



Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace: New England Crime Literature and the Origins of American Popular Culture, 1674-1860 (Commonwealth Center Studies in American Culture)

Daniel A. Cohen

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Starting with the insight that crime and punishment have been among the most persistent and pervasive themes of American popular culture, this book demonstrates a major shift in their depiction from the colonial period to the Civil War. Through the systematic study of hundreds of early books, pamphlets, and broadsides, Cohen traces the declining authority of Puritan ministers and Calvinistic notions of sin and their replacement by a romantic, pluralistic literary marketplace where new professionals--lawyers, journalists, and even fiction writers--served as leading cultural arbiters. The book begins with a comprehensive survey of the entire field of crime literature in New England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, focusing especially on execution sermons, conversion narratives, and criminal autobiographies. It not only explores the changing arguments of orthodox clergymen but also shows how the conventions of documentary reportage that they established gradually undermined their control of the public discourse, as criminals themselves gained a sometimes defiant literary voice. In the final chapters the focus shifts to two highly publicized sexual murder cases of the nineteenth century that illustrate new attitudes toward crime and new patterns of popular literature. Recovering a lost culture of legal romanticism--featuring trial reports, romantic biographies, and fictionalized docudramas--Cohen challenges the conventional assumption that there was a growing split between law and literature during the antebellum period. To the contrary, he demonstrates how the motifs of popular fiction even infiltrated the courtroom arguments of prominent criminal lawyers. An imaginative use of unpublished court records and a wide array of popular literary sources revealing insights into early American society and culture, this fascinating book probes the forgotten origins of our modern mass media's preoccupation with crime and punishment.

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