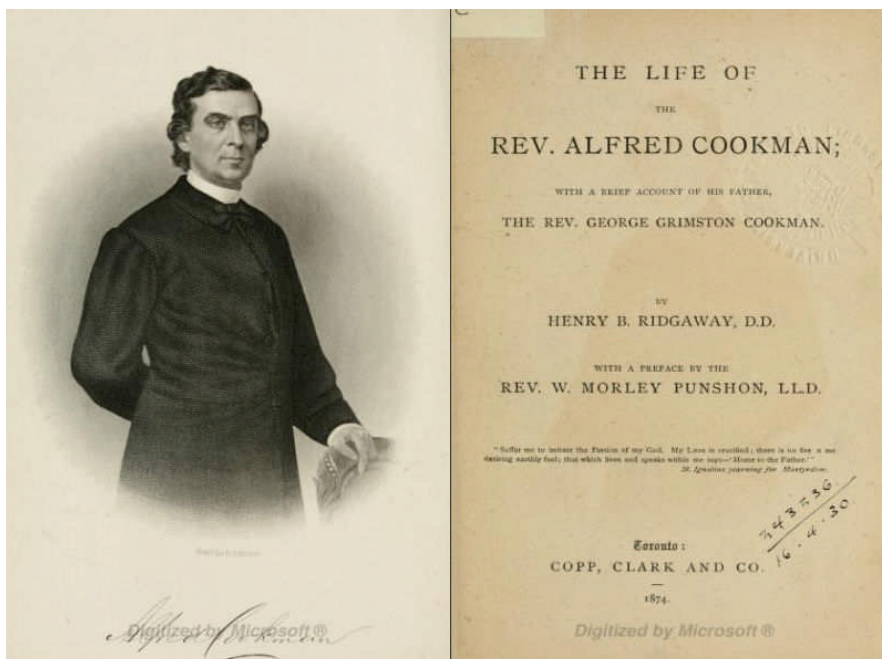




The Cookman Story: Reform in Hull and the United States



In March 1841 the liner, *SS President*, then reputedly the largest steamship in the world, disappeared without trace in the vast tracts of the still wintry Atlantic, sometime after leaving New York en route for Liverpool. The *SS President* was the first steamship to founder on the transatlantic run and there was universal lamentation for the 136 crew and passengers. Amongst those mourned deeply on both sides of the Atlantic, in both Hull and Washington amongst other places, was George Grimston Cookman, aged 41, who had been returning to England to visit his aged father.



SS President - sailing between New York and Liverpool, sank on 11 March 1841
(Source: http://www.maritimequest.com/daily_event_archive/2006/march/11_ss_president.htm)

George Grimston Cookman had emerged as one of the most eloquent Wesleyan Methodist clergymen in the United States. He was regarded as a passionate and riveting preacher, a dynamic orator, and had just served two terms as Chaplain to the US Senate in Washington, preaching every Sunday morning in the Hall of Representatives. His sermons attracted great crowds, including all the prominent contemporary US statesmen of the day, not least John Quincy Adams, Daniel Webster, and Henry Clay. Yet Cookman was no true-born American, he was an Englishman, born and bred in Hull. He was the second of three generations of Cookmans who made their marks, in terms of political reform, emancipation and spiritual revival, on both sides of the Atlantic.

Their story starts with George Grimston Cookman's father who was also named George. He had been born at North Cliff Farm in the parish of Owthorne on the Holderness coast in 1774. George senior had left home when thirteen years old and taken up a leather finishing apprenticeship in Hull. In 1793, whilst still in his indentures, became a member of the Wesleyan Society and remained an ardent Methodist for the rest of his life. He helped form 'The Poor and Stranger's Friend Society', described as an organisation of a 'few serious persons united for visiting the poor and distressed, making them acquainted with their best interests, ministering to their bodily wants.'

George Cookman subsequently became a successful businessman and built up a substantial leather finishing business and also bought much property, at one time being a part owner of Wilberforce House. In July 1799 he married Mary Chambers from Halsham in Holy Trinity Church. Mary was also an ardent Methodist, and they had three children; their eldest was named George Grimston and born on the 21st November 1800. George senior been a local preacher in 1796 and for much of the following thirty three years he covered a Sunday preaching circuit of more than thirty miles on horseback.

Apart from being a successful businessman and devout Methodist, George senior seems to have had strong political views, later, being described by his son as 'independent in his feelings even to the verge of republicanism.' He and his family were strongly opposed to slavery and George also was in favour of giving more people the right to vote. Political pressure for change eventually led to the passage of the Great Reform Act in 1832 which gave middle class males the vote. George Cookman later expressed his disappointment that this act did not extend the franchise further or include the requirement for a secret ballot (not achieved until 1872). Soon afterwards the impact of the Municipal Corporations Act of 1834 swept away the Hull Corporation with its outdated practices and restricted electoral practices. New elections were held George senior was elected to the new corporation. He also became a JP and played a major role in local government for the rest of his life. He was mayor for two years from 1837 and retained his family's strong association with the slavery abolitionists: in December 1837 attended an Anti-Slavery Meeting at the Mechanics Institute in his capacity as Mayor and moved the vote of thanks after an address by R.M. Beverley on the horrors of the apprenticeship system for the ostensibly free slaves.

His eldest son, also of course, called George, was sometimes a problem at school and eventually started work in his father's business but in his leisure time he was encouraged to read widely, especially history. He was almost certainly also influenced by the works of his fellow townsman William Wilberforce and later named one of his sons William Wilberforce Cookman.

In 1821 young George Cookman was sent by his father to the United States on business and whilst there he became convinced of his duty to preach the gospel. He evidently witnessed slavery at first hand and decided to play some part, however small, in the emancipation of the southern slaves. Once home, he settled himself into

his father's business for a while and became a lay preacher. He developed a good speaking style and, in an age of good public orators was soon described as a 'prince amongst platform speakers'.

Backed by both parents, he decided to forgo his business career and take up the ministry but in America not Britain. Having made his decision, he was filled with a zeal for his mission, 'my heart exults to reflect that in a few months I may be permitted to preach Christ crucified to the poor blacks of Maryland.' He returned to America in the spring of 1825 and, after being cordially received by the Methodists of Philadelphia, he was admitted into the Methodist ministry the following year. Young George returned to England briefly in 1827 to marry Mary Barton of Doncaster. The preaching skills that he had developed in Hull were used to great effect in America. He proved an impressive speaker and large crowds gathered to hear him. His circuit extended through a whole county and included both white and coloured people. Although he found firm friends amongst the southern white community he was pained by the presence of slavery. Methodism had taken early root in Maryland and here also large numbers turned out to hear him speak.

The celebrated orator and former slave, Frederick Douglas, later wrote in his book, *My Bondage and My Freedom*:

'We slaves loved Mr. Cookman. We believed him to be a good man. We thought him instrumental in getting Mr. Samuel Harrison, a very rich slaveholder, to emancipate his slaves; and by some means got the impression that he was laboring to effect the emancipation of all the slaves. When he was at our house, we were sure to be called in to prayers. When the others were there, we were sometimes called in and sometimes not. Mr. Cookman took more notice of us than either of the other ministers. He could not come among us without betraying his sympathy for us, and, stupid as we were, we had the sagacity to see it.'

By 1838 he and his wife had a family of five children: Alfred, George, Francis, William Wilberforce and John Emory. That year he removed once more, this time to Washington where he was stationed at Wesley Chapel, close to Capitol and many members of Congress were amongst his congregation. Once more his eloquence attracted people from far and wide, senators, government officials and visitors to the capital city.

Unbeknown to Cookman, he was put forward for election as Chaplain to the Senate. This post had been created when Senate first convened in New York in April 1789 and chaplains of various denominations have subsequently been elected to serve. Cookman's duties in this role included opening the Senate each day, preaching in the Hall of the House of Representatives and providing spiritual care and counselling for the senators.

The Cookmans, father and son, had now reached the zenith of their respective political and religious careers. For a time George Senior was Mayor of Hull whilst his son was Chaplain to the US Senate where his preaching attracted politicians of all religious and political persuasions and merited regular reports in the Press. He held the post for over two years, until March 1841 after which he determined to visit his aged father in England. By this time George Senior, with no children to take over the family leather business sold this off to the Homes family and was living in Stepney Lodge along Beverley Road on the very outskirts of Hull (now the site of Stepney Primary School and Beverley Road Baths).

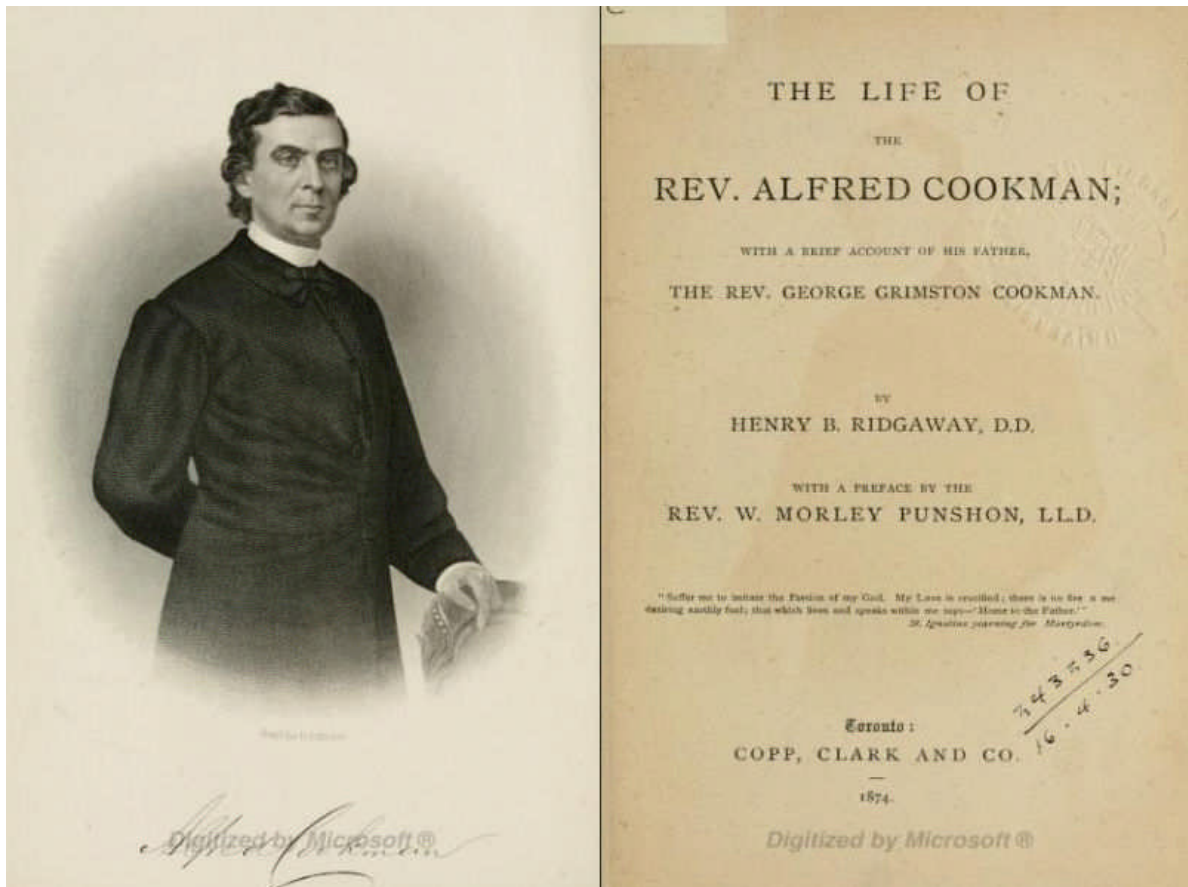
George junior sailed for England on the steamship *President* on the 5th May 1841 and the vessel was never seen again. No one knows for sure what happened to the ship: it was believed by some at the time that she had struck an iceberg in much the same region as the Titanic came to grief some 71 years later although it seems more likely that she foundered in the violent storms that had been raging for days.

The disappearance of the Steamship *President* brought deep sorrow in both Hull and America. Old George Cookman tried to persuade his distraught daughter in law to return with her young family to England but Mary decided to remain in America. The family moved into a small house in Baltimore and the children continued their education. Her eldest son, Alfred was thirteen years old at the time his father was lost. He had already received a good education under the care of his father at schools in Baltimore and Washington. He and his brother George built up a regular correspondence with their grandfather back in Hull, and, receiving support and guidance from afar as well as home they too followed in the Methodist footsteps, eventually becoming Ministers.

Over the next couple of decades Alfred Cookman was to become one of the most highly regarded preachers in the United States. It was later said that 'there was no minister in the Episcopal Church who could draw together a larger crowd of ardent, admiring hearers in the City of Baltimore than Alfred Cookman.'

He remained in regular correspondence with his ageing grandfather and in the summer of 1850 he crossed the Atlantic on the steamer *Europe* to meet him for the first time. They evidently got on well and Alfred stayed at Stepney Lodge for almost two months. Both travelled to London and Alfred also visited relatives in Doncaster, his mother's home town. He seems to have made his mark amongst Hull's Wesleyan Methodists as a strong speaker and preached several times at a number of local chapels. He was also particularly pleased to have 'blew my trumpet in old George Yard where Wesley, Benson and my beloved father have been heard.'

He returned to America in September 1850, and over the following years took up ministries with various circuits in towns and counties across the east coast of the United States. In March 1851 he married Annie, the daughter of Abraham Bruner of Columbia Pennsylvania. Back in England his grandfather George died in Stepney Lodge in 1856.



Frontpiece of Henry B. Ridgaway's (1830-1895) *The Life of Rev. Alfred Cookman*
(Source: <http://www.archive.org/details/lifeofrevalfredc00ridguoft>)

Alfred's skills as orator seem to have matched those of his father – contemporaries suggest that their passion and gift for eloquence were perhaps inherited from Mary, Alfred's grandmother, rather than George Cookman senior who was by all accounts a more reserved speaker. Alfred's work as a preacher took him to various places but in the spring of 1857 he moved his family back to Philadelphia where he was to be based until May 1861.

During these years the American divisions over the issues relating to slavery grew wider and relations between the northern and southern states deteriorated. The growing schism between north and south was also evident in the Episcopal Methodist Church. Alfred was very much in the vanguard of those who wanted to see the abolition of slavery. In May 1860 he travelled to the Methodist Episcopal General Conference, held in Buffalo, New York State where a motion was to exclude slaveholders was to be debated. The atmosphere accompanying the proceedings was tense but Alfred, in common with many other Methodist ministers and laymen, felt he must witness the proceedings. 'Tomorrow', he wrote to his wife on the eve of the proceedings, 'it is expected the great battle will commence. The anti-slavery column stands strong and united. May God rule and overrule.' The motion was passed, to the chagrin of many white church members from the south: as far as the Methodists were concerned, the lines had finally been drawn.

The resultant schism in the Episcopal Methodist Church was a reflection of the fault lines evident across the United States and these widened swiftly after the election of Abraham Lincoln, a known opponent of slavery, in January 1861. After the outbreak of the American Civil War Alfred moved to New York and soon preached to soldiers in Union Square. The following summer, whilst on a visit to Columbia with his family, he made a patriotic speech, extolling the values of the Union at an immense war meeting held in Lancaster:

‘This union, which is so unutterably dear to our hearts, is at the present time in imminent peril..... a government closely connected with the cause of liberty throughout the world.....must be preserved and perpetuated in all its purity and integrity.’ (Cheers)

In January 1863 President Abraham Lincoln issued his emancipation proclamation, declaring all slaves free men. Both the justice and expediency of his proclamation were questioned by some but his move was soon supported by New York’s Episcopal Methodists at their Conference held in Washington Square Church. The Conference proceedings took place in an atmosphere of great excitement and Alfred Cookman was prominent amongst those championing Lincoln. He prepared a war report, which contained ten resolutions declaring unconditional loyalty to the USA and the Unionist cause. The Fifth Resolution declared:

‘That slavery is an evil, incompatible in its spirit and practice with the principles of Christianity, with republican institutions, with the peace and prosperity of our country, and with the traditions, doctrines and discipline of our Church.’

The Conference adopted the report with but little opposition and afterwards it was ordered that a copy be transmitted to the President of the United States. Lincoln was later to say that no church ever did so much to support the Government in its efforts to maintain the Union as the Methodist Ministers.

Early in 1864 Alfred Cookman visited the Army of the Potomac at the front in its winter quarters. During a four week period he covered a great deal of ground, riding through country made desolate by the actions of war and sleeping under canvas. He was at Brandy Station in late February 1864 and throughout his stay preached to both officers and men and although not in good health saw as much of the army as he could in the time he was there.

After the Civil War ended in 1865, Alfred Cookman proved a strong supporter of granting full rights of citizenship for freed slaves and for providing opportunities for elevation through education:

‘It must be left to Providence and to the colored people themselves. We cannot force them away; it would be unwise, unkind, unchristian and to colonize as we have been doing is like emptying a river by taking out a bucketful every now and then. Let us live for the present, faithfully discharging the duty of the passing hour which is to educate and elevate a people whose unrequited labor, multiplied wrongs, tedious bondage and deep degradations

give them a special claim upon us. Give them the spelling book, the bible, equal rights before the law and the electoral franchise as their weapons of defence and then leave all the rest to God.'

In the 1860s Alfred Cookman became closely associated with the Holiness Movement, perhaps the best known of a group of urban pastors who professed the experience of sanctification. He was an avid supporter of the Methodist summer camps and continued to preach at these every summer. In the spring of 1871 he moved his ministry to New Jersey and also acquired a summer cottage for his family on the edge of the ocean. His health began to fail and then deteriorated rapidly, although he continued to visit camps and preach almost to the end. President Ulysses S. Grant came to hear one of his last sermons in October 1871. He died on the 13th November 1871 aged only 43 and was buried in Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia, one of the most revered resting places in the United States.

The Cookman name, however, lived on. The summer cottage retreat eventually became part of Asbury Park – named after Francis Asbury, who had brought the Wesleyan message to the United States – and one of the main thoroughfares of the New Jersey resort – later made famous by Bruce Springsteen – is called Cookman Avenue. Perhaps the most valuable reminder of Alfred Cookman is in Florida. In 1872 the Cookman Institute was opened in Jacksonville, Florida by the Reverend Alfred Darnell and named after Alfred who may have provided some money for its foundation. The Cookman Institute, or *Old Cooky* as it was sometimes affectionately known, was the first institute of Higher Education for blacks in the State of Florida. In 1924 it was merged with the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute of Daytona Beach, which had been founded for Negro girls in 1904 by Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune. It has since been known as the Bethune-Cookman Institute and provides a distant but enduring connection with the early days of both Methodism and the antislavery movement in Hull.

Robb Robinson, January 2009

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