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# Daniel Denton's *A Brief Description of New-York*: A Pre-Industrial American Dream

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Daniel Denton's eyewitness account of the Duke of York's proprietary colony was the first such description of New York by an Englishman. Allegedly a new contribution to his countrymen's knowledge of America, it was also a candid appeal to immigrate to New York by a public official of Jamaica, New York, only a few years after the colony was forcibly taken from the Dutch. As an early English advertisement for America, Denton's tract was an ostensibly factual presentation of the advantages to immigrants of settling in New York. The romantic lyricism of some of Denton's language was rooted in personal observation, not hearsay or fanciful tales, and was, as such, a sensible and sensuous literary appeal to the imaginations of his readers in England. Still, Denton's was only a partial account of New York in the 1660s. It passed over contemporaneous controversies of political controls and administrative centralization of the colony's legal systems. The author regarded socio-political conditions as unimportant to prospective colonial planters and tradesmen and, instead, focused on climate, topography, economic development, and relations with the native Indian inhabitants. Judging by the content of contemporary political interests, Denton's materialistic bias was probably well-considered. Denton's appealing thesis – his edenic pre-industrial interpretation of what would later be called the American Dream – is that wealth and standing would yield to the endeavors of hard-working, exuberant individualists prepared to risk all to reshape the natural environment into a land "yielding plentiful increase to all their painful labors". In Denton's eyes, New York was a future land of peace, plenty, independence and equality for its denizens, provided only that it attracted numbers of adventurous, enterprising, opportunistic "inferior ranks" of English men and women. The literary and intellectual connection of Denton's fetching tract to what became, a century later, Thomas Jefferson's image of an agrarian paradise and, two centuries later, Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis of a democratic, individualistic, progressive American national character is now obvious from the first paragraphs of Denton's relation of early New York. Not a few popular writers still rely on

similar themes. Sadly for the historical reputation of Denton's reasonably accurate literary propaganda of 1670, much of the best land in New York was engrossed by rich planters within a generation of his publication of *A Brief Description*. Ironically, many of Denton's enterprising and individualistic inferior ranks of English men and women fled southward and westward to greener pastures, a freer environment (especially in Pennsylvania and Ohio) and, eventually, to Faulknerian probity and Twainesque satire.

In March, 1664, King Charles II granted to his brother, the Duke of York, a vast expanse of land in North America lying between what is now Connecticut and Maryland, and including the present states of New York, New Jersey and Delaware. Daniel Denton, an Englishman, having journeyed to the duke's "proprietary," offered to the English reading public in 1670, as an inducement to settlement in the duke's tract, a little book titled *A Brief Description of New-York, formerly called New Netherlands With the Places Thereunto Adjoyning*.

Denton alleged in the book's preface ("To the Reader") that the treatise would be "a Brief but true Relation of a known unknown part of America," preceding an American secretary of defense's thoughtful pronouncement of a plethora of military and diplomatic "known unknowns" by some 332 years. (Seely). Denton informed his readers that he had been an eyewitness "to all or the greater part" of the "Relation". Although we have little proof but his word to offer as substantiating documentation, Denton's descriptions (for one) of the customs of the Indians in New York is persuasive internal evidence that he was telling the truth (although not the whole truth, as we shall see); and he was likely the first English writer to provide his countrymen with a first-hand account of the new English colony.

Daniel Denton was born in Yorkshire in 1626, the son of Reverend Richard Denton whom Daniel accompanied on his Puritan spiritual peregrinations until the mid-1640s. After that, Daniel seems to have settled down – sort of – as town clerk at Hempstead on Long Island and, later, at Jamaica, New York, where he occupied the same public office. In 1670, Daniel returned to England and published *A Brief Description* apparently to promote the colony's development. He returned to Piscataway, in East Jersey, and became a magistrate there in August, 1673. Shortly afterwards, the peripatetic Denton taught school and was town recorder in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1674. Back in Jamaica by 1680, Denton became town clerk there for a second time. Still later, in December, 1689, Daniel was county clerk of Queens County, New York. Meanwhile, Denton married, divorced, married again, and sired eight children. He died in 1703 (Snell 173; *The Denton Dispatch*).

Ostensibly Denton wrote *A Brief Description* to provide an account of New York for those "that never had any relation of it," because it was a new English possession, and for the information of those who might have been contemplating removal from England to America. His justification on the first two counts constitutes a high-minded appeal to scholarship. Denton said he was making a new contribution to knowledge. Obviously, he was doing more than that. His primary aim, in fact, was to convince Englishmen to make a hazardous voyage across the ocean and to risk their fortunes (such as they were) in New York.

The book is not so much scholarly as factual. Its theme is the material advantages to be gained by migrants from settling in New York. In his attempt to communicate these advantages to Englishmen, Denton, at times, reaches the height of romantic lyricism; but his poetry is always grounded on observable facts, not fancy. His story is not so much a fairy tale as a novelette. Plausible though improbable because, unlike a fairy tale, the hero is not a particular individual. Denton's hero is every man, and this is as it should be. That is why Denton's tract is good propaganda from a literary point of view.

Since Denton did not write about the actual political control of New York by a few wealthy families (patroons), or of the legal centralization of the administrative system under the regimentation of the "Duke's Laws," his book was a true but incomplete account of the colony in its early years. Why did Denton ignore pressing (and, later, in the 18th century, explosive) political and social issues? Because his chief purpose was to attract English colonists to New York, not to analyze its constitution broadly considered. This is why Denton's treatise is bad propaganda from a philosophical point of view. Had Denton's account been of the same precision and completeness with regard to actual socio-political conditions as it was with regard to the geography, climate, topography and economic potentials of early New York, he would have composed a scholarly work on the life of the colony. This is exactly what he avoided doing. Let us look, therefore, at *A Brief Description*, as a true, if not a very comprehensive, account of New York's condition shortly after its reduction "to his Majesty's obedience".

Denton employed several basic techniques to lure his readers into serious contemplation on transplanting to New York. For the purpose of this analysis, his most important approach was to describe the colony in terms of an agrarian paradise where peace, plenty, independence, and equality awaited the adventurous, opportunist spirit of the author's fellow countrymen. So, for Denton, New York was an agrarian – that is, a pre-industrial – version of what would come to be called the American Dream. "I

shall not feed your expectations," he wrote, with typical Indian lore about "glittering stones, diamonds, or pearl" (Denton 4/15). Unlike the descriptive accounts of some parts of New Spain written by Spanish *conquistadores* a century or more earlier, Denton avoided the temptation to prevaricate about New York's mineral wealth. On the other hand, he told of the richness of the soil, sun, and climate, attractions which, it might be thought, differ only in degree from those held out by the 16th century's Spanish propagandists.

Both nationalities really sought the same things, but Denton had no silver mines in Peru as precedent for fanciful allusions about New York. While he insisted that New York's inhabitants are "blessed in whatsoever they take in hand," the soil yielded only to "all their painful labors". There were no legions of native peons to sweat and die for English comfort in the northern mainland colonies. Though New York, New Jersey and Delaware would know slavery, this social and moral blight came in a later generation. Thus, in Denton's time, New York's wealth was a taunt of nature, a challenge tossed to would-be colonial parvenus; not merely a reward for successful opportunism. The message appealed to a certain kind of Englishman of the 17th century, as it appeals on the same level to many Americans of the 21st century – all of them sons and daughters of the Renaissance spirit. Rugged individualism long antedated Herbert Spencer's sociology. "You may travel," Denton wrote, "by Land upon the same Continent hundreds of miles, and pass through Towns and Villages, and never hear the least complaint for want, nor hear any ask you for a farthing" (Denton 13/15). Definitely a pre-industrial American dream, though one which still resonates powerfully in the United States.

The challenge was not to be taken up without reasonable guarantees of return, however. The book confirms its author as a realist. Denton is certainly not cynical, or he might never have attempted *A Brief Description* in the first place. Yet, he well recognized that numbers of his countrymen were not likely to risk hazards to life in the wilderness simply on account of its being a wilderness. It was new, and therein lay the opportunity. But what was the character of the land? Were the natives hostile? Were there facilities for communication with England, with home? Was the territory defensible against England's enemies?

Denton attempted to answer these questions and more in a hopeful and encouraging style. What was needed most of all, he said, was people. The rich soil could afford prosperity only in so far as it was cultivated by skilled farmers. The fine townsites could grow into civilized *entrepots* only as they came to be peopled with tradesmen and artisans. The challenge was many-sided, but the wilderness would yield to the backs and brains of men. For

example, the south coast of Long Island, Denton wrote, attracted whales in the winter "to which the inhabitants begin with small boats to make a trade Catching to their no small benefit". One would find seal as well, in season, which yielded "excellent oil" and "might be easily got were there some skilful men would undertake it" (Denton 7/15). About twenty miles to the west of New York City, farmer-settlers would discover fruitful land for raising corn and cattle, "no place in America being better". "How many poor people in the world would think themselves happy, had they an Acre or two of Land, whilst there is hundreds, nay thousands of Acres, that would invite inhabitants" (Denton: 11/15) in New York. This is an appeal familiar to many urban dwellers and immigrants, and scholars of social history. Denton here used two techniques, two appeals, combining them for maximum effectiveness; but we will separate them for clear analysis.

First, there is Denton's appeal to the unskilled poor of England to better their conditions through emigration to New York, its fertile soil and spacious terrain "of indifferent level" an attraction alike to the poor farmer, the wretched factory and mill hand. As Denton puts it:

> Here those which Fortune has frown'd upon in England . . . such as by their utmost labour can scarcely procure a living, I say such may procure here inheritances of land and possessions, stock themselves with all sorts of Cattle, enjoy the benefits of them whilst they live, and leave them to the benefit of their children when they die (Denton 13/15).

Second, in conjunction with the appeal to the English poor to become independent and prosperous – the subtle hint, to become a country gentleman, was the bridge – was Denton's use of the language to evoke an image of an agrarian paradise. There are several almost poetical sentences in Denton's tract which attempted to accomplish for the reader's mind a depiction of what nature had so providentially accomplished for New York. He told of plentiful timber of many types, white and red oak, walnut, chestnut, maples, cedars, beech, birch, holly, hazel, "and many sorts more". Fruits covered the countryside which produced mulberries, grapes "great and small," huckleberries, cranberries, plums, raspberries, and strawberries:

> Of which last [Denton rhapsodized] is such abundance in June, that the Fields and Woods are dyed red: Which the country-people perceiving, instantly arm themselves with bottles of Wine, Cream, and Sugar, and instead of a Coat of Male, everyone takes a Female upon his horse behind him, and so rushing violently into the fields, never leave till they have disrobed them of their red colours, and turned them into the old habit (Denton 6/15).

So it was possible in colonial New York to have time for the gay, the light-hearted recreation of a strawberry hunt! Denton portrays this happy, erotic frolic through the use of the pun about the "Coat of Male" and the "Female upon the horse behind him". A clearly pacifist allusion which is not so surprising if one knows that New Amsterdam became New York without a shot being fired in anger in 1664. War was then considered bad for business. Nor should we overlook the interesting and perhaps fruitful contribution that might be made to colonial Americana by a scholar who possessed the curiosity and sense of frivolity to investigate the use of sexual allusions in colonial propaganda tracts. Maybe sex was good for business?

For those among his readers who were well-satisfied with the women in England, Denton concocted a different appeal also lyrical in style and, from the point of view of the English urban dweller, perhaps more attractive:

> There is also the red Bird, with divers sorts of singing birds, whose chirping notes salute the ears of Travellers with an harmonious discord, and in every pond and brook green silken Frogs, who warbling forth their untun'd tunes, strive to bear a part in this music (Denton 7/15).

It might be difficult to find better prose poetry in any literary journal published in our own times. In order to obtain the highest measure of efficacy from the appeal to readers to build a share in New York's agrarian paradise, Denton capped his lyricism with declaratory generalizations which, if not true at least could not be proved false. For example, Denton wrote:

> I must needs say, that if there be any terrestrial Canaan, tis surely here, where the Land floweth with milk and honey. The inhabitants are blessed with peace and plenty, blessed in their country, blessed in the Fruit of their bodies [country living is still alleged by some to have something to do with human fecundity], in the fruit of their grounds, in the increase of their Cattle, Horses, and Sheep, blessed in their Basket, and in their Store. In a word, blessed in whatsoever they take in hand, or go about, the Earth yielding plentiful increase to all their painful labours (Denton 14/15).

Is it any wonder that a more famous frontier planter, Thomas Jefferson, wrote more than a century later that "those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people" (*Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query XIX)? Daniel Denton thought of it first.

Much as the appeal to the New World as an agrarian paradise – or as the more sophisticated "agrarian myth" – has influenced generations of immigrants both foreign and internal, it may have been misconstrued by scholars. The "land of milk and honey" is a condition, a possible

consummation to the efforts of many and diverse enterprising persons. Nature was bountiful in the New World and we shall soon see that Denton tried to show that there was reasonable security in reaping its rewards. But this brings us to the crux of the issue of the agrarian myth. Potential plenty is not actual wealth, and Denton employed an unmistakable undertone to point out that fact and to appeal to enterprising people to avail themselves of New York's natural wealth through hard work and ingenuity. If Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis of the origins of American national character is valid, it is so in terms of David Potter's thesis of potential abundance (Faragher; Potter). Obviously, Denton's appeal was not pitched to the settled aristocracy of the English countryside, nor to rising and wealthy mercantile classes in the kingdom's port cities. The advice in *A Brief Description* is aimed at the enterprising poor among Denton's countrymen: "I may say, and say truly, that if there be any terrestrial happiness to be had by people of all ranks, especially of an inferior rank, it must be here" (Denton 12/15):

> How free are those parts of the world from that pride and oppression, with their miserable effects, which many, nay almost all parts of the world are troubled, with being ignorant of that pomp and bravery which aspiring Humours are servants to, and striving after almost everywhere: Where a Wagon or a Cart gives as good Content as a Coach, and a piece of their home-made Cloth, better than the finest Lawns or richest Silks (Denton 14/15).

At this point in his argument, Denton encountered a possibly formidable obstacle in the form of an apparent paradox. Why, if New York were such an excellent place for the enterprising to live, was it not settled more widely and productively by the Dutch during their forty years tenure of the territory? Still, the problem was only apparent, and in resolving it Denton enabled himself to address another and more vexing issue, the Indian question. He argued, for one thing, that the Dutch "Gave such bad Titles to Land, together with their exacting of the Tenths of all which men produced off their Land, that did much to hinder the populating [of New York]" (Denton 12/15). Second, Denton cleverly used the appeal from the "rights of Englishmen," perhaps most keenly appreciated by his countrymen of the late 17th century, to explain the relative paucity of New England immigration to New Netherlands. To put it simply, he wrote that Englishmen disliked living under foreign governments and that, since 1664, many New Englanders had come to New York, several small towns having been founded in consequence. Finally, the former Dutch colony so far attracted few New Englanders because of the continual Dutch-Indian struggles over the fur trade. Since the transfer of the colony to the Duke of

York, however, these difficulties had dissolved as English law, English rights and, most of all, peaceful Indian relations quickly followed. The first two effects of English occupation are understandable as an English constitution simply followed the English flag, even if it did bear the divine-right ensign of the duke of York. The third consequence, Denton thought, required additional explanation. The condition of Indian relations and the provisions for the defense of the colony were important considerations in the minds of many would-be migrants to New York.

Denton told his readers that there were but a few Indians in the colony (specifically, Long Island), and even these few were "serviceable to the English" for they had

> Strangely decreased by the Hand of God, since the English first settling of these parts [....] It hath been generally observed, that where the English come to settle, a Divine Hand makes way for them, by removing or cutting off the Indians, either by Wars one with the other, or by some raging mortal disease (Denton:7/15).

Besides this remarkable intervention by Providence – abetted powerfully by Europeans' diseases – on behalf of the English, the Indians' lives and habits were rather primitive. During the ensuing decade of the 1670s, there would occur severe – even genocidal - colonial-aboriginal wars in both Massachusetts-Bay (1675) and Virginia (1676) colonies which would devastate the local Indian populations in those places. In Denton's 1670 account of early New York, however, the Indians loved to spend their days playing card games and "Foot-ball" (another kind of American Dream), and drinking themselves into fits of alcoholic rage during which times they frequently killed each other off. It would seem that more than Providence was involved in the rapid depletion of Indian numbers, and Denton also failed to account for the sources of the Indians' alcoholic liquors. Any more comprehensive relation of the Indian question would have involved social and political issues arising from the pursuit of the fur trade; hence, the politics of the colony (Klein). As we have seen, Denton avoided such discussions as alien to his purpose. In any case, peaceable relations with the Indians did follow upon English occupation, and Denton did not fail to mention the fur trading center at "New-Albany," far up the Hudson River from New York; although it was a passing mention. The Dutch had been terribly heavy-footed in their managing of relations with the Indians, probably on account of their settlers being so few in numbers at New Amsterdam; but the English would find during the next century that their Iroquois alliance could be a burden as well as an advantage if they depended too heavily on it. Indeed, by the 1680s, the Iroquois had lost so many

warriors to their French-supported native enemies that they afterward remained neutral in European contests for New York down to the American Revolution of the 1770s (Norton: Ch. 3).

The defense of the settlements in New York against England's European opponents was pretty well assured by man and nature, according to Denton's view of things. The south shore of Long Island, "which joins to the sea," was fortified by sand bars and shoales, "a sufficient defence against any enemy". As for the north shore of the island, it was bounded by a narrow passage of water called "Hell-Gate," which lay south of New York City, where

> There runneth a violent stream upon Flood and ebb, and in the middle with some Islands of Rocks which the current sets so violently upon, that it threatens present shipwreck; and upon the Flood is a large Whirlpool, which continuously sends forth a hideous roaring, enough to affright any stranger from passing further [....] Yet to those that are well-acquainted [there is] little or no danger; yet a place of great defence against any enemy coming in that way, which a small fortification would absolutely prevent, and necessitate them to come in at the West-End of Long Island by Sandy Hook, where Nutten Island doth force them within Command of the Fort at New York [City], which is one of the best Pieces of Defence in the North-parts of America (Denton 5/15).

According to Denton, the colony was well-nigh impregnable against attack; however, he did not then explain how the English were able to take it from the Dutch in 1664. Nor does his exposition of the defensive provisions of the colony help to explain how the Dutch briefly re-captured New York City shortly after *A Brief Description* was published. In justice to Denton, it must be admitted that on both occasions extraordinary circumstances had much to do with the tactical military situations at New York. Otherwise, it might be supposed that Denton's irenic approach to the issue of imperial rivalries involving New York is merely another in a series of isolationist (and exceptionalist) attitudes towards European interpositions in America that characterize the 17th century history of the northern English mainland colonies (Savelle and Fisher).

We have now only to analyze Denton's instructions to prospective settlers on how best to prepare to transplant to New York. He informed his readers that the most important single item to carry with them aboard ship was clothing. Cattle for beef and for sale, and nails, hinges, and glass for house and shop construction could be had in the colony at cheap prices. The

colony especially needed blacksmiths, masons, tailors, weavers and carpenters. This shortage of skilled labor was a condition in all the English colonies of the mainland, and for Spanish colonies as well (where skilled artisans of every nationality were permitted to locate as long as they were Catholics). The *El Dorado* of New Spain's colonial lore and Denton's version of the American Dream in early New York have much in common.

Those who wished to start a farm in the wilderness were told to join with companies of like-minded souls, petition the duke's governor for a suitable tract of land, and take out a patent (deed). The land system, as Denton described it, owed much of its character to the one devised by the Puritans in New England. The patent was divided up equitably; that is, "suitable to every man's occasions, no man being debarr'd of such quantities as he hath occasion for" (Denton 12/15). Truly a fetching thought. The remainder of the town tract, or the undivided lands, was apportioned in similar manner among new-comers, while pasture lands were held in common. Here, Denton's decision not to report on socio-political conditions in New York again led to distortion, for within twenty years of the publication of his relation most of the best lands in the part of the colony he described were parceled out among a few great landholders. After that, New York became anything but an agrarian paradise; and thousands among Denton's enterprising "inferior ranks" fled southward and westward in search of what might be termed, ironically, greener pastures of the American Dream.

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