

EXCELSIOR NEWSLETTER

Excelsior Classical Covenantal Community

November 2009

www.excelsiorclassical.org

“The Father of Our Fathers” and “Fin-de-Siècle” by George Grant

FOR SEVERAL YEARS NOW I have been a fascinated student of the early years of American life and liberty. Admittedly, separating fact from fiction, exactitude from nostalgia, and actuality from myth is often more than a little difficult, but I have found it to be well worth the effort. Though I do not have anything like an idealized perception of that great epoch, I am nevertheless constantly amazed by the breadth and depth of the fledgling American culture and by the substantive character of the people who populated it. Living in a day when genuine heroes are few and far between—at best—those pioneers and the times they vivified provide a startling contrast.

The fact is colonial America produced an extraordinary number of prodigiously gifted men. From William Byrd and George Wythe to Thomas Hutchinson and William Stith, from Robert Beverley and Edward Taylor to Benjamin Franklin and John Bartram, the legacy of the seventeenth-century’s native-born geniuses remains unmatched. Their accomplishments—literary, scientific, economic, political, and cultural—are staggering to consider. According to historian Paul Johnson, “Never before has one place and one time given rise to so many great men.”

As a child, my attentions were naturally drawn to such men as Washington, Hamilton, Adams, Lee, Laurens, Hancock, and the other leaders of the Revolution. But as I have grown older, it has been the men who preceded the so-called “Founding Fathers” that most evidently captivate my interests—it has been the great Pilgrims and Puritans like Cotton Mather (1663–1728).

I have often reflected that it is a cruel irony of history that Mather is generally pictured unsympathetically as the archetype of a narrow and severe intolerance, who proved his mettle by prosecuting the Salem witch debacle of 1692. In fact, he never attended the trials—he lived in the distant town of Boston—and actually denounced them once he saw the tenor they had taken. And as for his Puritanism, it was of the most enlightened sort. Mather was a man of vast learning, prodigious talent, and expansive interests. He owned the largest personal library in the New World—consisting of some 4000 volumes ranging across the whole spectrum of classical

Thanksgiving Feast

Saturday, November 21st 4:00-7:00pm

Look for sign-up sheets at Excelsior. Each family will need to sign-up for a food dish **and** a booth. If you have not come up with a costume, here's a website that has some great (inexpensive) Pilgrim outfits.

<http://search.costumesupercenter.com/search?asug=&w=pilgrim&af=cat1drop%3A>

TeenPact

This is a reminder that December 22 is the early bird registration for TeenPact. Here is the website if you would like more information.

www.teenpact.com

Ladies' Christmas Brunch

Saturday, December 5th

10:30am at the home of Connie Ramsey



learning. He was also the most prolific writer of his day, producing some 450 books on religion, science, history, medicine, philosophy, biography, and poetry. His style ranged from *Magnalia Christi Americana*, dripping with allusions to classical and modern sources, to the practical and straightforward *Essays to Do Good*, which Benjamin Franklin claimed to be the most influential book ever written in this hemisphere.

He was the pastor of the most prominent church in New England—Boston's North Church. He was active in politics and civic affairs, serving as an advisor to governors, princes, and kings. He taught at Harvard and was instrumental in the establishment of Yale. He was the first native-born American to become a member of the scientific elite in the Royal Society. And he was a pioneer in the universal distribution and inoculation of the small pox vaccine.

His father, Increase Mather, was the president of Harvard, a gifted writer, a noted pastor, and an influential force in the establishment and maintenance of the second Massachusetts Charter. In his day he was thought to be the most powerful man in New England—in fact, he was elected to represent the colonies before the throne of Charles II in London. But according to many historians, his obvious talents and influence actually pale in comparison to his son's. Likewise, both of Cotton Mather's grandfathers were powerful and respected men. His paternal grandfather, Richard Mather, helped draw up the Cambridge Platform which provided a constitutional base for the Congregational churches of New England.

And with John Eliot and Thomas Weld, he prepared the Bay Psalm Book which was the first text published in America, achieved worldwide renown, and remains a classic of ecclesiastical literature to this day. His maternal grandfather was John Cotton who wrote the important Puritan catechism for children, *Milk for Babes*, as well as drawing up the Charter Template with John Winthrop as a practical guide for the governance of the new Massachusetts Colony. The city of Boston was so named in order to honor him—his former parish work in England was at St. Botolph's Boston.

According to historian George Harper, together these men laid the foundations for a lasting "spiritual dynasty" in America.

Even so, according to his lifelong admirer, Benjamin Franklin, "Cotton Mather clearly outshone them all. Though he was spun from a bright constellation, his light was brighter still." And according to George Washington, "He was undoubtedly the Spiritual Father of America's Founding Fathers."

Mather was assuredly a man of splendid talents and varied interests whose impact covered the whole field of human endeavor, but his greatest contribution may well have been pioneering a theology of Biblical balance—one that ultimately gave shape to early American culture and life.

Again, according to George Harper: "His supreme achievement lay in drawing on the perspectives of English Puritans like Richard Baxter and German Pietists like August Hermann Francke to forge a distinctive American covenantal theology. This new piety would finally come into its own with the flowering of Evangelicalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Mather's ministry bridged the gap between what was and what was to be."

Though some might doubt the influence of the other-worldly German Pietism in Mather's thought, there is no doubt that he was able to combine deep devotion and strident action into a single and cohesive vision for life and ministry that gave a unique tenor to the nascent American mind-set. He proclaimed a careful balancing of "word and deed, of hand and heart, of the life in the heavenlies and the life of this earth, of personal piety and corporate responsibility."

For Mather this balance was the hallmark of the Reformed faith and was supremely Scriptural—drawn from the very nature and character of God. "Cognizant of His sovereignty, alert to His providence, and respectful of His majesty," Mather believed there was no alternative but to

Excelsior Fundraiser

We are working on scheduling three fundraisers for Excelsior this year. Our first is scheduled for November 5th from 5:30 - 7:30 pm at the Atlanta Bread Co. Excelsior will receive 10% of the cash registers during this time period plus any tips earned by our students and parents serving as food runners in the dining room. We need to invite everyone we can. Tammy Mackey will be sending out an email invitation this week for all Excelsiorites to forward onto your contacts and beyond. Please contact her if you are interested in serving others on this evening. We need your help! We will also try to do this again in December, if our turnout is good. The third fundraiser will involve Steak Escape (on Gloster St.). Tammy will send out more details later. Proceeds will be used to purchase a carrying case for the new projector, paint for the art room, and hopefully scholarships for TeenPact.

“yield to every dimension of true discipleship,” regardless of the “adjustments of life and comfort” such yielding “might effectuate.” It was simply a matter “demanded by the very attributes of the Lord.”

Mather’s influence on my own life has been profound. The fact that he could be so active and at the same time so devout impresses me as the very kind of balance that we all ought to strive for. But the fact that this balance was invigorated in his life by an apprehension of God’s own character and nature is more impressive still.

Mather wasn’t just an overachiever, a pioneer workaholic. He was a man who knew God, disciplined the protocol of his life accordingly, and thereby was used in the good providence of God to alter the destiny of this nation forever. And that is the kind of example to which we should all give credence.

THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO COTTON MATHER completed a book of historical reflection he had worked on “in snatches” for a little more than four years. Toward the end of 1693 he became convinced that in order to facilitate a spiritual reformation in the life of the American church—and those abroad—a survey of the heretofore untold “mighty works of grace” needed to be made public.

Though it would not be published until 1702, *Magnalia Christi Americana* is clearly marked by the concerns of the fin-de-siècle—or end of the century—in which it was written.

Ever since men first learned to measure the passing of time, the fin-de-siècle has been filled with expectation and portent.

Every culture across the globe has invariably attached special significance to the fact that another hundred years have passed. Some because they thought the earth was coming to an end. Some because they thought the earth was coming to a beginning.

But all because they thought the earth was coming to something—perhaps even something significantly new and different.

As the twentieth century comes to an end—and with it, the second millennium since Christ—all those primordial fears, foibles, fancies, and fascinations seem to have redoubled their hold on the attentions of the wise and the foolish alike. Witness for instance the vast proliferation of apocalyptic literature: rapture fiction, prophetic speculations, and end times hubbub.

Thus, we can probably identify all too well with Mather’s concerns as he sat to write.

As at the end of the tenth century, men were frightened by the mendicant movements of barbarians pouring over

once safe borders with an alarming prolificacy and profligacy. As at the end of the twelfth century, men were unsettled by the specter of unchecked plagues rampaging through the population. As at the end of the fourteenth century, men were uncertain about those things men are usually most certain of: doctrines and dogmas—their careless admixture of faith and faithlessness had wrought remonstrance, schism, confusion, and inquisition. As at the end of the sixteenth century, men were shaken by the terrible swiftness of geopolitical change—by the revolutionary emergence of startling new alliances, the stirring of age-old animosities, and the plotting of fierce contemporary conspiracies.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Then, as now, the speculations of men ran to the frantic and the frenetic.

Ecstatic eschatological significance was read into every change of any consequence—be it of the weather or of the government. Apocalyptic reticence was chided as faithlessness, while practical intransigence was enshrined as faithfulness. Fantastic common wisdom replaced ordinary common sense, and plain selfish serenity replaced plain selfless civility.

Mather wrote three hundred years ago, but he wrote in a time very much like our own. What he wrote was a jeremiad—a stern warning. It is a mode of address that we would do well to hear and heed. Though his subject was a survey of the ecclesiastical history of New England—from the founding at Plymouth, the establishment of culture at Boston, and the erection of institutions like Harvard to the desperate struggles of the frontier, the disputations of heretics like Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson, and the wars against the Indians—his purpose was the restoration of the original vision of

the pioneers who had come to America to “set a city on a hill.” He desired, first and foremost, to revive the traditions of the “New England way” and the fervor of the old “errand into the wilderness.”

His fear was that the growing prosperity of the land had “softened the resolve and hardened the hearts” of the “heirs of the Pilgrims and Puritans.”

So instead of writing original history, after the fashion of eyewitnesses like Thucydides and Villehardouin, or reflective history, after the fashion of scholastics like Pselus and Livy, or even directive history, after the fashion of propagandists like Arminius or Bonaventure, Mather preferred philosophical history, after the fashion of functionalists like Eusebius and Vasari.

While philosophical history is primarily concerned with the forest, original history is concerned with the trees, reflective history is concerned with the roots, and directive

Religion hath brought
forth prosperity, and
the daughter
destroyed the mother
—there is a danger,
lest the enchantments
of this world make
them forget their
errand into the
wilderness.
- *Mather’s Magnalia*

history is concerned with the humus. Thus, Mather was concerned first and foremost about the landscape, and only secondarily about the flora and fauna that made up its ecology.

His aim was to preserve the practical lessons and profound legacies of Christendom without the petty prejudice of academic fashions or the parsimonious preference of enlightenment innovations.

He wanted to avoid the trap of noticing everything that went unnoticed in the past while failing to notice all that the past deemed notable. He shunned the kind of modern epic that today is shaped primarily by the banalities of sterile government schools or the fancies of empty theater scenes rather than the realities of historical facts.

At the same time though, he believed that history was a series of lively adventure stories—and thus should be told without the cumbersome intrusion of arcane academic rhetoric or truckloads of extraneous footnotes. In fact, he believed that history was a romantic moral drama in a world gone impersonally scientific—and thus should be told with passion, unction, and verve. To him, the record of the ages was actually philosophy teaching by example—and because however social conditions may change, the great underlying qualities which make and save men and nations do not alter, it was the most important example of all. He understood only too well that the past is ever present, giving shape and focus to all our lives—yet it is not what was, but whatever seems to have been, simply because the past, like the future, is part and parcel of the faith. It is no surprise then that he sought to comprehend events through the same worldview lens as those who wrought the events in the first place.

Reading *Magnalia Christi Americana* is thus satisfying on several levels. First, it affords readers insight into the colonial era unclouded by the palimpsests of modern skeptics and cynics—instead, the remarkable achievements of our Pilgrim and Puritan fathers is confirmed through the lens of faith. Second, it reveals the breadth and depth of the spiritual foundations upon which American liberty was based—freedom was clearly not conceived in a worldview vacuum. Third, it recasts the image of American education—its character and its purpose—by recalling the remarkable early days of classical and covenantal learning at Harvard and Yale. Fourth, it presents a lucid literary approach to the task of writing history—one that became a model of moral philosophy for many of America's finest historians and writers in the years to come.

There are, alas, very few editions of this groundbreaking work available. Indeed, apart from the few copies floating about in the antiquarian booksellers pipeline, *Magnalia* is almost impossible to find. A bound manuscript form of *Magnalia Christi Americana* is available from Standfast Books. It is the only version available of which I know. Although considerably shorter than the full text, it retains the important elements of the original. Regardless, the hunt for this work is worth the effort. In fact, I would say that no serious study of American history, much less American Christian history, is complete without a grounded familiarity with Mather and his master work *Magnalia Christi Americana*.

Preparing for November...

November Headmasters

November 6th - *No one signed up*

November 13th - Anthony Mathenia

November 20th - Charlie Hardin

November 27th - *Thanksgiving*

Lunch:

November 6th -

Little Caesar's

November 13th - **Pepper's**

November 20th - **Taco Bell**

November 27th -

Thanksgiving