Francis Asbury came to America in 1771 with high hopes, and by the end of 1776 there was much that he could feel good about. A revival in the South had swept thousands of new believers into the fold, offsetting the challenges that the impending revolution would undoubtedly present. ‘God is at work in this part of the country; and my soul catches the holy fire already’, he wrote (F. Asbury 1958: i. 166) when he first entered the Brunswick circuit, the heart of the revival in southern Virginia and North Carolina, in October 1775. By January 1776 he could write that ‘Virginia pleases me in preference to all other places where I have been’ (ibid. 178). Despite its raucous emotionalism, the revival was exactly what he had been praying and working for since his arrival in America.

Others were not so sure. Thomas Rankin, Wesley’s senior preacher in America since 1773, had joined with Asbury to enforce the discipline of the class meeting and love feast and extend circuit preaching beyond the cities. Yet when Rankin journeyed through Virginia during the summer of 1776 he was dismayed by the emotionalism of southern worship. At a conference of the preachers soon afterward, Rankin launched into a tirade against ‘the spirit of the Americans’, criticizing the preachers for allowing ‘noise’ and ‘wild enthusiasm’ in their meetings and for becoming ‘infected with it’ themselves. As he listened, Asbury ‘became alarmed, and deemed it absolutely necessary that a stop should be put to the debate’,
according to Thomas Ware, who witnessed the event. Jumping up, Asbury
across the room and said, 'I thought,—I thought,—I thought,' to which
asked, 'pray...what did you thought?' [sic] 'I thought I saw a mouse!' ex-
Asbury. This joke 'electrified' the preachers, and in the ensuing laughter
realized that he had lost. The result was 'alike gratifying to the preachers
and mortifying to the person concerned [Rankin]'; according to Ware (W
102; 1840: 252–3). Asbury's timing must have been prefect to get such a hit
from 'I thought I saw a mouse!' But the deeper significance of this story is
with his understanding of the intersection of faith and culture.

UPBRINGING AND EARLY CAREER

Francis Asbury was born about 20 August 1745 in a cottage in the
Handsworth, Staffordshire, about four miles outside Birmingham. His
were Joseph Asbury and Elizabeth Rogers Asbury, known as Eliza. Jos
farm labourer and gardener employed by two wealthy families in the par
Francis was still quite young the family moved to a cottage in nearby C
which at the time was attached to a brewery and is still standing. In all
Joseph worked for the brewery and the cottage was part of his con
(Hallam 2003: 2–4). By age 6 Asbury could read the Bible, and he a
charity school at Sneal's Green, about a quarter of a mile from the family
But, as Asbury later remembered, the schoolmaster was 'a great churl, a
beat me cruelly' (F. Asbury 1958: i. 721). His severity filled Asbury
horrible dread, that with me anything was preferable to going to sch
left school at about age 13 and was soon apprenticed to a local m
slipping into the rapidly expanding metalworking industry that made B
an early centre of the industrial revolution. As a metalworker's appr
son of a gardener, Asbury understood the lives of working people, wh
enabled him to forge a bond with American Methodists, most of whom w
the lower and middle ranks of society. This was particularly true of the
preachers, almost all of whom came from artisan and farming backgr
little formal education. They accepted Asbury so easily because he was o
The death of Asbury's sister Sarah in May 1749 at the age of 6 was a se
Elizabeth Asbury, but also the root of her spiritual awakening. Accordin
his mother sank 'into deep distress at the loss of a darling child, from wh
not relieved for many years' (ibid.). The tragedy of Sarah's death drove
search for deeper spiritual meaning in life. Elizabeth soon gained a
for seeking out almost anyone with evangelical inclinations, inclu
Methodists. Asbury’s religious convictions grew along with his mother’s, who directed him to Methodist meetings in nearby West Bromwich and Wednesbury. Asbury was impressed by the zeal of the preachers and their audience. After an intense search for the assurance of salvation, he experienced conversion at about age 15 and sanctification, or something close to it, a year or so later.

Asbury soon joined a class meeting and a band, and at about age 17 he began to exhort and then preach in public. At 21 he took the place of the travelling preacher assigned to the Staffordshire circuit. In August 1767 he was admitted on trial (a probationary period for new itinerant preachers) and assigned to the Bedfordshire circuit. In August 1768 he was admitted into full connexion and over the next three years rode the Colchester, Bedfordshire, and Wiltshire circuits, none of which were particularly easy. Nevertheless Asbury stuck with it, demonstrating a resiliency that characterized his entire career. At the Bristol Annual Conference in August 1771 he answered Wesley’s call for volunteers to go to America.

Under Asbury’s leadership Methodism in America grew at an unprecedented rate, rising from a few hundred members in 1771 to more than 200,000 in 1816, the year of his death (Methodist Episcopal Church 1840: 5. 282). Methodism was the largest and most dynamic popular religious movement in America between the Revolution and the Civil War. In 1775, fewer than one out of every 800 Americans was a Methodist; by 1812 Methodists numbered one out of every 36 Americans. These figures are even more impressive given the movement’s wider influence. Many more Americans attended Methodist gatherings than actually joined the church, particularly during this early, volatile period of growth.

As the movement’s leader Asbury had a hand in shaping the religious lives of more people than probably any other American of his generation. Yet his dedication to the ministry cost him dearly, requiring that he set aside more worldly desires. During his forty-five-year career in America he never married, and never owned a home or much more than he could carry on horseback. He travelled at least 130,000 miles by horse and crossed the Allegheny Mountains some sixty times. He was more widely recognized face to face than any person of his generation, including such national figures as Thomas Jefferson and George Washington. Landlords and tavern keepers, not to mention ordinary Methodists, knew him on sight in every region.

Asbury’s Method

Asbury communicated his vision for Methodism in four enduring ways that came to define much of evangelical culture in America. The first was through his legendary piety and perseverance, rooted in a classically evangelical conversion
experience. No other Methodist, perhaps few other Americans, maintained spiritually disciplined a life over such a long period of time as did Asbury. Although most Methodists, even most preachers, settled for a serviceable faith, he strove for a life of extraordinary devotion. Despite a gruelling schedule, he usually rose at 5 a.m. to pray for an hour in the morning stillness. During his forty-five years in America he essentially lived as a houseguest in thousands of other people’s homes across the land. This manner of life ‘exposed him, continually, to public observation and inspection, and subjected him to a constant and critical and that from day to day, and from year to year’, wrote Ezekiel Cooper (1847), who knew Asbury for more than thirty years. He had no private life bey beyond the confines of his mind.

Asbury’s spiritual purity produced a ‘confidence in the uprightness of intentions and wisdom of his plans, which gave him such a control over the preachers and people as enabled him to discharge the high trusts confided to him with so much facility and to such general satisfaction’, observed one contemporary account (Bangs 1839: ii. 401). Perseverance counted for much among evangelicals, and this score Asbury had few equals. He relentlessly pushed himself to the limits of his health, seldom asking more of other Methodists than he was willing to do. From 1793 on he suffered from progressively worsening congestive heart failure probably brought on by bouts of streptococcal pharyngitis (strep throat) rheumatic fever that damaged his heart valves. As a result, he suffered from diabetes and kidney failure. In his last years he made worse by endless hours on horseback with his feet dangling from the saddle, fit to be carried from his horse to his preaching appointments because he could not bear the pain of walking, which must have been an inspiring, if bizarre, sight. One observer who saw him preach in this condition in ‘breathless astonishment’ (ibid. 364). Asbury’s piety brought him respect, even renown, not only for sacrifice rather than accumulation of buildings, money, or other tangible power. ‘It was almost impossible to approach, and converse with him, without feeling the strong influence of his spirit and presence…. There was some the remarkable fact, almost inexplicable, and indescribable’, wrote Ezekiel (1819: 25–6) shortly after Asbury’s death. Even James O’Kelly (1801: 61), who led the most bitter schism from the Methodist church in Asbury’s day and acknowledged his ‘cogent zeal, and unwearied diligence, in spite of disappointment’. One lesson of Asbury’s life is that mass religious movement often begins with the backs of those who are willing to sacrifice body and soul to ‘it as early Methodists would have said.

The second way that Asbury communicated his vision was through his ‘Connexion’ was an important word for Methodists, and Asbury embodied its meaning better than anyone. As the nation from year to year he conversed with countless people demonstrating a gift for building relationships face to face or in small
It is remarkable how many of those he met became permanent friends, even after a single conversation. Asbury often chided himself for talking too much and too freely, especially late at night. He considered this love of close, often lighthearted, conversation a drain on his piety. In reality it was one of his greatest strengths, allowing him to build deep and lasting relationships and to feel closely the pulse of the church and the nation. Henry Boehm (1866: 443), who travelled some 25,000 miles with Asbury from 1808 to 1813, recalled that ‘in private circles he would unbend, and relate amusing incidents and laugh most heartily’. Asbury once told the Ohio preacher James Quinn, ‘if I were not sometimes to be gay with my friends, I should have died in gloom long ago’. Quinn also remembered that in frontier cabins, ‘the good Bishop always made himself pleasant and cheerful with the families, so that they soon forgot all embarrassment’ (Wright 1851: 164, 245). In these settings Asbury felt most at home. ‘His conversational powers were great. He was full of interesting anecdotes, and could entertain people for hours’, Boehm (1866: 447) remembered. ‘As a road-companion, no man could be more agreeable; he was cheerful almost to gaiety; his conversation was sprightly, and sufficiently seasoned with wit and anecdote’, wrote Nicholas Snethen (1816: 9), who was Asbury’s travelling companion for several years beginning in 1800. People found him approachable and willing to listen to their concerns more than they found him full of inspiring ideas. ‘He was charitable, almost to excess, of the experience of others’, remembered Snethen (ibid. 4).

Many recognized Asbury’s ability to connect with people on a personal level, though few found it easy to explain. The dissident Methodist preacher Jeremiah Minter (1814: 7, 10, 11) concluded that Asbury must have been a ‘sorcerer’, ‘in league with the devil’ to have ‘enchanted [and] deceived’ so many who ‘thought him a good man’. Asbury’s only equal in this regard, Minter believed, was the famous evangelist Lorenzo Dow. ‘With their sorcery and enchantments’, Asbury and Dow had ‘bewitched multitudes, who take them to be, as it were, the great power of God’, Minter wrote in 1814, two years before Asbury’s death. Few would have agreed with Minter’s analysis, but many would have recognized what it was about Asbury that so annoyed Minter. Even James O’Kelly (1801: 61) confessed a ‘disagreeable jealousy’ over Asbury’s ability to influence those closest to him.

The third conduit of Asbury’s vision was the way that he understood and used popular culture. John Wesley and Asbury were alike in their willingness to negotiate between competing religious and cultural worlds. In his biography of Wesley, Henry Rack (1989: 352) argues persuasively that Wesley acted as a ‘cultural middleman’ between Methodists on the one hand and clergymen and educated gentlemen in England on the other. If so, then Asbury acted as a mediator between Wesley and common Americans. Wesley and Asbury came from significantly different backgrounds, but they shared a realization that the dominant religious institutions of their day were failing to reach most common people. The great question they both addressed was how to make the gospel socially and culturally relevant in their time.
and place. The audience was never far from their minds. This led Asbury to think things in America that he would not have done in England, some of which disapproved. Asbury, for example, accepted the emotionalism of southern Baptists in the 1770s, proposed camp meetings in the early 1800s, and reluctantly accepted southern Methodists holding slaves. This mediating impulse, transmitted by Wesley through Asbury, became a trademark of American Methodism.

Yet Asbury did not accept American culture without reservation and never identified the mission of Methodism with that of America. He grew dismayed at the presence of slavery in the church, a reality that he tacitly accepted, but which haunted him for the last thirty years of his life. Furthermore, cultural adaption is never a static thing, since both the church and the broader culture are constantly changing. Asbury was remarkably well informed (the product of his travels of conversation) and flexible in keeping up with these changes, but ever within their limits. Though the American Revolution led to a good deal of persecution of American Methodists, Asbury fretted that its end would produce too much materialism and thereby dampen Methodist zeal. Later he worried that the available land in the West would have the same effect, drawing people’s attention away from spiritual concerns to the cares of this world. As long as they were poor, Methodists agreed with Asbury that wealth was a snare. But as Methodists became more prosperous, they became less concerned about the dangers and more about the success of the church that he was so instrumental in creating. This, in the end, seemed like a great tragedy.

The fourth way that Asbury communicated his message was through his organization of the Methodist church. He was a brilliant administrator, and a keen observer of human motivations. He had a ‘superior talent to read men’, as Peter Coxe (1856): 155 put it. As Asbury crisscrossed the nation year in and year out, he kept track of countless details of doctrine, finance, discipline, and staffing. He never lost sight of the people involved. The system he crafted made it possible to keep tabs on thousands of preachers and lay workers. By 1812 Asbury had more than a thousand itinerant preachers under his supervision (Methodist Episcopal Church 1841: 153).

At the centre of Asbury’s system was the itinerant connexion. Asbury left the itinerant system in England under John Wesley, bringing it to America and worked even better than it had in England. Methodist itinerant preachers, called ‘circuit riders’, did not serve a single congregation or parish, but rather ministered to a number of congregations spread out along a circuit that the preacher rode. Under Asbury, the typical American itinerant rode a predominately circuit of 200 to 600 miles in circumference, typically with twenty-five preaching appointments per round. He completed the circuit every ten weeks, with the standard being a ‘four weeks’ circuit of 400 miles. This meant that each month. Often they were assigned a partner, but even so, they usual
at opposite ends of the circuit instead of travelling together (Wigger 1998; 2001: 56–62). The itinerant system worked well for reaching post-revolutionary America’s rapidly expanding population. In 1795, 95 per cent of Americans lived in places with fewer than 2,500 inhabitants; by 1830 this proportion was still 91 per cent. While Methodism retained a stronghold in the seaports of the middle states, Asbury hammered its organization into one that had a distinctly rural orientation adept at expanding into newly populated areas. ‘We must draw resources from the centre to the circumference’, he wrote in 1797 (F. Asbury 1958: iii. 332).

Despite its success, keeping the itinerant system intact proved the greatest challenge of Asbury’s career. From the beginning he faced opposition from those unhappy with its demands and constraints. Some, like Joseph Pilmore, wanted to focus Methodist resources more on the cities of the Atlantic seaboard, where they believed it was important for Methodism to build a base of influence and social respectability. Others, like James O’Kelly, wanted to make Methodist polity more congregational, allowing preachers who had built up a local following to remain on the same circuit indefinitely. Asbury believed that all such proposals would ultimately limit the movement’s ability to reach the most people with the gospel. He maintained that sending preachers where they would have the most telling impact, rather than leaving them where they were most comfortable, was crucial to the success of the Methodist system. For the most part Asbury succeeded in defending the itinerant system until the last decade of his life. By then a new generation of Methodists, one accustomed to a higher social status than their parents had enjoyed, had begun to chip away at his cherished itinerant connexion. For all its usefulness, the itinerant system was rooted in a particular place and time, something that Asbury couldn’t fully understand.

There was another, less obvious but equally important, component of Asbury’s system that went to the heart of what it meant to be a Methodist: to practise a method; the necessity of a culture of discipline. As individuals and communities, believers had to take it upon themselves to regulate their spiritual lives. Neither Asbury nor his preachers could be everywhere at once. This is why, from his first days in America, he insisted on upholding the requirement that all members attend class meetings, and that love feasts be limited to active members, creating an atmosphere of mutual trust and support. He delegated authority to others, recognizing that a voluntary system would not work if it relied on coercion from above. It needed to become a central component of people’s world-view. Though there were plenty of disagreements along the way, Methodists succeeded where other religious groups failed in large measure because they were more disciplined. This culture of discipline nonetheless changed over time, much to Asbury’s chagrin, as the church itself became more respectable and less countercultural (Wigger 1998; 2001: 173–90).

For all his focus on a single goal, Asbury remained a complex figure. At the core of his personality was a fear of rejection that at times made him seem aloof or
severe in settings he found intimidating. He tended to hold others at arm's length until he could be sure of their intentions. John Wesley Bond (1817) re-
marked that Asbury himself believed ‘that by nature he was suspicious’. Hen-
ry Boehm recalled that at a distance Asbury often seemed ‘rough, unfeeling, leisure-
tical’. While rarely mean-spirited, he feared being taken for a fool. He had a rather rough exterior, that he was sometimes stern; but under that sternness of manner beat a heart as feeling as ever dwelt in human breast, Boehm (1866: 451) asserted. Nicholas Sthenen, who often opposed Asbury after 1812 and later left the Methodist Episcopal Church, was not as fond of Asbury as Boehm. Sthenen believed that Asbury’s ‘suspicious disposition’ stemmed from his well-known irritability, his faculty of obtaining the most secret inform-
ation, the quickness and penetration of his genius. Yet even Sthenen did not believe Asbury’s ‘ambition’ flowed from a ‘criminal nature’. Like nearly everyone who knew Asbury well, Sthenen acknowledged his ability to assess human nature, or, as he said, to judge ‘human nature’. ‘In what related to ecclesiastical things, he was all eye, and ear; and what he saw and heard he never forgot, the tenacity of his memory was surprising. His knowledge of human nature, penetrating and extensive’, wrote Sthenen (1816: 6, 9). Asbury was a keen observer of the human heart, and it often left him melancholy.

For all his insight, Asbury was not a good preacher. His sermons were disjointed and nearly impossible to follow. ‘This excessive delicacy of feeling shuts my mouth so often, may appear strange to those who do not know me,’ wrote in August 1806, and it did (F. Asbury 1858: ii. 315). Nathan Bangs, for the first time in New York in June 1804. ‘His preaching was quite disconnected, a fact attributed to his many cares and unintermittent labours, which admitted of little or no study… He slid from one subject to another… He abounded in illustrations and anecdotes’, remembered Bangs (1863: 128). This was more or less what everyone said about Asbury’s preaching.

Asbury’s inability to speak clearly in formal settings led him to use proxies. He was the quintessential backroom negotiator, perhaps his most notable trait. ‘In a judicial or legislative capacity he seemed not to excel, and did not often appear to the best advantage in the chair of conference,’ Sthenen, who observed Asbury at many conferences from 1794 to 1814, also the art of governing, and seldom trusted to the naked force of his goodness. Indeed, the majesty of command, was almost wholly concealed, or supressed, that wonderful faculty, which belongs to this class of human geniuses, enables them to inspire their own disposition for action, into the breasts of the people. Concluded Sthenen (1816: 6).

Wesleyan perfectionism—his belief that it was the duty of all believers to seek perfection in this life—also coloured Asbury’s personality. It heighten
ed not only his aspirations but also his insecurities. His failings instilled in him a genuine humility. He was not a man of his career any number of churches had been named for him, but ‘I
approve of this, and called it folly’, according to Boehm (1866: 446). He did not expect great rewards in this life because he did not believe he deserved them.

Yet Wesleyan perfectionism was not a theology of despair. With diligence, holiness was attainable in this life, if only for brief periods. Ultimately, believers could be confident of God’s grace if their resolve did not waver. Guiding the church towards this goal became an all-consuming passion for Asbury. ‘His patience in bearing disappointments was equal if not superior to that of any man I ever knew’, remembered Bond ([1817]). According to Bond, Asbury rarely allowed himself to ‘repine’ or ‘brood’ over past difficulties, instead he turned them over in his mind, thinking ‘How shall I mend it?—How can things be made better?’. In fact, Asbury did brood and fret, but it did not define him. He could sink deep within himself when concentrating on a problem, but this was not the same thing. ‘At times he appeared unsociable, for his mind was engrossed with his work’, recalled Boehm (1866: 448). Or, as Bond ([1817]) put it, Asbury ‘thrust himself into every part of his charge; lest something might be wrong—lest some part of the cause of God might suffer’. Asbury had a thorough and even subtle mind, but he was often slow in formulating his ideas. He could work his way through thorny problems, but it took time. The long hours he spent on horseback gave him the space for reflection, prayer, and meditation he needed. Those who did not know him sometimes mistook his preoccupation for severity.

Coupled with Asbury’s fear of rejection was a genuine compassion for others, especially the downtrodden. He believed that true religion embraced the suffering of the poor and did all that was possible to alleviate it. Resources should be channelled to those most in need, not squandered on luxuries, he believed. This is why he allowed himself few comforts. His clothes were cheap and plain, though he took some care to appear presentable. He often said ‘that the equipment of a Methodist minister consisted of a horse, saddle and bridle, one suit of clothes, a watch, a pocket Bible, and a hymn book. Anything else would be an encumbrance’ (Boehm 1866: 445; Smith 1848: 34). Indeed, Asbury rarely owned much more than this. At the same time, he gave away nearly all the money that came his way. Both Boehm and Bond kept track of Asbury’s funds while travelling with him as assistants. ‘He would divide his last dollar with a Methodist preacher’, Boehm (1866: 454–5) recalled. ‘He was restless till it was gone, so anxious was he to do good with it.’ Once, in Ohio, Asbury and Boehm came across a widow whose only cow was about to be sold for debt. Determining that ‘It must not be’, Asbury gave what he had and solicited enough from bystanders to pay the woman’s bills. ‘His charity knew no bounds but the limits of its resources; nor did I ever know him let an object of charity pass without contributing something for their relief’, wrote Bond ([1817]). He recalled that Asbury often gave money to strangers he met on the road whose circumstances seemed dire, especially widows. He had his share of failings, but the love of money wasn’t one of them. This won him a great deal of respect from almost everyone who knew him.
After Asbury's death in 1816 admirers and critics sought to define his legacy. Former pointed to his intense spirituality and perseverance, his ability to communicate with people and his administrative finesse as the defining qualities of his character. The latter decried his lack of democratic sensibilities and what they saw as pretensions. What neither Asbury's admirers, including Ezekiel Cooper (1839), Abel Stevens (1867), John Emory (1825), Frederick (1890) and Ezra S. Tipple (1916), nor his critics, Edward Drinkhouse (1899), McCaine (1850), and Nicholas Snethen (1816), for example, doubted was the importance. Yet by the Civil War Asbury had begun to lose his salience in culture. "There is a man, not even named in our leading histories, who wrought more deeply into American life in its social, moral, and religious any other who lived and acted his part in our more formative period", begins an article in Harper's New Monthly Magazine ("Francis Asbury", 1866). What follows is a brief laudatory biography of Asbury that assumes, clearly enough, that rea little about him. In the fifty years following his death Asbury had failed to American hero. "The names of Ethan Allen and Anthony Wayne have become familiar to the popular ear of America than that of Asbury; yet how the influence compared to his!" concluded the anonymous author in Harper's.

Methodists themselves were largely responsible for Asbury's fall from grace. Upwardly mobile Methodists were glad to be shot of miniature preachery out-of-date sermons, and who lacked even the most rudimentary sense of social distinctions, as Harold Frederic put it in his popular Damnation of Theron Ware (1896, 1960). Asbury meant little to Methodists were generally happy to see the church's rise in wealth and social status.

By the twentieth century most Methodists saw themselves as part of the mainstream. From this vantage point Asbury looked different than in the nineteenth century. Much of this new historical perspective was shaped by William Warren Sweet (1881–1959), the dean of Methodist studies in the early twentieth century. Sweet grew up in Baldwin City, Kansas, before college at Ohio Wesleyan University and seminary at Drew University, a doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania. He then taught at Ohio Wesleyan University before becoming Professor of American History at the University of Chicago. He was, according to his biographer, 'the first professional, American historian who specialized in religion' (Ash, 1988). Sweet was shaped by his background in the church (he had planned to be a minister before his doctorate) and the academy. As was typical of historians in the early twentieth century, he believed that history could be pursued as a science, free of personal bias, in which the facts spoke for themselves. His work deeply influenced by Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, which he
that the availability of 'free' frontier land had made possible the development of American democracy and individualism. Sweet's contribution was to find a role for the church (by which he mostly meant the Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists) in this scheme, arguing that organized religion's greatest contribution to American life was in bringing civilization to the frontier. 'On every American frontier life was crude, and ignorance and lawlessness were everywhere in evidence. The great majority of the people were indifferent to the prevailing conditions and accepted them as a matter of course', Sweet (1952: 161–2) writes in one of his later books. Fortunately, all was not lost. 'There was in every considerable community a little company of people, the majority of them constituting the membership and the ministry of the frontier churches, who believed that conditions could be changed; that life on every frontier could be raised to a higher level, and thus through them the seeds of culture were planted in the west', writes Sweet (ibid. 161).

Within this framework Asbury is presented as a 'benevolent despot' and an agent of order and control (ibid. 115). In regard to the 'religious frenzy' often associated with frontier revivals, Sweet assures his readers that it is 'an entire misconception' that Asbury and his preachers did anything to promote such 'extravagances'. 'Asbury, like Wesley, believed that everything should be done decently and in order. Indeed, order was his passion and this he communicated to his preachers' (Sweet 1933: 159). Sweet's scholarship was voluminous (he published twenty-five books, beginning in 1912) and he did more than anyone to make primary sources readily available. Nonetheless his interpretation of Asbury has done as much to obscure as illuminate. In Sweet's hands Asbury became the patron saint of decency and decorum.

These views were reflected in what remained of Asbury's image in the broader culture. As the US Army Band played 'The Star-Spangled Banner' on a 'perfect' October day in 1924, with 'not a fleck of cloud in the sky', an imposing bronze statue of Asbury on horseback was unveiled in Washington, DC, at the intersection of Sixteenth and Mount Pleasant streets (Carroll 1925: 13). Celebrated amidst much fanfare in front of a distinguished audience—President Calvin Coolidge gave the keynote address—the unveiling marked a high-water mark for Methodist influence in American society, and perhaps for all mainstream Protestantism. The Scopes monkey trial took place the next summer in Dayton, Tennessee. It is significant that the church selected Asbury to represent them, though it was a carefully crafted image of Asbury that the clergy and politicians chose to remember. To them Asbury was first and foremost a patriotic American. 'On the foundation of a religious civilization which he sought to build our country has enjoyed greater blessings of liberty and prosperity than were ever before the lot of man', Coolidge declared amid cries of 'Hear! Hear!' and vigorous applause. 'Asbury must be called great, because he laid the foundation of the great Christian empire, of the increase of whose ministry and peace there shall be no end', added Methodist Bishop J. W. Hamilton (ibid. 31, 33). Granted, public celebrations of this nature are generally not the place to raise a controversy, but the effect was to obscure Asbury behind a haze
of patriotic consensus, to make him seem no different from any of the gen-
memorialized in bronze throughout the city, only perhaps less well armed.

The most sensational biography of Asbury is Herbert Asbury's *A Met
turned his back on his strictly religious upbringing in a small town in south-e
Missouri, Herbert Asbury intended to expose Francis Asbury as the demagogu
fanatical religion that promised 'spiritual loot' to simple country folk (H. A
1927: 53). In an earlier book, *Up From Methodism* (he later wrote *Gangs of New
Asbury* describes growing up among Methodists on his father's side (he claim
Francis Asbury was the half-brother of his great-great-grandfather, but
unlikely) and Baptists on his mother's side. The more devout the relati
more repressive and sadistic the religion. 'Among all my relatives I do no
one whose home was not oppressed, and whose life was not made miser
fretful, by the terrible fear of a relentless God whose principal occupat
on was to swoop this searching for someone to punish', writes Herbert
(1926: 98). 'I find myself full of contempt for the Church, and disgust for th
of religion. To me such things are silly; I cannot understand how grown peo
believe in them, or how they can repress their giggles as they listen to the mi
platitudes and perform such mummeries as are the rule in all churches', co
Asbury (ibid. 168). No unbiased observer, this Herbert Asbury.

Asbury (1927: 1) begins *Methodist Saint* by informing his readers th
Elizabeth Asbury 'was pregnant God appeared to her in a vision and
that her child would be a boy and that the lad was destined to become
religious leader and spread the Gospel among the heathen, although H
specify the Americans'. We are also told that Elizabeth was 'ambitious' fo
'to become Archbishop of Canterbury', and that her 'favourite scriptural
were the bloody horrors of the Old Testament, and those portions of th
which describe the agonies of Christ bleeding on the cross', which she dir
Francis even during his infancy. And this is all on the first page! Later, He
us that at the time Francis came to America 'the people generally were
weary of wrestling a living from the wilderness, but had become alar
frightened by the clamours and excitements of the impending Revo
had reached that pitch of emotional insanity and instability which has ah
essential to the success of Methodism' (ibid. 51--2).

In a chapter entitled 'The Father of Prohibition', Herbert tells us that F
'the real father of prohibition in the United States', who did more than a
to frighten good folk away from the enjoyment of a refreshing beverage
In making such a claim he either ignored or was ignorant of the fact th
drank alcohol in moderation. With evident glee Herbert (ibid. 249) de
'jerking, barking, jumping, hopping, dancing, prancing, screeching
writhing in fits and convulsions, falling in cataleptic trances' and other 'I
that attended camp meetings. 'One child was considered especially bless
she barked hoarsely, like a mastiff, while the best the others could do was to imitate spaniels or other small dogs; he informs us, though without citing a source (ibid. 258). 'Francis Asbury regarded camp-meetings with great favour; to him the spectacle of thousands of men and women and little children writhing in torment was a glorious visitation of the Lord, and he loved to hear a score of howling prophets belabouring the wicked,' he writes (ibid. 248). One has to admire the audacity of an author who, when faced with a lull in his narrative, simply makes something up, the more outrageous the better. In the end, Herbert's main complaint against Francis was that he did not drink, smoke, or chase women enough. Instead, Francis's 'whole life is a record of fearful grovelling before the Almighty' (ibid. 264). *Methodist Saint* is a fun read, but only if one does not take it too seriously.

But many did. It is a testimony to just how little the reading public knew about Francis Asbury or early Methodism that Herbert Asbury could publish *Methodist Saint* with a leading commercial press to generally favourable reviews. A review in the *New York Times* touted the book as 'impressively documented' and 'damaging to Methodism' in the way that it exposed the church's early fanaticism and 'grotesque personalities' ('Bishop Asbury' 1927). This kind of reception helps explain why William Warren Sweet and the Asbury monument backers were anxious to make their founding figure seem so rational and respectable. They can perhaps be forgiven for seeing in Asbury only what seemed most pertinent to their needs at the moment. They were willing to admit that he could be heavy-handed, but they insisted that he was also a calmly rational man who would have felt perfectly at home in modern America.

More recent analyses of early Methodism and biographies of Asbury have done better at identifying the importance of Methodism in America's religious landscape and Asbury's role in formulating the church. While Methodism is declining in membership in the US today, some of its offshoots, including much of Pentecostalism, are thriving, as is evangelical culture in general, which Methodism did much to create. The cultural and religious patterns that Asbury helped to create are a big reason why. Asbury is a model of a new kind of religious leader, defined by a sincere practice of piety, an ability to connect with ordinary people, a considerable degree of cultural sensitivity, and an ability to organize effectively. This model has proved remarkably resilient across the American religious landscape.

**Suggested Reading**

The two most recent biographies of Francis Asbury are Darius Salter's *America's Bishop* (2003) and L. C. Rudolph's *Francis Asbury* (1966). A number of recent works have integrated Asbury into the larger story of early American Methodism and the rise of new religious

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