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New England Soul

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The New England Soul. Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England. By Harry S. Stout (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. Pp. xii + 398. Cloth. \$32.50. Paper \$10.95.)

George Whitefield, the great English evangelist, preached no fewer than 175 sermons in a crowded forty-five day itinerary in Massachusetts and Connecticut in 1740. For the power and drama of his delivery he had no equal, and his success seemed convincing proof of his method, which was to preach extemporaneously without notes.

Fortunately for the historian, Whitefield's practice was not general at the time. If it had been, Professor Stout's book, which relies heavily on the very aids to preaching so disparaged by Whitefield, could not have been written. Its novelty is two-fold. First, it attempts a synthesis of the development of preaching and religious culture in the whole colonial period — a tall order in itself. Second, an achievement that makes the book even more remarkable is the substantial use of large numbers of *unpublished* sermons which, the writer accurately contends, were more representative than the occasional sermons which found their way into print. This material enables Stout to get closer to the religious life of the different localities. Perry Miller and others are suitably chastised for the distortions produced by their reliance on the big-name preachers and on printed texts.

Stout, like other historians before him, emphasizes the power of preaching in a society in which other forms of communication, such as pamphlets and newspapers, were entirely secondary. He estimates that something like five million sermons were preached by Congregational ministers in seventeenth and eighteenth century New England to a colonial population that never exceeded half a million people; the average churchgoer heard 7,000 sermons in his lifetime. The author looks at the university background of the preachers and at the changing styles of preaching. He considers the reception of the new learning in the eighteenth century and at the mingling of heart and head in Puritan worship.

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Rather more attention, however, is devoted to the aims, content, and influence of preaching. Stout shows how ministers responded to critical events, such as various Indian hostilities, harvest failures, the Glorious Revolution, the earthquake of 1727, and the wars against France. He makes much of the providential view of history expounded by the Puritan preachers. "Only the history of New England could verify the continued applicability of federal covenants and document God's continued involvement in the affairs of men and of nations." Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*, though it stood out for its excellence, was typical of a general preoccupation with God's dealings with New England.

In its assessment of the role of preachers in the American Revolution, the book moves out into the sociology of religion and politics and invites comparison with work done on the midcentury upheavals in Stuart England. Stout is cautious in the claims he makes and does not see preaching in a simple, direct sense as a cause of rebellion against the perceived British tyranny. Nonetheless, years of preaching on providential themes certainly prepared the way for, and justified, the bold works and actions of 1776, and make it easier to understand why the Revolution and republican principles could be readily accepted by New Englanders as the fulfillment of their history. Preaching also made a vital contribution to the broadening of the previously exclusive New England vision. This vision, by 1776, embraced all American patriots — a democratic impulse that quickly rebounded on the Congregational ministers, since it weakened their privileged status and undermined deference in their hearers. The success of earlier preaching was chiefly measured after the Revolution in the assertiveness and consolidation of a liberty-loving laity. Ministers lost their preeminence, and a common ideology, rather than a common religious faith, came to characterize the new American nation.

The themes Stout explores in *The New England Soul* are complex. The scholarship is impressive, and the argument — itself occasionally sermon-like — is skillfully conducted. The book is a powerful vindication of the principle that religious

history should not be treated as a separate category. Here, quite rightly, the constant interplay of religion, society, and politics is properly recognized.

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Fair Clear and Terrible: The Story of Shiloh, Maine. By Shirley Nelson. (Latham, N.Y.: British American Publishing, 1989. Pp. x + 447. \$21.95.)

In *Fair Clear and Terrible*, novelist Shirley Nelson weaves the captivating but often shocking story of a southern Maine religious colony that proposed to transform the world but instead ended in confusion and disaster. Though Nelson's family were participants — caught up in the impassioned belief in the Second Coming of Christ, as interpreted by their movement's leader, Frank Weston Sandford — her work is told with objectivity and grace, not an easy task considering the rather volatile subject matter.

Centered for its twenty-five year history on a cluster of turreted buildings atop a sandy hill at Durham, the "Holy Ghost and Us Bible Society" began its lofty efforts in 1896. Soon after the completion of its main building, a mansard-roofed structure with a seven-story tower topped with a gold crown (called by Holman Day, then a star among the *Lewiston Journal's* reporters, "one of the showiest places of Androscoggin County"), the colony became known as "Shiloh" (which many Christians saw as a reference to the first coming of Christ). The name Sandford was chosen for its castle-like headquarters.

To understand how Shiloh came into being and why it spawned controversy throughout its existence, one needs to delve into the mind of Frank Sandford, its founder. Author