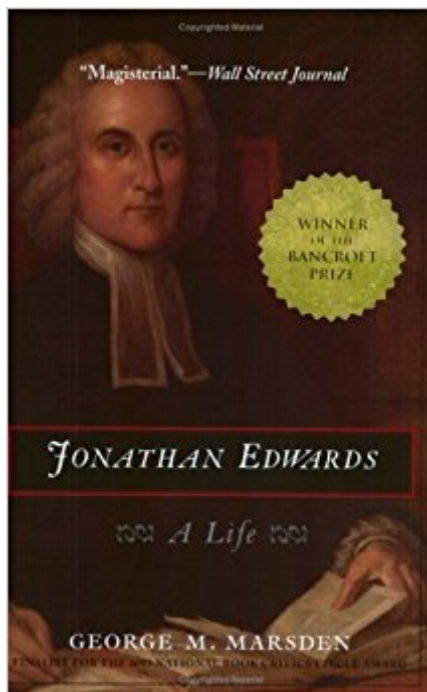


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Jonathan Edwards: A Life



Synopsis

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) is a towering figure in American history. A controversial theologian and the author of the famous sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, he ignited the momentous Great Awakening of the eighteenth century. In this definitive and long-awaited biography, Jonathan Edwards emerges as both a great American and a brilliant Christian. George Marsden evokes the world of colonial New England in which Edwards was reared—a frontier civilization at the center of a conflict between Native Americans, French Catholics, and English Protestants. Drawing on newly available sources, Marsden demonstrates how these cultural and religious battles shaped Edwards's life and thought. Marsden reveals Edwards as a complex thinker and human being who struggled to reconcile his Puritan heritage with the secular, modern world emerging out of the Enlightenment. In this, Edwards's life anticipated the deep contradictions of our American culture. Meticulously researched and beautifully composed, this biography offers a compelling portrait of an eminent American.

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Customer Reviews

Although probably best known for his fire-and-brimstone sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," Jonathan Edwards led a rich intellectual and spiritual life that took him far beyond the pulpit in his contributions to colonial America. In this first critical biography in over 60 years, Marsden, a professor of history at Notre Dame, places Edwards squarely within the context of his times. Drawing on newly available sources in the Yale edition of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, he

elegantly traces the details of Edwards's life, from his precocious childhood of observing God's handiwork in the natural world and his adolescent struggles with his faith to his powerful preaching in the revivals that dominated the Connecticut Valley in the First Great Awakening to his later modestly successful mission to the Indians. From his childhood, Edwards struggled to understand the sovereignty of God, and as he later developed his theology he placed the "religious affections" at the center of his notions about God's sovereignty. Marsden reminds us that Edwards struggled with his faith as he labored to write his treatises on the freedom of the will, the religious affections and the nature of true virtue. Marsden's elegant prose and vivid, vivacious storytelling brings Edwards to life. This magisterial and definitive biography reveals the complexities of Edwards's life and provides new appreciation for his commitment to fostering religious sensibilities in the increasingly secular world of his time. This is a beautifully written book about one of America's most important thinkers. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In the first full critical biography of Edwards in 60 years, a distinguished Notre Dame scholar humanizes America's greatest colonial clergyman, a man highly esteemed in his own time but since singled out for decades of abuse by Puritan-bashers. To be sure, Edwards' brimstone pulpit rhetoric (most famously deployed in his 1741 sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God") offends modern sensibilities. But Marsden--drawing heavily on recent scholarship--restores Edwards to an eighteenth-century New England where most shared his doctrines, though few could rival him in the power with which he preached them. Exceptional insight shines through a felicitous style as Marsden recounts how Edwards acquired that power, the intellectual rigor of his Yale studies gradually lending force to his intense spiritual vision. His rare gifts enabled Edwards to kindle the Great Awakening, emblazoning his name on the pages of American history. But in narrating Edwards' luminous achievements, Marsden also scrutinizes the periods of deep personal depression and probes the dark drama of jealousy that cost him his position of ecclesiastical prominence. The man who emerges from this tangle of triumph and travail defies the easy stereotypes of the hellfire preacher: tender in his pastoral care, passionate in his conjugal loyalty, joyous in his celebration of divine love, unintentionally democratic in his New Light theology. Neither alabaster saint nor cardboard hypocrite, the Edwards Marsden delivers will fascinate serious students of American culture and history. Bryce ChristensenCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Mr. Marsden has provided us with an exhilaratingly honest look at Jonathan Edwards. For many years I thought I'd read the best recent biography of Edwards in Iain Murray's *Life of Jonathan Edwards*. Though Mr. Murray's work is good, Mr. Marsden's is just more honest: a warts-and-all (there aren't many) look at Edwards that lets us admire him all the more because Marsden doesn't give in to the temptation toward hagiography. The book builds. Edwards' end is even better than his beginning. Fired from Northampton, moving to the Indian settlement of Stockbridge, you might assume Stockbridge an idyll after the bitter pains at the end in Northampton, but no. Edwards went from frying pan into the fire. All the human elements of Northampton are present in Stockbridge, only with the frisson of naked vs. cloaked scheming and real, flesh-and-blood danger. It's fascinating to learn how Edwards adapted his preaching to a native American audience. Marsden has done the Church a service with this book. A discriminating, discerning masterpiece of a biography. I especially love Marsden's appreciation of the imminence of death in Edward's thought and the reality of 18th century frontier life. The story of Edwards sending his son to help in the Indian mission outpost in Oneida, New York, at the age of 10 (!) during a time of great danger during the Indian wars is worth the price of the book alone.

Jonathan Edwards is one of the most influential and remarkable figures in the history of Christianity. In terms of theological influence, none since Calvin had shaped the thought of evangelicals the way Edwards did. The works he published has carried on the tradition of Calvinism and has especially contributed to the Christian Hedonism of John Piper, Sam Storms, and others. His corpus of theological works is worthy of consideration for any serious theology student. Edwards was the premier theologian of the 18th century and there has yet to be a theologian to surpass his greatness since. However, Jonathan Edwards the theologian is only one title that only describes one aspect of his being. Jonathan Edwards was also a devoted husband, father, and missionary. His supreme love for God flowed over into every other aspect of his life. Because of his influence and example as theologian, husband, father, and more, Jonathan Edwards is worthy of studying his works and his life and if one is found without the other in a biography, the reader will come away disappointed. In fact, even approaching the authorship of a biography of a man like Edwards is an enormous task. What Marsden does in this biography of Edwards is he shows us Jonathan Edwards, the man. We see both his life and his theological works, and how the latter fits into the former. For such a polarizing and influential figure, Marsden remarkably *“gets him.”* This is why this biography must be considered the primary biography on Jonathan Edwards and can already be considered a classic. Summary Marsden accomplishes the goal of painting an accurate

and compelling picture of Edwards by examining the complete journey of his life. Marsden provides a holistic understanding of Edwards's thought and personal struggles.

Edwards's teachings are brought out within the context of his life. What Marsden does throughout all thirty chapters is trace the life, ministry, thinking, and theology of Jonathan Edwards through various joys and struggles. Whether it is detailing taking over as pastor of Solomon Stoddard's church, or describing the painful ousting of Edwards from the same post, Marsden honestly portrays Edwards as a man who adored the triune God and faced everything in his life with utter confidence in him. Marsden presents Edwards's life in what seems to be three different sections. First, Marsden examines the childhood of Edwards. Here Marsden discusses his lineage by giving some background to his parents.

Edwards's mind is portrayed in this section in his pre-Christian state.

Edwards's conversion is described as happening over a period of time and not in an instantaneous moment. Edwards understood his conversion as he slowly grew spiritually. In the second section, Marsden chronicles a time of growth, reflection, and personal suffering for Edwards and his family when they were in Northampton. During this time, Marsden details

Edwards's relationship with David Brainerd as well as Edwards's marriage to Sarah and the birth of his seven children. This section also gave space to the First Great Awakening where revivals hit America. Marsden discusses Edwards's role in the spiritual explosion in Protestantism in America. It is here that Marsden demonstrates his candor and honesty when it comes to Edwards. He writes that Edwards probably overstated the extent of the revivals that happened in Northampton. Nevertheless, Edwards was a primary figure in the Great Awakening. In the third and final section, Marsden chronicles the latter years of

Edwards's life. Edwards goes from being a pastor to a missionary to Native Americans and then finally he takes the position of President of Princeton before his death. Marsden focuses on Edwards writing in this section and after a thorough look at Edwards's life, his writings can be more accurately understood. One thing that is particularly helpful is the correct context that we are taken into. Edwards considered himself to be a citizen of Great Britain and was politically "pre-Revolutionary" (1). Edwards grew up in the colonial time of the New World. It was during this time that the First Great Awakening was prepped. As it was, Edwards viewed this arrival of revival as being a direct work of a sovereign God. From the initial overview of Edwards's life to the summation of the legacy he left behind, Marsden carefully probes the history in such detail that this biography can be simultaneously viewed as a weighty history book. Marsden's dwelling on the historical context gives great

reliability and better understandability to the life and ministry of Edwards. To ignore the history of the time of Edwards is to miss the major influences on Edwards's mind and ministry. Understanding any historical figure must be done so within the historical context in which he lived. Marsden takes readers into 18th century pre-Revolutionary America, which provides a much clearer portrait of Edwards. Critical Evaluation Marsden's biography on Edwards is the premier Edwards biography and it seems that there are a few reasons worth mentioning. Firstly, Marsden gives fair attention to the life of Edwards and the works of Edwards. One is not forsaken for the other. Marsden would break away from the biographical life and look at Edwards the author as he chronologically approached his writing in the course of his life. As Edwards's writing appeared in his life, so did Marsden bring it out. This is evidence of Marsden's unparalleled research. A second major strength of this work is its overall historical prowess. While most biographies do well with the immediate historical context, Marsden goes above and beyond by deeply bringing out all of the historical significance of Edwards's life and the time period in which he lived. A third strength is the unbiased tone and direction this biography takes. Biographies by nature are usually biased one way or another. Marsden accomplishes the goal he sets out in the preface to produce an unbiased portrait of Edwards (xvii, xviii). One example is Edwards's removal from his pastorate at Northampton. The way Marsden presents the details of the decision to remove Edwards, the reader is forced to draw his or her own conclusions as to whether his removal was just or not. By avoiding bias, Marsden stands in the backdrop and allows Edwards to speak for himself through his words, writings, and actions. Conclusion Jonathan Edwards: A Life is quite simply a masterpiece. There is no greater biography on this giant theologian. While this biography is self-admittedly not an exhaustive look at Edwards's life, Marsden leaves little to be desired. If one wants to know Edwards the man, pastor, and theologian, he or she must look no further than Marsden's work. Edwards is a figure who will always be talked about. This discussion has been greatly aided by the work of Marsden. This honest portrayal of a sinner redeemed by grace helps those looking back to Edwards not to idolize him, but actually learn from him— from his sins and from his devotion to the God he loved and adored.

Note: This book review was an assigned requirement for a History of Christianity course. Coinciding with the tercentenary of Johnathan Edwards's birth (1703), Marsden's A Life, marked part of a larger renaissance of academic interest on the eighteenth-century theologian. Coincidentally, a critical edition of his extensive literary output, was

then near completion at Yale. Scholarly reviews have in unison agreed upon the refined distinction of Marsden's work, vis-à-vis previous efforts. This is no insignificant critique, considering that such includes that of Ola Winslow's Pulitzer-winning volume from 1940. What sets the work apart is evident in Marsden's declared purpose; "My focus is primarily on understanding Edwards as a person, a public figure, and a thinker in his own time and place. Implicit in my presentation is my fascination with how Edwards fits or does not fit with the larger patterns of religion in American life." Essentially, Marsden wishes "to make Edwards intelligible to widely diverse audiences by first attempting to depict him in his own time and in his own terms". In order to accomplish this, Marsden labors in depicting the socio-economic and religious milieu of eighteenth-century New England as well as the familial aspects that inevitably shaped Edwards. Such a complex task required significant primary data and academic reviewers agree; one of the great strengths of the book stems from Marsden's ability to draw on many disparate sources in order to construct the completed mosaic. No doubt, access to the fruits of the labor at Yale, uncovering much of what was unavailable prior to, enrich Marsden's work and at 600 plus pages, mark a significant contribution. Among the glowing academic reviews, noted shortcomings, if they are to be classified, would undoubtedly fall in the category of "minor quibbles". Personal instances of disagreement amount to similar nit-pickings. A Life is a pleasure to read. Marsden's ability to immerse the reader into eighteenth-century colonial America and relate it to Edwards' thought, invites one not to just simply know something of Edwards but to begin to understand one of America's greatest theological minds. Nevertheless, the most striking aspect throughout, is the humanity of Johnathan Edwards; he is the affectionate father and husband, the zealous revivalist, the doubting youngster, the estranged and aloof erudite, and perhaps to a flaw; the resolute man of piety and principle. Yet, his keen self-awareness of indwelling sinful tendencies towards pride and its cohort, self-righteousness, make him relatable to any reader that knows something of the Christian life. Ultimately, as Marsden aptly states; "Edwards was a man that spent his whole life preparing to die". Nonetheless, in doing so Edwards was a man that had learned how to live, as one, ultimately, whose affections were drawn profoundly by Christ. Thus his story resonates powerfully with all those who have sensed the same.

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