

CSCH President's Address 2016

**“May I print any of your books?” John Wesley and the  
Rise of Methodist Publishing in America**

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“I was awakened about four o’clock A.M. by a ringing at my door, and a voice which apprised me that the Book Room was on fire! I sprung from my bed . . . and repaired with all possible speed to the scene of the conflagration . . . The smoke was already issuing from the windows of my office, and the flames from other parts of the house! . . . The hydrants were frozen, and the waters were thrown but feebly, though all exerted themselves to their utmost. We saw that all was gone.”<sup>1</sup> So observed Nathan Bangs of a cold February night in 1836 after watching helplessly as the Methodist Book Concern was reduced to ashes. The loss of buildings and stock was more than heartbreaking: the financial consequences were so enormous that New York’s insurance industry was driven to its knees. Astonishingly, and despite the financial panic of 1837 that gripped America into the middle years of the 1840s, the Concern’s losses were quickly – even miraculously – recovered. Indeed, by the 1850s, the Concern had grown in size to eclipse every other publishing competitor – commercial, denominational, and interdenominational – to become, in the words of Nathan Hatch, “the largest publishing house in the world.”<sup>2</sup> With over a dozen power presses, an in-house bindery, stereotyping equipment, four successful periodicals, virtually no debt, and a distribution system that extended up to and even beyond the limits of white settlement in North

America, its dominance must have seemed almost (but not quite) predestined.

The extraordinary growth of the Methodist Book Concern reflected and reinforced the wider and equally astonishing success of the Methodist Episcopal Church itself. Methodist historians writing in the nineteenth century had little difficulty accounting for their denomination's remarkable ascendancy. It was a matter of universal agreement that God's special blessing rested on both the United States and Methodism. Thus it merely stood to reason that Methodists within the United States were doubly blessed. "History, when rightly written," noted Hollis Read in 1849, "is but a record of providence; and he who would read history rightly, must read it with his eye constantly fixed on the hand of God . . . There is no doubt at the present time, a growing tendency so to write and so to understand history."<sup>3</sup> And that is precisely the understanding that American Methodists brought to the contemplation of their nation as well as their own church. "No history in the world presents so many interesting combinations of piety, wisdom, patriotism, and daring enterprise, as that of these United States, and none exhibits more striking instances of a Divine Providence in the government and direction of the affairs of men," enthused Methodist abolitionist La Roy Sunderland in his *History of the United States of America* published by the Methodist Book Concern in 1834.<sup>4</sup> Nor was such patriotic bluster limited to the relatively few national histories written by American Methodists. When the Concern published an American edition of the Religious Tract Society's *The Dawn of Modern Civilization* under Daniel Kidder's name in 1847, American triumphalism was simply substituted for English. In the Concern's edition it was America, not England, whose "destiny shall be a new thing in the earth . . . filled with the illustrations of a merciful Providence."<sup>5</sup> For American Methodists reading these and other such texts the message was clear and emphatic: God's unique blessings rested on the United States in a way that was without peer. In a word, America was, as John Winthrop proclaimed in its colonial days, "a city upon a hill."<sup>6</sup> The triumph of the Methodist Episcopal Church by mid-century was understood in terms equally providential. Indeed, no less a figure than Nathan Bangs, our eyewitness to the Concern's destruction in 1836 and Methodism's first official historian in America, underscored as much in an 1850 address to a group of young Canadian preachers: "All you have to do it to smite the rock. It is God's work to split it. All you have to do is to preach the word, and attend to the other duties of your office. It is God's work to bless the labor

of your hearts and hands, and to give effect to your well-meaning efforts.”<sup>7</sup>

As historians in the twentieth century progressively distanced themselves from denominational polemic and turned away from providential narratives, the work of accounting for evangelicalism’s rapid expansion following the Revolutionary War became much more difficult. A bewildering array of social, cultural, political, and even aesthetic forces had to be accounted for in order to explain why so many Americans found themselves irresistibly drawn to the more radical forms of evangelicalism perhaps best exemplified by Methodism. Undoubtedly the most influential historian to grapple with this problem in the last several decades is Nathan Hatch. Hatch’s groundbreaking book *The Democratization of American Christianity* proposed an interpretive framework that linked the expansion of evangelicalism in the new United States to the spirit of democratization that was sweeping the country in the wake of the Revolutionary War. Unlike historians before him, who argued that the rapid growth of evangelicalism was a reaction against the expansion of nascent capitalist markets in America, Hatch proposed that evangelicalism was a liberating force that operated in harmony with America’s ascendant political egalitarianism.<sup>8</sup> Hatch’s book was also remarkable for the fact that it was one of the first major studies of religion in America to attend to the role that reading, writing, publishing, and bookselling played in that evangelical expansion. At the heart of American evangelicalism, he argued, was a powerful “democratic urge to multiply authors and readers” that transformed the pulpit and the press into mutually reinforcing means for driving the evangelical project.<sup>9</sup> Methodists set themselves at the forefront of what Hatch called an emergent “democratic religious press” when they aggressively deployed preachers as commissioned booksellers across Methodism’s far-flung preaching circuits.<sup>10</sup>

Over the past decade, a growing number of historians have begun to question Hatch’s sweeping arguments, and the sweeping nature of those arguments, about the relationship between democracy and religion in the early republic. Some have done so by placing emphasis on the contested place race and gender occupied in this matrix, while others have foregrounded the degree to which evangelicals attempted to subvert democratic influences by erecting authoritative and exclusionary moral establishments to exert power over others.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps most notably, Amanda Porterfield has stressed the role political and religious doubt played in nineteenth-century America by investigating the ways in which evangelical leaders exploited doubt to bolster denominational agendas and

draw people into their churches.<sup>12</sup> Hatch's argument about religious print culture has also attracted criticism, most conspicuously in the work of David Paul Nord. Arguing that Hatch's "linking of publishing and religion to the market revolutions . . . does not tell the whole story about either," Nord proposes that many evangelicals were inclined to view the market as a "wily and dangerous foe" and for that reason sought ways to subvert it by giving books away "regardless of ability or even desire to pay."<sup>13</sup>

However, Hatch and his critics, including Nord, are largely in tacit agreement on one key point: their narratives often take for granted John Winthrop's view, shared alike by nineteenth-century denominational historians, that America was something special, something like, if not quite, a city upon a hill. "Only after independence," Nord argues, "was the American evangelical spirit fully awakened and wedded to systematic organization." For both Hatch and Nord, America's political independence from Britain and its concomitant burgeoning democratic spirit prepared the ground for a "democratic religious press" that would have been all but unimaginable in any other geopolitical context.<sup>14</sup>

The subtle cadences of American exceptionalism that permeate these narratives – particularly those penned by Hatch and Nord about religious print culture – have contributed to forestalling any serious consideration among scholars of religious print culture that lingering transnational forces may have continued to exert consequential cultural influences on the western side of the Atlantic after the Revolutionary War. Interestingly, those working outside the bounds of religious history have been more open to this approach. Meredith McGill, for example, has advanced a remarkably compelling argument that such transatlantic influences were operative well into the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> In this essay I show that the religious press in America, and particularly the Methodist Book Concern, the first and largest denominational publisher in the United States, did not flourish simply because Methodists evinced a uniquely American "democratic urge to multiply authors and readers" as Hatch suggests, and certainly not because Methodists had designs on subverting the market by giving away their wares at no cost as Nord proposes, but in large measure because Methodists found themselves reacting against powerful transatlantic forces exerted on them and their publishing activities by John Wesley before and following the Revolutionary War. Just as Hatch notes that there was a critical, but accidental agreement between Methodism's Arminian theology and America's political egalitarianism, so too I argue that there was a powerful, but equally unintended congruence between the kinds of

publishing and remunerative structures the Methodist Book Concern developed in response to Wesley's criticism of American Methodist publishing activities, and the early republic's rapidly expanding free market for religious books and periodicals.

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The decades preceding the Revolutionary War witnessed not only the arrival of the first Methodists in America, but also important changes in the way books were produced and distributed in the colonies. The first printers to ply their trade in America were mostly immigrants who imported their presses, types, and even paper from overseas. The Massachusetts printer Stephen Day produced the first book in British North America, the Bay Psalm Book, in 1640. But when Parliament passed the Licensing Act in 1662, the London Stationers' Company became the patent owner of bibles, psalters, and the majority of most other titles. As a result, printers in America constrained their output and survived by producing mostly handbills, government documents, local almanacs, and, on rare occasion, schoolbooks. The vast majority of books sold in America – sermons, hymnals, poetry, histories, and manuals – were imported from London by general merchants.<sup>16</sup> Beginning around 1740, however, the number of printers operating in the colonies increased dramatically – an increase closely connected with the rise of the colonial newspaper. These printers forged relationships with their London counterparts and soon displaced the general merchants as America's largest importers of British books. When a large market for cheap reprints emerged in Scotland and Ireland around the middle of the eighteenth century, colonial booksellers, eager to increase their margins, made a point of importing these cheaper books for their American customers.<sup>17</sup> And, by the 1760s, when it became clear that the American market for books was increasingly lucrative, a number of printers operating in Scotland and Ireland pulled up stakes and emigrated to the colonies in the hope of establishing bookselling businesses of their own. They were highly successful. That success did not escape the notice of the first Methodist preacher to plant his feet on American soil that same decade.

In 1768, a small but growing body of Methodists in New York wrote to ask John Wesley to send help. They needed preachers. Wesley raised the matter at the Leeds Conference in August 1769. "Who is willing to go?" he asked. No one responded. Wesley had to ask twice more before

Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmore reluctantly raised their hands. A collection of £50 was taken up to speed them on their way and to serve, in Wesley's words, as "a token of our brotherly love."<sup>18</sup> And yet, despite the difficulty Wesley had procuring volunteers, there was a third preacher who seemed more eager than all the rest but who did not offer himself in conference. Without any financial support or public endorsement, Robert Williams, a Welshman who cut his teeth as a Methodist preacher in Ireland, quietly set about making preparations to embark for America. The young preacher had at least one very good reason for not bothering to raise his hand when Wesley called for volunteers. Wesley did not much like him. Although admitting Williams possessed a rare pulpit oratory to hold thousands "quiet and attentive," Wesley found the younger man's cheeky attitude toward the Church of England all but intolerable.<sup>19</sup> But, no doubt reminding himself of his own pledge that Methodism was open to all regardless of religious inclination, Wesley permitted himself to be practical rather than principled on the matter.

Shortly after Williams learned that he would have the unenthusiastic company of Boardman and Pilmore in America, he made an abrupt and chaotic departure. "He hurried down to the town near to which the ship lay," wrote the first historian of American Methodism, "sold his horse to pay his debts, and taking his saddle-bags on his arm, set off for the ship, with a loaf of bread and a bottle of milk, and no money to pay his passage."<sup>20</sup> Williams's haste delivered him to the American shore sometime in August 1769 – some two months before the slightly more dignified Boardman and Pilmore eventually arrived.

Wesley's concerns about how Williams might conduct himself overseas were borne out almost immediately. One of the first things Williams did when he landed was to settle on a way to make Wesley – or at least Wesley's hymnbook – pay his way. Although preachers in Britain were forbidden from publishing anything without Wesley's approval, Williams seems to have thought the same restriction ought not to apply in America.<sup>21</sup> He can hardly be blamed for that. After all, as soon as he set foot on American soil, he found himself all but surrounded by British books and advertisements for British books printed not in Britain, but by Scottish and Irish immigrants on American presses. The financial success that these printers and publishers achieved in America's burgeoning reprint market rested on their common conviction that the colonies were, like Scotland and Ireland, beyond the jurisdiction of the London Stationers' Company. It was an infectious idea. As Williams reached into his

pocket and pulled out one of his only remaining possessions – a battered copy of the bestselling Methodist hymnbook – the circumstances must have seemed almost providential.

Using Williams's hymnbook for copy, John Dunlap in Philadelphia soon placed three hundred inexpensive duodecimo copies of Wesley's *Hymns for the Nativity of our Lord* in Williams's hands. Stuffing his saddlebags with as much as he could carry, Williams sold them wherever he went. When his inventory became depleted, he printed a cheap edition of Wesley's sermons in New York with the help of Philip Embury. The next time he was passing through Philadelphia, Williams ordered more hymnbooks from Dunlap. Wesley's sanctioned preachers, meanwhile, Boardman and Pilmore, did not lift a finger to stop him. They did not even report him to Wesley. It was not until a young Francis Asbury finally arrived in America in October 1771 that Wesley had any chance to find out what Williams was doing. At first, Williams's ministry impressed Asbury. "Brother Williams," he enthused in his journal, "gives a flaming account of the work. Many people seem to be ripe for the Gospel and ready to receive us."<sup>22</sup>

But Asbury's enthusiasm was dampened when he learned that Williams was doing more than just preaching. Asbury immediately wrote to Wesley about it. Then, in the autumn of 1772, Asbury received a letter from Wesley appointing him general assistant in place of Richard Boardman and charging him to ensure that, "Mr. Williams might not print any more books without my consent."<sup>23</sup> This sudden promotion was almost certainly a reward for, among other demonstrations of loyalty, tattling on Williams.<sup>24</sup> And yet, though the benefits to Asbury were not to be doubted, his censure of Williams seems to have been sincere. When Williams died in September 1775, Asbury remarked darkly that, "perhaps brother Williams was in danger of being entangled in worldly business, and might thereby have injured the cause of God. So he was taken away from the evil to come."<sup>25</sup> Those familiar with Williams's ministry would have had no difficulty interpreting the phrase "worldly business" as a veiled reference to Williams's unsanctioned publishing endeavors.

Despite Asbury's loyalty, Wesley was not quite ready to leave everything in the hands of a man quite so young and untested. In the spring of 1773, veteran preacher and Church of England clergyman Thomas Rankin was dispatched to restore order and make certain that others would not follow Williams's bad example. Rankin was a hard man with a reputation for dealing quickly with problems. In less time than it

would have taken him to cross the Atlantic, he had called all the preachers in America back to Philadelphia where they met together in June of that year. Acting on orders from Wesley, Rankin affirmed the subordination of Methodist preachers to Church of England clergymen, forbade those preachers from administering the sacraments, and made it perfectly clear that Wesley's rule against publishing applied every bit as much in America as it did in Britain. "No preacher," the minutes read, "shall be permitted to reprint our books, without the approbation of Mr. Wesley, and the consent of the brethren." As for Williams, the practical Wesley allowed that he would be permitted to "sell what he has, but reprint no more."<sup>26</sup>

David Hempton notes that, "one of the most striking features of Methodism is the extent to which Wesley tried to secure control over the discourse of the movement by remorselessly selecting, editing, publishing and disseminating print."<sup>27</sup> Wesley was deeply committed to maintaining that control on both sides of the Atlantic. Indeed, his preachers were specifically enjoined in the minutes of conferences to "sing no hymns of your own composing," to publish no tracts without first obtaining approval, to print nothing until Wesley had first revised it, and, in general, to avoid what Wesley called "that evil disease the *scribendi cacoethes*" or "itch for writing" that threatened to infect some of his assistants and helpers.<sup>28</sup> Yet Rankin puzzlingly cited none of Wesley's editorial concerns when he set out to explain why Methodists must not follow the example set by Williams and other Scottish and Irish immigrant printers in America. Instead, Rankin said, the rule was merely in place to ensure fairness, "so that the profits arising therefrom, might be divided among the preachers, or applied to some charitable purpose."<sup>29</sup> And although Wesley's preachers in America proved themselves to be remarkably tractable on this point in the short term – no further unauthorized editions of Wesley's works were printed on American presses at the behest of Methodist preachers until the darkest days of the Revolutionary War – Rankin's carefully crafted language eventually provided Methodists with just the opening they needed to begin assuming control over their own printing and publishing activities.

By the end of the 1770s, Methodism in America was in a state of serious disarray. Since the outbreak of hostilities, Methodist preachers had come under heavy persecution as suspected loyalists. As a result, all of the preachers Wesley had dispatched overseas, with the single exception of Francis Asbury, fled the continent. The appearance of Wesley's startling anti-revolutionary tract entitled *A Calm Address to Our American Colonies*

hardly helped. Although controversial on both sides of the Atlantic, in America it was nothing short of dangerous and no doubt contributed to the frustration of his followers in America.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, despite Asbury's continued presence in America and his intense loyalty to Methodism's founder, Wesley's authority overseas was soon hanging by a thread.

In 1779, Asbury narrowly prevented a body of southern Methodist preachers from arrogating to themselves the sacramental powers of ordained clergymen – a move that would certainly have invited Wesley's profoundest censure.<sup>31</sup> The following year, John Dickins, a rising star in the Methodist fold who went on to become a key figure in American Methodism, called for the formal separation of Methodism from the Church of England in the full knowledge that Wesley would oppose such a move. With so many ready to set aside Wesley's authority in relatively weighty matters, it is not surprising that Asbury came to the conclusion that printing a few Methodist books amounted to no great trespass under the circumstances. "May I print any of your books? We are in great want," Asbury pleaded in the waning weeks of the summer of 1780, adding by way of explanation that the last shipment received from London "was huddled and improper."<sup>32</sup> Without waiting for a reply, Asbury noted in his journal a month later that, "we have come to the conclusion to print the four volumes of Mr. Wesley's Sermons".<sup>33</sup>

The extraordinary circumstances under which these books were printed might have been taken by some to mean that no binding precedent about printing Methodist books in America had been set. At least that seems to have been Wesley's view. When regular lines of communication were restored after the war, it became clear that Wesley had every expectation that his followers on the far side of the Atlantic would resume their unwavering patronage of his London Book Room. But a different sentiment now prevailed in America. After the cessation of hostilities, everyone knew that the London Stationers' Company could no longer even pretend to hold sway over publishing in the new republic. American Methodists slowly evolved a similar view about Wesley's Book Room. When Wesley dispatched Rankin to put a stop to Williams's publishing activities more than a decade earlier, Rankin had argued that such restrictions were necessary in order to ensure that "the profits arising therefrom, might be divided among the preachers, or applied to some charitable purpose."<sup>34</sup> With that language at the forefront of their minds, American Methodists passed a new resolution requiring that profits arising from the sale of all books – presumably those printed locally as well as

those imported from London – be used to make up deficiencies in the salaries of the preachers.<sup>35</sup> The result was that Wesley and his lieutenants could no longer complain about an unfair distribution of profits. This also set books published by the London Book Room and those published on American presses on an equal footing for the first time. Wesley, who remained as committed as ever to controlling the discourse of the movement, was not appeased.

Over the next several years it became increasingly clear that Wesley's endorsement of a truly independent Methodism in the United States was not quite as unqualified as many had hoped. Although he had reluctantly sanctioned the establishment of the Methodist Episcopal Church under the joint superintendence of Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke in 1784, he seems to have been surprised when Americans made attempts to accommodate Methodism to the realities of their new environment. Around this time John Dickins, who had attempted to push back against Wesley's authority during the war, began to play an increasingly important role in Methodist affairs. Born and educated in London, Dickins traveled to America as a tutor before joining the Methodists on the eve of the Revolutionary War in 1774. In spite of his British birth, Dickins's sympathies were wholly with the disgruntled colonists. Dickins's remarkable talent for rhetoric became apparent when the time came to bestow a new name on the movement that had once been known by Wesley simply as "circuit number 50" in his transatlantic renewal movement within England's established church. Dickins suggested the Methodist Episcopal Church – a shrewd formulation that signaled both Methodism's independence from the Church of England and arrogated in three simple words the same sacramental prerogatives that he and his southern coreligionists had been demanding for years.<sup>36</sup>

Tensions between Wesley and his American followers finally came to a head in 1787. That year, in an effort to reassert his authority, Wesley attempted to blunt Asbury's influence by installing Richard Whatcoat in his place – a candidate who promised to be more deferential. The Americans, who had already come to regard Asbury as a kind of evangelical hero, flatly refused. Wesley, they argued, was simply too far removed from the situation on the ground to know what was best. Some even went so far as to suggest Wesley could reasonably expect no duty of obedience from those who had joined the ranks of the preachers after the establishment of an independent Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784.<sup>37</sup>

With Wesley's influence thus diminished, and no doubt recalling the

good that had resulted from Williams's unauthorized reprinting activities a decade or so earlier, Dickins, at the urging of the preachers, began the work of reviving Methodist printing in America. In the spring he issued a thoroughly revised edition of Wesley's familiar *Minutes of Several Conversations* under the distinctly American title *Form of Discipline*. It was a landmark document that further diminished Wesley's authority by excluding his name from the list of preachers, styling Asbury a bishop against Wesley's thunderous but futile opposition, and unambiguously placing the right to decide what would be printed in the hands of American preachers. Importantly, it anticipated any criticism Wesley might make on the grounds of financial fairness by codifying the principle that "the profits of the books, after all the necessary expences [*sic*] are defrayed, shall be applied, according to the discretion of the conference, towards the college, the preachers' fund, the deficiencies of the preachers, the distant missions, or the debts of our churches."<sup>38</sup> Although that did not put an end to the importation of books and periodicals from Wesley's London Book Room, Americans now placed their oversea orders by choice rather than by compulsion. "From that time," Jesse Lee observed, "we began to print more of our own books in the United States than we had ever done before."<sup>39</sup>

In May 1789, Methodist preachers meeting together in New York made Dickins's role official by appointing him the first Book Steward of the newly established Methodist Book Concern – the first denominational publishing house in America. With the full weight of the preachers' authority now behind him, and even Wesley's own reluctant agreement, Dickins turned his full attention toward ensuring the Concern's survival. It would not be easy. Three serious threats to its welfare emerged almost immediately. First, America's booming postwar market for print meant that Methodists had no need to patronize the Concern to fill their shelves with the right books. Rival editions of Methodist hymnbooks, works by John Wesley, and other staples of Methodist spirituality were pouring forth from the presses of rival publishers in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York. Second, in 1790 Congress passed a Federal Copyright Act that effectively threw the whole of the Methodist canon, with the exception of a tiny proportion of literature actually authored by American Methodists, into the public domain. Third, financial pressure on the Concern to succeed was increased that same year when Asbury's controversial Bishops Council invested the Preachers' Fund in the book business in exchange for the right to draw dividends arising from the sale of the

Concern's books.<sup>40</sup> With fewer than a dozen books in print at that time, however, there was no guarantee that the Concern would even survive much less turn a profit.

Competition in the market, internal financial demands, and the lack of a distribution infrastructure, all drove the book business into an early debt. Under these pressures, Dickins began to evolve a marketing strategy that was clearly based on Wesley's earlier demand that Williams stop printing Methodist books in America because such activities prevented the equitable distribution of profits. In the face of the Concern's mounting debt, Dickins seems to have realized that there was an important difference between directing profits back into the wider Methodist Episcopal Church and loudly proclaiming that one was doing so. In 1793, Dickins issued the Concern's first catalogue as an appendix to his edition of John Fletcher's *Posthumous Pieces*. It contained something far more important to the Concern's long-term survival than the twenty-three titles actually listed for sale. Almost half of the allotted two-page space that the catalogue occupied was allotted to a kind of advertisement in which Dickins attempted to explain why his books were more desirable than those of rival publishers:

The Following BOOKS are published by John Dickins, No. 118, North Fourth-Street, near Race-Street, Philadelphia; for the use of the Methodist Societies in the United States of America; and the profits thereof applied for the general benefit of the said Societies. Sold by the publishers, and the Ministers and Preachers in the several Circuits . . . As the Profits of these Books are for the general Benefit of the Methodist Societies, it is humbly recommended to the Members of the said Societies, that they will purchase no Books which we publish, of any other person than the aforesaid *John Dickins*, or the Methodist Ministers and Preachers in the several Circuits, or such Persons as sell them by their Consent.<sup>41</sup>

By connecting the sale of his books to the welfare of the Methodist Episcopal Church in a document read not only by preachers, but also by all his potential customers, Dickins took a critically important step in equating patronage of the denominational publisher with loyalty to the church itself. No other publisher could make a similar claim. And every book the Concern published, whether authored by a Methodist or a non-Methodist, a living or a dead author, an American citizen or a British subject, conferred in equal measure the same denominational distinction

on the purchaser. This set apart not only the Concern's Methodist hymnbook from the rival hymnbooks that were beginning to flood the market, but also spiritual classics popular among Methodist readers but over which they had no special claim of ownership, such as Richard Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted* – a book that the Roman Catholic publisher Matthew Carey soon issued in Philadelphia in the hope of selling it across denominational lines. Tellingly, Dickins made no effort to describe his texts as more accurate, less expensive, or of a superior manufactured quality. The only reason Methodists ought to prefer his books to those published by others was that his books conferred financial benefit on the wider Methodist Episcopal Church. To open an edition of Baxter's *Call* and see Dickins's name on the imprint conveyed to anyone who had read Dickins's catalogue a message about the denominational identity and loyalty of the owner of that book.<sup>42</sup>

For decades to come, Dickins's language, or language inspired by it, appeared at the head of all the catalogues and in many of the prefaces to the books the Concern published. Meeting in Baltimore in 1800, the General Conference took this principle about the proper use of profits derived from Wesley one step further by instituting a commission on the sale of all books to Methodist preachers who were also now required to offer the Concern's wares wherever they went. The amount of the payable commission varied but typically fell somewhere between 15% and 25%. A portion of this was also reserved for presiding elders – senior preachers who bore responsibility for overseeing a group of preaching circuits.<sup>43</sup> The result was an unintended ironic twist on Dickins's rhetoric and Rankin and Wesley's original language inasmuch as the wider church now assumed responsibility for the Concern's debts, and preachers became commissioned salesmen rather than straightforward beneficiaries of the Concern's bounty.

Strangely enough, the arrangement was not much different from the one Robert Williams pioneered decades earlier: the more books a preacher sold, the more money he could put in his pocket. And, not surprisingly, individual preachers became so intent on selling the Concern's books that the money earned from commissions in some cases equaled or even exceeded their entire annual salaries.<sup>44</sup> But what mattered to success in the market just as much as a motivated sales force was an effective advertising campaign. Methodists continued to believe, despite the competitive nature of the system, that the profits earned from the sale of books supported their preachers as well as widows, orphans, and missionaries. Taken together,

Methodists in America were left with a powerful recipe for placing books in the hands of readers and visibly strengthening the role those books played in the Methodist economy as denominational status objects.

Between 1800 and 1805 – a time when other printers and publishers all along the American seaboard were spiraling down into bankruptcy – the Concern’s financial standing improved rapidly.<sup>45</sup> During these same years the church’s membership rolls almost doubled from 64,894 to 119,945.<sup>46</sup> As the number of Methodists in the United States grew, the rhetorical relationship between patronage of the denominational publisher with the religious identity of readers promised to become ever more expedient. And as the Concern earned greater and greater profits, American Methodist historians set about recuperating Williams’s reputation. “The sermons which he [Robert Williams] printed in small pamphlets,” Jesse Lee later reflected, “and circulated among the people, had a very good effect, and gave the people great light and understanding in the nature of the new birth, and in the plan of salvation: and withal, they opened the way in many places for our preachers to be invited to preach where they had never been before.”<sup>47</sup> Nathan Bangs and Abel Stevens, each of whom authored an official history of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the nineteenth century, were similarly laudatory in their accounts of Williams and his publishing activities.<sup>48</sup>

In the end, then, these American Methodists not only judged Williams to be in the right, but also quickly forgot that he had ever found himself in conflict with Wesley. Though later Methodists, particularly those who relied on the accounts penned by Bangs and Stevens for their information, may have been only vaguely aware of it, the rhetorical strategies on which the Concern’s market dominance was built were pioneered by John Dickins not merely in response to an American “democratic urge to multiply authors and readers,” but also, and even primarily, with an eye to the transatlantic pressures Wesley exerted on his American followers to resume importing all their reading material from his London Book Room after the Revolutionary War. Thus it may be that Wesley’s distant but insistent objections to the printing of Methodist books in America had as much to do with the Methodist Book Concern’s success as American democracy or market capitalism. This matters not only for the study of American religious print culture, but American evangelical expansion more broadly. After all, the Methodist Book Concern was a publishing house so deeply intertwined with the fortunes of the Methodist Episcopal Church that the success of the one drove and depended on the

progress of the other.

### **Endnotes**

1. Abel Stevens, *Life and Times of Nathan Bangs* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1863), 301.
2. Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 204.
3. Hollis Read, *The Hand of God in History: Or, Divine Providence Historically Illustrated in the Extension and Establishment of Christianity* (Hartford: H. E. Robins and Co., 1849), iv.
4. La Roy Sunderland, *History of the United States of America, from the Discovery of the Continent in 1492, to the Fiftieth Anniversary of Their Independence* (New York: B. Waugh and T. Mason, 1834), 6.
5. Daniel Kidder, *The Dawn of Modern Civilization: Or, Sketches of the Social Condition of Europe, From the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Lane & Tippet for the Sunday-School Union of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1847), 175. See also *The Dawn of Modern Civilization: Or, Sketches of the Social Condition of Europe, From the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1847), 152.
6. Francis Bremer, *John Winthrop: America's Forgotten Founding Father* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 180.
7. Nathan Bangs, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lang, 1838-41), 4:359.
8. See, for example, Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); see also Roy Rogers, "After Democratization?" *The Junto: A Group Blog on Early American History*, March 2013, <https://earlyamericanists.com/2013/03/14/after-democratization/>
9. Hatch, *Democratization*, 142.
10. Hatch, *Democratization*, 127, 142.
11. See, for example, Catherine Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); and Monica Najar, *Evangelizing the South: A Social History of Church and State in Early America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

12. Amanda Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
13. David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6-7.
14. Nord, *Faith*, 221-223; Hatch, *Democratization*, 127.
15. Meredith McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-1853* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).
16. Scott E. Casper and Joan Shelley Rubin, "The History of the Book in America," in *The Oxford Companion to the Book*, ed. Michael Suarez and H. R. Woudhuysen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1:425-26.
17. James Green, "English Books and Printing in the Age of Franklin," in *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, eds. Hugh Amory and David D. Hall (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 270-83.
18. Henry Rack, ed., *The Methodist Societies: The Minutes of Conference*, vol. 10 of *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 374; and W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds., *Journals and Diaries*, vol. 22 of *The Works of John Wesley*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 197.
19. Ward and Heitzenrater *Journals*, 5:47, 2:322 n. 85; Dee Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 40.
20. Jesse Lee, *A Short History of the Methodists, in The United States of America: Beginning in 1766, and Continued till 1809* (Baltimore: Magill and Clime, 1810), 27.
21. Rack, *Minutes*, 190, 207, 235, 291. See also T. B. Shepherd, *Methodism and the Literature of the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Haskell House, 1966), 71, 253.
22. Francis Asbury, *Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), 1:28; and John Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 78.
23. Asbury, *Journal*, 1:46; Andrews, *Revolutionary America*, 44.
24. Despite the wording of Wesley's letter, John Wigger draws no connection between Asbury's promotion and Wesley's desire to see a stop put to Williams's publishing activities in his recent biography of Francis Asbury. See John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 56.

25. Asbury, *Journal*, 1:164. Wigger is similarly silent on this letter in his biography (*American Saint*, 85).
26. Asbury, *Journal*, 1:85; Lee, *Short History*, 46-47.
27. David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 58. See also Henry Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 247; Andrews, *Revolutionary America*, 22, 25, 28, 230; Wigger, *Taking Heaven*, 179-80; and Wigger, *American Saint*, 271-75, 402.
28. Rack, *Minutes*, 190, 207, 235, 291. See also Shepherd, *Methodism and the Literature of the Eighteenth Century*, 71, 253.
29. Lee, *History*, 49.
30. James Penn Pilkington, *The Methodist Publishing House: A History* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), 1:37, 1:41; Andrews, *Revolutionary America*, 48-50; and David Hempton, *Methodism and Politics in British Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), 45.
31. Wigger, *American Saint*, 114-20.
32. Asbury, *Journal*, 1:326.
33. Asbury, *Journal*, 1:413; Wigger, *Taking Heaven*, 23-4; and Pilkington, *Methodist Publishing*, 1:49-50, 51-55.
34. Lee, *Short History*, 49.
35. Methodist Episcopal Church, *Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the Years 1775-1828* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), 16; Pilkington, *Methodist Publishing*, 55.
36. Bangs, *History*, 2:67-9; Pilkington, *Methodist Publishing*, 1:43; Andrews, *Revolutionary America*, 40-44, 68ff; and Wigger, *American Saint*, 118, 159ff.
37. Andrews, *Revolutionary America*, 197; Wigger, *Taking Heaven*, 19; and Hatch, *Democratization*, 90-91.
38. Lee, *Short History*, 129.
39. Lee, *Short History*, 129; Pilkington, *Methodist Publishing*, 1:71, 1:77; Andrews, *Revolutionary America*, 198; Robert Emory, *History of the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Lane & Scott, 1851), 81-82.
40. Pilkington, *Methodist Publishing*, 1:95

41. Melville Horn, ed., *Posthumous Pieces of the Reverend John William de la Fletchere* (Philadelphia: Parry Hall, 1793), n.p. See also Pilkington, *Methodist Publishing*, 1:102.
42. For additional examples of this rhetoric aimed directly at readers see Lucas Endicott, "Settling the 'Printing Business': John Dickins and the Methodist Episcopal Book Concern from 1789-1798," *Methodist History* 48, no. 2 (January 2010): 88-89.
43. Methodist Episcopal Church, *Journals*, 1:45-46; and Bangs, *History*, 4:427.
44. Hatch, *Democratization*, 142; and Hempton, *Empire*, 122.
45. See James Green, "The Rise of Book Publishing," in *An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840*, eds. Robert Gross and Mary Kelley (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 86-88, 93-95; Wigger, *American Saint*, 275; and Pilkington, *Methodist Publishing*, 1:127.
46. Wigger, *Taking Heaven*, 197-200.
47. Lee, *Short History*, 48.
48. See Bangs, *History*, 1:89 and Abel Stevens, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1866): 1:165-66.

