

John demos: a little commonwealth



**ASSIGN
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John Demos: A Little Commonwealth The major theme of A Little Commonwealth, written by John Demos is a study of the puritan lifestyle and a reevaluation of the puritan image which has come to be commonly accepted by many people in present times. My own image of the earliest settlers in America had been one which was cast in stereotypes and (to a certain extent) prejudice since I thought they did not believe in liberal thoughts and were completely different from the American ideal which we hold so dear today. John Demos clearly shows how our opinions and ideas about the pilgrims from the mayflower are not entirely based in the reality.

Even the word ‘ puritan’ comes with a contextual meaning which suggests fundamentalism, a strict interpretation of religious dogma and a life devoid of personal luxury or extravagance. The term has also been used for people who engage in or preach a more meticulous or purer moral system than that which prevails in society. Yet the book shows us with evidence that the puritans did not have a moral code which was far different from what was accepted in other areas of the colony. This was certainly a shocking realization for me since it completely upset my own ideas about the puritans.

Contrary to my own ideas about puritans as people who were witch hunters, unfriendly towards strangers, prim and proper as well as completely devoid of fun, the books gives them a totally different image. Instead of being consumed by religious ideas, religion figured in a rather random way in their lifestyle since it was culture which was the dominant force in their lifestyle rather than religion itself. What the puritans did not like was anything which disrupted social systems or caused social harmony to be put out of sync. Other than that, even sexual promiscuity would not be given that much

attention and fun seeking was hardly objectionable to them.

The book presents evidence like divorce documents, estate listings and other records from the time which show that women were able to have equal or in some cases greater rights than some of the other places where England had established colonies. The case of India is one such example where the treatment of women continued to be undermined even when the British were firmly established as rulers in the area. The descriptions given for the clothes which the puritans used to wear clearly dissolved my idea of the ‘ Amish’ lifestyle which I thought puritans would force upon their community. In fact, clothes were used for pretty much the same purpose we use them today in our times or as they had been used for generations i. e. to proclaim the man.

In fact, the book manages to completely shake up the earlier ideas I had about the first settlers in New England and makes me wonder what else I have got wrong about other communities which have had a historically negative image. Clearly, if the puritans were not so puritanical, could it be that the Amish are not so Amish? I believe that is the greatest achievement of the book since it makes a person think and reexamine the stereotypes which have been established by society or the media.

Word Count: 560

Works Cited

Demos, J. A Little Commonwealth. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.