By now, it would seem there is not much left to be said about George Marsden’s commanding biography of Jonathan Edwards. It has been awarded prizes too numerous to list, (but including the Bancroft, the Merle Curti, and the Grawemeyer). It has been praised as a “magisterial synthesis,” and the “best book ever written about America’s ... greatest theologian” (comments by Edmund Morgan and Sam Logan from dust jacket.) It is, indeed, a much-needed book. The first major biography of Edwards in over half a century, it is arguably the first biography ever to attempt to take the measure of the whole man. Marsden’s signal contribution is in creating a cogent, compelling synthesis of the rapidly expanding field of Edwards scholarship. In a tightly wrought narrative that clocks in at just over 500 pages, Marsden elegantly braids together this new scholarship with the raw materials that have only recently been made more widely accessible through the efforts of Harry Stout, Kenneth Minkema and the others at the Works of Jonathan Edwards at Yale who carry on the work started by Perry Miller. A look at the newly launched website of the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale (http://edwards.yale.edu/) quickly makes apparent the magnitude of Marsden’s achievement and why such a biography could only have been written recently. The website will soon make available all 26 volumes of the published Works of Jonathan Edwards series, representing about 25,000 manuscript pages of Edwards’s writings. An additional 25,000 pages will be added over the next few years.

Much has changed in Edwards scholarship since Perry Miller revived scholarly interest in the Puritans in general and Edwards in particular. Miller’s classic 1949 biography championed Edwards’s genius in mastering Newton and Locke and corralling the latest Enlightenment ideas to a defense of Calvinist doctrine. But even more than that, Miller echoed the Neo-Orthodox sensibilities of his age in praising Edwards for his frank reckoning with human sinfulness. Subsequent scholars have largely dismantled Miller’s mythical Edwards, although not without some regret. The scope and the quality of work generated by Miller’s heirs means we are unlikely ever to have such a compelling, and unified, Edwards again. Conrad Cherry began the deconstruction of Miller’s work by reclaiming the theological and not simply intellectual Edwards (The Theology of Jonathan Edwards, 1966); Subsequent work falls into four broad categories: focused studies of various aspects of Edwards’s theology by Roland DeLattre (Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards, 1968), Sang Lee (The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards, 1988), Allen Guelzo (Edwards on the Will, 1989), Gerald McDermott (One Holy and Happy Society, 1992), and Amy Plantinga Pauw (The Supreme Harmony of All: The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards, 2003); the transatlantic intellectual world – beyond Newton and Locke – to which Edwards was indebted, by Norman Fiering (Jonathan Edwards’ Moral Thought and its British Context, 1981), and more recently, Robert Brown (Jonathan Edwards and the Bible, 2002); social history approaches to Edwards’s life and theology by Patricia Tracy (Jonathan Edwards, Pastor, 1979), Ava Chamberlain (“The Immaculate Ovum: Jonathan Edwards and the Construction of the Female Body,” William and Mary Quarterly 62, April 2000), Kenneth Minkema (“Old Age and Religion in the Life and Writings of Jonathan Edwards,” Church History70, December 2001) and Rachel Wheeler, “‘Friends to your Souls’: Jonathan Edwards’ Indian Pastorate and the Doctrine of Original Sin,” Church History72 (December 2003); and finally, Edwards’s legacy, with

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works by Joseph Conforti (Jonathan Edwards, Religious Tradition and American Culture, 1995), Daniel Walker Howe (Making the American Self: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln, 1997), and Douglas Sweeney (Nathaniel William Taylor, New Haven Theology and the Legacy of Jonathan Edwards, 2003). The new Edwards is more prone to human foibles than Miller’s and the iron coherence of his thought is no longer taken for granted. Marsden incorporates much of this new research and struggles valiantly to put a grand Edwards back together again.

The acclaim Marsden’s book has garnered suggests that it is something more than a work of synthesis, and indeed it is. Although Marsden would reject the comparison, his project bears a certain likeness to Edwards’s masterpiece, A History of the Work of Redemption (except that Edwards was prevented from completing his imagined summa theological by a failed smallpox inoculation). In his biography of Edwards, Marsden brings together the big questions that have engaged him throughout his long and productive career as a scholar: the history of American evangelicalism, the secularization of the academy, and the legitimacy and viability of scholarship informed by Christian commitment.

Marsden’s biography of Edwards is part of his larger project to demonstrate that evangelicals are not, as Progressive historian Vernon Parrington famously labeled Edwards, simply anachronisms who held back the tide of reason and tolerance. Marsden finds this same sentiment at work in the marked preference American historians show for Benjamin Franklin, who “seems so congenially to represent tendencies that triumph in mainstream American life and politics.” Celebration of America’s Franklin, urges Marsden, should be tempered, “with a serious reckoning with its Edwarss” (p. 9). That Marsden is right on this last point is confirmed by the surprise of secularists on the day after the 2004 election when they found out that religion matters to many Americans.

But perhaps even more than the staunchly secular historians, Marsden’s book is addressed to other evangelicals. His biography is a jeremiad, a call to repentance and renewal, warning Christian scholars to beware they not be seduced by the gods of the Canaanites (in this case, devout secularism) into thinking Christian commitment has no place in scholarship. Marsden, like the Puritan ministers of the second and third generations, laments the fall from the godliness of the forefathers. As he tells us in the very first line of the book: “Edwards was extraordinary” (p. 1). This is both praise and a lament that no evangelical since has risen to the stature of Edwards. Marsden’s Edwards has his Haws but still he towers. He lived in the world without being entirely of it (more on this below). He stands as a man who faced modern thinking head on, mastered the latest in philosophy and physics, and applied these new tools of the Enlightenment to his defense of Calvinism. Modern evangelicals, Marsden hopes, will follow Edwards’s lead, engaging and employing the tools of modern historical scholarship and enlisting them to the larger Christian project, rather than shying away from critical scholarship and seeking refuge from academe in uncritical appropriations of Edwards.

Like Edwards, Marsden has his critics. At a time when the “culture wars” are once again topping headlines, Marsden’s book has made some historians uncomfortable with its openly confessional stance. (Allen Cuelzo, “America’s Theologian, The Christian Century, October 4, 2003, 30–31, 34–35; and Douglas Winiarski, “Seeking Synthesis in Edwards Scholarship,” William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd ser. LXI (January 2004), 135–151.) Indeed, Marsden shifts gears in the last four chapters, leaving behind the Edwards enmeshed in family affairs, local politics, and the weekly work of pastoring his congregation, and unveiling a heroic Edwards, almost blessedly alone at his desk, contemplating and defending his God against the evils of modernity. These chapters treat Edwards’ major works from the Stockbridge era, including Freedom of the Will, Original Sin, True Virtue and the unfinished History of the work of Redemption). This Edwards, the one who articulated “a post-Newtonian statement of classical Augustinian themes,” Marsden finds “breathtaking.” Marsden hopes his explication of the treatises will convey the core of Edwards’ (and Marsden’s) faith, to those “who are given eyes to see” will see “the beauty of the redemptive love of Christ as the true center of reality” and “will love God and all that he has created” (p. 505).
Marsden’s biography is an application of his agenda as laid out in his earlier work, The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship (1997), in which he argued (persuasively, to my mind) that Christian scholarship is no more or less inherently problematic than any other ideologically rooted scholarship such as feminist or Marxist scholarship. Marxist, feminist or Christian convictions may well motivate a historian, but if their ideological commitments not only shape the questions asked, but also drive the conclusions reached, then the work presumably will be quickly relegated to the dust heap. Marsden strives nobly to avoid charges of being ideologically driven, as is apparent in his efforts to capture Edwards in his full, and flawed, humanity. And so we see Edwards the prickly pastor, the slaveholder, and the committed believer in the social hierarchy. Similarly, Marsden strives mightily to avoid the charges leveled at Perry Miller of lifting Edwards out of his own time, and to that end Marsden regularly steps into the foreground of the narrative to remind the reader that Edwards’s world is not our own, that Edwards was very much a resident of the eighteenth century.

In the end there is a way in which Marsden’s Christian commitment becomes problematic. While a feminist or Marxist interpretation of Edwards would by definition read against the grain of the sources, Marsden reads largely with the grain. Marsden has largely accepted Edwards’ definition of the terms, his standards of what is important. And so, although Marsden has admirably incorporated much of the new social history into his biography, it serves primarily as colorful backdrop to the main story of Edwards’ Christian commitment. Marsden’s categories, questions and commitments remain those established by Edwards.

To be sure, Marsden’s intellectual kinship with Edwards in many respects enhances the narrative. Marsden shares with Edwards the language of evangelical Christianity, and this allows him to slip into Edwards’s voice even when not quoting directly. This rhetorical strategy seamlessly and unobtrusively conveys to the reader the profound sympathy of author for subject and eliminates the need for clunky intrusions: “as Edwards believed,” or “in Edwards’s view.” This device makes for a lively and engaging narrative, but it also functions sometimes to render the work’s interpretive claims invisible. Marsden is perhaps too successful in channeling Edwards, for he often does not distinguish clearly enough in detailing the various controversies in which Edwards was embroiled whether he presents his own estimation or Edwards’s. So, for example, the Northamptonites are “high spirited” and “cantankerous,” hold to “fashionable” views, and are lured by “the seductive tavern culture” (p. 296). Radical evangelicals are “over-zealous purveyors of a spiritual religion” who “ignored biblical rules” and thus promoted “atheism and infidelity” (p. 290). By contrast, Edwards displays “typical God-centeredness” (p. 289). And, in his farewell sermon to his Northampton congregation (in which he warned them that a congregation would meet its pastor on the day of judgment), Edwards “kept the tone compassionate” (p. 361). Arguably, in these passages, Marsden is attempting to convey Edwards’ view without necessarily endorsing it and the effect is to undo his efforts to keep Edwards firmly rooted in his full humanity and complex times.

The radical break in the narrative with the last four chapters heightens this feeling by loosing Edwards from his physical and social world. Anyone who has worked with his writings knows that this is exactly how Edwards would have it – he certainly did not see his position as husband, father, and missionary on the frontier as important shaping forces behind his philosophical treatises. Marsden has perhaps let Edwards off too easily in not attempting to link these realms. We might well gain new insights into Edwards’s great treatises if we refuse to follow his lead in strictly separating the social and the intellectual realms.

Whether or not one agrees with Marsden’s confessional stance, his book will stand for decades as the definitive biography of America’s most revered and most reviled theologian. It will be mined by future students of the life and thought of Edwards, providing as it does a distillation of the previous half-century of Edwards scholarship, with all of its accomplishments and its tensions.

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