

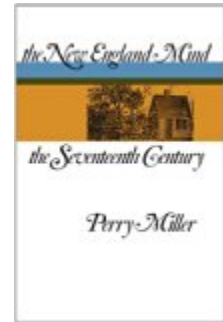
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Perry Miller. *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1982. xii + 491 pp. \$18.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-61306-5.

Perry Miller. *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1998. ix + 485 pp. \$18.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-61301-0.

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Perry Miller and the Puritans

Note: This review is part of the H-Ideas Retrospective Reviews series. This series reviews books published during the twentieth century which have been deemed to be among the most important contributions to the field of intellectual history.

Perry Miller and the Puritans

With the publication of his two-volume study of the American Puritans entitled *The New England Mind*, Perry Miller achieved immortality in the historical profession. *The New England Mind*, along with other works such as *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts* (1933) and *Jonathan Edwards* (1949), established Miller as the Dean of New England history, an accomplishment only comparable to those of Frederick Jackson Turner or C. Vann Woodward. *The New England Mind* has served as the paradigm for early New England history for the last half century, and Miller's contributions and influence, centered in *The New England Mind*, have cast such an immense shadow over admirer and critic alike that the colonial history of New England can justly be called "Miller country," even nearly forty years after his death in 1963.

Miller published the first volume of his work, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* in 1939. In it Miller emphasized coherence and unity as he concerned himself with "defining and classifying the principal concepts of the Puritan mind in New England, of accounting for the origins, inter-relations, and significance of the ideas" (p. vii). Most of his discussion is centered on

the years prior to 1660, and Miller found that "the first three generations in New England paid almost unbroken allegiance to a unified body of thought, and that individual differences among particular writers or theorists were merely minor variations within a general frame" (p. vii). He took the "liberty of treating the whole literature as though it were the product of a single intelligence," and intermingling quotations from various clergymen in making his point because "in most instances, it is a matter of complete indifference or chance that a quotation comes from Cotton instead of Hooker, from Winthrop instead of Willard; all writers were in substantial agreement upon all the propositions which I am discussing in this book" (pp. vii, ix).

In Miller's estimation, there existed an "equilibrium of forces, emotional and intellectual, within the Puritan creed," and seventeenth-century New England Puritanism contained both an intense piety and "an indispensable intellectual element." In other words, "Puritan theorists sought to unite in one harmonious system both science and religion, reason and faith," and they "endeavored to reconcile revelation with natural learning and so to combine in one systematic belief both piety and the inherited body of knowledge" (p. 77). Miller ar-

gued that Puritans synthesized the “Augustinian strain of piety” with the Renaissance conception of reason to form a unified theological and intellectual system that they imposed in New England. Theirs was a thoughtful system, and their intellectual framework was constructed from a variety of influences, including European Protestantism, scholasticism, humanism, physical science, and, most significantly, the “new” logic of Petrus Ramus which Miller believed tremendously influential. Puritan thinkers used all these intellectual tools to bolster their piety and their society.

New England Puritanism had at its center the notion of voluntary contractualism. With the adoption of the covenant of grace, the social covenant, and the church covenant, the participants agreed to a system of mutual obligations and responsibilities. Even God chose voluntarily to limit Himself in the Covenant of Grace: in exchange for faith God granted grace. Mankind was innately depraved and many were damned, but through the covenant system Puritans allowed free will to humans despite the doctrine of predestination and an omnipotent, omniscient God. Moreover, covenant theology with mutual obligations helped New England Puritans walk the fine line between Arminianism and Antinomianism, both of which they abhorred. Miller ended *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* with a statement of his belief that Puritanism had situated itself well for the future: “New England was founded as a Puritan commonwealth and was intended to be a holy and unique corner of the world, but it went into the eighteenth century well prepared in the terms of its own tradition to keep pace with the intellectual and emotional alterations of a new era, with both the emergence of an Age of Reason and the newer religious mood that was to arise in the reaction against reason” (p. 491).

Fourteen years and a stint in the military passed before Miller published the second volume, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* in 1953. This second volume brings Miller’s discussion of New England Puritanism and history up to about 1730, and examines the effects of the passage of a century on the system established by the original founders. Miller believed that the story he told was illustrative: “I believe profoundly that the story herein recounted is chiefly valuable for its *representative* quality: it is a case history of the accommodation to the American landscape of an imported and highly articulated system of ideas. We have a chance to see exactly how this process, which began the moment the ships dropped anchor in Boston harbor, was driven by local influences, and yet was constantly diverted or

stimulated by the influx of ideas from Europe. What I should most like to claim for this study is that it amounts to a sort of working model for American history” (p. viii).

Whereas the first volume stressed unity and coherence, Miller’s second installment explores change and conflict. By the late 1650s, the Puritan experiment in New England experienced significant challenges. Of the great founders only Richard Mather (father of Increase) remained. New England Puritans were increasingly an isolated Protestant sect, particularly in light of the relative religious toleration adopted in England. “New England had become, by remaining faithful to its radical dedication, a stronghold of reaction” (p. 9) Moreover, “New England was no longer a reformation, it was an administration. It was no longer battling that most of the populace should be left out of church-fellowship, but was striving to keep church-fellowship alive” (p. 11). The New England Way as envisioned by the original generation was under assault by the 1660s. In the first volume, Miller had observed that Puritan piety was beginning to wane at the time when New England was first settled (p. 396). During the second half of the seventeenth century, other factors emerged to further erode the original vision of the city upon a hill. Trade emerged as an end unto itself, not to serve God; younger generations in increasing numbers failed to meet the tests for church membership; old social hierarchies and orders were upset; social vices such as drunkenness and extramarital fornication became more prevalent, and the colonial status within the empire changed. Ministers responded to the perceived erosion of religious values and mission with the jeremiad, a new literary form that took aim at all the sin and strove to make sense of the changes in society. The jeremiad was a way of “making intelligible order out of the transition from European to American experience” (p. 31); it was, according to Miller, “purgation by incantation” (p. 34).

Ministers were increasingly on the defensive. Largely at their behest, the Half-Way Covenant was adopted as a means of assuring the perpetuation of church membership. They found, however, that the measures, though enacted, were bitterly divisive, and ministers found themselves in conflict with church members and some colleagues. Moreover, ministers found their positions assailed as religious uniformity declined. Many found themselves in churches whose members refused to grant them adequate wages. In short, a decided “antiministerial sentiment” prevailed. By the end of the seventeenth century, Puritan ministers themselves had split into at least three different camps: those who favored retaining the

traditional covenant religion, those who leaned towards denying covenant theology and embracing Presbyterianism, and those who had pronounced democratic tendencies. In the middle stood the Mathers, Increase and, most significantly, Cotton. For Miller, Cotton Mather is a central figure of his book. Mather appears again and again as leader of the smallpox inoculation movement, as proponent of the “experimental philosophy” and as defender of covenant theology. Cotton Mather has been almost as difficult to type-cast as Jonathan Edwards, and Miller reveals his own ambivalence: “In a hundred respects, Mather is the most intransigent and impervious mind of his period, not to say the most nauseous human being, yet in others he is the most sensitive and perceptive, the clearest and most resolute” (p. 476). Mather strove to retain the covenant system in the face of men such as the extremely influential Solomon Stoddard (grandfather of Jonathan Edwards) who denied covenant theology and embraced Presbyterianism, offering the Lord’s Supper and baptism to all but the most brazen sinners. In the process, “at one stroke he [Stoddard] cut his way through the maze of the covenants by identifying the church not with a society of saints but with the town meeting—where he himself was dictator” (p. 227). The Brattle contingent in Boston led its own assault on the covenant theology. With his emphasis on rights and democracy, John Wise led an assault from another angle. By 1730 the New England religious establishment, as Miller described it, in no way resembled the unified coherent system of a century earlier.

Miller’s magisterial achievement, of course, spawned debate. Scholars such as David D. Hall, Alan Simpson, Bernard Bailyn, Sacvan Bercovitch, George Selement, and Kenneth Lockridge have disagreed with Miller’s conception of New England Puritanism. Among the various complaints, some objected that his system was too monolithic and static, and overemphasized the writings of a select few ministers. Others argued that he focused too much on Puritan intellect, and too little on their passions.

Still others argued that he overstated declension. Social historians, inspired by the French Annales School, argued that in focusing on the mind, Miller ignored the social realities of New England life. There is some merit to all of the objections. Even Miller himself conceded: “The more one studies the history of Puritan New England, the more astonished he becomes at the amount of reeling and staggering there was in it.”[1] Miller’s most important contribution may be the degree to which his work engaged, and continues to engage, scholars to think not only about *The New England Mind*, but about New

England history generally. For over four decades Miller has fostered an incredible productivity in New England studies. Consider that, more recently, historians have even started to reassess Miller’s critics. Francis Butts argued that “in trying to liberate themselves from his shadow, Miller’s critics have been, in a sense, merely shadowboxing. They have been contesting figments of their own imaginations and not the reality of Miller’s history.” He concluded that “the more Perry Miller’s critics have struggled to break free from his grip, the more they have unknowingly embraced him.”[2] Arne Delfs argued more recently that Sacvan Bercovitch’s typological critique “reveals itself to be not one more attack on, but rather a sophisticated defense of, Miller’s coherent view of Puritanism.”[3]

So what, in the year 2000, can we say about *The New England Mind* and the influence of Perry Miller? With the distance of time, it is obvious that Miller’s detractors have made some valid criticisms. In his monolithic conception of Puritanism depicted in the first volume, Miller does emphasize intellect over passions. Social and economic forces, while not entirely neglected as some critics have maintained, are de-emphasized. In fairness, Miller acknowledged that he was interested in “the intellectual terrain of the seventeenth century” (vol. 1, p. vii) and not some of the other important factors that subsequent studies treated. Miller constructed a lasting paradigm. The sheer breadth of his knowledge, his ability to weave a coherent interpretation out of a huge corpus of information and his artful use of the English language raised *The New England Mind* to a classic standing in the canon of American intellectual history. The second volume is the more informative, structured and balanced. His first volume, perhaps owing to its author’s relative youth and inexperience, was more ungainly. The sections on piety and the covenants are brilliant, other chapters less so. The chapter on Petrus Ramus, for example, is dense and trying. One cannot help but agree with Carl Bridenbaugh’s analysis in 1940: “A Teutonic ponderosity, which at times makes the book read like a translation of Mommsen, often obscures the sweep and poetry of a truly magnificent conception.”[4]

In the final analysis, Miller has left us a work of towering importance. In 1993, thirty years after Miller’s death, Edmund S. Morgan wrote: “It took a good many years before it became clear that *The New England Mind* had transformed American intellectual history, and in my opinion its full impact has still not been felt to this day.”[5] The final testimony to Miller’s importance is that, nearly forty years after his death, his work continues the

shape the discourse on early New England history.

Notes

[1]. See Arne Delfs, "Anxieties of Influence: Perry Miller and Sacvan Bercovitch," *New England Quarterly* 1997 70(4) p. 611.

[2]. Francis T. Butts, "The Myth of Perry Miller," *American Historical Review* 1982 87(3) pp. 693-694.

[3]. See Delfs, p. 602.

[4]. Carl Bridenbaugh review, *American Historical Review* v. 45, July 1940, p. 889.

[5]. Edmund S. Morgan, "An Address to the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, on the Occasion of Its Centennial," *New England Quarterly* 1993 66(3), p. 362.

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