

John Wise  
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In John Wise we have a man entirely different from Cotton Mather. Not a great deal is known about him, and he never devoted himself to writing for publication. As against some over 325 volumes written by Cotton Mather, John Wise is remembered by fewer pages of printed matter than Mather by volumes. Two short pamphlets, practically of about 235 pages of ordinary printed matter cover all that we have of his writings.

In matter of birth he differed from Mather. His father, Joseph Wise, came to this country as an indentured serving man to Dr. George Alcock of Roxbury, who was one of Governor Winthrop's company. In 1640 Dr. Alcock died and thus Joseph Wise became a freeman. He soon married, and in 1652 the fifth child was born, and christened John Wise. His early education was ministered into the Roxbury Free School, now Roxbury Latin School. His father was one of the patrons of the school. In 1669 he appeared at Cambridge, and was admitted to Harvard College in the class of 1673, about six years before Cotton Mather graduated. Of his college course we know but little except that he stood well, and at one time came very near losing his standing in College for being detected in the act of wasting some chickens which he had found somewhere about Cambridge. For five years of [sic] graduation he was rather unsettled. He was chaplain of the Army in King Phillip's War. He did some graduate work at Cambridge and got his second degree, and was preacher at Hatfield, Conn.

In 1678 he was married in Roxbury. Married a Miss Rogers.

Two years later in 1680 he was preaching in a newly organized church at Chebacco in the town of Ipswich<sup>1</sup>. He was

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<sup>1</sup> Chebacco was the Native American term for the lake that was between the towns of Essex and Wenham.

ordained in 1683, and remained with the same church until his death in 1725.

He was indeed a great man, and has been called "the first clear-headed American Democrat." One or two incidents of his life indicate how entirely different he was from men like Cotton Mather. Story of wrestling. Chaplain in the Army. Strong, brave courageous, independent and a man of common sense.

In his public life we see him as a representative of a new type of New Englander. Cotton Mather, and his father Increase Mather, came in contact with the rule of Sir Edmund Andros<sup>2</sup>, and they represented the conservative aristocratic elements of the colony. By 1686 Andros, invested with sovereign power from James II had taken control of the Government. On Sunday morning, Aug. 31, 1687, the report reached Ipswich that Governor Andros had levied a tax on all property in the colony without consulting the general court. This roused John Wise to action. The next morning, John Wise and two of his parishioners went over to Ipswich and called together the leading men of the town to take council together upon this act of Gov. Andros. As a result of this conference of Sept. 1<sup>st</sup> 1687, a meeting of the citizens was called for the next day and through the influence of John Wise the citizens voted to a man to resist all attempts at collecting the tax. To pay for this resistance, the Rev. John Wise and 5 others were arrested, taken to Boston, and lodged in jail. A fine of £50, suspension from the ministry and being placed under bonds of £1,000 to keep the peace was the result of this resistance. It is possible that this was the first clear cut case of defiance to the principle of taxation without representation. At the expense of some slight repetition I quote the following of John Fiske:

The despotic rule of Andros was felt in more serious ways than in seizing upon a meetinghouse.  
... All the public records of the late New England governments were ordered to be brought to Boston,

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<sup>2</sup> Sir Edmund Andros (1637-1714) was an English colonial administrator. In 1686 he was appointed Governor of the Dominion of New England, which included Massachusetts Bay Colony (including present-day Maine), Plymouth Colony, Rhode Island, Connecticut and New Hampshire. In 1689, after the overthrow of James II, the colonists of Boston rose against Andros' rule and deposed him.

whether it thus became a tedious journey in order to consult them. ... The general court was abolished. The power of taxation was taken from the town meeting, and lodged with the Governor. Against this crowning iniquity the town of Ipswich, led by its sturdy pastor, John Wise, made protest. In response Mr. Wise was thrown into prison, fined £50 and suspended from the ministry. A notable and powerful character was this John Wise. One of the broadest thinkers and most lucid ministers of his time, he seems like a forerunner of the liberal Unitarian divines of the nineteenth century. (*The Beginning of N. E.*, Fiske, 271).

In the years of the Salem witchcraft, John Wise was about the only minister in New England who kept his head, and opposed the witchcraft delusion from the beginning to the end.

But perhaps his most important work was in a literary way. The final attempt of the Theocracy to regain its control was in the sixteen proposals which the Mathers sent out for consideration by the churches. This was in 1705. In 1705 John Wise published "The Churches Quarrel Espoused," a careful and keen reply to these proposals, which has never been answered. It is one of the most pungent racy criticisms I have ever read.

But in 1717 he published a book under the title, "A Vindication of the Government of New England Churches." This is a most thorough going defense of Democratic power of Government, and is to this day, I am told, used by judges at law as an authority in congregational polity.

In this justification of the democratic form of government from right reason and the clearness and the originality of his thought appears to its best advantage. His argument given almost entirely in his own words is as follows:

It is agreeable that we attribute the system to God whether we receive it from Reason or from Revelation, for each is an emanation of his wisdom. The internal native liberty of man's nature in general implies a faculty of doing or

omitting things, according to the direction of his judgement. Reason is {??} with his nature wherein by a law immutable, instantiated upon his frame, God has provided a rule for men in all their actions, the which is nothing else but the dictate of right reason founded in the soul of man. That which is drawn from man's reason is a law of nature. The way to discover a law of nature in our own state is by the narrow watch, and accurate contemplation of our natural conditions."

Such contemplation shows in man, (1) a principle of self-love, and self-preservation that is very prominent in every man's being. (2) a sociable disposition. (3) An affection or love to mankind in general.

But a Democracy is a form of Government, which the light of nature does highly value and often directs to as most agreeable to the just and natural prerogatives of Human Nature.

This by way of suggestion as to his line of thought.

This book has been called the textbook of the Revolution. In 1772 when the colonists were welding themselves together for the defense of their rights, two editions of one-thousand copies each were published and sold in New England. A subscription list was published in one edition, and many a name prominent in the war is found on this list. 38 copies in Concord, 7 at Lexington, and scores of them in Cambridge and Boston.

Two sentences suggest the spirit and forcibly the phraseology of the Declaration of Independence:

The end of all good government is to cultivate humanity, and promote the happiness of all, and the good of every man in all his rights, his life, liberty, estate, honor, without injury or abuse to any. ...

All men are born free, and nature having set all men upon a level, and made them equals, no servitude or subjection can be conceived without inequality.

This was written 58 years before the Revolutionary war.