
**JONATHAN
EDWARDS**

— AND THE —

**AMERICAN
EXPERIENCE**

EDITED BY

Nathan O. Hatch

Harry S. Stout

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THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

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Jonathan Edwards *and the* American Experience

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JONATHAN EDWARDS AND
THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

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1

Introduction

I

Judged over two centuries, Jonathan Edwards stands forth as one of America's great original minds, one of the very few individuals whose depiction of reality has known enduring attraction. Even in our own day, when the conclusions of "that terrible theologian" seem light years removed from modern sensibilities, the allure of Edwards continues. M. X. Lesser's recent bibliography of Edwards's studies reveals that in the last forty years the number of Ph.D. dissertations on Edwards has doubled every decade.¹

The reasons for this compelling attraction vary widely over time and individual persuasion: some have approached Edwards for religious inspiration, others to exorcize the ghosts of their Puritan forebears; some have come to appreciate true virtue, others to understand the reality of total evil; some have discovered a great anachronism, others a prophet of modernity. But whatever the attraction or personal point of view, 250 years of ongoing attention confirms Henry F. May's conclusion that "Edwards was somehow a great man, whether we admire him most as artist, psychologist, preacher, theologian, or philosopher."

To account for the recent surge in Edwards studies since World War II, one could point to many factors including postwar realism, the rise of neo-orthodoxy and, most importantly, the creative genius of Perry Miller. For three decades and more, Miller's *Jonathan Edwards* (1949) stood at the epicenter of Edwards research and stimulated two generations of scholars in graduate programs across the nation. Whatever the limitations of the book, and there is no lack of critics to point them out, *Jonathan Edwards* succeeded in bringing Edwards to the forefront of

scholarly attention in a variety of disciplines including religion, history, literature, and philosophy.

Miller's central achievement in *Jonathan Edwards*, like his achievements in Puritan studies generally, was to provide a broad framework of inquiry that raised innumerable topics for specialized study. From Miller, students of American culture inherited an image of Edwards as an isolated genius who stood so completely above and beyond his immediate culture that our own time is "barely catching up." Like the epic Western hero, Edwards emerges from Miller's pages as a lonely hero riding into town out of nowhere, exploding on the American scene in a brief but brilliant flurry of prophetic genius, and then riding off into the sunset alone. Miller's Edwards was so abstract and "modern" that it was practically impossible to fix him in any concrete historical or philosophical context. He remained, in Sydney Ahlstrom's apt phrase, a "perpetually misunderstood stranger."²

Scholarly works in the last two decades have moved beyond this internal and abstract focus, clarifying many dimensions of Edwards's multifaceted thought. Studies have assessed Edwards's role as pastor, his strategies in constructing sermons, the context of his moral thought, and the contours of his thinking in a number of areas: metaphysics, psychological theory, aesthetics, apocalyptic speculation, even his interest in Indian missions.³

Yet for all the quality and depth of these individual studies, they have not begun to add up to an integrated and synthetic understanding of Edwards and his contributions to American culture. No serious biography of Edwards has appeared since Miller's in 1949, and none is likely to appear in the near future for at least two simple reasons. First, contemporary writing about Edwards issues from the channels of several disciplines—historical, literary, theological, philosophical—approaches that ask different questions of the Edwards material and understand him in relation to quite different intellectual traditions. A second and related difficulty is the sheer volume and diversity of the Edwards manuscripts themselves: some fifteen hundred unpublished sermons as well as a staggering range of notes and exegetical writings, for example, over fourteen hundred entries (nine manuscript volumes) in the "Miscellanies"⁴ and over ten thousand separate entries in the "Blank Bible."⁵ Despite an unprecedented number of scholars plumbing facets of Edwards and volumes of unpublished manuscripts brought to light by the editors of the Yale edition of Edwards's *Works*, Edwards scholarship retains an elusive and segmented quality.

In the fall of 1984, a conference "Jonathan Edwards and the American

Experience" was convened at Wheaton College in an attempt to pull together some of these disparate strands and to make accessible the best of current thinking about this remarkable individual. This book of essays, like that occasion, addresses the subject of Edwards and the American experience in three broad senses. Three opening essays attempt to explain Edwards's enduring hold on the American imagination—from the homage of disciples who remembered him to the scorn of Americans in the Victorian age to the mixture of curiosity, bemusement, and admiration in our own. Tracing Edwards's always vivid reputation is, in some sense, to measure how firmly the "iron of Calvinism" has gripped America's soul.⁶ A second set of essays in this volume attempts to ground the development and elaboration of Edwards's thought in a specific cultural context. This new attention to context removes Edwards from the Olympian heights of lonely genius and focuses instead on contemporary influences, religious and philosophical. Such a perspective is not antithetical to earlier internal analyses of Edwards's thought so much as it completes the picture of Edwards by locating him in a concrete past, present, and future. Several of the essays in this second section are able to draw upon unpublished manuscripts in order to present a fuller intellectual portrait of the man. A third group of essays attempts to trace Edwards's specific legacy and influence in theology, psychological theory, philosophy, and literature. Taken altogether, the essays in this final section provide the most complete account to date of the relationship between Edwards and his immediate and self-conscious heirs, and of the extent to which Americans who came to claim the Edwards mantle did so for their own specific ends.

II

In the volume's opening essay, Henry F. May unveils the intense dialogue that generations of Americans have sustained with the figure of Jonathan Edwards. As one who himself has found Edwards at times interesting, repellent, attractive, and moving, May is able to address a range of issues that would have eluded most Edwards specialists. In his deft hands, the figure of Edwards becomes a superb index of how Americans have come to terms with those strands of stern Calvinism that are a central element in their historical identity. Refusing to patronize either Edwards or later generations who have interacted with him, May is able to explain plausibly and emphatically why Edwards has been taken so seriously by successive generations—from the veneration of the New Divinity, to the disdain

of Enlightenment figures such as John Adams, to the anguished rejection of Victorians such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Samuel Clemens. May assists the reader in understanding why, from the middle of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century, the tradition of “deciding against Edwards” seemed so logical and became so entrenched in American culture, premised as it was upon the Enlightenment and the spirit of democratic progress. Edwards, after all, stood firmly against the essential goodness of the common man, denying that most American of notions that what is popular is right. Only an era of war and holocaust has permitted Americans once again to gaze without flinching upon Edwards and his dark and foreboding portrait of reality. May’s essay also gives students of Edwards ample challenge to continue the work of fathoming this elusive figure. He also cautions that despite the fact the Edwards is a major figure in American religion and intellectual history he does not stand as the genuine ancestor of any of the major kinds of nineteenth and twentieth century American religion. In the end, May concludes that Edwards’s work seems virtually inexhaustible and impossible to pin down.

For all the controversy that Edwards’s work stirred up in his own day and beyond, his reputation has been that of a great man, worthy of study and emulation. This is the point of departure for David Levin’s meditation on historical character and reputation, which compares historical perceptions of Edwards with those of Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin. In contrast to Cotton Mather, whose reputation *was* permanently sullied by his critics, Edwards’s reputation as a brilliant thinker remained relatively untouched by friends and foes alike. Why is this so? It is not, Levin shows, because Edwards did not believe himself to be brilliant or deserving of worldly praise. In this sense the two (together with the other luminary of the age, Benjamin Franklin) had much in common. Nor was it because Edwards avoided the sort of self-pity that characterized much of Mather’s diary. In the Northampton Farewell sermon, Edwards displayed the same self-righteousness that characterized Mather’s attitudes toward his critics. Rather the difference lies in temperament. Edwards was not prone to display himself or expose his feelings to the same degree as Mather, and so avoided the harsh treatment that Mather received. By laying the characters of Edwards, Mather, and Franklin alongside one another, Levin points out the dangers of stereotyping characters and confusing reputation with character. In the process, he confirms how very much Edwards remained in the eighteenth century among a generation who sought to purify and justify their pride through “doing good.”

In his essay on Edwards as a "figure" in American history, Donald Weber traces the enduring hold of Edwards on the American imagination with reference to the filial conscience of Samuel Hopkins; the rhetorical reappropriation of Jonathan Edwards, Jr.; the anguished execration of Oliver Wendell Holmes; and the virtual identification of H. Richard Niebuhr. Especially interesting is Weber's treatment of Jonathan Edwards, Jr., who applied his father's thought on the providential meaning of America to the Revolution. From an examination of Edwards, Jr.'s sermons during the Revolutionary era, he shows how Edwards's followers drew on a "blurring" of republicanism, millennialism, and the New Birth that first appeared in Edwards's proclamations during the wars with France. One reason that Calvinism endured into the nineteenth century was its eager participation on the Revolution and in the creation of the American republic. Edwards's thought, it appears, was not only compatible with the theological needs of the new nation but with its social and political needs as well.

Weber's essay also includes a poignant discussion of H. Richard Niebuhr's appropriation of Jonathan Edwards. Niebuhr recognized in Edwards a spiritual ancestor whose voice resonated with divine sovereignty and the heart-quickenings strains of revival. In the 1930s Niebuhr found Edwards's realism the perfect antidote to a social reality of disillusionment and uncertainty on the one hand, and a misplaced confidence in human reason that had characterized Protestant Liberalism on the other. Niebuhr's fullest treatment of Edwards, in a speech in Northampton in 1958, reveals how strikingly Niebuhr continued to identify with Edwards. In assailing the complacency of Americans for not having ears to hear of depravity, corruption, unfreedom, and wrath, Niebuhr's message, "The Anachronism of Jonathan Edwards," became his own twentieth century version of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

III

In the twentieth century, scholars' treatment of Edwards has alternated between extremes. On the one hand, he has been viewed as a solitary figure. Early in the century, scholars found Edwards to be a brilliant, if flawed, anachronism, "a wreck on the remote sands of time." Perry Miller also championed Edwards as a lonely genius equally out of step with his own times but, in his rendering, a prophet of modernity. Yet at the same time Miller also came to view Edwards as a representative American, a genius whose vision came to embody the very meaning of

America. In Alan Heimert's monumental work *Religion and the American Mind from the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), Edwards comes to assume this dominant role throughout. Heimert suggests, for instance, that Edwards's work, *Thoughts on the Revival*, was "in a vital respect an American declaration of independence from Europe," and his *History of Redemption* "a scenario for American social and political history in the last half of the eighteenth century." For Heimert, Edwards is key to understanding the emergence of distinct "American" culture.⁷

The six essays comprising the second section of this book evidence the recent inclination of scholars to ground Edwards more firmly in the culture of which he was a part. Leading the way in this revision is Norman Fiering's widely acclaimed study, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context* (Chapel Hill, 1981). In that work, and the essay included in this collection, Fiering ignores questions of Edwards's modernity or uniqueness, and instead demonstrates how thoroughly Edwards's work was caught up in the traffic of conventional seventeenth and eighteenth century debates on the affections and the meaning of true virtue. Edwards's importance, Fiering argues, was less as an innovator than as a synthesizer; more than any of his American contemporaries, Edwards had the ability to draw from a broad range of reading and bring the insights from these works to bear on a defense of traditional Calvinist orthodoxy. He did not so much move forward in his philosophy (as Miller claimed in the most Kierkegaardian terms) as he moved backward in reattaching sentimentalist ethics to their Christian and biblical starting points. This great reversal placed him less in the company of Locke, Shaftsbury, or Hutcheson (though he studied them closely), than in the systematic achievements of Gottfried von Leibniz, Blaise Pascal, or Nicolas Malebranche fifty years earlier.

The attention to context that Fiering encouraged in his study of Edwards's philosophy has been picked up and applied to other aspects of Edwards's thought in essays by Wilson Kimnach, Stephen Stein, John Wilson, Harry Stout, and James Hoopes. All of these studies underscore Edwards's dependence on his past and confirm the limits of his modernity. In so doing, they rely on categories of evidence largely ignored in earlier Edwards scholarship, namely the unpublished manuscripts housed in the rich collections of Yale's Beinecke Library. Recognition of the importance of unpublished manuscripts for understanding Edwards's thought goes back to the pioneering work of Thomas Schafer on Edwards's "Miscellanies." But only recently have scholars extended Schaf-

er's search to include other areas of Edwards's writing that never appeared in print during his lifetime.

Of all the surviving Edwards manuscripts, the most numerous, and the most revealing of his innermost thought, are the sermons. Over fifteen hundred of these sermons survive in Beinecke Library, and other scattered archives. Many of these sermons are currently being prepared for publication in the Yale edition of Edwards's works under the general direction of Wilson Kimnach. When published, the collection of sermons could extend to as many as fifty volumes of printed text.

Naturally a collection as broad as Edwards's sermons is diffuse and includes enough topics to keep another generation of students active in the field. If there is any overarching theme to these sermons, Kimnach argues, it lies in Edwards's unwavering "pursuit of reality." This phrase, Kimnach explains, refers both to Edwards's method of sermon composition in the conventional Puritan formula of text-doctrine-application and to the central themes of his theology as they found expression in the pulpit. Although the sermon form was inherited, no other colonial minister equaled Edwards's achievement in confronting his listeners with the unseen principles that upheld life and moved history to its foreordained end. In each sermon he examines, Kimnach discovers a relentless obsession to push beyond mundane concerns and "deal with the ultimate reality of the Deity." This obsession helps to account for the "unity of effect" one finds in the Edwards sermons and in his thought generally. Informing Edwards's pursuit of reality at every level was his rooting in biblical texts. Edwards was, Kimnach demonstrates, a "textuary in an age of textuaries," and his pursuit of reality was bounded by the world of scripture narratives. Through thousands of pages of sermon manuscripts one discovers less an attention to theological novelty, than a "terrific intensity" to "re-establish the authority of the Christian vision and to refresh the language of orthodoxy."

In his essay on Jonathan Edwards and scriptural exegesis, Stephen Stein picks up the theme of Edwards's biblicism from the vantage point of his unpublished "Harmonies" of the Old and New Testaments, and the handwritten "Blank Bible" where Edwards jotted his commentaries on Bible passages. To establish Edwards's modernity, Miller tended to ignore the all-consuming hold that scriptural exegesis held on Edwards's thought, and because of this he missed the traditional world that Edwards occupied. Edwards's reliance upon the authority of Scripture placed him "squarely in the precritical camp" of exegesis. He read biblical narratives as literally and historically reliable. Instead of reconciling the

diverse worlds of the Old and New testaments through historical criticism of literary texts, Edwards resorted to the conventional exegetical tool of "typology," where both testaments came together in a preordained Christic unity orchestrated by God from the beginning of time. In contrast to Miller, who treated only Edwards's interest in natural typology, Stein emphasizes Edwards's interest in biblical typology and finds that the two were never of "coequal" importance in Edwards's thought. Biblical typology always enjoyed the last word and served as the point of departure for Edwards's exploration of natural imagery and metaphor.

An unpublished sermon series, "A History of the Work of Redemption," delivered by Edwards in 1739 and published posthumously, forms the basis for John Wilson's reexamination of Edwards's eschatology. On the basis of those sermons, Wilson critiques C. C. Goen's influential essay, "Jonathan Edwards: A New Departure in Eschatology," published in 1959. In that article Goen acknowledged the influence of Perry Miller and argued that Edwards was America's first "post-millennial" theologian, whose views of progress and the millennium anticipated nineteenth century Protestant millennialism. Such a view, Wilson demonstrates, is not confirmed by a reading of *History of Redemption*. In the first place, Edwards's views on the millennium were not new and could be found in the earlier work of New England Puritans and among Protestant theologians on the continent. Second, nineteenth century theologians were less influenced by Edwards in their thinking about history and progress than they were by the post-Edwardsian Enlightenment, which swept American seminaries after the Revolution. While nineteenth century American theologians rejected the secularism of the Enlightenment and its optimistic views of humankind, they adopted a propositional style of discourse that was foreign to Edwards and eighteenth century New England thought generally. In summarizing Edwards's sense of history and the millennium, Wilson finds that, like his philosophy and biblicism, he was a "pre-Enlightenment thinker whose philosophy of history grew out of the soil tilled so thoroughly in New England."

In "The Puritans and Edwards," Harry Stout focuses on one category of Edwards's unpublished sermons: the occasional or weekday sermons delivered on days of fasting and thanksgiving. None of these sermons was ever published in Edwards's lifetime, but they appear frequently in the corpus of his manuscript sermons, and supply invaluable guides to his thinking on the providential meaning of New England. Earlier scholars relying on printed sermons that made no reference to New England's corporate identity, argued that Edwards repudiated the "federal theology" of the Puritans that held forth promises of temporal rewards and

punishments to nations as well as individuals. Such a view, however, is more a reflection of biases in the publication of Edwards's sermons than an accurate reflection of his thought on the corporate meaning and mission of New England. When viewed as a whole, Edwards's occasional sermons reveal a preacher who adhered exactly to the old Puritan notions of New England as a "peculiar" people and a "city upon a hill," who would be blessed or cursed according to their keeping of the covenant. Instead of breaking with traditional themes of temporal rewards and corporate covenants, Edwards instinctively drew from them in times of great public trial and calamity. Occasional preaching, like philosophy, eschatology, and exegesis, reveal dimensions of Edwards that were far more Puritan and traditional in outlook than previously scholars ever allowed.

If Edwards's own words reveal him to be a product of his age, so also did the words of his contemporary critics. In "A Flood of Errors: Chauncy and Edwards in the Great Awakening," Amy S. Lang examines Charles Chauncy's famous critique of Edwards in terms of Old Light theories of language and authority. According to that theory, Edwards was far less akin to novel views on theology and the church, than he was a throwback to the "antinomian" views of Anne Hutchinson in the seventeenth century. In Chauncy's view, Edwards and Hutchinson were of a piece. Both erred by severing the connection between "sign and meaning" and, in the process, eroding the basis of authority in the church and the state. Just as Hutchinson spoke out of place and justified it by appeals to the Spirit, so also did Edwards threaten to make the relation between pastor and people a "sound without meaning." Language brought Hutchinson and Edwards together in Chauncy's thought and was so important that it furnished "the subtext of *Seasonable Thoughts* as well as its surface."

IV

If the image of Edwards is being revised in terms of past traditions and contemporary influences, the same is true of questions bearing on his legacy. Were there worthy successors to Edwards in nineteenth century Protestantism? Students of Miller tended to say no, and moved their histories of American thought and culture from the Calvinism of Puritanism and Edwards to transcendentalism and the American Renaissance. But, as the concluding five essays in this volume make clear, this sequence rests on a mistake. In fact, there were many talented, self-

proclaimed successors to Edwards, each drawing on the master in different ways for inspiration, and each carrying the Calvinist tradition into nineteenth century America. These successors, moreover, were not the half-witted, pedantic dullards that historians earlier portrayed, but a group of widely followed, engaging intellectuals who constituted a central, if neglected, tradition in American thought.

Of all Edwards's self-proclaimed successors, none enjoyed a more direct lineage than the "New Divinity" theologian-preachers who dominated western Massachusetts and Connecticut well into the nineteenth-century. Included in this group was his own son, Jonathan Edwards, Jr., and Samuel Hopkins and Joseph Bellamy, both of whom had studied divinity with Edwards in Northampton. In reconsidering the work and influence of the New Divinity preachers, William Breitenbach revises their image as narrow "hyper-Calvinist" who petrified Edwards's creative thought into a dead "moralism" and demonstrates how they applied Edwards's thought to American culture in creative ways. Instead of strangling Edwards's thought in a thicket of metaphysical speculation that left their hearers cold, the New Divinity "remained true to Edwards's principles" in every major category, and injected those principles with a life-sustaining vigor. In comparing New Divinity thought to Edwards's *Treatise on the Affections*, Breitenbach shows how both traditions represented a cautious blending of "piety and moralism," rather than one or the other. By so doing, the New Divinity was able to keep the tradition of revivalism alive, alongside the attention to systematic theology that had characterized American Calvinism since the seventeenth-century.

Of all Perry Miller's claims for Edwards's modernity, none was more far-reaching than his claim that Edwards was America's first modern psychologist. According to Miller, Edwards was so advanced over his contemporaries in explorations of the psyche that "it would have taken him about an hour's reading in William James, and two hours in Freud, to catch up completely." Such a view, James Hoopes argues, badly misses the mark and distorts the distance that separated Edwards from modern psychology. Modern psychology is premised on a disjunctive model of mind that ascribes separate and sometimes contradictory impulses to the conscious and unconscious. Edwards's "unitary" model of mind, on the other hand, allowed "no possibility of unconscious mental phenomena." Hoopes argues that the reason Edwards took such a monolithic view of the mind was his commitment to the seventeenth century "way of ideas" and especially Locke's view that "thought" and "consciousness" were synonymous. But Edwards went far beyond Locke in his commitment to

the "way of ideas" by denying that there was anything but ideas. Where Locke accepted the traditional view that the human soul is a substance, albeit a spiritual rather than material substance, Edwards held that the human soul was insubstantial and was constituted of nothing but ideas. This was the heart of his famous idealist metaphysics and also of his defense of Calvinist fundamentalism. But Edwards's self-proclaimed successors as defenders of Calvinism were unaware of his metaphysics and accepted the traditional distinction between soul and body, between spiritual and mental substance. Hoopes shows how they were consequently driven more or less against their will to abandon fundamental Calvinist tenets, thus unwittingly and ironically confirming Edwards's brilliant perception that Calvinism was basically irreconcilable with Locke's distinction between mind and body.

Of all the disciplines incorporating an Edwardsian heritage into their survey, none is more problematic than the history of American literature. Edwards, after all, wrote no fiction or poetry, yet he was, in Miller's terms, an "artist in ideas" whose use of language was novel and arresting. In assessing Edwards's heritage from a literary point of view, David Laurence discovers a Boston or Harvard bias in what Americans have come to accept as literature. If all texts composed in America was in some sense "literary," as Laurence believes they are, then Edwards's place in the American literary tradition is clear: "Edwards is not outside and below American literature . . . as secular students of the novel believed," nor is he "outside and above" American literature as Christian publicists believed. Rather, Laurence argues, "he is, simply, one American writer," whose use of language embodies "a certain literary-historical region" that is as equally and authentically "American" as Emerson, Hawthorne, or Melville. Instead of tracing lines of descent "from Edwards to Emerson," Laurence puts forward a concept of American literature as a series of "intellectual episodes" that share in common the quality of "alterity," of being "non-Europe."

Edwards's distinct mark on American philosophy is easier to chart. In his recent book *Churchmen and Philosophers: From Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey* (New Haven, 1985), Bruce Kuklick shows the continuities linking Edwards to the Congregationalist John Dewey. Such a lineage had been largely ignored by earlier studies that concentrated on Transcendentalism and Unitarianism, rather than Trinitarian Congregationalism. In his essay, "Jonathan Edwards and American Philosophy," Kuklick continues this line of inquiry with a critique of surveys of American thought that all but ignored the formative influence of the New Divinity

and the New Haven theology. Particularly grievous in these surveys, Kuklick asserts, is the omission of Yale's Nathaniel Taylor who, unlike Emerson or Channing, was "the most talented systematic thinker in America between Edwards and Dewey." Earlier studies of American philosophy, Kuklick concludes, are less a reflection of the evolution of American thought than they are a reflection of "Harvard's dominance of the academic world in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries." If there is a coherent philosophical tradition in nineteenth century America, it travels a line that largely bypasses Boston and stops instead at prominent stations in Princeton, New Haven, Hartford, New York, and Chicago.

Whatever strains of Edwardsian thought can be traced in American literature and philosophy, one finds the most direct legacy of Edwards among theologians in the century and a half after his death. In his survey "Jonathan Edwards and Nineteenth-century Theology," Mark Noll traces three major lines of Edwardsian descent, including the New Divinity, the "New Haven" theology emanating from Yale College, and the Presbyterian theology at Princeton Seminary. All of these traditions claimed Edwards as their progenitor and fought to retain his name in their theological speculations. In fact, Noll observes, each one of these traditions including important aspects of Edwards's thought, but none of them followed the master exactly. Nor could they. Those who were committed to sustaining Edwards's "spirit" of creative philosophical inquiry and relevance to the age had to adjust his theology to the new spirit of a republican culture. This can be seen most clearly in the New Haven theology. Conversely, those who were committed to retaining the exact content of Edwards's theology sacrificed an element of creativity and spontaneity that made Edwards's thought exciting as well as orthodox. This was especially true of the Princeton theologians. If Edwards did not survive intact in any one of these schools of thought, he did continue through the work of all three, and exerted a formative influence on nineteenth century theology.

Taken as a whole, the essays coming out of the Wheaton Conference reveal how far Edwards studies have travelled from the state Henry May described in his keynote address. By opening up Edwards to a larger American context replete with a formative Puritan past and a legitimate group of heirs, it is now possible to speak of Edwards and the American experience in terms that both recognize his greatness and, at the same time, locate that greatness in a history that moves, as Miller once said, "crablike" throughout the pages of American history from the Puritans to a broad spectrum of modern heirs.

Notes

1. M. X. Lesser, *Jonathan Edwards: A Reference Guide* (Boston, 1981), xli. In all, Lesser lists 1800 books, articles, and dissertations on Edwards from the eighteenth century to 1979.
2. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, 1972), 312.
3. Two essays by Donald Weber are excellent introductions to the current state of Edwards scholarship. See his review essay, "The Figure of Jonathan Edwards," *American Quarterly* 16 (1983), 157–60 and his "Perry Miller and the Rediscovery of Jonathan Edwards," the introduction to a new edition of the Miller biography (Amherst, Mass., 1981). Also excellent is Daniel B. Shea, "Jonathan Edwards: The First Two Hundred Years," *Journal of American Studies* 14 (1980), 181–197.
4. Wilson H. Kimnach, "The Literary Techniques of Jonathan Edwards," unpub. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1971, pp. 56–57.
5. See the essay by Stephen J. Stein (Chap. 7 of this volume).
6. See the discussion of Oliver Wendell Holmes in the essay by Henry F. May (chap. 2).
7. See Heimert, pp. 14, 98–99. The index of *Religion and the American Mind* shows that Heimert cited Edwards on at least 400 occasions.

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*Edwards and
the American Imagination*

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2

Jonathan Edwards and America

HENRY F. MAY

When I told a Berkeley friend that I had been asked to give a keynote speech for a conference on Jonathan Edwards, this friend, ever frank, asked the obvious question: "Why you? You don't know all that much about Edwards." He was of course quite right, I don't, and I realized this rather acutely when I saw the list of formidable Edwards experts who were going to be represented in this symposium. Then I thought, maybe that is *why* I am asked to do this. A keynote speech—a term borrowed from American politics—is not expected to be a profound scholarly inquiry. What is it supposed to do? It is supposed to help create an atmosphere of enthusiasm and unity, and perhaps to gloss over deep differences of opinion. Maybe this can't be done by people profoundly involved in passionate argument and can best be attempted by somebody distinctly on the periphery.

Aside from not knowing too much, I have one other qualification for this job. I have long found Edwards deeply interesting, sometime repellent, often attractive and moving. (And we all know the importance, in relation to real understanding, of lively affections.) When I first read as a graduate student that true virtue consists in the disinterested love of being in general, my immediate response was not "how clever, how well put" but rather "how right, how beautiful." Long years later, after teaching a semester run-through of the history of American religion, I once offered to teach an undergraduate seminar on any topic we had covered. I prepared myself to deal with the churches and Vietnam, or the churches and civil rights. Instead, I got the most requests for a seminar

on Edwards. Not very many requests of course—there were eight students. All had their special attitudes toward Edwards. At least three were part of the neo-evangelical movement that was flowering on the campuses in the wake of political movements of the sixties. (Incidentally, these were disappointed as they got to know Edwards better—he was not what they wanted him to be.) Of the others, one, the ablest, had a Catholic education, which meant—at that time—a solid grounding in philosophy and theology. At least one was an intelligent and articulate sceptic. We read most of the Edwards writing that was then generally accessible, and a lot of Edwards criticism from Oliver Wendell Holmes and Leslie Stephen through Parrington to—you guessed it—Perry Miller. We arrived at no consensus, and I think this was perhaps the course that I most enjoyed teaching at Berkeley.

More interesting than the question, “Why me?” is the question “Why you?” Why is it that Edwards has attracted not just a passing glance, but the devotion of years of hard work on the part of so many fine scholars? Is it because you believe him, love him, admire him? Is it because you find him complex and baffling, a perfectly engaging puzzle, a figure eternally subject to profound reinterpretation? Is it because he seems to some of you, as he did to Miller and others, to offer a key to the understanding of American culture? I suspect that all these and other powerful attractions helped to incline your wills in the direction of attending this conference.

It is an intriguing fact that, according to M. X. Lesser’s massive Edwards bibliography, the number of dissertations on Edwards has doubled in each decade since 1940.¹ And the quality has gone up, as well as the volume. Yet, as with most interesting subjects, the more we know about Edwards, the harder he becomes to deal with. We have learned, for instance, that he did *not* develop on the far frontier isolated from European thought, that he was *not* suddenly changed in college by reading Locke, indeed that he was not really a Lockeian. If you hear a noise, it is the crackling of burning lecture notes.

Who and what was Edwards *really*? It is impossible to answer that question without the divine and spiritual light to which I claim no access. Since I am trained as a historian, all I can do is try to suggest, in most of the rest of this essay, what Edwards has meant to some kinds of Americans during the two centuries leading up to the present explosion of Edwards scholarship. I want to try to deal with motivation as well as understanding, to discuss the power of attraction and repulsion exerted by Edwards on several kinds of people in several historical periods. But before I do this I want to make it clear that I am not intending to

patronize the past. Much as I admire the Edwards scholarship of today, I do not want to imply that in the past people saw Edwards through a mist of prejudice, and now we look at him in the clear light of objectivity. I assume that we all look at Edwards from where we are, and that this will always be so.

Most of us, in our first courses in historiography, heard a lot about the dangers of presentism. I agree that it is a disastrous mistake to push and kick one's subject matter so that it will fit into fashionable categories. This is clearly bad, and Edwards has suffered from it. But another kind of presentism gives most of its vitality to historical study, the kind that after rigorous discipline and close study of the sources asks the questions that arise from the most important concerns of the present. I think that the best Edwards scholarship has always done this. From each of the successive views of Edwards that I want briefly to present there is much to learn, about the preoccupations and assumptions of successive periods in intellectual history, but also about Edwards himself.

The first Edwards, of course, was that of his disciples. According to Samuel Hopkins, perhaps his most devoted follower:

President Edwards, in the esteem of all the judicious, who were well-acquainted with him, either personally, or by his writings, was one of the *greatest—best and most useful* of men, that have lived in this age. . . . And that this distinguished light has not shone in vain, there are a cloud of witnesses. . . . And there is reason to hope, that though now he is dead, he will yet speak for a great while yet to come, to the comfort and advantage of the church of Christ; that his publications will produce a yet greater harvest, as an addition to his joy and crown of rejoicing in the day of the Lord.²

How many ardent young men followed Edwards as closely as they could is a question much debated among recent scholars.³ It seems clear that there were several hundred of these all-out Edwardsians, most of them intelligent, articulate, and poor. By the 1820s or 30s the New Divinity, developed directly from Edwards's theology, was being forced into rural strongholds in New England, where it long survived. Yet even in the centers of modified Calvinism, where Edwards's teachings were more and more modified to fit nineteenth century optimism, Edwards was yet venerated by Congregationalist and Presbyterian divines. Timothy Dwight, one of the first of the long list of modifiers, called Edwards "That moral Newton, and that second Paul."⁴ Lyman Beecher, the most

powerful spokesman of nineteenth century neo-Calvinism, made in his youth a statement he was never to retract: "I had read Edwards's Sermons. There's nothing comes within a thousand miles of them now."⁵

In a statement made by Edwards Amasa Park in 1839 one can hear the dying gasp of Edwardsian loyalty, struggling with the Genteel Tradition and losing:

We bow before this father of our New England theology with the profoundest veneration. We read his precious volumes with awe in tears. We are so superstitious, that we almost fear to be called profane for lisping a word against the perfect balancing of his character. And yet we can not help wishing that he had been somewhat more of a brother and somewhat less of a champion. . . .

We need and crave a theology, as sacred and spiritual as his, and moreover one that we can take with us into the flower-garden, and to the top of some goodly hill, and in a sail over a tasteful lake, and into the saloons of music, and to the galleries of the painter and the sculptor, and to the repasts of social joy, and to all those humanizing scenes where virtue holds her sway not merely as that generic and abstract duty of a "love to being in general," but also as the more familiar grace of a love to some beings in particular.⁶

Long before this, while the New Divinity was gaining its triumphs, even while Edwards was still alive, he was being rejected in several different ways by the protagonists of the Enlightenment. In New England from Charles Chauncy on, many took on the formidable task of refuting his arguments, and of showing that these were not only mistaken but immoral. The doctrine of necessity was crippling to the conscience. The idea of double predestination was an insult to the moral and benevolent God who established the law of nature and gave us the ability to know and follow it. To Ezra Stiles and John Witherspoon, practical men like most college presidents, the New Divinity was fanatical and obscurantist. To those who moved beyond liberal Christianity toward Enlightened scepticism, Edwards's whole subject matter was without interest. Nobody expressed this better than John Adams:

Mr. Adams leaves to Homer and Virgil, to Tacitus and Quintilian, to Mahomet and Calvin, to Edwards and Priestley, or, if you will, to Milton's angels reasoning high in pandemonium, all their acute speculations about fate, destiny, foreknowledge absolute, necessity, and predestination. He thinks it problematical whether there is, or ever will be, more than one Being capable of understanding this vast subject.⁷