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Cotton Mather's Contributions to Wilderness

Cotton Mather was a man of academia, beginning his studies at Harvard at the age of 12 and graduating by eighteen, he became a writer and preacher in early America. Although he preached for those around him to assist their community with humanitarian acts, his outlook on the wilderness was not so compassionate. As a Christian preacher in New England, Mather viewed the wilderness as a source of savagery and temptation to settlers. He believed that the wilderness was full of savages and witches without benefit to man, fostering this ill opinion in his many literary works. Being a lover of language, Mather viewed the wilderness as a source of foreign languages which he thought even worse a threat to the English than the temptations of wilderness. Seeing wilderness as a threat was tied to the challenges man faced when greeted with such harsh landscapes. To Mather, a source of difficulties which bred emergencies was the wilderness.

In his writings, Mather used imagery to describe wilderness in New England as a dark place full of serpents and the devil, where temptation was rampant. Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* establishes these opinions of the devilish forests in New England. When describing the history of New England in *Magnalia Christi Americana*, Mather writes about newcomers as "poor men that were now to transplant themselves into a horrid wilderness" (49). Much unlike current day descriptions of beautiful and transcendent experiences had in the wild places of America, Mather's distaste for wilderness and its dangers is clear in his pity for the men who had to enter the New World's wild places. Mather uses wilderness as a theme in his writings to describe that which contests his Christian view of God. His fear of wilderness is explicit when he writes "There were angels that helped the whole people of God in the wilderness to their daily bread" (Mather, 93). This supports his opinion that newcomers to wilderness required a higher power to receive assistance when faced with wilderness rather than the view that it was a place of great bounty.

In my opinion, Mather's view of wilderness as a tempestuous place and utilization of it as a theme in his writings was done out of fear. His fears were that the religious man would find some conversion from faith in wild places and prevent a fruitful community from flourishing. Mather even states that "the leader of a people in a wilderness had need be a Moses" (Mather, 113), which he most likely thought himself to be for those residing in New England. This not only brought need for a guide through wilds but also the idea of taming wild places. Although twisted by fear and doubt of man's capability within the wilderness, Mather's description is not inconceivable because of the real dangers of making a life in wild places to new settlers. Disease, food shortages, and improper shelter were real concerns to settlers in early America and Mather's opinion simply puts these fears into his own arena of Christ. Apprehension of wilderness was not uncommon in his time and the fear of living in wild places was not irrational for early settlers.

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