The English literature of colonization

2. The Puritans
The Puritans

• They were radical Calvinist who believed that the Church of England had betrayed the spirit of the Reformation

• http://www.historyguide.org/earlymod/lecture3c.html
The Puritans (some historical notes)

• Entered in conflict with Elizabeth I when they demanded more reformation in England
• For the Queen, the national church should be subordinated to royal purposes
• The Church of England should be the church of all Englishmen (but she would make no window into men’s souls)
• Escaped English persecution by emigrating to Holland
• In 1620 planned their escape to America (they bought a small ship, *Speedwell*, that proved unsatisfactory for sea travel)
• On 16 September 1620 finally sailed on the *Mayflower* from Plymouth
Three Puritan Principles

• They wished to have their feelings changed through God’s Grace. They wanted to be cleansed of envy, vanity, and lust.
• They valued plainness and simplicity
• They saw their bringing Christianity to America as a divine mission.
Puritan terms and influences...

• **From Calvin: Predestination**: the idea that God has willed eternal damnation for some people and salvation for others.

• The Puritans believed that the accumulation of wealth through hard and honest work was a sign of being “elected” to go to heaven.
The Puritans

• The Bible as a central hermeneutical tool

• Recast their voyage to America in Biblical terms (from the Book of Exodus): They were the new Jews, the “chosen people”

• The notion of the “Divine Providence” as central to Puritan beliefs (articulated in John Winthrop’s famous sermon in 1630)
DIVINE MISSION

• John Winthrop
  – “We shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us; so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work have undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through all the world.”
Two Important New England Settlements

1) The Plymouth Colony (1620) (settlers known as Pilgrims)
   - Leader: William Bradford
   - Provided religious freedom, with ties to the British crown
2) The Massachusetts Bay Colony (1630)
   - Leader: John Winthrop
   - Established a theocracy, free of ties to Great Britain
The Puritans

• Self-governing communities gathered around a congregation
• In theory upheld religious freedom from external state control
• In practice, a theocratic society, with the clergy ruling over legal, political and moral matters
• Dissenters:
  Anne Hutchinson:
  Defied the religious authorities
  Asserted her spiritual independence
  Roger Williams:
  Advocated separation between church and state
  Founded the colony of Providence (shrine for the persecuted: for Quakers, Baptists, Jews, Indians...
Forces undermining Puritanism

• Theocracy suffered from a lack of flexibility
• Change in economic conditions (an expanding economy)
• The presence of the frontier - concept of self-reliance, individualism, and optimism
• Early dissenters revealed the contradictions inherent in the Puritan enterprise: intolerance and individualism ended up compromising the early ideals

• The trials of the “witches” of Salem in 1692
Puritan Literature

• Common genres were sermons, biographies, diaries and autobiographies

• The style was Protestant; plain and against ornamentation

• This style mirrors the Puritan way of life and their belief that one should not call attention to oneself
Puritan literature

• There was a purpose to Puritan writing: to glorify God

• Puritans reinforced in their writings their religious mission by using the language of the Old Testament, adapted to the realities of the New World

• They believed that events described in the Old Testament anticipated their own experiences
Puritan literature

• Texts reflected the scope of their readers, who were well-grounded in religious

• Common themes in early Puritan writing:
  • a. Idealism, both religious and political
  • b. Pragmatism, practicality and sense of mission
Puritan Writers to remember...

• William Bradford *Of Plymouth Plantation* (HISTORICAL NARRATIVE)
• Jonathan Edwards “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (SERMON)
• Anne Bradstreet “Upon the Burning of Our House,” and “To My Dear and Loving Husband.” (POETRY)
Some aspects of the Puritan legacy

• a. The need for moral justification for public, and governmental acts
• b. The Quest for Freedom - personal, political, economic, and social
• c. The Puritan work ethic (being rich through honest work is a way of winning God’s favour)
• d. The city upon the hill - concept of manifest destiny.
Bibliographical sources

• [http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap1/1intro.html#themes](http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap1/1intro.html#themes)