Keith Edward Beebe (Ed.)


Preparing a critical edition of William McCulloch’s “Examinations of Persons under Spiritual Concern at Cambuslang, during the Revival, in 1741–42” was a large and important undertaking, and Keith Edward Beebe has accomplished it with persevering erudition. McCulloch, a minister at Cambuslang outside Glasgow in the very eye of Scotland’s swirling evangelical awakening, set out to record the personal narratives of those swept up in the revival. In all, he collected 108 testimonies, which he assembled into two manuscript volumes totaling 1,300 pages. Though McCulloch had planned to publish a good number of the narratives as evidence of the glorious work of God in Scotland—just as Jonathan Edwards had done for the revivals in New England—those designs were never realized. The manuscripts sat little noticed in the family’s possession until 1844 when a granddaughter of McCulloch’s donated the papers to New College in Edinburgh. There they caught the attention of an evangelical churchman who thought publishing highlights from them, along with a handful of George Whitefield’s sermons, would provide inspiration for the ongoing work of revival and awakening. Those excerpts made the Cambuslang narratives known in evangelical hagiography and eventually helped call scholarly attention to them. Over the last three decades historians have come to recognize McCulloch’s examinations as among the very best inlets into the popular piety of eighteenth-century evangelicalism. Now with Beebe’s critical edition in hand, scholars will be able to explore these testimonies without making the trek to New College or reading them in the dim light of a microfilm reader.

Creating a critical edition of these handwritten manuscripts was no easy task. One of their chief complicating features is also one of the elements that make these examinations so compelling to historians: namely, McCulloch circulated the first volume of 48 testimonies to four other Presbyterian clergy-men, each of whom made annotations and emendations in the first-person accounts. How to preserve those revisions and comments within the critical edition was a tricky task, and Beebe has done an especially fine job of negotiating those editorial challenges. That means, with volume one, scholars can see—just as they would in the manuscript collection—the layering of ministerial caution and correction over the unabashed immediacy of the lay narratives. The tension points between popular religious experience and ministerial
orthodoxy—on visions, dreams, or overwrought emotions—become utterly transparent. As one of the ministers noted at the bottom of a 47-year-old shoemaker’s account, “I think this Person shou’d be caution’d (as no doubt he has been) about not being heasty in regarding every Impression on his Mind, or Occasional thoughts, as if they were all from the Lord’s Spirit. He seems to need Advice much this way” (1: 90). Accordingly, the proposed deletions and refinements were particularly heavy for this testimony; a whole paragraph, describing a meditative vision of dead men’s bones coming to life and a shower of manna, was marked for expunging.

In his introduction Beebe pays close and noteworthy attention to the four clerical redactors themselves, bringing them into full view for the first time. McCulloch’s ministerial collaborators, handpicked to certify the confessional and scriptural integrity of the narratives against critics of the revival, very much warrant the meticulous documentation Beebe accords them. One of them, James Ogilvie, was so insistent on McCulloch collecting “after-Experiences” of the converted to show the unfolding process of sanctification that his concerns may well have helped derail McCulloch’s publishing plans (1: liv). As the slow editorial process lurched along, the charge that the revival had been long on emotional pyrotechnics and short on lasting regeneration had gathered momentum—locally and well beyond. McCulloch, Beebe suggests, felt the pressure to reconceive his grand project in order to emphasize the perseverance of the saints and the enduring signs of genuine conversion (again not unlike Edwards who shifted his attention in that direction both in his Treatise on Religious Affections and in his Life of David Brainerd). Ogilvie’s challenge, along with backsliding in McCulloch’s own parish, seems to have sapped his editorial resolve. McCulloch left his collection shelved and still unpublished upon his death in 1771.

Beebe’s introduction offers a full account of the manuscript’s history along with a careful contextualization of the Cambuslang revival within eighteenth-century Scottish church history. The editorial procedures he has used to preserve the multiple layers of McCulloch’s examinations are thorough and exacting. He has also provided several useful indices for the two volumes, including for biblical citations as well as for theological and devotional works mentioned in the testimonies. His glossary is short, aimed to pick up a few archaic terms in the Scottish vernacular without acknowledgment that the theological, devotional, and liturgical fine points can themselves be quite arcane at this remove and in need of clarification. Why, for example, would a redactor worry that one woman seemed to make a distinction “twixt convictions and concern” in her sorrowing over her sins (1: 20)? Or, what is an “Action Sermon,” or what does it mean to fall into “a swarf” (1: 313, 318)? But, Beebe’s editorial apparatus is already