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WHO WAS THE LAST AMERICAN PURITAN?

Avihu Zakai

Michael G. Hall. *The Last American Puritan: The Life of Increase Mather, 1639–1723.* Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1988. xv + 438 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00.

“Who was the first Puritan and who may prove to be the last one are questions one need not try to answer,” wrote William Haller in *The Rise of Puritanism* (1938). The truth of this assertion can be clearly seen in the fact that “there were Puritans before the name was invented, and there probably will continue to be Puritans long after it has ceased to be a common epithet.”¹ Geoffrey Chaucer’s fourteenth-century *Canterbury Tales* contains a wonderful description of a Puritan he met on the road to Canterbury: a poor man by his appearance, yet a man whose ultimate vocation in life was “to lead men to heaven by fair words and good example.”² William Bradford³ discovered the first Puritans while reading Eusebius Pamphili’s celebrated *Ecclesiastical History* (c. 303–323), where he encountered Novatus and his followers the Novatians, who “in the pride of their mind called themselves Puritans,” from the Greek word “Katharoi,” “pure.”⁴

Now, there were obviously Puritans long after Increase Mather, if “Puritan” means someone who seeks to reconstruct all dimensions of human life and experience upon the sacred word of God; and there will continue to be Puritans despite Michael Hall’s description of Increase Mather as “the last American Puritan.” Yet if we accept Hall’s contention that we should consider Increase Mather’s life and thought in the context of his endless striving to maintain the principles of the founding Puritan fathers of New England, to which he remained true to the very end, or in Perry Miller’s words, to the last ditch, then clearly Increase Mather was indeed “the last American Puritan.” In the course of his life he experienced the most profound transformation taking place within Puritan society: the change from the view of a theocratic universe, ruled directly by God’s divine providence, to the theory of natural law, which governs the whole universe, and to which both ecclesiastical and civil polity were subservient. During his lifetime, “early Puritanism, the original, intense, plain, ascetic, pietistic, judgmental Puritanism

of the providential world and the gathered church, had passed in Massachusetts before Mather died, although he himself, its greatest American exemplar, remained true to the very end" (p. 361). During those years, the rhetoric of divine Providence and the language of providential Puritanism were replaced by the language of Whig politics, which in turn led to a new, more "secular way of thinking in Massachusetts" (p. 362).

During the heyday of Puritan orthodoxy in Massachusetts, "the church had governed the world" (p. 270), but by the end of the seventeenth-century, as Mather preached in 1695, "the world rules the church" (p. 282). Most important, the new royal charter for Massachusetts of 1691, for which Mather himself was chiefly responsible during his stay in England (1688-1691), was a significant turning point in the history of Puritan New England. It destroyed forever the ecclesiastical and political foundations of the Puritan commonwealth which John Winthrop had envisioned, and laid down "the constitutional framework for the pluralistic, secular society that would be inherited by John Adams" (p. 251). The new charter of 1691 replaced the system of "a franchise based on church membership and a government elected entirely within the colony" with the system of "a franchise based on property and a government supervised and directed from London" (p. 252). Consequently, the new legislation of 1692, the Bill for General Rights and Liberties, replaced the Body of Liberties which had served Massachusetts since 1641; but whereas the goal of the Body of Liberties of 1641 was to create a religious state, the Bill for General Rights and Liberties neglected all reference to church and religion. The outcome evidently was the desacralization of politics: "Life, liberty and property, not religion, were the concerns of the government in Massachusetts" (p. 264). Viewed, then, in the larger context of the decline and the eventual demolition of Puritan orthodoxy in Massachusetts, Increase Mather was indeed, as Hall argues convincingly, "the last American Puritan."

"The fathers may have founded" the Puritan colonies in America, wrote Robert Middlekauff in *The Mathers* (1971, p. 98), "but the sons invented New England." Increase Mather belonged to this second generation of American Puritans, the sons of the founders who faced the problems of continuity and identity, and who later played an important role in the invention of New England. Among this second generation of American Puritans, Increase Mather held a prominent place. The son of Richard Mather, Increase was born in 1639 at Dorchester, "the greatest Town in New England" at that time. In 1651, at the age of twelve, he left for Harvard College, from which he was graduated in 1656. At the age of fifteen, following the death of his beloved mother, Increase experienced a religious conversion. Almost immediately after graduating, in 1657, he went to England to complete his studies at a "real university." Upon the advice of his brother, Samuel, who was already living

in Scotland, Increase went to Trinity College, Dublin, from which he received his M.A. in 1658. For the next three years, until his return to New England in 1661, Increase preached at various Puritan garrisons and conventicles in England. With the Restoration of the House of Stuart, the Puritan Revolution was over, and the Puritan movement, which had originated in the 1560s, had lost its long and continuous struggle for the soul of the English people. Increase evidently could have stayed in England and earned a decent living as a preacher at Dorchester if he would have been able to conform to the rites and ceremonies of the Church of England, but he could not. Instead he returned to Boston, married a daughter of John Cotton, thus uniting the two most prominent and respected ministerial families in New England, and was installed in 1664 as a pastor of Boston's Second Church. Thus began a career which would transform him in the next decades into one of the most enduring spiritual leaders of New England, a prominent figure among "the jeremiads," and "the most important spokesman in print of his generation" (p. 140).

Increase Mather's importance in Puritan New England began to emerge with the struggle over the issue of the Half-Way Covenant of 1662, in which at the age of twenty-three he assumed the role of a leading divine and champion of orthodoxy against the views held by his father, his proxy-father John Norton, and his college tutor, Jonathan Mitchell. By the time he was thirty-one, Increase "had written more than most of his colleagues were to do in their life time" (p. 91). At a very early age, then, he was establishing himself not only as the most important spokesman of his generation for Congregationalism, but also as the major exponent of "God's plan for New England." In 1674 he was elected fellow of Harvard College, and later became its president from 1685 until his enforced resignation in 1701. He was sent in 1688 as an agent of Massachusetts to the halls of Parliament. Because of the Glorious Revolution, which took place after his arrival in London, Increase had to prolong his stay in England negotiating a new charter for the colony through the shifting scenes of the Revolution. His three years of work in England on behalf of the colony climaxed with the new royal charter for Massachusetts in 1691. Returning to New England in 1692, Increase was at the height of his powers. He immediately took an active part in the ministers' debates concerning the Salem witchcraft trials of 1692. He wrote that although he "believed that witches did exist and witch trials were justified," he would "rather judge a Witch to be an honest woman, than judge an honest woman as a witch" (p. 262).

In the closing years of the seventeenth century, the tensions within the Puritan religious community in Massachusetts were fully exposed with the establishment of the Brattle Street Church under Benjamin Colman in 1699 and Solomon Stoddard's Presbyterianism, which repudiated the vision of the

gathered church as formulated in the Cambridge Platform of 1648, which Increase firmly and rigidly upheld, unwilling as ever to "give away the whole Congregational cause" (p. 299). By 1701, forced by men tired of the old Puritan stringencies to resign the presidency of Harvard, which he considered to be "one of the glories of New England," Increase proclaimed that if the college were to fail "the glory is like to be gone from these churches in less than one generation" (p. 306). Now, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, with many of his godly, orthodox visions shattered before his very eyes, Increase "no longer preached as if New England were a New Israel" (p. 351). In 1720, three years before his death, he had to acknowledge that, even in Massachusetts, God's chosen people were comparatively few. New England society as he came to know it during his last years had repudiated the great utopian vision of his Puritan ancestors, and resembled more and more the ungodly world from which they had fled to America. Or as Hall tells it very persuasively, for Increase Mather "history had gone full circle, and as had been the case before there was a New England, it was necessary to call the faithful to separate themselves from the sinful world" (p. 353).

Michael Hall's biography of Increase Mather shows that the best history may indeed be biography. Based on almost twenty-five years of research and study into the nature of Puritan culture in New England, Hall's work is truly a remarkable achievement: a distinguished book, highly informative and unusually readable. *The Last American Puritan* combines masterful historical knowledge with wonderful biographical narrative. Hall has already edited Increase Mather's *Autobiography* for the American Antiquarian Society (1962), he has published many essays and studies on Puritan New England in general and on Increase Mather in particular, and most recently has prepared a typescript of Mather's surviving diaries. At that point, however, as Hall describes in his preface, he had to make a crucial decision whether to publish Mather's diaries as such, or whether to write a comprehensive biography. Fortunately, Hall decided to write the biography first and the outcome is indeed impressive. *The Last American Puritan* is graciously written, and filled with so many insights as to the nature of New England Puritan culture, that readers will immediately find themselves wholly absorbed by the biographical narrative.

The extraordinary life and career of Increase Mather has already drawn the attention of historians in the past. In the early twentieth century, Kenneth B. Murdock's *Increase Mather: The Foremost Puritan* (1926), helped to launch the modern historiographic reconsideration of Puritanism in America, which reached its culmination during the 1930s with the works of S.E. Morison and Perry Miller. More recently, Robert Middlekauff dealt with Increase Mather's intellectual life as part of his important study, *The Mathers: Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals* (1971). And now, drawing extensively on Mather's di-

aries to trace his mind through the various passages of his life, Hall has succeeded in producing the most definite and authoritative biography of Increase Mather.

Moving cautiously but confidently through the course of Mather's life, Hall leads the reader through one of the most important periods in the history of New England, marvelously depicting the profound changes taking place within Puritan society and culture. Hall makes it very clear at the beginning of this study that it was not the history of religion that was his interest in writing this biography. His goal was broader and more ambitious, namely, to reveal the richness and variety of Puritan culture in New England of which Increase Mather was the greatest exemplar, one of the men who "invented New England," and one of its "leading defenders in the ensuing fifty years" (p. xiv). Central to his argument is the contention that "the high point of New England Puritan culture came in the 1670s. That was the time when self awareness was most fully articulated and before the social, political and intellectual forces that would erode Puritanism had taken effect" (p. xiv).

In the biographical narrative of his father, *The Life and Death of that Reverend Man of God, Mr. Richard Mather* (1670), Increase Mather quoted the famous line from Horace's *Odes*: "Many brave men lived before Agamemnon, but all are overwhelmed in unending night, unwept for, unknown, because they lack an inspired poet" (p. 363). Those who read Hall's impressive biography, *The Last American Puritan*, will instantly recognize that Increase Mather himself does not lack "an inspired poet."

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1. William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (1938), p. 3.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
3. William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1952), p. 7.
4. Eusebius Pamphili, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2. vols (1955), I: 78-81.