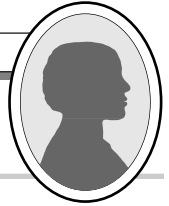


BIOGRAPHY



Jonathan Edwards

The Great Awakening had many far-reaching implications for the nation long after colonial times. It spawned the first movement against slavery; it created the American tradition of religious revival meetings; it emphasized the value of personal religious experiences; and it encouraged a more democratic spirit in religion. At the heart of this influential movement was the fiery preacher and religious thinker Jonathan Edwards.

As you read the passage below, think about how religious fervor can affect people's lives.

From the time of his birth in 1703 in the frontier town of East Windsor, Connecticut, there was little doubt that religion would play a major role in the life of Jonathan Edwards. Both his father and his grandfather were ministers, and Jonathan early on showed a strong spiritual nature. He was also deeply interested in science. He loved to roam the fields nearby East Windsor and study the wild plants and insects that he found there.

Jonathan was a precocious student who graduated from Yale when he was only 17. After two more years of theological studies, he entered the ministry. Intent on living the most upright life possible, he made many resolutions for himself: “Resolved, never to do anything which I should be afraid to do if it were the last hour of my life,” and, “Intend to live in continual mortification [self-denial], and never to expect or desire any worldly ease or pleasure.”

In 1726 young Reverend Edwards became assistant pastor at his grandfather's church in Northampton, Massachusetts. There he preached compelling sermons that combined the fire and fervor of his religious nature with the logic of his scientific bent. He exhorted his listeners to believe that they were totally dependent on God and His grace for their salvation. From 1734 to 1735, he led

a religious revival in Northampton that introduced the Great Awakening to New England.

WORKING AS A MISSIONARY

Although Edwards became known throughout New England, his stern and strict interpretation of religious law caused a clash with his congregation, and in 1750, they dismissed him. “I have spent the prime of my life and strength in labours for your eternal welfare,” he told them, “but you have publicly rejected me and my opportunities cease.” With that, he headed farther west, to the Massachusetts frontier town of Stockbridge. There he did missionary work among the Native Americans and ministered to the small white congregation of settlers. He also completed his last major writing, *Freedom of the Will*.

In 1757 Edwards was called out of the wilderness and invited to be president of Princeton (then the College of New Jersey). Like other colleges—Brown, Dartmouth, and Rutgers—Princeton was founded as a result of the Great Awakening. However, Edwards's tenure as president of Princeton was short-lived. A few months after arriving there, he was stricken with a fever that killed him, silencing the great orator and writer at age 54.

Questions to Think About

1. What examples can you find that Jonathan Edwards was an intellectually precocious youngster?
2. Why did his congregation at Northampton dismiss him?
3. **Identifying Central Issues** What contributions did Jonathan Edwards make to the Great Awakening?