

Textual Warfare & the Making of Methodism (Review)

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Textual Warfare & the Making of Methodism, by Brett C. McInelly. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 256. \$65.48. ISBN: 9780198708940.

Using a balanced mixture of canonical and non-canonical texts, Brett McInelly argues that the dialectical relationship between textual attacks on Methodism and Methodist responses did much to form the Methodist movement itself. While other studies have documented this “warfare,” as the title calls it, McInelly’s work moves beyond cataloging and historicizing to make a rhetorical argument based upon the theories of Kenneth Burke, thereby contributing new insight. The book clearly will appeal to those interested in Methodism, but it does not assume such a specialized audience, offering context, description, and definitions all while assiduously historicizing. Historians, literary scholars, rhetoricians, and sociologists all will find the text approachable and persuasive.

In his introduction, McInelly notes he will cover the period of 1732, the date of the first known printed account attacking Methodism, to 1791, the year of John Wesley’s death, as Wesley was both Methodism’s most important leader and most prolific defender of it in print. McInelly lays out typical eighteenth-century attacks against Methodism through a reading of the most extended fictional critique of Methodism: Richard Graves’s nearly 1,000-page work *The Spiritual Quixote* (1773). The most prevalent concerns for Graves were enthusiasm and itinerant preaching since both—particularly as combined in Methodism—held the potential to create a revolutionary movement designed to undermine the stable social order of the eighteenth century. The opening of the book also states McInelly’s central (and insightful) questions: “To what extent and in what ways did the anti-Methodist literature influence perceptions of the revival? In what ways did this literature shape Methodist religiosity and self-understanding?” (10).

Chapter 1, “Print Culture and the Making of Methodism,” lays the foundation for the rest of the book, describing the textual warfare as an attempt by anti-Methodists and Methodists to own the discourse describing the movement. McInelly states explicitly at the beginning of this chapter “that Methodism in the eighteenth century was experienced largely through conflict and the printed word” (24) and argues that Methodism ironically flourished thanks to the printed attacks against it. In addition to a thorough review of secondary literature, this chapter, like all others, engages with a wide range of primary texts as it explores the attempts by detractors to define the terms of the debate and Methodist refusal to be defined by detractors. The term “Methodist” itself is a prime example since critics coined it as a pejorative label while Wesley chose to embrace the name. This kind of thinking led to Methodists seeing themselves as a unified group under attack and feeling confirmed in their beliefs as a persecuted people. In addition, writing and reading were central means of creating a Methodist identity, once again a problematic aspect of the movement as it spread literacy among the poor.

“Rhetoric and Revival,” the next chapter, invokes Burke to frame Methodism as a rhetorical problem since Methodists wrote both to persuade others of their legitimacy and to

confirm themselves in their beliefs. McNelly argues that “the appeal of Methodism rested, in large part, on what Burke refers to as an experience of symbolic identification, an inter-subjective experience in which individuals see themselves in and through the language of others” (64). Methodists used writing to create a sense of identification, something especially important for a mystical religious movement that relied so much on personal experience of spirituality. Reading accounts of fellow Methodists created community as well as serving as an affirmation of faith.

In “Performing the Revival,” McNelly extensively reads Samuel Foote’s play *The Minor*, an important critique given the genre, both because it reached a wide audience and because of the anti-theater stance of Methodism. What Foote demonstrated is that even as Methodists condemned theater going, its leaders appropriated theatricality to persuade. This was particularly true of George Whitefield, the object of satire in *The Minor*. Once again, such attacks did nothing to undermine Methodist community but rather confirmed members in their belief that they were, like early Christians, enduring persecution for their faith.

The fourth chapter treats hymn singing, another Methodist practice that invited scorn because of its bent toward what was perceived as enthusiastic: Methodists singing with great exuberance religious lyrics to popular songs. At the same time, John and Charles Wesley tried to use the Methodist hymnal to negotiate charges of enthusiasm and to check individual responses with group singing that coordinated emotional experiences. McNelly claims that the Methodist hymnal shaped Methodist experience unlike any other discourse of the time with the singing of hymns often becoming the moment of spiritual conversion.

The most damning charge against Methodism, sexual promiscuity, serves as the subject of Chapter 5. Critics accused Methodists of confusing spiritual and sexual impulses thanks to the enthusiastic, visceral nature of the religion; of Methodist leaders using their powerful rhetorical techniques to seduce women; and of forming improper relationships due to the close, soul-searching relationships Methodists formed. Contrarily, attackers accused Methodists of refusing sex to their spouses, thereby undercutting family structure; Wesley did, in fact, encourage celibacy. Of course, the discourse surrounding sexuality involved debates over women’s roles in the family and culture at large, particularly because Methodist women were active leaders in the movement. McNelly also grants that the physicality of the conversion experience and intimate Methodist meetings invited the charges of sexuality.

The book’s last chapter deals with the threat within, examining infighting over predestination with an extensive reading of *Humphry Clinker*. Both Wesley, who argued against predestination, and Whitefield, who argued for it, attempted to situate themselves within Church of England orthodoxy. Wesley feared the doctrine of predestination opened Methodists to accusations of antinomianism so that by carefully and publicly separating himself from Whitefield and Calvinist Methodists on this issue, he actually allied himself with Methodism’s critics. For the most part, Wesley’s attempts to distinguish his version of Methodism failed because the general public saw little difference between Wesley’s and Whitefield’s ideas. An exception is *Humphry Clinker*, in which the eponymous hero’s virtues align him with Wesleyan Methodism (with an emphasis on good works) while the critiques of Methodism (such as the doctrine adopted by Tabitha) are aimed at the Calvinist branch. Like the attacks aimed from the outside, doctrinal infighting, McNelly argues, served to cohere the Methodist movement.

McNelly’s conclusion emphasizes that Methodism is a product of print culture. He notes, “Even though Methodists represented less than 1 per cent of the total population during Wesley’s lifetime, print media gave readers a different impression entirely” (216). The print war

exaggerated the threat of Methodism while providing a cohesion that could not have existed without it.

An impressive bibliography closes a book that will surely be seminal in Methodist studies yet accessible to readers less familiar with the religious movement. *Textual Warfare* is a well-researched and carefully argued work that will benefit all scholars interested in social movements, print culture, and rhetoric.