

## [Australian and New Zealand American Studies Association Conference: Community, Conflict, and “the Meaning of America”](#)

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Conference

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In 1939, Perry Miller published the first volume of *The New England Mind*, a foundational text in American Studies. Looking back, he regarded this book as part of his life’s study of “the meaning of America.” Eighty years later, the 2019 Australian and New Zealand American Association (ANZASA) Conference, hosted at the University of Auckland, will engage with Miller’s intellectual endeavor.

With a productive career spanning four decades, Miller’s many writings and their critical reception provide prompts for American Studies scholars today. A historian of ideas, particularly Puritan theology, ensconced in an English Department, and interested in philosophical questions, Miller used interdisciplinary methods. As a public intellectual, he addressed scholarly and popular audiences alike. And he contributed greatly to the core concept of the emerging field of American Studies: exceptionalism or, as he put it, “the uniqueness of the American experience.”

Into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, scholars have taken a dimmer view of Miller’s work, with many rejecting the exceptionalist thesis. Amy Kaplan and others have powerfully critiqued its imperialist underpinnings. His project to understand “the massive narrative of the movement of European culture into the vacant wilderness of America” erases indigenous peoples. Slavery gets no attention, nor does the South. The singular “New England mind” misses the diversity of early America.

Yet, Miller’s interrogation of the “meaning of America” remains relevant. In his later work—published during the Cold War—he found disunity and decline in the nation’s past. Already in 1949, he began to rethink American exceptionalism in the context of “the contemporary crisis” with its attendant “conflicts, anxieties, and cruelties.” In the same year, he addressed his historical moment in a way that resonates with ours. “Faith in democracy can no longer be maintained by ignorance of the recurrent lessons of history.”

The 2019 ANZASA conference will revisit these long-standing “Millerian” themes in American history and culture. After a theme-setting opening address by **Paul Giles**, Challis Professor of English, University of Sydney, our keynote speakers will address major points of conflict—the American Revolution, slavery, the Civil War, World War II, and Vietnam—as well as how Americans defined, sought, and built community in the past. Keynote Speakers:

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- **Carrie Tirado Bramen**, Professor of English and Director of the Gender Institute, University of Buffalo
- **Kathleen M. Brown**, David Boies Professor of History and Director of the Alice Paul Center for Research on Women, Gender, and Sexuality, University of Pennsylvania
- **Neal Curtis**, Associate Professor of Media and Communication, University of Auckland
- **Peter S. Field**, Associate Professor of History, University of Canterbury
- **Michael A. McDonnell**, Professor of History, University of Sydney

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