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Calvinist Foibles on Massachusetts Bay: Review Essay



by James Calvin Schaap

Sarah Vowell. *The Worthy Shipmates*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2008. 250 pp.

Sarah Vowell loves out-of-the-way places—and ideas. She takes her sister and her nephew to the Mashantucket Pequot Museum while on their way to Plymouth, Massachusetts, and they watch a

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film that details the 1637 Mystic Fort Massacre, in which hundreds of Pequot men, women, and children were slaughtered by Massachusetts Bay Puritans.

As the details of the slaughter get more and more bloody, as the flames build and the Puritans pick off those Indians attempting to run from the conflagration, Owen, who is seven, turns to her and says, “Aunt Sarah, when do they have Thanksgiving?” (198).

Those many Americans who know little or nothing about this country’s earliest Puritan history might find themselves asking the same question as they read through Vowell’s latest incredible read, *The Wordy Shipmates*, a book as difficult to categorize (mostly history, but significant political punditry spiced with knee-slapping humor) as it is to put down (figuratively and literally).

The truth is, of course, most of us would prefer the Thanksgiving grade school pageant/ritual, some sweet montage of Puritans and Indians swigging beer and gobbling turkey, their stout arms interlocked. There was a first Thanksgiving, of course, and the fact that the event is celebrated annually isn’t unholy. However, the history of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, especially in those very early years, is a far more interesting and complex story than the solitary one Americans celebrate annually, the only story most of us know.

The Wordy Shipmates is as frolicsome as the Puritans, by reputation anyway, never were; nonetheless, Sarah Vowell makes me wince. Most significant education about the Puritans comes from two sources these days, she says: Arthur Miller’s play *The Crucible*, which makes

Puritans out to be fiendish religious bigots; and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, a novel of industrial-strength sexual repression. In an effort to make history relevant, many teachers—this one included—use either or both, choices which have created a caricature that simply doesn't do justice to them or history itself, she claims. Hence the book.

So who is Sarah Vowell, and why should we care? Born in Oklahoma, she walks in the footsteps, in a way, of one of the most famous Oklahomans of all, Will Rogers. Like Rogers, she is a humorist, a writer with a remarkable voice—both vocal (her frequent contributions to *This American Life* are delivered in a memorable monotone) and literary. Mencken may well have been right; "Puritanism," he once quipped, is "the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy." But what's clear in this oddly titled little history is that Sarah Vowell isn't above sporting a bit with John Winthrop, Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson, and the entire Massachusetts Bay Company. "Anne Hutchinson," she writes, "is one of the brainiest English-women of the seventeenth century. Yet she is no stranger to the goopy fluids of female biology" (207).

Vowell, whose previous work includes the equally fascinating *Assassination Canon*, can be just plain deadly with her humor, even though the material she's working with is just as deadly serious. Is she a historian? Certainly not by trade. But she is an immensely gifted storyteller who pieces together, as a historian might, the principal details of a single, lively American decade, the very first decade of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, 1630-1640, a time when just a few Calvinist Brits populated New England, most of them trying to create and sustain what they ardently conceived to be a truly Christian nation. Any library worth its salt holds fifty histories of New England, several of which anyone can read on line; I'm not sure that we need another.

But then, Vowell's *Shipmates* is not just another history. Her lively wit and almost uncanny analogies energize the narrative. *The Wordy Shipmates* is immensely popular history, engaging and lucid and always entertaining, despite what the ordinary American might think, on first glance, of its dour subject matter, American Puritanism. In the last few years, when people have asked her what she's

been writing and she tells them "the Puritans," largely vacant kindnesses have come her way, she says, as in "oh, really?—how interesting." Sure.

Frankly, who cares? When President Barack Obama spoke at Cairo University not long ago and reminded the Middle East of American misdeeds, mid-twentieth century, some commentators were not only skeptical but derisive. Because most Americans tend to think of things that happened

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fifty years ago as ancient history, it comes as a shock to hear of a culture that doesn't forget—or can't, as when some memories are burnished or branded into psyches. Honestly, before I'd read about it, I never heard of the horrors of "the Long Walk"; when I listened to the life stories of Navajo people, I was amazed to discover, as I did, that not one of them had forgotten, even though it occurred a century and a half ago.

To most of us at least, America's Puritan past is really of interest only as a quick swipe; we conveniently blame this or that national embarrassment—censorship or religious fanaticism or niggling prudery—on "our Puritan heritage." There's much more to blame, of course, and much more to honor because the truth about our Puritan heritage is, as Vowell's lively read makes clear, far, far more complex.

What draws her into the study is a single line from the gospel of Matthew, a line repeated by Massachusetts Bay Colony's first governor, John Winthrop, in a very famous speech titled "A Model of Christian Charity," and then by American politicians and Presidents ever since—the idea of "a city on a hill," a line which inaugurates the very significant belief in "American exceptionalism." "The only thing more dangerous than an idea," Vowell says in the opening line of the book, "is a belief." She claims that our political culture has subscribed to that idea in full measure, made it a belief. She says that American foreign policy is often based on that vision, that we are somehow specially blessed by God almighty, and for that reason—and Vowell has a political agenda that is hardly hidden—our foreign policy has often led to disaster.

On that point she's at least half right. There have been times when American exceptionalism has proffered gifts and blessings to the larger world; then again, not. Has *The Monroe Doctrine* been a good thing or a bad thing for America and the world? Hmmm.

Three major difficulties arose before Governor John Winthrop and the Massachusetts Bay Colony during that first decade. One came from "the outside"—Indian trouble. But the other two were purely internal and even theological: First, Roger Williams, the oft misguiding "Puritan of Puritans," an early American hero who founded Rhode Island as a refuge for the heretics (like himself) that the Massachusetts Bay Colony banished, even though—and because—he was more "conservative," theologically at least, than they were; and second, Anne Hutchinson, a bright and faithful woman who was confident quoting God in conversations he carried on, frequently, *only* with her.

Sarah Vowell tells those three stories in *The Wordy Shipmates*, all three very much worth telling, especially for those, like me, of the Reformed faith. The Puritans were, after all, seventeenth-century Calvinists—and then some.

Vowell's assessment of Calvinism, at least within the confines of its Puritan tradition, seems to me, a Calvinist, somewhat jaded, although she claims she was herself a victim of "the idea that all human beings are corrupt vessels of evil" (163). The result of such indoctrination? "I was exposed,

from infancy on," she says, "to so much wretch-like-me, original-sin talk that I spent my entire childhood believing I was as depraved as Charles Manson" (163). Interestingly, she was reared Pentecostal.

She quotes from Calvin's own last will and testament to underline what she says constitutes the arduous and conflicted selfishness of the theology, the conviction that no true believer ever knows for sure whether he or she can be named among "the elect":

The will I have had, and the zeal, if it can be called that, have been so cold and sluggish that I feel deficient in everything and everywhere. . . . Truly, even the grace of forgiveness [God] has given me only renders me all the more guilty, so that my only recourse can be this, that being the father of mercy, he will show himself the father of so miserable a sinner. (42)

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Calvin's own unease about his salvation, she claims, makes a Calvinist "a war correspondent on the move," someone whose terror it is to be "kept awake to his shortcomings." She adds, "And with fear comes adrenaline" (43). That adrenalin jump starts kingdom-building on the one hand but utter desolation of one's enemies on the other.

Yet—and this is a great strength of the book—Vowell finds all three of the central characters at once both heroic and despicable. They each are given their due, from Vowell’s point of view. While she deeply admires John Winthrop for the graciousness of “A Model of Christian Charity,” she is as deeply disappointed with Winthrop’s inability to put into practice what he proposed aboard the *Arabella*, where he delivered his own vision of life in the New World as a place where “every man might have need of others, and from hence they might be all knit more nearly together in the bonds of brotherly affection” (38).

That sentiment, something Vowell, a New York City resident, claims she saw in evidence in the selflessness of New Yorkers during days following 9/11, is both commendable and, she argues, scriptural (with specific reference to the Sermon on the Mount).

However, the Pequots, Mr. Williams, and Mrs. Hutchinson found little charity or understanding in the colony. The Pequots were killed, Williams and Hutchinson banished. “This contradiction—between humility before God and the egomania unleashed by being chosen by God—is true of Winthrop and the colony of Massachusetts itself” (39), she writes.

Vowell is tirelessly interesting in *The Wordy Shipmates*. Her analysis of that initial decade in American Calvinist history is both fascinating and perceptive; all of it is aided by her often bizarre brand of humor. She is worth quoting at length. Here she is on one of the major players, Roger Williams:

Let’s pause here and try to look past Williams’s seemingly teenage behavior—past his tendency toward fussy and abrasive theological scrutiny, past his loopy Christian naval-gazing, past his grating inability to make any of the small charitable compromises involved in getting along with other people. William’s greatness lies in his refusal to keep his head down in a society that prizes nothing more than harmony and groupthink. He cares more about truth than popularity or respect or personal safety. (127)

To call her “even-handed” might be a little generous; she has axes both to grind and wield. But she handles her own chosen people as if they were themselves—as they likely were—sometimes unevenly balanced mixtures of darkness and light, men and women of silliness and slander who *were* nonetheless capable of glorious proclamations of radiant light. She handles them, in other words, as if they were altogether human.

At one point in this long essay on the Puritans, Sarah Vowell takes us aside for a moment and relates how a “fabled East Coast Media elite” once asked her if being raised Pentecostal meant she grew up “fondling snakes in trailers.” She told him this: “You know that book club you’re in? Well, my church was a lot like that, except we actually read the book” (51).

You’ve got to admire her pluck, her intelligence, and her wit. If you want to know something about a fascinating moment in American history—a fascinating moment especially for latter-day saints of the Calvinist stripe—you could do worse than start with Sarah Vowell’s exceptionally readable *The Wordy Shipmates*.