CHAPTER 1

DREAM OF THE GOOD LIFE (I): THE PURITAN ENTERPRISE

FEW PEOPLE in American history have been as consistently disliked as the Puritans. To be sure, they have always had relatively rare, if prominent, champions (usually direct heirs). And they have often received grudging respect for their tenacity. But that's about as far as it goes. Some figures, like the Founding Fathers, quickly ascended into our pantheon of heroes; others, like leading Confederates of the Civil War, have had fluctuating reputations; still others, like the presidents of the late nineteenth century, rapidly fell into deserved obscurity. But the Puritans have had a consistently bad reputation that stands out like a scarlet letter in collective national memory.

There are a number of reasons for this. First, and most generally, the Puritans are widely regarded as very unpleasant people. Arthur Miller's 1953 play *The Crucible*, which used the Salem witch trials of the seventeenth century as a metaphor for the McCarthyite witch hunts of the twentieth century, remains a fixture of high school literature classes, providing millions of American schoolchildren their most vivid image of Puritanism. The word "puritanical" is still in wide usage in the early twenty-first century, usually as a synonym for intolerance, and knowledgeable observers at home and abroad have attributed American prurience and self-righteousness (typified, to many, by the sex scandal

surrounding another turn-of-the-century president), to the nation's Puritan heritage. The American philosopher Richard Rorty has memorably summed up the prevailing contemporary view of the Puritans: "self-flagellating sickies."

This is not a new idea. "We call you Puritans," an English clergyman wrote in the early seventeenth century, "not because you are purer than other men . . . but because you think yourselves to be purer." Later American writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne and H. L. Mencken saw the Puritans as the source of most defects in American society. Hawthorne, writing more than two hundred years after his own Puritan ancestors arrived, was obsessed with them, indicting them (in his ironic, elliptical way) in his stories and novels. A far less ambivalent Mencken had few compunctions about using sarcasm. In one of his typically merciless epigrams, he defined Puritanism as "the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy."

Recent scholarly trends have emphasized the degree to which the Puritans were part of a broad wave of early modern European conquest in a hemisphere that was neither "discovered," "new," or even a "world." In such a context, the important point is that the Puritans not only made it difficult for the people who lived *among* them; they made it impossible for anyone to live *alongside* them. In the succinct words of a literary critic in the 1980s, the Puritans were people "who massacred Indians and established the self-righteous religion and politics that

PURE LEGEND *An 1806 engraving of Massachusetts founder John Winthrop. Winthrop's American Dream was a communitarian one: "We must delight in each other, make others' condition our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together," he reputedly said in his famous address "A Model of Christian Charity," delivered before the Puritans arrived in Massachusetts. (Photo from the collections of the Library of Congress)*

determined American ideology." Of course, they were not alone in this regard. From the Spaniards who enslaved natives (and imported Africans) to the British who sold disease-riddled blankets to Indians in North America, genocide was at best an incidental and at worst an avowedly embraced practice of European societies in the place they named "America." But if the Puritans were no worse than their contemporaries, there's little reason to think they were any better, as their track record in the Pequot (1637–38), King Philip's (1675–76), and other wars attests. One does not have to sentimentalize the Indians—who, in many cases, gave as good as they got—to nevertheless conclude that the lives of generations of Americans were only made possible by the slaughter of countless innocents.

And yet I admire them greatly. This attachment is in some degree irrational, tethered to some of the fondest memories of my early adulthood, like driving by white clapboard churches in Maine. But there's a firmer foundation for my feelings, too. To begin explaining why, I'll echo an heir of people the Puritans and others enslaved: they had a dream. In and of itself, that's not enough: so did Adolf Hitler. Nevertheless, the Puritans' dream, however strange and even repellent, was an exceptionally powerful one that had tremendous consequences, most of them unintended. In a palpable sense, it is only because of their dream that those Americans who followed had theirs, and only because of their ambitions that later Americans had the terms and standards by which they justly condemned the Puritans.

They had a dream. You don't have to love it, but you'll never really understand what it means to be an American of any creed, color, or gender if you don't try to imagine the shape of that dream—and what happened when they tried to realize it.

> *The myth of America, if it persists at all, has always rested on a precarious foundation. It is precisely its fragility, not its audacity—the perpetual worry of its believers, not their arrogance—that has made it something different (dare we say, something better?) than just another version of nationalist pomp.*
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> **—Andrew Delbanco, *The Puritan Ordeal* (1989)**

"Puritanism" is one of those words—like "racism," or "democracy," or "feminist"—whose meaning is often far more clear in the minds of those

who speak or write them than those who hear or read them. Any social label associated, as "Puritan" often is, with figures ranging from Plymouth Colony founder William Bradford to U.S. Founding Father John Adams *has* to be a little vague (237 years separated Bradford's birth in 1589 and Adams's death in 1826). Indeed, some of the most important writers on early American history have given up on the word entirely.

Yet elasticity has its uses. Noted Puritan scholar David Hall, who believes that "the term 'Puritanism' is so lacking in precision that I have tried to do without it," follows his disclaimer with a good umbrella definition. "In general," he writes, "the term may be understood as referring to a tendency within the Church of England to practice stricter 'discipline,' as in limiting access to the Lord's Supper." *Discipline* was the key. With its connotations of sustained inquiry (like the study of history), an attractive capacity for deferred gratification (like an athlete in training), or a punitive approach to regulating behavior (like an authoritarian police officer), the concept of discipline went to the very heart of the Puritan experience. Of course, any number of other people were disciplined about their religion and much else, but relatively few Catholics, Buddhists, or atheistic workaholics lived within, or in the context of, the Anglo-American Church of England (also known as the Anglican Church) in the centuries following the Protestant Reformation.

Defined this way, the Puritan experience, like its membership, was varied and really *did* encompass people ranging from William Bradford to John Adams. It was useful to say so when one considered, for example, the characteristics that made New England culture distinctive in American life—like, for example, its relative receptivity to a government role in social and economic life when compared to other regions in what eventually became the United States. Yet texturing that assertion was also important: Adams could only be called Puritan in the loosest sense of the term (such as when compared with his less morally rigorous friend, fellow Founding Father Thomas Jefferson); as an organized religious movement, Puritanism was on its last theological legs by the time Adams was born in 1735. And Bradford wasn't exactly a Puritan either, because he and his fellows who arrived on the *Mayflower* in December of 1620—popularly known as the Pilgrims—were, in the language of the time, "Separatists" who avowedly broke from an Anglican Church they viewed as corrupt beyond redemption, even as they shared many of the assumptions and practices of those who did not make that break.

One got closer to the heart of Puritanism with the founders of Massachusetts Bay Colony, who came to New England in 1630. *These* Puritans were—in theory, anyway—"*non*separating" members of the Church of England, who hoped its members back home would finally come to their senses, acknowledge their mistakes, and reform it on (more disciplined) Puritan lines. In practice, however, Massachusetts Puritans, like their friendly rival Pilgrims, wanted to get as far away from England and its Church as possible, and their particular brand of congregation-based organization eventually became a separate church in its own right in the increasingly sprawling world of early modern Protestantism.

Viewed in this light, the Massachusetts Puritans were actually moderates compared to the separatist Pilgrims and more radical sects like Quakers and Anabaptists, who had even less respect for traditional organized religion than the Puritans did. Indeed, one can visualize seventeenth-century Christianity on a spectrum, placing the nonseparating Puritans in the middle, with the Anglican and Catholic churches on one side and the Pilgrims and Quakers on the other. Thinking of the Puritans as middling figures departs from the traditional view of them as extremists, but doing so gives one a more accurate sense of their place in their American world.

Amid all the various abstruse concepts that complicate discussions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Puritanism—episcopacies and presbyteries, Arminians and Antinomians, covenants of grace and covenants of works—the irreducible foundation of *all* varieties of Protestantism was this: a belief that the world was a corrupt place, but one that could be reformed. *How* it could be reformed, of course, was another question, one that provoked all kinds of squabbling. But that it *could* be reformed has been central, a belief—actually, there were times it was an aggressive assertion—that distinguished sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestantism from Roman Catholicism (which did reactively reform itself by its own lights, though never enough for Protestants skeptical of its emphasis on institutional authority). This faith in reform became the central legacy of American Protestantism and the cornerstone of what became the American Dream. Things—religious and otherwise—could be different.

For the first generation of American Puritans, reform meant starting over, building a new society of believers for themselves and their children. Actually, this possibility had first been glimpsed in the sixteenth

century by Sir Thomas More, a man who persecuted English Protestants before himself becoming a martyr at the hands of Henry VIII, who decided they had the right idea after all and founded a Protestant sect of his own, the Church of England. In his classic work *Utopia*, first published in 1516, More imagined a place—inspired by the discovery of a previously unknown hemisphere, in which he had a keen interest—where the opportunity to create a new society would lead to religious freedom and a communitarian approach toward property. More's Utopia was a relatively abstract thought experiment, but in the following century more pragmatic utopians, who weren't much more happy with the Church of England than More himself was, moved toward actually acting on such impulses. These Separatists initially tried to achieve their goals more modestly by leaving England for Holland, where a successful struggle to achieve independence from Spanish Catholic rule inspired the belief that perhaps here was a true holy land. Yet here too they were disappointed. The most far-sighted of these Separatists "began both deeply to apprehend their present dangers [of moral corruption] and wisely to foresee the future and think of timely remedy," their future governor, William Bradford, later recorded in *Of Plymouth Plantation*. "In the agitation of their thoughts, and much discourse of things hereabout, they began to incline to this conclusion: of removal to some other place." Writing almost a hundred years later, the Puritan minister Solomon Stoddard added that they "would not have left England merely for their own quietness; but they were afraid that their children would be corrupted there." From the very beginning, then, a notion that one's children might have a better life has been a core component of the American Dream.

The place that later became the United States has been called "the Promised Land" by innumerable people in the past four hundred years, many of them Jews, but it's important to emphasize here that the Pilgrims who crossed the Atlantic Ocean in 1620 really did believe themselves to be literal and figurative descendants of the tribes who wandered in the desert for forty years after leaving Egypt and founded the nation of Israel. In trying to convince Separatists back home to leave England, Robert Cushman, author of *Reasons and Considerations Touching the Lawfulness of Removing out of England into the Parts of America* (1622), argued that for them there had been no "land or any possession now, like unto the possession which the Jews had in Canaan, being legally holy and appropriated unto a holy people, the seed of Abra-

ham." But British North America, Cushman said, would change all that. After all, there was no one there but heathen Indians who could be converted; "to them we may go, their land is empty."

Those Indians surely viewed the matter a little differently. But compared to later immigrants who arrived to find teeming citizens and a multiracial society, the Pilgrims and Puritans came to what seemed to them an impossibly remote place. In his *Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law* (1765), a political pamphlet that fanned the flames of the American Revolution, John Adams imaginatively evoked the new world they confronted:

> Recollect their amazing fortitude, their bitter sufferings—the hunger, the nakedness, the cold, which they patiently endured—the severe labors of clearing their grounds, building their houses, raising their provisions, amidst dangers from wild beasts and savage men, before they had time or money or materials for commerce. Recollect the civil and religious principles and hopes and expectations which constantly supported and carried them through all the hardships with patience and resignation. Let us recollect it was liberty, the hope of liberty, for themselves and us and ours, which conquered all discouragements, dangers, and trials.

Principles, hope, and liberty were powerful attractions, and would remain so for subsequent generations who came here from all over the world. But it's worth remembering that unlike many of those who followed, the Pilgrims were not immigrants with nothing to lose. Without minimizing the challenges faced by many of the teeming masses who arrived under the gaze of the Statue of Liberty, these immigrants were relatively well educated people who in many cases had substantial financial resources at their disposal, making their decision to leave everything behind all the more striking. This sense of worldly prosperity was even more true of the Puritans who arrived in Massachusetts Bay in 1630. They were certainly not the first people of means who threw away their security for the sake of an idea; figures ranging from Saint Francis to Vladimir Lenin have done similarly. But the scope of the Puritan enterprise, both in its collective nature and its logistical complications, was amazing. Here, truly, were some astonishingly committed people, people who were all the more so for *not* being solitary geniuses, battle-hardened soldiers, impoverished peasants, or unwilling slaves.

So it was that some people with a strong sense of religious mission founded a new world they hoped would become a model for the old one. Their confidence—in themselves, in their sense of mission for their children, and in a God they believed was on their side—impelled them with ruthless zeal to gamble everything for the sake of a vision. In the process, they accomplished the core task in the achievement of any American Dream: they became masters of their own destiny.

But a good Puritan would never put it that way.

> *The Puritans were gifted—or cursed—with an overwhelming realization of an inexorable power at work not only in nature but in themselves, which they called God; whatever may have been the factors in their society and their experience that so sharpened their sense of awareness, the acuteness and poignancy of the awareness are phenomena which psychology will recognize though it cannot explain, and which history must take into account.*
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> **—Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*, 1939**

The Puritans descended from the Calvinist branch of Protestantism, which meant that they were predestinarians: they believed individuals' fates were sealed from the moment they were born, and there was absolutely nothing they could do to affect their ultimate salvation or damnation. But they could not know for sure where they were actually headed and so had to live their lives hoping for signs that things would turn out for the best.

This psychology is alien to a modern Western mindset. Contemporary Americans in particular are typically contractual: being a good person isn't easy but seems like a reasonable investment, if, not in immediate or even earthly payback, then perhaps in an afterlife, one will have racked up enough points on a moral scorecard to get into heaven (a forgiving God giving the benefit of any doubt). But if the matter is already decided before one is even born, then what's the point? One might as well indulge every instinct, since it won't affect the outcome.

Of course, one does not have to be a Calvinist to point out that such logic misses the point. In theory one *could* live a life of amoral excess,

but even articulating a *desire* to do so would not seem like an especially encouraging sign one was on the right track. Nor does God necessarily think like an accountant who keeps a careful set of books. (The Puritans were fond of comparing God to an indulgent landlord ready to forgive regular lapses on the rent—but not a cavalier attitude—from his spiritually impoverished tenants.) Calvinism may or may not have been a compelling element in some Protestant denominations, but our reaction to it may reveal more about the world we live in than the one they did.

In any case, the historical record is reasonably clear that in theory—and in widespread, though probably not universal, practice—Puritans followed a Calvinist line. To at least some extent, this was a response to one of the most important reasons for the Protestant Reformation in the first place: the Roman Catholic practice of selling indulgences whereby the rich could buy forgiveness of their sins. What made this so repellent was not so much what might bother someone today—a kind of class inequality that suggested salvation went to the highest bidder—but rather a suggestion that any human being could exercise prerogatives that belonged to God alone. For a committed Puritan, it was offensive to maintain that an ordinary sinner could somehow exercise the levers of destiny—more offensive, even, than garden-variety Catholic corruption, like priests who had neither the training nor inclination to actually minister to the people, or those who declined to even say mass at all (except perhaps for the dead landlord whose estate paid their income).

Perhaps you sense a tension, even a contradiction, here. On the one hand, the Puritans believed and acted as if a person could make a difference in making the world a better place—indeed, had an obligation to do so. On the other, they believed they were powerless to do anything but follow the dictates of God's inscrutable will. Here, it seems, is the worst of all possible worlds: accountability without power. The Puritans were haunted by questions: how do I know? How do I know that I really am sanctified and will thus have a place in heaven? How do I know that my beloved dead are at peace? And when there are conflicts, as there so often are, between contesting versions of what is truly right, how will I know which way to follow? Maybe they would hear an inner voice. But could they trust it? And if there was only silence, what would that mean? To ask these kinds of questions is to begin to imagine the sheer anxiety involved in Puritanism.

Like other people who have inhabited worlds governed by difficult,

even contradictory, ideas, some Puritans negotiated their way through life by trying to find a middle ground on their new native soil. For them, this middle ground was known as the doctrine of preparationism. It was out of the question that one could actively affect one's fate through specific actions; this constituted a heretical "doctrine of works" embraced by Catholics, Protestants influenced by Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius, and the much-hated William Laud, the Bishop of London who persecuted Puritans in the name of the Church of England. On the other hand, to live a life without knowledge of, or power to affect, who was saved—a doctrine known as the "covenant of grace"—was for many Puritans too much to bear. Preparationism softened the covenant of grace by suggesting that there were steps one could take to get in a proper frame of mind so that one could be fully receptive to sanctification if it were forthcoming. If this sounds a little fuzzy, that's because it undoubtedly was; even with the elaborate sequencing and terminology of preparationist doctrine—which must surely have confused, if not exasperated, many a lay Puritan—the line between preparationism and a doctrine of works seems gossamer thin. Indeed, one faction of Puritans specifically rejected the notion of preparationism as a slipshod compromise with the doctrine of works. (On the other hand, as Andrew Delbanco has pointed out, preparationism may well have increased rather than allayed anxiety, because it effectively ratcheted up expectations that Puritans *would* prepare rather than passively wait.)

Notwithstanding the widespread, and generally accurate, perception that the Puritans were mavericks in the world of early modern Protestantism, the doctrine of preparationism was an important indication of their instinctive moderation. It was evident, too, in the way Massachusetts Bay Puritans contrasted with the Separatists of Plymouth by not formally reneging on their ties to the Church of England. And it was evident again in their less than wholly intimate relationship with the Puritans in the English Civil War of the 1640s, a war that threatened the colonial "errand into the wilderness" because a reformed England would make a *New* England superfluous. That such pragmatism—some might say cynicism—could coexist with their rigorous theology suggested that these were flesh-and-blood people who lived lives that were very different than, and yet comparable to, our own. They made compromises in pursuit of what they wanted, and what they wanted often caused them a good deal of grief, whether they got it or not.

But what, exactly, *did* they want? And what happened when they tried to turn their dream into reality?

It appeared as if New England was a region given up to the dreams of fancy and the unrestrained experiments of innovators.

—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835

They wanted freedom—any high school history textbook will tell you that. They *themselves* would tell you that. But they didn't define it the way we typically do today. In fact, insofar as they did understand freedom as we do, they considered it monstrous. "There is twofold liberty—natural (I mean as our nature is now corrupt) and civil or federal," Massachusetts Bay founder John Winthrop explained in 1645. "The first is common to man with beasts and other creatures. By this, man as he stands into relation to man, hath the liberty to do as he lists." This kind of freedom "makes men grow more evil, and in time to be worse than brute beasts." True freedom, on the other hand, "is maintained and exercised in a way of subjection to authority." Freedom involved a willing surrender to the will of the Lord, a choice to defer to Godly clerical and civil authorities that ruled in His name. Oppression, by contrast, involved having to live with—having to *tolerate*—self-evidently corrupt sects (like the Anglican Church back home, which was virtually as bad as the Roman Catholicism it supposedly reformed) and complacent rulers (like Queen Elizabeth I, whose noncommittal, split-the-difference approach to theology seemed more a matter of dispiriting indifference than anything else). To cast off such tawdriness and sloth: *that* was freedom.

The free new world of their dreams was to be a place of, by, and for the Puritans. There would be other people around; the best shipwrights, for example, weren't necessarily true believers, and there was always the possibility of Indians to convert, visitors to entertain, or even colonial officials to appease. But the leaders of the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay colonies planned to be in charge in both sacred and secular realms—which, while separate, were nevertheless intertwined. No one could join their churches without giving convincing testimony of their religious commitment, that is, without "conversion." And no one could vote in secular matters who was not a member of the church.

Religious toleration was out of the question; these people had not come all this way to accept the indolence, conflict, or obvious evil that had marred the Holland and England they had left. From now on, they would cut through all the clutter and cacophony: no more ornate iconography in churches; no more decadent amusements like plays and gambling; no more idolatrous distractions like Christmas celebrations. Long-standing convictions could finally become the law of the land.

This all sounds rather severe. But toleration was not a fixture of religious life in many places in the Western world of that time, and to the extent pluralism was present, it was as much a function of the irrelevance of religion as a principled embrace of diversity. And while Puritan stringency regarding recreation was notable even for the time, there was never any suggestion that pleasures like laughter, drinking, and sex were impermissible, only that they had a clear time and place. Moreover, the Puritans were unusual, even unique, for the degree to which popular participation in civic life was widespread; while it was not really a democracy as we would understand the word—there were far too many gender, racial, economic, and religious constraints on political participation—New England really did represent the leading edge of changes that would transform Western life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The most important manifestation of this embryonic democratic impulse was the Mayflower Compact, a document binding the Pilgrims to frame and obey "just and equal laws" that they signed even before they landed. The signal institution in subsequent Pilgrim and Puritan life was the town meeting, in which members of a community could vote on matters of concern to them and elect representatives to voice their concerns to the colony as a whole.

Yet to focus too much on the procedural dimension of New England would be to lose sight of what these people were really after. And that was a sense of *community*: not a philosophical or legal framework so much as a series of deep emotional and affective bonds that connected people who had a shared sense of what their lives were about. Freedom was a means to that end. There is, of course, a paradox here, because so much of their faith was premised on the fate of the solitary soul, but the very intensity of Puritan individualism makes the need for some compensating dimension all the more important. If the Puritans were essentially alone in the world, they nevertheless wished to be alone together.

This longing for intimacy dominates one of the great early addresses of American history, John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity." Winthrop, one of the organizers of the Massachusetts Bay Company, was chosen by the company to govern the colony, a post he was subsequently elected to twelve times. While on board the *Arbella*, one of four ships that carried about seven hundred immigrants across the Atlantic Ocean, he delivered a lay sermon. Though its precise content is not certain (it was not published in his lifetime), the sermon captures both the world the Puritans sought—and the world they inhabited.

In some ways, "A Model of Christian Charity" was a document of hard-headed realism. "God Almighty in his holy and wise providence hath so disposed the condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and duty, others mean and in subjection," Winthrop began. God, he explained, ordered these differences "for the preservation and good of the whole" and exhorted the Puritans to maintain that order. Never a fan of democracy—he held out for as long as he could to prevent the election of representatives to the general court, even though the colony's charter explicitly called for it—Winthrop, like most Puritan leaders, affirmed sacred and secular hierarchy in government.

And yet the heart of the sermon was a call for interdependence, even equality, for all Puritans in the eyes of God. "No man is made more honorable than another or more wealthy, etc., out of any particular and singular respect to himself, but for the glory of his creator and the common good of the creature, man," he asserted. Comparing the colony to a body with different organs that work in complementary effort to sustain it, Winthrop invoked a communitarian vision of American life: "We must delight in each other, make others' condition our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body."

Such soaring hopes coexisted with mundane, even gnawing, realities. At first glance, one of the more surprising things about "A Model of Christian Charity" was the amount of space it devoted to financial matters. In the highly structured interrogative style typical of Puritan sermons, Winthrop posed a series of questions (How should one determine how much money to give to charity? What rules should govern lending?) that he goes on to answer in some detail. For a century after

Max Weber's classic study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in 1918, associations between Puritans and their money were common, and rightly so. But what was sometimes overlooked was the intense ambivalence, even hostility, the Puritans felt toward a market economy even as they plunged into it. Winthrop was only one of many landholders in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries to be impaled on the horns of a painful dilemma: inflationary pressures for rising rents conflicted with feudal injunctions to deal paternalistically with tenants. Some made the transition to the new economy; others lost their fortunes to their overseers. Winthrop was one of a few who dealt with the problem by fleeing to America. In this context, a call for communitarian cooperation was less a cheap sentiment than a utopian vision.

Moreover, the threat of failure loomed large over "A Model of Christian Charity." Winthrop's clarion call for a "city upon a hill" has been cited as a source of inspiration by later Americans, notably Ronald Reagan. Yet in the context of his sermon, the city Winthrop imagined was perhaps less a shining example than a potential object of ridicule. "The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world," Winthrop said. "We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God's sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are agoing."

Such was the mix of hope and fear, of looking ahead and looking over their shoulders, that characterized the Puritan migration. On balance, their utopian impulses overrode their conservative ones: they made the journey. Perry Miller, the historian who more than any other imaginatively projected himself into the mind of the Puritans, called them "cosmic optimists"—a strange phrase in light of the dour image of the Puritans, but one that finally explains how they marshaled the energy to act on their imaginations. But only in appreciating just how hard it was—not simply in terms of the physical privations but in terms of the emotional and intellectual doubts that haunted them—can we appreciate the audacity of their strange American Dream.

Perhaps inevitably, things didn't turn out as planned.

"Are these the men that erst at my command
Forsook their ancient seats and native soile,
To follow Me into a desart land,
Contemning all the travell and the toile,
Whose love was such to purest ordinances
As made them set at nought their fair inheritances?"

—Michael Wigglesworth,
"God's Controversy with New England," 1662

From the start, things began to go astray. More accurately, *people* began to go astray—not so much in a spiritual sense (though some surely said and felt so) as in a literal one: the Puritans diffused over a much wider area than a compact city and ended up in plains and valleys as well as upon hills. The Pilgrims were supposed to land in Virginia; instead they anchored at the tip of Cape Cod, eventually settled further west in Plymouth, and spread out from there ("for now as their stocks increased, and the increase vendible, there was no longer any holding them together, but now they must of necessity go to their own great lots," William Bradford reported). The Puritans of Massachusetts were even more itinerant. Their first encampment was at the present-day town of Salem, then at Charlestown, then a scattering across Watertown, Roxbury, Dorchester, Medford, and Saugus before concentrating in the peninsula known as Shawmut, which was ultimately named "Boston" for the port city in East Anglia, the wellspring of the Puritan movement. By 1634 settlers were leaving Massachusetts Bay altogether and moving into New Haven and Hartford, laying the foundations for what would ultimately become Connecticut. Puritans also infiltrated New Hampshire, overwhelming the Anglican population there. The lust for land, the fear of contagious disease, and, one surmises, a desire for freedom from the burden of community impelled this dispersal, which leaders like Winthrop regularly lamented. But expressions of regret, however sincere, did little to concentrate the spread of people who would go on to show a seemingly inexhaustible appetite for frontiers.

The problem with pursuing dreams, even shared ones, is that not everyone sees them in quite the same ways. The course of events in New England was shaped not only by material conditions and timeless human impulses (like greed) but also by aspirations that pulled people apart in literal as well as figurative ways. Although the precise reasons

are unclear, it appears that theological and/or political factors impelled Thomas Hooker, a minister at Newtowne (later Cambridge), to take one hundred members of his congregation to Hartford in 1636. Some historians believe that rivalry with fellow minister John Cotton was a consideration; others believe Hooker's faith in more democratic governance clashed with Winthrop's beliefs on the matter. In any event, it is clear that even the relatively homogeneous world of the Puritans was marked by factions and sectarianism.

Much of the conflict in Massachusetts centered on just how far to take basic philosophical tenets of Puritanism. This issue was particularly pressing, because the unwillingness to break publicly with the Anglican Church engendered compromises that the Separatists of Plymouth, for example, did not make. Some Puritans considered this an unacceptable form of hypocrisy.

The most famous of these malcontents was Roger Williams. Williams came to Massachusetts in 1631, a generally well liked figure with strong ministerial credentials. But his refusal to serve as pastor for a Boston congregation because it had not severed its ties with the Church of England was only the first of a series of declarations—among them assertions that the Puritans had acted illegally in acquiring land from Indians—that at first worried and finally infuriated colonial officials, who banished him from the colony in 1636. Williams fled to what became known as Rhode Island, for which he received a charter, over Massachusetts's objections, in 1644, and helped lay the foundations for what became the Baptist Church in America. Rhode Island has been remembered as a haven of toleration, an achievement for which Williams deservedly gets credit. It's worth noting, however, that the impetus for Williams's ministry was less an embrace of pluralism for its own sake than a refusal to allow what he regarded as the pollution of his religious practice; temperamentally he belonged, in effect, to a congregation of one.

One of the most serious challenges to the Puritan project was the so-called Antinomian crisis of the mid-1630s, the event that more than any other suggested the practical limits of Puritan ideology. Antinomians insisted that since no one knew who was saved, no one—not even ministers—could have authority over the individual conscience. At the heart of the Antinomian movement was a disgust with formulaic Puritan religious practices, which critics charged were lapsing into empty rituals—or a heretical "doctrine of works" that contradicted the core

Calvinist principle that individuals could not affect their salvation. Instead, the Antinomians called for a rigorous, but deeply personal, approach to piety grounded in a more pure form of Puritanism.

Taken to its logical conclusions, however, Antinomianism had deeply subversive implications for Massachusetts. It would only be a matter of time before an individual's beliefs would lead to the rejection of all outside authority, since just about any law, sacred or secular, could be perceived as trampling on a personal conscience. Any form of collective governance would be impossible. What to some might seem like an American Dream of religious freedom was to others a nightmarish prescription for anarchy.

Antinomianism was no marginal faction in early Massachusetts. While few openly pressed the doctrine to its extremes, sympathizers included the ministers John Cotton and John Wheelwright, as well as Henry Vane, a prominent Englishman who arrived in Massachusetts in 1635 and was elected governor in 1636. The most vocal proponent of the creed was Anne Hutchinson, the wife of a wealthy merchant, whose controversial views on the subject led to her trial for "traducing the ministers and their ministry." The surviving transcript shows her to be an agile defendant, able to invoke scripture with the best of her male adversaries. But when she claimed that she knew scripture was correct because God had spoken to her directly about its veracity, her opponents branded her a heretic and had her banished from the colony. She and her followers fled to Rhode Island and ultimately to New York, where she was killed by Indians near the parkway that now bears her name.

For nearly four centuries, the Antinomian controversy has eluded those who tried to untangle motives and events that remain shrouded in mystery. The Puritans themselves seemed haunted by the affair, referring to it repeatedly in their journals and memoirs. They and later observers have viewed the Puritans' subsequent history as a long gradual slide away from an ultimately untenable doctrine of grace toward a more practical doctrine of works. And the Hutchinson affair continued to generate heat into the twentieth century. One writer in the 1930s referred to Hutchinson's trial as "a legal travesty"; in his 1958 biography of John Winthrop, Edmund Morgan described her and her fellow travelers as guilty of "seventeenth-century nihilism." Feminist scholars considered it no coincidence that a woman ended up as the scapegoat of the affair, and still others warned of the dangers of trying to impose

twenty-first-century categories on a seventeenth-century consciousness. Whatever one concluded, one fact was unmistakably clear: despite an unusual degree of social homogeneity, the Puritans were unable to create a harmonious community in their new home, succumbing to all too human foibles as well as highly specific, even technical, intellectual disagreements (the two often overlapping).

Ironically, even apparent *consensus* created problems for the Puritans. New England prospered throughout the 1630s, as a steady arrival of disaffected English settlers found refuge and developed the local as well as international economy of the region. But the onset of the English Civil War, a war waged and won by Oliver Cromwell's Puritans, created multiple problems for New England in the 1640s. Wartime disruptions precipitated an economic recession, as the stream of new arrivals and the flow of goods slowed to a trickle. This ebbing also engendered a psychological trauma: once an alternative beacon for discouraged English Puritans, New England now seemed irrelevant at best—and a self-indulgent sideline at worst—to some on *both* sides of the Atlantic. Cromwell's ascension to dictatorship in the 1650s also revealed previously hidden fissures within Puritanism. In England, a fierce debate broke out between those Puritans who wanted discussion and rule-making between congregations to be led by ministers of particular congregations in an egalitarian manner (i.e., a congregational approach) and those with a slightly more hierarchical approach, who thought such governance should be conducted by more powerful bishops in the name of groups of congregations, or presbyteries (hence the eventual emergence of a separate Presbyterian Church). All Puritans rejoiced at the execution of the much-hated Archbishop Laud, but in some ways it was easier maintaining independence from avowedly hostile British authorities than from a supposedly friendly Puritan dictatorship seeking to centralize its administration and wary of New England's independence. (Cromwell himself described Massachusetts as "a poor, cold and useless place.") Perhaps fortuitously, Cromwell's death in 1658 was followed by the restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660, and the New England Puritans were again, at least theoretically, ruled by hostile, but highly inefficient and distracted, crypto-Catholic kings. For a little while longer, anyway, they were situated where they were happiest: as a largely autonomous set of communities on the Atlantic rim of a global empire.

Indeed, the problems I'm describing here—with Roger Williams

and toleration, Anne Hutchinson and Antinomianism, Oliver Cromwell and his revolution—are essentially political disputes that most directly affected those in, or near, positions of power. That's not to say the issues argued over were unreal, or that they didn't affect ordinary people in palpable ways. But the fact remains that as the months became years and the years became decades, the Puritans truly took root in America. Even their much-lamented relations with Indians weren't all that bad. Between the end of the Pequot War in 1638 and the beginning of King Philip's War in 1675, there were almost four decades of relatively peaceful coexistence between the two races. Many of those who survived the initial adversity built houses, founded churches, started schools, and lived to see their children have children. America became their home—the only one they ever knew. The dream had once been the creation of a new world. Now the task was to sustain and extend it. By any standard, then or now, this was a tremendous accomplishment.

And yet that accomplishment was in some ways oppressive. As the first generation of Puritans died off and their children took their place, a persistent mantra seems to run through the Puritans' copious commentaries: we are not the men our fathers were. The very strenuousness of their literary forms—particularly their election day sermons and a form of vitrolic preaching known as the jeremiad—testifies to their difficulty in maintaining the white-hot intensity of the founders. Poets like Michael Wigglesworth, in his widely reprinted "Day of Doom" and "God's Controversy with New England," looked to portents like droughts (in apparent violation of the covenant of grace, which denied that God would give such signs) and saw them as warnings. One imagines that there was a less dramatic, but probably more widespread, sense of melancholy over the limits of the Puritans' achievements and the failure of ideals to meet up with realities.

Faced with this prospect, many Puritans did what most people do when ideals and realities seem irreconcilable: they compromised. This approach was on vivid display in the debate over the so-called Halfway Covenant of 1662, over how to handle the church membership of children. The founders had been clear, even emphatic, about who could become full members of a congregation: only those who had rendered convincing testimony of their spiritual conversion from sin to grace. Almost by definition, children were incapable of doing so. Case closed, said some Puritans. Others, however, could not bear the thought of

denying their children what they themselves most cherished. Under the pressure of such sentiment, Congregationalists developed a doctrine whereby children could be provisionally accepted into the church, pending a later confirmation-type experience. Such was but one example of how the Puritans were pulled, seemingly inexorably, away from the covenant of grace toward the very practices of the churches they most hated.

Another way of dealing with unrealized dreams was a conscious rededication to original ideals. As late as the 1740s, amid the swirling eddies of religious revivals known as the First Great Awakening, ministers like Jonathan Edwards (1703–58) sought to shape, channel, and temper newer, more works-based tendencies in American Protestantism by calling on the faithful to embrace a tough-minded, but psychically satisfying, pursuit of spiritual rigor. Edward's classic sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is to religious literature what Frank Sinatra's version of "My Way" is to popular music: a signature expression of a particular cast of mind (and one that was ebbing at the very moment of its most crystalline expression). But Edwards was dismissed by his congregation in 1750, an indication of exhaustion and impatience with a century of Puritanism.

And yet the energy, the personality of Puritanism survived even when its founding ideals were discarded. The utilitarian aphorisms that characterized the writing of Edwards's contemporary, the Boston-born Benjamin Franklin, were bracing precisely because they inverted, satirized, or reconfigured Puritan ideology. "So convenient a thing it is to be a *reasonable* creature, since it enables one to make a reason for everything one has a mind to do," the founder of *Poor Richard's Almanac* wrote in his 1758 *Autobiography*. The line was simultaneously a subtle jab at the Puritan tendency to scrutinize (and rationalize) behavior, a (glib) acknowledgment of a common psychological pattern, and, perhaps, an implicit admission of Franklin's own fall from Calvinist grace (he had by this point long since given up Puritan Boston for a Quaker-dominated, but increasingly secular, Philadelphia). Once a form of distraction or comfort while awaiting the implacable hand of fate, becoming healthy, wealthy, and wise had gone beyond an instrument of salvation into being a practical end in its own right. This emphasis—some might say mania—for self-improvement, cut loose from its original Calvinist moorings, remains a recognizable trait in the American character and

is considered an indispensable means for the achievement of any American Dream.

It was clear that by the end of the seventeenth century, the original Puritan vision no longer held sway in New England or anywhere else. Outside influences—whether Quakers subject to persecution by Puritans seeking to preserve their homogeneity, or Anglicans who could not be pushed around so easily—became increasingly important in shaping provincial life. More obvious social dislocations also played a role. Years in coming, the outbreak of King Philip's War (named after a Native American leader whose very name suggests the degree of intercultural contact between Indians and whites) proved to be a debacle in New England, where not even the combined forces of the Massachusetts, Plymouth, Hartford, and New Haven colonies were able to prevent the destruction of dozens of New England towns. The colonists ultimately prevailed. But in the aftermath of their costly victory—adjusted for population, the bloodiest war ever fought on American soil—the Stuart monarchy resolved finally to do something about its unruly subjects, and King Charles II named his brother James, the duke of York, to govern a vast territory that stretched from Manhattan to Maine. Finally, over half a century after they arrived, the Puritans were brought to heel. New Haven and Hartford were combined into Connecticut; Plymouth was folded into its dominant neighbor of Massachusetts. The latter's luck had not altogether run out; no sooner had a royal delegation arrived in New England than the Stuarts themselves were toppled in the Glorious Revolution of 1688 that brought the Dutch William of Orange and his English Mary to the British throne.

Yet the New England Way never quite recovered. William III and his wife were both committed Protestants, effectively ending a century and a half of religious struggle in Britain. But for precisely that reason, the Puritan insistence on a narrowly defined religious orthodoxy was regarded as needlessly divisive. New Englanders were told in no uncertain terms they could no longer persecute religious minorities with impunity.

Instead, the region must resemble other parts of British North America, whether it took as its model the casual Anglicanism that dominated Virginia or the heterogeneity that characterized Middle Atlantic colonies like New York. The Act of Toleration of 1690, which established the new order, did guarantee the Puritans the same rights as

Englishmen back home. But the price was high: it forced them not only to accept self-evident reprobates like Gortonists (who denied the Holy Trinity) or Anabaptists (who rejected any form of state church) but also to recognize that the Puritans *themselves* were nothing more than a dissident sect within a now firmly established Anglican Church that would never, as they once hoped, reform itself in their own image.

Perhaps, as the great Puritan historian Perry Miller suggested, it was a sense of brittle bitterness over such defeats that provoked the Puritans into one of the most notorious episodes of their checkered history: the Salem witch trials of 1692, an event that has lastingly stained their reputations. Twenty people were executed in the wake of the trials, which took place after a group of young girls became hysterical while playing at magic and were described as bewitched. (Tolerating religious diversity was one thing, but tolerating Satan was another.) Once again, this was a prismatic historical event that has been subject to multiple interpretations: sexual anxiety, economic distress, psychological trauma, and (especially) political hysteria.

It was, surely, all these things. But Miller's point—I mean historian Perry Miller, but playwright Arthur Miller applies as well—that the witch trials represented a grotesque effort to recapture a sense of lost cohesion, a lingering longing for communion curdled into a dictatorship of false virtue, remains salient. If the dispersal of the original Puritans suggested the degree to which the dreams of individuals compromised collective aspirations, the trials suggested the way in which collective fears could crush individual lives. More than three centuries later, the American Dream still straddles—perhaps it's more accurate to say it *blurs*— the tension between one and many, a tension we still all too often fail to recognize, let alone resolve.

Amid the changes, even reverses, the Puritans tried to forge a usable past for those who followed. Cotton Mather's 1702 history of the Puritans, *Magnalia Christi Americana* ("The Great Achievements of Christ in America") begins on a triumphal note that rarely wavers: "I write of the wonders of Christian religion, flying from the depravations of Europe to the American strand; and, assisted by the holy author of that religion, I do, with all conscience of truth itself, report the wonderful displays of His infinite power, wisdom, goodness and faithfulness, wherewith his divine providence hath irradiated an Indian wilderness." The point of this was to suggest all that had been, and still was being, accomplished, to celebrate as well as goad. Yet try as he might to affirm

an unbroken history, Mather—grandson of Massachusetts founders Richard Mather and John Cotton, and son of the powerful Increase Mather—could not help but realize he was not the man his forefathers were. (If nothing else, his many clerical, educational, and political enemies were there to remind him, for example, of his silence during the Salem witch trials and his subsequent defense of the judges.) As an early twentieth-century historian once wrote of Mather, "Essentially a conservative, he was always torn between allegiance to inherited ideals and realization that a newer day demanded new standards." A reluctant Mather was forced to realize that dreams are a difficult business. Not only must they compete with other dreams, but they are mortal, whether realized or not. Other dreams—better dreams?—were taking root in the very garden the Puritans had cleared and tilled.

There is no object that we see, no action that we do, no good that we enjoy, no evil that we feel or fear, but we may make some spiritual advantage of all; and he that makes such improvement is wise as well as pious.

—Anne Bradstreet,
"Meditations Divine and Moral" I (undated)

The basic outline of the Puritans' history in the century after their arrival in New England seems like one damning episode after another. Arrogance, querulousness, hypocrisy, and even murder followed them wherever they went. Here was a people who affirmed the primacy of the individual conscience yet demanded religious orthodoxy. Who denied knowledge of salvation but devised doctrines, like preparationism, that resembled the very practices they most severely condemned when practiced by others. And who claimed to want to convert Indians, only to destroy them. Most fundamentally, their dream of a city on a hill became an empire on a continent, largely peopled by Americans who would have appalled them in their diversity and secularity.

In the end, though, it's their dream—the fact of it, the degree of good faith, however incomplete, that animated it and the degree to which it was realized—that despite all that has happened partially redeems them. The Puritans were not the first people to have a dream, even in North America. Virginia was founded before New England,

and its founders also had a dream: to get rich. They might not achieve it with gold, the way the Spaniards did in Mexico and Peru, but tobacco was a possibility (so was attacking Spanish shipping). The Puritans wanted to get rich too, and as a number of observers pointed out, their temperament was exceptionally well suited to an emerging capitalist world order. But Puritanism was not finally about money. For all its focus on the afterlife, it was also about making the world a better, more holy, place. Even among themselves, Puritans disagreed about how to do this, and many of their best intentions did indeed pave a road to hell. Yet it is also true that some of the most important reforms in American life, from the end of slavery to the creation of the nation's great universities, derived from conceptions of community and morality central to the Puritan worldview. In the Puritans one could find refuge in the faith that one of the most important things that makes us human—the capacity for ideas—might actually be a basis for living one's life, not as a matter of brute self-interest or of self-abnegation from worldly concerns but rather as a possibility that one can simultaneously be intellectually and emotionally engaged with contemporary life even as one always remembers that something lies beyond it. Hence the Puritan injunction to "live in the world, but not of it." This is an extraordinarily difficult thing to do. But it is precisely the willingness to do something difficult, painful, unintentionally mischievous, or finally impossible that gives purpose to individual lives, both as they are lived and as they are remembered.

The Puritans, of course, weren't the only ones to try. The Quakers, for example, followed some early forays into New England—where they would do unforgivable things like allow women to preach—by forming their own far more tolerant colony under the leadership of the remarkable William Penn, who founded Pennsylvania in 1682. And though it isn't exactly our idea of paradise now, the governorship of William Berkeley of Virginia (1642–76) helped transform a primitive Virginia colony into a highly elaborate slave society that captured the imagination of successive generations of southerners. In the centuries that followed, countless groups of Americans—from the Mormons who founded Utah in the 1840s to the hippies who founded communes in the 1960s—made their own efforts to found cities on hills, valleys, or plains. Hope sprang eternal in a promised land that straddled a continent.