

*Reviving the
Heart*

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Other publications

A Passionate Faith, Oxford: Monarch, 2012

Shaftesbury: The Great Reformer, Oxford: Lion, 2010

Anglican and Evangelical? London: Continuum, 2007
(reprinted 2010)

RICHARD TURNBULL

*Reviving the
Heart*

THE
STORY OF THE
18TH CENTURY
REVIVAL



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A Lion Book
an imprint of

Lion Hudson plc

Wilkinson House, Jordan Hill Road,

Oxford OX2 8DR, England

www.lionhudson.com

ISBN 978 0 7459 5349 6 (print)

ISBN 978 0 7459 5892 7 (epub)

ISBN 978 0 7459 5891 0 (Kindle)

ISBN 978 0 7459 5893 4 (pdf)

First edition 2012

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

This book has been printed on paper and board independently certified as having been produced from sustainable forests.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 12/14 Perpetua

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my wife, Caroline, and my children, Sarah, Katie, Matt, and Rebecca, with whom my love of history has been shared whether or not it was wanted. The stories of John and Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, and other pioneers have travelled with us on car journeys and accompanied our family meals. I am very grateful also to my commissioning editors, first Kate Kirkpatrick and then Ali Hull, to Jessica Tinker and Helen Birkbeck for their editorial work, and to Lion Hudson for publishing. I am also very grateful to Katie Hofman, my personal assistant, who prepared the terms for the index. The research was partially funded by a grant from the Latimer Trust and my thanks go to the Trustees for this support. The privilege of study leave from my post as Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, assisted immensely with the writing. I hope the students will benefit in due course.

Richard Turnbull
Oxford, Summer 2012

Contents

FOREWORD 9

CHAPTER 1: THE ORIGINS OF THE
EVANGELICAL REVIVAL 13

CHAPTER 2: THE RECTORY AND THE INN 29

CHAPTER 3: PREACHING THE NEW BIRTH 47

CHAPTER 4: DISPUTE AND DIVISION 67

CHAPTER 5: SPREADING THE FLAME: THE
EARLY PIONEERS 83

CHAPTER 6: THE COUNTESS AND HER
CIRCLE 105

CHAPTER 7: THE CONSOLIDATION OF
THE REVIVAL 125

CHAPTER 8: THE MATURING OF THE
REVIVAL 149

CONCLUSION 161

APPENDIX 165

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY 175

NOTES 177

INDEX 187

Foreword

“Why is it”, asks Os Guinness, “that no movement of spiritual renewal has ever lasted longer than the third generation? Is it not partly because men forget so soon?” (*Doubt*, Lion Publishing, p. 62).

Perhaps it is this awareness that has prompted Richard Turnbull to give us desperately needed *reminders*, as he takes his readers on a captivating journey across some sixty of the most exciting and nation-changing years in Britain’s history. As far as many modern observers and historical commentators are concerned, the eighteenth-century Revival – together with the Reformation two centuries earlier – might never have taken place at all. It is *history* that provides the educative building blocks for both society and church. It is *memory* that brings the vital lessons of the past into the present.

It is in the preservation of names – and the stories surrounding them – that *Reviving the Heart* so clearly demonstrates divine sovereignty at its most generous. How is it that widespread blessings can be granted from heaven out of the conversions to Christ of such separately placed and uninfluential persons as Grimshaw of Haworth, Fletcher of Madeley, and Walker of Truro? Yet, if a little reflection is given to one of the most dysfunctional families in all Scripture – that of Jacob – we can only recognize that this is the style of God... once we are faced by the visions of Revelation, which

reveal the twelve children of Israel standing around the glory of the divine throne.

How was it that, from a collection of nonentities and workers in the Israeli fishing industry, there could have emerged a movement that was to *turn the world upside-down*?

The same pattern is apparent in the book before us. That a major spiritual awakening can be occasioned despite the limitations of its leaders – the mistakes, the rashly maintained romances, the disputes and divisions, the little conceits and painful rivalries – the message is plain enough:

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise...
(1 Corinthians 1:26–27)

True, there were a few highly placed individuals who fanned the flames of the Revival, notably the redoubtable Countess of Huntingdon and, later, the playwright celebrity of London, Hannah More. The numerous cameos before us will certainly include the touching of the great and the good – and the consequent upturn in national standards and policies – but the chief emphasis is that here was a movement and message that was not so much *for* the common people as *of* the people. The effect of the message on the Kingswood miners is a case in point.

Many thousands of Londoners would turn up for Wesley and Whitefield on London's Blackheath – not far from the nearby public tennis courts – at a small hillock that has been

preserved until today in its original state and is known as “Whitefield’s Mount”.

Gwennap Pit – the famous hollow in the earth resulting from a collapsed tin mine near Redruth in Cornwall – is still visited today as pilgrims relive the days when John Wesley would preach to the thousands who gathered to hear him. The Black Bull public house in Yorkshire’s Haworth still stands – with its reminder of Grimshaw, the fiery “apostle of the north”, sending his parishioners flying into church with the lash of his whip.

The numbers attending open-air preaching in the fields and highways were massive – and that in an overall population of no more than 9 million.

The preachers – whether it was in Bristol, Oxford, or London itself, or in Savannah far away in Georgia (for the pages before us helpfully set out the effects of the Awakening on both sides of the Atlantic) – were kept at full stretch. Often they would be required to preach five or six times a day. And the preaching could be feared. Samuel Walker of Truro was so powerful that parishioners would edge away from church – “Let us go, here comes Walker!”

How would we react to the banning of preachers in our own day? How might a fresh sovereign act of God in revival affect town and country alike? How may we prepare the ground for such a sovereign act to take place once again? We can surely believe, as we read the pages before us, that – although God never exactly repeats his wonders – *there will be a next time!*

RICHARD BEWES OBE
West London

CHAPTER 1

The origins of the Evangelical Revival

The outbreak of what is now known as the Evangelical Revival was as surprising to the participants as it was to observers. It had a profound and lasting effect on English culture and society, as well as on the Church. Before we can tell the story we need to set the scene. Why did these events take place? What caused them?

What was the Revival and when did it happen?

Labels and dates are convenient for the historian, but can act like a sticky note covering up a more complicated picture. The Evangelical Revival (or “Awakening”, the term used for the phenomenon in North America) is the name given to the series of events of intense religious fervour – local, regional, national, and international – in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. The Revival had a number of key distinguishing marks. The first was a recovery of a profound piety in personal devotion. The early participants rose early and prayed deeply and often. The second was a rejection of superficiality in faith in favour of more substantial beliefs

and a new depth of self-examination. The focus was on the all-pervading impact of sin, and then, most importantly (and arguably a new feature of religious faith at the time), on thankfulness in response to what God had done. So John Wesley kept a diary indicating his daily “grace rating” – how he was doing! Third, there was a recovery of the doctrines of the Reformation, the essential beliefs of Protestantism. Two further distinguishing marks of the Revival, occurring perhaps not for the first time but certainly in a newly distinctive way, were a resurgence of expectation of the experience of God in the believer’s life, and a passion to bring the message of the faith to all. So we have an intensity of devotion and faith plus classic doctrines combined with an experiential encounter with the divine, expressed in a transformation of life and a renewed passion for evangelism.

The preaching of the “new birth” – that is, of conversion – was probably the defining feature of the Revival, though there were antecedents.¹ Conversion did not happen for the first time in this period, but it did move centre stage. The Revival was characterized by relatively large numbers of people having a common experience of God’s action in their heart in comparatively confined areas over a fairly short period of time. Mark Noll refers to “intense periods of unusual response to gospel preaching linked with unusual efforts at godly living”.² Thomas Kidd invests the meaning with a more spiritual explanation by referring to “seasons of revival, or outpourings of the Holy Spirit”.³ Revival was bound by neither geography nor social class. Important aspects of the phenomenon can be discovered by considering both the local and the national and transnational perspectives. There were local revivals in various parts of Great Britain and

the colonies, and regional outbreaks (or “outpourings”, if the more spiritual interpretation is preferred) in Wales and parts of New England, which had a national impact on both sides of the Atlantic. John Wesley, comparing North America and England, remarked that the work in one place seemed to be identical to that in the other.⁴

The conversion of John Wesley (1703–91) in 1738 is often seen as a convenient date with which to mark the beginning of the Revival. However, it is both inadequate and inaccurate. Key individuals had already undergone this distinguishing characteristic of evangelical faith, including George Whitefield (1714–70), Howell Harris (1714–73), and Daniel Rowland (1713–90). In North America, Jonathan Edwards (1703–58) had already overseen an outbreak of revival in the town of Northampton, Massachusetts, in 1734, which later spread to other communities in the area of the Connecticut River valley.

The action of God did not distinguish between the social backgrounds of the recipients. The Revival was notable for a new intensity of religious conviction among both the poorest and the best-off in society. Indeed, conversions among the miners of the Kingswood district of Bristol and other deprived groups may have encouraged resistance from some elements of higher society and the Church. The privileged preferred order; conversion empowered the poor. Some of the more radical elements of the “Methodists” pushed the boundaries beyond what the leadership would tolerate. Within a century of the outbreaks the once-radical Methodists had become institutionalized and were expelling new radicals from their ranks – hence the emergence of the Primitive Methodists. Wesley always remained a Tory, a political conservative.

Some important and influential figures did, however, experience conversion, including two prominent women, Selina, Countess of Huntingdon (1707–91) and Hannah More (1745–1833). In this way the gospel reached at least some policy-makers and opinion-formers. Selina certainly met some resistance from her aristocratic friends, horrified by “enthusiasm” and disturbed by some of the more chaotic expressions of revival, but also fearful of disruption of the social order. The Duchess of Buckingham, writing to the Countess of Huntingdon, rather gave the game away: “Their doctrines are most repulsive and strongly tinged with impertinence and disrespect towards their superiors, in perpetually endeavouring to level all ranks and do away with all distinctions.”⁵ However, not everything can be explained in terms of social history. The noble lady also made clear the challenge of the Revival doctrines: “It is monstrous to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl the earth.”⁶ The recovery of the Reformation doctrines (especially the idea of justification by faith alone – being put right with God on account of faith in Christ and his work) was a significant Revival feature. Equally socially disruptive to some were the phenomena that accompanied many of the events: an unruly cacophony of cries, swooning, and trances. Such things gave rise to varied interpretations, though generally there was a degree of healthy scepticism.

The Revival in England took place both within and without the Established Church. The Church of England was built on foundational documents: the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion set out certain basic doctrinal standards; the Book of Common Prayer contained the services of worship authorized by the Church; and the Ordinal was the service

of ordination – hence revealing the Church’s understanding of ministry. These doctrinal and liturgical writings (together with Archbishop Thomas Cranmer’s *Book of Homilies*, that is, sermons) placed the Church of England firmly within the Calvinist traditions of the Protestant Reformation (in other words, its doctrine largely reflected the emphases of John Calvin of Geneva). However, the passing of time and the ebbs and flows of the history of the Church of England had left these key building blocks shrouded in at best a degree of mystery. For some clergy the Revival brought these roots back to prominence, and was thus instrumental in establishing the moderate Calvinist tradition on which Anglican evangelicalism was built. For others this was not so, as is shown by the development of Methodism as a separate denomination towards the end of the eighteenth century. In England there was also a considerable body of traditional religious dissenters (those who did not give their consent to the Established Church; sometimes called non-conformists). They too were affected by the Revival, Isaac Watts (1674–1748) the hymn writer being a notable example. However, much of the main action took place within the Church of England. In North America the dominant Presbyterianism was no less affected – indeed more so than the Established Church. Those influenced by the Awakenings were known as the “New Lights” – and those who resisted, the “Old Lights”.

The Revival, in both Great Britain and North America, also employed new means of evangelism. Two prominent features were preaching and itinerancy. The proclamation of “new birth” or spiritual regeneration, required because of human sin and depravity, was central to the Revival’s methodology. Sermons had become long, dry, moralistic rambles, but were

now transformed by spiritual vitality and preaching to the heart as much as to the intellect. Also, in contrast to the usual model of preaching in a church, the practice of itinerancy developed – that is, the preacher or evangelist travelled from place to place to speak to large crowds, often in the open air. The picture was in reality more complicated. Some of the pioneers adopted the principles of itinerancy while others remained faithful to parish boundaries. Itinerancy was controversial within the Established Church, where it was viewed with suspicion and disdain. Without the permission of the incumbent, it was illegal to preach in his parish. For most of the early Revival preachers, while the pulpits were closed, the fields were open.

The Revival can thus be characterized as the religion of the heart, a Protestant awakening, or even a work of God. It had a wide range of social, political, ecclesiastical, and psychological aspects. The weight given to any one or combination of these factors rather depends on the approach adopted by the historian. If the Revival is simply portrayed as the work of God, then why within two years of Wesley's conversion did the group of Christians with which he was most closely associated (the Moravians) split in two, and why did Wesley and Whitefield fall out so ferociously? This is perhaps a rather unusual way for the Lord of history to operate. The Revival can also be fully understood only by appreciating its place within a global context, recognized much more now than previously. Both Wesley and Whitefield, two of the central players in the story, were as well known in the North American colonies as in England. Each of them made regular visits, caused controversy for a variety of reasons, and found the pulpits of the Established Church closed to them, despite

being ordained ministers of the Church of England. European as well as North American influences are also central to understanding what took place.

The state of religion in England

The classic understanding, propagated mostly by those within the evangelical movement, is that the Revival was essentially a reaction to the condition of society and faith in the early eighteenth century. Indeed, the state of faith had declined rapidly (at least as seen through the rose-tinted spectacles of the later evangelical commentators) from the high point of the Commonwealth period; that is, during the Puritan ascendancy represented by the Cromwellian Protectorate of 1653–59. This was the case despite the nation being saved from Catholicism by William of Orange's accession to the throne in 1688. The day was dark, the embers of faith were low; it was time for God to act. The case is put explicitly, if uncritically, in one of the earlier "house histories" of evangelicalism: "the drunkenness of the age is proverbial", the "country squires were sodden with alcohol", "filth was regarded as the choicest form of wit", and, as for the Church, "only the cautious and colourless remained, Laodicians, whose ideal Church was neither hot nor cold".⁷ The Church "had forgotten its mission, unspiritual, discredited, useless".⁸

How accurate is this picture? There has been a reaction against the claim that the Church in the pre-Revival period lacked faith and sophistication. The nation and the Church both emerged from the conflagration of 1649–62 (the Civil Wars, execution of Charles I, the Commonwealth, and the Restoration) in need of breathing space. A king had

been executed and then his house restored, Puritan faith established and then repudiated. The matter was settled with the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The nation was to remain Protestant, but perhaps in a slightly more polite way.

The classic explanations

The standard approach was set out by John Walsh in an essay published in 1966, in which he identified three main categories into which explanations of the Revival fall.

The first of these was the continuing influence of high-church spiritual piety. This requires some explanation. The high-church spiritual tradition of the early eighteenth century was considerably different from what was subsequently termed “high church” in the light of the Anglo-Catholic renewal movement of the nineteenth century. High-church orthodoxy in the period after 1688 had a number of characteristics. The tradition was not Roman Catholic and not especially sympathetic to Catholicism. The loyalty of its adherents was not in doubt. Considerable weight was given to the Church and its continuing tradition. So there was a tendency to look to significant bishops (e.g. Lancelot Andrewes) and the divines of the Stuart period, Jeremy Taylor and George Herbert, if not to the monarchs. Some doubted the legitimacy of William of Orange and hence declined to swear the necessary oaths (as the Puritans had done before them in 1660), and so acquired the name “non-jurors”. In short, the high-church group remained Protestant and orthodox, but eclectic and wedded to the royal supremacy (even though there was some disagreement over which monarchy). Walsh describes their adherence to “apostolic

order, continuity, authority and discipline of the visible Church, the necessity of apostolic succession”,⁹ together with baptism, Eucharist, and liturgical conformity. It is no surprise that some of these efforts and desires for spiritual vitality formed part of the background to the Revival. The usual example given is that of William Law (1686–1761). His early works, especially *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1729), represented the classic high-church description of holiness, requiring dedication and discipline of life. This book certainly influenced both of the Wesleys and the other members of the Holy Club in Oxford (see Chapter 2). That is hardly surprising. It was not an evangelical work. As we will see, the Awakening was something of a reaction to it, rather than a continuation.

The second group of explanations saw the outbreak as a reaction against Protestant rationalism and a protest against arid intellectualism and the perceived cold formality of much of contemporary religiosity. This was reflected in sermons – long (indeed, *very* long), dry articulations of obscure points of theology. There seemed to be very little for the soul. In many ways this was a reflection of the age, with the advance of Enlightenment thinking, and the elevation of the mind and carefully constructed argument. Wesley commented that faith “is not barely a speculative, rational thing, a cold lifeless assent, a train of ideas in the head, but also a disposition of the heart”.¹⁰ The reaction to rationality was exemplified in the appeal to experience. Presbyterianism in North America – old-fashioned dissent – was increasingly influenced by rationality. Some even abandoned Trinitarian faith altogether. Wesley and Whitefield were seen as reacting against this trend.¹¹

The third type of explanation emphasized direct continuity with the Puritan tradition, reviving pre-existing Christian doctrines, and taking its adherents down well-known and recognizable paths with familiar guides. The continuities are many. Despite the ebbs and flows it is now accepted by many scholars, in particular Patrick Collinson, that throughout the history of the Church of England a continuing Puritan tradition remained within it. So the Revival can be represented as Puritanism coming back to life. Certainly many of the spiritual and doctrinal works that featured in the Revival, and indeed in the personal stories of many of the participants, came from the Puritan stable and the Puritan divines. The classic appeal to the formularies of the Church of England also reflected this approach. The theology of the Revival clearly mirrored that of the Reformation, more so with Whitefield and the progress of the Revival within the Established Church than with Wesley and the development of Methodism.

However, there are also difficulties. Whitefield cut through some of the rationalistic, systematic theology of the Puritans to preach and proclaim the “new birth”. This was a new appeal that placed much more emphasis on individual experience of the power of the Spirit in the heart than previously. Indeed, in some ways Whitefield was much more radical, concerned for field preaching and even church planting (though the phrase is an anachronism), and less so for church order and doctrinal confessions.

The problem with Walsh’s original essay is that it leaves the impression that the Revival came about as a result of some sort of combination of these factors, a synthesis. This approach is inadequate, but, before looking at a new framework, there remains one crucial aspect to consider.

International connections

The Revival was not simply an isolated phenomenon restricted to Great Britain. There were many influences from other parts of the world, especially continental Europe and North America. Much greater recognition is now given to these international aspects. There was communication between friends and contacts, together with the exchange of news about people and events. As immigration increased from Europe, so too did the links. With England's heritage as a Protestant country, it is not surprising that the movements of peoples across Europe, caused by what was seen as Catholic oppression, led to greater sympathy for the victims and perhaps even greater openness to the influence of Revival. The expulsion of Protestants from Salzburg in 1731 was a particular case in point.

The role of Pietism in central Europe is particularly important. From this movement emerged the Moravian Church, especially in the form fostered by the significant but eccentric Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf (1700–66). He was born into a Pietist family and educated at Halle. In 1722 he offered refuge to a number of persecuted Protestants from Moravia and Bohemia and allowed them to build the village of *Herrnhut* (“the Lord's Watch”) on his estate at Berthelsdorf. During the 1720s the village began to attract groups of like-minded people, and the classic features of such communities began to emerge: a press, schools, and a community house. The worship and daily life sought to reflect those of Acts 2: communal living and informality in prayer and worship. Other developments included, in 1735, a new Moravian settlement in the North American colony of Georgia. This settlement, together with stories of

oppression at the hands of the Catholic authorities of central Europe, brought the Pietists a new prominence and attracted the attention of figures such as Gilbert Tennent and Jonathan Edwards, prominent Presbyterian pastors in North America. In this way continental Pietism was connected to key figures of the Revival in England and the American colonies. Pietism was essentially a renewal movement. It embraced elements of theology that were central to the Revival, but also some mystical emphases and practices from Catholicism which were far removed from traditional Calvinism. There were also complex divisions between the main protagonists. The promotion of inner godliness, hymnody, personal encounter, and new birth had a significant influence on the Revival, yet certain elements of Pietism (“the wounds of Jesus”, “quietness or stillness”) did not sit well with an England where Calvinism and Puritanism remained formative for the national Church.

Across the Atlantic there were stirrings before Revival broke out in England. There was a long-standing Puritan heritage in North America. We have already noted how this led to division between the traditionalists and those who embraced revival. However, despite the differences, international Calvinism also provided a channel of communication. So when Jonathan Edwards sought to tell the story of Revival in Northampton in 1733–35 – *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* – it was two England-based Calvinist dissenters, Isaac Watts and John Guyse, who published the work in London. This helped ensure that Revival and Calvinism remained partners. The settlement of Moravians in Georgia and the visit by John and Charles Wesley also helped bring the relevant forces and individuals in contact with each other.

By placing the Revival in England in a wider context, we can see how differing influences came to bear on its various aspects. The international links between North America, Great Britain, and continental Europe provided a ready flow of information but also raised consciousness, brought participants into contact with one another, and prepared the ground for the work of God in all its diversity.

A new framework

The story of the Revival, its personalities and key events, and its impact on people, both individuals and communities, is an exciting one. However, it cannot be understood without both context and interpretation. The traditional explanations have changed in the light of more recent scholarship. Inevitably there remains a degree of tension between “providential” approaches that stress the Revival as an act of God and more “secular” understandings that seek alternative cultural, social, and political causes. The two approaches should not be presented as an either/or choice. We can easily dismiss the extremes – either an outpouring of the Spirit of God without reference to other aspects, or the failure to recognize that the wide range of factors that led to Revival cannot explain everything. The explanation of “a surprising work of God” may be seen as providential by some and psychological by others; there still remains the essential task of setting out and elucidating the events, their impact, and their meaning.

One of the complexities in seeking to understand and explain the origins of the Protestant awakenings of the early eighteenth century is the tendency to present the reader with a vast array of differing options. Historians today are

less likely to opt for a single explanatory narrative (no doubt rightly so), but neither does that mean that explanations of events can simply be seen as some sort of convergence of various alternatives.

We have explored the classic explanation that the origins of the Revival lay in high churchmanship, a reaction to rationalism, and a reawakening of the Puritan tradition. Each of these has merit, but also poses difficulty. The link of the Evangelical Revival to high churchmanship continues to be asserted but is something of a confusion of category. Walsh correctly notes that high churchmen being converted were deserting their principles. Similarly, we have seen that the relationship to rationalism was not simply a reaction. The more recent scholarship has re-emphasized the importance of the international dimension, with regard to both communication links and, of course, the influence of continental Pietism.

Perhaps we can reassess the traditional approach? There were three distinct themes in the background to the Revival. The first of these was *reaction to moralism*. Orthodox, moralistic sermons were key elements of both the high churchmanship and the rationalism that pervaded the period before the Awakenings. The important point is not the high-church tradition or rationalism per se, but that both offered solutions that were essentially moralistic. The exhortation was to live a better life, to be more devoted to spiritual exercises, or to become more pious. This is what evangelicals reacted against because it both proved inadequate and sat awkwardly with the Reformation doctrines. The second key source then was *reclaiming doctrine*. The Revival cannot be seen simply as the reassertion of Puritanism and yet that tradition, including its Calvinism, featured strongly. Indeed, the combination of an

inadequate moralism and the reclaiming of the Reformed doctrine of justification by faith alone go hand in hand. The third crucial element is that of *appropriating experience*. Specifically this came about through the influence of continental Pietism and played itself out in the Revival themes of “new birth” and “conversion”. The experiential encounter was a personal one, a truly transformational meeting with God. The origins of the Revival lie in the combination and meeting of these three great themes: reacting against mere moralism, reclaiming Reformation doctrine, and appropriating experience.

The transcontinental connections, between England, North America, and Europe, provided channels of communication through which stories were transmitted. The movement of people and population contributed to the meetings of individuals, the recognition of shared experiences, and different emphases in the various parts of the Revival. So different individuals were more or less affected by the Calvinist international – that is, the friendships and intercontinental communication channels between Calvinists (for example, the story of the Northampton Revival coming to England via dissenting Calvinist ministers) – or by Moravian Pietism (for example, John and Charles Wesley’s encounter with the Moravian Christians).

The uniqueness of the Revival stems from each of these elements; the distinctiveness of the various aspects derives from their relative weight. We now turn to the story, to the narrative of the Revival itself, with all its twists and turns, its excitements, personalities, and complexities.