

## JOHN WIGGER'S ASBURY

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Ezekiel Cooper's 1816 sermon on Francis Asbury's death, enlarged to some 230 pages, provided an assessment unequalled until John Wigger's *American Saint*. Three dimensions of Cooper's assessment helped me appreciate Wigger's new biography.

1. Cooper's Asbury so shaped American Methodism that to write his life was/is to write the history of the Methodist movement and vice versa:

It is almost, if not altogether, impossible to give a narrative of his life and character, without incorporating with it, in some degree, the history of the Methodist Episcopal Church. The one, is so intimately and essentially connected with the other, that they cannot well be separated, without injustice to the subject. The *Memoirs* of his life, must necessarily contain a considerable history of the Methodist church in America. And a faithful history of the church, must, as necessarily, give a history of his life.

2. Cooper's Asbury modeled and molded Methodism's ministry and made the connection truly a connection:

Perhaps, no other man, could be equally justifiable, in wishing, or claiming, or exercising, the same degree of authority in the church; and, probably, the conferences will not consider themselves justifiable in admitting, or granting, the same power to any other. Bishop Asbury, stood as a father, and as a patriarch, in the connexion. The preachers, and the members, were nurtured, and brought up under him, like children by a parent; they were in the habit of being directed by him, and of looking up to him, with filial affection, and peculiar reverence, and of rendering a respectful submission to him. As sons, and children, in the gospel, they felt their obligations to him, as to a father. They had also experienced his parental care over them, and proved his fatherly solicitude for their prosperity and welfare. He was, to the American connexion, like the patriarch Jacob, to the tribes of Israel. The venerable Wesley, was, as the Abraham, the father of the Methodist community; and Asbury, as the Jacob to the American Methodists.

No other man, can ever possibly stand in the same relation to us. To us, he was like a Moses, who led us out of Egypt, through the wilderness, toward the promised land. And from him, the servant of God, we received, as it were, the tables of the law.

3. For Cooper, Asbury served as a prototype of the Christian. Having compared Asbury to the patriarch, Jacob, and to the deliverer, Moses, Cooper also invoked the image of the Apostle Paul, of John Wesley's self-image as a man of one book, and of the exemplary Christian:

Have we not the prototype, or the archetype, of the manner of life, of our late venerable bishop Asbury? That is, the original exemplar, in Paul, of the surprising copy, in Asbury?

In the early part of his life and ministry, more especially, he gave himself diligently

to study, and to reading; and had acquired a considerable stock of useful information and knowledge . . . . Of all his studies, there was one, especially, which was always dear to him, which he never neglected, and in which he was continually delighted, and never ceased to make an improvement in, unto the latest period of his life. It was, the study of the Bible, the Religion of the Bible, Christian and ministerial duty and usefulness. In this Christian science, this evangelical philosophy, he made a very extraordinary proficiency, and was equaled by few, perhaps surpassed by none.

He was truly a man great and wonderful in prayer. His access to the throne of grace was remarkable, his gifts in prayer were astonishing, and he appeared to address himself to God, in his intercessions with much assurance of faith . . . . Perhaps, no man every devoted himself more frequently, more fervently, and more devoutly, to prayer, than he.

Are we left as fatherless children? We had, and have, many brethren, many teachers, and instructors; but, we had only one father, and he is no more.<sup>1</sup>

### John Wigger and the Social Historians of Early American Methodism

Wigger's *American Saint* sustains and sharpens these three images of Asbury that Cooper sketched and adds a fourth. Wigger's Asbury shaped American Protestantism not just Methodism. So Wigger provides an assessment of Asbury's and of American Methodism's place in American society that echoes the mid-century estimates by William Warren Sweet and Winthrop Hudson. But Wigger probes more deeply into the interaction of Methodism with American culture than either of those historians. *American Saint* is the third of Wigger's books reconstructing the interaction of Methodism with American culture. His dissertation, revised as *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America*<sup>2</sup> appeared in 1998 and the results of a conference, co-edited with Nathan Hatch, *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture*,<sup>3</sup> appeared three years later.

Wigger's work has been rightly acclaimed as perhaps the best among a number of other quite fine recent social histories of early American Methodism and is much cited. *Taking Heaven by Storm* arrived on the scene amidst a flurry of attention to early Methodism by social historians whose books all derived, I think, from dissertations or dissertation research. These works responded, at least in part, to the case Nathan Hatch made in 1989 in *Democratization of American Culture* and in a much cited article, "The Puzzle of American Methodism."<sup>4</sup> Hatch argued against "The Puritan Origins of the American Self," and for taking Methodism and other popular movements

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<sup>1</sup> *The Substance of a Funeral Discourse, Delivered at the Request of the Annual Conference on Tuesday, the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April, 1816, in St. George's Church, Philadelphia: On the Death of the Rev. Francis Asbury, Superintendent, or Senior Bishop, of the Methodist Episcopal Church: Now enlarged* (Philadelphia: Jonathan Pounder, 1819), 58-60, 118-119, 124-125, 130, 185.

<sup>2</sup> John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> John H. Wigger and Nathan Hatch, eds., *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Chapter 1 of *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture*.

seriously for their creative and transformative societal effect. Whether actually motivated by Hatch's "Puzzle" or not, we saw, in relative short order, an array of fine books that now figure prominently in our understanding of the denomination, its dramatic nineteenth-century growth, and its role in the construction of the American popular culture.

Note that, unlike myself and most commentators on Methodism, these younger historians published with secular presses: Philip F. Hardt, *The Soul of Methodism: The Class Meeting in Early New York Methodism*; Dee E. Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800: The Shaping of an Evangelical Culture*; Cynthia Lynn Lyerly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind, 1770-1810*; William R. Sutton, *Journeymen for Jesus: Evangelical Artisans Confront Capitalism in Jacksonian Baltimore*; Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt*; and A. Gregory Schneider, *The Way of the Cross Leads Home: The Domestication of American Methodism*.<sup>5</sup> These scholars—and one might add others like Kathryn Long, Beth Schweiger, Richard Shiels, Catherine Brekus and others who give Methodism central roles in more broadly gauged works—have indeed transformed our understanding of religion in the early national period and certainly altered our picture of Methodism's part therein. So though Wigger's work did not and does not stand alone in that reassessment, his has become the most widely cited and been recognized as the most significant.

### *American Saint*

This new book has been worth the wait. It is clearly related to the first volume, cites it in footnotes, and reiterates Wigger's findings about Methodism's preeminent role in the transformation of American religion and society. Through painstaking research—no one has so thoroughly, carefully and exhaustively covered and uncovered resources on early Methodism, as the incredible footnotes show—Wigger now focuses those claims on Francis Asbury. The title may mislead persons unfamiliar with Wigger's authoritative scholarship. He shows Asbury to have Americanized Methodism, to have "redefined the religious landscape of America,"<sup>6</sup> and to have been the primary agent in the development of the American system of popular, voluntary, expansive, vernacular, societal transformative religion. And Wigger berates interpreters of Asbury after his day—mostly the bishop's fellow

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<sup>5</sup> Philip F. Hardt, *The Soul of Methodism: The Class Meeting in Early New York Methodism* (Lanham: UP of America, 2000); Dee E. Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800: The Shaping of an Evangelical Culture* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000); Cynthia Lynn Lyerly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind, 1770-1810* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998); William R. Sutton, *Journeymen for Jesus: Evangelical Artisans Confront Capitalism in Jacksonian Baltimore* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1998); Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997); and A. Gregory Schneider, *The Way of the Cross Leads Home: The Domestication of American Methodism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009), 417.

Methodists—for obscuring his greatness. So the word “saint” in the title may initially lead some potential readers to think this a study in spirituality and deter some historians from picking it up. Any such avoidance will be quickly dissipated by scholarly reception to the book.

The “Saint” in the title does, however, accurately describe a welcome deepening in Wigger’s historical sensitivity. In ways beyond what we saw in *Taking Heaven by Storm*, Wigger probes Asbury’s religious formation, devotional or spiritual practices, emotional ups and downs, patterns of interaction, leadership style, and day-to-day reading habits. Treatment of Asbury has tended to extremes, to hagiography by Methodists or demonization by Methodism’s competition, in either case, to caricature. In Wigger’s treatment, Asbury emerges as an empathetic figure whose spiritual depth, capacity to read character, loyalty to John Wesley, and single-minded commitment to the Methodist cause commanded incredible respect, trust and affection among Methodists. Wigger shows Asbury’s authority to have derived from such strength of personality and his relation to and reading of others. He effectively dispels the notion that Asbury was an autocrat and that Methodism at that period was hierarchical. Later bishops would be imperial and later Methodism centralized and hierarchical. Not Asbury or Asbury’s movement. Wigger makes Asbury very credible—not a “sinless” saint but a leader who made grave mistakes, embraced slavery, had important critics, and was in many ways quite limited—but for all his faults effectively embodied and institutionalized a religiosity and religious organization that drew on and contributed to the energies, dynamism, mobility, adventuresome and openness of Americans and American society.

### Six Books in One

One way of acknowledging the complexity and nuance in *American Saint* is to recognize it as six books in one. First, it is as finely grained and exhaustive a biography as we will likely see, perhaps ever, and certainly for decades. Wigger has been over everything that relates in any way to Asbury and introduces, via exhaustive notes, the secondary and primary material in terms of which Asbury and American Methodism are to be understood. Wigger stays with Asbury year-by-year, follows the career chronologically, treats both Asbury’s inner (spiritual, intellectual, emotion) and outer (organizational) life, and, when Asbury is ill, tells us more than most of us need to know about his ailments and medicine. Second, the book provides a superb analysis of the transmission, adaptation and institutionalizing of Wesleyanism in America. Fidelity, acculturation, organizational embodiment—all three were Asbury’s doing and we watch Asbury’s exposure to Wesleyanism in England and the unfolding of the Methodist system in America, looking over Asbury’s shoulder as it were. Third, Wigger offers an accessible, readable, engaging reconsideration of the formative period of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Jean Miller Schmidt, Kenneth E. Rowe and I come at this stage in somewhat different fashion, writing as we do with the teaching of

United Methodist history, polity and doctrine in mind. Wigger's books may well serve the non-Methodist better. Fourth, he introduces other leaders; explains and names Methodist practices, beliefs and organizational features; and treats tensions and conflicts (most notably, over slavery), in ways that non-Methodists will appreciate. And, fifthly, because Wigger writes as a non-Methodist and for general as well as denominational readers, he can more credibly make the case that he does for Methodism in the shaping of American culture. That theme is introduced early and sustained through the book. It is an important, revisionist evaluation of Methodism's place in American history and frankly one that seems like denominational self-aggrandizing when United Methodists attempt similar claims.

Finally, Wigger offers us, as already mentioned, a nuanced study of Asbury's leadership, his power and authority, his itinerant general superintendency, his exercise of *episkopé*. Wigger gives us a bishop

- whose early home life and apprenticeship among market-oriented artisans made him innovative, flexible, and consumer-sensitive and uniquely equipped to deal with the diverse common people (white and black) across the North American landscape;
- whose inner resources and depth—spiritual, emotional, intellectual—kept him focused on the church's mission;
- whose character, integrity and warmth elicited affection, trust and loyalty;
- whose capacity to read the gifts and grace of his preachers and whose judgment of others' character made him effective in stationing preachers;
- whose humor, relationship-building, and willingness to work behind the scenes gained him the trust of his preachers and an authority that did not require pomp or display;
- whose fierce loyalty to Wesleyan practice, order, doctrine and discipline warranted his adaptation of it to the American religious market-place;
- whose passion to reach the frontier and continued concern for rural America kept Methodist circuits uncommonly sensitive to population movements; and
- whose relentless travel modeled the itinerancy which he demanded of others.

Asbury exercised *episkopé* by exemplification, personal interaction, presence and devotion to the cause. He modeled what he required and demanded of others.

### **Wigger's Next Project?**

In our session at the AAR, I did not get a chance to ask Wigger what comes next. I would hope that he might entertain further engagement with Methodism and would encourage others to offer him similar counsel. I could

see his revisiting early American Methodism yet again with focus on slavery, on which his work already sheds much light, or on a cadre of figures around Asbury whom he has read but who remain in the background in this study of the bishop. Or he might move to a slightly later period, perhaps in reconsideration of the divisions in the movement. Having as much control over early Methodism as he does, I would hate to see him move on to a totally separate project. (And I say that as one who, with two colleagues, is just now completing an equally extended competitive writing project, a text-survey of American Methodism, 1760s to 2000, and who does not agree entirely with Wigger on how to depict Methodism's embrace of culture and its growing societal prominence.)

The payoff for Wigger in building on his investment in and demonstrated expertise on American Methodism might be seen in another scholar who has stayed with the topic of Methodism and whose research has recently earned him a chair at Harvard. I speak of David Hempton. Hempton's *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*<sup>7</sup> works in a trans-Atlantic fashion much as does Wigger and portrays Methodism in terms of paradoxes, tensions, contrasts and conflicts, a different strategy from *American Saint*. Hempton's production shows the value of working and reworking a productive vein. Hempton, and perhaps also W. Reginald Ward, might be held up as social historians with whom Wigger ought to be compared. Wigger is their scholarly peer.

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<sup>7</sup> David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (Yale UP, 2005).