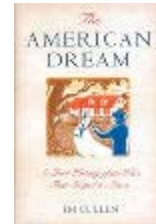


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The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation

by Jim Cullen, New York: Oxford UP, 2003



A review by [William Doty, Ph.D.](#), Professor Emeritus of Humanities and Religious Studies at the University of Alabama, author, translator, and editor of *Mythosphere: a Journal for Image, Myth, and Symbol*

It may seem strange that a specialist in mythology would review a work of an eminent American historian. Further, "myth" is not formally the focus of Cullen's book — the index cites only one reference to "myth of America." And yet as identified when I had to take over a "Religion in America" course several years ago — I entitled it *Myths In and Of America* — and as developed strongly in my *Myth: A Handbook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004; Greenwood Folklore Handbooks), I fully support the opinion that this has been a mythically founded and sustained nation from (in Cullen's scope) the Puritans through Lincoln; MLK, Jr. (he, you may recall, very famously had "a dream!"); the Homestead Act; and Hollywood.

The "very source of (the *American Dream's*) mythic power" consists of its multiple meanings — "there is no *one* American Dream" (7) although "America is essentially a dream, a dream as yet unfulfilled" (126). It is the Dream of Upward Mobility (188) sustained by citizens' "insistence that history doesn't matter, that the future matters far more than the past" (184).

Cullen writes sparkling and often entertaining prose: "the Dream is neither a reassuring verity nor an empty bromide but rather a complex idea with manifold implications that can cut different ways" (6-7). Obviously such a framework can easily be applied to myths and mythic themes and Cullen treats several historically in his work, supported not by the incessant footnoting of more formal historians, but by useful back pages of relevant data and bibliographic sources.

His early chapters on the initial years of the nation are highly sophisticated analyses of the inherent contradictions in Calvinist moral theology (see the list of damning episodes in the Puritan century after their arrival, 33; their "reign" is over by the end of the 17th century, 31). Cullen tracks the ways the extremely fundamentalist claims of the early settlements gave way to the exigencies of liberalizing — led, for instance by Benjamin Franklin, among the originally exiled Quakers, whose religious pietism was balanced by a belief in the importance of a secular

state. Franklin introduced a sense of the importance of improving one's status and holdings in "the real world," in a manner that displaced the pure pieties of the Puritans (63).

And he shows how Lincoln wrestled with the slavery issue, which was actually initiated by the earliest founders. I confess to having my own Mayflower relative, Edward Doty, an "indentured servant." The legal disenfranchisements for these folks would later serve as precedents for Southern plantation owners, who felt less responsible toward "slaves," who would not compete with them when released from their bonds, either (61).

It's a long way from here to Martin Luther King, Jr., and Oprah's great success, but Cullen's accounts are well-balanced and nuanced. It is a gift to be able to write sparkling prose so deeply informative and hermeneutical. I refer to his ability to understand the psychological depths of the American Dream, alongside the socio-political ramifications of the theme. Although so often contrary to actual experience, most of us still believe in the sacred mythical role of equality: a clear indication that myths are not just spacey religious stuff, but have vastly ideological influences (108).

This book is massive and covers much more than I have been able to name here. It makes me think about teaching that *Myths In/Of America* course once again!