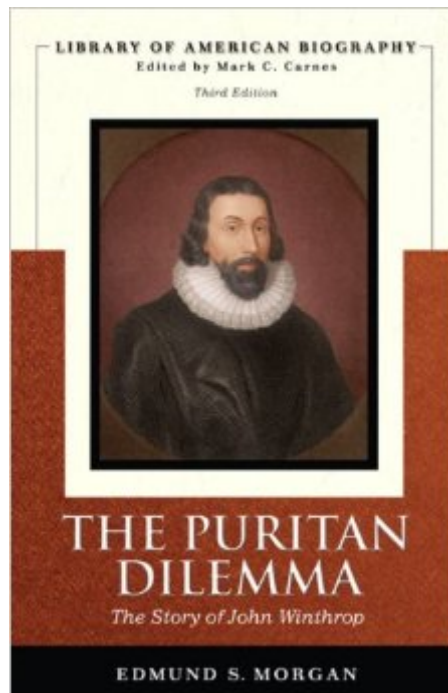


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# The Puritan Dilemma: The Story Of John Winthrop (Library Of American Biography)



## Synopsis

Caught between the ideals of God's Law and the practical needs of the people, John Winthrop walked a line few could tread. In every aspect of our society today we see the workings of the tension between individual freedom and the demands of authority. Here is the story of the people that brought this idea to our shores: the Puritans. Edmund Morgan relates the hardships and triumphs of the Puritan movement through this vivid account of its most influential leader, John Winthrop. The titles in the Library of American Biography Series make ideal supplements for American History Survey courses or other courses in American history where figures in history are explored. Paperback, brief, and inexpensive, each interpretive biography in this series focuses on a figure whose actions and ideas significantly influenced the course of American history and national life. In addition, each biography relates the life of its subject to the broader themes and developments of the times.

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## Customer Reviews

One of Edmund Morgan's most enduring works, *The Puritan Dilemma*, published in 1962, is still a good starting point for understanding the motivations behind Puritan migration to America and the ideological and political difficulties they faced once they arrived. It was Winthrop who declared that the new colony would be as a city on a hill, a new example of community for the rest of the western world. Morgan shows that this statement masks the Puritans' somewhat melancholy desertion of the political revolution brewing back in England, and examines what the search for true community cost in terms of individual freedom as well. The contradictions in Winthrop himself mirror those of the

entire Puritan colony and by extension America: what does freedom mean, and what is the proper role of the individual in society? How could a group looking for freedom of worship cast Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams out of their society? Morgan examined the issue of freedom many times, most definitively in *American Slavery--American Freedom*, but this short biography lays bare fundamental American problems with grace, concision, and a consistent point of view that debunks our culture's simplistic use of the "puritan" label. An intellectual bargain at only 200 pages.

This is an excellent overview of Winthrop and his Massachusetts Bay Colony. The author traces how John Winthrop struggled with the dilemma, first internally, as he dealt with the question of whether traveling to the New World represented a selfish form of "separatism", the desire to separate himself from an impure England, or whether, as he eventually determined, it offered a unique opportunity to set an example for all men by establishing a shining "City upon a Hill", a purer Christian community in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In this regard, it seems to have been of vital importance to Winthrop and his fellow Puritan colonists that they had the imprimatur of the King and that though they were physically distancing themselves from the Church of England, they were not actually renouncing it. The issues Winthrop faced are no different than what the Church still faces today (though perhaps seemingly less practical). That is, what is the normative and non-arbitrary basis for jurisprudence- Gods' law or autonomy? Gary North's books are particularly helpful in answering this, hopefully, rhetorical question. The sad reality is that most ecclesiastic officers and the Church as a whole are altogether unprepared to deal with the task presented to Winthrop because of their pessimillennialial views despite Christ's admonition that the (defensive!) Gates of Hades shall not prevail against His kingdom. I highly recommend this book.

I read this book many years ago for an American Literature class and am now rereading it for an American History class. I enjoyed it the first time and am enjoying it now. The writing is fluid, entertaining; the points made are profound. I would recommend this book to anyone who wants to know more about Winthrop and the early Puritan immigrants--a quick, pleasurable read.

Edmund S. Morgan is simply a wonderful historian and writer. As I get older I find I appreciate a writer who can get to the nub of his subject without blathering on for hundreds of unnecessary pages. This excellent short biography concisely tells the story of Winthrop's leading role in the Massachusetts Bay Colony established during the Great Migration of Puritans. Great books challenge us with new insights. Read this book and leave your preconceptions of Puritans behind.

People often bemoan or praise the "Puritan work ethic" and the Puritan character as being judgemental (true), hardworking (true) and joyless (not true). For better or worse, the Puritans are so much at the core of the American character that it is fascinating to delve into the details of how they came to the New World and what they did. As an agnostic reader, I have no opinion of his religious beliefs, but John Winthrop's self-discipline, focus and all-round ability are fascinating. He was the original Go To guy, I suppose. I especially like the way they figured out how to govern themselves. I am sure if I was assigned this book in high school or college I would write similar reviews as many of the previous ones; but as a 50-year-old who is interested in American social history, I think this book is a winner, and Edmund Morgan is an excellent writer.

This brief and dense history of John Winthrop's Boston is a must-read for folks interested in colonial life in America. Beginning with the formation of the Massachusetts Bay Company in England, and following them to the new world and the new struggles that accompany their arrival, historical juggernaut Edmund Morgan paints an unfamiliar picture of John Winthrop. Often depicted as a fundamentalist zealot, Morgan's Winthrop is a more pragmatic puritan - one willing to make compromises in favor of trade, diplomacy, or popular support. Winthrop's struggles with his own people are also highlighted throughout the book, particularly in the roller coaster of on-again, off-again governorship between him and his rivals. The book also clarifies the objectives and different types of puritanism, which I, as a student of history, found very helpful in understanding the religious landscape of Englands both new and old. The one downside to the work is the style in which it's written. As an early work of Morgan's, he had not yet found the compelling, conversational voice which he is today known for, resulting in an academic tone that makes reading a bit tedious at times. Regardless, the thorough research and interesting subject matter more than makes up for it.

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