

Rack, Henry D., ed. *The Methodist Societies: The Minutes of Conference*, Volume 10 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011. 1046 pages. ISBN-13: 9781426711909.

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In the past, students of early Methodism, working with material from the *Minutes* of the Methodist Conference during Wesley's lifetime, have frequently turned to the most easily accessible material from the Doctrinal and/or Disciplinary *Minutes* in either the Jackson edition of Wesley's *Works* or the source volume, *John Wesley*, edited by Albert Outler for the Library of Protestant Thought series (Oxford University Press). That material is centrally important in its summary of early Methodist doctrine and pastoral theology, as well as for the role it has played in Methodist self-understanding, past and present. However, it was only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the history of the early Methodist Conference and the full body of *Minutes* produced out of it.

Dr. Henry Rack has given us the rest of the iceberg with the publication of *The Methodist Societies: The Minutes of Conference*. This is the seventeenth volume to appear in the ongoing 34-volume critical edition of the *Works of John Wesley* published by Abingdon Press. It is also the first to appear in print since the 2003 publication of the final volume of Wesley's journal and diaries (volume 24 of the *Works*). While the earlier collections are limited in scope, both in terms of chronology and historiography, Rack's new volume changes this situation dramatically. Students and scholars now have available to them all the annual MS *Minutes* extant from 1744 to 1764 (there are gaps in the manuscript record in the 1750s and 60s), the published annual (or "penny") *Minutes* from 1765–1783, the annual *Minutes* and MS Conference *Journal* from 1784 to 1791 (the creation of the *Journal* being stipulated by the 1784 Deed of Declaration), the Doctrinal and Disciplinary *Minutes* of 1749, and the "Large" *Minutes* that grew out of the 1749 Disciplinary *Minutes* and were elaborated upon and reissued in 1753, 1763, 1770, 1772, 1780, and 1789.

It should be noted that volume 10 serves as something of a companion to volume 9 in the Bicentennial edition of the *Works*. Volume 9 (edited by Rupert E. Davies and published in 1989) carries the title, *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, and contains material largely narrative in nature—i.e., Wesley's many historical *apologia* for the

revival over the course of his lifetime, as well as such key texts as the “General Rules of the United Societies.” In that sense, Rack’s work in volume 10 on the *Minutes of Conference* helps to fill out the historical picture of institutional Methodism as it developed, an effort that adds to our understanding of the early movement in areas as diverse as doctrine, the theology of ministry, the composition of Wesley’s body of preachers, the intersection of the revival with external factors (e.g., from relationships with the Church of England to the growing economic prosperity of Methodists), the evolution of Methodist missiology, and a nascent Methodist ecclesiology.

An almost monograph-length essay heads the volume, in which Rack puts the phenomenon of the Conference in the context of the early Methodist movement itself. Rack gives attention in this introduction to the wider socio-religious environment in which Methodism developed, the role of John Wesley as the dominant figure in the Conference, the business of the Conference and participation of the lay preachers, the fiduciary responsibilities assumed by the Conference, the significance of the Deed of Declaration and the issue of post-Wesley leadership, and the role of the *Minutes* themselves. Some of Rack’s most insightful and intriguing work is in his analysis of the nature and use of Wesley’s power in the Conference (covered specifically on pages 62–74 but also looming in the background of his entire account). This introductory essay is crucial to setting the stage for the reader’s engagement with the primary source material that follows, and equally important are the meticulously documented footnotes that are present throughout the primary sources contained herein.

Rack reports in his preface that the purpose of the volume is “not only to reproduce the Minutes as a formal record, but also, through the introduction and the information supplied in the notes, to convey something of the nature and role of the Conference in Methodist life and polity” (xvi). Together, the introductory essay and the notes (as well as additional brief introductory essays before each section heading) demonstrate the high-level historiography of the volume, a credit both to Rack and to the broader project that the Bicentennial edition of the *Works* represents. Note in particular the textual comparative work laid out in the sections on the MS *Minutes* from 1744–1764 (on pp. 120–298 and the “Large” *Minutes* on pp. 844–946.)

Little by way of critique can be offered here. The volume is indeed hefty at 1046 pages, but given the fact that it is covering some 45 years of

primary source material (in addition to the substantial introductory essay), it is difficult to see how it could have been made shorter. The 1784 Deed of Declaration is included in one appendix, and the Irish *Minutes* (1778–1790) in another. Rack mentions that the design of the volume had originally called for the inclusion of the early American *Minutes* as well as biographical sketches of the preachers mentioned in the records of the Conference. Given the scope of the work, it is certainly understandable why that was left on the cutting room floor.

In sum, students of early Methodism can be thankful that this new volume of the Bicentennial edition of the *Works* is now in print and can eagerly look forward to the publication of future volumes under the direction of the project's editors, Dr. Richard Heitzenrater (General Editor) and Dr. Randy Maddox (Associate General Editor).