

*The Rise of Evangelicalism: The age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys* by Mark A. Noll, IVP, 2003, 330pp.

This is the first in a projected 5-volume series on the history of evangelicalism written by an evangelical historian. It takes the evangelical revivals of the eighteenth century in Britain and America for its starting point.

In a lucid style, Mark Noll traces the rise of evangelicalism chronologically in five main parts: antecedents of revival, revival (1734-8), revival and consolidation (1738-45), development (1745-70) and diversification (1770-95). Each section contains plenty of narrative, and is anchored in the wider historical scene. As you would expect from the title, the main revival leaders receive ample coverage. What is less expected, and especially gratifying, is the way Noll pulls together the scholarship of the last twenty years to give an integrated picture of the transatlantic communication between evangelicals in Britain and America, and of the link with the European continent, in particular, the influence of pietism and the Moravian missionary fervour on the revivals and their leaders. Noll also uncovers the revivals' impact on groups traditionally neglected by historians – Africans, women and lay-people – vitally significant for understanding the later development of evangelicalism. Themes such as theology, hymnody, warfare and politics, are skilfully drawn in, and developed. Noll interacts with current historical scholarship throughout the book, and footnotes direct the reader into specialized follow-up.

Noll is at pains to justify his treatment of the eighteenth century revivals as the birthplace of what we now call 'evangelicalism'. His arguments are convincing. But his continual use of the term 'evangelicalism' in connection with the revivals of the mid-eighteenth century has an anachronistic ring, and gives the misleading impression that the nascent movement already had a self-conscious identity. One suspects this tendency is the consequence of writing the first book in a series on the 'history of evangelicalism'!

Though a respected academic historian, Noll does not hide his evangelical sympathies. He gives the participants

of the revivals the first and primary voice in describing and interpreting the work of the revival – ahead of the cacophony of historical theorists, who would claim the authority of distance and objectivity to downgrade and reassess the participants' own 'spiritual' analysis of the revivals. The final chapter outlines experiences of ordinary people whose lives were changed through the revivals. Notably, Noll concludes that not only do these autobiographies provide us with the best way of discovering how these individuals understood their experiences, but 'an evangelical historian of evangelical history may be pardoned for his own conclusion that in many particulars they also sound like the truth'!

Regrettably, however, Noll gives far too much weight to humanistic explanations of the revivals, which as secondary causes he regards as compatible with the primary 'spiritual explanation'. Political, social, ecclesiastical and intellectual trends, of course, all played a part. Under God's overarching providence this is not a problem for the Christian. But Noll attempts to syncretize the contributions of contemporary historians, (including those whose work effectively denies the spiritual reality of the revivals), within one interpretative framework. In his chapter entitled 'Explanations', he quotes with apparent approval the view of Michael Crawford that 'the eighteenth century Evangelical Revival had more to do with adaptations to structural changes in society, in particular, those conducive to religious voluntarism, than with death and rebirth of evangelical piety', and of David Bebbington that Jonathan Edwards and other early evangelicals got their 'confidence about salvation from the atmosphere of the English Enlightenment'. Noll has failed to grasp the humanistic nettles, evident, alas, even among evangelical historians, and, as a result, his interpretation of the revivals becomes seriously skewed.

Despite these reservations, any serious reader or student of history will find this book highly stimulating. Noll's research and learning is immense. His ability to serve it up in palatable form is masterly. The book will repay thoughtful reading.