

Smith's statement about the American West: "the limits thereof are unknown." After the empirical precision of the preceding sentences, this terse remark opens up bright vistas of possibility. No longer a realm of geographical transition, the West has become a massive challenge to the European imagination.

3.1.2 | Labor and Faith: English Writing, English Settlement (1584–1730)

England was a latecomer to the colonial race. Largely a Reformed nation—although Reformation theology took some idiosyncratic turns off the continent—it followed a course of colonization markedly different from Spain, Portugal, and France. In hindsight, it is hard to argue with the success of the English model, if success can be measured by the longevity of settlements, the sustained cultivation of resources, and long-term economic wealth. In intellectual terms, England brought two conflicting traditions to the New World: radical **Protestantism** and **Baconian empiricism**. In conjunction with the latter, early English authors tended to imagine the Western hemisphere not only as a natural paradise for exploitation or seclusion but as an explicitly political testing ground: a place to remake society. Appropriately, the early modern genre of *utopia* was launched by an English author, with Thomas More's Renaissance classic from 1516 (in Latin, translated into English in 1551; cf. section I.2.2.2). Francis Bacon followed suit in 1627 with *The New Atlantis*.

Colonization. But actual colonization started out differently. The first attempt at English settlement was initiated and overseen by **Sir Walter Raleigh**. It failed miserably. In 1584, Raleigh founded a colony on Roanoke Island, off the coast of today's North Carolina. Six years later, in Raleigh's absence, the settlement had mysteriously disappeared. All of the colonists were gone; only a signpost with the word "CROATOAN" remained. Unperturbed by the tragedy of the 'lost colony,' Raleigh turned his attention to South America, publishing *The Discovery of Guiana* in 1595, a tract promoting large-scale, Spanish-style settlements on the Orinoco river. Raleigh's book stands as one of the strongest expressions of the road not taken by English colonialism. It described Guiana as a land where riches could be acquired easily: "every stone that we stouped to take up, promised either

golde or silver by his complexion" (pt. 4). *The Discovery of Guiana* urged Queen Elizabeth I to get a foothold in South America, because if she did not, Spain would enlarge its transatlantic holdings and become a colonial superpower. Not mincing his words, Raleigh recommended that a virgin land be raped:

Guiana is a countrey that hath yet her maydenhead, never sackt, turned, nor wrought, [...] the graves have not bene opened for golde, the mines not broken with sledges, nor their Images puld downe out of their temples. It hath never bene entered by any armie of strength, and never conquered or possessed by any Christian Prince. (pt. 5)

A list of negatives, but its reasoning was unmistakably **imperialistic**: a rhetoric of national competition for resources and glory. In the end, England chose a different path to empire. Partly because of the costly failure of Roanoke, parliament and the crown decided to sidestep established models of settlement that relied either on private initiative or large-scale government commitment (as in the Spanish case). In contrast to these policies, England would concentrate on small bases which were to be financed by joint-stock companies and granted royal charters. Two companies were founded in this way: the Virginia Company of Plymouth (no relation to the later Puritan settlement in Plymouth, Massachusetts) and the Virginia Company of London, which in 1607 established the first permanent English settlement in Jamestown.

Writing in the Jamestown Settlement. In terms of its literary representation, Jamestown is inseparably linked with Captain **John Smith**, British America's first great prose stylist. Smith's description of the Powhatan Indians in *A True Relation of Virginia* (1608), though inflected by promotional purposes and Christian prejudices, counts among the earliest proto-ethnographic texts in American literature, evincing an empiricist ethos of observation and experiential knowledge. Even though Smith stayed in Jamestown for only two years, he shaped English colonial discourse in profound and lasting ways. Apart from being the author of some of the earliest English-language descriptions of the New World, Smith also became one of America's first self-made literary characters, mainly through his relationship with Powhatan's daughter Pocahontas, which he increasingly dramatized in later writings.

Like Raleigh, Smith believed that England required colonies to keep up with other European

Roanoke, the 'lost colony'

powers. Moreover, he feared that English society, with its economic imbalances between the lower and the upper classes, was heading toward a crisis. He was particularly troubled by the dependency of farmers on their landlords, but also by the growing number of young people who lived off their inheritances. The New World provided a solution to these problems; it made unprofitable labor profitable and counteracted rising unemployment, offering a purpose to aimless youngsters in the bargain. The underlying idea was as simple as it was convincing: **send England's surplus people overseas** to make them become productive elsewhere. For centuries, this formula, so different from the Spanish model, encapsulated the socio-economic rationale behind English (and later British) settlement efforts. In bettering their own condition, colonists were supposed to open up new resources for the home-country. And vice versa: by benefiting the market at home, they would improve themselves. Thus, the relationship between England and its colonies was considered to be a mutually beneficial and contractual one (during the American Revolution, this model would become the source of many a dramatic misunderstanding between parliament and the Anglo-American colonists).

Little wonder that Smith rejected "the shimmering mirage of gold [...] through which the sixteenth century saw the New World" (Gunn 65). Instead of Raleigh's emphasis on easy wealth, Smith stressed the importance of **diligent employment**. *A True Relation of Virginia* and *A Map of Virginia* reinforced this point, constantly repeating the need for *industry* in a fertile but demanding environment. Prototypically, these writings envisioned America as a place where hard-working young men and poor people could become self-sufficient and act in their own interests. Long before the liberal theoreticians of the Enlightenment, Smith maintained that land-ownership and private property were able to stabilize society. Believing that common wealth leads to commonwealth, Smith managed to do without the double-edged topos of America as a virgin to be raped or to be protected from modern corruption. Nor was Smith's America a paradise regained (in paradise there is no toil). Rather, the America of John Smith made a reasonable promise to those willing to exert themselves for their own and their community's welfare. Describing sustainable subsistence rather than sudden prosperity as the New World's boon, Smith's was an ideology of labor fulfilled,

Focus on Pocahontas

Pocahontas (ca. 1596–1617) was the daughter of Powhatan, a Native American chief in Virginia. She has become famous through Smith's account of how, as a small girl, she saved his life from execution at the hands of her father by shielding him with her own body. The historical accuracy of this account is dubious, however.



A nineteenth-century drawing of Pocahontas saving John Smith's life

extolling self-interested work and the satisfaction and safety that come with it.

Needless to say, there was a gap between these lofty ideals and the facts on the ground. Smith nearly despaired of the fortune-seekers in Jamestown, "ten times more fit to spoyle a Commonwealth, then either begin one, or but helpe to maintaine one" (*The Genrall Historie of Virginia* bk. 3, ch. 12). After he left in 1609, social and economic discipline in Jamestown deteriorated dramatically, as did relations with the natives. Virginia was saved from failure only when John Rolfe, the later husband of Pocahontas, developed a successful system of planting and exporting tobacco in 1612. However, to the extent that discourses create realities, it was important for the future course of North America that Virginia first described itself in terms of John Smith's socio-economic philosophy.

Writing in Puritan New England. A similar philosophy, with an additional ingredient, ruled Puritan New England. Calvinist theology crossed the Atlantic with those who founded **Plymouth Plantation** (1620) and the nearby Massachusetts Bay colony in Boston (1630). While holding fast to radical Protestant doctrines of divine sovereignty and predestination, these settlements developed flexible religious systems that balanced theological principles with the political and economic realities

Key Texts: Early American Literature

English Settlement (1584–1730)

- Sir Walter Raleigh, *The Discovery of Guiana* (1595)
 John Smith, *A True Relation of Virginia* (1608), *A Map of Virginia* (1612)
 John Winthrop, *A Model of Christian Charity* (1630)
 William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1630/1648)
 Anne Bradstreet, "To my Dear and Loving Husband" (1641)

Revolutionary Literature (1730–1830)

- William Hill Brown, *The Power of Sympathy* (1789)
 Susanna Rowson, *Charlotte Temple* (1791)
 Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland, or the Transformation* (1798),
Ormond, or the Secret Witness (1799), *Arthur Mervyn* (1799),
Edgar Huntly (1799)
 James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans*
 (1826)
 Washington Irving, "Rip van Winkle" (1819), "The Legend of Sleepy
 Hollow" (1820)

of an overseas colony. Rather than establishing strict theocracies, Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay separated religious and political authority at the level of local institutions, but committed both to a unified social ideology based on Christian notions of justice and morality, most famously expressed in **John Winthrop's** lay-sermon *A Model of Christian Charity* (1630). Later revolutionaries, such as John Adams, regarded this Congregationalism as a forerunner of the enlightened separation of church and state.

The tension between Puritan theology and colonial *realpolitik*, faith and facts, dominates early literature from Massachusetts. **William Bradford**, the first governor of Plymouth, chronicled his settlement's history in *Of Plymouth Plantation*, written in two parts in 1630 and 1646–1648, and first published in 1856. Composed in the Puritan *plain style* which avoided ornamental rhetoric in favor of unadorned speech close to the vernacular, Bradford's book illustrates the mutual dependency of religious typology (i.e. the figural interpretation of worldly events as biblical symbols) and secular necessities. Everyday desires needed to be brought into accordance with a religious language that, in turn, gave meaning to the colonial experiences of displacement, exposure, and loss. Thomas Shepard's *Autobiography* (1646, published 1832) and the poems of **Anne Bradstreet** (written 1632–1672) bear witness to this sensual dimension of early American life. In fact, Bradstreet's records of her religious doubts and sexual longings for her

husband, sometimes described by modern scholars as covertly rebellious, were fully compatible with Puritan conceptions of faith and marriage. Later, American writers from Nathaniel Hawthorne to H. L. Mencken and Arthur Miller found it convenient to turn the Puritans into exemplars of sexual repression and American exceptionalism, but the texts speak a different language.

The more the colony thrived, the harder it became for Bradford to negotiate between the settlement's worldly success and its religious purity. Thus, the second part of his chronicle laments the decline of faith among the colonists, turning *Of Plymouth Plantation* into a jeremiad, the admonitory tale of a better past, which according to Sacvan Bercovitch is one of the central genres of North American writing. However, what Bradford saw as impending failure was the outline of an unequalled success story: Massachusetts' slow rise to become a mercantile force in the British empire. Bradford writes:

[T]he people of the plantation began to grow in their outward estates, by reason of the flowing of many people into the country, especially into the Bay of Massachusetts. By which means corn and cattle rose to a great price, by which many were much enriched and commodities grew plentiful. And yet in other regards this benefit turned to their hurt, and this accession of strength to their weakness. [...] And this I fear will be the ruin of New England, at least of the churches of God there, and will provoke the Lord's displeasure against them. (ch. 23, "Anno Dom: 1632")

A similar fear informed one of the most famous Puritan self-descriptions, John Winthrop's "**city upon a hill**" passage from *A Model of Christian Charity* (1630). Frequently quoted as an example of America's self-confident sense of mission, on closer inspection Winthrop's sermon reveals more anxiety than triumphalism. Its historical and intellectual contexts would have nothing to do with the imperial aspirations for which it was so often appropriated:

Now if the Lord shall please to hear us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then hath He ratified this covenant and sealed our commission; [and] will expect a strict performance of the articles contained in it; but if we shall neglect the observation of these articles [...] and prosecute our carnal intentions, seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us; be revenged of such a perjured people and make us know the price of the breach of such a covenant. [...] For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes



John Winthrop,
 Puritan writer and second
 governor of the Massa-
 chusetts Bay colony

William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*

The conflicting claims of faith and facts structure *Of Plymouth Plantation* and the colonial imagination at various levels. Among other things, they frame Bradford's depictions of intercultural encounters. At one point, his chronicle relates how the English newcomers stumbled upon a store of Indian corn and freely helped themselves. Predictably, Bradford offers a typological interpretation of the event: "And here is to be noted a special providence of God, and a great mercy to his poor people, that here they got seed to plant them corn the next year, or else they might have starved, for they had none nor any likelihood to get any" (ch. 10). The question of who owns the corn seems to be conveniently avoided, because if it was placed by God, the taking of it cannot be theft. However, Bradford is thoroughly aware of the pragmatic vicissitudes of the situation, i.e. the fact that the Indians—potential trade partners and military allies—have stored the corn for purposes other than feeding the Christians. Therefore, he complements his religious interpretation

Interpretation

with the following remark: "Also there was found more of their corn and of their beans of various colours; the corn and beans [we] brought away, purposing to give them full satisfaction when [we] should meet with any of them as, about some six months afterwards [we] did, to their good content" (ch. 10).

Bradford's insistence that the corn was properly exchanged in a trade-off would be unnecessary if his view of the natives were guided by typological conviction alone. But an exclusive reliance on theological discourse is prevented in this case by Bradford's knowledge that his struggling community will be dependent on Native assistance and instruction—not least in order to learn how to properly plant and grow the seeds they have just borrowed, with the help of God, from their future neighbors. Even later military conflicts, such as the Pequot War of 1636, did not divide neatly among ethnic or religious lines, but combined tribal and colonial groups in coalitions of interest, often dictated by internecine power struggles in European and Native communities.

of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God's sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going. (pt. 2)

still different in important ways from those of other nations, entangled histories and worldwide webs of communication notwithstanding.

3.1.3 | A Revolutionary Literature (1730–1830)

In fact, the eyes of all people were not on Massachusetts. The world—addressed also by Thomas Jefferson 146 years later in the *Declaration of Independence*—could not have cared less what a small group of sectarians was doing in some wild, far-away province. New England's pervading sense of provincialism explains a lot about the colonists' need for self-assertion. Nothing short of divine providence would legitimize their presence in this godforsaken place. Thus, in American writing, the declaration of communal cohesion has all too frequently been a sign of the natural lack thereof, from settler cultures clinging to their biblical self-images to citizens pledging allegiance to the flag of a country without a royal family, state religion, or long inherited symbols expressive of a common heritage. American nationalism is a strange phenomenon, for it has a strange history,

Emphasizing faith over works, seventeenth-century Protestantism constantly needed to balance its appraisal of individual experience with the mediating agency of religious institutions, embodied by pastors and ministers. From the beginning, the Congregational establishment of New England worked hard to contain its faith's inherent tendency towards **antinomianism**, i.e. the privileging of subjective spiritual justification over the communal letter of the law. But Puritanism's propensity for self-radicalization broke through again and again, for the first time in 1636 with Anne Hutchinson's ultra-Puritan rebellion against the ministers and magistrates of Boston. Hutchinson was banned and became an implausible martyr in later American narratives (among other things, she served as inspiration for Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, 1850, and was