

Coke Lecture

When Abraham Lincoln died, his Secretary of State for War Edwin Stanton said that he was now “for the ages”. That is, he belonged to humanity in general rather than to mid-19th century America in particular.

We can't make a similar claim for Thomas Coke but the 200th anniversary of his death might be a good moment to re-evaluate him. For all his considerable achievements, he's had a bad time within his own community. Again and again desultory and accusatory words have been common as commentators have tried to assess his importance. This is what Henry Rack wrote in his magisterial life of John Wesley *Reasonable Enthusiast*:

Coke became a highly controversial and suspect figure within Methodism at the time, and has remained so ever since in Methodist historiography. The picture often given is of a man too busy, too interfering, taking too much upon himself and, above all, too ambitious. He was seen as manipulating the aged (and perhaps even senile) Wesley for his own ends, which allegedly included gaining a major influence in running the connexion during Wesley's lifetime, with the ultimate ambition of succeeding him as leader after his death. In addition, or as an alternative, he appeared to be nursing episcopal ambitions within Methodism or, if necessary, within Anglican missions overseas. One of the most conspicuous as well as attractive aspect of Coke's concerns was his passion for overseas missions, yet even here he was accused of ambition, pushiness and at best an irresponsible tendency to act without counting the cost.

Rack did his best to rescue Coke's reputation from such scathing and dismissive interpretations but, on the grounds that there's no smoke without fire, lingering suspicion remains. I believe that something has to be done about that and I'm glad to have an opportunity to do so today. I feel “sympathique”.

I feel very connected to Thomas Coke. We were both born and raised in Wales before our guiding star led us elsewhere. We were neither of us cradle Methodists – we came to that later in life. Coke made a number of visits to the Caribbean where I would one day be ordained and, of course, to America whose historic sites (from Savannah to Baltimore) I have visited from time to time over the years. Though he didn't step into John Wesley's shoes as Methodism's supremo in 1791, he did follow him as superintendent of Wesley's Chapel where I, as the 59th person to hold that position, now find myself successor to both of them. And the two of us came to occupy John Wesley's chair as President of the Methodist Conference. What's more, I've met the same kind of incomprehension on the part of people who suspect me of rocking the boat, stitching up deals with the Anglicans, having ideas above my station – just as Coke did. Yet, for all those points of contact, I have felt something of the will-o-the-wisp about Thomas Coke as I've prepared this lecture over the last few weeks. There's so much of him to look at and yet so little of his deeper self to engage with. I'm just hoping that what follows will somehow help to bring his character to life.

Before entering into any detail, it's important for us to be up front about the fact that he "got up people's noses" – he was, after all, clever and that's never a good thing in Methodist circles. He was a "parvenu", an upstart. His verbal outbursts were often glib and undigested. He was drawn into a close relationship with John Wesley and this allowed people to suspect that he nurtured a secret ambition to succeed him. He was John Wesley's "fixer" – he was to his master what Thomas Cromwell was to King Henry VIII.

The great factor that underlies all my understanding of Thomas Coke has rarely been given proper prominence in public or scholarly assessments of him. I want to suggest that, virtually alone, he bridged the gap between Wesley and a more organised Wesleyan Methodism virtually alone. He was working in the dark. He was walking through no-man's land. There were few fixed landmarks to guide him through the morass. It meant he was often thrashing around, making things up as he went along, trying to satisfy insatiable demands coming to him from all quarters. There was undoubtedly a period of great flux in the years leading up to (and following) 1791. For me, the big and overriding question is a simple one. What would emerging Methodism have done without a Thomas Coke present to hold things together?

That question is far removed from supposing that he should have got the job. As a successor to John Wesley he'd probably have had a similar ride to David Moyes following Alex Ferguson. But there must have been more to Coke than those dismissive and contentious remarks, something we can carry forward in a more positive way.

Let's start with the most obvious. He was "the father of Methodist missions." No-one can dispute that.

James Buckley (1770-1839) certainly didn't. In the mid 1790's this Lancashire lad was a young Circuit minister living first at Swansea and then at Brecon. During those years, Coke had already completed twelve of his eighteen crossings of the Atlantic. He'd begun to gain a reputation as an intrepid missionary. He had made four visits to the West Indies, five to America, and was contemplating setting up work in Sierra Leone and France. This impressed the young Buckley enormously and the fact that he (Buckley) lived in Coke's home city, gave some immediacy to the relationship he felt with the missionary.

By 1829 (fifteen years after Coke's death) Buckley was in no doubt. Whatever Coke's contemporaries had felt or said about him, Buckley (by now back in Brecon as Chairman of the District) was determined to give Coke the honour he deserved. Buckley, we should remember, had launched the October 1813 missionary meetings in Leeds and had become a key figure in the development of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society in the years following that. Coke was, in his mind, the architect of Methodist missions. All the dross had fallen away. The Brecon boy had made good. No wonder it was Buckley who saw to it that a suitably worded plaque should be mounted on a wall within the Priory Church (subsequently Brecon Cathedral) in Coke's home town.

We all know the later development of this missionary work. Today there are 70 million Methodists worldwide. At Wesley's Chapel where we frequently remember John Wesley's word about the world being his parish, we note that the world, taking Wesley at his own word, seems to have come to live in his parish. 55 nations are represented in our congregation. 24 mother tongues other than English can be heard. Our leadership team includes people from Korea, Guyana, St Vincent, USA, Southern Africa, Haiti, Fiji and Ghana.

Around the world, schools and universities, hospitals, agricultural projects, social and political programmes and various efforts at theological and spiritual development can be pinpointed for their excellence.

It was Coke who did so much of the early pioneering – and he did so pretty much on his own. He raised and spent money, he forked out fortunes from his own pocket, he set about awakening interest in missionary work and finding missionaries with no precedent to work with, no rules of engagement to follow, and the negative force of people's opinions to suffer and combat. It was (and should be recognised as) heroic. So this is the very first point to make.

The writing of a global world view into the very character of the Methodist people is directly attributable to Thomas Coke and is part of his enduring legacy.

Then there's the question of Methodism in America. It's one thing to study the activity and output of Thomas Coke through the nine trips he made to North America. But a different way of looking at the same period would be to ask the question: "What would have happened to American Methodism without Coke?" As I thumbed through the "Life of Wesley" written jointly by Thomas Cooke and Henry Moore and published in 1792, I read (on page 437) how, in the aftermath of the American War of Independence, the Methodists were left with Francis Asbury as the only legitimate representative of official Methodism. Other denominations would offer the sacraments to Methodist members but only if they agreed to transfer their allegiance from the Methodist Church to their own bodies. Church of England clergy had left the country in large numbers leaving Episcopalian congregations bereft of pastoral oversight. In these circumstances, can anyone wonder about the plea that was directed towards Wesley for help.

We all know about the famous ordinations that took place in August 1784 at 4.00am in Bristol. But how many of us know about Coke's letter to John Wesley written before he sailed for America? It was dated August 9th 1784 and seems to be a simple request for a clear statement by John Wesley that the ordinations he (Coke) was being asked to perform in America were being done with the full and direct authority of Wesley himself. Coke had seen a letter that seemed to suggest that Francis Asbury would resist anyone sent by Wesley "to take any part of the superintendency of the work invested in him". Coke continued thus:

I am determined not to stir a finger (against the authority of Asbury) without his consent, unless sheer necessity obliges me; but rather to lie at his feet in all things. But as the journey is long, and you cannot spare me often, and it is well to provide against all events, and an authority formally received

may be disputed, if there be any opposition on any other account; I could therefore earnestly wish you would exercise that power in this instance, which I have not the shadow of a doubt but God hath invested you with for the good of the Connexion. I think you have tried me too often to doubt whether I will in any degree use the power you are pleased to invest me with further than I believe absolutely necessary for the prosperity of the work.... In short, it appears to me that everything should be prepared, and everything proper to be done, that can possibly be done, this side of the water....

The tone of this letter hardly seemed to suggest an overbearing ambition or illusions about episcopal grandeur on the part of Thomas Coke. And what about the Book of Discipline with its statement on the Episcopacy as written in 1789? Whatever historians or others may have to say, this was the situation widely accepted by that date (remember it's a mere four years since the original Baltimore Christmas Conference of 1784):

In the year 1784, the Rev. John Wesley, who under God, has been the father of the great revival of religion now extending over the earth by means of the Methodists, determined at the intercession of multitudes of his spiritual children on this continent, to ordain ministers for America, and for the purpose sent over three regularly-ordained clergy: but preferring the Episcopal mode of church-government to any other, he solemnly set apart by the imposition of his hands and prayer, one of them, viz. Thomas Coke, Doctor of Civil Law, late of Jesus College, in the University of Oxford, for the Episcopal office; and having delivered to him letters of Episcopal orders, commissioned and directed him to set apart Francis Asbury, then general assistant of the Methodist Society in America, for the said Episcopal office, he the said Francis Asbury being first ordained Deacon and Elder. In consequence of which, the Said Francis Asbury was solemnly set apart for the said Episcopal office, by prayer and the imposition of hands of the said Thomas Coke, other regularly-ordained Ministers assisting him in the sacred ceremony. At which time the general Conference held at Baltimore did unanimously receive the said Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury as their Bishops, being full satisfied of the validity of their Episcopal ordination.

Asbury and Coke, like Peter and Paul in the letter to the Galatians, were radically at odds with each other on certain matters. And Coke knew that the only way he could properly stand alongside Asbury in the leadership of the American Methodists would be to settle there permanently. No British citizen could properly seek to head an independent American body at this critical time in America's history. The popular chant that might have emerged from all this might have run: "No Episcopacy... without residency". And, how many of us know this, Thomas Coke repeatedly made arrangements to do so. He was prevented from following through with his plan by none other than John Wesley who kept calling him back to the United Kingdom to Chair meetings, to supervise conferences, to organise various events and to travel here there and everywhere.

John Wesley's remark comparing himself to Dr Coke is well-known. He suggested that he (Wesley) was a louse while Coke was a flea and added a commentary "I proceed slowly but keep the ground I gain whilst he, like a flea, jumps forward though later he may be obliged to jump back again." And there is some truth in that. But in the way the old man dealt with his young colleague it's not difficult to conclude that Wesley was a lousy manager and a demanding flea-master. He dangled Coke on a string and this itself led to some of the spasmodic and episodic patterns of behaviour for which history has judged Coke in such a negative way.

When Richard Whatcoat was elected to the episcopacy, all speculation was brought to an end. There would now be no future role for Coke and he never returned to America after 1803. In any case, by then, American Methodism was up and running.

Thomas Coke was a key player in creating the Episcopal Church of the United States of America. Without him it would have lacked continuity or authenticity. It owes a great deal to him and should be more ready to own that fact.

For all their differences, Asbury and Coke were as one on the question of slavery. In the 1785 *Book of Discipline*, there was a co-written paragraph on the subject as follows:

We view it as contrary to the Golden Law of God on which hang all the Law and Prophets, and the unalienable Rights of Mankind, as well as every Principle of the Revolution, to hold in the deepest Debasement, in a more abject Slavery than is found in any Part of the World except in America, so many Souls that are all capable of the Image of God.

The Conference urged Methodists to make arrangements to free their slaves and made this a "virility test" for their membership. The declaration raised a perfect storm, so much so that it was removed from subsequent editions of the *Discipline*. Coke learned how inappropriate it was to denounce slavery from the pulpit and he received threats, calumny and bitter resentment for his outbursts on this subject.

Fourteen years later, in the 1798 edition of the *Discipline*, when the relationship between the two Bishops was at its most strained, they made another attempt to stress the importance of this issue. The following appears in that year's edition:

The buying and selling the souls and bodies of men... is totally opposite to the whole spirit of the gospel. It has an immediate tendency to fill the mind with pride and tyranny, and is frequently productive of almost every act of lust and cruelty which can disgrace the human species.

Both men took satisfaction from their work. "If ever I drew up any useful publications for the press, this one of them, and perhaps the best," Coke wrote.

Subsequent events in America were to prove the stubborn resistance of this subject which would divide the Church (with the succession of the Episcopal Church South in 1844), drive America into its Civil War, and linger on in the struggle for civil rights for African Americans right down to our own day.

Slavery continues to preoccupy us today and the question of human trafficking is widely debated. The threat of terrorists in Northern Nigeria to sell the hundreds of kidnapped girls they've taken into slavery reminds us of the ongoing problems related to this subject.

A Methodist, in his/her DNA, is conditioned to condemn slavery and commit him/herself to its overthrow. John Wesley was strong on this point. But so too was Thomas Coke. And part of his continuing legacy is the way he helped to predispose the Methodist conscience on this question.

On another matter, the matter of Church Governance post-Wesley, the controversy stirred up by Wesley's ordinations for America led to a failed opportunity.

The way the 1784 *Deed of Declaration* was dealt with was a cock-up. It created a "Legal Hundred" and an extra-territorial 91 – the number of those excluded from the official body. This was a formula for a disaster. It created deep resentment, high jealousy, narrow-mindedness and broad unhappiness. And it stopped an important development from taking place. Let's consider the matter:

- When Wesley wanted to guarantee continuity and constitutionality to the emerging Methodist Church in America, he "ordained" Thomas Coke as General Superintendent and also Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey to be presbyters in the Church of God. This threesome, directly appointed and commissioned by him, were to create the mechanisms necessary to continue and develop valid ministry in America.
- Similarly, Wesley ordained John Pawson, Thomas Hanby and Joseph Taylor for Scotland. Once again, the model was set up to ensure a plan for valid ministry in Scotland – another place where the Church of England was not the established ecclesiastical body.
- And then, finally, Wesley with two presbyters of the Church of England (James Creighton and Peard Dickinson) ordained Alexander Mather as a Superintendent, supported by Thomas Rankin and Henry Moore as "Presbyters in the Church of God" – to be available for continuing ordination of ministers for England. He left this as a mechanism to be employed after his death, "a common thing, whenever it should be judged by the Conference best to adopt it".

Thomas Coke was involved in all of these matters. His handwriting appears on all the certificates of ordination. What is clear is that Wesley wished to consider an episcopal church (whether graced with those bearing the title "Bishop" or not) to mark the Methodism that he'd leave behind. But the conference, intent on never again having "a King in Israel", did not put Wesley's plan into operation. They took full responsibility for ordaining ministers upon themselves. As James Pawson was later to put it:

Had the preachers, after his death, only acted upon his plan, and quietly granted the people who desired the sacraments that privilege, no division would have taken place.

In view of his wise proceedings and subsequent events, we cannot refrain from expressing our regret that Wesley's carefully arranged plan, fully and ably supported by Thomas Coke was not adopted by the Conference.

In America, Wesley's plan **was** endorsed by the General Conference. This created a series of checks and balances between those appointed to be Bishops and the Conference of Preachers. It allowed personalised leadership but within the constraints established and imposed by Conference.

In England, the principle of avoiding an over-strong successor to John Wesley, together with the deep animosity felt towards the supposed successor ("the pretender") saw to it that a deeply flawed and emasculated rule by Conference became Methodism's norm. This involved an almost paranoid fear of "personalised leadership".

This missed opportunity offers and early example of the readiness of the Methodist leadership to reach decisions as much on the basis of personal sentiment as considered theological judgement. Soon, personalised leadership of non-accountable kind would emerge. Jabez Bunting would be the first of many such leaders who exercised undue and unhealthy authority of this non-accountable kind.

And so we come to an evaluation of Coke "the man". It might be a good thing to begin with the words of John Hampson, the discontented minister left out of the "Legal Hundred" (as was his father) and whose animus against Coke needs to be clearly understood. Hampson's three volume biography of John Wesley came hot off the press within a month of his death. He had many axes to grind. Here he writes about Thomas Coke:

From his known character, and a certain consequence he derived from his ecclesiastic and academical distinctions, he has often been suspected of casting a longing eye to the supremacy, after Wesley's decease; and some have thought he would attain it. But we doubt not to predict the contrary. The chair will certainly be filled by no individual. And in case of such a such a succession, the distinction between the former and the present possessor would be too strongly marked, and might produce from the united influence of reason and propriety in some, and envy and jealousy in others, an opposition which every man, who has the least regard for his own peace, would be careful to avoid.

So much for Hampson's view of Coke and his description of the "reason and propriety, the envy and jealousy" of his antagonistic peers. It's interesting to read from Coke's commentary on the Epistle for the third Sunday of Easter (this lecture was given on the day before that Sunday in 2014), the following words (the words of scripture are in italics):

When through the Spirit ye have purified your hearts by obeying the truth, so that you are become capable of fraternal affection without disguise, see that you love one another with a clean heart fervently as

persons who are regenerated, not of corruptible seen, but of that which is incorruptible; even the efficacious and eternal world of God.

[Here, it can be seen,] the love of the brethren is the love of Christians: in human friendship there is sometimes a mixture of hypocrisy; but Christians love one another unfeignedly, or without hypocrisy. They love one another for their holiness and piety and from a pure heart, not out of merely temporal views, but for views the most generous and disinterested.

Too often, Coke was subject to those merely temporal views rather than anything that smacked more obviously of holiness or piety. And that quote from Coke's commentary on the New Testament leads me to mention his industry if not his scholarship. How could anyone have completed six volumes, each one of them huge, while jumping around like a flea?

John Vickers is quite right: it isn't up to much. Coke was no scholar. Even so, a quick comparison which I've been able to make with John Wesley's "Notes on the New Testament" show Coke's work at least on a par with Father John.

Coke was in no-man's land – it's important to reemphasise that point. In the field of overseas and home mission, he pre-figured Jabez Bunting. As far as scholarship went, he came before Adam Clarke. On the matter of American Methodism, he brought in the regularising of ministry and "enthroned" Francis Asbury as the legitimate leader of Methodism in the United States. In all those ways, he somehow contributed greatly the holding together of forces that were pulling apart.

His concern to put formative material into the hands of the preachers began a long tradition. It was, of course, taken up by better able and more learned successors. ***But his concern to put good and usable material in the hands of the Methodist people is definitely another strand in his legacy.***

And so, a few remarks to finish this lecture. When Thomas Coke died in May 2014 it took some months to reach the ear of Francis Asbury. Asbury had not worked well with Coke so perhaps his voice is a good one to hear on the subject of his death:

He was in temper, quick – it was like a spark; touch it and it would fly and was soon off... But jealousy, malice, or envy dwelt not in a soul so noble as that of Coke.... He was a gentleman, a scholar, and a Bishop, to us – and as a minister of Christ, in zeal, in labours, and in services, the greatest man in the last century.

Asbury's biographer adds a word of his own: "Coke had had his differences with the American preachers, Asbury included, yet he had stood by the American Church for 30 years, and for this Asbury honoured him." And so should all Americans.

Those of us who have been members of the Labour Party know well the difference between "Old Labour" and "New Labour". There was emerging towards the end of John Wesley's life a similar cleavage, with familiar mutterings on both sides within Methodism. And no-one represented "Old Methodism" better than Charles Wesley.

Let the following story speak of the heedless outpourings of the one and deft capabilities of the other.

One Sunday, at City Road, Charles Wesley preached at a service led by Thomas Coke. The pulpit was a three-decker in those days and Coke would be sitting in an enclosed stall at level two, directly beneath the preacher, Wesley was very excitable when he preached and totally impervious to contextual factors like hymnbooks or Bibles on the desk in front of him. In full rig, cassock and bands topped by a Geneva gown, this invested these harmless objects with potential lethal force. At a moment of high drama in Wesley's sermon, his arms flailing like windmills, he knocked the hymnbook over the edge and it fell into the lap of Thomas Coke, the father of Methodist missions, who was fast asleep at the time. His rude awakening occasioned a mild titter from a congregation not used to such entertainment. Wesley, meanwhile, totally oblivious to what was happening, intensified his fulminations. And now it was the Bible, a much heavier item, that became an endangered species. Nearer and nearer it got to the point where its centre of gravity would take it over the brim in hot pursuit of the 1780 hymnbook. The audience were on the edge of their seats eager to see whether the little Doctor would be caught napping once again. It was not to be. With his Welsh genes predisposing him towards a natural ability for the rugby-playing arts, he was alert, he saw the arriving holy missile, and (with the congregation uttering a barely suppressed, almost audible, gasp of admiration) he caught it, closed it and set it neatly beside himself in the preacher's stall. Meanwhile, Charles Wesley, the decks entirely cleared and no doubt imagining that the congregation was right behind him, just went on preaching.

And so to my final word – a free adaptation of a well-known epitaph composed for a hero of the Civil War in the 17th century.

*In the days surrounding the death of the venerable John Wesley, when
the future of all things Methodist was unshaped and without form,
Thomas Coke, Doctor of Civil Law, worked hard to hold things together.
He it is whose singular praise is to have done his best in the worst of
times and to have hoped them in the most calamitous.*