

Keynote Address for the Conference

THE TASK OF THE METHODIST HISTORIAN TODAY

by Frederick E. Maser

The task of the Methodist historian may be summarized in three words or expressions: Integrity, Understanding, and Moral Purpose.

Without integrity in the discovery and use of his materials the historian will present a distorted, prejudiced and preconceived picture of what took place. He will fail in what Professor W. H. Walsh terms the "business of the historian," namely "to construct not just a plain narrative of what occurred in the past, but a significant narrative--a narrative which is self-explanatory, which makes us see not only the order of events but also their connections."<sup>1</sup>

Without understanding the historian will present his characters as wooden soldiers, the play-things of children, who place them on the table or on the floor and when weary return them once more to their box. Understanding is necessary if the historian is to give life to his characters or to fulfill the challenge laid down by Joseph Conrad, the novelist, when expressing his creed as a writer. "My task," he wrote, "...is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel--it is before all, to make you see. That--and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there, according to your deserts, encouragement, consolation, fear, charm--all you demand--and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask."<sup>2</sup>

Without moral purpose the historian may end as an entertainer, building an attraction for tourists who wish to wander into the past for the pleasure of contemplating life as it was. His work may prove useful and may even be widely accepted, but it will be read as one reads an American Western, not to be taken too seriously.

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Gardiner (ed.), Theories of History (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1959), p. 297.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Conrad, The Nigger of the Narcissus (New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1926), p. xiv.

I propose now to discuss each of these terms in relation to the Methodist historian in the hope that my ideas will be like a corridor leading directly to our next paper, "Methodism in a Philosophy of History," to be given by Bishop William R. Cannon.

### Integrity

By integrity I mean that the historian should be careful that his narrative is based squarely on fact--that he is presenting truth in his writing and not what he wishes were the truth. He should have the integrity to take into consideration all of his sources, weighing and evaluating them with the care of a scientist using a high precision instrument, and he should remember that once a false image has been painted of a man or an event, the picture will often be deepened and fixed rather than obliterated by future historians. Time will cast a halo of sanctity about a false image that will make it sacrilege to destroy even by truth itself.

The historian soon discovers that false images are often the result of traditions, hoaxes or deliberate deceptions, and he must carefully sift them for that nugget of gold called truth.

To be sure the historian must give a reasonable amount of consideration to a deep-seated tradition even while subjecting it to a rigorous examination. Sometimes his efforts to undermine an accepted tradition can be both satisfying and amusing. One such example appears in the Historian as Detective<sup>3</sup> and concerns Stephen A. Douglas, the Illinois senator contemporary with Lincoln. According to a widely accepted tradition Douglas, sometimes called "the little giant," was addressing a hostile crowd in Chicago to explain why he had reopened the slavery question by introducing the Kansas-Nebraska Bill. For two hours he held his ground against the boos, jeers, and hisses of the audience. Finally, he looked at his watch and noted that it was quarter past midnight. Then he shouted, "It is now Sunday morning--I'll go to church and you may go to hell."

This is what is known as a good story--too good for the average biographer to cast aside lightly. The tradition was finally undermined by Granville D. Davis, who

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<sup>3</sup> Robin W. Winks (ed.), The Historian as Detective (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 220 ff.

thoroughly researched the incident and discovered, among other related facts, that (1) Douglas's meeting was over by ten-thirty, and (2) that it was held on a Friday night rather than Saturday. To accept it as true, therefore, one has to believe that Douglas had become so rattled he could not read the time on his watch and that he had forgotten his meeting was taking place on a Friday night and that the next day was Saturday, not Sunday.

Every denomination, including the Methodist, has persons and churches around whom numerous traditions have clustered. Many are harmless. It is not always possible, furthermore, to undermine them as in the case of "the little giant." Many are deep-seated and may well be based upon fact. They often can be used by the historian as supportive evidence for a position, but they should be carefully labeled as traditions.

It is a well founded tradition, for example, that Francis Asbury was a poor horseman; but the deep-seated tradition that Freeborn Garrettson rode off "like an arrow" in a kind of Paul Revere ride to notify the American preachers of the Christmas Conference would be difficult to sustain. However, it makes a dramatic picture and has always been widely accepted by American Methodists. Numerous American Methodist preachers have asserted that "traditionally the Methodist Church has been opposed to the use of alcoholic beverages." This is substantially a true statement and a sound tradition, but the historian should qualify it with an appropriate footnote. Many of the early Methodist preachers drank wine, including Asbury; Old St. George's Church sometimes provided wine for its visiting Methodist preachers, and among the last letters of John Wesley (November 14, 1790) is a request to the Custom House for two dozen of French Claret which had been sent to him by Mr. Ireland for medicinal purposes but had been seized at the White Swan. He offered to pay any duty necessary, but the officials refused to release the wine. By this time it may have disappeared into the place where excellent wine would naturally gravitate--into the generous "corporation" of the personnel of the Custom House itself.

Hoaxes, now, are in a different category than traditions. They are deliberate, often amusing deceptions foisted on the general public. Sometimes they gain widespread acceptance and universal credence.

An amusing example is found in the story of the first American bathtub, written by Henry L. Mencken. The article states, among other things, that (1) the first

American bathtub was introduced by Adam Thompson on December 10, 1842, to a group of derisive friends in Cincinnati, Ohio; (2) doctors denounced the bathtub as a menace to the general health, and Boston prohibited its use entirely except on medical prescription; (3) Virginia levied a tax of thirty dollars on every bathtub sold within its borders, and a bill banning the use of the bathtub entirely in Philadelphia from November 1 to March 31 was defeated by the narrow margin of two votes; and (4) no bathtub was allowed within the White House until 1851, when President Millard Fillmore bravely dunked his limbs in one of the fiendish contraptions.<sup>4</sup>

There is only one thing wrong with these fascinating statistics, namely that Mencken admitted later that there was not a word of truth in the whole article. He had written it in a playful mood, and only after he discovered that his fabrication was being taken seriously did he try to convince anyone that the whole thing was a harmless hoax. But it was too late. According to Mencken himself, the article has appeared in several learned reference volumes, in senatorial speeches, and as recently as this year (1973) it appeared in a Philadelphia newspaper running a series of articles on new styles in bathrooms. It is in this way that a false image may make an impact upon the reading public that truth, herself, cannot destroy.

Hoaxes in religious matters are more serious and take the form of lampoons. They are less playful than the true hoax and carry a more deadly intent. In 1810, for example, there appeared in London a slim volume published by Samuel Trippin, entitled Confessions of a Methodist by a Professor. It was one book amidst a great deal of anti-Methodist literature that appeared in both the 18th and 19th centuries. It was supposedly the autobiography of a Methodist itinerant, who in writing about his activities revealed every kind of extravagance and deception of which the Methodists were accused. The Editor claimed it was found in a secret pocket of a black coat left in the bedroom of a pious sister; whence, on the sudden and unexpected approach of the husband of the devout fair one, the saintly owner of the cloak had fled. To the trained eye the book is immediately recognized for what it is, but in the early 19th century it may have given support to those persons who were already opposed to Methodism and may have swayed the minds of the doubtful against the

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<sup>4</sup> See the New York Evening Mail for Dec. 28, 1917.

Methodist movement. Lampoons like this one have flourished in every generation including our own; they are not a true hoax, although they may appear in the form of a hoax, but they lack the light touch of the hoax which is in reality perpetrated for amusement, whereas the lampoon usually has a deadly purpose and intent.

Sifting through traditions, hoaxes and lampoons, however, is not so difficult a task for the historian as correcting deliberate deceptions that arise from at least three sources: (1) a story without foundation in fact but invented by its author to prove a point; (2) the destruction of historical data so that an existing image cannot be corrected or changed; and (3) the ignoring of facts or the misinterpretation of facts to prove a particular interpretation or viewpoint.

An example of the first of these forms of deception is the attempt of Pastor Weems to inculcate a high morality into the youth of America by recording fabricated stories about George Washington. The best known is the legend of Washington and the cherry tree which centers in the pious statement, "I cannot tell a lie," supposedly made by Washington to his father in prefacing his confession to having chopped down the tree.

Mason Locke Weems was an Episcopal clergyman who served temporarily at Pohick Church, Mt. Vernon parish, where Washington was thought to have been one of his parishioners. For more than thirty years Weems was also an author and peddler of chap-books, contending that the selling of good books was but a wider missionary field for God's work. The best known of his biographies is The Life and Memorable Actions of George Washington. It was published about 1800, and it is in the so-called fifth edition of 1806 that the story referred to first appears. The book has been largely responsible for the Washington myth. Evidently the enterprising pastor believed that a "good book" was one that carried moral tales about an historical character even though the stories might be made out of whole cloth. Weems' efforts now are well known to most historians and Washington buffs, but what is not so well known is a story told by A. Edward Newton in This Book Collecting Game, which illustrates the second and possibly more devastating form of deception I have mentioned--that of destroying historical data to maintain a particular viewpoint about an event or person.

Newton was an American bibliophile of the last generation. He relates that a friend of his on inquiring

at the J. Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City for some manuscripts of Lafcadio Hearn was informed that they had been destroyed several years before. The manuscripts, the librarian explained, were indelicate. Then she added that in that very room she herself had burned a number of Washington letters. "They were smutty, too," she stated, and "...as we did not want them to become public and smudge the reputation of the Father of our country, we destroyed them."<sup>5</sup>

Methodist historians will remember that some of John Wesley's papers and books were destroyed by John Pawson, who Nehemiah Curnock says, "possessed a fiery zeal against what he thought was dangerous literature." Further destruction was prevented by Henry Moore, who, hearing of Pawson's exploits, arrived in time to save the books and letters in the Coleman Collection.<sup>6</sup>

We are amused by Pastor Weems, and shocked by John Pawson and the Morgan librarian. Neither of these stances, however, are so very different from that of some Methodist historians who illustrate the third form of deception I have mentioned--that of ignoring or misinterpreting historical data in order to prove their ideas about a particular person or event in Methodist history. An excellent example is found in those historians who have set up for us a plaster saint in John Wesley, carefully overlooking, misinterpreting or totally ignoring anything that might cast a shadow across the purity of his figure. The earlier biographers of Wesley, of course, were more guilty of this lack of integrity than those of more recent times. But, in spite of some present-day efforts, the Wesley myth persists to this day, and it should be refreshing when we come to the close of this Conference to hear a paper on "The Real John Wesley."

Now, I would not have you think I am in favor of muck-raking or debunking for its own sake. But when one undertakes to write a biography or history, he should have the integrity to take all his sources into consideration. To be sure, he must evaluate them, and much that has been said about a person can safely be laid aside as irrelevant or the result of malicious gossip, and therefore discounted. In this category can be placed

<sup>5</sup> A. Edward Newton, This Book Collecting Game (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1928), pp. 236-37.

<sup>6</sup> Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, edited by Nehemiah Curnock (London: Epworth Press, 1938), Vol. I, p. 261.

much of the gossip in the letters of Horace Walpole, for example, including the story of the schism between Lady Huntingdon and George Whitefield. The rift was supposedly the result of the discovery by Lady Huntingdon that George Whitefield had given his wife some jewelry he had persuaded Lady Huntingdon to give him for the poor. Walpole admits the uncertainty of his source, but, he adds, "I hope it is true."<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, some of the factual records of John Wesley have been ignored or placed in the limbo of the lost. From the time when the Methodists first decried John Hampson, Jr. for his objective study of Wesley and roundly criticized Southey, who had noted Wesley's love of power, some Methodist historians have been eliminating truths, misinterpreting facts or totally ignoring certain realities about Wesley which they mistakenly believe besmirch his venerable figure as the mud thrown by the mobs sometimes soiled his meticulous garb and appearance.

Bishop Francis McConnell looked upon Hampson's biography as a healthy corrective for the Wesley myth. He writes, "The son evidently resented Wesley's treatment of his father keenly enough to correct his own vision so that he did not fall into that mood of extravagant and out-of-focus adulation of Wesley which injures all friendly utterances about Methodism's founder. The author of that Life without being harsh, gives us a temper of approach which introduces a realistic note into the treatment of Wesley, a note Methodists have always sadly needed. Hampson's book is out of print, but it is well worth being looked up and read by anyone who cares to see Wesley in the flesh, before the period of apotheosis fully dawned."<sup>8</sup>

To continue the point further, numerous biographers ignore those parts of Wesley's account of his life in Georgia which place him in a poor light and build extensively on those sections that make him appear as a noble self-sacrificing pastor. John S. Simon, for example, who attempted a definitive biography of Wesley in the twenties, ignores Wesley's narration of his relations with Sophey Hopkey. "It is not our intention,"

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<sup>7</sup> The Letters of Horace Walpole, edited by Mrs. Paget Toynbee (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904), Vol.5, p.72.

<sup>8</sup> Francis J. McConnell, John Wesley (New York: Abingdon Press, 1939), p. 130.

he wrote, "to tell once more, the story of Wesley's love affair in Georgia." He refers the curious reader to Wesley's Journal if he wishes to read the account, a strange suggestion from an author writing a definitive biography. Nevertheless, Simon feels constrained to note "certain facts." He admits that Sophey was a most remarkable person, but then with the astuteness of a Philadelphia lawyer he slowly destroys our image of her and ends by picturing her as guilty of "deliberate dissimulation." In the meantime, he sets forth Wesley himself as an heroic figure who in finally repelling Sophey from the Communion Table was following the only course open to him.<sup>9</sup> Dr. Martin Schmidt, who has given us a great deal of new material about Wesley at Herrnhut, and has written a valuable study entitled John Wesley, A Theological Biography, also follows the party line in defending Wesley in his relations to Sophey Hopkey. In defense of Dr. Schmidt it should be pointed out that he is presenting what he terms "a theological biography"--one that deals with Wesley's views--which is different from a definitive biography which should deal with the whole person.

Neither biographer, however, satisfactorily explains why Wesley firmly applied ecclesiastical law in the case of Sophey Hopkey, although on the ship coming to America he had, against the unanimous advice of his spiritual counselors and advisers, admitted to the Holy Communion a woman of questionable character. Neither biographer, moreover, sees any Freudian overtones in Wesley's conduct toward Sophey, in his demands that Sophey openly confess to him that in their personal relations she had been guilty of dissimulation and deception amounting to fraud. Neither biographer questions why Wesley was so meticulous in his so-called pastoral concern for this one parishioner, harrassing her after her marriage into a miscarriage, according to Mrs. Causton and Sophey herself, but at the same time was indifferent to the spiritual needs of other of his parishioners. There is no doubt that Wesley was generally a good pastor. Johann Martin Bolzius testified that Wesley visited his people industriously and was well received by some; but, in spite of the fact that Wesley was a far better pastor than most eighteenth century ministers, evidence can be given of his pastoral indifference. One example will suffice.

<sup>9</sup> John S. Simon, John Wesley and the Religious Societies (London: Epworth Press, 1921), pp. 160 ff.

When Sophey and her friends attended Wesley's church, in her earlier and happier relationship with Wesley, she was at times accompanied by a lad, little older than a boy, who had come to America on the same ship with Mr. Williamson, who became Sophey's husband. Over fifty years later, writing in the Gentleman's Magazine under the pseudonym "A Wanderer," this same person speaks almost wistfully of Wesley's neglect and lack of concern for his spiritual condition. He writes about his attendance at church and then adds, "After Church, Sophey Hopkey and I believe some other females, went constantly home with Mr. Wesley to his lodging in order to be further instructed, and I well remember wondering why I was not asked also. Surely, I said, my soul is of as much importance as theirs; and if I am to be excluded a part of the benefit I will withdraw myself altogether, and did so."<sup>10</sup> Wesley, busy with the ladies, was unconcerned.

Simon's omissions and distortions are further seen in his failure to make clear in his definitive biography that when Wesley departed from Savannah, Georgia for England, it was not as a beloved pastor waving farewell to his people but as a man deeply depressed by a sense of failure and in the company of three scurvy characters who arranged an "escape" for him rather than a dignified departure. Simon completely omits the incident. As the Morgan librarian who burned the Washington letters, he would rather burn the evidence by ignoring it than relate any fact that might conceivably harm Wesley's image.

My objection to this false picture of Wesley in Georgia is that the biographer is doomed to arrive at Wesley's Aldersgate experience without any reasonable or logical antecedents to explain its necessity. Georgia should be viewed as a preface to Aldersgate or, as I expressed it in an article some years ago in Religion in Life, a "Preface to Victory."<sup>11</sup> For this reason we need to see the whole Wesley in Georgia. We need to appreciate those finer qualities in Wesley which caused him to love and respect the Moravians, which inspired him to translate some of their hymns and publish his first hymn book, which caused him to defend the weak in a frontier settlement where they might easily have been destroyed, and which drove him to search for the experience he

<sup>10</sup> Gentleman's Magazine, London, Vol. LXII, pp. 23, 24, 792.

<sup>11</sup> Religion in Life, Vol. XXV, No. 2 (Spring 1956), pp. 280 ff.

finally found at Aldersgate. But we need also to understand how his arrogance, pride, repressed sexual desires, fears, and self-centeredness brought about a state of uncertainty, a despair, and sense of failure which made the experience in the Aldersgate Street prayer meeting a possibility and necessity. In short, when we present Wesley as nearly perfect throughout his life, as does Simon, we not only demonstrate a lack of integrity as historians, but also violate the rule laid down by Professor Walsh mentioned in the beginning of this paper, that "the business of the historian is to construct not just a plain narrative of what occurred in the past, but a significant narrative...a narrative that is self-explanatory, which makes us see not only the order of events but also their connections." John Simon's Wesley never needed Aldersgate.

In setting forth the remainder of Wesley's life, now, not many biographers consider or evaluate for study what Wesley's enemies said about him--and it is often from our enemies that we learn the truth about ourselves--and most biographers refer to Wesley's Journal as a kind of fifth gospel and not merely a biographical tool somewhat dulled by the fact that it was published for the edification of the Methodists and therefore hardly to be placed in the category of Pepy's Diary as a revelation of the writer's character. Wesley's letters are far more revealing than his Journal, but they are seldom used in setting forth the complex personality of the man.

Another example of the lack of integrity in writing Methodist history is peculiar to the early historians of American Methodism. It centers in the limited amount of space given to the contribution of Blacks to Methodism and the emergence of the Black Methodist denominations in America. Apparently little attempt was made to discover or preserve what must at one time have been a vast amount of material on these subjects. Today one is appalled at the paucity of material available to the researcher. It is true that Black Methodists are mentioned by Bangs, Buckley and others, and reference to them is to be found in Simpson's Cyclopedia, but only in the most general terms, and the individual Black leaders who gave life and direction to the Blacks in the Methodist Episcopal Church or to the emergence of the Black Methodist denominations are completely ignored. In the eyes of the historian they were irrelevant.

It is evident now that I am using the term integrity in a far broader sense than "accuracy." To be sure accuracy is of first and greatest importance, but a small error of fact now and then in an historian is like an

error in the great American sport of baseball. A fielder's error can be embarrassing, even costly, but the player is judged more by his overall ability than by one miscue.

The term integrity, as I am using it, implies something beyond accuracy in the use of source material. It implies something about the honesty of the historian, himself. It implies that he will write not as an apologist, but as a narrator--not as a lawyer defending a client, nor yet as a judge pronouncing guilt and punishment, but rather as a witness on whose testimony the judgments of his readers will rest. He is sworn to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. He will, therefore, refuse to write under the direction of public opinion, accepted versions, or his own personal prejudices, but only under the direction of his own conscience and his own insatiable hunger for justice and truth. Joseph Conrad, in speaking of his art as an author, expressed what might well be the creed of the Methodist historian. "And art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest justice to the invisible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colors, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter and the facts of life, what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential--their one illuminating and convincing quality--the very truth of their existence.<sup>12</sup> This is "integrity," and without it the historian is as sounding brass or tinkling cymbal.

### Understanding

The second characteristic of the task of the Methodist historian is understanding. This phase of his activity is ever necessary as he pursues his task of accumulating and recording facts. Many historians seek to present in their narration only an accurate outward description of the historical event; or in the words of the Prussian Historical School, Wie es eigentlich gewesen. The supreme law of the historiographer, according to this rule, is the strict presentation of fact.

Obviously, no historian in his right mind objects to the knowledge and use of facts. If, as Shakespeare has said, "We are such stuff as dreams are made on,"<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Conrad, op.cit., p. xi.

<sup>13</sup> From The Tempest, Act IV, Scene One, Lines 156-57.

facts are such stuff as histories are built upon. It has always been a source of annoyance to most historians how few facts are to be found in some of the memorials on American Methodist preachers as compared with the amount of space given to perorations on their virtues and their prowess as preachers. It may be the writers had few facts to record, but more than likely the writers prided themselves on their word pictures and their ability to paint a moving death scene or a camp meeting revival. It was characteristic of the times.

Recently I had occasion to consult a slim little volume published in 1891 by William Brotherhead on Forty Years Among the Old Booksellers of Philadelphia. As I thumbed through it I discovered that Brotherhead's main concern seems to have been to preserve the virtues and vices of his fellow book dealers. He wrote of W. A. Leary, "He dealt in books as a grocer deals in sugar and candles, more by weight than from any intrinsic value." He wrote of a certain H. McKean, "He was literally of the character of an old junk dealer; and as a man his conduct was anything but exemplary--nay censurable in every sense....He was an Irishman by birth, but now is dead." I was searching for a Methodist, James Barr, of whom Brotherhead wrote, "He was a sincere Methodist and sold Methodist books and also stationery. The latter years of his life were very chequered ones, and he died poor, but highly respected."<sup>14</sup>

Brotherhead obviously did not believe in cluttering up his biographies with such trivia as dates, ages, the background or education of his subjects, the location of the store or the quality or quantity of the books that were sold. His work is entertaining but frustrating.

The same sense of annoyance and frustration overcomes the historian when he reads some of the diaries of the early Methodists. Some diarists write volumes examining their own spiritual condition and describing their struggles with Satan who comes to them in the form of depressions and sinful thoughts, but say little about matters relevant for the historian. In some diaries one will find nothing about what was going on in the church, the community, or the country during the lifetime of the

<sup>14</sup> William Brotherhead, Forty Years Among the Old Booksellers of Philadelphia (Philadelphia: William Brotherhead, 1891), pp. 35, 57, 46.

writers. Dates are of no importance to the diarist, church controversies make no impression on them, the political situation is of little significance, and even the greatest church leaders with whom they come in contact stir their imagination so little that they record no descriptions of them other than possibly the text of the sermon from which they preached.

A hasty reading recently of the unpublished Journal of Thomas Morrell, in the possession of Drew University, revealed a fabulous amount of material about Morrell's physical condition but not much about events in early Methodism on which he might have cast considerable light. Francis Asbury writes in a derogatory vein about Asbury Dickins, the son of John Dickins, the first Book Editor of the Methodist Episcopal Church, but he states no reason for wishing that Asbury had never been named after him.<sup>15</sup>

In December 1801, Asbury Dickins fled from the country because of a suit brought against him by one Samuel Blodget in which bail to the extent of \$15,000 was required. The cause of the suit is not known, although the form of action suggests that it was not a monetary suit but more likely a wrong not involving contract or conversion. Asbury Dickins might conceivably have seduced or enticed Blodget's daughter or servant or committed some other wrong not involving money, but it should be hastily added that we have no evidence at all concerning Asbury's fault. The records were burned in a disastrous fire in Philadelphia. The suit must finally have been settled, for Asbury Dickins eventually became the Secretary of the United States Senate.<sup>16</sup> Any Methodist historian would give a great deal to know what was going on in Philadelphia Methodism during these years and would give even more to know the truth about Asbury Dickins and also his illustrious father, about whom equally little is known. I make this point only to illustrate that, as every historian, I am deeply interested in facts about Methodist events and personalities. But the true historian must be interested in more than the statement of a fact or the mere recital of the outward event.

<sup>15</sup> Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, edited by Elmer T. Clark et al (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958), Vol. III, pp. 229-30.

<sup>16</sup> Peter J. Parker, "Asbury Dickins, Bookseller," in The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, Vol. XCIV, No. 4 (October 1970), p. 481.

In this connection the Methodist historian might well take a leaf from the theory of historicism, although it should be immediately noted that all the concepts of historicism would hardly be acceptable to the writers of Methodist history.

Professor Hans Meyerhoff in describing historicism writes, "it is the historian's aim to portray the bewildering unsystematic variety of historical forms--peoples, nations, customs, institutions, songs, myths, and thoughts--in their unique, living expressions and in the process of continuous growth and transformation." He points out that Johann Herder was the first to describe this technique on the principle of empathy. One must feel oneself into a period, in life, and into history as a whole.<sup>17</sup>

Robert George Collingwood, who spent most of his life at Oxford, was an historicist of the first rank. He emphasized that the historian may begin his work by "discovering the outside of an event, but it can never end there; he must always remember that the event was an action, and that his main task is to think into this action, to discern the thought of its agent....For history, the object to be discovered is not the mere event, but the thought expressed in it....After the historian has ascertained the facts, there is no further process of inquiring into their causes. When he knows what happened, he already knows why it happened."

This does not mean, he adds, "that words like 'cause' are necessarily out of place in reference to history; it only means that they are used in a special sense. When a scientist asks, 'why did that piece of litmus paper turn pink,' he means, 'on what occasions do pieces of litmus paper turn pink.' When an historian asks, 'why did Brutus stab Caesar?' he means 'what did Brutus think, which made him decide to stab Caesar?' The cause of the event for him means the thought in the mind of the person by whose agency the event came about: and this is not something other than the event, it is inside the event itself."<sup>18</sup>

It is not my purpose here to discuss the many ramifications of historicism or to attempt a defense of

<sup>17</sup> Hans Meyerhoff (ed.), The Philosophy of History in Our Time (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1937), pp. 10, 11.

<sup>18</sup> Gardiner, op.cit., pp. 252 ff.

Herder or Collingwood in their effort to get "inside" the event or persons of another age living under totally different circumstances and surroundings than the historian writing about them. The subject can better be dealt with by Bishop Cannon in his paper. Whether or not it is even possible to do as Herder and Collingwood advise is open to debate. But this is not the point. What I am saying is that the historian is under obligation to make that attempt. He has the responsibility imposed upon him of trying to understand the man and the age he is considering. Only after he has listened to the character about whom he is writing, and lived in imagination in the historical setting about which he is concerned, and has sought to move in the web of circumstances of the historical event he is describing, only after he has felt in some measure the outer pressures and the inner compulsions that drove these persons to act in the particular historical setting as they did, can he write their history or find in their lives any guidance for his moral judgments.

Some Methodist historians, for example, have cast much of the blame upon the broad shoulders of George Whitefield for the break that occurred between him and Wesley and their respective followers. How many historians, however, have made the attempt to get inside the event? How many have sought to understand what was going on in the mind of both Wesley and Whitefield or how many have sought to assess fairly the responsibility that each man carried for the subsequent break and its disastrous effects? How many biographers have felt the outer pressures and the inner compulsions that influenced both men and their followers, and how many have then tried to describe the conflict so perfectly that the reader will think to himself that had he been Whitefield he might well have acted as Whitefield did, or had he been Wesley he might well have acted as Wesley.

One of the dangers, of course, in writing history in this way is that by seeking to understand all we end by forgiving all, and moral judgments become impossible. On the other hand, without this kind of knowledge our moral judgments become the expressions of our personal prejudices and our individual mores and taboos. We become the victims of our own politico-religious allegiances.

This need to get "inside" the event and the persons about whom we are writing cannot be overemphasized or over-elaborated. We succeed as historians in direct proportion to the extent that we are able to attain this

goal. Dr. Herbert Butterfield explains what we are saying by an illustration based on the massacre of St. Bartholomew. He writes:

Let us take the case of the Massacre of St. Bartholomew and imagine that we have traversed the whole range of accompanying facts and conditioning circumstances. Let us say that we have assembled around Catherine de'Medici everything that may have reference to the affair--all that we can discover of her predicament at the time, of preceding events, of her own constitution and structure, of her views, her intentions and motives as well as all that we can discover of options which were open to her at the decisive moment. Assisted by all this material and by all the humanity we possess, we are now called to resurrect the whole occasion and to see with Catherine, feel with her, hold our breath with her, and meet the future with all her apprehensions. If by imaginative sympathy we can put ourselves in her place in this way, not only envisioning the situation in all its details, but apprehending it in all its vividness and intensity, until we reach the point at which we could almost conceive ourselves making the drastic decision, or at least have a sense of just what it would take to carry us across the border to such a decision--then we are historians indeed.<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately, none of the early or 19th century Methodist historians ever reached this high pinnacle in their writing. Francis Asbury wrote his Journal with but the meagerest references to the stirring times through which the country was passing, and although he showed masterly generalship as a leader of the early Methodist Episcopal Church, he seldom in his Journal delineates with understanding the character and personalities of the men who were his co-laborers. He shows little understanding of their problems, and he writes with a sense of frustration and annoyance when any of them express a desire to get married and lead normal lives. Jesse Lee, who wrote the first history of American Methodism, gathered a vast number of facts but he presented them simply as the annals of Methodism, not as the evolution of a denomination in an historical setting. Some of the

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<sup>19</sup> Meyerhoff, op.cit., p. 245.

biographers of John Wesley used the founder of Methodism only as a point of reference to describe the growth of the Methodist movement and not as a person to be seen and understood.

This is not to underrate the present-day giants in the field of Methodist history. I have purposely avoided quoting extensively from or using as illustrations the works of modern Methodist historians, for they stand on their own merits and in their own right. The reading of only a partial list of present-day Methodist historians overwhelms one with the amount of erudition they represent. Nevertheless, a definitive biography of John Wesley still remains to be written, and a good popular life of Wesley would be a boon to all of Methodism. Furthermore, because he has never really been brought to life, John Wesley as a living person is little known, even among the clergy of The United Methodist Church in America today. Their knowledge of him is confined to a few salient facts, ideas and misconceptions: He was a son of Susanna who, after a shaky beginning, made good in the best American tradition because his heart was strangely warmed at Aldersgate. He rode all over England in the interests of Methodism, and, though his sermons are pretty dull stuff, he gave birth to a half-dozen pithy sayings, the most famous of which, they mistakenly believe, is "the world is my parish." He bequeathed to America the Methodist Episcopal Church, how and where is known only to Methodist historians, and he is universally credited with being the father of all the social concerns of The United Methodist Church in America. He finally died after a long life, murmuring or triumphantly shouting, depending upon the dramatic stance of the preacher, "the best of all is God is with us."

True, it is not fair to place the entire blame on the Methodist historian for this lack of knowledge about John Wesley and his famous brother Charles, but we might well ask ourselves to what extent we are to blame. Charles, I dare say, is known in America only as the author of an unconscionable number of hymns, the most famous of which is Jesus Lover of my soul, and most of which, with a few exceptions, have been set to unsingable tunes.

Unfortunately, with the exception of some outstanding present-day examples, most of us as historians have been unable to infuse life into Methodist personalities and characters or to draw an adequate picture of the exciting days in which Methodist history is placed. This requires not only integrity but also understanding in the sense

in which I have used the word.

### Moral Purpose

The third characteristic of the task of the Methodist historian is caught up in moral purpose.

The question of the making of moral judgments on the past or present is a thorny one. Hans Meyerhoff has pointed out that it involves at least two questions. One, the "vexing problem of moral relativism," and two, the propriety of moral judgments by the historian. As to the former, he adds "the question is whether moral principles are written on 'the tablets of eternity' or whether a historical consciousness reveals the relativity of every metaphysical or religious doctrine." As to the moral judgments, themselves, the question is whether they are legitimate or not, and what their effect is upon the 'truth' of an historical narrative.<sup>20</sup>

For us today the question is a little simpler because we are dealing with the Methodist historian, and therefore with a person who per se writes from a particular view of morality. The question for the Methodist historian is not so much whether certain moral principles are written on "tablets of stone" but what are those moral principles which are eternal. It is amusing to note that sometimes in the American Methodist Church social customs and mores have been permitted to usurp the place of moral precepts, and many Methodists have claimed for them an eternal verity which they seem to deny to sound moral principles. In a Layman's Association meeting of the Central Pennsylvania Conference in 1916, this illuminating comment was made during a heated debate on the use of moving pictures in the church:

If a preacher in our parts were to suggest moving pictures in our church he might as well go out and steal chickens. His reputation would be gone.<sup>21</sup>

Here is a frank statement made with refreshing candor, illustrating that a social practice can become of more importance than a moral principle.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 226.

<sup>21</sup> Frederick E. Maser, Methodism in Central Pennsylvania (Editorial Board of the Central Pennsylvania Conference, 1971), p. 193.

This is, of course, not the place to discuss the whole theme of morality, nor need we. As we have noted, we are writing from the viewpoint of the Methodist historian, and we can safely assume that the Methodist historian believes there are moral absolutes, and that he has the right within the framework of his own theory of history to make moral judgments. My purpose in my third point, now, is not to defend the Methodist historian's right to make moral judgments on the past or present, but rather to challenge him to write with such integrity and understanding that he will influence the moral tone of the age in which he himself lives and writes. I am ready to admit that history is not a science, but on the other hand, the writing of history is not merely a form of entertainment. It has a purpose and a goal.

In addition, to what extent is the Methodist historian responsible morally for the adequate presentation of historic facts in denominational literature and lesson materials? Dr. Frank H. Littell, a reputable American scholar, in his publication CCI Notebook, No. 12, May 1973, states, "Henry Friedlander's study of textbooks in Contemporary European History--to be published shortly in the volume The German Church Struggle and the Halocaust--showed that nine-tenths of the authors never even mention the destruction of European Jewry."

Gerald S. Strober's study (Notebook No. 10) showed that the denominational publishing houses "continue to ignore the issue in their lesson materials." Strober is a Lutheran theologian who made an analysis of 3,000 lessons among twelve denominations. He found among other things that the lesson materials isolated Jesus and His disciples from the Jewish populace of their times, presenting them as other than Jews and continued the myth of the collective guilt of the Jewish people for the crucifixion of Jesus. In addition, he discovered that only six out of the 3,000 lessons dealt with the destruction of European Jewry and only one in depth or with any sensitivity.

It is not my purpose to enter this whole torturous field of inquiry. I am, however, raising the question of the Methodist historian's responsibility of seeing that his own denomination, at least, teaches truth in its attempts to influence the moral conduct of its own age.

This leads to a sobering almost discouraging thought. Never before in the life of mankind have we had so much

historical material at hand for the researcher and historian. The nineteenth century, in particular, has been called the age of history as well as the age of science, and the twentieth century has not diminished our store of historical knowledge, but added to it through vast acquisitions of manuscripts, letters and memorabilia. In spite of these mountains of facts at his command, however, the historian has made little or no impact on the age in which he writes. For some reason he seems to have been unable to infuse his subject with sufficient life and power to persuade mankind to a new and better course of action. No historical presentations that I know of have as yet prevented a war or improved to any great degree the morality of a nation.

On the other hand scientific research has changed the world and society. It has added years to a man's life, cured his disease, and enabled him to control nature and his destiny. It has also added horrifying cruelties, it must be admitted, but its beneficent effects have far outweighed its evils, and now war itself may be ended not by the wisdom of the historian, but by the foolishness of beginning a conflict which science has guaranteed will end the world. Historians must awake. The day is far spent, but there is still time to fulfill the destiny to which we are called. It is to aid and inspire each other to some such purpose that we are gathered here this week in Conference.

Now, do not mistake me. I am not saying that the Methodist historian should write as some of his earlier compatriots, interspersing his accounts with little homilies and sermonettes; nor should he pause in his writing to point out a special lesson in morality illustrated by the event he is describing. Rather it is that by the integrity and understanding with which he presents the past he will influence the present and give to his readers guidance and direction for the future. This purpose, I believe, is imposed on the Methodist historian by the nature of his calling and the seriousness of his task. And once he takes his task as a serious calling he can make Methodist history the Queen of Methodist Disciplines, from whom may come guidance and direction not only for the Methodists but for all mankind.

In short, if the Methodist historian fulfills this task he will build a broad platform out of the materials of history upon which an individual may stand in making his own moral judgments, both upon his own age and upon his own life.

Permit me to go somewhat afield for an illustration of what I mean. One of the most significant of the recent books about the Third Reich in Germany is Inside the Third Reich, by Albert Speer. At the Nuremberg trials Speer was the only defendant to admit his share in the crimes of the Third Reich. Speer's incisive mind and understanding are clearly shown when he was questioned as to how all the crimes of the Nazi were possible. He answered that for the first time in history unlimited personal power had been combined with the new devices provided by modern technology, a conclusion that well may serve as a moral warning to our time.

But this does not explain why Speer himself became a part of the Nazi regime and why, after understanding its aims and purposes from the inside, he nevertheless continued a part of it.

Speer readily admits that he knew of the suffering and the crimes that were being perpetrated by the regime, although he was not aware of the wholesale destruction of the Jewish population. "An American historian," he wrote, "has said of me that I loved machines more than people. He is not wrong. I realize that the sight of suffering people influenced only my emotions but not my conduct. On the plane of feelings only sentimentality emerged; in the realm of decisions, on the other hand, I continued to be ruled by the principles of utility... in either case I was moving within the system." Later in this paragraph he adds what is probably one of the most revealing explanations for much of human conduct in every generation. "I did not see any moral ground outside the system where I should have taken my stand."<sup>22</sup>

Here is an explanation of much of the evil in the world from the stabbing of Julius Caesar to the break-in at Watergate. The perpetrators of crimes were moving within a system which provided its own moral ethic that supposedly justified them--they had no moral ground "outside the system" on which they might take their stand.

And now, who can best provide that moral ground "outside the system" upon which a person may take his stand--the theologian or the historian or yet someone else? Here in this closing question I have opened a whole

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<sup>22</sup> Albert Speer, Inside the Third Reich...trans. by Richard and Clara Winston (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1970), p. 375.

new avenue for debate which well might occupy considerable time during this conference where we have gathered together some of the most brilliant theologians and historians from both sides of the Atlantic.

And so I close, having touched upon many things briefly, having presented ideas only partially, but, I trust, having set in motion some thoughts that may serve as a basis for future study and debate; and having finally led you to our next paper to be presented by one of the great scholars of our day, Bishop William R. Cannon, who will speak on "Methodism in a Philosophy of History."