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Methodist Itinerants' Autobiographies and the Politics of Memory

Charles McCrary



THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
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METHODIST ITINERANTS' AUTOBIOGRAPHIES
AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

By

CHARLES MCCRARY

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The members of the supervisory committee were:

John Corrigan
Professor Directing Thesis

Amanda Porterfield
Committee Member

Martin Kavka
Committee Member

The Graduate School has verified and approved the above-named committee members, and certifies that the thesis has been approved in accordance with university requirements.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the history of American Methodism, circa 1790–1860, through an examination of the autobiographical writings of Methodist itinerants. Their stories, frequently repeated, took on certain narrative tropes, which became standardized over time. In the middle decades of the nineteenth century Methodist leaders used these memoirs to lament contemporary Methodism and suggest changes for a better future based on a hagiographical retelling of the denomination's past.

PROLOGUE

Maurice Halbwachs, a Durkheimian sociologist of the early-to-mid twentieth century, argued that although individuals cannot control which era they inhabit, they can choose which time or times to remember. In this way, the act of remembering—on both the individual psychological level and the realm of “public” or “collective” memory and commemorations—is occasioned by nothing so much as the present. “Society,” Halbwachs argued, “from time to time obligates people not just to reproduce in thought previous events of their lives, but also to touch them up, to shorten them, or to complete them so that, however convinced we are that our memories are exact, we give them a prestige that reality did not possess.”¹

The object of study within this thesis is not the exactness or inexactness of Methodist memories, and especially not what prestige or essence reality possessed. To assign the label “reality” to one version of a person or story is to render other accounts invalid “abstractions.”² Such authenticity was indeed the business of mid-century Methodists, laboring to craft denominational definitions and ways that spoke (declaratively and imperatively) to past, present, and future. I have tried not to enter these debates, so far as such avoidance is possible.³ Instead, following Halbwachs, the focus is primarily on the processes by which a given society “obligates” these remembrances. The foundational assumption is that “memory depends on the

¹ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. and ed., Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 [orig. 1925]), 51. For a helpful assessment of Halbwachs and his contexts, see Erika Apfelbaum, “Halbwachs and the Social Properties of Memory” in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, ed. Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 77–92. For an overview of the interdisciplinary field called “memory studies,” for which Halbwachs generally is considered the originator, see Jeffrey K. Olick, “‘Collective Memory’: A Memoir and Prospect,” *Memory Studies* vol. 1, no. 1 (Jan 2008): 23–29.

² Here I am writing against a number of works but foremost in my mind is John Grigg’s *The Lives of David Brainerd: The Making of an Evangelical Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). Grigg argues, “Brainerd’s legacy, while often demonstrating the excesses of American mythology, should also remind us of the truth that lies at the heart of many of those myths.” Also, “while Edwards may have furnished us with the picture of Brainerd that dominates our understanding of him today, beyond the Edwards construct other facets of Brainerd’s true character and nature emerge...he speaks to human nature not only in eighteenth-century America, but also in our own day” (3–4). This thesis has absolutely nothing to do with circuit preachers’ “true character” except insofar as notions of it were constructed, how those constructions were occasioned, and what effects they had.

³ There are a few reasons to avoid the authenticity and identity politics involved in delineating “primitive” (“true”) Methodism from “modernized” (“corrupted”) Methodism, but chief among them is a historiographical concern. American Methodists circa 1800 were generally different from their 1850 counterparts, and I am not denying that substantive changes happened. I strive, though, to refuse to assign value judgments to those changes, lest this thesis become, on one hand, either a jeremiad decrying mid-century Methodists’ lost zeal or, on the other hand, a teleologically tinged triumph of “progress,” “modernization,” or “secularization.” If I successfully have avoided situating myself in either dichotomous camp, then—I hope it is not too brash to say—I would consider myself part of a minority of historians of American Methodism.

social environment.”⁴ This is the first step but only that. Halbwachs continued, “It is not sufficient, in effect, to show that individuals always use social frameworks when they remember. It is necessary to place oneself in the perspective of the group or groups. The two problems, moreover, are not only related: they are in effect one. One may say that the individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group, but one may also affirm that the memory of the group realized and manifests itself in individual memories.”⁵ Thus, memory is necessarily social.⁶

According to Halbwachs, the whole process of memory, from encoding to storage to retrieval, plays a key role in the formation of individual and collective identity: “We preserve memories of each epoch in our lives, and these are continually reproduced; through them, as by a continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated.” Thus, “We can understand each memory as it occurs in individual thought only if we locate each within the thought of the corresponding group. We cannot proper[ly] understand their relative strength and the ways in which they combine within individual thought unless we connect the individual to the various groups of which he is simultaneously a member.”⁷ This idea has led other theorists to posit philosophies of “narrative identity,” especially in its relation to autobiographical thinking and writing. Literature scholar Paul John Eakin’s “narrative identity system” resembles Halbwachs’s “social frameworks” but emphasizes the role of stories and storytelling:

My claim that we are players willy-nilly in a narrative identity system may seem surprising and counterintuitive, given that we doubtless believe that we talk about ourselves both freely and spontaneously. Don’t we conduct our lives, after all, in a culture of democratic individualism? In fact, the language we use when we present ourselves and our stories to other is a rule-governed discourse, both when we talk and when we write...[W]hen we talk about ourselves, in however fragmentary, spontaneous, and casual a fashion, we are also operating, under the discipline of rule-grounded identity regime.⁸

⁴ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 37.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶ Here, as throughout his work, Halbwachs was building on his teacher Emile Durkheim’s ideas. Halbwachs’s stress on the social nature of memory, via “frameworks,” rests on the Durkheimian idea that society is, in a sense, more than the sum of its individual parts. While Halbwachs seems to have reified society less than Durkheim did, for both, society and its productions were contingent upon being informed by individuals who in turn are informed by the collective society. See Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman and Mark S. Cladis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001 [orig. 1912]).

⁷ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 47, 53.

⁸ Paul John Eakin, *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 16–17. See also pp. 22–31.

It is in this way that “words themselves become ciphers of power, part of empirical reality and not simply pointing to it. A chain of signification that originates from nowhere in particular, weaving itself over the skin and underneath.”⁹

Methodist circuit riders, I intend to demonstrate, lived in a constant state of self-narration, contingent upon explicit, institutionally issued guidelines as well as narrative frameworks transmitted and recirculated verbally and textually. Further, these tellings were occasioned—“obligated,” to quote Halbwachs—by historical circumstance. In sum, the purpose of this thesis is not simply or primarily to recover the circuit preachers or to narrate their history or to refute the simplified image of “the circuit rider.” The central aim is to examine how and why the creation of the circuit rider character occurred—why and how, when American Methodists wanted to remember and memorialize their past, they did so through circuit riders.

⁹ John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America, With Reference to Ghosts, Protestant Subcultures, Machines, and their Metaphors; Featuring Discussions of Mass Media, Moby-Dick, Spirituality, Phrenology, Anthropology, Sing Sing State Penitentiary, and Sex with the New Motive Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), xxii. This passage echoes Durkheim in that it recognizes the place of discourses of “religion”—or “secularism”—as mediations of the social just as individuals attempt to exercise agency within that framework. As Durkheim claimed, “The collective ideal that religion expresses, then, is not due to some innate power of the individual, but rather to the school of collective life that the individual has learned to idealize. It is by assimilating the ideals elaborated by society that he has become capable of conceiving of that ideal” (*Elementary Forms*, 318). Halbwachs extended this theory of religion to include memory: “A religious truth, as I have said, is at the same time a traditional remembrance and a general notion,” so, “When Saint Francis consecrates himself to poverty, he stands in opposition to the Church of his time which does not despise wealth; he believes he is returning to the truth of the Gospels” (*On Collective Memory*, 106, 108). All three authors cited in this note allow that “religion” (again, or “secularism”) might not be entirely social, but it nevertheless must function within social frameworks even as it helps to craft those frameworks and they allow for its (perceived) existence. This footnote is meant 1) to address the question of how and why this thesis is presented to a “department of religion” and 2) as an indication of how I understand Methodist itinerants’ subjectivity.

CHAPTER ONE

THE CIRCUIT PREACHERS AND EARLY AMERICAN METHODISM

Circuit Preachers and How Methodists Won the West

The rise of the Methodists in America has been well-documented. The statistics are remarkable. There were fewer than 1000 American Methodists—and almost no formal organization whatsoever—in 1770, but by 1850 they were by far the largest religious group in America. The period often referred to as the “Second Great Awakening,” roughly 1800–1830, was marked by increased participation in “evangelical” forms of Christianity and the competition for new converts to these forms.¹⁰ Just as the early decades of the nineteenth century were marked by the proliferation of religion, they provided the setting for religious competition. By almost any method of score-keeping, Methodists won. How Methodists achieved such remarkable success has been surprisingly underexplored, and possible answers tend to be more suggestive than conclusive. Whatever causes one attributes to Methodism’s rise in America, though, it would be difficult—and highly uncommon—to overlook the central roles of circuit preachers.

Because of their demonstrable importance and instrumentality in obtaining the clearest markers of Methodist success, circuit preachers feature prominently in the historiography of Methodism. However, in many ways, histories—even recent academic histories—have perpetuated the myth of “circuit rider” as a sort of archetypical figure, rather than understanding Methodist itinerants as complex individuals. In so doing, historians have been too quick to accept the hagiographies, autobiographies, and early denominational histories (not that these are entirely distinct categories) as reflective of circuit preachers’ real experiences. Granted, significant features of the circuit rider as a character or image are accurate to the itinerants themselves; it is not as if this character were created *ex nihilo*. Nonetheless, by illuminating certain aspects of circuit preachers’ experiences, much of the historiography obscures other parts of itinerants’ lives. A primary purpose of this first chapter will be to construct—as best and

¹⁰ John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998 [paperback, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001]), 3, 197-200, 201n1.

briefly as possible—a “lived” history of the circuit preachers, with an eye toward the elements of their experiences that later would be memorialized, celebrated, lamented, or forgotten.

The Methodist system was comprised, in addition to the ever-important lay ministry, of two basic classifications of clergy: itinerants and “located” preachers. Located preachers were those who had a “home church,” a congregation whom they knew and lived among. They preached at the same pulpit every Sunday (and usually more often than that) and did not travel regularly as a part of their vocation. The itinerants—following the lead of Methodism’s English founder, John Wesley, and, more importantly, the example of the first American bishop and “father” of American Methodism, Francis Asbury—traveled, usually on a “circuit,” rather than having a home church.

The circuit system hinged on a highly structured series of appointments and duties assigned to itinerant preachers, usually young men. Most circuits were designed to be ridden in about a month, with preaching appointments nearly every day and often more than once per day.¹¹ The regimentation of the system fostered its growth on the frontier by helping the Church be assured that it canvassed every accessible square mile. It also quashed most of the influence of unlicensed Methodist preachers, who, though small in number, were troublesome for Wesley and Asbury, as they were not affiliated with Wesley or his ministry.¹²

The young men who would become circuit preachers were primed for the job. Often coming from humble backgrounds, labor-intensive careers, and mobile families, Methodist preachers not only were readied for the demands of itinerant life but also held much in common with the members of their circuit. As John Wigger has put it, “most early circuit riders were accustomed to frequent relocations and understood the sense of rootlessness engendered by the unprecedented geographic expansion of the early American republic.”¹³ The transition from an

¹¹ See John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 8–9; Dee E. Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760–1800: The Shaping of an Evangelical Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 207–209. For how the rigors of this traveling and preaching schedule led to valorization of circuit riders, see chapter three of this thesis.

¹² The main problem with this, other than a lack of control and order, was the administration of sacraments like baptism without proper licensure. In early Methodism, to preach required less training than to perform ministerial duties like baptizing people or officiating marriages. See Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 44–45; and James E. Kirby, *The Episcopacy in American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 20–23. Russell Richey has emphasized the need for order within early Methodism. See especially Richey, *Early American Methodism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 10–15.

¹³ John H. Wigger, “Fighting Bees: Methodist Itinerants and the Dynamics of Methodist Growth, 1770–1820,” in *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and John H. Wigger (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2001).

apprenticeship in, for instance, the hardscrabble world of millwork or blacksmithing to riding a circuit was not so great as a transition from coursework at Yale. The immediacy of a (potential) circuit preacher to his circuit, in terms of both geography and mentality, allowed Methodists to push westward quickly and efficiently, holding classes and claiming converts before other denominations even arrived.

Reflecting Methodist preachers' relentless push westward, a popular story, repeated in a number of nineteenth-century publications, had a circuit preacher come upon "a fresh wagon track; and he followed it until it brought him to an emigrant family, who had just reached the spot where they intended to make their home." The man heard the preacher greet him and "observing his unmistakable appearance,—'have you found me already? Another Methodist preacher!'" He had left Virginia and then Georgia to escape Methodists, who had converted his wife and daughter. He complained, "Then, in this late purchase,—Choctaw Corner, I found a piece of good land, and was sure I would have some peace of the preachers; but here is one, before my wagon is unloaded." The itinerant, Richmond Nolley, informed that the settler could go to Heaven or hell and still find Methodist preachers, "So you had better make terms with us, and be at peace."¹⁴

What made this efficient system possible, theologically and organizationally, was the Methodist idea of conversion and the "call to preach." Whereas many other denominations required or at least encouraged schooling, training, and preparation, a prospective Methodist minister needed only to have experienced a conversion, usually prompted by Methodist

¹⁴ Quotations from William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit; Or Commemorative Notices of Distinguished American Clergymen of Various Denominations, From the Early Settlement of the Country to the Close of the Year Eighteen Hundred and Fifty-Five, With Historical Introductions*, Vol. 7 (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1859), 441. This story appears in a variety of printed works, and doubtless was the product of numerous conversations and occasions for story-swapping. Something like the event may have actually happened, but the effectiveness of the story and the snappiness of the dialogue make it clear that the story as written is not entirely historical. Abel Stevens, in his 1867 history of Methodism, noted that the story was "often cited as an illustration of the energy of the primitive Methodist ministry," and he preceded his own telling with some circuit-rider-valorizing flair of his own: "For two years he ranged over a vast extent of country, preaching continually, stopping for no obstructions of flood or weather. When his horse could not go on he shouldered his saddle-bags and pressed forward on foot. When Indian hostilities prevailed, and the settlers crowded into isolated forts and stockades, Nolley sought no shelter, but hastened from post to post, instructing and comforting the alarmed refugees" (Abel Stevens, *A Compendious History of American Methodism, Abridged from the Author's 'History of the Methodist Episcopal Church'* [New York: Carlton and Porter, 1867]), 500.

In addition to this theme, though, Nolley's story illustrates the ubiquity of Methodist itinerants (and their pride in that fact), but it also speaks to the common trope, grounded in historical reality, of many men's, especially Southern men's, disapproval of Methodists and their disappointment at their wives' and daughters' conversions. Women, especially young women, converted at a far higher rate than men. See Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America*, especially 99–122. For more on Southern men's resistance to their female family members' conversions, see Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997 [republished Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998]), 210–217.

preaching and/or Bible-reading. Following the conversion experience, preachers-to-be often would receive a message—often in a dream, occasionally via an audible voice—that they should go and preach. John Wigger has noted the democratizing effect this system had for Methodists: “Because of its individualistic and self-validating nature—who can say if another person has really seen a vision or not?—this kind of supernaturalism often works to circumvent established patterns of hierarchy.”¹⁵ Prospective preachers still did need to report their experiences to Methodist leadership, be admitted into the brotherhood of itinerants, and, until the 1810s, be assigned to their circuit by Francis Asbury. These steps were relatively short, though, and the speed with which Methodist ministers could transition from pre-conversion lives to riding a circuit gave them an advantage over competing denominations.¹⁶

To illuminate the success of the Methodists, it helps to compare them to their competitors and imitators. Competition between Methodists and other denominations, while violent only very rarely, was at the forefront of Methodist minds. Indeed, all parties involved were keenly aware that were engaged in competition. In many parts of trans-Appalachia and later the “Old Southwest” Methodists’ individualistic style of conversion and evangelism made their denomination more appealing to homesteaders and frontierspeople. Ohio, still a Methodist stronghold in the twenty-first century, was the site of Methodists’ most lasting success. But Methodists won Ohio only by besting their rivals.

Congregationalists were one of the largest, most powerful, and wealthiest denominations of the 1700s and early 1800s. If any one denomination was poised to take over the new nation, the Congregationalists probably were that group. They were outpaced by the Methodists, though. The reasons for this defeat are telling. Congregationalists sent missionaries and preachers out into the “frontier,” particularly the Western Reserve in the area which is now northeast Ohio; they were often beaten there by the quicker and more efficient Methodist itinerants. Tasked with first completing school, receiving ordination, often learning Greek, and then making preparations for the journey west—which often included building a church—the

¹⁵ Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 110.

¹⁶ For more on Methodist conversion, see Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 84–92; Rodger M. Payne, “Metaphors of the Self and the Sacred: The Spiritual Autobiography of the Rev. Freeborn Garrettson,” *Early American Literature* 27, 1 (March 1992): 31–48; and, on religious conversion and autobiographies more generally, Rodger M. Payne, *The Self and the Sacred: Conversion and Autobiography in Early American Protestantism* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1998). Daniel B. Shea, *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968 [reprinted Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988]) deals with an earlier time period but is helpful for contextualizing the narrative framework from which Methodist autobiographies later drew.

requirements of a Congregationalist minister were far more time-consuming than those of a Methodist.

The Congregationalists' itinerant missionary efforts, organized by the Connecticut Missionary Society (CMS), informed and were informed by a different mentality than that which drove the Methodist connection. Education was essential for Congregationalists. However, it not only slowed the process of sending a young man out to the frontier; it often left them encumbered by bibliophilic persuasions. Not all Congregationalist missionaries were from the upper rungs of society. Even those from more humble roots, though, almost always spent years receiving liberal education before they were asked to trade the halls of Yale for a saddlebag and often dilapidated meeting-house.

Other professions boasted more “elites” among their ranks, but still, as historian James Roehrer has written, one “must carefully qualify the characterization of Congregational evangelists as an elite cadre by virtue of their education.”¹⁷ Congregationalists gave the itinerant lifestyle their best effort, despite some complaining (the wages, not extravagant but often five or more times higher than their Methodist counterparts, helped assuage the discomfort.) They mimicked the Methodist style, adopting extemporaneous preaching as their most common form of exhortation¹⁸ and participating, though with some initial misgivings, in camp meetings.¹⁹ They started to cast themselves in dramas similar to Methodist stories: “Striking an odd hybrid form between John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and a classic adventure tale, frontier missionary letters depicted hardship and the lessons learned through trying experiences. The missionaries were quick to observe the outward manifestations of divine providence—a river easily crossed of a destination reached before dark.”²⁰ While Methodists perceived a clear connection between physical hardship (and physical expression in general) and inner piety or godliness, Congregationalists spent less time and energy on personal examination and interpreting their physical circumstances, as Amy DeRogatis put it, as “a gauge for their own spiritual stamina.”²¹

¹⁷ James R. Rohrer, *Keepers of the Covenant: Frontier Missions and the Decline of Congregationalism, 1774–1818* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 121.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 92–96.

²⁰ Amy DeRogatis, *Moral Geography: Maps, Missionaries, and the American Frontier* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 72.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

Ultimately, many CMS evangelists proved not to be cut out for the job. Thomas Robbins, who eventually would found the Connecticut Historical Society and edit and republish Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*,²² itinerated in the Western Reserve for three years before returning to the East. In 1906, fifty years after Robbins's death, the Connecticut Historical Society celebrated his life and his useful book collection. The Reverend W. DeLoss Love, who offered a commemorative address, waxed poetic about Robbins's trials and hardships in a way strikingly reminiscent of a Methodist circuit rider autobiography or an obituary: "He rode one hundred miles on horseback to [preach his cousin's ordination sermon], finished his sermon at three o'clock in the morning of the day it was delivered and preached it in a frontier meeting-house that was 'quite open' to a bitterly cold winter's day." Despite the allure of such stories, in the very next paragraph Love admitted that "It is easy to see, however, that Thomas Robbins was not following his deepest inclinations. He was proving the heroic elements in his nature, but it was a discipline and contrary to his tastes. He missed his books."²³

The Making and Meaning of Methodism: A Historiographical Debate

Circuit preachers were real individuals, located in space and time. Beginning in the first half of the nineteenth century, though, circuit preachers became "the circuit rider," a mythic figure whose personality, moral character, and even dress was so specified that individual circuit preachers, with their idiosyncrasies, deficiencies, personalities, fears, interpersonal conflicts, dissents, and doubts faded from Methodist memory. Denominational historians since the early nineteenth century have tended to downplay aspects of Methodist life that do not contribute to a cogent narrative of success.²⁴

²² Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana; Or, The Ecclesiastical History of New-England, From its First Planting, in the Year 1620, Unto the Year of our Lord 1698, in Seven Books, in Two Volumes*. With an Introduction and Occasional Notes, by the Rev. Thomas Robbins, D.D. and Translations of the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin Quotations by Lucius F. Robinson, LL. B. (Hartford: Silas Andrus and Son, 1853).

²³ Rev. W. DeLoss Love, PhD. *Revered Thomas Robbins, D.D.: An Address Delivered before the Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, October 2, 1906* (Hartford: Connecticut Historical Society, 1906), 16.

²⁴ If we are able to treat historiography as memory—which I think is a defensible and potentially fruitful choice, especially with denominational histories which frequently verge on hagiography or at least draw on hagiographical themes—then Methodist historiography often demonstrates Michael Kammen's point that "Memory is more likely to be activated by contestation, and amnesia is more likely to be induced by the desire for reconciliation" (Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991], 13). This point is also central to David Blight's analysis in *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002).

A possible corrective to this problem is to craft something of a “lived” history of circuit riders, aimed to recover them from the (intentionally) flattening effects of a hagiographical historiography, often focusing on more heterodox beliefs and actions. Works that take this tack question existing notions about how “democratic” Methodism was, and how accurately Methodists’ own self-representations reflect on their lives. This is a very important historiographical debate, but to stand too far on either side of it inevitably will result in an incomplete history. Just as one can (and many have) take Methodists’ self-understandings and own histories too much at “face value,” it likewise is possible to do too much “decentering,” to the point that it obscures one of the main features of the circuit preachers’ experience, namely, their self-consciousness. Though Methodist identity based on a tradition was a construction, it was negotiated and changed over time. This thesis is a history of that process of construction.

The debate over democratization was marked by Nathan Hatch’s 1989 book, *The Democratization of American Christianity*.²⁵ Since then, almost all works on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American Methodism (as well as other evangelical denominations) have been, to some extent, responses to Hatch. *The Democratization of American Christianity* is a flawed book. While Hatch’s claims are not altogether incorrect, he made too little effort to separate rhetoric from reality. The history suffers for having been molded to fit an oversimplified thesis. As a result, Hatch made strange choices; for instance, he highlighted the fact that Lorenzo Dow quoted Thomas Paine but brushed over the increasingly hierarchical nature of the MEC. Such selectivity—perhaps inevitable in any thesis-driven work which draws five very disparate groups together as its main subjects²⁶—call the book’s main conclusions into question, but the “Hatch thesis,” nonetheless, has left its mark on the last quarter-century of Methodist historiography.

The Democratization of American Christianity focuses on “Jeffersonian democracy” and its influence on American evangelicals (and Mormons) in the early republic. This narrative is located firmly within the context of church-state disestablishment and cast as “popular” versus “elite”:

America’s nonrestrictive environment permitted an unexpected and often explosive conjunction of evangelical fervor and popular sovereignty. It was this engine that accelerated the process of Christianization within American popular

²⁵ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

²⁶ The five groups Hatch focuses on are Methodists, Baptists, the “Christian” movement (later Disciples of Christ, et al.), black Protestants, and Mormons.

culture, allowing indigenous expressions of faith to take hold among ordinary people, white and black. This expansion of evangelical Christianity did not proceed primarily from the nimble response of religious elites meeting the challenge before them. Rather, Christianity was effectively reshaped by common people who molded it in their own image and who threw themselves into expanding its influence...The rise of evangelical Christianity in the early republic is, in some measure, a story of the successes of common people in shaping the culture after their own priorities rather than the priorities outlined by gentlemen such as the framers of the Constitution.²⁷

This passage presented a clear and clean narrative, but a problematic one. There are glaring methodological issues. Hatch tellingly chose the word “permitted” instead of “created,” establishing from the start that the spark of “evangelical fervor” was not a historically located phenomenon but, rather, something that would emerge when conditions are right. This interpretation is supported by the puzzling phrase “indigenous expressions of faith,” which implied that religious beliefs pre-exist their expression. These problems are worth noting, since this thesis took as its starting point the idea that “faith” develops in tandem with “outside” circumstances and that faith itself, in addition to “expressions” of it, are historically conditioned. Matters of methodology can be set aside for now, though, in order to focus on the historical issues and historiographical impact of *The Democratization of American Christianity*.

Hatch noted that Francis Asbury did claim “it was his duty to condescend to people of low estate, and Peter Cartwright, dispensing with the trappings of respectability, recast the gospel in a familiar idiom.”²⁸ This is true, but knowing one’s audience does not necessarily suggest any sort of egalitarianism. During the decades Hatch focused on, Methodists in fact were beginning to build schools, concentrating hierarchical power, and slackening their previously staunch anti-slavery stances. Amanda Porterfield astutely has noted Hatch’s own context: “during Ronald Reagan’s presidency and the rise of the religious right.”²⁹ Nevertheless, the Hatch thesis endured long after Reagan left office and Pat Robertson left major-party tickets.

Whereas *The Democratization of American Christianity* looked at five groups, John Wigger’s 1998 book, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, which began as a dissertation chaired by Hatch, applied Hatch’s analysis to only Methodists. As one of surprisingly few recent histories of early Methodism, the book provides much-needed insight into the early stages of the rise of

²⁷ Hatch, *Democratization*, 9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁹ Amanda Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 11.

Methodism (1770–1820, roughly), and circuit riders feature prominently Wigger’s analysis. However, well-researched as it is, Wigger’s work is selective in what is emphasized in order to craft the narrative: “At the popular level, the holiness ethos fostered by Methodism was more powerful than any abstract theological innovation of the time. Under Methodism’s aegis, American evangelicalism became far more enthusiastic, individualistic, egalitarian, entrepreneurial, and lay oriented—characteristics that continue to shape and define American popular religion today.”³⁰ This is not wrong, per se, but it is incomplete. More problematic, though, it still leaves important questions unanswered (and unasked.) For instance, who drove the system? Who benefitted from “entrepreneurial” religion? Were there cases in which these characteristics led not to positive results but to further oppression or other ill effects?

Christine Heyrman, in her 1997 work *Southern Cross*, exchanged denominational particularity for a regional focus. By noting that “Evangelicalism came late to the American South, as an exotic import rather than an indigenous development,” Heyrman used region as a device by which to show the inorganic, manufactured quality of evangelicalism.³¹ In so doing, she was able to craft a narrative that emphasizes evangelicalism’s strangeness and, at times, destabilizing capabilities. When introducing the circuit system into her narrative, Heyrman was quick to note the power that itinerants held to accept or reject members and to determine an “accused member’s innocence or guilt,” all situations which could make class meetings “turn sour”: “That power, mixed with moral certitude and ignorance of local circumstances, could make for explosive consequences. By chastising the great, itinerants often succeeded only in alienating both those prominent sinners and their humbler neighbors, who took part of leading families out of either loyalty or fear.”³² This is an excellent example of Heyrman’s ability not to take Methodist histories for granted, but it also displays her selectivity, which, though it allowed her to make a brilliant and convincing argument, occasionally smacks of over-correction.

In an effort to bring nuance to the one-dimensional histories of Methodist triumph and virtue, some historians have emphasized the trials endured by people such as the manic, suicidal William Glendinning, a circuit preacher who began to doubt everything and eventually saw

³⁰ Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 7.

³¹ Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 9. Heyrman does not indicate that her use of the word “indigenous” is a direct reference to the above quotation from Hatch, but, whether she meant to or not, the use of the same word indicates the stark differences between the historical and methodological assumptions of both scholars.

³² *Ibid.*, 89–90.

frequent traumatic visions of Satan for five years.³³ How a given historian deals with a story like Glendinning's is illustrative of what type of history he or she wants to tell. Not surprisingly, many of the early denominational historians either leave Glendinning out or make only a brief reference. Jesse Lee's 1810 history, for example, mentioned Glendinning only to note that he stopped itinerating in 1786, because, in Lee's words, "By some means he lost his reason: which his own words will prove." Lee then quoted a few select passages from Glendinning's own narrative, since "his case was rather extraordinary." Lee concluded concisely that "The conference believed him to be beside himself at that time, and would not receive him."³⁴

Contra Lee's quick treatment, Glendinning's descent into madness forms the "centerpiece" of the first chapter of *Southern Cross*, and Heyrman brings him back into the narrative repeatedly.³⁵ Several other works, including Jeffrey Williams's *Religion and Violence in Early American Methodism*³⁶ and Wigger's *American Saint*, tell Glendinning's story too, both to suit their own narratives.³⁷ Glendinning makes so many appearances in *Southern Cross* that one could be led to think he was something of a typical circuit preacher or Methodist. Heyrman even opened her first chapter with the attention-grabbing sentence, "William Glendinning pressed a razor against his pulsing throat and awaited the worst."³⁸

A brief historiography of William Glendinning illustrates both the complexity of the lived history of circuit preachers and the crucial role historians have played as co-crafters of images of the circuit preachers abstracted from those lived histories. Glendinning is a fascinating character, and his story does help to paint a more multifaceted, nuanced—and certainly more vibrant—picture of American Methodism, but he was no more typical than the exceptionally

³³ Glendinning's narrative can be found in William Glendinning, *The Life of William Glendinning, Preacher of the Gospel. Written by Himself* (Philadelphia: Printed for the Author, at the office of W.W. Woodward, 1795), 10–32.

³⁴ Jesse Lee, *A Short History of the Methodists, in the United States of America; Beginning in 1766, and Continued till 1809. To which is Prefixed, a Brief Account of their Rise in England, in the Year 1729, &c.* (Baltimore: Magill and Clime, 1810), 122–123.

Glendinning applied for readmission and to become a licensed preacher again, but, as Lee notes, he was denied this request. See Francis Asbury's November 1792 letter to Glendinning in J. Manning Potts, Elmer T. Clark, and Jacob S. Payton, eds. *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, in Three Volumes*, Vol. 3, The Letters (London: Epworth Press and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), 111–112. This volume will be hereafter cited as *JLFA*.

³⁵ The word "centerpiece," applied to Heyrman's treatment of Glendinning, is borrowed from Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 295n67.

³⁶ Jeffrey Williams, *Religion and Violence in Early American Methodism: Taking the Kingdom by Force* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010).

³⁷ Wigger uses the episode to illustrate challenges to the itinerant system and how effectively Asbury dealt with them (see *American Saint*, 203–206). Williams tells Glendinning's tale as an example of the reality and immediacy of the devil, as a possibly threat to one's body and mind, in early American Methodism (see Williams, *Religion and Violence in Early American Methodism*, 83–89).

³⁸ Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 28.

virtuous, famous, or successful itinerants. Historians of Methodism have tended to further the image of the circuit rider as a standardized character, assuming the tropes created by nineteenth-century Methodist publications. When other historians have challenged this picture, they often have done so in over-corrective ways, emphasizing the bizarre, scandalous, or insidious.

In recent years, Hatch's "democratization" interpretation of religion in the early national period has lost some strength. A few works, beginning with Heyrman's *Southern Cross* and now with Amanda Porterfield's *Conceived in Doubt*, have taken direct aim at Hatch from various angles. Hatch's waning influence is also evident in the work of John Wigger, whose first book made almost no departures from Hatch's thesis whatsoever but whose more recent biography of Francis Asbury is far more even-handed in dealing with issues of authority and egalitarianism. Nonetheless, for nearly a quarter-century *The Democratization of American Christianity* has abided, popping up even in works not indebted to its thesis, such as Dee Andrews's social history of Methodism from 1760 to 1800: she wrote, "These [evangelical] movements—the Methodists rapidly advancing to the head—without question derived power and credibility from the rising hegemony of Jeffersonian democracy itself."³⁹ Hatch's narrative, despite its problems, does contribute to historians' understanding of early republican evangelical rhetoric and imagery, so long as one does not take his conclusions (or his sources) at "face value." Instead, they can be treated as data. One still can ask, how did these stories originate? How was the Methodist aesthetic—"the Methodist experience"—manufactured?⁴⁰

Francis Asbury, Organization, and Fracture

Francis Asbury was instrumental in the proliferation of American Methodism. He was the first bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC), which formed in 1784 after an official break from the Anglican Church. Asbury was the key figure in Methodism's transition from an English Anglican sect led by John Wesley to an American denomination characterized by frontier revivals, emotional conversions, and, of course, the circuit system. Francis Asbury was a leader with considerable power in the MEC: he directed each circuit preacher to his circuit,

³⁹ Dee E. Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 224.

⁴⁰ The word choice here is a nod to Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse of Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). McCutcheon writes, "Simply put, the discourse on sui generis religion deemphasizes difference, history, and sociopolitical context in favor of abstract essences and homogeneity" (3). Pairing McCutcheon's work with the above block quotation from Hatch's *The Democratization of American Christianity* draws attention to the error in Hatch's implicit assumption of the chronological primacy to politics of "evangelical fervor."

keeping notes on their individual capabilities and deficiencies. This was a job Asbury took very seriously, and it was precisely this type of control with which people like O’Kelly took umbrage.⁴¹ However, Asbury was himself a circuit preacher, outpacing almost all others. Some historians, including Wigger, have suggested that this leading-by-example was Asbury’s main source of authority: “At some basic level, Methodists trusted Asbury because of his personal discipline and the example he set: no one sacrificed more for the gospel or better represented what Methodism ought to look like.”⁴²

To understand the lives of circuit preachers, familiarity with the life of Francis Asbury is important for three reasons. First, Asbury did affect the life of every circuit preacher in America, often in very specific and intimate ways. Second, Asbury was seen as an exemplar of Methodist piety and a model for all circuit riders to follow. Third, conversely, Asbury was exceptional. These latter two points help demonstrate a tension among early circuit preachers. Though there was a specific ideal to which they aspired, that ideal was too high a mark for many to attain, and indeed, most gave up and many died trying. Lest any young man think such rigorous discipline and demanding travel regimen impossible, they had only to look to their leader battling malaria, traversing mountain trails, and overcoming myriad physical infirmities, even into his sixties.

Asbury thought of his own vocation in practical terms. Throughout his journals and letters, he remains focused on the expansion of the Methodist church and the conversion of souls. Asbury lacked the speaking skills of other famous itinerants, such as the dazzling Lorenzo Dow, and his journal frequently revisits the theme of doubt or disappointment at his ineffective preaching. Describing one Saturday sermon in a barn in North Carolina, he wrote, “[I] was weak but spoke long. A few felt and understood. The unawakened appeared unmoved; my discourse was not for them. I think my immediate call is to the people of God: others seem in a hardened state; they have heard much, obeyed little.”⁴³ Unlike Dow, who drew crowds from miles around and made standard practice of converting the previously unrepentant, Asbury’s strengths lay in management, individual conversations, and small group settings. Most of all, though, Asbury

⁴¹ Wigger also notes that “Asbury jealously guarded the itinerant system and had little patience for critics on this point” (215). For more on how Asbury was allowed to have such power, see Wigger, *American Saint*, 130-131; and Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 43-44.

⁴² Wigger, *American Saint*, 280.

⁴³ *JLFA*. June 17, 1780. Vol. 1, 357. Asbury was always wary of drawing too big a crowd, and especially of receiving acclaim of the wealthy, lest it lead to pride on his part or slackness on others’. For instance, in 1779 he wrote, “Sundry persons of respectability attend my feeble exercises in public, and express satisfaction. But shall this satisfy, or lift me up? God forbid! If this should be the case, God would punish me for my folly. And what is the esteem of man, whose breath is in his nostrils, when compared with the approbation of the Most High” (*JLFA*, April 16, 1779, Vol. 1, 300)?

was indefatigable. His perseverance through hardship would become his defining characteristic (at least, among those who thought well of him) for the rest of his life and after his death.⁴⁴

Although his hardships had not yet become the stuff of legend, Asbury did begin sowing the subtle seeds of the circuit rider mythology, if only through careful notation of his various trials, illnesses, and weaknesses. Though he rarely valorized his own efforts outright, it took little finagling to transform Asbury's bare-bones accounts of hardship into heroic tales of triumph.

All itinerants were supposed to be like Asbury, but most were not. Indeed, none could be, at least in terms of authority. Asbury remained an itinerant until his death, and he championed an old-fashioned style of circuit preaching, even as the MEC was changing. He advocated poverty among the itinerants, avoided marriage, and advised others to do the same (though his stance on marriage softened somewhat over the course of his life), and even a particular style of dress.⁴⁵ These were aspects of Asbury's life that anyone—provided they were willing enough and did not die—could strive to replicate. What could not be replicated, though, was Asbury's role in the Methodist system. As the first American bishop, Asbury presided over the entire MEC from 1784 (the date the MEC was established, thus breaking from the Anglican Church to which John Wesley still belonged) until his death in 1816. It was this role, and the authority and powers it entailed, that drew criticism and even revolt in the early decades of American Methodism. This role also highlights the inadequacy of the Hatch thesis for explaining Methodism. In the intra-denominational conflicts that marked early Methodism, if one side were to be considered “democratizers,” it usually would not be the MEC.⁴⁶

Beginning most notably with the 1792 schism led by James O'Kelly, seeds of anti-Asbury sentiment bubbled under the surface of American Methodism, even as Asbury was championed as the exemplar of Methodist piety and discipline. Controversy had been brewing

⁴⁴ John Wesley Bond, in an obituary for Asbury, wrote that “even the pangs of death were not able to wrest from his the interests of the missions which lay with so much weight on his mind” (John W. Bond, “Rev. Francis Asbury,” *Niles' Weekly Register* [1814–1837]; Jun 8, 1816; 10, 249).

Even Asbury's biographer, John Wigger, felt compelled to eulogize in this same way, remarking that his place of death is still “a rural, out-or-the-way place. A highway marker indicates that spot, but there is nothing else to see. Asbury died as he lived, unencumbered by this world's things, traveling a back road on his way to preach the gospel to lost souls” (*American Saint*, 399).

⁴⁵ Wigger, *American Saint*, deals with all these issues. For more on Methodist dress and its significance, see Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 209.

⁴⁶ Hatch may have realized this, given that the Methodist he references most frequently is Lorenzo Dow, who not only was far from typical (a fact reflected in his nickname, “Crazy Dow”) but was not even a licensed Methodist preacher for parts of his career. Hatch mostly pits Dow against “elites” like Congregationalists or against Dow's favorite target, Calvinists in general, but does not do much to note Dow's inconsistencies with other Methodist preachers.

for months, and it came to a head at the 1792 Conference in Baltimore, when O’Kelly, upset with the increasingly hierarchical nature of the MEC, voiced his dissent and left the conference in protest.⁴⁷ A few weeks later he wrote a letter to Jesse Nicholson, a local preacher in Portsmouth, Virginia, in which he laid out his reasons with clarity and rhetorical flair: “What have I done? Overturned government? What? the Council—not Methodism. I only say no man among us ought to get into the Apostle’s chair with the Keys, and stretch a lordly power over the ministers and Kingdom of Christ. ’Tis a human invention, a quicksand; and when my grey hairs may be preserved under ground, I may be remembered. We ought to respect the body before any mere man. A consolidated government is always bad.”⁴⁸

In this letter O’Kelly made a rhetorical move that, though centuries old in Christian history and thought, was given fresh life in the American Methodist context. The differentiation between “the Kingdom of Christ” and the kingdoms of the earth is an ancient distinction, found even in certain passages from the New Testament Gospels. O’Kelly furthered that distinction so that, roughly, “the Council” was to “Methodism” as denominations were to all of Christendom. O’Kelly was arguing for a “true spirit” of Methodism that was distinct from the ecclesiastical structures of the MEC and, especially, not essentially related to the powers of Francis Asbury. These ideas, at a time of democratization, in rhetoric if not in fact, appealed to a large number of Methodists and other restorationist-minded evangelicals, and the O’Kelly schism resulted in twenty percent of the MEC leaving the denomination, many to join O’Kelly’s Republican Methodists in Virginia. Elizabeth A. Georgian has demonstrated that the rate of the MEC’s growth and expansion in America was greatly adversely affected by the schism, effects whose extent had been unrecognized in previous histories.⁴⁹

The O’Kelly schism demonstrated the lack of consensus within early American Methodism, especially with respect to church authority and hierarchy. This was a tension of

⁴⁷ Six years later, O’Kelly wrote his own account of the event, defending his reasons. James O’Kelly, *The Author’s Apology for Protesting Against the Methodist Episcopal Government* (Richmond, VA: Printed by John Dixon for the author, 1798). This pamphlet drew criticisms, and O’Kelly responded in turn with James O’Kelly, *A Vindication of the author’s Apology: with reflections on the Reply, and a few remarks on Bishop Asbury’s annotations on his Book of discipline* (Raleigh: Printed for the Author by J. Gales, 1801). The letters between Asbury and O’Kelly can be found *JFLA*, 81–115.

⁴⁸ James O’Kelly to Jesse Nicholson, December, 1792. *JLFA*, 114.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth A. Georgian, “A Church in Crisis? Paradoxes in the Rise of American Methodism, 1777–1835” (PhD Diss, University of Delaware, 2010), 296–301. In her appendices, Georgian records the number of members of MEC churches from 1773 to 1835. In the years of the O’Kelly schism, membership takes a jarring hit: though membership went from 57,631 in 1790 to 76,153 in 1791 (which was the meteoric pace at which it had been expanding for the last five years), the numbers then went down to 65,980 (1792) to 56,190 (1796) (O’Kelly founded his Republican Methodists in 1795), and did not reach 70,000 again until 1801, at which point numbers again began to skyrocket.

extreme importance, and the results were never so clear as historical hindsight might suggest. Arguments over church authority touched every important feature of the MEC around the turn of the nineteenth century, from national politics to social refinement to the role of women to, of course, the lives of circuit preachers. Georgian has argued convincingly that “beginning with the Christmas Conference of 1784, the itinerants and the bishops chose to take the church in an increasingly hierarchical direction, excluding more and more people from ecclesiastical decision making over time, and concentrating power in the hands of the bishops,” noting that, “[w]hile numerous dissidents protested this trend, none of them succeeded in stopping, let alone reversing it; instead it increased over time.”⁵⁰ The figure of the circuit preacher as a rugged individualist has helped to obscure the increasing rigidity of church hierarchy and tightening grip of leadership.

This historiographical introduction is to introduce my own position and lay the groundwork for my argument. On one hand, one can choose to accept Methodists on their own terms and emphasize the features of their lives that they emphasized, accepting their self-representations as mostly accurate. On the other hand, one can “look behind” the published sources, treating the formalized histories and doctrinal statements as manipulations crafted by those in power in order to support the established orthodoxy and retain ecclesiastical power. These are two extreme positions, but they do create two endpoints on a sliding scale along which all studies of early American Methodism fall. Indeed, to choose what to emphasize and what to downplay—and every historian must choose—is to step into a debate whose terms have been set for two centuries. How exactly the terms of that debate have been set, though, has not yet been explained. This is not just a historiographical problem. Though few historians have considered this notion, it is evident that the constructed-ness of the Methodist experience was an integral part of that experience, especially for circuit preachers.⁵¹

Lives on Circuits and the Beginning of a Mythology

During the nineteenth century, and especially in its middle decades, the lives of circuit preachers

⁵⁰ Georgian, “A Church in Crisis?”, 45–46.

⁵¹ One way, other than simple historical analysis, that I arrive at this conclusion is by way of philosophies of “narrative identity.” There is a number of variants of this idea, but my conception of narrative identity is essentially that a primary way that individuals understand their selves is to find themselves emplotted within a narrative which is constructed in their memory as well as social contexts (and, as Maurice Halbwachs demonstrated, these two categories are inextricably connected.) See also section 2.3 of David Shoemaker, “Personal Identity and Ethics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2012/entries/identity-ethics/>.

were mythologized. Although the 1840s and 1850s did give rise to a proliferation of circuit rider stories, to assume that this mythology popped up entirely after the fact, the creation of a group of people trying to rewrite their past, is too simplistic. As will be addressed in chapter two and especially chapter three, there was a specific sort of remembering or reimagining occurring in those years, due to a variety of circumstances, but the hagiographers and autobiographers of mid-century did have templates. The mythology of the circuit rider—a rugged hero on the frontier; a selfless, gentle soul leading love-feasts; a self-denying laborer for the Gospel; and all these at the same time—was created over time. The remainder of this chapter will explain the circumstances surrounding the early itinerants, the gap between their self-representations and their experiences, and how, at times, that gap closed.

Denominational identity was an important feature of early Methodism. The *Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America*, carried by every circuit preacher, made a strong case for the specialness of the MEC, detailing the historical origins of the Methodists, their basic theological positions, and doctrines concerning church governance, the actions and duties of ministers, and even citizenship in the United States. This publication, which went through many new editions and revisions, was required reading for Methodist ministers and preachers, and, MEC leadership hoped, for all Methodists: “We wish to see this little publication in the house of every Methodist, and the more so as it contains our plan of Christian education,” Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke wrote in the introduction to one edition. “Far from wishing you to be ignorant of any of our doctrines, or any part of our disciplines, we desire you to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the whole. We know you are not in general able to purchase many books: But you ought, next to the word of God, to procure the Articles and Canons of the church to which you belong.”⁵² To understand oneself as a Methodist was an important aspect of the experience of being a Methodist. To treat self-construction and lived experience as two separate categories is an interpretive move not well supported by the sources.

The Methodist identity was not just a product of official publications, periodicals, or relationships between clergy and parishioners. Circuit preachers often formed bonds among

⁵² Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke, *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, in America. With Explanatory Notes*, 10th ed. (Philadelphia: Henry Tuckniss, 1798), iv. The preface had appeared in earlier editions. It is dated November 16, 1792, at which time Asbury and Coke were in Baltimore at the very conference from which James O’Kelly departed in protest. It is not clear from the sources that Asbury and Coke wrote the new preface specifically in response to O’Kelly, but the fact that they composed it the day after O’Kelly left is at least noteworthy.

themselves. The reasons for forging a sort of “brotherhood,” as it was sometimes called, of itinerants, are fairly straightforward and predictable. They held a lot in common. Only other itinerants really could understand their problems and lifestyle. Also, few had wives, so other intimate relationships with encouragers and confidants became necessary, and of course it helped to vent frustrations about being wifeless (and, presumably, frustratingly sexless) to someone who shared the same circumstances. There is nothing unique about this type of social formation. What is worthy of exploration, though, is the way that circuit riders formed these communities. As historian Jon Butler has written, “Methodist itinerants made a near ritual of their strong collective identity.”⁵³ Their conversations with each other, both in print and in person, created the early forms for what would become increasingly standardized tropes and motifs, eventually crystalized in published autobiographies.

Methodist ministers gathered together regularly for regional and national conferences. At these conferences, ministers would vote on various doctrinal issues, be assigned to new circuit, voice concerns, and meet up with old friends. These meetings thus were sites for long sessions of story-swapping. The conferences were not the only occasions itinerants had to socialize. Many of them frequented particular retreats or hot springs, where they could recuperate from the hard traveling. Additionally, many itinerants wrote letters to each other describing their travels and encouraging one another, as well as letters to the editors of the large number of Methodist periodicals circulated throughout the republic. In all these forms, the stories of the itinerancy began to take shape. Readers and writers alike became familiar with the tropes of difficult travel, inhospitable accommodations, and triumphant successes in gaining converts. In short, these were where the seeds were planted that would, given a few decades, bloom into full-fledged characters and established story-cycles.⁵⁴

Recent historians have shown much interest in marriage and the family in early American Methodism⁵⁵ (and many nineteenth-century Methodists shared this interest.) Asbury remained a

⁵³ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 237.

⁵⁴ Donald E. Byrne, Jr., *No Foot of Land: Folklore of American Methodist Itinerants* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1975) is one of the only works to take up Methodist autobiographies as works of folklore. Byrne uses the methods of a folklorist, identifying typologies and motifs found in autobiographies. Many story-cycles, taken as likely historical by some historians, are identified by Byrne as recycled structures with slight variations to account for region or time period. This study is helpful because it calls into question the historical value of many of these stories while illuminating their significance for both the storytellers and their audiences.

⁵⁵ See especially Heyrman, *Southern Cross*; Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America*; A. Gregory Schneider, *The Way of the Cross Leads Home: The Domestication of American Methodism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993);

bachelor his whole life and advised his itinerants to do the same, lest they become distracted or have their allegiances divided. Upon receiving word that Thomas Coke had married, Asbury responded, “Marriage is honourable in all—but to me it is a ceremony as awful as death. Well may it be so, when I calculate we have lost the travelling labours of two hundred of the best men in America, or the world, by marriage and consequent location.”⁵⁶ Circuit preachers who married often left the itinerancy and either located or left the ministry altogether, for financial and geographical stability. The *Discipline* allowed ministers to get married but offered far from a ringing endorsement of the idea: “The ministers of Christ are not commanded by God’s law either to vow the estate of single life, or to abstain from marriage; therefore it is lawful for them, as for all other christians, to marry at their own discretion, as they shall judge the same to serve best to godliness.”⁵⁷ Marriage among ministers was permissible, but it is not hard to see why the itinerant clergy often looked down upon their located brethren, creating a sort of hierarchy of piety based on the willingness to endure hardship.⁵⁸

Although the 1840s and 1850s gave rise to most circuit-rider autobiographies, there were a few published in the early decades of the nineteenth century. An examination of some of these works allows a clearer window into early Methodism than do those from midcentury. Of course, any self-representation, especially in an organized *post facto* narrative like an autobiography, is subject to the mind’s conscious and subconscious editorial revisions. However, even taking this into account, to examine these early publications is elucidative—particularly when contrasted with those from a few decades later—for to do so reveals, if not an exact picture of lived Methodism, then at least examples of how Methodists self-represented at that time.

and, more recently, Anna M. Lawrence, *One Family Under God: Love, Belonging, and Authority in Early Transatlantic Methodism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011) and Charity R. Carney, *Ministers and Masters: Methodism, Manhood, and Honor in the Old South* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2011).

⁵⁶ *JLFA*, July 1805, Vol. 2, 474. See Wigger, *American Saint*, 340–346.

⁵⁷ *Discipline*, 1798. 25.

⁵⁸ Many, including Asbury, made attempts to protect the reputation of “located” preachers. To do so they often used the argument that duty, especially duty to family, was godly and necessary. To cite one example of many: Joseph Travis, a Southern itinerant, defended the decision of Josiah Askew, a man he never had met, assuring the reader that Askew “located, which was in the year 1797, having travelled nine years. He no doubt located from absolute necessity, in order to provide for his family; well knowing that he that provides not for his own household, has denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel” (Joseph Travis, *Autobiography of Rev. Joseph Travis, A.M., A Member of the Memphis Annual Conference, Embracing a Succinct History of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South; Particularly in Part of Western Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, With Short Memories of Several Local Preachers, and an Address to His Friends*, ed. Thomas O. Summers [Nashville: E. Stevenson and F.A. Owen, 1856], 195). Of course, if one had no family for whom to provide this was not a concern, hence Asbury’s lifelong hesitance to encourage any itinerant to marry.

Benjamin Abbott's autobiography is an especially important example, since its 1805 publication antedates most others', serving as a sort of template from which later narratives would draw. Abbott (1732–1796) was a very early American Methodist preacher, and became, especially through the distribution his autobiography, a widely revered symbol of “primitive” Methodism. Abel Stevens, a nineteenth-century Methodist leader and historian, called Abbott a “mighty but simple-minded apostle, intent only on the spiritual results of his humble mission.”⁵⁹ Dan Young, writing as an old man in 1860, never knew Abbott, but he recounted stories about him, both from Abbott's autobiography and from stories told by those who did. Young called Abbott “probably the most illiterate man that was ever licensed to preach among the Methodists...His case was a good illustration of the declaration of Divine truth, that ‘God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise.’”⁶⁰ Despite Abbott's educational deficiencies (or, perhaps, partially due to them), his autobiography was very well received. In fact, one recent scholar has concluded that it was “perhaps the most widely read Methodist memoir of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At least 18 editions were published in the antebellum period.”⁶¹ In this way Abbott the actual person, Abbott the character in his autobiography, and Abbott the creation of later memory are three figures so intertwined that none of them is “purely” one and not the others.

Abbott's story is often very dramatic, often even more so than its counterparts from decades later, filled with spiritual warfare, physical abuse, and frequent depictions of intense emotions, from rapturous joy to suicidal depression. In particular, Abbott's conversion narrative exemplifies, and probably helped solidify, the basic structure of the Methodist preachers' conversion narrative. However, Abbott's conversion narrative is more fantastical than later narratives. Vivid dreams and visions of heaven and hell—complete with giant scorpions—occur frequently, and dramatic conversion experiences pack the volume. It is rare for more than five pages to pass without a scene with someone weeping. Nonetheless, what endured was the image of Benjamin Abbott as a fiery, zealous preacher, captivating and often converting anyone within

⁵⁹ Abel Stevens, *A Compendious History*, 135.

⁶⁰ Dan Young, *The Autobiography of Dan Young, A New England Preacher of the Olden Time*, ed. W.P. Strickland (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1860), 216.

⁶¹ Wigger, *American Saint*, 480n6.

earshot. Indeed, one bishop reportedly said, “If all the bishops on earth, and all the devils in hell were here, I must preach like Ben Abbott.”⁶²

The story of Benjamin Abbott and his later veneration demonstrate the way that later memories and memorials brushed over some details that made contemporary audiences uncomfortable (not many 1850s Methodists wanted to believe in real visions of giant scorpions) while maintaining important ideas like “zeal” or “experience” as exemplary. This theme of selective memory in order to elicit certain responses was a recurring theme in the production and consumption of circuit rider autobiographies. By and large, the later autobiographies contain more adventure and focus more on physical hardship than the earlier ones, while they narrate some fewer dramatic spiritual experiences, such as physical apparitions of the devil, miraculous weather, and fantastical visions of the afterlife.

Conclusion

This first chapter has sketched the lives of circuit preachers and their place in the United States in the decades around the turn of the nineteenth century. The tropes that would become so familiar and revered in the mid nineteenth century had their genesis in the facts of early circuit preachers’ lives. Though many features of early Methodism resulted from simply practical considerations—carrying saddlebags, for example—even these material necessities became imbued with significance. A saddlebag was not just a saddlebag; it was a symbol of the itinerant life, poverty, rootlessness, ruggedness, and hardship. “In this way,” David Hempton has written, “the early privations of Methodist itinerants were confined to a different dispensation and then sacralized by memory.”⁶³

While the circuit system was the lifeblood of early American Methodism, in following decades its relevance waned, especially along the Eastern Seaboard, and the itinerants were pushed to the frontiers of Kentucky and Illinois. The decline in itinerants’ visibility in the East did not mean a decline in Methodist membership. Instead, the MEC was by the 1840s by far the largest denomination in the United States, with members throughout the entire republic. With increased numbers came increased wealth and status—and, according to many of the old circuit riders, a noticeable decline in zeal and an uptick in complacency and comfort. In order to remind

⁶² Young, *Autobiography of Dan Young*, 217.

⁶³ Hempton, *Methodism*, 126.

Methodists and other Americans of the original zealous spirit of Methodism, they took up pens to craft narratives in which they played the star roles.

The valorization of the circuit was deeply embedded in the minds of Methodists of the nineteenth century and is even until today. John Tigert's 1898 history, *The Making of Methodism*, illustrates this point. Though Tigert's chief aim was a history not swayed by the myths of earlier generations, this critical edge was lost when it came to circuit riders. Explaining the occasion and impetus for his work, he wrote,

[T]here have been slowly collecting the materials for a more comprehensive and exhaustive presentation of the history according to the philosophical and causal principles of its development; for the correction of errors and misconceptions, some of them grown hoary and stubborn by long unchallenged acceptance; for freeing the narrative from one-sided controversial elements; for more accurately and minutely tracing the genesis of the government of the Church, and the unfolding of the organic principles of fundamental law, purely in the light of the abundant contemporary sources; for filling in details in the biographies of the itinerant heroes who planted Methodism in the wilderness and made it bloom as the garden of the Lord; and in fine, for occupying a new and higher historical standpoint from which a better outlook over the whole field can be secured, putting all the objects of the vast panorama in something like their true proportion and perspective.⁶⁴

The fact that Tigert could be so consciously critical and deconstructive in other areas and yet replicate hagiographic rhetoric when it came to circuit riders is striking. The remaining chapters of this thesis will seek to explain the contexts which shaped those tropes and how they became implanted within American and Methodist memory.

⁶⁴ Jno. J. Tigert, D.D., LL.D., *The Making of Methodism: Studies in the Genesis of Institutions* (Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1898), vii–viii.

CHAPTER TWO

RESPECTABLE METHODISTS

When Methodism Became “Respectable”

In the 1840s and 1850s, American Methodism was not the same Methodism of the Revolutionary Era and the turn of the nineteenth century. Differences were evident everywhere. For one, Methodist Episcopal Church, though it remained the largest Methodist denomination, was no longer American Methodists’ only option: the years between 1790 and 1850 had seen a number of splits and fissures, including the O’Kelly schism, the advent of the African Methodist Episcopal Church,⁶⁵ a struggle over lay representation resulting in the Methodist Protestant Church,⁶⁶ and a regional division of the MEC in 1844 over slavery, creating the MEC-South. Despite setbacks caused by various conflicts and contestations, many of which revolved around church structure and authority in one way or another, Methodists found methods that worked. Not only did they have great numerical success in almost every region of the new American nation; they also ascended the ranks of American culture.⁶⁷ Methodists’ twentieth-century status as “mainline” Protestants, a denomination “respectable” as any, was far from foreordained. Instead, the Methodists’ relationship with American culture—shaping and being shaped by it—has a long history. The purpose of this second chapter is to sketch briefly some of the advances Methodists made, situated within American culture, and varying Methodists reactions to those changes.

Perhaps no individual illustrates Methodists’ rise to respectability and ascent into politics more vividly than Philip Gatch. He was born in 1751 near Baltimore to strict parents who belonged to the Episcopal Church. In 1772, according to Gatch’s autobiography,⁶⁸ Methodists came through his neighborhood. For years Gatch had been interested in “experimental” religion but had no firsthand access to groups that preached or practiced it. Upon finally hearing a

⁶⁵ For more on the beginnings of the AME, see Richard Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

⁶⁶ See Georgian, “A Church in Crisis?”, 93–270.

⁶⁷ See Hatch and Wigger, eds., *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture*.

⁶⁸ Philip Gatch, *Sketch of Rev. Philip Gatch*, ed. Hon. John M’Lean, Ll. D., (Cincinnati: Swormstedt & Poe, 1854)

Methodist sermon, he admired the preacher, felt convicted, and eventually converted and quickly received the “call” to preach.

Gatch was of the very first generation of American Methodist itinerants; he was in attendance at the first conference, held in 1774, a full decade before the Americans broke from the Anglican Church. During the Revolution, when to be a Methodist meant—in theory, at least—to be a loyalist, Methodists were subjected to suspicion, verbal assaults, and occasional violence. These physical attacks—indeed, suffering in general—held profound meaning for many early itinerants.⁶⁹ In the midst of a vivid description of being tarred and feathered, Gatch remembered feeling “an uninterrupted peace,” claiming, “My soul was joyful in the God of my salvation.” The violent account continues, including the smearing of tar across Gatch’s “naked eyeball, which caused severe pain, from which [he] never entirely recovered.”

Suffering itself had meaning, but there were other payoffs as well. As Gatch “fell prostrate in prayer before [the Lord] for [his] enemies,” “the man who put on the tar, and several others of them, were afterward converted.”⁷⁰ That type of hardship, and the numerous benefits of it, was much less frequent as Methodism’s profile rose. Gatch himself is a fitting representative. In the 1770s he was tarred and feathered, but by 1803 he had left the itinerancy and was appointed as an associate judge in Clermont County, Ohio, and his journal was edited and published with commentary by John McLean, a United States Supreme Court justice.⁷¹

McLean’s commentary on Gatch belies a form of nineteenth-century gentility mostly foreign to American Methodists of the 1770s and 1780s. The clues in McLean’s word choice are subtle but clear: “I should think that Judge Gatch, in his long and successful ministerial labors, was more indebted to a kindness of manner, and simplicity and clearness of expression, than to any peculiar excitement of his nature. His aim was to speak of religion in all its loveliness, and recommend it for its happifying effects on individuals and on society, rather than its language of poetry to paints its glories...In public and in private, on the bench and in the pulpit, the whole life of Judge Gatch was a beautiful commentary upon the religion he professed.”⁷² This passage demonstrated a central tension common among gentrified Methodists of the 1850s. Gatch’s

⁶⁹ See Williams, *Religion and Violence in Early American Methodism*, especially 65. On Asbury and suffering: “The idea of suffering as confirmation of one’s chosen status or a means for deeper communion with God was actually central to Asbury’s thinking and dominates his journal writings.” (189n97).

⁷⁰ Gatch, *Sketch*, 45–47.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 180.

story featured suffering, violence, and adventure. He exemplified traits that many Methodists wanted to instill in younger generations. However, Gatch's world was no longer most Methodists' world. Some of his most honorable episodes—withstanding physical abuse and leading his persecutors to conversion—were unlikely to be replicated in the 1840s.

Such a dramatic transition as Gatch's—from murderous mob violence to a judgeship and veneration from a Supreme Court justice—within the course of one lifetime is emblematic of Methodism's rise to respectability and power. American Methodism of the 1850s was quite different from the church in the 1790s, but the United States itself was different as well. The politics, economics, and culture of the nation underwent sweeping changes. Methodists were not immune to these changes and, indeed, were sometimes instrumental to them. As membership in the MEC and other, smaller denominational offshoots increased, the scope of Methodism widened. By the 1820s—and increasingly so in the following decades—it was difficult to pinpoint many features of Methodist distinctiveness. This was a fact that made some Methodists, especially those who had been alive in the church's early days in America, uncomfortable, and this anxiety gave occasion for the proliferation of circuit rider stories. Chapter three will examine the circuit rider stories and autobiographies themselves and the politics of memory involved in their creation. The remainder of this chapter will situate the MEC of the 1830s through 1850s in its cultural and political context, focusing on concepts of gentility and refinement, as well as factors like the Market Revolution and higher levels of education. Methodists participated in all these developments, and in so doing they significantly changed the MEC and what it meant to be a Methodist.

Education and Science

Despite the ascension of preachers and former preachers like Philip Gatch, and Methodists' penchant for building universities, they still maintained a reputation as uneducated and anti-science. An 1845 article in Orestes Brownson's *Brownson's Quarterly Review*, in a response to an anti-Catholic article from an issue of *The Methodist Quarterly Review*, remarked that Methodists "had originally manifested a great contempt for human science and learning, and cannot, in this country at least, boast of having made a single permanent contribution to literature

or science.”⁷³ Much of the historiography has basically shared this assumption, if a tempered and less vitriolic version thereof. However, as Maura Jane Farrelly recently has shown, Methodists did show remarkable interest in science, using it to demonstrate God’s grandeur and explain the world. They took to magazines, particularly the *Methodist Quarterly Review*, to debate the merits and meanings of scientific inquiry and, later, how to approach Darwinian evolution.⁷⁴

The connection between “religious” and “secular” knowledge had always been acknowledged somewhat nervously in Methodist minds. The dangers of higher education’s connection with a gentrified class helped contribute to the championing of Methodists’ unlearned itinerants. Nevertheless, education of some sort, such as self-education through reading, was a hallmark of the itinerants’ ethic. As early as 1798, the *Discipline* urged itinerants to read in order to correct the problem of itinerants not knowing enough. It urged, in a section on “employing our Time profitably,” “Be diligent. Never be unemployed. Never be triflingly employed: neither spend any more time at any place than is strictly necessary.” After a lament that not enough time was spent “in God’s work,” a few corrections were offered, even preemptively responding to the probably objections: “1. Read the most useful books, and that regularly and constantly. 2. Steadily spend all the morning in this employment, or at least five hours in four and twenty. ‘But I have no taste for reading.’ Contract a taste for it by use, or return to your former employment.”⁷⁵

By the late nineteenth century, Methodists had built dozens of colleges in the United States, but the college-building impulse among American Methodists was present early. Cokesbury College, though it was an all-around failure, remained an important project to Francis Asbury for years. As early as 1784, Asbury and Coke began planning and collecting finances for the college. Cokesbury, meant primarily as a training ground for future ministers, was from its beginning implicated in the coming conflict between “refined” and “unrefined” Methodists. As John Wigger has argued, “Coke’s own educational background, including his days at Oxford, must have had a lot to do with this desire for a Methodist college in America. His status as a

⁷³ “ART. IV. -- Methodist Quarterly Review for July, 1845. ART. VII. Brownson's Quarterly Review, no. V. 1845.” *Brownson's Quarterly Review (1844–1875)*, 3.

⁷⁴ Maura Jane Farrelly, “‘God is the Author of Both’: Science, Religion, and the Intellectualization of American Methodism” *Church History* 77:3 (Sept. 2008), 659–687.

⁷⁵ Asbury and Coke, *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (1798), 106.

gentleman had opened doors for him that were closed to Asbury and the other American preachers.”

The equation of education with gentrification (which was, as will be shown later in this chapter, linked with ineffectuality and a lack of zeal) weighed heavily on Asbury, who “had no desire to make gentlemen of the preachers’ sons who would attend Cokesbury, yet he wasn’t averse to offering them the kind of opportunity that he had missed as a boy. He knew what it was to feel awkward and unlearned, but he really didn’t understand what he was after.”⁷⁶ Despite some ambivalence toward education, Methodists by and large were not anti-education or anti-science, and they were anything but anti-reading. Methodist periodicals, narratives, and diaries proliferated as the nineteenth century progressed. Asbury, ever conscious of himself as an example for other itinerants, was a voracious reader, who spent large portions of his days reading the Bible and other books, for hours in the morning and evening, and while in the saddle.⁷⁷

Reading was important for all Methodists, not just itinerants and preachers. Reading kept the mind sharp and, provided the content of the reading was appropriate, the heart pure and zealous. As A. Gregory Schneider has shown, “It was commonplace to urge parents good reading material in the home in order to keep children from evil and to improve their piety...The main thrust of such urging was, of course, to see the children pious in this world and happy in the next.”⁷⁸ Periodicals and other literature became the primary means of inculcating certain sensibilities and values in new generations of Methodists. Among these values was education, both religious and, increasingly, scientific and “secular” education. Acquainted with scientific concepts, Methodists were becoming able to speak the language of the elite, and, significantly, they were able to learn that language from distinctly denominational sources.

Nathan Bangs serves as a primary example of the educational side of Methodists’ shift toward respectability. He also effected that change, arguably more than anyone else. Bangs revamped the Methodist Episcopal Church’s primary publication, taking charge of *The Methodist Magazine and Quarterly Review* from 1830 to 1841, emphasizing the more “intellectual” aspects of Methodism and helping to mold the Church’s image into something more “respectable” and palatable to the upper rungs of society. It was in the Bangs-edited *Magazine* that the minister

⁷⁶ Wigger, *American Saint*, 156–157.

⁷⁷ See *Ibid.*, 104–108.

⁷⁸ Schneider, *The Way of the Cross Leads Home*, 165.

John Price Durbin published a sermon he preached in Bourbon County, Kentucky in 1831. As Farrelly has pointed out, this sermon, which focused on the works of God in nature, assumed a significant degree of scientific knowledge on the part of the listening audience, in addition to demonstrating Durbin's own acumen.⁷⁹ During the 1830s the *Magazine* published dozens of articles celebrating science, when properly considered and not "divorced from proper religious instruction." By Farrelly's count, during Bangs's tenure some forty percent of articles touched in some way the subject of science.⁸⁰

Some article- and letter-writers attempted to reconcile what some had seen as conflict between religion and science. Once such article, a transcript on an address delivered to the Wyoming Literary Institute, skillfully navigated this perceived tension by making religion and science twin markers of humanity's distinctiveness: "Those advantages, peculiar to man, seem to have been furnished him in view of his moral and intellectual natures. Among these religion and science stand forth with the greatest prominence; the first adapted to his moral, the second to his intellectual constitution. These two natures of man are intimately blended in their origin, and should keep pace with each other in their developments."⁸¹

Similarly, eight years earlier the *Magazine* ran a short series of articles praising "intellectual" disciplines, ranging from physical science to philosophy to even political science, whose argument was predicated on the reality and utmost importance of a mind separate from the body. Indeed, one of these articles argued, in addition to bodies and physical needs, "bountiful Providence has endowed us with the higher nature also—with understandings as well as with senses—with faculties that are of a more exalted nature, and admit of more refined enjoyments, than any the bodily frame can bestow; and by pursuing such gratifications rather than those of mere sense, we fulfil [*sic*] the highest ends of our creation, and obtain both a present and future reward."⁸² Science and religion, according to many newly "respectable" Methodists, were both essential to humanness, and thus knowledge in each arena ought to be cultivated as much as possible. Language like this made some older Methodists, particularly former circuit preachers, uncomfortable, but in many ways it was the logical sum of the old

⁷⁹ Farrelly, "God is the Author of Both", 659. Durbin's sermon can be found in John Price Durbin, "On the Omnipresence of God," *The Methodist Magazine and Quarterly Review* 13 (1831): 49.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 662, 667.

⁸¹ Rev. D. Holmes, "Religion the Nourishing Mother of Science." *The Methodist Magazine and Quarterly Review (1830–1840)* 22, no. 4 (Oct 01, 1840): 361.

⁸² "Advantages and Pleasures of Science." *The Methodist Magazine and Quarterly Review (1830–1840)* 14, no. 1 (Jan 01, 1832): 39.

emphasis on reading and knowledge combined with the Methodists' quest for respectability, led by Bangs.

Contours of Gentility and Refinement

American culture in the nineteenth century was marked by an increased focus on “refinement.” In the eighteenth century, especially in the decade prior to the Revolutionary War, Americans had begun creating what was, or at least would become, a distinctively American culture.⁸³ The contours of this culture were defined more carefully by the wealthy, who placed considerable stock in the cultural impact of property, taking careful note of choices of home design, types of fabric, patterns of speech, and no limited number of household goods. Such distinctions hinged on the concepts of gentility and refinement. These ideas, as Richard Bushman has written, “heightened self-consciousness” and “created a standard for exclusion as well as a mode of association.”⁸⁴

In the six decades following 1790, gentility became something to which a majority of Americans, not just the already-wealthy, aspired. Bushman has called this new form “vernacular gentility,” noting that its “desired goal was respectability rather than eminence.”⁸⁵ Methodists, as their numbers increased, joined the ranks of the vernacularly genteel. This happened in two ways. First, some members who had been Methodists for years began to settle into the burgeoning middle-class society and became more comfortable with its wares. Sometimes this included higher incomes, but sometimes Methodists (and other Americans) simply spent their money differently, even while keeping the same occupations and similar salaries. Second, as Methodist membership grew, members of the already-established middle class started joining the church. The mediations of the two types of mindsets, those of early Methodists and those of the middle class, spawned contested redefinitions of what Methodism was. Circuit rider autobiographies were as integral a part of these processes as any.⁸⁶

⁸³ For more on the creation of American culture and its relation to the Revolutionary Era, see T.H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁸⁴ Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), xiv–xv. It is not incidental the period Bushman defines as the period of “respectability,” 1790–1850, overlaps with the period of Methodist growth. The interplay between these two burgeoning movements in American culture has been understudied. Understanding that relationship is an important, if not central, historiographical concern of this thesis.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁸⁶ Especially in the South, Methodists had a number of common ideologies with which to contend, including ideas of manliness and the culture of honor. As many historians have shown, these ideologies and their stark contrast to Methodists' self-presentations and practices made it very difficult for Methodists to make early inroads in the South,

Especially as the nineteenth century progressed into its second and third decades, Methodists were reluctantly accepting of the concepts and language of gentility and refinement, but frequently made certain to articulate why, how, and when gentility was acceptable. Periodicals like the *Christian Advocate* and the *Ladies' Repository* devoted many pages to open meditations on “gentility,” and these debates lurked in the subtext of even more pages, foregrounding discussions of women’s roles, the importance of mothers, how to raise boys, how church buildings ought to be constructed and adorned, and what level and type of education ministers ought to attain.

Methodism, from John Wesley’s Oxford Methodists to American frontier preachers, was very often marked by its leaders’ pragmatism. Innovations and organizations were means to ends, namely, the conversion of souls and cultivation of godly societies. Thus, many discussions of gentility hung on similar concerns. What good could refinement do? What trappings should be avoided? Education among clergy was a hot-button issue for decades. In 1855, a writer in the *Christian Advocate* demonstrated that even in the 1850s some were worried about the possible adverse effects of an educated clergy, even as they recognized the inevitability of further increases in learning.

Learned men are in the ministry, and learned men will continue to increase as educational advantages multiply. What we fear is, that the tone of certain recent articles will tend to excite an increased fastidiousness in hearing the plain, old-fashioned truths of the Gospel; and that the usefulness of many preachers will be lessened by the capriciousness of ignorant pretenders to good taste and polished periods.⁸⁷

Later, in same article, the author had a Methodist preacher say, “‘But the polish of theological schools, and the ado made about the refinement of city congregations, if not watched, will go far toward softening these homely but forcible illustrations; so that, while they put in more elegance and grace, they will take out the point and power of Methodistic address from the pulpit.’ There is something in *that*—don’t you think so, Christian reader?”⁸⁸

Significantly, the article-writer was concerned with preachers’ “usefulness.” Gentility itself was not necessarily a problem for most Methodists. There was nothing inherently wrong

especially among men. See, for example, Cynthia Lynn Lyerly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind, 1770–1810* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Carney, *Ministers and Masters*; Heyrman, *Southern Cross*; and Schneider, *The Way of the Cross Leads Home*, especially chapter eight, “Methodist Identity: The Way of the Cross Versus the Culture of Honor,” pp. 111–121.

⁸⁷ “Methodist Preaching.” *Christian Advocate and Journal (1833–1865)* 30, no. 40 (Oct. 4, 1855): 157.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

about owning some good-quality spoons or spiffy buttons or keeping a nice parlor. What was a problem, though, was the way that focusing on these things could distract people from more important matters, like cultivating a “pure heart” or raising godly children. If refinement could be *used* properly, then the trope was acceptable, but it more often was misused, according to many concerned letter-writers and preachers who voiced their concerns in periodicals and sermons.

One woman named Anna Huntley, writing in *The Ladies' Repository*, dealt directly with the detrimental effects a preoccupation with gentility could reap: “He whose wishes and desires are bounded by the narrow limits of self-gratification destroys the finest sensibilities of his nature, and renders himself unfit for the pure and ennobling practices which flow almost spontaneously from minds more spiritually developed.”⁸⁹ The appropriation of middle-class language is telling, especially given the publication date, 1859. By that time most Methodists had accepted the tropes and rhetoric of refinement, but they made concerted efforts to define its contours and proper applications. Proper Methodist practices were “pure and ennobling,” and, further, they were facilitated by the “finest sensibilities” of one’s “nature.” Readers certainly would have noticed the word choices and their clearly middle-class corollaries. As Richard Bushman has shown, Americans, especially of the upper and middle classes, took great stock in “sensibilities” and their material manifestations. Beginning in the eighteenth century, Americans began to use clothing, goods, and houses to make inferences about individuals’ spiritual states. “Parlor people,” Bushman wrote, “claimed to live on a higher plane than the vulgar and coarse populace, to excel them in their inner beings. Pecuniary display was outward and by definition superficial; refinement was inward and profound.”⁹⁰

By the 1850s, when Huntley was writing, these ideologies were widespread. However, for years evangelicals had resisted and even consciously inverted the celebrations of refinement. Again, Bushman notes this: “The shedding of genteel trappings became a standard episode in evangelical conversion narratives. The accoutrements of the fashionable life came to stand for pre-conversion worldliness. Giving up hats, jewelry, balls, and tea parties signaled the convert’s turn of heart.”⁹¹ As will be more fully explored in this thesis’s third chapter, many circuit rider

⁸⁹ Huntley, Anna M. "Refinement of Feeling." *The Ladies' Repository; a Monthly Periodical, Devoted to Literature, Art and Religion (1849–1876)* 19, (1859): 521.

⁹⁰ Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 182.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 314.

autobiographies followed this trope in their conversion narratives, and they often served as the life stories' opening scenes. Methodists were part of a long tradition—in Christian history more broadly and evangelicalism more specifically⁹²—of renouncing “the world” and its distractions and vices in order to cultivate “self-denying” piety. Indeed, Wesley warned of the spiritually harmful “self-indulgent” lifestyle to which wealth almost unavoidably led.⁹³ However, because gentility and refinement, manifest by higher levels of wealth as well as education, were so common among American Methodists, stark and wholesale condemnations of wealth and refinement could be hard pills to swallow. Huntley navigated this tension skillfully:

But let the holy principles of Christianity be inculcated, and the heart touched by the renewing Spirit of God, and genuine refinement of feeling will flow out, as refreshing and fertilizing as showers on thirsty lands. Well would it be for society generally if they fully appreciated the value of cultivating this noble science, and were as ambitious to study and practice its sacred teachings as they are those of a more showy character. A loving heart and an easy address wins its way to the esteem and confidence of those worthy of its friendship.⁹⁴

The rhetoric of gentility was employable, but only when classed as the word “refinement” was cast as “genuine refinement of feeling.” Feelings and emotion—as will be demonstrated more fully in chapter three—were crucial concepts for Methodists because emotion and emotional displays were understood to be the best evidence of a true “heart work,” or, in Huntley’s phrase, “the heart touched by the renewing Spirit of God.”⁹⁵

Whereas Wesley had contrasted wealth with holiness, the former being outward and superficial and the latter being inward and spiritual, Huntley reclaimed refinement, but flipped its meaning, such that *true* refinement was inward and fundamentally emotional. “Yet, wherever true refinement dwells in the soul, it will speak through the eye, and throb with the heart’s

⁹² Much of the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century emphasis on self-denial is due, at least in part, to the popularity of David Brainerd’s diary, amended and published by Jonathan Edwards and republished many times, including by Sereno Edwards Dwight, Jonathan Edwards’s grandson in 1822. John Wesley also published an extract from the journal and included a recommendation of the text in the official handbook for Methodist preachers. See Joseph Conforti, “Jonathan Edwards’ Most Popular Work: ‘The Life of David Brainerd’ and Nineteenth-Century Evangelical Culture,” *Church History*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (Jun., 1985); Joseph A. Conforti, *Jonathan Edwards, Religious Tradition, and American Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), especially chapter three, “David Brainerd and Disinterested Benevolence in Antebellum Evangelical Culture,” 62–86; and Grigg, *The Lives of David Brainerd*.

⁹³ See Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 188.

⁹⁴ Huntley, “Refinement of Feeling,” 522.

⁹⁵ The “heart” was a common trope for Methodists, beginning with Wesley. See Phyllis Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment: Gender and Emotion in Early Methodism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). The phrase “heart work” was used with some regularity in early American and British Methodism. Here, though, I have in mind Benjamin Abbott’s conversion narrative, in which he distinguished a “heart work” and “experimental religion” from the simple knowledge of doctrine or religious ideas. See John Ffirth, *The Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rev. Benjamin Abbott, to which is Annexed, A Narrative of his Life and Death* (New York: Ezekiel Cooper and John Wilson, 1805), 6.

warmest pulsations. Its language wells up from a truthful fountain within, and is ever chaste and beautiful.” She then gave examples of “the manifestation of true refinement of feeling worthy to be recorded,” which included a “self-sacrificing daughter,” who cared for her mother and was “doubly endeared by sanctified affliction.”⁹⁶

Others also took up the term “true refinement” with similar application. In 1839, *The Western Christian Advocate* ran an article which was even more tentatively praised “the present age,” “one of taste and refinement,” noting the proliferation of “the sciences” “not only over Europe and the oriental world, but over our own happy Columbia; and it must be gratifying to every lover of learning, to see the laudable emulation that glows in the hearts of the youths of our country to outstrip even the old world in point of learning and refinement.” These celebratory remarks, though, were followed by warnings of misplaced priorities and the ill effects of an unbalanced life, employing the fall of Rome as a cautionary tale. The writer concluded by arguing that “religion is refining in its influence,” because it, among other positive effects, “curbs or destroys those unholy passions which belong to every man in his natural state,” “makes a man cheerful and courteous,” and “refines his feelings.” Again, refinement was laudable, but only when it was both inward and pragmatic. The article ended by stating the matter explicitly: “in order to true refinement, our *moral* powers must be cultivated in such a manner as no agency can effect but the agency of God’s Spirit.”⁹⁷

The theme of agency and effects was picked up by many Methodists at that time. True religion and true refinement had positive, godly results. The world’s standards of refinement were merely superficial and had few effects at all, and certainly none productive or spiritually beneficial. In 1850 the Methodist publication *The Christian Advocate and Journal* republished a small portion of John Lauris Blake’s *Farmer’s Every-Day Book*, in which Blake exposed the frivolity of “modern gentility.” Blake noted approvingly the definition the “best lexicographers” gave to gentility: “politeness of manners—easy, graceful behavior; manners of well-bred people; genteelness.” This sense of the word, though, was often lost in its modern usages. “Not a few apply it to the mode of living rather than to personal attributes of any description. Hence, if a family maintain a style of expenditure denoting wealth, occupy a large house stocked with elegant furniture, employ a full retinue of servants, make costly entertainments, control ample

⁹⁶ Huntley, “Refinement of Feeling,” 522.

⁹⁷ T. G. “Refinement.” *Western Christian Advocate* (1834–1883) 5, no. 42 (Feb 08, 1839): 165. T.G. identifies himself or herself as hailing from Butler County, Ohio, located north of Cincinnati, bordering Indiana.

equestrian establishments, and, above all, abstract themselves from the very appearance of useful occupation—it is said to live genteelly...”⁹⁸

Uselessness and ineffectuality, in addition to plain vice and sinfulness, were marks of gentility gone amuck. “By the mid-nineteenth century,” historian John Modern has demonstrated, “the link between modernity and excess had become almost commonplace—excess projections, excess repression, excess credulity, excess rationality, excess bureaucracy, excessive political rationality, and so on and so forth.”⁹⁹ Articles mocking modern women’s silly excesses amused readers, providing through caricature equal parts entertainment and moral cautioning. A particularly pointed example was published in 1853 in *The Ladies’ Repository*, castigating “the model lady,” a title applied only with acerbic sarcasm:

The model lady puts her children out to nurse, and tends lap-dogs; lies in bed till noon, wears paper-soled shoes, and pinches her waist; gives the piano fits, and forgets to pay her milliner; cuts her poor relations, and goes to Church when she has a new bonnet; turns the cold shoulder to her husband, and flirts with his “friend;” never saw a thimble; don’t know a darning-needle from a crowbar; wonders where puddings grow; eats ham and eggs in private, and dines off a pigeon’s leg in public; runs mad after the last new fashions; doats [*sic*] on Byron; adores any fool who grins behind a mustache; and when asked the age of her youngest child, replies, “Don’t know, indeed; ask Betty!”¹⁰⁰

The model lady was a caricature, of course. Few women, especially Methodists, resembled her much at all. However, there was an anxiety within the denomination, or at least its leaders and preachers, that, though Methodist women did not yet live as the model lady, they were headed in that direction. The small concessions the church had made as it grew—the types of changes that caused major schisms—were beginning to add up. The question “What is the ‘spirit of

⁹⁸ “Modern Gentility.” *Christian Advocate and Journal (1833-1865)*; 25, 38 (Sept. 19, 1850): 152. The original version can be found in John Lauris Blake, *The Farmers Every-Day Book; Or, Sketches of Social Life in the Country: With the Popular Elements of Practical and Theoretical Agriculture, and Twelve Hundred Laconic and Apothegms Relating to Ethics, Religion, and General Literature; Also, Five Hundred Receipts on Hygeian, Domestic, and Rural Economy* (Auburn, NY: Derby, Miller and Company, 1850), 200–201, in a section titled, “How to Live Prettily in the Country.” Blake’s concern was with the appropriation of the finer aspects of country living by those who did not appreciate the “sweets of country life.” He wrote, “All know that some of the prettiest and most innocent amusements have been denounced and discarded by decent society, because they have so generally been prostituted to the vilest purposes. And the term of which we are speaking [gentility] has been so frequently appropriated to such ridiculous fooleries, that we sometimes think we will banish it from our vocabulary” (200). (These sentences were not included in the *Advocate* piece, which picked up immediately after this passage.)

⁹⁹ Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*, xxix.

¹⁰⁰ “Editor’s Repository: Mirror of Apothegm, Wit, Repartee, and Anecdote.” *The Ladies’ Repository; a Monthly Periodical, Devoted to Literature, Art and Religion (1849-1876)* 13, (1853): 231. This anecdote was originally written by Fanny Fern (a pseudonym—her given name was Sara Wills), the popular humorist and novelist, and published in the Boston newspaper *The Olive Branch*. See Melissa J. Homestead, *American Women Authors and Literary Property, 1822–1869* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 167; and Joyce W. Warren, *Fanny Fern: An Independent Woman* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 328n3.

Methodism?”” hung thick in the air at annual conferences and in letters to the editors of periodicals. While many MEC leaders, like Nathan Bangs, were determined to elevate Methodism and to find a comfortable place within early republican American culture, a number of ministers and laypeople thought things had gone too far.

Croakers

As Methodists increased their membership, sought education, embraced science, and climbed social and political ladders around the country, some long-time Methodists, many of them current and former circuit preachers, began to voice their discomfort with these changes. Such grumblings were known as “croaking” and those disgruntled nostalgic preachers “croakers.” “Croaker” was an insult, and examples of anyone claiming the label for him or herself, especially in print, are extremely rare. Nevertheless, a number of mid-century publications, including circuit rider autobiographies, aimed to remind their audiences of the zeal of early American Methodists and at least hint, if not state forthrightly, that modern readers might do well to aspire to be more like their forebears. Gentility and refinement were main targets of their corrections-by-narration.

A number of concerned Methodists voiced their objections to current practices while explicitly distancing themselves from the label, such that the construction “I am not a croaker, but...” showed up repeatedly in periodicals and even in circuit rider autobiographies. Henry Boehm, a travelling companion of Francis Asbury, spent most of his 1866 autobiography—published when Boehm was nearly a nonagenarian—recounting stories from his travels and describing the character of his by-then-deceased friends, especially Asbury. However, he also could not help to contrast the MEC of his old age with that of his youth. Despite assuring the reader that “all my brethren know that I never belonged to the family of croakers,” summed up the croaker sentiment with blunt conciseness: “There was a power among the fathers, both in the ministry and laity, that we do not possess.”¹⁰¹

This “power,” as well as the frequently referenced “zeal,” was not always clearly defined, but if one thing was certain, it was that Methodists would not harness it by succumbing to the allures of gentility, especially attending balls or the theatre. *The Western Christian Advocate*,

¹⁰¹ Henry Boehm, *Reminiscences, Historical and Biographical, of Sixty-Four Years in the Ministry*, ed. Joseph B. Wakeley (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1865), 140.

published in Cincinnati, was a forum in which many of the most explicit complaints about gentility were expressed. Current and former circuit riders, many of them stationed in areas of the country that were still considered the frontier, comprised a sizable share of letter- and article-writers. William Simmons, a former itinerant who located in Cincinnati, wrote a letter to the editor of *The Western Christian Advocate* in which the croaker position and style—though not the label—was on full display. Simmons was responding to a previous article entitled “Methodist Balls,” in which the writer, “Nathan,” admitted to attending a ball. Simmons, who chided the editor for the alarming title, minced no words in describing the seriousness of such a sinful notion as a “Methodist ball”:

The idea of Methodists going to balls, or having them in their parlors, on a large or a small scale, is so perfectly at war with the spirit of religion, and all the rules and usages of the Methodist Episcopal Church, that certainly there is not an administrator of discipline among us, who would allow a member to remain in the Church three months guilty of the conduct named by brother Nathan; but it may be that the evil exists, (for we live in an age of wonders,) and may be Nathan has hit on the right plan to wake us up on the subject. In the meantime, I would say we train our children for the business we expect them to pursue in after life. If we wish them to serve God, be holy, and get to heaven when they die, we train them on Bible principles; but if we wish them to please the wicked and ungodly world, cut a dash while they live, and care not if they go to hell when they die, then we train them with reference to these things.¹⁰²

For Simmons, Nathan’s transgression was gravely serious not just because it was sinful, but because evinced participation in what Simmons saw as a disturbingly widespread trend: attraction, even among Methodists, to the pleasures of “the world” and a lack of zeal. Decades earlier, learning to dance or attending a ball would have been unthinkable, according to Simmons. The very fact that these activities no longer were unthinkable was perhaps more astonishing¹⁰³ than the acts themselves.

Simmons’s diagnosis of the problem was quintessential croaking. He blamed bad parenting (specifically mothering), drawing on familiar tropes of genteel women with poorly prioritized lives and too little care for their children’s spiritual well-being. It was not always so, though. “What a pity,” he wrote, “that our wives have not as much sense as our mothers had, who could learn their children to walk without the aid of a fine dancing master!”¹⁰⁴ These

¹⁰² Simmons, W. “Methodist Balls.” *Christian Advocate and Journal (1833-1865)* 23, no. 13 (Mar 29, 1848): 52.

¹⁰³ Simmons opened this piece by writing that he read Nathan’s article “with astonishment.”

¹⁰⁴ Simmons, “Methodist Balls,” 52.

problems were indicative of the age, but they also reflected the perverse values of big cities. Simmons dovetailed these two complaints when he lamented, “Well, I have been a traveling preacher for more than twenty-seven years, but never, no never, till I came to this great city, did I ever hear of Methodists sending their children to dancing school; but Madam Rumor says it is done here. Lord have mercy!” Simmons assured readers that the situation in Cincinnati was not widespread, but he did conclude with a very somber and apocalyptic caution, in which he cited another minister’s condemnation of balls as “snares for souls; destructive of chastity, modesty, and sometimes even of humanity itself.” The editor of the periodical affixed an addendum to the article, assuring the reader (and Simmons, presumably) that Nathan had been promptly “cut off” and “expelled from the Church.” He then admitted that “the appropriateness of the title [‘Methodist Balls’] was similar to *Methodist distilleries*, *Methodists selling grain to distillers*, *Methodist drunkards*, and the like.”¹⁰⁵

Grave warnings about the genteel sins of modern Methodists came not just from the West. In 1853 the *Christian Advocate* published a letter to the editor written by “A New-York Methodist” about Methodist visitors to New York City attending theatres. began, “Although I am no croaker nor alarmist, and am by no means prone to be righteous much in matters of indifference, I must confess that I am not a little anxious in view of the recent alarming increase of theatre-going among professors of religion, and even among members of the M.E. Church.” A New-York Methodist, once he had made sure his letter could not be classified as croaking, warned readers of new schemes and tricks, such as affixing a theatre to something more acceptable, like a travelling “menagerie of wild animals;” calling a theatre a “museum;” or creating dramas around some “pseudo-religious subject.” Having laid out these cautions, A New-York Methodist then ramped up his rhetoric, chastising Methodist visitors to New York for attending the theatre on their vacations, some of whom were seen “crying and laughing over ‘Uncle Tom!’” and “witnessing a *dance* by some half-naked French women.” Such Methodists “disgrace themselves in the eyes of their brethren,” “disgrace the cause of God, and bring reproach upon the Christian name.” He concluded by urging visitors to New York to avoid theatres, for the sake of their families, fellow Methodists, and “the dear bleeding cause of Christ.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ A New-York Methodist, “Theatre-Going Professors,” *Christian Advocate and Journal* (1833–1865); Dec 8, 1853; 28, 49.

Although concerns over proper behavior and warning against potential pitfalls, many Methodists were very hesitant to endorse an outright declension narrative. Articles refuting croakers' claims—and criticizing their character—began to be published as early as the 1830s. One piece, published by *Zion's Herald* in 1836, took a text,¹⁰⁷ “probably written by some old-fashioned, misanthropic croaker,” and offered point-by-point corrections. The writer began by brushing off croaking in general, remarking, “Just such things were said forty years ago, and in fact, have always been said. Just such things will be said forty years hence, and by certain persons, will always be said.” He then reprinted the croaker's main points, each of which began “*Forty years ago—*”, and replied to each in turn.

The croaker first argued that “*Forty years ago—*literature meant solid learning, and was supported by common sense. Refined nonsense had no advocates, and was pretty generally kicked out of doors.” The correction: “Literature means solid learning now, no less than it did forty years since; and it is as much supported by common sense now, as then. Refined nonsense had as many advocates then, as now, and more, other things being equal.” What is significant about this exchange is that the arguments against croaking were historical corrections noting that various situations actually had improved. The debunker had not a quibble with any croaked lamentation on the basis of morality or proper Methodist action. In response to the charge that forty years ago, “there was no such thing as balls in summer, and but few in winter—except snow balls,” he did not defend balls but instead informed the foggy that “Perhaps no kind of vain amusement has so much gone out of fashion during the last twenty years, as balls. Forty years since, they were very fashionable.”¹⁰⁸

Direct insults to croakers sometimes accompanied refutations of their claims. In the same way that the writer in *Zion's Herald* cited just above noted disdainfully that “certain people” would also have complaints, croaking often was chalked up to being simply the product of a particularly dour disposition. It said more about the croaker than about Methodism. “Among the motley group which to go make up the world,” one exceptionally derisive 1830 article noted, “few have made themselves more prominent and more dreadful than the croaker. He is ever dissatisfied with himself and all around him.” Making clear that croaking reflect a personality

¹⁰⁷ It is not clear if this text was manufactured by the article-writer as a sort of representative straw man against which to illustrate his points, or if it was a previously published article actually written by someone else. I was unable to locate the original article, if it indeed did exist.

¹⁰⁸ “Article 2—No Title,” *Zion's Herald (1823–1841)*; Feb 24, 1836; 7, 8; p. 30.

type and not the reality of Methodism, the article went on to discuss the various occupations of the croaker and his sentiments: “Is he an author, he cries down his contemporaries, and mourns over the general decay of literature...Is he a farmer, the crops are cut short, the pastures are dried up, the flocks and the herds are starving, poverty stares him in the face. Is he a politician, conspiracy, and anarchy, and death, are in the land...” The croaker mindset was exhibited not just by professional men. “Is she a beauty (for there are women croakers,) she reads its wane in the slightest compliment paid to another. Her pillow is haunted with horrible visions of old age and ugliness...”¹⁰⁹ This sort of *ad hominem* was common, and it appears to have been at least somewhat effective. Moreover, when croakers and non-croakers shared so many concerns—usually regarding Methodist zeal and piety and the threats of gentility thereupon—it was a necessary rhetorical move.

Croaking and, more present in the literature, opposition to croaking persisted even into the twentieth century. The writer in *Zion’s Herald* who predicted in 1836 that in forty years some still would be croaking about “forty years ago” was right, as evidenced by the advertisement for Newell Culver’s 1873 book *Methodism Forty Years Ago and Now*¹¹⁰ in the *Prohibition Herald* deemed it necessary to praise the author for presenting “the contrast between the social, numerical, and financial condition of ‘Methodism forty years ago and now’ and, notably, for doing so “in no spirit of a croaker.”¹¹¹

While croakers (and other Methodists) criticized “modern” times for being marked ineffectuality, defenders of Methodism leveled the same charge against croakers. Croaking was only talk, not action. “By neglecting exercise,” one writer in *Zion’s Herald* opined, “one may come to that state were all is seen through an atmosphere of gloom, where the eye seems indisposed to rest upon the good, and is fixed solely upon the bad.” Actually *doing* something was an effective cure for a negative outlook on the world. There was one exception to this maxim, though: “A little exercise, of almost any kind, except croaking, will give the world a better aspect.”¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ “The Croakers,” *Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion’s Herald* (1828–1833); May 28, 1830; 4, 39. p. 139.

¹¹⁰ Newell Culver, *Methodism Forty Years Ago and Now: Embracing Many Interesting Reminiscences and Incidents; Also, The Responsibilities, Present and Prospective, of the Methodist Episcopal Church, with an Introduction by Rev. Lorenzo D. Barrows, D.D.* (New York: Nelson and Phillips; Cincinnati: Hitchcock and Walden, 1873).

¹¹¹ Rev Newell Culver, Member of the New Hampshire Conference, “Methodism Forty Years Ago and Now; Embracing Many Interesting Reminiscences and Incidents. also, the Responsibilities, Present and Prospective, of the Methodist Episcopal Church,” *Christian Advocate* (1866–1905), Sep 10, 1874. 296.

¹¹² “Never Despair,” *Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal* (1842–1867); Mar 3, 1847; 18, 9.

Croakers were condemned, disparaged, and pathologized from a number of angles—their lack of action, their incorrect view of history, their out-of-touch-ness with contemporary culture, their generally sour disposition, and more—but, noticeably, their general sentiments about what Methodism ought to be (or was, in essence) rarely were a cite for disagreement. This was the dilemma of nineteenth-century Methodist identity politics. Few disputed that Methodism’s “spirit” or “essence” was to be found in Wesleyan piety, an ethic of self-denial, strong bonds in loving communities, and, above all, “zeal,” however construed. How, exactly, zeal was understood, was the subject of some contestation—the place of anti-slavery fervor in Methodism, for instance—and shifting. Overall, though, croakers and their debunkers most frequently debated facts rather than ideologies driving their inquiries. That is to say, discussions centered on what Methodists were like “*forty years ago*” as opposed to now (“now” being the 1830s, ‘40s, and ‘50s), not the terms on which those comparisons were made.

Although not many people self-identified as croakers, the sense that Methodism was undergoing a transformation was widespread. The first half of the nineteenth century facilitated remarkable numerical growth among American Methodists, but it also saw a number of splits, fissures, and crises. At stake in many of these debates was nothing less than what it meant to be a Methodist. “What is a ‘true’ Methodist?” was the question to which a myriad of preachers, historians, bishops, and writers provided their disparate answers. The “spirit” of Methodism could be found in any number of people, places, or actions, depending on who was making the case. What nearly everyone held in common, though, was a reverence toward the circuit rider. Individual circuit riders could be commended or condemned in turn, but the circuit rider as a character, a mythic figure, was unassailable. The final chapter of this thesis will examine the creation of this character and its uses, particularly through their numerous widely read mid-century autobiographies.

CHAPTER THREE

“...A GOOD STORY CANNOT BE TOO OFTEN TOLD...”:

MEMORY, AUTOBIOGRAPHY, AND THE CIRCUIT RIDER

The Methodist Preacher

In 1844, a short volume entitled *The Methodist Preacher; Or, Lights and Shadows in the Life of an Itinerant* was published, with anonymous authorship. The advertisement that opened the volume addressed the issue of authority and authorship head-on, citing not the reputation of the narrative’s writer but the “genuineness” of its content: “How the manuscript from which the following pages have been printed came into the hands of the publisher, need not here be told. Of the genuineness of the narrative, those most familiar with the trying duties of a Methodist Itinerant Preacher, can best judge. It has been sketched by one who is evidently no stranger to the subject he has presented.”¹¹³ The defense of the authenticity of the narrative rested on the writer’s ability to tell the right stories and to tell them the right way. The emphasis on “trying duties” indicates what was central to the imagination of itinerants’ lives.

Writing autobiographies and, more often, shorter personal narratives like conversion accounts was an important feature of Methodism beginning in the eighteenth century. John Wesley’s own account of his religious experiences—especially his “sanctification,” in which his heart was “strangely warmed”—was foundational to both Methodist theology and ways of writing. The conversion account, to which was added the “call to preach,” became staples of Methodists’ narrations of their own lives and their self-understandings. Over the course of the early nineteenth century, as more narratives were read and published, Methodist conversion stories became a sub-genre of their own. Certainly the conversion narrative and call to preach were not new forms: Methodists drew heavily from already-established stories and theology. However, the template these accounts followed became more specific as the narratives were produced and reproduced.

¹¹³ “Advertisement”, *The Methodist Preacher; Or, Lights and Shadows in the Life of an Itinerant* (Philadelphia, PA: J. Harmstead, 1844).

In addition to the narrative tropes of conversion, call to preach, and sanctification, other features of circuit rider autobiographies became standardized. This happened to such an extent that “the circuit rider” became a mythic character, and the idiosyncrasies of individual historical itinerants were largely sacrificed to memory. The purpose of this third chapter is to examine these processes of memory. In so doing, it will focus on the structures of the autobiographical narratives themselves, as well as some key themes, primarily hardship and self-denial, within them, which served as models for emulation. Former circuit riders remembered their experiences in autobiographical, episodic ways, but those memories were shaped by the occasions for remembering.

Memory, Tradition, and Story Circulation

Like any framework for interpretation, “the circuit rider life” was a learned format, both as a lived experience and as a literary tradition. These two categories are not entirely distinct. The importance of the *Discipline* attests to the regimentation of itinerants’ lives and that order’s impact on how they lived and how they thought and wrote about their lives and experiences.¹¹⁴ While Wesley, Asbury, Coke, and other leaders meant to be prescriptive in their explanations of Methodism and the Methodist “connexion,” the tropes and themes of itinerant life arose in less scripted ways as well. A clean distinction between “manufactured” and “organic” identities and practices is neither necessary nor tenable, but it should suffice to say that itinerants lives and their narrations thereof were highly constructed, though not always in a hierarchically top-down fashion.¹¹⁵

Methodist preachers told and retold stories and anecdotes of all types in their letters to each other and at conferences and meetings. The itinerant system was, in this sense, a community of memory producing an oral and written tradition. Explaining his concept of “social frameworks of memory,” Maurice Halbwachs maintained, “We preserve memories of each epoch in our lives, and these are continually reproduced; through them, as by a continual

¹¹⁴ The best secondary source for information on the *Discipline*, its doctrines, and its history is Frank Baker, “The Doctrines in the *Discipline*” in *Perspectives on American Methodism: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 46-61.

¹¹⁵ In this way, circuit rider autobiographies are an example of what Jan Assmann has identified as “cultural memory” (as opposed to psychological or social memory), which he has defined as a theory which “explores the textuality of the past within the linguistic framework of our experience of the world that hermeneutics has decoded for us.” See Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006 [orig. 2000]). Quotation from p. ix.

relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated.”¹¹⁶ This sense of identity is simultaneously individual and collective. Russell Richey, a Methodist historian who has argued persuasively that historians ought to take denominational distinctiveness more seriously,¹¹⁷ has made a similar point about early Methodism, asserting that “Methodism created, in itself, a new ethnicity, a new way of being people, a new structure for order.”¹¹⁸ These structures for order—prescriptions for the proper way to be in the world—necessarily entailed structured narratives.

Methodist autobiographies brim with conversion accounts. Many stories were structured around a preacher’s interactions with an individual—usually predisposed to disregard Methodism for some reason, such as a “hardened heart,” great wealth, education-induced arrogance, addiction to various vices, Calvinist beliefs, or some combination of these—who was provoked emotionally and, as a result, eventually converted. Everyone from humbled cynics to befuddled Calvinists to regretful drunkards, if they were so “moved,” could come to perceive and, more importantly, to feel the truth of Methodism. These accounts could happen only after another conversion: the autobiographer’s.

Not only did conversion narratives have structures, but so did Methodist itinerants’ autobiographies as a whole. The beginning of the book—which, almost without exception, was where the conversion narrative was situated—was the most routinized. Dee Andrews has written, “Following the revival meeting, the frequently solitary experience of conversion was the central drama of the new evangelical’s rebirth. Among Methodists, the event was intensified by the expectation of the paired experiences of justification and sanctification.”¹¹⁹ Most of the memoirs began with some brief facts about childhood, sometimes that the writer was brought up with “godly” parents and “received instruction” at an early age. However, the writer was often plagued by something, such as those listed above as causes of predispositions against Methodism. Then, the writer heard the “Gospel,” almost always from a Methodist preacher who has come through town. Hearing this preaching led to a feeling of “conviction,” prompting thoughts with which the writer wrestled for a spell, until a distinct conversion experience happened. Often the convert doubted the verity of conversion, for it could be just a trick of the

¹¹⁶ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 47.

¹¹⁷ See Robert Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Richey, eds., *Reimagining Denominationalism: Interpretive Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) and Russell E. Richey, “History as a Bearer of Denominational Identity: Methodism as a Case Study,” *Perspectives on American Methodism*, 480–497.

¹¹⁸ Russell E. Richey, “The Formation of American Methodism: The Chesapeake Refraction of Wesleyanism” in *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture*, 218.

¹¹⁹ Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 83–84.

mind or, worse, a trick of the devil. However, a feeling of assurance and peace eventually washed over the writer, and he (or, occasionally, she) is then able to know truly that the conversion had been true. This is to paint with a broad brush, and of course there are exceptions, but the majority of autobiographies began with some recognizable variation of these basic features.

However, there were subtle shifts in the ways these narratives were told, and these changes reflected middle-class sensibilities and Bangs-ian “respectability.” A decreased emphasis on dramatic conversions, spiritual dreams, and fantastic visions indicated mid-century Methodists’ concerted attempts to create a middle position between their respectable, reasonable present and their less restrained—perhaps proto-pentecostal is an apt descriptor—past. The case of Benjamin Abbott’s conversion narrative and its reception history illustrate these changes.

Abbott, whose conversion account was examined in the first chapter, was a central figure in what Ann Taves has called the Methodist “‘shout’ tradition.”¹²⁰ Shouting Methodists made two important innovations: “by pushing the Methodist performance tradition in a more interactive direction and by interpreting their bodily experiences in light of biblical typologies.”¹²¹ On one hand, this type of emotional performance, identified with zeal, was what Methodists in the refined age of the 1840s and 1850s wanted to recover. On the other hand, though, they distanced themselves from the more fantastic, ecstatic episodes and spectacular visions that would not have been well received by middle-class audiences. Zeal remained the central organizing theme of circuit rider autobiographies, but it eventually would be differently constructed. Visions like Abbott’s were mostly absent from the narratives published at mid century, but the emphasis on hardship remained and became even more crucial to the reimagined Methodist past and, by extension, the constructed essence of Methodism.

Circuit rider autobiographies told and retold stories to remember and imagine Methodism’s past. Croakers and defenders of “modernized” Methodism, though they were at odds over attitude, held much in common. Whether one thought American Methodism to be improving (by whatever standard) or worsening (by the same standard or a different one), the questions “What is Methodism?” and “What ought Methodism to be?” provided constant

¹²⁰ Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999). See chapter three, “Shouting Methodists” (76–117) and, on Abbott specifically, 92–95.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

discussion and debate. It is in this climate that circuit rider autobiographies proliferated. These narratives were ways to answer those two questions in two related ways.

Instructing and Instructive

First, circuit rider autobiographies presented a hagiographical past as a means of historical evidence for Methodism's essence. As was shown in chapter two of this thesis, the nineteenth century's middle decades were the setting for a great deal of consternation and anxiety among Methodists as well as non-Methodists. Economic and demographic changes, as well as conflicts over gentility, wealth, and social changes in family structure and gender roles shaped the conversations and self-constructions of many Americans of that century. A main goal of many itinerant autobiographies was to provide anecdotes and generalizations which would highlight the differences between mid-century Methodism and the MEC of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Second, the narratives were intended to inspire. As a part of what literary scholar Gregory Jackson has called the "homiletic tradition," Methodist memoirs utilized "the power of narrative" to teach "readers to interpret their own *lived* experiences according to spiritual templates."¹²² The life stories of the "heroes of Methodism"¹²³ were not just fun stories meant to entertain—though they often were that as well. Their authors hoped that by painting a picture of the heroic, self-denying early circuit riders their readers would be spurred on to seek after the same zealous piety. Circuit preachers were usually familiar with narratives of the same homiletic style—and, more so, the hermeneutical techniques for reading them—as evidenced by their reading patterns, encouraged by John Wesley himself, of homiletic narratives, which included Wesley's personal reflections, stories of famous missionaries, Christian history, and, significantly, each other's journals. Thus, circuit rider autobiographies evinced preachers' immersion in this homiletic literary tradition, steeped in the "aesthetics of immediacy,"¹²⁴ just as their narratives furthered its pedagogical aims.

¹²² Gregory S. Jackson, *The Word and Its Witness: The Spiritualization of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 92.

¹²³ Joseph Beaumont Wakeley, *The Heroes of Methodism, Contains Sketches of Eminent Methodist Ministers, and Characteristic Anecdotes of Their Personal History* (New York: Carlton and Phillips, 1856).

¹²⁴ Jackson, *The Word and Its Witness* uses the phrase "aesthetics of immediacy": "A particular way of seeing and narrating social reality that I call an 'aesthetics of immediacy' emerged as a project of self-education aimed at allowing all good Americans to live simultaneously in the United States and in Christ, simultaneously in history and outside time" (5). Jackson has traced this idea to Jonathan Edwards and his contemporaries, and has defined the term more clearly as "visual language, the personalization of religious narrative and doctrine, and the evocation of intense emotions,

Evangelical readers were accustomed to reading stories of progress, and they knew that their role as readers included placing themselves into the narrative and applying it to their lives. Methodist itinerants were readers before they were writers. They read stories in *The Life of David Brainerd*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, captivity narratives and missionary tales, John Wesley's journals, and the journals of their fellow preachers. The lines between allegorical and literal readings were blurry, and readers were encouraged to insert autobiographies' templates and, to use Gregory Jackson's term, "masterplots."¹²⁵ Jackson has noted that itinerants were participants in this reading tradition as well as propagators of it: "nineteenth-century itinerant evangelicals, especially among the poor or disempowered, reoriented existing paradigms of migration, reading the hardships of their journeys within the context of the Christian-pilgrimage template. The physical challenges that lay ministers...endured as they traveled the back roads of colony and nation, witnessing to the poor, became metaphors of Christlike suffering, at once literal and spiritual."¹²⁶ The former itinerant Charles Giles opened his memoirs with a some thoughts on the nature of biography, concluding that in a "religious biography the reader expects to find an account" of a person's own actions, as well as "how Providence has attended him from year to year. So," Giles continued, "these works are chiefly designed to proclaim the power of

especially fear—all of which...worked to create an intensely indentificatory structure" (17–18). This "indentificatory structure," which is a mode of reading just as much as a way of writing, is, I argue, a foremost way that Methodist itinerants understood their own self-narrations and how their audiences read, or were supposed to read, at least, their autobiographies.

See also David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), especially chapter 6, "How Readers Should Read" (113–129) and chapter 7, "How Readers Did Read" (131–149). According to Nord, mid-nineteenth-century groups like the American Tract Society republished "classic" texts like *Pilgrim's Progress* in order "to democratize tradition: they hoped to turn every family in the United States into an old-fashioned New England family reading circle" (128). Other helpful works on nineteenth-century (auto)biographical writing and reading include Ann Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000) and Scott E. Casper, *Constructing American Lives: Biography and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

¹²⁵ The second chapter of Jackson's *The Word and Its Witness* is entitled "Personalizing Progress: Spiritual Masterplots and Templates of Redemption" (89–156). Jackson has identified John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* as the key text in the creation and maintenance of the Protestant narrative of life progress: "As an *ur* template of homiletic forms, the story of Christian's pilgrimage became a universal one awaiting the overlay of personal details" (115).

¹²⁶ Jackson, *The Word and Its Witness*, 117. In this section Jackson focused largely on African American Methodists' narratives, especially that of Zilpha Elaw, because they best demonstrate his point about these narratives' similarities to captivity narratives. Like most works which lack a specific denominational focus, Jackson missed (for lack of interest, not necessarily unintended oversight) the historically located arguments undergirding the narratives and their production. Also, as a scholar of literature foremost, Jackson's book shows far more interest in the development of literary forms than Methodist history. Candy Gunther Brown has pointed out deathbed narratives bade the reader to place himself or herself into the story as well, arguing that they "invited the reader's emotional participation" (Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789–1880* [Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004], 91).

grace; and to show the various gifts and dealings of God to the children of men.”¹²⁷ These stories gave examples of the patterns of “Christian experience” and, further, how God dealt with humans. In this way, they encouraged the reader to step into the story and reimagine his or her own life according to the narratological framework laid out.

Mid-century Methodist circuit rider autobiographies belong to this tradition, but in them there was something much more specific also going on simultaneously. Specific, historical arguments—which were used as assertions of Methodism’s essence—drove the narratives. Literary scholars largely have missed the denominational context of these circuit rider autobiographies, whereas historians of Methodism generally have neglected to acknowledge the way these narratives fit into a longer and broader tradition of evangelical modes of writing and reading. In order to tell their stories with effective historical argumentation and, simultaneously, inspiring spiritual autobiography, Methodists memoirists played on contrasts between the “present” age and the MEC’s “golden” age (as the early nineteenth century frequently was called, sometimes sarcastically). Thus, hardships, abnegations, and privations played key roles in the twofold goal of informing the reader of Methodism’s past and, at the same time, offering guidance. Giles “was induced to believe,” after contemplation and some coaxing from friends, “that many things that have occurred in the course of his life, if published to the world, would be interesting to some, and instructive and beneficial to others, in passing along over the rough bridge of life, in the same world of care, toil, and perplexity.”¹²⁸

Hardship and Heroism

Prefaces, written by autobiographers, publishers, compilers, and/or editors, explained why the particular volume was being presented to the reader,¹²⁹ how readers were supposed to approach the text, and what the intended effect on the audience was. Namely, audiences were expected to be inspired to replicate the narratives—in a “spiritual” sense if not through literal actions—and perform the zealous piety of circuit riders. That zealous piety was manifest in several ways, but the two most constant tropes were hardship and an ethic of self-denial. These overlapping

¹²⁷ Charles Giles, *Pioneer: A Narrative of the Nativity, Experience, Travels, and Ministerial Labours of Rev. Charles Giles, Author of the “Triumph of Truth,” etc. with Incidents, Observations, and Reflections* (New York: G. Lane and P.P. Sandford, 1844), 7–8.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹²⁹ Many autobiographers included some remark about how they would not have written down their stories if it were not necessary to preserve history or if other people had not requested it. Jacob Young took an amusing tone, somewhere between apologetic and defiant, when explaining why his memoirs were being published. The preface opened, “What! another autobiography of an itinerant? Yes, my friend, another autobiography. And why should there not be another, and even still another” (Jacob Young, *Autobiography of a Pioneer: Or, the Nativity, Experience, Travels, and Ministerial Labors of Rev. Jacob Young, with Incidents, Observations, and Reflections* [Cincinnati: L. Swormstedt and A. Poe, 1857], 3)?

categories combined to construct “zeal,” the reinvigoration of which was the chief aim of circuit rider autobiographies. These dual themes had a number of common iterations, and were promoted, often quite explicitly, by the publishers and distributors of the stories.

John McLean’s introduction to *Sketch of Rev. Philip Gatch* illustrates the aims of Methodist itinerant autobiographies: to rewrite Methodism’s past and to inspire a particular “writing” of its future. “To those who feel an interest in the rise of Methodism in the country, the sketch can not fail to be interesting and instructive,” McLean offered. “Mr. Gatch showed traits of character eminently calculated to meet the exigencies of the time, and to inculcate and carry out the doctrines he preached. He had great firmness and perseverance, and was ready to suffer and die for the truth.”¹³⁰ McLean recognized the value of Gatch’s story as “interesting,” but the recommendation was for those with historical interest. Gatch was emplaced in his time, from which McLean acknowledged he and his readers were removed. However, Gatch’s life could also be “instructive” for those aspiring to emulate him. Foremost in this characterization of Gatch was his self-denying perseverance, as well as his willingness to endure hardship. Likewise, the publisher’s advertisement introducing Thomas Ware’s 1840 autobiography made clear the rationale for publication:

That influence under which an individual is led to persevere in a life of self denial and much labour for half a century or more without turning aside at any time must be presumed to constitute in a very eminent degree the principal element of his faith and practice. Hence are the biographies of the early Methodist preachers profitable to those who would imbibe their spirit and imitate their virtues those who would be primitive Methodists as well as interesting to all.¹³¹

The direct opposition between the characterization of Ware’s “life of self denial and much labour” and the “self indulgence” and “idleness” associated with nineteenth-century ineffectual gentility.

James B. Finley’s autobiography, edited by William Peter Strickland, who edited a number of other histories and memoirs, including Dan Young’s and Peter Cartwright’s,¹³² repeated the same themes:

¹³⁰ Gatch, *Sketch*, 3.

¹³¹ Thomas Ware, *Sketches of the Life and Travels of Rev. Thomas Ware, Who Has Been an Itinerant Methodist Preacher for More Than Fifty Years* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), 5.

¹³² Dan Young, *The Autobiography of Dan Young, A New England Preacher of the Olden Time*, ed. W.P. Strickland (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1860); Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright: The Backwoods Preacher*, ed. W.P. Strickland (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1856).

Our readers will here find, as they turn over these pages, much, we trust, that is interesting and valuable in reference to olden time; and while they shall trace the life and labors of the pioneer Methodist preachers, in planting the standard of the cross in these western wilds before many of them were born, we hope they may be induced to engage with like zeal and devotion, to sustain the interests of the Church, and hand down to posterity, unimpaired and unadulterated, what our fathers have so nobly contended for in the well-fought field of itinerant life.

The noble examples furnished in these sketches, of untiring labor and self-sacrificing devotion of those who cheerfully gave up all for Christ at the advancement of his cause, should stir up every impulse of our nature to emulate their virtues and strive to imitate their truly-heroic deeds.¹³³

Remarks about the link between hardship, self-denial, and zealous piety were not confined to prefaces and introductions overtly instructing the reader. Stories drawing on these themes saturate the narratives, of course, but writers frequently stepped back from the stories to make more direct points. Autobiographers often launched into sermonettes on their own hardships and their fears that their lifestyles would be forgotten as they became uncommon. For example, Charles Giles, in the middle of a simple narration of a new circuit assignment, included a page-long aside attesting that “no one can believe that wealth, ease, or honour was the object which induced men at that early day to desire a place in the travelling ministry.” He recounted their loneliness, physical difficulties, travels “over rough, miry roads, from settlement to settlement, having withal to preach twenty-five or thirty sermons every month. Why did they do it?” Giles asked. “The answer is obvious: To save souls that were like lost sheep in the wilderness, and to sow the word of God, that Bible religion might grow and flourish there. These self-denying pioneers laid the foundation of Methodism in this new country, at a great sacrifice. Do the young preachers, who now move round in village stations, know how Methodism first came to these places?—when and by it was planted there?” Giles went on to lament that these great men’s names were, with a few exceptions, being forgotten by a new generation of educated preachers with inadequate appreciation for or understanding of their progenitors.¹³⁴

Methodist preachers had been expressing concerns about failing to live up to their forerunners’ examples well before the genre of circuit-rider autobiography was burgeoning. Lack of hardship was central to these worries. In 1821 Bishop Enoch George wrote the itinerant Abner Chase a letter—which Chase reproduced as a sort of epilogue to his memoir—by asking,

¹³³ James B. Finley, *Sketches of Western Methodism: Biographical, Historical, and Miscellaneous Illustrative of Pioneer Life*, ed. W.P. Strickland (Cincinnati: Printed at the Methodist Book Concern, for the Author, 1854), 3.

¹³⁴ Giles, *Pioneer*, 169–170.

apparently very earnestly, “are we not, as ministers, departing from the spirit of the itinerant plan adopted by fathers and predecessors, who by voluntary sacrifices, zealous labors and perseverance, have taken the ground, and formed the greater part of North America?” If the earlier generation had fussed about their circuit assignments and, as Chase’s and George’s contemporaries did, had gone “murmuring because all things have not been made ready to their hands,” there would be no Methodists in North America, George reasoned.¹³⁵

David Hempton has argued that former circuit preachers “wrote the history of Methodism in ways that privileged their own contribution and thereby became guardians of the church’s collective memory.”¹³⁶ Nevertheless, the tropes and stories, and their import, developed by itinerants eventually were propagated by those who never knew Asbury, dressed in the traditional “Methodist style,” or rode a circuit. Publishers and editors frequently published portions of itinerants’ journals or memoirs, as Justice McLean did for Philip Gatch, but circuit rider stories were not at all confined to the itinerants’ own words. Biographers, historians, hagiographers, and even storytellers and novelists crafted narratives of early Methodism and Methodists in ways that drew heavily from the tropes and themes laid out in the autobiographical writings.

Joseph Beaumont Wakeley, a Methodist minister stationed in various locales in New York and New Jersey, developed a keen interest in early American Methodism. This interest led him to publish several volumes, including, in his later years, books of anecdotes regarding the Wesleys and George Whitefield. Much of Wakeley’s work was the result of his familiarity with the tradition of circuit rider autobiographies. Whereas many autobiographers tended to express some modesty and humility while telling their tales, Wakeley felt no such compunction. His first book-length publication, *Heroes of Methodism*, a work whose rhetoric scarcely could be called understated, evinces the centrality of hardship of self-denial and those virtues’ association with zeal and piety, in the minds of so many mid-century Methodists.

Wakeley introduced the book by posing and answering, “But what is true heroism? And who are the true heroes? True heroism ‘*is the sacrifice of self for the good of others,*’ says the Rev. William Arthur. Then the self-sacrificing man for the good of his race is the *real* hero.”¹³⁷ He then went on to sketch a constructed genealogy of the heroes of “the Church,” beginning with

¹³⁵ Abner Chase, *Recollections of the Past* (New York: Published for the Author, 1846), 146.

¹³⁶ Hempton, *Methodism*, 149.

¹³⁷ Wakeley, *Heroes of Methodism*, iii.

Moses and Joshua, moving to Hebrew prophets, then, “in the days of the Apostles, Stephen and Paul; afterward Wickliff and Zwingle, Luther and Knox, Wesley and Whitefield, Coke and Asbury...The subjects of this work were heroes in the loftiest sense of the word.”¹³⁸ Rather than a compendious history, Wakeley preferred to stick to anecdotes, since they “have at all times been read with deep interest, because they show the disposition of the men, and furnish us with a key to their character...[and] will not only interest the reader at the time, but will awaken in his soul a desire to know more of the person concerning whom it is related.”¹³⁹

Heroes of Methodism was a compilation of anecdotes, some written by Wakeley, some borrowed from published sources, and some submitted to him by Methodist preachers, bishops, and even a U.S. Supreme Court Justice (John McLean, who edited Philip Gatch’s memoirs). Wakeley spent some pages in the preface explaining his methods and reasons for constructing the book, even reprinting some positive letters from bishops who, in Wakeley’s words, “highly approve of a book of this kind,” if not “*this* work, for they have not read it.” An additional legitimating move was in order. “There is one thing to comfort the reader: the anecdotes are not fictitious, the incidents are not apocryphal. They are not manufactured to make a book.”¹⁴⁰

Despite these various sources, the stories maintained noticeable consistency in themes, structures, and messages. Unsurprisingly, the volume teems with toils and privations, self-denial and zeal. By using stories rather than sermonizing, Wakeley’s clear points about true heroism could be made without sounding like croaking. Embedding moral instruction into narrative eased the sting of direct condemnation. Characters, though, were not always spared. For instance, when a “young lady” “dressed most fashionably” approached Jacob Gruber to thank him for converting her some time earlier (this story-type was a standard motif¹⁴¹), the itinerant replied, “if you were the Lord’s, you would not be dressed so fine, nor have those posies in your hat.”¹⁴²

Henry Boehm was a traveling companion of Francis Asbury, a circuit preacher from one of the earliest generations of American Methodists. In 1847, after years of intent to do so, the New Jersey Conference created a committee to help Boehm collect his papers and craft his autobiography. The members of that committee, though were, in Boehm’s words, “too widely

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid., iv.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., vi–vii.

¹⁴¹ See Byrne, *No Foot of Land*, 151–154.

¹⁴² Wakeley, *Heroes of Methodism*, 462.

separated for any effectual result.”¹⁴³ For years Boehm’s recollections and records went unpublished, and fewer and fewer circuit preachers from his generation were left alive. Asbury died in 1816. The number of people who had known him, much less spent years traveling with him, dwindled by the 1850s. Eventually, none other than Joseph Wakeley contacted Boehm and offered his hours of services, transcribing Boehm’s stories, sorting through “a manuscript journal of two thousand pages,” and crafting from all this data a cogent narrative. The result was Boehm’s 1866 autobiography, *Reminiscences, Historical and Biographical, of Sixty-Four Years in the Ministry*. Boehm introduced his memoirs by concisely highlighting the themes which have driven this chapter: “From [this book] the reader may get a good idea of primitive Methodism, and learn how our fathers toiled and ‘endured hardness as good soldiers,’ and some, I trust, will catch their spirit of labor and self-denial for Christ and the Church.”¹⁴⁴

Celibacy, Castration, and Itinerants’ Wives

By this point, the general importance of hardships should be clear. But an examination of a few specific issues should illustrate the way that Methodist itinerants’ self-narrations were employed to make political, denominational arguments. One example of itinerants’ difficulties, and one that changed significantly throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, was celibacy. To talk of celibacy as a hardship in early Methodism might have seemed strange to leaders like Asbury, who saw celibacy as a pragmatic necessity for successful ministry to a circuit. Members of circuits were supposed to be itinerants’ families, and fostering the family bond among the “brotherhood” of itinerants as well as the circuit was an essential aspect of Methodism’s method. In addition to the unifying practice of the love-feast, preachers often slept in houses where they preached, ate meals with the homeowners, and generally acted like one of the family.

This closeness was occasionally challenged, both by circuit preachers and by those uncomfortable with such familiarity. Cynthia Lynn Lyerly has noted that in the South, Methodists faced resistance when they “violated unspoken southern rules about privacy or personal space, rules closely related to the code of honor.”¹⁴⁵ Particularly in regions less prosperous, where a household’s space and resources often were limited, putting up a hungry man in his early twenties for a day or two was quite an imposition. Resistance increased, of

¹⁴³ Henry Boehm, *Reminiscences, Historical and Biographical, of Sixty-Four Years in the Ministry*, ed. Joseph B. Wakeley (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1866), 5.

¹⁴⁴ Boehm, *Reminiscences*, 6.

¹⁴⁵ Lyerly, *Methodism and the Southern Mind*, 150.

course, in cases where one member of the household, often the husband, was less interested in Methodism than others in the home were.

Having to rely on generosity was not easy for circuit preachers either. Though the preachers were hesitant to complain and thus seem ungrateful, they occasionally took to their journals to express private complaints. Henry Bascom minced no words in his journal when he complained in March of 1814, “Tried to study, but too much confusion, tried to pray in the family, but felt too dull—tried to eat breakfast, but the victuals were too dirty for any decent man to eat. The old man is an idiot, the old woman a scold, one son a drunkard, the other a sauce-box, and the daughter a mother without a husband.”¹⁴⁶

Usually, though, uncomfortable conditions, when not due to the incompetence or sinfulness of the hosts, were cheerfully accepted—especially after the fact—as more happy toils of Methodist life. One travelling preacher, who identified himself only as “One of Many,” penned a letter to the editor of the *Christian Advocate and Journal* in 1831 outlining some basic guidelines for how hosts ought and ought not to treat their preacher-guests. In the letter, which gushed with gratefulness and politeness, he made only four requests, but listed nine embarrassments he did not wish. The latter category included that he did not wish “to be applauded in my own presence,” “to hear the good people make excuses concerning the inferiority of their accommodations,” or that “the families me to prepare any better food for me than they do generally for themselves. Only let it be clean.”¹⁴⁷

Likewise, Henry Smith recounted a story in which he stayed with a family and prayed for their sick daughter, Polly. In the midst of the story, Smith noted that he denied the host couple’s offer to give up their bed, and so they set him up with some bearskins on the floor. He was exceedingly grateful, proclaiming that “if Solomon, in all his glory, was ever happier on a bed of down than I was on the bear-skins, he must have been happy indeed!” “But the most of our sweets,” he admitted, “are mixed with some bitters”:

A tribe of busy, hungry insects, who had possession of the bear-skins long before I had, came out upon me, and contended earnestly for their rights, and annoyed me very much; but they could not disturb my piece of mind. The next morning I was up early, and found Polly free from fever, and in a comfortably state of mind.

¹⁴⁶ Rev. M.M. Henkle, *The Life of Henry Bidleman Bascom, D.D., LL.D., Late Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (Louisville, KY: Morton & Griswold, 1854), 58.

¹⁴⁷ “What I Wish and What I Do Not Wish,” *Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion’s Herald (1828–1833)*; Jul 8, 1831; 5, 45; p. 177.

She pitied me, because I had such a restless night; for I had kept up a pretty constant, although fruitless, combat with my enemies.¹⁴⁸ Smith's readers must have imagined the crawling army, the infested bear skins, and the young preacher tossing throughout the night. With such a picture, the juxtaposition with Smith's rapturous response is even more striking. Such inconveniences were trifling, since—and this was the point of including the anecdote where it was—Smith had higher purposes, namely, praying for the healing of a young girl (who herself seems more concerned about his sleep than her illness). Walter Brownlow Posey, a historian and one of William Warren Sweet's students, writing in the 1930s, tapped into the trope of restless nights when he painted this picture for his readers: "Facing dangers such as the average frontiersman did not encounter, the circuit rider as a rule was as hale and hardy as the folk who gathered so eagerly about him. Doubtless the night before had been spent in a cabin, infested with bed bugs, fleas and itchy children, yet, he was fresh for his work, strong in purpose and tireless in effort."¹⁴⁹ Squalid accommodations became indicators not only of early Methodist virtuous poverty, but they set a more dramatic stage for single-minded itinerants to accomplish their noble tasks, despite the difficulties that followed them all day and, of course, all night as well.

Circuits were not always satisfactory families, and many of the itinerancy's young men desired, more or less openly, to marry and raise children of their own. Marriage among itinerants was a contentious topic for decades. Wives, according to Wesley and Asbury, could be distractions.¹⁵⁰ They required time, attention, and money, three things of which early circuit preachers had little to spare. Early on, that is, until the 1810s, celibacy was encouraged strongly, and those preachers who located—often to marry—maintained higher status in the Methodist Connection. In the cases in which preachers did begin to feel an urge to marry, usually prompted not by a general desire but by a particular woman, they felt torn between their feelings and their fidelity to the Methodist cause.¹⁵¹ Most tried to avoid temptation as much as they could bear to do. As a result, singlehood among itinerants was the norm. At Virginia's Annual Conference in 1809, of the eighty-four preachers in attendance, all but three were unmarried.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Henry Smith, *Recollection and Reflections of an Old Itinerant: A Series of Letters, Originally Published in the Christian Advocate and Journal and the Western Christian Advocate*, ed. George Peck (New York: Carlton and Phillips, 1851), 318–319.

¹⁴⁹ Walter Brownlow Posey, *The Development of Methodism in the Old Southwest, 1783–1824* (Tuscaloosa, AL: Weatherford Printing Company, 1933), 22.

¹⁵⁰ See chapter one above.

¹⁵¹ See Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 217–219.

¹⁵² Lawrence, *One Family Under God*, 151.

No one took these sentiments quite so far as Jeremiah Minter, who, in his words, “from a desire to live entirely to the Lord Jesus, and a willingness to die for him, and from St. Paul’s advice, and the words of Christ too, to devote myself entirely to the Lord in a single life, and never marry...by the aid of a surgeon, became an *eunuch for the kingdom of heaven’s sake*.”¹⁵³ Minter’s radical action was likely the result of accusations that he had been sexually involved with a married woman. Though speculation about any affair—at least any ongoing one—was quieted, Asbury banned Minter from riding his circuit, only later to allow him to be a local preacher. As John Wigger has argued, “Giving Minter even this much leeway reveals his colleagues’ ambivalence about what he had done.”¹⁵⁴ Minter got the sentiment right, but the execution was a bit off.

Some early itinerants were able to have it both ways, marrying and continuing to ride their circuits, but these were rare exceptions to the rule. The most famous example was Freeborn Garrettson, who married Catherine Livingston, of the very wealthy Livingston family of upstate New York, after she heard him preach, and the two “read one another’s journals and even had the same religiously inspired dreams.”¹⁵⁵ Garrettson was the chief organizer of the Methodist Connection in New York, and was spared the frequent relocations forced upon most itinerants. Garrettson could make brief trips around the area, oversee other itinerants, and then return home, eventually raising a family and remaining in the same spot for nearly four decades—a perk of his friendship with Asbury and, likely, the status of his wife’s family.

Gradually, the ubiquity of bachelorhood in the Connection waned. Some preachers even began to travel with wives. William Burke was, in his words, “the first married preacher that had ever attempted to travel with what the people and preachers called the incumbrance of a wife.” This decision was met with resistance, and, he wrote, “every thing was thrown in my way to discourage me. The presiding elder thought I had better locate; for, he said, the people would not support a married man.” Burke’s wife, though, was remarkably supportive, and she “wrought with her own hands, and paid her board, and clothed herself.” Because his helpful spouse was not the “incumbrance” many had feared she would be, Burke’s critics were silenced.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Jeremiah Minter, *A Brief Account of the Religious Experience, Travels, Preaching, Persecutions from Evil Men, and God’s Special Helps in the Faith and Life, etc. of Jerem. Minter, Minister of the Gospel of Christ, Written by Himself, in His 51st Year of Age* (Washington City: for the author, 1817), 13.

¹⁵⁴ Wigger, *American Saint*, 136.

¹⁵⁵ Wigger, *American Saint*, 179. For more on Garrettson and Livingston, see *American Saint*, 178–181.

¹⁵⁶ Finley, *Sketches*, 53–54.

As the nineteenth century wore on, marriage eventually became more common among itinerants, even as they traveled. Charity Carney has written about the gradual shift in attitudes toward ministers' marriages, particularly in the South, noting that the MEC recommended celibacy but then backpedaled just a bit, "telling them to only choose wives who could live on little to nothing. This shift in rhetoric occurred in the 1820s and 1830s and reveals the gradual recognition of southern values regarding masculinity and patriarchy and the changing conditions of the itinerancy."¹⁵⁷ Carney's regional focus ought not to obscure the fact that rhetoric and official positions of the MEC became more lenient toward itinerants' marriages throughout the country.

Because of the demands of their jobs, itinerants were advised to look for certain qualities in prospective wives. Likewise, periodicals like *The Ladies' Repository* gave advice to young women who might be considering marriage to a preacher. One article, written in 1848 by an aging itinerant still seeking a wife, noted that "a wife, a good wife, and a good wife for an itinerant preacher, are three quite distinct things." The writer noted the shift in attitudes toward preachers' marriages, lamenting his unfortunate timing: "Early in my itinerancy, I would have been easily suited; but you know, in olden times there was a dreadful rule in the Discipline, which compelled our youthful clergy to adjourn, at least for a season, all hopes of tasting the blessedness of wedded life." Some of his fellow preachers had married anyway, and many made poor selections. Having seen both good and bad selections, the writer, "A Seeker," felt "considerable solicitude on the subject" of what a good wife for an itinerant was like: she was "pious" ("of the operative, cross-bearing kind"), "intelligent," "Methodist—not only in form, but also in fact...not merely from convenience or interest, but from principle," "industrious," "prudent," "of an excellent family," and, "last, though not least, she is rich."¹⁵⁸

"A Seeker" was not alone in his envisioning an ideal woman. In fact, by the 1840s, "The Itinerant's Wife" was becoming a revered character in Methodist literature. Notably, some of her most praiseworthy traits—piety, industriousness, hardship, and a penchant for self-denial—were the same characteristics celebrated in circuit riders. At least three different poems were

¹⁵⁷ Carney, *Ministers and Masters*, 71.

¹⁵⁸ A Seeker, "A Wife for an Itinerant," *Ladies Repository, and Gathering of the West (1841-1848)*; Apr 1848; 8, p. 101. A Seeker concluded by admitting that such a woman existed, though he had "only seen her in a dream...and my dream, unfortunately, neither revealed her name, nor declared her habitation." He then entreated his readers, with a note of desperation, "I wish you, therefore, not only to tell me whether I may form an alliance with her, but tell me, also, *where I can find her, and whether I can get her*. Dear brethren, answer me speedily..."

published in various Methodist magazines under the same title, “The Itinerant’s Wife.” One such poem, a eulogy of sorts written by “An Itinerant’s Daughter,” told the life story of the title character. Such a life commenced with her self-denying decision to leave her parents’ household and “tread a path of toil and care,” “layeth by her girlish ways,” and live “a pure, devoted life,” became more difficult with age (“her duties grow/More heavy, but her strength is gone;/But that the others may not know,/She meekly toileth on and on”), and ended with her death, underappreciated:

Her years the bell rings on the air,
We wonder they so soon are told,
For there was silver in her hair,
And we had thought that she was old
We say, “‘Tis well that she hath died,
For she was weak and frail at best;
He soon will find another bride,
One of more zeal and strength possessed.”
We speak with dry and careless tone,
He and his children grieve alone.¹⁵⁹

Death of a Circuit Rider

Coming full circle, An Itinerant’s Daughter’s poem drew on tropes already associated with the circuit rider and applied them to their wives. Obituaries often brought together the themes of this chapter—hardship, zeal, self-denial, the fear of forgetting, and the importance of remembering. A few short anecdotes sometimes were the only remembrances left of the “fathers of Methodism,” especially in the west, James Finley lamented. “So far as a connected biography is concerned the most that we can find is the bare announcement, on the Minutes of the various fields of labor, occupied by the preachers from year to year, and then, at the close of their earthly labors, a short obituary, embracing but a meager outline of their life and labors, and the circumstances connected with their death. But even this is denied the toil-worn soldier, should he be found in the local ranks, when death calls to take him home.”¹⁶⁰

Methodist periodicals and local newspapers frequently published obituaries for recently deceased circuit riders. These memorials, especially in Methodist publications, often were noticeably similar in mood and language to the prefaces to their autobiographies, stressing hardship, self-denial, and zeal. An obituary for Hezekiah Smith in the *Western Christian*

¹⁵⁹ “The Itinerant’s Wife,” *Christian Advocate and Journal* (1833-1865); Jun 4, 1863; 38, 23; p. 179.

¹⁶⁰ Finley, *Sketches*, 231.

Advocate tellingly assumed its readers would associate itinerancy with hard work and assured them of the Smith's disinclination toward idleness, even in poor health: "For 25 years he performed the arduous labors of a pioneer Methodist itinerant. In 1862 he was compelled, by reason of failing health, to ask for a supernumerary relation, which he sustained till the close. He could not be idle, however, and thought not able for the regular work he was abundant in labors, helping his brethren and preaching as health and opportunity permitted."¹⁶¹ Obituaries like this demonstrated the centrality of suffering to the life of an itinerant. An 1822 obituary for Platt P. Morey centralized the role of hardship in the relationship between body and soul, noting that Morey's "corpse was taken to Detroit, where it was deposited to await a re-union at the final resurrection, with its partner in labour and suffering."¹⁶² In her history of American obituaries, Janice Hume noted that in the years after the Civil War, "obituaries no longer dwelled on the act of dying or its religious implications—death had become far too familiar." By 1870, the *New York Times* almost never gave into "sentimentality about death," a common feature of their death notices in previous decades. Only one obituary in that year "sought to romanticize death, an obituary for an elderly Methodist minister."¹⁶³

Circuit riders' wives often were remembered in similar ways. Esther Newhall "shared the privations, labors and sufferings of an itinerant life" with her husband and in so doing "happily exemplified the purity and power of that Gospel, in the spread of which her heart was so deeply interested." Just as Francis Asbury thought only of others even on his deathbed and greeted his last breaths peacefully,¹⁶⁴ Esther Newhall, long-suffering with an "extreme" illness which included "internal ulcerations" and "a diseased heart," would lie "without sleep or rest, amid the most trying scenes," "without a murmur or a groan, often remarking that her sufferings were great, but not so great as others; and when compared with what Christ had suffered for her, not worthy to be mentioned."¹⁶⁵ Wives were "help-meets" in the toil of the itinerancy, and thus often constructed themselves—and were constructed by others—with the same themes of itinerant Methodist life and piety. Their work was arduous, and their sacrifices were great as

¹⁶¹ Isaac Pattison, "Smith," *Western Christian Advocate* (1834–1883); Jan 14, 1880; 47, 2, pg. 15.

¹⁶² "Death of Platt P. Morey," *The Methodist Magazine* (1818–1828); Apr 1, 1822; 5, pg. 159.

¹⁶³ Janice Hume, *Obituaries in American Culture* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), 77.

¹⁶⁴ See chapter one of this thesis, tk 20n36. John Wesley Bond was with Asbury when he died, and he reported, "he lifted his head towards Heaven in token that he should soon be there. I then asked him if he found that Jesus was present? When he raised both his hands towards Heaven with an expression which I shall never forget. He then without a groan or complaint, fell asleep in the arms of his Saviour" (Bond, "Rev. Francis Asbury").

¹⁶⁵ Ray Putnam, "Obituary 1" *Zion's Herald and Wesleyan Journal* (1842–1867); Mar 6; 21, 10, pg. 40.

well. Sophia Blake, though from a well-off Congregationalist family, married an itinerant and “literally forsook all to devote herself to the cause of God with her spiritual father.”¹⁶⁶

If autobiography is, as Paul John Eakin has suggested, “a discourse of identity” which “structures our living,” then a recapitulation of that life ought to be more consciously and specifically structured.¹⁶⁷ “Narratives,” after all, “are emplotted in a way that life is not.”¹⁶⁸ Obituaries and autobiographies share an important frame of reference and, often, a common ambition. Both aim to arrange a life *post facto* into something coherent, identifiable, and even reified.¹⁶⁹ It is noteworthy, then, that these two types of texts were similar when remembering Methodist itinerants. Autobiographies and obituaries ostensibly were referents to the same data set: itinerants’ lives. However, the parallels between autobiographical, biographical, hagiographical, and historical writings—in their various forms, including obituaries, anecdotes, “sketches,” and, of course, full autobiographies—were not due simply to a universally objective reading of the facts themselves. Instead, these narratives depended on styles of narration and modes of reading, ways of constructing and understanding stories, as much as the data set which formed the stories’ contents.

By casting themselves in the starring roles of Methodist history, circuit riders preserved their place in Methodist memory, but they also effectively flattened it. Zealous piety, self-denying labors, and heroic hardship had become markers of a mythic character. Even particular stories became standardized by the process of oral and written recitation and reproduction. With few exceptions—made usually due to institutional status, extreme eccentricity, or some sort of nefariousness—individual circuit riders were not remembered, especially among those not heavily invested or interested in Methodist history, as distinctive from one another in many ways other than name. William Strickland wrote of Jacob Gruber, “His whole life was full of incident.

¹⁶⁶ V.A. Cooper, “Mrs. Sophia Blake,” *Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal*, 38, 11 (Mar 13, 1867) pg. 44. For other obituaries of circuit riders’ wives, see E.A. Smith, “Memoirs: Mary Elizabeth Stubbs,” *Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal*, 37, 33 (Aug 15, 1866), pg. 132 and G.W. Warner, “Mrs. Matilda Smith,” *Western Christian Advocate (1834–1883)*; 36, 32 (Aug 11, 1869), pg. 251.

¹⁶⁷ Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 4.

¹⁶⁸ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 8.

¹⁶⁹ A number of works explore the concept of “narrative identity” from a variety of angles, including cognitive psychology and literary studies. See, for example, Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993); Mark Freeman, *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative* (New York: Routledge, 1993); and Dan P. McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich, eds. *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative* (American Psychological Association, 2006). For a less scholarly but nevertheless insightful (and enjoyable) take on these issues, see Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).

Possessed as he was of such a striking individuality of character, it may be safely affirmed, that among all the varieties found in the ministerial ranks he stands alone. There are not many Cartwrights or Finleys; there was but one Gruber.”¹⁷⁰ Nevertheless, other than its protagonist being somewhat wittier and more outspoken, Gruber’s narrative mostly follows the same format as any other. In the same way, Joseph Wakeley’s *Heroes of Methodism* concludes with a eulogistic poem for Gruber that, despite Gruber’s acknowledged exceptionality, repeated the same tropes, even using the same words, as memories of any other circuit rider (and, as above, some itinerants’ wives).

Rest from thy labours, rest!
Warrior, resign thy trust;
The mem’ry of thy name is blest.
The mem’ry of the just.
A star is lost below,
An orb is found above,
To spread snow the burning glow
Of everlasting love.

For threescore years and ten
He walk’d the earth till even;
For fifty years he offer’d men
Salvation, life, and heaven.
Then to his promised rest
He turn’d with faltering tread,
And found on the Redeemer’s breast
A place to lay his head.

Fallen—at close of day;
Fallen—beside his post;
At sunset came the bright array,
The chariots and the host.
With triumph on his tongue,
With radiance on his brow,
He pass’d with that exulting throng,
And shares their glory now.

Warrior, thy work is done!
Victor, the crown is given!
The jubilee at last begun,
The jubilee of heaven.
Rest from thy labours, rest!
Rise to thy triumph, rise!

¹⁷⁰ William Peter Strickland, *The Life of Jacob Gruber* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1860), 4.

And join the anthems of the blest,
The Sabbath of the skies.¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ Wakeley, *Heroes of Methodism*, 468.

EPILOGUE

On Being a Character

By the latter half of the nineteenth century, “the circuit rider” was a well-established character. Methodist itinerants’ ubiquity in the early republic had made most Americans aware of Methodists and their circuit system and the young men which fueled it like kindling. Circuit preachers were encouraged, sometimes via deliberate efforts like the *Discipline*, to standardize their personalities, self-understandings, and self-narrations. Many of these forms were solidified by the spate of circuit rider autobiographies published in the nineteenth century’s middle decades, which were themselves a reaction to tensions among Methodists and borne of a desire to call “the church back to the zeal of its earlier, less refined days.”¹⁷²

In the years around the Civil War, circuit rider narratives began emphasizing their distinct western-ness. This signaled a gradual fusing of western folklore and mythologies with Methodist ones. From Peter Cartwright’s self-identification as “the backwoods preacher” and Jacob Finley’s *Sketches of Western Methodism* to the rise of Cincinnati publishing houses and the *Western Christian Advocate* (also printed in Cincinnati), American Methodism, in fact and in literature, took on an increasingly western flavor.¹⁷³ Edward Eggleston—the famous late-nineteenth-century novelist, educator, and historian (and president of the American Historical Association in 1900)—began his career as a Methodist circuit rider in Indiana and Minnesota during the 1850s and 1860s. His novel *The Circuit Rider: A Tale of the Heroic Age*, which originally appeared in serial in the *Christian Union* in the early 1870s, was a celebration of frontier life and “back-woods” preaching. Eggleston’s focus on “country life,” perhaps a prefiguring of American regionalism,¹⁷⁴ appealed to readers who wanted to imagine the charms of the old West and religion’s, specifically Methodism’s, prominent place on the frontier. “In a true picture of this life,” Eggleston opined, making an argument quite similar William Warren

¹⁷² Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm*, 181.

¹⁷³ Catherine L. Albanese, “Savage, Sinner, and Saved: Davy Crockett, Camp Meetings, and the Wild Frontier,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 5, Special Issue: American Culture and the American Frontier (Winter, 1981), 482–501. Despite some outdated “psychologizing,” Albanese identified some major tropes of western folklore, and convincingly connected “the frontier *mentalité*” of Davy Crockett stories with Methodist circuit rider narratives, especially those of Peter Cartwright (492–496).

¹⁷⁴ See Mark Storey, “Country Matters: Rural Fiction, Urban Modernity, and the Problem of American Regionalism,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 65, no. 2 (September 2010): 192–213.

Sweet's notion of churches as "moral courts,"¹⁷⁵ "neither the Indian nor the hunter is the centerpiece, but the circuit-rider. More than any one else, the early circuit preachers brought order out of this chaos. In no other class was the real heroic element so finely displayed."¹⁷⁶

Lest anyone think Eggleston's fiction was unrealistic, he began from the outset, "Whatever is incredible in this story is true. The tale I have to tell will seem strange to those who know little of the social life of the West at the beginning of this century...But the books of biography and reminiscence which memory of that time more than justify what is marvelous in these pages."¹⁷⁷ Reviewers agreed; one assessed *The Circuit Rider* as "full of human nature" and "true to the life," high praise considering the source, *The Phrenological Journal and Science of Health*.¹⁷⁸ Eggleston himself could attest to the veracity of his story since he himself had ridden a circuit. He expressed his impetus for doing so in terms that clearly showed he had gotten the point: he read (and listened) for historical accuracy *and* inspiration:

How do I remember the forms and weather-beaten visages of the old preachers, whose constitutions had conquered starvation and exposure—who had survived swamps, alligators, Indians, highway robbers and bilious fevers! How was my boyish soul tickled with their anecdotes of rude experience—how was my imagination wrought upon by the recital of their hair-breadth escapes! How was my heart set afire by their contagious religious enthusiasm, so that at eighteen years of age I bestrode the saddle-bags myself and laid upon a feeble frame the heavy burden of emulating their toils!¹⁷⁹

Eggleston admitted the impossibility "to write of this heroic race of men without enthusiasm," but also strove, as all novelists ought, "with his whole soul to produce the higher form of history, by writing truly of men as they are, and dispassionately of those forms of life that come with his scope."¹⁸⁰

The character of the circuit rider had become so established and specific that in 1933 Walter Brownlow Posey, a historian and former student of William Warren Sweet's, felt able to

¹⁷⁵ William Warren Sweet, "The Churches as Moral Courts of the Frontier," *Church History* 2, no. 1 (March 1933): 3–21.

¹⁷⁶ Edward Eggleston, *The Circuit Rider: A Tale of the Heroic Age* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1878), vi.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, v.

¹⁷⁸ "The Library," *The Phrenological Journal and Science of Health (1870-1911)*; 58, no. 6 (Jun 1874), 407.

¹⁷⁹ Eggleston, *The Circuit Rider*, vi.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, vi–vii. As noted above, Eggleston took the role of historian seriously. In 1900 he was president of the AHA, and in 1896 his *The Beginners of a Nation: A History of the Source and Rise of the Earliest English Settlement in America with Special Reference to the Life and Character of the People* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1896) was published. Eggleston also had great interest in education of young people, publishing multiple history textbooks and books of historical anecdotes for young readers, including his brilliantly illustrated *The Household History of the United States and Its People for Young Americans* (New York: D. Appleton and Co, 1888).

write about “the circuit rider” in the singular with marked specificity with regard to clothing and appearance:

[H]is complete appearance was prepossessing and his whole attire suggested rigidity...Indeed his very presence checked levity, and from his entrance to the altar the congregation sat expectantly.

He was a man who spent most of his time for others; yet, within himself, lived apart. Even his appearance marked him as a clergyman. A child could recognize a parson’s attire of long, double breasted coat of dingy black, with short breeches and long stockings. Hair parted in the middle and hanging long to the shoulders accentuated ‘his chaste and sanctified look’ and added to the naturally haggard and pale face caused by scant food and frequent exposure.¹⁸¹

Posey’s focus on the circuit rider’s hair and clothing was in keeping with early American Methodists’ emphases as well. In some 1744 instructions from John Wesley republished in later editions of the *Discipline*, he advised Methodists “to wear no needless ornaments, such as rings, earrings, necklaces, lace, [or] ruffles,” “to use no needless self-indulgence,” and “zealously to maintain good words.”¹⁸² Predated the American MEC and circuit system by decades, this instruction formed a guideline for Methodist practice and explicitly connected a lack of “self-indulgence” with shunning fashionable though “needless” adornments. These rules applied not just to preachers. In its catechistic style, the *Discipline* posed, “Should we insist on the rules concerning dress?” and answered, “By all means,” noting that “This is not time to give any encouragement to superfluity of apparel” and advising ministers to “be very mild, but very strict” with their congregants regarding this matter.¹⁸³

Nineteenth-century Methodists took clothing seriously, and they emphasized their own distinctiveness in dress. Peter Cartwright remembered that in the early part of the century, “you could know a Methodist preacher by his plain dress as far as you could see him. The members were also plain, very plain in dress.”¹⁸⁴ The Southern itinerant Joseph Travis described his fellow itinerant Hope Hull as “quite plain in his dress—not by necessity, but by conscientious choice.”¹⁸⁵ When remembering his early years as an itinerant, Thomas Ware wrote, “In the Holston country there was but little money and clothing was very dear. My coat was worn

¹⁸¹ Posey, *The Development of Methodism*, 23–24, 44.

¹⁸² *The Discipline* (1798), 146.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁸⁴ Cartwright, *Autobiography*, 515.

¹⁸⁵ Travis, *Autobiography*, 126.

through at the elbows; and I had not a whole under garment left; and as for boots, I had none.”¹⁸⁶

These characterizations, though, were not simply descriptions with no analytical value.

Cartwright, for instance, made the above point in order to lament the “extravagant dress and superfluous ornaments” he saw around him decades later.¹⁸⁷ When recounting their first meetings with Francis Asbury, multiple preachers noted his appearance and dress with surprising specificity, indicating its significance. Henry Boehm explicitly connected Asbury’s dress with his character and “native dignity”: “He seemed born to sway others. There was an austerity about his looks that was forbidding to those who were unacquainted with him. In dress he was a pattern of neatness and plainness. He could have passed for a quaker had it not been for the color of his garments, which were black when I traveled with him.”¹⁸⁸

There was, as historian Dee Andrews has noted, a distinct style of Methodist preachers’ dress, at least early on: “black, gray, or blue-gray breeches and leggings, topped by a vest, an overcoat, and low-crowned white hat: the standard livery until about 1810...”¹⁸⁹ Andrews also pointed out that many had skin “tanned like a workman’s, the result of years of riding out-of-doors,” and stressed the importance of saddlebags, “symbols of their traveling life.”¹⁹⁰ By understanding saddlebags thusly symbolically, Andrews demonstrated the type of reading of Methodist lives that autobiographers, and, indeed, most Protestant ministers and exhorters, intended: as “homiletic narrative.” From this perspective, according to Gregory Jackson, “everything in the temporal world is representation, a shadow of a larger, universal reality.”¹⁹¹ In the highly constructed and constantly narrated lives of circuit riders, saddlebags were not just saddlebags.

Walter Posey was in some senses correct when we wrote, “The way of the circuit rider rarely ever served as a path to personal glory. The entire life of an itinerant was charged with hardships, abnegations, and sacrifices,”¹⁹² especially if by “personal” he meant “individual.” However, as has been shown throughout this thesis, “the circuit rider” was widely revered, from the late eighteenth century and well into the twentieth. Further, the glorification of “the circuit

¹⁸⁶ Ware, *Sketches*, 161.

¹⁸⁷ Cartwright, *Autobiography*, 515.

¹⁸⁸ Boehm, *Reminiscences*, 439. For more examples of veneration of Asbury by remembrance of his clothing, see Wigger, *American Saint*, 373–374.

¹⁸⁹ Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 209.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ Jackson, *The Word and Its Witness*, 172.

¹⁹² Posey, *The Development of Methodism*, 44.

rider,” and especially his self-denying zeal and endurance of hardships, was made possible largely by Methodists’ intentional—and institutionally implemented, via the *Discipline*—iterations of those values, as itinerants fashioned themselves as self-conscious instantiations of “piety” and “zeal.” There was another side to this issue, though. Because they had so uniformly latched onto a life of difficulty, Methodist preachers—“innocent unassuming men who cheerfully embraced the happy toil”¹⁹³—had set up an expectation for themselves that not everyone of the later generations was so interested in fulfilling.

Furthermore, hardship and self-denial legitimated the Methodist cause. Nathan Bangs, despite his status as a “modernizer” of Methodism, made the case that Methodists’ success was due to the ability of the itinerancy to meet the pragmatic needs of early America, contrasting “lukewarm clergy” with “zealous itinerants.” The itinerants, because of their earnest single-mindedness, manifest in the endurance of hardship, assured that “God would sanction their labors by sending upon them the energies of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁹⁴ Hardship came to be expected, and itinerants’ concerns for their own well-being seemed out of place and contrary to the selves they were supposed to be. The creation of the circuit rider as a mythic figure and the atmosphere of mid-century croaking and anti-gentility made it difficult for itinerants and former itinerants to criticize the circuit system.

Thomas Ware, after almost half a century as an itinerant, wrote pointedly about the harsh realities of the itinerant system: “It called us in youth to sacrifice all means of acquiring property, and threatened to leave us dependant on the cold hand of charity for our bread in old age.”¹⁹⁵ William Capers, reflecting on a life of service as a Methodist, articulated the consequences of the fact that “[t]he aspects of poverty, if not poverty itself, seemed to be Methodistic, if not saintly.” “It had been reiterated from the beginning that we were eighty-dollar men, (not money-lovers, as some others were suspected of being,) till it got to be considered that for Methodist preachers to be made comfortable, would deprive them of their glorifying, and tarnish the lustre of their Methodist reputation. It was all nonsense, perfect nonsense, but it was not then so considered.”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ Ware, *Sketches*, 213.

¹⁹⁴ Nathan Bangs, D.D., *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Vol. 1: From the Year 1766 to the Year 1792*, 3rd ed. (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), 362–363.

¹⁹⁵ Ware, *Sketches*, 214.

¹⁹⁶ William M. Wightman, D.D., *Life of William Capers, D.D., One of the Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South; Including an Autobiography* (Nashville: J.B. McFerrin, 1858), 202–203. \$80 was the standard salary for an itinerant, beginning

Opinions like Capers's were not frequently published, but others did recognize the downside of self-denial. Even circuit preachers' wives complained that, because of the character their husbands were required to be, their lives were made more difficult than was actually necessary. Cora Harris, the wife of the Methodist itinerant William Harris, published a book entitled *The Circuit Rider's Wife* in 1910, one of a number of such books in the decades following spiked public interest in circuit riders, likely spurred on by Eggleston's novel. Harris addressed the standardization of circuit rider life directly, using the common tropes to describe her husband: "If William was covetous about anything it was salvation. He was never satisfied with being as good as he was. He was always longing and praying and going about in the effort just to be a better man, more worthy of the message he had to deliver. These were the kind of seraphic pleasures he took in living. And there was no mortal power, no poverty or hardship that could do him out of them."¹⁹⁷ Not only did William endure the hardships; he thrived on them. "It seemed to strengthen his spirit to drive five miles through freezing winter weather..."¹⁹⁸

This lifestyle, necessary for Methodist success, was not conducive to family life. "And of course," Mrs. Harris admitted, "if you are called to preach, this is the way to be, but if you are called to be just the wife of a preacher, it is different. I do not say it ought to be, but it is. I used to get tired of being poor in spirit. There came days when I wanted to inherit the earth, the real earth, you understand. The figure of speech might have been better for my soul, but what I hankered after was something opulent and comfortable for just the human *me*."¹⁹⁹ This led Harris to a story about wanting some fashionable new clothing ("It is no mystery to me," she wrote, "why dress fashions for women connected with the itinerancy tend to mourning shades. When you put the world out of your life, you put the sweet vanity of color out."), but being denied the opportunity. "Just as you think you are about to get your natural heart's desire somebody slams the Bible down on it, or gets an answer to prayer that spoils your pleasure in it. So it was in my case."²⁰⁰ Circuit preachers' lives were thusly shaped by the standardized tropes of hardship, self-denial, and zealous piety, performed in self-consciously narratological

in 1800, when it was raised from \$64 (See Nathan Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, Vol. 2: From the Year 1793 to the Year 1816, 3rd ed., revised and corrected [New York: Carlton and Phillips, 1853 (orig. New York: Mason and Lane, 1838)], 267). This was extremely low, especially considering that in 1800 the average Congregationalist minister, whose daily life was far less arduous and more healthy, made \$400 per year (Wigger, *Taking Heaven By Storm*, 49).

¹⁹⁷ Cora Harris, *A Circuit Rider's Wife* (Philadelphia: Henry Altemus Co., 1910), 201.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 202.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 203–207.

frameworks. For these reasons, the character endured. He made it possible for Methodists to expand as successfully as they did. However, he simultaneously quashed deviation and individuality. These effects, while detrimental to Methodist historiography, were a primary engine driving nineteenth-century Methodism's success.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Charlie McCrary is a graduate student at Florida State University, studying American religious history. His BA is from the University of North Dakota.