

Methodist Missions and Popular Literature

Martin Wellings

I am very grateful for this opportunity to present a paper today, and thus to make a small contribution to the most important and significant work you are doing on the history of the MMS. This project has been dear to the heart of the Connexional Archives and History Committee for a long time now, and we are excited and encouraged by all that is taking place. Both the process and the outcome will make a major contribution to Methodist history, to the history of missions and to the history of the worldwide Church.

Having said that, I have to confess that missionary history is not really my field. I have much more to learn from you than you have to learn from me! I am here mainly because Professor Walls is very persuasive, and not because I believe that I have a huge expertise in the area of missions and popular literature. The work that I have been able to do in preparation for today has served to remind me of my limitations, as well as to make me more aware of the sheer scale and richness of the subject before us. I hope that some will be inspired to take this further, and that those who do not arise inspired will at least awake refreshed.

In his initial invitation, Professor Walls was very generous in his comments on a paper I presented some years ago on William Arthur, and it is with Arthur that I wish to begin today. I do so because his life, career, writings and reputation open up many themes which will be fruitful for the consideration of Methodist missions and popular literature.

Let me outline the salient features of Arthur's biography. William Arthur was born in Ireland in 1819, and became a Methodist when he was a teenager. He was accepted as a candidate for the Wesleyan ministry in 1837, trained at Hoxton, and sailed for India in 1839. His overseas service was brief, due to ill-health, and he returned to England after two years in the subcontinent. He described his work in India in a series of articles in the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*, and published them as his first book, *A Mission to the*

Mysore, in 1847. In this period he was a popular speaker at missionary meetings, because he combined gifts of oratory with first-hand experience of the mission field and with the pathos of broken health. He recovered sufficiently to work in France in the late 1840s and then in two London circuits, but his voice failed in 1851, necessitating a complete rest and retirement from the itinerancy. He joined the WMMS secretariat and was on the staff of the Mission House almost continuously from 1851 until 1888, during which time he was also elected President of the Conference (1866), appointed a secretary of the Evangelical Alliance and invited to give the 1883 Fernley Lecture. He became a Methodist elder statesman, evolving from a protégé of Jabez Bunting in the 1840s into a cautious reformer and patron of Thomas Bowman Stephenson in the 1870s. He wrote extensively: books, pamphlets and articles; his best-selling work, *The Tongue of Fire* (1856), part biblical exposition of Pentecost and part revival sermon, was a runaway success and enormously influential on both sides of the Atlantic. He retired to the South of France, to Cannes, in 1888 and he died there in March 1901. Younger Wesleyan ministers were apparently surprised to learn of Arthur's death, because they had forgotten that he was still alive: perhaps understandably, since he survived fully sixty years after returning from India as an invalid and died in retirement at the age of eighty two.¹

Arthur is a good place to begin our consideration of Methodist missions and popular literature for at least four reasons. First, his life and posthumous reputation span much of the period we are discussing today. He was born the year after the inauguration of the WMMS; he lived through the Victorian era of missionary expansion; he died a couple of decades before the publication of Findlay and Holdsworth's monumental centenary history; and his most recent biography, by another distinguished missionary, Norman Taggart, brings us right up to the 1990s. He introduces us to the sweep of time that we will be exploring today, and to the tremendous changes in Methodism, in missions and in world history which form the backdrop to our exploration of missionary literature.

¹ Arthur's modern biographer is Norman W. Taggart: see his *William Arthur. First among Methodists* (London, 1993). See also my article on Arthur in Timothy Larsen (ed.), *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals* (Leicester, 2003). Contemporary accounts may be found in *Methodist Recorder* [hereafter *MR*], 14 March 1901, 11-14; *Methodist Times* [hereafter *MT*], 14 March 1901, 184, 186. It was the *MT* that suggested younger ministers might think Arthur had already died.

There is more to Arthur though than chronological contrivance. My second reason for beginning here is that he was closely involved in the WMMS over a very long period. As we've seen, he served as a missionary in India and in France. He was probably the most popular missionary speaker on the home circuit of anniversaries and missionary meetings during the 1840s, in that tense period when the Reform agitation in Methodism found expression in a campaign to cut off funds to the Missionary Society. The Reformers saw this as an effective way of hitting at Jabez Bunting and his allies, and the campaign to 'stop the supplies' concentrated the multitude of conflicts which were tearing Wesleyan Methodism apart in those turbulent years. Arthur was at the heart of that bitter and painful period in the Society's history. He went on to serve as part of the secretariat through years of expansion, retrenchment and renewal, retiring just before Henry Lunn, another Indian missionary manqué, ignited the 'missionary controversy' of 1889-90 and sent the Society into another crisis.

Third, Arthur as preacher, speaker, author, educationalist, theologian and Methodist elder statesman illustrates the crucial role of the WMMS in and to the wider life, leadership and relationships of Wesleyan Methodism. Missionary history cannot be treated in isolation, and in Methodism the WMMS operated at the core of the Connexion. Through the Society Arthur was drawn into the network around Bunting, and brought into contact with wealthy Wesleyan lay leaders like Thomas Farmer, the WMMS treasurer, and Farmer's son-in-law James Budgett. Arthur thus became part of what James Everett excoriated as 'the Clique, that ruled the Conference, that ruled the People'.² This dimension of the Society is an important part of the story. More than fifty years after the Reform agitation, Henry Lunn described the Mission House in Bishopsgate Street as 'the Acropolis of Methodism'. I take it that he meant a combination of sacred edifice, bastion of authority and official power-base, rather than crumbling ancient ruin or gunpowder warehouse, and for much of the Victorian period it was indeed all three. The Missionary Society was a source of immense pride and loyalty in the Connexion, and it was this pride and loyalty which persuaded many to resist the call to 'stop the supplies' in the

² I have explored this in "A friendly and familiar *Book for the Busy*": William Arthur's *The Successful Merchant: The Life of Mr Samuel Budgett*', in R.N. Swanson (ed.), *The Use and Abuse of Time in Christian History* (SCH 37) (Woodbridge, 2002), esp. 287.

1840s. In the days before Central Buildings, central services and the Connexional Team, the Mission House was Methodism's closest approximation to a London headquarters. Until the colleges expanded, it had the largest ministerial staff of any connexional institution. It provided an institutional base for a team of influential and high-profile ministers. It is suggestive that Robert Newton and Jabez Bunting had a long official association with the Society, as did George Osborn and Ebenezer Jenkins and other powerful figures in nineteenth century Wesleyanism.³ In other words, the WMMS was not just about managing foreign missions. It had a key and complex role within British Methodism at home, and that's a theme worthy of exploration. Arthur's career shows the opportunities open to a minister operating at the centre of connexional affairs.

Fourth, coming closer to our topic for today, Arthur was both the author and the subject of popular missionary literature. It has already been seen that his first book was based on his experiences in India, his 'mission to the Mysore'. He went on to write a biography of Samuel Budgett which both illustrated and subverted the genre of edifying memoirs in which many contemporary missionary lives were cast.⁴ Arthur's own biography, by Bowman Stephenson, was published in 1907 as one of a series in a 'Library of Missionary Biography' promoted by the Wesleyan Book Room. This life, brief and hagiographical, held the field until the publication of Norman Taggart's affectionate but far more nuanced and scholarly treatment in 1993. In assessing the market for Methodist missionary literature, as judged by denominational publishers and demonstrated by the purchasing decisions of the public, it is interesting that Stephenson's biography was one of a series, while Taggart's was a stand-alone volume, and it is perhaps also significant that the Taggart biography has now been remaindered! Arthur, then, is suggestive and indicative as we reflect on what Methodists were writing, reading and buying across our period.

By looking at William Arthur we have set the context for our exploration of Methodist missions and popular literature: two centuries of Methodist history and missionary

³ At least a dozen WMMS secretaries in the nineteenth century served as President of the Conference.

⁴ Wellings, 'William Arthur's *The Successful Merchant*', 281-3.

history, and two centuries of writing and publishing about missions and missionaries. Now we need to map, in outline at least, the contours of the British reading public in the period under discussion.

This is not easy, because the study of literacy and popular culture is a burgeoning subject. It is also a contentious one, drawing on the skills of social and cultural historians, sociologists, cultural critics and, sadly, literary theorists. Historical scholarship in this field has moved beyond taking at face value the assertions and agendas of representatives of the contemporary cultural elite – politicians, educational reformers, anxious clergymen and career-minded school inspectors. Attempts have been made to explore levels of popular literacy in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and to investigate the understanding, appropriation and use of literacy as a ‘tool’ among other skills in labouring or working class communities. Through the recovery and analysis of contemporary memoirs, moreover, historians have been able to reconstruct patterns of reading and to assess the effects of reading as perceived and reported by a much wider cross-section of the population that used to be the case. In these ways, it has become possible to write a ‘history of audiences’, in Jonathan Rose’s phrase, and thus to qualify, challenge or correct the exclusively text-based theoretical approaches of the literary critics.⁵

At the risk of over-simplifying, these conclusions may be offered. In addition to elite and middle class reading of books, periodicals and newspapers, popular literacy increased significantly during the nineteenth century, so that by 1913 the illiteracy level was below 1% of the population. Alongside the campaign for literacy, promoted by voluntary societies and then enforced by the State through grants and ultimately through legislation, the nineteenth century also saw a huge expansion in demand for printed material and a significant reduction in the price of books, newspapers and magazines. The publication of new book titles increased by an estimated 400% during the eighteenth century; between

⁵ The two sources I have used for this section of the paper are: David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914* (Cambridge, 1989) and Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven and London, 2002). The concept of literacy as a ‘tool’ is drawn from Vincent.

the 1790s and 1853 it increased by a further 600%, to reach 2500 titles a year. Demand stimulated supply, and new technology in the printing industry helped to reduce prices. David Vincent has shown that a penny would buy a 250-word broadside in the 1840s, a fifty page songbook or 7000 word serial by the 1860s, a 20,000 word novelette by the 1880s and, from 1896, an unabridged classic text in the eponymous Penny Library of Famous Books. The Dent and Everyman libraries, launched in 1894 and 1906 respectively, sold classics in vast quantities at prices starting at one shilling per volume. People who were not attracted by the classics could turn to cheap fiction and Sunday newspapers, as the author of an article entitled ‘What the Working Classes read’ in the middle-class periodical *Nineteenth Century* observed sadly in 1886. Clearly there was a market for escapist literature, for adventure stories and ‘penny dreadfuls’ as well as for Shakespeare, the Penny Library of Famous Books and W.T. Stead’s ‘Penny Poets’.⁶ Rose and Vincent also remind us that more expensive books were often available on second hand stalls, as well as through public libraries: among Methodist examples of poor readers taking advantage of the second-hand trade, mention may be made of Hugh Gilmore and Richard Pyke. Gilmore (1842-91), a Primitive Methodist itinerant from 1865, began in ministry equipped only with a Bible and a few back numbers of the periodicals *Good Words* and *The Christian World*. In the second year of his probation he passed through Edinburgh, spent all his money in the second-hand book shops, and had to walk to Berwick, where he arrived ‘footsore, but happy’. Pyke (1873-1965), a Bible Christian minister, rejoiced in a London appointment from 1903 to 1913 not least because of the opportunities to visit the second-hand book shops in Paternoster Row and the barrows in Farringdon Road.⁷

Although public libraries, the second-hand trade and cut-price classics brought books within the reach of a broad swathe of the British population, access and interest were by no means uniform. Vincent suggests that children were taught to read under government pressure, but were not shown the benefits of literacy beyond satisfying the school teacher

⁶ Vincent, *Literacy*, 4, 11, 211, 179; Rose, *Intellectual Life*, 132-36, 120.

⁷ Joseph Ritson, *The Romance of Primitive Methodism* (London, 1909), 193-4; Richard Pyke, *Men and Memories* (London, 1948), 80.

and the inspector.⁸ Jonathan Rose draws attention to the ‘intense localism’ of much working class life, pointing out that the ‘mental map’ of many people, even of city dwellers, was confined to a small neighbourhood. Evening and Sunday papers carried little world news, even at the turn of the twentieth century.⁹ In such a context, ‘pulp fiction’ might have far more appeal than world affairs. In rural areas, as late as the 1880s, many homes possessed few books or periodicals, and according to the Bible Christian Richard Pyke, born in 1873 and brought up in Devon, the weekly paper, ‘with news of a ewe that had given birth to three black lambs, or a workman who had broken his leg’ was passed from house to house, to be read aloud to illiterate parents by one of the older children.¹⁰

Given this general background, it may be asked how Methodism fits in to the broader picture of the British reading public. This question can be addressed in two ways. First, attention may be paid to the social composition of Methodism across the period under review. Again, this is a complicated and controversial subject, but the work of Clive Field and Michael Watts offers some guidance. Field and Watts have challenged the conventional orthodoxy that Methodism appealed to the unskilled and the poor in the eighteenth century, but became increasingly respectable in the nineteenth. On this view, the Wesleyans were most likely to draw a middle class clientele, while the various secessionist Methodist groups, especially the Primitive Methodists, continued to attract manual workers. After the Edwardian era, it is suggested, all strands of Methodism lost contact with the working classes, while Methodism after 1932 increasingly became a middle class clique.

Much of this picture is refuted by Field’s empirical research. He shows that eighteenth century Methodism was predominantly composed of skilled artisans, not the poor and destitute. This pattern endured in Wesleyan Methodism until at least 1850, at which point most Wesleyan worshippers were artisans or skilled manual workers, with the number of semi-skilled and unskilled workers exceeding employers and non-manual employees.

⁸ Vincent, *Literacy*, 92-94.

⁹ Rose, *Intellectual Life*, 341-50.

¹⁰ Pyke, *Men and Memories*, 17-18.

Artisan numbers, although declining as a proportion of the total, continued to exceed the lower middle-class segment of the church into the twentieth century. The New Connexion and the Free Methodists, both secessions from Wesleyanism, followed the Wesleyan pattern, while the revivalist Prims and Bible Christians had a majority of manual workers, principally craftsmen and the semi-skilled. By 1932 the proportion of manual labourers in each denomination had decreased. Among Local Preachers the drift towards lower-middle class identity was more marked, and this trend continued through the twentieth century. Michael Watts supplements this general picture with a detailed survey of Leeds Wesleyanism from 1810 to 1870, suggesting that from the 1840s to the 1860s there was a steady increase in the proportion of businessmen, retailers and white-collar workers and a decrease in the proportion of unskilled labourers. To these statistical surveys may be added examples of Methodists and ex-Methodists among Rose's working class memoirists.¹¹ Methodism, then, was socially diverse, sustaining a strong, albeit diminishing, constituency among the artisan and labouring classes well into the twentieth century. We might expect to find, then, working class reading patterns reflected in Methodism.

The second way of locating Methodism in the broad spectrum of the British reading public is to consider the place of reading in Methodist rhetoric and practice. Vincent suggests that working people could not always see the value of literacy as a tool,¹² but for Methodists, as for other evangelical Protestants, reading was highly prized as a skill affording access to the Bible and to devotional literature. John Wesley famously ordered his preachers to read for five hours a day, and when some protested that 'I have *no taste* for reading', tartly replied, 'Contract a taste for it by use, or return to your trade.'¹³ Wesley read extensively, wrote copiously, abridged and plagiarised the works of others, established reference libraries for his preachers and sought to guide the reading of his people by precept, prescription and publication. His fifty-volume *Christian Library*

¹¹ Clive D. Field, 'The social structure of English Methodism: eighteenth-twentieth centuries', *British Journal of Sociology*, 28 (1977), 201-02; Clive D. Field, 'The Methodist Local Preacher: an Occupational Analysis', in Geoffrey Milburn and Margaret Batty (eds), *Workaday Preachers* (Peterborough, 1995), 223-42, esp. 239; Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1978-95), 2, 599-601; Rose, *Intellectual Life*, 9-11, 30, 32.

¹² Vincent, *Literacy*, 56.

¹³ *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences*, I (London, 1812), 67 (1766).

(1749-55) was expensive and not a commercial success, but it exemplified a commitment to serious reading. More accessible were Wesley's tracts, pamphlets and sermons, and his *Arminian Magazine*, launched in 1778. The preachers were expected to read, to advertise and to disseminate Methodist publications as they walked or rode round their vast circuits.¹⁴

Wesley claimed that the Methodists were 'a reading people', but was this true? The Connexion was certainly keen to provide reading material for its members.¹⁵ We will turn to the Book Room catalogues in a few minutes, but we may note here that each branch of divided Methodism quickly established its own monthly Magazine, while the Wesleyans brought out a cheaper abridged version (the 'sixpenny edition') between 1811 and 1870.¹⁶ Cost, then, may have been a deterrent to potential readers: there were eighteen subscribers to the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* in Penzance in 1845, four at Mousehole and just one at Newlyn, while the membership of the Penzance circuit was over 1100: we presume that copies were passed around or read in groups.¹⁷ By the 1860s William Wakinshaw was looking forward to the arrival of the monthly parcel of magazines from the Book Room at his home in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The Wakinshaws though were a prosperous household, with a family library of 'many Methodist biographies'.¹⁸ Richard Pyke, by contrast, grew up in a home with few books and was encouraged to read during his training for the Bible Christian ministry at Shebbear and in his first circuit appointments.¹⁹ An indication that Methodists were indeed reading in the nineteenth century is provided by the range of titles – books and periodicals - published by the Book Rooms, and by their monetary turnover. When the Wesleyan Conference asked anxiously in 1889 'Why are our profits not greater?' an aggrieved Book Committee pointed out that £44,000 of their proceeds had been appropriated by the Conference and disbursed in

¹⁴ See 'Arminian Magazine' and 'Christian Library' in John A. Vickers (ed.), *A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland* (Peterborough, 2000).

¹⁵ The history of Methodist publishing is treated by Frank Cumbers, *The Book Room* (London, 1956).

¹⁶ By the 1890s the full *Magazine* was available for sixpence per issue, or 7/6 for the bound annual volume, a reflection of the reduction in the cost of printing: *Minutes of Conference* 1893, advertisements.

¹⁷ David W. Bebbington, 'Culture and Piety in the Far West: Revival in Penzance, Newlyn and Mousehole in 1849' (forthcoming); *Minutes of Conference*, x (1845), 278.

¹⁸ William Wakinshaw, *Gleanings from My Life* (London, 1931), 16.

¹⁹ Pyke, *Men and Memories*, 36-43.

grants over the previous ten years. Joseph Ritson reported proudly in 1909 that the Primitive Methodist Book Room was issuing three and three quarter million items a year, making a profit of £4800 on an annual turnover of £37,000. This evidence helps to offset the gloomy comment of an anonymous writer who published a portrait of Methodism in 1879 that there was too much novel-reading among younger Wesleyans.²⁰ By the end of the century, of course, Methodism had its own best-selling novelists, to whom we will return later. Responding to the development of circuit magazines towards the turn of the twentieth century the Wesleyan Book Room launched *The Wesleyan Methodist Church Record*, a ‘homely and out-and-out Methodist magazine’ designed for insertion in a local publication. By autumn 1893 the *Church Record* was claiming a monthly circulation of 100,000 and among its advertised articles was one on ‘The Romance of Foreign Missions’.²¹ It should also be remembered that the Methodist public sustained a spread of weekly denominational newspapers, all of which were commercial undertakings which had to make a profit. The newspapers illustrated the social and economic diversity of Methodism, ranging in the early 1880s from the conservative and rather stuffy *Watchman*, priced at three pence to the more progressive *Methodist Recorder* and the liberal *Methodist*, at one penny each. When Hugh Price Hughes revolutionised Methodist journalism with the launch of the *Methodist Times* in 1885 it joined the penny papers, while *Joyful News*, two years older than the *Methodist Times*, cost only a halfpenny a week. By the end of the 1880s the weekly circulation of *Joyful News* was 50,000 copies.²²

Evidence for Methodist reading in the twentieth century has been harder to find.

Methodism had its bibliophiles, the most celebrated of whom was Isaac Foot, with his library of 70,000 volumes.²³ On a more modest scale, Sidney Richardson (1910-2002), himself an avid reader, recalled the extensive library of his uncle, William Henry Oakes,

²⁰ Cumbers, *Book Room*, 68-70; Ritson, *Romance of Primitive Methodism*, 304; (Anon.), *Methodism in 1879. Impressions of the Wesleyan Church and its Ministers* (London, 1879), 154-60.

²¹ Advertisement in *Minutes of Conference* 1893. This suggests that the publication was launched in 1891.

²² The *Watchman* ceased publication in 1884, and the *Methodist* gave way to the *Methodist Times*: ‘Watchman’, in Vickers, *Dictionary*; Christopher Oldstone-Moore, *Hugh Price Hughes* (Cardiff, 1999), 120-23; Howard Mellor, *Cliff: more than a College* (Calver, 2005), 97, 100. The Primitive Methodists had their own newspapers in this period.

²³ Sarah Foot, *My Grandfather Isaac Foot* (St Teath, 1980), 81.

an impecunious Local Preacher from Winsford.²⁴ Shrinking membership, rising prices and competition from other publishers and other media contributed to the decline of denominational newspapers, periodicals and publishing houses in the twentieth century. The five Methodist newspapers of the 1920s had declined to one by the 1960s, the *Methodist Magazine* ceased publication in 1969, and the *Epworth Review* was sustained into the twenty first century only by a connexional subsidy. Frank Cumbers, the connexional Book Steward, commented ruefully in an interview in November 1961 that Methodists were no longer readers.²⁵ It might be more accurate to say that they were no longer reading the books published by the Book Room and the Epworth Press.

Drawing together the threads of the previous sections, we have seen that literacy levels increased in nineteenth century Britain, as did the provision of relatively inexpensive books, newspapers and magazines. The social composition of Methodism largely reflected the structure of society in general, although with a drift from unskilled labour, first towards artisans in the late nineteenth century and then towards white-collar workers after the Great War. Methodists were exhorted, expected and motivated to read, and were supplied with reading matter by their denominations. Books and newspapers, religious as well as secular, were reaching a wider audience by the late nineteenth century, as prices came down and as publications were designed to appeal to a greater range of readers.

With this background in mind, we turn to missionary literature, and we begin with an analysis and comparison of three popular histories of Methodist missions: William Moister's *Conversations on the Rise, Progress and Present State of Wesleyan Missions in Various Parts of the World*, published in 1869, *Wesley's World Parish*, by George and Mary Findlay, published in 1913, and Cyril Davey's *The March of Methodism*, published in 1951. The preface to each book made it clear that the full story of Methodist missions requires a much larger work, probably in multiple volumes. Moister and Davey wrote in

²⁴ Sidney Y. Richardson, *When my cue comes* (Loughborough, 2000), 42. Oakes taught himself Latin, Greek and Hebrew.

²⁵ The newspapers of the 1920s were the *MR*, *MT*, *Joyful News*, *Primitive Methodist Leader* and the *United Methodist*; the *Epworth Review* was successor to the *London Quarterly and Holborn Review*, itself an amalgamation of Wesleyan and Primitive periodicals; Mellor, *Cliff*, 121, notes that the circulation of *Joyful News* stood at 9000 in 1958, and that it was making a loss; *MR*, 30 November 1961, 1.

hope of an authoritative study at some stage in the indeterminate future; the Findlays offered their ‘sketch’ in anticipation of the centenary history which was already in preparation, and which was eventually published in 1921-24. These were works, then, intended to be accessible to a fairly wide and non-academic audience. We’ll look at the three books and draw some comparisons.

William Moister (1808-91) entered the Wesleyan ministry in 1830 and served in a variety of overseas appointments in West Africa, the West Indies and South Africa for most of the next thirty years. He returned to England in 1860, moved to the Isle of Wight as chaplain to the garrison at Parkhurst, and retired to Sedbergh in 1878, dying there in 1891. He wrote several books on missionary themes, including biographies of Thomas Coke, Barnabas Shaw and Henry Wharton, an autobiographical memoir and a volume of missionary stories, and he donated the proceeds of his literary endeavours to the WMMS.²⁶

Moister’s 1869 history was timed to coincide with the centenary of the Conference decision to send Methodist preachers to North America. By taking this development as the birth of Methodist missions, Moister was able to draw attention to the zeal and earnestness of John Wesley in persuading an initially reluctant Conference to act, thus side-stepping Wesley’s coolness towards the later missionary plans of Dr Coke.²⁷ The book was structured as a series of eleven conversations between a retired missionary, ‘Mr M’, and ‘George’, ‘an intelligent youth’, following an encounter at a Juvenile Missionary Meeting. In the first chapter ‘Mr M’ invites George to visit his home ‘to hear more about the state of the world and the progress of the Gospel in heathen lands.’²⁸ On a series of winter evenings, prompted by questions and comments from an ever-obliging and remarkably attentive George, ‘Mr M’ explains the geography, topography, history and missionary development in the principal centres of Wesleyan missions, from America and the West Indies via Africa and the Pacific to India, China and Europe. The book is

²⁶ ‘Moister, William’, in Vickers, *Dictionary; Minutes of Conference 1892*, 14-15; William Moister, *Conversations on the Rise, Progress, and Present State of Wesleyan Missions in Various Parts of the World* (London, 1869), vi.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, v, 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

replete with facts and figures, giving precise statistics of members and scholars at the end of each section, and a ‘tabular view of Wesleyan Missions 1869’ below the map at the start of the volume.

The purpose and theology of Moister’s work are clearly indicated in the preface to the *Conversations*. The book is designed ‘to trace the operations of Divine Providence and grace in the development of this great and glorious work in foreign lands, for the information of the young’.²⁹ A providentialist theme runs through the narrative, for example in the raising up of the Irish Methodist, George Neal, to begin Methodist work in Canada, and of George Piercy to commence work in China, and in the storm which brought Coke to Antigua in 1786. The loss of five missionaries returning from St Kitts in 1825 is likewise a mysterious dispensation of Providence.³⁰ Moister has little time for the Tractarian Bishop Selwyn in New Zealand, and less for the ‘pernicious errors’ of the Roman Catholics. Traditional religions, whether the heathenism of West Africa, the idolatry of the inappropriately-named Friendly Islands or the mistaken beliefs of ‘dark, benighted Hindus’ in India receive short shrift.³¹ Moister hopes to encourage ‘more strenuous efforts to send the Gospel to the perishing heathen’, to lift them out of superstition and moral degradation, and the book ends with a prayer that George may be called to be a missionary and with some lines from the hymn ‘See how great a flame aspires’.³²

In its structure the book is didactic rather than discursive: George asks leading questions, but does not argue with ‘Mr M’. When discussing the West Indies, West Africa and South Africa, Moister’s own experience is called into play, while for other parts of the world further reading is recommended. George evidently has access to a library, because he is able to do some research on the geography of Australia. Moreover, he has a friend who has recently joined the Indian Civil Service.³³

²⁹ Ibid., v.

³⁰ Ibid., 23, 474-76, 60, 69. Other sources place the loss of the *Maria* in February 1826.

³¹ Ibid., 289-90, 291, 99, 297, 421.

³² Ibid., vi, 99, 528.

³³ Ibid., 88, 120-34, 167, 191, 294, 418.

This raises the question of the readership envisaged by Moister. As noted already, it is assumed that George is well educated and well connected. The book is attractively produced, with eight engravings, a map of the missions, and an elaborate cover design. Although it has not been possible to ascertain the cover price of the *Conversations*, Moister's memoir retailed at 7/6 in 1869 and the *Missionary Stories* at 5/-. This corresponds to between a third and a half of the weekly wage of an agricultural labourer.³⁴ It may be suggested, therefore, that the book was intended for affluent Wesleyan families, and not for the labouring classes, although notwithstanding this restricted readership, the *Conversations* went through three editions in two years.

Wesley's World Parish, published jointly by the Wesleyan Book Room and Hodder and Stoughton, appeared in 1913, the centenary year of the Leeds meeting which inaugurated the first District Missionary Society. It was the work of three members of the Findlay family: father and daughter George and Mary Findlay wrote most of the text, with a final chapter, on 'The World Call to Methodism', added by George's missionary brother William.³⁵ Like Moister, the Findlays had extensive missionary experience. William Findlay served in India from 1881 to 1900 and was then a member of the WMMS secretariat, spending a year during that time promoting the work of the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference. George Findlay spent his entire career in theological education, but three of his children were missionaries, and according to his obituarist, the cause of missions 'always called forth his deepest devotion'. In 1913 he was engaged in the preparation of the centenary history of the WMMS, and *Wesley's World Parish* provided both a foretaste of the larger work and an invitation to readers to submit information for incorporation in the centenary volumes.³⁶

Wesley's World Parish is a shorter work than Moister's *Conversations*, and is organised on slightly different lines. The general approach is a blend of chronology and geography: after three introductory chapters on the origins of Methodism and of the MMS, seven

³⁴ Pamela Horn, *Labouring Life in the Victorian Countryside* (Stroud, 1987), 259 (appendix G).

³⁵ George G. Findlay and Mary Grace Findlay, *Wesley's World Parish* [hereafter *WWP*] (London, 1913), 6.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 5-6; 'Findlay, Dr George G' and 'Findlay, William Hare' in Vickers, *Dictionary; Minutes of Conference 1920*, 116-19. W.H. Findlay published *Light, Sound and Silence in Edinburgh, a study in the art of Christian fellowship, as exhibited at the World Missionary Conference* in 1910.

chapters examine developments region by region up to the middle of the nineteenth century, and then four further chapters take the story on to the early twentieth century. Although they confess that ‘the home-side of the Missionary Society has been largely ignored’,³⁷ the Findlays devote more space to Coke, to the formation of the Society and to the role of Bunting, Watson and Newton than does Moister. Moreover, Methodist missionary work is set in the context of other missions, including the SPCK, SPG and CMS. *Wesley’s World Parish* also has a chapter dedicated to ‘Women’s Work for Missions’, looking at the home organisation of the ‘Ladies’ Committee’ (later the Women’s Auxiliary) and at the role of the women sent out to India, China and other stations. This chapter pays tribute to the leadership of Mrs Caroline Meta Wiseman in organising and inspiring the Women’s Auxiliary.

The Findlays’ narrative, full of facts and personalities, is a story of adventure and heroism. Contemporary sources are drawn upon to allow missionaries to speak in their own words. The providential note is still sounded, although more quietly than in the *Conversations*: Coke’s arrival in Antigua, for instance, is the end of a chain of providences, but the wreck of the *Maria* is merely a ‘tragic calamity’.³⁸ Besides the privations and sufferings of the missionaries, moreover, there is a greater acknowledgment of failure in policy, strategy and home support: for example, there is frank criticism of the decision to withdraw funding from the West Indies in the 1850s because it was believed in London that the mission should be more self-supporting, and of the retreat from Great Namaqualand at the same time, again for financial reasons. The Findlays admit that the first missionaries in Ceylon were ‘full of zeal and enterprise’, but ‘without specific training for their work’.³⁹ In discussing ‘Tides of Missionary Zeal’ in their penultimate chapter they emphasise the connection between the strength of the Church at home and commitment to foreign missions, commenting on the difficult domestic circumstances which gave rise to the financial crises of 1851 and 1893. They remain concerned that Methodists may believe that the greater part of the missionary task has been accomplished, whereas ‘the heathen world’ still demands the best and co-

³⁷ *WWP*, 5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 50,

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 61, 83, 118.

ordained efforts of the ‘the Evangelical Communions’.⁴⁰ *Wesley’s World Parish* expresses a conversionist theology, fuelled by a sense of opportunity in China and India, responding to the energy of the Edinburgh Conference and echoing the SVMU watchword ‘the evangelization of the world in this generation’.⁴¹

As a piece of popular literature, *Wesley’s World Parish* resembles SCM handbooks of the period: 220 pages of fairly dense prose, with half a dozen black and white plates, published in paper covers and sold for 1/-. It may be suggested that it would appeal more to a readership committed to missions than to the casual or general reader.

Thirty eight years after the publication of *Wesley’s World Parish*, Cyril Davey’s *The March of Methodism* provided a brief history of Methodist missions for the middle of the twentieth century. Davey (1911-98) entered the ministry in 1933, served in India from 1939 to 1946, worked for the MMS for a further year in London and was later Home Secretary of the Society from 1965 to 1976. He earned respect as a gifted communicator and prolific author.⁴²

The March of Methodism, subtitled ‘the story of Methodist missionary work overseas’, was commissioned by the Literature Committee of the MMS which asked for ‘a popular and easily readable account of our work’.⁴³ Apart from a portrait of Dr Coke, the illustrations chosen were photographs of the contemporary world church. Davey set himself the task of indicating ‘the main trends of missionary development through almost two centuries of work’, rather than presenting an exhaustive (and exhausting) catalogue of names and dates, and he provided a list of recommendations for further reading in an appendix. His approach is chronological, dividing the story into three parts: ‘How it began: 1786-1820’ (Coke and the origins of Methodist work in the British colonies), ‘On to Victory: 1820-1900’ (the Victorian development of missions, including a brief mention of the non-Wesleyan Missionary Societies) and ‘Twentieth Century: 1900-50’ (an

⁴⁰ Ibid., 215, 217.

⁴¹ Ibid., 217-18.

⁴² ‘Davey, Cyril James’, in Vickers, *Dictionary; Minutes of Conference* 1999, 30-31. Davey wrote another popular missionary history, *Changing Places*, for the bicentenary of Methodist missions in 1986.

⁴³ Cyril J. Davey, *The March of Methodism* (London, 1951), vii.

overview, followed by thematic studies of women's work, medical and educational missions and 'mass movements' in China, West Africa and India). The final chapters of the book consider contemporary problems and opportunities. While respectful of other world faiths, in Davey's view the Church still has the task of presenting the Gospel. Religious toleration, prompting indifference, is noted as a challenge, as is the expansion of Islam. Other difficulties to be addressed are primarily social and economic obstacles to the Gospel: the legacy of slavery in the West Indies, poverty in India and social dislocation in Africa. The Church needs to face the ideologies of nationalism, materialism and Communism. Davey sees hope in the growth of indigenous leadership as 'missions' become 'churches', in the commitment to evangelism and in the consequent quest for Christian unity. He ends his book with a description of the Church of South India and with a call to continue giving, sending and praying.

Davey's book is an interesting amalgam of traditional and modern approaches to missionary literature. *The March of Methodism* is clothed in modern garb, with contemporary photographs, an attractive dustjacket and an upbeat publisher's blurb. It discusses nineteenth century problems (inadequate planning, misguided methods and straitened finances) frankly and it seeks to portray accurately the new conditions of the post-war world. However, the blurb could have been written by an Edwardian journalist: 'There is no more thrilling story than this tale of cannibal islands, slave plantations, of heroes and martyrs, evangelists, doctors and teachers, of disaster and triumph.', while the imaginary dialogue between Wesley and Coke (and even more between Coke and John Baxter on the beach at Antigua) makes the reader long for George and 'Mr M'.⁴⁴ *The March of Methodism* retailed at 6/-; one wonders how well it sold, and whether it was, or was not, one of the books that Frank Cumbers discovered ten years later that Methodists were reluctant to read.

Although the three books considered here differ in date, style and price, there are nonetheless significant similarities between them. Furthermore, their common features reflect aspects which may also be discerned in a wider sample of Methodist missionary

⁴⁴ Ibid., 4, 11.

literature, drawn from the Book Room catalogues of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴⁵ For the next section of this paper, we turn to consider the aims of this material, and here further exploration of Moister, Findlay and Davey will be supplemented by reference to other missionary works.

Four broad aims may be identified. First, missionary literature sought to communicate information on a range of subjects. Moister's *Memorials of Missionary Labours* (1850) appeared in a third edition in 1866 with revised contents and a much-expanded title: *Memorials of Missionary Labours in Western Africa and the West Indies, with historical and descriptive observations, illustrative of natural scenery, the progress of civilization and the general results of missionary enterprise*. As the cumbersome title suggests, these books were packed with facts – geographical, topographical, historical, cultural, political, biological, anthropological, as well as religious. Unsurprisingly, this didactic element is very clear in Moister's *Conversations*, but it also comes through in the work of the Findlays and of Cyril Davey. Other contemporary titles suggest the same approach: for instance, Elijah Hoole's *A Personal Narrative of a Mission to Madras ... with Historical Notices of Madras; Remarks on Tamul Literature, the Religion of the Hindoos etc.* (1844), Thornley Smith's *South Africa Delineated* (1850) and Robert Young's *The Southern World. Journal of a deputation ... to Australia and Polynesia. Including Notices of a visit to the Gold-Fields* (1854). Much of this factual content, of course, was essential scene-setting for the principal didactic task of informing readers at home about the Missionary Society and its work and about the progress of the Gospel in foreign lands, but it forms an important feature of the genre. And putting the informational content so clearly in the title suggests that it was seen as an attraction to potential readers.

Second, the literature sought to inspire, as well as to inform. Davey, regretting his inability to write at greater length, expressed his hope that 'hearts will be warmed and

⁴⁵ Catalogues drawn from endpapers of Thomas Jackson, *Life of the Revd Robert Newton* (London, 1855); Benjamin Gregory, *The Marrow of Methodism* (London, 1886); James H. Rigg, *The Churchmanship of John Wesley* (London, 1887); Anna M. Hellier, *Talks on the Catechism* (London, 1893); John Telford, *The Life of John Wesley* (London, n.d. [early twentieth century]).

inquiring minds driven to seek the truth more fully' as a result of his brief history.⁴⁶ Moister and the Findlays aimed higher, looking to present the challenge of 'the world call to Methodism' in an age of opportunity. By offering the home readership a judicious mixture of heroic endeavour, exciting progress (with statistics!) and formidable obstacles to be overcome, this literature encouraged commitment to the missionary cause. That commitment could take the form of prayer, advocacy, giving or even volunteering for service overseas. Moister left George contemplating a missionary vocation; Joseph Race, who went from Richmond College to China in 1873, was inspired in his calling by an intensive reading of missionary books and tracts.⁴⁷

Beyond encouraging a specific missionary vocation, we can see this material fitting more broadly into the well-established genre of exemplary lives. In other words, missionary literature could function as a particular sub-species of edifying biography. The lineage of this strand of Christian writing runs back in Methodism to Wesley's *Journal*, to the *Christian Library* and to the spiritual biographies which were a staple of the *Arminian Magazine*. It was sustained through the nineteenth century in the Magazines and in the obituaries of ministers presented to the Conference. And it continued into the twentieth century in, for instance, the *Library of Methodist Biography* in the early 1900s and the *People called Methodists* series in the 1990s. Recognising that continuity of basic genre has to be complemented by an acknowledgment of development and change in contents: so, for example, the 1907 and 1993 biographies of William Arthur have clear similarities, but also marked differences. But biography matters, to Christians and to Methodists. It is a form of testimony. And certainly for much of our period it had a very clear inspirational and exemplary purpose. Missionary lives fit into that pattern. At every stage in our survey, biography bulks large in the missionary literature. Most of the nineteenth century material on missions was cast in the form of biography, from the memoirs of Moister and W.H. Rule to the lives of John Hunt of Fiji, Thomas of the Friendly Islands and William Shaw of South Africa. The biggest section of further reading at the end of *The March of*

⁴⁶ Davey, *March of Methodism*, vii.

⁴⁷ Steve Race, *The Two Worlds of Joseph Race* (London 1988), 34.

Methodism comprises biographies. And the general histories, of course, may be read as collections of biographical narratives.

It is interesting to note that there were a significant number of women's lives among the biographies. Some were autobiographical, like Mrs Hutcheon's *Glimpses of India and Mission Life* (1878). Some were books by women about women, like Mrs G.F. White's *Memoir of Mrs Jane Tucker* (1877).⁴⁸ And some were books about women by men, like Alfred Barrett's *Holy Living: exemplified in the Life of Mrs Mary Cryer* (1845). In some cases missionary wives called forth admiring biographies, while their husbands did not.⁴⁹

The third aim of the literature was apologetic. There were two targets here. Methodist authors sought, first, to portray Christianity in a positive light over against other religions. We have seen examples of that in Moister's work, and it may be found in Findlay and Davey as well: Davey, for instance, refers to 'the ancient, cold faith' of Sri Lankan Buddhism.⁵⁰ Barrett's memoir of Mary Cryer contains critical descriptions of the Hindu temples at Mannargudi and reports her husband's sermons against idolatry. Second, the material also offers an apologetic for Methodism against European religious indifference and against other brands of Christianity. The Cryers, on their journey to India, were unable to minister on the ship because of the rigid establishmentarian outlook of the owners of the vessel – a point taken up by Thomas Cryer and by the WMMS in subsequent correspondence.⁵¹ Moister, as we have seen, dismisses Bishop Selwyn and the Roman Catholics in New Zealand, and the whole tenor of his work is to demonstrate the astonishing success of Wesleyan missions – hence the ubiquitous statistics. This aggressive use of statistics was not unusual in nineteenth century Methodism – J.H. Rigg does it, for example, in his *Churchmanship of John Wesley*⁵² – but it is an interesting phenomenon, suggestive perhaps of insecurity as much as arrogance.

⁴⁸ Although this was edited by a man, Henry W. Williams.

⁴⁹ Neither Charles Tucker of Tonga nor Thomas Cryer of India were accorded biographies, beyond the official obituary in the *Minutes of Conference*. Mrs Tucker received a brief and approving mention in her husband's obituary (*Minutes of Conference* 1881, 50), but Mrs Cryer did not (*Minutes of Conference*, 1853, 186).

⁵⁰ Davey, *March of Methodism*, 179.

⁵¹ Barrett, *Holy Living*, 319-23.

⁵² Rigg, *Churchmanship of John Wesley*, 116-21.

Fourth and finally, missionary literature sought to entertain. It has been argued that biography offered excitement and adventure without spiritual risk to an evangelical constituency where novel-reading might still be regarded with suspicion.⁵³ Nineteenth century missionary literature fulfilled the same purpose, with added dimensions of the unfamiliar and the exotic. Barrett was able to reprint in his memoir of Mrs Cryer letters describing the voyage to India, travels through the monsoon season from Madras to Mannargudi and a dramatic incident when Mary discovered a large snake coiled around her baby's cot.⁵⁴ If Moister's narrative is to be believed, George was enthralled by the first-hand tales of Africa and the West Indies told by 'Mr M'. No doubt this was entertainment in a good cause, but tales of adventure surely also helped to sell books. At a time when working-class autodidacts found religious literature dull and unappealing, when newly literate adults turned to escapist fiction and when children taught to read by rote were issued with compilations of adventure stories, missionary literature perhaps stood a better chance than most products of the religious presses of attracting a more general readership.⁵⁵

Three other aspects of literature need to be mentioned briefly. In each case, much less material has been discovered than might have been expected, and we may wish to reflect on why that is so.

First, Methodist tracts seldom seem to have had a missionary motif. It is possible that tracts were designed to connect more immediately to the situation of the reader and that it was judged that stories of foreign climes might distract the recipient and so detract from the force of the message.

Second, I have found comparatively little children's literature with a clear missionary theme. In the nineteenth century John Shaw Banks abridged and combined existing biographies of William Carey, Henry Lawrence and Henry Havelock to produce *Three*

⁵³ Wellings, 'William Arthur's *The Successful Merchant*', 280.

⁵⁴ Barrett, *Holy Living*, 183-229, 251-67, 289-90.

⁵⁵ Rose, *Intellectual Life*, 32; Vincent, *Literacy*, 89.

Indian Heroes: The Missionary, the Statesman, the Soldier in a series of ‘new books and new editions suitable for Sunday school libraries and rewards’. Jabez Marrat wrote biographies of *David Livingstone: Missionary and Discoverer* and of *Two Standard Bearers in the East – Dr Duff and Dr Wilson*, and published *The Land of the Ghauts* and *Robert Moffat, the African Missionary* in ‘Uncle Frank’s Library of Shilling Books’, presumably for children. The same series, from the 1880s, also included *Old Daniel; or, Memoirs of a converted Hindu*, by the Revd T. Hodson, and the Revd W. Reed’s *Recent Wanderings in Fiji*. Annie Keeling’s *General Gordon: Hero and Saint* appeared in the Wesleyan Book Room catalogue in 1890, as did *Among the Pimento Groves. A Story of Negro Life in Jamaica*, by the Revd Henry Bunting, but otherwise material has proved rather elusive.⁵⁶ I find this comparative dearth of material surprising, both because the catalogues do contain scores of stories for children, some contemporary and some historical in their setting, and because I can vaguely remember - not, of course, from the nineteenth century - Sunday School stories and prizes about Gladys Aylward and other missionary characters. An inspection of Sunday School magazines, libraries and records might turn up more material, as might the JMA archives. It is possible that popular missionary literature for children was carried in serial or short story form in magazines more often than in books.

Third, although the anonymous author of *Methodism in 1879* suggested that home and foreign missions would afford excellent subject-matter for ‘some of our racy and skilled authors’, the invitation does not seem to have been taken up, at least in respect of overseas missions. I have found very little about missions in fiction, whether in works by Methodist authors or by others writing about Methodism. Neither Mark Guy Pearse nor the Hockings nor the Fowlers set their stories in the mission field (although several Hocking stories touch on the Colonies). Edward Thompson’s *Introducing the Arnisons* (1935) has a back story about missions, but the novel is set firmly in Britain. Henry Mynors, the anti-hero in Arnold Bennett’s *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902) has a nameless aunt ‘who went to China as a missionary and died of fever’, but the novel does not extend

⁵⁶ For Henry Bunting, a former West Indian missionary, see *Minutes of Conference* 1930, 103. There were seven Keelings in the Wesleyan ministry in the nineteenth century, and Annie Keeling was a popular author of historical fiction. J.S. Banks was better known as a systematic theologian than as a children’s author.

its sardonic picture of chapel life at Duck Bank from Sunday School Anniversary, Revival and Bazaar to Missionary meetings.⁵⁷ The popular novelists seem to have been predominantly regional or historical in orientation, rather than placing their stories in overseas settings. Perhaps this illustrates Jonathan Rose's observation about the restricted mental map of the popular readership: Cornwall and Yorkshire, or the England of Cromwell and the Cavaliers, or of the Wesleys, were perhaps sufficiently exotic locations for mass market fiction.⁵⁸

In conclusion, there is a great deal of work still to be done on the production, marketing, purchase and reading of missionary literature, and on the relationship between substantial books and missionary material in periodicals, magazines and newspapers. The present survey indicates that Methodists formed a cross-section of British society, and were probably slightly above the average in social status and literary motivation: Methodists were more likely to be skilled workers than unskilled labourers and they had strong incentives and encouragement to read. Much material was provided, although it may be suggested that missionary literature in book form tended to address a broadly middle class rather than a working class audience. A biographical approach was favoured, and this connected missionary literature to the older but enduring genre of edifying memoirs. The lack of appeal of missionary settings to the popular novelists may suggest that a mass readership looked for its escapism elsewhere. For the majority of Methodists, perhaps, engagement with the MMS functioned through missionary meetings, JMA collections, local fund-raising and articles in denominational newspapers and magazines, rather than through a sustained programme of solid reading.

© *Martin Wellings 2005*

⁵⁷ *Methodism in 1879*, 116, noting too the 'almost imperial sway' of books of romance, travel and adventure in the repertoire of the circulating libraries; Arnold Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns* (London, 1902), 65 (citing 1986 edition).

⁵⁸ This theme may be pursued in Alan M. Kent's study of the Hockings, *Pulp Methodism* (St Austell, 2002).