The Legacy of Melvill Horne

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The following poem published in the Evangelical Magazine in September 1795 celebrated the formation of the interdenominational Missionary Society and the new opportunities it presented for spreading the Gospel of Protestant Christianity to the globe:

O! that from Britain now might shine
This heavenly light, this truth divine!
Till the whole universe shall be
But one great temple, Lord, for Thee!

The legacy of Melvill Horne (1762–1841), a contemporary of William Carey (1761–1834), lies principally in his role as a missionary advocate and publicist who helped to foster this renewed phase of overseas Christian expansion in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Horne’s Letters on Missions; Addressed to the Protestant Ministers of the British Churches, published in 1794, stimulated extensive debate on the nature and purpose of overseas missions and provided the main catalyst for the formation of the Missionary Society (later renamed the London Missionary Society). Although building on the work of his Continental predecessors, Horne moved debate in new directions by calling for a pan-evangelical response to missions. Horne’s account of his experimental missionary praxis in Sierra Leone also offered guidance that informed the organization of later missionary ventures to the South Seas and Africa. He was regarded as an important source of intelligence by both the Missionary Society and the Society for Missions to Africa and the East Instituted by Members of the Established Church (later known as the Church Missionary Society). The republication of Letters on Missions in America in 1797, 1815, and 1834 reflects the popularity and continuing relevance of his work. An edition published in London in 1824 asserted that the book “at the time of its first publication . . . was eminently instrumental, in first kindling and extending the flame of missionary zeal that has since that period spread so widely through our country.”

Although Letters on Missions enjoyed a far wider contemporary circulation than Carey’s celebrated Enquiry of 1792, Horne has received comparatively little attention in the historiography of missions. His work helped to erode contemporary prejudice against missions and created a culture in which the moral imperative to convert heathen nations became an accepted and respectable feature of religious activity in mid-nineteenth-century Britain. Horne was aware of this changing climate of opinion. In a sermon preached before the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in June 1811, Horne observed that missions, which were “at first treated as wild and romantic, begin now to be considered feasible, as well as laudable.”

Development of a Missionary Impulse

Horne was born in Antigua in 1762, and the family moved to England following his father’s death. His family background and early education in the West Indies may have influenced his later predilection for missionary work. He was the nephew of Nathaniel Gilbert III (ca. 1721–74), who, inspired by a meeting with John Wesley, introduced Methodist preaching among an estimated three hundred slaves on his Antiguan plantation. Horne was admitted on trial as a Methodist itinerant preacher in the Liverpool circuit in 1784 and subsequently preached in the Chester and Wolverhampton circuits. Ordained to the ministry of the Church of England in 1786, Horne became curate of Madeley in Shropshire following the death of John Fletcher.

Horne’s Arminian eschatology and acceptance of the Wesleyan view of a world parish are reflected in his decision to undertake a mission to the west coast of Africa. In March 1792 Horne explained to his parishioners that he was obliged “to forsake all I hold dear, and to encounter all I esteem dreadful in life, if peradventure, the wretched sons of bleeding Africa may be brought to flee for sanctuary under the wings of the God of Israel.” Horne’s correspondence with his parishioners indicates that his missionary impulse was long-standing in nature. His network of evangelical contacts included Thomas Coke, whose enthusiasm for overseas missions had been articulated almost a decade earlier in his Plan of the Society for the Establishment of Missions Among the Heathens (1783). Coke had attempted to organize a mission to Africa in 1778, and the development in 1787 of the “Province of Freedom” at Sierra Leone as a colony for freed slaves revived his interest in an African venture. Coke informed Ezekiel Cooper of Horne in November 1791, writing that “we are going to send missionaries to Sierra Leone in Africa, where the English are establishing a very capital settlement. The Company has chosen two chaplains. One of them is a zealous Methodist preacher of my recommendation.” The other chaplain was Nathaniel Gilbert (1761–1807), who traveled out to Sierra Leone in advance of Horne, his cousin.

Despite a conviction that his mission was divinely sanctioned, Horne expressed anxiety about the perceived trials that awaited him in Africa. He compared his African mission to a descent into the “burning-fiery furnace,” and this reference to Daniel 3 may have reflected his hope that he would emerge unscathed from the ordeal. Embarking for Africa without any training or practical preparation, Horne prayed that his work would be sustained by “wisdom, patience and fortitude.” When he sailed for Africa in July 1792, he expressed sadness at parting from his wife, Nelly, and his infant son, Edward. It was planned that they would join him after a short period.

A Mission to Sierra Leone

Horne accepted the appointment as chaplain to the colony at Sierra Leone as a springboard for his missionary work. As one of the stated ambitions of the Sierra Leone Company was to diffuse “European light, knowledge, and improvement” to Africans through “religious and moral instruction,” Horne may have expected a close and harmonious relationship between his missionary plans and company objectives. He intended to combine his duties as chaplain at Freetown with a missionary role among the Temne people of Sierra Leone. Prior to his departure for Africa he considered the possibility that he would “go farther into the country among the natives, build myself an hut, and try what living among them will do.”

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The Court of Directors of the Sierra Leone Company provided John Clarkson, superintendent of the colony, with a glowing appraisal of Horne’s qualities and his anticipated usefulness in the colony. Horne was introduced to the settlers at divine service on September 9, 1792, and preached to a “crowded congregation” in the afternoon. Contrary to his original plans, Horne was required to take over all the duties as chaplain, as Gilbert had returned to England on company business. His cure included a number of European company employees and over one thousand self-liberated slaves from Nova Scotia divided among Baptist, Arminian, Methodist, and Calvinistic Methodist congregations. Horne’s entanglement in the fraught and highly politicized relationship between company officials and settlers weakened his influence, particularly as he was openly critical of the settlers’ behavior. He complained to Mary Fletcher, widow of John Fletcher, that he was required to be “an instrument of civil government” as well as a minister of Christ, and “what with the religion and the politics of the colony, I am ready to throw the business up in despair and to take a hasty leave of the place.”

Within a short period of Horne’s arrival at Freetown, tensions arose between the demands of the chaplainship and his missionary ambitions. In November 1792 Clarkson complained that Horne neglected the instruction of the Nova Scotian preachers and spent too much time “amongst the natives who do not understand English.” Horne felt constrained by the demands of regular preaching and complained bitterly that he was unable to itinerate among local Africans. He became so demoralized that he managed to preach only one sermon to Africans, through an interpreter. This sermon, preached at Signor Domingo’s town at Royema in January 1793, was dismissed as futile by two contemporary observers, Anna Maria Falconbridge and Isaac DuBois. However, the publication of the sermon entitled “We Preach Christ Crucified” in the Baptist Annual Register of September 1795 was influential, as it helped to promote British evangelical interest in the cause of heathen conversion in Africa. By February 1793 Horne was convinced that he had been misled by his own enthusiasm and began to doubt whether he had the piety to sustain this “apostolic” warfare.

**Horne’s Missionary Advocacy**

Unfulfilled in his missionary ambitions, Horne returned home after fourteen months. Although bitterly disappointed by the failure of his mission, he used his experience to compose a series of nine letters advising prospective candidates about the purpose, design, and conduct of overseas missions. He was sanguine that an exposition of his dismal missionary record would support the efforts of “men wiser and better than myself.” His main intention was to raise awareness of the urgency of the global commission and promote an active missionary culture. He challenged the lethargy of the clergy and their apparent indifference to the spiritual plight of heathen peoples. He berated his fellow ministers for their materialism and neglect of the apostolic commission. Horne reiterated Carey’s argument that a minister was a “servant of God” and duty bound to preach wherever God commanded. Displaying a postmillennial eschatology, he argued that “latter ends of the world are fallen upon us.” He was optimistic that preaching the Gospel would usher in an age when Christianity was the faith of all nations and peoples.

The originality of Horne’s missionary legacy lay in his appeal for interdenominational cooperation among Protestant ministers to facilitate the global spread of the Gospel. He appealed to “liberal Churchmen and conscientious Dissenters, pious Calvinists and pious Arminians” to “embrace with fraternal arms” and to concentrate on making Christians rather than converts to particular denominations. In the context of bitter sectarian division in late eighteenth-century Britain, this appeal for ecumenism in missions was groundbreaking and controversial. When the society best known as the Baptist Missionary Society was formed just two years earlier, it was asserted to the contrary that, “in the present state of Christendom, it seems that each denomination, by exerting itself separately, is most likely to accomplish the great ends of a mission.”

In other aspects of his work Horne made no claim to originality. His writings were important in drawing attention to the missionary practice and advocacy of a number of his predecessors. He recommended Carey’s *Enquiry* to his readers, particularly as “that gentleman has given to his precepts the force of example, by actually embarking in a mission to India.” In common with Carey, Horne acknowledged the tradition of missionary work that was already well underway in continental Europe. In particular, he highlighted the outstanding piety, perseverance, courage and self-sacrifice of Moravian missionaries. When Horne visited Bristol before his departure for Africa, he was given a copy of A. G. Spangenberg’s *Account of the Manner in which the Protestant Church of the Unitas Fratrum, or United Brethren, Preach the Gospel and Carry on their Missions Among the Heathen* (1788). Horne’s knowledge of Moravian practice strongly influenced his views on the organization and conduct of missions, which is evident in his recommendation that missionaries should avoid contested points of doctrine and concentrate on preaching the Gospel of Christ crucified. His argument that men “learned and unlearned” could contribute to the cause of missions reflected Moravian practice, but it was also a pragmatic response to the apathy of British clergy. Although his *Letters on Missions* was influential in fostering a missionary identity associated with the artisan classes, it was not Horne’s intention to create such a narrowly defined identity. He wished to inspire missionary vocations among ordained ministers but conceded that “we must be content, for one man of letters, to receive twenty, who have no pretension to learning.”

Horne’s writings also sparked debate on the place of European women in missions. Drawing on his experience in Sierra Leone, Horne was insistent that missionaries should be single, as married men “will always have it in contemplation one day to return to England.” He recommended intermarriage with indigenous women, as he considered that a local female convert could play an active part in the conversion of indigenous populations and withstand hardship better than a European woman. This recommendation met with little contemporary support.

**The Development of Voluntary Societies**

Horne was an early advocate of the formation of voluntary societies, recognizing that they could provide a flexible structure for
the recruitment and support of missionaries. The main practical legacy of his missionary advocacy can be traced in the formation of the interdenominational Missionary Society in September 1795. The Reverend Thomas Haweis and other founder members of this society were impressed by Horne’s plea for ecumenical cooperation. As Roger Martin recognizes, it was Horne’s powerful appeal that provided the key source of inspiration for the formation of the society. Haweis corresponded with Horne shortly after his return from Africa and approximately ten months before Haweis’s favorable review of Letters on Missions appeared in the Evangelical Magazine in November 1794. The sermons preached on the formation of the Missionary Society in September 1795 echoed Horne’s plea for a pan-evangelical response to missions. David Bogue’s sermonizing on the “funeral of bigotry” encapsulated this new spirit of ecumenism. Bogue, struck by the innovative nature of the interdenominational Missionary Society, claimed that “this is a new thing in the Christian church.”

Horne’s appeal in 1794 for recruits to come forward in large numbers was predicated on the view that the “missionary spirit has not yet warmed the bosom of the Church.” Three years later, when Horne was appointed a director of the Missionary Society, his sermon “The Unsearchable Riches of Christ” again emphasized the shortage of candidates. This problem was still more acute for the CMS, as they lacked a single candidate for missionary service during the first decade of the nineteenth century. Horne accepted an invitation to become a country member of CMS in 1800, a position that accorded more closely with his status as an evangelical minister of the Church of England. Although he had supported the interdenominational Missionary Society from its inception, the dominant influence of Calvinistic dissenters in the society was at odds with Horne’s increasing conformity with Anglican church order and discipline.

Horne expressed concern about the fragile support for missionary work in the Anglican Church. In 1811 he used his anniversary sermon for CMS to challenge the apathy of Anglican clergy and their failure to volunteer for service overseas. He was critical of the reliance on German recruits and pointedly questioned, “Have you, my honoured Brethren, in Africa, or in the East, one English Clergyman, who serves as a Missionary?” He contrasted their reluctance to volunteer with the enthusiasm for missions displayed by the pious laity and was at pains to stress that the demands of the mission field necessitated the service of the most able men.

Horne emphasized the importance of developing a home
infrastructure to harness the support of those unable to volunteer for service overseas. He preached in support of missions at national and local levels, and he encouraged his parishioners at Olney in Buckinghamshire and Macclesfield in Cheshire to make donations to mission societies. Recognizing that grassroots support could be cultivated through the home, he made a novel appeal to women to nurture future recruits by telling “the missionary story to your little ones, until their young hearts burn” and “they cry, ‘Shall not we also be the missionaries of Jesus Christ?’” 46

Horne was an enthusiastic advocate and publicist who inspired a number of his contemporaries to missionary activism. His preaching style was by all accounts engaging, impassioned, and challenging. His written legacy reflects his efforts as a publicist to promote the cause of missions at a time when they were viewed in some quarters as radical and politically divisive. 47 In the absence of a developed missionary tradition in late eighteenth-century Britain, Horne’s writings caught the evangelical imagination and stimulated a number of initiatives to expand missionary work overseas. The directors of the Scottish Missionary Society republished part of his Letters on Missions in 1823 as part of an initiative to recruit candidates for missionary service. 48 Horne’s influence was not confined to a British evangelical constituency. Favorable reviews of Letters on Missions appeared in the Theological Magazine in 1797, and the Christian Observer of 1811 characterized Horne as an “able advocate of missions.” 49 One of the earliest publications of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1810 was A Collection of Letters Relative to Foreign Missions; Containing Several of Melvill Horne’s “Letters on Missions,” and Interesting Communications from Foreign Missionaries: Interspersed with Other Extracts. 50 The transatlantic exchange of missionary intelligence is also reflected in the republication of Horne’s anniversary sermon preached to the CMS in June 1811. 51 Its inclusion in a work containing Claudius Buchanan’s Christian Researches in Asia (1811) contributed to the wide circulation of Horne’s ideas. 52 A lengthy and enthusiastic review in the Literary and Philosophical Repertory of April 1812 noted that “in some sections of our country, this sermon is already in high demand: It is read with eagerness and its merits are duly appreciated.” 53

Even though Horne’s own mission experience was limited, his writings strongly influenced the progenitors of missions in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In an atmosphere of growing millennial expectation, his writings appealed to a wide evangelical constituency in Britain and America. They contributed to the emergence of a positive missionary culture,
holding out the possibility that the collaborative efforts of missionaries with piety, passion, and appropriate practical skills could facilitate the global spread of Christianity. Horne was among the first generation of missionaries in the British phase of revival in

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the late eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{54} and Letters on Missions provided an instructional guide for early mission strategists. The directors of the Missionary Society considered that Horne had provided a valuable service by using his “painful experience” to draw attention to mistakes in the design and conduct of missions.\textsuperscript{55} A practical legacy of Horne’s writings during this early phase of the modern missionary movement was to encourage a concentration of missionary efforts on the west coast of Africa.

After the failure of his brief African venture, Horne did not attempt any further missions overseas, and for the remainder of his career he developed his missionary advocacy in conjunction with a number of appointments in English parishes. His dual commitment to heathen conversion at home and abroad is reflected in his parish ministries. His concern to promote “real” Christianity is evident in his frequent sermonizing and pamphleteering on issues of spiritual and moral reformation, and his support for the British and Foreign Bible Society reflects his continuing commitment to missionary activity. Horne, in common with Charles Simeon, developed an interest in the conversion of the Jews and in 1812 preached before the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews.\textsuperscript{56} When he wrote Letters on Missions he found it necessary to refute a wide range of contemporary objections to overseas missions. By the time of his death at Ashbourne in Derbyshire in 1841, the climate of opinion had shifted markedly with the emergence of a strong missionary consciousness in mid-nineteenth-century Britain. Horne was a key figure in promoting reform, and his “passion for missions”\textsuperscript{57} ignited the missionary fervor of a number of his contemporaries.\textsuperscript{58}

### Selected Bibliography

#### Works by Melvill Horne

Many of Horne’s published works are held at the British Library and at the John Rylands University Library, Manchester. Horne’s correspondence with Mary Fletcher forms part of the Fletcher-Tooth archive at John Rylands University Library.


1795  “A Sermon by the Rev. Mr. Melvill Horne.” Baptist Annual Register, September, pp. 249–55.


1820  An Address Delivered by the Rev. Melvill Horne at a Public Meeting of the Macclesfield Auxiliary Bible Society Held in the Assembly Room of the Macclesfield Arms Hotel on Wednesday the 30th of August, 1820. Macclesfield: E. Bayley.

#### Works with Detailed Reference to Horne


### Notes

1. Evangelines United, September 1795, p. 392.
6. Melvill Horne, A Sermon Preached at the Parish Church of St. Andrew by
Resources for advancing the Gospel at the edges of the Kingdom
Respecting the Establishment and First Attempts of that Society (London: T. Chapman, 1795), pp. 172–73. The editor of the 1824 edition of Letters on Missions noted that “the experience of missionary societies has led them not to throw any impediment in the way of the marriage of their missionaries” (p. 104).


41. Ibid., p. 130.


43. A country member was someone resident outside London who was kept informed about society affairs. There was an expectation that country members would contribute to fund-raising and dissemination of information in their localities. Horne to T. Scott, April 22, 1800, Church Mission Society archives, Univ. of Birmingham, G/AC 3/1/20.


45. Horne, Sermon Preached at the Parish Church of St. Andrew by the Wardrobe, pp. 36, 39–42.

46. Ibid., pp. 27–29.


49. Theological Magazine 2, no. 3 (Jan./Feb. 1797): 237–39; Theological Magazine 2, no. 5 (July 1797): 387–88; Christian Observer, Conducted by Members of the Established Church 10, no. 7 (July 1811): 451–53.

50. Printed in 1810 by Galen Ware, Andover, Massachusetts.


57. Horne stressed that candidates must have “a passion for missions” (Letters on Missions, p. 80).

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