
John Wesley and the Press-Gangs

by Samuel J. Rogal

During the 50 years (1739-1790) of John Wesley's campaign throughout England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales on behalf of primitive Christianity and the evangelical revival, the leaders of British Methodism received more than their share of verbal insults and physical abuse. Negative responses to their efforts to reform both Church and social structure included everything from spittle to dead cats and dogs and rotten vegetables, to dirt, stones, and even fire. Generally, Anglican vicars and their bishops encouraged the sheep to engage in such exercises in the hope that disruption of Methodist indoor meetings and outdoor services would tend to discourage the development of societies and classes, and would force the Wesleys to see that Methodism was not wanted, not needed, and not to be tolerated by men of reason. In addition, a host of pulpit orators, satirists, and literary hacks broadcast the Establishment position against Methodism through scurrilous tracts published separately and in anti-Methodist periodicals spawned for the occasion. Although John Wesley could not ignore this opposition, he maintained a position of selective reaction: he responded principally to high ranking officers of the Church and in periodicals and tracts with a wide readership.

Although by 1780 there appeared, especially in London and Bristol, a relaxation of the tensions between Wesley and the Anglican bishops, a lasting peace between him and the established institutions in Britain never really occurred during his lifetime. Further, there continued to exist one aspect of anti-Methodist sentiment that Wesley could never really understand, essentially because it bore the seal of government sponsorship, the imprimatur of the nation's courts, and the blessings of the Church of England. No matter what accusations may have been hurled against him, Wesley viewed

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John Wesley and the Press-Gangs

himself and each one of his followers as loyal Britons and equally loyal Anglicans. Why, then, should they be harassed and even persecuted by agents of a most inhuman system — a system devised by a supposedly sophisticated, enlightened, and human government of reasonable men?

As early as the summer of 1739, John Wesley experienced first-hand the evils of the press-gang system, employed then in various parts of the island-kingdom as a form of irregular constabulary to carry off obnoxious characters against whom no real legal charges could otherwise be brought. Naturally, in the minds of certain town magistrates, Wesley's preachers and society members took on the identities of obnoxious characters, and were thus expeditiously and most often illegally impressed into His Majesty's service. On Sunday, July 22, 1739, at 7:00 a.m., Wesley addressed a crowd estimated (by his count) at 3000 gathered on the bowling green in Bristol.

“. . . we had a fair opportunity of showing all men what manner of spirit we were of; for in the middle of the sermon the press-gang came, and seized on one of the hearers (ye learned in the law, what becomes of Magna Charta, and of English liberty and property? Are not these mere sounds, while, on any pretence, there is such a thing as a press-gang suffered in the land?); all the rest standing still, and none opening his mouth or lifting up his hand to resist them.”¹

The irony of the situation was that throughout the spring and summer, the press-gangs scoured the cities and towns to impress landsmen into the services in preparation for war with Spain (declared on October 4, 1739) — a war precipitated by an incident of the previous year when Robert Jenkins, a master mariner, produced to a committee of Commons his ear! Jenkins claimed that his appendage had been cut off by a Spanish captain at Havana exercising the right of search, which the Spanish claimed so that they might prevent English trade with Spanish America. Thus, as Wesley must have viewed the affair, a Bristol Methodist lost *his* freedom, in July 1739, and was forced to fight in a war supposedly brought on by a Spaniard's violation of a British freedom. Little wonder, then, that he found himself directing questions to the “learned in the law.”

The parenthetical from the journal entry (“ye learned in the law”) was thrown back at John Wesley 10 years later. In a tract entitled *The Enthusiasm of Methodist and Papists Compar'd* (1749), George Lavington (1684-1762), bishop of Exeter, draws forth the case against the Methodists’ “undutiful behaviour to the *civil powers*,”² citing Wesley’s outburst about impressment being against English liberty and property. “The legislature,” claims the Bishop,

“. . . has at several times made Acts for pressing men. . . . But no matter for this; touch but a Methodist . . . and all may perish, rather than a soldier be pressed. . . . He who had before bound himself not to speak a tittle of worldly things is now bawling for liberty and property” (*Works*, II, 407).

In his response to that specific point — as set forth in *A Second Letter to the Author of the Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compar'd* (London: H. Cock, 1751) — Wesley identified the key issue in the debate over both the legality and the morality of impressment: “The legislature six years ago did not appoint press-gangs, but legal officers, to press men. Consequently this is no proof (and find another if you can) of our *undutiful* behaviour to the *civil powers*” (*Works*, II, 407).

There exists little doubt that although Wesley disliked the entire idea of impressing men into the military services, he saw the system (as did the majority of his contemporaries) as a necessary evil, especially during periods of emergency. What he and others objected to, of course, were the outright violations upon that system. According to the format set down by the Admiralty for press warrants, a naval commander was to give

. . . unto each man so impressed one shilling for press money; and in execution hereof that neither yourself nor any officer authorized by you do demand or receive any money, gratuity reward, or other consideration whatsoever for the sparing, exchanging, or discharging of any person or persons impressed, or to be impressed, as you will answer it at your peril. You are not to intrust any person with the execution of this warrant but the Commission Officer, and to invest his name and office in the deputation on the other side hereof, and set your hand and seal thereto.³

John Wesley and the Press-Gangs

The press-gangs, instead of acting under warrants, were often hired thugs in the employ of town magistrates; the press money never reached the victims, but was, instead, divided between the magistrate and his press-gang. An example of the extreme to which violations were enacted may be seen by an instance in 1770 (an occasion documented in the *Annual Register*, 1770, p. 161) when a press-gang burst in upon a marriage ceremony at St. Olave's Church, Southwark, struck down the incumbent, and managed to arrange a substitute union between the unfortunate bridegroom and one of His Majesty's men-of-war.⁴

In two tracts published in 1770 — *An Enquiry into the Practice and Legality of Pressing by the King's Commission* and *An Enquiry into the Nature and Legality of Press-Warrants* — John Almon (1737-1805), a political pamphleteer, publisher, and bookseller, argued against the entire concept of impressment. He wanted to know why, if press warrants were legal, those who committed murder during the execution of those warrants never came to trial. Further, he inquired why the practice of press warrants applied to seamen, but were not authorized for or by the Army. Impressment, according to Almon, had never been legalized by Parliament, nor was it part of the common law; in fact, he claimed that there was no mention of impressment by commentators on the King's prerogatives.⁵ The final word on the issue, however, rested with Chief Justice Lord William Mansfield, who ruled, on November 28, 1776, that "The power of pressing is founded upon immemorial usage" and exists solely for "the safety of the state." Nonetheless, Lord Mansfield did state, in the clearest of terms, who could and who could not be impressed. The Royal Navy could not "press landmen, or persons of any other description of life, but such men as are described to be sea-faring men. . . ." ⁶ Despite the clarity of language, the Chief Justice's argument did contain an obvious loophole, as he declared "that there is in fact no other exemption stated or alluded to, which rests upon the common law. There are many exemptions by statute: But they are grounded upon considerations of public policy at the particular times of their being made . . ." (p. 589).

If indeed the Royal Navy proved the most active practitioner of impressment, the Army engaged in the custom only upon those occasions of dire emergency. In other words, the Navy was considered the first line of defense, and its needs came first. In fact, impressment into the Army without the individual's consent was

considered on a par with kidnapping. According to the political climate and the particular state of a regiment, a recruit might receive from one guinea to forty shillings in levy money, while a good citizen responsible for bringing in a qualified recruit would earn himself a guinea for his services. By an Act dating from William and Mary, a recruit had to be presented before a justice of the peace or a high constable of the area in which he resided, at which time and place he was to declare his consent. Not until the moment of declaration was private citizen transformed to soldier. In April 1727, the Rev. Francis Welles, J.P., vicar of Prestbury, Gloucestershire, declared any violation of the recruitment acts to be “such treatment as could not be endured by Englishmen, who always glorified in their liberties and in the excellency of their Constitution.”⁷

The degree to which Methodists — who gloried in their liberties to no less an extent than the good Establishment people of Gloucestershire — were forced to endure the press-gangs and magistrates may be viewed from several instances, all of which violated both the spirit and the letter of the impressment system and the recruitment acts. On Thursday, June 20, 1745, after arriving in Redruth, John Wesley learned that Thomas Maxfield — one of his most devoted lay preachers, whom he had converted in May 1739 at Bristol — had been impressed in Cornwall for service into the Army. He had been taken at Crowan, but then removed to the house of one Henry Tomkins, some two miles outside the town. “It seems the valiant constables who guarded him . . . received timely notice that a body of five hundred Methodists were coming to take him away by force. . . .”⁸ Wesley, in the company of Rev. George Thompson, vicar of St. Gennys (Cornwall), rode to Tomkins’ house, saw Maxfield, and then demanded to see the warrant for his seizure. The document ordered the constables and overseers of several parishes in West Cornwall to “apprehend all such able-bodied men as had no lawful calling or sufficient maintenance, and to bring them [to] . . . Marazion on Friday the 21st, to be examined whether they were proper persons to serve His Majesty in the land-service.” The warrant contained “the names of seven or eight persons, most of whom were well known to have lawful callings and a sufficient maintenance thereby. But that was all one: they were called Methodists; therefore soldiers they must be.”⁹ As Wesley and Thompson left the house, they were accosted by a crowd of anti-Methodists; the two challenged the mob, whereupon the latter retreated, hurling stones as they ran. The next day (June

John Wesley and the Press-Gangs

21), Wesley and Thompson rode to Marazion to attend Maxfield's hearing; the magistrates kept them waiting from 2:00 p.m. until 7:00 p.m., at which time they finally determined to hear Maxfield's case. Not surprisingly, the poor man was sentenced to the Army and ordered immediately to be placed on a boat for Penzance. The press-gang "had first offered him to a captain of a man-of-war that was just come into the [Penzance] harbour; but he answered, "I have no authority to take such men as these, unless you would have me give him so much a week to preach and pray to my people."¹⁰ Maxfield was then thrown into a dungeon, where he remained until his release early in July 1745.

The spring and summer of 1745 proved to be trying times for the British nation: the Spanish war of 1739 had expanded into the War of the Austrian Succession; intended invasion of England by Comte de Saxe's fleet in March 1744 had been repulsed only by stormy seas; and in July 1745, Charles Edward landed in Scotland. Thus, the people of Cornwall and adjacent counties, obviously on edge and never really friendly toward Methodism, required little encouragement to turn on John Wesley and his followers. On Tuesday, June 25, 1745, at the completion of a sermon at St. Just, Wesley witnessed the impressment of Edward Greenfield, a 46-year-old tinner with a wife and seven children. On July 2, Wesley, himself, was arrested by a constable of St. Just; however, when on the next morning the impressment officer attempted to deliver his prisoner to the magistrate, he found that the jurist had gone off to church. "Well, sir, I have executed my commission. I have done, sir; I have no more to say."¹¹ And so, Wesley proceeded on his way! That very afternoon (July 3), at Gwennap, the sheriff of Cornwall led the press-gang into the midst of the Methodist service, at which point the congregation struck up a hymn. In a fit of temper, the sheriff ordered his men to "seize the preacher for his Majesty's service."¹² For whatever reason, the men were unwilling to lay their hands on Wesley, whereupon the sheriff "leaped off his horse, swore he would do it himself, and caught hold of my cassock, crying, 'I take you to serve his Majesty.'"¹³ Instead of delivering his prize to the magistrate, the sheriff took Wesley for a walk; after three-quarters of a mile, he set the Methodist leader free. We may note, finally, another instance during this period concerning the impressment of a Methodist. In its issue of Saturday, June 8, 1745, the *Westminster Journal; or, New Weekly Miscellany* an organ of Anglican clerical opinion hostile to Methodism —

reported that a Methodist preacher by the name of Tolly had been taken in Staffordshire by an Army recruitment detachment and brought before the magistrates. Accompanying him was a group of his “deluded followers of both sexes, who pretended he was a learned and holy man; and yet, it appeared that he was only a journey-man joiner, and had done great mischief among the colliers.” Apparently, Tolly had been pressed once before, but the members of his society had subscribed £40 to obtain his freedom; they were prepared to do so again. However, the magistrates ordered the man bound for Stafford jail, thus obviously pleasing the correspondent of the *Journal*, who remarked that “such wretches . . . are incendiaries in a nation. . . .”¹⁴ The *Westminster Journal* is the same news-sheet that, in January 1761, termed Methodism “an ungoverned spirit of enthusiasm, propagated by knaves, and embraced by fools.” Because of the people called Methodists, “the decency of religion has been perverted, the peace of families has been ruined, and the minds of the vulgar darkened to a total neglect of their civil and social duties.”¹⁵

The turbulent year of 1745 proved not to contain the last instances of John Wesley’s encounters with the King’s press-gangs. In fact, one later episode seemingly worked in his favor. On Sunday, July 10, 1757, he preached to and then met with the society at Normandy, a small village in Yorkshire. Observing “more than ever the care of God over them that fear Him,” he paused to reflect upon the renewed piety of those assembled. Apparently, one William Manuel, “a well-meaning preacher . . . was inflaming them more and more against the clergy. Not could he advise them to attend the public ordinances, for he never went either to church or sacrament himself. This I knew not; but God did, and by His wise providence prevented the consequences which would naturally have ensued.” Wesley’s concern, during this period, focused upon the attempts of a significant number of his followers to separate themselves from the Church of England — an act against which their founder fought successfully throughout the last 45 years of his life. Thus, we have little difficulty sensing the note of relief in Wesley’s tone as he records in his journal that Manuel had been pressed into the Army, “so the people go to church and sacrament as before.”¹⁶ William Manuel and William Thompson were impressed into the 11th Regiment of Foot on December 24, 1756 at Whitby Strand, in the North Riding. The latter survived the experience to become an assistant in the Manchester circuit in 1784, was named in Wesley’s will to preach at the New Chapel in City

John Wesley and the Press-Gangs

Road, London, and to serve on the committee for appointing preachers in the new chapel at Bath; further, he served as president of the first Methodist conference held after Wesley's death.

John Wesley's final recorded encounter with the press-gangs came on Wednesday evening, July 4, 1759, at Stockton-upon-Tees. Immediately after the opening hymn, the service (held in the market-place) was interrupted by the arrival of a lieutenant from a man-of-war leading a Navy press-gang. The officer instructed his men to seize Joseph Jones and William Alwood, two of Wesley's itinerant preachers. Jones cried out, "Sir, I belong to Mr. Wesley,"¹⁷ and was set free on the spot; the lieutenant held Alwood for three hours until he determined him to be a licensed preacher and thus exempt from the impressment warrant. Not wishing to return to his vessel empty handed, the officer then ordered his charges to seize a young townsman in the congregation, but the women in the group rose to the occasion and rescued the intended victim. According to Wesley's account, those same women "Also broke the lieutenant's head, and so stoned him and his men that they ran away with all speed."¹⁸ Young Alwood would have another opportunity to witness the workings of the press-gang system. Early in 1760, he sat in a meeting of the Scarborough society as a Navy detail impressed three of its leaders — Thomas Brown, George Cussons (ironically the founder of the Naval and Military Bible Society), and William Hague; the gang herded them aboard a man-of-war lying off shore. Because of unfavorable winds, the vessel could not sail; the delay allowed Brown to send a message to General Lambton, M.P. for Durham, informing him of his plight. The parliamentarian secured their immediate release.¹⁹

The actions of the military press-gangs against Wesley and the Methodists demonstrate the degree to which the government and its institutions feared Methodism. For instance, Church strategy was clear. From their pulpits and within the pages of their journals and pamphlets, vicars and bishops alike sought to drive Wesley and his societies outside the Church of England; if Methodists could be regarded as Dissenters, then they might be officially legislated against and persecuted. However, John Wesley would never lead Methodism away from the Church, for he saw no solution to the problems besetting Anglicanism within the fragments and often irrational tenets of Protestant Dissent. Instead, he stood his ground as an outspoken reformer, harassed by institutions that he

desperately strove to save from their own weakness and corruption. For 50 years he faced the assaults of angry mobs, sent forth by government and blessed by Church. For almost the same length of time, he and his subordinates shook off the clutches of the press-gangs, they, also, sent by government and blessed by Church. In the end, Wesley achieved for Methodism the kind of victory reserved for the significant figures of history — those who managed to endure the most serious and formidable types of harassment. Through personal example, Wesley and his preachers secured legitimacy for British Methodism because they proved its strength and its ability to survive. On Sunday, February 14, 1790 — approximately one year before his death — the founder of the Methodists addressed the children at West Street Chapel, London: “They flocked together from every quarter, and truly God was in the midst of them, applying those words [Psalms 34:11], ‘Come, ye little children, harken unto me and I will teach you the fear of the Lord.’”²⁰ At the risk of ending this discussion upon a note of evangelical fervor, we may, nonetheless, understand why an Oxford don, slightly over five feet in height and weighing but 126 pounds, held no fear for the stones or the garbage of country rioters, or for the shackles of his sovereign’s press-gangs. Certainly no less than the leading philosophers, theologians, and *literati* of 18th-century Britain, John Wesley cast forth the steady light of peace and gentleness onto an age made tense by its own violence and controversy. ■

Footnotes

¹Nehemiah Curnock (ed.), *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1909-1916), II, 244-245.

²Quoted in *A Second Letter* . . . , in Gerald R. Cragg (ed.), *The Works of John Wesley* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), XI, 407.

³Quoted in James Fulton Zimmerman, *Impressment of American Seamen* (New York: Columbia University, 1925), p. 12.

⁴See William Edward Hartpole Lecky, *A History of England in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1883-1890), III, 536.

⁵Zimmerman, pp. 15-16.

⁶D.B. Horn and Mary Ransome (eds.), *English Historical Documents, 1714-1783* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 588-589.

⁷*English Historical Documents*, p. 613.

⁸*Journal*, III, 182.

⁹*Journal*, III, 183.

¹⁰*Journal*, III, 184.

¹¹*Journal*, III, 187-188.

John Wesley and the Press-Gangs

¹²*Journal*, III, 188.

¹³*Journal*, III, 188.

¹⁴See Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1872), I, 473.

¹⁵See Tyerman, *Life of Wesley*, II, 397.

¹⁶*Journal*, IV, 223.

¹⁷*Journal*, IV, 328-329.

¹⁸*Journal*, IV, 329.

¹⁹Tyerman, *Life of Wesley*, II, 410.

²⁰*Journal*, VIII, 42.