

## [Cossen on Rodgers, 'As a City on a Hill: The Story of America's Most Famous Lay Sermon'](#)

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**Daniel T. Rodgers.** *As a City on a Hill: The Story of America's Most Famous Lay Sermon.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. viii + 355 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-18159-2.

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I wonder how many historians and history educators have actually read in its entirety John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity." We routinely teach excerpts from it as examples of the New England Puritan mind. How many wouldn't recognize its famous lines? "For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill; the eyes of all people are upon us," Winthrop writes. For some readers, the study of the piece may end there. For others, they may continue to the next lines: "So that if we deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world." How many of us, though, read the bulk of Winthrop's text preceding the "city upon a hill" section, which only appears at the very end of the Model and is arguably not the larger piece's central theme?

For the sake of transparency, I will admit that I had only previously read excerpts from the Model, perhaps from the same textbooks and primary-source readers from which many other historians first encountered the work as students and from which they are still teaching it to their own students years later. Not a specialist in the history of the colonial Americas, I never had occasion to study Winthrop's Model in much more depth than could be found in the aforementioned textbooks and edited primary-source collections. It was simply an emblematic Puritan text that I mentioned briefly in classes out of teaching habit and that I associated with President Ronald Reagan's patriotic speeches of the 1980s. My thanks, then, go to Daniel Rodgers, author of *As a City on a Hill: The Story of America's Most Famous Lay Sermon*, not only for encouraging me to finally read the complete text of Winthrop's Model (a task made much easier due to Rodgers's inclusion of a modern transcription of the Model in the book's appendix)—which I should have done years ago—but for also prompting me to think more critically about the lives of texts and their uses and misuses in nation making.

Rodgers, the Henry Charles Lea Professor of History Emeritus at Princeton University and the author of acclaimed books such as *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (2000) and *Age of Fracture* (2011), has done a great academic and civic service in writing *As a City on a Hill*. This fresh interpretation of Winthrop's Model in history and memory prompts readers to reconsider the meaning and significance of Winthrop's text. The Model, surprisingly, has not played the central role in American political rhetoric, civil religion, and history textbooks readers might have been led to believe from its late twentieth-century starring role in the speeches of presidents and presidential aspirants across the ideological spectrum and from its regular appearances in modern compilations

of American founding documents.

The Model's history, Rodgers explains, is much more complex. Far from being the genesis of American nationhood, "its foundational status is a twentieth-century invention" (p. 5). Winthrop's text is not one of triumphal American exceptionalism but is rather one of doubt and vulnerability. The Model was concerned less with Puritans serving as beacons of freedom to the world and more with them forging a beloved community built on cooperation, but with the ever-present fear that divine judgment would chastise the Puritans if they failed in their Christian obligations. The lore surrounding Winthrop's writing and delivery of the Model—it was allegedly penned and spoken to the Puritans aboard the *Arbella* on their journey to Massachusetts Bay—is likely mythical, Rodgers argues, and mostly a product of Cold War figures seeking timeless roots for the American nation as it faced off against communism in the second half of the twentieth century. Its connection to the modern notion of American national exceptionalism has now been thoroughly intertwined with the Model's original text to such an extent that separating the text from its subsequent reimaginings may seem an impossibility, but Rodgers succeeds in this task admirably.

The book's narrative progresses from Winthrop's writing of the Model around 1630 almost to the present, over the course of which Rodgers examines the piece through three lenses (which serve as the book's three parts): text, nation, icon. The first part of Rodgers's book includes an impressive textual analysis of the Model and pushes back against extant scholarship's assumption that Winthrop wrote the essay at the point of the creation of a new nation and people. Winthrop likely wrote it over the course of several months, with its roots long predating the Puritans' transatlantic voyage to North America. Rodgers stresses throughout part 1 that both the Puritans' settlement in New England and the Model often associated with Massachusetts Bay's founding were "as steeped in doubt as in ambition" (p. 32). This is a central theme of *As a City on a Hill: The Story of America's Most Famous Lay Sermon*: the line of the Model that serves as the book's title, when considered in its proper textual and theological contexts, indicates Winthrop's and the Puritans' "double burden of honor and exposure" (p. 39). Puritan ministers and writers were perpetually concerned that a chosen people could have its chosenness withdrawn by God if they failed to live justly and charitably. Winthrop's main goal in the Model, Rodgers argues, was discerning Providential designs for the world, but not necessarily changing it. This was not a blueprint for making an exceptional, triumphal nation—the image evoked in modern political uses of the Model, the subject of part 3 of Rodgers's book—but was rather one for ensuring the "right ordering of social and economic relationships" among a godly people (p. 86). Potential triumph and failure were linked inextricably in Puritan theology, a point Rodgers demonstrates in later points of the book that has been forgotten in modern appropriations of Winthrop's text. Readers must be careful, Rodgers notes wisely, to keep separate the version of the Model dealing with a just social order (part 1: "Text") and the version dealing with national glory and historical memory after World War II (part 3: "Icon").

Part 2 of the book, "Nation," should be of particular interest to H-Nationalism readers. It also serves as a terrific primer for readers interested in taking a first dive into scholarly literature on nation making. It is in this section dealing with the long nineteenth century that Rodgers explains that Winthrop's Model was largely forgotten until the Cold War. Though examples of similar rhetoric of national chosenness and mentions of a "city on a hill" may have appeared in the nineteenth century, Rodgers argues that most attempts to connect these to the Model amount to "false sightings" due to a common cultural storehouse of long-standing biblical and nascent nationalistic themes (p. 125). This

lengthy period of the Model's absence from mainstream attention, however, is significant because it established the framework of nationalist language and the dominance of the nation-state through which the Model would be understood by twentieth-century audiences. Perceptive analyses of the thought of a diverse array of American intellectuals and political leaders, including Herman Melville, Orestes Brownson, Margaret Fuller, William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Woodrow Wilson, and a fascinating examination of the Liberian nation-building process are highlights of this portion of the book, all of which demonstrate the growing power of American nationalism over the course of the long nineteenth century. They also indicate, though, a significant problem of historiography dealing with Winthrop's Model, which tends to assume, without much evidence, that various nineteenth- and early twentieth-century nation-making projects were influenced by Winthrop and his "city on a hill," when instead, Rodgers argues, the Model was largely ignored in this period.

"Icon," the concluding part of Rodgers's book, finally explores the process through which a mostly forgotten essay was resurrected as a foundational American document in the twentieth century. This process began in earnest in 1930, the three-hundredth anniversary of Massachusetts Bay's founding, during which "the tercentenary's organizers remade [Winthrop] into a figure that they would have liked far better than the governor of 1630" (p. 202). Winthrop and the Puritans were refashioned as American founders; their religious intolerance was decidedly deemphasized. Perhaps more than any individual figure, historian Perry Miller, Rodgers explains, played the most central intellectual role in "writ[ing] the Puritans into the core story of the development of the 'American mind'" (p. 204). This included rediscovering the Model and publicizing it for wider audiences. Cold War readers seeking a usable past for their nation amidst the stresses of the early post-World War II period found the object of their search in the work of historians of Puritanism and early New England such as Miller, Edmund Morgan, and Daniel Boorstin, who interpreted Winthrop and the Massachusetts Bay colonists more positively than previous portrayals of them as dour authoritarians. Rodgers then argues that this new, usable past made its way into mainstream political rhetoric by way of John F. Kennedy and Reagan. Just how this scholarship influenced presidential speechmaking is not entirely clear in Rodgers's book. The author speculates that the Model became known to Kennedy's speechwriter, Theodore Sorensen, perhaps because he "was a serious reader of history" or perhaps because it "was passed on to Sorensen, in a blizzard of other suggestions, by one of the Harvard historians who circled around the Kennedy campaign." Sorensen himself "could no longer remember" precisely how the Model entered Kennedy's speeches (p. 224). This historical murkiness is of course not Rodgers's fault, and the author does a fine job navigating an incomplete archive, demonstrating to readers the difficult work of piecing together historical cause-and-effect.

Most importantly, the adoption of the "city on a hill" theme by Kennedy and subsequent public officials—Reagan most prominently among them; his rearticulation of Winthrop's writing as a formative national text cannot be underestimated, Rodgers argues—signaled a major shift in emphasis in interpreting the Model. Whereas the original text of the Model may have focused heavily on charity and social hierarchy, Cold War speakers and audiences emphasized "national civic renewal" and a sense of "world-historical mission" for the United States, with ostensible roots for this national project in colonial New England (p. 227). Reagan's post-1980, presidential speeches were especially effective vehicles for deemphasizing Winthrop's focus on the potential for failure and for shifting the Model in a more triumphalist direction in national consciousness, a process prevalent in political speechmaking and in high school textbooks and history curricula well into the twenty-first

century.

Rodgers's *As a City on a Hill* is an exceptional piece of scholarship. Eminently readable and sophisticated in its analysis, scholars of nationalism, religion, political history, and the colonial Americas will find much material of interest, as will general audiences seeking to learn more about the shifting contours of American nationalism and about how historians, public officials, and the public work perpetually to remake both national history and the means by which it is propagated. This is an important book.

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