The title I have chosen indicates that in American Methodism, we rarely mention Thomas Coke, but who, you already know about—or will do before this weekend is over. Francis Asbury, however, is well known as our pioneer bishop, born in Staffordshire and sent to America by John Wesley dying just two years after Thomas Coke.

By way of introduction to this talk I would like to quote from a book by the historian Frank Baker, a British Methodist who taught for many years at Duke University. Baker quotes Asbury at the time of Coke’s death and Baker offers an assessment of Coke.

When news came of Coke’s death on May 3, 1814, en route to Ceylon to establish missionary work in Asia, Asbury preached a funeral sermon, adding a remarkable testimony to Coke in his Journal: “…a gentleman, a scholar, and a bishop to us; and as a minister of Christ, in zeal, in labours, and in service, the greatest man in the last century.” What does this signify? In penning such a tribute Asbury could hardly have overlooked John Wesley. Many, perhaps most, would not agree in ranking Coke above Wesley. Was this a faulty judgment on Asbury’s part? Was it indeed a cold assessment? Or was it a posthumous expiation for having held Coke at arm’s length during the past thirty years, thus denying him the opportunity prove his constant assertion that he wished to live up to his full potential as the first bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church? At the very least such a tribute emphasizes the fact that Thomas Coke hardly merits his status as the forgotten man of early American Methodism.1

For it is—or has been—true that Coke is hardly remembered in American Methodism and where he is, the shadow of Asbury falls heavily upon him. Can he ever be brought out into the light? I searched for Coke in church names. I found one in Louisville, Kentucky. Three were named “Coke’s Chapel,” and twenty-two were named “Cokesbury” (I should perhaps point out here that the name Cokesbury was achieved by running the names Coke and Asbury together). By contrast there were 200 named for Asbury. About all we remember about Coke are the ill-fated Cokesbury College and the retail arm of the United Methodist Publishing House being named Cokesbury. If someone is well-informed on Methodist history, that person might be able to say something about Coke coming to America in 1784, meeting Asbury at Barrett’s Chapel and ordaining him at the Christmas Conference. Beyond that, he disappears. By contrast, he is remembered in British Methodism for his role in organizing mission work outside the British Isles and as a leader of conference after Wesley’s death.

There is a statue of Coke over the door of the Duke University Chapel but it is not Thomas Coke (the identity is uncertain although it is not in any sense a likeness). Also, there is

a rendering of Thomas Coke in the stained-glass windows over the doorway at the United Methodist Church in Ocean City, New Jersey where he joins John and Charles Wesley and Francis Asbury. Only two American biographies exist, one written by F. F. Upham in 1910 and one by Warren A. Candler written in 1923, who claimed that Coke was ranked, "far below his real worth."² There is one doctoral dissertation by Warren Thomas Smith.³ But the greatest honor must go to John Vickers for his monumental work insuring that Coke would have a modern hearing.

Coke spent the equivalent of three years in America over nine visits made during twenty years. After 1784-1785, he came every two years. After the quadrennial General Conference of 1792, he came every 4 years. In 1804, he came offering his services and left rebuffed, never to return to the United States.

In summarizing Coke’s impact on American Methodism, Baker has written:

He was the transmitter from Wesley of American ministerial orders, he was the chief formulator of the original Discipline, he was a pioneer in several aspects of social concern, and the effective promoter of government by a quadrennial General Conference. Had he had his own way he would have transformed Methodism into a church rather than a society at a much earlier stage in its history, and he himself might have remained here permanently as one of Methodism’s joint fathers-in-God.⁴

**Coke in 1784: First Journey**

At 10:00 am on September 18, 1784, Coke and two preacher companions set sail from Bristol. Even here, popular history gets it wrong in a painting by Kenneth Wyatt showing Wesley present and bidding them farewell “To Offer Christ.” From September 14, Wesley was preaching in northern Somerset.⁵

Coke was Wesley’s ambassador sent to America to transmit orders, a worship book, and an organizational plan to the American Methodists. The first action was to receive from Wesley the power to ordain, which power Wesley had taken without justification from the Church of England. How much of the blame for such irregularities should be placed upon Coke is open to debate. Vickers wrote: “In the case of the ordinations for America, it is difficult to be certain at what stage Coke was drawn into the preliminary deliberations, or how far and on which aspect of the issue he had any influence on Wesley… On 9 August, ‘ordination’ had become the central issue, and Coke was urging the expediency of it—but again, we should note, on pragmatic rather than theoretical grounds. He is aware that the task on which he is being sent will not be an easy one.”⁶ Coke notes:

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² Warren A. Candler, *Life of Thomas Coke* (Nashville, TN: Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1923), iii.
³ Boston University Graduate School, Ph.D. dissertation, 1953.
⁴ Baker, 142-143.
The more maturely I consider the subject, the more expedient it seems to me that the power of ordaining others should be received by me from you, by the imposition of your hands; and that you should lay hands on Brother Whatcoat and Brother Vasey, for the following reasons ... I may want all the influence in America which you can throw in my scale... But as the journey is long, and you cannot spare me often, and it is well to provide against all events, and an authority formally received from you will be fully admitted by the people...I could therefore earnestly wish you would exercise that power in this instance, which I have not a shadow of doubt but God had invested you with for the good of the Connexion. I think you have tried me too often to doubt whether I will in any degree use the power you are pleased to invest me with further than I believe absolutely necessary for the prosperity of the work.⁷

Following John’s action authorizing Coke to ordain and he himself ordaining Whatcoat and Vasey, Charles Wesley wrote poetry expressing his disgust with this action and Coke does not come off well:

So easily are bishops made  
By man or woman’s whim;  
Wesley his hands on Coke hath laid  
But who laid hands on him?

Wesley himself and friends betrays,  
By his good sense forsook,  
When suddenly his hands he lays,  
On the hot head of Coke.

Secure he now the sacred Pale o’erleaps,  
Taught by audacious Coke to slight the guilt.⁸

Two charges made against Coke were that he persuaded Wesley against his better judgment and ignored Wesley’s plan by substituting his own for the American church. Vickers counters these by pointing out that Wesley continued to ordain and may have regretted the consequences but not the actions themselves. Wesley defended his ordinations. There was claimed that Wesley also sent over a “little sketch” outlining the organization of the American church which has never been found. Vickers claims it has not been found because it never existed.⁹

Coke’s Journal from this first voyage reveals Coke’s deep piety. He wrote, “I devoted the morning to fasting and prayer, and reading the scriptures, and found it a truly profitable

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⁹ Vickers, 42-43.
time." A few days later, “I set apart this morning for fasting and prayer, as I did also last Wednesday, and found it a refreshing season for my soul.” On Sunday, October 17 he wanted to limit work on Sunday, “Two dolphins visited our ship, and immediately the sailors brought out their spear and lines. I knew not whether I should oppose them or not on account of the day: but as the difficulty I should have to convince them of the sin would be very great, and as they now consent to have public worship three times on the Lord’s day, I forbore for this time, hoping to bring them in gradually. They killed one of them with a spear, and we are to dine upon it tomorrow. It is more like salmon, than any other fish I know.”

This journey is the most remembered aspect of Coke’s ministry in America because of the meeting with Francis Asbury on November 14, 1784, at Barratt’s Chapel, the preparation for the Christmas Conference, the ordination of Asbury, and the formation of the Methodist Episcopal Church creating a blueprint for a new church. Coke, for his sermon on the ordination of Asbury, took as his text, Revelation 3:7-11 which was to the angel of the church in Philadelphia. God knew “thy works” and had set before them an open door. Coke stated that he would in the course of the sermon “In the first place, vindicate our conduct in the present instance. Secondly, open the words of the text. And thirdly, delineate the character of a Christian bishop.”

Concerning the Christmas Conference, Candler says the two superintendents participated in the debates. He quotes Thomas Ware, a member of the Christmas Conference, as saying of Coke as a debater: “He was the best speaker in a small circle or on a Conference floor I ever heard.”

Asbury and Coke visited General George Washington at Mt. Vernon in May 1785 revealing their opposition to slavery. Coke wrote in his Journal:

Mr. Asbury and I set off for General Washington’s. We were engaged to dine there the day before. The general’s seat is very elegant, built upon the great river Potomawk…After dinner we desired a private interview, and opened to him the grand business on which we came, presenting to him our petition for the emancipation of the negroes, and intreating [sic] his signature, if the eminence of his station did not render it inexpedient for him to sign any petition. He informed us that he was of our sentiments, and had signified his thoughts on the subject to most of the great men of the State: that he did not see it proper to sign the petition, but if the Assembly took it into consideration, would signify his sentiments to the Assembly by a letter.

Coke also was instrumental in pressing for preachers to go outside the newly formed country to Nova Scotia and to the Caribbean Islands.

Warren Thomas Smith wrote of this first trip about its major events, “1. The Christmas Conference had been held and out of it a new church grew. 2. Cokesbury College was started. 3. Methodism was developing a social conscience regarding slavery. 3. There was an interest.

10 Vickers, ed., Journal, Friday, October 8; Friday, October 15; Sunday, October 17; 29.
11 Candler, 68.
12 Candler, 68.
13 Vickers, ed., Journal, 63-64.
in missions. 5. There was a strong zeal for evangelism. In all of these interests, Coke played no small part.”

On June 3, 1785, he began the journey back to England.

Transatlantic Tug-of-War:
A Brief Overview of his Travels (9 round trips, 3-4 years in America)

John Vickers summarizes these next eight trips of Coke to America. “Despite the difficulties of travel in the eighteenth century, he made eight more voyages to America. Yet his standing with the American Methodists remained somewhat equivocal. His British citizenship was a handicap in a period of continuing tension between the two nations. Asbury was clearly reluctant to parcel out his authority and only grudgingly gave Coke opportunity to exercise his Episcopal office when he was in America. Above all, perhaps, neither Coke nor the American Methodists ever quite decided whether he should shed his other commitments and give himself entirely to America.”

His time was also consumed by work in Great Britain, with writing, and with missionary work. But this is part of the “context in which his contributions to American Methodism were made.” His issues with the American preachers included carrying Wesley’s directions for the election of Whatcoat and Garrettson as superintendents, which was refused and his efforts to promote liturgical worship in the face of the informality of the American frontier.

Second Tour: March 1-May 27, 1787

It was on this visit to America that the title of General Superintendent was changed to bishop but this was probably more the work of Asbury and not Coke.

Coke’s zeal for education was reflected in his support of Cokesbury College which was created by action of the Conference at Christmas of 1784. He raised money for it and wrote in his Journal of May 8, 1787, “On Tuesday, the 8th of May, Mr. Asbury and I paid a visit to our new college, which will be opened (we expect) between this and Christmas; and we trust, will united together those two great ornaments of human nature, Genuine Religion and Extensive Learning. The situation pleases me more and more. Our object is (not to raise Gospel-ministers, but) to serve our pious friends and our married preachers in the proper education of their sons.”

Third Tour: February 24-June 5, 1789

He wrote in his journal about his visit in New Jersey, “May 1789: In our conference which in Trenton, on the 23rd, for the State of New Jersey, all the Preachers seemed full of love. The few friends we have in this town, did everything, I believe, that they could conceive, to make us comfortable; but alas! the work is, and ever has been, at a very low ebb in this place. The numbers in Jersey are 1,751: here also there has been a decrease of 295. This will necessarily happen sometimes in so extensive a work; yea, where the ministers have been most faithful.

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14 Smith, 204-205.
15 Vickers, 44.
16 Vickers, 45.
17 Journal, 89.
Rotten members, be they ever so numerous [sic], must be lopped off, or we should soon become like other men. We have three Indians in this district; and who knows but they are the first fruits of a glorious harvest among that people.”

“A notable event during the New York Conference was the presentation of a loyal address to the newly elected President Washington. Coke’s published Journal remains significantly silent on this. But he was involved both in drafting the address and in witnessing its presentation, despite his British citizenship and continuing Tory leanings. For this he was severely criticized in the New York press and, on his return home, had to face further condemnation at the British Conference.”

Fourth Tour: February 21-May 15, 1791

This was marked by a hasty return to England when word reached him of the death of John Wesley on March 2. It was also marked by an exchange of letters between Coke and the Bishops of the Protestant Episcopal Church, White and Seabury, in which Coke proposed reunion with the Anglicans. Asbury had heard of Coke’s proposals and was much opposed and along with Wesley’s death, the prospects for the proposal looked slim indeed. In a letter to Bishop Seabury on May 14, 1791, he wrote:

Again, I love the Methodists in America, and could not think of leaving them entirely whatever might happen to me in Europe. The Preachers and People also love me. Many of them have a peculiar regard for me. But I could not with propriety visit the American Methodists possessing in our Church on this side of the water an Office inferior to that of Asbury.

Coke then goes on and proposes that Asbury and he be consecrated as bishops “of the Methodist Society in the Protestant Episcopal Church.”

Fifth Tour: October 30-December 12, 1792

Coke returns to be in attendance at the first quadrennial General Conference. His opposition to Asbury’s plan of organizing a council of bishops and presiding elders to conduct the business of the church leads to its demise and the adoption of the alternative of a conference of all the preachers.

Sixth Tour: October 8, 1796-February 6, 1797

There was little that was noteworthy.

Seventh Tour: August 28, 1797-Spring, 1798

There is nothing noteworthy to report.

Eighth Tour: April 27-June 11, 1800

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18 Vickers, Letters, 126.
19 Vickers, Journals, 92.
20 Vickers, Letters, 144-145.
The General Conference was marked by concern over Asbury’s declining health. It elected Richard Whatcoat as a third bishop and confirmed “the decision of the Virginia Conference of 1797 by “lending” Coke “for a season, to return to us as soon as he conveniently can; but at farthest by the meeting of the our next General Conference.” Asbury was never quite sure how he much he wanted Coke to be part of the governance of the American preachers.

**Ninth Tour: October, 1803-Spring, 1804**

In 1803, Coke promised to spend the remaining days in America but he was snubbed by Asbury and did not do much other than preach. With his return to England he completed his last trip to America. Marriage diminished his desire to return. The conference and Asbury did not support his return. The 1807 minutes are the last to record his name. In 1808 McKendree was elected bishop and Coke recedes into the historical background.

Marriage kept him from returning to the United States. One day in Bristol he made an appeal for missions and received a subscription from a wealthy maiden lady of the sum of one hundred guineas. When he called to collect the sum promised she made the gift two hundred. Such generosity overwhelmed him. It was too much like his own generosity. He married her only a few weeks later.

**Conclusion and Appraisal**

Concerning American Methodism his visits were too brief to form a bond with the American preachers. His efforts on behalf of Cokesbury College were a precursor to American interest in education but without a direct linkage. He may have raised the consciousness of some in his opposition to slavery but it bore little fruit. But as John Vickers wrote,

As the first Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, he presided at many of the early Conferences in America, and during his last visit he preached before the Congress itself in Washington. He was twice elected to the presidential chair by his brethren in the British Conference, and in other years frequently served as it secretary. The name of no other Breconian is so widely remembered and honoured as that of this man who travelled so continuously and extensively throughout the world he served. Thomas Coke was indeed a son of whom Brecon may be proud, and one it should be ashamed to forget.

However, the only mention in the memorial tablet in the Priory Church in Brecon, where he wanted to be buried, is that he crossed the Atlantic 18 times on his visits to the American continent and West Indian colonies in the service of the souls of Man. Maybe that is enough to remember him.

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21 Baker, 159; also *Journal of the General Conference, 1800*, 31-37.
24 Smith, 414; also Candler, 395-396
One more quotation from John Vickers as he wrote, “The twenty years of Coke’s association with America was a period of rapid growth for Methodism in that land, and his contribution to that growth was far from negligible. Of course, he was dwarfed by Asbury, the lone giant of the American scene. But Asbury gave himself utterly and exclusively to America, for over 40 years; where Coke came and went, and had many other commitments elsewhere. Not least important was the fact that in his own person he provided a link between the American and British connexions, at a time when the two nations were alienated; a link which was virtually severed by his death and has been laboriously reforged only in recent time by the formation of the World Methodist Council.”

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