The Worlds of John Winthrop: England and New England, 1588-1649

On 17-18 September of this year Millersville University was the site for an extraordinarily successful international conference on “The Worlds of John Winthrop: England and New England, 1588-1649”. This conference was organized by Dr. Francis Bremer over the course of two years, with essential assistance from program co-chair, Dr. Lynn Botelho of Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Primary support came from Millersville University, with co-sponsorship and financial commitments from Indiana University and Clarion University. Additional support was forthcoming when the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, and the Rothermere American Institute of Oxford University also joined the venture as co-sponsors. The occasion for the conference was the commemoration of the 350th anniversary of the death of John Winthrop, Winthrop, who was born in Suffolk, England in 1588, led the Great Migration to New England in 1630. The first governor of Massachusetts, his “Model of Christian Charity” not only expressed the goals of the emigrants but set forth a vision that has resonated down through American history. Using the anniversary year as the occasion, the conference became a means of bringing together historians of two different fields in creative dialogue. Just as Winthrop himself was a bridge between the old England and the new, the conference brought scholars of Tudor-Stuart England together with American colonialists to illustrate how a comparative approach can further research in both fields. Each of the conference’s fifteen topical sessions had a scholar presenting a creative synthesis of English scholarship and a colleague synthesizing and interpreting the subject from the colonial viewpoint. Papers were pre-distributed so that session time was mainly devoted to discussion of illuminating similarities and differences between English and New England cultures of the early seventeenth century. Among the conference highlights were sessions on women’s experience in the early modern world, law and law reform, the practice of piety, puritans in the marketplace, worlds of wonders and witches, poverty, the world of the book, the medical world, treatment of religious dissent, gender identities, and forms and functions of local government. Dr. Pauline Croft of the University of London opened the conference with a lecture on “England in the Armada Year; 1588”, while the closing address on “Winthrop’s Worlds in 1649” was delivered by Dr. David Cressy of the Ohio State University. The participants on the program included historians from both sides of the Atlantic (eighteen from the United Kingdom, thirty from the United States, and one from Canada). There were influential senior historians as well as promising younger scholars. More than half of those presenting have won prestigious awards for their work, including national Book Awards, a citation as a Pulitzer Prize finalist, and honors from professional organizations that include the American Historical Association, the Society of American Historians, the North American Conference on British Studies, and the Colonial Society of Massachusetts. They included Guggenheim Fellows, Fulbright Fellows, fellows at the Institute of Advanced Studies, members of the British Academy, and of the Royal Historical Society. In addition to those on the program we had over one hundred and fifty registrants from the United States, Canada, and Australia! Students from IUP and Clarion traveled to Millersville to be part of the conference, along with students from Millersville. In all there were over two hundred in attendance over the two days, despite the ill effects of hurricane Floyd, which complicated many travel plans. We were especially pleased to have Mrs. Dorothy Winthrop Bradford with us for the conference.

The Millersville Conference Lives On

The conference has been highly acclaimed and will prove an important landmark in the fields of colonial America and Tudor-Stuart England. We are negotiating for publication of three separate volumes of essays delivered at the conference. Also furthering the goals of the conference, Drs. Bremer and Botelho are each teaching a matching course dealing with "The Worlds of John Winthrop" on their separate campuses. Each course focuses on the conference theme and uses the conference papers as texts. Students from each of these courses attended conference sessions in September. And while each of the classes is separate we have been able, with the help of grants from SSHE and CAPE, to link the two courses together by tele-conferencing so that they share a common electronic classroom that spans the state. Thus students at both sites can interact with each other and benefit from the insights of two professors. Furthermore, students in both the IUP and Millersville courses meet weekly in an electronic chat room where a different conference participant each week is a guest. Thus, students get to discuss the week’s course topic with leading scholars such as Dr. John Morrill of Cambridge University and Dr. Laurel Ulrich of Harvard University. Thus the celebration of John Winthrop has been the occasion for integrating exciting new uses of technology into the classroom.
The Passing of Robert Winthrop

Anyone and everyone who knows of the Winthrop family history joins in mourning the passing of Robert Winthrop (1904-1999). For the past half century no one did more to preserve the heritage of the Winthrops than did Robert Winthrop. During the long period from 1948 to the 1980s, publication of the Winthrop papers was slowed by a variety of factors. Robert Winthrop and his brother Nathaniel continued to make sure that the project did not die, supporting it by their financial contributions and by their unflagging interest. Many are the letters in the Winthrop collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society which attest to this interest. After Nathaniel’s passing, Robert assumed the primary responsibility of encouraging efforts to preserve and promote the heritage of Governor John Winthrop. His contribution of family papers in his possession to the Massachusetts Historical represented an important addition to the Winthrop Papers archives. As editor of the project I was fortunate to have the chance to correspond with Mr. Winthrop, to receive his encouragement, and to have other doors opened to me as I have continued to seek family papers. Those in Groton, England also have good reason to mourn the passing of Robert Winthrop, for his interest in the family heritage was not limited to books and papers. He was a valued friend of St. Bartholomew’s Church, the ancestral parish of the Winthrops, always there to contribute to needed repairs of the church fabric.

Electronic Seminars

In coming months visitors to the Winthrop Papers Web page will be able to join in discussions of papers posted for two electronic seminars reflecting different aspects of John Winthrop’s world, one on puritanism and one on Atlantic history.