

John Wesley the Methodist

Chapter XV - Ireland, Scotland, and Wales

Island Visits.--" The Dairyman's Daughter. "--Irish and Irish-American Methodism.--Shamefully Treated.--The Palatines.-Wesley in Scotland.--A Dash into Wales.

BEFORE the death of Wesley, Methodism had touched all the islands that gem the coast of Britain, with the exception of the Shetlands, in the far north of Scotland. Midway between Ireland and the north of England lies the Isle of Man, with a resident population to-day of fifty-five thousand, and visitors who annually number one hundred and thirty thousand. The Manx novelist, Hall Caine, remembers among the old Methodist local preachers "some of the sweetest, purest, truest men that ever walked the world of God."

It was a Liverpool local preacher, John Crook, who preached the first Methodist sermon in the island, in 1775, and the apostolic succession has been well maintained. Wesley came in 1777 and preached to vast assemblies in churchyards, markets, and fields. When he died one tenth of the adult population of Manxmen were members of the Methodist societies.

The Scilly Isles lie off the coast of Cornwall. As early as 1743 Wesley paid them a flying visit, accompanied by John Nelson. "It seemed strange to me," he writes, "to attempt going in a fisher boat fifteen leagues upon the main ocean." Landing at St. Mary's, they waited on the governor, with the usual present, namely, a newspaper. "I desired him, likewise," says Wesley, "to accept of an Earnest Appeal. The minister not being willing I should preach in the church, I preached at six, in the street, to almost all the town and many soldiers, sailors, and workmen, on 'Why will ye die, O house of Israel!' It was a blessed time, so that I scarce knew how to conclude. After sermon I gave them some little books and hymns, which they were so eager to receive that they were ready to tear both them and me to pieces."

Among Wesley's hearers in the Isle of Wight, where he formed a society in 1753, was one Robert Wallbridge, whose daughter, Elizabeth, was the Methodist girl saint whose piety has been immortalized in the character of "The Dairyman's Daughter."

Twelve years before Wesley visited Ireland Bishop Berkeley had advocated the very methods which Wesley used for reaching the hearts of the Irish people: the employment of lay preachers taken from the people, speaking their tongue, and "well instructed in the first principles of religion." The Established Church was feeble, and spiritually paralyzed, and Thomas Jackson, in his life of Charles Wesley, was justified in claiming that even the forms of Protestantism would at this day be extinct in most of the country had it not been for the new energy that was infused into the Irish Protestant churches by Wesley and his helpers. It is true that, while the progress of Methodism in Ireland has not been so rapid as elsewhere, owing to racial estrangements and deep-rooted Romanism, yet the fruit of Irish Methodism may be found in almost every land, and America and Australia owe a mighty debt to Erin.

Wesley crossed the Irish Channel forty-two times, and spent six years of his busy life in the island. The bells were ringing for church when he first entered. Dublin Bay, on Sunday morning, August 9, 1747. In the afternoon he preached in St. Mary's Church "to as gay and senseless a congregation" as he ever saw, and the next morning at six he preached to the Methodist society in a crowded room. When he went back to England, a fortnight later, the Catholic mob wrecked the meeting room. The next year he came again--his brother Charles having made some progress in his absence.

John Wesley was welcomed on his second visit, 1748, with great joy, so that his voice could scarcely be heard for some time for the noise of the people in praising God. He soon began to preach at five in the morning, "an unheard-of thing in Ireland," and he continued to do this at Philipstown, Tullamore, Clara, and Athlone.

Wesley states that, while many of the Methodist converts had been Roman Catholics, the number would have been far greater had not the Protestant as well as the popish priests hindered them. "The dead Protestantism of the land was his chief obstacle." "O what a harvest might be in Ireland did not the poor Protestants hate Christianity worse than either popery or heathenism!"

Let us follow John Wesley in his itinerancy and obtain from his Journals passing glimpses of the Ireland of his day.

On his second visit to Cork, in 1750, where he was accompanied by Christopher Hopper, riots broke out with renewed violence. He went to Bandon to preach, but the Cork mob followed him and hung him in effigy. His best guardians were the soldiers, many of whom became stanch Methodists, and the mob became more afraid of them than of the mayor, to whom Wesley wrote a letter closing with these words: "I fear God and honor the king. I earnestly desire to be at peace with all men. I have not willingly given any offense either to the magistrates, the clergy, or any of the inhabitants of the city of Cork; neither do I desire anything of them but to be treated (I will not say as a clergyman, a gentleman, or a Christian) with such justice and humanity as are due to a Jew, a Turk, or a pagan."

The day came (in 1787) when Wesley was received at the Mansion House by the mayor and "the chief of the city, being no longer bitter enemies, but cordial friends." Methodism was firmly planted, a large chapel built, and Wesley even feared, only five years from the date

of the riots, that Cork might prove "the Capua of the preachers."

We find him in Dublin in 1752 preaching at five in the morning, and at midday attending the service at St. Patrick's, where he is shocked at the "careless and indecent behavior of the congregation." At Kinsale he preaches in a grander cathedral. On the hill above the fort was a deep hollow capable of containing three thousand people. On one side the soldiers cut with their swords a ledge of earth which served as a pulpit, from which Wesley preached to a vast multitude who sat on the grass.

He and Christopher Hopper had attempted to reach Waterford in 1750, but the ferryman, fearing the mob which the notorious Butler had gathered, would not take them across the Graimah Ferry. So he came again two years later, heard Thomas Walsh preach on market day in Irish, and preached, himself, to a shouting, cursing crowd at the courthouse. Eleven years later he again faced the rioters in this city, and an interesting incident is related in the diary of Samuel Wood, a preacher of a later date: "I shall never forget the feelings excited within me when I was hardly five years old, in April, 1773, when I saw that venerable servant of God, the Rev. John Wesley, shamefully treated by a rude and desperate mob while he was preaching in the Bowling Green, Waterford. I felt all my blood rushing into my face. I stood at the table upon which Mr. Wesley was standing; and while I heard the shouting of the crowd, and saw the dead animals and cabbage stalks flying around his hoary head, I was filled with pity and horror. I wished that I were a man. I clinched my little fists. Some person came to remove the 'child;' but 'the child' resisted and would not be removed, until a gentleman, afterward well known as Sir John Alcock rushed forward, took Mr. Wesley in his arms off the table and conveyed him in safety to Mr. Scott's. He [Mr. Wesley] afterward inquired who 'the child' was who so bravely stood by the table. I was brought to him. He put both his hands upon my head and blessed me, in the presence of my mother. Dear Mr. Wesley must have been seriously injured but for the manly intervention of Mr. Alcock. Such was my first sight of, and such my first introduction to, my venerable and much-beloved father and friend, the Rev. John Wesley. This outrage, I afterward learned, was excited and encouraged by a superstitious faction of some mercantile reputation in the city of Waterford, which faction soon melted away, like hail in summer. God visited them suddenly and awfully.

"The next evening Mr. Wesley preached in John Street, 'Sir Charles's Yard,' as it was called in Waterford; and there, before the gate, a wretched vagrant was dressed up in a white shirt and a flaxen wig, placed upon a table, and was singing ribald songs."

In Limerick, Wesley preached to the Palatines, those German Protestant refugees who had been allowed to settle there a generation before. The Methodist doctrine and order took hold upon them, and from among them went out Philip Embury and Barbara Heck, who, with Robert Strawbridge, another native of Ireland, were to plant Methodism in New York and Maryland, and open the way for the widest extension of Methodism.

Scotland first heard of Methodism through a handful of Methodist soldiers at Musselburgh, near Edinburgh.

Wesley first visited Scotland in 1751, at the entreaty of his friend Colonel Gallatin, who was quartered at Musselburgh. Moore tells us that Whitefield had urged him not to go, saying that he would have "nothing to do but to dispute from morning to night." Wesley, however, went his way, resolving to avoid controversy. His companion was Christopher Hopper, who had been among his brother's curious hearers at Tanfield Cross, Newcastle. At Musselburgh a large congregation "remained as statues from the beginning of the sermon to the end," though they were said to be grossly inattentive when in their own kirk.

At Edinburgh, Wesley says he "used great plainness of speech toward them, and they all received it in love; so that the prejudice which the devil had been several years planting was torn up by the roots in one hour. After preaching, one of the bailies of the town, with one of the elders of the kirk, came to me and begged I would stay with them awhile, if it were but two or three days, and they would fit up a far larger place than the school, and prepare seats for the congregation. Had not my time been fixed, I should gladly have complied."

Wesley visited Scotland again in 1753, when Dr. Gillies, of Glasgow, courteously offered him his pulpit. "Surely," said Wesley, "with God nothing is impossible! Who would have believed, five and twenty years ago, either that the minister would have desired it or that I should consent to preach in a Scotch kirk!" He preached also in the open air to crowds, who stood listening even in the rain. Hopeful at first, he soon learned that respectful attention covered much indifference, or difference of opinion; but he found those who joined the society were reliable in character. "Steadiness, indeed," says Moore, "he looked for in the people of North Britain."

At Aberdeen, in 1761, Wesley preached to a vast crowd in the college close, and about twenty were added to the society. Before noon on Monday morning, he says, "twenty more came to me desiring to cast in their lot with us;" and as he was looking at the King's College, shortly after, one of a large party of ladies and gentlemen came to him and said, "We came last night to the college close, but could not hear, and should be extremely obliged if you would give us a short discourse here." "I knew not," says Wesley, "what God might have to do, and so began without delay on 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself.' I believe the word was not lost--it fell as dew on the tender grass. In the afternoon I was walking in the library of the Marischal College when the principal and the divinity professor came to me, and the latter invited me to his lodgings, where I spent an hour very agreeably. In the evening the eagerness of the people made them ready to trample each other under foot. It was some time before they were still enough to hear, but then they devoured every word." In the evening the professors and magistrates attended the service. Wesley left ninety members in the society.

On two later visits to Edinburgh we find him preaching in the High School yard and on Calton Hill, until, in 1766, he reports a service in "the new room, a large and commodious building."

His summary of what he said at Dundee in answer to objections to Methodist work in Scotland, in 1766, is so important that it must be given in full. He writes: "The sum of what I spoke was this: 'I love plain dealing. Do not you I will use it now. Bear with me. I hang out no false colors; but show you all I am, all I intend, all I do. I am a member of the Church of England; but I love good men of every Church. My ground is the Bible. Yea, I am a Bible bigot. I follow it in all things, both great and small. Therefore I always use a short private prayer when I attend the public service of God. Do not you Why do you not Is not this according to the Bible I stand whenever I sing the praise of God in public. Does not the Bible give you plain precedents for this I always kneel before the Lord my Maker when I pray in public. I generally use the Lord's Prayer, because Christ has taught me when I pray to say . . .' I advise every preacher connected with me, whether in England or Scotland, herein to tread in my steps" At Dundee he found a society of sixty members.

At Edinburgh again, on the following Sunday morning at five o'clock, he had a larger congregation than he had ever seen before, and he remarks--probably in view of the idea that the Scotch can only be reached by elaborate polemical and profound discourses--"It is scarce possible to speak too plain in England; but it is scarce possible to speak plain enough in Scotland. And if you do not, you lose all your labor; you plow upon the sand."

Controversies over doctrinal points made the progress of the Scottish societies slower than that in other parts of the British Isles.

On several occasions he was present as a spectator at the meeting of the General Assembly of the Kirk of Scotland. He was shocked at the behavior of many of the members, and he declares, "Had any preacher behaved so at our Conference, he would have had no more place among us." At Edinburgh many of the ministers attended the services which he held during the session, and he had pleasant intercourse with some of them. Moore tells us that Mr. Wardrobe, minister of Bathgate, preached at Wesley's Chapel at Newcastle, to the no small amazement and displeasure of some of his zealous countrymen. It was not Wesley's fault that his fellowship with many other excellent Scotch ministers was interrupted by the Calvinistic controversy

John Wesley preached his first sermon in Wales on October 15, 1739, on the little green at the foot of the Devauden Hill near Chepstow. Wesley's first convert was a poor woman who had walked six miles to hear him, and followed him to Abergavenny, Usk, and Pontypool, found peace, and stood by his side at Cardiff, the wave-sheaf of an abundant harvest. At Cardiff he preached in the shire hall, and on later visits in the castle yard. As he explained the last six beatitudes he tells us that his heart was so enlarged that he knew not how to give over, so he "continued three hours." At Cardiff was formed the mother church, and here Wesley opened his first chapel in Wales on May 6, 1743. The Calvinistic wing of Methodism, led by such splendid evangelists as Howell Harris and George Whitefield was first in the field and has always been predominant in Wales.