

BOOK REVIEWS

John Lenton. *John Wesley's Preachers: A Social and Statistical Analysis of the British and Irish Preachers Who Entered the Methodist Itinerancy before 1791*. Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2009. 506 pp. \$44.99.

"Historians have tended to concentrate on [John] Wesley and forget the contributions of other Methodists, especially of laywomen and laymen." This sentence from p. 408 of John Lenton's study of John and Charles Wesley's "sons in the gospel" could well be its opening. Next could be his observation on p. 420 that Methodist history has largely been written by, and thus about, "those who won"—John rather than Charles; the preachers who stayed rather than those who left; those after the Wesleys who favored separation rather than the Church Methodists, and male preachers and leaders rather than female preachers and the female majority in the Methodist societies. Lenton works "to fill the gap in Methodist historiography" by presenting the preachers in their own right and by giving fair minded attention to the leavers and the left out.

Lenton's thesis is that those who made Methodism were the lay traveling preachers as the core of the corps—their experience of Christ, their perseverance in rugged, penurious ministry, and their bonding through the *koinonia* of their countercultural appointive itinerancy and their Conference. He has identified 802 lay and ordained men who served under or with the Wesleys as preachers from the 1740s until John's death in 1791, dividing them into five decennial "cohorts." He believes more will be discovered and that many can never be known, so he views these 802 as a beginning database, an estimate. His method of analysis by decennial cohorts reveals that from the 1760s Wesleyan Methodism both attracted larger numbers of lay preachers and retained more of them than in the previous twenty years and that momentum was building right through to the end of John's ministry.

Lenton has shaped his *tour de force* of primary source research into twenty-one chapters of detail and story. The preachers' origins are presented under seven headings, their marriages under eleven, families under nine, retirement under eight, and deaths under seven. The detail goes as far as the preachers' clothing and their families' table fare. The story includes astounding feats of physical endurance in traveling the circuits and touching accounts of poor families giving the only bed in their cottage to their preacher on his visits and finding better food for him than they themselves normally enjoyed. "The care shown for the early itinerant by the ordinary Methodist member should be remembered" (144). Diligent social and statistical analysis come to life in this comprehensive, narrative reference work.

Lenton makes assertions that revise or challenge some generally accepted perceptions of early Methodism. He establishes that the preachers were better educated than their stereotype acknowledges and that on the whole they did not die early but lived longer than most men of their time. He believes in the continuing importance of Charles after 1749; both brothers being continuously perceived as those to whom the preachers were sons in the gospel. He thinks Charles probably began the encouragement of lay itinerants, but was more anxious than John about quality control and struggled vainly against John's leniency in readmitting leavers. Lenton views John as reluctant to support missions beyond the main island of Britain; some Methodist work was begun and made progress without his knowledge. He says that after the early years John did not try new places. He is convinced that, "All good Methodists attended the Church in Wesley's day . . ." (45). He lifts up the importance of Ireland for Methodist missions beyond the British Isles. Lenton appropriately discerns Wesley's preachers as a "Travelling Order of Preachers," noting Thomas Macaulay's favorable comparison of John Wesley to Ignatius of Loyola. However fitting this personal comparison may be, Franciscans, as Rupert Davies showed, are a better analogy for the Wesleyan Order of Preachers. No phenomenon in Protestantism compares to the Jesuits; the Reformed preachers educated in Geneva in the 1500s come closest.

How best to read and use *John Wesley's Preachers*? As the chapters are topical, one can begin anywhere. Circuits (8), Conference (9), Ordination (18), and Conclusion (21) in that order get one into the Connexion's story and its issues. Lenton's deep documentation and engaging style will motivate one to continue. The twenty-two page general index is very thorough for the reference work aspect of *Preachers*.

Both in size and significance this is a big book in today's scholarly initiative to take early Methodist history well beyond John Wesley. As Richard P. Heitzenrater states in the foreword, Lenton brings the topic of the preachers onto "the next level of usefulness." John Lenton is among those deepening our knowledge of the phenomena and dynamics of the beginning of what Wesley termed "the work of God called Methodism."

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Jason E. Vickers. *Wesley: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London/New York: T&T Clark, 2009. viii + 133 pp. \$24.99.

This is a perplexing book. It would be interesting to see the publisher's brief to the author: who are perceived as the perplexed and what are they perplexed about? One perplexity I often encounter is, which Wesley? Surprising confusion can exist over which is which, and who did what. Yet

such basic questions are not even addressed.

Jason Vickers states “the deep thesis in this book is, to discern the unity and consistency of John Wesley’s ecclesiastical, political and theological commitments. . . .” (83). He addresses this in four chapters (a new quadrilateral?); John Wesley’s evangelical mission; his churchmanship; political loyalties and theological framework (“covenantal Arminianism”). But I detect another underlying thesis: that John Wesley was fundamentally a theological thinker, and, indeed, the progenitor of “Wesleyan” thought.

These are theses I would dispute; John Wesley was more a pragmatic evangelical opportunist and hardly a theological thinker. Sometimes he seemed to have aimed to perplex. But a reviewer must treat a book on its own terms. Does this address real perplexities about John Wesley? The publisher’s blurb suggests a general audience of “students and readers,” although the author’s *Introduction* indicates “advanced undergraduate and graduate students” (5). I would suggest that the target is more specific: academics and churchpeople (clergy and lay) chiefly within (or familiar with) Wesleyan and Methodist groupings in North America, for whom questions about the heredity and emphases of the tradition remain live issues.

As such it deals with the issues thoroughly: the author is well versed in the literature of the period. Although a short book it is not light reading and like an eighteenth-century polemical publication, makes its way at times point by detailed point. It presents an argued case for “covenantal Arminianism,” setting John Wesley in his political and ecclesiastical context. As Vickers observes, “all too often Wesley is approached as if he were either timeless or . . . our contemporary” (108), reminding the reader that John Wesley must be read as a child of his times—the British eighteenth century. To cast Wesley as either a reactionary or proto-liberal democrat is mistaken.

Writing of British history from a transatlantic perspective is never easy and the terminological nuances between, for instance, conformity and dissent or Whig and Tory are not always accurately navigated. “No bishop, no king” is hardly original to J. C. D. Clark (48)! Typographical errors are few: I noted Shepper (Sheppey) (48) and Magdallen (Magdalen) College, Oxford (50). There are some bibliographic anomalies; although David Hempton is often quoted, his very important *Methodism, Empire of the Spirit* fails to appear. Nor does an 1870 New York edition of the *Book of Common Prayer* seem entirely appropriate for a work on Wesley.

The extent to which this book succeeds depends on the reader’s starting point. For those immersed in Wesleyan historical and theological debate this is a useful synopsis and contribution. But “Wesley for dummies” it is not.

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Joanna Cruickshank. *Pain, Passion, and Faith: Revisiting the Place of Charles Wesley in Early Methodism*. Lantham, MD: Scarecrow, 2009. 186 pp. \$45.00.

In this recent work on Charles Wesley's theology of suffering Joanna Cruickshank has given the readers of *Methodist History* a thorough and well documented study of one of the younger Wesley's most integral theological themes. Many scholars have noted, in passing, that Charles Wesley had a distinctive theology of suffering that connected with and shaped several of this main theological constructs; in this work Cruickshank ably demonstrates that Charles Wesley's theology of suffering is absolutely central to his over-all theological enterprise, and indeed to the proper understanding of early Methodism.

Drawing upon Charles's hymns and other writings Cruickshank develops a well-argued and cohesive picture of Wesley's theology of suffering which sets it in the context of other eighteenth-century writers of passion and sensibility, on the one hand, and recent scholarship on the cross-shaped history and theology of evangelicalism (Hindmarsh, Bebbington, etc.) on the other. The work is lavishly documented from Wesley's hymns and other writings, and presents a compelling case for its thesis about the centrality of suffering in Charles Wesley's theology.

The substance of the argument is that suffering is inherent in Christian life: the proper response to suffering, Charles Wesley believed, is selflessness and resignation. This response leads directly to justification and sanctification, as well as sympathy. Sympathy leads to identification with others who suffer, and the creation of a sympathetic community of Christians who are willing to take compassionate action on behalf sufferers. Hence, our author reminds us that "Charles Wesley's conviction that suffering was a valuable and even necessary part of Christian discipleship was not historically unusual" (90). But it should be said with equal clarity that "Charles's insistence on the necessity of extreme suffering as the means of Christian Perfection is distinctive (91)." Cruickshank is correct on both accounts and this takes us near to the heart of the significance of her work for our understanding of Charles Wesley and his theology.

In assessing the place of Charles Wesley's theology, Cruickshank rightly sees him as an original theological thinker. She concluded: "In particular, in emphasizing the role of suffering in sanctification, Charles developed a theology of perfection that was noticeably different from that presented by his brother John. My analysis thus supports recognition of the theological diversity within early Methodism, and of Charles Wesley as a theologian in his own right" (170).

While Cruickshank leaves open the question of whether Charles Wesley's theology of suffering continues to have validity, she has given an accurate and interesting treatment of this topic. This book is highly recommended to all readers.

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