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Douglas Winiarski’s *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light* is a history of “New England’s era of great awakenings” that resists the very idea of a “first” or “second” Great Awakening (p. 9). To Winiarski, the Connecticut River Revivals of the late 1730s and preaching tours of George Whitefield in the early 1740s—commonly identified as the First Great Awakening—were the beginning of much greater event. The changes that began to spread as Whitefield traveled around the Northeast were the “rock on which the ship of New England Congregationalism foundered” (p. 373). They destroyed a church system that had run more or less smoothly for over a century, and gave birth to the competitive religious marketplace that still exists in the United States today. The First Great Awakening—instead of a brief flare of religious excitement that may or may not have had long-term consequences—was in Winiarski’s view the opening act of American evangelicalism.

Winiarski aims to tell his story through the experiences of ordinary churchgoers, rather than their ministers. To that end, he leans heavily on the records of eight church communities from around southern New England. He is particularly interested in “relations of faith,” sometimes referred to as church admission testimonials, which were read aloud whenever a man or woman wished to advance from mere affiliation to full church membership (p. 27). Sermon notes, letters, diaries, and prayer bills (written by parishioners and tacked up to meetinghouse doors) are also examined. *Darkness Falls* traces changing ideas about God and godliness through the changes in these documents. How did people describe their decision to advance to full membership, especially their decision to join the Lord’s Supper? What moments in their lives convinced them that they were ready? And how did this change as revivals burned through New England?

Winiarski has been building to this comprehensive study for a few years. The most obvious predecessor to *Darkness Falls* is his 2015 article entitled “Lydia Prout’s Dreadfullest Thought.” There, he used evidence from Prout’s and other journals, in addition to sermons, pamphlets, and church admission relations, to explore “the dark side of a religious culture that persistently preyed upon the anxieties of young mothers.”[1] In the first decades of the eighteenth century, young married women made up the majority of the people joining New England churches. They were doing this for their children. As New England settlements grew crowded, child mortality rose alarmingly. Mothers were responsible for families, and the way to ensure baptism was to move beyond passive affiliation in the church. This was a “family strategy designed to safeguard the health and temporal welfare of ... young children.”[2]<a title=”” name="_ednref2" href="#_edn2">)</a>

*Darkness Falls* picks up where “Lydia Prout” left off. Through the 1730s, young mothers continued to be the “driving engine of Congregational culture” (p. 109). Their ministers made joining the church relatively easy. Long gone were the days when potential church members had to stand before their neighbors and extemporaneously prove themselves worthy. Ministers allowed written confessions of faith, and many worked with po-
potential church members to compose them, some providing what was essentially a template. One of the most common tropes in these confessions was the “ideal of the godly walk,” which basically meant living a pious, ethical, and diligent life (p. 118). Exemplars of the godly walk, according to the popular understanding, were good candidates for church membership. This, according to Darkness Falls, was the system that exploded with Whitefield’s arrival in New England. “Whitefield directly repudiated the ideal of the godly walk,” as he and others like him convinced people that respectable, godly behavior was no evidence of salvation at all (p. 135). Instead, converts should be looking for a moment of conversion—a moment of received light, or contact with the Holy Spirit. The new enthusiasts no longer searched their lives for evidence of worthiness. They either had experienced conversion, or they had not. Young mothers ceased to be the dominant group in church membership, as the age of conversion skewed younger and more men were caught up in the movement. And the emphasis on the presence of the Holy Spirit and spontaneous conversion made church membership more than just a local story. The new converts “imagined themselves as participants in an interconnected religious phenomenon,” a massive revival that was transforming the Atlantic world (p. 135).

For readers interested in the northeastern borderlands, Winiarski hints at some tantalizing connections without going into too much detail. To be fair, his book is not about northern New England or the colonies that became Canada. His main source base is data from eight churches, all but one of which were in Massachusetts or Connecticut. Winiarski does note, however, that a “disproportionate number” of the early settlers of Nova Scotia emigrated from the same eastern Connecticut and southeastern Massachusetts towns that come up repeatedly in his study (p. 427). Additionally, anyone familiar with the settlement of Downeast Maine and New Brunswick knows that many of the settlers there came from Essex County, Massachusetts—another area of intense revivals. In fact, a map of the most intense Whitefieldian revivals of the 1740s aligns remarkably well with a map of the most intense emigration northeast in the 1760s.

Winiarski provides a reasonable explanation of this phenomenon, too. The revivals led to a great deal of strife: “Ecclesiastical and civil discord often erupted simultaneously” (p. 312). Once a group chose to form a new congregation, they were often permanently divided from their neighbors. If they refused to pay taxes to their former church, local officials would sometimes confiscate their property. Former friends would refuse to socialize or do business with them. They might be denied a burial spot in the churchyard. Considering these repercussions, it is understandable that revivalists might look to the frontier for a new start. If they removed to a new settlement, theirs would be the established church. Winiarski does briefly trace one example of this sort of migration, when a group of separates from Hardwick, Massachusetts, became the founders of the First Church of Bennington, Vermont. And he makes a brief connection with Henry Alline of Nova Scotia and the revivals he sparked in the late 1770s. The Nova Scotia revivalists called themselves New Lights just as Whitefieldians did, and Winiarski implies that their revival makes his “rise of American evangelicalism” a transborder phenomenon (p. 8).

This has implications for a few different corners of early American and Canadian history. In the first place, historians have tended to consider the borderland religious excitement of the Revolutionary Era as separate from the First Great Awakening, and have examined New England and Maritime revivals in isolation. Winiarski promotes a much broader interpretation, seeing the events of the 1740s as just the beginning of a grand “Protestant evangelical awakening,” which comfortably includes events in the 1770s and 80s, both in northern New England and the British Provinces. Secondly, studies of the Northeast have tended to ignore religious strife as a possible push factor driving families to settle the frontier. Typically, migration from southern New England has been attributed to economics. But Winiarski makes a compelling case that the rupture in the church drove people north into the borderland. His work here would be an excellent jumping-off point for another historian willing to do the archival work to uncover more connections between emigrants and evangelicalism.

Notes
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