Episode Book

EPISODE #5663

Did the Puritans Really Hate Fun?

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SYNOPSIS

The Puritans are America's favorite scapegoats for strict alcohol laws, drab clothing, and a war on fun. But how much of that is real? This episode digs into the history behind the caricature — from a 1781 loyalist hoax that invented Connecticut's "Bloody Laws" to taverns funded at town expense, rum consumption that outpaced the twentieth century, and ministers preaching "garden love." It also takes the counterargument seriously: historians like Bruce Daniels warn the revisionist rescue went too far, and that Puritan childrearing could be genuinely brutal. The result is a messier, more interesting picture of the twenty thousand people who shaped American ideas about work, education, and purpose for the next three hundred years.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Here's what Daniel wrote in this week. He wants to talk about the Puritans, the history and the influence they left on America. And he's upfront that everything he's ever read about them has been negative. He gives the example of asking why certain New England states have such strict alcohol rules, and the answer always comes back to Puritan influence.



Herman

The catch-all.



Corn

And then he puts it bluntly. He calls them, quote, "a gang of Debbie Downers and killjoys who seemed to wage a cultural war on enjoyment, fun and leisure." And he asks two things. How do we respond to that attack on Puritan values, and is there a more uplifting side to this group than the one he's set out.



Herman

That's a fair challenge. And the honest answer is that the caricature Daniel's describing is real, it's old, and it's mostly wrong.



Corn

Mostly wrong but not entirely.



Herman

That's the whole episode, right there. Because there are two separate things tangled up in Daniel's question. There's what the Puritans actually did, and there's what we've decided the word "puritanical" means. And those two things have been drifting apart for about four hundred years.



Corn

Start with the word. Because "puritan" started as an insult.



Herman

It did. It was a pejorative from the beginning. A sixteenth and seventeenth century English reformist Protestant who thought the Protestant Reformation under Elizabeth hadn't gone far enough. They were the hotter sort of Protestant. And the label stuck, they eventually embraced it, and then somewhere along the line it became an insult again. So the word has been doing this pendulum thing for centuries.



Corn

Which means when Daniel says the only time he's read about them was in a negative way, he's reading a tradition that has been negative by design. The word was built to be a slur.



Herman

And the most famous line in that tradition is Mencken. Puritanism is, quote, "the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy."



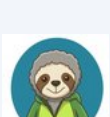
Corn

That's the one everybody knows.



Herman

It's a great line. It's also, as one historian put it, a quotable bon mot not unduly troubled by a strict sense of fairness or accuracy. Mencken was writing in the twenties, he needed a villain for Victorian America, and the Puritans were available.



Corn

So the killjoy is a twentieth century casting decision.



Herman

Largely. The image crystallized during Prohibition, when you needed somebody to blame for why America was so uptight about drink. And the Puritans were three hundred years dead and couldn't object.



Corn

Let's take Daniel's alcohol example head on, because it's the one he actually used. Did the Puritans ban alcohol?



Herman

No. Flatly no. They maintained taverns in almost every town. Samuel Eliot Morison was making this point back in 1930, and it's only gotten clearer since. Beer, cider, hard liquor, provided at town expense to attract unpaid help at a house raising. There's a church parish record that lists malt and wine among the necessities of life.



Corn

The necessities of life.



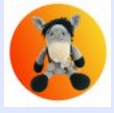
Herman

Alongside bread, presumably.



Corn

So where did Daniel get the idea?



Herman

From the blue laws, which are a fascinating mess. The Puritans never banned the sale of alcohol. What they restricted was commerce on the Sabbath. You couldn't open the tavern on Sunday. That's it. And one of the original blue laws was actually a price control. It said you couldn't be charged too much for a drink when you went to a tavern.



Corn

A consumer protection statute.



Herman

The Puritans were worried about being gouged at the bar.



Corn

That is the single funniest thing I've heard this week.



Herman

And then there's the part that I think Daniel will enjoy most, because it's the "everything you know is wrong" beat. The term blue law, the whole image of Connecticut as this grim legal code, traces back to a hoax. A reverend named Samuel Peters, an Anglican loyalist, fled to London in 1774, and in 1781 published a history of Connecticut containing forty five harsh statutes that he simply made up.



Corn

Invented.



Herman

Invented. To discredit America as backwards and fanatical. He called them the Bloody Laws. And we are still, two and a half centuries later, citing his fabrications as though they were real.



Corn

So Daniel's strict alcohol rules in New England are partly a loyalist propaganda campaign that worked.



Herman

Partly. The modern rules are real, and they have their own history. Massachusetts didn't allow Sunday retail sales until 1983, and didn't allow Sunday alcohol sales until 2004. Happy hour is still banned in Massachusetts.



Corn

Why?



Herman

A 1983 drunk driving death in Braintree after a bar ran a name that tune contest. So the no happy hour rule in Massachusetts is not Puritan. It's a 1983 tragedy and a subsequent law.



Corn

The Puritans get blamed for a 1983 car accident.



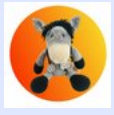
Herman

They get blamed for a lot of things.



Corn

Okay, so the alcohol charge collapses. What about the broader charge, the war on fun, the war on leisure?



Herman

This is where it gets interesting, and where I'd want to be careful, because the revisionist case is strong but it has its own problems. The core of it is Edmund Morgan's 1942 essay on the Puritans and sex. His argument was that the Puritans enjoyed sex, were told by their ministers and their theology that sex within marriage should be enjoyed, and in general had as healthy an attitude toward it as you could hope to find anywhere.



Corn

That is not the received image.



Herman

Not remotely. And it wasn't just tolerance, it was obligation. A spouse could be punished for withholding sex. There's a minister, Thomas Hooker, preaching that there's wild love and joy enough in the world, but we would have garden love and garden joy. That's not a man telling you to be miserable. That's a man telling you the good stuff is at home.



Corn

Garden love.



Herman

Harry Stout at Yale put it about as directly as you can. The Puritans were not opposed to parties. They certainly did not have sexual hang ups. They were not prudes. And then he adds the number that I think is the best single fact in this whole episode.



Corn

Go on.



Herman

Scholars estimate the Puritan rum consumption rate surpassed the alcohol consumption rate in the twentieth century.



Corn

The killjoys out-drank us.



Herman

And that's not a joke about hypocrisy, it's a point about how badly the image has drifted. If you're picturing a room full of people sipping water and frowning, you have the wrong century.



Corn

What about the clothes? The black hats, the drab everything.



Herman

Largely wrong too. The Puritans wore bright clothing and painted their houses brightly. The drab image is really just what most seventeenth century middle class people looked like. And the leadership was more colorful than the stereotype allows. Bulstrode Whitelocke, a Puritan parliamentarian, composed music, directed plays, and let his servants play cards. John Owen wore thigh high Spanish leather boots.



Corn

Spanish leather. On a Puritan.



Herman

And John Cotton, writing a commentary on the gospel of John, said God was to be glorified in eating and drinking, sleeping and recreating.



Corn

Recreating is right there in the sentence.



Herman

Right there. And when the Cambridge synod met in 1647, the Massachusetts General Court rewarded the attendees with barrels of wine and kegs of beer.



Corn

They catered it. Okay. So far the case for the defense is strong. But you said the revisionists have a problem, and I want that, because Daniel asked a genuine question and I don't want us to just hand him the flattering version.



Herman

The problem is Bruce Daniels. University of Winnipeg, 1991, an article called Did the Puritans Have Fun. And Daniels accepts that the killjoy image is a caricature. He's not defending Mencken. But he warns that Morison and Miller and Morgan may have overcorrected, and created a new, equally ahistorical stereotype of the Puritans as twentieth century moderates.



Corn

The rescue mission went too far.



Herman

That's his argument. And the sharpest version of it is this. We know what Puritan leaders said about pleasure. We do not know what most Puritans did. The sermons and the tracts are the record of the elite. The ordinary farmer who wasn't a church member, whose interior life left no paper, we have almost nothing on him.



Corn

So the revisionist case is built on the writings of the literate minority.



Herman

Partly, yes. And Daniels is also blunt that some things really were harsh. He says by almost any standard employed today, Puritan attitudes toward childrearing were repressive, and even judged by seventeenth century standards the Puritans were unusually harsh. He uses the phrase psychologically brutal.



Corn

That's a real charge.



Herman

It's a real charge from a sympathetic historian. And you can feel it in the language. Samuel Danforth preaching, let thy lustful body be everlasting fuel for the unquenchable fire. That's not garden love. That's a different register entirely.



Corn

So the honest position is that the caricature is wrong and the flattering correction is also partly wrong.



Herman

The truth is between the killjoy and the bon vivant. And I'd say it's closer to the bon vivant than the caricature, but not as close as the revisionists sometimes imply.



Corn

Which is a much more interesting answer than either Daniel's version or the rebuttal.



Herman

Considerably.



Corn

Let me push on something else, because I think the real substance of Daniel's question is the influence. He asked about the history and influence on the US. The alcohol stuff is the hook, but the legacy is the meat. What did they actually leave?



Herman

Stout's line is that they were more than merely one group among many. They exerted an influence in American culture disproportionate to their numbers. Twenty thousand people in the Great Migration, and they set the terms for the next three hundred years.



Corn

Twenty thousand is nothing. That's a mid-sized town.



Herman

It's a mid-sized town. And out of it comes the phrase that every American president from Carter to Reagan to Clinton has reached for, whether they know it or not. A city set upon a hill. Winthrop's image from the Arbella sermon. The idea that America is a project with a purpose, and the world is watching.



Corn

That's the uplifting side Daniel's asking about, and it's not small.



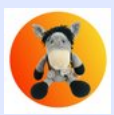
Herman

It's not small at all. And it's not just rhetoric. Harvard was founded while people were still digging out the first settlements. Within a decade of landing. And here's the detail that I find astonishing. Harvard and Yale were the only colleges in the Western world that required Hebrew.



Corn

Required.



Herman

Required. For admission. You had to read Hebrew to get into Yale. There is no university on earth that asks that now.



Corn

So the people we picture as grim and anti-intellectual built the most linguistically demanding higher education system in the world.



Herman

Near universal literacy in New England, which was not true of England itself at the time. Town meeting self government. The whole apparatus of the New England town, which is the seed of a certain kind of American civic life. And then the thing that Weber built a book on.



Corn

The Protestant ethic.



Herman

The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. Weber's argument, published in 1904 and 1905, was that Reformed and Calvinist Protestantism was the seedbed of the character traits that undergirded modern capitalism. Work as a vocation, a calling, the German word is Beruf. Worldly asceticism. Frugality. The idea that your labor is not just a job, it's an obligation and a form of worship.



Corn

And that's the double edged part, isn't it. Because the same theology that says your work is a calling also says leisure is suspect. That's where the killjoy charge actually has purchase.



Herman

That's the strongest version of Daniel's argument, and I'd give it to him. The work ethic and the suspicion of idleness come from the same root. If your labor is worship, then the hours you're not laboring are a question you have to answer.



Corn

The Puritans didn't hate fun. They suspected it.



Herman

They were ambivalent about it. There's a whole scholarly literature on Puritan ambivalence toward leisure and recreation. Ambivalence is the right word. Not prohibition, not celebration. Ambivalence.



Corn

And an ambivalent tradition, over three centuries, gets flattened into a caricature. Which is what happened. There's one more thread I want to pull, because it's the one I keep circling. The Acton Institute made an argument that the Puritan drive for moral reform and self improvement wasn't original to them at all. It was inherited from Renaissance Christian humanism. Erasmus, Cicero. Their line was, if people today dislike the Puritans so much, they should blame the Renaissance.



Herman

That's a real point and I think it's the deepest one in the whole discussion. The Puritans weren't inventing a new austerity. They were holding mainstream early modern Christian views, more intensely than their neighbors. The intensity is what made them Puritans. The content was the common inheritance of Christendom.



Corn

So when a modern person recoils from the Puritans, what are they actually recoiling from?



Herman

That's the provocative version of the argument. Timon Cline's line is, if they seem harsh or superstitious today, perhaps it's because we're the weird ones.



Corn

We're the weird ones.



Herman

And I don't think that's just a provocation. It's a genuine observation about how we read the past. A group that held the standard beliefs of its era more seriously than its neighbors is going to look strange to a culture that holds almost none of those beliefs at all. The strangeness is partly about them and partly about the distance we've traveled.



Corn

Which reframes Daniel's whole question. He asked whether there's a more uplifting side. And the answer is yes, but the uplift isn't that they were secretly fun. It's that they were serious, and the seriousness built things that outlasted them.



Herman

Harvard. Yale. The town meeting. Near universal literacy. The city on a hill. The work ethic that Weber says undergirds capitalism. And on the other side of the ledger, the childrearing, the coercion, the idea that this larger purpose requires the coercive arm of the state.



Corn

Stout said that was the most frustrating thing about them.



Herman

He did. He said the most exciting thing would be to be part of something bigger than yourself, connected to something that lives after you die. And the most frustrating thing is the conviction that the larger purpose requires the state to enforce it.



Corn

That's the tension. The same intensity that builds the college and the town meeting also builds the coercion.



Herman

Same root. You can't take the one without understanding the other.



Corn

So how do we answer Daniel's attack, then. Because he asked us to respond to it directly, and I don't want to dodge. The killjoy charge. Is it fair?



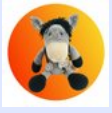
Herman

Partly fair, mostly misdirected. The specific charges are mostly false. They didn't ban alcohol, they didn't hate sex, they didn't wear black, they didn't ban fun. The blue laws he's thinking of are partly a loyalist hoax and partly twentieth century temperance politics. So as a factual indictment, it doesn't hold.



Corn

And as a cultural indictment?



Herman

As a cultural indictment it has a real target, which is the suspicion of leisure. That's genuine. The work ethic and the suspicion of idleness are the same doctrine. And the childrearing was harsh by any standard. So if Daniel wants to say, I wouldn't want to live under their discipline, I'd say that's a fair preference and a defensible one.



Corn

But the caricature is doing something else. It's not really an argument about the seventeenth century. It's a way of telling ourselves a story about how we got free.



Herman

The killjoy Puritan is a useful character. He makes us feel like we escaped something. And Mencken needed him for exactly that reason.



Corn

The caricature survives because it's a better story than the correction.



Herman

It's a much better story. The correction is a pile of journal articles and a debate about whether the revisionists overcorrected. Nobody's putting that on a bumper sticker.



Corn

So what do we tell Daniel.



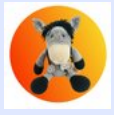
Herman

Tell him the Debbie Downer is real but he's a composite. He's Mencken plus a hoax plus a Prohibition era grudge plus a genuine strand of Puritan suspicion about leisure. And the uplifting side is real too, and it's larger than people expect. The city on a hill, the literacy, the colleges, the town meeting, the work ethic. You can't have the second without the first. They come from the same intensity.



Corn

I'll take that.



Herman

And one more thing, which is the thing I actually find most moving about them. Stout says, to understand the Puritans you have to adopt their attitude. Life is a great adventure.



Corn

A great adventure.



Herman

That's not a killjoy talking. That's somebody who thought the stakes of every ordinary day were enormous. And whether or not you share the theology, that's a posture toward living that most of us don't have.



Hilbert

They're right about the barrels.



Corn

Sorry, what?



Hilbert

The barrels of wine at the synod. I believe it. I worked a function hall in the early nineties, out near the state line. Weddings, mostly. And the churches, the little ones, they were the best customers we had. Not the big ones. The small congregations. They'd book the hall, they'd bring their own wine, and they would go through it. I remember a deacon from one of them, a man named Frank, who ran the whole thing off a clipboard. He had it down to a science. How many bottles per table, how many tables, when to open the second case. He never got it wrong once in the three years I was there.



Herman

A clipboard.



Hilbert

A clipboard and a pencil. And he'd stand at the door at the end of the night and shake every hand on the way out. Every single one. I asked him once how he figured the count and he said he'd been doing it since he was a boy, and his father did it before him, and you don't learn it from a book, you learn it by watching how people drink.



Corn

So the tradition is older than the stereotype.



Hilbert

The tradition is older than the stereotype. And I'll tell you what I noticed. The people who came to those things worked six days and they came to the seventh to be together, and they were not grim about it. They were happy. Loud, some of them. Frank's wife used to bring a cake she made herself, and it was not a good cake, but everybody ate it.



Herman

That's the thing the caricature can't hold. The same people who wrote the sermons about idleness were the ones who booked the hall.



Hilbert

They were the same people. And Frank, he'd have been the first to tell you the sermon was for Sunday morning and the hall was for Saturday night. He didn't see a contradiction. I don't think he'd have understood the question.



Corn

So the ambivalence isn't confusion. It's a division of labor.



Hilbert

You do the work, you say the prayer, you book the hall. All three. That's a whole life. I don't know anybody who does all three now.



Corn

That's a better answer than anything we've said.



Hilbert

I don't know about that. I just know Frank never ran out of wine and never over-ordered. That's a skill. Nobody writes it down.



Herman

It's the thing the record doesn't capture. We have the sermons because somebody wrote them down. We don't have Frank's clipboard.



Hilbert

No. And Frank's been gone a long time. But I still think about that count.



Corn

The count.



Hilbert

How many bottles per table. He had it right. Every time.



Herman

There's something in that I want to hold onto, actually. The whole debate we've been having is about the written record. The sermons, the tracts, the laws. And the thing you're describing, the actual texture of how these people lived, it left almost no paper. Frank's clipboard didn't survive. Which means the historians are arguing about the loudest voices, and the ordinary life underneath is mostly invisible.



Corn

Which is exactly the gap Daniels flagged. We know what the leaders said. We don't know what most of them did.



Herman

We don't. And every generation fills that gap with its own assumptions. The Victorians filled it with dour killjoys. The mid twentieth century filled it with healthy moderates. We're filling it with something else.



Corn

So the honest answer to Daniel is that the question is partly unanswerable, and the caricature is a way of not admitting that.



Herman

That's the most honest version of it. And it's more interesting than either the attack or the defense.



Corn

Here's the thought I want to leave with, and it comes out of what Hilbert just said. The caricature survives because it's a story, and the correction doesn't survive because it's a debate about sources. But there's a third thing underneath both, which is that a whole life, work and prayer and the hall, is harder to caricature than either side wants. Frank's count is the part nobody wrote down. That's the part worth looking for.



Herman

And it's the part that doesn't fit either the attack or the flattering rebuttal. Which is usually where the truth is.



Corn

Thanks as always to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop. This has been My Weird Prompts. If you want to send us a prompt, email us at show at my weird prompts dot com. We'll be back soon.