

# There Once Was a New England

Timothy Dwight's New England Catechism

by John Willson

A few years ago, I was talking about Timothy Dwight to an audience of people old enough to appreciate both his Christian orthodoxy and his old-fashioned patriotism. When I mentioned Dwight's passion for farming and his devotion to agriculture as a way of life, a man from Dwight's adopted state of Connecticut informed me that there are now fewer than 50 people in the entire state who list themselves as "farmers." If one adds to that sad statistic the decline of Yale, which Timothy Dwight made into a great college, then one begins to realize how far New England has fallen from its place as a "city upon a hill."

New England's glory rested on the foundation of the most homogeneous population of any region in the history of North America. Nathaniel Ward, author of the *Massachusetts Body of Liberties*, said cheerfully, non-Puritans "shall have free liberty to keep away from us, and such as will come to be gone as fast as they can, the sooner the better." East Anglian English founded and conquered what became the six states of New England proper and later moved their culture to Long Island, Northern New Jersey, most of Western New York, part of Western Pennsylvania, about half of Ohio and Indiana, parts of Southern Michigan and Northern Illinois, a little bit of Wisconsin, and almost all of the original Oregon. As David Hackett Fischer shows in his majestic book *Albion's Seed*, the 20,000 or so who came in the great migration of 1630-41 have turned into as many millions and have put their stamp on virtually every good and decent institution, political and otherwise, in the United States. As M. Stanton Evans says, they "planted on American soil virtually every institution of free government with which we are familiar."

Despite the fact that the hardy Puritan Calvinists were almost the opposite of a warrior people (although they did require their citizens to own guns), the American War for Independence effectively ended in New England well before the Declaration of Independence was even written. The towns rose against the English Regulars. As many as 50,000 men were in the field within a day after the first battles in Lexington and Concord. In a now often-told story, historian George Bancroft, desperately trying in the 1830's to interview the few remaining veterans of the Revolution, found Levi Preston of Danvers, then 91, and asked him, "Captain Preston, what made you go to the Concord fight?" Asked about the Stamp Act, it turned out that the old man had never seen a stamp: "I always understood that none were ever sold." He never drank a drop of tea—"the boys threw it all overboard." He never read Locke or any other of the English writers on liberty: "the only books we had were the Bible, the Catechism, Watts' psalms and hymns and the almanacs." Bancroft, a little confused, said, "Well, then, what was the mat-

ter?" Preston replied, "Young man what we meant in going for those Redcoats was this: we always had governed ourselves and we always meant to. They didn't mean we should."

The Preston story is important for us to understand because it so effectively contradicts the grounds for the Puritan-bashing that has become a national pastime since about the 1920's. It has often been a pastime of this magazine. Yet this was the nation that, six years before Jefferson, produced one of our first declarations of independence. After the Boston Massacre, the minister of the congregation at Abington said to the town meeting, "Ye are, as yet, freemen." They seceded the next day. The old New England was not built on abstractions or, as H.L. Mencken once said, on "the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy." It was a happy place, as far as men can make them, full of free people who understood the right balance between freedom and order.

Timothy Dwight did not understand this very well until he lost his father during the War for Independence. Major Dwight was a wealthy man, a man of influence in Northampton, Massachusetts, who had married a daughter of Jonathan Edwards. A judge in the Court of Common Pleas who had taken an oath of loyalty to the crown, he could not bring himself to disobey the king and left Massachusetts rather than become a revolutionary. He, his sister, and her husband and several children went to the Mississippi territory, where most of them died within a few months. Timothy, who had joined the Continental Army as a chaplain, resigned and came home to take care of his mother and younger siblings. Even the war could not trump family obligations.

He held their property together and educated the younger children, working in the fields with his hired men, running a school in the mornings and evenings, preaching twice a week at churches around Northampton, defending his mother against rumors that she, too, was a Tory. It is said that she never entered the church sanctuary after her husband's death. She sat every week in the narthex in defiance of her uncharitable neighbors. Timothy inherited, or acquired, her iron will. He later said that "all that I am I owe to her." He reconciled with his neighbors, however, and earned their esteem. He also learned in these hard times what the Romans called *pietas*.

Dwight knew Roman literature well, as did most of the educated men of his generation. His poetry drew heavily upon Virgil. His attempt at an epic, *The Conquest of Canaan*, was an allegory about the American conquest of the New World, told in the setting of the biblical book of Joshua. It did not work very well. One of his critics said the poem was full of 18th-century Americans with Hebrew names who talked like Milton's angels and fought like prehistoric Greeks. It was a young man's poem, begun when Dwight was 19, filled with an American triumphalism that would not survive his experience of war and family hardships. Dwight wrote another long poem later on,

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*Greenfield Hill*, which was modeled in part on Virgil's *Georgics* and *Eclogues*. Virgil wrote the *Georgics* between 36 and 29 B.C., against a background of almost constant civil wars that threatened the structure of rural Italian society. Virgil presented the difficulties and the promise of country life to remind his countrymen that real life is also partly mythical; that the past, present and future are intermingled; and that the values of local life directly affected the destiny of Rome.

*Greenfield Hill* was a celebration of the local institutions that Dwight felt bound all Americans together and represented what was worth preserving about the new nation. The title referred to Dwight's home in Connecticut after the War for Independence, a New England village much like a thousand others, and not terribly unlike the thousands of local settlements in other regions as well. Dwight intended the poem to describe "the dignified character of free republicans" and the "competence" of the farmers, tradesmen, ministers, and housewives who made up the happy society of New England. *Competence* was a term that meant, for Dwight, much the same thing as *pietas* to a Roman republican such as Cato the Elder. It meant a person who did his duty, who gave the gods their due, who honored his parents and was loyal to his friends, who paid attention to his community's past and honored its local institutions, and who served the republic in war and peace. "Men who devote themselves to their own concerns," Dwight said, "usually manage them well." The connections between republican Rome and the Virginia elite are well known; they are perhaps less so in the case of such a loyal son of New England—and an agrarian, at that.

Timothy Dwight wanted to write the "songs" of his nation rather than its laws. He did write a hymn that is still found in several Protestant hymnals:

I love thy kingdom Lord,  
The house of thine abode,  
The Church our blest Redeemer saved  
With his own precious blood.

His poetry, however, did not capture his countrymen's hearts; his preaching and teaching did. He helped lay the foundations of the Second Great Awakening and Yale's powerful influence for several generations. It is, however, his posthumously published collection of essays, *Travels in New England and New York*, for which he should be best remembered. There is nothing like them. They chronicle the life of the New England nation for a generation and present us with a picture that would hold quite true for every generation from John Winthrop to Calvin Coolidge. And they are accessible in an excellent modern edition edited by Barbara Miller Solomon (Harvard, 1969). Solomon says that "Dwight made the *Travels* a final affirmation of what he valued in his world."

What he valued was what he saw. He took mini-"sabbaticals" during his years as president of Yale (1795-1817), usually after commencement, during the fall when the students had gone home for the harvest. Altogether, he estimated that he traveled 18,000 miles on horseback, by carriage, or on foot. He wrote about churches, murders, how towns laid out streets, rivers, politics, Indians, notable citizens, creeping Unitarianism, Eli Whitney's genius, fishing, the immigrants in New York City, pronunciation of words, New England women, how militias functioned, penal systems (anticipating Tocqueville), good and bad schools, lots about farming and religion, and a hundred

other topics. Almost all the essays contained some history. As he had written in *Greenfield Hill*,

Utopias then,  
Ancient and new, high fraught with fairy good,  
Would catch no more the heart. Philosophy  
Would bow to common-sense, and man, from the facts,  
And real life, politic wisdom learn.



Talking about Connecticut, he said in the *Travels*, "There is not a spot on the globe, where so little is done to govern the inhabitants; nor a spot, where the inhabitants are so well governed, or perhaps, in more appropriate terms, where the state of society is so peaceable, orderly, and happy." Dwight did not have to make up a theoretical republic. He saw republican order in the New England towns.

That order began in the individual soul. Dwight's conviction that God's Word written and God's covenantal promises to the visible Church lay behind every attempt to form a decent polity informed every observation he made about New England. "Without religion," he wrote, "we may possibly retain the freedom of savages, bears and wolves; but not the freedom of New England." Citizens could not function as citizens without God being present in their hearts and minds. But individuals were also not individuals absent their connections to their families, churches, colleges, towns, states, and, ultimately, their nation. When he said, "the personal conduct of no individual can be insignificant to the safety and happiness of a nation," or, "if each man conducts himself aright, the community cannot be conducted wrong," he was simply acknowledging the connection between character and a healthy state. Men live in covenants that are vertical, resulting in obligations and freedoms granted by God and operating largely through churches, as well as covenants that are horizontal, working mainly in families and polities. This echoes Homer, Moses, Aristotle, Virgil, and a thousand other of Dwight's spiritual ancestors. That, to him, it also was the message of Jesus applied to the political order only strengthened its immediacy for Connecticut, New England, and America.

Most of the individual citizens Dwight observed were farmers. "Every farmer in Connecticut and throughout New England," he said, "is dependent for his enjoyments on none but himself, his government, and his God; and is the little monarch of a dominion sufficiently large to furnish all the supplies of competence, with a number of subjects as great as he is able

to govern." Visitors to his home were often disappointed to discover that he would rather talk about potatoes than theology or politics. Dwight gardened six acres by himself when he lived in Greenfield Hill and wrote more about agriculture than Thomas Jefferson did, although not as much or as deeply as did John Taylor of Caroline. He gained a little fame for his fish-emulsion fertilizer and was one of the first New Englanders to grow good watermelons and strawberries. And he was a patriot precisely because he loved the enterprising farmers around him: "To me," he said, there is something delightful "in contemplating the diffusion of enterprise over an immense forest," because the "process here is all voluntary and free." Farmers make useless land into sustenance, and "poverty is here commuted for competence, and competence for wealth."

to judge well concerning governmental matters."

Such general statements are sprinkled throughout the *Travels*, but their real power lies in the richness of detail, wherein every interesting individual, every notable family, every church building, every village and field clearly is bound to every other. This is another way of saying what many Americans of Dwight's generation believed, that *society precedes government*, and that *strong local institutions determine the strength of a free people*. To Dwight and to most New Englanders, these were not merely instrumental notions. God had built families, churches, and towns into the created order in such a way that there can be no meaningful freedom apart from their vitality. Tocqueville would later say,

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Farmers also made up the towns—and sustained them. Dwight devotes many of the essays in the *Travels* to describing towns—their physical characteristics, governments, churches, schools, militia—and it is clear that, to his loving eye, they were the centerpieces of the civilized world. He would certainly have approved of what Tocqueville wrote about them 15 years after Dwight's death:

The New Englander is attached to his township because it is strong and independent; he has an interest in it because he shares in its management; he loves it because he has no reason to complain of his lot; he invests his ambition and his future in it; in the restricted sphere within his scope, he learns to rule society; he gets to know those formalities without which freedom can only advance through revolutions, and becoming imbued with their spirit develops a taste for order, understands the harmony of powers, and in the end accumulates clear, practical ideas about the nature of his duties and the extent of his rights.

Dwight found his fellow New Englanders "educated in the business of a town," plain folks conducting government better than perhaps any other place on earth. "A republican government is founded on general opinion," he wrote. "It is, therefore, of the highest importance, that this opinion should be correct. No method, hitherto adopted by mankind, has been equally successful with this, in forming that opinion, and fitting men

The strength of free peoples resides in the local community. Local institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to science: they put it within the people's reach; they teach people to appreciate its peaceful enjoyment and accustom them to make use of it. Without local institutions a nation may give itself a free government, but it has not got the spirit of liberty.

"More free than we are," Dwight often told his graduating seniors, "man with his present character cannot be. If we preserve such freedom, we shall do what never has been done. The only possible means of its preservation, miracles apart, is the preservation of those institutions from which it has been derived." He knew that the forces of "infidelity" were on the march, that a balance between traditional Protestantism and the Enlightenment would be hard to maintain. He knew that villages and farms might be overwhelmed by cities and the spirit of enterprise. (To Dwight, the Hamiltonian vision was dangerous not because it was evil but precisely because it was so attractive.) He even thought he saw a danger to the family in softening divorce laws and changing attitudes toward marriage and warned, "this system of government, though here efficacious and happy, derives a principal part of its efficacy from the early habits of children, formed in the family, the school, and the church." He argued that the history of New England should be put in the form of a catechism and taught to every schoolchild by the third grade! He even saw the eroding effects on local institutions brought about by the variety of immigrants to New York City.

All in all, by the time of his death in 1817, Timothy Dwight was happy about the state of New England, as his instructions to publish the *Travels* indicates. The New England nation was still very peaceable, agrarian, inward-looking, and, Dwight was convinced, the most democratic spot on earth. It is interesting that except for one very important difference—Dwight's New England nation being based on God and the churches—what he said about it often reminds us of what Jefferson said about Virginia when he looked out his windows at Monticello. So, in the sense that there once was a New England, there also once was a Chesapeake nation, and they probably began to wither about the same time. In New England, a friend remarked to me lately, the withering probably began in earnest with Emerson and was completed when the Red Sox sold Babe Ruth to the Yankees. It will always be true, however, that what Timothy Dwight valued was indeed a good place. It is also true that what his student Samuel Goodrich called Dwight, "a Yankee Christian gentleman, nothing more—nothing less," is not high praise today. To our detriment.



# Tocqueville's America and America Today

Liberty, Equality, Materialism

by Claude Polin



At the time of Alexis de Tocqueville's writing, the French Revolution still loomed over minds and, with it, memories of a bloodbath and of a new kind of tyranny. The American Revolution seemed to offer grounds for rosier hopes about democracy. Convinced that there was no turning back to the old days, Tocqueville set about assessing whether humanity could have a bright future.

Tocqueville nurtures a deep nostalgia for the times when societies were aristocratic, when their leaders were men others could look up to because of their eminent virtues, and he views the advent of egalitarian societies as a backward step in many respects. He feels very guilty, however—so much so that he struggles constantly to show those were also unjust societies and that the development of equality is the result of some providential disposition. His obsession—an aristocratic one, no doubt—with equality as the *idée mere* of modern societies is, for him, a source of many meaningful insights but also the cause of his ultimate failure to understand American democracy.

I believe that American history reveals that there were actually two Americas. The American Civil War was a cultural war, almost a clash of civilizations. Two social spirits had been sewn together into a sort of improbable body. For better or for worse, the truly revolutionary spirit, the Yankee spirit, won and became the spirit of America. This spirit is the only one Tocqueville observed.

To summarize his two lengthy volumes in a few words—a daring proposition, indeed—I would say that, for Tocqueville, equality generates two main dangers, which are (to make things simpler) of a somewhat contradictory nature.

Men who are deemed equal cannot be governed but by them-

selves—hence the principle of popular sovereignty. Tocqueville's first concern is to show how, through procedures of public discussions and elections, starting at the level of the township, American citizens actually implement that sovereignty.

The more democratic France became, the more tyrannical: That was the legacy of recent French history. Are not, asks Tocqueville, the same ghosts of despotism looming over the New World? Isn't it obvious that, whenever people are endowed with absolute power (and what power can be more absolute than a power that is deemed sovereign?), they are bound to make limitless use of it? When the will of the people is the people's only master, even God is overruled, and anything is permitted. Now, isn't that tyranny compounded by the condition that, since it is highly unlikely to be unanimous, there will be dissenters, and the majority of the people will feel entitled to disregard and prevail upon them? Again, we can clearly hear a man in the tradition of Locke or Montesquieu who fears the vociferous empire of the populace, led by demagogues, upon competence, virtue, and thoughtfulness.

But equality seems to have had, in Tocqueville's eyes, a result of an altogether different nature. (That seems to be the reason for his second discourse.)

Equality, he claims without further explanation, engenders materialism (an exclusive devotion to material well-being). And, as far as individual liberty is concerned, Tocqueville sees that devotion as a drawback. For running one's own business means losing all interest in public affairs. Forgetting what he said about the active involvement of citizens in their local communities, Tocqueville insists more and more, as the book unravels, on the danger of a new kind of despotism.

Being immersed in their private petty activities, living as if isolated from one another, the power they could wield when united becomes fragmented and useless so that actual power

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