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Introduction: Witherspoon in His Transatlantic Contexts

C.B. Bow
UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
bradford.bow@abdn.ac.uk

Abstract

The seven articles of this special issue reevaluate Witherspoon's legacy of transformation shortly after the 300th anniversary of his birth. It examines the dilemma of 'two Witherspoons' anew by comparatively interrogating continuities and discontinuities of his theological and philosophical convictions from Scottish to American contexts. Witherspoon did not develop his thought in an intellectual vacuum. He exchanged ideas with Scottish and American Enlightenment thinkers as well as engaged with established and set forth new intellectual traditions, which will feature throughout this collection of articles on Witherspoon in his transatlantic contexts.

John Witherspoon (1723–94) seemingly lived two lives on either side of the Atlantic. His first life began as the son of an East Lothian Presbyterian minister, alumnus of Edinburgh University, and ordained minister of Beith (1745–58) and then Paisley (1758–68). During this time, he received notoriety as a critic of Scottish Enlightenment intellectual and ideological values associated with the ecclesiastical Moderate party in the Church of Scotland. His appointment as the sixth president of the College of New Jersey in 1768 allegedly created an opportunity to be reborn as a professor of Scottish Enlightenment moral philosophy and agent of political change in Revolutionary America. The scholarly narrative of Witherspoon transforming from Scottish to early American contexts disjointed his legacy in the Atlantic world.

In *An Address to the Natives of Scotland Residing in America being an Appendix to a Sermon Preached at Princeton of a General Fast* published in 1777, Witherspoon insisted that he did not abandon his Scottish identity after signing the American Declaration of Independence. He wrote:

> I am certain I feel the attachment of country, as far as it is a virtuous or laudable principle; perhaps it would be nearer the truth to say—as far as it is a natural and pardonable prejudice. He who is so pleased may attribute it to this last, when

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> I say, that I have never seen cause to be ashamed of the place of my birth: that since the revival of arts and letters in Europe … the natives of Scotland have not been inferior to those of any other country, for genius, erudition, military prowess, or any of those accomplishments which improve or embellish human nature.[1]

Having been 'personally abused in news-papers [sic] at home, for the part he has been supposed to have taken in the American cause', Witherspoon claimed to sustain the same principled convictions 'as a scholar, a minister, or a Christian' in Revolutionary America that he had developed in Enlightened Scotland.[2] However, the question of whether early American higher education and the politics of revolutionary change transformed his view of Scottish Enlightenment intellectual culture persist in the scholarly portrayals of 'two Witherspoons'.

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The first article on 'James Wodrow, John Witherspoon and the Negotiation of Moderation in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland' by Emma Macleod reconsiders the rivalry between ecclesiastical Moderates and Evangelicals in Scottish Enlightenment intellectual culture. Macleod challenges the scholarly characterisation of ministers associated with the Evangelical party (also known as the Popular party) as being strictly opposed to Moderatism. This case study of Witherspoon's relationship with the parish minister of Stevenston, Ayrshire James Wodrow (1730–1810), reframes the imprint of a Moderate stamp upon a Covenanting and Evangelical heritage. Wodrow's relations with Evangelicals, such as Witherspoon, illuminate a spectrum of Moderate theology in late eighteenth-century Scotland, rather than a uniformed commitment to a singular practice. Through critical analysis of correspondence between Wodrow and Witherspoon, Macleod reframes the proximity between divines associated with Moderate and Popular ecclesiastical parties.

The next article on 'A Failed Utopia: John Witherspoon's *History of a Corporation of Servants*' by Euan Gorrie turns to Witherspoon's pessimism about the state of virtue in the Church of Scotland and, in turn, Scottish civil society. From *Ecclesiastical Characteristics: or, the Arcana of Church Policy* (1753) to an embittered *History of a Corporation Servants* (1765), Gorrie examines Witherspoon's criticisms of the Moderates and traces his disengagement from the kirk. In doing so, Gorrie sheds new light on Witherspoon's decision to emigrate to New Jersey in 1768.

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1 John Witherspoon, *An Address to the Natives of Scotland Residing in America* (London, 1778), 1–2.

2 Witherspoon, *Address to the Natives of Scotland*, 23.

Dafydd Mills Daniel's article on 'John Witherspoon's Ethics and "Sir Issac Newton's Bulldog"' explores the consistency of Witherspoon's ethics during his time in Scotland and America by comparing his (in)famous satire of moderatism, *Ecclesiastical Characteristics* (1753) with his 'Lectures on Moral Philosophy', delivered at Princeton from 1769. In doing so, Daniel draws attention to the fundamental role that 'Sir Isaac Newton's bulldog', Samuel Clarke, plays in both the Scottish *Arcana* and American 'Lectures'. Although scholars frequently debate whether there are 'two Witherspoons'—not least because his lectures engage with the thought of his Scottish nemesis, Francis Hutcheson—Daniel argues that Witherspoon's ethics are consistently Clarkean as opposed to Hutchesonian, in Scotland and America. By investigating the constancy of Witherspoon's ethics, Daniel's argues that Clarke's ethical rationalism and Newtonianism are the key to interpreting Witherspoon's lectures on ethics as well as appreciating the moral philosophical subtlety of his satirical language in the *Arcana*.

Like his ethics, Witherspoon's appeal to Christian Hebraism as a mode of political theology on either side of the Atlantic remains relatively understudied. Julia Pohlmann on 'Christian Hebraism in John Witherspoon's Sermons' comparatively examines his 'Prayer for National Prosperity' (1758) and 'The Dominion of Providence' (1776). Pohlmann argues that Witherspoon's application of covenant theology, and his use of biblical Israel as a template for the ideal state, suggests a consistency in his perception of the ecclesiastical election of a nation, the responsibilities of monarchs, and the justification of public upheaval in both Scotland and America. Pohlmann examines Witherspoon's treatment of Scotland's covenanting heritage and the universality of ecclesiastical covenants in the British imperial world in a 'Prayer for National Prosperity'. In doing so, she addresses the question of whether Witherspoon subscribed to national interpretations of covenant theology that perceived America as the sole covenanted, proto-democratic Israel relative to other Protestant nations. Pohlmann advances evidence that Witherspoon's covenant theology and understanding of Protestantism should be universally understood in both Scottish and American contexts as indicating a commitment to Christianity as a global faith.

The next couple of articles in this collection explore Witherspoon's complex relationship to the institution of chattel slavery and abolitionism. Gideon Mailer's article on 'Thomas Jefferson, John Witherspoon, and the Declaration of Independence' examines how Patriot discussions of Scottish identity from the late 1760s through the 1770s may illuminate the tension between the universal language of liberty in the U.S. Declaration of Independence and the continuation of racial slavery among the Founders, such as Jefferson and Witherspoon, who contributed to and signed that document. This exploration takes up three interrelated themes. First, Mailer considers how intellectual historians have explained Jefferson's contradictory approach to racial slavery in his role as primary author of the Declaration of Independence by referencing his Scottish Enlightenment educational background. Finally, Mailer suggests a new way to comprehend an often-overlooked aspect of Witherspoon's contribution to the Declaration of Independence; his likely role in campaigning for the removal of the word 'Scotch' from the document even as its final draft condemned Britain for having encouraged 'insurrections' by offering freedom to enslaved people.

My own article on 'Witherspoon and Beattie on the Philosophy of Common Sense Abolitionism' also considers the ways in which Witherspoon sustained his Scottishness as an abolitionist.

It explores the question of how Witherspoon reconciled his moral philosophy with being an abolitionist and an enslaver. Witherspoon baptised a runaway slave, taught anti-slavery sentiments in his course of lectures on moral philosophy, personally tutored three black freemen, enslaved at least two people of colour, and voted against the immediate abolition of human bondage in New Jersey. Witherspoon's appeal to the thought of another Scottish Enlightenment moralist, James Beattie, resolved what might appear to be his contradictory positions on human bondage. Witherspoon shared Beattie's belief in the divinely inspired self-evident or 'common sense' understanding of universal liberty, which applied to all races, in response to David Hume's mitigated scepticism and racism. They sought to gradually prepare enslavers and enslaved for the inevitable end of human bondage as a condition that they deemed incompatible with Christianity. I argue that their philosophy of common sense abolitionism exemplified how contexts changed the applications of Scottish Enlightenment thought on either side of the Atlantic. By exploring the philosophical origins and pedagogy of their antislavery and their gradualist approach to abolishing the institution of chattel slavery, this comparative case study entangles the legacies of Witherspoon at Princeton and Beattie at Marischal College, Aberdeen.

The final article in this special issue on 'Re-Imagining "the Witherspoon Tradition' by Paul Helseth explores Samuel Miller's understanding of the epistemological capacity of the mind regenerated by God's Spirit and sanctified by God's Word. Miller accommodated an epistemological paradigm that was compromised by the naïve realism of the Scottish Enlightenment. Helseth argues that Miller was in fact a consistently Reformed scholar who recognised that the work of God's Spirit is essential to right knowledge not just of God's Word, but of his world as well. In so doing, Helseth provides a fresh perspective not just on Miller's understanding of the relationship between piety and learning, but also on the understanding of enlightened education that animated the founding of Princeton Seminary in 1812 and that was paradigmatic for those standing in 'the Witherspoon [or Old Princeton] tradition' throughout the long nineteenth century.