



William Bradford (1590-1657)

[Robert Daly \(SUNY, Buffalo\)](#)

Colonist; Historian / Chronicler; Politician.

Active 1620-1657 in Massachusetts

William Bradford haunts us still, standing hazily glorious at the beginning of Puritan America. A separatist committed to community, the first communist and first anti-communist writer in American literature, a reluctant governor who begged off when he could but was repeatedly elevated at the insistence of Plymouth Colony, he remains a paradox. He represents one starting point for American literature, yet he subsumed his individual identity so thoroughly into the communal identity of the group that the work for which he is now principally remembered, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, makes no mention of the death of his first wife, Dorothy May, his second marriage to the widow Alice Carpenter Southworth, or the births of his children. One of the few individual actions reported is quite humble and unheroic, of “one in his sickness desiring but a small can of beer”, and only in a footnote does Bradford add: “Which was the author himself.” He did not get the beer. He did not publish the book. The manuscript, lost since 1776, was found in 1855, in the Fulham Palace library in London, sportingly returned to America, and published for the first time in 1856 by the Massachusetts Historical Society. Yet both the life and the work continue to matter, and they deserve to.

On 19 March 1590, in Austerfield, Yorkshire, a small agricultural town in the north of England, William Bradford was baptised, the son of William and Alice Hanson Bradford. His family was prosperous yeomanry. Austerfield lay near the Great North Road from London to Edinburgh. He probably attended the local grammar school and later became competent in several languages, but he was not, like many other Puritan leaders, a university man. Misfortunes arrived soon. In 1591 his father died. In 1594 his mother remarried and William went to live with his grandfather, whose death in 1596 sent him back to his mother, who died in 1597, leaving him to the care of his uncles, Robert and Thomas Bradford. He did farm work when not hindered by a long illness and was, by the age of twelve, attending Puritan and Separatist meetings. The Separatists were the radical left wing of Puritanism, determined on “reformation without tarrying for any,” as the title of one of their early tracts put it, and unwilling to remain within the Church of England. We now call them Pilgrims because Bradford did so, and we call the slightly more conservative non-separating Congregationalists Puritans, and the slightly still more conservative group Presbyterians, since they were willing to retain a church hierarchy of “presbyters,” though at this time and in that place all were Puritans, and all were suspect. King James I vowed to harry them and all other “novelists” out of the land, then promptly made it a crime for them to attempt to leave.

In the face of such royal logic, the Separatists’ options were clear, if harsh. In 1606 his group organized in Scrooby as a Separatist congregation and chose Richard Clyfton as pastor and John Robinson as teacher. In

1607 they attempted to flee to Holland but were betrayed and thwarted. In 1608 they succeeded and settled in Amsterdam but were unable to thrive economically, though Bradford found employment in the silk industry. In 1609, now with John Robinson as pastor, they moved across the lake to Leyden and economically did much better, indeed all too well. Bradford worked as a weaver of fustian, a thick twilled cotton cloth, short-napped and usually dyed dark, exactly the kind of cloth we now associate with the Puritans. In 1613 he married Dorothy May, and around 1615 their son John was born. But all was too well. The Dutch were tolerant, and the little group feared absorption into Dutch culture and the loss of their separate and separatist identity. Some of them determined to leave. Their fears were well-founded: by the third generation of those who stayed, all had become absorbed and were no longer religiously separate.

On 22 July 1620 the group of Separatists who chose to separate yet again sailed from Delftshaven and arrived in Southampton on 27 July. They now had to elude the authorities, find financial backing, and secure transport to the new world. That took time, during which the weather over the North Atlantic worsened. By the time they had secured passage on the *Speedwell* and the *Mayflower*, summer was ending. They set sail anyway, but the *Speedwell* did not speed well. Instead, it began to “crink” - to have the boards in its hull work open enough to take on water. Scholars now believe that the sailors did not wish to undertake the voyage at this time and so made too much sail, causing the masts to work back and forth and the ship to begin to founder. After two tries they put back into Plymouth, and those still willing to make the voyage, less than three fourths of those who had come from Holland, set forth on the *Mayflower* on 6 September 1620 just in time to meet the westerly gales and the Gulf Stream, to lie ahull or turn into the eye of the wind to ride out terrible storms, to move at an average speed of about two knots, and to experience, many for the first time, seasickness. Of the Holland congregation of over 300, there were now only a little over fifty Separatists among the 102 passengers. They were not sailors, and the sailors were not sympathetic. In their cramped and wet quarters, other diseases eventually joined seasickness, and the master of the ship, Christopher Jones, knowing that they were well north of their goal, the mouth of the Hudson River, decided to run for shore on a latitude that would take them to Cape Cod. Once they had sighted land, the Saints, or Pilgrims, and the Strangers, secular people under Christopher Martin with strong ties to the Merchant Adventurers in London, realized that for the small colony to survive they would have to be far more united than they had been so far. In one day they put together the Mayflower Compact, one short paragraph forming themselves “into a civil body politic” to frame laws “for the general good of the colony,” thereby establishing a precedent for a written constitution. Finally, after sixty-six days at sea, on Saturday, 11 November 1620, they made port in Provincetown Harbour. Only one person had died on the journey. The *Mayflower* was a wine ship used in the trade with Bordeaux, and the ullage, or leaking and evaporation, from the casks of wine had put alcohol into the bilges, killed some germs, and made it a comparatively clean ship, with the result that there was less disease than usual. Bradford saw a special providence, a divine intervention in the probable course of life to further the destiny of a chosen people, and he might well have seen it even had he known the germ theory of disease. While there, Bradford’s wife Dorothy fell or jumped overboard and drowned, but Bradford makes no mention of this event in his history. There was no fresh water in Provincetown, and they sent out a shallop, a light open boat for shallow water, to find a place to live. On 16 December the *Mayflower* anchored off New Plymouth.

In 1621 the first governor, John Carver, died, and Bradford was elected governor, as he would be for every one of the remaining years of his life, save for five when he begged off. In 1623, he married Alice Carpenter Southworth, a widow who brought to the marriage two sons from her first marriage and bore three more with him. In 1627 he joined with seven other men from Plymouth and four more from London to assume the colony’s debt to the London “Adventurers” who had invested in their journey.

In 1630 the last immigrants from Holland arrived to rejoin the congregation in Plymouth. Eleven ships brought the “great migration” of Puritans, or non-separating Congregationalists, who came with John Winthrop to found Massachusetts Bay. The Council of New England issued in Bradford’s name the Warwick Patent for the colony of New Plymouth. And Bradford began what he called the “scribbled writings” that would become *Of Plymouth*

Plantation. These were quite different from the journal he had kept. That had recorded events soon after their occurrence. Indeed passages from his journal and that of Edward Winslow had already been published in London in 1622 as *Mourt's Relation*. This new writing would be less a contemporary account of the colony than a retrospective history of its significance.

That significance was as a new Israel. His little group was like “Moses and the Israelites when they went out of Egypt”. They had not been driven out but had left Holland of “their own free choice and motion” and had come to New England to set up a church “as near the primitive pattern of the first churches as possible”. Like the Israelites, the Pilgrims were sent forth by God, “whose work they had in hand”, and “they rested on His providence”. Now it was clear that, “as one small candle may light a thousand, so the light here kindled hath shown unto many, yea, in some sort to our whole nation.” They were pilgrims and they were fathers: “May not and ought not the children of these fathers rightly say: Our fathers were Englishmen which came over this great ocean and were ready to perish in this wilderness; but they cried unto the Lord, and he heard their voice and looked on their adversity.” Here Bradford quoted the book of Deuteronomy, which promises God’s special providences to His chosen people, and he identifies the quotation in his own footnote. He will go on to cite and identify in footnotes the ecclesiastical history of Eusebius, who sees Christian Rome as a new Israel and Constantine as a new Moses; Socrates Scholasticus, who identifies himself as a new Eusebius; and John Foxe, who sees Queen Elizabeth I as a new Constantine and himself as a new Eusebius.

Bradford placed his own account within this tradition of providential history, a public history addressed to “the reader” and promising to relate only what is “profitable to know or to make use of”. “The First Book” sets the pattern. It begins, not with their attempts to line up a ship, but with an overview of reformation history, which they would now continue, “though they should be even as stepping-stones unto others for the performing of so great a work”. “The Second Book” is a series of annals tracing out the fulfilment of this pattern and destiny over time, from 1620 onward. In this shaped narrative, he recorded only those events which affected or clarified the progress of the colony. Personal details are left out that he “may haste to other things” more useful to the readers he knows will come. One such is the story of a significantly unnamed young sailor, “of a lusty [healthy] able body” but “proud and very profane”, who cursed the Pilgrims and told them that “he hoped to help cast half of them overboard before they came to their journey’s end”. Since this young man has set himself against the colony, “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”. This fate “was an astonishment to all his fellows for they noted it to be the just hand of God upon him”.

His mirror opposite is another “lusty young man”, the Pilgrim named John Howland, who fell overboard during a storm. As the healthy young sailor would be expected to live, so Howland, “sundry fathoms under water”, would be expected to die. Yet “it pleased God that he caught hold of the topsail halyards which hung overboard and ran out at length” so that “he held his hold” till he was “hauled up” and “his life saved”. In this case God’s reason for saving Howland becomes apparent only in retrospect, since “he lived many years after and became a profitable member in both church and commonwealth.” Having established the pattern, Bradford decides “to omit other things (that I may be brief)” and hastens on to other providences.

Seed corn taken from an Indian dwelling is “a special providence of God” in his view, though probably not in that of the Native Americans. In the battle at First Encounter Beach, “it pleased God to vanquish their enemies and give them deliverance”. Even the weather is providential: “God gave them a morning of comfort and refreshing (as usually He doth to His Children) for the next day was a fair sunshining day”, as are many subsequent days. Even the “small can of beer” requested and denied occasions a special providence: “The disease began to fall among them [the sailors] also” with the result that Master Jones “was something stricken [*sic*]” and decided “he should send for beer for them that had need of it, though he drunk water homeward bound”. And the providences keep coming, until they don’t.

The great migration of settlers to Boston and Massachusetts Bay had helped to convince Bradford that his little group had been in the vanguard of history. They had also created, however, a bull trend in the corn market. Soon the thin strip of arable land between the shore and the rocky uplands around Plymouth was no longer sufficient to grow the corn needed. Farmers needed to be near their fields to keep them from racoons and other competitors. They wished to move out of Plymouth to the towns of Marshfield and Duxbury. In the annal for 1632, written much later when its significance was more apparent, Bradford describes “continual opposition and contention” and fears that this division “will be the ruin of New England, at least the churches of God there, and will provoke the Lord’s displeasure against them”.

In later annals there are fewer triumphs and less order. The good ship *Lyon*, with a full load of Plymouth beaver pelts bound for England, founders; John Howland’s men, operating a Plymouth trading post, must kill to keep it; the French seize and keep the trading post on the Penobscot; in 1638 an earthquake shows the power of God but not His intentions, and even in hindsight he can only “leave it to naturalists to judge”; and in 1642 young Thomas Granger is “detected of buggery . . . with a mare, a cow, two goats, five sheep, two calves and a turkey”, possibly a record but hardly evidence of special providence and significant destiny.

Whatever the course of providential history, Plymouth no longer seemed central, a candle to light a thousand: “And thus was this poor church left, like an ancient mother grown old and forsaken of her children . . . her ancient members being most of them worn away by death, and these of later time being like children translated into other families, and she like a widow left only to trust in God.” Yet trust in God is no longer rewarded in any discernible pattern.

In Bradford’s last entry he records Edward Winslow’s failure to return from England, to which he had gone against Bradford’s wishes and from which he had not returned for four years. (He never did.) The leaves for “Anno 1647” and “Anno 1648” he left blank, testament to a vision of human and divine purpose that had dwindled into the complexities of ordinary life. Then he skipped two leaves and in 1650 wrote out the names and notes on the lives and children of his fellow *Mayflower* passengers, writing that this record “may be of some use to such as come after; but however I shall rest in my own benefit”.

Scholars debate whether Bradford despaired. He certainly turned a public book into a private one and set it aside. Yet he continued to govern effectively, to write poems and dialogues, and to learn languages, including Hebrew. On the last day of his life, 9 May 1657, he dictated his will. And he left to us the manuscript of what the historian Nathaniel Philbrick has called “certainly the greatest book written in seventeenth-century America”. The “children of these fathers” and mothers read him still.

Citation: Daly, Robert. "William Bradford". *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 24 May 2008.
[<http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=532>, accessed 21 July 2014.]

This article is copyright to © [The Literary Encyclopedia](#).

All entries, data and software copyright © The Literary Dictionary Company Limited

ISSN 1747-678X