

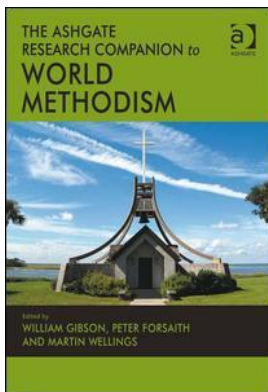
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The Price of Respectability: Methodism in Britain and the United States, 1791–1865

Kevin Watson

Introduction

Situated in a pleasant Cheshire hamlet, Englesea Brook Chapel and Museum tells the story of the Primitive Methodists, one of several splinter groups in British Methodism that emerged in the early part of the nineteenth century. Not everyone in British Methodism was pleased at the prospect of a museum telling this story when it became a possibility in the 1980s. To some it appeared to run against the spirit of Methodist unity that had existed since the establishment of the Methodist Church in 1932. The fear was that the museum would encourage people to live in the past and open up old wounds.

A visitor to the museum recalled an occasion in the Staffordshire town where she grew up when the local Wesleyan congregation planned to hold a garden party. Hearing about it, several Primitive Methodist women met specifically to pray for rain. This is clearly not an inspirational story. Indeed, it is not even a respectable story and as such it is indicative of the problem of Methodist heritage beyond 1791. It is not as respectable as it ought to be.

In existing Methodist historiography no one did more to undermine the impression of respectability than E. P. Thompson. Thompson's parents were Methodist missionaries, though it is clear from his writing that the experience of growing up within the denomination was not a happy one. An entire chapter of *The Making of the English Working Class* is devoted to religion, and it makes for memorable reading as Thompson abandoned objectivity so that his full ire could be directed at the pernicious influence in history and his own life that was Methodism:

It is difficult to conceive of a more essential disorganisation of human life, a pollution of the sources of spontaneity bound to reflect itself in every aspect of personality. Since joy was associated with sin and guilt,

and pain (Christ's wounds) with goodness and love, so every impulse became twisted into the reverse, and it became natural to suppose that man or child only found grace in God's eyes when performing painful, laborious or self-denying tasks. To labour and to sorrow was to find pleasure, and masochism was 'Love'. It is inconceivable that men could actually live like this; but many Methodists did their best.¹

Almost fifty years after it was first published, Thompson's writing on Methodism still has the capacity to impress and appall in equal measure. As a result of his work the predominant theme in Methodist historiography for the next thirty years was class and whether Methodism might be seen as politically revolutionary or counter-revolutionary. In this chapter class is one theme among several but the broader scope of analysis is the relationship between Methodism and respectability that Thompson undermined so effectively.

Much of what follows revisits the familiar terrain of Methodist history from below, exploring the contribution of ordinary, working people including women and African Americans, who until relatively recently were sidelined or overly-compartmentalised from the main narrative. In exploring these themes, a particular area of concern for British Methodist historiography is that in recent years it has become increasingly marginalised from the main narrative of the nineteenth century. In the post-Christian era of British life, the nineteenth century is in danger of being secularised, with few historians focusing on the interplay between religion and society. A new generation of scholars of British Methodism has yet to emerge to continue the work of people like David Hempton, David Bebbington and W. R. Ward.

Whilst objectivity is the goal and intention of every historian, this essay is offered with the sense that, partly as a reaction to the excesses of Thompson's prose, the tone of scholarship on Methodist history in the past few decades has tended a little too much towards the reverential. In the nineteenth century Methodism expanded at a phenomenal rate; it provided working people with new skills and raised self-esteem, and its adherents enjoyed a sense of community that many, if not most, in modern society have cause to envy. However, the movement also provided a platform from which racism was rendered respectable, and women's expectations of their expanding role in society were raised but then trampled upon. Between 1791 and 1865 Methodists around the world rejoiced in increasing numbers and increasing respectability but that respectability came at a price.

By the second decade of the nineteenth century, Methodism was spreading around the world at an impressive rate. In this chapter a transatlantic comparative analysis will explore Methodism's movement from fringe sect to an establishment of several denominations. It will examine Methodist worship and politics (internal and external) and demonstrate how a growing need for wider acceptance and respectability moved sinners from the mourning benches of the camp meeting to the grand galleried chapels of the Victorian era.

¹ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1980), 409.

Fear versus Respectability in Revival Worship

Drawing together an impressive range of statistics, Mark Noll has noted that whilst the United States had just 20 Methodist churches in 1770, this number had risen to 19,883 by 1860. In the tumult of the impending war of Independence in 1776 only 17 per cent of the population were active in any church but by 1850 34 per cent of Americans belonged to churches, many of them converts of an extraordinary era of revival that eventually became known as the Second Great Awakening.²

For many years the terms 'Second Great Awakening' and 'camp meeting' were regarded as practically synonymous, and generalised accounts of Methodism as the embodiment of new and fresh 'frontier' religion became the official version of events. More recently, such a perspective has been increasingly called into question. Ruth Lester has demonstrated that much of what has been regarded as new and fresh in 'camp meetings' was already happening in Methodist quarterly meetings, field meetings and, in Virginia, a sixteen day 'siege' before camp meetings became popular.³ Taking the story even further back, Paul Conkin asserts that 'little if anything that happened ... was new, without precedents that stretched back through two centuries, to Carolina, to Virginia, to Pennsylvania, and ultimately to Ulster and Scotland'.⁴ Nevertheless, stripped of its frontier associations the camp meeting is worthy of brief consideration for the insight it offers into a style of Methodist worship that attracted a million people in 1811 alone.⁵

The archetypal image of an early camp meeting is J. Maze Burbank's 1839 watercolour entitled 'Religious Camp Meeting'.⁶ In the painting an evangelist with wild hair is gesturing violently on a platform but none of his listeners can bear to look at him as they are in various states of distress on the mourning benches below. Some are praying, some have their arms outstretched and some have collapsed. Most are visibly distressed. With such dramatic 'manifestations of the spirit' as the 'jerks', 'holy laughter' and 'holy barking', camp meetings were occasions for sinners to endure a dark night of the soul in the hope of rising with a knowledge of their sins forgiven.

One of the most popular camp meeting evangelists of this era was Lorenzo Dow. With a fashion sense that appears to have been modelled on John the Baptist, Dow based many important life decisions on dreams he had.⁷ In his reliance on

² Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 166.

³ Lester Ruth, 'Reconsidering the Emergence of the Second Great Awakening and Camp Meetings Among Early Methodists', *Worship*, 75:4 (2001), 242.

⁴ Paul K. Conkin, *Cane Ridge: America's Pentecost* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 63.

⁵ Ruth, 'Reconsidering the Emergence of the Second Great Awakening', 337.

⁶ J. Maze Burbank, 'Religious Camp Meeting' [watercolour] (1839), housed in New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford, Connecticut.

⁷ Lorenzo Dow, *History of Cosmopolite; or the Four Volumes of Lorenzo's Journal, Concentrated in One: Containing His Experiences and Travels, from Childhood to 1815, Being Upward of Thirty-Seven Years. Also His Polemical Writings; Consisting Of His Chain, with Five*

dreams as a means of Divine communication, Dow was no different from many other Methodists of the era. In England, the Magic Methodists of Delamere Forest went so far as to make dreams and trances a central aspect of their devotional life and many Methodist memoirs of the time devote serious space and attention to revelations of the spirit experienced in sleep. As Methodism on both sides of the Atlantic became more respectable, representations of dreams and visions became less common but their function in shaping the experiences and worship style of early Methodists is worthy of serious academic attention.

Whether through dreams or other events, it is clear that fear of damnation was important in shaping Lorenzo Dow's Christian conviction and he was anxious to share in this gospel of fear with others. This he did to remarkable, theatrical effect, for example by hiring a small boy to hide in a tree and sound a horn at the moment when the evangelist was talking about the Day of Judgment and the arrival of the Angel Gabriel.⁸

Whilst fear remained part of the spiritual armoury of Methodism, the lack of emotional restraint it encouraged at camp meetings and other revival events came to be regarded by some as bad for business. In the marketplace of American religion, it was essential that the denomination attracted not only ordinary, working people but the affluent as well. However, the respectably well-off tended to regard camp meetings with a certain amount of disdain, for these were vulgar gatherings of common people expressing themselves in unsophisticated music and embarrassing emotional displays. In trying to appeal to a broader cross-section of society, much of Methodism retreated indoors and camp meetings were rendered respectable. As Winthrop Hudson has noted, 'By the 1830's, even among Methodists, camp meetings had become occasions when the faithful gathered to combine an annual outing with an opportunity to listen to an inspirational address.'⁹

It was not only the camp meeting that underwent significant change and decline in the period of this study. In a study of Methodism in New York City, Philip Hardy drew attention to the importance of the class meeting not only as a means of renewal, support and discipline for members but as a method of conversion for those not yet full members of the church. Indeed, the class meeting is described as the primary evangelistic mechanism of Methodism in the city in the opening decades of the century during which time the denomination deliberately established classes in areas without a Methodist presence to bring about conversions. However, by the early 1820s these class meetings were in decline. It was felt that prayer meetings

Links, Two Hooks and a Swivel. Reflections on Matrimony. Hints on the Fulfilment of Prophecy. Dialogue between the Curious and the Singular. Analects Upon the Rights of Man. A Journey from Babylon to Jerusalem &c. (Philadelphia, 1815) 25, 8.

⁸ Charles Coleman Sellers, *Lorenzo Dow: The Bearer of the Word* (New York: Minton, Balch & Co., 1928), 147.

⁹ Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America: An Historical Account of the Development of American Religious Life* [4th Edition] (New York: Pearson, 1989).

effected conversions more quickly.¹⁰ It may also have been the case that Methodists welcomed some level of release from the tight discipline of the class meeting in which other lay people had authority over them. In his comments on British Methodism, E. P. Thompson labelled class meetings as a form of espionage, though most other scholars have regarded them in a less sinister light.¹¹ Class meetings had a disciplinary aspect to them but they were also an effective means of binding the Methodist community together in sacred devotion, mutual respect and love. Love feasts served a similar purpose, though these were open to members only and, as a consequence, proved very popular among non-members whose imaginations reeled at the possibilities of what such a gathering might involve.

That camp meetings, class meetings and love feasts declined in popularity throughout the nineteenth century is undoubtedly attributable to some of the factors that informed Liston Pope's flawed but useful selection of indices of change from sect to denomination which he based on the typology of Max Weber.¹² For example, in both the United States and England the movement began to move from cultural periphery to centre, from fervent, active religious expression to a more restrained form of worship and, to an extent, from constant emphasis on evangelism and conversion to religious education and fellowship.¹³ To some degree this was a natural reaction to the changing environment in which Methodism operated. In the United States, as communities became more settled so too did churches, but in England many felt that the appearance of respectability was essential to the survival of the movement, and that perception was to trigger a half-century of controversy.

An illustration of this point is to be found within the export of the Second Great Awakening's religious excitement to working-class communities in England. In Nathan Hatch's seminal text on American religion he argues that at a deep level evangelical religion in the United States mirrored the political values of the new nation.¹⁴ It was religion of the people, by the people and for the people. Camp meetings gave a voice to everyone irrespective of class, gender, age and sometimes race. Whilst such respectable Methodist leaders as Francis Asbury expressed approval of camp meetings in the United States they were an altogether more controversial prospect in Great Britain largely because of their perceived potential to incite political radicalism among working people.

Matters were not helped by the fact that the man who initiated the idea of camp meetings in England was Lorenzo Dow whose fusion of evangelical and republican values made him a dangerous proposition. These were tense times in

¹⁰ Philip F. Hardy, 'The Evangelistic and Catechetical Role of the Class Meeting in Early New York City Methodism', *Methodist History*, 38:1 (1999), 14–26.

¹¹ Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, 388.

¹² Liston Pope, *Millhands and Preachers: A Study of Gastonia* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1965).

¹³ John Munsey Turner, *Conflict and Reconciliation: Studies in Methodism and Ecumenism in England 1740–1982* (London, 1985), 59.

¹⁴ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

which the perceived threat of revolution was heavy in the air so it is little wonder that Dow found many Methodist pulpits closed to him. The controversy deepened when Dow's preaching triggered a camp meeting movement in Staffordshire, led by Hugh Bourne, a wheelwright and carpenter. The first English camp meeting took place on a hill called Mow Cop in May of 1807 and attracted many working people from surrounding villages. Whilst it was a much more restrained affair than its American counterparts, its occurrence prompted the Wesleyan Conference to officially announce that 'even supposing such meetings to be allowable in America, we find them highly improper'.¹⁵ For the leaders of Wesleyanism, the preservation of a respectable image was of paramount importance, for this was an era in which the denomination was not yet fully protected by law and in which charges of sedition and revolution might derail the progress that had been made since Wesley's death in 1791.

The camp meeting controversy went on for several years and was the main factor in the emergence of what was to become the second largest Methodist denomination in the United Kingdom – the Primitive Methodists.¹⁶ However, the chief founder of the movement complained that, as early as 1816, Primitive Methodists were losing their impact, especially with regard to the way camp meetings were run. He argued that preaching was too long, that there was not enough prayer, resources were badly directed and that the meetings had lost their converting power.¹⁷ To his mind Primitive Methodism was swiftly evolving into something that lacked the raw emotional and spiritual power that characterised its birth, and Bourne was committed to resisting Primitive Methodism's rise to respectability.

Methodist worship in the early nineteenth century was well organised, drew effectively on popular culture (for example in the use of contemporary folk tunes for revival singing) and was adaptable to change. In both Britain and the United States, Methodist worship developed significantly in the period from 1791 to 1865, spurred on by opportunities for growth, the desire to include a wider range of people and the variety of spaces in which worship took place. Whilst deviance from the central doctrines was not tolerated, ordinary men, women and children found that in various modes of Methodist worship they had a voice and what they said mattered. In finding their voices such people consciously or subconsciously raised questions about where authority in Methodism lay and how it related to the wider political world.

¹⁵ Quoted in Hugh Bourne, *History of the Primitive Methodists, Giving an Account of their Rise and Progress up to the Year 1823* (Bemersley: Primitive Methodist Connexion, 1823), 14.

¹⁶ For a detailed analysis of the origins of Primitive Methodism see Julia Stewart Werner, *The Primitive Methodist Connexion: Its Background and Early History* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984).

¹⁷ John Walford, *Memoirs of the Life and Labours of the Late Venerable Hugh Bourne, Founder of the English Camp Meetings, and the Originator, and for Twenty-Two Years Editor, of the Primitive Methodist Magazines* (Stoke-on-Trent: Berith, 1999 [reprint of 1856]), 59–62.

Methodism Goes Forth and Multiplies

One of the reasons why many modern Methodists shy away from exploring their nineteenth-century heritage is the perception that it was a spectacularly unecumenical age. In the sixty years from Wesley's death in 1791 new Methodist denominations in England frequently arose out of disputes within Wesleyanism. These included the Methodist New Connexion, Primitive Methodists, Tent Methodists and Bible Christians. Whilst the political context was rather different in the United States, some strikingly similar issues led to the formation of a range of new denominations including the Republican Methodists, Methodist Protestants and African Methodist Episcopalians. Most serious of all was the eventual sectional split in the Methodist Episcopal Church that even at the time was regarded as a grim foretaste of the conflict faced by the nation in years to come.

In theological terms there was very little difference between most of these groups. Exceptions to the rule include the Methodist Unitarians in England, who might better be understood as part of Unitarian history rather than Methodist, and the Evangelical Alliance in the United States, who drew from Lutheran theology and culture as much as Methodist.¹⁸ For the most part, however, the different Methodist groups had very similar patterns of organisation and discipline, similar styles of worship and similar theological emphases. What separated these groups was not theology but arguments about who should be in control. In struggles over lay representation at conferences, the rights of black American Methodists to organise their own societies and worship, or the struggle in England to make camp meetings an acceptable part of Methodist practice, there is a common theme of ordinary people demanding a greater involvement in the running of their religious societies and as such the story of Methodism contributes significantly to the history of democracy.

That said, in the parallel narratives of the two countries, differences can be detected. Mark Noll portrays American evangelicals of the time as having a much more affirming view of human nature than their British counterparts. Life was a staging ground for personal and social transformation and churches were nurturing communities in which God could put his people to work. In Britain, by contrast, there was a stronger emphasis on the sovereignty of God and the inability of human beings to really reform the institutions of society. The overwhelmingly hierarchical nature of British society was echoed in theology that portrayed life as a transitory time of moral trial.¹⁹ Such an analysis resonates convincingly when applied to the elite clergy who strove to keep Wesleyans under control in the period but, as scholars of the movement on both sides of the Atlantic have made clear, issues of denominational government were no less difficult to resolve in the new republic than they were in Britain.

¹⁸ Methodist Unitarianism has not been given a great deal of serious academic attention but for an overview of the movement see H. McLachlan, *The Methodist Unitarian Movement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1919).

¹⁹ Noll, *America's God*, 193.

In 1968, Robert Currie published a provocative study of the causes and consequences of the divisions and reunions that were a large part of the British Methodist story. He engaged with the idea of Methodism as a training ground for democracy, observing that 'if all the offices in Methodism had been held singly, every other member could have been an office holder. In the event, one member in twelve was a local preacher or steward, one in ten a trustee, one in four a Sunday School officer or teacher.'²⁰ However, a clear theme in Currie's work was that at a national and district level Wesleyan Methodism in the first half of the nineteenth century was run as an autocracy. For example, when the impressive Leeds Brunswick church was opened in 1825, the local trustees felt that an organ would be desirable whilst the leaders and Local Preachers believed that worship was purer when kept simple so they opposed it. The District then endorsed this view only to have it overturned by Conference. Ultimately, the Conference decision was upheld but such was the strength of feeling that some Methodists left the movement to form the Protestant Methodists. Further controversy erupted between 1849 and 1852 after the publication of a series of fly-sheets criticising the way that Wesleyan Methodism was run. At the centre of it all was Jabez Bunting, the four times President of the Wesleyan Conference whose leadership style is epitomised in his famous declaration that Methodism was as opposed to democracy as sin.²¹ The fly-sheet situation was not handled well, as Bunting's supporters published increasingly intemperate counter-attacks on their critics. In an era in which Methodism was gaining a greater sense of respectability within society, this was an extraordinarily degrading time for those who led the movement. Currie paints a picture of a Tory elite attempting to over-manage a membership made up of people of largely liberal sympathies.

A more nuanced and less judgemental view is offered by David Hempton, who provides the events of the half-century from Wesley's death with some important political context. Issues around the distribution of sacraments in Wesleyan chapels in the 1790s were not mere details of how worship was conducted but had important political implications connected with the relationship between Methodism and the Church of England and the perceived loyalty of Methodists to the king. Hempton considers it quite an achievement that there was only one British Methodist secession in the decade. Alexander Kilham led 5 per cent of existing Wesleyan Methodists into the Methodist New Connexion after being expelled from the mother connexion for failing to retract the radical beliefs he expressed in *The Progress of Liberty among the People Called Methodists* (1795). In targeting the ministerial elite he felt were exploiting ordinary Methodists and calling for lay representation in the government of Methodism, Kilham mirrored the ongoing radical critique of the British constitution.²² Hempton goes on to place the controversy that brought about the Primitive Methodists in the context of the ongoing threats of revolution and

²⁰ Robert Currie, *Methodism Divided: A Study in the Sociology of Ecumenicalism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 46.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

²² David Hempton, *Methodism and Politics in British Society 1750–1850* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984), 68.

Lord Sidmouth's bill, which threatened to severely curtail Methodist activity. As Hempton notes, Sidmouth felt the need to limit the number of preachers' licences being issued as among those who had been granted them in recent years were 'cobblers, tailors, pig-drovers, and chimney sweeps'.²³

The political context of Methodism in the United States was quite different and, it might be assumed, more favourable to the democratisation of the denomination. As Louis Billington has noted, Methodists in America did not live with the same sense of impending threat as some of their British cousins did, where job loss and persecution were a real possibility for the ordinary Methodist in the wrong place.²⁴ However, this actually encouraged participants in the Methodist drama in the United States to voice their objections even more vociferously than was the case in Great Britain.

One obvious problem that American Methodist leaders faced was geography. Methodism quickly expanded throughout a vast area and whilst Francis Asbury tried to keep up with this it swiftly became apparent that organising the movement into a single conference would not be an effective or practical way forward. Thus the work was split into several conferences with a General Conference meeting every four years to consider issues of national importance.

The political context of the United States was also problematic as in its early days in the country Methodism was still noticeably Anglican. Freed from the fetters of Church of England associations, American Methodists even had bishops, a move that was ill-received among those who believed in a more democratic future for the church and/or had not been made bishops themselves.

Standing on the cusp of all this was Francis Asbury, a man who scholars have portrayed as sympathetic to the idea of the need for Methodism in America to reflect republican values but also someone who gained his understanding of the rules, language and discipline of the movement in England.²⁵ Drawing on sources relating to American Methodism's first schismatic controversy (which brought about the Republican Methodists and ultimately the Christian Church), J. Timothy Allen has demonstrated that, consciously or not, Asbury reacted to the taunting of James O'Kelly's fierce, patriotic, republican expression with language that reflected English, Wesleyan and even Anglican sensibilities.²⁶ Whilst American politicians continued to disagree quite vociferously on what shape the United States government should take, similar disagreements were generated within Methodism as Asbury unquestioningly created an ecclesiastical aristocracy of people invited by him to participate in the governance of Methodism. As Allen

²³ Cited in *ibid.*, 100.

²⁴ Louis Billington, 'British and American Methodisms Grow Apart', in R. A. Burchell (ed.), *The End of Anglo-America: Historical Essays in the Study of Cultural Divergence* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 117.

²⁵ For an excellent study of the life of Asbury and the broader issues with which he was involved see John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²⁶ J. Timothy Allen, 'Religion and Politics: James O'Kelly's Republicanism and Francis Asbury's Federalism', *Methodist History*, 44:3 (2006), 154.

notes, 'Since Anglicanism was gaining a stronghold in the North and Asbury was acting more like an Anglican bishop, it was only natural for O'Kelly to assume that he was recreating the very British government the Americans had fought so hard to eradicate.'²⁷

By the early part of the nineteenth century republicanism had become to some within the denomination as sacred a cause as Methodism itself and the first line of defence in any disagreements about authority in the church. Thus debates ranging from obviously important matters such as the possible election of elders to the installation of church carpets contributed to an increasingly furious debate in which the patriotism of Methodist Episcopal leaders was called into question. Writing in 1827, Alexander McCaine made a direct connection between what he perceived to be the shortcomings of Methodist leadership and the future security of the country:

It is believed that a community living under the influence of such a form of government as that of the Methodist Episcopal Church, where the members are not permitted to participate in legislation, will sooner or later prefer a monarchical form of civil government to the pure republican institutions of our happy country.²⁸

This controversy ultimately resulted in the formation of the Methodist Protestant denomination, one of several non-episcopal groups that used their political distance from the Methodist mainstream as an indicator of their enhanced American political values. However, even the Methodist Protestants failed to adequately include black people in their vision of what the future church would look like.

Revivalists and Race

From the beginning, the Methodist movement in the United States included black people in both north and south. J. Gordon Melton has observed that Methodism was the only denomination that systematically approached African Americans and invited them into membership.²⁹ Whilst Donald Mathews once argued that embracing Christian evangelicalism amounted to a rejection of African American heritage, contemporary scholars have demonstrated ways in which blacks imbued Methodist worship with a distinctly African style of music and expression.³⁰ Ample evidence can be found to portray Methodism both as a tool of control of black

²⁷ Ibid.,161.

²⁸ Alexander McCaine, *The History and Mystery of Methodist Episcopacy or A Glance at the Institutions of the Church, as we received them from our Fathers* (Baltimore: R. J. Matchett, 1827), v.

²⁹ J. Gordon Melton, *A Will to Choose: The Origins of African American Methodism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 126.

³⁰ Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 67.

Methodists and a means of liberating self-expression. Frederick Douglass, the former slave who became the most famous black activist in the United States, had a tense relationship with the Methodist movement throughout his life. Unimpressed by the effects of his former master's involvement with the Methodist movement, Douglass nevertheless recalled that religious expression could simultaneously give the impression of submission while being an act of resistance:

We were at times, remarkably buoyant, singing hymns and making joyous exclamations, almost as triumphant in their tone as if we had reached a land of freedom and safety. A keen observer might have detected in our singing of

'O Canaan, sweet Canaan,

I am bound for the land of Canaan,'

something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the *north* – and the north was our Canaan.³¹

Years after his liberation from slavery, Douglass almost became a member of a Methodist church in New Bedford, Massachusetts, but was appalled to discover that blacks were expected to wait until all the whites had received communion before they could receive theirs.³² This anecdote gets to the heart of why Methodism was simultaneously such a blessing and a frustration to American blacks. Methodist slaves saw in their church a hope of future freedom and present dignity. The church provided blacks in both the north and south with a sense of self-esteem and purpose that was often denied them but that dignity was easily undermined by the paternalistic racism of those whites who saw no corollary between the ideas of equality before the throne of grace and equality at Methodist conferences or church councils.

One of the weaknesses of Methodist historiography is a tendency to construct narratives from a top-down, denominational approach, in the case of African Americans defining their contribution almost entirely by the disputes that led to the formation of new and exclusively black Methodist denominations. Even scholars working specifically in black history have tended towards narrowing their focus to a particular Methodist group rather than the black Methodist experience more broadly. In 2007, J. Gordon Melton provided an effective challenge to the assumptions that accompany such approaches with the publication of a book providing an overview of African American Methodism. Instead of segregating blacks into the churches that some of them formed, Melton used a sophisticated

³¹ Cited in James H. Cone, 'Black Spirituals: A Theological Interpretation', in Cornell West and Eddie S. Glaude Jr (eds), *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 787.

³² David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (Newhaven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 25.

array of sources not only to demonstrate the interrelationship of different black Methodist churches and organisations but also to highlight the black contribution to the Methodist mainstream.³³

Whether or not it has been overstated, the tragedy of black American Methodism in the nineteenth century was that the racism they endured often did necessitate separation from white Methodists, and the thirty years from 1790 are notable for the establishment of several exclusively black American Methodist denominations. Usually this began with an affront to the dignity of African Americans in the congregation that brought a period of integrated worship to an end. For example, the story of the African Methodist Episcopal Church can be traced to the Sunday when black members of St George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia were removed from a 'whites only' section of the church. In protest, they walked out of the church intent on forming a community in which they could be respected as equals.³⁴ For a while they worshipped as a black community within the Methodist Episcopal Church but ultimately their lack of representation within the church government demanded separation, a process that involved complex legal battles.³⁵ Unfortunately, the drama that was to lead to the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church involved a great deal of indignity on both sides, with white Methodist authorities attempting to stop black ministers from administering the sacraments and black Methodists blocking the pulpit to white preachers.³⁶ Made in the image of God as they may have been, many black and white Methodists felt the call to love their neighbours but balked at the idea of doing it in the same room.

From Slavery to Freedom and Back to Slavery: White Methodists and the Peculiar Institution

In Wesley's day, Methodism was a great source of hope for those who opposed slavery. Opposition to slavery was the official Methodist position from the publication of the first *General Rules* in 1743 and in his famous last letter to William Wilberforce, Wesley labelled American slavery 'the vilest that ever saw the sun'.³⁷ In 1784 an anti-slavery stance became the official American Methodist position and strict rules were drawn up requiring that people freed their slaves within one

³³ Melton, *A Will to Choose*.

³⁴ Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 109.

³⁵ Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism: A History of the United Methodists and Their Relations* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1974), 169.

³⁶ Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 110.

³⁷ Robert H. Craig, 'Liberative History and Liberation Ethics: A Case Study of American Methodism and Popular Struggle', in D. M. Yeager (ed.), *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1987), 142.

year of becoming a Methodist. Six months later, this rule had already proved to be completely ineffective.

Opposition to slavery within white Methodism was sporadic and largely ineffective in the nineteenth century. Most white Methodists in the 1830s and 1840s saw abolitionism as a much greater evil than slavery for it disparaged the reputations of slaveholders who had joined the church and threatened opportunities for evangelism. As one southern minister proclaimed in a passionate anti-abolitionist speech at the General Methodist Episcopal Conference of 1844:

If you really wish to do us good, and be a blessing to the black man, I will tell you how to accomplish it ... Go with me to the cabin of the slave and wipe the tear from the sorrowing face of affliction. Stand by his dying couch, and tell him Jesus died that he might live. Exalt before the admiring gaze of slave and master the consecrated cross, and let both come and weep beneath its shadow!³⁸

It was a powerful argument that was made many times. Indeed, the only effective predominantly white abolitionist Methodist denomination, the Wesleyan Methodist, came into being largely because the Methodist Episcopal Church from 1824 onwards proved more effective at enforcing discipline against those considered abolitionist extremists than expressing unease at the existence of slavery.³⁹

Free from the shackles of the mother church the Wesleyans were able to oppose the peculiar institution in a way that drew strong praise from the likes of Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison. However, as Mark Noll has demonstrated, those who argued in favour of slavery had the upper hand with biblical literalists for the institution of slavery is mentioned but not criticised several times in the Bible. The abolitionist perspective demanded an appeal to the spirit rather than the letter of scripture; there were arguments about whether modern slavery and biblical slavery could be treated separately, and William Lloyd Garrison made the controversial claim that since scripture appeared to sanction slavery, scripture must be wrong.⁴⁰

The General Conference of 1844 was the moment when the mainstream of American Methodism split in two. Controversy erupted over a series of actions taken against southern ministers who owned slaves, the best remembered being Bishop James O. Andrew, of Georgia, who became a slave-owner through marriage. The majority of delegates at that Conference have been described by historians of the last few decades as 'moderates', an ill-fitting label for those who were not pro-slavery but were anti-abolitionist, clinging to the racist assumptions of the

³⁸ *The Debates of the General Conference of the M.E. Church, May 1844 to which is added a review of the proceedings of said conference, by Rev. Luther Lee and Rev. E. Smith* (New York: Wesleyan Methodist Connection of America, 1845), 46.

³⁹ Chris Padgett, 'Hearing the Antislavery Rank-and-File: The Wesleyan Methodist Schism of 1843', *Journal of the Early Republic*, 12 (Spring 1992), 70.

⁴⁰ Noll, *America's God*, 387–90.

middle ground in the hope of preserving the status quo. They sought to pacify both extremes in the debate by arguing that whilst the institution of slavery was a great societal evil, the owning of slaves was not an individual sin.⁴¹ To them, slavery was bad but offending southern honour was worse and liable to lead to schism. The schism of 1844 was a tragedy for the Methodist Episcopal Church and for race relations in the United States. Furthermore, it was a foretaste of the horrors that were to come. As the Reverend H. Splicer warned during the debates about Bishop Andrew, 'I say, when we must part and dissolve our ecclesiastical connection, the death-knell of the Union is certainly given; for I am well persuaded that no power has more to do with binding the remote parts of our country together, than the itinerancy and general superintendency of the M. E. Church.'⁴²

The Political Impact of Methodism

The sad story of Methodism and slavery in the United States demonstrates the impossibility of keeping religion out of politics. For historians of British Methodism in the twenty years following the publication of *The Making of the English Working Class*, class was the defining issue. Robert Moore, for example, argued that one influence of Methodism was to inhibit the development of a class consciousness and reduce class conflict.⁴³ Sometimes, however, Methodism provided people of a radical persuasion with the skills and the platform to express their ideas. For example, on 21 March 1849 Joseph Heslop used a meeting at Swinhope Primitive Methodist Chapel in the North Pennines to incite a miners' strike. After the singing of a hymn and a period of prayer, Heslop delivered a speech that drew heavily on biblical references and the conventions of revival preaching. Those who refused to join in the strike action were encouraged towards eternal hellfire. 'Let them be like Cain, deserted by God and forsaken of men,' Heslop warned the congregation. 'Let them be like Judas, only fit for taking their own lives if none of you can do it for them.'⁴⁴ Read in the twenty-first century Heslop's speech still has the power to shock and it is easy to understand why such voices were challenged and suppressed in nineteenth-century Methodism. Just as opposition to slavery was curtailed in the United States because of its capacity to cause offence and undermine opportunities for evangelism, so was labour radicalism discouraged in Britain. In his work on Primitive Methodism Geoffrey Milburn drew attention to a number of trade union leaders who held prominent lay positions within the denomination but also demonstrated that political radicalism and Methodism were uneasy bedfellows. Tommy Hepburn,

⁴¹ *Debates of the General Conference, 1844*, 41.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴³ Robert Moore, *Pit-Men, Preachers and Politics: The Effects of Methodism in a Durham Mining Community* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 13.

⁴⁴ Quoted in C. J. Hunt, *The Lead Miners of the Northern Pennines in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 132–3.

for example, was a Primitive Methodist local preacher and strike leader in 1831 but the denomination 'felt obliged to disown him' because of his trade union activities.⁴⁵ Methodists may have been offended at the activities of labour radicals at the connexional level but, as Robert Colls has demonstrated, locally the situation was quite different. In the Durham coalfields, for example, Methodists felt called to a mission of community and the result was something radical enough to deeply challenge Thompsonian assumptions.⁴⁶

British Methodism has been credited with bolstering the Tolpuddle Martyrs, providing Chartists with a form of worship that could be put to very effective political use (the camp meeting) and ensuring that the revolutionary change that took place in the country during the first half of the nineteenth century was largely non-violent. For half a century debates have focused on Methodism and class but the challenge for the next generation of historians is to move the debate on from this whilst avoiding the risk of sidelining the movement to a position of political irrelevance.

Inspiration can be drawn from the United States where similar debates about evangelicalism and class took place in the 1960s and 1970s. However, historians of American Methodism have been careful to ensure that class has not completely consumed the political agenda. In the 1990s Richard Carwardine waded into the political and theological currents of antebellum America and showed how Methodists helped to steer the political course of the nation. Early in the century Methodists saw involvement in politics as an unnecessary distraction from the work of evangelism but by the end of the Civil War the situation had changed so dramatically that Ulysses Grant claimed the three great parties in the United States were the Republican, the Democratic and the Methodist Church.⁴⁷ Carwardine explored how engagement with Wesley's idea of Christian Perfection encouraged an optimistic view of the political future of the country. In the 1840s, Methodists may have had their own increasingly fragmented position in mind when they opposed the two-party system because it made conflict the default position of politics. In an era of paranoia that mirrored the Communist scare a century later, the 1840s and 1850s were a time when many Methodists were actively committed to controlling the enemy within. Roman Catholics were regarded as that enemy and a papal takeover of the United States the threat to be faced. Whilst the Democratic Party gained Roman Catholic votes through its opposition to religious tyranny, many Methodists supported the Whigs who championed the legislation of morality, opposing political corruption and Sunday mailings among other issues, before being swallowed up in the tumultuous events of the 1850s. The decade before the Civil War was a time of radicalisation for Methodists with many in the north finally adopting an abolitionist stance. However, it was also a fiercely anti-Catholic period

⁴⁵ Geoffrey Milburn, *Primitive Methodism* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2002), 55.

⁴⁶ Robert Colls, *The Pitmen of the Northern Coalfields: Work, Culture and Protest, 1790–1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 118–203. See also Hempton, *Methodism and Politics*, 215–16.

⁴⁷ Richard Carwardine, 'Methodists, Politics, and the Coming of the American Civil War', *Church History*, 69:3 (September 2000), 578.

that saw the advent of the nativist Know-Nothing Party. Carwardine notes that the Know-Nothings certainly appealed to many Methodists but ultimately failed to attract the support they needed because of their emphasis on secrecy, vitriolic hatred of foreigners and failure to properly address the slavery issue.⁴⁸

An area that Carwardine mentions but does not develop is the contribution of evangelical women to the political landscape of antebellum America. The contention that women had a feminising influence on the Whig Party is an alluring perspective though difficult to prove. It is arguably dependent on the kind of stereotypes of women as the moral and spiritual superiors of men that were current in the opening decades of the nineteenth century and allowed women to enjoy positions of responsibility that they would later be denied.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, Carwardine's perceptive analysis invites further exploration on both sides of the Atlantic. Whilst the evangelical basis of women's opposition to issues like temperance, Sabbath observance and poor relief is easily demonstrable, the more subtle influences that Carwardine refers to deserve more detailed investigation and application to the broader story of Methodism's intersection with the wider political world.

Carwardine's comments can be placed in the context of thirty years in which the women who made up the majority of Methodist membership on both sides of the Atlantic have been reinstated into the main internal narrative of the movement's history. Particular attention has been given to the role of women preachers. In the opening decades of the nineteenth century, as religious revival swept across the United States, the number of women preachers increased. Catherine Brekus emphasises that the women preachers of this revivalist age tended to have imminent millennial expectations that overrode any consideration of whether what they were doing was proper and were usually working class.⁵⁰

Although the religious landscape of Great Britain was more conservative than that of the United States in the early nineteenth century, women preachers played an integral part in the early history of Primitive Methodism in England. R. W. Ambler places women preachers in the context of the Industrial Revolution in England, claiming that they provided a refuge from the harshness of a fast-changing world by offering a gospel based in traditional homeliness.⁵¹ Deborah Valenze takes up this theme, noting how hymns of the time portrayed heaven as a place of idealised domesticity but also emphasising that through religion women found 'ideological support and inspiration for their campaign against economic defeat'.⁵²

⁴⁸ Richard Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

⁴⁹ Richard Carwardine, 'Religious Revival and Political Renewal in Antebellum America', in J. Garnett and H. G. C. Matthew (eds), *Revivals and Religion Since 1700: Essays for John Walsh* (London: Hambledon, 1993), 129.

⁵⁰ Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America 1740–1845* (Chapel Hill, NC and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 6, 120.

⁵¹ R. W. Ambler, *Ranters, Revivalists and Reformers: Primitive Methodism and Rural Society in South Lincolnshire 1817–1875* (Hull Academic Press, 1989), 47.

⁵² Deborah Valenze, *Prophetic Sons and Daughters: Female Preaching and Popular Religion in Industrial England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 30, 40.

In Britain, the phenomenon of women preaching was particularly strong among the Primitive Methodists. Dorothy Graham's research reveals that 125 different women served as travelling preachers in the Primitive Methodist Connexion.⁵³ However, few of these women lasted more than a few years in the role since their mission was undermined by restrictions on married women preaching and oppressive working conditions. For example, in 1836 the maximum salary for a male single preacher was four pounds per quarter while for women it was two pounds and ten shillings.⁵⁴ The assumption that women could survive on so much less than men was a blow to their dignity and well-being. Ruth Watkins was a travelling preacher who served the British denomination in its short-lived mission to the United States. In 1835, she wrote to the British Conference complaining that she had not been paid in four years, a situation that had caused her intense physical and emotional hardship and was about to force her departure from the denomination. On the back of the letter, a representative of the British Conference wrote, 'From Ruth Watkins in America dated March /35. To the Conference as it could not be officially answered, no answer was sent.'⁵⁵ Anne Wearing was another Primitive Methodist missionary in America although her work mainly involved family visiting. She covered a very large area that forced her to rely on the hospitality of many people including 'an old gentleman, a Methodist Episcopal', a 'Quaker lady' and 'a gentleman of French extraction'.⁵⁶ These small details reveal that the reputations of female preachers were extremely fragile. Little wonder that most ultimately sought the respectability and security of marriage.

By midcentury, women preachers were increasingly rare on both sides of the Atlantic. They were victims of Methodism's rise to respectability. In an era in which Methodism had moved from open fields to increasingly decorative and impressive buildings and the role of the travelling preacher had become professionalised, women were no longer regarded as suited to the role. There is a certain irony in the fact that in 1848, when the popularity and acceptability of women preaching was fading away, the radical Wesleyan Methodist Church in Seneca Falls, New York played host to the first Women's Rights Convention. Even as this historic event was taking place Methodism's women preachers were becoming a thing of the past, sacrificed on the altar of respectability.

⁵³ Quoted in Milburn, *Primitive Methodism*, 15.

⁵⁴ *Various Regulations Made by the Conferences of the Primitive Methodist Connexion and Consolidated at and by the Conference held at Lynn-Regis in Norfolk, May 20–25, 1836* (London: M. R. Publications, 1836), 2–3.

⁵⁵ Ruth Watkins to William Clowes and John Flesher, March 1835 (Methodist Collection: John Rylands Library, University of Manchester).

⁵⁶ *Primitive Methodist Magazine*, 1831, 206–9; 184–7.

Conclusion

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Methodists on both sides of the Atlantic made the difficult transition from childhood to adolescence. Whilst growth was rapid and impressive, it often came with shocking consequences. Like most adolescents, many Methodists found it difficult to get along with family members, resulting in numerous bitter arguments that echoed the political divisions of the day.

For the traditionalist elites who attempted to dominate the story on both sides of the Atlantic, respectability was of central importance but the pursuit of respectability sometimes undermined the dignity of those who saw in Methodism their great hope of liberation. Consequently much of American Methodism suffered the blemish of a missed opportunity in race relations and the women who made up the majority of Methodists were often reduced to standing on the sidelines, like cheerleaders at a football game.

There is much to inspire people in the story of Methodism in the early part of the nineteenth century but there is also an awkwardness, emotional intensity and naivety that is more embarrassing to the contemporary church than the literary outpourings of a teenager's diary rediscovered after thirty years. Methodism provided many early nineteenth-century adherents and members with a sense of purpose, confidence and belonging that no other institution could match. By midcentury, the movement was still fresh and idealistic but it was also fragmented and damaged. For many contemporary Methodists this is a period of repressed historical memory, when our forbears, so often remembered as dignified and restrained, struggled towards the day when they could call themselves grown-ups.