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978-0-521-28680-0 - American Colonial Prose: John Smith to Thomas Jefferson

Edited by Mary Ann Radzinowicz

Excerpt

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Introduction

When we have said that American colonial prose was written by men who came to and usually remained in an American colony, about American experiences sometimes but not always true or to be found only in the New World, we have said almost all that can be generally affirmed of it. (Even so it was not always written by men: more women in the colonies than in England wrote lasting work.) The interesting Americanness of American colonial prose is not a matter of its stylistic or intellectual or thematic difference from English seventeenth- and eighteenth-century prose, nor a matter of its homogeneity of subject or literary stance, nor a result of any uniform progress towards a recognition in America of a common identity, nor the consequence of a gradually or consistently developing tradition marked by the emergence of individual prose stylists who served as models for subsequent writers. Some of the best of it was not printed in America in the lifetime of the writer; its Americanness was not recognized as such until after the writer's death, and then as much by English as by American readers. American colonial prose is regional in a way English seventeenth- and eighteenth-century prose had long since ceased to be; it registers a halting domestication of a varied land; it bears the marks of where and when in the new continent it was written quite as much as by whom.

In the beginning neither the history nor the literature of a country of immigrants looks like its own, either to the mother country or to the immigrants. To begin with, the continent of North America seemed both to its explorers and their contemporaries at home a vast wilderness dotted with islands of Englishness. If the reality of a culture is established by its dawning consciousness of identity, however, even from the beginning America had a good deal more history than it had literature. The first settlers both in Virginia and Massachusetts landed in British America with a sense that they were making history or fulfilling it, and their first acts included the writing of that history. Historical consciousness is to be found everywhere and literary self-consciousness nowhere in early colonial America; to write of early American literature is to record the activity of the first

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chroniclers and narrative historians of the new country. Five of the ten writers from whose works I have selected called their writings in some sort ‘histories’ – John Smith, *Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and The Summer Isles*; William Bradford, *History of Plimmoth Plantation*; Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana; or, the Ecclesiastical History of New-England*; William Byrd, *History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina*; and Patrick Tailfer, *A True and Historical Narrative of the Colony of Georgia in America*. Two adapted Tailfer’s label ‘narrative’ to imply descriptive historical interest – Mary Rowlandson, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God, Together with the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed; Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*; Jonathan Edwards, *Personal Narrative*. The remaining three gave, or had given, their books the genre indication ‘journal’ or ‘autobiography’ – Sarah Kemble Knight, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson – but their works had memorial and chronological ambitions. They were recording, they thought, current history; it is we who see them writing accounts of their achievement of identity.

The ‘American’ historians came to whatever part of the new continent they found bearing with them the cultural stuff of their English class, religion, region, and generation. What they set down as having happened to them answered to their social, theological, intellectual, and political expectations of what would happen. Predictably, their individual sense of fulfilled prophecy included the common notion of divine guidance. Bradford expected and found God’s protection; Mrs Rowlandson, spiritual sustenance in physical trials; Mather, awesome support from his God amidst the backslidings of his people. Their religious expectations were Puritan, but even the Anglicanism dominant in Virginia had a matching prophetic strain represented in George Herbert’s lines:

Religion stands on tiptoe in our land
 Readie to pass to the American strand.

(‘The Church Militant’, lines 235–6, from *The Temple*)

William Byrd considered ‘Tis natural for helpless man to adore his Maker in Some Form or other’ and his own form of adoration was to register ‘how Fortune delights in bringing great things out of Small’. When, considerably earlier, John Smith wrote in the *True Relation*, his first published work, that ‘God (beyond al their expectations) by meanes of the shippes (at which they shot with their Ordinances and Muskets) caused [four hundred Indians] to retire’, he but initiated the ascription of divine significance to human events as common in the south as in the north.

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Had Stuart England been a united and coherent society. American settlers might have exhibited more of a common heritage. We might have been able to say that they transplanted with them a cross-section of the English seventeenth-century mind. We might then have drawn a myth of organic American growth to assert that English consciousness adapted to altered conditions of American life, became gradually less English and more American, and at last by natural evolution smoothly though rebelliously stepped aside from its parentage. That myth is seductively false. Stuart England offered no such homogenous and harmonious 'mind' and the formation of a sense of identity in each colony preceded the emergence of a national or, more properly, federal sense of identity. Each identity was itself the product of an interchange between the widely differing Englishnesses brought to each of the thirteen colonies and the widely differing conditions found in them. The formative years produced characteristics and attitudes which persisted in later generations. Even the persistence of regional traits, however, was uneven; the true myth of American identity must not only recognize the distinctiveness of colonial origins in distinctive strands from inharmonious sources of Stuart Englishness, but allow for the persistent intrusion of cultural pressures from much more homogenous Hanoverian England and elsewhere in Europe. The colonies once planted were permeated by reinfusions from the mother country. The American culture of Jefferson's day would share far more of dominant English enlightenment than the very diverse and scattered writers of the earlier years could share with the unsettled Englishness of Stuart times. The colonies looked to England rather than to each other for intellectual stimulus. The absence of an American public for a good deal of American writing, the effect on much of the prose of its having been addressed either to England or to posterity, is in part the cause of its regionalism. A Virginian would scarcely imagine a Massachusetts audience: no Massachusetts books are to be found, for example, in the largest southern library on record, that belonging to William Byrd and catalogued at Westover in 1777, although it contained a number of English studies of New World history, including John Smith's.

If first there was history and then the literature of history and only subsequently literature itself in America, and if first there were colonial styles and only subsequently a federal style, then in order to have a purchase on the writings which follow we must suggest, however sketchily, the history of the separate settlements of the New World.

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I

The North American continent on the eve of its English settlement was a triangular land mass with the widest section located between the twenty-sixth and fifty-fifth parallels. Its eastern seaboard was fringed with bays and inlets and pierced with large rivers – the St Lawrence, Connecticut, Hudson, Delaware, Susquehanna, Potomac – so that landing was easy, a foothold possible, and penetration into the interior more inviting than communication across the capes and peninsulas of the coastline. Behind the coastal plain, thickly forested, was a wild mountain barrier, the Appalachian chain, running virtually the entire length of the English settlement. As the rivers encouraged settlers to travel into the interior, the mountain barrier prompted them to remain in coastal regions and to exploit the environs thoroughly before pushing into the central basin. The very jaggedness of the Atlantic coastline promoted individual colonial identity. Nevertheless the entire continent seemed to lie invitingly open, for all the undeniable evidence that it was already populated. At least fifty million American Indians, and perhaps double that number, inhabited the hemisphere of North, Central and South America, the bulk living in central and southern regions in hundreds of cultural and language groups until Spanish explorers and conquistadores devastated their country and decimated their numbers – by disease as much as by design. The northern half of the western hemisphere and especially the eastern Atlantic seaboard was more thinly settled than the southern, its Indians organized into woodland cultures of hunting, fishing, and gathering tribes who would in turn suffer the same depopulation as the southern half. By the end of the seventeenth century at least ninety per cent of the native population of the eastern seaboard would have been eliminated. Of those woodland tribal groups, Powhatan's Confederacy¹ was especially sophisticated in polity and well-organized in culture. Its civility would not save it.

The confrontation of settlers with the native population would lead very early to the development of sub-genres of colonial history, ranging from military accounts of English and Indian warfare, to missionary diaries, to semi-anthropological surveys of Indian customs, to 'captivity narratives' and the like. By one of the ironies of history, the Indians themselves played a notable role in the conversion of America from a target of exploration to a land for settlement. Raleigh's company in the ill-starred Roanoke expedition (1583),

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conceived of as an outpost for exploration as much as a plantation, included Sir Thomas Heriot, experimental scientist, who drew up before he returned to England a dictionary of Algonkian Indian words, now lost, which John Smith very probably studied before making his journey to America. Heriot's dictionary accounted for Smith's unexpected proficiency in the language. In 1605 Captain George Weymouth brought five kidnapped Indians from cognate Algonkian tribes to Plymouth, England. The Governor of the Plymouth Forties, Sir Fernando Gorges, retained three and dispatched two to London to the Lord Chief Justice, Sir John Popham. Those Indians strengthened interest in the New World, particularly Virginia. Gorges wrote of them in his *Description of New England* (reprinted in James P. Baxter, *Sir Ferdinando Gorges and His Province of Maine*, 3 vols. Boston, 1890): 'They were all of one nation, but of several parts and several families; this accident must be acknowledged, the means under God of putting on foot, and giving life to all our Plantations.' Probably both Heriot and Smith interviewed the two Algonkians in London; certainly the desire to settle and not simply explore Virginia Britannia was fuelled by the living presence of Indians in England. Smith's subsequent account of his Indian adventures reinforced that desire.

The part of this lightly populated, fertile, temperate continent which in the first hundred years of its settlement would be developed into thirteen colonies was not *terra incognita* in England, when the first small fleet was authorized to set sail, for all that only a century had passed since Columbus had bumped into its southerly fringe by mistake, plunging as he was towards Cathay. In the common English view it was something like the Enchanted Isles. Spanish experience of more southerly America had made it so. By the middle of the sixteenth century, Englishmen interested in America had begun translating Spanish histories and memoirs, including the principal chronicle by Peter Martyr, in the hope of encouraging English efforts to achieve a parallel success. The picture which emerged from such translation and popularization was of an Eden teeming with gentle natives who lived without effort on the earth's natural bounty; if the natives were unfriendly or even cannibalistic, they lacked both gunpowder and ambition, and in all probability would be quickly subdued. That the natives did not at once see the merits of labouring for the new arrivals would present difficulties for which John Hawkins had found a rough solution even before the problem arose in English America: in 1562 he initiated a slave trade between Africa and New Spain² which was to continue in English hands with various modifications in the African

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sources of slaves and the New World location of markets until officially abolished in 1807. But if the Spanish chroniclers emphasized the fertility and commodity of the land, what was conspicuous to Englishmen watching the progress of Spanish conquest was that it would surely contain gold and silver. The Spanish mines of Peru and Mexico were not only objects of envy to the Elizabethans, they were significant goads to emulation. Not all the leading politicians in Elizabeth's court could be persuaded that the New World afforded an opportunity important enough to challenge Spain for; Burleigh, for example, steadily advised the Queen to work out a *modus vivendi* with Spain and concentrate on trade with the continent. But a faction – including such men as Raleigh, Sir Francis Walsingham, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, Sir Francis Drake and his half-brother Sir John Hawkins, and the spokesman-propagandist Richard Hakluyt – was so persuaded. It enjoyed the private support of the Queen; she denied the group only official political endorsement. At first, then, the Englishmen who sailed for the Enchanted Isles or New Eden (as private explorers), were prompted by commercial motives, envy and hatred of Spain, national self-interest and, later, other intermingled acknowledged and unacknowledged motives as different as each man who held them: pious Protestant desires to carry Christianity to the Indians, bourgeois wishes of younger sons to hold land, administrative hopes to relieve the mother country of its dangerous classes of the vagrant, unemployed, and criminal. England had no single embracing policy concerning land-holding, land use or taxation, immigration, or regional and local government. The sheer reliance on dissimilar charters and *ad hoc* arrangements would conspire with the geography of North America both to encourage regional diversity and to weaken attachment to England.

Each region spoke for itself during the century and a half between the founding of the colonies and their proclamation of independence. What in the subsequent assertion of an American identity surprises the modern Englishman most is surely the ease with which the Massachusetts settlement retrospectively imposed its version of America upon colonial heterogeneity. Interpreting colonial America from the popular English vantage point has come to mean a deft employment of bifocals – a Puritan halfmoon for short sight, a Yankee lens for long distance. The bent of mind which sees everything south of the Potomac as a cavalier intrusion of little importance should not survive a reading of the following excerpts. The very diversity of English policy towards settlement had much, however, to do with

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New England's interpretative primacy. New England was more separatist in its inception than Virginia Britannia, and that separatism quickly became identified as the true mark of Americanness. The selections which follow have been chosen to display the birth of American prose – first, as a set of stairs, so to speak, geographically stepping up and down the coastline to produce regional literatures; second, as a series of waves moving down the flow of time from the accession of James I to the Declaration of Independence to produce distinctive preoccupations in each period; third, as an oscillation of continuing influences between the Old and New Worlds to produce a concept of Americanness that took form in England before it achieved substance on the ground of the new continent and was continuously nourished by new arrivals or by the English education of settlers' children; fourth, as a class-structure recapitulating the demography of settlement from landed gentlemen to tradesmen to skilled workers to indentured servants, from learned elders to spiritually excitable youth, from adventurous men to timorous, or adventurous women to nervous; and lastly as a group of genres, commencing with history and current affairs and displaying an increasing self-reflection which did not exclude self-satire.

Self-reflection and self-satire played no part in prompting the first explorers to write of the New World; their motives were promotional and historical, their self-presentation heroic or religious. The contemporary European picture of America deriving from Spain had a strongly southern and optimistic cast; the systematic survey of the North Atlantic coast from the Grand Banks to Florida undertaken by the Portuguese seaman Estevan Gomez in 1524, the failed attempts of De Sota and Coronado to explore the southern interior, the disappointment of Cartier at finding only fool's gold in Canada, the abandonment of the Roanoke Settlement³ – these and other encounters with reality soon led to sceptical reports of wilderness, warlike Indians, inhospitable climates, and difficult supply routes. North America disappointed the Hispano-Portuguese imperialists; and not only did they say so, they left the northern part of the northern continent strictly alone. North America, it would soon be argued, abandoned by Spain and Portugal, virtually vacant of European foes, geographically accessible to England, potentially profitable to a people by temperament willing to work and not merely plunder, had been, surely, providentially reserved for English possession. The prose of Elizabethan maritime expansion is doubtless a precondition for an American prose but it is not that prose. That prose came into being to display the New World as England's opportunity for settlement. The

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story properly begins in James I's reign, and with a haphazard royal grant jointly sought by two incompatible groups and given so as to permit each to develop under local circumstances. The two groups consisted on the one hand of a London branch of would-be developers headed by Sir Thomas Smith and augmented by Bristol merchants gathered around Richard Hakluyt, interested in the Chesapeake and North Carolina regions to which Sir Walter Raleigh had gone and whose Roanoke rights they acquired; and on the other hand a West Country group centering on Plymouth headed by Sir Humphrey Gilbert's son, Raleigh Gilbert, and interested in northern New England and the rich fishing areas around Newfoundland. James I granted a royal charter on 10 April 1606 authorizing the London–Bristol group to colonize between the thirty-fourth and forty-first parallels (Cape Fear, North Carolina to New York City) and the Plymouth group to colonize between the thirty-eighth and forty-fifth parallels (the Potomac to Bangor, Maine). Either group was authorized to settle the overlapping area (what was to become Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware and Maryland) so long as they did not encroach within a hundred miles of each other.

The London–Bristol group with southern interests got off the mark first. It dispatched three ships to Virginia, variously estimated to contain 104 to 144 men, of whom 93 can be named. Before they set sail, in accordance with James's *Articles* incorporating the Company, seven councillors were appointed to govern the colony locally, one of whom was Captain John Smith. Upon landing, they built a fort and commemorated their royal benefactor by naming it Jamestown. Despite the granting of a second charter investing control in the Treasurer and Company of Adventurers and Planters of the City of London for the first Colony of Virginia which brought into being a viable joint stock company and enlarged the land grant, and despite the granting of a third charter in 1612 still further enlarging its territory and enriching the stock company with lottery rights, the vicissitudes of that settlement were such that, nearly wiped out on several occasions, the population was only 1,275 person by 1624 – the year of the bankruptcy and dissolution of the Virginia Company, the last year of James I's life, the year at which John Smith concludes his *Generall Historie* and, conveniently, the year of a census.

The Plymouth-based northern group set sail later in 1607, landed 120 men at the Sagadahoc River in Maine and there built a rough village. Those settlers returned to England in disillusionment, half of them in 1608, the other half in 1609. A third, most southerly attempt at settlement was made in 1612 by a subsidiary of the Virginia Com-

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pany called the Somers Islands or Bermuda Company, reorganized by 1620 into an independent company with perhaps 1,500 people living in Bermuda. Rivalry and factional quarrels between the Virginia and Bermuda adventurers precipitated the investigation by a royal commission which led to the dissolution of the Virginia Company. A fourth attempt brought into being the Newfoundland Company, aiming to establish a permanent base to protect the fisheries of the north. Neither the Bermuda nor Newfoundland company was fertile in developing colonial prose. It was otherwise with the final attempt which led to the colony of Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620. That attempt resulted from negotiations by representatives of a largish group of English religious dissenters living in Leyden who applied unsuccessfully in 1617 to the Virginia Company for land rights, secured financial backing from the merchant Thomas Watson in 1620 in exchange for an agreement to return all profits to him for the first seven years of their settlement, and with that money behind them set sail in the same year. They embarked with 102 emigrants and just before landing at Plymouth drew up the Mayflower Compact to serve as their instrument of government in place of the formal charter they never received. This group enjoyed a cultural and spiritual homogeneity from the strength of their apocalyptic reading of history; when they got the name 'the Pilgrim Fathers', their grip on the American imagination took its permanent form as the foundation myth of the country's true origin. Although both the Dutch and the French had bases in North America, British America began as three unstable settlements along the James River, at Plymouth, and on Bermuda, the three regions named by Captain John Smith in his *Generall Historie of Virginia, New England and The Summer Isles*, printed in London in 1624. The first extract I have chosen comes from that *Generall Historie* by the eyewitness who sailed with the southern group in 1607; the second, from the *History of Plimmoth Plantation* by an eyewitness who sailed with the pilgrim group on the Mayflower. For his English readers John Smith pictures America as a place of danger, opportunity and exotic strangeness, a ground for heroic conquest and profit; for the elect William Bradford projects America as the locus of the divine testing and perfecting of man.

To complete the staircase of steps up and down the American coast: five further colonies were added to Virginia and Plymouth before the Civil War and Interregnum in England: Massachusetts Bay (1628), Maryland (1634), Connecticut (1635), Rhode Island (1636), and New Haven (1638). Virginia, Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay were each sponsored by English merchants organized into joint stock

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companies; Connecticut, Rhode Island and New Haven were offshoots of religious impulses from Massachusetts Bay; Maryland, the first colony to be settled by a proprietary grant from Charles I and not by a joint stock company, also had a religious motive, being intended by its founders George and Cecilius Calvert as a refuge for Roman Catholics. Although from 1642 to 1660 emigration from England never ceased – over 75,000 persons landing – no new colonies were founded in that period of English turbulence and the existing colonies were left to their own devices; even Virginia, which had become a royal colony directly under crown control in 1624 after the bankruptcy of the founding stock company, lived largely by itself. The preoccupation of England with its internal troubles resulted in a defensive league of all the New England colonies save Rhode Island in 1643, called the New England Confederation, which lasted until 1684. But the Confederation did not stem, nor seek to stem, the natural development everywhere towards local autonomy, encouraged by England's self-absorption.

With the Restoration came renewed colonial activity. Charles II made a number of proprietary grants on the model of his father's Maryland grant in part to recompense his loyal nobility. Those grants together with the conquest of New Netherlands secured the establishment of Carolina (1664), New York (1664), New Jersey (1665), Pennsylvania (1681), and Delaware (1701). Of the new proprietors only William Penn, the proprietor of Pennsylvania, was driven by religious motives, intending his colony as a refuge for Quakers. But while the King was active in proliferating colonies, his Parliament and Privy Council were equally active in attempts to regulate and organize them. Parliament enacted the Navigation Act of 1660 (a reenactment of Commonwealth navigation acts) to clarify the economic relationship of colonies and England by creating a national monopoly of colonial trade; the Privy Council designated a standing committee, the Lords of Trade, responsible for the administration of all the English colonies. It sat for twenty years during which it vigorously sought to centralize and systematize colonial administration and to convert all colonies into royal colonies. (Upon its recommendation New Hampshire was separated from Massachusetts Bay in 1679 and the charter of Massachusetts forfeited in 1684.) At the accession of James II, the zeal for centralization grew even intenser and the Dominion of New England was created in 1686 to include all the colonies from Maine to Pennsylvania under one government without local representative assemblies. The Glorious Revolution ended not only the rule of James but also the Dominion of New England.