

# NEW ENGLAND'S CRISES AND CULTURAL MEMORY

*Literature, Politics, History, Religion, 1620–1860*

JOHN McWILLIAMS

*Middlebury College*



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Calamities are the caustics and cathartics of the body politic. They arouse the soul. They restore original virtues.

John Adams, writing as John Winthrop,  
"Governor Winthrop to Governor Bradford,"  
*Boston Gazette*, January 1767

The generations of men are not like the leaves on the trees, which fall and renew themselves without melioration or change; individuals disappear like the foliage and the flowers; the existence of our kind is continuous, and its ages are reciprocally dependent. Were it not so, there would be no great truths inspiring action, no laws regulating human achievements; the movement of the living world would be as the ebb and flow of the ocean; and the mind would no more be touched by the visible agency of Providence in human affairs.

George Bancroft, *History of the United States*, iv (1852)

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As published, this book is a much shortened version of a manuscript entitled “New England’s Crises,” which can be consulted in the Abernethy Collection of the Middlebury College Library. Three of the nine chapters contain revisions of parts of previous essays. Chapter 2, “Thomas Morton: Phoenix of New England Memory,” is a reworking of “Fictions of Merry Mount,” published in *American Quarterly*, 29 (1977), 3–30. The first half of chapter 6, “Race, War, and White Magic: The Neglected Legacy of Salem,”

includes a revised version of "Indian John and the Northern Tawnies," first published in *New England Quarterly*, 69 (1996), 580–604, and since republished in Alden Vaughan's *New England Encounters* (Northeastern University Press, 1999). Chapter 8 includes revised portions of "Lexington, Concord and the 'Hinge of the Future'" (*American Literary History*, 6 [1993], 1–29) and "The Faces of Ethan Allen" (*New England Quarterly*, 49 [1976], 257–282).

The incorporating of parts of these essays into a much larger argument has demanded a broadening of historical and literary contexts in order to reflect new critical approaches and recent scholarship. But it would be disingenuous not to say that, in revising my earlier forays into the Matter of New England, I have discovered a need to write with greater tolerance and less smarty definitiveness. This tradition is complex, interwoven, self-reflexive, and deserving of more than one lifetime of study. Despite many an exclusionary sin and consequent affliction, New England historical writing has given us a profound and enduring cultural legacy. It would be folly not to respect it, especially because it stands so self-accused.

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## *Introduction*

### *Crisis rhetoric: exclusion in New England history*

First, the inevitable question about a well-traveled road. Why, in a time of cultural studies that assimilate race and gender criticism, should anyone write yet another book centering on the Anglo-protestant northeastern writers, mostly male, who seem to comprise that regrettably inescapable term "Puritanism"? The field would seem to be as overworked, as exhausted, as a New England upland farm during the 1890s. One undeniable rejoinder would be that, since Vernon Parrington launched this academic complaint in the 1920s, hundreds of scholarly books on New England Puritanism and its authorial galaxy have testified to the lasting importance of the tradition.<sup>1</sup> Nor has Puritanism remained a dead letter, recalled only in scarlet, in twentieth-century literature. The famed title of Santayana's novel notwithstanding, we are perennially ready to entertain yet another rediscovery of "the last Puritan," whether in the guise of T. S. Eliot's assimilation of his New England roots to his Anglican present (*Four Quartets*), Robert Lowell's decidedly protestant Catholicism (*Lord Weary's Castle*), John Updike's witty broodings on sin and sexuality in New England suburbia (*Couples*), or Donald Hall's up-country generational pastoralism (*String too Short to be Saved*). The overhasty foreclosure of George Bancroft's insistence that Samuel Adams had been "the last Puritan" in America has been demonstrated again and again.<sup>2</sup>

The lasting power and sheer volume of New England literary tradition, from William Bradford's *History* and John Winthrop's *Journal* onward, surely originate in the Puritan faith in the power and authenticity of the written word. God's Word, rather than the liturgy of any Anglo-Catholic priest, was to be the absolute standard for human conduct. *Sola scriptura*. But just as man's words, spoken or written, could draw near to God's Word, so later New England generations could draw near to the spirit of the forefathers by reading – and revising – the words of their community and regional histories. The opening of the good news from St. John, "In the beginning was the Word," would continue to be applicable to immediate

secular history as long as the New England past remained demonstrably imbued with divine purpose and the prospect of spiritual fulfillment. To antebellum New Englanders, the postmodernist distinction between signifier and signified was literally inconceivable. Until the time of Henry Adams, word was assumed to correspond to thing; truth was ultimately one. Properly understood, the deeds and discoveries of "the Puritan forefathers" held forth standards of spiritual value and communal conduct upon which contemporaries could, should, and ultimately must build.

The resulting search was to continue much longer, however, than we usually believe. Robert Lowell's splendid posthumous essay on the region he loved and hated, "New England and Further," attacks New England's pretension by symbolizing its empty contemporary end ("And inland, still shunning the light of day though now elmless, stand the white rectilinear houses, marked 1810 – nothing changed without, nothing regained within"), but simultaneously insists that there remains something "spiritual, or rather invisible . . . a longing in New England so strong for what is not that what is not perhaps exists."<sup>3</sup> The betrayal and the longing, Lowell knew, had been complementary, even symbiotic responses for three centuries. When intense longing for a perhaps unrealizable spirit becomes the defining trait of a regional culture, that unrealizable spirit paradoxically exists in the very words used to try to describe it. Not for nothing did Robert Lowell once plan a book – and write three vivid poems – on Jonathan Edwards, whose search for God's grace had left him continually conscious of his inability to describe the fleeting moment of union with the divine through the flawed medium of human words.

The fact that the Puritan and neo-Puritan tradition has yielded durable harvest is, however, no excuse for a scholarly book that would merely pick the same fruits and align them into slightly different patterns. The contribution I hope to make to the study of American Puritanism rests on three conceptual differences. Perry Miller established a tradition of studying Puritanism from within, citing as American Puritanism's defining texts the sermons, theological works, diaries, and histories of New England Protestant leaders, mostly clergymen. From Perry Miller to Sacvan Bercovitch and beyond, although differences among Puritans have often been emphasized, the predominant assumption has been that collective abstractions like "the New England Way," "the New England Mind," "the American Jeremiad," and especially "the Puritans" not only existed but continuously outlasted any theological/political impasses proclaimed during particular controversies. Within this scholarly tradition, evolving traditions of Puritan rhetoric have thus often been emphasized at the expense of their origins

in historical events.<sup>4</sup> In fact, however, the verifiable stuff of harsh and hard-won conflict – starvation, covenants, extradition, wars, revolution, mob violence, battle bravery, self-sacrificial protest – had given rise to the tropes and evolving symbology through which New England historical writers reinterpreted past crises. By summarizing what historians now believe “actually happened” during perceived crises, I hope to put the floor of recoverable historical fact back beneath and beside the grand designs of New England mission, and to see what emerges. I aspire to the quality Clifford Geertz once called “thick description”; I assume that cultural history has a “shifting collection of meanings” from which one must draw “explanatory conclusions from the better guesses.”<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, recent scholarship has made it indefensible to maintain that the selection of primary texts, and their alignment to genres, should follow the unbranching path of regional male leadership. For Perry Miller, belief in the existence of the New England Mind meant that Puritan beliefs and Puritanism’s major doctrinal controversies had to be clarified through study of the works of expository prose written by those Puritans most directly involved in them. Novelists, poets, and dramatists, especially those from without New England’s borders, were excluded from scholarly view as if their contributions had been merely imaginative, often Mencknite, and therefore uninformed. In recent years, American exceptionalism has been rather roundly attacked, and the canon of literary works pertinent to Puritanism has been considerably broadened, but American exceptionalism has been criticized chiefly by noting similarities and unanimities within the experiences, and within the expository prose, of British and American Puritans.<sup>6</sup>

I seek multiple kinds of widening. I propose to select crises based on events within New England history, and then to study recreations of those crises in writings of many genres, by women and men from diverse traditions, with a time of publication ranging from Bradford’s and Winslow’s *Mourt’s Relation* (1622) through Lydia Maria Child’s *The First Settlers of New England* (1829), through the histories of the fourth generation Adamses (1880–1920), to the poetry of Robert Lowell and to Maryse Condé’s *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (1986). To me, it is the cumulative discourse among these voices that has always, at any historical juncture, made up “American Puritanism” as it should be understood, then and now. Nor is this cumulative discourse obtainable by simply adding in writings by women, Native Americans and blacks. Are Samuel Adams’s rebellious editorials and Theodore Parker’s jeremiads still to be excluded from the American Puritan tradition because their authors (certainly of old New England lineage) were

not neo-Calvinist preachers? Are Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* to be excluded from the "matter" of Puritanism because their authors were not New Englanders? Or, to turn the tables against more recent assumptions, are we now to slight the importance of Mather's *Magnalia* or Bancroft's *History* because neither the works nor their authors represent diversity and diverging traditions as we now understand those terms? Ours is a postcanonical, and therefore revisionist, time, but surely, if we are to understand the past on its own terms, the very real benefits of searching for diversity within New England's first two hundred years must be supplemental and corrective rather than substitutional.

The third difference: in spite of this book's broad time range, my focus in examining the reconstruction of "American Puritanism" will be upon the historical memory of early nineteenth-century New England.<sup>7</sup> It was at this time that the crosscurrents in attitudes toward the Puritan heritage became most acute and arguably most important. Tenth generation descendants of the founding families of 1620 and 1630 needed to make sense of their heritage. In particular, they needed to find the providential connections between the three eras of greatest significance to the presumed advance of protestant virtue: the plantations of 1620 and 1630, New England's Time of Troubles from 1675 to 1700, and New England's early leadership of the revolution that would form the American Republic. (Hence the tripartite division of this book's chapters.) Nineteenth-century immigrants needed to be encouraged to understand that heritage and those connections. Whether "the Puritans" had ever been synonymous with "New England," and whether America was in any sense New England writ large, posed complementary definitional problems that elicited both pride and anxiety, creating multiple possibilities for the use of synecdoche and metonymy in writing about the regional past.<sup>8</sup> The many New England commemorative addresses, which began in Plymouth in 1776 and climaxed in the bicentennial addresses of Massachusetts settlements' foundings between 1820 and 1840, effectively replaced Election Day sermons as occasions for lending remembrance of forefathers. While serving contemporary political purpose, these bicentennial orations added a national dimension to local history in ways that show the difficulties of assimilating Calvinism into Republicanism.<sup>9</sup> The complexity and significance of Hawthorne's historical short stories derive from his artful ways of negotiating these same crosscurrents.

We need to recognize that by the mid-1830s an acute and ominous tension existed between New England's pride in its past and the growing signs that New England, despite its recurrent claim to represent the entire

Republic, might soon become a geographically enclosed backwater, isolated from an America growing ever westward and gravitating ever southward. Such a shift in the Republic's geopolitical center diminished the prospects for the growth of both New England's economic prosperity and its protestant mission. More importantly, it threatened to transfer power from the very intellectual tradition through which Republican liberty had evolved, toward the misconceived claim that the Great American Republic would, like Greece and Rome, support as well as condone slavery. Hence my final chapter will explore the neglected connection between the Garrisonian abolitionists of Massachusetts and their need to reassert New England's national leadership through remembrance of the forefathers.

Insofar as this book has a single major figure, it can only be the now neglected literary historian who endeavored, as Bercovitch noted, to make a grand synthesis out of New England and the South, Calvinism and Republicanism, American nationalism and the growing worldwide power of Liberty as exercised through the popular will – namely, George Bancroft. Although Bancroft may have grown up on a Worcester farm, attended Unitarian Harvard, and served as a collector for the Port of Boston, he was neither the parochial New Englander nor the spread-eagle nationalist zealot he is popularly assumed to be. When Bancroft returned to Cambridge after four years of *wanderjahren* earning a Göttingen Ph.D., Andrews Norton judged him a Europeanized fop and promptly cut his acquaintance. Recurrent mention of Bancroft's founding of the Naval Academy at Annapolis has obscured his stints as ambassador to the court of St. James and to Berlin. Most important for our purposes, however, is Bancroft's decision, after his term in Polk's cabinet in Washington, to move to New York, rather than return to Boston, in order to complete the remaining seven volumes of his *History*.<sup>10</sup> Here is the equivalent of William Dean Howells's move from Boston to New York a generation later – both a cause and a sign that the center of the American intellectual/publishing world was shifting away from Boston.

Revering both the Puritans and Thomas Jefferson, writing about providential causation like a Unitarian while insisting he was a Congregationalist, hating slavery but unwilling to sever liberty from constitutional union, Bancroft remains, in his determination to make one whole out of all sequential controversies, the New Englander who best serves as the template for his age's view of the American past. So many editions and reprintings of Bancroft's *History* were published in the half-century after 1834 that sales figures have not been hazarded. Compared to the stylistic power and daring breadth of Bancroft's immensely popular *History*, John Gorham Palfrey's

still useful *History of New England* (1858–1890) seems dutiful and pedantic, ultimately parochial in spite of its undeniable corrective contributions.

Setting out in the early 1830s to write national history after a New England upbringing and years of European travel, Bancroft faced formidable problems of mediation. At the exact moment when the new demand for the immediate abolition of slavery broke apart the era of good feelings, Bancroft faced the challenge of balancing, for a national if not international readership, the competing claims to be advanced for Columbus or Cabot, Jamestown or Plymouth, John Smith or John Winthrop, Patrick Henry or Sam Adams, Thomas Jefferson or John Adams. The contributions of all needed to be seen as one even at a time of increasingly recognized sectional hostility between Virginia and Massachusetts, North and South. There was the need to show how American protestantism was an outgrowth of old world reformation, while still somehow preserving what we now call American “exceptionalism.” Even more pressingly, there was the need to praise the wisdom of the popular will, emerging as the undirected consensus of a free Republican people, while still acknowledging that national leadership must be exercised by those individuals most qualified, and often best educated, to do so.

Training and circumstance left Bancroft with fruitfully conflicted attitudes. In Germany he had absorbed the international positivism of Comte, the nationalism of Herder, and the beginnings of Von Ranke’s empiricism (“how things really were”).<sup>11</sup> The resulting tension between Bancroft’s desire to record fact and his desire to pen narratives of democratic progress would never be resolved. While recognizing the origins of regional distinctions that were increasingly apparent after 1830, Bancroft also yearned to write of one undifferentiated American people, *e pluribus unum*. On the one hand, he isolated and insulated the United States of America as the special preserve of Republican virtue; on the other, he celebrated America as an open nation, today’s exemplar of the worldwide force of individual liberty and democratic voluntarism. Like Tocqueville, he negotiates the most powerful contrarities of his day (perhaps also of ours?) even when he does not directly confront them.

Historical mediation had been needed even among Bancroft’s immediate predecessors. Harlow Sheidley has shown that, between 1800 and 1830, the Federalist elite of Massachusetts had sought to “exorcise the American past of its potentially radical thrust, so that it would reinforce deference, hierarchy and due subordination and serve as a weapon in the battle with the South for historical preeminence and present predominance.”<sup>12</sup> Such purposes would lead Webster, Story, and Everett to aggrandize Puritans as

ur-Republican gentlemen devoted to retaining civil liberty. Bancroft knew full well, however, that the “élite” Federalist view did not accord very well with the *History* of Mercy Otis Warren, for whom the Puritans had been of little interest in contrast to the Provincial Massachusetts citizen’s courageous revolt against the luxuries and centralized power of British empire. American exceptionalism and old world origins might be assimilated to each other by insisting that, under God’s Providence, America was leading the world toward democratic progress, but how exactly were Anglican and Congregationalist, Separatist and non-Separatist, the country party and the town party, Federalist and Republican, section and nation, all to be plausibly seen as working together to comprise the American Republic as the vanguard of Liberty and Democracy? The challenge to the historian was immense, but as a devotee (like Webster) of Liberty and Union, while also being a devotee (unlike Webster) of iconoclasts who had spoken the popular will against privilege, Bancroft knew how high the stakes were in trying to hold the Republic’s historical origins together.

New Englanders of Bancroft’s generation had an uncomfortable sense of being stalled, caught, or even mired, in historical time between the great achievements of Puritan forefathers and Revolutionary fathers, the limitless future promised by their regional and national heritage, and an uncertain, deeply compromising present. Their own era, the mostly prosperous, expansive, and peaceful decades from 1830 to 1860, did not seem to portend any crisis comparable to 1630, 1688, or 1775, except possibly the darkening cloud of slavery, yet New Englanders often spoke and wrote as if theirs was a time of special urgency, perhaps because they longed for crisis in order to show they were worthy of their heritage. Theirs was a situation to which Frank Kermode’s model of personal and cultural “crisis” seems particularly applicable. Rephrasing Aristotle in an attempt to uncover human assumptions about time, Kermode argues that “Men die because they cannot join the beginning and the end.”<sup>13</sup> If we were present at the beginning or the end, we would be not only be immortal; we could *know* absolutely. In fact, however, every human being has been born in the middle of linear time, unable to see the beginning or the end, longing to find coherence in time’s passing and meaning in life’s happenings, yet sensing that, unless beginnings and ends could be truly seen, coherence and meaning remain doubtful at best. We therefore need to live through identifiable crises, because crises are spots in time that enable us to define our beginnings and, more importantly, our ends.

Antebellum New Englanders never voiced their unease in precisely this way, of course, but they approached their history in similar spirit. To know

how the fathers and forefathers had met their crises could never be exactly applicable today, but the cultural past provides a guideline for worthy conduct that could transcend the confusing present. The many familiar words written and rewritten within New England's ever-accumulating historical tradition were certainly not to be regarded as the Word, but their moments of illumination should be recalled for purposes of collective self-understanding, and then adapted to today's actions on behalf of Liberty and/or Democracy. New Englanders' investment in their past was thus clearly shifting toward presentist concerns. While holding forth eighteenth- or even seventeenth-century standards, the import of Calvinism and Congregationalism upon models of communal mission turned outward in ever-growing anxiety about the relation of region to nation.

How, then, are we to best define the terms "New England" and "New England Literature" from the perspectives both of our time and of the antebellum decades? As early as the 1830s, New Englanders recognized that their literature was becoming increasingly subdivided into two overlapping halves. At first there had been the founding literature of Puritan Mission, emanating from Boston and Plymouth, with its offshoots in Hartford, New Haven, and Providence plantations, and its continuing self-revisions from Nathaniel Morton onward. But later, first emerging to prominence in the *Narrative of Colonel Ethan Allen's Captivity* (1779), came the literature of up-country or rural New England, a literature that existed in uneasy resentment of Boston's claims, and of which the later prominence of "New England Local Color" would be only a part, not a separate nor exclusively women's tradition.<sup>14</sup> This division admittedly required modification as early as the writing of the post-constitutional state histories (Benjamin Trumbull in Connecticut, Jeremy Belknap in New Hampshire, James Sullivan in Maine, Samuel Williams in Vermont). This dichotomy should no longer lead us to overlook important texts written outside its parameters from a woman's, an Indian's, a slave's, a non-New Englander's, or an ex-New Englander's perspective. Although the urban-rural, country party-town party, Boston-up-country distinction remains essential, I hope to bring selected important up-country and minority texts into comparison with the 'mainstream' literature of Boston and eastern Massachusetts, which was of the origin and was still dominant in Bancroft's era.<sup>15</sup>

The name and identity of the region itself poses even greater problems. The term "New England," which all of us use with confidence in its shared meaning, has in fact always been remarkably elusive. Consider just a few of the more common, still current visual images: has "New England" ever really been definable as staid town communities of white clapboard



houses built around a village green, dominated by a Congregational Church steeple, and surrounded by farms on which the constant labor has more often been admired than experienced? Is “New England” more accurately imaged as the once struggling mill town or decaying seaport that has turned its brick mills and warehouses into condos for retirees and shopping malls for chain stores? Is New England best conceived, in John Elder’s title phrase, as *The Mountains of Home*, a human-size, low-mountain landscape backed by the expansive forests that have now reoccupied the largest tracts of New England acreage? Or does the name “New England” continue to signify, as it did for Cotton Mather, an expanding community centered on Boston, now a leveled trimont with back bays filled, but still and recently a “city on a hill” to those with Fidelity Investments or Fleet Bank in mind? Of course, a formidable case can be made that whatever was once culturally distinct about New England disappeared at an accelerating rate after the cataclysm of the Civil War and the subsequent incorporation of America. Is “New England” now merely an accident of political geography, six states circumscribed by New York, Canada, and the Atlantic, an anachronism collectively promotable for the tourist dollar in either its quaint or gleaming guises?<sup>16</sup>

Although the mind protests against images at once so hackneyed, so superficial and so enduringly profitable, agreement upon a deeper historical definition is not easy to achieve. Is a credible New England heritage still recognizable in the many late nineteenth-century claims for a stubborn strength of inner character (mal)nourished by daunting climactic extremes and by New England’s geographic isolation, leading to the culture that Henry James, somewhat wistfully but mostly satirically, referred to as “plain living and high thinking”?<sup>17</sup> If James’s words evoke the Protestant work ethic (now entirely outmoded?), we might remember that performing hard labor for earthly or heavenly reward was admired in Philadelphia and Charleston, New York and London, as well as Plymouth and Boston. And then there is the most intellectually demanding and perhaps most reverential definition of them all. To Perry Miller, the lasting essence of the New England way was the spiritual and political complex he called the “New England Mind” – a federal theology, accepting good works as partial evidence of grace, struggling to maintain a godly community gathered through Congregational covenant – a mindset long maintained by the determination of a New England educated élite. Entirely an anachronism?

Behind all these formulations, however, lies the question raised implicitly by John Smith’s *A Description of New England* (1616) and its famous map, the promotional work that for the seventeenth century, and ever thereafter,