

Book Review

George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003, 615 pp.

George Marsden, noted scholar of American evangelicalism, offers this theological biography of Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) in the year marking the tricentennial anniversary of the towering figure's birth. At the close of the book, Marsden recalls Yale President Ezra Stile's 1787 prediction that Edwards' works "in another generation will pass into as transient notice perhaps scarce above oblivion...." (498). Rarely has a prophecy proved less true. Edward's popularity has soared in the modern era, and he is now something of a patron saint for evangelical Calvinists who continue to pore over his voluminous sermons, notebooks and treatises. He also remains an object of fascination for American historians. Indeed, Marsden notes the growth of "a major scholarly industry" around Edwards (502), citing one bibliographer who found over five hundred Edwards related publications in the 1980s alone (599, n. 35). Still, Marsden is undaunted in tackling, mastering, and presenting the mass of information about, and analysis of, Edwards' life.

The author also reveals his hope that his study "may help bridge the gap between the Edwards of the students of American culture and the Edwards of the theologians" (502). He further confides, "My belief is that one of the uses of being an historian, particularly if one is part of a community of faith, is to help persons of such communities better understand what they and their community might appropriate from the great mentors of the past and what is extraneous and nonessential" (502). In keeping with this intention, Marsden expresses admiration for Edwards' formidable intellectual achievements, tireless industry, devoted family life, and intense piety. Nevertheless, this work is more than an "admiring" biography, as the author also presents Edwards' shortcomings, including his often brooding, contentious, and uncompromising disposition. Marsden presents Edwards as a man of his times, a "conservative revolutionary," caught up in colonial competition between the British and French and the global struggle between Protestants and Catholics.

Marsden offers the life of Edwards in chronological sequence, from his birth on the frontier, to his student days at Yale, to his tumultuous pastoral tenure at Northampton, to his missionary work among the Indians at Stockbridge, to his untimely death from a small-pox vaccination just after assuming the presidency of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton). In the midst of the chronological flow, Marsden devotes intermittent chapters and sections within chapters to analysis of Edwards' great theological works. In so doing, he does, in fact, bridge the gap between history and theology. This book might, in fact, be described not only as a biography of Edwards but also as a survey of his great works.

As one might expect, the book is a treasure trove of anecdote, intriguing detail, and historical insight into the life of Edwards. Marsden also makes some effort to distinguish between Edwards' lore and reality. For example, he debunks the idea that Edwards' naturalistic article on spiders was written when he was only twelve as "a legend about Edwards' scientific precocity" (66). He also gives little credence to speculations about the relationship between missionary David Brainerd—for whom Edwards became biographer—and Edwards' daughter Jerusha (329). Marsden even makes some suggestions for improving the terms for discussing Edwards' life,

preferring, for example, to refer to the infamous “bad book” case as the “young folk’s Bible” case (300).

Topping five hundred pages in the main body with another hundred pages devoted to notes and index, this biography is thorough, and yet it is written in a style that easily draws one into Edwards’ fascinating and influential life. It is must reading for those who wish to understand Edwards and sets a high scholarly standard for future studies of his life and work. It will also doubtless fuel response and interaction and keep the Edwards “scholarly industry” humming.

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