Introduction

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THE THEMES AND CONTEXTS

The name of Coalbrookdale is synonymous with the dawn of the industrial age, where in 1709 Abraham Darby I pioneered new technologies of smelting iron. This came to be symbolized by the world's first iron bridge, constructed nearby over the River Severn in 1779, and recognized in the 1986 award of "World Heritage Site" status to the Ironbridge Gorge, among the first in the United Kingdom.

Less well known are the religious aspects of the area and the people, as well as the part played by women. The Darby family, and some of their associates, were Quakers, and John Wilkinson, another leading ironmaster, was brother-in-law to the Unitarian (and scientist) Joseph Priestley. Coalbrookdale was situated in the Church of England parish of Madeley, which had been a stronghold of old Catholicism: Charles II took refuge here after his defeat at the Battle of Worcester in 1651. It was to this parish, with its potential religious tensions and social significance and demands, that the evangelical clergyman John Fletcher (1729–1785) was appointed as vicar in 1760, where he ministered "with uncommon zeal and ability" for the remainder of his life.[1]

His wife, Mary (née Bosanquet, 1739–1815), continued to have effective, though wholly unofficial, dominance over the parish, followed after her death by her protégé, Mary Tooth (1777–1843). Their reputation meant that other evangelical women looked to them for support.

1. Inscription on the Reverend John Fletcher's tomb, Madeley churchyard.

Abiah Darby (1716–1793), widow of Abraham Darby II, was also celebrated as a leading and influential Quaker. Thus the area can be seen as paradigmatic for positive readings of the place of women in eighteenth-century society and religion.

John Fletcher[2] was a Swiss migrant, born Jean de la Fléchère, who came to England aged about twenty. He came under the influence of the Methodists, and was associated with the Wesleys, Lady Huntingdon, and George Whitefield. His persona and his ministry in Madeley became renowned; he was noted for his personal godliness and as a leader among the Methodists, a potential successor to John Wesley and formulator of "Arminian" dogma.

Mary Bosanquet[3] was the daughter of a wealthy Huguenot businessman in London. She too underwent a Methodist religious experience and started a school for poor girls which relocated to Yorkshire in 1768, where it developed into a more extensive Christian community. She also preached in the neighborhood and led Methodist class meetings. She married John Fletcher in 1781.

Both John and Mary Fletcher became subjects for Methodist hagiography in the nineteenth century, a process which brought the accretions and inaccuracies of legend. Through the same period, the Severn Gorge, "the most extraordinary district in the world,"[4] with its iron bridge which had been the wonder of the age in its time, and which visitors from across Europe came to see, slowly fell into neglect.

However, over recent decades, a number of emerging themes in academic studies have led to growth of interest in aspects of religious history and biography, gender studies and industrial archaeology, disciplines which converge in this volume. The place of religion, often dismissed by a previous generation of historians, has become reintegrated in the general picture, and a pessimistic view of the eighteenth-century church as moribund and corrupt has been challenged. The emergence of

2. For recent brief treatments, see Patrick Streiff, "Fletcher, John William (*bap.* 1729, *d.* 1785)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004) and Peter S. Forsaith, "Fletcher, John William," *Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland*, available online: http://www.wesleyhistoricalsociety.org.uk.

3. John A. Hargreaves, "Fletcher, Mary (1739–1815)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and E. Dorothy Graham, "Bosanquet, Mary (Mrs Fletcher)," *Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland*.

4. Joseph Plymley, *A General View of the Agriculture of Shropshire* (London: Phillips, 1803).

disciplines such as Women's Studies has brought new interest to Mary Fletcher and her context.

Industrial archaeology has been another discipline to emerge, and it was Barrie Trinder's pioneering work in tracing the growth of early industry in Shropshire which drew attention to the huge significance of the area.[5] A key factor of his studies was to recognize the importance of the religious life of the area, for much of the new industry was centered in or around what then comprised Madeley parish (it was subdivided into three in the nineteenth century).

By that time some significant archive sources were also becoming more readily accessible. Around the late 1950s, a number of Madeley parish records associated with the Fletchers were deposited in the Shropshire County Records Office. The 1960 publication of George Lawton's *Shropshire Saint* at one and the same time presented (for the first time) a critical study of John Fletcher, and by an Anglican (yet published by the Methodists).[6]

The relocation to the John Rylands Library, Manchester, of the Methodist Church's historic papers has arguably been a major stimulant for new research. The greater accessibility of this archive, as well as others, has led scholars to start to challenge the dominant place of John Wesley in early Methodist historiography, and to question the narrative of Methodism's past from the centre. Stories from elsewhere—as this volume indicates—sometimes give a different account and legitimize alternative viewpoints. The largest single collection of the Methodist Archives remains the "Fletcher-Tooth" papers.

So the juxtaposition of some of the leading figures at the start of the Evangelical Revival, arguably the most significant Protestant religious movement since the Reformation, including several influential women, in the area which has come to be known as the "cradle of industrial revolution" formed the rationale for the "Religion, Gender, and Industry" conference in 2009, at which the papers in this volume were presented.

5. Barrie Trinder, *The Industrial Revolution in Shropshire* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1973 [1st ed.]).

6. George Lawton, *Shropshire Saint* (London: Epworth, 1960).

THE CONFERENCE

It had its origins one summer's day in 2006 when ten people met in Manchester to discuss the progress and scope of their research into the lives and ministries of John and Mary Fletcher and their circle, and the religious life of Madeley parish. Some were established researchers in the area, others new hands, so there was a meeting of minds, both of long-held opinions against new approaches, and different disciplines—centrally theology, history and literature, but taking account of gendered readings in these areas. It became clearer that day that numbers of people were working in and around these strands—that it was a growing area of interest—and so the idea of a full conference was mooted.

If the germ of the idea was sown at the Nazarene Theological College that day, one immediate issue was where to hold such a conference. Manchester or Oxford, locations of the partner organizers, would have been straightforward, but it seemed much more appropriate to hold it in its geographical setting of east Shropshire. A suggestion of the Priorslee campus of the University of Wolverhampton was made and plans started to become realities.

No comparable conference to this one—specifically around the Fletchers and Madeley, and rooted in that locale—had been attempted before. It was an adventure, particularly as its aim was to contextualize the specific subjects, both against each other and against their larger background. It also became clear that certain partners were needed on board, centrally Madeley churches and the Ironbridge Institute, the academic face of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum. Respectively, the Reverend Henry Morris and David de Haan became willing supporters, offering advice and—most crucially—premises to hold conference sessions in St Michael's, Madeley (splendid after an internal re-ordering) and Coalbrookdale.

Perhaps one memorable highlight of the conference could not have been planned or predicted. At the end of the middle day, after a full schedule of papers and visits, it was planned to visit the historic 1779 iron bridge itself. But it had been the kind of damp and dreary weather that the British midsummer can so readily provide; yet, driving down the dale and into the Severn Gorge, the clouds cleared and by the time the bridge was reached the sun was shining. The bridge, which years ago was rusting and threatening collapse, was rarely more

spectacular than on that evening, with the sun on the raindrops in the trees sparkling like diamonds.

The success of the conference depended on a number of factors, and most critically achieving a balance. The theme was "Religion, Gender, and Industry," to reflect the aspects of the field, but ensuring that different disciplines and varying interest groups were present was critical. Having conference participants from Europe, Australasia, Canada, and the United States helped make the event and perspectives truly international. Hopefully, this is reflected in the essays.

In retrospect, the scope and balance might have been improved had it been possible to include speakers on recusancy and Quakerism.[7] Perhaps there could have been more on the industrial background, although the "Feo9" conference, celebrating three hundred years since Abraham Darby's pioneering development in iron smelting, had taken place very shortly before. The exhibition of art of the Industrial Revolution, curated by David de Haan, at Coalbrookdale, was a significant contribution to the tercentenary.

Those who would have wanted to be present, and to have contributed, but who could not included Herbert McGonigle (John Fletcher's theology), who generously hosted the original 2006 meeting, Bishop Patrick Streiff, Rhonda Carrim, David Frudd, and Gareth Lloyd (on Mary Bosanquet/Fletcher).[8]

THE PAPERS

This volume presents an important contribution to discussions on the separate issues involved, but most significantly links them together and is thus especially a landmark addition to the literature on religion, gender, and industry in Madeley parish. Existing works range from the

7. For further reading, see Malcolm Wanklyn, "Catholics in the village community: Madeley, Shropshire 1630–1770," in Marie Rowlands, ed. *English Catholics of Parish and Town 1558–1758* (Wolverhampton: University and Catholic Record Society, 1999); Rachel Labouchere, *Abiah Darby* (York: Sessions, 1988).

8. Herbert Boyd McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace: John Wesley's Evangelical Arminianism* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001) esp. chap. 11; Gareth Lloyd, *Catalogues of The Fletcher-Tooth Papers* (Manchester: John Rylands Library, from 1994) and with David Frudd, "Mary Bosanquet-Fletcher's Watchwords," *The Asbury Journal* 61:2 (Fall 2006) 5–94. See also the essays by Carrim, Frudd, and Lloyd in Norma Virgoe, ed. *Angels and Impudent Women in Methodism* (Wesley Historical Society, 2007).

largely biographical, such as John Wesley's 1786 *Short Account* of John Fletcher and Henry Moore's *Life of Mrs Mary Fletcher* (1817) through to recent broader studies including Patrick Streiff's *Reluctant Saint?* (2001) and Phyllis Mack's *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment* (2008). As with many works of that age and genre, Luke Tyerman's comprehensive and heavily detailed *Wesley's Designated Successor* of 1882 has come to be challenged in its veracity and thesis. These papers bring a series of new insights and angles to the growing body of research and literature. It will hopefully come to be seen not simply as a fruit of new research, but as a stimulus to continuing studies.

There were four keynote papers at the conference. The opening and closing papers by Jeremy Gregory and Peter Forsaith, respectively, along with that by Barrie Trinder, are published in this volume. In lieu of Phyllis Mack's paper not appearing in this book, the editors selected David Wilson's important essay as an "honorary keynote," in that it is published in full here. The other nine essays in the volume are revised versions of shorter papers originally given in the conference sessions. The essays have been ordered in a roughly thematic and chronological sequence. The first four essays by Gregory, Trinder, Gibson, and Wilson help to set the historical framework for the rest of the volume. These are followed by two essays that look at John Fletcher's spirituality and theology (Lineham and Loyer), four essays on the contribution of women to the Evangelical Revival and life in Madeley (White, McInelly, Lenton, and Blessing), two essays that examine the impact of the Fletchers in early American Methodism (Raser and Wood), and the closing keynote by Forsaith.

The volume opens with a sweeping historiographical essay by Jeremy Gregory on the themes of religion, gender, and industry, which have all been major topics of research by historians of eighteenth-century Britain, but usually considered independently of one another. Providing a critical context for the rest of the volume, Gregory brings these topics together to demonstrate how recent research in these areas has questioned some long-held interpretations of these subjects.

The three essays that follow contribute further to the historical context for the volume, while advancing understanding of aspects of John Fletcher's context, life, and ministry. Barrie Trinder draws on decades of research into the early industrial history of Shropshire to point out a number of ways in which knowledge of Fletcher's early industrial context

can challenge existing interpretations and encourage deeper investigation into his role in the community in which he served. Through a study of Lord James Beauclerk's work as bishop of Hereford from 1746 to 1787, William Gibson sheds light on some possible reasons why Fletcher's High Church diocesan declined to criticize his Methodist practices and Methodism more generally. David Wilson's essay deals directly with one of the central themes discussed at the conference: Madeley as the most notable instance of Methodism remaining within the Church of England. Wilson argues that John and Mary Fletcher's gradually expanding ministry, which included the building of new meeting rooms and setting up of religious society groups throughout the parish, effectively fused Anglican and "Methodist" means of providing pastoral care.

Essays by Peter Lineham and Kenneth Loyer advance knowledge of John Fletcher's spirituality and theology. Lineham gives a fascinating account of Fletcher's little known interest in the mystical theosophy of Emanuel Swedenborg. This essay helps advance understanding of the attraction of mystical writers and theology to Fletcher and other evangelicals. The doxological nature of Fletcher's Trinitarian theology is the theme of Loyer's study. He shows that Fletcher's doctrine of the Trinity is grounded in experimental religion in a way that set him apart from both English Unitarianism and English rational theology.

The following four essays explore the part played by women in the Evangelical Revival, which had a key focus in John and Mary Fletcher and their immediate circles. Eryn White's essay looks at their prominent role in the spiritual, social and economic life of the Trefeca community led by the Welsh evangelical leader Howel Harris, with which John Fletcher came into contact during his time as President of Lady Huntingdon's college at Trefeca. In "Mothers in Christ: Mary Fletcher and the Women of Early Methodism," Brett McInelly provides an alternative to the trend of an influential strand of scholarship that has focused on the social consequences of women's involvement in early Methodism. While he affirms that their actions did indeed have political ramifications, evidence from the writings of these women shows that their focus was first and foremost on their spiritual experiences. John Lenton and Carol Blessing offer studies of women in Madeley and Methodism more widely in the early nineteenth century. Lenton illustrates how women (and a few men) supported each other's ministry in the face of growing opposition to women's preaching in Methodism following a hostile

declaration from the Methodist Conference in 1803. He outlines three regional clusters of women who provided such support for one another: one based in and around Madeley, another centered around Mary and Zechariah Taft, and a group in East Anglia. Through telling the story of Mary Tooth's ministry in Madeley, Blessing demonstrates the continuation of female ministry in the parish that was carried on by Tooth for nearly thirty years following Mary Fletcher's death in 1815. Along with Lenton, Blessing's essay highlights the fact that female preaching could survive in spite of official hostility from Methodist leadership.

The influence of the ministry and writings of the Fletchers extended beyond Britain and their own lifetime, particularly in the United States. This fact is insightfully expressed in essays by Laurence Wood and Harold Raser. Wood argues that John Fletcher was a dominant theologian of early American Methodism through the ongoing influence of his theological writings. His thinking profoundly shaped American Methodist doctrine and spirituality. This is clearly reflected in the life and ministry of Phoebe Palmer, the prominent American revivalist who is the subject of Raser's essay. Raser argues that Palmer's theological vision, which continues to shape the holiness movement, owes more to the writings of John and Mary Fletcher than any other source.

The final essay of the volume was the concluding keynote presentation from the conference by Peter Forsaith. He charts the development of research on the Fletchers and Madeley parish and offers incisive comments on how Fletcher can be used as a "case study" to enlighten central concerns for historians of the eighteenth-century church in England, such as the complex relationship between evangelicals, "Methodists," and the Church of England. What, then, he asks, is the way forward for continued research into the Fletchers and Madeley parish that retains the relevance of this subject in the wider area of religion, gender, and industry in eighteenth-century Britain and beyond? Based on his experience of studying John Fletcher's life for over thirty years, Forsaith concludes that the answer lies in fidelity to primary sources and attention to cross-disciplinary study.

Recent published work has included pieces around the women of Madeley, by two conference speakers: Phyllis Mack (keynote) and Joanna

Cruickshank. Neither is published here since they were already committed for publication elsewhere, and similarly, Jonathan Clark's paper was taken from his introductory chapter in the recent *Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*.[9]

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Thanks are due to many people, without whom neither the conference nor this volume could have come into being. First to Reverend Dr. Herbert McGonigle and Prof. William Gibson, respectively (now emeritus) director of the Manchester Wesley Research Centre and director of the Oxford Centre for Methodism and Church History (Oxford Brookes University), for their support and contributions, and also to Margaret Pye, who so efficiently acted as administrator for the conference and has formatted the essays for publication. David Wilson also generously gave editorial support to the volume.

In Shropshire itself, we should thank the Reverend Henry Morris and Geoff Pochin, as well as the congregation of St Michael's, Madeley; and the Reverend Peter Clarke and members of Fletcher Memorial Methodist Church (who bravely provided lunch for conference members). In Coalbrookdale, we are grateful for the support of David de Haan, Steve Miller and colleagues at the Ironbridge Institute. The staff of the University of Wolverhampton (Priorslee campus) worked hard to make the conference arrangements a success.

Lastly, to the contributors, whose work on the themes of religion, gender, and industry as they interacted in the fascinating parish of Madeley in Shropshire is offered as a contribution to these areas of research. We hope this international group of scholars and their multidisciplinary perspectives will spur on further research into the subjects of this volume and lead to future conferences and writings on its themes.

9. Phyllis Mack, "Religion and Popular Beliefs: Visionary Women in the Age of Enlightenment," in Ellen Pollak, ed. *A Cultural History of Women in the Age of Enlightenment*, vol. 4 of A Cultural History of Women (forthcoming, Berg). Joanna Cruickshank, "'If God . . . see fit to call you out': 'Public' and 'Private' in the Writings of Methodist Women, 1760–1840," in *Religion in the Age of Enlightenment*, vol. 2 (New York: AMS Press, 2010) 55–76. See also Cruickshank, "'Friend of my Soul': Constructing Spiritual Friendship in the Autobiography of Mary Fletcher," *Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32:3 (2009) 373–87. J. C. D. Clark, "The Eighteenth-Century Context," in William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 3–29.