John James Biography

John James

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Biography

John James, born in London, immigrated to America in about 1657 and served as pastor first in Derby, Connecticut, and then in Brookfield, Massachusetts. He later became the first minister of Haddam, Connecticut, where he remained from 1686 until 1689; and in 1693 he was called to Wethersfield, Connecticut, where, as well as being minister, he served as town clerk and schoolmaster. Although, according to Harold Jantz, James stood "somewhat apart from the university group" and was "eccentric and rather unstable," he was nonetheless awarded an honorary M.A. from Harvard College in 1710.

James's body of poetry is small, part of it found only in manuscript, written in the margins and on blank pages of a 1616 edition of the poetry of William Drummond. One work, *On the Death of the very Learned, Pious and Excelling Gershom Bulkley Esq. M.D.* (1714) was published as a broadside by Timothy Green in New London. Other surviving manuscripts include "On the Decease of the Religious & Honourable Jno Haynes Esqr, Who made his Exit off the Stage of this world--1713"; elegies on an unnamed infant who died in 1696; on Grace Nichols, who died in 1702; and on Esther Buckinghame and Esther Beaumont, a mother and daughter who died in 1702. An epitaph on Noadiah Russell is mentioned in the 1908 *Annual Report* of the Connecticut Historical Society (some scholars believe that it was published).

Probably James's best-known work is the taut, ten-line memorial "Of John Bunyans Life &c," anthologized in Harold S. Jantz's *The First Century of New England Verse* (1944) and Harrison T. Meserole's *Seventeenth-Century American Poetry* (1968). Characteristically, the poem displays James's use of images from alchemy, but here the allusion to Bunyan's occupation as a tinker reinforces the metallurgical concreteness. As the force of Grace moved upon the "brass" of Bunyan's life to make it gold, God's hammer fashioned of Bunyan "an other blad / Unswaupt, instampt and meliorate"; that is, he is redeemed (and not to be swapped), stamped or engraved with the sign of grace, and made better, as base metal may be transformed into precious and as amorphous substance may be made into art.