

John Winthrop's Woodpile,

Or,

Cotton Mather Remodels Christian Charity.

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As our students are can be quick to remind us, early America is just not relatable.

However, there are aspects of life in early colonial New England that do resonate with the present moment. As any number of sources can confirm, life in Boston was austere, and it was precarious. Indeed, Austerity and Precarity sound like they could be names puritan settlers might give their daughters in the 1630s, but they are also an increasingly pervasive part of life in the 21st. As such, considering how the Bay Colony and its leaders respond in a time of material scarcity might offer us the chance to rethink some familiar texts in unfamiliar ways. I offer a consideration of two models of charity associated with John Winthrop, briefly trace their lives and afterlives, and argue that the displacement of one by the other suggests a need for renewed attention to the mythologies associated with New England's early settlement. On a methodological level, this means more thorough analysis of who uses a usable past, and how; on an intellectual level, this means a more thoughtful consideration of political typologies.

John Winthrop and charity have a complicated history together. "A Modell of Christian Charity" is the title of one of the most important texts attributed to Winthrop (and a text with a complicated history of its own). However, this text most often appears in the context of Winthrop's invocation of a City on a Hill, which has been quoted by generations of US politicians, notably JFK and Reagan. In general, these references do not engage the actual model of charity for Christians Winthrop articulates in this text. For one thing, the word

“charity” does not appear in the text of the document a later person titled “A Modell of Christian Charity.” At the same time, we do have a familiar example of Winthrop’s charity — it is a theme of Cotton Mather’s life of Winthrop, most notably in an anecdote from a cold winter that is an anachronistic vignette Mather tucks into “Nehemias Americanus.” As we will see, these models of charity are at odds with one another. Winthrop proposes charity as a reflexive, metabolic duty of members of a body politic; Mather relates charity as a self-indulgent gesture of a rich man to a poor man. It is, not surprisingly, Mather’s model that has enjoyed traction as an exemplar of Winthrop’s virtue. Informed by Abram Van Engen’s heroic textual scholarship on the *Modell*, and emboldened by Jordan Stein’s provocative interventions in early American temporalities, I would like to consider the history of these two texts in tandem.

As Abram details in his NEQ article, the text of a *Modell* is a complicated thing. For our purposes here, the most salient aspect is the text’s disappearance from view shortly after it was delivered (if indeed, it ever was) until 1838, when it popped up in the collections of the NYHS. It is doing a disservice to Jordan ALH essay to draw from it only that we need to pay attention to discontinuities and rediscoveries as much as traditions and legacies, but in this case, the disappearance of the *Modell* for two centuries allowed Mather’s version of Winthrop’s charity to flourish in a vacuum, as it were, while the rediscovery of the *Modell* produced a conflation of these competing models of charity. To begin, let us revisit the charity Winthrop himself details. There is a great deal we do not know about a *Modell* of Christian Charity, but the contents of the text are consistent with the label. It is not clear where or when the *Modell* was composed or how it was shared, and even some question

about Winthrop's authorship, but the document known by this name does detail at some length a blueprint for the obligations the members of this nascent community have to one another. **There are moments where Winthrop's vision for the Bay Colony comes quite close to the notion of "from each, according to his ability, to each according to his need," even as it traces rigid social hierarchies.**

"The diffinition which the Scripture gives us of love is this[:] Love is the bond of perfection." (288) For Winthrop, it is a remarkably real metaphor. "There is noe body but consists of partes, and that which knitts these partes together gives the body its perfeccion, beacause it makes eache parte soe contiguous to other as thereby they doe mutually participate with eache other, both in strengthe and infirmity and pleasure and paine." (288) Winthrop continues, "the severall parts of this body considered aparte before they were united were as disproportionate and as much disordering as soe many contrary qualities or elements but when Christ comes and by his spirit and love knitts all these partes to himselfe and each to other, it is become the most perfect and best proportioned body in the world." (288-9) Winthrop returns to the model of the parts of a single body illustrating the power of love to combine disparate parts: "Among the members of the same body, love and affection are recipocall in a most equall and sweet kinde of Commerce. (291) To explain, Winthrop points out that "in the naturall body the mouth is at all the paines to receive, and mince the food which serves for the nourishment of all the other partes of the body, yet it hath noe cause to complaine; for first the other partes send back by secret passages a due proporction of the same nourishment in a better forme for the strengthening and comfoteing the mouthe. (291-2).

By contrast, here is the episode from Mather's life of Winthrop:

"And there was one passage of his charity that was perhaps a little unusual: in an hard and long winter, when wood was very scarce at Boston, a man gave him a private information that a needy person in the neighbourhood stole wood sometimes from his pile; whereupon the governour in a seeming anger did reply, "Does he so? I'll take a course with him; go, call that man to me; I'll warrant you I'll cure him of stealing." When the man came, the governour considering that if he had stolen, it was more out of necessity than disposition, said unto him, "Friend, it is a severe winter, and I doubt you are but meanly provided for wood; wherefore I would have you supply your self at my wood-pile till this cold season be over." And he then merrily asked his friends, " Whether he had not effectually cured this man of stealing his wood?" (Magnalia)

In place of a social contract, it is an act of personal charity on behalf of an individual, performed by the leader of the colony, and in a way designed – as Mather tells it – to amuse himself and his friends.

Writing at the end of the 17th century, Mather imagines Winthrop's greatness through his personal generosity, rather than his political acumen in providing for his colony at large. From the relative prosperity of the 1690s, the principles of mutual support Winthrop models for the austerity of the 1630s perhaps seem unimportant to Mather; at the same time, Mather's anecdote anticipates a paradigm of supporting the poor through individual

and voluntary largesse, rather than as a responsibility of the state to care for its weakest members.

As such, Mather presents Winthrop as a forerunner – or antitype – of the privatized model of charity articulated by George H. W. Bush in his speech at the 1988 Republican National Convention, and again in his 1989 inaugural speech as “a thousand points of light.” Peggy Noonan was responsible for this phrase, and these speeches. Noonan is also responsible for Ronald Reagan’s farewell address, which preceded the Bush inaugural speech by a few days. So, Reagan’s farewell address is bracketed by two speeches by Bush, senior, where he articulates his vision of a thousand points of light. Peggy Noonan wrote all three of these speeches. Reagan invokes Winthrop like this:

“And that's about all I have to say tonight, except for one thing. The past few days when I've been at that window upstairs, I've thought a bit of the “shining city upon a hill.” The phrase comes from John Winthrop, who wrote it to describe the America he imagined. What he imagined was important because he was an early Pilgrim, an early freedom man. He journeyed here on what today we'd call a little wooden boat; and like the other Pilgrims, he was looking for a home that would be free.

I've spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and

creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it, and see it still."

To be sure, **Reagan's** city looks quite a bit different from Winthrop's. "Free ports humming with commerce and creativity," is a far cry from the image of a lone ship coming into view Winthrop as distributes the last of the meal to his hungry neighbors.

George H. W. Bush invoked the image of "A Thousand points of light" in speeches bracketing Reagan's invocation of Winthrop. Points of light is a cliché that repetition can render meaningless, but the original context is illuminating — it celebrates acts of individual kindness as the foundation of social order, in explicit contrast to the state. Randy Travis's 1991 song, "Point of Light," states this ethos succinctly:

All it takes is a point of light
A ray of hope in the darkest night
If you see what's wrong and you try to make it right
You will be a point of light

Naturally, I wondered if he, via Mather, also informed Bush's Points of light. It's not. So I apologize, in that the contemporary relevance of this project is not quite what I hoped. My takeaway is to avoid talking to alive people about your research, as they have a way of derailing otherwise promising lines of inquiry. I asked Peggy Noonan about Mather, and she said:

"I do not know of Mather's biography of Winthrop and do not know if President Reagan or President Bush did. The story you mention of Winthrop and the man who took the firewood sounds like a story they'd both enjoy, a very American story, but I don't know if either of them knew it and am not certain they'd view it as one whose central meaning touched on the role of government. " Thanks, Peggy. In retrospect, it was perhaps too much

to hope that she would tell me “Yes I invented the neoliberal charitable ethos in 1989, and Cotton Mather helped!”

And yet. We see Winthrop engage in an act of charity that is a form of affective self-indulgence he can afford. He is acting as an individual, to address an individual need, with one major outcome being that it forms an anecdote he can share - “mirthfully” - with his friends.

In some ways, this is at odds with the portrait Mather works to present. Winthrop is the American Nehemiah, and Nehemiah did not fix the latch on a needy neighbor’s door — Nehemiah built a wall around Jerusalem. As an individual donor, addressing an individual need, and largely for his own satisfaction, Winthrop, as Mather portrays him here, bears an uncanny resemblance to one of the points of light conjured by the first Bush administration as a model for charity. Mather remodels Winthrop’s charity this anecdote of the woodpile, in ways that have unsettling resonances with our recent history.

If we consider these texts in light some of the work that Wendy Brown does in *Undoing the Demos*, Mather’s remodeling of Winthrop’s Christian charity takes on new valences. It is an uncomfortable fit in some ways, especially as Brown’s book mourns the decline of democracy, while Winthrop imagines an explicitly undemocratic society. However, Brown, engaging with Foucault’s 1978-79 lectures on biopolitics, complicates Foucault’s distinction between *homo politicus* and *homo economicus*. Brown identifies the figure of the homo politicus as humankind “living together in a deliberately governed fashion, to self-rule in a settled association that comprises, yet exceeds, basic needs, and to the location of human freedom and human perfectibility in political life 87) Mather’s anecdote forecloses Winthrop’s political role as a governor, and instead casts him as a benefactor. As

Brown details, *homo politicus* is often thought to have withered in the seventeenth century, as interest, especially in property and things, became paramount.” (92) Mather, writing at the end of the seventeenth century, offers the spectacle of a founder notable for his generosity as much as for his leadership. As such, Mather’s vision of Winthrop takes on some of the features of Foucault’s account of *homo economicus* as “an image of man as entrepreneur of himself.” (80)

Early Americanists love declension narratives, and Brown offers us a doozy. However, I do not propose to read the 200 year disappearance of the Modell as the recipe we will never get again, but if Winthrop’s life and legacy persist as a legacy we invoke, it is worth asking just what that legacy is. Darreit Rutman’s reading of the Modell as an effort to disavow the evils of England in order to build a utopia in the wilderness has been challenged by Van Engen and others, but *Winthrop’s Boston* does trace how quickly that vision evaporated. As such Mather’s competing vision of Winthrop’s charity lying in his personal largesse, as corny as it is, resonates with a strain of political thought that has been hard to avoid for the last three decades.

So, I am making a claim for the significance relative popularity of two ideas of charity associated with John Winthrop, and in particular that Mather’s model flourishes and takes root while Winthrop’s own is out of sight. As such, if this line of thinking is worth pursuing, the work that lies ahead is something like constructing the literary history of an anecdote, and I would welcome your thoughts on how to approach this challenge. The persistence of one model of charity, rather than the other, once both are available to scholars and readers, suggests something of what use we choose to make of a specific slice of the past. A story of personal philanthropy rather than communal sharing and struggle has proved to be the

preferred way to relate to this moment of austerity and precarity for the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. I would like to suggest that early Americanists work to recover John Winthrop as something more than a point of light.