

Order, Ethic, and Industry: The Beehive as a Model in Transatlantic English Migration

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**ORDER, ETHIC, AND INDUSTRY:
THE BEEHIVE AS A MODEL IN
TRANSATLANTIC ENGLISH MIGRATION**

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Abstract:

Though the English generally saw wild nature as crude in late sixteenth and early seventeenth century England, they considered the beehive to be a powerful symbol of order. The beehive influenced how the English saw themselves, and due to the available flexibility in interpreting the hive's structure, the beehive became an enduring model for utopian social, political, and religious order in England. Once the English began to consider the idea of colonization, the beehive model helped influence their efforts in developing New World societies from the ground up. This thesis looks at the influence of the hive model in the early development of the Massachusetts and Virginia colonies. How each colony interpreted the hive model depended on the specific motivations for each colony's settlement, but both colonies used the hive as a model. And because the hive was a model of organization from wild nature, its use survived the transatlantic transfer of ideas and prospered in the colonies due to the agricultural nature of the New World colonies and colonists' resulting receptiveness to ideas from nature.

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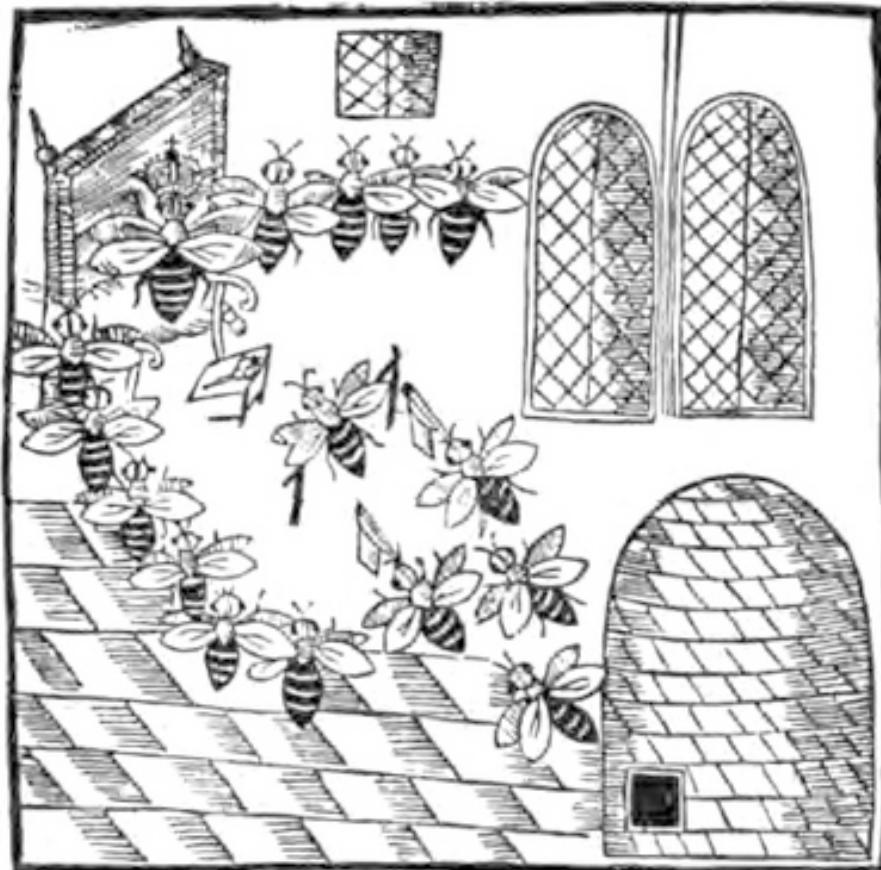


Illustration from John Day's
Parliament of Bees, 1641

Anthony Villanacci

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I. Introduction

If considering the defining influences on how the seventeenth and eighteenth-century English thought of themselves and the society in which they lived, the concept of order would probably be near the top of the list. Not that such a concept was unique to England—as order is integral to the proper functioning of any human society—but as a nation of protestants, England placed a definite emphasis on the idea of man’s dominance in the world. As might be expected, this desire defined the English relationship to nature; nature was wild and disordered, and it was man’s place to impose order upon it. Thus, when considering those defining influences on how the English regarded themselves, their society, and their concept of order, few would probably venture to hedge any bets on influences from nature. Or, an even more absurd idea, from insects. Yet, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the English positively adored one specific insect—an insect that in its very existence represented the order that Englishmen so urgently sought in the world. That insect was, of course, the honeybee.

In the structure of honeybee society, the English saw a model for an ideal human society. And when the English began to colonize the New World and subsequently establish new societies from the ground up, many embraced the opportunity to put the model of the hive to the test. Thus given the “who”—the English and the honeybee—this thesis attempts to explain the “how” and the “why”—how and why the honeybee became such a significant and enduring source of inspiration in the New World colonies. This thesis will focus on the colonies of

Massachusetts and Virginia, which, as the two most contrasting of early English colonies, show, through their adoption of the hive metaphor, the incredible flexibility of the hive as a social model.

II. England: Natural Versus Artificial

Before and during the early years of colonization, the English generally saw nature in its natural form to be synonymous with crudeness and backwardness. As one historian confirms, “Early modern English men and women found raw nature uncongenial; the word “natural” meant undeveloped or, in the human case, a simpleton.”¹ Indeed, the English considered the idea of raw nature to be antithetical to that of civilization, and only when nature was properly developed did it lose its negative connotations. “Artificial,” one historian claims, stood in stark contrast to “natural,” as “a word of highest praise.”² Central to the English concept of nature was therefore an emphasis on imposing order upon it.

Examples of the importance the English placed on the rationalization of nature are numerous. English gardens were formal, carefully structured and organized. Natural philosophers, the forerunners of modern scientists, directed their fascination with the natural world in an extensive attempt to classify and categorize it. English agriculture maximized control over nature through the

¹ Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *America in European Consciousness 1493-1750*, (Williamsburg: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 272.

² Kupperman, 272.

fencing of plots, impeccably rooted and weeded fields, organized separation of crops, and husbandry practices that regarded domesticated animals as private property. Perhaps underlying all of these examples is the influence of English Protestantism, in which the dominance of man over nature was a central theme. Popularly citing Genesis 1.28, in which God instructed man to “Increase & multiply, replenish the earth & subdue it,” the English considered nature as being created by God for the sole purpose of being developed by man, giving credence to the idea that leaving nature undeveloped constituted a sin against God’s will. Indeed, many Protestants considered “wilderness,” as one historian explains, to be “the environment of evil.”³ This emphasis on the ordering and cultivating of nature additionally went hand in hand with the economic realities of a small island nation with strictly limited natural resources. It made a certain amount of sense for England to consider nature strictly in terms of its usefulness as a body of natural resources. As one historian sums up the prevailing seventeenth century English attitude toward raw nature: “Wilderness was waste; the proper behavior toward it, exploitation.”⁴

III. New World Nature and American Exceptionalism

Though the first English colonists carried such attitudes towards nature with them in their settlement of the New World, they found the direct and complete

³ Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3 rd ed., (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 24.

⁴ Nash, 31.

application of such ideas problematic. After all, the New World wilderness was far too vast for the first colonists to have any realistic hope of total mastery (indeed, the frontier would not be officially closed until centuries later in 1890). Confronted with such a dilemma, however, the English colonists did not give up in their efforts to control nature. Rather, they redoubled those efforts. And in the hardships that colonists faced in establishing “civilized” life in the New World wilderness—devoid as it was of any form of civilization as the English knew it—the battle to achieve dominance over nature came to be the defining factor in colonial American life. As one historian notes, “Safety and comfort, even necessities like food and shelter, depended on overcoming the wild environment.”⁵ In facing these harsh realities of survival in their efforts to establish functioning English-style societies in the midst of a continental wilderness, early English colonists faced nature in a way that those in England did not. Confronted by the New World wilderness, early colonists had no choice but to accept wild nature as a permanent force in their lives.

And if colonists held an increased acceptance of wild nature, they certainly held an increased receptiveness to the idea of nature as it pertained to husbandry. As one historian notes, “It followed from the pioneer’s association of wilderness with hardship and danger in a variety of forms, that the rural, controlled, state of nature was the object of his affection and goal of his labor.”⁶ In this heightened acceptance and receptiveness, colonists developed a different relationship with nature than existed in England. Because nature so defined colonial life, nature infiltrated the colonial vocabulary, creating receptiveness among colonists to the

⁵ Nash, 24.

⁶ Nash, 30-31.

idea of considering and expressing conditions in their lives through the rhetoric of nature.

IV. New England Concepts of Nature

During the time of the colonization of New England, prominent New England Protestant theologians had begun exploring nature's use as a medium to explain conditions in their lives. One such man was protestant clergyman John Flavel (1630-1691), who wrote *Husbandry Spiritualized*, a work that sought to explore the understanding of spirituality through the language of the natural world. "As man is compounded of a fleshly and spiritual substance," Flavel explained his concept, "so God hath endowed the creatures with a spiritual as well as fleshy usefulness."⁷ By introducing this "spiritual usefulness" upon nature, Flavel urged a perspective of nature that transcended its negative connotations as a hostile wilderness. "[Creatures] have not only a natural use in alimental and physical respects," he explained, "but also a spiritual use, as they bear the figures and similitudes of many sublime and heavenly mysteries."⁸ Thus, Flavel believed that nature, as part of God's creation, provided important examples of God's will.

⁷ John Flavel, *Husbandry Spiritualized; or, The heavenly use of earthly things. Consisting of many pleasant observations, pertinent applications, and serious reflections; and each chapter concluded with a divine and suitable poem; directing husbandmen to the most excellent improvements of their common employments. Whereunto are added, by way of appendix, several choice occasional meditations, upon birds, beasts, trees, flowers, rivers, and several other objects; fitted for the help of such as desire to walk with God in all their solitudes, and recesses from the world,* (Elizabeth Town, NJ, 1795), 3. Though this book was not published until over one hundred years after Flavel's death in 1691, *Husbandry Spiritualized* represents ideas contemporary to the time period in which Flavel was alive.

⁸ Flavel, 3.

Indeed, he insisted that the natural world could teach the careful observer important things that civilization did not have answers for. “Believe me...”, he urged, “thou shalt find more in the woods, than in a corner; stones and trees will teach thee what thou shalt not hear from learned doctors.”⁹

Building on this argument, Flavel’s primary concern through *Husbandry Spiritualized* was to explore the usefulness of nature in illustrating difficult theological concepts. “Notions are more easily conveyed to the understanding,” he explained, “by being first cloathed in some apt similitude, and so represented to the sense.”¹⁰ This idea held particularly true in matters of spirituality, where Flavel observed that “Those that can retain little of a sermon, yet ordinarily retain an apt similitude.”¹¹ Flavel chose nature as the subject of his “similitudes” because he realized the significance of nature in the lives of the colonists. Through the rhetoric of nature, Flavel saw an ideal universal medium for enlightenment, a common allegorical language understandable by all colonists.

This belief in the illuminating powers of nature was enthusiastically shared by other New England colonists including Protestant minister Cotton Mather (1663-1728), who in 1727 published “*Agricola, or, the Religious Husbandman.*” This work expanded on Flavel’s ideas, focusing entirely on articulating Protestant religious doctrine to New England colonists through allegories pertaining to husbandry. *Agricola*’s chapters, entitled, *The Work of the PLOUGH*, *The SOWING of the Field*, *The RAIN waited for*, *The GRASS before the MOWER*, *The ORCHARD flourishing*, *The Joyful Harvest*, and *The Wishes of PIETY produced by the Affairs of HUSBANDRY*, illustrated

⁹ Flavel, 3.

¹⁰ Flavel, 4.

¹¹ Flavel, 4.

Mather's concerted efforts to provide a framework for viewing Protestant religious doctrine through the guise of the natural world.

The body of Mather's sermon was no less full of allegorical exercises in explaining theology through nature. For example, in one verse, Mather explained how through the act of sin, man made himself incapable of receiving the saving grace of God. Standing alone, such a concept might have been difficult for many New England colonists, especially those with poor educational backgrounds, to understand. However, like Flavel, Mather realized that colonists held an increased receptiveness to ideas from nature, and thus utilized the rhetoric of nature in his sermon to make his ideas more comprehensible. "A Repenting Sinner will acknowledge This;" Mather thus preached, "*My Heart is a very harden'd Soyl. Fallow Ground* is become *hard*; by lying long undisturbed, its parts come to stick very close to one another. Perhaps, 'tis the more *hard* for being often trod upon. Our *Heart* is this *fallow Ground*."¹² For Mather (who borrowed his imagery of fallow ground from the biblical reference in the parable of the seeds), the heart of the sinner thus became a patch of infertile soil—an understandable concept for the farmer-colonists of New England. "The *Truths of GOD*," continued Mather in his allegorical explanation, "which are the *Seeds of Life*, the *Rays* that are shot from the *Sun of Righteousness*, the *Do(c)trine* which *drops as the Rain*, will not enter into so rough a Soyl."¹³ The analogy was simple: infertile soil (a sinful heart) could not support life (God's grace). These husbandry issues were the same ones colonists faced in their everyday lives, and thus proved very relatable as analogies. Through *Agricola*, Mather used a proverbial

¹² Cotton Mather, *Agricola. Or, The Religious Husbandman: the main intentions of religion, served in the business and language of husbandry. A work adapted unto the grand purposes of piety; and commended therefore by a number of ministers, to be entertained in the families of the countrey*, (Boston, 1727), 5.

¹³ Mather, 5.

cornucopia of nature allegories to effectively make his ideas more understandable to those who understood the basic processes of nature, particularly as they pertained to husbandry. Because all early New England colonists followed agricultural pursuits, Mather's ideas were particularly geared towards his New World audience.

Through their treatments of nature in *Agricola* and *Husbandry Spiritualized*, Flavel and Mather both revealed an important willingness among New England colonists to accept nature as a model to articulate and understand complex ideas. After all, from a religious perspective, Flavel and Mather's arguments could hardly be considered radical departures from Christian doctrine, which held that God, as creator of the universe, designed and directed the laws of nature. If nature was indeed designed and overseen by God, then it was not a far step to assert that one might expect to find divine insight from within the natural world. Though examples of similar arguments were beginning to be made in England as early as the late seventeenth century, such works tended to be strictly limited in focus, such as Thomas Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1684) and John Ray's *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation* (1691), which restrained their postulations of God's hand in nature to the creation of geographical formations such as mountains.¹⁴ Flavel and Mather's arguments, in contrast, took a much more expansive position towards God's presence in nature, reflecting the colonial context under which their ideas were created. Indeed, illustrating the colonial receptiveness to the natural world, Flavel and Mather saw God's presence not in just part of

¹⁴ As referenced by Roderick Nash in *Wilderness and the American Mind*.

nature, but in all of it. “The Divine Reason,” argued Mather, “runs like a Golden Vein through the whole Leaden mine of Brutal Nature.”¹⁵

Thus, the early New England colonists proved eager to seek inspiration from the natural world. And in their efforts to establish a New World utopian commonwealth based on English society, there was surely no better natural inspiration than nature’s own proven example of utopian order: the honeybee.

V. The Utopian Hive in England

The honeybee had a long history in England of utopian idealization. Popular fascination with the bee had its roots in a traditional source of inspiration very dear to Western civilization—ancient Greece and Rome. As one historian confirms, “Ancient writers had originally cited the hive as the model for a perfect human society.”¹⁶ Examples are numerous. Aristotle devoted considerable space to the study of bee society in his *History of Animals*. Virgil, in his *Georgics*, described in depth the bee social structure in terms of an ideal human society, urging veneration for “these great souls in little bodies.”¹⁷ Pliny too, in his *Natural History*, idealized honeybees for their advanced level of civilization, stating that, “they are patient of fatigue, toil at their labours, form themselves into political communities, hold councils together in private, elect chiefs in common, and, a thing that is the most

¹⁵ Cotton Mather, *The Christian Philosopher*, Winton L. Solberg, ed., (2000), 172. This book was originally published in 1721.

¹⁶ Kupperman, 273.

¹⁷ Virgil, *The Georgics*, trans. Robert Wells (Manchester, 1982), Georgic 4, 79-82.

remarkable of all, have their own code of morals.”¹⁸ Indeed, Pliny described bees as “a marvel beyond all comparison”—insects with “human genius” that “ought, in justice, to be accorded...especial admiration.”¹⁹ By the seventeenth-century, these and countless other classical references to the honeybee had created a strong tradition in England of using the beehive as a natural model of an ideal socio-political structure.

Seventeenth-century idealizations of bee society were even more extensive than those in classical times. Samuel Purchas’s 1657 publication, *Theatre of Politicall Flying-Insects*, devoted much of its space to the idealization of the bee, describing in one passage the unrivaled and enviable industriousness of honeybees, being “indefatigably...laborious, always working, but never satisfied...being impossible to be stinted, and the longer they work, the more...impatient of delayes, or loyterings, while there is matter to be worked upon in the fields, and the weather is seasonable.”²⁰ In all, Purchas urged that bees deserved not only to “be prized, but praised; not only magnified, but admired.”²¹ In 1679, Moses Rusden published his second publication on the honeybee, “*A further discovery of bees.*” Describing bee society as being rationally guided to the point of perfection, Rusden explained, “[I]n good years there are very few or no robberies committed among [the] Bees: the cause of which I judge to be, because the Bees know when they have sufficient to maintain them until the next summer, and are not so desperate as to endanger the loss of their

¹⁸ Pliny, *Natural History*, translated by John Bostock and H.T. Eiley (London, 1851), Chapter 4. Accessed from http://www.archive.org/stream/naturalhistoryof03plin/naturalhistoryof03plin_djvu.txt on 5/12/08.

¹⁹ Pliny, Chapter 4.

²⁰ Samuel Purchas, *A Theatre of Politicall Flying-Insects. Wherein Nature, the Worth, the Work, the Wonder, and the Manner of Right-ordering of the Bee, is Discovered and Described* (London, 1657), 13.

²¹ Purchas, 13.

own lives, to get more with so much difficulty, danger, and injustice.”²² Even William Shakespeare gave a detailed description of the beehive as an ideal monarchial society in *Henry V* (1599) when he spoke of bees as a “peopled kingdom” comprised of magistrates who “correct at home,” merchants who “venture trade abroad,” “singing masons building roofs of gold,” “civilian citizens kneading up the honey,” and soldiers, who, “armed in their stings, / Make boot upon summer’s velvet buds, / Which pillage they with merry march bring home, / To the tent-royal of their emperor, / Who busied in his majesty surveys” his perfectly structured and flawlessly functioning kingdom.²³

The honeybee was thus an anomaly in English society. While the English generally saw any form of untouched nature as antithetical to civilization, the honeybee undeniably existed as a natural example of rationally guided beings, living in an incredibly structured society, working with industry, operating under a set of laws, exploiting their natural resources to create wealth, storing that wealth for the winter, all in perfect harmony. In other words, the honeybee was one of the only forms of nature that did not need to, and, by all considerations, could not, be improved by Man; it was a natural example of unnatural artificiality. Ruysden articulated this conundrum of bees’ simultaneous naturalness and artificiality when he explained how “Bees are creatures full of wonders, being not altogether tame, nor absolutely wild, but between both.”²⁴ And it was Thomas Muffet who perhaps most effectively summed up the English fascination with the honeybee in what was the

²² Moses Rusden, *A further discovery of bees: treating of the nature, government, generation & preservation of the bee: with experiments and improvements arising from the keeping them in transparent boxes, instead of straw-hives : Also proper directions (to all such as keep bees) as well to prevent their robbing in straw-hives, as their killing in the colonies*, (London, 1679), 124-125.

²³ William Shakespeare, *Henry V* (London, 1599), 1:2, 183-204.

²⁴ Rusden, 8.

most famous English zoological work of its time, *Theatrum Insectorum* (1658), when he charged that “Bees (creatures without reason) have not only providence and foresight, joined with art and industrie, perfect order and discipline in their government, being naturally loyal, valiant, and magnanimous, and abhorring as well rebellion and treason, as cowardice and sloth, all which plainly shew that nature in Bees laying down such a pattern should not only be imitated but surpassed by men, lest they be reproved by these unreasonable creatures.”²⁵ Thus, the honeybee was a clear exception to the English attitude towards wild nature. Indeed, the English saw the hive as no less than a utopian model of order for England to follow.

The cornerstone of this success of the beehive as an enduring utopian model stemmed from its flexibility. Depending on the political and intellectual climate, the English easily adopted, ignored, or reinterpreted certain features of the hive to best serve their image of a utopian society. For example, despite scientific evidence that the so-called patriarch of the beehive was in fact a matriarch, monarchial interpretations of the hive tended to ignore such facts and uphold a king bee. Indeed, as one historian explains, “For as long as two hundred years, natural philosophers and even beekeepers were willing and even eager to distort their closely observed accounts of bee sociality in the service of maintaining the power of the bee “polity” to analogize, and thereby to authorize, prevailing norms such as gender hierarchy in government.”²⁶ It was not until the context of Queen Elizabeth and the resulting shifts in English perceptions of gender-political structures that individuals such as Charles Butler felt comfortable enough to officially publish

²⁵ Thomas Muffet, *Theatrum Insectorum*, (London, 1658), 33-34.

²⁶ Mary Baine Campbell, “Busy Bees: Utopia, Dystopia, and the Very Small,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 36 no. 3, (Fall 2006), 622.

findings that reorganized the gender structure of the hive to support a queen rather than a king. As can be seen through this example, the flexibility allowed in the English observation and interpretation of honeybee society allowed the beehive model to effectively correlate with English perceptions of utopian order even as those perceptions changed, giving the hive a remarkable versatility that allowed it to endure in England as a utopian model.

Indeed, so fond were the English of the hive model that many began to assert that because bees were insects and thus not themselves intelligent creatures, only God could have provided them with such a perfect social framework. As a result, many English began to consider the order underlying bee society as direct evidence of God's preferred form of social order. As Butler argued in *Feminine Monarchy*, “The Bees...God having showed in them unto men, an express pattern of A PERFECT MONARCHY, THE MOST NATURAL AND ABSOLUTE FORM OF GOVERNMENT.”²⁷ Thus, despite the traditional English distaste for uncultivated nature, the English believed the honeybee to be intimately tied with God's will, and thus used the beehive to justify their preferred system of government on religious grounds. Unique in the natural world, the English popularly adopted the hive not only as a convenient metaphor, but as a natural model to justify the institutions of Man.

²⁷ Charles Butler, *The feminine monarchie or a treatise concerning bees, and the due ordering of them wherein the truth, found out by experience and diligent observation, discovereth the idle and fond concepts, which may haue written anent this subiect.*, (London, 1609), 5.

VI. The Transatlantic Utopian Hive

In their migration to North America, the English Puritans who colonized New England carried with them the strong tradition of the utopian hive. Indeed, the hive proved very dear as a model to these colonists, for the Puritans' very purpose for colonization revolved around the realization of a utopian commonwealth. Believing England's Anglican Church structure—which upheld a hierarchy in which local churches were governed by a system of elders—to be blasphemously close to Catholicism, the Puritans desired England to adopt a Congregational system of Protestantism, which eliminated all vestiges of hierarchy to give relative autonomy to local churches. Only England's adoption of this truest form of Protestantism, so the Puritans believed, could save the country from religious demise. The mission of the Puritans in the New World was thus to establish a successful Congregational religious community, thereby providing a model for England and the rest of the Christian world to follow.²⁸ Church reform, however, was not the Puritans' only goal in colonization. "John Winthrop and other leaders of this venture," as one historian explains, "endeavored not only to secure perfection in the church but also to create a society that, in contrast to the increasingly chaotic world of early modern England, would conform as closely as possible to traditional English prescriptions for the ideal well-ordered commonwealth."²⁹ In their creation of a "city on a hill," the Puritans not only desired to reform England's church structure, but its social

²⁸ Jack P. Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America: Exceptionalism and Identity from 1492-1800*, (University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 55.

²⁹ Greene, 55.

structure as well. In the Puritan mindset, religion and community were one and the same, and so reform in one area meant reform in both.

No model better fulfilled this integrated social and religious desire for reform than the beehive. First, the hive existed in England precisely as a model for a traditional, ideal, well-ordered commonwealth. One historian describes the primary aims of the Puritans in their communities as being “to use strong institutions of church, town, and family to subject the moral and social conduct of themselves and their neighbors to the strictest possible social discipline and to maintain the traditional social values of order, hierarchy, and subordination.”³⁰ As a utopian model, the strict commitment those “traditional social values” that characterized the hive fit perfectly within these aims. Additionally, the hive, as shown, had a history in England of providing religious justification for the institutions of Man, which also fit well with the Puritans’ aims to create a religious utopian commonwealth ordained by God. The beehive thus fulfilled the model of a utopian socio-political structure that the New Englanders sought, and additionally provided the undertones of religious validity that was at the heart of the Puritan’s New World mission. As Cotton Mather urged quite explicitly in *The Christian Philosopher* (1721), “But how many *moral instructions* would the *Commonwealth of Bees* afford to a Mind willing to be *instructed* of God, by the Ministry of this *mysterious* insect!”³¹

In 1630, shortly before the first Puritans left for the New World, the highly regarded and influential Protestant minister John Cotton used the hive to justify the Puritans’ mission to the New World in his famous farewell sermon to John Winthrop’s fleet. “[T]o plant a Colony,” Cotton explained, “that is, a company

³⁰ Greene, 55.

³¹ Mather, *The Christian Philosopher*, 165.

that agree together to remove out of their owne Country, and settle a City or Common-wealth elsewhere. Of such a Colony wee reade in Acts 16. 12. which God blessed and prospered exceedingly, and made it a glorious Church.”³² Cotton thus established the idea of colonization as being sanctioned by God, allowing the Puritans to cast off accusations and uncertainties that by colonizing the New World they were abandoning their mother country. To emphasize his point, however, Cotton turned to the model of the beehive. “Nature teacheth Bees to doe so,” Cotton explained, “when as the hive is too full, they seeke abroad for new dwellings.”³³ The English, Cotton urged, were thus justified in following suit, so that “when the hive of the Common-wealth is so full, that Tradesmen cannot live one by another, but eate up one another, in this case it is lawfull to remove.”³⁴

Cotton, in his efforts to provide a framework for the utopian society that the Puritans sought in the New World, used the metaphor of the beehive to justify the Puritans’ colonization of the New World as no less than part of God’s law. As the argument followed, God directed beehives to create new colonies once they became overcrowded, and because God intended the hive to act as a model for Man, by extension, He directed the English to do the same. The beehive in this way became a model for the justification of the very idea of colonization.³⁵ Cotton’s sermon,

³² John Cotton, *God’s Promise to His Plantation*, (London, 1630), 9.

³³ Cotton, 9.

³⁴ Cotton, 9.

³⁵ Cotton was not the only Englishman to follow this train of thought. Other colonial promoters such as Richard Hakluyt, one of the most ardent and famous of promoters of colonization, also used the hive to justify the act of colonization. As Hakluyt explained in *Divers Voyages Touching the Discovery of America and the Islands Adjacent* (1582), “Wee reade that the Bees whe’ they grow to be too many in their oun huius at home, are wont to bee led out by their Captaines to swarne abroad and seek themselves a new dwelling place. If the examples of the Grecians and Carthaginians of olde time and the practise of our age may not mooue vs,” Hakluyt urged, “yet let vs learne wisdom of these smal weake and vnreasonable creatures.” Richard Eburne as well argued much the same in *A Plain Pathway to Plantations* (1624) when he described England as an overcrowded hive that needed to relieve itself through the creation of new bee colonies. As he explained, “...whereas our land at this present...swarmeth with multitude and plenty of people, it is time, and high time, that, like stalls that are

entitled *God's Promise to His Plantation*, was particularly well known to most New England colonists, being, according to one historian, "central to the Puritan experiment in the New World" alongside Winthrop's *A Model of Christian Charity* (1630).³⁶ Through its ties to God in its example of order, the model of the beehive thus helped to inform the very framework of the New England colonies.

And once the New England colonists had settled into their new lives, the beehive was able to endure as a popular social model for New England because of the hive's close ties to both nature and civilization. As an agricultural colony in the midst of a wilderness, Massachusetts' society by necessity revolved around the idea of nature, but the nature New Englanders celebrated was a civilized form of nature. The beehive was perhaps the ultimate form of civilized nature. Indeed, because of its utopian socio-religious connotations and its direct tie to nature, the hive proved to be a particularly attractive model to New England colonists.

Looking back in his *Magnalia Christi Americana*, Mather noted how the process once described by Cotton in England was soon taking place in the colonies: "It was not long before the Massachuset Colony was become like an Hive overstock'd with Bees; and many of the new Inhabitants entertained thoughts of swarming into Plantations extended further into the country."³⁷ Indeed, through its simultaneous ties to nature and civilization, all within the context of God, the honeybee in a way was the very embodiment of New England. In the form of a prayer, Mather urged

overfull of bees...no small number of them should be transplanted into some other soil and removed hence into new hives and homes." As one of the primary reasons for the colonization of Massachusetts was religious in nature, however, Cotton's use of the beehive as a model from God resonated particularly strongly with New England colonists.

³⁶ Reiner Smolinski, editor, quoted in abstract from John Cotton's *A Promise to His Plantation*. Taken online from <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/etas/22/> on March 3, 2008.

³⁷ Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana: Or, the ecclesiastical history of New-England from its first planting in the year of 1620. Unto the year of our Lord, 1698.*, (London, 1702), 23.

New England colonists always to consider the following: “Let me be no *Drone* in the Hive of the *Commonwealth*.³⁸

VII. Frustrations in Early Virginia

While New Englanders were well aware of the negative connotations of the drone—the rather idle member of bee society who serves no other productive purpose in the hive other than to breed—the problem of the drone held a much greater level of significance in Jamestown, the primarily settlement in the colony of Virginia. Established some twenty years before Massachusetts, the colony of Virginia was almost wholly commercially oriented from the start.³⁹ This motivation for colonization stood in stark contrast with the Puritans’ socio-religious reasons for colonizing New England. In many ways, the two colonies could hardly have been more different. In its original conception, Virginia was to follow the formula for success established by the Spanish conquistadores—instant riches and glory through the conquering of native civilizations. As a result, the first colonists sent to establish Virginia were military adventurers—primarily glory-seeking aristocrats and their house servants, along with some skilled specialists and the urban unemployed, all who hoped to benefit from the New World’s instant riches.

³⁸ Mather, *Agricola*, 217.

³⁹ Jack P. Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formulation of American Culture*, (University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 8.

Perhaps the one characteristic uniting this diverse group besides their lust for fame and fortune was their complete lack of knowledge in basic sustenance practices. As one historian notes, “In choosing prospective Virginians, the company did not look for men who would be particularly qualified to keep themselves alive in a new land. The company never considered the problem of staying alive in Virginia to be a serious one.”⁴⁰ Indeed, the colonists gave little thought to the procurement of food, because nearly all accounts of the New World had described it as a “new Eden” in which one was able to reap the bounty of the land with little to no personal labor.

Unfortunately, once the first colonists arrived, they quickly discovered that not only did the New World seem to lack the opportunity for riches and glory that they sought, but to make matters worse, the land was not nearly as bountiful as promised. Regardless, Jamestown’s military adventurers had no interest in spending their time farming, and as a result, depended almost entirely on trade with local tribes to obtain foodstuffs. However, the resulting burden placed on the local tribes, who traditionally produced very little in the way of surplus, combined with the colonists’ steadfast refusal to make any genuine attempt at farming for themselves, escalated tensions and threatened the very integrity of the colony both internally and externally.

⁴⁰ Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*, (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1975), 86.

VIII. The Hive Model in Virginia

In 1609, English preacher and colonization promoter Robert Gray observed the general lack of productivity among the early Jamestown colonists in *A Good Speed to Virginia*. Seeking to explain the sapping effect that the idle colonists were having on the resources of the colony, Gray chose the language of the hive, noting that “a Drone will in short space devoure more honey than the Bee can gather in a long time.”⁴¹ Gray was neither the first nor the last to equate the Jamestown colonists with drones. And in the hive, drones were usually cast out of the hive and left to starve once they became an undue burden on the hive’s resources. Gray’s proposed solution to Jamestown’s drone problem thus rather simply followed the logic of the beehive: “they which will not labour must not eat.”⁴²

Such views were shared by Captain John Smith, a member of the colony’s first governing council. From the start, Virginia’s governing body proved to be particularly ineffectual at organizing the colony properly. As one historian notes, the council’s “members spent most of their time bickering and intriguing against one another...”⁴³ Out of this group of councilors, Smith proved to be the only man capable of any positive sort of action. Sensing the urgency of the situation, Smith harshly criticized Virginia’s colonists for their idleness, using the beehive model to illustrate their laziness and lack of discipline. “If the...sillie Bee seek by their diligence the good of their Commonwealth,” urged Smith, “much more ought

⁴¹ Robert Gray, *A Goodspeed to Virginia*, (London, 1609), D3.

⁴² Gray, D3.

⁴³ Morgan, 75.

Man.”⁴⁴ The hive thus proved to be an important model in Smith’s vision of a properly functioning colony. In contrast with the Puritans’ later religiously oriented conception of the hive, however, Smith saw the hive as an example of strong leadership in a militaristic disciplinary social structure. Only such a structure, Smith felt, could properly motivate colonists to begin working for their food.⁴⁵

Though his unpopularity among the other councilors initially prevented him from making much headway in such efforts, by 1608 Smith was left in complete control of the colony as the other councilors died off or returned to England. Seizing his opportunity, Smith took charge of the colony, proclaiming all power to “resteth wholly in my selfe,”⁴⁶ Like Gray’s drones that consumed the efforts of the worker bees’ labors, Smith decreed that “the labours of thirtie or fortie honest and industrious men shall not be consumed to maintaine an hundred and fiftie idle loiterers.”⁴⁷ Smith thus gave the Jamestown colonists an ultimatum again strikingly similar to the opinions of Gray: “You must obey this now for a Law, that he that will not worke shall not eate.”⁴⁸

Though his harsh disciplinary tactics provoked much resentment among the colonists, Smith’s leadership proved remarkably successful at organizing and restoring the structural integrity of the colony. Justifying his harsh policies, Smith again used the beehive as a model, stating that, by example, if authorities in the hive

⁴⁴ John Smith, *Description of New England* (1616), in *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith*, ed. Philip L. Barbour, 3 vols. (Chapel Hill, 1986), 1:311. Quoted in Kupperman, 275.

⁴⁵ Kupperman, 275-280.

⁴⁶ John Smith, *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles: with the names of the Adventurers, Planters, and Governors from their first beginning. An: 1584 to this present 1624.* London, 1624. Book 3, *The Proceedings and Accidents of The English Colony in Virginia, Extracted from the Authors following, by William Simons, Doctour of Divinite.*, chap X. In *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith (1580-1631)*, Philip L. Barbour, ed., University of North Carolina Press, 1986. 208.

⁴⁷ Smith, *Generall Historie*, 208.

⁴⁸ Smith, *Generall Historie*, 208.

“punish the drones and sting” those who chose to live off the work of others and refused to labor themselves, then Smith was justified in doing the same in Virginia. “Little honey hath that hive,” Smith defended, “where there are more Drones than Bees: and miserable is that Land, where more are idle than well employed.”⁴⁹ Smith thus, through his articulation of the regimentation of the hive, proposed that through strong, militaristic discipline, idle drones could be turned into productive workers.

Though Smith’s leadership in Jamestown was rather brief (he left for England after suffering injuries in a small powder explosion and never returned), his example effectively showed that Virginia needed a stronger sense of leadership and discipline in order to endure. As Smith had realized, the order underlying the beehive could easily be interpreted to justify the necessity martial law in a colony of drones. Indeed, as John Levett argued in *The Ordering of Bees* (1634), “These Master Bees are absolute in their authorities and commands, and out of a regall power or civil discipline answerable to our Marshall lawes, and as having a supreame prerogative above all the rest, he over-vieweth all that are within the compasse of his squadrons, he administreth Justice unto all, correcting the lazie, sloathfull, and disobedient, and giving honour and incouragement to those which are painefull, laborious and diligent.”⁵⁰ And referring to the bees’ natural process of colonization, Richard Eburne, in *A Plain Pathway to Plantations* (1624), emphasized the importance of sending such “Master Bees” in human attempts at colonization. “...Nature herself,” explained Eburne, “teaching the Amazonian bees not to swarm without their lady...may easily teach us that we shall transgress the very order of

⁴⁹ Smith, *Description of New England*, 1:311. Quoted in Kupperman, 275.

⁵⁰ John Levett, *The Ordering of Bees*, (London, 1634), 66-69. Quoted in Kupperman, 277.

Nature and neglect that instinct which is engraffed in all if we shall make such a removal without the conduct of such men as for their place and power, birth and breed, may be fit to order and rule, to support and settle the rest.”⁵¹ Much like the beehive, only under the guidance of strong leadership could Jamestown remain organized and productive. As Richard Remnant noted in *A Discourse or Historie of Bees; Their Nature and usage, and the great profit of them* (1637), referring to a hive without its queen: “Without one they cannot subsist, but are distract, disperst, wander and worke not, but come to naught and perish.”⁵²

This larger point was made particularly clear when, during the Winter after Smith’s return to England and the subsequent delay in the arrival of the colony’s new governor, Lord De la Warr, Jamestown reverted into utter chaos in a winter in which an estimated eighty percent of the Jamestown population died of starvation or disease. Once he finally arrived, Governor De la Warr consciously adopted and expanded upon the policies of Smith, issuing the *Lawes Divine, Morall and Martiall* (1610), which forced Jamestown colonists, as one historian describes, to work communally as company employees “under a severe military regimen.”⁵³ Such policy governed the colony until the Crown finally seized authority of Virginia in 1624.

Through its many trials and errors in Jamestown, the English eventually learned the necessity of proper order and regimentation as being dependent on strong leadership. And as Virginia faced its many hardships, the hive proved to be a valuable model through which the English made sense of their shortcomings and

⁵¹ Richard Eburne, *A Plain Pathway to Plantations*, (London, 1624), 102. Quoted in Kupperman, 278.

⁵² Richard Remnant, *A Discourse or Historie of Bees; Their Nature and usage, and the great profit of them* (London, 1637), chap 3. Quoted in Kupperman, 278.

⁵³ Greene, 54.

interpreted necessary remedies. As Sir William Vaughan noted in *The Newlanders Cure* (1630), as Jamestown had showed, “The truth is, without *Discipline*, / Our Bees turne Drones, and will decline / From *Charity*, and virtuous *Thrift*, / To *Idleness*. And basest *Shift*.”⁵⁴

IX. Conclusions

The idea of the beehive played an important part in the founding of early American societies. Because the hive served as a popular social model in England during the time of colonization, many colonial promoters and designers considered the hive when conceptualizing the formation of their New World colonies. And because the beehive was a model of order from nature, it survived the transition across the Atlantic and became embraced by early colonial societies, which socially and economically revolved around various forms of husbandry, and subsequently, held a special receptiveness to the idea of ordered nature.

Indeed, at the heart of the model, the beehive stood for order. What exact form or order it represented was left to the interpretation of the individual. As this thesis has shown, both Massachusetts and Virginia used the beehive as a model to justify and inform their emerging social structures, each while following two extremely different models of development. Massachusetts used the hive as a model for a utopian English religious commonwealth, while Virginia used it as a model for

⁵⁴ Sir William Vaughan, *The Newlanders Cure*, (London, 1630), 103.

the efficiency of social regimentation. Because of the flexibility that the hive allowed as a social model, it was able to fulfill both of these roles effectively and endure through subsequent social changes each society underwent. That an insect could have had so much impact on intellectual thought and social development in the early American colonies is nothing short of incredible.

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