



The Lives of David Brainerd: The Making of an American Evangelical Icon (Religion in America)

John A Grigg

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David Brainerd is simultaneously one of the most enigmatic and recognizable figures in American religious history. Born in 1718 and known for his missionary work among the Indians (as well as for being expelled from Yale), Brainerd and the story of his life entered the realm of legend almost immediately upon his death at the age of twenty-nine.

Much of his reputation is based on the picture of Brainerd constructed by Jonathan Edwards in his best-selling *Life of David Brainerd*. This new biography seeks to restore Brainerd to the context of the culture in which he lived. Combining archival research with the most recent scholarship on the Great Awakening and Indian missions, John A. Grigg argues that Brainerd was shaped by two formative experiences. On the one hand, he was the child of a prosperous, well-respected Connecticut family that was part of the political and social establishment. On the other, he was a participant in one of the more fundamental challenges to that establishment—the religious revivals of the 1740s. Brainerd's work among the Indians, Grigg argues, was a way to combine the sense of order and tradition inherited from his family with his radical experiences in the revival movement. Moving beyond biography, Grigg also examines how the myth of Brainerd came to be. He argues that both Edwards and John Wesley crafted their versions of Brainerd's life in order to address specific problems in their own churches, and he examines how subsequent generations of evangelicals utilized Brainerd for their own purposes.

The *Lives of David Brainerd* is the first truly scholarly biography of Brainerd, drawing on everything from town records and published sermons to hand-written fragments to tell the story not only of his life, but of his legend. The David Brainerd who emerges from this work is a man who is both familiar and remarkably new.

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