

American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists

reviewed by [Grant Wacker](#) in the [June 29, 2010](#) issue

In Review



American Saint

John Wigger

Several years ago, my daughter, who is a Methodist pastor, received an appointment to a small charge in North Carolina's tobacco country. One day a parishioner informed her that Francis Asbury had preached at a camp meeting at a nearby lake. My daughter soon discovered, with a neck-tingling shudder, that every time she drove past the lake, the ghost of the great man's achievements, if not of the man himself, still haunted the site.

The broad outlines of Francis Asbury's imposing life are well known. Born in 1745 to artisan parents near Birmingham, England, he converted as an adolescent under Methodist exhorting and soon became a local preacher. Though Asbury lacked a classical education, in 1771 he responded to John Wesley's plea to help establish Methodist societies in America. Asbury never returned to England. Celibate and ascetic, the young

evangelist spent the rest of his life preaching the gospel and nurturing Methodist cells throughout the colonies and then the young republic. Less well known are the statistics that detail Asbury's achievement. In 45 years he traveled, mostly on horseback, 130,000 miles up and down the coast from Georgia to Canada, crossed the Appalachians at least 60 times, oversaw 224 annual conferences, ordained 4,000 preachers and delivered more than 16,000 sermons.

This first-rate biography by John Wigger, a history professor at the University of Missouri, is worthy of its subject. It runs along two parallel tracks. The first and more important one is Wigger's chronicle of Asbury's life, in which he pays particular attention to Asbury's public activities. The second track is, as the commentator Paul Harvey used to say, the rest of the story: an account of the plethora of men and women who framed Asbury's ministry.

I will focus on the first track. Wigger argues that Asbury's importance lies in four areas. First, his "legendary piety and perseverance, rooted in a classically evangelical conversion experience"; second, his facility for connecting with ordinary people; third, his adroit use of popular culture for his evangelistic purposes; and fourth, his ability not only to organize Methodist societies but also to persuade thousands of Americans that polity matters. This fourth point merits emphasis. Hierarchical organization, with power flowing from top to bottom, enabled superintendents to send (typically) unmarried itinerants where they were needed rather than relying on men who had married and located where they wanted. This conviction, seemingly so alien in a democracy, formed a cornerstone of Wesleyan doctrine and practice. The result, in Winthrop Hudson's memorable words, was to make the 19th century "the Methodist Age." Eventually Methodist churches outnumbered post offices.

Wigger's attitude toward Asbury is respectful but not reverential. He rightly focuses on Asbury's accomplishments but does not hesitate to give us a flesh-and-blood man with flesh-and-blood failings. Perhaps the most striking of Asbury's accomplishments was his iron-willed personal discipline, which manifested itself in a devotional life of heroic exactitude. He routinely rose at 4:00 a.m. for an hour of prayer and Bible study and then set aside another hour for devotions before retiring. The same iron will drove him to make the rounds of almost all of the nation's preaching circuits, regardless of heat, cold, rain, snow, flies, chiggers, mosquitoes, recurrent illnesses, threatened Indian attacks and the infirmities of old age.

Running a close second to his personal discipline was the ethic that Asbury strove to impose on "the people called Methodists." He urged that class meetings (subsets of societies) enforce clear boundaries, strict spiritual regimens and rigorous standards of daily behavior. He insisted that his itinerants keep a watchful eye not only on their flocks but also on themselves, abjuring earthly romance and needless possessions. He struggled to maintain an apolitical stance during the Revolution, to stand up to Wesley's withering disapproval of his increasingly pro-American attitudes after the Revolution, and to hold the southern and northern conferences together as sectional clouds darkened. He agonized, both privately and publicly, about the immorality of slavery. And he preached relentlessly, not eloquently or with conspicuous learning but with the passion of "a dying man to dying men."

The book's virtues are many. Most obvious is the herculean research. The pages seem shackled to Earth by the weight of the notes (or they would be if the notes were at the bottom of each page). The judiciousness of Wigger's evaluations also catches the eye. His account of the temperament of church folk, both those long gone and those here today, reads like the reflections of a seasoned shepherd of souls. His ability to embed the narrative in the larger story of colonial and early-republic "secular" history, including the story of medical knowledge of the era, suggests that the volume might serve as a U.S. history text just as well as a religion text.

For a work so finely wrought, criticism seems gratuitous. Still, for the sake of the sport, I will offer three suggestions for the next edition. First, all but the most ardent students of American Methodism will find the book too long and detailed. After a while, the multiple accounts of Asbury's multiple journeys begin to blur. Here I find myself reminded of one of Billy Graham's associates, who affectionately quipped that if you have

heard ten of Graham's sermons, you probably have heard them all. Second, the volume's second rail—the stories of the countless souls who crisscrossed Asbury's life—sometimes turns into the proverbial third rail: a distraction. Finally, while Wigger's ear for the rhythms of colloquial dialogue and his eye for choice quotations are impressive, his decision to use the contractions and split infinitives of everyday speech seems curious in a work of serious scholarship.

Asbury has not lacked for biographies, but Wigger's is definitive and magisterial. One of my teachers used to say that there are two ways to kill a subject for future researchers. The first is to botch it so badly that others will have no idea how to begin again. The second is to do it so expertly that others will have no idea where to begin again. Wigger will leave later historians wondering where to plunge the spade. My guess is that no one will even want to try, at least not for a very long time.