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ALDERSGATE: A TRADITION HISTORY

Randy L. Maddox

The 1988 commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the event of Aldersgate may well be remembered more for the renewed vigor it brought to debate about the meaning of this event than for any of its celebrations. One of our aims in this essay is to show why such debate was inevitable. Another aim is to highlight the dynamics of this debate and suggest some of its implications for understanding the place of Aldersgate in Wesley's life and in later Wesleyan traditions.

The Need for Tradition-Historical Investigation

It is no secret that the Aldersgate event has been interpreted in a variety of ways by Wesley scholars and those in the various traditions descended from Wesley's ministry. Indeed, Frederick Maser has developed a typology of these various readings that divides them into five main categories: 1) Those who accept the Aldersgate experience as an important watershed or conversion in Wesley's life (Maser lists five varying specific descriptions of the nature of this watershed); 2) Those who deny that Aldersgate was a conversion experience, assigning that experience to some earlier date, while still recognizing Aldersgate's importance as a religious crisis in Wesley's life; 3) Those who deny that Aldersgate had any enduring significance for Wesley's life—emphasizing, instead, some earlier date (usually 1725) as his conversion; 4) Those who stress the gradual nature of Wesley's spiritual development and see Aldersgate as simply one step in a

steady process of growth; and 5) Those who believe that Aldersgate is one of many “conversions” in Wesley’s life.¹

How could a single event spawn such a variety of interpretations? One obvious possibility is that the information which Wesley’s later interpreters have to work with is inconclusive. A quick reading of participants in the debate about the meaning of Aldersgate reveals that they spend much of their time dealing with the ambiguities of Wesley’s references to the event. These ambiguities have received extensive scholarly attention in recent years and the major textual dilemmas are now fairly clear.²

First: On the one hand, Wesley’s initial account of Aldersgate in his *Journal* presented it as a dramatic transition to a consistent Christian life, in explicit contrast with the perceived shortcomings of his earlier practice. On the other hand, Wesley added footnotes to the 1774 and 1775 editions of the *Journal* which significantly qualified this contrast. Moreover, the accounts in the full *Journal* cast doubt upon both Wesley’s initial pessimistic reading of his life before Aldersgate and his initial optimistic claims about the results of the event.

Again: On the one hand, Wesley reprinted the extract of the *Journal* containing the Aldersgate account five times during his life. On the other hand, he almost never again mentioned Aldersgate explicitly in his *Journal* or other published works.³

Finally: On the one hand, Wesley made frequent chronological references that highlight 1738 as significant both to his own life and to the Methodist revival. On the other hand, these references are all quite general and may have referred to the beginning of open-air preaching or the organization of the first society rather than to the event of Aldersgate.

In drawing our attention to these textual dilemmas, Wesley scholars have shown why there has been room for a debate about the significance of Aldersgate in the Wesleyan traditions. Indeed, the ambiguities are such that this debate cannot be settled on textual grounds alone. The consideration of other relevant aspects of the issue would appear to be necessary.

The increased hermeneutical sensitivity of the last few decades confirms this need for considering other aspects of the issue. Contemporary hermeneutic philosophy has made us keenly aware that the act of interpretation is influenced by the cultural/historical assumptions of the interpreter’s context as much as by the object of interpretation and its context.⁴ This suggests that the differing interpretations of Aldersgate should be analyzed not only in the light of textual ambiguities but also from the perspective of the history of shifting theological concerns within the later Wesleyan traditions. The need for this

second type of analysis has been mentioned a couple of times in the discussion of Aldersgate (e.g., McIntosh 1969; and Snow 1963), but no extended treatment has been forthcoming. Hence, our initial foray into this promising field.

Historical Shifts in the Interpretation of Aldersgate

The purpose of a tradition-historical study is to increase an interpretive community's awareness of shifts or developments in the history of its understanding of a classic text (or event). Central to such a study is the attempt to correlate shifting interpretations with broader changes in the self-understanding of the community. Thus, our task is to investigate correlations between changes in the general theological self-understanding of the Wesleyan traditions and their shifting interpretations of Aldersgate.

1791–1850: Aldersgate as Personal Conversion Event

In the first half-century following Wesley's death, Methodism was an adolescent movement seeking to find its own feet. During this time, it generally honored Wesley more as its founder than as its theological mentor or norm.⁵ Thus, the major literary productions of this period were funeral eulogies and triumphalistic biographies, rather than theological studies. When these early works mention Aldersgate, they generally portray it as Wesley's "conversion." Thereby, they were primarily re-presenting Wesley's own early evaluation, for they depended heavily on the early volumes of his *Journal* for their account.⁶ Indicative of such dependence, these works typically do not clarify what they meant by "conversion." If they evidence any distinctive concern, it was to defend Wesley from charges of enthusiasm by stressing that it was a transition to which he was brought by calm rational and scriptural considerations.⁷ In other words, they portrayed Aldersgate more as Wesley's *personal conversion event* than as an *exemplary conversion experience*.

The suggestion that, during this time period, Aldersgate was regarded more as an intriguing event in Wesley's life than as a normative model for subsequent Methodist piety is lent further support by the Methodist centennial celebrations of 1839. The event that British Methodists chose to commemorate as most crucial to their founding was the establishment of the first Society in 1739. This choice sparked a mild protest from Thomas Jackson (1838), who argued that

the centenary of Aldersgate would have been more appropriate. Nonetheless, both the centennial and sesqui-centennial of Aldersgate passed without formal commemoration.⁸ While defended as Wesley's "conversion," it had not yet been adopted as the defining metaphor of Methodist belief and practice.

1850–1870: Initial Questions About Aldersgate as “Conversion”

In the absence of a stated definition, one is left with the impression that the previous biographies assumed some version of Wesley's *Dictionary* definition of conversion: "a thorough change of heart and life from sin to holiness."⁹ The problem with such a definition of what happened at Aldersgate, of course, is that it is not at all clear that this event was such a dramatic and thorough change in Wesley's life—as he admitted later himself. As such, it was only a matter of time before designations of Aldersgate as Wesley's "conversion" provoked debate. One of the earliest public debates took place in the pages of the *Wesleyan Methodist Association Magazine* in 1854. A letter from a reader (Miller 1854) argued that Wesley's early piety and good works demonstrated that he was already a Christian, so Aldersgate could not have been his conversion. The editors (Anonymous 1854) admitted that the pre-Aldersgate Wesley would have been saved if he had died, but insisted that Aldersgate was his conversion from trusting in his own righteousness to trusting in Christ for salvation. So began a continuing variety of refined definitions of Aldersgate as a "conversion."

The most striking refined definition during this period came from Robert Brown. Brown authored one of the few nineteenth-century considerations of Wesley *as a theologian*. He argued that Wesley's theology was essentially a matter of morals, drawn directly from the conscience. In keeping with this general characterization, he suggested that Aldersgate was not a total conversion but only one "from a comparatively low standard of Christian morals . . . to a high standard!"¹⁰ Given the rigorous nature of Wesley's early life, this suggestion has found few supporters. Rather, it stands as vivid evidence of how easily Aldersgate could take on the hue of the position from which it was being viewed.

1870–1900: Aldersgate as the Rejection of High-Church Bigotry

One of the most significant issues with which nineteenth-century British Methodism struggled was its relationship to the Anglican tradition from which it had come. Wesley remained an Anglican priest until his death and never tired of claiming that all of his distinctive doctrinal claims could be found in the Anglican standards of doctrine. Shortly after his death British Methodists followed the earlier example of their American counterparts and officially separated from the Church of England. Some leaders helped facilitate this decision by obscuring the most explicit evidences of Wesley's (high-church) Anglican loyalties and stressing those aspects of his life or work that favored the (low-church) dissenting traditions.¹¹

The debate concerning Wesley's apparent high-church sympathies and their significance for later Methodism became increasingly reactionary with the emergence of the Oxford Movement, reaching a fever pitch in the 1870s. In this setting an alternative refinement of "conversion" in relation to Aldersgate surfaced. Those who wished to champion an evangelical (i.e., low-church) model of Methodism began to argue that Aldersgate was not a conversion from sinner to believer, but Wesley's rejection of his former high-church bigotry and intolerance, and his adoption of the true form of Christianity.¹² This reading of Aldersgate also proved to be impossible to sustain, given Wesley's life-long eucharistic practice and theology, etc.¹³ Once again, the desire to provide traditional warrant for a contemporary theological agenda overrode the text.

1900–63: Aldersgate as Partisan Theological Warrant

Wesley's early twentieth-century descendants demonstrated more theological interest in their founder than their nineteenth-century counterparts. However, this interest typically continued to be of a partisan nature; i.e., they appealed to Wesley as a "theological hero" in support of their particular theological agendas. Appeals to Wesley occurred most often in the context of debates between concurrent theological agendas. The result of this was a proliferation of contrasting redefinitions of Aldersgate, which are best organized around the agendas that championed them.

Catholic Readings: Aldersgate as a "Mystical" Conversion. One of the significant developments in early twentieth-century Wesley Studies

was the emergence of Roman Catholic investigations of Wesley. In general, these scholars sought to highlight the “catholic” elements in Wesley, and some even argued that he could serve as a helpful mediator between Protestantism and Catholicism. Understandably, these studies took particular offense at Wesley’s immediate post-Aldersgate disparagement of his earlier spirituality, since this early spirituality drew heavily from catholic spiritual writers (both Eastern and Roman). They insisted that Wesley’s real conversion to serious religious life was long before Aldersgate—in 1725. Aldersgate was then read as simply a further step of a religious man to a higher stage of devotional practice and experience.¹⁴ Eventually, the term “mystical conversion” was applied to this reading of Aldersgate.¹⁵ It has been the reading of most Roman Catholic studies and of some other Wesley scholars who recognize and appreciate the catholic elements in Wesley.¹⁶

Liberal Readings: Aldersgate as the Validation of Experience as a Theological Source. The elevation of the role of experience in theological reflection was a prominent element of Protestant Liberalism in the early twentieth century. This emphasis was derived both from the growing dominance of the empirical model of the natural sciences and from Schleiermacher’s influential *Glaubenslehre*, which tried to relate all normative theological claims to the (Romantic) human experience of absolute dependence. The underlying agenda of Liberalism was the rejection of mere subservience to traditional authorities, accepting only those theological convictions that could be grounded in or derived from experience.

The most prominent nineteenth-century Methodist theologians had largely avoided the challenges being raised for traditional theological claims by the developments in the sciences, etc. However, some adventurous theologians began to embrace these new intellectual trends in the early twentieth century and to seek a corresponding reformulation of Methodist theology. Intriguingly, they believed that they found warrant for their endeavor in the example of John Wesley. For some he was an early model of a truly empirical theology. For others he was a proto-Schleiermacher. Either way, it was argued that his major theological contribution was to elevate the place of experience in theological reflection. More importantly—for our purposes—it was suggested that the real significance of Aldersgate was that it marked the emergence of his emphasis on experience.¹⁷ That is, Aldersgate was valued not so much for its place in Wesley’s spiritual development as for its contribution to his theological method!

Neo-Orthodox Readings: Aldersgate as Conversion to Evangelical Doctrine. The neo-Orthodox movement that swept Protestant theology in the second and third decades of the twentieth century emphatically rejected the experientialism of liberal theology and called for a return to the biblical and doctrinal commitments of the Protestant Reformation. This movement found many sympathizers in Methodist circles; so many that there was talk of a “neo-Wesleyanism.”¹⁸

Understandably, those sympathetic to neo-Orthodoxy were uncomfortable with both the Catholic and Liberal readings of Aldersgate just summarized. Indeed, they polemicized against them!¹⁹ In contrast to the Catholic reading, they argued that Aldersgate embodied Wesley’s turn from his earlier “catholic” theological training to an unreserved appropriation of the Reformation *sola fide*. In contrast to the Liberal reading, they argued that the importance of Aldersgate lay not in its elevation of experience in theological method, but in its affirmation of traditional theological claims. Aldersgate was put forward as emblematic of Wesley’s theological rejection of works-righteousness and his embracing of the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith.²⁰ If it was a conversion, it was a doctrinal conversion. As such, they could still value Wesley’s religious commitment in 1725, and yet argue that he was not fully Christian until his “evangelical” conversion of 1738.²¹

Revivalist Readings: Aldersgate as the Model Conversion Experience. None of the interpretations of Aldersgate discussed so far were the majority voice in the chorus of answers offered in the first half of the twentieth century. That honor belongs to the reading of Aldersgate as Wesley’s exemplary *conversion experience*. Central to this position are two claims: 1) that Aldersgate marked Wesley’s *conversion* from a pre-Christian state to a Christian one (cf. the title of Smith 1930, “BC and AD in John Wesley”), and 2) that the central element of this conversion was his *experience* of the “warmed heart” (Cf. Raymond 1904 on “Wesley’s Religious Experience”).

It is important to note that this interpretation of Aldersgate originated among and was championed by those Methodists concerned to stress evangelism or revivalism. One of the earliest clear examples of this reading was an essay by Henry Elderkin commemorating the bicentenary of Wesley’s birth in a journal dedicated to renewing appreciation of great evangelists among Methodists. Elderkin referred to Aldersgate as Wesley’s “second birth” and as the most important experience of his life.²² A second early example comes from the Fellowship of the Kingdom, an evangelical movement within Methodism that urged people to seek “the transforming experience of the

resources of God in Jesus Christ;” which, of course, is what Wesley was considered to have received at Aldersgate.²³

We have suggested that this “conversionist” reading of Aldersgate became the majority position in the first half of the twentieth century. An evidence (and *cause!*) of this dominance was its appropriation by official Wesley commemorations. The earliest example was 1924, when the London Mission Committee inaugurated a yearly observance of “Wesley Day” on May 24 *with an evangelistic campaign*.²⁴ Obviously, such a commemoration assumes a conversionist reading of Aldersgate.

With the precedent set, it is no surprise that the bi-centennial of Aldersgate was officially commemorated in 1938. Nor is it a surprise that the majority of the reflections surrounding this celebration assumed a conversionist reading of Aldersgate. For example, a major commemoration by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South focused on the theme: “The Primacy of Personal Religious Experience in the Life and Work of Methodism.” It defined Aldersgate as Wesley’s “experience of spiritual transformation,” and most of the addresses presented viewed Aldersgate as a crisis conversion that illustrated the importance of experience.²⁵ Similar claims were presented at the British Methodist recognition,²⁶ and in a commemorative address presented to Methodists in China.²⁷ Likewise, the conversionist reading of Aldersgate permeated the study volumes prepared for the bi-centennial of Aldersgate by the Methodist Episcopal Church—both North (Joy 1937) and South (Watkins 1937)—and, to a lesser degree, by German Methodists (Nuelsen 1938).²⁸

Ironically, while Aldersgate had been neglected (in favor of other events) by official Wesley commemorations until 1938, it became the dominant event from there on. Other events were now either passed by unnoticed (such as the bi-centennial of the founding of the first Society), or were given an “Aldersgate ambience.” A case in point: both British and American Methodists chose to focus the 250th anniversary of Wesley’s birth (1953) around the theme of evangelism. By this time, however, evangelism and Aldersgate were nearly synonymous; so Aldersgate encroached on the celebration, with some suggesting that the celebration be moved to May 24 as more appropriate to the emphasis on evangelism.²⁹

Given its new-found dominance, even the 225th anniversary of Aldersgate (1963) was commemorated (particularly by American Methodists); again focusing on evangelism, and again dominated by a conversionist reading of the event. At least, those materials that were most directly connected to evangelistic settings carried on the conversionist reading. Good examples are three related books published by

the Board of Evangelism (Thomas 1962, Ten Methodist Bishops 1963, and Arnett *et al.* 1964). One should also note the article by the Secretary of the Board of Evangelism (Denman 1963) and that of the Director of the Department of Preaching and Evangelism (Lacour 1963). While several other articles joined in such a conversionist reading,³⁰ an incipient critique of this interpretation also began to emerge. We will return to this critique later, however.

If one were to look for a classic example of this conversionist reading of Wesley's own spiritual journey, they could probably do no better than Clark 1950 or Jeffery 1960. Both of these present Wesley's life up to Aldersgate as a search for a "satisfying religious experience."

Of course, the conversionist reading did not apply just to Wesley. Rather, his conversion experience was presented as emblematic of what ours should be. To quote just one example, "The chief concern for all Methodists is not that two hundred years ago John Wesley had an experience of the warm heart, but have the Methodists in this good year of our Lord the experience; and if they have not that experience, may they get it?"³¹

Moreover, this experience was not seen as simply initiatory to the Christian life, it was presented as the *dynamic* of that life. In particular it was frequently argued that effective social service and reform (dear to many non-evangelistic Methodists of the day) were actually *derivative* of such an experience (e.g., Urwin 1938, and Yost 1938).

In other words, the first half of the twentieth century witnessed a widespread attempt to make Wesley's Aldersgate *conversion experience* definitive of Methodist identity.³²

Holiness Readings: Aldersgate as Entire Sanctification. Justification was not the only crisis experience with which Aldersgate was identified during this time period. Some of Wesley's descendants, particularly in the holiness movement, proposed that Aldersgate was actually his *second* crisis experience—i.e., his entire sanctification.³³ According to this distinction, Aldersgate was not the time when Wesley received forgiveness of sins and began his Christian walk. It was the completion of his conversion—his purification from the "sin nature," his filling with perfect love, his attainment of Christian perfection.

The topic of entire sanctification has been the focus of considerable debate among Wesley's twentieth-century heirs. For many Methodists it is simply an *ideal* toward which we (and Wesley!) continually strive but never attain in this life. By contrast, for many in the holiness movement it is an unsurpassable *state* which can be attained instantaneously by faith, shortly after justification. There are still others who view entire sanctification as a significant *transition*

within our growth in Christ-likeness. To use developmental terms, they do not see entire sanctification as the arrival at adulthood, but as the move from the passivity of spiritual infancy to the Spirit-empowered growth of Christian adolescence. As one might suspect, a careful reading of those who identify Aldersgate as Wesley's entire sanctification reveals similar distinctions. For some, Aldersgate was the "spiritual climax" of Wesley's life (Gentry 1979). For others, it was his transition from the state of a "babe in Christ" to that of a "young man" (Cubie 1989; see also Sommer 1938, 347; and Sommer 1953, 56).

Overall, the identification of Aldersgate as Wesley's entire sanctification faces serious questions. In the first place, there is the issue of which of the understandings of sanctification noted above are most true to Wesley's own views. More important, is the fact that Wesley never explicitly claimed to have obtained entire sanctification—at Aldersgate or thereafter.³⁴ If he intended the Aldersgate event to function as a normative model of entire sanctification for his followers, surely he would have identified it as such.

Pentecostal/Charismatic Readings: Aldersgate as Wesley's "Baptism in the Holy Spirit." The next reading of Aldersgate is closely related to the holiness reading. One of the (debated!) developments in the holiness movement was the identification of entire sanctification with the "baptism of the Holy Spirit." For them this baptism was an experience, subsequent to conversion, that brought cleansing from inward sin. It required only slight alteration of such a position to construe the baptism of the Holy Spirit as an experience of new spiritual vitality and power for service, bestowed upon (previously powerless) Christians—the characteristic emphasis of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements.³⁵

While relatively rare, there have been some advocates of a Pentecostal or Charismatic model of Christian life that have identified Aldersgate as Wesley's "pentecostal" experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit.³⁶ Again, the serious questions faced by this reading would be whether such a definition of "baptism of the Holy Spirit" was congruent with Wesley's own theological understanding and why Wesley never identified the event in this manner himself.³⁷

Protestant "Once-Born" Readings: Aldersgate as the "Witness of the Spirit". The last significant reading of Aldersgate during this time period agrees with the previous three that the event had something to do with Wesley's spiritual *experience*. However, it differs from these previous views in that it does not perceive in Aldersgate, or Wesley's spiritual development in general, an emphasis on dramatic or instan-

taneous (i.e., crisis) experience. Put in the terms of William James' influential analysis of the varieties of religious experience, this reading views Wesley as a better example of a "once-born" person whose spiritual development is gradual, than of a "twice-born" person whose spiritual development is marked with major disjunctures (see especially: Bashford 1903, and Funk 1963).³⁸

As a result, this reading assumed greater continuity between the pre- and post-Aldersgate Wesley than did the conversionist, holiness, and pentecostal readings. It assumed that Wesley was already truly a Christian and growing in Christ-likeness before the night of 24 May 1738. But, if this is so, then what was the significance of that night? Their answer is that Aldersgate was the time when Wesley's growing Christian life was further strengthened and clarified through the "witness of the Spirit," or gift of assurance.³⁹

Such a "witness of the Spirit" may accompany one's transition into the Christian life, but (as the later Wesley came to see) it does not always do so.⁴⁰ It's distinctive contribution to Christian life is not justification *per se*, but our release from intense spiritual self-preoccupation through a *felt* assurance of God's acceptance. For one like Wesley who is thoroughly convinced of God's desire for Christians to be holy, such an assurance is crucial, because it changes our motivation in Christian life from seeking to *insure* God's acceptance to *living out of* that acceptance.

We have noted how this interpretation of Aldersgate is distinguished from the revivalist, holiness, and pentecostal readings by its rejection of an exclusively "twice-born" model of Christian life. It carries slightly different emphases than the three other views current during this time as well. Compared to the Liberal reading, its primary emphasis is on the contribution of experience to Christian life, not theological method (though Wesley's experience of assurance surely served as a warrant for later developing his doctrine of the "witness of the Spirit"). Likewise, while the possibility of assurance is consistent with the Neo-Orthodox stress on justification by grace, it is not a necessary correlate (see Luther!) and may be grounded more in theological syllogisms than in an experience of the Spirit (see Calvinist Scholasticism!) Finally, the "witness of the Spirit" is not just a general "mystical" transition to a deeper spirituality, but a specific experience of assurance that grounds spiritual life *per se*.

1963ff: Questioning Partisan Readings of Aldersgate

The last three decades have witnessed a dramatic professionalization in the field of Wesley studies. A truly critical edition of Wesley's works has been undertaken (*The Bicentennial Edition*) and Wesley scholars have developed a broadened awareness of his context and an historical-critical realism about his unique stance or contribution.⁴¹

The most obvious result of this professionalization in relation to Aldersgate has been the rejection of many of the previous partisan readings of the event. We have noted the questions raised about some of these models in our earlier summary. Since the "conversionist" reading was the dominant one in the period leading up to the 225th anniversary in 1963, it was this reading that received the greatest amount of critical attention.

Already in 1960, Webb Garrison expressed dissatisfaction with the "myth" that Aldersgate was the central factor or single climactic hour in Wesley's spiritual quest (Garrison 1960). Several participants in the 1963 discussion added their qualifications to the conversionist reading of Aldersgate. Frank Baker carefully detailed the interpretive issues regarding Wesley's original *Journal* entries and later footnotes concerning Aldersgate, demonstrating that a strong "twice born" reading of the event was untenable. Theophil Funk highlighted Wesley's continuing spiritual struggles *after* Aldersgate and the crucial role of the nurture of community and the means of grace in Wesley's mature understanding of Christian life. Gerald Kennedy stressed the importance of Wesley's prior disciplined life to his attainment of peace. And, Albert Outler chose to stress how Wesley held together learning and piety, countering anti-intellectualistic appropriations of Aldersgate language.

Two contributors to the 1963 discussion were particularly critical of the conversionist reading. Lawrence Snow, drawing on recent hermeneutic philosophy, claimed that the portrayal of Aldersgate as a private conversion experience was an example of reading present concerns *into* Wesley's experience. He then argued that such a reading fits, at best, only materials around 1738 and does not do justice to the full corpus of Wesley's reflection. Boyd Mather filed a similar charge that American Methodists had imposed a camp-meeting revivalist model upon Wesley's Aldersgate experience and, *it did not fit*. In particular, he argued that the typical expressions of the anniversary's evangelism thrust (with their focus on personal religious experience)

lacked the very elements that the mature Wesley considered essential to awakening and forming Christian life: *discipline* and *doctrine*.

The questions raised during the 225th anniversary of Aldersgate received continuing scholarly attention in the years leading up to the most recent anniversary. One result of this is the greater awareness of the ambiguities of Wesley's references to Aldersgate noted at the beginning of this essay. Another result is a deeper appreciation of the theological nuances of the *later* Wesley. A particularly noteworthy result is the insights gained from some sophisticated psychological studies of Wesley's *life-long* spiritual development, placing Aldersgate within this context.⁴²

What has been the impact of this continuing study in relation to the previous dominance of the conversionist interpretation of Aldersgate? To begin with, the emphasis of these studies has generally shifted from the discontinuities to the continuities in Wesley's religious development (See especially: McIntosh 1969, and Miguez 1983). As a result, while a few continue to view Aldersgate in conversionist terms (e.g., Maser 1978), the more common tendency is to identify Aldersgate as the time when Wesley (already a Christian) received a deeper sense of assurance, which empowered him for a life of obedience and ministry (e.g., Heitzenrater 1973, 8; and McIntosh 1969, 59).

With these developments we are brought to the 250th anniversary debate about Aldersgate surveyed in the Introduction to this volume. As was noted there, this debate shows all the signs of an interpretive revolution with the conversionist reading of Aldersgate being displaced from its previous dominance, in favor of a nuanced version of the identification of Aldersgate with Wesley's reception of the "witness of the Spirit."

Conclusion

Perhaps the most appropriate conclusion to a tradition-history study such as this is not an argument for one of the alternative readings of Aldersgate but a plea for hermeneutic responsibility. The key to a legitimate appropriation of a past text or event by a present community lies in preserving the integrity of *both* of the contexts involved—that of the original event and that of the present community. To use the terms of Hans-Georg Gadamer, a proper interpretation must "fuse these two horizons."⁴³

Such a fusion requires that the two horizons be self-consciously identified in the process of their dialogue. It is not sufficient merely to

engage in historical inquiry into the precedents or intricacies of Wesley's own understanding; one must also ask what such an understanding would mean today in light of our differing precedents and needs. In this process, however, we must exercise extreme caution that we do not simply impose our current agendas upon an ill-fitted historical authority. The best way to determine if a legitimate "fit" has been found is to forward a proposed interpretation into the community of interpretation and see how it survives the questions of those with differing perspectives.

We have observed several examples of this process in our preceding survey. At the moment, it appears that the most adequate reading of Aldersgate is that which focuses on the place of assurance in Christian life. Whether this reading will remain the most persuasive will depend on how well it can stand up to continuing historical study of Wesley's context and continuing theological inquiry into the current setting and needs of Wesleyan (and larger Christian) traditions.

Notes on Maddox – Tradition-History

1. Maser 1978, 35–36.
2. The most helpful surveys of these issues are: Baker 1963, Maser 1978, and Weyer 1988a. For treatments championing a conversionist reading, see: Cell 1937, and Collins 1989b.
3. Maser has argued that repetition of Aldersgate within the *Journal* would not have been appropriate from a literary point of view (1978, 40). While this is possible, it does not explain the absence of explicit mention in Wesley’s sermons—particularly awakening sermons. For an argument similar to Maser, based on an historical analysis of the genre of spiritual autobiography, see W. Reginald Ward, “Introduction,” *Works* 18:24–43.
4. The classic expression of this hermeneutical tension is Hans-Georg Gadamer’s image of interpretation as a “fusion of two horizons.” For a brief summary of this notion and an analysis of some of the issues involved, see Randy L. Maddox, “Hermeneutic Circle—Vicious or Victorious?” *Philosophy Today* 27 (1983): 66–76.
5. For this and our subsequent characterizations of twentieth-century Wesley studies, cf. Albert Outler, “A New Future for `Wesley Studies’: An Agenda for `Phase III’,” in *The Future of the Methodist Theological Traditions*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 34–52.
6. Cf. the evaluation of Ward, “Introduction,” *Works* 18:94–98.
7. This concern is most evident in the biography by John Whitehead. However, similar tones are found in those by Thomas Coke, Henry Moore, John Telford and Richard Watson. The only biography that reads Aldersgate as evidence of Wesley’s inclination to enthusiasm is that by the “outsider” Robert Southey. For brief insightful characterizations of all of these biographies, see Richard Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon) 2:172ff. See also the essay by Schmidt in this volume.
8. For further details on Wesley commemorations, see the Schmidt essay in this volume; Kenneth E. Rowe, “Celebrating Aldersgate: Historical Reflections,” unpublished address given at Drew University, May 1988; and Randy L. Maddox, “Celebrating Wesley - When?” *Methodist History* 29 (1991): 63–75.
9. Cf. John Wesley, *The Complete English Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (London: Hawes, 1777).
10. Robert Brown, *John Wesley’s Theology: The Principle of It’s Vitality and It’s Progressive Stages of Development* (London: Jackson, Walford, and Hodder, 1865), 14.
11. One of the most glaring examples of such a “de-Anglicanization” of Wesley was Thomas Jackson’s omission of Wesley’s extract of the Anglican *Homilies* from the “standard” edition of Wesley’s works, even though Wesley had included it in his own last collected edition.
12. The best example is James H. Rigg. Cf. his *The Living Wesley*, 3rd ed. (London: Charles H. Kelley, 1905; first edition, 1874), 115–21. See also Luke Tyerman. *The Life and Times of the Reverend John Wesley, M.A.* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1871) 1:179ff.

13. For “high-church” readings reacting to the de-Anglicanization of Wesley, see: Richard Denny Urlin, *John Wesley’s Place in Church History* (London: Rivington’s, 1870); and Frederick Hockin, *John Wesley and Modern Wesleyanism*, 3rd. ed. (London: J. T. Hayes, 1878).
14. The two classic Catholic studies that presented this argument are: Augustin Leger, *Le Jeunesse de Wesley. L’Angleterre Religieuse et Les Origines du Methodisme au XVIIIe Siècle* (Paris: Libraire Hachette et Cie, 1910), 77–82, 350, 364; and Maximin Piette, *John Wesley in the Evolution of Protestantism* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1937; French original: 1925), 234, 305ff. For a similar reading see Laura Petri, *John Wesley* (Stockholm, 1928), 259. For a sympathetic Methodist review of Leger, see Beet 1912.
15. This term was actually suggested by a Methodist, Umphrey Lee (*John Wesley and Modern Religion* [Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1936], 103, 58–59). The term was then adopted by several Catholic scholars. One example is Jean Orcibal, “The Theological Originality of John Wesley and Continental Spirituality,” in *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, eds. R.E. Davies and E.G. Rupp (London: Epworth, 1965) 1:90.
16. There are some exceptions among Catholic scholars. Perhaps the most dramatic “conversionist” reading of Aldersgate by a Roman Catholic scholar is Brendan Byrne, S.J., “Ignatius Loyola and John Wesley: Experience and Strategies of Conversion,” *Colloquium: the Australian and New Zealand Theological Review* 19.1 (1986): 54–66.
17. The best examples of a championing of an “empirical” Wesley are: George Eayrs, *John Wesley, Christian Philosopher and Church Founder* (London: Epworth, 1926); and Frank Wilbur Collier, *John Wesley Among the Scientists* (New York: Abingdon, 1928). For their comments on Aldersgate, see Eayrs, 90; and Collier, 56. Examples of a Schleiermacherian reading of Wesley are: Herbert B. Workman, *The Place of Methodism in the Catholic Church* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1921), esp. 23–26; and George Croft Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley* (New York: Henry Holt, 1935), esp. 46–51. For Cell’s description of Aldersgate as the “masterkey to (Wesley’s) mature doctrine of Christian experience,” see 92. N.B., Cell actually presented an intriguing blend of a Schleiermacherian emphasis with the emerging Neo-Orthodox concerns.
18. See the entire issue of *Religion in Life* 29.4 (1960). For a critical perspective on this emphasis, see Claude Thompson, “Aldersgate and the New Reformers,” *Christian Advocate* 6.10 (1962): 7–8.
19. Lee 1937 & Rattenbury 1938 are both framed as extended rejections of the Catholic reading of Aldersgate. They also register various concerns with the Liberal reading. A clearer rejection of Liberal emphases is J. Ernest Rattenbury, *Wesley’s Legacy to the World* (London: Epworth, 1928), 80ff.
20. Besides Lee 1937 & Rattenbury 1938, other examples of this general reading of Aldersgate include: Bond 1938, Cameron 1955, and Schofield 1938. This reading is particularly amenable to those who tried to stress Wesley’s similarities to the Reformers, whether Luther (Martin Schmidt & Philip Watson) or Calvin (William Cannon). Cf. Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley, with Special Reference to the Doctrine of Justification* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1946), 68; Schmidt 1938a, esp. 54, 75; Schmidt 1938b, 137–41; and Watson, *The Message of the Wesleys* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 7.
21. One of the first to make this distinction is Matthieu Lelièvre, *La Théologie de Wesley* (Paris: Publications Méthodistes, 1924), 8, 27. While Rattenbury emphasized the importance of Wesley’s “Protestant conversion” during March of 1738 as setting the scene for Aldersgate, he reserved the phrase “evangelical conversion” to cover something more like the emphasis on assurance to be treated later.
22. Henry Elderkin, “The Bi-centenary of John Wesley,” *Experience* 12 (1903): 81–87; here, 87.
23. Cf. a pamphlet published by the Fellowship: John Arundel Chapman, *John Wesley’s Quest* (London: Epworth, 1921). The description of the Fellowship is on the cover. The discussion of

- Aldersgate is on page 2.
24. Cf. the article on “Wesley Day” in *Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, ed. Nolan B. Harmon (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1974), 2:2510–11. In 1951 this observance was moved to “Aldersgate Sunday.”
 25. The addresses presented are collected in Clark 1938. Clark’s leading essay particularly stresses the idea of Aldersgate as a crisis conversion. For a survey of some of the other essays, see Schmidt above.
 26. These are collected in the *London Quarterly and Holburn Review* 163 (1938): 168–224 (includes Platt 1938). Cf. the emphasis on the role of experience in religious life on pages 171, 175, 179, 197, 211, 219.
 27. Williams 1938. Note his claim that at Aldersgate Wesley found “a new faith” (297), and that Aldersgate commemorates an “experience” (299).
 28. Joy 1937 organizes his biography of Wesley around his search for spiritual experience, his finding the same (Aldersgate), and his “having and doing.” Watkins 1937 is a missions study volume which deals with Wesley only at the beginning, but stresses his crisis conversion (19). Nuelsen 1938 reads Aldersgate as Wesley’s foundational salvation experience (*heilserlebnis*, 4) and as a great turn in his life (12). However, he stresses that Wesley was as pious before his conversion as after (23) and that Wesley does not reduce religion to feelings (15ff).
 29. Cf. Leslie F. Church, “Two Birthdays – and Their Celebration,” *London Quarterly and Holburn Review* 178 (1953): 82–84. For more on these points, see Maddox, “Celebrating Wesley.”
 30. See especially, Arnett 1964, Edwards 1963a & 1963b, Rott 1963, Sommer 1963, and Wood 1963.
 31. In an editorial by William P. King, “Aldersgate Recurrent,” *Christian Advocate* (Nashville) 99 (8 April 1938): 421.
 32. This was particularly true in America. A good illustration is the *American Book of Discipline*. In the original 1785 edition this included Wesley’s account of the rise of Methodism which traces it back to the Holy Club in 1729. In 1790 this section was moved to the opening address of the discipline. But, in 1948 this “historical statement” was replaced by one emphasizing Wesley’s Aldersgate experience! Cf. Frank Baker, *From Wesley to Asbury* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1976), 164–65.
 33. One of the earliest examples of this reading is Eltzholtz 1908. For further details on the holiness movement and this reading of Aldersgate, see the essay by Stephen Gunter in this volume.
 34. For a detailed discussion of events (including Aldersgate) identified by Wesley’s successors as his testimony to entire sanctification, see John L. Peters. *Christian Perfection and American Methodism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985), 201–15.
 35. For an insightful study of the development of Pentecostalism from Wesleyan holiness roots, see Donald W. Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987). Dayton summarizes the current scholarly debate over the appropriateness of the identification of the “baptism of the Holy Spirit” with Wesley’s “entire sanctification” on pages 184–85.
 36. The best example of a Pentecostal reading is probably Fadiey Lovsky, *Wesley: Apôtre des Foules, Pasteur des Pauvres* (Lausanne: Foi et Victoire, 1977), esp. 31, 158, 163. Cf. Lovsky 1947. For a reading arising out of the German Catholic Charismatic movement that identifies Wesley’s Aldersgate experience in this way, see Lucida Schmieder, *Geisttaufe: Ein Beitrag zur neueren Glaubensgeschichte* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1982), 75, 93.

37. For a convincing proof that Wesley rejected the suggestion that the “baptism of the Holy Spirit” was an event in Christian life subsequent to justification, see M. Robert Fraser, “Strains in the Understanding of Christian Perfection in Early British Methodism” (Vanderbilt University Ph.D. thesis, 1988), 382ff.
38. For an explicit (conversionist) reading of Wesley as a “twice-born” man, see Ross W. Roland. “The Continuity of Evangelical Life and Thought.” *Religion in Life* 13 (1944): 245–53.
39. For examples of this reading throughout the time period, see: Bashford 1903, 784; Green 1909, 33, 43; Bradfield 1938; Lewis 1938; Vivian H. H. Green, *The Young Mr. Wesley* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1961), 271, 288; and Arthur Yates, *The Doctrine of Assurance with Special Reference to John Wesley* (London: Epworth, 1952), chapter 1.
40. At the time of Aldersgate Wesley assumed that assurance *must* accompany conversion; hence, he viewed Aldersgate as his conversion! Later he becomes convinced by his observations of the Methodist revival that one can be a Christian without having full assurance. On reflection, he corrects the *Journal* account to portray himself as in that situation prior to Aldersgate. Cf. Yates, *Doctrine of Assurance*; and the essay by Heitzenrater in this volume.
41. Cf. Richard P. Heitzenrater, “The Present State of Wesley Studies.” *Methodist History* 22 (1984): 221–33.
42. Of particular note are: James W. Fowler, “John Wesley’s Development in Faith,” in *The Future of the Methodist Theological Traditions*, edited by M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 172–92; and Donald M. Joy, “Toward Christian Holiness: John Wesley’s Faith Pilgrimage,” in *Moral Development Foundations*, edited by D. M. Joy (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 207–32. Also interesting, but more idiosyncratic, are: Thorvald Källstad, *John Wesley and the Bible: A Psychological Study* (Bjärnum, Sweden: Bjärnums Tryckeri, 1974); and Robert Moore, *John Wesley and Authority: A Psychological Perspective* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979).
43. For two helpful discussions of the process of such a fusion in theological reflection, see: Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); and Werner G. Jeanrond, *Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking* (New York: Crossroad, 1988).

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NOTE: This bibliography is limited to works that deal specifically with Aldersgate. The Tradition-History also notes several other sources that make reference to Aldersgate, within a larger context.

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