Roy Hattersley: **A Brand from the Burning: the life of John Wesley.** Little Brown. 2002. pp 450. ISBN 0 316 86020 4. £20.00.

John Kent: **Wesley and the Wesleyans: Religion in Eighteenth Century Britain.** Cambridge. 2002. pp 229. ISBN 0 521 45555 3. price?

John Munsey Turner: **John Wesley: The Evangelical Revival and the Rise of Methodism in England.** Epworth. 2002. pp 214. ISBN 0 7162 0556 4. £14.95.

Roy Hattersley is the first non-Methodist to write a biography of John Wesley since Robert Southey in 1820. Southey was Poet Laureate, Coleridge's brother-in-law, and an Anglican convert from Unitarianism. Hattersley is a man of letters and a self-confessed atheist, an admission that rang alarm bells for me even as it whetted my appetite.

I found myself comparing Hattersley's effort with two of his forerunners in this field. Henry Rack, a much-respected Methodist historian, published his *Reasonable Enthusiast* in 1992. While most in-house biographies have ranged in tone from uncritical hagiography right through to merciless deconstruction, Rack managed to avoid both extremes with a well-researched and comprehending piece of work. My other benchmark was none other than Southey. He had little personal admiration for Wesley but recognized him as an influential man, "a man of great views, great energies and great virtues." This didn't prevent him pinpointing Wesley's "extravagancies" or "eccentricities," however, in a highly polished biography which commanded a far wider audience than any Methodist could have hoped to reach.

Hattersley sets Wesley in his historical context with an easy familiarity. With great aplomb, he picks his critical way through events in Wesley's life which have assumed almost mythical importance for Methodists though, at times, he displays more self-confidence than sure-footedness. The rescue of the young John from the blazing rectory in Epworth, the shaping influence of a formidable mother, his contribution to the Holy Club (a group of pious Oxford students formed by his younger brother Charles), the missionary trip to the newly-founded colony of Georgia, the influence of the Moravians, the 1738 "conversion" experience in London, the beginnings of his preaching in the open air, the admission of lay preachers, his troubles with the established

church, the opposition he faced and the personal courage he showed against people set on destroying his work and ruining his reputation, his formidable travels, his organisational skills, his wretched marriage, his literary output, his attempts to find a successor, his ordinations for America, his fall-out with his brother, his "good" death and his abiding legacy – all these are looked at dispassionately and, often enough, demythologised along the way. Thus, the pious Susanna Wesley is referred to as "draconian," his conversion experience turns out to have been only one of many such moments, the American expedition was a disaster, his efforts to remain within the Church of England were ungainly and sometimes duplicitous, his itinerancy was obsessive, his writings manipulative, and so on. These revisionist assessments of key moments in Wesley's life are intended to challenge the views of Methodists (and others) who've tended to swallow the myth whole. Hattersley rests his authority for offering such judgements more on the objectivity he brings as a detached outsider than on a critical examination of the primary documents. And, on the whole, his assessments are well worth pondering; even when far-fetched, they remain stimulating.

He seems more at sea in his efforts to spell out the doctrines and define the ethos of early Methodism. He does what he can with Wesley's sometimes contorted attempts to wrestle with theological concepts such as instant assurance, final perseverance, Christian perfection, justification by faith, irresistible grace and the like. He succeeds in displaying Wesley's confusions in this area but only by revealing his own. Indeed, it's baffling to gauge just how a person without faith can hope to grapple with the swirling tides of a doctrinal position that was being passionately fought for yet always in the process of emerging. A bit like Norman Tebbitt trying to explain the inner dynamics and soul-searching that saw the transition of Old Labour to New perhaps. Lots of contradictory things are undoubtedly said but largely because a mighty theological tussle was going on between Wesley and predestinarian Calvinists on the one hand and antinomian Moravians on the other. It's hard to imagine how a man seeking to put his stamp on a rapidly developing movement could have done so without some vacillation and self-contradiction along the way.

Hattersley gives a splendid account of the ups-and-downs of Wesley's relationship with his mother, his brother Charles, and his wife Mary. He is profound in observing that what Wesley really lacked was a good friend. But he tries too hard to show how the great evangelist's ineffectual ways with women were proof that he was unbalanced and his behaviour somewhat

improper. The real tragedy of this aspect of Wesley's life was his brother's intervention to prevent his marriage to Grace Murray, the real love of his life. It was pure snobbishness on the part of Charles and a woeful misreading of the likely effect of such a marriage on the Methodist community (plus, of course, John's own dithering) that led to this outcome. And who will ever know if the disastrous marriage which followed soon afterwards wasn't "on the rebound"? Certainly, he kept brother Charles out of *that* decision! Hattersley has chosen this as the nearest thing he can find to the kind of sexual theme that tends to titillate a modern readership. But it's hard to avoid the conclusion that he doth profess too much.

As the book proceeds, Wesley is variously described as self-pitying, almost heathen, a philistine, manipulative, dishonest, incapable of understanding normal human emotion. It's hard to avoid the impression that Hattersley actively dislikes his subject. All of which simply begs the question why he bothered to write the book in the first place.

There are misunderstandings and mistakes. "Universal redemption" (p.366) should read "universal grace"; "common law" appears instead of "canon law" (p.374); the Authorised Version of the Bible is mixed up with the Book of Common Prayer (p.371); "the moment of transubstantiation" is a meaningless term in a Methodist context (p.275), and it is flatly wrong to state that Charles Wesley was "never the most fervent of evangelists" (p.387).

So, to my mind, Henry Rack's remains the authoritative biography and Robert Southey's tops this one for style. There's nothing here about Wesley's poetry and very little about the spirituality or ethos of the societies he formed across the land. Hattersley does occasionally refer to John Wesley as "the leader of the Second Reformation" but even that seems laden with irony. In his endeavour to render the symphony of Wesley's life he seems, on the whole, to have mastered the notes but without always finding the music.

John Munsey Turner's book is inappropriately titled. It is less about Wesley and far more an account, certainly rooted in Wesley, of the contribution of Methodism to British life. There is an admirable chapter on the relationship with the Church of England and another which addresses the question of whether Methodism saved England from a revolution similar to that which had taken place in France. This turns out to be far more

complicated than might seem to be the case and Turner succeeds in showing how Methodism, together with other prevailing influences, certainly did play some part in creating a state of affairs that militated against such revolutionary happenings. As far as Wesley himself is concerned, we are given a fairly conventional portrait with little to shock or surprise the reader.

John Kent makes it clear from his very first page that he wants to challenge the myth that surrounds Wesley whose success, he argues, lay in making "primary religion" available to ordinary people, a piety of experience and feeling. Wesley was no intellectual giant, he showed no awareness of the findings of science or the historical criticism which was then developing, and was interested only in re-peddling spiritual writings which had affected him in his youth. He was an anxious man and this drove him to an excessively activist lifestyle. Indeed, even his indefatigable travels could be put down to this anxiety, he "itinerated because he needed to itinerate" (190). He was a man with a mission and the result of his incessant activity was undoubtedly praiseworthy but more as "a national body with a common subculture" than as a church. Very soon after Wesley's death, Methodists were more concerned with respectability than with holiness. This is a severe judgement offered by someone who seems determined to prove his own forensic skills by the denial of empathy or fellow-feeling.

The last word is best left with Roy Hattersley. Wesley's work, the Methodist Connexion he'd shaped by a lifetime of incessant labour, "embedded itself in the life of Victorian England. Although founded in the eighteenth century, it became an essentially nineteenth century institution which not so much illustrated the values of the age as helped to shape them. Not in his own lifetime, but certainly by proxy during the hundred years which followed his death, Wesley was one of the architects of modern England. John Wesley's Second Reformation created a new Church and helped to build a new nation."