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REVIEW ARTICLE

Early Methodism

by BARRIE TABRAHAM

John Wesley. The evangelical revival and the rise of Methodism in England. By John Munsey Turner. Pp. x + 214. Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2002. £14.95 (paper). 0 7162 0556 4

Wesley and the Wesleyans. Religion in eighteenth-century Britain. By John Kent. Pp. vi + 229. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. £37.50 (cloth), £13.95 (paper). 0 521 45532 4; 0 521 45555 3

A brand plucked from the burning. The life of John Wesley. By Roy Hattersley. Pp. vii + 451 + 18 plates. London: Little, Brown, 2002. £20. 0 316 86020 4

Mirror of the soul. The diary of an early Methodist preacher, John Bennet, 1714–1754. Edited and introduced by S. R. Valentine. Pp. xii + 243 incl. 2 frontispieces. Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2002. £15 (paper). 1 85852 216 1

The tercentenary of John Wesley's birth saw the appearance of a whole crop of studies on various aspects of the Wesleys and early Methodism. Whether the current conversations between Methodists and Anglicans concerning the Covenanting Proposals is providing an additional spur remains to be seen. However, there can be no doubt that there is continued interest in the Wesleys and the way that Methodism developed, particularly in the eighteenth century, as the following four studies show in their very different ways.

For those interested in the broader context in which Methodism grew, John Munsey Turner's *John Wesley: the evangelical revival and the rise of Methodism in England* is both instructive and entertaining. It is the latest book by an author who has written a great deal about Methodism in the past twenty-five years, as can been seen by looking at the second part of the select bibliography. He is not only thoroughly at home with the subject, but one who is well-known for the quality of his literary style. Readers should be aware, however, that the subtitle is a better description of the book's scope than the title itself, for it covers a very broad canvas indeed. That is to say, there is less on John Wesley himself than the title of the book suggests, and John Munsey Turner's analysis of Wesley is, in places, interspersed with

other information to such a degree that a reader unfamiliar with the material could be a little confused. However, the author achieves his main aim by placing Wesley firmly in the wider context of the evangelical revival and refuses to make him into 'a man for all seasons', as some American authors are prone to do. Turner avoids the trap of arguing from specifics, and his gift for using judicious illustrations brings colour to the narrative. As ever, his dry humour – sometimes Methodist historians can be a little too reverential – is present throughout.

Some of the chapters combine the study of ideas with the analysis of the history of Methodism, such as the one entitled 'John Wesley's strategy, spirituality and Charles Wesley's hymns'. In this chapter Turner's succinct examination of Charles's hymns (the author wryly observes that 'Charles Wesley wrote too many') is particularly well done, though the section on perfection, so important to the younger Wesley, is dealt with in a rather too summary fashion by means of a brief reference to the hymn 'Jesus, the First and Last'. One of the most interesting chapters examines the well-cooked chestnut: 'Did Methodism prevent revolution in England?', and the author draws on a wide range of sources, from F. D. Maurice to modern revisionists such as Harold Perkin, to revisit the Halévy thesis and its critics. We are made aware of the essential paradox – that 'Methodism provided a means by which there could be a combination of social stability and, in England, the erosion of the confessional state' – and the author is careful to leave the debate open; a pity, perhaps. The final chapter looks at the growth and impact of the Primitive Methodists and provides a useful lead-in to more detailed studies, such as the recent treatment by Geoffrey Milburn.

John Munsey Turner's scholarly approach to his subject is evinced by the extensive endnotes, and although the bibliography is somewhat brief, the endnotes themselves will prove a valuable aid for those wishing to delve deeper into specific issues. All in all, this is a splendid work.

John Kent is another author well known for his many contributions to Methodist scholarship, and he has a record of fearlessly promulgating what have been often seen as controversial theories. His most recent work, *Wesley and the Wesleyans: religion in eighteenth-century Britain*, does not disappoint in this respect. With the very first sentence beginning, 'One of the persistent myths of modern British history is the myth of the so-called evangelical revival', we know that we are about to read a thought-provoking book. John Kent sets the scene by drawing a careful distinction between the 'fundamental level of religious behaviour' (or 'primary religion', as he terms it) on the one hand, and the 'secondary theologies' and the trappings of ecclesiastical institutions which developed around it, on the other. Thus Methodism in its different forms took advantage of the religious climate of the time to create what was, in effect, a religious subculture. In this respect, Kent asserts, Wesley and Whitefield – though disagreeing sharply on theological grounds – were both part of the same phenomenon.

Of especial interest, given the renewed interest in Anglican-Methodist unity today, is the chapter which deals with the ways in which Anglicans reacted to Wesley and his followers. This contains a scholarly analysis of the varied responses made by individuals and groups within the Church of England, and though the author's concluding comment that the Established Church's response was 'adequate' is a little strange, the content of the chapter makes it clear that an over-simplified picture will not do. Whether it was true that the majority of people who became Methodists joined because they resented their local Anglican priest rather than consciously 'choosing Dissent' (as the author contends) is open to question, but John Kent offers a convincing interpretation. His detailed and sympathetic handling of Archbishop Thomas Secker's reservations concerning Wesley is also particularly welcome.

This is not a book for 'beginners', and in order to appreciate where John Kent is coming from, readers really need to have familiarised themselves with the background to the subject – perhaps by first tackling John Munsey Turner's study, or some of the writings of W. R. Ward or Henry Rack. The notes are full and helpful, though the index is less so and the proof-reading has not always been done accurately – for example, the reference on p. 191 to a letter from John Wesley to his brother Charles to which the author has previously referred is on p. 35, not p. 30, as given in the text. These, however, are minor criticisms. Provided it is approached with care, and with a watchful eye on some of John Kent's tongue-in-cheek comments, *Wesley and the Wesleyans* is an interesting and challenging study which should be compulsory reading for any student of eighteenth-century Methodism.

Roy Hattersley's *A brand plucked from the burning: a life of John Wesley* is quite different in character and aimed at rather a different market. Written – as one would expect from a politician turned writer – in a lively, fluent style, it is a full and, for the most part, an accurate account of John Wesley's life. Biographies of Wesley abound, so how does it compare with others? Probably the nearest equivalent is that which was written almost a generation ago by Stanley Ayling (like Hattersley a 'secular' historian), which was as detailed, but less readable. Like Ayling, Roy Hattersley seems to revel in the anecdotal aspects of Wesley's personal life, such as the incident when Mrs Wesley reportedly dragged John across the floor by his hair. There are a number of small niggles. There is a detailed index which, as with John Munsey Turner's book, oddly contains no reference to Aldersgate Street, but there is no bibliography – which is to be regretted, considering the kind of reader who would purchase this book. The author also frequently quotes early biographers of Wesley such as Luke Tyerman as though they were contemporary sources, which may mislead the casual reader. Moreover, the 'asides' – of which the author is fond – are not always substantiated by hard evidence. Benjamin Ingham, for example was never a member of the Holy Club, though a close associate of John and Charles Wesley.

Although *A brand plucked from the burning* does not pretend to be a work of original scholarship, there is sufficient detail and analytical comment to make this book instructive as well as entertaining. Roy Hattersley draws a nice distinction, for instance, between the 'spiritual revelations' and the 'intellectual revelations' which Wesley received, an example of the latter being the way in which in 1746 Wesley became convinced that 'bishops had no exclusive right to ordination' – which had momentous consequences forty years later, when separation from the Church of England had become virtually inevitable. The author also deals with the 'Methodist myths' (such as Wesley's Aldersgate experience) very competently, and is not afraid to turn a critical eye on Wesley's style of leadership and how he was able to justify to his followers (as well as to himself) his change of mind on important issues, such as the notion of Christian perfection, the nature of the episcopate, and in his belief that the sacrament of holy communion could be a converting as well as a confirming ordinance.

Henry Rack's *Reasonable enthusiast* is in no danger of being toppled from its place as the current standard biography of Wesley, but – despite the slight criticisms that have been mentioned above – Roy Hattersley has provided us with a well observed account whose chief virtues are its balanced interpretation and its readability.

Mirror of the soul, a transcription of the diaries of John Bennet, edited by Simon Ross Valentine, is a book which could almost be described as a companion volume to the author's own definitive biography of Bennet which appeared in 1997. Most students of early Methodism will know that Bennet was a tireless evangelist who died at the relatively early age of forty-five in 1759; that he was a key figure at the first Methodist Conference in 1744; that he competed (successfully) with John Wesley for the hand of Grace Murray, and that eventually he went his own way, disenchanted with the way that Methodism was developing. What *Mirror of the soul* does is to make accessible a treasury of primary source material that complements the editor's own biography and fleshes out the details.

Bennet's diary begins shortly after his conversion experience in January 1742 and ends rather abruptly in 1754, the year he was ordained as a Presbyterian minister and two years after his break with Methodism. It is a fascinating record, not just of his day-to-day activities, but of the way in which his theology developed. That the diary was meant to be read by his followers is shown by numerous instances of his preaching to the reader, albeit obliquely, though the text leaves us in no doubt as to Bennet's intentions. In this autobiographical record we not only have a detailed insight into the way in which Bennet's mind worked, but a remarkable picture of the way in which early Methodism flourished in northern England, and as such it provides an interesting comparison with the journals of the Wesley brothers. The significance of Bennet's achievements went far beyond his minute-taking at the conference of 1744, for example, in his pioneering of

the Quarterly Meeting. Simon Valentine proves that he is as able an editor as he is a biographer, and the helpful introduction together with the detailed notes make this a valuable resource for those wishing to explore aspects of early Methodism not recorded by Bennet's more illustrious partners.