

BRANDISHING THEIR GREY GOOSE QUILLS



The Struggle to Publish an Official Life of
John Wesley, 1791–1805

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John Wesley went to his eternal reward shortly before ten o'clock on 2 March 1791. Having spent much of his long life crisscrossing the British and Irish countryside to preach in churches, fields, and barns, Wesley had become one of the eighteenth century's most recognizable figures. In the process, Methodism, the renewal movement that he had started fifty years earlier within the Church of England, had expanded to become the fastest growing religious society in the three kingdoms. Part of the reason for his success lay in the fact that Wesley used more than the power of his own voice to call people to repentance. Throughout the course of his life, Wesley published more than fifteen hundred separate editions—some authored, others edited, abridged, or prefaced by him—to be sold everywhere by his travelling preachers as well as through the growing number of Methodist preaching houses that dotted the British and Irish countryside.¹ By the 1790s, this publishing business, known by Methodists simply as the Book Room, was bringing in annual revenues of as much as £10,000.²

Wesley had hardly breathed his last before obituaries and short biographies began to appear in London newspapers accompanied by speculations about who would write the famous preacher's life. "His history, if well written, would certainly be important, for in every respect, as the founder of the most numerous sect in the kingdom, as a man, and as a writer, he must be considered as one of the most extraordinary characters this or any age ever produced," enthused the *London Chronicle*.³ "The death of John Wesley will afford food to the biographers who continue to pick a snug living from the remnants of mortality," quipped the *Star*, while the *Morning Chronicle* commented that Wesley's "bones will afford good picking to the biographers, a legion of whom are now brandishing their grey goose quills about his life."⁴ Meanwhile, the crowds that pressed into London to

see Wesley's body became so enormous that his corpse had to be removed from public view. The funeral, originally scheduled to take place at eleven o'clock in the morning on 9 March, was hastily and secretly rescheduled for five o'clock to avoid a mob.⁵ John Whitehead, the physician who attended Wesley's deathbed, preached his funeral sermon. The Book Room rushed Whitehead's sermon into print, together with a detailed account of Wesley's last days and hours made by his housekeeper Elizabeth Ritchie, and offered the two for sale together "at the Chapel, in the City-road; and all other Methodist Preaching-houses in town and country."⁶ At only one shilling, the slim volume was an immediate sensation and quickly went through four separate editions. Despite his newfound prominence, however, Whitehead soon found himself at the heart of an intense controversy. Less than a year later, he was not only denounced from the same pulpit at which he had preached his celebrated funeral sermon, but publicly expelled from Methodism altogether. And it was all because he had agreed to a request made by Wesley's Executors to become the man's official biographer. "Mr. Wesley never met with a more malignant opposition in the whole course of his labours," Whitehead later remarked ruefully, "than I have experienced for attempting to describe them."⁷

Although it was the first major battle to be fought among Wesley's followers after his death, recent scholars have mentioned the biography controversy only in passing. With one recent exception, none has connected it to the subsequent and more protracted controversies that rocked Methodism for decades to come.⁸ As this paper will argue, however, there was much more at stake in the unfolding of this controversy than simply who would write Wesley's life and how much that person would be paid. Although these questions were hotly contested, a close examination of the surviving evidence will show that the dispute over who would have the sanctioned right to interpret Wesley and his words to a wider reading public prepared the ground for many of the conflicts yet to come by providing a rhetorical framework through which the authority of Methodist preachers could be openly challenged. The themes and figures that emerged gave language and lent shape to later disputes over the apportionment of institutional power, the means by which Wesley's authority would pass to his preachers and the lay trustees of his chapels, and the degree to which the Book Room's revenues would be protected to continue underwriting Methodism's religious and charitable endeavors. Later clashes over the ownership of chapels, the assignment of preachers to pulpits, ongoing liturgical subordination to the Church of England, and even the secession of the Methodist New Con-

nection under dissident preacher Alexander Kilham, were all framed using tropes that first appeared as the conventions governing Methodist print culture were variously refashioned or reaffirmed by agents active in the biography controversy.⁹ In this struggle that began over money, but that steadily grew to encompass the wider tensions between preachers and people as it set the power of Conference against the autonomy of individuals, and the authority of Wesley's preachers against Wesleyan egalitarianism, the stakes could hardly have been higher.

John Whitehead's problems all started with Wesley's Will. It was a confusing document. "I give all my manuscripts," the document decreed, "to Thomas Coke, Dr. John Whitehead, and Henry Moore, to be burnt or published, as they see good." Wesley also named "my faithful friends, John Horton, merchant, George Wolff, merchant, and William Marriott, stock-broker, all of London" as Executors with charge in trust for the Conference over "all my books now on sale, and the copies of them."¹⁰ Horton, Wolff, and Marriott had more in common than their backgrounds in business. All three were also laymen. Although his journals are silent on the matter, Wesley seems to have come to a belated realization that by placing these men in charge of all his books, he was effectively placing them in charge of his entire estate. An early hint of his uneasiness with this is suggested by the fact that five days after signing the original Will in February 1789, Wesley added two additional codicils leaving his "Types, Printing-Presses, and everything pertaining thereto" to Thomas Rankin, a trusted preacher, and George Whitfield, the official printer for the Book Room known as the Book Steward. Throughout the following months, Wesley's uneasiness appears to have grown until he finally became persuaded that preachers, not laymen, ought to have charge over the Book Room and its stock in the event of his death. Accordingly, in October 1790, less than six months before his passing, Methodism's hoary founder signed a deed or "third codicil" that, in much more precise language, left "all his Books, Tracts, Pamphlets, and stock in trade, in *Great-Britain and Ireland*; and all his Books, Tracts and Pamphlets which shall be his property at the time of his death; and all his Copy-Rights to all Books, Tracts, and Pamphlets, which he has already printed, or may print hereafter, unto the said Thomas Coke, Alexander Mather, Peard Dickinson, John Valton, James Rogers, Joseph Taylor, and Adam Clarke."¹¹ With the original Will still in full force, however, these seven preachers, known as Trustees, now found themselves with responsibilities that unavoidably overlapped with those previously assigned by Wesley to the lay Executors. Although it is impossible to know precisely why Wes-

ley changed his mind, Whitehead and other laymen laid the blame clearly at Coke's feet. In a veiled though unambiguous accusation published years later, Whitehead denounced Coke and his fellow preachers for manipulating Wesley in "extreme age and near senility" to sign the deed in order to further their own "influence and ambition."¹² If Whitehead had any hard evidence to support this bold allegation, however, he did not disclose it.¹³ But what must have been clear to all parties in hindsight was the fact that by signing the deed, without at the same time revoking any of the existing provisions in the original Will, Wesley had well and truly set the stage for later conflict. Any hope there may have been for an amicable resolution between the Executors and the Trustees was almost certainly dashed by the overseas absence of the only person named in both the original Will and the subsequent deed at the time of Wesley's death: Thomas Coke.

Everyone knew that Coke was an ambitious man. He had been for some years Wesley's chief lieutenant and made sure that he was never far from the levers of power. An Oxford-trained lawyer and, like Wesley, an ordained Church of England clergyman, Coke rose quickly through the Methodist ranks. Wesley appointed him superintendent of the London circuit in 1780, assigned him to preside over the first Irish Conference in 1782, and that same year appointed him to direct his Tract Society for the printing and distribution of free religious literature.¹⁴ After the Revolutionary War, Wesley elevated Coke to a position of undisputed preeminence by sending him across the Atlantic as his special emissary to help guide Methodists in the new United States as they set about establishing an independent Methodist Episcopal Church.¹⁵ In 1784, after Wesley suffered a serious illness, Coke was instrumental in helping his mentor draft a Deed of Declaration (not to be confused with the deed or third codicil of Wesley's Will) intended to set forth the terms under which institutional Methodism would operate after Wesley's death.¹⁶ The deed named one hundred preachers, known as the Legal Hundred, who together would constitute Methodism's highest deliberative body after Wesley's death. Not surprisingly, Coke's name was the first to appear on this list. Although Coke's ambition did not always please Wesley, he never fell long out of favor with Methodism's revered founder. It is almost certain that had Coke been in London at the time of Wesley's death, it would have been he and not John Whitehead who would have been given the honor of preaching Wesley's funeral sermon. But the news of Wesley's death did not finally reach Coke, who was then preaching in Virginia, until late April.¹⁷ By the time he managed to return to London in July, Wesley was long buried, two rival biographies written by non-Methodists were already

in print, and Whitehead had been officially deputed by the Executors to write Wesley's biography. A broadside to that effect had even been printed by the Book Room and made public.

If any of Coke's fellow preachers, including the six Trustees who remained in Britain, thought the Executors had acted rashly in appointing Whitehead, they kept it to themselves. The need for haste in getting an official biography to market seems to have crowded out all other considerations. "[T]he whole depends upon expedition," observed the *Morning Chronicle*, "for the first oars will be sure of the silver badge."¹⁸ In the race to protect Wesley's reputation, Horton, Wolff, and Marriott moved quickly not only to oppose the circulation of unauthorized biographies, but to promise one of their own. "The Executors of the late Rev. John Wesley," read one circular published the day after Wesley's funeral, "think it necessary to caution his numerous friends and the public against receiving any spurious or hasty account of his life; as three gentlemen, to whom he has bequeathed his manuscripts and other valuable papers, will publish an authentic narrative as soon as it can be prepared for the press."¹⁹ Although it seems in these early days the Executors hoped for a collaborative effort on the part of Coke, Whitehead, and Moore, events soon began to move too quickly to allow for that eventuality. In no time, they received word that at least one "hasty and spurious" biography was already in the offing. In less than a month, the first of two promised volumes of John Annesley Colet's *An Impartial Review of the Life and Writings, Public and Private Character, of the Late Rev. Mr. John Wesley* appeared in print. Amounting to little more than an extended introduction or advertisement for Colet's putative second volume, the whole text seems to have been calculated to entice potential readers with hints of slanderous and salacious material of just the sort the Executors were most anxious to suppress. Claiming to be the grandson of one of Wesley's sisters, Colet pronounced himself the keeper of "family anecdotes, and other materials, which Mr. Wesley did not think necessary to communicate" to his followers.²⁰ He also promised "Private Correspondence, or a Series of Letters from the Reverend Mr. Wesley to *****, and of which the Editor flatters himself, that the gentlemen to whom his papers are bequeathed are not in possession of copies."²¹ Colet offered a hint about what these secreted materials might contain toward the end of his text. "If [Wesley] had any failings," he mused, "(as the most exalted character is not free from failings and weaknesses,) they were Ambition and Love."²²

Wesley's Executors were not about to take this lying down. Even before Colet's first slim volume appeared in print, they set about doing all

they could to discredit the *Impartial Review* as anything but impartial. In response, Colet devoted the whole of his relatively lengthy preface to complaining bitterly about their opposition, noting that his honest efforts had unjustly “given great offence to some interested in a similar publication, from whom I have met with very illiberal treatment, and violent opposition.”²³ According to Colet, his opponents dismissed his work as “spurious” because he did not have access to Wesley’s private papers and manuscripts. Some were apparently even spreading false rumors that the aspiring biographer was not a blood relation. Colet responded by claiming that Wesley’s manuscripts were all but useless since everything they contained had already been published “in his annual journals and monthly magazines.”²⁴ Referring all those who doubted his kinship to Wesley’s sister, Colet concluded his harangue with a threat, promising that if he was further provoked, he would publish certain “Anecdotes” that would not reflect well on those who have “interested themselves in suppressing this humble performance.”²⁵ Unfortunately for Colet, the critics were largely unimpressed. “On the whole,” concluded one, “Mr. Colet may have been somewhat too eager for starting first in the race;—a little more time, thought, and judgment, might have improved his performance.”²⁶ Although he would later make good at least on his promise to publish sensational letters, the immediate threat Colet posed to Wesley’s reputation was thus quieted for the time being by a combination of Methodist opposition and unfavorable reviews in the press. Importantly for the Executors, his poor performance meant that there was still time for an official biographer to win the coveted “silver badge.”

The Colet affair seems to have made the Executors yet more anxious to secure an official biographer. At the same time, the surprising willingness of the preachers to stand aside and allow these laymen to act as Wesley’s public defenders had the effect of enhancing the Executors’ authority to appoint a biographer of their own choosing. Thus while their first circular did no more than promise the public a biography written by the three men named in Wesley’s Will as trustees of his manuscripts, the Executors now took steps to open a negotiation with John Whitehead to assume that task alone. With Coke still overseas and Wesley’s preachers, including Moore, working overtime to accommodate the large influx of new converts to Methodism that had resulted from Wesley’s death, Whitehead must have seemed by far the most likely candidate.²⁷ Although his Methodist credentials were not entirely above reproach—he gave up Methodism in 1769 to become a Quaker before returning to the fold in 1784—Whitehead was now undeniably a figure of some prominence.²⁸ His funeral sermon, moreover, was in its

fourth edition and continued to sell well in the absence of a more complete biography. Most importantly, Whitehead was available to take on the task right away. Although there is some evidence to suggest that he may have been initially reluctant, Whitehead yielded to the Executors' "repeated solicitations" sometime in early June 1791.²⁹ Like the Executors themselves, however, Whitehead was a layman and as such regarded himself as being "under no obligation but what friendship laid upon him, to give the fruit of his labours and abilities to the Society" without expecting to reserve "to himself some advantages from it."³⁰ In other words, he expected to be paid.

Although Horton, Wolff, and Marriott, as fellow laymen, would have had little difficulty accepting the fairness of Whitehead's demand for compensation, Wesley's preachers seem to have expected that Whitehead would write for nothing, or next to nothing. About a month before Coke's return to England in July, Whitehead found himself in the company of James Rogers while visiting Wesley's Chapel in City Road, London. Like Whitehead, Rogers had been a member of Wesley's inner circle at the time of his death and one of the few to witness his passing in person.³¹ Unlike Whitehead, Rogers was a preacher, the superintendent of the London circuit, and one of the Trustees named in the deed to take charge of Wesley's books and copyrights. Although their meeting appears to have taken place by chance, it undoubtedly marked the beginning of the confusion that would later morph into an open conflict with Whitehead and the laymen Executors on one side, and Coke, the Trustees, and the Legal Hundred on the other. Both the Executors and the Trustees published a version of events that took place at this meeting.³² Needless to say the accounts were not in agreement. The Executors claimed that Rogers unrelentingly pressed Whitehead to name the specific sum he expected to receive in compensation for writing Wesley's life.³³ The preachers insisted, for their part, that the Executors "could never be supposed to have any authority over the profits arising from any book published after Mr. Wesley's death."³⁴ Consequently, Rogers had not only the right, but also the responsibility as a trustee and a member of the Legal Hundred, to negotiate with Whitehead. As far as the preachers were concerned, then, while the Executors were guilty of grossly overstepping their authority, Rogers was acting entirely within the bounds of legal propriety. Whatever may have transpired throughout the course of the informal meeting, however, both parties granted that by its conclusion Rogers and Whitehead had agreed that the latter would write Wesley's official biography for the sum of £100.³⁵ By almost any measure it was a victory for the preachers. While Whitehead had managed to avoid writing for nothing, his compensa-

tion, when compared to the profits his biography would almost certainly generate for the Book Room, was next to it. Before parting, Whitehead reluctantly agreed to allow Rogers to take word of the agreement to the Executors, provided he did so “delicately.”³⁶

Rogers seems to have been in no great hurry to confirm anything with the Executors. After all, he almost certainly imagined himself, as a trustee as well as one of the Legal Hundred, to be in a position of greater authority than the three laymen. Instead, Rogers took the good news directly to George Whitfield at the Book Room where he “expressed much satisfaction that the Doctor, on his own accord, has fixed a sum he wished for, as we had often been at a loss to know what to offer him.”³⁷ Rogers may even have felt a little guilty since he and Whitfield agreed between themselves that “it will be more handsome” to pay Whitehead’s fee in guineas rather than pounds.³⁸ Before Rogers and Whitfield parted company that evening, however, Whitehead was already having second thoughts. Realizing just how cheaply he had sold his labor, the physician sent for Marriott the next day and proposed “as a compensation for writing the *Life of Mr. Wesley*, to take one half of the profits arising from the sale of it for two years; after which the whole should be the property of the Book-Room forever.”³⁹ When they eventually learned of this new arrangement, the preachers complained, with some justice, that, “A man of integrity . . . would have sent for *Mr. Rogers*, with whom he made the agreement.”⁴⁰ It seems probable that Whitehead was acting with some calculation at this point. Although he may have believed sincerely that the Executors had the greater authority, he seems also to have understood that, as fellow laymen, they would be more sympathetic to his demands. Not surprisingly, Marriott and the other Executors readily agreed to the new terms. Rogers, the Trustees, and the rest of his fellow preachers, meanwhile, claimed they knew nothing about this new and much more lucrative agreement until it was too late. That oversight may have resulted in part from the fact that a new threat to both the interests of Whitehead and the Book Room was about to appear on the horizon: another rival biography.

John Hampson Jr. had originally intended to publish his meticulous three-volume biography of Wesley during the preacher’s lifetime.⁴¹ No doubt his hopes would have been raised considerably by Wesley’s death and the attendant expectation that his work would be met with an increased public appetite as the newspapers promised. But although Hampson’s biography was far more serious and balanced than the trifle rushed to market by Colet, the Executors treated it with the same contempt. Their opposition seems to

have taken Hampson by surprise. But that was nothing new. Hampson had a history of being on the wrong end of unpleasant surprises when it came to the Methodists. He and his father, John Hampson Sr., had both served as travelling preachers until 1784 when Wesley drew up his Deed of Declaration. Despite John Hampson Sr.'s considerable seniority, neither he nor his son was named to the Legal Hundred. Disgruntled, Hampson Sr. published a tract on behalf of the ninety-one excluded preachers before both father and son left Methodism for good.⁴² Although Hampson Jr. later took orders as a Church of England clergyman, it is clear he remained fascinated by John Wesley.⁴³ Hampson complained that "The Executors of Mr Wesley" had taken "much pains, by notices and advertisements to prevent the circulation of these Memoirs, or any other account of Mr Wesley, than that which they are now preparing."⁴⁴ But the Executors went further than that. Exactly one week after the appearance of Hampson's biography, the Book Room published a broadside announcing Whitehead's appointment as Wesley's official biographer. "Dr. *Whitehead*," it read, "having been acquainted with the public and private Character of the late Rev. Mr. Wesley more than twenty-five-years, and being appointed in his Will, with two other persons, to examine and revise his manuscripts, we have solicited him to write the Life of Mr. Wesley. And from the specimen of his candour and impartiality which he has given in his Funeral Discourse, we doubt not but it will be executed to the satisfaction of candid and liberal minded Christians of all denominations."⁴⁵ The broadside was signed by George Wolff, John Horton, and William Marriott. To their later regret, but just as they had during the Colet affair, the preachers once again stood aside and allowed Wesley's lay Executors to take up the mantle as Methodism's public defenders. In the process, Whitehead's role as Wesley's sole official biographer was confirmed publicly before Coke had returned to England, before the Legal Hundred could meet together for the first time since Wesley's death, and before any preacher had yet discovered that Whitehead was no longer willing to write Wesley's life for anything less than half the profits.

When Coke finally arrived in London at the beginning of July, it was less than a month before his fellow preachers would gather in Manchester to hold Methodism's first annual conference since Wesley's death. It was a moment of crisis with much at stake. Coke well knew that Wesley's unyielding refusal to loosen his grip on the reins of power throughout his lifetime meant that the provisions of the 1784 Deed of Declaration outlining the transfer of that power to the Legal Hundred had never been fully tested.⁴⁶ In addition, Coke must have understood the potential for conflict when the

seven preachers named in the third codicil as Trustees of Wesley's books and copyrights, and the lay Executors charged with overlapping responsibilities in the original Will, faced each other in the same room for the first time. Add to this the fact that there were already murmurs that Coke's notorious ambition might seduce him into attempting to arrogate an unjustifiable proportion of Wesley's powers to himself, and it is not difficult to see why the returning preacher uncharacteristically chose to accept quietly Whitehead's lay appointment as Wesley's official biographer.⁴⁷

With Coke's agreement "in the opinion of the Executors," Whitehead wrote to Henry Moore to request that Wesley's papers and manuscripts be deposited in his charge so that he might begin work immediately. Coke, together with another preacher and the wife of James Rogers, personally boxed up Wesley's papers and dispatched them to Whitehead's house.⁴⁸ The papers thus in transit, the Book Room published another broadside in early July, this one signed by Whitehead, promising an official biography "printed in a neat Type and good Paper" at a cost of "six Shillings, in Boards." The text also called on preachers to "send a list of Subscribers to Mr. *Whitfield*, at the Book-Room, in the City-Road, before the sixth of January 1792" so that the promised volume might be placed in the hands of subscribers in less than a year.⁴⁹ Although the Book Room would more than deliver on its promise, publishing an acclaimed biography of Wesley in April 1792 for only five shillings, none could have foreseen at the time that the title page of that anticipated volume would ultimately bear not Whitehead's name, but the names of two preachers: Whitehead's fellow trustees of Wesley's papers, Thomas Coke and Henry Moore.⁵⁰ How that came about was bitterly contested among preachers and people. While Whitehead's lay supporters would blame "bigoted and persecuting" preachers for pushing the physician aside in a bid to suppress lay rights, the preachers would fault Whitehead's unreasonable demands for lucre and editorial autonomy.⁵¹ However that may be, much of the trouble seems to have first taken root in events bracketing the meeting of Conference that summer.

About a week before Conference, James Rogers, George Whitfield, George Wolff, and William Marriott met to review the Book Room's financial accounts. Rogers and Whitfield remained under the impression that Whitehead had agreed to write Wesley's biography in exchange for one hundred guineas.⁵² Although the Executors knew otherwise, Wolff later protested that Rogers "represented this in such a manner as firmly persuaded Mr. Marriott, that the Doctor had altered his mind after he had made the proposal to him of taking one half of the profits for two years. The two

Executors present, believing what Mr. Rogers said was perfectly agreeable to the views and wishes of Dr. Whitehead, agreed the sum should be one hundred guineas.”⁵³ Unfortunately, this was anything but agreeable to the views and wishes of Whitehead. Whitehead and his supporters later claimed that the physician-turned-biographer paid a visit to the Book Room a day or two later to discuss the matter in more detail with Rogers and Whitfield. At this purported meeting, Whitehead claimed he objected to the proposed compensation and instead insisted the preachers honor the agreement he had made with the Executors to share in the profits for two years.⁵⁴ Rogers and Whitfield, for their part, denied that this meeting ever took place. Although the matter remains clouded, events as they transpired at the Conference the following week strongly suggest that Whitehead was not being entirely truthful.

More than two hundred preachers descended on Manchester in the last week of July “deeply sensible of the importance of the occasion.”⁵⁵ In accordance with the instructions laid out in the Deed of Declaration, a president and secretary were duly elected. William Thompson, a congenial and mild-mannered preacher, was elected to the former post while Coke, unsurprisingly, was selected for the influential role of secretary. One of the most important items of business before the Conference concerned the property of the Book Room. It was taken for granted by the preachers and the seven Trustees named in the third codicil that “the printing, the distribution of books, and the application of the profits, were designed by Mr. Wesley, to be as heretofore, under the direction of the Conference.”⁵⁶ In other words, the preachers believed that all authority over the Book Room and its stock should be in their hands. It seems to have come as a very great surprise to them that the lay Executors named in Wesley’s original Will, who had made the long journey from their places of business in London to attend Conference, disagreed. Refusing to step aside quietly, Wolff, Horton, and Marriott insisted that, “their authority was to continue over the property, for the benefit of the Conference, as long as they should live.”⁵⁷ Though vastly outnumbered, the Executors held to their position for days as the preachers offered both arguments and concessions to persuade them to surrender their authority. Refusing to acknowledge the legality of Wesley’s third codicil, they twice rejected offers on the part of the Conference to be included in the membership of a Printing Committee “to be formed in London, for the regulation of the Press, and the examination of the Accompts.”⁵⁸ Thus thwarted, the preachers finally resorted to threats. If the Executors did not accede to the demands of the Conference, they menaced, then the preachers

as a whole would simply give up selling books on behalf of the Book Room as they had throughout Wesley's life. The Book Room, as a result, would be driven into bankruptcy. Faced with this ultimatum, the Executors retreated to London to obtain the advice of "the King's Advocate and one other eminent Doctor of Civil Law," promising to "yield if they could do so legally."⁵⁹ Although the Executors were ultimately forced to surrender the property to the Trustees, who in turn transferred the property to Conference, the whole affair left a bad taste in everyone's mouth and was not quickly forgotten.⁶⁰

Despite the fact that the matter of the Book Room remained formally unsettled for several more weeks, the preachers proceeded to pass resolutions as though they were already in charge. Accordingly, a new Printing Committee was constituted to oversee "the regulation of the Press" and a further resolution passed requiring that "nothing should be issued from the Conference press, until it had obtained the sanction of [this] select committee, that was appointed to inspect all papers that were prepared for publication."⁶¹ Members of the Committee were also empowered to deal with the Executors after the latter had satisfied themselves that the law was not on their side. According to its lay detractors, Coke became the leading voice of the new Committee.⁶² Two of his fellow Trustees, James Rogers and Peard Dickenson, were also appointed together with George Whitfield and three other preachers sympathetic to Coke's leadership.⁶³ When the matter of Wesley's official biography was subsequently raised, several preachers objected to Whitehead on the grounds that he had temporarily lapsed into Quakerism several years earlier. With the Executors absent in London, Rogers doubtless felt that it fell to him to take up the mantle of Whitehead's advocate since he was now both a member of the Printing Committee and the one who had negotiated Whitehead's fee of one hundred guineas at the Book Room just a few weeks earlier. Speaking persuasively and at some length, Rogers succeeded in satisfying "the Brethren on these points and the Doctor was authorized to compile the Life."⁶⁴ Although every preacher in the room would later regret the outcome of that vote, none would regret it more than Rogers himself.

With the Executors out of the way, Rogers and Richard Rodda, both members of the new Printing Committee, met with Whitehead in early September to review the terms of his appointment. Things got off to a bad start almost immediately when Whitehead learned that some preachers had voiced objections to his nomination as Wesley's official biographer.⁶⁵ Despite Roger's assurances that he had personally assuaged their concerns—a circumstance that strongly suggests he remained at that time unaware of Whitehead's

more lucrative arrangement with the Executors—it soon became clear that the matter remained far less settled than Rogers had suggested to his fellow preachers the previous July. Having by now completely set aside his earlier willingness to write for a fixed sum, Whitehead “considered his agreement with the Executors as still subsisting” and demanded that the Printing Committee honor the profit-sharing arrangement he had reached with his fellow laymen.⁶⁶ Although Rogers claimed this was the first he had heard of any such arrangement, neither he nor Rodda seemed entirely surprised by this unwelcome turn of events. According to sworn testimony submitted later by Rodda, rumors were already circulating around London suggesting that Whitehead planned “to publish [the biography] on his own account, and to retain the Copy-right as his own private property.”⁶⁷ Perhaps with this specter in mind, Rogers and Rodda dismissed Whitehead’s demand out of hand by arguing that, whatever had transpired at Conference, “the Executors could never be supposed to have any authority over the profits arising from any book published *after* Mr. Wesley’s death: nor were they the proper persons to bargain at all with Dr. W. or any other person for the Life of Mr. Wesley.”⁶⁸ When it became clear that an impasse had been reached, Rodda proposed that Whitehead step aside to allow Coke and Moore to take his place. After all, these men were not only preachers, but, according to Wesley’s original Will, equal trustees of his papers and manuscripts. Whitehead, according to Rodda, responded angrily, threatening that “neither of them should have one scrip of them till he had done with them, and that when the Life *was* published, it would be necessary to keep the papers as vouchers.”⁶⁹

Despite being in sole possession of Wesley’s papers, Whitehead was not inattentive to the weakness of his own position. With the Book Room now under the apparent control of the preachers, it was clear that he could no longer rely on the sympathies of fellow laymen to guide its affairs. In a few days, Whitehead dispatched a letter to James Rogers and George Whitfield that, at first blush, must have seemed conciliatory enough. “I am,” he wrote, “ready to yield advantages to the Book-Room to my own injury, and which the Preachers have no right to claim; but I am not willing that the fruit of my labours should be wrested out of my hands by violence.”⁷⁰ No doubt Rogers, Whitfield, and the rest of the Printing Committee must have been surprised by what followed. Far from yielding advantages to the Book Room, Whitehead argued that his mistreatment by the preachers meant that the Conference no longer “*deserved of me the same advantages which I thought the Executors had some right to expect.*”⁷¹ Instead, Whitehead advised the preachers to settle on one of three proposals that, in the end, amounted

to little more than variations on his earlier profit-sharing agreement with the Executors. Rejecting the authority of the Printing Committee outright, and confirming at least part of the rumor that had set Rogers and Rodda on their guard earlier, Whitehead also indicated that he would publish the biography on his own account since there was no one with authority at the Book Room to authorize its publication until the next gathering of preachers at Conference almost a year hence. By almost any measure the terms were outrageous. Under them, the preachers would be reduced to little more than paid subscription agents and commission salesmen operating in large measure for Whitehead's personal financial benefit. Allowing an author a share in the profits, to say nothing of superintending the printing of his own book, moreover, would set a terrible precedent by diluting the authority of the preachers over the daily business affairs of a materially weakened Book Room increasingly less able to underwrite Methodism's charitable and missionary activities. Coke, responding on behalf of the Printing Committee, spurned Whitehead's proposals and reasserted the authority of that Committee. "If you suppose," he wrote, "that the Conference has appointed no persons to direct in respect to what may or may not be printed for the benefit of the connection during the interval of the Conference, you are mistaken."⁷² Nevertheless, in the fading hope that Whitehead might yet see reason, Coke offered to double his compensation to "two hundred guineas for your trouble in writing the history of Mr. Wesley."⁷³

Whitehead's response indicates the extent to which he had come to see the putative mistreatment of the Executors by Conference and his own mistreatment by the Printing Committee as a problem rooted in the arbitrary exercise of power on the part of Methodist preachers over the rights and affairs of Methodist laymen. "*Had the Executors continued in their office without molestation,*" he complained, "*the plan I proposed would have been followed with mutual harmony. But when the Conference had rejected Mr. Wesley's Will, and the very principle on which every part of it was founded: and had driven the Executors from their office, as far as their influence could reach; my situation in this work was quite altered. And the conduct of Conference, both in relation to the Funeral discourse and this work itself, has laid me under no obligation, except to pass them over in silence, or to consider them merely as strangers.*"⁷⁴ Despite his profound dissatisfaction, Whitehead suggested that a new committee be formed to negotiate a compromise, consisting of three laymen to represent his interests, and three preachers to speak for the Printing Committee. But that meeting quickly came to nothing when it became clear to the preachers that Whitehead's rep-

representatives, “*were under restraints* concerning the Copy-right, and *not* left at liberty to give it up.”⁷⁵ Thus it was finally confirmed that all the rumors were true. Far from being willing to write for a fixed sum, Whitehead had now escalated his demands to include control over the production of the book, sharing in the profits from its sale, and ownership of the copyright. The Executors, meanwhile, who increasingly identified Whitehead’s interests as their own, met together at the physician’s house to draft yet another profit-sharing proposal that was also rejected by the preachers at the Book Room.⁷⁶

Sometime in mid-October, Henry Moore wrote to Whitehead about Wesley’s papers. Although he claimed that, “the examination of those papers, as directed in the Will, is more necessary, and a much higher duty in us than having *any* Life of Mr. Wesley written,” no doubt his appointment, together with Thomas Coke, as Wesley’s new official biographers played some part in the timing of his correspondence.⁷⁷ Moore proposed in his letter that the three men act together as a committee to review the papers, set aside whatever material is deemed necessary for writing Wesley’s biography, burn what ought to be destroyed, and dispatch the rest to Thomas Coke for inspection and possible publication by the Printing Committee. Doubtless intuiting a darker motive on Moore’s part, and making good on his earlier threat, Whitehead rejected the request. “I am determined not to part with the papers,” he wrote, “nor suffer them to be examined, until I have made use of them as far as I shall want: unless you and Dr. Coke will enter into a positive engagement, to leave such papers in my hands as I shall desire, or think I may want.”⁷⁸ Moore, declining to offer Whitehead any assurances, expressed feigned surprise at Whitehead’s refusal. “When, as you say, I consented that the papers should be put in your hands,” he complained, “I did it without the most distant thought of precluding myself from examining them, in case the Conference should think it necessary for so to do.” Moore did his best to disabuse Whitehead of what seemed a sincere conviction that he could simply hold the papers ransom until, and even beyond, the time when his biography was in press. “But that any thing in those manuscripts should be published without our examination and consent,” Moore argued, “appears to me to be entirely contrary to justice, and subversive of the design of the Testator.”⁷⁹

A final but fleeting hope for resolution dawned when the lay Executors and the seven Trustees found themselves together in the same small room waiting for the probate of Wesley’s Will. The Executors, no doubt at Whitehead’s urging, “used every means in their power, to persuade them

[the Trustees] to put an end to the difference with Dr. Whitehead, by accepting of the agreement which they, the Executors, had made with him before the Conference.”⁸⁰ Although there was disagreement among the preachers, Coke seems to have rallied the Trustees on the grounds that the terms on offer, though far from ideal, at least afforded the Book Room eventual ownership of the copyright and the Printing Committee control over the production of the book.⁸¹ But when the parties met two days later at Whitehead’s house to formalize the arrangement, Whitehead scuttled the deal by refusing to allow the Printing Committee to review his work before publication. In so doing he rejected not only the authority of the Printing Committee, but by extension the authority of the Conference itself.⁸² As well they might, Whitehead’s supporters later blamed Coke for insisting on this condition in order to protect his own reputation. Indeed, as the first member of the Legal Hundred, a leading voice in Conference, one of the seven Trustees of Wesley’s books and copyrights, the unofficial chair of the Printing Committee, and one of the three trustees of Wesley’s papers, Coke, or his influence, must have seemed all but ubiquitous. “It is easy to conceive that Dr. Coke foresaw, if an impartial history of Mr. Wesley and of Methodism were published, many parts of his conduct in the government of the Society would be brought to light, for which Mr. Wesley had chiefly borne the blame.”⁸³ In the end, the two parties could agree only on one thing: the final break between Whitehead and the Printing Committee stemmed not from a financial disagreement, but over whether a layman or a group of preachers would be privileged to exercise final authority over the translation of Wesley’s life and words into print.

The Printing Committee and the Trustees met the next day to select a replacement for Whitehead and to draft a circular describing the latest turn of events to the preachers who had until then continued to collect subscriptions along their preaching circuits for Whitehead’s biography. Although the circular was not signed by Coke, everyone knew that he had written it and no one was surprised when he and Moore, joint trustees with Whitehead of Wesley’s papers, were nominated by the Printing Committee and Trustees to take up their pens as Wesley’s new biographers.⁸⁴ But if the preachers expected Whitehead to meekly surrender and turn over Wesley’s papers to the new biographers they were sorely disappointed. Whitehead no doubt must have flirted with the idea of giving up the whole project and all the trouble it entailed. At least until he read the contents of the circular. In it Whitehead was publicly humiliated. Painting the physician’s demands for financial compensation and control over the manuscript as insupportably selfish

and unreasonable, the Committee and Trustees invoked Wesley's memory to justify the removal of Whitehead and the appointment of preachers in his place. "Seeing it impossible to treat with Dr. Whitehead on such terms," the circular ran, "we maturely weighed the whole subject, and were persuaded that a life of Mr. Wesley ought to be written from liberal motives—such motives, and such alone as we well know our honoured father would have approved, if his advice could have been taken."⁸⁵ Unlike the covetous physician, Coke and Moore, the circular noted piously, were content to trade their labor for whatever reward awaited them "at the resurrection of the just."⁸⁶ The circular concluded with an instruction to the preachers to return the money they had collected for Whitehead's biography and to begin collecting new subscriptions for the work to be authored by Coke and Moore. Thus pilloried by the preachers, Whitehead concluded that his reputation was now in peril. "[A]fter Dr. Coke, &c., had misrepresented my conduct, and traduced my character in the most artful manner, in the printed circular letter of the 31st of October 1791," he concluded, "I had no choice left, but either to persevere in writing the Life, or by relinquishing it, tacitly to acknowledge the charges alleged against me. I have, therefore, been contending for my character, as an honest man, against slander and defamation."⁸⁷ Not surprisingly, Whitehead offered Coke and Moore only the barest minimum of what he thought the law demanded: supervised access to Wesley's papers by appointment at his place of residence.⁸⁸

Over the next several months, Whitehead and Moore exchanged a flurry of increasingly threatening letters about Wesley's papers. When it became clear that Whitehead planned to retain possession of the papers "till I have written the Life of Mr. Wesley," Coke and Moore demanded that "nothing should be published out of Mr. Wesley's papers but what was first read over and approved by them."⁸⁹ Although it was not an unreasonable demand—after all, Wesley's Will had entrusted his manuscripts to the three men together "to be burnt or published as they see good"—Whitehead objected that the two preachers acting together would have an effective veto over all decisions.⁹⁰ The weeks passed and, despite Whitehead's continued insistence that he had no wish to prevent Coke and Moore from examining the papers at his own residence, those papers remained beyond the reach of Coke, Moore, and the rest of the preachers.⁹¹ By late November the preachers ran out of patience. Moore quietly took up his pen and began writing the biography using Wesley's published journals and his own recollections. Coke, for his part, filed suit in the Court of Equity against Whitehead for violating the terms and conditions of Wesley's Will.⁹² As the conflict became increas-

ingly public, Whitehead's reputation suffered further. Reports began to circulate that Whitehead planned to "ruin the Methodist Society, if he lose his soul in doing it." Whitehead's lay supporters, meanwhile, complained that the preachers were guilty of "working up the minds of the lowest of the people to believe, that Dr. Whitehead is a perfect monster of covetousness and wickedness."⁹³ Meanwhile, Whitehead received an anonymous letter threatening him with dire consequences if he did not yield to the demands of the preachers.⁹⁴ John Annesley Colet, perhaps still smarting from his own injuries, wrote to Coke to complain that the slanders being directed against Whitehead could result in schism. Coke dismissed the speculation as nonsense. "As to Dr. Whitehead," he replied, "he has no more power to divide our general conference of SYNOD (without which our great connection cannot be shaken) *than the man in the moon.*"⁹⁵

If Whitehead thought that Coke had done his worst by filing a claim against him in the Court of Equity, he was mistaken. At the regular London Quarterly Meeting of travelling and local preachers held in early December, Coke, Moore, and Rogers brought a motion against Whitehead, accusing him of failing "to fulfil Mr. Wesley's Will, by not suffering the manuscripts to be examined."⁹⁶ Whitehead's supporters later complained that the physician had been given no warning of the charges to be brought against him and was therefore unjustly deprived of any opportunity to defend himself against Coke's calumnies. However true that may have been, no one thought to object to the motion on those grounds that December. In the absence of any serious opposition, Coke proposed that Whitehead be expelled from Methodism altogether until such time as he returned Wesley's papers to the preachers. The motion passed by a large majority—twenty-nine to one.⁹⁷ The following Sunday, Coke took to the pulpit of the City Road Chapel in London—the same pulpit from which Whitehead had preached his celebrated funeral sermon seven months earlier—to announce to all present that Whitehead had been expelled and that, as a result, "in future he could only be considered as a stranger."⁹⁸ With that, Whitehead's humiliation within the Methodist community was complete. His reputation was in tatters thanks to Coke's circular and his anonymous letter, his legal position was in doubt, his biography would no longer enjoy the patronage of the Book Room, and he himself was now an outsider, a stranger, and no more worthy of consideration than either John Annesley Colet or John Hampson Jr.

Despite these setbacks, Whitehead's refusal to surrender Wesley's papers to the preachers remained unyielding. His extraordinary tenacity would probably have been impossible—both on financial and psychological

grounds—had a group of equally tenacious laymen not gathered around him to offer their support. Among these supporters, known as Whitehead’s “Committee of Thirty One,” were numbered all three Executors, as well as prominent lay trustees of the City Road Chapel in London.⁹⁹ Tellingly, no preacher was ever invited to join the group or attend any of its meetings. Coke and his brethren, for their part, dismissed Whitehead’s supporters as “*monied* men” who, they intimated, may have had a financial stake to protect now that it became clear that his biography might not sell as well as he had hoped and that, consequently, the value of his copyright was in decline.¹⁰⁰ Whether these men acted from altruistic or self-interested motives, they remained at Whitehead’s side for the duration of the conflict. In the following weeks, doubtless with an eye to Coke’s pending suit in the Court of Equity, Whitehead’s Committee made several proposals that would permit the preachers, with Whitehead, to examine Wesley’s papers in a way that would satisfy the requirements of his Will. In the end, however, it wasn’t Coke, but John Annesley Colet the Committee ought to have been worried about. By January 1792, Moore was making good headway on the biography even without access to Wesley’s papers, and Coke, as a result, was musing openly about dropping the lawsuit. His decision was no doubt made easier when Whitehead’s reputation suffered yet another serious blow—this time with no help from Coke.

Making good on a promise made almost a year before in his *Impartial Review of the Life and Writing, Public and Private Character, of the Late Rev. Mr. John Wesley*, Colet published an extraordinary pamphlet, identifying himself only as “an Old Member of the Society,” that included copies of two damning letters purportedly written by Wesley—one illustrating his “ambition” and the other his “love.”¹⁰¹ As its title suggests, however, those sensational letters were intended only as part of the sideshow. The real, and perhaps ultimately ironic, purpose of Colet’s pamphlet was to defend Whitehead against the alleged abuses perpetrated against him by the preachers. But as both an attack on Coke and Moore, and an extraordinary slander on the memory of Wesley himself, it seems highly probable that Colet may have published it as much to exact revenge on Whitehead and the Executors for maligning his own *Impartial Review* as to champion lay rights. Indeed, there is almost no other way to account for the text’s striking juxtapositions. After threatening in his preface that schism will be the almost certain result of Whitehead’s mistreatment, for example, Colet goes on to disparage Wesley himself as a lecherous narcissist more interested in his own power and reputation than the welfare of Methodism—even at one point

comparing the late preacher to Milton's Satan.¹⁰² The two scandalous and obviously forged letters—one predicting the triumph of Enlightenment philosophy over Methodism after Wesley's death and the other pretending to be a love letter penned by Wesley to a young woman more than fifty years his junior—included in Colet's pamphlet only served to tarnish further Whitehead's reputation by association.¹⁰³ Any reader even remotely sympathetic to the Methodist cause would no doubt have concluded that with friends like Colet, Whitehead didn't need any enemies. In the wake of Colet's bizarre apology for Whitehead, Coke announced from the pulpit toward the end of January that he was dropping the lawsuit to let "God avenge our cause."¹⁰⁴ It is hard to imagine what more Coke might have wanted God to do. The very next day, a notice appeared in the London *Public Advertiser* announcing the imminent publication of Wesley's official biography authored by Thomas Coke and Henry Moore.¹⁰⁵ Whatever threat Whitehead may have once posed to the interests of the Book Room and Methodism must have seemed to the preachers to be well and truly at an end.

Over the next several months the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* published the third codicil to Wesley's Will, a statement on the treatment of the Executors and their claim over the property of the Book Room at the Conference of 1791, and a copy of the document legally transferring the property of the Book Room from the Trustees, who had won control of it from the Executors, to the Legal Hundred and by extension the Conference itself.¹⁰⁶ All of this seems to have been calculated not only to exonerate Coke from any lingering calumnies that may have yet been circulating among Methodists, but also to prepare the ground for the Book Room's official biography of Wesley. It seems to have worked. When the biography Coke and Moore had managed to write with access only to their own recollections and Wesley's published materials appeared in April 1792, it was an immediate sensation. In a matter of weeks the initial edition of 10,000 copies—issued as promised in boards for five shillings—was sold out. Notably, unlike the works published by Colet, Hampson, and later Whitehead, its preface contained no hint of the controversies that led to its publication. Coke and Moore must have concluded that their own victory over Whitehead, the Executors, and his other lay supporters had been so complete, that any further reference to the dispute was unnecessary. Not surprisingly, Whitehead's Committee responded with a publication of their own—*A True Narrative of the Origin and Progress of the Difference Between Dr. Coke, Mr. Moore, Mr. Rogers, and Dr. Whitehead*—abounding with descriptions of how the preachers had mistreated not only Whitehead but also the lay

Executors. All had been “anathematized from the pulpit by Dr. Coke, with almost frantic rage,” and unjustly held up “to the people as monsters of wickedness, as persons not fit to live”¹⁰⁷ Having received no satisfaction from Coke and his coterie of supporters, the Committee appealed to the members of Conference to “disapprove of these proceedings, repair the injury done, as far as possible, and provide a remedy against such injuries in the future.” Although still months away, the *True Narrative* also included a promise that Whitehead’s own two-volume life of Wesley was “now put to the press; and the first volume will be published with all convenient speed, after the Conference.”¹⁰⁸ That part of the *True Narrative*, at least, turned out to be a gross exaggeration.

The weeks leading up to Conference at the end of July 1792 were tense for preachers and people alike. At the beginning of July, James Rogers took to the pulpit in London’s City Road Chapel to persuade his hearers that the claims made by Whitehead’s partisans in the *True Narrative* were anything but true. The sermon no doubt angered many in the congregation—not least a majority of the chapel trustees who were strident supporters of Whitehead’s cause. Rogers risked their anger at his peril. Since Wesley’s time, Methodist chapels had operated under the authority of such lay trustees who oversaw building expenses and enforced orthodoxy in their pulpits.¹⁰⁹ As a result, there had always been at least the potential for conflict between preachers and lay trustees.¹¹⁰ At the time Rogers ascended the pulpit that summer, twelve of the seventeen trustees at City Road were members of Whitehead’s Committee and signatories to the *True Narrative*—including the Executors John Horton and George Wolff.¹¹¹ At their first opportunity, these twelve trustees determined to reward Rogers for his sermon with formal expulsion from the pulpit and, without seeking the permission of the preachers, restore Whitehead to full membership in the Society.¹¹² About the time that Rogers’s sermon appeared in print two weeks later, William Smith, another member of Whitehead’s Committee, published a clamorous pamphlet of his own that both rebutted the sermon and, more consequentially, served as an infectious jeremiad directed against Methodist preachers more generally.¹¹³ “I have been shocked and disgusted at the artful means that have been used in private and public,” Smith castigated Rogers, “to strengthen your own influence, and keep the minds of the people in a slavish and superstitious bondage to your authority.”¹¹⁴ Although his criticism of the rest of the preachers was somewhat more muted—Smith still hoped they might be persuaded to see reason at the upcoming Conference—it was nevertheless uncompromising.¹¹⁵ “The efforts which they seem to be mak-

ing,” he lamented, “to extend their authority and increase their influence in temporal and religious matters, are an evident mark of a decline from their primitive simplicity.”¹¹⁶ Smith warned his lay readers that if they failed to resist multiplying clerical encroachments on their liberty, the result would be corruption so widespread that the whole of Methodism would become “as tyrannical and violent as Rome itself.”¹¹⁷

With Smith’s words still echoing in their ears, Methodist preachers gathered in London just two weeks later for their second Conference since Wesley’s death. “The Preachers had no sooner assembled,” remarked one early historian, “than they were involved in a dispute which had occasioned great uneasiness throughout the connexion in the preceding year.”¹¹⁸ That dispute, of course, revolved around what should be done about Whitehead’s life of Wesley. Whitehead began his address to the Conference by complaining that the “cruel and persevering opposition” he had suffered at the hands of the preachers, particularly those appointed to the Printing Committee, had slowed the pace of his work considerably. “Whenever, therefore, I found my mind affected by their conduct,” he later wrote, “so that I could not write with the calmness and ease that I wished, I laid the Work wholly aside, which has been no small cause of the delay.”¹¹⁹ With only just over a hundred pages of writing complete, however, Whitehead knew that his back was against the wall. Accordingly, he offered to surrender the copyright to the Book Room completely, together with all the profits from the sale of the work. But he continued to refuse to allow the Printing Committee a veto over the text, arguing that he had “*an undoubted right to the use of his own judgment without control, in writing a book to which his name must be prefixed, and for the contents of which he only was responsible to the Methodist Connection at large, and to the Public.*”¹²⁰ In other words, Whitehead refused to surrender editorial control to the preachers because he saw himself as accountable not to them, but to the Methodist laity and the wider reading public. Only one preacher was persuaded by Whitehead’s arguments: Alexander Kilham, who would later become the leader of Methodism’s first secessionists.¹²¹ The rest, with a runaway bestseller already on their hands, saw little reason to compromise. In a written response signed by none other than Thomas Coke, the Conference dismissed Whitehead, his proposals, and his unfinished biography, concluding, “they could have nothing to do with him in any other character.”¹²² They could not, however, so easily dismiss the City Road Chapel trustees who were simultaneously holding their own conclave across town.

Finding his proposal refused for the last time by the preachers, Whitehead no doubt resorted to the company of his supporters. The City Road

Chapel trustees, for their part, petitioned the Conference for an opportunity to address the preachers with their grievances but were refused. “When the trustees saw the conference treated them with contempt,” Kilham later remarked, “and would not so much as condescend to meet a committee of their body, they were driven to the measure which they afterwards pursued.”¹²³ That measure was the filing of an expensive and protracted lawsuit against the preachers in which the trustees argued that they held the legal right to determine who would preach from the City Road pulpit and who would be considered a member of the Society. Kilham laid the blame for the whole affair squarely at the feet of the preachers: “If the London trustees had followed the most excellent way, perhaps they would not have entered into a law-suit. But the preachers were the moving cause of that suit. They laid the foundation, and the trustees availed themselves of the laws of their country, when they saw their rights invaded.”¹²⁴ The London lawsuit, as it came to be known, cost the preachers dearly. Not only did they eventually find themselves obliged to pay upwards of £2,000 in fees and damages, but the legal recourse the trustees had sought against them inspired other trustees, including those in Bristol and Newcastle, to file similar suits to rein in the authority of the preachers in their own pulpits. Kilham, for his part, traced all the subsequent strife between people and preachers over matters of property and doctrine back to the biography controversy.¹²⁵ Shortly after the suit was settled in 1796, the dissident preacher observed in a letter to his brethren that it was their treatment of “Dr. Whitehead and the London trustees” that had been “in a great measure . . . the cause of all our troubles ever since.”¹²⁶ William Thomson, in a sermon preached in defence of the preachers at City Road, also admitted as much.¹²⁷ Another preacher, no doubt expressing the sentiments that were all but universal among his brethren, simply remarked that he “should be glad if it could be everlastingly forgotten.”¹²⁸

Whitehead lived long enough to see his two-volume biography of Wesley finally appear in print: the first volume in late 1793 and the second in 1795. Although it was for the most part a balanced treatment, Whitehead did not keep the promise that had been made by his supporters in the *True Narrative* to remain silent on the opposition he had faced while writing it.¹²⁹ Perhaps in retrospect Whitehead can be forgiven for taking one final opportunity to set the record straight. By the time Whitehead’s second volume appeared, Kilham himself was on the verge of expulsion for his ongoing opposition to what he characterized as increasingly tyrannical behavior on the part of his fellow preachers. Indeed, it was none other than Whitehead

who wrote to Kilham to warn him of the steps the preachers planned to take against him just months before his formal excommunication at the Conference of 1796.¹³⁰ Less than ten years later, both Whitehead and Kilham were dead. Whitehead died of old age, Kilham from complications arising from choking on a chicken bone.¹³¹ Kilham left behind a thriving secessionist movement—the Methodist New Connection—that would survive as an independent body until the twentieth century. Whitehead, for his part, would have perhaps been as surprised as he might have been irritated to learn that the Book Room kept his own biography of Wesley in print—in expurgated form, of course—for decades to come. And yet, despite the fact that the preachers superintending the Book Room succeeded in finally gaining editorial control over Whitehead’s text, the effects of the dispute were not thereby effaced. However much the preachers might have liked to have “everlastingly forgotten” the whole affair, it was Whitehead’s struggle against the Printing Committee that had first prompted the laity to mount an organized opposition to the authority of the preachers. That opposition led inexorably to the filing of the London lawsuit that in turn helped shore up the arguments of agitators like Kilham who labored untiringly to advance the rights of the laity across Methodism as a whole. In the end, it is perhaps fitting to recall that, although eventually overshadowed by the trials and schism that followed, the first major dispute to divide Wesley’s followers was rooted not in doctrine or in theology, but in print culture. After all, the fortune that Wesley left behind, and over which preachers and people fought so determinedly for control, had first been won in the eighteenth century’s burgeoning market for books, pamphlets, and periodicals.

Notes

1. Isabel Rivers speculates that, with the possible exception of Daniel Defoe, John Wesley was “editor, author, or publisher of more works (the majority of them short religious pamphlets in duodecimo format) than any other single figure in eighteenth-century Britain.” See Isabel Rivers, “John Wesley as Editor and Publisher,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, eds. Randy L. Maddox and Jason E. Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 145.

2. “Interesting Domestic Intelligence,” *General Magazine and Impartial Review*, March 1791, 166–68; “Mr. Wesley,” *Morning Chronicle*, 11 March 1791, n.p. Alexander Kilham, in a dispute over the property of the Book Room, estimated that its value at the time of Wesley’s death “would not be less than 12,000l.” See Alexander Kilham, *The Methodist Monitor* (Leeds: Printed by Binns and Brown, n.d.), 140. Although Henry Abelove suggests these figures may have been exaggerated for sensational effect, using far more conservative figures he concludes that Wesley’s annual income from the sale of books and periodicals equaled, at the very least, the combined revenue of between eight and eighteen of England’s largest bishoprics.

See Henry Abelove, *Evangelist of Desire: John Wesley and the Methodists* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 9.

3. "Death of Mr. Wesley" *London Chronicle*, 3 March 1791, n.p.
4. *Star* (London), 9 March 1791, n.p.; "A Life of John Wesley," *Morning Chronicle*, 7 March 1791, n.p.
5. "Interesting Domestic Intelligence," *General Magazine and Impartial Review*, March 1791, p. 167.
6. John Whitehead, *A Discourse, Delivered at the New Chapel in the City Road, on the 9th of March Instant, at the Funeral of the Late Rev. Mr. John Wesley* (London: George Whitfield, 28 March, 1791). Although Whitehead claimed later that his sermon had netted the Book Room £200 in profit, several of his opponents including Thomas Coke later contested this figure. "For the very high opinion the Doctor has of that performance," they countered, "caused him to insist on so large a number being printed, that several thousand lie unsold, and are of very little value to the Connection." Whitehead, for his part, eventually expressed regret for allowing his sermon to be published by the Book Room at all, denouncing Coke and his fellow the preachers as "a set of mercenary covetous men" for collecting all the profits from its sale without rendering him even any "thanks for it." See [James Rogers,] *Remarks on a Pamphlet, Entitled "A True Narrative &c. Compiled by Persons Well Acquainted with the FACTS Contained Herein: Revised and Corrected by a Select Committee; Read over and Approved by Forty Christian Brethren, and at Their Request, Published by the PREACHERS Now Stationed in London* (London: Printed by G. Paramore and Sold by G. Whitfield, 1792), 17-19.
7. John Whitehead, *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.* (London: Printed by Stephen Couchman, 1793), xii.
8. Henry Rack's definitive biography of Wesley includes only a brief mention of Wesley's earliest biographers. Even then, his interest is in the historical value of their narratives, and not the struggle that took place between these writers for status and legitimacy. See Henry Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 2002), 536-37. Although Richard Heitzenrater provides a fuller overview of the biography controversy, he misleadingly characterizes the conflict as being grounded chiefly in financial concerns that took place between "preacher and preacher" rather than between preachers and people. See Richard Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 314. David Hart's very recent article on the biography controversy is the only study to suggest a relationship between the dispute over who would write Wesley's life and Methodism's subsequent controversies. Hart's treatment, however, is relatively brief and passes over many of the controversy's key developments in silence. See David Hart, "John Wesley's Biography and the Shaping of Methodist History," *Methodist History* 50, no. 4 (July 2012): 227-35.
9. This is not to suggest that controversies over the exercise of power with Methodism did not erupt during Wesley's lifetime. Such struggles, however, typically ended with the antagonists either being silenced or excluded from the Society. See, for example, Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 246-49.
10. "A Copy of the late Rev. Mr. Wesley's Will," *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*, January 1792, 29.
11. "Copy of a Deed," *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*, March 1792, 145-47.
12. John Whitehead, *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A. Some Time Fellow of Lincoln-College, Oxford. Collected from his Private Papers and Printed Works; and Written at the Request of his Executors* (London: Printed by Stephen Couchman, 1793), 3:462-63.
13. A note recorded by Wesley in his journal just a day after signing the deed suggests otherwise. "[M]y memory is not much decayed," the aged clergyman wrote, "and my understanding is as clear as it had been these fifty years." See W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater,

eds., *Journal and Diaries VII (1787–91)*, vol. 24 of *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 157.

14. John Vickers, *Thomas Coke: Apostle of Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), 41–67.

15. Dee Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760–1800* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 66–72.

16. “The Deed of Declaration, 1784,” in *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, eds. Rupert Davies, A. Raymond George, and Gordon Rupp, 4:195–97 (London: Epworth Press, 1988). A thorough overview of the 1784 Deed of Declaration can be found in Henry Rack’s edition of *The Minutes of Conference*. See Henry Rack, ed., *The Methodist Societies: The Minutes of Conference*, vol. 10 of *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 90–93. See also Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 502–4.

17. Samuel Drew, *The Life of the Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D.* (London: Thomas Cordeux, 1817), 231.

18. “A Life of Mr. Wesley,” *Morning Chronicle*, 7 March 1791, n.p.

19. [John Annesley Colet,] *A Letter to the Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D. and Mr. Henry Moore. Occasioned by Their Proposals for Publishing the Life of the Rev. John Wesley A.M. in Opposition to That Advertised (under Sanction of the Executors) to be Written by John Whitehead M.D.* (London: Printed for J. Luffman, 1792), 12; William Myles, *A Chronological History of the People Called Methodists. Containing An Account of their Rise and Progress, from the Year 1729, to the Year 1799* (Liverpool: Printed for the Author by J. Nuttall, 1799), 147.

20. John Annesley Colet, *An Impartial Review of the Life and Writings, Public and Private Character, of the Late Rev. Mr. John Wesley* (London: Printed for the Author and sold by C. Forster, 1791), vii.

21. *Ibid.*, n.p.

22. *Ibid.*, 34.

23. *Ibid.*, v.

24. *Ibid.*, vi.

25. *Ibid.*, viii.

26. *Monthly Review*, June 1791, 219. See also *Critical Review*, May 1791, 199–200; *English Review of Literature, Science, Discoveries, Inventions, and Practical Controversies and Contests*, June 1791, 468–69.

27. James Rogers, *Experiences and Labours of James Rogers, Preacher of the Gospel* (Bristol: Printed by R. Edwards, 1796), 49.

28. Myles, *Chronological History*, 147; Dictionary of British Methodism at www.wesley-historicalociety.org.uk.

29. George Wolff, et al., *A True Narrative of the Origin and Progress of the Difference between Dr. Coke Mr. Moore, Mr. Rogers, and Dr. Whitehead, Concerning the Publication of The Life of the Late Rev. John Wesley, M.A. The Whole Drawn up from a Statement of Fact Fully Proved before a Committee, Consisting of Thirty One Gentlemen, and Afterwards Read and Approved by Said Committee* (London: C. Paramore, 1792), 1.

30. *Ibid.*

31. James Rogers, *Experiences*, 49.

32. See George Wolff et al., *True Narrative*, *passim*, and [Rogers,] *Remarks on a Pamphlet*, *passim*.

33. Wolff et al., *True Narrative*, 2.

34. [Rogers,] *Remarks on a Pamphlet*, 12.

35. [Rogers,] *Remarks on a Pamphlet*, 14–16; Wolff et al., *True Narrative*, 2.

36. Wolff et al., *True Narrative*, 2.

37. [Rogers,] *Remarks on a Pamphlet*, 15.

38. *Ibid.* By making the payment in guineas rather than pounds, Whitehead's fee was effectively raised by five percent.
39. Wolff et al., *True Narrative*, 2.
40. [Rogers,] *Remarks on a Pamphlet*, 16.
41. John Hampson, *Memoirs of the Late Rev. John Wesley, A.M. with a Review of His Life and Writings, and a History of Methodism, From It's [sic] Commencement in 1729, to the Present Time* (Sunderland: Printed for the Author, 1791), 1:xi.
42. *An Appeal, to the Reverend John and Charles Wesley, to All the Preachers who Act in Connection with Them, and to Every Member of Their Respective Societies in England, Scotland, Ireland, and America* (N.p.: n.p., n.d.). See also Myles, *Chronological History*, 123, 146; Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 504.
43. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 536.
44. John Hampson, *Memoirs*, 3:n.p.
45. Reproduced in *Proposals for Printing by Subscription The Life of the late Rev. J. Wesley, A.M., By John Whitehead, M.D.*, Broadside, (London: George Whitfield, July, 1791).
46. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 504.
47. Drew, *Life of Coke*, 233–37.
48. Wolff et al., *True Narrative*, 3; Drew, *Life of Coke*, 237.
49. *Proposals for Printing by Subscription The Life of the late Rev. J. Wesley*.
50. Thomas Coke and Henry Moore, *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M. Including an Account of the Great Revival of Religion, in Europe and America, of which He was the First and Chief Instrument* (London: Printed by G. Paramore, 1792), v.
51. [William] Smith, *A Letter to Mr. James Rogers, Assistant Preacher to the Methodist Society in London. Occasioned By his Reading an Address to the Society, at the NEW CHAPEL, City-Road, on Sunday, July 1st, which Address He Informed Them, was Intended as a Preface to Some Remarks on a Pamphlet Entitled, "A TRUE NARRATIVE, &c." Which He said, Would Shortly be Published as an Answer to It* (London: Printed by C. Paramore, 1792), 7.
52. Myles, *Chronological History*, 147–48; Wolff, *True Narrative*, 3; *Remarks on a Pamphlet*, 15–16.
53. Wolff et al., *True Narrative*, 3.
54. *Ibid.*, 4.
55. Myles, *Chronological History*, 148. It is worth noting that only those preachers belonging to the Legal Hundred, according to Wesley's 1784 Deed of Declaration, had the power to act in a deliberative capacity as members of Conference. See Henry Rack, ed., *Minutes of Conference*, 65–66, 93.
56. Myles, *Chronological History*, 150.
57. "Statement Respecting the Executors," *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*, March 1792, 147.
58. *Ibid.*, 148.
59. Myles, *Chronological History*, 152–54.
60. "A Copy of the Bargain and Sale of Books, belonging to the late Rev. J. Wesley," *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*, April 1792, 194–98.
61. Drew, *Life of Coke*, 238.
62. Wolff et al., *True Narrative*, 5.
63. [Colet,] *Letter*, 21. The chief historical value of this publication rests on its inclusion of correspondence exchanged between Whitehead and the preachers in the early days of their conflict. Although largely unreliable in other respects, the authenticity of these letters is verified by the fact that no subsequent publication, including one published in direct answer to Colet's *Letter*, questioned their credibility. Despite internal and external evidence to the contrary, David Hart mistakenly attributes this publication to Whitehead (232). See "A Letter to the Rev.

Thomas Coke, LL.D. and Mr. Henry Moore,” *English Review of Literature, Science, Discoveries, Inventions, and Practical Controversies and Contests* (February 1792), 19. See also *Vindex to Verax, or Remarks upon “A Letter to the Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D. and Mr. Henry Moore”* (London, n.p., 1792), 12–13, 48–49; and “Vindex to Verax, or Remarks upon ‘A Letter to the Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D. and Mr. Henry Moore,’” *Monthly Review* (April 1792), 467–68. These letters will be discussed in more detail below.

64. Myles, *Chronological History*, 157–58.
65. Wolff et al., *True Narrative*, 5–6.
66. [Rogers,] *Remarks on a Pamphlet*, 19; Wolff et al., *True Narrative*, 5.
67. [Rogers,] *Remarks on a Pamphlet*, 18.
68. *Ibid.*, 12.
69. *Ibid.*, 19.
70. [Colet,] *Letter*, 17.
71. *Ibid.*, 18.
72. *Ibid.*, 19.
73. *Ibid.*, 20; [Rogers,] *Remarks on a Pamphlet*, 17.
74. [Colet,] *Letter*, 22.
75. [Rogers,] *Remarks on a Pamphlet*, 20. According to Rodda and Coke, Whitehead had obtained the opinions of two booksellers who assigned a value of “not less than two thousand pounds.” See [Rogers,] *Remarks on a Pamphlet*, 16, 19.
76. Wolff et al., *True Narrative*, 6.
77. [Rogers,] *Remarks on a Pamphlet*, 25. Strangely, this letter is neither mentioned in Wolff’s *True Narrative* nor included in Colet’s *Letter to the Rev. Thomas Coke*.
78. [Colet,] *Letter*, 23.
79. *Ibid.*, 24.
80. Wolff et al., *True Narrative*, 7.
81. [Rogers] *Remarks on a Pamphlet*, 22.
82. *Ibid.*
83. Wolff et al., *True Narrative*, 8.
84. “Dr. Coke’s great modesty would not suffer him to sign it,” Whitehead’s lay supporters later remarked sarcastically, “though it was written by him.” See Wolff, *True Narrative*, 9.
85. [Colet,] *Letter*, 14–15.
86. *Ibid.*, 15.
87. John Whitehead, *A Defence of “A True Narrative of the Origin and Progress of the Difference between Dr. Coke, Mr. Moore, Mr. Rogers, and Dr. Whitehead, &c.” In Answer to the Gross Misrepresentations of Remarks on the Said Narrative* (London: Printed by Charles Paramore, 1792), vi.
88. Wolff et al., *True Narrative*, 12; [Rogers,] *Remarks on a Pamphlet*, 26.
89. Wolff et al., *True Narrative*, 13.
90. *Ibid.*, 17.
91. *Ibid.*, 12.
92. [Rogers,] *Remarks on a Pamphlet*, 27.
93. Wolff et al., *True Narrative*, 14.
94. This letter is not reproduced in Colet and appears to be no longer extant. See Wolff et al., *True Narrative*, 14.
95. [Colet,] *Letter*, 11.
96. Wolff et al., *True Narrative*, 15.
97. *Ibid.*, 22; [Rogers,] *Remarks on a Pamphlet* 28–29.
98. Wolff et al., *True Narrative*, 19.
99. *Ibid.*, iii.
100. [Rogers] *Remarks on a Pamphlet*, 21,

101. See note 63 above. See also Colet, *Impartial*, 34.
102. [Colet,] *Letter*, ii, 1–10, *passim*.
103. *Ibid.*, 50–56. There is little evidence to suggest that the authenticity of these letters was widely credited. See, for example, *Monthly Review* (April 1792), 467–68. Robert Southey, in his own celebrated biography of Wesley, mistakenly describes both letters as “love-letters” and indicates, also mistakenly, that Colet published them in his first pamphlet *An Impartial Review*. See Robert Southey, *The Life of Wesley and the Rise and Progress of Methodism* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1858), 391.
104. [Rogers,] *Remarks on a Pamphlet*, 29; Wolff et al., *True Narrative*, 17.
105. “The Life of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.,” *Public Advertiser* (23 January 1792), n.p.
106. “Copy of a Deed,” *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*, March 1792, 145–47; “Statement Respecting the Executors,” *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*, March 1792, 147–49; “A Copy of the Bargain and Sale of Books, Belonging to the Late Rev. J. Wesley,” *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*, April 1792, 194–98.
107. Wolff et al., *True Narrative*, 25–26.
108. *Ibid.*, 26–27.
109. In 1763, Wesley instituted a Model Deed for the purpose of securing the property of chapels for the Conference. Many of the deeds governing the use and control of the chapels, particularly after the mid-1780s, also contained a clause empowering trustees to expel from their pulpits any preacher whose “doctrine or practice . . . be not conformable to Mr. Wesley’s Sermons and Notes on the New Testament.” See Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of John Wesley* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1871), 3:381. See also Rack, *Minutes of Conference*, 84–85.
110. One such dispute erupted in Birstall in the early 1780s where trustees claimed the right both to appoint and dismiss preachers. As a result, Wesley had drafted a “Model Deed” outlining in stricter fashion the rights and responsibilities of lay trustees. See Heitzenrater, *Wesley*, 277.
111. The others were William Clulow (secretary of Whitehead’s Committee), William Cowland, John Hallam, John Folgham, Edward Collinson, Hervey Walker Mortimer, James Smith, James Hammond, James Love, and Thomas Day (secretary of the chapel trustees). See Wolff et al., *True Narrative*, iii. See also *Address of the Trustees of Manchester, Salford, and Stockport, to the Methodist Societies at Bristol, and Elsewhere* (N.p.: n.p., n.d.), 20.
112. [Rogers,] *Remarks on a Pamphlet*, 38.
113. *Ibid.*, *passim*.
114. Smith, *A Letter*, 9.
115. *Ibid.*, 10.
116. *Ibid.*, 12.
117. *Ibid.*
118. Myles, *Chronological History*, 161. See also Jonathan Crowther, *A True and Complete Portraiture of Methodism* (New York: Daniel Hitt and Thomas Ware, 1813), 81.
119. John Whitehead, *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A. Some Time Fellow of Lincoln-College, Oxford* (London: Printed by Stephen Couchman, 1793), 1:xi–xii.
120. Whitehead, *Life of Wesley*, 1:v
121. *Review of the Conduct and Character of the Late Mr. Alexander Kilham* (Leeds: Printed by Binns and Brown, 1800), 22. Ironically, Kilham himself had been ordered to attend the Conference where he was censured (Coke had moved for his expulsion) for publishing letters in which he urged his fellow preachers “to give liberty to the societies” to conduct their liturgies as they saw fit. See Alexander Kilham, *The Life of Mr. Alexander Kilham, Methodist Preacher, Who Was Expelled from the Conference, or Society of Methodist Preachers, for Publicly Remonstrating with Them for Countenancing Various Corruptions and Abuses* (Nottingham: Printed and sold by C. Sutton, n.d.), 57–59.

122. Myles, *Chronological History*, 164.
123. Kilham, *Methodist Monitor*, 1:139. See also Myles, *Chronological History*, 140.
124. Alexander Kilham, *A Defence [sic] of the Account, Published by Alexander Kilham, of His Trial before the London Conference* (Leeds: n.p., n.d.), 43.
125. Kilham, *Methodist Monitor*, 1:138, 1:337-38.
126. Kilham, *Methodist Monitor*, 2:298; *Conduct and Character*, 22.
127. William Thomson, *An Exhortation Delivered to the Methodist Society, in the New-Chapel, City-Road, London* (London: n.p., 1793), 4-5.
128. Kilham, *Methodist Monitor*, 1:139.
129. Wolff, *True Narrative*, 27.
130. Kilham, *Life*, 109.
131. *Ibid.*, 172-80.