

GEORGE BELL, PROPHET AND ENTHUSIAST*

KENNETH G. C. NEWPORT

In eighteenth-century England belief in the literal return of Jesus to this earth was very much alive and well. Such belief had very real consequences and perhaps there is no better example of this than the activities of the Methodist preacher George Bell. Bell prophesied that the world was to end on February 28, 1763 and on the day previous to the earth's predicted doom went with his followers to a mound near St. Luke's hospital in London, there to take a last look at the doomed city and await the fulfilment of prophecy. Bell was arrested and charged with public order offenses. The end of the world did not come and Bell's movement came to naught.

This crowning incident in the enthusiastic career of George Bell is well known to historians of Methodism, principally through the work of Tyerman (who is himself partly dependent upon Southey).¹ Tyerman's work on Bell is in turn referred to by numerous later researchers, who add little to the somewhat hazy picture one finds there.² This rather stagnant state of affairs is no doubt largely due to the general paucity of primary material relating to Bell and his followers. It is the primary purpose of the present study to draw attention to a number of manuscript letters relating to Bell currently held in the Methodist archives at the John Rylands University Library of Manchester. These letters have material which substantially augments that which has hitherto been available.

Little is known of Bell's life prior to his emergence on the stage of Methodist history. He was born at Borningham, Durham, but the date of his birth is unknown. He died in Paddington in 1807.³ Bell had been a Corporal in the King's Life-Guards, and signs himself such in a letter to John Wesley written in 1761.⁴ In this letter Bell's conversion must therefore have been in

*It is a pleasure to acknowledge my gratitude to the Board of the John Rylands Research Institute for the award of a generous research bursary without which this article would not have been written.

¹Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley M.A.*, 3 vols. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1870–1871), 2:433–444; Robert Southey, *The Life of Wesley*, rev. ed. (London and New York: Frederick Warne and Co., 1889), 418–421.

²See for example George Smith, *History of Wesleyan Methodism*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, 1863), 1:296–297; Nolan B. Harmon, ed., *Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, 2 vols. (Nashville, Tennessee: United Methodist Publishing House, 1974), 1:248. Stanley Ayling, *John Wesley* (New York: Collins, 1979), 211–212.

³Harmon, *Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, 248.

⁴"George Bell to John Wesley, April 6, 1761," *Arminian Magazine* 3 (1780): 674–676.

about 1758. Little is known of Bell's private life, though it seems from one source that he was married.⁵

Bell was soon to earn the reputation for extreme enthusiasm. He took the view that the sacrament was unnecessary and that he and his followers were more pure even than Adam and Eve.⁶ Bell let it be known that he read nothing but the Bible,⁷ and his meetings were characterised by such emotion that the resultant ecstatic utterances seemed to some that he was in some terrible pain.⁸ According to the *Encyclopedia of World Methodism* it was as a result of such enthusiasm that Wesley expelled Bell in December 1762.⁹ This detail, however, seems to be in error. Wesley did not "expel" Bell; he left, apparently of his own accord, sometime in early 1763.¹⁰

Bell's notoriety continued and came to a head with his prediction that the world would come to a dramatic end on February 28, 1763. However, Bell was arrested on February 27,¹¹ and W. Briggs has it on the authority of "Mr Madan" that Bell had subsequently been charged with "raising unnecessary fears in the King's subjects, for blasphemy and for holding meetings in unlicensed places."¹² Bell's prophecies failed and, naturally enough, his credibility declined in proportion. According to Southey, Bell made no further pretense of religion. Rather, he turned his attention to politics and exhibited there the same enthusiasm and lack of constraint that he had shown in his religious outbursts.¹³

The Bell incident was inextricably tied to another much more widespread early Methodist movement, that of perfectionism. It was this link that forged the bond between George Bell and much better known figure Thomas Maxfield. Bell made his views regarding his own perfection clear in a letter he wrote to John Wesley on April 6, 1761.¹⁴

This perfectionist point of view was, it seems, central to Bell's theological agenda. This was certainly the impression which William Briggs gained

⁵John Walsh to Charles Wesley, August 11, 1762, Methodist Archives, John Rylands University Library of Manchester (hereafter JRL), Early Methodist Folio (hereafter EM) no. 134. In the course of the letter Walsh questions Bell's claim to perfection, for, states Walsh, if Bell were perfected in the flesh, he would have to deny that he desires his wife when he lies with her.

⁶Tyerman, *Life*, 2:434; cf. G. C., "Thoughts on the Work of Sanctification," *Arminian Magazine* 13 (1790): 42.

⁷*The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1872), 8:315. Hereafter cited as Wesley, *Works*.

⁸William Briggs to Charles Wesley, October 28, 1762, JRL, Letters to Charles Wesley Folio vol. 6 (hereafter cited as LCW 6), no. 10.

⁹Harmon, *Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, 1:248.

¹⁰John Wesley to Charles Wesley, February 8, 1763, JRL ref. DDWES 3:20 (*Works* 12:124–125); cf. Nehemiah Curnock, ed., *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, 8 vols. (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1909–1916), 5:5; hereafter cited as Wesley, *Journal*.

¹¹Tyerman, *Life*, 2:438.

¹²William Briggs to Charles Wesley, March 5, 1763, JRL ref. DDWES 2:61.

¹³Southey, *Life*, 421; cf. *Works* 8:315.

¹⁴"George Bell to John Wesley, April 6, 1761," *Arminian Magazine* 3 (1780): 674–676.

when he attended a meeting in Beech Lane led by Bell and Maxfield on October 27, 1762.¹⁵ Briggs' account of the Bell-Maxfield meeting provides a remarkable first-hand account of grass-roots Methodist enthusiasm in early 1760's London. It is evident from the letter that the meeting was no small affair and that Bell was central to it. No less central, in fact, than Maxfield. According to Briggs, Bell was in overall charge of the meeting and Briggs reports how Bell,

Prayed, and soon ran into such an Extraordinary strain, Screaming in such a violent manner to Compel a blessing upon the present meeting, that he seemed to be in a rapture and in fact was as one raving with agony.

Bell's ecstatic ravings seem to have had a dramatic effect, for while all this was going on, Briggs states, the audience "fell into singing the glorious state of being free from sins." This first hand account of the Bell-Maxfield meeting is significant for several reasons, not the least of which is the absence of any real evidence to suggest that Bell was in Maxfield's shadow. According to the report by Briggs, Bell evidently led the hymn singing which preceded the meeting, opened the meeting itself, and was the one who later took the initiative in seeking to silence opposition. He is later described by Briggs as one who "managed" the whole meeting. The letter also makes it clear that the meeting was not a small matter.

Nothing is said in the letter regarding Bell's prophecy. However, it is possible that Bell's reputation as a prophet was already known to Briggs since at one point Briggs referred to an expectation which he had at the time that he would see Bell "fall down and with foaming mouth, wild eyes and uplifted hair, deliver a prophecy." This expectation was, however, unfulfilled. Briggs also referred to the expectation that he had (based upon his study of Bell's letters and recent attendance at the meeting) that he would hear of his "prophecying, denouncing judgments and calling himself one of the witnesses." This is an ambiguous reference, but it does at least seem possible that Bell had already begun prophesying the end of the world. It is even possible that Bell saw himself as one of the two witnesses described in Rev. 11:3ff.

Bell and Maxfield, then, were closely connected. The question of whether Maxfield accepted Bell's prophecies is, however, a difficult one. Wesley seems to have suspected that Maxfield did believe Bell's prognostications,¹⁶ but this contradicts Maxfield's own protestations in his *Vindication*.¹⁷ We must allow, of course, for the possibility that in the *Vindication* Maxfield was, quite understandably, seeking to salvage what he could of his reputation following the failure of Bell's predictions. What seems reasonably certain, however, is that Bell and Maxfield split with the society at about the same

¹⁵Briggs to Wesley, October 28, 1762, JRL LCW 6:10.

¹⁶Wesley, *Journal*, 5:12

¹⁷Tyerman, *Life*, 2:438.

time, for in a letter dated February 8, 1763, John Wesley writes to Charles Wesley

I think now the sooner you could be here, the better: for the mask is thrown off. George Bell, John Dixon, Jos. Calwert, Benj. Biggs etc. etc. have quitted the society and have renounced all fellowship with us. I wrote to Thomas; but was not favoured with an answer. This morning I wrote a second time and received an answer indeed! The substance is, "You take too much upon you: we *will not* come up."¹⁸

Maxfield, then, seems to have left the society at the same time as Bell and the two desertions were almost certainly intertwined. However, this is still far short of conclusive evidence that Maxfield believed Bell's predictions. In fact Briggs reported in a letter to Charles written on March 5, 1763 that it was John's fear that Maxfield was intent on "raising a separate party."¹⁹ According to Briggs, John voiced this fear on the evening of the Sunday, February 27 (i.e. the evening before the world was, according to Bell, about to be destroyed). If John could have such fears it suggests at least that Maxfield was not convinced that the world was on the very brink of the apocalypse.

In the course of his letter to Charles regarding the Bell-Maxfield meeting, Briggs expressed some concern that John was not dealing with the movement in the way it deserved. This failure was similarly criticized by others. John himself referred to such criticism in a letter written to Charles on January 5, 1763:

Mr Whitefield has fallen upon *me* in public open-mouthed and only not named my name. So has Mr. Madan. But let them look to it. I go on my way. I have a sufficient Answer as to G. Bell. But I will not give it before the time.²⁰

Precisely when John Wesley began to give his "sufficient answer" to Bell is unclear. John was certainly actively engaged in countering Bell's claims during the final few days leading up to Bell's predicted apocalyptic climax.²¹ However, John's response to Bell seems to have been far less unequivocal in the earlier stages of the incident.²²

John's reluctance to condemn out of hand the followers of Bell is related also in another letter by Briggs, dated December 16, 1762. Here Briggs recounted to Charles how he had been in John's company twice in the course of the preceding week and had ascertained that John was determined, "either

¹⁸John Wesley to Charles Wesley, February 8, 1763, JRL ref. DDWES 3:20 (*Works* 12:124; Tyerman 2:462).

¹⁹William Briggs to Charles Wesley, March 5, 1763, JRL ref. DDWES 2:61.

²⁰John Wesley to Charles Wesley, January 5, 1763, JRL ref. DDWES 3:17 (*Works* 12:122–123). The letter is actually dated January 5, 1762, but this is a mistake on John's part since the contents clearly indicate a 1763 date. Further, on the original, Charles, as was his custom, has written a brief note of the contents of the letter and its date. Charles dates the letter "Jan 5, 1763."

²¹William Briggs to Charles Wesley, March 5, 1763, JRL ref. DDWES 2:61. Wesley, *Journal*, 5:9.

²²Wesley, *Journal*, 4:540; John Wesley to Charles Wesley, December 11, 1762, JRL ref. DDWES 3:18 (*Works* 12:123–124).

to amend or abolish the present disorder amongst our wild brethren."²³ John's continued credulity is clear, for, says Briggs, though John had found some 500 who profess that they have attained "that holy state" (N.B. the numbers involved), he believed the claims of only one in ten of them. Clearly, then, John here did not deny that perfection was possible or that some of the Bell-Maxfield group have achieved it. He was doubtful only regarding the numbers of involved.

The position seems to have changed by December 22, however, for it was then that John again heard Bell and this time was convinced that "he must not continue to pray at the foundry."²⁴ What Bell had said is not reported, but it is perhaps a reasonable guess (though nothing more) that Bell's message of doom was beginning to emerge. Soon after this John began openly to speak his mind on the issue and said as much in a letter to Charles written on January 5, 1763. In the course of this letter John mentioned Bell by name and refers also to "five or six honest enthusiasts."²⁵ It is against such "honest" enthusiasts, presumably, that John "speaks his mind." Despite John's determination to deal with the matter, however, Bell seemed to be holding his own. Indeed, in a letter dated January 19, 1763, J. Butcher reported to Charles that although John had now forbade Bell from speaking at the foundry, a report was circulating that, this ban notwithstanding, Bell would speak at the Foundry that very night.²⁶

The turning point in John's dealings with Bell seems therefore to have come sometime in late December, 1762. By January the rift was complete, and in a letter published in the *London Chronicle* on January 8, 1763 Wesley stated that,

One Bell, said to be a Lifeguardsman, holds forth to an assembly, near Hanover Square. He is supposed to belong to the Methodists; but he advances things which many Methodists abhor. Nevertheless his delusions spread. Many of his followers think themselves perfect, and declare they shall never die, 'because,' as they say, 'our dear Lord, who certainly will come a second time, is at the door and we shall see him come.'²⁷

By early January 1763, then, John's response to the Bell movement had taken a definite turn. However, even then John was moving slowly and for this failure to deal much more directly with the issue came in for severe criticism. As noted above, Briggs more than once voiced his concern to Charles that John was far too gentle in his dealings with the movement and John himself referred to the specific criticisms by Whitefield and Madan. On March 20, 1763 John wrote to the Countess of Huntingdon in which he again referred

²³William Briggs to Charles Wesley, December 16, 1762, JRL ref. LCW 6:12.

²⁴Wesley, *Journal*, 4:541.

²⁵John Wesley to Charles Wesley, January 5, 1763, JRL ref. DDWES 3:17.

²⁶J. Butcher to Charles Wesley, January 19, 1763, JRL ref. EM 29.

²⁷*London Chronicle* January 8, 1763 (quoted in Tyerman, *Life*, 2:460). John had a meeting with Bell on January 7, 1763 in which he sought to convince Bell of his mistakes. Bell was, however, "as unmoved as a rock" (Wesley, *Journal*, 5:4).

to the criticisms launched by "Mr Madan, Mr Haweis, Mr Berridge and . . . Mr Whitefield."²⁸ The general criticism seems to have been that John had not acted firmly or quickly enough to deal with Bell and Maxfield. Mr Madan, however, was prepared to go further; John was not only negligent in dealing with the incident, but was even partly responsible for it. Such a criticism was reported by Briggs who met Madan in the street shortly after the failure of Bell's predictions. John was not to be excused all responsibility for the fanaticism to which Bell had given such dramatic voice. Rather, according to Madan, who shook his head as he spoke, "all this Confusion arises from Mr Wesley's encouraging so many people to believe they had attained to a state of perfection."²⁹

It is evident, then, that John did suffer personally from the Bell-Maxfield movement. Thus, when John wrote to the Countess of Huntingdon that he was very much working alone and that those from whom he might have expected help were crying, "Down with him, down with him; even to the ground" he seems to reflect genuine criticism.³⁰

Briggs' letter of October 28, 1762 was followed by another to Charles dated November 10, in which he elaborated further on the general situation which had been created by Bell and Maxfield.³¹ In the same letter Briggs also referred to a group of "7 at the other end of town who meet in a dark room to see visions." These individuals have sought to heal a lame man and to restore the sight of "blind John." Neither attempt worked, and the failure was put down to the sick persons' lack of faith.

Such attempts at healing were hardly unusual within a broader eighteenth-century English Methodist context. Rack has already made the point that early Methodists (like many of their religious contemporaries) frequently dabbled in spiritual healings and exorcisms.³² It comes as no surprise, then, to find that Bell similarly engaged in such activities. Already in December 1760 we find John Wesley investigating a report of the miraculous healing by Bell of one Mary Special.³³

Some time after, according to Southey, Bell attempted the cure of a blind man by rubbing spittle on his eyes and calling out "ephphatha."³⁴ Southey, who is in turn referred to by Rack,³⁵ gave no source for this information. How-

²⁸Tyerman, *Life*, 2:463; John Telford, ed., *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, repr. ed., 5 vols. (London: The Epworth press, 1960), 4:206.

²⁹Briggs to Wesley, March 5, 1763, JRL ref. DDWES 2:61.

³⁰Telford, *Letters*, 4:206.

³¹William Briggs to Charles Wesley, November 10, 1762, JRL ref. LCW 6:11.

³²Henry D. Rack, "Doctors, Demons and Early Methodist Healing," *Studies in Church History* 19 (1982): 137-152.

³³See Southey, *Life*, 418.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 419. cf. Mark 7:32-37; 8:22-26.

³⁵Rack, "Early Methodist Healing," 150.

ever, reference to attempts to heal the blind were made by "G.C." (= George Cussons?) in an account printed in the *Arminian Magazine* for 1790, which reported that "about the year 1760 and 61, there was a great work of God in London." According to the report the "work" got off to a good start, but was soon hijacked by the Devil. Some in the movement took the view that they were "more holy than our first parents and stood on a better foundation." The writer continued,

I do not speak these things by hearsay; I was an eye and ear witness. They even went farther, professing to have the gifts of healing, and in *London* did really attempt to heal the blind, and raise the dead.³⁶

Naturally, we cannot be sure that Bell was referred to by G. C., but the date and location fit the reference in Southey. Similarly ambiguous is a reference made by Briggs in his November 10, 1762 letter to Charles Wesley to which we have already referred. Here again we find attempts at faith healing. In this instance the name of the blind person is mentioned (blind John), but the names of those seeking to perform the healing are not.

That Bell did claim the ability to heal is certain. We have noted already John Wesley's account of Bell's healing of Mary Special, and to this we can add the testimony of John Walsh who wrote to Charles in August 1762.³⁷ Much of this long letter (about 5000 words) is concerned with the question of perfection, and, needless to say, Bell appears frequently in this context. However, in the course of the letter Walsh reported also that on January 12, 1762, Bell had told him and Mr. Berridge that,

God had given him the gift of healing, which he had already practiced, and of raising the Dead, which he should perform in God's time.

Walsh himself was so impressed by Bell's confidence in his assertion that he could carry out such healings that he came close to asking Bell to heal his asthmatic mother.

This letter thus confirms not only the remark in Southey regarding Bell's engagement in spiritual healings of the blind. It confirms also the claim of "G.C." (repeated by Tyerman and Rack)³⁸ that Bell sought even to raise the dead. At the time of Bell's remarks to Walsh and Berridge (January 12, 1762) he had not as yet attempted such raisings, but that he claimed such ability is plain.

Bell was indeed a man of enthusiastic religious persuasion and his enthusiasm seems to have reached its zenith in his prophecy that the world was to end on the night of February 28, 1763. Unfortunately, there is very little information regarding the events immediately surrounding this date in the

³⁶*Arminian Magazine* 13 (1790): 42.

³⁷JRL EM 134.

³⁸Tyerman 2:434; Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1989), 338.

sources beyond that which is found in Tyerman and Southey. However, there are at least two letters among those held in the John Rylands Library which do add significantly to our understanding of that event.

The events as they are reported by Tyerman and Southey are straightforward enough. Bell predicted that the world was to end on February 28, 1763 and on the day before Bell and his followers ascended a mount near St. Luke's hospital, London, there to await the coming of the Lord. Bell was arrested and thrown into prison, but was later released.

Briggs tells us a little more. According to him,

Bell took a solemn farewell of Biggs a few days before Monday, saying, 'farewell—I shall see your face no more before we hear the last trumpet'!³⁹

This reference to the "last trumpet" perhaps gives a very slight clue to the origin of Bell's thought, for it is possible that Bell was referring here to I Thess. 4:16 (cf. Matt 24:31) which refers to a hope which Paul has that, "the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trump of God." This is consistent with Tyerman's remark that several of Maxfield's closest followers spent the night of February 28 at Mr Bigg's house "every moment in full expectation of hearing the blast of the archangel's trumpet."⁴⁰

Wesley's journal entry for February 28, 1763 indicates that the followers of Bell expected an earthquake. This expectation of an earthquake is referred to also by Briggs in the letter of March 5. According to Briggs, Bell predicted that there would be two "preparatory shocks on Sunday evening at 5 and at 6."

A slightly more informative account of Bell's thinking is found in Walsh's letter to Charles Wesley.⁴¹ We have had cause to note this letter above, for it contains an unambiguous reference to Bell's claim to healing abilities. However, in addition to stating that Bell had told Walsh and Berridge that he had the gift of healing, the letter reports also that it was Bell's claim that,

the millennium was begun, and he should never die, that he and several other Men had seen Satan bound and cast into the bottomless pit, and the angel had set a Seal upon him that he should not come out to deceive the nations.⁴²

To this slight information may be added the reference Walsh makes to the fact that Bell encouraged him to sing hymns "significant of my name being written in the Lamb's book of life."

³⁹William Briggs to Charles Wesley, March 5, 1763, JRL ref. DDWES 2:61.

⁴⁰Tyerman 2:438 (probably based on John Wesley's diary entry for April 23, 1763 [Wesley, *Journal*, 5:12]).

⁴¹JRL EM 134.

⁴²Ibid.

The information given by Walsh regarding Bell's apocalypticism is then slight, but it at least provides a glimpse of what Bell was thinking. The references to the millennium, immorality, and the binding of Satan are all taken from Revelation 20:1–6. The "lamb's book of life" appears in Rev. 13:8; 21:27 (cf., Rev. 3:5; 17:8; 20:15; 22:19). Bell, then, obviously had an eye on the book of Revelation as he sought to work out his prophetic scheme. The millennium had already begun and hence death had lost, at least for the perfect, its cruel sting.

Bell's prophetic chronology was basically premillennialist. To be sure his statement (reported by Walsh) that the millennium had *already* dawned is somewhat unusual, and suggests a much modified postmillennial viewpoint, but the basic ingredients of the premillennial faith seem to have been in place in Bell's scheme. This is seen especially in Bell's belief that the kingdoms of this world will not gradually slip into the millennial age, but be radically transformed by the cataclysmic breaking in of the kingdom of God. The events of February 28, 1763 would not, according to Bell, be perceptible only to the spiritual senses (cf., the fact that the "binding of Satan" was seen only by visionaries). There will be an earthquake the likes of which has never before been seen. The archangel will sound his trumpet and God's glorious kingdom will visibly arrive.

Bell's prediction that the world would end on February 28, 1763 was a mistake. It was a mistake in the simple sense that he was wrong about it, but it was a mistake also in that by it he provided his critics with a means by which to test his prophetic authority. It is with triumphant irony that Grimshaw could write to Charles on March 5, 1763,

Last Monday should have been the Day of Judgment. Therefore to have answered your letter sooner would have been [to] waste Labour, Time and Paper. Something else should be a doing, when the Judge is at the Door.⁴³

The question of what happened to Bell's followers in the wake of the failure of his predictions is not one which the sources enable us to answer. The only scrap of information we get is from J. Downes, who wrote to Charles on March 10, 1763. According to him,

Mr Bell is bailed. He is prosecuted by one Payne in Mr Whitefield's Society and also by the Society for the Reformation of Manners. Mr Jones has been with him and thinks that he will not appear against him at the Tryal and by consequence that he will be cleared. The prophets associate together and encourage one another. It seems they were mistaken and so were the Apostles, that God has spared the wicked another year for which they give him thanks. Others have talked of the 28th Old Style, as the New Style is only by Man's Appointment.

The argument of the first group is a standard one (cf., II Peter 3:9). The second argument is slightly more ingenious. The position here seems to be that date for the end must be calculated on the older Julian and not the later

⁴³William Grimshaw to Charles Wesley, March 5, 1763, JRL ref. DDWES 2:58.

Gregorian calendar (this would have given a new date for the end of March 10, 1763). The argument of this latter group suggests (though no more) that Bell arrived at his February 28 date on the basis of some particular biblical prophecy, though it is impossible to say which one it was. If so, Bell fits comfortably into line with a distinguished array of prophetic interpreters who were ready to state the year, if not the day (many were wary of fixing the precise day on account of Matthew 24:36) of the Lord's return. However, both the first and second group had sown the seeds of their own destruction, for they both were still willing to set dates (the latter group have only a few days grace) and the theories of both, therefore, were disprovable. It is of no surprise then, that the movement did not survive.

George Bell was clearly a man of enthusiastic religious persuasion. He lived in a supernatural world of miraculous healings, resurrections from the dead, prophetic fulfilment, and cataclysmic final judgements. In looking for the final consummation of all things, however, Bell was not alone among early Methodists. Indeed, according to one early critic of the Methodists, the numerous attempts to set specific dates for the dawn of the literal Kingdom of God was one of the clearest evidences of Methodist absurdity. The same critic refers to an alleged incident among the Methodists in Nottingham who, it seems, had taken the view that the world was to end on a particular day.⁴⁴ We might note further a letter to Charles written by Dr. J. Robertson in 1747, in which the author expressed the view that the millennium would begin on "Sunday 18th June, 1836."⁴⁵ John Wesley may not have agreed with all that he read in J. A. Bengel's work on Revelation (from which Robertson got the 1836 date), but he clearly felt sufficiently open minded on the matter to reprint large sections of the works of "that excellent man" in his own *Notes on the New Testament*, including, let it be noted, Bengel's time chart.⁴⁶ Perhaps most surprisingly Charles Wesley himself once set a date for the end.⁴⁷ Bell, then, seems not to be alone among early Methodists in his attempt to set a date for the eschaton.

Neither, as Rack has clearly shown, was Bell alone in seeking to heal the infirm by means of spiritual rather than medical remedies. Bell probably outdid others in trying to raise the dead. However, even here we ought to note that although there is no evidence of anyone else in early Methodism claiming

⁴⁴Richard Hardy, *A Letter from a Clergyman, to One of his Parishioners who was Inclined to turn Methodist* (1753 [JRL G.A. 349]), 72–79. The Nottinghamshire incident is reported in another anti-Methodist publication published under the pseudonym 'Academicus', *The Principles and Practices of the Methodists Considered in some Letters to the Leaders of that Sect*, 2nd ed. (1761 [JRL ref. G.A. 294]), 25.

⁴⁵J. Robertson to C. Wesley, September 23, 1747, JRL ref. LCW 6:67.

⁴⁶John Wesley, *Explanatory notes on the New Testament* (1754), 932, 1051–1052.

⁴⁷See K. G. C. Newport, "Charles Wesley's Interpretation of Some Biblical Prophecies according to a Previously Unpublished Letter Dated April 25th, 1754," forthcoming in the *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*.

for themselves the ability to raise the dead, there is some evidence of believers attributing the power to someone else.⁴⁸ Neither was Bell alone in his visionary experiences. Bell claimed that he had seen Satan bound,⁴⁹ but, as we have noted, his claim was that he was not alone in this experience. We have noted also how Briggs reported to Charles that there were “7 at the other end of town who meet in a dark room to see visions.”⁵⁰ Finally, it hardly needs to be stated that Bell was not alone in thinking that he was perfect.

Bell, then, is an enigmatic figure. At first sight he appears to be a blip on the screen of early English Methodism; a moderately mad extremist wholly unrepresentative of what was generally going. This is certainly the impression of Bell which Southey and Tyerman wish to convey to their readers, but the story is probably much more complex. On many of his basic points—the world is coming to an end, it is possible to heal by prayer, perfection on earth is attainable—Bell could claim significant contemporary support among his Methodist brethren. To be sure, Bell was an extreme enthusiast, but extremity is not the same as uniqueness and enthusiasm is not the same as insanity.

⁴⁸Rack, “Early Methodist Healing,” 140–141.

⁴⁹JRL EM 134.

⁵⁰William Briggs to Charles Wesley, November 10, 1762, JRL ref. LCW 6:11.