



LIBRARY OF RELIGIOUS BIOGRAPHY

Edited by Mark A. Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, and Allen C. Guelzo

THE LIBRARY OF RELIGIOUS BIOGRAPHY is a series of original biographies on important religious figures throughout American and British history.

The authors are well-known historians, each a recognized authority in the period of religious history in which his or her subject lived and worked. Grounded in solid research of both published and archival sources, these volumes link the lives of their subjects — not always thought of as “religious” persons — to the broader cultural contexts and religious issues that surrounded them. This volume includes a bibliographical essay and an index to serve the needs of students, teachers, and researchers.

Marked by careful scholarship yet free of footnotes and academic jargon, the books in this series are well-written narratives meant to be *read* and *enjoyed* as well as studied.

LIBRARY OF RELIGIOUS BIOGRAPHY

William Ewart Gladstone: Faith and Politics in Victorian Britain
David Bebbington

Aimee Semple McPherson: Everybody's Sister • *Edith L. Blumhofer*
Her Heart Can See: The Life and Hymns of Fanny J. Crosby
Edith L. Blumhofer

Orestes A. Brownson: American Religious Weathervane
Patrick W. Carey

Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision • *Lawrence S. Cunningham*
Billy Sunday and the Redemption of Urban America • *Lyle W. Dorsett*
The Kingdom Is Always but Coming: A Life of Walter Rauschenbusch
Christopher H. Evans

Liberty of Conscience: Roger Williams in America • *Edwin S. Gaustad*
Sworn on the Altar of God: A Religious Biography of Thomas Jefferson
Edwin S. Gaustad

Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President • *Allen C. Guelzo*

Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism
Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe

Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief • *Roger Lundin*

A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards • *George M. Marsden*

The Puritan as Yankee: A Life of Horace Bushnell • *Robert Bruce Mullin*
Prophetess of Health: Ellen G. White and the Origins of the Seventh-day
Adventist Health Reform • *Ronald L. Numbers*

Blaise Pascal: Reasons of the Heart • *Marvin R. O'Connell*

Occupy Until I Come: A. T. Pierson and the Evangelization of the World
Dana L. Robert

God's Strange Work: William Miller and the End of the World
David L. Rowe

The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the
Rise of Modern Evangelicalism • *Harry S. Stout*

Assist Me to Proclaim: The Life and Hymns of Charles Wesley
John R. Tyson

A SHORT LIFE OF JONATHAN EDWARDS



George M. Marsden

WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN / CAMBRIDGE, U.K.

© 2008 George M. Marsden
All rights reserved

Published 2008 by
Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
2140 Oak Industrial Drive N.E., Grand Rapids, Michigan 49505 /
P.O. Box 163, Cambridge CB3 9PU U.K.

Printed in the United States of America

13 12 11 10 09 08 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Marsden, George M., 1939-
A short life of Jonathan Edwards / George M. Marsden.
p. cm. — (Library of religious biography)
ISBN 978-0-8028-0220-0 (pbk.: alk. paper)
1. Edwards, Jonathan, 1703-1758.
2. Congregational churches — United States —
Clergy — Biography. I. Title.

BX7260.E3M415 2008
285.8092 — dc22
[B]

2008012433

www.eerdmans.com

For
Anneke, Zach, Saskia,
Elena, and Vivian

Contents



<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
1. Edwards, Franklin, and Their Times	1
2. Wrestling with God	15
3. Transitions and Challenges	27
4. Awakening	40
5. An American Revolution	60
6. Drama on the Home Front	80
7. A World in Conflict	96
8. A Missionary, a Scholar, and a President	115
Conclusion: What Should We Learn from Edwards?	134
<i>Suggestions for Further Reading</i>	143
<i>Index</i>	146

Preface



My hope is that this brief biography will make Jonathan Edwards accessible to a wide variety of readers. Edwards is, by all accounts, one of the most remarkable figures in American history. More broadly, he is one of the most influential and respected Americans in the history of Christianity. Yet he is not as well known or understood as he should be. Most people who know anything about him recall only something about a school assignment of his sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” which has left them with a stereotyped impression at best. I hope that this book will provide the general reader with a view that is more balanced at the same time it is entertaining, informative, and short.

The origins of this book help explain its character. In 2003 I published *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* with Yale University Press on the occasion of the three-hundredth anniversary of Edwards’s birth. Prior to being asked to write that major biography, I had already told my friends at Eerdmans that some day I would write a life of Edwards for them. So with the cooperation of both publishers, I agreed that after I wrote the more definitive biography for Yale, I would write something shorter for Eerdmans. The happy outcome is that, having already published a much longer, closely documented work, this book could be kept brief without any scholarly apparatus. With the

PREFACE

exception of a few items noted in the acknowledgments, documentation for whatever is said here can be found in the larger work. Nevertheless, I need to emphasize that this book is not an abridgement of *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*. Rather it is a fresh retelling in which I have tried to include just what is most essential and most engaging. A few things, especially the recurrent theme of Edwards and Franklin, are new. My hope is that the result will appeal not only to the general reader but also to church study groups and to students in college courses in American history or American religious history. In the retelling, I have tried to keep the interests of each of these audiences in mind.

Acknowledgments



This book, like *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, is built on mountains of research and writing by others, of which I am a deeply grateful beneficiary. Most of the researchers and interpreters have been associated with the impressive Works of Jonathan Edwards project at Yale University. I am especially grateful to my friends and former students Kenneth Minkema and Harry S. Stout for their personal help as well as their recent leadership in that project, but there are too many other major contributors to mention here. More complete acknowledgments as well as documentation of their impressive contributions can be found in the larger volume. Edwards's own works, including his previously unpublished sermons, notebooks, and the like, can be found online under the Works of Jonathan Edwards. Some quotations new to this book from Benjamin Franklin are from well-known sources. In chapter four I was newly guided regarding Whitefield and Franklin by Frank Lambert, "*Pedlar in Divinity*": *George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals* (Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 97-99, 110-30, and regarding the awakenings generally by Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (Yale University Press, 2007). For the account of Edwards and the Suffield awakening in chapter five I have used new material from Douglas L. Winiarski, "Jonathan

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Edwards, Enthusiast? Radical Revivalism and the Great Awakening in the Connecticut Valley," *Church History* 74:4 (December 2005), pp. 683-739.

I am very appreciative to Thomas S. Kidd and Sarah Miglio for reading a draft of this manuscript and making many useful suggestions for improvements. I am also grateful to David Bratt for his very helpful work in editing. My thanks are due also to Andrew Baxter White for his expert work on the index. As always, my greatest debt is to Lucie. She is well named.

CHAPTER ONE

Edwards, Franklin, and Their Times



At the beginning of October 1723 two remarkable young New Englanders, unknown to each other, dearly hoped to settle in the city of New York. Had they both succeeded, the story of early America would include dramatic accounts of close interactions and conflicts between the two most renowned colonial-born figures of the era. New York City, a town of less than ten thousand, might not have been big enough for the both of them. As it turned out, the New York hopes of both Benjamin Franklin and Jonathan Edwards were quickly dashed, and the two probably never met.

Two Young Men in British America

Benjamin Franklin's New York quest is part of a familiar tale. Not quite eighteen, he broke his printer's apprenticeship with his brother James and secretly embarked on a sloop bound for New York. After delays due to contrary winds, he eventually arrived at the formerly Dutch seaport only to find that the sole printer in town, William Bradford, needed no help. Bradford nonetheless suggested that the young man try his luck in Philadelphia, where Bradford's son was a printer and looking for help. The rest is legendary.

A SHORT LIFE OF JONATHAN EDWARDS

During the same weeks that Franklin was visiting New York, Jonathan Edwards, having spent the summer at his parents' home in East Windsor, Connecticut, was holding out a last hope to return to the city where he had spent the previous fall and winter. Just turning twenty on October 5, 1723, he had already served as an interim pastor in that cosmopolitan town not far to the south. The young man's months in New York were among the sweetest in his memory, and he had formed some deep personal attachments. He was hoping he might be called back there as the regular pastor of the city's Presbyterian church. But the existence of such a position depended on first healing a schism between the English and Scottish factions of Presbyterians in the city. In October a delegation sent by Edwards's alma mater, Yale College, reported that the schism could not be healed. There was no opening for Edwards. He would have to wait four more years before finding a venue suited to his high personal and spiritual ambitions.

Franklin and Edwards, although about as different in both temperament and commitments as they could be, also had a lot in common. They were both products of the Calvinist culture of New England, and they both came of age in the eighteenth century, when it was an open question as to how the ways of the old Puritan experiment could survive in the self-confident modern world of the British Empire and the Enlightenment. Franklin and Edwards responded to this juxtaposition of eighteenth-century British modernity and New England's earlier Puritan heritage in almost opposite ways. They represented two sides of the same coin in the emerging American culture during the era before the American Revolution. Each grew to be one of the most influential figures in the British colonial culture of the mid-1700s. Each is better understood if we keep in mind that he lived in the same relatively small colonial world as the other and dealt with many of the same issues.

In the case of Jonathan Edwards it is especially helpful to be reminded that his life paralleled that of the *pre-revolutionary* Franklin.

Edwards, Franklin, and Their Times

Edwards died at age fifty-four in 1758, at a time when no one envisioned the coming break with Great Britain. Franklin lived until 1790, so we remember him as a revolutionary. If he also had died in his mid-fifties (and he did almost die while crossing the Atlantic in 1757), we would have a very different picture of him. He would still be remembered as a great wit, as British America's most famous scientist and inventor, especially for his electrical experiments, as an ingeniously practical civic leader, and as prophet of inter-colonial unity. Yet he would also have been a figure always loyal to the British Crown (he, in fact, did not give up that loyalty until the eve of the revolution), and as a slave owner (until 1781), considerably less progressive in some of his social views than the Franklin we usually remember.

Edwards and Franklin, though opposite in temperament, were both sons of pious New England Calvinist families at a time when their heritage faced a severe crisis. Each was precocious and, growing up in an era when print dominated the media, each read everything he could get his hands on. Each as an extraordinarily curious boy delved into the mysteries and rigors of the theological volumes in his father's library. In their teens each admired the witty writings of England's *Spectator*, edited by Addison and Steele. Each soon realized that the Calvinist theology that dominated New England's intellectual life was sadly out of date according to fashionable British standards. Edwards and Franklin each spent a lifetime dealing with the clash of these two worlds. Each worked vigorously to use what he saw as essential in his New England heritage to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing modern age.

If we think of the Puritans as one of America's first immigrant communities, then the opposing reactions of Edwards and Franklin to the dramatic transitions of their era becomes the prototype of a classic American story. A community founded on faith as much as on ethnicity divides within itself over how to adapt to the ways of a new era. In later times we would say these conflicts were about