

Reviews

A BRAND FROM THE BURNING: The Life of John Wesley

by Roy Hattersley London: Abacus, 2004. 405 pages \$24.95

Roy Hattersley's biographical study of Wesley deserves a review of both subject and author. The first task is to claim Hattersley's own stated fascination with Wesley's "weaknesses". On-line at "Meet the Author.com" Hattersley describes Wesley as "a man with a deeply disturbed personal life but a great sense of mission who believed in his own destiny; and who not only founded a new church and contributed to a 'second Reformation', but came to influence Britain and the world in ways he could not have imagined." The author's captivation with Wesley's disturbed personal life supercedes his attention to anything else in the legacy.

Hattersley was born in 1932 and raised in industrial Yorkshire, and is now retired after a distinguished season as a British Member of Parliament, including service for a dozen years as Deputy House leader of the Labour Party. Furthermore, Hattersley boasts an impressive publishing resume of biographical

reflections, social commentaries and other historical pieces.

Many other fine biographies on John Wesley can be found on book shelves, yet Hattersley's is valuable for its detailed attention to Wesley's profound influence upon modern democratic society, not to mention the establishment of the world-wide Methodist movement and Wesley's fascinating character.

The title, *A Brand from the Burning*, of course, points to six-year-old John's narrow escape from the burning family parsonage at Epworth. Employing tools of contemporary psycho-social analysis, Hattersley begins his review of Wesley's long life by noting the influence of his parents, "an ill-matched couple". We are introduced to father Samuel, preoccupied by church "manners", who shrinks in significance beside mother Susanna and her considerable intellect.

A detailed account of Wesley's personal development unfolds. We meet a young man graced by phenomenal physical energy, convinced that he must do God's work. We learn how the spiritual resources of Christianity were made readily available to the working classes of 18th Century Britain. "His genius was the way in which he matched organization to doctrine and made both reflect the needs of the essentially naive men and

women who became his followers....Holy Communion was gradually accepted not just as an occasion of the renewal of faith but – in order to meet the needs of simple Christians who wanted to mark the beginning of their compact with God – as the actual occasion of conversion” (143).

Hattersley draws detailed evidence from journals and Wesley’s personal correspondence to describe his firm hand upon the pastoral behaviour of many colleagues and the personal actions of family members — who all stepped forward and joined the British Methodist movement. Hattersley barely mentions the legendary horseback excursions or Wesley’s abundantly productive record as an outdoor preacher. Rather, the biographer celebrates Wesley’s spirited organizational energy but only while uncovering those peculiar interests in the paranormal and in adoring women.

Hattersley’s focus is strangely contagious, engaging the reader as Wesley’s entire adult life is scrutinized with considerable analytical skill. While it is pointless to defend Wesley’s ambivalent behaviour towards women, it is unfair to place 21st Century sensibilities about emotional irresponsibility upon him. Hattersley’s detailed analysis of Wesley’s correspondence with a

series of young women makes for compelling reading (chapter 14 for example) but falls short of any useful application. Wesley was hardly the first charismatic character to be confused about the public effects of his personality. Ancient literature including holy Scripture, reveals the subtle yet powerful connections between spirituality and sexuality. Our contemporary media often pays attention to the sexual preoccupations of powerful politicians and celebrities. So Wesley was a dynamic character, and many women were drawn to him. By naming Wesley’s (troubled) dilemmas, Hattersley might have led us deeper into the delicate territory of our human vulnerabilities: how might individuals with true charisma live faithfully? It is noteworthy that at age 48, Wesley actually “plunged into a marriage (with Mary Vazeille) which began in acrimony and ended in disaster” (243) Hattersley’s claim that “He remained, into old age, dangerously susceptible to every woman who seemed to admire him” (296) is provocative, but ought not to imply that Wesley should have been as enlightened as a contemporary United Church ordinand.

It is not clear whether Hattersley cares much for the troubled Christian leader he chastises, but he

deserves commendation for recognizing the value of Wesley's legacy. "Wesley's genius was not the discovery of a new religious idea. It was the mobilization of the men and women who shared the beliefs of the Connexion which he led" (300). It feels strange to recommend a book for the very reason it must be criticized. It focusses excessive attention upon Wesley's personal character, yet still provides us with a valuable spiritual/political report. Finally, with the author, we celebrate how "Methodism encouraged the working poor to be ambitious, industrious and respectable – the qualities which made them the indispensable backbone of industrial and imperial Britain" (410).

– Paul Campbell

RELIGION AND ETHNICITY IN CANADA

**Edited by Paul Bramadat
and David Seljak.**

**Toronto: Pearson Education
Canada Ltd., 2005.**

**Pp. xii + 252. Paperback ,
\$47.95.**

Religious and ethnic diversity have increased in Canada over the past 50 years. But little attention has

been given to the interaction between the two and their growing implications for public life. Also, many Canadians know little about the presence of religions other than Christianity in Canadian society. This book seeks to redress this. Part I studies six minority religious traditions that have a significant presence in Canada: Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Chinese religion, Judaism and Islam. Part II looks at the implications of this diversity for public policy in terms of immigration, education, and health care. It concludes with a helpful chart giving an overview of the demographics of religious identification in Canada. The book is part of a projected series of three volumes. The other two will study ethnicity within Christian communities and First Nations communities.

Each of the six chapters in Part I offers an introduction to the religion in question, a history of its presence in Canada, and an analysis of how it relates to particular ethnic groups. These chapters offer an interesting account of how these religions have adapted to Canadian life. They show how they are helping shape Canadian contexts, and how the contexts are shaping the local forms of these religions. The result is a very helpful introduction and overview to the history and current state of these