

A GENERAL CRITIQUE

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I am very pleased to be able to comment on this magnificent work of John Wigger, who has made, and continues to make, major contributions to the understanding of the history of Christianity in America. I have read Wigger's previous works as part of my own scholarly research and teaching in the field of Church History. His first major book, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America*, sets the tone and methodology for the later works. For instance, in his collection of essays, edited with Nathan Hatch (*Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture* [Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2001]), Wigger's own contribution, "Fighting Bees: Methodist Itinerants and the Dynamics of Methodist Growth, 1770-1820," applies to Methodist itinerants an image used by Abraham Lincoln about liking preachers who acted like they were "fighting bees." The picture that he draws of the preachers exhibits first-rate historical scholarship, solidly grounded in primary documents (letters, journals, and sermons of the preachers) set into a matrix of cultural complexity, personal hardship, and institutional vitality that combined to set the frontier abuzz. The "heart-swelling" response to the preachers resulted, according to Wigger, from an alluring combination in their preaching: a down-home gospel "that was attune to everyday life and common experience" and the larger "unsettling" implications of its personal application. He supports these observations with a plethora of examples that makes his conclusions very convincing. This same sort of excellent research methodology is employed in this latest product from John Wigger.

The first comment that one must make about Wigger's new study of Francis Asbury is that it requires a brave soul to take on the revisionist study of a religious icon, which Asbury has become and which the title of his book (*American Saint*) implies. Fortunately, however, this book on Asbury is not a hagiography, as one might read into the title. Neither is it a sarcastic or scathing criticism of the early Methodist bishop, which has been the approach of some biographers who have applied the saintly moniker to Asbury. The author does an excellent job in portraying Bishop Asbury's life and thought, character and actions, in a way that displays Asbury's fatigue and mistakes as well as his piety and zeal, and that analyzes the bishop's genuine consternation over complex issues as much as his autocratic exercise of authority. The image that emerges is no less attractive in terms of a model for leadership in confusing times, but it is much more realistic in terms of portraying the human nature of the subject. Wigger has managed to avoid the overly tiptoeing approach of some objective historians as well as the sharply subjective

approach of those with an axe to grind. The balanced nature of his view is evident in brilliantly insightful comments; for example, Wigger states that Asbury's life was one "that many have admired but few have envied," an observation that might also apply to other great leaders such as Wesley, Calvin, or Aquinas. The author does a very good job of showing how the impression that people had of Asbury's piety was not equivalent to a sense of satisfaction on his part that he had ever actually achieved his goal of holy living. But his strong personality had a soft and alluring edge that was capable in many cases of winning over his harshest critics, some of whom admitted that their nemesis was a tyrant in only the most subtle ways and basically operated from "an upright soul."

As one reads this narrative, the insights on nearly every page bring forth the reaction, "Yes, yes." Not only are the interpretations right on the mark; they are projected with memorably succinct phrasing. Wigger does an excellent job in fleshing out just how Asbury was able to mediate the basically British religious perspective of the Wesleyan ideal and the popular culture of the American scene, which was a very different context, even as he was operating in tension with both Wesley and many Americans.

The scope of research in this work is signaled by the acknowledgements in the introduction, which lists the institutions visited and scholars contacted in his doing this book. The level of his research is then evident in the 102 pages of footnotes, which display a solid grounding in the vast primary literature of the period as well as the basic interpretive material of more recent scholarship. And I for one am very pleased with the fact that Wigger chose to illustrate his work with maps, woodcuts, and photos (many of his own),¹ which help bring the story to life. The book is a work that one can unabashedly hold up to students as a model historical and biographical enterprise.

In some ways, the last chapter, "Bending Frank," contains some of the most interesting considerations. Wigger surveys the various ways that observers, from Asbury's contemporaries to recent historians, have "bent" the legacy of Asbury to fit their own purposes. Even friends, like Ezekiel Cooper, for example, criticized Asbury for not promoting democracy, and therefore determined that Asbury was an obstructionist to Americanizing trends; while critics, like Alexander McCaine, thought episcopacy was fraudulent, and therefore determined that Asbury was "bad at heart." In another instance, Nicholas Snethen echoed Samuel Bradburn's criticism of Wesley. Bradburn felt Wesley would have done better if he had preached fewer times per day; similarly, Snethen said that Asbury could have done better "had he known the art of doing less." Herbert Asbury twisted the bishop's piety in such a way as to make him a fanatic as well as a demagogue, which then caused William Warren Sweet to attempt to rebuild Asbury's image as a rational leader, about the same time the nation was literally building an Asbury statue as a tribute in downtown Washington, D.C. In this chapter, Wigger brings

¹ Eight of the ten photos are by the author and are of very high quality; in addition, there are nearly twenty engravings and three maps.

together a historiographical collection of praise and criticism that is literally unique in Asbury studies and a major contribution in itself, capped by the comment, "Driven by their own agendas, most commentators have missed the extent to which Asbury redefined the religious landscape of America," a task that Asbury faced without any blueprint.

The book fleshes out the ways in which Asbury approached and carried out this task. The author's method is unabashedly narrative and chronological, and his style of writing makes this approach both appropriate and attractive. Wigger is a good story teller as well as an excellent historian. The narrative draws one through the book. The pauses here and there to insert interpretive comments are succinct and to the point, such as his listing of four reasons why the southern preachers broke from the traditional Wesleyan "method" or plan in 1779. Such comments provide an appropriate bridge in this work between a fascinating biographical portrait and a careful historical study.

In looking for some point that might be helpfully critical, I did notice that Wigger did not give an explanation for why Wesley ordained two elders for America, along with Coke as bishop. He is not alone on this score: I don't know of anyone who has commented on this point. The reason, of course, is that Wesley wanted very much for the ordination of Asbury to be as regular as possible, and the ordinal in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* (as in many denominations) requires that two fully ordained priests assist the presiding bishop in the ordination rite. Wesley was providing Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vesey as fully ordained elders to assist in that ordination, just as Coke and James Creighton had assisted in their ordination under Wesley.

I could go on and on with very positive comments about this new book by Wigger, including the high quality of the index (done by the author himself).² But I think I have said enough to show that I am very excited by the quality of the author's research, the attractiveness of his style of writing, and the insightful nature of his interpretive comments. His previous work has demonstrated his abilities in these regards, but this book reaches new levels in every way. Wigger has fixed his place as the best Asbury scholar to date and one of the top historians of the American religious scene in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

² E.g., nearly all the complicated entries are divided into sub-heads that have no more than a dozen page references each, except for a small handful under Francis Asbury, of which only three transgress the rule notably: "illnesses of" (16 entries), "prayer life of" (19 entries), and "piety of" (20 entries).