

THE AUTHOR'S RESPONSE

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I would first like to thank Richard Heitzenrater, Jane Donovan, Ian Straker, and Russell Richey for their generous and thoughtful comments. It is a privilege and an honor to have this book reviewed by such an accomplished and knowledgeable panel. Their work on early Methodism has informed and enriched my own in so many ways.

As I researched and thought about Asbury's life I came to see that this would largely be a book about religious leadership, not just among Methodists, but within evangelicalism more broadly as it took shape following the American Revolution. I quickly realized that Asbury was not an autocrat as he is so often portrayed. Rather, he led through exemplary piety, an ability to connect with ordinary people, an almost instinctive feel for popular culture, and organizational genius. Along the way he lived a life of remarkable transparency. I also learned that he was not a very good preacher, but that he had an active and memorable sense of humor. The closer people got to him, the more they tended to like and respect him. He led both with his mind and his heart.

Dick Heitzenrater's work on John Wesley and British Methodism has been an essential resource and a helpful model. I am glad that he liked the illustrations (I spent a lot of time assembling them), but I am even happier that he found the epilogue worthwhile (it's my favorite chapter). It was tempting to end the book simply with Asbury's death, but I wanted to trace the application of his legacy over time. History is about creating context, and the story of Asbury's life has had many interpreters. Mapping how Asbury's legacy has been manipulated tells us as much about the development of American Methodism and its relationship to American culture as it does about Asbury. Heitzenrater is also right that it never occurred to me to wonder why John Wesley sent three preachers to ordain Asbury.

Jane Donovan is certainly correct that one of the central tensions in Asbury's life was between his commitment to voluntary poverty and the increasing wealth of the church. Considering that he traveled almost constantly for forty-five years, Asbury spent far more time in the modest homes of ordinary Methodists than he did in the homes of the wealthy. But, as Donovan points out, these wealthy members contributed a disproportionate share of the money the church relied on. Asbury rarely commented on this fact, which is probably why I underestimated its significance, but it clearly created a pattern toward respectability that would accelerate after Asbury's death. Hence, as Donovan says, we need more studies that trace these de-

velopments after 1816, the year of Asbury's death. In the past twenty years there have been a number of fine studies of Methodism before 1816 (as Richey says in his review), but few for what comes after that.

As Ian Straker notes, understanding Asbury's upbringing is key to understanding his later career (when isn't this true?). If I am qualified to practice eighteenth-century medicine I would never have the stomach for it! I readily concede Straker's point that "there are complexities" surrounding Asbury's response to slavery that are "deeper and more puzzling" than I present. But it is also true that Asbury was the only Methodist leader who regularly visited every region of the country every year. Within the space of a few weeks he might meet with South Carolina slaveholders, northern abolitionists, slaves, and free African Americans. It would have been far easier to stick with a single constituency, but Asbury was committed to a unified church; the tragedy was that he could not find a way out of the dilemma this created, but not surprising. Sanctification was most important to Asbury at the beginning and end of his career, which is perhaps a metaphor for the church. Currency values were as confusing as the medicine of the period, but whereas medical treatments significantly affected Asbury's life, currency conversions were mostly just an annoyance. I think Asbury paid so little attention to Canada because he never had enough preachers for the U.S., though the border was still clearly that, a border.

I completely agree with Russ Richey's assessment that Ezekiel Cooper's 1819 funeral sermon for Asbury was the best biography of Asbury until very recently, though in fact I didn't read Cooper's account until relatively late in my research and writing. Richey is also quite correct that in my earlier work I frankly did not understand the depth or significance of Wesleyan piety and its role in shaping American Methodism. Spending a decade with Asbury corrected this, at least to some degree. No one knows the history of early American Methodism better than Richey, or has analyzed it from so many angles, so it is very satisfying to see him conclude that the book works on a number of different levels. As Cooper first noted, the church and Asbury were nearly inseparable during his lifetime, so that the history of one becomes the story of the other.

Asbury was one of the most important religious figures in American history. He created a new model of religious leadership that is still with us today. Eventually there were more Methodist churches than post offices in the U.S. To understand this growth and the nature of American evangelicalism more broadly, Asbury is a good place to start.