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978-0-521-61805-2 - The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards

Edited by Stephen J. Stein

Excerpt

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Introduction

STEPHEN J. STEIN

Jonathan Edwards (1703–58) is, indisputably, a significant figure in American history. He emerged on the religious landscape of New England in the opening half of the eighteenth century, but soon achieved an international reputation. Edwards's description of religious revivals and his defense of evangelical Protestantism vaulted him into the public arena at home and abroad. Though his life was cut short prematurely a few months after becoming the president of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University), his publications and his personal influence on a subsequent generation of religious leaders assured that his theological legacy would continue after his death.

The impact of Edwards's ideas expanded with the passage of time. In the eighteenth century, disciples and members of his extended family, including Samuel Hopkins, Jonathan Edwards, Jr., and Timothy Dwight, were instrumental in the articulation of an Edwardsean theology. The nineteenth century saw the consolidation and expansion of that tradition within evangelical Protestantism. The image of Edwards as a powerful preacher and a sophisticated apologist for traditional Christianity also attracted literary and cultural reflection by authors as diverse as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Oliver Wendell Holmes. Those same years witnessed the publication of collected editions of Edwards's *Works* as well as the frequent republication of his individual titles, including, most notably, *The Life of David Brainerd*. Biographies of Edwards also abounded, some laudatory and uncritical, others adopting partisan and critical viewpoints. During the first half of the twentieth century, favorable reflections on Edwards were published by such distinguished thinkers as William James and Josiah Royce at the same time that negative judgments were recorded by George Santayana and Clarence Darrow.

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a surge of scholarly interest in Edwards, triggered, in part, by the publication of contrasting biographies by Ola Elizabeth Winslow and Perry Miller.¹ Winslow's work won the Pulitzer Prize; Miller's set off a wave of sophisticated academic

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scholarship. Miller was also instrumental in launching the publication of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* begun in 1957 by Yale University Press. That undertaking set out to make available the full range of Edwards's public and private writings in a critical scholarly edition. To date, the Yale Edition has published twenty-four volumes.²

The year 2003 marked the tercentenary of Edwards's birth. Numerous gatherings and professional meetings focused on that anniversary. Scholarly conferences took place at such diverse locations as Princeton Theological Seminary, Calvin College, and the Library of Congress. Publications on Edwards abounded in that year. Notre Dame historian George M. Marsden, in a prize-winning biography, declared Edwards "the most acute early American philosopher and the most brilliant of all American theologians."³ Avihu Zakai, an historian at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, noted that Edwards "is no less celebrated as a prominent philosopher, ethicist, and moralist."⁴ E. Brooks Holifield, an historian of Christian thought at Emory University, asserted that "no other theologian in America" was equal to Edwards "in intellectual depth."⁵ Cultural historian Richard Wightman Fox observed that Edwards "influenced believers on both sides of the Atlantic."⁶

Edwards rose to prominence in his own day for more than just his theological accomplishments. Family was another reason that he gained attention and public acclaim. Edwards's father, Timothy, was the minister of the Congregational church in East Windsor, Connecticut. Jonathan was the only son in a family of eleven children – one therefore, in his parents' eyes, virtually destined for the cloth. His mother, Esther, was the daughter of Solomon Stoddard, a prominent and powerful minister in Northampton, Massachusetts. He was also related to the Williams clan that included several prominent ministers in the Connecticut River Valley. These family connections virtually guaranteed Edwards a measure of visibility and vocational opportunities that situated him well for rising professional and personal prominence. Ultimately, he succeeded his grandfather Stoddard and took over the pulpit in Northampton. From that noteworthy location, for more than two decades he exercised an expanding sphere of influence.

Edwards was himself a successful preacher and revivalist. His congregation in Northampton, Massachusetts, and other congregations throughout New England were at times deeply moved by his preaching. Edwards's accounts of local religious awakenings and his engagement with other influential revivalists, including the English itinerant preacher George Whitefield, gave him a prominence that attracted both contemporary commentary and the attention of later historians. The revival that Edwards led in his congregation in 1734–5, for example, assumed a kind of definitive quality for the larger American evangelical movement. His subsequent defense of the

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widespread awakenings in later years confirmed his pivotal role in the emerging evangelical movement.

Edwards enjoyed a regional reputation as a successful preacher. That reputation grew with the publication of a few of his sermons during his lifetime and then even more with the later appearance of collected editions of his writings. Some of his sermons were deeply theological, almost metaphysical; others were graphically and emotionally disturbing. Sometimes his sermons formed the core of subsequent major publications. The medium of the spoken word was one of the most obvious ways that Edwards achieved high reputation during his lifetime and in subsequent generations. His most famous (or infamous) sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, has achieved a degree of notoriety in the field of American literature almost without precedent for a piece of religious literature.⁷ Anthologized extensively, the sermon evokes reflections on human contingency in the face of a demanding and wrathful God. The image of an offended God holding the sinner over the open fiery pit of hell, as one might hold a spider by a thin thread, suggests the rhetorical power of Edwards the preacher and, even more, his willingness to employ rhetoric for religious ends.

The image of Edwards as a terror-evoking preacher contrasts sharply with another element of his reputation that emerged, especially during the last decade of his life. Theological and philosophical insight and precision came to mark the major treatises published during his lifetime and posthumously. *Religious Affections*, for example, defined and distinguished signs of “gracious affections” or authentic Christianity from signs or evidences that were not proof of true spiritual religion. *An Humble Attempt* employed an apocalyptic argument in support of an international proposal for united prayer on behalf of the advancement of the kingdom of God. *An Humble Inquiry* articulated and defended controversial, alternative, and restrictive conditions for admitting persons to the Lord’s Supper. *Freedom of the Will* engaged and contributed to contemporary philosophical discourse centering on the analysis of volition, causation, determinism, and moral necessity. *Original Sin* reaffirmed and clarified a traditional judgment on human depravity and its universal transmission in the face of and in opposition to the Enlightenment’s increasingly successful assault on that dogma. *The Nature of True Virtue* abstracted and elevated virtuous love, defined as benevolence or consent to “Being in general” or God, above love to “particular beings” or the neighbor. *The End of Creation* asserted and reinforced the centrality of God and the communication of God’s glory as the highest purpose informing the creation of the universe.

Side by side with the theological and the metaphysical – and not unrelated in Edwards’s mind – is striking evidence of his pastoral preoccupation

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throughout his professional life. His fixation on the experience of God's grace in the Christian's life led to both occasional and systematic reflection on the life stages and states of mind characteristic of "visible saints," that is, persons who experienced God's grace in their lives and struggled to reflect the divine presence in their daily activities. At times Edwards held up notable Christian examples and models for others to emulate. Abigail Hutchinson was a young woman in Northampton plagued by serious illness whose "lively sense of the excellency of Christ" maintained her resolve to testify to the glory of God in the face of her impending death. Phebe Bartlett was a four-year-old in the congregation whose devotional activities and spirit of charity were a remarkable example for the members of her family and others in Northampton. And then there was Sarah Pierpont Edwards, Jonathan's wife, who was often "swallowed up" for hours in contemplations of Christ's love and whose body sometimes sank under the weight of these religious experiences. She embodied, *par excellence*, the virtuous Christian life.

But Edwards's life was not without public setbacks. In the course of his ministry, he came into conflict with his own congregation over the issue of admission to the Lord's Supper. He also irritated and alienated members of that Northampton community by his heavy-handed pastoral style and insensitive communication with his parishioners. The conflict with his congregation, which reached a crisis stage in the late 1740s, ultimately resulted in his dismissal and, after some time, a move with his family to western Massachusetts where he assumed responsibility for a mission to the Mahican Indians centered at Stockbridge. On one level, therefore, as a pastor he was strikingly unsuccessful and defeated, turned out by the members of his own congregation. His defeat and rejection in Northampton were a massive personal and professional blow. They also have placed an enduring stamp upon his public image and led to a vastly different pastoral reputation from that which he had enjoyed during the height of the revivals in Northampton.

Edwards's dismissal by his congregation contrasts sharply with his theological and philosophical achievements. The difficulties in Northampton have also fueled a tradition of commentary that depicts Edwards as a stiff and difficult personality, a fact that he himself seems to have recognized. The reputation appears to be quite accurate. He was accustomed to spelling out the truths of God to others, but he was not given to easy acceptance of criticism. His controversies with other clergy and with theological and philosophical opponents reflect an unbending and self-confident perspective. Perhaps his profession as a minister contributed to the cultivation of that sense of righteous cause rather than self-doubt. With those who accepted his judgments, he felt a close relationship. Students, family, and friends formed a religious coalition that looked to him for leadership while he was alive. Their bond

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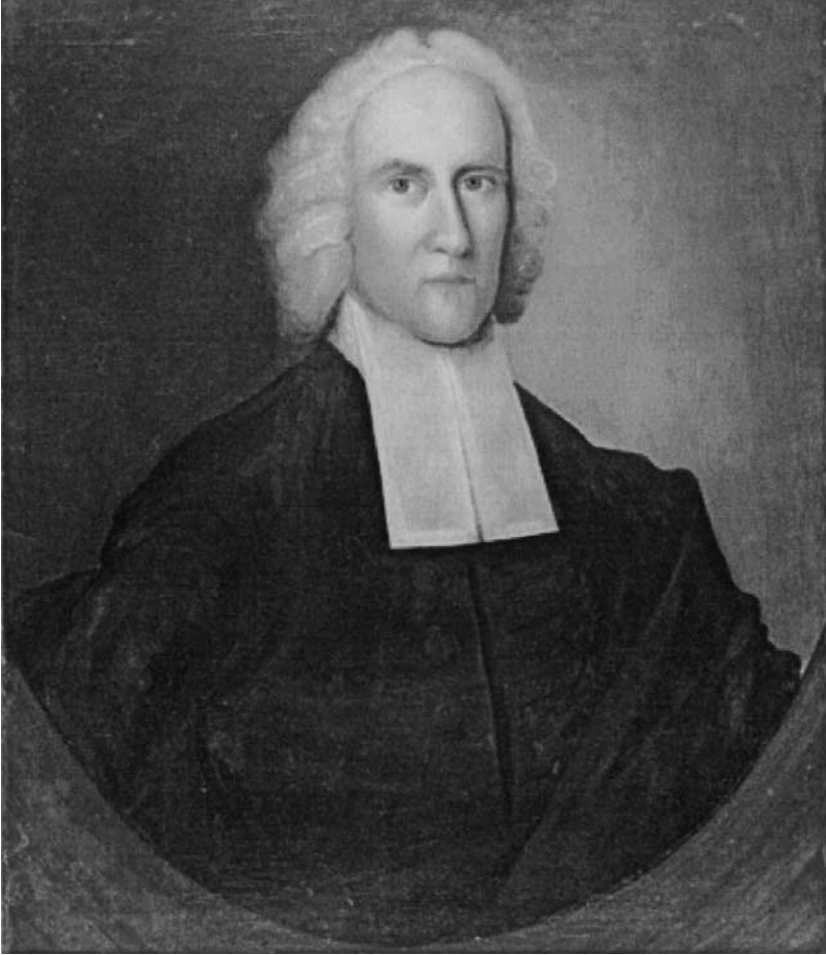
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1. Portrait of Jonathan Edwards by Joseph Badger, courtesy of Yale University Art Gallery, bequest of Eugene Phelps Edwards.

with him appears very strong. After his death, family members and disciples played a central role in the establishment and expansion of his reputation and legacy.

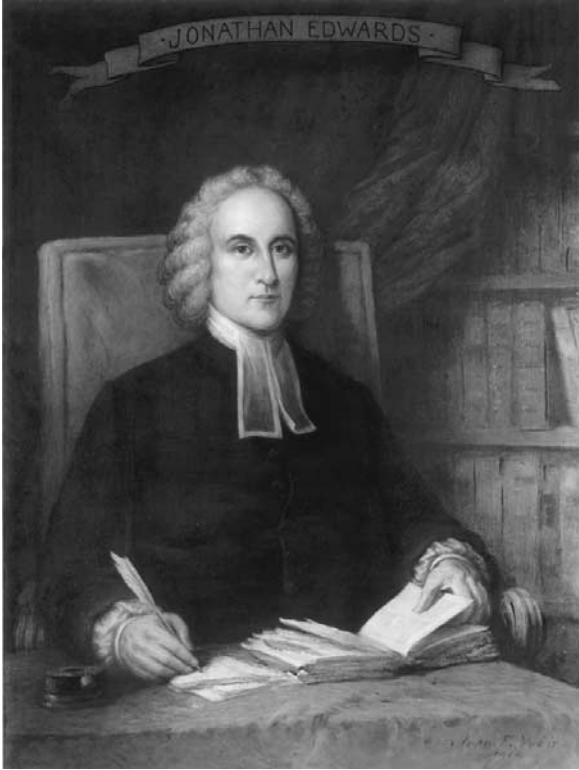
Given the two sides of Edwards's career, it is no surprise to discover that he has been the subject of conflicting artistic representations with the passage of time. Edwards's image in the widely disseminated Joseph Badger portrait painted in the mid-eighteenth century can be described as penetrating and searching (see Figure 1). Edwards's face captures all attention of the viewer. The powdered wig, the clerical bands, and the dark robe are

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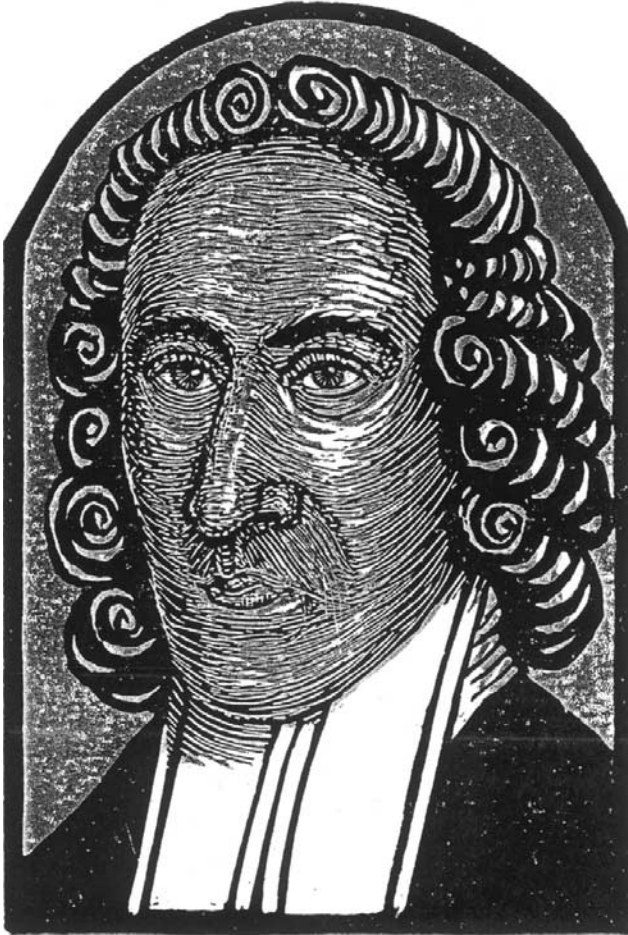
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2. Portrait of the Reverend Jonathan Edwards by John Ferguson Weir, Yale University Art Gallery, gift of Arthur Reed Kimball, B.A. 1877.

mere surrounding appointments. Prominent and central are Edwards's high forehead, his piercing eyes, and his firm mouth. Badger's portrait seems to capture the man well; it is the image of a resolute man of God. By contrast, the portrait by John F. Weir painted in 1910 places Edwards at a desk with an open book, a quill pen, and paper (see Figure 2). The same clerical appointments are present, but softened in severity, as is also the prominence of his forehead, eyes, and mouth. A bookshelf in the faint background adds ambiance of a working study to this portrayal of Edwards as a scholar. One can almost imagine Weir's Edwards, though deep in thought, allowing a smile to break forth across his face – an unthinkable prospect on Badger's portrait. A more recent representation, a woodcut by Lance Hidy, which serves as the frontispiece in an Edwards giftbook published in 1974, evokes a sense of both austerity and inflexibility. The rough texture of the carved facial lines dominates the image (see Figure 3). One can perhaps even imagine a sneer coming from the pursed lips of this Edwards. Diverse "portraits" of Edwards



3. Wood-engraving of Jonathan Edwards by Lance Hidy, the frontispiece in *Of Insects* by Jonathan Edwards, edited by Wallace E. Anderson (New Haven, CT: Jonathan Edwards College Press, 1974). Courtesy of Ruth M. Anderson.

have been present for more than two and a half centuries – witness the depictions of Oliver Wendell Holmes and Mark Twain – and have contributed to contrasting judgments of the man and his life.

One measure of Edwards's continuing prominence in the twenty-first century is his presence on the Internet. The number and variety of websites identified by entering "Jonathan Edwards" in a search engine is truly astonishing. (One must, of course, discount references to others by the same name, including the contemporary musician Jonathan Edwards.) Thousands of websites invite perusal. Some identify diverse scholarly resources. At the

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official website of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* at Yale University, for example, one can examine scholarly resources, gain access to online archives including materials never before available in printed form, and take part in a beta-testing program that provides feedback to the Yale Edition for its impending launch of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* online.⁸ This site represents the most sophisticated option available to those interested in Edwards. But it is hardly typical of the majority of the entries on the Web. On many sites, one can access the texts of treatises and other writings by Edwards, available in whole or in part. Most of these are drawn from nineteenth-century editions of his *Works*.⁹ Sermons by Edwards are present in text, audio, and video on the Web.¹⁰ Devotional readings selected from Edwards's writings appear in different formats. One release, entitled "Day by Day with Jonathan Edwards: Selected Readings," represents itself as [f]eaturing 365 thought-provoking reflections" that offer "a daily measure of penetrating insight and thoughtful encouragement."¹¹ Another site by John Piper banners its offering under the title "A God-Entranced Vision of All-Things," and subtitles the site, "Why We Need Jonathan Edwards Three Hundred Years Later."¹² If one desires a more material Edwards item, that too is available on the Web. "Reformer Ware" offers for sale the "Jonathan Edwards" coffee mug on the back of which reads, "The enjoyment of God is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied."¹³ And, of course, there are bloggers who write of their admiration for Edwards. One blog, entitled "Sojourner: Admiring Jonathan Edwards," dated August 19, 2005, was posted by a Baptist minister in "Bayou country," a person who regards Edwards as a "super-genius."¹⁴ It is intriguing to speculate about the kind of website that Edwards would have constructed had he been alive in the age of cyberspace.

This *Companion* seeks to open for you the reader the life and times of Edwards, his religious and professional achievements, and the full range of his reputation in diverse fields. This book includes work by three generations of distinguished scholars whose ground-breaking research has opened new insights on Edwards's background, life, accomplishments, and legacy. The chapters that follow are organized into three parts dealing with Edwards's life and context, his roles and achievements, and his legacy and reputation, respectively. The parts are not exclusive of one another. On the contrary, the three are mutually reinforcing of the ways in which the study of one or another particular aspect of Edwards leads inexorably into other dimensions of his experience. There is no chapter in this book that does not cast distinctive light on his life circumstances. Yet biography qua biography is the specific assignment of only one of the contributors. The other chapters are biographically complementary and expansive. That is also true with respect to the place of Edwards in American history. All of the chapters

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that follow provide perspective on the professional roles he played during his lifetime and on the subsequent ways that later Americans and persons outside America have viewed him and his accomplishments. However, no single viewpoint or critical perspective on Edwards controls these chapters. The range of judgments expressed by the contributors includes admiration as well as criticism, objective evaluation as well as subjective engagement, scholarly detachment as well as personal opinion. Frankly, it is impossible to read about Edwards and to engage the scholarship that he has elicited without coming to some conflicting judgments regarding him and his place in American history.

The goal of this *Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards* is to provide a wide-ranging interdisciplinary encounter with this significant American figure. In the chapters that follow, Edwards is situated in the exciting world of the eighteenth century. He is examined as a person, theologian, philosopher, preacher, pastor, exegete, missionary, husband, father, observer of nature, British colonial, and resident in both New England and the Atlantic community. He was living in a culture that was changing rapidly. His engagement with the forces of change is, in fact, one subtheme that ties together many of the chapters in this book. The Atlantic community of which he was a part was locked in international tension that broke into open warfare more than once during his lifetime. Political tension was also commonplace in eighteenth-century New England. Religious conflict in the American colonies followed traditional lines stretching back to the Reformation, but it was fueled in new ways by the growth and development of alternative religious movements. Philosophical advances linked to the celebration of reason exalted by the Enlightenment challenged longstanding assumptions about human nature and the world. Yet cultural and racial hierarchies continued to exercise dominance in most aspects of life. These diverse challenges posed by the eighteenth century are very evident in Edwards's life and work.

Edwards is remembered by most nonspecialists as the preacher of a potentially frightening (or disturbing) sermon that pictures the human plight in the face of a stern God. Scholars, by contrast, underscore the pivotal role that Edwards played in articulating an evangelical religious perspective, defending the revivals that were the agency of expansion for evangelicalism, and in establishing the religious framework for a tradition that would grow into one of America's most powerful religious and cultural forces.

Part I of this *Companion*, which focuses on Edwards's life and context, introduces readers to the complexity of Edwards's biography. George M. Marsden, an historian who perhaps has written the definitive modern biography

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of Edwards, underscores the importance of understanding the diverse contexts in which Edwards lived – one as wide as the transatlantic Western world and another as narrow as the confines of the town of Northampton, Massachusetts. Central to his life, according to Marsden, were a continuing preeminent concern with his own spirituality and a vocational attention to the religious well-being of those around him and those whom he served as a minister. Though a public figure much of his life, Edwards also had a very private sense of self that is revealed in his personal writings. Kenneth P. Minkema, who has written extensively about Edwards's public and private life, explores the documents Edwards wrote for himself and those in which he revealed himself to others. From these there emerges a complex person who has not always been evident in studies of Edwards. Minkema, for example, sheds light on Edwards's ambition, his sense of self, his interpersonal style, his ultimate commitments, as well as his attitudes toward women and slaves.

Edwards was, of course, a product of Puritan New England, and it is that religious and cultural context that David D. Hall, who has invested his career in the historical study of that region, addresses in his chapter. Longstanding controversial issues of central importance for the "Congregational Way" in New England, including the nature of the church and of the ministry, occupied Edwards and shaped the outcome of his career. In his chapter, Hall opens that historical context and the religious background in New England in a most revealing way. But Edwards was also engaged with the intellectual changes occurring in the larger Atlantic community, many of which were the product of the transforming forces associated with the Enlightenment. In his chapter, Avihu Zakai, who has written extensively about the ways that Western thought was refashioned by the Enlightenment, charts Edwards's encounter with modern thought and the manner in which he struggled to respond to the challenges it posed for his theological positions. Zakai evaluates Edwards's engagement with European thinkers who were writing in controversial ways about such topics as revelation, history, natural philosophy, and ethics. Collectively, the chapters in the opening part of this book set the stage for considering the particular ways that Edwards engaged the worlds of which he was a part.

Part II of this *Companion* focuses on the diverse professional roles Edwards filled during his lifetime and his achievements in those roles as well as his limitations with respect to those vocational functions. It may appear that focusing on one professional role at a time artificially divides his activities; in fact, however, all of the professional functions considered in Part II relate to one another in Edwards's experience.