In June 2014, an interdisciplinary group of scholars met at Pembroke College, Oxford for the purpose of reassessing George Whitefield’s life on the 300th anniversary of his birth. Panels explored his theology, his influence on religious culture, his interpersonal relationships, and significance over time. The panels were interlaced with keynotes by senior scholars. *George Whitefield. Life, Context, and Legacy* is a collection of the keynotes and some of the papers (in revised form) from that conference.

The volume opens with a biographical sketch and contextual essay by editors Geordan Hammond and David Ceri Jones. Fittingly, Hammond and Jones start with Wesley’s November 1770 memorialization of Whitefield at Whitefield’s Tottenham Court Chapel. It was a memorial sermon that sidestepped the contentious relationship that Whitefield had with his one-time mentor, although it was on the mend at the time of Whitefield’s death at the parsonage of Old South Presbyterian Church in Newburyport, Massachusetts. Like many larger-than-life historical figures, treatments of Whitefield are prone to hagiography. Efforts to analyze Whitefield’s life are obscured by the fact that most of the primary sources on Whitefield’s life were either produced by Whitefield himself, or edited to emphasize key themes, like his role in American religious culture.1 This opening essay sets the reader up to understand the complex, and sometimes contradictory life and legacy of its subject.

Beginning in the 1730s, Whitefield’s preaching tours covered Great Britain and seven missionary trips to the Britain's North American colonies. He was also influential in continental Europe. He interacted with an uneven and fractious religious geography, particularly in the colonies, and built no permanent ties to either geography or denomination.2 Among this volume’s strengths is that the essays reflect that expansive geography. In terms of the big picture, Carla Gardina Pestana’s essay reflects upon Whitefield’s relationship with the British Empire. Pestana correctly concludes that despite having been sent to Georgia by the Church of England at the start of his career, his primary connection was with peripheral colonies, rather than formal cosmopolitan power

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structures. Ultimately, the ecclesiastical and civic elite came to fear Whitefield’s popularity, despite the fact that Whitefield challenged, but never rejected the Church. As a result, Gardina observes, Whitefield’s career did more to elevate dissenting denominations than it served the objectives of empire (pp. 82–85).

Other key contributions to the geography of Whitefield studies include Keith Beebe and David Ceri Jones’ essay on Whitefield’s engagement with Celtic nations of the British Isles—Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, as well Stephen Berry’s examination of an Atlantic Whitefield. David Ceri Jones has done some previous work exploring the Methodist angles of the Great Awakening, and this article by Jones and Beebe is a useful assessment of an understudied aspect of Whitefield’s missionary work. Similarly, drawing on his previous research of shipboard religious communities, Berry sheds light on an arena in which Whitefield spent an estimated 8% of his life, removed from his usual “onshore celebrity” (p. 223). Therein, Whitefield’s interpersonal relationships mattered more than his popular image.

Whitefield’s interpersonal relationships are another understudied aspect presented in this volume. As a larger-than-life and often controversial figure, the Grand Itinerant’s celebrity frequently obscures him as an individual person, making it difficult to definitively pin down exactly who he was. But as Boyd Stanley Schlenther’s essay demonstrates, studying Whitefield’s difficult childhood, and the nature of his (typically fraught) interpersonal relationships (especially with women) helps to shed light on Whitefield the man (pp. 12–28). Schlenther’s points are complemented by other essays, such as Brett McInelly’s thoughtful analysis of how the voices of Whitefield’s critics can be used to understand his interpersonal issues (pp. 150–166). Collectively, Schlenther, McInelly, Kenneth Minkema’s chapter on Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards, and Isabel Rivers’s essay on Whitefield’s reception in England (and particularly within the Anglican communion) suggest ways that scholars of Whitefield could expand their understanding of the man by indulging in closer reads with both individuals and institutions, rather than focusing more broadly on his career (pp. 261–277).


4 Stephen R. Berry, A Path in the Mighty Waters. Shipboard Life and Atlantic Crossings to the New World (New Haven, 2015).