John Danforth Biography

John Danforth

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Biography

The most prolific of the poets in the Danforth family, John Danforth was the son of Samuel and Mary Danforth and the elder brother of Samuel Danforth II. He was born in Roxbury, Massachusetts, graduated from Harvard in 1677, served as a fellow of the college, and was, on 28 June 1682, ordained as pastor of the Congregational society in Dorchester, where he remained for the rest of his long life. On 21 November 1682, he married Elizabeth Minot. They had three sons, Elijah, John, and Samuel. Extremely studious and learned, he excelled in mathematics and literature, and he traveled to Assonet Neck near Dighton, Massachusetts, to make a careful transcription of the curious carvings on Dighton Rock in the Taunton River, to see if he might be able to decipher those mysterious marks, some made by Indians and others possibly made by the lost Portuguese explorer Miguel Cortereale in 1511.

Danforth experimented with poetry in many genres, exchanged manuscripts of verses with Edward Taylor and Samuel Sewall, and managed to have nearly every poem he wrote published, often appending them to appropriate sermons. His notion of the poet as one who performs a public service for his community is evident not only in his many elegies but also in his frequent allusions to Vergil, George Herbert, and others who had served as public poets and supporters of their communities. In many of the elegies, moreover, the source of comfort is that the subject of the poem, though apparently isolated from the grieving community, has gone to another community (salvation was a communal affair for Danforth, as for many Puritans), there to await a joyous reunion with friends only temporarily left behind. In all his lyrics, almanac verse, epigrams, anagrams, epitaphs, and verse epistles, Danforth worked, as he did in his elegies, to serve the community of poets, the community of the elect, and the community of Dorchester, where he died in 1730.