

Richard L. Bushman

# FROM PURITAN TO YANKEE

Character and  
the Social Order  
in Connecticut,  
1690-1765



AWARDED THE BANCROFT PRIZE IN AMERICAN HISTORY

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CHARACTER AND THE SOCIAL ORDER  
IN CONNECTICUT, 1690 – 1765

RICHARD L. BUSHMAN

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**FOR MY FATHER AND MOTHER  
TED AND DOROTHY BUSHMAN  
OF  
SALT LAKE CITY**

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## Foreword

No attempt to trace the history of liberty can deal with the detached individual in isolation. Freedom is a condition not of the single man alone but of man in relationship to a community. The group protects him against the misuse of the power of others and provides the setting within which he can advantageously exercise his own powers. Therefore, changes in the nature of the community, which necessarily either increase or restrain the capacity of the individual to act, affect his liberty.

Colonial Connecticut provides a particularly fruitful example of the processes that shaped American society and the character of its people. The circumstances of settlement established and kept intact through much of the seventeenth century a tightly organized, homogeneous community—in this volume designated Puritan—which ascribed to the individual a limited role marked out by forceful religious and secular sanctions. Yet by the eve of the Revolution the community and the people who lived in it had changed radically. The old prescriptions lost their compelling power, the role of the individual was redefined, and the community itself took on a new character—here referred to as Yankee. The interplay of the complex political, religious, and economic forces responsible for that transition are the subjects of this thoughtful book.

Particularly significant in the analysis of the process by which the Puritans of Connecticut became Yankees is the light it throws on the relationship between society and individual personality. The description of the forces in the community that gave birth to the wish to be free, among men brought up in a closed order, illuminates an important, and neglected, facet of the history of liberty in the United States.

OSCAR HANDLIN

## Preface

Sometime between 1690 and 1765 Connecticut Puritans became Yankees. The transition had begun earlier and was far advanced in Boston by 1690, but in Connecticut the institutions inspired by the founders' piety persisted to the end of the seventeenth century. Then after 1690 the close-knit, tightly controlled, homogeneous community of the earlier period steadily became more open and heterogeneous. By the eve of the Revolution Connecticut was moving toward a new social order, toward the republican pluralism of the nineteenth century. With the death of old institutions had come the birth of new freedom.

This book describes the growth of liberty in pre-Revolutionary Connecticut and assesses the impact of freedom on human character. Its overarching themes are the answers to three questions: What were the changes that relaxed the restraints on men's feelings and actions? How did they respond as they felt the authority that had structured their lives slowly crumble? How did the thoughtful among them propose to keep order as traditional social cohesion dissolved?

The account of how freedom grew, which occupies most of the book, focuses on the details of life on farms and in meetinghouses, because there men felt the worth of liberty concretely. The normal pursuit of everyday ambitions engendered the expansive impulses that opened up society, and restraints relaxed because of accumulated frustrations. The organization and balance of my approach follow from this conception.

My thesis is that law and authority embodied in governing institutions gave way under the impact first of economic ambitions and later of the religious impulses of the Great Awakening. Restraint of ambition was a vulnerable spot among the interlocking institutions and beliefs that contained men through most of the seven-

teenth century, for Puritan preachers could not clearly distinguish laudable industry from reprehensible worldliness. As, in the expanding economy of the eighteenth century, merchants and farmers felt free to pursue wealth with an avidity dangerously close to avarice, the energies released exerted irresistible pressure against traditional bounds. When the Great Awakening added its measure of opposition, the old institutions began to crumble. By 1765, while the structure still stood, the most perceptive leaders were looking for new methods of ordering society in an age when human loyalties would be forthcoming voluntarily or not at all.

Connecticut is well suited to a study of ordinary people and local conditions, for the colony was probably less involved in imperial affairs than any other. No royal governors and few British officials were present to complicate politics and social life. Hence, when seeking the significance of a given document, it is rarely necessary to calculate the effect of relations with Britain; the contents of nearly every page reflect the situation of the common people or the maneuverings of the colonial aristocracy. Though Connecticut was closely linked to Massachusetts by the migration of people and ideas, its relative autonomy made the evolution here described more visible than in the other Puritan colony.

Connecticut invites research because the colonial records are so full and accessible. A large portion of my work was done at the Connecticut State Library, where Miss Frances Davenport and Mr. G. Wesley Dennen were unusually accommodating guides to the library's resources. The Yale University Library kindly gave permission to quote from the Lane Memorial Collection. Congregational House in Hartford gave access to the life of Samuel Nott and various county association and consociation records.

I am grateful to be working at a time when foundations and universities are generous with scholars. While preparing this book, I received aid from the Samuel S. Fels Foundation, the Frederick Sheldon Fund of Harvard University, and Brigham Young University faculty research funds.

Professors Bernard Bailyn and Oscar Handlin produce the kinds of scholarship I most admire. Both have usefully criticized the

manuscript. Professor Handlin gave it an especially close reading, exercising vigorously his uncommon editorial skill. He has also been a wise friend and counselor. I am pleased that the book is part of the distinguished series coming from the Center for the Study of the History of Liberty in America.

After innumerable readings of the manuscript, my wife's well of stylistic criticisms had not run dry. More than critic, however, she has been a steady and true companion.

For the convenience of the reader in finding the full citation for each reference, all writings are listed in alphabetical order at the end of the book, and the short form of citation is used from the beginning in the footnotes. The only abbreviations that might mystify are *Conn. Recs.* for Connecticut, Colony of, *The Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut*, and *Conn. Arch.* for Connecticut Archives. In quoting manuscripts, directions for the expanded method suggested in Oscar Handlin, *et al.*, *Harvard Guide to American History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1954), pages 98-99, are followed. In all but a very few instances, the spellings used in contemporary printed materials are left intact. Dates are in Old Style. Years are stated as if January 1 were New Year's Day.

RICHARD L. BUSHMAN

Provo, Utah  
Spring 1966

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## PART ONE

### Society in 1690



# I

## Law and Authority

IN THE LAST QUARTER of the seventeenth century the Puritan rulers of Connecticut valued order above all other social virtues. Disorder and sin were equivalents in their minds. Turmoil in the towns or conflict in the General Assembly interrupted the harmonious flow of divine power into the extremities of creation, while a well-ordered society evidenced God's dominion among men. Submission to His will brought tranquility to a people.

Jonathan Edwards up the Connecticut River was later to define order and cogently express the pleasure it afforded:

There is a beauty of order in society, as when the different members of society have all their appointed offices, place and station, according to their several capacities and talents, and everyone keeps his place, and continues in his proper business.<sup>1</sup>

The traditional image of society as an organism portrayed the harmony and control the rulers sought when they hedged men about with law and authority, bound people to their stations, and stopped trespasses on the rights of others. Europeans had elaborated the same theme for centuries, but the rulers of Connecticut, while drawing on a medieval legacy, appropriated the idea of order as their own because it so well suited their situation and temperament.

Social harmony as an end in itself was less important to the first settlers of New England than to their immediate descendants. Religious belief had been preeminent in 1630, when, painful as the departure was, the migrating founders had broken with the existing social pattern. The distortions of Christian worship in England and the yearning to establish Zion had warranted resistance to

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, II, 275. The material in this chapter is covered in a somewhat different fashion for Massachusetts in Haskins, *Law and Authority in Early Massachusetts*.

authority. The body politic existed for the glory of God, and when the two clashed, good order in the state was sacrificed.

Once in America, the early Puritans had struggled to reestablish coherence. While still in passage, John Winthrop told the company that they must be "knitt together in this worke as one man."<sup>2</sup> The town covenants, even in recalcitrant Rhode Island, symbolized the ideal of community life which the first settlers wished to recover in founding governments in "love, union and order," for the blessing of all and to the glory of God.<sup>3</sup>

Ostensibly, religion remained preeminent in the hierarchy of value, but community order occupied most of the rulers' field of vision. By the end of the century they were no longer critical of the ends of uniformity as their predecessors had been. Righteousness had become another name for conformity.

Failures only intensified the compulsion to control. Puritan leaders at the end of the century knew that they were more distant from their goal than their fathers had been; disruptive forces had been mounting for decades. Yet the Winthrops and the Saltonstalls were not prepared to accommodate the enemies of order. At stake were not only their power and prestige, but the very meaning of their own and their fathers' lives.

The opposition to order came as no surprise. Puritan theology plainly taught that rebellion was the natural state of men deprived by the fall of the capacity to control their passions. "Pride, Contradiction, and Rebellion," ministers reminded rulers, had possessed the hearts of men "since our Corruption by the first unhappy Apostasy." The devil ruled the human will, and "unlimited, and unsatiable lusts" possessed people when they were under no restraint and there were none "to stop their wicked career."<sup>4</sup> From these innate evil impulses, "all the Disorder and Confusion in the World" took their rise.<sup>5</sup> Thus accounted for, troublemakers met stony faces when called before Puritan magistrates.

Rulers conceived their function to be the containment of the

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Winslow, *Meetinghouse Hill*, 27.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in I. Backus, *History*, I, 167.

<sup>4</sup> Woodward, *Civil Rulers*, 9, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Bulkley, *Necessity of Religion*, 40.

wicked passions unleashed at the fall. To govern was to control the corrupt human will. At the height of Connecticut's troubles with insurgents in the 1690's, Gurdon Saltonstall, minister from New London and future Governor, reminded the freemen that "Divine Wisdom" provided civil government "to give check to those wretched Principles, of Pride and Contradiction, Disorder and Confusion, which the first Rebellion hath unhappily brought into the hearts of men." The alternative to strong government was chaos. Consider, he enjoined, "what Irreligion and Profaneness, Unrighteousness, and Oppression, Disorder, and Confusion, do use to invade a People, when the Rod of Dominion is broken, the Bands of Authority dissolved, and every man is his own King."<sup>6</sup> Another sermon described the terrifying consequences of anarchy: "Were it not for Government, the World would soon run into all manner of disorders and confusions: mens Lives and Estates and Liberties would soon be prey to the Covetous and the Cruel"; each would be "as a wolf" to the other.<sup>7</sup> Government, the ministers repeated annually on election days, was "a great Blessing to this Sinful and Miserable World," for to a degree it compensated for depravity and imposed peace on society.<sup>8</sup> The controlling axiom of all social and political thought was the proposition that civil and ecclesiastical authorities must strictly rule every detail of human life.

The first requisite of good government was law. Deficient in both reason and will, men required rules "to guide them and to bind them to their good Behaviour."<sup>9</sup> The law defined evil and prescribed appropriate punishment for it. "Since Vice, Immorality and Profaneness are ever-more the common Enemies of our Comfort, and all good Order," magistrates were obliged to suppress them.<sup>10</sup> The multitude of ordinances regulating personal behavior was an outgrowth of the divine commission bestowed upon the civil authority to keep the peace. Tippling, sabbath-breaking, gambling, singing and dancing in public houses, lax family discipline,

<sup>6</sup> Sermon, 4, 6-7.

<sup>7</sup> Estabrook, *Sermon*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> W. Burnham, *God's Providence*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Buckingham, *Moses and Aaron*, 43.

<sup>10</sup> Woodward, 37.

failure to attend worship, and sexual offences, all received punishments ranging from a small fine to death. Each was a detail in the total pattern of order.

Always conscious of its responsibility to govern, the Connecticut General Assembly periodically revived the sumptuary laws and encouraged more rigorous enforcement. In 1676 the legislature expanded statutory regulations of the standard vices. In 1684 and 1686 the Assembly urged closer attention to the laws. Two decades later the clergy were asked to investigate moral conditions and suggest reasons for the obvious decline. In response to their report, the Assembly recapitulated the laws on education, profanity, the Sabbath, and drunkenness, ordering that they be distributed through the Colony and read publicly before each election of town officers.<sup>11</sup> The almost instinctive response to disorder was to devise more laws. Bound by their understanding of character and their place in the divine economy, rulers could conceive of no satisfactory alternative. "When Sin and Iniquity Prevails over the Laws already made," the preacher of the election sermon said in 1717, "the Nature of such Times call for the Addition of further, to Force it to Hide its Head." <sup>12</sup>

Sumptuary and criminal legislation forbade evil actions, but law also included liberties or privileges, the carefully circumscribed areas where men could rightfully expend their energies. Towns were given liberty to build churches or to distribute land. Individuals had liberty to own and control property and to worship God. Frequent reference to the colony statutes as the "laws and Liberties" expressed this positive, prescriptive as well as purely repressive aspect of law.<sup>13</sup>

Such liberty was far from license, the freedom to act as one wished. The privilege of electing rulers, for example, did not permit selection of candidates who favored a private interest, but only the right to choose those qualified to rule for the common good.<sup>14</sup> Religious liberty implied freedom to worship not as one wanted but only as the Bible interpreted by the Puritan ministry

<sup>11</sup> *Conn. Recs.*, II, 281-283; III, 147-148, 202-203; V, 529-531.

<sup>12</sup> Cutler, *Firm Union*, 16.

<sup>13</sup> *Conn. Recs.*, II, 567.

<sup>14</sup> Fiske, *The Good Subject's Wish*, 8; Woodward, 31-32.

dictated. John Winthrop had explained how natural liberty gave men free rein, while civil liberty only allowed them to be good, just, and honest. Private will had to be moral; it would have contradicted the purpose of government to give liberty to do evil as well as good.<sup>15</sup>

One part of the work of government was to assure men the free exercise of their just privileges. Without law to define the boundaries of human action and government to protect peoples' rights, "Lives and Estates and Liberties would soon be a prey to the Covetous and the Cruel."<sup>16</sup> By seventeenth-century definitions, order and liberty were opposites of the same coin.

The hedge of laws thus both contained and protected each individual. Sumptuary legislation suppressed impulses men themselves could not discipline, while liberties marked out the channels of approved activity along which human energy might flow. Within these bounds, a man was safe so long as government functioned properly, securing to him the peaceful possession of his person and property and allowing him to worship God as commanded, protecting the observant and punishing trespassers. The image of social order in 1690 was of limited and foreseen activity within these legal forms.

However beneficial and divine the rule of law, not all yielded to it for the sake of conscience or of self-interest. Reprobrate natures required strong measures, and even the elect occasionally needed discipline. Election sermons reiterated the maxim that "The Constitution of Good Laws" and a "due Execution of them" had

<sup>15</sup> The use of the word 'liberty' was apt in this context because it was conceivable in the seventeenth century that civil authority might forbid men to do good. To the Puritans lately escaped from Laud's oppression, the liberty to worship in the biblical pattern was considered a privilege, for all liberties were privileges wrested from an authority that had at times repressed even righteous actions. By the seventeenth century a large number of rights had been won from rulers; in many areas men were free to follow their own interests without special permission. But the struggles of the eighteenth century are unintelligible unless it is understood that people believed government might rescind their liberties if they were not vigilantly guarded. Rights had to be asserted: to assume they were secured was to risk their loss. The possibility of civil authority completely dominating its subjects, though strenuously resisted, remained lively and ominous for some time.

<sup>16</sup> Estabrook, 18.



to be improved for the good of the people.<sup>17</sup> Through law and authority, "Right is secured; Injuries are suppressed; Offenders are punished; the Obedient are Rewarded; The Good Order and Peace designed is preserved."<sup>18</sup>

The magistrates who administered the law included the governor and deputy governor along with the assistants and commissioners.<sup>19</sup> The assistants, twelve in number, were elected members of what in essence was the upper house of the legislature, though they then sat with the lower house composed of deputies or representatives from the towns.<sup>20</sup> The commissioners were appointed in each town by the General Court for the sole purpose of enforcing the law. These officials manned a variety of agencies of surveillance, judgment, and punishment.

By 1690 the apparatus had enlarged until it operated on four levels. In each town a constable, elected annually, was responsible for apprehending offenders.<sup>21</sup> Causes of up to 40s. were heard locally by two assistants or two commissioners, or by one of these and the selectmen.<sup>22</sup> Appeal from the court of small causes was to the county court, composed of an assistant and two commissioners or of three assistants, which also heard presentments from constables and from grand jurors appointed in each town by the Assembly to expose "breaches of any laws or orders or any misdemeanors they shal know of in their respective Countys."<sup>23</sup> On the colony level, a semiannual court composed of at least seven assistants heard appeals from the county courts and also tried capital crimes. The General Assembly was the ultimate court of appeal.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Buckingham, 43.

<sup>18</sup> Saltonstall, *Sermon*, 17-18.

<sup>19</sup> For the commissioners' role as magistrates see Farrell, "Administration of Justice," 7-8.

<sup>20</sup> In 1698 the two Houses were divided, but even before this time the agreement of the assistants was required for the passage of any act (*Conn. Recs.*, I, 119; IV, 267). The towns elected two deputies annually to the General Court. In both elections only the freemen voted. The qualifications for freemanship were £10 estate and the recommendation of the selectmen (*Conn. Recs.*, II, 141, 253).

<sup>21</sup> Connecticut Colony, *Book of General Laws*, 1673, 14-15.

<sup>22</sup> *Conn. Recs.*, II, 108.

<sup>23</sup> *Conn. Recs.*, II, 35, 61.

<sup>24</sup> *Conn. Recs.*, II, 28-29.