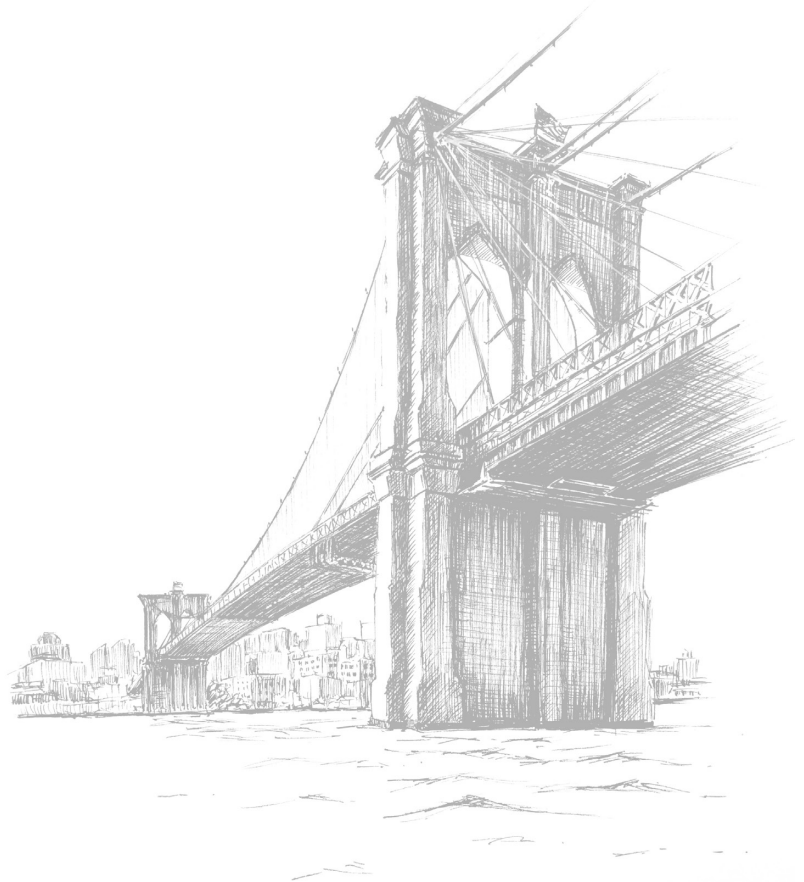


Part 1

The Literature of Colonial America



Introduction

Background

At the beginning of the 17th century, the vast continental area that was to become the United States was probed only slightly by European explorers. The settling of this continent occurred surprisingly late. Almost a hundred years earlier the Caribbean Islands, Mexico, and other parts of Central and South America had been occupied by the Spanish. At last early in the 17th century, the English settlements in Virginia and Massachusetts began the main stream of what we recognize as the American national history.

The earliest settlers included the Dutch, Swedes, Germans, Frenchmen, Spaniards, Italians, and the Portuguese. Frenchmen settled in the Northern Colonies and along the St. Lawrence River, Swedes along the Delaware, the Dutch along the Hudson, Germans and the Scotch-Irish in New York and Pennsylvania, and Spaniards in Florida. There were Negroes in New England, the Middle Colonies, and throughout the South; and American Indians were everywhere. All contributed to the forming of the American civilization, but the colonies that became the first United States were for the most part sustained by English traditions, ruled by English laws, supported by English commerce, and named after English monarchs and English lands: Georgia, Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, New York, New Hampshire, and New England.

The first writings that we call American literature were the narratives and journals of these settlers. They wrote about their voyages to the new land, about adapting themselves to unfamiliar climates and crops, about dealings with Indians. They wrote in diaries and in journals. They wrote letters, contracts, government charters, and religious and political statements. They wrote about the land which stretched before them—unimaginable and immense, with dense forests, deep-blue lakes and rich soil. It stirred the imagination to great heights. All seemed possible through hard work and faith.

The first permanent English settlement in North America was established at Jamestown, Virginia in 1607. Among the members of the small band of Jamestown settlers was Captain John Smith, an English soldier of fortune. His reports of exploration, published in the early 1600s, have been described as the first distinctly American literature written in English. Smith's descriptions of America were filled with themes, myths, images, scenes, characters, and events that were a foundation for the nation's literature. He portrayed the North America as a land of endless bounty. His vision helped lure the Pilgrims and the Puritans who saw themselves as new saints with a spiritual mission to flee the Old World and create a New World.



The writers of the Southern and Middle Colonies who followed Smith made their great contributions to American literature in the 18th century, in the Age of Reason and Revolution. Then there appeared such literary aristocrats as William Byrd II and such political philosophers as Thomas Jefferson. Until that time, literature developed slowly, especially in the South. Farms widely dispersed. Towns were few. Illiteracy rate was high. The urban audience for books and newspapers was scant. And there was little of the religious ferment and zeal that inspired such a tide of literature to flow from Puritan New England.

Early New England Literature

Although the literature of Virginia and the South displayed little variety in the colonial time, New England had from the beginning a literature of ideas: theological, moral, historical, and political. The Puritans had come to New England for the sake of religious freedom, while Virginia was established mainly as a commercial venture. Southern society was almost completely rural, interested primarily in the development of a tobacco economy. Because of the lack of schools in the South, well-to-do planters sent their sons to England to be educated, or relied on tutors or the local rector of the Anglican Church.

The Puritans in New England embraced hardships, together with the discipline of a harsh church. Their first intention in Massachusetts was to found a theocracy—a society in which religious leaders would govern through the church. The church thus became the supreme political body. The ideal might have been inspiring, but because of the imperfections of the human governance, in practice the theocracy often led to injustice and intolerance. Whatever the faults of these Puritans, they still had toughness, purpose, and character. They grappled with the challenges they set for themselves.

Over the years the Puritans built a way of life that was in harmony with their somber religion, one that stressed hard work, thrift, piety, and sobriety. These were the Puritan values that dominated much of the earliest American writing, including sermons, books, and letters of such noted Puritan clergymen as John Cotton and Cotton Mather. During his lifetime Mather wrote more than 450 works, an impressive output of religious writings that demonstrated that he was an example, as well as an advocate, of the Puritan ideal of hard work.

The American poets who emerged in the 17th century adapted the style of established European poets to the subject matter confronted in a strange, new environment. Anne Bradstreet was one such poet.

Puritan Thoughts

We have used the word “Puritan” frequently. Now we must move from the Puritans’ outward actions of settling a land to the beliefs and ideas that inspired them and greatly influenced their history. To do this, we shall have to ask just what “Puritan” means.

As the word itself hints, Puritans wanted to make pure their religious beliefs and practices. A Puritan was a “would-be purifier”. The word was coined by the opponents of the group and was applied to them in scorn; it was intended to ridicule them as persons who thought themselves holier or better than others. The undaunted Puritans claimed the name for themselves, adopting it as a badge of honor.

The Puritans wished to restore simplicity to church services and the authority of the Bible to theology. They felt that the Church of England was too close to the Church of Rome in doctrine, form of worship, and organization of authority. Another point of controversy was that the Church of England was the established church, that is, the official church of the state, and the most extreme Puritans, among them the Plymouth Plantation group, felt the influences of politics and the court had led to corruption within the church. These Puritans were Separatists—that is, they wished to break free from the Church of England. The Massachusetts Bay group, on the other hand, wished to reform the church but remain a part of it. Yet once they were settled in this land, they too moved gradually toward complete separation.

Puritans included people from the humblest to the loftiest ranks of English society, both educated and uneducated, poor and rich. Their faults were those common to persons who hold extreme opinions. The Puritans looked upon themselves as chosen people, and it followed logically that anyone who challenged their way of life was opposing God’s will and was not to be accepted. They were thus zealous in defense of their own beliefs but often intolerant of the beliefs of others. They drove out of their settlements all whose opinions seemed dangerous to them, and history criticized them for their actions.

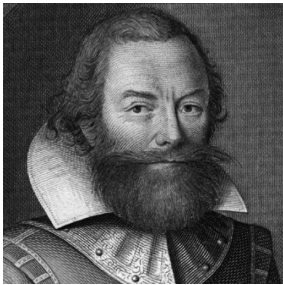
Puritan opposition to pleasure and the arts has been exaggerated sometimes, but it is true that their lives were disciplined and hard. Puritans tended to consider joy and laughter as symptoms of sin: a Puritan woman was once threatened with banishment for smiling in church. The Puritans made laws about private morality as well as public behavior. Yet this very attempt to suppress all sins seemed to produce outbreaks of misbehavior, as if in reaction to the strictness.

Puritan religious teaching tended to emphasize the image of a wrathful God and to forget his mercy. From this harsh side of Puritan thought came the picture of what Nathaniel Hawthorne called the “stern and black-browed Puritans”.

Chapter 1

John Smith

Life and Works



John Smith (c. 1580–1631) grew up on his family's farm and was apprenticed in his teens to a wealthy merchant. At age sixteen or seventeen his adventuresome spirit found an outlet on the battlefields of continental Europe, where he fought for the Netherlands in its war of independence from Spain. Having returned to England by 1599, he spent about two years reading classical military texts and studying horsemanship. He then traveled to Hungary in 1601 as a mercenary to join Austrian forces fighting the Ottoman Empire; he advanced to the rank of captain. Captured by the enemy the following year and taken to Turkey, he escaped to Russia and returned to England in 1604 or 1605. He then attached himself to a group preparing to establish an English colony in North America. When a royal charter was granted to the Virginia Company of London, Smith and about 100 other colonists led by Christopher Newport set sail on December 20, 1606.

Less than a year after the establishment of the Jamestown Colony in 1607, some settlers showed their dissatisfactions. One of them returned to England with complaints. However, Smith sent a letter to the Virginia Company in London, defending the handling of the settlement and proclaiming the merits of the new land. The greater part of this letter was published in 1608, under the title *A True Relation of Such Occurrences and Accidents of Note as Hath Happened in Virginia Since the First Planting of That Colony*.

Thus Smith became the first American writer. The little book was read eagerly by many and made a reputation for its author. Smith enjoyed this taste of fame and determined to maintain his reputation. His next book was *A Map of Virginia, With a Description of the Country* (1612). Like many similar accounts of the period, the book was a guide to the country and an invitation to the bold spirits needed to enlarge and strengthen the English plantations in the new land.

Smith published eight in all, and some of them dealt with New England, the coast of which he explored and mapped after his fortune faded with the Virginia Company. He sought

a post as a guide to the Pilgrims. Though they made use of his publications and maps, they did not want the man. He had too much color and flamboyance for sober Puritan tastes; moreover, he was suspected of having less than complete regard for the exact truth. His *General History of Virginia* (1624) contains his most famous tale of how the Indian princess Pocahontas saved him from the wrath of her father Powhatan by laying her head upon Smith's when the Indians were about "to beat out his brains". This pleasing story is not credited by anyone. Nevertheless, through Smith's book she has remained "Pocahontas" in legend and history. She later married John Rolfe, one of the Jamestown settlers, and went back to England with him.

Smith may not have been a modest man, but it is clear that he contributed more to the survival of the Jamestown Colony than anyone else did. He tirelessly explored the rivers and bays around the Chesapeake region. And he saw from the beginning what was eventually to be a basic principle of American history, the need of "workers" instead of "gentlemen" for the tough job of establishing colonies and pushing the frontiers westward.

Brief Comment

Smith was an English soldier, explorer, colonial governor, Admiral of New England, and author. He played an important role in the establishment of the colony at Jamestown, Virginia, the first permanent English settlement in America, in the early 17th century. Smith played an equally important role as a cartographer and a prolific writer who vividly depicted the natural abundance of the New World, whetting the colonizing appetite of prospective English settlers.

Chapter 2

Anne Bradstreet

Life and Works



Anne Bradstreet (c. 1612–1672) was one of the earliest American feminists and the first true poet in the American colonies. Her sequence of religious poems, *Contemplations*, was taken seriously by the literary critics of the 20th century and considered to be an immortal work.

Bradstreet was born to Thomas and Dorothy Dudley, a dedicated Puritan couple in Lincolnshire, England. Her father was a steward of the Earl of Lincoln. She grew up in an environment of cultural upbringing. At sixteen, she was married to Simon Bradstreet, another protégé of the Earl of Lincoln. At eighteen, she sailed for Massachusetts Bay of America in 1630 with her parents and husband. Her father and her husband subsequently served as governors of the new colony. As one of the first Puritan refugees to leave English shores between 1630 and 1642, Bradstreet's life showed us the hardship of constant struggle, from her difficult adaptation to the rigors of the new land, to her constant battle with illness. She gave birth to eight children and kept working as a housewife while still engaged in writing. Her enduring fame was to rest on her poetry, which she wrote regularly and circulated in her family for their private enjoyment.

Her brother-in-law, without her consent, brought the manuscripts of her poems to England and arranged to have the poems published under the title *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*. This made Bradstreet feel thoroughly embarrassed but pleased. The book's first edition in America was published after it was revised and amplified, and the title was changed to *Several Poems Compiled With Great Variety of Wit and Learning*. It became the first collection published by English colonists living in America. Most poems in the collection were dull and imitative works, and only the last two poems, "Of the Vanity of All Worldly Creatures" and "David's Lamentation for Saul and Jonathan", had unique style. For this collection, she became known as the Tenth Muse who appeared in America. Some of her later poems were written for her family and revealed the process of her spiritual growth after her whole-hearted acceptance of Puritan doctrine. These poems without moralism, such as

“The Flesh and the Spirit”, were loved by people. She also wrote some touching and personal poems, including those written to her husband and on her children and the deaths in her family, such as “To My Dear and Loving Husband”, “All Things Within This Fading World Hath End” (which exhibits her thought before she gave birth to a child), “Upon the Burning of Our House” (which subtly reveals the inner complexity of the Puritan), and “With Troubled Heart and Trembling Hand I Write” (which is about the death of a grandchild).

Bradstreet suffered from poor health because she had been previously afflicted by smallpox. However, she did not let her plight dim her passion for living. She married, raised her children with her husband, and obtained a comfortable social standing. However, in 1666, a tragedy befell her family. Her home was engulfed in a devastating fire, which deprived the family of personal belongings and made the family homeless for a time. At that time, she was ill with tuberculosis and had to face her relatives’ deaths. But she had a strong will, which perhaps was a reflection of her religious devotion and knowledge of Biblical scriptures. Her religious belief that her relatives were in heaven made her find peace.

She died at the age of sixty, on September 16, 1672, in Andover, Massachusetts.

Brief Comment

Her poetry is considered as a document of the struggles of a Puritan wife against the hardships of New England colonial life, and in some way is a statement of predicaments of the women of the age. It is rather easy for us to see Puritan ideology in a bad light, for its view toward women and strict moral code. Bradstreet’s indifference to material wealth, humility and spirituality, regardless of religion, made her a positive, inspirational role model for any of us.

Bradstreet’s faith was exemplary. Her works reveal her as a devoted wife and loving mother. Most of her poems were written during the period of loneliness when her husband was away on political errands. Her poems also express the strong spiritual convictions that shaped America’s early laws and underpinned its society. But, above all, she viewed the Christian life as a pilgrimage. Her humble dependence on God and her desire to live constantly in the light of a better world yet to come provided a challenge to the frequently materialistic, earthbound outlook.

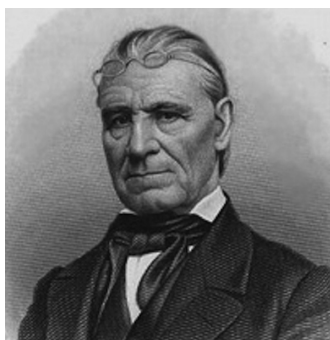
Another important quality of Bradstreet was her strong intuition, although only subtly hinted at in her works, probably for fear of reprisal from the deeply religious Puritan community. One cannot help but feel her constant fascination with human mind, spirit and inner guidance.

Her style was deceptively simple, yet represented a woman of high intelligence and ideals who was very much in love, and had unconditional faith. While it was difficult for women to express their views in the 17th century, Bradstreet did so with ease, as her rich vocabulary and knowledge brought a lyrical, yet logical quality to her works which made them pleasant for anyone to read.

Chapter 3

Edward Taylor

Life and Works



Edward Taylor (c. 1645–1729) was probably born in Leicestershire, England. His childhood was spent on the family farm where he enjoyed the stability of a middle-class upbringing. His later works are full of influences from his farmhouse childhood, for example, the imagery and the occasional use of the Leicestershire dialect.

After his mother and father died in 1657 and 1658, respectively, Taylor worked as a schoolmaster at Bagworth but after the restoration of the monarchy, he refused to sign the Act of Uniformity, which cost him his teaching position.

It was at this point that he began to write poetry in which he continued to lament the loss of religious freedom after he emigrated to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in America in 1668.

In July, 1668, Taylor disembarked at Boston, and was admitted as a sophomore by the president of Harvard College. Later he entered the ministry, a major profession of the time. He was one of the most accomplished poetic craftsmen of the early years. His works followed the styles and forms of the leading English poets of the mid-17th century. Although Taylor was not the best of his time, he showed an authentic poetic ability. Most of Taylor's works deal with religious themes, and many of his poems are based directly on the Psalms.

Brief Comment

Taylor was one of the foremost poets in colonial British North America, but he did not publish any of his works in his lifetime. Manuscripts of his poems were found in 1937. This discovery brought Taylor to immediate prominence in the colonial literary history, and enriched American poetic heritage. A complete edition of Taylor's poems appeared in 1960. His poetry has been characterized as “American baroque” as well as metaphysical.