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Jonathan Edwards—A life:
A review article

Scott Dyer

A new book from the pen of George Marsden, the Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame, is always cause for celebration among Evangelicals that have a keen interest in their roots. Add to this that the book in question is a major biography of the progenitor of the American Evangelical movement and we have cause to celebrate indeed.

Chronicling Edward's life, because it requires serious engagement on the part of the biographer, has proven to be anything but straightforward. Perhaps this should be expected when attempting to relate the life and thought of so complex a genius. Like the proverbial attempt to squish mercury with your finger, great historical personages tend to foil our attempts at easy classification. It shouldn't be surprising then to discover that over the centuries lives of Edwards have ranged from the hagiographical to the dismissive and to the outright cynical.

Writing biography

The study of history has become a much-debated topic of late and Marsden wants to make his approach clear from the outset. In the introduction he states:

we all have points of view... Even the fairest observers have biases and blind spots. They have (and they ought to have)

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interests. The best way to deal with these universal phenomena is to acknowledge one's point of view rather than posing as a neutral observer.

So what is his point of view? "In writing a *life* of Edwards I am not attempting a theological work nor even essentially an intellectual biography. While I hope I have adequately integrated his theology and his thought into his life, my approach also reflects my interests as an historian of American culture. My focus is primarily on understanding Edwards as a person, a public person, and a thinker in his own time and place." He then goes on to outline two overarching themes that, while not always explicitly stated, should be kept in mind by the reader.

First, on a broad scale, Marsden believes that historians have failed to take seriously ethno-religious traditions that emphasize the exclusivity of Christianity. The victors write the history, as they say, and in this case, at least at major American universities of the past few centuries, the victors were the liberals.

Marsden doesn't take issue with those who have focused on the pluralist tradition but he feels that this imbalance should be corrected. In his words: "Historians of the United States have been prone to give much more attention to Benjamin Franklin than to Edwards as a progenitor of modern America... a good case can be made that stories of America are deficient if they do not at least temper emphasis on the Franklins with a serious reckoning with its Edwardses."

The second key goal that Marsden articulates is to present the life of Edwards as a story that situates him in his own historical landscape. This does not obviate the need for exacting scholarship. But it does mean that the results of such research should be pre-

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sented to the reader as a narrative whole that spans the historical horizon of the person in question as well as the reader of the historical narrative. He states: "Unlike specialized studies that analyze every intellectual issue and historical debate, much of the illumination should come simply from the telling a story."

It is also refreshing to note that Marsden does not shy away from stating his own philosophical and theological bias. He declares his commitment to the Christian faith and to have being reared "in a tradition that is a branch of the same Augustinian and Reformed tree" as Edwards and that he therefore finds some of Edwards' theological reflection "awe inspiring." He also goes on to admit, "Overall, since I have learned from many of his insights, my attitude towards Edwards' theology is more sympathetic than not." This does not mean, however, that he has an uncritical attitude toward the New England theologian. He even goes so far as to say that some aspects of Edwards' theology "seem to be brilliant analysis based on false premises."

Edwards' background

Having stated his approach, Marsden begins his biography with an outline of Edwards' ancestors. This is to be expected in any major biography, but, as Marsden demonstrates throughout the book, in Edwards' case the importance of understanding his lineage is paramount. The immense influence of his father Timothy (d.1758) and his maternal grandfather Solomon Stoddard (d.1729) would be difficult to overemphasize.

New England in the first half of the eighteenth century was still a British colony and was essentially organized as an aristocracy. Fam-

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ily lineage was a key determinant to one's place in society, educational opportunities, and political status. In Edwards' case his lineage would turn out to be both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, if he hadn't had such a lineage he may never have had the opportunity to hone his keen intellect. On the other hand, the key theological controversies that preoccupied so much of his later career may not have been as inflammatory given a different familial context.

It is also interesting to note that not all of Edwards' ancestors were of a saintly nature. In fact, his paternal grandmother committed adultery and suffered bouts of psychosis. Her sister murdered her own child and one of her brothers murdered one of his sisters with an axe! Marsden concludes: "Jonathan Edwards is sometimes criticized for having too dim a view of human nature, but it may be helpful to be reminded that his grandmother was an incorrigible profligate, his great-aunt committed infanticide, and his great-uncle was an axe-murderer."

Early years

Marsden moves on to outline Edwards' youth and in particular his quest for truth and the assurance of salvation. A statement of Edwards' about his reaction to the doctrine of divine sovereignty is revealing: "[I was] full of objections to the doctrine of God's sovereignty, in choosing whom he would to eternal life, and rejecting whom he please; leaving them eternally to perish, and be everlastingly tormented in hell. It used to appear like a horrible doctrine to me." Marsden considers this to be key to understanding Edwards' struggle at the time as well as his thinking throughout his

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entire career.

During this period Edwards underwent a deep intellectual struggle as he tried to throw off the Calvinistic framework of his youth. However, at a deeper spiritual level he had a deep sense of his rebelliousness and unworthiness. This was exacerbated by an illness he suffered that almost took his life. For Edwards, as for most people of this period, the spectre of death was ever present and, as Marsden says later, Edwards' whole life was a preparation for his death.

It is fascinating to learn how Edwards overcame his intellectual restlessness and spiritual angst. As Marsden recounts it, the struggle ended with not so much an intellectual breakthrough as a spiritual awakening precipitated by a direct experience of the awful beauty and majesty of God. As with most such experiences this came via Edwards engagement with Scripture, in this case, Timothy 1:17, "Now unto the King eternal, invisible, the only wise God be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen"

As Edwards read these words he later recalled:

There came into my soul, and was as it were diffused through it, a sense of the glory of the divine being; a new sense, quite different from anything I ever experience before. I thought with myself, how excellent a Being that was; and how happy I should be, if I might enjoy that God, and be wrapped up to God in heaven, and be as it were swallowed up in him.

Revival

In 1734 revival broke out in Northampton that took everyone, not

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the least Edwards, by surprise. In what would be a pattern for many such awakenings in America, this one began with the young people. It was occasioned by the sudden death of a young man from pleurisy. Marsden says that “Edwards’ whole life had prepared him to seize this moment.” He preached a sermon to the mourners on Psalm 90:5-6: “In the morning they are like grass which groweth up. In the morning it flourisheth and groweth up. In the evening it is cut down and witherith.” Many who heard the sermon were brought to tears and Edwards focused much of his time afterwards on meeting with the young people privately to encourage their spiritual progress.

In this same period Edwards published a sermon entitled *A Divine and Supernatural Light* in which Edwards “more concisely than anywhere else... related his most profound theological reflections on his understanding of true Christian experience.” For Edwards mere intellectual knowledge of Christ and the Christian faith is not adequate. In one of his favorite analogies he contrasted intellectual apprehension with true belief as “the difference between having a rational judgment that honey is sweet, and having a sense of its sweetness.”

The Northampton awakening and the one that followed in 1740 under the influence of George Whitefield would define Edwards’ theological agenda for years to come. Simply stated, Edwards would become preoccupied with understanding religious experience and its relationship to conversion and sanctification. Treatises such as *The Religious Affections* would be an enduring result of such reflection. One cannot help but note the irony that the reflective and scholarly Edwards would become perhaps the greatest theologian of religious experience. Unfortunately, the revival of

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1734-1735 did not produce the lasting results that Edwards had hoped for. Quite possibly this was a factor in his concluding that even intense religious experiences, while not bad in themselves, were insufficient as marks of true salvation.

Controversy ensued quickly on the heels of the second awakening under Whitefield and was primarily ignited by the concern of some among the clergy with the external “enthusiasms” of some of those affected. Marsden details the growing split into those who became known as Old Lights, who were opposed to such outward displays of emotion, and those New Lights who cautiously accepted them. Edwards was firmly in the camp of the New Lights and, although he remained committed all his life to a Calvinistic framework, he felt that such displays of enthusiasm could be accommodated within it.

Having to leave Northampton

Edwards’ commitment to the awakening would eventually alienate him from many key religious and political leaders. To make matters worse, he came to the conclusion that his grandfather Stoddard’s willingness to allow the “unconverted” access to the communion table was both incorrect theologically and a great hindrance to revival. Marsden details this controversy skillfully and attempts to present a balanced view. What becomes clear is that even though it would mean losing the patronage of key powerbrokers Edwards tenaciously held to his convictions that he believed were the result of careful engagement with Scripture.

Eventually Edwards became so alienated from his Northampton congregation that he was forced to leave. Marsden outlines the

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circumstances of Edwards' departure in excruciating detail, including accusations that he was materialistic and greedy. It was a tragic end to what had been such a promising ministry. Many lesser men might have cracked under the pressure. Edwards, however, always situated his life's circumstances within the greater framework of God's sovereign purposes and it is this stalwart faith that carried him through these and the subsequent years in Stockbridge.

Marsden, to his credit, does not skirt the issue of Edward's own responsibility for what ensued at Northampton. He notes several "tragic flaws" that included being a perfectionist and attempting to hold the townspeople to a standard of spirituality that they were incapable of sustaining. "Part of Edwards' problem," he states, "was that he was building his nearly perfectionist hopes for the long-term spiritual strength of the town on the inherently unstable sands of revival."

A missionary at Stockbridge

The final chapter in Edwards' life would be spent mostly at Stockbridge, Massachusetts, on what was then the American frontier. It was here that he would do some of his most important writing (*Freedom of the Will, Concerning the End for Which God Created the World, The Nature of True Virtue, Original Sin*) while attempting to bring the gospel to the Mahican Indians. This was a tumultuous period marked by British ineptness to deal with the Indians fairly, struggles between Edwards and the Stoddard-Williams clan, and the constant threat of war.

Edwards displayed a genuine concern for the Indians at Stockbridge and was critical of the Williams family for, in his opinion,

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exploiting the mission for their own business interests. Marsden does not feel that Edwards was totally fair in his assessment of the Williams' motives and he chides historians who have unquestioningly taken Edwards' side on the issue. Nonetheless, it is clear that Edwards' focus was on the Indians' spiritual needs and he was critical of British policies that undermined the trust he was endeavoring to inculcate.

Ultimately, however, Marsden feels Edwards was naïve as to why the British policies toward the Indians were a failure. He states: "The sheer numbers of English-speaking "settlers meant that, whatever the announced intentions, almost all the British interest in the Indians was with the ultimate aim of displacing them."

Esther Edwards Burr

Edwards' family was also touched by several personal tragedies during these years, including the death of Edwards' son-in-law Aaron Burr, the husband of Esther Edwards. Esther was initially distraught, but this led to a spiritual breakthrough that helped her deal with the near-death of her son, Aaron Burr Jr. soon after. She stated in a letter to her father: "O how good is God," God had given her the child and God could "recall what he had lent" and she was willing "to offer up the child by faith."

Marsden also cites her recounting of one of her powerful encounters with God:

My soul carried out in such longing desires after this glorious state that I was forced to retire from the family to conceal my joy. When alone I was so transported and my soul carried out in such eager desires after perfection and the full

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enjoyment of God and to serve him uninterruptedly that I think my nature could not have borne much more—I think...I had that night a foretaste of Heaven.

I quote Esther at length to give a glimpse of the many touching details that Marsden includes in the book and which give the modern reader a sense of the period.

President at Princeton

Another good example of this is Marsden's inclusion of a part of Edwards' response when asked to take over the presidency of the College of New Jersey at Princeton after the death of Aaron Burr in 1757, who had been its President.

Edwards writes that he feels unqualified due to a "childish weakness and contemptibleness of speech, presence, and demeanor, with a disagreeable dullness and stiffness, much unfitting me for conversation, but more especially for the government of a college." Nevertheless, Edwards was finally convinced to take over the presidency at Princeton and looked forward to an opportunity to focus on completing what he considered to be his magnum opus *A History of the Work of Redemption*. In this work he promised to create a "body of divinity in an entire new method, being thrown into the form of an history, considering the affair of Christian theology, as the whole of it, in each part,...in reference to the great work of redemption by Jesus Christ."

It is amazing to think that after several centuries of Enlightenment triumphalism, theologians as diverse as Karl Barth and Emil Brunner would once again discover the essentiality of centering theology on "the great work of redemption by Jesus Christ." Unfor-

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tunately for us Edwards never got to complete his great work and so we remain intrigued by what he meant by an “entire new method.”

Soon after becoming president, Edwards, always the willing scientist, allowed himself and some of his family members to be inoculated for smallpox. This was a brave act at a time when such medicine was in its infancy and inoculations used live viruses. Interestingly enough inoculations were one of the few successful medical experiments that emerged from this period, in no small part due to the willingness of people like Edwards to undergo the risky procedure.

Unfortunately, after what seemed an initial success, Edwards fell ill and succumbed to the disease within a few weeks. In his final moments he called his daughter Lucy to his side and said:

Dear Lucy, it seems to me to be the will of God that I must shortly leave you; therefore give my kindest love to my dear wife, and tell her, that the uncommon union, which has so long subsisted between us, has been of such a nature, as I trust is spiritual, and therefore will continue forever: and I hope she will be supported under so great a trial, and submit cheerfully to the will of God. And as to my children, you are now like to be left fatherless, which I hope will be an inducement to you all to seek a Father, who will never fail you. And as to my funeral, I would have it be like Mr. Burr's; and any additional sum of money that might be expected to be laid out of the way, I would have it disposed of to charitable uses.

The Edwardsean legacy

Marsden summarizes his life of Edwards by outlining the enduring

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legacy of his life and thought. Among the most important of these are Edwards' ability "to carry the implications of widely held Christian assumptions to their logical conclusions, sometimes with unnerving results" as well as his view that reality is "essentially a universe of personal relationships."

He states further that: "Our culture's intellectual life is largely preoccupied with observing material and social forces that lead to change. Typically we think we have found the best explanation of an event when we can see some of the cultural or psychological dynamics that contribute to its development." But Edwards, "while not indifferent to such matters, would challenge us to see the universe as most essentially God's unceasing action."

Normally, I thoroughly enjoy the writing portion of doing a book review. In this case, however, it has been somewhat frustrating, ~~since it would~~ require a review four times the length of this one to relate the richness of this work. No space has been given to the relationship of Edwards with his wife Sarah, his relationship to Whitefield, which was affectionate but not as warm as Whitefield's relationship to Franklin, or many of the other important themes that Marsden explores in this fine work. I leave it to the reader to discover these for himself or herself.

In conclusion, has Edwards finally found his Boswell in Marsden? If one takes this to mean someone who is both a careful chronicler and also has the ability to situate a subject in their time and place then I think he has. More than anything he presents us with a contextualized, "flesh and blood" Edwards who speaks across the ages. Through Marden's careful historical research and his ability to weave this research into a compelling narrative, we can better understand the Edwards that *was* and then apply his ideas to the