

By W. THOMAS SMITH

Thomas Coke's War on American Slavery

Dr. Thomas Coke's [1747-1814] many-faceted career is, at long last, becoming increasingly known and appreciated. A high spirited little Welshman, educated at Oxford's Jesus College and ordained in the Church of England, Coke became John Wesley's assistant. In September of 1784 Wesley set Coke apart as a General Superintendent (the term was later changed to Bishop) and dispatched him to America to ordain Francis Asbury. At the Christmas Conference, convened in Baltimore, December 24, 1784, the Methodist Episcopal Church was born.

During the six months immediately following the Christmas Conference Coke engaged in a heroic war against slavery. This little known campaign was held in early 1785. While it may appear to have been of little immediate success, by it seeds were planted which would bear much fruit in later years. Coke was the gadfly which stung many — either to action or withdrawal — from Methodism.

Coke had good precedence for his anti-slavery views. In 1774 John Wesley published his "Thoughts Upon Slavery," a forthright document which gave a brief, factual history of slavery and closed with a vivid portrayal of the plight of Negroes brought from Africa to the Americas: "If, therefore, you have any regard to justice, (to say nothing of mercy, nor the revealed law of God), render unto all their due. Give liberty to whom liberty is due, that is, to every child of man, to every partaker of human nature. Let none serve you but by his own act and deed, by his own voluntary choice. Away with all whips, all chains, all compulsion!"¹ Richard M. Cameron rightly points out that "Thoughts Upon Slavery" had far reaching repercussions.² Freeborn Garrettson, in writing of his 1775 conversion affirmed: "... — till then I had never suspected that the practice of slave keeping was wrong; ... I told them they did not belong to me, ..." ³

While American Methodism was still but a group of loosely organized Societies, the 1780 Conference took a bold anti-slavery stand when it asked: "Ought not this Conference to require those travelling preachers who hold slaves to give promises to set them free?" The following question was yet stronger:

Does this Conference acknowledge that slavery is contrary to the laws of God, man, and nature, and hurtful to society; contrary to the dictates of conscience and pure religion, and doing that which we would not others should do to us and ours? Do we pass our disapprobation on all our friends who keep slaves, and advise their freedom?⁴

¹*The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1959), XI, p. 79.

²*The History of American Methodism* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), I, p. 251.

³Nathan Bangs, *The Life of the Rev. Freeborn Garrettson* (New York: J. Emory and B. Waugh, 1832), pp. 41-42.

⁴*Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, for the years 1773-1828* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), I, p. 12.

The Conference of 1783 asked, "What shall be done with our local preachers who hold slaves . . . ?" and answered, "We will try them another year . . . let every assistant deal faithfully and plainly with every one . . ." ⁵ Spring of 1784 witnessed a Conference which inquired: "What shall we do with our friends that buy and sell slaves?" The answer: "If they . . . have been previously warned, they shall be expelled, . . ." ⁶ Local preachers not complying in Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania and New Jersey would be suspended.

The Conference voted to expel members who "buy and sell" slaves.

Every member in our society who has slaves, in those states where the laws will admit of freeing them, shall, after notice given him by the preacher, within twelve month, (except in Virginia, and there within two years) legally execute and record an instrument, whereby he sets free every slave in his possession, those who are from forty to forty-five, immediately, or at farthest at the age of forty-five. Those who are between the ages of twenty-five and forty, immediately, or within the course of five years. Those who are between the ages of twenty and twenty-five, immediately, or at farthest at the age of thirty. Those who are under the age of twenty, as soon as they are twenty-five at farthest. —And every infant, immediately on its birth. ⁷

Thus the stage was set for Coke's arrival in America, November, 1784. In Coke's *Journal* we find a revealing and dramatic capsule of 18th century Americana, as he spent from January to June, 1785, touring the Atlantic seaboard. Coke's *Journal* — actually a series of *Extracts* — went through many printings in England and America. Frequently there were brief but very significant changes in the several editions. These alterations reflect the manner in which Coke reported either to his American or British readers.

One of the first slavery entries comes as an uncomplimentary rebuke to the Reverend Devereux Jarratt, the Anglican clergyman usually regarded as very sympathetic to Methodism:

Roanok Chapel, Wednesday [March] 30. [1785] I found in this Chapel a serious, attentive people. Here I met with Mr. Jarret [sic]. After duty he went with me to one Brother Seaward's (in the state of Virginia) about eight miles off. We now talked largely on the Minutes concerning Slavery: but he would not be persuaded. The secret is, he has twenty-four Slaves of his own: but I am afraid, he will do infinite hurt by his opposition to our Rules. ⁸

While Jarratt vociferously denied owning slaves, in reality he "vigorously assailed the unpopular [anti-slavery] rules" ⁹ of the Methodists.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁷Jesse Lee, *A Short History of the Methodists . . .* (Baltimore: Magill and Clime, 1810), pp. 96-97. Note the phrase "... legally execute and record an instrument, . . ."

⁸*Extracts of the Journals of the Rev. Dr. Coke's Five Visits to America* (London: G. Paramore, 1793), pp. 32-33. This edition was for the British public. Also see *The Arminian Magazine* (Philadelphia, 1789) for the American account of his tour.

⁹H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, But . . .* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1972), p. 39, citing a letter from Jarratt to Dromgoole, May 31, 1785.

In a letter to Edward Dromgoole on March 22, 1788, Jarratt "expressly contended that the Bible authorized slavery."¹⁰

From the outset, Jarratt and Coke did not see eye to eye on many issues, slavery being but one major point. Of the two clergymen it can only be said that it was a clear — and unhappy — case of incompatibility. Jarratt poured out his resentment of Coke in a letter of August 31, 1790, taking the Doctor to task for using the published *Journal* as public information, "Dr. Coke's journal [*sic*], I hope to treat with becoming contempt. . . . I am no advocate for slavery. Slavery, as it is practiced in general is most abhorrent to my mind. I wish its abolition."¹¹ Jarratt earlier commented ". . . After saying he met me at Roanoak . . . says he, that I have twenty-four slaves. God knows me better, and so do you . . ." ¹²

In Virginia, Coke actually launched his anti-slavery campaign: "Friday, April 1. [1785, Virginia] I preached in a Chapel belonging to *Isaac Johnson*. I now begin to venture to exhort our Societies to emancipate their Slaves."¹³ This was followed shortly by the first public statement: "Tuesday [April] 5. [1785] I rode to Sister *Bedford's*. Here I dared for the first time to bear a public testimony against slavery, and I do not find that more than one was offended."¹⁴ Coke gives an illuminating account of a funeral: "On Wednesday 6, I preached the late Colonel *Bedford's* funeral sermon. But I said nothing good of him, for he was a violent friend of slavery," Coke continued, ". . . his interest being great among the Methodists in these parts, he would have been a dreadful thorn in our sides, if the Lord had not in his mercy taken him away."¹⁵

Deep, personal relationships are expressed by Coke: "Thursday [April] 7. [1785, Virginia] I went some miles to a dying friend, and spent about half the day with him drawing up his Will, in which he emancipates at the times there specified his eight Slaves. This is a good beginning. . . ." ¹⁶ Coke's reference to drawing up a Will calls to our attention the realism of emancipation. Did the white slaveholders actually liberate the slaves, or was it just pious talk? There is no question that pious talk was part of the problem, but records indicate that there were legal documents whereby slaves were set free. As to the manner in which these newly emancipated slaves became economically, socially and psychologically free, remains quite another matter. At this period in America there were approximately three-quarters of a million Negroes with "almost 89 per cent" living in the South Atlantic area. The

¹⁰*Ibid.*, see note 72.

¹¹See *The Life of the Reverend Devereux Jarratt, . . . Written by Himself* (Baltimore: Printed by Warner & Hanna, 1806), pp. 75-76, in "Thoughts on Divinity: . . ."

¹²*Ibid.*, letter dated April 15, 1790, in "Thoughts on Divinity," . . . , p. 83.

¹³Coke, *Journal*, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

¹⁴*Ibid.* These passages regarding the Bedfords are glaringly omitted from *The Arminian Magazine*, *op. cit.*, I, p. 343.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 34.

1790 slave population, in the South Atlantic states was 641,691. There were 32,048 free Negroes in this same territory.¹⁷

Opposition, however, was not long in rearing its ugly head:

Saturday [April] 9, [1785, Virginia] I set off with the friends to Brother *Martin's*, in whose barn I preached that day. . . . The testimony I bore in this place against slaveholding, provoked many of the unawakened to retire out of the barn, and to combine together to flog me . . . as soon as I came out. A high-headed Lady also went out, and told the rioters . . . that she would give fifty pounds, if they would give that little Doctor one hundred lashes. When I came out, they surrounded me, but had only the power to talk. . . . But God restrained the rage of the multitude. Our Brother *Martin* has done gloriously, for he has fully and immediately emancipated fifteen slaves. And that sermon . . . , has so affected one of our brethren (Brother *Norton*) that he came to Brother *Martin*, and desired him to draw up a proper instrument for the emancipation of his eight slaves. A brother (whose name is *Ragland*) has also emancipated one.¹⁸

It is obvious, that for all his prophetic zeal, Coke exercised a rather cautious approach in dealing with many of his belligerent hearers:

Monday [April] 11. [1785, Virginia] I preached at Brother *Baker's* Here a mob came to meet me with staves and clubs. Their plan, I believe, was to fall upon me as soon as I touched on the subject of slavery. I knew nothing of it till I had done preaching; but not seeing it was my duty to touch on the subject here, their scheme was defeated, and they suffered me to pass through them without molestation.¹⁹

Slavery was a dreadful thing and the tragedy of it became increasingly real:

Tuesday [April] 12. [1785, Virginia] I rode to Brother *Kennon's*, preaching a funeral sermon in the way at a Planter's house for a little child, and reading our burial service in the wood over the grave. They have a funeral sermon preached in these parts for every human creature that dies, except the Blacks . . .

Coke seems to pause in reflection, emancipation comes to mind, for Kennon " . . . has emancipated twenty-two Slaves. These are great sacrifices: for the Slaves are worth, I suppose, upon an average, thirty or forty pounds sterling each, and perhaps more."²⁰

Once Coke left Virginia, he brought his campaign to a temporary halt due to North Carolina laws: "Thursday [April] 14. [1785] . . . I have now done with my Testimony against Slavery, for a time, being got into *North Carolina* again, the Laws of this State forbidding any to emancipate their Negroes."²¹

While Coke was guarded in public statements, he was not inactive: "Tuesday [April] 19. [1785, North Carolina] We came to Brother *Greenhill's* where we held our Conference. . . . We have also drawn up

¹⁷See John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1969), p. 145.

¹⁸Coke, *Journal*, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 36. By present day currency standards and values, the twenty-two slaves would represent an investment of approximately \$22,000.

²¹*Ibid.*

a petition to the General Assembly of *North Carolina* signed by the Conference, intreating them to pass an Act to authorize those who are disposed, to emancipate their Slaves. Mr. *Asbury* has visited the Governor, and has gained him over."²²

This Conference witnessed the first of several disputations between Coke and Jesse Lee regarding the slavery rules. The Welshman was making a valiant attempt to carry the preachers with him in this, the *summum bonum* of all causes. There is marked irony that the host for the Conference, Major Green Hill, was a wealthy slave owner.²³

Once back in Virginia, Coke reestablished his crusade, but with a new approach: "*Mecklenburg County, Virginia*, Saturday [April] 23. [1785] . . . Here I bore a public testimony against Slavery, and I have found out a method of delivering it without much offence, or at least without causing a tumult: and that is, by first addressing the Negroes in a very pathetic manner on the Duty of Servants to Masters; and then the Whites will receive quietly what I have to say to them. . . ." ²⁴

Opposition in local congregations was soon experienced. Coke's mettle was being tested, both as to his convictions on the slavery issue, and his ability as an administrator:

Sunday, May 1-4, [1785, Virginia] About twenty Preachers met Mr. *Asbury* and me at Brother *Mason's*. . . A great many principal friends met us here to insist on a Repeal of the Slave-Rules; but when they found that we had thoughts of withdrawing ourselves entirely from the Circuit . . . they drew in their horns, and sent us a very humble letter, intreating that Preachers might be appointed for their Circuit . . . we formed a petition, a copy of which was given to every Preacher, intreating the General Assembly of *Virginia*, to pass a Law for the immediate or gradual emancipation of all the Slaves. It is to be signed by all the Freeholders we can procure, and those I believe will not be few. There have been many debates already on the subject in the Assembly. . . .²⁵

"I found the minds of the people greatly agitated with our rules against slavery," noted *Asbury*. He went on to describe the confrontation: ". . . Colonel Bedford and Doctor Coke disputed on the subject, and the Colonel used some threats: next day, brother O'Kelly let fly at them, and they were made angry enough; we, however, came off with whole bones, . . ." ²⁶

In spite of the disagreement, Coke felt that much had been accomplished at the Conference. ". . . Many of our friends and some of the great men of the States, have been inciting us to apply for Acts of Incorporation, but I have discouraged it, and have prevailed. We have

²²*Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

²³See John Vickers, *Thomas Coke, Apostle of Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), p. 95.

²⁴Coke, *Journal*, *op. cit.*, p. 37. This passage is pointedly deleted from *The Arminian Magazine*, I, see p. 346.

²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

²⁶*The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), I, *The Journal*, p. 488, entry for Saturday, April 30, 1785. In all probability the two Bedfords are father and son.

a better staff to lean upon than any this world can afford. We can truly say, 'The harvest is great, but the labourers are few.'"²⁷

Coke's second withering comment on Devereux Jarratt is worth mentioning: "... on the 7th [May, 1785] passed by the house of Mr. *Jarrat* [*sic*], that violent assertor of the propriety and justice of Negro-Slavery. . . . I lodged that night at the house of Brother *Rees*. . . . He lives just by Mr. *Jarratt*, and is the great bar in the hands of God to that fallen man's ruining our whole work in that neighborhood. . . ."²⁸

Jarratt's reaction was candid: "Did you ever discover me to be such a violent man, as to authorize any one to make *violence* a distinguishing characteristic of me? The truth is, the little man [Coke] read the minutes to me, and asked my opinion of them. I told him I was no friend to slavery; but however I did not think the minutes proper, . . . I care not one straw for what he has journalized about me. . . ."²⁹

Coke later regretted the harshness of his charge against Jarratt, writing a "penitential letter"³⁰ which prompted an acceptance "... you had a full and free pardon, . . . I shall say no more on this hand, but wish it to be forever buried in oblivion."³¹ Mutual apology seems to have cleared the air between the two.

Coke's observation on people is noteworthy: how can a Christian rationalize slavery?

Friday [May] 13. [1785, Virginia] . . . At night I lodged at the house of Captain *Dillard*, . . . as kind to his Negroes as if they were White servants. It was quite pleasing to see them so decently and comfortably clothed. And yet I could not beat into the head of that poor man the evil of keeping them in Slavery, although he has read Mr. *Wesley's* Thoughts on Slavery, (I think he said) *three times over*: but his good wife is strongly on our side.³²

Coke tenaciously stood by his convictions, regardless of mounting opposition:

Saturday and Sunday [May] 14 and 15. [1785, Virginia] . . . But when I enlarged to the Society on *Negro-Slavery*, the principal leader raged like a lion, and desired to withdraw from the Society. I took him at his word, and appointed that excellent man (Brother *Skelton*) Leader in his stead. When the Society came out of the Church, they surrounded Brother *Skelton*, "And will you," said they, "Set your Slaves at liberty?" (He has many Slaves) "Yes," says he, "I believe I shall."³³

Insights are given regarding the private, and public, lives of individual Methodists: "Monday [May] 16. [1785, Virginia] I preached . . . at *New-Glasgow*, and lodged at Colonel M_____'. . . . Colonel M_____

²⁷Coke, *Journal*, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹*Life of Devereux Jarratt*, *op. cit.*, pp. 83-84, letter dated April 15, 1790, in "Thoughts On . . . Divinity; . . ."

³⁰William Warren Sweet, *Virginia Methodism A History* (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1955), p. 113.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 114. Also see note 16, p. 115.

³²Coke, *Journal*, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 41. The concluding paragraph on slavery is not included in the *Arminian Magazine*, *op. cit.*, I, p. 393.

is a very sensible, and polite man. He acknowledged the force of my arguments concerning the Negroes, but (I evidently saw) did not chuse [*sic*] to take any active part for fear of losing his popularity. His son is a Member of the house of Delegates, and he wants himself to get into the Senate. . . .”³⁴

Coke’s experience with Mr. Tandy Key illustrates the problems faced frequently within a family:

Thursday [May] 19. [1785, Virginia] I preached . . . at Brother *Tandy Key’s*. . . . He told me, as we rode together, that he was determined to emancipate his Slaves (about twenty) although his miserable father, I suppose, will never give him any further assistance, if he does. I pushed on in the evening, with an intention of reaching his father’s, Mr. *Martin Key’s*: . . . when I called there the next morning, I found he had shut his door against the Preachers, because he has eighty Slaves. . . . before I went away, [I] cleared myself of the blood of the old man. . . .³⁵

Coke consistently sought to know the leaders of the state: “Sunday [May] 22, [1785, Virginia] I read prayers, preached, and administered the sacrament in Mr. *Fry’s* great Room. . . . He is a precious man, and, I trust, will be eloquent in the House of Delegates for the emancipation of the Slaves. He is to present our petition.”³⁶

The grand moment in Coke’s anti-slavery crusade came with the visit to Mt. Vernon, a time of obvious enjoyment — and triumph — for Coke:

Thursday [May] 26. [1785] Mr. *Asbury* and I set off for General *Washington’s*. We were engaged to dine there the day before. . . . He received us very politely, and was very open to access. . . . 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 his signature, . . . He informed us that he was of our sentiments, and had signified his thoughts . . . 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.³⁷

The visit had been arranged through General Roberdeau, “an intimate acquaintance of General *Washington’s*, . . .” Coke always had a mania for associations with notables. In writing his American version of the visit Coke glowingly described Washington as “. . . a friend of mankind.” At his loquacious best, Coke added a final commendation (for the benefit of his American readers):

. . . I was loth to leave him, for I greatly love and esteem him, and if there was no pride in it, would say that we are surely *kindred spirits*, formed in the same mould. O that my GOD would give him the witness of his Spirit! . . .³⁸

It is worth noting that in Washington’s nine hundred volume library there were some three hundred fifty volumes on divinity. Among these

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 43.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 45.

³⁸*The Arminian Magazine*, *op. cit.*, I, p. 396.

are several of Wesley's Sermons, including "Thoughts Upon Slavery," gifts from Coke and Asbury.³⁹

Asbury's only comment on the visit was a simple: "We waited on General Washington, who received us very politely, and gave us his opinion against slavery."⁴⁰

In his reforming zeal, Coke may have gone too far and too fast, at least as far as a young American church was concerned. Capitulation at the Conference at Baltimore is clearly seen: "Wednesday, June 1. [1785] We opened our Conference. . . . We thought it prudent to suspend the minute concerning Slavery, . . . we were agreeably informed that several of our friends in *Maryland* had already emancipated their Slaves."⁴¹ Concrete action was taken, so Coke reported to the Americans, regarding Maryland:

. . . But we agreed to present to the assembly of *Maryland*, through our friends, a petition for a general emancipation, signed by as many electors as we can procure, similar to that which we agreed to present to the *Virginia* assembly.⁴²

"The Dr. was much respected in the United States;" observed Jesse Lee, "but he met with some opposition in the south parts of *Virginia*, owing to his imprudent manner of preaching against slavery. No doubt but the Dr. thought at the time he was doing right: . . ." ⁴³

Lee reflected the attitude of many American churchmen, certainly Jarratt, who wrote Dromgoole that the Methodist rule regarding slavery had "already done more harm than the united effort of all the Preachers . . . would ever do good."⁴⁴

At the direction of the Christmas Conference, Bishops Coke and Asbury drew up the *Discipline*, and made the entry: "What methods can we take to extirpate Slavery?"

. . . We view it as contrary to the Golden Law of God on which hang all the Law and the Prophets, and the Unalienable Rights of Mankind, . . . to hold in the deepest Debasement, in a more abject Slavery than is perhaps to be found in any Part of the World except America, so many Souls that are all capable of the Image of God. . . . every Person concerned, who will not comply . . . shall have Liberty quietly to withdraw himself from our Society within the twelve months succeeding the notice given. . . . ⁴⁵

No legislation regarding slavery was passed by the Conference of 1785, however, a single N. B. was made: "We do hold in deepest abhorrence

³⁹See *Zion's Herald*, September 1, 1920, p. 1144.

⁴⁰Asbury, *Journal*, *op. cit.*, I, p. 489.

⁴¹Coke, *Journal*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

⁴²*The Arminian Magazine*, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 397-398.

⁴³Lee, *History*, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

⁴⁴Letter to Edward Dromgoole, May 31, 1785, quoted in Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality 1780-1845* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 12.

⁴⁵*Minutes of Several Conversations between The Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D. and The Rev. Francis Asbury . . . composing a Form of Discipline* (Philadelphia: Charles Cist, MDCCLXXXV), pp. 15-16.

the practice of slavery; and shall not cease to seek its destruction by all wise and prudent means."⁴⁶

Coke sailed for England on June 3, 1785 and spent two busy years in close association with Wesley. There were many assignments and a multiplicity of responsibilities.

In 1787 Coke returned to the United States for his second visit. Two *Journal* entries regarding slavery are expressions of the backlash of his previous tour. He had sown the wind, and now reaped the whirlwind: "[March, 1787, Virginia] . . . I visited the county of *Halifax*, where I met with a little persecution . . . on account of the public testimony I bore against Negro-Slavery . . . soon after I left the country . . . , a bill was presented against me as a seditious person before the Grand Jury, . . . and ninety persons had engaged to pursue me, . . . Another bill was also presented in one of the neighbouring counties, but was thrown out. . . ."⁴⁷

Coke noted the "perfect peace and quietness" with which he was received. He then added a startling admission: "Indeed I now acknowledge that however just my sentiments may be concerning Slavery, it was ill judged of me to deliver them from the pulpit." Nevertheless, a harvest was seen — small though it may appear. ". . . A man who pursued me with a gun in order to shoot me when I was in this neighborhood before . . . is now converted to God, and become a member of our Society."⁴⁸

On his fourth visit to America, Coke made this telling observation: "[February, 1791, South Carolina] During my stay at *Charleston*, a striking proof was given of the regard which is paid in this country to religious liberty. We employ a poor negro [*sic*], a member of the society, to snuff the candles in our Chapel: and a stranger from *North Carolina* beat him unmercifully with a stick, because the poor black only desired him not to talk whilst the Minister was preaching. The next day we applied for justice to the chief Magistrate, and got the rioter safely locked up in prison, . . ."⁴⁹

During the General Conference in Baltimore, October, 1796, with Coke present, "The subject of Negro Slavery was brought forward, and more said in favour of it than I liked to hear," noted William Colbert. "The debate on the subject of Slavery resumed and when put to a vote, it went in favour of its standing as it had. — They who hold Slaves are to be continued in Society."⁵⁰

It was an obvious victory for the conservative wing of Methodism. Had Coke become weary? Possibly so. Another important element: the

⁴⁶*Minutes, op. cit.*, p. 24. The phrase "... wise and prudent ..." may have the ring of "... all deliberate speed ..."

⁴⁷Coke, *Journal, op. cit.*, p. 69.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁵⁰William Colbert, *A Journal of the Travels of William Colbert . . . 1790 to 1838*. Typed, unpublished manuscript at the Commission on Archives and History, Lake Junaluska, North Carolina, Vol. 2, pp. 95-96.

peripatetical nature of his ministry in the United States. He was in America for only a few months at a time [in all, he made nine separate visits]. It is unlikely that one can champion a cause *in absentia*.

Unhappily, a postscript needs to be added regarding Coke and slavery in the West Indies. In contrast to the United States, no such crusade was conducted there, in fact in 1792 William Hammett charged Coke with purchasing slaves out of mission funds. Alas! As Coke admitted, there was a basis for the accusation, "... My friends on all sides of me urged that the present [a cotton and coffee plantation presented to the mission by the Colonial Legislature on St. Vincent] might be an exempt case, that the gift of the land was undoubtedly *providential*, and that the slaves purchased for the cultivation of it would certainly be treated *by us* in the tenderest manner. . . ." He frankly said the "... wound continued to deepen in my mind . . . till at last I wrote . . . (Mr. Baxter) that I could not admit of any slaves upon the estate. . . ." He concludes, "At the time I acted for the best, and '*humanum est errare.*'"⁵¹

Coke's involvement in the St. Vincent episode is indeed regrettable, a major — and tragic — blunder. It ought not, however, prevent our seeing Coke as a man endowed with a love for people, especially the down-trodden of the earth. Nor should it diminish our awareness of his contribution to the anti-slavery cause in the United States. His attack on slavery, brief though it may have been, helped awaken the American conscience and — to a degree — bestir it to action.

In many respects, the attack on slavery represents Coke's finest hour. Not always wise as to his methods and timing, he nonetheless acted the part of a prophet, and possibly more, he became a wellspring of encouragement for those who held similar views.

Thomas Coke, like kindred historical figures, was a child of his time. He must be seen against the background of late 18th century sociocultural, socioeconomic concepts and values. His limitations are obvious; he is not a 20th century social scientist. Product of the evangelical revival, his overwhelming desire was the salvation of souls. There was an additional dimension — he had a social concern. He viewed slavery with horror: it was morally wrong! The slave was to be *saved*; the slave was likewise to be *liberated*. We see these two ideals in juxtaposition.

In 1786, as Coke wrote of his dreams for mission throughout the world, he made special mention of the West Indies as an area where God "... has laid open the whole country to our labours among the blacks." The British Empire had exploited these people shamelessly, "... enriched by the labours of the poor slaves . . . surely the least compensation we can make . . . is to endeavour to enrich them . . . with

⁵¹Quoted in Warren A. Candler, *Life of Thomas Coke* (Nashville: Publishing House M. E. Church, South, 1923), pp. 148-149.

the riches of grace. . . ." He continued, ". . . the grand consideration . . . is the value of the souls of these negroes [*sic*], . . ." ⁵²

Almost twenty years later Coke was writing to an American preacher, ". . . have great Compassion on the poor Negroes & do all you can to Convert them. If they have Religious Liberty, their Temporal Slavery will be comparatively but a small thing; but even in respect to this latter point, I do long for the time when the Lord will turn their Captivity like the Rivers of the South [Africa]. . . ." For God, said Coke, ". . . is sweeping off the Wicked . . . and will never withdraw his Hand until Civil & Religious Liberty be Established all over the Earth." ⁵³

⁵²see Thomas Coke, *An Address to the pious and benevolent, proposing an annual subscription for the support of the missionaries in the Highlands and adjacent islands of Scotland, the Isles of Jersey, Guernsey and Newfoundland, the West Indies, and the Provinces of Nova Scotia and Quebec.* (London: 1786).

⁵³Letter to Ezekiel Cooper, April 23, 1795.

