

Those Human Puritans

HARRY ANDREW WRIGHT

WE THINK of the Puritans as a dour sort of people, interested mainly in religious affairs and to whom we ascribe an uncouth speech filled with grotesque expressions. But we should remember that these people were contemporaries of Shakespeare, akin in thought and speech, and recall such passages as: "whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles?" The English of Shakespeare was the language of those New England pioneers. That it did not persist, as it perhaps did in parts of Virginia, "is another story, that is no part of this story," as Kipling would say.

In common with Shakespeare, those people also had their Romeos and Juliets. The men of Governor Winthrop's family were a bit amorous by nature. John Winthrop, the younger, was born when his father, the Governor, was barely eighteen years old, and in his sixty-two years of life, the Governor had four wives. And he loved them mightily—every one.

John, the son, the future Governor of Connecticut, had some early love affairs that resulted in his twice being sent off on a long sea voyage, but though the old Adam was stilled, he refused to be silenced. Young John returned from the Levant in 1629 and though he may not have found prosperity just around the corner, he certainly found another petticoat lurking there. This particular petticoat was that of his cousin, Martha Fownes, an orphan and a ward of his father. Though they came to be very much in love, being cousins marriage was denied them, yet by some subterfuge, this twenty-four year old lad secured a marriage license. For more than a year he kept this hidden, but after the "old man" sailed for New England, leaving his son behind to close up his affairs,

love found a way. It would seem that even then all the world loved a lover, for the persuasive Romeo prevailed upon some impressionable parson to perform the marriage ceremony. The sequel is told in their letters.

In those days there were few regular mails and no envelopes. A completed letter was folded to the shape and size of a modern envelope, sealed with wax and given to the first traveler destined for the town where the letter was to be delivered. If, in transit, the brittle wax seal became broken by accident or design, the messenger had ample opportunity to satisfy his curiosity as to the contents of the missive. So it became customary to employ some cipher system for correspondence. Such were of many sorts, some quite intricate, and others rather simple. Queen Elizabeth used a rather elaborate shorthand system. John and Martha Winthrop had a cipher all their own. A number of their letters have been preserved, though for 300 years they remained undeciphered and

| | | | | |
|-------|-------|-------|--------|-------|
| 1 | s | u - a | a - u | m - p |
| 2 - r | n - t | t - n | n - b | |
| 3 - i | o - c | c - o | o - u | |
| 4 - y | c - d | d - c | p - v | |
| 5 | a - e | e - a | r - v | |
| 6 - n | s - g | f - 7 | s - l | |
| 7 - f | x - m | g - 8 | t - o | |
| 8 - u | v - o | h - 9 | uv - 8 | |
| 9 - h | v - p | i - 3 | w - ∞ | |
| o - t | e - k | k - e | γ - 4 | |
| ∞ - w | l - e | l - e | | |

THE CIPHER OF JOHN AND MARTHA WINTHROP

unread. Quite recently the riddle has been solved, revealing much of their affairs. One of these decodes to read:

To hir very lovinge husband Mr. John Winthrop at Mr. Downings house in Fletstrete neare Flete Condite these dd.

Teusday night, 1631.

“MY SWEETE HUSBAND,

I came safe to Groton upon Teusday at noone thankes bee too God and in this little time have much wanted thy company: since my coming I have heard such strange newes: It is credebly reported all over the cuntry that thou wert taken up at the court like a very boy and the reason was 1. because wee were neere a kine 2ly because wee married without consent 3ly because I was under age. With soe many surcumstances has made my mother and all of them beelieve it and to mend the matter my Uncle Gostlin came and tould my mother that shee could not goe too New Ing. because of that and that she and the rest must starve and I must have 60 pound a yeere joynter, with many more such like words, which made them all very sad and it was that newese which made my mother write of going without us. I have a great deale of newes to write thee but time will not permit. I comend thee thearfore to God with my owne love and rest, yours thy faithfull wife

MARTHA WINTHROPE”

Then, being a woman, she added three postscripts, but as those related to impersonal matters, they appear in longhand, as follows:

Comend mee to all our freinds with thee. All our freinds heere are in health and remember theare loves unto thee. My mother would pray thee to send downe a bottle of sallet oyle.

It all seems quite modern. Here was a young lass, coming to her husband's family rooftree after her elopement, being bedeviled and ticked off by her mother-in-law and her uncle. But she had faith in her John, for was he not a man of the world? After leaving Trinity College, he had dallied a bit about the law courts and, in 1627, had acted as aide to Captain George Best on His Majesty's Ship *Repulse*, in the expedition for the relief of Rochelle. The following year he made a long voyage to Venice, Constantinople, and the Levant. So he took such trifles in his stride and replied in the same cipher, the superscription reading:

09368 0093810 20368.00068

3ε96 00360224 74 00120 003706 3 20003840
094 848368 800024 06 00 8024 800 0-
70020 0000 0948 030040 0200 1070 0-
82006. 742 094/0 20002001 0948 002707-
0010 0700 0900 020 020800 0900. 0948
003010 00310 1003173 0900 0900 30 31 007000
180 3 02000 0000 000 000 0900 0300
020 0000 00 000 0900 7300 07 7300
0020 742 3 70020 30 004. 04 0900 0000
1000 000008 000001 00 10000 0000
06 000 00 0000 0700 00000001 0001
00309 00030306. 3 0000 00 1000 0900
0900 00030308 070000 000000 00309 3
013680 00000 0900 000 0300 00 0000
0000 0948 020 00300 00. 7000000 04
0000 000 00 0000 81 000000 81 000000
0000000.

London
28
631

3 1000 0900 0000000
0900000 00 0000000
031101 0000000000
0400. 00 0000000000 00
04 131000 000002 0000000000
0000 0000 0000 0000000000
0000000000.

To my loving wife Mrs. Martha Winthrop dd in Groton.

London May 28, 1631

MY DEARE WIFE,

I received thy loving letters and am very glad to heare that thou diddest come safe to Groton. For those reportes thou wrightest of let them not trouble the. Thou maist satisfi them that it is al false but I prethe doe not tel any that I doe not meane to pay the fine of five marke, for I feare it may by the same tatling tonges be spread abroad and come to some of the aldermans ears with additions. I hope to see the the beginning of next weeke which I thinke longer than ten time the time when thou art with me. Farewel my deare God keepe us and send us a merry meeting.

I send the heerwith a hundred and twenty kisses and as many more. My love remembred to my sister Winthrop and Mary. I must have a horse meete me on Monday.

Thine whilst mine owne,

JOHN WINTHROP

I want to read one more of these letters. From it you will sense that perhaps someone had been cheating a bit or had at least indulged in some injudicious flirtations. Jealousy there certainly had been, with a lover's quarrel and an attempted reconciliation. But ignore all that and go along with the letter with thoughts of Shakespeare's romances and note the similarity. This also was in cipher, addressed by John Winthrop to his little "Gretna Green" bride at Groton, whom he saluted as:

MY DEAREST HART,

I received thy sweete letter whereby thy love doeth manifest its true desire and greate diligence to manifest itselfe without the omission of the least and sodainest occasion offered, to him who needes noe glasse of verbal expression to make it appeare and shine forth before his eies or put him in remembrance of its former splendor but as he enjoyeth the sweetnesse of thy love being present with the, so recreateth his thoughts with the sweete memory of the same in thy absence. My dere, thou needest not feare but I am fully perswaded of thy love, nor thought the contrary, although thy clouding of thy love sometime hath suddenly darkened my mind with greif and sadned; but my deare, let us beare with one an others weaknesses and seeke to cherish love by all menes, for that will make our condition sweete houeever.

Thy loving husband

JOHN WINTHROP

It probably never occurred to John Winthrop that he was writing something rather beautifully phrased. It was just a note of love and reassurance to his wife, with no thought of composing a poem.

We are fortunate in having these letters, for lacking some such cipher, no mentally-disciplined Englishman would have so revealed his inmost thoughts. In a sense it is a pity to bring them out into the open, after all these years, but I feel that we are justified, for in no other way could we be made so aware of the humanness of these people, whom we have been taught to consider as so cold, stern and forbidding.

Because of the irksomeness of reducing his text to code or because his further messages were of no interest to the general public, John Winthrop concluded the foregoing letter in long-hand, as follows:

Send John Robinson on Monday in the morning or if this letter come not to you till Monday, then send him a Tuesday morning betimes, to Hitcham to Mr. Kemtons, and desire them to cause their tailor to take measure of Mrs. Penelope Nanton, for a gowne, and let him stay there till it be done, and let him bring away the measure with him and doe thou put it up safe in a letter and send it next Wednesday to my aunt Downing. Let it be done with out faile for my aunt Downing hath promised my lady Nanton, and I have promised her, to doe it certainly, therefore prethe doe not thou failie to see it done. I hope to be downe my selfe before this letter come to thy hands but if I should not, remember my duty to my mother, and my love to my sister Winthrop and sister Mary. Tell them that my cosen Barfoots sonne is deade.

Martha Fownes had but a short life, dying with her first-born. Her successor, Elizabeth Reade, was a most estimable person—an able wife and mother. She cooperated in her husband's work and ambitions, living to see him become one of New England's most valued men, yet we can but wonder what would have been the outcome, for better or for worse, had he tripped through life with this blithesome poetic inspiration by his side.

It is all quite provocative. Here for the first time is revealed the fact that John Winthrop's marriage was most irregular. Had there been no Martha Fownes to hold his interest, would he have come to New England with his father in 1630, rather than with

his bride in 1631? Had such a versatile and compelling force been a part of the original Winthrop expedition, what would have been the effect on those early days and ways?

Puritan youth did not find life in New England all work and no play. At Plymouth, Governor Bradford came home at noon on Christmas Day, in 1622, to find a group "in the street, at play, some pitching the bar and some at stool ball and such like sports." I cannot tell you of the occupations of the young people of Boston in the seventeenth century. Perhaps they were attending Elijah Corlet's preparatory school or the free school, en route to Harvard. But at Springfield there were no such sissies. There, young hellions were abroad in the land, and as Sunday was an idle day, it was their busy time. The minister's sons and the deacon's daughters were laying the foundation for the reputation attributed to them at a later period.irate fathers of careless daughters brought the town youth into court for shotgun weddings.

Let's look at the record.

Miles Morgan and Jonathan Burt were ordered "to sit in the meeting house gallery, to check disorders in youth and young men in time of God's service." Apparently the young people's kidneys couldn't endure a seventeenth century church service. They simply had to go out. To borrow a phrase from Magistrate Pynchon—"even in sermon time." And once out, they stayed out.

Here was a distressing situation. The selectmen gathered in solemn assembly and out of their wisdom came this conclusion:

Whereas, for a long time, there has been great disorder in our assembly, many young persons stealing out of the meeting house before the blessing be pronounced. So many of them cannot be thought to have any necessity so to do and it being a great grief to serious minds, we order that no person so do, except there be necessary occasion.

And we request that Lieutenant Stebbins see that there be no disorderly practice by the youth and if they will not be reformed, then to make return of their names to the selectmen.

The action seems to have effected both a bodily cure and the desired reform, for there is no further mention of those weak-kidneyed lads.

Thomas Stebbins, son of a deacon, and four other young men were admonished for "fiercely galloping and running their horses in the street, to the endangering of children." This charge of driving to endanger is an old, old story in Springfield.

The selectmen met to consider "the great damage done to the glass windows by children playing about the meeting house."

Complaint was made to the Springfield court that Thomas Thompson and John Horton engaged in a fistic bout, "on the Sabbath, half an hour after sunset, profaning the Lord's Day." But the boys didn't take it lying down. Contending that as the affair was admittedly after sunset, it was after the close of the Puritan sabbath and therefore could be no offense against the Lord's day. Ergo—the indictment must be faulty. And they got away with it.

In 1640, Samuel Hubbard was licensed to keep a tavern in the vicinity of the present Howard street, with "some inoffensive sign, obvious for stranger's direction." *Some inoffensive sign, obvious for stranger's direction.* That's a good example of seventeenth century English as used here.

The tavern was at what was then the outskirts of the town, away from the seats of the mighty and undoubtedly "a good time was there had by all." Six years later, complaint was made of "great disorder caused by the game called shuffle board in houses of common entertainment, whereby much precious time is unfruitfully spent and much waste of wine and beer occasioned." And that by our reputed strait-laced Puritan fathers.

This shuffle board was not the game of today, played on ship-board, but a gambling game; a cross between billards and checkers, played with coins on a table.

In 1640, the General Court forbade dancing in taverns and in 1648 decreed a fine of five shillings for those "who expend time in unlawful games, as cards and dice." But the prohibition was so lightly regarded that twenty-four years later the penalty was increased twenty-fold, one-half going to the informer. So came the day of the snoopers, nose parkers, and official informers.

By spying on their neighbors, sneaking busybodies were enabled to add to their incomes, but it was not all one-sided. "Hugh

Parsons was complained of for taking tobacco in the open street and James Bridgman did testify the same." In retaliation at the next session of the court, the tables were turned and "James Bridgman was complained of by Hugh Parsons for taking tobacco in his yard."

Personal liberty and joy of life were getting to be a thing of the past in New England with darker days in the offing. But that the early days were gay and lightsome, there is ample evidence. Winthrop concluded one of those cipher letters to his wife with the admonition,—“be merry and resolve to be very cheerful, I pray thee.”

Much of the freedom of early Springfield was due to the benign influence of William Pynchon, founder of the town; great defender of personal rights and liberty for both English and Indians. In this he was abetted by the Rev. George Moxon, the town minister. In 1640, John Pynchon, then a lad of fourteen, kept a shorthand record of the pastor's sermons. Like the Winthrop love letters, this remained undeciphered until recently, but now it can be read and is most illuminating. The texts were from the new testament; the themes were of comfort, love and the necessity for happiness. “We are in a new country,” said Moxon, “and here we must be happy, for if we are not happy ourselves, we cannot make others happy.” It was not until two generations later that those “hell-fire-and-damnation” sermons came from New England pulpits. Two generations of arduous labor to provide a subsistence; when schools were few and opportunities for education meager. When daughters of gentlemen married sons of indentured servants. Then came the dark period of bigotry and superstition. But such had no part in the early Springfield of Magistrate Pynchon and Dominie Moxon.

There is reason for believing that this recording of the pastor's sermons by young Pynchon was not made in church, but was in the nature of mental gymnastics, provided by the minister, as tutor to the young son of his patron. As in a later era, laggard pupils were placed in the corner, with a dunce cap, and still later were obliged to write a series of irritating words on the blackboard, so the same spirit seems to have prevailed in the classroom of

three centuries ago. At the bottom of one of the pages of John Pynchon's shorthand record of 1640 is a sentence that decodes to read, "John Pynchon is a disobedient and ungrateful boy." The labor of reducing that bit to code was the punishment meted out to that inattentive student.

Pynchon and Moxon were most sympathetic. In 1650, Pynchon published his controversial book, *The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption*, and there is little doubt but that the pastor had a considerable part in its composition. The volume includes such a wealth of references and quotations as to indicate that a comprehensive library was available. Details of the collection are lacking, for on the return of Moxon and Pynchon to England, the Library was left for the succeeding minister and was destroyed by the Indians in the sack of the town on October 5, 1675. In his report of the disaster to Governor Leverett, John Pynchon wrote, "Pastor Glover had all his books burnt; not so much as a Bible saved. A great loss, for he had choice books and many."

For knowledge of a significant incident connected with Pynchon's book, we are indebted to a very kindly person at the John Carter Brown Library. With rare patience, he has made clear an interesting point. To him it was perhaps merely a bibliographical curiosity, but it provided a link in a chain of events.

The book was printed in England in 1650 and reached Boston that fall. On account of objectionable opinions expressed, the edition was publicly burned and the author was coerced into making certain retractions, with the expectation that he would later make others. But in 1652, Pynchon and Moxon slipped away and returned permanently to England.

Of the 1650 edition, five copies are known and the John Carter Brown Library has a similar copy, but dated 1652. A comparison gives assurance that the later edition was made up of previously unbound sheets of the first edition, with the inclusion of a new title page. It is conclusive that Pynchon's retractions were made with his tongue in his cheek and that on reaching England, he thumbed his nose across three thousand miles of ocean and brought out the second edition without altering a single expressed opinion.

If I have given the impression that John Winthrop was just a playboy, that would be most unfair. He was an active, versatile person, as earnest and serious in his later activities as in his early love making. Among his major interests was the practice of medicine. The index of his medical account books reads almost like a directory of New England at that time.

In contrast with the progress then being made in other lines, the ignorance concerning the treatment of bodily ills was appalling. Winthrop experimented with the feeding of powdered coral for the relief of cancer. The wife of Governor Hopkins of Hartford had been insane for years and the distracted husband appealed to William Pynchon of Springfield, who advised:

A plain, thin diet will make less matter for those subtle vapors. Gentle nosing will open the brain and give some refreshment, provided it be done by gentle means. Nosing tobacco and the like are too violent, but if lettuce leaves could be had, nothing is so good for nosing.

The inducing of sneezing as a cure for insanity seems most absurd. Yet Pynchon was a practical man. His account books include many a charge for "two pills and a vomit," administered to neighbors. Frequent return of grateful patients suggests that some relief resulted.

In 1661, Springfield appears to have been visited by an epidemic similar to infantile paralysis. A lame son of Miles Morgan was referred to Winthrop, then at Hartford, as follows:

HONORED SIR:

When I was at Hartford I was at your house, desiring to speak with your Worship about my lame boy. But you were from home when I brought him to your house, whereupon I carried him to Goodwife Watts and left him with her. My humble request to your Worship is that if you see it needful that he be purged or take physic that you give him what you judge needful and I shall account it a great favor and be ready to give you full satisfaction and content. Entreating your pardon for my boldness, I humbly take leave and subscribe:

Your Worship's servant,

MILES MORGAN

Knowing that Miles Morgan could neither read nor write, we realize that both text and signature are in the hands of John Pynchon. In the lower left-hand corner is the Latin equivalent

of "turn over." The thrifty Pynchon was getting a free ride for a letter of his own, for on the inside of the folded sheet he wrote:

Here is a Dutchman from fort Aurania who pretends skill in surgery. He hath taken Goodman Dorchester's leg in hand and thinks to cure it and he thinks he could cure my daughter. He speaks very confidently that he can bring her leg to rights and straight. He offers to cure her for £60. Myself and wife are fearful of meddling with him, being a stranger, lest he may do her hurt and therefore, though he hath been here these eight days and I have entertained him at my home, yet I have not hitherto employed him. He says he will use no launching nor any violent means, but bathings, rubbings and chafing the sinews and that he intends to follow two or three days, night and day. He intends at first to take little or no sleep for two or three nights. I at first thought he might be needy of money and his aim might be to get some, but he says I shall not pay him one penny until I see it be a cure and see her go without crutches or stick.

We may assume that the massaging by Born Van Horn, the Dutchman, produced results, for he became a permanent resident of the town. Crippled Mary Pynchon, ten years old when this letter was written, married at the age of nineteen, Joseph Whiting, Treasurer of the Connecticut Colony and became the mother of two children.

Generation followed generation, but boys continued to be boys. In 1776, the Continental Congress ordered that an Armory be established at Springfield under the command of Colonel William Smith, barely twenty-one years old when commissioned. But the Congress was just another Congress and the probers soon began to probe. A Commission sat at Springfield in November, 1778, to consider charges that with public funds the young officers had built a yacht, christened the *Lady Washington*, for "sporting up and down the Connecticut river." The girls did their best to brighten the lives of the heroes. Brigade Major Hughes wrote to Colonel Smith, "Sally says that the first opportunity, you shall have some ginger cake." He concluded, "I must hasten to Springfield to court that dear, bewitching girl, Nabby. By Heavens, she is a Venus. Do be kind enough to do what I dare not—give her a kiss and tell her it was from me. What was I saying—Damn it, give her my love as a prelude to our correspondence."

So we find that through the years, human nature varied little.

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.