

## BOOK REVIEWS

O'Brien, Glen. *Wesleyan-Holiness Churches in Australia: Hallelujah under the Southern Cross*. Routledge Methodist Studies. Edited by William Gibson et al. London and New York: Routledge, 2018. 242pp. ISBN: 978-0-8153-9320-7

The renowned and award-winning writer of narrative history, David McCullough, wrote: "History is the course of human events. And it must therefore be, if truthful, about failure, injustice, struggle, suffering, disappointment, and the humdrum. History demonstrates often in brutal fashion the evils of enforced ignorance and demagoguery. History is a source of strength, a constant reminder of the courage of others in times more trying and painful than our own."<sup>1</sup> This quotation captures well O'Brien's brilliant book, which is academic historical writing at its best—soundly researched and captivatingly written. The stated aim of the book is to tell the story of the various Wesleyan-Holiness groups in Australia and their struggles to establish themselves as insiders, orthodox, and evangelical, while also being distinct from Reformed evangelicalism. O'Brien's analysis encompasses several distinct groups while primarily focusing on the four Wesleyan-Holiness denominations that remain in present day Australia: The Salvation Army, Wesleyan Methodists, Nazarenes, and (to a lesser extent) the Church of God (Anderson).

O'Brien's introduction is a brief positioning of his book, which does three things. First, it provides the reader with a basic review of the literature available on this subject and how his book both fits within and differs from these. Second, it briefly sets forth the historical background of the above-mentioned Wesleyan-Holiness denominations in Australia and defends why other denominations/churches are not included. Finally, he outlines his methodological framework, referring to himself as a 'reflexive insider,' one who is both a Wesleyan-Holiness adherent and a historian of faith. O'Brien is a historical theologian and his book evidences the strengths of this disposition as God is allowed to 'peep in from the margins' (p. 11).

---

<sup>1</sup> David McCullough, "The Course of Human Events," National Endowment for the Humanities 2003 Jefferson Lecturer in Humanities, assessed on 10/08/18 at: <https://www.neh.gov/about/awards/jefferson-lecture/david-mccullough-lecture>.

Chapter 2 is devoted to The Salvation Army (TSA), the oldest Wesleyan-Holiness church in Australia and the only one with British rather than American roots, which began with open-air meetings in Adelaide in 1880. O'Brien outlines TSA's impressive start spreading relatively quickly into Melbourne and Sydney (1882), Tasmania (1883), Queensland (1885), and Western Australia (1890), and having a registered 31,000 members by 1901. Most interesting to this reviewer is O'Brien's analysis of TSA's Wesleyan-Holiness theological journey, which is not without its twists and turns. TSA founders, William and Catherine Booth, were strong advocates of the teaching and experience of holiness and were greatly influenced by Phoebe Palmer's 'shorter way.' Some thirty to forty years later, Samuel Brengle is credited with steering TSA 'away from Phoebe Palmer's alter theology by insisting in a more Wesleyan fashion on the need for a direct witness of the Spirit to entire sanctification' (p. 43). O'Brien notes that there was some tension between the teachings of Frederick Coutts and Samuel Brengle concerning whether sanctification was primarily a process or a crisis moment, which, at least in part, was responsible for 'a loss of a distinctive holiness message in The Salvation Army in Australia' (p. 41). Still, as O'Brien highlights, 'varying holiness emphases within The Salvation Army in Australia have depended partly on the influence of territorial leadership' (p. 46). Perhaps the strongest modern proponent of a Wesleyan-Holiness identity within TSA in Australia is (former) General Linda Bond, who made strategic faculty appointments at Booth College in Sydney (in 2009) designed to ground cadets in this theological framework. Nevertheless, '[n]ot all Australian Salvationists identify as Wesleyan . . . and the new emphasis has sometimes been met with ambivalence from those whose identity is strongly "Salvationist," without being necessarily at the same time "Wesleyan"' (p. 48).

Chapter 3 focuses on early holiness movements in Australia, with the main emphasis falling on the holiness impetus in mainline Methodism. Much of this chapter is O'Brien reacting to Kingsley Ridgway's (who established the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Australia) autobiographical account, which suggested that the 'Australian Methodists of the 1920s were strangers to the doctrine and experience of entire sanctification' (p. 57), a point O'Brien aptly disproves. The holiness streams in Methodism at that time 'favoured rational sobriety over emotional excitement' (p. 57) and, therefore, looked very different (and liberal) compared to the North American revivalism that influenced Ridgway's views and moved him out of

ministerial candidature with the Methodists. By the early 1940s, American Holiness movement churches began taking root in Australian soil, the Church of the Nazarene among them; and yet, in O'Brien's estimation, they were about twenty years too late 'to capitalise on what was left of the Methodist interest in holiness' (p. 75).

Chapter 4 documents Nazarene and Wesleyan Methodist beginnings, which bear a decidedly American fingerprint. Both denominations viewed their work in Australia as 'home' rather than 'foreign' mission work, and some may have overestimated the similarities. When surveying the Nazarene work, O'Brien reveals tensions between the American church and those in Australia, some from lack of trust and some from miscommunication. However, in his assessment, 'there seems to have been an absence of any real paternalism and a desire to see Australian leadership emerge as soon as possible' (p. 89). This may be evidenced in the fact that only two years after their Australian work began, Nazarenes elected the first Australian District Superintendent, Albert Berg, in 1948. Likewise, '[f]rom the beginning the need to indigenise was encouraged and pursued' (92) within the Wesleyan Methodist church, and Ridgway charged the church with working towards becoming self-supporting. O'Brien paints a synergetic picture of American missionaries and Australian leaders working together to spread holiness down under (p. 95).

Together, chapters 5 and 6 unpack the difficulties undergone by Wesleyan-Holiness churches as they sought to establish themselves. As O'Brien writes, 'They were often looked upon by mainstream Australian Evangelicals as "holy rollers" and "sinless perfectionists," purveyors of a brand of religion thought to be populist, coarse, and theologically suspect' (p. 114). This scepticism meant that many of the charter adherents, who often came from established denominations or organisations, had to make significant sacrifices to join these movements. Nevertheless, O'Brien argues that Wesleyan-Holiness churches 'did not expend a great deal of energy in answering their theological detractors' (p. 114), at least not in their early years. O'Brien also provides a measured account of how some anti-American sentiment may have worked against these Wesleyan-Holiness churches. But, it is important to note, says O'Brien, that while most of the churches had American connections, they were still 'authentic movements of Australian Christians finding in their American cousins willing "sponsors" who could provide legitimacy for their efforts by links with recognised and established denominations' (p. 136).

Chapter 7 has a strong sociological focus as it evaluates how these Wesleyan-Holiness churches moved along the church-sect continuum, ultimately becoming ‘insiders’ rather than ‘outsiders.’ As O’Brien observes, early Wesleyan-Holiness churches usually refrained from things like television, movies, alcohol, tobacco, extravagant or promiscuous dress, and makeup, seeing them as incongruous with the sanctified life. While some of this conservatism could be viewed as legalistic dogmatism or even outright sexism, there were good reasons behind many of the social standards. For example, the mandate to dress ‘plainly’ was not just about good financial stewardship, it was also a consideration for the poor who might feel alienated by such extravagances. The reasons for abandoning such external markers were multifaceted, some theological, some sociological/cultural, and still others as the result of lessening convictions by later adherents. The loss of certain theological distinctives was similarly complex. Sadly, O’Brien notes, ‘Little difference is now found between Holiness preaching on sanctification and general exhortations to godly living that might be found in any Evangelical church’ (p. 149). The cost of such moderation is ‘the loss of a distinctive fervour, the loss of a sense of divine mission to announce a specific message about holiness, and the lessening of religious demands upon its members’ (p. 171). Indeed, we find that these churches now look very similar to the groups they originally separated from.

Chapters 8 and 9 appear to function more as appendices than as part of the main thesis of O’Brien’s book. Chapter 8 looks at the relationship between Holiness and Pentecostal movements with the Church of God (Cleveland), known in Australia as The New Testament Church of God, as a case study for this evaluation. In the end, O’Brien argues that this group is more Pentecostal than Wesleyan-Holiness. While this analysis is important, it may have fit better in the introduction, which argued for the exclusion of other groups that were not deemed Wesleyan-Holiness churches. Chapter 9 is a very brief look at the viability of conservative religion. O’Brien looks at patterns of growth and decline between 1977 and 1981 and ultimately arguing that varying tensions within the Uniting Church in Australia resulted in some of the growth of Pentecostal and Wesleyan-Holiness churches. Ultimately, says O’Brien, ‘While the Wesleyan-Holiness churches have not spearheaded a widespread spiritual awakening as they had hoped they would, they nonetheless represent the continuation of the Wesleyan theological tradition within Australian Evangelicalism’ (p. 207).

Overall, this is a significant work that is well researched, well written, and makes a significant contribution to Australian church historical studies and to Wesleyan-Holiness studies more broadly. If one has even a casual interest in the subject, then he/she should read this book. It is a good reminder to us of the sacrifices of those who have gone before and of the faithfulness of a God who is ever before us. The historical persons discussed in this book surely had their shortcomings, but they believed they were being called by God to re-establish the Wesleyan-Holiness message and identity in Australia and, in many ways, to break new ground. While some of their aspirations fell short, they give us hope for a brighter Wesleyan-Holiness future in Australia. I finish with these words from O'Brien, 'If the Wesleyan-Holiness churches can continue to attract people who are looking for religious movements with strong convictions and certainty about the truth they claim to possess, they will in all likelihood negotiate the new world they inhabit with some degree of continued success' (p. 214).

Rob A. Fringer  
Nazarene Theological College, Brisbane

Glen O'Brien and Hilary M. Carey, eds. *Methodism in Australia: A History* (Ashgate Methodist Studies). Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015. xviii+308pp. ISBN: 9781472429483

Although I am not denominationally Methodist, I am Australian and my heart is often strangely warmed, so this book was both illuminating and encouraging in equal measure. Its goal was to bring together regional, thematic and chronological approaches to Methodist history, in Australia and more generally in the South Pacific, in a series of seventeen chapters by local authors to prompt further writing on Antipodean Methodism and to fill the gap while we wait. The topics were decided as a result of extensive consultation, and treat a wide range of historical interests, for example colony/state distinctives, the place of Methodism in the British Empire, liturgy, academia, gender issues, historiography and legacy. The authors are expert in their fields, and are allowed to approach their topic mindful of the purpose of the volume and free to compose their chapter according to their own lights. Some chapters were more chronicling, and others more interpretative, but the overall achievement was pleasantly unified, not always possible in a volume

with a variety of contributors.

As an Australian, the sections on Methodist contribution to society and its relationship with the imperial agenda were especially satisfying. Belief in the providential character of the Empire spilled over into Methodist nation-building here (p. 116). The bigger question of the nature of Federation was linked to Methodist heart religion and Romantic sensibilities, and the longer story of lay and female contributions to Methodist classes were tied to the movement for female political suffrage. Along the way, pithy definitions were given which may otherwise escape non-Methodists, for example the importance of the class meeting as an accountability rather than educational group (p. 169), and the demise of class meetings was frequently mentioned as a portent of wider decline in Methodist identity and spirituality. I was also very appreciative of the distinctions made between Methodism in Victoria and elsewhere, given the mobility of early Victorian settlement and the more liberal theological inclinations which eventuated (p. 58). Marxist interpretations of the movement were acknowledged, but more prominent were readings of the denominational shape of societies in the nineteenth century.

As an evangelical in the Anglican tradition, I valued learning here about my cousins in the cause, and the subtle but persistent role that heart religion had played not just in revivalist or conversionist expressions of Methodism, but in its social and cultural modes as well. Engagement with the writings of Phyllis Mack was evident, not only in the chapters treating Methodist historiography in particular. I had only dimly understood the various Methodist sub-groupings, here often described as the minor Methodists, which helped me to understand the nature of the Uniting Church of Australia, and the weaknesses (perhaps strengths) of the Wesleyan Methodists, with their more centralising and less revivalistic posture. I was more surprised that significant voices in the recent history of evangelicalism were neither named nor quoted, for example David Bebbington and his quadrilateral, or Gascoigne's attention to the more rational edge of the Enlightenment project in the Australian colonies, especially since cultural parallels with other types of evangelicalism (for example in the US) were noted (p. 269).

There were several emotional moments for me, an alumnus of Queen's College in the University of Melbourne, as names familiar from my undergraduate studies were placed in a bigger historical arc: Edward Sudgen, Calvert Barber, Raynor Johnson, Eric Osborn, to name just a few. The historical reasons for Methodists to join the

Uniting Church were adequately explained, though theological debates as distinct from sociological ones in the modern period were less satisfactorily presented. There are other chapters I might have wished to include, but the ones collected here provide excellent overviews and insights into late modern religion in its Methodist and Australian guise. I commend it wholeheartedly.

Rhys Bezzant  
Ridley College, Melbourne