

***The Trials of Thomas Morton
An Anglican Lawyer, His Puritan Foes,
and the Battle for a New England***

Peter C. Mancall

(New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019)

[ISBN 9780300230109]

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By the time English travellers set foot on North America, the Ninnimissinouk, who inhabited the southern area of what would later become New England, had developed a sophisticated knowledge of the region, creating in those lands a sustainable economy. Archaeological excavations have yielded practices such as the use of fish as fertiliser, or the singular habit of keeping canoes underwater to protect them from the winter frost. In his work *A Key to the Language of America* (1643) the linguist Roger Williams argued that, before the arrival of the English, the locals referred to themselves as *Ninnuock*, *Ninnimissinnuock*, *Eniskee-tompauwog*, which signifies *Men, Folke, or People* (232). The Ninnimissinouk, who spoke a form of Algonquian dialect, had devised topographic maps of the region. These were not cartographic representations on paper according to European fashion, but toponyms related to the geological features of a given place. Thus, Connecticut indicated ‘on the long tidal river,’ while Massachusetts meant ‘at the big hill.’ The gods worshipped by the natives were thirty-seven in total, as Williams himself reported, though the Algonquians did not claim any religious monopoly: they very well knew that other deities existed. For the Ninnimissinouk, nature was the result of the interaction between several forces and energies, human and nonhuman. Likewise, it would prove far too easy for the English to see in native deities no less than the devil. So did Edward Winslow, one of New Plymouth’s first settlers, towards Hobbamock, the deity who appeared to the natives as they slept and knew how to heal diseases and wounds.

References to the mores, the religion and the material culture of the Algonquians are part of the latest work by Peter C. Mancall, professor of history and anthropology at the University of Southern California and author of the acclaimed book *Hakluyt’s Promise: An Elizabethan’s Obsession for an English America*.¹ The author’s ethnographic information, who cites seventeenth-century publications and recent anthropology

¹ PETER C. MANCALL, *Hakluyt’s Promise: An Elizabethan’s Obsession for an English America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007).

works, enriches this interesting and meticulous research, dedicated to the figure of Thomas Morton and his controversial colonial philosophy. Across six chapters, the volume considers how Morton attempted to create a promised land, quite different from the one envisioned by the Puritans, fostering positive relationships between newcomers and natives, and promoting indigenous values in the early New England society. Through the story of his picaresque life, the study highlights the crucial features of the first overseas colonies' experience: the Puritans' ideology on the one hand, and the importance of the legal framework provided by charters on the other. A fine lawyer, trained at the Inner Temple in London, Morton challenged the Puritans from a legal point of view and resorted to the power of the written word to achieve his political ends.

The first chapter ('Homelands') looks at Morton's formative years in England and his first North America experience in 1622. It shows how accounts of travel represented a vital source to learn about the abundant resources available on the new continent. However, Morton's knowledge of North America was also the result of direct observation and numerous conversations with the natives. The English, he wrote, could show them the use of salt as a mean to preserve food ('a chiefe benefit in a civilized Commonwealth') (30), but the natives too had many things to teach. In their commercial transactions, Morton noticed that the Algonquians employed the so-called *wampum* (beads made of river shells) as currency, and he correctly understood their value: the violet ones were equivalent to gold, the white ones to silver. He discouraged English readers from making forgeries because the natives had remarkable eyesight and could recognise imitation wampum. The chapter offers an analysis of the impressions that Morton developed about the local population, whom he deemed worthy of admiration and whose trust he was able to gain, establishing a profitable fur trade in 1624. A few years earlier, in furs and fish, Captain John Smith had identified a 'refuge' (40) if any attempt to hunt whales and locate gold and copper mines did not succeed. Smith, who explored the area from Penobscot Bay to Cape Cod in 1614, concluded that only people incapable of fending for themselves would fail in such a prosperous land. The territory seemed much more comfortable to colonise than the Chesapeake Bay, where the Virginia Company was striving to preserve its settlement since 1607. The chapter traces the adventurous history of the first explorations of the Atlantic coastline from the Piscataqua River to Nova Scotia, highlighting the characteristics that most attracted investors: the abundance of fish and the theme, which became recurrent, of the 'medicinal climate' (37). The region promised riches equal to those of the Venetians and the Dutch. It also offered the opportunity to convert the natives and save them from Spain's 'adulterated' faith.

By exposing the Puritans' salient values by antithesis, Peter C. Mancall seems to follow the path indicated by Patrick Collinson. The great historian of English Puritanism saw in the movement 'not a thing definable in itself but only one half of a

stressful relationship,² and the Maypole episode, which angered the Puritans of New England, exemplifies this relationship. In the volume, the tall wooden pole (which Morton erected at Ma-re Mount to dance and sing merrily with the natives, drawing upon himself the accusations of bacchanal excesses and the title of ‘Lord of Misrule’) becomes a symbol of two different ideas of society. The episode may also be read as an allegory on the future character of New England: the challenge between ‘grisly saints’ and ‘gay sinners,’ as the writer Nathaniel Hawthorne put it (187). Such was the Puritans’ disposition towards Maypoles that a few years earlier, in the *Book of Sports* (1618), James I made it plain that Maypoles were a harmless recreation and Puritans were not to punish these sorts of amusements. The second chapter (‘Partners’) introduces another relevant figure alongside the Puritans, the military commander Ferdinando Gorges. Largely forgotten today, Gorges was Morton’s strongest supporter and the most bitter enemy of New Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay’s settlers. His true desire was to convert the natives and long before Morton arrived in New England, he had been cherishing ambitious dreams of colonising the region. Gorges, who was well aware of the colonisation schemes circulating among Bristol merchants, concentrated his efforts on New England, known as Northern Virginia until Smith’s book publication in 1616 (*A Description of New England*). In 1620 Gorges’ petition to the king led to a patent for a group of forty men based in Plymouth to create a colony to be called New England. The patent specified that the land stretched from 40 to 48 degrees north latitude from the Atlantic across the continent. Gorges, who had direct knowledge of some indigenous Americans, was in the best position to organise a settlement, but he would need partners, ‘on the ground, on the seas, and possibly in courtrooms to advance his claims against other contenders’ (79).

The third chapter (‘Exiles’) looks at Morton’s American experience and the beginning of the colonial enterprise in New England. While there is a tendency to imagine the English settlements as isolated outposts, in reality, as the author points out, each village was connected to the others: ships plied between Virginia and New England, carrying individuals and information. For their part, news travelled even faster on the newcomers’ shallows, thus reproducing the communication network of the natives. As the author writes, the English knew that survival chiefly depended on three factors: good relations with the Algonquians, constant ties with England to ensure the supply of goods, and the ability to live peacefully in the colony. However, for the Pilgrims, it was above all a matter of founding a society different from the one, in their eyes corrupt, they had left behind. In November 1620 they signed some principles of self-government, the so-called Mayflower Compact. The colonial beginnings in the New World, first in New England and then in Pennsylvania, were greatly influenced by the doctrine of the covenant, which the historian Perry Miller described as the ‘marrow’ of Puritan communities in America.³ The challenge for the

² PATRICK COLLINSON, *The Birthpangs of Protestant English* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1988), 143.

³ PERRY MILLER, ‘The Marrow of Puritan Divinity,’ *Puritan New England. Essays on Religion, Society, and Culture*, eds ALDEN T. VAUGHAN, FRANCIS J. BREMER (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1977), 44–65.

Mayflower passengers, as William Bradford knew, was of unprecedented magnitude: there were no friends to give them a warm welcome, nor there were inns or houses to take shelter. The ‘mighty ocean’ separated them from ‘all the civil parts of the world’ and, in addition to the freezing winter, the greatest threat was represented by the indigenous population, ‘these savage barbarians,’ in the words of Bradford himself (86–88). Luckily for the Pilgrims, there was plenty of clean water, a significant advantage over Jamestown, and furs to pay off their debts. Through the experience of Morton, who in 1624 began to weave close relations with the natives, selling them guns and obtaining furs in exchange, it emerges the fragility of New England early settlements, still far too weak to tolerate a figure so openly hostile to their values. In Morton’s vision, the Puritans had to drop all their claims, since they had abused the charter’s authority: English and Algonquians could still live side by side learning from each other. Consequently, the Puritans, afraid of losing all the advantages they had secured, shipped Morton back to England in 1629.

The fourth chapter (‘Cutthroats in Canaan’) considers Morton’s tools to undermine the New England colonies. Morton’s experience in America gave a fresh stimulus to Gorges’ aspirations. As soon as he had landed in England, Morton allied himself with Gorges to deprive the Massachusetts Bay Company Charter of its legitimacy by relying on the *quo warranto*. This doctrine, which the author examines drawing on documents found in the National Archives, admitted the possibility of questioning the royal authorisation granted to a corporate body, provided there was evidence of an abuse of authority. Charles I lent a willing ear, and Morton was victorious in the Privy Council. But his success was not decisive and, following the protests of the Massachusetts General Court, the physical charter was not returned. Morton decided to pursue his cause with a real ‘literary assault,’ as the author writes (131), and in 1637 *New English Canaan* was published in Amsterdam by Jacob Frederick Stam. The book’s purpose was to make English readers understand that New England could head towards a different future. Morton discredited the Pilgrims, portraying them as false heroes, devoid of humanity: a ‘Sect of cruell Schismaticks’ (148), for whom the *Book of Common Prayer* was an idol, and all that used it idolaters. The chapter explores the most salient and original aspects of Morton’s work, also underlying the canonical features of travel narratives (such as presenting oneself as a trusted observer). Morton gave earnest attention to the customs of the natives and held their physical appearance and intellectual capacities in reverence. Worthy of note is the idea that the Algonquians should not be laughed at but emulated or the claim that cod was after all preferable to Spanish gold. Morton placed his observations in a trans-European perspective, paying particular attention to French and Dutch actions. Above all, he did not interpret the devastation against the natives as a divine signal but saw it as the human tragedy of a world doomed to perish. It is argued that Morton did not isolate the indigenous population in their misery, but entirely placed their story in the history of humanity. The next chapter (‘Acomenticus’), dedicated to Morton’s return to New England in 1643, until his death in Acomenticus in 1646, looks at the destruction of the Ninnimissinouk. The author analyses the Puritans’ rhetorical arsenal, for whom

divine action had intervened to pave their way. As part of a cynical and sanctifying rhetoric, the epidemic of 1616 to 1619, the violent Pequot wars, and even the Mystic massacre, were nothing but proofs of the grace that God had bestowed upon the colonists.

The final chapter ('Legacies') evaluates Morton's political and literary legacy. After the American Revolution, much was done for the rehabilitation of his character. In the nineteenth century, Morton became more the hero, an object of admiration, and less the villain, the obnoxious miscreant vilified by Bradford, Nathaniel Morton, and John Hancock, who chastised his 'wicked and insufferable Behavior' (180). From a historical perspective, as the author points out, Morton's legal and literary challenge was destined to have far-reaching effects. He left the colonies more conscious of their mission and aware of the importance of a certain degree of legal autonomy. Furthermore, the value of Morton's story, and Peter C. Mancall's fascinating study, is that of restoring a polyphony of voices to the history of New England, providing an opening into the worldview of the Ninnimissinouk. Through a plurality of observation points, the author introduces vibrancy and nuances to the monolithic narrative of the Pilgrims and underlines how, in the first decades of the American experience, more than one colonial vision existed. The last chapter also considers *New English Canaan's* publishing history, up to the scholarly edition produced by Charles Francis Adams Jr. in 1883, who worked on the copy kept in the family library. These are most compelling pages, as Adams' accurate editorial work testifies to the book's complexity and richness. Adams involved the flower of Boston's intellectual milieu and Harvard University. He consulted Latinists, historians, jurists, bibliographers, geologists, ornithologists, ichthyologists, and linguists such as James Hammond Trumbull, author of a *Natick Dictionary* (later published in 1903) and expert in the Massachusetts language, now again spoken and known as Wôpanâak.