**The Pagan pilgrim:  
Thomas Morton of Merrymount**

**Intellectual "heathen" remains an inspiration**

by Steve Rasmussen

*"The inhabitants of Merrymount ... did devise amongst themselves to have ... Revels, and merriment after the old English custom ... & therefore brewed a barrell of excellent beer, & provided a case of bottles to be spent, with other good cheer, for all comers of that day. And upon Mayday they brought the Maypole to the place appointed, with drums, guns, pistols, and other fitting instruments, for that purpose; and there erected it with the help of Savages, that came thither of purpose to see the manner of our Revels. A goodly pine tree of 80 foot long, was reared up, with a pair of buckshorns nailed on, somewhat near unto the top of it; where it stood as a fair sea mark for directions, how to find out the way to mine Host of Ma-re Mount."   
–Thomas Morton*

Those dour Puritans who kneeled in thanksgiving at Plymouth Rock before marching forth to conquer the wilderness and its native inhabitants with Bibles and guns weren't the only Pilgrims to seek spiritual freedom on the New World's shores. Just a few leagues up the Massachusetts coast from Plymouth's fortress of fundamentalist conformity, a poet and lawyer named Thomas Morton founded a colony that, had it survived Puritan persecution, might have spawned a far more Earth-friendly and egalitarian history of America than the one that's come down to us.

Morton, a senior partner in a Crown-sponsored trading venture, sailed to New England in 1624 with a Captain Wollaston and 30 indentured young men. They settled and began trading for furs on a spit of land given them by the native Algonquin tribes, whose culture the classically educated, broad-minded Morton soon came to admire as far more civilized and humanitarian than that of his intolerant, brutal European neighbors. When Wollaston began seeking more profits by selling off the indentured servants to hard labor on the Virginia tobacco plantations, Morton persuaded the remaining servants (it wasn't hard) to reject their harsh master and throw in with this visionary as free members of a colony that would trade and live in harmony with the local tribes.

It didn't take long for the free-thinking Morton to draw the ire of the nearby Puritans. His prosperous, easygoing colony attracted escapees from the harsh, hunger-ridden regime of the Plymouth plantation. Morton had no compunctions about trading guns to his Indian friends, whom the Puritans viewed as hostile savages. They resented Morton's intellectual scorn for their fundamentalist pieties, which he thought simply masked their stupidity and greed. (Morton made up mocking names for the Puritan leaders – the diminutive soldier Miles Standish he called "Captain Shrimpe," and the pompous John Endicott he dismissed as "that great swelling fellow, Captain Littleworth.") The Puritans condemned Morton as an impious, drunken libertine who – worst sin of all – consorted with the native women and encouraged his men to do so, too.

The final straw for the Puritans came when Morton erected his great Maypole, renamed his colony (from Mt. Wollaston to "Merrymount" – or "Ma-re Mount," punning on the Latin word for "sea"), and threw a merrie olde pagan MayDay party to help woo Indian wives for his young bachelors. Morton penned a courtly poem for the occasion full of references to Greek mythology and gods and goddesses "which although it were made according to the occurrents [fashions] of the time," he later wrote, "puzzled the Separatists [as the Puritans were then called] most pitifully to expound it.

"The setting up of this Maypole was a lamentable spectacle to the precise Separatists that lived at new Plymouth. They termed it an Idoll; yea they called it the Calf of Horeb: and stood at defiance with the place, naming it Mount Dagon; threatening to make it a woefull mount and not a merry mount."

Or, as the Puritan Gov. William Bradford wrote with horror in his *History of Plymouth Plantation*: "They ... set up a May-pole, drinking and dancing about it many days together, inviting the Indian women, for their consorts, dancing and frisking together, (like so many fairies, or furies rather,) and worse practices. As if they had anew revived & celebrated the feasts of ye Roman Goddess Flora, or ye beastly practices of ye mad Bacchanalians."

The Puritans made good on their "woefull" threat – motivated, later historians suggest, as much by Merrymount's challenge to their fur monopoly as by its defiant heathenism. Miles Standish and his troops invaded Merrymount, seized Morton without a shot fired in defense – to avoid bloodshed, according to Morton; because the inhabitants were too drunk to lift their weapons, according to Bradford – and hauled him in chains before the governor to be tried for his supposed crimes.

Bradford didn't dare execute Morton, who was well-connected in London, so he marooned him on a desert isle till an English ship could carry him back to England. John Endicott chopped down the proud Maypole, scattered Merrymount's inhabitants and destroyed its houses.

Morton spent the next decade in London fighting the Puritans with his pen and legal skills. He published *New English Canaan* in 1637, describing America's bounty and defending the wisdom and decency of her native inhabitants, while wittily excoriating the Puritan settlers. He was instrumental in having the royal charter of their Massachusetts Bay Colony revoked.

But times were rapidly changing in England, too. The newly rising Puritan Roundheads, struggling with the old-guard Royalist Cavaliers, would soon win the Civil War that not only decapitated the English Crown (laying the groundwork for the American Revolution) but also persecuted and destroyed the remaining vestiges of Merrie Olde England's pagan past.

An aging, disheartened Morton set sail one last time for the fertile wilderness he loved, only to find his Indian friends decimated by the white man's guns and diseases and the Puritans' hold on New England stronger than ever. They welcomed their old nemesis back by throwing him into a dank dungeon all winter long. His health broken, Mine Host of Merrymount finally died in 1647 in Maine, as far away from the "precise Separatists" as he could get.

Two centuries later, another rebel against rule-bound conformity, Nathaniel Hawthorne, immortalized the seminal struggle among New England's first settlers between pagan freedom and fundamentalist rigidity in a still-popular tale, "The May-Pole of Merry Mount." Today, as Earth-based spirituality is being practiced more and more openly, modern Pagans and Wiccans point for evidence of America's deep-rooted religious diversity to the true story of Merrymount – that could-have-been earthly paradise Thomas Morton called "Glory Here."

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*mhtml:file://G:\education\Umaine\fall%202009\NAS\presentations\Done\W13\handouts\The%20Pagan%20Pilgrim%20Thomas%20Morton%20of%20Merrymount.mht!http://members.aol.com/oldenwilde/pix/earth_ball.gif****For more information:***[Read Bradford's and Morton's versions](http://members.aol.com/srasmus/oldentext/more_merrymount.html) of the events at Merrymount, Morton's poem which mystified the Puritans, and his lusty MayDay song:   
"Drink and be merry, merry, merry boyes,   
Let all your delight be in Hymens joyes,   
Iô to Hymen now the day is come,   
About the merry Maypole take a Roome. ..."   
  
[Manners and Customs of the Indians (of New England)](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1637morton.html) describes the homes, clothing, customs, and way of life of the Native Americans he befriended.  
  
["The May-Pole of Merry Mount,"](http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/HawMayp.html) Nathaniel Hawthorne's fictional account, published in 1837, hews fairly closely to the actual events.  
  
[Read more about May Day](http://reclaimmayday.org/redandgreen.htm) and its history as a holiday of defiance of the puritanical work ethic.

A happy footnote to Merrymount's history is that the community at Mt. Wollaston (later Braintree, then Quincy) continued to be associated with rebels and freethinkers for many years after Morton was forced out. In 1636, Anne Hutchinson and her husband William settled there upon arriving from England. (Anne was an "Antinomian" who asserted that God could speak directly to the individual through inspiration, and not through the Bible alone as the Puritans insisted.) [Goody Cole, the Witch of Hampton](http://www.hampton.lib.nh.us/hampton/history/hampton350th/page_18.htm), first settled there at the same time as the Hutchinsons. Later, John Hancock was born there, and the great-grandfather of John Quincy Adams owned the Mt. Wollaston farm in the early 1700s.

*Thanks to the* ***Thomas Morton Alliance*** *for first drawing my attention to this pioneer of religious freedom some nine years ago. Their motto was "Earth Religion, Earthly Concerns!" Sadly, the group apparently no longer exists -- at least not until someone out there rears up its standard anew ...*