

BOOK REVIEWS

Gary Best, *Charles Wesley: A Biography*. London: Epworth, 2006. ix + 390 pp. \$29.99.

Anniversaries have a tendency to spur our memories. The 300th anniversary of Charles Wesley's birth has prompted a whole host of events and publications focusing on the role Charles played in the formation of Methodism, a role that has often been overlooked. Gary Best is one of many who strives to remind us of Charles Wesley's role in the Methodist movement. He does this by retelling the story of Methodism with Charles at the center.

Charles Wesley's story is laid out chronologically. It begins by recounting Charles's family background emphasizing that He was born and raised in a Church of England parsonage. Many of the stories known to Methodists are recounted in chapters about his years at Oxford, his adventure in America and his interaction with the Moravians. Examples of what it means to tell the story with Charles at the center can be illustrated from these chapters. In discussing the Holy Club, Charles's relationship with other members of the Holy Club is discussed, but sometimes the stories shared, especially about John Wesley or George Whitefield, do more to clarify their lives, than to clarify their relationship with Charles. The recounting of John's relationship with Sophey Hopkey is one such story. Although an interesting story, it does not seem central to a biography on Charles who was back in England at the time.

Best does a good job covering the early years of the revival and the different struggles the Wesleys had with the Calvinists and the Moravians. He also deals with the struggles John and Charles have over their marriages and the role of lay preachers. Best ends the book discussing the years when Charles has located in Bristol and London. He also noted Charles's response to the American Revolution.

Best does a good job of correcting the often over-looked role of Charles in the Methodist movement. He does this by looking at Charles's letters, journal, and hymns. One weakness of the book is its reliance on secondary sources which recent scholarship has shown to be flawed. Scholars will probably be frustrated by the regular use of the phrase "Quoted in" in the footnotes. The result is that for the most part Best's book is a repackaging of the same old stories. This book is an entertaining retelling of the life of Charles Wesley, but in no way is it a critical reappraisal of the life of Charles Wesley.

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Gareth Lloyd, *Charles Wesley and the Struggle for Methodist Identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. xii + 258 pp. \$80.

Gareth Lloyd makes plain in the Preface that he intends this book to be a new assessment of the life of Charles Wesley. He does it with fresh insights, solid documentation, and a felicitous style of writing. I welcome his challenges to past historiography concerning Charles and the willingness to elucidate the tensions between John and Charles, even though some may find that Lloyd painted the struggles more starkly than necessary. This is a must read for all who are interested in the Wesleys and the development of 18th century Methodism in England.

Lloyd is very critical of the work of Thomas Jackson and all who followed his interpretation of Charles' life. Lloyd wrote:

The major influence on the evolution of Charles Wesley biographical scholarship has been the Wesleyan minister Thomas Jackson, the author of a two-volume life published in 1841. . . . The conclusions that Jackson reached had an impact that still influences the way that Charles Wesley is viewed. This is regrettable as his portrayal of the co-founder of the Methodist movement was highly distorted (vi-vii).

Lloyd's aim was "to present a new assessment of Charles Wesley's place in church history, and also his legacy, which was very different from that of his brother. . . . This book is not a conventional biography, but rather an examination of the evolution of Methodism against the background of the life and ministry of one of its principal exponents" (x). There is no question that John and Charles had a deep and abiding relationship but Lloyd clearly counters any notion that the relationship was without its strains and years of difficulties. The relationship suffered after Charles' marriage in 1749. Lloyd wrote, "The extent of the pain and hurt that this breakdown cause to both men and the significant ways that their mistrust impacted on Methodism will form an important theme of the rest of the book" (42). And finally, Lloyd tells the reader again what he set out to do, "The primary aim of this book has been to present a new evaluation of aspects of the life and ministry of the Evangelist and hymn-writer Charles Wesley" (234).

Some may claim that it is impossible to write about Charles Wesley's influence of the formation of Methodist identity without a detailed analysis of his hymns. After all it is the part of the Methodist movement which most shaped the common person. But instead of focusing of the hymns, Lloyd makes extensive use of Charles's correspondence, an under-utilized resource and one that is readily available to Lloyd as archivist of the Methodist collection at the John Rylands University Library in Manchester. This choice does leave out a critical source for understanding the formation of Methodist identity, but it avoids having to deal with the difficult questions raised when dealing with the hymns, such as authorship, and whether or not and to what degree the hymns are autobiographical. It is not as though the hymns are ignored. One section is entitled "The Use of Hymns in Worship"

and there are eight references to hymns in the index.

Even though this is a well researched and written book, there are broad generalizations that may be open to debate. For instance, one may want to question that “the most important relationship of Charles Wesley’s life was with his brother John.” What about Samuel and Susanna or his wife, Sarah? Even though his older brother Samuel died in 1739, Charles’ loyalty to the Church of England was shaped by Samuel. Yet, this study focused on the fact that “the fraternal relationship had singular significance” (21). At least in one instance, a detail of fact needed to be more carefully nuanced. Although Charles did tender his resignation as secretary to General Oglethorpe in July, 1736, as claimed by Lloyd (31), it is only later in England that his resignation was acknowledged by Oglethorpe.

The extensive use of Charles’ letters and the fresh interpretative analysis makes this one of the most informative books about Charles’ impact on the shaping of Methodist identity, moving the reader beyond mere biographical facts to providing a window on the Methodist movement.

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