

The  
**Life and Times**  
of the Reverend  
**George Whitefield**

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by Robert Philip

**Quinta Press**

**2000**

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THE  
LIFE AND TIMES  
OF THE REVEREND  
GEORGE WHITEFIELD, M.A.

BY  
ROBERT PHILIP,  
AUTHOR OF THE EXPERIMENTAL GUIDES, ETC. ETC. ETC.

*Third Edition.*

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“Thou art permitted to speak for thyself.”—ACTS,

“That seraphic man!”—REED.

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## PREFACE.

THIS Work is chiefly from Whitefield's own pen. So far as it is mine, it is in his own spirit. It will, therefore, help all that is good, and expose not a little of what is wrong, in all churches; and thus, like his actual life, *tell* upon both. At least, if it fail to do this, my object will be defeated. Should its *honest* catholicity commend it; it may be followed by similar "Annals and Illustrations of Evangelical Preaching," from the dawn of the Reformation to the close of the last century.

In regard to the *style* of this Work I have nothing to say; except that it is my *own* way of telling the facts of personal history.

R. P.



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## CHAPTER 1.

### WHITEFIELD'S EARLY LIFE, EDUCATION, AND ORDINATION.

“I WAS born in Gloucestershire, in the month of December, 1714. My father and mother kept the *Bell Inn*.” In this unassuming manner Whitefield commences a brief memoir of himself. It will not, however, be uninteresting to add some particulars respecting his family. His great-grandfather, the Rev. Samuel Whitefield, born at Wantage, in Berkshire, was rector of North Ledyard, in Wiltshire, and afterwards of Rockhampton. In the latter charge he was succeeded by his son, Samuel, who died without issue. Two of his daughters were married to clergymen. Andrew, Whitefield's grandfather, was a private gentleman, and lived retired upon his estate. He had fourteen children; Thomas, the eldest, was the father of the Rev. George Whitefield. Mr Thomas Whitefield was bred to the business of a wine merchant, in Bristol, but afterwards kept an inn in the city of Gloucester. While in Bristol he married Miss Elizabeth Edwards, a lady related to the families of Blackwell and Dinmour, of that city. He had six sons, of whom George was the youngest, and one daughter.

Concerning his father and mother, Whitefield writes: “The former died when I was two years old; the latter is now alive, (she died in December, 1751, in the 71st year of her age,) and has often told me how she endured fourteen weeks' sickness, after she brought me into

the world; but was used to say, even when I was an infant, that she expected more comfort from me than from any other of her children. This, with the circumstance of my being born in an inn, has been often of service to me, in exciting my endeavours to make good my mother's expectations, and so follow the example of my dear Saviour, who was born in a manger belonging to an inn."

This amiable solicitude to realise his mother's "expectations," is the more worthy of notice, because, whatever she was as a mother, she was not distinguished as a Christian. This seems more than implied in the following lamentation, extracted from one of his letters: "Why is my honoured mother so solicitous about a few paltry things, that will quickly perish? Why will she not come and see her youngest son, who will endeavour to be a Joseph to her, before she dies?" Such was his suspense in regard to the spiritual state of his parent; and yet he gratefully owns the salutary influence of her maternal hopes upon his mind, and, while afar off on the Atlantic, commemorates her tenderness. "My mother was very careful of my education, and always kept me, in my tender years, (for which I never can sufficiently thank her,) from intermeddling in the least with the tavern business." (This paragraph was written on board the *Elizabeth*, during the voyage to Philadelphia.) Now these acknowledgements were penned during the heat of his zeal and the height of his popularity; at a period when recent converts are prone to speak with harshness of their unconverted relatives, and to sink the child in the champion towards them. This is so common, and, to say nothing of its cruelty, so unwise, that I could not record this pleasing exception, without holding it up to general imitation. "The servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle towards all,—apt to teach,—patient; in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God, peradventure, will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth."

Whitefield's humiliating recollections of his own early and inveterate opposition to "the truth," contributed, no doubt, to moderate his natural impatience towards others. The following is his own narrative of that period.

"My infant years must necessarily not be mentioned; yet I can remember such early stirrings of corruption in my heart, as abundantly convince me that I was conceived and born in sin; that in me dwelleth

no good thing by nature; and that, if God had not freely prevented me by his grace, I must have been for ever banished from his presence. I was so brutish as to hate instruction; and used, purposely, to shun all opportunities of receiving it. I soon gave pregnant proofs of an impudent temper. Lying, filthy talking, and foolish jesting, I was much addicted to, even when very young. Sometimes I used to curse, if not swear. Stealing from my mother I thought no theft at all, and used to make no scruple of taking money out of her pockets before she was up. I have frequently betrayed my trust, and have more than once spent money I took in the house, in buying fruit, tarts, &c. to satisfy my sensual appetite. Numbers of sabbaths have I broken, and generally used to behave myself very irreverently in God's sanctuary. Much money have I spent in plays, and in the common amusements of the age. Cards, and reading romances, were my heart's delight. Often have I joined with others in playing roguish tricks; but was generally, if not always, *happily detected*: for *this* I have often since, and do now, bless and praise God."

This enumeration of youthful vices and follies, is certainly minute, and, in one sense, gratuitous; but, when the spirit and design of the confessions are duly weighed, no man will venture to laugh at them, except those who regard sin as a "light matter." Every candid mind must be conscious of seeing *itself* in young Whitefield, "as in a glass;" and every *spiritual* mind will not fail to deplore these early exhibitions of depravity, nor to mark this modern exemplification of an ancient truth, "Thou makest me to possess the iniquities of my youth." (Job 13:26.) Were these acknowledgements written in the spirit, or for the same purpose, as Rousseau's unblushing "Confessions," I should despise myself, as well as insult the public, were I inclined to transcribe them. Were they even calculated to suggest the bare idea of uncommon sins, I should not have hesitated to merge the particulars in some general charge of corruption: but, besides carrying their antidote along with them, in their penitential tone and spirit, they are but too common, however melancholy. Bishop Lavington, indeed, affects great horror and disgust at them, and compares them with the confessions of "the wild and fanatical *Theresa*," in his treatise "On the Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists;"—a book, to which his own description of Whitefield's confessions is far more applicable; "so

ludicrous, filthy, and shameless, as quite defiles paper, and is shocking to decency and modesty." Such a "perfect Jakes" of ribaldry never issued from the episcopal bench; and yet it found an editor in the vicar of Manaccan, in 1820!

I shall have occasion more than once, to refer to both the bishop and the vicar. In the mean time, I cannot but allow Whitefield to speak for himself, on the subject of his early life. "It would be endless to recount the sins and offences of my younger days. *'They are more in number than the hairs of my head.'* My heart would fail me at the remembrance of them, was I not assured that my Redeemer liveth to make intercession for me! However the young man in the gospel might boast, that he had kept the commandments from his 'youth up,' with shame and confusion of face I confess that I have broken them all from *my* youth. Whatever foreseen fitness for salvation others may talk of and glory in, I disclaim any such thing: if I trace myself from my cradle to my manhood, I can see nothing in me but a fitness to be damned. *'I speak the truth in Christ: I lie not!'* If the Almighty had not prevented me by his grace, and wrought most powerfully on my soul—quickening me by his free Spirit, when dead in trespasses and sins, I had now either been sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death,—or condemned, as the due reward of my crimes, to be for ever lifting up my eyes in torments. But such was the free grace of God to me, that though corruption worked so strongly in my soul, and produced such early and bitter fruits,—yet I can recollect, very early, movings of the blessed Spirit upon my heart. I had, early, some convictions of sin. Once, I remember, when some persons (as they frequently did) made it their business to tease me, I immediately retired to my room, and kneeling down, with many tears, prayed over the 118th Psalm."

It appears from the narrative, that, on this occasion, the mind of young Whitefield fastened chiefly upon the words, *"In the name of the Lord will I destroy them."* This, of course, he applied to his *teasing* enemies, who had "compassed him about like bees:" a coincidence likely to be noticed by an irritated boy, of quick perceptions. Even *men* are but too prone, when injured, to appropriate the Messiah's weapons to their own warfare;—as if revenge could be sanctified by the use of sacred language. But what is pitiable in the boy, is contemptible

in the man. This happened when Whitefield was only ten years old; but the following hint will account for the facility with which he turned to a psalm suited to his purpose. "I was always fond of being a clergyman, and used frequently to imitate the minister's reading prayers, &c." Such being his favourite habit at the time, he was sure to be familiar with the *imprecatory psalms*, of which so many occur in the book of Common Prayer.

We have seen that he was addicted to petty thefts. The manner in which he seems to have reconciled his conscience to them, is not peculiar to boys. "Part of the money I used to steal from my mother I gave to the *poor*; and some books I privately took from others (for which I have since restored fourfold) I remember were books of *devotion*."

"When I was about twelve, I was placed at a school, called St Mary de Crypt, in Gloucester: the last grammar school I ever went to. Having a good elocution and memory, I was remarked for making speeches before the corporation, at their annual visitation. During the time of my being at school, I was very fond of reading plays, and have kept from school for days together, to prepare myself for acting them. My master, seeing how mine and my school-fellows' vein ran, composed something of this kind for us himself, and caused me to dress myself in girls' clothes, (which I had often done,) to act a part before the corporation." Thus he contracted that taste for theatrical amusements, which gave rise to the well-known insinuation, that he learned his peculiar style of oratory upon the stage. This, however, is not the fact: his acting was confined to the boards of St Mary de Crypt, and to his own chamber. But his fondness for this species of amusement was not left at school. When seventeen years of age, he was not weaned from this folly. Even while at college he says, "I was not fully satisfied of the sin of reading plays, until God, upon a fast day, was pleased to convince me. Taking a play, to read a passage out of it to a friend, God struck my heart with such power, that I was obliged to lay it down again."

How deeply he deplored the cause and consequences of this habit, appears from the following remarks. "I cannot but observe here, with much concern of mind, how this way of training up youth has a natural tendency to debauch the mind, to raise ill passions, and to stuff the

memory with things as contrary to the gospel of Christ, as darkness to light—hell to heaven.” This fatal “tendency” was but too fully exemplified when at school. “I got acquainted with such a set of debauched, abandoned, atheistical youths, that if God, by his free, unmerited, and special grace, had not delivered me out of their hands, I should have sat in the scorners’ chair, and made a mock at sin. By keeping company with them, my thoughts of religion grew more and more like theirs. I went to public service only to make sport, and walk about. I took pleasure in their lewd conversation. I began to reason as they did, and to ask, why God had given me passions, and not permitted me to gratify them? In short, I soon made great proficiency in the school of the devil. I affected to look rakish, and was in a fair way of being as infamous as the worst of them.” This, not oratory, was what young Whitefield learned from plays and acting. He fell into sins, of which he says,—“*their dismal effects I have felt and groaned under ever since.*”

Of course, this progress in vice was gradual. During his first two years at school, he bought, and read with much attention, *Ken’s Manual for Winchester Scholars*: a book commended to him by the use made of it by his mother in her afflictions. He was also a diligent scholar, and for some time made considerable progress in the Latin classics. But the amusements which alienated his heart from virtue, gradually impaired his taste for education. “Before I was fifteen, having, as I thought, made sufficient progress in the classics, and, at the bottom, longing to be set at liberty from the confinement of a school, I one day told my mother,—that since her circumstances would not permit her to give me a University education, more learning, I thought, would spoil me for a tradesman. and therefore I judged it best not to learn Latin any longer. She at first refused to consent, but my corruptions soon got the better of her good nature. Hereupon for some time I went to learn to write only. But my mother’s circumstances being much on the decline; and, being tractable that way, I began to assist her occasionally in the public-house, till at length I put on my blue apron and my snuffers—washed mops—cleaned rooms, and in one word, became professed and common *drawer* for nigh a year and a half.”



Thus he exchanged the confinement of a school for the imprisonment of an inn; and, as might be expected in such a place, he was twice or thrice intoxicated. It does not appear, however, that he was addicted to drinking.—“He who was with David when he was *‘following the ewes big with young,’* was with me here. For, notwithstanding I was thus employed in a common inn, and had sometimes the care of the whole house upon my hands, yet *I composed two or three sermons,* and dedicated one of them, in particular, to my elder brother. One time, I remember, I was much pressed to self-examination, but found myself very unwilling to look into my heart. Frequently I read the Bible, while sitting up at night. Seeing the boys go by to school, has often cut me to the heart. And a dear youth would often come, entreating me, whilst serving at the bar, to go to Oxford. My general answer was,—“I wish I could.”

“After I had continued about a year in servile employment, my mother was obliged to leave the inn. My brother, who had been bred up for the business, married; whereupon all was made over to him; and I being accustomed to the house, it was agreed that I should continue there as an assistant. But God’s thoughts were not as our thoughts. By his good providence it happened, that my sister-in-law and I could by no means agree; and, at length, the resentment grew to such a height, that my proud heart would scarce suffer me to speak to her for three weeks together. But, notwithstanding I was much to blame, yet I used to retire and weep before the Lord, as Hagar when flying from Sarah: little thinking that God, by this means, was forcing me out of the public business, and calling me from drawing *wine* for drunkards, to draw water from the wells of salvation for the refreshment of his spiritual Israel. After continuing for a long time under this burden of mind, I at length resolved (thinking my absence would make all things easy) to go away. Accordingly, by the advice of my brother and consent of my mother, I went to see my elder brother, then settled in Bristol.”

During a residence of two months in Bristol, Whitefield experienced some awakenings of conscience. Once, in St John’s church, he was so affected by the sermon, that he resolved to prepare himself for the sacrament, and decided against returning to the inn. This latter resolution he communicated by letter to his mother; and the former was so strong, that, during his stay in Bristol, reading *Thomas à Kempis*

was his chief delight. "And I was always impatient till the bell rung to call me to tread the courts of the Lord's house. But in the midst of these illuminations, something surely whispered,—*this would not last*. And, indeed, it so happened. For (oh that I could write it in tears of blood!) when I left Bristol and returned to Gloucester, I changed my devotion with my place. Alas, all my fervour went off. I had no inclination to go to church, or draw nigh to God. In short, my heart was far from him. However, I had so much religion left, as to persist in my resolution not to live in the inn; and, therefore, my mother gave me leave, though she had but a little income, to have a bed on the ground, and live at her house, till Providence should point out a place for me.

"Having now, as I thought, nothing to do, it was a proper season for Satan to tempt me. Much of my time I spent in reading plays, and in sauntering from place to place. I was careful to adorn my body, but took little pains to deck and beautify my soul. Evil communications with my old school-fellows, soon corrupted my good manners. By seeing their evil practices, the sense of the divine presence, I had vouchsafed unto me, insensibly wore off my mind. But God would let nothing pluck me out of his hands, though I was continually doing despite to the Spirit of grace. He even gave me some foresight of his providing for me. One morning as I was reading a play to my sister, said I, 'Sister, God intends something for me, which we know not of. As I have been diligent in business. I believe many would gladly have me for an apprentice, but every way seems to be barred up; so that I think God will provide for me some way or other, that we cannot apprehend.'

"Having thus lived with my mother for some considerable time, a young student, who was once my school-fellow, and then a servitor of Pembroke College, Oxford, came to pay my mother a visit. Amongst other conversation, he told her, how he had discharged all college expenses that quarter, and saved a penny. Upon that my mother immediately cried out, '*This will do for my son!*' Then turning to me, she said, '*Will you go to Oxford, George?*' I replied, '*With all my heart.*' Whereupon, having the same friends that this young student had, my mother, without delay, waited on them. They promised their interest, to get me a servitor's place in the same college. She then