

A SYMPOSIUM ON JOHN H. WIGGER'S
AMERICAN SAINT: FRANCIS ASBURY AND THE METHODISTS
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AN INTRODUCTION

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The analysis of Francis Asbury's impact on American religion began during his lifetime, and has continued ever since.¹ Asbury intended his published *Journal* to be his definitive biography; just prior to his death, he expressed his conviction that his own narrative would be the best chronicle of the opening chapter of American Methodism. "As a record of the early history of Methodism in America, my journal will be of use; and accompanied with the minutes of the conferences, will tell all that will be necessary to know."² Many others—both admirers and disparagers—disagreed with Asbury's assessment that his personal account was all that was necessary to know about his life or the formative years of Methodism, and so they soon added their voices to the mix. Over the years, though, most of those versions have been pointedly one-sided, either hagiographical or hypercritical. When this lack of objectivity concerning the historical depictions of Asbury was combined with the common disregard of the influence of Methodism by American religious historians,³ the result was several decades (in the late twentieth century) of scholarly neglect of the consequence of Methodism, in general, and Asbury, in particular, in the treatments of American religion and culture.

That historiographical neglect of the relevance of Methodism for an adequate comprehension of early American society was rectified, beginning in the 1990s, by the work of several scholars of American religion—most especially Nathan O. Hatch⁴ and John Wigger. Wigger's previous books, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (Oxford, 1998) and (co-edited with Hatch), *Methodism and the*

¹ In his exceptionally useful Epilogue to *American Saint*, John Wigger traces the history of interpreting Asbury's life. Entitled "Bending Frank," this concluding section of the book describes the multitude efforts over the years to shape Asbury's legacy.

² Elmer T. Clark, J. Manning Potts, and Jacob S. Payton, *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), II, 783 (29 June 1815).

³ Nathan Hatch describes the disregard of Methodism in his article, "The Puzzle of American Methodism," *Church History* 63 (1994): 175-189. Hatch explains this omission at least partly as the result of the lingering predominance of a Puritan paradigm for understanding American religious history.

⁴ Hatch's book, *The Democratization of American Culture* (Yale UP, 1989), argued forcefully for the importance of Methodism in understanding U.S. social history.

Shaping of American Culture (Kingswood, 2001), helped to set the tone for a new appreciation of the significance of the Wesleyan persuasion in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America.

In anticipation that Wigger's new biography, *American Saint*, would be equally pertinent, the Wesleyan Studies Group of the American Academy of Religion scheduled a session devoted exclusively to his book at its November, 2009, meeting held in Montreal. The short essays which follow in this issue of *Methodist History* derive from that session. Each of the presenters/authors was asked to participate because he or she had a unique point of view to provide on Asbury's life, and therefore, on Wigger's book. The first essayist, Richard P. Heitzenrater—perhaps today's best-known historian of the eighteenth-century Wesleyan movement—offered a broad view of the historiographical contribution of Wigger's biography in light of the corpus of Wesleyan scholarship. Jane Donovan's close research into the life of the influential and affluent American Methodist, Henry Foxall, allowed her in the second essay to have a distinctive perspective regarding Asbury's attitude toward wealthy patrons. Ian Straker's deep knowledge of early American Methodism enabled him to speak about a number of aspects of Wigger's book; and his expertise on the topic of Methodism and race, in particular, gave him singular insight into the complexities of Asbury's actions related to African Americans and slavery. And as a leading historian of American Methodism, Russell E. Richey helped to place Wigger's work in the larger context of U.S. religious history, assisting us to see the importance of this new biography for highlighting the role of Asbury's leadership in promoting popular religion in America. To conclude this symposium, Wigger responded in a short piece which immediately follows the four essays.

Wigger's book has not disappointed those of us who appreciate Methodist history. This biography is extraordinarily thorough, covers new ground, and provides fresh insight into several previously underexplored aspects of Asbury's life, including his family background, home life, recurring illnesses, living conditions, and the true extent of his travels. Asbury's weaknesses are dealt with fairly and judiciously. For example, Wigger points out that although it was true that Asbury was not a promoter of educational institutions, nor a scholar (as exemplified by his mentor, John Wesley), nonetheless Asbury insisted on developing the largest denominational publishing house in America, an enterprise that continues until today. And although Asbury compromised on slavery and had little understanding of the challenges that African American preachers faced in a culture rife with systemic racism, Wigger demonstrates that Asbury worked behind the scenes to make sure that the white preachers he appointed would be ones who were friendly to the aspirations of Richard Allen and other African Americans. And although Asbury's authority over the Church was infamous, Wigger recounts occasion after occasion when preachers and laypeople commented on his common touch and his personal warmth.

It is this angle on Asbury's life that may be Wigger's greatest service to the history of American Methodism. Wigger assists us in explaining the

mystery of why so many cared for and supported Asbury even when he governed forcefully and, at times, almost autocratically. Asbury, it seems, led on the basis of his affable personality and because he so well understood the people with whom he was ministering.

Wigger shows us, for instance, how Asbury—in contrast to Thomas Rankin—defended the “noisy” meetings of Southern “wild enthusiasts” because he knew his audience. Though not necessarily drawn to this style of piety himself, Asbury made room for it if this was the way that the people took to the Christian message. Later, Asbury did the same thing once again when he appropriated the idea of camp meetings as a tool for reaching the masses with the gospel. Wigger persuasively writes that Asbury understood Americans, “their hopes, tastes, needs, and fears—perhaps as well as anyone.”⁵ He had an ability to perceive accurately the interests of America, and thereby, the interests of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Even more significantly, Americans trusted Asbury. Because of Asbury’s habit of staying in homes throughout the country, his life was intently observed by an astonishing number of people over many years. Wigger cites Ezekiel Cooper, who wrote that “few, very few, have been so generally known... we have known him to be critically inspected, carefully watched, closely examined, [and] thoroughly tested.”⁶ In such a crucible of observation, Asbury stood above others as a consistently kind, considerate, humorous, and thoughtful person. His personal discipline was legendary. None of his itinerants was expected to sacrifice any more than (or as much as) he did, and the example he set of personal asceticism was not lost on those whom he appointed. Indeed, most of the preachers viewed him as their beloved father in the gospel. Flawed and limited though he was, Francis Asbury was “as Christ-like a figure as most Methodists could imagine,”⁷ according to Wigger.

But this noteworthy book is more than just a biography of an American “saint,” influential though he was; more essentially, it opens up an entire world of early Methodist piety and experience for twenty-first century readers, whether they hail from a Methodist background or not.

⁵ Wigger, *American Saint*, 122.

⁶ Wigger, 405.

⁷ Wigger, 404.