Franklin Wilder, Father of the Wesleys, a biography. Exposition Press, New York, 1971, hardback, 220 pages, $6.00

A good thing about this book is that it was written by a Methodist layman who not only appreciates the importance of Samuel Wesley to Methodism but was ready to express that appreciation in an entertaining biography. Samuel Wesley, unfortunately, has been overshadowed not only by his famous sons, John and Charles, but also by his strong-minded wife. Scant attention has been paid to him by biographers, and this work of Wilder's is, according to the dust jacket, the first full length biography of Samuel Wesley in over one hundred years.

Laymen will enjoy reading this story of the small statured, energetic, fearless, 18th century clergyman who, in some ways, is the most interesting of all the Wesleys. But the book is not for the student, the scholar or anyone who has a concern for accuracy or for facts. The book is full of undocumented speculations and errors. One example will suffice. The author states that Daniel Defoe had a great effect on Samuel Wesley's later career (p. 16). He supports this (pp. 32-34) by speculating that Defoe, John Dunton and Samuel Wesley often met at Smith's Coffee House in George Yard "when they established the Athenian Gazette and the Athenian Society in London." John Dunton, however, in his autobiography The Life and Errors of John Dunton gives a different picture, stating that the three proprietors of The Athenian Gazette were himself, a Richard Sault and finally John Wesley. After Wesley joined the group, he adds, "we found ourselves to be masters of the whole design, and thereupon we neither lessened nor increased our number." Defoe is not mentioned except as a contributor. There is no doubt that Defoe knew Samuel Wesley. This is clear from his attack on Wesley in More Short Ways With The Dissenters, but there is no evidence that he ever had the cozy relationship with Wesley pictured by Wilder.

Mr. Wilder, furthermore, attempts to give life to his picture of Samuel Wesley by referring to him throughout the book as "Sam". It is doubtful if, after reaching maturity, Samuel Wesley would have allowed anyone to refer to him as "Sam". When his wife wrote to him she addressed him as "Dear Husband".

On the other hand the book carries one along. It is written in a fast moving, journalistic style that is neither dull nor pedantic. A top-flight copy-editor would have worked with the author to remove most of the errors, and the book then would have proved more helpful. Since the work is obviously not a scholarly volume, the lack of any critical apparatus or index is not missed.

—Frederick E. Maser


This work, as the introduction says, both supplements and updates Volumes I and II published under the same title in 1958. It contains a number of articles which properly belong in the first two volumes but were inadvertently omitted. An asterisk at the beginning of an article in Volume III means that one on the same subject also appears in Volume I or II.

Unfortunately Davis C. Collier, the managing editor for Volume III, became ill in 1970 and passed away before the work came from the press. His associate, Lynn E. May, Jr., guided the project to completion.
Volume III has 1,151 articles compiled by 643 writers. It presents the biographies of 411 deceased Baptist leaders, most of whom died between 1956 and 1970. The work includes no sketches of living Baptist leaders. It contains some 200 pictures, the majority of them showing impressive buildings erected by the various Southern Baptist state conventions since 1956. One judges by the photographs that the state conventions are materially prosperous.

It seems significant that Volume III contains a four-page statement of "The Baptist Faith and Message" which was adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1963. Traditionally Baptists have been wary of subscribing to set creeds; they say they speak where the Bible speaks, thereby suggesting that the Bible itself is their creed. The article says that this statement was adopted to serve as "information to the churches" and "guidelines to the various agencies." Though couched in modern phraseology, its main divisions dealing with the scriptures, God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, salvation, the church, etc., read much like the standard creeds of Christendom.

Since many articles appearing in the first two volumes are appropriately updated in Volume III, this reviewer could wish that the one on The Methodist Church had been rewritten. Since 1958 Methodists have been surprised to read in Volume II that "the three orders of the American [Methodist] ministry are bishop, pastor, and district superintendent!"

On the whole Volume III has updated and rounded out well the Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists. The three books are mainly for reference in which one can find quickly interesting and significant facts, statistics, biographies, and historical data pertaining to the Southern Baptist denomination. Libraries and individuals who have the first two volumes will certainly want to acquire the third.

Albea Godbold