

NEWS

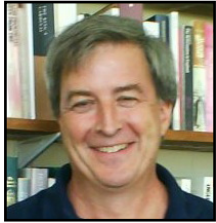
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Carey's influences, circumstances deserve consideration

AN ESSAY BY
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In September 2011, 250 years and one month after the birth of William Carey, the Carey Center at William Carey University purchased two volumes for its collection of rare materials regarding Carey and the Serampore Mission. One of the volumes was a first edition published in London in 1678; the other was a later edition of the same book published in

1786. The two editions were versions of a book that William Carey read in rural India in 1795, two years after his arrival in Calcutta as a missionary of the recently-founded Baptist Missionary Society. It is likely that Carey, for whom poverty was as much a watchword as “expect” and “attempt,” read the later and probably cheaper edition of 1786. The book that Carey read was by John Flavell and was entitled *Divine Conduct, or, the Mystery of Providence*. Flavell was a Presbyterian minister who lost his livelihood when he was ejected from his pastorate in Dartmouth, England, a town in southwestern England not far from the

more famous Plymouth.

Flavell's book concerned Providence, the intervention of God in the course of human events. An unfortunate soul, Flavell had suffered religious persecution that tore from him much of his property and brought him to the brink of jail. Nearly a century before Carey was born, Flavell led religious meetings at night to escape detection by authorities determined to enforce laws against dissenters from the established Church of England. Carey too had suffered ostracism by family and friends for his religious pilgrimage that propelled him from being born the son of the Anglican parish clerk in 1761 to becoming, on the

royally-appointed Anglican Fast Day of Feb. 10, 1779, at the age of seventeen, an outcast amongst poor dissenters. It was a self-inflicted wound and one that he nursed all his life.

Carey read Flavell's book at what was arguably the low point in his career. In answer to what Carey believed to be divine commandment, he had proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of God in India and was now exiled to a rural area where he complained of the lack of Christian society and the disinterest of his family.

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It seemed at the time that he had failed, so Flavell's book likely comforted him with the realization that God had been in charge of his life from the time of his conception (a point explicitly made by Flavell) and was in charge still. When linked to other theological/devotional works that Carey read such as Robert Hall's 1781 book *Help to Zion's Travellers*, Flavell's work reveals Carey as a man who was influenced

to his very soul by books. It also indicates that he was a man of ideas, however quirky or unpopular (even amongst the faithful), and a man who struggled with himself to contain and use the slow fire of conscience that burned within him.

Acquisition of the two Flavell volumes complements campus celebrations of Carey's 250th birthday. They divert attention momentarily away from a colorful art exhibit and an elaborate, tasty

birthday cake to remind us that attempts to write an enduring biography of William Carey are still in their formative stages. The reason for the delay of a quarter-millennium in understanding Carey owes much to the problem of historical context. Previous biographers have isolated Carey by treating him as a subject for hero-worship. They have failed to take into account the welter of people and circumstances that enriched and compli-

cated Carey's life – among them an obscure Dartmouth pastor named John Flavell. That the role played by Flavell and those like him in Carey's life has not been recognized is a shame, but it is a shame that can be redressed before Carey turns 300. And that prospect provides reason for extended celebration.

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