones.

As a "Methodist Anglican" (or "Anglican Methodist") Coke's attitude towards the Church in which he had been reared and ordained vacillated over the years, often enough for him to be likened by his critics to a weathervane. There was in particular the occasion in 1791, towards the end of his fourth visit to America, when he learned of the death of John Wesley. While cutting short his stay and preparing to hasten home, he saw fit to approach the Episcopalian bishops William White and Samuel Seabury with a plan to reconcile the Anglicans and Methodists in America. His proposals were not rejected out of hand, at least by White, but were swept aside by the tide of events. By the time this exchange of letters came to light nearly two decades later, Coke's views had suffered a further sea change and he was obliged to defend himself in a letter to the General Conference of 1808. Once again the issue of reordination of Methodist preachers came to the fore, and once again his attitude was essentially a pragmatic, quite as much as an ecclesiological one. He was at least following Wesley's own view in declaring, "I never, since I could reason on those things, considered the doctrine of the uninterrupted apostolic succession of bishops as at all valid or true." But his essential concern was not whether reordination of Methodist preachers amounted to a denial of their existing ministerial orders, so much as what would best serve the cause of the gospel in America.⁷

For a more positive attitude to the age-old practice of ordination we may turn to a letter Coke wrote to William Thompson, veteran among Wesley's itinerants who, as a moderate among the preachers, was the first to be elected as President of the Conference after Wesley's death. The British Conference of 1793 had decided to abandon the distinction between ordained and unordained itinerants. This and its implications for future Methodist ordinations became an issue for debate, to which Coke's letter of April 21, 1794, was a contribution. Coke wrote:

Without a debate, we laid aside a mode prescribed by the oracles of God and practised by the universal Church. It is with us a point that cannot on any terms possible be dispensed with. We will not run counter to the Oracles of God, and the universal practice of the Christian Church, even to prevent a division It will not do to tell us that the inward Kingdom is all in all. For we pay deep regard to modes prescribed by the Oracles of God and the Universal practice of the Christian Church.⁸

⁷ *Letters*, 536-540; cf. his letters to Asbury and to Ezekiel Cooper, *Letters*, 540-542, 546-548. For Wesley's views on "apostolic succession," see his letter to Charles Wesley, August 19, 1785, in *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, ed. John Telford, (London: Epworth, 1909-1916), VII, 284.

⁸ *Letters*, 183.

Coke's propensity for speaking his mind, rather than keeping a discreet silence goes a long way to justifying Wesley's comparison of him to a flea. In other respects, too, it is easy to understand why he found himself the object of suspicion and resentment both before and after 1791. For one thing, Coke was a latecomer on the Methodist scene, and still relatively young amongst those veteran itinerants who had borne the burden and heat of the day. Coupled with this there was growing resentment among the itinerants of Wesley's insistence on retaining control of connexional issues, and Coke's role in acting as Wesley's deputy focussed much of that resentment upon him. A number of contentious issues were coming to a head, and he was called upon to deal with problems that the aging Wesley would have dealt with in person in his earlier years.

Resentment was particularly inevitable in the case of "brother Charles," who had increasingly opposed the drift of Methodism from the Established Church and whose worst fears seemed vindicated by the 1784 ordinations. Perhaps inevitably, he saw Coke as a young upstart who had usurped his own former position as his brother's confidant and joint leader of the movement. As is well known, his resentment found utterance in a series of bitterly sarcastic verses, far removed in spirit and mood from the hymns he is still remembered for. Still smarting at the discovery of his brother's clandestine ordinations under his very nose, he wrote to him a year later:

When once you began ordaining in America, I knew, and you knew, that your Preachers here would never rest till you ordained them. You told me they would separate by and by. The Doctor tells us the same. His Methodist episcopal Church in Baltimore was intended to beget a Methodist episcopal Church here. You know he comes, armed with your authority, to make us all Dissenters.⁹

But Charles Wesley was far from being alone in his resentment of young Coke. However little they felt they had in common with Charles, the rank and file of the preachers had their own grounds for similar misgivings. Coke's social and cultural background as an Oxford graduate distanced him from them, however hard he might try to gain their confidence and to use his influence with Wesley to serve their interests. In his earliest Methodist years he had shown one of his shortcomings in a spate of heresy-hunting, accusing Joseph Benson and others of Arianism in their understanding of Christ's relationship to God the Father. This was, at the very least, rash and indiscreet on his part, as several of the letters he exchanged with Benson and Samuel Bradburn in 1779 demonstrate.¹⁰ For example, his November 10, 1779, letter to Bradburn of begins:

I have recd. (I cannot say with pleasure) your letter: the fashionable way of talking & writing, which you take notice of, arising from a too fashionable opinion, and the custom of wresting Scripture-terms from their original simplicity . . . I will not wear a mask, and therefore I will frankly own to you, that it is my full resolution to bring

⁹ Letter of August 14, 1785, quoted in Thomas Jackson, *Life of Charles Wesley* (London: John Mason, 1841), ii. 403.

¹⁰ *Letters*, 16-23.

this important point on the carpet at the next Conference.¹¹

One particular occasion on which Coke's involvement earned him suspicion and resentment was the drafting of the "Deed of Declaration" early in 1784. His legal training¹² enabled him to share in the drafting of the text of the deed and to consult with legal advisers, and specifically with Wesley's London solicitor, William Clulow. But there were those among the preachers who resented being left out of the list of those named as forming the "Legal Hundred," the legally recognised Conference after Wesley's death. In sending out copies of the deed, Coke found it necessary to deny the rumor that he had been involved in the selection, declaring: "I had no hand in nominating or omitting any of my Brethren."¹³ Wesley himself confirmed this by stating laconically, "*Non vult, non potuit.*" But the suspicion lingered on and in 1790, Coke had to deny it again in his "Address to the Methodist Society . . . on the Settlement of the Preaching Houses."¹⁴

Among British Methodists, insofar as Coke is still remembered at all, it is as the "Father of Overseas Missions." That this is fully justified is nowhere clearer than in his correspondence with Thomas Williams and, later, in his closing years, with the Conference missionary committee. It rests on two premises. In the first place, it was his initiative—and his alone—which launched the earliest missions. It was he who issued the first "Plan" for a mission "among the Heathens" in 1783-1784, and who followed it up two years after that fell on stony ground with an "Address to the Pious and Benevolent" which sought support for the launch of missions not only abroad but in parts of the British Isles so far untouched by the Methodist movement. As a result, the first missionaries were sent out to the Caribbean and Coke found himself carrying not only the administrative consequences of this momentous step, but the responsibility for raising the funds to sustain it. He did so mainly in two ways: firstly by digging increasingly into his own resources, and secondly by financial appeals, both printed and in person.

More than fifty of Coke's surviving letters are addressed to Thomas Williams of Brecon, a lawyer related to Coke by marriage, to whom he entrusted his financial and other business affairs once he had left his native town. Once his life of almost ceaseless travelling on both sides of the Atlantic had begun, there was no other way in which he could have dealt with these personal affairs. It could nevertheless be argued that these letters to Williams deal so exclusively with mundane and long outdated matters that they do not warrant the space they occupy in his collected correspondence. This would be a false conclusion on at least two counts: firstly because they throw detailed light on the funding of the earliest years of Methodism's overseas

¹¹ *Letters*, 16.

¹² It is not clear what was required from him for the award of an Oxford DCL, but, however minimal it may have been by today's standards, it clearly stood him in good stead on this occasion and highlighted the gulf between him and the rank and file of the itinerants.

¹³ *Letters*, 50.

¹⁴ See my *Thomas Coke: Apostle of Methodism*, 62-65.

missions and secondly because they reveal aspects of Coke's personality that would otherwise remain invisible.

Coke had inherited from his father, if not a substantial fortune, then at least a modest competence. This was steadily eroded, as his business letters to Williams show in some detail. They make clear, for example, that in 1784, Coke was planning to finance his first visit to America out of his own pocket, even though he was going as Wesley's representative; and he did this, not for the last time, by realising some of his assets.¹⁵ As the missions proliferated, they came to depend more and more on his personal support as well as on the fruits of his begging tours. And when the missionary finances were at stake, he could be quite ruthless with those debtors who were slow to pay, like the landlord of the Shoulder of Mutton Inn, who in January, 1790, was five or six years in arrears. On August 30, 1790, he was still pressing Williams on this outstanding debt:

I find it expedient to make up the sum of one hundred pounds before I sail for the West Indies & America, which will be the beginning of October if it please Divine Providence. I therefore beg the favour of you to transfer the inclosed Turn-pike bonds in the best manner you can, and also the Turnpike writings which you have now in your hands. I'll also beg of you to send me the year's Interest of the mortgage. And I'll entreat you to oblige the Landlord of the Shoulder of Mutton, Howell (by kind means if these will do, otherwise by other proper means) to pay me through you the Interest now due to me.¹⁶

And on at least one occasion, he found it necessary to put pressure on Williams himself, writing from Dublin on April 8, 1795:

A particular circumstance renders it expedient for me to entreat the favour of you to pay me the Year's Interest of the Coity-Mortgage, due last February, now. A Bill of £150, is just come from the West Indies on account of our Missions in those Islands. Those Missions have but £80 at present in Bank; and therefore I must lend £70 to take up the Bill. I shall therefore take it as a favour, if you will send the £10 on my account as soon as possible, to Mess^{rs} Down, Thornton, &c. Bankers, directing y^r Letter to Henry Thornton Esq^r. MP, Bartholomew-Lane, London; & desiring them to acknowledge the receipt of y^r Letter

Reading between the lines, we gather that Thomas Williams was at this time under some financial constraint, causing Coke to write again more urgently on May 13, 1795.¹⁷

By the time he married Penelope Goulding Smith in 1805, Coke's own resources were running out and it would be rash to deny that one of his motives for marrying may have been her fortune. At any rate, it soon began to be devoted to the same cause.

As the missions and their cost grew year by year, another burden went alongside this personal contribution: that of appealing for financial support, often by begging from door to door in whatever town he found himself. This could be exhausting and time-consuming, and it is hardly surprising that he

¹⁵ *Letters*, 59-62.

¹⁶ *Letters*, 116, 124.

¹⁷ *Letters*, 196-197, 201-202.

found it almost impossible to persuade any of the itinerants to follow his example, including those in London who formed the “Missionary Committee of Finance and Advice” from 1804 on. Their task, as they saw it, was to curb and bring under control, the spiralling costs to which he had committed the Methodist people as well as himself. But for Coke himself, who had for so many years maintained the infant missions single-handed, this meant devoting countless hours to keeping in touch with the Committee by letter, wherever in the British Isles he happened to be. This has left us with a valuable epistolary record (though one-sided, as the Committee’s letters do not seem to have survived) from which we gain a day-by-day view of the extra burden it imposed on Coke and his frustration at having to carry the Committee with him at every step.

The earliest letters in the series illustrate this clearly enough. In August, 1804, Coke was still in London and so was able to attend the first two meetings of the Committee. But by the beginning of September he had left for Raithby Hall in Lincolnshire, where he had a retreat as the guest of his friends the Brackenburys and could give himself to working on his Bible Commentary. But it did not take long for a letter from the Committee to provide an unwelcome distraction. His reply began positively enough—perhaps a shade too much so in view of what followed.

I do assure you I am thankful to God that I have a committee of finance and advice to assist me in the missions. I am growing old, and cannot live long; and there is some degree of uncertainty respecting my engagements in America. Consequently, that my brethren should be led of God into the proper missionary spirit, is very desirable.

However, the paragraphs that follow make it clear that Coke already had misgivings:

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

You observe in your Letter, “The brethren do not wish to clog the wheels of the missions, but to co-operate with Dr. Coke to promote them to the utmost.” Methinks I would not take ten thousand pounds for that sentence. I bless God and thank you for it. We shall go hand in hand together; and neither you nor I would divide the child, if it were to save our lives.

Just three day later, however, he was writing again, following three nights in which his misgivings had robbed him of sleep. His language had already become much more fraught with doubts about the future. He was ready to concede that the missionaries’ official letters should be directed to the Committee. But over the years his relationship with the young men he had recruited for the mission field had developed to the point where he could not refrain from adding: “Only let them be informed that they may correspond with me as (shall I say?) their friend and father, in the most friendly and familiar manner. If this be not the case, I shall consider myself as entirely

laid aside.”¹⁸

Although a *modus operandi* was soon worked out and conveyed to the missionaries already in the field, the difficulty of collaborating with a committee based in London and with quite different priorities was one with which Coke continued to struggle throughout the last decade of his life. This is spelled out in detail in the surviving records. It is reflected particularly clearly in an exchange of notes in the very last days before the missionary party prepared to embark from Portsmouth for Asia in December, 1813. Coke found himself having to justify minor expenditures on such items as pillow cases, towels and “pewter chamber pots” for each of his companions.¹⁹

Step by step, and in the face of Conference indifference or even opposition, Coke had over the years launched and financed the earliest missions both abroad and at home. Now at last, in 1813, as he prepared to accompany the missionary party to Asia in person, the first steps were taken to put the missionary finances on a firmer footing. But once again, the initiative did not come from—and the responsibility was not that—of Conference or its missionary committee. A group of preachers and leading laymen in the Leeds District, recognising the very real problem that would be created by Coke’s departure, convened a meeting at the “Old Boggart House” in October of that year, at which a “Leeds District Missionary Society” was formed. For the first time effective means for financially supporting the work were put in place and other Districts quite quickly followed this initiative. But it was not until 1817, that the Conference itself took up the matter connexionally and determined that what became the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society should be formed to co-ordinate what had begun in Leeds five years earlier.

These clearly established facts do not tally with several official statements in more recent times on the origins of British Methodist overseas work. In 1943, the Constitution of the Methodist Missionary Society claimed unequivocally that “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.” In 1983, in a definitive account of British Methodist overseas missions, Allen Birtwhistle, echoes this claim: that with the publication of Coke’s *Address to the Pious and Benevolent* in 1786 “the Methodist Missionary Society was launched.”²⁰ This official propaganda was far removed from the historical facts.

It did not help that from 1784, Coke found his loyalties, like his commitment, divided between two spheres of Methodist activity: in the newly independent United States and back home in the British Isles. We get a glimpse of this in a letter sent from Bristol to a number of the American itinerants, including Ezekiel Cooper, on July 23, 1794:

¹⁸ *Letters*, 358.

¹⁹ Committee memorandum with Coke’s annotations, is in the library of Wesley College, Bristol; future location currently uncertain.

²⁰ N. Allen Birtwhistle, “Methodist Missions,” *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, vol. 3 (London: Epworth, 1983), 5; elaborated on p. 7: “From 1786 . . . the Conference finally and formally shouldered its overseas missionary responsibility.”

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 have twice visited Holland [over the matter of persecution on the Dutch island of St. Eustatius], Ireland once, and the principal Societies in England twice Added to all this, the raising the necessary funds for our Missions in the West Indies, entirely lies upon me; [and] that great work now costs us about 1200£ Sterling a year.²¹

Similarly, in a letter in 1801, he protests that he is still “theirs” and intends to set off for America in about eighteen months’ time:

In America only I consider myself at home. I have been kept abroad for several years past by the will of God. However, I shall endeavour to wind everything round, so that, if the Lord will but suffer me, I may close my career among you I do assure you, it would be my supreme earthly delight, if I know my own heart, to hide myself in your woods and labour and dwell among you.²²

Subsequent events, however, threw doubts on how well at that time he “knew his own heart.” Late in 1804, he met Penelope Goulding Smith; she became his “supreme earthly delight” and by the next April they were married. Another letter informed the American preachers of this change in his situation, but still did not entirely rule out the possibility of his settling in America:

My most beloved wife is also equally willing [to accompany me to America]. She is indeed a twin soul to myself. Never, I think, was there a more perfect congeniality between two human beings, than between us.

But, on the other hand, I should be the most ungrateful of husbands if I trifled with her health or feelings. It therefore does not appear at all probable that I shall make you another transitory visit I cannot think of leaving my dear wife for so long a time as a transitory visit would require; nor can I think of making her cross the Atlantic ocean twice for such a purpose. If we come to you at all, we come for life. But if we come for life, we come under the most express, permanent, and unalterable conditions; except in the case of the death of Bishop Asbury, in which case I should consider it as my duty to sail for America, as soon as possible.²³

He continued to correspond with the General Conference and with individual American preachers on this matter. His most detailed and explicit statement of his side of the case was in a letter to the New York Annual Conference on January 6, 1807.²⁴ In retrospect, he had clearly come to believe that during his American visits he had deliberately been shackled by Asbury and prevented from exercising his episcopal authority; and he protested that, if he came merely as a preacher, it would be to sacrifice his extensive usefulness back in Europe. Rightly or wrongly, Asbury, despite increasing age and disability, clearly could not bring himself to share even a part of his responsibility with someone who, despite nine visits, was much less acquainted with either the American preachers or the Methodist people, and in any case was still a British citizen. The publication a few months later of Coke’s letter to Bishop White and Coke’s letter of January 29, 1808, in his own defence set the seal on what was already a *fait accompli*.

²¹ *Letters*, 185.

²² Letter of February 28, 1801, in *Letters*, 293.

²³ *Letters*, 409-410.

²⁴ *Letters*, 486-493.

Coke's struggle to fulfil the demands and expectations of Methodism on both sides of the Atlantic was, in retrospect, an impossible task and doomed to failure. But that he should continue to attempt it for so long, and in such circumstances, is revealing of the man behind the public figure.

The death of his second wife Ann (née Loxdale) on December 5, 1812, plunged Coke into a period of intense grief, from which he emerged only by the return to a vision he had cherished for thirty intensely busy years. Early in 1784, he had begun a correspondence with Charles Grant of the East India Company, on the feasibility of a mission to the Indian sub-continent. Other ventures had intervened; but now, in the wake of bereavement, he began to declare himself dead to all except the mission to Asia that was already envisaged. As a result of his bereavement, he determined to accompany in person the young missionaries he was beginning to recruit and on the last day of 1813, they embarked at Portsmouth for by far the longest voyage even Coke himself had undertaken. A journey which today would take just a few hours by air then involved months of hazardous sailing, largely out of contact with the "outside" world. Coke's increasing frustration surfaces in the letters he began to write, sometimes in multiple copies, to the missionary committee and to the Conference itself back home, begging for reinforcements. Even he began to recognize the enormity of the task presented to his handful of recruits preparing to win India's millions for Christ. Yet the hope that the Conference would respond positively to this last appeal must have seemed slight even to his eyes.²⁵

In any event, Coke did not live to learn the result of his pleading. After four months at sea, on the morning of May 3, 1814, he was found dead on the floor of his cabin and was buried beneath the waters of the Indian Ocean later that day.

²⁵ For the letters written during this final voyage—or at least those that found their way back to England and have survived—see *Letters*, 710-726.