

**THE MINISTER'S RIDE OF WILLIAM JENKINS (C. 1763-1844): A
WESLEYAN METHODIST LEGEND AND INTERNATIONAL
RELIGIOUS STORY-TELLING**

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In his fine collection of essays on the history of Methodism, David Hempton discussed several factors that could explain the expansion of Methodism as a popular religion in British, Irish, and American society in the late 18th and 19th centuries. As one of the factors not often noticed in traditional Methodist historiography, he mentioned the impact of many "special providences passed down by oral tradition and recorded in edifying lecture or propaganda literature as particular evidence of the missionary success of itinerant preachers. Using biographies, personal documents and other material littered with such remarkable occurrences, Hempton provided several examples of supernatural manifestations and providential interventions, such as angelic music, sudden deaths of religious opponents, or prophetic dreams.¹

It is not difficult to place this Methodist story-telling in an old and large tradition of religious historiography, hagiography, or folklore. There are several well known groups of "remarkable providences" delivered by early Protestant or later Puritan authors in Britain and New England, like Stephen Batman, Increase Mather, and William Turner.² So Methodism joined a lively culture of telling and publishing exciting biographies, wonder stories, or sermon examples. Another question is whether and how Methodist lore became part of the continuing tradition of popular religion in the North Atlantic as well as the Continental European world of orthodox

¹David Hempton, *The Religion of the People. Methodism and Popular Religion, c. 1750-1900* (London and New York, 1996), see especially, 33-34.

²See Keith Thomas, *Religion and the decline of magic. Studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth century England* (London, 1971); David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonders, Days of Judgement. Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York 1989); Kaspar von Greyerz, *Vorsehungsglaube und Kosmologie. Studien zu englischen Selbstzeugnissen des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen and Zürich, 1990); Lucia Bergamasco, "Hagiographie et sainteté en Angleterre aux XVIe-XVIIIe siècles," *Annales ESC* 48 (1993), 1053-1085; Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999); Fred van Lieburg, *Merkwaardige voorzienigheden. Wonderverhalen in de geschiedenis van het protestantisme* (Zoetermeer, 2001); Fred van Lieburg, "Remarkable providences. The Dutch reception of seventeenth-century Anglo-Saxon wonderstories," *Intersections. Yearbook for Early Modern Studies*, vol. 3, *The Low Countries as Crossroads of Religious Belief* (Leiden, forthcoming).

Protestantism or Evangelicalism.³ In the following article I want to show that there are evident links between British Methodism on the one hand, and Dutch and German Pietism or Revivalism on the other hand, in the field of oral tradition in the 19th and 20th centuries, and even of present-day religious story-telling.

My initial focus is on a story about a Methodist itinerant preacher that took place in Wales around 1800, but was not published before 1925. Then it appeared in a collection *Legends of the Severn Valley*, edited by Alfred Rowberry Williams.⁴ In his preface, Williams referred to the mass of regional folklore, since both sides of the River Severn were believed to be populated with fairies, goblins, witches, wizards, black dogs, ghosts, saints, and human beings with odd and uncanny reputations. From these he has tried to preserve a few records with antiquarian or literary value, throwing light upon the mentality of the past and a little upon its history. Williams draw his legends from many different sources some of which made their first appearance in his collection. The story I shall deal with, called "The Minister's Ride," was published from oral tradition. Since its contents are essential for my comparison with other story-types, and because Williams' collection is hard to find in libraries, I will first give the text in extenso.

I

At the beginning of last century Methodism was a potent force in the religious life of the community, but possessed few chapels of its own or regular ministers. These deficiencies were supplied by amateurs, enthusiastic laymen and laywomen preaching in the open air or in any room or building where two or three could be gathered together.

Along the Welsh border, on the slopes of a range of hills and mountains overtopped by the towering peak of Moel Aled, were scattered cottage and farms and tiny villages inhabited by a hardy, frugal race of shepherds and peasant farmers. Amongst these Methodism took firm hold, and its itinerant preachers received patient hearing and eventually a warm welcome in farm kitchens and cottage houseplaces. Even sheds and barns were not despised as preaching places when the weather proved unfavorable to outdoor meetings, though these early missionaries of the revival of faith preferred the village green, the shade of the ash tree, or the open hillside to any building.

Soon the numbers and enthusiasm of the believers made the appointment of a regular minister imperative, and thus the Reverend William Jenkyns made his appearance along the Mynydd Aled. He was a disciple of John Wesley in belief, in eagerness for the cause, and in methods. Of middle height and sturdy build, strong and untiring, eloquent in Welsh and English,

³See Ton Dekker, "Wahre religiöse Geschichten in der niederländischen mündlichen und schriftlichen Tradition," *Rheinisches Jahrbuch für Volkskunde*, 26 (1985/1986) 93-107; Reimund & Karin Kvideland, "Chrisliches Erzählen in norwegischen Erweckungsbewegungen," Hartmut Eberhart (ed.), *Volksfrömmigkeit, Referate der Österreichischen Volkskundetagung 1989* in Graz, Wenen, 1990, 219-231; Fred van Lieburg, "Pietismus," *Enzyklopädie des Märchens. Handwörterbuch zur historischen und vergleichenden Erzählforschung*, Band 10, Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen (Walter de Gruyter: Berlin and New York, 2002), 1047-1056.

⁴Alfred Rowberry Williams, *Legends of the Severn Valley* (London [1925]), 11-20. I thank the Shropshire County Council for providing a digital version of the relevant parts of the book.

he thought no distance too great, no congregation too small, no soul too simple to be outside his notice. He travelled on horseback, was about at all hours of the day and night, called at farms and cottages to preach and pray and read and talk with his people, and was known and admired for miles around. He was a man of unbounded courage and equal bluntness of speech. Whatever he thought was right that would he say and do, and naught else.

The cause flourished under his vigorous pastorship, and the provision of permanent buildings for chapels in the larger villages became necessary. The Connexion developed an ambitious scheme. William Jenkyns threw himself into it with heart and soul, and to finance the establishment of zealous centers of Methodism an Extension Fund was promoted. It was a great success. The Reverend William Jenkyns travelled and preached and sang with increased zest, and the Fund grew rapidly. In the quaint but entirely sincere phraseology of the true believers there was a great outpouring of spirit and refreshing of souls about that time, and it was clear that more than one tabernacle would soon be erected for praise and worship.

II

It was rapidly approaching evening on a gloomy autumn day. Darkness was settling down over the wild mountain landscape, and all but the nearer objects were sinking into obscurity. "It is late to be riding over the mountains," said the farmer anxiously. "Especially with all that money. Better to stay with us the night and go on in the morning." "It is kind of thee, friend," replied the Reverend William Jenkyns, "but I must go on. I feel called to put this money away to-night."

The farmer and his wife offered no further opposition, and after farewells the minister mounted his horse and rode away. Secured to his waist by a thick leather strap was a large bag of money, the fruits of many weeks steady collecting among the Methodists of the Aled Mountains, making a handsome addition to the Extension Fund.

The rider felt no anxiety or fear as he trotted along, humming a hymn tune. It was a dark night and the road was only just distinguishable. But the horse knew the way as well as the man and could be trusted to keep right along the miles of deserted track in front of them. Before he could descend the slope into the small town of Craigderyn William Jenkyns had to traverse about three miles of flat, boggy table land, deserted but for a group of hovels standing back from the road. The inhabitants of these wretched dwellings worked at peat cutting, picked up plovers' eggs, did odd jobs for farmers, and got a living with as little exertion as possible. Just beyond the cottages great stacks of peat were set up by the roadside to dry.

It was a dreary night and a dreary ride. Not a soul did the solitary minister see as he jogged along. Occasionally a plover called eerily, then all was weird silence again. When about a quarter-mile before reaching the peat dumps William Jenkyns heard a peewit cry harshly and suddenly close on his right. Turning his head he found to his great surprise that he was not alone. On that side of him, riding a little way behind, he discerned a man on a big white horse. Jenkyns was used to being about all hours of the night, his sight was good and his eyes were getting accustomed to the darkness. He could see the rider of the white horse to be a bigger and taller man than himself, wrapt in a great cloak completely covering him and the hood drawn over his face preventing any possibility of seeing his features. Although surprising, it was not greatly unusual to find a horseman abroad even at this hour, for it was a district where everybody above the labouring class rode or drove a horse. Yet something struck Mr. Jenkyns as vaguely uncanny. Groping about in his mind for an explanation, it occurred to him suddenly that he could hear nothing of his companion's horse's hoofs. He rode on, listening intently. No, not a sound of a second horse reached his ears. The shoes of his own cob clattering over the loose stones were audible enough, but it was a single beat all the time. And the other was a bigger animal. The fresh horseman neither passed nor came level. William Jenkyns glanced furtively over his right shoulder. The stranger was in the same relative position. Jenkyns spoke, but got no reply. He steadied his horse, and the stranger went slower too, keeping the same distance. Jenkyns spoke again louder, greeting the man in English and Welsh, but still no answer. He felt annoyed at such unfriendly behaviour, and in his blunt way determined to make no further advances. The min-

ister urged his horse to a faster trot, and took little more notice of his aloof companion. He felt the bag of money safely attached to his person, his heart beat a trifle faster and he was much puzzled, but trotted swiftly on. He was used to eccentric people. The worst sensation was the absence of any sound from behind him. He strained his ears to listen, but the horse and rider came along noiselessly. There was not even the soft pad-pad of an unshod horse. No wonder the minister felt an increasing sense of mystery and glanced round repeatedly. Every time he did so the stranger was trotting along in the same way, as if William Jenkyns did not exist.

So they went past the cottages and the peat bog, left the piles of peat far behind, and reaching the edge of the moor, could see the lights far below them. As they turned off the moorland, passed the pine trees and started downhill, Jenkyns looked back again, and still the horseman rode a few paces away. Now the road was good and familiar, horse and rider felt the call of home and pressed on faster. William Jenkyns did not look back again till he drew rein at the hostelry, the "Aled Arms." Then he nearly fell off his horse in surprise, for his travelling companion was not there. How could he have turned off, because from the pine trees to the "Aled Arms" there were walls or hedges each side all the way? Thinking deeply Jenkyns pushed on and reached Craigderyn without further happenings, and bestowed the money in safety. He was much puzzled but in no way alarmed, and put it down to be merely some uncivil traveller.

Next day he rode up and made inquiries all the way, at the "Aled Arms," at the shepherds' huts and farms, and of people living about the district whom he knew. But no one had seen a tall stranger, wrapped in a cloak, riding on a big white horse. So he gave up the quest, and though very mystified did not trouble much further about it, as nothing of the sort ever happened again, and he was far too busy to worry over a single incident.

III

Coming out of a big farm kitchen where he had conducted a service one Sunday morning, the Reverend William Jenkyns was accosted by a bareheaded and barefooted boy ragged, who exclaimed breathlessly, "Come to the Llyn Cottages. Dad's hurt, Mam says he's dying." Despite their unsavory reputation the minister had his horse fetched out, and in a few minutes was trotting hard across the upland flats to the Llyn Cottages. They were a row of hovels bordering the peat bog, miserable residences of a miserable race of beings. The inhabitants of these huts were the Ishmaelites of the mountains. They only of all people perpetually resisted all advances made by Jenkyns, spurned his ministrations, scoffed at his message, insulted him, and did all but offer personal violence and that they had threatened.

Jenkyns rode past the great piles of peat, turned off the high road across the spongy turf and drew rein before the cottages. A dishevelled woman ran out of one, crying, "Oh, sir, come to my husband, He is terribly hurt but says he must speak to you before he dies."

Stooping his head under the low door-lintel the minister followed her into the hovel. The place was in semi-darkness, the reek of peat smoke hung heavily, and a motley group of men and women and children were gathered at the far side of the room. They fell back dumbly at the entrance of William Jenkyns, revealing a man covered by a ragged blanket lying on a heap of dried bracken spread on the earthen floor. Though he groaned at the effort the man turned his head and moved convulsively as his wife and the minister came to his side. His face was haggard and drawn, and his eyes bloodshot with pain Jenkyns dropped on his knees, pushed back the sufferers matted hair off his brows, and said feelingly, "My brother, God has brought us together at last."

The man went momentarily calmer, then speaking with great effort, said, "I'm done for. I shan't last much longer. But I must tell you before I go." William Jenkyns gave the unfortunate fellow a drink of water, and made him more comfortable. He longed to put him at ease spiritually, but the man persisted in doing the talking, and seemed to acquire temporary strength for the purpose. This was what he said: "We were stacking peat this morning. The lot slipped on me. When they dug me out I was like this. A year ago—I must tell you—I was hiding behind that pile. To kill you. We had followed your movements. Knew when you would come this way. Boy watched you start out, and we were let know. And we knew you had a bag of money. We were

going to kill and rob you. Three of us. And a savage dog. Armed with sticks we hid behind the peat stack and waited. Presently we heard your horse's hoofs on the road. We got ready to slip the rope off the dog and rush out. When you sounded near we crept out from behind the peat. And then..." The narrator struggled for breath; his eyes grew wild and frightened as he resumed, "I tell you, on our side of the road was a man on a great white horse that made no sound as it trotted. The man's head was higher than the peat stack. We loosed the dog, but he crouched down in a hole, trembling and panting. Level with us the big man turned and looked at us. His eyes shone like stars. Looked right through us. We could not move for fear for a long time after. We have never robbed anybody since."

The injured man ceased from sheer exhaustion. The minister was overcome with astonishment and awe. But there was no time for words, except "Thank God!" and a hasty, silent prayer. The man's fast glazing eyes were fixed on his in mute agonized appeal. William Jenkyns clasped the man's hand in his, laid the other tenderly on the perspiring forehead, and said clearly, "Father, forgive him, as Thy Son did..." A look of relief and ease had barely time to overspread the man's features before he breathed his last and died.

IV.

Never before had the Reverend Williams Jenkyns moved a congregation as he did at a great Preaching Meeting shortly afterwards when he recounted in eloquent detail his ride with the money accompanied by the silent stranger, and the subsequent confession and death of the peat cutter. It created an immense revival of faith.

Reading this story from the collection of Severn legends, one might not put any trust in it at all. Should we refer "The Minister's Ride" to the domain of fairy tales or should we verify how much is based on reliable historical facts? Troubles start with checking the place names mentioned in the story. Moel Aled and Mynydd Aled sound right. There is a River Aled west of Denbigh and there might be a Moel (Welsh for hill) and a Mynydd (Welsh for mountain) near it, but not on any map of the region. Neither can the town of Craigderyn be recognized as a location in Wales, although there is a hell called Craig y Deryn in Tywyn in the county of Merioneth.⁵

More evidence, however, can be found for the main figure of the story, William Jenkyns. Let us first note that the 'y' can be take as a phonetical indifference of 'i.' Jenkynses are very rare, while Jenkins is a common surname. A certain William Jenkins is mentioned as pastor of the Rehoboth Congregational church in Bryn-mawr, Monmouthshire. He played a role in the beginnings of the Welsh Revival in 1858 and was apparently a Welsh Calvinistic Methodist.⁶ Yet he could be hardly meant by the person of our story. The horse-riding minister was called a pupil of John Wesley and suggested to represent the Wesleyan wing of the Methodist movement. Thanks to the database of Wesley's preachers, compiled by John Lenton on the basis of primary sources, and containing all ministers who entered before John Wesley's death in 1791, we can safely assume that the story is about William

⁵Cf. Elwyn Davies (ed.), *A Gazetteer of Welsh Place-Names* (Cardiff, 1975):

⁶Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters II. The Expansion of Evangelical Nonconformity 1791-1859* (Oxford, 1995), 662; referring to E. Evans, *When He is Come* (Bala, 1959), 31, 33.

Jenkins, who is known as one of the founders of the Welsh Wesleyan Methodism at the beginning of the 19th century.⁷ What can we say about his life and work?

According to his age at death, William Jenkins was born around 1763. His geographical origin is not known, although the Severn legend makes it likely that he came from Wales, since he is said to have spoken Welsh. Regarding his social background, he was destined to become an architect, just like his cousin John Jenkins. William worked as such before he was admitted to the Wesleyan ministry in 1788.⁸ His name occurs for the first time in John Wesley's letters in July 1789, in a reference which implies that he had been preaching in Bedford the previous year, probably for Robert Empringham.⁹ It is curious that his wife Mary was said to be converted by him in Northampton about this time, being "brought out of the gay and fashionable world."¹⁰ Mary, whose name first appeared as Jenkins' wife in the Wesleyan Minutes in 1798, bore him at least six children.¹¹

Apparently from his career, Jenkins was a successful and leading minister. He spent his first period as an Assistant (1788-1797), then he travelled in important circuits as a Junior Preacher (1797-1803), and then was a Superintendent (1802-1806), everywhere in English regions. Finally he moved to London, a call that only fell to influential preachers.¹² Unfortunately, his service in the capital city was not long. He superannuated in 1810 because of failing health and took up his former profession of architecture, although he was mentioned in the annual Minutes until the year of his death. Meanwhile he was in business in Red Lion Square with his cousin and later with his sons. He designed or repaired many buildings, including the Methodist City Road Chapel.¹³ His wife Mary died in London

⁷Another Wesleyan Methodist preacher called William Jenkins entered the ministry 1797, became a missionary at St. Kitts in the West Indies for two years, and died 1830. He was not the minister in the story because he travelled mostly in Cornwall and never anywhere near the Welsh border.

⁸John Telford, *Two West End Chapels* (1886), 110-114, for the building of Hinde Street Chapel in London.

⁹John Telford (ed.), *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley* (London, 1931), vol. 8, 156.

¹⁰George Stevenson, *City Road Chapel, London and its Historical Associations* (London, 1872), 548-549.

¹¹John Lenton's database lists the names of Mary, John, Susan, Joseph, Hesther, and William Wesley. He also mentions two sons-in-law, H. W. Williams and Dr. Brewer. If they were not husbands of one of the daughters just mentioned, William and Mary Jenkins may have had seven or eight children.

¹²According to the *Minutes*, these were his stations: 1788-90 Bedford, 1791 Lynn, 1792-93 Colchester, 1794-96 Gloucestershire, 1797-98 Bristol, 1799 Stockport, 1800-01 Liverpool, 1802-1803 Manchester, 1804-05 Sheffield, 1806-1810 London.

¹³Howard M. Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1660-1840*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, 1995). Jenkins designed Hinde Street, the Mint, Exeter, Lambeth, Southwark, Great Queen Street, Kings Cross, Waltham Street, Hull, Bethel, Rochester, Carver Street, Sheffield, Walcot, Bath, Canterbury (St. Peter's Church, opened 1812); cf. *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, vol. 36, 64; John A. Vickers, ed., *A dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland* (London, 2000), 181.

on April 11, 1838 aged 75; William Jenkins died after a very "harassing and distressing illness" on June 19, 1844 at 81 years old.¹⁴

Jenkins was a minister of high respectability within his religious movement and beyond. John Pawson judged him a very good Superintendent.¹⁵ The English King George III would have accompanied him to a Methodist class meeting.¹⁶ Nevertheless, his reputation as a good preacher may be reflected in the story of "The Minister's Ride" and must harken back to an earlier period in his life when he was a young circuit rider. The problem seems how to fit his activities near the river of Aled and his experience in the Severn Valley into his religious career. He only worked in a series of locations in England and was never stationed in Wales, although he could have done particular work by travelling to this region while in circuit, for instance, Liverpool. However, Welsh Methodist historiography gives sufficient evidence to explain why legendary tradition has associated William Jenkins with the beginnings of the Wesleyan Mission in this area at the turn of the century.

In 1800 this Welsh mission was set up under the leadership of Owen Davies, the Superintendent of the Ruthin Circuit, but Jenkins was much involved. They were close friends, since Davies had been a neighboring Assistant in Oxford some years earlier, when Jenkins served in Gloucestershire. Both had travelled together in Bedford Circuit in 1790 and Lynn in 1797. They organized the Methodist Conference in London where Jenkins urged an evangelization campaign. The "great preaching meeting" mentioned at the end of the story, possibly refers to that happening in August 1800. As a result, the Welsh Wesleyan Mission was founded and developed very successfully. By 1810 it had a complete District to itself with twenty ministers, so it could well be described as the reason for a major revival in Wales.¹⁷ Presumably the Extension Fund, a typical Wesleyan phenomenon mentioned in the legend, was also set up at the Conference. Furthermore, the idea of Jenkins as a collector and transporter of money for the Methodist movement is supported by the fact that he was the Secretary of the Itinerant Preachers Fund 1806.¹⁸

Resuming, we could on the one hand feel that no historian should take the legend of "The Minister's Ride" seriously. There is not real Craigderyn, Mynydd or Moel Aled, the mountains in the Severn Valley are not high, and

¹⁴Stevenson, *City Road Chapel*. For some reason, William Jenkins never received an obituary in the Minutes, although he was mentioned as a supernumerary until the year of his death, cf. *Wesleyan Methodist Minutes*, 1844, 775. Maybe because he was regarded as having left, he was considered not deserving a necrology.

¹⁵John C. Bowner and John A. Vickers, eds. *The Letters of John Pawson*, 3 vols. (1994), vol. 3, 48, 69-70.

¹⁶Stevenson, *City Road Chapel*, 548-549.

¹⁷A.H. Williams, *Welsh Wesleyan Methodism 1800-1858* (London, 1935), 78, 86-87.

¹⁸A. Kingsley Lloyd, *The Labourer's Hire. The payment and deployment of the early Methodist preachers 1744-1813* (1986), 37.

it's not the head waters of that part of Wales where Welsh Methodism started. On the other hand, William Jenkyns was a real preacher, who probably spoke Welsh, was the close friend of Owen Davies who was the real pioneer, had influence and spoke in the Conference that paved the way for the organization and financing of a Welsh speaking circuit. These observations do not say anything whether the story of the mysterious rider and conversion of criminals is credible or not. To interpret the oral tradition that seems to be rooted in historical facts or events, we compare stories about supernatural protection of religious personalities collected by folklorists and others.

William Jenkins would have had his miraculous experience about 1800, but the story seems not to have been written before 1925. However, reports of similar events appear to have circulated in the course of the 19th century. Two examples are recorded in the diaries of the English author Augustus Hare. First, in 1880 he had a dinner with a friend, Mr. Synge, who declared his belief in ghostly apparitions. He told an exciting story of a clergyman in Somersetshire who had ridden to the bank and drawn out all the money for his poor club. He was taking it back with him, when he became aware of another horseman riding by his side, who did not speak, and who, at a certain point of the road beyond a hollow, disappeared. In that hollow, highwaymen who knew the clergyman was coming with the money, were waiting to attack him. But they refrained, "for there are two of them", they said.¹⁹ "It was his guardian angel," his partner added.¹⁹

In 1885 Hare heard a second story over dinner, told by Mr. Wharton, who had heard it from a certain Mr. Bond in a little inn at Ayscliffe. The story dealt with Johnnie Greenwood from Swancliffe, a chaplain at the beginning of the century. One night he had to ride through woods a mile long to make a visit. At the entrance of the woods a large black dog joined him and pattered along by his side. When he emerged from the wood, the dog had disappeared, and he could not tell where it had gone. Returning home after his visit, the dog accompanied him in the wood again. Years later, two condemned prisoners in York jail told the chaplain that they had intended to rob and murder Greenwood that nights in the woods, but that he had a large dog with him, and when they saw that, they felt that Johnnie and the dog together would have been too much for them.²⁰

Hare's diaries, including both stories about guardians of preachers, were published in London in 1900. They were later inserted in a dictionary of British folk-tales compiled by Katharine Briggs. According to Briggs, similar stories were widespread in the beginning of the century. In a personal footnote she added to Hare's paragraph on the black dog that she herself was told a variant of this story as a child in 1910 by an old clergyman, called Hosey, in London. Another story, Briggs stated, was known in Yorkshire

¹⁹Augustus Hare, *The Story of My Life*, vol. 2 (London, 1900), 285-286; also in Hare, *In My Solitary Life* (London, 1953), 163-164.

²⁰Hare, *The Story of My Life*, 425, also in Hare, *In My Solitary Life*, 188.

“about a well-known non-conformist minister who had been making a charitable collection in a lonely part of the country.”²¹ In this context, the extensive Welsh legend on William Jenkins is discovered to be one of many oral traditions about heavenly bodyguards seen as angels, dogs, horseriders, and criminals confessing their murder plans against unassailable ministers. There is more.

In 1934 Charles Lindley Wood, the Viscount of Halifax, died at the age of 94. He was a lover and collector of supernatural experiences and heard a lot of stories during his long life, which he wrote down in his “Ghost Book.” His materials were published in two volumes after his death including two quite similar stories about “hostly guardians.”²² These apparitions would have occurred about 1890 and were supposed to refer to the same incident. One tale deals with Edward King, Bishop of Lincoln from 1885 until his death in 1910, and would have been told by himself at tea. Before citing the story, it should be remarked that he was a charismatic personality and an evangelical Christian. Known as an advocate of the Anglo-Catholic Oxford Movement, he had at the same time great respect for Methodism. He was an admirer of John Wesley and like to work in the diocese where Wesley was born. The following report of his wonderful escape would have happened while Edward King was serving in Wheatley between 1854 and 1862.²³

When the Bishop was a young man, he was curate in a village. One wet cold night he had come home very tired and had just got his boots off, when his landlady came in and said that a farmer, living three miles off across the fields had met with a serious accident and wanted King to come at once. She did not know the messenger, and he refused to come in because he was so wet. King put his boots on again and started off; but it was very dark and he missed the man who had brought the message. When he reached the house to which he had been summoned, the door was opened to his knock by the farmer himself, hale, hearty, and much surprised to see his visitor. No message had been sent, and, greatly mystified, King went home. The man who had summoned him had gone, and the matter remained unexplained.

Some years afterwards in another county, King was ministering to a dying man in hospital, and the man said: “Don’t you remember me, Sir?” The Bishop could not recall him until he gave his name, which was that of a very bad character who had lived years ago in that village where King was a curate. The man went on: ‘It was lucky for you that you brought a friend with you that night when you thought you had a call to the farm. I meant to murder you, only I couldn’t, as there were two of you.’ The Bishop had seen and heard nothing, but the man was certain that he had been accompanied by a second great-coated figure walking beside him.

²¹Katharine M. Briggs, ed., *A dictionary of British folk-tales, Part B: Folk legends*, Vol. 1 (London, 1971), 14-15, 531.

²²J. G. Lockhart, ed., *Lord Halifax's Ghost Book. A Collection of Stories of Haunted Houses, Apparitions and Supernatural Occurrences made by Charles Lindley, Viscount Halifax*, vol. II (London, 1937), 123-128; reprint, Simon Marsden, ed., *The Ghost Book of Charles Lindley, Viscount Halifax* (London, 1994), 83-88.

²³See John Anthony Newton, *Search for a Saint: Edward King* (London, 1977).

This story was told to Lord Halifax by a woman who had heard it from the Bishop himself several decades before. Meanwhile, the story was also told to Lord Elton, who published a biography of Edward King in 1958 who did not know the publication of Halifax. Interestingly, when he sought the origins of the oral tradition he was told this story was about other people. One of his informants said the miracle happened to Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford from 1845 to 1873, but King's biographer judiciously supposed that he in fact meant Samuel's father, William Wilberforce, "who was even better qualified, one would think, to receive supernatural protection."²⁴ William was the great abolitionist and pious Methodist to whom John Wesley wrote his famous deathbed letter against slavery in 1791. I cannot confirm that old Wilberforce is said to have been protected by ghostly guardians, but rumor shows that the legend can be associated with holy persons in religion and with "political saints" as well.²⁵

Stories about heavenly helpers of pious preachers, like that of Bishop King, were widespread in the Netherlands during the 20th century. A number of them are only known in the short version of the failed murder attack, not with a full plot including the confession or conversion of the offender(s). Regarding the mysterious guardians, they were mostly described as angels. However, the oldest variant of this story-type that I know was published just at the end of the 19th century in West Germany in a collection of Bergian legends published by the folklorist Otto Schell in 1897. They dealt with anonymous pastors in Wichlinghausen and Wülfrath and were written down in Barmen and Elberfeld not long before that year.²⁶ It is remarkable that the oral tradition documented by Schell, which remained unknown to the Dutch folklorists until recently, represents a complete that makes it more likely that the story is much older.

In the Netherlands the first printed stories about guardian angels of Protestant ministers appeared in church periodicals in 1920 and 1921, dealing with a little known Reformed pastor and a famous evangelical preacher.²⁷ The first publication of a similar story by a folklorist was in 1933, which I will discuss shortly. Since then, many reports concerning religious persons of different denominations have occurred in oral tradition as well as in sermons, regional newspapers, or family magazines. Collectors of folktales in the province of Friesland have noted 32 variants. These were mentioned by

²⁴Lord Elton, *Edward King and Our Times* (London, 1958), 138-140.

²⁵Standish Meacham, *Lord Bishop. The life of Samuel Wilberforce, 1805-1873* (Cambridge, MA, 1970).

²⁶Otto Schell, *Bergische Sagen* (Elberfeld, 1897), reprint, (Remscheid, 1978), 183-184 (No. 109, *Die geheimnisvollen Begleiter*) and 205-206 (No. 155, *Engel als Beschützer*).

²⁷Ds. W[illem] Raman, *Jaarboekje van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland 1920*, 330-331; "Het leven van wijlen ds. Jan van Petegem," *Ons Orgaan van de Vrije Evangelische Gemeenten in Nederland*, November 1921.

Jurjen van der Kooi in his thorough inventory in 1984.²⁸ I have found in the meantime twice as many stories in which more than thirty preachers or exemplary pious persons in the period from 1840 to 1960 are said to have had guardian angels.²⁹

Who were these men protected by the Lord's grace from evil attacks? Most of them belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church, in particular to its orthodox wing, or to one of the smaller Reformed denominations that originated from both the 19th century secession movements (the *Afscheiding* of 1834 and the *Doleantie* of 1886). Beside, this "corpus sanctorum" embraces a significant contingent of representatives of international revival or holiness movements. In general it concerns the current of Pietism, its older confessional and ecclesiastical traditions as well as its younger more evangelical and charismatic variants. This is not only true for the Netherlands, but also for the adjacent German Lower Rhine region. There the story was still noted in 1965 dealing with the Reformed saint Jakob Gerhard Engels, pastor in Nümbrecht from 1854 until his death in 1897, a leading figure in a revival movement in the Homburgerland. A frequently drunken doctor would have intended to murder him one night about 1885, but it was prevented thanks to a "white man" beside Engels.³⁰

A most interesting point is that the stories were not only attached to contemporary figures, but were also ascribed to religious heroes from a longer past. Even the most popular story, told in the Netherlands by the present day, deals with Bernardus Smytegelt, one of the most important representatives of Dutch Reformed Pietism in the 18th century.³¹ Smytegelt was a pastor in Middelburg, the capital of the province of Zeeland, from 1695 until his death in 1739. He was a preacher who could fulminate against half-hearted governors and indifferent church people, but also offered comfort, who encouraged troubled souls and edified pious Christians. Smytegelt was a living saint, who remained beloved after his death because of sermons that were written down and published by his congregation. They are still read by pietistic believers and also read publicly in some Reformed services. He lived in Middelburg at the Singel near the St. Joris-bridge, which was later popularly called the "Smytegelt-bridge" or the "Angels bridge" because of the following story.

One night, as often occurred, Rev. Smytegelt was called out of his sleep by knocks on the door. He was asked to immediately to a member of his congregation, who suddenly had become ill. The 'Old Man of the Singel' dressed in a hurry and went on his way. There was

²⁸Jurjen van der Kooi, "Volksverhalen in Friesland. Lectuur en mondelinge overlevering. Een typencatalogus" (Ph.D. thesis Groningen).

²⁹Fred van Lieburg, *De engelenwacht. Geschiedenis van een wonderverhall* (Kampen, 2000).

³⁰Otto Kauffmann, "Oberbergische Volkserzählungen IV," *Rheinisch-westfälische Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*, 12 (1965), 70-82, here 81.

³¹Martin Brecht and Klaus Deppermann, eds., *Geschichte des Pietismus*, vol. 2 (Göttingen, 1995), 546-550. See for a contemporary biography of Smytegelt see, Joel R. Beeke, ed., *Experiential Grace in Dutch Biography* (Grand Rapids, 1985).

a heavy storm and he met nobody. Just near the bridge he passed two men, who seemed unworried by the weather, apparently sailors going to their ship. Finally he arrived at the stated address, but to his surprise there burnt no light. He had to knock persistently before someone opened the door. Then he heard that there must be a mistake. No one had called for him at all.

Two years later he was woken up again in the middle of the night. He was urged to go with the messenger, for someone who had been his bitter enemy for years was on the verge of death. Smytegelt hurried and soon faced the sick man, who told him with sobs that he had lured him out of the house on the earlier stormy night with the intention of throwing him over the bridge railing with the help of a friend. However, when Smytegelt approached the bridge, the minister of God was clearly surrounded by angels before, behind and beside him, guarding him with flaming swords. His friend had seen nothing, but was so impressed by the fright of his mate, that he came to conversion too.

This story was published for the first time in the *Zeeuwsch Sagenboek* by Mr. and Mrs. Sinninghe in 1933 on the basis of a manuscript collection of Zeelandish legends from one or two decades before. Curiously, this publication was read by a lover of folktales, who also knew the collection of Severn legends of 1925 and immediately remembered the story of the Methodist preacher. He delivered a Dutch translation of the story about William Jenkins that appeared in 1934 in a folklore journal as an English variant of the story on the guardian angels of Bernardus Smytegelt.³² The clear similarity of both story types is striking. The mysterious rider on the horse seems to be replaced by one or more angel figures. A difference remains that in the English variant, not in the Dutch version, the supernatural helpers let themselves be seen to the guarded person. Most important point of comparability, however, is that both stories seem to be backdated in projecting on charismatic figures in the past.

This way of dealing with religious history or sanctifying pillars of tradition by telling wonderstories can be seen as a frequent phenomenon in popular religious culture of any confession or denomination.³³ To give one more example from Dutch Reformed history, I refer to the Rev. Jodocus van Lodenstein, who is known as a figure-head of Pietism in the 17th century.³⁴ His first congregation was Zoetermeer in South Holland, where he served from 1644 to 1650. When a church historian wrote his biography in the 1940s, he heard several stories told by the inhabitants, one of them about “two men, who wanted to attack Van Lodenstein out of the village, but abandoned while seeing, wonderfully, not one but three men who set themselves against them.”³⁵ Is this the oldest case of the angel story or is it the recent

³²J. Rasch, “Een Engelsche variant van de engelenwacht van Smytegelt,” *Eigen Volk* 6 (1934), 172-176.

³³Fred van Lieburg, “Sanctifying pillars of Pietism. Guardian Angels in European Storytelling,” Jürgen Beyer et al., eds., *Confessional Sanctity (c. 1550 - c. 1800)* (Mainz, forthcoming).

³⁴Martin Brecht, ed., *Geschiede des Pietismus*, vol. 1 (Göttingen, 1993), 783-788. See also Carl J. Schroeder, *In Quest of Pentecost: Jodocus van Lodenstein and the Dutch Second Reformation* (Lanham, 2001).

³⁵M. J. A. de Vrijer, *Ds Bernardus Smytegelt en zijn “Gekrookte Riet”* (Amsterdam, 1947), 69.

projection of an international tale of the old Pietist movement? Orthodox Protestant believers credit the first option, folklorists and historians tends to support the latter solution.

Everyone who is no stranger in the Jerusalem of contemporary religion knows that angels have "returned" in everyday life.³⁶ This return in common culture could have been preceded by a revival of supernatural stories in the evangelical world over the past decades. Some of them are told among orthodox Christians without knowing their roots in more secular or even esoteric atmospheres of oral tradition. The American specialist of urban legends, Jan Harold Brunvand, has recently studied a story known among folklorists as "The ghost in search for help for a dying person."³⁷ It has been recorded in many versions, one of them about an English country doctor who was also a Methodist lay preacher summoned to the bedside of an old couple by the ghost of their dead daughter.³⁸ Brunvand has proved that this legend was created in a novel about an American physician, spiritualist, and science fiction author in 1891. Unaware of this origin, the celebrated evangelist Billy Graham retold and "christianized" the story from an issue of *Reader's Digest* in his 1975 bestseller on angels in the following way:

Dr. S. W. Mitchell, a celebrated Philadelphia neurologist, had gone to bed after an exceptionally tiring day. Suddenly he was awakened by someone knocking on his door. Opening it he found a little girl, poorly dressed and deeply upset. She told him her mother was very sick and asked him if he would please come with her. It was a bitterly cold, snowy night, but though he was bone tired, Dr. Mitchell dressed and followed the girl. He found the mother desperately ill with pneumonia. After arranging for medical care, he complimented the sick woman on the intelligence and persistence of her little daughter. The woman looked at him strangely and then said, "My daughter died a month ago." She added, "Her shoes and coat are in the clothes closet there." Dr. Mitchell, amazed and perplexed went to the closet and opened the door. There hung the very coat worn by the little girl who had brought him to tend to her mother. It was warm and dry and could not possibly have been out in the wintry night.³⁹

There are contemporary legends that look much more like the heavenly protections from murder attacks discussed earlier in this article. There are current stories about Christian girls who escaped rape owing the mysterious bodyguards accompanying them while passing a suspicious character in a

³⁶Cf. Konrad Köstlin, "Die Wiederkehr der Engel," Nils-Arvid Bringéus, ed., *Religion in Everyday Life*. Papers given at a symposium in Stockholm, September 13 -15, 1993 (Stockholm, 1994), 79-95; Olivier Abel, ed., *Le réveil des anges, messagers des peurs et des consolations* (Paris, 1996); John A. Williams, *The Cost of Deception. The Seduction of Modern Myths and Urban Legends* (Nashville, 2001), 46-56.

³⁷Jan Harold Brunvand, "The folklorist's Search for the Ghost in Search of Help for a Dying Person," Jan Harold Brunvand, ed., *The Truth Never Stands in the Way of a Good Story* (Urbana and Chicago, 2000), 123-136.

³⁸Gillian Bennett, "The Phantom Hitchhiker, Neither Modern, Urban nor Legend?" Paul Smith, ed., *Perspectives on Contemporary Legend* (Sheffield, 1984), 45-63, here 56.

³⁹Billy Graham, *Angels. God's Secret Agents* (Garden City, 1975), 2-3.

dark street or park. The next day they read in a newspaper that another young woman was violated and they went to the police to identify the man at a lineup. When the offender was arrested and asked why he did not attack the other girl, he answered she had tall men walking on either side of her. An early version of this story appeared in an edifying book on angel apparitions, published in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1982.⁴⁰ The same stories were told in the 1990s among evangelical teenagers and collected by folklorists in Germany and Sweden.⁴¹ They were also widespread in the Netherlands and in Scotland through a Dutch informant of a Strict Baptist youth magazine.⁴² In 2000 the story was put on the internet and placed as the “legen of the week” at an American website.⁴³ Here is a paraphrase of a later version mentioned by a collector who said he has heard the story dozens of times in different contexts:

Sally, a student of a midwestern college, fell asleep in the library, when cramming for an exam she had failed the first time. She awoke after midnight, was let out by a janitor, and although she could have used the service of the campus police, she decided to walk alone in the dark. She was anxious and prayed silently the whole way, “Oh, Lord, protect me. Place your angels around me.” Sometimes the echo of her own footsteps sounded like another pair of footsteps. But she made it safely to the door of her dorm when she heard a blood curdling scream from behind her. She ran inside and called the police, but they came too late. The next day she heard that at that place a girl was not only raped, but murdered too. The offender was arrested, and of course Sally was an important witness for the police. Although she was very shocked, she asked if she could speak with the murderer. “Why didn’t you kill me?”, was her curious question. He replied, “How stupid do you think I am? Do you think I would attack a girl with two huge guys on her arm?”

In the meantime, the classic variant of the oral tradition, dealt with in this article, remains to the present day. In 1997 the story about Bishop Edward King was written on a leaflet hung in a chapel in the Lincoln Cathedral as “a prayer in these days of violence and growing anxiety in our communities.”⁴⁴ Dutch variants were republished by the Evangelical Broadcast in a magazine accompanying the American television series “Touched by an Angel” distributed in the Netherlands in the Autumn of 2000.⁴⁵ However, not only the well-known story of the Rev. Smytegelt was remembered, a more “modern saint” also became popular in religious storytelling. This was Cornelis Breet, baker and evangelist in the pious quarter of

⁴⁰Hope MacDonald, *When Angels Appear* (Grand Rapids, 1982), 75.

⁴¹Rolf Wilhelm Brednich, *Das Huhn mit dem Gipsbein. Neueste sagenhafte Geschichten von heute* (München, 1993), 138 (no. 101); Bengt af Klintberg, *Den stulna njuren. Sägner och rykten i vår tid* (Stockholm, 1994), 282-284 (no. 100).

⁴²G. D. Buss, “He Shall Give His Angels Charge Over Thee,” *Friendly Companion Magazine*, vol. 124, January 1998, 17.

⁴³Urban legends and folklore: <http://www.urbanlegends.about.com>.

⁴⁴Information from Alex Adkins, who was not aware of written versions of this legend as I mentioned from Lord Halifax and Lord Elton.

⁴⁵*Engelen. Minimagazine*, edited by the Evangelische Omroep (Evangelical Broadcast), Hilversum, 2000, 12-13.

the navy town of Den Helder. He would have been protected by angels for a murder attack on a bridge about 1900, nearly in the same way as was the Rev. Smytegelt about 1700, the later conversion and confession of the offender inclusive. But the story of "Late Breet" was not written before 1981 and since then has been circulated all over the world by the best-sellers of a Dutch physician, whose books about angels have been translated into English, German, Italian and Portuguese.⁴⁶

Although the Jenkins legend focused on in this article was published about 125 years after the time of the story, it may have a germ of historical truth. William Jenkins was a real person about 1800, who acted in the tense situation during the rise of Methodism in Wales and could have told about special experiences in public meetings. The original version of the story, however, must have been extended and transformed from generation to generation. In this way the narrative has been fitted into a general current story type that was known outside the Methodist movement and outside British borders, even to the present day. It is almost impossible to reconstruct how such a process of oral tradition develops in the case on one story and how different social and cultural groups participate in it. Of course, tales of ordinary people as well as educated elites, and written versions in manuscript as well as in print, could have influenced the form in which it was definitely given by the Welsh folklorist.

The dynamics and flexibility that are typical for the circulation of stories may also have shaped the supernatural contents of the legend. Possibly Jenkins attributed any escape from an attack only to the Lord's providential help. The scene of the ghostly horse rider is probably a later insertion by pious imagination and oral tradition. Such an addition also fits in the world-view of Methodism and similar religious movements in which supernatural appearances and miracles were normal and also in continuous discussion during the 19th and early 20th centuries.⁴⁷ The belief in guardian angels was no problem for some Protestants, yet others question if everyone has an individual guardian angel and whether angels appear in a visible body on earth. The latter was dealt with by John Wesley, founder of Methodism and teacher of William Jenkins. We cannot better finish this article by citing a paragraph from his sermon on good angels, based on Hebrew 1, 14: "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?"

⁴⁶H. C. Moolenburgh, *Engelen als beschermers en als helpers der mensheid* (Deventer, 1983); English trans, *A Handbook of Angels* (Saffron Walden, 1985); a sequel to this book, including several other variants of the angel story, was published as: H.C. Moolenburgh, *Een engel op je pad. Honderd en een engelenervaringen* (Deventer, 1991); English trans, *Meetings with Angels. A Hundred and one Real-life Encounters* (Saffron Walden, 1992).

⁴⁷Cf. Owen Davies, "Methodism, the Clergy, and the Popular Belief in Witchcraft and Magic," *History* 82 (1997) 252-265; Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions. Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, 1999).

⁴⁸John Wesley, "Of Good Angels," Albert C. Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley, Sermons III* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), vol. 3, 14.

Whatever assistance God gives to men by men, the same, and frequently in a higher degree, he gives to them by angels. Does he administer to us by men, light when we are in darkness; joy, when we are in heaviness; deliverance, when we are in danger; ease and health, when we are sick or in pain? It cannot be doubted but he frequently conveys the same blessings by the ministry of angels: Not so sensibly indeed, but full as effectually; though the messengers are not seen. Does he frequently deliver us, by means of men, from the violence and subtlety of our enemies? Many times he works the same deliverance by those invisible agents. These shut the mouths of the human lions, so that they have no power to hurt us. And frequently they join with our human friends, (although neither they nor we are sensible of it,) giving them wisdom, courage, or strength, which all their labour for us would be unsuccessful. Thus do they secretly minister, in numberless instances, to the heirs of salvation; while we hear only the voices of men, and see none but men round about us.⁴⁸

⁴⁸John Wesley, "Of Good Angels," Albert C. Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, Sermons III (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), vol. 3, 14.