

# Book Review

---

*Jonathan Edwards: A Life*. By George M. Marsden. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. xxii, 615 pp. \$35.00, ISBN 0-300-09693-3.)

Mark Twain once said that Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) was a resplendent intellect gone mad. Twain, however, would be surprised to see a century later an impressive renaissance in Edwards studies. During the last few years alone many works have appeared dealing with Edwards's thought, such as Joseph A. Conforti, *Jonathan Edwards, Religious Tradition, and American Culture*, 1995; Michael J. McClymond, *Encounters with God: An Approach to the Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 1998; Gerald R. McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods: Christian Theology, Enlightenment Religion, and Non-Christian Faiths*, 2000; and Douglas A. Sweeney, *Nathaniel Taylor, New Haven Theology, and the Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, 2003, to name only a few. Yet, as recognized by all, what was crucially missing in this great renaissance was a new, modern biography of Edwards. The last one appeared over sixty years ago: Ola E. Winslow's Pulitzer Prizewinning *Jonathan Edwards, 1703–1758: A Biography*, 1940. But now, at last, a new biography of Edwards's life and times has seen the light of day.

George M. Marsden took upon himself an important mission of great proportions, something very few scholars would dare—writing Edwards's life based upon the "revolution in Edwards studies" (p. xvii) of the last decades and the new findings and insights developed by modern studies. The outcome is very impressive indeed, both in the wide range of new sources and materials used by Marsden and in his great ability as a historian and biographer. Never before has Edwards's life with all its complexities—moments of happiness and agonies, social tensions, political, ideological, and theological struggles—been given such careful examination and thorough scrutiny. And never has Edwards as "a real person" with all his "weakness and strengths" (p. 10) been so clearly depicted.

Following closely the long and complex details of Edwards's life and of his family, Marsden has depicted the New England theologian "in his own time and his own terms" (p. 2). He has illuminated Edwards's life and thought "in terms of his own eighteenth century outlook" (p. 503), keeping in view all the time "Edwards as a person, especially as a person in a family setting" (p. 10). Hence, this is not "a theological" or an "intellectual biography" (p. 6). Rather, Marsden defined his task primarily as that of "a cultural historian" (p. 502) whose goal is to understand "Edwards as a person, public figure, and a thinker in his own time and place" (p. 6) and thus, eventually, to close "the gap between the Edwards of the students of American culture and the Edwards of the theologians" (p. 502).

By providing a magisterial synthesis of Edwards's daily life and the development of his thought, Marsden's biography is now definitive, and it will remain so for decades to come. Students of American history, cultural historians, and historians of religion will find this book essential to any possible understanding of the most important American philosopher and theologian to write before the era of the Civil War and of American provincial society before it was engulfed in the events leading to the American Revolution.

Avihu Zakai  
*Hebrew University of Jerusalem*  
*Jerusalem, Israel*

---

Content in the History Cooperative database is intended for personal, noncommercial use only. You may not reproduce, publish, distribute, transmit, participate in the transfer or sale of, modify, create derivative works from, display, or in any way exploit the History Cooperative database in whole or in part without the written permission of the copyright holder.