

**VILE OR REVILED?  
THE CAUSES OF THE ANTI-METHODIST RIOTS AT  
WEDNESBURY BETWEEN MAY, 1743 AND  
APRIL, 1744 IN THE LIGHT OF NEW ENGLAND REVIVALISM**

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“Elizabeth Lingham, a widow with five children, had her goods spoiled; her spinning wheel (the support of her family) broke, and her parish allowance reduced from 2s 6d. to 1s 6d. a week.

Valentine Ambersly, collier, had his windows broke twice, his wife, big with child, abused and beat with clubs.

Jos.. Stubs had his windows broke twice, and his wife so frightened that she miscarried.”<sup>1</sup>

“James Yeoman of Walsal . . . came with a mob . . . and after they had broke all the windows, he took up a stone, and said, ‘Now; by G-, I will kill you.’ He threw it, and struck me on the side of the head. The blood gushed out, and I dropped down immediately.”<sup>2</sup>

“. . . my wife was going to Wednesbury, and a mob met her in the road, and threw her down several times, and abused her sadly.”<sup>3</sup>

These were some of the vile acts inflicted upon Methodist women during the succession of anti-Methodist riots at Wednesbury and the neighboring towns of Walsall, Darlaston and West Bromwich between May 1743 and March 1744. Edward Eggington, the Vicar of Wednesbury, was responsible for the riots and has been reviled “as an unscrupulous man, committed, almost to the point of obsession, to destroy a movement which threatened the cozy complacency of religious life in his parish.”<sup>4</sup> This verdict is in keeping with the standard Methodist interpretation of the persecutions endured by the early Methodist people who are regarded as having carried “the truth of God into quarters where it was unwelcome; and innocently provoked the hostility of men, who ought rather to

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Jackson, Editor. *The Works of John Wesley Vol. 13* (London. Wesleyan Conference Office. 1865 edition), 164–165.

<sup>2</sup>Jackson, *Vol. 13*, 165.

<sup>3</sup>Jackson, *Vol. 13*, 168.

<sup>4</sup>Roger Leese, “The Impact of Methodism on Black Country Society 1742–1860” (Manchester University. Ph.D. thesis 1972), 39.

have repented in sackcloth and ashes.”<sup>5</sup> The aim of this study is to show that the opponents of Methodism were not as unscrupulous and as unjustifiably prejudiced as their Methodist victims have claims. Though nothing can excuse the brutality shown towards some of the female victims of the riots, nevertheless, studies of mob behavior in the eighteenth century by scholars like George Rude, Eric Hobsbawm, and E. P. Thompson allied to Anglican accounts of the riots published in 1744<sup>6</sup> indicate that the Methodists were not quite as innocent as they claimed to be, and that the Anglicans were not quite as villainous as the Methodist traditions would have us believe. Because of the highly emotive character of the issues involved the rise and progress of Methodism in the Wednesbury area is best evaluated in the perspective of the revivalism that took place in the North American colonies during the same period under the stimulus of the itinerant ministry of George Whitefield.

### New England Revivalism

The appearance of George Whitefield at Northampton in New England on October 13, 1740 to begin a preaching tour of the colony has been described as “the most sensational event in the history of New England preaching.”<sup>7</sup> This autumn tour was the last phase of a programme of tours begun in the spring of 1740 based in Savannah, and continued in the summer based in Charleston.<sup>8</sup> As in Pennsylvania, Georgia, Maryland, Virginia and the Carolinas so in New England, the preaching of George Whitefield attracted large crowds. Hundreds of people behaved like Nathan Cole of Middleton in New England who dropped his tools in the field where he was working and rushed off to hear Whitefield preach in response to the news of the messenger galloping excitedly by that Whitefield was due to preach in the neighborhood.<sup>9</sup> “It is wonderful to see what a spell he casts over an audience by proclaiming the simplest truths of the Bible,” wrote Mrs. Jonathan Edwards. “I have seen upwards of a thousand people hang on his words with breathless silence, broke only by an occasional half-suppressed sob. He impresses the ignorant, and not less the educated and refined . . . our mechanics shut up their

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<sup>5</sup>Wesleyan Methodist Magazine, 1838, 671.

<sup>6</sup>Roberts, “Some papers Giving An Account Of The Rise and Progress Of Methodism At Wednesbury In Staffordshire, And Other Parishes Adjacent: As Likewise Of The Late Riot In Those Parts.” Reproduced by F. W. Hackwood in *Religious Wednesbury: Its Creeds, Churches and Chapels* (London, 1900).

<sup>7</sup>Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (London: Oxford University Press, 1988), 189.

<sup>8</sup>Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield, Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival* (London: The Wakeman Trust, 1990), 89.

<sup>9</sup>Dallimore, 197–198.

shops, and the day-laborers throw down their tools, to go and hear him preach, and few return unaffected. Many, very many persons in Northampton date the beginning of new thoughts, new desires, new purposes, and a new life, from the day they heard him preach of Christ."<sup>10</sup>

The people of New England were used to revivals of religion. According to John Kent they were social events within the life of a local congregation when the resident minister applied emotive preaching allied to group psychology to gather the young people into the membership of the church.<sup>11</sup> One of the most effective of these local revivalist ministers was Solomon Stoddard who generated five revivals of religion at Northampton between the 1680s and the 1720s. He was succeeded by his grandson Jonathan Edwards in 1727 who generated an entirely different kind of revival in 1733. It began in the conventional way among the youth of the church but assumed a novel character by virtue of its mass conversions among all age groups, heightened religiosity, regional rather than local character for it affected the whole of the River Connecticut valley, and turbulence and noise due to the active participation of those lay people who had been converted.<sup>12</sup> Whitefield's itinerant field preaching gave a new dimension to the novel involvement of lay people in promoting this emerging kind of popular revivalism. Whitefield attributed the decline of religion in the North American colonies to the unconverted character of the local ministers.<sup>13</sup> He had barely landed in the colonies before he was "much carried out" in bearing his testimony against "the unchristian principles and practises" of his fellow clergymen in Philadelphia.<sup>14</sup> At both the Harvard and New Haven (later Yale) Colleges he informed the students that they were studying the wrong kind of books, and that ministers needed to be converted men.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly Whitefield saw voluntarily willingness of the people to turn out in such large numbers to hear him preach away from the formal, minister dominated, environment of church buildings as "the first steps in restoring

<sup>10</sup>Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), 162.

<sup>11</sup>John Kent, *Holding the Fort: Studies in Victorian Revivalism* (London: Epworth Press, 1978), 15.

<sup>12</sup>Stout, *New England Soul*, 188–189.

<sup>13</sup>Stout, *New England Soul*, 195. Joseph Tracy described unconverted ministers as good men sincerely trying to lead a better life with the aid of the means approved by the Church but ignorant of the nature of, and the need for, a conversion experience. This was due to the decision taken in 1709 to admit unconverted members to the Lord's Supper on the ground that the sacrament was a converting ordinance. *The Great Awakening: A History of the Revival of Religion in the time of Edwards & Whitefield* (1842. Reprinted London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 4–7.

<sup>14</sup>Dallimore, 78.

<sup>15</sup>Dallimore, 100.

piety to the land.” Whitefield, therefore, eroded the trust of the lay people in the integrity and the authority of their local ministers. A process that was carried further by the itinerant revivalists and local lay exhorters who sprang up in his train. The activities of these men with their “wild censures and accusations” of the local ministers disrupted normal church life by encouraging local congregations to judge the Christian character of the preaching of their local minister to the extent that if they thought it was deficient in “gospel purity” they had the right to separate themselves from him in order to form their own independent congregations. For their part the established ministers were offended by the irregular behavior of self-appointed lay exhorters who thought the conversions taking place under their preaching was sufficient proof of their divine calling to justify abandoning their regular trades. Not only were these men usurping the work of the ministerial office but they were also encouraging scenes of unedifying religious hysteria during their revival meetings and breaking the bounds of scriptural propriety by allowing women to speak in public.<sup>16</sup>

The Great Awakening inspired by the preaching of Whitefield thus became an attack on the established churches of the colonies by calling into question the authority of their ministers and by challenging their “monopoly of the Word.” As a result the revival followed a clear pattern of welcome turning to hostility and ending in conflict. This pattern of development is unique in England to the rise and progress of Methodism at Wednesbury between September 1742 and March 1744. It provides the analytical framework for evaluating the uniquely protracted severity of the anti-Methodist riots at Wednesbury and its neighborhood, as do certain features common to the revivals both in New England and in Wednesbury, namely, the novelty of extempore preaching, the criticism levelled at the deficient religious experience of the established local clergy, the superior, self-righteous attitude adopted by the converts towards their local clergy, and the hostile reaction of the local clergy towards the irregular, improper behavior of the converts.<sup>17</sup>

### **Welcome: September 1742 to January 1743**

Charles Wesley introduced Methodism to Wednesbury in response to an invitation extended to him by Francis Ward the Church Warden. The exact date is uncertain but Charles Wesley was at Newcastle-on-Tyne

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<sup>16</sup>Stout, 207–211.

<sup>17</sup>G. E. Milburn, ‘Charles Wesley in the Rude Populous North: The Newcastle Journal 23rd September to 3rd October, 1742.’ in *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society Volume XLVII* (Part 5, May 1990), 202–220.

between September 22 and October 3, 1742. If he followed the pattern of subsequent visits to the area, he called at Wednesbury on his way to the northeast of England in September, 1742.<sup>18</sup> According to the Anglican account he arrived on the understanding that he came, "to reform the Colliers and other ignorant Persens [sic]; and intimations were given that a Charity school was designed to be built and endowed at Wednesbury, wherein poor Children should be instructed and trained up in the Principles and Practice of the Christian religion."<sup>19</sup> This is a good summary of what the Wesleys, building on the foundations laid by George Whitefield, had achieved in the mining district of Kingswood near Bristol between the spring of 1739 and the winter of 1740. On December 6, 1740 John Wesley informed a correspondent in Cardiff that Kingswood, "is no longer the seat of Drunkenness, uncleanness, and idle diversions that lead thereto. It is no longer filled . . . with clamour and bitterness, with strife and envying." Instead the lips of the colliers were filled with "singing praise unto God their saviour."<sup>20</sup> To consolidate the transformation achieved at Kingswood John Wesley completed Whitefield's scheme to build a school for the education "chiefly of the poorer children" and of "the elder people."

The Wednesbury district was also a mining and metal working area. Beneath the uninviting, unproductive expanse of open heath and furze which stretched between Walsall, three miles to north-northeast of Wednesbury; Darlaston, a mile to the northwest of Wednesbury; and West Bromwich, a mile to the northeast of Wednesbury lay a unique bed of coal some thirty feet thick which in parts came to within two or three feet of the surface where it could be dug out underfoot and carted away by wheelbarrow. Since the coal was eminently suitable for use as domestic fuel, and for coking as industrial fuel, it gradually grew in demand within a region where the supply of wood was almost exhausted, and where the manufacture of glass, brick, salt, and small metal objects was expanding rapidly.<sup>21</sup> Scattered among this busy, populous, and prosperous area were small settlements of mainly colliers, nailmakers, and general smiths, whose moral behavior was deplorable. At Lime and Mares Green the colliers were especially notorious "for cursing and swearing, sabbath-breaking, idleness, and all manner of debauchery. Few thereabouts used to go to church or to trouble themselves with religion."<sup>22</sup> It would appear that far from being complacent about the state of religion in his parish Eggington had heard of what the Wesleys had accomplished at Kings-

<sup>18</sup>As claimed by E. A. Dingley, *Footsteps of John Wesley in Wednesbury* (1938).

<sup>19</sup>Hackwood, *Religious Wednesbury*, 69.

<sup>20</sup>Jackson, *Works*, Vol. 13, 149.

<sup>21</sup>M. J. Wise, Editor, *Birmingham and Its Regional Setting: A Scientific Survey* (London: S. R. Publishers, 1970), 162-173.

<sup>22</sup>Jackson, *Works*, Vol. 13, 167.

wood and through his church warden extended an invitation for them to come and to do the same at Wednesbury with his approval and blessing.

The novelty of a clergyman preaching in the streets and fields of Wednesbury aroused great curiosity and “drew great numbers of people” after Charles Wesley who, “told them he did not come to collect Money among them, or to draw anything from them, but to instruct them in the Purity of the Christian Doctrine: and to confirm this a Person who accompanied him gave a Guinea to be distributed in Bread among the Poor, and did some other acts of Charity.”<sup>23</sup> John Wesley followed up his brother’s visit on Saturday, January 8, 1743. He reached Wednesbury at “four in the afternoon,” and at seven o’clock preached in the town hall to a “deeply attentive” audience. Wesley preached in the town hall again at five o’clock the following morning to another capacity audience. At eight o’clock he preached to four or five thousand people in a large hollow on the outskirts of Wednesbury. He attended the service in the parish church in the afternoon where he heard Eggington preach “a plain useful sermon.” Most of the congregation then followed him to the Holloway where he preached to a much larger crowd than in the morning. Wesley preached again “at five, at eight, and . . . three” on the Monday, spending the intervals between the preaching in speaking “to all who desired it” to such good effect that the Society had grown to a hundred members by the time he took his leave of them on the Wednesday for Evesham and Stratford.<sup>24</sup> He left with Edward Eggington’s cordial invitation to return ringing in his ears for he had been invited to the Vicar’s house, and had been told that the oftener he came the more welcome he would be for he

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<sup>23</sup>Hackwood, *Religious Wednesbury*, 69.

<sup>24</sup>Jackson, *Works*, Vol. 1, 384–385. There are several descriptions of John Wesley’s appearance and manner of preaching at this stage of his life. Silas Told heard him preach at the Foundery in London in July 1740. He was not impressed by Wesley’s appearance which he “much despised. The enemy of souls suggested that he was some farmer’s son, who, not able to support himself, was making a penny in this low manner.” (Told, *The Life of Mr. Silas Told as told by Himself* (1786 Reprinted 1954 Epworth Press, 67.) It was the aged Wesley’s rustic air which first struck Johan Henrick, the Swedish professor, twenty-nine years later, in 1769: “He is a small, thin old man, with his own long and strait hair, and looks as the worst country curate in Sweden. . . .” (quoted by R. P. Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*, Volume 2 [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984], 87). It was Wesley’s air of composure which impressed Benjamin Kennicott at Oxford in 1744: “He is neither tall nor fat; for the latter would ill become a Methodist. His black hair quite smooth, and parted very exactly, added to a peculiar composure in his countenance, showed him to be an uncommon man.” (Heitzenrater, 85) Wesley’s appearance was overshadowed by the sincerity of his preaching. Howel Harris heard him preach on Romans Seven in May 1743: “He was very sweet and loving, and seemed to have his heart honestly bent on drawing poor souls to Christ.” (quoted Albert Outler, *The Works of John Wesley Volume 1* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984], Sermons 1–33, 7) Henry Moore recalled of the aged Wesley: “Sometimes when he had liberty his words literally struggled for utterance and he poured

had done much good there already, and Eggington was in no doubt that he would "do much more."<sup>25</sup>

### Hostility: January–May 1743

When John Wesley returned to Wednesbury on April 15, 1743 he found that Eggington's "former love was turned into bitter hatred." On the Sunday he heard Eggington preach "so wicked a sermon, and delivered with such bitterness of voice and manner" that he began "to prepare the poor people" for the persecution to come "that, when it came, they might not be offended."<sup>26</sup> The warm appreciation of Edward Eggington for the work of the two Wesleys had turned to bitter hostility because of the criticisms made of him by the lay travelling preachers who took over the supervision of the Society begun by the Wesleys. The first to arrive was "simple" Robert Williams, a former Dissenter. Where Charles Wesley had "made the strongest asseverations [to Eggington] that nothing should be done by him or his followers to alienate the Affections of the people from him . . . or to withdraw them from the Church of England,"<sup>27</sup> Williams proceeded to disparage the lax worldly standards of the local clergy: "Look upon your ministry: there are dicers and carders, some blind guides and cannot see, some dumb dogs and will not bark. It might be better if all dumb ministers were hanged up in their church." There was some truth in these charges. Eggington may well have been addicted to gambling. Although he had a good income from his incumbency which he supplemented by acting as gamekeeper to the local Lord of the Manor, and although his wife inherited a good sum of money on the death of her father, Eggington died owing own man the huge sum of £600.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Williams (after the manner of the lay exhorters in New

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them out with great rapidity and force, often stopping for a moment to breathe out a most impressive prayer that the people might then and there believe, and the word have an entrance to them." (*Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* 1897, 515) Silas Told, despite his initial hostility towards Wesley's rustic appearance found, as he put it, "my prejudice quickly abated; and I plainly saw that I could never be saved without knowing my sins were forgiven. At the close of the discourse, however strange it may appear, a small still voice entered my heart with these words, "This is the truth!" and instantly I felt it in my soul." (Told, 67) Wesley remained loving and persuasive to the end of his life. Richard Birch heard him preach at Ilkeston in 1786: "The discourse came home to my heart and conscience with all the authority and weight of truth: and the impression was all the more powerful, by reason of the affectionate and heavenly manner in which the venerable servant of God delivered his message." (*Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* 1838, 882).

<sup>25</sup>John Telford, Editor, *The Letters of John Wesley*, Vol. 2 (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 76.

<sup>26</sup>Jackson, *Works*, Volume 1, 394.

<sup>27</sup>Hackwood, *Religious Wednesbury*, 69.

<sup>28</sup>J. L. Waddy, *The Bitter and Sacred Cup* (London, 1976), 7.

England) cast doubts on the spiritual fitness of the local clergy to pursue their calling as priests by saying they were not converted Christians. These attacks on the integrity of Eggington's character and calling were aggravated by the social status of Williams and the other lay preachers who followed him who were drawn from the ranks of the skilled manual workers: "After him came a Bricklayer, and then a Plumber and Glazier, both said to come from London, who Both publicly prayed and usurped the Office of a preacher."<sup>29</sup> Behind this disdain for the pretensions of the Methodist Preachers lay over a century of public ridicule for the artisan in educated English society. It was Nick Bottom the weaver, Francis Flute the bellows mender, Robin Starvling the tailor, Tom Snout the tinker, and Snug the joiner who were ridiculed by Shakespeare for their confused, inept misuse of the English language in their presentation of "A tedious brief scene of young Pyramus and his love Thisby: very tragical mirth at the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta."<sup>30</sup> No wonder Edward Eggington was so bitterly outraged by the attacks made upon him by men of such despised status as Robert Williams and his fellow preachers. There was also a sense of having been betrayed by men of his own class for John Wesley had established a rival religious organization subdivided into classes under the leadership of laymen "whose business it is to enquire into the State of the Souls of his class. After such enquiry he makes a Prayer for them; when that is ended, he tells them they are all pardon'd. After this he exhorts them to give him what money they can spare, that he may deliver it to the steward."<sup>31</sup> Not only were strangers usurping the office of a preacher but local men were also usurping the office of a priest. These developments "differing very widely from what had been declared at the first setting out, began to open the Eyes of the serious and thinking sort of People."<sup>32</sup>

The "illiterate and unthinking people" were also antagonized by the Methodists. To begin with, their curiosity was aroused by the novel spectacle of Anglican clergymen deigning to preach in an extempore, plain way to common people in the open air, and by the even more novel spectacle of people of their own kind preaching in a similar way. They heard

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<sup>29</sup>Hackwood, *Religious Wednesbury*, 69.

<sup>30</sup>A disdain shared by Charles Wesley who never came to terms with his brother's use of lay preachers. He scorned "the tinner, barber, thatcher" who so forgot themselves as to "set up for a gentleman." [Frank Baker, *Charles Wesley as Revealed by His Letters* (London: Epworth Press, 1948), 82] While resident in London he exercised his right as a clergyman to preach twice every Sunday in the City Road chapel to the exclusion of the lay itinerant preachers. [George J. Stevenson, *City Road Chapel, and Its Associations: Historical, Biographical, and Memorial* (London, 1872), 75] While resident in Bristol he warned the people not to be led into schism from the Church of England by the preachers on the death of himself, and of his brother. [*Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*, 1830, 722].

<sup>31</sup>Hackwood, *Religious Wednesbury*, 70.

<sup>32</sup>Hackwood, *Religious Wednesbury*, 69.

a novel kind of message, one which would have appealed mostly to the more literate religiously inclined artisan class in their midst familiar with the Bible, and with Puritan literature like *Pilgrim's Progress*, which would have instilled in them a fear of eternal damnation and a moral desire for a better quality of life. It was to this minority group of religiously susceptible people that the Methodist preaching would have had maximum appeal. The Anglican account of the Methodist preaching may in some respects be a caricature of what Wesley and his preachers were saying, but it is still a fair representation of what could be legitimately inferred from what they preached and taught:

- "That every person must have an absolute Assurance of his Salvation, or he would certainly be damned;"
- That all who did not adhere to, and follow them, were not in a state of salvation; and that this had been the case of our Forefathers for several generations past;
- That every true Christian did arrive at such a Degree of Perfection as to live entirely free from all Sin;
- and that those who had not made this progress were no Christians at all;
- That every person must receive the Holy Ghost in a sensible manner, so as to feel and distinguish all its several motions which sometimes could be quite violent."<sup>33</sup>

The image given by this message of a fanatical, self-righteous, censorious, highly excitable group of religious people was reinforced by the behavior of the Methodists themselves. They became a divisive element within the local community: "The Methodists became prejudiced against their lawful minister, and spoke ill-natured and unjustifiable things of him. They likewise, upon every dispute they had with their neighbors of the Church of England, would tell them they were eternally damned, and even children would tell their parents the same."<sup>34</sup> The practice of open confession in the class-meetings, and the Methodist custom of seating men and women separately during worship, were regarded as threats to

<sup>33</sup>Hackwood, *Religious Wednesbury*, 69.

<sup>34</sup>Hackwood, *Religious Wednesbury*, 69. In this complaint we have an echo of the complaint made against the early Christians of the Third Century A.D. by Celsus who said of the Christian artisans like wool-makers, cobblers, laundry-workers who gained access to private homes: wherever they get hold of children in private and some stupid women with them, they let out some astounding statements as, for example, that they must not pay attention to their father and school teachers but must obey them; they say that these talk nonsense and have no understanding, and that in reality they neither know nor are able to do anything good, but are taken up with mere empty chatter. But they alone know the right way to live, and if the children would believe them, they would become happy and make their home happy as well." (Origen. *Contra Celsum* translated Henry Chadwick, London: Cambridge University Press, 1980, 165). It was the possibility of making comparisons like this which strengthened the belief of the early Methodists that they were experiencing a revival of primitive Christianity.

the privacy and solidarity of family life. Three weeks before his death in 1739 Samuel Wesley Junior had expostulated with his brother over these matters: "Will any man of common sense or spirit suffer any domestic to be in bond engaged to relate everything without reserve to five or ten people, that concerns the person's conscience, how much soever it may concern the family? Ought any married persons to be there, unless husband and wife be there together? This is literally putting asunder whom God hath joined together."<sup>35</sup> This perceived threat to the integrity of family life in the eighteenth century was a fundamental one for, as Asa Briggs has pointed out: "The dominance of family ties made for both order and continuity." Land belonged to families and was held in trust from generation to generation; business organization was often associated with family partnerships; the individual advanced socially by marriage; and even at the humblest levels of society people depended on the family for their livelihood and security.<sup>36</sup> Suddenly, due to the Methodists, familiar relatives, friends, and neighbors had become seemingly fanatical religious aliens.

Even the local sportsmen felt threatened. The first thing John Sheldon did on being converted was to go home and sell his fighting cocks. John Griffiths, Junior offended his former companions because he would "not drink and game, and break the Sabbath with them" as he used to do. A local sportsman is reputed to have said: "I'll tell thee, lads. If we don't put a stop to these Methodists as goes about preaching and praying there'll be nomore sportsmen left us bye and bye."<sup>37</sup> English society at this time, to quote Harold Perkin, was "one of the most aggressive, brutal, rowdy, outspoken, riotous, cruel and blood thirsty nations in the world."<sup>38</sup> Rich and poor alike shared in the vulgarity and brutality of a life marked by drunkenness, sexual laxity, extravagant gambling, and violence. The more brutal sports like cock-fighting, bull-baiting, and football depended upon the patronage of the local gentry. It is not surprising that the religious representatives of this kind of society were regarded with tolerance as long as they behaved like gentlemen and fulfilled the duties of patronage and benevolence proper to their rank. William Moreton, the curate of Willenhall between 1789–1834 was a notorious drunkard who resisted all the attempts of his church wardens to depose him because he commanded the popular support of his parishioners by remembering his social obligations as a gentleman. In April 1815

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<sup>35</sup>Quoted in Robert Southey, *The Life of John Wesley* (London: Hutchinson and Co. abridged in one volume by Arthur Reynolds, n.d.), 173.

<sup>36</sup>Asa Briggs, *The Age of Improvement* (London: Longmans, 1967), 9.

<sup>37</sup>J.C.T., *Sketches of Early Methodism in the Black Country with the romantic story of the Leek-Seed Chapel* (London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1871), 3.

<sup>38</sup>Harold Perkin, *Origins of Modern English Society* (London: Ark paperbacks, 1969), 280.

he used his connections at court to gain an audience with the Prince regent in order to intercede successfully for the lives of a man and boy from Willenhall who had been sentenced to death for sheep stealing.<sup>39</sup> The great majority of people wanted a "friendly" religion that would assist them in so ordering their relationship with the arbitrary behavior of the natural world as to minimize individual misfortune or communal catastrophe. Dire, unanticipated misfortune was the great fear of the common people, rather than the fear of hell or the moral desire for a better quality of life which so motivated the Methodists. The aggressive nature of the Methodist attempt to reform the morals of their local communities with its attendant disruption of traditional social relationships and popular pastimes antagonized both pastors and people and drew them together to oppose the enemy within their midst.

Disgruntled people and offended Vicar could join forces in "the mob" which was a recognized social institution in eighteenth century England. Workers, for example, organized themselves into mobs for the purpose, to quote E. J. Hobsbawm, of "collective bargaining by riot."<sup>40</sup> It was a planned method of coercion in which workers put pressure on employers through rioting in which employers' property was destroyed, and selected machinery was wrecked. In 1738 the nailers of Stourbridge and Dudley whose living was threatened by a disruption of trade with the North American colonies rose continually in numbers between 500-1000 strong in a tumultuous manner "threatening to destroy and pull down the houses and warehouses of their employers."<sup>41</sup> This kind of bargaining had the support both of the local magistrates and of the central government. When the clothiers of the west of England complained to Parliament in 1724 that their weavers "threatened to pull down their houses and burn their work unless they agreed to their terms," the government replied regretting that the employers had antagonized the men needlessly by arresting some of the rioters! It was suggested that the employers and workers should get together to frame a petition on which Parliament could act.<sup>42</sup> This kind of collective bargaining by riot required leadership, planning, discipline and moral justification. "Actions on such a scale," observes E. P. Thompson, "indicate an extraordinarily deep rooted pattern of behavior and belief."<sup>43</sup> The same leadership, planning, discipline and moral justification were also put to use by mobs "hired" to coerce a selected target through rioting and selective destruction of property. The

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<sup>39</sup>N. W. Tildesley, "William Moreton of Willenhall" in *Essays in Staffordshire History*, 180-181.

<sup>40</sup>E. J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 7.

<sup>41</sup>Marie B. Rowlands, *Masters and Men in the West Midland metalware trades before the industrial revolution* (London: Manchester University Press, 1975), 83.

<sup>42</sup>Hobsbawm, 16.

<sup>43</sup>E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Pelican, 1968), 71.

use of such mobs, says E. P. Thompson, “was an established technique in the eighteenth century . . . it had long been employed by authority itself. . . . A mob was a very useful supplement to the magistrates in a nation that was scarcely policed.”<sup>44</sup> He then goes on to quote the anti-Methodist riots at Wednesbury and Walsall in 1743 and 1744 as examples of the hired mob in action. John Wesley described the mobs which despoiled the homes of the Methodists in 1743 and 1744 as “hired for that purpose by their betters.” The mob certainly regarded itself as engaged in legitimate business for they blandly informed some gentlemen who were endeavoring to quell them on the Shrove Tuesday of 1744 that since the Methodists “met on purpose to promote the Interest of Popery, and to bring in the Pretender . . . they were doing what the Soldiers shortly would do; and that if they endeavored to stop them they were enemies of his Majesty, and Friends of the Pretender. . . .”<sup>45</sup>

The early 1740s were a time of a national political crisis aggravated by threats of a French invasion on behalf of the deposed Stuart dynasty. In this tense atmosphere the Methodists appeared in a very threatening light due to their ambivalent preaching and behavior. Silas Told’s first impression of John Wesley’s preaching was that “he was a Papist, as he dwelt so much on the forgiveness of sins.”<sup>46</sup> The rustic congregation which crowded into Wensley Parish church on October 30, 1743 were totally confused as to John Wesley’s identity. Some thought that he was a Quaker, others an Anabaptist, “but, at length, one deeper learned than the rest, brought them all clearly over to his opinion that he was a Presbyterian Papist.”<sup>47</sup> The man did not merit Wesley’s scorn for a critic like Josiah Tucker described Wesley’s theology as “a medley of Calvinism, Arminianism, Montanism, Quakerism, Quietism—all thrown together.”<sup>48</sup> To confuse the issue even further, the Methodists claimed to be loyal members of the Church of England while behaving like radical Dissenters. When Jonas Turner, a West Bromwich Methodist, was asked by John Baker and his cronies whether he would persist in staying with the Methodists or return to the Anglican Church he replied: “I go to the church very often, but I never see you there.”<sup>49</sup> This was the standard Methodist defense of their identity. They were neither Recusants nor Dissenters because they attended the worship of the Anglican Church, and embraced all her doctrines. It was a disingenuous and unconvincing argument since Dissenters could repudiate Papal authority and affirm their

<sup>44</sup>Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 74.

<sup>45</sup>Hackwood, *Religious Wednesbury*, 70–71.

<sup>46</sup>Told, *Life of Silas Told*, 67.

<sup>47</sup>Jackson, *Works*, Volume I, 419.

<sup>48</sup>Albert Outler, *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), Vol. 1 (1984) Sermons 1–33, 64.

<sup>49</sup>Jackson, *Works*, Vol. 13, 165.

Protestant identity under the terms of the Toleration Act by taking an oath of allegiance and supremacy and by signing a declaration against transubstantiation. They could also evade the articles of the Corporation Act, and qualify for holding municipal office by the practice of "occasional conformity" in which they partook of the Sacrament of Holy Communion according to the rites of the Anglican Church once, and once only.<sup>50</sup> The Methodists claimed to be loyal members of the Church of England without any need for such devices as allowed by the Law, and yet they openly flouted the authority of the Church by preaching in the open air without the prior permission of a bishop, raising religious societies responsible to Wesley and his preachers alone instead of to the local clergy, building chapels in competition with the parish church, permitting laymen to preach and to absolve sins, ill-conceived attacks on the lax worldly standards of both the local clergy, and of the local populace, and seeming papist emphasis upon the forgiveness of sins and the open confession of sin in the class-meeting.

A detailed account of the persecutions suffered by the Methodists during their period of conflict with the clergy, gentry, and people of Wednesbury and its neighborhood does not fall within the scope of this study. It is enough to note that the anti-Methodist riots at Wednesbury instigated by Eggington took place during a critical period of English national history. The most serious riots in June 1743 and February 1744 took place during the English victory at Dettingen and the declaration of war against France respectively, when national feelings against a foreign enemy were already running very high and could be further inflamed against a religious movement that was sincerely, if misguidedly, regarded as a subversive agent of the Jacobite cause. During the period of the persecutions the local suspicions of the Papist character of Methodism were further reinforced by Methodism's seemingly superstitious emphasis on miraculous deliverances by God in its teaching. According to the Anglican account it was in the course of his sermon dissuading the Methodists from taking steps to defend themselves that Charles Wesley in "haranguing his audience told them, That he was afraid on Tuesday following most of them would desert Christ. But, said he, to strengthen your faith, I was once in a Mob myself; a Man struck me, and immediately God almighty withered away his Hand so that he lost the Use of it."<sup>51</sup> If Charles did not say some-

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<sup>50</sup>Elie Halevy, *A History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century, Vol. 1. England in 1815* (London: Longmans, 1949), 404 ff.

<sup>51</sup>Hackwood, *Religious Wednesbury*, 70. As an example of Charles Wesley's belief in the miraculous acts of God there is his record that, "On Christmas Day [1743] I heard that one of our fiercest persecutors, who had cut his throat and lay dead for some hours, was miraculously revived as a monument of divine mercy." cited by D. M. Jones, *Charles Wesley: A Study* (London: Epworth Press, n.d.), 113.

thing as crudely miraculous as that then it is possible that he did say something to the effect that if God so willed to defend His people from harm then he was perfectly capable of withering the hands raised to strike them for both Charles and his brother were convinced believers in the Special Providential Acts of God. John Wesley went so far as to assert that God was prepared to work miracles, which he defined as "a deviation from the general laws of nature," on behalf of all "real Christians" to the extent: "If it please God to continue the life of any one of his servants, he will suspend that or any other law of nature; the stone shall not fall; the fires shall not burn; the floods shall not flow; or he will give his angels charge, and in their hands shall bear him up, through and above all dangers."<sup>52</sup> It was easy for critics of Methodism to represent this kind of teaching as a revival of that popular superstitious nonsense so insidiously cultivated by the Roman Catholic Church to retain its hold over a backward, credulous peasantry. It was easy to use garbled misrepresentations of Methodist teaching to depict the Methodists as meeting on purpose "to promote the Interest of Popery, and to bring in the Pretender."<sup>53</sup>

### Conclusion

The conclusion to be drawn from the whole dismal series of events is that Edward Eggington was vile in his treatment of the Methodists, but that he does not deserve the reviling he has received at the hands of some Methodist historians because both the local Methodists and the visiting Methodist preachers gave him good grounds for sincerely believing that they were a dangerous subversive threat to the peace and religious settlement of both the locality and of the nation.

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<sup>52</sup>Sermon LXVII, "On Divine Providence" in Jackson, *Works*, Volume 6, 305.

<sup>53</sup>Hackwood, *Religious Wednesbury*, 70. Jeremy Morris in his review of Colin Haydon's book *Anti-Catholicism in Eighteenth-Century England c. 1714-80* (Manchester University Press, 1993) in *Reviews in Religion and Theology* (August 1994), 84 points out how Haydon underlines the widespread popular view of Popery as a virulent, conspiratorial and dangerous threat to the safety of England.