

# An Outline of American Literature

Peter B. High

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Peter B. High

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*American Literature*



**Longman**

London and New York

**Longman Group Limited,**

*Longman House, Burnt Mill, Harlow,  
Essex CM20 2JE, England  
and Associated Companies throughout the world.*

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*Published in the United States of America by  
Longman Inc., New York*

First published 1986

ISBN 0 582 74502 0

Set in Monophoto Lasercomp Baskerville

Produced by Longman Group (FE) Ltd

Printed in Hong Kong

**BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING  
IN PUBLICATION DATA**

High, Peter B.

An Outline of American Literature

1. American Literature - History  
and criticism

I. Title

810.9 PS88

**LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING  
IN PUBLICATION DATA**

High, Peter B.

An Outline of American Literature.

Includes index.

1. American literature - Study and teaching.

2. American literature - history and criticism.

3. English language - Text-books for foreign speakers.

I. Title.

PS92.H54 1986 810.9 85-19766

**Acknowledgements**

Special thanks to: George Farina, who initiated the project; John Edlund, who collaborated in the original planning; and Prof. Takagi Taikan, for valuable advice and encouragement.

We should like to thank the following for permission to reproduce the photographs:

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Frontispiece illustration for Captain John Smith's General Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles

## Chapter One

# Colonial Beginnings

The story of American literature begins in the early 1600s, long before there were any “Americans”. The earliest writers were Englishmen describing the English exploration and colonization of the New World (America). THOMAS HARIOT’s *Briefe and True Report of the New-Found Land of Virginia* (1588) was only the first of many such works. Back in England, people planning to move to Virginia or New England would read the books as travel guides. But this was dangerous because such books often mixed facts with fantasy<sup>1</sup>. For example, one writer (WILLIAM WOOD) claimed that he had seen lions in Massachusetts. It is probable that these “true reports” had a second kind of reader. People could certainly read them as tales of adventure and excitement. Like modern readers of science fiction<sup>2</sup>, they could enjoy imaginary voyages to places they could never visit in reality.

The writings of CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH (1580–1631) probably satisfied readers of both kinds. A real adventurer, he had fought the Turks in Hungary, where he was wounded and taken prisoner. He was sold as a slave and escaped by killing his master. In 1607, he helped found<sup>3</sup> Jamestown, the first English colony in America. Although the details are not always correct, his *True Relation of Virginia* (1608) and *Description of New England* (1616) are fascinating “advertisements” which try to persuade the reader to settle in the New World. The Puritans<sup>4</sup>, for instance, studied his *Description of New England* carefully and then decided to settle there in 1620. Smith was often boastful

<sup>1</sup> *fantasy*, imagination.

<sup>2</sup> *fiction*, stories from a writer’s imagination.

<sup>3</sup> *found*, start (a colony, college etc.).

<sup>4</sup> *Puritans*, believers in a simple Christian religion without ceremony.

about his own adventures in his books. His *General Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* (1624) contains the story of his rescue by a beautiful Indian princess. The story is probably untrue, but it is the first famous tale from American literature. His Elizabethan<sup>5</sup> style is not always easy to read, and his punctuation was strange even for the seventeenth century. Still, he can tell a good story:

Two great stones were brought before<sup>A</sup> Powhattan (*the Indian "King"*): then as many as could dragged him (*Smith*) to them, and thereon<sup>B</sup> laid his head, and being ready with their clubs, to beat out his brains, Pocahontas, the King's dearest daughter, got his head in her arms, and laid down her own (*head*) upon his to save him from death: whereat<sup>C</sup> the King was contented<sup>D</sup> he should live.

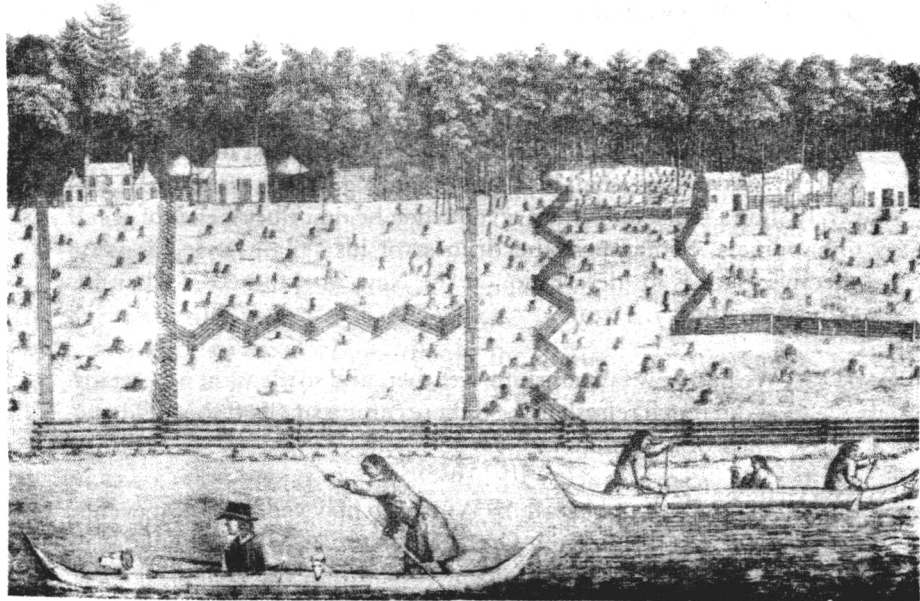
<sup>A</sup> in front of    <sup>B</sup> on them (the stones)    <sup>C</sup> because of that    <sup>D</sup> agreed

Almost from the beginning, as the English settled along the Atlantic coast of America, there were important differences between the Southern and the New England colonies. In the South, enormous farms or "plantations" used the labor of black slaves to grow tobacco. The rich and powerful plantation owners were slow to develop a literature of their own. They preferred books imported from England. But in New England, the Puritan settlers had come to the New World in order to form a society based on strict Christian beliefs. Like the Puritans in England, who were fighting against the English king (in a war that lasted from 1642 to 1652), they believed that society should be based on the laws of God. Therefore they had a far stronger sense of unity and of a "shared purpose". This was one of the reasons why culture<sup>6</sup> and literature developed much faster than in the South. Harvard, the first college in the colonies, was founded near Boston in 1636 in order to train new Puritan ministers. The first printing press in America was started there in 1638, and America's first newspaper began in Boston in 1704.

The most interesting works of New England Puritan literature were histories. To the Puritans, history developed according to "God's

<sup>5</sup> *Elizabethan*, of the time of Elizabeth I (Queen of England 1558-1603).

<sup>6</sup> *culture*, the particular way of living and thinking of a society, including its art.



1. The original of this picture  
is the property of the  
author of the book  
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copied.

*PLANT OF AN AMERICAN NEW-CLEARED FARM.*

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*An early farming settlement on former forest land*

plan". In all of their early New England histories, they saw New England as the "Promised Land" of the Bible. The central drama of history was the struggle between Christ and Satan.

*Of Plymouth Plantation* by WILLIAM BRADFORD (1590-1657) is the most interesting of the Puritan histories. It describes the Puritans' difficult relations with the Indians. It also describes their difficulties during the first winter, when half of the small colony died. This is all told in the wonderful "plain style" which the Puritans admired. In order to present the "clear light of truth" to uneducated readers, Puritan writers avoided elegant language. The examples they used were drawn either from the Bible or from the everyday life of farmers and fishermen. At the same time, Bradford's history is deeply influenced by the belief that God directs everything that happens. Each event he writes about begins with, "It pleased God to . . ."



*The History of New England* by JOHN WINTHROP (1588–1649) is also in the “plain style”. But it is far less cheerful. Winthrop was the first governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony and, like most of the Puritan writers, was a minister all his life. His writing style is rather cold. He rarely shows shock or sadness, even when he describes scenes of great unhappiness. Sometimes, the dryness of his “plain style” is very effective. This is his description of the New England coast when he arrived on June 7, 1630:

We had now fair sunshine weather, and so pleasant a sweet air as did much refresh us, and there came a smell off shore like the smell of a garden.

(ˈpjʊərɪtən) (清教徒)

Like all of the Puritan historians, Winthrop believed that most events could be seen as a sign from God. For example, when a snake was found and killed in a church, people saw this as the victory of New England religion over Satan.

The first Puritans were not very democratic. *The Wonder-Working Providence of Sion's Saviour in New England* (1650), by EDWARD JOHNSON (1598–1672), defends the harsh laws made by the Puritan leaders. Everybody had to obey these church laws. Believers in other forms of Christianity were called “snakes” or even worse names. Puritan society was a “theocracy”: the laws of society and the laws of religion were the same. Those who broke the laws were punished severely. *A Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline* (1648) by THOMAS HOOKER (1586–1647) is the most famous statement of these Puritan laws. Less severe was JOHN COTTON's *Way of the Churches of Christ in New England* (1645). In fact, by the beginning of the 1700s, newer Puritan ideas were becoming important to the development of democracy.

Even in the early days, some writers were struggling hard against the Puritan theocracy. ANNE HUTCHINSON (1590–1643) and ROGER WILLIAMS (1603–1683) both desired a freer religious environment. Rogers, who went off to establish his own colony in Rhode Island, was especially important. His *Bloudy Tenent* (1644) became a famous statement of the case for religious freedom. To him, freedom was not only “good in itself”, it was a necessary condition for “the growth and development of the soul”.

The New Englanders were quite successful at keeping the absolute

“purity” of Puritanism during the early, difficult days of settlement. But when the Indians were no longer a danger, the dark forests had become farmland, and more comfortable settlements had grown up, Puritan strictness began to relax. The change was very slow and was not easily recognized by New Englanders at the time. By looking at the early history of the Mather family in New England, we can see how the Puritan tradition<sup>7</sup> grew weaker and weaker.

RICHARD MATHER (1596–1669), the founder of his family in America, was greatly admired as a typical strong Puritan minister. Another preacher, who knew Richard Mather well, described his way of preaching as *very plain, studiously avoiding obscure*<sup>8</sup> terms”.

INCREASE MATHER (1639–1723), his son, was a leader of the New England theocracy until it began to fall apart at the end of the seventeenth century. He was also a minister at North Church in Boston, the most powerful church in New England. The 1690s was the time of the great witchcraft<sup>9</sup> panic. In the town of Salem, Massachusetts, young girls and lonely old women were arrested and put on trial as *witches*. A number of these people were put to death for “selling their souls” to the Devil. Increase Mather’s best-known book, *Remarkable Providences* (1684), tells us much about the psychological environment of the time. The book is filled with the Puritans’ strange beliefs. To Mather and other Puritans, witchcraft and other forms of evil were an absolutely real part of everyday life.

Increase’s son, COTTON MATHER (1663–1728), became the most famous of the family. He had “an *insane* genius<sup>10</sup> for advertising himself”. He wrote more than 450 works. Whenever something happened to him in his life, Cotton Mather wrote a religious book. When his first wife died, he published<sup>11</sup> a long sermon<sup>11</sup> called *Death Made Easy and Happy*. When his little daughter died, he wrote *The Best Way of Living, Which is to Die Daily*. Most of these works were quite short and are of little interest to us today. But some, such as his famous *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), were very long and were published in many volumes. He was certain that his longest work, *The Angel of*

<sup>7</sup> tradition, beliefs and customs passed from older to younger people.

<sup>8</sup> obscure, not clear.

巫术<sup>9</sup> witchcraft, the imagined ability to work magic of certain women (witches).

<sup>10</sup> publish, print and sell (books etc.); n. publisher, publication.

<sup>11</sup> sermon, religious address.

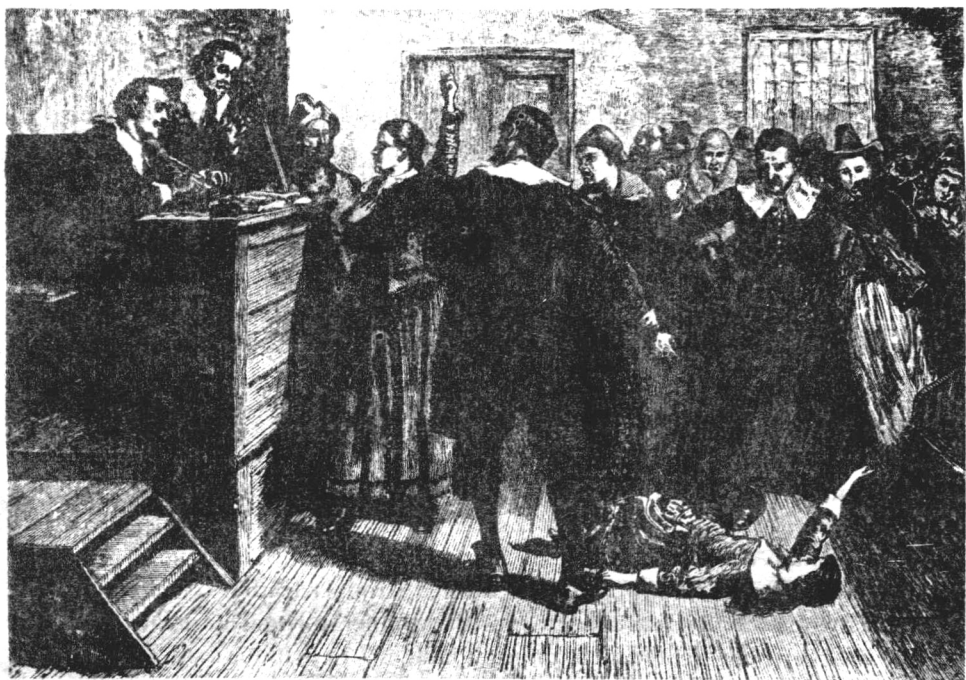


Cotton Mather

*Bethesda* (written in 1723), would “prove one of the most useful books that have been published in the World”. But the book was so long, no one ever tried to publish it. Cotton’s *Diary* gives us a clear picture of the inner life of this strange and often unpleasant man. On almost every page, he speaks of his special relationship with God. When he had a pain in his stomach or teeth, he thought about how he had broken God’s law with his stomach or teeth. During his last years, he expressed shock at the “increasing wickedness” of the people around him, including his own children.

The most fascinating part of his *Magnalia Christi Americana* is the description of the Salem witch trials. He makes it clear that he personally believed that this was an “assault<sup>12</sup> from Hell” and that all of New England was filled with evil spirits from hell. At the same time, he admitted that the witch trials had been a mistake and that it was good that they were finally stopped.

<sup>12</sup> assault, attack.



*The witch trials in Salem, Massachusetts, in the 1690s*

The writings of Cotton Mather show how the later Puritan writers moved away from the “plain style” of their grandfathers. The language is complicated and filled with strange words from Latin. Although Mather called his style “a cloth of gold”, ordinary people usually found it hard to read.

In the writings of the earliest Puritans, we often find poems on religious themes<sup>13</sup>. ANNE BRADSTREET (1612–1672) was the first real New England poet. Her *Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up In America* (1650), contained the first New World poems published in England. None of her early poems are very good. Her later poems, written with charming simplicity, show her progress in the art. She refuses “to sing of Wars, of Captains, and of Kings”. Instead, she gives us a look into the heart of a seventeenth-century American woman.

The poetry of MICHAEL WIGGLESWORTH (1631–1705), on the other hand, is meant to frighten readers with a picture of the day when the

<sup>13</sup> *theme*, subject (of a piece of writing etc.).

Simplicity (ˈsɪmˈplɪsɪti] = 1911年 2 朴素。 简单

Puritan God will judge mankind. The sound is often ugly, but the images are powerful:

No heart so bold, but<sup>A</sup> now grows cold  
and almost dead with fear

Some hide themselves in Caves and Delves<sup>B</sup>,  
in places underground

<sup>A</sup> so brave that it does not become    <sup>B</sup> holes dug in hillside

(*The Day of Doom*, 1662)

The poetry of EDWARD TAYLOR (1645–1729) was unknown to American literary historians until 1937. Written during the last years of the Puritan theocracy, it is some of the finest poetry written in Colonial America. Like Cotton Mather, Taylor hoped for a “rebirth” of the “Puritan Way”. Mather wanted stronger leaders for society. Taylor, however, was concerned with the inner spiritual life of Puritan believers. He created rich, unusual images<sup>14</sup> to help his reader “see, hear, taste and feel religious doctrine”. In one poem, he describes truly religious people. They are as rare “As Black Swans that in milkwhite Rivers are.” Sometimes, he sounds quite modern. In a poem about the making of the universe, he asks, “Who in this Bowling Alley bowled the Sun?”

Throughout American history, even in the twentieth century, there have been many sudden explosions of religious emotion. One of the most famous, called the “Great Awakening”, began about 1730. Preachers like George Whitfield toured the country, telling people to “repent<sup>15</sup> and be saved by the New Light”. The sermons of JONATHAN EDWARDS (1703–1758) were so powerful – and so frightening – that his church was often filled with screams and crying: “The God that holds you over the fire of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors<sup>16</sup> you,” he said. The sermon from which this line is taken, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (1733), is still famous for its literary quality. Later in life, Edwards developed into a

<sup>14</sup> *image*, a picture brought into the mind by words; *imagery* = the use of such words.

<sup>15</sup> *repent*, be sorry for one's wrongdoing.

<sup>16</sup> *abhor*, hate; n. *abhorrence*.



great theologian, or religious philosopher. In his *Freedom of Will* (1754), he tried to build a philosophy based on the Puritan faith.

The Puritans admired science as "the study of God's material creation". Edwards developed this idea further. He said that there was a close relation between knowledge of the physical world and knowledge of the spiritual world. This idea created a bridge between the old strict Puritan society and the new, freer culture which came later, with its scientific study of the world.

Although literature developed far more slowly in the South than in New England, a few early writers are worth mentioning. In Virginia, ROBERT BEVERLEY (1673-1722) wrote intelligently about nature and society. His *History and Present State of Virginia* (1705) is written in a plain, clear style, mixing wild humor with scientific observation. Although he was a strong defender of black slavery, his section on the Indians of Virginia is free of race hatred. Even more amusing is the *History of the Dividing Line* by WILLIAM BYRD (1674-1744). Writing for London audiences, Byrd used humor and realism to describe life along the dividing line (or frontier) between Virginia's settled areas and the deep forest. His opinions about the Indians were surprisingly liberal<sup>17</sup> for the time. He felt that the English should marry them rather than fight them. He had a similarly liberal view of blacks: "We all know that very bright Talents may be lodged under a dark Skin." These ideas were certainly not shared by the majority of Southern plantation owners.

<sup>17</sup> *liberal*, ready to understand other people and their opinions.



Engraved & Printed & Sold by PAUL REVEREND BOSTON

Unhappy Boston! see thy Sons declare  
 Thy hallow'd Walks besmear'd with guileless gore  
 While faithless P—n and his savage Bands  
 With murderous Rencour stretch their bloody Hands  
 Like fierce Barbarians gazing o'er their prey  
 Approve the Carnage and enjoy the Day.

If falling drops from Rage from Anguish wring  
 If speechless Sorrow lab'ring for a Tongue  
 Or if a weeping World can ought appeal  
 The plaintive Ghosts of Victims such as these  
 The Patriot's copious Tears for each are shed  
 A glorious Tribute which embalms the Dead.

But know Fate summons to that awful Goal  
 Where Justice strips the Murderer of his Soul  
 Should venal C—ts the scandal of the Land  
 Snatch the relentless Villain from her Hand  
 Keen Execrations on this Plate infer'd  
 Shall reach a Judge who never can be brib'd

The unhappy Sufferers were Messrs. SAM<sup>l</sup> GRAY SAM<sup>l</sup> MAVERICK, JAM<sup>s</sup> CALDWELL, CRISPUS ATTUCKS & PAT<sup>r</sup> CARP  
 Killed Six men & maimed two of them (CHRIST<sup>m</sup> MONK & JOHN CLARK) Mortally

British soldiers fire on Americans in the Boston Massacre of 1770

# The Birth of a Nation

The most memorable writing in eighteenth-century America was done by the Founding Fathers, the men who led the Revolution of 1775–1783 and who wrote the Constitution<sup>1</sup> of 1789. None of them were writers of fiction. Rather, they were practical philosophers, and their most typical product was the political pamphlet<sup>2</sup>. They both admired and were active in the European “Age of Reason” or “Enlightenment”. They shared the Enlightenment belief that human intelligence (or “reason”) could understand both nature and man. Unlike the Puritans – who saw man as a sinful failure – the Enlightenment thinkers were sure man could improve himself. They wanted to create a happy society based on justice and freedom.

The writings of BENJAMIN FRANKLIN (1706–1790) show the Enlightenment spirit in America at its best and most optimistic. His style is quite modern and, even today, his works are a joy to read. Although he strongly disagreed with the opinions of the Puritans, his works show a return to their “plain style”. At the same time, there is something “anti-literary” about Franklin. He had no liking for poetry and felt that writing should always have a practical purpose.

We can see these ideas even in his earliest work, the *Dogood Papers* (1722), written when he was only sixteen. These are a series of short pieces which are very funny, but full of moral advice (praising honesty and attacking drunkenness, etc.). His *Poor Richard's Almanac* (1732–1757) gives similar advice. Almanacs, containing much useful information for farmers and sailors (about the next year's weather, sea tides, etc.), were a popular form of practical literature. Together with

<sup>1</sup> *Constitution*, statement of how a country is to be governed.

<sup>2</sup> *pamphlet*, short book of a few pages.