

Critical Review: George M. Marsden's *Jonathan Edwards: A Life (Yale, 2003)*

Introduction

Jonathan Edwards: A Life by George M. Marsden, published by Yale in 2003, is the latest in a comprehensive biographical look at the life and ministry of Jonathan Edwards. Edwards, who perhaps preached, “what became to be [known as] American’s most famous sermon” is now seen by many as one of America’s greatest theologians.¹ In *A Life*, Marsden takes on the incredible task of presenting the life of a patriarch, preacher, theologian, philosopher, missionary, and prolific writer, in an almost overly objective manner, through what had to be one of the most exhaustive research projects to date on the study of Edwards’ life. Marsden’s compilation of previous biographical works, primary and secondary sources, even letters and correspondence between Edwards, his family, friends, and opponents, which Edwards interacted with throughout his daily life, has made for a new benchmark in Edwardsean study. In a highly annotated biography, Marsden has not only completed an outstanding examination of the life of Jonathan Edwards but also a detailed look at late 17th to mid 18th century history, and all the complexities of a country passing through the Great Awakening about to be thrust into the American Revolution.

Brief Summary and Critique

Edwards was certainly a product of late 17th and early 18th century history. In “American political and social terms, he was pre-Revolutionary” and considered himself

¹ George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 1.

a citizen of Great Britain. Edwards grew up in the colonial time of the New World that provided the groundwork for the First Great Awakening, which Edwards came to view as God's way of intervening into the history of His people.² Marsden from the introductory overview of Edwards life to the to the summary of the Edwards legacy, systematically goes through this history in such detail that the reader will sometimes contemplate if this publication is a historical work or a biography. The historical time in which Edwards lived was certainly worthy of this extensive treatment and Marsden's exhaustive research and study is apparent throughout the text.

Through thirty chapters, Marsden presents Edwards' life in basically three different parts or sections. First, Marsden looks at Edwards' childhood or early years including his family lineage with backgrounds on both his parents and siblings. Marsden at times seems to speak almost from the mind of Edwards when recalling diary entries of prayer prior to Edwards' conversion to Christianity, (something that took place not in an instant but through a process of spiritual growth that took many years to develop) and into the excitement about his first preaching assignment in New York when he was 19.³

Next, Marsden continues his chronological method going through what would be a time of growth, reflection, and eventually hardship for Edwards and his family, the years in Northampton. Among many events over the years, this includes the time of David Brainerd and the births of several children. This was also the time of the Great Awakening and several revivals in Northampton and was a time of spiritual growth for much of the protestant world. As Marsden explains in various places in the text, even Edwards, at times, possibly overstated the full extent of the awakenings in Northampton

² Ibid, 259, 467.

³ Ibid, 59, 113.

but it was certainly another example of a larger historical event going on in the world, in which Edwards was able to materially participate.⁴ Third, Marsden looks at the elder, perhaps wiser Edwards of Stockbridge and his move from the prominent pastor of Northampton to a missionary to the Indians and an even more prolific writer.

One of the more daunting tasks of the biographer in a case like Edwards is the overwhelming volume of written material, published and non-published, most still in existence today. Edwards, the author, was another, possibly fourth part or theme that Marsden examines in detail, and runs throughout the text. Chronologically, as Edwards wrote and published, Marsden would break away from the biographical life and look at Edwards the author. He took an in depth look at the more important publications from Edwards, providing an essay summary of each with smaller discussions about his lesser known works and notebooks. A difficult task all the prior biographers of Edwards had to address and not something that could be overlooked when it came to his life.

Examination and Conclusion

In what is sure to be a classic biography on Jonathan Edwards, Marsden presents what has to be one of the most researched and historical biographies of an extremely complex individual. Even with a work that seems to be as exhaustive as *A Life* appears, Marsden had to choose a direction and inevitably had to also choose what to leave out, many times it was details other biographers have previously captured. Marsden himself notes in the preface that this biography is limited in scope and the attempt is made to take

⁴ Throughout the revivals, the first Great Awakening, and years afterwards Edwards was constantly battling between excesses and genuine awakenings. He often took the cautious middle ground between Chauncy, who was anti-awakening and Whitefield's view, though Edwards was always pro-spiritual-awakening, see also Marsden, 267, 284-285.

an objective look at Edwards where many in the past have had a strong bias for or against Edwards.⁵ Marsden achieves this un-bias view in such that he leaves the reader to reach his or her own conclusions on such matters like Edwards removal from Northampton. As extensive as his trials in Northampton came to be, no moral conclusion was reached in the text and the reader is transitioned into Stockbridge.

In *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, Marsden presents Edwards from a historical point of view, but in no way completes an exhaustive look at Edwards' life. As much as Edwards wrote in his notebooks for future generations to study, little seems to be known about his personal life. To fully know Edwards' life today one must examine him in the way Marsden's research suggests. It might be all but impossible to take a life as rich as Jonathan Edwards' and present it in one comprehensive volume, but Marsden does this to the extent that it is possible and leaves us with a unique look into the life a 17th to 18th century Puritan pastor.

⁵ Ibid, xvii, xviii