

Fall History & Heritage -- #9 (November 7)

This installment of Fall History & Heritage will be our last, unless there is a postscript next week, prior to our seasonal exam at the end of November (**Fall 2011 History & Heritage Test**). The comments below are based on the sources indicated.

All Saints' Day -- (Almanac, Nov. 1)

So many were martyred in the first three centuries of the church that eventually, by papal decree, **this Christian feast day (November 1)** was set aside in their honor? The persecutions fulfilled the prophecies of Jesus, who told His followers they would be like sheep sent out in the midst of wolves (Matt. 10:16). Thus, Christian martyrdom, then and now, is the ultimate witness to the truth of the gospel, to the infinite value of Christ and His cross, and to the hostility of men toward God and His holy purposes.

Henry Laurens -- (Almanac, Nov. 1)

Of Huguenot (French Calvinist) ancestry, **this South Carolinian Merchant (1724--1792)** served the American republic as president of the Continental Congress and, later on, as a diplomat who was captured by the British on the high seas? America did not get him back until after the decisive Battle of Yorktown (1781), in a momentous prisoner exchange for Lord General Cornwallis. Following his release, the persevering patriot participated in the Peace of Paris negotiations to end the War for Independence.

More on Melville -- (Almanac, Nov. 3)

There's something to be said for a writer, or anyone in any sphere, who's true to himself and, even more importantly, true to the fundamental and vital issues of life that flow from the heart (Prov. 4:23).

Herman Melville (1819--1891), as mentioned in an earlier post (Fall H&H -- #8), was such a writer. When he quit his craft in 1857, his novels having failed to satisfy the demands of mass marketability, he said, "What I feel most moved to write will not pay. Yet write the other way, I cannot."

In this respect at least (a refusal to make peace for profit's sake with diminished or debased standards), Melville is a model for us today. On a personal level, there has to be more to life than success, getting ahead, and making money. Or in some grand collective sense (the rich, the poor, workers, capitalists, the people, people of color, women, gays, etc.), striving for an ever greater slice of the pie, not the one supposedly in the sky but the one most definitely of this world.

Earth's necessities (What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we wear?) do matter, of course, but they never matter most of all. "For what will it profit a man," asked Jesus, "if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" (Matt. 16:26)

Melville, it's safe to surmise, wanted to succeed in the literary and commercial milieu of 19th-century America. But not at the expense of his soul.

Salem Revisited -- (America, Vol. 1, p. 50)

Compounding the disgrace of the infamous Salem Witch Trials (1692) has been a false and misleading historiography, down through the years, with respect to the events themselves. Unfortunately, author Bill Bennett repeats one of the more characteristic errors when he says that Puritan divine Cotton Mather (1663--1728) "argued that spectral evidence should be accepted" against the accused.

(spectral evidence consists of claims of threatening or hostile acts made by the ghosts or specters of those suspected of engaging in the black arts)

Mather, like most of the New England clergy, conceded the existence of witchcraft in Salem and the legitimacy of the trials to repress it, but cautioned *against* the use of spectral evidence. He also recommended prayer and pastoral care for the souls of those tormented by evil spirits or an inflamed conscience. The whole tenor of his counsel leaned clearly toward mercy for the accused.

The tragic episode originated in the playful experimentation of adolescent girls (including the daughter of parish minister Samuel Parris), probably influenced by the magic arts of a West Indian slave-girl named Tituba. The girls' behavior became increasingly bizarre (inexplicable fits, convulsions, moans & groans, etc.), and they said witches in town were doing them harm. Such claims may have seemed fanciful, yet onlookers couldn't deny that something nightmarish had happened to these girls.

In the highly-charged atmosphere of the court, more and more people got implicated. Finally, when citizens with sterling reputations were also accused of being in league with the Evil One, the trials ground to a halt. Twenty of the accused (deemed unrepentant) were executed.

"By 1697 Massachusetts was ready," writes historian Richard Lovelace, "to confess its guilt in the shedding of innocent blood by observing a public fast day. The common opinion by that time was that the Devil had indeed been active in Salem, but not so much in the suspected witches as in their accusers, who had been both tormented and used as instruments to slander the innocent."

Ever since, various "free-thinkers" (those who dismiss religion and tradition as sources of knowledge) have cited Salem to discredit the existence of witches, devils, the supernatural realm in general, and the intelligence of Christians.

Wisdom (via the light of the Word and the lamp of experience), however, would concede the reality of the occult, and reflect on how difficult it can be for a society to deal with it truly, justly, and compassionately. All our resources in religion, education, science, and politics seem, oftentimes, unequal to the task.