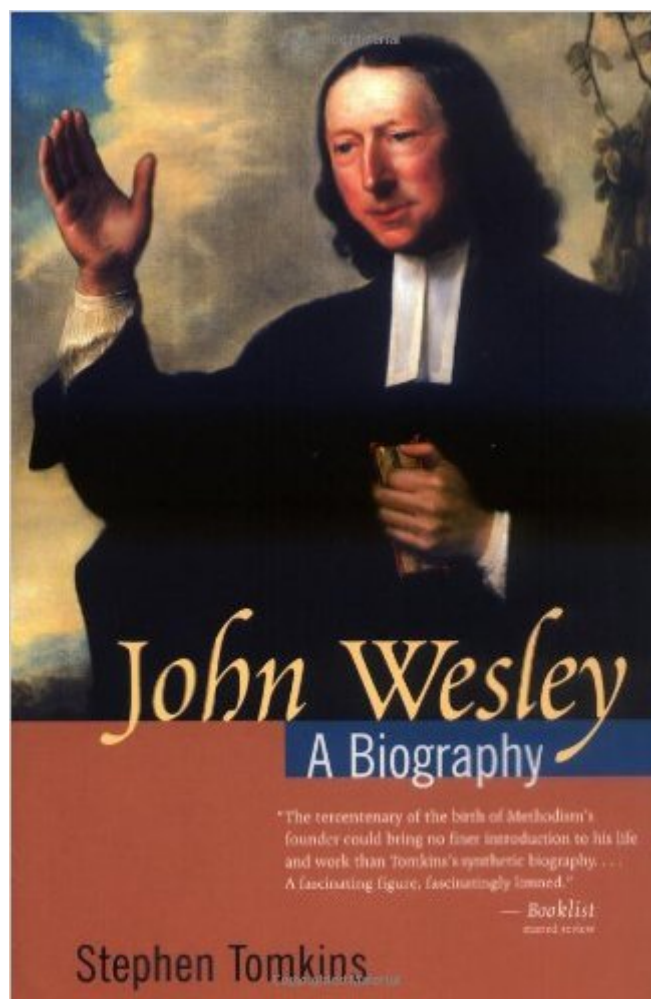


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John Wesley: A Biography



Synopsis

A compelling portrait of the father of Methodism. The life and work of John Wesley (1703-1791) has had an enormous influence on modern Christianity, not least for his role as father of the Methodist church. *John Wesley* is a popular biography of the great figure, which brings his career and ideas alive for a new generation. Written with verve and grounded in thorough research, the book tells the story of Wesley's colorful and dramatic life. Stephen Tomkins chronicles Wesley's family background and early childhood, his school and university career, and his adult life as a religious leader in England. Throughout this engaging portrait, Tomkins pauses to explore a number of key issues in Wesley's increasingly rich religious views, including the renunciation of wealth and the role of women in church life. The volume concludes with an important assessment of Wesley's abiding influence both in his own country and abroad. Superbly crafted, *John Wesley* will interest those from the Methodist tradition as well as all general readers of church history.

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Customer Reviews

This is not the type of Christian biography I generally care for. The facts are all there (I hope), but the author's psycho-analytical comments on Wesley's relationships with women and subtle (and often not-so-subtle) mocking of John Wesley's characteristics, beliefs, choices and friends served to undermine the historical narrative rather than to support it. I hesitated in giving this book a 3-star rating, because it is (sadly) the best biography currently available on John Wesley. To that end, if you are primarily interested in his life and the origins of the Methodist church, then you could

consider this a 4 1/2-star book instead. However, if you are interested in Christian biography for the sake of strengthening both your understanding and your spiritual fervor, this may not be the book for you. I'd like to comment briefly on the distinctive areas that comprise (in my opinion) a good Christian biography.

1) Historical Accuracy: As far as I can tell, the book sticks to the facts fairly well. If you have read Dallimore's biography of George Whitefield, you will notice that Tomkins' treatment of figures other than Wesley himself is somewhat lacking, but it is not the facts that cause the lack in this book. History-buffs will find what they are looking for here as long as they can distinguish between 21st century commentary and the true historical account. If anything, no one could accuse this biographer of candy-coating Wesley's life.

2) Spiritual Character Development: Do we get to see into Wesley's heart and glimpse the passion for God that drove him forward? At times you almost feel like the writer has accomplished this, but he quickly follows it up with discouraging, mildly-sarcastic statements that tear that feeling away from you. This is particularly true in his insistence on contrasting Wesley's characteristics in early, mid and late life. The most disturbing point for me was in the discussion of Wesley's later life. A rather depressive segment from a letter written to his brother Charles is quoted and taken as formative for Wesley's outlook through his entire life. Any student of Christian history knows that most (but not all) great evangelists suffer from some form of depression. Luther, Spurgeon, Lloyd-Jones, etc.--all of these men suffered at times from depressed spirits as a result of the great labor they put forth in declaring the word of God. At this point the author makes you feel as though everything he's reported about Wesley's great evangelistic success and powerful preaching has been a fraud. Overall a very disappointing portion of the book.

3) Theology: The author brings out Wesley's theology and its development with some degree of accuracy. I get the distinct feeling, however, that the lack of flow between Wesley's earlier convictions and later convictions was due to the author's own lack of theological understanding (or perhaps conviction is a better word). He perpetually seems to be condemning Wesley's doctrine of Christian Perfection and at one point agrees with the conclusion that salvation is by faith AND works while deriding Wesley's views on the matter.

4) The Author: I guess, when it comes down to it, this is really where the book falls short. Tomkins doesn't seem to have a firm grasp on Christian theology, much less Wesley's theology. He takes great delight in applying Freudian psycho-analysis to Wesley's varied female relationships, seems overly skeptical of Wesley's conversion, comments sarcastically on many of Wesley's decisions and repeatedly suggests (according to human wisdom and modern psychology) how Wesley might have better managed his life and doctrine. Only in the chapter on his death and heritage is Wesley given much credit at all. I would recommend this book to history-minded persons, but could not in good conscience recommend it to sincere evangelicals

(particularly those of the Calvinist persuasion). John Wesley is more muddled in my mind after reading this book than he was before. I only hope the truth lies other than where Tomkins would allow it to rest.

I wanted a thorough insight into the doctrines and life of the John Wesley, the great English man, and founder of the Methodist Church. I wanted it presented through a very objective pair of lenses. In choosing to read about Wesley, I recognized that history already passed its judgment on him, I sought only to examine the facts on which this judgment is based. In selecting a biography, I pointedly tried to avoid biographies from star struck fans of Wesley who could fall into the temptation of purging their subject of the many human foibles that make extra-ordinary lives attractive to me. I definitely wanted to stay away from those hacks who feel a deep duty to cut greatness to size, and dampen the auspicious aura that history casts on the present with their irreverent pen. After carefully reviewing many, I decided that ROY HATTERSLEY's "John Wesley: A brand from the Burning" fell in the later category, and Paul Wesley's "Recapturing the Wesleys' Vision: An Introduction to the Faith of John and Charles Wesley" may fall too far into the later rank. Stephen Tomkin's John Wesley: A Biography was my unfortunate choice. John Wesley - A Biography comes across more as a critique of Wesley's life than a biography. The book provides a lot of information in its two hundred pages; only, the information is time after time introduced merely as prelude to many scathing psychoanalysis of the man. Mr. Tomkins seems to prod into his subject's mind (centuries after the fact) for the singular purpose of finding reasons to question the motives behind many of the decisions taken by Wesley (see what the writer wrote about Wesley's ability to distinguish between biography and hagiography in Chapter Seven: The Wilderness Georgia, as one example in a book froth with cynical editorializing.) A few times the writer boldly questions the veracity of some of the categorical claims of his subject, only to offer equally unconvincing reasons that Wesley would lie. The effect of this practice on the book is to effectively inject the writer's thoughts into the narrative in a noticeably intrusive manner. Essentially, it became a book about the fundamental soundness of Tomkins as much as it was about Wesley. This book may appeal to those interested in Wesley in much the same way as a surgeon is interested in his patients. It may appeal to the student of dialectics, but my guess is that few Christians will find the style tasteful. It was neither objective, nor particularly insightful.

Stephen Tomkins has written a highly engaging and thoroughly informative book that shines a shimmering spotlight on the man who was the founder of Methodism and one of the greatest

religious reformers in Western history. Linear, concise, and lively, Tomkins's book takes the reader from Wesley's fiery near-death as a child through his formulation of a stringent code of self-discipline (which, strict as it was, failed to protect Wesley from a string of unfortunate romances) and tireless days and nights of hard riding and preaching through his death and far-reaching influence. The Wesley who emerges is a fascinating individual, flawed as all men inevitably are but one who answered the unique call God had upon his life with an admirable resolve. Tomkins has a clear command of the facts and his analysis is uniformly logical and not without humor. Highly recommended not only to Methodists but to any student of Christian history.

Used this book for a class on John Wesley. The author had some good information, but makes reference to modern things such as a Toronto incident, without explaining what it was. If using this book, you have to be ready to do a lot of supplemental research. Also, the author refers to Wesley's wife as Molly, yet every other biography, as well as Wesley's journals, refer to her as Mary. Tompkins seems to want to make his own twist without doing extensive research or referencing.

John Wesley's whole life is on display, from his time at Oxford to his marriage later in life. You will learn about his friendship with George Whitefield, the sermons he preached, the passion he displayed, his missionary work in the USA with his brother, and his evangelistic preaching in his homeland by horseback in Britain. A must get for the Bible school student.

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