

Martin Wellings, *Methodism in Victorian Oxford: The Oxford Wesleyan Local Preachers Book 1830 – 1902*, Oxford: The Oxfordshire Record Society, vol.76, 2023, 343 pp., £35.

Better organisation, order and efficiency characterised a number of spheres of nineteenth-century life. For example, it was in the early 1800s that decennial census records began. Wesleyan Methodists were no exception in valuing orderliness and developed an impressive administrative structure in order to support and maintain some control over this growing movement. One aspect of this was holding regular meetings for Local Preachers and paid ministers, including the Superintendent, in each preaching circuit. Martin Wellings has meticulously transcribed into print over seventy years of handwritten minutes from Oxford's Local Preachers' quarterly meetings, contained within two source books covering 1830 to 1866 and 1867 to 1902. Additionally, he has footnoted his transcriptions with much valuable background information on the meetings and people in attendance, making them much more accessible to historians and others. The introduction to Wellings' book provides a helpful overview of Methodism's development nationally and within the Oxford Circuit. It also provides further explanatory detail that is essential for making sense of the minutes. Overall, his book shines a spotlight on the middling sort in Victorian Oxfordshire who worked hard to serve God in the context of Wesleyan Methodism but who could be easily overshadowed by the proximity of Oxford University.

Wellings' introduction starts with a summary of Methodism's origins during the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century. The conversions, beliefs and work of John and Charles Wesley are discussed and George Whitefield's role is mentioned too. As the Methodism grew, inevitably, disagreements occurred. Early on, the Wesleys split from Whitefield and others over theological differences concerning Calvinism and Arminianism. The Wesleys favoured Arminian doctrine which taught that the gospel is for all who choose to accept it. Wesleyan Methodism developed and it is this strand of Methodism within Victorian Oxfordshire that Wellings examines here.

As Wesleyan Methodism spread, greater organisation was needed; a 'Connexion' of societies was established by the Wesleys across Great Britain. Wellings describes how Wesleyan methods of evangelism and organisational structure developed over time. Members attended a fellowship or 'class' meeting during the week as well as Sunday worship. Preaching places were grouped into circuits. Wellings explains the role of itinerant Travelling Preachers, who received a stipend, and volunteer Local Preachers, who were tied to particular localities by work and families but who would preach at different places within a circuit. The Travelling Preachers, or ministers, met at an annual Conference which was important for the governance of Methodism. There was a hierarchy amongst Methodist preachers with ministers being above the Local Preachers.

Whilst the Wesley brothers remained within the Church of England until their deaths in the late 1700s, strains on the relationship between their voluntary societies within the national church and some Anglican clergy became more marked in the 1800s. Wellings notes how some within early Wesleyan Methodism, including the Wesleys themselves, could be described as being prejudiced towards dissenters. Nevertheless, some Wesleyan Methodists began to cease attendance at their parish churches and to hold their services at the same time as the local Anglican church. This had been frowned upon during the Wesleys' lifetimes. Whatever Wesleyan Methodists were claiming at the turn of the century, they were acting as a separate denomination and beginning to ordain their own ministers. Furthermore, by the

1830s Wesleyans became concerned about the theology of some within Anglicanism as the Oxford Movement spread and Anglo-Catholic ideas took hold. Over the 1800s, Wesleyan Methodists developed closer relationships with nonconformist evangelicals.

Disagreement did not only occur with Anglicans. There were a number of disputes and tensions within Wesleyan Methodism itself during the nineteenth century. Helpfully, Wellings untangles these and explains the causes of arguments, splits and expulsions. A particularly damaging dispute arose in the 1840s following the publication of some satirical fly sheets. Those thought to be guilty were expelled but this led to mass meetings, petitions and reform societies being established. An underlying cause, according to Wellings, of several of these controversies was the dissatisfaction some laity, including Local Preachers, felt at being excluded from decision-making. Wesleyan ministers could be perceived as over-bearing. Another cause was a growing emphasis on respectability, coupled with a concern about the authenticity of some revival activities, whilst others were worried about Methodism departing from its roots.

After Wellings' overview of Wesleyan Methodism's national development through the nineteenth century, he focuses on the Oxford Circuit. He describes how the movement grew over the 1800s with more chapels and societies being formed across the county. However, the growth was not linear. Some of the quarrels mentioned above had their parallels in Oxford. For instance, when Local Preacher, Josiah Crapper, was expelled for preaching and administering the sacrament at an Independent church in Summertown, opinion was divided over the expulsion. Articles appeared in local publications. As with the fly sheet expulsions, the controversy touched on the underlying issue of ministerial control. The overall growth of Victorian Oxfordshire Methodism noted above masks the ebbs and flows in membership which occurred during the 1800s. Oxfordshire Wesleyanism experienced shrinkage in the 1850s on account of disputes amongst its members but growth in the second half of the century.

Other national developments in Wesleyan Methodism are also mirrored in Oxford. Wellings describes how the movement gained respectability in the city. A number of Wesleyans became city councillors or prominent within the business community. When restrictions upon nonconformists attending Oxford University relaxed, Wesleyans came to have a presence there and proctors stopped visiting Methodist services to catch undergraduates who might be exploring this expression of faith. Wellings notes the active involvement of Wesleyan Methodists with the Nonconformist Council later in the 1800s.

Wellings' discussions about disagreements within and without Victorian Methodism and his footnotes to the Local Preachers' meeting minutes are valuable because the minutes themselves are sparse on detail and fairly reticent about disputes but Wellings fills in some gaps. For instance, the minutes for 26th March 1851 mention some brethren having preached for the 'Agitators' and the unwillingness of Mr Scott to leave the meeting. Wellings' introduction provides background to tensions and a footnote gives more information on Mr Scott. Without Wellings' additional material, a modern reader of the minutes would have many unanswered questions.

Wellings' introduction highlights the importance accorded to preaching in Wesleyan Methodism and the valuable contribution of Local Preachers. Many Local Preachers walked considerable distances on a Sunday to preach to more than one society; Joseph Ostler covered fifty miles and preached three times in one day. Such detail makes it more understandable

that some might feel a little under-appreciated by Wesleyan ministers charged with decision-making about them or why they might sometimes miss appointments. Wellings describes the process by which Local Preachers were recruited and trained and the evolution of this training. Again, this information helps to make sense of the Local Preachers' minutes. The latter were written in a question and answer format. Questions such as, 'Are any to be received in full connection?' or 'Are any proposed as eligible to receive a note from the Superintendant?' could be confusing without extra explanation.

Following the introduction, Wellings provides an example of an Oxford Circuit preaching plan and a map of preaching places. He explains how to read the plan, a model of efficient, succinct communication. As noted, within the two Preachers' Book sections, Wellings' footnotes to the minutes provide extra information about most of the Local Preachers. He frequently tells us their occupations which shows the type of people drawn to Methodism in Victorian Oxford and how the demographic changed over the period. Glovers, basket-makers, bakers, carpenters, shoemakers are mentioned, representing Oxford's middling sort. Later in the century, undergraduates are listed as undertaking some preaching. Some terminology is helpfully clarified. For example, when Brother Greenhill is recorded as having 'disappointed' Woodstock and Murcot in January and February 1830, it is not immediately apparent that this meant that Greenhill did not arrive at the services as expected; it was not that his sermon failed to meet expectations.

Methodism in Victorian Oxford does not provide histories of the different Methodist societies within the Oxford Circuit but it shows how they were managed by the Superintendant, ministers and Local Preachers who attended the Local Preachers' meetings. It highlights what was important to them. Wellings provides a select bibliography for those wishing to research the topic in more detail. Possibly, a list of primary sources would have been helpful too, especially for those who wish to focus on particular Wesleyan societies or stand back and look at Oxfordshire Methodism in the context of the county's wider religious world in the 1800s.

Overall, Wellings' meticulous research into those mentioned in Victorian Oxford's Local Preachers Books sheds light on many, almost entirely men, involved in Wesleyan evangelism. His background information on Methodism gives enough detail to provide context but is not overwhelmingly detailed. Wellings demonstrates the impressive commitment of Oxfordshire tradesmen, artisans and, later, some University men to the spread of the gospel who, hitherto, may have been little known. They also argued with each other and sometimes stumbled morally. Nevertheless, preaching God's Word mattered to them and Wellings' book brings their work to life.

Emily Greig, January 2024