

## Foreword

In 1788 twenty-one inhabitants of the village of Westgate, situated in Weardale in County Durham, clubbed together to start a book society. Contributing four shillings each, they purchased an initial stock of volumes and began to exchange them monthly for a small fee. The institution flourished, turning into a subscription library with its own premises and, by 1840, a membership of over two hundred. A rule adopted at its foundation is worth pondering: ‘In the choice of Books to be bought for the Library, the Methodist Preacher who is assistant in this Circuit for the then present time must be consulted, & his advice followed.’ There might be exceptional occasions when the preacher’s veto could be overridden by a two-thirds majority, but even then the acquisitions must not be ‘hurtfull [*sic*] to morality or religion’.<sup>1</sup> The Westgate Library was an evangelical institution. The locally dominant form of evangelical religion, Methodism, shaped the selection of stock. The librarian for half a century from 1806, a gentleman named John Dover Muschamp, was himself a Methodist, first a Wesleyan and later a Primitive. In the year he became librarian, he borrowed five different titles by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. The holdings also included works by Edward Bickersteth, Thomas Gisborne and Hannah More, all prominent Evangelicals in the Church of England. The people of Westgate used their library as a resource for the nurture of their religious convictions.

Yet Westgate Library was by no means narrow. It contained a range of books in history, philosophy, literature, and travel. It included, for example, a life of Mary, Queen of Scots, the *System of Natural History* by the French naturalist Georges Buffon, the collected works of the German dramatist Johann von Schiller, and an account of an autumn tour in Italy. These titles were borrowed by the same Methodist lay preachers, class leaders, and members who absorbed the output of Wesley. The effects were remarkable. Local workers in the lead mining industry were drawn into the venture. In 1839 ten out of the seventeen trustees were lead miners. Literacy rates rose to

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<sup>1</sup> ‘A Catalogue of Books in Westgate Library,’ Durham County Record Office, D/X 1355. Other information is taken from this source.

exceptional heights. In 1842 an assistant to a Royal Commission commented that the intellectual condition of the people was superior to that of any other district he knew.<sup>2</sup> And Weardale produced in George Race, a Primitive Methodist local preacher who drew his knowledge from the library, a prodigy of learning who evaluated the philosophical theology of Samuel Taylor Coleridge with suave authority.<sup>3</sup> Here were evangelical Christians who delighted in exploring the culture of their day.

Doreen Rosman's book, first published in 1984, bears testimony to the eagerness of evangelicals to join in cultural affairs. Covering the years from 1790 to 1833 and embracing all the evangelical denominations, it readily admits the limits of involvement by evangelicals. They disliked, for example, cards, horse races, and the theatre. Yet they loved other forms of recreation and enjoyed music, the fine arts, and literature. Intellectuals emerged from their ranks. The author provides a wealth of evidence to dismiss what she calls on her first page 'the legend of evangelical philistinism'. Although other writers have subsequently concurred in her judgement, nowhere else is the case made out with such skill and thoroughness. John Wesley, Edward Bickersteth, Thomas Gisborne, and Hannah More, the authors of the favourite reading of the Westgate lead miners, all figure prominently in her pages. Here is a book that goes a long way towards explaining the permeation of nineteenth-century culture by evangelical values.

David Bebbington,

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<sup>2</sup> C. J. Hunt, *The Lead Miners of the Northern Pennines in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Manchester, 1970), p. 230.

<sup>3</sup> C. C. McKechnie, 'Local Preachers I Have Known,' *Primitive Methodist Magazine* (1892), pp. 20–24.