What Are the Winthrop Papers?

A few years back the publication of Winthrop materials was separated into two projects. When we speak of the Winthrop Papers we are generally speaking of the continuing effort to publish volumes that deal with the colonial era and its English antecedents - the ancestors and descendants of Massachusetts Governor John Winthrop to the time of the American Revolution. The Papers of Robert C. Winthrop, representing the next most valuable element in the entire Winthrop collection, was identified as a separate project with Dr. Donald Yacovone as editor. While other important material exists in the collection and are regularly used by scholars, there is no current plan to systematically publish those other documents.

Following this definition of the project, as editor of the Winthrop Papers, I saw my responsibilities as threefold: to identify any additional manuscript material that related to the Winthrops, to transcribe and publish materials in the MHS collections which earlier editors had not included in volumes 1-5, and to carry on the sequence of volumes dealing with Winthrop correspondence. My initial activities were divided between the first two of these efforts, but over the past few years I have concentrated on identification of “new” manuscripts and the search for “missing” texts once known to have been in the possession of Robert C. Winthrop when he wrote his Life and Letters of John Winthrop. I have been led to concentrate on this effort largely because it has proven more fruitful than I had expected. Some of the success is spelled out elsewhere in this newsletter. Of course, since Winthrop work is performed as a supplement to my full time responsibilities at Millersville, the efforts devoted to such searches has slowed the progress which we had hoped to achieve.

Where are we now? The Winthrop Papers will henceforth follow two tracks. Winthrop Papers: Series I will include the six published volumes now existing and will include future volumes of correspondence. Winthrop Papers: Series II will include longer written works organized in a topical fashion. The greatly anticipated new edition of John Winthrop’s Journal, edited by Richard Dunn, is projected to be the first volumes in this series, though actual designation of them as such awaits the conclusion of negotiations with Harvard University Press, which will publish the edition in the Fall of 1996. Other volumes in the series will include Religious Writings, Legal Papers, and The Medical Notebooks of John Winthrop Jr. I am working on the first two of these. Robert Charles Anderson will begin work on the medical notebooks when he finishes his efforts on the initial stage of the Genealogical Society’s “Great Migration Project”. To produce these volumes expeditiously and with the quality that is expected of MHS Publications will require that I be freed up for large blocks of time in order to concentrate on each of these volumes as they near completion. To do this we are planning to submit separate grant proposals to foundations that may have particular interests in religious, legal, and medical scholarship. The purpose of these grants would be to buy released time for the editor, to engage an assistant editor, and to fund student internships, new equipment, and other expenses. The bulk of the printing expenses will come from the Winthrop Funds generously established by members of the Winthrop family in the past.

New Finds

Over the past few years a number of new documents that shed light on the Winthrop history have been uncovered in English archives. These include new letters to John Foxe describing the Marian persecutions that were forwarded to him by William Winthrop, John’s uncle. These letters are in the archives of Emmanuel College, Cambridge and were discovered with the help of Tom Freeman of Rutgers University. William Winthrop also features prominently in the minute book of the Italian Protestant congregation in London, which has been preserved in the British Library. William was an elder of that church. Religious notes by Henry Browne, John Winthrop’s maternal grandfather, were discovered in the original manuscript volume in which John’s father, Adam Winthrop, kept financial records and diary entries. Adam’s writings were published as “Adam Winthrop’s Diary” in Winthrop Papers: I, but the entries by Browne were not included. Documents relating to Adam Winthrop’s call to the bar of the Inner Temple and involvement in that Inn of Court have been found among the records of the Inner Temple. Various court cases that shed light on the family’s relationships and property dealings were found in the Public Record Office. Most of the new discoveries were in the records of the Court of Requests and the Court of Chancery, but a significant group were found in the records of the High Court of Admiralty. These include fourteen cases that involved John’s grandfather, Adam Winthrop Sr., who was Master of the Clothworkers Company and is the Winthrop who purchased Groton Manor. These records, which I am still working to transcribe, reveal that Adam also owned one ship and had interests in at least one other vessel. With the help of Sue Sadler, an English researcher, the actual lists of the commissions of the peace that included John Winthrop have been identified and copied. Similarly, we have found and copied John Winthrop’s membership on the county Forced Loan Commission and on the Suffolk Sewer Commission. Some new evidence of the future governor’s involvement as a county JP has been found in an order book of the Suffolk Justices of the Peace int he British Library.

Identifying the documents is, of course, only the first stage of the editor’s work. All of the above have to be transcribed from damaged manuscripts written in difficult sixteenth and seventeenth century hands, and often in Latin. Microfilm and photographic copies of many of the above have been acquired by the MHS and are currently in the possession of the editor for purposes of transcription. When that work is completed, the copies will be deposited in the Winthrop Collection at the Society. Transcribed material will in some cases be made available through the Internet connection to the Winthrop Papers described below.

A parallel effort has been the tracking down of the libraries of John Winthrop and his father, Adam. I have to date identified over fifty books that can be demonstrated to have belonged to Adam Winthrop. Most of these still survive and I have examined them at the Massachusetts Historical Society, the New York Society, Harvard University and elsewhere. A large number of Winthrop books were donated to Allegheny College by James Winthrop in the early nineteenth century and I am planning a trip to examine that collection. Books that Adam Winthrop usually contain his signature, but commonly also include marginalia and extended essays on the fly leaves which provide insight into the man and his views.

The Letters of Robert C. Winthrop

The Massachusetts Historical Society has begun a new editorial project: a selected edition of the letters of Robert C. Winthrop (1809-1894). An influential Whig political leader, Congressman and Speaker of the House, Senator, orator, philanthropist, gentleman scholar, and M.H.S. president for thirty years, Winthrop is a symbol of nineteenth-century New England culture. Unaccountably ignored by American historians, Winthrop helped guide the destiny of his region and nation. This project will bring to light Winthrop’s important political career and his impact on the course of American history. Perhaps most promising of all, is the new information surfacing about his leadership of the Peabody Education Fund. Founded after the Civil War by the Anglo-American merchant-prince George Peabody, the Fund helped establish the South’s first free, public educational system and provided support for both whites and blacks. The Peabody fund also established several teacher-training schools in the South, providing vital support to black schools predicated on the belief that “homegrown” teachers ultimately would prove more successful in the South than Yankee imports of any color.
Although the Society owns thousands of RCW letters in its Winthrop family papers and in scores of other collections, the project's editor, Dr. Donald Yacovone, has contacted over two hundred additional archival repositories throughout the country-and in England-in search of Winthrop documents. Thus far, he has uncovered 2,000 new Winthrop letters, with the promise of thousands more at Harvard's Houghton Library and at the Library of Congress. Each letter (by, to, or about RCW) will be assigned a record in a computer database, noting the standard bibliographic information along with a subject and name index. This database will prove invaluable to the project and any researcher interested in Winthrop's career or in the vital issues of his day. The project is currently seeking grants from several funding agencies to support a year's worth of Winthrop research and an extended research trip to Washington, D.C. The Society would love to know about additional RCW letters still in private hands.