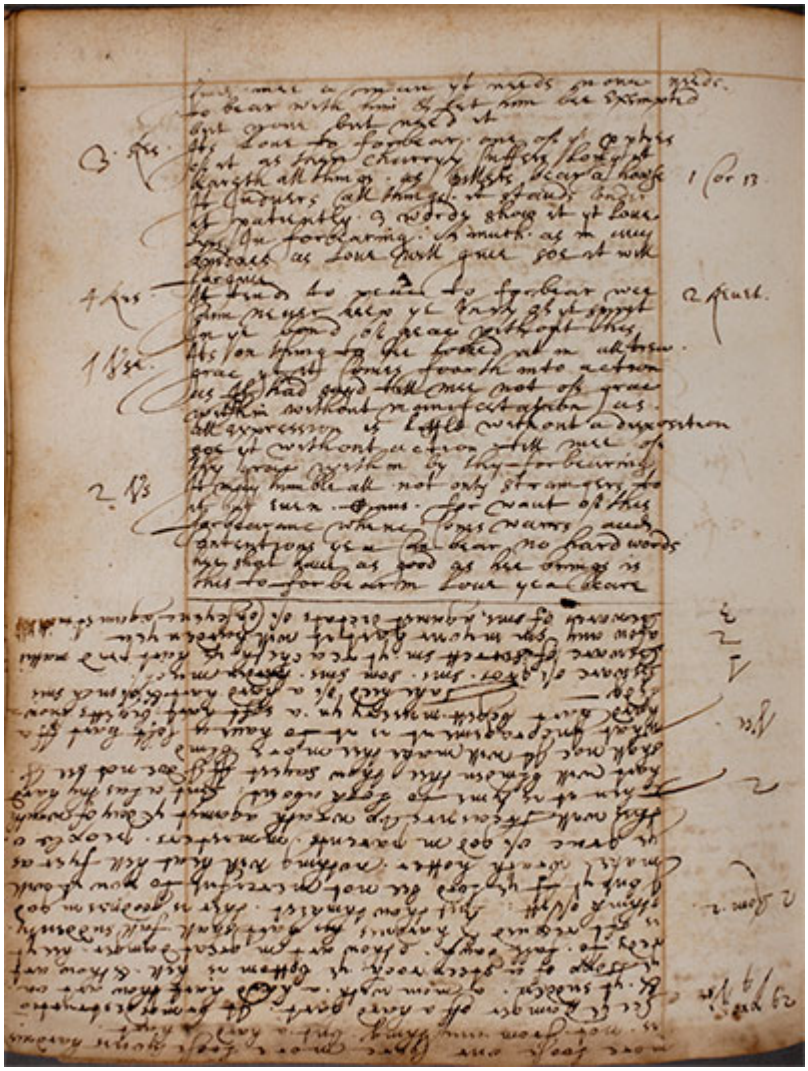
Eavesdropping on the Meetinghouse



Notetaking and Sermon Culture in Puritan New England

Common-place talks to Meredith Neuman, author of *Jeremiah's Scribes: Creating Sermon Literature in Puritan New England*, about sermon culture among Puritans, the physical processes they undertook to take notes, and the resonances of that culture in modern research practices.

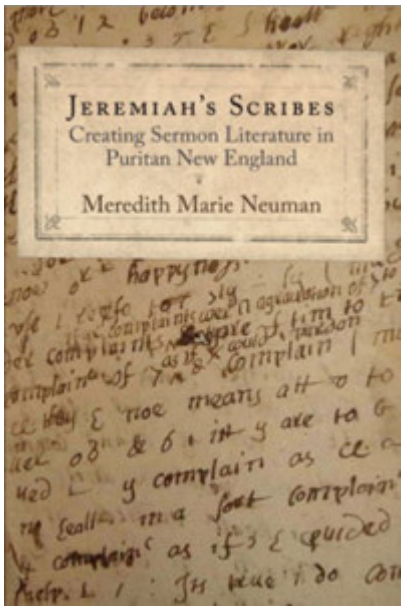
Your argument hinges on the idea that seventeenth-century Puritans lived in a "sermon culture." Can you elaborate on what that encompassed and how it worked?

As a literary scholar, I am interested in how sermons permeated other genres as well.

I use the term “sermon culture” to indicate not just the sermon texts themselves but also the practices and phenomena involved in the production and reception of those texts. I knew that people sometimes took notes on the preaching they heard, and I thought this might be a better way to explore the aural experience of the sermon, even though I wasn’t sure I could even find such notebooks. The first auditor sermon notebooks I found were at the Massachusetts Historical Society, and the first one I encountered transformed how I thought about the larger experience of the sermon. One page was filled with barely legible scrawl and dotted with what might have been shorthand symbols. All I could make out was repetitive variations of a single verse of scripture that the minister had taken as his text. It seemed to me as if the notetaker was happy to dwell in the purely aural experience of the minister’s voice and the echoing scriptural passage. Elsewhere in the notebook, other sermons were recorded in just a few succinct, numbered points. It was all very orderly, and the handwriting was careful and ornamental, like a penmanship exercise. (To this day I cannot decide if the two notetaking styles came from one person or more.) From that unusual notebook came the double revelation that auditors could experience sermons in quite divergent ways and that those ways were not always predictable based on what we know from print sermons and preaching manuals.

Essentially, I went to the archive to be a fly on the wall and to eavesdrop (as it were) on the minister speaking, but I soon became more interested in the auditor listening. Contemplating the sermon via the auditor’s experience forced me to think about the complicated ways that sermon texts circulated in the community and abroad. This is part of what I mean by sermon culture. Sermon distribution was truly multimedia. Delivery was oral, of course, usually based on an outline that the minister had by memory or in outline form. In turn, the

individual auditor might retain preaching by memory or take notes (often at home, but sometimes in the meetinghouse). The ministers and the laity sometimes wrote their notes up more fully. Ministers complained about unauthorized publication of their sermons based on auditor notes, but they were sometimes beholden to those very sources when developing their preaching for the press. Notes, memory, and print also formed the basis of formal and informal conversations that occurred within families, throughout the community, and abroad. When we think of what it meant to "publish" a sermon in this period, we must think of overlapping modes of print, manuscript, and oral circulation. Ultimately, the complex material circumstances of sermon publication cause us to question what we mean by authorship. In *Jeremiah's Scribes* I posit a model of "disseminated authorship," where the sermon is not the product of individual ministers but of entire communities.

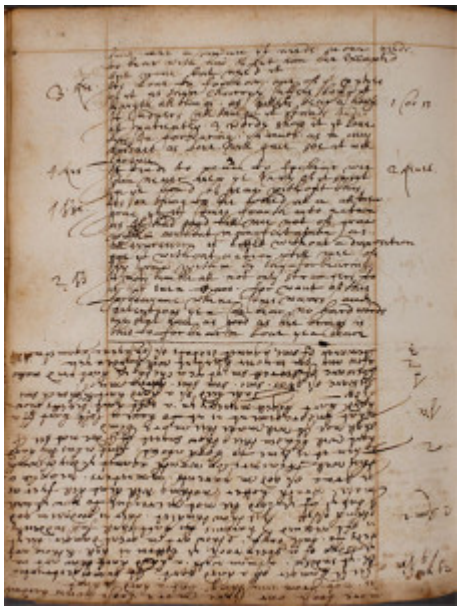


Another part of what I mean by "sermon culture" has to do with how sermons affected thinking and self-expression beyond the meetinghouse. As a literary scholar, I am interested in how the sermons permeated other genres as well. Dan Shea muses in*Spiritual Autobiography in Early America* that "ours has been a notably sermon-ridden literature from the beginning." I love that quote so much that I used it to open the introduction to *Jeremiah's Scribes*. Harry Stout estimates that an individual might have listened to 15,000 hours of preaching over his or her lifetime. How could our literature *not* be "sermon-ridden"? The effect of this prolonged exposure is easy to find in conversion narratives, such as the so-called Cambridge confessions recorded by Thomas Shepard, which are peppered with scriptural citation as well as references to specific sermon encounters. ("I heard Mr. So-and-so on X verse on Y occasion, and I thought Z.") We can also see ready evidence of sermon culture in Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative. Every time I teach that text, some savvy student inevitably observes that a little sermon breaks out when Rowlandson gives that numbered list of "a few remarkable passages of providence." Moving beyond the

structural level, we get the impression that Rowlandson cannot *not* interpret biographical incidents like scripture, with clear doctrines to be opened and applied. Anne Bradstreet makes a similar move in her poem “Upon the Burning of Our House.” New England “plain style” preaching emphasized its own exegetical and rhetorical maneuvers. As a result, the influence of sermon on other genres is not merely topical but interpretive and methodological.

The book examines the seventeenth century essentially as a long moment for Puritan sermon culture, but can you discuss some of the ways in which that culture changed during the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth?

I allowed myself to remain quite narrowly focused for this book because I was ultimately less interested in tracing the evolution of sermons than I was in framing a few very specific questions about language for a particular people during a prolonged historical moment. Despite my narrow focus, however, I hope that I have managed to open up new avenues for scholarship on the sermon in early America. There is so much I did not address in terms of the diversity of sermon traditions in the seventeenth century and particularly in relation to Native engagement with Puritan sermon culture. The scene only gets more diverse as you move into the eighteenth century, of course. That’s why I am so excited by a collaborative project headed up by Zach Hutchins with Rachel Cope and Chris Phillips called TEAMS (Transcribing Early American Manuscript Sermons), a searchable database of original transcriptions of pre-1800 American manuscript sermons. They will be launching the prototype in 2015 with a base of 50 sermons from South Carolina, Pennsylvania, Maryland, New York, and Massachusetts by Episcopalian, Baptist, Catholic, and Congregational preachers. Projects like this one are crucial to an understanding of the full spectrum of early American sermon cultures.



Richard Russell sermon notes. Russell family sermons and sermon notes, Manuscripts Department, octavo vol. 1 (1649). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

And, yes, I am deflecting the original question just a bit, but I will make a few points about how the sermon culture that I examined in *Jeremiah's Scribes* fits into a longer trajectory (at least in terms of non-conformist Anglo-American preaching). By the late sixteenth century, you have a situation in England where the demand for good, original, vernacular, non-conformist preaching has outpaced the number of ministers who are trained and securely established in pulpits. Into the seventeenth century, writers of spiritual autobiography frequently relate the need to travel long distances on a Sunday or even to migrate in order to be closer to "godly" preaching. This demand helps to fuel what we call the Great Migration to New England in the 1630s. What's always fascinated me, though, is the lag time between the increased availability of such preaching (say, in New England where the per capita rate of godly preaching is extremely high, but even in certain corners of England at an earlier date) and a critical mass of printing based on that lively oral culture.

It is actually quite hard to find print versions of "ordinary" preaching from mid-seventeenth-century New England. In *The New-England Soul*, Stout calls attention to a preference for publishing occasional preaching (fast days, funerals, etc.), a phenomenon that causes a distorted view of sermon themes and tones. If you look only at print sermons based on a single delivery, there appears to be a lot more brimstone in New England than I think there really was. For me, the flip side of that coin is the disproportion of unwieldy, polemical "sermon cycles" that come from the first generation of New England preachers. Thomas Shepard's preaching on the Parable of the Ten Virgins is a good example. His multi-year sequence of preaching on a single parable from Matthew comes out of the aftermath of the Antinomian Controversy, but on a weekly basis, I think those sermons would have sounded like "ordinary" pastoral exhortation. The frequency with which members of Shepard's church cite the Parable of the Ten Virgins suggests ordinary, pastoral preaching, yet the posthumous 1660 publication emphasizes topical concerns—this time millennialist eschatology rather than a local Antinomian threat.

In New England, the scene changes when the first generation of preachers begins to die off, I suspect. Suddenly you have posthumous collections, like John Norton's *Three Choice and Profitable Sermons*, that include occasional as well as ordinary preaching. Increasingly in the last part of the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth, you have straightforward pastoral preaching making its

way into print more frequently, I think, as part of a general acceleration of print as consumer commodity across the board. (This point is driven home for me in Sewall's *Diary* where he sometimes brings print sermons as a gift and other times sugared almonds when he comes a-wooing.) Part of the issue also seems to be a shift in supply and demand relative to the status of print vs. oral transmission. Anxiety over the scarcity of "godly" preaching in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England was tied up in the perceived primacy of *hearing* the Word. I've not worked it out completely for myself, but I suspect that the traditional Protestant preference for hearing sermons becomes less of an issue as both print sermons and good preaching become increasingly available (not to mention increased denominational diversity). There is more of a marketplace feel to New England sermon culture by century's end.

In chapter 2, you discuss some of the challenges of looking for notetaking practices in archival collections, including varying description procedures, uncertain provenances, and unnamed notetakers. What strategies did you develop as a researcher to overcome these obstacles?

Honestly? My strategy was to embrace the messiness and idiosyncrasy of the process. I developed a dragnet of keyword combinations, often with wildcards and simple Boolean syntax (e.g. sermon? OR preach* AND note* NOT print* NOT pub*). I would run variations upon variations of advanced searches and e-mail hundreds of results to myself. Later I would comb through the records, discarding what was clearly not what I wanted and calling up anything that seemed remotely plausible. I looked at a lot of material that was not what I wanted but that nevertheless helped me to define the larger project. For example, the "wrong" material allowed me to figure out key differences between notes for delivery and true auditor notes. Or that a minister's own auditing notes could have more in common with lay notes than with his own notes for delivery. Or that many individuals made manuscript copies of sermons for preservation and distribution, based both on manuscript and print sources. In short, the great inefficiency of the system paid off. Ironically, if the searchable metadata had been more consistent and reliable, I would not have stumbled across so many important ancillary documents. For me, it will always be important to flail about in the archive, to allow one's self to be surprised and confused by it. As I tell my students, you can go to the archive with what you think your questions are, but, if you are very lucky, the archive will tell you what your questions really are.

Interaction with library staff and curators is absolutely crucial to this sort of research. They are the ones who know the collections and who can tell you about material that sometimes isn't even catalogued. Importantly, they are also

the keepers of Institutional Knowledge. Every library's collections are described and organized according to criteria that are often particular to the institution. To search for sermon notes at the Houghton Library, then, is in some sense to search Harvard's sense of its own history. At the Massachusetts Historical Society, notebooks are attached to individuals in a way that highlights local histories. The American Antiquarian Society emphasizes print and family collections, and at the New England Historic Genealogical Society, of course, it's always about ancestry. (A staffer there once asked me if I'd ever found the grave of an auditor whose notes I'd been trying to decipher. I'll admit that such a marvelous notion had never occurred to me before.) Bumping up against diverse collecting agenda and disciplinary practices will shake you out of a lot of methodological complacency, if you let it.

I expect that auditor notes will continue to be discovered and identified after generations of obscurity. We don't always know what we have. Literally. This summer I identified at the Boston Public Library what I believe to be a misattributed leaf of a sermon notebook supposedly kept by Samuel Sewall. My search for evidence of misattribution led me to discover that there were in fact two sets of notes taken by two different auditors (the other, in fact, *was* Sewall's) at the same sermon delivery. To me, that's a much more valuable discovery than a single manuscript fragment associated with the famous judge. For me, however, the most exciting discoveries these days are in deciphering shorthand. *Common-Place* readers may already know about the team of undergraduates and scholars at Brown University (including Linford Fisher) that cracked Roger William's shorthand code. Fewer likely know about David M. Powers's work transcribing shorthand sermon notebooks kept by John Pynchon on the preaching of George Moxon in the 1640s. I hope to see the entirety of this important work in print, but in the meantime we will have to satisfy ourselves with sample pages from the Springfield notebook, available online via the Congregational Library. An image of Pynchon's youthful notebook is on the cover of *Jeremiah's Scribes*, and so I was grateful when David was able to translate previously undeciphered symbols for me. More importantly, though, Powers's work is an exciting contribution to our understanding of notetaking generally and the use of shorthand in particular.

As you discuss in Jeremiah's Scribes*, notetaking is a deeply embodied practice; it is, literally, a physical process. Yet historians and literary scholars now encounter many of our sources online. How did you navigate those differences, and what challenges did you face in trying to understand a seventeenth-century practice with twenty-first-century technology?*

In graduate school in California, my research was both enabled and limited by access first to microfilm and then to digital images of print sermons. Once I moved to Massachusetts, I suddenly had access to manuscripts but—ironically—less digital access (especially to early English imprints). Such flukes of access can define our scholarship, of course; these particular flukes

also caused me to reflect on issues of access for seventeenth-century readers. Notetaking was pious practice, but it was also just a practical method of text-getting. Like making manuscript copies of print books, compiling sermon notes was a way of expanding one's library. There is a different sense of intimacy and authorship with texts you create by hand with pen and paper rather than by mouse and keyboard. Early on in my research, I started keeping a notebook of my own in order to get a better sense of that experiential process. In particular, I was fascinated by the phenomenon of flipping the notebook upside down in order to record different information from the "back" of the book forward. John Hull, for example, recorded public occurrences in one direction and private reflections in the opposite direction, a practical method that nevertheless evokes other kinds of public-private overlap. I found it convenient to record reading and transcription notes in one direction and my own reflections and compositions in the other. That juxtaposition preserves an interesting record of the evolution of my arguments.

What began as a somewhat whimsical experiment in recording by hand in order to get a better sense of the physical process of notetaking has since become a bare necessity. One morning, just around the time I was completing the final draft of the book manuscript, I woke up to discover that I could barely lift my arms; intense bouts of writing on my laptop had triggered underlying chronic back and shoulder issues. I was under a tight deadline with no time to heal, so I had to get creative in order to finish the book. My department found money to pay four wonderful students for assistance in finalizing the manuscript. I marked up drafts by hand and then dictated edits (once, memorably, correcting a transcription of a seventeenth-century sermon with a student in Washington state via Skype and Google Docs). I spoke the final passages aloud while one of my amanuenses took everything down. It was a remarkable and rather moving experience that drove home—in a very personal way—my larger argument about communal textual production.

Textual production is now indeed very embodied for me. I draft by hand mostly, restrict myself to a special keyboard and mouse setup, and use a standing desk at all times. This is a challenge in reading rooms, of course, because I can't use my laptop, which means that all my research is now done by hand in notebooks. And so I continue to think about the way handwritten notes are different from typed, electronic notes. I muse frequently on Ann Blair's investigations of information management, and I consider organization itself to be an expressive form. You can't alter the experiential chronology of the notebook. For example, notetakers often follow a sermon series on a single verse. Sometimes the sermon *continua* is interrupted by preaching on other topics, especially by occasional preaching, but sometimes the notetaker records those interrupting sermons in another book or in another direction, and sometimes there seems to be a mix of organizational strategies. There are accidents, too, that determine which notebook is on hand for any given circumstance, and so you see all kinds of odd texts intrude (pen trials, drafts of letter, lists of books, mathematical calculations). Similar phenomena appear in my own notebooks, which helps me to theorize what odd ordering and

juxtapositions mean and, just as importantly, don't mean.

Manuscript notebooks preserve errancy of all kinds. If I write something foolish in a Word document or put that document in the wrong place on a computer, I can change it. The computer's default settings leave no trace of the original wording or organization. With notebooks, however, those features that speak to experiential process leave traces everywhere. Unfortunately, cramped handwriting toward the end of a line, truncated ideas toward the end of a page, the heavy correction of a word, and indecisive spaces left in a sentence are all hard to convey via transcription. I tried to cultivate a transcription style that preserved these idiosyncrasies, but so much gets normalized when put through a word processor. I used to work in desktop publishing, and so I know good tricks for making word processed text approximate the oddities of the manuscript page (much to the chagrin of copy editors and production managers). Trying to render manuscripts typographically is an exercise in diminishing returns, however. One solution was to create a Sermon Notebooks Online resource on my personal website, but even that feels like a poor substitute for having the thing itself in front of you.

In many cases, technology made it harder to do things with text that are easy to do by hand. When I used to transcribe by laptop, for example, I created simple keyboard shortcuts (or "macros") for common abbreviations that incorporated superscript (y^e for "the," for example, or w^t for "with" or "what"). When the university upgraded my laptop, the newer version of Word interpreted those macros as viruses, and so I had to ask IT to reinstall the old version just so I could keep transcribing. Copyediting and typesetting was a struggle, too. Bolded letters indicating darker ink in the original or extra spacing in the middle of a line were easy enough to reproduce, but other textual effects proved much trickier. In a few cases, I had to indicate text that the original notetaker had marked off with a border. I easily created a rule around the text in Word, but the production department—with its much more sophisticated software—could not replicate the effect. UPenn Press was wonderful to work with on these odd problems. We went back and forth, and I simplified what I could, but in the end there were three places where they had to create tiny pieces of art incorporating text and border. In two cases the little piece of art stood on its own as a block quote, which I think was easier for them to work with. In one case, however, the little piece of art was inserted and had to flow with the regular characters. Tricky. I haven't seen the ebook version of *Jeremiah's Scribes* yet, but they warned me that these little pieces of embedded art wouldn't all resize along with the rest of the text. I actually thought that was a lucky quirk of digital publishing—an additional way to call attention to the "thingyness" of this and of all texts. Digital textuality may not be embodied, strictly speaking, but it is filled with wonderful idiosyncrasies that we are only beginning to understand how to identify and contemplate.

This article originally appeared in issue 15.2 (Winter, 2015).

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