Coke, Thomas Encyclopedia Article

Coke, Thomas

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Contents

Coke, Thomas Encyclopedia Article.....1

Contents.....2

Coke, Thomas.....3

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COKE, THOMAS (1747–1814), chief associate of John Wesley in the organization of worldwide Methodism. Born in Brecon, Wales, Coke attended Jesus College, Oxford, and earned in 1775 the degree of doctor of civil law. Having been ordained a deacon of the Church of England in 1770 and a priest in 1771, he served as curate of South Petherton, Somerset, from 1771 to 1777. In 1776 he fell under the spell of John Wesley and in 1777, largely because of his Methodism, was dismissed from his curacy. Becoming Wesley's colleague, he took over most of the supervision of the Irish societies, served as Wesley's secretary and agent, and employed his legal acumen in 1784 to draw up the deed poll incorporating the British Methodist Conference. In the same year he helped Wesley prepare and publish his revision of *The Book of Common Prayer*.

Wesley conveyed his own ecclesiastical authority to Coke in a form of ordination as "superintendent" for America, and thus transmitted ministerial orders to the Methodists there. Coke ordained Francis Asbury as his episcopal colleague—an act confirmed, at Asbury's insistence, through election by the American preachers—but Coke was the leader in formulating the American preachers' original *Discipline* on the basis of Wesley's "large" *Minutes*. Altogether, Coke spent less than three years in America, so that eventually Asbury took precedence over him, especially after it was discovered that in 1791 Coke had clandestinely sought a union of American Methodism with the Protestant Episcopal Church.

However, Coke had other irons in the fire. Among his many published works were a commentary on the Bible (1801–1807) and a *History of the West Indies* (1808–1811). He formed a tract society in 1782, advocated a missionary society in 1784, began to evangelize the West Indies in 1786, and was traveling to a mission in India at the time of his death. It was he more than any other who kindled Methodism's missionary zeal.

See Also

Methodist Churches.

Bibliography

Easily the best biography is *Thomas Coke, Apostle of Methodism* (Nashville, 1969) by John Ashley Vickers. Additional insights and information can be found in chapter 9 of my book *From Wesley to Asbury: Studies in Early American Methodism* (Durham, N.C., 1976) and in *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, 2 vols., edited by Nolan B. Harmon (Nashville, 1974).