

to “plastic domes for such iconic U.S. bombers as the P-29 [B-29]” (p. 14); and his mention of “the formal surrender of Japan aboard the *USS Mississippi* [*Missouri*]” (p. 111).

Despite such minor distractions, James MacLeod has written the current best introduction on the subject of Evansville during World War II. His book is highly recommended to those with both new and long-time interests in the period. The book should also be of statewide interest, as events

similar to those in Evansville occurred throughout the state. MacLeod’s book documents one part of the story that changed twentieth-century Evansville, Indiana, and America.

STAN SCHMITT is Vanderburgh County Historian and lives in Evansville. His projects in the works include histories of Evansville in the canal era and the Civil War, and a history of coal mining in Vanderburgh County.



### *Methodism in the American Forest*

By Russell E. Richey

(New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. 230. Appendix, notes, index. \$55.00.)

Russell E. Richey is now well established as the preeminent contemporary interpreter of the history of American Methodism, and his latest volume, with the intriguing title *Methodism in the American Forest*, marks yet another original contribution to the understanding of the Methodist past. Richey is unsurpassed in his encyclopedic grasp of the journals, diaries, sermons, minutes, and records of Methodist conferences and preachers in the first century of Methodism in America (1760s through the 1800s). Each time he returns to these materials, he discovers a fresh angle of vision.

In this study, Richey explores the relationship of Methodism to the natural environment. Pushing well beyond the standard presentations

of Methodism as a religious organization uniquely suited to expansion on the American frontier, Richey leads the reader into the woods—both literal and figurative—that Methodists, particularly the itinerating preachers, actually experienced in their travels. He assimilates their observations and reflections into three predominant metaphors by which they understood the American forest: as shady grove or natural cathedral for preaching and song; as garden for meditation and prayer apart from the everyday world; and as wilderness that constituted both challenge and opportunity for an expanding society and church.

Richey guides the reader through layers of interpretation of these metaphors in successive chapters that move from practice to theol-

ogy to institutions that grew out of Methodism's encounter with the woods. He begins with Methodism's distinctive practice of field preaching in 1730s England. As Richey points out, preachers and congregations in America needed shade from the sun. This led them to the woods and to regularizing their gatherings into camp meetings that drew thousands of participants from the surrounding countryside into the forest.

Richey's forays into the documentary record produce two intriguing insights with implications beyond the immediate topic of his book. One is that the term "wilderness" may have signaled less a state of nature than a profound Methodist—and European-American—perception of boundlessness in the land and the economic and social possibilities of America. Richey interprets the Methodist purpose statement—"to reform the Continent and spread scripture Holiness over these Lands"—as distinctly reflecting its time and place, that is, a period when much of "these Lands" had no name and "the Continent" was not a nation (pp. 24, 92). The same boundlessness brought a sense of risk and unlimited possibility to the emerging society and culture in which Methodism would have a significant role as organizer, institution-builder, and moral guide.

The second insight is that Methodism's "regular and substantial sylvan experiences" did not translate into a richer and more profound theology of

creation (p. 172). Instead, the institutionalizing of outdoor gatherings into what became primarily educational events, from classes at church camp to lectures and concerts at chautauquas, drew Methodist sensibilities away from nature and toward the individual and social concerns of an increasingly urbanized society. Methodism proved unable "to offer the rest of Christianity" any fresh understanding of God's creation, Eden, "the land flowing with milk and honey," and the human responsibility to relish and care for it (p. 175).

Methodism missed its ecological moment. Contemporary Methodist study of environmental issues draws little on early Methodism's experience of "creation's wilds" (p.176). But surely Richey's text contains the seeds of new scholarship. Drawing from the wealth of documents Richey has gathered, a re-reading of early American Methodism from the standpoint of ecological crisis may well produce fresh perspective on the meaning of the American forest today.

THOMAS EDWARD FRANK is University Professor and Chair, Department of History, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Prof. Frank is author of the standard text, *Polity, Practice, and the Mission of The United Methodist Church* (rev. ed. 2006) as well as numerous articles on the historic roots of polity and its current practice.

