

The Social Impact of John Wesley's Mission to Georgia

Geordan Hammond

November 2005

Stable URL: <http://www.mwrc.ac.uk/scholarly-papers/>

Your use of the MWRC archive indicates your acceptance of MWRC's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.mwrc.ac.uk/terms-and-conditions/>.

Please contact the author regarding any further use of this work. Author contact information may be obtained at <http://www.mwrc.ac.uk/current-fellows/>

For more information regarding MWRC, please contact ghammond@nazarene.ac.uk.

This paper was presented at the Methodist Missionary Society conference on 'Methodist Missions and the Organisation of Society' in November 2005. The essay can also be accessed on the MMS website at <<http://www2.div.ed.ac.uk/other/mms/mmspapers.htm>>.

The Social Impact of John Wesley's Mission to Georgia¹

In accepting the call to be a missionary in Georgia, John Wesley agreed to take on a leadership role in a newly developing society and culture. As the Georgia Trustees' designated minister for Savannah, Wesley was placed in an important position which pushed him towards the top of the social hierarchy. Therefore, the way in which he conducted his ministry was bound to have a significant impact on the society. Wesley faithfully carried out his role as parish priest and for a time seemed to be capturing the hearts and minds of the colonists as he was leading flourishing religious societies and attendance at divine service increased. However, he ended his twenty-two month stint in Georgia by fleeing from criminal charges under the cover of darkness.

On the positive side, Wesley instilled a sense of social identity into several groups of pious settlers whom he formed into religious societies for the promotion of piety. While it can be argued that Wesley's ministry was successful in this sense, these pious settlers represented a small part of the society as a whole. From a broader perspective, Wesley failed to contribute a sense of social cohesion to the society as a whole. There are three principal reasons why Wesley failed to unify Georgia society. First of all, Wesley tried to impose High-Church Anglican ritualism on a group of poor and largely uneducated colonists. Secondly, Wesley interacted with women in a way that many male colonists found repulsive. Thirdly, Wesley helped undermine the authority of the magistrates by publicly opposing them in a several legal disputes. In this essay, I will only be able to expound on the first two points. The purpose of this paper is to expound on the social impact of John Wesley's missionary work in

¹ This paper was presented at the Methodist Missionary Society conference on 'Methodist Missions and the Organisation of Society' in November 2005. The essay can also be accessed on the MMS website at <<http://www2.div.ed.ac.uk/other/mms/mmspapers.htm>>.

Georgia by looking at the colonists' opposition to his High-Church practices and his promotion of women into spheres of religious leadership.

High-Church Anglicanism

That Wesley intended to carry out his ministry in a High-Church fashion was made evident by his first missionary act as the colonists were preparing to depart for Georgia. After conversing with a thirty-year old locksmith called Ambrose Tackner who had only received "lay baptism," Wesley took an unorthodox step and baptized him "at his desire" on the following day.²

During the week Wesley was preparing to give his first sermon in Georgia, his *Diary* notes that for two hours on March 5, 1736 he "Revised Common Prayer book."³ Fredrick Hunter is likely correct in concluding that Wesley worked on bringing the 1662 Prayer Book into line with the 1549 Prayer Book of King Edward VI.⁴ Two days later, Wesley read a paper to let his parishioners know how he intended to carry out his position:

(1) That I must admonish every one of them not only in public, but from house to house; (2) That I could admit none to Holy Communion without previous notice; (3) That I should divide the Morning Service on Sundays, in compliance with the first design of the church; (4) That I must obey the rubric by dipping all the children who were able to endure it; (5) That I could admit none who were not communicants to be sureties in Baptism; (6) That in general, though I had all the ecclesiastical authority which was entrusted to

² *Journals and Diaries I*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, vol. 18 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988) MS Journal, October 18, 1735, 313; *Diaries*, October 17-18, 312-13.

³ Wesley, *Diaries*, 18:363.

⁴ Frederick Hunter, "The Manchester Non-Jurors and Wesley's High Churchism," *London Quarterly and Holborn Review* 172 (1947): 58.

any within this Province, yet I was only a servant of the Church of England, not a judge, and therefore obliged to keep her regulations in all things.⁵

On the fifth of May 1736 Wesley showed his faithfulness to the 1549 Prayer Book and inflexibility in his new environment by refusing to baptize a child whose parents would not consent to its being dipped or certify that the child was weak.⁶

Colonists opposed to Wesley's High-Church practices saw him as a divisive figure in the colony. Patrick Tailfer and his fellow authors of *A True and Historical Narrative of the Colony of Georgia* (published at Charles Town in 1741) commented:

And now to make our subjection complete, a new kind of tyranny was this summer (1737) imposed upon us; for Mr. John Wesley, who had come over and was retained by us as a clergyman of the Church of England, soon discovered that his aim was to enslave our minds, as a necessary preparative for enslaving our bodies. The attendance upon prayers, meeting and sermons inculcated by him, so frequently, and at improper hours, inconsistent with necessary labour, especially in an infant colony, tended to propagate a spirit of indolence and of hypocrisy among the most abandoned; it being much easier for such persons, by an affected show of religion, and adherence to Mr. Wesley's novelties, to be provided by his procurement from the public stores, than to use industry which true religion recommends, nor indeed could the reverend gentleman conceal the designs he was so full of, having frequently declared, that he never desired to see Georgia a rich, but a religious colony.⁷

In this instance, Tailfer chose to argue that Wesley's enthusiasm for

⁵ Wesley, MS Journal, September 11, 1737, 18:563-64.

⁶ Wesley, *Journal*, May 5, 1736, 18:157. Charles Wesley was also firm on baptism by immersion, refusing to Mrs. Germain's child by any other method. *The Journal of Charles Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, vol. 1 (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1980), March 10 and 14, 1736, 2, 4.

⁷ Tailfer, Pat., Hugh Anderson, DA. Douglas, and others, *A True and Historical Narrative of the Colony of Georgia in America* (Charles Town: P. Timothy, 1741), 40-41.

frequent and irregularly timed services led to “indolence” and “hypocrisy” among the poorest of the settlers as they neglected manual labour in favour of “an affected show of religion.” The charge that Wesley’s followers displayed affection and showy religion seems to be a veiled accusation that they were, in fact, religious enthusiasts. In a very serious allegation against Wesley’s character, Tailfer blamed him for encouraging slothful behaviour by obtaining goods from the public store for his poor followers. In a generous reading of their accusations (generous towards Wesley, that is), they allege that Wesley was a subversive citizen of Georgia. According to their interpretation, Wesley’s actions as a high-ranking and influential resident of Georgia played a role in directly undermining the social unity of the colony by encouraging laziness in the name of religion. When compared with the frequency of divine service that most of the colonists would have been exposed to in Britain, the frequency with which Wesley held services may have seemed unusual and to some excessive. However, considering that Wesley confined most services to the early morning and evening, it is difficult to accept the insinuation that frequent services at improper hours brought people into church during prime working hours.⁸ Moreover, the claim that Wesley was able to regularly procure goods from the public store for his followers seems an exaggerated accusation. It may very well have been the case that from time to time Wesley acted as an advocate for poor settlers by requesting that Thomas Causton grant them food stuffs or other goods from the Trustees’ store, however, this was probably not a common occurrence. The credibility of Tailfer’s claim is made suspect by the fact that Causton and Wesley were embroiled in a legal dispute during the summer of 1737 making it unlikely that Causton would have been inclined to pander to Wesley and his supporters.

⁸ As Peter Forsaith pointed out, colonists may have believed early morning and evening services conflicted with prime working hours during the hot summer.

It is evident that the authors of *A True and Historical Narrative* had an axe to grind which led them to exaggerate their criticisms of Wesley, however, their polemic certainly contains a measure of truth and deserves to be taken seriously. Tailfer's statement that Wesley frequently "frequently declared, that he never desired to see Georgia a rich, but a religious colony" is completely in keeping with his view of himself as being in Georgia first and foremost as a missionary whose essential job description was to help mould Georgia into a religious colony. Wesley would not necessarily have been opposed to some degree of economic prosperity in Georgia but he was, of course, far more concerned for the colony's spiritual welfare and so would have preferred a poor yet religious colony over a rich colony indifferent to religion. The religiously minded Trustees of Georgia would have sympathized with Wesley on this matter. Few colonists would have agreed with Wesley's declaration at face value – even his poor followers may have felt uneasy about his tendency to set riches and religion in juxtaposition. One who disagreed with Wesley's sentiments would not necessarily have been irreligious – some religious colonists may have sided with the authors of the *Narrative* in seeing his comments as incompatible with the spirit of Anglicanism. Of course, many Anglican clergymen of Wesley's day would have seen a much closer link and compatibility between Christianity and economic prosperity than Wesley. However an individual colonist interpreted Wesley's words, the colonist's lens for interpretation would surely have been shaped by whether they were hearing his words as one of a small number of his select disciples or whether the statement was heard by one on the outside looking in on Wesley's group of followers.

The same book claimed that people believed Wesley to be a Roman Catholic in all but name due to his high-church Anglican practices. In Georgia, even colonists outside Wesley's circle of disciples were well aware of his liturgical innovations

which Patrick Tailfer noted “he called *Apostolic Constitutions*.” He specifically mentions Wesley’s

Endeavours to establish Confession, Penance, Mortifications, Mixing Wine with Water in the Sacrament, and Suppressing in the Administration of the Sacrament, the Explanation adjoined to the Words of communicating with the Church of England, to shew that they mean a Feeding on Christ by Faith, saying no more than ‘The Body of Christ; The Blood of Christ;’

“appointing Deaconesses” and attempts to suppress people’s minds and liberty by “Fastings.”⁹

Tailfer’s critical remarks contain a good deal of truth mixed with some exaggeration. The claim that Wesley termed his liturgical preferences “*Apostolic Constitutions*” is entirely believable given that this fits with Wesley’s own statements about his intention to revive primitive Christianity in the Georgia wilderness. Wesley’s own self understanding was that he was reviving the practices and discipline of the primitive church, however, Tailfer saw things differently. For him, Wesley’s practices were reminiscent of the tyrannical behaviour displayed by Roman Catholic priests. Tailfer knew the Georgia charter excluded Catholics from the colony so the fact that he observed in Wesley an extreme form of High-Church practice that he (and surely a number of other colonists) interpreted as Roman Catholic rather than Anglican practices, must have been a shock to the system for a man who would not have expected to have encountered this sort of clerical behaviour in the new world. Georgia was conceived as a buffer zone between South Carolina and Spanish Florida and colonists’ sense of communal identity was set in juxtaposition to the brutal Catholic Spaniards. If anything, the constant danger that Georgia would be raided by

⁹ Tailfer, 42.

the Spanish must have made Wesley's "Catholic behaviour" all the more suspect in the minds of some colonists.

Tailfer observed (or heard of) confession and perhaps penance, mortifications and fastings among a select few colonists to whom Wesley devoted the bulk of his pastoral care. In the context of Tailfer's overall criticism of Wesley, he charged that Wesley specifically targeted women for confession. This was not the only way he violated orthodox Anglican practice for he took the extremely radical step of "appointing Deaconesses." The charge of penance probably relates to Wesley's high view of his ecclesiastical authority which led him to impose a stringent form of ecclesiastical discipline on his parishioners. Tailfer may have been thinking of Wesley's attempt to convince Sophie Williamson to confess her faults in a penitential fashion after her neglect of public worship following her marriage to William Williamson. The asceticism displayed by the Wesleys, Ingham and Delamotte were likely behind the charge of mortification and fastings. It would not have escaped the colonists' notice that the Georgia Methodists experimented with a vegetarian diet and rigorously observed days of fasting. The type of ascetic spirituality they modelled would have encouraged their followers to follow suit if it was not the case that the Methodists tried to convince the religious society members to join them in their spiritual practices. The mixing of wine with water in the sacraments was, of course, one of the Non- Jurors four primitive usages based on the no longer used 1549 Prayer Book and the Apostolic Constitutions.

Interaction with Women

Wesley's relationship with Sophy Hopkey was only the most prominent of a number of close friendships he developed with women in the colony. Alan Hayes has

correctly point out that “his relatively liberated attitude toward women in the church was far more a factor in the opposition to his work in that day than has generally been recognized.”¹⁰ Wesley’s belief that women were in spiritual matters independent of men and equal to them aroused a significant amount of opposition among male colonists. Patrick Tailfer claimed that “those who had given themselves up to his Spiritual Guidance (more especially Women) were obliged to discover to him their most secret Actions, nay even their Thoughts and the Subject of their Dreams.”¹¹ This serious accusation is laced with insinuation of manipulation and seduction. At first the vulnerable women may have voluntarily “given themselves up to his spiritual guidance,” but little did they know that Wesley would manipulate them to such an extent that they would be “obliged” to tell him everything even their most intimate secrets. The assumption runs throughout this statement that these women innocently put themselves into a situation that they were helpless to escape from once they “had given themselves up to” Wesley’s guidance – guidance which Tailfer suggests really amounted to control. Perhaps the most serious and damaging part of Tailfer’s accusation is the clear insinuation that Wesley seduced these women leaving open the possibility that he manipulated them in a sexual manner (if one is to take the widest possible interpretation). At a minimum, Tailfer certainly found it repulsive that Wesley pursued what he believed was a socially unacceptable level of intimacy with these women. Although Tailfer’s language is severe, he was far from the only man who found Wesley’s manner of relating to women suspect.

Given that in the same series of accusations, Tailfer outlined Wesley’s Catholic “Endeavours to establish Confession, Penance, Mortifications” and

¹⁰ Alan Hayes, “John Wesley and Sophy Hopkey,” in *Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the Wesleyan Tradition*, ed. Hilah F. Thomas, Rosemary Skinner Keller and Louise L. Queen (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), 29.

¹¹ Tailfer, 42.

“Fastings” it appears that he was attempting to cast Wesley in the stereotypical mould of the seductive Roman Catholic priest. As was the case with manipulative popish priests, Wesley persuaded these women to confess everything to him. Tailfer’s readers would have easily understood what he was trying to say – women are vulnerable, women are less rational than men, therefore women are easy targets for manipulative men and Wesley was fully exploiting the weaknesses of these women.

It is unlikely that Tailfer and other colonists really believed Wesley to be a Roman Catholic in disguise but they did believe that they saw hints of popish practices in Wesley. And, of course, Tailfer found the culturally prevalent language of anti-Catholicism congenial to his own purposes. In attacking Wesley’s inappropriate relations with his female disciples, Tailfer was clever enough to maximize the affect of his polemic by painting Wesley as a pseudo Roman Catholic priest.

Tailfer accused Wesley of straying from proper church practice by attempting to re-institute the office of deaconess. Wesley may have used the term himself to describe the work of three women who were key players in the Savannah religious societies: Margaret Bovey (later Mrs. James Burnside),¹² Mrs. Robert Gilbert,¹³ and

¹² It seems that Wesley became better acquainted with Margaret Bovey after the mysterious and sudden death of her sister Becky whose funeral service he conducted in July 1736 (*Diaries*, July 10 and 11, 1736, 401). Dr. Patrick Tailfer was the physician who bled Becky on the day she died. While Dr. Tailfer was in the same room as Wesley and Margaret Bovey, it is possible that he may have at this time heard Wesley refer to Miss Bovey as a deaconess (*Journal*, July 10, 1736, 164-65). In September of that year Wesley was spending a considerable amount of time teaching Miss Bovey French and reading prayers and other devotional literature to her at her home (*Diaries*, September 8-9, 11, 420-422). In February of the next year Wesley advised Miss Bovey not to marry Mr. Burnside and though they could not agree on the matter, he remarked “Here is one woman in America in whom to this day I have found no guile” (*Journal*, February 1, 1737, 467). After Miss Bovey married, she maintained a close spiritual friendship with John Wesley (see for example *Diaries*, July 12 and August 23-26, 1737, 527, 557).

¹³ Mrs. Gilbert’s home was used by Wesley as a place for prayer, singing and the reading of religious books (*Diaries*, September 11 and October 6, 1736, February 20 and July 16, 1737, 422, 428, 474, 528). Along with Robert Hows, Mrs. Gilbert exercised leadership in the Saturday evening communion preparation class (*Diaries*, May 7, 1737, 506).

Mrs. Mary Vanderplank.¹⁴ Either consciously or unconsciously, Wesley was training these women to be lay pastors among his circle of disciples.

Philip Thicknesse was another settler who found himself repulsed by Wesley's liberal attitude towards women. Thicknesse became aware of John Wesley before he sailed to Georgia through his family's friendship with the Hutton family. Thicknesse carried to Georgia several letters written to Wesley written by the Reverend John Hutton in which Hutton probably recommend Thicknesse to his care. When he arrived in Georgia around August 1736, Thicknesse noted that Wesley "seemed disposed to admit me among the number of his elect"¹⁵ After Thicknesse observed that Wesley seemed to be more concerned with the soul of Miss Hopkey than his own, he began to avoid associating with him. Convinced that he understood the real motives behind the attention Wesley and his colleagues gave to spiritually inclined women, Thicknesse wrote: "those gentlemen were not ignorant, that there never was, nor ever can be, a new sect formed, (and that was their great object) if women were not engaged to promote it."¹⁶

The male chauvinism that exudes forth from Thicknesse's comments might cause modern readers to dismiss his words as a typical eighteenth century statement of male prejudice. However, it would be wrong to neglect his point of view for this reason alone since it was his genuinely held view. On one level the statement is simply false while on another level the statement is highly revealing. The strong link in Thicknesse's mind between women and Methodism was not entirely fanciful. Indeed, recent studies have shown that women made up a numerical majority of early Methodist adherents in both Britain and America. In Georgia, Thicknesse observed

¹⁴ Wesley met with Mrs. Vanderplank at her home on several occasions where in one meeting they read Fleury's *Manners of the Ancient Christians* and sang (*Diaries*, March 28, 1737, 493).

¹⁵ *Memoirs and Anecdotes of Philip Thicknesse* (Dublin: Printed by Graisberry and Campbell, 1790), 15.

¹⁶ Thicknesse, 19.

first-hand the attraction of some women to Wesley's strong leadership and rigorous spirituality. To both Thicknesse and Tailfer it appeared that women were particularly attracted to Wesley's spiritual guidance. It does not seem that Wesley specifically targeted women over men as objects in need of spiritual direction, but his family background helped prepare him to be at home in the company of women. And he may have found that women in Georgia were more open to his pervasive concern for practicing the Christian faith. Although it would be difficult to prove that Wesley had a strategy to attract women to his religious societies in Georgia, Thicknesse was perhaps hinting at a subtle truth when he insinuated that the Georgia Methodists were clever enough to cater their message to women.

The logic of Thicknesse's statement is fairly clear: women are irrational; women were needed to promote Methodism because they could best recruit other irrational women; because women are irrational, they are prone to religious enthusiasm. (As with Tailfer's criticism Thicknesse appears to imply that women were seduced into the Methodist sect.) It is assumed, of course, that the sect of Methodism could not have succeeded without women because men are rational and would not so easily fall into the trap of enthusiasm. Obviously, this is misleading since plenty of men like Robert Hows were enthusiastic about Wesley's religious societies in Georgia. The main problem with Thicknesse's assertion is that there is no evidence that the Georgia Methodists had any design to form a new sect. In forming pious colonists into religious societies the Methodists believed they were being entirely faithful to the Church of England. They did not see their beliefs as distinct from orthodox Anglicanism, nor did they see the religious societies they promoted as bodies separated from the Church.

Fifty years later, Thicknesse was still troubled by Wesley's attitude towards women and the way in which the Methodist movement offered women opportunities to exercise religious leadership.

I thought to have done with this *methodistical* subject, but I cannot lay down my pen, without observing, that however seriously, and in earnest, many of the leaders of those people no doubt are; yet they are all, men of *warm constitutions*, and that if they had been natives of a Mahometan country, where women are excluded, even religious societies, they never would have separated from the established mode of worship.¹⁷

Thicknesse characterizes the leaders of Methodism as “men of *warm constitutions*” (i.e. enthusiasts) connecting them with the enthusiastic women who promoted the movement. The connotation of his remark is that these men are not true honourable men but effeminate irrational men. In this line of thinking, effeminate enthusiastic men are like parasites who seek out vulnerable irrational women who all too easily collude with these men to advance their brand of fanatical religion. Since Thicknesse seemingly wrote these words long after his sojourn in Georgia, one must be weary of accepting these sentiments as representative of his views as a young man in Georgia.¹⁸ Despite these reservations, his perceptive observation that religious societies were key to Methodist growth rings true for Wesley's period in Georgia and beyond. As an observer of Wesley's religious societies in Georgia, Thicknesse had a unique vantage point to view the insipient beginnings of Methodism. In his mind, religious societies and Methodism were

¹⁷ Thicknesse, 24-25. The reader of Thicknesse's narrative should keep in mind that his *Memoirs* were written fifty years after these events when he perhaps looked back and saw these events in a more negative light than he might have seen them at the time.

¹⁸ A letter from Thicknesse to his mother seems to indicate that he had a favourable view of Wesley during the first few months he was in Savannah. Thicknesse wrote “I believe...he [Wesley] is a very good man.” Letter of November 3, 1736 in *General Oglethorpe's Georgia: Colonial Letters 1733-1743*, ed. Mills Lane, vol. 1 (Savannah: Beehive Press, 1975), 280.

linked. Thicknesse probably first came into contact with Anglican religious societies as a young man in London since his family was acquainted with the Hutton family. Prior to his departure for Georgia, the Hutton family home served as a gathering place for John Wesley and friends and became something of a early staging ground for Methodist meetings until James Hutton moved from the home while Wesley's was absent in Georgia. Thicknesse's comments make it clear that decades after his departure from Georgia, he continued to associate Methodism with religious societies. He correctly contends that had the situation been different, the Methodist movement could have been crushed before it got off the ground. If Church and State was not so tolerant as to allow religious societies in the first place, there would have been no Methodist sect. What Thicknesse does not mention is that Wesley's experience in Georgia where he was entirely free from the Church's jurisdiction played a key role in his continued and expanded use of women in positions of leadership. Women were rarely tolerated in religious societies in Britain and if they were tolerated they were separated from male societies. In the new Georgian landscape the authority of tradition was a distant one and women became more than simply second class religious society members – they became eligible to exercise spiritual leadership and some became deaconesses.

While this paper may have come across as excessively negative towards Wesley, I think we can nonetheless learn a good deal about the social impact of his missionary work in Georgia by analyzing the nature of the opposition to his ministry. The opposition to Wesley's High-Churchmanship was caused by his insistence on implementing what he believed to be the practices of the primitive Church. His romantic dream of reviving the primitive church in the Georgia wilderness was an extension of his fascination with the primitive church at Oxford and was central to his

self-understanding of his mission. This dream was so compelling for him that it was not dropped even in the face of stiff opposition (in fact, opposition served to strengthen his resolve since he expected to be persecuted as the ancient Christians were). Wesley's attitude here was far from conducive to social stability. The utopia he envisioned involved persecution and hardship and would lead to spiritual harmony among pious Christians rather than large-scale social harmony. His promotion of women to positions of spiritual authority was not an elaborate plan to relieve the oppression of women within the Church. It was rather a result of his past experience of relating to his mother and sisters on an equal spiritual plane. That women were spiritually equal to men was taken for granted and there is no indication that the opposition he faced in Georgia had any effect in altering this basic assumption. Wesley was interested in encouraging people whose lives gave evidence of integrated faith and practice regardless of their gender.