

Comptes rendus — Book Reviews

Henry Abelow — *The Evangelist of Desire: John Wesley and the Methodists*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990. Pp. xii, 136.

This book cannot be ignored as it applies psycho-history, one of the most provocative, controversial, dangerous and insightful current interdisciplinary fields, to a portrait of John Wesley (1703-1791), the most studied British religious reformer since Bunyan, Milton and Cromwell. According to W.H. Lecky (1838-1903), John Wesley, who travelled a quarter-million miles from his 1838 conversion to his death, preaching 40,000 sermons to millions of largely working-class listeners, “meant more for Britain than all the victories of Pitt by land and sea” (3).

Wesley, who taught workers non-violent improvement through puritan virtues and a conservative world view, has been given credit by Elie Halévy (1870-1937), for nothing less than preventing a French-style English Revolution, and by Bernard Semmel (*The Methodist Revolution*, 1973), for accomplishing a revolutionary transformation of values, as Britain passed from agrarian to industrial society. Contrary to the liberal-democratic interpretations of Halévy and Semmel, E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of English Working Class* (1963), presented from literary, sociological, Marxist, as well as Freudian vantage points, criticized Methodism as counter-revolutionary — encouraging “psychic masturbation” in its transference of sexual and revolutionary passions.

The fine focus which Abelow sets for his book is justified by the existence of a comprehensive inter-disciplinary body of literature on Wesley and Methodism, which could have permitted the author full treatment of his subject, by referring generally to the conclusions of others, without straying in detail from his chosen topic. “[N]ot a biography” although he does include “new information” on Wesley, not “a socioeconomic profile of the early Methodist community”, Abelow’s book asks: “How did Wesley succeed in attracting to himself so many long-staying followers? Of what he taught these followers once he had attracted them, how much did they really accept?” (xi-xii).

Abelow comes to the psycho-historical conclusion that “Wesley was successful in attracting to himself a long-staying following...largely because he was both seductive and monopolistic” (xii). Examining Wesley’s well-known attachment to his mother, contempt for his father, unsuccessful courtships and passionless marriage, Abelow contends that Wesley spent a lifetime seeking among his millions of humble followers substitutes for his unrequited desires. His attractiveness depended on his selective use of the customary “counters of genteel behaviour” (24).

Abelow, who previously taught history at Wesleyan University and now is a professor of English literature, uses his critical abilities profitably to explore some of the richly-detailed Victorian biographies, finding a Wesley we have forgotten. Even after he devoted himself to religion, Wesley kept some of the privileges which were

his as a gentlemen. For example, he did not always ride on horseback: in his senior years, he travelled in a gilded carriage, fitted as a kind of travelling library (114). The more familiar ascetic Wesley, whom Abelow also skilfully presents, sought “not only to exact deference but also to win love from the masses”; he “stepped out of his own set, went directly to the poor, to their own ground, and let them hear him there, see him and even on occasion stroke him” (32). His charitable donations exceeded what was considered right for a gentleman (32); and, providing “a charity still greater and more important to his hearers: he offered them all free grace” (33).

This book must inevitably be compared with *Young Man Luther. A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (1958), a work Abelow does not mention, by the master of Freudian historians, Erik Erikson, who argued that Luther, who also preferred his mother to his father, suffered an adolescent identity crisis, paralleled and made historically relevant by the identity crisis of Christendom, as it passed from the medieval to the early modern period. Roland Bainton’s charge that you cannot “psychoanalyse the dead”, who can no longer respond to probing questions, does not apply to Luther and Wesley who left heavy soul-searching memoirs providing many of the answers psycho-historians seek.

The value of Abelow’s book is restricted, however, by a limited grounding in psycho-history, by an insufficient attempt to inform his conclusions generally with the findings of scholars in other fields and by fundamental deficiencies in the Freudian frame of reference, itself. Abelow admits that he had not anticipated taking a Freudian approach to his subject, but came to the conclusion as his work progressed that “religion and sex, at least in the case of early Methodism, were intermixed” (xii).

To his credit, Abelow did consult writings by Freud, himself (“The Dynamics of Transference” and “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego”); and by two distinguished French scholars, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 1973); and the historian Michel Foucault (1926-1984, *The History of Sexuality*, 3 vols., 1976-1984). Among English historians, Abelow praises E.P. Thompson, “whose masterpiece” “first sparked” his “interest in the subject” (119); and refers to works by Robert Currie in his bibliography, but not to *Methodism Divided* (1968), Currie’s clearest Freudian exposition of Wesley. Abelow, however, does not mention, *The Angel Makers. A Study in the Psychological Origins of Historical Change, 1750-1850* (1958), by G.R. Taylor, whose Freudian understanding of Wesley was more subtle than his own. According to Taylor, Wesley’s fixation on his mother created in him tendencies to “matrism”; but his mother, herself, had “been fixated on a severe father”, qualifying young Wesley for a “curious mixture of matrism and patrism”, Taylor called “patromatrism”, which engendered his social concern and his authoritarianism, as well as an “ambivalent attitude to women, whom he both courts and denigrates” (208-209).

Abelow’s study of Wesley lacks the germane theological understanding found in Erikson’s treatment of Luther; and does not account sufficiently for the sociological conclusions of Thompson or the insights of social psychologists, such as Zevedei Barbu, to explain the Methodists’ motivations. Abelow’s chapter on “spirituality” displays his skill in dealing with theology; but he does not discuss fully other theological and ecclesiastical concepts fundamental to understanding Methodism and its founder, such as Arminianism, Wesley’s non-Calvinistic belief in the efficacy of good works for Salvation, which permitted him to offer his mass following “free

grace". Abelow does not pretend that Wesley was explicitly conscious of his Freudian motivation, although he attributes to him a kind of implicit awareness. Seeing the "job of [Wesley's] historian" "in much the same relation as the critic does to the actor", Abelow admits that Wesley may not have known "in detail just how he made the impact he made", but "he certainly was conscious in a general way of what he was doing". "He knew that he managed...by winning love. That was why he worried that some of his flock preferred him to God. He knew, too, that he was succeeding in making his revival last" (44). Wesley, of course, saw his own mission in Evangelical concepts which have been studied by theological historians, such as Semmel, to whose conclusions Abelow might have referred generally.

Psychoanalytical techniques can help throw light on Wesley's personality and the elements in it which were attractive to the masses; but only social psychology, which Zevedei Barbu so skilfully employed in *Democracy and Dictatorship: Their Psychology and Patterns of Life* (1956) to describe converts to Naziism, can help explain why the masses felt a need to follow Methodism. Erikson's Lutherans, Barbu's Nazis, Thompson's working people and Abelow's Methodists all suffered anxiety brought on by profound social change which social psychology can help historians understand. There is a more timely problem in Freudian historical accounts of religious figures. As much a product as he was a cause of early contemporary sex stereotyping, Freud was guilty of making mothers responsible for the lives of their sons (as Toronto's Paula Caplan has shown in *The Myth of Women's Masochism*, 1985). Can psycho-historians be accused of the same kind of gender-laden explanations?

This book is worth reading as much for its value in raising significant psycho-historiographical questions, as it is for its fascinating, if sometimes fanciful, portrait of Wesley and the Methodists.

Gerald Wayne Olsen
Nipissing University College

Jean Barman — *The West beyond the West: A History of British Columbia*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991. Pp. x, 428.

Robin Fisher — *Duff Pattullo of British Columbia*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991. Pp. xv, 445.

The resurgence of regional history in British Columbia as a legitimate field of study is indicated by the publication of these two books. Both volumes share a common perspective that seeks to establish the distinctive character of B.C. outside the national story.

Jean Barman's *The West beyond the West* is the most comprehensive general history of B.C. written since Margaret Ormsby's *British Columbia: A History*, which was first published in 1958. Although acknowledging the important contribution that Ormsby's book continues to make, Professor Barman has attempted to offer more than a general political history by examining themes of social and economic change.