H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Kent. *Wesley and the Wesleyans: Religion in Eighteenth-Century Britain.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. vi + 229 pp. $53.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-45555-8.

Reviewed by Robert Ingram (Department of History, Ohio University)

Published on H-Albion (August, 2003)

Wesley and the Republicans

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What were Methodism's origins? What accounted for the movement's successes during the eighteenth century? One hundred years ago, historians might very well have answered that from "about 1730 [...] a dramatic, divinely inspired return to true Christianity balanced the moral budget of the British people. Lives were changed, society was reformed and in the longer run the nation was saved from the tempting freedoms of the French Revolution [...]. The instruments of this divine intervention were John Wesley and his followers, the Wesleyans or Methodists" (p. 1). No serious historian of the subject thinks this today. And therein lies one of the fundamental flaws of *Wesley and the Wesleyans*; it is a book written to refute an argument that no one now believes.

What do historians these days say about Methodism? Our view of the subject has been shaped in the last fifty years by scholars who have located Methodism in a wider, truly international evangelical revival. What we call the evangelical revival is really the sum of a series of revivals in Europe and across the Atlantic world during the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries; the various evangelicalisms shared certain core beliefs, chiefly biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, and activism.[1] Though the evangelical revivals were spontaneous and shaped directly by local considerations, their existence owed much to the crisis of Protestantism in the late-seventeenth century. Louis XIV's revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 was emblematic of Catholic persecution of Protestant minorities across Europe. The Counter Reformation had succeeded not only in stemming the tide of Protestantism but also in reversing its spread, so that by the 1690s, the only Protestant states in Europe lay on the continent's northwest edge. In response to the widespread perception of Protestantism's internal rot during the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, there sprang up a number of Protestant reform and revival movements, including the Halle Pietists and the United Brethren of Moravia. Immigration and a vibrant print culture helped spread the ideas of these central European evangelical movements abroad and across the Atlantic world.[2]

Evangelicalism flourished in the Anglophone world, particularly during the 1730s. Howell Harris took up

a career as an itinerant preacher in Wales after his conversion in 1735. At a Moravian lovefeast in Fetter Lane, London, in May 1738, the Oxford don, John Wesley, was born anew after feeling his heart "strangely warmed." He would take up a life of itinerant preaching and would help lead the Methodists, an evangelical group that flourished initially within the established Church of England.[3] Across the Atlantic, Jonathan Edwards, the Congregational minister in Northampton, Massachusetts, preached a message of revival to his congregation in 1734, and there followed a series of ecstatic conversions, which he would later chronicle in *A Faithful Narrative of the surprising work of God in the conversion of many hundred souls in Northampton* (1737).[4] George Whitefield, a Methodist leader from England, helped ignite a wider Great Awakening in the North American British colonies during a fifteen-month speaking tour that began there in 1738.[5]

Little of this background is material to the argument of *Wesley and the Wesleyans*, for John Kent says that his concerns are essentially ahistorical. "The centre of this study is the nature and value of religion as such," he writes (p. vi). Unfettered by the need to marshal historical facts to support his argument, Kent contends that there was no evangelical revival and that Wesleyanism was popular during the eighteenth century because it met the needs of the "primary religious impulse" of ordinary people (p. 1). We never learn precisely what primary religion is, though it seems to have involved "harnessing supernatural power" for one's personal benefit (p. 5). And why more of those ordinary people wanted their primary religious impulses satisfied in the 1730s than in previous decades or centuries is one of many important questions unposed in this book.

Yet, if I understand Kent correctly, his intended audience is not really professional historians but those engaged in a current confessional debate. We learn that there are some today (unnamed, unfortunately) who explain eighteenth-century evangelicalism as "a Christian institutional recovery prompted by the Holy Spirit and involving the recovery of theological preaching of a purer, primitive form of the gospel" (p. 23). Their understanding of the evangelical revival forms "part of a conscious, quasi-political desire to provide the evangelicalism of the twenty-first century with a history which may supersede the Catholic and Roman Catholic and Anglo-Catholic versions of the growth and consolidation of the modern Church" (pp. 23-24). Worse yet, these apologists of evangelicalism are natural allies of, you guessed it, right-wingers in the United States. "It was not an accident that by the time the Republican George W. Bush secured the presidency in 2001 the Religious Right was demanding the restoration of the Churches' social hegemony. The same aim, quite as much as any revival of the gospel, lay at the heart of the myth of the eighteenth-century evangelical revival" (p. 157). *Wesley and the Wesleyans* teaches us this about modern politics. Regrettably, it tells us little else that we did not already know about Wesley and the Wesleyans or about religion in eighteenth-century Britain.

Notes:

[1]. David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989).

[2]. W. R. Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); G. M. Ditchfield, *The Evangelical Revival* (London: UCL Press, 1998); Colin Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England, 1728-1760* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[3]. Henry Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1989); John Walsh, " 'Methodism' and the Origins of English-Speaking Evangelicalism," in *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies in Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and beyond, 1700-1900*, ed. Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George A. Rawlyk (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 19-37.

[4]. George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

[5]. Frank Lambert, *"Pedlar in Divinity": George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals, 1737-1770* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

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Citation: Robert Ingram. Review of Kent, John, *Wesley and the Wesleyans: Religion in Eighteenth-Century Britain.* H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. August, 2003.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8020