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John Wesley

300th Anniversary Service



Coleraine Methodist Church
29th June 2003

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John Wesley in the Coleraine area

A talk by Eric Hayes at the 300th Celebration Service at Coleraine Methodist Church on Sunday 29th June 2003

It is appropriate to be talking about John Wesley this evening for two reasons. He was born on 28th June 1703 and also in this past year the Methodist Church in Ireland and the Church of Ireland have signed a covenant encouraging closer co-operation in worship and outreach between the two churches. Wesley remained an Anglican during his lifetime.

(The quotations used are taken from Rev. C.H. Crookshank's 'History of Methodism in Ireland'.)

John Wesley came to Ireland 21 times, starting in 1747. He visited the area four times with at least another visit to Garvagh, and surrounding areas.

In describing the rise of Methodism in this area we need to recognise not only the visits of John Wesley but the itinerant preachers who developed the work and gave Wesley much encouragement.

Wesley visited Garvagh in 1760. By 1763 Ireland was divided into 7 circuits – 6 in what is now the South, and “the North”.

In 1775 we read of the start of Methodism in Coleraine.

“During this year John Price, who was stationed on the Londonderry circuit, preached at Coleraine in the street. Mr Stephen Douthett was one of his hearers, and was so deeply impressed with what he heard that at the close of the service, when the preacher expressed his intention to visit the town again if anyone was willing to entertain him, he gladly embraced the opportunity, and made the messenger of the Lord welcome to his house. Thus Methodism for the first time obtained a footing in this town.”

The Londonderry circuit, which included Coleraine, extended to Donegal and Tyrone, with quarterly meetings being held in Lisleen from time to time.

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In 1776 (the following year) - "The itinerants and Mr. Boyle (preacher) then proceeded to the North, preaching at Ballymena and Ballymoney en route to Coleraine, where on the following Sunday, October 6th, Mr. Hern preached. He could not sing! But this lack was supplied by the zeal and devotion of a young woman, afterwards Mrs. McKenny, and several other members of the Society at Ballymena, who walked the entire distance, nearly 30 miles, that they might assist at the service.

Surrounded by this choir, Mr. Hern took his stand in the Diamond when the several congregations were retiring from their respective places of worship; and soon had an attentive audience, "almost the whole town attended".

Charles and John Yatt, who had been at the Presbyterian meeting house; Robert and Thomas Rice who were returning from the parish church, and Thomas Bennett, were among the hearers, and afterwards attended the Methodist services, more or less frequently.

The preachers and their kind friend remained in the town for the two following days, preaching each evening in the market house "to a great multitude". With the financial assistance of Mr. Boyle, the wing of an old barrack which had been long unused and was falling to decay, was secured as a place of worship. By throwing several rooms into one, an apartment was fitted up for the services, capable of containing from 300 to 400 persons.

Another portion was prepared for the preachers to lodge in during their periodic visits, while they boarded with the people, being received with much attention and respect. A class was founded of which Robert Douthett was appointed the leader; and before the close of the year there were almost sixty members of Society, chiefly persons in a very humble circumstances, called "the poor folk at the barrack". The moral improvement in the conduct of these, however, was so marked, that the Society gained the goodwill and confidence of those of more influence."

The preachers were also received very cordially by the rector in Kilrea.

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By the following year, 1777, the total membership of Methodists in Ireland was 5,211 (an increase of 413 on previous year).

New preachers were appointed to the Londonderry circuit.

“Through the instrumentality of these excellent brethren the good work greatly prospered, especially at Coleraine, the rector of the parish, the Rev. Mr. Boyd, being favourable to the cause, and kind and attentive to the preachers.”

The next year (1778) John Wesley visited Kilrea, being the guest of Mr. Haughton the rector. “The church being a mere heap of ruins, he preached in the new meeting- house to a very large auditory, some of whom seemed not a little affected, and all were seriously attentive.”

Wesley then made his first recorded visit to Coleraine.

“At Coleraine the spacious preaching room could not contain a third of the congregation; but, standing at the door, he had them all before him in the barrack square.

On the following day, having visited the Giant’s Causeway in the morning, he witnessed a cheering and touching scene in the evening.

A few days previously a young lady had joined the Society without the knowledge of her relatives: and having been informed that her sister was speaking to Mr. Wesley with the same object, she entered the room, saw and fell upon her neck, wept with holy joy, and then sank on her knees to praise God. Her sister could hardly bear it – she was in tears, and so were all present. These two young ladies were the Misses Young and their becoming Methodists added much to the influence and success of the Society. One of them was afterwards united in marriage to Mr. Henry Moore, and the other to Mr. T. Rutherford.

On Sunday Wesley having breakfasted with the Rev. Mr Boyd, of whom he speaks in strong terms of commendation, read prayers in the church, and administered the Lord’s Supper to an unprecedented number of communicants. The Right Hon. Richard Jackson, M.P., and his excellent lady, who were present, seemed to rejoice in showing him every mark of respect. In the evenings the venerated evangelist preached to a wonderful congregation in the Barrack

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Square, many of whom were present at the five o'clock service next morning."

Wesley received a cordial welcome in some towns from the rector, especially it seems in Coleraine. This example of co-operation is there for the present day.

Wesley then continued to Carrickfergus after visiting Ballymoney and Ballymena (only a passing reference).

The next year 1779, a preacher Thomas Barker began his itinerant ministry in country parts of the Londonderry circuit including the Portrush and Portstewart areas, also Bushmills and Mullaghacall where the first Methodist chapel was erected in the area. He also visited Ballycastle.

A brief word about Adam Clarke, associated with Portstewart and Portrush, and who lived in Agherton. "One day a school-fellow said to him: Adam, let us go to Burnside, there is a Methodist preacher to be there this evening, and we shall have nice fun. And he consented without the slightest expectation of the promised diversion. So deeply was the youth impressed, that he went again to the services, and thus entered upon his connection with Methodism."

To summarise his story, his family and he went to hear Mr Barber and were impressed. They heard "the doctrine of the Reformation, true unadulterated Christianity". His father pronounced it as, "the genuine doctrine of the Established Church". A Society was formed in the village of Mullahacall, and Adam was converted, rejoicing in the God of his salvation. Later in 1781 he was offered a situation with a linen merchant in Coleraine and gradually he took an active part in the Society and on at least one occasion he walked the thirty miles to Ballymena to attend a quarterly meeting (!). In 1782 one of the preachers at Londonderry believed that Adam Clarke was called of God to the work of the Ministry, encouraged him by lending him books and directing his studies, and at Newbuildings persuaded him to become a preacher of the Gospel. He wrote to Wesley who offered to receive Adam Clarke into his Kingswood school.

"Thus Providence opened up his path to the Wesleyan itinerancy and Ireland gave to Methodism one of the most illustrious of commentators and powerful of preachers"

Back to 1779 when Mr. Moore from Londonderry describes the Society at Coleraine.

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“So Mr. Moore proceeded to Coleraine, the second place on the circuit, which even at this early period was the residence of one of the preachers who had the charge of the adjoining country places, and interchanged with his colleague once in every three months. Mr. Moore said he never knew a Society more dead to the world, more alive to God or more attached to Methodism, than in this town. The meetings were very lively, the congregation continued to increase, and there appeared to be a general pressing after holiness. He formed select bands (groups), appointed a general meeting one evening in the week, preached himself every morning at 5 o’clock, and also frequently held meetings in the open air”.

This preacher also paid attention to the area outside Coleraine and soon a little Society was formed in Ballycastle.

In 1785 Wesley paid his second visit to this area.

“At Coleraine there was a larger congregation than even at Clones, and the people seemed to him more intelligent than most he had met with.

On the following day he preached in one of the Presbyterian Meeting houses at noon and in the evening. At Ballymoney he discoursed in the court-house to a very civil and dull auditory, and from thence to Ballymena.”

On one occasion in Ballymena, the Presbyterian minister kindly offered his meeting-house. Wesley willingly accepted it, and preached to a large congregation, on many of whom the Spirit descended.

Again in 2003 our conference met in a Presbyterian meeting-house.

In 1786, the next year, by order of Wesley, Mr Griffith was removed from the Londonderry circuit to Coleraine, which had been formed into a separate Circuit with 3 preachers on it. In this town he had the satisfaction to witness a considerable addition to the congregation. The Rev. Mr Hazlett, the rector of a parish in the neighbourhood, was one of his regular hearers on week nights. This clergyman declared afterwards that during the first five weeks in which he attended the ministry of Mr. Griffith he had received more

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evangelical instruction than in all the studies of his previous life. The country parts of the circuit, however, were in a deplorable condition, but soon improved through the faithful labours of Mr. Griffith.”

The following year, in 1787, Wesley again visited Coleraine, but there is only a passing reference to the visit.

“At Coleraine he preached in the barrack yard to people of whom he speaks as “good old soldiers”, steady and affectionate, with whom one would willingly have remained a little longer.”

Two years later, in 1789, Wesley visited Coleraine for the fourth and last time.

“At Coleraine the Society was just after his own heart, “in spirit, in carriage, and even in dress”. The services were held in the large meeting-house, which was well filled. But he was much concerned to find that the junior preacher, John Stephens, who had been received on trial at the preceding conference, was far gone in consumption. This promising and devoted young man only survived a few days and then died in the full triumph of faith.”

Wesley described Coleraine as a “clean town, free from noise and the people very intelligent.”

John Wesley was 86 years of age when he visited Coleraine for the last time, two years before his death.

In this area of God’s vineyard we have a heritage of which to be proud, but it is also a challenge to move forward with an evangelical and social gospel which was the hallmark of Mr. Wesley himself.

By Michael Byrne

John Wesley, the founder with his brother Charles, of the religious movement, Methodism, visited Ireland on twenty one separate occasions between 1747 and 1789 and has left four volumes of journals to tell the tale. The journals are mainly spiritual in character but nevertheless contain much that is useful about Irish life, the towns, estates and even the weather. The late T. W. Freeman, in his John Wesley in Ireland (*Irish Geography*, vol. 8, 1975), pages 86 - 96 used the Everyman edition *The Journals of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, edited by the Rev. F. W. Macdonald. I have used the same edition for this survey.

Freeman noted that Wesley generally visited Ireland in the late Spring and stayed for 2 or 3 months; making what was in those days, the perilous journey across the Irish Sea. Wesley was born in 1703 and died in 1791 and was the fifteenth child of Samuel Wesley. Soon after being ordained, he went to Georgia (1735) On the boat, he met a party of German Moravians and after discussions began to have a more earnest view of the importance of evangelical doctrine. Wesley's mission to Georgia was not successful and he returned to England in 1738. His 'conversion' is dated to this time and following the example of George Whitefield (1714 - 70), the originator of Methodism, he began his open-air preaching of which he did much across his 'parish' which was effectively England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. The DNB noted that his journal of missionary travel would serve as a guide book to the British Isles. To the last he continued to travel and is said to have preached **40,000 sermons** and travelled **250,000 miles**.

[http://www.offalyhistory.com/content/reading_resources/irish_interest/wesley.htm]

300th Anniversary Web site – <http://www.wesley2003.org.uk>