

The Life of *The Life of David Brainerd*: Agency, Evangelicalism, and Book History

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Article abstract

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THE LIFE OF *THE LIFE OF* *DAVID BRAINERD*: Agency, Evangelicalism, and Book History

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the editorial practices that Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley brought to their respective editions of *The Life of David Brainerd*, explains how those practices were informed by their opposing theological stances towards salvation, and traces the circulation and reception of each edition back to those theological stances. Finally, the article invokes classic models of the methodology of book history and recent work on the circulation of nineteenth-century evangelical publications, arguing that an understanding of the kind of theological editing eighteenth-century figures like Edwards and Wesley took can better help us to articulate nineteenth- and twentieth- (and twenty-first) century attitudes and assumptions about agency and material texts.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article décrit les pratiques éditoriales adoptées par Jonathan Edwards et John Wesley dans leurs éditions respectives de *The Life of David Brainerd*, explique de quelle manière ces pratiques furent alimentées par l'opposition théologique entre les deux hommes concernant le salut, et retrace la diffusion et la réception de chaque édition en fonction de ces positions théologiques distinctes. Sont également évoqués les modèles traditionnels de la méthodologie de l'histoire du livre ainsi que des travaux récents sur la diffusion des publications évangéliques du XIX^e siècle, de manière à faire valoir que la compréhension du genre d'édition théologique pratiqué par des figures du XVIII^e siècle comme Edwards et Wesley peut nous aider à mieux cerner les attitudes et les hypothèses ayant cours aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles (et au XXI^e) en ce qui a trait à l'agentivité et à la matérialité des textes.

If I were to begin this article with the words “Poor David Brainerd,” I would be embarking on the kind of reading of Brainerd’s life that Jonathan Edwards, in his edition of Brainerd’s diary, *The Life of David Brainerd* (1749), sought to prevent. Yet the “Poor-Brainerd” heuristic—which highlights the reader’s identification with the hero’s exercise of moral agency and individual struggle—has proved persistent for the past two hundred and sixty-five years (the text remains available in print and in two Kindle editions, and has a continued presence in evangelical blogs and websites). David Brainerd (1718–1747): tragic figure; epic failure; tuberculosis victim; Protestant saint; missionary folk hero of the Great Awakening. *The Life of David Brainerd*: bestseller; memoir; hagiography; exploitation; romance. These versions of Brainerd’s life and his *Life* have dominated not just the book’s popular reception but also much of the twentieth- and twenty-first century scholarship on both the book and the individual it depicts. My aim in the pages that follow is to ground that reception within the theological context—specifically, the debate between Calvinist and Arminian branches of the transatlantic evangelical revival of the mid-eighteenth century—that inflected how David Brainerd’s journal was rendered into *The Life of David Brainerd* (1749) by Jonathan Edwards, and then into *An Extract of the Life of David Brainerd* (1768), by John Wesley.

The restless evangelical revivalism that criss-crossed the Atlantic Ocean during the eighteenth century between Scotland, New England, Wales, the southern colonies, and England, gave a new urgency to questions of personal moral agency that responded to Enlightenment concepts of individualism and rationality. These questions were articulated through religious debates that took physical form in both the published texts that circulated throughout Britain and its Atlantic colonies, and in the bodies of the itinerant preachers—like Brainerd himself—who distributed those texts and gave voice to their contents. Was Brainerd an agent of the transatlantic evangelical revival, or an instrument of divine will? How did the editing of his idiosyncratic, handwritten journal into a printed, mass-distributed book determine the answer to that question? How does a life—represented in all of its self-centered, quotidian individuality by a manuscript diary—become an exemplary *Life*—a (literally and figuratively) type-set, mass-produced book wherein readers are directed to find both a representation of a particular self and a pattern or type by which to model their own behavior? How does a singular subject become an object? And how might a greater

understanding of the competing theologies that shaped *The Life of David Brainerd* help us to better comprehend a recurring issue in the field of book history: that of agency in the production, circulation, and reception of books?

Leah Price has recently taken up the question of agency and book history, using the circulation of evangelical tracts in nineteenth-century Britain as a case study of the ways in which “questions about agency are routed through a particular category of object, the book.”¹ Price complicates the methodology of twentieth- and twenty-first century book historians, who “remain no less attached than literary historians to narratives centered on agents,” by focusing on evangelical tract distribution as figured within popular evangelical it-narratives of the early 1800s, which paradoxically personify books while stripping them of agency.² Such texts, she reminds us, literalized the evangelical belief that “the force that drove books around the world was divine rather than human,” and studying them can help us productively to question “what the personification of the book elides” in book history more generally.³ My work in the following pages engages with Price’s critique of current formulations of agency in book history by delving further back into evangelical history than she does. Here I root these questions of agency and book history within eighteenth-century evangelical debates over determinism and free will, which had a profound effect on the nascent mass market for print in the transatlantic world; evangelical publishers pioneered technologies and distribution strategies far in advance of their secular counterparts.⁴ If, as Price observes, “the master trope of book history has always been personification,”⁵ especially of books, the following pages could be considered an examination of the book-ification of a person, and its potential later ramifications for book history.

Unlike much recent scholarship on Brainerd, I do not aim to prise the “real” David Brainerd from the mythic figure he posthumously became, to separate the life of David Brainerd from *The Life of David Brainerd*.⁶ Instead, I examine how Brainerd’s life was transformed by Edwards and then subsequently retransformed by Wesley. Brainerd died in Northampton, Massachusetts, in 1747; two years later, Jonathan Edwards published in Boston *An Account of the Life of the Late Reverend Mr. David Brainerd*, purportedly taken “from his own *Diary*, and other private Writings, written for his own Use,”⁷ but heavily emended by Edwards’s pen into a polemical

defense of the Calvinist side of transatlantic evangelicalism.⁸ In 1768, John Wesley published in Bristol *An Extract of the Life of the Late Rev. Mr. David Brainerd*, an edited version of Edwards's edition, making of the latter a weapon in Wesley's own print arsenal against Calvinism.⁹

Both Edwards and Wesley published their editions of Brainerd's life at moments of theological crisis within the evangelical movement, when the old Protestant debate over the issue of human agency in salvation had reached one of its periodic boiling points. Calvinist evangelicals held a determinist, or predestinarian, view of the dispensation of divine grace: God had eternally decreed who would be saved and who damned, and no mortal effort would ever be sufficient to change that decree. Those who disagreed with predestination argued that some part of salvation must involve an exercise of the will: people could choose to accept divine grace (or not). These evangelicals were loosely grouped under the label "Arminian," after the sixteenth-century Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius, whose teachings followed these lines.¹⁰ Wesley and his followers appropriated the term as a positive designation of their emphasis on individual participation in the process of grace; as Henry D. Rack has described, Wesley tried "to find a solution to the old problem of how to reconcile the notion of a salvation that depends on a divine act of grace . . . with the desire for a positive and progressive realization of the mind of Christ in which men can take an active part."¹¹ Edwards and other proponents of the Calvinist view (including George Whitfield) in turn made "Arminian" a pejorative designation for the Wesleyans' nondeterminist theological stance, which, they argued, was heretical.¹² As Perry Miller put it,

by redefining Arminianism in the context of the eighteenth century . . . he [Edwards] made it evident that many who considered themselves sound . . . Protestants were no longer entitled to the name. He descended on New England as though he were a divinely commissioned physician equipped with a new technique of diagnosis, and told them they were leprous.¹³

The war between the two sides was waged on fields of ink and paper: the hundreds of printed sermons and tracts that circulated through evangelical communities east and west of the Atlantic. Brainerd's *Life* was enlisted on both sides.

The Life of Edward's *Life*

David Brainerd's life story in and of itself is full of the stuff of tragedy and pathos. He was raised in a large, respectable family active in Connecticut church leadership and colonial government, orphaned at fourteen, and expelled from Yale in 1741 due to his zealous approbation of the evangelical revivalism that swept New England at that time. Despite the attempts of Edwards and other influential friends on his behalf, Yale refused to re-admit him, and he was ordained a missionary to the recalcitrant populations of Native Americans in frontier New Jersey and Pennsylvania by the Society in Scotland for Promoting Christian Knowledge. Intermittently disabled by melancholy, broken by the harsh physical and emotional conditions of mission life, he died a lingering death of tuberculosis in 1747, at twenty-nine, in Edwards's Northampton, Massachusetts home. "He had not at any time led a happy life," observed Norman Pettit, editor of the Yale edition of the *Life*: "although historians over the years have made every effort to shape Brainerd into the foremost missionary of his times, his achievement in the field was slight; he made relatively few converts along the way."¹⁴ Brainerd kept a diary throughout his brief adulthood, excruciatingly documenting the ups and downs of his inner life. In 1746 he published, at the behest of the Scottish Society, a two-part journal account of his missionary activities. His original intention for the diary, however, was to have it burned upon his death. In the months before his passing, Edwards (with some help from Brainerd's brother, John) convinced him to leave most of the manuscript for editing and publication.¹⁵

It wasn't the tragedy and pathos of Brainerd's life, nor his moody tendencies, that attracted Edwards to the idea of editing his diary. "It was Brainerd's experience of religious truths, rather than his personality," Pettit writes, "that Edwards stressed . . . [He] was mainly concerned with the theological example that the diary provides."¹⁶ While *The Life of David Brainerd* is often read as a corollary to Edwards's earlier *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746)¹⁷—Brainerd as a real-life exemplar of the phenomena that text describes—it also served the purpose of polemic in Edwards's promotion of what he called "the Calvinistical scheme"¹⁸ of the spiritual life. In the months before Brainerd's death, Edwards wrote that he was preparing to write and publish a direct refutation of the dangers of excessive religious enthusiasm and the encroachments of Arminianism,

which held that believers actively participated in their own salvation through rational choice and moral behavior.¹⁹ Edwards may have seen an edition of Brainerd's diary as linking the contents of *Religious Affections* to an explicitly anti-Arminian, pro-Calvinist position, connecting that earlier text with his subsequent *Freedom of the Will* (1754), which Albert Outler describes as "setting forth with stringent logic the deterministic implications"²⁰ of the earlier *Religious Affections*.

Both enthusiasm and Arminianism, Edwards believed, dangerously stressed human capacities: the former, by overly emphasizing the affective receptivity of individuals to revelatory visions and emotions; the latter by placing too much faith in the power of people to choose and act towards their own salvation. Both threatened to displace focus from the power of divine will to the heroic power of the struggling individual. Rendering Brainerd's life into an exemplary Calvinist *Life* required that Edwards strike a careful balance: how to strip the original manuscripts of as much evidence of individuality and agency as possible, while still retaining enough of both—evidence of Brainerd's own struggle to resign himself to the dispositions of Providence—to ensure the didactic and affective power over readers that reading an intimate account of that struggle could wield?

While most of Brainerd's original diaries did not survive his deathbed request to have them burned, the Beinecke library at Yale does hold 36 manuscript pages of Brainerd's account of his youth, his first eighteen months at Yale, and his conversion—the germ of what comprises Part I of Edwards's *Life*. The Yale edition of the *Life* juxtaposes Brainerd's manuscript with Edwards's published edition, and comparing the two gives us an inkling of just how much Edwards had to manipulate the entire manuscript's individuality into a model of Calvinistic spirituality—or in other words, the effort that went into trying to de-heroicize Brainerd's potential as a tragic hero, while still emphasizing his process of resignation to the Divine will. As Pettit observes, "One finds in the manuscript pages a far more imaginative and certainly more desperate man than the printed text will allow"; Grigg has also argued that Edwards downplayed Brainerd's rebelliousness towards authority, especially during his time at Yale.²¹ Edwards's editing wrestled this "desperate man" into an acceptable exemplar for radical submission to divine will.

There are many examples of this process throughout Part I of the *Life*. For example, the manuscript's accounting of spring 1739 teems with instances of Brainerd struggling, with various degrees of success, to accept the concept of his own mortal incapacity to effect any change, either in his own soteriological status or in the world at large, without resignation to the will of God. "Still I trusted in all the duties I performed: but, though there was no manner of goodness in [them] . . . nor . . . any principle of aiming at the glory of God, yet the Lord was pleased to make them a means to show me my helplessness and, in some measure the insufficiency of all duties."²² Edwards makes only one grammatical change to this sentence (changing a colon to a semicolon) but otherwise lets it stand. His editorial emendations are far more drastic a few pages later, in response to Brainerd's recounting of a shocking fantasy of reclaiming agency:

Sometimes I contrived whether I could not escape the notice of God, and shun his all-piercing eye; sometimes whether I could not by some means or other undermine and disappoint his designs and decrees concerning me by dropping into nothing. And if all would not do, I used immediately to contend with God, as if I were stronger than he and faulted his justice as if his ways were not equal; and scores of times in this case my heart has wished "there was no God"(Ps. 14:1): yea, my enmity against him has sometimes arisen to that degree that I have wished inwardly, but as it were, secretly there was another God equal in power, with whom I might join and fight against the living God! Thus I longed to have God depart from me. Oh, what horrid spite and revenge I discovered in these thoughts against the blessed God! And my very soul would have rejoiced to overcome and vanquish him and so defeat his designs.²³

Brainerd here escalates from passive-aggressive tactics ("escape the notice . . . undermine . . . his designs and decrees concerning me by dropping into nothing") to rational argument ("faulted his justice as if his ways were not equal") to, finally, language reminiscent of Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*, as he imagines himself playing the part of epic hero in a grand battle between rival gods. The passage depicts a successive amplification of agency, from scurrying and hiding, to verbal debate, to physical combat.

While Brainerd apologizes for these flights of rebellious fancy in a later marginal note, he also takes full ownership of them: “These thoughts and desires were the secret inclinations of my heart that were frequently acting before I was aware: but alas, they were mine, although I was frightened to think of it, when I came to reflect.”²⁴ Edwards, however, lets neither the passage nor the marginalia of hindsight remain in his version:

[I]f ever God should bestow mercy on me, it would be mere grace, though I should be in distress many years first, and be never so much engaged in duty; that God was not in the least obliged to pity me the more for all past duties, cries, and tears, etc. These things I strove to my utmost to bring myself to a firm belief of, and hearty assent to; humbled and bowed to the divine sovereignty; and was wont to tell God in my prayers that now I had those very dispositions of soul that he required, and on which he showed mercy to others, and thereupon to beg and plead for mercy to me: But when I found no relief, and was still oppressed with guilt and fears of wrath, my soul was in a tumult, and my heart rose against God, as dealing hardly with me.²⁵

Brainerd’s original struggle for resignation remains, but in mitigated form. Edwards’s language keeps the reader’s focus not on the knowable personality of the supplicant as he wrestles with his mortal condition, but on the inscrutability of a sovereign God. Brainerd becomes the object of Divine dispensations of mercy and grace, rather than the heroic subject of a spiritual *agon*. Such moments of editing-out of Brainerd’s self occur and re-occur throughout this first part of *The Life of David Brainerd*—the only part for which an original manuscript is extant—so much so, in fact, that Pettit claims it is safe to assume that Edwards made similarly drastic changes to the rest of the diary.²⁶

Edwards’s editorial manipulations of Brainerd’s text certainly bear out the observation that *The Life of Brainerd* was published as a rebuke both to Arminianism and the kind of individualism upheld by religious enthusiasm.²⁷ Edwards himself affirms as much in the “Appendix Containing Some Reflections and Observations on the Preceding Memoirs of Mr. Brainerd”—the last section of the *Life*, in which Edwards has the last word on its desired interpretation. Brainerd’s conversion, for example, “was utterly inconsistent with the Arminian notion of conversion or repentance”:

[N]o confirming and perfecting of moral principles and habits, by use and practice, and his own labor in an industrious disciplining himself, together with the concurring suggestions and conspiring aids of God's Spirit, but entirely a supernatural work . . . in no regard produced by his strength of labor, or obtained by his virtue; and not accomplished till he was first brought to a full conviction that all his own virtue, strength, labors, and endeavors could never avail anything to the producing or procuring this effect.²⁸

Indeed, for Edwards, David Brainerd's life—his feelings, his decisions, his actions, his thoughts, his personality, the places he went and the things that he saw, even the community of converted Native Americans he established—meant far less than this absolute negation of self and agency, the “wonderful change that he experienced in his mind and disposition”²⁹ that is the actual story *The Life of David Brainerd* purports to tell.

Given the amount of effort Edwards put into removing the life of David Brainerd from *The Life of David Brainerd*, in order to make Brainerd's diary more consistent with the “Calvinistical scheme,” it is striking how often recent scholarship insists on Brainerd as a subject-hero. John Grigg critiques Edwards's editing for its eradication of Brainerd's self: the *Life*, he claims, lacks “any real subject or depth. Brainerd moves across the pages of these accounts almost unencumbered by external events and without any real explanation of his decisions.”³⁰ “Subject and depth,” as I have argued here, however, were precisely what Edwards did not want distracting the reader from the real point of the *Life*. Other readings focus on Brainerd's frequent and severe bouts of depression.³¹ Laura Stevens has argued that a part of the book's blockbuster appeal during the century after it was published stems from how its emotional affect reverberated with larger transatlantic cultural currents of feeling and sensibility, an “exploration of individual subjectivity” that “enriched the affective vocabulary of the eighteenth century.”³² Joseph Conforti casts Brainerd as a premonition of Goethe's Young Werther, claiming that “from the literary remains and meager accomplishments of Brainerd's brief life, Edwards constructed a didactic, romantic tale of a sickly, orphaned young missionary who persevered against physical, spiritual, and emotional hardships, who finally experienced success, and who was guided by Providence back to family and friends, where his precious

diary was preserved and he was selflessly cared for by his betrothed, who died shortly after her beloved's death."³³ This is certainly material for a sentimental bestseller of the mid- to late-eighteenth century; it is an ill fit with Calvinist hagiography.

It's likely that twentieth- and twenty-first century scholarship on *The Life of David Brainerd* is only continuing to respond to what so many eighteenth-century readers found appealing about the book almost in spite of itself: Brainerd's tenacious subjectivity, which sufficiently resisted Edwards's editorial attempts to subjugate it to the Divine will. As Amanda Stevens has observed, "[t]hrough Edwards expected people to treasure his theological works, fans of Edwards flocked instead toward his evangelical works concerning emotions and signs of conversion."³⁴ John Wesley was one of those readers, and recognized in Edwards's *The Life of David Brainerd* an opportunity for textual appropriation in the service of his own, Arminian opposition to Edwards's "Calvinistical scheme." It is to that appropriation that my next section turns.

The Life of Wesley's *Extract of the Life of David Brainerd*

Wesley noted Brainerd's recalcitrant sense of self in Edwards's *The Life of David Brainerd*, commenting on his penchant for "applauding himself and magnifying his own work," but admiring it notwithstanding: "[f]ind preachers of David Brainerd's spirit," he wrote in 1767, "and nothing can stand before them."³⁵ One year later, he published *An Extract of the Life of David Brainerd* (1768), a condensed and abridged version based on Edwards's *Life* of twenty years earlier. As with Edwards, Wesley's decision to bring out an edition of Brainerd's life came at a crisis point in the history of the Methodist movement, which he molded out of the energies of the mid-century evangelical revivals in which Edwards played such an important part. In the late 1760s and early 1770s, Wesley redoubled his printed polemic against what he saw as the threat of both Calvinism and a more secular determinism (embodied in the works of writers like David Hume and Henry Home, Lord Kames).³⁶ As part of this effort, he shaped the most popular of his Calvinist opponent's published works into a model of Arminian spirituality, shortening it in the process, and rendering it accessible to a broader reading audience than Edwards's *Brainerd* had ever found.

As Grigg has also pointed out, Wesley removed “implicit endorsements of Calvinism” as they occurred throughout Edwards’s text, subtly (and sometimes not-so-subtly) manipulating Edwards’s Calvinist Brainerd into an Arminian Brainerd, someone who “affirmed his own theological view that good works performed as part of the process of repentance did indeed assist one on the road to salvation.”³⁷ Conforti likewise claims that “though he rejected Edwards’s high Calvinism, Wesley approved of Brainerd’s Edwardsian piety.”³⁸ It is important to keep in mind that Wesley’s *Brainerd* was based, not on Brainerd’s original diary, but on Edwards’s version of that diary. Whereas Edwards heavily edited those instances of the original that recounted Brainerd’s idiosyncratic and imaginative struggles with submission to his own helplessness in terms of his eternal fate, Wesley’s *Brainerd* foregrounds the efficacy of human participation—in the form of outward action and inward reasoning and assent to the divine will—in the process of conversion.

Evidence of Wesley’s editorial recasting of Edwards’s text into one that commends human agency and actions in conversion and salvation is apparent throughout a page-by-page comparison of *The Extract* with *The Life* from which it was taken. I will focus here on a specific passage early in the text, which describes Brainerd’s initial conversion during the winter of 1738–39. Describing the youthful religious zeal that descended on him in his late teens and early twenties, when he lived with Phineas Fiske, the pastor of the church in Haddam, Massachusetts, Edwards’s *Brainerd* says:

So much concerned was I about religion, that I agreed with some young persons to meet privately on Sabbath evenings for religious exercises, and thought myself sincere in these duties; and after our meeting was ended, I used to repeat the discourses of the day to myself, and recollect what I could, though sometimes it was late in the night. Again, on Monday mornings, I used sometimes to recollect the same sermons. And I had sometimes considerable movings of affection in duties, and much pleasure, and had many thoughts of joining to the Church. In short, I had a very good outside, and rested entirely on my duties, though I was not sensible of it.³⁹

In this account, the young Brainerd’s efforts to fulfill his “religious duties” are cast as willfully delusional and even self-indulgent. Wesley’s version

strategically shortens Edwards's by removing one early clause and the final sentence:

So much concerned was I about religion, that I agreed with some young persons to meet privately on Sabbath-evenings for religious exercises; and after our meeting was ended, I used to repeat the discourses of the day to myself, and recollect what I could, though sometimes it was late in the night. Again, on Monday mornings I used sometimes to recollect the same sermons. And I had sometimes considerable movings of affections in duties, and much pleasure therein.⁴⁰

Taking out “thought myself sincere in those duties,” and the dismissive summary “in short, I had a very good outside, and rested entirely on my duties, though I was not sensible of it,” significantly undercuts the determinist thrust of Edwards's original. Brainerd's “movings of affections” and his “pleasure” in “duties” are no longer cast as misleading and self-deceptive, but instead potentially positive indicators that the young man is indeed in earnest in his belief, even if he still has a long path to true conversion ahead of him.

Wesley continues to underscore this interpretation of the text in the following paragraph, which continues to describe Brainerd's conversion process in his early twenties: “After Mr. Fiske's death, I proceeded in my learning with my brother; and was still very constant in religious duties. Thus I proceeded on a *self-righteous* foundation; and should still, had not the mere mercy of God prevented.”⁴¹ This paragraph is identical to its correlate in Edwards's edition, with one prominent exception: Wesley adds a note after “*self-righteous* foundation” that directly contradicts Edwards's Brainerd's statement with the dry observation, “I doubt that: I believe this was True Religion as far as it went.”⁴²

Whereas Edwards only slightly condensed Brainerd's original account of the following winter of 1738, maintaining focus on the futility of Brainerd's belief that his outward actions might have any impact on his soul's standing with God, Wesley's emendations shift emphasis to the value of those same actions as preparatory steps on the way to Brainerd's full experience of redemption and grace. Edwards's version of the daunting progress of

conversion is full of constant, exhaustive reminders of Brainerd's ineffectuality:

Sometimes there appeared mountains before me to obstruct my hopes of mercy; and the work of conversion appeared so great I thought I should never be the subject of it: but used, however, to pray and cry to God, and perform other duties with great earnestness, and hoped by some means to make the case better. And though I hundreds of times renounced all pretences of any worth in my duties (as I thought) even in the season of performance of them, and often confessed to God that I deserved nothing for the very best of them, but eternal condemnation; yet still I had a secret latent hope of recommending myself to God by my religious duties; and when I prayed affectionately, and my heart seemed in some measure to melt, I hoped God would be thereby moved to pity me . . . Sometimes after enlargement in duty and considerable affection, I hoped I had made a good step towards heaven, and imagined that God was affected as I was, and that he would hear such sincere cries (as I called them), and so sometimes when I withdrew for secret duties in great distress, I returned something comfortable; and thus healed myself with my duties.⁴³

Repeatedly throughout this passage, Edwards highlights the hopelessness of any attempts to “move” or “affect” God by human activities. Countering the original's focus on futility, Wesley shortened this paragraph considerably: in the octavo, 1793 edition of Edwards's *Life* printed in Worcester, Massachusetts, it runs to over fifty lines; in the duodecimo third edition of Wesley's *Extract* printed in London in the same year, the same paragraph has become a lean fifteen lines. Brainerd's “religious duties” are no longer part of the problem, but part of the solution to his distress, as the final sentence emphasizes: “And thus I lived from day to day, in great distress: sometimes there appeared mountains before me to obstruct my hopes of mercy; but I used, however, to pray and cry to God; and perform other duties with great earnestness.”⁴⁴ For Wesley's Brainerd, performing duties “with great earnestness” is a means of removing obstructions to his “hopes of mercy;” Edwards's Brainerd can take no such solace in the efficacy of his own actions.

Through these and other unmarked editorial excisions and emendations—including the deletion of the entire fourth item in Edwards’s “Appendix” (where Edwards argues that Brainerd is the ideal illustration of the “Calvinistical scheme” of redemption) and the re-numbering of the “Appendix” as if it never existed⁴⁵—Wesley shaped a lengthy pro-Calvinist biography into a streamlined narrative that celebrates the uneven progress of human agency aligning itself with providential design. As Ann Taves has noted, “the net effect of Wesley’s editing is (amusingly enough) to turn David Brainerd into a quintessential Methodist.”⁴⁶ In its message and in its production and distribution, Wesley’s *Extract of the Life of David Brainerd* came to embody the very identity of early Methodism, which emphasized human participation in the process of salvation, and reading as a means of modeling that participation.

Evangelicals on both sides of the Calvinist/Arminian divide acknowledged the importance of print to their endeavors—Edwards, in his *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New-England* (1742), advocated the regular publication of materials reporting on and promoting the revival,⁴⁷ but the unprecedented comprehensiveness of Wesley’s book distribution network was a material expression of his Arminian theology.⁴⁸ Reading was a crucial component of the participatory salvific ethic that Wesley insisted his converts follow, enabling them to exercise and hone their moral judgment and ability to hear and knowingly accept God’s call. “A reading people will always be a knowing people,” he wrote, towards the end of his long life. “It cannot be that the people should grow in grace unless they give themselves to reading.”⁴⁹ Wesley’s itinerant preachers, most of them peers of the rank-and-file Methodist converts, recruited from the same socioeconomic classes and communities, were both models for, and supplied the means of, that grace in the form of their preaching and the printed books, tracts, sermons, and periodicals that they carried in their saddlebags.

Conforti’s trenchant observation that “the popularity of the *Life of Brainerd* reflected the Methodization of Edwardsianism”⁵⁰ is borne out by tracing the subsequent publication history of the respective editions that I have examined here. Brainerd’s life served both Edwards and Wesley at crisis points in their respective careers, but it was Wesley’s version, the *Extract of the Life of David Brainerd*, that formed the basis for over two hundred years of

subsequent popular editions, abstracts, and abridgements.⁵¹ Conforti has argued that Wesley's abridgment "anticipated the reaction to the *Life of Brainerd* of nineteenth-century evangelicals of varying doctrinal persuasions"⁵²; here I'd like to suggest that Wesley shaped, rather than anticipated, that reaction, through the sheer numbers of readers who came to know Brainerd through his abridgment. First printed in Bristol by William Pine (who also produced the 1771–74 edition of Wesley's thirty-two volume complete *Works*),⁵³ and broadly dispersed through Wesley's widespread print network, it went through six British editions before 1825, and another seven editions in London and Boston, with commentary by Wesleyan-Methodist preacher John Styles, during the same time period.⁵⁴ This is testimony to the efficacy of early Methodist book-distribution networks, which relied on the efforts of the movement's itinerant preachers. These individuals—both male and female, especially during Methodism's early years—connected Methodist printing centers in London and Bristol with the "book-rooms" of Methodist meeting-houses and the many converts who attended Methodist meetings and outdoor preaching events on both sides of the Atlantic.⁵⁵ Robert Altick has called Wesley "a pioneer popularizer of literature," and his followers "the largest single group of lower-class readers" in the later eighteenth century, testifying to the efficacy of the Wesleyan print-distribution network through which the *Extract* circulated.⁵⁶

Brainerd's *Life*—or, to be more precise, Wesley's version of Brainerd's life—was a crucial text for both the promotion of Arminianism and the development of Methodist publishing and distribution networks, instilling a version of evangelical agency and inspiration into its preacher-colporteurs and their audiences. Within two years of the publication of the *Extract*, Wesley rewrote Edwards one more time, including an extract of the *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* in Volume 23 of his 32-volume *Collected Works*, which he published between 1771 and 1774, with the following explanatory comment "to the reader": "out of this dangerous heap, wherein much wholesome food is mixed with much deadly poison, I have selected many remarks and admonitions which may be of great use to the children of God."⁵⁷ January 1778 saw Wesley's publication of his most explicit printed preventative against the spread of Calvinism, the aptly named *Arminian Magazine*, which featured the conversion narratives and portraits of his itinerant preachers cast as a corps of Brainerdesque heroes.⁵⁸

Wesley's preachers found themselves in the example provided by the *Extract of the Life of David Brainerd*, as Wesley intended. References to Brainerd abound in the spiritual autobiographies Wesley encouraged his itinerants to write. John Valton's journal entry for August 3, 1768, for instance, recounts the influence of the *Extract* thus:

Since I have read the Life of David Brainerd, I have sorely lamented my unworthiness, and late decay of life and love. I have never read of any man whose life had so near a resemblance to my own, with regard to feelings, to trials, and desires! In how many places has he transcribed my whole heart, which I, for want of abilities, have omitted! . . . But, then, as a little star differs from one of the first magnitude, so it was between that man of God and me, a worm of dust. My aims, not my progress, resembled his achievements; or rather as the miniature is to the original . . . I honour his memory, and should have thought it a great favour to wash his feet.⁵⁹

Valton focuses on Brainerd's achievements, and his reaction to reading Brainerd's life simultaneously renders him Brainerd's equal ("I have never read of any man whose life had so near a resemblance to my own") and his subordinate ("as the miniature is to the original").

While he would never have seen Brainerd's original imaginative fantasies of epic battles and mythic struggles, which Edwards had edited out, Wesley's invocation of the impact he expected the *Extract* to have on its readers often echoes Brainerd's heroic flights of fancy, simultaneously acknowledging both the moral agency of the individual and the importance of the individual's acquiescence to divine will. In his 1780 *Minutes of the Methodist Conference*, Wesley underscored the importance of the *Extract* to the mission of his itinerant preachers. To the query "what can be done to revive the work of God where it is destroyed?", Wesley answers, "let every preacher read carefully over the *Life of David Brainerd*. Let us be followers of him as he was of Christ, in absolute self-devotion, in total deadness to the world, and in fervent love to God and man. Let us but secure this point, and the world and the devil must fall at our feet."⁶⁰ Wesley's language juxtaposes individual heroics ("the world and the devil must fall at our feet") and the abnegation of the self to the divine ("in absolute self-devotion, in total deadness to the

world”), highlighting the paradoxical nature of his Arminian concept of agency as synergistic, involving “cooperation between the human will and agency on the one hand, and God’s will and agency on the other hand.”⁶¹ Wesley’s Brainerd exemplified this evangelical synergism, which refused the Calvinist zero-sum equation between divine and human will.

Synergy, Agency, and Book History

Considering the intersection of the theological and material forces that shaped the life of David Brainerd into Edwards’s *The Life of David Brainerd* and Wesley’s *Extract of the Life of David Brainerd* has potentially profound implications for helping us think about how we study book history overall. The conditions of the production, circulation, and reception of these versions of Brainerd’s life, and the evangelical debates over determinism and free will that governed those conditions, speak to contemporary discussions of agency in the field. Over a dozen years ago Thomas Adams and Nicholas Barker, in their critique of Robert Darnton’s famous “communications circuit” model for book history (which, they insisted, overemphasized the role of human agents in the life-cycle of books), called for book historians to focus on “the book rather than the people who are involved in its movements.”⁶² Leah Price—as I touched on in my opening paragraphs—has argued that too great a dependency on current concepts of agency or personification severely hinders book historians’ ability to accurately decipher historical interactions between books and their readers.⁶³ She identifies the circulation of evangelical tracts during the early nineteenth century as particularly illustrative of how twentieth- and twenty-first century formulations of agency undergird the methodology of book history and thus limit its scope.⁶⁴

Following Price’s argument, I’d like to suggest here that we trace the genealogy of issues surrounding the relation of human agency and the circulation and reception of books further back, to the interlinked beginnings of evangelicalism and the mass market for print. Examining the debate between Calvinist and Arminian soteriologies, and how that debate materialized through the publication and reception history of both Edwards’s and Wesley’s versions of the life of David Brainerd, can provide a fulcrum to more effectively leverage our understanding of the relationships between early modern editors, readers, and books. The

Arminian theology of Wesley's Methodism, with its emphasis on a synergistic interaction between human and divine wills, and its focus on reading as a practice by which to model that interaction, seems to me to offer a possible alternative to the either/or, subject-object impasse that Price identifies in the opposing positions occupied by Darnton and Adams and Barker.⁶⁵

The lasting success of Wesley's—as opposed to Edwards's—Brainerd, edited into a vehicle for the promotion of this Arminian, synergistic model of selfhood, demonstrates the currency of that Methodist model for a broad audience of his contemporaries, however alien it may seem to us. Through reading his version of Brainerd's life, Wesley's itinerant Methodist preachers were encouraged to think of themselves as both subjects (whose individualism and interiority were articulated by Brainerd's account of his heroic spiritual struggle) and objects (moved through the world, as Brainerd was, by providential design).

The comprehensiveness of Methodist soteriology, reflected in and furthered by the equal comprehensiveness of Methodist book production and distribution, was key to the success of Wesley's movement. Misty Anderson has suggested that the unprecedented growth and persistence of Methodism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was due to the fact that it offered a viable alternative to Enlightenment concepts of the self as singular and autonomous.⁶⁶ It also, as my readings of Edwards's and Wesley's competing versions of the life of Brainerd show, offered an alternative to the Calvinist insistence on human agency as wholly abnegated by divine will. As Phyllis Mack has argued, “the issue of agency is not only a conceptual problem for the historian of religion; it was also a problem—perhaps the problem—for eighteenth century religious seekers; indeed, it was partly through their reflections on the relationship between agency and passivity that Methodism changed from a renewal movement on the fringes of Anglicanism into a modern, independent, world-wide church.”⁶⁷ The relationship between agency and passivity that Mack comments upon was also, I would add, inherent in Methodist publishing and distribution of books, tracts, and periodicals. As such, this evangelical movement—and its involvement in the development of mass media during the eighteenth century—may have much to contribute to the field of book history.

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Notes

¹ Leah Price, *How To Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2012), 125.

² Price, *Things with Books*, 107, 125–28.

³ Price, *Things with Books*, 134.

⁴ Scholars of the early nineteenth-century American evangelical press have identified it as pioneering the very concept of the mass media, just as it pioneered the technological developments that made mass media possible. See Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America 1789–1880* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Frank Lambert, *Inventing the Great Awakening* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Susan O’Brien, “Eighteenth-Century Publishing Networks in the First Years of Transatlantic Evangelicalism,” in *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700–1990*, ed. Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George A. Rawlyk (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 38–57.

⁵ Price, *Things with Books*, 134.

⁶ See John A. Grigg, *The Lives of David Brainerd: The Making of an American Evangelical Icon* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *The Life of David Brainerd*, ed. Norman Pettit, vol. 7 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), vii.

⁸ Pettit, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *The Life of David Brainerd*, 5; Grigg, *The Lives of David Brainerd*, 128.

⁹ Grigg, *The Lives of David Brainerd*, 160–61.

¹⁰ See Gerald O. McCulloh, ed., *Man's Faith and Freedom: The Theological Influence of Jacobus Arminius* (New York and Nashville, 1962); Theodoor Marius van Leeuwen, Keith D. Stanglin, and Marijke Tolsma, eds., *Arminius, Arminianism, and Europe* (Leiden and Boston, 2009).

¹¹ Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 409. Also see Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994); Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 156–57.

¹² See George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 432–46; Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 292–305.

¹³ Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1949), 108.

¹⁴ Pettit, “Editor’s Introduction,” 2.

¹⁵ Pettit, “Editor’s Introduction,” 21.

¹⁶ Pettit, “Editor’s Introduction,” 22.

¹⁷ See Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 331.

¹⁸ Edwards, *Life*, 525.

¹⁹ See Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 20–40.

²⁰ Albert Outler, *John Wesley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 472–73.

²¹ Pettit, “Editor’s Introduction,” 82; Grigg, *The Lives of David Brainerd*, 138–39.

²² Edwards, *Life*, 108.

²³ Edwards, *Life*, 114–15.

²⁴ Edwards, *Life*, 115n6.

²⁵ Edwards, *Life*, 114–115.

²⁶ Pettit, “Editor’s Introduction,” 83.

²⁷ Alan Heimert and Perry Miller, eds., *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and its Consequences* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 442.

²⁸ Edwards, *Life*, 522–23.

²⁹ Edwards, *Life*, 90.

³⁰ Grigg, *The Lives of David Brainerd*, 4.

³¹ See Gail Thain Parker, “Jonathan Edwards and Melancholy,” *New England Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (June 1968): 193–212; David L. Weddie, “The Melancholy Saint: Jonathan Edwards’s Interpretation of David Brainerd as a Model of Evangelical Spirituality,” *Harvard Theological Review* 81, no. 3 (July 1988): 297–318.

³² Laura Stevens, *The Poor Indians: British Missionaries, Native Americans, and Colonial Sensibility* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 139–40.

³³ Joseph Conforti, “David Brainerd and the Nineteenth Century Missionary Movement,” *The Journal of the Early Republic* 5, no. 3 (Autumn 1985): 309–329, 314. The “beloved” was Edwards’s seventeen-year-old daughter, Jerusha, who did indeed nurse Brainerd through his final illness. It is believed that her death about a year later was caused by her exposure to Brainerd; there are, however, no clear records that she and Brainerd actually had a romantic relationship.

³⁴ Amanda Stevens, “On Free Will: Edwards in Conversation with Arminians,” *The Pulse* 3, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 45–62, 58.

³⁵ John Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, 8 vols. (London, 1938), 5:226.

³⁶ See Outler, *John Wesley*, 472–73.

³⁷ Grigg, *The Lives of David Brainerd*, 161–62.

³⁸ Joseph Conforti, *Jonathan Edwards, Religious Tradition, and American Culture* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 69.

³⁹ Edwards, *Life*, 104–105.

⁴⁰ John Wesley, *An Extract of the Life of the Late Rev. David Brainerd, Missionary to the Indians. By John Wesley, M.A. The Third Edition*, (London, 1793), 8.

⁴¹ Wesley, *Extract*, 8.

⁴² Wesley, *Extract*, 8.

⁴³ Edwards, *Life*, 106–108.

⁴⁴ Wesley, *Extract*, 8.

⁴⁵ Compare Edwards, *Life*, 522–25, with Wesley, *Extract*, 270–71. Grigg also notes this change; see *The Lives of David Brainerd*, 160–61.

⁴⁶ Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 327n20.

⁴⁷ Jonathan Edwards, “Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New-England,” 1742, in *The Great Awakening*, ed. G.C. Coen, Vol. 4 of *The Yale Edition of the Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), 529.

⁴⁸ For Wesley's incredible publishing and editing record, see Isabel Rivers, "John Wesley as Editor and Publisher," *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, eds. Randy L. Maddox and Jason Vickers (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 144–59; T.W. Herbert, *John Wesley as Editor and Author* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock, 2008).

⁴⁹ John Wesley to George Holder, November 8, 1790, in *The Letters of John Wesley*, ed. John Telford, 8 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1930), 8:247.

⁵⁰ Conforti, *Jonathan Edwards*, 9.

⁵¹ See Grigg, *The Lives of David Brainerd*, 163; Conforti, *Jonathan Edwards*, 68–71.

⁵² Conforti, *Jonathan Edwards*, 69.

⁵³ Samuel J. Rogal, *John Wesley's Book Stock and the Arminian Magazine Catalogue of 1789* (Lewiston, Queenston, and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 50–51.

⁵⁴ Conforti, *Jonathan Edwards*, 70.

⁵⁵ See Rogal, *John Wesley's Book Stock*, especially chapter 5, 29–38. .

⁵⁶ Robert Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800–1900*, 2nd ed. (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1998), 35–38.

⁵⁷ See Outler, *John Wesley*; Richard Green, *The Works of John and Charles Wesley: A Bibliography* (London: C.H. Kelly, 1896), 170; John Wesley, *Collected Works*, 32 vols. (Bristol: W. Pine, 1773), 23:178–279.

⁵⁸ See Andrew Goodhead, *A Crown and a Cross: The Rise, Development, and Decline of the Methodist Class Meeting in Eighteenth-Century England* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 212–13; D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 157.

⁵⁹ Thomas Jackson, ed. *The Lives of Early Methodist Preachers, Chiefly Written By Themselves*, 6 vols. (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1865), 6:71.

⁶⁰ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1831), 3: 294; Also cited in Green, *Bibliography*, 144.

⁶¹ Roger E. Olson, "Confessions of an Arminian Evangelical," *Salvation in Christ: Comparative Christian Views*, eds. Roger P. Keller and Robert L. Millet (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 203.

⁶² Thomas R. Adams and Nicholas Barker, "A New Model for the History of the Book," in *A Potencie of Life: Books and Society* (London, 2001), 5–43, 13–15; also see Robert Darnton, "What Is the History of Books?," *Daedalus* 111, no. 3 (Summer 1982): 65–83. Reprinted in Robert Darnton, *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991), 107–35, 112.

⁶³ Price, *Things with Books*, 16.

⁶⁴ Price, *Things with Books*, 113.

⁶⁵ Price, *Things with Books*, 130–31.

⁶⁶ Misty Anderson, *Imagining Methodism in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Enthusiasm, Belief, and the Borders of the Self* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

⁶⁷ Phyllis Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment: Gender and Emotion in Early Methodism* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 12.

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