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**Walter W. Woodward. *Prospero's America: John Winthrop, Jr., Alchemy, and the Creation of New England Culture, 1606-1676*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. Hb. 336pp. \$ 45.00. ISBN 978-0-8078-3301-8.**

In the popular imagination, alchemy was (and still is) associated with the transmutation of base metals into gold. Since its rise to prominence among European intellectuals during the Renaissance, this professed goal was useful for gaining broad acceptance of alchemical procedures and for advancing an even more important goal: the elevation of humanity to a higher degree of enlightenment and perfection. Alchemists sought the purification of mankind by developing laboratory practices and processes that took recourse to an immediate relation with the divine. This relation was thought to entail the spiritual development of humanity and to provide practical knowledge of the Philosopher's Stone, a hitherto hidden substance or process that could produce an infinite amount of gold and an elixir that would cure all diseases and ensure eternal youth.

Until recently, Puritanism and alchemy, if their relationship was investigated at all, were considered as irreconcilable intellectual currents in colonial America. Alchemy meant magic, witchcraft, tempering with God's law and associating with the Devil, and was therefore shunned by Puritans, as Perry Miller and other early New England scholars have taught us. One of the central achievements of Walter Woodward's interdisciplinary study of John Winthrop, Jr., a renowned alchemist, entrepreneur, politician, and physician, is to demonstrate how alchemy was far more accepted among New England elites and shaped colonial culture to a greater extent than previously suggested.

As the first monograph on the younger John Winthrop since Robert C. Black's 1966 biography, *Prospero's America* masterfully places the life, thoughts, and actions of the Connecticut governor in elaborate cultural, political, and historical contexts. Its author leaves few stones unturned as he immerses his reader in Renaissance occultism, seventeenth-century medicine, early New England religious culture, and the politics of

empire. The structure of the book is organized around Winthrop's alchemical activities and their relation to the development of the New England Way during the second half of the seventeenth century: alchemy shaped Winthrop's views on Indian relations, enabled him to assess economic possibilities, influenced his plan to establish New London as a center for pansophic education, caused him to take a relatively lenient position on witchcraft, and guided his administration of medical care for the sick. In addition, Winthrop maintained a lively correspondence with alchemists, medical practitioners, and scientists in Europe, thus building a network of knowledge exchange which helped him to secure a spot on the founding roll of the Royal Society in London. His membership allowed the younger Winthrop to witness and participate in the formation and development of scientific agendas and methods, especially in the fields of chemistry, medicine, agriculture, and astronomy. This knowledge, as Woodward relates in engaging detail, proved useful for building his own power position in the colonies and also benefitted his constituents, because Winthrop's broad interest in the practicability of scientific discoveries ensured that he learned about and applied, often with stunning success, the latest medical advances.

One of the main methodological difficulties addressed in *Prospero's America* is the scarcity of first-hand colonial records pertaining to alchemy. Given the arcane nature of alchemical practice and cooperation, it is hardly surprising that one finds few references to experiments, discoveries or concepts in New England sermons, official records, and other writings. The lack of open deliberations hailing or promoting the goals of alchemy indicates that Puritans who were aware of the practice quietly allowed it as a private undertaking reserved for a few trusted colonists. Woodward's study compensates the relative lack of primary records by mining hundreds of letters and notes sent to or written by Winthrop. In addition, the author is able to explicate Winthrop's thoughts and actions by studying the lives and writings of his main correspondents in Europe (especially Samuel Hartlib and contemporary members of the Royal Society) and by weaving a vivid account of the cultural and scientific currents of the time into his narrative fabric.

Winthrop's engagement with alchemy and Hermetic philosophy had significant repercussions for his religious, cultural, and political positions: his extant writings lacked the devotional diction and gloomy introspection apparent in other Puritan texts; his silence in the cases of Anne Hutchinson and Robert Child, who were prosecuted as enemies of the Massachusetts Bay Colony due to their religious convictions, reflected an unusual degree of tolerance; his decisions as governor, especially on witchcraft and Indian relations were at odds with dominant colonial policies. Contrary to public Puritan dissenters such as Roger Williams, though, Winthrop never announced his disagreement with orthodox positions in theological, political, and scientific matters, because he ultimately seemed to have agreed that a rather strict social and theological order was necessary for the success of the American experiment. Despite his support of the system of power entrenched in New England, Winthrop adhered to a comparatively moderate and irenic strain of Puritanism and, in doing so, added to a diversity of American Protestantism that is often overlooked in other scholarly investigations of early New England culture.

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