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Pedlar, James E. Review of *The Origins of Primitive Methodism*, by Sandy Calder. *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 41, no. 1 (2018): 135-137.

The Origins of Primitive Methodism. By Sandy Calder. *Studies in Modern British History*, 33. Woodbridge: Boydell Press. 2016. 293 p. 10 b. and w. illus. £75 (hb). ISBN 978-1-7832-7081-1.

Sandy Calder's *The Origins of Primitive Methodism* offers a revisionist account of the Primitive Methodist Connexion (PMC). His main targets are two prominent strands of Primitive Methodist historiography: the romanticised story of triumph over adversity told by denominational historians and the more recent interpretation of the PMC as a vehicle for working-class emancipation. Early Primitive Methodists were not as humble as we have been told, Calder argues, and the denomination only became recognisably working-class after its founding myth turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Following the introduction, Chapter 2 offers a survey of Primitive Methodist historiography and Chapter 3 discusses the paucity and unreliability of sources prior to 1820. This challenge intertwines with 'the Bourne problem', discussed in the fourth chapter. Co-founder Hugh Bourne's manuscript journal is the only early contemporary source, and it is incomplete, with some notebooks lost, destroyed or censored by the denomination. The multiple versions of Bourne's unpublished 'autobiography' were focused exclusively on the period prior to 1813; however, the earliest of these was drafted in the mid-1840s, and they reflect the older Bourne's agenda of discrediting co-founder William Clowes. The materials available after 1820 are also heavily dominated by Bourne, who was the denomination's first historian and editor of the *Primitive Methodist Magazine* until 1842. In light of these issues, Calder reads all of Bourne's material with a hermeneutic of suspicion, questioning everything from minor details about his childhood to his status as co-founder of the PMC.

In the following five chapters Calder challenges other accepted interpretations of PMC history, using newspaper accounts, baptismal registers, the 1851 religious census, chapel architecture and financial data. The newspaper accounts, he suggests, do not support the PMC view that the movement was held in derision by the broader culture after the early 1840s. He argues that baptismal registers support the idea that the PMC was 'down-market' in relation to its sister denominations, but not as much as the denominational histories would like us to believe. He also notes that the denomination went against the typical 'redemption and lift' pattern and became more working-class over time. Turning to the 1851 religious census, Calder debunks simple north/south and urban/rural divides, arguing that the PMC flourished most in provincial industrial areas and responded well to urbanisation, excepting the major metropolitan centres. He also claims that early PMC chapels were simple because of the theological and missional priorities of the denomination, rather than the poverty of its members. Finally, Calder suggests that the character of the PMC leadership was not as humble as the denominational myth would lead us to believe. The leadership tended to be more prosperous than the members, and the gap between the two widened over time. He provides a number of examples of leaders who were relatively prosperous, arguing that denominational histories have underplayed their wealth.

The main contribution of Calder's book is that it will generate discussion, given that he has called into question many standard interpretations of the PMC's history. He has certainly marshalled a great deal of evidence in order to de-bunk purported PMC 'myths'. However, some of his arguments rest on debatable evidence and thus may not withstand the level of scrutiny he has applied to others. He often offers caveats as to the reliability and completeness of the data he is using (e.g., p.134, 152, 225, 253), but nevertheless proceeds to use that data to support his contentious reinterpretations. His conspiratorial reading of the Bourne material leads him to the radical conclusion that Hugh Bourne and William Clowes should not be accorded the status of 'co-founders' of the PMC. It was James Steele, Calder argues, who was really the central figure in the denomination well into the 1820s, and the inability of Bourne and Clowes to deliver a solution to significant administrative challenges facing the PMC in the 1820s suggests that neither of them could have been the clear leader of the movement before 1828 (p.103-4). It is certain that Bourne overplayed his own importance and tried to eliminate key figures from the story owing to personal conflicts. Nevertheless, it is hard to see how he and Clowes could have gone on to gain universal recognition within the PMC community if their status as founders had so little basis in reality.

In sum, Calder has done a service to Primitive Methodist scholarship by putting a question mark next to nearly every aspect of the movement's perceived character. Some of the standard interpretations of the PMC undoubtedly need revision, but I expect that other scholars will respond to Calder's account with more measured arguments.

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