

## BOOK REVIEW

Howard A. Snyder, *Populist Saints: B. T. and Ellen Roberts and the First Free Methodists*. Grand Rapids, MI/ Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006. xx + 975 pp. \$39.00.

The central drama in Snyder's twin biography, the revivalistic/holiness/reformist 1850 events in the Genesee Conference that led to trial and expulsion of B. T. and other "Nazarites" and the formation of the Free Methodist Church in 1860, will be familiar to serious students of Methodism. What Snyder provides with near 1000 small print pages, lavish citations from principals (and later interpreters) and ample footnoting is the life and the making of the reformer. He takes B. T.'s and Ellen's perspective, not surprisingly nor inappropriately. So for adequate explanation of the theological convictions and the motives of those who resisted and frustrated B. T.'s reforming efforts, one will have to look elsewhere. Here we see how a talented, highly educated, well connected, idealistic couple come to attack a religious system at its heart, deeply and resolutely convinced that the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) seemingly gravitating away from its Wesleyan commitments retained the capacity, the will and the values to reconstitute itself.

Snyder shows why and how B. T. and Ellen could be so optimistic about Methodist recommitment to active revivalism, a mission to the poor, holiness, camp meetings, the General Rules (especially on discipline and dress), to anti-slavery, and the old Wesleyan doctrines and practices and so hopeful that the MEC would reconsider recent barriers to the poor (pew rental, choirs, upscale churches, finery). B. T. and Ellen were extremely well-connected. Ellen Stowe had lived her formative years in New York with relatives George and Lydia Lane. He then headed the MEC Book Concern, arguably the most powerful and well-connected position in the entire church. Walter Palmer was the Lane's physician and Ellen and later B. T. came under the magnetic influence of Phoebe. Ellen grew to young adulthood at the very heart of New York Methodism, indeed at the heart of the MEC, its leadership frequenting the Lane home. She spent considerable time, as well, in Middletown where another relative, Harvey Lane, served on the Wesleyan University faculty, then the MEC's most important and formative college. She came to know, as did student B. T., Wesleyan's highly influential centrist president, Stephen Olin, whose frequent statements on Methodism as mission and its missionary imperative defined B. T.'s own views. At several points, B. T. offered himself as a missionary. B. T. and Ellen met at his Wesleyan graduation and their

subsequent courtship and marriage might well have pointed to a great career within the MEC. He had, after all, the best education that Methodism could provide and she the best connections.

Ironically, B. T. did not step into urbane and urban roles in the Genesee Conference but to those that pitted small town and camp meeting against Buffalo and its fine churches, and the young and old preachers against emerging conference leadership (the Regency). Snyder gets at this irony in a variety of ways—depicting “radical” dimensions to B. T.’s religious formation, noting early antislavery commitments, and detailing his transformative exposure to the revivalist, John Wesley Redfield. The latter conducted a revival campaign in Middletown during B. T.’s student days and would be a frequent collaborator with B. T. thereafter, Snyder crediting him even as a co-founder of Free Methodism. B. T.’s Methodism world also changed. By 1848 when B. T. began ministry in Genesee, the holiness-centrism represented by the New York-Middletown axis had failed, proving unable to hold together a church troubled by slavery (1844). B. T.’s mentor, Stephen Olin, in declining health, died soon thereafter (1851). At the 1852 General Conference, Ellen’s uncle, George Lane, was replaced as head of the Book Concern by Thomas Carlton, a member of the Genesee Conference and closely tied to its power structure. Also in 1852 the bishop sent B. T. from small town to city, specifically to Niagara Street, which under Thomas Carlton went from being the largest in Buffalo (in 1848) to a declining church, losing 158 members during Carlton’s ministry and presenting B. T. with the classic urban challenge—a big facility, a huge debt and a membership that was too small.

B. T. coupled concerted efforts at revival with an attack through the press on what he deemed the causative MEC and Genesee practices inhibiting effective ministries to the unchurched and the poor. That twin thrust elicited a repressive response from the conference power structure (Carlton and the Buffalo Regency), the purging of B. T. and allies, and their gathering of reformist/holiness/revivalists into the new denomination.

Howard Snyder has written a wonderful, engaging, scholarly retelling and one that sheds great light on the life of a pastor at mid-century.

RUSSELL E. RICHEY  
Atlanta, Georgia