

Lisa Smith. *The First Great Awakening in Colonial American Newspapers: A Shifting Story* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013). Pp. 183. Figures, notes, appendices, bibliography, index. Paper, \$32.99.

Lisa Herb Smith closely analyzes the phenomenon called the First Great Awakening as it played out in colonial newspapers during the decade from 1739 to 1748. To define and give shape to her collected data, Smith identifies three important stages in the First Great Awakening: the years 1739–41, when the revival could be traced by following newspaper accounts of Rev. George Whitefield’s tour of the colonies; 1741–43, the “most contentious years,” when (with Whitefield gone) “both revivalists and their critics were attempting to define the movement and influence public opinion” in the newspapers; and 1744–48, the years marking Whitefield’s second tour of the colonies, a period of marked decline in news concern about the movement (7). Smith highlights shifts that occurred across time or within individuals’ views about the awakening, showing how the revival was, across time, presented by the majority of newspapers she discusses, how the newspaper reportage differed in different regions, and how the central personalities of the revival were represented.

The first chapter, “Reporting the Awakening,” argues that newspapers fueled public fascination with the revivalism of George Whitefield and fueled as well different communities’ anticipation of his arrival. Because of the emotional and enthusiastic responses among some participants in the revival, some newspapers treated revivalist news as major news, reprinting stories of Whitefield’s movements across the colonies. After the initial news furor about Whitefield’s presence, some newspapers began to offer negative views about Whitefield and revivalism, after Whitefield had departed. Smith points out two features of news reports after 1741: negative reports by far outnumbered positive ones, and letters debating the quality and reliability of faith practices resulting from revivalism dominated newspaper reports (23). Smith’s evaluation of the situation is that “Whitefield’s criticisms of established church traditions and ‘dead’ religious practice created a backlash” against him (22), and this criticism, coupled with anxiety about “the impact of the revival on the colonial social order” (29), led to a significant change in how lay preachers would be treated in some communities. In fact, Smith reports, “some colonies outlawed itinerant and lay preaching” entirely (32). Eventually, the reportage faded, but for a time, religious news—pro and con revivalism—dominated newspaper reporting, so much so that Benjamin

Franklin could remark in his autobiography that “it seem’d as if all the World were growing Religious” (36). For those interested in Pennsylvania history, the book’s discussion of Franklin and Whitefield will be useful.

Chapter 2 recounts the “Regional Paper Wars” that took place during the era of revivalism. By tracking the local “paper wars,” as they were called, Smith can outline the central controversies caused by the awakening within the different communities. In some well-populated areas, “party papers” could afford to take particular viewpoints and hold to them (the *Boston Gazette* in favor of revivalism, the *Boston Evening-Post* against). In other areas, where papers were fewer and the population more dispersed, partiality toward a particular view could have sunk the paper. In New England several issues dominated newspaper discussions. From 1739 through 1743, the primary concern about the revival arose over itinerancy and whether itinerant preachers ought to be permitted to operate. From 1745 to 1747, another topic emerged as more crucial—what to do about congregations broken apart by itinerant preachers. A third element of concern arose thereafter, this time around sacramental practices of baptism and of ministers’ ordination (56–57). In the middle colonies—which Smith seems to identify as New York through Virginia—where there was greater diversity in religious practice, there was likewise a more tolerant disposition toward the awakening, with the strongest support emanating from Philadelphia, where Benjamin Franklin’s *Pennsylvania Gazette* favorably reported on Whitefield and tended to dominate the news scene. Even so, Smith says, the middle colonies did offer some concern about the revival as it continued, with the key area of concern about authenticity: “Whitefield’s honesty as a minister of the gospel, the accuracy of newspaper accounts on the Awakening, the genuineness of emotionalist preaching—these were some of the matters that Philadelphians debated in the papers” (65). New York, by comparison, seemed “lackluster” in its concern about the revival, perhaps (as Smith concludes) because of the previous newspaper controversies (e.g., the Zenger trial of the 1730s) in their recent past (70–71).

In southern areas, where William Parks (Maryland, then Virginia) and Elizabeth and Peter Timothy (South Carolina) had significant connections with Franklin’s printing network, reports of the revival appeared, but they did not seem to cause the extreme controversies evident in places like New England. To be sure, controversy did occur in South Carolina, where Whitefield in 1740 refused to use the Anglican Prayer Book and thus was called before the ecclesiastical court of Alexander Garden to answer for his

actions (77–78). The issues that arose in South Carolina related more to theology than practice, Smith says: “While Bostonians argued over topics that dealt with religious tradition and church stability, the most lengthy local paper wars in the South dealt with . . . debat[ing] the concept of original sin and Calvinist versus Arminian doctrine” (80). Rather than using her information to create an overarching argument about the awakening, Smith concludes that an examination of the newspapers suggests the extent to which “newspaper readers brought their own opinions and interpretations to the religious events of the 1740s” (81).

Chapter 3, “Whitefield, Tennent, and Davenport: Newsmakers of the Awakening,” treats the different careers of the three principal characters of the awakening and the different regional responses made to their activities. Smith argues that “the newspapers made Whitefield, Tennent, and Davenport household names” by covering their preaching tours in detail and printing numerous local contributors’ letters about them. The chapter offers a detailed summary of the three men’s activities and the newspaper reports made about them.

Smith’s conclusion summarizes her findings and suggests some of the larger implications of her study. Remarking that scholars have “linked public discussion of the Awakening to later intercolonial incidents in American history, such as the Stamp Act and the Revolutionary War,” Smith asserts that the “public debate of the revival made readers more comfortable with civic disagreement and helped create a sense of interrelatedness among the colonists” (163).

The book’s many tables and graphs, in addition to its several appendices, offer readers a source to support larger arguments than Smith’s about religious life in early America. Given that the study was produced not from using electronic databases but from careful reading and mining of newspapers available on microfilm, Smith’s book is a singular achievement.

CARLA MULFORD  
*Pennsylvania State University*