John Wesley’s Rebuke to the Rebels of British America: Revisiting the Calm Address

Glen O’Brien

Abstract

This essay revisits John Wesley’s A Calm Address to Our American Colonies in an attempt to contribute to the renewed interest in the global and transatlantic dimensions of the American Revolution, particularly its religious aspects. Mapping Methodist responses to the Revolution on both sides of the Atlantic may provide a helpful microcosm of responses in the broader religious world. It cautions against seeing Wesley’s political views as extreme Toryism and draws on recent scholarship to demonstrate that Wesley supported a constitutional monarchy since its finely tuned balance of power between king, parliament and people needed only to be preserved in order for genuine liberty to prevail. The myth that Methodists destroyed copies of the Calm Address when they reached America in order to avoid being seen as Loyalists is disproved. Methodist responses to the Revolution were varied, ranging from strong opposition to active support, but Wesley’s political views were not unusual in the hotly contested world of eighteenth-century rhetoric on liberty even if Methodists would distance themselves from them in the more politically reformist atmosphere of the nineteenth century.

Published in Methodist Review: A Journal of Wesleyan and Methodist Studies
ISSN: 1946-5254 (online) • URL: www.methodistreview.org
Introduction

John Wesley’s *A Calm Address to Our American Colonies* was a Loyalist pamphlet published in September 1775 three months after the hostilities at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, that launched the American Revolution. It defended the right of Parliament to tax the American colonies, pointed Americans to the liberties they already enjoyed under the crown, and ended with an exhortation to “fear God and honour the king.” Going through nineteen editions, 100,000 copies were circulated within a year.¹

The *Calm Address* is probably the best known of John Wesley’s political tracts and is usually considered the primary source for ascertaining his views on the American Revolution. It is chiefly responsible for the suspicion that Methodists in British America were Loyalists and traitors to the cause of freedom, and as a piece of Christian discourse at a turning point in human history it is valuable in shedding light on concepts of political liberty in the eighteenth-century world. Understandably, along with Methodist responses to the Revolution in general, the *Calm Address* became the focus of a considerable number of publications around the time that the United States celebrated its Bicentennial in 1976.² A return to the *Calm Address* at a distance from that particular celebration may contribute to the renewed interest in the global and

---

¹ This essay is the result of research undertaken at the Divinity School at Duke University, North Carolina, during the Wesley Research Seminar of June 2011. I want to express appreciation to Randy Maddox, Richard Heitzenrater, and Russell Richey for the gracious assistance offered during that time as well as to archivist Michael Shumate and the staff of the Special Collections area of the Perkins Library.

transatlantic dimensions of the American Revolution, particularly its religious aspects.

The earliest histories of the American Revolution tended to see things from the American perspective. A heroic interpretation of good men overthrowing tyrants eventually gave way to a Whig interpretation that stressed America’s destiny and the inevitability of historical progress. The canons of early twentieth-century historiography soon dealt with what it considered such flights of fancy and sought to apply objective, unbiased, scientific analysis, leading to a variety of approaches, most focusing on the dimension of social struggle inherent in the events. By the late 1960s, Charles M. Andrews’ interpretation had come to dominate scholarship. The source of the conflict lay in the inability of the colonial assemblies to see themselves as subordinate to the British Parliament. The American legislatures thought of themselves as on equal footing with the House of Commons and equal in power to the British Parliament. Needless to say, Parliament did not see the authority of such upstart provincial assemblies in quite the same light. Bernard Bailyn argued persuasively that the American Revolution arose out of a perceived threat to British liberties occasioned by malevolent forces within the British Parliament. Ironically the only way to preserve the freedoms originally guaranteed by the crown was to throw off the shackles of a corrupt government and start again.

Recent decades have included a focus on previously neglected participants such as Native Americans, slaves, and women. The international dimensions of the conflict, however, remain relatively unexplored, though there have been


some recent impressive approaches. It is increasingly recognized that the Revolution was a global war: one phase of Britain’s war with France as well as America’s first civil war, which was fought between fellow Britons. The transatlantic and global dimensions need fuller exploration, especially the religious responses to the conflict. Though Methodism was a tiny sect in British America at the outbreak of hostilities, it was at that very time being established as a transatlantic movement. This essay revisits Wesley’s *Calm Address* as the beginning point of mapping Methodist responses to the Revolution on both sides of the Atlantic, hoping that such an investigation may provide a helpful microcosm of responses in the broader religious world.

---

**A Calm Address to Our American Colonies**

The overall argument of the *Calm Address* is that the English Parliament has the rightful power to tax the American colonies and that the inhabitants of British America remain obligated to submit to the king’s authority. Everyone is born the subject of some state or other and they are born duty bound to accept the laws that exist within that state. If the Americans claim the rights to liberty guaranteed to English subjects they must be subject to English laws. Those who form a colony in a faraway land do not forfeit their legal rights under the crown but they have lost the capacity to exercise the right of representation in Parliament. The colonies were established under royal charters and have no more right to establish their own legislature than the multitudes in England.

---


8 As David Hempton has argued, “any account of Methodism that failed to take into account its international dimensions was by definition incomplete, perhaps even dangerous.” David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 5.
who have no vote have a right to establish their own Parliament. There is no clause in any colonial charter which exempts any colony from paying taxes forever; therefore, they are all obligated to pay them.

The real cause of discontent in America is the agitation of those in England plotting to overthrow the government and establish in its place a Cromwellian-style commonwealth. If America secedes from Britain these incendiaries will take the opportunity to overturn the government while the military is occupied elsewhere. But what advantage could possibly be gained from such a scenario? There is no greater or more secure liberty, either civil or religious, than that which is presently guaranteed under the authority of the crown and parliament and no governments are as despotic as republics and commonwealths. The average American is unaware of the real plot and would be surprised to discover it. He should not be deceived by such schemers but should seek peace and unity under the authority of God and the king.

The bulk of the *Calm Address* was borrowed (plagiarized, said Wesley’s detractors) from Samuel Johnson’s *Taxation No Tyranny* published in the same year. Wesley reproduced the first eighteen pages of Johnson’s tract and then to fill it out added a five-page response by William Smith of the College of Philadelphia from *A Sermon on the Present Situation of American Affairs*. Allan Raymond suggests that Charles Wesley may have written to John after the first edition urging him to write to Johnson and ask him to clear him of the charges of plagiarism. For his part, Johnson was not bothered but delighted by John Wesley’s appropriation of his material. On February 6, 1777, he would write to Wesley referring to the *Calm Address* as “your important suffrage to my argument on the American question. To have gained such a mind as yours may justly confirm me in my own opinion.” In fact, Wesley did Johnson a favor by placing his flowery prose into a more readable style and thus more effectively spreading the government’s position to a wider audience.

The Prime Minister Lord North’s government was also delighted, knowing that Wesley, by this time seventy-two years of age and one of the best-
known men in England, was gladly heard by many. The government purchased the entire first edition and circulated it to every church in London.\(^{12}\) When asked what the government could do to assist Wesley and his people in return for the writing of the *Calm Address*, he replied that he wanted no favors, but ultimately accepted fifty pounds for the relief of the poor. Later he expressed regret that he had not “requested to be made a royal missionary, and to have the privilege of preaching in every church.”\(^{13}\)

It seems odd that Mark Noll would claim that John Wesley took a “specifically biblical approach” to the conflict and that he should see this as strangely out of step with Loyalist rhetoric and more in keeping with Whig politics.\(^{14}\) This may be an assumption on Noll’s part since an acquaintance with Wesley’s political tracts shows that he rarely appealed to the Bible in setting out his case in support of the king and the Parliament. The concluding exhortation in the first edition of the *Calm Address* echoes Galatians 5:15 (“Let us not bite and devour one another”), Romans 14:19 (“Let us follow after peace”), and 1 Peter 2:7 (“Fear God and honour the king”), but explicitly biblical arguments are not made in the body of the work. Ronald H. Stone describes Wesley’s political writings as “philosophical” and as expressing “the political work of the intellectual.”\(^{15}\) He agrees with David Hempton that Wesley’s political conservatism is based not only on an amended Toryism but also on his appreciation for the liberty enjoyed by “the free-born Englishmen.”\(^{16}\) One may assume that biblical principles such as the submission to God-instituted authority urged upon believers by Paul in Romans 13 lie behind Wesley’s political conservatism, and he does characteristically end his political tracts with an appeal to the sovereign God who rules the world with wisdom and with a call to repentance before the inevitable judgement arrives. These are of course biblical themes, but the arguments themselves are based more on political theory and on notions of natural law rather than on explicitly theological grounds. In fact, Wesley states in *Thoughts upon Slavery* that he develops his argument against slavery “setting

\(^{12}\) Sandoz, 424.
\(^{14}\) Noll, 116.
the Bible out of the question.” Slaves have the right to rebel against any system that takes away their natural right to liberty, “which they have as much right to as the air they breathe.”

Of course the absence of explicitly biblical material in Wesley’s political tracts does not mean that there was no theology at all behind Wesley’s politics. Jason Vickers has argued that in the eighteenth-century context of a “confessional state,” Wesley’s ecclesiastical, political, and theological commitments are “interrelated, mutually enforcing and generally of a piece with each other,” so that in interpreting Wesley “every political statement must be ‘monitored . . . for its theological and ecclesiastical implications.’” Certainly for Wesley human liberty is derived from the natural image of God bestowed at creation rather than from any contingent political condition. This would be but one of many possible examples of the way in which Wesley’s political statements are underpinned by theological convictions, notwithstanding the absence of any explicit appeal to the Bible.

Wesley’s Political Writings Prior to the Calm Address

The American Revolution was the most widely reported event in the eighteenth-century British world. The size of the printed output on the subject in newspapers alone can hardly be overestimated. Being a civil war within the British colonies, the hunger in England for news of the conflict was insatiable and by the mid-eighteenth century the British consumed newspapers so voraciously that everybody thought themselves to be experts on every aspect of global politics. According to Troy Bickham, “an examination of the British press during this period demonstrates that the responses and experiences of ordinary Britons

---

18 Ibid., 11: 68.
19 Vickers, 108.
who stayed at home and did not engage directly in the conflict were significant and had consequences for peoples on both sides of the Atlantic.\textsuperscript{22}

For contemporaries, the conflict was as much about Britain losing its colonies as it was about the colonies winning independence. . . . American colonists were fellow nationals in the eyes of many Britons, and for those Britons the conflict was nothing short of a tragic civil war. Moreover, rising nationalism in Britain during the second half of the century meant that overseas victories and defeats had an impact on individuals’ sense of self-worth at home.\textsuperscript{23}

According to Bernard Bailyn, the opposition press in England was the single greatest influence on early American politics.\textsuperscript{24} The rise of the mass media, and particularly newspapers, during this period is one reason why Britons were so divided over the American crisis. For the first time in modern history “a literate public sustained a major, widespread critique of their government’s use of military force as a tool of public policy.”\textsuperscript{25} Differences over the conduct of the war in a newly media-saturated culture divided households and led to civic unrest and violence at home. John Wesley was only one of many who responded to widespread popular criticism of the government as disloyal and even treasonous. Rather than being seen as an “arch-Tory” out of step with political realities, Wesley should be seen as holding views typical of a large sector in the wide public debate on the American question.

The \textit{Calm Address} is best understood when read in the context of Wesley’s other political tracts and his broad political views.\textsuperscript{26} Wesley’s defense of the poor, his admiration for the common sense of the ordinary person, and his

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 251–52. See also Dora Mae Clark, \textit{British Opinion and the American Revolution} (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1930).
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{25} Bickham, 8. Even being illiterate or unable to afford the relatively expensive threepence for a daily newspaper was no barrier since newspapers were often read aloud in coffee houses, a service provided for patrons and a practice that contributed to the twenty-fold increase in the circulation of ideas and opinions published. Lutnick, \textit{The American Revolution and the British Press}, 2.
\textsuperscript{26} Wesley’s political tracts have not yet made their way into the Bicentennial Edition of Wesley’s \textit{Works}, though the proposed Volume 14 under the capable editorship of David Hempton will be dedicated to \textit{Social and Political Tracts}. The forthcoming Volumes 14 and 15 of the current Wesley Works Project were originally conceived as a single unit to be entitled “Pastoral and Educational Works,” edited by A. Lamar Cooper. It has now been divided into two proposed volumes, vol. 14 on “Social/Political Tracts” edited by David
stress on religious societies dedicated to self-improvement might suggest Whig politics. He was in fact, as is well known, a political conservative with a passionate commitment to the principles of submission to the divinely instituted authority of the crown. Though Wesley claimed no special expertise in the area of politics, he did write a considerable number of political tracts and expressed very strong political opinions. He often wrote letters to friends leading up to parliamentary elections advising them about candidates for whom they should cast their vote, and issued warnings against the bribery which was rife throughout the parliamentary system of preferment.27

Wesley’s fear of English radicalism undergirds all of his political tracts. Both John and Charles frequently compared the American Revolution with the English Civil War. One of Charles’ Hymns on Patriotism reflects this:

The horror of the good old Cause
The hate of Kings and Church and Laws
Thou wilt, O God, expel,
And then the kingdom of the Fiend
Shall come to a perpetual end
And sink again to hell.28

As Bernard Bailyn made clear in his classic work The Origins of American Politics, it was difficult in the eighteenth century to conceive of “sustained opposition to constituted authority as anything other than the work of parties [which] were believed naturally to degenerate into conspiratorial juntas whose


27 See Bailyn, Origins of American Politics, 52–57, for a description of political culture of Britain in the eighteenth century.

aim in the end could only be the overthrow of the existing government.”

Wesley’s conservative outlook was certainly not, therefore, unusual.

The Wesleys shared the common belief that the French were planning to invade England. A French fleet did in fact appear off Plymouth on August 17, 1779, but was turned back due to an outbreak of smallpox. Wesley was fearful that a revolutionary storm begun in America would soon spread to England. The American troubles were being fomented by those at home who wanted to overthrow the crown, and the colonists were but pawns in a game, unaware that they were being played by malevolent forces of revolution there. He wrote to his brother Charles in October 1775 that he was in danger of losing his love for Americans, at least for their leaders. “The bulk of the people both in England and America mean no harm; they only follow their leaders, and do as they are bid, without knowing why or wherefore.” Wesley would make this conspiracy theory quite explicit in the Calm Address:

> Be no longer the dupes of designing men! I do not mean any of your countrymen in America; I doubt whether any of these are in the secret. The designing men, the Ahithophels, are in England; those who have laid their scheme so deep, and covered it so well, that thousands, who are ripening it, suspect nothing at all of the matter. . . . They love neither England nor America, but play one against the other, in subserviency to their grand design of overturning the English government.

The suggestion that pro-American parliamentarians were playing into the hands of those engaged in a treasonous plot to overthrow the monarchy and establish a Puritan-style commonwealth while British troops were occupied in America was deeply resented by many members of Parliament. For their part, the patriots in America also discerned a conspiracy but one of an opposite kind. Robert Midlekauff attributes to “the character of their Protestantism” the view of “the children of the awakened” that “an evil plot against their liberties had

---

32 John Wesley to Thomas Rankin, 13 August 1775, Letters (Telford), 6:173.
33 John Wesley to Charles Wesley, 17 October 1775, Letters (Telford), 6:179.
35 Sandoz, 422.
been hatched in a corrupt and faintly ‘Catholic’ England.” This line of interpretation is in keeping with the earlier view of Bernard Bailyn that the roots of the conflict lay in a conspiracy between ministers of state and their supporters to overthrow the British crown both in England and America and thus severely limit if not annihilate English liberties.

The imprisonment of the radical MP John Wilkes in 1768 and the subsequent civil uprising in protest which led to several deaths and Wilkes’ expulsion from the House of Commons prompted Wesley to respond in Free Thoughts on the Present State of Public Affairs (1768). Wilkes had published a notorious tract in 1763 in which he accused the king of being a liar and a bumbler. The Prime Minister Lord Grenville issued a writ of libel and arrested Wilkes, who was exonerated on a technicality. When he republished his libellous tract, Parliament expelled him from the country. He fled to France but returned in 1768 and was elected member for Middlesex. When Parliament denied him a seat there were riots in the streets as mobs called for justice and cast the king and parliament as despots and destroyers of liberty with Wilkes seen as a champion of civil liberties. For Wesley, the king and the Parliament represented the best method of securing and maintaining genuine liberty and Wilkes and his radical followers the surest way of destroying it.

At first, Wesley showed considerable sympathy for the American cause. His strong affection for America and Americans can be traced back to his time spent in Georgia from 1735 to 1736. He welcomed the publication in 1775 of the anonymous pamphlet An Argument in Defence of the Exclusive Right Claimed

---

38 Letters (Telford), 5:370–88; Works (Jackson), 11:14–33. Thoughts upon Liberty (1772) and Thoughts Concerning the Origin of Power (1772) also arose out of the Wilkes controversy.
40 Though Adam Zele maintains that Wesley’s views of America and Americans were negatively affected by his time in Georgia. “For Wesley, the map of America that existed in his mind was of a large Georgia colony covering the entire eastern seaboard. Wesley understood that larger cities existed in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York, but when he wrote about the American environment or residents, he was almost always describing Georgia.” Adam Scott Zele, “John Wesley’s America” (PhD dissertation, Duke University, 2008), 339–40.
by the Colonies to Tax Themselves." Wesley’s opponent Caleb Evans maintained that Wesley had become convinced by this that “the Americans were an oppressed, injured people, and that Great Britain had no right whatever to tax them.” Wesley recommended it to his brother Charles and suggested that his printer William Pine might wish to publish excerpts from it in his newspaper the Bristol Gazette, which the latter did.

He wrote to the Earl of Dartmouth, secretary of state for the American colonies and a friendly Evangelical, and the following day essentially the same letter to the Prime Minister Lord North, outlining his concerns about the American situation. Wesley felt that the Americans had some cause for complaint but pleaded ignorance on the political matters at the heart of the dispute. He was bound, he admitted, to take a conservative stance being “a High Churchman, the son of a High Churchman, bred up from my childhood in the highest notions of passive obedience and non-resistance.” Describing the Americans as “an oppressed People” who had “asked for nothing more than their Legal Rights,” he warned that a war with the Americans could not easily be won since they were “calm, deliberate Enthusiasts” for liberty. They fought not only for this but also for their wives and children. Such a force would always have the advantage over those who fought merely for pay. He concluded his appeal with a warning to “remember King Charles I,” bringing to mind the spectre of the English Civil War, never far beneath the surface for those with a fear of radical politics.

What, then, is to account for Wesley’s change of tune in the Calm Address? Frank Baker suggested a reaction on Wesley’s part to the increasingly militant pro-American discourse in Britain. Wesley himself attributed his change of heart to his reading of Johnson’s Taxation No Tyranny: “As soon as I received

42 Caleb Evans, A Reply to the Rev. Mr. Fletcher’s Vindication of Mr. Wesley’s Calm Address (Bristol: Pine, n.d.), 10.
43 Published in three excerpts, 22 September, 29 September, and 6 October 1774.
more light myself I judged it my duty to impart it to others."\(^{46}\) Holland sees Wesley’s strengthening support of the king as influenced by the discussions at the Leeds Conference of August 1–3, 1775, in which a group of preachers urged a separation from the Church of England.\(^{47}\) But this can only be a supposition.\(^{48}\) Perhaps more significant than all of these suggestions is that the king’s Proclamation of Rebellion on August 23, 1775, declared that anyone aiding or abetting the Americans would be considered treasonous. This tended to put a damper on the more diverse discussion of the situation that had prevailed earlier. Wesley could not show sympathy for the Americans now without the possibility of an accusation of treason.\(^{49}\)

**Impact of the Calm Address in England**

Albert M. Lyles has identified over twenty-nine replies to the *Calm Address* and Johnson’s *Taxation No Tyranny*, not counting the numerous reviews that appeared.\(^{50}\) According to Kirkham, “though Wesley was no stranger to pamphlet attack . . . no single publication he issued created such an intense storm or was attacked with more severity [than the *Calm Address*]. . . . Such a powerful pamphlet so extensively circulated could not go unchecked. Opponents of the government made every attempt in print to discredit Wesley and weaken his arguments.”\(^{51}\)

Wesley defended the *Calm Address* in a letter to the editor of *Lloyd’s Evening Post* claiming that in his travels across Britain people cried out over the poor Americans and the cruel King George, so that he felt the need to set the record straight. “The flame which rages all over the land,” he wrote to the Editor

\(^{46}\) John Wesley, “Calm Address,” *Works* (Jackson), 11:80.


\(^{48}\) Allan Raymond believes that Holland confuses dates and “should be used with great caution.” Raymond, “I Fear God and Honor the King,” 316.


of Lloyd’s Evening Post, “I have more opportunity of observing than any other man in England.”

On August 23, 1775, he wrote again to the Earl of Dartmouth, expressing concern at the anti-royal sympathies he encountered during his travels. Wesley’s views on the attitudes of ordinary people should be taken seriously since he was so well-traveled and engaged in constant conversation with many of his hearers. He was convinced that his “Calm Address” was turning the tide of public opinion:

The eyes of many people were opened; they saw things in a quite different light. They perceived, and that with the utmost clearness, how they had been hoodwinked before. They found, they had been led unawares into all the wilds of political enthusiasm, as far distant from truth and common sense, as from the real love of their country.

The Whig newspaper, the Daily Chronicle, held a different estimate:

It has been said that a certain Calm Address has been so far from producing the intended serene effect that on the contrary nothing but storms and tempestuous disputations have been the consequence since the publication of that piece of plagiarism.

Unfavorable responses appeared in all of the major periodicals including the London Magazine, the Gentleman’s Magazine, Lloyd’s Evening Post and many others. More significant were the formal replies of foes such as the Calvinist controversialist Augustus Toplady, and a wide range of Dissenters including James Murray, Caleb Evans, and John Towers. It should not be surprising to find Dissenters at the forefront of attack on Wesley’s Tory politics, since eighteenth-century English Dissent was strongly Whig in politics and generally supportive of the American cause.

The Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley Occasioned by his Calm Address by the Bristol Baptist minister Caleb Evans, writing as “Americanus,” was the most successful attack, going through five editions and producing numerous replies

52 John Wesley to the Editor of Lloyds Evening Post, 29 November 1775, Letters (Telford), 6:192–93.
53 John Wesley to the Earl of Dartmouth, 23 August 1775, Letters (Telford), 6:175–76.
from both Wesley and such able supporters as John Fletcher and Thomas Olivers. It charged Wesley with performing an about-face from his former pro-American sentiments and suggested that he may have only pretended to his earlier views in order to infiltrate the “king-haters” and expose them. Wesley was particularly upset by the charge that he had an eye on preferment. “You have one eye on a pension,” wrote a correspondent to the Gentleman’s Magazine, “and the other upon heaven; one hand stretched out to the K[ing], and the other raised up to God. I pray that the first may reward you, and the last may forgive you.”

Most responses depended on Evans or were at least familiar with his arguments and reiterated them. Many used satire and invective. A Cool Reply to a Calm Address was anything but cool and Toplady’s An Old Fox Tarr’d and Feather’d used ad hominen argumentation to good effect picturing Wesley on its title page as a grinning fox clothed in clerical garb. Patrick Bull’s A Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing sought to unmask Wesley as “an old Jesuit.” Five accusations are repeatedly made in all of this literature: Wesley had plagiarized Samuel Johnson’s Taxation No Tyranny, he had changed his earlier views, his motivation was personal preferment, his purpose was unclear, and his interference in politics was unwelcome.

---

56 ‘Americanus,’ [Caleb Evans], A Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley Occasioned by his Calm Address to the American Colonies (London, 1775); Thomas Olivers, A Full Defence of the Rev. John Wesley in answer to the several personal reflections cast on that gentleman by the Rev. Caleb Evans in his Observations on Mr. Wesley’s late reply prefixed to his Calm Address (London, 1776, but in fact, according to Frank Baker published in late December 1775); Baker, “The Shaping of the Calm Address,” 12; John Fletcher, A Vindication of the Rev. Mr Wesley’s “Calm Address to our American Colonies”: In Some Letters to Mr. Caleb Evans (Dublin: Whitestone, 1776).

57 Gentlemen’s Magazine 45 (December 1775): 564, cited in Raymond, “I Fear God and Honor the King,” 322.

The direct impact of the *Calm Address* in British America is likely to have been minimal. Wesley told his Assistant in America Thomas Rankin, in October 1775, “I had written a little tract upon the subject before I knew the American ports were shut up.” The oft-repeated claim that Methodists destroyed copies when they reached America in order to protect themselves from the charge of being Loyalists is built on very little evidence and has perhaps gained credence because of its appearance in Robert Southey’s influential biography of Wesley. On October 20, 1775, Wesley wrote to Thomas Rankin that there were those who “would willingly burn me and it together.” It should be remembered, however, that he is referring here to people in England not to the American colonies. Apart from this, there appears to be no further evidence for the burning of the pamphlets story and in fact the claim is directly refuted by Wesley’s own reference to the closing of the American ports and his inability to “send it abroad as I designed.” No copies of the original *Calm Address* could have been burned in America by Methodists or anybody else since none ever reached there.

Wesley’s Loyalist views did however become widely known in colonial newspapers. A correspondent to *The Pennsylvania Packet* in March 1776 wrote this assessment:

> The great numbers of this treasonable Essay against the constitution of England, daily sold or given away at the Royal Exchange, ought to alarm every well-wisher to our civil and religious liberties. The whole

---


62 Wesley, “A Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England,” *Works* (Jackson), 11:129. The American ports were closed on 20 July 1775 as a result of a decision of the Continental Congress of 4–6 July.
is a barefaced and bail attempt towards establishing the doctrines of absolute monarchy."

An advertisement in *The New Jersey Gazette* for July 15, 1778, offered for sale a comic opera in three acts, accompanied by the reply of “Junius” to Wesley's *Calm Address*. The cast includes Lord North, Lord Dartmouth, and “Canting John” as John Wesley. Not only was Wesley the butt of jokes among actors and theatre-goers, but Methodist themselves could show embarrassment over their founder’s strongly worded opinions. Bishop Francis Asbury, the most respected Methodist itinerant in America, was “truly sorry that the venerable man ever dipped into the politics of America” and wrote to Jasper Winscom in 1788, “There is not a man in the world so obnoxious to the American politicians as our dear old Daddy, but no matter, we must treat him with all respect we can and that is due to him.”

Loyalists were left unmolested before the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord, since before that date, though there was widespread dissatisfaction with the actions of the British Parliament, many still opposed separation from the crown. After open hostilities had broken out, however, it became much more difficult to take a Loyalist stance. In 1775, anyone refusing to take an oath of allegiance to the new government was denied citizenship. Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* (January 1776) proposed that the confiscation of Loyalists’ property would be an effective means of financing the Revolution. Given that around one-third of the population, many of those among the wealthy, were Loyalists at that time, a considerable take was envisioned. The property of all Loyalists was declared liable to seizure on June 24, 1776, and states were advised to sell the estates of those whose citizenship had been revoked. When the British Government set up a commission to enquire into compensations after the war, a figure of £10,000,000 was estimated as the worth of these appropriations.

---

63 Letter to the Printer of the Pennsylvania Packet, 4 March 1776, *The Pennsylvania Packet* [Philadelphia, PA], published as Dunlap’s *Pennsylvania Packet* or, the *General Advertiser*, volume 5, issue 228, p. 3.

64 Advertisement in the *New Jersey Gazette* [Burlington, NJ], 15 July 1778, volume 1, issue 32, p. 3.


1779 regarding the poor treatment of Loyalists in America and Charles Wesley relied on Galloway for the seven poems on the fate of the Loyalists that appeared in his *Hymns and Verses on Modern Patriotism*.68

Life was made more difficult for Methodists in this anti-Loyalist atmosphere, especially for those who would not swear oaths of allegiance to the new republic. In March 1775 just prior to armed hostilities, Wesley wrote to the American itinerants, “It is your part to be peace-makers, to be loving and tender to all, but to addict yourselves to no party . . . say not word against one or the other side.”69 Their work was the saving of souls and any other entanglements were distractions at best. Methodist itinerants were usually apolitical and often pacifist before the revolution but increasingly now took sides. Wesley reported in 1776 that although Thomas Rankin and George Shadford were both in good health they had been “threatened unless they declared in favour of the Republicans.”70 The following year he assured Joseph Benson that “[friends in New York] inform me that all the Methodists were firm for the Government, and on that account persecuted by the rebels, only not to death; that the preachers are still threatened, but not stopped; and the work of God increases much in Maryland and Virginia.”71 George Shadford remembered that “the spirit of the people began . . . to be agitated with regard to politics. They threatened me with imprisonment when I prayed for the King; took me up, and examined me, and pressed me to take the test oath to renounce him forever.”72 Francis Asbury only avoided arrest as a suspected Loyalist by retreating to the home of Thomas White in Delaware.73

Dee Andrews sums up nicely the situation in which Methodists in America found themselves on the eve of the Revolution:

> In this context, the Methodists, until now a set of little known missionaries of chief concern to the Anglicans, were projected into unwanted prominence by their British origins, Wesley’s notoriety, and yet another dangerous deviation from republican norms: the rising

---

68 Ibid., 6.
anti-slavery convictions of many of the preachers. Methodists, patriots reported, were proxies for their papist-style leader, sent to preach passive obedience to British authority, or worst, active and militant loyalist spies working against the common cause and fostering slave rebellion. Formerly a movement of small account espousing the apolitical teachings of an English religious reformer, the Methodists were now widely perceived as presumptuous outsiders bent on betraying American independence.74

This may have been a widely held perception but in fact one finds among Methodist preachers the full range of attitudes toward the Revolution found in the wider populace from pacifist to armed loyalist to fighting rebel. In 1775 Freeborn Garrettson was court-martialed and fined for refusing to enter military service and in 1777 he had difficulties in Virginia because of his refusal to take the oath of loyalty.75 On the other hand, some Methodists, including John Littlejohn, were more than willing to take up arms against British oppression in defense of their adopted country.76 In spite of the variety of stances taken by Methodists there was plenty enough Loyalist sentiment among them to justify patriots’ concerns. As the Methodist itinerant Martin Rodda made his way to the British fleet on his homeward journey he was “spreading the king’s proclamation.” And the lapsed Methodist Chancey Clower raised a band of three hundred men and attempted to join the British fleet at Chesapeake Bay.77 Methodist Loyalists could also take differing positions on how best to respond to the crisis in the colonies as illustrated by Wesley’s Assistant Thomas Rankin and Captain Thomas Webb in their correspondence with Lord Dartmouth. Rankin urged reconciliation with the colonies but Webb counseled coercion through naval force and economic restrictions.78 Webb’s strong Tory politics coupled with his high profile was a contributing factor to Methodists being suspected of disloyalty to the revolutionary cause.79 Webb identified the “true cause of all the

74 Andrews, 51.
76 John Littlejohn, manuscript Journal, Kentucky Wesleyan College, cited in Wigger, 93.
79 John Adams referred to Webb as “the old soldier” and “one of the most fluent, eloquent Men I ever heard.” Andrews, 52.
present disturbance, both in Great Britain and America” to “that restless spirit of independency, which never can be happy under any government.”

### Wesley’s Political Writings after the Calm Address

After the original *Calm Address*, Wesley’s anti-American rhetoric rose to a high point with *A Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England* (1777), after which a more muted response is evident in light of the inevitably of the war and the need to calm the fears of the population about French Catholic aggression in the event of an American victory.

Some Observations on Liberty occasioned by a Late Tract (1776) was Wesley’s response to Richard Price’s *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty*. In it he rejects Price’s claim that there could be no liberty without independence. British subjects already have perfect liberty under the crown. In any case, how dare Americans speak of liberty with “ten thousand negroes in the American colonies” enslaved? The American people could only suffer with men of such questionable character as John Hancock to rule over them. Why now, just as the British populace was beginning to settle down again, did Price feel that it was necessary to stir up further agitation? In 1776, Wesley issued a pamphlet in which he turned to the theme of the horrors of war itself. By this time he seems to have given up the theory that Americans were the innocent dupes of anti-monarchists in England.

In February 1777 appeared his third pro-government pamphlet, *A Calm Address to the Inhabitants of England*, which marked “the high point in Wesley’s anti-Americanism,” accusing them of acts of atrocity such as robbing, plundering, torching whole towns, and driving the inhabitants, including the aged and infirm, defenseless into the wilderness. He declared that he could no more

---

83 Raymond, 326.
have fellowship with any Methodist who “blasphemed . . . the King” than he could with a whoremonger or a thief.\(^8^4\)

Even as early as December 1775 Wesley had seemed willing to admit defeat. The war had been expensive and was without likelihood of resolve; let the Americans have their independence.\(^8^5\) In *A Serious Address to the People of England, With Regard to the State of the Nations* (early 1778), Wesley’s rhetoric begins to shift. War had in the end proven unavoidable and the time had now come to reassure people that England and Ireland were still safe and secure from their enemies. Claims that England was facing financial ruin were countered in an attempt to encourage the populace.\(^8^6\) He took a similar approach in *A Compassionate Address to the Inhabitants of Ireland* (also early 1778), addressing the fears and rumours of foreign invasion and the growing strength of Washington’s army.\(^8^7\)

The entry of the French into the war caused particular concern and Wesley noted fear and panic among the people not seen since the days of the Glorious Revolution.\(^8^8\) Wesley began to turn his discourse away from the war itself and toward anti-Catholic activity. It was feared that French involvement in the War might lead to a Catholic-backed revolution in England.\(^8^9\) Strangely for one who often expressed an in-principle opposition to war, in 1779 Wesley even approved a plan to raise Methodists troops to defend England against invasion.\(^9^0\)

After contact with the Loyalist Joseph Galloway, Wesley grew concerned about the way the war was being conducted and published three pamphlets

---

\(^8^6\) John Wesley, “A Serious Address to the People of England, With Regard to the State of the Nations” (1778), *Works* (Jackson), 11:140–49.
\(^8^7\) John Wesley, “A Compassionate Address to the Inhabitants of Ireland” (1778), *Works* (Jackson), 11:149–54.
critical of the British military command. As the war continued Wesley said less about it and seemed to retreat to the refuge of Providence. God, it seemed, was cleansing both sides of the conflict, sweeping away the wicked with the broom of destruction.

In How Far is it the Duty of a Minister to Preach Politics (1782), Wesley defended his right as a minister to defend the king's honor and rebuke any slandering of the royal name. In An Estimate of the Manners of the Present Times (1782), British losses as the war drew to an end were put down to the English contempt for God, a spiritual attitude that could only lead to defeat in spite of a well-appointed navy and experienced military leadership. Wesley grew increasingly disillusioned with the conduct of the Parliament and expressed the wish that George III would act the despot and rule his own country rather than defer to a Prime Minister who could not get things right.

When the war finally ended Wesley remained somewhat bitter toward American leaders. When Princeton’s John Witherspoon, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, was invited to England for a fundraiser, Wesley could not offer support. Wesley’s omission of the “Hymn for the Loyal Americans” and the “Hymn for Congress” in his reprint of Hymns for the Nation (1782) should not be seen as something done out of malice, however. The occasional nature of such hymns had bound them to a particular time and place and the flow of events had since made them redundant.

Conclusions

Wesley’s dim view of the situation in America could not help but be negatively affected by the tyranny of distance. John Hirst taught me the value of historians examining the counterfactual question. How different might Wesley’s...
approach have been if he had known about the situation on the ground? Might he have taken the position of the New Lights, such as Samuel Hopkins, who supported the Revolution but directed those engaged in the struggle for liberty to grant the same privilege to their slaves? Samuel Hopkins makes a suggestion that might be seen as supporting this theory when he states that “[the Calm Address] discovers Mr. Wesley’s conscientious attachment to the government under which he lived. Had he been a subject of America, no doubt but he would have been as zealous an advocate of the American cause.” It is interesting to note, in light of this, that once independence from Britain was secured Wesley urged the Methodists to render due submission to the established government. In 1789, he advised Thomas Coke with some degree of wariness, “I wish you to obey ‘the powers that be’ in America; but I wish you to understand them too.” Asbury’s conjecture is interesting but Wesley’s commitment to constitutional monarchy as the only safeguard of genuine liberty makes such an alternative universe unlikely. It probably says more about Asbury than it does about Wesley, and American Methodists have certainly taken encouragement from the idea that their founder was some kind of proto-democrat and a champion of natural rights. Recent scholarship has made this view increasingly untenable. Jason Vickers provides a very helpful survey of the changing views of Wesley’s political philosophy, from those who (like Maldwyn Edwards and William Warren Sweet) saw him as a High Church Tory, to those who (like Bernard Semmel and Leon E. Hynson) saw him as a Whiggish champion of liberty in a second-stage development of his thinking. For his own part, Vickers argues for an essential unity to Wesley’s political thought based on his “covenantal Arminianism.” David Hempton has preferred to emphasize “principle” rather than “party” as the key to Wesley’s political philosophy. It was the principle of natural rights and human liberty that was most securely

97 Samuel Hopkins, A Dialogue Concerning the Slavery of the Africans (Newport, 1776). Hopkins is discussed by Mark Noll as an example of those who supported the Revolution but maintained a distinctive Christian voice and did not succumb to the temptation of creating a generically civil religion. Noll, 92–98.

98 JLFA, 1:181.

99 John Wesley, Letter to Thomas Coke, September 5, 1789, Letters (Telford), 8:163–64. It is possible of course that ‘the powers that be’ here refers to the Methodist hierarchy, but in my view unlikely, since Coke and Asbury were officially equal in authority, though clearly Asbury’s actual authority far exceeded that of Dr. Coke who was often seen by American itinerants as an inconsistent and bumbling meddler in their affairs.

100 Vickers, 62–71.

preserved in the Hanoverian dynasty and it was this principal, rather than the idea of divine right, that led Wesley to insist on “honouring the King.” 102 Theodore Jennings also stresses Wesley’s commitment to principles over party in portraying him as a champion of human rights and a forerunner to liberation theology. 103 Both Ted Weber and Jason Vickers have convincingly shown that Wesley held a “constitutional Toryism” that supported the Glorious Revolution as the true beginning of English liberty and made room for the checks and balances placed on the power of the crown by Parliament. 104 For Ted Weber, Wesley was an “organic constitutionalist” who stood not in the tradition of individual liberty so much as in the tradition that ran from Richard Hooker to Edmund Burke of asserting an organic unity between the crown, the parliament, and the people. 105

Wesley’s political tracts are just that, political, and not primarily theological, albeit like all of his many and varied reflections on God’s universe, built on a set of theological convictions. They consistently reject on historical and pragmatic grounds John Locke’s social contract theory with its idea that nations govern only by the consent of the governed. 106 The notion of liberty, as defined by slavery and the John Wilkes affair, was a crucial aspect of his political rhetoric. Wesley is often referred to as an “Evangelical Reformer,” and indeed the moral and spiritual reform of the nation were among his most deeply held passions. But a political reformer he was not. He saw no need to reform the political system of constitutional monarchy since its finely-tuned balance of power between king, parliament, and people needed only to be preserved in order for genuine liberty to prevail. His word to the rebels of North America was a word of warning and rebuke: fear God and honor the King lest you reap disaster. It was not an unusual stance to take in the hotly-contested world of eighteenth-century rhetoric on liberty, but it was a stance from which Methodists would distance themselves on both sides of the Atlantic in the more politically reformist atmosphere of the nineteenth century.

102 Hempton, Religion of the People, 80–82.
104 Vickers, 60–82; Weber, 149–51.
105 Weber, 30.
About the Author

Glen O’Brien is a Senior Lecturer in Church History and Theology and Head of Humanities at Booth College, a Member Institute of the Sydney College of Divinity. He is the Secretary of the Australasian Centre for Wesleyan Research and Editor of its peer-reviewed journal Aldersgate Papers. He has degrees in theology from Kingsley College (BTh, MA) and Asbury Theological Seminary (MA), holds the PhD in History from La Trobe University, and has engaged in postdoctoral research at Duke Divinity School. His research has appeared in numerous scholarly journals including The Journal of Ecclesiastical History, The Journal of Religious History, and The Wesleyan Theological Journal. Along with Hilary Carey of the University of Newcastle (NSW) he is the co-convenor of a research project with the aim of publishing a new History of Australian Methodism.