‘Sure the time here now is like New England’: What happened when the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists read Jonathan Edwards?

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That the thought and writings of Jonathan Edwards made a significant impact on the evangelical revival in England, particularly in its Wesleyan form and among some evangelical Dissenters has been well documented, but it was in revival communities in the Celtic periphery of the British Isles, where evangelicals and Methodists shared a commitment to Calvinist theology, that Edwards was often read most consistently, most carefully and with most profit. Recent work on the evangelical awakenings throughout the mid eighteenth-century British Atlantic world tends to stress their similarities and inter-connectedness, but this comparison has tended to operate on a strictly trans-Atlantic, or east-west, axis. In a recent essay Nigel Yates has suggested that the juxtaposition of a pan-Celtic approach might be a useful tool to reveal and explain some of the other inter-connections and influences that made-up the early evangelical movement. What I want to do in this essay is to try to combine both paradigms; by exploring Edwards’ influence on the eighteenth-century Welsh Methodists, the trans-Atlantic dimension, it will be quickly apparent that the fortunes of the Scottish and Welsh awakenings, the pan-Celtic dimension, became periodically intertwined.

At the outset, though, it is necessary to introduce a caveat by pointing out that the Welsh Methodists did not possess the sort of direct and immediate relationship with Edwards that a number of prominent Scottish ministers clearly enjoyed. Edwards’ influence in Wales was neither as hands-on, nor as sustained. There are probably a number of reasons for this. The Welsh did not have as sophisticated a network of actual
trans-Atlantic correspondents\(^3\) as the Scots; Welsh migration levels to the colonies were much lower, and there was comparatively little on-going interchange between the smaller number of Welsh settlers in the New World and the old.\(^4\) In addition, Wales did not possess the kind of university educated semi-professional ministerial body enjoyed by the Scots,\(^5\) nor the accompanying tradition of high level theological discourse, either in the public or private spheres. What both revivals did share was a commitment to a broadly Calvinist soteriology, and access to the revival’s most ubiquitous international personality, George Whitefield. These two common factors had bound the Welsh and Scottish evangelicals into a Calvinist-based trans-Atlantic community of saints by the early 1740s. It was through the networks that this community generated that Edwards’ influence became most keenly felt in Wales.

In November 1738, following his first face-to-face meeting with his co-revivalist Daniel Rowland, Howel Harris confided in his diary that ‘sure the time here now is like New England’.\(^6\) The Welsh revival had begun just two years earlier when Harris, a schoolmaster from Breconshire near the English border, and Rowland\(^7\) a Church of England curate based at Llangeitho in Cardiganshire, west Wales, experienced evangelical conversions and began preaching startlingly awakening sermons independently of one another. When they met for the first time at Defynnog during November 1738, a strategically important meeting at which their two independent mini-awakenings were fused together to create a unified Welsh revival, they set aside time specifically to discuss Edwards’ *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*, the British edition of which had been published under the sponsorship of the English dissenting ministers Isaac Watts and John Guyse towards the end of 1737. Harris claimed to have first read Edwards in February 1738 and testified that he found his heart ‘boiling with love to Christ’ as he read it, and interceded with God to: ‘O go on with thy work
there and here’. We don’t know exactly when Rowland read Edwards, but must clearly have done so by the time he met Harris on this first occasion.

What did Harris mean when he compared the Welsh revival to the Northampton awakening? What did he and Rowland read in Edwards’ *A Faithful Narrative*, that seemed to resonate so strongly with their own experience in Wales? The first point that needs to be made is that the appearance of Edwards’ book was timely. Harris and Rowland had been working steadily in their pioneering ministries for over eighteen months, and their activities were just beginning to arouse suspicion and even opposition. Meeting one another and pooling their resources was clearly important, but reading Edwards’ *A Faithful Narrative* seemed to confirm to them the authenticity of God work’s in their midst, and suggest to them, probably for the first time, that they might actually be part of something far bigger and more extensive than they had initially realised. But they would have read something far more practically useful than just this in its pages. A number of recent writers, including C. C. Goen, in his introduction to the critical edition of *A Faithful Narrative*, have argued that it was probably one of the most important books in the definition and defence of revivalism; Edwards’ Northampton revival, which the book described in paradigmatic terms, quickly becoming the benchmark account of genuine religious revival.

Using thoroughly empirical categories, born of his deep immersion in Enlightenment thought and literature, Edwards argued that the authenticity of any religious revival could be deduced from a number of observations. Primary was his conviction that a genuine revival would affect all kinds of people, from both sexes, of all ages and from all ranks of society; this was reinforced by the presence of numerous dramatic conversion experiences and clear evidence of transformed lives; the strength of the spiritual impressions experienced was important, but as with the test of numbers, this
was not always as reliable a sign of an authentic work of grace as the other indicators. There was much here for Harris and Rowland to digest and reflect upon; they had both witnessed the accentuation of the religious concerns of many of the members of their respective communities in Breconshire and Cardiganshire. They had both seen frequent and dramatic conversions in response to their preaching, and both could point to many examples of the individual transformations that these conversions had brought about. In early 1739, for example, Harris could write excitedly to George Whitefield:

I have some more good news to send you from Wales. There is a great revival in Cardiganshire, through one Mr D. Rowland, a Church clergyman, and he has been much owned and blessed in Carmarthenshire also. We have also a sweet prospect in Breconshire, and part of Monmouthshire; and in the county where I am now [Glamorgan], the revival prospers . . . In Montgomeryshire . . . there seems to be some shining beams of the Gospel of grace.11

Edwards’ taxonomy of a genuine religious revival was fleshed out with two carefully constructed case studies of the conversions of Abigail Hutchinson and Phoebe Bartlett, both of which became models by which others could explain and assess what they had themselves experienced. Harris had already begun organising his converts into small cell groups, or societies; the first of these was established in early 1736, and within four years a network of some fifty of them were fully operational in south-east Wales. These societies had strict rules of entry, and even stricter rules for those who had managed to pass that first hurdle and wished to remain members. The societies became the forum in which individual conversion experiences were assessed; the reading of Edwards at such a critical juncture in the Welsh revival undoubtedly helped Harris and Rowland to do this by enabling them to fine tune their theology of conversion. Having
said this it was perhaps the vocabulary of revivalism, picked up from Edwards, which proved the most enduring legacy of their reading of *A Faithful Narrative*. As Edwards talked about ‘a considerable revival of religion’, ‘an unusual religious concern’ or ‘no small effusion of the Spirit of God’, so the Welsh Methodists began to talk of ‘demonstrations of the divine love and favour’, of ‘amazing power’ and that ‘God was [among] us indeed’.¹²

Much of the scholarly work on Edwards’ influence in Britain has concentrated on the way in which John Wesley edited his writings according to his own theological predilections. But for much of the 1740s there were multiple parallel readings of Edwards going on in the early evangelical communities. The split between Calvinistic and Wesleyan Methodists by 1741 meant that the Calvinists under the direction of Whitefield and Howel Harris read different versions of Edwards than their Wesleyan near neighbours. In 1742 the English Calvinistic Methodist printer Samuel Mason secured the rights to re-print the Boston edition of Edwards’ *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741). It was placed on sale in Whitefield’s Tabernacle and in the Calvinistic Methodist magazine, *The Weekly History* and carried the enthusiastic endorsement of George Whitefield who recommended it ‘to the serious perusal of all Christians, and to ministers of every denomination in particular’.¹³ The book, read in this edition rather than in John Wesley’s more popular and much shorter 1744 abridgement,¹⁴ was circulated fairly widely in Wales, being of particular help during the controversies surrounding Howel Harris’ adoption of Moravian-style ‘blood and wounds’ theology and his passionate advocacy of the prophetic gifts of his new ‘companion’, Mrs Sidney Griffith, in the later 1740s.¹⁵

By 1749 these two issues were causing major problems in Wales. In that year Thomas Bowen, an exhorter from Montgomeryshire, wrote to Howel Harris outlining a
dispute which he was having with a fellow exhorter Thomas Jones, who happened to be part of Harris’ inner circle. Bowen accused Jones of using ‘unguarded expressions’ and confusing language about the efficacy of the blood of Christ. It is not too much to infer that this criticism was also being simultaneously levelled squarely at Harris himself, who had become notorious for the use of such language by this time. However, Bowen’s accusations went a step further as he criticised Jones, and once again by implication Harris, for his enthusiasm, especially Jones’ tendency to use wild and exaggerated hand gestures and bodily contortions during his preaching, and his and Harris’ seemingly unanswerable claim that their views about the blood of Christ were views which had been revealed to them directly by the Holy Spirit. It was at this point that Bowen dragooned Edwards into the support of his case. Drawing on his reading of *The Distinguishing Marks of the Work of the Spirit of God*, Bowen used Edwards’ warnings against a reliance on what he called ‘private impressions’ of the Holy Spirit to rebuke some of the excesses of the Welsh Methodists, and Harris in particular, for using claims to direct inspiration to, as Bowen put it, ‘ascend the chair of infallibility in . . . points that are ambiguous’. In the same way that Edwards had been forced to defend the Great Awakening against the excesses of some of its preachers, he was now being deployed by certain well-read Welsh Methodists in the task of defending and defining genuine religious experience from the counterfeit.

However, it was Edwards’ commitment to the establishment of an international prayer network that brought him and his writings to the attention of a greater range of the Welsh Methodists during the later 1740s. The idea of a ‘Concert for Prayer’ had first taken shape in July 1743 among a group of Scottish evangelical ministers who had set aside part of every Saturday evening, every Sunday morning and the first Tuesday of the last month of each quarter of the year for earnest intercessory prayer for a fresh
The full potential of these special periods of prayer was realised by John Erskine, who was to become minister of the strategically important Old Greyfriars Church in Edinburgh, who persuaded many of the most prominent evangelical leaders of the day to join what quickly became an international intercessory network aimed at stimulating fresh revivals. Erskine worked closely with Jonathan Edwards whose *A Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God’s People in Extraordinary Prayer* (1747) became the manifesto of this new community.

Both the Scots and many of the colonial American evangelicals were already on board, so Erskine circulated a private document to some leading British evangelicals, outlining the rationale for the prayer network, in a pitch for wider support. John Wesley enthusiastically signed up on behalf of himself and his preachers almost immediately, and the same proposals were sent to Howel Harris in Wales during 1745. Harris had first been introduced to Erskine by George Whitefield, and the two had maintained a close correspondence since 1741. Harris had sent material to him for inclusion in the Scottish evangelical magazine, *The Glasgow-Weekly History*, and Erskine had done the same for the London-based version of the magazine. By 1745 Harris had assumed the leadership of English Calvinistic Methodism on account of Whitefield’s extended absences in America, and so brought Erskine’s proposals before the monthly gatherings of the English and Welsh Calvinistic Methodists at Trevecka in March 1745. Following the Scottish example very closely, he recommended that a regular day of prayer should be set aside once every three months and that every Sunday morning should be set aside ‘on account of ye late work in England, Scotland, Wales & America, both to praise God for it & intercede & pray for it[s] furtherance & to be humbled for ye sin that attended it’. For a while it looked as though Erskine’s network would lead to an impressive coming
together of many of the main strands within the revival, recapturing the unity that had existed before the acrimonious splits between the Moravians, Wesleyan and Calvinists in England in the early 1740s, at least that was what Harris seemed to be hoping for when he signed up for the venture. But in the end the network was only entered into spasmodically by the Calvinistic Methodists in both England and Wales, and came to represent one of the last really realistic opportunities for healing many of the rifts that had opened up within English Methodism in the early 1740s.

Having said all this, it was William Williams, Pantycelyn, who sustained the most prolonged and thorough engagement with Edwards’ work. Following the disruption of Welsh Methodism in 1750 and the enforced retirement of Howel Harris, Williams came to the forefront of the leadership of the Welsh Methodist movement, together with Daniel Rowland steering it through the difficult waters caused by the split. Williams quickly emerged as the main theological writer in the Welsh revival and from the later 1750s began publishing theological works that defined and gave structure to it. The influence of his close reading of Edwards is not far from the surface in many of his writings.

In 1762 there was a fresh outbreak of revival in Wales, this time centring on Llangeitho; this revival was more dramatic and ecstatic than many of those which had taken place in the previous decades and as a result aroused more severe opposition, particularly on account of many of the bizarre ecstatic bodily manifestations, including sobbing, jumping and dancing, that regularly occurred. To answer those who wished to discredit the revival on account of these excesses, Williams produced two apologetic works: his *Llythyr Martha Philopur* was published in 1762, and was followed shortly afterwards with *Atteb Philo-Evangelius* (1763). Both works demonstrate the full extent of Williams’ debt to Edwards. Martha Philopur was a typical, if fictitious, female Methodist convert, while Philo-Evangelius was a model local Methodist society leader. In Williams’
hands Martha described her experience; phrases like ‘I received the Word in fullest ecstasy’; ‘While you preach . . . I do my utmost to restrain myself . . . and I often cannot stop my tongue from crying out, ‘God is Good’; ‘I leap and shout for joy, in so great salvation, that I never knew before’, occurred again and again in her narrative. In the sequel Williams used the character of Philo-Evangelius, to counsel Martha and explain the place and role of such phenomena to the Methodists themselves in the first instance, but also to all those who were keen to discredit them. Williams, through Philo, wrote:

> It is not only by means of outward manifestations . . . that I conclude that God is in the Church and is visiting his people. Apart from the heavenly inclination on their spirits inciting their tongues to a living praising of God, this fire burns in the life and behaviour of so many of them . . . They are zealous, not for the secondary matters of faith, but for the essential issues of salvation. Faith and love are the chief graces they cry for.27

The Edwardsean line of reasoning here is clear; Edwards had argued that extraordinary physical manifestations were inevitable in times of religious revival, whether in the form of ‘tears, trembling, groans, loud outcries, agonies of body, or the failing of bodily strength’, but the acid test of the authenticity of a person’s religious experiences was not to be judged by the strength of emotion, but whether they believed correct notions about the divinity of Christ, whether there was a conscious and decisive turning away from sin, a greater love of the Bible and a greater regard for the worship of Christians. Williams readily admitted that Edwards’ *The Distinguishing Marks of the Work of the Spirit of God* (1741) was ‘the best book I have seen to that purpose: it gave me more light in some things’, and assured his readers in the closing lines of *Atteb*
Philo Evangelius that if anyone was still unconvinced by Williams’ two books he would reissue a new edition of Edwards’ work to finally settle matters.30

In the second place, Williams’ long involvement in the Welsh revival led him to think carefully about the place and role of religious revivals in the broader historical process. Like Edwards once more, Williams wrote history that attempted to place the revival in which he participated into a larger over-arching historical meta-narrative. Although there is no evidence to suggest that Williams read Edwards’ A History of the Work of Redemption (1773), the parallels between their teleological historiographies is striking. In Atteb Philo-Evangelius, Williams argued that before Harris and Rowland arrived on the scene in 1735, ‘Ignorance covered the face of Wales, hardly any gospel privilege could stand against the corruptions of the day’ until their revival begun a couple of years later and ‘light broke forth as the dawn in many parts of the world . . . and O wonderful morning! The Sun shone on Wales’.31 From this starting point, Williams extrapolated that the dawn of the current revival in Wales was but one of a whole series of dawns that the Church had experienced since the days of the Apostles. In what appears to have been a combination of both a linear and cyclical view of history, Williams argued that the sun had initially shone on the early church for about ‘300 years’--there was undoubtedly a nod here in the direction of traditional Protestant appeals to a pre-Catholic Celtic church as well32--but had then faded for over a thousand years before a series of proto-evangelicals like John Wycliffe, Jerome of Prague, the Bohemian Jan Hus, the Waldenses and the Albigenses, had attempted to recapture the primitive simplicity of the apostolic church. The Reformation was merely the most dramatic of these new dawns, but even it was followed by a further succession of sunrises and sunsets, albeit in quicker succession, as the fortunes of Protestantism in England and Wales waxed and waned throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The most recent night, that between
the Glorious Revolution and the mid-1730s, was merely a short hiatus in the grand narrative of the spread of Christianity to the ends of the earth before the dawning of the millennial reign of Christ.33

The writing of what Michael J. McClymond calls ‘universal chronicles’ of this kind was far from unusual in the early eighteenth century.34 Edwards had argued, in his History of the Work of Redemption, which was after all a greatly expanded series of sermons, first preached in 1739 in the lull between the Northampton revival and the beginning of the Great Awakening, that major turning points in history were always accompanied by powerful and widespread religious revivals. These revivals, he said, were God’s customary way of working within history and they would become both more frequent and more wide-ranging until the world was gradually Christianised and the millennial age ushered in.35 The optimistic mindset that lay behind this eschatologically-driven view of history, as David Bebbington reminds us, lay behind much of the activism of later eighteenth and nineteenth-century evangelicals.36

Which leads neatly into the third area of overlap between Williams and Edwards: Williams also incorporated a very prominent eschatological perspective into his histories. Inspired by the appearance of the Northern Lights over his home in Carmarthenshire in October 1769,37 Williams penned Aurora Borealis (1773), a quasi-scientific description of the natural phenomenon, but one from which Williams also drew some spiritual observations and lessons.38 He interpreted the lights as a portent of the end times, as a prophetic signal that the spread of the gospel would continue and increase in its reach, much as the Northern Lights themselves covered the skies. He wrote:

As the Northern Lights spread across the sky, so also the gospel in time will cover the earth as well . . . All the earthquakes that happened in 1755 and 1756 . . . all the Wars
in Asia, Europe and America are merely a fulfilment of the Lord’s Word . . . and when I see them and similar things I am ready to believe that summer is at hand.39

This was very similar to the sort of typology which Edwards frequently adopted, and which was most fully developed in his *A History of the Work of Redemption*. But in many respects the most interesting of Williams’ quasi-eschatological publications was his *Pantheologia*, a seven-part publication published in installments between 1762 and 1779, the subtitle of which gives the most complete sense of its contents: ‘A History of all the Religions of the World; namely the Pagan Religion, Islam, Judaism, and Christian, which comprises the three branches, the Church of Rome, the Greek [Orthodox] Church, the Protestant Church . . .’ To both Williams and Edwards, the fate of the ‘heathen’ was an essential component of their end-times speculations, and one that preoccupied much of their attention. While it’s important not to make too much of this comparison, since much more work has been done on Edwards’ more sophisticated interest in comparative religions than Williams’, it is possible to make a number of broad observations.

Williams, in Enlightenment fashion, had clearly been collecting information for a major survey of all of the world’s religions for many years before the publication of *Pantheologia*.40 Edwards similarly filled many notebooks with material on the various world religions throughout his life, but unlike Williams he never made extensive use of them in any of his writings, despite harboring a wish to write a major book showing that any evidence of true religion among the heathen was the result of God’s revelation rather than natural law as the Deists of his day argued. Recently, Gerald McDermott has paid close attention to the material in Edwards’ notebooks and made a strong case for Edwards’ adoption of enlightened and generous attitudes towards non-Christian religions. Based on his view that ‘pagans’ had received some knowledge of God, however
rudimentary, from the Jews and from the *prisca theologia*, Edwards tentatively speculated that there might be vestiges of true religion in the non-Christian religious traditions.⁴¹ Despite plenty of evidence that Edwards and Williams read some of the same authors, particularly travel works describing various world religions, Daniel Defoe, Humphrey Prideaux and Isaac Watts, Williams’ thought was probably not moving in the same radical direction. Williams was not really given to speculative theology in the same way as Edwards, and was probably not possessed with the same kind of original insight as Edwards either, but he was committed to introducing his fellow Welsh men and women to some of the latest knowledge of the day. In some of the early pages of *Pantheologia*, for example, he wrote:

> It is lamentable that the white, monoglot Welshman in Britain differs so little from the white monkey in India . . . the illiterate Hottentot far outstrips him in all universal knowledge . . . But whoever considers that there is no locality in Europe (if the monoglot Welsh know what ‘Europe’ means) which possesses so few books of national and ecclesiastical history in their own language as obtains in Wales . . . When a monoglot Welshman hears the words ‘philosophy’, ‘mathematics’, ‘geography’ and such like, he scarcely thinks other than that they are words of enchantment.⁴²

Williams did not speculate further, but it is surely possible that had Edwards produced his projected work critiquing some of the assumptions of Enlightenment religion, then Williams might well have taken up his interest in world religions once again. It was their shared eschatologically driven view of history that lay behind Edwards’ and Williams’ interest in other world religions. They both thought that the millennium was fast approaching, their revivals were part of its inauguration, and that the conversion of the
heathen was imminent, whatever form that was actually to take. This kind of thinking was to play a key role in the birth of the modern missionary movement, and it was no accident that it was from the pages of Jonathan Edwards that William Carey, the founder of the first missionary society, the Baptist Missionary Society, was to find inspiration.  

This essay has explored the Welsh engagement with Jonathan Edwards’ writings and ideas throughout the eighteenth century, and argued that it was both thorough and sustained. Yet for much of the eighteenth century it was Edwards’ practical works on the nature of religious revival that were most avidly read and used. It was not until the beginning of the nineteenth century that some of Edwards’ writings were actually translated into Welsh and a more detailed engagement with his major theological ideas and works took place, particularly among those elements within Welsh Methodism, and nonconformity more generally, who were adopting elements of the Edwardsean ‘New Divinity’ in their desire to combat both High or Hyper Calvinism on the one hand and Arminianism on the other, both of which were on the rise in Wales by that point.
Endnotes


6 Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales (NLW), Calvinist Methodist Archive (CMA), Howel Harris’ Diary 35, 27 November 1738.


8 Aberystwyth, NLW CMA, Howel Harris’ Diary 35, 22 & 23 February 1738.


11 Aberystwyth NLW CMA, The Trevecka Letters, no. 136, Howel Harris to George Whitefield, 8 January 1739.

16 Aberystwyth NLW CMA The Trevecka Letters, no 1847, Thomas Bowen to Howel Harris, 30 January 1749.
21 See Aberystwyth NLW CMA Trevecka 3188, ‘Reasons for observing certain times in the manner within written to bless the Lord for his late revival of real Christianity’.
24 See Jones, David Ceri (2003) ‘“The Lord did give me a particular honour to make [me] a peacemaker”: Howel Harris, John Wesley and Methodist infighting, 1739-1750’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, vol. 85, nos. 2 and 3, pp. 73-98.
27 ibid., p. 321.
29 Aberystwyth, NLW CMA, The Trevecka Letters, no. 1381; William Williams to Howel Harris, 7 December 1745.


Translation in Evans (2011), Bread of Heaven, pp. ***.

This link is explored in some detail in a number of the essays in Stanley, Brian (ed.) (2001) Christian Missions and the Enlightenment, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.


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