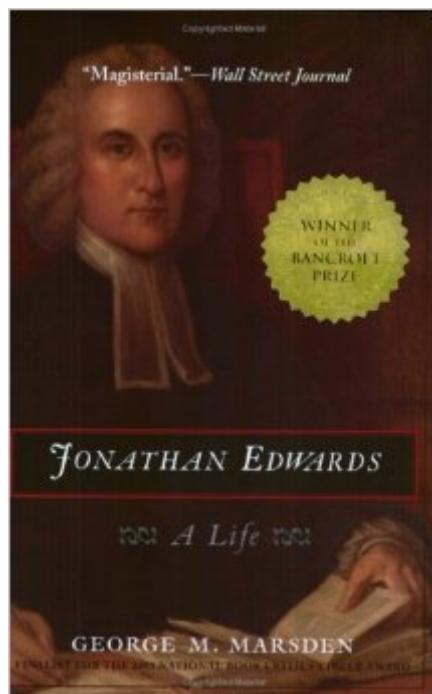


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Jonathan Edwards: A Life



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' 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' 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

Jonathan Edwards was probably the most impressive American intellectual of the 18th century. Not the best known, which would be Benjamin Franklin, or the most influential, which would be James Madison, but the individual with most impressive intellect and purely intellectual achievements. Edwards' reputation today suffers because he was on the losing side, so to speak, of a pair of particularly important developments in American life. In the Great Awakening that inaugurated

modern American religious life, Edwards was an outspoken proponent of revivalism, but the ultimate emergence of a more democratic and less organized form of Protestantism ran counter to his essentially conservative form of Calvinism. Edwards' conservative Calvinism led him also to oppose the rationalistic philosophy and theology of the Enlightenment that came to be such an important element of American life. One of the great virtues of this outstanding biography is that it gives readers a vivid and unanachronistic understanding of how this powerful intellect ended up reaffirming doctrines that were coming to be regarded as outmoded by so many of his contemporaries. Marsden shows Edwards' development as the son and grandson of learned Puritan clergymen, his immersion in the complicated theology of his branch of Calvinism, and his encounters with new intellectual currents emanating from Europe. Marsden does a particularly good job of connecting Edwards' thought with the interesting circumstances of his social position. Edwards was a child of the Puritan establishment of Colonial New England.

I came to realize not too long ago that, for a man of such importance, I knew shockingly little about Jonathan Edwards. I had some knowledge of the basic outline of his life and teachings, but knew little beyond that. Having heard so many positive reviews of George Marsden's recent biography of the man, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, I turned to this book to learn more about this giant of the faith. I was richly rewarded. And if ever I have felt inadequate to the task of summarizing a book in just a few short paragraphs, this is the time. Whether we are aware of it or not, most contemporary Calvinists are deeply indebted to Edwards. His defense of Calvinism in works such as *Freedom of the Will* have made a deep and lasting impact on Reformed theology. It did not take me long to realize that much of what I believe, much of what I have taught to others and much of what has been passed down to me originated with Edwards. A lifelong student of the Bible, he wrestled with the great doctrines of the Scriptures and expounded them for countless generations of other Christians. Truly his impact can hardly be exaggerated. I have sometimes found that biographies can become bogged down with examinations of the most minute details of a person's teaching. When I have been looking for the story of a person's life I have instead found a thorough examination of the person's thought and writing. I was pleased to see that, by and large, Marsden does a good job of incorporating Edwards' teaching into the story of his life, rather than examining them as separate entities. A possible exception to this is in three of the final four chapters where he focuses on Edwards' major theological treatises, but even here he summarizes them in a brief but satisfying way.

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