

John Witherspoon's American Revolution**Gideon Mailer****Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2017****440 pages****\$45.00****ISBN: 978-1469628189****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v3i2.92>**

On December 7, 1776, a British army brigade entered Nassau Hall, the primary building on the campus of the College of New Jersey at Princeton, and used it as a barracks and horse stable. The troops occupied this building, one of the largest in British colonial America, until George Washington's Continental Army arrived on January 3, 1777 and drove them out of town at the Battle of Princeton. One British officer stationed in Nassau Hall would later write, "Our army when we lay there spoiled and plundered a good Library...." The damaged library belonged to Reverend John Witherspoon, the president of the college, who had fled Princeton for his own protection shortly before the arrival of British soldiers.

Earlier in 1776, John Witherspoon sat in the Pennsylvania State House as a member of the New Jersey delegation to the Continental Congress. We know that he played a major role in Congress, but the destruction of his papers have prevented historians from writing the kinds of magisterial biographies of him like those published on George Washington, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, or Thomas Jefferson.

Historians do have, however, Witherspoon's extensive published writings, allowing them to explore the depths of his religious and political thought. This is the approach that Gideon Mailer has taken in his new biography *John Witherspoon's American Revolution*. Those expecting a page-turner along the lines of other so-called "founders chic" biographies will be disappointed with Mailer's book. There is little here about Witherspoon's love life, his family life, or his inner spiritual struggles. Instead, Mailer treats us to a carefully argued and deeply researched exploration

of Witherspoon's ideas in the context of the eighteenth-century world—both American and British—in which he lived. This is early American intellectual history at its best.

Prior to *John Witherspoon's American Revolution*, the received wisdom from historians of Witherspoon's thought was that the Presbyterian divine was the perfect representation of how evangelical Protestantism had either merged with, or was co-opted by, the enlightened moral thinking emanating from the great Scottish universities. Historians Ned Landsman and Mark Noll argued that Witherspoon's ethical sensibilities drew heavily from moralist Francis Hutcheson and the moderate wing of the Scottish Presbyterian Church. Landsman coined the phrase "The Witherspoon Problem" to describe how Witherspoon strongly opposed Hutcheson's human-centered system of morality prior to arriving in the colonies in 1768, but then seemed to incorporate these same ideas in the moral philosophy lectures he delivered to his students at Nassau Hall. Noll forged his understanding of Witherspoon amidst the intramural squabbles in late twentieth-century evangelicalism over whether or not the United States was founded as a "Christian nation." Since Witherspoon was a minister with deep evangelical convictions, many modern evangelicals claimed him as one of their own and used his life and career to buttress the Christian nationalism of the Religious Right. In a series of scholarly books, Noll challenged his fellow evangelicals to understand Witherspoon less as an evangelical in the mold of First Great Awakening revivalists such as Jonathan Edwards or George Whitefield, and more as a product of the Scottish Enlightenment who drew heavily from secular ideas to sustain his understanding of virtue.

Mailer's revisionist work challenges much of what we have learned from Landsman and Noll. (In his back cover endorsement of the book, Noll writes "...Mailer corrects what other historians, including myself, have written about this influential minister, educator and public servant." For the sake of full disclosure, Landsman and Noll's work provided much of the

interpretive scaffolding for my own book, *The Way of Improvement Leads Home: Philip Vickers Fithian and the Rural Enlightenment in Early America*). Mailer's Witherspoon looks more like Edwards than he does Hutcheson. Mailer consistently argues that Witherspoon's devout evangelical faith, and not the trendy moral ideas emanating from Glasgow and Edinburgh, was the primary source of his ethical thought, his understanding of what makes a good society, and his understanding of the American Revolution. In other words, there was no "Witherspoon Problem." The Presbyterian patriot never abandoned his unswerving commitment to a public morality informed by a public theology. Social virtue must be rooted in the grace of God as provided through evangelical conversion and the subsequent work of the Holy Spirit in guiding the life of the believer to make the ethical choices necessary to sustain all kinds of communities.

Though at times Mailer's efforts to drive home his thesis forces him to give short shrift to the moments when Witherspoon clearly did seem to be appropriating Scottish thinkers in his moral thought, the overall argument of the book is convincing. Mailer suggests, contra Noll and Landsman, that Witherspoon's arrival at the College of New Jersey did not significantly alter the evangelical Calvinism of the school's first five presidents (Edwards included). During the American Revolution, Witherspoon preached sermons such as *The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men* that used providential history to justify independence. In the early years of the republic, he rested his hopes for the survival of the new nation on an evangelical revival, rather than on universal benevolence or the civic humanism of classical republican thought. In the 1780s, Witherspoon was a champion of religious liberty, but he also believed that political leaders had a responsibility to enforce Christian moral codes for maintaining social order. Mailer also devotes an entire chapter to the constitutional theory of James Madison, Witherspoon's most famous student. He revives the idea that Madison's sour view of human nature as expressed, for example,

in *Federalist 10*, owed more to his teacher's Calvinist view of sin than many historians are willing to admit.

Readers of *New Jersey Studies* interested in placing one of the Garden State's favorite sons in a transatlantic world of ideas will not find a better book about the only minister to sign the Declaration of Independence, but *John Witherspoon's American Revolution* is not for the faint of heart.

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