
DANIELS, BRUCE C. *Puritans at Play: Leisure and Recreation in Colonial New England*. New York, St Martin's Press, 1995. Pp. 271. Notes, index. \$23.95 cb.

By studying a wide range of activities that he describes as “fun,” Bruce Daniels seeks to advance the reader’s understanding of the complex realities of New England colonial life that lay somewhere between the dour, joyless, and repressed Puritan persona of traditional history and the picture of the “happy, well-adjusted Puritan” (p. 8), presented by Edmund Morgan and others. It is his hope that the reading of *Puritans at Play* will be “instructive and fun” (p. xiv), just as the writing had been for the author. In general terms Daniels has succeeded in this dual endeavor.

This study clearly shows that even the “respectable” Puritan mind was sufficiently flexible as generally to concede a place for relaxation within the ambit of mortally correct human behavior. At the same time, orthodox caution over the dangers of excess led to the ambiguities and inconsistencies to be found in both the thinking and the official policies of the Puritans which have, in turn, been central to the difficulties historians have experienced in deducting or unravelling the essence of the Puritan mind. Daniels makes very effective use of the term *sober mirth* (p. 24) to illustrate the ambivalence in Puritan thinking. Much of the book is devoted to tracing a prevailing pattern of increasing relaxation in the ways in which this ambivalence is worked out, in theory and practice. “In the context of an evolving complex social structure” (p. xiii), the restricting caution of the 17th century is slowly mitigated so that, by the Revolutionary era, an increasingly wide range of activities are generally sanctioned or at least tolerated. Yet Daniels makes it clear that this is a general pattern, not a rigid template, for such changes occur unevenly. Thus the theater and many sports remained targets of almost total prohibition, while greater diversity of reading materials and forms of music, more open sexual contacts, and a tavern culture, which includes drinking, were increasingly tolerated during the course of the 18th century.

In constructing his story, Daniels employs an engaging written style, a scholarly judgment that balances finer points of detail and broad analysis, and thorough documentation, even though, as he concedes, he is obliged to rely much more heavily on “respectable” sources than “unrespectable” sources.

Partly, one suspects, as a result of the praiseworthy effort to take every possible opportunity to illustrate the “other” mirthful side of Puritan thinking and behavior, Daniels casts the definitional net of relaxation/play so wide as to embrace the act of listening to a three-hour sermon. Even for sports historians accustomed to definitional debates over “sport,” “leisure,” “play,” and “recreation” (all terms used in the full title of the book), the breadth of activities incorporated by Daniels in this study stretches far beyond the scope of familiar terminological disputes. Apart from any debate over semantics that is thus provoked, one unfortunate consequence for those whose interests focus on sport and physical recreation is that these topics are the primary subject of only one chapter out of eleven; 21 pages out of 222. Furthermore, more than a third of that chapter is devoted to gambling and card-playing.

There are two main, somewhat overlapping, themes in Chapter IX, “Men Frolic by Themselves,” where the main emphasis is on sport. The first concerns the Puritan’s distinction between approved and unapproved sport, which largely involves application of the criteria of “moderate and useful” (p. 166). Under this standard, hunting, fishing, and the martial arts “fared better in the move across the Atlantic” (p. 167) than most ball and blood sports. The second main element in Daniels’ discussion concerns the influence of Puritan presumptions about the association between monarchical and aristocratic society on the one hand and vulgar, undisciplined, and violent sports on the other. Daniels argues that for the Puritans the increasing popularity of such sports in England, from the Restoration of 1660 onwards, served to justify discouragement of them in New England on

both political and moral grounds. In their presumed homogeneity, English sporting practices provide a perfect foil for the Puritan disapproval. Such an argument can only be sustained in its entirety by ignoring the fact that the mortality of many sports was contested territory in England and that there was no simple path of development toward the modern world of sport, including the burgeoning of spectator sports.

The absence of R.W. Malcolmson's *Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700-1850* from the sources cited by Daniels appears relevant here. A comparable uniformity is assumed to mark the role of sport in the colonies outside of New England where one suspects some of the same tensions were evident as in England. One would wish that elements of comparability were considered alongside those of contrast.

For the historian generally interested in colonial New England, *Puritans at Play* does indeed make for informative and enjoyable reading. The sport historian may similarly appreciate this achievement but also have reasons to be disappointed in the contribution to the specialized field both as to quantity and quality.

—NORMAN BAKER
University at Buffalo