CHURCH HISTORIAN AND WESLEY SCHOLAR FRANK BAKER DEAD AT 89

DURHAM, N.C. – The Rev. Frank Baker, an internationally renowned authority on Methodism founder John Wesley and a Duke University professor emeritus, died in his sleep Monday at the Durham Regent Retirement Home. He was 89.

Born in Kingston-upon-Hull, England, in 1910, Baker earned his bachelor of arts degree from the University of London in 1931 and his bachelor of divinity degree three years later from Manchester University. He continued his education at University of Nottingham, earning his Ph.D. in 1952.


“Frank Baker was, without question, the leading authority on the history of the Wesleys and early Methodism,” Divinity School Dean L. Gregory Jones said. “His academic zeal, along with his gracious hospitality, made a profound impression on generations of Methodist ministers and Wesley scholars here at Duke and throughout the world. We will miss his presence among us and his friendship.”

Baker’s 30 books and more than 200 articles ranged from scholarly volumes, such as *John Wesley and the Church of England* and *From Wesley to Asbury: Studies in Early American Methodism*, to an original collection of children’s stories.

“It is right to identify Dr. Baker as the preeminent Wesley historian who took Wesley scholarship to a higher level,” said Richard Heitzenrater, William Kellon Quick professor of church history and Wesley studies at Duke. “But what is not as well known is that he was a gentleman. A warm and friendly person, he was willing to help anyone who needed assistance with scholarship, and that ranged from undergraduate basketball players to doctoral students in religion.”

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During his career at Duke and after his retirement, Baker was closely associated with a project to publish the definitive edition of John Wesley’s writings. Baker served as editor for the 36-volume *Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, which is being published by Abingdon Press.

“He determined what John Wesley says today,” said Russell E. Richey, professor of church history at the divinity school. “That series is and will be a monument to Frank Baker, signaling a lasting contribution to scholarship. Through his teaching he inspired many to interest in Wesley and Methodist history and trained the leadership of the next generation of Methodist scholars.”

An avid collector of books and writings on Methodism, Baker began his collection in the mid-1930s after winning an essay prize on Wesley’s library. “I came to believe that it was important as far as possible to secure not simply the first, but every edition of the writings of the two brothers and the members of their immediate families,” Baker wrote in 1962.

His collection of Wesleyana and Methodistica grew in excess of 15,000 items and four tons before Baker started donating it, over a period of more than two decades, to the Perkins and Divinity School libraries at Duke. The collection contains the second largest number of Wesley publications in the world and has more than 50 titles representing the only known copies.

A recipient of the St. George’s Gold Medal for distinguished service to the United Methodist Church, Baker was presented in 1994 the distinguished service award by the General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church. In September 1999, the Baker Methodist Research Center was established at Duke Divinity School to serve as a focal point for future Wesley scholarship.

Baker is survived by his wife of 63 years, Nellie; his daughter, Margaret Whitehead, of Irving, Texas; his daughter, Enid Hickingbotham, of Stouchsburg, Pa.; his son, Peter Baker, of Tampa, Fla.; and six grandchildren.

A memorial service will be held at 10 a.m. Thursday in the Duke University Chapel. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the Frank and Nellie Baker Methodist Research Center, c/o the Duke University Divinity School, P.O. Box 90968, Durham, N.C. 27708.

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