

Faith and Fury: Eli Farmer on the Frontier, 1794-1881

By Riley B. Case

(Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2018. Pp. x, 219. \$24.95.)

Between 1776 and 1850, Methodism grew from an upstart sect of fewer than 11,000 adherents into the largest Christian body in the United States, with more than 2,600,000 followers. After 1800, the Methodists' growth centered on the states bordering the Ohio River, including Indiana. Dozens of the preachers who led early nineteenth-century America's most numerically successful religious organization published their memoirs, which have since given historians insight into the cultural appeal of the Second Great Awakening's revivalism. However, none of the best-known autobiographies were published by Hoosier preachers.

Riley C. Case's *Faith and Fury* fills this gap by publishing an edited version of Eli Farmer's previously unprinted memoir. *Faith and Fury* consists of extended passages from the memoir interpolated with Case's analysis of how Farmer's personal experiences illustrate broader historical trends. Case uses Farmer's example not only to contend that Indiana played a crucial role in early Methodism but also to make the bolder claim that Hoosier revivalism was central "in development of the religious culture known as evangelical Christianity" (p. 111).

Case builds on historian Nathan Hatch's seminal thesis in *The Democratization of American Christianity* (1990). Both Case and Hatch contend

that American Christianity transformed after the Revolution because the separation of church and state fragmented traditional religious authority and replaced it with a marketplace of sectarian competition. As a result, the Methodists and other revivalists preached an egalitarian message, which prioritized personal experience over formal theological training, empowered ordinary people to question elites' authority, and championed self-reliance. Case extends Hatch's thesis by asserting that the Ohio Valley Methodists embraced camp meeting revivalism, relished sectarian controversy, and otherwise greeted religious innovations more energetically than did their eastern colleagues. According to Case, religion in the East was dominated by long-established denominations, which were characterized by values originating in Europe; in the West, the Methodists "were writing a religious ethos with a clean slate" that made the "Americanization of Christianity" possible (p. 111).

Case organizes *Faith and Fury* to exhibit how Farmer's life and ministry exemplified the impulses that rewrote the face of Protestant Christianity in Indiana. Farmer's memoir reveals that he was a self-made man, prone to fighting but nevertheless guided by a strict morality. He often paused his ministry to invest in business ventures and dabble in politics, and he eventually won a term in the state Senate. He frequently

engaged in fisticuffs, including a brawl with the Speaker of Indiana's House of Representatives, and even more frequently threatened to "whip" men who slighted his honor. Revival-goers nevertheless loved his emotionally charged sermons, eagerness to scuffle with rowdies, and readiness to assail rival theologies. Farmer's ministry added hundreds of Methodist converts. Ironically, he ultimately broke with the Methodists and accused their leaders of being "tyrants" who cared more about respectability than saving souls. However, Case asserts that Farmer's sectarian belligerence and republican suspicion of outside authority were core attributes of the Americanized Christianity born on the western frontier.

Case can be faulted for not engaging the most up-to-date historiography. While he cites Hatch and other

historians who were active in the 1980s and 90s, he does not reference John Wigger, Mark Noll, and other recent historians of early American Methodism. One wonders how Case would respond to Noll's assertion that the paradox of Methodism was that a religion that "had *not* been adjusted to the norms of American ideology [flourished] in the new American nation" (p. 340). Nevertheless, Case's insight that Hoosier Methodism etched a populist, combative, and ruggedly individualistic spirit into American evangelical Christianity seems pertinent at a time when these values are once again shaping our nation's culture.

JOHN ELLIS, Department of Humanities,
Bemidji State University

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Abe's Youth: Shaping the Future President

Edited by William E. Bartelt and Joshua A. Claybourn

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Abe's Youth publishes thirty papers prepared by residents of southwestern Indiana during the 1920s and 1930s. The authors of the papers—women and men who were politicians, school teachers, lawyers, journalists, and artists—were drawn together by a common quest (known in its time as "the Lincoln Inquiry") to document and share the history of

their community in which Abraham Lincoln lived from age 7 to 21. The Inquiry took the institutional form of the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society, founded in Evansville in 1920. Editors William E. Bartelt and Joshua A. Claybourn open their preface by acknowledging that "Keith Erikson's 2012 book, *Everybody's History: Indiana's Lincoln Inquiry and the Quest*