



The Notorious Elizabeth Tuttle: Marriage, Murder, and Madness in the Family of Jonathan Edwards (North American Religions)

Ava Chamberlain

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Who was Elizabeth Tuttle?

In most histories, she is a footnote, a blip. At best, she is a minor villain in the story of Jonathan Edwards, perhaps the greatest American theologian of the colonial era. Many historians consider Jonathan Edwards a theological genius, wildly ahead of his time, a Puritan hero. Elizabeth Tuttle was Edwards's "crazy grandmother," the one whose madness and adultery drove his despairing grandfather to divorce.

In this compelling and meticulously researched work of micro-history, Ava Chamberlain unearths a fuller history of Elizabeth Tuttle. It is a violent and tragic story in which anxious patriarchs struggle to govern their households, unruly women disobey their husbands, mental illness tears families apart, and loved ones die sudden deaths. Through the lens of Elizabeth Tuttle, Chamberlain re-examines the common narrative of Jonathan Edwards's ancestry, giving his long-ignored paternal grandmother a voice. Tracing this story into the 19th century, she creates a new way of looking at both ordinary families of colonial New England and how Jonathan Edwards's family has been remembered by his descendants, contemporary historians, and, significantly, eugenicists. For as Chamberlain uncovers, it was during the eugenics movement, which employed the Edwards family as an ideal, that the crazy grandmother story took shape.

The Notorious Elizabeth Tuttle not only brings to light the tragic story of an ordinary woman living in early New England, it also explores the deeper tension between the ideal of Puritan family life and its messy reality, complicating the way America has thought about its Puritan past.

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