BOOKS I HAVE READ: THE EXPANSION OF EVANGELICALISM

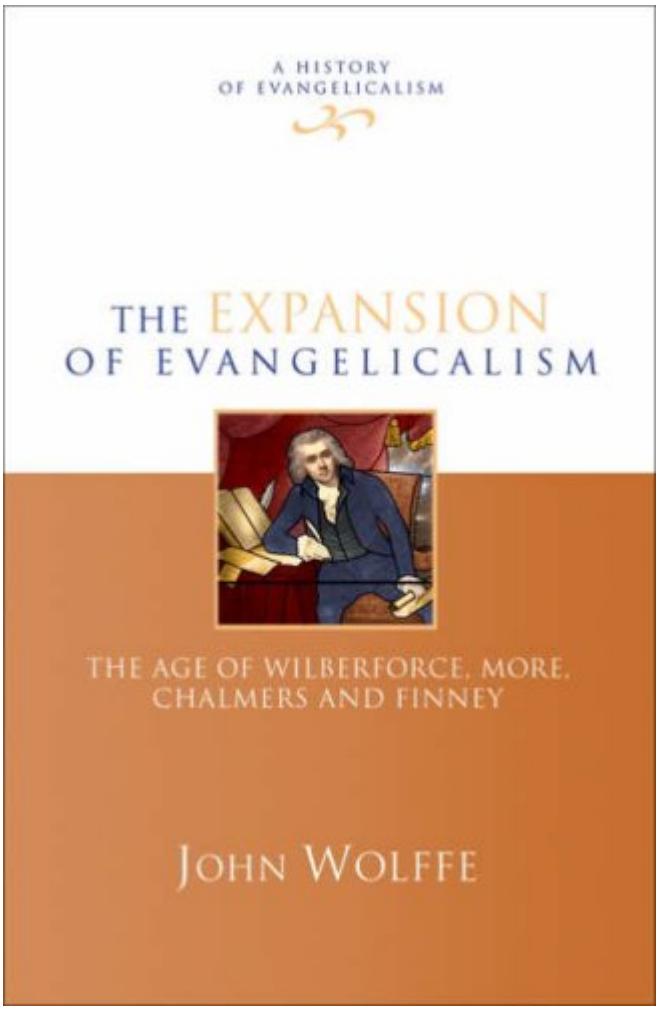
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An excellent overview of a period that I knew very little about.
Category: Reviews

Like many conservative Evangelicals, I have a rather patchy knowledge of modern church history; it goes from Luther, to Calvin, takes a brief pause at the puritans, on to the Wesleys and Whitfield and from there to Spurgeon and the modern day. I know that something must have happened between these stopping off points, but I'm not sure what it was. For people like me,Â The expansion of evangelicalism: The Age of Wilberforce, More, Chalmers and FinneyÂ is the perfect book as it fills in one of these lacunae.

The second volume in the IVP history of evangelicalism, John Wolffe's book is readable, consistently interesting and very informative. This medium format hardback has about 270 pages, with the last 35 given over to indices and references. The style is academic-ish, there is no reason why any interested reader can't benefit from this book, but there are enough footnotes and scholarly bits to keep the specialist happy. The hardback will set you back about Â£18 on Amazon, though other formats are available.

The book has a wide scope, covering events from the 1790s to the 1840s, focussing on the UK and the US with the odd foray into other anglophone countries.



The book has eight chapters.

1. Landscapes and Personalities: this gives a brief overview of the whole period, looking at the overall political and religious situation and highlighting some of the key figures of the era. This is a period in which evangelical social engagement was particularly important and as a result, the book has more politics and social information and less theology than others in the series.

2. Revivals and revivalism, 1790-1820

3. 'New measures' revivals, 1820-50: These two chapters are the nearest that the book gets to a chronological recounting of the era. As the chapter titles suggest, they focus on revivals and the different ways in which evangelicalism was spread.

4. Spirituality and Worship: looks at life in the church which included a fertile period of hymn writing.

5. Women, men and the family:Â is a counterpoint to the previous chapter and looks at the home life of evangelicals during this period.

6. Transforming society: looks at the way evangelicals and evangelical voluntary societies were involved in various forms of social action.

7. Politics: freeing slaves, saving nations:Â this takes the previous chapter a bit more deeply and looks at the way in which evangelicals were involved in the political life of their nations. Particular attention is paid to Wilberforce and the Clapham sect.

8. Diversity and unity in the expansion of evangelicalism:Â this fascinating chapter highlights an issue which runs through all of this series of books - evangelicalism is constantly shifting and changing. Evangelicals within denominations are often more closely identified with other evangelicals, rather than with those in the same denomination. Yet at the same time, evangelicalism is fissiparous, constantly splitting and dividing. Charting the unity in diversity is fascinating.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed this book. It focussed on a period that I knew relatively little about. I suspect that most readers will be particularly interested in the sections on political action and the fight against the slave trade. From my point of view, a book which covers the period which marks the birth of the modern protestant missionary movement is always going to interest me.