

INTRODUCTION



William Bradford

(1590-1657)

William Bradford, son of an English farmer, originated American literature with its first classic, *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647*, the chronicle of the Pilgrims:

“Bradford’s history is a story of a simple people inspired by an ardent faith to a dauntless courage in danger, a resourcefulness in dealing with new problems, an impregnable fortitude in adversity that exalts and heartens one in an age of uncertainty, when courage falters and faith grows dim. It is this story, told by a great human being, that has made the Pilgrim Fathers in a sense the spiritual ancestors of all Americans, all pioneers.” Samuel Eliot Morrison, Preface, *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647* (Knopf 1963) xii

BIOGRAPHY

Bradford was a prototypical American in being of humble origin, a member of an oppressed minority group in search of liberty, self-educated and self-made. As a boy of 16 he declared his independence from his family and his neighbors by joining a Puritan church in Scrooby, Yorkshire. His congregation moved to the Netherlands to escape persecution, where Bradford followed the trade of weaver and married Dorothy May. Members of his congregation sailed to America on the *May-flower* and Bradford took part in the legendary landing at Plymouth Rock in 1620. When he returned to the ship, he learned that his wife had fallen overboard and drowned. He does not mention this sad event in his history, consistent with his modesty and sense of high purpose. Historians suspect that while anchored offshore for six weeks, his wife got so depressed staring at the barren sand dunes of Cape Cod, she threw herself over the side.

WILDERNESS

The mixture of great anticipation and joy!--then shock and grief that young Bradford must have felt corresponds to the conflicting images of America held in Europe at that time: as an unspoiled Garden of Eden populated by noble savages versus a “howling wilderness” full of beasts and demons--as the place for a new life or a quick death. Only 98 survivors made it ashore and founded the Plymouth Colony. 50 died the first winter. Ten years later the population had reached about 300 and it was still under a thousand by 1650, when Anne Bradstreet published the first book of poetry by an American, *The Tenth Muse*. By 1675, when the first Indian war broke out, the population had reached 52,000.

GOVERNOR

After their Governor John Carver died in 1621, Bradford was elected Governor. He was a humble and judicious leader who got re-elected 30 times, declined an opportunity to increase his power, as did George Washington later, and shared proprietary rights with the people, as did Benjamin Franklin. In his library containing about 400 books he wrote verse, including the lines, "In fears and wants, through weal and woe, A Pilgrim passed I to and fro." The inventory of his estate--contrary to the stereotype of the Puritan--included a red waistcoat, a silver beer bowl and a violet cloak.

Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-47

Of Plymouth Plantation is written mainly in the Plain Style of the Elizabethan period: simple, direct, natural, objective, self-effacing and resonant with implications beyond the literal, such as Bradford's parallel of Pilgrims to Israelites. The Puritans tended to purge language, as well as religion, of adornments in order to focus attention upon content rather than style--allegory in particular. Bradford studied the King James *Bible* throughout his life and his rhetoric is also biblical, giving *Of Plymouth Plantation* the tone, dignity and resonance of scripture, which in a cultural sense it was throughout American history, affirmed in education, popular literature, Nathaniel Hawthorne and by most other Americans. Like the *Bible*, Bradford's narrative derives power from archetypal symbolism and allegory, in particular Life as a journey on a "sea of troubles" to a Promised Land. Melville uses some of the same symbolism in *Moby-Dick* and Hawthorne draws upon Bradford's history in "The Maypole of Merry Mount." Emerson and Hawthorne were deeply influenced by the allegorical thinking of all the Puritans, as was Melville by Hawthorne.

AMERICA AS A SYMBOL

Bradford adds new meanings to the symbol of America and establishes basic themes that recur throughout American literature, with variations in the archetypal Model of Metaphors as to Garden versus City and the pastoral versus the urban view of a perfect society: (1) Journey into the Wilderness; (2) westward movement toward liberty in a potential Garden (most Puritans and most other Americans have been farmers); (3) quest for justice and a perfect society imaged as a City by both Bradford and John Winthrop; (4) aspiration into the Sky: upward mobility to salvation and/or success. Americans have continued to enact this drama ever since Bradford and the Puritans, literally by moving west or to Alaska or into the woods like Thoreau or by immigrating to America like the first pilgrims.

Michael Hollister (2015)

