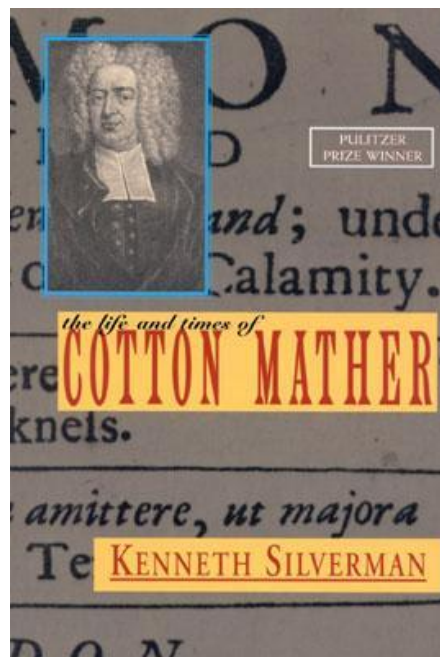




The Life and Times of Cotton Mather

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The early American Congregational minister and author Cotton Mather (1663-1728), remembered mainly for his participation in the Salem witch trials, is perhaps the greatest and most misunderstood figure in pre-revolutionary American history. Mather believed his main purpose in life was to do good and he devoted his life to praying, preaching, and writing, eventually publishing more than 400 works.

The Life and Times of Cotton Mather Details

Date : Published November 21st 2001 by Welcome Rain Publishers (first published 1984)

ISBN : 9781566492065

Author : Kenneth Silverman

Format : Paperback 480 pages

Genre : Biography, History, Nonfiction

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Tamhack says

The author's conclusion:

"To speak very generally now, but with no intent of putting Mather in a nutshell: he was the first person to write about the New World having never seen the Old. Much of his career illustrates, for the first time, the costs and gains to America's intellectual and artistic life of its divorce from Europe. These costs and gains have been one and the same—a lack of standards or a freedom to create (depending on how it is viewed) which has often inspired works tainted by provincial crabbedness, eccentricity, and overreaching, but also often distinguished by their close kin, pungency, innovation, and grandeur. Some or all of these qualities impart the feel of the New World to work by many later Americans who have accepted or declared, and deeply explored, their isolation from the European mainstream—Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Charles Ives, Gertrude Stein, Frank Lloyd Wright, Jackson Pollock. The list might be extended (and challenged) and to be sure Mather was far more an artist of sorts than an artist. In his curiousness, epic reach, and quirkily ingenious individualism he was nevertheless the first unmistakably American figure in the nation's history."

"Especially Mather's eulogists remembered him as the most learned man and the most voluminous writer New England had ever produced—the #88 works he published, the huge works he left unpublished, his devotion to science, his quick apprehension, tenacious memory, and ready invention. "He was a wonderful Improver of Time. Thomas Prince said, "and tis almost amazing how much He had read and studied—How much He has wrote and published—How much he corresponded abroad; not only with the several Provinces in the British America, but also with England, Scotland, Ireland, Holland, Germany and even the Eastern as well as the Western Indies." Among Mather's works illustrative of his for the church and its people, Prince singled out *Magnalia Christi Americana* "for the noble Care He has take to preserve the Memory of the great and excellent Fathers of these religious Plantations, that was just a sinking into Oblivion." He also called attention to the ill-fated "*Biblia Americana*," an extraordinary that his Heart had been set on from his early Days and has taken Him up almost Fifty Years to compose."

He had a..." rich zest of his personality."

"Cotton Mather, the minister of Boston's Old North church, was a true believer in witchcraft. In 1688, he had investigated the strange behavior of four children of a Boston mason named John Goodwin. The children had been complaining of sudden pains and crying out together in chorus. He concluded that witchcraft, specifically that practiced by an Irish washerwoman named Mary Glover, was responsible for the children's problems. He presented his findings and conclusions in one of the best known of his 382 works, "*Memorable Providences*." Mather's experience caused him to vow that to "never use but one grain of patience with any man that shall go to impose upon me a Denial of Devils, or of Witches."

As it happened, three of the five judges appointed to the Court of Oyer and Terminer that would hear the Salem witchcraft trials were friends of Mather and members of his church. Mather wrote a letter to one of the three judges, John Richards, suggesting how they might approach evidentiary issues at the upcoming trials. In particular, Mather urged the judges to consider spectral evidence, giving it such weight as "it will bear," and to consider the confessions of witches the best evidence of all. As the trials progressed, and growing numbers of person confessed to being witches, Mather became firmly convinced that "an Army of Devils is horribly broke in upon the place which is our center." On August 4, 1692, Mather delivered a sermon warning that the Last Judgment was near at hand, and portraying himself, Chief Justice Stroughton, and Governor Phips as leading the final charge against the Devil's legions. On August 19, Mather was in Salem

to witness the execution of ex-minister George Burroughs for witchcraft. When, on Gallows Hill, Burroughs was able to recite the Lord's Prayer perfectly (something that witches were thought incapable of doing) and some in the crowd called for the execution to be stopped, Mather intervened, reminding those gathered that Burroughs had been duly convicted by a jury. Mather was given the official records of the Salem trials for use in preparation of a book that the judges hoped would favorably describe their role in the affair. The book, "Wonders of the Invisible World," provides fascinating insights both into the trials and Mather's own mind.

When confessed witches began recanting their testimony, Mather may have begun to have doubts about at least some of the proceedings. He revised his own position on the use of spectral evidence and tried to minimize his own large role in its consideration in the Salem trials. Later in life, Mather turned away from the supernatural and may well have come to question whether it played the role it life he first suspected. --DL

The book reads like a long New England church sermon-very wordy and wandering. I did not realize who Cotton Mather was and what part he played in early American history. He was an interesting man.

Lytle says

"Cotton wished to have God in his thoughts every waking moment. To attain that high end he practiced a 'spiritual Alchemy.' This meant ceaselessly creating brief petitions and supplications—'Ejaculatory Prayers'—and sending them to Heaven in an all-day stream of spontaneous praying. He often based the 'ejaculation' on some present thing or person, viewing the entire world as a preacher: 'The Meanest Objects in the House, or in the Street, have afforded me Thousands of Lessons, which I have immediately Sent up to Heaven.' Transmuting his moment-to-moment sensory experience into glorification of God, he could form prayers not only before acts of worship or while hearing sermons or singing psalms, but also while traveling in the road, eating dinner, walking down the street, or just sitting in his study" (32).

In passages like this we see a surprising connection between Mather's exploration of the quotidian and that of the New American poets.

Richard Bartholomew says

"In his curiousness, epic reach, and quirkily ingenious individualism he was...the first unmistakably American figure in the nation's history".

With his Puritan background, weird name, and early involvement in the Salem witch-trials, Mather has - in Silverman's observation - become a "national gargoyle" in the US: a type of bigotry, superstition, and wrathful religion. Silverman's biography gives us all Mather's many faults and human failings (some of which repel, some of which amuse), but there is so much more here: no grim black-hatted witch-finder, Mather was in fact an early scientist and a witty man of the world who shocked ministerial colleagues with his view that luxuriant wigs were an "innocent fashion" rather than to be condemned. He was also in many ways humane, preaching Christian ecumenism (within limits), opposing religious persecution, and promoting smallpox inoculation in the face of sceptics.

My particular interest is in Mather's links to evangelicalism: he was distantly related by marriage to Jonathan

Edwards, and he had an up-and-down relationship with Benjamin Colman, who later interacted with Edwards and George Whitefield. Mather also corresponded with Isaac Watts in London and with German pietists

Christian Engler says

Religion, next to poor economic conditions, was primarily responsible for the foundation of the colonies. It too was the backbone for its evolvement. And one of the chief leaders in that unfolding was the noted Congregational minister Cotton Mather, who, as author, theologian, science-minded neophyte and sometimes political insider, helped to lead the way before the likes of Washington, Franklin, Paine and Jefferson came into the underdeveloped social, religious and political scene. Though often cited as the one who added fuel to the fire in the Salem witch trials by giving a sense of legitimacy to the ideas and beliefs of spectral evidence, he was also openly criticized by his harshest critic and dogged nemesis Robert Calef, who mocked him for his blatant inaction and for his uttering of dated apocalyptic pronouncements when primitive superstition took a firm hold of the Salem villagers: "Robert Calef, Mather's angriest and most dogged critic, charged that by being "the most active and forward of any minister in the country" in the Goodwin case, and by printing his account of it, Mather "conduced much to the kindling of those flames" at Salem that "threatened the destruction of this country." P.87. There were those who saw the trials for what they were-a farce. And Mather-as a "learned" man-was not in the league of those who possessed clear comprehension. Hence, his name, over time, became stigmatized with that dark period of early colonial history.

As people are sometimes granted a second chance, Cotton Mather, after the tragic witch fiasco, took the opportunity to do only good-even in exchange for the bad-which he received from his enemies, a Biblical offering of the "other" cheek. The latter was the way of German Pietism, an approach that appealed to Mather, for it had: "...its emphasis on pastoral work and involvement in community life, its far-flung missionary work, perhaps especially its ecumenical attempt to reduce dogma to essentials." P. 231. But more than that, Cotton Mather seemed to try to go beyond himself, to try to outdue past accomplishments, because there was always this psychological manifestation of the stammerer he used to be, coupled with the stress of his prominent family lineage. It seemed to be pressure coupled atop pressure, forceful and expected success at all costs. In trying to be God's warrior and live up to perfection, he paid many costs: bankruptcy, the death of 13 of his 15 children, intellectual belittlement, to scores of other misfortunes. Yet, through his voluminous religious, economic, social, science, political and medical writings, he refined the colonies to a crest that it had never been at before. He, by his sermons, writings, insight, gave the colonies a caliber of legitimacy that it sorely needed in the eyes of the mother country, England. In a way, he gave the colonies respect by immersing himself in the lives of those who sought his council: academics, doctors, politicians to a bevy of others. He, in effect, taught himself and become knowledgeable-sometimes even an expert-in the career fields of the very individuals who sought him out. And thus, he was past being well-rounded and effective. But that also brought about jealousy and contempt. But prayer, introspection and conformity to theology (though it was a heavy struggle) gave him the necessary framework to do what he had to do. And upon his death, the respect that he so yearned for while alive, was heaped upon him in abundance.

Kenneth Silverman's *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather* is quite simply a stunning work of early colonial history and biography; he delves deeply into age-old diaries, hymnals, political documentation, to a whole pool of sources, and he makes them come to vivid life by his crisp and tight writing style. He brings a bygone era and all its conceivable joys, sufferings and anger to the forefront, illustrating with scholarly and literary certitude that the problems of our times have not differed in any extremity to previous generations. The evolution just becomes more pronounced. In the *Life and Times of Cotton Mather*, readers will be exposed to wharves, perriwigs, flickering candles and towering Congregational steeples that loom over a fledgling city trying to form its own identity, history and truth. The book is a resounding achievement.

Nate says

Technically well-written. However, Silverman over-psychologizes Mather. Compared to other biographers (Levin, Lovelace, Kennedy, Middlekauff, Smolinski), this portrait of Mather is markedly different, perhaps even patronizing. Brilliant work, yet disappointingly unflattering.

Susan O says

". . . the nebulous mythological Mather serves to symbolize what American character is not, or should not be - bigoted, superstitious, authoritarian, and devious. In it's elements the conception is simplistic and inaccurate" (p 425)

Mather, "the quintessential Puritan bigot", was drawn "into the vanguard of religious toleration." (p 302)

Cotton Mather was one of, if not, the most prominent American colonialists until Benjamin Franklin and the other founding fathers. In fact, a teenaged Franklin wrote a criticism of Mather for the newspaper as Silence Begood. Many people wrote criticisms of Mather. He was involved in many things and had a quick tongue and few diplomatic skills, at least on the spur of the moment.

There is also more written by and about Mather than probably any other minister in American history. He wrote over 400 documents (388 of which were published in his lifetime), kept diaries, and conducted voluminous correspondence. Silverman does an excellent job drawing on all of this material to paint a picture of a complex man, who saw his world change from a small village (Boston) of 3000 Puritans into a cosmopolitan city with many competing interests both secular and religious. In doing this, he grew and changed with the times, as he could and remain true to his beliefs. For example, he eventually promoted unity between all Protestants, including those of the Church of England, but drew the line at those who didn't believe in the Trinity.

If you're interested in 17/18 th century America, or American religion, I highly recommend this book. It is well-written and researched.

Jonathan says

Cottonus Matherus 1663-1728 named after both his grandfathers.

Interesting read: Cotton's (Cotton) father, Increase, was a solitary (spent sixteen hours daily at his writing desk), moody and demanding man wholeheartedly committed to making those around him miserable. He was resentful of his parishioners of North Church due to his inadequate salary and when resolved initiated new resentments and antagonisms. Increase always wanted to return to England. His wife Maria wrote of Increase, "she expected no good either of body or soul from him" but was devoted to him.

The mismanagement that led to the decay and near collapse of Harvard College, back then the training ground of the New England ministry yet not a divinity school "but aimed at educating both religious and civic leaders."

King Philip's war resulting in the destruction of twelve towns and the deadliest war in the history of European settlement in North America in proportion to the population.

Cotton had a bad stutter and he pursued scientific interests even though his main pursuit was to become a minister and how this setback helped make him a superb writer.

All this and much more just in the first chapter! I learned a lot from this well-researched tome and enjoyed it. I did a lot of toggling back and forth between the book and Wikipedia. Much fun and many more avenues of other books to explore as a result of the many subjects covered in the book. Well-written and engaging.

Coyle says

"Kenneth Silverman's biography is out of print, which is both fortunate and unfortunate at the same time. It is fortunate because Silverman writes his bio with all the best psychoanalytical tools at his disposal- which are exactly the kind of tools that rust and crumble as quickly as the next fad comes along. Given that this book was first published in 1984, you can probably well imagine how odd some of the analyses of Mather's psychology sound to someone living in the midst of today's fads. It is as if I were to write about how similar the New England Associations of Ministers are to Facebook. There might be truth to it, and it might even help people understand something true about New England Associations of Ministers, but 30 years from now when Facebook has gone the way of Myspace, that comparison will be jarring to those who remember Facebook and pointless to those who do not.

With that said, it is also unfortunate that this book is out of print, since Silverman is an excellent writer and (the aforementioned weaknesses aside) gives us a picture of Mather that is fascinating and compelling for a number of reasons."

Full review available here:

<http://coyleneal.blogspot.com/2013/03...>
