



The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century

Perry Miller

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In *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*, as well as successor *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, Perry Miller asserts a single intellectual history for America that could be traced to the Puritan belief system.

The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century Details

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Joshua says

It is the formative modern work on American Puritanism, and every book on Puritanism in America since has had to drink from its well of scholarship. Miller's prose is laborious at times, and his lack of footnoting is really unfortunate, despite the fact that an additional book was published which gave appropriate references for his numerous quotations of primary sources. All in all the work is a positive treatment of Puritanism, the first of its kind in the modern era, which is why it has become the standard. Some Puritans get slammed a bit (Cotton Mather), and some of Miller's general claims have now been shown to be overstatements (i.e. the Puritan's extreme rationalism, or a trend of later generations away from evangelical preaching). Don't read this book unless you love Puritan studies. If you aren't interested in Puritan studies, then please read the Puritans instead--for they are immanently more interesting in their own words, unencumbered.

Steve says

I particularly liked the sections on anti-Aristotelian thought and then the impact of Ramus on New England thought.

Sarah says

Oh. My. I'm clearly not a fan of Mr. Miller's writing. This book was an absolute torture to get through, and I only did it for my friends. I hope they know I love them. :)

Nate says

Obviously a masterful work; essential reading, for sure. Though not my favorite work on the Puritans.

Lizzytish says

Ugh, that's done. A major Mego and cure for insomnia book.

Peter says

This book is awesome...too often people look at the Puritans as some repressive, somber group of men who wielded control over New England wearing clothes of black and brown, immortalized in a million grade-school plays. The reality is that 1., the Puritans worked very hard to reconcile their rigorous faith with their

flock, and with the people who hovered at the edge of their flock. And 2., The idea of a covenant, so vital to Puritan philosophy, permeates throughout all of American law & politics...the idea that honest deals can be brokered by two sides, that actions have consequences, and thus sticking to - or not fulfilling - the details of a covenant can have upsides and downsides...great book!

Joel Zartman says

How much better than multiple volumes of historiographical bafflegab by evangelicals edited by D. G. Hart is one volume of history by Perry Miller. They will perish, but Perry Miller will always have to be consulted.

This is a cogent, careful, ingenious, devastating, irascible, symphonic, amazing volume. Even with the palpably dated portions, the structure stands majestic, like a tremendous tower that has withstood a siege in which every other surrounding edifice has been laid low. It is one of the great works of American historiography.

What Perry Miller has is: good insight, thorough research, and trained skepticism. He admires the puritans, but not too much, and he does not fail to clearly identify their failure. While remaining skeptical of their claims, he sifts through them carefully, evaluates them seriously, thus exposing hidden assumptions and agendas. He is brilliant in pointing out that while they believed that the church must be ordered from the obvious teaching of Scripture, what constituted a church in independent, Congregationalist polity, a local church covenant, was not, in fact, obviously drawn from Scripture. And his grasp of human weakness helps him see what is often overlooked. There are things for which Miller ought to be corrected. He did not, for example, always read as thoroughly in the sources of the sources of the Puritans as he did in the Puritans themselves. He apparently did not have or did not find reliable information on crucial fields outside of his own field of expertise. For all that, there are many things that need no correction in his book, eighty years later. Not being a Christian, he had no need to whitewash the Puritans in the name of appearing charitable; his view was more disinterested. His book remains a standard text on the New England mind, and it bids fair, the way a classic work does, to remain.

Jonathan Kieran says

Some really interesting nuggets here, buried in page upon page of lackluster minutiae. As a non-historian, I'll leave method quibbles and questions of datedness aside, and say that I'd have much preferred something operating at a bit higher level of synthesis and taking in more than just theological and liturgical writings of Mass. Bay's ruling class. Miller brings us up to the edge of some pretty fascinating territory regarding the inner life of Puritans, the seeming contradictions their thought bridged between religious ecstasy and logical punctiliousness. Still, it all seems very stuck on paper, in terms both of its sources and the lack of lightness, or illumination, in its prose.

Michael says

The biographical summary of Miller is interesting. A man who got his PhD in an era where 1 year of undergrad work, followed by three years of grad work after a hiatus traveling the world, could quite directly land tenure at Harvard. One thinks of Miller as a tweedy Harvard professor in the "consensus" era of

historiography. Trapped inside the minutia of high culture debates, he seems one caught in the amber of historiographical time. Perhaps, as Stephen Foster implied in "New England and the Challenge of Heresy" (WMQ 1981), "division" and "dissent" did have an intimate association with "decline." What did Miller accomplish? He rescued the Puritans from the hands of the Progressive Historians, who had relegated them to the positions of demagogues and hypocrites. In the words of Bernard Bailyn, he "recast the image of New England origins from one of hypocrisy, savage intolerance and the stultification of the senses, to one of intellectual and spiritual splendor." (Bailyn's review of *Errand into the Wilderness* in Essex Institute).

It is indeed a different world in the sense of academic sociology, but also in terms of the types of things that interest scholars. As Hall points out in his "On Common Ground," the interest in social history of the 1960s and 70s certainly refocused the profession away from the close textual exegesis of Perry Miller's *New England Mind*. As social history came into fashion, so intellectual history went out. Even with the literary turn of the 80s and 90s, when we returned to the study of the Mathers' writings, it is more to understand their relationship with the popular press than it is to probe the depths of Calvinist - Puritan intellectual continuities. Within New England Studies, the impact of Gender (masculinity as well as femininity) have impacted our view of the clergy and interactions with the laity as they changed over time. See C Dayton (Taking the Trade). Today we celebrate difference, division and dissention. We sing with Walt Whitman from *Leaves of Grass* ... "Do I contradict myself? So I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes" And we seek out the sources of social and cultural contest. We glory in our differences and in the genius of America in containing all of this ...

Aolund says

Admittedly, I did not read this whole work. But Miller's work--while certainly a product of its time-- is comprehensive and generally represents the Puritans in their own words and through their own worldview. Unfortunately, though Miller is exhaustive in his explication of Puritan understandings of piety, intellectualism, science, and various covenants, there is no discussion in this book on what Puritans thought of their physical struggles in the land they occupied as colonizers, nor of the people they met there.

Dan Gorman says

This book from 1939 is very much a product of its time. Miller focuses only on men and elite writings in telling his story of New England Puritanism. I think it's a good idea to situate religion within a broader intellectual history framework, and Miller should be applauded for reading tons of seventeenth-century British theology and logic philosophy. Miller also shows that the Puritans weren't just dour stereotypes, but rather complex people who found joy in their religion. Unfortunately, Miller chooses to treat all of Puritan thought as the product of "a single intelligence" – in other words, he sees Puritan culture as so uniform that he skips over individual personalities and treats Puritanism as a closed system. I'd say that's pretty ahistorical for a historian! The book really works better as theology, especially once Miller enthuses about invisible forces which the Puritans recognized in their lives. Those invisible forces can't be proven to be there, so I don't think they belong in a history book. Theology, sure, but not history. Still, Perry Miller's book shows us how a historian of religion wrote in the modernist, post-Progressive period – focused solely on Christianity, men, stasis, and numinous forces.
