Foreword

In the eighteenth century, as today, people did not live their lives in disciplinary silos, with their religious lives nicely separated from their workaday experience of getting and spending or their experience of relationships as men and women. Then, as now, they lived their lives for the most part in a local milieu where the factors that shaped their lives, day by day, were interconnected and very particular. Even large forces of cultural, demographic, and economic change were encountered not in the abstract but in the names and things of one's own familiar place. Since the rise of the new social history and since the anthropologist Clifford Geertz first coined the term *thick description* in the 1970s, it has been common for many historians to aspire to an integrated depiction of the lives of those they study in their local context. Like a Peter Breughel painting of village life, the historian's account aspires to somehow capture the interrelatedness of all aspects of life in its local setting with as much detail as possible crowded into the picture frame. This attention to the local is not, however, mere antiquarianism. Several British historians have used this sort of careful local history to good effect to test, refine, or question general models of historical change such as secularization theory, or broad claims about the relationship of church and politics, or the tacit assumption of a trickle-down influence of the ideas of intellectual elites.

The genius of this present volume is not only its awareness that the interconnectedness of life on the ground requires an interdisciplinary framework for investigation, but also the particular locale chosen for study. In the eighteenth century, the parish of Madeley in Shropshire was, at one and the same time, the cradle of the Industrial Revolution, a heartland for Methodism, and the setting for the public ministry of

several remarkable women and men—and all of this remains richly documented in a vast archive of well-preserved manuscripts. Between 1760 and 1840, the parish was notable for the evangelical ministries of the Reverend John Fletcher and his wife, Mary, both of whom were Methodist associates of the Wesleys, as well as for the ministry of Mary's assistant and successor, Mary Tooth. The parish also included Coalbrookdale in the Ironbridge Gorge, where the Quaker Abraham Darby pioneered the smelting of iron ore using coke, a process central to the rise of industrial society. Historians of gender, religion, and industry all have a stake, therefore, in understanding the life of Madeley during the last half of the eighteenth century through the early decades of the nineteenth century. This is the right place to shine the spotlight during these years, since the issues illuminated in Madeley are issues that remain of great concern to scholars today.

The essays presented here originated at a conference held on location, June 16–18, 2009, at the Telford (Priorslee) campus of the University of Wolverhampton, with sessions nearby at Madeley and Ironbridge. The conference attracted more than fifty scholars from around the world. Uniquely, in my experience, it put theologians and industrial historians in the same room with specialists in women's studies and church historians and others. As I listened to the various papers, and thought about the vastly different training and academic discourses represented by the presenters, I was not left with the feeling one so often has at academic conferences, namely, of an incommensurable unlikeness papered over by the clever rhetoric of a creative chairperson. No, these papers genuinely illuminated each other and helped to build up a larger picture of life in Madeley and its environs as a case study of larger issues important in the formation of the modern world. On the same day, I was listening to dream narratives from the archive of Mary Fletcher and Abiah Darby, viewing an exhibition of haunting landscape paintings of blast furnaces at night in Coalbrookdale, and thinking about the sophisticated theology of Trinitarian dispensations of John Fletcher and its influence upon later Methodism. But it all fit together, and when I got back home, I found myself revising one of my class lectures on early modern Christian spirituality in a way that drew on all of this.

It is a real service that Peter Forsaith and Geordan Hammond have edited these essays together for publication so that a wider audience can benefit from the Breughel-like picture of life in Madeley that emerges

from its pages, and so that we can all revise our understanding of the late eighteenth century accordingly.

D. Bruce Hindmarsh
James M. Houston Professor of Spiritual Theology
Regent College, Vancouver