REVIEW

The Eyes of the World Upon Us, Again: John Winthrop's Remarkable Comeback

Van Engen, Abram C. *City on a Hill: A History of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 392 pp. $19.89 (hardcover).

Rodgers, Daniel T. *As a City on a Hill: The Story of America's Most Famous Lay Sermon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 368 pp. $21.78 (hardcover).

Gamble, Richard M. *In Search of the City on a Hill: The Making and Unmaking of an American Myth* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 224 pp. $25.46 (hardcover).

About two thousand years ago, in Galilee, Jesus of Nazareth delivered his famous "Sermon on the Mount." As part of that discourse, he encouraged the audience to set a godly example in public, styling his followers "the light of the world," their virtue radiating as though from "a city that is set on a hill."[1] Sixteen centuries later, the Puritan John Winthrop employed this image in *A Model of Christian Charity*, drafted aboard the flagship *Arbella* as it approached Massachusetts Bay. "We shall be as a city upon a hill," Winthrop wrote of the colonists, "the eyes of all people are upon us."[2] His words went unpublished for 200 years after that, then languished in obscurity for 100 years more, before achieving 20th century prominence first in the work of select New England historians and later in the campaign speeches of John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan. Suddenly ubiquitous, Winthrop was retroactively lauded as author of the American mission statement, his address canonized as an essential founding document with standing somewhere between the Mayflower Compact and the Declaration of Independence. It was cited routinely in schools, revered in churches, and for a time awarded primacy of place in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Winthrop, it seemed, had been progenitor of it all; the intellectual grandfather of the American experiment. But he wasn't really, and so finally, in the second decade of the 21st century, three serious scholars have written three excellent books recounting the singular story of his remarkable comeback. Each is a compelling piece of American historiography; all demonstrate the rhetorical value of past discourses to present purposes—even when the connections are tenuous between.

The story of the story begins in 2012, with the publication of Richard M. Gamble's *In Search of the City on a Hill: The Making and Unmaking of an American Myth*. Though not the first scholar to notice problems with the Winthrop narrative, Gamble was first to explore them at book length and so to crack the vein that subsequent

[1] Matthew 5:14, King James Version.
[2] John Winthrop, *Winthrop Papers,* Vol. II (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1931), 294-295.

treatments would mine. Central to his case are a series of simple observations—first, that the image of the city was not original to Winthrop or even distinctive of his work; second, that Winthrop was addressing a historical context prior to and in no way predictive of the American state; and third, that the *Model* was a negligible text when it was composed and remained so for a very long time after. Gamble argues that the late centrality of the "city" within contemporary American discourse gets the history exactly backward. He is concerned not with the story of "how the metaphor helped make America what it is today," but with "the story of how America helped make the metaphor what it never was."[3]

A devoutly Christian scholar, Gamble hopes to return the phrase to its primary author—Jesus Christ. In the gospel context, the city on a hill is clearly illustrative of a theological concept, and its subject is clearly the Church. As a metaphor, the city is wedged—even *mixed*—between related references to salt and light with sacred meaning to centuries of Christians. Thus a modern nation state could not presume to hoist that mantle without first appropriating and re-signifying the terms. If American Christians now take pride in the city imagery as descriptive of their godly nation, they do so at the expense of the original referent. And because American history is fraught with ungodliness of all disturbing sorts, the transfer of focus from saints to citizens is certain to cheapen the text. Though Gamble is tolerant of politicians who find rhetorical utility in scriptural reference, he emphasizes that the things they borrow may never be returned. The city on a hill—like the house divided against itself—generally cannot stand now outside of a garishly American context. Once again, an idea with eternal resonance has been rendered finite after all.

In Winthrop's usage, the phrase lends itself to English colonization while maintaining its plainly religious inflection. Though it is true that the Puritan settlers were crossing the sea to found a new polity on the other side, their stated reasons for doing this were decidedly pious, and few in the fleet were more so than their prospective governor. Winthrop could not have imagined what the future held for Massachusetts, much less the United States, and there is nothing to indicate that he had such ambitious plans. His focus was on the members of his own beleaguered party, on their discomfort with the situation back home, and on their intent to build a refuge in which to worship God as they deemed appropriate—at least for the time being.[4] In that context, Winthrop's claim that the Puritan errand was the object of everyone's curiosity feels somewhat more guarded than boastful. *If this doesn't work out,* he seems to suggest, *we'll be very visible failures.* His people therefore had good reason to be good brethren; to honor the faces of God's worthy servants and prevent their prayers from being turned into curses. They had strong incentive to succeed at their task, modest and provincial though it was.

Having carefully situated the *Model* within the 17th century English world—and divorced it from the assumptions of the 21st century American—Gamble observes that the text landed with an inaudible thud. Though likely authored at least in part during the

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[3] Richard M. Gamble, *In Search of the City on a Hill: The Making and Unmaking of an American Myth* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 5.

[4] Not only did the Puritans not consider their colony a new nation, they did not even consider it a new "home" in any permanent sense. Gamble cites historian Susan Hardman Moore's finding that, "perhaps one in four of the Puritan settlers in the first few decades returned home to England. The figure for pastors was higher and for Harvard graduates higher still." Gamble, *In Search of the City,* 23.

crossing, there is no evidence that the speech was actually delivered either while at sea or upon arrival. Winthrop makes no mention of it in his journals and none of the passengers ever recorded hearing it. The words simply sat on the page, among the author's papers, and collected dust for what Gamble calls "208 years of silence."[5] During this time the speech persuaded precisely no one, exerting no influence over the shapers of the American nation. Even after it was first published in 1838—and far later, after it was first popularized in the 1930s—the *Model* continued to fork no lightning at all, so that historian Ernest Lee Tuveson could publish his classic *Redeemer Nation* in 1968 without a single reference to an address that was, by then, only about a decade away from having founded America.[6] Gamble credits this notable omission with piquing his curiosity and prompting him to look back through earlier historical works to learn just how irrelevant the text had been and for how long. This survey allowed him to map the life, death, and rebirth of Winthrop's discourse, from the pen to the archives and, eventually, to the shining optimism of an American President. It's a fascinating tale, told in clear and careful fashion by a very capable historian. And unlike its subject, the book was influential right away.

In 2016, Daniel T. Rodgers published his *As a City on a Hill: The Story of America's Most Famous Lay Sermon.* Like a cartographer reviewing a map, Rodgers follows the trail that Gamble blazed, adding refinements and considering new questions. His book is split into three parts, grappling first with the nuances of the *Model* itself, next with the global rise of nationalist discourse that prefaced its second act, and finally with the Cold War context in which the speech—or, rather, one of its decontextualized and particularly resonant lines—could be made to project American freedom like light onto the world. Throughout, Rodgers remains attentive to the ways that texts "live in and through time." Incomplete even after publication, they may be reread, reinterpreted, and redeployed by various generations, across changing circumstances, to unpredictable ends. Indeed, Rodgers writes, texts "endure only through their continuous reappropriation for inescapably shifting times and purposes."[7] Even an artifact that lived and died without distinction may rise again—and again.

Rodgers examines the *Model* in meticulous detail, building on Gamble's already exacting work. Gamble had noted, for example, that certain lines in the text appear to have been written in England, others while at sea, suggesting that the speech had been authored serially over time. Rodgers traces the content back specifically to a meeting of the Massachusetts Bay Company in the winter of 1629-30, at which a conflict had arisen between those committed to emigrate and those committed only to invest. At stake were control of the colony's direction and management of its finances. As governor, Winthrop was charged with mediating the dispute and so set to work constructing a scriptural warrant for the congenial risk of life by some and fortune by others. His argument was situated within a traditionally hierarchical view of society that conceded the justice of inequality while asserting obligations to be charitable and true. Rodgers argues persuasively that this internal debate prompted Winthrop to assemble the major themes

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[5] Gamble, *In Search of the City,* 65.
[6] Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).
[7] Daniel T. Rodgers, *As a City on a Hill: The Story of America's Most Famous Lay Sermon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 6.

of his eventually-to-be-famous text.[8] Its four sections—three of which are almost never read or quoted, one of which is almost never read but quoted all the time—should be cast back against the circumstances of that moment, rather than forward upon those of distant futures. In that faded light, Rodgers confirms, we see not the bold confidence of those out to *build* a city upon a hill, but the nervous dedication of those resigned to "*be* as a city upon a hill, whether they willed it or not."[9] Winthrop likely composed much of the *Model* before departure and finished it on board, in response to these particular exigencies and within their constraints. The text itself was thus far less immediately consequential than the administrative labor from which it emerged.

Whatever its merits within a small and homogenous religious sect in the 1630s, Winthrop's vision of a holy community bound by social affection could not long withstand the global drift of peoples into nations and of virtues into interests. After the English colonies had proliferated, stabilized, and broken with King George III to found a country of their own, they created something wholly distinct from the Puritan ideal but for which the Puritans could still be of constitutive value. Nationhood depends upon cohesion, which depends in turn upon tradition, meaning that any new state must quickly establish itself at the victorious end of a usable past. As early as 1776, the Puritans were being touted for their revolutionary spirit, having once turned their backs on England and sailed boldly into the impending west. As Winthrop's *Model* slept, his people became enshrined in a providential history of covenants, jeremiads, and sacred cities. This is significant, Rodgers writes, because the first generation of Americans did not need access to Winthrop's script to draw liberally on language that was already in the air. The self-proclaimed "city on a hill," altered now and proud, was among a series of biblical phrases that had by then become "too ubiquitous" to make "any serious impression" upon people who heard them with frequency.[10] Winthrop had written of *a* city—as opposed to *the* city—recognizing that his would be one among many; Rodgers documents widespread examples of the competing claims.[11] He writes that, by the nineteenth century, "the act of imagining one's own nation to be a beacon to others, a light illuminating the world's darkness, an example set upon a hill, came with the very rhetoric of nationalism."[12] Over the course of decades the phrase was borrowed, altered, and employed—eventually it evolved. But John Winthrop had nothing to do with it.

By 1820, when the citizens of Massachusetts celebrated the bicentennial of the Pilgrims at Plymouth, the strong nationalism that was then at work erecting cities on hills all across the world had taken on a regional character in New England. Though only one of many ports to which European immigrants had teemed during the past two centuries, and only one of many sites at which tyranny was opposed during the Revolution, Boston began to assert its claims to special status in America. Like a new Israel—and with help from Puritan rhetoric to that effect—Bostonians fashioned their city as *the* city; their citizens the firstborn of the new nation. Over time this process established enough public

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[8] Rodgers, *As a City on a Hill,* 22-23.
[9] Rodgers, *As a City on a Hill,* 43.
[10] Rodgers, *As a City on a Hill,* 138.
[11] Contra the popular perception of the Puritans—or earlier, the Pilgrims—as forerunners, each of these texts situates them somewhere within a larger westward migration that had been already underway for decades. For a more focused examination of this history, see John G. Turner, *The Knew They Were Pilgrims: Plymouth Colony and the Contest for American Liberty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).
[12] Rodgers, *As a City on a Hill,* 141.

events and lecture series, archives and historical societies, monographs and textbooks so that, by the 1930s, a young Harvard professor named Perry Miller would have a sturdy foundation on which to build large claims. His work persistently hyped Winthrop's contribution to the American tradition, pushing the Puritan migration into chapter one of countless textbooks while validating an ongoing public relations campaign intended to "boost the City of Boston's fortunes."[13] Rodgers narrates these transitions smoothly, tracing nearly four hundred years of self-interested self-fashioning from Winthrop's forgotten discourse to John F. Kennedy's "Farewell" address to the Reagan Revolution and beyond. Broad in scope but attentive to detail, the book defies attempts at summary. Paired with Gamble, it is revelatory. But there was still more to say.

In 2020, Abram C. Van Engen completed the trilogy with the publication of his *City on a Hill: A History of American Exceptionalism*. Like Gamble and Rodgers, Van Engen opens with attention to the text and context of the *Model* itself before examining the sequential moments in its travel through time. His book is split into five parts, each corresponding to an important touch point between Winthrop's vision and America's generous self-concept. Though readers of the earlier books will be familiar with the narrative arc, Van Engen explores fresh questions and etches new textures into this already twice-told tale. His notable contributions include a careful examination of the historical societies instrumental in recovering and distributing the text, detailed profiles of the amateur and professional historians who boosted its influence, and the focused application of this discourse to the development of American exceptionalism through Ronald Reagan to the present. Van Engen writes that Winthrop's speech, as part of the Pilgrim and Puritan legacies more broadly, has "enabled Americans to define their nation not as the outcome of events but as the fruition of exceptional ideals"—at least until recently.[14]

In 1791, for example, Jeremy Belknap founded the Massachusetts Historical Society, intent on collecting and preserving documents important to the founding generation. It was an idea that he had formulated through conversations with Philadelphia printer and former Postmaster General Ebenezer Hazard, then at work on his two-volume *Historical Collections*. Just over a decade later, in 1804, a down-and-out merchant named John Pintard founded the New York Historical Society, an organization that he had planned during a year spent in debtors' prison. The founder, previously, of an "American Museum" dedicated to the preservation of notable manuscripts, Pintard's financial troubles condemned him to watch helplessly as his institution moved from documents to "curiosities and oddments," and then sold them all off to P.T. Barnum. Van Engen explains how, perhaps more than anyone else, these three charismatic figures and their two societies were instrumental in locating and preserving Winthrop's *Model,* doing so as part of a larger mission, first, to save as much history as possible and, second, to fashion that history into a narrative about the steady advance of liberty.[15] This account allows Van Engen to draw the curtains on some early historical methods, demonstrating how the influences of the place (New York and New England), the time (the first decades of the new nation) and the reigning ideology (liberal republicanism) combined to shape

[13] Rodgers, *As a City on a Hill,* 203.
[14] Abram C. Van Engen, *City on a Hill: A History of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 3).
[15] Van Engen, *City on a Hill,* 73.

the popular narrative into which Winthrop's address would soon be born again. Though focused on a particular historical moment, Van Engen's commentary about the decisions that historians are routinely charged to make feels just as applicable now and always.

The regional history compiled by the new state-based societies began to accumulate at the very moment that a band of united states coalesced into the truly United States, creating the demand for *national* histories that Rodgers captures in wide aperture. Van Engen follows Belknap, Hazard, and Pintard into the work of Vermont teacher-turned-textbook-author Emma Willard, a comfortable housewife pushed into writing by the collapse of her husband's fortune following an 1812 bank robbery. Willard crafted a narrative in which her beloved New England became the gateway to America, more important than comparable and even earlier colonial establishments in Florida, Virginia, New Amsterdam, and elsewhere. She based her account on Puritan purity, distinguishing Winthrop and his pious following from the crasser motivations of those who sailed merely for the love of glory or gold. In the Puritans, Willard located the essential spirit of America; the higher principles to which its people would always aspire. Already influential in untold schoolhouses, her work was also dear to Daniel Webster, the silver-tongued Senator from Massachusetts who carried a copy of her book and incorporated her framing into his popular orations. This expanding network of regional influence demonstrates how a few energetic individuals were able to construct an exceptional New England through which to usher an American exceptionalism.

The Puritan legacy has always been contested, though, and the passage of years played host to a string of scholarly disputes between those who deified Winthrop's set, those who cast them as scolds and oppressors, and those—like German sociologist Max Weber—who saw in them a prototype of the coming citizen capitalist. These exchanges prepared the way for Miller, who sought to decipher "the Puritan mind" as the key to America, and who by the 1950s had done more than anyone else to usher a popular variety of Puritan thinking into the American self-concept. Van Engen observes that, though no American president had ever quoted the *Model* prior to Miller's tenure at Harvard, almost every president has quoted it since.[16] In the 1980s, when Ronald Reagan reimagined the nation as "a shining city on a hill," the long and improbable journey from Winthrop's solitary pen to the establishment of the Superpower was finally complete. The phrase had changed hands and meanings with some frequency along the way, such that the rhetorical power invoked by American presidents bore little resemblance to that harnessed by the colonial governor, but they gave him the credit anyway. In exchange, they lifted his timeless *ethos* onto their modern shoulders, guiding America confidently onto the difficult terrain of international affairs.

Though the *Model* would continue to enjoy outsized influence for several decades to come, there is reason to believe that it may now be bound for obscurity once again. Rodgers and Van Engen each close their books with a meditation on Donald Trump, the American president most notable for dropping the exceptionalist banner, replacing it instead with an old "America First" mentality that spurns exceptional status and declines global responsibility. (Gamble, having published during the Obama administration, was mercifully exempt from this analysis.) Though it is unclear at this writing whether the present shift is outlier or trend, the question invites careful attention in the light of this past. In its breadth, organization, care, and insight, Van Engen's book

[16] Van Engen, *City on a Hill,* 241.

provides a fitting conclusion—if a conclusion it is— to an important and fertile scholarly conversation.

The story of John Winthrop's *Model of Christian Charity* has a lot to teach us—about our nation, about our history, about our values, and about our motivations and methods for determining just who *we* are at any given time and place. In that sense, these history books are also explicitly about religious and political rhetoric. They are about the language we use to construct our traditions and situate ourselves. They are about the meanings we extract from—or impose upon—the information we uncover. They are about the challenge of separating the true from the mythical, and the stakes attendant to that task. Ultimately, they are about the life of a text, the uncertainty of life, and the unexpected public outcomes that may follow even the most private of discourses. Four centuries on, that initial story now contains myriad others, and the titles in this review tell a sample of these well.

Though the outline of the argument is the same across all three books, each author asks questions and makes assertions that the others either miss or elide. The net result is a deep cumulative history that fills in the gaps, via three scholarly takes that get more nuanced as they go. Readers may reasonably wonder whether these authors have provided us with three versions of one book, like artists taking different perspectives on a bowl of fruit. But a stronger comparison may be found in three improvisations on one song, with Gamble standing in as the Leonard Cohen to Rodgers's Jeff Buckley to Van Engen's Rufus Wainwright, and "Hallelujah" the persistent refrain. Clearly reminiscent, each iteration is also new and newly provocative. A casual interest can be satisfied by listening to any one, but the enthusiast should take in all three, preferably in order.

Yet even that analogy fails in an important respect—though Gamble was first to the publishers and Van Engen last, these projects overlapped in their preparation, leaving each author to learn, at a different stage in the process, that he was not alone. This is crushing news for a scholar, especially when the intellectual investment has been large and the discovery feels significant. After years of labor, both Rodgers and Van Engen reached a point at which they had to consider scrapping it all, and only after consultation and consideration did both opt to see it through. We can be thankful that they did, not simply for the scholarship but for the collegiality. In an academic arena famous for the intensity of its competition—sometimes for the pettiness of its rivalries—they have made a case for cooperation. In 2018, the three writers came together for a panel discussion at the annual meeting of the Society for American Intellectual History in Chicago. Titled "'*A Model of Christian Charity' and American Intellectual History: Three Ways to Tell a Story," the panel featured expert discussion about projects and process, bringing a happy conclusion to a story that might have ended otherwise. The example radiates, and in that respect it is, in some small way, like a city on a hill.*

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