By Warren Thomas Smith*

The University Of Oxford As Thomas Coke Knew It

Dr. Thomas Coke (1747-1814), an Anglican clergyman, became John Wesley's Assistant in Methodist work in England. In 1784 Coke was "set apart" by Wesley as Superintendent—later designated Bishop—and sent as his emissary to American Methodists. Coke presided at the Christmas Conference in Baltimore at which time the Methodist Episcopal Church came into being. In all, he made nine trips to the United States. Known as Father of Methodist Missions, Coke supervised British Methodist outreach. His extensive travels included four voyages to the West Indies. He died en route to Ceylon. A man of keen social consciousness, great interest in education and fiery evangelistic passion, Coke stands as a fascinating personality in eighteenth-nineteenth century church history.

Thomas Coke was at Oxford from 1764 to 1768, and occasionally thereafter. During this time he formed numerous impressions of it, judging from his own comments—or lack of them. Coke's seasoning at Oxford reflects an ethos of class consciousness, status, the snobbishness of the wealthy—those perquisites of power so evident in the rise of a titan British Empire rapidly extending itself around the world. Coke's acquaintance with Oxford likewise indicates the heady ferment of new intellectual wine in old academic bottles, those desultory curricular patterns alongside creative, energetic brilliance.

Oxford at mid-eighteenth century was a fascinating amalgam of the best and the worst in academic, religious and general cultural standards. The university as experienced, understood and loved by Thomas Coke is a vivid testimony to the intense, lifelong influence it exerted over its students. In seeing "the sweet city, with her dreaming spires" through the eyes of Coke, an epoch comes alive.

Jesus College

Matriculation day for sixteen year old Thomas Coke was "6 Apr. 1764 Bre. Thomas Cooke [*sic*]: 16 s. Barthmw. gent. St. John's par. Brecon." [1] The University Register of Admissions records the date of April 11, 1764. It was the Paschal Term.

Jesus College, intended chiefly for Welsh students, had been established with permission of Queen Elizabeth I in 1571 by Hugh Ap Rice

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[1] Battel Book, Jesus College, in a letter to the author from The Bursar, 9th September 1961. Additional data were sent by Principal John T. Christie, 1964.

(or Price) LL.D.,[2] a native of Brecon, buried in 1574 in the Priory church. Letters patent of foundation issued by the Queen on June 27, 1571 provided for a "college consisting of a principal, eight fellows and eight scholars." [3] A John Coke had enrolled much earlier, "Coke, John,s. of Edward of Llanfrynach, Co. Brecon, bleb. Jesus Coll. matric. 5 March 1723, . . . aged 19." [4] He was Thomas' uncle.

Jesus College, one of the smaller colleges of Oxford, was on the Turl, between Market and Ship Streets. Its neighbor was Exeter, where Samuel Wesley had entered as a Servitor and when he took his bachelor's degree June 10, 1688 was "the only Exeter man who did so that year." Not far away was Lincoln where, as a Fellow and tutor, John Wesley had directed the Holy Club.

Architecturally, Oxford of Coke's day was imposing. The eighteenth century saw a revolt in building design; the university became a mixture of older Gothic and new Classical. Magdalen is said to have best represented the taste and genre of the period. Oxford was a garden city with many historic groves and avenues: Christ Church meadow, Trinity grove, Merton Walk, Magdalen Walk. There was a profusion of formal, classical gardens with trees and shrubs cut into fantastic shapes, as "in living trees . . . a vegetable Hercules!" Buildings and landscape proudly presented a facade of charm and dignity. The grey stone buildings of Jesus retained the conservative late Tudor collegiate architecture. Windows and gables especially reflected Elizabethan influence, severe molding which the period reserved for institutional structures, contrasting sharply with the exuberant mode of country houses. With passing years additional buildings appeared: a second quadrangle and the tower—erected in Coke's time—preserved the same style.

To the right of the first quad—the neat green lawns carefully and methodically tended for centuries—Coke would have seen the chapel, not grand, but pleasing and worshipful. Carved over the arched doorway: ASCENDAT ORATIO DESCENDAT GRATIA (Let Prayer Ascend Let Grace Descend), an admonition he would have read daily. This chapel, which Coke must have known intimately, had been consecrated by the Bishop of Oxford, May 28, 1621, and had undergone only slight change in intervening years. The splendid pulpit roof and lectern dated from 1621; the handsome porch and east end of the edifice were added in 1636. The screen with the arms (three cocks—designating the family of Sir Leoline Jenkins, munificent benefactor and Principal 1661-1673) was added in 1698. The exquisite candlesticks were given in 1736. Coke could hardly have escaped seeing the monument to Sir Eubule Thelwall who led in building the chapel, nor could he miss

[2] C. E. Mallett, *History of the University of Oxford*, II: 195-196. The name is usually given as Price. The Battel Book registers several students by the popular Welsh name of Price.

[3] *Jesus College*, reprinted from *The Victoria History of the Counties of England*, Oxfordshire, III:264.

[4] *Alumni Oxonienses*, 1722-23. Also see John Vickers, *Thomas Coke, Apostle of Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), p. 11.

the picture of St. Michael overcoming the Devil.

The Hall was completed in 1620 with a fine timbered roof; the ceiling had been covered in 1741. The screen at the south end was constructed in 1634; arms at the top of the pillars were the quarterings of Principal Griffith Powell, who during his 1613-1620 administration financed the building. The Inner Quadrangle "one of the most beautiful . . . in the smaller Oxford colleges," was begun in 1639 but not completed until 1713.

Coke would have seen the splendid portraits, treasures adorning the walls. There was founding father Hugh Ap Rice; imperious Queen Elizabeth I, dated 1590; a Van Dyck of Charles I and a Lely of Charles II. There were also impressive likenesses of Principal Thelwall; Edmund Meyricke, Scholar in 1656 and Fellow in 1662. Of course there was the famous Bible translator Lancelot Andrews who in 1576 became Bishop of Winchester; Herbert Westphaling, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity in 1562 and Bishop of Hereford in 1586.[5] Coke would also have beheld portraits of Principal Jenkins and the renowned Biblicist, James Ussher, Archbishop of Armagh, 1625-1656. These dour countenances of the great of the earth scrutinized the neophyte from Brecon: would his portrait ever be here?

On festive occasions Coke and his fellows enjoyed dining on gleaming silver plate, the original magnificent collection had been a gift of Charles I. There was also a choice silver-gilt chalice dating from 1661; a beautiful acquisition of domestic silver which included a sumptuous bowl "of porringer form" dating from 1684, and an accumulation of silver-gilt tankards. Too, there was Lord Sankey's gift of more tankards, a rose bowl, a cigar box and finely crafted cups—these pieces reflected the silversmith's art at its best. They were essential elements in the ritual of entertaining. Indeed, it was elegant, extravagant living. The notorious wastrel, Beau Nash, had been a Jesus student. The college still proudly possesses its famous, enormous silver punch bowl, capable of holding ten gallons—presented in 1732—appropriate symbol of eighteenth century morals and mores. By 1735 Jesus College was cheerfully described as the school where "everyone is a gentleman born." [6]

Jesus College, like all Oxford during Coke's residency, retained much of the spirit of the Middle Ages. Encompassed by fens (land later reclaimed) the colleges felt a remoteness from the outside world. Porters guarded the gates and undergraduates had to be in college by a certain hour at night; medieval walls provided seclusion for those residing within. Strict regulations required that Fellows remain celibate —a rule abandoned (in Cambridge at least) only in the nineteenth century. All must carry or wear gowns at all times. Academe was a world unto itself in mode and spirit of earlier centuries.

[5] See *Jesus College*, pp. 272-273.

[6] A. D. Godley, *Oxford in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Methuen and Co., 1908), p. 196.

The Establishment

Oxford, as Coke knew it, was ultraconservative politically and religiously: Crown and Altar. "The loyalty of the University to the Church was fervent and absolute." [7] These were certainly young Coke's own sentiments, and of his rising middle class.

Oxford reflected, almost to the point of caricature, the eighteenth century religious establishment. The Anglican Church—protestations notwithstanding—had reached its weakest period, almost moribund in terms of meeting spiritual needs of masses. The great unwashed were sorely neglected by a hierarchy grown cold, indifferent, calloused, whose energy was dissipated in theological hairsplitting. Out of bitter religious controversy of the seventeenth century had come the backlash: the *avant-garde* of Deism, Edward Herbert of Cherbury and his *De veritate.* John Locke's monumental *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and *The Reasonableness of Christianity* ushered in the Age of Reason. There followed a varied assortment of writers whose views ran the gamut from liberalism to Deism to outright atheism, including John Toland's *Christianity not Mysterious,* Anthony Collins' *Discourse on Freethinking* and Matthew Tindal's *Christianity as Old as the Creation.* Thomas Morgan wrote *The Moral Philosopher;* Thomas Chubb published *Discourses Concerning Reason* and Thomas Woolston had *Six Discourses on the Miracles of Our Saviour.* This was likewise the era of that "greatest modern skeptic" David Hume. His *A Treatise of Human Nature* and *Natural History of Religion* remained in a class by themselves as the author attacked both Deism and the traditional defense of the Faith.

It is no surprise that militant opposition to Deism was soon in evidence; the canonical Faith must be championed. A spate of polemics appeared between 1700 and 1750, among the best known: William Law's *The Case of Reason,* George Berkeley's *Treatise on the Principles of Human Knowledge* and *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* and Joseph Butler's *Analogy of Religion.* These celebrated works would have been grist for private discussion in the coffeehouses and taverns and public debate in lecture halls.

Officially Oxford was rigidly orthodox. "At the beginning of the eighteenth century it would have been difficult to find any place more completely devoted to the Church of England than the University of Oxford."[8] Dissenters were firmly and frostily refused admission and freethinkers dismissed (sometimes).

> In 1729 the heads of Oxford issued a notice complaining of the great spread of open Deism among students; and in the following year three students were expelled, and a fourth had his degree deferred on this ground.

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[7] John S. Simon, *John Wesley and the Religious Societies* (London: The Epworth Press, 1921), pp. 73-74.
[8] Ibid., p. 76.

At Cambridge ten years later several students were "convicted of a similar infidelity." [9]

College rules required attendance at daily chapel and Holy Communion at least three times a year—precepts observed more in the breach. Deism was rife, as evidenced in Coke's drunken tutor who ridiculed the naïve beliefs the youth brought from Brecon:

> It was chiefly in his cups that this gentleman administered the poison—'Eh! Coke,' he would then say, as well as he could, 'do you believe the Adam and Eve story, Eh?' And thus get rid of the Bible with a foolborn jest.[10]

During his sixth visit to the United States, in 1796, Coke detected, "my two companions had embraced the opinions of *Thomas Payne,* and other modern Infidels." He then added, with no little degree of personal satisfaction, "Having once been a Deist myself (O what a Miracle of Grace now!) I perhaps was better qualified on that account to meet their various arguments." [11]

Coke may well have had Oxford in mind when in 1773, speaking of education, he remarked that public schools scandalously neglected religious and moral training; youths

> . . . before they arrive at the age of sixteen or seventeen, have been perfect masters of the vile arts of debauchery, drunkenness, and almost every kind of immorality. One would think their masters looked upon Heaven and Hell as only old women's tales, or that the knowledge of Latin and Greek were sufficient to secure their everlasting salvation.[12]

Deism and immorality had become synonymous—at least for the rigidly orthodox.

At almost the same time that Coke came to Oxford a fresh outpouring of "enthusiasm" had been prompted by a group of Calvinistic Methodist students. This brand of Methodism flourished chiefly in Wales. Now, under the leadership of Thomas Haweis and James Stillingfleet it became a veritable second Holy Club. They met to read the Greek New Testament, discuss theology, share their Christian experience and join in prayer.[13] It was a movement so similar to Wesley's, in content and ardor, that the consequences were not unexpected. On March 11, 1768 six students were dismissed from St. Edmund Hall for holding "methodistical principles: viz. the doctrine of absolute election: that the Spirit of God works irresistibly: that once a child of God always a child of God." [14] They also attended "illicit conventicles"—prayer, scripture, hymns were used in private homes. Such animated, spiritual

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[9] William Edward Hartpole Lecky, *A History of England* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1878), III:583.

[10] Henry Moore, *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (London: John Kershaw, 1824), II:308, note.

[11] *Extracts of the journals of the late Rev. Thomas Coke, L.L.D. . . .* (Dublin: R. Napper, 1816), p. 226.

[12] Thomas Coke, *A Sermon Upon Education . . .* (Sherborne: W. Cruttwell, 1774), pp. 23-24.

[13] See A. Skevington Wood's splendid article in *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society,* XXIX:73. Also see Vickers, p. 11.

[14] Godley, p. 271.

activity was frowned upon by hidebound administration. The *London Chronicle* employed a telling quatrain:

> So drink, ye jovial souls, and swear,
> And all shall then go well;
> But oh! take heed of Hymns and Prayer,
> These cry aloud—E-X-P-E-L[15]

The Academic Setting

Was it a scholarly environment? More specifically, we must ask, does the Oxford milieu not seem to point to the absence of any compelling atmosphere inciting intellectual industry? Oxford ought to have been an ideal place for learning, for the pursuit of truth; unfortunately it was not. Characteristic of the early Hanoverian reigns, universities were noted for "formalism, inordinate reverence for indolent tradition, dull devotion to a status-quo." [16] The academic decline may have reached its nadir during Coke's day. Charles II's residence at Oxford—the Merry Monarch and his unregenerate Court—a hundred years earlier, left its mark. Chesterfield, writing in 1749 to an Irish friend about Dublin University commented:

> Our two universities at least will do it no hurt unless by their examples, for I cannot believe that their present reputations will invite people in Ireland to send their sons there. The one [Cambridge] is sunk into the lowest obscurity, and the existence of Oxford would not be known if it were not for the treasonable spirit publicly avowed and often exerted there.[17]

Adam Smith, Oxford graduate of this time, observed acidly:

> In the University of Oxford the greater part of the public professors have for these many years given up altogether the practice of teaching. . . . The youth neither are taught nor always can find any proper means of being taught the sciences.[18]

Edward Gibbon entered Oxford in 1751 and described the time as "the most idle and unprofitable of my whole life." He pictured his fellows as:

> . . . decent, easy men, . . . their days were filled by a series of uniform employments: the chapel, and the hall, the coffee-houses and the common room, till they retired, weary and well satisfied, to a long slumber. From the toil of reading, or thinking, or writing, they had absolved their consciences.[19]

John Scott, a contemporary of Coke, said he was examined for his degree by being asked, "What is the Hebrew for the place of a skull?" and "Who founded University College?" [20]

The Gentleman Commoner

Thomas Coke, son of an apothecary who became mayor, entered Oxford—not as a lowly Servitor as George Whitefield at Pembroke—

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[15] Quoted in *History of American Methodism* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), I:27-28.
[16] Godley, p. 17.
[17] From Chesterfield's "Letters to Madden" in *Miscellaneous Works,* IV:100.
[18] From *Wealth of Nations,* Book V, Ch. 1.
[19] Edward Gibbon, *Memoirs,* pp. 63-65.
[20] Godley, p. 179.

but as a Gentleman Commoner at Jesus. He was thus entitled to take his meals at the high table with the Dons in the Great Hall, and to wear a distinctive dress. It also put him in the company of wealthy students. His economic background paved the way to the society of young men of "high rank and large fortunes whose purses were better filled with money than their heads with wisdom." [21] Alas, "it was the gentleman commoner who was the problem." [22] In 1798 a commentary in the *Gentleman's Magazine* was probably the penultimate:

> . . . a keen spirit of expensive rivalship has long been kept up by purse-proud nabobs, merchants, and citizens, against the nobility and gentry of the kingdom. Universities may rue the contagion. They were irrecoverably infected. In them extraordinary largeness began to purchase immunities: the indolence of the opulent was sure of absolution: and the emulation of literature was gradually superseded by the emulations of profligate extravagance: till a third order of pupils appeared, a pert pampered race, too forward for control, too headstrong for persuasion, too independent for chastisement: privileged prodigals. These are the *gentleman-commoners* of Oxford, and the *fellow-commoners* of Cambridge. They perfectly are their own masters and take the lead in every disgraceful frolic of juvenile debauchery. They are curiously tricked out in cloth of gold, of silver and of purple, and feast most sumptuously throughout the year.[23]

The wealthy Gentleman Commoner might thus avoid distasteful academic pursuits by merely paying a small fine:

> . . . a gentleman commoner pays for neglecting matins or vespers, 2d. each time: the hours of closing gates, 3d.: lectures, 4d.: meals in halls, 1s.: St. Mary's on Sunday, if detected, 1s.[24]

The academic costume—an egregious pitfall—proved to be another indication of ostentatious improvidence and pompous class consciousness. In 1770 rules governing academic regalia were revised and designed for recognizing and emphasizing distinction of rank. Peers and peers' sons wore gowns of any desired color and ornamented with gold lace and gilded "tufts." At Cambridge in 1764, Lord Fitzwilliam, a Fellow Commoner of Trinity Hall wore "a pink gown laden with gold lace." [25] Baronets wore a costume similar to nobles of higher rank except that the silk gowns were black. Gentleman Commoners were entitled to a band around the velvet cap and as many as four dozen buttons on the silk gown. Servitors did not wear caps.[26]

Stilted, dandiacal teaching was inevitable. "I doubt not that you had a dunce for a tutor at Cambridge, and so set out wrong," wrote Wesley. He continued, "Dr. Middleton is no standard for a preacher; no not for a preacher before the University." The founder of Methodism went on, "His diction is stiff, formal, affected, unnatural. The art

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[21] Samuel Drew, *The Life of the Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D.* (New York: J. Souls and T. Mason, 1818), p. 11.
[22] Godley, p. 161. Also see V. H. H. Green, *The Young Mr. Wesley* (London: Arnold, 1961), chapter 2.
[23] Godley, pp. 161-162.
[24] Ibid., p. 162.
[25] Ibid., p. 165.
[26] See E. W. Scobie Stringer, *The Degrees and Hoods of the World's Universities* (Cheshunt Press, 1949), p. 159.

glares." [27] Synthetic pedagogy reflected the life style of wealthy university students and their family backgrounds.

Little wonder that Southey, undergraduate at Balliol in 1794, remarked, "the college was in a flagitious state of morals."[28] Likewise it is no shock that ingenuous Coke gave way (but hardly to the extent his strait-laced nineteenth century Methodist biographers claimed). "So, at the midnight revel, . . . as he told a friend in afteryears, he frequently witnessed scenes of depravity which were not to be described, his soul recoiled with abhorrence."[29] He joined his "privileged prodigals"—so the story, originating with Coke, runs—in going to a brothel.[30] It was "a God in whom he scarcely believed" who "shook him . . . and withheld him from sin." What, then, was the extent of unfledged Coke's indulgence? What were the sins of this rather guileless student? "To cards he was much inclined; and whist and quadrille were his favourite amusements. . . . To liquor his attachment was never excessive." [31] While in the West Indies in 1791, Coke recorded, "When I entered the room I found it nearly filled by the young Bucks and Bloods of the town, (as we used to term the debauchees at *Oxford.*)." [32]

Alma Mater

In spite of flagrant weaknesses, there was a reservoir of stability at Oxford. Outstanding scholars had served as principals of Jesus: Jonathan Edwards—a "keen controversialist"—in 1686. John Wynne held office in 1712 and became Bishop of St. Asaph in 1713. William Jones assumed the post in 1720, Eubule Thelwall in 1725 and Thomas Pardo in 1727. Of special interest is P. Humphrey Owen, D.D., a Fellow. In 1747 he was Bodleian librarian and May 11, 1763 became Principal and served during Coke's day. Joseph Hoare, B.D., assumed office April 27, 1768.[33]

A group of brilliant teachers was at hand—balance to the "atheistic crew"—and William Newcome was an example. Fellow of Hertford College, he was a tutor Coke knew and respected as a "man of a very amiable disposition and of great learning." He was known for the *Minor Prophets* and a *Harmony of the Gospels.* Coke renewed his acquaintance in 1797 when visiting Armagh, Ireland at his Archbishop's palace.[34] Thomas Randolph, Vice Chancellor of the University from 1756 to 1759, was a Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity. George Horne, Vice Chancellor, 1776-1780, was at Magdalen engaged in his

[27] Quoted in F. B. Upham, *Thomas Coke* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1910), pp. 23-24.
[28] J. W. Etheridge, *The Life of the Rev. Thomas Coke, D.C.L.* (London: John Mason, 1860), p. 10, quoted from *Life,* IV:186.
[29] Ibid., p. 11.
[30] Coke, *Journal,* 1816 ed., p. 5. Sutcliffe is the author of the short biography.
[31] Drew, p. 19.
[32] *Journal,* 1793 ed., p. 138.
[33] Listed among Doctors and Masters in the records sent to the author by the Bursar of Jesus College.
[34] See *Journal,* 1816 ed., p. 257. Also see Vickers, p. 14, note.

commentary on the Psalms. Kennicott of Exeter was working on the huge Variorum edition of the Hebrew Bible. Thomas Warton at Trinity was the foremost authority on the history of poetry. David Gregory, Dean of Christ Church in 1756, was the first Professor of Modern History and Languages. Samuel Johnson was a frequent visitor at the university.

Among Coke's fellow students were Jenkins, later Earl of Liverpool, and Addington who became Lord Sidmouth. Both were to hold important government offices; Coke corresponded with them, and in Sidmouth's case, clashed bitterly. Scott became Earl of Eldom and Lord Chancellor of England. William Jones at University College was to become the greatest Oriental scholar of the time.[35] Listings of Jesus College Fellows, Scholars, Doctors and Masters, Commoners, Batlers, Servitors indicate strength in the academic community.[36]

Coke was a diligent, if not brilliant, student. He studied Greek and Latin, perhaps Hebrew. Modern languages—French and Portuguese—he learned in later life. He knew Milton, and of Spenser (the "English Virgil") he wrote glowingly, "His genius and strength of imagination were amazing; and from his allegories may be extracted some of the most instructive lessons of religion: indeed I grudge not the twenty shillings I gave for his works."[37] Coke had some knowledge of Shakespeare.[38] Andrew Hamilton provides a delightful vignette:

> In the sciences he particularly delighted. I recollect hearing him tell a very pleasing anecdote, concerning his love for mathematics, during his residence at College. Having had a problem of more than ordinary difficulty under consideration, he found his mind for a long time greatly exercised: at last, in the happy moment, he saw the solution of the problem, and for joy got up and danced about his room, crying out with the celebrated Greek philosopher on a nearly similar occasion, εὕρηκα, εὕρηκα, i.e., *I have found it, I have found it.*[39]

Coke's stringent study habits were formed at Oxford. "Having a little study to himself, he often sat up till the midnight hour, deeply resolving the doubts and difficulties peculiar to infidelity."[40]

Coke had superb library resources at Bodleian, in the libraries of sister colleges, as well as the excellent Jesus collection, many of the old volumes were still chained to the shelves. The building itself was completed in 1679 and housed a sizable acquisition of fine manuscripts, including the early Welsh "Red Book of Hergest"—dating from late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Principal Edwards bequeathed

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[35] Godley, p. 284.

[36] Names of all members of Jesus College, 1764-1768, were sent to the author by the Bursar, 9th September 1961. Original spelling has been retained.

[37] *Journal,* 1816 ed., pp. 157, 80.

[38] See letter to Joseph Entwistle, October 29, 1802 and letter to the Missionary Committee, December 2, 1807. Originals at the Archives, Methodist Missionary Society, London. Also see Vickers, p. 12, note.

[39] Andrew Hamilton, *The Faithful servant receiving his reward: a sermon preached on Nov. 6, 1814, on the death of the Rev. T. Coke* (Dublin: 1814), p. 14. Also see Vickers, p. 12.

[40] *Journal,* 1816 ed., p. 6.

a number of works in theology, the classics and history, as did Griffin Davies in medicine. Henry Fisher, Registrar of the University 1737-1761, gave a large collection. In Coke's time Principal Hoare bestowed several hundred volumes. Regrettably, they were "simply placed, or flung, into the room and lay there on the benches or the floor or in the gaps in the presses, not incorporated into the library or noted in its catalogue for over a hundred years." [41]

At some point during his Oxford years Coke began a period of soul-searching. It might have been prompted by his attendance at a distinguished clergyman's church in Wales. Coke was thrilled by the eloquent, theological sermon, but in a private conversation the minister blandly admitted he did not believe any of the doctrines he so ably defended.[42] Coke's fundamental honesty was outraged. About this time he became a bit of an ascetic, turning to the library. He read works in divinity, among them the small devotional by Thomas Sherlock, Bishop of London, *The Trial of the Witnesses of Jesus*—the copy Coke used is probably still in the library. More than thirty years later, in his *Commentary,* Coke suggested:

> I recommend to my readers the perusal of the sermons, Dissertations, and other writings of Bishop Sherlock; . . . During part of . . . my residence at . . . Oxford I was a Deist—an infidel; but by reading the works of Bishop Sherlock was restored to a belief of the Bible, that Blessed Book, which is the delight of my heart.[43]

Another volume which proved to be of great value to Coke was John Witherspoon's [44] treatise on *Regeneration.*

Baccalaureate

Thomas Coke took his Bachelor's degree: "B.A. 4 Feb. 1768." [45] He became a Fellow Commoner "5 Feb. 1768." [46] During the eighteenth century the Hebdomadal Council—Heads of Houses, and the Congregation, University functionaries and all Regent Masters—both governed Oxford and conferred degrees.

Laudian Statutes required a succession of exercises for the Bachelor's degree, culminating in several examinations: grammar, rhetoric, logic, ethics, geometry, Greek classics and fluency in Latin. "These various stages of examinations . . . were purely 'pass' tests . . . eighteenth century Oxford had no honor examinations. Oxonians can but blush in silence and admit the fact is so." [47]

After receiving the B.A. Coke apparently did not spend more time at

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[41] *Jesus College,* p. 278.
[42] Drew, p. 8.
[43] Thomas Coke, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (London: 1801-1803), "Introduction to the New Testament," p. XIV.
[44] President of Princeton, the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence.
[45] Battel Book, Jesus College.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Godley, p. 173.

the university than was necessary.[48] He returned to his home in Brecon, Wales and went thence to Somersetshire in southwest England.

Ordination as Deacon

Early in June, 1770, Coke returned to Oxford to take his examination for Holy Orders. "My examination for deacon's orders in Oxford . . .[was] oral. I was examined . . . in the Greek Testament, not in the grammatical department. At Oxford I translated a Latin article into English: . . . and . . . was asked some general questions in divinity." [49] June 10, 1770—Trinity Sunday—in the beautiful Cathedral of Christ Church, Coke knelt before the Bishop of Oxford, Robert Lowth, and was ordained Deacon.[50]

Master of Arts

Three days after his ordination as Deacon, Thomas Coke took his Master of Arts degree: June 13, 1770. Under the heading FELLOW-COMMONERS, the Battel Book records: "1768 Bre. Thos. Coke B.A. 1768 (M.A. 1770)." [51]

Theoretically, during the eighteenth century, the period for serious study began after the B.A. It was necessary for the candidate to reside only for one term during the year. An imposing succession of disputations had to be observed: two in Latin grammar, rhetoric, ethics, politics or logic. Other examinations followed: *apud Augustinenses,* and *Disputationes quodlibeticae* where the student was ready to answer all comers on any questions. Also there were lectures in natural and moral philosophy, two declamations delivered before a Proctor. The final examination supposedly covered a wide field: geometry, natural philosophy, astronomy, metaphysics, history, Greek and Latin. Frequently the rules were scandalously neglected, strictness or laxity depended entirely upon the tutor. Reform was attempted at the close of the century under Cyril Jackson, Parsons and Eveleigh in the "New Examination Statute."

Doctor of Civil Law

In June 1775, after Coke had spent four years as Curate in South Petherton, he presented himself for the degree Doctor of Civil Law. He had not taken a Bachelor's degree in law, although in a letter to Bishop Seabury of the Episcopal Church he mentions "having taken two degrees in Civil Law in the University of Oxford." [52] Coke re-

[48] He would have met residence requirements for advanced degrees.
[49] Etheridge, p. 22. Also see Vickers, p. 17.
[50] This was the same cathedral in which John Wesley had been ordained Deacon in 1725 and Priest in 1728. Coke's ordination parchment, printed, with name and dates filled in, is in the Archives, Methodist Missionary Society, London. Etheridge quotes the document, pp. 427-428. Coke was ordained Priest on August 23, 1772 in Wales.
[51] Letter from The Bursar, Jesus College, to the author.
[52] Letter to Seabury, May 14, 1791, copy in Bodleian Library.

quested both degrees and his friendship with Lord North, Prime Minister and Chancellor of Oxford, proved exceedingly helpful. On June 8, 1775, from Downing Street, North wrote:

> Reg. Conv. Term. Trin. Conv. 14 June 1775
>
> Mr. Vice-Chancellor & Gentlemen,
>
> I have been moved in behalf of Thomas Coke M.A. of Jesus College who is from his matriculation of full standing for the Degree of Doctor in Civil Law, but was prevented by circumstances from proceeding regularly to the Degree of Batchelor in that Faculty. He therefore humbly prays that by Favour of Convocation he may be allowed to accumulate the Degrees of Batchelor and Doctor in Civil Law, paying Fees for both Degrees but doing exercise for that of Doctor only, in order to his being a Candidate for the Degree of Doctor in Civil Law next Term. To this [request I give my Consent, and am
>
> Yr. Affectionate Friend and Servant]
> North
>
> Sex hasce Literas Venerabilis Domus ratas habuit [53]

The Latin passage at the foot of Lord North's letter is rather interesting:

> The phrase aliquid ratum habere was used in Classical Latin with the meaning 'confirm or approve.' There is little doubt that is the sense of the passage. The words Venerabilis Domus refer to the Ancient House of Congregation, i.e., the appropriately qualified members of the University, acting in its capacity as a degree-giving body. This particular phrase is in modern usage in degree ceremonies. The entire sentence may be translated 'The Ancient House of Congregation has approved the request in these six letters.' We may thus assume that North's letter was one of the six, with five additional letters of a similar nature.[54]

It would appear that Civil Law was much in the thinking of many aspiring clergymen. "In the second half of the eighteenth century non-graduates were often described as 'S.C.L.' an abbreviation of 'Student of Civil Law.' " [55]

The request was granted. Coke may have read a thesis. On June 17, 1775, he received the D.C.L.; the Register of Congregation records:

> 1775. Supplicat etc. Tho. Coke A.M. Stud. in Iure Civili e Coll. Jes. Quatenus pro gradibus cumulandis in Iure Civili secum per venerabilem Domum Convocationis dispensatum fuerit; publicum praelectorem diligenter audiverit; tres lectiones curserias in Schola Jurisprudentiae pro forma habuerit; et reliqua praestiterit omnia quae per Statuta requiruntur (nisi quatenus secum dispensatum fuerit etc.) ut supra Conceditur supplicet etc. 17 Junii [56]

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[53] Copy in the Archives, Methodist Missionary Society, London. (The original spellings and punctuation have been retained.) It is interesting to note that Oxford conferred the D.C.L. on North, October 10, 1772 at the time he became Chancellor. In North's case the degree appears to be honorary.

[54] Letter from E. E. Sabben-Clare, Information Officer, Oxford University, to the author, 17 September 1976.

[55] Arthur Warne, *Church and Society in Eighteenth-Century Devon* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, 1969), p. 37.

[56] From a letter to the author, 1951, from the Secretary of Faculties, University Registry:

> "1775 Thomas Coke, Master of Arts, a student of Civil Law from Jesus College begs etc. In-so-far-as it has been dispensed to him by the venerable House of Convocation in regard to the grades to be required in Civil Law; (and since) he has diligently heard a public lecturer; (and since) he has had according to requirement three lecture courses in the School of Jurisprudence; (and since) he has performed all other things which required by the Statutes (unless in-so-far-as he has been dispensed therefrom etc). It is granted as above petitioned. 17 June"

Oxford's D.C.L. of the eighteenth century would be, for the most part, regarded as earned, not *honoris causa,* since it was necessary for candidates to have to their credit a period of residency in the university, and to have completed certain academic exercises—lectures—which were usually formal in nature.[57]

In a number of books, pamphlets and sermons, Coke gives his degree as LL.D. Wesley, in documents, uses a full degree in referring to Doctor Coke.[58] Oxford granted "no higher law title than D.C.L. (i.e., Civil Law)" and the reason simply "that by special parliamentary statute, Oxford is forbidden to grant a degree in Canon Law." Cambridge, on the other hand, was privileged to confer such, and there is reference to "the double doctorate." [59]

In any case, whatever the letters, Coke's doctorate was his identification. Colleagues, friends and enemies in all parts of the world referred to "Dr." or "Little Doctor"—a sobriquet he loved.

In Later Years

At Bridgetown, Barbados, during his fourth West Indies tour, Coke records, on February 26, 1793:

> I had received intelligence that Mr. Henry, a gentleman of property and respectability, had made frequent inquiries concerning my name, persons, &c, adding, 'He certainly is my old friend Coke, with whom I was so intimate at Oxford.' I made one of my first visits to him: and as soon as we came in sight of each other, we mutually recognized an old and intimate acquaintance, and embraced with all that warmth of affection which juvenile friendships inspire into the breast. I spent a great part of two days with him, repeating old adventures, and endeavouring to mix with them useful observations. His house and estate have been already opened to the Missionaries.[60]

This Mr. Henry was, in all probability, Ellis Henry of Wrexham, B.A. from Brasenose, 1763.[61]

On the same missionary tour Coke provides another interesting Oxford reference. A "Counsellor in the Island of Tortola," whom Coke met March 29, 1793, "had received his education at Brazen-Nose College in Oxford, and had taken the Degree of Doctor of Civil Laws in that University." [62]

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[57] On April 1, 1775 Oxford conferred the D.C.L. on Samuel Johnson, apparently an honorary degree.

[58] In the F. Deaville Walker papers, Archives, Methodist Missionary Society, London, is a letter from the Keeper of the Archives, Oxford:

> "The University only gives the D.C.L. Degree. This group of initials is, curiously enough the representative of the English phrase 'Doctor of Civil Law'. Yet it is used in a large number of Latin documents in the phrase 'ad gradum D.C.L.'. I have never once come across the Latin equivalent J.C.D. (Juris Civilis Doctor). Since the D.C.L. represents an English phrase, those who wrote in Latin frequently Latinised it as LL.D. (Legum Doctor) and the use of the LL.D. spread from Latin title-pages to the title-pages of English works. Thus the use of LL.D. while not strictly correct, became common and is not to be regarded as an abuse."

[59] *Proceedings,* XI:144; also 94.

[60] *Journal,* 1793 ed., p. 181.

[61] *Alumni Oxonienses,* also see Vickers, p. 13.

[62] *Journal,* 1793 ed., p. 185.

At St. Ann's Bay, Jamaica, Coke wrote a marvelous account of his meeting, the evening of April 9, 1793, with a supposedly educated gentleman:

> Before I retired to rest, the Curate of the parish, . . . came into the room where I was. The Curate was exceedingly inquisitive; and being informed by me, in answer to one of his many inquiries, that I had been educated in the University of Oxford, he observed 'I had my education in Oxford too.' 'Pray, Sir,' said I, 'of what house were you?' 'House, Sir, house,' said he. 'Of what College, Sir,' said I. 'O Sir, of Oxford College.' He seemed a little confounded, apprehending he had made a small blunder; and quoted the first line of the Aeneid of Virgil, in Latin, and the first verse of the first chapter of St. John's gospel in Greek, but in a most wretched manner. However, finding my mouth perfectly sealed, he and his companions, after a few more observations, were pleased to withdraw to my great joy.[63]

Whatever its shortcomings, Oxford remained dear to Coke's heart. In his *Sermon* on the death of John Wesley, delivered in the United States in 1791, in a moment of inappropriate bluntness, Coke expressed his deep emotions:

> Those who are acquainted (as I have been), with the difference between one of the most elegant Universities in the world [Oxford], and a country just laid out for colonization [Georgia] . . . between the varieties and luxuries of life in the former instance, and the vast simplicity of living in the latter: . . . and above all, between a converse with some of the first Literati in the world, and in general with men of improved understandings, on one hand; and only with a few honest planters, . . . on the other, . . . will estimate the sacrifice made by Mr. Wesley.[64]

Undiplomatic though it may have been, how singularly apropos that in the eulogy for his favorite person, Coke would employ as illustration his favorite university. Thomas Coke was an Oxford Man!

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[63] Ibid., pp. 193-194. Coke's punctuation has been retained.

[64] Thomas Coke, *The Substance of a Sermon Preached in Baltimore and Philadelphia, on the First and Eighth of May, 1791, on the Death of the Rev. John Wesley* (London: G. Paramore, 1791), p. 9.