JOHN WESLEY AND THE ENLIGHTENED HISTORIANS
KEN MACMILLAN

John Welsey was no stranger to the writings of Enlightened historians. He left comments about the writings of Voltaire, David Hume, and William Robertson, three historians whom one writer has fairly termed patriarchs of 18th century historiography. Wesley had little good to say about these writers: Voltaire was a “consummate coxcomb!”, Hume did not understand “the heart of man,” and Robertson, a Christian divine, deserved censure for writing history “with so little Christianity in it” and instead attributing events not to God but to fortune or chance. It is comments like these, more often than not directed toward contemporary intellectuals, that have encouraged historians over the past century to accuse Wesley of anti-intellectualism, of subjecting the rationality of science and reason to the irrationality of superstitious religion.

Yet recent work by Frederick Dreyer, John English, J. W. Haas, and Henry Rack, among others, has shown Wesley to be very much a product of the 18th century. Trained in the liberal, classical tradition of his age and well aware of the commonly accepted principles of Lockean empiricism, Cartesian rationalism, and Newtonian physics, Wesley strove in his writings to show that revealed religion and the Age of Reason were complementary and reconcilable. As Dreyer has shown, for example, in his famous and

1J. B. Black, The Art of History: A Study of Four Great Historians of the Eighteenth Century (London, 1926). The fourth historian was Edward Gibbon, whose well-known History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire did not appear in final form until 1788, by which time Wesley’s reading had reduced considerably, perhaps accounting for the reason he does not appear to have read it.


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tellingly-titled Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Wesley incorporated the theories of contemporaries John Locke and David Hume regarding faith and belief into his own theology. This paper reveals that Wesley attempted a reconciliation of this sort in written history. Furthermore, in his own historical writings, he showed his use of contemporary historical models, demonstrating that in written history, as in theology, Wesley was influenced by, indebted to, and shared theories with, his more secular contemporaries.

I

Joseph Seaborn, the only historian to write on Wesley's views about history, has shown that to Wesley history was a ministerial and educational tool designed to instruct in virtuous living, demonstrate the sovereignty and immanence of God in historical events, and reinforce scriptural truths. Seaborn's argument is persuasive, and is certainly in concord with Wesley's role as minister, educator, and spiritual leader of Methodism. When evaluating a historical work in his Journal, purchased largely by Methodist lay preachers, Wesley considered these principles and censured or approved of the history depending on how well they were applied. Writing about extant histories of England, for example, Wesley complained that they "seem calculated only for Atheists." He continued: "for there is nothing about GOD in them. . . . Nay, from the whole tenor of their discourses one would suppose that GOD was quite out of the question." Wesley's solution was to gather and expurgate these and other histories, making considerable changes in order to correct perceived infelicities of interpretation and methodology, reconciling the history with his own principles. "My view in writing history," Wesley candidly wrote to his brother Charles in 1774, "is to bring God into it."

Something that Seaborn did not consider is Wesley's views in relation to other 18th century historians. At the same time when Wesley desired history to affirm God's immanence and scriptural truths, the prominence of Enlightened ideas in defining the world as rational and governed by the quantifiable rules of science had resulted in fundamental changes in intellectual speculation. Eighteenth-century scholars became convinced that the right application of science and rational thought was capable of unlocking the world's secrets. The world was created and set in motion by God, but rather than being governed by mysterious forces intelligible only to God, it
moved in Newtonian orderliness, governed by immutable principles. Enlightened thinkers, among them historians, criticized revealed religion—the supposed external proofs of Christian teachings based on appeals to miracles and prophecies—which were contrary to natural laws and common sense. Historiography became an exploration of humankind's movement toward greater rationality and empiricism.9

Given the stark oppositions between Wesley's and most of his contemporaries' views of history, one might think that any relationship between them would be one of sharp contrast. But Wesley himself firmly believed that reason and religion need not be opposed in history writing, that they could exist both complementary and parallel to each other. He first applied this reconciliatory view to history in a famous dispute with the Rev. Dr. Conyers Middleton, an Anglican clergyman who held various posts in Cambridge University. As Ted A. Campbell has suggested, this quarrel about written history was an ideological conflict between, on the one hand, Wesley's desire to see God's intervention throughout the range of human history, and on the other hand, Enlightened historians' distaste for the superstition of revealed religion in historical writing.10 In his Free Inquiry, published in December, 1748, Middleton accepted scriptural accounts of miracles, among which he listed, for example, "healing the sick," "casting out devils," and "speaking in unknown tongues," but suggested that by the second century, "the extraordinary gifts of the Apostolic age were by this time actually withdrawn."11 After this time, accounts of miraculous powers came to be offered by highly questionable claimants, only believed by Roman Catholics and certain "modern Fanatics," among whom Middleton included Methodists.

Middleton's treatise was not a work of dispassionate scholarship and as might be expected nor was Wesley's response. The latter work did, however, show Wesley to be sympathetic to the intellectual tensions of his own age. In a seventy-nine page open letter addressed to "any man of common understanding," Wesley admitted that God had removed miraculous powers from man's hands, though he disagreed with Middleton on when this occurred. Where Middleton argued for the cessation of miracles in the second century, Wesley pushed this time forward to the coming of Constantine, after which "a general corruption in faith and morals infected the Christian Church." During the Apostolic age, though, the accounts of the early Christian writers merely needed independent verification to demonstrate their

11 Conyers Middleton, A Free Inquiry into the Miraculous Powers which are Supposed to have Subsisted in the Christian Church through Several Successive Centuries (London, 1749 [sic]), 9.
truthfulness. This verification, Wesley asserted, was found in the similarity between the miracles described by the early Christian writers and those told in the New Testament. To impugn such accounts of the primitive church was also to impugn scriptural accounts, which Wesley certainly would not entertain.12

Of course, Wesley had a vested interest in making this claim. His doctrine of Primitive Christianity, of which the early Christian writers formed the foundation, made it necessary for him to challenge any arguments that suggested these writers lacked credibility. Nevertheless, in appealing to "any man of common understanding," in recognizing the lack of miraculous powers and the intangibility of God's providence in the modern age, and in measuring the veracity of 2nd to 4th century miraculous powers against scriptural accounts (which not even the most assiduous Enlightened writers seriously considered challenging), Wesley could effectively escape the charge of espousing anti-reason. Although Wesley believed that God was providential throughout the range of human history, he did not argue for the continuation of miraculous powers when there were no witnesses to their occurrence. Instead, as Wesley was to suggest in a couple of sermons, proof of divine intervention no longer required first-hand accounts of miracles and prophecy, because reason and science could now provide these proofs.

In his sermons, "The Imperfections of Human Knowledge" (1784), Wesley described how science and reason could be profitably used to show God's sovereignty over the human world. Its epigraph, taken from 1 Corinthians 13:9, is "We know in part," a reminder that humankind's knowledge is limited. God gave man reason so that "the present knowledge of man is exactly adapted to his present wants," but kept the greater part of knowledge concealed to "hide pride from man."13 Thus, the existence of reason was attributable to providence. To Wesley, it powerfully affirmed God's sovereignty. Reason alone, however, could not offer enough answers to satisfy the thinking man. Wesley argued in "The Case of Reason Impartially Considered" (1781) that reason has a significant purpose since it helps mankind understand the natural world created by God. But since reason cannot give either faith, love, virtue, happiness, or salvation, which only the love of God and scriptural hope could do, it necessarily falls short of replacing religion. Hence, a via media was required between those who undervalued and those who overvalued reason; reason and religion must exist in tandem.14 In both sermons, Wesley promoted scientific inquiry and rational thinking while simultaneously providing a prominent place for God and scriptural revela-

tion in history. Whereas in the primitive church, God's providence could be shown by witness accounts, in the modern age it could be shown by rational thought and science. Wesley was not the only contemporary theologian to attempt a reconciliation between reason and religion, though he was one of its more successful advocates.\(^\text{15}\)

One can stretch this reconciliatory view too far. Certainly, Wesley and the Enlightened historians were in strong opposition regarding God's intervention in history. To Wesley, the right application of science and reason could demonstrate what divine providence has wrought throughout history. To the Enlightened historians, crusading under the motto Écrasez l'infâme, it could demonstrate that the universe was constant and immutable, lacking the uncertainties of divine intervention. So, too, did they disagree on the uses of history. To Wesley, as Seaborn showed, it was to hold up cardinal examples of virtue, divine intervention, and scriptural truths.\(^\text{16}\) To the Enlightened historians, as Leonard Kreiger has suggested, it was to show how the irrationality of the past was being overthrown through the development of reason and science.\(^\text{17}\)

II

Despite their clear differences on the uses of history, a pillar of consensus formed on Wesley's and the Enlightened historians' beliefs on the value of history. To Wesley, it could help humankind on its preordained progress toward Christian perfection by way of justification and sanctification. To the Enlightened writers, it could show the progress of humankind toward another kind of perfection, a world governed solely by rational, quantifiable principles. Both, then, believed in a teleological theory of history, that over time humankind evolved into something better. Perhaps the 18th century historian Jacques Turgot put this belief best when he declared that "the whole human race, through alternate periods of rest and unrest, of weal and woe, goes on advancing, although at a slow pace, towards greater perfection."\(^\text{18}\) In their over-arching desire to show progress, neither Wesley nor the Enlightened historians were particularly interested in history for its own sake and they shunned the purely antiquarian pursuit of gathering and indiscriminately relating historical events, because such history served little function. Rather, they believed, to quote their contemporary Lord Bolingbroke, that "history is philosophy teaching by examples."\(^\text{19}\) As Wesley wrote: "A bare


\(^{16}\) Seaborn, "John Wesley's Views on the Uses of History."


\(^{19}\) H. S. J. Lord Bolingbroke (ed. I. Krammick), *Historical Writings* (Chicago, 1972), 9.
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recital of facts can enrich the memory, but the historian ... administers useful lessons of wisdom and prudence.\textsuperscript{20} The Enlightened historians would surely agree.

Given their consensus on the value of history, when writing as historians, Wesley and the Enlightened writers could apply a similar model of history writing without compromising their views on the desired results of such history. The principal tenets of Enlightened historiography are not generally matters of contention among historians, and all of Edward Gibbon, David Hume, William Robertson, and Voltaire, besides many lesser writers, shared all of these principles to a greater or lesser degree, although they did not always explicitly express them.\textsuperscript{21} Their approval of the progress theory, of the importance of history as an instructional tool, and of empirical reasoning, made (1) universality, (2) readability, (3) claims to impeccable methods of scholarship, and (4) the highly selective use of evidence, fundamental tenets which could help accomplish these goals.\textsuperscript{22} Let us briefly examine each of these in turn, and at the same time examine Wesley's own understanding and application of these principles.

To begin with, Enlightened historians believed that human progress was not something that could be shown over a brief period of time, and thus universal histories were essential. Voltaire portrayed a whole society "in the round" in \textit{The Age of Louis XIV} and offered wide-ranging general reflections in the \textit{Essay on the Customs and the Spirit of Nations}. Hume wrote on the history of England from Julius Caesar, and Robertson penned a complete history of America. In another work, Robertson suggested that universality was important "to mark the great steps by which \{the nations of Europe\} advanced from barbarism to refinement, and to point out those general principles and events which . . . [brought about] . . . improvement in policy and in manners." Histories narrow in subject matter could not accomplish this. As well, chronological accuracy and giving equal space to each subject or time period were not paramount; "it is of more importance . . . to show how the operation of one event, or one cause, prepared the way for another, and augmented its in-


\textsuperscript{21} I am aware that seeing Hume as a proponent of progress argues against some historians, especially R. G. Collingwood (\textit{The Idea of History}, rev. ed., ed. Jan Van der Dussen [Oxford, 1994], 77, 83) and Breisach (\textit{Historiography}, 210). But while Hume was admittedly not as strongly accepting of progress, he did agree that the empirical study of human experience "affords room for many general observations concerning the gradual change of our sentiments and inclinations." (David Hume [ed. C. W. Hendel], \textit{An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding} [Indianapolis, 1955], 95). For an argument that accepts Hume as supporting progress, see: S. K. Wertz, "Hume, History, and Human Nature," in David Livingston and Marie Martin, eds., \textit{Hume as Philosopher, Politics and History} (New York 1991), 77–92.

In Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, for example, the first three centuries were given as much space as the last nine, and frequent comparisons were made between past and present events.

Few of the histories that Wesley recommended to Methodists, and none of those he expurgated, are narrow in subject matter, most covering at least several centuries. His *Short Roman History*, like Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*, covered two millennia, and his *Concise History of England* (1776), like Hume’s *History of England*, 1700 years. Wesley’s belief in the instructional value of these histories is better shown in his four-volume *Concise Ecclesiastical History, from the Birth of Christ, to the Beginning of the Present Century* (1781) where Wesley included a universal depth and breadth of treatment. Wesley dealt with each century separately and in two parts: external history, dealing with government, doctrine, and ceremonies, and internal history, showing the spiritual state of the church. Such a broad thematic approach allowed Wesley to give readers a full understanding of Christianity. As well, the space devoted to certain epochs says much about Wesley’s desire to show progress and his lack of concern for giving equal space to historical events. The time of the Church Fathers (to c. 320) and of Protestantism (c. 1520–1700), a total of some 500 years, receives approximately 750 duodecimo pages, or 150 pages per century, describing in detail the pious and simple lives of many eminent Christians. The period of “corruption” (c. 320–1520), 1200 years, receives fewer than 600 pages, or less than 50 pages per century, of circumspect narrative in which Wesley attempted to demonstrate the falseness surrounding the church. Wesley also appended a separate work entitled *A Short History of the People Called Methodists*, which could show Methodists where they fit into the larger picture. Without such a broad chronological period, Wesley could not have demonstrated that Christians are moving toward their ultimate goal, progress that can be shown by offering a description of how over a lengthy period of tribulation, Christians threw off the yoke of corruption and began living a more scriptural life. Because of its universality, Wesley believed that the *Concise Ecclesiastical History* was the only church history Methodists would ever need.

The lessons that Wesley and Enlightened writers wished to impart could be learned only if people read histories willingly and eagerly, and so the writing had to be eloquent and the subject matter entertaining. The Enlightened historians strove in their histories to avoid pedantry and ostentatious displays of erudition. Instruction without entertainment, and vice versa, was not suf-

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23 William Robertson (ed. Felix Gilbert), *The Progress of Society in Europe: A Historical Outline from the Subversion of the Roman Empire to the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century* (Chicago, 1972), 7–17. This was the introductory volume to Robertson’s *History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V* (1769). Even though Robertson was a devout Presbyterian who accepted God’s divine plan, he saw history as an exploration of “revolutions of human affairs.” Sacred texts alone could deal with God’s plan. (*Progress of Society in Europe*, xvii.)

ficient. History had to accomplish both tasks. So, Hume in his *History of England* could support his plan to “hasten through the obscure and uninteresting period of Saxon annals” and “reserve a more full narration” for those times which “promise entertainment and instruction to the reader.”

Even Wesley could applaud the eloquence of Enlightened historiography. He found in Robertson’s *History of America* writing that was “always clear and strong, and frequently elegant.” Whatever other problems Wesley had with this history, he could not deny its appeal, as indeed it is difficult to deny that much of the Enlightened historians’ success, especially Voltaire’s and Gibbon’s, may be attributed to their elegance of presentation.

Evidence of Wesley’s desire that history be eminently readable and entertaining while it instructs is abundant in the *Journal* and prefaces to the abridgements, where adjectives such as “dull,” “dry,” “tedious,” “pedantic,” and “prolix” are used to describe the majority of his historical readings. In a passage illustrative of Wesley’s dry humour, he questioned whether such writing was not “exactly fitted to spread a pleasing slumber over the eyes of the gentle reader?” Among all of the histories that Wesley read, his highest praise went to Henry Brooke’s *The Fool of Quality; the History of Henry, Earl of Moreland* because it entertained while it instructed. He wrote that Brooke’s writing was “frequently beautiful and elegant, and, where there is room for it, truly sublime.” The work’s “greatest excellence” was that it roused emotion in the reader: “The strokes of this are so delicately fine, the touches so easy, natural, and affecting, that I know not who can survey it with tearless eyes, unless he has a heart of stone.” Important truths “are not only well illustrated, but also proved in an easy, natural manner; so that the thinking reader is taught, without any trouble, the most essential doctrines of religion.” Still, through abridgement he omitted “most of the trifling and ludicrous incidents, which would give little entertainment, to men of understanding.”

When Wesley abridged Tobias Smollett’s *History of England*, he put his belief in entertaining history to full use. Smollett, writing on William III’s defeat of Viscount Dundee at the Battle of Killiecrankie in July 1689, had simply written that the Viscount “fell by a random shot in the engagement.” Wesley’s version is rather different: “And Dundee, casued in steel, lifted up his

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27 Examples are numerous. See *Journal* entries for October 4, 1750; August 12, 1767; December 7, 1771; April 28, 1772; June 25, 1778; July 6, 1781. Also Wesley, *Concise Ecclesiastical History*, I, v; Wesley, *Concise History of England*, I, iii.
29 John Wesley, *The History of Henry, Earl of Moreland*, 2 vols. (London, 1781), I, iv–vi. (Hereafter *History of Henry, Earl of Moreland.*) This is the only history Wesley abridged that was not universal, but its elegance of presentation and its displays of history’s raison d’être, to instruct in religious truths, made it irresistible to Wesley.
arm, and sware [sic] a broad oath, He would not leave an Englishman alive that day. Just then a musket-ball struck him under the arm, on the joints of his armour, and he dropt down dead. So GOD avenged the blood of the poor, which he had shed like water." Undeniably, Wesley's version is the more entertaining and affective of the two, and characteristically the providence of God is amply shown, since, unlike Smollett, Wesley could not attribute events to chance.

The 18th century was a time when the tools of modern historical writing were being developed, specifically the quest for truth begun by the Bollandists and the Maurists, Catholic scholars who developed a critical method of history writing based on irrefutable sources, primary documents, and non-literary material. These were not influences that the Enlightened historians were likely to have escaped. Indeed, their empiricism could justify no other approach. Facts must be doubly checked, information drawn from both sides of a dispute, and possible partisanship determined and eliminated from historical discourse. Hume prided himself on his impartiality: "I may be liable," he wrote to a friend, "to the reproach of ignorance, but I am certain to escape that of partiality." Robertson, certainly the most careful of the Enlightened historians, went so far as to append to his History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V a series of "Proofs and Illustrations": "I have carefully pointed out the sources from which I have derived information, and have cited the writers on whose authority I rely with a minute exactness." Voltaire expressed concern that historians differentiate between "fact" and "fable" by refusing to believe anything contrary to nature or common sense, by suspending judgement on all questionable events, and by receiving anecdotal evidence with marked skepticism.31

Wesley, too, made great claims to impartiality and indubitable research and he commended a few historians for their impeccable methodology.32 But in his Concise History of England he criticized most historians for their partiality. He admitted that it was difficult to "divest oneself of prejudice and partiality," but in this and other works, he offered a number of solutions to help avoid partiality.33 One solution was to be well educated and well read, a comment characteristic of 18th century intellectuals. Another was to write on events for which the historian did not have a vested interest in maintaining a certain position. Wesley accused George Buchanan of partiality regarding his histories of Mary, Queen of Scots, because he was a hireling in


32For those histories Wesley found objective, see a host of Journal entries from April, 1768, to November, 1769 (BE Works, XXII, 123–211 passim).

Queen Elizabeth's pay.34 The best solution was the use of irrefutable sources. To Wesley, Wodrow's History of the Sufferings of the Church of Scotland "would transcend belief, but that the vouchers are too authentic to admit of any exception."35 He also recommended rejecting any material that is wholly beyond common sense, such as that "there was ever such a nation as the Amazons in the world."36 As we saw in his dispute with Conyers Middleton, Wesley was generally as skeptical toward unsupported anecdotal evidence as the Enlightened writers. Indeed, Wesley's solutions to partiality strongly mirror those of the Enlightened historians and show him to be well aware of contemporary concerns regarding history writing.

In theory, then, Wesley and the Enlightened writers sought and strove for objectivity and careful procedure in historical writing, as would be expected of any educated 18th century person, and in some measure they did apply these notions where they could be reconciled with their broader philosophy. This application was not altogether successful. R. G. Collingwood termed the Enlightened historians too "anti-historical"—that is, not sufficiently interested in history for its own sake—to expect them to use these new methods of historical research in a truly scholarly spirit, a criticism that also can be made against Wesley.37 As G. E. Aylmer has recently written, and as we have partly seen above, 18th century historians who supported the progress theory "seem to have been more concerned with lucidity and elegance of expression than with close investigation of the evidence or the proper balance between research and exposition."38

If, for example, showing human progress was a chief criterion of history, Enlightened historians believed, then only great events and great people deserved their attention. In his Age of Louis XIV, for example, Voltaire claimed to discard "minute details" and dwell on "that which deserves the attention of all time, which paints the spirit and customs of men, which may serve for instruction and to counsel the love of virtue, of the arts and of the fatherland." Hume and Robertson tended to agree with Voltaire. The former chose to "drop all the minute circumstances," and the latter averred that: "Nations as well as men arrive at maturity by degrees, and the events which happened during their infancy or early youth, cannot be recollected, and deserve not to be remembered." In addition to eliminating all information that was not directly instructive and entertaining, the Enlightened historians

36Journal 21, July 26, 1787, BBH Works, IV, 388.
tended to suppress or modify factual data in order to preserve the dignity of important persons, to better reconcile theory and reality.39

In these ahistorical techniques Wesley was complicit. His demand that historians exclude unimportant information, and include only those incidents that tended to instruct or entertain has already been seen in his comments regarding the abridgement of Brooke’s The Fool of Quality, but is best shown in his Concise History of England. “In such an History as I wish to see,” Wesley wrote, “unimportant incidents should have no place: at most, they should be very briefly and slightly touched, just to preserve the thread of narration.” He complained that most histories are filled with these unimportant events, “the knowledge of which brings the reader neither profit nor pleasure.” Wesley approved of the classical historian Tacitus’s tendency to pass over a thousand unimportant circumstances, while reserving full narration to “those striking incidents, which have a tendency either to improve the understanding, or to amend the heart.”40 Only “shining examples which display their lustre,” Wesley was to write in the Concise Ecclesiastical History, “have an admirable tendency to inflame our piety.”41 Thus he could castigate the biographer of Mr. de Renty’s life, who, “by inserting all, if not more than all, the weak things that holy man ever said or did . . . has cast the shade of superstition and folly over one of the brightest patterns of heavenly wisdom.42 Like his Enlightened contemporaries, Wesley believed that regardless of how accurate some information was, if it was detrimental to proper instruction or if it gave the wrong impression of an important person, it was unimportant and need not be related.

III

Using history writing as essentially a case study, this essay has shown that, contrary to some historians’ beliefs, and confirming recent historians’ findings, John Wesley was solidly immersed in, and indebted to, contemporary epistemological notions. In several works, Wesley attempted to reconcile his belief in providential history with science and reason, believing that when properly understood, and its limitations recognized, empiricism could show what God has wrought in history. A shared belief that mankind was progressing teleologically toward perfection, despite an opposing opinion on the form that this perfection would take, encouraged both Wesley and the Enlightened writers to desire universal, entertaining, elegant, and instructive histories that were necessarily shorn of materials deemed unimportant or

41Concise Ecclesiastical History, I, 16.
42Journal 1, January 6, 1738, BE Works, XVIII, 208.
detrimental to this purpose. Wesley's similarity with the Enlightened histo-
rians was likely less the result of a direct, explicit influence and more the
result of a common education and common historical outlook, although in
the climate of the 18th century he could not have escaped their influence and
(although Wesley himself might be loath to admit it) possibly even knew
that this application of these principles furthered his reconciliation with
reason and provided a wider readership for his histories. Regardless of
Wesley's conscious or subconscious intentions, in historical writing he
showed himself to be sympathetic to the intellectual tensions of his age, par-
ticularly the contemporary dislike for superstitious revealed religion. He
was also contributory to the reconciliation of religion and reason, and in-
debted as much as many 18th century historians to the application of empir-
ical techniques to history.