



Jonathan Edwards, Religious Tradition, and American Culture

Joseph A. Conforti

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As the charismatic leader of the wave of religious revivals known as the Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards (1703-58) is one of the most important figures in American religious history. However, by the end of the eighteenth century, his writings were generally dismissed as remnants of a moribund Puritan tradition. Focusing on the publishing history and appropriation of Edwards's works by succeeding generations, Joseph Conforti explores the construction and manipulation of the Edwards legacy and demonstrates its central place in American cultural and religious history. Most of Edwards's writings were not regularly republished or widely read until the early nineteenth century, when he emerged as a prominent thinker both in academic circles and in the new popular religious culture of the Second Great Awakening. Even after the Civil War, Edwards remained a popular figure from the Puritan past for colonial revivalists. But by the early twentieth century, scholars had again reinvented Edwards, this time deemphasizing his influence. These contrasting constructions of the one man, Conforti says, reveal the dynamic process of cultural change.

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