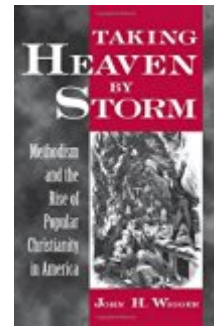


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John H. Wigger. *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America*. New York and Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1998. ix + 269 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-510452-3.

Reviewed by Jonathan D. Sassi (College of Staten Island/CUNY)
Published on H-SHEAR (December, 1998)



Before the Methodists reached the Mainline

In his 1994 presidential address before the American Society of Church History, Nathan O. Hatch noted the dearth of scholarship on American Methodism, despite the facts that it was one of the nation's largest and most important denominations of the nineteenth century and contained a wealth of unexploited source material.[1] In *Taking Heaven by Storm*, Hatch's student, John H. Wigger, picks up the challenge of writing a history of Methodism's first generation. Specifically, Wigger's goal is to answer the question of why the Methodists flourished so abundantly in the early republic: how did the denomination go from a membership of less than a thousand to over a quarter million in the fifty years after 1770? This timeframe roughly overlaps with the ministry of Francis Asbury, who was sent to America by John Wesley in 1771 and served as the first superintendent or bishop of the American Methodist Episcopal Church from his appointment in 1784 until his death in 1816. In a nutshell, Wigger's answer is that early Methodism became so popular (i.e., had such a tremendous appeal) because it was thoroughly popular (i.e., of the people). Wigger relies upon his mentor for his basic "conceptual framework" (p. vii), but goes beyond the ideological thrust of Hatch's *Democratization of American Christianity* to suggest a variety of cultural, organizational, and interpersonal factors behind the Methodists' rise.[2] Wigger draws primarily upon the memoirs and journals of Methodist circuit riders and also makes selective use of institutional records. Members of H-SHEAR should especially take note of this book, for Wigger roots his argument firmly in the culture of the early republic.

The first five chapters of *Taking Heaven by Storm* analyze the different factors behind the Methodists' success. Chapter One, the book's least original, recapitulates the familiar interpretation that the early republic underwent a far-reaching "democratization," a thesis typified in Gordon S. Wood's *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*. [3] As Wigger summarizes, the Methodists moved into an environment of declining hierarchy and order and rising individualism and mobility, and they adapted to it in a way that the older, established denominations could not. They appealed to "middling people on the make" (p. 5) like artisans, shopkeepers, and yeoman farmers by opening their movement to individual participation and by preaching a theology that emphasized the individual's struggles. Relying upon the secondary literature, Wigger also briefly touches upon Methodist theology. With its commonsense, anti-Calvinist elements, it validated both the individual's quest for sanctification and the personal revelations found in dreams.

The heart of Wigger's argument, located in Chapters Two through Five, is that Methodism's appeal boiled down to a combination of an "ordinary," down-to-earth character and an organizational cohesiveness that bound people into the movement. The Methodists built a hierarchy from the bottom up of local class meetings, societies, itinerant preachers' circuits, districts, annual conferences, and, after 1792, the quadrennial general conference of the entire denomination. In a break with textbook treatments of Methodism and the Second Great Awakening, Wigger downplays the camp meeting's signifi-

cance. Rather he writes that other institutions, such as the class meeting, were of greater importance, and that the idea that the camp meeting was a uniquely frontier phenomenon is unfounded. Chapter Three—probably Wigger’s best because here he is most at home with his sources—focuses upon the itinerants whose constant circulation held the network together. This was no far-off priesthood, but rather circuit riders were like the people they served in social and educational background, which allowed them to preach in the vernacular. The itinerants themselves were knit together in an informal fellowship, and they often delayed marriage in order to pursue their callings. Their network of circuits crisscrossed the country, fanning out with the population of the early republic. Wigger convincingly refutes the idea that this was a top-down hierarchy under the heavy hand of Francis Asbury. Instead, he emphasizes grass-roots, lay involvement at the same time as there was a national organization to direct itinerant resources centrally. In this light, the defeat of James O’Kelly’s “Republican Methodists,” who protested Asbury’s episcopal power, Wigger sees as a triumph of “connectionalism” (p. 40) over congregationalism, rather than as an autocratic coup for Asbury. Methodism was further popular in its emotional worship and its acceptance of prophetic dreams and visions. With these examples Wigger scotches the idea that Methodism was a “bland, bourgeois religion” (p. 204, n. 12). By emphasizing these enthusiastic, folk aspects of early Methodism, Wigger turns on its head William Warren Sweet’s interpretation that Methodism civilized the frontier (see p. 232, n. 17). And yet, Wigger also discusses Methodist discipline, from whence the movement took its name, as something which both created personal order and appealed to the upwardly mobile common men and women in the class meetings.

Chapters Six and Seven address the special appeal of Methodism for African-Americans and women, respectively. These are important topics for Wigger to take up, if for no other reason than the facts that by the early nineteenth century free African-Americans represented twenty percent of the church and women were always the numerical majority of Methodists. Wigger follows Hatch in accounting for the Methodists’ appeal among African-Americans as a result of many itinerants’ early denunciations of slavery and racism, plain preaching, and the use of African-American exhorters and preachers. In turn, black Methodists gave to the movement much of its enthusiastic style and openness to magic and visions, which Wigger, citing Albert J. Raboteau,[4] relates to elements in the African religious heritage. But

as is familiar from the work of Donald G. Mathews,[5] the Methodists were never able to implement the strong antislavery position they took in 1784 and repealed it by 1808. Their populism, Wigger explains, the very ordinariness that made Methodist leaders so empathetic toward white America, ironically left them unable to confront their audience with a prophetic voice.

Aside from this insight, Chapter Six displays less originality and relies more upon the secondary literature, since Wigger’s main source, the itinerants’ memoirs, were seldom written by African-Americans. Likewise the seventh chapter on Methodist women operates under the same primary source constraints. To fill the gap, Wigger makes use of the writings of elite women such as Elizabeth Henry Campbell Russell, the sister of Patrick Henry, and Catherine Livingston Garrettsen of the prominent New York family. Women were important to the movement as exhorters, class leaders, and the sinews that held the network together as local organizers or hostesses to the circuit riders. Of historiographical note, Wigger’s analysis of the place of Methodist women differs from Susan Juster’s finding that Baptist women became identified as disorderly and sinful during the same time period.[6] “If anything,” Wigger concludes from a limited source record, “the disciplinary cases decided before quarterly meeting conferences of this period indicate that Methodists saw men as the more disorderly element in their midst” (p. 169).

The final chapter, number eight, provides the denouement to Wigger’s tale. It considers Methodism’s shift from outsider sect to mainstream denomination after about 1820. The death of Francis Asbury in 1816, who had directed the movement since its early years in America and epitomized its itinerating energy, symbolized the transition. As Methodism’s adherents became more refined, the church abandoned many of the hallmarks of the movement’s first generation. Class meetings lost their intimacy and let discipline decay, and women’s roles became more domestic and confined. Methodist pastors went from being roughhewn itinerants to educated clergymen settled in well-constructed church buildings, where worship likewise shifted from an enthusiastic, participatory experience to a much more dignified affair. In short, the former outsiders had arrived.

Methodism’s transformation occasioned many of the memoirs that are the primary source foundation for Wigger’s study as a whole. So-called “croakers” (p. 181) lamented their denomination’s abandonment of its old style and fervor, and sought to chronicle the movement’s

origins as a way of criticizing the present. But what the croakers failed to realize was that Methodism in the second quarter of the nineteenth century was just doing what it had done so adroitly during its first fifty years—appealing to the sensibilities of ordinary Americans, although those had now changed. As Wigger summarizes the futility of the croakers' lament, "The church simply could not be both respectable and countercultural" (p. 188).

John H. Wigger has given us a book that is lucidly written, coherently organized, and generally cogent. In *Taking Heaven by Storm* he has provided an important analysis of Methodism's tremendous appeal to people of the early republic and brought into focus some of the main reasons behind its stunning growth. Still, there are a few areas where his methodology and choices leave certain issues underexamined. As I discuss these issues, I hope to suggest some broader themes for discussion by H-SHEAR.

Wigger's book does not quite deliver on the promise announced in the first sentence of the Preface to study "the dynamics of early Methodist growth in America" (p. vii). Yes, Wigger gives us many reasons for the Methodists' success, but his study is not structured to dissect that success as a *dynamic* process. The reader does not learn in depth how Methodism grew chronologically or geographically. Instead, Wigger takes a generation as a whole and studies it statically. Contingencies of time and place are subordinated to a synoptic view of the first generation. Obviously, no one author or book can follow Methodist circuit riders everywhere they went over a fifty year period, but a closer look at when and where Methodism grew *and* stalled might have yielded some different conclusions. Along these same lines, Wigger deliberately sidesteps regionalism for a national perspective. Certainly he is correct that "American Methodism was a truly national phenomenon" (p. 6), but it did not play out the same all over the nation. *Taking Heaven by Storm* mentions regional variations here and there, but it never pursues these systematically. Moreover, the book deals mostly with Methodist itinerants, so the movement's urban dimension is underplayed. Certainly Western and Southern Methodism have been historiographically significant topics in their own rights,^[7] and it is a shame that Wigger did not bring his considerable talents more to bear upon these issues. At SHEAR's annual meeting in Harpers Ferry this summer, several panels raised this question of regional particularities amidst nationalizing trends, and perhaps the members of H-SHEAR can continue that line of inquiry.

Wigger also needs to provide a fuller discussion of the uses and limitations of the itinerants' memoirs that are his principal primary source, especially since most were published anywhere from two to five decades after the incidents recounted. He does this to some extent (p. 181) in discussing the motives of the croakers, but more is needed. For example, do these memoirs, coming from movement insiders and long after the fact, mute conflict and provide an overly consensual picture of events, such as in discussing Francis Asbury's role? Certainly many historians of the early republic have mined memoirs as a valuable source; are there any general rules of thumb for using these texts?

Finally, I would have liked to have seen closer attention paid to the recurring use of amorphous terms like "ordinary people" (p. 5) and "middling folk" (p. 6), which remind me of the way in which "middle class" has become such an expansive and imprecise category in contemporary popular discourse. The issue becomes cloudier when Wigger writes that one of the reasons for the Methodists' post-1820 transformation is that they were "becoming more middle class" (p. 184). But wasn't the first generation of Methodists made up of people whose status was "middling" to begin with? Moreover, not all of the early Methodists were so ordinary. Wigger cites many Delmarva Methodists who belonged to the gentry (see pp. 161-63); what was Methodism's appeal for them? This lack of clarity regarding his subjects' social origins relates back to the larger question of sources. Can we truly gain insight into the experience of lay people from the itinerants' memoirs? For a study of a popular religious movement, we hear comparatively little from the laity. This may reflect the limitations of the primary source record, or it may result from the types of sources not chosen.

Despite these unaddressed issues, John H. Wigger's *Taking Heaven by Storm* fills an important gap. To say that the book left me wanting more is a criticism, but it is also a tribute to the book's accomplishments and ambitious scope. Whatever unanswered questions remain provide topics for further research. For historians of early Methodism who follow Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm* will be their starting point.

Notes:

[1]. Nathan O. Hatch, "The Puzzle of American Methodism," *Church History* 63 (June 1994): 175-189.

[2]. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989).

[3]. Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

[4]. Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); idem, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

[5]. Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

[6]. Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics and Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England* (Ithaca, N.Y. and London, England: Cornell University

Press, 1994).

[7]. On Methodism in the South, see Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Knopf, 1997). Western or frontier Methodism was largely the subject of the work of William Warren Sweet; see, e.g., *Religion in the Development of American Culture, 1765-1840* (New York: Scribner's, 1952).

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-shear/>

Citation: Jonathan D. Sassi. Review of Wigger, John H., *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. December, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2574>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.