

## BICENTENARY ISSUE: A RESPONSE

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Every issue of *Methodist History* as it arrives brings with it a generous measure of good things, even if some of the topics are of only marginal interest to a British reader. The January 1991 issue is even richer in content than usual and has provided much good reading and food for thought. The editors are to be congratulated upon a worthy contribution to the bicentenary of John Wesley's death. As usual, the only thing to be regretted is that what is published on one side of the Atlantic is often difficult to obtain on the other and therefore gets less scholarly attention than it deserves.

What follow are the seriatim thoughts and comments of one British reader, and any interest or value they may have will come primarily from the fact that they represent an English perspective on the topics covered by your contributors.

It is good to have at the outset a detailed and critical review of the rise of what might be called "the Aldersgate hullabaloo." Even if it has come too late to pre-empt the worst aspects of the 1988 celebrations we may hope that it will not be overlooked as another generation of Methodists begin to look towards 2038! True, the fact that the Centenary of Methodism was celebrated, not in 1838, but in 1839, and that this is more historically accurate if we are trying to focus on the movement rather than the man, is hardly news on *this* side of the Atlantic, but our denominational leaders and the organizers of pilgrimages do still need to be educated—in this, as in other ways!

The widespread representation of Wesley as a kind of proto-Billy Graham (what Randy Maddox calls the "camp-meeting revivalist model") does so much less than justice to him that every exposure of its inadequacy deserves a warm welcome. It may take a long time for even the commonplaces of reputable scholarship to percolate down to pulpit level (if indeed they ever do), but education is always worth the effort of trying.

I am rather puzzled, all the same, by the statement (p. 63) that "there is no mention of commemorations of [John Wesley's] birthday in his published journal," especially as the rest of the sentence virtually cancels out that statement. From 1770 onwards, Wesley regularly noted his birthday in the *Journal*, failing to do so only four times in twenty years. Perhaps this falls short of "celebrating" the event or of amounting to a "commemoration" in American English, but it would certainly justify either of these expressions over here. It may be difficult to cast the mind (or the imagination) back to a primeval age before Hallmark was even a twinkle

in its founder's eye, but perhaps the crucial question that has to be asked is: What evidence do we have that in 18th century England birthdays were celebrated in 20th century style? (If Wesley *were* to return in our own age, I am certain that the one thing he would not fall for would be its unbridled commercialism!) The answer, I suspect, would be, "No more than was the post-Victorian Christmas known to our 18th century forbears."

At least a partial answer can be given to the question of the source of Wesley's "purported response" on ways of keeping Methodism alive after his death (p. 74). It will be found, though not quite in identical words, in Volume 4 of our new History of British Methodism,<sup>1</sup> where the source is given as an anecdotal reminiscence by one of the preachers, Robert Miller, at the British Wesleyan Conference of 1820. Miller had been in the itinerancy since 1788, so the anecdote's pedigree is reasonably well authenticated, and I suspect that the Edinburgh variant is derived from it.

Turning to the commemoration of the "spiritual birthdays" of the Wesley brothers, I find the reference given in footnote 4 on p. 63 puzzling. I am hampered by not having access to the 1980 edition of Charles Wesley's *Journal* which the author cites, but I *do* have the reprint of the same year from Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, which is a facsimile reprint of Jackson's two-volume edition of 1849. Neither at the page cited nor elsewhere in that edition can I find any reference by Charles to either his own or his brother's "Aldersgate experience," but there *is* some evidence to support the contrast between the two brothers on this matter, in the *hymns* which Charles wrote to mark the anniversary of his conversion and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

The question of John Wesley's later silence about his Aldersgate Street "conversion" surfaces again more obliquely in the article "John Wesley on the Origin of Methodism," where the author rightly and helpfully focused our attention on the fact that Wesley continued to develop, both spiritually and theologically, during the next half century—how strange and pathetic a figure he would otherwise have been! The point I want to underscore here is well made by Dr. Jennings himself: that in quoting Wesley we need to be clear what he is writing about. In the case of the two quotations on p. 77, his sermon on *The Wisdom of God's Counsels* is a potted history of the course of the Evangelical Revival, whereas the passage from the *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* is not so much "a fuller account of this origin of Methodism" as a review of his own spiritual

<sup>1</sup>*A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, Vol. 4 (Epworth Press, 1988), 194; henceforth: *HMGB*. (The bulk of this volume consists of a collection of source material, supplementing Volumes 1–3 of the *History*.) Miller's reminiscence is preserved in a printed cutting pasted into a notebook belonging to the itinerant preacher, Joseph Entwisle, and now in the Methodist Archives Collection, Manchester.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Charles' letter to his wife, Whitsunday, 1760, quoted in Frank Baker, *Charles Wesley As Revealed by His Letters* (Epworth Press, 1948), 33.

pilgrimage. It is all too easy, after more than a century of Wesleyan misrepresentation (or at the very least, “simplification”), to equate the two, but, whatever Wesley’s role in the rise of Methodism, we are wrong to do so. As I argued in an article in the May 1988 issue of the *Epworth Review*,<sup>3</sup> whatever birth date we choose for Methodism, it was *not* May 24, 1738. On the other hand, that does not mean that his experience on the evening of that day had no significance for Wesley himself—and therefore, *indirectly*, for the movement in which he became increasingly the dominant (but never the only) figure. As Asbury, from his detached viewpoint in post-Revolutionary America, rightly discerned, Methodism was larger and wider than “daddy Wesley.” More recent generations of American Methodists, like their British cousins, have, perhaps, tended to lose sight of this and need to be reminded of it.

In any case, to argue whether *this* or *that* event marked the “birth” of a movement like Methodism not only ignores the difficulty of distinguishing between early Methodism and its wider context, the Evangelical Revival as a whole, but also loses sight of the fact that “birth-day” is here a figure of speech. So we are really debating a non-existent issue. It is not only the biblical literalists who go astray by misinterpreting figures of speech!

My grateful thanks to Dr. Jennings for highlighting the fact that for Wesley the heart of Christianity was *not* faith, but love (p. 83). As I myself tried to repeat *ad nauseam* throughout 1988, Wesley’s gospel was neither the Catholic heresy of “salvation by works,” not the Protestant heresy of “salvation by faith,” but the Pauline doctrine of “salvation by grace”: hence his favorite phrases, “scriptural holiness” and “faith working by love.” And that links in with what Wesley meant by “experience” (p. 84)—not mere “feelings” (though that is all it came to mean for many later Methodists, giving substance to Edward Pusey’s 19th-century criticism<sup>4</sup>), but the evidence of changed lives. (What would our present-day statistics look like if we seriously applied *that* yardstick as a condition of membership?)

On the other hand, I do not go along with the statement that “the change in Wesley’s doctrine and practice associated with the role and nature of saving faith appear[s] to have nothing whatever to do with Aldersgate” (p. 86). *Nothing whatever?* However much we need to acknowledge the continuities before and after Aldersgate Street, this is surely overstating the case. In the weeks and months before May 24th, he had slowly and painfully, and with much prodding from Peter Böhler, edged his way to an understanding of saving faith *with his mind*—and that says a great deal

<sup>3</sup>John A. Vickers, “The Significance of ‘Aldersgate Street,’” in *Epworth Review*, Vol. 15, No. 2, May 1968, 8–14, dismissing in particular, the wording of Drew University’s Aldersgate Street plaque: “This experience of grace was the beginning of Methodism.”

<sup>4</sup>For Pusey’s dismissal of the Methodist heresy of “justification by feelings” and Thomas Jackson’s reply to it, see *HMGB*, Vol. 4, 457–60.

in the case of a man as cerebral as Wesley. But it does not say all, even when we also note that he was already following Böhler's advice by "preaching faith" and being barred from the parish churches of London for his pains. The change represented by Aldersgate Street was surely a very real and significant one both in what this doctrine meant to him and the manner (and therefore, increasingly, the success) of his preaching it. We are taken back to the "deeper sense of assurance" to which Maddox refers on p. 71.

Of Ted Campbell's examination of "the Wesleyan Quadrilateral," which as a relatively recent American Methodist fabrication has understandably foxed British Methodist scholars, I need say little more than a word of welcome to this unraveling of how a 20th-century Methodist myth came into being. As a non-theologian, I am tempted to ask: Provided we find it useful or serviceable, does it matter whether a concept is *true*? It almost seems not!

Writing these jottings just as the Gulf war is reaching what may prove a horrific climax, a dispassionate academic discussion of the theme of Briane Turley's article seems almost obscene. Fortunately, there are only two thoughts which occur to me. In the first place, the evidence seems to me to show that, rather than being "neither a pacifist nor a militarist," Wesley managed to be something of both, in much the same way as he managed to combine his much praised "catholic spirit" with typically virile 18th-century anti-popery. Much depended on the circumstances to which he was responding. Under pressure Wesley was no more consistent than the next person and we do him less than justice by vesting his thinking with a greater degree of coherence than was the case.

Secondly, at the risk of offending national pride, I must insist that it simply is not true that "the paradigm of revolution for eighteenth-century England was, of course, provided by the American colonies." An event that did not occur until three quarters of the way through the century could hardly be that. But even after the war had broken out and run its course, it still had little significant impact on political thought in England. An embarrassment to King and government, yes, and its outcome an ignominious setback to national pride. But the fact that Wesley had something to say about the conflict, as he did about almost every event within his ken, does not demonstrate that the War was intellectually significant. Here is an example of the need to avoid a blinkered view of Wesley and to look in both breadth and depth at his world. What know they of 18th-century England who only Wesley know? The real "paradigm of revolution," permeating and dominating English political thinking throughout the century and only ousted in the opening years of the 19th century by the French Revolution, was the constitutional upheaval of 1688 known to us as the "Glorious Revolution." This has recently been demonstrated and analyzed in great

detail in a masterly study by Robert Hole,<sup>5</sup> in which John Wesley is allocated a (rightly) minor role.

One final word of appreciation and minor cavil. We do well to note Wesley's insistence on the exercise of discipline in the life of the Methodist societies, though perhaps we need to analyze this rather more closely and examine his advocacy of both discipline and *self*-discipline, and the relationship between them. This might be especially salutary (and disturbing?) in an age when, it sometimes seems, Methodism on both sides of the Atlantic has corralled the term "discipline" in the title of a book. But it is *not* true that "seeing how effective this practice [*sc.* the regular meeting in class] was convinced Wesley that the work of God could not prosper without church discipline" (p. 112). This is surely a case of putting the cart before the horse; in fact, of arguing *ante hoc, ergo propter hoc!* Though the class meeting emerged early in the development of Methodism, Wesley was by then already well aware of the necessity of discipline and had shown himself quite willing and able to exercise it within the societies. Indeed, the class-meeting, when it emerged, was essentially a means of *nurture*, and only incidentally an instrument of discipline—one among several and never the main one. Wesley's letter to Adam Clarke, which is cited in support of the assertion quoted above, not only was written nearly half a century later, but is entirely beside the point, being concerned with the need for discipline in general, not with the disciplinary value of the class-meeting (which the letter does not mention). Many more pertinent statements about the vital importance of discipline for the life of the Methodist societies are strewn throughout Wesley's *Journal* and other writings<sup>6</sup> during the previous decades.

*Postscript:* Charles Wesley not only just "missed being accosted by a highwayman" (p. 120), but on an earlier occasion actually *was* robbed by one. See his *Journal* for October 11, 1737. (Of course, some early Methodists might have been at pains to point out that this was in his *unregenerate* days, before he could hope, as one of the faithful, for providential protection from such wayfaring hazards. Charles himself took the more positive view that the robber's taking only his small change and missing the main part of what he had on him was a providential delivery!)

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<sup>5</sup>Robert Hole, *Pulpits, Politics and Public Order in England 1760–1832* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>6</sup>E.g., the passages collected together in *HMGB*, Vol. 4, 45–7.