



Book Review

Women, Preachers, Methodists John Lenton, Clive Murry, Linda A Ryan (eds), Oxford: Oxford Centre for Methodism and Church History, 2000.

This lively collection comprises papers given at two conferences in 2019 celebrating the 350th anniversary of Susannah Wesley's birth. The volume aims to reclaim the lost voices of women preachers and explore their contribution to Methodist worship in contexts that were everything from wary of women preachers to outright hostile.

Part One focuses on Susannah Wesley. Charles Wallace argues for her agency as an able and assured woman navigating the complex ecclesiology of the time, offering an alternative to that of the familiar slightly twee caricature. William Gibson explores her political marriage to Samuel Wesley in the light of the shifting powers of Church and State in the late 17th Century, and against the backdrop of the prevailing attitude that men were sovereign within marriage. Linda A. Ryan offers a portrait of Susannah Wesley as an educator, particularly of her female children, and identifies the significant, if complex, influence this had on John Wesley's attitude to female education. In the final chapter in this section, John Lenton further examines Susannah Wesley's influence on John on matters of lay preaching and women's leadership. What emerges from this section is a rounded, nuanced picture of Susannah Wesley and her place in Methodist history.

In Part Two focuses on Susannah Wesley's legacy in the women preachers of the eighteenth and nineteenth century from Wesleyan, Primitive, and Bible Christian traditions. While there are some differences, such as the greater opportunities afforded by the 'cottage religion' in the poorer rural areas of Primitive Methodism's strongholds, the overarching narrative is remarkably similar. It is a story of women who were gifted and called, whose ministry was valued and encouraged by some, tolerated by some, including John Wesley himself, and rejected by others. A common thread is that of the rejection of women as the different branches sought greater structure and respectability. Former Vice President Jill Barber's paper argues that ultimately the Church failed to stand up for women. At a time when societies and institutions are being confronted with the injustices of their past, it is important that the injustices done to women within Methodism are not forgotten.

Part Three brings us up to date with three reflective papers from female presbyters (interestingly no lay preachers are included), two of whom were amongst the first to be ordained in the British Methodist Church. Whilst church and society have taken great strides since the days of the first women preachers, their stories too are a 'mixed bag' of experiences. Judith Maizel-Long's contribution notes that that struggle for women's ministry is not over, citing the experience of women of colour and those from other excluded groups in ministry. Assistant Secretary of Conference Michaela Youngson makes the case for the importance of role models, and of seeing other women wearing clerical collars. This is particularly pertinent in terms of the church's most senior roles, one of which she now holds.

This is an engaging contribution to history of women preachers in British Methodism. There is agreement amongst the contributors that more research is needed into these women, and amongst the contemporary preachers that we have further work to do; certainly more reflection is needed on the experience of women today. Indeed the editors note that this is but a partial history and that there are more stories to tell. The inclusion of deaconesses and women of colour would have been of particular value and hopefully there will be opportunities to hear their stories

in future publications. The collection may have benefited from a concluding chapter, tying together common threads and asking questions about where we might go from here. Perhaps the most pressing questions are who are the pioneers and boundary-pushers of our time, and how are we treating them?

Hannah Bucke