

Anne Hutchinson

Brief life of Harvard's "midwife": 1595-1643

by PETER J. GOMES

ON JUNE 2, 1922, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts received from the Anne Hutchinson Memorial Association and the State Federation of Women's Clubs a bronze statue of Anne Hutchinson. The inscription read in part: IN MEMORY OF ANNE MARBURY HUTCHINSON/COURAGEOUS EXPONENT OF CIVIL LIBERTY AND RELIGIOUS TOLERATION. It might have added that Mrs. Hutchinson was the mother of New England's first and most serious theological schism (traditionally known as the Antinomian Controversy); that in debate she bested the best of the Massachusetts Bay Colony's male preachers, theologians, and magistrates; and that as a result of her heresy the colony determined to provide for the education of a new generation of ministers and theologians who would secure New England's civil and theological peace against future seditious Mrs. Hutchinsons "when our present ministers shall lie in the dust," as the inscription on the Johnston Gate puts it. Thus, Anne Hutchinson was midwife to what would become Harvard College.

The colony's first generation of clergy, described by C. Conrad Wright as "a speaking aristocracy in the face of a silent democracy," included John Cotton, the charismatic minister of St. Botolph's in Boston, England, who moved with many of his parishioners to the new Boston in New England. Hutchinson, a minister's child, was among his most devoted admirers and determined to follow him. She chafed under the constraints of the Anglican Church and yearned for the soul liberty she imagined would flourish in the Puritan commonwealth, where she and her merchant husband, William, arrived in 1634.

Two public talents commended her to the new community. She was an able midwife to the women producing the first generation of New Englanders, and—theologically literate—she provided useful Bible-study classes for women and later for men.

At first she simply invited a few women in to discuss Mr. Cotton's sermons. But as her reputation for scriptural interpretation grew, so did the gatherings, which often included the young governor, Sir Henry Vane. Many saw her as a welcome antidote to the clerical establishment: an admirer noted, "I'll bring you to a woman who preaches better gospel than any of your black-coats who have been at the ninnyversity, a woman of another kind of spirit who has had many revelations of things to come....I had rather such a one who speaks from the mere notion of the Spirit without any study at all than any of your learned scholars."

Soon, however, Hutchinson moved from commentary to criticism. Lacking the authority of the magistracy or the clergy, she claimed the authority of the Spirit and an inner light. At her trial, in response to the charge that she had traduced the laws of church

and state, she replied, "As I understand it, laws, commands, rules, and edicts are for those who have not the light which makes plain the pathway." This audacious claim proved the beginning of the end of her time in Massachusetts.

In 1637, her friend Henry Vane lost the governorship to John Winthrop, who considered her a threat to the order of his "city set on a hill," describing her meetings as a "thing not tolerable nor comely in the sight of God, nor fitting for your sex." She was accused of breaking the Fifth Commandment, which requires honoring one's parents, by refusing to defer to the magistrates, her fathers in the colony, and to the clergy, her fathers in the church. The transcript of her trial shows her to have been deft in theological and legal sparring, intellectually superior to her accusers, and a woman of conscience who yielded to no authority.

Having been found guilty in her civil trial, she was placed under house arrest to await ecclesiastical trial. In 1638, the final blows were delivered. A sentence of banishment was never in doubt. Her former mentor, John Cotton, fearing for his own credibility, described her weekly Sunday meeting as a "promiscuous and filthy coming together of men and women without Distinction of Relation of Marriage" and continued, "Your opinions fret like a Gangrene and spread like a Leprosie, and will eate out the very Bowells of Religion."

With her family and 60 followers, Hutchinson was banished into the more tolerant wilds of Rhode Island; she is counted among the founders of Portsmouth. After her husband's death, in 1642, she took her youngest children and removed to New York where, a year later, she and all but one child were slaughtered in an Indian raid.

Eleanor Roosevelt claimed Mrs. Hutchinson as the first of America's foremothers; others see her as the "courageous exponent of civil liberty and religious toleration" of the Boston monument. Contemporary readers might see her as a woman who declined to stay in the place assigned her by society. At Harvard we may seek her memorial in vain, but without her it is difficult to do justice to the motivating impulse of our foundation. Inadvertent midwife to a college founded in part to protect posterity from her errors, Anne Marbury Hutchinson, ironically, would be more at home at Harvard today than any of her critics. ▢

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Opposite: Edwin Austin Abbey's depiction of Anne Hutchinson on trial appeared in a popular nineteenth-century history of the United States.

