BOOK REVIEWS


Phyllis Mack, Professor of History and Women’s Studies at Rutgers University, first established her reputation as an elegant writer and meticulous historian able to navigate the complexities and analyze the contradictory elements of religious biography in her 1992 study of seventeenth-century *Visionary Women*. In this somewhat parallel volume, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment*, in which Mack examines the issues of gender and emotion as an interpretive framework for a revisionist history of early Methodism, we encounter the same indelible footprint. In this present study she demonstrates anew her navigational skills, depth of insight, and judicious use of primary sources, opening to the reader a more fully textured vision of the early Methodist people, and particularly the women. As a consequence, both secular and ecclesial historians must take the participants of this movement of renewal within the life of the Church of England in the eighteenth century, as well as their leaders, with utmost seriousness. Mack’s incisive analysis of early Methodist people and her fascinating interpretation of the internal dimensions of their faith and practice establish a new set of landmarks for a new chapter in Methodist historiography.

Mack challenges both traditional, negative depictions of early Methodism (e.g., the denunciations of historians such as E. P. Thompson) and hagiographical interpretations of the movement (historical narratives based almost exclusively on John Wesley’s theology and charismatic authority). She develops a “third alternative” by analyzing how ordinary Methodists understood the way of salvation, their relationships in life (including all of the internal contradictions revolving around issues of marriage, sexuality, and agency), and their mission in the world. She enables us to view and understand ordinary Methodists as thinkers and actors who participated in the cultural discourse about the nature of feeling and sensibility, who both shaped the movement and engaged the seismic shifts of the age in which they lived. She demonstrates persuasively how Methodist men and particularly women boldly confronted issues of self-definition, lived within the tensions of their inherited Protestant theology and emerging Enlightenment ideals, struggled with the desire for passivity and the drive for personal agency, and thereby generated “a new kind of psychic energy” characterized by aggressive spiritual agency, emotional discipline, and missionary zeal. These conclusions become particularly transparent when we include women in the
historical equation on their own terms, especially their perspectives as worshipers, thinkers, actors, and sufferers. Unlike some secular interpretations that reduce Methodism to repressed sexuality and religious authoritarianism, and unlike some idealized portraits of Methodism and its leaders that ignore or obfuscate the realities of paradox and contradiction in religious life, Mack’s study demonstrates “the power of Methodism to convince people of their capacity for moral and spiritual change and their ability to sustain their lifelong efforts at self-transformation, however difficult the discipline and however imperfect the result” (28).

In the first of seven chapters, Mack introduces the reader to the meaning of emotion in Wesleyan theology and discusses the ways in which spiritual formation, including the elements of self-control and self-transcendence, played a part in the shaping of a Methodist ethos. Her incisive discussion of “Holy discipline and sacred music” (41-54) elevates the role of hymns in Methodist character formation and contributes significantly to a growing literature in this area.

In the next chapter, contrasting the contours of conversion among the women and men, she argues that women had a more radical conception of their own sinfulness, a more severe self-condemnation, and an experience of transformation in Christ that fused ecstasy and agony, pain and desire.

Chapters three and four examine the emotional formation and identity construction of men and women respectively. The autobiographical narratives of three itinerant preachers—Samuel Bradburn, James Rogers, and John Pawson—reveal that the locus of their most profound spiritual struggles, somewhat unexpectedly, was the terrain of marriage and familial love. The inherent tension between the ideals of itinerant ministry and domesticity functioned as a crucible upon which their capacity for spiritual love was formed. In her chapter on “Women in Love,” Mack elevates the axial theme of relational spirituality and the formative role of friendship among the women. Her central thesis is that “while women and men have the same capacity for the experience and expression of feelings, their different patterns of friendship and marriage generated a different emotional and imaginative relationship to the divine” (135).

Mary Bosanquet Fletcher figures prominently in her analysis, and Mack devotes chapter five to Fletcher’s theology of the cross in a highly nuanced discussion of “gender and the suffering body.” One of the most significant essays in the volume, this chapter explores the meaning of pain vis-à-vis women’s bodies and the relationship between health/illness through the lens of the Methodist hymns, particularly those depicting the passion of Christ. Women as healers and sufferers not only identified with images of the wounded Christ, but, through their active engagement with and reflection upon such themes reclaimed maternal power and protection, thereby enabling them to reconcile passive and active conceptions about the meaning of their own lives. In a chapter somewhat reminiscent of Ann Taves’s groundbreaking study, Fits, Trances, and Visions, Mack examines the role of dreams and mystical experience in the lives of early Methodist women, concluding that
this dimension of their spirituality both generated individual reflexivity and shaped their autobiography decisively.

Mack concludes her study with a discussion of Methodism following the death of John Wesley and its relationship to modernity, using the commanding figure of Adam Clarke as a seismometer for the cataclysmic shifts of the early nineteenth century. In keeping with David Hempton’s modulated analysis, she interprets Methodist evolution in terms of “a creative tension between spirit and discipline, creativity and regulation, expansion and consolidation” (262). The conscious self-fashioning of the earlier generations of Methodist disciples put later Methodism on a world stage and in a position to embrace an emerging modern mission.

*Heart Religion* is such a magnificent example of meticulous analysis, balanced presentation, and judicious historiography, I am reticent to raise several “quibbles.” But in a work on heart religion, gender, and emotion, I find it somewhat strange that there is no discussion of the shaping of “tempers” or “dispositions,” to use John Wesley’s own words, all of which was so central to the contemporary discussions of the “religious affections” on both sides of the Atlantic. Gregory S. Clapper’s *John Wesley on Religious Affections: His Views on Experience and Emotion and Their Role in the Christian Life and Theology* provides essential theological background about these conversations. I am not sure Mack’s description of Wesley as a “theological minimalist” (32) does justice to the unique theological contributions he made to the history of Christian thought, especially with regard to some of the concepts central to the thesis of her book, entire sanctification in particular. In general, my concerns revolve around theological issues/questions that seem to lack the same kind of careful nuance and precision of Mack’s historical insight and analysis, e.g., a somewhat static view of “assurance” (34-35). Similarly, with regard to Wesley’s criticism of Calvinism in his own day, the point of contention was not so much his antipathy to fatalism and his fear of antinomianism. On Wesley’s own account, the twin pillars of his theology were not “the doctrines of atonement and entire sanctification,” but “justification and sanctification,” and his vision of faith working by love leading to holiness of heart and life provides a profound theological grounding for the historical claims Mack seeks to make. Quite simply, a more robust understanding of Wesley’s theology, and much of this conveyed in Charles Wesley’s hymns, would have added even greater weight to the central arguments Mack sets forth.

These minor criticisms pale, however, in light of the highly significant contribution of this volume to Methodist scholarship. Of its many strengths, several stand out dramatically. No previous work excels as does this volume in differentiating between the experiences, discourse, and vision of women and men in the early Methodist movement. Mack’s interest in bringing Charles Wesley out from the shadow of his older brother, and to figure his life and work prominently in the unfolding of her arguments, is to be highly commended. She has taken seriously the important formative role that hymns played in the life of the movement, and particularly in their shaping
of the emotional world of the Methodist people. Similarly, in this volume, Mary Bosanquet Fletcher receives the attention and critical examination she has long deserved. How anyone can really understand early Methodism apart from critical figures like Mary is beyond my comprehension. Mack’s use of primary sources, and the way she has woven them into the tapestry of this volume astounds me. Her gift is to let the early Methodist people speak for themselves, but at the same time, to bring all of her critical skills to bear upon their lives and words so that we not only hear them, but better understand them. In my own volume on *Early Methodist Spirituality*, I elevate the importance of holy friendship among the early Methodist women and I simply register my appreciation for Mack’s discussion of this critical axial theme. *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment* provides new ways for us to think about and appreciate the life-shaping and character-forming influence of the early Methodist movement.

**Paul Chilcote**  
*Ashland, Ohio*


When I began my own dissertation on Fletcher, one person knew more about unpublished letters than anyone else and helped me to find them: Peter S. Forsaith. And here is, thirty years later, the first ever publication of letters in a critical edition. All earlier publications of letters were not only deficient in their selection but were presented in an often poor quality of accuracy. Hence, an important number of letters, particularly very personal ones to the Rev. Charles Wesley, are now accessible to a larger public.

The volume presents an introduction into the life and ministry of the Rev. John Fletcher with particular attention to the corpus of letters. The main part contains a choice of letters by Fletcher, but no letters sent to him. They are presented in historical order in three sections: (1) before becoming vicar of Madeley in October, 1760; (2) the early years of ministry up to 1769; and (3) letters after 1770 when Fletcher became more prominent through his role in the controversy over antinomian and predestinarian topics. A letter to Charles Wesley in December, 1782, closes the volume.

Many letters to Charles Wesley were originally written in French. The volume presents the original (unfortunately with too many mistakes of spelling) as well as English translations which are mostly of very good quality. Footnotes make references to names, biblical texts or related topics, in part added by Kenneth Loyer. Unfortunately, the volume does not include a list of all letters by and to John Fletcher. Thus, readers do not get an oversight of the full corpus of letters. They would need to turn to my theological biography, *Reluctant Saint?* (Epworth Press, 2001), and its lists of primary
sources. Unfortunately the reader would be without the last updates from Peter Forsaith’s own research. The criteria for selection of letters were “firstly because they form the most substantial coherent sectors of his surviving manuscript correspondence, but also because they were written to the key evangelical leaders with whom Fletcher was closely associated” (7).

Of course, specialists always find possibilities for improvement. The biographical notes in the opening repeat old mistakes about the early period and a typing error for the time of convalescence (xi). The introduction does a better job. When talking about the special role which John Wesley wanted to give to Fletcher, the introduction only mentions the well known offer in 1773 to become Wesley’s successor, but not the most surprising reference of 1761 to hand over the leadership of the Methodists. But everyone has now a chance to read this passage and make his or her own conclusions (see letter of August 19, 1761, 132 French/134 English). Out of the three key themes mentioned in the introduction, the relations with women and the influence on him of the French churches only play a key role during a short segment of the life and ministry of Fletcher—and none of the letters to his later spouse are printed. However, Forsaith adds new insights on connections between Swiss-French and English people (e.g. 31, 33, 349). The reference on page 257 leads nowhere and is probably a left-over from the original dissertation. A helpful index closes the book.

The author and the publishers are to be commended for this valuable contribution to an often forgotten part of early Methodist people and history. It will give authentic evidence to Fletcher’s life and ministry and all will rejoice who are looking for critical editions of primary sources.

Bishop Patrick Streiff
Biel, Switzerland
BOOKS BRIEFLY NOTED


Did John Wesley have a doctrine of the church? In an answer similar to Albert Outler’s answer to a similar question, to say “yes” says too much and to say “no” doesn’t say enough. This is the most complete work examining Wesley’s understanding and practices around the nature and mission of the church. Included in this published form of the author’s doctoral dissertation are the influences and sources of Wesley’s thought and practice. Wesley’s ecclesiology is packaged by eras in his life with topics such as ministry and the sacraments treated in each era. The eras are the early Wesley (up to 1738), the middle Wesley (up to 1765), and the later Wesley. The work is thorough and useful in gaining a grasp of Wesley and the church in a well written and well organized work. It is especially important in that it traces the changes in Wesley over time, but it does rely on sources that are well known to the serious student and offers little fresh insight.


This is a useful study of the planting of Methodism in Southeast Asia from the arrival of the missionary pioneers through the quest for self governance and autonomy, from the development of Central Conference structures through the creation of the Methodist Church in Malaysia and Singapore and finally the formation of the Methodist Church in Singapore. Photographs and a bibliography add to the usefulness of the work written by the archivist of The Methodist Church of Singapore and former Principal of the Anglo-Chinese School.


A thoroughly researched and richly textured account of the rise of the pro-slavery arguments in Virginia, the work will have limited appeal to those interested in the Methodist involvement as the work studies Baptist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, as well as Methodist sources and is limited in its geographical scope. The author states that “the central thesis is that white
evangelicals forged their policies on slavery in response to the spiritual initiatives of black evangelicals (2).


This is the 29th volume in the Revitalization: Explorations in World Christian Movements, Pietist and Wesleyan Studies Series, edited by J. Steven O’Malley. Milton Wright was a United Brethren in Christ bishop who helped lead a group of United Brethren congregations to form the United Brethren Church (Old Constitution) in the late nineteenth century. This is an anthology of 135 of his editorials written when he was editor of the *Religious Telescope*, the UB periodical, between 1869 and 1877. Editorials are grouped around theology, piety and morality, church polity and practices, and American politics and society. It is a valuable resource for primary source materials from a church periodical of the post-Civil War era.


The subtitle is “Biographical and Personal Reflections on a Life Touched by Godliness.” John Seybert was a bishop of the Evangelical Association, the first to be elected according to the church’s *Discipline* in 1839. Jacob Albright, the first bishop, had died in 1808, and no one was elected until Seybert. O’Malley weaves insights from Seybert’s writings with letters his great-grandparents had written during their courtship in order to present a vision of godly living that can serve an inspirational and instructive role for The United Methodist Church today. The book’s goal is a renewal of godliness in the Church.


This is the third volume in the editor’s five-volume series he entitled “The John Wesley Christian Perfection Library.” This volume is a collection of Wesley’s writings on the subject of holiness in their chronological order. Each selection is introduced with brief comments by the editor. Volume one of this series is an annotated edition of Wesley’s *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* and the second was a study of the development of the doctrine of Christian perfection in Wesley’s thought.


This work is a part of the Princeton Theological Monograph Series. Dr. William Abraham writes in the introduction, “Elaine Heath’s work breaks
extraordinary new ground in the interpretation of the theology of Phoebe Palmer.” An important figure in the nineteenth-century holiness movement both within and beyond Methodism, Palmer’s theology is placed in the context of Christian mystical traditions, Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox.


This is the first volume of what is planned as a peer-reviewed annual series entitled, *Wesley and Methodist Studies*. This is to be a collaborative project of the Manchester Wesley Research Center and The Oxford Centre for Methodism and Church History, Oxford Brookes University with Didsbury Press as publisher. The five essays that comprise the volume include three on aspects of John Wesley’s thought, one on Charles Wesley, and one on Mary Bosanquet Fletcher. Four of the authors are research students at Nazarene Theological College, Manchester, or the University of Manchester. Henry Rack’s essay, “A Man of Reason and Religion? John Wesley and the Enlightenment” is also included in this collection. The journal intends to publish essays that “examine the life and work of John and Charles Wesley, their contemporaries in the eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival, their historical and theological antecedents, their successors in the Wesleyan tradition, and studies of the Wesleyan and Evangelical traditions today.”


While not primarily a work in Methodist history, *Methodist Present Potential*, draws heavily on the Wesleyan tradition in seeking to chart a course of renewal for the Methodist Church in Great Britain. The introduction helpfully summarizes the core content of the book, “seven younger Methodist scholars . . . reflect on their understanding of some of the key aspects of Methodist identity: Evangelism, Scripture, Sacraments, Diversity and Inclusivity, Connexionalism, Ecumenism, and the World Church.” The second part of the book responds to these essays, including one by Richard Heitzenrater analyzing how history is used in the church. Drawing on the work of Randy Maddox, Heitzenrater explores that the tradition can be used across a spectrum suggested by such words as normative, instructive, supportive, or suggestive. Works published by the British Methodist imprint, Epworth, should have a reading beyond the shores of Great Britain.