John Wesley and the Education of Children

Gender, Class and Piety

LINDA A. RYAN

ROUTLEDGE METHODIST STUDIES

John Wesley and the Education of Children

Scholars have historically associated John Wesley's educational endeavours with the boarding school he established at Kingswood, near Bristol, in 1746, primarily because of the importance he himself placed on it. Nevertheless, his educational endeavors extended well beyond this single institution, since they were based not just on a desire for academic advancement, but were motivated by individualistic, familial and evangelical considerations. By examining all aspects of his work, this book sets out Wesley's thinking and practice concerning child-rearing and education, particularly in relation to gender and class, in its broader eighteenth-century social and cultural context.

Drawing on writings from Churchmen, Dissenters, economists, philosophers and reformers as well as educationalists, this study demonstrates that the political, religious and ideological backdrop to Wesley's work was neither static nor consistent. It also highlights Wesley's eighteenth-century fellow Evangelicals including Lady Huntingdon, John Fletcher, Hannah More and Robert Raikes to demonstrate whether Wesley's thinking and practice around schooling was in any way unique.

This study sheds light on the attitude of Wesley and his contemporaries to children, child-rearing, piety and education and demonstrates how Wesley's attitude to education was influencing and influenced by the society in which he lived and worked. As such, it will not only be useful to academics with an interest in Methodism, but to those interested in broader aspects of eighteenth-century education and schooling, as well as those concerned with attitudes towards children, gender, class and religiosity.

Linda A. Ryan is a mature researcher with an interest in early Methodism, and more specifically eighteenth-century attitudes to children, education and gender. She has previously published articles in *Wesley & Methodist Studies* and the *Journal of Religious History, Literature and Culture*.

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First published 2018
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Names: Ryan, Linda A., author.

Title: John Wesley and the education of children : gender, class, and piety / Linda A. Ryan.

Description: first [edition]. | New York : Routledge, 2017. | Series: Routledge Methodist studies series | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017023984 | ISBN 9781138092365 (hardback : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781315107516 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Wesley, John, 1703-1791. | Education. | Christian education of children.

Classification: LCC BX8495.W5 R93 2017 | DDC 371.0092-dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017023984>

ISBN: 978-1-138-09236-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-10751-6 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Taylor & Francis Books

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Acknowledgements

My grateful thanks are warmly extended to Professor William Gibson, and Professor Joanne Brown of Oxford Brookes University, who have been unerringly generous in their support and encouragement for my work. Their level of expertise, which has significantly influenced my research, has been outstanding, and it has been a privilege and pleasure to work with them.

I am also indebted to Dr Peter Forsaith of the Oxford Centre for Methodism and Church History for allowing me access to archive material, and whose knowledge and guidance has been invaluable.

My grateful thanks go also to staff at the Methodist Archives and Research Centre, John Rylands University Library, University of Manchester for helping me track down valuable archive material, and to the archivist at Kingswood School, Bath, for her help and support during my research visits.

Linda Ryan
May 2017

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Introduction

By taking account of the work of eighteenth-century educationalists, and of new forms of schooling, particularly that of the poor, this book develops a body of knowledge which for the first time accurately places John Wesley's educational programme in its broad social and cultural context. The focus of this study is not solely on one gender or social construct, but it examines the impact of Wesley's thinking and practice across social and gender divides. Only by doing so can its conclusions be said to have been fully tested. The originality of this book lies in the way it compares and contrasts Wesley's thinking and practice with that of his contemporaries working in the field of education. By taking account of recent scholarship on eighteenth-century attitudes to children, particularly children of the poor, the family and issues surrounding gender, new insights are offered into Wesley's attitude to the young, parenting, gender and class distinctions, as well as education and religiosity.

This book argues that although John Wesley took an interest in how children were raised and educated throughout his life, his thinking was complex and in some ways contradictory. In many respects, his views were grounded in Puritan traditions of the seventeenth century which emphasised original sin, and failed to acknowledge new concepts of the innocence of childhood which became more fashionable in the eighteenth century. Despite this, he advocated the thinking of Locke, and encouraged reading and learning. His Arminian philosophy championed self-improvement and gave his followers, particularly women and the poor, an invitation for self-advancement. Nevertheless, the evidence demonstrates that his educational practice was more strongly Evangelical than intellectual, more pious than academic.

Historiography

Over the last two decades Wesleyan scholarship has witnessed an increasing sophistication in the interpretation of Wesley's writings. There has been a growth in interdisciplinary and contextual studies, with scholarship becoming much more nuanced. Such an approach needs to be extended to John Wesley's educational work, which is currently fragmented and incomplete. Indeed, Alfred H. Body's *John Wesley and Education*, published in 1936, stands virtually alone in this field.

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Influential scholarship of the 1950s and 1960s was unashamedly critical of Wesley's educational endeavours. J. H. Plumb claimed that Methodism 'was at its worst in its attitude to education'.¹ E. P. Thompson, who dominated scholarship for thirty to forty years, claimed in *The Making of the English Working Class*, first published in 1963, that 'Methodism was a strongly anti-intellectual influence, from which British popular culture has never wholly recovered'.² Drawing on an extensive range of eighteenth-century primary source material, both published and unpublished, including writings from Churchmen as well as Dissenters; economists, philosophers and reformers as well as educationalists, this study seeks to provide an accurate and balanced assessment both of Wesley's significance in the field of child-rearing and education, and his role in the development of educational initiatives.

Methodist scholars have historically placed great significance on Susanna Wesley's 'education letter' of 24 July 1732. Indeed, it has not only been seen as one of her most important pieces of writing, but is regarded as the model on which her son John based his education practice.³ Although frequently criticised as austere and puritanical, by applying a more sophisticated approach to her writings, and building on the recent work of Elizabeth Lynch, Martha Bowden and Claire Potter, chapter two argues that not only did Susanna Wesley recognise the individuality of the child, but she regarded her children with affection and respect.

John Wesley's educational endeavours have predominantly been associated with the boarding school he established at Kingswood, near Bristol, in 1746, principally because of the importance he himself placed on it. Nevertheless, the school, even at its peak, educated no more than fifty pupils at any one time. Indeed, it is clear that Wesley's work extended well beyond the confines of the school that scholars have for many years used as a bench-mark by which to judge his educational practice. Arthur Ives, in his publication *Kingswood School in Wesley's Day and Since* comments of the adjoining colliers' school established at Kingswood in 1739: 'the story has an interest of its own, but to follow it here would take us off at a tangent'.⁴ Research contained in this book suggests that to overlook Wesley's work with children of the poor at Kingswood, and elsewhere, is short-sighted, albeit perhaps understandable as source material is limited.

Equally important to this study is the recent work of non-Methodist scholars. Joanne Bailey's research highlights the importance of parental responsibility, and the significance of the parent-child relationship; it also draws attention to the importance of gender in discussions about child-rearing and education.⁵ Rebecca Davis argues that eighteenth-century women commentators on education such as Hannah More and Sarah Trimmer carried an implicit authority in their writing, based on their accepted function as maternal educators.⁶ Despite this, existing scholarship has frequently overlooked the provision of education for girls. This is primarily because, over the course of the eighteenth century, female education was largely overshadowed by an emphasis on the training of boys. This study seeks to redress this imbalance. Indeed, although

Porter argues that female education was primarily designed to equip young women for their primary role as wife and mother, research contained in this book suggests that the level of female education has been frequently underestimated.⁷ Finally, of significance to how the work of Evangelicals is viewed, recent research argues that opinions of the eighteenth-century Church as hopelessly divided, and of clergy as being lazy and low in doctrine have, almost without exception, been redressed by modern scholarship.⁸

John Wesley (1703–1791)

John Wesley was one of the leading figures of his age. He was born in Epworth, Lincolnshire in 1703. Not only were both his parents, Samuel and Susanna Wesley, influential in his upbringing, but John Wesley grew up in an atmosphere of piety and learning. Educated at home until the age of ten, he attended Charterhouse School from January 1714, before going up to Christ Church, Oxford, in 1720. He was a Fellow of Lincoln College from 1726, and was ordained a priest of the Church of England in 1728. Throughout his life, Wesley maintained an allegiance to the Church of England, and espoused Christian values of virtue, morality and piety, alongside Puritan values of industriousness, sobriety, frugality and temperance.⁹ He considered education not merely as a means of expanding intellect, but as an essential part of moral and spiritual development, arguing that the sole end of life, and consequently of education, was to prepare for eternity.¹⁰

Wesley was a prodigious reader. Although this enabled him to draw on a range of philosophies and practices in order to construct his own thinking, he nevertheless had firmly held views. By 1732, his growing interest in the upbringing and education of children prompted him to write to his mother asking her for an account of her Epworth system, which he later published in his *Journal* for 1749, and in *The Arminian Magazine* of 1784.¹¹ Wesley was also a prodigious writer. His *Journal*, published in twenty one instalments between 1740 and 1791, ran to over a million printed words.¹² He was the editor, author or publisher of more works than any other single figure in eighteenth-century Britain.¹³ The very abundance of detail in Wesley's *Journals* and other writings provides a useful insight into the period.¹⁴ Yet this is not unproblematic evidence. Rodell argues that 'a collection of quotations can be put together implying his support for all manner of often contradictory opinions, and shorn of their setting, these opinions can take on a wholly misleading significance'.¹⁵ Furthermore, Gregory argues that Wesley's version of events can frequently be shown to have been highly partial.¹⁶ His known propensity for editorial licence and close control of his projects and papers necessitates a degree of caution.¹⁷

Moral and spiritual development were essential elements of education because, for Wesley, salvation lay not in the Calvinist doctrine of the predestination of God, but an individual's pursuit of a life of holiness.¹⁸ Although he upheld the Arminian doctrine of 'free will', Wesley argued that without the

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constraints of reason, this manifested itself in the young as 'self-will', something to be conquered if children were to be governed by the reason and piety of their parents. While the salvation of the child's soul depended on piety and virtue, learned in relationship with and by example of parents, this did not, in Wesley's view, necessitate the sort of deep emotional attachment brought about by parenthood. Wesley saw no place for a 'softening' in the relationship between parents and their offspring.¹⁹ Indeed, he condemned 'good men' for being too 'easy' and for failing to 'restrain their children from evil'; 'a wise parent', he contended, 'should begin to break their child's will the first moment it appears'.²⁰ While this sentiment has been seen as austere, Wesley's methods were not based solely on punishment. Writing that 'the duty of educating children requires first encouragement, second correction', he stated:

We should endeavour to make children in love with duty, by offering them rewards and invitations, and whenever they do well, encouraging them to go on... the second means is correction... when all fair means prevail not, then there is a necessity of using sharper, and let that be first tried in words, I mean not by railing and foul language, but in sober, yet sharp reproof, but if that fail too, then proceed to blows, 'He that spareth his rod hateth his son'.²¹

Indeed, despite being frequently condemned as unfeeling, Wesley's view was not unusual for the period; among those who held similar views was Quaker George Fox who claimed: 'Withhold not correction from thy child, for if thou beatest him with the rod he shall not die'.²²

In regarding education as training for a life of holiness as well as academic attainment, Wesley's educational practice was frequently characterised by tension between piety and learning; that is, a desire to instruct children in Christian values of virtue, morality and piety, while at the same time providing academic learning conforming to these values. Although he demanded a rigorous standard of education, Wesley consistently employed Masters for their piety rather than their pedagogical credentials; pupils were commended for displays of religious fervour, rather than their intellectual achievement. Determined to challenge what he saw as the debauched and ruinous nature of eighteenth-century schools and universities, Wesley built a strong and rational foundation of religious instruction into the educational programme he instigated at the boarding school he established in Kingwood in 1746. While Wesley's decision to admit a small number of girls into the school in the early years, and his support of small boarding schools run by Methodists, might at first appear progressive, it is clear that he did not consider boys and girls as educational equals. Although he was a supporter of female education, Wesley's primary concern was to instil attitudes of piety and virtue, alongside such knowledge as was necessary to secure salvation. Nevertheless, such learning not only enabled girls to develop spiritually, but to expand their intellect.

A firm advocate of family religion, Wesley argued that it was the responsibility of parents to instruct their children from an early age in the family home.

He also acknowledged that this was not always possible. Particularly concerned for the plight of the poor, Wesley recognised the need to open day schools that their offspring might receive religious education. Although he 'determined to have them taught... to read, write and cast accounts', Wesley argued that children of the poor were to remain submissive, obedient and content, even though they had 'little or nothing in the world', for they had 'more than they deserve'.²³ In line with sentiments of the day, while boys in these schools were educated 'fit for any trade', all that was expected of girls was that their education 'fit them for the enjoyment of God in eternity'.²⁴ Religious instruction was designed to protect the poor against the dangerous influences of a non-Christian way of life, rather than ameliorate their condition, or give them aspirations above their station.

Evangelicals were concerned with reforming the character of the individual, not bringing about social change. In the closing decades of Wesley's life, there was a growing tension between a desire to 'form' the child, and a drive to 'reform' their parents. Family religion enabled faith to be enacted and reinforced outside the Church and school, and Wesley, like many of his fellow Evangelicals, did not confine himself to these institutions. Increasingly, he sought to strengthen family religion, built not only on the education of children, but the Evangelism of their parents. As a result, there was a growing need within the Methodist movement for men trained not only to preach, but to teach. Wesley's preachers, many of whom were from humble backgrounds, were encouraged by him to improve their education by reading and study. They were also encouraged to improve their learning by attending his boarding school at Kingswood. Towards the end of his life, Wesley's 'educational model' not only adapted to accommodate his preachers, but increasingly became a place where they might also send their sons.

Historical context of John Wesley's work

In order to accurately place John Wesley's educational programme in its broad social and cultural context, it is important to understand eighteenth-century perceptions of children, education, gender, piety and class. Underpinning an understanding of attitudes towards the young in the eighteenth century is the fact that historians have consistently identified the period as a watershed in thinking concerning children and childhood. Over the course of the century, philosophical works by John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau provided a foundation for new concepts of childhood which not only acknowledged the individuality of the child, but by arguing that children were inherently innocent, recognised their potential for goodness.

Indeed, Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, published in 1693, rapidly became a reference point for new ideas on education, and while it has historically been largely cited as a compendium for the fashioning of a gentleman, it was in fact written with both sons and daughters in mind.²⁵ Although Rousseau's *Emile*, published in 1762, reignited debate concerning child-rearing

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and education, his view that ‘a woman’s education must be planned in relation to man... She will always be in subjection to a man and she will never be free to set her own opinion above his’, did little to change existing assumptions about female education.²⁶ These new concepts of childhood were not universally accepted and, with at least two hundred treatises on education published in England between 1762 and 1800, the debate they ignited was significant.

Among influential writers in the eighteenth century whose views on children and education were taken seriously were the political philosopher Bernard Mandeville and economist Adam Smith. As the oldest and largest sponsor of educational institutions, views expressed by leaders of the Church commanded attention; leading Anglican figures including White Kennett, Thomas Hayter and Francis Brokesby wrote and preached on the subject, as did prominent Dissenting figures, including Phillip Doddridge and Isaac Watts. The work of educational reformers such as Jonas Hanway and Sarah Trimmer was important, particularly as far as children of the poor were concerned.

Education was not solely confined to institutions. Parental responsibilities played an important part in the upbringing and early education of children. That children should attend Church and read the Bible was considered essential and printed catechisms providing questions and answers between parent and child were readily available. Parents were expected to read, pray, catechise and instruct their children in acceptable patterns of Christian behaviour.²⁷ High mortality rates in the eighteenth century meant that many children lost a parent in childhood. When possible, mothers generally had responsibility for the nurture of young children; once they had reached the age of seven, fathers made decisions concerning their offspring’s discipline, training, education and future occupation.²⁸

In a time pre-dating Locke, children had been largely regarded as the ‘property’ of their parents, or those *in loco parentis* at school or in the workplace.²⁹ Puritan thought regarded children as ‘tarnished by original sin’ and ‘like a young colt, wanton and foolish, till he be broken by education and correction’³⁰ and Porter argues that this often led to child-rearing practices being stern and brutal.³¹ New concepts of childhood not only softened attitudes, but raised questions among parents as to the degree of authority or liberty to be exercised in raising and educating children.

Those families that possessed the skills of reading and writing prized them and sought to pass them on to their offspring. Indeed, literacy became increasingly important to farmers and labourers in the face of economic change. Letter-writing aided and encouraged literacy by offering constant practice in writing; it was also an aid to piety. Not only could letters disseminate religious news, but they were a place where the correspondent could focus on God.³² Over the course of the century a plethora of cheap reading materials became available, sufficient to stimulate many of the poor into gaining elements of literacy.³³ Children’s books were predominantly designed for instruction, whether religious, moral or practical. To love books in youth was regarded as

an indication of potential spirituality, and writers of memoirs and obituaries frequently noted with satisfaction that their subjects had been readers as children, isolated from the childish play of their fellows.³⁴

While existing concepts of education were largely those inherited from the Tudors and Stuarts, the growing affluence and influence of the 'middling sort' brought about changes in educational institutions, which were reshaped to meet the needs of people anxious that their offspring acquire useful skills and social graces befitting their new-found genteel status.³⁵ The rise of prosperity resulting from the growth of mercantile capitalism, particularly during the 1750s and 1760s, meant that by the end of the century there was a powerful and extensive middle class whose enterprise, skill or circumstances had elevated them above the 'labouring poor'. This 'middling sort' had a wide range of incomes and a variety of professions and occupations, and included merchants and farmers who had transformed the faces of both urban and agrarian society.³⁶ In looking for an education for their sons that would fit them for a life in commerce, Dissenting academies offered parents an alternative curriculum to the grammar schools and universities of the day. Georgian society regarded effeminacy as the feminisation or weakening of men, and the risk to society of boys unable to mature into men of sterling character was regarded as profound.³⁷ Despite the anarchic and immoral nature of public schools and universities, not only did they offer a classical education, but supporters argued that they taught manly ideals of competition, endurance and self-reliance.

Piety and morality were essential elements in the assessment of 'character' in eighteenth-century society. Indeed, religion was central to people's lives, individually and collectively, in local communities and nationally. In the early part of the century nearly everyone was a member of the Church of England; less than six per cent of the population of England and Wales dissented from the Established Church; even in the 1790s, over 90% of the population at least nominally belonged.³⁸ The Bishop of Gloucester, William Warburton described the Establishment as a mutual contract between the State and the majority Church based upon common interests and utility.³⁹ Although there remained a general consensus that Church and State were interdependent, over the course of the century, religion increasingly became a matter of social status.⁴⁰ From the Toleration Act of 1689, legal relief afforded through annual Indemnity Acts gave Dissenters freedom to worship in their chapels, liberty to run schools and a good deal of practical power at the local level, despite theoretically being denied the full rights of citizenship by the operation of the Test Act of 1673 and the Corporation Act of 1661.⁴¹

Although Holmes describes the class structure in eighteenth-century Britain as a 'thing of infinite subtlety', there emerged from the mid-century onwards a growing class of people for whom poverty became a 'whole life' experience, and whose poverty was passed to their children.⁴² There was a clear demarcation between those who paid poor-rates and those who were not only exempt from payment but who were all too likely to find themselves applying for relief.⁴³ Clergy asserted that poverty was the result not of sin, but of God's

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providential plan for the world; it was regarded as God's gracious method of allowing men to win salvation in the exercise of their mutual ties of obligation and gratitude.⁴⁴ The provision for the poor fell within the Poor Laws, which, although offering a 'safety net' to the poor, at no time gave them a personal 'right' to relief.⁴⁵ Matthew Decker claimed in *An Essay on the Causes of the Decline of Foreign Trade* of 1744: 'Not only did the regular care afforded by parish relief encourage sloth, but charity itself, given indiscriminately to beggars or through casual solicitation, contributed to the same evil'.⁴⁶

Every child who died young, or who followed his or her parents into dependency and poverty, was a cumulative drain on society; children's potential needed to be harnessed through instruction both in the ways of the Church and in a work ethic.⁴⁷ In 1746, White Kennett declared in *The Christian Scholar*, 'Nothing has so much corrupted the latter age and debauched the morals of our present generation; nothing so much, as irreverence... to God, atheism, profaneness and all manner of irreligion'.⁴⁸ The inculcation of Christian values was designed to regulate and reform the poor and to teach the labouring classes to accept their lot and not to grieve for what they could not have.⁴⁹ Charity schools provided a form of inexpensive poor relief where, it was argued, instruction in the Bible and catechism would build up a God-fearing population, guard children against habits of sloth and debauchery and instil in them obedience to their superiors.⁵⁰ Educating the young to be virtuous and industrious was not only regarded by many as a prudent way of maintaining social order, it was also seen as a means by which these values might be passed on to their parents.⁵¹ Despite this, Mandeville argued that educating the poor simply increased their desire for material things; and by bringing them into closer physical or intellectual proximity to their superiors, the nation would lose the sort of labourers it needed.⁵²

During the 1780s and 1790s anxiety about the poor mounted among the ruling classes on several counts. While the economist Adam Smith argued that a growing population was a sign of an expanding economy, anxieties about the perceived fecklessness of the poor exposed fears about the problems arising from the increasing and unsustainable population.⁵³ That pauper children were more visible and audible than they had ever been raised calls for moral reform through education and fuelled a resurgence of evangelicalism from within the Church as well as among Dissenters.⁵⁴ The perceived threat of possible civil unrest following the French Revolution hardened attitudes towards the poor, and brought about attempts to exercise social control amid fears of political insurrection.⁵⁵ Indeed, over the course of the century, tensions between a drive for moral reform among the poor through religious instruction, and a desire that their children not be elevated 'above their station', but controlled through work, were never fully resolved.

Overview of chapters

Chapter one demonstrates that while the ideological backdrop to John Wesley's work was neither static nor consistent, questions of gender and class

remained entrenched. The fashioning of a gentleman continued to largely define the education of boys of wealthy, or 'middling sort'. Although the level of female education is easy to underestimate, prevailing sentiments meant that instruction for girls was predominantly framed in a way that would enhance their future roles as wives and mothers. Among the poor, educating children of the lower orders was intended to make them good Christians, rather than elevate them above their peers.

John Wesley's upbringing at Epworth, discussed in chapter two, informed his belief in the importance of family in instructing children. His thinking on education favoured Locke, but did not compromise his strongly held Christian principles. The evidence presented in this chapter demonstrates that Susanna Wesley's educational thinking was more compassionate than has been argued and was in many ways governed by affection and respect for her children. John Wesley's time at Charterhouse and Oxford was influential in developing his thinking on education, gender, class and piety. Although he encouraged young women to improve themselves through learning, his primary concern was with their piety rather than their intellect.

Evidence suggests that Wesley's educational practice was governed by key themes, which are discussed in chapter three. Although he supported female education, Wesley did not consider boys and girls as educational equals. Tension in his thinking between piety and learning meant that his educational practice was frequently more strongly Evangelical than intellectual, more pious than academic. Wesley placed emphasis on ascetic self-denial, introspection and emotion, but overlooked their effects on the minds of adolescent boys. His thinking on what constituted suitable reading material was complex; although he wrote and published huge quantities of material, this was heavily edited to his own way of thinking. Nevertheless, it undoubtedly enhanced the religious and academic knowledge of his readers.

Education for children of the poor, discussed in chapter four, was frequently marked by tension between piety and a degree of learning that might give them aspirations 'above their station'. Wesley's Arminian doctrine ignited in Methodists a desire for self-improvement and self-advancement; nevertheless, his educational programme was not intended to break down existing social and gender boundaries. Although he opened day schools for the poor, Wesley kept tight control not only on what children were taught, but by whom they were instructed. He sought to protect children against the dangerous influences of a non-Christian way of life, rather than ameliorate their condition, arguing that the poor should be industrious, and deferential to their social superiors.

As chapter five demonstrates, Wesley's boarding school at Kingswood was gender and class defined. Although a few girls attended in the early years, his rules for the school echoed sentiments of the day regarding the fashioning of a gentleman. The eighteenth-century framework of household-family, which manifested itself in concepts of authority and possession, was central to Wesley's concept of Kingswood. Assuming every child would behave well and be as studious as he had been, Wesley showed little understanding of the effect

his strict regime had on adolescent boys. Far from offering anything new at Kingswood, Wesley's boarding school in many ways conformed to eighteenth-century norms.

Chapter six covers the closing decades of Wesley's life, at a time which witnessed growing tension between education and Evangelism. Wesley increasingly looked to his preachers to promote family worship in the home. Lady Huntingdon's College at Trevecka held out the prospect of a training centre for the entire Methodist movement, but tension between Arminian and Calvinist factions saw Kingswood increasingly regarded as a place where Wesley's preachers might advance their learning, and where their sons might be educated. Not only were the 'parlour boarders' less than welcoming, but preachers' sons received a level of learning which led some to treat their parents with derision.

The emergence of the Sunday school movement, examined in chapter seven, had far-reaching consequences for the religious life of the poor. Instruction was basic and admission non-denominational. Wesley promoted Sunday schools among Methodist Societies, giving working class laymen and women opportunities for leadership roles.⁵⁶ Unpublished material provides an insight into John Fletcher's Sunday schools in Madeley. Through her series of *Cheap Repository Tracts*, Anglican Hannah More not only offered spiritual and moral guidance to unsophisticated readers, but provided girls with a female role model. Growing suspicion of the work of non-Anglican Evangelicals raised concerns over the education of the poor as attitudes hardened following the French Revolution of 1789.

The book concludes by setting out its key findings. It argues that John Wesley's views emphasised original sin and failed to acknowledge new concepts of innocent childhood; nevertheless, he advocated Locke and encouraged reading and learning. His female course of study was rooted in a restrictive religious perspective, but gave girls an opportunity to expand their intellect. He encouraged schooling for children of the poor, but this was designed to enhance piety, rather than offer learning that might give them aspirations 'above their station'. His Arminian philosophy championed self-improvement and gave his followers an invitation for self-advancement, but his educational practice was more strongly Evangelical than intellectual, more pious than academic.

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