Proceedings

OF THE

Wesley Historical Society

Editor: E. ALAN ROSE, B.A.

Volume XLV **October 1986**

BOOK NOTICES

Methodism and Politics in British Society 1750-1850 by David Hempton. (Hutchinson, 1984, pp 276, £13.95)

This book returns to the well-ploughed field of the relationship between Methodism, in what now has to be called its early period, and politics. Dr. Hempton is lecturer in modern history at the Queen's University of Belfast, and he has a strong interest in ecclesiastical history. Whether his approach will recommend him to Methodist readers is not quite clear. His discussion of Roman Catholic Emancipation between 1790 and 1830, one of the more original parts of his book, offers an example of his method. He says that in this period Methodist opposition to Roman Catholicism became more public and more political. Methodist anti-Catholicism ruined its chances of missionary expansion in Ireland, he says, but it paid unexpected returns in England. 'Not only did it cement Methodist respectability in the eyes of aristocratic Tories and Protestant Anglicans, but it strengthened Methodist roots in English popular culture at a time when its opposition to popular radicalism threatened its survival in industrial districts.' In fact, he concludes, in their opposition to radical politics and Irish Catholics, the Wesleyans set themselves against the two principal liberal crusades of the first half of the nineteenth century : religious equality and the extension of political influence to new social groups. These are not the only negatives which affect his picture of Wesleyanism between 1800 and 1850. It is part of his general thesis that Wesleyanism also broke with popular revivalism, and so dug another gulf between the Old Connexion and the working-class. These were the vital years in Wesleyan history, he argues, because it was then that Wesleyanism failed to sink deep roots into working-class culture, and therefore lost the chance to become the focus of popular religion.

Dr. Hempton's position marks an advance, in as much as he drops implicitly the older view that Methodism played a vital role in English politics in the early Victorian period. Wesleyanism in particular never functioned as part of the political forces which were demanding change, but gratefully accepted the ability of the ruling groups to maintain social order. What seems less certain to me is that one can relate the Wesleyanism of the 1800s, then moving into a third generation, to the emergence of 'working-classes' in the industrial districts. Wesleyanism was largely the product of an internal readjustment of the English religious sub-culture to the early eighteenth-century Hanoverian settlement, which confirmed the eclipse of 'historic Dissent', relegated Roman Catholicism to the backwoods for a century, and defined 'Anglicanism' as a conciliatory 'civic religion'. The unconciliated found themselves in limbo, and Wesleyanism expressed a limited alienation from the 'soft' absolutism of the Hanoverians, who showed no interest in forming the kind of links with this English version of Pietism which the Prussian government formed with its own Pietism. Given its eighteenth-century history, I don't think that there was ever a serious possibility that Wesleyanism could have sunk deep roots into a working-class culture ; it was always moving away from the 'lower orders', without making much progress, in the early nineteenth century, towards a fixed social identity. There was no question of choice, and to the extent that a working-class 'culture' may be said to have developed by 1848 it was hostile to Pietism. What mattered most in the religious world in those years was the gradual return of Catholicism into the main stream after 1829 : Wesleyan anti-Romanism showed an instinctive appreciation of the importance of the

change, which was to be symbolised by the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in 1850, but in practice it was to be Catholicism which grew and Methodism which declined. It is unlikely, however, that the political choices made by men like Jabez Bunting affected the outcome, or that Methodism could have found a proletarian constituency to balance the consequences of the Irish famine.

All Methodist historians will find David Hempton's approach refreshing, and he has much new information both about Methodism and Ireland and about Methodist involvement in education. It is still true, however, that we need new conceptual tools for our interpretation of this area of recent religious history.

JOHN KENT

The Irish in World Methodism, 1760-1900 by Norman W. Taggart (Epworth Press 1986. pp. xvii + 222, £12.50)

This book does not disappoint the high expectations which one brings to it, and that is already saying a great deal. Its author is uniquely qualified to undertake a task of this scope, since he has been a missionary in India, was for some years Home Secretary of the Methodist Church Overseas Division, and is now Superintendent of the Belfast City Mission.

Dr Taggart has tested these qualifications to the full by attempting, in limited space, a survey which could easily have become patchy and episodical. Not only does the story as a whole cover the world ; some of the individuals had extraordinarily varied and chequered careers—William Butler in India and Mexico, John McKenny in South Africa, Sri Lanka and Australia, and John Barry in Jamaica, Canada and Bermuda. The author lets us see them as whole, often complex, living people, in a way often missed in histories of a particular area, and sometimes even in general surveys.

The author has wisely chosen a twofold approach : biographical and thematic. In addition to the figures already mentioned, chapters are devoted to Adam Clarke and William Arthur, and to James Lynch of Sri Lanka and India ; to the role of the WMMS in relation to Ireland ; to Irish emigration ; to lay pioneers and leaders ; and to Canada. The study opens with a chapter on "the Irish and Methodism's world outreach", which among other things corrects exaggerated claims for Ireland's contribution in both people and money. It ends with an assessment of the period in the light of the predominant concerns of mission today. An appendix lists Irish-born Methodist ministers and probationers in Canada.

Lives and themes flow into each other ; the main concern of the chapter on Clarke and Arthur is rightly with the theology of mission, and the account of Barry's work broadens into an analysis of Wesleyan policies on slavery. Correspondence with the Mission House is not entirely concerned with dishonoured bills and unauthorised travel ; it touches sensitively if incidentally on major questions of theology.

The author's complex task is carried through with fine and balanced judgement. There is no hint of hagiography ; yet in the end the story is inspiring, both in itself, and also because it is so well and simply told. The numerous quotations, from archival or not easily accessible sources, are so requotable

that this reviewer must impose on himself an almost total ban in this respect. The author is particularly good at drawing out significant elements, and expressing them succinctly.

There is really almost nothing in this book to criticise. On trivialities, it would have been more helpful for all abbreviations (xvii, 202) to have been explained in one place, and for the spelling "Sinhalese" to have been used consistently outside quotations.

Just one question remains in the mind of a non-Irish reader. William Butler is quoted as saying, a few years before he died :

> Dear old Irish Methodism ! If I have been of any use in this wide world, I owe it, under God, to her.

It would be good to know a little more of the distinctive character and flavour of Irish Methodism, which made this story possible, and now gives coherence to the record of it. But that, perhaps, is another story.

PAUL ELLINGWORTH

Endless Song by Elsie W. Cooper, with Foreword by Kenneth G. Greet. (WMHS Publications, 1986, pp. 122 plus, £2.75 plus postage.)

Endless Song is a simple story, simply told, of *Lark Rise* genre, a family history as far back as great-grandmother, with domestic pets not forgotten. Claim to be noticed and, I imagine, to be published by the WMHS is that the writer married a Methodist minister, the Rev. Frank M. Cooper, though one could wish that Mrs. Cooper had given us more views of Methodism "through a manse window", so to speak. However, what we do have is a delightful picture of a life as it was lived—from village scenes and customs in peaceful Edwardian days to those terrific upheavals during the Bristol blitz. The closing chapter is "a moving plea for peace to be given a chance in our nuclear age". The title is taken, very appropriately, from the first line of a poem (? by Mrs. Cooper), "My life flows on in endless song" and the sub-title, equally appropriate, reads, "A Celebration of Life".

JOHN C. BOWMER

John Wesley and the Methodists by Cyril Davey. (Marshall Pickering, 1985, pp 46, £4.95.)

This is intended as a popular introduction to Methodism for British and American readers and is everything such a book should be : balanced, readable, accurate for the most part and beautifully illustrated in colour throughout. Within severe limits of space, Cyril Davey manages to give us a life of John Wesley, a glance at Charles and his achievements, a history of Methodism and its divisions, a survey of Methodism's expansion overseas including America and a sketch of the present situation.

Inevitably, there are a few slips : John Wesley died aged 87, not 88 (p.4), Deighton Street should read Dighton Street (p.30), the date of 1779 with relation to Wesley's ordinations is clearly wrong (p.30), the origin of the New

Connexion was not confined to the North East (p.32), laymen were first admitted to the Wesleyan Conference in 1878, not 1871 (p.34), the account of the origin of the UMFC on page 34 is somewhat garbled and a full page portrait of Queen Victoria (p.35) seems of doubtful relevance.

This book fulfils the need for a simple and attractive account of our Church. One wonders why such a book was not commissioned by our own publishing house.

E.A. ROSE

Welsh Chapels, by Anthony Jones. (National Museum of Wales, 1984, pp.87, £3.50.)

Churches in Bristol, by Bryan Little. (Redcliffe Press, 1967, pp.46, £1.25.)

To many, Wales and chapel are synonymous and so a booklet profusely illustrated with both black and white and colour plates is most welcome. The ultimate plea of the author is that although not all chapels can or should be preserved, the chapels of Wales must not be dismissed *in toto* and the best examples should be retained, possibly by amalgamation of churches. In presenting his case he traces the origins of Welsh Dissent and then looks both at the architectural designs and the architects responsible for this once familiar Welsh landscape feature.

As an introduction to Welsh chapel architecture this book is highly recommended and those concerned with recording chapels could learn from the author's presentation of his material. His photographic techniques are worthy of consideration, especially the way he retains the feeling of curvature at Llandudno, Ebeneser Methodist. Another useful contribution is on the rebuilding of chapels, selective illustrations being used to show how a particular facade was changed. Inevitably the book is primarily concerned with Welsh-speaking chapels but a clearer distinction perhaps could have been made between Calvinistic Methodists and Wesleyan Methodists, both English and Welsh speaking.

Bristol may only be separated from Wales by the Severn Estuary but the city's religious history is quite different. Belated note should be made of this booklet which, although mainly concerned with Anglican churches built since the Medieval period, also gives brief potted histories and descriptions of some Nonconformist and Methodist examples. A number of the churches are illustrated.

D. COLIN DEWS

LOCAL HISTORIES

In place of our normal listing of local histories, in this issue we give brief notices of those which call for a fuller treatment on account of their length and quality. First, a very belated review of *Methodists of West Somerset* by A.G. Pointon (106pp, £3 post free from the author at The Flat, No 1 High Street, Dunster, Minehead, Somerset, TA24 6SF). This is a model circuit history, in an area which combines two very different traditions—rural Methodism