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Edmund S. Morgan

The Puritan Dilemma

The Story of John Winthrop



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Edited by Oscar Handlin

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Editor's Preface

FROM its first discovery, the emptiness of the New World made it the field for social experiment. Europeans, crowded in by their seeming lack of space and by a rigid social order, looked with longing across the ocean where space and opportunity abounded. Time and again, men critical of their own society hoped by migration to find the scope for working out their visions of a better order.

Yet, in the actual coming, as likely as not, they encountered the standing quandary of the revolutionary. They had themselves been rebels in order to put into practice their ideas of a new society. But to do so they had to restrain the rebellion of others. As they laid out their communities they learned to fear the dangers that emanated from other dissenters unwilling to be bound by their restraints. The result was a long conflict between the demands of authority and the permissiveness of freedom. To a considerable measure, the American pattern of constitutional and responsible liberty emerged from more than three centuries of such conflict.

This process had already begun in the seventeenth cen-

ture. The Puritan effort to create a Bible Commonwealth in New England was the product of the unsettlement of English society. For John Winthrop and his companions the New World was a New Canaan, set aside by Divine Providence as the field for their experiment. Yet once the Puritans had arrived, they encountered in disconcerting number a variety of visionaries whose individual conceptions of society threatened to destroy the whole community. It was manifestly dangerous to allow every man to build his own Utopia. The Puritans thus found it necessary, almost at once, to begin to delineate the lines between the freedom of the individual to follow his own dreams and the responsibility of the society for maintaining order.

The conflict was exposed in dramatic fashion in the career of the main mover of the Puritan migration and its most influential leader, John Winthrop. The vivid account of his life throws light on the whole movement from the start of the enterprise in England to the development of a flourishing society in Massachusetts Bay.

OSCAR HANDLIN

Author's Preface

THE Puritans of New England are not in good repute today. Authors and critics who aspire to any degree of sophistication take care to repudiate them. Liberals and conservatives alike find it advantageous to label the measures they oppose as Puritan. Whatever is wrong with the American mind is attributed to its Puritan ancestry, and anything that escapes these assaults is smothered under a homespun mantle of quaintness by lovers of the antique. Seventeenth-century Massachusetts has thus become in retrospect a preposterous land of witches and witch hunters, of kill-joys in tall-crowned hats, whose main occupation was to prevent each other from having any fun and whose sole virtue lay in their furniture.

It is not likely that this vision will ever be wholly dispelled. We have to caricature the Puritans in order to feel comfortable in their presence. They found answers to some human problems that we would rather forget. Their very existence is therefore an affront, a challenge to our moral complacency; and the easiest way to meet the challenge is to distort it into absurdity, turn the challengers into fanatics. It is not hard to do, for there were real fanatics

among them. Ironically, we have often given our praise to the fanatics, while the man who successfully fought them has received only the grudging admiration we accord to one who succeeds in a bad business.

Actually the central problem of Puritanism as it affected John Winthrop and New England has concerned men of principle in every age, not least of all our own. It was the question of what responsibility a righteous man owes to society. If society follows a course that he considers morally wrong, should he withdraw and keep his principles intact, or should he stay? Americans have answered the question in various ways. Henry Thoreau did not hesitate to reject a society that made war on Mexico. William Lloyd Garrison called on the North to leave the Union in order to escape complicity in the sin of slaveholding. John Winthrop had another answer, which colored his approach to every problem he confronted as a man and as governor of a Puritan colony. What his answer was this book attempts to show.

EDMUND S. MORGAN

Contents

<i>Editor's Preface</i>	ix
<i>Author's Preface</i>	xi
I The Taming of the Heart	3
II Evil and Declining Times	18
III A Shelter and a Hiding Place	34
IV The Way to a New England	45
V Survival	54
VI A Special Commission	69
VII A Due Form of Government	84
VIII Leniency Rebuked	101
IX Separatism Unleashed	115
X Seventeenth-Century Nihilism	134
XI The New England Way	155
XII New England or Old	174
XIII Foreign Affairs	185
<i>Acknowledgments and Sources</i>	207
<i>Index</i>	217

The
Puritan Dilemma
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I

The Taming of the Heart

WHEN Henry VIII turned his back on the Pope, dissolved the monasteries, and confiscated their property, many Englishmen rejoiced. Their country could now join in the Protestant Reformation and gain a purer church. Adam Winthrop, a London cloth merchant with ready cash, was pleased for a simpler reason: he was able to buy part of the confiscated monastery at Bury St. Edmunds, in Suffolk. He paid the King £408, 11s. 3d. for the manor of Groton and thus transformed himself into a country gentleman. That was in 1544.

Forty-four years later, in the year when English sailors defeated the Spanish Armada, and with it the last serious effort by a Catholic power to recapture England for the Pope, John Winthrop was born, grandson to Adam. John's father, also called Adam, came into possession of Groton Manor a few years after John's birth and brought his family to live there on the old monastic estate.

Groton was a good place to grow up in — gently rolling country, checkered with dark wood lots and bright fields of wheat, rye, peas, barley, hops, with here and there a shallow pond, stocked with fat carp, which were harvested

regularly like any other crop. The heart of the place was a huge half-timbered barn whose steep thatched roof covered the stalls of cart horses, milk cattle, and a few fine saddle horses for the lord of the manor and his lady. And there was a great house, where John, the only son of the family, knew he would one day sit in his father's place and preside over the modest entourage of servants and tenants who lived in this small world.

Though small, it was not an isolated world. A constant procession of uncles and aunts and cousins marched through it, bearing strange tales of strange places. One had gone to Spain with the Earl of Essex to attack the Catholic king, but had been himself converted to Catholicism by a Jesuit priest. Another shuttled back and forth between Groton and Ireland, setting the ladies' tongues wagging wherever he went, and finally getting himself excommunicated, apparently because he failed to obtain a proper divorce from one wife before marrying another. The Winthrop tribe was a large one, and sooner or later, good or bad, they all showed up at Groton.

John's father, the second Adam Winthrop of Groton, was one of the good ones. He had been trained in the law, but after coming into possession of the manor he devoted himself entirely to the difficult business of making it a success. For nearly half a century prices had been rising all over England and Europe, with disastrous results for gentlemen like himself, who lived on the rents received from tenants. Rents were often fixed by law, so that they could not be raised to match the rise in prices, nor could the tenants be evicted. Such was the case with some of the lands at Groton; on the rest the lord of the manor could grow crops for his own use or for sale. Adam saw where the main chance lay and made the most of the untenanted

lands. Groton was near enough to London to profit by the rising metropolitan demand for foodstuffs; and by the time John was five years old, Adam was collecting £62 a year from the sale of crops, a little more than he obtained from all his rents. In addition to Groton Manor, he held land as a tenant on three or four manors nearby, and he was constantly buying more. Adam was a country gentleman, but he was also a good businessman, and the Winthrop family fortunes rose steadily under his guidance. It would be up to John to keep them rising. From Adam he learned how.

What else John learned from his father or his mother would be hard to say. The few surviving letters of his mother's suggest that she was a pious woman, and he may have received a religious bent from her. However, with a Roman Catholic and an excommunicated bigamist familiar and welcome guests at the manor, the Winthrops cannot have been a narrow-minded family.

When John was seven, Adam was paying John Chaplyn, vicar of a nearby church, for "scholinge." The boy was evidently being prepared for college. It had already become fashionable for gentlemen and even noblemen to send their sons to the universities, and Suffolk men went to Cambridge. Adam himself had gone there, in fact had married as his first wife the sister of John Still, then master of Trinity College. Probably through this connection he gained the office of auditor at Trinity and St. John's, and every year in late November or early December mounted his horse and rode away to Cambridge to audit the accounts and renew old friendships. In 1602 on one of his regular trips he got his son admitted, and the following March John, now fifteen, went off to college.

Here the great Thomas Nevile, master of Trinity, was pulling down old buildings and throwing up new ones to

produce the magnificent court with its great fountain in the center. At the same time he was making the college foremost in the university for scholarship. The students responded to his efforts not merely in their studies, but in ways that students esteem more highly than scholarship: they had "provision of stones layd up; and also of some bucketts to be provided to fetch water from her conduyt, to poure downne upon St. John's men." They also had a reputation for demonstrating their prowess in another manner: "Oh the greivous sinnes of T Colledg," sighed one pious student a few years before Winthrop entered, for the boys "had a woman which was from chamber to chamber on the night tyme."

How all this struck John Winthrop is hard to say. He later remembered that his "lusts were so masterly as no good could fasten upon mee," but this was a conventional way for men of his time to speak of their youth. He was certainly homesick: "I fell into a lingring feaver, which took away the comfort of my life. For being there neglected, and despised, I went up and down mourning with myself." Since it was not customary for sons of gentlemen to stay at college long enough for a degree anyhow, John was back at Groton within two years, ready to do his part in advancing the family fortunes.

Opportunity came quickly. About the time of his return Mr. John Forth of Great Stambridge in the neighboring county of Essex paid a visit to Adam Winthrop, and the two of them talked about a possible match between John and Forth's daughter Mary. It was proper for parents to arrange these things. The children might be consulted, but marriages involved the transfer of large amounts of property belonging to the parents. When a boy and girl were married, the father of each of them was expected to

endow the couple with capital in land, goods, or money, and every father wished to make a good bargain, to get as much as possible out of the other father. Adam's bargain with Forth evidently was a favorable one and included large quantities of land. When John returned from Cambridge, he and his father rode to Great Stambridge, and on March 28, 1605, the couple were contracted, a ceremony corresponding to our engagement. Within three weeks they were married, John having then attained the age of seventeen. Ten months later he was a father.

It was a solemn young man who brought his youth to a close by so early a marriage. Somewhere, at Groton or Cambridge or Great Stambridge — it is impossible to say where — John Winthrop had caught a fever more lingering than the one that took away his comforts in college. He had caught the fever of Puritanism.

Superficially Puritanism was only a belief that the Church of England should be purged of its hierarchy and of the traditions and ceremonies inherited from Rome. But those who had caught the fever knew that Puritanism demanded more of the individual than it did of the church. Once it took possession of a man, it was seldom shaken off and would shape — some people would say warp — his whole life. Puritanism was a power not to be denied. It did great things for England and for America, but only by creating in the men and women it affected a tension which was at best painful and at worst unbearable. Puritanism required that a man devote his life to seeking salvation but told him he was helpless to do anything but evil. Puritanism required that he rest his whole hope in Christ but taught him that Christ would utterly reject him unless before he was born God had foreordained his

salvation. Puritanism required that man refrain from sin but told him he would sin anyhow. Puritanism required that he reform the world in the image of God's holy kingdom but taught him that the evil of the world was incurable and inevitable. Puritanism required that he work to the best of his ability at whatever task was set before him and partake of the good things that God had filled the world with but told him he must enjoy his work and his pleasures only, as it were, absent-mindedly, with his attention fixed on God.

These paradoxical, not to say contradictory, requirements affected different people in different ways. Some lived in an agony of uncertainty, wondering each day whether God had singled them out for eternal glory or eternal torment. Some enjoyed a holy certainty and went their indomitable ways with never a look backward. Some spent their lives demonstrating to themselves and everyone else how holy they were. All labored hard, and some by so doing amassed great wealth or won fame among their fellow men — but never dared enjoy it.

Puritanism meant many things. But to young John Winthrop it principally meant the problem of living in this world without taking his mind off God. It would have been easier to withdraw from the world, as the monks and hermits did, to devote oneself wholly to God, but that was not permitted. Puritans must live in the world, not leave it. For a time Winthrop thought he would study divinity and enter the ministry. In that profession he might at least have been freed from the distractions of ordinary business in order to concentrate his attention on God. But his friends dissuaded him, and anyway it was not so much his business as his pleasures that laid snares for him. He was a countryman of

simple tastes who liked good food, good drink, and good company. He liked his wife. He liked to stroll by the river with a fowling piece and have a go at the birds. He liked to smoke a pipe. He liked to tinker with gadgets. He liked all the things that God had given him, and he knew it was right to like them, because they were God-given. But how was one to keep from liking them too much? How love the world with moderation and God without?

After his marriage he tried one way after another to keep his exuberant worldly spirit within bounds and gradually denied himself many of the things that he liked most. He resolved, as he noted in a sporadic record he kept of his religious experiences, to give up his tinkering "and to content my selfe with such things as were lefte by our forefathers." He resolved to give up shooting, after a prolonged and revealing argument with himself. For one thing, he said, it was against the law, and "though the lawe cannot binde from the use of the creatures, yet it may limitt the manner of taking them." It took too much time. It was too strenuous ("it toyles a mans bodye overmuch"). It was dangerous. It was expensive (if you were caught, the fine was more than a man ought to pay for such a sport). Finally he came to the most telling point: "lastly for mine owne part I have ever binne crossed in usinge it, for when I have gone about it not without some woundes of conscience, and have taken much paynes and hazarded my healthe, I have gotten sometimes a verye little but most commonly nothings at all towards my cost and laboure." In other words, he was a poor shot!

To Winthrop there was nothing incongruous or hypocritical about this reasoning. Shooting was not a legitimate recreation for a Puritan unless he got a satisfaction from it