2016

Reconsidering George Whitefield at 300

Kyle Roberts

Loyola University Chicago, kroberts2@luc.edu

Recommended Citation

Roberts, Kyle. Reconsidering George Whitefield at 300. Common-Place: The Journal of Early American Life, 16, 2.5: , 2016. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, History: Faculty Publications and Other Works,

Reconsidering George Whitefield at 300

Kyle Roberts

There is much more to know about the enigmatic George Whitefield, as new books by Kidd and Parr amply demonstrate.

2014 saw the commemoration of the 300th anniversary of the birth of George Whitefield, the great eighteenth-century Anglo-American evangelical itinerant. The tercentenary included a major conference hosted at Pembroke College, Oxford, and the appearance of scholarly works by Thomas S. Kidd and Jessica M. Parr, the subject of this review. A third volume, essays derived from the Pembroke College conference, entitled *George Whitefield: Life, Context, and Legacy*, is forthcoming from Oxford University Press in May 2016. These works offer valuable reconsiderations of Whitefield that will be of interest to scholars of evangelicalism and the eighteenth-century British Atlantic more broadly.

The interest in Whitefield should not be surprising. Renewed scholarly attention paid to
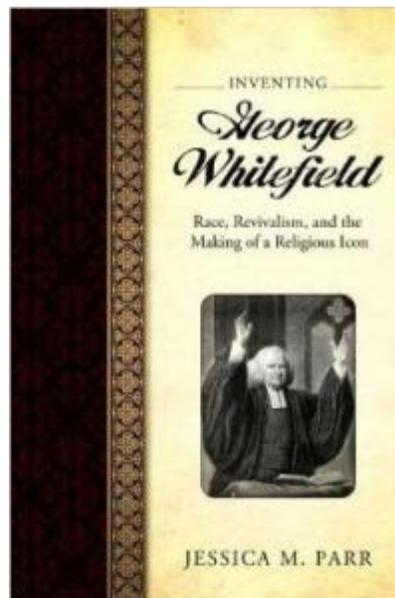
THOMAS S. KIDD

GEORGE WHITEFIELD

AMERICA'S SPIRITUAL FOUNDING FATHER
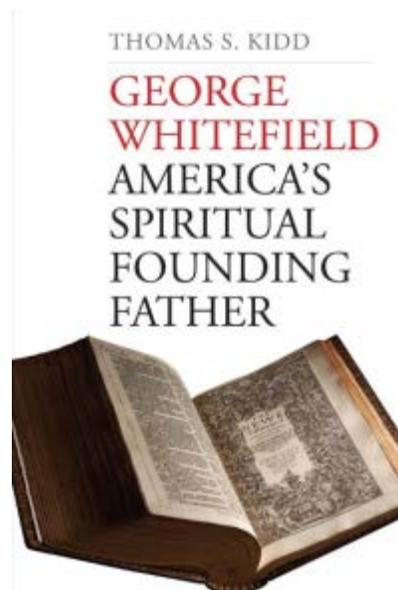
Thomas S. Kidd, *George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2014. 344 pp., $40.

the Great Awakening over the past twenty-five years has transformed a field once the domain of church historians into a vibrant arena for interdisciplinary explorations. As a result of these studies we have come to understand and appreciate new aspects of Whitefield's experience and success. In *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (1991), Harry Stout revealed how Whitefield's early interest in the theater informed his preaching style and primed him to be "Anglo-America's first religious celebrity." Frank Lambert's study of Whitefield's masterful use of modern media, *"Pedlar in Divinity": George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals* (1994), recovered how he skillfully deployed print—newspapers, sermons, pamphlets, and his published *Journals*—to generate publicity for his ministry before, during, and after his tours. Peter Charles Hoffer demonstrated how illuminating it can be to compare and contrast Whitefield and his longtime friend Benjamin Franklin as "representative men" of their time in *When Benjamin Franklin Met the Reverend Whitefield: Enlightenment, Revival, and the Power of the Printed Word* (2011). Whitefield has even been credited with being a "central figure" in creating unity among the diverse colonists of British North America in the lead-up to the American Revolution in Jerome Mahaffey's *The Accidental Revolutionary: George Whitefield and Creation of America* (2011).

But there is much more to know about the enigmatic Whitefield, as new books by Kidd and Parr amply demonstrate. They offer different takes: one provides a comprehensive biography that seeks to restore the theological motivations that undergirded the decisions Whitefield made in executing his transatlantic ministry; the other, a more focused study of the contested fashioning of Whitefield's image by the great itinerant himself, his supporters, and his critics. The authors are in agreement on the broader contours of their subject's significance. They see him as a pivotal figure in the series of mid-eighteenth century revivals

Jessica M. Parr, *Inventing George Whitefield: Race, Revivalism, and the Making of a Religious Icon*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015. 192 pp., $60.

throughout the United Kingdom and the British North American colonies that have come to be known as the Great Awakening. They credit him with popularizing the importance of a conversion experience—of being "born again"—in order to achieve salvation. They engage with his voluminous archive of printed sermons, journals, and letters, as well as the extensive coverage that followed him in colonial newspapers. The Bethesda Orphan House in Savannah features prominently in these studies, acknowledging its place as an important "vehicle" by which Whitefield could express his religious message and justify his missionary travels. They also agree that it opens up a troubling chapter in the preacher's history as a slaveowner and proslavery advocate. Despite these stances, Whitefield inspired the admiration and affection of those at the center and on the fringes of colonial society, including domestic slaves like Phillis Wheatley, indigenous clergy like Samson Occom, and turncoats like Benedict Arnold.

Thomas Kidd appreciates the recent work of scholars to place Whitefield in the context of important developments in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, but feels they have missed the point of his primary significance. In *George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father,* Kidd argues that the well-known and travelled itinerant was the "key figure in the first generation of Anglo-American evangelical Christianity" (3). John Wesley might have been the nascent religious

movement's great organizer and Jonathan Edwards its great theologian, but it was the peripatetic Whitefield that tied it together and gave it coherence (260). Whitefield functioned as the common denominator—opening him up to both favor and scorn—in linking mid-eighteenth century Arminian Methodists (under John and Charles Wesley), Calvinist Methodists (under Whitefield and Howell Harris), Moravians, and numerous dissenting churches scattered across the United Kingdom and the British colonies of North America into a unified evangelical movement. Kidd pays special attention to the theological motivations and developments underlying Whitefield's preaching and publishing, providing a valuable explanation of the doctrines and practices that united—and divided—evangelicals. Running throughout the volume is an argument for considering the importance of the Holy Spirit to the experience of evangelicalism. Kidd even goes so far as to propose a modification to David Bebbington's influential definition of evangelicalism to include—as a fifth criteria alongside conversion, activism, Biblicism, and crucicentrism—the Holy Spirit's ministry (36). The "power and presence" of the Holy Spirit, Kidd argues, would be the most "novel aspects" of converts' new lives, but also would open Whitefield up to charges of enthusiasm and fanaticism. Over the course of twelve chapters, readers follow the itinerant's rapid rise to transatlantic fame, and a much longer period spent reconciling himself to never again matching that success while having to make amends to those with whom he butted horns along the way.

Jessica Parr takes a more topical approach. In *Inventing George Whitefield: Race, Revivalism, and the Making of a Religious Icon,* she argues that Whitefield must be understood as a "religious icon of the British Atlantic World" (5), a model for imitation in response to the Great Awakening's need for a central figure to unite its masses. Whitefield's lifelong refusal to limit his ministry to any single denomination is interpreted as a commitment to religious toleration and a

service to a burgeoning evangelical community that newly (and radically) crossed not only sectarian lines, but also those of gender, class, race, and ethnicity. Toleration became a practical necessity given the varied religious landscape of the North American colonies and, as Kidd details more fully in his volume, England, Wales, and Scotland. The first two-thirds of Parr's book explore the initial North American tours where Whitefield had his greatest impact and achieved his most lasting fame. In these chapters we see Whitefield shift from being on the offensive in the construction of his image to the defensive against critics from a range of stations and theological standpoints. Throughout Whitefield provided supporters and critics alike with all the fodder they needed. Ultimately, Parr argues, Whitefield was unable to exert complete control over shaping his image. Her last two chapters reveal how the appropriation of Whitefield accelerated in later life and especially after his death in 1770 in Newburyport, Massachusetts.

In both of these books, Whitefield is often at odds with his friends and his foes. To what extent did he bring this upon himself? Was he his own worst enemy? Kidd and Parr offer different interpretations of Whitefield's character. Parr's Whitefield aggressively marches into American port cities and acts dismissively toward the Anglican establishment, despite being an Anglican himself. His motivation, she explains, derives from an early vision of himself as a reformer within the church rather than as a schismatic (16). "He made a public example of those who failed to live up to the pious model that he set in his autobiographies and his journal," she writes, "particularly in contrast with the image he presented of himself as an indiscrete youth who had found 'true religion' as an adult" (32). In Whitefield's broadly circulated *Journal*, William Vesey of New York is portrayed as an "out-of-touch interloper" (47) and the Protestantism of Alexander Garden of Charleston is called into doubt in an era when anti-Catholicism fueled serious slights with

political implications (53). (Neither Kidd nor Parr pull any punches when it comes to detailing Whitefield's rabid anti-Catholicism and devotion to British Protestantism.)

Kidd takes a more conciliatory stance on Whitefield's character. He tends to interpret Whitefield as the victim of overbearing Anglican commissaries and competitive fellow leaders of the evangelical movement. Vesey is portrayed as waiting with "hostile reaction" (90), Garden "ready to put Whitefield in his place" (102), and back in London, "Whitefield renewed his clash with Anglican authorities— or rather, they renewed it with him" (177). Whitefield was perennially in tension with John Wesley, who often comes off as the instigator in Kidd's telling, such as when we are told, "Wesley *intended* to cause a public rift with Whitefield" (80). At another point, Jonathan Edwards fell afoul of Whitefield when he told him "he should be more cautious about 'judging other persons to be unconverted'" (128-129), a warning that theological disagreements should not be couched in terms of personal attacks. Whitefield did not take kindly to Edwards' advice. "This was a delicate issue," Kidd admits, "one that Whitefield did not handle delicately" (92). But Kidd blames Edwards and Wesley for the fallings out —"they were eleven years older than Whitefield, strongly opinionated, and inclined to correct the headstrong itinerant's perceived errors" (129). The real Whitefield—who once stated "The more I am opposed, the more joy I feel" (117) and on another occasion argued that the great seventeenth-century Anglican divine John Tillotson "knew no more of true Christianity than Mahomet [Muhammad]"— probably lies somewhere between these characterizations (107). Certainly some Anglican clerics and evangelical leaders were plotting their own strategy to try to contain the brash young preacher, but it is important to identify culpability on both sides.

Perhaps the greatest revelation to readers will be the extent of Whitefield's conflicted relationship with slavery in the British North

American colonies. On this point Kidd and Parr agree. (Parr, in fact, states in her introduction that she had originally intended her book to be a study of Whitefield's relationship to slaves and slavery [4].) The crux of the problem comes down to a disjuncture between Whitefield's early vocal criticism of slaveowners in Charleston for their ostentatious lifestyle and failure to catechize their slaves, and his later aggressive championing of the institution of slavery and his transformation of the Bethesda Orphan House into a slave plantation. Both studies confirm that less than a decade after castigating slaveowners, Whitefield was looking to enter their class as much out of paternalistic concerns as from a desire to reap its economic rewards. He aggressively advocated for the removal of a ban on slaveholding in Georgia, a key feature of James Oglethorpe's original plan for his holy experiment, by pushing for legislation that would make slavery legal. (This legislation would finally pass in 1751.) On top of this, Whitefield also illegally brought slave labor into Georgia to work at the Bethesda Orphan House at least two years *before* slavery was legalized there.

How could someone who preaches the equality of souls before God simultaneously endorse the biblical right to profit off those bodies at the same time? Kidd equivocates on the implications of this disjuncture. To understand Whitefield's position on slavery, he explains, we need to understand his conviction that heaven and hell are real and that slaves would receive their reward in the world to come. (Of course, as a Calvinist, he would have expected only some of them to receive that reward.) "Blinded as [Whitefield] was by the prejudices of the time, and by the quest for financial stability, the itinerant did not see slave ownership the way we do," writes Kidd. "Instead he viewed his plantation as another means of advancing the gospel among orphans, and among the slaves themselves" (200). Whitefield's paternalism provides a common thread for Parr, predating his efforts

to achieve financial stability by expanding the holdings of his South Carolina plantation or his Georgia Orphan House and extending to his pastoral relationship with others of different ranks and ethnicities. But in the end, Whitefield became more rather than less invested in slavery over time—unlike fellow evangelicals John Newton and John Wesley. It is not hard to conclude that he ultimately acted in self-interest. After his death, Parr reminds us, both proslavery and antislavery evangelicals invoked his memory in support of their arguments about the compatibility of slavery and Christianity (80).

These books remind us that the challenge in interpreting Whitefield goes back to the sources that he left us. Our knowledge of him is largely dependent upon what he wanted his audiences to know. Whitefield's thoughts and life were always filtered through print media. As soon as he began preaching, he published copies of his sermons for sale. Even before he departed for his first trip to North America, he hired William Seward as his publicist. Paid advertisements alerted readers to his impending arrival, or reprinted selections from his other works. Few of Whitefield's manuscript personal papers have survived to allow us to compare his original drafts and printed versions. Kidd uses the manuscript draft of Whitefield's life at Cambridge to read against the published account, but one is left wishing that he had given the text a close explanation akin to what Norman Pettit so illuminatingly did to the manuscript and printed versions of David Brainerd's journals in the introduction to the Yale edition of the *Life of David Brainerd* (1985). The difference here, of course, is that Whitefield edited himself—Brainerd was already gone from this world when Jonathan Edwards produced his edition —yet how Whitefield fashioned himself for print remains a key point.

The most extensive and problematic sources for reconstructing Whitefield are the various journals that he published in almost real time during his preaching tours of the late 1730s

and early 1740s. Parr identifies them as an "essential part of his public relations campaign" that "enabled him to assert considerable influence over his public image and to counter criticism" (28-29). The journals lived on after he left town and sometimes played a pastoral role in his absence. But they were unstable documents: they were frequently reprinted, testament to Whitefield's ongoing popularity, and their contents changed as Whitefield edited them over time. The authors know firsthand that the Whitefield that emerges in them is at times ambiguous and contradictory. Kidd notes at several points in his study where Whitefield later revised the journals, often by excising passages or by changing their wording and meaning. For example, early on, Whitefield had a tendency to draw parallels between his life and the life of Christ, but as he grew older and more moderate, he downplayed or removed such comparisons. Unfortunately, the reader has to wait until the start of chapter 11 for a sustained discussion of Whitefield's editorial practices. An examination of such practices at the start of these volumes would have been helpful not only for scholarly readers but also for the undergraduates who will undoubtedly be assigned them.

Finally, the titles of both books seek to make larger claims for Whitefield's legacy. The subtitle of Kidd's book—*America's Spiritual Founding Father*—is a bit perplexing given the story that he tells inside. Evangelicalism, as the book beautifully demonstrates, was at its heart a *transatlantic* phenomenon. If we must indulge the current cultural need to proclaim founders, then Whitefield seems to stand first and foremost as a Founding Father of Atlantic Evangelicalism, alongside, for example, Rebecca Protten, as recovered so masterfully by Jon Sensbach in *Rebecca's Revival* (2006). To limit Whitefield to American evangelicalism, alongside, say, Sarah Osborn as detailed by Catherine Brekus in *Sarah Osborn's World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America* (2012), denies his important impact in Scotland, Wales, and England. If the title is

meant to imply Whitefield's contribution to the founding of the American nation, then it contradicts the arguments of both authors. Parr flat out rejects any consideration of Whitefield as an American founding father (4), identifying such a belief as a co-option after his death, while Kidd finds such claims "overstated, but … hardly surprising" (255) and shows that Whitefield's increasing interest in politics during the Seven Years' War and after was grounded more in his anti-Catholic concern for British Protestantism than any nascent interest in a Revolution that he could not have known was coming six years after his death. The most challenging and least elaborated claim—of Whitefield as a father of American spirituality—is perhaps the hardest sell. If the implication is that the spiritual essence of America has always been evangelical, then that is going to require significant unpacking, certainly more than the brief mention it receives on pages 249-250.

In many ways, it appears that the title of Kidd's book exemplifies the point Parr is trying to make in *Inventing George Whitefield*. Playing off Frank Lambert's *Inventing the Great Awakening*, Parr reminds us that the Whitefield we know is as much a product of choices he made during his lifetime as those of his supporters and detractors in the intervening centuries. Her argument about his iconic status is grounded in what she sees as the malleability of his public image, one that allowed him to be "co-opted for a variety of purposes," and to be continually reinvented (105). Both Parr and Kidd amply document these appropriations in forms as diverse as bawdy theatrical productions, polemical pamphlets, and material artifacts. As Parr rightfully points out, Whitefield, of all the first generation of evangelical leaders, left himself the least tied to any particular memory and the most open for interpretation. He founded no denomination, like the Wesleys, and his own denomination, Anglicanism, often seemed not to want him. His body of writings remained open to revision and interpretation in his own life, a trend that continued with the writing of

pious biographies for different audiences after his death. Even his physical remains were repurposed into talismans for good luck and seemingly un-Protestant religious relics. (Some even survive in archives today, like his desiccated thumb at the United Methodist Archives & History Center at Drew University.)

In the end, would Whitefield actually mind what happened during his journey in this life and after? Both Thomas Kidd and Jessica Parr confirm that Whitefield would gladly have accepted the modern-day dictum that there is no such thing as bad publicity. Whether we are convinced that this was because it allowed Whitefield to portray himself as a heroic reformer, attempting to save his church from the theologically corrupt within and the persecuting and heterodox without, or as simply a pragmatic reflection that more publicity meant larger crowds and more opportunities to make conversions, is up to the individual reader to decide. In death, as in life, Whitefield continues to be many things to many people. As the recent spate of publishing demonstrates, there is no indication that this is going to change anytime soon!

Kyle Roberts is assistant professor of Public History and New Media and author of the forthcoming book, *Evangelical Gotham: Religion and the Making of New York City, 1783-1860* (October 2016)

About Kyle Roberts

Chicago Citation

Roberts, Kyle. "Reconsidering George Whitefield at 300."Review of *George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father by Thomas S. Kidd. Common-place.org.* 16, no. 2.5 (Spring 2016). http://common-place.org/book/reconsidering-george-whitefield-at-300/

Topic Tags: Founders Religion