A Brand from the Burning, by Roy Hattersley

reviewed by Philip R. Meadows in the September 20, 2003 issue

Lock up your sons and daughters, John Wesley is riding into town! According to Roy Hattersley, Wesley was a man of "dubious conduct." Maybe he was even a psychologically disturbed religious megalomaniac who used the Methodist movement as a vehicle for establishing his own status and salvation.

As a man, Wesley was "silly about women" and "remained, into old age, dangerously susceptible to every woman who seemed to admire him," Hattersley charges. His relationships were characterized by "emotional irresponsibility" and even bordered on "emotional masochism." Perhaps the problem of sexual impotence accounted for his "juvenile pursuit of women" well into middle age?

As a theologian, Wesley was "not an original thinker" but "susceptible to whatever influence was most recently upon him," to the point of being "intellectually footloose," according to Hattersley. If "women were his weakness, doctrinal promiscuity was his abiding sin." He had "a unique facility for ignoring inconvenient truths" and "was not the man to allow a malign purpose to prevent the endorsement of a convenient conclusion." Wesley was a pragmatist after all, for whom theology at times "had to be forgotten in order to attract men and women who were frightened by long words and complicated ideas."

As a pastor, Wesley was intolerably superstitious: he actually believed in supernatural realities and miracles. And he held that all of life was subject to the providence of God. As a result, he had the habit of "taking piety too far" and seemed "incapable of experiencing, or even understanding, normal human emotions." It is also likely that Wesley was a hypochondriac and a valetudinarian who reveled in the self-absorption of ill health.

As a leader, Wesley possessed an "unscrupulous determination never to admit that he had been wrong": he "intimidated (as well as influenced) those around him" and "constantly sought to deceive others." Indeed, he was a tyrannical autocrat who

"lived in perpetual fear of being overthrown and thus believed that calls for democracy must immediately be crushed." The fact is, Hattersley says, "Methodism was made up as it went along--very largely inside John Wesley's troubled mind"--and was then governed by his "ruthless organization." In short, Wesley was a capricious and egocentric attention seeker.

As a work of modern criticism Hattersley's biography seeks to present the historical Wesley warts and all, with the objectivity of an outsider's point of view. But there is no such thing as neutral reporting, not even from the pen of a former British Labor Party politician turned Lord of the Realm like Hattersley. It is clear that he reads his sources through the lenses of a self-confessed atheism and the secular prejudices of modern psychosocial categories.

To this Methodist scholar it seems that the author portrays a "tabloid" version of Wesley's life: sensational and sweepingly judgmental; often historically inaccurate; and largely ignorant of the research of Wesley scholars over the past few decades.

Ironically, those who are familiar with the scholarship actually consulted by Hattersley may be led to conclusions very different from his. Many will not find it strange that Wesley could innocently desire female companionship and even the sexual intimacy of marriage, while struggling to accept his true calling to a single life. Many will find it strange that the author condemns Wesley for being both unyieldingly dogmatic and pragmatically susceptible to doctrinal revision. The combination of openness and conviction can be seen as admirable qualities in a Christian leader.

Many will not find it strange that Wesley refused to break "new intellectual ground," if that meant joining the rationalists or latitudinarians in suspending the authority of scripture and Christian orthodoxy. Many will find it strange that the author continually portrays the ambiguities of Wesley's leadership in Machiavellian terms, rather than in terms of the subtle complexities of sustaining a renewal movement within the Church of England while striving for a genuine catholic spirit.

Many will not find it strange that Wesley chose to live and minister to others as though what he professed to believe about divine providence were actually true! I could go on. The great flaw of Hattersley's book is that he ruthlessly sacrifices balanced judgment and plain coherence in order to cast Wesley in the worst possible light.

To his credit, the author does draw upon a broad range of primary sources in the Wesley corpus and a fair number of important secondary works. Despite attempts to separate "fact from fable," however, his substantial reliance upon older texts, combined with his unquestionable talent for storytelling, leads to some repetition of half-truth and legend.

Hattersley does a decent job of summarizing complicated historical events and theological ideas, placing them carefully within the wider social context of 18th-century England, and still managing to keep the whole account interesting. At its best, the biography highlights many important modulations in Wesley's life and thought: Wesley's own spiritual and theological journey; the controversies over doctrine and practice within the Methodist movement itself; the struggle to resist schism from the Church of England; and the development of American Methodism into an independent church.

However, the editorial promise of this book to become "the classic work" on Wesley will either succeed for all the wrong reasons or fail on scholarly grounds. Its usefulness as an antidote to Methodist hagiography is seriously hampered by the unrelenting and unwarranted assassination of Wesley's character. Hattersley finds nothing much good to say about him and finally dismisses any lasting significance of early Methodism as a whole, except, perhaps, as an embarrassing precursor to the influence of 19th-century Methodism on working-class Britain.

Historians will be constantly frustrated by the book's ubiquitous historical and typographical errors--from Wesley's christening name in 1703 to the place of his near death experience in 1775. And theologians will be dissatisfied with the often confused treatment of key doctrinal questions, especially what Wesley means by real Christianity and its relation to the pursuit of perfect love.

Finally, pastors will be disappointed by the scant attention paid to the means of grace; the practices of disciplined small-group fellowship; the way Methodist societies worshiped; the contributions of lay leaders in the movement; and the commitment to ministry among the poor. These things, among many others, have been the lasting gifts of Wesleyan discipleship and spirituality to the church as a whole.