The Elect Methodists: Calvinistic Methodism in England and Wales, 1735-1811: Book Review

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The Calvinistic Methodists have received far less attention from historians than the Wesleyan or Arminian Methodists, and this book sets out to remedy that neglect. The imbalance is not surprising—Methodism of the Wesleyan kind became and remains a multimillion, worldwide movement, with many variants that retain the Wesleyan emphasis on holiness and salvation open to all, whereas eighteenth-century English Calvinistic Methodism is now represented only by the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion, active on a small scale in England and Sierra Leone, while its Welsh co-movement became the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Church, now known as the Presbyterian Church of Wales. The aim of the authors is for the first time "to tell the story of English and Welsh Calvinistic Methodism woven into a single analytic narrative," organized chronologically, exploring how the movements overlapped and interpenetrated and yet never fully merged, and asking why the Welsh movement went from strength to strength while the English movement ran out of steam. They "hope to reflect the remarkable complexity of the eighteenth-century evangelical revival"(xiv–xv). This is a readable, clearly written, and scrupulously referenced account, which is in many ways an invaluable guide to its tricky terrain but which
oddly misses some important opportunities when dealing with the English movement.

The three authors are extremely well qualified for the task. David Ceri Jones has previously published a detailed account of the early stages of the Welsh revival, 'A Glorious Work in the World': Welsh Methodism and the International Evangelical Revival, 1735–1750 (2004); Boyd Stanley Schlenther has published a biography of the Countess of Huntingdon, Queen of the Methodists: The Countess of Huntingdon and the Eighteenth-Century Crisis of Faith and Society (1997), and edited Calendar of the Trevecka Letters (2003) with Eryn Mant White; and White has published The Welsh Bible (2007). All three have published relevant articles, with several of White's in Welsh; indeed, it is one of the strengths of the book that the findings of so much scholarship in Welsh is now made available to English readers, presumably through White's mediation.

The book's opening date refers to the conversions of George Whitefield (1714–70), Howel Harris (1714–73), and Daniel Rowland (1711–90) in 1735, and its closing date to the ordination of Welsh Methodist preachers as ministers in 1811, marking the Methodists' break with the Church of England and the establishment of a new denomination in Wales. The English figures discussed in most detail are Whitefield and the Countess of Huntingdon (1707–91), with attention given where appropriate to their relations with John Wesley (1703–91) and to other figures such as John Cennick (1718–55), Rowland Hill (1744–1833), and Thomas Haweis (1734–1820); the main Welsh figures in addition to Harris and Rowland are William Williams (1717–91), Howell Davies (1717–70), Thomas Charles (1755–1814), and Peter Williams (1723–96). The topics covered include the rise of the revival in England and Wales in the 1730s; the split into Moravian, Wesleyan, and Calvinist factions in 1740–41; the varieties of predestinarianism among the Calvinists, and the theological disputes with the Wesleyans in the 1740s and 1770s; Harris's role in the 1740s as Whitefield's deputy, his attempt to unite the English and Welsh Calvinistic Methodists, and his expulsion; Whitefield's influence and dependence on Lady Huntingdon; the disparate nature of English Calvinistic Methodist groups (a very useful
attempt has been made to track down Whitefieldian societies in 1747); the development of Methodism in different parts of Wales and the shift of the center of gravity from the southwest to the north; the importance of publishing in Welsh for the support of Welsh-speaking Methodist societies.

A recurring and essential question is that of the relationship of the Calvinistic Methodists to the Church of England. Whitefield, despite his irregularities as an itinerant in Britain and North America, never made any move to leave the Church and join the dissenters, and hence, it is argued here, he had an ambivalent attitude to the movement he had created (47); Lady Huntingdon found herself on the wrong end of ecclesiastical law in her claim that her huge public chapel at Spa Fields was private and, in 1782, made the decision to leave the church, register her chapels as dissenting, and create a new denomination, despite the fact that she opposed a settled ministry, unlike the dissenters, and always favoured itinerancy, one of the hallmarks of Methodism. Harris and Rowland argued from the outset that the Welsh Methodists should not take actions that would lead to secession, and this view was still held by Rowland and William Williams in the 1780s. After 1800 the mood changed, partly because there were not enough ordained Welsh clergy of Methodist sympathies to administer the sacraments, and the lay preachers pressed for ordination. No suggestion is made here that the split of the Wesleyan Methodists from the Church of England for similar reasons in the 1790s after Wesley's death might have been a precedent, although such a comparison could have been illuminating.

The least convincing part of the book is that dealing with the supposed disintegration of English Calvinistic Methodism. There is some inconsistency on the question of Whitefield's capacity or otherwise for organization (at which Wesley was a past master): at one point it is said that Whitefield did put in place an effective structure for his societies, contrary to the usual assumption of historians, but could not oversee it when in America (62), but elsewhere he is said to have had no taste for administration (149). More is needed on the afterlife of Whitefield and of the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion. It is stated that after Whitefield's death most chapels in his connexion joined the Independents,
but no attempt is made to assess his great impact on English evangelical dissenters or to consider the work of those who took over his Tabernacle, such as Matthew Wilks. The heroic portrait of Whitefield as George Fervidus in *Christian Memoirs: or, A Review of the Present State of Religion in England* (1776) by William Shrubsole, minister in Sheerness, Kent, is not mentioned. No account is given of the long publishing history and usage of Whitefield’s *Collection of Hymns for Social Worship*, well into the nineteenth century.

Lady Huntingdon comes out of the story very badly. There is a good account of her Connexion in chapter 8, but her educational legacy is not properly assessed. No one can deny that her college at Trevecca in Wales was badly run and that her students were inadequately educated, nor that her support for slavery in Georgia (like Whitefield’s earlier, but in strong contrast to Wesley) was reprehensible. However, the brief picture given of Cheshunt College in Hertfordshire, the successor to Trevecca after her death, is too negative (216): it became in the course of the nineteenth century an important interdenominational college serving both her Connexion and Congregationalism. John Eyre, one of her students, a Church of England clergyman who took part in the opening of Cheshunt in 1792 and founded the enormously influential *Evangelical Magazine* in 1793, is not mentioned (indeed the *Evangelical Magazine* is only referred to as the model for the Welsh equivalent, *Trysorfa Ysprydol*). The movement of Calvinistic Methodism in England into dissent is judged as a failure, in contrast to the establishment of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Church as a new dissenting denomination.