John Pritchard

*Methods and their Missionary Societies, 2 vols: 1760–1900 and 1900–1996*


By 1838 the Wesleyan London missionary committee had to secure a second headquarters or Mission House and bought the ‘City of London Tavern’ for £15,000 with ‘two thousand dozen of the finest Port, sherry, Madeira and other wines’, thrown in! John Pritchard is the first to acknowledge that he writes his very fine account in the wake of Findlay and Holdsworth’s massive five-volume *History of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (1921–1924)*, that he owes a debt to those who recorded and published the considerable overseas missionary contributions of the Methodist New Connexion, of the United Methodist Free Churches (whose first medical missionary, Alfred Hogg, became Principal of Shanxi University), of the Bible Christians and of the Primitive Methodist Church (who provided the first official women missionaries from any branch of Methodism). Side by side with these debts are those to the prodigious Methodist knowledge of the SOAS archivist, Lance Martin, and to the contemporary database of Albert Mosley containing details of ‘almost every Methodist missionary that ever was’. To these we must add the author’s own intimate involvement with the inside story of Methodism and the world church over the last fifty years. Alongside the well-documented but ultimately small part played by the saintly characters and the achievers (the missionaries and mission partners and their spouses) the author has portrayed the hidden history and the massive contribution of the indigenous believers, whose names are now known only to God: ‘the Indian biblewoman, the Chinese evangelist, the African catechist and the Caribbean class-leader’ – all easily overlooked.

The missionary mindset came late to the first generation of Methodists. Wesley thought the British Isles and North America constituted a sufficient arena for his preachers with a reluctant and late agreement to sanction missionary subscriptions for the West Indies. The first Methodist itinerants or local preachers had no commission to minister overseas but had travelled in the company of soldiers or traders. The Wesleyan Missionary Society of 1818 grew out of spontaneous local and regional missionary societies committed to funding pioneering appointments in the colonies and dominions. The official arriving missionary more often than not found a company of waiting believers among the settlers, the planters, the convicts or liberated African slaves. Many early missionaries relied heavily on interpreters and did not always keep good accounts but had the good sense to train and appoint assistant missionaries from the more articulate indigenous converts.
Sydney Smith despised the verminous Methodists because their foreign missionaries encouraged a religion that contained ‘a passion for social change’. Counter-cultural Methodist missionaries took risks in opposing human sacrifice, the burning or strangling of widows at their husbands’ funerals and the killing of twins. A long struggle against the caste system in India was matched by opposition elsewhere to trade in opium and in slaves. The befriending of slaves often cost missionaries and evangelists their lives. Henry Bleby began his forty-six year ministry in Jamaica by being tarred, feathered and all but burned alive. When Mary Calvert and Mary Ann Lyth arrived in Fiji in 1838 almost their first task was to walk through the royal guards and successfully demand that the chief put an end to his cannibalism forthwith! Africa, the Pacific and China all claimed Methodist missionary martyrs in both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. In 1930 Dietrich Bonhoeffer rallied his German pastors by recalling his time at the Wesleyan missionary college in Richmond, London, ‘I am not asking you to do or suffer anything new. This has always been the way of witness. In Richmond College there are boards with names of Methodist missionaries who died on the field, and when one fell there was another to take their place’ (vol. 2, p. 58). In the early 1880s the missionaries serving in Bengal had to endure the fierce hostility of the Brahmin, Kuluda Prasad Pande, but by 1890 amidst great rioting Panda announced his conversion. His son C. C. Pande became the District Chairman who led the Bengal Methodists into the Church of North India in 1970.

Wherever possible the chapels were accompanied by mission compound schools and medical units which became the twin instruments of change, and these invariably along with a dogged commitment to the translation of the scriptures into more and more languages, into endless dialects and often accompanied by pioneering dictionaries. That most early missionaries came from a working background meant they had practical skills. Even the great Wesleyan prelate ‘Posnett of India’ began his ministry by making a coffin for a convert whose corpse no local believer would touch. In 1858 Methodists provided the first girls’ boarding school in China. For thirty years the tone-deaf David Hill struggled to master Mandarin pronunciation and led a huge programme of famine relief against the hopeless cruelty of the massive north China famine of 1877 which left 70 million starving and 10 million dead. By 1900 the churches of ‘colonial’ Methodism had become autonomous and ‘dependent’ Methodist missionary districts only remained in the Bahamas and Honduras, with six in Africa, thirteen in Asia and four in Europe, including Methodist centres for worship, schools and orphanages in Italy, Spain and Portugal. The first two generations of Methodist missionaries, including educationalists and doctors, were commissioned as ordained ministers. Only in