Early American Literature 1620-1820

Key words: Puritans, colony, Deist, Enlightenment

--account of the New World

  e.g. Captain John Smith, Description of New England (1616)

  Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia (1787)

--fable vs. fact

I. The Puritan Experiment: Plymouth Plantation

--pilgrims as soldiers in a war against Satan

--pilgrims in Holland → England (1620) → Virginia Plantation

  Plymouth → Massachusetts Bay Colony (1691)

II. The Puritan Experiment: The Massachusetts Bay Colony

--leadership of John Winthrop

--religious believes:

  1. Martin Luther: no pop or bishop had a right to impose any law on a Christian soul without consent

  2. John Calvin: God chose freely those He would save and those He would damn eternally

--Puritan letters, diaries, histories, and poetry

  1. attest to faith, a “noble design,” to make daily life bearable

III. Puritan Historiography

--writing of history in high regard: progression toward the fulfillment of God’s design on earth

--self-consciousness: God’s hand present in every human event, rewarded good and punished bad

  e.g. Cotton Mather, Magnalia Christi Americana (1702)

IV. An Expanding Universe

--population ▲

--community of helping souls ▼

--diversity: English, Dutch, German, French Protestants, Jewish merchants
--Philadelphia (1750), unofficial capital, second only to London as a city of commerce

V. The Enlightenment

--science & philosophy → less attention to religion → seeing every natural, human event as a message from God

--Deists:

1. deduce the existence of a supreme being from the construction of the universe itself rather than from the Bible
2. not interested in theology but in humankind’s own nature

VI. The Great Awakening

--religious revivals → reassert old values

--senses:

  e.g. Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*

VII. The American Crisis

--declaration of independence (revolution)

  e.g. Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (1776)

--anti-British

  e.g. Philip Freneau

VIII. The Pursuit of Happiness

--Benjamin Franklin:

  self-educated, social, man of the world, ambitious, public-spirited, speculative about the nature of the universe, but in matters of religion content to observe the actual conduct of humanity rather than to debate supernatural matters that are unprovable

--individual’s rights to happiness on earth vs. glory of God