

Stout, Harry S. *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991

While modern historiography has shifted away from the Great Men, political, nationalistic focus of the Nineteenth Century and shifted toward social history, biography must retain its focus on the individual. However, Stout's book does reflect the influence of prosopography on biography. While Whitefield holds center stage in Stout's book, he also focuses a good deal on others who impacted the rise of evangelicalism such as Edwards, Wesley, Franklin(who, while not an evangelist, impacted evangelicalism with his innovations in printing and newspaper writing) and Sarah Crosby. He discusses these others in light of their relationship to Whitefield, but the same forces, unleashed by the changing times, that effected Whitefield also effected them. In a certain sense, then, his book is a biography of a group of people with Whitefield as the ideal example. In his book, Stout shows how Whitefield and the rise of modern evangelicalism existed in a symbiotic relationship, each feeding on the other. This paper will examine this relationship from both sides and show how Stout makes his case.

First, one needs to examine the forces that shaped George Whitefield, and the first of these is family. His father died when he was young, and this left his mother to raise seven children. His mother was the most powerful force in shaping his early life and directing him to the ministry. She wanted the family to regain its fallen social standing, and the ministry was the best means available to them. The family's social decline (more likely his mother's preoccupation with it) created in Whitefield a sense on inferiority that became bound up in his sense of personal destiny and possibly his sense of persecution.

Another very powerful force on Whitefield's early life, that shaped almost everything he later did, was drama. He was naturally gifted in this area. He was more adept at elocution, oration, memorization, and mimicry than at any of the more traditional academic disciplines. If Whitefield's mother determined that he would be a minister, it was Whitefield's nature that determined what kind of minister he would become- not a pulpit preacher but a field preacher. Whitefield's dramatic skills fused with another powerful influence, the rise of methodism, to form a new kind of preaching. This new preaching was extemporaneous, and it was a particular feature of methodism. Stout writes that "extemporaneous preaching had become an accepted innovation among the Oxford methodists during Whitefield's tenure there." (p.43). Whitefield adds to this extemporaneous preaching his full "pulpit arsenal" of pathos, tears, consolation, and release(discussed individually on pp.42-43). The development of this arsenal was a direct result of Whitefield's dramatic tendencies and abilities. This extemporaneous preaching gave Whitefield the opportunity to put his dramatic skills into practice to provide himself with the "power and legitimacy"(p.37) he craved.

A final influence on the young Whitefield was his Oxford experience. This was important not just because this is where he came under the influence of methodism but also because of his position there. Whitefield went to Oxford as a servitor. This effected him in two ways. The first is that, along with the work he did at his mother's inn, it helped him develop what today is called people skills. Whitefield's personality was such that he needed to be liked, and so he developed skills in which to ingratiate himself to others. The other effect of being a servitor was that Whitefield felt alienated from the Oxford establishment. This combined with his newfound Methodism caused him to devote himself, almost fanatically, to

personal piety. Stout makes this point when he writes that "on a personal level, Methodism offered these alienated students an element of control and meaning in a rapidly changing world." (p.20) So much so that in Whitefield's case he "soon tried to out- methodize the Methodist." (p.21)

If family, school, theater, and Methodism had a big influence on determining who Whitefield became, one can also see how who he became helped develop the revivals and new religious history of the eighteenth century. One of the most important ways that Whitefield and the changing times fed on each other was in the area of marketing. In the mid-eighteenth century American and England were in the midst of a "consumer revolution." Stout writes in the introduction that Whitefield's "greatness lay in integrating religious discourse into this emerging language of consumption."(p.xviii) One of the primary ways Whitefield did this was through his Journal. Using his Journal, Whitefield could create a character for mass consumption, and in the process merge his private life with his public life in such a way as to cause the private man to become completely lost. In essence, Whitefield became an entrepreneur whose product was himself.

Another way in which Whitefield used the media to promote himself was through newspapers. Using controversy, Whitefield managed to make himself news. Stout argues that in most instances Whitefield actually manufactured the controversy in order to promote himself such as the "St. Margaret's Affair." (pp.70-71) Whitefield needed to get himself thrown out of the London pulpits in order to reach larger audiences in the fields, so he manufactured a controversy. Whitefield was also constantly provoking the established ministers with tirades against unsaved clergy. Stout also argues that Whitefield's sense of persecution is largely an effort at self-promotion.

Another way Whitefield used the media for promotion and marketing was in taking over the magazine entitled *The Weekly History*. Distribution of this magazine was done largely by local societies and also by the vast, intercontinental network that Whitefield had already established through massive letter writing campaigns. Whitefield used this magazine to “record the new history of revivals” and to “advance publicity” (p.145). There are three fundamentals to a successful business: a product, capital, and marketing. Whitefield had all of these. Field preaching was his product. Whitefield’s drama, his skill at extemporaneous sermons, and rhetorical ability all combined to make his preaching a form of entertainment that could attract even secular audiences away from other forms of entertainment like theater. Whitefield’s capital came from fund raising letters, the magazine, and offerings. In this regard Whitefield proved that religion “could survive...in an outdoor setting if[italics his] it was presented in terms that would attract eighteenth century crowds.” (p.123) Whitefield’s marketing ability has already been discussed above. Stout sums up these three points when he writes that “having already led the way with field preaching and fund raising, Whitefield now pioneered with religious journalism.” (p.145)

Stout’s book is a very illuminating account of the rise of modern evangelism, but in its historiography it has some weaknesses. Primarily, it is Stout’s attempt to psychoanalyze Whitefield that causes the most problems. Trying to understand the mind of a person and what they were thinking is next to impossible for a historian. Even the groundbreaking work in this field by Erik Erikson in *Young Man Luther* was filled with unsupportable speculation. Stout uses language that suggest that he knows Whitefield better than Whitefield himself. For example, when explaining why Whitefield wanted to covert the crew on his ship he argues that

Whitefield wanted to overcome his effeminate image, and that "he had to believe[italics mine] that nothing would be more impressive than his successful witness to the crew." (p.54) In regards to Whitefield's Journal, he argues that "the writer could even fool himself."(p.52) Stout wants to preserve Whitefield's piety, sincerity, and integrity while doubting the veracity of his accounts. To reconcile this he has to present Whitefield as sincere but self-deceived. Other language is also suggestive. In explaining why Whitefield went to the field he writes that "Whitefield needed to legitimate his pretext." (p.67) This suggests that Whitefield had ulterior motives that Stout has discovered, and that now he can explain his behavior as an attempt to legitimate that hidden motive. One final example can be seen when Stout writes about Whitefield's cool reaction to his mother's death. He writes that "perhaps on a level Whitefield could never have recognized...came private resentment for a mother who had so definitively carved his destiny without consultation." (p.215) At least he prefaces this with "perhaps". In most instances he simply asserts as fact what can only be speculation. However, an historian, especially a biographer, has to immerse him/herself in the sources and attempt some sort of explanation. It seems that some attention to his/her point of view should be given in the introduction, however, along with some discussion of why he/she reached the conclusions that he/she did. While Stout does admit that "the actor's psyche provide[s] keys to the interpretation of Whitefield's greatness,"(xxiv) he does not mention the presuppositions that he takes with him into the analysis of Whitefield's psyche, nor does he acknowledge that such an analysis is unreliable at best.

George Whitefield was a prime force in the rise of modern evangelicalism; however, he was also a product of its rise. Stout does a good job of showing this.

Whitefield, a born dramatist and people person, tapped into the forces of the new consumer revolution to bring "a sense of international significance and culmination to the local work" of evangelicalism (p.148). The product of this culmination was a new religious history based on the personal experience of the believer which "became the ground for a shared theology of revival."(p.206)