

COMMENTARY

Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647

William Bradford

(1590-1657)

The essential portion in literary history is the first 12 of 36 chapters, concluding with the Mayflower Compact, Bradford's election as Governor and the first Thanksgiving in 1621. The Pilgrims were a religious minority who separated from the mainstream of Puritanism in England, the equivalent of treason. They went further in simplifying Christianity and in "purifying" the Church of England. They were called Congregationalists because each congregation was self-governing rather than subordinating itself to a national church. Hence they were the most "American" of Protestant sects before they set out to found America. Only the Brownists referenced by Nathaniel Hawthorne in "Young Goodman Brown" were more separatist. They were more common people and less Calvinist than the Puritans who settled Massachusetts Bay in 1630 led by John Winthrop.

Bradford presents his congregation as increasingly "persecuted on every side" until they shake off a "yoke of antichristian bondage" and escape to the Netherlands. They see themselves as chosen by God to carry on the divine mission of the Israelites in the *Bible*, to carry a purified Christianity to the New World, the new Promised Land, paralleling the flight of the Israelites into Egypt. This sense of a divine mission inspired them, is referenced frequently in Puritan writing and contributed to belief in Manifest Destiny during the westward movement, as dramatized by James Fenimore Cooper in *The Prairie* (1827).

Contrary to the popular stereotype of the Puritan, Bradford expresses great empathy when he renders the suffering of families separated during the escape to Holland: "But pitiful it was to see the heavy case of these poor women in this distress; what weeping and crying on every side, some for their husbands that were carried away in the ship as is before related; others not knowing what should become of them and their little ones; others again melted in tears, seeing their poor little ones hanging about them, crying for fear and quaking with cold." John Winthrop is closer to the stereotype as revealed in his journal, which contrasts with Bradford in being more Calvinist--legalistic, elitist and heartless.

The Pilgrims are country people from "plain country villages" out of place in the Dutch cities, facing poverty, corruption and decline. They choose to sail for America despite all the costs, the deprivation they expect and the reports they have heard about "the continual danger of the savage people, who are cruel, barbarous and most treacherous, being furious in their rage and merciless where they overcome; not being content only to kill and take away life, but delight to torment men in the most bloody manner that may be; flaying some alive with the shells of fishes, cutting off the members and joints of others by piecemeal and broiling on the coals, eat the collops of their flesh in their sight whilst they live, with other cruelties horrible to be related."

One of the sailors on the Mayflower is "a proud and very profane young man" who curses, harasses and mocks them and says he hopes they die so he can throw them overboard. "But it pleased God...to smite this young man with a grievous disease, of which he died in a desperate manner, and so was himself the first that was thrown overboard." The Pilgrims see this as "a special work of God's providence," a sign that He is intervening in history on their behalf. They also believe that He helps those who help themselves--a great incentive to civic virtue--as illustrated by young John Howland, who is thrown overboard by a roll of the ship, "but it pleased God that he caught hold of the topsail halyards" and hung on until he was saved. As a divine reward for his virtues and service, Howland "became a profitable member both in church and commonwealth."

Bradford builds to the climax of their arrival off the coast of Cape Cod, "the which being made and certainly known to be it, they were not a little joyful." This understatement is evidence of the restraint that is characteristic of a Puritan and also conveys the subsequent grief that deflated his joy. His allegorical

view of their journey is expressed by his metaphor: "Being thus passed the vast ocean, and a sea of troubles." Comparing them to an apostle in scripture who encounters friendly barbarians, Bradford reports that most of the Indians they encountered were hostile instead. Their situation is also worse than that of the Israelites, who were able to climb to the top of Mount Pisgah and view the Promised Land, a fruitful land of milk and honey. For here they can see only "a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men." Bradford extends the comparison, saying "they wandered in the desert wilderness out of the way, and found no city to dwell in..."

The Pilgrims envision their own ideal City on a Hill, sign the Mayflower Compact forming "a civil body politic" and begin the experiment in human improvement that is America. Like all the Puritan settlements in New England in the 17th century, their colony was utopian, in contrast to the hundreds of Indian tribes in North America, who adapted to Nature. For the Pilgrims, their survival that first winter depended upon "true love," as half of them died and there were only six or seven strong enough to care for the rest: "with abundance of toil and hazard of their own health, fetched them wood, made them fires, dressed them meat, made their beds, washed their loathsome clothes, clothed and unclothed them. In a word, did all the homely and necessary offices for them which dainty and queasy stomachs cannot endure to hear named." Their survival demonstrated the social value of Christian self-sacrifice.

Michael Hollister (2015)