

1. WRITINGS OF ENGLISH COLONIES

THE BEGINNINGS OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

Where is the beginning of American literature? And what can be seen as American literature? Many “histories” of American literature start with the writing of Captain John Smith and his Pocahontas story, moving on to Puritan chronicles. Yet, can the texts be limited only to those written in English? The beginnings of American literature can be, and are, connected not only with the writings of Christopher Columbus and other explorers like Leifr Eriksson (Voyages to Vinland), but also with the oral literature and culture of Native Americans before the arrival of Columbus.

There was a a rich Native American oral culture in North America, even before the arrival of Europeans. The earliest myths, legends and songs were orally transmitted by the more than 500 hundred Indian tribes. Their cultures as well as languages were varied according to the place of their settlement, society organization, religion and way of life, e.g., narratives of hunting cultures like the Navajo, stories of agricultural tribes such as the Acoma, or desert tribes like Hopi. As the cultures of these tribes are varied, the reader usually needs a background information on the tribe and its traditions. However, when the poems discuss topics familiar tot he Europeans, no extra information is needed. The following poem reflects the Spanish conquest of Mayans in 1541:

They Came From the East

They came from the east when they arrived.
Then Christianity also began.
The fulfillment of its prophecy is ascribed to the east . . .
Then with the true God, the true Dios,
Came the beginning of our misery.
it was the beginning of tribute,
the beginning of church dues,
the beginning of strife and purse snatching,
the beginning of strife with blow guns;
the beginning of strife with trampling on people,
the beginning of robbery with violence,
the beginning of forced debts,
the beginning of debts enforced by false testimony,
the beginning of individual strife,
a beginning of vexation.

The poetry of North American Indians require a certain knowledge of the individual tribes’s culture and life as the indiviudal songs and stories were not composed for entertainment but mainly for religious or magical practice. Songs also served as the most powerful instrument of the medicine men. As F. W. Hodge observed:

Most Indian rituals can be classed as poetry. They always relate to serious subjects and are expressed in dignified language, and the words chosen to

clothe the thought generally make rhythm. . . . The picturesque quality of Indian speech lends itself to poetic conceits and expressions. The few words of a song will, to the Indian, portray a cosmic belief, present the mystery of death, or evoke the memory of joy or grief; to him the terse words project the thought or emotion from the background of his tribal life and experience, and make a song vibrant with poetic meaning. (Hodge, Handbook, 271)

The poetry was often chanted, usually accompanied by a musical instrument. As the Indians did not observe the European poetic forms, their poetry can be classified according to its purpose as those praising the gods, rite initiations, seasonal celebrations, chronicle tribal history, explain various natural processes, mourn the dead, celebrate the heroes or nature, to call the tribe to war and many others.

The composition of songs was not limited to men only. The following patriotic poem was written by a Sioux woman:

You May Go On the Warpath

You May Go On the Warpath
When your name I hear (announced among the victors)
Then I will marry you.

EUROPEAN ROOTS

As a vision America existed a long time before its discovery. Columbus, expecting to reach the shores of India brought with him a complex set of expectations. There was wealth, strange cultures and Paradise-like nature, yet at the same time, there were conflicts, diseases and danger. The new continent aroused hope and visions of new utopian society. The imaginary history of America thus has its roots in Europe and for a long time it overshadowed the histories of native inhabitants. The first writers were mainly Europeans who brought their speech, manners, politics, and religion. The Colonists thought of themselves as Europeans; and, when they wrote, they discussed issues of interest in Europe, and followed European models of style. Yet from the very beginning, their Old World manner of life was modified by their new environment. Colonial literature was, therefore, the product of two basic forces: the European cultural heritage and the American environment.

The first written record of America, though not the mainland, came from CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS on the October 12, 1492 in *The Journal of the First Voyage of Christopher Columbus* (1492-3): "At two hours after midnight the land was sighted at a distance of 2 leagues." (Adolph Caso, *To America*, 123) The explorers renamed the island to San Salvador and started to ruthlessly conquest the island by force.

As the Europeans regarded themselves to be superior, they started to write down the arguments for occupying the land of the barbarians. The Indians were so different from the Europeans, that they were immediately considered savages who should not decide over their territory and fate. As Columbus described them:

They are an inoffensive, unwarlike people, naked, except that women wear a very slight covering at the loins; their manners are very decent, and their complexion not very dark, but lighter than that of the inhabitants of the Canary Islands. "I have no doubt, most serene Princes," says the admiral, "that were proper devout and religious persons to come among the natives and learn their language, it would be an easy matter to convert them all to Christianity, and I hope in our Lord that your Highnesses will devote yourselves with much diligence to this object, and bring into the church so many multitudes, inasmuch as you have exterminated those who refused to confess the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. (Columbus, *Personal Narrative*, 80)

The Spanish and the English were convinced of their cultural superiority and did not make any attempts to learn of the native inhabitants' culture or religion. Therefore they often used violence and repression to "convert" and subdue the natives. Considerably different was the attitude of the French and Portuguese who often married Indians and accepted their traditions. As a result, many of their wives and their families were willing to convert to Christianity and adopt a blend of French and Indian habits. The integration and cooperation was on such a high level that the French even supported the Indians in the King Philip's War (also called the French and Indian War, 1755-63) against England and New England.

EARLY WRITING IN ENGLISH COLONIES

From the European shores, America was imagined as the Garden of Eden, utopia, that is why was the first state called Virginia. Yet, because of the humid climate with swamps, not many settlers were willing to move to the region where malaria was one of the threats. Moreover, there was an urgent need for cheap labour on the tobacco plantations which was under these conditions would not be done by the white settlers. The main work force thus consisted of indentured labourers and African slaves.

As a result, the plantation owners, who were mainly Anglicans, produced a lot of writing, ranging from sermons and hymns to autobiographies and diaries. Letters, journals and reports from the voyage thus became one of the most popular and earliest genres of American literature. They mostly contained geographical description and potential dangers. Yet this practical information also influenced European fiction, mainly Spenser, Shakespeare, John Donne or Andrew Marvell who wrote about the New world.

In 1607 the first permanent settlement was founded, the Jamestown. The earliest chronicles were written by a sailor and adventurer Captain JOHN SMITH (1580-1631), who is considered to be the first American writer.. He sailed to America in 1606 with London Trading company. The newcomers came mainly for a search for gold and they underestimated local climate and living conditions. Smith was aware of the fact that survival and explorations of the surroundings is vital. He became famous with his report *A True Relation of such occurrences and accidents of note as hath happened in*

Virginia since the first planting of that colony, which is now resident in the south part thereof, till the last return from thence, which was published in London in 1608.

Here Smith describes the obstacles the immigrants had to face: lack of drinking water, lack of food, diseases and conflicts with Indians. As a practical man, he realized that survival in this "wilderness" should be the first thing on their mind.

Smith was sent to explore the northern shore. At the beginning of colonization, America was seen as a new, better Europe, that is why he called the newly discovered area New England and gave many of the places names of British cities. Beginning of American literature was thus closely connected not only with British geography but also English language and culture.

In his *A Description of New England* (London, 1616) Smith not only described the climate and terrain but also stated the main obstacles in cultivating the land. Colonization was for him a heroic deed and almost a godly mission.

His principal work, *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England & the Summer Isles: Together with The True Travels, Adventures and Observations, and a Sea Grammar* (London 1624) was already written in England. It contains the first truly American story of Indian princess Pocahontas.

NEW ENGLAND LITERATURE

New England, which was named by John Smith, underwent a different development from the Southern colonies. This region was not settled by the more liberal Anglicans, but by their opponents, the Puritans, who wanted to „purify“ the church of England. They were influenced by the theology of John Calvin and believed that everything is already pre-given by all-knowing God. Which meant that each man was either predetermined to be saved or damned before birth and could not change the course of events. The only hope was obtaining grace which could not be earned, only granted. The Puritan faith was based mainly on the Old Testament, believing they were the Chosen ones. The Puritans presented themselves as the New Israelites who found their promised land, being inspired mainly by the Biblical books of Genesis and Exodus. Because of their austerity, literature and arts were not supported. They wrote in so called "plain style" which was didactic, utilitarian and used metaphors and allegories only from the Old Testament. The only important and recommended book was the Bible. All the theatres were closed, as plays could corrupt the thinking and imagination of the audience. As a result, only chronicles and religious writing were acceptable, as the chronicles mainly connected the described events with religious allusions and allegories.

The first wave of Puritans, following Smith's maps, arrived to Plymouth, America in 1620 on the ship Mayflower. They also decided to keep records of way of life in the colonies. Chronicle thus became one of the most popular genre of the period. The Puritans brought with them printing press and in 1640 published the first book on American continent *A Bay Psalm Book*. It was a metrical version of Psalms to be used in churches in „the plaine style.“

The writers were examining and searching for the relationship between God and man, trying to separate the words from their ornamental and ceremonial meanings to present the truth about the world. The style, seemingly simple, included

many metaphors and biblical allusions to the Old Testament, yet used only for clearer and more direct presentation of the way the Puritans envisioned the world.

The governor of the Plymouth Colony was WILLIAM BRADFORD (1590-1657). He was the judge, divided land and supervised trade and agriculture. He was born in England and soon joined the Separatists, who saw no hope of reforming the Anglican Church. He became famous for his chronicle *Of Plimouth Plantation* (written 1630-1650, published 1865) where he relates the beginnings of the settlement. It is the earliest record of Puritan ideas and intentions.

The same Puritan narrative of Promised land is also the basis of another chronicle *The History of New England from 1630-1649* (1825-1826) by JOHN WINTHROP (1588-1649). He left England in 1630 on a ship *Arbella* with other seven hundred immigrants. They founded a colony in Massachusetts Bay and Winthrop was elected governor. He became famous for his sermon *A Modell of Christian Charity*. He claimed that Puritans were elected by God to build a "city upon a hill" that would set the example to the rest of the world. For both Bradford and Winthrop, the coming to New World corresponds to the Creation and shall be fulfilled by the apocalyptic Last Judgement.

SOUTHERN CHRONICLES

The Southern writers and plantation owners also wrote chronicles which reflect their more liberal and tolerant attitudes to the Native Americans. The best known example is WILLIAM BYRD'S (1674-1744) *History of the Dividing Line*, a diary of a 1729 trip to survey the line dividing the neighbouring colonies of Virginia and North Carolina. He is describing the wilderness, Indians, whites behaving like savages, or wild animals. He is ironically commenting on the first Virginia colonists, whom he sees as: "about a hundred men, most of them reprobates of good families," and jokes that at Jamestown, "like true Englishmen, they built a church that cost no more than fifty pounds, and a tavern that cost five hundred."

ROBERT BEVERLEY JR. (ca. 1667-1722) published his *The History and Present State of Virginia in Four Parts* (1705, re-edited 1722), which records the history of the Virginia in a more liberal style. It is not the Puritan Virginia he is describing. Like Byrd, he admired the Indians and even published a collection of Indian sayings. His history is divided into four parts: History, Natural Productions, Native Indians, and the Present State of the Country. His sympathy for the Indians went so far that he even called himself an Indian: "I am an Indian, and don't pretend to be exact in my language." (Beverley, *History*, xxi) The earlier voice defending the Indians belonged to ROGER WILLIAMS. He was exiled both from Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay. Williams was interested in Indians's culture and languages. He lived with them and as an outcome published a dictionary of Indian expressions and sayings *Key to the Languages of America* (1643).

INDIAN CAPTIVITY NARRATIVE

The chronicles combine diaries with religious visions; this is true also for a typically American form: the Indian Captivity Narrative. It contains the narration of obstacles, failures and difficulties in combination with nostalgia for the pure past. The authors were telling their stories of Indian captivity and salvation. The stories included elements of adventure and sermons, as they were seen as a God's test. The most famous Indian Captivity narrative was written by MARY ROWLANDSON (c.1635-c.1678). She published her detailed account of her captivity during the French Indian War under the all-telling title *The sovereignty and goodness of GOD, together with the faithfulness of his promises displayed, being a narrative of the captivity and restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, commended by her, to all that desires to know the Lord's doings to, and dealings with her. Especially to her dear children and relations. The second Addition [sic] Corrected and amended. Written by her own hand for her private use, and now made public at the earnest desire of some friends, and for the benefit of the afflicted. Deut. 32.39. See now that I, even I am he, and there is no god with me, I kill and I make alive, I wound and I heal, neither is there any can deliver out of my hand.* (1682)

In 1675, during the King Philip's War, Rowlandson was captured by Indians who attacked the town of Lancaster. Her *Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration* is linking her experience with Biblical stories, mainly of Job. Regarding the Indians, she calls the the "hell-hounds" and devils, refusing to see them as human being. Her tale thus combines the story of adventure, autobiography, sermon and historical account. The form influenced the following generations of American writers, e.g. James Fenimore Cooper.

PURITAN POETRY

All writings were meant to cultivate and define a holy life. The works written chiefly for entertainment, such as theatrical plays or novels, were not appreciated. The Puritans supported only religious, scientific and didactic writings, yet there were several poets who, aside from keeping to the spiritual and religious poetry, were recognized even in Europe. The first one was ANNE BRADSTREET (c. 1612-1672) who came to America when she was eighteen on the ship *Arbella*. She published the first book of poems by an American which was at the same time the first American book published by woman. It was released in England in 1650 under the title *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650) shows the influence of Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney, and Metaphysical poets. Except for the religious themes, she often wrote about common everyday life and her husband and children. Moreover, she was also critical of the Puritan society, which treats women as inferior.

EDWARD TAYLOR (c. 1644-1729) was a poet and preacher born in England. He studied at Cambridge and then at Harvard College for three years. He knew Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. Taylor was influenced by the British Metaphysical Poets, mainly John Donne and George Herbert. He was aware of the anti-poetical sentiments in the community and even though he was addressing religious subjects, he decided to not to publish his poems. The first edition came out in 1937. He wrote elegies, lyrical poems and meditative poems. His best works, according to modern critics, are the series of short *Preparatory Meditations*. His poetry proved that it was possible to turn

the puritanical concerns of salvation, grace and predetermination into spiritual, meditative autobiographical poetry of artistic value.

MICHAEL WIGGLESWORTH (1631-1705) was like Taylor an English-born, Harvard-educated Puritan minister who practiced medicine, is the third New England colonial poet of note. He continues the Puritan themes in his best-known work, *The Day of Doom* (1662) which became the best-selling poem of the period, dealing with the Calvinist doctrine of Last judgement in form of a ballad.

For at midnight brake forth a Light,
which turn'd the night to day,
And speedily a hideous cry
did all the world dismay.
Sinners awake, their hearts do ake,
trembling their loynes surprizeth;
Amaz'd with fear, by what they hear,
each one of them ariseth.

...

Before his face the Heav'ns gave place,
and Skies are rent asunder,
With mighty voice, and hideous noise,
more terrible than Thunder.
His brightness damps heav'ns glorious lamps
and makes them hang their heads,
As if afraid and quite dismay'd,
they quit their wonted steads.

...

The Judge draws nigh, exalted high,
upon a lofty Throne,
Amidst a throng of Angels strong,
lo, Israel's Holy One!
The excellence of Awhose presence
and awful Majesty,
Amazeth Nature, and every Creature,
doth more than terrify.

The Mountains smoak, the Hills are shook,
the Earth is rent and torn,
As if she should be clear dissolv'd,
or from the Center born.
The Sea doth roar, forsakes the shore,
and shrinks away for fear;
The wild beasts flee into the Sea,
so soon as he draws near.

...

Before his Throne a Trump is blown,
Proclaiming the day of Doom:
Forthwith he cries, Ye dead arise,
and unto Judgment come.
No sooner said, but 'tis obey'd;
Sepulchres opened are:
Dead bodies all rise at his call,
and 's mighty power declare.

END OF PURITAN RULE

The second generation of immigrants started to turn away from Puritan heritage to materialism. COTTON MATHER (1663-1728) was a historian and preacher. He was admitted to Harvard College at the age of twelve, studying Hebrew and philosophy. Mather wrote of New England in over 500 books and pamphlets. Mather's 1702 *Magnalia Christi Americana: The Ecclesiastical History of New England; From its first planting, in the Year 1620, unto the Year of Our Lord 1698*, his most ambitious work, chronicles the settlement of New England through a series of biographies. The seven sections tell of the settlement of New England, the lives of its governors and ministers, and the story of Harvard College and of the Congregational Church.

I write the wonder of the Christian Religion, flying from the depravations of Europe, to the American Strand; and, assisted by the Holy Author of that Religion, I do with all conscience of Truth, required therein by Him, who is the Truth itself, report the wonderful displays of His infinite Power, Wisdom, Goodness, and Faithfulness, wherewith His Divine Providence hath irradiated an Indian Wilderness. (Mather, *Magnalia*, 25)

He is associated with the Salem witchcraft trials (1692-93), in which nineteen women were accused, tried, and executed and several others imprisoned. Although he had proposed severe punishment of the devil's work, he did not agree with execution.

He wrote in seven languages including the Iroquois Indian language. He published three hundred eighty-two works including histories, sermons, biography, fables, books of practical faith, religious and scientific essays, and poetry.

The years of Salem trials marked the end of the strongest religious movement in America. Yet, Puritanism and its ideas were still present in the thinking and culture of 18th century America.

FURTHER READING:

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