

*Inventing the "Great Awakening,"* by Frank Lambert

reviewed by [James D. D. Bratt](#) in the [August 30, 2000](#) issue

A lot of parties have put a lot of stake in the Great Awakening, the wave of religious enthusiasm which swept up and down the colonial seaboard in the early 1740s. To evangelicals, it shows how well revivals can work and entrenches them at the nation's foundation. To liberal Protestants during the cold war and to neoconservatives since, it has endowed American nationhood with moral ballast. To all these and more, it marks the onset of democracy and autonomy in the American religious narrative.

That's why the proposal made some years ago by Yale historian Jon Butler that the Great Awakening was really the contrivance of historians generated considerable dispute. Frank Lambert tries to settle the issue by splitting the difference between the new account and the old. Lambert, an historian at Purdue University and a biographer of the Awakening's leading protagonist, George Whitefield, casts the movement as both real and fabricated, and as a colonial culture war that divided Americans as much as it unified them. The union actually forged in the heat of the revival linked parts of colonial America with parts of Great Britain in a transatlantic evangelical federation that would remain a power for 150 years.

To say that the Great Awakening was "fabricated" is to use the second meaning that 18th-century people gave to the word "invention." Lambert allows this sense full play in what might be the most nuanced and comprehensive treatment the opposition case has ever received. But the bulk of the book is given to "invention's" other, positive meaning: the discovery of something heretofore hidden. That something was an extraordinary work of God which its "inventors" then felt called upon to "improve"--to broadcast and thereby extend. The publication of sermons, news reports and revivalists' journals knit together what otherwise would have remained local events and wove them into an international movement. And so not for the last time, though arguably for the first, religious "news" generated its own fulfillment; reports of revivals produced more revivals.

Lambert's great strength is to go beyond this now-familiar part of the story and retrace the formation and operation of a much larger communications network. It is

fascinating to see how Benjamin Colman in Boston and Isaac Watts in London inflated the first reflections of Jonathan Edwards on his 1734-35 revival in Northampton into a harbinger of a transatlantic work of the Lord. In their hands Edwards's narrative defined the genre into which other testimonies had to fit, often at the cost of local nuance and variant voices. If the earlier work of Gilbert Tennent and Theodore Frelinghuysen in New Jersey had benefited from like promotion, the model for revival experience might have been significantly different.

Lambert goes beneath the template to recover the details of how the revival worked and where. Inherited expectations strongly disposed some places to welcome the movement and others not. Social disparities (economic in New England, ethnic in the Mid-Atlantic, geographic in the South) differentiated the groups with whom the revival did succeed. Revival audiences understood the theology and psychology of the Lord's work in different ways. Partly for that reason radicals and moderates fell out with each other in responding to the antirevival critique.

In weaving all these strands around his major themes, Lambert has created the best account we have of the Awakening as a whole, at least on the American side. He could have mined British sources better, could have paid more attention to the war fever (first over Spain, then France) that coincided with Whitefield's tours, and could have explained why, and not just observed that, the movement flamed out almost as quickly as it had flamed up. But these are concerns for another book. The reader of this one will go away more discerning about revivals past and about their counterparts today, from televangelism to megachurches to house fellowships to pastors as comedians.