

“... too indelicate to mention ...”: Transgressive Male Sexualities in Early Methodism

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Abstract

The first known use of the term “Methodist” to refer to the religious group associated with the Wesleys may have been linked to their taking the part of a prisoner accused of sodomy in Oxford in the 1730s. In discussion and debates on sexuality today, churches seem to pay little attention to relevant historical background. This paper attempts to offer some evidence for same-sex occurrence around the genesis of what has evolved to be the Methodist community of churches.

Introduction

Sexuality, and in particular same-sex relationships, remains an emotive and divisive issue across the contemporary Christian church.¹ In Catholic and Protestant traditions, much rancorous debate continues to be engaged, yet it

¹ This article is based on a paper presented to the 2007 Oxford Institute for Methodist Studies, “Moorfields, Mollies and Methodists: The Coincidences of Two Divergent Subcultures in Eighteenth-century England.” Available at <https://oxford-institute.org/2007-twelfth-institute/working-groups/>. *WJW* is used for *The Works of John Wesley*, general editors Frank Baker and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Oxford: Oxford University Press; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975—). *Journal* is used for *The Journal of John Wesley*, first published from 1739. There are many editions; unless otherwise noted that used here is the modern critical edition in *WJW* 18–24.

seems little attention is given to serious consideration of how the church has historically viewed divergent sexualities and attitudes to those, particularly in recent centuries. This article attempts to offer some evidence and assessment in this area around the genesis of what has come to comprise the present-day Methodist church. It should be emphasized clearly at the outset that there is no suggestion (or evidence) whatsoever that the Wesleys were anything but heterosexual. It does, however, offer evidence that there were those in early Methodism whose sexuality disrupted the heteronormativity of the movement, but a key purpose of the article is to highlight how difficult it is to co-relate their world with ours.

Historians of sexuality have noted how the eighteenth century marked a significant transition in understandings of sexual activity between men.² In the wake of what is now often termed the “Enlightenment” came adjustments in many sectors of life and thought. Sexuality is one such instance: religion another. Methodism itself might be understood as a product of a ferment between internalised emotional faith and external rational dogma; individualised experiential religion and outward group cohesiveness.³ Such constructs open the way to productive discourse with studies of other phenomena of the time—indeed, the whole area of religion and sexuality in the eighteenth century is starting to gain more attention.⁴

Part of John Wesley’s heritage has been a tendency for Methodism to over-document itself, more than many religious traditions, so historians approaching the denomination may be faced with a perplexing surfeit of primary material. Over against that, sources for “hidden histories,” such as women’s studies or black history, can be obscure, difficult to find and even more problematic to interpret. This is particularly so with homosexuality: sodomy was a capital offence so any direct documentation was potentially damning evidence. One has, therefore, to read between the lines; interpreting specific phrases or contexts, and risk drawing quite inaccurate inferences or conclusions. This represents a significant methodological hurdle for study and discussion in this area,

² See, for instance, George Rousseau, “The Pursuit of Homosexuality in the Eighteenth Century: ‘Utterly Confused Category’ and/or Rich Repository?” in Robert Purks Maccubbin, *’Tis Nature’s Fault: Unauthorized Sexuality During the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 133ff.

³ See David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

⁴ See, for instance, William Gibson and Joanne Begiato, *Sex and the Church in the Long Eighteenth Century* (London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2017).

so it should be said at the outset any conclusions are in general necessarily tentative, although it is the author’s opinion—and the intention of this article to indicate—that there is evidence that same-sex activity was not unknown among early Methodists.

The “first rise of Methodism”⁵

The Oxford English Dictionary gives the first use of the word “Methodist” in a London news-sheet of December 1732 where a letter was printed criticising a “Sect call’d Methodists” who “have occasioned no small Stir in Oxford.”⁶ Dated November 5, 1732, an anniversary inextricably linked with the threat of religious extremism as “gunpowder, treason and plot,”⁷ after general cautions about “wrong Notions of Religion,” it focused on “those Sons of Sorrow, whose Number receives daily Addition” and details their eccentricities: fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays, enthusiastic religious observance (“enthusiasm” being considered as dangerous fanaticism); over-scrupulous use of time; excessive self-denial. It suggested they follow the pattern of Origen who performed “a particular Operation on himself ... if they knew how to make a proper Incision, they would quickly follow him.”⁸ For those unfamiliar with the early church Fathers, Origen castrated himself.⁹

Both the writer (possibly an Oxford don¹⁰) and target are anonymous, but it is clear that it was directed at a small group of which John Wesley, as a Fellow of Lincoln College, was the most visible leader. The Methodist Church (as it now is) usually traces its origins to these pious religious enthusiasts meeting in Oxford University in the 1730s. The group attracted various scornful soubriquets: “Bible-moths,” “Sacramentarians,” “Supererogation men,”¹¹ as well as “Holy Club” and “Methodists.”¹²

⁵ John Wesley, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4 vols. (London: Paramore, 1781), 4:175.

⁶ *Fog’s Weekly Journal*, 9 December 1732.

⁷ On 5 November 1610, Guido Fawkes was discovered in the cellars under the Houses of Parliament, preparing to blow up the building during the opening of Parliament by King James VI & I. 5 November is still celebrated in Britain as “Guy Fawkes night.”

⁸ *Fog’s Weekly Journal*, 9 December 1732.

⁹ Origen of Alexandria, c.185–c.254, Christian theological author and ascetic.

¹⁰ A “don” is the usual term for a Fellow of a College.

¹¹ Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People called Methodists* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1995), 41.

¹² V. H. H. Green, *The Young Mr. Wesley* (London: Arnold, 1961), 160.

Neither of the two latter terms was coined for the group. “Holy Club” seems to have been in general use with a wider application for in 1713 a group of less than sober Oxford dons was satirized:

... When Holy Club dispers'd, the Members reel
To College, full of Liquor as of Zeal...¹³

The origin of “Methodist” is unclear, but it may have harked back to a group of first-century Greek doctors or a Puritan sect of the mid-seventeenth century.¹⁴ But it was this derogatory nickname which stuck, and which John Wesley, however much he disliked the jibe, eventually had to accept, later referring to his societies as “the people called Methodists.”¹⁵

The group had started in around 1728 with John Wesley’s younger brother Charles, then an undergraduate at Christ Church.¹⁶ Having spent his first year in dissipation, in his second year he became more serious about his religion and formed like-minded friendships, gathering a small circle around him. When John Wesley returned in late 1729 from a year spent assisting in his ageing father’s parish in rural Lincolnshire, about 150 miles from Oxford, he seems to have assumed a dominant role and put the group on a more organised footing.

The “Holy Club” was not a homogenous body under the Wesleys’ leadership, but a loose network of individuals across the University who followed a similar path of the pursuit of “primitive Christianity.” The idea of re-forming society and culture around “primitive” models, a return to a real or imagined golden age, had its roots in the Renaissance and was implicit in many aspects of eighteenth-century life.¹⁷

In 1730, at the suggestion of one of the student members, William Morgan, they started visiting in the two Oxford prisons: the Castle (the county prison for felons and debtors) and the Bocardo (the city prison over the medieval

¹³Quoted Graham Midgley, *University Life in Eighteenth Century Oxford* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 83.

¹⁴Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Mirror and Memory: Reflections on Early Methodism* (Nashville, Kingswood, 1989), 15–17.

¹⁵Cf. [J. Wesley], *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* (London: Paramore, 1780).

¹⁶John Wesley was an undergraduate at Christ Church 1720–1724, Fellow of Lincoln College 1726–1751. Charles Wesley was also an undergraduate at Christ Church 1726–1729, then a “Student” of Christ Church (similar to Fellow in other colleges).

¹⁷See Geordan Hammond, *John Wesley in America: Restoring Primitive Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), and Vaughan Hart, *Nicholas Hawksmoor; Rebuilding Ancient Wonders* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 140–42.

north gate), taking food, drink, medicines and reading matter to the prisoners. On Sundays they read prayers and took monthly services. They also went further in seeking legal assistance where it was needed, and attempted to redress what they considered injustice where they encountered it.

In 1732 in the Bocardo prison they had come across a young man named Blair, accused of sodomy, whom they considered was being victimised by his fellow prisoners.¹⁸ Writing in September 1732 to John Wesley, then away from Oxford, John Clayton (a Fellow of Brasenose College and leading member of the “Holy Club”¹⁹) noted that ‘Mr. Blair is still mightily persecuted in prison, tho’ we take as much pains as possible to quiet the people but all to no purpose.’²⁰ One prisoner “was determined never to come near Blair lest his indignation should rise at the sight of him.”²¹

Preparing for Blair’s trial, Clayton told Wesley he had “marshal’d his evidence ... to the best of my skill: And I cannot but think it is such as will convince any reasonable man of his innocence.”²² On 14 November Wesley “rose at four, went through his notes,” then (with Charles and a Mr. Crotchley) went to Thame, some 25 miles distant, where Blair’s case was to be tried.²³ Blair was found guilty, and fined 20 marks (neither a corporal nor capital sentence), though Wesley noted that costs were not given.²⁴ Presumably Blair languished in prison as when on Thursday 14 December 1732 Wesley spoke with the Vice-Chancellor, he recorded raising the case.²⁵

This public stance seems to have tipped the balance between the Methodists being tolerated and being castigated. They reaped the whirlwind from all sides for “countenancing a man whom the whole town think guilty of such an

¹⁸The Bocardo prison was situated over the north gate of Oxford, and was the town prison; the Castle being the county prison. Its most famous prisoners were Archbishop Cranmer and bishops Ridley and Latimer, held there before their executions in 1555. It was demolished in 1771.

¹⁹See Green, 173.

²⁰Letter from John Clayton to John Wesley, 4 September 1732 (Methodist Archive and Research Centre, John Rylands Library, Manchester, MA 1977/610/37; transcription in Nehemiah Curnock (ed.), *The Journal of John Wesley*, 8 vols. (London, Kelly: 1909–16), 8:275–8.

²¹Letter from John Clayton to John Wesley, 1 August 1732 (Methodist Archive and Research Centre, Manchester, MA 1977/610/36; transcription published in *WJW 25: Letters 1*, 331–34). Also in Curnock, *Journal*, 8:278–81.

²²Letter from John Clayton to John Wesley, 4 September 1732.

²³Green, 184.

²⁴Green, 184

²⁵Green, 172.

enormous crime,”²⁶ although the concern of Wesley and the other Oxford Methodists in this case was primarily to prove Blair innocent of the charge, it is noteworthy that they were also concerned that he be provided humane treatment. Such a hostile reaction was predictable in any event. However, just at that time the chaplain of Merton College of forty years standing, Rev. John Pointer, had been forced to leave:

... upon a complaint made by one of the Commoners whom he had got into his chamber, and after urging him to drink, would have offered some very indecent things to him. He has been long suspected of Sodomitical Practices, but could never be fairly convicted of them.²⁷

It was elsewhere commented that:

He has been guilty of this abominable vice many years ... but this and other Vices are become so common in England ... that they are not by many looked upon as sins.²⁸

A few years later the Warden of Wadham College, Robert Thistlethwaite, departed in not dissimilar circumstances, uncovering a web of same-sex relationships in that college,²⁹ and incidentally giving Oxonian rhymesters “Wadham/sodom” for years to come.³⁰ It should be remembered that Wesley and many members of the University including the Chaplain of Merton, and the Warden and Fellow of Wadham, were ordained clergymen. It was written of Oxford in 1715 that “among the chief men in some of the colleges sodomy

²⁶“Mr. Horn and I had rather a warm dispute about the Methodists taking the part of Blair who was found guilty of Sodomitical Practices and fined 20 marks by the Recorder. Whether the man is innocent or no they were not proper judges, it was better he should suffer than such a scandal given an countenancing a man whom the whole town think guilty of such an enormous crime. Whatever good design they pretend it was highly imprudent and has given the occasion of terrible reflections.” Wednesday, 12 November 1732, in C. L. S. Linnell (ed), *The Diaries of Thomas Wilson, D.D.* (London: S.P.C.K., 1964), 81.

²⁷Linnell, *The Diaries of Thomas Wilson*, Thursday, 30 November 1732.

²⁸Midgley, 88.

²⁹Midgley, 89–90.

³⁰“... Not Pembroke’s Warden; no, ’tis *W-dh-m/* The Word, I’faith, sounds much like *Sodom.*”

is very usual and ... it is dangerous sending a young man that is beautiful to Oxford.”³¹

While Thistlethwaite probably fled the country, since evidence had come to light of a string of offences and he was indicted to appear before the Assizes, in the event Pointer was merely disciplined by being rusticated from Merton College for some months. After this he returned to live in Oxford, although possibly he resigned his position. Blair incurred only a fine on conviction for sodomy. It may be that these indicate some laxity towards punishment for homosexual offences, in Oxford at least.³² Around 1751 Dr. William Lewis, a senior member of Christ Church, was censured by the Vice-Chancellor for his “indiscreet dealings with a choirboy,” although not committed for trial in the university courts.³³

Wesley and his Oxford friends’ eccentricities might also be tolerated - their excessive religious observance, their closed group intensity, their self denial and strict code of living reminiscent of some of the wayward Puritan sects of the previous century. Even their lowering themselves to undertake good works in the prisons and workhouse was not beyond the pale. But it seems that when they took up the advocacy of a man accused of homosexual crimes they crossed the boundary between bizarre but tolerable behaviour to the reprehensible.

The personal renunciation practiced by the Oxford “Holy Club,” taken to an extreme, had probably contributed to the death in August 1732 of one of Wesley’s pupils, William Morgan.³⁴ So John Wesley was already facing criticism across the University not only for his religious views, but for the pressure and influence he exerted as a tutor. Indeed, in the light of the prevailing atmosphere in Oxford, the Wesleys’ stance becomes all the more noteworthy. They must have been fully aware of the odium likely to be heaped upon them and yet he openly took up Blair’s case.³⁵

Moreover, this was at a time when John Wesley’s future was at a crossroads. Although long before he was famous, he had been a Fellow of Lincoln for six years. He was a promising young academic, who in time might become head of a College, or possibly a bishop. Had he been driven from Oxford he might (like

³¹ “Dudley Ryder’s 1715 diary,” quoted Tim Hitchcock, *English Sexualities 1700–1800* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 64.

³² Midgley, 88–9; Linnell, 83–4.

³³ In Wilfrid Prest, *William Blackstone* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 106.

³⁴ Green, 168–72.

³⁵ V. H. H. Green, “Religion in the Colleges 1715–1800” in L. S. Sutherland, L. G. Mitchell (eds.), *The History of the University of Oxford*, Vol. V: *The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 434.

his father) have found himself spending his life sidelined in an obscure country living. His brief curacy in Wroote³⁶ had shown him that the life of a country parson was not amenable: he had lived already in a bigger world. To court further animosity was a risky course of action.

Key texts on Wesley's Oxford years, such as V. H. H. Green, *The Young Mr Wesley* or Richard Heitzenrater, *Mirror and Memory*, fail to tell this narrative as a coherent whole. Prof. Heitzenrater's anticipated edition of Wesley's Oxford diaries may be more informative.³⁷ While the connection between the Blair episode and the *Fog's Journal* critique may not be made directly, it seems some link is probable, especially given the sexual innuendo about Origen and a further implication that such holy behaviour concealed immoral activity:

Others, tho' perhaps it may be too presumptuous, tax their Characters with Hypocrisy, and suppose them to use Religion only as a Veil to Vice....³⁸

A few weeks after the *Fog's Weekly Journal* letter Wesley was due to take his turn, as a College Fellow, in preaching the University sermon. On 1 January 1733, the feast of the Circumcision of Our Lord, in St Mary's Church he preached on "The Circumcision of the Heart."³⁹ Intentionally or otherwise he used the metaphor of genital mutilation with a different spin. In replying to accusations of devious and dubious practices, he maintained that what matters is an inward attitude of heart and soul and a clear conscience before God—very Puritan sentiments.

Sources for Religious and Queer Histories

Like so much of Wesley's and Methodism's past, the foregoing narrative is readily extracted from accessible sources. Methodism has generally constructed its history from an abundance, perhaps even a surfeit, of mostly internal documentary material, both published and manuscript, which because it was privileged within the tradition has had a high survival rate. Moreover it is

³⁶A small parish near Epworth, of which Samuel Wesley was also the incumbent. John Wesley served as curate here 1726–1729.

³⁷Richard P. Heitzenrater (ed.), John Wesley, *Oxford Diaries, 1725–1735*, vol. 32 in *WJW*, forthcoming.

³⁸*Fog's Weekly Journal*, 9 December 1732.

³⁹*WJW* 1: *Sermons I*, 398–414.

top-heavy. So a local history of even some small Methodist chapel in a remote village in Britain will typically open with an account of when Mr. Wesley or one of his preachers visited (often using Wesley’s published *Journal and Letters*) and lean heavily for its early accounts on the official “Minutes of Conference” or the denominational *Magazine*.

In contrast, those for the study of hidden histories may at points be limited, obscure or tangential,⁴⁰ although their recovery can shed contrasting and informative light on the subject. So there is ambiguity in studying (for instance) trials for sodomy. While we may interpret “sodomy” straightforwardly as meaning (usually same-sex) human anal intercourse,⁴¹ the reality is far from being so simple. It was generally construed as “unnatural sex”⁴² so applied, for instance, to the case of Mary Price, a young woman tried at the Old Bailey in 1704 for sodomy with a dog.⁴³

As to penetrative male sex, the law made no distinction between passive and active, receptor or inserter, “top” or “bottom.” Both were construed guilty of having participated in an “unnatural act” as the church viewed it and interpreted the Bible. So although one party might force sex on another, there was no redress at law: to have engaged in sodomitical sex was effectively tantamount to putting a rope around your neck, for sodomy was a capital offence—although capital sentences were not always given, and (since this was supposed to serve more as a deterrent) those that were, were not always executed.⁴⁴

Nor does the eighteenth-century vocabulary of the “mollies” readily translate into today’s gay-speak. “Gay” and “queer” were centuries from current usage, nor had “homosexual” entered the dictionary,⁴⁵ although “cruising” seems

⁴⁰ McCormick, 1997, is a useful anthology of sources dealing with eighteenth-century England.

⁴¹ Rictor Norton, *Mother Clap’s Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England 1700–1830* (Stroud: Chalford Press, 2006, 2nd edition), 206.

⁴² Gibson and Begiato, 195.

⁴³ 26 April 1704: “Mary Price, alias Hartington, of the Parish of Eling, was indicted for the Horrible and abominable Sin of Sodomy, committed with a Dog, on the 25th of March last.” oldbaileyonline.org (ref t17040426-42), accessed January 2013. She was acquitted after it transpired that the accusation was brought by her mother out of spite.

⁴⁴ See Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 296–98, also 155–62.

⁴⁵ The Oxford English Dictionary records the first use of “homosexual” as 1892. Cf. Natasha Frost, “How the 18th-Century Gay Bar Survived and Thrived in a Deadly Environment” (8 December 2017), <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/regency-gay>

to have a long history.⁴⁶ On the religious front, we should also bear in mind that not only “Methodist” but “evangelical,” “church,” and “chapel” are among words with changed meanings. While “Methodist” has come to equate to the denomination which looks back to Wesley, even into the nineteenth century it could simply indicate excessive religious zeal, or divergence from the national church. So the semantics need careful handling.

Moreover, contemporary ideas of sexuality as “orientation” have limited currency before the mid-nineteenth century. John Boswell has traced the church’s (and society’s) understanding and tolerance of homosexual practices in western Europe through the Christian era, from the Roman empire to medieval times.⁴⁷ In her important essay “The Homosexual Role,” Mary McIntosh challenged the conceptualisation of homosexuality, arguing that “the homosexual should be seen as playing a social role rather than as having a condition.”⁴⁸ She suggested that much research, in assuming that “homo-” and “hetero-” sexualities are fixed conditions (with “bi-sexuality” as an awkward hybrid), has been inconclusive because it is wrongly directed. One very short section “The development of the homosexual role in England”⁴⁹ explores evidence for the emergence of “the notion of exclusive homosexuality” in the eighteenth century.⁵⁰

This carefully argued and nuanced approach to understanding sexual behavior in a historic context seems not to have been taken due account of by subsequent scholars. Trumbach commented that “the avoidance of an exclusive homosexuality was in the early eighteenth century not yet the test of male reputation that the sodomy blackmail cases show it becoming after

[-bar-molly-houses](#) (accessed January 2020): “In 18th and early 19th-century Britain, ‘molly’ was a commonly used term for men who today might identify as gay, bisexual, or queer. Sometimes, this was a slur; sometimes, a more generally used noun, likely coming from *mollis*, the Latin for soft or effeminate.”

⁴⁶Norton, 116.

⁴⁷John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

⁴⁸Mary McIntosh, “The Homosexual Role” (first published in *Social Problems*, vol. 16/2 (Fall 1968), in Kenneth Plummer (ed.), *The Making of the Modern Homosexual* (London: Hutchinson, 1981), 33.

⁴⁹McIntosh, 36–38.

⁵⁰For a summary of this area see Jérôme Grosclaude, “From Bugger to Homosexual: The English Sodomite as Criminally Deviant (1533–1967),” available at <https://hal.uca.fr/hal-01272782> (accessed 21 November 2019).

1730,” concluding unequivocally that “by 1730 men were divided into those who were sodomites and those who were not.”⁵¹

However, in his summative *English Sexualities, 1700–1800*, Tim Hitchcock recognised that “The majority of eighteenth-century men who committed sodomy did not think of themselves other than as ordinary, everyday members of their society. They did not belong to a sub-culture, nor did they have a distinctive self-identity,”⁵² although his list for “further reading” does not include McIntosh. Rousseau perhaps goes furthest, proposing six categories wherein masculine sexual relationships in the eighteenth century might be understood.⁵³ He notes that the century was a “crucial turning point” in modern understandings of sexuality.

So in Georgian Britain, homosexual relations between men may be better characterized as expressions of a range of sexual activity rather than of fixed orientation—“a sodomite was identified by his acts, not by the nature which caused them.”⁵⁴ To take the scenario beyond the historic boundaries of this article, it can be argued that understanding homosexuality as orientation has arisen as a result of legislation (in Britain) both to criminalise deviant behavior (particularly the Offences Against The Person Act 1861 and the “Labouchere Amendment” of 1885) as well as its decriminalisation (the Sexual Offences Act 1967). In both respects, identifying “homosexuals” as a distinct category suited the parties involved.⁵⁵ But many current assumptions about being homosexual should only be applied with caution for the eighteenth century.

Transgressive male sexual behavior was not merely a social and legal matter but a theological and ethical one maintained by the church, based on Romans 1:27 and often endorsed popularly by society at large, both the elite and the mob.⁵⁶ In the case, for instance, of a Dutch sailor who in 1725 was tried onboard ship for having sexual relations with a boy, the chaplain argued that they should both be thrown overboard to the sharks. The ship’s captain was more merciful and only the sailor was put ashore on Ascension Island with

⁵¹ Randolph Trumbach, *Sex and the Gender Revolution* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 53, 428.

⁵² Hitchcock, 63.

⁵³ Rousseau, 138ff.

⁵⁴ John Chandos, *Boys Together: English Public Schools, 1800–1864* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 284, quoted in Rousseau, 165 (n51).

⁵⁵ See McIntosh, 32–33.

⁵⁶ “And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet.” (Authorized Version).

basic supplies, although he died of thirst and his body was found by the crew of a British ship the following year.⁵⁷ The Dutch carried on a particularly vicious pogrom of men suspected of sodomy during 1730–31⁵⁸—virtually contemporaneous with the incidence of transgressive male sexual occurrences in Oxford noted above.

In court much argument was often had over whether the crime committed was sodomy or merely attempted sodomy: the difference was between the gallows or (usually) the pillory, although the latter could prove fatal if the mob was hostile.⁵⁹ Penetrative sex was notoriously difficult to prove unless those involved were actually caught in the act. While court records can provide much hard detail evidence about the circumstances and nature of the homosexual sub-culture of the England of early Methodism, they still need to be read with care.

The religious proscription of homosexual activity meant that this was an unmentionable subject,⁶⁰ so in other sources such as early Methodist documents it has to be deduced by inference. Terms such as “un-natural act” or “enormous crime” are generally construed as indicating sodomy given their context, often emphasizing that it is a crime against nature. The clearest indication is to the biblical injunction of Romans 1:27.⁶¹ But the character of hidden histories often lies in the interpretation of surmise. If publications, such as newspapers, must be decoded for innuendo, personal papers may be even more secretive. Written, let alone published, accounts by active participants are very rare—leaving aside papers left by elite individuals such as Lord Hervey or William Beckford—they were potentially hugely incriminating. To keep a journal or write a love-letter, even in code, might be to pen your own death warrant. This is in marked contrast with the journal-keeping and published conversion and other religious narratives which are such a feature of early Methodism.

Another source of evidence comes from the activities of the crusading Society for the Reformation of Manners (S.R.M.). Formed in 1690, riding a tide

⁵⁷Mawson (Capt.), *The Just Vengeance of Heaven Exemplify'd...* (London: Jenkins, c.1730).

⁵⁸Norton, 207–208; Rousseau, 154

⁵⁹See, for instance, Ian McCormick, *Secret Sexualities, A Sourcebook of 17th and 18th Century Writing* (London, New York: Routledge, 1997), 115.

⁶⁰“...that most horrid, detestable, and sodomitical crime, (not among Christians named) called Buggery....” quoted McCormick, 109.

⁶¹Rousseau, 158, cites such a case.

of Protestant moralising which followed the Glorious Revolution, the S.R.M. set out to suppress bawdy houses, prostitution and other social evils in London and throughout the country, in parallel to other religious societies such as the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.). Its strategy was to gather vigilante intelligence about people and places where sexual immorality was suspected, collaborating with magistrates and constables, following which prosecutions were brought. Its most prominent case was the February 1726 raids on London “molly houses,” most notably Margaret Clap’s in Holborn, and subsequent prosecutions.⁶²

The S.R.M. techniques also involved entrapment. It gleefully trumpeted its moral victories through the publication of black-lists which offer a further source for the existence of subcultures deviant from prevailing sexual and social mores. Public weariness with the rather sanctimonious activities and attitudes of the Society led to its decline and demise in 1738, although it was reconstituted twenty years later in a less extreme form. John Wesley’s 1763 charity sermon for the Society praised its opposition to “sabbath-breaking... profane swearing... common prostitutes,” but made no mention of unnatural crimes.⁶³

In *Sex and the Church in the Long Eighteenth Century*, William Gibson and Joanne Begiato have very usefully summarized and assessed discussions and ambiguities around this area, pointing also to the grey area between homosocial male friendships and sexual relationships—it was, for instance, quite common for men to share a bed.⁶⁴ This theme is explored in an American context by Richard Godbeer who draws attention to Methodists’ relationship to the divine being described in these terms but also the intimacy between Methodists, and particularly travelling preachers.⁶⁵ Glen O’Brien has suggested that George Whitefield “was likely to have been same-sex attracted.”⁶⁶

⁶²Norton, 87ff.

⁶³Sermon preached before the Society for Reformation of Manners on Sunday, January 30, 1763 at the Chapel in West-Street, Seven-Dials, text “Who will rise up with me against the wicked” Ps. 94:16. In *WJW 2: Sermons II*, 299–323.

⁶⁴Gibson and Begiato, esp. 195ff and 215–21.

⁶⁵Richard Godbeer, *The Overflowing of Friendship: Love between Men and the Creation of the American Republic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), esp. 83ff.

⁶⁶Glen O’Brien, “‘A Divine Attraction Between Your Soul and Mine’: George Whitefield and Same-Sex Affection in 18th-Century Methodism,” *Pacifica* 30:2 (2017): 177–92. George Whitefield (1714–1769) was the most popular preacher of the time.

Sodomites and Methodists

Henry Abelove's *The Evangelist of Desire* has been justifiably criticised for its infidelity to well-established sources, although it contains some worthwhile insights.⁶⁷ Abelove posited that in early Methodism, and focally in the person and ministry of John Wesley, religious experience was sexually supercharged.⁶⁸ This raises the topic of the critical interaction between spirituality and emotion—"enthusiasm"—which was such a controversial factor in eighteenth-century religion. Moreover, in terms of this article, Abelove's conclusion to a brief treatment of same-sex eroticism and the 1732 Blair episode in Oxford, was that "there is virtually no verbal evidence of sodomy in any of the early Methodists' confessional diaries, journals or letters...."⁶⁹ Although fragmentary, there are, however, scattered indications.

The Georgian church in general was not immune from homo-sexual activity. The most celebrated case, in the closing years of Hanoverian Britain, was that of the Bishop of Clogher who in 1822 was caught *in flagrante delicto* with a young guardsman in the back room of a London tavern.⁷⁰ More relevant to Methodism is the case of John Church, a Whitefieldite preacher and protégé of Jeremiah Garrett (an evangelical minister with links to Wesley).⁷¹ Church became minister of an Independent Chapel in Banbury, Oxfordshire, where his sexual reputation risked the very survival of the congregation and his pastorate was terminated. He then ministered at the Obelisk Chapel in south London where he was a popular preacher, although his dalliances with younger men were evidently an open secret. He also apparently "officiated" at molly marriages. In 1817 he was imprisoned for attempted sodomy, although members of his congregation ensured he was cared for in prison and he returned in some triumph to his pulpit.⁷²

Some evidence survives of Wesley's itinerant preachers having homosexual leanings, although sparse and fragmentary, and needing careful interpretation.

⁶⁷ Henry Abelove, *The Evangelist of Desire: John Wesley and the Methodists* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990). See the review by Richard P. Heitzenrater in *Methodist History* 30 (January 1992):118–20.

⁶⁸ Abelove, *passim*.

⁶⁹ Abelove, 67.

⁷⁰ Garrett had been in the Lock Hospital for treatment for sexually-transmitted diseases, later a member of Lady Huntingdon's Connexion, and, according to Norton, a "notorious Sodomite." Norton, 372ff.

⁷¹ Norton, 355.

⁷² Norton, 363.

John Lenton’s detailed study, *John Wesley’s Preachers*, surveys those who withdrew or were expelled from the itinerant ministry, including cases of immoral behaviour. Wesley’s travelling (“itinerant”) preachers (as opposed to “local” preachers) were paid and were under the discipline of Wesley and the annual conference. Lenton notes that “leaving the itinerancy was something which Wesley... did not want publicized... Wesley and Conference after him much preferred it if men left without arguing and no publicity was aroused.”⁷³ Although he notes that thirteen preachers were expelled for immorality, he is specific neither about their misdeeds nor identity. So it becomes more problematic to identify instances such as homosexual actions which might have precipitated expulsion, as the documentation is opaque.

Late in the century several preachers parted from Wesley’s connexion under circumstances which bear interpretation as homosexual misdemeanours. James Perfect left the ministry in 1785: “...we have expelled him out of our Connexion, not for vanity and self-sufficiency (shocking as it was), but for repeated acts of immodesty such as I could not name to a woman.”⁷⁴ Andrew Inglis was expelled in 1793 for a “shocking crime,”⁷⁵ and William Dieuaide in 1797 for “reprehensible acts.”⁷⁶ Clearest is the case of Nathaniel Ward who left Wesley in 1784–85, ostensibly over financial irregularities, and probably jumping before he was pushed,⁷⁷ to join Lady Huntingdon’s Connexion. However, the Countess later instigated enquiries and was told:

He has in Time past, too near approached a Line of Conduct, unnatural in itself and too indelicate to mention. Rom.1.27.... Mr Ward had been very acceptable, and much respected, in Mr W—’s Connection. But being suspected in a certain Particular, he had been admonish’d; acknowledg’d his Error; and promis’d future

⁷³John Lenton, *John Wesley’s Preachers* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), 291, 297.

⁷⁴John Wesley to Sarah Baker, 30 July 1785, in John Telford (ed.), *The Letters of John Wesley* 8 vols. (London: Epworth, 1931), 8:275.

⁷⁵John C. Bowmer and John A. Vickers (eds.), *The Letters of John Pawson*, 3 vols. (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, for World Methodist Historical Society, 1994), 1:149, 152n.

⁷⁶Telford, *Letters*, 8:68. See Mattieu Lelievre, *Histoire du Methodisme dans les Iles de la Manche* (Paris: Librairie Évangélique; Londres: Theophilus Woolmer, 1885), 394: “Le silence s’est fait sur cet home, qui dut sortir du ministère pour des actes reprehensible”. Both Inglis and Dieuaide had sons who remained at Kingswood School, established by Wesley for the sons of preachers.

⁷⁷See Lenton, 297.

Amendment. In this, however, he fail'd; the consequence of which was, he was dismissed the Connection.⁷⁸

Then, early in the nineteenth century another preacher was expelled, again accused of embezzlement. John Kingston had been accepted as a preacher in 1791, the year of Wesley's death. He served in the Caribbean for several years, then in Cornwall where in 1800 he married Jane Branwell of Penzance (an aunt to the Brontë sisters). However, in 1807 he was charged with the theft of funds, against which he gave an account, but also of "improper behavior towards two young men, the Circumstances of which must be explained to the Conference ... Mr. Kingston's conduct in this matter has been very vile: that he shall be suspended to the Conference."⁷⁹

By then he and his family had evidently migrated to the U.S.A., where he successfully established himself as a publisher, including Methodist works. In 1808 his father-in-law Thomas Branwell died, leaving money to Jane, which was not to be accessible to John Kingston. She, with their youngest daughter, returned to England in 1809. Kingston himself revisited England briefly in 1818, when there was some attempt, though largely unsuccessful, to reconcile the divided family. Kingston probably died in 1824, in New York. While the matter of 'improper behavior towards two young men' straightforwardly suggests sexual misconduct, the causes and circumstances of his migration and failed marriage may be entirely unrelated.

In 1772 James Glazebrook, one of the Countess of Huntingdon's preachers who had studied at her College at Trefeca, Wales, wrote to her about another former student William Ellis. Although the language is strongly suggestive, it is not totally clear whether or not this was a same-sex episode: certainly it was scandalous.

I fear (Ellis) has been quite as imprudent as he was in the affair at the College. But I doubt this is not all I know not whether your Ladyship has well consider'd what was poor Ellis's besetting evil, before he came to college. The point is too delicate for me to touch upon. However this I can say, that as 4 years experience in the world has not

⁷⁸Thomas Young to Lady Huntingdon, 11 April 1791 (Cheshunt Archive, Westminster College, Cambridge).

⁷⁹Minutes of a meeting of the preachers in the Birmingham District held July 1, 1807. I am grateful to Melissa Hardie of the Hypatia Trust for drawing my attention to this incident.

cured him, if at all mended him, it must be very dangerous trusting him....⁸⁰

Ten years later the Countess had to dismiss “one of the leading laymen in her main London chapel”:

As a member of the committee, Morris Hughes held power of attorney for Lady Huntingdon and was superintendent of the chapel society which met weekly. Claiming that he had been “made free,” Hughes “exposed his person” to a chimney-sweep, a baker, a plumber and a cabinet-maker....⁸¹

In 1755 a case of sodomy was brought against Charles Bradbury, a “methodist preacher.” The plaintiff was an apprentice who alleged that Bradbury had committed sodomy with him a number of times, in the chapel where he preached and elsewhere. Bradbury was eventually found not guilty largely (one suspects) because the evidence of a young apprentice was discounted against that of a respectable master and preacher.⁸² Yet Bradbury was not an itinerant, and probably not one of Wesley’s local preachers: the location and circumstances suggest he was possibly a Dissenter.⁸³

In terms of ordinary members of Methodist “societies,” there is negligible solid evidence. Comprehensive membership lists are a rare survival, and only list names, so identity may be uncertain, and of little relevance when set against Court records or the blacklists of the S.R.M. However, both Norton and Anderson cite the case of one Mary Hamilton, born c.1721, published by Henry Fielding in “The Female Husband.” In her teens she was converted to

⁸⁰James Glazebrook to Lady Huntingdon, 12 August 1772 (ms. Cheshunt Archive, Cambridge).

⁸¹Spa Fields Chapel Minutes, 10, 13 August 1782. Cited Boyd Stanley Schlenker, *Queen of the Methodists, The Countess of Huntingdon and the Eighteenth-Century Crisis of Faith and Society* (Durham: Durham Academic Press, 1997), 139.

⁸²10 September 1755: “Charles Bradbury was indicted, for that he, not having the fear of God before his eyes, but being mov’d and seduc’d by the instigation of the devil, on James Hearne, feloniously did make an assault, and the said James Hearne, did carnally know, and with him, the said James, did commit that detestable crime not fit to be named in a christian country, called sodomy, April 14.” oldbaileyonline.org (ref t17550910-42), accessed January 2013. See also Trumbach, 60.

⁸³“Dissenters” compassed those who refused to conform to the established church, met in “independent” congregations and were barred from public office.

both Methodism and lesbianism by her neighbour Anne Johnson,⁸⁴ with whom she went to live in Bristol. Cross-dressed as a man, she subsequently courted and married first a widow in Dublin (where “she became a Methodist teacher”), then a young lady in Devon and another in Somerset. Eventually brought to trial, revelling in her notoriety, she was prosecuted under the vagrancy act for “false and deceitful practices,” it being difficult to find a charge otherwise which covered her case.⁸⁵ Here again, what was meant by “Methodist” is uncertain.

Some of Wesley’s societies are likely not to have been in ignorance of a homosexual sub-culture. The area of “moorland” north of the city had long been a dumping ground for the city’s detritus, including the stone from Old St. Pauls after the Great Fire. Moorfields, “that Coney Island of the eighteenth century,”⁸⁶ was a gathering space for other groups existing on the margins of society (such as Grub Street). Wesley’s London headquarters at the Foundery⁸⁷ was thus on the edge of the capital’s main cruising area:

...in London, one area was so popular with the mollies that it became virtually synonymous with homosexuality: Moorfields. ... By the early eighteenth century a path in Upper-Moorfields, by the side of the Wall that separated the Upper-field from the Middle-field, acquired the name ‘The Sodomites Walk.’⁸⁸

In Bristol, too, in the 1730s there was an identifiable molly culture around St. James and the Horsefair, an area that was also the focus of Methodist

⁸⁴An identification with the Methodist Elizabeth Johnson is unlikely although not impossible. See [Elizabeth Ritchie], *An Account of Miss Elizabeth Johnson, Well Known in the City of Bristol for more than Half a Century* (Dublin: Dugdale, 1799).

⁸⁵Norton, 407–12; Misty Anderson, *Imagining Methodism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012), 70–84, 92–99.

⁸⁶Halford E. Lubbock and Paul Hutchinson, *The Story of Methodism* (New York and Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1926), 3. John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, was known as “the Moor-Fields author” for his 1684 “Sodom, or the Quintessence of Debauchery” (quoted Norton, 127). McCormick, 71, cites a case of entrapment in Moorfields in 1726.

⁸⁷A ruined armaments factory which Wesley leased from 1739 and repaired and adapted as a preaching house, living quarters, book depot and for other functions.

⁸⁸Norton, 125. This is in present-day Finsbury Square.

activity.⁸⁹ As “enthusiasts,” the Methodist movement as a whole was regarded by many as socially transgressive in the Augustan age of “polite society” threatening, as it did, the integrity of the national church. So Methodists occupied coterminous social space with other marginalized groupings. This proximity to the areas of molly activity may signal no more than that these low areas of town functioned both as the seat of the vices against which the Methodists were urging people to flee from the wrath to come, and also as a sanctuary for the ecclesiastically dispossessed.

A further link between Methodists (considered broadly) and mollies is that both might be viewed as part of the Catholic threat to national identity. At the time of Bonnie Prince Charlie’s invasion in 1745 Wesley needed to distance himself publicly from Jacobitism but the suspicion of Methodists being Jesuit fifth-columnists was not so quickly dispelled.⁹⁰ Although the direct possibility of an invasion from Catholic Europe had otherwise largely passed, the religio-political challenge remained, part of which was the notion that Catholic masculinity was somehow effete and puny.⁹¹ Homosexuality was also, perhaps because of the habits of classical Greece, viewed as a southern European characteristic (“the Italian menace”⁹²), fuelling justification for persecution of mollies.⁹³ Methodism, Wesley and ideas about gender identity, particularly masculinity, is another area for exploration.⁹⁴



⁸⁹Wesley’s “New Room” in the Horsefair, Bristol, is the oldest surviving Methodist building in the world (1739).

⁹⁰Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast, John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth, 1989), 370ff.

⁹¹See Jeremy Gregory, “Homo Religiosus: Masculinity and Religion in the Long Eighteenth Century” in Tim Hitchcock and Michelle Cohen (eds.), *English Masculinities 1660–1800* (London, New York: Longman, 1999), 85–110.

⁹²Rousseau, 143.

⁹³Gregory, 109–110, also Norton, 300ff; Philip Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society, Britain, 1660–1800* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), 132–35.

⁹⁴For increasing masculinity in depictions of Wesley see Peter Forsaith, *Image, Identity and John Wesley: A Study in Portraiture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 44.

Conclusions

John Wesley

Looking first, and at greatest length, at John Wesley, it is the vicissitudes of his relationships with women which have attracted scholarly and popular writers.⁹⁵ He fled from Georgia after a mangled love-tangle; his brother Charles intervened to prevent him marrying the one person with whom (in retrospect) he might have found happiness, and his eventual marriage to a monied widow was a disaster.⁹⁶ Some have pointed to how, having “a discerning eye for female company,”⁹⁷ Wesley cultivated the close friendship of younger women, particularly as an older man.⁹⁸

As to his sexuality, there is no realistic indication that he experienced same-sex attraction. Only the vituperative Augustus Montague Toplady suggested such: in a 1771 polemic he alleged that Wesley “once had a boil on a part that shall be nameless and which ... was ripened and cured by an application of *shoe-maker’s wax* ...”—probably meant to suggest that he had had a homosexual relationship with one of his preachers, the ex-cobbler Thomas Olivers.⁹⁹ This isolated and obtuse comment can reasonably be discounted.

Wesley was one of the most prolific writers, editors and publishers in eighteenth-century Britain. In publications, as in his preaching, he was insistent about the offer of free grace, and equally the ethical and moral demands of religion. Yet only in a few places do his writings refer to sexual transgressions. In *Thoughts on the Sin of Onan* (i.e., masturbation),¹⁰⁰ which although largely an abridgement and translation of another work might be expected to pillory anything other than marital, reproductive sex, such issues as same-sex activity are not mentioned. On Romans 1:27 his *Notes on the New Testament* comment

⁹⁵ See, for instance, Roy Hattersley, *A Brand from the Burning: The Life of John Wesley* (London: Little, Brown, 2002); G. Elsie Harrison, *Son to Susanna: The Private Life of John Wesley* (London: Ivor Nicholson and Watson, 1937).

⁹⁶ Rack, 257–67; Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984, 2 vols), 1:174–94.

⁹⁷ Green, in Sutherland and Mitchell, 439.

⁹⁸ See John Banks, “Nancy, Nancy” (Leeds: Penwork, 1984), 1–9; Rack, 257–69.

⁹⁹ *Gospel Magazine* 1771/2, cited George Lawton, *Within the Rock of Ages, the Life and Work of Augustus Montague Toplady* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1983), 156.

¹⁰⁰ Anon. [John Wesley], *Thoughts on the Sin of Onan: Chiefly Extracted from a Late Writer* (n.p., 1767), translated from (Samuel Auguste André David) Tissot, *L’Onanisme* (Chapuz: Lausanne, 1764). In *WJW* 32: *Oxford Diaries*, 365–88. See also Rousseau, 140.

that “their Idolatry: Being punished with that unnatural Lust, which was as horrible a dishonor to the Body, as their Idolatry was to GOD”—hardly a clear condemnation.¹⁰¹ For another key verse, 1 Corinthians 6:9, which explicitly implies anal sex, Wesley was also more general, “ ... we are never secure from the greatest Sins, till we guard against ... the least...”¹⁰² Indeed, this latter might be construed as indicating empathy for those who succumb to temptations.

Elsewhere in Wesley’s publications are two other condemnatory mentions of sodomy: both have political, as well as religious, connotations and put sodomy alongside other moral transgressions. Both need to be read in their wider context and both have xenophobic overtones.

In late 1745 England was in a state of panic. The Pretender’s army was in Scotland and marching south: the country was braced for invasion and war. That October Wesley published a pamphlet *A Word in Season*.¹⁰³ The style, it has to be said, was unlike his usual measured and logical prose. The threat of conquest, it states, was clearly rooted in England’s corruption and wickedness:

4. How dreadful then is the Condition wherein we stand? On the very Brink of utter Destruction! But why are we thus? ... Because of our SINS; ... *Sabbath-breaking... Thefts, Cheating, Fraud, Extortion; ... Robberies, Sodomies and Murders* (which, with a thousand unnamed Villainies are common to us and our Neighbour *Christians of Holland, France and Germany...*¹⁰⁴

In the event, “Bonnie Prince Charlie” was halted almost a hundred miles from London, and defeated at Culloden the following spring. But suspicion of Methodists being closet Catholics, in league with the rebels, was not so easily dispersed: Wesley overplayed his loyalist rhetoric deliberately.

Then, nearly forty years later, he wrote in his *Journal*:

... on the road I read over Voltaire’s “Memoirs of himself”.... But even his character is less horrid than that of his royal hero! Surely so unnatural a brute never disgraced a throne before! ... A monster that made it a fixed rule to let no woman and no priest enter his palace,

¹⁰¹John Wesley, *Notes on the New Testament* (London: William Bowyer, 1755), 385.

¹⁰²Wesley, *Notes on the New Testament*, 435.

¹⁰³John Wesley, *A Word in Season; or, Advice to an Englishman* (Bristol: Strahan, 1745). See *Journal*, 15 October 1745, *WJW* 20: *Journal and Diaries III*, 95.

¹⁰⁴Wesley, *A Word in Season*, 4–5.

that not only gloried in the constant practice of sodomy himself, but made it free for all his subjects!¹⁰⁵

A great deal might be written of this extract, about Voltaire, his “Memoirs” as well as about the “royal hero,” Frederick the Great of Prussia (1712–86, king from 1740), in whose court Voltaire had served in the 1750s but left acrimoniously. Both were rationalist free-thinkers, sceptical about religion: Wesley would be utterly opposed to both.

“... these [Wesley’s] allegations ... simply parroted by other writers, are in the last degree unlikely to be true.”¹⁰⁶ What matters here, however contentious Wesley’s comment, is that he identified sodomy with misogyny and irreligion. In the wider context, this was a time of governmental and even monarchical uncertainty following the loss of the American colonies.¹⁰⁷ Further, this section of Wesley’s *Journal* was published in early 1789, months before the French revolution, and doubtless re-edited for publication. So, as in 1745, there are accompanying reasons behind the denunciation.

Both of these excerpts, while condemning sodomy, need to be read against the context in which they appeared. While he could not have done other than denounce transgressive male sexuality, when these two comments by John Wesley are read in the broader historical context, one is struck that they are less frequent and less strident than might be expected. What may be inferred is that John Wesley seems to have shown at least some hints of tolerance towards same-sex inclinations. His attitude in Oxford in 1732–33, and later instances of his dealings with his preachers, at the least suggests some pliability. Interestingly, Gibson and Begiato explore the eighteenth-century church’s equivocation over homosexuality, paradoxically both condemnatory and collusive.¹⁰⁸ Might it be that Wesley’s position is best interpreted within that apposition?

The Methodists

Turning, second, to early Methodism and its people, there are some, though few, surviving narratives to suggest that there were individual homosexual

¹⁰⁵ *Journal*, 26 August 1784, *WJW 23: Journal and Diaries VI*, 328–29.

¹⁰⁶ G.B. Volz, “Friedrich der Grosse und seine sittlichen Anklage,” in *Forshungen zur Brandenburgischen und Preussischen Geschichte* 6 (1928):1–37; quoted *WJW 23: Journal and Diaries VI*, 328, n26.

¹⁰⁷ See Jeremy Black, *George III, America’s Last King* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2006), 242 ff.

¹⁰⁸ Gibson and Begiato, 195ff.

cases as well as some interface between Methodists (and evangelicals more generally) and homosexual sub-cultures in England; in London and elsewhere. Such narratives need to be investigated more closely and set into their context. But they suggest that homosexuality was not entirely unknown among early Methodists.

Understanding of the slipperiness of some sources, and the malleability of the history constructed from them, needs to be given due weight. Both hegemonic official documents (Wesley's publications or court records) carry in one direction, surreptitious, and often veiled, references move in another. These influence the grounds on which debate is engaged. So if historical insights are to contribute to the church's ongoing debates on gay issues, not only should these factors be taken into account but it needs to be recognized that there are several debates, and that they also take place beyond the church. How adequately can Methodist history and queer history engage fruitfully with each other? The dialogue is complicated by methodological distinctions and terminological differences but perhaps Methodist history could benefit from hearing voices from the margins. It has to be a two-way process. If this article has indicated that as human sexuality is multifarious, so is Methodism: it may have offered a contribution to debates in both arenas.

To conclude with a somewhat contrasting male sexual transgression: in his anthology *Early Methodist Life and Spirituality*, Lester Ruth cites the case of an American Methodist preacher, Jeremiah Minter. Around the time of the death of John Wesley he appears to have emulated Origen.¹⁰⁹ His purpose in self-castration was to ensure the innocence of his relationship with one Sarah Jones. But thirteen years afterwards he could still not understand why he had been excluded from the Methodist society and sacraments for following the biblical injunction *to make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake*.¹¹⁰ The interface between Christian life and human sexuality is complex, as was the sexual world of early Methodism: historians have roles to play in current debates.

¹⁰⁹ *Fog's Weekly Journal*, 9 December 1732.

¹¹⁰ Jeremiah Minter, *Devout Letters* (Alexandria: Snowden, 1804), 49; quoted in Lester Ruth, *Early Methodist Life and Spirituality* (Nashville: Kingswood, 2005), 283. Cf. Matthew 19:12 (Authorized Version). See also Cynthia Lynn Lyerly “A Tale of Two Patriarchs; or, How a Eunuch and a Wife Created a Family in the Church,” *Journal of Family History* 28/4 (October 2003): 490–509.

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