

JOHN WINTHROP (1588-1649)

By HENRY J. COWELL, F.R.S.L.

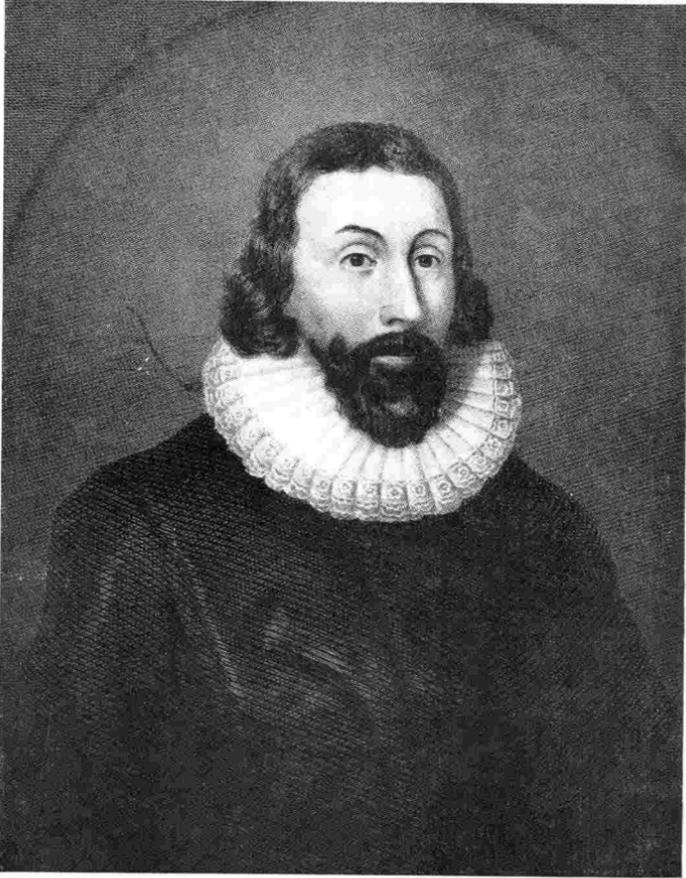
[*Note.*—John Winthrop, of Groton, afterwards first Governor of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay, died at Boston, U.S.A., on 26 March, 1649. In September, 1949, mainly at the instigation of Mr. Cowell and the rector of Groton, the Rev. A. B. Bird, the three-hundredth anniversary of his death was celebrated at Groton, the Suffolk village adjoining the village of Edwardstone, where he was born in 1588. An historical play, entitled *A Puritan Father*, written by Miss Eleanor Dawson, of Groton House, was acted by residents of the parish and on the afternoon of 24 September, at a meeting in the village hall, tributes were paid to Winthrop by Mrs. Helena Normanton, K.C., the Archdeacon of Sudbury, Lt.-Col. R. Hamilton, M.P., and others. The meeting was also addressed by several representatives from the United States, including Dr. Robert C. Dexter, Mr. Elisha C. Mowry, the Rev. G. L. Blackman and Professor A. Newell. At the commemoration service held in the parish church on Sunday, 25 September, greetings were read from the present Governor of the State of Massachusetts and the sermon was preached by the Rev. G. L. Blackman, of Harvard University.

Hitherto, this famous Suffolk man has been neglected in the *Proceedings*; it seems fitting, therefore, that we should publish the following summary of his life by Mr. Cowell, who has made a special study of the subject.—Editor].

John Winthrop is described by Cotton Mather as ‘the Father of New England: the terror of the wicked, the delight of the sober, the envy of the many, but the hope of those who had any hopeful design in hand for the common good of the nation and the interests of religion.’¹ Almost every American historian writes in terms of unqualified praise not only of his qualities as a statesman and an administrator but as a Puritan of the highest and sincerest religious standing. The statement is made that Winthrop’s is the only name worthy to be placed side by side with that of George Washington, in the whole course of American history. A statue of Winthrop stands in the hall of historical figures in the Capitol at

¹ Mather, Cotton, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, (1702), Book II., chap. iv., p. 8, col. 1.

PLATE XIX.



Jo: winthrop Govr

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Washington, D.C., and another statue has its place in one of the public squares of the city of Boston, U.S.A.

Nor is it only American historians who do honour to the name and fame of Winthrop. For example, the *Cambridge Modern History* says of him:

Cast in the same mould and trained in the same school as John Hampden, John Winthrop represented all that was noblest and most attractive in Puritanism. His definiteness of mind and his constructive statesmanship were invaluable to a young Colony, while his modesty, humility, and sweetness of character enabled him to work with men of a narrower and more austere cast of mind and to modify what might have been evil in their influence.²

John Winthrop was born on January 12, 1588, at Edwardstone, near Sudbury, Suffolk. He was a grandson of Adam Winthrop,³ to whom, upon the dissolution of the monasteries, the manor of Groton, formerly in the possession of the Abbot of Bury St. Edmunds, had been granted by Henry VIII in 1544. Admitted to Trinity College, Cambridge, in December, 1602, John Winthrop stayed there for only a limited period, as in April, 1605, when but a little over seventeen years of age, he married Mary Forth, daughter and heiress of John Forth, of Great Stambridge, Essex. She brought to her husband 'a large portion of outward estate.' In 1608 the couple went to live at the wife's former home at Stambridge. From this marriage there were three sons and three daughters. Concerning this wife John wrote that she was 'a right godly woman,'⁴ but there are no letters of hers among the family papers to throw any light upon her personality. When she died in June, 1615, John was but twenty-seven.

Within six months he married as his second wife Thomasine, daughter of William Clopton, of Castleins Manor, Groton. After a year and a day this second wife died, and within a few days her child (a daughter) died too. Of Thomasine, John records that:

She was a woman wise, modest, loving, and patient of injuries. She was truly religious, and industrious therein; free from guile, and very humble-minded. She was sparing in outward show of zeal, but her constant love to good Christians and the best things did clearly show that truth

² *Cambridge Modern History*, Vol. VII., pp. 15-16.

³ This Adam was a well-to-do clothier of Lavenham who also had connections with the City of London; so much so that for several years he was Master of the Clothworkers' Company. *Encyclopaedia of American Biography*, (1889), p. 572. Winthrop, R. C., *Life and Letters of John Winthrop*, (1864-7), Vol. I., p. 17.

⁴ Winthrop, R. C., *op. cit.*, Vol. I., p. 66.

and love of God did lie at the heart. Her loving and tender regard of my children was such as might well become a natural mother; as for her carriage towards myself, it was so amiable and observant as I am not able to express.⁵

Thirdly, in April, 1618, John married, at Great Maplestead, Essex, Margaret, daughter of Sir John Tyndal, with whom he lived in great happiness and contentment until June, 1647: by her he had six sons and two daughters. Early in 1648 came the fourth marriage, the bride this time being Martha, daughter of Captain William Rainsborough and widow of Thomas Coytmore. One child (a son) was the issue of this fourth marriage. It is quite clear that John could not endure living without a wife. His four wives brought him sixteen children in all—ten sons and six daughters. But of these only his eldest son John (1606-1676) by his first wife, Mary Forth, has left any male descendants, and all living Winthrops, in this country and in the United States, are descended from this John.⁶

Quite early in his life Winthrop was seriously moved to definite religious convictions. Here is his own testimony:

About eighteen years of age I married into a family under Master Culverwell's ministry in Essex, and, living there sometimes, I first found the ministry of the Word come home to my heart with power. I began to come under strong exercises of conscience. I could no longer dally with religion. . . . Now came I to some peace and comfort in God and in His ways: my chief delight was therein.⁷

It was under the influence of his third wife that his tendency towards undue religious introspection was gradually subdued. While at Cambridge he had contemplated taking holy orders, but his father persuaded him from adopting this course. He turned to law, and was admitted to the Inner Temple in November, 1628.

After the dissolution of Parliament in 1629 he became convinced that 'evil times are come when the Church must fly to the wilderness.' In July of that year a statement was prepared by him setting forth 'Reasons to be considered for justifying the undertakers of the suggested plantation in New England and for encouraging such whose hearts God shall move to join with it.' This statement appears to have been shown to Sir John Eliot and other leading Puritans.

⁵ *ibid.*, Vol. I., pp. 88-89.

⁶ [A full pedigree of the Winthrop family and its connections will be found in Muskett's *Suffolk Manorial Families*, Vol. I., pp. 1 *et seq.*—Ed.]

⁷ Winthrop, R. C., *op. cit.*, Vol. I., pp. 60-61.

In his volume on *The Beginnings of New England* John Fiske writes:

On August 26, 1629, twelve men among the most eminent in the Puritan party held a meeting at Cambridge and resolved to lead an emigration to New England provided a charter of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and the government established under it could be transferred to that country. On examination it appeared that no legal obstacle stood in the way. For Governor the choice fell upon John Winthrop, who was henceforth to occupy the foremost place among the founders of New England. Winthrop, at that time forty-one years of age, was a man of remarkable strength and beauty of character, grave and modest, intelligent and scholarlike, intensely religious yet withal liberal in his opinions, and charitable in disposition.⁸

Four ships out of eleven which the emigrants had chartered were ready to sail in March, 1630. These four were led by the *Arbella* (formerly known as the *Eagle*), a vessel of 350 tons, navigated by a crew of fifty. The voyage took seventy-five days—from March 29 to June 12. The *Arbella* and her three companion vessels were, of course, not passenger ships but freight-carrying ships. The four small vessels carried in all about 700 men, women, and children, the children numbering 135. There were also 240 cows and 60 horses: in one great storm which lasted ten days 70 animals died. Between April and December, 1630, 200 human beings had died and another 100 for various reasons had returned to England, leaving but 400 survivors of the original 700. The great majority of the emigrants were artisans or tillers of the soil. Roughly the settlers were drawn from these counties: Suffolk, 159 (about 100 from Groton and the surrounding parishes within a radius of ten miles); Essex, 92; London, 78; Northants, 22; Lincolnshire, 12; Yorkshire, 8; Leicestershire, 7; 5 each from Kent, Hampshire, and Lancashire; Norfolk, 4; Oxfordshire, 3; Herts and Bucks, 2 each; 1 each from Notts., Cambs., Rutland, and Cheshire.⁹

Writing in March, 1930, in *Builders of the Bay Colony*, S. E. Morison, of Harvard University, says:

Groton to-day is a tiny village on a hillside overlooking the market town of Boxford. An ancient mulberry tree marks the site of Groton Hall, but the old parish church is still there with the tombs of the early Winthrops. Suffolk, to a new Englander, is the most homely part of Old England. Here

⁸ Fiske, John, *The Beginnings of New England*, (1889), pp. 101-102.

⁹ Banks, C. E., *The Winthrop Fleet of 1630*, (1930), p. 50.

is our very homeland. Suffolk is the heart of East Anglia, the section of England which has produced the greatest statesmen, scientists, ecclesiastics, scholars and artists in English history, and which has always been distinguished for a profound love of liberty and independence. In East Anglia the Puritan movement bit deepest. From East Anglia came the heaviest contingent for the planting of Massachusetts Bay; and Massachusetts has produced more distinguished men and women in proportion to her population than any other State of the Union.

Puritanism was a way of life based upon the belief that the Bible was the Word of God and the *whole* Word of God. Puritans were the English who endeavoured to live according to that light. Persons who read the Bible and sincerely believed in it adopted, or attempted, a very exacting code of morals, and this code they endeavoured to force on others. English Puritans in 1630 rallied to representative government and traditional English liberty because that was their only refuge against innovating Bishops and a High Church King; but in New England, where they had things their own way, their political spirit was conservative, and their temper autocratic. If American democracy came out of Puritan New England it came from the English and not the Puritan in our ancestors. We will not often find *breadth* of mind among the English Puritans, but you will find a spiritual *depth* that belongs only to the great ages of religious experience.

John Winthrop was happy to have lived in the golden age of English Puritanism. Whatever Puritanism may have come to mean in later ages, it meant, 300 years ago, a high sincerity of purpose, an integrity of life, and an eager searching for the voice of God. Often, like the ancient Hebrews, he misunderstood the voice of God. Often he mistook for it the echo of his own wants and passions. But the desire to hear it, the sense that life consisted in hearing and obeying it, never left him. The Winthrops were Puritans of that sort, as we may infer from the books they read, the friends they valued, and the preachers they liked to hear. One of John's uncles was a friend to John Foxe, compiler of the *Book of Martyrs*.¹⁰

Winthrop, after an adventurous voyage across the Atlantic, landed at Salem, but not liking this place he left for Charlestown, afterwards crossing to the other bank of the Charles river to found

¹⁰ Morison, S. E., *Builders of the Bay Colony*, (1930), pp. 52-59.

Boston and its famous First Church. On the roll of membership of this church his own name appeared first. By the Christmas of 1630, seventeen ships had sailed for New England, carrying more than 1,000 passengers. This exodus of 1630 has been called "the great migration." The selection of Winthrop to take charge of the venture was a wise choice, as probably no other man in all England was better suited to act as the Moses of this great Puritan exodus.

By 1634 some twenty villages had been founded on or near the slopes of the Bay. Permanent houses and other buildings had been erected; roads made and defences put up. Trade with the Mother Country was being carried on, and in other directions also definite progress was being made.

In October, 1636, the general court of Massachusetts agreed to give £400 towards a school or college. The place chosen for the new building was Newton. In 1638 the name was changed to Cambridge (in honour of the university of Cambridge in the Motherland). Subsequently it was agreed that the new institution should be called Harvard College after the original founder who had donated to the college one-half of his estate and the whole of his library.

Seven years later the plantation was divided into the four shires of Suffolk, Norfolk, Essex, and Middlesex, and in the same year the four New England Colonies of Massachusetts and Plymouth, Connecticut and New Haven were confederated, with Winthrop as the first President of the Confederation.

By 1644 the general court had developed into a bicameral legislature, the Governor and his assistants constituting the upper house and the representatives of the freemen the lower house. In this way a corporation had developed into a commonwealth. Massachusetts was a self-governing republic regulating its own internal affairs with little or no restraint from the Homeland.

Winthrop lived to see Boston become a thriving and prosperous capital and the State extended by successive settlements over a very wide area. Indeed, the full territory of the Massachusetts Bay Colony exceeded in extent the whole of Wales. In all the settlements religion had taken deep root and churches were gathered wherever there was an adequate population. Winthrop had been re-elected Governor for most of the years after his first appointment in 1630. When he passed away in 1649 the men of Massachusetts laid the body of their Governor in the burial-ground of King's Chapel in the city of Boston. There, they said, was his sepulchre, but his epitaph was 'engraven in the minds of the people as a worthy gentleman who had done good in Israel, having spent not only his whole estate but his bodily strength and life in the service of the country, not sparing, but always as the burning torch,

spending his health and wealth for the good of others.¹¹

When he died, Winthrop was only sixty-one; his life had been filled with hard work, much anxiety, and many sorrows. In the same tomb with the Governor were afterwards laid his son, John Winthrop, jun., Governor of Connecticut, and this second John's two sons—FitzJohn Winthrop, also Governor of Connecticut, and Wait Still Winthrop, chief justice of Massachusetts.

Wherever one turns in the history of New England one meets tributes to the first Governor of Massachusetts. For example, Reginald W. Jeffery writes:

John Winthrop's character was of the best, and he is revered as one of the strongest and certainly one of the most lovable of the early settlers in America. He was a thorough Puritan. Like his brethren, he showed humility, but unlike so many he was sweet-tempered and moderate. As a man of wealth, of good birth, and of great ability, Winthrop was the most remarkable Puritan statesman in Colonial history.¹²

Occasionally we get a quaint and revealing touch as in a letter from Thomas Wiggin, one of the Governor's companions, who discloses that 'John was a discreet and sober man, wearing plain apparel, drinking plain water ordinarily, ruling with much mildness, and putting his hand to any ordinary labour with his servants.'

In his third wife, Margaret Tyndal, John Winthrop found a real mate: she it was who made him the man he became under her co-operation and companionship. No more was heard of his former moodiness or timidity. He learned to step out boldly among his equals and to take his share in the world's work. His married life with Margaret endured for almost twice as long as his total married life with the other three wives. Margaret's home at Great Maplestead, Essex, named Chelmshey House, was a fine manor house which had been built by her father, Sir John Tyndal. Alice Morse Earle thus depicts Winthrop at the time he courted the lady destined to be his third wife:

Winthrop's flowing locks and sober beard, his thoughtful forehead and clear-cut features, combine to make a picture which is unmistakably that of a sincere and kindly English gentleman. But though he might be deemed Elizabethan in expression and bearing we know that he was no Elizabethan in nature and temper. For he was ever orderly, never capricious; he had an intense domestic tenderness

¹¹ Winthrop, R. C., *op. cit.*, Vol. II., p. 397.

¹² Jeffery, R. W., *The History of the Thirteen Colonies of North America*, (1908), p. 88.

rather than the broad geniality of the Elizabethan age; he was just rather than sympathetic; he had a Christian courteousness rather than a cavalier courtliness; he was reflective and dignified but always kind. John Milton has been held by many to be the noblest type of the Puritan. I think that John Winthrop, as seen both in his public career and his domestic life, in deeds as well as words, is a far nobler personification of the essential spirit and flower of Puritanism.¹³

When Winthrop, on April 24, 1618, carried his third wife to Groton Manor, there were already in that home four young children by the first wife—John, Henry, Forth, and Mary. At the birth of her first child (Stephen), in September, 1619, Margaret came very near to death. Two years later a second son was named Adam, after his grandfather and great-grandfather.

By the duties of his profession as a lawyer, the father was kept much in London and on circuit. He was a J.P. when he was but eighteen years of age. Frequent letters were exchanged between husband and wife. One of these letters, written at Groton by Margaret to John in November, 1627, is described by Alice M. Earle as 'certainly one of the most exquisitely trusting and tender letters ever printed. Its piety and simplicity make it seem the typical voice and expression of a pure and idyllic married love.' Here are a few sentences from this letter:

My most sweet husband, What can be more pleasing to a wife than to hear of the welfare of her best beloved, and how he is pleased with her poor endeavours? I blush to hear myself commended, but I wish that I may be always pleasing to thee, and that those comforts we have in each other may be daily increased as far as they be pleasing to God. I will do any service wherein I may please my good husband. I have many reasons to make thee love me, whereof I will name two: first because thou lovest God, and secondly because thou lovest me. If these two were wanting, all the rest would be eclipsed. . . . Farewell, my good husband. The Lord keep thee. Your obedient wife
MARGARET WINTHROP.¹⁴

Is it not said that the postscript to a lady's letter is often the most significant part of the epistle? Well, here is Margaret's postscript:

I send up a turkey and some cheese. I did dine at Groton Hall yesterday. We did wish you there, but that would not bring you, and I could not be merry without thee.

¹³ Earle, A. M., *Margaret Winthrop*, (1895), pp. 4-5.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

Winthrop's absence in London was not from choice, or love of City life, but arose out of the exigencies of his office and calling. In his letters to his wife he constantly lamented his absence from his home in such tender sentences as these:

My heart is already with thee and thy little lambs, and I will hasten home with what speed I may.
My heart is at home, and specially with thee, my best beloved.

In October, 1629, with his departure for New England in view, John wrote to Margaret:

I am very sorry that I am forced to feed thee with letters when my presence is thy due and so much desired; but my trust is that He who hath so disposed of it will supply thee with patience and better comfort in the want of him who thou so much desirest. The Lord is able to do this, and thou mayest expect it, for He hath promised it. Seeing He calls me into His work, He will have care of thee and all ours and our affairs in my absence; therefore I must send thee to Him for all thou lackest.¹⁵

The first year in the new Colony was a time of apprehension and of loneliness. There are several letters. Here are two extracts:

My dear wife, We are here in a paradise. Though we have no beef and mutton, yet here is fowl and fish in great plenty. I will say nothing of my love to thee and of my loving desires for thee; thou knowest my heart.¹⁶

I praise God I want nothing but thee and the rest of my family. Again I kiss thee, my sweet wife, and commend thee and all ours to the Lord, and rest, Thine, JOHN WINTHROP.¹⁷

At last comes the great day of the arrival of Margaret in New England. Under date of November 2, 1631, Winthrop enters in his *Journal*:

There came in the ship *Lyon* the Governor's wife, his eldest son and his wife, and others of his children, and other families, being in all about sixty persons, who all arrived in good health, having been ten weeks at sea.¹⁸

Two days later, in the same *Journal*, these words appear:

Divers of the assistants, and most of the people of the near

¹⁵ Winthrop, R. C., *op. cit.*, Vol. I., p. 339.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, Vol. II., pp. 54-55.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, Vol. II., p. 59.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, Vol. II., p. 89.

plantations, came to welcome them, and brought and sent, for divers days, great store of provisions—fat hogs, kids, venison, poultry, geese, partridges, etc., so as the like joy and manifestation of love had never been seen in New England. We kept a day of thanksgiving at Boston.¹⁹

Without doubt there were other occasions for thanksgiving, as well as for sorrow, in the fifteen years Margaret was spared to enjoy with her husband after her arrival in New England. But there was more than a touch of real tragedy in the manner of her passing, which took place on June 14, 1647. In this year there ran through the country, among Indians and English, French and Dutch, what was called an 'epidemical sickness' taking the form of a cold accompanied with a light fever. To this sickness the Governor's wife fell a victim. It did its fell work quickly—all too quickly. She became ill on the afternoon of June 13; died on the following morning; and a day later was buried. In his *Journal* her husband recorded in these characteristically simple and moving words the passing of his dear companion in grief and in joy:

In this sickness the Governor's wife, daughter of Sir John Tindal, knight, left this world for a better, being about fifty-six years of age: a woman of singular virtue, modesty, and piety, and specially honoured and beloved of the country.²⁰

There does not exist any portrait or description of Margaret, but it is known that she had 'a sweet and smiling countenance,' and that she was remarkable alike for mind and for character. It is also on record that she was one of the loveliest of her sex and entitled to be given the foremost place among the Puritan women of New England.

In her biography of Margaret, Alice Morse Earle writes:

It was given to Margaret Winthrop to endure, in her fifty-six years of life, a far wider and deeper range of emotions and experiences than had fallen to the lot of many women. She had a life of hard work and of many cares, and she experienced entire loss of fortune; yet I think her life was a happy one, for in all her sorrows she was cheered and strengthened not only by an inspired religious faith but by a love such as is the fortune of few women to arouse and retain: a love so tender, so thoughtful, so sterling, that it might well prove to her, as her husband said, a symbol of

¹⁹ *ibid.*, Vol. II., p. 90.

²⁰ Earle, A. M., *Margaret Winthrop*, (1895), pp. 327-8.

the everlasting love of her heavenly Father. Throughout her life she ever displayed traits of character and disposition and faith that were most noble and beautiful, and rendered her fit to stand as the emblem and personification of what we have learned to believe is one of the purest types of womanhood—the Puritan wife and mother.²¹

Nathaniel Morton, in his *New England's Memorial*, has the following entry under the year 1649:

This year Mr. John Winthrop, Governor of Massachusetts, deceased the 26th day of March. He was singular for piety, wisdom, and of a public spirit. He brought over a great estate into the country, and spent the most part of it, so that when he died he was but low in that respect; and yet, notwithstanding, very much honoured and beloved of the most, and continued in the place of Governor, for the most part, until his death, which was much lamented by many. He was a man of unbiased justice, patient in respect of personal wrongs and injuries, a great lover of the saints—especially able ministers of the Gospel; very sober in desiring, and temperate in improving, earthly contentments; very humble, courteous, and studious of the general good. His body was, with great solemnity and honour, buried at Boston in New England the 3rd of April, 1649.²²

²¹ *ibid.*, pp. 333-4.

²² Quoted by Winthrop, R. C., in *op. cit.*, Vol. II., p. 396.