METHODIST CONCERN WITH SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN ENGLAND, 1848-1873

by Harry M. Hutson

“I shall endeavor to show,” said John Wesley, “that Christianity is essentially a social religion; and that to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it.” To this observation by the founder of Methodism was joined another prediction. Methodism, the Rev. Mr. Wesley suggested, would eventually enter a second and slower period of development as the original driving force of the movement gave way to cooler emotions and even apathy. In response to the pressures placed upon it by its very success, Methodism was destined to move a considerable distance away from its evangelical enthusiasm towards reaction and institutionalization.¹

These insights, clearly establishing the fact that John Wesley was sensitive to the dangers that might be faced by his successors, are important for the social historian who intends to examine the course of Methodism in the nineteenth century. Were they accurate prophesies? Did the evangelistic impulse falter, the social concern wane? In the eighteenth century Wesley and his preachers went into the streets to exhort. Did such preaching characterize the nineteenth century? The experience of the Primitive Methodists, who had to secede from the parent body of Wesleyans in 1811 in order to conduct camp-meeting type evangelistic services, indicates that it did not. In the eighteenth century Methodists, stunned by the horrors of Newgate prison, poverty-stricken masses, and Negro slavery in the West Indies, acted to lessen these evils through humanitarian work. What was their reaction to the variety of social, economic, and political problems generated in the nineteenth century by the swift movement towards industrialization and urbanization? What follows here is an effort to answer this latter question.

The third quarter of the century lends itself well to an investigation of Methodist social concerns. The year 1848, which saw Chartism’s demise and continental revolutions, ushered in a prosperous period of twenty-five years in England, ending abruptly in 1873 with a severe depression. This was an era of great social and economic contrasts, when an outwardly prosperous nation became painfully aware of the existence of “two Englands,” the rich and the poor. Challenging issues confronted English governments and society: the problem of poverty and poor laws, the question of parliamentary reform, labor-capital relations, the movement for popular education. Was there such a thing as a “Methodist conscience” which exercised judgment in these areas, helping to shape

the "Nonconformist conscience" which Élie Halévy observed in the Victorian political scene?

The student of this topic is aware at the outset that, though he can study Methodist social teaching, the motivation and impact of that teaching are elusive and perplexing matters. Methodists were motivated by their religious views and interests, their economic needs, prevailing currents of thought, contemporary events, and probably by a dozen other factors. One can do no more than offer tentative hypotheses to explain their outlook and behavior. Occasionally, in moments of frankness, Methodist writers offered explanations or rationales which throw a clear light on this problem. More often than not the historian can only surmise.

At the other end of the continuum, where questions of impact or influence arise, one can seldom do more than guess what may have been the effect upon the general course of events of editorials, books, and articles on social and economic topics issuing from the Methodist press. The researcher comes nearer to an understanding of impact when he observes the actions of Methodists who took leading roles in reform movements and trade union activities. The connection in this case between teaching, action, and results is close and direct. The late Methodist historian Robert F. Wearmouth, in several books and pamphlets, has carefully studied one aspect of this relationship by presenting a detailed picture of Methodist participation in the working class movements. But again, one does not know very much about the overall impact of this activity by Methodist trade unionists. Suffice to say that the focus of this paper will be on the teaching itself—that is to say, on the social concern, or lack of it, expressed by Methodist writers and ministers in their journals and books and occasionally in their sermons.

II

Methodism was a growing institution in the nineteenth century. There were some 57,000 members in England and Wales in 1791; in 1848 all branches of Methodism (exclusive of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists, which are not included in this study) counted 474,000 members. The population of England and Wales doubled during those fifty years, but Methodism more than kept pace; one in every 157 people was a Methodist in 1791, while in 1848 the ratio was one in every thirty-eight. During the next twenty-five year period the number of ministers and laymen increased to 613,000—representing a thirty percent increase. But the ratio of Methodists to total population remained nearly the same in 1873 (one in every thirty-seven) as in 1848, indicating that Methodists were now just keeping pace with the growth of population.

Methodism had not long remained unscarred by schism after Wesley's death. The "New Connexion" broke off in 1797 in order

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3 These statistics are taken from the minutes of the annual assemblies of the five Methodist bodies in 1848 and 1873. The minutes may be consulted in the Epworth Press Library, London.
to achieve greater lay representation in church management. It grew slowly and had only 15,000 members in 1848. “Primitive Methodists,” who liked the camp-meeting type of evangelistic services, had to secede from the Wesleyans in 1811 in order to conduct such services and subsequently became the largest of the offshoots. A group of Wesleyans in Devon and Cornwall formed themselves into a “connexion” in 1815, calling themselves “Bible Christians;” they numbered only 11,000 in 1848. The “Wesleyan Methodist Association,” formed in 1836 as a protest against alleged Wesleyan autocracy, numbered 20,000 in 1848. In that year seventy percent of all Methodists were still Wesleyan Methodists belonging to the parent body which claimed an unbroken lineage from John Wesley; thirty percent belonged to various splinter groups.

But schismatic disturbances were not at an end. In 1849 the parent body was rocked by a series of internal explosions which further weakened it. It counted its losses by the thousands each year from 1851 to 1855 and in fact did not recover lost ground until 1875. Out of this last schism emerged a fifth offshoot body, the “Wesleyan Reformers,” which joined the Wesleyan Methodist Association in 1857 to create a new church, the “United Methodist Free Churches.” Methodism in the middle of the century, then, consisted of a parent Wesleyan body and four dissenting groups, none of which had seceded over questions of religious doctrine. Quarrels with the Wesleyans were constitutional in nature. Should control of the church be exercised by the ministers alone, or by ministers and laymen? Like the medieval Catholic church, Methodism had to contend with a powerful conciliar movement.

III

Education was an area of concern in which Wesleyans, but not the Dissenting Methodists, were consistently active. There were numerous Wesleyan elementary schools in existence by 1848. The basic issue involved was that of the government’s relationship to denominational schools and on this issue Methodists, along with others, had to take a stand. Government support of denominational schools began modestly in 1833 with a subsidy to the churches for their educational work, an appropriation which was renewed and increased in subsequent years. In 1847 the government took another step by consolidating the system of certifying teachers and granting public funds (to be proportional to denominational giving) to train and pay teachers and buy school equipment. Finally, in 1870, parliament passed the Forster education bill, the first comprehensive

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6 To distinguish between the Methodists of the parent Wesleyan body and those of the schismatic sects, the former will henceforth be referred to as Wesleyans, the latter as Dissenting Methodists. “Methodists” and “Methodism” will be used to refer generically to all groups.
education measure in English history. Recognizing denominational efforts to supply educational needs, the legislation permitted church and chapel schools to continue their work and increased their subsidies. Wherever they failed to supply local needs, however, locally-elected school boards were permitted to build and maintain schools out of local taxes. Within walking distance of every child in England, henceforth, a school was available—though compulsory attendance was yet to come.6

In these developments the Wesleyans were the most cooperative of the Methodist bodies. They accepted government aid in 1847, worked closely with government officials, and aided in the drafting of the bill of 1870.7 Dissenting Methodists, on the other hand, opposed government aid to education in the 'forties and 'fifties; in the 'sixties they switched to the support of a state system of non-sectarian schools. The Forster bill of 1870, because (in their minds) it continued to give encouragement to denominational education, was a bitter disappointment. They interpreted it as a measure destined to increase sectarian bickering on the two issues of government subsidies to denominational schools and membership of the new local school boards, resulting in the advancement of Wesleyan and Anglican church schools.8 In this they were to be proven correct.

But a curious change began to take place within Wesleyanism itself. In the competition for government subsidies and membership on local boards the Wesleyans were destined to lose out to the Anglicans. The Church of England could raise more private funds and hence acquire more government "matching" subsidies for its schools than could the Wesleyans. In elections to local school boards—and this was a very sensitive matter—the Anglicans could usually turn back Wesleyan electoral challenges and then exert considerable influence over the new state schools. For some Wesleyans, then, the only defense was to adopt the solution of their Dissenting Methodist brethren: a national state system under local boards, the termination of all subsidies to denominational schools and membership of sectarian teaching (but not the Bible) in those schools. The Wesleyan Conference of 1872 accepted the resolution that "with due regard to existing interests, further legislation for primary education at the public cost should provide for such education only upon the principle of unsectarian schools under the School Boards."9 This official action inspired The Anglican Record to accuse Wesleyans of going

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7 For an account of the heated debate over the issue of cooperation with the government, see James H. Rigg, Wesleyan Methodist Reminiscences Sixty Years Ago (London, 1904), 105 ff. Wesleyan views on the bill of 1870 are found in the Methodist Recorder, May 10 and June 17, 1870, and in the Watchman, Feb. 15, 1871. Both papers reflected Wesleyan opinion.

8 This interest in state-supported, non-sectarian education is reflected in the various Dissenting Methodist journals after 1860, and specifically in Minutes of UMFC Assemblies, 15th Assembly (1871), 84; Methodist Quarterly, June, 1872, 127-133; and Minutes of New Connexion Conferences, IX (76th Conference, 1872), 26.

9 Watchman, Dec. 11, 1872.
over to the Birmingham League, a lay organization which stood for compulsory, secular education.\textsuperscript{10}

To stop here, however, would be to treat Methodism unfairly on this issue. Another kind of motivation was at work: the willingness to accept a new governmental role in education as a positive function clearly demanded by the social needs of the era. The churches could not give a good elementary education to every child in the United Kingdom, and experience in other countries was bringing this lesson home.\textsuperscript{11} It is important, then, to observe this reluctant but inexorable movement away from a commitment to voluntary action and private enterprise towards an acceptance of decisive state authority in the sensitive area of education. It was in accord with the increasingly collectivistic behavior of the English people who will, by 1914, have cast their ballots for an elaborate program of state action in other social areas.

IV

In dealing with a social problem of a different character—the cause and cure of poverty—Methodists could lay claim to a legacy of concern that stretched back to the eighteenth century. Wellman J. Warner, writing of the Wesleyans of that day, observed their refusal to accept the contemporary analyses of the cause and cure of poverty, analyses which were characterized by a criticism of the poor and an economic justification for their condition. John Wesley thought poverty to be the result of two factors. First, he assailed the "inequitable consumption of the products of industry," providing luxuries to the few and denying necessities to the many, which proceeded from an immoral use of property. Second, he noted the absence of "industrial virtues" among all classes and particularly among the rich. The poor, he thought, were for the most part paralyzed by the injustice of the social system.\textsuperscript{12}

Was there a cure for this social malaise? "Let everyone avoid luxuries, let everyone work, provide employment for all," was the Wesleyan answer,\textsuperscript{13} an answer recognizable to those familiar with the work of Weber and Tawney. Characteristically, the spread of Methodism did have important economic effects. The religious transformation was complemented by the inculcation of the time-honored virtues of thrift and hard work in the operative classes. "By the masses of the operatives," says one historian of Methodism, "both time and money had been recklessly wasted in drinking, gambling,
roystering, and sporting. But when the revival came crowds of these
became productive instead of wasteful elements in the national
life."  

At the same time Wesley and his followers, aware of the
shortcomings of the religious conversion of individuals as a com-
plete cure for poverty, worked actively for reforms to aid the poor
and wretched: abolition of distilling, higher taxes on the rich,
slavery abolition, prison reform, and the establishment of poor men’s
loan offices, banks, and medical dispensaries.

It is important at this point to recall that Wesley, though im-
pressed with the economic and social by-products of the religious
revival, was also fearful of them and found it necessary to warn
against the accumulation of riches. In stern language he urged
Methodists not to hoard riches nor to indulge in extravagance of any
kind. Increasing personal wealth was the source of the decay of any
strong religious revival. What Will Herberg calls “Wesley’s Law”
would gradually rob Methodism of its vitality.  

Nineteenth century Methodism, then, could draw upon a long-
standing tradition of interest in the problem of poverty. Both urban
and rural poverty caught the attention of latter-day Methodist lead-
ers and writers. The betterment of the agricultural laborer for ex-
ample, was the special interest of Dr. James H. Rigg, a prominent
Wesleyan clergyman. Convinced that palliative measures were of
no value, he vigorously espoused land law reform as the best means
of eliminating poverty in the countryside. Land should be easier to
purchase for the farm laborer. With the complicated restrictions sur-
rounding the sale of land gone, every laborer would be able to buy
a cottage and a small plot of ground. Dr. Rigg’s conservation comes
sharply into focus, however, both in his concern for the aristocracy
and in his use of the word “peasant" for agricultural laborer. He
did not envision a widespread land ownership which might under-
mine the aristocracy, “the crowning glory of England.” Rather, he
visualized a medieval manor with Victorian embellishments. “What
more beautiful sight,” he exclaimed, “than to see the domain of the
wealthy landowner belted around by borderlines of cottages, the
property of a happy, thrifty, independent peasantry, whose families
make their living by working on the estates?”  

Urban poverty, however, presented the greatest challenge to so-
cial reformers of the nineteenth century and Methodists shared the
rising public concern over this baffling problem. A nineteenth cen-
tury innovation, the “home missionary,” served as a constant ba-
rometer of the seething forces at work in the ghettos of that day.
Employed to bring the Gospel to the poor, the home missionary
found himself face-to-face with the grim reality of conditions in
overcrowded slums in London and the factory towns of the mid-
lands. This encounter brought forth several reactions. On the one
hand there appeared the traditional sympathy and desire to help

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15 Ibid., 374-375; Will Herberg, op. cit., 122, 128-129.
that had given results in an earlier era. As evidence accumulated on
the condition of the poor, Methodists began to debate and support
reform measures to ease the condition of the poverty-stricken. These
included the construction of “model lodgings” for the poor, reform
of the Poor Law to permit a more generous dispensing of aid, and
assisted emigration.

There also appeared, inevitably, the conviction that the preaching
of the Gospel and the conversion of souls would help uplift the
poor economically just as it had in the eighteenth century. This
doctrine carries the implication that being “lost in sin” is a source
of poverty, but previously (in the eighteenth century) this was not
stressed. Now, however, the implicit became explicit as the Meth-
odist writers began to say that sin and vice caused poverty. This
hard doctrine, in part a reflection of Malthusian views, helped gen-
erate a censorious attitude towards the poor in some Methodist
literature. A commentator in a Wesleyan journal, for example, wrote
that “poverty, indeed, so mainly comes of vice that we are bound
to hope for its gradual mitigation through the improvement of morals....” 17 Similarly, the Wesleyan Spectator, defining the work
of the home missionary, spoke of him as one who must “spend hours
every day in the nauseous homes and haunts of the depraved poor.
... His instinctive desires for congenial society, his intellectual
tastes and habits, must all be laid upon the altar of sacrifice.” 18

Were these statements a reflection of the pride that accompanies an
increase in wealth, and hence a fulfillment of Wesley’s prophecies?

This concern with the relationship of poverty and morals also
produced spokesmen for the more liberal (and modern) view that
grinding urban poverty degraded people and ruined morals, rather
than the reverse. The informal sociological evidence provided by
home missionaries seemed, in the eyes of some observers, to support
such a conclusion. Those who took this position argued their case
forcefully and in some ways were able to silence the “Malthusians.”
The fact that Methodists began to see the necessity of positive re-
forms (i.e., construction of model lodgings to replace slums) to ease
the lot of the poor is a measure, not only of the humanitarian im-
pulse, but also of the conviction that slums are bad for the soul.
A summation of these approaches to the problem of poverty should
begin with the observation that Methodists were quite conscious of
the plight of the poor in a land enduring the spasms of rapid in-
dustrialization and rural change. The active work of Methodists—
that is to say, their denominational efforts—were nevertheless con-
finned largely to the support of home missionaries and of charitable
enterprises. Much emphasis was placed upon the “duties of prop-
erty.” Though this was essentially a palliative effort to meet the
problem, it must be borne in mind that many Methodists honestly
looked to the preaching of the Gospel by home missionaries as the
surest method of abolishing poverty in the long run. Others, grasp-

ing the complexity of the problem of urban poverty and its relationship to morals, took an interest in social legislation. There is nothing original in all this; Methodists were simply debating issues and reforms which were in the public domain during the third quarter of the century. But it is not without significance that, as in the debate over popular education, Methodists looked increasingly to the state rather than to “voluntaryism” for help in solving one of man’s oldest and most trying social problems.

V

When one turns to the problem of Methodism’s interest in the relationships between labor and capital, one enters an area complicated by class divisions within the denomination. Methodism included large numbers of middle class people and also of working men. The part played by Methodists as active labor leaders, particularly fitted for such work by the training and teaching of the chapel in democracy and leadership, is usually taken for granted. Did Methodist literature reflect their views, as well as the views of the many Methodist working men whose role in the labor movement was a more passive one? With what clarity was the voice of the Methodist employer class heard? Finally, was there also an expression of the public interest?

It is easier to ask these questions than to answer them. One view expressed in the pages of Methodist papers, magazines and books reflected a desire to correct existing conditions among labor by appealing to the moral sentiments of the employer class. The question of wages, for example, was generally considered from a Biblical point of view, based upon the passage from St. Luke, “The laborer is worthy of his hire.” Though some Methodists took the unsympathetic position that wages were adequate and that working men simply squandered their earnings, the general consensus was that working men were desperately in need of better wages. Thus, one finds some Methodists, echoing Charles Kingsley, complaining bitterly about the “cutting off of wages until workmen starved,” about the plight of rural laborers whose pay remained stationary while rentals trebled, about the factory system which, as one put it, performed the devilish alchemy of grinding humanity down to gold. Movements to shorten the hours of labor in factories and retail shops received the approval of Methodist papers. “If you cannot do all of your business without grinding men,” admonished William Arthur.

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20 For example, see London Quarterly Review, Oct. 1848, 35 ff, and Wesleyan Times, May 8, 1849.

21 London Quarterly Review, April, 1857, 8-9; Methodist Quarterly, Dec., 1872, 274-275.
a prominent Wesleyan minister, "abridge it; better do less than commit cruelty."  

It is interesting to note at this juncture that some observers, committed to the Methodist tradition of hard work (Wesley had refused to hold services at any time which would interfere with a day's work), expressed concern over how working men would use the increased leisure time they might acquire. Such critics were usually silenced by those who noted that long hours of work and little leisure ill served the cause of the Church, since the working man who spent ten or more hours a day at labor usually sought to recoup his strength in a public house rather than in a chapel. Fourteen or fifteen hours of slavery in a retail shop, said the Wesleyan Watchman on one occasion, were enough to drive a young person to seek "giddy excitement" in his half-hour of leisure. Methodist thus seemed anxious to see working men receive more money and work fewer hours, and editorials were on many occasions written to advise employers to grant these concessions.

In all of the comments so far one can recognize the preacher and the moralist, rather than the employer or working man, attempting to apply Christian ethics to a contemporary social problem by appealing to the employers. But what about the growing power of labor itself? That was another matter. Methodist writers at first expressed fears about this new cloud on the horizon. Some journals viewed with alarm the increasing use of the strike weapon and even the growth of producer cooperative movements. Unions were criticized as "tyrannical," opposed to the interests of the employer and the public, damaging to England's industrial position, and in violation of the laws of political economy. With the late 1860's, however, came a subtle change—a reluctant acceptance of the existence of unions and the necessity of strikes so long as the unions sought only to secure to the working man his "just share" of the fruits of industry and not to eliminate competition or choke industry. This view tends to sum up what Methodists believed to be an expression of the public interest in labor-capital relations. It is an attitude grounded both in a laissez-faire philosophy, which treated masters and men as buyers and sellers in an open market, and in the doctrine of the natural identity of interest of labor and capital. It was not simply a reflection of Methodist middle class influence nor of clerical conservatism; many Methodist working men were of similar views. Even the Primitive Methodists, who played an important role among the miners and agricultural laborers unions, were not particularly radical in their views. Many Meth-

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23 Watchman, June 6, 1849.
24 See Watchman, Dec. 26, 1866, Aug. 4, 1869, and Feb. 1, 1871 for illustrations of these attitudes.
25 This change is seen, for example, in the United Methodist Free Churches Magazine, July, 1873, 429, the Methodist Recorder, Mar. 2, 1866, and Jan. 12, 1872.
26 See E. J. Hobsbawm, Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries (Manchester, 1959), 134-142, for an interesting sociological analysis of the Primitive Methodists as a "labour sect."
odist working men were associated with craft unions, that is, with conservative labor organizations that accepted *laissez-faire* economics and stressed friendly relations with employers.

A summary of these viewpoints would indicate that the Methodist press was conservative in its reaction to the growing labor movement of the 'fifties, 'sixties, and early 'seventies. Biblical moralism and classical economics dictated the spirit in which most editorials were written. The Methodist formula for labor peace and improved conditions among working men was a moralistic and individualistic one: both laborers and employers should conduct themselves in a decent and Christian manner. The “power of combination” must be used cautiously. Even when commenting on the scandalous abuse of child and female labor in mines and factories as revealed by parliamentary commissions of inquiry, Methodist writers did not suggest labor initiatives to curb avaricious employers. Instead, they condemned those whom they thought responsible for such outrages—parents and employers both—but also appealed to parliament for remedial legislation.²⁷

This last approach is part of a growing body of evidence that Methodists were disappointed in the effectiveness of moral suasion upon the relations of labor and capital in the 1870’s. The future, as many Methodists interpreted it on the basis of contemporary conditions, promised only additional labor strife. Somewhat sadly the *Methodist Recorder* observed in 1867 that the labor question would not be solved “until the strength of both sides had been put to severer tests than any which have yet been experienced.” ²⁸

VI

Methodists, to sum up the evidence presented here, revealed a sensitivity to human needs in several social areas. When they sought to discover remedies, they found it increasingly difficult to adhere to a *laissez-faire* program—i.e., to be satisfied with an appeal to the virtue of individuals. In matters of education, of public health, housing, poor relief, and factory labor abuses, they found state action desirable in the righting of wrongs. But in dealing with the problems of adjusting the relationship between labor and capital, Methodists retained a *laissez-faire* outlook as they sought to motivate and constrain individuals, urging both employer and employee to practice the golden rule.

Certain inferences about Methodist class structure might be drawn from the Methodist approach to some questions and from various comments found in Methodist literature on the role of the middle class. The *Watchman* once remarked that the morality of the nation resided chiefly in that class,²⁹ and the *Wesleyan Times*, chief organ of the Dissenting Methodists, often took the same position. Before one concludes that Methodism had become a bourgeois

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²⁷ Lord Shaftesbury’s charge in 1871 that thirty thousand children in England’s brickyards were oppressed led the *Methodist Recorder* to condemn the avarice and intemperance of the parents. *Methodist Recorder*, July 14, 1871.
²⁸ *Methodist Recorder*, April 26, 1867.
society by 1873, one must recall that many working men worshipped in Methodist churches and chapels and that not all of them were of the upper working classes. The common denominator was the acceptance of middle class conceptions of morality, social stability, work habits, and private property by Methodist employer and employee. Methodist writers and employers were quick to praise the "industrious and moral class of workers," Methodist or not, and supported legislation to enfranchise and educate the children of that class at public expense. Associations of labor which had Methodists at their head were useful and without danger to the state, even if they were made up of unskilled rather than skilled workers. An example is offered by the rise of agricultural unionism in the early 1870's, which saw Primitive Methodists and Wesleyans playing leading roles. Methodist journals supported this movement, confident that the new unions were in good hands.30

The Methodist goal, finally, was to help build a society in which the individual Christian, the Church, and the Christian-oriented state should, on the one hand, enlighten, reform, and care for the masses and, on the other, search out the ways of peace in labor-capital relations. In this society the familiar landmarks of class and wealth would continue to serve useful purposes. This outlook produced results in the period 1848-1873 which were more intangible than tangible; as noted earlier, the impact of Methodist teaching can only be surmised. In a later period, however—the last quarter of the century—some fruitful developments may be noted. Under the changing conditions of that era the Methodist social reformer as well as the Methodist Laborite made their appearance on the national scene. It is not unreasonable, hence, to trace the origins of the "social Gospel" in the Methodist Church and the emergence of Methodists in the Labor party leadership back to the teaching and practice of Methodist ministers, writers, and labor leaders during the third quarter of the century.

30 Methodist Recorder, April 12, 1872; Watchman, April 17, 1872.