Cultural Secrets as Narrative Form

Reid, Margaret

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THE perfect subject for the generation of the historical imagination in nineteenth-century America proves to be the founding age of Puritanism in the New World. Michael Davitt Bell notes that American romances written between 1820 and 1850 reveal an extraordinary interest in seventeenth-century New England history.1 While a previous generation had worked to remember the American revolution as a site of national origins, Hawthorne and his contemporaries reveal anxieties about the limits of this narrative by turning further back, suggesting an anterior point of origins, an alternative founding story. A turn back to the colonial era of New England is, of course, a narrowly focused search for origins, but Hawthorne was not alone in assuming “that New England’s priority in historical influence lent it primacy in determinations of national identity.”2

To Hawthorne and his contemporaries, the very remoteness of early New England history might be useful for purposes of imaginative consolidation, and so through that apparently narrow regionalism the new national story—potentially—would expand its bounds. In contrast to Cooper’s America of 1821, here there is no longer an active anxiety about a dying generation of leaders taking sacred memories to the grave, but rather national storytelling must address a broad sense of far-flung descendants with perilously little to connect them to their forefathers’ history. The task, then, is not to ensure the continuity of memory, but to prove connectedness, that is, to reimagine fully—to bring back to life—a story with no tangible threads holding it to the present.

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Stories of the founding era risked revealing America’s condition of ruptured isolation from that foundation; thus the appeal of the golden age of Puritanism may have appeared at times less as an image of promise than of
threat. If Puritanism thus came to signify both a belief in connection and a fear of division, it seems fitting that new interest might arise in Old England’s Puritan revolution, that aspect of New England’s Puritan heritage from which there was greatest distance, thus the least to be lost and the most to be gained, imaginatively.

Critics have noted *The Scarlet Letter’s* particular resonance with the Old World Puritan revolution because the major action of the story is set between 1642 and 1649. In England, of course, these are the years of bitter civil strife between Charles I and the Puritan army. In New England these years are remembered for a decidedly mixed set of portents—events seen at the time as great crises, but later as harbingers of consolidation. As crises, these events had been interpreted to be direct results of Old World events: substantial reverse emigration (often to support the Puritan army), the establishment of the New England confederation (a protonationalistic movement), the first execution for witchcraft, and the death of the Massachusetts Bay Colony’s legendary leader, John Winthrop.

In their broad folkloric life, the Puritan judges were linked in some way to all of these, and all in turn have resonance within Hawthorne’s novel. This is not to say that Hawthorne’s primary context is that of the fiction’s setting. On the contrary, by reviving alternative stories from the Puritan ages—stories that had proven, through their repetition, to be particularly resonant to antebellum America—Hawthorne examines these inherited stories, finding some connections to his own day as well as some limitations in their capacities to restore imaginative order to nineteenth-century audiences. Thus these seventeenth-century contexts become useful to Hawthorne insofar as they have remained resonant to antebellum audiences; invoking such familiarities, *The Scarlet Letter* explores the sources and the boundaries of their nineteenth-century resonance.

In numerous retellings and several versions lasting well into Hawthorne’s day and beyond, tales of the regicide judges focused on their uncanny return at moments of crisis. In their fictional and symbolic lives, the judges’ ability to lead the Puritan colonies away from the dangers of the first century of colonization and later repetitions of the same—desertion, witchcraft, failures of cohesion or leadership, and enemy attacks—made them heroes. As the stories go, it is by the hidden care of the colonies that these men—whose lives represent a radicalism never fully embraced by New World Puritans—are saved. In one sense the regicides might seem to be historical figures too overdetermined for an elastic life within cultural mythology; their lives are so fully shaped by one past event. But that past event—the conviction and execution of Charles I—never finds a comfortable place in the cultural consciousness of America, in either the colonial
or the early national periods. For that reason, the judges of legend develop a paradoxical relationship to their own history: Their relation to history makes them unknowable rather than familiar, and they are effectively separated from the Old World consequences of their actions.

As characters within American folklore, the regicides are larger than their British context, and so they implicitly transcend blame for their excesses; this becomes possible because, inversely, in the American tales, they are absolutely subordinate to their American context. That is, in colonial and early national legend, the judges are imagined to be restored to potency only within carefully controlled national (or protonational) crises during which their particular powers of radicalism would be deemed necessary rather than dangerous; despite their formidable powers of agency, these men are reborn only to facilitate cultural continuity rather than radical change in the American imagination. The emergent mythology surrounding the judges’ symbolic lives deepens with the necessary secrecy of their existence. Hidden in a cave near New Haven and in a basement in Hadley, Massachusetts, traveling only at night or in disguise—and yet always well known to loyal citizens of the colonies—the judges become a perfect symbol of carefully muted rebellion, essential in spirit, but always fortuitously controlled by external ideological constraints.

**AMERICA’S CROMWELL**

In both England and America, these judges—along with other players in the Puritan revolution—had been favorites in the invention of heroes and martyrs beginning with the publication of *Eikon Basilike*, which inaugurated “the cult of the martyr king” immediately after Charles I’s death. Not surprisingly, in America the status of hero or martyr is reserved for those on the Puritan side, although during the Protectorate, New England’s relations with Cromwell were hardly enthusiastic. Early American accounts express a cautious uncertainty, easily imagined in light of Cromwell’s decidedly ambivalent attitude toward the colonies. As one nineteenth-century historian explains it, “The protector possessed great energy of character; and it was his object to raise both the glory and the terror of the commonwealth. For this purpose, he was disposed to keep the colonies in due subjection.” In fact, a petition to Parliament in 1651 from the Massachusetts Bay leaders expresses concern in response to “the parliaments pleasure that [Massachusetts] should take a new patent” from them; the threat of more restrictive patent conditions and other matters led Governor John Endicott and the General Court to say, “These things
make us doubt and fear what is intended towards us.” Letters between Cromwell and Endicott in 1652 and 1654 reveal more of this relationship. Here Massachusetts first successfully resists being drawn into Cromwell’s campaign against the Irish after Cromwell had proposed transplanting the Bay Colony to Ireland to assist in his conquest. In response to Cromwell’s further request to raise troops to help against the Dutch in New Netherlands and Jamaica, again the Massachusetts leaders diplomatically reply, “It hathe beene no small comfort to us poor exiles, in these utmost ends of the earth” to see Cromwell rise in power, and yet, they say, they prefer to “forbeare the use of the sword” on his behalf.

Despite these tentative early relations between New World and Old during Cromwell’s lifetime, later American interest in Cromwell is strong and sustained through the nineteenth century. Many seem to have agreed with Emerson, who writes of his respect “for the simplicity and energy of evil” in both Cromwell and Napoleon. George Bancroft’s History (1834–1876) romanticizes Cromwell’s ambition and criticizes him only for trying to do too much, too fast. According to Bancroft, “hypocrisy” and “piety” are almost equally blended in Cromwell and his army, but this contradiction is not the cause for their failure. Instead, Bancroft argues that “Nations change their institutions but slowly: to attempt to pass abruptly from feudalism and monarchy to democratic equality was the thought of enthusiasts, who understood neither the history, the character, nor the condition of the country. It was like laying out into new streets a city already crowded with massive structures. The death of the king was the policy of Cromwell, and not the policy of the nation.”

According to Bancroft, the “fatal mistake” dooming this historical movement is Cromwell’s radicalism, not the revolution itself. Radicalism here may be abstract and ideological at one level, but it is also decidedly concrete, reflected quite clearly through its temporal manifestations. Cromwell’s ultimate failure comes because he seeks “immediate emancipation” where “moderation” is the better course, and according to this view Cromwell’s achievements are not as great as the age they usher in; “his death was necessarily a signal for new revolutions.” “The authority of Cromwell marks but a period of transition. His whole career was an attempt to conciliate a union between his power and permanent public order, and the attempt was always unavailing, from the inherent impossibility growing out of the origin of his power. It was derived from the submission, not from the will of the people.” Unable to gain “a concert with the national affections,” Bancroft’s Cromwell is a man of great power but not of “truth,” and it is “truth only that of itself rallies men together.”

Cromwell, then, takes his place in American historiography through
the nineteenth century as an individual in the most powerful and most restrictive senses of the word. These historians remember neither his ability to garner popular support nor his management of the Puritan army. Despite "profess[ing] himself the servant of Providence, borne along by irresistible necessity," Cromwell "did not connect himself with the revolution, for he put himself above it, and controlled it." As a player in the drama of the Puritan revolution as remembered from afar—in America's nineteenth century—Oliver Cromwell stands apart from the very revolution he leads, leaving him at once untouched by its corruption and/or alienated from its purity of spirit, depending upon historiographical perspective.

This symbolic separation from the war itself paradoxically helps shape American imaginings of Cromwell; taken from the very context that gave him fame, America's Cromwell is at once admired in spirit and considered to be a sort of lost kinsman, one close to them in spirit and yet fatally divided from their colonial venture. Two representative works on the subject of the lost possibilities of Cromwell's possible affiliation with New England are an 1850 lecture by Sherman Canfield to the Young Men's Literary Association of Cleveland and an 1866 pamphlet reviewing evidence of Cromwell's reputed desire to emigrate to New England. John Dean's eleven-page pamphlet, "The Story of the Embarkation of Cromwell and his Friends for New England," announces its purpose as the "bring[ing] together [of] the different accounts" of the legend—in the various authors' own words—in order to survey the evidence behind the one mythic claim that most closely links Cromwell to the colonists:

[Emigration had become so general, that in April 1637, the King issued a proclamation to restrain the "disorderly transportation of his subjects to the American colonies." It commanded that no license should be given them without a certificate that they had taken the oaths of supremacy and allegiance and conformed to the discipline of the established church. A fleet of eight ships was soon after stopped, which were lying in the Thames and ready to sail. In one of those ships were actually embarked Oliver Cromwell . . . and others who afterwards figured [prominently] under the commonwealth. Charles little suspected, that by his arbitrary measure, he was detaining men destined to overthrow his throne, and to terminate his days by a violent death.]

As Dean recounts his sources and their evidence, he shows a strong interest not only in pointing out the foibles of the monarchy, but also in claiming Cromwell for New England as an idealist and an adventurer. Canfield's
lecture similarly casts Cromwell in the mold of a typically “American” hero. He sets out to redress the “horrid caricature—drawn by political and ecclesiastical partisans” with what he will consider to be an accurate, even exemplary, portrayal. As a Presbyterian pastor, Canfield’s overt social purpose here is to provide in the image of Cromwell an appropriate role model for his audience of young church members. Canfield invokes the legend of Cromwell’s intended emigration to demonstrate the sincerity of a man “willing to forsake his country and retire to a wilderness”; he writes much in the spirit of Thomas Carlyle, and he goes on to promote an image of Cromwell’s great integrity by citing characteristics common to “our own Washington.”22 Like Washington, Cromwell stands for the “natural state” of justice that precedes the order of a nation.23

The lesson in Canfield’s lecture is that “men devoted to literature and the fine arts” must recognize the “genius” of the man of action; this recognition is saved for a redeemed world, perhaps the future America: “[A]s resurrection trumpets to tribes and nations spiritually dead, then will mankind begin to render a due tribute to the memory of Oliver Cromwell.”24 American affections for Cromwell all share a complex patriotism as they celebrate their own achievements (and perhaps, implicitly, their own moderation and restraint) in the lost figure of a foreign revolution: “Had Cromwell had his way he would have made the political system of England akin to that of the United States.”25 According to the logic of these accounts, the early American colonies are naturally, wisely, intimidated by this man of action. Now in the nineteenth century, however—with the new nation firmly established—America stands at a safe distance, ready to embrace this symbol of its newly achieved present state, precisely because that symbol is forever mired in his own Old World past. These admiring, even affectionate, American portraits of Cromwell all depend upon the knowledge that he is, culturally speaking, irrecoverable. To Hawthorne’s world, Cromwell has come to stand as the emigrant manqué, an agent whose actions prove that, despite disasters in his own land, he heroically served the chosen New England world as prophet.

NEW ENGLAND’S REGICIDES

New England’s three regicides are born into legend through their successful act of emigration, and as they emigrate into a secret existence, they too become figural prophets. One historian writes that when Cromwell’s cousin, Edward Whalley, and Whalley’s son-in-law, William Goffe, arrived in Boston on July 27, 1660, “no such prominent Englishmen had
visited New England during its entire Colonial existence.” Whalley and Goffe had been high-ranking participants in the Puritan revolution. They were among fifty-nine signers of the execution order for Charles I, and the same ship that carried them to New England also brought confirmation of the Stuart Restoration.

Although Whalley, Goffe, and John Dixwell (who joined the others in New England in 1664) all play important official roles within the Puritan army, they come to represent a kind of link between New England and the Old World revolution that is substantially different from the one Cromwell represents. Predictably, early British accounts of the Protectorate’s rise and fall, celebrating the restoration of the monarchy, do little to separate one regicide from another, and they are filled with condemnation of all of the high-ranking revolutionaries with relatively equal vitriol. Such pamphlets accuse not only Cromwell but all of the regicides of being “savage creature[s] in the midst of a Civil People” and of committing violations of biblical proportions:

[The regicides], not having fear of God before [their] Eyes, and being instigated by the Devil, did Maliciously, Treasonably, and Feloniously . . . Sign and Seal a Warrant for the Execution of His Late Sacred and Serene Majesty.

Next [to] our Saviours Crucifixion, never Sins wore a deeper Dye, than that Horrid Cruelties of these Matchless Regicides. . . . To commit Villany unparallel’d, and bravely to outface Death, is the badge of a desperate Traytor, and an Unhappy Christian . . . as if the Murther of a King, and the Ruine of Church and State were of so slight a consequence, that among birds of his own feather Treason becomes meritorious, and his detestable death a glorious Martyrdom.

Overall, if there is a distinction to be made between Cromwell and his officers, it seems that Cromwell is the less maligned in these Restoration-era pamphlets, most likely (at least in part) because he is no longer a threat, having died before the Restoration. Many of these British texts focus their anxieties on the possible spread of revolution via those who have escaped prosecution (“so many Poisonous Opinions having gone abroad”). Others, however, celebrate their sense of justice by insisting that vengeance will find every accomplice. In their religious hyperbole and political metaphor, all of these early accounts sow the seeds of romance that will later revive these figures abroad and draw them into international legend, while the regicides’ own countrymen seem to wish to forget them following their successful escape from Britain.
New England accounts offer chronologies of the regicides’ travels in the colonies; these may be established from local and family histories, letters from the regicides preserved among such papers, and Thomas Hutchinson's foundational account in his 1764 *History.* Virtually all sources agree that Whalley and Goffe arrived in the Bay Colony on July 27, 1660. Their ship had left England in May, the same month that the restored King was officially proclaimed. In October of that same year, twenty-nine other regicides were tried and convicted for their crimes in England; by this time, most authorities believe that New England was aware that Whalley and Goffe were wanted by the crown.

Before his death—hoping for an eventual restoration of his family’s position—Charles I had written to his son, instructing him: “[S]how the greatness of your mind, rather to conquer your enemies by pardoning than punishing. . . . If God give you success, use it humbly and far from revenge.” Charles II did indeed issue offers of pardon for those of his father’s judges who would be willing to turn themselves in voluntarily under stated conditions, but Whalley and Goffe had already fled England shortly before that offer of indemnity, which followed the House of Lords’ order of arrest. All of those who failed to appear—including, of course, Whalley, Goffe, and Dixwell—were then excluded from the offer of pardon by an act of Parliament. By this time Whalley and Goffe had been enjoying the open hospitality of New England for more than a month.

As pressure on the colonial authorities increased, Whalley and Goffe apparently left Massachusetts Bay on February 26, 1661, arriving in the New Haven Colony by March 7. This initial removal marks the end of their charmed first year as celebrities of sorts in New England, but it marks only the beginnings of their mythic existence. Although their lives would soon become much more difficult, the judges enjoyed safe travel to New Haven, as facilitated by John Davenport. In preparation for their arrival, Davenport delivered a sermon to his congregation, asking the citizens of New Haven to avoid using “the reproachful titles put upon the people of God, whom prophane men call Phanaticks.” The lesson, Davenport emphasized, is God’s commitment to the chosen people even (or especially) as they suffer in captivity, and the event of this sermon marks the judges’ transfiguration into symbol within New England culture:

Let us . . . own the reproached and persecuted people and cause of Christ in suffering times. With-hold not countenance, entertainment, protection, from such, if they come to us, from other Countreys, as from France or England, or any other place. Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained Angels unawares. . . . [P]rovide safe and
comfortable shelter and refreshment for my people, in the heat of prospection and opposition raised against them, hide the outcasts, betray not him that wandereth.40

Davenport’s sermon not only sets the tone but actually establishes the vocabulary for many New England memories of the regicides. Their lives—as documented in their own letters and by local legends—were recalled as a mixture of the mundane and the fantastic, and they were immediately embraced by the American imagination (in the words of one Scottish historian) as “men dropped down from heaven.”41

According to Hutchinson, on March 27, Whalley and Goffe traveled from New Haven to the town of Milford, nearby but to the west, apparently to throw pursuers off track by seeming to head for New Netherlands. They then returned to New Haven to stay for about a month at Davenport’s home. On April 28, the official king’s order arrived, commanding the capture and return of Whalley and Goffe, and historians have long believed that within ten days the authorities of all of the New England colonies would have known of the order:42

Trusty and well-beloved,—Wee greete you well. Wee being given to understand that Colonell Whalley and Colonell Goffe, who stand here convicted for the execrable murther of our Royall Father, of glorious memory, are lately arrived at New England, where they hope to shroud themselves securely from the justice of our lawes;—Our will and pleasure is, and we do hereby expressly require and command you forthwith upon the receipt of these our letters, to cause both the said persons to be apprehended, and with the first opportunity sent over hither under a readiness and diligence to perform you duty; and so bid you farewell.43

Here the regicides’ travels would take on a greater sense of urgency. From late April through late August they moved quickly among friends and protectors: From Davenport’s house, they moved to the home of William Jones, “said to have been the son of the regicide John Jones,” who had recently been executed.44 In May, a search party led by Thomas Kellond and Thomas Kirke, two merchants who had recently arrived from England and remained zealous supporters of the crown, formed in Boston.45

When Kellond and Kirke arrived in the New Haven area, the regicides apparently embarked on one of their more famous adventures. Governors Winthrop (Connecticut) and Leete (New Haven) are credited by early New England historians with delaying the search: The search party reported that the New Haven magistrates in particular were “obstinate and
pertinacious in their contempt of his Majesty,” and during this manufactured delay the regicides left Jones’s home for a cave near New Haven harbor. Kellond and Kirke were then persuaded to push their search to Manhattan, and from there they returned, without success, to Boston by sea. Hutchinson reports that the regicides left the cave at West Rock and returned to the public space of the New Haven Colony on June 11, 1661, and in an effort to take pressure off of friends who had concealed them, they offered themselves to Governor Leete for arrest. When Leete declined this opportunity to turn them in, the judges returned to West Rock and stayed there for two more months before leaving for Milford once again, where they lived for two subsequent years.

Despite the failure of the Kellond and Kirke expedition, British authorities did not give up their pursuit of the escaped judges, nor did they forget to punish the colonies for their rather evident complicity. On April 20, 1662, when Charles II granted a charter for Connecticut, he listed no men of New Haven among the patentees. On June 28 of the same year, the king again wrote to the authorities in Massachusetts, reiterating the fact that he had not issued pardons for the escaped judges. In a 1662 letter to his wife, who remained in England, Goffe mentions this atmosphere of heightened anxieties present on both sides of the Atlantic: “Pray be private and careful who you trust.” In the summer of 1664, when commissioners for the king arrived in New England to attend to various administrative matters, they listed among their concerns the apprehension of not only the regicides but also of anyone who had aided them. During this tense interval, the judges left the home of friends in Milford and again headed for their cave at West Rock. Around that time, too, legend relates that the judges were comfortable and contented, enjoying the luxury of irony while reading British reports that they had been found and killed in Switzerland. However, all historical evidence shows that they were still facing substantial dangers. Sources agree that on October 13, 1664, Whalley and Goffe began their night travels to Hadley, a town in western Massachusetts. At Hadley, they stayed at the home of John Russell, and there John Dixwell joined Whalley and Goffe several months later.

According to all evidence, the regicides saw themselves as a part of a world about to end rather than at the birth of a nation. Letters to and from the exiled judges recall their sense of acting in a time “the like hardly falling out in the memory of man.” Goffe writes to his wife in 1674, “These are dying times, wherein the Lord hath been and is breaking down what he hath built, and plucking up what he hath planted, and therefore it is not a time to be seeking great things for ourselves.” Particularly while hiding in Hadley, the judges were apparently eagerly awaiting the fulfill-
ment of their apocalyptic expectations. Hutchinson reports that “they were much disappointed, when the year 1666 had passed without any remarkable event.”

Those who sheltered them had also come to expect the end-times, as John Davenport shows in a letter to William Goodwin, a prominent Hadley citizen: “N. England allsoe hath cause to tremble, whose day is repentance & reformation prevent not, for our backsliding, & changing our waies, from the ancient pathes, to comply with Old England, in thire corruptions.” The judges often wrote of their concerns about “what may become of poor England, whose sins are grown to a great Height.” They received with horror news of celebrations of the Restoration, parliamentary acts passed against the Puritans, and even festivities culminating in the vilification of “the effigies of the Protector, Hugh Peters, & others.” Throughout their years of exile, they watched for portents of God’s wrath—in crop failures, hailstorms, an earthquake, and birthing disasters—while eagerly awaiting the time when such wrath might prove curative, “cutt[ing] asunder the spirit that is in Princes, and be[ing] dreadful to the Kings of the earth.”

While the three regicides lived secretive lives at Hadley, British interest in their capture failed to diminish. But in one letter to Goffe from his wife, she “regoyce[s] to heare that the contry agres so well with [him] & that [he] thryve[s] so well.” From such personal letters we see evidence suggesting the regicides’ engagement with their outside world. When Mrs. Goffe makes the simple offer of “a perreweg” “by reson of the cold” in New England so that her husband might “in[j]oy more of the Are,” her words clearly suggest that the judges are not spending all of their time in confinement. Even so, the lack of historical documentation from those years suggests that they remain most often hidden.

By 1673, however, Dixwell is known to have settled in New Haven under the assumed name of James Davids. There he married and lived under that identity until his death on March 18, 1689. Whalley and Goffe, however, never emerge from hiding into the public sphere. Hutchinson dates Whalley’s death in late 1674 or early 1675, and he bases this information on a letter (no longer extant) written by Goffe. Goffe traveled from Hadley to Hartford sometime before September 8, 1676; with this as the last documented sighting of him, neither the date nor the place of his eventual death is known.

Given this information, only Goffe could possibly have been at Hadley during the late summer raids of King Philip’s War in 1675. He, then, is at the center of the legend of the Angel of Hadley. And with this, the most famous of the regicide tales, Hutchinson’s History concludes its discussion.
of the judges; his sources are ambiguous at best, as he concedes when he writes, “I am loth to omit an anecdote handed down through Governor Leveret’s family”:

The town of Hadley was alarmed by the Indians in 1675, in the time of publick worship, and the people were in the utmost confusion. Suddenly, a grave elderly person appeared in the midst of them. In his mien and dress he differed from the rest of the people. He not only encouraged them to defend themselves; but put himself at their head, rallied, instructed and led them on to encounter the enemy, who by this means were repulsed. As suddenly, the deliverer of Hadley disappeared. The people were left in consternation, utterly unable to account for this strange phenomenon. It is not probable, that they were ever able to explain it. If Goffe had been then discovered, it must have come to the knowledge of those persons, who declare by their letters that they never knew what became of him.62

Hutchinson’s account sets off centuries of elaboration and debate on the accuracy and, more importantly, the imaginative currency of the legend. Eager to support Hutchinson’s tale, later historians offer reasons for the mysterious and heroic act: “[H]ad Hadley been taken the discovery of the judges would have been unavoidable”63 further, they argue “it is utterly inconceivable that this old Commonwealth veteran of many battles could have remained shut up in a secret chamber, when the Indians either approached or attacked Hadley.”64 A look at the progress of the war, as told by Increase Mather immediately afterward, however, may provide insight into less concrete, but at least as compelling, reasons for the birth of the legend as well as some of its particular details.

Though Hutchinson is somewhat ambiguous, Goffe’s intervention is most often dated as September 1, 1675. Increase Mather tells of little other than terror for Hadley during that time, and he recalls that a series of bloody episodes proved that “God saw [New England was] not yet fit for Deliverance.” In a September 12 letter from John Russell, quoted at length in Mather’s text, the colonies indeed sound far from deliverance: “If the Lord give not some sudden check to these Indians, it is to be feared that most of the Indians in the Country will rise.”65 Throughout September, Mather reports, the colonists fared badly, losing many men and suffering thefts of their provisions. Specifically, on September 18 “The Indians, whose cruel Habitations are the dark corners of the Earth, lurked in the Swamps, and multitudes of them made a sudden and frightful assault.”66
Mather’s description of this Indian assault is brief but includes a marked emphasis on the Indians’ invisibility among the wild landscape and their victory through the element of surprise. In these details the account resonates powerfully with the mythic reversal attributed to the Angel of Hadley, but with a full inversion of victor and vanquished. Certainly it is noteworthy that this legend of colonial victory is born out of days characterized by such bitter colonial defeat. Perhaps in this darkest moment of the war, Hutchinson (or his source) finds images still potent and dangerous despite the eventual colonial victory, or perhaps that eventual victory later seems to merit some greater signifier to account for what really had to be a series of deadly struggles with so many innocent lives lost. In either case, the revision of those images to feature the machinations of a Puritan warrior rather than Indian forces might help dispel colonial anxieties about the land and its leaders, might make the victory more decisive, even portentous. Later New England historians do not acknowledge the ironic parallel between the historical account of the Indians’ actions and the legendary account of Goffe’s intervention; rather they argue that Mather simply suppressed or omitted the story of Goffe’s actions in order to preserve the secrecy of the judge’s identity. Perhaps, then, the image of the Angel of Hadley emerges specifically as a curative symbol to rewrite one of New England’s darkest moments in King Philip’s War. Similarly, as their broader legend grows in America, the escaped regicides undergo nothing less than transfiguration: Indeed it is not too much to say that their cultural function has shifted so dramatically that they fulfill the peculiar prediction of the king whom they condemned, and from “Devil[s] of Rebellion” they have turned into American “Angel[s] of Reformation.”

CULTURAL USES OF THE REGICIDE TALE

Ezra Stiles’s *History of Three of the Judges of King Charles I* (1794) is still the most extensive treatment of the “fugitive pilgrims,” and by providing the generational link between Hutchinson’s prerevolutionary account and the mid-nineteenth-century revival of the legend, this is the work that figures most prominently in the establishment of cultural uses of the judges’ lives in the American imagination. The highly partisan tone of Stiles’s work helps to ensure that the judges will stand out among the American landscape as persecuted exiles rather than as Old World visitors bearing unprecedented political power. His strategy begins with an epigram, a biblical allusion echoing Davenport’s sermon:
They wandered about—being destitute, afflicted, tormented—they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

—Of whom the world was not worthy—

Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained Angels unawares. Heb. xi, xiii

The work is structured as a defense. Stiles argues that he is providing a corrective to the reputation of “infamy” that has surrounded the regicides “for a century and a half,” although in America, at least, there does not appear to be any such dominant history. For Stiles’s purposes, however, the assumption of generations of misunderstanding provides the symbolic context necessary for his postrevolutionary, early national, account to work in the service of a new cultural truth rather than as Old Puritan propaganda. The spiritual-national quality of that assumed truth is clear in the rhetoric he uses: Stiles writes that the regicides have already begun to experience “resurrection in France, Poland, and America,” and he promises further that—with his work—“the memoirs of these suffering exiles” will “hereafter be approved, admired and imitated.”

Perhaps to obviate potential criticism of the colonies’ complicity with deception, much of Stiles’s early narrative focuses on the less complicated relations between New Englanders and the judges in the first year of their arrival, before they are known to be wanted by the crown. Stiles warmly recalls the open welcome provided by John Endicott, John Davenport’s hospitality and support in New Haven, the later protection of Goffe’s journal in Cotton Mather’s library, and, in general, the quickly established esteem of the colonists for the judges. While Stiles concedes that his own view is that “the judges achieved a great and important work, and it was well done,” he also notes that there are “those who did not approve of their political conduct,” although even these critics (according to Stiles) admire the judges “for their professions of piety, and their grave deportment.” He reports in detail that there are “stories . . . scattered and circulating all over New England to this day” of those who sheltered the judges, gave them food, and risked their lives for them. Thus New England’s later tacit agreement to shelter the judges from British law becomes an issue of local communal loyalty as well as a demonstration of early, protonational, independence. The tie between spiritual and national identity, furthermore, is clear again when Stiles insists that much of New England looked upon the possible execution of the judges as “the slaying of the witnesses.”

While historically the age of the judges would have seemed remote to
Stiles’s audience, his work ensures that mythically they will belong to a new configuration of time, the national future of a great democracy. As emblems of exile and persecution, the judges in Stiles’s account must herald the coming of fulfillment, and he grounds this spiritual claim in history by suggesting that their image leads a new political revolution even after their struggle against the monarchy has been lost: “All Europe is ripening with celerity for a great revolution; the æra is commencing of a general revolution. The amelioration of human society must and will take place. It will be a conflict between kings and their subjects. This War of Kings, like that of Gog and Magog, will be terrible.” Stiles argues further that this large-scale social change—the “natural course of events” after “established systems arrive at a certain height of corruption”—will “abundantly repay all the blood and treasure expended in the glorious contest with tyranny, from 1641 to 1660, inclusive of the twenty or thirty regicides who were ingloriously sacrificed at the Restoration.” Writing in the wake of the successes of the American revolution, Stiles suggests that such spirit was born in America at least in part due to the regicides’ years of residence and that now similar success will spread abroad.

Writers of Hawthorne’s time make the same immediate ironic shift as they resituate the significance of the lives of the judges from past to future. Although upon arrival in New England they may have appeared to be mere relics of a lost cause—“the forlorn hope of civil and religious liberty for the English race,” the progress of legend ensures that they are quickly disassociated from England’s failed revolution and recast quite specifically as omens of future glory, a glory that Hawthorne and his contemporaries see reflected first in the everyday life of the colonies, two centuries before their own time:

Except in New England, royalty was now alone in favor. . . . The democratic revolution had been an entire failure, but that, with all its faults, its wildness, and its extravagance, it set in motion the valuable ideas of popular liberty which the experience of happier ages was to devise ways of introducing into the political life of the nation. We still presently see that the excessive loyalty of the moment, too precipitate in the restoration, doomed the country to an arduous struggle, and the necessity of a new revolution.

Both the escaped regicides and those executed for their crimes in London, George Bancroft writes, herald “a better world . . . opening to receive them.” As living symbols, then, Whalley, Goffe, and Dixwell evade absolute identification with the excesses of the past from the very first
moment they are refashioned by colonial experience from hunters into the hunted—from the very moment, that is, that they become not English but American.

Indeed, by the middle of the nineteenth century, the escaped judges stand unambiguously as a favorite historical and imaginative topic in New England, and, more specifically, use of their legend plays a strangely purifying role in the reconsideration of antebellum America’s Puritan origins. Speaking at the bicentennial celebration of the town of Hadley, Frederic D. Huntington tells his audience that a major part of the region’s historical interest lies with “the true romance of the regicides,” and as evidenced in the events of the day, apparently many others in the town agree. The preface to Huntington’s text recalls that a masque competes with the regular procession in the bicentennial’s opening festivities: “[A]n episode not laid down in the programme, occurred. It was no less than an attack from a party of Indians. . . . The troops gave way as if badly frightened” until a second group of colonials, “marshaled by an old continental, with white hair and queue, representing Goffe, came to the rescue.”

Throughout the text of his speech Huntington is torn between representing aspects of “romance” and aspects of “history” for his town’s recollection. He generally objects to “superstition[,] that mournful and destructive form of moral hallucination,” yet he cites the “two very different causes” of Hadley’s colonial fame as “English politics, and man’s universal passion for the marvelous.” Huntington finds no reason to doubt the legend of the Angel of Hadley, and he finds all of the regicides’ legendary status to be well deserved: “[T]he public service which exiled them and made them prisoners hidden from men for a few short years, lifted them up into the sight of after ages, and gave them an imperishable fame before the world.”

As he makes the proud claim of having “the blood of the regicides” in his veins, Huntington even lays claim to his authority by producing a relic of sorts, a tooth (he claims) from the disinterred remains of one of the judges.77 Holding this out toward the audience, Huntington laments the loss of all else proving their earthly existence, and he wishes aloud that he had the dust of their bones to “keep it as a Christian talisman in the village Pastor’s study, as long as Christ has a minister here to preach the Gospel that is deliverance to the captive, and the opening of prison-doors to the bound!”78

In hiding for so much of their time in New England, the regicides feed imagined legends well because of the inherent mystery of their lives, from the basic facts of the quotidian to the complex truths of their now shrouded personal history.79 In one sense their lives are overdetermined,
fully shaped by one past event. But because that event has no comfortable place in their adopted culture's present consciousness, the past they embody is a matter only for whispers and (often fearful) speculation. Their relation to history, then, makes them unknown rather than familiar. The paradox of their definitively mysterious character is nicely illustrated in one of the common rumors that circulates about them in nineteenth-century America, a tale laced with dramatic irony. As an explanation for one of the judges' removals from New Haven toward Hadley, this story is offered:

The incident which caused them to leave the cave [at West Rock, near New Haven harbor] was this: the mountain being a haunt for wild animals, one night as the judges lay in bed, a panther or catamount putting his head into the aperture of the cave, blazed his eyeballs in such a frightful manner upon them as greatly terrified them. One of them took to his heels and fled down to Sperry's house [the home of a family that had provided them with food] for safety. Considering the situation too dangerous to remain any longer, they quitted it.80

Clearly, in American imaginings, these are not the savage, bloodthirsty revolutionaries—men of blind rage, action, and ambition—that early British accounts describe. Stripped of their combative military qualities, the regicides' situation in New England as it is reimagined in the nineteenth century is reminiscent of the particular moment of mythic purity associated with the first generation of New World settlers, suffering in quiet exile, with barely shelter or known context. The threatening fanaticism of their reputation fades for audiences among the image of the familiar horrors of the American wilderness, and the judges become—even more so than Hester Prynne—the most domesticated of revolutionaries.