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## David Brainerd and the Nineteenth Century Missionary Movement

Joseph A. Conforti

*University of Southern Maine, conforti@maine.edu*

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Author(s): Joseph Conforti

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# DAVID BRAINERD AND THE NINETEENTH CENTURY MISSIONARY MOVEMENT

Joseph Conforti

In the middle of the nineteenth century William Sprague, historian of the American ministry, reported that the grave of David Brainerd in Northampton, Massachusetts, was a spot “hallowed to the hearts of thousands” and an evangelical shrine visited by pilgrims from both sides of the Atlantic. One pilgrim recalled in the late nineteenth century the emotions involved in his first visit to Brainerd’s grave. “Does it savor of saint-worship or superstition,” Baptist minister Adoniram Judson Gordon asked, “to be thus exploring old graveyards, wading through snow-drifts, and deciphering ancient headstones on a cold day in mid-winter?” This zeal, Gordon explained, resulted from the fact that he had “never received such spiritual impulse from any other human being as from him whose body has lain now for nearly a century and a half under that Northampton slab.”<sup>1</sup>

Gordon was far from alone in his emotions. Between the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, prominent evangelicals from Francis Asbury, the first Methodist bishop in America, to Samuel J. Mills, “the father of Congregational missions,” and Francis Wayland, the Baptist president of Brown University, to cite only a few examples, all enthusiastically testified to the influence Brainerd had exerted on their lives, and they described

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Mr. Conforti is a member of the departments of History and English at Rhode Island College.

<sup>1</sup> William Buell Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit* (9 vols., New York 1859), III, 116; Gordon, quoted in Ernest B. Gordon, *Adoniram Judson Gordon: A Biography* (2d ed., New York 1896), 85.

the importance of his heroic figure for the American evangelical community in general.<sup>2</sup> Such testimony enhances the historical credibility of Sereno Dwight, the great-grandson of Jonathan Edwards, who observed in 1822 that “the veneration felt for his [Brainerd’s] memory, by the Church, approaches that, with which they regard the early evangelists and Apostles . . . .” Somewhat hyperbolically but not far removed from the truth, Dwight claimed that Brainerd “would probably be selected by all denominations of christians as the *holiest missionary*, if not the *holiest man*, of modern times.” Thus, when the General Association of Massachusetts met at Northampton in the middle of the nineteenth century, the clergymen marched *en masse* to Brainerd’s grave and paid their respects to the man who had attained an exalted place in evangelical hagiography.<sup>3</sup>

Jonathan Edwards initiated the historical process that resulted, by the early nineteenth century, in the canonization of Brainerd. In the mid-1740s, Brainerd became an intimate of the famous theologian and his family. It was in Edwards’ Northampton parsonage in 1747 that the young minister died from tuberculosis, which for years had caused him to cough up blood.

Before his death, Brainerd reluctantly consented to the publication of his private diary, which contained a detailed account of his spiritual life, his devotional exercises, his physical afflictions, his psychological difficulties, and his quest for Indian souls during the four years he spent as a missionary. Brainerd devoted the last weeks of his life to preparing the work for publication; upon his death Edwards inherited the uncompleted task. Through careful editing and additions of his own, the eminent theologian fashioned the diary into a heroic memoir and inspirational guidebook which he published in 1749 as *An Account of the Life of the Late Reverend Mr. David Brainerd . . . .* The volume became the most popular and most frequently reprinted of all Edwards’ works.<sup>4</sup> It transformed an obscure, sickly, largely ineffectual young

<sup>2</sup> *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, ed. Elmer T. Clark (3 vols., Nashville 1958), II, 154, 486, III, 218; Gardiner Spring, *Memoir of Samuel John Mills* (1820; rep. New York 1842), 10; Francis Wayland, “The Ministry of Brainerd,” *American Presbyterian and Theological Review*, 3 (July 1865), 395.

<sup>3</sup> Sereno Edwards Dwight, *Memoirs of the Rev. David Brainerd . . . .* (New Haven 1822), 9; Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, III, 116.

<sup>4</sup> The full title is *An Account of the Life of the Late Reverend Mr. David Brainerd, Minister of the Gospel, Missionary to the Indians, from the honourable Society in Scotland,*

missionary into a saintly figure who embodied authentic spirituality, not simply ephemeral revivalistic enthusiasm, and who had sacrificed his life for Christianity. As a result, as Edwards' biographer Ola Winslow pointed out, the *Life* "made the name of Brainerd better known in the generation following its publication than that of Edwards himself." Similarly, historian William Warren Sweet observed that, because of the popularity of the *Life*, "David Brainerd dead was a more potent influence for Indian missions and the missionary cause in general than was David Brainerd alive."<sup>5</sup>

Yet, in spite of such large claims and abundant evangelical encomiums to his influence, historians have largely overlooked Brainerd's importance.<sup>6</sup> He became widely revered inside the transatlantic evangelical community between the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, and the *Life* became an immensely popular inspirational work. But it was within the missionary movement, as Sweet suggested, that Brainerd's romanticized figure and Edwards' heroic memoir exerted the greatest influence. Brainerd emerged as a patron saint of evangelical missionaries, particularly the young Andover Seminary graduates who were the first Americans to carry the gospel to foreign lands. Furthermore, Brainerd personified and the *Life* described a lofty Edwardsian doctrine of disinterested benevolence which was a major element in the theological rationale for missionary work. Finally, the *Life* served as the archetype for the missionary memoir, an important sub-genre of religious biography that was widely popular in the nineteenth century.

The reverence Brainerd evoked in evangelical circles and the influence he exerted over American missionaries were drastically

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*for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, and Pastor of a Church of Christian Indians in New-Jersey, who died at Northampton in New England, Octob. 9th 1747, in the 30th Year of his Age: Chiefly taken from his own Diary, and other private Writings, written for his own Use; and now published, by Jonathan Edwards, A.M. Minister of the Gospel at Northampton.* For convenience, all citations of the *Life* and of Brainerd's *Journal* are from volume three of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (1817; rep. New York 1968). I have, however, checked all quotations against the original editions of the *Life* and the *Journal*.

<sup>5</sup> Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards, 1703-1758: A Biography* (New York 1940), 273; William Warren Sweet, *The Story of Religion in America* (New York 1930), 236. See also R. Pierce Beaver, ed., *Pioneers in Mission* (Grand Rapids, Mich. 1966), 105.

<sup>6</sup> See below, especially note 42.

out of proportion to the modest accomplishments of his brief life. Born in Haddam, Connecticut, in 1718, Brainerd was left an orphan at the age of fourteen when his mother died (his father had died five years earlier). Brainerd went to live with relatives and seemed destined for life as a Connecticut farmer, working family land that had been left to him and his brothers. In 1739, however, he experienced conversion and, though well past the age of the typical Yale freshman, he enrolled at college with aspirations for the Congregational ministry. By his sophomore year, when the Great Awakening swept through Yale, Brainerd was recognized as one of the college's "New Light" student leaders. For this reason, he was among the first undergraduates to be disciplined by college authorities as they attempted to restrain religious enthusiasm. Rector Thomas Clap expelled Brainerd in 1742 for remarking that tutor Chauncy Whittelsey had no more grace than a chair and for attending a meeting of Separate Congregationalists in defiance of college rules.<sup>7</sup>

In the less than six years that he lived after his expulsion from Yale, Brainerd found accepted evangelical outlets for his religious fervor. He studied for the ministry, received a license to preach, and in November 1742 accepted an appointment as a missionary of the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge. The following spring he took up his first assignment among a small group of Mahican Indians at Kaunameek, New York, between Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and Albany. After a year filled with physical ailments, psychological depression, and struggles to learn the Mahican language, Brainerd had little to show for his missionary efforts, and he began to cast about for another Indian outpost. In June 1744, he was ordained by the Presbytery of New York at Newark, New Jersey, and he

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<sup>7</sup> Existing studies of Brainerd are admiring accounts written from an evangelical perspective. See Jesse Page, *David Brainerd: The Apostle to the North American Indians* (London 1891); Richard Ellsworth Day, *Flagellant on Horseback: The Life Story of David Brainerd* (Philadelphia 1950); and David Wynbeek, *David Brainerd, Beloved Yankee* (Grand Rapids, Mich. 1961); also see "David Brainerd," in Don O. Shelton, *Heroes of the Cross in America* (New York 1904), 1-83; "David Brainerd, A Puritan Saint," in George McLean Harper, *John Morley and Other Essays* (Princeton 1920), 134-162; and Clyde S. Kilby, "David Brainerd," in Russell T. Hitt, ed., *Heroic Colonial Christians* (Philadelphia 1966), 151-206. Kilby's is the most scholarly study of Brainerd.

launched new Christianizing endeavors among the Delaware Indians near the forks of the Lehigh and Delaware rivers in Pennsylvania and more than one hundred miles west of this location along the Susquehanna River. Again, a year of effort proved unproductive.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, at yet another Indian settlement, Crossweeksung, New Jersey (near Trenton), Brainerd experienced his only notable success as an Indian missionary. Between 1745 and 1746, he led a revival among small bands of Delawares, who had been stripped of most of their land and victimized by disease and alcohol. At the start of the revival, Brainerd remained cautious, even skeptical because he “had passed through so considerable a series of almost fruitless labours and fatigues . . . .” Thus he was unable to “believe and scarce dared to hope that the event would be so happy, and scarce ever found myself more suspended between hope and fear, in any affair, or at any time, than this.”<sup>9</sup> Indians regularly attended his religious services, and occasionally he found himself preaching to more than ninety worshippers. Brainerd baptized thirty-eight adults whom he was persuaded had experienced saving grace, and he formed a small church. The missionary described his modest achievement in his *Journal*, which was published by the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge in 1746.<sup>10</sup>

Though in declining health, Brainerd left New Jersey in the spring of 1747 to visit family and friends in New England. Throughout the summer and early fall, Brainerd’s physical distress worsened; he became bedridden in Edwards’ parsonage, where the theologian’s daughter Jerusha, to whom Brainerd was engaged, nursed him until he died on October 9, half a year short of his thirtieth birthday. According to Edwards, Brainerd displayed “unmoveable stability, calmness and resignation in the sensible approaches of death.”<sup>11</sup> For Edwards such resignation was only one

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<sup>8</sup> Edwards, *Life of Brainerd*, *passim*, contains the details of Brainerd’s activities.

<sup>9</sup> Brainerd, *Journal*, 322.

<sup>10</sup> The *Journal* was published in two parts, both of which are reprinted in Edwards, *Works*, III. Part one is titled *Mirabilia Dei inter Indicos; or the Rise and Progress of a remarkable work of Grace, Among a number of Indians . . . . Justly represented in a Journal, Kept . . . by David Brainerd*. Part two is titled *Divine Grace Displayed . . . .*

<sup>11</sup> Edwards, *Life of Brainerd*, 553.

of a number of moral and spiritual ideals that the missionary embodied. 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.<sup>12</sup>

Edwards became Brainerd's Parson Weems; and antebellum evangelicals venerated the missionary as one of the founding fathers of America's "righteous empire." The first half of the nineteenth century, the highwater mark of popular interest in Brainerd, was an era of revivalism, millennialism, and missionary work during which Protestant leaders sought historical precedents and inspirational models for their religious crusades.<sup>13</sup> Edwards' biography of Brainerd provided evangelicals with an exemplary life of self-denying piety and with an historically rare example of a partially successful Indian missionary. Through repeated reprintings of the *Life*, Brainerd was once again called on to serve the evangelical cause. The American Tract Society, for instance, sponsored one of the most successful editions of Edwards' memoir. Among the largest and most thoroughly interdenominational organizations in the "benevolent empire" of nineteenth century Protestantism, the tract society attempted to Christianize America by publishing and distributing works that stressed common religious ground shared by various denominations. First issued in 1833, the society's edition of the *Life of Brainerd* remained on its publication list until 1892. Between those dates the society frequently reprinted the *Life* and distributed upwards of 70,000 copies.<sup>14</sup> The popularity of Edwards' memoir with the American Tract Society suggests how conversion of the heathen was the

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<sup>12</sup> Seventeen-year-old Jerusha Edwards died in February 1748.

<sup>13</sup> On this crusading spirit see Martin E. Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York 1970).

<sup>14</sup> *The Life of David Brainerd* . . . (New York [1833]). This edition was frequently reprinted but never with a date. The number of copies distributed is the estimate of Thomas Johnson. See *The Printed Writings of Jonathan Edwards, 1703-1758: A Bibliography* (1940; rep. New York 1970), 55. Among other important nineteenth century American editions of the *Life* were those of John Styles and Sereno Dwight, first published in 1812 and 1822, respectively.



kind of hoary, conventional reform behind which an increasingly fragmented American evangelical community could rally. Brainerd's traditional form of benevolence attracted nineteenth century Protestants from various points on the theological compass and provided them with an opportunity to assert the superiority of white Anglo-Saxon evangelical culture.

At the same time that the *Life* was frequently being reprinted, biographical accounts of Brainerd began to appear, particularly in the religious periodical press. These accounts reflected the extensive interest in and influence of the missionary; they also reinforced and propagated Edwards' heroic interpretation of Brainerd's life. "Of the ministers of the Gospel in modern times," one writer panegyricized in the accustomed fashion, "there is no one whose history I remember, whose piety and success remind one more of apostolic times, than the missionary David Brainerd."<sup>15</sup>

The abundant published material about Brainerd won him a prominent place in evangelical oral tradition. Ministers recounted his life from the pulpit, and parents in evangelical households described his self-denying exploits in inspirational stories that were passed down to children. Samuel J. Mills recollected that he was first attracted to missionary work by stories of Brainerd and John Eliot that his mother told him in his youth. Evangelicals spoke of Brainerd as the successor to Eliot; ministers and parents held up both missionaries as heroic models of piety to be emulated by Christians of all ages. Brainerd became a kind of evangelical folk hero and the subject of a body of lore. Stories depicted him as a frontier saint who subsisted on bear meat and Indian corn meal. Often forced to sleep on the ground during his travels between Indian settlements, he supposedly encountered poisonous snakes that always refused to attack him. Frequently, the stories went, he knelt with clenched hands and prayed for so long that he was unable to walk or flex his fingers.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Wayland, "The Ministry of Brainerd," 395. Other biographical sketches include the following: "David Brainerd," in *The Gospel Treasury: Containing Biography Compiled from the London Evangelical Magazine* (4 vols., Boston 1811), II, 98-137; "David Brainerd," reprinted from the *Missionary Herald* (1834) in Thomas Brainerd, *The Life of John Brainerd, the Brother of David Brainerd and His Successor as Missionary to the Indians of New Jersey* (Philadelphia 1865), 463-466; and W.B.O. Peabody, *David Brainerd* (New York 1837), a volume in the *Library of American Biography* series edited by Jared Sparks.

<sup>16</sup> Spring, *Memoir of Samuel John Mills*, 10; Brainerd, *Life of John Brainerd*,

Though Brainerd emerged as a hero to evangelical America, it was within the missionary movement that he came to be viewed as a patron saint. In the *Life*, Edwards stressed that Brainerd's "example of labouring, praying, denying himself, and enduring hardness, with unfainting resolution and patience . . . may afford instruction to *missionaries* in particular."<sup>17</sup> The appeal of Edwards' memoir to late eighteenth century Methodist circuit riders foreshadowed the work's popularity among nineteenth century foreign missionaries. John Wesley had been among the first to see the value of the *Life* as an inspirational volume for missionary-minded ministers. Wesley prepared an abridgement of the *Life*, published in seven separate editions between 1768 and 1825, and urged the volume on his clerical disciples as a way of firing their evangelical commitment. "Let every preacher read carefully over *The Life of Brainerd*," he wrote. "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." Wesley even inserted his enthusiastic recommendation of the *Life* in the handbook of the Methodist ministry.<sup>18</sup> The work became a devotional-inspirational manual for circuit riders while the figure of the sickly Brainerd traversing the American back country on horseback in search of souls for Christ became a model of selfless heroism.

Similarly, Brainerd's story found a zealous audience at Andover Seminary, the institutional center of the foreign missionary movement in the early nineteenth century. Leonard Woods, Professor of Theology at Andover, reported that the *Life* was among "the most sound and searching books on experimental and practical religion"<sup>19</sup> that the faculty recommended to students.

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465; Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Mission for Life: The Story of the Family of Adoniram Judson* (New York 1980), 25, 235; Shelton, *Heroes of the Cross*, 20; Day, *Flagellant on Horseback*, 248. Sermons such as Leonard Woods, "A Sermon Delivered at the Tabernacle in Salem, Feb. 6, 1812," described Brainerd as a missionary hero. Beaver, ed., *Pioneers in Mission*, 263.

<sup>17</sup> Edwards, *Life of Brainerd*, 563.

<sup>18</sup> *Works of John Wesley* (14 vols., Grand Rapids, Mich. 1959), VIII, 328; Robert C. Monk, *John Wesley: His Puritan Heritage* (Nashville 1966), 221. The *Life* was also immensely popular and influential among English Baptists, particularly leading missionaries such as William Carey and the famous Henry Martyn. See E. A. Payne, "The Evangelical Revival and the Beginnings of the Modern Missionary Movement," *Congregational Quarterly*, 21 (July 1943), 228.

<sup>19</sup> Leonard Woods, *History of the Andover Theological Seminary* (Boston 1885), 168-169.

Seminarians drew from Brainerd the kind of inspiration that Levi Parsons, the first American missionary to Palestine, described in his diary in 1815 while he was a student at Andover:

Much refreshed this day by perusing the life of Brainerd. How completely devoted to God, how ardent his affections. What thirst after holiness, what love for souls. His life was short but brilliant and useful. He ushered in a glorious day to the church. Courting pain and distress and every bodily infirmity as dross, he patiently encountered difficulties and dangers, and at last sweetly resigned his all to his Savior. Multitudes have reason to call him blessed.<sup>20</sup>

Parsons and other Andover graduates took the *Life* and Brainerd's public *Journal* to their missionary posts, where the works were used in devotional exercises. In Egypt in 1823, for example, Congregational missionary Pliny Fisk noted in his diary one Sabbath how, while reading the *Life*, he was led "to contrast this monument of Brainerd and his character" with the accomplishments of the Pharaohs. "All their cities, mausoleums, temples and pyramids," Fisk concluded, "seemed insignificant compared with the crown of glory which Brainerd won."<sup>21</sup> Fisk was not simply commenting on the worldly values of ancient Egypt; for, like other young men who were converted in the local revivals of the Second Great Awakening and who aspired to the missionary ministry, he drew on Brainerd's life for the inspiration that helped him reject the values of his contemporaries who were pursuing the impressive worldly opportunities that antebellum America offered.<sup>22</sup>

For Fisk, Parsons, and other Andover graduates, Brainerd stood first in missionary hagiography. They spoke of him as continuing to inspire the missionary movement from heaven and as

<sup>20</sup> Daniel O. Morton, ed., *Memoir of Rev. Levi Parsons, First Missionary to Palestine from the United States* (1824; rep. Burlington, Vt. 1830), 42.

<sup>21</sup> Alvan Bond, *Memoir of the Rev. Pliny Fisk, A.M., Late Missionary to Palestine* (Boston 1828), 249.

<sup>22</sup> For example, during the antebellum period college graduates with good social backgrounds increasingly found careers in business, law, politics, and medicine more attractive than the ministry. See Daniel Calhoun, *Professional Lives in America: Structure and Aspiration, 1750-1850* (Cambridge 1965), 157-166; and Donald M. Scott, *From Office to Profession: The New England Ministry, 1750-1850* (Philadelphia 1978), 55-62.

escorting the souls of deceased missionaries into the Divine presence. Perhaps Brainerd's saintly status in the eyes of nineteenth century American missionaries is summed up by the fact that when the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions established its first Indian post, among the Cherokees in 1817, the missionaries named it Brainerd.<sup>23</sup>

Memoirs of Andover graduates who enlisted in missionary service not only contain direct testimony to the *Life's* influence, but they disclose an Edwardsian approach to spirituality that clearly bears Brainerd's imprint. At the center of the complex of missionary ideas that Andover transmitted to students lay an Edwardsian conception of disinterested benevolence that Brainerd was perceived as embodying to the highest degree. In the *Nature of True Virtue* Edwards defined authentic holiness as benevolence to "Being in general." Through regeneration, Edwards argued, a genuine Christian had a benevolent affection implanted in his heart which motivated him to love and seek the good of "Being in general."<sup>24</sup> Samuel Hopkins, Edwards' leading theological disciple, extended his teacher's thought and developed a challenging conception of disinterested benevolence that established a *willingness* to die and be damned, if necessary, for the glory of God and the good of mankind as the ultimate test of true holiness. These Edwardsian interpretations of true holiness as disinterested benevolence furnished dynamic theological arguments for the missionary cause. Hopkins' doctrine of disinterested benevolence in particular was as popular among Andover missionaries as Edwards' *Life of Brainerd*.<sup>25</sup> In fact, Brainerd came to be seen as

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<sup>23</sup> Bond, *Memoir of Fisk*, 182; Morton, *Memoir of Parsons*, 370-371; William E. Strong, *The Story of the American Board: An Account of the First Hundred Years of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions* (Boston 1910). The name may have also served to recognize David's brother John.

<sup>24</sup> *True Virtue*, in Edwards, *Works*, II, 7-10.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph A. Conforti, "Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity: Theology, Ethics, and Social Reform in Eighteenth-Century New England," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 34 (Oct. 1977), 572-589; David E. Swift, "Samuel Hopkins: Calvinist Social Concern in Eighteenth Century New England," *Journal of Presbyterian History*, 47 (Mar. 1969), 31-54; Wolfgang E. Lowe, "The First American Foreign Missionaries: The Students, 1810-1829: An Inquiry into their Theological Motives" (Ph.D. diss., Brown University 1962). Amazingly, while noting the influence of the Edwardsian and Hopkinsian doctrines of disinterested benevolence, Lowe completely ignores Brainerd as a model of true virtue and missionary piety.

a personification of radical disinterested benevolence; his self-effacing piety was viewed as a practical demonstration of the powerful theological argument that Hopkins had developed.

The *Life of Brainerd* thus became a spiritual touchstone for missionaries, who used it to test the genuineness of their commitment to disinterested benevolence. Enduring the physical and emotional hardships of missionary work, as Brainerd had, was one element in this test; facing the prospect of death, especially from disease, was another. The risks of foreign missionary work are borne out by the number of Andover graduates who, like Brainerd, died at a young age after a relatively brief period in the field.<sup>26</sup> With Brainerd's example instilled in them, missionaries left Andover prepared to risk death. Before sailing from Andover to Bombay, missionary Gordon Hall wrote to his parents: "It will be trying to your parental tenderness to see your son leaving you to live and die in a foreign land. But have you not given me away in covenant to God?" Hall went on to remind his parents "That *death* will separate us whether we consent or not." Likewise, before departing for Palestine Levi Parsons observed in his farewell address, after citing Brainerd's example: "Better, my brethren, wear out and die within three years than live forty in slothfulness."<sup>27</sup>

Such self-denying affections became so common among nineteenth century foreign missionaries that in *The Great Awakening*, the first comprehensive historical account of the eighteenth century revival, Joseph Tracy issued a warning to young men burning with zeal to spread the gospel. He cautioned prospective missionaries against a close emulation of Brainerd's self-effacing piety, which "hurried him to his grave." Tracy went on to observe in his important work, published in 1842, that too many foreign missionaries had already experienced a "failure of health . . . in

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<sup>26</sup> See the biographical sketches in Lowe, "The First American Foreign Missionaries," Appendix, and in Leonard Woods, *Memoirs of the American Missionaries Formerly Connected with the Society of Inquiry Respecting Missions in the Andover Theological Seminary* (Boston 1833).

<sup>27</sup> Horatio Boardwell, *Memoir of Rev. Gordon Hall, A.M., One of the First Missionaries of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions at Bombay* (Andover 1841), 21-22; Morton, ed., *Memoir of Parsons*, 407. See also Bond, *Memoir of Fisk*, 93, 182; Spring, *Memoir of Samuel John Mills*, 234-236; and John Holt Rice and Benjamin Holt Rice, *Memoir of James Brainerd Taylor* (New York 1833), 301.

about the same length of time'' as Brainerd and from the same kind of religious enthusiasm.<sup>28</sup>

The *Life of Brainerd* and the conception of disinterested benevolence which served as its theological undergirding bequeathed another intellectual legacy to missionaries that may have worked against the success of their efforts, or at least helped these zealous young men endure failure. Historians have frequently noted how ambitious designs to Christianize American Indians or convert foreigners usually produced only meager tangible results at best. The cultural norms of American missionaries—their ethnocentrism—worked against the success of Christianizing endeavors. Brainerd's view of the Indians was all too typical of the cultural bias of his missionary successors:

They are in general unspeakably indolent and slothful. They have been bred up in idleness, and know little about cultivating land, or indeed of engaging vigorously in any other business. . . . They have little or no ambition or resolution. Not one in a thousand of them has the spirit of a man. And it is next to impossible to make them sensible of the duty and importance of being active, diligent, and industrious in the management of their worldly business; and to excite in them any spirit and promptitude of that nature.<sup>29</sup>

Hence, conversion was only one aspect of a larger process of anglicizing native people—or “reducing the Indians to civility.”<sup>30</sup> The Edwardsian conception of disinterested benevolence added a theological element to the evangelical cultural perspective that may have contributed to the failure of Brainerd and the missionaries who followed in his train.

Especially when Indians were not only indifferent but outwardly hostile, Brainerd viewed his missionary work as a test

<sup>28</sup> Joseph Tracy, *The Great Awakening: A History of the Revival of Religion in the Time of Edwards and Whitefield* (Boston 1842), 238.

<sup>29</sup> Brainerd, *Journal*, 460.

<sup>30</sup> James Axtell, *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of North America* (New York 1981), 68. Also, on the cultural bias and the unimpressive record of American missionaries, see, for example, Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *Salvation and the Savage: An Analysis of Protestant Missions and American Indian Response, 1787-1862* (Lexington, Ky. 1965), esp. 152, and John A. Andrew III, *Rebuilding the Christian Commonwealth: New England Congregationalists and Foreign Missions, 1800-1830* (Lexington, Ky. 1976), esp. ch. 9.

of his commitment to disinterested benevolence. Indeed, in his *Journal* he stressed the numerous obstacles to converting Indians, from the problems of learning native languages to the bad examples that nominally Christian whites set for the Indians.<sup>31</sup> When these and other realities conspired to hinder his ministry, he turned inward, torn by doubts that he did not possess the spiritual resources—the saving grace and self-denying disinterested benevolence—to endure seeming failure. At times he expressed guilt for being too concerned with his own salvation rather than that of the Indians. Arriving at the forks of the Delaware and Lehigh rivers in the summer of 1744, he noted his renewed hope “for the conversion of the Heathen. . . . And when I long for holiness now it is not so much for myself as formerly . . . .” Yet, faced with hostile Indians, he resumed his quest for personal holiness. His sacrifices, “fatigues and hardships,” he recorded, “serve to wean me more from the earth; and, I trust, will make heaven the sweeter.”<sup>32</sup> Clearly, Brainerd was on a two-fold mission in the American backwoods: to gather souls for God and to convince himself of his own holiness by demonstrating his commitment to disinterested benevolence. As, inevitably, the first part of his mission went poorly, the second increased in importance.

For young men influenced by the thought of Edwards and Hopkins and by Brainerd’s example, missionary work came to be viewed as a spiritual trial—a test of their holiness, of their commitment to disinterested benevolence. Thus, like Brainerd, Edwardsian missionaries often seemed disproportionately concerned with their own spiritual lives and quests for true holiness and only secondarily with the salvation of non-Christians. While not gainsaying the idealism or dismissing the millennial outlook of Edwardsian missionaries, it would appear that they too often saw the missionary crucible as a way of affirming a personal commitment to disinterested benevolence and of practicing the self-denial and moral activism that would bring them closer to the spiritual perfection they saw embodied in Brainerd.<sup>33</sup> In one sense,

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<sup>31</sup> Brainerd, *Journal*, 440-464.

<sup>32</sup> Edwards, *Life of Brainerd*, 190, 204.

<sup>33</sup> The Edwardsian view of missionary work as a test of disinterested benevolence—as a physical and spiritual ordeal that constituted an evangelical rite of passage—is illustrated not only by Edwards’ spiritual sons but by an incident that occurred with his real son in 1755. At a time when Indian hostilities

then, success at converting non-Christians was irrelevant; failure in the field became another part of the test of the missionary's spiritual endurance. Edwards' *Life of Brainerd* provided missionaries with more than ample inspiration and instruction for enduring failure and for transforming it into a personal spiritual triumph.

Moreover, as a model of Edwardsian piety, the *Life of Brainerd* not only gave the missionary movement an inspirational heroic figure and helped shape a self-denying spiritual sensibility; it also served as the archetype for an important sub-genre of nineteenth century religious biography—the missionary memoir. The first generation of missionaries sponsored by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, which was founded in 1810, became heroic Christians in their own right. These pioneering American missionaries were the subjects of inspirational nineteenth century memoirs that were modeled after the *Life of Brainerd*. From the perspective of literary history, Edwards' *Life* links such earlier Puritan works as Cotton Mather's biography of John Eliot (and, indeed, all of Mather's efforts in *Magnalia Christi Americana* to use biography to stimulate piety) and the formulaic popular missionary memoirs of the nineteenth century.

Edwards had cast his work in the form of a case study of genuine religious affections—a case study similar to the brief life histories of converts that he had employed in accounts of revivals such as *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*. While Edwards recommended the *Life of Brainerd* to “Christians in general,” he had a more specific audience in mind: critics of the experimental religion of the Great Awakening; enthusiasts, converts who displayed “strong fancies” or spiritual pride; and missionaries and their supporters. Consequently, the *Life* was written to serve a range of evangelical objectives, from demonstrating and pro-

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made the frontier unsafe, the theologian sent ten-year-old Jonathan Edwards, Jr., along with Indian missionary Gideon Hawley, into Iroquois country more than two hundred miles from Stockbridge. In a lengthy letter to his son, Edwards made no mention of the Indians but stressed the spiritual lessons and benefits that the boy would derive from his ordeal: “Never give your self any Rest, unless you have good evidence that you are converted & become a new creature.” Furthermore, Edwards wrote, “alwaies remember that Life is uncertain; you know not how soon you must die, & therefore had need to be alwaies ready.” This letter is reprinted in Robert L. Ferm, *Jonathan Edwards the Younger: 1745-1801* (Grand Rapids, Mich. 1976), 15-16.



moting genuine revivalistic piety to arousing interest in and support for missionary work. Edwards' volume incorporated elements of several genres of popular religious literature which enabled it to serve diverse evangelical objectives. The *Life* was many things to many people: spiritual journal, case study of conversion, spiritual guidebook, inspirational-devotional manual, and heroic memoir.<sup>34</sup>

The *Life*, moreover, was in part a travelogue. Though Brainerd focused on his spiritual experiences, he described his feverish physical movement through the eighteenth century landscape as he searched for prospective converts, and he introduced his readers to backcountry corners of colonial America. Such travelogue elements increased in importance as the missionary memoir evolved. The genre changed to accommodate the new experiences and needs of Brainerd's successors. As missionaries journeyed farther from home, the travelogue aspects of their memoirs became more pronounced and developed than they had been for Brainerd. Missionaries gave their readers detailed accounts of foreign cultures and exotic lands that contributed significantly to the popularity of their memoirs. In contrast, the *Life of Brainerd* reveals a man who was preoccupied with the landscape of his soul. Yet the travelogue does suggest an important link between the *Life* and the nineteenth century missionary memoir.

The pilgrim's journey and captivity motifs of the *Life* establish a more important structural connection to the missionary memoir. Indeed, the pilgrim, captivity, and travelogue elements of the *Life* evolved into the epic Christian journey which informed most missionary memoirs of the nineteenth century.

The *Life of Brainerd* described a circular itinerary not unlike the travels of the Methodist circuit riders to whom John Wesley and Bishop Francis Asbury strongly recommended Edwards' work. Brainerd left white civilization for the wilderness, rode on horseback between Indian settlements in New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey and, from time to time, returned to white society. Brainerd used the language and the imagery of the Christian pilgrimage—one of the most popular motifs of Puritan devotional

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<sup>34</sup> Edwards, *Life of Brainerd*, 546, 549-550; Joseph A. Conforti, "Jonathan Edwards's Most Popular Work: *The Life of David Brainerd* and Nineteenth-Century Evangelical Culture," *Church History*, 54 (June 1985), 188-201.

literature—to allegorize his travels. The alien American wilderness became the spiritually barren wilderness-desert of this world. “My soul longs to feel itself more of a *pilgrim* and *stranger* here below,” Brainerd wrote, “that nothing may divert me from pressing through the lonely desert [*sic*], till I arrive at my Father’s house.”<sup>35</sup> The perilous journey through the wilderness-desert of the American backcountry brought hardships that were depicted as spiritual tests of pilgrim Brainerd. On one missionary trip he encountered particularly hazardous terrain: “we had scarce any thing else but lofty mountains, deep valleys, and hideous rocks to make our way through . . . .” Brainerd’s difficulties multiplied when his horse stumbled on a rock, broke its leg, and had to be destroyed. Badly scraped and bruised himself, Brainerd reacted like a devout Puritan pilgrim to this test of his physical and spiritual endurance: “This accident made me admire the divine goodness to me, that my bones were not broken, and the multitude of them filled with strong pain.”<sup>36</sup>

In many respects Brainerd’s account of his wilderness travels and his experiences with the Indians reveals the influence of the Indian captivity narratives, allegories of conversion that were enormously popular during the eighteenth century. Brainerd was never actually held captive by the Indians, though he lived on the frontier when Indian-white hostilities were intense and the prospect of capture was real. Like the authors of the captivity narratives, Brainerd was forced to live with the Indians and even to adopt some of their customs. Survival in the wilderness thus became a religious and cultural test, as it had been for the captives. The structure of Brainerd’s account of this test is strikingly similar to the captivity narratives. After his departure from white society, Brainerd encountered indifferent, even hostile Indians. He underwent a series of physical and spiritual trials resulting from the difficulties of adapting to the wilderness and from his lack of success among the Indians. At this point Brainerd expressed the kind of utter despair of the awakened sinner facing eternal damnation and of the captive confronting endless days with the

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<sup>35</sup> Edwards, *Life of Brainerd*, 114. On the popularity of the pilgrim theme in Puritan devotional literature and private writings, see Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill 1982), ch. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Edwards, *Life of Brainerd*, 197-198.

Indians. While in the “depths of distress,” he crawled “‘into a kind of hovel, and there groaned my complaint to God.’”<sup>37</sup>

In this emotional state, he developed a new awareness of the sinfulness of his previous life that was typical of both the awakened sinner and the Indian captive. He passed the test of despair by surrendering to God’s will, even if it included capture by the Indians: “Was now much resigned under God’s dispensations towards me, though my trials had been very great. But thought whether I could be resigned, if God should let the French Indians come upon me, and deprive me of life, or carry me away captive . . . ; and my soul seemed so far to rest and acquiesce in God, that the sting and terror of these things seemed in a great measure gone.” Deliverance (that is, symbolic salvation) followed the appropriate attitude of resignation to the divine will. Brainerd’s salvation was a variation on the restoration theme of the captivity narrative. He was delivered from his spiritual despair by leading a revival among the Indians. Moreover, as Edwards stressed, by “remarkable providences” Brainerd was restored to white society before his death and his inspirational diary was delivered into the hands of his friends.<sup>38</sup>

Edwards followed the practice of ministers who had recognized the didactic and inspirational potential of the captivity narrative and had shaped its conventions. Undoubtedly, he recognized how Brainerd’s interpretation of his experience drew on popular Puritan devotional literature. Clearly, Edwards shaped Brainerd’s diary account by careful editing and by additions of his own. As a result, the *Life* became a literary model for later missionary memoirs.

Authors of these works created graphic case studies of disinterested benevolence that, like the *Life of Brainerd*, demonstrated and promoted evangelical piety and were intended to encourage interest in and support for the missionary movement. One editor-biographer described the purpose of his work as follows: “If by the perusal of this volume some Christians should be comforted; if some sinner should be raised from his fatal slumber; if there should be excited in any bosom a truly apostolic

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 142. On the Indian captivity narrative see Richard S. Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, Conn. 1973), chs. 3-5; and Hambrick-Stowe, *Practice of Piety*, 256-265.

<sup>38</sup> Edwards, *Life of Brainerd*, 157, 566-569.

zeal in the cause of missions, the writer will have lasting occasion to rejoice that he has had an agency, however feeble, in giving this work to the public."<sup>39</sup> Missionary memoirs usually begin with conventional accounts of their subjects' pious childhoods in deeply Christian homes to impress upon readers the importance of early religious training. These childhood experiences laid the religious foundations for the missionaries' conversions, which most commonly occurred during early adulthood and which excited a desire to bring the gospel to non-Christians. In farewell addresses, missionaries testified to their commitment to disinterested benevolence by describing their willingness to face the prospect of death while serving Christ.<sup>40</sup>

Authors concentrated on the private experiences of their subjects in the field, in part because missionaries recorded such meager success in their public work. Extensive quotation, even reproduction, of the private writings of missionaries formed the body of the memoirs. Here, showing the influence of Brainerd, the young men described the physical and emotional hardships that challenged their commitment to disinterested benevolence. Frequently, they turned to Edwards' memoir and Brainerd's heroic figure for the inspiration to persevere. "What must not Brainerd have suffered, when sick among the Indians?" Pliny Fisk noted in his diary in 1823 when he was seriously ill in Egypt.<sup>41</sup> References to Brainerd in widely read nineteenth century missionary memoirs

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<sup>39</sup> Morton, ed., *Memoir of Parsons*, 4.

<sup>40</sup> In addition to the memoirs of John Brainerd, Samuel J. Mills, Levi Parsons, Pliny Fisk, Gordon Hall, and James Brainerd Taylor, cited above, see James Barnett Taylor, *Memoir of Luther Rice, One of the First American Missionaries to the East* (Baltimore 1840), and the numerous memoirs of Adoniram Judson, who was raised as a Congregationalist but became a Baptist and was known as the "Baptists' Brainerd." The Judson hagiography is described in Brumberg, *Mission for Life*, 11-13; see also the inspirational biographies of missionary women such as James D. Knowles, *Life of Mrs. Ann H. Judson* (Philadelphia 1830), and Miron Winslow, *A Memoir of Mrs. Harriet Wadsworth Winslow* (Boston 1835). Irene Quenzler-Brown, "Friendship and Spiritual Time in the Didactic Enlightenment," *Proceedings of the Conference on Socio-Cultural Time and Space in Early America* (University of Paris, forthcoming), offers an insightful analysis of female missionary biographies. See also Joanna Bowen Gillespie, "'The Clear Leadings of Providence': Pious Memoirs and the Problems of Self-Realization for Women in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 5 (Summer 1985), 197-221.

<sup>41</sup> Bond, *Memoir of Fisk*, 259.

reinforced and further disseminated the saintly image that Edwards had cultivated in his biography.

In no small measure, the popularity of missionary memoirs derived from a literary formula that had evolved from the pilgrim, captivity, and travelogue motifs of the *Life of Brainerd*. A kind of epic Christian journey—a quest for spiritual knowledge and experience as well as for converts—underlay Edwards' work and informed the accounts of Brainerd's successors. This religious quest required a separation from family, friends, and home. After a ritualistic farewell, the missionary began his epic journey and was initiated into another side of life. He repeatedly confronted and surmounted physical and spiritual tests, which deepened his understanding of himself and of life. In the process, the missionary experienced a rite of passage into evangelical adulthood, and the certainty of salvation increased as the prospect of death was blissfully accepted. Having measured up to the saintly standard established by Brainerd, the new Christian hero was assigned a place in evangelical hagiography.

Brainerd now languishes in historical obscurity, especially in comparison to the heroic figure he cut for antebellum American evangelicals in general and for missionaries in particular. Moreover, Edwards' most popular work, which did so much to propagate Brainerd's name and influence, suffers from scholarly neglect.<sup>42</sup> The *Life of Brainerd* addressed major concerns of nineteenth-century evangelical America from revivalism to disinterested benevolence and conversion of the heathen. But as what William G. McLoughlin has called the "Evangelical consensus that dominated nineteenth-century American culture"<sup>43</sup> began to disintegrate and the numerical strength and cultural influence of liberal Protestantism increased, Brainerd's piety became less fashionable and Edwards' *Life* declined in popularity. Brainerd

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<sup>42</sup> The most recent comprehensive bibliography of writings dealing with Edwards and his works does not list a single scholarly essay on the *Life*. See M.X. Lesser, *Jonathan Edwards: A Reference Guide* (Boston 1981). The recent reprinting of the *Life*, along with the extant portion of Brainerd's original diary, in the now standard Yale edition of Edwards' works, ought to encourage scholarship on the theologian's most popular volume. See Norman Petit, ed., *The Life of David Brainerd, The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (7 vols., New Haven 1985), VII, which appeared too late for use in this essay.

<sup>43</sup> William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America* (Chicago 1978), 140.

began to recede into the historical obscurity from which Edwards had rescued him.

Yet even in the twentieth century religious presses continued to reprint Edwards' *Life* and publish biographies of Brainerd, and evangelical Americans continued to cherish his memory. In 1904, for example, in *Heroes of the Cross in America*, a textbook published by the Young People's Missionary Movement, Brainerd was chosen as the sole representative of "missionary heroism in colonial days . . . ." The two chapters devoted to his life far exceeded the attention accorded other "heroic" Christians.<sup>44</sup>

Thus Edwards' *Life of Brainerd* gave evangelical America a genuine folk hero. In addition, as its influence on the missionary movement suggests, the *Life* helped transmit Edwardsian ideas to the nineteenth century. American religious historians, however, have more often than not restricted Brainerd's significance, when they have recognized it at all, to the First Great Awakening. His difficulties at Yale which led to his dismissal, for instance, are usually cited as an example of the anti-institutional behavior that religious enthusiasm encouraged. Consequently, Brainerd has been frequently viewed as the spiritual brother of radical eighteenth century New Lights such as James Davenport and Gilbert Tennent.<sup>45</sup> But Brainerd should be recalled more accurately as a spiritual forefather of nineteenth century evangelicalism.

Historians have noted how antebellum Americans found a usable past in the revolutionary generation, whose "heroic" exploits were mythologized and pressed into the service of romantic nationalism and an emergent civil religion. Perhaps, as Brainerd's case suggests, evangelicals of the nineteenth century fashioned a similar and parallel usable past; evidence does indicate that they discovered in the First Great Awakening and in the generation of Whitefield, Edwards, Tennent, and Brainerd

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<sup>44</sup> Shelton, *Heroes of the Cross*, chs. 1-2; the quotation is at 20. Also see the studies of Brainerd identified earlier, note 7; Johnson, *The Printed Writings of Jonathan Edwards*, 59-60; Charles C. Creegan, *Pioneer Missionaries of the Church* (New York 1903), 34-47; and Mary Gay Humphreys, ed., *Missionary Explorers Among the American Indians* (New York 1913), 93-118.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Edwin Scott Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England* (New York 1957), 70, 105; Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind from the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge 1966), 312-314; and Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765* (Cambridge 1967), 204-206.

a “golden age” of revivalism, piety, and Christian zeal.<sup>46</sup> Such an historical vision helped inspire the aggressive evangelical Christianity of the antebellum decades and elevate Brainerd to the front ranks of America’s Christian soldiers. Furthermore, the evangelical history of Christian disinterestedness contributed to a culture of self-sacrifice in nineteenth century America whose importance extends well beyond its influence on male missionaries and religious reformers. Immersed in a culture of self-sacrifice, antebellum evangelical families, for example, reconciled themselves to the departures of sons *and* daughters not only to foreign lands but to the frontier and to the next world.<sup>47</sup> It remains for historians to restore Brainerd and Edwards’ memoir of him to their central place in the history of evangelical America and its culture of disinterested benevolence.

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<sup>46</sup> This evidence includes the frequent reprinting of Edwards’ revivalistic works such as *A Faithful Narrative* and the publication of articles and memoirs about Edwards and his evangelical activities. See Johnson, *The Printed Writings of Jonathan Edwards*, and Lesser, *Jonathan Edwards: A Reference Guide*. The publication during the first half of the nineteenth century of memoirs and collected works of such prominent mid-eighteenth century evangelicals as Joseph Bellamy, Samuel Hopkins, and Nathanael Emmons, moreover, indicates the importance of the Great Awakening. As Jon Butler has recently pointed out, the idea of the eighteenth century awakening as a “great” and “general” revival was a creation of the nineteenth century. “Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretative Fiction,” *Journal of American History*, 69 (Sept. 1982), 308-309.

<sup>47</sup> See Quenzler-Brown, “Friendship and Spiritual Time in the Didactic Enlightenment.”