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Joshua Scottow (c.1618–1698)

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## Joshua Scottow (c.1618–1698)

### Works:

- *Old Men's Tears for Their Own Declensions* (1691)
- *A Narrative of the Planting of the Massachusetts Colony Anno 1628* (1694).

**Biography:** Born in England, Joshua Scottow came to Boston in New England with his widowed mother and elder brother Thomas sometime between 1630 and 1634. He was admitted to the Old (South) Church in 1639 and granted land along Muddy River that same year. He married Lydia (surname unknown) in 1640, and the first of his seven children was born in 1641.

Scottow became a colonial merchant, dealing in waterfront lots in Boston, trading with Acadia (Quebec) to the north, investing in the fishing industry, and developing frontier settlements in the area around Scarborough, Maine. His most famous transaction was the purchase and resale of the condemned cargo of the *Charles of Oleron*, seized in 1661 by the Massachusetts authorities for allegedly smuggling French goods. Suit was brought before the General Court of the colony by Thomas Deane, one of the original owners, seeking damages. Although the suit was dismissed, the claim was brought up again (also without issue) before the royal commission that visited New England in 1665.

Scottow continued to develop his Maine holdings until finally dispossessed by King Philip's War. He returned to Boston, continued in trade, and supported the older established interests of the town in colonial political and ecclesiastical affairs. Scottow evidently devoted himself to matters of church polity and discipline, because both of his published works are in some part responses to local church issues of the day and argue for the older system of church government. A successful merchant and a man of considerable wealth, he was also a devout supporter of the New England orthodoxy.

Scottow died in 1698, survived by his wife and four children, three daughters and a son Thomas, who graduated from Harvard College in 1677. Scottow's career in Massachusetts spanned virtually the entire history of the colony in the seventeenth century, from the Great Migration to the reorganization of politics and trade under imperial control late in the 1690s. A member of a threatened class, Scottow became an interpreter of the divine mission of New England in his two histories of the colony.

**Critical Appraisal:** As a writer, Joshua Scottow demonstrated both the intellectual strengths and eccentricities of the Massachusetts theocracy: a plain but colorful prose style, rich in biblical and classical allusions, well-founded in Calvinist doctrine and in the system of scriptural exegesis as applied to New England. His two works are un-

paralleled examples (by a layman) of the jeremiad form that figured so largely in the development of American public Language. Of the two works, *A Narrative of the Planting* is in all respects the better, being an expansion and revision of the earlier volume. Both works contrast the heroic stature and godly spirit of the founders with the profane, worldly, and apostacizing society of the 1680s and 1690s. (Scottow may have furnished the term for Perry Miller's well-known "declension thesis.")

Especially important is Scottow's recourse, at a critical period in colonial history, to the myth of New England. In writing his jeremiad-histories, Scottow recast the political and social events of the past sixty years into the form of a spiritual biography, the story of an elect nation in America, founded to one purpose, united by covenant and contract, called to one single destiny, and "animated as with one soul." Scottow celebrated the unanimity of the founding generation and offered their vision of providential design as a basis for a reconstituted communal enterprise in New England. In the face of increasing colonial diversity (social, economic, and religious), Scottow asserted New England's primary loyalty to a single set of common principles by proposing an ideology based on New England's special character as a simultaneously historical and spiritual society.

Scottow's jeremiads describe two New Englands. One is sunk in sin and beset by Indians, witches, Quakers, and the French — a society fallen off from the spiritual purity

of its fathers. The other New England is the one prefigured in Scripture, preserved by God's special providence, a society representing the nation of the elect, still guaranteed to triumph in anticipation of the apocalypse and in fulfillment of the millennial prophecies. Calling both of these entities "New England" resolves the contradiction. Scottow mediated between opposite visions of his society by creating a symbolic "New England" that represents them both. When he wrote "That NEW-ENGLAND is not to be found in NEW-ENGLAND," Scottow's lament also contained an implicit special promise: the plenitude of symbolic language is itself proof for him of New England's destiny. Densely, rhetorical, Scottow's prose abounds in scriptural types and figures that, when applied to New England, provide a system of reflected assurances. The signs of success are certain; the Puritan enterprise, already vindicated in Scripture, will inevitably be vindicated in fact.

Scottow's affirmation of the myth is strong enough to make him precisely invert the meaning of the lines from George Herbert that he quoted in both his works: "*Religion Stands on Tiptoe in our Land, / Ready to pass to the AMERICAN Strand.*" Herbert's lines are from a poem on the vanity of human wishes; Scottow's inversion makes them an assertion of the new heavens, new earth, New World, and New Israel in America.

### Suggested Readings / Bibliography:

*Dictionary of National Biography*

Bernard Bailyn, *The New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century* (1955), pp. 122–123, 135, 138

Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975), pp. 104–105, 115, 120, 132, 146, 226

Hamilton Andrews Hill, *Joshua Scottow and John Alden* (Boston, 1884)

“Memoir of Joshua Scottow,” *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, 4 (1816), 100–104

Perry Miller, *The New England Mind* (1953), pp. 46, 184, 263

“Sketch of Captain Joshua Scottow,” *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, 10 (1906), 370–378

*More recently, see:*

Julie Helen Ott, “Lydia and Her Daughters: A Boston Matrilinial Case Study,” *NEHGS Nexus*, 9, 1 (1992)

<[http://www.newenglandancestors.org/education/articles/NEXUS/nexus\\_9\\_1\\_3.asp](http://www.newenglandancestors.org/education/articles/NEXUS/nexus_9_1_3.asp)>

Dennis Powers, “Purpose and Design in Joshua Scottow’s *Narrative*” *Early American Literature* 18, 3 (1983), 275–290

*A Narrative of the Planting of the Massachusetts Colony Anno 1628* is reprinted in *CMHS*, 4<sup>th</sup> series, 4 (1858), 279–332.

Scottow’s manuscript “Narrative of ye voyage to Pemaquid, 1677 : journal, 1677” is in the manuscript collections of the Library of Congress.

Scottow is also credited with the English translation of a work by Guy de Brès (1522–1567): *The Rise, Spring and Foundation of the Anabaptists, or Re-baptized of Our Time /*

*Written in French by Guy de Brez, 1565 ... ; and translated for the use of his countrymen, by J. S.* (Cambridge [Mass.]: Printed, and to be sold by Marmaduke Johnson, 1668). An earlier version appeared as *Johannes Becoldus Redivivus; or, the English Quaker the German Enthusiast Revived* (London: John Allen, 1659). The original *La racine, source et fondement des anabaptistes ou rebaptisez de nostre temps* was published in Rouen in 1565.

From:

*American Writers Before 1800: A Biographical and Critical Dictionary*, edited by James A. Levernier and Douglas Wilmes (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984), volume 3, pages 1283–1285.

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Columbia University (1984)  
University of Nebraska–Lincoln (2005)