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These books offer cultural biographies of two sharply contrasting personalities: John Winthrop, leader of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and symbol of New World Puritan orthodoxy; and Elias Smith: evangelical preacher, herbal physician and leader of one of the more influential evangelical democratic movements of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Despite their obvious temporal, religious and political differences, both men struggled to create a culture where true spirituality could flourish and the ideal of liberty would prevail.

Moseley takes as the focal point of his study Winthrop's Journal, the document that has been read by generations of scholars as an access to the lived realities of colonial life. In his journal Winthrop recorded his perceptions of a number of key relationships—the communal (political, economic and spiritual) relationships among the Puritans, relations with neighboring colonies and Indian tribes, and colonial relations with the metropolis—which have crucially influenced the way in which the meaning of America has since been formulated. Quite rightly, Moseley is less interested in what Winthrop means to us than he is concerned with reconstructing the significance of Winthrop's work on its own terms. Consequently, although he does discuss at length the reception of Winthrop and his journal by a succession of historians, each of whom has brought a distinctive framework through which to view and evaluate Winthrop's achievement and his legacy, Moseley follows Puritan usage, especially in terms of spelling, syntax and general linguistic habits to avoid the danger of simply translating Puritan thought into misleading modern terms. For much the same reason, Moseley's account of Winthrop is placed within the context of his family history and his early life in England. Thus, Winthrop himself is viewed on his own terms and, later, via the medium of his own words. Moseley argues that the journal reveals Winthrop to be not only an accomplished politician but also an historian of insight who used writing as an important analytical tool. So the connections between political activity and the activity of journal-writing provide the focus for this book and for Moseley's central insight. It was through writing, he contends, that Winthrop learned much about himself and the foundational events in American history that he felt bound to interpret. The journal, thus approached, not only describes Winthrop's world and articulates the daily reality of his life, but it also inscribes the mental processes by which Winthrop reached an understanding of himself and the historical enterprise in which he was engaged.

Where Moseley prevents fresh perspective upon an established historical figure, Kenny has more explicit methodological aims at the center of his enterprise. Kenny analyzes the intersection of biography with the history of an idea—specifically, republicanism, in his account of the life of Elias Smith and the tradition of evangelical Christianity he represents. Smith's evangelical mission brought together the Jeffersonian concept of republicanism and the practices of radical Protestantism in a vision of the "perfect law of liberty" that challenged the established social order and galvanized the sentiments of those who joined the "Christian Movement" or "Christian Connection"—the group he helped to lead after breaking with the Baptist church over the issue of equality. Smith practiced a style of rhetoric that fused New Testament prophecy with the ideals enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, which he disseminated in sermons, other writings including his autobiography, and the nationally circulated newspaper The Herald of Gospel Liberty. In an interpretation of national destiny that drew heavily upon millennial influences, Smith hailed America as the promised land of true democracy where equality and individual autonomy would prevail and social hierarchy or deference would be unknown. Going further than this, he translated his vision into a coherent ideology and program for his followers. Kenny does more than simply describe the life and social context of this remarkable and fascinating character. He uses the figure of Elias Smith as an example of the democratization of social practice in the post-Revolutionary years and as the text for a compelling analysis of the complex interplay of theology, social experience and historical consciousness that determined the ideology shaping Elias Smith's life.

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