1971

The Puritan Conscience in the Diary of Samuel Sewall

Carson Linwood Tucker

*College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences*

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[https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-p08a-kb95](https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-p08a-kb95)

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THE PURITAN CONSCIENCE
IN THE
DIARY OF SAMUEL SEWALL

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Carson Tucker
1971
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

Master of Arts

Carson L. Tucker
Author

Approved, May 1971

[Signatures]
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the Puritan conscience as revealed in the Diary of Samuel Sewall of Boston, and, through illustrations from the Diary, to demonstrate that the traditional Puritan, the historical figure, the devout Calvinist whose life was dominated by adherence to his strict set of religious tenets, is not merely another American myth.

I first trace the definitions and connotations of the word "Puritan" from the mid-nineteenth-century to the present, and then proceed to summarize, very briefly, Calvinist doctrines as they were practiced in colonial New England. This leads to a discussion of conscience and its overriding significance in ordering the devout Puritan's life-style. In this discussion I disagree with both H.L. Mencken's calumnies against the Puritans and the revisionists' tendencies to make them just another colonial American group.

Using excerpts from Sewall's Diary, I not only explain the difference between what I have designated the positive and negative consciences, but also demonstrate various manifestations of Sewall's guilt and his need for confessions of conscience at various times in his life. These confessions were, I think, spiritually beneficial to Sewall. I also attempt, through excerpts, to prove that Sewall used his Diary at times for introspection and self-evaluation aimed at ascertaining whether God had chosen him for grace and for preparing his heart for receiving that grace. In this respect, I disagree emphatically with Mrs. Ola Winslow's statements that the Diary is all fact and that Sewall was incapable of introspection.

In short, the traditional Puritan, the historical figure, the prototype of Puritanism mistakenly characterized by his non-Puritan contemporaries as dour and humorless, did exist in colonial New England and lived within the confines of a strict, self-imposed doctrine of beliefs. As one of those devout Puritans, Samuel Sewall has revealed himself to us in the legacy of his Diary. His spiritual struggle, incited by his conscience, is recorded in this diary amid a mass of other information that is not only factual and objective but also of little interest in the study of Sewall's spiritual and psychological make-up.
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Prom Hawthorne in the mid-nineteenth-century to the early decades of the twentieth-century, the word "Puritan" had a neutral significance, in that it described an historical prototype who advocated simpler forms of faith and worship. The word connoted the traditional aspect of the doctrine of Puritanism—religion-oriented, God-fearing, and devoted to the further reform (purification) of the Church.¹

By his non-Puritan contemporaries, the Puritan was characterized as harsh, humorless, and dour, because these contemporaries were looking at the Puritan from the viewpoint of a segment of the society that was comparatively less restricted by a disciplined set of religious beliefs.

With the advent of the arch-iconoclast H.L. Mencken, who attacked the doctrine, the word "Puritanism" took on a more pejorative association, suggesting censoriousness and undue repression.² Mencken generally widened the application of the word to mean WASP. Mencken lived in the jazz age, a time of social revolution against parents' mores, against harsh laws (such as Prohibition), against the censorship advocated by the anti-obscenity "smut-hounds" such as Charles Sumner and that "professional sinhound . . . of militant morality . . . the virtuoso of virtue" Anthony Comstock, head of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice.³ Mencken
suggested that the old Calvinism of the early Puritans had eventually become no more than a "luxuriant demonology," and that God himself had been transformed into a sort of devil. The old religion died: "The old God of Plymouth Rock . . . is scarcely worse than the average jail warden or Italian padrone." Nonetheless, Mencken continued, the Puritan ethics still linger in the American hinterland and still hinder the Americans' enlightenment, just as it wildly stifled the zest of the age of Shakespeare. America has never had a prolonged or successful revolution against the Puritan morality:

The American can never imagine any work of the imagination as wholly devoid of moral content; . . . the Puritan's utter lack of aesthetic sense, his distrust of all romantic emotion, his unmatchable intolerance of opposition, his unbreakable belief in his own bleak and narrow views, his savage cruelty of attack, his lust for relentless and barbarous persecution [make it possible for him to wage a successful] war on beauty in its every form.

Mencken called this bleak period of American culture the "reign of the God-crazy" in which the "throttling influence of an ever alert and bellicose Puritanism" made sure that the God of the Puritans, "a jealous God who brooked no sort of creative rivalry," would indeed not be rivalled. Mencken's epigrams on the Puritan tend to crystallize the high disdain with which he characterized these people, old and new:

Puritanism: an attempt to bleach the red corpuscles.

The Puritan is one who uses the Cross as a hammer to knock in the heads of sinners.

At the bottom of Puritanism one finds envy of the fellow who is having a better time in the world, and hence hatred of him.
The objection to Puritans is not that they try to make us think as they do, but that they try to make us do as they think.

Conscience: the inner voice which warns us that someone may be looking. 6

Such accusations of hypocrisy could not, of course, but damn the whole era and cloud the vision of generations after Mencken. But there was, in time, a reaction against Mencken's calumnies—a new literary criticism termed "revisionism," an attempt to revise totally our ideas of the Puritans. The revisionists endeavoured to portray the Puritans as no different than any other colonial group. The Puritans merely took their religion very seriously. If we can understand the theology of the New England Puritans, reason the revisionists, we shall see that they were not really dour and humorless, much less repressive, if considered within the confines of their self-imposed religious structure. To the revisionists, language and literary form are themselves expressions of emotion: we must look at these forms and styles of rhetoric to understand the emotional experience embodied in them.

Contemporary revisionists, among them Harrison T. Meserole and Norman S. Grabo, claim that the way any particular age acts, thinks, works, and lives is largely shaped by the artists and writings of the day: Wigglesworth's Day of Doom, the "lurid confessions of Congregational 'relations'," 7 the many published sermons, as well as the many private diaries helped structure the thoughts of the colonial New England era, for
Norman Grabo is a revisionist critic of New England Puritan art and culture also in regard to the sensuality he finds in the poetry of Edward Taylor, Anne Bradstreet, and Jonathan Edwards, among others. For example, in "Contemplations" Anne Bradstreet is deeply moved by the "autumn trees all richly clad": "Rapt were my sense at this delectable view." Now the modern, "romantic" interpretation of these lines, writes Grabo, suggests calm and repose; but, he continues,

"Prime symptom of weariness is to overlook the greater sinew behind the seventeenth-century use of the word "rapt." Closely related through its common root with the words "rape" and "rapture," Bradstreet's innocent term functions much more strenuously than modern sentiment usually recognizes. The sexual implications of raptness or of being enraptured are developed in a similar context by Jonathan Edwards, too, with full awareness of their violent suggestions."

Too much and too far! The pendulum of revisionism has gone to its limit and beyond. In endeavouring to re-evaluate what seems an unbelievable image of the American Puritan, revisionism attempts, I recognize, to humanize (that is, to make them less saintly and more human in appetites and failings) historical figures stereotyped and pigeon-holed as "ultra-religious" and "Puritan" (primary definition), or, on the other hand (as Henc-ken would have it), "bigoted." And yet the revisionists have failed, I think, just as they claimed the traditionalists had. Both failed to recognize the individuals in the "fair field full of folk"--the traditionalists often do not see the earthy dregs and the revisionists often do not see the saintly pinnacles. It is only the revisionists' tendencies to over-humanize,
smooth-out, and generalize about the Puritans, while often overlooking outstanding examples of true Puritanism, that I question: with one particular Puritan, Samuel Sewall of Boston, using his own personal record (his Diary), I will endeavour to demonstrate that, however scarce, the traditional Puritan (primary definition) did, truly and after all, exist in seventeenth-century New England. And as one individual among other traditional Puritans, Samuel Sewall lived by a strict set of principles and with a particularly religious conscience.

In America the Puritans believed they could make the New Jerusalem possible by living their strict Calvinist doctrine of salvation by faith alone. Not only did they believe that every man could come to know God and His Word and that the inner voice of conscience could be understood as the voice of God but also that nothing short of complete obedience to God's commands was acceptable in His sight. The Puritans of New England made a substantial addition to the theology of Calvinism—and, to them and to the doctrine of American Puritanism, the addition was just as important as the original concepts of Calvinism. The addition was called the "Covenant Theology" (or "Federal Theology"). This theology prescribed a special reading of the Bible and explained the idea of grace: in short, God condescended, after the Fall, to treat man as an equal. He then drew up the covenant, in which the terms and conditions of salvation were listed and by which He promised to abide. "The covenant did not alter the fact that those only are saved upon whom God shods his grace, but it made very clear
and reasonable how and why certain men are selected, and prescribed the conditions under which they might reach a fair assurance of their own standing." It was this "fair assurance" that every devout Puritan sought in his life.

New England Calvinism allowed diversity of opinion within the limits of a few tenets: pure-faith acceptance of some basic beliefs was necessary, but these few beliefs were revealed to the heart of the individual and these alone were essential. However few the tenets of Calvinism, it was, nevertheless, these tenets and the Puritans' struggle to adhere to them that created, in their lives, not only such a profound emphasis on salvation but also the concept of the conscience as the paramount factor in their religious compliance. The ancient Biblical images of spiritual struggle within each man proved that it was only the spirit (or soul) that "Satan fears and endeavours to overthrow." Conscience was the spirit's guardian. Protestant, and particularly Calvinist, theology made necessary a new emphasis on a theory of conscience, derived in many respects from mystic and Platonic traditions. George Sidney Brett, in A History of Psychology, claimed that the bases for conscience were "certain inborn moral certainties" left lingering in the mind of man after the Fall. In theological terms the conscience may be conceived as the remnants of the image of God left in the mind of man, since at the Fall man lost only his "moral powers," not his moral "image."

All Puritans, however, did not accept the view that
conscience was the "inner judgment, the sense of Rightness or Wrongness" that "theologians had made . . . signify an intuitive grasp of the highest principles." For instance, William Ames, an eminent Puritan divine, in his De Conscientia (or, Conscience with the Power and Cases Thereof), derived his idea of syneresis (that is, conscience) from Stoicism. To him and many Puritans, conscience was

an activity of reason, reaching a conclusion through the syllogism. Thus from the premise, "He that lives in sin shall die," through the assumption, "I live in sin," conscience concludes, "I shall die." It seems to me, however, that Ames disproves, to a certain extent, his own case for "reasoning conscience" by the further statements he makes, namely that we know our conscience through the "light of nature." By the fact that we "understand" the principle naturally, Ames thinks himself correct to put the emphasis on the understanding of the conscience. But he goes on to say that we are allowed to understand because "through the goodness of God [we are given] the knowledge [which knowledge is "still conserved in man's mind even after his fall"] of many things which we ought to do or shun." In other words, man understands these things through some knowledge of right and wrong granted him by God, by "morall principles that are naturally in us . . . so cleare, and written in the hearts of all men, that they cannot erre to obey and practice them." As pain is to the body, warning of types of danger and often remaining with the body even after the danger has been removed (e.g., heat and fire and lingering discomfort), so
is the afflicted conscience both warning and punishment to man's soul. Henry Smith's sermons on Matthew 27: 1-4, adum-brating Jonathan Edwards' sermons on the souls of sinners in the hands of an angry God, portrayed vividly and memorably, to the Puritan mind, the tortured conscience:

If there be any hell in this world, they which feel the worme of conscience gnaw upon their hearts, may truly say, that they have felt the torments of hell. Who can express that man's horror but himselfe? Sor-rowes are met in his soule at a feast: and fear, thought, and anguish divide his soule between them. All the furies of hell leap upon his heart like a stage. Thought calleth to Fear; Fear whistleth to Horrour; Horrour beknoneth to Despair, and saith, Come and help me to torment the sinner: One saith, that she cometh from this sinne, and another saith, that she cometh from that sinne: so he goeth thorow a thousand deaths, and cannot die. Irons are laid upon his body like a prisoner. All his lights are put out at once: he hath no soul fit to be comforted. Thus he lies upon the racks, and saith that he beares the world upon his shoulders, and that no man suffereth that which he suffereth. So let him lye (saith God) without ease, untill he confesse and repent, and call for mercy. This is the godly way which the Serpent said would make you Gods, and made him a devil.19

One Puritan who was particularly affected by this emphasis on the dominance of conscience was Samuel Sewall of Boston. Sewall was a devout Puritan and a good Calvinist. Despite his extensive worldly concerns, the "issue of salvation was almost uppermost"20 in his mind. Mrs. Ola Winslow, Sewall's definitive biographer, while following the revisionist line of "humanization" to a certain degree, strikes a true note in the "Epilogue" of the biography. The "Epilogue" is a summation of the man's life and essential character:

Samuel Sewall appeared to [his contemporaries] as a man who stood for the old faith, the old ways, already different enough from current thought and ways to seem a little old-fashioned.
[His religion] was his own and it put its stamp on everything he thought or did. When he awoke in the morning his first thought was the Scripture lesson and the Psalm for the day. To go to the Town-House or mount his horse for the Court circuit without the family worship would have been unthinkable to him. It is easy to dismiss this traditional program as a mere pattern, but to look twice is to see that for Judge Sewall, whatever the pattern meant to him, it cannot be dismissed or subtracted. It was not separate; it cannot be subtracted; he cannot be understood without it.

Good Mr. Sewall [the people of Boston called him].
With all his pride in high-sounding titles, he might have liked it better than Judge Sewall, or even Captain.21

Sewall, unlike his acquaintance Michael Wigglesworth, was not sure of God's given grace. For these reasons—that he was a Puritan controlled by his conscience and that he never experienced an epiphany of grace—Sewall's lengthy life was often troubled by doubts and fears. Despite Mrs. Winslow's claim that "he wrote from the same impulse that impelled New England men from the earliest days to enter on the almanac pages for each day . . . what they could write on the one line"22 to preserve a factual record of events, and besides the other usual reasons for diary writing—egoism and cacoethes scriben-di (an "itch to write")—the purpose of the diary was to record his life's spiritual travails and his religious struggles to adhere to the precepts of Calvinism. He recorded these things so that he could look back over his life to ascertain whether he was progressing in his quest for salvation: the Diary was a deeply personal attempt to record his headway.23

In this respect I disagree emphatically with Mrs. Winslow's statement concerning the Diary: "Facts, not experiences;
opinions seldom; interpretations hardly ever. This is an objective story." Yes, there are certainly innumerable facts, myriads of facts, even mostly facts. And facts are often, indeed, objective. Yet was not his confession before the congregation concerning his participation in the witchcraft trials an emotional experience? Were not his denunciation of Anglican efforts to use the South Church for their services and his council orations against putting the cross in the flag opinions? And were not his Selling of Joseph (and the lengthy struggle recorded in the Diary to write it) and his condemnation of wigs interpretations of Scripture? These are just a few examples that suggest that Mrs. Winslow has made the same error that other critics have made: she seems eager to label things—the Diary; Sewall himself—and overlooks the admittedly lesser number of personal entries. She even goes on, in my opinion, to contradict herself: although she says that the Diary is unlike those of Pepys, Evelyn, D'Ewes, which are not based on fact alone, she says that Sewall's Diary reflects "attitudes, motives, loyalties unrevealed in documents of state." She states further that to read the Diary "is to sense the anger, the superstition, the loyalty to something their [i.e., the Puritans'] own which was already old enough to be revered." 

And yet Mrs. Winslow can say that Sewall was not, as was Pepys, involved in what he wrote. She can say that he was incapable of introspection and on the very next page claim that although "one does not know another's spirit," it would nonetheless appear that one could know Sewall's spirit from "these
Diary pages of which his own religion is in some way the subject. She even says that self-revelation about his religion comes through this "human document."

And with this statement, Mrs. Winslow clarifies her assertion that there is no introspection in the Diary. The self-revelation, she suggests, is primarily of his religion; diary passages that are not concerned with his spiritual affairs are unconscious revelations on Sewall's part. We understand them by reading between the lines:

To see the self-importance and self-approval apparent in his very bearing as he walked the streets, his confidence in his own safe orthodoxy, was not his talent. Had he attempted to write an autobiography, he would not have revealed these qualities so plainly as he does in the objective story, in which it is often an unconscious undertone.

This suggests that Sewall was unable to think deeply and was intellectually naive about what he was doing. I do not think so. The diary tells us differently if we pass over the mass of factual information to the passages where he consciously speaks of his religion and of his struggles to adhere to the principles of his religion. When he writes of his sins, of his feelings of guilt, of his religious fear; when he humbles himself; when he questions himself and his God (Why hast Thou made me a fit subject for calamity?; see p.19); when he stands before an audience and accepts humiliation to atone for his transgressions, he does not do it without serious forethought and extensive self-examination. My discussion (below) of his emotional struggle leading up to his confession of January 15, 1696/7, and the diary entries that parallel this struggle will
reveal exactly the extent to which he was capable of introspection.

I believe that the Diary was of therapeutic value in the extensive self-examination required of the perpetual penitent. Sewall was therefore not writing for an audience, but for himself and his God at the urging of his conscience. In this respect, the Diary is a veritable record of a God-fearing man's constant struggle and self-evaluation—a type of recorded conscience, notwithstanding Mrs. Winslow's claim that it is dominated by fact. Most important of all, it demonstrates my belief that the Puritans developed a profound "method of introspective self-scrutiny to prepare the heart for receiving God's grace."30

But I would suggest that the conscience, and especially Samuel Sewall's conscience, is not, as usually conceived, necessarily negative; that is, it does not merely record transgressions and create remorse, but also creates the impulse of good of itself, in a positive manner. For, after all, the Puritan believed the conscience to be the actual voice of God, the supreme arbiter and last reasoner between right and wrong, good and evil. This positive aspect of Sewall's conscience caused him to be vocal, sometimes unpopularly so and often unsuccessfully so, in upholding the conservatism of Puritanism or in attacking the actions of libertines—whether he spoke out as a member of the church, as a businessman, as a judge, or as an alderman. It is this force that caused him to condemn trivial dancing, swearing an oath in court by kissing the
Bible, capital punishment for counterfeiting, the use of the Congregational church for Anglican services, the pagan customs of Christmas, the foolishness of April Fool's Day, and "naked breasts," among other things. It was also his positive conscience that caused him to feel that the days of the week should be called as they are in Genesis (e.g., Tuesday should be the second day), because the "Week only, of all parcels of time, was of Divine Institution, erected by God as a monumental pillar for a memorial of the Creation perfected in so many distinct days" (June 11, 1696).

Taking its support from I Corinthians xi, his condemnation of the wearing of wigs was repeated many times in the course of the Diary: "God seems to have ordain'd our Hair as a Test, to see whether we can bring our minds to be content to be at his finding. And they that care not what men think of them care not what God thinks of them" (June 10, 1701). Likewise, it seems Sewall heard the voice of God much in reference to the Negro and Indian problems. In December of 1705 he fought a strict miscegenation law; in June of 1716 he wrote of his sorrow for the dispossessed Indians and attempted to rectify the laws rating Indians with hogs and horses.

But best known of all Sewall's humanitarian ideas were his "abolitionist" tendencies: he apparently felt deep regret at the slave trade and was, in this respect, surprisingly liberal for all his other traditional and conservative beliefs. On June 19, 1700, for example, the inner voice of conscience prodded Sewall into action concerning slavery:
Having been long and much dissatisfied with the Trade of fetching Negros from Guinea; at last I had a strong inclination to write something about it; but it wore off . . . . But I began to be uneasy that I had so long neglected doing any thing. 34

Immediately after this entry appears the first finished draft of The Selling of Joseph: A Memorial. These are a few instances of an unafflicted conscience at work—what I have designated the positive conscience. 35

Indeed, by far more interesting and by far more striking is the Puritan negative conscience and all the dark corners of guilt it created. Perhaps this single aspect of the conscience of the Puritan psyche is that which not only created the harsh reputation concerning the Puritan mystique but also supplied Hencken with much with which to damn heartily the whole religious doctrine in the early decades of this century. This negative conscience, as any rate, is the factor that caused hypersensitive Puritans, such as Sewall, so much penitential anguish. Sewall was ever-conscious of his actions, their moral significance, and his conscience's interpretation of them. His conscience was strict and nagging: it rarely allowed him serenity of mind if therein were recorded the least transgression unreconciled. Sewall felt guilt and believed in God's vengeance visited upon him for his iniquities. 36

He felt guilt at some of the slightest and most nebulous of sins: see his entry for July 6, 1715—"The Lord help me to Redeem the time which passes swiftly"—and for May 26, 1720, when his second wife of one year died—"May the Sovereign Lord pardon my Sin, and Sanctify to me this very extraordinary, awful
Dispensation." He does tell us that he considers his waste of time a sin; in the second entry he writes only of the "Dispensation" visited on him—perhaps he does not even know what his sin was. Even more extraordinary, however, was Sewall's quaking superstition that in every act or mishap of nature or coincidence could be divined the blessing or displeasure of God. Perry Miller, in The Puritans, summarized this widely held belief:

God's will is the ultimate reason why things fall out one way rather than another, although God does work through natural causes; His will is intelligent, and the task of the historian [or merely the sensitive and introspective man] is to discover, as far as the evidence will permit, the conscious and deliberate direction which lies behind all events.

In addition, as William Perkins wrote in his Works describing the first four of the ten stages of an individual's acquisition of faith, an initiate's first attendance to the Word might very well be accompanied by some outward misfortune, "to break and subdue the stubbornness of our nature." It was, of course, Sewall's conscience that so interpreted events and that ransacked his brain, particularly in reference to the displeasure of God, for unrecognized sins. On the death of his son Henry (December 24, 1685) and the apoplectic convulsions of his daughter Hull, Sewall wrote guiltily, "The Lord humble me kindly in respect of all my Enmity against Him, and let him breaking my Image in my Son be a means of it." In this case, he was unable to determine his transgression, other than the equivocal "Enmity."

At other times he was more aware of the reason for the
manifestation of God's displeasure. On June 15, 1707, he wrote, "I felt my self dull and heavy and Listless as to spiritual God: Carnal, Lifeless; I sigh'd to God that he would quicken me." That night, June 16, his house was broken open in two places and burglarized, and his diary entry the next day, upon discovery of the burglary, might seem strangely elated: "Is not this an Answer of Prayer? I was helped to submit to Christ's stroke, and say, Wellcome, CHRIST!"\(^{39}\) The visitation of punishment, in this case, absolved him of sin and corrected his wandering spirit. At other times a divine warning was enough to reveal God's displeasure: in the middle of the night of June 13, 1709, a fire was discovered in a closet. Sewall's diary entry explaining the probable cause of the fire was rationally hypothetical: "We imagine a Mouse might take our lighted Candle out of the Candlestick on the hearth and drag it under my closet-door." The purpose, or reason, however, of the incident was unequivocally divine: "The good Lord sanctify this Threatening [italics mine]. The Lord teach me what I know not; and wherein I have done amiss help me to do so no more!" At still other times, his conscience "pressed" so forcefully that he felt he must impose actual physical penance on himself:

> Being pressed with the sense of my doing much harm and little good, and breach of Vows at my return from New York, this time twelvemonth, that is, not heedfully regarding to go at God's Call, I kept a Fast to pray that God would not take away but uphold me by his free spirit (April 20, 1691).

In this respect the Diary serves a utilitarian purpose for Sewall. In the daily self-examination of soul by conscience
and consciousness, confession of guilt was of paramount importance. His own discussion and explanation of this importance to the Christian soul occurred in the August 12, 1676 entry of his Diary. He visited one Tim Dwight, who was abed after swooning in an apoplectic fit:

I asked him, being alone with him, whether his troubles were from some outward cause or spiritual. He answered, spiritual. I asked him why then he could not tell it his master, as well as any other, since it is the honour of any man to see sin and be sorry for it. I told him "twas sin for any one to conclude themselves Reprobate [Italics mine].

Sewall's own feelings of guilt and of spiritual inadequacy (and, therefore, his need to "voice" acknowledgement in print) occurred during the period 1676-1678, when he faced the choice of conversion, or entrance into the church (which called for the "Confession of Faith"). He told Dr. Alcock, a clergyman and close friend, of his temptations to sin during his contemplations of coming into the church. Alcock, however, reassured him and said Sewall "ought to be encouraged, and that [his] stirring up to it was of God" (March 19, 1676/7). In this case, Sewall's confession to his friend probably relieved the tension of guilt—especially since good Dr. Alcock encouraged Sewall. But Sewall continued to feel guilt during his meditations upon entering into bonds with God, because he felt unworthy. On January 22, 1677/8, he wrote, he went to a Mr. Thacker's and "rehearsed to him some of [his], i.e., Sewall's discouragements, as continuance in Sin, wandering in prayer."

On February 15 of the same year, he prayed and wrote asking God to take away his pride (in worldly affairs) and make him content with God's wisdom. He knew that God, if not the
congregation to which he must confess, would realize the insincerity of his belief. Fortunately, he finally resolved at least this inner conflict—and it was apparently by means of this written, reasoning confession:

Having often been apt to break out against God himself as if he had made me a person that might be a fit subject of calamity, and that he led me into difficulties and perplexing miseries; I had my spirit calmed by considering what an absurd thing it was to say to God—"Why hast thou made me thus?" and startled at the daring height of such wickedness [I left off such questioning] (February 15, 1677/8).

A free confession was the best way, as he told his son: "Kisse [yield to, confess to] the Son, lest he be angry." And the free confession—the full public confession—seemed to be that method by which Sewall's conscience was completely absolved.

The best known example of Sewall's confessions of this sort occurred during the Salem witchcraft trials. Sewall had no legal training, but as a church-member and prominent citizen of Massachusetts, was required to sit in judgment.

Sewall, as did the rest of the judges, accepted "spectral evidence," where acts of devils could be sworn to by witnesses as valid testimony. As Harrison T. Meserole tells us, "only men of little faith doubted the existence of witches." Neither Catholics nor Protestants of either the Old World or the New doubted the Bible's injunction not to suffer a witch to live. And not least of the extenuating circumstances accounting for Sewall's (and Massachusetts') severity in the trials was the fact that most of New England believed the advent of mass witchcraft a divine affliction, sent to punish New England.
for its laxness. In fact, the belief that the end of the world would fall at the end of the century was commonly held among the Puritans of New England. According to Vernon Louis Parrington in *Main Currents in American Thought*, "men's thoughts naturally ran much on the demonology that is the logical consequence of the Hebraic dualism, and the most intelligent saw no reason to doubt" that, as Cotton Mather wrote in his *Wonders of the Invisible World*, "the Evening Wolves [i.e., witches and the like] will be much abroad, when we are near the Evening of the World."

Although the official records of the Salem trials show that Sewall was not as severe as some of his companion judges, the personal guilt, he felt, was his own—and it was overwhelming. His guilt was so overwhelming that he attributed the deaths of two of his loved children to God's vengeance. To follow the contrition expressed in his *Diary concerning his part in the investigation of Massachusetts*! "Doleful Witchcraft" is to understand, truly, the depth of his feeling of guilt in the matter. On October 11, 1692, Increase Mather published his *Cases of Conscience Concerning Evil Spirits*, which attacked the admission of spectral evidence in the trials. Sewall read it closely. On October 26 he imposed a fast on himself to help him understand the right way in the trials. The same day the Court of Oyer and Terminer ended. It so appears that Sewall had misgivings concerning his part in the trials even before they were brought to an end. And, once the Court ended, Sewall's conscience began its ever-increasing, inwardly-directed tirade:
I prayd that God would pardon all my SInfull Wanderings, and direct me for the future. That God would bless the Assembly . . . and assist our Judges . . . and save New England as to Enemies and Witchcrafts, and vindicate the late Judges . . . with Fasting (November 22, 1692).

These feelings continued to be expressed in the Diary until his entry of September 16, 1696, which recorded his first public expression, an outburst in Council: "Spake smartly at last about the Salem Witchcrafts, and that no order had been suffer'd to come forth by Authority to ask Gods pardon."
On the first of January, 1696/7, his wife aborted. Sewall attributed it to his participation in the trials.

Finally, the Massachusetts General Court appointed January 14, 1697, as a day of fasting and prayer concerning "the late tragedy raised among [the people of Massachusetts] by Satan and [his] instruments, through the awful judgment of God." This is obviously no confession of error regarding the executions of innocents. The following day, however, there was a confession regarding the executions. And, after five years, Sewall finally found relief for his plagued conscience. His Diary entry (January 15, 1696/7) gives the text of his confession and records his complete humiliation and submission during its reading:

Copy of the Bill I put up on Fast day; giving it to Mr Willard as he pass'd by, and standing up at the reading of it, and bowing when finished:
Samuel Sewall, sensible of the reiterated strokes of God upon himself and family; and being sensible that as to the Guilt contracted upon the late Commission of Oyer and Terminer at Salem . . . he is, upon many accounts, more concerned than any that he knows of, Desires to take the Blame and shame of it, Asking pardon of men, And especially desiring prayers that God, who has an Unlimited Authority, would pardon that sin and all other his sins; personal and Relative: And according to his Infinite
Benignity, and Sovereignty, Not Visit the sin of him, or any other, upon himself or any of his, nor upon the Land: But that he would powerfully defend him against all Temptations to Sin, for the future; and vouchsafe him the efficacious, saving Conduct of his Word and Spirit.43

It seems to me that many interpretations of Puritanism ignore the existence of the traditional, deeply and devoutly religious Puritan, as he is revealed in this and other passages from Sewall's Diary. It is true that Sewall was interested in worldly concerns and pleasures--law and order, his captaincy in the militia, sea trade, his courtships, his wife's dress, his fine claret, his silver shoe buckles. Nonetheless, Sewall's primary concern was for his salvation. He did not deny the world as a gift sent by God for use; but this world was coincidental, as far as he was concerned: it should never be allowed to usurp faith's importance or to dominate a man's life. There was never, therefore, a great psychomachia between earthly and spiritual voices, as the revisionists' more humanized Puritan might have had. In his article "The prepared Heart: A Comparative Study of Puritan Theology and Psychoanalysis," Howard M. Feinstein described the situation:

The Puritan was not at all concerned with worldly happiness but with man's relation to God. This relationship between a moral life and salvation in the life to come was a paradox for the Puritan. He was obliged to follow God's law, yet he could not be certain this would influence his soul's future. He could see changes in behavior in the "visible saints" but he lived forever in doubt of the connective between these changes and predestined fate. The Puritan community demanded moral conformity and the saved Christian found new strength to comply. Whether this increased his satisfaction was of little consequence.44
With Sewall, the traditional Puritan and the individual, at any rate, spiritual concerns and the dictates of conscience were uppermost in thought and deed.

In this context, Sewall's arch-conservatism (the support of the ideals of the New Jerusalem) and conscience-oriented self-examination are understandable. Guilt, religious fear, conscience, and "religious" superstition all shaped Sewall's mental make-up. I think that he discerned no difference between psychological and theological transgressions—to him any transgression was humiliating, not only because it was a breach of the creed of his faith, but also because it pointed up his personal weakness, his own inability to follow his religion's implied dicta of temperance and self-control. In other words, his realization of his failings was the result not only of dogma but even more so of his personal conscience and sense of "honor." He was, indeed, hyperconscious of his failings. And there was a satisfaction inherent in this consciousness, because the mere realization (or consciousness) of the failing gave him the opportunity to atone for it, clear his slate.

The atonement doubtlessly afforded him a certain spiritual comfort (recall his fastings and confessions and the relief they afforded). Even the government, though respected for its traditional authority and its ordering and unifying principles, could jeopardize his personal salvation. For instance, when the Assembly was debating the question of whether to put the symbol of the Cross in the official flag, Sewall's conscience was concerned that it might be considered a graven image. He confided his fears and resolution to his Diary: "I was and
In great exercise about the Cross to be put into the Colours, and afraid if I should have a hand in 't whether it may not hinder my Entrance into the Holy Land" (August 20, 1686). Even as administrator, Sewall could not chance his salvation: "When the Authority [meaning the colonial government or the government of England] over us require that which is unlawful of us, we must be Noncompliers and Dissenters" (September 14, 1718). His first allegiance was always to his God and his conscience.

In describing the traditional Puritan ideal—exemplified by such men as Cotton Mather and Samuel Sewall—I have used Sewall's Diary to show the overwhelming influence that both the "positive" and "negative" consciences (as I have differentiated them) had in ordering Sewall's life. The contemporary view, to a large extent held by the revisionists, of the Puritan life-style combines a Puritan's earthly and heavenly concerns into an easy-to-accept early Renaissance humanism. This view is oversimplified—it may hold for the majority of Puritans, but not for the devout, such as Mather and Sewall. The worldly concerns of Mather (his library) and of Sewall (his businesses and courtships) were parts of these men, but only incidentally so. Each would doubtlessly have subscribed to John Cotton's dissertation Christ the Fountaine of Life, wherein he claimed that there is a "combination of vertues strangely mixed in every lively holy Christian, And that is, Diligence in worldly businesses, and yet deadnesse to the world; such a mystery as none can read, but they that know it." The ideal Puritan, Cotton goes on to say, was the man who could take all
opportunities and exploit every occasion "and bestir him-
selfe for profit," and at the same time "bee a man dead-
hearted to the world." He might take the land of New England
from the heathen; he might furrow the oceans in trade-ships;
he might speculate in land and goods. "Yet his heart is not
set upon these things, he can tell what to doe with his estate
when he hath got it." He might be

busy in his calling from sun rising to sun setting, and
may be God's providence fill both his hand and head
with businesses, yet a living Christian when he lives
a most busy life in this world . . . he lives not a
worldly life."[6]

Sewall and Mather recognized that there must be a spark of
enlightenment, of sincere belief, of faith, to make earthly
existence worthwhile. Otherwise, as John Cotton wrote in

The Way of Life:

Let a man live the life of reason, and so as that he
can discourse never so wisely and judiciously, and
that he can converse with all sorts of men, and
transact businesses in great dexterity, yet it is but
a dead life.[8]

The essence of Sewall was his concern for his salvation.
Not only this concern in itself, but especially the meditation,
uncertainty, and religious fear accompanying it were spiritual
and emotional experiences—not merely a "style of rhetoric"
or even a way of purging guilt. His conscience maintained
an ever-alert vigil to guide—and sometimes prod—Sewall in his
search for a sign from God that he was among the Chosen. By
analyzing examples of his "positive" conscience, his full and
often public confessions, the personal despair created by his
"negative" conscience, I have sought to restore the rejected,
or compromised, or calumniated view of the traditional, historical Puritan in America.
NOTES

1. To an even greater extent than Elizabeth had reformed it, the Church of England had, of course, broken with Rome in 1530. By about 1560 the term "Puritan" was acquired by that group of "Anglicans" who wanted to purify the Church even more than Elizabeth had. For the similarities and essential differences between Puritans and Anglicans, see Perry Miller, The Puritans (New York, 1938), p. 9.

2. Inspect the definitions of the word in Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language (or another standard dictionary) for a demonstration of the dichotomy of meanings—the primary definition is basically pre-1920 in tone and a secondary definition that is post-1920. Mencken was, of course, confusing "pietism" and Puritanism.

3. H. L. Mencken, "Puritanism as a Literary Force," essay in A Book of Prefaces (New York, 1917), p. 243. Mencken also damned the Anti-Saloon League, which, he claimed, had membership itself "besotted by moral concepts" (p. 279) and through which moral endeavour had "become a recognized trade, or . . . profession" (p. 245).


6. H. L. Mencken, A Little Book in C Major (New York, 1916), pp. 73, 45, 76, 53, 42, respectively.


8. See Grabo, pp. 505-506.


10. It is important, I think, to observe that the Calvinism of New England was quite metamorphosized from the Calvinism of Germany and Switzerland. As Perry Miller notes in The Puritans (p. 57),
In order to harmonize reason and scripture, the Anglican endeavoured to reduce the doctrines imposed by scripture to the barest minimum; the Puritan extended scripture to cover the whole of existence . . . . But the theology of New England was not simply Calvinism, it was not a mere reduplication of the dogmas of . . . [Calvin's] Institutes. What New Englanders believed was an outgrowth . . . of their background, which was humanistic and English, and it was conditioned by their particular controversy with the Church of England. Simon-pure Calvinism is a much more dogmatic, anti-rational creed than that of the Congregational parsons in Massachusetts. The emigrants went to New England to prove that a state and a church erected on the principles for which they were agitating in England would be blessed by God and prosper [cf. note 45]. The source of the New England ideology is not Calvin, but England, or more accurately, the Bible as it was read in England, not in Geneva.

Calvin's metaphysics were scholastic and Aristotelian; New England discarded most of the implied philosophy; "Calvinists" in the New World believed man had a shadowy knowledge of the essential truths imparted by God in the form of knowledge of right and wrong—or, conscience.


A Puritan's knowledge of his salvation depended on three precepts. First, he must feel his depravity and unworthiness before God and despair of high spiritual attainment. Second, he must feel God stirring in his heart; through prayer and self-examination he must come to a knowledge of Jesus Christ. Third, the knowledge of God is revealed. Note that a Puritan did not know God through good works but, as Meserole (p. 39) tells us, through a "soul-searching self-examination accompanied by prayer and supplication."


It is . . . true that in natural man there exists an internal conflict which to the uninitiated seems to be the struggle of grace and sin. There is in man something of a conscience; he was created with it, exactly as he was created with eyes or limbs, and no more could it have been obliterated at the fall. It is now extremely unreliable, but still strong enough to restrain most men from the more extravagant vices. It accuses men of their sin, and it can make them so uncomfortable that some will fly to religion for refuge.


22. Winslow, p. 196.

23. Grabo would have called it, I think, one of the “ubiquitous spiritual autobiographies” (p. 499) of the day.

24. Winslow, p. 194.


27. Winslow, p. 204.

28. Winslow, p. 204.

29. The oft-debated question as to whether a diarist or journalist actually intended for his works to be read by posterity may be answered by deciding if Sewall thought his struggle to be a good struggle, an exemplum to later generations.

31 I.e., the giving of gifts, the firing of cannon, the cessation of work. Every Christmas entry in the Diary was written with joy if the townspeople worked, brought in firewood from the country, and kept their shops open during the "holiday."

32 This is particularly so in respect to Harvard students.

33 There are entries in the Diary that seem hypocritical when compared to the humanitarian conscience predominating the Diary:

May 1, 1697: Sewall was visited by Hannah Duston, to whom he gave a gift of flax in remembrance of her recent deeds.

March 7, 1707: "Gave Thanks for the News of the 18. Indians kill'd . . . ."

January 30, 1707/8: An Indian Christian preacher visited town; Sewall could find no place for him to stay, so "I was fain to lodg him in my Study."

January 13, 1712: Sewall signed the bill for "Scalp Money for [the] garrison since their danger is greater 'Skin for Skin'."

In some respects, Sewall's conscience might be termed an Old Testament conscience—he felt no guilt in the extirpation of hostile Indians or pirates (Quelch and Kidd). These, of course, were disruptors of peace and order and should be dealt with accordingly, that is, harshly.

34 As in most of his arguments, Sewall's reasoning in this case is Biblically-oriented: cf. Exodus 21:16, "He that Stealeth a man and Selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to Death."

35 But a positive conscience, even of the magnitude of Sewall's, is not so unusual, of course. Men have always done things—attempted reform and decried inequity, injustice, cruelty—because their consciences, personally unafflicted, have exhorted them: Benjamin Franklin's essay "On the Slave Trade" (1790) and St. George Tucker's "Dissertation on Slavery: with a Proposal for the Gradual Abolition of It in the State of Virginia" (1796) are good examples.

36 Note Sewall's entry of December 24, 1713: "Dr. Cotton Mather preach'd of God's Punishing Sin with Sickness," which suggests that the belief in actual physical retribution by God
on mortal man was not confined to Sewall. Recall, however, that this was an era of "hypochondria," when all the best of society contracted one malady after another. To be unafflicted was unfashionable. Perhaps the Puritans merely added an extra, intriguing dimension to the affectation of the age.

37 The Puritans, p. 84.

38 Morgan, pp. 68-69, quoting William Perkins' Works (London, 1608, II, p. 13): Perkins was a Puritan preacher at Cambridge University who was very influential in converting Anglicans to Puritanism. The first four steps he listed in the process of the acquisition of faith are preparatory; after the "stubbornness of our nature" has been made pliable to the will of God, God gives to the initiate a knowledge of the law, or, a general understanding of good and evil. This leads him to an awareness of "his own peculiar and proper sins." This awareness creates "legal feare" (later called "humiliation") in which the initiate perceives his helpless and hopeless condition and despair of salvation. This is the critical stage. In considering the promise of grace, he may realize a spark of faith, but then commences the fight against doubt and despair by means of "fervent, constant, and earnest invocation for pardon." Successfully fought, this psychomachia yields a certain assurance, accompanied by "Evangelicall sorrow" ("a grief for sin, because it is sin"). In the last step, God gives a man "grace to endeavour to obey his Commandments by a new obedience."

39 Sewall's belief that such visitation of punishment was not only just upon himself but on the community as a whole is obvious in his entry of November 27, 1676, which also shows the vengeance of God tempered in sparing a universal Boston conflagration by the approach of a thunder shower.

40 Harvey Wish, ed., The Diary of Samuel Sewall (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1967), p. 13. Wish remarks that "in the enlightened year of 1957, a Gallup Poll showed 61% of the responders admitting that they believed in a personal devil."


42 Wish, p. 185.

43 Sewall personally sat on the bench condemning nineteen persons to death for witchcraft. From the total censure of postority, at least, this manly act of confession has saved him.
Note that Cotton Mather was also an arch- or fanatic conservative. He was the Jeremiah of the times because he realized he was fighting a losing battle against a backsliding people. For instance, as Parrington notes (p. 115),

In that common seventeenth-century delusion [witchcraft], Cotton Mather not only ran with the mob, but he came near to outdistancing the most credulous. His speech and writings dripped with devil talk. The grotesqueries that marked current marvel-tales crop out nakedly in his writings. "I have set myself," he wrote in the Diary, "to countermine the whole Plot of the Devil, against New England, in every branch of it, as far as one of my darkness can comprehend such a Work of Darkness." His conviction of the malignant activities of Satan was so vivid, that in delivering a carefully prepared sermon on the Wiles of the Devil, he was fain, he tells us, to pause and lift up his eyes and cry "unto the Lord Jesus Christ, that he would rate off Satan," who "all the Time of my Prayer before the Lecture" had "horribly buffeted me"—by inflicting on the fasting priest certain qualms of the stomach. ... "God indeed has the Devil in a chain, but has horribly lengthened out the chain."

Perhaps Increase Mather, Cotton's father, realized just how fruitless their battle was, or just how far short of the goal of creating the New Jerusalem in New England they had fallen. "When old Increase was near the end of his many years, a friend wrote to ask if he were still in the land of the living. 'No, Tell him I am going to it,' he said to his son; 'this Poor World is the land of the dying.'" But Parrington (p. 117) places the blame for the failure of the New Jerusalem on the very precepts Increase and Cotton had employed to build the "theocratic utopia": "The bitter words [of Increase, above] were sober Truth. The New England of the dreams of Increase and Cotton Mather was sick to death from morbid introspection and ascetic inhibitions; no lancet or purge known to the Puritan pharmacopeia could save it."

446 The Puritans, p. 61, quoting Cotton's Christ the Fountain of Life (p. 497), which is not available.

447 Everett H. Emerson, John Cotton (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1965), p. 270, quoting Cotton's Way of Life (p. 301), which is not in print or on microfilm due to its length.

The first printing of Samuel Sewall's Diary appeared in the Massachusetts Historical Collections, series 5, volumes 5, 6, and 7. References to diary entries in this paper, however, are noted by dates only: this facilitates finding them in any edition of the Diary instead of only in the CHS.


VITA

Carson Linwood Tucker