BOOK REVIEWS


How appropriate that the first “Saddlebag Selection” of the Historical Society of the United Methodist Church should be a book on Peter Cartwright, the archetypal frontier preacher of the 19th century! And how appropriate that the cover illustration would depict a circuit rider with his saddlebags packed with books!

We already have the famous Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, published in 1856, so why another book on Cartwright’s life?. Professor Bray’s answer to the question is that Cartwright’s autobiography was selective and personal. Cartwright mentioned his family very little and his famous rival Abraham Lincoln not at all. His memory of events necessarily revealed his own perspective on things, and therefore reflected perhaps too well on the author. Cartwright lived another two decades after publication, and was active almost to the end. Bray attempts to fill in these gaps and to place Cartwright’s career in a broader perspective.

Why another book on Cartwright? This reviewer’s answer is so that we may have insights on Cartwright from the perspective of a Lincoln scholar and expert in 19th century American literature. And just as importantly, so that we may experience Bray’s eloquent, lyrical prose. “Not much of a farm . . . third-rate land, bought and sold by speculators hoping someone like the Cartwrights would come along. Subsistence in the 1780s: broadax ringing down the valley, slash and burn, smoke and ash; lowing, manuring cattle; noonday scream of wheeling hawk, a crying in the cabin” (1).

Peter Cartwright’s parents moved from the “third-rate land” in Virginia to the backwoods of Kentucky where young Peter grew up and became caught up in the Cane Ridge revival. Eventually, Peter answered a call to preach and became an effective evangelist in the Western Conference. In 1824, he moved his family northward and joined the Illinois Conference, ostensibly to get away from slavery. He quickly became a power in the Illinois Conference, often leading the General Conference delegation and serving almost consecutively as presiding elder from then on. Cartwright was a central figure in the General Conferences of 1844, 1848, and 1860, when the course
of north-south relations in Methodism was determined.

He ran for and won a seat in the Illinois legislature, and eventually ran for U.S. Congress as the Democratic candidate against the Whig Abraham Lincoln. Cartwright and the younger Lincoln became spirited competitors, and not only in politics. Both were rough-hewn men, spellbinding story-tellers, talented leaders, the very best that frontier society could produce. They were natural rivals for pre-eminence in central Illinois.

There are two minor complaints. First, the book would profit by inclusion of a couple of maps. Also, while the author uses standard endnote style for other citations, the references to the Autobiography are imbedded in the text in parentheses. Unfortunately, the edition that Bray consulted does not have the same pagination as the 1956 Abingdon Press edition.

In the preface, Bray says he was in a “fencing-match” with Cartwright’s self-portrayal in the Autobiography. In his acceptance remarks before the Historical Society of the United Methodist Church on receiving the Saddlebag Selection designation, he amended that comment to say the encounter was not so genteel; with a man like Cartwright, it was more like a “wrestling match.” Each participant in that match came out the winner, and so will the reader.

ROBERT W. SLEDGE
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Dr. Snyder has done Methodist historians a great service with his meticulous editing of Redfield’s entertaining, startlingly vivid autobiography. Though less well known today outside of Free Methodist circles than his younger cohort in that denomination’s founding, B. T. Roberts (1823-1893), Redfield was highly influential in his day both on Roberts and on the new church. His manuscript autobiography was the basis for The Life of Rev. John Wesley Redfield, M.D. (Chicago: Free Methodist Publishing House, 1889) by Joseph Terrill, and is available at the denomination’s Marston Memorial Historical Center, but Snyder, a professor of the history and theology of mission in the E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism at Asbury Theological Seminary, puts Redfield’s entire story—parts of which Terrill edited out or toned down—before a wider public.

Born in New Hampshire, Redfield experienced conversion and a powerful call to preach as a youth, but shrank from both his faith and his calling until his thirties. He spent the intervening years studying medicine (he was
a self-taught medical doctor), art, philosophy, and spiritualism, as well as enduring a troubled first marriage to a psychologically disturbed woman (he eventually divorced his wife, and remarried in 1856).

He became a licensed local preacher in the Methodist Episcopal Church in the 1840s, and conducted what by his estimation (often born out by official statistics) were extremely successful revivals in New York, New England, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Missouri, often accompanied by extensive physical manifestations. Not afraid of either the holiness or abolitionist messages, he clashed repeatedly and increasingly with the bureaucracy of what he saw as an increasingly upscale and formal MEC burdened with expensive churches and worldly conformity. “If you join the Methodists,” he told one revival audience, “there can be no more dancing, novel reading, afternoon parties, wearing of jewelry, or conformity to the world. This may seem hard to you. But there are a plenty of formal churches here, who will open folding doors to let you in.”

Redfield left the MEC for good over a controversial revival in St. Louis in the winter of 1858-1859. Shortly after the official organization of the FMC in 1860, he suffered a severely debilitating stroke which curtailed his ministry. According to Snyder, Redfield wrote his autobiography in 1861 or 1862. The last few chapters (mostly omitted by Terrill) record visions and revelations he experienced during his convalescence, including his conviction that the Civil War was a direct result of the MEC’s lack of “fidelity to God and humanity” shown in the acceptance of slavery: “When the spiritual phases of Methodism are turned out of doors, [and then] beautiful edifices, metropolitans, fiddles, and the whole claptrap of worldly policy and appliances subsisted, ruin is the result.”

Snyder has enhanced Redfield’s manuscript with detailed footnotes which give specific historical context (including statistics and independent accounts of Redfield’s revivals); compare the manuscript with Terrill’s published account; and occasionally point out passages crucial to Redfield’s theological development. His editing of the text itself is light, allowing Redfield’s vivid, somewhat disjointed narrative style to stand out in its full power. The volume also contains a few pictures, a chronology of Redfield’s life, a bibliography, and a reasonably extensive index. Unfortunately, Scarecrow Press’s production quality has declined in recent years, and the volume is not as physically attractive and durable as its content (and price) deserves. Nevertheless, it makes a valuable primary source available to those seeking a deeper understanding of the 19th-century MEC as it wrestled with the tensions between its noisy, populist past and its well-modulated uptown future.

Jennifer Woodruff-Tait
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BOOKS BRIEFLY NOTED


This autobiography gives a very personal glimpse into the life of Methodism in Bolivia, Argentina, and Texas as experience in the life of ministry of the author. Merubia is a retired elder in the Southwest Texas Annual Conference. Subtitled, “A Candid Life Story Through Joy and Sorrow” the reader journeys with Merubia across North and South America learning of life in the church and the impact of governments and politics on the lives of the people. In relating the many stories of family life, Merubia shares his views of ministry, the gospel, servanthood, making disciples, and inviting persons to accept Jesus Christ into their lives. This is a much needed window on the global nature of Methodism and the interrelationships among Christians around the world.


Biography is a time honored and well used genre for inspiring persons to live faithfully as the stories are told of the saints who have gone before. Thomas McAnally’s admiring biography of Bishop Copeland seeks to do just that. Drawing on Bishop Copeland’s papers and family remembrances, McAnally writes a warm work of praise and appreciation for Copeland’s devotion to the church, brilliance as a preacher, and passion for evangelism. As a Methodist Protestant pastor, Copeland’s life is seen against the backdrop of the merger of 1939, the merger in 1968 with the Evangelical United Brethren Church, and the dissolution of the Central Jurisdiction across the landscape of Texas and Nebraska. Copeland’s emphasis on making disciples presages the current mission statement of The United Methodist Church and the emphasis of the Council of Bishops.

Robert J. Williams