

BOOK REVIEWS

Virginia Gatch Markham, *Descendants of Godfrey Gatch of Baltimore County*. Printed by Allen Press, Inc., Lawrence, Kansas, 1972. \$15.00. Available from author, Box 573, Baldwin City, Kansas 66006.

As the subtitle states, this carefully researched and well-planned genealogical record contains material on early Methodist history in Maryland, Virginia and Ohio. In addition to the full listings and descriptions of eleven generations of the Gatch family, there are many photographs and facsimiles of important documents, thirty-four appendices, a bibliography and a most gratifying index which make the book useful, as well as indispensable, for the study of early American Methodism and Philip Gatch, particularly. The author distinguishes fact from fiction in her well-documented accounts of some old familiar stories about this important Methodist leader. Every library, where American Methodist history is a concern, will need this excellent volume.

—Douglas R. Chandler
Wesley Theological Seminary

David M. Thompson, *Nonconformity in the Nineteenth Century*. London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972. 281 pp., \$10.00.

Voltaire displayed more wit than wisdom when he wrote regarding numerous sects he had encountered in England, "An Englishman, like a free man, goes to heaven by the way which pleases him." The Englishman did choose his path to heaven—but not freely and easily. The dissent of the eighteenth century Englishman was suspect as radical, condemned as supportive of the French Revolution and—in the case of the new, spirited Methodism—feared because Methodism was unpredictable as to the turns it would take among the lower and lower-middle classes.

Nonconformity entered nineteenth century England on the defensive, with Balfour's pro-Anglican Education Bill one of the various attempts to eliminate dissent or reduce it to impotence. Moreover, nonconformity came in many shapes and sizes so that dissenters found it hard to combine forces to fight for acceptance. Variety militated against success in efforts to gain the very freedom Voltaire so glibly praised. The "Old Dissent"—stemming from the seventeenth century, and consisting of Presbyterians, Independents, Baptists and Quakers—was different from the "New Dissent" which bore the trademarks of eighteenth century evangelical revivalism. While the Calvinistic sects of the "Old Dissent" (including even strongly Calvinistic Baptists) disdained evangelism—God already having decided who would be saved and who damned—

yet evangelical revivalism stimulated denominational organization and expansion, at least during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. This growth slowed, however, in part because of infighting and the splintering of groups, in the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries. By the time of World War I the nonconformist growth was merely numerical, not keeping pace relatively with population growth.

In *Nonconformity in the Nineteenth Century*, David M. Thompson has presented a selection of significant and very interesting items from primary sources—letters, sermons, excerpts from parliamentary debates, essays and even fiction and poetry—arranged in chronological groupings between political and religious landmarks of the period. He introduces each grouping with an arresting and informative interpretation of the selections in the light of their historical context. The volume thus portrays the strong commitments, passions, and sufferings of nonconformists in general and individual dissenters in particular and the migrations some of them thought it imperative to undertake. It reveals the resulting strains on the very social fabric of a troubled England. It shows above all, perhaps, that one cannot make simplified judgments on history—that one cannot take progress for granted as the result of some kindly process of evolution.

Davidson describes the diversity of nonconformists' worship and theology, their varieties of anti-Episcopalianism, their breaks with the Church of England and various struggles in the courts and in Parliament and also their political and social attitudes which were by no means always "liberal," and the coarseness and crass pragmatism of some of the individuals involved. He thus weighs the merits and the faults of the nonconformists. The merits have been such that apologists have sometimes ignored or underplayed the faults. The faults, for example the anti-intellectualism of a simplistic faith, have been such that the movements have sometimes come off badly in histories and texts. Davidson strikes a more evenhanded balance.

Even so, it appears clear that nonconformity did make a great contribution to the freedom of religion and thought now enjoyed in Britain and, indeed, in British-influenced countries. Nonconformity prompted sufficient change in the established church to save it, possibly, from disaster. It did so by providing a third alternative between no faith and the faith of the Church of England, and with this a self-image as identified with the denominations. Deep social and political concerns of the dissenting groups contributed to the idealism in British public life as reflected in both the Liberal and Labour Parties. Indeed, Gladstone praised it as "the backbone of Liberalism."

On November 16, 1918, a Thanksgiving service of the Free Churches was held in Albert Hall with the King and Queen present. An observer noted in his diary how happy an occasion it was. But he must have had some misgivings that nonconformity had

now become establishment for he cautioned, "The Free Churches are glad; but they must not forget that their strength is in their inward simplicity and faith" (p. 273). When nonconformity becomes respectable a new nonconformity is demanded.

This work carries the weight of authority, the author being both a son of nonconformism and a disciplined historian as lecturer in Modern Church History at the University of Cambridge.

—John B. Bennett
Western Carolina University