Illustration 6  Andrew Crosbie, advocate (1736–85): detail from the portrait by David Martin presented to the Faculty of Advocates by Crosbie’s widow in 1814
9 Concluding Essay: The Snodgrass affair and Witherspoon’s ‘coming to America’

_Least of all do I intend to endeavour to satisfy you of the motives which have induced me to accept of a call to a distant part of the world, and, in some degree, a different employment in the church of Christ._

John Witherspoon, _The Farewell Sermon (“Ministerial Fidelity”),_ preached in the Laigh Church, Paisley on successive Sundays, April–May, 1768.

_Seeing someone able to reconcile in some measure Princeton’s warring New Light and Old Light theological factions, they [the trustees] appointed Witherspoon, formerly a stalwart champion of the popular Calvinist (anti-Enlightenment) wing of the Church of Scotland. Originally expected to combat the New Divinity men at Princeton more in the style of the New England ‘Old Calvinists’, urging not reason but Calvinist orthodoxy, discipline, and sober morality as the essence of religion, Witherspoon, who had latterly become a man of the Enlightenment, in fact introduced the Scots Common Sense school of philosophy with tact but great vigour and acumen._


_Issues posed by this study_

It has been the aim of this book to narrate the full story of John Witherspoon and the successive Snodgrass affairs, as revealed in the mass of unpublished church and legal documentation published here in extract for the first time. If this study has accomplished anything, it will at least no longer be good enough for future Witherspoon scholars to ignore, set aside or dismiss in a sentence or two this fraught episode in his life, lying as it does at the crossroads of his career, spanning the period preceding his departure from Scotland and the start of his new life as an American.

In the light of the new information presented here, we are left, however, with some difficult questions:

_First:_ What lasting impact, if any, did the Court action have on Witherspoon?

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1 _WJW_, 2, 510.
Secondly: What part—again, to be pedantic, if any—did it play in his decision to accept the call of America?

Finally: To indulge in the current fad among historians for ‘counterfactuals’, what if Witherspoon had stayed in Scotland? To clarify, if he had not gone to America, what would be his place and standing today in the history of eighteenth century Scotland, and, more specifically, of the Scottish Enlightenment?

As we noted in chapters 2 and 4, 1762 was a veritable annus terribilis for Witherspoon when, in August that year, he had first learned of the action raised against him in the Court of Session from the Court summons pressed into his hands in Paisley by the messenger-at-arms. We saw how his reaction was one of indignation and resolute defiance. Employing the vehicle of A Serious Apology for the Ecclesiastical Characteristics, published in the following year, he enthusiastically re-stated his views on ministerial censure and the continuing duty of church ministers not to distance themselves from involvement in disciplinary matters affecting individuals—even if that meant maintaining ‘a bold and open testimony’ in face of his colleagues everywhere (as it seemed to him) increasingly preferring to withhold action of any kind in such matters, or, at least, to sit on the fence. That was not the way for him. In the pages of A Serious Apology we have the best evidence there is that, whatever other emotions Witherspoon may have felt at this time—anger, hurt or conceivably, even private remorse—he stubbornly refused to back down, least of all admit he was wrong in the actions he had taken, first from the pulpit, and subsequently with his pen. One is entitled to speculate that these views conceivably changed after he crossed the Atlantic and settled into a wholly different life in colonial, pre-revolutionary America.

Then there is the important related issue: in the light of all that has gone before in this study, is it fair to conclude that we can now package John Witherspoon as ‘unenlightened Scot, enlightened American’? Another, admittedly edgier way of putting it might be: ‘anti-Enlightenment Scot, pro-Enlightenment American’? It is by no means an original notion. Witherspoon’s American ‘regeneration’, we might call it, remains a problem for scholars. Writing in 1985, Richard B. Sher—one of the leading authorities on the Church of Scotland of the eighteenth century—sees the point with his usual clarity:

It is ironic that Witherspoon, whose Scottish ministry was devoted so largely to combating the Moderate vision of an enlightened clergy in
an enlightened society, should be remembered today as the man most responsible for transporting the ideals and philosophical principles of the Scottish Enlightenment to the colleges of colonial America.²

Similarly, in 1989 Mark A. Noll observes that, despite a revival of interest in him at that time, Witherspoon ‘remains an enigmatic figure’. For Noll ‘sea change’ still seems the only appropriate phrase to describe the two stages of his career [in Scotland and America].³

Jonathan Israel, a distinguished scholar of the history of ideas, offers an attractively straightforward explanation of Witherspoon’s bipolar life and career: that, bluntly, he was ‘unenlightened’ in Scotland, and only became ‘enlightened’ when he went to America.⁴ (See the quotation from Israel at the head of this chapter).

The clear implication behind Israel’s diagnosis is that when Witherspoon went to America it was as if the scales fell from his eyes and for the first time in his life he was able to perceive the great truths of human reason, viewed from all points of the intellectual compass. Consequently, and ironically, says Israel, the trustees of the College of New Jersey ended up failing to get the man they thought they were getting for that very reason. And Israel perceives that Witherspoon’s introduction into the College curriculum of the study of some of the greatest names in Scottish Enlightenment philosophy—in Paisley he had referred to the outpourings of two of these authors (his principal targets were, of course, Kames, and above all, Hume) as ‘the poison of infidel writings’—was, if they could have anticipated it, positively the last thing the College trustees would have desired in headhunting him for Princeton.⁵

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⁴ *Democratic Enlightenment*, 468–9.

⁵ It is sometimes held that JW was responsible for putting exclusively Reid and the Scottish common sense school of philosophy on the curricular map of American colleges at this time. That is not the end of the matter. The key reference is the ‘Recapitulation’ at the close of his ‘Lectures
 Few could improve on the clarity of Israel’s succinct analysis. Yet, beguiling though his assessment undoubtedly is, it is hardly the whole story. For one thing, it insufficiently accounts for Witherspoon’s often remarked upon enigmatic side—the numerous apparent paradoxes and contradictions detectable in his writings on both sides of the Atlantic—if, that is, we compare his Scottish work up to 1768 with his later American productions. It is true that some of these contradictions cease to be what they seem when considered within the continuity of his orthodox Presbyterian religious faith which, in contrast to whatever else that can be traced more or less exclusively to his new-found passion for ‘Americanisation’, remained constant throughout his life regardless of location or nationality. Israel is far too sweeping in implying that somehow Witherspoon in America, in embracing the ideas of the Enlightenment, at the same time disengaged from the Calvinist ethic of salvation and rebirth. Tait, for one, has pointed out that Witherspoon is still urging on his young graduate audience at Princeton, year in year out, the old Calvinist message of regeneration of the Practical Treatise and several of the Scottish sermons—‘Except a man be born again he cannot see God’. It is, of course, precisely this same message he delivers in the great Dominion of Providence sermon in the jeremiad tradition of May 1776 when, on the eve as it were of its creation, he addresses his words to the entire emergent American nation.

That view certainly seems to be confirmed in a letter of 7 December 1786 from the Reverend James Wodrow, minister of Stevenston in Ayrshire, to Wodrow’s erstwhile fellow student at Glasgow University, Samuel Kenrick. Wodrow, who knew Witherspoon from his Beith years, informs Kenrick that in the course of Witherspoon’s visit to Scotland two years previously he, on Moral Philosophy’ where he lists for the benefit of his students ‘the most considerable authors, chiefly British’ among whom is the ‘father of the moral sense’, Francis Hutchison, whose selected books JW especially recommends include Inquiries into the Ideas of Beauty and Virtue and ‘his System’. ‘Reid’s Inquiry’ sits alongside Hutchison’s works in the checklist. Other Scottish writers recommended by JW to his students are Hume, Kames, Smith, Beattie, Ferguson and Balfour (WFJW, 3, 470–2). Further, it is important to note that as far back as 1749 Benjamin Franklin praises ‘the ingenious Mr Hutchison [sic]’ in his Proposals relating to the education of youth—even though Franklin errs in attributing the anonymous Dialogues Concerning Education (1745 and 1748) to Hutcheson, when it is actually the work of David Fordyce (1711–51), a relatively obscure Marischal College, Aberdeen academic.

6 The Piety of John Witherspoon, 185.
Wodrow, had ascertained that although ‘he is & always was a most excellent Preacher’, yet Witherspoon ‘retains the same calvinistick principles he had when he left this Country’.7

If we can agree, nonetheless, that Israel is right in the generality of his analysis, it makes the construction of a reply to one of our three questions a little easier. Yeager’s biographical study of Witherspoon’s friend and correspondent, the Reverend Dr. John Erskine, is sub-titled Enlightened Evangelicalism; the reference to the epithet ‘enlightened’ being explained that Erskine, Yeager’s argument runs, was ahead of many of his contemporaries in the Kirk by anticipating liberal, even ‘modern’ notions of Christian values. As discussed in chapter 2, Erskine found he could comfortably support a more liberal interpretation of moral and political behaviour and still accommodate it within his Calvinistic/Scottish Presbyterian orthodox theology. And as we have also seen, much the same can be said of William Thom of Govan. But it was egregiously untrue of John Witherspoon, as it was of his staunchest ally in Paisley, the Reverend George Muir, author of The Excision, in its quaint way a monument of Scottish ‘anti-Enlightenment’ literature.

That image of Erskine and Thom accords with the hypothesis developed in this study that at least in relation to their views on contemporary church discipline, they were poles apart from such as Witherspoon and his uncle, Thomas Walker—author of the counterblast to John Graham in the Kilwinning ‘heresy’—while still kindred spirits within the Popular party faction opposed to the Moderates. All three—Erskine, Thom and Witherspoon—felt alienated by the personal lifestyles customarily associated with ‘enlightened’ Moderatism that, in their view, deliberately obfuscated the fundamental tenets of their own reformed faith and creed. It is a subtle argument—and admittedly perhaps a slightly convoluted one—but it helps explain part of the genuine enigma that is Witherspoon. To interpret it a little differently from Professor Israel, in America Witherspoon discovered a new life for himself that required him to modify aspects of the extreme narrow orthodoxy he had espoused from his Calvinist past in favour of a more liberated mindset that could begin to, and did embrace—or, at the very least, could not ignore—his great contemporaries among the Scottish Enlightenment he had formerly despised, along with the ‘infidel writings’

7 Wodrow—Kenrick correspondence in Dr. Williams’s Library (Ms. 24.157. 86).
they gave to the world. He was now prepared to recommend these authors to his students and did so. It is Israel, if the term may be allowed, slightly watered down.

Putting that construction on things, there can be little doubt that the legacy left by Witherspoon *qua* eighteenth century Scottish Kirk minister, pastor, pamphleteer and pulpit theologian would, today in the twenty-first century, be virtually nugatory. True, there is *Ecclesiastical Characteristics*. But even that great monument of satirical infighting in the eighteenth century Kirk is insufficient to ensure an enduring place for its author in the history books. What could distinguish him, after all, from the likes of John Gillies, John Willison or Robert Walker? The answer surely is: nothing of much consequence. But, it will be argued, he *did* go to America and, assuredly, his achievements there earned him his place in history as one of the founders of an independent United States.

All the evidence these days points to a genuine move to revalue and reappraise Witherspoon, led by major original studies on both sides of the Atlantic. Interest in Witherspoon the American statesman (albeit the ‘forgotten Founder’ as portrayed by Morrison) seems at present to have given way to some extent to interest in him as the (admittedly unoriginal) purveyor of Scottish enlightenment philosophy—its conduit one might say—and as one of the leading and most influential educational innovators in the *ante* and immediate *post* revolutionary war period. All this is a far cry from the time when, not so long ago, Witherspoon scholarship, on both sides of the Atlantic, was being described as ‘astonishingly thin’.

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*Witherspoon’s coming to America re-considered*

At the same time, and viewed from the perspective of the disclosures in this study, easily the most difficult of our questions remains: What part, if any, did the Snodgrass affair play in Witherspoon’s decision to leave Scotland for colonial America? The answer, by its nature, is bound to be tentative and inconclusive. My cautious conclusion, however, is that the aggregate evidence presented in this study leaves it inconceivable that Witherspoon was unaffected by the case. The notion that, somehow, he strode through the entire *débacle* unfazed, shrugging it off as another example of God’s providence manifesting itself in wayward and unpredictable ways, is unconvincing,

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unlikely and ultimately untenable. Those who might subscribe to that view after reading this book should go back and read again the humiliating Court summons of 21 August 1762; they should consider John Snodgrass’s speech to the Presbytery of Paisley, utterly condemning Witherspoon’s misguided determination to hunt him down and persecute him; they need to take account of the strength of Moderate opposition and personal antagonism to his every move within the Presbytery of Paisley; and, finally, they should set in context the unusual steps Witherspoon took to ensure that his departure from Scotland should not be subject to any eleventh hour glitch.

Varnum Lansing Collins, we remarked, had dismissed out of hand James McCosh’s purely instinctive claim – McCosh never conducted any research worthy of the name into the subject – that Witherspoon had no option but to leave Scotland on the grounds that the combination of the lingering malodour caused by the Characteristics, together with ‘these local troubles’, made his situation in Paisley ‘somewhat too hot’ for him to remain. What prompts Collins to be so confident he can reject McCosh’s hypothesis out of hand? He had, he tells us, reached his conclusion in the light of ‘consideration of the documents and of his [Witherspoon’s] own words and character’. But which documents? All the evidence points to Collins having located and inspected only the Extract Decreet—and then only cursorily. In particular, there is no evidence he had located and read any of the five immensely important printed Court of Session submissions of 1768 and 1775–6, the work of the advocates George Wallace, Henry Dundas, Charles Hay, David Dalrymple and Andrew Crosbie. It is just as unlikely that he succeeded in locating and examining the contents of the box of inventoried Court Mss. relating to the cause. The two almanacs of 1763 and 1768 also eluded him. Crucially, Collins seems totally unaware of the diligence of inhibition served on Witherspoon by Snodgrass’s lawyers, and its reclamation only three months before his departure from Scotland. While he was able to access some records of the Presbytery of Paisley he seems to have been content to read only those germane to Witherspoon’s last few weeks in Paisley in May 1768.9

We can safely conclude that the aggregate of historiographical evidence has consistently lacked the means necessary to construct a fully complete

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9 Collins cites from the minutes of the Presbytery for the last meetings attended by JW in 1768 before setting sail, quoting the whole of the ‘shipboard’ letter of May 18 to the Reverend George Muir, Moderator of the Presbytery. (President Witherspoon, 1, 95). This is the letter Butterfield thought was written to JW’s brother which begins ‘My dear Brother’.
picture surrounding the events leading up to—to borrow Butterfield’s phrase—Witherspoon’s *coming to America*. Specifically, all of his biographers have failed to recognise that Witherspoon was well aware that the truce he had temporarily reached with Snodgrass *et al.* in the light of the Wallace and Dundas submissions to the Court of Session of February 1768 was, by its nature, bound to be extremely fragile and would not hold indefinitely. And so it proved. With that fragility in mind, we can proceed to reconstruct the last few days Witherspoon spent in Scotland before stepping aboard the *Peggy* at Greenock on 18 May.

Deploying his customary tidy, even businesslike mind Witherspoon resorted to two unusual steps at the last Presbytery meeting he would attend on 10 May. First, and extraordinarily, he arranged—the Presbytery had not *required* it—for young Benjamin Rush to journey through to Paisley from Edinburgh in order to produce for the Presbytery’s inspection

an Extract of the minutes of the Trustees of New Jersey College Bearing that upon the ninth day of December last Doctor Witherspoon was unanimously Re Elected to the Presidentship of said Colledge which Extract was read.\(^\text{10}\)

More important, Witherspoon ‘craved’

That the Presbytery would consider his demission as under the following Limitation That his ceasing to be minister of Paisley should take date from his actual departure from Scotland least any unforeseen circumstances in Providence should render that impracticable and in the mean time that the Presbytery should grant him Liberty to depart in case the Ship in which he expects to take his passage shall sail betwixt and next ordinary meeting\(^\text{11}\)

Witherspoon leaves nothing to chance. Nothing must go wrong—not now at the last hurdle. The risk of ‘any unforeseen circumstances in Providence’ occurring to prevent his departure must be painstakingly minimised. He would have dreaded the re-imposition of the diligence of inhibition served on him by the Court of Session just a few months previously—in spite

\(^{10}\) Presbytery of Paisley records, minutes of meeting of 10 May 1768, f. 295.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., f. 296.
of his bail-bond having successfully reclaimed it a week or two later. All of this was quite unknown to Collins. Yet, he can state he has no truck with McCosh’s claim that Paisley (and Scotland) became ‘somewhat too hot’ for Witherspoon. ‘Fugitive’ or not—McCosh’s word is doubtless over-dramatic—the grotesquely prolonged circumstances of the Snodgrass legal process and of Witherspoon’s personal ‘trial’ at the bar of successive ecclesiastical courts and of the Court of Session are likely to have proved a factor of significance in the reversal of his original decision to refuse the Princeton invitation. Beyond that we dare not make assumptions.

It will, of course, still be argued there is the conclusive evidence that within the town of Paisley Witherspoon’s personal reputation remained largely intact—which it was—in spite of the ignominy of his wholly pyrrhic victory at the bar of the Presbytery in 1762 and John Snodgrass’s crushing triumph in the adultery case in the same ecclesiastical arena two years later. That Witherspoon had at least as many rich and powerful supporters in the town as the Snodgrass faction is beyond dispute; the letter from members of the Town Council that the Edinburgh newspapers had printed in May 1762, defending his good name, makes that clear. But just how many in Paisley were fully aware of the Court of Session action and, above all, knew all the facts behind it? It is safe to assume that gossip about the case would have been rife in the town. After all, Snodgrass himself had taken great pleasure in intimating the fact of the ongoing Court action to the Presbytery in the course of his Answers and Defences of 2 March 1764. As we have noted, that was tantamount to shouting it from the rooftops. Further, there is the pocketbook evidence that within his own parish ordinary folk were pressing money on him from 1763 onwards. Where, one wonders, did their reason for doing so spring from?

Above all, however, what are we to make of Ashbel Green’s extensive comments on the impact of the Snodgrass case? Green devotes pages and pages of special pleading, culminating in essentially the same conclusion as Collins—that Witherspoon’s coming to America had nothing to do with the Snodgrass episode. But Green, too, was largely ignorant of the Snodgrass historiography, though unlike Collins, he had never seen any of the original Court documentation. Though he was Witherspoon’s student, on his own admission he ‘never heard a word’ of the affair from his teacher’s lips or from his amanuensis. The more expansively Green protests Witherspoon’s innocence, the more convinced we may just possibly become that there is much more to it than meets Green’s, and the proverbial, eye.
In a recent study of the Scottish courts system from the late seventeenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century the distinguished legal historian, John Finlay, has laid bare that fascinating but intricate world of causes, processes, advocates and judges and has pointed out that since Scots procedure favoured fairness over speed, it was possible to reclaim against interlocutors and to do so repeatedly. Lords ordinary were regularly called upon to review their own decisions, as were the judges in the Inner House, and cases could continue for several years without a final resolution.\textsuperscript{12}

Finlay does not specifically cite the Snodgrass process but there could be no better case study to confirm he has hit the proverbial nail on the head when we try to account for its unconscionable longevity.

In the harsh world of reality, the supreme irony is not just that the fourteen-year long Court of Session process finally exhausted itself in the year of American independence, but that the target of the pursuers’ action—‘one of the ministers of Paisley’—would play a part in assisting the passage of a document containing ‘the most important fifty-five words in American history… and perhaps the most inspiring words in all of modern history’.\textsuperscript{13} Irremediably, the terms of Lord Auchinleck’s Decreet of February-March 1776 were, in a real sense, unrealizable. Although the verdict went against Witherspoon, the award of damages and expenses was \textit{de facto} incapable of implementation after America had declared itself independent from Great Britain. Anticipating this himself, when he had communicated with his legal agent, James Edmonston, in February 1775, Witherspoon had pointedly observed that ‘nothing now ought or could in justice be awarded against him’; and his counsel, David Dalrymple, declares to the Court that the former Paisley minister, now separated by thousands of Atlantic sea miles, is effectively ‘obliterate and forgot’.\textsuperscript{14}

Although we shall probably never know how the aggregate debt was settled to the satisfaction of the Court, theoretically responsibility for payment would have fallen on the three cautioners he had named in his \textit{Petition} of 16 February 1768. By that time for Witherspoon—he had been at Princeton for nearly eight years when the decreet was pronounced—the formal outcome

\textsuperscript{12} The \textit{Community of the College of Justice}, 11.
\textsuperscript{13} Joseph J. Ellis, \textit{Revolutionary Summer}, 64.
\textsuperscript{14} See Chapter 7, Dalrymple’s \textit{Answers} of 9 December 1775.
of the process scarcely mattered. As far as he was concerned, the nature of the outcome had long become irrelevant. One senses that by that time he had anticipated an unfavourable verdict. Nevertheless, one important matter remained unresolved and continued to trouble him: repayment of his long outstanding debts. That was a matter of honour.

Repaying his debts

The American colonists had declared independence from Britain on the fourth of July 1776. John Witherspoon was among the 56 ‘signers’ of the Declaration; they had included the two individuals who had worked hardest on behalf of the College of New Jersey in persuading him to leave Scotland – Richard Stockton (like Witherspoon, signing for New Jersey) and Benjamin Rush (for Pennsylvania). Ellis reminds us that the actual signing of the parchment did not take place until 2 August. In the autumn of that year, however, following the débacle at Long Island, the town of Princeton was sacked by redcoats and Nassau Hall ravaged. The war dragged on for seven more years, through the British surrender at Yorktown in October 1781, with hostilities continuing up to January 1783 when finally they ceased. The Treaty of Paris, formally marking closure, was signed in September that year. In December 1783, now a citizen and founding father of a formally recognised foreign power, John Witherspoon started out on an ill-starred journey back to the country of his birth in a six-month long mission ostensibly to seek funds from well-wishers of America in Britain – there were surprisingly many – to help restore and replenish the College.

From the point of view of its intended objective the visit was an abject failure, provoking a rare note of criticism from his erstwhile student, Ashbel Green, who concludes that Witherspoon had been unwise to push ahead with it in the face of unambiguous warnings that it would not succeed from the likes of Benjamin Franklin, John Jay and, in Scotland, the Reverend Drs John Erskine and John Snodgrass (no relation of Witherspoon’s pursuer). Collins clears Witherspoon of any responsibility for conceiving the original idea behind the trip, laying the blame for it squarely on the Princeton trustees. It was no surprise that the outcome of the visit was even worse than its many sceptics predicted. It turns out, however, that fund raising may not have been Witherspoon’s primary purpose after all.

Thomas Crichton of Paisley, who was baptised by Witherspoon in the Laigh Church in January 1761, and whose monograph on Witherspoon’s life is cited by Green, discloses in a letter to the Reverend Dr. Greville Ewing of
Glasgow of 1 June 1835 that he had learned from an old senior Paisley Town councillor, William Carlile, that

when the Dr. paid a visit to Paisley in 1784, after the conclusion of the revolutionary war, that a son in law of one of the sureties (who was by that time deceased) and had the management of his affairs, threatened to arrest him for the payment of the debt owing his relative; and that the Dr. told him plainly, that he was unable to answer his demands. It was at this time, Mr. Carlisle [sic] thinks, that if the story is true, that Mr. Dale would come forward to his relief.15

From the evidence of the 1768 pocketbook16 it seems probable that financial assistance to Witherspoon provided by the rich Glasgow merchant and philanthropist David Dale had been initiated quite early in the life of the process and culminated in the large loan he negotiated with Dale’s company via Dale’s London agent, William Cochran, a month or two before he set sail for America. William Carlile’s revelation that it was Dale who settled Witherspoon’s debts to one or all of the ‘sureties’ (the three ‘cautioners’ named in the 1768 bail bond) has, therefore, the distinct ring of truth about it.17

Dale’s key part in the payment of Witherspoon’s debts is confirmed from a little known source—a letter in the James Wodrow-Samuel Kenrick corpus of correspondence held in Dr. Williams’s Library, Gordon Square, London. I am indebted to Professor Richard B. Sher for drawing my attention to the correspondence between James Wodrow (1730–1810), minister of Stevenston, Ayrshire, and his lifelong friend and older contemporary at Glasgow University, the ‘learned and worthy’ Samuel Kenrick, a banker at Bewdley, Worcestershire and son of a dissenting minister.18 In a letter dated

15 Green, *Life*, 83.
16 See chapter 6, *Second Interlude*.
17 John Sclater, John Paisley and Alexander Skeoch. None of the subscribers was alive in 1784.
18 Apart from the Wodrow–Kenrick correspondence in Dr. Williams’s Library, the Mitchell Library in Glasgow holds an important bound volume entitled ‘Account of Robert Foulis–Buchan MSS’, containing letters and memoranda relating to the Earl of Buchan’s project (which he never completed) of preparing a memoir of Robert Foulis, printer to the University of Glasgow. There we learn that Wodrow was a student at Glasgow from 1741 when he matriculated at the age of 11, was taught by Adam Smith, Francis Hutcheson and, of course, William Leechman.
7 December 1786 Wodrow answers a query put to him by Kenrick about the motive for Witherspoon’s return to Scotland and, in the process, sheds important new light on its real purpose:

… You put questions to me in a former Letter about Dr Wotherspoon which I never had time to answer. I believe he had no other Errand here but to pay his Debts & see his friends at least I never coud penetrate into any thing further from his conversations with his most intimate friends.

His debts he payed punctualy & settled some intricate transactions in business with a Company at Greenock this he did at London before he came down One David Dale a noted shopkeeper at Glasgow & Preacher at their congregational meeting was so pleased with the recovery of a debt of £1300 [130£?] for which he did not expect that he present[ed] the Dr. with one of the finest Carriages that could be made in Scotland. The Dr. would have come to Scotland sooner but was frightened by the apprehension of being mobbed on the Contrary he was well received every where except at Glasgow where some of his Acquaintances declined speaking to him He preached at crowded audiences at Paisley & Beith.

Witherspoon had salved his conscience at last. He had repaid the debts he had first incurred almost twenty years before—principally, of course, to David Dale in relation to the money Dale had loaned him to enable him to organise his defence in the Court of Session. There remains the difficulty of the anecdote concerning the assault on him in Paisley by the relative of one of his deceased friends who had stood surety for damages and expenses. But, if the evidence of William Carlile is reliable, Dale’s generosity dealt with that problem also in the course of the 1784 visit.

The story of the last few weeks Witherspoon spent in Scotland in 1768 cannot properly be narrated in the absence of an understanding of the concomitant Court process and its many intricacies. Its lasting impact on Witherspoon must ultimately, however, remain conjectural. At the same time, historians are allowed to speculate. McCosh, we could say, was almost right. In all likelihood, things did become ‘too hot’ for him in Scotland but

Wodrow left Glasgow ‘for a Pastoral charge’ in 1753. Citing his biographical sketch of Leechman, included in his edition of the latter’s *Sermons* (London & Edinburgh, 1789), Wodrow refers to him as ‘my revered friend & Teacher Dr. Leechman’.
perhaps not quite in the way McCosh suggested. What possibly weighed most heavily with Witherspoon’s conscience was the way he had acted over the publication of *Seasonable Advice* when he had clashed with his Moderate peers in the Presbytery of Paisley, earning a reputation in the immediate wake of events for ‘inconsiderate zeal’ unbecoming in a Church of Scotland minister. His misjudgment was further compounded in the circumstances of *Snodgrass 2* where it seems likely he had deliberately succumbed to what he had too quickly perceived as a covert means of getting even with Snodgrass. In particular, Witherspoon’s dubious part in the precognition conspiracy in the early stages of *Snodgrass 2* was especially reprehensible and by ‘never speaking of it’ he doubtless temporarily overcame the threat of his bad conscience getting the better of him, while continuing to regret his role in the part-fabrication of the document—a crime his pursuers and their counsel rightly identified as particularly mean-spirited and unbecoming in a minister.

The unravelling of this episode in John Witherspoon’s life ‘before America’ postulates that the aggregate humiliation he suffered at the hands of John Snodgrass combined to torment him in the years leading up to the call from Princeton and their aftermath. In the end, it seems that it was all simply too much. He had made numerous mistakes, further alienated many of his ministerial colleagues—though some of them no doubt rejoiced at the chance to get back at him—indulged in serious miscalculations and committed irreversible errors of judgment. Above all, the agonising prolongation of the Court of Session process meant that its outcome was over many years unknown and unpredictable. The call of New Jersey was a heaven-sent opportunity to put all that behind him. The opportunity of a new beginning was literally irresistible. American liberty, in every sense, meant the opportunity of personal, intellectual and spiritual regeneration far from his former home in Scotland. It was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to make a fresh start—*Except a man be born again*… John Witherspoon, we might say, was born again in America.