

Book Review: Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt. *American Methodism: A Compact History*. Abingdon Press, 2012.

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As I read the final installment of what is now a three-volume set on the history of American Methodism, I was reminded of nineteenth century Methodist leader Frances Willard's rallying cry to "do everything" as she expanded her temperance crusade to include the many-headed hydra of alcohol's attendant social problems. The authors of this text could doubtless sympathize with Willard's challenges as each paragraph written suggests a plethora of options for continuing the Methodist story they sought to write. Rich in detail, the authors have given professors of United Methodist history many choices to consider in crafting a course that tells the Methodist story. A historiographical essay setting this work in the context of preceding efforts of a similar nature is unfortunately not present in this volume or the more extensive volume one. Such a discussion, however, is laid out in an April 2010 article of this journal and well worth a careful reading.

Readers of the third volume will find little that has changed from the approach taken in volume one, except that it is less than half the length at 276 pages. This volume will likely be most frequently assigned for classroom use along with the Sourcebook. (Volume one of the set is less amenable for this purpose due primarily to the length of the survey which limits instructors' flexibility in assigning supplemental reading.) Because volume three does a good job of outlining the development of United Methodist polity, it may be especially useful for those professors who closely integrate the study of United Methodist history with changes in its polity. It is less well-suited to the study of key personalities in the Methodist movement or in assessing the popular spirituality of Wesley's American followers. The Sourcebook is a necessary text to read alongside both volumes one and three. Without frequent pauses to consult the splendid primary source documents, the narrative simply feels too encyclopedic as it

moves from subheading to subheading in a sometimes tiresome march through important changes in the church.

The two companion volumes for the Sourcebook are structurally similar to one another and both are helpfully keyed to the Sourcebook. The interpretive framework chosen for volume one as well as for the “compact history” is one that accentuates the tensions between and the evolution from piety to nurture and then advocacy in the history of Methodism in America. The authors readily acknowledge, however, that this framework only goes so far in explaining the diverse movements which have swirled through American Methodism for nearly 300 years. They neglect in-depth analysis of the events they chronicle in order to favor discussion of the rich texture of Methodist ecclesial developments. Providing deeper analysis of the meaning of many historical events will be the responsibility of the instructors and students who use these books.

Undoubtedly most readers of *American Methodism: A Compact History* will easily identify the lack of attention or nuance to any number of topics they find to be of particular interest. This is unavoidable in a book of such scope. This reviewer, for example, found the mid twentieth century debates over mission in the denomination’s mission board to have been treated somewhat one-sidedly. The cursory attention given to Methodism’s most famous twentieth century missionary, E. Stanley Jones, is an example of this. The wider historiographical neglect of Midwest Methodism and other regional particularities is unfortunately (if understandably) reflected in this volume as well.

With the completion of this three volume project, some additional remarks concerning the project as a whole are warranted. Of the three volumes it is clear that volume two, the Sourcebook, has been and will be of greatest use for teachers of United Methodist history. The authors began with this text and it is their most valuable contribution as a significant improvement over the previous compilation by Frederick Norwood. As one reads the Sourcebook it is easy to sympathize with the challenge of their editorial decisions. The preface to the Sourcebook also alerts the reader to what are

the two greatest weaknesses in the project's design. These weaknesses, however, are provocatively suggestive of how future surveys of Methodism could take shape.

First among these problems is the authors' stated decision to make this book only about the North American context. Understanding how Methodism emerged outside North America is vitally important for all United Methodists, not just for those who happened to live there. The historiographical trends toward "transnational history" and the growth of United Methodism in Africa and Asia should have been sufficient to prompt the authors to venture beyond their considerable expertise in the study of American Methodism. To be fair, the Sourcebook contains several good selections on the global nature of Methodism, but how the unfolding of Methodism occurred in dozens of countries around the world is mostly overlooked. Clearly, quadrennial debates over denominational restructuring require a worldwide outlook as United Methodists seek to overcome dualistic thinking concerning "the west and the rest." Previous survey texts which examine world Methodism are helpful, but there remains ample room for improvement.

A second decision by the authors (or publisher?) is reflected in the misleading use of the term "Methodist" in the project's title. The many vibrant Methodist offshoots from the Methodist Episcopal Church and subsequent bodies are not discussed beyond the point of the departure from the main trunk. Had the authors chosen otherwise, readers would have gained not only a more thorough understanding of black Methodism in America but also the holiness and Pentecostal movements and the institutions they formed which are playing an increasingly formative role in United Methodist experience. As other scholars have noted, relatively few holiness adherents left the main trunk of Methodism in the late 1890s. The decline of holiness teaching in American United Methodism must be explained in more nuanced ways besides that of the departure of holiness advocates. A study of American Methodism that included multiple Methodist, Holiness, and Pentecostal offshoots would have broken new historiographical ground and born different fruit from the current project. More attention

to this is necessary as United Methodism develops deeper ecumenical relationships with traditions which departed from them.

What this reviewer perceives as unfortunate missteps in the project's design underscore how difficult a task it is to tell the full story of American Methodism for this or any age. As Frances Willard learned over a century ago one simply cannot "do everything." And yet one must try. The authors would be delighted if this project served as an invitation for instructors of Methodist history to collaborate in the months and years ahead to develop other resources to complement this one. At the top of the list – and a project which would prove an easy collaboration by readers of this journal – would be a set of well-crafted discussion questions for each chapter which integrates all three volumes to introduce deeper analysis of the issues raised in this study. Dynamic conversations in classrooms based on the Sourcebook have been occurring for well over a decade throughout the country already. One hopes that those conversations about United Methodism's past will also yield fruit in imagining – and praying for – a bold United Methodist future.