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4: THE HISTORY OF THE WESLEYAN METHODIST MISSIONARY SOCIETY¹

FINDLAY and Holdsworth's *History of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society* (henceforth 'the History' is an irreplaceable monument, directly to Wesleyan Methodist work overseas, and indirectly to British Wesleyan Methodism in the period in which it was written.

A monument, first, in its comprehensive scope. A brief article cannot begin to do justice to its five volumes and more than 2700 pages. The project was originally intended as part of the celebration, in 1913, of the supposed² centenary of Methodist missions. It grew to such dimensions under the direction of its first editor, the New Testament scholar Dr G. G. Findlay, that publication by the target date was soon abandoned; a brief history by Findlay, entitled *Wesley's World Parish*, was all that could be published in time. W. W. Holdsworth was co-opted, first to bring the project within a measurable compass of space and time, and later, following Findlay's long illness and his death in 1919, to complete it, with the help of associates whose contributions are duly acknowledged in the prefaces to the various volumes.

Publication, once started, went fairly briskly, according to an outline set out at the beginning of Volume 1: Volume 1 itself, published in May 1921, covers the formation and development of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (henceforth WMMS) itself, and work in North America; Volume 2, devoted to the West Indies, and Volume 3, on Australasia, appeared together two months later; Volume 4, on Africa and Europe, was published in

¹ The writer is indebted to Prof. Andrew F. Walls for comments on a draft of this review.

² The date is disputed by N. Allen Birtwhistle, 'Methodist Missions', in Rupert Davies *et al.* (ed.), *The History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, 3.1-116, here 2-5. Birtwhistle prefers to date the launching of the Methodist Missionary Society from John Wesley's letter of March 1786, commending Thomas Coke's project impressively entitled *An Address to the Pious and Benevolent, proposing an Annual Subscription for the support of Missionaries in the Highlands and adjacent Islands of Scotland, the Isles of Jersey, Guernsey, and Newfoundland, the West Indies, and the provinces of Nova Scotia and Quebec*.

The breadth of vision evidenced in the Introduction is maintained throughout the *History*. To take an example almost at random, the last chapter written by Dr Findlay, that on Sierra Leone, begins with three pages of geographical and historical background, before opening its account of Methodist involvement in the country (4.73-76).

Perhaps even more important is the authors' constant awareness that they are writing, not just history, still less a would-be presuppositionless record under the *wie es eigentlich gewesen* motto, but church history, Christian history, one might almost say salvation history, written 'from faith to faith'.

This shows itself, as it were in an outer circle of the dartboard, in the careful and relatively enlightened treatment of other religions. The language sometimes tends to conceal this: for example, the summary of developments to 1863 is presented under the headings '(1) Colonial Methodism', '(2) Barbarian heathenism'⁵, '(3) the civilized heathenism of Asia', and '(4) the Missions in Christian Europe' (1.116-120). But, at least in respect of the third category, the *History* bears the mark of several missionaries who made a major contribution to the study of world religions. The account of Wesleyan missions in China begins with a chapter of 'Prolegomena' which discusses the place of Christianity in a nation based on Confucian ethics, supplemented by Buddhist and Taoist religion.

The distinctively Christian purpose of the *History* appears most explicitly in its first part, devoted to the 'Formation and Development of the Society'. The interest of the Wesley family in overseas missions is traced back to John Wesley's grandfather and namesake, who in the mid-seventeenth century offered for missionary service in Surinam; and to his father Samuel, who unsuccessfully proposed a plan to engage the British East India Company in mission. The theological link between Arminianism and mission is illustrated from Charles Wesley's hymns:

⁵ The distinction between (1) and (2) is recognised as fluid: 'The West Indies are colonial also, but in these tropical islands Europeans are not likely to be more than a ruling caste, and Methodism is preponderantly the Church of the negro' (1.117).

Look into Him, ye nations, own
 Your God, ye fallen race.
 Look, and be saved by faith alone,
 Be justified by grace.⁶

So also is the Wesleys' concern for scriptural holiness. As the *History* puts it, in a style typical of the preacher not ashamed of the gospel:

The Christian sanctification never terminates with the sanctified man; it is consecration to a mission - to the world - mission of the Redeemer Himself; it is the soul's invitation to 'the fellowship of God's Son.' The passion for holiness which breathes in Charles Wesley's hymns 'For Believers seeking Full Redemption,' and which signaled the middle period of John Wesley's ministry in Methodism, was the prelude to the outburst of missionary enthusiasm in the next generation (1.34).

One is reminded that the *History* was written at a time when Methodist scholars of the calibre of W. F. Lofthouse and J. A. Findlay, not to mention the Primitive Methodist A. S. Peake, were in their creative prime. The proper corporate self-confidence which initiated the *History* is reflected in the work itself: a confidence such that it feels no need to conceal or play down setbacks and controversies, such as the general and damaging criticism of the Society's Indian missionaries in 1888-89 (1.138-154). As the *History's* Preface puts it,

The story of the spirit in which the Wesleyan Church went forth under the influence of the Evangelical Revival to fulfil her Master's commission, and to 'make disciples of all the nations,' was seen to be one which was far more than a record of the activities of a Society within the Church. It was part of the religious life of the Church universal... (1.5-6).

⁶ The *History* describes this verse as the culmination of 'the hymn that stands first in the [Wesleyan] Methodist Hymn-book' (1.30). Allen Birtwhistle, *op. cit.*, 39, is still just able to state that 'O for a thousand tongues to sing' 'has stood first in every major collection of hymns published for Methodists', but regrets the omission in the 1933 hymn book of a verse which 'completely changes the merely personal application'. Alas! the 1983 *Hymns and Psalms*, while restoring another verse omitted in 1933, also misses the missionary dimension of the hymn, placing it under the heading 'Growth in Grace and Holiness' and incidentally relegating it to no. 744.

Yet a monument is a paradoxical thing. On the one hand, it is built to last, and the *History* has certainly worn well, and well repays re-reading. But on the other hand, a monument is inevitably erected at a particular time, and reflects the circumstances of its construction; the *History* is no exception.

It was written long after the period of British Methodism's greatest proportionate expansion, in the first half of the nineteenth century; also after the late Victorian boom in the construction of church buildings. In the 1920s, Methodist church membership was still rising in absolute terms, though no longer as a percentage of population⁷. Confidence among the free churches generally was high. Methodist union was already on the agenda. It is difficult to detect in the *History* any sense that Methodism at home might have passed its peak; in any case, there were 150 years of solid, almost world-wide achievement to be recorded, since Thomas Coke's *Plan of the Society for the Establishment of Missions among the Heathens*. The writers of the *History* had reason to be proud of their assignment.

Yet the qualification 'almost' points to an aspect of the *History* which, to our eyes, belongs most clearly to the period of its composition. This is the close, though far from complete, association of mission with empire. The *History* is outspoken in its attacks on commercial companies' refusal to allow missionary activity in areas under their control or influence; by contrast, and at least by implication, it sees colonial government as a liberating rather than a constricting force. The authors make a thought-provoking comparison which deserves extensive quotation without comment, other than the highlighting of certain noteworthy expressions.

The normal [!] history of Christian Foreign Missions may be compared to that of a British colony, with its four phases of progress [!] variously graduated and combined. There is, first, the stage of *private adventure*, under which Dr. Coke's voyages might be classed; secondly, the stage of *joint-stock enterprise*, recognized and encouraged but not administered by the State... to this semi-political organization most of the English Missionary Societies⁸ present an analogy in their relations to the Church; thirdly, the status of the *Crown Colonies and Dependencies*, under the full control of Parliament and the Colonial Office in London, but with extensive powers of

⁷ J. M. Turner, 'Methodism in England 1900-1932', in *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, 3.309-361, here 340.

⁸ The writers exclude Methodist missions from this category.

local administration - such is the position, broadly speaking, of the Methodist and Presbyterian Missions on heathen fields; and fourthly, the stage of full-grown nationhood within the Empire [!] which four groups of British Colonies have attained (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa). In the same regions the Church order of Methodism had previously [!] reached a parallel development, through its 'Affiliated Conferences,' which became self-governing as they were self-sustaining [!], and remain bound to the mother church [!] by the ties of spiritual kinship and tradition (1.63-64).

Elsewhere, the writers, in the context of a discussion of the rise of British power following the Napoleonic⁹ wars and especially the first World War, comment, apparently without any *arrière-pensée*:

It is noticeable how closely Methodism has followed, or in some instances preceded, the expansion of the Empire. Even to-day the Missions we have lying beyond its borders [even including China] are comparatively few and small (1.84).

We have already noted the writers' distinction between '*Colonial Methodism*' and '*the fields of Barbarian Heathenism*' - and also their admitted inability to sustain the distinction. The missionary motive is traced back to the beginnings of Methodism, since 'heathen England was a veritable Mission Field to Wesley and his preachers' (1.164); but there is no suggestion of even residual heathenism in the Britain of the 1920s, and the authors can speak without blushing, indeed with ecumenical inclusiveness, of 'Christian Europe'. The expression 'Greater Britain' is used more than once; most notably in an account of what the writers call a 'friendly collision', at a Cambridge degree ceremony in 1859, between W. E. Gladstone and Sir George Grey, recently returned under a cloud of controversy from the governorship of Cape Colony.

Both were earnest Christians... But [Grey] represented the Greater Britain, and he knew how limb is bound to limb in the parts of a mighty empire (1.130).

⁹ In a rare misprint, spelt "Neapolonic" at 1.14.

It would however be unfair to close this review on a note which strikes a discord with our own presuppositions, which are also relative. True, the *History* does not show the same degree of critical distance from events as that displayed, for example, in Allen Birtwhistle's account of Methodist Missions, referred to above. John Wesley's own initial reluctance to engage in overseas mission¹⁰ is not mentioned, though the pros and cons of the connexional system are frankly discussed¹¹. Between the journals and correspondence which form the major original sources, the missionary magazines and annual reports of the period, and the *History*, there is inevitably at times a process of progressive smoothing.

Yet the writers are scrupulous and generous in their use of those original sources; fresh in their style of writing; and generally possessed of that prime qualification of historians, a sense of what is vital. The next history of British Methodist mission will be very different from Findlay and Holdsworth, but will not supersede it.

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¹⁰ Birtwhistle, *op. cit.*, 4-5

¹¹ *History*, 1.61-63.

Late in the day, we draw attention to two lectures published in 1994: *'The Necessity of God'*, *The Message and Ministry of Leslie Weatherhead* by John Travell (£2.00 from Caroon House, 14 Farringdon Street, London EC4A 4DX) and John Walsh's fine study of John Wesley (£2.00 from Dr Williams's Library, 14 Gordon Square, London WC1H OAG)

'People called Methodists' is the title of a new series of short illustrated biographies published by the Methodist Publishing House at £2.50 each. Titles so far include *Jabez Bunting* by Kenneth Greet, *John Fletcher* by Peter Forsaith and *The Countess of Huntingdon* by Peter Gentry. More are planned for 1996.

The Charles Wesley Society's latest facsimile reprint is, appropriately, *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*, to mark the 250th anniversary of the first edition. This edition includes Brevint's Preface and an introduction by Geoffrey Wainwright. Copies, price £8.00, can be obtained from 26 Roe Cross Green, Mottram, Hyde, Cheshire, SK14 6LP. The Methodist Sacramental Fellowship have also published a selection from *HLS*, edited by Donald G. Rogers. Copies are £3.50 plus postage from 70 Sweetbrier Lane, Exeter, EX1 3QA.