

**EARLY METHODIST EXPERIENCE:
SOME PROTOTYPICAL ACCOUNTS**

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A great many 20th century studies of 18th century Methodism concern John Wesley himself, and even those which promise to tell you about early Methodist beliefs and activities often turn out to be largely based on Wesley's alone. Few have concerned themselves with the humble folk who followed him. Yet it is impossible properly to understand even why Wesley himself believed and behaved in the way he did without taking account of the minds and desires of his disciples. Two examples may suffice to show this.

One is very familiar. The class meeting, which became the very foundation of the Methodist system, was originally a device suggested by a Captain Foy to pay off a debt, and Wesley seized on this to develop it into an instrument for pastoral care and oversight¹. Less familiar is an illuminating diatribe by Wesley at the Conference of 1768 about Methodist singing. He complained that "formality" was creeping into it. This was because of "those complex tunes which it is scarcely possible to sing with devotion. Such as 'Praise the Lord ye blessed ones'" or "the long quavering hallelujah annexed to the morning song tune, which I defy any man living to sing devoutly". Then there is the bad practice of "repeating the same words so often (but especially when another repeats different words, the horrid abuse that runs through modern church music)". This, Wesley says, "as it shocks all common sense, so it insensibly brings in dead formality, and has no more religion in it than a Lancashire hornpipe".² In this diatribe we can hear, quite literally, echoes of the voices of the early Methodist people and their musical taste. I may add that it was the Methodist members' claims to the experience of Christian perfection that fortified Wesley in his advocacy of the doctrine.³

But we can hear these early voices more directly. I was led to study this material by the pursuit over some years of two related problems. The first has been to explain the still relatively little-studied question of the origins and causes of the Evangelical Revival, especially in England.⁴ The second has been to understand the life and outlook of the early Methodist people, as near to the rank and file as possible. The sources for the second inquiry are more numerous than many people realise and have been little used, even by Methodist historians. They should indeed be of interest to social historians as well because, until the 18th century, it is rare to find biographical and autobiographical material of this kind for people of such low social status. The main exception earlier is a batch of mid-17th century Puritan autobiographies which in many ways are very like the Methodist ones. This is not an accident, though the links between the two groups are not straightforward; however, I cannot discuss this question here.⁵

The motive for creating these accounts is clearly religious and, as we shall see, this shapes their structure and contents – though it does not rule out other interests entirely. Indeed, there are good reasons for believing that, for pious Methodists who distrusted worldly reading like novels, these lives supplied some of the thrills of secular literature – and not just

religious thrills. There are distinctly picaresque elements in the autobiography of Silas Told which reads like a mixture of *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Robinson Crusoe*.⁶ Told had a spectacularly adventurous life. He had worked in a slave ship under a brutal captain who came to a grisly end, poisoned by one of his African victims. Silas was shipwrecked more than once, and captured by pirates. Returning home, he tried schoolmastering, was converted to Methodism and ended up as a specialist in ministering to condemned criminals, converting them on the way to Tyburn.

I think there are probably about 600 of these accounts for the 18th century, the majority published but also some unpublished diaries and other manuscript accounts, as well as some hundreds of letters. I have not read anything like all of them, but sufficient I think to obtain a fair idea of their character. The best-known collection in print is that of some 40 *Lives of the Early Methodist Preachers*, edited by Thomas Jackson in the 19th century and later re-edited by John Telford as *Wesley's Veterans*. But there are many more as separate volumes, and still more buried in the old *Arminian Magazine*. The only extensive attempt so far to distil them into a kind of collective profile of early Methodism is in the affectionate (and too little read) volumes by Leslie Church entitled *The Early Methodist People* and *More About the Early Methodist People*.⁷ It is high time that they received a fresh analysis and there are signs that this may be beginning in a rather piecemeal way.

I have already mentioned that it is the religious concerns of the authors that are most conspicuous, and what is revealed about the rest of their lives is unpredictable and patchy. They also, of course, represent a kind of spiritual elite of Methodism since only such people survived within the connection to be commemorated. Mostly, too, they represent literate Methodists although some others were commemorated by their friends.

There are other problems in using these accounts to recover the mind of the early converts. They show signs of editorial moulding of style, though the more startling evidence of their supernatural experiences is well preserved – at least in 18th century accounts, though it is liable to be toned down in later versions. In the early 19th century, the life of Sammy Hick (the eccentric blacksmith) was told by James Everett without too much toning down, and a reviewer in the *Wesleyan Magazine* scoffed at Sammy's peculiar ways and beliefs. But Everett replied, with telling effect, by quoting similar material from *Wesley's Journal*.⁸

Where the accounts were written years afterwards, we may suspect that the pattern tended to be moulded to the expectations of the evangelical public, which knew how it thought the drama of conversion should unfold. The diaries are less subject to this kind of later reshaping if they are of the first generation, though they often do not begin until after the conversion is accomplished, or at least is in its early stages. However, the manuscript and even some of the published accounts still contain clues about the uncertainties of the first generation, when people often stumbled in the dark in pursuit of a goal which they could not yet perceive or at the least understand.⁹ Some even experienced conversion without knowing until later what had happened or how to define it in formal language. There is indeed a good deal of evidence to suggest that the old Reformation doctrine of justification by faith (on which the subjective experience of conversion was based) had become a lost secret in most of the Church of England, though it had survived as a living tradition in some nooks and crannies of the Dissenting World¹⁰.

A general pattern does emerge, even when one has allowed for editing and stereotyping and individual variations. It runs something like this: the future convert begins in a state of ignorance by his or her later judgement, though often with a conventional religious

upbringing. He or she is then awakened to a personal sense of sin and guilt. Then comes a prolonged period of effort by pious exercises and ascetic disciplines to please God, but without being convinced of success. Then comes a personal experience of justification by faith, commonly through a more or less instantaneous and datable conversion. A period of rising and falling, confidence and doubt often follows.

But what tends to mark off the Methodist converts from their Puritan predecessors is the stress on feeling, especially the experience of inward assurance taught by Wesley – though this, like their original conversion, commonly owes little or nothing directly to him or even to Methodist preachers. Even more distinctive of the Methodists is the pursuit and achievement (at least temporarily) of Wesley's favourite notion of perfection. This generally happens through a kind of second instant conversion. The pursuit of perfection does seem generally to follow prior knowledge of the doctrine, though occasionally it is apparently the product of a feeling of dissatisfaction with one's Christian achievement.¹¹ Finally, for the Methodist preacher there is a painful struggle to accept a calling as a preacher. A further contrast with Puritan and evangelical Calvinist conversions is that the Arminian Methodists did not believe in 'final perseverance': salvation could always be lost (though perhaps also regained). But the anxiety about the reality of conversion also affected Calvinists who, in the Puritan tradition, saw it as a defence against complacency. The whole process in this period generally extended over a long period, and in some cases there were long spells of dryness, doubt and guilt after conversion. There is a contrast here with some of the professionally-led 19th century revivals which compressed this process into a single short campaign, even a single meeting.

Despite the clues in the worked-up retrospective accounts printed in the 18th century, one naturally welcomes finding something closer to the earliest experiences. So there is a special interest and value attached to a clutch of manuscript accounts from the early 1740s written at the request of Charles Wesley. They come from London and Bristol and were written within a few months of the actual conversion, though they also trace the subjects' religious progress earlier. (There are also some written to John Wesley which I do not consider here; and a few printed in his *Journal*.)

These accounts are of interest from several points of view. Later on I shall analyse some of them, along with other accounts in print. But one point is worth making at once. Occasionally they are self-consciously 'literary' or show a knowledge of certain types of religious literature (as do some of those written to John Wesley). But what especially attracts is the evidence that some are obviously from people with only a modest grasp on literacy. As must often have happened in early Methodists and others of the artisan class, they are still not far from the oral culture. Not infrequently there is a combination of Biblical language absorbed into common speech, plus a vigorous vernacular (rather like John Bunyan whom some of them had read). There is a comparison here with the published autobiography of the Yorkshire stonemason John Nelson (which indeed encourages one to think that some of the original flavour of these memoirs survived editing for publication). Commenting on a Moravian convert, John wrote that "he had got into the poor sinnership [Moravian jargon] ... held his head on one side and talked as if he had been bred up on the borders of Bohemia". This last phrase could have come straight out of *Pilgrim's Progress*.¹²

To give you the flavour of these accounts, I will quote some extracts from two of them addressed to Charles Wesley, which also have features of general interest. One gives a picture of a girl's childhood; the other includes an example of spirited dialogue. First on Mary Ramsey's upbringing:

I was very passionate in my infancy; but when I grew to the age of two years then my parents began to check these evil tempers; but from four years of age I can remember many things particularly the death of a brother which was twelve months old when he died. I was then four years of age. I was very inquisitive to know where he would go and what must become of him: my mother talked to me as my tender age could then bear telling me he was gone to God: but I said he was here still he lays in his coffin said I. She then told me his soul was gone into the golden city but what must be done with him now when we go to the burying. They told me he must be put in a hole in the church yard. Then I cry'd but they pacified me by telling me he was to be fetched out by angels: but when we returned from the grave and I saw not the angels come, then again I wept sadly but they told me the angels did not come while the people stood there. But still I was very much concerned and I thought I could go willingly to the golden city also. I was soon after sent to school where my parents took great care to keep constant. There among the other children I did not fail to observe pride and would not go to school without I was drest clean and in such and such a dress as such and such other children had. I cannot but observe how natural these things come into the world with us and how soon the old Dragon tempts us, for about the age of six or seven years one morning as I was going to school it was very cold and my mother gave me a pair of gloves and I did not like them but she bade me put them on and charged me to go with them. Away I went in a passion but did not dare lett her know. I murmured and contrived which way I should do for I was resolved not to go quite to the school with them on. Well says I as I went along where shall I pull them off: not in this street thought I for several people that lives in this street knows me and if they see me they will tell my mother. At last I appointed that I would pull them off when I came to the corner of such a street. And Satan he came in and caused me to vow he should have me if I did not pull them off just at that place. Well after that as [I] walked along my anger began to abate so that when I came to the place I forgot the vow and past the place and went directly to school with the gloves on. But when I came to the doors I could not go in for some time for it came fresh into my memory what a bargain I had made with the Devil and I trembled very greatly to think he had cheated me. So which way to turn I could not tell. Well then there came a thought: Go back to the place and pull them off and then youl be secure.

Eventually she said "Lord dont let the Devil have me" and went trembling into the school. The Lord's preventing grace, she thought, had saved her. There followed several other incidents of this kind. She was also frightened by a dream of the Devil and reformed a little, but at the age of 13 she

became acquainted with a neighbour's daughter a polite young lady. O good Lord how dangerous is evil company especially to youth for then had it not been for the preventing grace of God through the care of my parents I had doubtless run into all manner of vice. For I was pufed up with pride to excess and was ready to go anywhere with Miss Polly: they could send their servant for me to go with her to see plays but glory be to God my parents would not give me leave but then I thought they were very cruel ..." Polly, she continued, "run quickly to destruction and was cut off in her youth in the midst of her sins.

Religion of a sort then seemed to increase in her and she knew many prayers by heart but saw herself as a 'Pharisee'. She had been received into the French [Huguenot] Church at the age of 15 and was a regular communicant. She heard Whitefield preach 13 times, but did not apply his teaching to herself but rather to other people she saw as infidels. Yet he had some effect on her and the words of a hymn *His bleeding heart will make you room, His open side shall take you in* haunted her. So she read good books and took communion weekly and joined a society. John Wesley's preaching soon showed her her real condition of inward sin, and reflecting on what she had heard showed her that she needed remission of her sins. "And the Lord spoke unto me saying I am nigh that justifieth, thou art justified, believe and thou shalt be saved. Then I said Lord I will believe and I then found myself quite another. I was as I thought passed from death into life and thought I was in another world."

There followed a struggle with the Devil but John Wesley's preaching helped her further; so did Charles Wesley's and under his influence she received great joy and "methought I saw my Saviour in glory".¹³

The second account, from John Carter (a joiner), runs in part as follows:

About four years ago I was induced very much to pray to God for his grace and holy spirit, my wife told me that her mother taught her so to pray. I had reasonings about it that I did not know what it was, and how could I pray heartily for it. But however I went to pray and it was to that effect and I found satisfaction in it." So he prayed again and again, and had "great comfort" and "great drawings" to it. "One Saturday night being in a barber's shop the barber said he had been to hear a sermon preached before all the Religious Societies in London. He surprised me. I asked him if there was ever a one there. I told him, by the behaviour of the people there was little sign of it. He mentioned several. He belonged to one that met in Mile's Lane. I was glad to hear it and desired to be introduced into it, and see their orders. Accordingly by him I was. I found some comfort the first two or three times of meeting. But at length I began to see things in them which I did not like, as particular persons speaking at pleasure and dictating in their way as they thought fit and could not bear contradictions. These were the old men and great ones of the world.

He then went to hear Dr Heylyn and was convinced by him that religion is not outward but through a change of the heart. He insisted on this to the Society but they would not listen but said we were to do what we were commanded and that was enough. He said he could not manage to do this.

I still went to Dr Heylyn and was convinced of the spirituality of religion but could not find it in myself. At last being at work a'wainscotting of a house in Little Britain, it being near the White Horse alehouse, there comes in a boy to beg some shavings, which I gave him leave to take. I took particular notice of him, that he took nothing else, which was uncommon, for those that come for them take as many chips ['chips' being liberally interpreted as surplus wood, a perk of joiners] as they can with them, which made me ask who he belonged to. He told me Mr Bray a brazier hard by [this was a man from a religious society influenced by the Moravians and a friend of Charles Wesley]. I told him further that I had heard he was a very good man and he [the boy] was welcome to some [chips] at any time. He asked me if I knew him [Bray]. I told him no I never saw him in my life to know him, but I knew two young men that used a society at his house on Tuesday nights. He farther asked me if I had any notion of this new religion? What new religion replied I. Why salvation by faith only. No I told him; I had heard nothing of it. What did you never hear Mr Wesley's said he? No I never heard them. Mr Charles is in town and he'll preach a Sunday at this church. Well I think to go to hear him. Mr John is a'coming from abroad and he is a very fine man likewise said he. But I will tell you my belief said I, Pharisee like, with my arms folded together, swaggering as it were. I believe in all the Articles of the Religion (and I believe at that time I never read them all over nor hardly knew what was in them). Likewise I believe in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments in all the creeds etc. He asked me if my belief influenced all my life and actions? I told him no. I did not find that it did. He told me then that my faith was that of the head and not of the heart. I answered that I thought so too. Then he began to prove it by Scripture. He said if Christ hath made you free then you are free indeed; and we have not received the spirit of bondage unto fear but we have received the spirit of adoption whereby we cry Abba Father. He struck me all of a heap. I could not tell what to say. He advised me to buy a little book called *Choice Drop of Honey from the Rock of Christ*¹⁴ and bade me consider on't and bid me goodbye.

This made him consider the Scriptures and his sins, especially adultery.

There followed a period of terror of hell for his sins. He had a "little allay" by "reflecting that I prayed heartily for the grace of God that I might not fall" but he questioned whether he had grace or not. He was so concerned about this that one day he had no comfort for an hour and a half but

at last there came into my inmost soul a voice, that through the mercy of God in Jesus Christ my sins were forgiven me. I burst out crying and laughing and dancing and jumping about the room, that anyone if they had seen me would have thought me craze. I then knew that God was my father; and I could cry Dear Father, my Father, abba Father! I then saw that he had mercy upon me purely and only for the sake of Jesus Christ my saviour...

He then had “this full assurance of faith and love of God” for about six months.¹⁵

What light do these accounts throw on the nature of the early Methodists and the origins of the Revival? Here is a selection of characteristics, though others could be added. For the purposes of this snapshot (it is no more), I will use both the manuscript accounts, referred to as ‘writers’, and the Jackson collection of preachers’ lives (which I call ‘preachers’).

Much could be said about the **psychology** of the converts and their conversions. I have no special expertise here and psycho-history is a notoriously tricky area so I must leave serious discussion of this subject to more expert hands. But it seems reasonable to suggest that there are possibilities in the psychological effects towards conversion in family history and upbringing and in individual life experiences. But perhaps most noticeably there is a significant element of family religious nurture. Some have argued that the famous convulsions under John Wesley in the early stages of the revival, and in some later revivals, were the effects of hellfire preaching on emotional temperaments, but we seldom know what became of those affected. The sample of writers and preachers I have been analysing were not affected by such scenes but pursued noticeably individual and solitary pilgrimages. Convulsions of this kind are in any case not peculiar to the revival, or even to Christianity, and the Wesleys, especially Charles, were well aware of the risk of contagious hysteria and unconscious imitation and acted to reduce it.¹⁶ But I will confine the rest of my comments to more easily documented and measurable characteristics.

The writers unfortunately hardly ever indicate their **occupations** – one was a joiner, another a female teacher. The preachers were clearly drawn from the occupations most common among Methodists: skilled craftsmen and tradesmen.

The writers were predominantly **female** (29 out of 36); the preachers in the Jackson collection were all male, though we know of some 40 women preachers in Wesley’s lifetime.¹⁷ It is known that there is often an above-average proportion of females to males in Methodist membership.¹⁸

All of the writers and probably most of the preachers are obviously **literate** and can write as well as read, though writing skills range from shaky grammar and spelling to solid accuracy – and even flights of rhetoric and self-consciously literary flourishes among the writers.

The **geographical origin** of the writers is confined to London and Bristol because this is where the Wesleys were working from 1738-41. But the preachers came from all over the British Isles (18 from the north, 11 from the south, 11 from the Celtic lands) and one from the USA. This is probably not accidental: Methodism was very much a provincial movement and to some extent Celtic, though the Scots provided proportionately more preachers than members.

The **age of conversion** for the writers is not generally clear, but they seem to be relatively young, probably in their twenties. Of the preachers, only six or seven were converted under the age of 20; one, exceptionally, was converted at the age of 35 (like John Wesley). We know of much older converts but the majority in this sample were aged about 23 to 24.

Here we may contrast the late 19th and 20th century studies which portray evangelical conversion as typically adolescent.¹⁹ This probably reflects pressure on evangelicals' children in the later period, as well as adolescent problems even when we allow for the different patterns in the life-cycle in earlier times. Wesley, however, does note a rash of conversions of young children in the 1780s. Only one preacher was converted before the Wesleys in 1738, though other cases are known of this – some well before the revival started. It is noticeable, too, that even much later a considerable number of known converts were seeking or achieving conversion well before they met the Methodists. One or two of the writers were also converted before Methodism began.

As to **denominational background**, as expected, the largest single category is of at least a nominal Anglican background, and often more than nominal. Two or three preachers came from a Roman Catholic background or mixed marriages. Several were Scots Presbyterians or English Dissenters, categories often overlooked or glossed over by Wesley's claims that Methodism was an Anglican movement.

But, above all, the most significant point is that **some religious nurture** is common and so are early signs of worries about religion. Of the writers, some two-thirds show signs of this, and four others were at least awakened to a sense of sin and spiritual search before encountering the revivalists in 1739-40. Over two-thirds of the preachers had a more or less marked religious upbringing, one apparently being converted in 1738, before the Wesleys. Only one preacher avowedly experienced a complete absence of any parental religious concern, and had considerable drilling in conventional Anglican or Dissenting or Scots Presbyterian piety.

A **sense of the supernatural** is a marked feature of some of the writers' and of the printed lives of the early preachers. The writers show eight cases of visions, commonly of Christ crucified, while other biographies sometimes feature the Last Judgement. There are four cases of warning dreams, five of reassuring voices, and texts 'impressed upon the mind' also occur. One reports an apparently miraculous stoppage of rain – a not uncommon feature, incidentally, of Wesley's *Journal*. Fourteen of the writers had special spiritual experiences during the Lord's Supper, an unusual feature which will be explained later. Some three-quarters of the preachers' lives record more or less marked supernatural experiences of the same kind, apart from the sacramental type. All of these people – like practically all evangelicals known to me – had a strong sense of 'particular providences': that is to say, God was seen as judging guilty individuals by physical damage or death, while saving others miraculously from danger.

The following examples from the writers are typical. Elizabeth Downes wrote that, when a preacher said, during the Lord's Supper,

“Look up and behold your saviour, see him pouring out his blood for your sakes”, my heart was touched [and] in a manner the Lord revealed himself to me in his crucifixion. Evidently by faith I saw him with his blood running, his wounds in branches [?] down his arms, his body in great paleness and his mouth as gasping his last breath. I felt I received a quickening power and the benefit of his blood applied to my soul that moment.

On another occasion the Lord showed himself to her “like as St. John described him”. “I clearly beheld him with eyes of faith with his garment as white as snow and a glittering belt about his paps.” “I know the Father did with love send his son to me and that he commended the influence of his love to me by the power of faith, that for the time I was in a strong sense of justification.” Margaret Austin wrote that, at the Lord's Supper, “as I took the cup Satan told me ... I should be damned ... but when we had done receiving and the

minister was covering the cup I saw Christ lay with his open side and I thought I could see his heart bleeding for me.” Sarah Middleton, in agony of spirit, heard a voice saying “Daughter, be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee” which gave her great joy and restored her bodily health. James Hewitt dreamt that he saw an apparition of himself and, as he was accompanied by “the devil and carnal people” it “was a sure sign of my death and in a sense it was, for that dream being sanctified to me was one means of my dying to sin”. As Wesley’s preaching of the experience of perfection became increasingly insistent from the 1760s, it is noticeable that a number of Methodists seeking the experience had visions of the Trinity which seems to be a kind of beatific vision for the wholly sanctified.²⁰

It seems to be the case that in temperament most of these people were not habitual visionaries. Fairly clearly, such experiences highlighted or resolved crisis points in their spiritual pilgrimages and centred on the achievement of justification, assurance or perfection. It looks as though the intensity of these concerns could be heightened by relevant sermons or texts, or the physical symbols of the Lord’s Supper – to the point where they precipitated visual or aural realisations of what was preached or read.

Scriptural language is conspicuous in all. It is impossible to say whether this was acquired before or after conversion, though a few indicate special knowledge of the Bible early in life. The experience of texts being strongly impressed on their minds, with a personal application, is common. So is **evangelical jargon** but this was presumably acquired during or after conversion.

An identification of **clear stages of the evangelical experience** obviously reflects later observation but, as I said earlier, there are clues about uncertainty at the time and of lack of knowledge of justification by faith.

Three further observations can be made about the writers which are not generally applicable to people from other places and periods. They clearly reflect the special circumstances in London and Bristol around 1740.

The first is a common pattern in these accounts that the writers were awakened by Whitefield’s preaching; then helped (or, in some cases, made more alarmed) by John Wesley; and finally brought to conversion by Charles. Although this no doubt reflects the fact that they were writing as Charles’ converts, there are indications elsewhere that he was found to be a warmer pastor than John. Clearly Whitefield is confirmed as being above all an ‘awakener’.

Secondly, there is a group of special experiences while receiving communion. The explanation of this must be that they were people who had been under Moravian influence in London during the period when the Fetter Lane Moravians taught the ‘stillness’ doctrine – the notion that, to allow conversion by God’s grace alone, one should abstain from all means of grace. The Wesleys preached against this and recorded (as proving their case) that some seekers were converted while receiving the Lord’s Supper. Hence Wesley’s unusual doctrine of the Supper as a ‘converting’ as well as a ‘confirming’ ordinance.²¹ The writers show clear evidence of resisting the ‘still brethren’ in favour of the Wesleys, and one motive for Charles requesting their accounts may have been to record this success. The accounts incidentally record valuable evidence about this controversy which I think had not been generally noticed. There is also fresh information about the perfectionist outbreaks under George Bell in the 1760s²².

Thirdly, it is at first sight curious that so few of the writers show signs of having been members of the old Religious Societies before becoming followers of the Wesleys and Whitefield (the joiner I have quoted on page 5 is an exception). Other evidence shows that much of the initial recruitment in London and Bristol was among members of the old Societies, though this was seldom so elsewhere.²³ However, some had been in the Fetter Lane Society which was heavily influenced by the Moravians. The explanation may be that the old Societies were exclusively male and the majority of the writers were women. But, like the emerging Methodist Societies, Fetter Lane was open to both sexes – a highly significant innovation which greatly increased the appeal of Methodism.

Conclusions

Conclusions from this evidence must be tentative and the inquiry continues. However, I do think that intimate biographical material of this kind offers our best hope of understanding the mind of the early converts, and of testing some of the more speculative guesses about the origins of the Revival.

There are indeed limitations, some of which I mentioned earlier in this paper. The published biographies are clearly those of a spiritual elite which persisted to the end. As yet I do not know whether the writers survived as permanent converts.²⁴

Were the present converts and full members also socially different from those more ephemerally affected? Analysis of the occupations of those known members show that they were not among the very poor;²⁵ and that in the majority of cases, as we have seen, they did not lack at least some religious nurture. The most stable converts may well have been those with more skill, possibly with more literacy and above all more religious nurture and early history of religious anxiety. Illiteracy was no bar to conversion but the illiterate naturally leave fewer traces in evidence of the writers' kind. Literacy may also have a bearing on the degree of supernatural and, perhaps more particularly, magical beliefs in the converts, though John Wesley was actually more credulous than some of his followers. I am in the process of investigating this difficult question in a more intensive way.

It has been claimed that the decline of the old world of supernaturalism and magic after 1700 affected the educated classes more rapidly than the less educated and those in the oral culture, but this can be exaggerated and needs much more investigation. The most intractable problem for understanding early Methodism is the nature and fate of the religious experience of the anonymous crowds who were swayed by evangelical oratory and subject to convulsions but whose later fate is seldom known. Were they more emotional, with less religious background, and so likely to stay the course? We really do not know but we should always remember that Methodist influence through adherents, casual hearers and family contacts extended well beyond the membership and converts.

Still, allowing for all this, I would suggest that the kind of evidence I have considered in this paper takes us as close as we are usually likely to get to the individual sources of the Revival and to the nature of early Methodist experience. At least it helps us to understand why some were so strongly influenced and became so strongly committed. In a rather larger way, it also throws light on the world of the newly or barely literate; on the culture of the self-educated, serious-minded artisan; and, not least, on the more mysterious world of women in the lower reaches of 18th century society.

NOTES

1. John Wesley, *Journal* 15 February and 25 March 1742 (Bicentennial ed, vol.19, 251, 258)
2. John Wesley, *Works*, (1872) VIII, 315f.
3. See H.D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, (2nd ed., Epworth 1992) 398 for the case for this being so, and 334ff for the problems converts caused.
4. For the first comprehensive account of the international Revival and its sources, see W.R. Ward *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge University Press, 1991); and for suggestions about the English origins see J. D. Walsh 'The Origins of the Evangelical Revival' in G. V. Bennett and J. D. Walsh (eds.) *Essays in Modern English Church History* (Black 1966) and 'Elie Halevy and the Birth of Methodism' in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, XXV (1975).
5. For a discussion of two 17th century collections, see M. Watts, *The Dissenters*, I (Oxford 1978) 174-9; *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 421ff.
6. *The Life of Mr Silas Told by Himself* (1786 repr. Epworth Press 1954)
7. For further information, notably on Methodist sexuality, see H. Abelove, *The Evangelist of Desire*, Stanford University Press, 1990).
8. J. Everett, *The Village Blacksmith* (London 1848) 176ff, 187n; and, for the Methodist pilgrimage and its picaresque parallels, see I. Rivers, "'Strangers and Pilgrims": Sources and Patterns of Methodist Narrative' in *Augustan Worlds* ed. J. C. Hilson et al (Leicester University Press 1978).
9. Some examples are given in *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 423f.
10. G. F. Nuttall, 'Methodism and the Older Dissent' in *URC Historical Journal*, II (1981).
11. For an example see T. Jackson (ed.), *Lives of the Early Methodist Preachers*, (6 vols, London, 4th ed., 1872) II, 246-9.
12. *Lives*, (ed. Jackson), I, 55.
13. MS 'Early Methodist Letters' No.23 (Methodist Church Archives, John Rylands University Library) with original spelling and punctuation.
14. This may be *Honey Out of the Rock*, (1644) by John Price (Wing 3343).
15. 'Early Methodist Letters' No.17.
16. For a discussion of reactions to these events and explanations of them, see *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 194-7.
17. See P. W. Chilcote *John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism* (Scarecrow Press, 1991).
18. C. D. Field, 'English Methodism to 1830: A Membership Analysis in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 76 (1994) 155-78. The female average for Methodism as a whole is some 56%.
19. I am thinking here of studies like E.D. Starbuck, *Psychology of Religion* (Scribners, 1903) and J. B. Pratt, *The Religious Consciousness* (Macmillan, N.Y., 1926).
20. 'Early Methodist Letters' Nos. 53, 1, 5, 14. For the Trinitarian visions see my 'Early Methodist Visions of the Trinity in *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, XLVI (1987), 38-44, 57-69
21. For a discussion of this doctrine and its rarity, see *Reasonable Enthusiast*. 405-7.
22. 'Early Methodist Letters' eg: Nos. 51, 92, 93, 134.

23. See H. D. Rack, 'Religious Societies and the Origins of Methodism in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, XXXVIII (1987).
24. One possible example of persistence is that of William Barber ('Early Methodist Letters' No. 20, 1741) who is possibly the same man who wrote to Charles on perfection in 1762 ('Letters' No.23).
25. C. D. Field, 'The Social Structure of English Methodism in the Eighteenth to Twentieth Centuries' in *British Journal of Sociology* , XXVIII (1977) 199-202, 213, 216.

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The paper *Early Methodist Experience: Some Prototypical Accounts* (first published March 1997) was originally delivered at the Opening of the Wesley and Methodist Studies Centre at Westminster College, Oxford, on 4th May 1993.

RERC Second Series Occasional Paper 4
 March 1997
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 ISBN 0 906165 12 1