

Introduction

Why John Davenport?

Although many have debated whether the influence of puritanism on American society is a positive or negative one, the significance of that heritage has never been in doubt. Yet the puritans, their beliefs, and their actions are as misunderstood as they were when the historian Samuel Eliot Morison entitled a 1931 essay “Those Misunderstood Puritans.”¹ Appreciation of these early Americans remains clouded by the stereotypical attacks launched on them and their legacy by H. L. Mencken and other twentieth-century critics. Students still read poems of Anne Bradstreet in literature classes. Some may have heard of John Winthrop and his call that the New England colony become “a city upon a hill” in his “Christian Charity” sermon; others recognize Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams as in some way pioneers of religious freedom. But most Americans know little about the men and women who laid the foundations of colonial America. And stereotypes of Cotton Mather are more likely than not to persuade them that they don’t want to know more about these strange folk.

Despite this, in recent years there have been some signs of a renewed interest in the colonists of seventeenth-century New England. Biographies of John Winthrop, Anne Bradstreet, and Samuel Sewall and a well-told narrative of the Pilgrim’s settlement have won readers beyond the realms of academe. Cable documentaries have explored anew the Salem witch trials and the desperate crossing of the *Mayflower*. Renewed interest in America’s religious heritage invariably brings us back to the puritans. The issues that those colonists wrestled with, including how to balance the needs of the community with the aspirations of individuals and how to temper the value of newcomers and new ideas with the security of the state, seem as relevant to us as they did to the people of John Winthrop’s world.