

The George Whitefield and Transatlantic Protestantism Project
Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, Wesley Studies Group (August 2018)
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The George Whitefield and Transatlantic Protestantism Project commenced three and a half years ago. For 2 years and 3 months through April 2017 I was Research Assistant on this project aimed at producing the first critical edition of Whitefield's correspondence. During that time I was on research leave from my long-term roles as Lecturer in Church History and Wesley Studies at Nazarene Theological College and Director of the Manchester Wesley Research Centre. During this period the project was funded by the Leverhulme Trust (a major UK funding body for research in the humanities), with Dr David Ceri Jones of Aberystwyth University in Wales as project Director. To some extent, the project builds upon the resurgence of Whitefield scholarship surrounding the tercentenary of Whitefield's birth in 2014, including the international 'George Whitefield at 300' conference and the publication of *George Whitefield: Life, Context, and Legacy* (Oxford University Press, 2016) resulting from it. David and I edited the book and were amongst the organisers of the conference.

There have been two primary aims of the project thus far: (1) to locate, obtain, and catalogue the letters; (2) to transcribe the letters

The first aim was the primary focus for about the first 6 months, with a particular focus on manuscript letters (MS). This involved extending a preliminary Calendar that David had created prior to the start of the project. My approach was to:

- start with large union catalogues like the National Archives in the UK and WorldCat
- search catalogues of all libraries and archives that might possibly have GW materials
- email all libraries and archives that might possibly have GW materials

I quickly learned that in numerous cases there is no information online about MS letters of GW that some libraries and archives hold. Sometimes this is because the institution is small with limited resources; sometimes it is because material from old card catalogues has not been put online. Two pieces of advice I'd give to any of you who undertake this type of research: don't assume that because you don't find what you're looking for in online catalogues that it doesn't exist or that your research is necessarily done. Utilise the expertise of librarians and ask them if they have what you're looking for. I could give numerous examples of places where there is no information online about the existence of a GW letter(s) and I was only able to discover the existence of a letter(s) at the institution by emailing the librarian or archivist. Examples include: Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Lovely Lane Museum and Archives in Baltimore, and The Upper Room Museum in Nashville. Second, don't neglect the old fashioned card catalogue. At the John Rylands Library in Manchester, for example, I was able to locate some GW letters only via the card catalogue.

Another thing I soon learned is that prior to the electronic age this project, apart from being completed by a substantial international team of scholars, if it would have been possible for an individual or a small group of 2 or 3 scholars, it would have taken a lifetime and required vast amounts of money for research visits. In our case, the libraries have almost always been very helpful and supportive in sending photos or scans of the letters they have. The initial assumption was that this project would require at least one lengthy research trip to the USA, but, in fact, I've only spent 3 days in the US researching in Georgia and a week and a half this summer at Drew University.

The bulk of our time has been spent on transcribing the letters. Transcription of the MSS and almost all letters in C18 periodicals has been completed. Work has begun, but more work remains to be done on locating and transcribing letters in later periodicals, newspapers, and books from the C18 and to the present.

About 6 months into the project, we made a successful proposal to OUP for a projected 7 volume collection of GW's correspondence.

The project includes both letters by and to Whitefield. Including letters to Whitefield, of course, substantially extends the scope and amount of time required. Our basic definition of a letter for the project is a manuscript or printed letter that was or was likely to have been in its original form a letter that was sent via post. An ongoing challenge for us is that it's sometimes difficult to determine this, and many of GW's publications and those of his contemporaries directed to him were written in letter form—probably over 50 publications would fall into this category.

These are the basic categories into which the letters are divided in our Calendar of Whitefield's correspondence (now well over 100 pages long). The Calendar includes cross-referencing of letters found in more than one source. As you would expect, where letters appear in more than one source we will use the oldest version of the letter.

1) Manuscript Letters **[slide]**

2) Periodicals

A) C18 & 19

B) Modern

I) Journal issues with large manuscript-based collections

II) Journals with largely scattered individual letters

3) Newspapers

A) British

B) Colonial

4) Confirmed letters in C18 books and pamphlets

A) Publications of GW

B) Other authors

5) Possible letters in C18 books and pamphlets

A) GW publications often titled 'letters' which may have been (postal) letters or contain letters within them

B) Publications of GW's contemporaries which may have been (postal) letters or contain letters within them

6) Edited Primary Source Collections

A) Works of GW

B) In primary source works and edited correspondence of others

C) Other primary source collections

7) Biographies/memoirs

A) Biographies/memoirs of GW

B) Biographies/memoirs of others

8) Individual letters in books

As I noted, our focus thus far has been primarily (but certainly not exclusively) on manuscripts and C18 periodicals.

My main focus for the rest of this session will be on speaking through the chart/list on the 'Number of Unique Letters in Whitefield's Correspondence' and then showing you some sample letters and reflecting on what we can learn from them.

This is a work in progress, so the figures I give you will change, although they may not change dramatically.

Number of Unique Letters in Whitefield's Correspondence

Year	MS by GW	MS to GW	Periodical by GW	Periodical to GW	Publication by GW	Publication to GW	Gilles by GW	Total
1734							4	4
1735	4	1	1	1			5	12
1736	8	1	1		1	2	10	23
1737	13	6				2	10	31
1738	48	9			5	1	9	72
1739	67	30	1	2	11	17	103	231
1740	25	6	3	2	5	7	87	135
1741	10	26	9	43		7	139	234
1742	18	26	18	46	1		107	216
1743	12	22	33	59	1	3	22	152
1744	6	11	7	24		7	14	69
1745	8	7	1				8	24
1746	88	7	7		2		2	106
1747	9	6	12				45	72
1748	10	5	3				85	103
1749	3	14		1		4	78	100
1750	13	9	5				72	99
1751	4	5					35	44
1752	5	9					41	55
1753	6	28					62	96
1754	5	3			4		48	60
1755	8	1	1				42	52
1756	11	14					40	65
1757	3	9					33	45
1758	2	5	2				32	41
1759	6	4					12	22
1760	1	12					7	20
1761	3	11	1				15	30
1762	6	14					18	38
1763	3	8					26	37
1764	11	15	1				19	46
1765	6	11		1		1	17	36
1766	9	22	2		1	1	12	47
1767	14	13			2	3	33	65
1768	8	9	1			1	19	38
1769	6	14	1			2	42	65
1770	3	1				1	21	26
N.D.	6	18		8		1	—	33
Total	468	412	110	187	33	59	1374	2643

I. General Notes on the Letters:

This list is of unique letters, so when there are multiple copies of letters, it includes only the oldest or most reliable version of the letter.

[slide] Over 1/3 of the letters are from the 5 years between 1739-43 (968 letters), which is close to the total amount of letters for the 22 years from 1750-70 (1060 letters).

[slide] Looking at the numbers of letters by decades is another way of observing the general downward trend:

1730s: 373 (62 per year)

1740s: 1,211 (121)

1750s: 579 (58)

1760s: 422 (42)

II. Letters by vs. Letters to GW: **[slide]**

Letters by GW: 1985 (75%)

Letters to GW: 658 (25%)

Letters by GW (excluding Gillies): 607

If you exclude Gillies, the number of letters by and to GW are fairly even.

III. Gillies: **[slide]**

Church of Scotland minister John Gillies (1712-96), shortly after Whitefield's death, published in six volumes *The Works of Reverend George Whitefield, M.A.* (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1771-2). The first three volumes contain 1465 letters by Whitefield, followed by about 80 pages of published material relating to Whitefield's orphan-house in Georgia. Volume 4 contains a selection of 23 publications of Whitefield, most of which were written in letter form. Volumes 5 and 6 contain 57 of Whitefield's sermons.

- The first three volumes were also published separately as *A Select Collection of Letters* (1771-2), the title seemingly indicating that Gillies had more than the 1465 letters that he published.
- Gillies went on to publish *Memoirs of the Life of the Reverend George Whitefield* in 1772.

Sadly, we don't know what happened to the manuscripts after Gillies published them.

Unfortunately, Gillies is the only or oldest source for 51% of all letters.

[slide] Only 87 of the 1465 letters (6%) in Gillies can be found in an older source than Gillies. Some of these are manuscripts and some of them are in C18 periodicals.

- It's not clear whether the manuscripts are the same manuscripts that Gillies used or other copies of the manuscripts that have survived.

[slide] For most early years there are a substantial number of MS letters and letters from C18 periodicals to place alongside letters from Gillies—in the 13 years from 1734-46: 789 non-Gillies; 520 Gillies

- However, letters from Gillies dominate the total number of letters for the 12 years from 1747-58: 209 non-Gillies; 617 Gillies

- For the final 12 years of Whitefield's life from 1759, the numbers of non-Gillies and Gillies letters evens out: 229 non-Gillies; 241 Gillies, while the total number of letters for those years declines markedly compared to letters per year in the earlier part of Whitefield's life.

IV. Manuscript Letters: [slide]

There are 880 manuscript letters; 33% of all letters; 70% of all letters outside of Gillies.

MS letters have been located in 61 libraries and archives: 23 of these are in the UK, 34 in the USA, 1 in Canada, and 3 in Germany.

The size of the collections range widely. Complicating the project is that there is no single repository that has anything near a majority of the letters. The most common collection is the very small collection with only one letter: 18 institutions. These include large libraries like the British Library and National Library of Scotland, to perhaps unexpected sources like the Royal College of Surgeons; New England Historic Genealogical Society; Morristown Historical National Park, Morristown, NJ.

[slide] There are 7 manuscript collections with over 50 letters:

Library of Congress (131)
 Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia (93)
 Moravian Archives, London (71)
 National Library of Wales, Trevecka Collection (71)
 John Rylands Library (70)
 Dartmouth College (63)
 Cardiff Central Library (60)

559 of the 880 (64%) of the manuscript letters are in these 7 collections.

[slide] The Library of Congress letters are all *to* GW; the Presbyterian Historical Society letters are all *by* GW.

- Two other substantial collections have almost entirely letters to GW: the Evangelical Library (40 letters) and Dr Williams's Library (26 letters). Nearly half of the manuscript letters to GW are in these two collections and the LOC: 197 of 412 letters (48%).

[slide] There are a high number of manuscript letters in 1738, 1739, and a small upsurge in the mid-1760s.

Certain collections of MS letters make up a large portion of all MS letters during particular periods.

In 1738, 44 of the 57 letters (77%) are from the Moravian Archives, London (18 letters), and the Cardiff Central Library manuscript letter book copies of GW letters (26 letters).

In 1739, 55 of the 97 letters (56%) are from the Moravian Archives, London (25 letters), and the Cardiff Central Library manuscript letter book (30 letters).

[slide] The year 1746 is heavily dominated by 87 letters (92%) from the Presbyterian Historical Society manuscript letterbook copies of GW letters.

The Dartmouth collection (65 total letters) makes up a significant number of the letters from the mid-1760s. Most of these are from Eleazar Wheelock to GW regarding the establishment of the Indian School in New Hampshire.

V. Letters in Periodicals: [slide]

For the years 1741-44 there are substantial numbers of letters from evangelical periodicals (239 letters; 36% of the letters for those years; however, 61% of the letters outside of Gillies). Almost all of these letters come from the series of 5 periodicals published under four different names by John Lewis between 1740-48 to support Calvinistic Methodism. From 1741-44 these periodicals give us 67 letters by GW and 172 to GW.

VI. Possible Division of Letters into Volumes [slide]

Vol. 1	1734-39 [6 years]:	373
Vol. 2	1740-41 [2 years]:	369
Vol. 3	1742-43 [2 years]:	368
Vol. 4	1744-48 [5 years]:	374
Vol. 5	1749-53 [5 years]:	394
Vol. 6	1754-62 [9 years]:	373
Vol. 7	1763-70 [8 years]:	360

VII. Some Individuals that Whitefield Corresponded with Often [slide]

Howel Harris: 105 (mostly HH to GW)
John Wesley: 55 (GW to JW = 44)
Charles Wesley: 24 (GW to CW = 18)
James Habersham: 32
Anne Dutton: 24 (AD to GW = 18)
Thomas Adams: 21 (all but one TA to GW)
The Countess of Huntingdon: 15 (GW to C of H = 13)

VIII. What are some things we learn from the letters?

I'll give a few examples, which, of course, just scratch the surface, and show you images of some of the MS letters.

A. *GW was better educated and more intellectually sophisticated than is commonly assumed?*

[slide] 1) GW to Sir John Philipps (13 November 1736)—highlighting the likely reference to Shakespeare

'I only wish Honoured Sir that my prayers (worthless as they are) may through the merits of Our Blessed Redeemer pierce the Clouds in your Honour's & Good Family's behalf.'

[slide] 'Can curses pierce the clouds and enter heaven?' [Shakespeare, *The Life and Death of Richard the Third*, Act 1, Scene 3]

[slide] 2) GW to Sir John Philipps (27 September 1736) [read paragraph]—highlighting the reference to John Chrysostom

Whitefield: 'Here are likewise Good Sir John of devout Women not a few. And some of them press on so earnestly towards the mark of the prize of their High Calling,¹ that they really make me ashamed of my own lukewarmness & nonproficiency. I find I must rowze myself or I shall be outstripped by Women.²'

[slide] Chrysostom: 'However, I demand nothing like this of you, seeing ye have a mind to be outstripped by women' [commenting on the zeal of ascetic women to challenge his hearers to be more zealous in good works]

¹ See Phil. 3:14.

² See John Chrysostom, 'Homily XIII', in Philip Schaff, ed. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 13 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 116.

[slide] 3) GW to Gotthilf August Francke (9 November 1739)—an example of a Latin letter—use of Latin phrases in over 100 letters

B. Letters with interesting and challenging features:

4) 13 letters in the Moravian Archives (London) with William Seward as primary author and GW as secondary author, all written in 1739 to James Hutton / the Fetter Lane Society

[slide] Example: Seward and GW to James Hutton (7 April 1739)

[slide] Triple letter: Thomas Coombs, GW, and Westley Hall to James Hutton (9 February 1739)

[slide] 5) Evangelical Library (40 letters to GW): Letters to GW show how many (often ordinary) people he touched—PPT slide of first five EL letters—

[slide] Example of a damaged letter: Jean Jannet Kerr to GW (3 February 1744)

[slide] Example of an anonymous fragment / GW's notation that he answered: JG to GW [no date].
Fragment

C. Letters show GW's deep and inspirational spiritual experience:

6) As the excitement of the Revival was beginning in early 1738, Whitefield's sense of God's presence with him and the dramatic advance of the revival convinced him that 'Wherever I go, he makes his divine power to be known'. His letters at this time are filled with expressions such as 'God is with me and in me', 'God greatly visits my soul', 'He fills my soul every day with himself', underscoring his almost overwhelming experience of God's presence. Whitefield was convinced of the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit in nearly everything he did; writing, for example, God's 'holy spirit makes me do things'.³

D. Letters show how pioneering GW was in the Revival:

[3 slides] 7) GW to Daniel Abbot (3 March 1739)—'The whole World is now my Parish' [JW to [?]] [28 March 1739?] 'I look upon *all the world as my parish*'—recalibrates previous understandings; shows how pioneering GW was

E. Letters show GW's gift for developing intimate friendships and use of affectionate language:

³ Published transcriptions in Graham C. G. Thomas (ed.), 'George Whitefield and Friends: The Correspondence of Some Early Methodists', *National Library of Wales Journal*, 26:3–27:4 (1990–2). Volume 26:4: Whitefield to Mr Debart (23 January 1738), 380; John Edmonds (10 January and 13 January 1738), 372, 374; John Bray (22 January 1738 and 5 January 1738), 377, 369. Available online at: <https://journals.library.wales/view/1277425/1289287/80#?xywh=-1219%2C-222%2C5371%2C4434>. Extracts and further discussion can be found in Geordan Hammond, 'Whitefield, John Wesley, and Revival Leadership', in *George Whitefield: Life, Context, and Legacy* (Oxford, 2016).

8) Very affectionate language towards some male colleagues in the Revival that seems to be absent in letters to female correspondents. Most striking are 8 letters in January 1738 to John Edmonds, a founding member of the Fetter Lane Society. I'll just read a few short extracts:

'Surely . . . there is a divine attraction between your soul and mine . . . and the very mention of your name fills me with a sympathy I never felt for anyone before . . . May we continue lovers of God and one another for ever . . . oh dearest, dearest Mr Edmonds, ever, ever, ever your own, G.W.'⁴

He then went on to write to John Edmonds wife, Mary [Whitefield to M. Edmonds (31 January 1738)]—that she possessed what he 'would be glad to have . . . your husband for a companion'.

In a recent article on same-sex attraction in eighteenth-century Methodism, Glen O'Brien has used these letters as part of his evidence to cautiously, though provocatively, conclude that 'Whitefield was likely to have been same-sex attracted'.

['"A divine attraction between your soul and mine": George Whitefield and same-sex affection in 18th-century Methodism', *Pacifica*, 30/2 (2017), 177-92]

The evidence doesn't seem to allow a definitive conclusion on Whitefield's possible same-sex attraction, but his letters do clearly show his capacity to develop deep friendships with male colleagues in the gospel and converts for whom he became a spiritual director.

F. Letters show tensions in the Revival:

[slide] 9) GW to My Dear Brethren in Christ (14 March 1739)—highlighting tensions in the revival: 'I can therefore (without judging rashly) say that you were permitted by God to oppose for a little while' [drawing on 1 Peter 5:8-10]

[slide] 10) G[eorge] W[hitefield] to P[eter] B[öhler] (15 November 1741)—about 18 allusions to scripture in this short letter, even couching his marriage in scriptural language

'When I went first to Georgia, I thought wholly to Unite with the Brethren' then the letter refers to tensions/disputes—shows attraction to and tension with the Moravians

'I enjoy Day & night an uninterrupted Communion & Fellowship with the Ever blessed Three-One no Sin has Dominion over me, neither does any Sin lead me captive.'—shows the astonishing ecstatic spiritual experience of GW

⁴ Whitefield to J. Edmonds (10, 13, 22 January 1738), published in 'George Whitefield and Friends'; discussed in Schlenther, 'Whitefield's Personal Life and Character', in *George Whitefield: Life, Context, and Legacy*.