

Sober Mirth and Pleasant Poisons: Puritan Ambivalence Toward Leisure and Recreation in Colonial New England

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A culture at play tells much about itself. Patterns of leisure and recreation do not develop by accident; invariably they are manifestations of a society's core values. Unfortunately, assaying the meaning of specific patterns of leisure and recreation is seldom easy. Scholars often assert—virtually as a matter of faith—that pleasurable pastimes provide significant clues to a culture's inner workings, but then find the meaning of the clues puzzling and elusive.¹

In particular, people have sought to understand the culture of the United States by analyzing how its citizens relax.² Americans at play, however, send ambivalent signals both to themselves and to the international community. On the one hand, they pursue pleasure relentlessly—even wantonly. Licentious, narcissistic, hedonistic—all of these adjectives could be used to describe behavior that revolves around sexuality, individual gratification, and conspicuous consumption of everything. A large portion of music and film exaggerate reality and promote a picture of American decadence. Yet, on the other hand, many people, particularly foreigners, feel that Americans do not know how to play *properly*. According to this view, the seeming American hedonism in truth camouflages an inability to relax. Co-existing with the American attitudes of freedom of expression and behavior are deeper feelings that bespeak a repressive, censorious morality. Thus, bath-tub gin can be explained as a product of abstemious temperance; sex on the movie screen reflects sophomoric insecurities; the frenetic chase for fun parallels the rat-race pace of work. Americans work

too hard at play, a sure sign that they are not very good at it. They take their leisure and recreation like they take their role in the world—too seriously.³

When either foreign or American commentators search the past for clues to the American identity, a number of explanatory factors surface with regularity: among these, for example, are the frontier, abundance, immigration, and the short span of American history. Predictably, considerations of morality and pleasure begin with a short discussion about or diatribe against Puritanism. Something about Puritanism has fascinated—perhaps fixated is a more appropriate term—the historical imagination. The general storyline of the popular analysis goes as follows. Political freedom, individualism, a fluid class structure, prosperity, geographical mobility—all of these factors and others, fuel an American drive towards hedonism. But, lurking just beneath this surface gaiety, a cluster of attitudes derived from their Puritan origins prevent Americans from truly enjoying themselves. Despite their apparent carefree pursuit of pleasure, Americans have always been and still are chained to guilt, sanctimony, harsh judgments and hypocrisy by their Puritan past. As the French paper *Le Monde* wrote recently in a front page editorial on the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill scandal, “since the arrival of the pilgrim fathers, America has never truly settled its account with sin. The old Puritan heritage periodically surges forth from the collective memory.”⁴ Much of the popular culture, however, still associates Puritanism with dour prudery. And, modern literary figures as distinguished as Arthur Miller and Robert Lowell reinforce this perception.⁵

Contemporary historians have developed a view of Puritanism in opposition to this popularly-held view. Puritans enjoyed sex, beer, and time free from work. They may have been harsh in judging sinners, but they were clear and fairminded when they applied standards, not bigoted and hypocritical. Most professional historians attribute any ascetic, prudish qualities in American life to double-standards created by Victorian Americans in the late nineteenth century. Puritans have been relieved of blame by scholars who have reassigned the historical burden to the more recent past.

Why are the literary and popular cultures at such odds with recent historical interpretations? Have historians overstated Puritanism’s capacity to pursue pleasure through leisure and recreation? These questions have been raised by several recent analyses of Puritan attitudes towards sex which suggest that professional historians may have “over corrected” in their efforts to rehabilitate the Puritans. In an attempt to place Puritan attitudes in a more sophisticated context, historians may have replaced one stereotype with another: both the gloomy, religious fanatic and the relaxed, moderate Puritan may be equally ahistorical images.⁶

I believe that both of these historical figures—the gloomy fanatic and the relaxed moderate—fail to personify the complexity of Puritan attitudes towards leisure and recreation. And, by this I do not mean that Puritans said one thing but did another. That was to be expected. Scholars know, as did Puritans, that a gap existed between ideals and practice in all societies; such a gap merely reflects the

human condition. Recent social historians have done much to measure the distance between practice and preaching in New England by assessing criminality and deviance. It was within the preaching itself, however, that the real complexity existed. The Puritan ideal of leisure and recreation contained an ambivalence of profound importance. Puritans had a problem articulating their ideal of appropriate leisure and recreation. This problem resulted in ambiguous messages to their own society and to future generations.

Puritan Ambivalence

For a people remarkably consistent in their commitment to build a society based on Scriptural blueprint, New England's Puritans pursued their grand goal with a high degree of ambivalence over strategies, values, and secondary purposes. A series of conflicting, contradictory impulses underlay much of this ambivalence: Puritans believed in conformity to doctrine but also in liberty of conscience; they worked for material prosperity but wanted to avoid worldly temptations; they prized social communalism but asserted economic individualism. Each of these pairs (among others) provided alternatives that competed for loyalty both within society as a whole and within the hearts and minds of individuals. The leadership usually pretended no conflict existed and tried to fit these divisions into a coherent whole. They argued, for example, that people should use their liberty of conscience to arrive at the same doctrine as the ministerial elite. Yet, the contradictions did not go away in the seventeenth century; they resurfaced continually in both ideology and practice. In reality, they resurfaced because Puritans neither had the desire nor the ability to make these hard choices. Hence, they did not line up on either side of the alternatives for a showdown, but tried instead to make all of the contradictions fit together comfortably. They could not.

Puritan attitudes towards recreation and leisure reflected the ambivalence produced by those conflicting impulses. On the one hand, Puritans were virtually unanimous in stressing that all people needed relaxation to refresh their body and soul. As John Cotton, the most influential minister of the founding generation, wrote, "life is not life, if it be overwhelmed with discouragements...wine it [is] to be drunken with a cheerful heart...thy wife beloved and she to be joyfully lived withal, all the days of thy vanity." Cotton was quick to add, however, that enjoyment of drink and love did not extend to "gluttony and drunkenness...swaggering and debauch ruffians."⁷ In these cautions we see the manifestations of the Puritan's general ambivalence towards relaxation. Support of recreation and leisure in rhetoric was almost always accompanied by cautions against unGodly, unlawful, unreasonable or unproductive activities. As if the very assertion threatened to open the floodgates to Hell, almost every endorsement of pleasure and fun was hedged about with restrictions of its actual exercise. William Bradford, John Winthrop, Thomas Shepard, Thomas Hooker, among most other early leaders, took great care in their writings to identify the limits of

lawful recreation and to cite the many examples of fellow New Englanders who had exceeded these limits. A generation later in 1684, Increase Mather echoed these sentiments when he wrote, "Lawful recreations...moderately and reasonably used are good and in some cases a duty." Yet, people "often spend more time therein than God allowth of. And, too many indulge themselves in sinful sports and pastimes... The Scriptures commend unto Christians, gravity and sobriety in their carriage at all times; and condemn all levity." Mather concluded with a blanket requirement that virtually negated everything he had said earlier in praise of recreation.⁸

This tradition of give and take in moral rhetoric continued into the eighteenth century. In 1707 the tradition received its most comprehensive statement in Benjamin Coleman's 170-page tract, *The Government and Improvement of Mirth, According to the Laws of Christianity, in Three Sermons*.⁹ Coleman's *tour de force* is the only book-length study devoted exclusively to the subject of recreation and leisure published in colonial New England's history. Written at a time when the Puritan impulse seemed to be waning, *The Government and Improvement of Mirth* became the ideal text of its time.¹⁰ Its influence derived not just from its bulk but also from the care, judiciousness, and moderation Coleman brought to his analysis, giving it a legal-like quality of calm rationality.

As did John Cotton and Increase Mather before him, Coleman extolled the virtues of recreation in the abstract. "I am far from inveighing against sober mirth," he wrote, "on the contrary, I justify, applaud, and recommend it. Let it be pure and grave, serious and devout, all which it may be and yet free and cheerful." The concept of "sober mirth" which Coleman returned to continually, embodied in two words the ambivalence at the heart of Puritan attitudes towards recreation and leisure. Almost no page passed without a reminder that "mirth may and generally does degenerate into sin: tis ordinarily the froth and noxious blast of a corrupt heart." Mirth is "graceful and charming so far as it is innocent," Coleman admitted. But then he felt compelled to add, "tis pity that sin should mix with it to make it nauseous and destructive and make it end in shame and sorrow." Yet, continuing in this vein of give and take, Coleman reminded ascetics that Christ, himself, did not scorn mirth on proper occasions nor censor it in others: thus, "we read of his tears but never of his laughing." A reflexive caution against giddiness or sensuality, however, invariably followed any endorsement of joviality. In the final analysis, Coleman did not want readers to forget that above all, Jesus was "a man of sorrow."¹¹

In its overall thrust, Coleman's thoughts rehashed what must have been a familiar message to New Englanders: have fun but not too much. Unlike other Puritan moralists who freely gave advice on the pleasures/dangers of recreation, however, Coleman was systematic and precise in his attempt to separate the joyful from the sinful. He was a list maker and his lists of rules provide a detailed guide—almost a manual—of the rights and wrongs of sober mirth. Coleman's rhetorical commitments to recreation and leisure were qualified only by a few basic restrictions: they must be "innocent"; "do no injury to God or our neighbour";

and “must not transgress sobriety, holiness, or charity.” If his analysis had ended with the above caveats, Coleman’s work would stand as a monument to the happy, moderate Puritan. But, after rhetorically establishing his support for the principle of pursuing pleasure in Sermon One, Coleman examines the reality of the pursuit in Sermon Two. Lurking within the innocent pastimes of “sober mirth,” “virtuous mirth,” and “profitable mirth” are always their natural enemies, “carnal and vicious mirths.” Although these two types of mirth stood at opposing poles of good and evil values, Coleman argued that they were not far apart in the realities of daily life. And, herein lay the danger that was at the heart of Puritan ambivalence towards recreation and leisure. Once a

licentious manner of expressing our mirth takes over, all possibilities of innocence, neighborly love, or sobriety vanish. The pretence of restraint may be outwardly maintained but disdain is sneered from the eye and contempt is in the smile; tho indeed envy and spite are under the paint; the look is pleasing enough and gay but tis only disguise, a forced laugh while a man’s galled and mad at the heart...a wretch cannot be overjoyed to see a friend but he must curse him and every cup of drink he gets he damns himself....the wanton man’s mirth is ridiculous. He lays aside the man and the gravity of reason and acts the part of a frolic colt. He roars and frisks and leaps.¹²

Coleman’s list of licentious mirths—the attributes of the “frolic colt”—was inclusive and more detailed than the list of acceptable sober mirths. Among the commonplace practices that he found unacceptable were: playing the part of the “merry drunkard”; “mirth ill-timed” on fast days, days of sorrow or the Sabbath; “idle or impertinent mirth—a sport to a fool”; “making ourselves merry with sin”; “to make religion and goodness the object of our mirth”; “to make merry at the judgement of God”; mirth that “stops devotion, cramps industry and is big with idleness...[is] evil and unlawful.” None of these “lewd practices” could be lawfully tolerated, according to Coleman, because to allow them to exist, even if they were held in contempt, would expose the community to the dangers of contamination by one bad example. “Sensual lusts love company,” he argued. “Men can’t game and drink and be lewd and laugh alone. They provoke and spurt on one another.” Throughout the substantive heart of Sermon Two, one searches in vain for any specific non-religious recreations that Coleman found proper and lawful. Undoubtedly there were some, but Coleman left these unspecified. In the final third of his book, Sermon Three, however, Coleman described what he believed to be the greatest recreation of all: rejoicing in God. The worship of God was the source of true relaxation for a regenerate Christian.¹³ Thus, for Coleman, the apparently paradoxical phrase, “sober mirth,” was more than a convenient literary device: it was a statement of an ideal—an ideal from which he was not prepared to condone much deviation in practice.

This idea of sober mirth animated the writings of most respectable moralists. A statement jointly written by 22 ministers in 1726, nearly two decades after Coleman's tract appeared, shows the enduring quality of Puritan ambivalence. In *A Serious Address to Those Who Unnecessarily Frequent the Tavern....*, one of the last great Puritan manifestos on morality, a group of Boston-area ministers prefaced their diatribe against tavern and liquor abuse with a perfunctory endorsement of the need for leisure and relaxation: "We would not be misunderstood, as if we meant to insinuate that a due pursuit of religion is inconsistent with all manner of diversion. There are diversions, undoubtedly innocent, yet profitable and of use, to fit us for service." Then, however, they list some of the appropriate attributes of acceptable innocent diversion. "Harmless recreation," they argued, should "be governed by reason and virtue," "convenient, sparing, prudent," "give place to business," "observe proper rules," "subserve religion," and "minister to the Glory of God." Not surprisingly, these ministers believed that few people satisfied these requirements for "sanctifying recreation" and for "resisting the temptations that mingle with their diversions." Most, instead, "drink down poison in their pleasant cups and perceive it not."¹⁴

Puritan Attitudes Towards Specific Activities.

Only a few types of activities were categorically condemned as "poisons" by Puritans. Theatre was one of these. Puritans opposed the staging of plays with a vehemence that comes close to defying modern comprehension. Considered false recreations because they exhausted rather than relaxed the audience and actors, plays wasted labor, led to wantonness and homosexuality, and invariably were represented by Puritans as a foreign—particularly French or Italian—disease of a similar enervating nature as syphilis. To a seventeenth-century New Englander a play was as horrible as a Catholic Mass; both represented a special snare of Satan—public gatherings that promoted the anti-Christ.¹⁵

Probably only the concept of Sabbatarianism had as strong an ideological charge as the Puritan's hatred for the theatre. Most of the English colonies practiced some form of Sabbatarianism, but Puritans were its leading colonial proponents and quite probably the most strict Sabbath observers in all of Christendom. A "Day of Joy," was their term for the Sabbath which ran from sunset on Saturday to sunset on Sunday; but joy's manifestations were holy rather than festive. Normally lawful recreations or productive practices were forbidden on the Sabbath. Sexual intercourse, unnecessary travelling, and any type of banter or conversational frivolities were proscribed. Opportunities to hunt had to be forsworn even if food was scarce. Crimes usually regarded as minor such as using profanity or stealing apples from a tree were punished with great severity if committed on a Sunday. Brandings and mutilations for crimes committed on the Sabbath were not unusual and a few ministers and civil leaders believed the death penalty appropriate for Sabbath-breaking. New Haven Colony provided fodder for generations of jests by punishing a husband and wife who kissed on

Sunday. And, Michael Wigglesworth, the popular Puritan poet and quintessential neurotic, added to his historical fame by agonizing in his diary over whether closing a stable door that was blowing in the wind constituted an act of work which would profane the Sabbath. New Haven and Wigglesworth, of course, were extremes within New England, being akin to the spirit that moved one English wag to charge a Puritan with the "hanging of his cat on Monday for killing a mouse on Sunday." But, all of the region, with the exception of Rhode Island, embraced Sabbatarianism with a ferocious sobriety.¹⁶

Nothing quite matched their hatred of theatre and Sabbath-breaking, but Puritan moralists also condemned all forms of gambling. "An enchanting witchery," as one Englishman called it, "gotten betwixt idleness and avarice." Gambling seemed to strike at the heart of the values of family, work, and honesty.¹⁷ More than that, however, Puritans found gambling theologically offensive because it appealed to God to intervene in trivial matters. Implicating "Providence in frivolity" violated the Third Commandment against taking the Lord's name in vain since gamblers implicitly asked him to intervene on their behalf. Given the compelling social and religious reasons for despising gambling, it might seem surprising that Puritans devoted much less energy and emotion to combatting it than they did to fighting the scourge of theatre. However, little needed to be said about gambling; its ills were manifestly evident. Theatre had a more innocent appearance and hence a greater propensity to lure the unwarned into the life of debauchery that lay beneath the surface. The fact that all of the early Puritan law codes made gambling illegal did not deter some from its practice. The courts routinely fined card-players, dice-throwers, and others who seemed smitten with the "itching disease." Gambling held no special horrors for Puritans: it was wrong but inevitably some people out of weakness or greed would do it. And, in the same matter-of-fact way, those people must be punished.¹⁸

Puritan ideology also condemned music, art, and dancing as illegitimate recreational or leisure activities but made one or two important exceptions about each. Secular singing and the playing of instruments, moralists thought, had little to offer spiritual growth and ran the danger of leading to ribaldry. Hence, only music that could be regarded as an "effective, divinely given tool" to help worship God, as Calvin said, had a claim to legitimacy. And, only those songs that God had revealed in Scriptures, the Psalms, should be used in worship. These should be sung without the direction of a choir director and without the accompaniment of instruments since both of these aids were created by the Catholic Church to promote music as a form of sensual rather than spiritual arousal. The net result of all these strictures was that, in early New England, music played no morally acceptable role outside of church, and within church only a limited one. Tunes were forgotten, no training took place, and creativity was indulged only to the extent that each singer in the congregation anarchically dealt with each Psalm on his or her own terms.¹⁹

Similarly, the world of art afforded little in the way of legitimate relaxation to Puritans. They opposed almost all iconography as part of the Catholic apostasy and inasmuch as most European art reflected religious symbolism, Puritans opposed it as part of their warfare with Rome. Stained glass, ornate churches and altars, steeples, pictures of saints and of Christ, stood at the opposite end of the continuum to the end containing the small, unpainted, undecorated Puritan meetinghouse. This rejection of “craven images” joined with the Puritan contempt of beauty for beauty’s sake—which they regarded as a form of idleness—to produce a hostility to most forms of artistic expression.

Gravestone decorations and portraiture were the two important exceptions that Puritan ideology allowed. Moralists encouraged both activities because they had an instructive quality that served society. Decorating gravestones with religious images or messages did not constitute idolatry since one did not worship gravestones, but instead learned a sobering lesson of temporality from them. Portraiture performed the useful function of preserving the images of worthy men and women to inculcate respect among the rest of the present and future population. Puritans considered portraitists more as craftsmen than as artists and they received the wages of middle-of-the-road artisans. As did other craftsmen, portrait painters did something useful for society; they moved “men towards virtue” by marking the historical accomplishments of great people. If painters were regarded in any way as outside the regular bounds of crafts, it was more as historians than as artists. A few Puritan leaders owned landscape paintings which were painted in New England and were, indeed, closer to examples of art for pleasure than of art for purposes of moral instruction. Also, artists painted a few pictures of funeral processions of great men; these had the same function as portraits. Both landscape and funerary paintings were rare and seldom seen by most early New Englanders.²⁰

“Dancing or leaping,” Increase Mather wrote in his famous and much-quoted morality tract of 1684, “is a natural expression of joy; so that there is no more sin in it, than in laughter.” This endorsement may make the Puritans sound more liberal on the matter than many modern religious groups; however, closer examination of Mather’s definition of “dancing and leaping” reveals otherwise. The dancing of “men with men”, or of “women with women” was a reasonable form of recreation as long as done, “without offense, in due season, and with moderation.” Problems occurred, however, with what Mather termed “gynecandrical dancing” or what was more commonly called “mixed” or “promiscuous dancing.” Mixed dancing between men and women could not be tolerated in respectable society, according to Mather. Men and women dancing together or even in each other’s sight invariably would succumb to the “unchaste touches and gesticulations...[that] have a palpable tendency to that which is evil.” Mather argued that dancers did not always realize the seductive quality of dancing—its perceived innocence made mixed dancing all the more dangerous.²¹ A few of the seventeenth-century divines, including John Cotton, thought mixed dancing acceptable under a few select circumstances, but agreed that it was not

a practice to be encouraged. Even when men and women leaped about merely in the *presence* of the other gender, dancing posed danger. In particular, Puritans condemned organized dancing at weddings or on holidays such as the infamous dancing around the Maypole. Dancing at taverns was forbidden by law in each of the Puritan colonies because of the “many abuses and disorders” it provoked.²² When all these restrictions were added together, they created a large moral barrier to most forms of dancing as an acceptable recreation.

Similarly, sports and games played a surprisingly small role in recreational thought and practice. Puritans had no theological quarrel with them if they did not involve gambling; but, many of the English sports and games with which they were familiar, such as billiards, shuffleboard, horseracing, bowling, and cards usually did. At the very least, sports and games were felt to provide a ready opportunity for gambling. By 1650 all of the above mentioned activities were outlawed in New England because of their collateral propensities. Puritans also had serious social questions about other aspects of sporting activities commonly practiced in England. For example, sports had been played on Sundays and posed a constant threat to Sabbatarianism. Few New Englanders could forget that the greatest symbol of the royal repression of their movement was the *Book of Sports* issued in 1618 by James I and reissued in 1633 by Charles I.²³ Moreover, sports in England frequently involved injury-producing violence as an inherent part of the activity and engendered rowdy behavior among both participants and spectators. Puritans opposed the “blood sports” of cockfighting, cudgel-fighting and bearbaiting and had serious reservations about team sports such as football because they encouraged idleness, produced injuries, and created bitter rivalries. Football also was traditionally played on holidays, especially Epiphany Day, which made the sport even more compromising to Puritan sensibilities.²⁴ Some organized sports that drew on the medieval traditions of the jousting tournament with costumes, rituals, and cheering spectators smacked more of theatre than of sport to Puritans. Still other games such as tennis and handball had been the preserve of the English elite and the Puritans disdained them because of their association with the Established Church and the idle nobility.²⁵ In the final analysis, despite the fact that Puritan rhetoric did not generally condemn the concept of sport and games, it did specifically condemn all those most commonly played in England. A few sporting activities escaped Puritan proscription and were practiced in New England: hunting and fishing, because they were productive and did not normally tend towards immoderation; and competitions of marksmanship, running, and wrestling held intramurally within the membership of militia companies. These latter sports, of course, had the civic virtue of promoting health and defense as well as providing recreation for the men on militia training days.²⁶

One should not infer from the Puritan opposition to most forms of sport and dancing, however, that they did not prize sociability. Puritans were communalists whose social ideals were founded in groups: the family, the congregation, the town, the colony, and the way of life that knit them together in New England.

They visited each other a great deal and much of their recreation and leisure derived from the informal give and take of everyday conversation in the homes, the fields, the streets, the meeting house, and the tavern. Covenant theology forced upon the Puritans a required sociability that sat easily upon these pioneers and pilgrims who had been removed by distance and dissent from many of England's familiar pleasures. The Puritan landscape was dotted with central places that brought them together as a people who believed in sharing life's joys and hardships as well as in helping one another in the business of moral regeneration.²⁷

A quiet sort of *congregational recreation* provided the truest relaxation experienced by the most respectable Puritans. Church and town meetings were the two most obvious examples of group activities, but family prayers and meals produced daily meetings of a more intimate nature. Puritan sermons may have warned of the dangers of gluttony, but feasting was a popular and thoroughly legitimate pastime to the people who held the first Thanksgiving in American history. Puritans did not celebrate most traditional holidays such as Christmas, Easter, May Day or personal annual holidays such as birthdays and anniversaries, but they did celebrate special occasions of note—military victories, ample harvests, good news from abroad, ordinations, weddings, births and so forth. Almost all of these celebrations centered around food and conversation. This pattern of behavior explains the importance of the tavern in Puritan social life. It provided a warm place to gather together and enjoy good fellowship. Beer, ale, and cider played the same role as bread and cakes did at the dinner table. Drunkenness was a crime just as gluttony was a sin; but both alcohol and food promoted conviviality—a virtue as well as a necessity to people living in cramped houses and austere ideological quarters.²⁸

At the other end of the spectrum from congregational recreation lay another strand of Puritan thought that prized the solitary activities of reading and writing. Puritans were a reflective people and extolled the virtues of contemplative leisure. Just as sociability lay at the heart of Puritan group recreation, literature provided the ideal vehicle for individual leisure. Scriptures, of course, were read for quiet pleasure and profit, but so were a whole host of other acceptable materials. History was a favorite subject, natural science another. One of the most literate groups in the early modern world, Puritans not only read, they also wrote a great deal. Spiritual diaries, autobiographies, daily journals, accounts of the weather, letters to friends in New and old England, poetry, commentaries on the New World landscape: all of these things commended themselves to Puritans who prized education highly for its theological as well as its economic and social benefits.²⁹ Puritan society espoused an intellectuality that made reading and writing its ideal form of quiet leisure. Despite its attractiveness, however, some practical problems made literary pursuits less perfect in practice than in theory. Although literacy rates were high by seventeenth-century standards, only about sixty per cent of New England could read with ease. Books and other printed

matter were expensive and in short supply. Finally, reading/writing did not have a sufficiently robust appeal to all.³⁰

Literature, however, added an ideological advantage of posing only a few dangers to the Puritan mind. Although one could, of course, read or write sacrilegious materials, in general, worries about the type of literature being consumed or produced did not weigh heavily upon Puritan moralists. Puritans perceived fewer potential problems in literature than in almost all other ways of having fun. Most forms of recreation or leisure were laden with lures, hidden ever so slightly, ready to trap the unwarned “like silly birds [who] hasten to the snare, not knowing that it is for life.” The natural propensities of people (especially men) inclined them to pursue sinful pleasures. Increase Mather’s famous warning against the snares prepared by passion put the proposition point-blank in his title, *Solemn Advice to Young Men Not to Walk In The Way of Their Heart* (1695).³¹ Puritans wrote much about the need for recreation and leisure to have a positive side—it must refresh, it must be uplifting—but, they wrote much more about the negative side always lurking just beneath the surface of even the most innocent appearing of activities. Warnings to the unwary—the duty of all figures of authority from ministers to town leaders to fathers of families to neighbors—freighted so many social activities with ambivalence that even the most pure of heart was likely to have a cautious soul. And, of course, this was the whole idea of Puritanism: to make all people aware of the need for constant vigilance against a descent into sin that could—and usually did—begin with the slightest immoderate step.

Certain specific circumstances or situations added to the danger inherent in all activities. Travel away from family and friends could easily loosen the bonds of restraint imposed by the familiar community. England and Europe provided particularly bad examples of conduct to ensnare the young. Youth, in general, and especially adolescents, were at much greater risk than were adults who had developed greater powers of resistance.³²

According to Puritan theology, women all had traces of the Eve temptress in them and, thus, had a larger burden placed upon them by original sin. Since women could more easily lure men into sinful situations than *vice-versa*, women had to guard themselves more closely against boisterous, excessive behavior. The Puritan fear of latent Eves, built a double-standard into their ideas of social conduct for the sexes. Puritans also believed women to be more vain. A woman’s pride in appearance became the particular “snare of her soul,” wrote Cotton Mather in a sermon entitled, *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion or the Character and Happiness of a Virtuous Woman*.³³

The winter season with its shorter days, longer nights and less essential farm work also held special dangers. Idleness and darkness, two winter products, made abuses of recreation both more likely and more possible. “The frothy diversions of bad company;” “spending the night in the telling of tales;” “dancing, drunkenness, and chambering and wantonness;” “games of pure lot;” “books of debauchery, tales, and songs;” were just a few of the frightful seasonal possibilities that

Cotton Mather warned of in his sermon *Winter Meditations* (1693).³⁴ Winter days were regarded as especially appropriate times for fasts either by the entire community or by individual families. In general, summer was much less a season of temptation than was winter, but it did have its special problem of providing sylvan opportunities for improper behavior.

Erosion and Change.

Determining how long these patterns of Puritan thought persisted is difficult. Attempts to define the chronological era of Puritanism have challenged the minds of the best historians, but, as of yet, no consensus on either dates or criteria has emerged. Nor is one likely to arrive very soon. Nevertheless, some aspects of the evolution of the Puritan mind may be described with a reasonable degree of certitude.

Puritan thought did not end at any grand moment or event, but instead eroded over the entire colonial period. The erosion started when New England began its two primary settlements in 1620 and 1629 and was still going on in 1790 when the regional identity became submerged in a national polity. The first governors of Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay, William Bradford and John Winthrop, lived in societies where practice sustained unusually high standards of moral conduct, yet both complained of licentiousness and expressed fears that their colonies were backsliding into English degeneracy. On the other hand, in the 1790s, when moral conduct had significantly deteriorated by Puritan standards, the opponents of theatre in Boston expressed their contempt with the same words used by their great grandfathers of the early seventeenth century.³⁵ Thus, despite being continually worn down, despite a perceived fragility from its very beginning, Puritan thought had an extraordinary tenacity and a very real influence long after any pretence of Puritan political and religious hegemony had ended. Along this continuum, however, it is possible to identify a few periods in which a shift in emphasis occurred and also to identify a few of the agents of change. A tension between the forces of self-denial and self-gratification—between austerity and pleasure—characterized all of the years on the continuum. In the first generation, the forces of self-denial had the upper hand. In a collection of fifty-six letters sent from Massachusetts to England in the decade of the 1630s (all those known to be extant), the subject of recreation and leisure rarely surfaced. Descriptions of land, climate, natives, daily work, news of self, family and colony crowd the pages but little mention was made of having fun. Small talk abounded in the letters but the only frequent reference to any form of relaxation came in discussions of food and the joy of worship.³⁶ Without any conscious historical intent, the ordinary Puritans painted a somber picture of an austere Puritan milieu of ideology and practice.

This golden era of Puritanism ended about 1660. As students of the ministerial literature point out, a new type of sermon began to appear in the 1640s. The “jeremiad,” a lament that extolled the virtues of the past and bewailed the

vices of the present, castigated congregations for their declension—for their inability to maintain the purity and glorious intent of the founding generation. By 1660, almost all of that founding generation lay in the grave. The second generation seemed less sure of itself and more convinced that the moral leadership of the ministers was losing sway over average people. On the distant horizon, the secular trends in Restoration England promoted what appeared to Puritans to be licentious, hedonistic behavior. Cards, dice, foppish clothes, idleness, theatre, circuses, and ribald literature returned to England with renewed vigor along with the return of the Stuarts to the throne. Closer to home, the growth and dispersion of population in New England, the passing of the spirit of martyrdom among those who fled the oppression of James I and Charles I, and the pursuit of “God land and God trade” by the sons and daughters of pilgrims all combined to create a world of alternative counterpoints to the stern morality of the early years. The plaintive cry of the jeremiads indicate that the second generation knew something was wrong but did not know how to fix it. Along with the increased shrillness of the warnings went an increase in prosecutions for crimes associated with the pursuit of pleasure: illegal sex, drunkenness, Sabbath-breaking, the wearing of vain clothes and so forth.³⁷ Michael Wigglesworth’s poem published in 1662, *God’s Controversy with New England*, is the most famous indictment of a New England “overgrown with many noisome weeds.”³⁸

From the 1660s to approximately the end of the 1720s, the second and third generation Puritan moralists struggled against what they regarded as the forces of laxity. Published sermons of the great ministers, always a barometer of their fears and insecurities but not a reliable guide to either popular thought or societal practices, repeatedly warned of the growth of sin and tried to maintain the proscriptions and prescriptions of the founding era. Several manifestos are of particular note. A Massachusetts church synod in 1679 issued a statement entitled, *The Necessity of Reformation*, which was a sort of official jeremiad bearing the moral authority not of one minister or congregation but of the churches of the entire colony. Among the recreational practices the authors found horrifying were: “walking abroad and travelling on the Sabbath;” “having unsuitable discourses;” “sinful drinking;” “days of training and other public solemnities...abused;” “mixed dancing, light behavior and expressions;” “unlawful gaming;” and “an abundance of idleness.”³⁹

The father/son team of Increase and Cotton Mather, the two most respected and prolific moralists of the second and third generation, wrote sermon after sermon trying to stem the tide of licentiousness that they perceived. Yet, changing circumstances forced even the Mathers to make concessions to more relaxed standards. In 1684, Increase railed against mixed dancing; in 1700, Cotton condemned organized balls but implicitly accepted some types of dancing between the sexes as long as they did not abuse the practice. By 1719, Cotton, as the first author listed of a collectively-written jeremiad, was forced to argue against the creation of dancing schools, dancing at the ordination ceremonies of ministers, “immodest irregularities at weddings,” parishioners who move from

the “House of God unto the Tavern after worship,” and “other revels.” As they tried to resist laxity by excoriating what they regarded as the most horrible of practices, however, the Mathers and other members of the ministerial elite grudgingly softened the ideology to condone in one decade what would have been unacceptable in the previous one.⁴⁰

This form of damage control received its last great statement in the 1726 collective jeremiad mentioned earlier in which twenty-two ministers combined their talents to blast the misuse of taverns. It contained an appended letter on the topic written by Increase Mather who had died three years earlier in 1723 and was organized by Cotton Mather who died two years later in 1728. The death of the Mathers and the ending of this type of jeremiad symbolizes the passing of the Puritan era. Hereafter, important traces of the austere moralism survived but did so as individual fragments of an earlier unified ethos. Cautions against many practices continued into the mid-eighteenth century in New England, but, in general, the ideology of recreation and leisure entered into a new, more permissive phase in the 1730s. The moral arbiters, tired of waging a Sisyphean battle, began to make ideological concessions to reality and practice. In the second quarter of the eighteenth century, New England was still relatively decorous and certainly appeared “puritanical” compared to urbane New York or cavalier Virginia. But a variety of recent analyses by social historians show that New England became increasingly less isolated and distinctive and more integrated into an Atlantic-Anglo world of culture and behavior.⁴¹

Conclusion

Many forces without and within New England created the shift in emphasis. Events near the end of the seventeenth century weakened Puritanism both politically and emotionally. Massachusetts’ charter was revoked in 1684 and when a new one was issued in 1691 it contained aspects of royal government including a governor appointed by the crown. New Hampshire had an even stronger royal presence and Connecticut and Rhode Island had to function with the knowledge that they also would lose their charters if they behaved too independently. The debacle of the Salem witch trials made the established church look foolish or antiquated in the eyes of many. And, in general, religious, social, and economic trends militated against the maintenance of Puritan hegemony. By 1730, the Congregational church no longer had a monopoly on religion but had to compete with Anglicans, Baptists, and, in a few places, Quakers. The population had grown to approximately 120,000 persons in Massachusetts, 60,000 in Connecticut, 18,000 in Rhode Island, and 10,000 in New Hampshire, the vast majority of whom, lived on isolated farmsteads whose locations ranged from the coastline to the White Mountains in the North and the Berkshires in the West. Over 250 incorporated towns existed with their own local governments. And, sophisticated urban centers began to emerge: Boston and Newport were preeminent among these, but Portsmouth, Newburyport, Salem, Springfield,

Providence, New London, Norwich, New Haven, Middletown, and Hartford developed into secondary cities as their trade burgeoned and their social structures grew much more varied by class and occupation. In short, the relative homogeneity of New England's churches, governments, and economy, gave way to a society of much greater heterogeneity as the sprinkling of Puritan villages evolved into a large, bustling region.⁴² Not surprisingly, the morality of the Puritan village also gave way to more heterogeneous views and practices of recreation and leisure. Of course, some areas of New England, most notably the small settlements of Rhode Island, had from the beginning departed a great deal from Puritan morality. Conversely, some Puritan villages based on one church, one community, and one shared restrictive vision of morality remained throughout the eighteenth century. And, some vestiges of Puritan morality remained in all communities, including the cities. Thus, a residue of the earliest ambivalence survived, but, overall, a new set of more permissive standards for recreation and leisure had become ensconced in New England by the fourth decade of the century. This more secular, relaxed view of morality carried the region into the Revolutionary era. In the years after 1730, New England still felt some of the tension between self-denial and self-gratification but the best mirth was no longer defined as sober, virtuous, or profitable. In an encompassing range of activities—courtship, tavern-life, social gatherings, holiday celebrations, music, the arts, games and so forth—New Englanders pursued mirth actively for the sheer sake of pleasure.

Notes

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1. For some general statements about the role of leisure and recreation in a society, see J. S. Hans, *The Play of the World* (Amherst, Massachusetts, 1981); N. H. Cheek, Jr. and W. R. Burch, *The Social Organization of Leisure in Human Society* (New York, 1976); and D. J. Tinsley, "A Theory of the Attributes, Benefits, and Causes of Leisure Experience," *Leisure Studies*, 8 (1986), 1-6.

2. See the most well known general history of American leisure and recreation, Foster Rhea Dulles, *A History of Recreation: America Learns to Play* (New York, 2nd ed., 1965) especially the two chapters added in the 2nd edition, "The Changing Scene," 366-385 and "The New Leisure," 386-397. For the unusual emphasis placed on analyses of American play see Walter Podilchak, "Establishing the Fun in Leisure," *Leisure Studies*, 13 (1991), 124.

3. Some of the well known commentators who have described America's "desperate drive for leisure," are discussed in Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (New York, 1962), 257-259. Americans "work easily; play hard," Bell argued. This is also implicitly argued in another scholarly analysis aimed at the mass market: John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston, 1958), 259-269, and *passim*.

4. For the quotation from *Le Monde* and for a wonderful statement of the association of Puritanism with an enduring prudery see the recent editorial by Strobe Talbot in *Time Magazine*, "America Abroad: How Tout Le Monde Missed the Story." Talbot's piece features a graphic which shows eight Puritans questioning Prof. Anita Hill on her morality and quotes extensively from the international press about the pernicious effect of Puritanism on modern-day American morality. See Talbot, "America Abroad," *Time*, Oct. 28 (1991), 15.

5. See among others the major revisionist histories of Puritanism by Perry Miller, *The New England Mind in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1939); Samuel Eliot Morison, *Builders of the Bay Colony* (Boston, 1930); and Edmund Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England* (New York, 1966). Many recent general interpretations of Puritanism disagree with important aspects of the Miller/Morison view but still agree with the conclusion that Puritans were not ascetic prudes. See, for example, the following diverse analyses: Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1978); Francis Bremer, *The Puritan Experiment* (New York, 1976). See also the following recent discussions of Miller's work: Francis Butts, "Norman Fiering and the Revision of Perry Miller," *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 17 (1986), 1-25; and Bruce Tucker, "Early American Intellectual History After Perry Miller," *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 13 (1982), 145-157. Miller, *The Crucible* (New York, 1953); and Robert Lowell, *Endecott and the Red Cross* (New York, 1968).

6. See Roger Thompson, *Sex in Middlesex: Popular Mores in a Massachusetts County, 1649-1699* (Amherst, Massachusetts, 1986), 92-94; and Kathleen Verdun, "'Our Cursed Natures': Sexuality and the Puritan Conscience," *New England Quarterly* (hereafter cited as N.E.O.) 56 (1983), 222-224, 229-230.

7. *The New England Mind*, 61.

8. Increase Mather, *An Arrow Against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing, Drawn Out of the Quiver of the Scriptures* (Boston, 1684), 6.

9. Coleman, *The Government of Mirth* (Boston, 1707).

10. See Richard Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765* (Boston, 1967), for a general discussion of the changes associated with this transition.

11. Coleman, *The Government of Mirth*, 1, 12, 18, 19.

12. *Ibid.*, 19-20, 46-47.

13. *Ibid.*, 46-47, 87, 89-120.

14. Cotton Mather, et al., *A Serious Address to Those Who Unnecessarily Frequent the Tavern, and Often Spend the Evening in Public Houses. By several ministers to Which is added, a private letter on the subject, by the Late Reverend Dr. Increase Mather* (Boston, 1726), 10.

15. For some general statements of the Puritan opposition to theatre see, James Barriskill, "The Newburyport Theatre in the Eighteenth Century," *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, 91 (1955), 211-245; B.W. Brown, "The Colonial Theatre in New England," *Newport Historical Society Bulletin* 76(1930), 2-25; Brooks MacNamara, *The American Playhouse in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1969); Edmund S. Morgan, "Puritan Hostility to the Theatre," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 110 (1966), 340-347.

16. Winton U. Solberg, *Redeem the Time: The Puritan Sabbath in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1977), 2-8, 9, 31-32, 76-77, 88, 107-113, 131-174 and *passim*. Solberg's extraordinary book is one of the few pieces of historical work to merit the term definitive.

17. Charles Cotton, *The Complete Gamester or Instructions How to Play at Billiards, Trucks, Bowls, and Chess, Together With All Manner of Useful and Most Gentile Games Either on Cards or Dice* (London, 1674; repub. London, 1930), XXVI.

18. John Findlay, *People of Chance: Gambling in American Society from Jamestown to Las Vegas* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), 21; Nancy Struna, "Puritans and Sport: The Irretrievable Tide of Change," *Journal of Sport History*, 4 (1977), 12-13.

19. Joyce Irwin, "The Theology of Regular Singing," *N.E.Q.*, L1 (1978), 177-178. See also, Lowell P. Beveridge, "Music in New England from John Cotton to Cotton Mather, 1640-1726," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 48 (1979), 145-165; and Cyclone Covey, "Puritanism and Music in Early America," *William and Mary Quarterly* (hereafter cited as W.M.Q.), VIII (1951), 377-388.

20. For general discussions of Puritan attitudes towards art, see Miller, *The New England Mind*, 157-167; Jonathan Fairbanks, "Portrait Painting in Seventeenth-Century Boston," in Fairbanks, et al., *New England Begins: The Seventeenth Century*, 3 vols. (Boston, 1982), 413-415; Lynn Haims, "The Face of God: Puritan Iconography in Early American Poetry, Sermons, and Tombstone Carvings," *Early American Literature*, 14, (1979), 15-47; Lillian B. Miller, "The Puritan Portrait: Its Function in Old and New England," in David D. Hall and David Grayson Allen (eds.), *Seventeenth-Century New England* (Boston, 1984), 157-165; and Dickran and Ann Tashjean, *Memorials for Children of Change: The Art of Early New England Stonecarving* (Middletown, Connecticut, 1974), 3-7.

21. Mather, *An Arrow Against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing*, 21-22.

22. Struna, "Puritan and Sport," 10-11. John Cotton was also more liberal on the role of music than were his contemporaries, although as with his view of dancing, Cotton made only the slightest of concessions. See Everett Emerson, *John Cotton* (New York, 1965), 27.

23. See Solberg, *The Puritan Sabbath*, 47-48, 70-77, for discussions of the dangers of sports and gambling in general and on the sabbath especially.

24. R. M. Wiles, "Crowd-Pleasing Spectacles in 18th-Century England," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 1 (1967), 93-95; Thomas Henricks, "Sport and Social Hierarchy in Medieval England,"

Journal of Sport History, 9 (1982), 21-23, 25-31; Struna, "Puritans and Sport," 6-7.

25. Henricks, "Sport and Social Hierarchy," 25-30.

26. Struna, "Puritans and Sport," 6-7.

27. The urban quality of the Puritan ideal is well known. Perry Miller in Chapter V, "Puritan State and Puritan Society," in his *Errand Into The Wilderness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1956), 141-152 provides the best intellectual analysis of their communal nature. Ola Winslow, *Meeting-house Hill, 1630-1783* (New York, 1952), demonstrates the social, economic, and political importance of meeting places throughout the work.

28. For a wide-ranging examination of the social role played by meals and food see the essays in Peter Benes (ed.), *Foodways in the Northeast* (Boston, 1984). See also Kym S. Rice, "Early American Taverns: For the Entertainment of Friends and Strangers," *Early American Life*, 14 (1983), 46-55.

29. The importance of reading and writing to Puritans is well known to New England historians. For a few general views see David Grayson Allen, "The Social and Cultural Landscape of Seventeenth-Century New England," in Fairbanks, *New England Begins*, I, 1-9; George Littlefield, *Early Boston Booksellers, 1642-1711* (Boston, 1900); and especially the collection of essays in William Joyce (ed.), *Printing and Society in Early America* (Worcester, Massachusetts, 1983).

30. Kenneth Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England: An Enquiry into the Social Context of Literacy in the Early Modern West* (New York, 1974), remains the best book on the subject. Lockridge's estimates of literacy rates have been adjusted upward slightly by some other scholars. See Ross Beales, "Studying Literacy at the Community Level: A Research Note," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 9 (1978), 93-102.

31. Mather, *Solemn Advice To Young Men Not To Walk In the Way of Their Hearts* (Boston: B. Green, 1695), 47.

32. For a particularly sharp warning aimed entirely at describing the dangers of travel see, Ebenezer Pemberton, *Advice to a Son: A Sermon Preached at the Request of a Gentleman in New-England, Upon His Sons Going to Europe* (Boston, 1705). Warnings in the sermon literature were often targeted at adolescents. See Thompson, *Sex in Middlesex*, 1986), 71-96.

33. Mary Maples Dunn, "Saints and Sisters: Congregational and Quaker Women in the Early Colonial Period," *American Quarterly* (hereafter cited as A.Q.), XXX (1978), 584-601; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Virtuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668-1735," *A.Q.*, XXVIII (1976), 20-40; Margaret Masson, "The Typology of the Female as a Model for the Regenerate: Puritan Preaching, 1690-1730," *Signs*, 2 (1986), 304-315; Cotton Mather, *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion or The Character and Happiness of a Virtuous Woman* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1692), 1-11.

34. Cotton Mather, *Winter Meditations. Directions How to Employ the Leisure of the Winter for the Glory of God* (Boston, 1693), 3-15.

35. Theatre was one of the most hotly debated morality issues in post-Revolutionary New England. See Morgan, "Puritan Hostility to the Theatre," 340-347; Brown, "The Colonial Theatre," 2-10; and John Gardiner, *The Speech of John Gardiner, Esq. Delivered in the House of Representatives on Thursday the 26th of January 1792 on the Subject...of Theatrical Exhibitions* (Boston, 1792), *passim*.

36. These letters are collected in Everett Emerson, *Letters from New England: The Massachusetts Bay Colony, 1629-1638* (Amherst, Massachusetts, 1976), *passim*.

37. Probably more than anyone else, Perry Miller has made historians aware of the function and nature of the jeremiad. See Miller, *The New England Mind*, 471-475. For some recent analysis of the jeremiads see, Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1978), 3-30; Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York, 1986), *passim*; and Peter Wagner, "American Puritan Literature," *Canadian Journal of History of Sport and Physical Education*, 8 (1977), 62-75.

38. Wigglesworth, *God's Controversy with New England*, (Boston, 1662); reprinted in *The American Puritans: Their Prose and Poetry*, ed. Perry Miller (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1956), 298.

39. See Wagner, *American Puritan Literature*, "64-65 for a discussion of this collective warning.

40. Cotton Mather, *A Cloud of Witness Against Balls and Dances* (Boston, 1700), 3-10; "Cotton Mather, et al., *A Testimony Against Evil Customs Given by Several Ministers* (Boston, 1719), *passim*.

41. Cotton Mather, et al., *A Serious Address to those Who Unnecessarily Frequent the Taverns*