

Foreword

MORE THAN THREE CENTURIES after his birth, Charles Wesley continues to inspire. I can still remember distinctly a day I spent in London with a student a number of years ago. We got lost, and in our attempt to figure out where we were going we came across Marylebone and its parish church. I knew that Charles Wesley was buried there—he was very insistent that he wanted to be buried in the consecrated ground of his local parish, carried by six clergy of the Church of England—but I did not know exactly where his grave was located. I insisted that we trudge around the building even if it was getting too dark to look for the grave. Having circled the building twice, we still could not find it. So I looked around for adjacent buildings that may have been built since 1788, and sure enough, behind one of them was the obelisk gravestone. I was elated. Here was one of my heroes. But when I looked over at my student, he was nonplussed. A Roman Catholic, he had no idea who Charles Wesley was until I told him that this man had written “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing.” With that realization, he lit up like a Christmas tree.

Scholars continue to discover the man whose lyrical theology has shaped the worldwide evangelical movement, and the hearts of Christians well beyond early Methodism. At the heart of the evangelical movement was an encounter with God, a

transformational encounter so radical that it was referred to as a new birth. Charles Wesley was able, primarily through poetry, to put the ineffable into words, even words that could be sung and therefore distinctly remembered.

This man “made for friendship,” as his wife Sally described him, is best known for his poetry, most often in the form of hymns. Yet Charles Wesley is a complex figure. He was a churchman through and through, a family man, and devoted husband. The letters between Charles and Sally reveal a beautiful marriage and are reminiscent of the letters of John and Abigail Adams. Charles Wesley’s vision for Methodism—one that would eventually diverge from his brother’s—was the original intention of the movement, a renewal of the Established Church. But all of this came after his time in America.

Having attended Oxford, Wesley soon made a sojourn to the newly minted colony of Georgia. The American episode—for both Charles and John Wesley—has been one of the most misunderstood periods of early Methodism. Often simply seen as the precursor to the more interesting moments after their evangelical conversions in May of 1738, the value of the American episode is lost, or even misconstrued. This is one of the main reasons why the present volume is so vital.

Charles comes alive in these pages as a young adventurer in his twenties, a missionary, and an administrator. He is moody. He is also very human as is seen in his numerous bouts with ill health, a theme that will continue throughout his entire life. His classical education shows through, even in trying times. And it is in America, as Kimbrough notes, that Wesley first exercised his priestly ministry, celebrating the sacraments and preaching the word of God.

Wesley is also in the midst of controversy from the time he lands in Georgia until the time he departs from Boston. And yet he still holds on to a rosy view of the colonies years later. One of the most vital contributions that Kimbrough makes to Charles Wesley studies is to examine the shorthand material of Wesley’s journal, previously avoided or even covered up by scholars

wanting to avoid controversial elements in the narrative. Here we see Wesley on full display.

Kimbrough digs deeply into the American narrative, not stopping at the *Manuscript Journals*—vital as they are—but filling in the details of the narrative with letters and historical details about the colonial context, much from primary source materials. He even extends the narrative by examining relationships that would continue after Wesley returned to England. These include his continued encounters with two enslaved men whom Wesley met in Charleston and encountered again in Bristol.

Kimbrough examines Wesley's views of the American Revolution as seen in his secular poetry later in life, revealing not only his allegiance to the Hanoverian dynasty but also his unshakable Tory commitments. Wesley is often remembered by Methodists for his acerbic challenge to his brother's irregular ordinations, yet they need also to see his challenge to the generals of the British forces in America to get a better view of his poetic arsenal.

On a personal note, I'm particularly glad to see further analysis of Wesley in Boston having lived and studied there and published on Charles Wesley in Boston. I still remember—as I sat in the top floor of the Boston Athenaeum—the moment when I realized not only who the doctor mentioned in Wesley's journal was, Nathaniel Williams, but that he was buried about forty feet away! Kimbrough's in-depth analysis of the Boston period expands the narrative even further.

For years, S T Kimbrough Jr. has tirelessly sought to make Charles Wesley known, through publications, analysis of his theology, and also through the publication of little-known portions of Wesley's vast poetic corpus. The *Manuscript Journals*, another project Kimbrough published in 2007 with Kenneth Newport, will serve as the critical edition of Charles Wesley's journal. Kimbrough founded The Charles Wesley Society and served as its first president and director of publications. He has even played Wesley in a superb one-man show titled *Sweet Singer!* It was within the Wesleyan studies world that we first met and I have had the distinct pleasure to learn from S T now as a colleague and friend for

FOREWORD

many years. The present volume is yet one more addition to his invaluable contribution to the field.

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