



Kenyon Gradert. *Puritan Spirits in the Abolitionist Imagination.* American Beginnings, 1500-1900 Series. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. 256 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-69402-3.

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Reading Kenyon Gradert's though-provoking new book, *Puritan Spirits in the Abolitionist Imagination*, made me realize that I had completely overlooked the four hundredth anniversary of the *Mayflower* landing. Granted, most of us had other things to think about in 2020. Nevertheless, the oversight was startling for me, a Massachusetts-born-and-bred historian of early America for whom the discovery, in a college history class, that 1620 *wasn't* the beginning of American history was a memorable shock. Today, though, the Pilgrims and the Puritans who followed them to Massachusetts don't seem as significant as they used to in popular historical memory. Over the past year, the latest front in the culture wars has been dominated by a contest between 1619 and 1776 as the origin points of American history—with the Pilgrims receding into a distant background.[1]

For New Englanders in the nineteenth century, the Pilgrim and Puritan origins of the United States would be nearly impossible to forget, even (or especially) in a time of national crisis. Gradert focuses on a particular group of nineteenth-century New Englanders—those who were active in, or at least sympathetic to, the movement against slavery—to examine how their perceptions of Puritan roots shaped their antislavery consciousness. Readers expecting scarlet letters and witch trials are in for a surprise. For the most part, abolition-

ists saw the Puritans as deserving of admiration and even emulation. Themselves branded by their detractors as fanatics, abolitionists appreciated the Puritans for their righteousness in the face of persecution and moral rigidity in the midst of a political system that seemed all too ready to compromise. Perhaps above all else, the spirit of Puritanism fueled abolitionists with an ethos of “holy war.” For those antislavery activists committed to “nonresistance” (or pacifism), this war unfolded in metaphorical terms, though it became literal for those convinced that worldly weapons were required to defeat the Satan of slavery.

While recent studies of early New England highlight the Puritan colonists' investment in slavery, Gradert makes clear that nineteenth-century abolitionists were not terribly interested in excavating the history of Puritan slaveholding.[2] Instead, this study focuses on how the abolitionists imagined and reinvented the Puritans to serve their own political and spiritual needs. White New England abolitionists seem to have looked to their Puritan forebears less for examples of how to treat enslaved people and people of color than as models for how to cultivate their own sense of self as nonconformists. In this respect, Gradert's study reinforces the idea that white abolitionists could be obtusely self-absorbed even as they participated in a movement ostensibly for the liberation

of others. As the lawyer-activist Wendell Phillips, himself a subject of Gradert's study, put it, "If we never free a slave, we have at least freed ourselves in the effort to emancipate our brother man."³ For abolitionists seeking their own self-emancipation, the Puritans represented "what they themselves wanted to be, a prophetic minority so enraptured with a moral-spiritual conviction that they could not compromise with a wicked status quo, even if it meant martyrdom and holy war" (p. 6). Gradert argues that scholars have overlooked the power that the Puritans held for the abolitionists because we have assumed the Puritan influence in American life to have been conservative. In fact, he contends, the spirit of Puritanism helped instill in New England abolitionists a revolutionary fervor and a rugged religiosity that carried their transformative cause through the (American) Civil War.

Gradert, a literary scholar, has immersed himself deeply in the writings of reform-minded New Englanders to produce this study. He establishes the wide reach of Puritan references in abolitionist writing by noting that the *Liberator*, Boston abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison's newspaper, mentioned the Puritans in "every other issue, on average" (p. 2). In each of the thematically structured chapters, Gradert looks more closely at a few writers and thinkers who grappled with the Puritan legacy. The two opening chapters form an especially effective pairing. The first examines how male abolitionists looked to the Puritans to construct a concept of revolutionary and religious heroism that venerated John Brown as a new Oliver Cromwell. The second chapter traces how three abolitionist women (Maria Weston Chapman, Julia Ward Howe, and Lydia Maria Child, each of whom in her own way chafed against the gender expectations of nineteenth-century society) embraced the "language of spiritual warfare" that they picked up from their Puritan forebears in order to highlight the feminine heroism of their antislavery organizing (p. 48). Other chapters consider "the link between America's Puritan-Pilgrim heritage and a

free abolitionist press"; the resonances of Puritanism (and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* [1667]) in abolitionist poetry; and the "beautiful Puritanism" invented by Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe that claimed Puritan roots but contained "little that was distinctly Puritan in any sense" (pp. 83, 125). The book's important culminating chapter, "The *Mayflower* and the Slave Ship," takes up Black authors' reimagining of Puritan narratives. Resisting the racialist idea that the Puritan legacy could only be claimed by blood descendants, these writers asserted that Black Americans from Nat Turner to Union army soldiers were the true inheritors of the Cromwellian Christian warrior tradition.

This book is eminently well conceived and well constructed. Drawing on various genres, Gradert's close readings are erudite without being obscure. In a number of cases, Gradert sheds new light on major figures of the antislavery movement by focusing on works less familiar to modern scholars, such as "The Kansas Emigrants" (1856) by Lydia Maria Child and *Oldtown Folks* (1869) by Harriet Beecher Stowe. The book thoroughly convinces that there is more to say about both the cultural significance of Puritanism and the consciousness of New England abolitionists, despite the hefty bodies of existing scholarship on these topics. Although nation and nationalism are not major categories of Gradert's analysis, scholars of nationalism will find the book's insights into national origin myths useful. Gradert argues that such myths do not necessarily shore up the status quo but can also be used to challenge it. His analysis is particularly valuable in showing how abolitionists drew on such mythology to explain and justify revolutionary violence—and, sometimes, to lament it after the fact.

The abolitionist imagination examined in this book is overwhelmingly a New England one, given the historical role of Puritanism in establishing English colonies in that region. As numerous scholars have pointed out, the historical narratives gen-

erated in New England often transcended regional significance and defined (or at least attempted to define) the memory and identity of the whole nation.[4] But despite New England's cultural influence, neither abolitionism nor memory making was limited to that locale. To what extent did appropriations of the Puritan past resonate in abolitionist texts produced outside of New England? What alternative memories competed with those of the Puritans in abolitionist imaginations? For instance, the most noble white characters in Stowe's antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) are Quakers, suggesting that those who were persecuted by the Puritans had an important cultural legacy for abolitionists as well. A broader consideration of abolitionist historical consciousness might consider how these different strands of memory competed and played off each other.

Gradert also hints in a few places to the very negative view of Puritans held by some nineteenth-century Americans. Near the beginning of the book, he presents a startling cartoon sketched by Confederate sympathizer Adalbert Volck in 1863. Titled "Worship of the North," the scene centers on an altar whose stones are each labeled with one of the (supposed) tenets of Northern heresy: "Negro worship," "spirit rapping," "free love," "socialism," "atheism," and "rationalism"—a predictable litany of abominations coming from a Southern critic. But one of the stones is etched with "witchburning," and the towering letters on the altar's foundation spell out "Puritanism" (p. 4). This image shows that slavery's supporters, like the New England abolitionists, perceived a close connection between abolitionism and Puritanism, but in their view, the relationship confirmed that abolitionists were extremists who threatened everything that Americans should hold dear. Exploring this proslavery critique of Puritanism more—alongside the ambivalence some of Gradert's subjects expressed about certain aspects of the Puritan heritage—would have been a welcome addition to the book. The critical views of the Puritans also highlight how appropriations of the

Puritan past might have differed from the uses of other strands of historical memory—notably, that of the American Revolution. Where people on different sides of the slavery question all clamored to claim the Revolution for their cause, the Puritans seem not to have had such universal appeal.[5] This discrepancy suggests that drawing on Puritanism was not an especially effective way to broaden the antislavery appeal (at least beyond a certain swathe of society), even if it did important work in cultivating a sense of self and justifying certain stances among those who were already part of the fold.

Especially given its brevity, *Puritan Spirits in the Abolitionist Imagination* gives readers a lot to think about. Specialists in nineteenth-century American literature, culture, and history will find ample insights in its analysis of specific texts and authors, while scholars of historical memory and nationalism will appreciate the questions the book raises about how people construct the past to make meaning in the present. Gradert makes an eloquent case that the Puritan influence in the American consciousness is worth another look.

Notes

[1]. For particularly salient examples, see the 1619 Project produced by the *New York Times* in August 2019 to commemorate four hundred years of American slavery, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html> as well as the report of former President Donald J. Trump's 1776 Commission, issued on January 18, 2021, available online via <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/1776-commission-takes-historic-scholarly-step-restore-understanding-greatness-american-founding/>.

[2]. See, for instance, Wendy Warren, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America* (New York: Liveright, 2016).

[3]. Quoted in Wendell Phillips Garrison and Francis Jackson Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879: The Story of His Life Told by His Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1894), 3:320.

[4]. Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Harlow W. Sheidley, *Sectional Nationalism: Massachusetts Conservative Leaders and the Transformation of America, 1815-1836* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998); and Stephen Nissenbaum, "New England as Region and Nation," in *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions*, ed. Edward L. Ayers, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Stephen Nissenbaum, and Peter S. Onuf (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 38-61.

[5]. Michael F. Conlin, *One Nation Divided by Slavery: Remembering the Revolution While Marching toward the Civil War* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2015).

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