

John Austin Dolan, Methodist Lay Sectarianism: The Independent Methodists 1796-1927, Ph.D. thesis (University of Manchester, 2004)

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Chapter 1

The Historiography of Independent Methodism

1. Primary Sources

For a small denomination, Independent Methodism has an abundance of historical source material. The Annual Meeting Minutes survive in MS or print, in part from 1808 and in totality from 1828 to the present day. The annual reports of churches are attached to the Minutes for those years where *printed* copies are extant; these cover some of the earlier years but are complete only from 1862. The denominational magazine, which was published from 1823-29 and 1847 to the present day, contains a wealth of information on church origins, evangelistic activity and biographical information. In addition, the minutes of various committees, correspondence, pamphlets, printed church histories and the primary records of many churches are held in the Independent Methodist Archives.

2. Hagiography

The earliest Independent Methodist chronicler was Hugh Kelly (1792-?), a Tyneside schoolmaster, who narrated the origins and subsequent history of the churches of the North-East in 1824,¹ but made little reference to the wider denomination. He was remarkably frank about the shortcomings of the movement in his area, recounting its fractiousness and the unrealistically low giving of the members who thought that an unpaid ministry meant that the churches had no financial needs. By contrast, the first picture of the Lancashire Churches (the largest group) came from Stephen

¹ H. Kelly, *An Impartial History of Independent Methodism in the Counties of Durham and Northumberland* (Newcastle, Edward Walker: 1824).

Rothwell,² who wrote ostensibly about one church, but covered many more in a rambling but informative account, recalling anecdotes which are found nowhere else and supplying valuable social background material.

In 1905, Arthur Mounfield, FRHistS, (1870-1941) edited the first denominational history, to mark the hundredth Annual Meeting of the Connexion.³ This supplied a few general chapters describing the early beginnings of the denomination and some of its characteristics, but there was no chronological account of the century and very little analysis. The rest of the book was taken up entirely with short histories of the individual churches; these reveal, at least implicitly, some of the traits which were characteristic of the Independent Methodists of the nineteenth century. As a historian, Mounfield showed great prowess in research, but gave no indication of his sources.

A further *History of Independent Methodism* was written by James Vickers (1851-1924), by profession a journalist.⁴ Like Mounfield, Vickers wrote a few general chapters but gave no chronological account of the denomination's development. About half of the book was taken up by potted biographies and a quarter was devoted to making a case for Independent Methodist polity. Theologically, Vickers was a child of his age, but he pursued the polemics of denominationalism at a time when its tide was ebbing in favour of ecumenism and some of the churches' brightest young men were changing their allegiance. However, his book continues to be regarded as the principal work on the denomination's history.

Fifty years after Mounfield's work, James Murray (1884-1964) wrote *Independent Methodist History 1905-1955*,⁵ with the aim of bringing to completion a record of

² S. Rothwell, *Memorials of Folds Road Independent Methodist Chapel, Bolton* (2. vols.; Bolton: Independent Methodist Bookroom, 1887 and 1897).

³ A. Mounfield (Ed.) *A Short History of Independent Methodism* (Independent Methodist Bookroom, 1905).

⁴ J. Vickers, *History of Independent Methodism* (Wigan: Independent Methodist Bookroom, 1920).

⁵ J. Murray, *Independent Methodist History 1905-1955* (Wigan: Independent Methodist Bookroom, 1955).

150 years' life of the Connexion. This was a chronological treatment of the period in question, with chapters on some of the issues of the time, but again it was non-analytical. Despite the fact that they were popular rather than academic treatments of the subject, the works of Mounfield, Vickers and Murray have been treated with respect by church historians who referred to them in their own scholarly work, but few have looked beyond them to earlier sources.

3. External Sources

No single work deals with the Independent Methodists comprehensively, but their place in the revivalist nexus which included the Primitive Methodists inevitably brought them mention in this context. George Herod referred to the IM leader, Peter Phillips, as having 'a hankering after Quakerism'⁶ and described his links with key figures in Primitive Methodist origins. H. B. Kendall's magisterial work on Primitive Methodist history showed how the two movements interwove at various points throughout the nineteenth century.⁷ He described their common revivalism as 'denoting not a party so much as a certain temper and tendency often found in the popular, emotional, aggressive evangelism of the beginning of the nineteenth century.'⁸ The conflicts between revivalists and Methodist officialdom were a matter of 'church statics versus church dynamics'. Citing Mounfield as one of his authorities, he explained the coming together of the IM churches as a union and approvingly commented that recent years had seen attempts 'to strengthen the Methodist or Connexional element in the denomination'.⁹ He noted that, like their PM counterparts, the Independent Methodists had become, by 1909, a body of 'permanent and well-ordered churches'.¹⁰

Robert Currie, writing half a century later, distinguished between Methodist secessions and offshoots, the latter being usually localised in origin and essentially lay-led movements. Independent Methodists, therefore, fell into this category, along

⁶ G. Herod, *Historical and Biographical Sketches, Forming a Compendium of the History of the Primitive Methodist Connexion up to the year 1823* (London, 1851), 272.

⁷ H. B. Kendall, *The Origin and History of the Primitive Methodist Church*, (2 vols.; London, n.d.)

⁸ H. B. Kendall, 'The Primitive Methodist Church and the Independent Methodist Churches', in W. J. Townsend et al, *A New History of Methodism* (2 vols.; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909), 1:555ff.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:565.

with the Primitive Methodists, Tent Methodists and Bible Christians. They often resulted from dissatisfaction with Wesleyan Methodism's 'feeble evangelism and distrust of revivalism.' Currie regarded the revivalists' pursuit of lay rights as the equivalent of a cleavage between priest and people. In his view, their emphasis on justification by faith and the priesthood of all believers was a better expression of the cardinal doctrines of the reformation than that of the Wesleyan Methodists. His comment that the Independent Methodists were 'a strange congeries of diverse chapels' was particularly apposite, as this thesis will show.¹¹

Referring to the leaders of the 'offshoot' groups, Currie observed that most of them were men of property. The ability of these groups to expand, he argued, was at least partly influenced by their leaders' financial means. But this was only partly true of the Independent Methodists. In Manchester, their main sponsor, John Broadhurst, a manufacturer of some substance, could buy or build property at will for the extension of his 'Bandroom Methodist' group into the surrounding area, but this remained the boundary for his largesse.¹² By contrast, the Quaker Methodists of Warrington were led by Peter Phillips, a chairmaker of more limited means; it was twenty years before this group could even afford a second property.¹³ An examination of other places shows similar variations.

John T. Wilkinson, drawing mainly on the works of Mounfield and Vickers, highlighted the significance of Lorenzo Dow's and Hugh Bourne's links with this group of churches,¹⁴ an aspect which is explored more fully in his biography of Bourne.¹⁵ He identified an autonomous spirit, self-reliance and egalitarianism as strengths of the movement, but also pointed out that its slow growth and extensive losses were largely due to its looseness of organisation.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:557.

¹¹ R. Currie, *Methodism Divided* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 55f.

¹² A. Mounfield, 'The Beginnings of Independent Methodism in Manchester', *IMMag.* 1908, 196.

¹³ Anon. 'The Life and Labours of Peter Phillips', *Zion's Trumpet*, 1855, 38ff.

¹⁴ J. T. Wilkinson, 'The Rise of other Methodist Traditions' in R. Davies et al (eds.) *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, (4 vols. London, Epworth, 1978) 2:325.

¹⁵ J. T. Wilkinson, *Hugh Bourne 1772-1852* (London: Epworth, 1952).

In a scrupulously detailed study of early Primitive Methodism, Julia Werner showed how Independent and Primitive Methodists shared a similar genesis under the same revivalist influences.¹⁶ Significantly, she explored the tensions which existed in early Primitive Methodism on the issue of ‘free gospel’ methods and the reasons for them. Her account of the problems in the Nottingham Circuit from 1816 onwards demonstrates that free gospelism was not solely an Independent Methodist trait, but involved some early PM preachers who acted with virtual autonomy as they expanded the movement into new areas.¹⁷

An examination of John Kent’s work on Methodist sectarianism gives another perspective on Independent Methodism.¹⁸ Kent referred to two distinct views of a sect (a) social withdrawal by the poor, who wanted a religious society of their own, and (b) a movement which had the will to change a social situation.¹⁹ The former view aptly describes the *first* Independent Methodists, whereas the latter fits those who joined them in the post-Peterloo years and who simultaneously identified themselves with political radicalism. Regarding Independent Methodists as of little significance, he described them as ‘a tiny group dedicated to the impossible task of reconciling Wesleyan and Quaker ideas.’²⁰ This proposed antithesis is examined elsewhere.²¹

Looking from a Wesleyan rather than a Primitive Methodist viewpoint, W. R. Ward showed how some IM groups resulted from Wesleyan Methodism’s growing resistance to revivalism at a time when Jabez Bunting and other young hard-liners were gaining the ascendancy. At this time, those who embraced the revivalist view were claiming ‘the same rights of private edification amongst Wesleyans as the latter had claimed in the Church.’²² The fact that they were denied these rights led to their defection and the formation of groups which became Independent Methodist. Later, Ward turned to the events which followed the 1819 Peterloo Massacre in

¹⁶ J. S. Werner, *The Primitive Methodist Connexion: Its Background and Early History* (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984).

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 87.

¹⁸ J. Kent, *Holding the Fort: Studies in Victorian Revivalism* (London: Epworth, 1978), 39.

¹⁹ Sectarian analysis is covered more fully in Chapter 8.

²⁰ Kent, *Holding the Fort*, 43n.

²¹ See Chapter 8

Manchester, by which time the issues which led to new defections to Independent Methodism were the authority of the pastoral office, the suppression of radicals within Methodism and a feeling of disenfranchisement among working class members, particularly in the Bolton area and Tyneside.²³

The most significant modern interpreter of Independent Methodism has been Deborah Valenze, who gave a full chapter (and parts of other chapters) to the subject in *Prophetic Sons and Daughters*,²⁴ a work devoted to the study of female preaching and popular religion in industrial England. Valenze brought grassroots Independent Methodism to life as she depicted the struggles of the people, whose faith was lived out in home-based believing communities untouched by professional clergy. Importantly, she also highlighted the role of women in ministry and leadership, a significant characteristic of Independent Methodism. She remains the only scholarly writer to devote even a chapter within a wider study to Independent Methodism. Her findings were based almost entirely on obituary records, with no reference to the denomination's corporate activity, but this was consistent with her aim. After several case studies, she concluded that, 'In milltowns, Independent Methodism evolved as a theology of the dispossessed.'²⁵ ... 'Teetotalism, fasting and plain dress replaced customary behaviour, and preachers demonstrated commitment to sectarian values by following a strict code of personal asceticism and refusing all pay for their work.'²⁶ These conclusions seem to be based on a conflation of the IM principle of unpaid ministry and the actual poverty of many adherents. In reality, the only work for which they refused payment was preaching, in the belief that they should not be a burden on their congregations and that they should earn their own living in the secular world; fasting sometimes resulted from starvation-level poverty, as during the Cotton Famine²⁷, but this was hardly an asceticism of choice. Furthermore, an analysis of the occupations of preachers in 1881 and 1901²⁸ shows that the majority were a mixture of white-collar workers (many of them settled retailers) and skilled

²² W. R. Ward, *Religion and Society 1790-1850* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1972), 80.

²³ *Ibid*, 92. See also Chapter 4.

²⁴ Deborah Valenze, *Prophetic Sons and Daughters* (Princeton University Press, 1985).

²⁵ *Ibid*, 241.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 215.

²⁷ See Chapter 6.

²⁸ See Chapter 9.

manual workers. Thus, the picture she painted of ‘uprooted labourers in search of work and domestic security’²⁹ is only partially true, largely because of the limited number of samples she used. Many Independent Methodists consciously resisted being stereotyped as a social phenomenon in religious clothes.³⁰

Valenze’s account also contains some factual inaccuracies and misquotations which inevitably weaken her case. The society at High Legh did *not* defect from the Wesleyan Methodists by 1800 as she stated. The eventual reason for its defection was not because Wesleyan Methodism was ‘too restrictive and perhaps too prestigious for the modest society’, but because of conflict in 1851 over the supply of preachers.³¹ Similarly, the society at Lowton Common is mistakenly contrasted with ‘bricks and mortar’ Wesleyanism because of its domestic beginnings in the eighteenth century; it was, in fact, a Wesleyan society until 1819.³² The society at Nelson did *not*, as she claimed, lose its chapel in the 1870s; it simply bought more land for purposes of expansion.³³

Perhaps of greatest concern is Valenze’s portrayal of the Independent Methodists as people whose ‘faith was full of vengefulness and self-righteous anger’. In support of this assertion, she highlighted some of the imprecatory psalms which, she stated, were used at IM funerals; in fact the examples she used were from Weber’s comments on the psalms in question and none featured (as she implied) in the IM obituaries cited in her footnotes.³⁴

Finally, questions must remain over Valenze’s main conclusion: ‘At a time when working-class political movements were growing in importance and strength, Independent Methodists withdrew from such developments and focused their energies on supportive efforts of their own.’ This withdrawal thesis is based largely

²⁹ Valenze, *Sons and Daughters*, 213

³⁰ Rothwell, *Folds Road*, 1:25. James Vickers, *History of Independent Methodism* (Wigan: Independent Methodist Bookroom, 1920), 32f.

³¹ Valenze, *Sons and Daughters*, 207f; Unpublished MS notes on history of Lymm Independent Methodist Church found among Church Deeds.

³² Valenze, *Sons and Daughters*, 229; Rothwell, *Folds Road*, i, 81.

³³ Valenze, *Sons and Daughters*, 228; Mounfield *Short History*, 161f.

³⁴ Valenze, *Sons and Daughters*, 211ff. Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, Ephraim Fischoff, trans. (1922; Boston: Beacon Paperback ed. 1964), 111.

on examples of disillusioned Chartists who became IM converts, but these men belonged in a brief time frame; wider investigation reveals a different picture.³⁵

Most recently, Michael Watts followed earlier writers in attributing Independent Methodism's origins to lay evangelistic activity, but he challenged Valenze's view that the growth of cottage-based churches was part of 'the struggle for domestic security in an increasingly uncertain world' and argued that a greater factor at this time was the integration of work and home – a relevant point for the handloom weavers whose homes were the bases of several early IM churches.³⁶ He further pointed out that not only Quakers but some Methodists felt strongly that ministers should earn their own livings and not live off the contributions of their members.³⁷ Some Methodist class leaders felt revulsion at being told to collect more money from people who were already suffering deep hardship. As a result, many of them found refuge in the IM fold where non-payment became for them a matter of principle. Finally, Watts noted that non-payment was to prove a major weakness since it impeded Independent Methodism's potential to expand at a comparable rate to other Nonconformist bodies in England.³⁸

4. Areas and Groups

The Bandroom Methodist schism in Manchester is the best-documented of the early IM offshoots, probably because it featured the young Jabez Bunting, almost certainly the anonymous author of a pamphlet which chronicled the events of the time.³⁹ The story was also narrated briefly by his son.⁴⁰ David Gowland placed the strife between the Methodist leadership and the headstrong revivalists of the Bandroom in the context of a growing society which resulted from the city's rapidly increasing population. This, he said, 'was accompanied by a sharp division of opinion between the upholders of discipline and the practitioners of wildfire revivalism'.⁴¹ John Bowmer, examining the same facts, saw the response of the Manchester leaders as

³⁵ See Chapter 7 and Summary Observations below.

³⁶ M. Watts, *The Dissenters*, (2 vols. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995) 2:164f.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 238.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 239.

³⁹ *A Statement of Facts and Observations relative to the late separation from the Methodist Society in Manchester: affectionately addressed to the members of that body by their preachers and leaders.* (Manchester: S. Russell, 1806), 30.

⁴⁰ T. P. Bunting, *The Life of Jabez Bunting, D.D., with Notices of Contemporary Persons and Events* (2 vols. London, 1859), 1:96.

being of great significance for the Methodist understanding of the pastoral office, which had never been fully explicated prior to this time.⁴²

Addressing a situation of twenty years later, Maldwyn Edwards⁴³, W. R. Ward⁴⁴ and David Hempton⁴⁵ used the early writings of Hugh Kelly to show the significance of the Independent Methodists in North-East England in the period immediately following the Peterloo massacre.⁴⁶ In each case, they assessed the conflict between the conservative forces within Methodism and the perceived sense of injustice on the part of those who espoused radical ideas. The story of the later Independent Methodist movement in the same area (1877 onwards) was outlined and analysed by G. E. Milburn to mark the centenary of the conflict in the Sunderland PM Circuit which marked its origins.⁴⁷ It gives a balanced account of both sides of the story.

Sharing contemporary origins with the North-East churches were the Independent Methodists of Liverpool and North Wales.⁴⁸ Drawing from Welsh language sources as well as IM records, A. H. Williams described how issues surrounding the Poor Fund led to an IM secession from Liverpool's Welsh Methodists and how this group attracted disaffected Wesleyans in North Wales.⁴⁹

5. Journals and Biographies.

The journals of Hugh Bourne⁵⁰ and Lorenzo Dow⁵¹ provide unique material concerning the earliest IM churches and their leaders; little would be known of the activities of the IM leader, Peter Phillips (who left no personal records), without

⁴¹ D. Gowland, *Methodist Secessions* (Manchester: Chetham Society, 1979), 22.

⁴² J. C. Bowmer, *Pastor and People* (London: Epworth Press, 1975), 71ff. See also Chapter 3.

⁴³ M. Edwards, *After Wesley* (London: Epworth Press, 1935), 58ff.

⁴⁴ W. R. Ward, *The Early Correspondence of Jabez Bunting 1820-1829* (London: Royal Historical Society, Camden Fourth Series, 1972), 21ff.

⁴⁵ D. Hempton, *Methodism and Politics 1790-1850* (Hutchinson & Co. 1984), 106ff.

⁴⁶ See Chapter 4.

⁴⁷ G. E. Milburn, *The Christian Lay Churches and their Origins* (Sunderland, 1977).

⁴⁸ A. H. Williams, *Welsh Wesleyan Methodism 1850-1858* (Wrexham, 1935), 195ff.

⁴⁹ See Chapter 5.

⁵⁰ MS Journals of Hugh Bourne, Methodist Archives, John Rylands University Library, Manchester.

⁵¹ L. Dow, *The Dealings of God, Man and the Devil as experienced in the Life, Experience and Travels of Lorenzo Dow* (Norwich, Connecticut: William Faulkner, 1833).

them. Biographies of Bourne, notably those by John Walford⁵² and John T. Wilkinson, also throw light on his association with the Independent Methodists. Wilkinson assessed the relationship between Bourne and the Independent Methodists, showing that during 1809-1810 he moved among them with great ease, contributing substantially to their work, but never having total oversight of it.⁵³ Of the major leaders of the Independent Methodists in the 19th. century, only William Sanderson left an autobiography, which provides unique information, but he made little comment on the various conflicts which involved him personally.⁵⁴

6. Summary Observations

On three points there is no dispute among the historians cited: that Independent Methodism emerged as a reaction against Wesleyan Methodism's attitude towards revivalism, lay rights and social justice; that it belonged in the same revivalist framework as Primitive Methodism; and that it failed to expand due to its looseness of organisation and insistence on non-payment. There are further individual observations which build up the picture: the diversity of the constituent churches (Currie); the radical element among them (Edwards, Ward, Hempton), the wider conflicts caused by free gospelism (Werner); the people's self-reliance (Wilkinson); Independent Methodism's gradual metamorphosis into a respectable denomination (Kendall) and its contradictory polity (Kent).

The most significant writer, however, is Valenze and even if some of her conclusions (as indicated earlier) are questionable, she goes beneath the issues of polity which often dominate denominational histories to the lives of the people themselves, unified by poverty and hardship, whose religion reflected their circumstances. This is an immensely valuable contribution to understanding their outlook and attitudes. However, her portrayal of the Independent Methodists as a group withdrawn from reform movements is sharply contradicted by Ward and Hempton in their analysis of the period following the Napoleonic Wars, when many

⁵² J. Walford, *Memoirs of the Life and Labours of the Late Venerable Hugh Bourne* (2 vols.; London: T. King and Burslem: R. Timmis, 1855), 1:172.

⁵³ Wilkinson, *Bourne*, 59ff.

IM people became involved in radical politics, and also by IM primary records of the mid-Victorian period onwards.⁵⁵

With the partial exceptions of Valenze and Milburn, all the academic commentators on Independent Methodism focus entirely on the causes of origin of its various strands. There is therefore a complete absence of any critical examination of Independent Methodism's development as a movement beyond its early years. This thesis therefore aims both to build on existing work and to draw on previously unused material to record and evaluate the history of Independent Methodism during the years 1796-1927.

⁵⁴ W. Sanderson, *The Life and Labours of William Sanderson* (Wigan: Independent Methodist Bookroom, 1899). See chapters 5 and 6 particularly for issues involving Sanderson personally.

⁵⁵ See Chapters 4 and 7.