REVIEW OF BOOKS


With the release of his Enlightened Evangelicalism, Jonathan Yeager, recently named Visiting Assistant Professor of Religion in the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, has served notice that he will be a voice to be heard in future discussions about the transatlantic evangelical world of the long eighteenth century, the latter has proved to be a thriving field of studies over the past two decades. His book, the revision of a doctoral dissertation produced at Stirling University under the supervision of the well-known D. W. Bebbington, takes as its subject the Scottish minister John Erskine (1721–1803), a figure whom Yeager shows to have been what we might call the great “influence broker” on the international evangelical Calvinist network binding together Holland, Scotland, England, and young America in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

Such a claim for such a man at first seems incongruous; how could Erskine of Edinburgh be a person at the hub of links binding together so many important Christian leaders (we may name Jonathan Edwards, Samuel Davies, Jonathan Dickinson, John Witherspoon, Andrew Fuller, and John Ryland as examples) and have gone virtually unnoticed since the biography produced by his colleague Henry Moncrieff Welwood in 1804? The answer to this conundrum is twofold. First, it was the nature of Erskine’s leadership to be the literary encourager, the supplier of theological literature, and the editor for a vast body of theological literature (none more important than the posthumously-published writings of Jonathan Edwards) on both sides of the Atlantic. This work was carried out behind the scenes, largely through long-distance correspondence with persons distant from major cities, libraries, and booksellers. Second, Yeager’s work in important respects has been that of pursuing “threads” laid down by earlier researchers of this period of transatlantic Christian cooperation; in point of fact, very many of these threads were observed to lead to and from Erskine.

But what kind of a man was this John Erskine, Church of Scotland minister first of country charges and from 1758, minister within the city of Edinburgh? Yeager portrays him as well-born, one well on his way to a distinguished law career. Erskine was also favorably disposed to the preaching of itinerant George Whitefield, who was in western Scotland in connection with the evangelical awakenings at Cambusbarr and Kilsyth in 1742. Hearldly approving of the Awakening and Whitefield’s influence, Erskine set a new course: he took up the study of divinity within his university, Edinburgh.

Central to the depiction of his subject is Yeager’s well-founded determination to help us to see that Erskine as a student and an aspiring preacher was determined to be an evangelical in the Reformed tradition who embraced the Enlightenment in what is termed its “moderate” form (not to be confused with the ministerial party of eighteenth-century Scotland termed “moderate”). The moderate form of the Enlightenment utilized John Locke; it emphasized that Christianity stood on a basis that could be defended by rational means, and it took pains
to write and to speak about the gospel and Christian doctrine in a manner that respected the literary conventions of that Augustan age. Both as a preacher and as an able theologian, Erskine drew on the theology of the preceding Puritan era while expressing himself in the brevity and lucidity that were the hallmarks of a new age. On this basis, therefore, Yeager is warranted in presenting Erskine to us as an example of an "enlightened Evangelicalism"—a stance which he suggests was also that of Jonathan Edwards.

In this portrait, we can see the guiding influence of Yeager's *Doktoratser*, Bebbington, who has been maintaining since the publication of his classic work *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (1989) that certain Enlightenment influences were appropriated by the evangelical leaders of the eighteenth century. And it is right that Yeager follows his mentor in this regard, inasmuch as the evidences of this measured appropriation—on both sides of the Atlantic—are there for all to see. Having said this, Yeager is eager to show that his subject was thoroughly conversant with and respectful toward the theological literature of the preceding post-Reformation period, and yet in no merely repetitively way. Erskine, the friend of Reformed theology, was determined to articulate that theology in a way that met the challenges of the Enlightenment era.

To be fair, some of Yeager's chapters delight the reader more than others. His third chapter, "The Enlightened Preacher," in addition to demonstrating how Erskine appropriated the ideals of his age regarding clear argument and oral delivery, takes us through an extended paraphrastic tour of Erskine's preaching; the latter is very heavy going. One might have appreciated reading a model Erskine sermon instead.

His fifth chapter, "The Enlightened Theologian," succeeds in showing us an Erskine alert to the intellectual currents of his age; but it sheds very little light on how—in detail—Erskine's articulation of Reformed theology differed from that of other eighteenth-century writers. In the reckoning of this reviewer, Yeager resorts to a rather wooden depiction of other expressions of eighteenth-century Calvinist in order to provide a "foil" against which Erskine's fresh approach can be displayed. The question is not about whether Erskine's approach represented something fresh (this Yeager knows better than anyone) but about the accuracy of the depiction of the Calvinist viewpoint the enlightened Erskine is suggested to have moved beyond. Yeager shows that Erskine is thoroughly conversant with literature on eighteenth-century Scottish theology. Yet we await a definitive treatment that displays the actual variety of Calvinist theology in that age. Surely, at the very least, it needs to be maintained that Erskine was one of a number of Reformed theologians—including Doddridge and Edwards—who were seeking to articulate the Reformed faith in a way sensitive to the new intellectual climate.

The head-turning chapters, in this reviewer's judgment, are the seventh, "The Friend to America," and the eighth, "The Disseminator." In both we see Erskine as the voluminous letter-writer, the encourager, the friend of liberty, the strategist. Like a good number of other Reformed or Nonconformist leaders in England and Scotland, Erskine was ready to encourage his home government to reach an accommodation with the American colonies, rather than resorting to war in 1775. At considerable risk to his own reputation, Erskine went into print as one who—while loyal to his monarchy—believed that his American friends had legitimate grievances which were not being heeded. And, continuous with that befriending of America, we are allowed to see that Erskine (an independently wealthy man quite apart from his ministerial salary) was the benefactor of American ministers and theologians with numerous gifts of books meant to spur them on in their theological writing of their own (Jonathan Edwards was simply the best-known recipient).

In this matter, Yeager acted almost as a commissioning editor, urging certain men (Edwards, Hopkiness, Bellamy) whom he judged able to write on certain themes and then managing their manuscripts through the presses of Edinburgh publishers who were in his trust. And not ministers only, but America's budding university libraries (Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, Pennsylvania) received Erskine's munificence. Residing as he did in one of the two great publishing centers of Britain, he was determined both to see worthy theological literature published there and disseminated across the Atlantic.

Clearly we are in Jonathan Yeager's debt. His chosen subject is one that should provoke us to think afresh about the appropriate stance for Reformed theology now, situated as we are in a new period of cultural and intellectual upheaval. We should not miss, either, the role played by this influential Scot as the encourager and enabler of others.

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With the publishing of *Cotton Mather and "Biblia Americana"*, the long-envisioned work of the Mather project has gained serious momentum. False perceptions of Mather as the egoistic proponent of the Salem witch trials are now on their way of being obliterated (although Mather supported the trials, his involvement was much more subdued than previously reported). Indeed, this collective volume will set historians on a new path in understanding Mather and will no doubt be remembered as the beginning of a renaissance in American Puritan studies, a field long inundated with nineteenth-century Hawthornian biases (e.g., his "Young Goodman Brown") and misunderstandings of Puritan introspection. For far too long, Mather, a Puritan polymath and pastor, has suffered from an unusually negative reputation; this collection of essays ably remedies that distortion.

Careful students of American Puritanism have long known the rewards of Mather study and the discoveries such inquiry leads to. For instance, Robert Middlekauff's *The Mathers: Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals, 1596–1728* (1971) aptly showed the intellectual continuity of the Mathers. Richard Lovelace's *The American Pamphlet of Cotton Mather: Origins of American Evangelicalism* (1979) revealed much about the origins of early-modern evangelicalism (Mather was the first to use the word "revival" in its modern sense). Winona U. Solberg's critical edition of Mather's *The Christian Philosopher* (1994) opened up Mather's significant achievement in assessing and raiding the Enlightenment. And now *Cotton Mather and "Biblia Americana"* will equally be remembered for inspiring the rebirth of Mather studies.

As noted in my previous review of Mather's work on Genesis, the *Biblia Americana* was the first comprehensive Bible commentary composed in America, and its republication opens a window into the academic and philosophical furor of eighteenth-century colonial America. Mather's *Biblia Americana* is far more than an antiquated historical piece; it is a witness to the