

***Authorizing the Past: The Rhetoric of History in Seventeenth-Century New England.***  
 By Stephen Carl Arch. DeKalb: Northern Illinois Univ. Press. 1994. xi, 232 pp.  
 \$30.00.

In *Authorizing the Past* Stephen Carl Arch sets two primary goals for himself. He wishes to gather the Puritan histories, challenging his readers to acknowledge a genre not sufficiently recognized, and to scrutinize the texts in this genre as literary works. That all these histories have of course been subject to scholarly treatment is a fact Arch recognizes, and his engagement with other critics shows his own broad knowledge of the secondary as well as the primary sources. His study focuses on, but is not limited to, John Winthrop's *History of New England*, Edward Johnson's *Wonder-Working Providence*, and Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*. He also devotes a chapter to Increase Mather.

Arch's Epilogue very nicely sums up the perspective from which he takes on his project. He writes that the histories he discusses represent attempts by each generation "to write its own books, its own stories, its own history. As such, these histories exist at the intersection of history and rhetoric: as history, they claim to chart New England's past, present the truth of providential history, and encompass confusing historical events in a comprehensible, reassuring narrative; as rhetoric, they represent 'visionary compacts'" (a phrase that expresses Arch's indebtedness to Donald Pease). It is the tension between these intersecting matters that informs Arch's study.

Although it may appear that Arch is stating the obvious in pointing out the process of successive generations reinterpreting history, his attempt to incorporate the reinterpretations within a particular vision often makes for provocative, insightful interpretation. Indeed, the book is at its best in its readings of particular histories rather than in its synthesizing argument. To give only one example of his textual scrutiny, without carping he points out rather successfully how his own reading of Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*, based on the whole, lengthy history, reaches conclusions other than those Sacvan Bercovitch articulated in focusing on eight pages of it. Yet Arch is no iconoclast, and he readily acknowledges the achievements of Bercovitch and other scholars in the field.

Inevitably, there are quibbles one may have with the book. In defending Increase Mather against charges of being a "harsh and unyielding fanatic," he cites Vernon Parrington as an example of a critic taking such a view even though Arch knows very well the more sophisticated work that has superseded such antiquated views. Indeed, he cites them. Also, although Arch's prose is usually quite fine, he falls into clichés such as "to call into question" and "it is also important to note." But these are indeed quibbles. Arch has done a very nice job of focusing attention on the rhetorical implications of the historical texts that he discusses and of placing them in the context necessary for appreciating their historical and literary significance.

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