I sat down this weekend and started to read Jonathan Edwards, A Life. I am half way through it and taking a break to take stock of the book in the course of thinking about the nature of biographies. Here are some thoughts and questions for you.

There are many ways to write a biography. Some biographers approach their subject from a Freudian perspective, analyzing the childhood of the subject as they search for the origins of their personhood. A significant portion of the book will be devoted to the subject’s childhood. The underlying assumption of such biographies is that the mature person follows in some significant way from the child and their formative experiences. Such an approach can be quite illuminating but can also be frustrating for a reader. Not many people want to wade through the childhood and rearing of a famous person; they want the writer to get on and tell the story of the subject.

Other biographers, either because they disdain the Freudian approach for some reason or because the material doesn’t exist to reconstruct the subject’s childhood, will dive right into the subject’s story. Sometimes leaving out the makings of the person delivers a quality biography; too often a lack of dealing with the early life of a subject leaves the reader wondering how the subject became the person that was worthy of being studied in the first place.

The best biographies invite the reader to explore, along with the subject, how the decisions that shaped the subject’s life were made. The reader will feel that they are witness to the making of history. Other biographies, those least satisfying, simply place the subject at a series of events in chronological order. The subject is detailed at having been at this event and that event without really shedding light on the influence of the individual on these events or influence of those events on the individual.

Some biographies are short as the author quickly assesses and catalogues their achievements; others are longer, lingering, as the biographer teases out nuances of the subject’s personality and views in the course of detailing their accomplishments.

The best don’t pull punches. They reveal the person warts and all with some authorial voice heard but they still leave the reader some space to judge the subject. As you read ask yourself, is the author gently guiding the reader toward a view of this subject that leaves the reader the freedom to reach some conclusions on their own? Some authors flesh out a tremendous amount of detail but they fail to offer sufficient guidance for the reader about how to perceive the subject. The book then will lack the satisfying completeness of a nice biography because there isn’t sufficient editorial guidance. The reader is left feeling that the biographer never really formed a view of the subject or a view they were confident enough to propose to the reader.

Biography is also a genre particularly challenging for its practitioners because the author literally spends eight or more hours a day with their subject for years. This can make it taxing to write the biography. Some biographers of Hitler have had to seek counseling after finishing their books. Others biographers feel a profound sense of loss when the book is done and they leave their compelling subject behind. Other authors can get caught up in the inertia of a great person’s life and subtly shade their conclusions rather than allowing the evidence to lead them to conclusions.

The best biographies also explore the times during which the subject lived so that the reader can appreciate the opportunities and limits dictated by the world in which the subject lived. No subject, regardless of how remarkable they might be, can step beyond the times in which they lived. All of us are shaped by the times in which we live. Thus well-written biography is both a careful analysis of a person requiring all the sophistication to understand the psychology of the subject and it is also a history of an age, the age during which the subject lived.

How would you characterize this biography? Is this a biography that is largely laudatory or critical of Edwards’s or do you get a sense that there is an evenhanded approach to appraising Edwards?

How deeply does Marsden explore Edwards’s psychological makeup? What does this say about Marsden’s view of Edwards’s childhood in his personality? Do you think he should have done more with Edwards’s childhood? Why might he have not done more with Edwards’s childhood even if he wanted to?

Do you find his description of world in which Edwards lived satisfying? The author tackles Edwards’s world by recounting a question that he said framed one aspect of the book. What is that question? Do you feel that you can sense the world in which Edwards lived or does Edwards emerge detached from the times? List the places where Edwards lived and how they affected Edwards? Why is place important in the makeup of a person? What does your list of places say about you?

Do you come away from this book with an understanding of the complexity of Edwards’s religious worldview and his faith? If religious faith was at the heart of Edwards’s world, has the author offered a compelling account of this faith that, even if you don’t agree with it, you can appreciate and respect? Learn what you can about Edwards’s faith. How does the author handle faith? Is it just crudely reduced to a psychological experience explainable as such or does the author leave you with the sense of the majesty and mystery of faith?

For each chapter you should be able to have a thesis sentence about Edwards. The idea is that you should see Edwards’s personality traits emerge and mature in the course of his decisions and actions in the context of the events going on at the time.

Be a skeptic as you read the book and encounter the editorial decisions that Marsden makes.

Preface: Why did Marsden write this book? There have already been a bunch of biographies of Edwards? Why do we need another one?

Introduction: Why is Edwards relevant and worthy of study according to Marsden? What does Marsden say he is focusing on with regard to Edwards in this biography?

For Chapter 1: Marsden introduces us to a man and a message at the beginning of Chapter 1. Who is the man and what is the message? A shocking event is recounted in Chapter 1. What is the event and why is it relevant? What affect would this shocking event have had on Edwards? Marsden explores the Edwards household. What do we learn here about the family setting that Edwards grew up in?

Chapter 2: Marsden describes a very significant event in the young Edwards’s life? What is it? How old is he? Is a member of his family involved in this event? If so, how? What is Timothy at expert at in terms of religion? What is the relevance of the struggle over the sacraments? What is “the Quest?” What do we learn about Edwards as a young man at this stage of his life? Describe him? How does he fair in his relationships? Edwards struggles over the issue of fully committing to God’s sovereignty? To what does Marsden attribute the “intellectual breakthrough” that will lead to Edwards’s final full commitment to God’s sovereignty? How should we as readers and the author rank this experience in Edwards’s life?

Chapter 3: What is the subject of this chapter? How old is Edwards as this chapter opens? How typical is he of young people his age? In what ways is he mature? In what ways is he typical of kids his age? What progress is Edwards making toward his chosen profession? How is he impacted by his experience in New York? What does he struggle with and have doubts about? What is the question he sets himself to answer at the end of the chapter?

Chapter 4: Now back at East Windsor under the watchful eye of his parents, he began to grapple with the prominent intellectual currents of his day. What were those currents called? Marsden argues that Perry Miller was wrong in his appraisal of Edwards. Distinguish Marsden’s view from Miller’s view. Although Marsden doesn’t tell the reader that he is doing it, he describes Edwards’s place in this emerging current of ideas and how Edwards comes to terms with the ideas. What is the link between Locke and spiders and optics for Edwards? Where does Edwards come down on this division in the metaphysics debates of his day over the material world and the spiritual world? What does consciousness have to do with reality? What is God’s role in revealing reality?

Chapter 5: Why is Edwards anxious? What happened at the Yale commencement of 1722? What was the subject of the commencement address at Yale in 1723 and who was to deliver it? What is the relationship between love and the greater harmony of the universe?

Chapter 6: What do you think caused Edwards’s spiritual crisis in this chapter? This chapter is an interesting exercise in piecing together small bits of evidence and reaching for tentative conclusions. What does Marsden attribute Edwards’s “low, sunk estate and condition” to? Do you agree?

Chapter 7: This is a chapter that is revealing about Puritan society. How does it appear to be structured? Is it egalitarian and horizontally organized? What do we learn about the parishioners, these dour and devout Christians? One practice in particular that the parents often countenance should shock you. What is it? What do we learn about how the Stoddard-Edwards-Williams clan operates? How powerful are the elders in the clan? How do they retain control? Look at John Stoddard as the example.

Chapter 8: What is the stage referred to in the chapter title? Is Edwards ambitious? How is it that books and hymns are divisive? There is another field of dispute that is introduced here that is not religious. It involves the governorship, the assembly, and the monarchy. Can you describe the underpinnings of this dispute? What are they really arguing over? It is fundamentally religious? If not, then what? Does Puritanism foster freedom and independence? Where does Edwards stand on this dispute involving Belcher and the monarchical authorities and the assembly? What are the roles of individualism, egalitarianism, and liberty in this society?

Chapter 9: What happens in Northampton in April, 1734? What is Edwards’s role in this happening? Can you describe the message that Edwards conveys? What is the role of Satan in his message? Who is Joseph Hawley II and what happens to him?

Chapter 10: The title of this chapter is a pun. Explain the pun. Why is there so much interest in Edwards’s revival in Northampton? Why would those in England care about a revival on the far fringe of the Empire an ocean away? What is the second major issue in this chapter? What is at stake according to Marsden in the course of this argument having to do with the second major issue? How profound was the division over this issue according to Marsden? Why does it matter how profound the division was?

Chapter 11: Leaving aside the particular details of Edwards’s theology, can you describe his overall worldview. Account for the place of his worshippers in a grander history, the place and role of God in this worldview and history, and what is at stake in that history? How does this view of Edwards and his religious views accord with our views of the world and religion today? Does anyone have such a view today?

Chapter 12: Who pays a visit to Northampton? What does this visit say about the British Empire in 1740? What is the visitor’s message? In what ways are both the message and the messenger revolutionary? Who actually becomes closer friends with the visitor than Edwards and why is this surprising? By the way, this is the Great Awakening that you are witnessing here up close and personal.

Chapter 13: What is the most famous of Edwards’s sermons? What is its message? What is the nature of the argument used to further the message? What was the parishioners’ reaction to Edwards’s sermon?

Chapter 14: We begin to get a sense of an ordered society being threatened. Whitefield has passed through; Tennent is preaching a similar message. Why is there argument over the awakenings? Can you explain the complex motives behind each side of this argument? Which side is Edwards’s on? Who are the New Lights? Who are the Old Lights? In what ways are both New and Old Lights conservative and traditional?

Chapter 15: Who is touched by the divine? Describe the physical manifestations of her experience? She discusses submission and martyrdom? Can you describe what these concepts mean for Puritans at the time? Who is Samuel Hopkins? What is lurking behind Marsden’s decision to end the chapter with such a strange and cryptic sentence?

Chapter 16: This chapter is really about Edwards’s perspective on changing attitudes? What is his view of slavery and what is the concept that prevents him from more enthusiastically embracing opposition to slavery? What is his view on religious revivalism? On this issue is he as equally conservative as he is on the issue of slavery? Why is it that the author juxtaposes Edwards’s conservative views on slavery with his more revolutionary view on the awakenings?

Chapter 17: What is the house that is divided? What does this chapter reveal about the consequences of the awakenings in New England? Who emerges as the chief critic of the revivalism among the clergy? This critic and Edwards agree on some points but disagree on a fundamental point about true religion. Can you describe their disagreement? What is the role of the argument about itinerancy in the dispute about the awakenings?

Chapter 18: What happened in the episode described as the bad book case? Why did Edwards view it as such a breach of proper religious practice? How could such a seemingly minor issue lead to such a division in Northampton that it would begin the end of Edwards in Northampton? Marsden finds that some of the reasons for the scandal have lots to do with changing mores? What is Marsden talking about? What does the episode reveal about the growing divide between the older ways of Edwards and the newer ways of the Roots? How does the episode lead Edwards toward the conclusion that he needs to change his mind on church membership?

Chapter 19: What are the wars referred to in the chapter title? In Edwards’s worldview what is the connection between war between France and England, Indian raids, civil war in England?

Chapter 20: By this point in the book you should have some sense of Edwards’s will. Describe it. Describe his fundamental outlook on the world. Is it optimistic or pessimistic? How do the deaths of Brainerd and his beloved Jerusha affect him? What is it that sustains him and his optimism?

Chapter 21: Edwards loses someone important to him; who is it? He reveals a pair of surprising views to his parishioners; what are they? What are the implications of his view about who gets to the church for the role of the church in a nation’s life? Do you appreciate the difficult decision that Edwards had to make?

Chapter 22: What is a crucible? What happens to the relationship between Edwards and the townspeople of Northampton in this chapter? What is Edwards’s analysis of why this happened? What is the view of other historians? What is Marsden’s view? By this point it should be obvious that dissension and disagreement were more prominent in the colony than you might have thought. Who does Edwards engage in a spirited argument with?

Chapter 23: Where do the Edwardses go? Describe the venture that they join? Keep track of Abigail Williams and Elisha Williams Jr. How does Edwards treat the Indians?

Chapter 24: The dormant animosities between the Edwardses and the Willamses emerge but it seems that Edwards has the upper hand because he secures someone’s appointment. Who is it that he gets appointed to help oversee the school? What is it that proves the undoing of his plan? What is it that the Williams clan wants to achieve in Stockbridge that diminishes the likelihood of the success of the school and this mission to the Indians? What happens to the school? What happens to Edwards?

Chapter 25: What is this war that is referred to in this chapter? What does it say about this author and his approach to writing this book that we learn so little about this war? From the way it is described it seems to be widespread. Explain how Edwards’s sees the war as one aspect of a wider struggle?

Chapter 26: What are these “deceptive doctrines”—to use Marsden’s words—that Edwards opposes? Collectively, what do we call these doctrines? Explain how Edwards sees these new doctrines. Does he see them and thus understand them from the lens of previous struggles or does he view them as harbingers of a bright and enlightening future? What does Edwards disagree with that is, according to Edwards, at the core of these new doctrines? Even if you don’t agree with Edwards can you explain his argument? Can you see its plausibility? Pay particular attention to Marsden’s artful description on pages 438-439 of how the new doctrines change the way people think of themselves.

Chapter 27: By this point in the book you should be able to sense that Edwards’s place in the world of ideas at large is changing. Only a few years before he was engaged in revivals that placed him at the center of what seemed an emerging religious consensus in a world shaped fundamentally by religion that seemed filled with signs of millennialism. Can you now describe where he sits intellectually in 1752 in this changing world of ideas? What is Edwards’s view of original sin?

Chapter 28: What are the presumptions that Edwards challenges? What are his arguments in the course of challenging these presumptions? What do you think? Do you see limitations in the emerging 18th C worldview? Can you appreciate Edwards’s arguments?

Chapter 29: What were Edwards’s unfinished masterworks and what would they have argued according to Marsden?

Chapter 30: Is there irony in how Edwards dies, at the hands of doctors deploying a new technique? What is Edwards’s legacy according to Marsden? How would you assess his legacy in light of Marsden’s evaluation?