Asbury, Francis Encyclopedia Article

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ASBURY, FRANCIS (1745–1816), chief architect of American Methodism. Raised on the fringes of Birmingham in England's "Black Country," where the industrial revolution was beginning, Asbury became a lay preacher at eighteen, eager "to live to God, and to bring others to do so." In 1766 he was admitted as one of John Wesley's itinerant preachers, and in 1771 he was chosen as one of the second pair of volunteers to serve in America. Asbury proved a tough and dedicated pioneer, a stable and influential leader in the manner of Wesley, whose writings saturated his mind. During the Revolutionary War he endeared himself to native-born Methodists by his refusal to return to England, and he restrained those who wanted to break away from Wesley. In 1784 Wesley named the absent Asbury a member of the "legal hundred" to administer British Methodism after Wesley's death, and he also appointed him to receive ordination as "superintendent," or bishop without pomp, at the hands of Thomas Coke. Asbury refused such ordination without the summoning of a conference of his colleagues, who thereupon elected him to that office.

At first Asbury and Coke jointly administered the new Methodist Episcopal Church, but Coke's frequent absences from America increasingly left authority in the hands of Asbury, who was in any case much more fully identified with the American preachers and laity. Asbury was noteworthy for his own tireless travels, both in settled areas and along the expanding frontiers, and his constant recruiting and nurturing of native preachers. He maintained that Methodism would succeed in its mission only through the retention of a disciplined itinerant system and an authoritative but sacrificial episcopacy such as his own. His preachers accepted his discipline because they recognized in him the true marks of the apostle of American Methodism.

See Also

Methodist Churches.

Bibliography

The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, 3 vols., edited by Elmer T. Clark and Jacob S. Payton (London and Nashville, 1958), is an authoritative collection of annotated autobiographical materials. No first-rate biography exists, although L. C. Rudolph's *Francis Asbury* (Nashville, 1966) is useful. Additional insights can be gained from chapters 7 and 8 of my book *From Wesley to Asbury: Studies in Early American Methodism* (Durham, 1976).