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George M. Marsden. *Jonathan Edwards: A Life.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. xx + 615 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-09693-4.

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The Search for the Real Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)

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Before beginning the search for the real Jonathan Edwards a few remarks about the composition of this biography are in order. The scholarship and writing are first rate. George M. Marsden, Professor of History at Notre Dame, is truly a Christian scholar who respects both the Faith and the canons of historical research. His other books such as *The Soul of the American University* and *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* demonstrated his proven record of scholarly achievement. I am impressed with the maps of New England, with the chronology of Edwards's life and times, and with the appendices dealing with Edwards's genealogy, the fate of Edwards's sisters (much of Edwards's life was spent in the company of women), and information about Edwards's immediate family drawn from the family Bible. Let us now turn to the hunt for the real Edwards.

In 1949, Perry Miller published a biography that celebrated Edwards as America's first philosopher and the champion of the new thought of Newton and Locke. As with all of Miller's scholarship it was intellectually challenging. Edwards was a proto-modern whose love of nature and science tempered his Biblical faith. Seventeen years later Peter Gay dismissed Edwards as the last medieval mind in the Enlightenment. Gay's *A Loss of Mastery* placed Edwards among those souls who had not adjusted to the rise of modern paganism. In a sense, Gay's treatment was a scholarly update of the old claim that the Puritans were just reactionaries in all senses of the word.

Meanwhile a scholarly cottage industry regarding Edwards and Puritans had emerged, sparked by Miller's contributions. Slowly Yale is publishing a definitive set of Edwards's writings which should take well into this century. The edited volumes are splendid. Endless studies continue. Two recent examples are by Avihu Zakai, *Exile and Kingdom: History and Apocalypse in the Puritan Migration to America* (1992) and *Jonathan Edwards's Philosophy of History: The Reenchantment of the World in the Age of the Enlightenment* (2003). In fact this biography is dedicated to the army of Edwards scholars currently at work. Marsden's book therefore is a masterful synthesis.

The heir to a long line of Puritan divines, Edwards was destined to write and preach. Graduating from Yale where he absorbed both the Puritan orthodoxy and the new science of Locke and Newton, Edwards served a pulpit in New York City for a brief time. Returning to tutor and acquire an M.A. from Yale, Edwards joined his grandfather's church as an assistant pastor and in time he became the head pastor. Meanwhile he married Sarah with whom he had eleven children (nine girls, two boys). She was a real helpmate to him, managing a busy household and the domestic accounts while Edwards tended his flock and wrote prolifically. Edwards's theological work in the Protestant tradition, supported by St. Augustine's insights and the close study of Scripture, has secured his place in American religious history. And Marsden's analysis does justice to Edwards's theology.

Edwards was both a contributor to and a victim of the Great Awakening. His desire for an authentic religious experience manifested in a sanctified life contributed to the revival. The event had a complex impact on both American religious practices and politics. In Edwards's situation, the Great Awakening challenged the stability of the great chain of being image expressed as given authority. Among his other characteristics, Edwards was a mystic, drawn to the quest for an authentic experience. Dismissed from his church, he conducted an Indian mission on the Massachusetts frontier. Called to the presidency of Princeton College, Edwards died a few months later from a botched smallpox inoculation.

In looking for understanding of Edwards's life and work, Marsden and others have correctly pointed to St. Augustine's influence. At the same time, Edwards's

world was a three-way presence among Indians, French Catholics, and Protestants. The three elements were a potentially dangerous combination for terror. He sought the assurance of a loving God. His life was a "mixture of the exalted and the pathetic" (p. 369). In that context, Edwards's humanity is revealed in Marsden's text.

The fascinating sub-text and theme of this biography is the Turner thesis. Edwards lived on the edge of the British Empire and by the brilliance of his writings he moved toward the intellectual center. Moreover, the New World wilderness contributed to his Americanness. A child of the New World, he was committed to the Puritan faith of his forefathers. Haunted by the cultural narrowness of Calvinism, he sought the transcendent beauty of nature around him. In large measure he was successful in practicing a "worldly asceticism." At the same time he fought against modern individualism and mechanistic determinism, twin challenges to the Faith.

Marsden quotes II Corinthians 4:7, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us." Edwards would have understood and approved the citing of the text. For Edwards was an earthen vessel, but the excellency of his thought and life came from where? In this finely presented biography, Edwards stands forth both as an historical being and a Christian. If one wants to understand him and his world, this biography is the starting point.

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